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(B) Description of Module

Items	Description of Module
Subject Name	Women's Studies
Paper Name	Women and History
Module Name/ Title, description	Women and art in colonial India
Module ID	Paper3- Module-19
Pre-requisites	None
Objectives	To explore the representation of women in art in colonial period in the context of various intellectual debates in art going on at the time
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Women and Art in Colonial India

The Colonial period in India was characterised by not only political and economic exploitation of India by the Colonial rulers, but also by the changing Indian cultural traditions under the monitoring of the Colonial rulers. This transformation brought Indian art closer to the Western aesthetic sensibilities and there were many directions given to this art form by the Colonial rulers, the Indian artists as well as the public, especially the patrons of this new emerging art forms. Woman had always been a popular subject of representation in Indian art forms. Now, with the Colonial interface with the Indian traditions, new forms of representing the woman emerged, which were infused with the broader context in which the discourses of women were being made in the Indian social and political arena of the time. In this module we will study a few of the works of art made during this period that depict women, in order to understand what kind of ideas influenced the depiction of women in Colonial India. We will be studying

some of the major ideas associated with the art styles of this period, in order to understand the dynamics associated with the depiction of women.

Company Paintings

In the early days of the British rule in India, the British travellers, merchants and the ruling officials who came here commissioned paintings for the British markets. For this, they employed Indian artists who were used to painting Indian themes in the various Indian courtly and folk styles of this time. However, these paintings were not of interest to the British patrons. Hence, these British commissioning agents for paintings, guided their artists to paint themes and employ artistic styles that would appeal to the British clients back home. This resulted in the evolving of a composite style involving various Indian styles and themes and combining them with the European themes and styles they were asked to paint in by their British clients. This is known as Company painting, although the clientele varied and was not restricted to the East Indian Company representatives alone. Gradually, Indian patrons such as princes, aristocrats and other rich people also began to commission such paintings. Hence, Company style really refers to the East Indian Company rule in India and a synthesis of the British and the Indian aesthetic tastes, rather than to a specific patronage by the East India Company (Archer, Mildred, Sotheby Parke Bernet, Totowa, New jersey, available from Biblio Distribution Centre, 1979, pp. 1-75).

The subjects in these paintings were varied and often depicted the day to day life of the nobility, street scenes, river banks, people going to the temples, people whom the British met in the marketplace and in the cities and villages and so on, apart from natural landscapes. The women in these paintings represent the women subjects encountered by the British in their day to day lives. These represented the dancing girls, courtesans and the women seen in the streets. This was also the time when the British in India had adopted a lifestyle similar to that of the Indian noble's of their times, having multiple wives, wearing Indian aristocratic dresses and attended by domestic workers, including both men and women. They ate Indian food, invited dancing girls to their mansions and lived their lives just as the Indian aristocrats lived in India. The Company paintings record these activities and show the women in these paintings in these roles (Hermione De Almeida and George H. Gilpin, Ashgate, London, 2005, p. 267-69).



Fig. 1 Dancing Girls, Dellhie Book Commissioned by Thomas Metcalfe (Get copyright permission from - Company Paintings of Delhi - <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-34292276>; <http://www.bl.uk/copyright>)



Fig. 2 – David Ochterlony, Resident of Delhi and Rajasthan (Get Copyright from - <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:DavidOchterlonyResidentDelhi.jpg>)



Fig. 3 – Group of Courtesans, Northern India, 19th Century (Get copyright from - [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Group of Courtesans, northern India, 19th century.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Group_of_Courtesans,_northern_India,_19th_century.jpg))



Fig. 4 – Women at the Market (get copyright from - <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/i/indian-company-paintings/>)

The above four paintings show some of the ways in which women were represented in Company paintings. David Ochterlony was a cadet in the British army in India, who rose to the level of Resident of Rajasthan and Delhi because of his military skills and the successes he obtained for the British in India. As mentioned above, he acquired an Indian aristocratic lifestyle while in Delhi. In Fig. 2 above, women are seen as musicians and singers who are entertaining him. In Fig. 1 again, women are represented as dancers in a troupe invited to perform at a mansion. The audience here is not visible, but the women are prominently depicted in the dance performance. In Fig. 3 also, women courtesans are placed visually in a prominent manner, while the male companion takes a side seat. The patron again is not visible here. These paintings are a record of the kind of lifestyles by the patrons of Company paintings and also of the kind of Indian themes that were popular in Britain at this time. In Fig. 4 we see a scene from daily life at a marketplace, where women are both sellers and buyers. These paintings represent an India that was exotic and women prominently take the place of dancers, singers and entertainers and also active participants in public life. The style not only shows the influence of the courtly miniature paintings, but also shows the European influences in the partial three-dimensionality of figures, elimination of minute details from backgrounds and decorative elements and also a liberal use of monochromes in the background, as opposed to the intricate details and brilliantly coloured backgrounds and flat, stylised figures of miniatures. There is also a tendency to show the women using thick cloth for dresses rather than the transparent dresses of the miniatures. This was the influence of European notions of feminine codes of conduct, in contrast to the Indian notions that had no objection to showing the women in transparent dresses, or even in the nude.

