

Mother and Child in Art: A Retrospect

Ranjan Kumar Auddy

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sabang Sajanikanta Mahavidyalaya.

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ABSTRACT

Representation of mother and child in art and sculpture is a popular theme in modern art and sculpture. The theme is present in diverse artworks which decorate our homes and offices. There is a huge national as well as international market for such artworks. Today it is worthwhile to look back to its evolution since ancient times. This paper offers a glimpse of the representations of the bond between mother and child in fine art and sculpture in Western and Indian art: how it evolved from religious ethos to emerge in modern times as an aspect of humanism. With this aim the paper critically analyzes a few specimen of Indian and western artwork.

Keywords: *ancient, medieval, theotokos, renaissance*

Artistic visual representation of mother and child are an important part of home décor today. Paintings, sculptures, murals, glass paintings etc of mother and child or of mother Parvati and Lord Ganesha are an inevitable part of many Indian household today and they have an increasing demand in the global market as well. Today there are artists who specialize on the particular theme. One may check the curio shops in town or the display of mother and child sculptures in websites such as www.ba-bamail.com, www.novica.com, www.pinterest.com etc. Amid a labyrinth of identities – political, provincial, religious, ethnic, and ideological – which keeps the human being segregated in the twenty-first century; motherhood stands out as a universal and global theme which readily appeals to all of us cutting across differences of nationalities and isms. At the same time it is sure to be appreciated. Hence its growing popularity and demand does not surprise us. But it is also worthwhile to retrospect the evolution of this theme in fine arts since ancient times in the west and the east. This paper attempts to give a glimpse of this evolution.

In ancient Egypt (see figure 1), Isis and her son Horus was present in artworks as symbolical representations of motherhood. Some of these ancient sculptures have a remarkable modern appeal; the naked child (Horus) and the nude or semi-nude Isis in these artworks does not represent divinity but rather celebrate motherhood.



Figure 1. Isis and Horus, 7th century B.C.

In medieval Europe, the concept of mother of God dominated representations of Mother Mary and Lord Jesus; it is evident in the invention of a classical word ‘theotokos’ which in Greek, means ‘God-Bearer’ (Encyclopaedia Britannica); it is, according to encyclopaedia Britannica, ‘the designation of Mother Mary as mother of God’. Simultaneously, it is also evident in the medieval paintings in the churches of Eastern

Europe, where there is an inevitable halo around mother and son; nudity is absolutely deleted and substituted by heavy formal dress in both mother and child (see figure 2 and 3).



Figure 2. Gelati Monastery Georgia, 12 th Century



Figure 3. Salus Pouli Romani, Rome, 5th or 6th century.

Medieval paintings are not mimetic representations of nature and human life but symbolic representations of the values of the church. But Italian renaissance art, such as those of Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael and Botticelli, holds up the mirror to nature.

According to Ioli Kalavrezou (1990), 'With the demise of Iconoclasm [sic], theologians and artists took a fresh look at the Virgin and began to develop the human and maternal side of her personality'. Botticelli's renowned work, *Madonna of the Book*, uniquely puts the focus on the mother with the child looking at the mother's face while the mother is deeply lost in her thoughts, understandably pondering on the content of the book she is reading. From the merely symbolic representations of medieval art, Mary emerges in Botticelli's work as a feeling and thinking lively personality, who participates in the humanistic culture of leisurely reading. Botticelli not only explores the 'human and the maternal side of her personality' but explores the coexistence of the maternal and the inquisitive faculties in Mary. The veil over Mother Mary's head and the curious headgear of Jesus are vaguely reminiscent of the medieval halo. But more unlike medieval traditions is the prominent presence of natural beauty in the background: the bouquet of rose, the blue sky and the landscape are present although in fragments.



Figure 4. *Madonna of the Book*, Botticelli

Raphael, who lost his mother when he was barely eight years old, is best known for his 'Madonnas'. In his treatment of the theme, the halo and the regal dress is entirely done away with and is replaced by a natural representation of life and motherhood which surpasses all the previous artworks on this theme in its beauty and simplicity:

In the famous Madonna della Seggiola (see figure 5), the boy with the Cross notwithstanding, the natural posture, the realism in the costume, the diversity of colours and the design of the shawl and the headscarf, all speak volumes about the onset of the modern age in European history. The painting is a celebration of the bond of mother and child, of the birth of new life and of the pride in a mother who brings forth new life on this earth. In subsequent times the theme has been the subject for great artists like Monet, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Tissot, William Adolphe Bougureau, only to name a few (see www.1st-art-gallery.com)



Figure 5. *Mario Della Seggiola, Raphael*

In Indian art, the depiction of Lord Ganesha and Mother Parvati is not common until the late nineteenth century. However, I have come across a *surasundari* with a child in Indian Museum in Kolkata. *Surasundari* or celestial beauty is a creation of artists who flourished under the Chandella dynasty in present Odisha and Madhya Pradesh (see figure 6).



