

# Raja Ravi Varma and Colonial Eyeing

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This paper on the colonial eyeing in the paintings of Raja Ravi Varma constitutes of three parts. Part 1 is on the advent of modernity and the scopic history of the West in the 19th century. Part 2 is on the colonist's eyeing towards the Indian other —the look towards the colony as both exotic and the other and also the identification of the elite, upper class Indian towards this eyeing. Part 3 is on the eyeing present in the works of Raja Ravi Varma, the Kerala born painter who was one of the most popular painters during the time of the Raj.

## Introduction

Looking is not an innocent or apolitical affair. As we already know, it is very much a political activity in which various dynamics of power are involved. The look could be just seeing, watching, viewing, observing, surveillance or voyeurism. Whatever may be the type of the look, some kind of power is present in the relation between the holder of the look and the object of looking. This presence of power relation in looking makes it political.

The look also plays a significant role in the construction of the body, because the body/concepts regarding the body do/es not

have a constant nature. Body in various cultures and various periods of different societies vary accordingly. The manner at which the look is constructed also differs in different cultures at different times. Hence, both the look and the body are variables and the body, is a construction in which the look also takes an active part. The look plays a significant role in the construction of gender and sexuality in a particular society. The gender and sexuality too are variables. The dynamics of looking is very significant in the making of meaning, concepts and practices of looking of a society.

The concepts regarding body, gender, sexuality etc. are neither static nor have a constant value. These are variants change from culture to culture and period to period. Hence, the plump, rounded body of women represented in the 18th century paintings need not be the concept of body in fashion field 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The concepts of the body and the ways of looking towards it are determined by various factors —economic, political, social and cultural. For instance, the mode of production, distribution, political atmosphere during that particular period etc. could be crucial in determining the ways of looking at the body. Ways of looking underwent huge change in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This change was more visible in the Western world. Industrialisation, urbanisation and colonisation along with access to more and more commercial products could be considered as one of the driving forces in this shift. The new access to landscapes, most of which were exotic, accelerated this process. The colonies which fell under the administration and the ‘educating process’ of their colonial masters were also influenced by the ways of looking of the west at a certain stage. Attempts were made by the coloniser to introduce the ‘sophistication’ among the natives of the conquered /colonised lands. While the occidental coloniser considered the natives as savages, this ‘savagery’ was also a source of fascination for them. Thus, the colonised world was fantastic and the savage, a fascination on one hand and the other, at the same time.

## Part 1

Eye of the West – 19<sup>th</sup> Century Scopic Regime of the Coloniser

The Modern era, it is said often, has been dominated by the sense of sight. (Mirzoeff, ed.1998). While the primacy of the faculty of sight began with the Renaissance and was enhanced during the age of scientific revolutions, modernity has been normally considered ocular centric. The invention of printing reinforced the privileging of the visual abetted by the invention of telescope and microscope (McLuhan, quoted *ibid*). If perspective was one major shift during the Renaissance, Rene Descartes was the one who brought light down to earth by considering it to be material element rather than a manifestation of the divine. He also comments that since sight is the noblest and most comprehensive among senses, inventions which serve to increase its power was undoubtedly among the most useful that can be.

The Industrial revolution along with scientific inventions and their applications in various fields of life, growth of technology, access to more and more foreign lands directly or indirectly in the course of colonisation etc. were some of the elements that worked as catalysts in this shift in the scopic regime. There was also a shift in the eyeing towards the body in relation with this where the normal was defined in contrast positioning with the social or racial other.

In the mid and late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the introduction of two important apparatus regarding mostly with the faculty of the eye marks the beginning of two landmarks in the history of perception in the culture – photography and cinema. Along with modernisation which came as the result of enlightenment, the mode of perception also underwent massive changes. The new inventions in modern medicine, science and technology led to the new ocular centric culture in Europe (Mirzoeff, ed. 1998). Also, the new methods in physiology and human anatomy, introduction of psycho analysis, anthropology and criminology, new inventions in Physics and the

newly expanded world contributed a kind of new awareness of the body, especially in terms of gender and race.

