

# GENDER, REPRESENTATION AND PHOTOGRAPHY

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*A review essay on gendered representations of the Human subject in Art and Photography in exhibitions of work by Lionel Wendt and Nihal Fernando.*

The 1994 exhibition of Colonial prints and wild life by Nihal Fernando (Studio Times) was held at the Lionel Wendt gallery from the 10th to the 14th of August. Fernando exhibited photographs of paintings by Colonial printers of the British period. The Lionel Wendt Photographs were exhibited by the Lionel Wendt Memorial Fund (sponsored by Deutsche Bank) at the same gallery from the 27th to 31st of August the same year. It celebrated Wendt's 50th death anniversary and exhibited 100 original photographs.

This year the exhibitions of excellent work by two photographers Lionel Wendt and Nihal Fernando have brought under scrutiny the representation of the human subject in an artistic medium. Fernando's photographic depiction of early prints reveals the colonial perception of the subject people whereas Wendt concentrates on the aesthetics of the physical form.

The work selected for exhibition presents a refreshing departure from the run of the mill photographic exhibit by exploring the territories of the formal aesthetic medium. While Nihal Fernando's objective was to expose and record the work of nineteenth century colonial painters, the Wendt exhibit revealed the artist's own individual perceptions. Having acknowledged the unique style of aesthetic and interesting techniques developed in these works I would like to analyse the social dimensions of these representations.

My interest in the exhibits is to understand the individualized human subject from the perspective of gender relations and to formulate some criteria on which to base a reading of such representations. The examples selected will be studied through the conventions of the visual medium explored in art and photography. My intention is to expose the criteria that generated these same conventions and to illustrate the efforts made by individual artists to address conventional limitations. Before examining the constructs that influence these exhibits, let us understand the visual vocabulary of our own generation in analytical terms. Let us consider the most popular manifestation of photographic images through the cinematic medium.

The stereotypical male or female roles as presented by Hollywood depend more on the actor's ability to conform to popular notions of gender than on the measure of acting talent. Gendered representations require the fulfilment of the expected quota of eroticism that feeds the personal fantasies of the viewer. Actors of some stature like Anthony Hopkins (*Remains of the Day*) actively resist such stereo typing and prefer to avoid 'scenes in bed' thus displaying his confidence in his own personality and acting talent. The ability of an actor or an actress is best realized

in roles that challenge such stereotypes with a variety and ingenuity which is not easily replicable. In this respect Robin Williams who has taken roles ranging from a homeless person (*Fisher King*) to a male playing a female nanny (*Mrs. Doubtfire*) has developed a versatility that Sylvester Stallone, the macho male stereotype (*Rambo*), can never hope to equal.

The individual position is however more available to the actor rather than the actress. The perception of the latter is often clouded by our own evaluation of her physical attributes and by the pressure on producers to satisfy a patriarchal audience. Thus a large proportion of today's popular cinematic productions (see local cinema fare- *Caged Beauties*, *Jungle Heat*, *Cave Girl*) are more likely to cater to a chauvinistic audience. Among actresses Whoopi Goldberg is an example of an individual and entertaining style (*Ghost*, *Color Purple*) in comparison with Julia Roberts (*Pretty Woman*) whose popular physical attributes disguise her failure as an actress. Individuality of style in a woman devoid of 'physical beauty' is however rarely promoted through Hollywood and seems in most cases less acceptable.

This condition is exacerbated in the case of female roles with the cinematic deployment of body parts of several other actresses which appear on screen as if they belong to the same person. It reduces the reliance on individuality and sustains the myth of the ideal woman. But most surprising is the ability of the conservative audience to witness the same actress/actor nude with any number of men/women and never question the moral promiscuity of a social idol. Ironically many of these movies present strong moral themes using what on their own terms might be conceived of as immoral processes. It seems acceptable because the actor/actress for that moment loses his/her original identity and embraces the identity of the narrative thus becoming in a sense anonymous. Visual representation depends for its success on one overriding factor- the political naivete of its audience.

Contemporary perceptions of gender often confine individuals to socially manipulated roles even where the separation of male and female has become redundant. Such perceptions illustrate previously established relations of power that continue obvious inequities so as to maintain an advantageous social position. The visual media is perhaps the most powerful medium through which such perceptions are disseminated. It maintains accessibility at a popular level by developing a predictable vocabulary of familiar signs that reiterate established perceptions of gender. Unlike the images of previously developed art forms those represented by the cinematic medium are directly accessible to a vast undefined audience. However all works of art whether oil painting or T.V. advertisement carry with them the impediments of a previous vocabulary of signs that feed the myths of our daily perceptions. It is only by scrutinizing the contents of this visual baggage that we may unravel these myths and exercise the visual medium's true liberative potential.

