



Research Article

Re-gendering Art: A Study of Ravi Varma's *Shakuntala Writing a Love Letter on a Lotus Leaf*

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Abstract

As a reflection of social patterns, culture is bound to change and the representations from the past distorted in the present need to be decoded to remove the staleness and fixation on various notions passed as absolute truths. This dichotomy inspires an investigation into an iconic representation of womanhood from the stature of an episode from mythological epic *Mahabharata* and the paintings of Shakuntala by the painter Prince Ravi Varma of erstwhile Travancore in the state of Kerala in colonial India to unravel the stories that characterized popular imagination of women in history. The theoretical framework of aesthetics in the depiction of human forms that define perceptions of gender directs this study to avail a close reading to evaluate the growth of empowerment of women within the dialectics of history and culture. 'Ekphrasis' studies mainly how visual arts are represented in literature and here interestingly visual art becomes the ekphrasis of the written text. A proposal of the theory of 'elimination', the study intends to debunk the societal gaze of the feminine form as fragile hindering the strength of character by analyzing the hidden details in art. The relevance becomes manifold in the twenty-first century as the new generation is ardently trying to break stereotypes. The limitations of binary ideas of masculine and feminine are interwoven mainly with physical characteristics. The pressure to mimic these attributes leads to the exclusion of anything beyond that idea which disturbs the balance of gender equality and justice.

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1. Background

Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* considers myth as a 'language' hence suggestive of the various 'myths' of communicating ideas on gender. This language has transcended time, but the intention has always been to retain power through an oppressive medium in the pretext of sanctioning captivity as heritage. For instance, when did patriarchy, a social system unleash violence against women? As a reflection of social patterns, culture is bound to change and the representations from the past distorted in the present need to be decoded to remove the staleness and fixation on various notions passed as absolute truths and a misfit in a progressive society. The human senses are trained due to conditioning made by repetition thrust upon by a general societal understanding of gender. Equally, ideas are refined to support the outcomes of social interaction to achieve the most suitable environment for survival and understand the flaws in adhering to such notions. This dichotomy inspires an investigation into an iconic representation of womanhood from the stature of an episode from the epic *Mahabharata* and the paintings of Shakuntala by the painter Prince Ravi Varma of erstwhile Travancore in the state of Kerala in colonial India to unravel the stories that characterized popular imagination of women in history. The theoretical framework of aesthetics in the depiction of human forms that define perceptions of gender directs this study to avail a close reading to evaluate the growth of empowerment of women within the dialectics of history and culture.

The dynamics of art lies in the effect of the receivers' emotions subject to change adding to the complexity where meaning is decoded as an evolving process. This is in contradiction to the objective analysis propounded by formalism. Art in antiquity has been subjected overtly to their form contributing to a lapse in comprehending 'modern' in the ancient. Art can be imitative, imaginative, or creative aspects of human intellect and an abstraction of reality as intellect is perfecting the representation to the extent possible and not complete. Recognition of conventions and specifications of visual images correlates to the agenda of the artist as they are embodied in the very conundrum. The elimination of anything that does not remain in the body and is a physiological process has transcended into the idea of 'waste' which upon clearing leads to an understanding of pleasant. Human endeavours are strategically seeking the convenience of this idea of 'pleasant' to garner attention and acceptance. Though the world has been grappling with prejudices based on race, class, caste, species and many more such distinctions, the tendency of the human psyche to sideline in order to ensure self-victory of survival needs to be analyzed. The creativity of mankind has thrived on this dichotomy of removal. There is an innate desire for this removal to please or in contradiction to highlight the substance of removal to initiate dialogues around matters that challenge one's existence, both contributing to a probe on aesthetics. However, aesthetics was limited to positive attributes and hence the detailing that was missed has distorted perceptions and led to wrong idolizations from the past. The study intends to debunk the societal gaze of the feminine form as fragile thereby hindering the strength of character by analyzing the hidden details in art. The relevance becomes manifold in the twenty-first century as the new generation is ardently trying to break stereotypes. The limitations of binary ideas of masculine and feminine are interwoven mainly with physical characteristics. The pressure to mimic these attributes leads to 'elimination' of anything beyond that idea which disturbs the balance of gender equality and justice.

