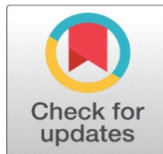


SHIFTING GENDER NORMS AND SEXUALITY QUESTIONS TOWARDS TRANSFORMING WOMANHOOD IN RAVI VARMA'S PAINTINGS

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ABSTRACT

Womanhood is identified as a fluid construct shaped by personal agency, social norms and cultural construction, intersecting the dimensions of identity, gender and sexuality. Exploring its cultural representations and meanings in art forms is crucial to understanding how the visual narratives challenge, reinforce or transform societal perceptions of womanhood over time. The paper analyses the transforming dimensions of womanhood, focusing on representations of gender norms, sexuality, and the female body in the select paintings of Raja Ravi Varma. Varma's paintings serve as a vital medium for decoding the roles and identities of women, offering insight into the complex interplay between art, culture, and gender dynamics. The paintings act as a prism that resonates with the concept that the construction of womanhood is a fluid and dynamic process subject to change. The study examines how Varma's artistic expressions hint at the sociocultural transformations of the early twentieth-century Kerala society. The paper employs feminist and visual analysis to explore the changing dimensions of womanhood and its representation in select paintings. It interrogates the strategic confrontations made by the artist on the traditional hegemonic narratives of womanhood construction and the artistic strategies used to reflect the societal transitions shaping womanhood in Kerala during the transformative period. Theoretical insights for visual analysis are derived from Van Leeuwen, Laura Mulvey, and James Rendell. Conceptual frameworks are adapted from the insights of G. Arunima, Niharika Dinkar, Uma Chakravarti and Partha Chatterjee.

Keywords: Ravi Varma, Womanhood, Gender Norms, Women's Body, Sexuality



1. INTRODUCTION

Womanhood is a complex, multifaceted concept that involves diverse continuums of femininity, identity, and social meaning (Jenkins, 2016). It encompasses various roles, identities, and expectations assigned specifically to women across diverse societies, reflecting one's cultural values, morals, and beliefs about gender and its performance. Womanhood refers to the state or condition of being a woman, encompassing various biological, psychological, and sociocultural aspects that shape one's identity and experiences as a female individual (Hoffman, 2006; Jenkins, 2016). The concept of Indian womanhood has undergone significant transformation in the last century, influenced by colonialism, nationalism, socio-political movements and postcolonial academic and activist interventions. The concept has consistently evolved and is shaped by cultural, social, and personal contexts, making it fluid and dynamic. The role of art and other forms of literary and cultural representations is significant in producing the ideology and counterargument influencing the norms of womanhood. Within this preview, the paper aims to interrogate and examine

the sociocultural representations in Raja Ravi Varma's paintings, which render the changing perspectives of Indian womanhood, illustrating its role in reflecting social change towards empowerment. The study delineates the evolving depictions of femininity and shifting gender norms, the female body, sexuality, and identity as aspects of womanhood in the selected paintings. Through the amalgamation of Western techniques and Indian aesthetics, Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906), a pivotal personality in Indian art history, bridges tradition and modernity, creating nuanced portrayals of women's subjects, reflecting his time's socio-cultural and political transformations. His paintings function as a prism for decoding the changing concepts of womanhood in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century colonial India.

Varma's depiction of women invariably concerns cultural expectations and societal power dynamics (Rendell, 2003; Nochlin, 1973; Mandakini et al., 2017). Despite the extensive scholarship on Varma's contribution to Indian art, feminist and nationalistic analysis of Varma paintings and the representation of women in art, a research gap remains in exploring how Varma's portraits can be used as an analytical tool to examine the shifting representations of Indian womanhood. This work addresses this research question by analysing how Varma's paintings disrupt patriarchal expectations and serve as a cultural narrative that reflects womanhood's evolving and empowering dimensions. Feminist and visual interpretation is used in the research to examine the emerging facets of womanhood, that is the gender roles, body politics and sexuality with Varma's painting as a tool for examination. The study analyses the composition, symbolism, colour, and spatial arrangement, drawing from Leeuwen's visual analysis, Mulvey's critique of the male gaze, and Rendell's notion of space and gender. The feminist conceptual note is derived from Arunima's documentation of Kerala society, contextualising gender roles and transitions, Chakravarti's notion of gender and the nation to understand the intersection of nationalistic discourse and the construction of womanhood and Chatterjee's concept of ideal woman, to investigate how Varma's depictions negotiate traditional and modern ideals of femininity. As a limitation, the study acknowledges that some inherent subjectivity of visual and thematic interpretation may exist. Additionally, since the selected paintings are drawn from a specific time period, from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, they might not comprehensively represent the full spectrum of Varma's depiction of the evolving concepts of Indian womanhood. The following paintings have been chosen for analysis based on their relevance to the themes of gender discourse, the female body, and sexuality: *Shakuntala* (1898), *Hamsa Damyanti* (1899), *The Galaxy of Musicians* (1899), *The Reclining Lady* (1902), and *Here comes Papa* (1893).



