SEXIST STRATEGIES:

THE POLITICS OF RAVI VARMA'S ART MAKING.

Dissertation Submitted to the School of Languages, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the award of the Degree of

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the Dissertation titled ***Sexist Strategies: The Politics of Ravi Varma's Art Making*** submitted by **BABITHA JUSTIN** for the award of the Degree of Master of Philosophy is her original work, and it has not been submitted previously for the award of any degree of this or any other university.

We recommend that this dissertation may be placed before the examiners for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy.

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CHAPTER I

NARRATION OF A NATION

Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906), eulogized as the 'Prince among painters' for his aristocratic birth as well as his coveted position in the realm of Indian fine arts, was born in a small village of Kilimanoor in the princely state of Travancore. But as his biographies say, he traveled all over India to fathom and expand the recesses of his artistic knowledge. This dissertation tries to locate Ravi Varma in his historical and social circumstances and analyze the evolution of his art during a highly transitional phase in the history of India (1870-1910). This was a period when the coercive urges of modernization merged with the forces of a rapidly developing awareness of an indigenous nationalistic tradition in literature and arts. Partha Chatterjee, in ***The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and PostColonial Histories,*** traces the birth of nationalism in India after the formation of Indian National Congress in 1885. The preceding period from 1820-1870 in Indian history was important in the sense that it expedited widespread social reforms, the

acceptance of Western Education among the Indian elite and paved the way for an assimilation of utilitarian values from the West. During that time the British had begun to 'modernize' various facets of Indian society and Indians were very much attuned to the Western impulses which tried to 'civilize' and 'educate' the natives. As I place Ravi Varma in his socio-historic surroundings, it is necessary for me to take a look at the operations of the so-called phase of nationalism. According to Partha Chatterjee, nationalism is "part of a social, intellectual and moral revolution of which the aspiration of democracy and personal freedom are also products."[1]

In the broad context of Indian Nationalism, a highly evolved spiritual formula was wrought out as the rudimentary step in countering the westernizing tendencies of the British. This began with the unconscious division of "the world of social institutions and practices into two domains - the material and the spiritual. The material domain is the world 'outside', of economy and of stagecraft, of science and technology; a domain where the West has proved its superiority and power and the

[1] Partha Chatterjee, ***Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World***. New Delhi: OUP,1986.p.3

East had succumbed... The spiritual, on the other hand, is an "inner" domain bearing the essential marks of cultural identity. The greater one's success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one's spiritual cultures."[2] Thus, operating within the domains of an 'inner' and 'spiritual' territory, Indian nationalists drew a powerful and creative project emphasizing the traditional ethos of a culture which corresponded with the notions of the modernity, yet totally distinct from the Western/European traditions.

Chatterjee explains how Western scholarship and print capitalism made regional languages "a zone over which the nation first had to declare its sovereignty and then had to transform in order to make it adequate for the modern world" (1984, p. 96). In Kerala, this modernizing trend began with the acknowledgement of Sanskrit literature as the center and source of Indian literature. (Simultaneously, new genre forms like the novels were also experimented with.) I will explore in the third chapter how the tendencies of assimilation and

[2] Partha Chatterjee, ***The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Post-colonial Histories.*** Delhi: OUP, 1994. p.6.

dissemination in early 'modern' Malayalam literature influenced Ravi Varma's art.

The Indian encounter with the enlacing web of a new body of colonial knowledge resulted in an aspiration for indigenous social and cultural storehouses in which one can draw from as well as bask in. Five thousand years of a glorious past instilled nostalgia as well as a foundation on which the Indian nationalists could devise the project of the 'modern'. After literature, which traced itself to the homogenizing facet of Sanskrit language, art became the specific arena where they could flaunt a definitive aesthetics which was 'national' and indigenous.

Another trend, which was a corollary of nationalistic expressions, was the British interest in Indian art. The Great Exhibition of London in 1851 was a tremendous success and this event led to a colonial curiosity about the variety and intricacy of Indian craftsmanship. This also meant a decline in the demand of Western art products, in London, which mainly thrived on hackneyed stereotypes and dull imitations. This interest was the direct outcome of an orientalist exoticisation that fixed a hawk's eye on the market value of Indian products and this in turn inspired an

analytical curiosity on the patterning of Indian art. "Orient appeared as system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness and later the Western empire."[3] For the first time in history, as a result of the 'interests' of British art historians, Indian art was assiduously divided into various phases like the Hindu, Buddhist and the Mughal periods. Till then the Indian art scenario was widely scattered, heterogeneous and unpreserved. So much so that its sudden disruptive aesthetic appeal unearthed precious artifacts from its recesses, neatly divided them into chronological and methodological sequences and splendid pieces were sent for preservation - mostly to art museums and private drawing rooms in London.

There were two streams of art historians. The first was led by Henry Cole and James Fergusson and the second group was led by Ernest Binfield Havell and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. "To the first, classical art was the exemplar of perfect taste against which all periods of Indian arts were judged. Therefore, by definition even the highest from of

[3]Edward Said, ***Orientalism.*** UK: Vintage, 1977. p.27.

Indian art was inferior to the classical. The second group denied for the first time the unquestioned supremacy of classical art which it did not consider to be superior to the best Indian art."[4] These denunciations and glorification furnished the terrain in which Orientalist interests sprouted and grew in the realm of Indian art. These were the same paradoxical conjunctions that nurtured astute nationalistic impulses resulting from the British initiative to civilize the native artisans. The Western art connoisseurs, in the latter half of 19th century, looked down on Indian art as lacking moral discipline and technical precision. The establishment of Art Schools in India by the British had for its main political objective, the mass production of oriental art as a marketable commodity for the Western market. This necessitated the 'refining' and 'correcting' of the 'profane' taste of Indian artists so as to make the artifacts malleable to suit the tastes of a Victorian consumer. According to Partha Mitter, the elementary levels of instruction in the art schools began with the introduction of a mathematical perspective and geometric schemata. This was followed by classes which trained pupils in shaded

[4] Partha Mitter, Much Maligned Monsters: History of European Reactions to Indian Art. Oxford: Clarendon, 1977. p.256.

drawing. Though not a product of British art schools, Ravi Varma was influenced by new perspectives in drawing and new techniques in painting. The adaptation of these western styles heightened the artist's fame in India and among the British 'art lovers'. For Indians he acquired legendary proportions because he used the master's weapon ingeniously; for the British he was one of the subjects who followed the rules and painted India in a marketable way.

Painting in oil, the preserve of the court painters from Europe, was condescendingly handed down to the Indian student as part of the academic curriculum. This gave in fact a technical and methodological advantage to Indian art students who were exposed, until then, only to traditional methods of art making. Ravi Varma was informally instructed in the traditional way akin to the techniques used in the mural paintings of Tanjore and the Padmanabhapuram palace. His uncle Raja Raja Varma, who was himself a painter, took pains to usher his nephew into the world of paintings through the use of traditional techniques. "Painting in those days meant primarily painting pictures of gods and goddesses and sequences from religious lore on the walls of temples and palaces, and

sometimes on glass and ivory, with the crude vegetable and mineral dyes the artists themselves made from leaves, flowers, barks and seeds such as *kunni* and *manchadi*, mineral earths like *manayola*, the white of the egg and olive oil."[5] In fact, Raja Raja Varma introduced him to the prestigious court of Travancore. Ravi Varma belonged to the second generation of Indian court painters in the state of Travancore . Alagiri Naidu and Ramaswamy Naicker who hailed from Tanjore belonged to the first. In the Indian art scenario, this was a time when an institutional space was created for the artists as their function was neatly distinguished from that of the artisans. Till then the artists and the artisans were an amorphous whole and there was hardly any distinction between their manual, constructive and creative skills. Their contribution to the vast resources of Indian art remained unacknowledged and unrecognised. Their identities remained unknown as they were merely known as anonymous artists/artisans due to the specific attributes given to artifacts of different dynasties and ages.

[5] E. M. J. Venniyoor, ***Raja Ravi Varma***. Govt of Kerala, 1981. p.3.

In the court of Travancore Ravi Varma was exposed to oil painting. Though not technically and formally instructed, it has been blown to mythical proportions how the artist learned oil painting from the Dutch painter Theodore Jensen and Ramaswamy Naicker, who were reluctant to impart their knowledge to the young artist. After relying on self-instruction for nine years, Ravi Varma was initiated into oil painting began in the 1870s. From 1870 to 1885, he remained a dependent of the court of Travancore and painted the portraits of his patrons, mainly the Maharaja, his relatives and the British officials in the nation state. In between he sent many paintings abroad which exoticised women, especially in relation to the matrilineal society in Kerala, and these paintings won much praise and acclaim there. In the following decades, he traveled extensively to the North, Central and South India, studying Indian history and the variety of Indian customs, costumes, styles of living etc. In between, he was stationed in Kerala with his family, but as he had fallen out of favour with the rulers who succeeded Ayilyam Thirunal, Moolam Thirunal and Vishakam Thirunal, he had to keep a respectful distance from the Travancore Palace. The Diwan of

Travancore at that time, Sir T. Madhava Rao, introduced his paintings to Sayajirao Gaekwad of Baroda. Gaekwad commissioned Ravi Varma to make portraits and a series of paintings on mythological themes. The awakening of a nationalistic consciousness was diligently inscribed in his paintings in a stylized cultural mystification of India around the same time.

Presently, Ravi Varma's paintings are scattered throughout the country, art museums, private collections and palaces in various places like Thiruvananthapuram, Baroda, Pune, Bombay, Mysore, Madras, Delhi etc. Because they are scattered throughout the country (probably abroad also) and due to the lack of historical material proving the date of these paintings, they suffer the misfortune of being improperly dated. The chronological details can be gleaned only from the scantily available background materials, biographies written much later and mostly from the dates inscribed by the artist himself. No one definitely knows how many paintings Ravi Varma has painted in all and where exactly they are. Due to the chronological uncertainties in locating Ravi Varma's paintings, I do not intend to base my analysis according to the sequential dates of

the paintings. This dissertation deals with a few selected paintings. In the case of some mythological paintings also, chronological order will be avoided, rather I will group them under a common period with sufficient evidence gleaned from his biographies. The inaccessibility of the x-ray photographs of Varma's paintings has also been a major handicap because many original details and intentions of the paintings are lost that way and only surface meanings could be salvaged from them.

The first chapter will deal with genre paintings like ***The Lady Holding a Fruit, Lady at the Ball Game, Sakuntala's Love at First Sight, The Reaper, In Contemplation*** and ***Lady in Prison***. These paintings cannot be dissociated from the social, historical and cultural contexts related to nationalism or the building of an imaginative topos with a series of encoded canons that appropriated the notions of an indigenous, aesthetic culture. Tapti Guha Thakurta, an eminent art historian, sees in Varma's paintings "a sharp sense of a break with the past which coexisted with an urge to selectively appropriate elements of that past (revived, refined and reimagined by nationalism) in the devising

of new artistic idioms."[6] This was the point of a historic disruption when the two equal forces of modernization and the nostalgic unearthing of a rich past resulted in a new kind of three dimensional art, with oil as its medium, that represented the quintessence of 'Indianness' from an ethical, cultural and religious point of view. Ravi Varma's travels throughout India, in fact, gave him an exposure to the diversities of the national culture and from the mental retention of variegated images, he created a rarified 'ideal' that incorporated homogenizing factors. These homogenizing factors corresponded with 'upper' class elitist notions of beauty and taste, though they have been categorized as 'universal'. Varma carefully excluded the two dimensional flatness and simple natural dyes of traditional art and adopted a suave realism verging on illusionism. This illusionism moulded a symbolic construction of Indianness and through the same technique a cultural levitation and glorification of India was made possible. "Illusionist oil painting had empowered Ravi Varma with a means of capturing the physical presence of the painted object and rendering it tangible to the viewer. Where women's images

[6] Tapati Guha Thakurtha, "Ravi Varma and the Project of New National Art." ***Making of a New Indian Art***. CUP: 1992. p.4.

were concerned, the technique allowed him to play up the sensuality and fullness of women's bodies, as well as the tactile gloss of their costumes and their jewellery. It may be observed here, that the artist, as he moved into painting such genre subjects, had before him two kinds of visual models. One model was, no doubt, provided by the aristocratic ladies who inhabited his social world and the women who posed for him in his studio. Another model was found in the images of women that abounded in Victorian genre and French neo-classical paintings ... He is said to have been particularly drawn towards two allegorical paintings of the French salon artist, William Adolph Bouguereau (1825-1905), 'Birth of Venus' and 'Charity'.... "(Thakurta, 48-49).

The fashioning of the woman's body according to Indian parameters of beauty and simultaneously accommodating Western ideals and techniques in art within those indigenous boundaries were the major challenges Varma faced as a pioneer in the history of modern Indian art. The union of the incongruous Western ideals and Eastern themes presents the female body in Varma's paintings as the site of cultural complexities, differences and ambiguities. My first chapter analyses the

'female body' in Ravi Varma paintings in its various sophisticated connotations. These layers of meanings range from the issues of gender, caste, colour and class. In my analysis of ***A Woman Holding a Fruit*** and ***Lady at a Ball Game***, I will try to interpret the function of the women's body as the bearer of 'look' and the difference between separate acts of looking and being looked at.

John Berger observes:

> ... *men* act and *women* appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object-and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.[7]

According to Berger, the woman on canvas becomes the object for the spectator to be surveyed as she becomes the passive bearer of look. But in the two paintings I have analysed, I would like to highlight the

[7] John Berger, ***Ways of Seeing***. UK: BBC and Penguin Books, 1972. p.214.

aspect of the active agency of the woman represented in the frame. In fact, I would like to analyse the simultaneous 'empowerment' and 'weakening' of the male gaze due to the return gaze of the woman and due to the subtle sexual display. Ravi Varma was faced with certain difficulties in representing 'nudity' on the canvas. This problem was solved by the employment of contortions and blurring out on a woman's body. These aspects narrate a fragile foundation in which the male gaze experiences the theatrical tensions of gaining and losing power. Here, in fact, the subject becomes an active agent because she is not fully contained or controlled either by the artist or the spectator: "the female... *exceeds* her characterization by men, and this excess is not simply the result of external analysis by feminist spectators but in fact is inherent in the object itself."[8]

In ***Sakuntala*** the spectator is disempowered by the presence of Dusyanta, though he does not appear in the picture. Sakuntala's and Dusyanta's glances intertwine outside the frame of the painting, thus Dusyanta gains the stature of the 'possessor' of Sakuntala's body. This

[8] Richard Leppart, Art and the Committed Eye: The Cultural Functions of Imagery. USA: Westview press, 1996. p.214.

aspect also questions the relation between 'seeing' and 'possessing' with regard to the spectator, who is placed outside the purview of the internal narrative of the picture. Simultaneously, Sakuntala in endowed with special bodily charms that ensure for her the focus of the spectator. These charms include Sakuntala's physical beauty, her skin tone, her drapery and her flowery ornaments which are set in a deep contrast with that of her sakhis who almost fade away in the background. In the next painting, ***The Reaper***, the woman's body bears major caste differences. Here too the skin colour becomes a major issue where the 'darkness' of the reaper carries encoded motives for questioning the 'standard' of beauty created through the depiction of aristocratic ladies created by the artist. These standards were in tune with the aesthetic concepts of a fast emerging middle class of art patrons and British connoisseurs. Secondly, he was questioning the social structure and conditions of that time by representing a semi-naked menial body. But here Varma's questioning of the disparities within the class/caste structure does not necessarily imply a revolutionary subversion of the whole axle of aesthetics on which his paintings are based. Painting a

half-naked labourer cowed down by labour means questioning the institutional norms to a certain extent; yet, he was partially accepting the rules and regulations of the time without completely upsetting the aesthetic yardsticks embedded deep within the needs and demands of his patrons. ***In Contemplation*** and ***Lady in the Prison*** narrate the displacement of bodies in the space they are situated. In these paintings, women are placed in between two spaces; the inner spaces indicate a confinement which varies from domestic and physical to geographic, and the outer spaces are limited by the imposing structures of a colonial presence.