2. The Protagonist

Every culture in the world goes beyond the historical narrative to that of myth though the former is more reliable. Incompleteness in knowledge seeks out validation from all aspects, especially the belief in origin stories. The Indian genealogy is no different, the land has mythological texts like *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* as its pride and many more Vedic texts which have the utmost significance to date. Indian traditions are always foreshadowed by this great body of knowledge. The trajectory of gender roles can be traced back through the many brilliant character sketches in these texts. *Mahabharata* traditionally attributes sage Vyasa as the author. The Pandavas and Kauravas of the Puru clan whose life events become the crux of the text *Mahabharata* dedicates a considerable amount of tracing the ancestral lineage as a task to foreground its conviction. As pointed out by Romila Thapar it was important to maintain the myth of origin, according to which "Bharata is a key figure in the genealogical record as he is among those who consolidate the clans. The story of Shakuntala is significant in the narrative of their ancestors because she was the mother of Bharata" (Thapar,2010,p.12). Irrespectively Thapar also argues that "analyses of the structure and content of the *Mahabharata* have led to the view that the original epic was subjected to many additions and interpolations. Thus two categories of compositions have been recognized, variously called epic and pseudo-epic or narrative and didactic" (Thapar, 2010,p.12).

The depiction of Indian culture through an orientalist gaze worked greatly on imagining Shakuntala in the latter versions of drama as well as the iconic muse of art works. The didacticism which sculpts the image of Shakuntala in the mythological texts becomes an addition to the initiation of the creation of the woman as torch bearers of tradition. However, the analysis was misinterpreted as a close reading would point out facts such as her intelligence, agency, and reluctance to be submissive even when the King refuses to acknowledge their liaison. Later in the narrative, he discloses that as a king he had the duty to convince his subjects about how she was equal to him in every aspect and had all the qualities to become his queen and didn't want them to belittle her as a mere object of desire. He willingly offers wealth and power to her to be his wife. She becomes an exemplar of womanhood endowed with dignity and self-respect and rightfully obtains what is hers through her ability to communicate, which somehow has fluxed in the course of time and marginalized. The strong woman that Shakuntala was epitomizes her at the centre of origin stories. However, the implications of her elevated status due to her giving birth to a son who would rule the kingdom in the future juxtaposes the present-day identity of women who are forced to take a back seat in all facets of life and be applauded when the strength of women is associated mainly with nurture. Perhaps more exploration of the ideas of gender beyond the available sources from myth or history would reinstate how gender has been politicized for building societies and the disadvantages that accompany if we continue to embrace the same.

3. The Artist, Raja Ravi Varma

The translation of Shakuntala from mythology to the pages of literature as in Kalidasa's play *Abhijnanasakuntalam* gave a limited understanding of her. This hindrance was lifted by the artist Raja Ravi Varma who brought her to life via his canvas intersecting the verbal and visual. The theory of 'ekphrasis' studies mainly how visual arts are represented in literature and here

interestingly visual art becomes the ekphrasis of the literary text thereby enhancing the artist's deep rootedness to the mythical and historical past of his belonging. An episode from a culturally popular text in antiquity to a popular dramatist Kalidasa's version, rendering timeless quality to the subject Shakuntala exemplified the prominence of the female subject manifold in the artistic rendition by Ravi Varma sanctioning Shakuntala as persona of strength and character throughout history till present times. To deconstruct the social environment and the role of women in the past a re-examining of the portrait elicits perspectives of an artwork taken for granted and as being self-sufficient.

