

INFLUENCE OF LITERATURE AND COLONIALISM IN THE INFORMAL LEARNING OF RAJA RAVI VARMA¹

INFLUÊNCIA DA LITERATURA E DO COLONIALISMO NA APRENDIZAGEM INFORMAL DE RAJA RAVI VARMA

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Abstract: The success of Raja Ravi Varma was heavily dependent on a number of variables. Two characteristics of westernised painting in India during the 19th century were addressed by Ravi Varma. He was adept at both the new medium of oil painting and the cutting edge of photo-illusionism. The distinctive painting and illustration style he had established was considered much better by both his mentors and clients. It was equally crucial to use these tactics and talents methodically. He painted life-size portraits using all the grace and elegance of Western Academic oil painting techniques. Since painting Indian women became Ravi Varma's primary subject matter, it is crucial to comprehend his method of painting them. The current study aims to address the images of mythology and colonial influences found in Raja Ravi Varma's paintings and printings.

Keywords: Raja Ravi Varma. Colonial Influence. Indian Painting. Mythology. Indian Painter.

Resumo: O sucesso de Raja Ravi Varma dependeu fortemente de uma série de variáveis. Duas características da pintura ocidentalizada na Índia durante o século XIX foram abordadas por Ravi Varma. Ravi Varma era adepto tanto do novo meio de pintura a óleo como da vanguarda do foto-ilusionismo. O estilo distintivo de pintura e ilustração que estabeleceu foi considerado muito melhor tanto pelos seus mentores como pelos seus clientes. Era igualmente crucial utilizar estas táticas e talentos de forma metódica. Pintou retratos em tamanho real, utilizando toda a graça e elegância das técnicas académicas ocidentais de pintura a óleo. Uma vez que a pintura de mulheres indianas se tornou o tema principal de Ravi Varma, é crucial compreender o seu método de as pintar. O presente estudo pretende abordar as imagens da mitologia e das influências coloniais presentes nas pinturas e gravuras de Raja Ravi Varma.

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Palavras-chave: Raja Ravi Varma. Influência colonial. Pintura indiana. Mitologia. Pintor indiano.

1. Introduction

1.1. *Raja Ravi Varma: A Painting Maestro*

Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906) was raised surrounded by aristocratic patrons of the arts and culture. Through matrilineal ties, Raja Ravi Varma's family was connected to the Travancore royal family. Born in Kerala, South India, Raja Ravi Varma studied Sanskrit with his father at Kilimanoor Palace in Kerala, and as a result of his traditional Hindu upbringing, he became fluent in *the Mahabharata*, *the Ramayana*, *the Puranas*, and other sacred writings. Kerala culture was built on Hindu mythology which was based on the oral tradition. This rich cultural heritage was highly regarded in the Travancore Court. He was well-prepared to learn the teachings contained in the classical painting legacy of India, which consisted of the traditional mural paintings on the palace and temple walls. All this Raja Ravi Varma owed to his education in religion and his learnings of classical languages.

Observing painters in practise at the family court was how Ravi Varma first became familiar with European art. His uncle, saw potential in him and urged him to follow his own passion for the arts. In order to develop his prospective talent, Ravi Varma's uncle made arrangements for the young Ravi Varma to live in a residence at the palace in Thiruvananthapuram in 1862. Ayilyam Thirrunal had a role to play in his uprising since he introduced Ravi Varma to the introduced to European paintings. European artists would occasionally visit the court and stay on commissions. The Dutch artist Theodore Jensen, was one such artist who made it easy for Ravi Varma to observe him while painting and learn the techniques. Painting at this time in most part of India was taken as a craft by the working-class men. While for aristocratic and royal families like it was a pastime. However, with the deepening of the colonial events and establishing of the western institutes and education Indian traditional painters got a lucrative chance to study the western methods of painting. Ravi Varma shared his contemporaries' admiration and acceptance of western principles and his fascination with European art in particular.