In the second chapter, I have analyzed how the borderlines between history and mythology traverse in Ravi Varma's paintings to constitute the narration of a nation's nostalgic remnants. The sense of nostalgia and craving for a supposedly innocent and harmonious time in the past, challenge and displace the usual tropes of a 'masculine symbol of nationhood with ideal images of femininity created from the rich repertoire of Hindu mythologies. Varma's sources were the popular epic-texts like the ***Ramayana*** and the ***Mahabharata.*** His pictorial

representation of epic themes followed a large-scale revival of Sanskrit literature in Malayalam. This was preceded by the implementation of the British Educational Policy in 1835 in Kerala. Historically, Kerala was equally wooed by three imperial powers - the French, the Dutch and the British. The British were the last to come soon after Tipu Sultan's invasion *(Padayottam)* of the Northern part of Kerala. As a part of the British ascendancy widespread English education was imposed on the state. The first English School in Kerala in 1834 had brought about a series of academic documentations of Malayalam literature by the Europeans. In 1841, Benjamin Bailey published the first Malayalam-English Dictionary. This was followed by Herman Gundert's publication of the famous Malayalam Dictionary in 1872. A Printing press was also established in 1839 in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of Travancore and the center of literary activities of the Malayalam speaking regions. The introduction of English education in the state, invigorated interests in a unifying national literature. In 1866, under the leadership of Ayilyam Thirunal Maharaja of Travancore and Diwan Sir T. Madhava Rao, a Book Committee was set up to look into the compilation of (1) text books, (2)

Vijnana Manjari (encyclopedia), (3) travelogues on India (4) the history of England, (5) Indian history (6) the history of Travancore (7) Geographical mappings of the region, (8) Economic analysis, (9) Science and Maths books, and (10) books on temple affairs. Geographic, regional, religious and linguistic concerns surfaced along with this major reconstitution of the academic scene in Kerala. Kerala Varma Valiya Koil Thampuran was appointed as part of a translation group commissioned by the government in 1867. Kerala Varma, known as the Modern Kalidasa of Kerala, brought in a major shift in Malayalam literature (which was still under the influence of the Bhakti movement), by translating Kalidasa's ***Abhijnana Sakuntalam*** as ***Manipravala Sakuntalam*** in 1882. This was for the first time that the drama as a genre was introduced and a series of Kalidas epics (***Meghasandesam, Bhasha Kumarasambhavam***, etc) were translated. Kerala Varma's nephew A.R. Raja Raja Varma continued the string of literary translations and experiments with the epic form. This period from 1875 to the 1900s witnessed a new interest in experimentation, the revival of old texts, the creations of new genres in the regional language (novel for example) and the compilation of linguistic

and grammar texts. A series of Kathakali *Padams* was also created during this time. The reign of Swati Thirunal of Travancore (1824-47), known as the golden age of Kathakali literature promoted composers like Irayimman Thampi (1783-186) and Vidwan Koil Thampuran (1825-57). Irayimman Thampi's ***Uttara Swayamvaram*** and ***Kichaka Vadham*** had inspired Ravi Varma to create many mythological frames. At the same time, ***Sakuntalam*** inspired Varma to paint a series of pictures of Sakuntala; from her birth to her fateful day-dreaming. I shall focus my attention on two mythical characters, namely Sakuntala and Draupadi and see how they are portrayed by Ravi Varma. I shall also focus on the similarity of Ravi Varma's Sakuntala to Kalidasa's creation rather than to her portrayal in the 'Adiparva' of the ***Mahabharata***. I would also like to explore how differently Draupadi had been portrayed from the original version in the ***Mahabharata***. This includes an analysis of how women are conveniently symbolised during the nationalistic phase, how the symbolisms became part of a nationalistic discourse, how the mythological characters are moulded to suit the linguistic, regional and national ideals and how an active male discourse is written into the whole

narrative which defines the male as the agency which authenticates specific ideals in history. I would also like to highlight the fact that Varma ignored the folklore of Kerala and privileged Sanskrit canonical texts and at the same time enriched his historical representations with a generous amount of regional colouring.

In my conclusion, I would like to analyse the portrait of ***Rani Lakshmi Bai***. After summing up I would like to give a brief account on a painter who was totally overshadowed by Ravi Varma. This painter, Mangala Bai Thampuratty, was Varma's was own sister and she was a person with considerable talent. Only two of her paintings are accessible to the public. One is the portrait of her brother and the other is of an instance of charity. This chapter deals with the recent rhetorical question of Linda Nochlin, "Why have there been no great women artists?" My primary interest and sympathies were with Mangala Bai whose naturalism or nearness to life in the painting '***Charity***' ignited a profound interest in her paintings. But then, the lack of biographical details, and inaccessibility and lack of information about her other paintings, or her possible collaboration in other paintings made working on

her works next to impossible. My thesis is a tribute to Mangala Bai and the conclusion deals with a more comprehensive account of the socio-cultural positioning of women at that time, how the interest of an overall patriarchal setup subdued and the repressed the artistic aspirations of the 'other' sex and how even contemporary art history, which boasts about unearthing the unnoticed talents of the periphery, ignores completely the existence of women painters like Mangala Bai.

CHAPTER II

THE BODY AND AMBIGUITIES

Raja Ravi Varma's artistic career began with portrait drawings, which was in fact the first step a struggling professional artist had to take due to his reliance on patronage. In his later periods he moved on to mythological and life paintings. Art historians point out that Varma began his art career with Kizhekkeppat Palat Menon's family portrait in the 1870's. With a few genre paintings in between, like ***Nair Lady at the Toilet***, 1873 (which won him an edge over his rival Ramaswamy Naicker at the Madras Exhibition and also won him wide applause in Vienna Exhibition of 1873) and ***Sakuntala's Love Letter to Dushyanta,*** he returned to portraits which included that of the Duke of Buckingham and Ayilyam Thirunal, the Maharaja of Travancore. His travels to Baroda (1880-81) also proved to be a fruitful time to work on portraits and mythological themes. His Baroda portraits include that of his patron Sayaji Rao Gaekwad, Maharani Chimna Bhai and Princess Tarabai. This division between portraits and mythological paintings continued

throughout the 1880s while he traveled extensively to Baroda, Pune, Bombay and Mysore, in search of favourable artistic conditions. He was commissioned by various patrons to paint mythological pictures too. And for a different spectator, the Western patron, he intermittently painted pictures which exoticised India and its regional peculiarities (***The Nair Woman at the Toilet, A Nair Beauty, A Tamil Woman Giving Alms,*** etc). The first half of the 1890s also began with mythological themes. In the second half he concentrated mostly on the delineation of the emotions of women on the canvas. Pieces like ***The Bashful Lady, The Dreamer, The Restless One, Sweet Memories, Feigned Arrogance,*** etc are also painted during this time. Later he turned to the portraiture of nationalistic leaders and themes: for example, the portrait of Dadabhai Naoroji and the picture of the Rajput soldiers are examples. This was also a time when he began working on landscapes, the pictures of palaces (e.g.: Udaipur Palace), horses, soldiers (which linked India's freedom struggle with its material potentials). This was a period of relative independence in his life. He had achieved enough artistic reputation and he could flaunt his artistic fantasies and at the same time rely on

patronage, adding to the material support of Ravi Varma the professional artist.

Ravi Varma's women became a celebrated cultural commodity in the Indian scenario, especially after being much popularised by oleographs and calendars (oleographs were a western import, with which Ravi Varma got acquainted with in Bombay. Slowly he gave publicity to his own art form by producing cheap prints from his press and thus familiarising his artifacts as common household images throughout Bombay and Pune). Varma's women became the figment of the imagination of various stereotypes influencing Indian cinema.[9] They were typecast in the visual as well as literary media of Kerala. Eulogies about Ravi Varma's 'paragons of beauty' were a popular device in Kerala, instrumental in a paradigm shift in the notions of beauty as, on the big screen and popular Malayalam fiction. "He (Ravi Varma) set the trends for calendars, film hoardings, labels for cosmetics and cloth. So much so that Dada Saheb Phalke who worked in the painter's lithography- press, brought the voluptuous grandeur of Ravi Varma's paintings into Indian cinema. The

[9] Ashish Rajyadaksha,"Raja Ravi Varma's Impact on Indian Cinema". Sharma R.C (ed) Raja Ravi Varma : New Perspectives. New Delhi: National Museum, 1992. p.105

trend continues till date when it is a Hindu myth in the making."[10] So far, feminist approaches to Ravi Varma's genre paintings have been centered around the criticism of the passivity and domesticity of the female figures resulting from the dominating patterns of the patriarchal discourse which shaped them. These patterns were primarily the outcome of the encounter between tradition and modernity in the seminal phase of Indian salon art.[11] The colonial India witnessed the clash between the ideals of an indigenous culture and an imposed one. Adherence to tradition often demanded an 'idealised' depiction of India and its cultural and religious ethos in a highly stylised manner. Very often, the woman became a cultural artifact synthesizing the adaptation of Western techniques and the depiction of a national culture. The elevation of woman, part of the visual rhetorics that depicted them as cultural symbols, was part of most nationalistic traditions. This was both an emotional and intellectual exercise to recover a highly subordinated

[10] Nirupama Varma, " Raja Ravi Varma Revisited", Indian Express, 2nd March, 2000

[11] Mitter describes salon art as academic naturalism that held sway in Europe in the nineteenth century. The British later imported this technique to Indian art schools.

tradition from the clutches of an imperialistic Raj, and a manner of social conservation that upheld patriarchal values by men. Idealised image of the Indian woman was conjured up from the sources on which Indian culture was supposedly built. The ideal woman, was in fact a construct, rather than a natural constituent in the process of nation building. This making of the 'ideal' was amenable to the historical transitions taking place at that time, and the 'aestheticised' feminine values were more politically motivated than virtually conceived. For Varma, the concept of the feminine ideal mainly relied on the canonical Sanskrit texts. There were various reasons for Varma to excavate elements from Sanskritic sources. Ravi Varma's aristocratic background and his exposure to these texts were synchronous with the rapid sanskritisation of Malayalam literature. Sanskrit scholars in Kerala were experimenting with literary forms other than parochial ones (which included poetic forms created for dance-dramas like Kathakali, Thullal and other folk forms) and adaptations of Hindu mythological texts by switching over to Mahakavyas based on religious themes and famous adaptations of these themes by Sanskrit writers. Much more significant is the fact that the writers were

in the process of creating their identities as major literary figures by pursuing literature as a profession that required much skill and expertise. This coincided with the division between the artist and the artisan. Many Sanskrit texts were translated into Mahakavyas that won them considerable reputation. The nexus of Ravi Varma's art with the growth of new literary forms in Malayalam will be dealt with in the next chapter. The process of nation building also necessitated a pan-Indian image of the woman and Hindu mythologies provided a foundation for Ravi Varma's pictorial creations. This also meant the acceptance of Sanskrit texts (translated as well as untranslated) as the standard that linked and accommodated all the diversities within Indian culture. Orientalising tendencies being an indelectable part of western scholasticism, was another triggering force to go back to the roots. Oriental studies became a political and academic agency that enabled a subtle manipulation over the colonised people in a highly discreet mode.[12] Indian artists capitalised on oriental tastes by depicting discordant elements in Indian culture and there by exoticizing them. The transitional phase of the artisan's metamorphosis into an artist rested primarily on the

[12] Edward Said, ***Orientalism***. USA: Vintage, 1977. p.27.

questions of patronage. Patronage was an essential ingredient to mould up the professional stature and identity of the artists came from various directions: from the colonizer, the Indian rulers and the public. Acknowledgement from the colonizer meant the affirmation of one's own technical capabilities and the drawing of a western clientele. This worked immensely in favor of the establishment of an artistic identity. Art exhibitions held to win favorable western opinions were the result of the artist's quest for recognition. Public approval and patronage from local kings and rulers furthered the reinforcement of the creative fecundity and the popularity of the artists. Thus the colonizers, who have magnified the exotic qualities of the major Hindu texts, were targeted as the main consumers and aestheticians and their approval formed the pivotal point on which the making of an artist primarily relied. Also, Sanskrit texts were conferred a status that was clearly distinct from that of the regional and vulgar texts. Widespread learning by both Western scholars and the educated Indian elite, attributed to the texts, a refinement of taste and sacredness which made them the most suitable

vehicles through which the concepts of an opulent culture and tradition could be convincingly imported.

An equally strong and opposing force were the modernizing trends that revolutionized technique and form. New techniques of painting, based on mathematical precision, introduced upcoming Indian artists to the arena of photo-realism. Realism, which created a fabricated aura of naturalism, testified and foregrounded the artistic intentions of exoticising and idealizing Indianness. The Modernist package of oil painting rendered a linear perspective and a succinct illusionism; and the suppleness of oil promised the scope of widening artistic horizons as well as fostered a private space for the artist as a professional. Feminist art historians believe that Ravi Varma's women evolved from a friction between the contradictory forces of tradition and modernity, thus embodying the quintessence of an ideal womanhood conceived by a male imagination. My purpose in this chapter is not to contest the notions of the constructions of femininity by the art historians and the critics, but to explore other possibilities of the inscription of male sexual fantasies into the 'body' of Ravi Varma's women. I would like to analyze how the

female body becomes the locus of a whole set of socio-cultural ambivalences in Ravi Varma's times. These ambiguities, I believe, are a result of the exigencies of a transitional phase in Indian socio-cultural scenario enkindled by a colonial Raj and consequent nationalizing instincts. While dealing with the ambiguous tensions in his paintings, I will also synchronize my arguments with a historical, social and cultural overview of the position of women in Kerala and how the women's issue became part of a major socio-cultural debate during the nationalistic phase.

