

## **Ravi Varma, Pushpamala, *There comes Papa*, and *Rang Rasiya*: citations and afterlives.**

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### **Abstract:**

The afterlife of Raja Ravi Varma, an Indian painter—whose oil paintings of Indian women and native goddesses were instrumental in creating a representational realm for the same. Through N. Pushpamala’s recreation of the iconic images, G. Arunima’s invocation of a Ravi Varma painting to understand conjugality in colonial Kerala and Ketan Mehta’s 2008 biopic, this paper argues that the citability of the original, that is the paintings of Ravi Varma and the figurations of the women he created, create new problematics for the representational realm. These range from the processes of artistic creation to modern renderings of the concepts of sexuality and desire.

### **Keywords:**

Raja Ravi Varma, Textual afterlives, citation practices, adaptations, *There Comes Papa*, Native Women of South India, *Rang Rasiya*, matrilineal society, dressing norms

### **Ravi Varma, Pushpamala, *There comes Papa*, and *Rang Rasiya*: citations and afterlives.**

This article discusses the work of the Indian painter, Raja Ravi Varma, and for this purpose, I shall draw on Sibaji Bandopadhyay’s formulation of the relation between text, citations and afterlives. Bandopadhyay defines “citability” as the ability to cite, the attribute of citation, as not merely an embellishment, but organic to the making as well as the functioning of any text.<sup>1</sup> This article takes up some of Ravi Varma’s paintings, and analyses how they have been dealt with by theorists in the recent past. Be it Arunima’s evocation of the painting of his daughter and grandson to explore the nature of matriliney in Malabar, of Pushpamala’s imaginative reconstruction of his paintings to loosen the classical harbour of art into the domain of aesthetics—to lay the processes and artifices of the icon bare, or Ketan Mehta’s biopic—the afterlives of these individual paintings<sup>2</sup> and indeed of his persona as the first modern Indian artist, when cited, point to the complexity and layered nature of both the texts and the acts of reading. This paper takes up some of Ravi Varma’s paintings, and analyses how they have been dealt with by theorists in the recent past.

Ravi Varma was an aristocrat of Travancore, belonging to a family of painters who were associated with the Maharaja of Trivandrum. Largely self-taught, mastering western

techniques and the methods of oil painting by observing Dutch painters commissioned to paint the Maharaja, Ravi Varma was initially dependent on the system of patronage that popularized him as a painter of portraits. He also developed a flair for individual figure composition, especially the female form. Using professional models, photographs, live models and members of his family, the women in Ravi Varma's paintings became "stereotyped models of femininity, in their sensual appearances, in their evocative facial expressions and in the leisurely mood of their actions" (Guha Thakurta 1986: 179). Varma himself followed the colonial anthropological mode with paintings such as *A Nair lady at toilet* and *A Tamil lady playing the sarabat*, both of which won the Governor's gold medal. What he undertook was a systemic portrayal of the Indian people. The paradigms of these portrayals "...are racial/universal; regional/national; individual/typical. It is within these terms that an iconography and also, in stylistic terms, a typology, for Indian representational arts develops" (Kapur 1989).

The other very significant aspect of his oeuvre was the illustrations from Indian mythologies and epics. British and Indian patronage were considerable for this project as well, as were the demands. Ravi Varma had already started to make copies of his own paintings for multiple collectors<sup>3</sup>, and in 1892 he himself set up the Ravi Varma Printing Press; a massive flood of reproductions of his mythological paintings from his own press (which was in business for a relatively short time) and other presses which either acquired copyright or printed pirated editions, made him the most famous Indian painter ever.

Ravi Varma's decision to produce oleoethographs of his paintings puts him in a very interesting position with respect to our consideration in this paper: the texts and their afterlives. The commonsensical understanding of the life of a painting as *the painting itself* and the prints as their after lives gets even more complicated when we find out that Ravi Varma produced a large number of paintings solely for the object of mechanically reproducing them<sup>4</sup>. The conjunction of new printing technology, of photography and of what was considered to be "high" art into popular/ bazaar art, problematizes the neat binary of text/ afterlife.

Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" identifies mechanical reproduction as displacing the aura of the work by the varied meaning it offers, thanks to the individual eyes which see the exactly reproducible object. The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction effaces the artist. Earlier, art was attached to rituals and cult. The characteristic of this period is that the work of art is then not meant to be exhibited, but functioned as an instrument of magic. One needn't see them, one just has to know of its presence. On the other hand, improvements such as photography signal a new beginning, an exhibitionary order. The work of art is now meant to be seen, that is, it is an act of participation, and therefore a political tool.