Positivist philosophy which supported the empirical acquiring of knowledge is another factor which attached more importance to the faculty of eye than all other senses. Seeing was considered as believing. Typographical standardisation made possible the new ideal of objective knowledge. The change in the culture of communication media lead to a change in the hierarchy of sensing (Donald M Lowe 1982). Lowe further adds that the standardisation of prints made visual information for the first time more reliable than oral and tactile information. The photographic revolution of the mid-nineteenth century made the object of sight, the visual image, much more exact in all its details than the print illustration. The graphic image became photographic. The photographic image has been accepted as being realistic.

Post enlightenment scientific and philosophic discourses in the west were charged with the concept of the centrality of vision due to the empirical determination of the world as perceivable. The gaze, was also an apparatus of investigation, verification, surveillance, cognition etc. (Irit Rogoff in N Mirzoeff ed. 1998). Surveillance through scientific (or normally, quasi scientific) methods was legitimised. It is in this context that the pan-opticon concept of Jeremy Bentham is to be understood. It is an institutional building with a circular structure The light is coming from back and the central eye of the supervisor could view and monitor each of the inmates without his/her knowledge. Bentham suggests this for prisons but conceived the basic plan applicable to schools, hospitals, poor homes and mental asylums.

While this surveillance forms a part of the viewing habits, there were also many other types of viewing. There was the expeditioner's and tourist's eyeing which could be read in connection with the reaching out into more and more exotic and alien lands. (The adventures of Alice in the Wonder Land, Dracula and many other 19<sup>th</sup> century British and Continental writings could be read

in this context). There was also a kind of pleasure seeking which was prominent among the French who were gluttons in terms of viewing. Hence, the Paris morgue, where unidentified dead bodies were kept and exhibited for the purpose of identifying them, turned out to be an exhibition ground of sights. The Musee Grevin, the wax museum also presented the viewers with life size wax images of dignitaries and sequential dramatic incidents. Along with these were the diorama, panorama, moving screens, kaleidoscopes, bioscopes and nickelodeon. The exotic, especially the land and women, of the orient and its past cultures were unrestrained source of eyeing for the west of the period.

“Before us lay a green sloping land full of forests and woods, with here and there steep hills, crowned with clumps of trees or the farm houses, the blank gable end to the road. There was every where a bewildering mass of fruit blossom – apple, plum, pear and cherry; and as we drove by I could see the green grass under the trees spangled with fallen petals....”

“...Then, far off in the distance, from the mountains on each side of us began a larger and sharper howling – that of wolves – which affected both the horses and myself in the same way – for I was minded to jump from the caleche and run....” (Dracula, written by Bram Stoker)

These lines describe the beauty and the horror of a land lying much farther on the eastern side of the Europe, which is also the land of the Slavs and the Gypsies, alien to the Central and Western Europe. The women pictured thus are sensuously beautiful, but were voluptuous vampires. The seductive beauty and horror are blended with savagery. Harker’s fantasy and horror towards the Slav land is in many ways equivalent to the coloniser’s/conqueror’s gaze. And the West defined its self in terms of contrast to this exotic/savage nature of the unknown colonies.

The colony was a rich terrain for exotic eyeing. The orient and its past fascinated the Western eyeing. At the same time, the

native people of the colonies, both oriental and Americans, were eyed as others. This kind of eyeing is present in the paintings of Paul Gaugin on Tahiti and the photographs of Native American chiefs taken by Western photographers. The paintings based on the concealed life inside the harems of ancient Egypt, *carte-de-visitas* with photographs of women of North Africa especially Algeria and Tunisia etc. are the other proofs of such eyeing. In his 'Colonial Harem' Malek Alloula describes how the western conquerors' eyes entered the concealed space of the harem and photographed their covered body. The concealed women of the oriental harem were desirable objects to these viewers as they were exotic and other.