Historian Manu S Pillai's *The Ivory Throne* dedicates a chapter in due respect to the painter prince observing the many facets of his illustrious career as a great artist of colonial India. The Maharajah through marriage was connected to Ravi Varma's family of country aristocrats who had the honour of lording a huge chunk of land given at the behest of the king. This eased his arrival in the royal court in Trivandrum and his journey towards the title of the most accomplished and world-renowned artist. A very tough competition to his successors who had to finally believe that the style and sophistication of Ravi Varma to date remained solely with him. He was educated in Sanskrit and Malayalam by the age of fourteen and had a keen sense of music, drama and was prodigious in painting. The tradition of his "clan to marry princesses of Travancore and to spend the remainder of their days in splendid luxury" (Pillai,2015, p.29) was a comfort that allowed him to polish his skills under many patrons, tutors, and audience. He was also fortunate to get the benevolence of the Maharajah. Pillai also points out an important factor that Ravi Varma's royal lineage benefitted him more than his talent and effort and "distinguished him from the legions of nameless artists and painters in India" (Pillai,2015,p.31). The initiation of collaboration for Ravi Varma with the West was with the arrival of the Danish painter Theodore Jensen at the Travancore court. Pillai supports E.M.J Venniyur's findings that the Maharajahs were keen to cultivate British tastes and thus entertained Europeans and sometimes artists who were not successful back home to find newer opportunities in India and gain appreciation as well as wealth. The Danish painter wasn't any different from the early tutors and was unwelcoming, prompting Ravi Varma to excel on his own perseverance. His intentions to make a living out of art did not go down well with the Varma aristocracy to which he belonged as they were once the ruling class and had;

...no precedent of any of them having worked at all, leave alone working as a painter, which was seen more as a profession of lowborn artisans...Maharajah came to Ravi Varma's rescue. Declaring that art was divine, he gave the painter his blessings and wholehearted encouragement. Reinvigorated by royal support (and the attendant silencing of the conservative faction), Ravi Varma went on a forty-one-day pilgrimage to Mookambika and propitiated the goddess Sarasvati. On his way back, in what was seen as a good omen, he received his first paid commission from a High Court Judge in Malabar, the northern portion of Kerala, once the domain of the Zamorin and now under direct British administration. He was hereafter officially a professional painter. (Pillai, 2015)

His successful international liaisons began when his painting *Nair Lady at the Toilet* won the gold medal at the Fine Arts Exhibition sponsored by Lord Hobart, the Governor of Madras and became a new sensation. The painting was also sought after in Vienna gaining headlines in all leading dailies. Sir Monier Monier – William's translated work *AbhijnanaSakuntalam* was adorned with the iconic *Sakuntala's love letter* as the frontispiece. This height of glory was preceded with a lull

period in Ravi Varma's artistic career with the death of Ayilyam Tirunal, the reigning Maharajah of Travancore. His patronage slowly drifted towards other states making him more popular across India and retaining his reputation as a brilliant artist and a representative of Indian talent par excellence.

Ravi Varma tried to bring life to the imagination of tales from Hindu mythology "depicted on the walls of temples and in the murals at his family home" (Pillai, 2015,p.30). Nevertheless, these paintings had in them perspectives beyond the epitome of aesthetics that lay bare to naked eyes and questioning what art means to an ordinary person and whether familiar contents in them delight the audience. In this manner, Ravi Varma's paintings cater mainly to the ordinary in extraordinary aesthetics. The perfection especially of the portraits, rendering life-like qualities became the experience of any person who had a glimpse of his work. Proximity is felt towards the artist as his subject displayed similar imaginative aspirations capable of forming in any human mind getting what they are seeking, an ultimate form and an ideal of aesthetic experience. Pillai points out an important fact that it was Ravi Varma's eldest daughter Mahaprabha whose beauty was synonymous with an artist's dream that inspired him to feature her in his famous painting, *There Comes Papa* (1893) and thereafter representing his image of goddesses and celestial beauties.



