



**ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER**

**Arts**

**LANDSCAPE AS REPRESENTED IN RAJA RAVI VARMA'S PAINTINGS**

**KEY WORDS:** Landscape, picturesque, Academic Realism, Miniature Painting

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**ABSTRACT**

Raja Ravi Varma is the pioneer who fruitfully implemented European oil painting technique in Indian art for the first time. He was born in Kilimanoor, Kerala in 1848. He had given a face of visual language to the age old Sanskrit literature of India in the European format. His works, which was based on academic naturalism, had Indian aesthetic idioms at its heart. Even though landscape as a genre was not a primary theme in Ravi Varma's paintings, nature had an inevitable role as backgrounds for images. Paintings like *Naladamayanthi*, *Nala Deserting Damayanthi* and *Udaypur Palace* belongs to this category.

**INTRODUCTION**

It was Raja Ravi Varma who opened the spatial and temporal horizons of the once restricted art forms of Kerala such as wall paintings, murals and ritualistic paintings. Raja Ravi Varma was never been labelled as one who paints nature but nature for its first time was represented at its best in his paintings. It can be said that in Raja Ravi Varma's paintings; memories, myths and imagination fuse harmoniously while representing nature. Ravi Varma's painting's gets inspiration from expertise of Realistic style and the essence of European Romanticism which he harbours to recreate myth in its pristine form using oil colours generating an aura of magic realism.



**Figure 1: Hamsa Damayanthi, Oil on canvas, 1899.**

Ravi Varma's painting 'Hamsa Damayanthi'(figure 1) foregrounds the palatial stone carved pillar which is embraced by Damayanthi, a demure and coy young maiden. The swan, her sweet accomplice sits beside her on the pedestal. The painting is silhouetted against nature at large, as though it represents a sylvan and remote mystic abode. Light disseminates in a rather subtle way that the whole locale is lit as if waves to a sea. The onlooker experiences elation by this play of light which moves lyrically around the architecture that is set as the background, to Damayanthi and Hamsa. This largely resembles the style of European Naturalism which is later seen in many of his paintings. As though in poetry, the emotion of love and its expression is intensely felt and seen in the art of painting. Nothing is lost, all intact the self reflexivity of the emotion, the painter tries to express rather metamorphosis, the true essence as seen in literature in his painting.

Nature is more an ideal back ground which serves to ignite the story rather than realistically represented fact. The situation portrayed in the picture gives immense importance to love. The *Sthayibhava* (basic sentiment) of love is heightened by the *vibhava* (determinant) that is seen in Damayanthi and her swan in the painting. "In the art tradition of India especially in painting, Nature has never been represented as a landscape, but the theme of the picture mostly is the *bhava* (emotion) that is being represented. In theatre *bhava* is synonymous with characters, the locale, and nature; similarly nature is

considered as the *vibhava* in Indian art tradition. Nature encompasses the *bhava*, the essence of the character in its entirety as seen in this particular painting'."

The miniature paintings which hail from India are found to have depicted Nature alongside the different emotional temperaments as experienced by man. The soul stirring emotional agency of man reflects more on the outer nature than on man's facial profile. The flora and fauna included in the painting is more than a replica of *bhavas* that are being manifested. The method that they envisage is one that is ornate and variant. Raja Ravi Varma belongs to this tradition where the huge vista of nature blends well with the character etched onto the painting; that is the emotive element of the character is ignited by the enticing catalyst present in nature. This style of representing nature that is largely seen in miniature paintings gets uplifted, rarefied and realistic as it enters the realm of Ravi Varma's painting, yet the element of imagination stays intact. The dramatic inclusion of light variations, colour merger and tonal variations synthesise creating a visual imagery which is lyrical in nature. Nature enters as *vibhavas* in paintings like 'Sakunthala removing Thorn', 'Radha Madhavam' etc. The forest, lake, flowers, rays of the sun, sky, clouds, and the entire atmosphere performs their role as *vibhava* which transpose the element of aesthetics. Ravi Varma's painting in short, reflects the elements followed by Indian aesthetics.

The imaginative element of nature which prevailed in the *Puranas* (epics) and *Ithihasas* (legends) are being transformed in these paintings in a realistic manner by Raja Ravi Varma. The oil colours used along with a novel perspective to the western visual art tradition brilliantly fuses in the painting. The backdrop of the painting when marked by the colours, following a particular pattern creates an illusion of a merger towards the horizon which is itself a trick played by the artist with his colour strokes on the eyes of the spectator which is nothing more than the technique of Perspectives. The painting 'Hamsa Damayanthi' elaborates on this technique of perspective in its accuracy. Ever since western renaissance (figure 2), the tradition of three dimensional representations in the pictorial plane is accepted as an all encompassing reality, i.e., the reality of nature itself.