The two exhibits showing nineteenth and early twentieth century representations of the same subject give us an opportunity to compare attitudes of the artists towards the Ceylonese people. Similarly it allows us to study the changing perceptions of the individual subject and to understand the social representations of gender. Both exhibits are strongly influenced by the formal technique and humanist values of European art and need to be examined in the context of European representations of gender. Similarly within the European tradition of art we find the patriarchal imagery that pervades both advertising and the cinematic media and conditions contemporary perceptions of gender.

In post-Renaissance European painting the dichotomy between the individual and the anonymous subject is seen as illustrative of the conditions of being nude and being naked. In Berger's analysis, a naked body has to be seen as an object (surveyed) in order to become a nude. In European oil painting of this period, the protagonist is the male spectator of the female nude. Sexual imagery is frontal because the sexual protagonist is the spectator - owner looking at the painting. The gaze of the woman is directed out of the painting towards the spectator signifying both her accessibility and her submission to his demands. Although the intimate representation of naked persons were in keeping with the European spirit of artistic individualism, these values did not extend to an examination of the subject's position.

Typically, a nude study would depict not a wife but a mistress. Not a recognizable woman of social standing but an anonymous illegitimate subject. The artistic representations of the submissive woman contrasted sharply with those of the male subject which depicted the embodiment of power. Artists like Durer for example believed that the ideal nude ought to be constructed by combining the most perfect features of different women. He believed that the result would glorify Man. But not unlike today's cinematic media it remained indifferent to the individuality or the identity of the woman. In European art, the exceptions to the established mores of gender perception is visible in a few of the great masters. Berger cites the painting of Danae by Rembrandt as an example. Here the tradition of painting the frontal nude is ignored. Interestingly within the non European tradition of art, sexuality is often depicted as both active and mutual (e.g. the lovers of Isurumuniya).

To what extent is the Sri Lankan artist influenced by the European tradition? The work of the photographer Lionel Wendt during the nineteen thirties and early forties presents an interesting reading of these perceptions. Although local in his choice of Sri Lankan subjects and models, Wendt is a product of a European *avant garde* when approaching the aesthetic form of the represented subject and is clearly influenced by European aesthetic perceptions. Manel Fonseka in her article 'Rediscovering Lionel Wendt' (exhibition catalogue P7) suggests that his student years in Europe exposed him to the modern movement in art and stimulated his interest in that direction. What is most controversial about Wendt's work is his illustration of the Sri Lankan nude in numerous photographic studies, and his preoccupation with the male rather than the female nude figure. In fact, we might argue that the male nude in Wendt's art has assumed the vocabulary of the European female subject and presents to the spectator a similar submission or disempowerment. Unlike the male nude in European media culture, the self conscious physique makes no appearance. This is a self conscious

nudity of a different nature (figs. 1 & 2). Contrast the facial expressions of the anonymous nude studies with Wendt's portraits of well known social figures and we see repeatedly the lack of expression or perhaps a look of irresolution in the nude subject's features. (exhibition catalogue figs 59 & 89)

The subject has become an anonymous physical object whose value lies not in his individuality but in the representation of his body parts through a visual aesthetic medium. What we admire in Wendt's nude studies is in fact his ability to capture light and form to see form in physical identity of his subject matter. But what of the individual selected as the nude subject? Is he or she celebrating this representation? The world of art demands that we inquire no further. Wendt's female subject seems in fact to be the less vulnerable; falling within the accepted model of European nudity, they hardly seem to be controversial. Although the medium and the choice of subject are very *avant garde*, Wendt does not liberate his subject from the gaze of the spectator.

Whereas Wendt was clearly influenced by his exposure to the European modern movement of the nineteen twenties, the foundations of a more formal tradition of European art had already been established in Sri Lanka through the colonial experience. The work of colonial artists reflected the European tradition of the nineteenth century adapted to a colonial medium.

In addition to the established mores of representing the nude subject, the European tradition of the nineteenth century was steeped in significant symbolism. Realism in art from the Renaissance to the early twentieth century was marked by carefully selected accessories to the individual subject. Backdrops showing expanses of land, rooms crowded with expensive objects, pure bred livestock — all these illustrated the social standing of the subject and revealed the social interests of the period.