The expeditioner's gaze towards the newly conquered land could also be seen in many of the paintings of the time of the colony. For instance, in one of the paintings, America, the newly found land is portrayed as a woman who prostrates naked at the feet of Vespucci. In another one, we see Europa assisted by Africa and Asia, all the three are presented as women, in which Europe is the fairest and Africa, the darkest. Still another painting shows India offering her pearls to Britain. In all these paintings, the conquered land (as well as the conquerer's land) is shown in the form of women. The conquered lands and the people of those lands were always seen as the other from the point of view of the coloniser. The coloniser tried to introduce the 'culture' and 'sophistication' and attempted to teach their religion. The native's traditions, religious rites, manner of dressing, customs etc. were seen as alien or uncultured but at the same time, fascinated by the exotic charm of it. Many of the painters of that period including Eugene Delacroix, Lecomte du Nouy, Lawrence Alma Tadema, Frederick Leighton etc. painted the orient, especially the Egypt and Greece of the past ages as well as incidents from the Old Testament. Thus the Pharaoh Ramses and his harem, Finding of Moses, The harem women, Andreoclese, Joseph as overseer in Pharaoh's granaries etc. are some of the topics of these paintings. We come to see the Egyptian juggler and women with headgears in these paintings. The western civilization seems to have tried to define itself in terms of the other —the

Oriental, African, Native American etc. They considered the Oriental/African women as hot and sensuous. There are paintings and photographs exhibiting the sensuality of the Oriental women. Also they conducted exhibitions using the captured women from the ‘other’ races like Hottentotte Venus.

Anthropology and its tools were used to mark the colonised people as the others against the West. Photography was a tool to record this otherness of the colonised, especially the aborigines and hill tribes. One famous photograph compares the bodily features of an aborigine man of Andaman with that of his Western conqueror. The photographs of the Native American Chief Red Fish, Keokuk, Chief Joseph etc. taken by the Western photographers contain the details of their otherness.

Criminology also used photographic camera as a tool to mark the criminal other. The 19<sup>th</sup> century capitalism demanded powerful means of social control over its white majorities in the West itself. Criminologists and psychiatrists along with social scientists from other disciplines defined ‘normal’ behaviour and identified and punished the ‘deviant’ behaviour with the help of photographs of the body they formalised the distinction between the ‘centre’ and ‘margins’ of society and created hierarchies that valued the former over the later (John Pultz 1995). Photography had an emerging role in the system of criminal justice. The industrial cities of the 19th century created anonymity due to the huge density of population. The forces of law enforcement were dealing with these people whom they could not know by sight. A criminal could easily escape using an alias. Hence, in 1870s England constituted a nationwide policy of photographing the criminals to fix upon them absolute and unchanging identities. In 1871, Thomas John Bernado employed photographers to make systematic photographic record of children at his “Home for Destitute Lads” as they entered and left home. Bernado’s purpose was to connect children with the crimes they might have committed before entering the home and to record those who ran away. The Victorian photographs were

regarded as authentic precisely because they were images of the poor and dispossessed. The apparently impartial eye of the camera added to the Victorian passion for the accumulation of statistical details, painstaking observation and careful classification (Liz Wells (ed.) 1997)

Photography of the body played a role in the science of psychiatry and physiognomy as well as in the biological sciences. Colonialism defines itself in the context of the other. Hence there is the creation of the social, racial and biological other. As it grew up along with imperialism, it returned to the western spectator images of native people which frequently confirmed the prevailing views of them as primitive, bizarre, barbaric or simply picturesque. (Wells (ed.) 1997). It is also pointed out that the photographic images, especially from late 1850s onwards reinforced attitudes of mind which was behind the imperialist approach to international politics, the positivist materialist approach to the natural world and a belief in progress through advancing technological development. (Ibid).

This was also a period when painting was gradually inclining towards photography. Thus portrait painting began to be significant. At the time of its initiation, photography was not thought as a threat to the art of painting. Later on, portrait painting gradually began to lean towards photography. The portraits were rather realistic and resembled the real life features with its details. The painters' attempt was to reveal through the portraits the inner feelings of the persons they painted.