Figure 6. *Ganesha and Parvati. Abanindranath Tagore*

It is quite well-known that in India, a high quality of artistic works carved on temples emerged on the subject of the female body as the form of beauty and lyricism. Surasundaris and yakshinis are more prominently present than goddesses on the exterior of Indian temples. In the above sculpture on the left (see figure 6), the beauty of the feminine posture and form spellbound the viewer. Hence, I think that the popularity of Lord Ganesha and mother Parvati was perhaps an influence of the west, particularly of the Madonnas of Raphael and Botticelli and several other renaissance painters.

In the words of Kishore Singh (2014), 'Indian art's tryst with modernism occurred in Bengal where visiting colonial artists brought with them the freshness and excitement of the realistic way of painting on a large scale, using the more glamorous medium of oil and canvas'. Abanindranath Tagore's subject of painting Ganesha and Parvati (see figure 7) is a case in point as it does seem to be an Indian adaptation of the theme of Madonna. However, Abanindranath's innovative wash-canvas sets him apart from the glossy western canvas. Moreover, Ganesha is not calm and quiet like the Jesuses of the western paintings but in a playful mood. The natural background is also present, although it seems to be decidedly non-western. Moreover, Tagore has also humanized the figure of Mother Parvati as she does not look like the traditional Hindu goddess; rather her dress has an impact of Islamic culture.



Figure 7. Surasundari

Jamini Roy has brought folk technique and immensely popularized the theme of Goddess Durga and Ganesha in modern Indian art in the twentieth century.

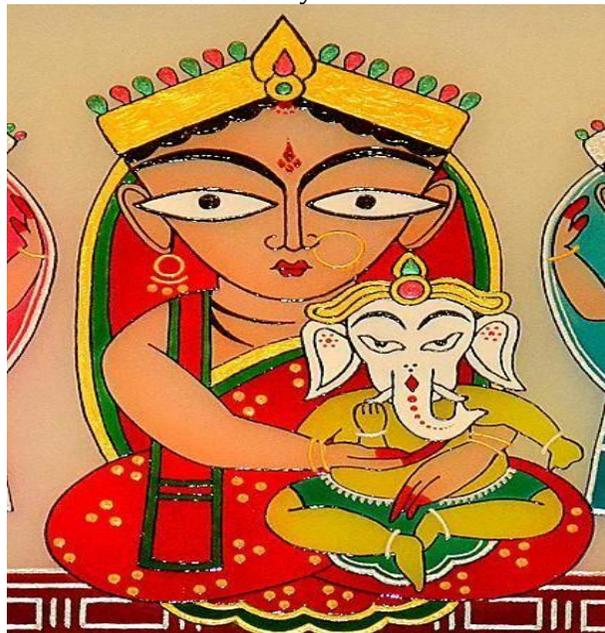


Figure 8. Lord Ganesha and Mother Durga, Jamini Roy

Like Raphael's paintings both mother and son are in complete harmony (see figure 8), which is manifested in posture. However, in the paintings on Krishna and Yashoda, there are distinct identities of the son and mother depicted in painting. In the painting where Lord Krishna wants more of the butter from her mother (see figure 9), mother and child face each other, in posture of negotiation rather than absolute harmony. This is a marvellous development on the theme, which presents the bond of mother and child from a new perspective.

Hence modern artists working on the theme of mother and child has a rich heritage to fall back upon

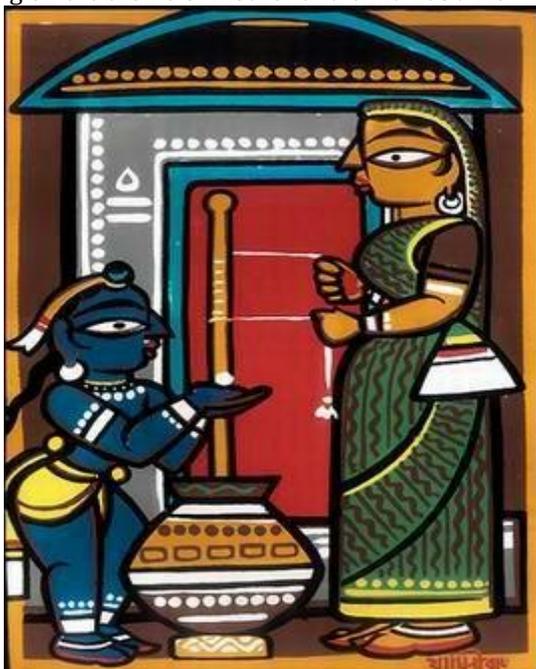


Figure 9. Lord Krishna and Mother Yashoda, Jamini Roy.

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