

**WOMEN, BEAUTY AND SEXUALITY: THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION  
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF FEMALE FIGURES IN RAJA RAVI VARMA'S  
PAINTINGS AND THE CHARACTER INDULEKHA IN O. CHANDUMENON'S  
INDULEKHA**

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**Abstract**

Beauty has always been that abstract idea influenced by the interventions of tradition, culture and technology. With its multitudinous dimensions, discourses on beauty vary from one society to other and is a significant notion in reflecting the perceptions and convictions of a society. This paper tries to research about the discourse of beauty existing in Kerala through the analyses of selected painting by Raja Ravi Varma and titular character Indulekha.

**Keywords:** woman, beauty, tradition, society etc

“Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder”; but Feminine beauty is essentially a male construction. The notion that forms the discourse of Feminine beauty is defined by the ‘male’ from ‘his’ perspective to satisfy ‘his’ sensual pleasures. These notions can range from the apparel, attire, shape, complexion, accessories, expressions, behaviour, responses etc. This is evident from the description of female characters in Malayalam literature and the most popular paintings of aesthetic acclaim by Raja Ravi Varma. The discourse on beauty evident from the art is a reflection of the culture indeed.

One classic instance on the discourse of feminine beauty in Malayalam literature is evident in the work *Indulekha* by O Chandumenon; the blatant description of the character Indulekha by one of the male character's in the novel:

I confess that it is impossible to describe the joy and the happiness and the fervour and the excitement and the intense desire and the grief that arises in the minds of men when they see Indulekha's complexion which resembles the colour of gold, her teeth which resembles gems, her lips red like coral, her eyes which makes dark flowers feel like slaves, her dark hair, her heavy breasts and her slender waist.

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The female figures of Ravi Varma's paintings like "Nair Lady Adorning Her Hair" or "At the Bath" are those hailed for the out pouring beauty and celebrating love and freedom in a matriarchal context. A close analysis of the paintings would reveal that these female figures are expressing submissiveness to their male counterpart rather than celebrating love and freedom. Thus modesty is established as a notion of feminine beauty.

John Berger in his work *Ways of Seeing* finds some criteria and conventions by which women have been seen and judged as sights. Often the nakedness or seductiveness is not expression of her freedom of sexuality, instead a submission to the owner's feelings and demand. The male owner of 'the painting and the woman.'

"We need to theorize the meaning of beauty in our lives so that we can educate for critical consciousness." Bell Hooks

Hume and Kant in their work *Of the Standard of Taste*, begin by acknowledging that taste or the ability to detect or experience beauty is fundamentally subjective, that there is no standard of taste in the sense that the *Canon* was held to be, that if people did not experience certain kinds of pleasure, there would be no beauty. Both acknowledge that reasons can count, however, and that some tastes are better than others. In different ways, they both treat judgments of beauty neither precisely as purely subjective nor precisely as objective but, as we might put it, as inter-subjective or as having a social and cultural aspect, or as conceptually entailing an inter-subjective claim to validity.

Hume's account focuses on the history and condition of the observer as he or she makes the judgment of taste. Our practices with regard to assessing people's taste entail that judgments of taste that reflect idiosyncratic bias, ignorance, or superficiality are not as good as judgments that reflect wide-ranging acquaintance with various objects of judgment and are unaffected by arbitrary prejudices. "Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to found, is the true standard of taste and beauty" (*Of the Standard of Taste*, 144).

A somewhat similar though more adamantly subjectivist line is taken by Santayana, who defines beauty as 'objectified pleasure.' The judgment of something that it is beautiful responds to the fact that it induces a certain sort of pleasure; but this pleasure is attributed to the object, as though the object itself were having subjective states.

The art historian Heinrich Wofflin gives a fundamental description of the classical conception of beauty, as embodied in Italian Renaissance painting and architecture:

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The central idea of the Italian Renaissance is that of perfect proportion. In the human figure as in the edifice, this epoch strove to achieve the image of perfection at rest within itself. Every form developed to self-existent being, the whole freely co-ordinated: nothing but independently living parts.... In the system of a classic composition, the single parts, however firmly they may be rooted in the whole, maintain a certain independence. It is not the anarchy of primitive art: the part is conditioned by the whole, and yet does not cease to have its own life. For the spectator, that presupposes an articulation, a progress from part to part, which is a very different operation from perception as a whole. (Wolfflin , 9–10, 15)

The beauty norms constructed in a society by the dominant class becomes a tool to maintain the dominance and these norms are validated and reinforced through media , art and literature. The beauty norms in every society are created by the powerful class and hence a major factor in determining the power relations in a society. In a male dominated society the feminine beauty norms thus becomes the tool of suppression. The concept of beauty is associated with the body and the most popular universal norms associated with it ..... fair , slim and soft bodies. The patriarchal society used the beauty norms always as a tool to dominate women.