**Figure 2: Titian, Orpheus and Eurydice, oil on canvas, 1506-14**

'Hamsa Damayanthi' is experimentation in its true sense on this technique of perspective, which mediates the so called mythical space into the realistic. As opined by Vijayakumar Menon, "Raja Ravi Varma tries to humanise the deities of gods and goddesses who remained in the realm of mythology far away from the reach of normal man by creating a different perspective which breaks the illusion of the untouchable space making it closer to man<sup>2</sup>." But it is strange to find the entire landscape quite different from the nature as is in the geography of Kerala. It is to be noted that the 'picturesque' as seen in Western art form is manifested in the paintings of Raja Ravi Varma. This is remarkably evident in the paintings like 'Lady in Moonlight', 'Radha Madhavam' and 'Sakunthala removing Thorn'. The pond, enthralling sky, sun's rays and its reflection all partake in the process of this aesthetics in the above said paintings. Western artists like Claude Lorraine, Titian and William Hodge have influenced Raja Ravi Varma to a great extent as he recreates their styles while painting landscapes.

Ravi Varma did not merely imitate the realistic representations as seen in Western paintings. Instead he recreated something novel using the technique of Oil colours. The techniques of shadow and light, sensibility as seen in his characters, melodramatic events etc. are elaborated to produce an aesthetics which patronise the Indian art tradition. Keeping in mind the Western aesthetic thought, Ravi Varma fathered a new aesthetic style for Indian art, which not only conquered the hearts of the elite but also that of the common mass. As opined by Asok Mithra, "Ravi Varma introduced perspective, having studied its laws according to the new science; European drawing, construction and composition and a new medium altogether; oil. He tried to wield the new tools in the Indian context and what he produced was not European painting at all but a new way of seeing. He introduced large bright areas of colour in his portraits and landscapes, adapted oil to the Indian light. It would be a mistake to regard his work as only a cheap or pointless imitation of the European technique. He was all the time struggling to look around himself through his European equipment and in doing so modified it to suit his vision<sup>3</sup>."

Ravi Varma's painting 'Nala Deserting Damayanthi' (figure 3) explores nature in its true sense. The character of Nala and Damayanthi is silhouetted against the huge forest in which they reside. The painting foregrounds Damayanthi who is asleep and in the background there is Nala who is slowly waking up from his deep slumber. Ravi Varma portrays these human characters by maintaining or rather by keeping intact the usual element of academic realism. In spite of the realistic representations Ravi Varma uses the technique of light manifestations foregrounding the element of drama in the painting. The landscape which forms the background of the painting is so represented that the elements of imagination as is seen in many of his paintings are negated and it is further furnished with a more realistic touch which takes it to a different realm. Keeping into account the different shades of nature, the artist uses colours, lighting techniques, and strokes of his brush.



Figure 3: Nala Deserting Damayanthi, Oil on canvas, 1890.

The nature thus painted in a way alludes to Impressionism (figure 4), a technique popular among the artist belonging to

the West. Ravi Varma's paintings thus synthesise elements of academic realism and impressionism. Impressionist painters of the West believed that we don't really see the real world objectively, because everything that we see is filtered through our minds. It is during such times that Ravi Varma painted his Nala Deserting Damayanthi.



Figure 4: Claude Monet, Bordighera, Oil on canvas 1884

The nature which was actually meant to cater as a backdrop to characters, has achieved an independent existence in Ravi Varma's painting, 'Udayapuram Palace' (figure 5) i.e. landscape as landscape. Nature is more an objective reality in the above said painting. Udayapuram Palace forms the vast panorama with its architectural splendour, ornate by a water fountain in the frontage. Myriad boats of different size, small and big also become a part of the landscape. One of the small boats seems to carry people who are immersed in their work. The painting differs from the rest of Ravi Varma's paintings as nature blends with architecture and its surroundings.



Figure 5: Udayapuram Palace, Oil on canvas.

The flora has found a home on the architectural framework of the palace which gets reflected on the wavelet water body. The rays of the sun as seen on the huge structure indicate the time that is being portrayed in the painting. The painting is epitomising the 'Picturesque' technique which was popularised by the British Painters of the century.

**CONCLUSION**

The landscape originated in Ravi Varma's paintings was a result of metamorphosing the imaginary-mythical natural elements from the Indian epics and legends into the realm of realism and thus 'reality'. These landscapes indeed could be observed as a hybrid, which is more or less Indian in nature. Or more wisely, it could be called as a new kind of landscape stemming from the merger of Indo-European aesthetics as such.

**End Notes:**

1. Vijaya kumar Menon, 2015, *Bharatheeya Lavanya Vicharavum Kalaparaspariyavum*, Kerala Sahitya Akademi, Thrissur, p-113.
2. Vijaya kumar Menon, June 1994, "Bharathathil Adhunika kalayude paschathalam", *Sukritham* Monthly, Thrissur, P-14, 17.
3. Ashok Mitra, 1961, "The forces behind the modern movement", in *Lalithakala Contemporary*, No.1, Delhi, p-16.

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2. Menon Vijaya kumar, June 1994, "Bharathathil Adhunika kalayude paschathalam", Sukritham Monthly, Thrissur.
  3. Menon Vijaya kumar, 2015, Bharatheeya Lavanya Vicharavum Kalaparasaryavum, Kerala Sahitya Akademi, Thrissur.
  4. Mitra Ashok, 1961, "The forces behind the modern movement", in Lalithakala Contemporary, No. 1, Delhi.
  5. Parimoo Ratan, 2006, Studies on the art of Raja Ravi Varma, Kerala Lalithakala Akademi, Thrissur.