Raja Ravi Varma

Raja Ravi Varma was a scion of the royal family of Travancore who learnt lithography and oil painting in Germany. He was influenced by the Western aesthetic ideals of painting. This was also the time when traditional Indian art forms were facing criticism by the Europeans because they didn't answer to the "Victorian" notions of chastity. Indeed, what is misunderstood as "traditional" in India today in terms of women staying indoors and covering themselves and acting in a docile manner in front of men, is in fact the remnant of the Victorian influence over the Indian society in the 19th century. Traditionally, Indian culture was very bold and open vis a vis women, who didn't particularly cover their bodies well, transparent clothing was admired and regarded as a mark of refined living and women had no inhibitions in interacting with men. We see continuous representation of this from the very beginning of the Indian history till the 18th century in Indian art forms. Even sexual scenes were liberally depicted without any inhibition. 19th century was the time when the Victorian Europeans and Christian Missionaries criticised the liberality of women in public space and as an apologetic reaction to this Victorian critique, women began to change their behaviour to cater to the modest and docile notions of Victorian Europeans and Christian missionaries. Unfortunately, this is misunderstood as Indian tradition, which it is not.

Ravi Varma was influenced by this cultural debate going on in the art sphere and he tried to synthesise his training in Western aesthetic norms with the traditional Indian themes. The result was a series of paintings that attempted to answer to the European critique by covering the women in thick clothing, using three dimensionality and shading of figures and showing the women as docile and modest in answer to the Victorian expectations. His art gave rise to a popular calendar printed art form, which survives till today (Partha Mitter, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 79-220).

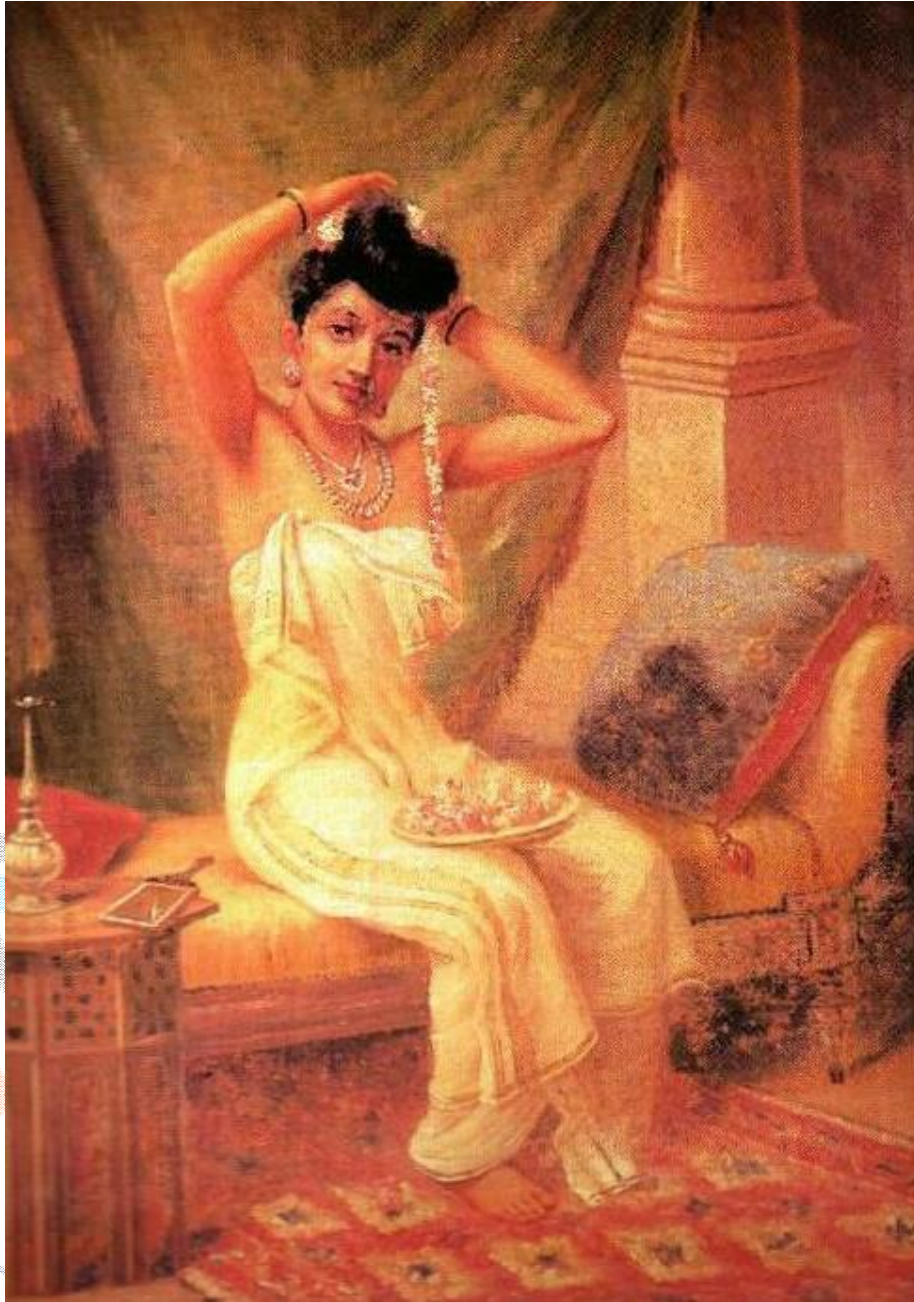


Fig. 5 – Malayali Woman in Dressing Room (get copyright from – <http://abhisays.com/art/selected-paintings-of-raja-ravi-varma-part-2.html>)