## Part 2

### The Indian Other

The Western culture sought to visualise racial differences after the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus' classificatory schemes. Linnaeus divided human (race) into four: white European, red American, brown Asian and black African. Ever since at different periods, race theorists looked to the skull, the brain, art and now gene to trace a visible and permanent mark of race. (N. Mirzoeff,



Ibid.) Photographs from several 19<sup>th</sup> century projects intentionally produced the bodies of the people of the colonies according to the scientific belief of that time. Thomas Huxley, distinguished professor of biology and populariser of Darwinism, was asked in 1869 by the colonial office to devise instructions for the ‘formations for the systematic series of photographs of the various races of men comprehended within the British Empire. (J. Pultz Ibid). The system he conceived called for unclothed subjected to be photographed full and half length, frontally and in profile, (standing in each exposure) beside a clearly marked measuring stick. Such photographs reproduced the hierarchical structures of domination and subordination inherent in the institution of colonialism.

The photographs made in the 19<sup>th</sup> century of the indigenous people of countries outside Europe should be viewed in this context. The 19<sup>th</sup> century exercised massive colonial expansion and domination over many other lands and people outside Europe. The white Europeans have used the non white cultures as a means of defining both their own culture and themselves. As a tool of literalising stereotypes and exercising symbolic control over the bodies of others in the form of their photographic surrogates, photography played a central role in the formation of colonialism. Photographs seemed to be truthful and uninflected. The power of photographs to control and stereotype was invisible. This fact made them insidious tools in the establishment and maintenance of colonialism. (J. Pultz, Ibid)

Photography came to India as part of the surveillance after the 1857 mutiny. Official photographers were appointed to undertake the task of photographing. Anyway, not much later non official photographers also took interest in India. By 1850s, large commercial photography firms such as Frith and Company of Reigate and Samuel Burns were established in India. Distribution and consumption of photographs were wide spread at that time. The huge photography firms produced photographs, both as post cards and individual prints. The photographic albums intended for the

drawing room tables of Europe were used for the fetishistic collecting, controlling and detaining of the bodies of native inhabitants of newly conquered lands. The otherness of the skin tone, facial features, clothing and housing is clearly depicted in these pictures. For instance, in the untitled photograph of three men, made in India by Frith and company, probably around 1880s, all these three men seem rigid and cut off from each other. They are distanced from the viewer as well. They seem less like friends and more like alien specimens, their entire bodies fully in sight and surrounded by a broad space which positions the viewer at a safe, objective distance from them. The three men in the photograph seem mute and unable to speak for themselves. They would not return the gaze that addresses them, for that would grant them subjectivity and plant them on more equal grounds with the viewer. Instead, the photographer has portrayed them with scientific detachment as specimen, as the other to the European viewer. (J. Pultz, *Ibid*). Frith and Company of Reigate, England was the largest photographic publishing firm at that time. The belief that photographs were true recreations of the real gave Frith's picture a documentary status. It also conformed to the conventions of ethnographic photography, which had the role of recording various physiognomic details.

The famous photographers of the period were attracted by the exotic nature, the historicity of the places etc. At the same time, they also marked the Indian as their other, through which they constructed their culture and themselves. For instance, in a photograph taken around late 19<sup>th</sup> century, we see a group of sadhoos sitting in front of an akhada. Their hair unkempt and manner not sophisticated. Neither do they show any affection between themselves, just as Pultz puts it in his example of the Frith photo of three Indians. Another photograph, Woman wearing nose ring shows a woman apparantly from the hilly North West India. There are also many other photographs showing the Indian villagers sitting in front of their door steps or work places. In the carte-de-visite photograph of the European with his servant and dogs, for instance, the Indian servant who sits among the dogs is

