



Mapping The Role Of Academic Structures In Shaping The Portrayal Of Women's Identity In Pre-Modern Indian Art

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Abstract: This research paper investigates how women's identity served as a source of representation and how artists trained in structured art schools interpreted this context in their own distinct ways. Weaving the intricate ways in which visual narratives reflect and shape societal perceptions of femininity, agency, and cultural identity. The paper is an approach that integrates an amalgamation of western style art merging with Indian image, cultural studies and semiotics; the study aims to unravel the complex layers of meaning embedded within artistic depictions of women in the Indian modernist movement.

As the colonial era progressed into the late 19th century, India experienced a significant confluence in its political and social spheres, leading to a new cultural convergence. This period introduced new dimensions to Indian society, redefining the concept of modernity. With the establishment of art schools and the designing of academic structures; art of the period embraced Western painting techniques while infusing them with distinctly Indian imagery. The interplay of this cultural dynamics, paved the way to analyse colonial legacies, socio-cultural movements, representations of gender and national identity. Delving into the work of pioneering Indian modernist artists such as M. V. Dhurandhar, Amrita Sher-Gil, Raja Ravi Varma, Hemant Majumdar and many more. The paper examines their use of imagery and interrogates how the art schools played an important role in generating new bodies of representation through their art.

The designing of early modern art through academics has allowed for the exploration of a new definition of 'Indian' art, its techniques and styles, pushing the boundaries and bringing new perspectives. Western academics have often been seen as the epitome of art education and the syllabus designing of institutions like the Royal College of Art have influenced the approach to art in India. The research focuses on concerning factors like- How women as a subject were utilized as allegorical image, where complex themes such as domesticity, sexuality and resistance played an important role in constructing the layout of what we are subjecting to 'modern'. Has art merely served as a purpose to represent the Indianness or did it play a pivotal role in shaping the discourse surrounding our perception?

In consideration with the above query the paper reciprocates through these reception and interpretation of women's representations in Indian modern art. This research proposal will aim to explore the nuanced development of early modern art in India by investigating its contextual shaping through academic structures. It offers insights into the complexities of representation intersecting the idea of ethnicity, caste, class and shaping the perceptions of femineity and empowerment with the Indian discourse.

Index Terms - image, identities, colonial realm, perception, art education, early modern Indian art

I. INTRODUCTION

The establishment of academic art schools in India was initially intended to train craftsmen and industrial workers to support British developments, fundamentally altering the age-old traditional painting practices of Indians. Before the British introduced structured education, access to artistic professions was limited due to the caste system, with occupations typically confined to family lineage. Consequently, the creation of these art schools marked a significant step forward, offering broader access to education and artistic training, regardless of one's social class. The amalgamation of stylistic exchange is evident in company paintings, court paintings, and various other cultural sectors, such as literature and music. With the introduction of academic structures, the works produced began to reflect a blend of European cultural influence and Indian imagery. Although these crafts were primarily tailored to British tastes, this adaptation led to the emergence of a new phase in Indian art, one that redefined perspectives and created fresh narratives.

A significant shift in the Indian art context was the newfound recognition of artists, who previously remained unnamed, with only the patrons credited for the work. The advent of art education played a crucial role in this transformation, as artists began to gain recognition and actively contributed to reclaiming Indian identity, while also supporting the movements of nationalism and modernism.

Art schools established in four major cities—Madras, Calcutta, Bombay, and Lahore—were supported by the South Kensington School of London. These institutions introduced an academic curriculum that included departments such as painting and sculpture, emphasizing figurative study and even introducing the study of the nude, which was a bold and unprecedented move in the Indian context at the time.

Women became prominent subjects for study, observation, painting, and sculpture, although men were also depicted, the focus was primarily on women. Drawing inspiration from Renaissance paintings and Greek sculptures, Indian artists began depicting Indian women with similar techniques, rendering them in traditional attire, props, and varied styles of dress. This led to a new approach in portraying women, merging Western figurative study with Indian cultural elements.

These confined educational spaces provided a new dimension for perceiving women within the Indian context. Art became more accessible and was exhibited during this period, offering the general public the opportunity to engage with its dynamics. Women were portrayed as symbols of nationalism, revered as idols, depicted as sensual bodies, and shown in various societal roles, or simply as individuals navigating spaces created by the artists. The viewer's role in interpreting these depictions contributed to the evolving forms that defined pre-modern Indian art.