Fig. 6 – Lady Playing Veena (get copyright from - <http://abhisays.com/art/selected-paintings-of-raja-ravi-varma-part-2.html>)

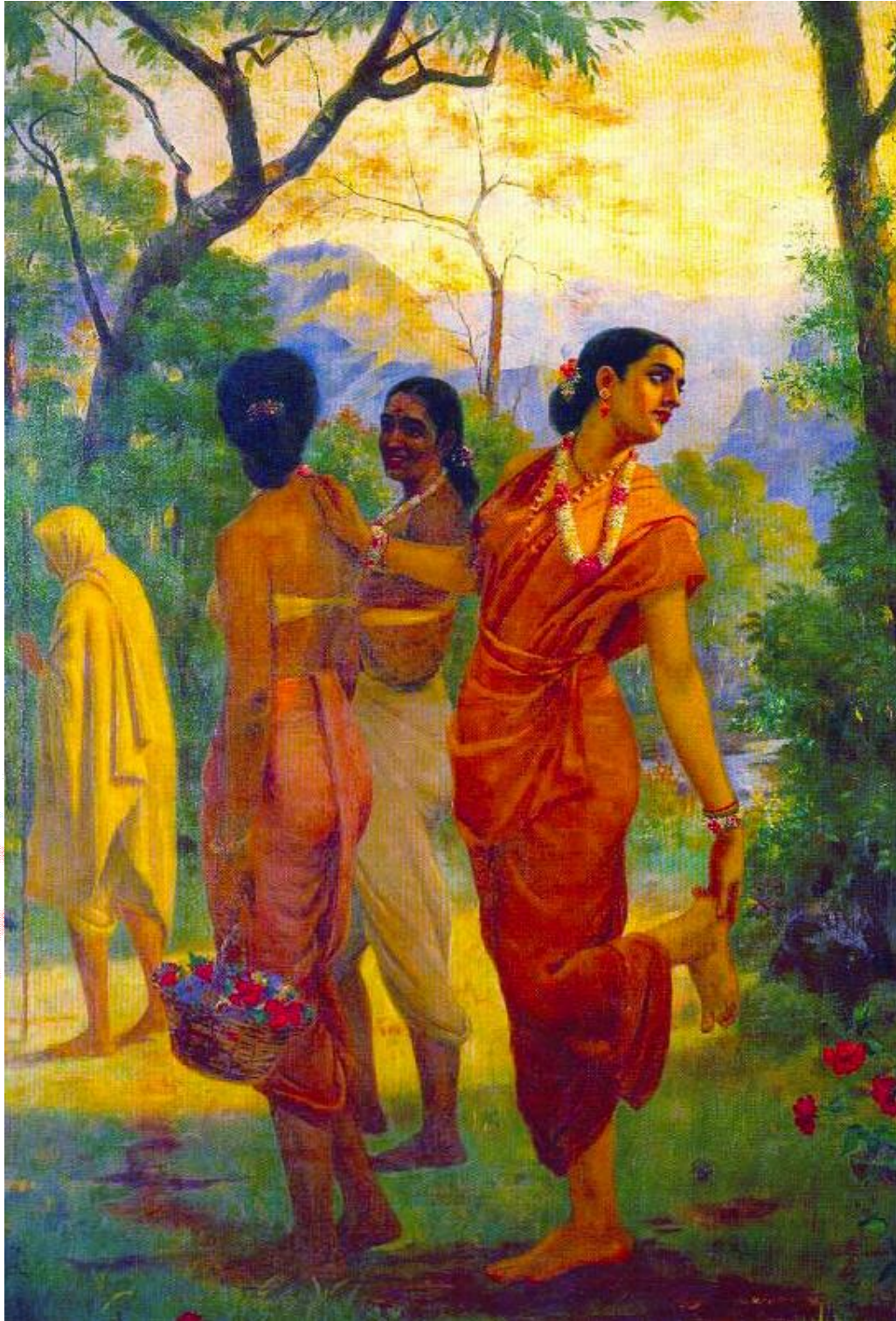


Fig. 7 – Sahukuntala (get copyright from - https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ravi_Varma-Shakuntala_columbia.jpg)

The above paintings by Raja Ravi Varma depicts these women in thick dress material and expressions of modesty and docility are evident on their faces. Figures are modelled in

the Western style using three dimensionality and shading techniques. However, the manner of dressing of women prevalent in his times also shows that women were not really required by the society to cover themselves up completely and hence, their bare shoulders, transparent shoulder covering and their display of feminine charms also become obvious in these paintings, overriding his Victorian and European aesthetical training. This is a dichotomy in his painting which has not been commented upon by the scholars. He attempts to answer to the Victorian notions, but at the same time, his Indian conditioning also shows up, thus showing the women in a more “revealing” fashion in line with the Indian tradition.

Artists from Bengal

In response to the Victorian critique of the Europeans and Raja Ravi Varma’s attempt to follow their guidelines, a group of artists arose in Bengal under the leadership of the Tagore family at Shantiniketan, who rejected the European Victorian critique but at the same time accepted the notion that it was possible to fuse Indian traditions with the shading techniques of Europe and also with the painting styles of other Asian countries such as Japan. By doing this, they attempted to create an art style that was traditional, modern, nationalistic and pan-Asian at the same time. The women in these paintings show a variety of Indian life as well as mythological roles in a variety of traditional-modernistic forms (Partha Mitter, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 221-233).