Figure 1 Varma, R.R. (1898). *Shakuntala*, Copyright 1989 by

<https://www.inspicanvas.com/collections/raja-ravi-varma/products/shakuntala-art-by-raja-ravi-varma>



Figure 2 Varma, R.R. (1899). Hamsa Damyanti, Copyright

<https://www.inspicanvas.com/collections/raja-ravi-varma/products/hamsa-damayanti-art-by-raja-ravi-varma>



Figure 3 Varma, R.R. (1899). The Galaxy of Musicians. Copyright by

<https://www.inspicanvas.com/collections/raja-ravi-varma/products/galaxy-of-musicians-art-by-raja-ravi-varma>



Figure 4 Varma, R. R (1902). The Reclining Lady. Copyright by

<https://www.tallengestore.com/products/reclining-nair-lady-raja-ravi-varma-indian-art-masterpiece-painting-art-prints>



Figure 5 Varma, R. R. (1893). Here comes Papa. Copyright by

<https://www.inspicanvas.com/collections/raja-ravi-varma/products/there-comes-papa-art-by-raja-ravi-varma>

2. FEMININITY AND SHIFTING GENDER NORMS

Gender in art, primarily paintings, “work as a mode of representation which create and constructs within a system, correlating sex to cultural production based on social values and hierarchy” (Dehejia, 1997, p.23). Varma predominantly engages and involves himself with his paintings, which raises his concerns and vision about the subject's subjectivity and selfhood. Arunima (2003) identifies that Varma represents the changing gender dynamics of society from a broader and more realistic perspective. The women subjects were represented as the preservers of age-old traditions, customs, and rituals (Guha, 1997) and the caretakers of the family and domestic orders. Male subjects were depicted as masculine figures, knights and warriors (Nagel, 1998), symbolising them as the bearers of power and authority. In the Indian patriarchal society, the representation of women and their bodies has been manipulated and dominated to channel the existing structure and display of male power (Chakravarti, 2003; Kapur, 2005). As a result, women became objects of the male gaze, often depicted as shy and docile with a passive and complaisant outlook (Mulvey, 1975) or primarily erotic.

In Figure 1, the foregrounding technique is employed to emphasize the protagonist, Shakuntala, who is represented in a moment of longing as she is searching for a thorn in her foot by covertly glancing back, symbolising her love and yearning for her lover, Dushyanta. She stands out from her subordinates through her restrained posture and attire, indicating her unique individual state and personality. The sage placed in the background appears as another comprehensible spatial realm (Leeuwen, 2004), a connotative figure of the learned patriarchal order from which Shakuntala has departed emotionally. This depiction of Shakuntala holds a duality that reflects the shifting gender norms in early 20th-century India. By being loyal and submissive, she represents the archetypal notions of the ‘ideal woman’ that align with the traditional notions of femininity. However, her active emotional engagement of covert gaze at Dushyanta challenges stereotypical and passive representations of women, suggesting agency that transcends societal expectations. Rendell's (2003) notion of space and gender resonates with the spatial dynamics of the painting; Shakuntala occupies an open, natural space opposing the traditional enclosed interiors associated with women. This spatial freedom symbolises her emotional and intellectual expansiveness, reflecting the gradual dismantling of rigid gender roles.

Figure 2 narrates an episode from the great epic, Mahabharata, where the princess Damayanti communicates with a divine swan (Hamsa), the messenger of Nala, the king of the Nishida kingdom. Damayanti is the central focus, emphasising her importance in the narrative, where women and her perspective become pivotal figures, which deviates from the stereotypical male narrative. Damayanti's passive yet assertive composition captures changing womanhood, where chastity and devotion are combined with individual desire and emotional independence. G. Arunima's (2003) documentation about Kerala's social and cultural changes underlines the duality where women began to be portrayed in public and cultural spaces. The painting aligns with Chatterjee's (1994) concept of ‘inner and outer domain’, where Damayanti is placed in an elaborate ornate interior space, embodying the essence of the “inner” domestic sphere of

emotional depth. Nevertheless, her conversion with a swan, the symbol of the outer world, shows her contact with the world of individualism, a subtle challenge to the patriarchal boundaries.

