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Through the lens of colonial painters: A unique look at Indian and Australian aboriginal women

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Abstract

Women, their image and their lifestyle has been the subject of interest among artists throughout the ages. This paper discusses the perception and portrayal of Indian and Australian aboriginal women in paintings by colonial painters. The study has found that there is a significant difference in how Indian and Australian aboriginal women have been portrayed and perceived. The Indian women have mostly been portrayed in a positive light, whereas aboriginal women were placed as an object derogation and exploitation. Even though the British colonisation exploited the Indian and Australian people, yet they have shown significant fascination towards their women. However, their perception varied by a great extent, which is quite clearly exhibited in the paintings by colonial painters. On one hand, the colonial Indian women were seen mastering a musical instrument, on the other hand the aboriginal women were shown devoid of clothes. Despite of the different perception and portrayal of women in colonial paintings, women in both nations can be clearly seen to be bound within the patriarchal chains. Women were mostly seen as a means of recreation and entertainment for the male population in both colonial India and Australia, but the Indian women were shown in a more respectable light compared to that of Australia.

Keywords: Colonial paintings, gender, women, aboriginal, India, Australia, portrayal of women

Introduction

Women of all ages and races have been the subject of interest of painters throughout the timeline. There are different aspects to women including her lifestyle, her beauty and her charm that captivates male attention. However, the glorification or derogation of women through painting depends on the perception of the painters and the perceptions of society during a specific period. The colonial rule has always been characterized by a period of economic and political exploitation of the natives at the hand of colonial rulers and therefore, there has been a great influence of the British culture on the culture and traditions of the natives as well (Verma, 2019)^[17]. In this context, this paper aims to compare and contrast the paintings of Indian women and Australian aboriginal women by colonial painters, to answer the research question of whether the British colonial perceived Indian women differently from aboriginal women. In lieu of this, the present paper discusses colonial painting depicting the lifestyles as well as the beauty of Indian and aboriginal women and demonstrate the similarities and differences between them. Through critical analysis, this paper will establish that Indian women and their beauty enjoyed a more respectable place in the eyes of white men while the beauties of aboriginals were only the subject of sexual exploitation.

Overview of Depiction of Indian Women and Australian Aboriginal Women in British Colonial Paintings

The period of colonialism in India was characterized by the economic and political exploitation of Indians at the hand of colonial rulers. However, the influence of colonialism in India goes beyond this exploitation so much so that Indian underwent significant cultural changes during British Colonial Period. The transformation in the Indian culture brought through colonialism brought Indian art closer to the aesthetic and sensibilities of the West, and one of the most popular subjects of these arts were women. The infusion of British culture with that of Indian traditions led to the emergence of novel representations of Indian women (Verma, 2019)^[17]. The origin of the company paintings, in this respect, can be traced back to the ethnographic works of the Europeans through the hands of authors who devoted themselves to the different aspects of Indian lives and described the same with illustrations.

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One such significant work is 'People of India' which contains 468 paintings of inhabitants of India (Kamińska-Jones, 2017)^[9].

Historian Robert Orme (1753)^[14], had once stated that "nature seems to have showered beauty on the fairer sex throughout Indostan with a more lavish hand than on most other countries". The portrayal of this beauty of Indian women can be attributed to the period of colonialism in India as before the 18th century, before the arrival of British artists, there was hardly any visual record of India and its beauty (Nevile, 2018)^[12]. With the emergence of Colonialism in India, the ethnographic depiction of Indians through painting increased significantly and Indian women gained more and more exposure through paintings that depicted their beauty and daily lives (Verma, 2019)^[17].

However, the story was the exact opposite in colonial Australia. In contrast to colonial Indian painting which depicted the rich culture of India and its women, colonial Australian paintings were characterized by a significant lack of depiction of aboriginals in general, not just aboriginal women. There was almost no presence of indigenous people in the colonial paintings in Australia during the mid-19th century which asserted the myth of terra nullius, i.e., Australia was uninhabited and unoccupied before the arrival of British colonials. Unlike colonial artists in India, colonial artists in Australia were reluctant to portray the original inhabitants of Australia into the Australian landscape, to avoid the complicated issues of resistance, guilt and dispossession. In this respect, Robert Dowling and George French Angas were some of the few artists that painted a true picture of the Australian aboriginals and even then the representation of aboriginal women in the paintings was lacking (Clegg & Gilchrist, 2014)^[3].

