

Threaded Histories: Clothing as Artefacts of Memory in Ravi Varma's Paintings

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Abstract

This research paper delves into the intricate representation of clothing as artefacts of memory in the paintings of Raja Ravi Varma, a renowned Indian artist from the 19th century. Through a detailed analysis of Varma's three famous paintings depicting the royal personalities, this paper explores how clothing serves as visual triggers, evoking deep-seated emotions and connections to religious and mythological stories passed down through generations capturing and preserving cultural, social, and historical narratives within the visual realm. By examining the intricate details of attire depicted in Varma's paintings, this study illuminates the significance of clothing in shaping and perpetuating collective memories, offering insights into the cultural context and societal nuances of the era.

Keywords: Raja Ravi Varma, Clothing, Painting, Cultural History, Visual Semiotics and Memory, Kerala.

Art in Kerala, especially in the regions of Travancore and Malabar, is a rich tapestry that reflects the cultural amalgamation of various influences. South Kerala's art is deeply rooted in its history, traditions, and religious practices, showcasing a unique blend of cultural heritage with European techniques representing Hindu mythology, and global influences. Among a handful of artists in Kerala, Ravi Varma revolutionised the Indian art scene with his unique style and portrayal of subjects. Though he had a great admiration for music, art and painting he began to look at them with a closer lens 'after being presented at the court of Ayilyam Tirunal Maharaja of Travancore¹. His paintings are characterised by a harmonious blend of Indian tradition with European academic art techniques. Born in a family of aristocrats he was closely associated with the Travancore royal family by marriage. The family adopted girls from Kilimanoor to which Ravi Varma also belonged. Varma's artistic repertoire extended beyond Hindu mythological scenes to include numerous portraits of Indians and British individuals in India. While exploring the palace, he marveled at its halls, corridors, and mural paintings, observing fellow artists at work. He drew considerable inspiration from the European art showcased in the Maharaja's private collection. Varma's portrayal of female figures and attire often mirrored Hindu mythological depictions found in the palace's mural paintings and sculptures adorning temple walls.

1 Manu S Pillai, The Ivory Throne, p29

Shortly after, the royal painter Ramaswami Naicker initiated him into the art of watercolor painting, deliberately excluding the use of oil paints, a skill Varma clandestinely acquired by observing Naicker. Three years later, Varma commenced his studies in oil painting under Theodore Jensen, a Danish-born British artist. Prior to embracing painting as a career, Ravi Varma embarked on a 41-day pilgrimage to Mookambika, earnestly worshipping the goddess Sarasvati. While some may perceive this as a mere anecdote, it's undeniable that devotees from Kerala consistently visit the temple, ensuring the deity's perpetual presence. Subsequently, Varma received his first paid commission from a high court Judge in Malabar, marking his entry into the realm of professional painting.

He earned the Governor's Gold Medal in 1873 for his artwork titled "Nair Lady Adorning Her Hair." This recognition catapulted him into high demand among both the Indian aristocracy and the European community in India, who sought his talent for portraiture. In 1904, representing the King of England, the Viceroy of India honored him with the Kaiser-i-Hind, granting him the title Raja Ravi Varma.² This distinction, conferred by Ayilyam Tirunal, placed him on an equal footing with his royal benefactors. Despite the acclaim his portraits garnered, Varma gradually shifted his focus to subjects rooted in Indian mythology. His artistic renditions of Hindu deities, mythological characters from epics and Puranas showcased his deep immersion in Indian cultural themes. Paintings like "Shri Rama Vanquishing the Sea", "Harischandra in Distress," and "Jatayu Vadha" vividly captured pivotal and dramatic moments from Indian mythological narratives.

His portrayals of Indian women garnered such admiration that a woman of exceptional beauty would often be likened to someone "stepping out of a Varma masterpiece." Varma's meticulousness extended beyond merely depicting clothing; he delved into the symbolic significance ingrained in specific attire. For example, the unique drapery and ornaments adorning his subjects often conveyed indications of social status, religious connections, or regional identities. Through his careful attention to these nuances, Varma elevated clothing to visual symbols rich in cultural and societal connotations for the audience to decipher.