Figure 3 presents a musical performance where four female instrumentalists accompany a singer while six other women listen to this performance in varying postures with significant interest. The collective portrayal of women engaging in musical performance reflects the emergence of women's cultural visibility in the public domain and transforming the image of womanhood, which challenges the male dominance over art forms during the era, dissolving the notion of gender in artistic creativity and its enjoyment. The warm, subtle and earthy colour tones provided by the women in that painting create a harmonious, inclusive space, embodying cultural unity and convergence (Leeuwen, 2004). Chakravarti's (2018) notions of gender underscore that women, custodians of culture, are provided with space and agency, suggesting the broadening of acceptable roles for women like their male counterparts, reflecting gender equality and unity amidst the diverse cultures existing in the Indian sub-continent.

Figure 4 depicts two women. One is foregrounded and placed centrally in a relaxing reclining position yet elegantly composed; the other could be a maid or servant. The spatial arrangement given for the two female subjects provides the identity of these characters (Leeuwen (2004). The background is constructed like an interior of a bedroom, as she is reclining consciously, looking or staring into the eyes of her onlookers with a "seductive approach" (Mandakini et al., 2017, p. 6). She directly gazes at the viewers, crafting an interplay of agency and vulnerability that restructures the traditional depiction of Indian women. The figure reflects a cultural tension, placing femininity in a transformative space (Kapur, 2000) by being graceful and modest, adhering to the traditional notions, yet assertive and self-assured, highlighting the newly emerging gender norms. Unlike the submissive portrayal of women, this lady appears more conscious, confident and self-possessed, emphasising the individuality a woman needs to possess. An open book in front of her suggests her modern education. The musical instrument beneath her resembles Veena, showing she is well-versed in art and literature. This portrait confirms Varma's notion of having equal access to education and arts for women like men. The technique of chiaroscuro (use of light and dark tones to enhance the depth of meaning) helps to identify the difference between these two females.

Figure 5 depicts the interior of a Westernized Malayali nuclear family, where the wife and child wait for their husband/father. This depicts the nuanced roles of women in creating and supporting familial structure and highlights the supportive presence of women, showcasing their strength and resilience within the confines of traditional societal roles. The woman subject is depicted as a product of the upcoming patrilineal family structure, emphasising their idealised view of womanhood as caregivers within the home, reinforcing the gender roles in the patriarchal structure of society. It resonates with Chatterjee's (1994) notion of a 'new woman' rooted in both modern and traditional, attributing to the redefinition of femininity in celebrating maternal and individual identities. The attires and jewellery of mother and child remain distinctly Malayali. Still, props like the red shawl, the appearance of the dog, and the hand gestures of the women appear as a part of European influences, which highlights the facts that sooner the gender relations will make a tremendous shift in creating family structure, thereby making societal changes.

These paintings of Raja Ravi Varma functions as a perceptual account of how femininity was reconfigured in colonial India when changing gender norms were interwoven with the overall sociopolitical and cultural change. In the paintings like Shakuntala, Hamsa Damayanti and Galaxy of Musicians, Varma departs from the old patriarchal notions of femininity by crafting the female subjects with emotional agency, self-reflection and the emerging notion of subjectivity and individuality. These women are no longer confined to represent subservient positions or ideal chastity rather they represent a series of identities that fall between tradition and emerging notion of then contemporary modernity. Taking insights from the Western academic tradition of realism and Victorian ideas on the womanhood, Varma brings some stealth moments of radical changes on the visual culture. Women are put to the centre of composition, where they are given interior space to express their emotional comprehensiveness and cultural involvement, and are shown with signs of literacy and aesthetic taste. The introduction of the female gaze, reinvention of the spatial relation, associating women with artists, thinkers, and muses sets the indication of a deviation of such gendered binaries between the public arena, and the domestic sphere. These representations highlight the women's emotional, intellectual depth and individual agency and their transforming roles in the society from domestic realm to public spheres, bearing autonomy rather than being a subject of passive objectification. All these visual elements can be attributed to the social reforms and appearance of the so-called a new Indian woman. Varma combines the code of the native custom with the demands of Western representational codes to offer a feminine image as being fluid, complicated, and self-understanding. His work not only echoes what should be a perfect woman, it forebodes a contemporary one that is aware of her position in a place well as

outside the household. So, these representations of Varma acts as a critical art-form through which femininity is reaffirmed and reimagined, offering a nuanced response to the cultural negotiations around gender and identity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