Furthermore, in colonial India, Indian painters were also respected and admired along with their work. Women painted by Indian artists were equally desired among the company paintings and one of the most prominent painters that captured the essence of the beauty of Indian women was Raja Ravi Varm (Fig 1; Culture India, 2021)^[6]. On the other hand, in colonial Australia, aboriginal art never gained attention in mainstream colonial paintings and the depiction of aboriginal women remained limited to the perception of white men (Woodburn, 2017)^[20].



Fig 1: Raja Ravi Varma, A Lady Playing Swarbat
Source: Culture India, 2021^[6]

Indian and Australian Aboriginal Women in their Daily Lives

The paintings that emerged in Indian during British colonial rule is often referred to as 'Company Paintings' whose clientele varied from British clients to Indian patrons like aristocrats and princes. Therefore the company paintings involved a synthesis of the Indian and British aesthetic tastes and even a large number of Indian artists were commissioned for these paintings (Archer, 1979)^[2]. The subject of the paintings with women in them also varied to a great extent and included the day to day lives of women, women in marketplaces, streets, river banks and temples (fig 3). The representation of women in the paintings included the types of women that Britishers encountered in their day to day lives. During the early periods of British colonialism in India, the Britishers had gradually adopted the lifestyles of that of Indian nobles who had multiple wives and therefore they often dressed as Indian aristocrats, and invited Indian dancing girls into their mansions (fig 2). These were the encounters that were represented heavily in the painting depicting Indian women (De Almeida & Gilpin, 2005)^[8].

Aboriginal art in Australia before the colonial settlement was abundant; however, there was very little or non-existent contact between the colonial artists and aboriginal art in Australia during the 19th century. In fact, unlike the colonial Indian paintings, colonial Australian paintings were heavily influenced by the hostile physical environments in Australia brought in by the colonial settlers. Moreover, the commissioning of paintings in Australia was also challenging for colonial artists in Australia as the only clients they had were rich colonial settlers who primarily commissioned for the paintings of their wives and daughters and therefore the demand for paintings of Aboriginal women was almost non-existent. Despite that, few colonial artists like George French Angas successfully managed to portray Aboriginal women and their daily lives even though in a limited manner (Fig 3). However, the daily lives of Indian women and aboriginal women as depicted in colonial paintings were poles apart and these differences in the lifestyles can be emphasized through comparison of some paintings (Visual Arts Cork, 2021).



Fig 2: Dancing Girls, Delhi Book Commissioned by Thomas Metcalfe
Source: Verma, 2019^[17]



Fig 3: Women at the Market
Source: Victoria and Albert Museum, 2021 ^[18]



Fig 7: Robert Dowling, Group of natives of Tasmania
Source: Alamy, 2021 ^[1]



Fig 4: Group of Courtesans, Northern India, 19th Century
Source: Das, 2020 ^[7]

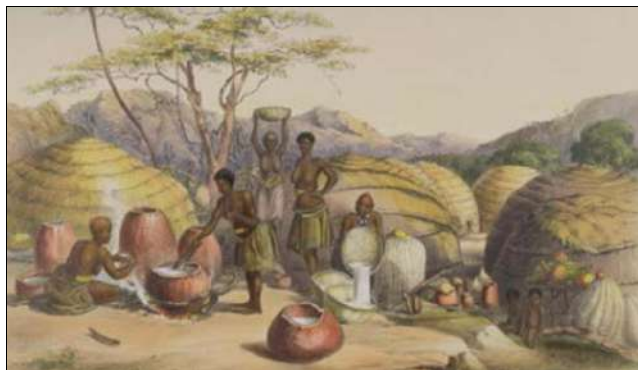


Fig 5: Gudu's Kraal at the Tugala, Women making Beer, plate 26
from 'The Kafirs Illustrated', 1849 (litho) ^[11]
Source: My Art Prints, 2021 ^[11]



Fig 6: George French Angas, Two of King Panda's dancing girls
Source: Philographikon, 2021 ^[15]

These paintings (Fig2, Fig 3, Fig 4, Fig 5, Fig 6, Fig 7) depict the differences in lifestyles of Indian and Aboriginal women. The paintings suggest the while Indian women enjoyed a more extravagant lifestyle surrounded by riches and more amenities, the lives of Australian aboriginal women were tainted with scarce resources. The aboriginal women were subjected to a marginalized status since the beginning of the arrival of colonial settlers. However, the class difference was much more highlighted among Indian women as compared to the aboriginal women. The Australian Aboriginal women, despite having different roles within the community enjoyed similar lifestyles (Fig 5, Fig 6, Fig 7), whereas the lifestyles of Indian women varied to a great extent based on their status and roles. The women in India, as depicted by colonial paintings, who enjoyed the company of upper classmen enjoyed a more lavish life surrounded with riches, colorful attires and jewellery and also sported a fairer skin. On the other hand, the working class Indian women were depicted as more plain with darker skins which were a reflection of the negative influence of hardships on beauty (Fig 2, Fig 3, Fig 4).