Woman's body, in Varma's paintings, becomes the site of differences, which enhances all aspects that are opposite to the concept of the 'masculine'. It is also the topos of difference which is compared and contrasted with western landscapes, thus creating a pan-Indianism (by a conglomeration of the techniques and the imaginative conceptions of the West and the East) that gives the backdrop to Varma's genre paintings. From a heterogeneous cauldron of regional pluralities and diverse elements like racial, caste, class and gender differences and disparities, Varma designed the female body as a homogenizing agent

that accommodated all the differences and upheld the essence of perfection. Within the boundaries of universalism he created pan-Indian elements, from a generalized pan-Indianism he illustrated the specificities of regionalism and even within regionalism he separated elite life instances from low life. The body became a metaphor to link all these diversities. Woman's body also becomes the terrain, which internalizes the rhetorical representation of two diverse discourses. On the one hand, it becomes the apex of desirability and titillation, and, on the other hand, it enjoys the position of being objectified yet distanced, visually available yet physically absent. Here the male gaze is at once empowered and then ebbed out of all its strength, when the image attains the dual role of first being objectified at first and later, being transformed into a teasing unattainability.

A Woman Holding a Fruit [fig: 1] is an undated picture which is reminiscent of the Ajanta mural 'The Lady Holding a Flower'. It is also a reworking on the tempting gesture of Eve. Perhaps inspired by his predecessors, Ravi Varma illustrates the four-quarter frontal piece of a woman clad in a red silk sari and decked up in ornaments, lifting her pallu

slightly and displaying a fruit to the spectator. The lady is set in a darkened out and blurred surrounding, so that the light falls directly and illuminates her face, shoulders, the undraping fingers and the fruit. The picture stimulates scopophilic tendencies and this is exactly the terrain where the artist's and the spectator's gaze, is invoked to a full play thus objectifying the woman's body portrayed in the picture. Fashioned from the creative gaze (with the potential to conceive and execute it) of the artist and sustained by the passive/active gaze of the spectator, the woman returns the gaze. Her half illuminated face betrays a provocative smiling gesture as she lifts the *pallu* from her shoulders, letting our gaze linger there and slowly become fixated on the fruit. The painting both visualizes and valorizes sense-derived physical pleasure, thus embodying the woman with sexual abundance and availability. The returning of the gaze, the process of undraping the *pallu* and the holding of the fruit evoke images that keep the object at a sensory range; titillating the visual, the tactile and the taste sensations. By aesthecising the science of pleasure the sensory images are flaunted to create an imaginary sense of pleasure derivation. The visual invocation of desire is common to

almost all the paintings of Ravi Varma. This is done by inscribing an artificial visual ebullience on the body of his creation, and forging a favorable ambience which demands 'being looked at'. This artificial ebullience, except in a few cases where class/caste differences are distinct, indicates the opulence that is mainly manifest in material things. First the interior designs, that attract gorgeous visual pleasure, which surround the object; and in case the object is supposedly the only subject of our gaze (as in the case of ***The Woman Holding the Fruit***), her body itself becomes the ground of being beautified with ornaments and gaudy attires. One can hardly find a Ravi Varma woman without ornaments. He conceives of all possible spaces in a woman's body to be usurped by foreign elements, especially gold, precious stones, pearls and glasses. Thus earrings, studs and nose rings (where the 'ayyankari' nose studs and the Marathi ones (Nath) are used so overlappingly that a regional distinction becomes almost impossible), bangles, and necklaces have the major function of defining both the class and the 'wholeness' of the woman's body.

Looking at *The Woman Holding A Fruit*, Varma draws our attention to three aspects: to the return of our gaze, to the fingers undraping the sari and finally to the fruit. The unusually plump arms converge at the level of the eyes that return the gaze and the angularity of the fruit and the fingers in the process of undraping, create an acute triangle, connecting the gaze, the fruit and the left hand fingers. The centrality of the fruit makes it a strong focal point. The proximity the fruit to the body, especially to the bosom, links the sensation of taste and touch, and unravels the hidden treasures of sensual pleasures that lie behind her drapery. More interesting is the plumpness of her arms in contrast to the blurred out bosom that imply the titillating effects of exhibitionism (or the contortion of a particular body organ) and the weakening paradox of implicitness. Between the world of sexual explicitness and implicitness, lies the whole problem of being objectified for a male gaze filled with desire. At the same time the picture enjoys the position of an objectified exclusiveness that arises from the fact of being desired and ends up in a tease where implicitness and blurring outs provide only a transient fulfillment of the male longing. The effacement

of the gap between the painting and the viewer remains a momentary spectacle. The artist poises his realistic representation of the body as a physically unattainable illusion. Women, as Marcia Pointon observes, "in (their) most objectified and objectionable form... constitute an acknowledgement by men of the ability of women to satisfy a desire that men cannot satisfy themselves." Moreover, female sexuality "represents an *imaginary* female body to which the male spectator has access only psychically, not physically. In representation, she is explicitly out of reach except in fantasy. In other words, the desire to look, and to "possess" by looking, in the end only demonstrates that looking is *not* the same as having."[13]

Ravi Varma's depiction of sexual implicitness came in the wake of the dilemma faced by Indian art students in the representation of nudes at the time of the British Raj. According to Partha Mitter, the art schools in India (established to 'refine' Indian artistic sensibility) were instrumental in laying down aesthetic conceptions that sidelined Indian art for its 'uncouthness', the lack of finish and a spiritual profaneness.

[13] Richard Leppart, Art and the Committed Eye: Cultural Functions of Imagery. USA: Westview Press, 1996. p.214.

The syllabus was framed in such a way as to encourage "perspective and architectural drawing with geometrical instruments, freehand drawing of flat shapes, of ornaments from books and objects in round. Then followed an advanced course in shaded drawing graduating from copying illustrations to actual objects" [Mitter,35]. Scientific accuracy was set to enlighten Indian art students to reach the acme of an art world 'perfected' by Western predecessors. With this goal ahead of them, the Indian student faced restraints and was deprived of many artistic liberties due to the fettering presence of a very harsh Victorian morality that reflected a crude sense of moral superiority and an inadequate comprehension of Indian art. The exemption of life class paintings from art schools came with "the elevation of science to a moral plane" [Mitter, 35] by the Western sensibility. The political motive of the exclusion of life studies was mainly economic; design and decoration were given an undue importance keeping an eye on their market value in the West. Thus by upholding the influence of high/fine art over the natives, the colonizers were able to create a plethora of decorative artists and designers during the seminal phase of the art schools in India.

Prior to a very significant stage in art criticism, the nude body remained as an unproblematised entity that became "the central subject of art."[14] Kenneth Clarke's observation on the nude body valorizes a whole string of essentialist claims that universalised the balance, prosperity and the reformed aspects of nudity. He invites our attention to the subjectivity of the artist in laying down prescriptions of nudity. But when we take the colonial background into account, Ravi Varma began his artistic career at a time when aesthetic paradigms were laid down by the British to cleanse Indian art of "the grotesque images which libel the shapes of men and animals in all parts of the Hindoo temple (which) are irredeemably bad. Their sculptured foliage is purely abstract in character.... It seems the safest way of attempting to regenerate this effete artificial manner of design ... is to set the student copy faithfully the objects of nature.... Thus a school of design would in time arise, native in its best sense, owning its accuracy, truth and natural beauty to European inspiration, but moulding its material into purely Indian types" [Mitter, 34]. The taboo on life paintings that came along with the moralizing package remained in the art schools till the last decade of the

[14] Kenneth Clarke, ***The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form.*** New York: Doubleday, 1959. p.4.

nineteenth century. The human figure, the preserve of high art, was kept away from the natives. The implications were clear, the native had to keep away from the compositional technicalities of the human body, especially the nude. And by harping on the immorality of Hindu art, the British could achieve their objective of condemning the inferiority of Indian art and alienating it from the 'superior preserves' of human forms which were reserved only for the Western artists. This unwillingness to 'impart' with the knowledge of Western secrets, which supposedly held the keys to the realm of human nudity, was an economically and intellectually motivated as part of an orientalising mechanism. Ravi Varma found himself exercising his faculties under such dilemmas of representation. The tensions and the inability to give full expression to representing a woman's physicality can be gleaned from his sexual discretion. The woman's body in his paintings, in its specific socio-cultural sphere, was reflective of the tensions and restraint resulting from the power imbalances that worked between institutional vested interests and the artist's subjectivity. On the one hand, art with all its sublimated paradigms, functioned in such a way as to perpetuate

institutional power. On the other hand, it reflected the artist's struggle for the freedom of expression. This was especially true in a colonial era. For Varma, the body became the visible terrain to exercise his artistic subjectivity and a vehicle to map out human identity in its relation to social/cultural practices and institutions.

The Lady at the Ball Game [fig: 2] is invested with the complex rhetoric of the tensions between candid and discreet eroticisation. ***The Lady at the Ball Game*** belongs to a private collection of Ravi Varma paintings. A woman, in red sari limply throws up a ball trying to manage her falling sari. The visual position of the woman, is latitudinal and gives us an elongated view from the bottom, and physicality is stressed through her widely parted legs. This physical aspect provides an over emphasis on their disjunctive largeness when compared to the rest of her slender body. The curvaceousness of the thin hips can be contrasted with the vague display of her navel and the receding pubic hair that is half hidden by the tumbling sari on which she trips. But the sari is held skillfully to enable a deft projection of the draping/undraping process. The bulge of the left thigh and the swollen feet do not necessarily posit

an anatomical failure, rather the parting of the legs is provocatively poised demanding our visual focus on the half hidden pubic area. So is the function of the ball in the air. Its rotund redness is almost on the same line with her breasts. The symbolic nature of the red and golden brocaded sari and the ball are also relevant indicators of the internalization of the external phenomena. In the background there are shaded out trees and rocks and the lady's open hair that reaches her thighs, contrasts with the fairness of her belly. That becomes another pointer to her sexuality on display. Here also the senses are awakened, the tactile (of the ball game) and the visual remind us of the play of sexuality on the canvas. In the background, besides the autumnal leaves, we are led to another beautiful sight of the blue skies, clouds, gray mountains, silhouettes of fir trees and a lake filled with lotuses. This provides a visual feast by presenting nature's bounty that culminates in the picturisation of the woman's 'gaiety' while being involved in the ball game. This picture fills up our senses providing a fulfilment and satiety, all but in one aspect where the realm of secrecy is maintained in the gap between the draped and the undraped sari. This is exactly the state

where the artist wants us to be, a world which gives an optical prowess over everything but one which takes a discreet pleasure in a situation where the unrevealing of the mysterious aspects of the woman's body alienate the spectator, who is given only a momentary admittance and then denied access to his focus of attention. Ravi Varma brings us to a world of imagination awakened by our visual consumption of the spectacles created by him, followed by a sudden disruption of sensorial indulgences through an infringement of deft stealthiness. "Imagery stimulates desire precisely by frustrating it....We can only *imagine.* What seems in representation so concrete, so available, so 'real', pulls back, always out of reach, to the very senses that otherwise confirm it. When we move too close to a painting, what makes perfect sense from a short distance suddenly blurs.... The eye that establishes what 'painting' is, likewise confirms that it is not what it claims to be" [Leppart, 108-9]. The technical and formal functions of visual arts' distancing technique are brought to another level where the spectator is not even endowed with the transient power of the 'possessor' of the object in the painting. ***Sakuntala*** [1898,fig: 3] captures a dramatic instance in the mythological

tale of Sakuntala and Dusyanta. (I will be dealing with Ravi Varma's retelling of myths in the next chapter). The painting reveals Sakuntala's love at first sight, to be precise Sakuntala's re-viewing of Dushyanta, after seeing for the first time. In the semblance of a framed picture (where all the visual characteristics are patterned diligently so as to fit in with in the spatial limits of the frame; for example: the straight walking stick of the stranger and the graceful casualness of Sakuntala's pose in the picture), Ravi Varma brings in the aspects of an extension (by bringing in the unseen presence of Dusyanta), which disempowers the spectator of being the only beholder of the picture. Sakuntala is enamoured by the sight of Dusyanta. The posture of removing the thorn is a pretext for taking a second look at Dusyanta, who becomes the unseen agent in the picture and challenges the position of the real spectator/possessor who stands outside the frame and *sees* the picture. Here within the guise of a framed picture, Varma complements the self-sufficient frame with a sequence which divests the viewer of his pleasure of being the sole viewer or the possessor. For the spectator his viewing becomes an intrusive act. By displaying the complexities within the realm

of the framed/unframed status of the picture, Varma once again leads us to the relationship between viewing and possessing. In this picture, the viewer becomes an intruder, who witnesses the amorous glances between Dusyanta (who is set outside the frame) and Sakuntala (positioned in an ambit of reality). The picture with its aspects of extension and interlocking glances (which are set outside the frame) snatches away the pleasure of a gaze that is linked with possessing. There are various other techniques employed by Varma that bring about this divestiture from the eyes of the spectator. These techniques are all related to the foregrounding of Sakuntala's body by contrasting it with other bodies and locating it in a specific position, so that it becomes the gaze inviting or focal point of the viewer's concentration. The first point of my analysis is Sakuntala's contrast with the other bodies around her. Her sakhis (Priyamvada and Anasuya) and an undecipherable figure (probably a man) clad in a white shawl are seen in the picture. In Varma's retelling of the myth, he makes use of the separateness of Sakuntala as the focus of the artist (or precisely her position as the heroine of the myth), by deploying two major elements: skin and clothing. Closely related as they

are, Sakuntala's clothing is a synthesis of the hooded, fully clothed stranger and the scantily dressed sakhis. Varma defines dress codes which qualify Sakuntala as the heroine of the narrative, elevating her to a higher plane than the figures who surround her. Later in this chapter, I will discuss the definition of appearances based on patterns of clothing, from which hierarchical status can be deciphered. While Sakuntala's sakhis wear breast-bands and pleated dhotis, and the stranger in the background covers himself from full view with a shawl. Sakuntala is made conspicuous as an object of our optical locus by the 'propriety' of her dress. She wears a sleeveless choli blouse and a bright saffron sari, indicative of her ashram life, that comes to her ankles. To supplement this, Sakuntala is fully covered and not an inch of flesh is exhibited other than a thin strip of her belly. She is shielded by clothes where as the sexuality of the scantily dressed sakhis is blurred in order to sustain our interest in Sakuntala herself. Sakuntala's arms are voluptuously painted, one holding a sakhi for support and the other taking the thorn out of her foot. She is ornamented with flowers that endow her with a rosy hue on her cheeks, forehead and her palms, covertly referring to

her virginal beauty covered in saffron clothes, as well as her proximity with Nature. Here is exactly where her virginity and Nature are relevant; in the complacency and friendliness of a rosy hued virginity around her (made effective by fresh foliage and flowers), she is suddenly pricked by a thorn. And she picks the thorn from her foot, to take a second look at Dusyanta who is somewhere in the background. Thus Sakuntala's blending with nature is suddenly disturbed by a thorn, and this is symbolically associated with the 'defilement' of her virginity. Sakuntala's taintlessness and lack of worldliness are further accentuated by the shaded patch of land in which she and her sakhis are set, whereas the hooded imposter is located on a sunny patch of land and his shadow stretches in front of him, implying his exposure to the ways of the world. Here the man is armed with the power of knowledge which forms foil to Sakuntala and her sakhis' naivete. More important is his position as a non-participating witness to the whole situation. Hence Sakuntala becomes a gendered symbol, the object of our desire as well as an ideal for possession, yet located beyond the corporeal realm so as to become an abstract instrument that embodies and internalizes purity, innocence,

chastity, and beauty. In the making of the ideal, racial imagery is also carried through by the depiction of relative 'whiteness.' Sakuntala's fairness and plumpness are set against the dark complexioned and blurred out sakhis, posit her in a dominant and advantageous position. Her fairness makes her irradiate light, thus making her glow. The sakhis' darkness absorbs light, bringing about a fade out effect. Sakuntala's glow and the white skin tone also function as a symbol that makes an epidermal statement, and is associated with subliminal and unconscious messages that legitimize the notions of the ideal. The moral value ladenness of the white hue is closely related to the idea that to be white is to be purged off all dirt and impurities. In Sakuntala's case, her presence is proclaimed through the technique of fairness and her physical bounty. Through the presence of the sakhis the heroine can feel what being physically presence can be like while dissociating herself from the non-whiteness [of the sakhis]. In Sakuntala, female body figures effectively as the point of final explanation of differences. Here Sakuntala and her sakhis are positioned on the grounds where skin hue

functions as "a standard aggrandizing or diminishing rhetoric," that projects whiteness as the "aspirational structure". [15]

