

# **‘Celebrating Womanhood’<sup>1</sup>: Politics behind the Portrayal of Women in Art**

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Artists can, through their work, reflect the values and aspirations of their own society and of humanity. While some reacts with cynicism and even despair, others produce an art of resistance (Turner 2004: 4).

## **Abstract**

Art is one of the strongest forms of social expression (of its units: people, culture, traditions, livelihoods, customs, etc.). These expressions, as Turner (2004) says in the quotation above, can be representations and approval of existing social phenomena, or can be a form of resistance and protest for the change. In this context, my paper talks about the works by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian artist Raja Ravi Verma whose work was more focused to pan-Hindu culture and the contemporary Nepali visual artist Ashmina Ranjit who challenges the established norms and moving beyond binding to one culture, tries to raise issues linked to human and humanity. The paper has tried to analyze both the artists’ works, juxtapose them and show how their works are different and in opposition to each other. I have tried to examine their works in order to substantiate my arguments regarding how one promotes the continuation of the tradition and how the other tries to demolish the established tradition and build a new tradition with a different meaning. Comparative study of both the artists gives us an overview regarding how had women been used in arts as a political tool to maintain the ideology of certain groups and how that ideology is being challenged by the works of artists like Ashmina Ranjit.

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<sup>1</sup> “Celebrating Womanhood” is a title of of Ranjit’s series of performance and installation arts that were performed and installed in different places at different times in 2010 to 2013.

## Introduction

Art is not created in vacuum. It is a product of the certain time and space, which means the societal space and the time, gets reflected in their works (see, for example Wheale 1995a, 1995b and Turner 2004). These works gives us an understanding of the world we are living in and gives a space to our imaginations that we derive from the environment we live in. Art gives a platform where our expressions come out with colors and different kinds of techniques and materials. Webster dictionary's one of the definitions of art says, art is "the conscious use of skill and creative imagination, especially in the production of aesthetic objects."<sup>2</sup>

A piece of art—though is created by an individual—carries the feelings, expressions, ideologies and emotions of the mass as well. For example, when an artist expresses her/his frustration related to political instability, the work itself becomes the representation of the larger group of the people from the community. People also take art as an expression of their freedom and while exercising these freedoms, sometimes it becomes a threat to the state and the government and the state tries to ban these kinds of arts (see, for example, the controversial paintings of an artist M.F. Hussain<sup>3</sup>).

Raja Ravi Verma , the famous 19<sup>th</sup> century artist from India and Ashmina Ranjit, a contemporary visual artist from Nepal are two such artists who have women as their common subjects in many of their works. However, based on their location and time, these subjects are used in a very different ways, they become political subjects, yet in different forms and with very different message. The following part of the essay will look at both the artists' work and analyze them to see how despite using the same subject, the intention of using these subjects are different.

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<sup>2</sup> Available at: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/art>. Accessed on 5 November 2014.

<sup>3</sup> For more info on M.F. Hussain's controversial paintings, visit: <http://webneel.com/mf-husain-paintings-art-controversy-indian-artist>. Accessed on 8 November 2014.

## Raja Ravi Verma

Raja Ravi Verma is one of the most celebrated artists of India. He was born on 29 April 1848, approximately 166 years ago, in a princely state in a southern part of Kerala in a place called Kilimanoor. He belonged to a royal family, and was raised amongst the group of scholars who appreciated arts. He got his preliminary training in art from his uncle Raja Raja Verma, when he became 14 years, he was trained to use watercolors by Rama Swami Naidu and later he was given training by Theodor Jenson, a British artist. He excelled in his work and when “he won an award for an exhibition of his paintings at Vienna in 1873, he became well known in many countries.”<sup>4</sup> Raja Ravi Verma is introduced in Encyclopedia Britannica as the

Indian painter best known for uniting Hindu mythological subject matter with European realist historicist painting style. He was one of the first Indian artists to use oil paints and to master the art of lithographic reproduction of his work. In addition to incidents in Hindu mythology, Varma painted many portraits of both Indians and British in India.<sup>5</sup>

Ravi Verma was, somehow, helping the existing social ideology, first in maintaining the traditional Hindu belief with his mythical paintings and portraits and second, shaping and disseminating the ideology that was common belief. If we try to locate him politically, he is one of the artists who dedicated his work to the emerging national cause of a pan-India, “[w]hat is notable is that he proselytized his version of *classical* Indian culture as contemporary *high art* and that in turn as genre through popular printing technology” (Kapur 2004: 148).

The colonial India has had a great impact on the works of Ravi Verma. These impacts reflected on his works. First, he was himself trained by the Western artist and second, he has taken so many ideas from the Western artwork. He was the first artist from India to paint a three-dimensional painting and to use oil colors.<sup>6</sup> The trend of (three dimensional) portrait making was already very popular in the Western countries when he adopted it (for example, see the works of Theodor Jenson).