bearded and wears a head gear. The white sahib bears an attitude of authority and looks towards the spectator while the servant does not return the spectators look. In another carte-de-visite photograph, an English woman is seen with her native servant. This photograph taken by J. Syke in the 1860s shows the English woman in upper class Victorian costumes while the servant, barely a girl, wears native dress. Her head is covered. The servant is dark skinned and of short stature, which places her to her mistress' opposite and as the other. There were also photographs of native Indians in their work places of houses – the photographs of the barber engaged in his work, Bania's shop etc. There are various photographs of Indian villagers presented in their surroundings. In all these photographs the poverty of the Indians are focussed. Many of the photographs are ethnographical – the Todas, Woman of North East, Marattas, Nair women, Nair men, Khyberis etc. The exoticness of various groups of the Indian community was photographed by these photographers. There are similar photographs of the Native Americans and Africans where the white body is defined in contrast with the 'other'. There are also photographs of the British officials and their families, which presented the characters in a different light. For instance 'the Missouri Theatre group' (taken by S. H Dagg), British officials and their families (about 1865, anonymous), vice Regal council 1867 and 1868 etc. deal with the British officers. Unlike those of the rural or working class Indians, authority and access to power are tangible in these photographs.

The photographs of the Rajahs and the royal family members of various Indian principalities have also been taken by the colonial photographers – the rajahs of various principalities such as Jodhpur, Kapurthala, Kutch and Kochi were among those photographed by the British photographers. These photographs depict them in their oriental royal attire as exotic others. The royal women were also the subject of photographs taken by some of the colonial photographers. They are of course elegantly dressed, but not in the manner of the West. Their exotic manner of dressing and appearance are on the whole aristocratic. Also, they hold some kind

of power and authority which are related to both class and caste. Whereas the aborigines of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands were photographed in a different manner. It could be the anthropological curiosity that led to these photographs. The way of their dressing, their body measurements etc. are recorded and contrasted with those of the coloniser. These photographs show men and women who are far apart from the so called norms of sophistication – the anthropological other.

Curiously enough, the photographs taken by the native photographers of the period of Raj such as Lala Deen Dayal were not much different from the British photographers in terms of theme and composition. Choice of their theme and subject and the manner of depicting resembled the ways of their Western counterparts. The eyeing of Deen Dayal and other native photographers, as it seems to us in the present time, was almost the same as that of their Western colonisers.

### Part 3

## Ravi Varma and colonial eyeing

Rabindranath Tagore commented once on Raja Ravi Varma's paintings thus: "I spent the entire morning looking at the Raja Ravi Varma pictures... After all these paintings prove how dear our own stories, our own images and expression are to us."

The period of Raja Ravi Varma was a transitional one in the area of painting in the West. Art of painting, it seems to have been gradually moving towards photography, which was believed to be more lifelike. Hence was portrait painting. In Western literature also, this has been a period of realism. This could be read in connection with the primacy of empirical acquiring of knowledge. Died at a rather premature age of 56, the life time of Raja Ravi varma covers the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early years of 20<sup>th</sup> century. This period, which proclaimed the primacy of sight in the West and influenced the ways of looking in the East was crucial

in the making of the habits of looking of the Malayalee also. It is also a period when the West was more or less influenced by the empirical knowledge which may have been resulted and reflected in the primacy of portrait painting as a form of art.

Experiencing the body and looking towards it has undergone an amount of change. There are social and political factors behind this. If it was the Missionaries who along with their instructions regarding Christianity – to be precise, the Western form of Christianity – injected a sense of sin to their followers in matters regarding body and its pleasures. The Indian spiritualism also stood against lust, though in a different perspective. The five senses, according to *Atmopadesa Satakam* written by Sree Narayana Guru, were five birds pecking into the filthy tubes. The religious reformation movements and movements against caste also formulated a different sense of experiencing the body. The Malayalee women of most of the Hindu communities did not cover their breast. The uncovered breast was not at all considered immoderate. On the other hand those who attempted to cover their breasts were considered as women of loose morals. (*Jeevithasamaram*, autobiography of the social and political activist C. Kesavan). While the women of the upper caste/rich families used to cover the upper part of their body on the rare occasions they went out of their family premises, the working class women mostly went bare breasted in the public places. The ways of attiring the body gradually underwent changes at this time.