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Although standards of feminine beauty have been tremendously varied throughout history and between cultures, “absolutes” of feminine beauty still exist in temporal contexts. This in itself is unproblematic; humans are adorning creatures and style shifts are natural to both cultural and historical variation. Culture is alive, growing and developing with the people living those standards of behavior. What is problematic, however, is the ways in which these beauty may restrict and restrain women, especially as a tool of political suppression. “There is no legitimate historical or biological justification of the beauty myth; what it is doing to women today is a result of nothing more exalted than the need of today’s power structure, economy, and culture to mount a counteroffensive against women” (Wolf 13) The beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about patriarchal limitations and institutions. Arguably, women’s autonomy has been suffocated by continuous restrictive standards of femininity, sexuality, and beauty.

The norms of feminine beauty in Indian Culture, like in any other culture, are an ideological apparatus to restrict and restrain women. Especially as tool of political suppression. Beauty is a quality attributed only to those women who accept and succumb

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to the norms of feminine appearance and behaviour. The ideals of feminine beauty that are essentially a product of patriarchal dominance, here the beauty norms are not just for the visual pleasure of a male dominant society rather it is a tool of political dominance. In her seminal work *The Second Sex*, iconic feminist Simone de Beauvoir argues that a woman's identity is shaped by upbringing in a world ruled by men. "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," and this manifests itself in a deeply ingrained idea that a woman's worth stems from male desire and approval. This battle for physical compliance robs a woman of her individuality and her voice, contributing to the suppression that will blight her progress throughout her life.

These norms of feminine beauty are largely been reflected in art and literature, reinforcing the norms into the culture of the society. One classic instance on the discourse of feminine beauty norms in Malayalam literature is evident in the work *Indulekha* by O Chandumenon; the blatant description of the character Indulekha by one of the male character's in the novel:

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Indulekha, the famous titular character of Chandumenon's novel is an archetype of feminine beauty in culture of Kerala. She became a bench mark to whom any other woman would be compared to when talked about beauty.

The idea of being beautiful is not just associated to the appearance, it also includes behaviour and attitude. Literature has always been ambivalent in its representation of women. Good women as in ones who accepted societal norms. Even feisty heroines eventually go onto find content and life's purpose in a good man's arms.

The most celebrated female figures in India are those portrayals in Raja Ravi Varma's paintings. They are hailed for the outpouring feminine beauty. But a close analysis of the portrait paintings by Ravi Varma like "An Amma Thampuran of Mavelikara" and "Mrs Ramanatha Rao" reveals the fact that they are a depiction of the repressed condition of womanhood. Enforcing the stereotype already existing in the social milieu gave popularity to Varma's paintings. They represent the Nair woman who were under the strict control of the ruling male in the family. The notion of women being identified with body and as a source of pollution, as supposed to mind and culture which are masculine, is depicted in the shrinking, withdrawn self-figures of portrait paintings.

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John Berger in his work *Ways of Seeing* talks about how the female figures in paintings are different from male. According to Berger, a woman's presence in a painting expresses her own attitude to herself. The presence is manifest in her gestures, voices, expressions, clothes, posture and it is so intrinsic that men tend to think of it as an almost physical emancipation, a kind of heat or smell or aura. The painting "Stolen Interview" in which woman with shy gesture and male gazing at her portrays the submissiveness of the female, she becomes an object of gaze by her male counterpart figure in the painting. Portrait paintings of women, such as Reclining Nair Lady, Woman Holding a Fruit, Shakuntala, in which the female figures are represented through shyness, seductive expression or longing for men. These paintings, through the absence of men and expression of women longing for men, indicates the already accepted notion of male superiority, associating women to their body and object of gaze or sexual pleasure. The portrayal of women in Ravi Varma's paintings, through their shy gestures and by becoming the object of gaze of their male counterpart, reinforces the existing beauty norms of Kerala culture. Thus, being confined to the allotted space into keeping of man is hailed as beauty.

Confining to the beauty norms helps the male dominant society to politically suppress women, the only way is to emancipate from the beauty norms and not to succumb to it. The representation of women in art and literature should be critically analysed and the beauty norms are to be questioned for critical consciousness.

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