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<sup>4</sup> Read more about Raja Ravi Verma at: <http://www.iloveindia.com/indian-heroes/raja-ravi-varma.html#Rc3xDLEsGTOCTh76.99>. Accessed on 25 October 2014.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1913081/Ravi-Varma>. Accessed on 29 October 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Classnotes; Sasanka Parera.

Ravi Verma is, thus, the artist who used local subjects and western styles and materials. He painted mythological characters, gave human face to the Hindu Gods and Goddesses, and painted portraits of people (especially women) of different cultures from different parts of India. He used Religion as a tool because the Hindu religion had been the basis of Indian culture. So using sacred and mythological texts displaying the Brahminical ideologies was an easy medium to grasp the sentiments of the people.<sup>7</sup>

As an example of this, we can see his painting *The Galaxy* (see Picture 1). It is known as one of his famous paintings; it consists of the 11 Indian women musicians who belonged to different communities and were from different regions. However, it promotes casteism as it was the representation of the women from high castes and classes.

**Picture 1: *Galaxy of Musicians*<sup>8</sup>**



As Kapur said, Ravi Verma's work was supporting the idea of a pan-Indian culture at the time of colonial period. And it seems to have one main intention: continuity of high caste Hindu

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<sup>7</sup> Regarding these issues, the movie *Rang Rasiya* can be useful. Released on 7 November 2014, the movie is based on Raja Ravi Verma journey to becoming artist, his work on religious characters; how his giving face to Gods became controversial and his uses of the models for his portraits. For more on it, visit: <http://www.rediff.com/movies/review/review-rang-rasiya-is-an-important-film/20141107.htm> and <http://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/movie-review/rang-rasiya-movie-review/2/>. Accessed on 8 November 2014.

<sup>8</sup> The picture was taken from: <http://www.artzolo.com/painting/galaxy-musicians>. Accessed on 7 November 2014.

traditions. Patricia Uberoi says, the painting was “subject to a single aesthetic” (1990: 44). Ravi Verma’s work intentionally excludes women from other caste groups and communities like Muslim. For him, it was the hindu brahminical ideology that was important and he used woman as a certain kind of representation through his artwork for that. His works, especially his “calendar art” becomes one of the mediums to spread the certain kind of ideology based on Hindu brahminical beliefs (Uberoi 1990). They limit women’s representation as mothers and caregivers from the high caste communities. So, despite women being invisible in many phases of their life, they were not invisible in his work, in fact they had been the important subjects for his paintings, but again, these representations in his paintings are highly questionable. The women in his paintings were not only the feminine symbolic representations, but also the objects used with an intention to achieve a definite goal.

The dissemination of his work in a wide range was also possible because of the new technology of producing the copy of a piece of art called chromolithographs<sup>9</sup> and lithographs.<sup>10</sup> These techniques became very powerful mediums to distribute the idea of pan-Hindu culture. The process made it possible to make hundreds of copies of a piece of art. The copies were cheap and accessible to all those who otherwise would not have been able to afford it. The paintings that used to be in the walls of palaces and elite’s mansions were now hanging on the cracked walls of the poor people. His paintings were travelling the world with this new technology and shaping the minds of the people in thinking in one way.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> A picture printed in colors from a series of lithographic stones or plates. See: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/chromolithograph>.

<sup>10</sup> To produce, copy, or portray by lithography (the process of printing from a plane surface (as a smooth stone or metal plate) on which the image to be printed is ink-receptive and the blank area ink-repellent). See: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lithography>.

<sup>11</sup> The reproductions of his works, especially in calendars hung in houses of many Nepali people, including our house.

## Ashmina Ranjit

The 1990s people revolution in Nepal was followed by many other political changes like the decade long maoist civil war that ended in 2006, constitutional assembly elections and so on. These upheavals motivated *nagarik samaj* (civil society) to come forefront and fight for the rights of the Nepali citizens (Kunreuther 2014: 4). Ashmina Ranjit, grew up during this era and she was herself very active and close to *nagarik samaj* and this can be seen in her art works.

For Ashmina Ranjit, artwork is not only a physical process but it is also the whole thought process. Ranjit is a popular performance/visual artist of Nepal and through her installations and performance artworks she has been talking about things related to women like menstruations, female body, women empowerment, patriarchal domination and women's conditions regardless of time and space. Apart from this, she has been raising her voice very actively on the social and political issues like violence and war. Most of the time, her works are very radical and displays her feminist thoughts. Her works are caught in controversies quite often as she goes beyond the tradition and talks about the taboos out in the open. She also "reclaims women's experiences and gives voices to their political concerns as well as to their most intimate expressions of desire, joy and fulfillment."<sup>12</sup> Popularity of her work is not only limited to Nepal, she is famous in Western art world as well. Her ability of being of global influence came from global itself. As Ravi Verma was trained by the Western artist, Ranjit got her training in arts from Australia and United States. She came back to Nepal in early 1990s, during a time when the influence of the international art was increasing among the Nepali artists and new experimental genres, such as, installation and performance was beginning.