The painter as author was novel regarding Kerala. There were artists – traditional artists like mural painters, wood carvers and sculptors, but the names of these artists are not recorded anywhere. Authorship belonged to the communities / sects / groups in which they were included. Unlike them, Raja Ravi Varma was a painter whose authorship was established. His themes and the medium also were different, because it was mostly with oil on canvas that he worked. While the traditional mural painting, *Kalamezhuth* (ritualistic drawing of the deities / serpents using powdered colouring

materials) were immobile, Ravi Varma did his work on the movable canvas. He owned a lithographic press with the help of which he could produce copies of his paintings mechanically and distribute them. This means he converted the painted images into a sellable commodity. This reaching out to the public could be one reason for his acceptability. He popularised the images of gods and goddesses, characters from Ramayana, Mahabharatha, Saakunthala etc. and the various postures and expressions of the 'Malayalee woman' through this mechanical reproduction so that a good number of families not only in Kerala but in the entire subcontinent possessed at least a cheap print of the original.

The themes he chose varied from portraits of men and women from different strata of the society to various dramatic incidents of the Puranas such as Damayanthi and the swan, Harischandra auctioning his son, Sairandhri carrying a pot of milk and honey, Jatayu and Ravana, Sakunthala writing love letter etc. He painted portraits of foreigners as well. Some of his portraits include the those of Ammakoil thampuran, Parumala Thirumeni ( the saintly Bishop of Parumala ) and a foreigner. The men in all these paintings held kind of authority and had access to power, political or otherwise. There are also portraits of women from aristocracy - portrait of an old lady, presumably of royal descent, and her granddaughter, Princess Tarabai, Bharani Thirunal Parvathi Bayi, Mrs. Rao and her son etc. We can also see an array of pictures of women, most of them belonging to the upper strata of the society in terms of both caste and class, almost all of them engaged in the so called feminine (or at times leisurely ) activities such as decorating themselves, holding a basket of flowers and fruits, playing veena, waiting for the beloved to come, reading a book etc. Their features are clearly depicted as per the standards of the time – fair, beautiful with savarna / Brahminical features.

Although as Tagore observed, these characters, images and expressions are Indian, the manner of looking at them seems not exactly Indian. If the Western painters of the period selected

their themes from Greco-Roman myths or Egyptian / Biblical stories , Ravi Varma chose from the Puranas. But unlike in the traditional Tanjore, the Rajput / Mughal or the murals of Kerala, the way of looking was entirely different. The Mughal or Rajput paintings lack perspective, the central focal point where the eyeing converges. The decorative figures gave way to human forms. The Gods and Goddesses and the characters from epics were pictured as having human features. The facial and body features began to be more precise with minute details. We could see that the eyeing has internalised the ways of looking of the photography. The prominence of portrait painting could be the outcome of this manner of looking. If photography was the product of both empirical acquiring of knowledge and colonisation, so was his paintings. Adding every details in his paintings marks one of the peculiarities of Raja Ravi Varma, which could be resulting from empiricism. At the same time, his concept of woman and the way of looking at her appears to be a blend of traditional Indian and the empirical colonial.

A tendency to classify the characters in terms of their colour and facial and bodily features is also visible in these paintings. It seems that Ravi Varma shares the characteristics of eyeing of his period. In this respect, the Indian photographers and painters shared a common denominator with their western counterparts who were working in India. We can see this aspect of viewing in Lala Deen Dayal's photos and M V Dhurandhar's paintings. Just like the ethnographic photographers of the Raj, Dhurandhar also paints the portraits of various communities or ethnicities of India. Thus there are the Muslim nautch girls, the dancing girl of Tanjaore, Parsi woman, Nair girl etc. Also, he has painted the pictures of women of various tribal sections such as the Toda woman, the Gond woman, Woman from the Nilgiris etc. Many of the photographs of Deen Dayal are based on the same topics on which the British photographers showed interests. For instance, there are photographs of the Rajas and Nawabs of India, places of glory etc. Ravi Varma, it seems also shares this sentiment for

that which, believed as Indian, both in his portraits and paintings. There are paintings portraying women from different provinces of India like the Maratta woman holding a fruit vessel, the Tamil woman etc. Depicting the peculiarities of different sects of India was a common practice, as it seems in these paintings and photos. Mostly the women were the objects in these paintings. Also, these were branded as the Indian.