Body and skin colour become the axes of class and caste differentiation in the picture of ***The Reaper*** [fig: 4]. This painting pertains to the 'low life' category of Ravi Varma's paintings. In contrast to this, the skin colour of Ravi Varma's upper class, bourgeois, women (especially in life paintings), is almost similar to that of the Europeans. By legitimizing the aesthetic aspect of 'fairness' or whiteness, Varma was transferring the epidermal garb of his master (on which the hierarchical patterning of colonial India was based), to the subjects and creating standard 'female bodies.' The artist, grasping very well the power of skin color and shades of difference, began a counterfeit production of female bodies based on relative pigmentation. In a colonial period, the skin tone nearer to that of Europeans meant the figuration of an imaginative resistant body, with all the corporeal discrepancies expurgated. The subsequent empowerment of the colonial body and raising it to the precincts of the master's enclosed and exclusive physical space meant a

[15] Richard Dyer, ***White***. London: Routledge,1995. p.35.

transgression of the conditions under which the oriental subject was conceived. The 'fair' Indian woman from ordinary life instances and mythologies exuded a symbolic value that narrated resistance through idealization. It was also part of the artist's unconscious reaction to the racial problematics latent in society. The artist, who had to cater to the diverse demands of the public, had to strike a compositional balance which emulated, in equal proportions, East and the West. And with questions of race and caste rankling throughout India, he had to willingly compromise with conceptions of the 'superior' race/ caste and illuminate them. More than a public, who was to know him through his lithographs, he had in mind his immediate patrons who were positioned in high and dominant positions. Partha Mitter notes that such attempts on the part of the Varma brothers were not received without criticism from the colonisers. One of the furious responses goes thus: "Why paint a face so fair? ...They are natives of this country, yet (their) flesh tones are fairer than [those of] Europeans" [Mitter, 32]. Ravi Varma's women were created on such a tensile balance where resistance and compromise became complementary themes.

In ***The Reaper***, "[Fig. 3] we can see a highly exoticised version of 'female' body, the body itself becoming the domain of class and cultural difference. What Ravi Varma does in the picture is to exoticise human labor and body, an act which in fact alienates these aspects from their actuality. The main feature of exoticism as an instrument is that "it inscribes its objects with an acultural illegibility, isolated from any coherence of origin" [Leppart, 204]. As the picture does not narrate any historic event, here the reaper herself becomes the metaphor of a plethora of cultural differences. She is a laborer and she is sitting on a coconut bark watching the backwaters. On the inset, the sun sets and a boat wanders away to the green foliage on the other shore. She has a bundle of hay near her pinned with a sickle. The time and the materials of labour indicate a hard day's work and a little bit of rest at the end of it. The reaper girl averts her face to the spectator and her eyes are focussed on the boat that is heading to another shore. This picture, painted at the verge of modernity, first of all delineates the contribution of labour and is associated with the economic prosperity of the nation state (Travancore) that mainly thrived on agriculture. The grain stacks

and the tired woman near it, also bring into the picture the contradictory relations of economic prosperity and the plight of the working class. The opposing forces of conformity and mental turbulence are written into the girl, who looks across the water with a melancholy stricken face. Her image is in conformity with "the naturally nurturing, pious naturalness, her proximity to instinct and animality."[16] This makes the female peasant "serve as the very embodiment of untrammeled, unartificed sexuality" [Nochlin,31]. The body of the girl bears all the caste marks that etch out her difference. First is the deep brown tone, the shade Varma generally gives to prosaic characters of his paintings. Here body becomes the metaphor of class and caste differences. Not only the tone, but her semi-nakedness and her exposure to the elements indicate her vulnerability and availability to the male gaze. Near her is the symbolic signifier of the grain stack and the sickle. The sickle has a phallic connotation, while the grain is generally associated with woman's fertility. Her averted face attracts our attention to her body and her hunched back and undeveloped breast refer to the paradox of a sexual

[16] Linda Nochlin, ***Women, Art and Other Essays***. London: Thames and Hudson, 1989. p.19.

immaturity coupled with a body hardened by physical labor. The piece of cloth she wraps around her head as protection from the sun and the absence of one on her bosom make her sexuality vulnerability an established paradox; she is protected from the harshness of the elements, and at the same time this aspect procures her to our gaze. As clothes symbolize the relation between social codes and power, her bared upper part points towards her pliancy and submissiveness to an external gaze. Dr. K.N. Panikker analyses the situation of a feudal Kerala where "men and women were expected to uncover the upper part of the body as a mark of respect to the members of the high castes. The attempts by low caste women to wear breast cloth, under the influence of European missionaries, resulted in a major controversy in the first half of nineteenth century. Members of the upper caste viewed the attempt as an infringement on their status.... Christians and Muslims were not required to remove their upper clothes, even when appearing in front of the landlords. In fact, conversion to Islam was metaphorically referred to as 'wearing a shirt', thus ending the semi nakedness imposed by caste restrictions. Thus, body-clothes relationship was not defined by a single

code applicable to all Indians, uniformly regardless of religious, caste and regional differences."[17] Ravi Varma's upper caste / class sensibility in the representation of low life becomes evident in the light of what Panikker has said. It explains the absence of clothes on the upper part of the girl's body. Nakedness as such being a taboo for Indian artists to explore, Varma maintains his 'colonized' propriety by a representation of body based on class/ caste difference. And hailing from an upper class and caste, he had the power to legitimize social tendencies in the body he represented. But, is the valorization of the peasant woman's plight the only issue in the painting? The painting was set in the changing times. Conversions for the sake of upward mobility in the society were still going on. So were the British moves towards homogenizing Indian culture. Uniform dress codes, according to Panikker, were one of the main agendas of the British. "The body-cloth relationship in India, like in all other cultures, was contingent on 'prohibitions and commandments' internal to its culture. The negotiation and reconciliation between the internal view of the British of all these prohibitions and commandment

[17] K N Panikker, "The Great Shoe Question: Tradition, Legitimacy and Power in Colonial India," *Studies in History.* Vol, 24, Jan- June, 1998. P.20.

was difficult. The British in India looked for customs, which were homologous to European practices. Second, the British sought to implement a homogenous practice" [Panikker, 20]. The reaper's semi-nakedness is socially problematized as she is exposed to the elements as well as our gaze. In the context of Kerala society, clothes were bearers of prestige, notably of wealth, status, class and caste. But when one looks at the social customs and the causation of these specific norms, one should take into consideration, the body in relation to its externality, which implies to a large extent, the climate of Kerala. The humidity and the lack of temperature variations in Kerala restricted the clothes to a spartan level. It will not be far fetched to believe, that, till the entry of the foreign rulers to the lands (I stress 'foreign rulers', and not 'foreigners', foreign trade relation was there in Kerala from 3rd millennium B.C onwards, which did not change Kerala's social equilibrium on a large scale), the natives of Kerala were semi-naked. Clothes were the luxury of a few who belonged to the higher strata of the society and had a greater exposure to people from other lands. Sreedhara Menon, while analyzing the early eighteenth and nineteenth century in Kerala,

notes that "women of lower castes including Ezhavas were prevented from covering their breast.... The proper salutation from a female to persons of rank was to uncover the breasts."[18] This shows how the minimal use of clothes, initially for the sake of convenience, later became a caste mark. An exposure to foreign tendencies of clothing, posited the upper class/caste members of the society in a privileged position to use clothes; and clothes, with all their caste marks, became a metaphor of exclusivity, privilege, and cultural hegemony. As in the case of bare-breasted women, the taboo on wearing clothes became an exploitative strategy, which catered to the perverse sexual interests men especially of the oppressing class. Baring one's breast suggested a pliancy and susceptibility, which domesticated them and in turn made them sexually available. The painting, ***The Reaper***, did not merely manifest the social and climatic set up of the age. From 1890 onwards, Ravi Varma became a much popular figure in India, but he was restricted by his adherence to traditional beliefs that forbade him to travel across the seas. "Ravi Varma could well have visited Europe to see for himself the art treasures

[18] A. Sreedhara Menon, ***A Survey of Kerala History.*** Thiruvananthapuram: S V PP, 1991. p.320-321.

in its many galleries and compare notes with his contemporaries there, but the Maharaja of Travancore, without whose permission he could not leave the country, would hardly brook even a suggestion of it. This occasion is set forth in ***The Tour of Upper India***, the context being a visit by the party to a steamer berthed in Bombay.

> Everything in the steamer appeared so neat and comfortable that some of us entertained thought not very charitable of Manu, Shankaracharya and other ancient lawgivers for having imposed restrictions on sea voyages.... However, pleasant and instructive a visit to that land of milk and honey, of its consequences are certainly unpleasant... and to be shunned by the members of the community as an out-caste are penalties sufficient to deter an educated Malayalee youth from undertaking a voyage to Europe."[19]

Venniyoor quotes from Ravi Varma's first biography, which illustrates how disappointed the brothers were due to these religious impediments. "Both the brothers regret very much that the rigorous

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19 E M J Venniyoor, ***Raja Ravi Varma***. p.36.

caste rules which obtain in Travancore prevent them from paying a visit to the centers of art in Europe and benefiting thereby. To make amends in a small way for this deficiency, they have purchased costly works of arts by well known European artists and adorned their studio at Kilimanoor with them" [Venniyoor, 36]. It was around this time that Ravi Varma began to paint a number of pictures which consolidate the turbulence of the self and tussle between the internal and the external world. ***The Reaper,*** being one of them, illustrates his turmoil and Varma extends this aspect by his metaphorical manouvering of the theme in the painting, where the internal dilemmas and external facts congeal, giving a highly personalised note with political/social overtones. The picture narrates the body in relation to its externality, the body is manifest with melancholy, and exhaustion and an urge to tress-pass the limiting frontiers. The limits are exteriorized in the elements, which vary between earth, water and the sky, paled out by the sunset. In addition to all the emotions associated with the body, it internalises a submissiveness and sexual vulnerability. But, side by side, the bodily exhaustion is largely resultant of physical labor as well as the mental

urge to transcend social and spatial barriers. When we talk about the mental urge, we should keep in mind the large scale social changes that were taking place in Kerala which are connected with a growing resistance to imperialism, social reform movements, labour discontent and organization, and foregrounded the woman's question. The woman's question that idealized her position in an artistic realm neglected the whole aspect of her day-to-day realities. Very subtly Varma gives a commentary on the caste, colour and social positioning of the woman, thus problematising the narrative passivity of the woman he had represented in the painting. I do not forejudge the positive intentions of the artist in positing such a dilemma in the picture. However, the self-reflexivity of the artifact testifies to the social circumstances of the times and the biographical accounts of Varma's life themselves prove these paintings bearing his individualised and subjective indictments in these paintings,

Varma's 'modernising' impulses are generally discussed in terms of his technical and formal consolidations that focus on external narratives. These narratives embed internal, diegetic figurations that supplant the

ambiguous frictions between a world of old order and new. Many of Varma's paintings depict the dilemma of synchronising the past and future. And as a result, the body becomes the ground of externalising this struggle. ***The Lady in Prison*** [fig: 5] and ***In Contemplation*** [fig: 6] are not simplistic pictures as their titles imply. ***The Lady in Prison*** has a lady's profile on the canvas and she is holding the prison bars with the sense of determination and equanimity. She has a dagger in her right hand, which is ready to strike a blow. She stands on a tiger skin and a discarded red drapery. ***In Contemplation*** presents a brooding woman holding a mirror, a comb and other decorative items like flowers, a rose water sprinkler, etc. What defines the ambiguity of these pictures is the contention between two spaces on which the 'body' is positioned. The female prisoner and thoughtful lady are located in closed internal spaces, from which, the spectator can also situate him/herself at a restrictive range within the inner spaces. By presenting the spectator the constricted space in which the body is set, the artist opens up the external space for visual consumption. Thus, we are exposed to the body's tenuous positioning in between closed spaces and in terms of

narrowed down accessibility to the outer space. The outer topos, in both these paintings, is defined by the architectural structures that are brightened and foregrounded. From the prison, the lady faces an arched door probably suggestive of a repressive colonial rapacity, and in her position inside the cordoned off space of the prison, she boldly faces the luminous and conspicuous architectural structure. Here, structures, inside and outside the jail, should be read as metaphorical spaces that furthers our perspicuity into the colonial background. The artist's expression of divided spaces encode multiple layered meanings largely set in the framework of coloniality. In a pictorial reduction of an expansive space, and the location of the female body as the site of tensions and historical inscriptions, Varma gives expression to the complex permutations of the mental categorisations and the mapping of definitive areas of operations. Mrinalini Sinha quotes Partha Chatterjee who identified "an elaborate gendered dichotomy between the inner/spiritual and outer/material world as crucial to the construction of identity in India. Given the 'constitutive contradictions' of the belated nationalism under conditions of colonialism, he suggests, Indian

nationalists located their own autonomous identity in the inner/spiritual world while conceding superiority to the west in the outer/material world."[20] She elaborates, "the discursive strategies of Indian nationalism, having acknowledged its own surrender and impotence in the 'outer world' of men, thus invested the figure of the Indian women with the burden of an authentic Indian identity. Henceforth, indeed, the terms for the emancipation and self-emancipation of women were set within parameters of new and improved nationalist patriarchy." [Sinha,66]. While analyzing body as a signifier, the female prisoner internalizes the ethos of a nation, of social formation, of moral visions, etc. She embodies the essence within the closeted 'effete' internal space and thus she becomes the cultural nucleus incorporating and emitting different visions and meanings. The jail bars become the dividing line on which freedom and restrictions converge. The prisoner faces the iron bars and the imposing edifice in front of her indicates that it does not promise an unrestricted mobility of the body, it in fact presents an area where the body has to function within limited

[20] Mrinalini Sinha, "Giving Masculinity a History: Some Contributions from Historiography of Colonial India," ***Gender and History.*** Oxford, vol.11, num.3, Nov.1993. p.66.

structures. The prisoner is incapacitated in between two spaces that constrict her mobility and this makes her 'dysfunctional presence' felt between constrictive spaces. Here her body does not become dysfunct, in fact the prisoner is hardened with a stiffness and determination and the dagger in hand also anticipates action. The discarded drapery besides her also has an interesting function; the red sari in almost of all Varma paintings becomes the symbol of desirability or a formulation of a feminine physicality highlighted through bright and suggestive colours. The conscious rejection of the cloth and the tiger skin on the ground suggest a highly evolved state of womanhood. Only by the refutation of certain 'materialistic' elements does she come close to a sacrificial figure that at the same time embodies the ideas of progress at the same time. The prisoner thus becomes a mental ideal or the ''symbol of different totalities within the discourse of tradition and religion; they become the symbol of sacrifice and the symbol of progress within the discourse of modern nationalism.''[21] Here the woman's body is given voice by the assertiveness, and the riddance of the materials which qualify her

[21] Sakuntala Rao, "Woman as Symbol: The Intersections of Identity Politics,Gender and Indian Nationalism," Women's Studies International Forum. Pergamon, vol.22, num.3, May-June,1999.p.43.

sexuality. Such a portrayal removes her from a direct desirability to the realm of an idealized form of subtle deification or enshrinement. Here the body is empowered on the level of ideology, and the contradictions and dilemmas of nation-building manifest themselves in a diffused and elusive manner - all pointing towards the subtleties of a gendered discourse.

