

TIED IN TRADITION: THE “BAPUBOMMA” AND HER IDEALISATION

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Abstract-The “BapuBomma” (Bapu’s dolls/ Bapu’s drawings) is a familiar term in Telugu language, and it refers to the ideal Telugu woman, as picturised by SattirajuLakshminarayana (1933-2014), commonly known as ‘Bapu’, through his artwork. Bapu was a painter, cartoonist, and filmmaker and in all three mediums he has constructed the image of the Telugu maiden as sensuous and domestic. There has been research done in the field of the Telugu literary tradition, but contemporary art remains unexplored, and there is no study of Bapu’s work in these three mediums, especially his portrayals of women. This paper will be looking exclusively at the artwork considered the traditional “BapuBommās”. Through a semiotic analysis, the paper will study the symbols embedded within the paintings and place them in the context of Telugu society to study their nature and implications. Being part of the mainstream, his work has managed to do much more than express the prevailing artistic tradition of his times- it creates and reflects society directly. The paper will also look at how this image has percolated into another form of art- film, in order to substantiate this argument. In a postcolonial and increasingly westernised context, there is a strong urge to retain a certain identity that is rooted in what is understood as rural and traditional, and this urge is depicted extensively in Bapu’s work.

Keywords-Bapu, Telugu, art, cultural identity, femininity, performativity, popular culture, commercial art

In popular culture, there are no mere works of art; there are phenomena, spectacles, trends, and entire narratives that depend on much more than just the artist. The “BapuBomma”, which refers to drawings of women by SattirajuLakshminarayana (1933-2014), commonly known as Bapu, is one such phenomenon that shaped and influenced its audience. His drawings of women are sensuous, with dramatic curves at the end of sharp lines. The subjects will be found doing mundane chores, like knitting garlands and getting ready, all domestic in nature. What the constant and multi-levelled bombardment of this image (through paintings, cartoons, and film) has done is reinforced a certain notion of femininity as ideal. This paper will explore how this came to be as a result of an anxiety about urbanisation and westernisation, and what are the reasons behind the transformation of Bapu’s art into a spectacle, by analysing it as visual culture, and understanding the implications of its integration into Telugu culture.

Bapu was a prominent artist, cartoonist, and filmmaker, and became a part of mainstream Telugu media and culture. His cartoons were, and still are, published by *Swati*, the largest circulated Telugu weekly magazine, in all their editions. *Swati*’s readership is women, mostly urban, at least in its earlier days. His cartoons thus revolved around the problems of the urban Telugu woman. What is interesting is how these problems have been addressed. To begin with, the women are housewives often portrayed only within the domestic space, and their characterisation is restricted to either serving the husband, and complaining about having to do so. This creates a rather flat and two-dimensional portrayal of women. Bapu’s contemporaries mostly stuck to similar tropes, though there was RagatiPandari (1965-2015), whose portrayal is more rounded, but the fact remains that none were as successful as Bapu, who had the advantage of broadcasting his images across three mediums.

This paper focuses exclusively on one artist’s work because it is unprecedented and unparalleled in terms of reception and popularity among its audience. There has been no academic engagement with Bapu’s art and the researcher feels that it is important to fill this gap. When looked at under the lens of cultural studies as an aspect of visual culture, it is revealing of how Telugu society understands and engages with notions of femininity and domesticity, and how a certain ideal is created. Visual elements become instrumental to this process, because as Nicholas Mirzoeff puts it, “[visual culture] is not just a part of your everyday life, it is your everyday life” (3).

The ideas prescribed within the seminal works of Stuart Hall, Nicholas Mirzoeff, and Guy Debord have been applied in this paper. Hall’s *Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms* provides an understanding of the evolution of cultural studies as a discipline and its basic tenets. Hall urges us to move away from understanding culture or the cultural as merely reflective (Hall 63). This concept is applied and taken forward by Mirzoeff in his essay *Visual Culture*, wherein he talks about the vastness of the visual in our world, and how studying the visual elements we are surrounded by creates post disciplinary work that takes cultural studies forward (Mirzoeff 10). Debord, an older Marxist theorist has ideas that are more straight in their connections between society and art, when compared to the fluid, intersectional opinions of thinkers like Hall and Mirzoeff. His work, *The Society of the Spectacle*, treats commodities (like mainstream art), as direct consequences and perpetrators of a certain culture. He says, “the spectacle presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as a means of unification.” (Debord 10).