The period depicted in colonial prints of Ceylon fall within the above category of representation. The project of Empire and its expansion is an extension of power and capital in keeping with the expectations of the period. A typical illustration of a local scene would depict the colonial 'masters' surveying the vast expanses of land in their possession. Horses or dogs would be seen in the background as an added embellishment. These pedigree animals were in most cases introduced to and bred by the colonizer on the island. e.g. *The Galle Face Esplanade* by John Deschamps 1845. Individual portraits of military officials showed persons of obvious stature again with a backdrop of house or garden. Such depictions conferred an omnipotency on the subject reinforcing both his own perception of himself and the image projected by him on to the 'native' perception. The colonial depiction of the indigenous people was, in contrast, an illustration of their disempowerment. The categories of depicting the native male subject as in the case of Wendt's studies imitated the tradition relating to the European nude and depicted a costumed figure gazing out of the painting with an expression of passive submission. (Figs. 3&4), *The portrait of Major General Charles Baillie (Samuel Daniel 1805)* standing before Maitland house - the Governor's residence at Mt Lavinia gives us a sense of the power and stature. *'The Moorman'* by Hippolyte Sylva 1839 (a french artist from Pondicherry) in contrast represents an anonymous ethnic example.

The native female in these representations shows a similar category constructed with attention to sexuality and presents a

wholly new subject for investigation. Elizabeth Harris in *Gaze of the Colonizer* (p.19) suggests that "the lack of clear gender demarcation in the appearance of Sri Lankans" i.e. in dress, jewelry, hairstyles, etc., disoriented the British male spectator and created in him a distaste for the effeminate male figure. It is thus interesting to analyze representation in 19th century prints of Ceylon not only as revealing the woman as an erotic subject but as allowing us to apply the same criteria to a gendered reading of Empire.

The reconstruction of a subject people within what was identified as an 'orientalist' discourse described for the colonizer both at home and abroad the categories denoting the relations of his power. Orientalist representations of this nature that were first invented in records of Napoleon's Egyptian Expedition had since become part and parcel of the colonial enterprise and constituted for many subject nations the only detailed records of their own historicity. The process of decolonizing these historic identities requires us to strip eurocentric constructions from these representations so that we may no longer be dependent on the European imagination for reconstructions of ourselves.

Artistic representation by claiming a relative autonomy for the aesthetic subject (art for arts' sake) achieves an aura of political innocence. Although this is necessary for the judgement of expression and technique, it ignores the subjective circumstances in which we find the individual. Artists who have been singled out as great masters are often those who have challenged or provided alternatives to the existing tradition. In the world of art we might label them political players. Colonial painters are often unconscious of their subscription to the imperial process and seldom deviate from the prescribed avenues for orientalist representation. The original sketch on location might also pass through two or three artists before reaching a British engraver. Raheem (*Exhibition Catalogue 1986*) suggests that they may thus be subject to unscrupulous alteration.

Typical of the colonial processes is the preoccupation with recording and classification. Inspired by the rationalism of the scientific method, it begins as a method of understanding and interpreting an alien environment. It is in fact the existence of these meticulous colonial records that make histories available to us, although it exposes the same to textual interpretation. For the colonial mind however whether it be recording strange tropical birds or native costumes and behaviours, the process is invariable. The colonized subject is equally a curiosity reduced to what Anderson describes in the *Imagined Communities* as an (ethnographic) series labeled according to its racially defined species of origin e.g. *The Ceylon Cockatoo*, *The Malabar Pied Hornbill*, *Tamil Girls*, *The Ceylon Moor*. It is an almost anthropological interest in primitive people by which they are primarily inspired. While attempting on the one hand to capture the essentialist notion of the indigenous people, it seems imperative that the subject must also remain anonymous, never identified (as in the case of the colonial counterpart) by name or station. (Figs. 5&6) *A matching of Legge's record of Glaucidium Castanonotum and Scops Minimus (two owls) with Eugene de Rasonnet's illustration of 'Malabar Girls' 1867 provides a humorous comparison of the 'series' tradition.*

The indigenous woman falls not only into the category of the ethnographic series, but is presented as an aesthetic and erotic subject to the colonial audience. Among the available examples

one which is most sought after as a subject is the bare breasted Rodiya woman. Why, we may inquire, with a substantial population of fully clothed indigenous women around them did these colonial artists seek out this small marginalized caste group for repeated representation? Why indeed publish an anomalous example as representative of a larger subject people?