3. FEMALE BODY, SEXUALITY AND IDENTITY

Female subjects in art form are especially associated with physical beauty, and they mostly exhibit their sexualities from the earliest times. Their body and sexuality have been given much focus rather than the matter and subject of representation. From time immemorial, female subjects are often created to “persuade the male gaze or to enhance the concept of the heroism of manhood” (Mandakini et al., 2017, p. 5), involving the political representation where women are devoid of a particular space. Instead, they are projected in irrelevant roles like that of a subject of an erotic display, or mistress waiting for her lover, etc., which satisfies the “ideal representation as per the social code of conduct” (ibid). Varma’s art comments on body and sexual subjectivity and explores societal desire and emergent definitions of Indianness in colonial India (Prabhu, 2022). Dinkar (2014) identifies, his painting involves the transition of female subjects from coy, diminutive, and mythological depictions to realistic subjects with empathy and emotional sensitivity, asserting their autonomy and space, shedding light on the idealised female self at the turn of the twentieth century.

Figure 1 celebrates the female body as a site of beauty, vitality, and emotional depth, imbuing her with a quiet sensuality. Arunima’s (2003) finding about the sociocultural transformations in Kerala highlights how the portrayal of women’s bodies during the period began to deviate from the classical ideals of beauty and chastity to more nuanced depictions that embraced individual, emotional and physical complexity. Shakuntala’s sensuality is grounded in her individuality, which reflects this cultural transition. Mulvey’s theory of the ‘male gaze’ aestheticizes Shakuntala’s body. Through the painting, Varma illustrates that the female body’s aesthetics are not limited to physical beauty and standards but are also utilised to convey the politics of desire, agency and the progressive identity of womanhood and sexuality. However, Varma turns this around by giving Shakuntala her own gaze, providing her with a statement of her desire and individuality, which contrasts with the submissive roles of women in Indian art.

Figure 2, Hamsa Damayanti, becomes an evocative painting of Varma, presenting the contours of a woman’s body and sexuality within the framework of cultural idealism and emotional expression. Damayanti’s introspective posture (Thakurta, 1991), adorned in a vibrant red sari, emphasises the curves and contours of her body, celebrating her femininity and the physical dimensions of womanhood while maintaining a sense of modesty. The delicate folds and drapery of the saree make her sensual and sacred, presenting the body as both a site of desire and virtue. Anticipating the implications of Chakravarti (2018), it recreates classical mythological discourses of female sexuality as both worshipped and disciplined. The meeting of a celestial swan corresponds to the subject awakening her emotional desire and personality, portraying her as an active subject engaging with her emotional and physical desires rather than being a passive recipient of male attention. The form of Damayanti is aestheticized, but in other ways, Varma complicates this by focusing on her, giving a tone of retrospective posture and an expression of longing that reflects her self-awareness and acknowledgement of her desire.

The women in Figure 3 are centrally placed by foregrounding techniques, highlighting their importance. The composition of the painting presents women as a coordinated group, where each one is absorbed in their musical instruments. As Arunima (2003) says, “[t]he background of the portrait emphasises a location within the private sphere, where the leisure of domesticity enables them to cultivate an interest in the art” (p. 15). The self-contained and self-indulged representations of these women’s subjects highlight their intellectual and artistic pursuits, which redirect the attention from their bodies, dissolving the notion of objectification of their bodies and sexuality. It suggests a shared cultural and artistic space where women actively participate and contribute, showing the emergence of women from their private sphere that involves their social mobility to entertain themselves with art forms and performances. It showcases Varma’s interest in having a progressive view of women’s space and power in a multicultural and patriarchal land like India.

In Figure 4, the subject is depicted in a relaxed stature in her bedroom, wearing a loosely fitted saree and blouse (a new addition to their sociocultural structure inspired by Western colonial notions). The foregrounded subject is Varma’s portrayal of a modern educated woman; her direct gaze on the viewers makes her a subject with autonomous individuality, suggesting an agency over her body and sexuality, surpassing passive objectification and creating an aesthetic appreciation. Varma provided a well-furnished bedroom, reflecting a private and intimate space where a

woman was inaccessible to the public in the contemporary period. The book placed in her bedroom depicts the evolving sense of literacy, intellectual pursuits, and engagements, underscoring that women's sexuality could co-exist with their intellectual depth. Usually, the scenes depicting "a toilet, bedroom scenes, or a garden symbolise male dominance" (Mandakini, 2017, p. 5); contrary to this idea, this painting challenges the traditional representations by focusing on her individuality and personal space. The domestic personal space employed by Varma in his paintings was "crucial to the constitution of the modern self" (Dinkar, 2014, p.515). This subtly propounds women's right to personal space, freedom, and expression and hints at a societal transformation.