In Contemplation situates a woman in terms of the items of beautification of her body: flowers, a comb and a mirror. The woman leans on to the wall of a room furnished in western style. The carpet, the carved table, the cushioned divan and drawn curtains have an effect opposite to the sparseness of the jail. Here the body is set amidst luxury and the close contact with colonizer-induced - comfort is implied in the painting. Here the body is set in a state of submission in an external/internal temporality. Outside the window, a building juts out. The gopuras of the structure indicate that it is a temple, the lady could be waiting for her marriage or resisting the marriage she dislikes. Whatever the core theme of the picture, the basic skein of the narrative places her within the functional limits of a muted down passivity. But

again the temporal frictions between spaces do not validate her perfunctory domesticity; in fact the spatial displacement of the body bring into question the complexities within pictorial representations. In both the pictures Ravi Varma presents two mutually complementing categorisations of body; the idealised and the domesticised, and along with these he brings out the synonymous nuances of a colonial trauma that entails it.

In Ravi Varma the body represented is problematised. All the bodies analysed in this chapter present an alternative, troubled narrative in spite of the simplistic one on the surface. What I have tried to bring out in this chapter is the ambiguity that pervades the seemingly simple visual representation of art. Ravi Varma's world, as we have seen, accommodated ambivalence, exhortations and resistance; and these facts enhance an artist's refusal to enhance the psychic infertility or monotony signified by a colonial encounter. In the artistic discourse which constructed images through subtleties, tease and contortion (of body parts especially limbs, hunched back, thighs, etc) and the displacement of the body between two spaces; Ravi Varma contributed to

the vast repertoire of a colonial imagination that figured the anxiety of the subject who was set in a placatory compromise with a dominating power- the British.

CHAPTER III

NATIONALISTIC NARRATIVES SPUN AROUND EPICS

As nation-building became an extensive phenomenon in the latter half of the 19th Century, Varma's paintings served to achieve a new synthesis and harmony in the psychological conception of a homogenous national history and culture. The first step in homogenization was achieved by a comprehensive investigation of the cultural sources and the gradual effacement of boundaries between history and mythology. This can be regarded as part of a psychological conditioning which resisted the pressures of a colonial culture as well as the monoistic ethos promulgated by the Westerners. Varma's period witnessed the tensions of choosing between the old and the new, colonial and indigenous, social homogeneity and heterogeneity, between maintaining old traditions and introducing new ones. The recourse to the rich repertoire of mythologies and the invective of disseminating information about the past were achieved by Varma's convincing artistic rhetoric. His mythological paintings should be taken as narrative wholes which internalize elements

of construction and coherence. Constructive in the sense that, Varma was visually authenticating the historicity and the cultural fecundity of the written epic texts. A close look at his mythological paintings discloses the edifice of a Western framework on which Indianness is coherently fleshed out. Western emulations not only involved techniques, but contexts as well. Varma's mythical illustrations and glorifications were the formal and ideological endorsement of the kind of neo-classical paintings legitimized by the English Art Schools in India. Moreover, Indian art had a long standing history of representing mythological themes, for religion and art were inseparable elements in ancient times.

Ravi Varma painted mythological themes during his patronage period from 1870's to 1890's. During this time, he painted for the rulers of Travancore, Baroda and Mysore. During his visit to Baroda in 1881, he was commissioned to paint a few epic themes. He chose to paint Goddesses Lakshmi and Saraswati, Nala-Damayanti, Sairandhiri and Sita - all being major figures in the Hindu mythologies. They were either Goddesses or human *avtars.* Varma's fascination for epic themes continued throughout his life as he catered to the tastes of people from all walks of life, including local patrons, common people and the British, whose orientalist concerns were also exploited. The retelling of Hindu

puranic themes (in literature as well as in art) on which Indian religious and cultural ethos were supposedly centered, were accelerated by the colonial collision. The governing canons of the Victorian style in painting merged with an Indian milieu, bringing along multifarious representations of Indian cultural life, which documented instances of contemporary life situations as well as dug up the abysses of an inexhaustible and opulent culture. The muted urge for nation building probably found its voice after political disturbances and reforms that stormed India during the first half of nineteenth century. The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, the introduction of English education and the far reaching visions of social reformers accelerated the advent of a nationalistic phase in Indian history. Partha Mitter, who has worked extensively on the relationship between art and nation building, tells us that Varma was not the first oil painter to document mythological narratives during that time, that is, at the wake of nationalism. Mitter points out that Tinkari Mukherjee's works predated Varma's historical/mythological works [Mitter, 201]. But it would not be wrong to consider Varma as one of the pioneers of historical/mythological narratives. In Varma, both history and mythology are clubbed together so intricately that mythological narratives substituted the narratives of Indian history and vice versa.

Technically, Varma did not emulate much from ancient Indian art because the flat and lacklustre traditional dyes could not compete with the palpable illusionism provided by oil paint. At the same time Varma imbibed popular themes of ancient art, like that of Krishna and the gopis in Vrindavan, tales from the ***Ramayana*** and the ***Mahabharata,*** etc. Tapti Guha Thakurhta sees these mythological adaptations as "the out-come of a growing aesthetic self-awareness" and the way in which "exclusiveness of colonial art was countered by the counter-exclusiveness"[22] of the painters during that time. According to her, Westernisation ushered in "the permeation of new techniques and modes of representation, the shifting status of artisans and artists, the expansion of patronage and market and the emergence of new professional and commercial opportunities in art." Thus nationalism in art became "a novel, emotional and intellectual issue, symbolizing the recovery of tradition and lost identity" [Thakurtha, 11]. In this highly charged up stage, Varma's mythological paintings were influenced by articulated canonical texts and all its tacit presuppositions. On the surface, his mythological illustrations are narrative wholes, but deep inside they incorporate the artist's

[22] Thakurtha, ***Making of a New Indian Art.*** p.11.

rhetoric conditioned by so many external factors which include instruments of persuasion and conviction addressed to various groups of recipients. Within the surface of the narratives, politics and value systems of the time were endorsed and authenticated by Varma. Value systems were based on the forces of 'Modernization' and subsequent nationalism which "glorified India's past and tended to defend everything traditional, all attempts to change customs and lifestyles began to be seen as the aping of Western manners and were thereby regarded with suspicion. Consequently, nationalism fostered a distinctly conservative attitude towards social beliefs and practices."[23] Thus within the rigid patriarchal set up, the nationalists exercised the maintenance of caste distinctions ... acceptance of the sanctity of the sastras (scriptures), preference for symbolic rather than substantial changes in social practices " [Chatterjee, 117]. These were the conscious steps taken towards the homogenization of a national culture. The most important question to be solved during the process of upholding cultural ethos hovered around the projection of an 'ideal' in literary as well as pictorial representation. Indubitably, the image of women were chosen as the appropriate agency to fulfil the requirements of an ideal. Fantasies

[23] Chatterjee, ***The Nation and its Fragments***. p.116.

woven around femininity were simultaneously narratives of the nation. His pictorial narratives appealed to a sense of nostalgia of a more innocent time, in each a colonial or imperial power, explicit or implicit, is the source of violence, corruption and loss. Each challenges the usual tropes of nationhood, displacing the young male hero, and the figure of woman was a mute ground to be defended with a patriarchal intensity. For this, it was necessary to project the superior status of women in the past. This was contrived in order to challenge the British assumptions and prejudices about the low status, mistreatment and lack of education of Indian women during the colonial period. Secondly, nationalism often stressed on the spiritual/inner realms of being. "The discourse of nationalism shows that the material/spiritual distinction was condensed into an analogous, but far more powerful dichotomy: that between the outer and the inner. The material domain, argued nationalist writers, lies outside us.... Applying the inner/outer distinction to the matter of concrete day-to-day living separates the social world into *ghar* and *bahir*, the home and the world. The world is external, the domain of the material; the home represents one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also

typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world - and woman is its representation. And so one gets an identification of social roles by gender to correspond with the separation of the social space into *ghar* and *bahir*." [Chatterjee, 120]. By emphasizing the inner/spiritual world, that of mind, creativity, and cultural ethos, women became the most appropriate vehicle to encapsulate resistance of the nationalistic phase. The question of how it is that nation in some sense represents or constitutes feminine is more intransigent. Real, historically specific women are metaphoric vehicles, continually reconstituting themselves within a variety of discursive frames that are implicitly, and often explicitly, about our 'national' identity, added with a deep mythical resonance. The culmination of this operation rests on the visibility of the female body thus making female a 'metaphor for nation.' Female fashioned this way, out of male imagination that mapped out 'ideals', was subjected to a *new* patriarchy. "The new patriarchy was ... sharply distinguished from the immediate social and cultural condition in which the majority of the people lived, for the 'new woman' (of nationalistic imagination) was quite the reverse of the 'common' woman, who was vulgar, coarse, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually

promiscuous, subject to brutal physical oppression by males ... Thus, the new woman of nationalist ideology was accorded a status of cultural superiority" [Chatterjee, 127]. Accordingly, women were eulogized as embodiments of the abstract principles of beauty, purity and well-being; in fact all the Utopian accessories associated with a new, ideal nation were conferred to the images of women. Women from mythologies served as allegories and adapted form for this symbolic inversion conceived imaginatively for a world turned upside down by Western usurpers. They served as allegories due to various reasons. They formed a part of sacred narratives in which they embodied certain 'positive' feminine values. Simultaneously, they became passive symbols within a discourse of tradition and religion as they exuded ethical values and at the same time symbolized progress within the context of modern nationalism. Thus they internalized two major conflicting forces. Firstly, their geniality with the norms of tradition and their complete subservience to it and, secondly, they symbolized modern impulses of liberation. Women from myths were carefully picked up from their epic narratives due to their exclusivity; they were status symbols and their iconic status itself became an apt topic for artistic projection. Moreover, by abstracting the social roles of women from mythologies, these figures

from religious texts underwent a secularization, thus adhering to the ideological codes of religion as well as the society. Varma chose different kinds of women from the epics and the puranas: celestial nymphs (Urvasi, Ganga, Menaka), mothers (Yasodha and Devaki), virtuous wives (Sita, Draupadi, Taramati, Damayanti), naive and flawless virgins (Sakuntala, gopikas, Matsyagandhi), and seductresses and monstrous women (Bhootana, Simhika). Here the function of these women are clearly defined into two dichotomous categories of good and evil. On the one hand, women glow with beauty, motherly tenderness, fidelity and naivete; on the other, some women are endowed with the negative qualities of seduction and murder. The evil 'other' was always accompanied by their 'virtuous' counterparts and they are eventually won over in the perpetual battle between evil and virtue. The 'evil' women always existed as a complementary device to give emphasis to the 'virtuous' side of the picture.

This chapter shall deal with two women protagonists of Varma's paintings: Sakuntala and Draupadi. The investigation will focus on the reason for their choice as suitable characters in his paintings, the cultural codifications they bear and their relevance during the time of his painting them. The literature dealing with their stories will also be

dealt with, (that is, the primary source of the visual narratives and the translated versions which have influenced and inspired Varma). Thus, this will be an investigation into the beginnings of nationalistic tendencies in Kerala and their reflection in the literature of the period. I will also analyze how parochial languages (especially Malayalam) became a zone on which nationalistic tendencies were exercised and the reasons for a switch over to Sanskrit texts rather than folk literatures. How women's bodies (Sakuntala's and Draupadi's) became pliant to the immediate dramatic situation engulfing them and the representational values perpetuated by them also make another interesting point. This is, in fact, part of a visual rhetorics which projects the body as the site of a moral, philosophical and intellectual enquiry. Here is where the artist exercises either his freedom or limitations to interpret and represent the epic themes fashioned by the influence of the age in which he lived in. Thus we can decipher multi-layered narratives of the same theme, each fashioned in accordance to the pressures of changing time. Thus Draupadi and Sakuntala in the ***Mahabharata*** differ from the that of Varma's paintings. Moreover, they are encoded with significant indicators which show the influence of a colonial era, and the consequent rise of an aristocratic middle class. The male conception of the female body and its

conflict with the surroundings; the skein of male versus female and the natural corollaries of gender difference like power versus weakness in those paintings are also points of my inquiry. Lastly, the elements of dramatization that have gone into Varma works; how "the past becomes the present clad in actual flesh and blood and costume" and "the oscillation between climaxes and denouements"[24] in Varma will be yet another point of investigation in this chapter.

> Reaching her youth , she needs a husband rather than a guardian. From her childhood association, she has found an appropriate groom from the neighborhood. Even auspicious *Kerala Bhasa* (Malayalam), who had descended right from Dravidian *gotra* will joyously be adorned as the Swayamvara bride of the *Chiranjeevi* groom of Aryan Origin - Sanskrit.[25]

After the late evolution of Malayalam language in the 16th and 17th century, there had been too much focus on the debate on the origins of the language. Malayalam in its spoken form, at one point of time, was inseparable from Tamil. Slowly it evolved to show distinct characteristics and thus became a separate language altogether. The development of Malayalam is closely associated with the workings of Brahminical

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[24] Geeta Kapur, "Ravi Varma: Historicising Representation."B N Goswamy (ed), ***Indian Painting Essays in Honour of Karl J. Kandalawala.*** New Delhi:Lalit Kala Academy, 1995.p.229.