This era of Indian modernism offers a powerful lens for analysing the legacies of colonialism, socio-cultural transformations, and the exploration of gender and national identity. It also raises a point on how we see modern and what exactly are its values. K.G. Subramanyan in his book 'The living Tradition', discusses the meaning of modern by asking 'Is modernity in art a matter of style (meaning a manner of statement) or a matter of attitude (meaning a new set of terms of reference to art activity itself)? That the modern artist has often come to cherish the values he has discovered in historical artifacts, starting with the earliest in civilization, confirms that what is in question is not any manner of statement but the terms of reference (Subramanyan, 1987, p.83).

The paper further discusses pioneering Indian modernist artists such as Amrita Sher-Gil, Raja Ravi Varma, Hemendranath Majumdar, Sunayani Devi, Gaganendranath Tagore and M.V. Dhurandhar playing a pivotal role in shaping this artistic landscape. Their art captures the essence of female identity, using subtle gestures and expressions to convey complex layers of emotion and societal expectations. By depicting women in positions of power and dignity, the artworks challenge stereotypical representations, offering metaphorical insights into their roles and identities as central figures.

II. Visualizing the pre-modern context

The transition from Western modern influences to Indian contexts reflects significant differences in inspiration. A comparative analysis can be drawn between two iconic representations: Ingres' neoclassical portrayal of women, such as "The Valpincon Bather," emphasizing the visual perception of the body within a playful engagement with the viewer, and Hemendranath's "Toilet," where semi-dressed women adorned with jewellery are depicted with a mirror in the background, conveying a self-awareness of being observed. These artworks symbolize divergent cultural perspectives on the dynamics of gaze and representation, echoing John Berger's observation that "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at," which is aptly reflected in these paintings. (Berger, Quotes of John Berger from Way of Seeing, n.d.)

Similarly, examining Picasso's fascination with African masks and folk objects in his artworks, alongside Kalighat paintings inspired by traditional scroll art, reveals contrasting approaches to image presence and the portrayal of the female body. Picasso's works demonstrate a shift toward abstract representation and the exploration of form, while Kalighat paintings remain rooted in relatable subjects like Hindu gods and mythological figures, reflecting the social structures and cultural narratives of their regions. Both artistic movements provide valuable insights into the evolving visual language and societal contexts that continue to shape the art we perceive today. Partha Chatterjee's observation in Kedar Vishwanathan's research paper, breakdown the two domains of society- the material and the spiritual. The nationalists envisaged the material sphere to be Western and technological, that which allowed the British to dominate Indians. The spiritual sphere was the inner sphere or the sanctum of domesticity where the nationalists did not allow intervention by the British. Simply, the material sphere was masculine and the spiritual sphere was feminine and domestic (Viswanathan, 2010, p.3). Western art was primarily defined by a visual language characterized by consistent formal analysis and challenges to established contexts, while Indian artists focused on representing and imbuing meaning into the narratives of the people they depicted.

According to Geeta Kapur in her book 'When Was Modernism' she states that, 'A systematic portrayal of the Indian people is an ongoing project everywhere in India and the rules are similar to those hypothesized for the larger question of national identity. The paradigms position the binaries racial, universal, regional/national, individual/ typical in place' (Kapur, 2000, p.152).

III. Women identities creating narratives

Artists have often sparked dialogues when women identities were interpreted and created new perceptions in exploring the cultural and social dynamics. The representation of women has always been an interest to paint depicting various as domestic figures to positioning them within hierarchical realm as symbols. In art education structure, women served as an important element to read a human anatomy and thus slowly and gradually recreating various depiction of women and subsequently portraying it. Whether its figures engaged in daily chores or in relaxed pose, the self-awareness and dignity a woman holds could be observed and was reflected in the painting. This representation of women is discussed in the following readings which explores themes of womanhood and the relationship between the artist, the viewer and the depicted woman. Discussions on these aspects are described in the following writings which focuses on certain artists and their perceptions on the subject.