I  
It is with the aid of photography that N. Pushpamala and Claire Arni in *Native women of South India: Manners and Customs*<sup>5</sup> attempt to organize a grammar for the visual culture of our times. The show includes images ranging from colonial anthropology, Ravi Varma's

paintings and oleographs, popular advertisements and “Process photos”, with the crucial difference being that Pushpamala herself, and at times Claire Arni as well, impersonate the lead figures in these images.



[Fig. 1: Left is Ravi Varma’s painting *Hindu Goddess Lakshmi*, published in 1910, after his death. This painting is available freely on Wikimedia Commons. The right is a screenshot from Pushpamala’s *Native Women in South India*, from the website of Chemould Gallery.]

In Fig. 1, we have juxtaposed the original Ravi Varma print of Hindu Goddess Lakshmi with a reconstruction of the same image, with the background meticulously created, and Pushpamala herself as the iconic Lakshmi. Placing the two images next to each other, helps us follow a logic of representation, the “original” on the left and the reconstruction on the right, the ‘before’ on the left, the ‘after’ on the right.

Pushpamala and Arni, in their act of re-presenting Ravi Varma’s iconic images, point at the immense potential inherent in acts of citation. As mentioned earlier, the inherent nature of the texts themselves make them citable, and citation remakes the text. The very title of the show, and the specific title “Native Types” under which Ravi Varma’s images are clustered, point at the colonial anthropological gaze that sought to collect and label the natives according to distinctive types and the logic of exhibition itself. Ravi Varma in his own work, through acts of naming such as *A Nayar woman...* or a *Galaxy* (of Indian women) was simultaneously producing the ideal types of womanhood in his contemporary India while also placing them in neat and distinguishable categories<sup>6</sup>. Ravi Varma not only painted for patrons, he also created for printing, and according to Tapati Guha Thakurta, this move into the domain of mechanical reproduction also engendered something formulaic: continuous duplication of mannerisms, expressions, postures, loud colours and dazzling costumes, especially in figures of women (1991: WS95). This comment shows up the repetitive motifs employed in art to create iconic

femininity, while it does not specifically mention the creation of femininity also through reiterations. Pushpamla and Arni, comment on both through their show.

For Susie Tharu (2006), *Native Women of South India* uses citations to “direct an attention, hitherto hypertrophied by empiricism and its naturalized realism, towards frame, structure, structural relations and the world of historico-cultural meaning in which subjects take shape and operate.” While the “Native Types” problematise the formations of subjectivities through icons, collections and the anthropological gaze, the process photographs point at iconic femininity, and therefore femininity per se as performative<sup>7</sup>, as constructed and therefore radically negotiable.



[Fig. 2, process photographs from *Native Women of South India*. Images sourced from pushpamala.com between 2011 and 2022]

The process photographs act on two registers. First, they look at a work of “art” as something that has been manufactured through specific technical processes, an original that can be recreated in a complex new medium. They comment on the ideological and technical complexities that surrounded their first creation and circulation- combination of photographs being used for painting, the photographs and later on prints of the paintings being sold, and standardization of the subject in the process of negotiating between these different media and technologies. Second, the reified femininities that come into being with the reified artifact are also performed and constructed. They are matters of specific bodies, faces, clothes, hairstyles. They are dependent on framing, on gestures and moods. Ritualized repetition produces and stabilizes the effects of gender. The meticulous attention towards recreating the exact shades in the backdrop as well as the texture and colour of the sarees and the jewellery, bring both

the artifacts and the bodies that they represent under the same umbrella- pointing at the logics that ensures the dominance and circulation of certain images and modes of being.

## II

This section looks into further acts of citation, and how it helps to reframe the text to the reader. *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and Transformation of Matriliny in Kerala, Malabar c.1850- 1940* is a 2003 book by G. Arunima which reproduces the Ravi Varma painting of the same name, in its cover. Arunima asks the reader to imagine an audience in 1893 viewing the painting. The image is of a young Malayali woman, holding a plump baby on her hips, pointing to a figure outside the frame, with even the dog at her feet gazing expectantly. To a modern Indian audience, already framed by the signifying structure of the title, the image is that of a nuclear family awaiting the arrival of the patriarch and holds no surprises. But to an audience in Kerala in the 1890s, belonging probably as Ravi Varma (and the models in this painting: his daughter and grandson) himself did, to a matrilineal Nayar clan, the painting and its title would not present any obvious connection.