This topic is open to many interpretations. Perhaps the colonial mind was intrigued by the anthropological example of the partially clothed primitive. Perhaps her state of nakedness presented a desirable contrast to the strict Victorian dress code of hoops and corsets imposed upon the European woman. Perhaps both these factors inspired the fantasies of the lascivious and mystic East that had been marketed in Europe. Perhaps to be more pragmatic being low caste they were the group that was easily sexually accessible. The importance of the colonial representation of Rodiya women lies in another significant factor. The depiction of persons of low caste groups in art was hitherto unknown to the artistic tradition of the indigenous people. Such representations had always been reserved for the nobility and this was possibly the first opportunity affording a marginalized group pictorial representation. (Figs. 7&8).

The illustration titled *The Village of Kadugannawa* by Prince Alexei Soltykoff 1841 is further described as being... the "*Habitation of the Rodiyas, outcasts from the times of the Kings of Kandy*". R.K. de Silva (*Early Prints of Ceylon*) adds the artists' own description of this plate which comments "... As a matter of fact, the husbands, far from being jealous, are, on the contrary eager to offer their women to whoever wants them. Fathers and mothers have the same attitude towards their daughters". De Silva similarly adds the artist Eugene De Ransonnet's comments to his illustration of *Agostina, A Singhalese Low Caste Girl* where he describes the low caste girls between 11 and 14 years being "particularly pretty" and reminiscent of "antique bronze statues of Psyche". Agostina is described as "...a Christian girl 13 years of age" who "performed the duties of an native ayah (*ayah*) in a house near Pelmedulla".

The female subject in colonial art was additionally layered by European perceptions of beauty and artistic composition. Often a simple village woman depicted in a colonial painting would assume a Renaissance physique or European features. (fig.9) Samuel Daniel's *Portrait of a Gentoo Chitty Woman of Jaffnaputnam* assumes classical proportions.

The representation of the mother and child would use Madonna like compositions as a reference. (Fig.8). The artist would recompose the subject on his canvas adding appropriate symbolism. e.g. Ceylon Moorman- ship and Mosque implying trade and Islam etc. (Fig.4) In a sense the final artistic product was coloured by the artist's own cultural judgment and interpretation. The subject might bear no resemblance to the 'native' model but create for the artist the category that best suited his aesthetic intention.

An important digression from this typological representation is evident in a few rare depictions of identified indigenous subjects available in the Van Dort collection. J. L. K. Van Dort who began his career as illustrator to *Young Ceylon* and *The Ceylon Observer* was a Ceylonese from the Burgher community and had a different perspective on the subject he illustrated. Although schooled in the tradition of the British colonial art, his depictions are far

more individualized and they show a greater involvement in the subject matter. It has animated both colonial master and subject as humorous caricature while illustrations of what he identifies as high caste subjects approach the area of portraiture. (Fig.10) *His depiction of three high caste ladies could for instance be captioned "The Obeyesekere Sisters."* Contrast this with the work by Prince Soltykoff depicting three women in the print titled, *The Village of Kadugannawa.* (fig.8). *The passive expressions on the faces of the Rodiya women illustrate their position.*

What were the avenues by which the indigenous people themselves resisted the forces of stereotypical representation? Among the urban elite, it required westernization to a level that imposed a recognizable distance between one's self and the indigenous typology and the appropriation of the dress, manners and lifestyle of the cultured gentleman or woman. Attempts at creating this cultural distance is best illustrated in the pages of Arnold Wright's compilation of the *Twentieth Century Impressions*. Here elite gentlemen, top hatted and frock coated, presented themselves with family in Victorian dress, horse carriage and colonial mansion in an attempt to assert their individuality within the recognized framework of the colonial empire. No doubt these families commissioned portraits of themselves in official regalia, in Victorian interiors to parallel their colonial counterparts. Imitation says Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) is one method of repatriation. But still more convincing is a parallel process that challenges the previous representations.

To achieve recognition is to rechart and then occupy the place in imperial cultural forms reserved for subordination, to occupy it self-consciously, fighting for it on the very same territory once ruled by a consciousness that subordination of a designated inferior Other (Said, 1993: 210).