Using a pictorial language, Ravi Varma was able to depict historical events that were supposed to be taking place in the present. Given that the Parsi theatre movement was at its height when he was working. Ravi Varma's work was devotion for him and it demonstrated his knowledge with the fine arts. For instance, his painting depicted Nala-Damayanti, standing in front of a painted forest curtain. This was a typical element embraced from the Parsi theatre. According to Suresh Awasthi, the Victorian theatre was influenced by the Parsi theatre and following it Ravi Varma was similarly influenced by Parsi theatre which was imprinted in his works. He felt that it

is “*only natural, as all our arts had come under influence,*” which have come a long way in adopting new standards and techniques and yet reflecting one another, in his opinion. The fine arts are positioned here as both a ‘*signifier*’ and ‘*a signified of the social structure*’ of Ravi Varma’s world, when Awasthi compares owning a painting by Ravi Varma to going to the theatre as equal status symbols of the time (Awasthi, 1993).

He was “*admired and supported by both British and Indian patrons*” for his religious and portrait work. Researchers have debated that Ravi Varma was “*convinced of the need to provide an alternate to the ‘atrocious’ and ‘debased’ varieties of cheap religious pictures that flooded the market, and thus improve popular taste*” (Mitter, 1993). Whether or not his motivations were this clear, once he started making his paintings available as prints to the general public, he undoubtedly changed the religious image market.

2. Literature in Painting and Printing during the Colonial India

The “*democratic value intrinsically embedded in images*” is that they are accessible to both uneducated and intelligent people, making them, in a sense, the most potent form of communication” (Castelli and Aprile, 2005). Images have the “*potential to become effective tools for religious, social, and political ideas*” which was comprehended by individuals from all social groups, castes, creed and backgrounds because they are readily available. It was claimed by Christopher Pinney, art historian and anthropologist, that printed depictions of gods in depth in his book *Photos of the Gods* and attributes images with the “*construction of public spaces and areas of consciousness that are intimately linked to nationalism*” (Pinney, 2004). Printed images were particularly effective during the Indian freedom movement. This phase of printed images lasted roughly from 1917 until its freedom in 1947, a “*common cultural, religious, and aesthetic background for the Indian people who were living in a fragmented political universe deprived of any sense of unity*” (Castelli and Aprile, 2005). Always more than just pictures, images are. They have histories that can be studied historically, social and political biographies and a dynamic essence that changes with time. This is especially true for pictures that are bright and that frequently feature Hindu mythical motifs (Adhikari & Saha, 2021b).

Popular subjects have alternated between religious and secular themes over the years which have reflected significantly showing the political and cultural shifts in India. For instance, under the British, painters painstakingly crafted allegories to depict Britain’s hegemony over India using “*mythological tales from the Hindu epics*” (Uberoi, 1990). Another recurring theme over time is mother

and child imagery, with the occasional landscape thrown in (Castelli and Aprile, 2005). Distributors of calendar art in the late 20th century loosely categorised their goods as heroic, picturesque, cinematic, or dharmic (Uberoi, 1990). Despite changes in popular prints, religious themes—both devotional and mythological—have continually predominated since the invention of mass-produced prints. Westerners have always been fascinated by Hinduism’s reliance on visuals, but none more so than the devotional image. A devotional image can be identified by the “*divinity’s eyes looking back at the viewer*” (Jain, 2007). The deity and spectator exchanged glances, allowing the viewer to partake in *darshan*, a crucial aspect of Hinduism’s religion in which being seen by the deity is just as significant as having a very right admittance to it (Jain, 2007). These pictures have a very simple depiction of the images of the deity, where they are placed in the centre and the other factors or plot correlating to it, usually against a rich background. Mythological scenes with scenes and narrations from the Hindu epics, were quite prevalent, even though they were not utilised for *darshan*. The moral climax of the story emphasizing on the emotion, was depicted in mythological prints, which emphasised feeling and immaterial qualities. Illiterate population consisting of the Hindus, were able to become familiar with these historical tales through mythological settings and oral storytelling. It is unfortunate that these prints have not been considered to be relevant enough to be researched academically given how commonplace they are in the country. According to Jain (2007), “*Despite its initial warm reception by “native” and colonial “master” alike, for the better part of the twentieth century this genre [of printed images] was either reviled or ignored by scholars and critics*”. It has only just become recognised for the intriguing aesthetic biography of this particular genre of printing religious images, became so essential to India. Many academics hold painter Raja Ravi Varma responsible for the garish, ubiquitous, glossy painted pictures frequently recognised as calendar art, despite the fact that he did not specifically create his works for calendars. Raja Ravi Varma’s printing press revolutionised the way in which divinity was portrayed.

