

The Girl Unknown: Understanding Social Attributes Through Visual Study of the Symbolism in a Maratha Painting From 19th Century Pune, India

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Abstract

It is a generally accepted view today that men and women are equals having equal rights. This was not an acceptable view a few centuries ago. Men were the bread earners and women were responsible for home and child care. As in other parts of the world of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, women of the western Indian state of Maharashtra were subjected to severe scrutiny and discipline where their behavior was concerned. A patriarchal society controlled several aspects of their lives including their marriageable age, their daily conduct, their clothing, even their sexuality. These rules were designed to restrict both their indoor as well as outdoor activities. In essence, all classes of women including women of regal and elite families were constrained to home and hearth. In that period of time, members of the elite class often commissioned portraits of the male members of their families. Paintings of female members of such families are rare. Among the artefacts in the collection of the Peshwe Museum in Pune, India, a painting of an unidentified young girl is displayed. With a wide-ranging background of the societal and traditional norms of the eighteenth and nineteenth century Maharashtra, the present study aims to examine this portrait through the lenses of household norms, social customs and pecuniary background of the female subject. A combination of semiotics, visual rhetoric and interpretative qualitative analysis of the observations is used as the methodology for carrying out visual analysis of the image.

Key words: Maratha, painting, women, societal norms, cultural customs

Introduction

Peshwas were prime ministers of the Maratha kings of Maharashtra, a state in Western India. The Marathas were a warrior group from Western Deccan plateau, currently Maharashtra. The Peshwas were influential rulers, sometimes even more important than the king and controlled large parts of India at one time. In early eighteenth century, they made Pune, a city in Maharashtra their home. Descendants of the Peshwas still reside in Pune maintaining a few historic properties including the Peshwe Museum which houses a collection of coins, arms, paintings and other artifacts belonging to the Peshwas. One of the paintings in their collection is of a young girl who is unidentified (Figure 1). Equipped with a wide-ranging social and cultural context of eighteenth and nineteenth century Maharashtra, the present study aims to investigate this specific portrait through the lenses of social norms, cultural standards and financial background of the female subject.

In the 21st century, it is a generally accepted view that men and women are equals having equal rights. However, this was not an acceptable view in most of the world a few centuries ago where women were considered subservient to men. Men were considered as the bread

earners and women were responsible for home and child care. As in other parts of the world of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, women of the western Indian state of Maharashtra were subjected to severe scrutiny and discipline where their behavior was concerned. A patriarchal society controlled several aspects of their lives including their marriageable age, their daily conduct, their clothing, even their sexuality (Chakravarti, 1995). They were married off before they turned 10 and were under pressure to ensure continuation of the family bloodline. These social customs were strictly enforced by the Peshwa government. Though girls and women belonging to different social strata all wore similar clothes, their clothes differed in details like color, fabrics, ornamentation and jewelry. Thus, what a woman wore was decided by the socio cultural norms of the period and affected by the pecuniary status of her family.

Review of Literature:

Women's Dress in Maharashtra during the eighteenth & nineteenth century:

An attire composed of a long ankle length skirt called purkur and a short knotted blouse called polke was the common dress of unmarried girls of Maharashtra (Bhave, 1935; Shirgaonkar, 2010). The purkur-polke were usually coordinated sets made of a khan fabric having woven geometrical designs and broad borders in contrasting colors. Once married, often at less than 10 years of age, girls would be expected to wear the attire of a grown up woman i.e. a traditional nine-yard saree called nauvari draped around the body with one end covering the back and shoulders. This was worn with a short knotted choli or blouse. These sarees were smaller in length and width than usual; as suited to be worn by little girls. However, their length itself made the saree cumbersome and awkward to be worn by young girls who were not accustomed to wearing it. Widows wore a brown saree known as avallan which signified a low class metal commonly found on river banks (Shirgaonkar, 2017) which underlined the insignificant status of widowed women. They also did not wear a blouse with their saree due to which they had to ensure that the saree was clutched very close to the body which effectively hindered their movement (Chakravarti, 1995).

Jewelry:

Saubhagya Lakshane or Saubhagya Alankar was a set of ornaments prescribed to be worn by married girls and women as an assertion of their married status. These were literally indicators of the women's 'good fortune on being married'. The most striking of these were a blood-red dot on the brow called kunkoo which was made using crushed aromatic dried herbs, a mangalsutra made of two or more lines of small black beads strung together with golden pendants, a nose ornament made of pearls called nath, gold bangles called bangdya accompanied by bangles made of dark green glass and toe-rings called jodvi (Deshmukh, 1973). On being widowed, women followed harsh practices of widowhood which included strict tonsure and prohibition from displaying any kind of ornamentation.