Whether capturing episodes from epic tales like the Mahabharata or creating portraits of royalty, Varma's art evokes a sense of nostalgia and remembrance, tapping into the collective memory of a nation. In 1894, he established a lithographic press to reproduce his paintings as oleographs, enabling wider accessibility for the common populace. This innovation led to the widespread popularity of his artworks, solidifying their place as an integral facet of popular Indian culture from then on.

Textile History of Kerala

Kerala boasts a rich tradition of handloom weaving dating back to the era of Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma. As part of his industrialization efforts aimed at generating more job opportunities for his people, he established handloom units in Travancore. To accomplish this, he brought in members of the Saliyar community from Nagarcoil. His intention was twofold: not only to provide employment but also to impart the skill of cloth making to the local population. In an interview with master weaver P. Gopinathan from Balaramapuram, a handloom village in southern Kerala, it becomes evident that Kerala's handloom industry predates the reign of the last prince. Handloom weaving had already reached Changanachery through Tamil settlers.³ The state has earned renown for its distinct weaving techniques and traditional designs that have been passed down through successive generations since that time.

In ancient times, people in Kerala had little concern for covering their bodies, particularly their upper torsos. However, as part of evolving fashion trends, they began adopting upper garments,

2 Manu S Pillai, The Ivory Throne, p34

3 Interview with Padma Shri P.Gopinathan master weaver, balaramapuram, Trivandrum

notably seen among women from the upper-caste Nair community. This upper cloth, a white Dhoti or Mundu, was draped over their shoulder, scarcely concealing their chest. In contrast, individuals from lower communities wore the Mundu primarily to cover their lower bodies. This sartorial evolution emerged after the infiltration of Western ideas into the state.

The advent of the Industrial Revolution reshaped the significance of clothing, prompting Kerala to start producing its handcrafted cotton and silk textiles, notably the renowned Kasavu Sarees exclusively crafted for the royal family. These sarees are distinguished by their off-white hue and adorned with golden zari borders, commonly worn during festivities and special events. Embroidery, being a labor-intensive endeavor and consequently expensive, became a pursuit of the affluent, often donned by royal women during ceremonial occasions.⁴

Upon Vasco da Gama's initial visit to Kerala, he was taken aback by the sight of Muslim and Christian women not covering their bodies or wearing revealing attire, which he deemed uncivilized. Subsequently, members of the royal family began integrating Kasavu into their cotton or silk garments as a symbol of their regal status. Since Kasavu wasn't locally available in Kerala, it was imported from Surat. These threads of gold were intricately woven into cotton or silk fabrics to create the exquisite Kerala Kasavusarees. Moreover, the royal family utilized these sarees as prestigious gifts to British authorities, signifying respect and honor.

Representation of Clothing in Ravi Varma's Painting

In 1979, the Indian government designated Raja Ravi Varma as a National Art Treasure, prohibiting the export of his paintings. He traversed boundaries between reality, the ideal, and imagination by adorning his artworks with jewelry and ornaments worn by men and women in India during that era. Indian jewelry lacks a clear chronological lineage. Only a few pieces have been unearthed in archaeological digs, and even fewer have verified origins. Given the absence of documented designs, symbolism, and terminology, researchers have relied on evidence found in sculptures, paintings, photos, and discussions with experts.⁵ His artworks are rare to find, hence commanding exceptionally high prices. One of his illustrious portraits depicts a striking woman radiating a luminous quality and exhibits the artist's famed sensitivity in rendering.

Through his paintings, Ravi Varma's deep fascination with intricate jewelry adorned with gems, semi-precious stones, traditional costumes, and indigenous hairstyles becomes strikingly apparent. The clothing depicted in Varma's paintings acted as mnemonic devices, encoding historical narratives within their folds. Through his choice of attire and its intricate portrayal, Varma encapsulated the essence of different time periods, allowing viewers to visually traverse through history and experience the nuances of various eras. Whether depicting royalty, commoners, or mythological figures, Varma's attention to clothing served as a gateway to understanding the socio-cultural milieu of different epochs.