[ Fig. 3 “There Comes Papa” by Raja Ravi Varma - there-comes-papa-raja-ravi-varma/\_AFv7N8y\_RbNbg — Google Arts & Culture, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=347239>]

In the Nayar *tharavadu* (the ancestral home of families in Kerala, which served as the common home for joint family system practiced in the state) all the women and all their children and grand children would live, property being inherited along natal lines. The Nayar women could form hypergamous polyandrous *sambandhams* with the Nambuthiri Brahmins and other Nayars. The Nambuthiris being a patrilineal community, everyone other than the

eldest son of the family could form *sambandhams* with Nayar women, who formed the other major land holding community of the region. While differences existed between south and north Malabar, the matrilineal woman and her partner usually lived apart, at their respective natal homes, and all children that the woman bore stayed with her at her natal home. However, with the attempt of the colonial state to standardize customs all over the subcontinent, the situation encountered by the administrators in the southern parts of India were entirely at variance with the situation in Bengal. The British used primarily Sanskrit texts to draw up the Anglo-Hindu law within the Anglo-Indian legal system. The non-Brahmin texts were relegated to the domain of customs, and in the peculiar context of the Nayars, the matrilineal practices became suspect.

While the position of power inside the *tharavadu* was more generational than on the basis of gender, the colonial state repeatedly singled out the oldest male member of the *tharavadu* to be the head of the unit- undermining the decision making power of many older women. Younger male members of the *tharavadu* who had earlier been merely dependents could now enter into employment, and with the growth of the notion of companionate marriages etc. the demands for the break down of the *tharavadu* increased. At the same time, the attempt to come out of the feudal family system entailed reinventing not only the image of the wife-mother, but also inventing the figure of the husband-father. In the existing matrilineal system, neither the husband nor the father was an important figure, and the security and the property relationships of the mother and the child were not determined by the father, but by the *tharavadu*. Since the norm of the rest of India was a heterosexual monogamous union, the image of the Kerala family also had to suit the model. But this model was absent in the social space of *There comes Papa*, because the concepts signifying the role of the male were not yet available and had to be invented in the context of the painting, in absentia. This is why the framing of the painting with a title that evokes a desire for that absence that must be made into a presence- an ossification of the desire which was finally witnessed in the 1933 Madras Marumakkathayam Act passed by the Legislative Council- which allowed for the partition and break down of the matrilineal *tharavadu*. Arunima's citation of *There comes Papa* as the central peg around which her analysis of matriliney in Kerala hinges, uncovers hitherto invisible ideological imperatives that went into the constitution of the painting.

### III

The question of conforming to the norm by situating desires and sexualities as normative and structured within the colonial modern nuclear family brings me to the final section of this paper. This section came to mind while watching *Rang Rasiya*, Ketan Mehta's 2008 biopic on Ravi Varma (titled in English: *Colour of Passion*). The film hadn't released in India yet, when it was screened at the Kolkata International Film Festival 2011, and the terrible rush to watch it may have also spawned from the belief that the film hadn't got a clearance from the Censor Board and therefore the only time one could watch it "uncut": would be at the KIFF. The director and the lead actress were both present at the screening, and Nandana Sen

presented the film as the first nude scene ever to get clearance at the censors. Ketan Mehta's speech as well as the opening sequence of the film presented this biopic as a rejoinder to Hindu fundamentalism towards the fine arts, and Ravi Varma's life as a reminder of the great sacrifices the men and women of India have made for the sake of art. Nandana Sen also places herself squarely in the middle of this tradition, her "bold" act is a homage to the figure of Sugandha- Ravi Varma's muse, and according to the film, the first nude model in India, who had to kill herself when the religious right wing persecuted the painter and her.

While authoritative and critical biographies of Ravi Varma do not mention a Sugandha like figure in his life, the point of interest in this piece is the revisionist manner in which the film addresses the question of the bare breast of the Malayali woman. J. Devika notes that anthropological writings and memoirs of travelers to Kerala clearly demonstrate that while both men and women were expected to remove the cloth covering their upper bodies in the presence of relatively upper caste people, the covered breast was unilaterally believed to be immodest. Early 19<sup>th</sup> century travelogues associated the covered breast with the courtesan. The Muslims and the Christians were expected to wear a shirt/ blouse, and the *antarjanams* had to cover their bodies with a cloak whenever they ventured outdoors. But otherwise, covered bosom was traditionally considered to be the symbol of sexual availability, and undesirable in respectable women. Note how Partha Chatterjee observes a strikingly similar case in Bengal till the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> c, where the use of petticoats, blouses and shoes were considered to be vulgar<sup>8</sup>.