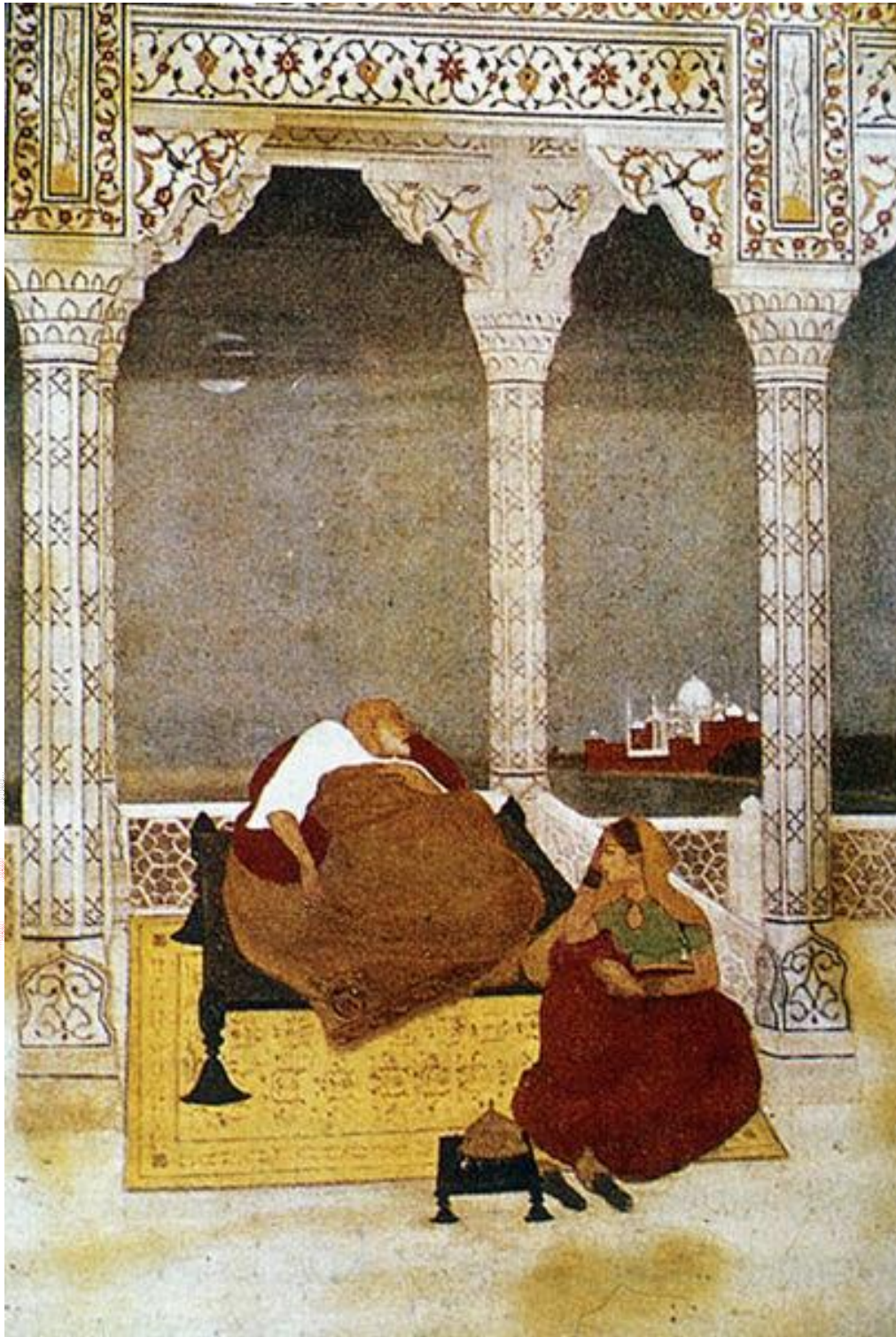


Fig. 8 – Passing of Shah Jahan by Abanindranath Tagore (get copyright from - <http://manashsubhaditya.blogspot.in/2013/09/famous-indian-painters-and-paintings-of.html>)



Fig. 9 – Bharat Mata by Abanindranath Tagore (get copyright from - <http://manashsubhadiya.blogspot.in/2013/09/famous-indian-painters-and-paintings-of.html>)



Fig. 10 – Ashoka's Queen by Nandlal Bose (get copyright from - <http://manashsubhaditya.blogspot.in/2013/09/famous-indian-painters-and-paintings-of.html>)



Fig. 11 – Sati by Nandlal Bose (get copyright from - <http://manashsubhaditya.blogspot.in/2013/09/famous-indian-painters-and-paintings-of.html>)

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Fig. 12 – Radha's Viraha by Nandalal Bose (get copyright from - <http://manashsubhaditya.blogspot.in/2013/09/famous-indian-painters-and-paintings-of.html>)



Fig. 13 – Gita Govinda by Kshitindranath Mazumdar (get copyright from - <http://murshidabad.net/people/kshitindranath-majumdar.htm>)

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Fig 14 – Sunayani Devi and her Paintings (get copyright from - <http://www.rappayi.com/art-culture/art/artist-profiles/sunayani-devi-indian-women-artist-from-tagore-family-post-1901>)