Clothing as Semiotics and Visual Representation

Clothing in Varma's paintings often interacted with the emotional narrative of the scene. The use of color, fabric, and style conveyed not only societal roles but also emotional states. Vibrant colors signified joy and celebration, while muted tones and somber attire might denote melancholy or contemplation, enriching the emotional depth of his compositions. Raja Ravi Varma's innovative use of clothing as visual semiotics continues to influence contemporary art and cultural discourse. His legacy in transforming clothing into a language of visual symbolism remains a source of inspiration for artists exploring the intersection of cultural representation and semiotics within their works.

4 Tirthankar Roy, *The Crafts and Capitalism*, p65

5 Content derived from *The Sparkle in Ravi Varm's Art* by Raja Ravi Varma Heritage Foundation



Kalyani Ammachi, Wife of Ayilyam Tirunal Maharaja of Tavanore

This 19th-century painting portrays Kalyani Ammachi, the spouse of Ayilyam Tirunal Maharaja. However, it is commonly mistaken to be Rani Parvathi Bayi of Travancore, who is shown covering her breasts with only a piece of cloth and no additional attire. This image narrates the story of a beautiful and intelligent daughter of the former Dewan of Cochin. She played a significant role in nurturing the budding artist Varma, much like her husband did. Displaying a keen interest in the arts, she composed several works such as *Rasakrida*, *Ambarishacharitam*, *Patrivritya Panchakam*, and *Parvathi Swayamvaram*. She holds the distinction of being the first Malayali woman to wear a saree.⁶

Despite being well-educated, her lineage was eventually obscured and concealed over time. While Lakshmi Bayi represented fidelity and a submissive wife, Kalyani Ammachi brought discomfort to proponents of modern morality. This unease stemmed from a single, now-awkward detail: when she first encountered the ruler, she was already married. This made her an embodiment of everything deemed improper in matriliney.⁷ This portrait also highlights the prevalent caste and social discrimination prevalent in early 19th-century Kerala.

Casteism was at the Zenith during that century. The Hindus were divided into two castes, the upper and lower castes. The lower caste were not allowed to touch an upper caste person...

Normally, like slaves, the lower caste men and women stood with a towel tied on their waist, with folded hands.⁸

The Breast Cloth Agitation was a confluence of modern influences arising from the Victorian era and the gradual erosion of longstanding customs. However, even after the abolition of the breast tax, the *Nadar* and other lower communities continued to experience the persistence of caste-based discrimination despite changes in their dressing. Some individuals from these communities sought to elevate their status by converting to Christianity, aiming to move up the social hierarchy. Nevertheless, the Brahminical court and the Maharaja opposed this, asserting that conversion did not eradicate one's caste identity. Eventually, a compromise was reached by permitting them to wear *Kupayam*, also known as a tunic top, to address the issue.

6 Manu S Pillai, *False Allies*, p216

7 Manu S Pillai, *False Allies*, p216

8 P.S.Menon, *The Breast Tax*, p13



Rani Lakshmi Bayi of Travancore, 1883

One of Raja Ravi Varma's renowned paintings portrays Maharani Lakshmi Bayi adorned in her regal attire, a piece that remains preserved at Sri Chithira Art Gallery in Thiruvananthapuram. She stood as a prominent historical figure in India, holding the position of Senior Rani of Travancore, a southern Indian state, from 1857 to 1901. Initially adopted into the Travancore royal family, she ascended to become the Senior Rani. Notably, she was the sister of Raja Ravi Varma's wife. Her marriage was to Kerala Varma Valiya Koil Thampuran, also known as Kerala Kalidasa due to his Malayalam translations of the works of the renowned Indian poet Kalidasa.

During her reign, she made substantial contributions to educational and social reforms in Travancore. Her initiatives included establishing schools for girls and ensuring education for women of all castes. Additionally, she founded the Sree Mulam Praja Sabha, India's inaugural democratic assembly, and abolished discriminatory social practices. Her close association with Raja Ravi Varma, along with her familial connection to him as her brother-in-law, positioned her as a significant figure in the cultural history of Travancore and India.