[25] A R Raja Raja Varma, ***Kerala Paniniyam.*** Kottayam:C S Ltd, 1989. p.56.

manipulations in Kerala. Brahmins are supposed to have come from outside the state and the fact that they knew Sanskrit was in a way responsible for their monopoly over the realms of 'knowledge' (which mainly meant an access to written scriptures) during the middle ages. The Sanskiritisation of Malayalam was a process aimed at a sort of ghettoization of language, so that the common/other caste people were kept out of its insurmountable premises. Sanskrit, due to its different nature, created an exotic and mystic charm. This was accentuated by the building of temples and the localization and quarantining of them which furthered the aura of exclusivity of the language and the religious rituals performed through it. The Brahmins encouraged the growth of temple arts with the help of Sanskrit literature and further alienated the lower castes from the charms of an aesthetic 'refinement' which was exclusive to them. With the knowledge of Sanskrit language, its mythologies and sacred epics, the campaign for gaining a hegemonial supremacy over other castes was complete.[26]

The institutionalization of temples and the creation of temple arts based on the ***Ramayana*** and the ***Mahabharata*** (and clearly distinct from

[26] Dr. N S Sam, ***Literature and social Reform in Kerala***. Kottayam:NBS, 1988. p.21.

folk arts) led to a canon fixation centered on Sanskrit literature. Though many local physical features were assimilated, indigenous and oral literatures were neglected. The next step was the establishment of links with other influential castes, like that of the ruling and land owning castes. They were slowly, but not completely, assimilated into the fold, and the knowledge of Sanskrit was slowly disseminated to the upper castes as well. As a result, various rulers like Kulashekhara Varman (978 - 1036) wrote pieces like ***Subhadra Dananjayam*** and ***Tapti Samvaranam*** in Sanskrit. This also led to the simplifications of temple art forms. *Koothu, Koodiyattom* and the evolution of ***Manipravala Malayalam*** (Malayalam and Sanskrit words so combined so they would appear one and the same) and ***Sandeshakavyas*** were the result of the spoken language absorbing Sanskrit words for a more flexible and comprehensible form. Thus from twelfth to fifteenth century Malayalam as a language evolved by retaining the basic Tamil structure and assimilating plenty of Sanskrit vocabulary. Along with this, the ritualistic enactment of classical Hindu texts in the form of temple art popularized these texts among the indigenous higher castes (Nairs, Kshatriyas, etc) in Kerala. In the sixteenth century, Tunchethu Ramanujan Ezuthachan, merged folk elements, existent forms of Malayalam language and the Sanskrit text of

Ramayana to write *Adhyatma Ramayanam Kilipattu* (Adhyatma Ramayanam sung by a Parrot). Ezhuthachan, known as the Chaucer of Malayalam, simplified Malayalam, released it from the amorphous mix it was in and gave the language a distinct status. After Ezhuthachan, there were widespread experimentations with Malayalam language and every new attempt brought the language closer to the present form. This continued till the eighteenth century and afterwards it slowly slid into a stagnation till 1850's. Parallel to these developments, the Portuguese, who preceded Englishmen, set up the first printing press at Kollam in 1576 and later at Cochin in 1578. With the objective of conversions into Christianity in mind, they began the study of various Indian languages to translate the Bible and make it available to the masses. Along with this, they compiled the history of Kerala, collected zoological, botanical and geographic details and tried to master Malayalam. For the easy execution of their missionary work, the missionaries began compiling bilingual-language dictionaries also. Till the arrival of British Protestant missionaries in the 1800's, after Tipu's invasion (1782-1799), the pace at which missionary prose developed, reached its zenith. Missionary prose was almost free from Sanskrit interpolations and the religious and moralizing tracts which were part of it were written in colloquial

Malayalam so that it could reach out and influence lay people. Col. Colin Macaulay became the British resident of Travancore in 1800's and Travancore became a vassal under British power. Macaulay introduced English education in Kerala with the help of the Raja of Travancore with far-reaching results. Col. Munroe, who succeeded Macaulay and became the Diwan of Travancore, opened five English Schools in the nation state. The Christian Missionary Service press opened by Benjamin Bailey in 1816 was another breakthrough, because the first complete Malayalam Bible was published there by Bailey himself in 1841. Soon, Swati Thirunal Maharaja opened a government press in Thiruvananthapuram in 1836. This expedited the sprouting of various Christian and secular presses all over the state, which produced a great deal of literary activity in the form of religious texts and secular texts like dictionaries and grammar books compiled by the foreign missionaries of the state (Benjamin Bailey's and Herman Gundert's dictionaries are examples). Meanwhile, the government and private presses were involved in journalistic activities and the journalistic prose was centered around issues of language and society. Later, the spread of English literature and the popularity of journalistic prose slowly gave way to imitations and later to the revival of

classic literature in Malayalam. This period is generally known as the Modern Period or the Nationalistic phase of Malayalam literature.

The Book Committee in 1866, set up by Ayilyam Thirunal Maharaja was spearheaded by Raja Raja Varma Valiya Koil Thampuran, who found a great need of cleansing Malayalam literature from the missionary and journalistic prose. The heavy load of Sanskrit and Christian prose, he believed, made the language expressionless and dry. Thampuran wanted to free the language from these influences and give it a charm and elegance. Thampuran's efforts to revitalize Malayalam language and the popularity of secular prose, ushered in the era of Modern Malayalam literature (1860-1920). The development of Malayalam poetry, in accordance with the Sanskrit canon was another contribution of Thampuran. On the one hand, he wanted Malayalam prose to be free of all influences and reach the common people, on the other he sanskritized Malayalam poetry and alienated it from the masses. In poetry, he maintained the *Manipravalam* style and embellished it with a heavy dose of Sanskrit vocabulary. In 1882, he translated Kalidasa's ***Abhijnana Sakuntalam*** as ***Manipravala Sakuntalam***. This was the first drama in Malayalam language. Thampuran was equally impressed by the original of the work and Monier Williams's translation of the text published in 1855

as ***Sakoontala*** or ***The Lost Ring***. The first foreigner to translate the story of Sakuntala was William Jones (in 1789) and his work took Europe by storm. The German romantics were the ones who were enchanted by ***Sakuntala*** the most. The play "was also a response to the 'discovery' of the orient, described as the oriental Renaissance. The Sakuntala of the play became the ideal Indian Woman encapsulating the beauty of womankind, but more than that, her portrayal as the child of nature was that attracted German romanticism most. The identification of the heroine with nature was an appropriate counter to the crafted women of neoclassicism."[27]

Monier Williams was Professor of Sanskrit at Hailegbury College, Oxford. His translation reflects the British enthusiasm to be conversant with the literatures of India, Hindu customs and heritage and the play was seen as an epitome of Indian life which was static and without much progress even after 1200 years of the production of the original play. For Thampuran, there were enough reasons for not choosing religious themes from the ***Mahabharata*** or the ***Ramayana***, and the popularity of Sakuntala among foreigners almost secularized the theme. For the natives, who were slowly introduced to English classics, Kalidasa provided

[27] Venniyoor, ***Raja Ravi Varma***. p.27.

the most appropriate parallel to the Colossus of European literature, Shakespeare.

Sakuntala's story had been taken from the *Adi Parva* of the ***Mahabharata*** (62-69).[28] King Dusyanta who gets lost near the *ashram* of Kanva, during hunting, meets the beautiful maiden Sakuntala and marries her secretly according to the legally appropriate bond known as *gandharva* marriage. Sakuntala makes the marriage conditional by extracting a promise that her son will be made the future king. Sakuntala, daughter of the celestial nymph Menaka and sage Viswamitra, begets a son and when he comes of age, takes him to the court of the King for a legal recognition. There Dusyanta rejects her, and the courageous Sakuntala, who is not crest-fallen, argues with Dusyanta, with all her dignity intact and leaves the court. Then a celestial voice confirms the parentage of the boy. Repentant Dusyanta calls Sakuntala back and recognizes the boy as the future king. From this story, Kalidasa weaves a great drama in which "there is almost a contestation with the epic version which, in the presentation of Modern times, has been marginalised. In Kalidasa's version we are in a realm of delicacy and

[28] Romila Thapar. ***Sakuntala: Texts, Readings and Histories***. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999. p.208.

romance, of anguish and imminent tragedy, of pathos and finally, of happiness. The emotional range is infinite when compared to the epic narrative, but in the intermeshing of the emotions, the image of Sakuntala undergoes a transformation. Kalidasa takes the theme from the epic but fills it out with subplots involving a curse and a signet ring. In adapting a known theme, he was following the theoretical rules relating to heroic comedies, in which earlier stories from the epics were frequently reworked" [Thapar, 44]. The regeneration of Sakuntala between the span of the great epic and the drama changes radically. Kalidasa added the story of the signet ring and elaborated the narrative of the epic, making it a romantic story of desire, loss and recollection. Romila Thapar summarizes Kalidasa's Sakuntala most effectively thus:

> She is an innocent child of the *asrama* grappling with the emotions of love, bewildered by the instincts of sexual desires with which she was hitherto unacquainted : that natural woman who knows no deceit. She is persuaded to the *gandharva* marriage and makes no conditions as did the epic Sakuntala. She encapsulates the romantic image of forest dwellers in the mind's eye of the urbanite, an image used in poetry ... she lives in the depths of the forest, difficult of access, she is born of an *apsara* and is initially nurtured by birds of prey, again symbolic of and innate gentleness. She grows up among the fawns and they drink water fearlessly from her hand. She is clothed in bark and adorned

> with flowers. There is an abundant use of similes in which she is compared to plants; her lips are the colour of the lotus bud, her arms are like the two stalks of the lotus, she calls herself the sapling of the sandalwood, the jasmine is her sister, and so on. The trees bend towards her as she passes by, and she is blessed by the guardian deities of the forest. When she writes a letter to the king expressing her love for him, she does on a lotus leaf ... When she leaves the forest to go to Dusyanta's court, nature shares in the sorrow of her farewell; the grass drops from the mouth of the doe, the peacock stops dancing, the *cakravaka* does not answer his mate, and the creepers shed their leaves which fall like tear drops ... This enhanced portrayal of her almost as a part of nature is in direct contrast to the epic Sakuntala, who was as real as the Sakuntala of the play is illusory. The latter is shy, retiring and modest. The portrayal is projected as so irresistible that it excludes even the minimum concerns of the epic Sakuntala. In the final act when Dusyanta recognizes her, Sakuntala's reactions are very revealing. She consoles herself stating that Dusyanta did not really spurn her, he merely lost his recollection of her for a while" (Thapar, 71-72).

Kalidasa's Sakuntala was the ideal beauty who personified innocence, desirability, wifely duty and submission (the way she bears Dusyanta's humiliating remarks without any demure). In Kalidasa's Sakuntala, Indian materialists found a rosy, idealized image of woman, which suppressed the reality of woman's condition and projected positive notions of a past paradise. When the nationalists tried to redefine and

construct a cultural hegemony, a powerful wave of nostalgic melancholia swept the consciousness of the educated and middle class elite. Their fantasy of a paradise and ideals were grounded in a growing awareness of fundamental socio-cultural change that would topple the oppressive forces around and install an utopia which imbibed past glories of a five thousand year old culture. Sakuntala embodied womanly virtue; virtue that accommodated modesty, chastity, self sacrifice, submission, devotion and patience. These were the idealistic configurations on which the 'question of women', during that time, was grounded on. The female bodies, in literature as well as arts, were moulded cisterns into which patriarchal imagination could be effectively emptied. The romanticized and the much acclaimed, secular version of Sakuntala became a favorite theme for the nationalistic imagination for its thematic parallel of hunting, conquest, triumph of memory over oblivion and the final recognition and reconciliation with that of the plight of India. Sakuntala becomes an allegorical theme while she symbolizes the interface with nature and culture. The landscape carefully organised and her body in relation to nature around her bring in the question of the clash of nature and culture centered around the female body. Varma portrays Sakuntala as the child of *ashrama*, at the same time he wraps her up in a sari, which

signifies a cultured urbanity with a rustic naiveté. The draping of mythical heroines in sari also functioned as a homogenizing agent. "It is a tribute to his (Varma's) aesthetic sense that it was the charm of his heroines draped in sari that persuaded, to a great extent, the young womanhood of India to take to this costume, as their national dress. Even the women of Kerala, long habituated to the *white mundu,* took to the sari with enthusiasm ... (He had) in him a sense of Indianness, the basic unity that underlies the bewildering variety that is India, and gave him some idea of what he could contribute by his gifts for the cultural renaissance of his countrymen" [Venniyoor,27].

Varma's series of Sakuntala paintings, painted after the publication of Thampuran's ***Manipravala Sakuntalam*** in 1882, capture different instances of the story from Sakuntala's love at first sight, her *Patralekhan* (which is painted many times over, experimenting with varying degrees of imagination and perfection; mainly painted to appease the demands of various patrons), her fateful day-dreaming and Sakuntala's ascension to heaven with Menaka. In this chapter, ***Sakuntala Patralekhan*** and ***Fateful Day Dreaming*** shall be dealt with, with reference to the translated version of ***Abhijnana Sakuntalam.***

Sakuntala Patralekhan [fig: 7] describes one of her desperate attempts to communicate her desire to Dusyanta. This painting was painted for an exhibition in Madras and Varma was awarded first prize for this painting. This was a remarkable painting because this established Varma as a known painter and all his apprehensions as a novice were written into this piece. In the painting, Sakuntala's physical and mental agony in the words of Priyamvada describes the extremes of a love worn situation.

> Her cheeks are deeply sunken
> Her breasts' full shape is gone
> Her waist is thin, her shoulders bent
> And the colour has left her skin-
> Tormented by love,
> She is sad but beautiful to see
> Like a jasmine creeper
> When hot wind shrivels its leaves [Thapar, 110].

Behind the camouflage of thick leaves that surround Sakuntala, Dusyanta watches Sakuntala with a desirous voyeurism. He says:

> As I gaze at her, my eyes forget to blink
> She arches an eyebrow,
> Struggling to compose the verse -
> The down rises on her cheek,
> Showing the passion she feels" [Thapar, 112].

Varma encapsulates the moment of inscribing passion in the form of a letter. Like Dusyanta's lingering gaze fixed on her, Varma wants our gaze to be trapped on Sakuntala at the zenith of her seething desire. (He also wants the spectators to see the charm of his artistic novelty and the apprehensions behind the exercise of such a faculty). Sakuntala looks away from us to a distance, with a forlorn expression, wondering what to write on the lotus leaf on her lap. In this absent-minded longing, her sari slips from her shoulders giving us a full view of her tight, sleeveless choli blouse. Here the artist's fidelity to the original text mingles eroticism with Sakuntala's desire.

> Sakuntala: Anasuya, I can't breathe! Our friend Priyamvada tied my bark dress tightly! Loosen it a bit!
> ...
> Priyamvada (laughing): Blame your youth for swelling your breasts. Why blame me? [Thapar, 91].

In the process of depicting cultural symbols on Sakuntala's body, Varma substitutes her bark dress with a choli blouse and sari. She wears a gold choker and a garland of roses unlike her sakhis who wear *rudrakshas,* indicators of their *ashram* life. Ravi Varma organizes the trio in verdant surroundings where trees make a dark and gloomy background and recede triangularly for a patch of clouds and dusk to seep through. Sakuntala has a cane basket filled up with roses, the stereotypical

ambience of the *ashrama* is disrupted by the fashionable introduction of a basket full of roses, the gold necklace and her sari. Here, even though Sakuntala is introduced as a flawless 'child of innocence'; she is groomed by the then fashionable parameters of elitist ways. These visual imports generally function as qualifiers of Sakuntala's physical beauty, foregrounding her as a cultural symbol. The gloomy forest behind her is expressive of nature's protectiveness and the other worldliness of the closeted shield enshrouding her. Her genealogy arising from a celestial and ascetic intercourse and her *ashram* upbringing are other indicators of her function as an intermediary between nature and culture.