Status of women in eighteenth and nineteenth century Maharashtra:

During the eighteenth and nineteenth century in Maharashtra, girls were wedded several years before they reached puberty. They were often married to men who were much older than them. The acceptable marriageable age for boys was 12 to 13 years while girls were married before they turned 10 years of age (Shirgaonkar, 2010). The Peshwa government issued a decree that girls had to be married by the age of nine. Defaulters of this rule faced strict punitive action at the hands of government officials (Kadam, 1988). After their marriage, the girls were practically restricted to their home and all their indoor as well outdoor activities were strictly monitored (Gune, 1953). Young married girls remained at their maternal home until they came of age after which they were solemnly dispatched to their husband's home so that they might begin their conjugal life. The first copulation was greatly celebrated in the form of a sacred ritual called garbha-dan which literally means 'gain a fetus' (Shirgaonkar, 2010).

Art in eighteenth and nineteenth century Maharashtra:

Unlike their Rajput or Mughal contemporaries, the Marathas rulers of the Deccan plateau in India; were refined connoisseurs of art, music, and literature. However, on coming in contact with other regional kingdoms of India like Jaipur, Udaipur and Delhi which were culturally rich, they patronized art, music, architecture and culture (Chavan, 1998 - 1999). Apart from building temples, gardens and other public utilities, members of the Maratha upper classes also commissioned paintings as an expression of their court culture. One such patron of the arts was the fourth Peshwa, Madhavrao. There were several interactions between him and the British representatives of the time. Under their influence, he patronized several artists and painters, one of which was an artist by the name of Mankoji Chitari. Mankoji was a talented artist who was encouraged by Madhavrao to paint pictures on paper. Due to the continuous interactions with the British during Madhavrao's reign, European technological advances like the invention of the camera found their way to Pune in 1765.

After the death of Peshwa Madhavrao, his chief advisor Nana Phadnis continued the patronage of painters and artists by recruiting painters from Jaipur and Jodhpur who were renowned for their painting style. Sir Charles Warre Mallet, the British resident, introduced an artist from Scotland by the name of James Wales at the court of the sixth Peshwa, Sawai Madhavrao. Wales painted portraits of the Peshwa, Nana Phadnis and several other respectable courtiers. His paintings featuring the Peshwa with his advisors are well known. On Mallet's advice, the Peshwa established a painting school at the Peshwas' palace in Pune appointing James Wales as its supervisor. Among the gifted artists that the school produced was Gangaram Tambat who has captured scenes of everyday activities, plants and animals found in and around Pune in the form of sketches and paintings (Bhave, 1935). In this manner, the style of painting which was distinctly European was introduced to the court of the Peshwa (Fordham, 2008). As per the social customs of that period, paintings of men are regularly seen while portraits or paintings depicting women are not seen.

In later years when photography cameras were introduced at the courts of the Maratha rulers, men and women both began to be photographed as portraits. Paintings of women from aristocratic families were also seen in later years (Lawate, 2017). On the basis of this understanding of the painting styles adopted during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this study aims to establish the timeframe of the chosen painting.

What Dress tells you:

Clothing is by nature representative of the social, cultural and economic conditions of a given period. These representations are additionally strengthened with the help of religious rituals thus establishing grounds of social behavior. Clothes are a depiction of one's identity in the social structure and may have many undertones and associations (Harris, 1995). Wilson also asserts that dress is an illustration of a multifaceted relationship between a person's choices and the social and cultural framework they live in (Wilson, 2003). This is particularly true for historical costumes which offer deep insights into the people who wore them and the possible reasons affecting their choices.

Material culture is represented by an array of objects and artefacts which include architecture, art, tools, clothing among others. Clothing and dress codes are widely recognized to be a rich source of information about a particular culture. These are now widely accepted as products of cultural constructs which are associated with intricate linkages of symbolic meanings. Since dress and textiles are prevalent in various aspects of human life, it is being studied by several disciplines of research (Kramer, 2005). Dress is a silent communicator of several inherent values of a particular culture (Tortora & Eubank, 2010). Textiles and dress are now recognized as culturally important artefacts (O'Connor, 2005).

The painting selected for this study has been analyzed on the basis of this understanding of the visual cues that dress silently exhibits. Various aspects of the subject's personality have been studied on the basis of her dress.

