

Encounters of Art and Aesthetics: The Artworks of Amrita-Sher-Gill and Ravi Varma

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ABSTRACT

In the distant past, conceptual topics were more often projected by artists as abstract or semi-abstract patterns. However, some of the six limbs' components can be applied to these artists' creations. *Roopa-bheda* is the first limb, and it denotes differentiation of the form. "Roopa" refers to the tangible or outward look of a subject or art form, which is entirely tied to the perception of an artist. Additionally, the person who creates an artwork needs to be adept at comprehending various forms and how to employ them on the surface. If we examine Ravi Varma's works in light of this specific canon of various genres, we may discover his proficiency in his artworks. While Amrita Sher-gill have taken this approach in a very different way. She encounters the norms of beauty and aesthetics through the projection of consciously driven theme and subjects. The aim of this study is to differentiate such ideologies on the bases of critical approach.

Keywords: .

INTRODUCTION

Ancient Indian art has been often looked through the lenses of aesthetic philosophy. In the early Indian text of Vatsyayana, the Kama Sutra, there is a description of six limbs of painting through a shloka or verse: - (Appasamy 1968)

*“Roopabhedah pramanani bhava-Lavanya-yojanam
Sadrishyam varnakabhangam it chitram shadakam”*

These ‘*Shadang*’ or the six limbs of painting or art have been followed for the creation of artworks from the ancient times and it is mentioned that without these limbs an artwork cannot be completed (Appasamy 1968). *Rupa-bheda* stands for differentiation of forms.

These are described as *Rupa-bheda* (secrets of differentiation of forms), *pramanani* (proportion), *bhava* (emotional feelings), *Lavanya-yojanam* (gracefulness and charm in artwork), *sadrishyam* (similitude) and *varnika-bhanga* (application of brush strokes and color application as per the artwork).

The traditional philosophy of aesthetic somehow changed its true meaning in contemporary times because previously the artworks usually used to be meant for beauty. It is mentioned by Sridharan

“Ideas of aesthetics seem to be changing and what is novel and has not been seen before is considered art. Alka says that what is prized greater than skills is new ideas” (Sridharan, 2011). From the remote past, the artist is more involved in the projection of conceptual themes in abstract or semi-abstract patterns. However, some of the parts of the six limbs can be applied to the works of these artists. Going through the very first limb which is *Roopa-bheda*, ‘*Roopa*’ means tangible or the outer appearance of a subject or art form which is entirely related with the perception of an artist and the ‘*Bheda*’ means differentiation of the form. Additionally, the creator of an artwork must have accomplishment in the understanding of a variety of forms and their uses on the surface.

Discussion

If we observe the works of Ravi Varma as per this very canon of a variety of forms, we can see his expertise in it. He has created multiple figures in different poses in the depiction of a woman. He has executed various women of the elite and lower class group, mythological characters after embellishing them in a proper attire. In the observation of forms, he has established a deeper insight into a particular subject, like when he executed rich and elite women he depicted the very attire which was popular among the high-class society. Additionally, when he executed their attendants or slaves, he has shown the same proficiency to build a connection between the real and painted forms of them. He has used an ornamented and glossy approach in their attire when he has shown elite classes, but in the depiction of marginalized or lower cast women, he has avoided the same. He usually executed the lower caste women in naked or semi-naked while in those of elite groups, he has executed the mostly covered. The ambiance of the painted space particularly indicates the difference of economic or social status of the women of all groups. In the depiction of Goddesses, he maintained to give a charming attitude with silky draperies and heavy jewelry, to differentiate the very concept of earthly and heavenly women. Ravi Varma was a genius in the differentiation of particular forms and we can understand at a first glance, what is the status of the executed women. If he portrayed the mythological theme, he accomplished the same calmness and peace on their faces, in their body postures, which have been described in mythology.

The painting titled *Harischandra and Taramati* has been executed by Varma to show the great sacrifice of the great king Harischandra who sacrificed all his life for the sake of his promise and morality. As per the story, the king was examined as a saint to prove his loyalty towards truth and his nature of giving. One day when his own wife came on the very cremation ground, where the king was doing his duty as a guard. He rejected to cremate the body of his son because his wife had no money to pay for it. He was so affirmed for his duty that without the payment he did not allow the cremation ceremony. Then, his wife gave him a piece of her mind, which she was wearing. The same story has been depicted by Varma in the painting. We can see the perfection of forms in the depiction of figures. Both the figures are looking very poor even their bodies have been executed as covered in rags and dirt which represents their economic and societal status. The woman has been executed without any make-up or jewelry except some of the essentials like the glass bangles (may be a projection of her marital status). On the other hand, another painting titled “*Hamsadamayanti*” showcases a beautiful elite class woman, who is a princess as talking to a swan. The princess has been executed as wearing an expensive dress with the jewelry. She has been shown beautiful and fair with perfect appearance. Both the characters represent a contradiction of the society, where one aspect is representing the poverty and another is representing the economic stability of the elite group in the portrayal of a woman.