Alongside these texts, ideas from Tapati Guha-Takarta’s *Monuments, Objects, Histories* have also been applied. She emphasises the importance of dismantling the binary between high and popular culture, and this is integral to this paper because it analyses a popular culture phenomenon through a lens that does more than look at it from a Marxist perspective as a commodity.

The term “BapuBomma” has a two-fold meaning. “Bomma” means a drawing and it also means a doll in Telugu. Thus, the “BapuBomma” becomes a drawing of a doll-faced girl or woman, whose porcelain beauty has come to become the ideal. The politics that have created this image are complex, but this paper attempts to understand and analyse some of them. At this juncture the researcher would like to state that none of the elements that contribute to such a creation can be understood in isolation. Each is intersectional in nature, and in this instance, it is mainly the intersection of the two broad discourses of gender and class

relationships, as understood in the Indian postcolonial context. More specifically, in the Telugu context during the time that Bapu's paintings entered the mainstream, which is the 1970s-80s.

The emergence and consolidation of what came to be understood as Telugu culture came about only post-independence, gaining traction during the movement for a separate Telugu state. Bapu's works came along two decades after Andhra Pradesh was established in 1952. By the 1970s, the state was well-established and rapidly growing in terms of urbanisation and industrialisation. The primarily agrarian state now had Hyderabad emerging as a bustling city, and numerous towns came up simultaneously. A considerable portion of the population migrated to these urban spaces. The urban is seldom understood without the connotation of modernity, and this case was no exception.

Colonialism created a binary wherein the West is modern, and the Orient is ancient and monolithic. In the case of India, this understanding was reinforced during the struggle for independence and later, in the realm of art. Tagore's *Bharat Mata* and Ravi Varma's portraits are two instances wherein the native and the woman are both idealised in opposition to change. This arose out of an anxiety about industrialisation and westernisation and is a straightforward example of how identity politics play out in the arts in a postcolonial context. What happened in Andhra Pradesh several decades later with the "BapuBomma" was born out of the same anxiety. The woman becomes a site where these problems are addressed and countered, and this happens through a certain portrayal.

The women in Bapu's paintings are almost always performing domestic tasks. The only 'modern' activity they appear to do is read, but even that occurs within a domestic space without any indication of applying that reading outside that space. The background never indicates an urban or rural space in particular, which is a method of saying that the woman is expected to behave in the same manner even if she is in an urban setting. Given below (fig.1) is an example of the same.



Fig.1.BapuBomma 05

As Debord puts it, "As long as necessity is socially dreamed, dreaming will remain a social necessity" (Debord 14). Here, the artwork becomes the spectacle that is dreamt about as a necessity, which then ensured that this image gained popularity, and was reimagined by Bapu and his audience for several years to come.

As discussed already, culture is not reflective and there is never a cause-and-effect relationship between society and cultural products such as art. There is a symbiotic bond wherein each reinforces the other. In the case of commodity as spectacle, where paintings become a commodity, there emerges an unquestionable authority of the spectacle as 'right' or 'true'. "What appears is good; what is good appears", and this is passively accepted by the audience (Debord 12).

From a gender-sensitive perspective, much can be said about the "BapuBomma". It is definitely pictured for the male spectator, and it gives him a rather specific image of the ideal woman—sensual, but without agency. Throughout the history of art in the subcontinent, female sensuality is often understood in relation to the male gaze, but also in relation to a certain kind of independence, especially when the female is drawn without a male figure in the frame. In the case of Bapu's women, however, this sensuality is portrayed alongside domesticity. The ideal Telugu woman is as sensuous as she is docile. The notion of feminine beauty then becomes about leashing in this sensuality, essentially winning a conquest.