However, despite the different lifestyles enjoyed by the Indian and Aboriginal women, two common themes are reflected through the paintings. The first being that both Indian women and Aboriginal women were somewhat independent in the sense that they actively participated in the public through activities like making beer or being vendors in the market (Fig 3, Fig 5). The second common theme that emerged in the depiction of Indians and aboriginals in colonial paintings is their status in society as means of recreation for men. The paintings demonstrate that despite the difference in resources and amenities, they were bound within the barriers of patriarchy and were frequently used as resources of men's pleasure, especially through dancing. Therefore paintings depicting dancing girls were one of the most common subjects of the colonial painters both in India and in Australia (Fig 2, Fig 4, Fig 6).

Celebration of Beauty?

Despite the hostile environment created by the British colonials and exploitation committed by them, the beauty of women always captured their interest be it in India or Australia. However, the perception of beauty varied among the colonials between Indian and Aboriginal women. In terms of appraisal of the beauty of Indian women through colonial paintings, the focus was largely on their charm, costumes, manners, jewels and customs; whereas with aboriginal women, the perception of beauty was limited to the physical attributes and depictions of their nudity (Nevile, 2018) ^[12].



Fig 8: Tom Roberts, Portrait of an Aboriginal Woman
Source: Ocean's Bridge, 2021 ^[13]



Fig 9: Augustus Earle's A Women of New South Wales
Source: Maymuru, 2016 ^[10]



Fig 10: Van Smith, Lady of Amritsar
Source: Nevile, 2018 ^[12]



Fig 11: William Hodges, A Hindustani Woman
Source: Nevile, 2018 ^[12]

The colonial painters in India could not be immune to the feminine charms of Indian women. According to the colonial painter, the charm and unshackles, grace that cramped figures of Indian women depicted were incomparable and the English women could not even venture into such territory of immense beauty. The deep bronze tint was highlighted again and again in the paintings of Indian women suggesting an attraction towards the Indian skin tone. Thus the Indian women were praised for their charms, complexion, grace, figure and even dark eyes in the painting and were depicted as one of the finest races of the world (Urquhart, 1925) ^[16]. Indian women through painting were also admired for their innate sense of womanliness and modesty (Cooper, 1915) ^[5] (Fig 10, Fig 11). Similarly, the young aboriginal women in Australia also attracted the newcomer colonial men; however, this attraction was mostly restricted to physicality that arose from their misconception that the 'native belle' were sexually accommodating and libidinous. Similar to the Indian women, the aboriginal women were also somewhat praised for the bronze tint of the skin through the painting. However, unlike Indian women, the royal attires, jewellery or modestly was never the subject of a painting of aboriginal women, and the celebration of the beauty of aboriginal women stayed limited to nudity (Maymuru, 2016; fig 9) ^[10]. The age of Australian aboriginal women also emerged as a major factor in the portrayal of beauty in the colonial paintings which was not so prominent in the paintings of Indian women. Colonial painters who encountered young as well as old Indian women out in the open, in the countryside as well as royal courts formed fascinating opinions of their beauty. Even among the older Indian women, their attires and aristocracy were greatly celebrated by the colonial painters (Nevile, 2018) ^[12]. However, aboriginal women did not enjoy the same levels of respect for their beauty. The colonial paintings depicted that the attraction of settlers towards aboriginal women was guided by lust as they hoped to catch the glimpse of the native belles who were perceived to be free from the scruples of European sexual desires. This perception, highlighted through the nude paintings of the aboriginal women portrayed their exceeding vulnerability to sexual violence at the hands of European settlers. On the other hand, the aboriginal women who were older were

considered to be unworthy of being salvaged by white men and therefore their portrayal in colonial paintings are mostly hag-like and hideous. These older aboriginal women were depicted as gorgon and repulsive and their nudity was indifferent to the gazes of white men (Fig 8; Conon, 2016) [4].

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that Indian women and Aboriginal women were treated differently in paintings during the colonial rule. Even though colonial paintings depict that patriarchy was highly prevalent in colonial India as well as colonial Australia that made their women a means of recreation for men, who were often subjected to the roles of entertaining men through dancing; Indian women were treated more respectably as compared to aboriginal women. Indian women were admired for their beauty, charm, grace, jewels, modestly and femininity while the aboriginal women were depicted as mere objects of sexual desires. The aboriginal women who were not considered attractive by white men were painted as hideous creatures.

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