This particular painting exemplifies Varma's meticulous attention to detail in depicting costumes and jewelry. The Queen is adorned in an opulent gold skirt embellished with silver elements. Her upper body is draped in a richly gold-bordered red fabric, distinct against her royal blue blouse. She wears an Oddiyanam, a waist ornament, not only used to secure the sari but also to maintain a slender waistline, accentuating the hips which signify feminine beauty in southern India. Adorning herself with pearls and traditional jewelry from the Malabar region, she also sports rings adorned with precious gemstones on her fingers. Varma's admiration for Tanjore paintings fused with European realism is evident in his use of gold.

Varma's choice to portray female figures is unsurprising, given the matrilineal society of the Travancore Royal family, surrounded by accomplished and influential women. Moreover, in Indian culture, women's clothing and jewelry serve as symbols of their family's social standing. The colors red and gold symbolize married women, signifying a certain social status within Indian society. The painting displays two books: *The Young Lady's Book* and *Near Home, or, The Countries of Europe Described*, indicating the Queen's exposure to education, although her ability to read English remains undocumented.

A distinguishing feature on her blouse is the blue badge denoting the Imperial Order of the Crown of India, established by Queen Victoria in 1878. This badge, although intended for women regardless of social status, was typically conferred upon royalty in practice.



There Comes Papa, Mahaprabha Thampuratti of Mavelikkara

Varma is primarily known for his paintings portraying women in saris, depicted as elegant and well-proportioned. His artworks became a significant symbol of the era, with reproductions present in nearly every middle-class household. The painting in focus captures a scene where a woman eagerly anticipates her husband's return home, reflecting the essence of contemporary life. The timeless theme of mother and child is delicately depicted in this artwork. While many artists find capturing a small child challenging, Varma excels in this aspect, presenting a visual delight. The mother's expression, attire, and physique are meticulously rendered, enhancing the authenticity of this masterpiece.

The woman portrayed wearing an exquisite white cloth with gold borders is his daughter, Mahaprabha Thampuratti of Mavelikkara, cradling her son, Marthanda Varma. Her hair is intricately styled and adorned with flowers, complementing her gold jewelry and traditional nose pin. The baby rests contentedly in his mother's embrace, adorned with minimal clothing and adorned with gold jewelry, with well-done hair, similar to his mother. Both mother and daughter sport a bindi (a forehead dot), signifying tradition. The backdrop shows a bed visible through the doorway, indicating the family's opulence and prosperity in India.

Varma skillfully manipulates light and shadows to draw attention to the central characters in the scene. A dog is seen seated beside the women, possibly their pet, eagerly awaiting its owner's return. The setting is at the house entrance, with all figures gazing in that direction. In the dimly lit background, a chair and a red shawl or piece of fabric are discernible. Through this painting, Ravi Varma articulates his perception of Indian culture and a woman's daily life. Some speculate that he might be depicting his family's story, reminiscent of how his wife used to wait for him.

Raja Ravi Varma's works skillfully blend elements from the early Tanjore tradition of painting Nayikas (centering on feminine emotions) and the graceful realism of European masters. He

initially used indigenous paints created by his uncle Raja RajaVarma from leaves, flowers, tree bark, and soil. His first set of oil paints was obtained from Madras after he noticed an advertisement in a newspaper. Overjoyed yet anxious, he finally got hold of the paints he had eagerly awaited.

Varma's reputation as a portrait artist soared with numerous prestigious portrait commissions. His sensitivity and immense skill as an artist continue to remain unparalleled. His depictions of Indian women garnered such admiration that a beautiful woman was often likened to someone "stepping out of a Varma canvas."

Conclusion

Moreover, Varma's paintings serve as repositories of historical memory, offering glimpses into India's colonial past. His works from the 19th century provide visual documentation of an era undergoing profound socio-cultural changes due to British colonial influence. These paintings capture a time of transition, preserving moments in history that contribute to the collective memory of India's struggle for independence and cultural preservation.

In essence, Raja Ravi Varma's paintings encapsulate a visual semiotics deeply intertwined with memory. His artistic legacy transcends mere representation; it serves as a living testament to the power of images in invoking and preserving individual and collective memories. Varma's art continues to resonate across generations, acting as a bridge that connects the past with the present, inviting viewers to traverse the corridors of memory and culture through the prism of visual semiotics.

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