This is not a criticism of Bapu's artistic style and decision to depict women as sensuous creatures. The paper is concerned not with the stylistic aspects but with how such a depiction also becomes bound by certain rigid ideals regarding how a Telugu girl or woman must be understood. For example, the complexion of his subjects is quite fair, which is not the average complexion of a person from the region. The glorification of a fairer complexion is one way in which this 'ideal' form cannot be mimicked by many Telugu women or girls. It is a popular myth in the region that Brahmin or upper-caste people tend to be fairer. Similarly, their attire is either saree or a "langa-woni" (half-saree), and while this is quite popular, the depiction of these clothes indicates a middle-class or upper middle-class background to the subjects. In this manner, the paintings not only portray a certain femininity, they also do so while placing her at a certain position in the social hierarchy in terms of caste and class relations.

Thus, the image becomes an intersectional piece of culture; it, and more specifically the female subject, is the site where politics are dealt with in overt and covert ways. The image is also mass-produced and circulated across the state (now two states, Andhra and Telangana). As Guha-Thakurta argues in the introduction to her book *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, institutional practices "cannot be explained away in terms of a simple binary of scholarly versus popular or academic versus political

knowledges,” (Guha-Thakurta xix). It is not sufficient to simply designate the position of popular culture and look at the first-level meaning that is assumed to be extracted by the mass audience. Within the popular lie the subtleties of culture, which are revealing of the social conditions of the time. “Visual culture is a necessarily historical subject, based on the recognition that the visual image is not stable but changes its relationship to exterior reality at particular moments of modernity,” (Mirzoeff 7). It is necessary to understand the dynamism of this relationship before assigning any meaning to the images.

Insofar, the paper has only discussed the paintings by Bapu. The artist was also, if not more, popular for his cartoons and movies. Bapu’s cartoons appeared in the Telugu weekly *Swati*. Here the “BapuBomma” does not appear as frequently. She is in fact replaced by other imaginations of the Telugu wife, young and docile, or old and loud. The latter is portrayed in a mocking light, while the former becomes the norm. As mentioned already, the magazine’s readership was primarily women who were in the cities and towns, and the cartoons created a space that attempted to define what a housewife should be like. Debord’s concepts can be seen at play more directly here, where the dream is an imagined necessity, and the repetition of this image becomes a necessary (Debord 14). “Whenthe real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings,” (Debord 13), and thus the cartoons gained status as funny and *relatable*.

The movies made by Bapu become a way for him to pour life into his paintings. They have a female lead with a significant role, which seems empowering, but they are still inevitably bound by the man, or the domestic space. *Mr. Pellam* (1993) is the story of a middle-class woman whose husband becomes unemployed, so she sets out and gets herself a job, becoming the sole breadwinner. The entire movie is about his ego and pride getting hurt in this process, and her attempts at quelling it by undermining herself in front of him. Another movie, *Radhagopalam* (2005) is the story of a couple who are both lawyers, and the wife defends her past sexual assaulter in another case where he is wrongfully convicted. The husband becomes insecure, and the marriage unravels, and just as she leaves the house, she realises she is pregnant and they instantly get back together. Both the female protagonists are essentially leashed in by the husband, taking the meaning embedded in Bapu’s paintings a step further.

In this manner, Bapu’s work, through several mediums, has managed to propagate and consequently prescribe a certain notion of femininity within the domestic space. Looking through the lens of cultural studies, one knows that the focus of study are the breaks, where there exists a possibility for subversion. “Breaks are where old lines of thought are disrupted” (Hall 57), and in the context of Bapu’s art and the Telugu audience, we are at a break, at a change in the problematic. No other artist has emerged as a worthy successor or become an icon equally large as Bapu. The changes in a problematic transform the nature of the questions asked, and at this juncture, the questions of what is quintessentially Telugu in identity need to be replaced by questions of how certain representations claim to embody this quintessence.

There are several contemporary Telugu artists and painters who are coming up with different portrayals of women. Some of these artists are Laxman Aelay, Bairu Raghuram, and Sunder Sukka. However, they remain beyond the spotlight of the mainstream, and do not do much to replace or redefine the image Bapu has left behind. One artist who is gaining popularity, and questions the portrayal of identity, especially of women in Indian art, is Pushpamala. She is a contemporary visual artist who recreates famous paintings, ethnographic studies, photographs from colonial and newly independent India, and in that process deconstructs them. To directly leap from Bapu’s portrayal to a radically different representation would not be organic and hence will be cast aside by the population, but as Hall states, there is space for the questions that are addressed to change. Art that deals with the same subjects can come about, and deal with them differently, like Pushpamala’s work.

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