3. Implementation of the Colonial Style in Depicting Indian Literature

In the middle of the 19th century, India underwent significant changes as a result of British colonisation; notable new materials were oil paint, canvas and paint tubes. Prior to it, tempera was largely employed by Indian painters (Mitter, 1993). Ravi Varma was able to achieve an elevation in practicing the form of naturalism which could compete with the Western paintings thanks to the use of these instruments. Given his obvious interest in European art, it is possible that Raphael, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Ingres, David and Manet had an impact on his style. Quick-drying tempera

did not allow for newer techniques in the tones and shadow of the paintings. Raja Ravi Varma did not yet attend a formal art school, yet his aesthetic choices propelled him into the academic realism tradition promoted in European art institutions. The nineteenth century saw widespread adoption of this fashion throughout the British Empire. Raja Ravi Varma was able to use oil paint to achieve these intricacies in light, colour, and perspective. It is said that he did this to acknowledge the dominance of colonial power in India by employing European methods and instruments.

Ravi Varma was raised immersed in the Hindu mythology and it served as a constant source of inspiration for his work's subject matter (Adhikari & Saha, 2021a). Raja Ravi Varma not like the artists who painted with traditional techniques. Raja Ravi Varma *“shrewdly and confidently fused European and Indian elements since he had a clear grasp of the underlying principles of naturalism”* (Mitter, 1993). His compositions based on portraits demonstrated a blend of early Tanjore tradition with the Dutch masters' *‘delicate realism’*. When live models were not available, he turned to photography, which helped to create the distinctive life study and photo-realism mark on his figures. He used these western colour, composition, and perspective techniques on all of his works, whether they were real or mythical. Partha Mitter (1993), thinks his artistic decisions went well with the country's themes: *“A certain sentimentality went hand in hand with a new image of voluptuous women, a blend of Kerala and Guercino.”* In 2012 work *The Printed Picture of the portraits*, Paula Sengupta writes *“they had a naturalistic finesse, and there appeared to be a three-dimensional quality, a sense of volume, and perspective in the composition.”* Paula contrasts his aesthetic with the dynamic academic realism taught at *The Calcutta Art Studio* at the period, which promoted the use of female figures in legendary scenarios with *“plump anatomies, oversized heads and large drooling eyes, gaudy costumes and patterned jewellery, heightened chiaroscuro effects, dark misty landscape settings, and palatial backgrounds”* (Sengupta, 2012).

Ravi Varma's aesthetic has an evident relationship with the traits of the colonial art schools, perched midway between Naturalism and Idealism. Indeed, the characters in the paintings on display at the Sri Chatra Art Gallery, Trivandrum have a substantial three-dimensional aspect, as well as warm complexions and animated facial expressions. When we talk about the composition, there are striking similarities between his pieces like *‘Gipsies,’* from 1893, and William- Adolphe Bouguereau's *‘Indignat Family,’* from 1865. Stated that after viewing the French artist's pieces at the Travancore Court, Ravi Varma developed a deep admiration for him. Similar to the works of many 20th century painters, Ravi Varma's portrayal of the female body reveals a lot about his method of painting. His neo-classical paintings of Victorian and French women as well as the royal ladies who modelled for him served as inspiration for his female subjects. His paintings of ladies depict women who are clearly figures of class and rank, as seen in their attire, living arrangements and

leisure activities. Regionally and nationally, the idealised representations are appealing: “*His heroines became ideal national prototypes, consciously representing a pan-Indian type...*” (Sengupta, 2012).