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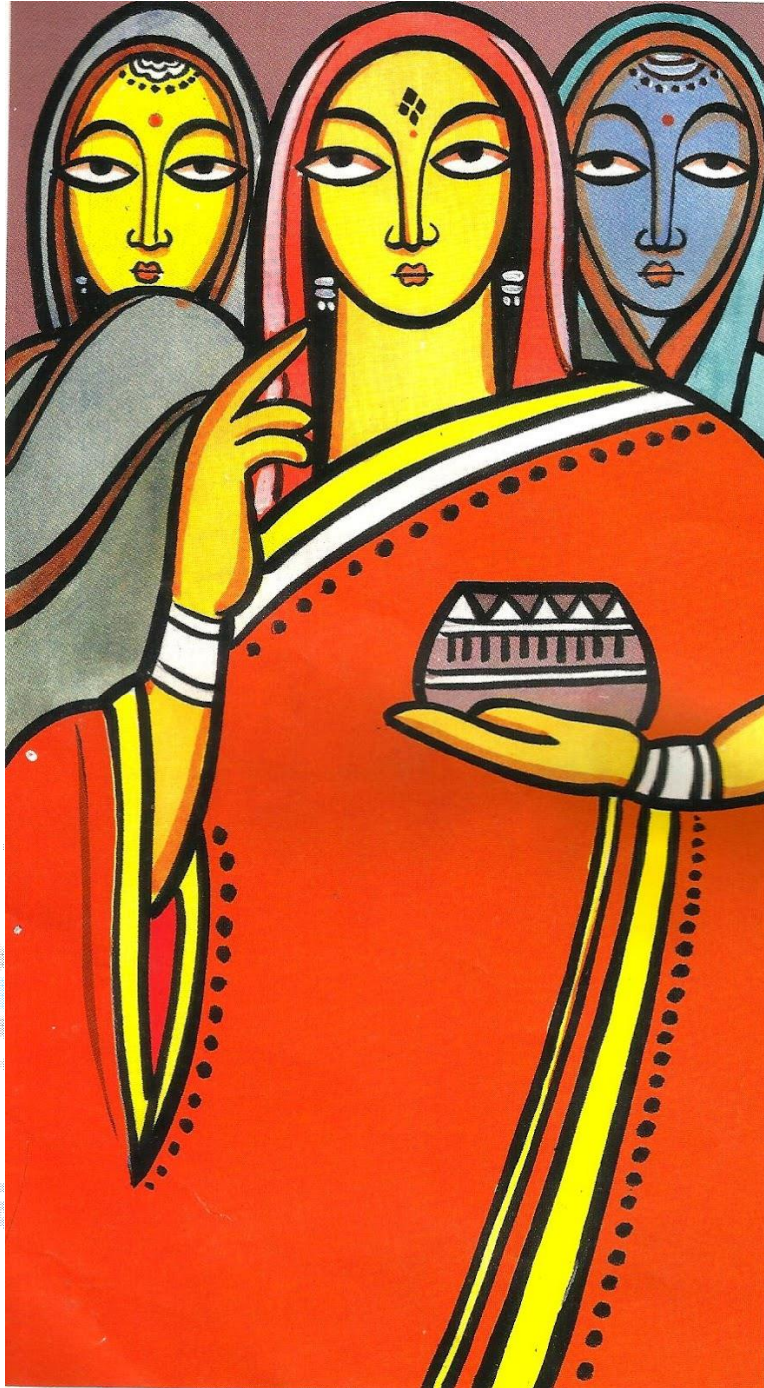


Fig. 15 – Bride by Jamini Roy (get copyright from - <http://manashsubhaditya.blogspot.in/2013/09/famous-indian-painters-and-paintings-of.html>)

The above paintings show some of the representatives of the artists active in Bengal at Shantiniketan or influenced by this style. Abanindranath and Nandlal Bose set the tone for the artistic nationalism, rejecting the European critique and Ravi Varma's attempt to respond to it. They drew figures from Indian history such as Shah Jahan and Ashoka's wife. It is remarkable that in the painting showing the passing of Shah Jahan, it is his

daughter who is in foreground and her grief is in visual prominence. The Taj Mahal in the back ground shows the glorious past of India. Shah Jahan's passing symbolically represents the end of this glorious era in the Colonial period, when a Mughal Princess is grieving the end of this era. Woman here represents India herself, who grieves at the loss of her glory. Ashoka's wife is shown in her regal splendour and in a romantic manner, very different from Raja Ravi Varma's style. She waits for the king to come, in a pensive mood. The style uses Japanese techniques, wash and a little shading, thus fusing traditional Indian, Japanese and Western aesthetics, but at the same time rejecting the Western expectations in theme and style of showing the woman, who carries forward the mood of the painting. Nandalal Bose also painted on current problems such as Sati, against which there was debate going on. Again, Sati here is as if in a dream, not the divinised form of Brahmanical orthodoxy. The victimhood of the woman is very apparent here. Kshitindranath Mazumdar belonged to Murshidabad, now in Bangladesh. He also painted in this tradition and highlighted another historical and popular theme, viz., from the Gita Govinda, which was the prescribed text for performances at the Jagannath temple at Puri, which was included in Bengal Province at this time. In Radha's Viraha, Nandalal Bose attempts to integrate yet another style from ancient Egypt. On the other hand, Jamini Roy tried to integrate the folk styles of the Bengal painting tradition. The Bharata Mata is obviously a depiction of patriotism personified and venerates the mother India herself. Sunayani Devi is a lesser-known woman artist from the Tagore family, who was the niece of Rabindranath Tagore and married the grandson of Raja Ram Mohun Roy. She was encouraged by her Tagore brothers to paint and began to paint at the age of 30. She mostly represented women in their various activities and showed the influence of the wash technique of her brothers. Thus, her art is a representation of the women in her times and also of a woman artist in the modernist forms. While there were many women folk artists who painted for ritual purpose, a woman artist who painted in modern circumstances without ritual context was a rarity in those days. Thus, nationalism in art acted on multiple levels, attempting to bind together the history, the various regions, various art styles and critiqued obnoxious practices such as Sati and evoked a feeling of patriotism against the colonial rule and rejected the European Victorianism, all at the same time. The fact that women were chosen as the agency to depict all this is very important. Besides, at least one woman was also given space to express herself artistically.