Chित्रलेखा by Ravi Varma, 1980



Disappointed by Ravi Varma, 1906

Ravi Varma has always been an epic enthusiast and knew a lot of narratives which helped him visualize and create images of the characters. One of such characters portrayed by him was 'Chित्रलेखा' which was taken from scenes in Bhagavata. The central figure is Usha, the daughter of Banasura who dreams of a prince, Aniruddha (grandson of Krishna). Usha is unable to identify the person in her dream when her companion Chित्रलेखा paints pictures of all the princes known to her. Finally, she paints Aniruddha and Usha is excited when she sees Aniruddha's painting and is able to identify the personage in her dream. In the second work named 'Disappointed', where we could see the agony in her eyes, longing for her beloved. She is portrayed in a classical depiction of 'the grieving women' which was not essentially been depicted in paintings in those days. Both the works have similar approach which focuses on the women in despair, and not just a mere representation of an idol image to be admired. We can also see references from neo classic paintings and romanticism artworks which had a similar approach to represent women and the conscience of them. 'Olympia' by Manet or 'madame Recamier' by Jacques David are examples of these references to begin with, which worked on the way of how women were portrayed.

Despite the mythological subject matter, the portrayal of women enjoying their own company suggests a sense of freedom and self-expression, positioning them as central characters within society. Being taught in western style, Raja Ravi Varma truly elevated the way we used to see Indian art and therefore was also known as the father of modern art. His ability to capture the essence of women being true to themselves and free is noteworthy, encapsulating this narrative in his artworks.

Amrita Sher-Gil, who was trained within the Western academic structure in Hungary, incorporated Western techniques into her art. Her earlier works clearly exhibit the influence of European art styles, often portraying women in intimate, personal spaces—whether in portraits of herself, her models, or her friends. Additionally, she explored social themes related to women from diverse backgrounds, capturing their roles as household figures who, whether in the background or, as depicted in her work, by supporting one another, contribute to shaping society.

Amrita Sher-Gil's painting *Dressing the Bride* draws clear inspiration from Rajput miniatures, capturing a blend of tenderness and a range of emotions as the bride prepares for a new chapter in her life. The earthy red hue enveloping her brings her into focus as she clutches her dress, symbolizing her transition from one life phase to another as she prepares to leave behind everything familiar and embrace her new role in her future husband's home. Despite Sher-Gil's background in a different cultural context, her artistic sensitivity allowed her to portray this moment with subtlety, using it as a metaphor to express the complexities of a woman's life and responsibilities, often depicted as symbols of sacrifice. This portrayal underscores the unique challenges women face in leaving their past behind and reconstructing themselves for new roles—a narrative that is rarely reflected in men's experiences.



Siesta by Amrita Sher Gill



Dressing the bride, 1937, 37.5x27.7inch, oil on canvas, DAG

In "Siesta," she strategically uses red colour to draw attention to the central female figure. The relaxed posture of the woman surrounded by others conveys themes of leisure and also reflects women in focus and her societal status in the given scenario. As Geeta Kapur in her book *When Was Modernism* mentions that Sher-Gil, with characteristic arrogance, dismissed Ravi Varma, the juxtaposition is very instructive. We have a male and a female painter, both possessing an aristocratic view, both devising the indigenous body from oil paint and, further, both wanting to materialize (and thus naturalize) the self-conscious presence of oriental women within a reconstructed local context (Kapur, 2000, p.9).

The depiction of women in leisurely settings varies significantly between male and female artists. Male artists often portray female figures as playful objects of the male gaze, emphasizing sensuality to cater to the desires of viewers. On the other hand, female artists like Amrita Sher-Gil or Sunayani Devi present women in society with a subtle realism, avoiding idealized beauty standards and creating relatable portrayals. In male artists' works, women are often depicted in an illusionistic manner despite using local women or familiar models as subjects. In contrast, female artists do not adhere to specific structures of desirability or exceptionalism in their depictions of women, focusing instead on authenticity and representation.