Ravi Varma holds an aristocratic eyeing. He applies a kind of grading which is proportional to the social status of the object. While the Malayalee woman is depicted or defined in terms of the aristocratic eyeing and the so called savarna / Brahminical aesthetics regarding body, the other, the non Malayalee and the non upper class / caste is pictured as dark skinned and / or having no sharp features. Their facial or bodily features are not clearly depicted in the latter cases. For instance, the portrait of the North Indian milk maid or the Woman with the lamp do not have the sharp features of those aristocratic women who sit leisurely decorating their body. The village girl, another painting in which the object of painting is a rustic earthy girl, presumably from the hilly lands of the North, shows no particular facial features. We view it as in soft focus. The rustic skirt, bangles, and the stack of hay placed on her head locate her socially. The painter does not romanticise with this rusticity nor intends that the viewer does the same. In another painting named Gypsies, in which Ravi Varma paints a group or family of the street singers, the figures of the singers contrast with the Malayaleeness in his other paintings. Their skin is very dark and features and manners represented in the painting do not match with those of the so called upper society. In the painting 'Alms', a girl gives alms to a poor old woman. Both the girl and the woman are dark skinned. The old woman wears soiled clothes. It is the side view of the girl which is visible to the audience and no facial features are clearly marked.

In paintings with the themes from the epics too the dark skinned/not so attractive others are placed in contrast with





the fair skinned/sensual/attractive women. While Anasuya and Priyamvada are dark skinned and not up to the standards of beauty, Sakunthala is fair skinned, beautiful and attracts the eyeing of the viewer. Ravana is dark skinned, rude etc. Malsyagandhi is fair but holds the kind of look that the painter does not provide to his other 'elegant' women characters of the puranas. Furthermore, Malsyagandhi is bare breasted unlike most of the other characters. She also holds the inviting look though not entirely direct towards the viewer while the elegant women characters do not look up or look directly into the eyes of the holder of the look. Urvasi though almost nude, does not eye at the spectator. Also, she is soaring upwards in the sky, towards the direction of heaven.

In his paintings portraying Malayalee women, Ravi Varma seems to define the Malayalee woman simultaneously in terms of the traditional aristocratic and the western patterns of viewing. It also appears that the depiction of the body of these women and the description of Indulekha, the heroine of one of the first Malayalam novel holding the same name, shares the same concepts. There is an element of sensuality in the portrayal of the body of these women. Their form desirable, but at the same time it is tamed sensuality. Their eyeing and body language indicate domestication. Thus, these women are mostly placed inside the domestic space. Even in those paintings where they are placed in spaces outside the homes, the framing is in such a way that the spectator cannot feel the open space. In his *Hamsa Damayanthi*, Damayanthi stands with down cast eyes. *Sairandhri*, in another famous picture also does not look straight to the viewers' eyes. In 'Harischandra in distress', Chandramati, the king's wife covers her face and does not look at either the spectator or other characters. In most of the pictures, the eye to eye contact between the female character and the viewer / other (male) characters painted on the canvas never happen. (The only possible exception may be *Matsyagandhi*). They never look up at the viewer nor return the viewers' look. The viewer in turn can enjoy undisturbed looking as the object does not pose any threat of giving back the look.

Post-script: It seems interesting to examine the ways of looking of another famous painter of the period, Abanindranath Tagore, in this context. The representation of his *Bharat Mata* (1905), chaste and austere and clad in simple austere robe provides an entirely different manner of looking.

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