Methodology:

The Peshwe Museum, Pune has several artefacts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in its collection. These include weapons, musical instruments, household articles, paintings, photographs, coins, etc. One of the paintings of an unidentified young girl has been chosen for the purpose of this study (Figure 1). The present research attempts to draw some conclusions about her through visual analysis of the painting.



Figure 1: A painting of an Unknown Girl

Courtesy Mr. Uday Singh Peshwe, Peshwe Museum, Pune, India

A combination of semiotics and visual rhetoric with qualitative interpretative analysis has been adopted as the methodology for this study. With reference to comprehensive studies of the socio cultural norms of eighteenth and nineteenth century Maharashtra, the pictorial cues in the selected painting have been analyzed. The analysis has been strengthened with a background study of ornaments and dress of Maharashtra of that period. Thus, the present research aims to bring to light various elements of the painting which yield nonverbal information about the subject.

Visual Rhetoric

When actual experience is not possible; for example, in paintings and dress, visual rhetoric enables one to study the underlying aspects of human practice. Visual rhetorical studies are often carried out on artefacts such as dress or paintings which help to make an informed judgment on the effect of history and perceptions on dress (Reeves-DeArmond, 2012). Both presented elements as well as suggested elements are considered when studying an image. Presented elements comprise of the actual visible features of an image while codes which are beyond the visual elements comprise suggested elements. The presented elements in an artefact are studied to analyze and draw inferences about the ideas, concepts, themes and allusions that may be indirectly projected by the artefact. Thus, visual rhetoric may be used to explain effects of external elements on dress.

This technique has been used to analyze the chosen painting both for its physical elements as well as suggested elements from which conclusions about the unknown girl may be drawn.

Semiotics

According to Kawamura, semiotics is used as an investigative device in the study of costume to appreciate the nonverbal meanings of costume and its elements (Kawamura, 2011). Barthes opines that dress is an indicator of signs, codes and iconography which speaks of deeper nuances about an individual (Barthes, 1990).

The semiotics of all visible elements of the painting is studied and parallels are drawn from corresponding social and cultural norms.

Visual Ethnography

The context of a study determines the manner in which images are studied; especially when a combination of visual methods and ethnography is used. In other words, an image may have completely contradictory meanings with every variation in the perspective of the study. Thus, it is imperative that an ethnographic researcher have a well-rounded perspective of the subject at hand along with a background of social, religious, historical and geographical facets (Riviera, 2010).

Significant historical and socio-cultural aspects of eighteenth and nineteenth century Maharashtra have been studied in comprehensive detail to analyze certain aspects of the painting and to draw deeper meanings from its visual elements.

Results and Discussion

For better understanding of the various aspects of the painting, the observations have been arranged along with deductions that can be made about them.

1. Clothing: The girl is wearing a black colored saree having a broad golden end piece or padar and small motifs known as buttas over the ground. The saree is drawn closely around the neck in such a way as to completely cover the choli or blouse.

Deduction: The saree appears to be a Paithani; a type of saree made of silk or cotton with rich woven borders and end pieces in gold or silver. The Paithani was greatly patronized by the Peshwas and was very popular among women in eighteenth and nineteenth century Maharashtra. Alternatively, the saree could also be an Asavali brocade saree from Gujarat which was also much prized in those times. The rich palav or end piece of the saree indicates its high value. Black is traditionally considered as an inauspicious color and is not worn on any festive occasion with one exception being the festival of Makar Sankrant where women wore black sarees. Thus, this painting could have been made around the time of the sun festival Makar Sankrant. This custom of wearing black only on the occasion of Makar Sankranti is practiced by women of Maharashtra even today.

The festive occasion may have been the reason for the family to commission a painting made of this girl. This, along with the richness of the saree indicates that the unknown girl could have belonged to the upper echelons of the Peshwa clan.

2. Jewelry: The girl wears rich pearl jewelry. The traditional nose ornament from Maharashtra called nath can be seen as the most noticeable piece of jewelry worn by the girl and dominates the center of the frame. The nose ornament is composed of several large pearls and colored gems joined in a crescent shape. At least three pearl necklaces are visible around the girl's neck; the one which is closest around her neck is a necklace made from small frames of gold studded with green colored precious stones alternating with four lines of pearls. This type of necklace is called the chinchapeti. A tanmani style of pearl necklace is seen just below the chinchapeti. This tanmani consists of strings of pearls fitted with a broad pendant studded with emeralds and uncut diamonds. Several more strands of pearls are seen. The ear ornament is made of numerous small sized pearls bunched up in such a way that the ear lobe is completely covered. Such an ornament is called a kap with a dangling inverted bell like ornament called bhokra attached at the lower end.