Sakuntala's Fateful Daydreaming [fig: 8] is from the collection in National Arts Gallery, Madras. Painted in 1898, this picture forms part of one of Kalidasa's fictitious justification of Dusyanta's oblivion of his past. This episode centres around the incident of Sakuntala's day dreaming and her being unaware of sage Durvasa's presence. Her lack of hospitality annoys Durvasa and he curses her. Sakuntala remains ignorant of the whole incident and the Sakhis interfere in time to relieve Sakuntala from the curse.

[Voice offstage (Durvasa): So ... you slight a guest...

Since you blindingly ignore
A great sage like me
The lover you worship
With mindless devotion
Will not remember you
Even when awakened -
Like a drunkard who forgets
A story he just composed!

[Thapar, 117-118].

The exchange of the signet ring reaches its functional climax with the curse. In the glorification of the past, Kalidasa propels the story in such a way as to put the blame on this unintentional error of Sakuntala. This is an example in which male narratives are methodically construed to lay blame on females errors (intentional and unintentional) for major masculine flaws (this strain has remained throughout the documentation of history, a famous example being that of the original sin). Kalidasa completes the justification of Dusyanta in this episode and relieves Sakuntala from the curse due to the pleas of the sakhis and the signet ring becomes a convenient vehicle to precipitate Dusyanta's memory. In this picture, Sakuntala is no more the youth who halts between desire and propriety. The lush green protectiveness of the *ashram* is substituted with the barrenness of a village settlement. On the

background a hillock rises dry and bare, shorn of much of its greenery. Another anachronism to the Himalayan landscape is a solitary date palm which shelters Sakuntala (historians locate the geography of the Sakuntala episode in an *ashrama* in the foothills of Himalayas. Romila Thapar identifies the hamlet with that of *Hastinapur* that would have been on the edge of the heavier Gangetic forests [Thapar, 14]. Varma has painted Sakuntala in arid circumstances and she sits on a rock on which a rose lies withered. Everything around her is dry and the lush green has turned into a desolate earthiness with dry grass spikes scattered throughout the terrain. This is symbolic of Sakuntala's lost virginity and the state of dejection she is going through. Sakuntala's cherubic looks have given way to a more melancholic and mature expression. In the background, sage Durvasa stands with a furious authority, almost ready to doom her with his punitive curse. Even though the male figure is painted in blurred distance, the effect of his presence is so strong that it upsets the peaceful rhythm of Sakuntala's life. Here the male and female bodies are set in opposition, though female images are projected loudly, the male presence and authority become a major force that could alter the destiny of the female.

More than being a romanticized and secular version of the epic narrative, the story has many multilayered meanings in a nationalistic context. The rise of the middle class and the rapid modernization which came along with an awareness of past glory resulted in the clash between the binaries of primitivism and civilization, of nature and culture. On the one hand, modern education was fashioned in such a way that the past culture was bundled together under the common category of being barbaric and primitive, on the other hand new vistas of westernisation was the only way to civilize oneself and stand up to the master. Once the master's ways became familiar, it became easier to interpret and popularize the glory of India. The latter half of nineteenth century witnessed this confusion of being between two cultures, and the fact that the new educated elite had to accept the master's civilization as refined and civilized was another dilemma. In *Sakuntala* the very theme of being seduced, hunted down/conquered and left desolate after having violated the feminine essence (i.e., Sakuntala's virginity wrapped up in her innocent beauty) and later scandalized, were almost analogous to the situation of India which had been colonized, stripped of its wealth and eventually postulated as inferior. The poetic justice in the play, the acceptance of Sakuntala as Dusyanta's lawful wife was another attractive

end to the story. It would not be wrong in assuming that the literary men and artists of the time were aesthetically representing their dreams of India, consecrated to her rightful, independent position, by reworking on the story of Sakuntala, Mother of Bharata after whom the country was named.

Another narrative which enhances exile and recovery of a lost kingdom is the main plot of the ***Mahabharata.*** Here, rather than dealing with the bravery of Pandavas, Varma turns his attention to a few episodes dealing with Panchali (Draupadi), the wife of Pandavas. For these narratives he relies on Kathakali literature (*Atakkada*). ***Kirmiravadham*** (the killing of Kirmira), was a much enacted piece composed by Kottayam Thampuran (1645-1716). This story is taken from the eleventh chapter "*Vana Parva*". In this chapter, 'Kirmira Bandha Parva', the demon Kirmira awaits to avenge the death of his brother Vaka (Baka). He confronts Bhima in a deadly combat and is slain the same way as Vaka. Kottayathu Thampuran gives regional colorings by including the tale of Simhika as a complementary theme to the story of Kirmira. Simhika, Kirmira's wife, on learning that her husband is no more alive, tries to abduct Draupadi in the form of Lalita, a beautiful woman. Sahadeva intercepts her on the way and disfigures the demoness by

cutting her nose and breasts. This regional variation has a lot in common with the story of Maricha and Shurpanaka in ***Ramayana.*** Maricha entices Sita into the forest, while Shurpanaka is killed in the same way as Simhika.

In the Kathakali version of ***Kirmira Vadha,*** the Simhika episode occurs from scenes 8-14. Simhika is given the *Kari* or black make-up associated with evil nature and Draupadi is given *Minukku* or radiant make up given for women. Varma's picture, ***Draupadi and Simhika*** [1898, fig: 9] illustrates Simhika whisking Draupadi away to the deep forest. Meanwhile, Draupadi is scared.

> **Panchali:** Here the cricket's sound resonates intensely, my body like a creeper repeatedly shivers. Friend, arent we going to return immediately. (at this point Lalita holds Panchali's hand. Panchali tries to release her hand, but Lalita wont' let go.)[29]

The dichotomy implied in *Kari* and *Minukku* make ups are illustrated by Varma in the skin tones. Draupadi has a radiant glow about her where as Simhika disguised as Lalita is given a human touch with a lighter shade of brown. Even their costumes are symbolic of evil (black sari worn by Lalita) and desirability (red sari draped by Draupadi). A reluctant

[29] Probodha Chandra Nair, N P Sankaran Namboothiri and Phillip B. Zarrilli (trans),' Kirmira Vadham' by Kottarathil Thampuran. ***Kathakali: A Dance Drama***. London: Routledge, 2000. p.124.

Draupadi is whisked off to a dense forest and her face displays a mixed expression of apprehension and fear. The same expression can be seen in ***Sairandhri and Keechaka*** [fig: 10]. Influenced by Irayimman Thampi's ***Keechakavadham***, Varma tries to manifest the seduction of Draupadi (disguised as Sairandhri in the *Virata Parva* of the ***Mahabharata***) by Keechaka, the brother in law of the King of Virata. Sairandhri hides behind a velvet curtain, half her body protected by the curtain so as to ascertain refuge from the lust of Keechaka. Keechaka tries to woo Draupadi; she stands for chastity and fidelity where as Keechaka's resemblance to a fox indicates canniness and sensuality. ***Draupadi at the Court of Virata***, [fig: 11] from the same Parva, is the continuation of the story. Rejected and humiliated by Draupadi, Keechaka drags her to the court of Virata and he kicks her. Varma captures the dramatic denouement of Draupadi, Keechaka who is about to faint (Draupadi was protected by a *Rakshasa Spirit,* and it attacks Keechaka*)*, Yudhistira as Kanka (the court advisor), asking the furious Bhimasena (Vallava, the cook) to go and the lackadaisical king, his consort and subjects. This artistic representation of the narrative shows the fallen figure of Draupadi set in opposition by towering male figures. In all the three pictures, Draupadi is shown as fearful, hesitant and powerless compared

to her male counterparts. But the women in the Mahabharata are strong personalities, cherishing their autonomy and willing to argue for their rights. Draupadi is considered to be one of the strongest women in the ***Mahabharata***. In Varma, she is passive, voiceless and rife with the constitutive process of symbol-making. Both Sakuntala and Draupadi are depoliticised agencies which symbolise suffering, and the muted urge for national liberation. By fixing women's suffering as a symbolic condition in both the stories, Varma validates their social and moral roles and idealizes them as embodiments of virtue, chastity, purity and self-sacrifice. Both of them become passive symbols of different totalities within the discourse of tradition and religion.

CONCLUSION

During his time, Ravi Varma was widely known as a portrait painter than a genre artist among elitist circles. Portraits have always served as vehicles for specific peoples (collectively named as patrons) whose identities they wish to establish and perpetuate. Above the epidermal reality, body also becomes the terrain on which non-physical realties can be mapped and visualized. Portraits are of specific people who are 'important' in their historic time. Portraits also give a factual information about the life styles of that particular time. While exploring and analyzing the construction of artifacts in Ravi Varma's art, I will be evading this most important realm of portraiture due to various practical difficulties. The study of portraits should be furnished with biographical and historical details. Many of the women sitters in Ravi Varma paintings have their 'names' and their bodies represented in art mark their identities (mostly bourgeois ones). But beyond these aspects, they simply function as adornments by enhancing their domestic roles within limited private spaces. Their historic or social specificity is not well documented and only a few details can be gleaned from the background. Mostly it is their bodies that communicate with the spectator. In this concluding chapter, the portrait of Rani Lakshmi Bai [fig: 2] will be included as a

case study to illustrate the difficulty of discerning the social conditions and the historical specificity of a body which is caught up in a cluster of traditional rubrics that surround it. The portrait of Rani Lakshmi Bai was painted in 1893 and is exhibited in Sri Chitra Arts gallery, Thiruvananthapuram. Ravi Varma's wife belonged to the Royal family of Mavelikkara from where her eldest sister Lakshmi Bai was adopted by the Travancore Royal Family. She was married to Kerala Varma Valiya Koil Thampuran, the author of ***Manipravala Shakuntalam.*** In this picture, Rani waits to be looked at, confronting the spectators with a tacit confidence. She is decked up with ornaments; gold, precious stones and pearl. Her necklaces and bangles show a royal exuberance and the absence of rings in the middle fingers of both the hands is based on the superstitious belief that it is inauspicious to wear one in the middle finger which is the seat of Saturn. Her costume is voluminous, it is not the traditional Kerala style dress she wears. She wears a gold embroidered skirt and a Banarsi *duppatta* worn from the right side of her shoulder. Her preference for it shows her exposure to the various styles of dressing up in other parts of the country (especially North India) and her tastes indicate her distinctiveness. The main intention behind wearing this costume cannot be gleaned from the picture, unless we assume certain things- the popularity of other regional costumes in the Royal household (and not elsewhere) and the theatrical effects highlighted by the adaptation of

another, exotic costume. Thus, portraits by Varma become a highly dramatized version of an individual. Varma exaggerates the play of light and shadow on her costumes, darkening the recesses of its fold to give the whole an overwhelming sense of pomp and the light reflected from the highlighted surface creates the same aura of dignity. The drapery at the back of the figure, the royal red curtain drawn aside a little to reveal the round pillars, brings about the conventional trappings of tradition and modernity. Tradition is encapsulated in Laskhmi Bai's body. The pillars in the backdrop are excellent epitomes of the colonial power and these edifices of imperialism anchor shades of authoritarianism lurking around the body. Her right hand is placed firmly on a hard-bound thick book and two books are also kept near her, carefully arranged, on a table. The firm placing of her hand on the book is linked with the education of women and their growing awareness during that period. Girls schools spread in Travancore as early as 1830s when upper caste/class women were exposed to learning within the limits of orthodoxy. Thus, the indicators of literacy and the exquisitely furnished room in western style, establish the link between the literacy of women and high standards of their living. The flowers on the table, roses and asters in full bloom, accomplished with fine fresh strokes, also complement the facet of imitating the western pomp and the bourgeois mentality that linked physical comforts with mental refinement. Lakshmi

Bai's head is turned slightly away from a perpendicular angle to the viewer indicating confidence and a scholarly introversion. The dark circles around her light eyes and the painter's sharp focus on the books delineate her physical space which is designed for scholarly pursuits and luxury. More interesting is the medal she wears, which cannot be of a royal bearing, but an indicator of her scholarly merits. Within the pictorial frame the physical presence of Laskhmi Bai qualified by the material wealth that surrounds her has a rhetorical significance. In fact, Varma uses light to warm the physique as well as the materials in the painting and the darkness in the background thus connects the value of the identity of Laskhmi Bai to what she possesses. Thus, this painting has diverse implications about the status of women and their links with education and higher birth. Lakhmi Bai at once becomes a symbol embodying these qualities as well as a fashionable body that incorporates the social changes catching up fast among upper class/elites.

The closed internal spaces around the body and the darkened out exterior highlight another grim facet of restrictions on social mobility during that time. Lack of Lakshmi Bai's biographical details retrict my study here. It will be interesting to take a look at another woman, who had been seldom or never mentioned in the context of painting in Kerala. She was Mangala Bai Thampuratty, the youngest sister of Ravi Varma.

Varma's biographies tells us that she became a painter of considerable talent and accomplishment, but his biographers never went beyond this statement to analyze why she did not rise to be a major painter. Her gender sidelined her artistic faculties. Her existence was just a shadowing complement to her brother's growth as an artist. Varma's artistic growth had in it the components of his aristocratic birth and his image as a self-taught artist. These facts boosted his reputation as a gentleman artist or 'Prince among painters', to legendary proportions.

Varma came from a family of artists. His grand uncle, Raja Raja Varma, introduced him to the court of Travancore and opened new vistas of artistic knowledge for the young man. The importance of this incident is such that it proves wrong our assumptions of art as an autonomous activity of a super-endowed individual. If Varma had not been patronized and exposed to new techniques of painting, he would have remained an anonymous artist, thus vanishing from the pages of art history. Varma's uncle, as biographies tell us, found out the artistic endowments of the young man and his sister. But due to various kinds of social restrictions on woman's empowerment at that time, Mangala's talents were totally ignored and only Varma was taken to the court to be given a formal artistic training. Thus, the development of the artist as such is influenced by social forces in terms of the nature and quality of art itself. Art is determined by the social structure and is mediated and

determined by specific and definable social institutions, be it art schools, systems of patronage, and mythologies of the divine creator or artist as a super human being. Thus the social structure of that time celebrated and encouraged the faculties of women bordering on their physical performances (dance and music) but had a hostile attitude towards faculties of mind (creative writing, painting etc.). Functioning within these hackneyed dichotomies, aspiring women artists of that time were confronted with an antagonism and oppression mediated by a social structure designed for the sustenance of male hegemony which established man as the subject of all scholarly pursuits. Women artists, like Mangala, had no other way but to accept these oppressive forces as 'natural' with an uncomplaining resignation.