But in the nineteenth century, the missionaries especially stressed on the connection between sin and nakedness (the pagan is naked while the civilizing missionary is always clothed) and suitable marriage partners for the young and educated Nambuthiris therefore had to be suitably garbed as well. The reconfiguration of sartorial codes for the native populace, as complex as it was with resistances and affirmations<sup>9</sup>, emphasized that the female body had to be aestheticized to suit the tastes of the modern male. Therefore, while earlier seduction manuals advised aspiring courtesans to cover her breasts with an attractive cloth so that her body becomes desirable to the eye of clients, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the upper cloth came to signify good breeding and desirability. A reflection of this is seen in *Indulekha*, by O. Chandu Menon, published in Malayalam in 1889. There the heroine Indulekha is described as one who "always covered the upper part of her body with a gold-bordered white *melmundu*. She dressed in this manner everyday (8)". Indulekha was not only the first modern heroine of the first modern novel in Malayalam, she was also the heroine of the first Malayali novel to be translated in English, almost as soon as it was first published in Malayalam. Interestingly, the 2005 English translation of the novel has as its cover yet another painting by Ravi Varma. Like *There comes Papa*, this also shows a young Nayar woman, but this one has her upper body covered with a cloth.

Questions of visibility and covering were therefore a much-contested terrain in 19<sup>th</sup> century Kerala, in the communities that Ravi Varma was a part of. What *Rang Rasiya*

therefore does is, in its attempt to recreate a past where Indian artists painfully strove for their art, even if it meant sacrifice for their near ones, it elides the multi-faceted negotiations that the native populace underwent with the colonial modern, especially in terms of understandings of chastity, virtue, modesty and admissible sexuality.

My attempt in this short article has been to critically read three future acts of citations, which hark back to the figure of Ravi Varma and his paintings—a harking back that helps the future reader/ viewer problematize the so-called ‘Indianness’ of Varma’s art, and thereby question, the meaning of being Indian, in this moment of negotiation with the colonial modern.

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1. Bandyopadhyay draws on Saussure’s formulation of the production of the linguistic sign as arbitrary and therefore the production of meaning has always differed and deferred, along with Ronald Barthes’ idea of the “text” as something constantly open to fresh reconstructions, as not an archive of what is already here, and therefore capable of being represented. The act of citation then, becomes something enabled by the text itself (2011).



2. In this brief paper, I am not going to comment on the afterlives of Ravi Varma's paintings that lived on as "calendar art": whether reproduced in the original in the form of garish bazaar prints, or influencing the genre of the popular photographs circulated among the masses that would later find their place in calendars adorning Indian walls, Ravi Varma's ability to tap Indian literary and mythic themes to create at first an Indian high art (with the help of oil paint), the nationalist reaction against him terming his art Western (led by the Bengal school of Abanindranath Tagore and his followers) and finally the same samples of once heralded high art spawning of replicas and copies that formed the bulk of the mass produced colourful pictures that have come to be termed "calendar art".

3. He made copies when two collectors wanted to possess the same painting, photographs of paintings were sold at public exhibitions, and already pirated prints were in circulation.

4. However, commenting on the changes brought about in Ravi Varma's painting when he started producing works for the specific intention of being oleographed, Tapati Guha Thakurta writes:

As the artist began churning out paintings specifically for the press, figures, costumes and settings were increasingly cast within a set formula. There were instances where the artist would only paint the central image, with his brother Raja Raja Varma or other helpers filling in suitable backdrops and other accessories. This erosion of individuality at the level of the original production set in deeper as the single work passed into multiple colour prints, the style coarsening through multiple duplication.(1991: WS95).

5. *Native women of South India: Manners and Customs*, Pushpamala N, Claire Arni; Bangalore : India Foundation for the Arts, 2004. This show was composed of a set of photographs, organized under the headings: "Native Types", "Ethnographic Series", "Popular Series" and the Process Photographs. The native types are drawn from Ravi Varma's paintings and prints, a reproduction of a sixteenth century Deccani Yogini and a votive Mary of Velankanni. Other women of South India are Jayalaitha in her avatar as a circus artist with a whip, a police photograph of two women caught snatching chains, a flirting scene from a Kannada film, etc. The process photos show up the images as photographs, stressing on the constructed nature of the images.

6. A trope that will be revisited later on.

7. In trying to formulate the relation between the materiality of the body to the performance of gender, Judith Butler points that "sex" is not a given matter of the body, instead regulatory norms materialize "sex" and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms (1993:x).

8. To ridicule the idea of a Bengali woman trying to imitate the ways of a *memsahib*...was a sure recipe calculated to evoke raucous laughter and moral condemnation in both male and female audiences. It was, of course, a criticism of manners, of new items of clothing such as the blouse, the petticoat, and shoes (all, curiously vulgar, although they clothed the body far better than the single length of sari that was customary for Bengali women, irrespective of wealth and social status, until the middle of the nineteenth century), of the use of Western cosmetics and jewelry, of the reading of novels, of needlework (considered a useless and expensive pastime), of riding in open carriages (1999: 122).

9. Devika notes instances of young women taking to the blouse as an act of resistance against the dominance of the older women at home (2005: 463).