This is notable because in 1993, Nepal's Association of Fine Arts had rejected installations as unacceptable art forms. The violence of the Maoist insurgency<sup>13</sup> and the royal murders<sup>14</sup> dredged up raw emotions and seemed to call for art forms that could engage the public and initiate healing dialogue (Hagy 2011: 7).

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<sup>12</sup> From Ranjit's Portfolio.

<sup>13</sup> Maoist insurgency is the 10 years long period of "People's War" in Nepal marked with the year 1996 and ended on 2006. To know more about it, see Basnett 2009 and Hachhethu nd.).

<sup>14</sup> Also widely known as the Nepal's royal massacre, royal murders took place on 1 June 2001 at the *Narayanhiti Royal Palace* in Kathmandu, which was the then residence of the royal family.

Ranjit's work, in her own words is "artivism," which is a mixture of "art" and "activism." Her "artivism" is one of her way to call for a social change. Her artworks, like performance, installation and printing, has become a medium to go to mass for this purpose of change and the betterment. Most of the times, these works are experimental and her influence for these kind of works came from New York, where she did her Masters in Fine Arts (MFA) from Colombia University. She was specially influenced by the works of "two of the leading faculty, including New York-based performance artist, Rikrit Tarivanija and renowned performance artist, Janine Antoni" and this "influence of New York's avant-garde art scene made a significant impact in Ranjit's experimentation in the field of new media genre" (Bangdel 2014: 4). Ranjit, through her art works, rebels for the cultural stereotypes, political hegemony and resistance of its authority. She also raises her voice regarding the issues of identity (2014: 5).

**Picture 2: *Feminine Force*<sup>15</sup>**



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<sup>15</sup> All the pictures of Ranjit's performance art used in this article are taken from her person collection in her Portfolio.

**Picture 3: *Feminine Force***



As I already said, Ashmina's work on women, despite being taken from the local subject, significantly connects with the larger community of women from the world. Her exploring of gender through art are usually related to women sexuality which in turn connects with identity, patriarchy and the socio-cultural norms and values that emerge as a result of patriarchy. Most of her works, both performance and installation, contains the high use of "red" color. Red color is considered very auspicious for Hindus but she uses it as a symbol of suffering. We can see a thread, hair, and red in most of her works related to women (see Picture 2 and 3). All these are related to women's sexuality and their experiences as women. These works suggest that women are good only if they can control their sexuality otherwise it will become something

unwanted by the society: characterless and impure. These things like hair and color like red, therefore, signifies the loss of women's status, both as a social being and as a married woman.

**Picture 4: *Feminine Force***



The other purpose of using the color red is to tackle a taboo subject where women no longer remain “goddesses” with auspicious red color clothes. Many of her works are related to menstruation, which gets linked with the color red. The same color, when comes out of women's body converts into something which is impure and inauspicious. This is a kind of a challenge to patriarchal mode of thought according to which menstruation is a private affair, and she attempts bringing it out in a public domain. She says, “[b]y working with these personal issues in public arena I invite dialogue and controversy” (Bangdel 2014: 4). Her performance work such as *Feminine Force* (Picture 4) is one of the examples. In this performance, she wore a dress that was made out of sanitary pads “equals the average periods that a woman has in her lifetime – 33 years\*13 months\*4 days = 8,580 pads)” (Hagy 2011: 36). This work of hers is a challenge to the patriarchal ideology, where menstruation is considered as a pollution, something that a women should hide and stay away from “pure things,” such as, Gods and Goddesses and “elderly men.” Men, as they do not have to face all these natural cycles, remain

pure forever. It looks like her work is suggesting, purity and impurity does not depend on such things.

## **Conclusion**

These two artists are completely different from each other, one artist promoted the continuity of the traditions and the other demands for change and freedom and talks about women bodies through her works, which for many is a social taboo. One artist focused his work on only one category of women, thereby making a “common” social belief on “how women should be,” very strong while the other has been trying to connect to the women throughout the universe and collecting and manifesting the similar stories on women bodies and suffering. Through her works, she demands emancipation for women

Ravi Verma became very popular because he was producing something that was single aesthetic of the Hindu people and was in high demand. This demand was fulfilled with the help of newly developed technologies like lithography and chromolithography. It can be said that, Ravi Verma’s work was one of the political attempts to establish the brahminical ideologies, regarding one religion. Her women subjects are the direct representations of Indian women, however, indirectly, it was representation of one category of women with a message that only these women are real Indian women.

Ashmina Ranjit on the other hand, uses postmodernism as a tool and experiments with different tools and techniques to break the boundaries of these definitions. For her all “women” and their sufferings are similar. As an postmodern artist, she blurs the border between different forms of art like painting and sculptures (Wheale 1995b) and talks about the issues which is equally relevant to people all over the globe, like menstruation, which is a common experience of all the women.

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