" "Why have there been no great woman artists?" This question tolls reproachfully in the background of the so called 'woman problem'. But like so many other so-called questions involved in the feminist 'controversy', it falsifies the nature of the issue at the same time it insidiously supplies its own answer. "There are no great women artists because they are incapable of greatness."[30] Even though Mangala's talents were known to the family from her childhood onwards, it was institutionally made impossible for her to achieve artistic excellence or success, on the same footing as men. This disadvantage, brought about by

[30] Linda Nochlin. *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays* New York: Harper and Row, 1988, p.147.

social and familial restrictions, is something more than an excuse, but it was a disempowering reality which functioned intune with the patriarchal interests. The extant paintings of Mangala, a portrait of Ravi Varma and an instance of ***Charity*** (both of them are in Srichitra Arts gallery, Thiruvananthapuram) are epitomes of her creativity *par excellence*. In the portrait she paints her brother in the familiar light of an artist prince, with the paraphernalia of artistic achievements adorning him (eg; The medal, 'Vira Sringhala' presented to him by Raja Ayilyam Thirunal of his artistic genius). The aura of respectability and the staff of authority painted in the portrait are grim indices of suppressing one's own individuality to project the glory of another. The individual glorifying artistic aura created by her is in fact at the cost of her own artistic individuality. It can be very well argued that Mangala had been taught oil painting by Varma himself. But then, the exercise of this faculty was always limited within the family. Mangala might have never traveled outside her familial boundaries (social conventions restricted mobility of women during that time), thus recognition and patronage were also out of her reach. On the one hand, Varma was considered to have superhuman talent as an artist: his control of strong, possibly dangerous powers, have functioned historically to project him as a god-like creator. On the other hand, Magala might have had to face the most determined familial and social opposition, suffering the slings and arrows of social opprobrium:

despite these, two of her paintings managed to survive through to the present century. This antagonism is evident in the popularity of Mangala's portrait of Varma over ***Charity***. Though adopted from the brother's painting which bears the same theme and name, Mangala's ***Charity*** has a simplicity which borders on her immediate experience of the world outside her. In this picture, a small girl gives oil to a beggar woman. Giving oil to beggars was a common custom in Kerala and when compared to the grand and dramatic gesture of Varma' painting, ***The Charity,*** it calls to attention the immediacy of a more realistic and simple action, which required no grand artistic embellishments. Inaccessibility of this painting, limits my attempt for an in depth analysis. It is doubtful if this painting has either been cited or documented in any substantial art books. It is indeed a sorry state of affair; but to document all the unknown and marginal artists is in fact a mammoth task for the art historians. It is in fact sadder, when a woman artist is drowned by the artistic effluence of her own brother.

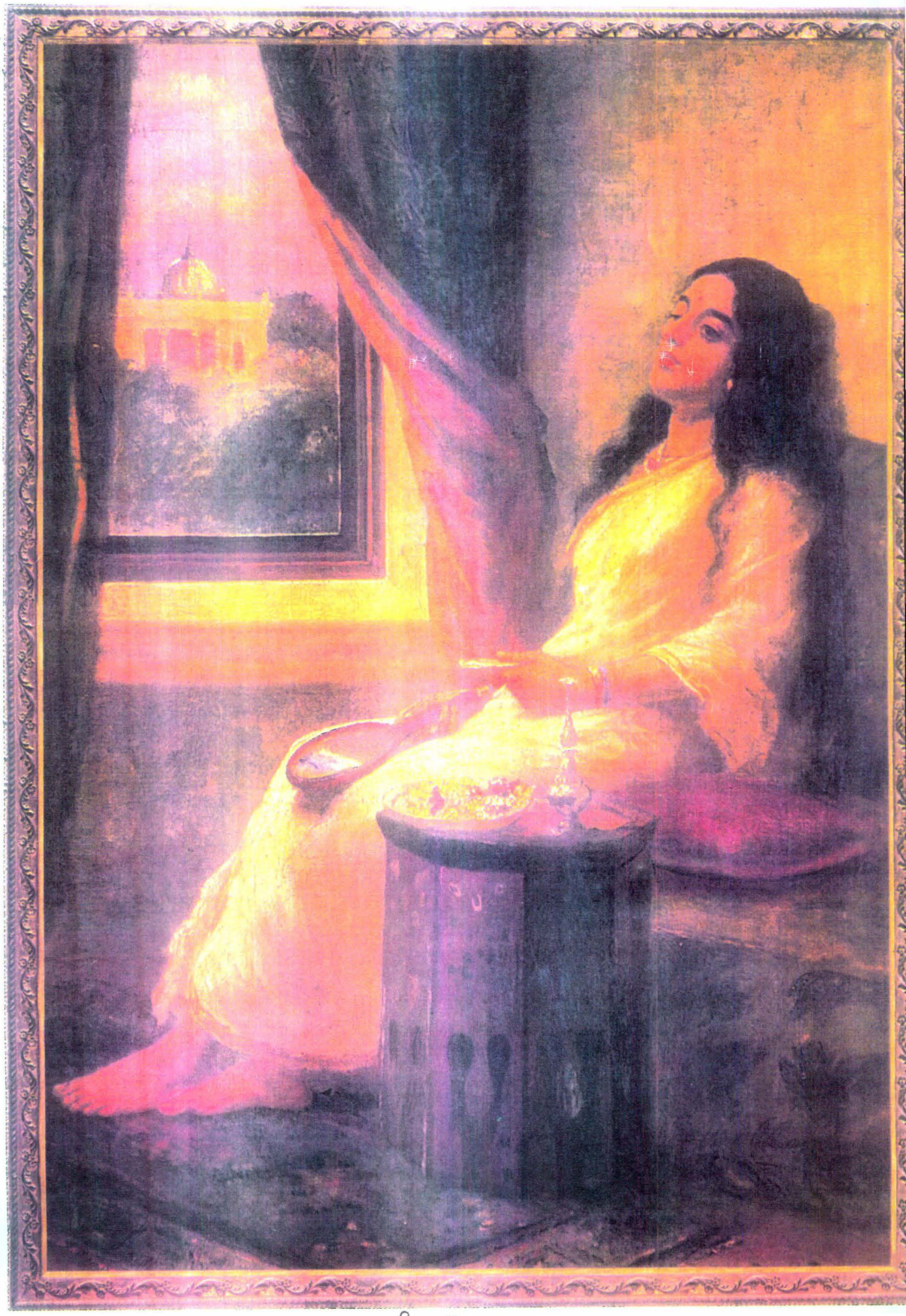
Such tales are repeated throughout history. Even in the present age, things have not changed much so as to enable an aspiring female artist (especially of the lower caste/class) to break free from the institutional fetters. Ignoring such peripheral artists will reinforce the myths about mediocrity and lack of talent for painting among women. In fact, the most commonly asked question, 'Were there any woman artists at all,' can be effectively answered by unearthing available pieces of

artists like Mangala and highlighting their contribution. Studies on such anonymous painters like Mangala do help a great deal in establishing and making the world aware of the equal talent women shared in the filed of fine arts. Their small, if not voluminous, contributions would prove a fruitful field of study, and would show us the creation of a world of colours and visual images by women, which was forbidden to them till the beginning of the twentieth century.

fig: 1

fig: 2
108

fig : 4



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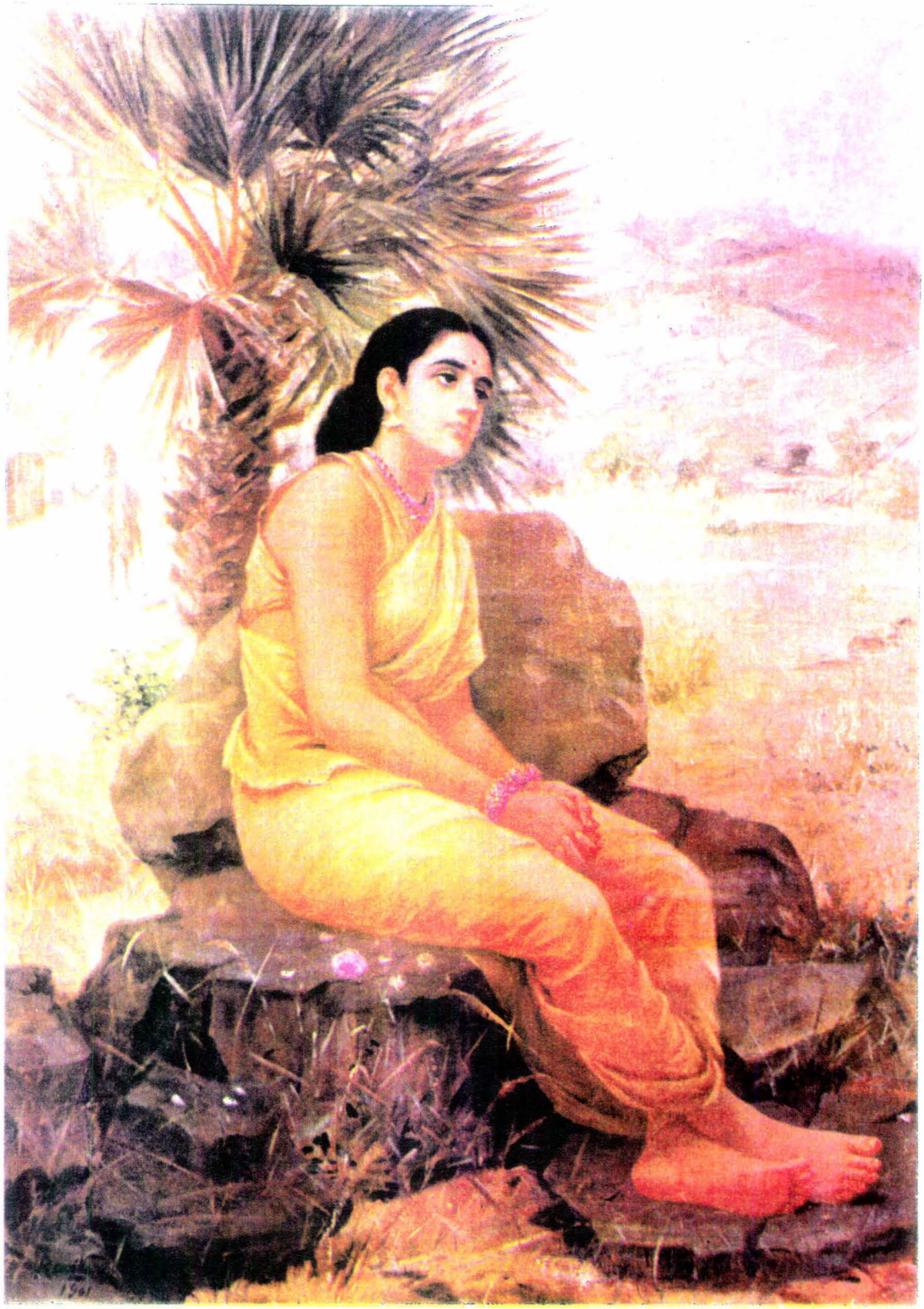

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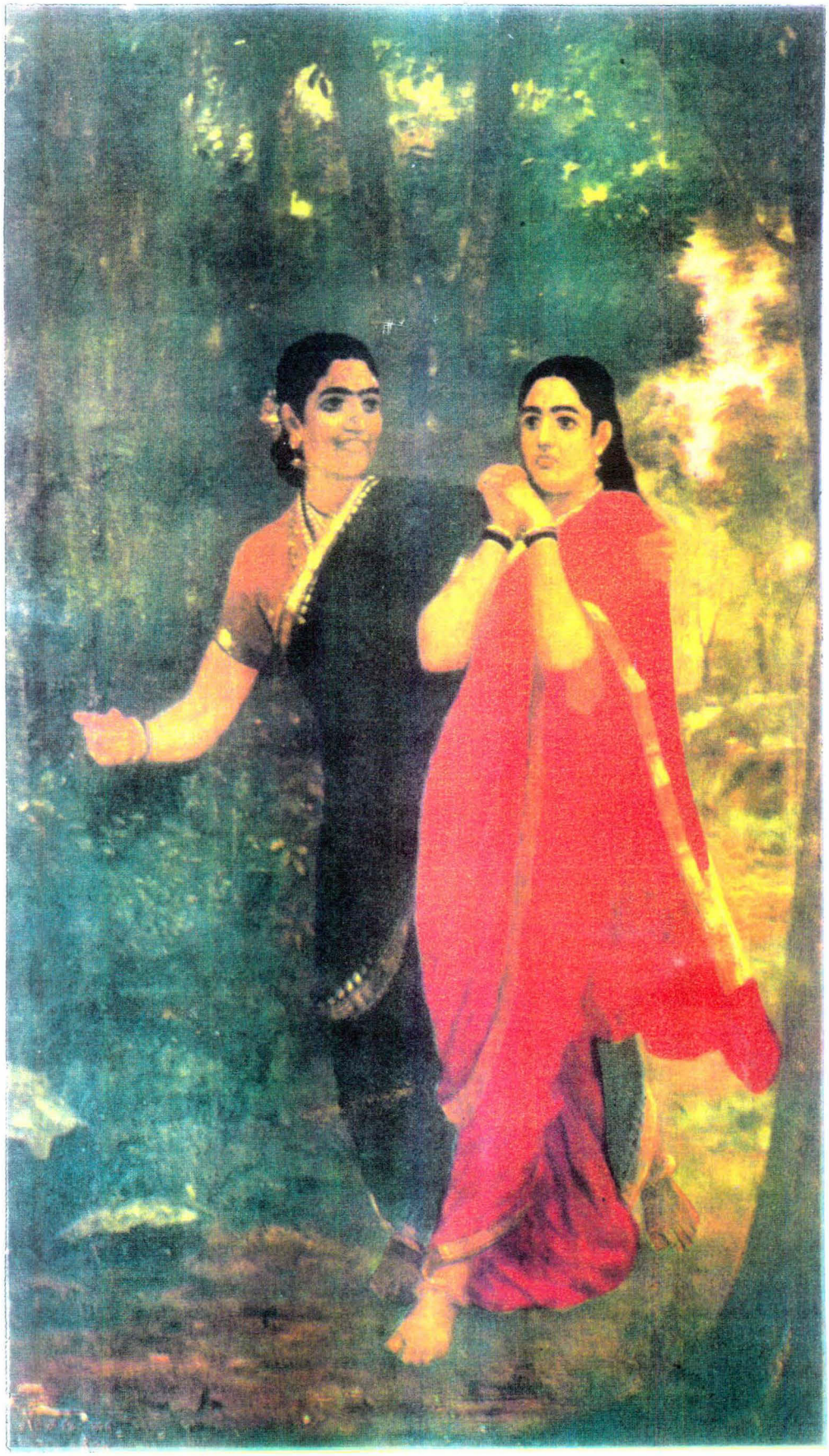

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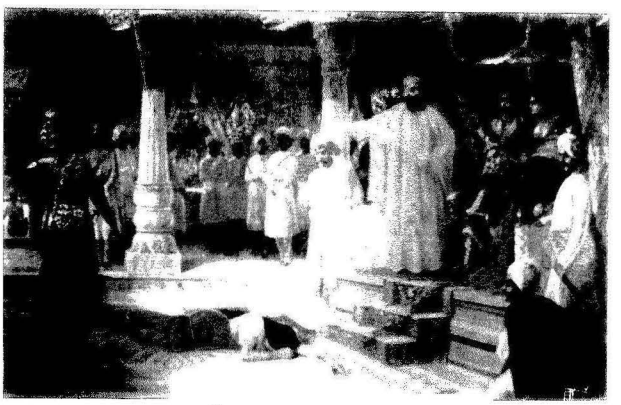

fig: 11

fig: 3

fig: 12

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