Sadly, examples of such challenges in the world of artistic representation were very few during the 19th Century and only one such portfolio is available for interpretation. Drawn by an indigenous Jaffna artist who signs himself as 'Maravan', this series of cultural studies depict the day to day activities of the Jaffna people through the colonial medium. They present a close stylistic resemblance to the revivalist folk art of the Bengali renaissance of the same period. In Bengal, they presented an avenue of resistance by providing alternative interpretations to the colonial subject matter. The forty odd paintings available to us are striking in their dynamic depictions of indigenous people. The subject is in fact empowered by these representations. (Fig.11). For example the painting depicting a woman and man carrying a baby in a pingo. The shared load attempts no patriarchal structuring of gender roles but affords an expression of mutuality that is desirable. In conclusion, the work of Lionel Wendt can be analyzed beside the constructs formulated by the colonial masters. Not only do their work claim sources within the European tradition, but their representations of indigenous people are structured by the criteria reserved for the female

gender. As such, they can be read as revealing the political anonymity of the then subject population. Unlike the colonial prints however, many of Wendt's other photographs do celebrate the revival of the marginalized subject by selecting the indigenous culture and people for the aesthetic object of his representation (e.g. scenery, festivals, village life etc). His uninhibited choice of local subjects which in turn inspired the formation of the 43 group of artists may be interpreted as an attempt to create an alternative to colonial representation and to explore an avenue for a local self-expression. Although Wendt was able to individualize the general Sri Lankan subject, the individuality of his models was subject to the limited social access to individualization.

The importance of the individualized representation of the human subject lies in the recognition of its self-conscious political content and its resistance to replicable commodification. The contribution of an art form to the project of social history cannot be evaluated outside the boundaries of this realization. ■

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## Acknowledgements and Sources of illustrations

My thanks to Nihal Fernando for providing me with photographed copies of colonial prints used in this article. Many of these prints are reproduced in R.K. de Silva's book 'Early prints of Ceylon'. The paintings by Maravan are in the possession of the Haywood school of Fine Art. The two photographs by Lionel Wendt have been taken from the exhibition catalogue arranged and designed by Albert Dharmasiri for the 1994 exhibition. It is printed by Guneratne offset Ltd. Colombo.

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Fig. 1 Male nude  
- Lionel Wendt



Fig. 2 D.R. Wijewardene Esq  
- Lionel Wendt

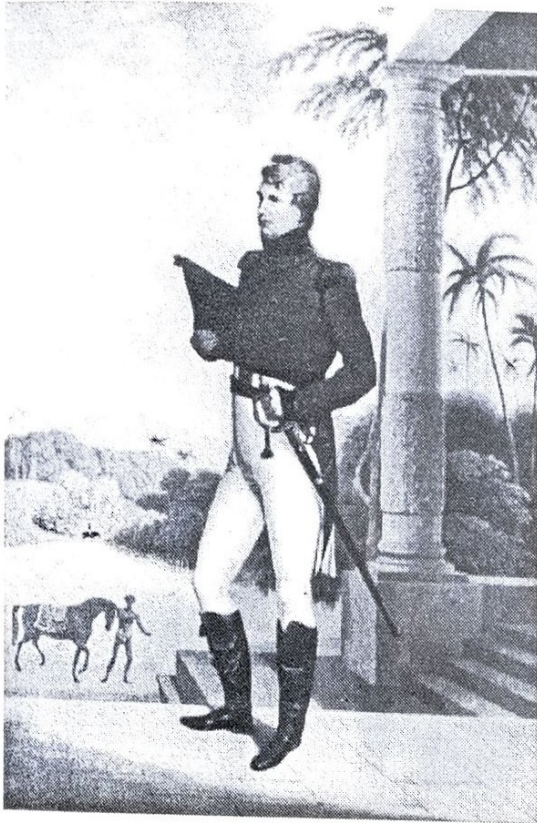


Fig. 3 Major General Charles Baillie  
- Samuel Daniell



Fig. 4 Ceylon Moorman  
- Hypolite Silvat



Fig. 5 Malabar girls  
- Eugene de Ransonnet



Fig. 6 Two species of Owl  
- Legge



Fig. 7 Village of Kadugannawa  
- Prince Soltykoff

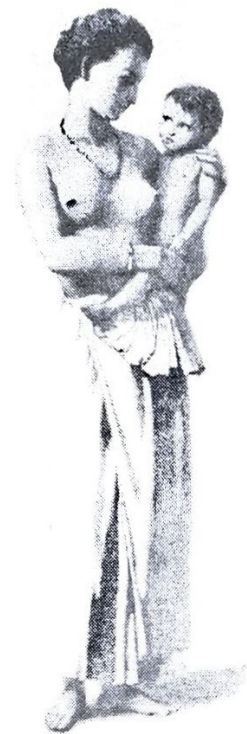


Fig. 8 Agostina  
- Eugene de Ransonnet



Fig. 9 Gentoo Chitty woman  
- Samuel Daniell



Fig. 10 High caste ladies  
- Van Dort



Fig. 11 Man and woman with baby  
- Maravan