Hindu girl of the period, postcard series by M.V. Dhurandhar



The Ayah, postcard series by M.V. Dhurandhar

M.V. Dhurandhar, trained in Western academic techniques at the Sir J.J. School of Art, depicted the varied phases of Indian women in his works. His works were a product of western art school which included painting in oils, water colour and figures depicted with western standard. His famous works such as 'scene of Hindu Marriage Ceremony' done in watercolour or 'Radha and Krishna', and many such works projected his approach from the western style. His application in bringing Indian themes to his painting were notified which also gave new perception of art coming out from a western art institute. He was awarded with many awards to appreciate and later on went on to become the principal of Sir J. J. School of Art. He was the first Indian to be a principal at a western build art institute. His way of painting figures resembled a lot like western art which had structured figures, fair complexion, colour selections and resembled company styles of painting to some extent.

His postcards series captured the complexities of colonial identities and new societal discourse forming under the umbrella of colonial domain. His work 'Hindu girl of the period' showcased a spectrum ranging from British loyalists (blending Western and Indian attire) to the changing identities of women among Indians. A glimpse of women engaging in conversations away from their household, brought new perceptions of women in a liberal space which were not very common scene to be seen. Dhurandhar's choice of subjects reflected the nuances of colonial discourse, as members of the Indian community collaborating with the British, embodying the role of memsahibs for Indian pupils. These depictions mirrored the evolving status of women adapting under colonial rule and the identities they derived from such contexts. Dhurandhar portrayed women as individuals who didn't require external affirmation or were under any form of possession.

"The Ayah" of Bombay; Dhurandhar highlighted the role of women as essential contributors to the workforce during colonial times. The central figure depicts the class which was forming and creating a new modern society, where a whole new work force (specially for women) was designed to cater the western household which takes care of the family and is still very relevant in today's time too. The portrayal resonates with the modern working class, emphasizing their presence across various sectors and their identifiable uniforms, reflecting a continuity in the roles and visibility of women in society.



'Blue Sari', 81x49.3 cm, oil on canvas.
on way to tryst, opaque water-
Image courtesy Kumar Collection
ca. 1760

Painting, Abhisarika Nayika, lady
colour and gold on paper, Guler,

Hemendranath Majumdar's depictions of female subjects often present them as objects of desire, where the figures engage with the viewer's gaze while asserting their self-assurance. His female figures are frequently shown with their backs turned; their faces angled in a way that suggests an awareness of how they are perceived. Majumdar skilfully captures the sensuous dilemmas these women face, often revealing their lower backs through transparent drapery while they adjust their pallu over their heads. In his work *Blue Sari*, the subtle contrast of using the veil as a cultural symbol against the revealing nature of their bodies highlights the complex portrayal of women in his art. It raises questions about whether these women are intentionally depicted as objects for the male gaze, challenging societal norms, or expressing their own desire to be seen in a particular light.

This painting presents a perspective distinct from the works of Ravi Varma or even Amrita Sher-Gil, who depicted women in either their comfortable surroundings or against illustrated backgrounds with vibrant colours and settings. In Majumdar's painting, the figure is set against a sublime backdrop, creating a sense of depth and movement as she walks toward an unseen destination. The composition evokes the series of *abhisarikas* in miniature paintings, particularly the *nayikas* who wander through dark nights in classical narratives. The contrast between the luminous figure and the dark surroundings emphasizes the journey and narrative unfolding in the artwork. Just as the *abhisarikas* embark on emotional and physical journeys in classical tales, the figure in this painting symbolizes a similar exploration or transition, capturing a moment of contemplation or anticipation.



Milk Maids, c. 1920s, tempera on paper, 34.2 cm; 33.5 cm,
Sunayani Devi
National Gallery of Modern Art, Bengaluru



A newly wedded bride by

If we analyse women depictions in arts scene, where an artist tends to either give meaning to a subject or emphasize certain features; Sunayani Devi's works simplify the way we perceive art compared to her other contemporaries. Though she was from the renowned Tagore's family, she was a self-taught artist, and with her approach to art was also acknowledged as the first Indian modern women artist by Dr. Stella Kramrisch. I took her as an example to support the readings because as she was not a trained artist from western style art form but she had an approach of showcasing women in a different light and portraying the simplicity of the person 'She' can be depicted. She merged the modernist discourse of primitive simplicity with the nationalist discourse of cultural authenticity, embodying the image of a nationalist artist, as noted by Partha Mitter in his book "The Triumph of Modernism" (Apna art adda, WordPress, n.d.). Her artworks, such as 'The Milkmaids,' depict naive and simple female figures in moments of solitude. The elongated, half-closed eyes with broad eyebrows and earthy colours reflect influences from Kalighat paintings, while her use of tempera on paper as a medium further defines her contribution to rendering Indianness in the Indian art scene. Her work 'a newly wedded bride' executes the whole layout of complex emotions a woman goes through when she is about to get married in an Indian context. The lady painted represents the emotional turmoil which a girl faces where she is happy for her new life and blessings but also is sad to leave her own