Figure 1

In the context of giving a form to the iconic woman Shakuntala from *Mahabharatha* to subsequently Kalidasa's Shakuntala, popularity is credited to the canvas of Ravi Varma and to the project of lithograph press initiated by him that enabled the access to art to common households thereby giving face to characters left to the imagination of only literate people who devoured its literary substitutes. Pillai documents this fact that "by 1876, the Governor of Madras was collecting his work, and his *Sakuntala's Love Letter* was sought by Sir Monier Monier – Williams as frontispiece for his famous translation of the Sanskrit *Abhijnana Sakuntalam*. The painting titled *Shakuntala writing a love letter on a lotus leaf* is at present housed at the Ashmolean museum, University of Oxford's Museum of Art and Archeology founded in 1683. The detailing about the painting as in the archives is quoted below:

"early and restrained example of Ravi Varma's mythological style, one of several treatments which he made of the Śakuntalā theme. It is believed to have been given to the Indian Institute in the 1880s by the Maharaja of Baroda, one of the artist's most important patrons. Monier-Williams published a colour reproduction of it by W. Griggs as the frontispiece to the fifth edition of his translation of Śakuntalā in 1887. Śakuntalā, the beautiful foster daughter of a forest hermit, who has met the king on a hunting expedition and fallen in love with him, is here shown, in the third Act of the play, pining for him and, at the instigation of her two companions, writing a love-letter to him on a lotus leaf. (The King, who has been eavesdropping, thereupon reveals himself and the couple declare their love; afterwards, following a long separation caused by an ascetic's curse, they are in the end united.)

Śakuntalā, who is the most strongly painted of the three figures, gazes demurely in thought as she composes the letter, exhibiting the little of the consuming passion evoked in Kālidāsa's verses. This decorous creature most of all suggests the banality of Ravi Varma's conception. Nevertheless, while today it is perhaps his portrait paintings that we can most admire, Ravi Varma's whole oeuvre has to be taken into account in any study of the development of modern painting in India."

(<http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/object/EAX.2502>)

4. Matrilineal Society

From *Mahabharata*, the great Indian epic to a literary connoisseur Kalidasa's adaptation to the brilliant paintings of Ravi Varma, Shakuntala has travelled across the world and has found a distinguishable persona blurring the lines of the myth and reality of being a woman. The male gaze and the resultant depiction of intelligence, a character of assertion of desire and decisions needs to be highlighted rather than the charisma absorbed by the audience which was mostly the subject of discussion to date. The information that follows would give an understanding of what conditioned such perceptions in the artist as the oeuvre of an artist is a blend of imagination and knowledge from lived experience. Ravi Varma's birth and growth in a matrilineal system which considered women equally capable of governance and his persistent support for this proposition proves his respect and notion of gender equality in his craft which is even a challenge in modern society. A matter to be considered here is whether the artist's accomplishment in the social

paradigm parallels the desire for satisfaction envisioned from the project embarked on. In that case, the portrayal of Shakuntala and the motive behind a certain way of representation or giving life to the subject could have been manipulated by the anxieties of conforming to societal standards as well as the courage to depart from those traditions and invent a new confident woman with agency.

Robin Jeffrey observes that the matrilineal system of old Kerala was highly responsible for the onslaught of a good section of girls having access to education and thereafter pursuing a career and becoming empowered though later it was 'disintegrated'. The liberty enjoyed by most women or the aspirations for the same is reflected in the confident personas of images by the artist Ravi Varma whose lineage stands as testimony to the positive aspects of the same system. As evidence Jeffrey cites the years after progression documented by the American economic historian Morris David Morris indicating the wellbeing of the population of Kerala on three parameters such as infant mortality, life expectancy and basic literacy leading to "a tolerable 'quality of life'...the potential to improve the quality"(Jeffrey, 1992, p. 8) and the fact that the experience of Kerala was not due to the inflow of foreign funds or knowledge rather strategic institution building plan over a long period with dedicated efforts and expertise of a learned population contributing to the state's wellbeing. This sums up Amartya Sen's idea of 'public action' which Jeffrey explains as "social conditions in which large numbers of its people could organize and agitate and in which girls went to school and women got jobs, the conditions would exist in which measures of wellbeing could be extracted from governments." (Jeffrey, 1992, p. xxxviii). Hence, Jeffrey's *Politics, Women and Well – Being* exemplifies the 'Kerala model' giving due credit to a substitute from the past;