Deduction: Being an essential part of the saubhagya lakshane or indicators of marital status, the presence of the nath clearly describes that this young girl is married. Besides this, depiction of pearl jewelry directs one to believe that she belongs to a well to do family. The three pearl necklaces with emeralds and uncut diamond pendants indicate her status as member of a well-to-do or even aristocratic family. The Peshwas belonged to the Chitpavan Brahmin sub caste of the Brahmin caste in the Indian caste system and were known to prefer pearl ornaments over gold (Shirgaonkar, 2017; Sathe, 2014). It is also known that members of high class families often ordered pearls of good quality; especially those found in the Gulf of Hormuz. Several types of pearls are recorded during the Peshwa era in the eighteenth and nineteenth century (Shirgaonkar, 2012).

Thus, it may be concluded that the girl belonged to the Chitpavan Brahmin sub caste and probably married into an aristocratic family as indicated by her heavy pearl jewelry.

3. Hairstyle and Hair Ornament: The girl's hair style is not clearly visible in the painting. However, at the top of her head, the edge of a beaded hair ornament called agraphul or seesphul is visible.

Deduction: Such a hair ornament was worn tucked into a bun called khopa made by first plaiting the hair and then rolling it into a tight spiral. The agraphul or seesphul helped to fix the bun on top of the head. The presence of the agraphul or seesphul indicates that the girl has tied her hair in the form of a tight bun called in a khopa. This hairstyle was much preferred by married women belonging to the Chitpavan Brahmin community.

Thus, this particular hairstyle and presence of hair ornaments point towards the possibility that the girl was married and belonged to a well to do family of the Chitpavan Brahmin sub caste.

4. Facial Features: The girl has fair skin and light colored eyes and her cheeks are smooth and rounded. She has been painted frontal view and seems to look away from the artist, the lips are pressed together in an unsmiling visage and there is a small dimple on her chin.

Deduction: Members of the Chitpavan Brahmin sub caste are known for their fair skin and light eyes. Bearing in account features of her dress and jewelry, it may be presumed that the girl belonged to a Chitpawan Brahmin community. The chubbiness of her face suggests that she is under ten or twelve years old and that that she was a member of a high class which could afford to commission a painting of a young female member. The angle of the girl's face turned at a slight profile and her unsmiling face indicates her nervousness and distress at being the subject of a painting. This ties in with the expression of innocence and anxiety displayed on her face. Considering the young marriageable age of girls in that period, the girl appears to be newly married as underlined by her dress and jewelry.

Conclusion

Representation of women of eighteenth and nineteenth century Maharashtra in the form of art is very rare. Women are ordinarily depicted in wall paintings and murals which have a decorative appeal rather than being as detailed as dedicated paintings. Hence, the present painting displayed at the Peshwe Museum in Pune is a crucial artifact which reflects the socio-cultural position of women in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. That the identity of the girl in the painting is unknown adds allure to the mystery and has inspired the present study to analyze the painting for clues about her identity.

With the use of visual rhetoric, semiotics and visual ethnography, several fascinating aspects of the image of the unknown girl like her facial features, dress and expressions have been explored. Since the painting is displayed at the Peshwe museum in Pune, it can be surmised that she belonged to an aristocratic family which was based in the same city. From her distinctive facial features like light colored eyes and fair skin, it can be concluded that the girl belonged to the Chitpavan Brahmin sub caste of the Brahmin caste considered to be the top most in the caste hierarchy in India. Her facial features indicate that the girl was 10 to 12 years of age when the painting was made.

As per social customs prevalent in eighteenth and nineteenth century Maharashtra, she is also married as indicated by her dress, hairstyle and jewelry including her saubhagya lakshane or indicators of marital status. The way her hair is tightly tied into a khopa and the close way in which her saree is drawn around her neck revealing nothing about her choli indicate that women and girls were expected to abide by the strict rules of behavior that society had laid for them. The profusion of pearl jewelry, rich saree and that the painting of a young female member of the family was commissioned indicates that the unknown girl belonged to a wealthy aristocratic family. The artistic style of the painting is distinctly European and thus may be placed in a timeframe between late 18th and early 19th century. She can thus be considered as a representation of girls of a similar age group and social standing belonging to that period. Thus, similar analysis from other paintings from this period using visual rhetoric and semiotics might yield further understanding into the social structure and customs of eighteenth and nineteenth century Maharashtra, Western state of India.

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