Towards Modernity

Also trained in Bengal were Ramkinkar Baij and Hemendranath Mazumdar, but they went a step ahead of the painters discussed above in their quest for showing the woman in a bolder form, breaking away from the tradition and also rejecting the Victorian notions of modesty and docile looks of the woman (Partha Mitter, Reaktion Books, London, 2007, pp. 29-52). On the other hand, Amrita Sher-Gil had lived in Europe and had a European mother. She was the first professionally trained woman artist who took up art as a profession. Her style was truly modern and free from the Victorian and colonial baggage. Her women show both a freedom and expressed display of emotions.



Fig. 16 – After the Bath by Hemendranath Mazumdar (get the copyright from - <http://manashsubhaditya.blogspot.in/2013/09/famous-indian-painters-and-paintings-of.html>)

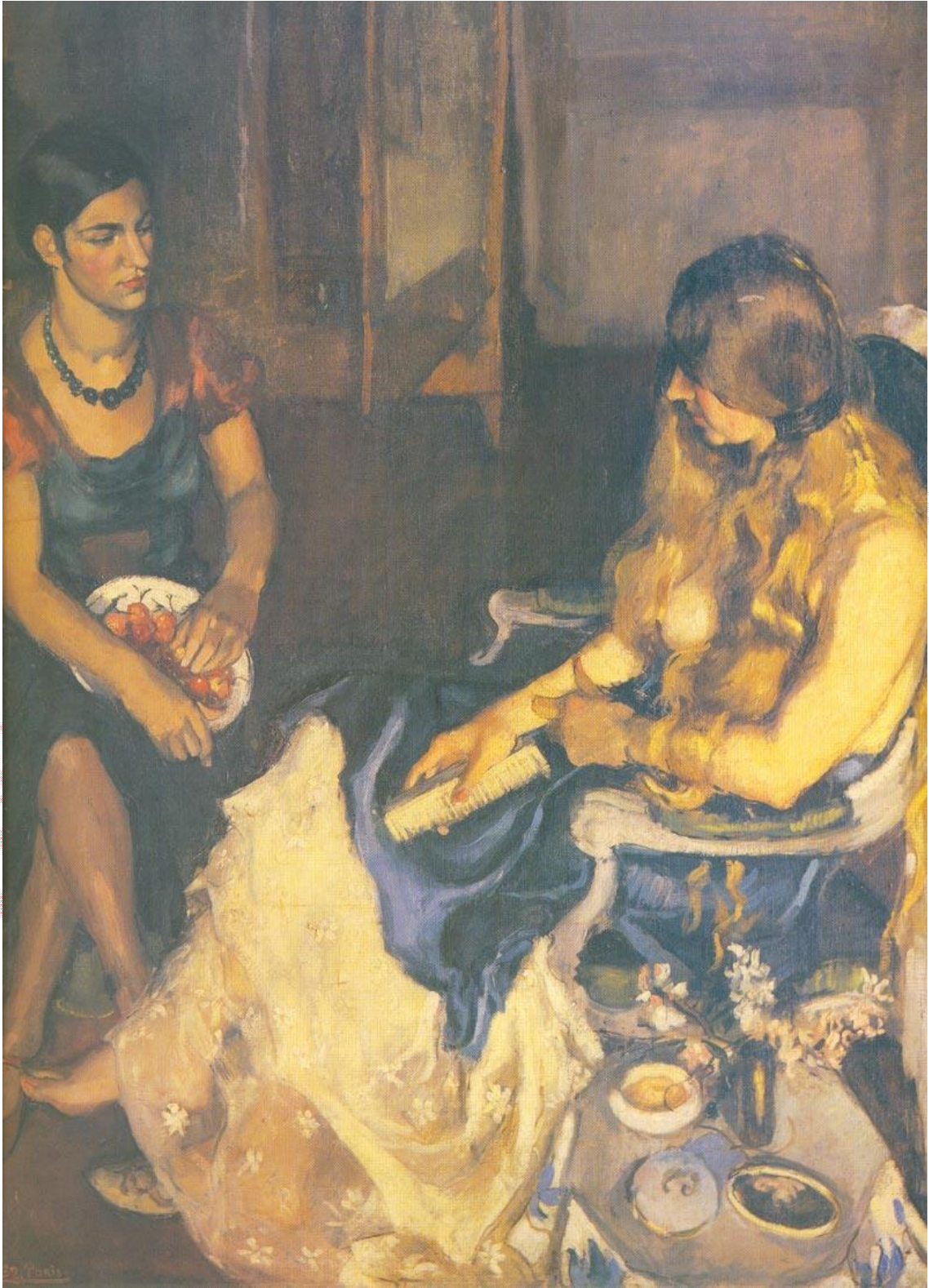


Fig. 17 – Young Girls by Amrita Shergil (get copyright from - <http://manashsubhaditya.blogspot.in/2013/09/famous-indian-painters-and-paintings-of.html>)