"that matriliney in old Kerala did not mean *matriarchy*. Women did not rule families; old men did. But women were essential in tracing the lineage of families, women's names identified families and women had an assured share of their family's property and a place under its roof. And because these were the practices of higher, well-off, powerful castes, they were the practices to which others also aspired." (Jeffrey, 1992)

Remodelling of societies which for so long echoed oppressive measures meted out to women that the existence of a glorious past that involved women making their choices in life is unbelievable. The male dominance in the field of art and literature is susceptible to the dilemma of reality versus imagination in the depiction of womanhood. However, to some extent, the relatability of the present is through the prism of the past. Taking into consideration the prominence of female subjects in the paintings of Ravi Varma more so than any other artists of his time in the eastern region it documents the demographics of social identities as observed in "Naked Truths about Classical Arts: An Introduction" by Lyons and Ostrow where it is stated that;

Because the construction of gender shifts depending on status, class, ethnicity, culture, and other factors, it is revealing to look at the evidence from the viewpoint of audience reception. Here the visual articles may be particularly useful, not only because of their narrative / didactic intent, but also because how they are seen and interpreted by different audiences reveals much about the underlying message. In this way, gender can be viewed as a performance that is re-enacted or manipulated according to the needs of individuals and communities. The symbolism of clothing and jewelry, whether employed to conceal ,

accent or expose the body beneath , carried clear and immediately legible messages for the viewer concerning not only the reproductive and erotic availability of the wearer , but also her or his position within community , social, and family hierarchies . Through the displacement of attributes, styles of dress, gesture, and "body language," artists are able to signal disapproval and the consequences of transgressing social boundaries. (Lyons & Ostrow, eds., 1997)

The painting in discussion is deeply rooted in the cultural ethos that the viewer is anticipated to have minimal knowledge to understand the communication intended by the artist. The mythological inferences shared through the community give prerequisite knowledge of the stories shared through its visual representation enhancing the emotional quotient more than an auditory percept. Here the artist has perfected an identity construction of women who lived in the sanctity of a spiritual abode. Nevertheless, she is ordained with embellishments like jewellery as evidence of the material culture but a substitute for forest products such as flowers rather than the precious gems or metals used by people in a domesticated way of life. For a woman, these adornments were necessary as it was hugely responsible for marking gender. The differences in the quality of the attire for instance the shade of gold worn by Shakuntala distinguishes her from the other two women marking her as the protagonist of the visual easily identifiable by the viewers. The backdrop of a dense forest and the presence of deer are all components of mythological references. The distraught expression on Shakuntala's face also indicates which moment in the story it is. Here we have a woman who considers communicating her pangs of separation from her beloved husband her right and does not shy away or immerse herself in misery. She is trying to find a solution and there is support from the other women as well who are equally engrossed and sharing the same feelings and perhaps guiding her. The backdrop of the dense forest in which the artist has positioned his subjects displays the familiarity the subjects have for the same and dictates their home environment. Hence, equating the woman to a raw essence of life that began in the wilderness but is not far removed from the ideas of modern life that stemmed from it in terms of form and emotions. The human characters are very relatable, and the landscape indicates the setting as primitive documenting the stories adage to it in the mythology of India. The images of women are ideals of aesthetics which are analyzed in relation to the concept of the male gaze in Shelby Brown's "Ways of Seeing Women in Antiquity" describing Mulvey's explanation of it as "a world "ordered by sexual imbalance," in which pleasurable looking is split between active/male and passive /female. She identifies a "determining male gaze," which projects its fantasy on to a female figure who connotes "to -be-looked-at-ness." (Brown, 1997, p.17). Since Shakuntala is an imagined persona the liberty to devote the beauty of utmost penchant is justified for a visual treat but at the same time there is a hidden viewer malevolence of a beautiful woman in distress being more appealing and capable of evoking more emotions. Beauty plays a pivotal role in the confidence exhumed by her in reclaiming her lost love who is under a curse of memory loss and it becomes the task of the woman in the picture to go through this misery, pour out her agony into words and send it to her beloved with the hope of revoking the relationship which is displayed as more important to her than the man in question. The woman bearing more brunt and the expected norms of her reaction to her separation from her loved one could be a harbinger of the artist's gendered conception more than how a woman

should in reality react to such situations in her life. Brown elaborates on the fact that investigation on the representation of women in antiquity began with:

...Identifying the intended viewer of both popular and high art in modern Western society became the first step in a process of seeing art and art history through new eyes. The spectator of high art was traditionally white, male, well-educated and well off, and his dominance in choosing the subjects of art and establishing artistic canons effectively excluded others from doing so. Seeing, assumed by many to be the simple act of taking in with the eyes visual facts about the world and the beautiful, became a loaded term. By the early 1980s, the word "gaze" had often come to signify an author's awareness that both the subjects an artist chooses, and how one views them, depend on who has power in society. Women became aware of themselves as excluded "others" within art history. (Brown, 1997)

5. The New Woman

Ravi Varma's representation of Shakuntala subjects it to varied contemplations such as giving a human form to a celestial nymph as a desire to have proximity with the idea of the divine. Another consideration could be the pressure of an artist to succumb to the demands of the profession to make art appealing to a specific audience or an urge to epitomize or give a signature style of representation on his canvas. This could be construed with the theory of Rasa (sentiments) which has been used to analyze art in India since early times. The word rasa is significant in daily living practices as something which literally means essence or finesse. The one who provides as well as the ones who receive equally partakes in the creation of this essence. Bharatha, who is the known proponent of the development of this theory applies it mainly to productions on stage, nevertheless, its tenets prove its application in art of all kinds. As it is pointed out by connoisseurs how aspects of colours are deeply embedded in this theory, making it apt for analyzing paintings and the real purpose behind an artist's rendition. Aesthetic experience is thus the complete involvement where everything else becomes insignificant. Goswamy opines in *Essence of Indian Art*, "the durable emotional state that is subtly brought into being by or through a work of art is one thing: its transmutation into a rasa is dependent upon the energy, the inner ability, the singleness of heart of the rasika. The faculty of imagination and wonder is greatly emphasized" (Goswamy, 1986, p.24).

Ravi Varma's painting *Shakuntala writing a love letter on a lotus leaf* is thus an embodiment of his imagination of a woman from a very distant past placed in terms of physical attributes in the context of what his probable understanding of a woman, decked up in what he understood was the paraphernalia of the times contested as the backdrop of the story. Finally, an expectation conditioned by what a woman ought to be which might seem universal as well as specific to a timeline that he lived in and the brilliant juxtaposition of it in his art.

Communicating realities to the audience although encompasses an aesthetics mirroring the intellect of the artist however is not devoid of the facet of 'elimination', a theory proposed to understand the tendency at the core of every human activity to create, excel and flourish dialectically sculpting norms of the unwanted in the making. The interesting fact remains that

Sakuntala's identity is transgressing due to the aesthetic chiselling in terms of this elimination and is evident in the rapid embodiment of a capitalist surge found in the relation to self in terms of tangibility.

The objectification of women seems to follow a pattern that accumulated both literally and metaphorically aspects of cliched ideas about beauty and the anxiety of enhancing the same. The case with masculinity is of similar characteristics but intelligence and strength are weighed over the notion of beauty, both as disadvantageous for society at large. This puts the understanding of gender in jeopardy with norms of identifying an important task for a society as well as in a narrow sense erasing the potential capabilities of human beings given due negligence. Hence, an improved understanding of gender with the passage of time should entail the shifting of focus towards the story rather than external appearances. Aesthetics in human dilemma and existence with a shift in gaze can realign the oppressive structures and reaffirm the need for variants and the idea that every being exists for a will of its own.

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