The regal *Hamsa Damyanthi*, which has been exhibited at the Sri Chatra Art Gallery, Trivandrum. It was painted for the Trivandrum Palace in 1899. This is a prime example of this. Authentic representations of Hindu dharma were offered, particularly in his legendary scenes, even as he used European techniques to satisfy the public’s need in works like these. This picture depicts a scenario from the *Vana Parva* part of the *Mahabharata* in which Damayanti is selecting a husband from among her many suitors when a swan informs her of Nala’s merits and abilities. Although Ravi Varma painted scenes from Damayanti’s life at various points, this portrayal of Damayanti is regarded by modern critics as “*the most beautiful and idealised*” of his women. In this painting, Damayanti’s glowing red and gold south Indian sari and stand on the stone steps appearing significantly to her grace. His skill was in portraying mythological and deity figures in settings and attire from the world he was familiar with, bringing them into the realm of the living. He saw the gods and goddesses as much alike to princes, placing them in the magnificent palaces. Those were interestingly the palaces the painter was accustomed to. This grounded them close to the reality. Raja Ravi Varma devoted systematic and patterned attention to the aesthetic characteristics of Indians in various locations, such as physiognomy, clothing, and jewellery that Varma believed to be most ideal for grounding subjects in reality (Adhikari & Saha, 2022).

Although he probably first drew influence from neo-classical women in Europe, Raja Ravi Varma always looked at women in his paintings as a reflection of his own thought process. He succeeded in reaching a larger audience and giving his legendary personifications a pan-Indian depth by infusing these particulars into them. Raja Ravi Varma made the decision to record those unique moments when *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata* listeners would become emotionally immersed in the story’s finale. The *Ramayana* scenario depicted in *Jatayu Vadham*, which he finished in 1895, depicts the tumultuous moment Ravana, cuts off Jatayu’s wing as he attempts to restrict Ravana from kidnapping Sita. This kind of dynamic energy-filled frozen moment was frequently captured in his scenes on his canvas. This further distinguished him from the earlier generation of traditional Indian artists; “*Narrative art was nothing new to India. But illusionist painting as a vehicle for story telling by presenting a ‘frozen moment was a Western invention*” (Mitter, 1993). Before going into the process of mass production, Ravi Varma honed these artistic aspects on canvas.

4. Conclusion

In India, and particularly in South India, calendar art as common printings in the style of Raja Ravi Varma are still widely used as objects of worship. According to Kajri Jain, the word ‘*calendar art*’ tends to be crucial because the factor that they depict calendars and the affects of how art is transacted in the bazaar. This has shaped the economy and is a place where the religious, lucrative, moral, beautiful, and libidinal kinds of value are intricately intertwined. Calendars which were previously kept as gifts might then be found hanging in devotional places, prayer rooms homes, workplaces, or even in the public transports. Smaller versions were occasionally kept in purse and wallets. It was found that the god in the image must be gazing over, blessing people, according to this essential notion of darshan, which is at the heart of the worship of the prints. at urban areas, this is on display at many snack and tea kiosks. This attitude of objectivity supports the idea that these images are a necessary component of an everyday life. People had the impression that they are defending the residences and establishments where they are stored, even when they are not looking at their pictures. Of course, the fact that Indian bazaar images are viewed more as anthropological artefacts than as works of art history is largely responsible for this. Raja Ravi Varma’s opulent “*oil paintings and the lurid, pungent, frequently tatty*” bazaar painting art that adorn Indian walls now are very different from one another. On the other hand, academics are now acknowledging that the value of these prints goes far beyond their monetary worth. Unquestionably, popular prints have a significant role in defining both the collective national identity of India and its visual culture. Raja Ravi Varma’s legacy inspires a fruitful discussion and had a significant impact on the unique aesthetic that not only his paintings but also these prints possess.

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