Figure 5 discusses the spatial distribution of the figures and the roles of family members portrayed. The spatial arrangement of the figures, like the foregrounding of the wife and child, and the absence of the father creates a dynamic composition which helps to convey the emotional connections and relationships between them highlighting the space with which a woman began to acquire in her family. It can also be seen as the celebration of the contemporary phenomenon of the emergence of the nuclear family and private space. Using colour and spatial foregrounding (Leeuwen, 2004) to place the wife and child and position the wife as the central figure reflects the redefining of womanhood through the evolving societal norms of Kerala. The female body is not eroticised nor portrayed as an object of male desire but instead depicted with dignified sensuality that denotes the transitions from the mistress, or concubine, to wife and mother. Her posture and gaze reflect an emotional depth that resonates with warmth and anticipation, subtly invoking her sexuality within the context of maternity and conjugal affection, making the female body a site of maternal authority rather than an object of desire.

Varma's portrayal of the female body stands out as a radical experiment of then existing conventional patterns of sexually alluring and submissive images of women as passively represented in Indian visual culture. His subtle treatment of women bodies evoking emotionality, self-sovereignty and individuality in a subtle yet decisive way equips the female body with agency and power, subjectivity, and even cultural positivity. Varma places the politics of the gaze back in the hands of women by situating them as thinking, feeling and desiring subjects; rather than setting them out as muses and other erotic symbols. The inclusion of books, musical instruments and intimate and ascetically appealing interiors holds a moment of sensuality and intellectuality combined, which provides a comprehensive picture of the feminine beauty which offers a holistic concept on womanhood that transcends the mere notions of women's physical beauty and sensuality. Varma's assimilation of Western academic realism and the Victorian domesticity was pivotal in re-contextualizing the female body in terms of the colonial-modernity. All these influenced him to redefine Indian women and womanhood notion in its possible best terms. He presented them as educated, articulate and self-absorbed, which was a slight break on the patriarchal order that converted it into decorative or reproductive conclaves. Paintings such as *Shakuntala*, *Hamsa Damayanti*, *Reclining Lady* and *Here Comes Papa* represent an overall movement away with a passive subject of male desire to autonomous agents negotiating their sexuality, intellectual self and family innuendo. Varma subverts the sacred/profane, public/private and sensual/virtuous binaries set in the backdrop of a changing Kerala and colonial India. His female models also defy the male mark of hegemony and represent a new dream of Indian womanhood in terms of mixing tradition with individuality; sensuality with intellect; body with identity, occupying a politically levitating landscape.

4. CONCLUSION

The research paper has interrogated the evolving construction of Indian womanhood through a close critical analysis on the select paintings of Raja Ravi Varma drawing on the feminist visual theory in order to examine the intersections of gender norms, sexuality and the representation of the body. Based on the analysis grounded on feminist theory and visual semiotics, the study unveils the ways in which the depictions of Varma resonate with the changing spirit of colonial Kerala, which is involved with the development of the nationalist ideologies, the construction of gender roles, and the national politics of domesticity and sexual desirability. Combining the academic realism with the traditional Indian aesthetics, Varma developed the visual language that mediated between the colonial modernity and the indigenous ideals. His representations of women as mythical, domestic, and performative, emerged not solely as passive subjects of aesthetic pleasure but as those who holds subjectivity and individual identity with layered signifiers in shifting gender ideologies in late 19th- and early 20th-century Kerala. In the course of paying tribute to the notion of femininity within both mythological and domestic contexts, the canvases of Varma allow the viewers to observe a cultural transformation wherein womanhood is not only portrayed but also re-engineered. Through the usage of compositional choices, spatial arrangement, and symbolic framing, Varma's canvases depict the woman her body and

identity as both culturally encoded and individually expressive. The infusion of Western stylistic elements particularly in terms of bodily posture, gaze, and sensuality reflects a complex negotiation with modernity, where women are not entirely liberated but are subtly repositioned within new frameworks of agency, desire, and visibility. Ultimately, his artistic oeuvre offers a compelling visual archive that enables to trace the historical and ideological contours of Indian womanhood notion as a fluid, dynamic, contested, and as ever evolving entity

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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