Fig. 18 – Three Girls by Amrita Shergil (get copyright from - <http://manashsubhaditya.blogspot.in/2013/09/famous-indian-painters-and-paintings-of.html>)

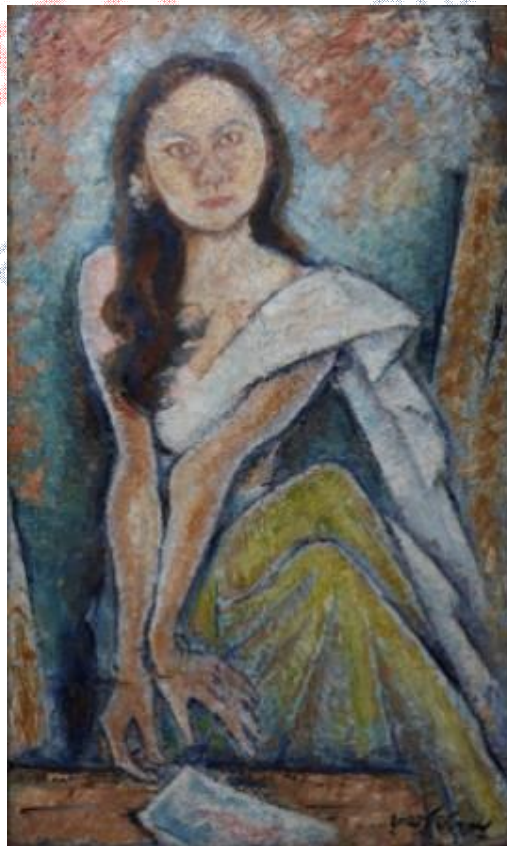


Fig. 19 – Binodini by Ramkinkar Baij (get copyright from - <http://manashsubhaditya.blogspot.in/2013/09/famous-indian-painters-and-paintings-of.html>)



Fig. 20 – Widows by Ramkinkar Baij (get copyright from - <http://manashsubhaditya.blogspot.in/2013/09/famous-indian-painters-and-paintings-of.html>)

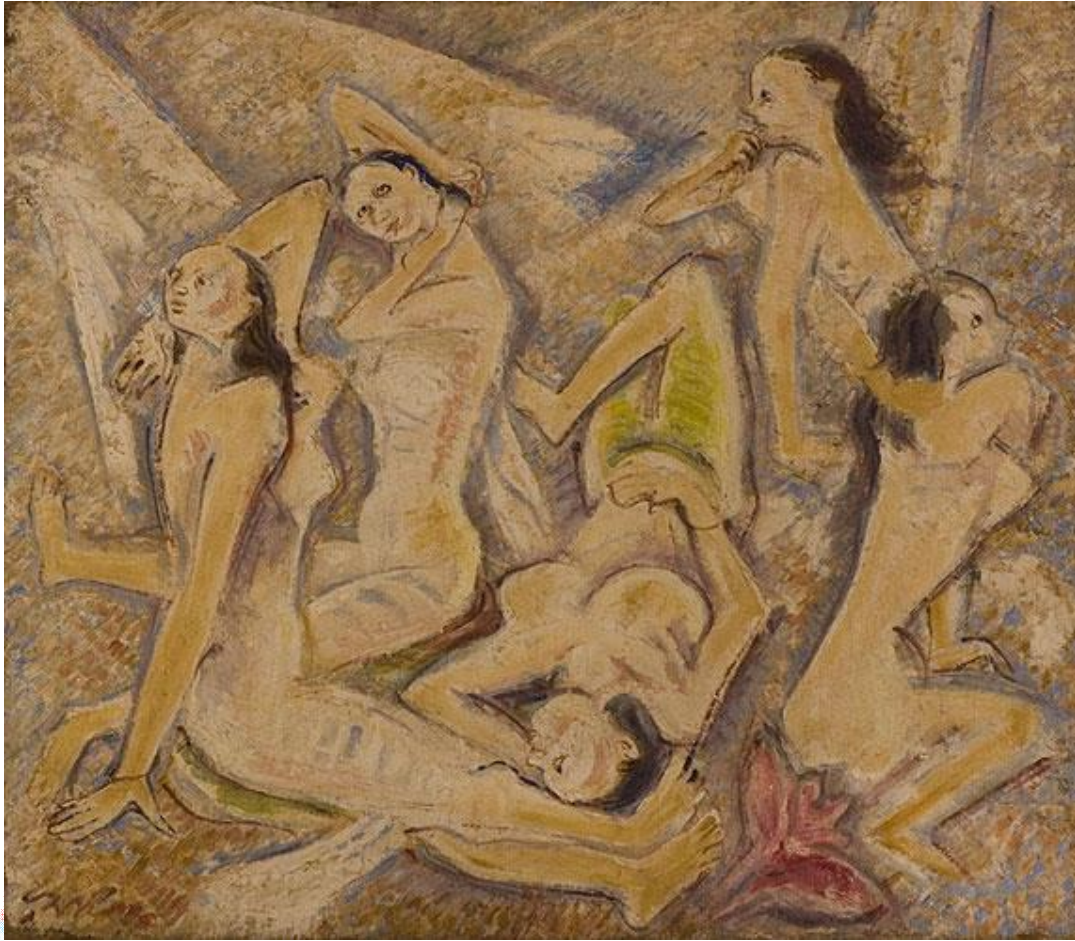


Fig. 21 – Women by Ramkinkar Baij (get copyright from - <http://manashsubhaditya.blogspot.in/2013/09/famous-indian-painters-and-paintings-of.html>)