family that she is going to leave behind. The identity of a married women described in the painting where she wears jewels, flower garlands and shiny silver sari best to her fitting, carrying the hope of a new happy life she waits for. Sunayani's works may resemble reference from our own miniature paintings but her approach of representing women were contemporary.



East and West: Indian Lady Dancing with an European Gentleman (Caricature), c. 1915/16



Untitled, 1916, by

east and west, Indian lady dancing with
Gaganendranath Tagore
European Gentleman (caricature), 1915 by Gaganendranath Tagore

While Gaganendranath is primarily recognized for his satirical caricatures that reflect the evolving societal perspectives and the emergence of the British-educated Indian elite known as the *Bhadraloks* and *Bhadra mohilas*, he also delved into Cubist techniques in his other works. These pieces often depict monochromatic compositions with multiple intersecting figures, including women integrated into these scenes. In these artworks, sensuality is absent, and the female figures are not necessarily the central focus or seeking attention. Instead, they are depicted in traditional Indian attire engaging in conversations within the spectator's surroundings.

One image captures the British-Indian new class society which presents a new set of educated people who were recognised by the Britishers and were part of the society. Her attire is of an Indian sari which has been accessorized with socks and heels which were introduced by the British, embodying a sense of duality or juxtaposition. In another image, the status of women is explored in terms of respect or judgment by the spectators. A Bengali commentary in the right-hand corner in the artwork, questions women's identity and societal perception of respect. The male figures surrounding the female subjects act as metaphors for male dominance or the pervasive male gaze that often shapes societal norms and perceptions. The artworks provide a nuanced commentary on gender dynamics and power structures within society, inviting viewers to reflect on themes of identity, respect, and societal expectations.

These readings articulate the complex themes such as domesticity, sexuality, and resistance. The works defines the pivotal role in shaping the discourse surrounding our perception of viewing art and women as an image in it. Exploring how visual metaphors intersect with broader discourses on gender, class, caste, and ethnicity, shaping perceptions of femininity and empowerment within Indian society.

IV. Conclusion

The symbolic use of women in social discourse, combined with Western influences in the Indian context, raises the question of whether art functioned as a visual transformation in Indian art context or played a crucial role in shaping the discourse around our perceptions. The works of artists who sought to capture these complexities not only sparked critical discussions on art and society but also explored deeper notions of gender and national identity.

The layers of modernity were often exaggerated as a Western evolution challenging itself with new styles and subjects. The influence of art schools was prominent through the works by the artists mentioned above, where we could see the idea of image making and how each artists applied their understanding of social dynamics and cultural perception in their works which had its own identity and also provided us with the varied phase and sight of womanhood and women's identity. Indian artists, like Raja Ravi Verma and Hemen Majumdar portrayed the essence of womanhood and its fragments could also be detected in the miniature paintings portraying abhisarikas which gave new perceptions of women identity; while focusing on narratives reflecting their cultural presence and redefined how Indian art discourse was perceived. We also observed women artists like Amrita Shergill and Sunayani devi who drew women in their own simple and naïve image, who does not identify itself through the viewers way of perceiving a woman (which is the male gaze) but rather showcasing women in a more comfortable posture which may not be created just for the sake of the image being beautiful to paint but rather women as being themselves and as a beholder (artist) trying to capture the subject as it is. We also encounter Gaganendranath's illustration which is again displaying women as a representation of societal lens and the emergence of a new class which was the British educated Indian elite. Although he was not trained in a formal art institution, yet he displayed his observation by understanding the art styles of post cubist artists and art of magazine/newspaper illustrations which gave new dimensions to art making and Indian representation. M. V. Dhurandhar's postcard series reflected or rather was a standard depiction of an album portraying society as it was and submerged academical influence. As the artists adopted Western techniques as guiding modes to paint new narratives, they also redefined the portrayal of art during the British period.

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