His painting also has the proportion and emotional sentiments which varies as per the theme. In the painting, Harischandra (**Patriot Forum, 2016**) the emotional sentiments of a mother can also be seen who is requesting her bound husband for mercy. After looking at the painting, the onlookers can feel the emotion of pity for the women. At the same time, the onlookers can also feel the power of giving and truth, which is considered the first duty of all the human-beings among all deeds. In most of the paintings of Varma, we can see a charm and grace in the faces of women. This perfection can also be found in various gestures and body postures in almost all of his paintings. The selected color scheme with all contrast always goes with the theme of Varma's work. He was very powerful to create the harmony through color with his brush strokes. He has taken dull colors to depict the tragic stories and also have taken bright shades to depict the casual or erotic ones. He was a master to give a realistic proportion to the figures after creating a balance between the light and dark tones. He usually used to execute voluptuous bodies with sharp features which is a prevalent trend of traditional Indian paintings and this has been followed by most of the artists who used to follow the six limbs norms. The *Lavanya-yojanam* or the appearance of paintings is quite remarkable which gives an aesthetical pleasure to the onlookers. The onlookers can enjoy an appreciable beauty in all of the projection related to female figures. Even a common person without any philosophical or critical knowledge of art field can appreciate and enjoy the works of Varma that are again a basic purpose of all ancient Indian art pieces. Even without any social or moral message, the projection of figures is a visual feast for the lover of beauty that is again very appropriate as per the six limbs trend. The theory of mimesis or imitation which has been given by the great philosopher Plato indicated the theory of imitation of nature in paintings. The theory has been followed until the Renaissance period and continued up to a late eighteenth century in the Western art world. It is stated that "The idea was still very strong in the Renaissance, when Vasari, in his *Lives of the Painters*, said that "painting is just the imitation of all the living things of nature with their colors and designs just as they are in nature." It may still be the most commonly held theory. Most people still think that a picture must be a picture of something and that an artist is someone who can make a picture that "looks just like the real thing". It wasn't until late in the nineteenth century that the idea of art as imitation began to fade from western aesthetics, to be replaced by theories about art as expression, art as communication, art as pure form, art as whatever elicits an "aesthetic" response, and a number of other theories". The realism and naturalism art movement which have been founded after following the same theory. In recent time, the word has been taken as to copy something but as per the philosophical thoughts of ancient times, the word stands various meanings. The popular schools of Athens had been nourished under the faculty of great philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. The theory of imitation also changed as per these three major aestheticians. Plato was the disciple of Socrates who has given a remarkable approach to decode the existing norms of the philosophical and metaphysical world of art. Then, Plato has narrated the theory of imitation in art and accepted it as an imitation of nature as a passive and faithful act of the world. Although he criticized the worthless attributes of coping something irrationally and he has given the priority to the carpenter rather than the artist because a table is more useful than a painted chair. If the paintings of Varma are observed as per the platonic view of imitation, he mostly depicted woman as a mere component of physical or materialistic value. They are not having any metaphysical or external values. They are just the imitation of the imitation i.e. the reality and morality are not there in the images.

Amrita Sher-Gill has taken the variety of forms in the depiction of womanhood, but the variation is closely associated with the life's experiences of the woman. She has virtually depicted the glimpse of the life of ordinary women if we observe her painting, the very *Rupa* or its variation has been taken through a different approach but it does not look unfamiliar. It is familiar because it is common rather than the uncommon fables of deities. It has no division on the bases of class or cast because Sher-Gil has executed all the women with the same appearance in a painting. She was more focused to depict the far bigger issues, which are somehow connected with the life of all women and that is the problematic status of patriarchal hegemonies. This approach is very living and lively as per the intention of the artist. Her first and foremost aim was to capture the realistic life, but she has also used some symbolism to make the subject more powerful.

She has depicted the figures in dark complexion and simple clothes and the paintings like "Mother India" and "Resting Mother" can be taken into consideration to observe the deeper impact of it. The color scheme and adjustment of darkness and lightness are very suitable for the theme. In both the paintings, Sher-Gil has tried to streamline the real situation of the mother in Indian society. She has executed them fully covered with inexpensive clothes without any ornamentation. The very title of the painting is indicating the same issue which Sher-Gil wanted to introduce through the painting but both the paintings have some additional detailing as compared to the realistic images. Sher-Gil has quite established a difference between the young and middle age woman through the gestures and details of a face which is appropriate in the variation of forms. Both the paintings create the feeling of pity and concern in the eye of the onlookers. The figures are having a strange kind of grace on their faces but there is also a sad feeling or distress which is a unique style of Sher-Gil in most of her paintings. In the works of Sher-Gill, we can see the projection of Catharsis, theory which has been described by Aristotle, another great philosopher. He has given the theory of imitation in a positive way as compared to Plato.

Conclusion

Varma and Sher-Gil have projected the body of a woman in a very juxtaposing way but somehow reflected the idea of six limbs in their projection. For Varma, the physical appearance is more preferable which has been used to create the variation in forms. The similitude has been created after taking inspiration from imaginative or so-called ideal norms of Indian beauty. Sher-Gil has given priority to the theme and subject and similitude has been created after exploring the realistic state of the woman of that time, they are more realistic and do not belong to any imaginative world. The well-proportion of figures in the works of Varma shows the appropriate balance but Sher-Gil did not take it utterly. She has followed mannerism in the depiction of female figures at most of the times because she was influenced by the European modern artist of her time. She has maintained to capture the similitude but in her individualistic style which is particularly influenced by Paul Gauguin. E. Narayanan has recorded, 'that Cezanne inspired her beyond all others but that she liked Paul Gauguin best of all' (**Appasamy, 1965**). The inspiration may take her to the path of observation in the exploration of reality rather the depiction of beauty. She explored the sense of aesthetics with more advancement than her contemporaries.

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