In the above paintings, Hemendranath Mazumdar shows no inhibition in showing a woman's body through wet clothes. This was a very interesting reversal of tradition to modernity and back to tradition in a very different form. For, traditional India before the European colonialism had no inhibition in showing a woman's body. This was part of the traditional art aesthetic of India. Under Victorian influence, artists began to cover up the woman in thick clothing, which was a sign of "modernity" in the colonial period. Hemendranath Mazumdar reversed it again and rejected Victorian modesty by showing the woman's body again through transparent wet clothes. But this was somewhat like today's Western "modernism" which critiques the Victorian tradition, rather than the tradition Indian aesthetic which showed the feminine body without any inhibition. This also shows how today's ideas of "conservative Indian traditions" have developed, which really have their roots in Victorian European ideals and not in the Indian tradition. The woman again becomes the medium through which these ideas are expressed. Amrita Sher-Gil and Ramkinkar Baij on the other hand, free the woman's body from conventional lines, forms and expressions. They break the patterns and attempt a truly "modern Western" art style that was contemporary in the West in those years. At the

same time, they highlight the emotions, moods and conditions of women in various walks of life. This includes contested subjects such as widows, about whom there were debates going on and the portrait of a woman theatre actress called Binodini, who was a prostitute-turned-actress and hence, not regarded as fit for refined society.

Synthesis in the North-Western India



Fig. 22 – Dream by MAR Chughtai (get copyright from http://indiapicks.com/Indianart/Main/Chughtai_Gallery.htm)



Fig. 23 – Radhika by MAR Chughtai (get copyright from http://indiapicks.com/Indianart/Main/Chughtai_Gallery.htm)

MAR Chughtai was a prominent painter in Lahore, trained at Mayo College of Art and who later also taught there. After partition, he remained in Lahore. However, he painted Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic and non-religious themes. His themes related to the entire South Asian subcontinental cultural heritage. Hence, he is rightfully an artist of South Asia. Earlier, it was erroneously thought that he also belonged to the art tradition of Bengal. However, it has been later established that he evolved his art style independent of the Bengal tradition, even though he was influenced by the intellectual debate going on in the field of art in India at the time. His art was also thought to borrow from the miniature painting tradition of India. But a close study of his art shows that even though his themes are similar to those of the miniature paintings, his style is in fact infused with modernism (Verma, Archana, "Convergences and Divergences in Chughtai's Nationalist Art: A Reappraisal," in *Pakistan Heritage*, Vol. 1, Hazara University, NEFP, Pakistan, pp. 101-106).

In the paintings shown above, Fig. 22 appears to be the traditional theme of Radha and Krishna meeting. However, the manner in which they are shown meeting is very different from the miniature painting tradition. Moreover, the painting is titled "Dream" and there is no suggestion that it is of Radha and Krishna. Krishna is not wearing his characteristic peacock feather in this painting. Only an audience that is familiar with the Radha Krishna theme will attempt to connect it to the divine figures. On a wider scale, this could be any couple having a romantic rendezvous. The dream enhances the romantic imagination of the subject and the figures are free from the stylised depictions of the miniature painting tradition. In that sense, it is a very modern painting, though it borrows its theme from the miniature painting tradition. Similarly, Fig. 23 shows Radhika coyly stealing into the night to go out. The Miniature paintings usually show a bold Radhika, surrounded by Gopis, who scolds Krishna for coming late. The silence, the delicate tenderness and the coyness of this painting is new for this theme. It has been shown by this author in a study to show marked departures from the traditional miniature paintings showing Radhika going to meet Krishna. MAR Chughtai shows a marked departure from the miniature tradition, even though his themes are borrowed from there (Verma, Archana, "Convergences and Divergences in Chughtai's Nationalist Art: A Reappraisal," in *Pakistan Heritage*, Vol. 1, Hazara University, NEFP, Pakistan, pp. 101-106).

Concluding Remarks

The above exploration shows that the colonial period had a marked influence on the art tradition in India as a whole and on the ways of representing the woman in particular. Woman became the prime agency for mediating the notions and contested debates on nationalism, cultural, historical and regional bonding, issues of modesty, which were sometimes mistaken for Indian tradition and debates about artistic aesthetic styles. Within this web of debates, reformulations and reactions, women artists were also functioning, though they were few and their expressions and voices in art practices were sometimes influenced by the current debates going on and sometimes they freed themselves and expressed their creativity in their own right. In general however, women painters were not many. This was in sharp contrast to the performing arts, where women artists were to be found in large numbers and especially the advent of cinema brought a profusion of women artists on screen. This will be the subject of another module. But in this module, we have seen that even men artists attempted to promote their ideas through the vehicle of women. Some of them encouraged the women to become artists, while others used the figure of women to evoke ideas of nationalism, beauty, rebellion, patriotism, tradition and modernity.