From ‘Document’ to ‘Subject’: Con FIGuration of the Colonized Body

Aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body.¹

4.1 Introduction

Like nature, the human body became one of the major objects of colonial control. As has been pointed out by several eminent scholars, British colonialism connected social identities with body types through the practice of regulation. The body functioned as a privileged trope featuring in a variety of colonial discourses ranging from medical studies, anthropology, literary and critical investigations.² This has been brilliantly understood by Stuart Hall who points out how the colonized body was used as a direct tool of representation.

Think how these cultures have used the body—as if it was, and it often was, the only cultural capital that we had. We have worked on ourselves as the canvases of representation.³ Yet we find that bodies and selves, subjugated within the colonial imaginary, were reclaimed and reframed through national/postcolonial strategies of self-invention.

Representation, Roland Barthes says, ‘stresses something refashioned, coded in rhetorical, textual or pictorial terms, quite distinct from its social existence.’⁴ These

bodily representations played a crucial role in colonial ‘visualism’. Therefore, as Griselda Pollock argues in different context, identification of the ideological fix and their modes of articulation in the painted bodies of the colonial period are ‘involved in a complex process—operating unevenly and contradictorily across multiple points of discourse and social politics.’

British colonialism brought in a new way of looking, articulating and performing identities. ‘Identities have turned fixed and gelled’ through the production and exercise of a wide range of colonial documents. The earlier fluid categories and ‘fuzzy boundaries’ of social and cultural identities were fixed and ‘enumerated’ as identifiable visual categories, through the wording and visualizing practices of documentation. In a way, categories of local identities were formulated through colonial documentation including population census, gazettes and administrative reports. It is by now a well discussed issue that colonial ethnography and anthropology achieved a visible body through colonial painting, engraving and photography. Though colonial knowledge did not intend to imagine identities in the way nationalism later did, these constructed bodily images concurrently became the point of departure for the imagination of local authenticities, community and ethnicity. This turned out to be the scaffolding for new social groupings and political mobilization at various levels and has functioned as the mirror and the mirrored of colonial modernity.

Keeping the above mentioned frames of reference in mind, this chapter tries to track the multifaceted processes of emergence of the modern self in colonial Ceylon by probing the transformation of visual representation of the local body from its colonial ethnographic documentation into nationalist and modernist aesthetic discourses. Through a selected reading of works, this chapter illuminates how tactics of representation premised on differentiation of race, class, gender and sexuality were mobilized towards hegemonic ends and later appropriated by the Ceylonese elite towards their own project

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of domination. I argue that in the Ceylonese context, the ethnicized and colonized local body functioned as the archetype for the later modernist aestheticized body. By negotiating with colonial representational modes as well as methodologies, the local elites inverted the language of dominance to handle their own subaltern. This leads to an inherent ambivalence within the local modernist or nationalist projects. On the other hand, the ambiguity in bodily representations demonstrates the elitist male artists’ abiding dilemmas in the production of self identities under the incomplete project of forming a nation.

4.2 Production of an Ethnographic Body and Colonial Self

Nineteenth-century travel narratives about Ceylon define a very specific conceptual domain. Many Europeans arriving in the colonies of the nineteenth century were interested in the sensual, physical and bodily nature of indigenous cultures and early ethnographic texts often shared this preoccupation. They express the outsider’s bewilderment in identifying the different castes, half-castes, races, mixed races, religions, languages, classes, each with their own customs and mannerisms. This demanded labels that served to locate the ‘strange’ in a frame of reference familiar to them. ‘The developments in physical anthropology and linguistics at the turn of the twentieth century were responsible for the definition of essentially linguistic groups such as Tamil and Sinhalese in Ceylon in terms of physical characteristics which were supposed to be specific to those groups.’

4.2.1 Locals as Traditional Visual Motifs

From the handful of available caste and costume drawings and paintings in Ceylon, it is evident that local artisans, who worked in the traditional idiom, were employed in the production of the ethnographic visual survey, either parallel with or prior to the photographic documentation. For this new task, the native artists borrowed the stylized human motifs from traditional

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10 Ibid.
11 This was similar to the situation in India that Archers revealed, where local artisans in princely states and colonial cities actively engaged with the souvenir market and the Raj and produced similar genres.
narrative paintings of the Kandyan or Anglo-Ceylonese Schools (Plate 4.1). In the newly created colonial space within these documents, the bodies of local men and women were 'motivized' as signifiers of caste, occupations and costumes and poised in a vacuum. These individualized bodies of local inhabitants, caused a break in the figure-to-figure relationship and figure-to-background relationship that existed in the traditional narrative registers of murals. Ethnographic visuals employing traditional stylization, on the other hand, placed the local body in an ahistorical, empty space. Isolating images from the 'sequential' narrative arrangement produced a purely spatial, but not temporal, experience. Referring to Barthes' argument on the spatial and temporal, Peter Wollon observes similar attributes in photography. In these drawings, the natives were uprooted from their environment (place), fixed into a stereotypical, emblematic form as 'specimens.' The bodily types, ornaments, dresses and drapery designs overshadowed the character and replaced traditional symbolism. On the other hand, the employment of traditional stylization made them more fictional (Plate 4.2).

4.2.2 Local Body and the European Painters

Amateur and professional foreign artists who worked with the Dutch and English military and administrative establishment showed considerable interest in documenting physiognomy, customs and occupations of the natives. Samuel Daniell's drawings and prints carved a niche in this mode of documentation (Plates 4.3, 4.4). He adopted an identical approach to document both local inhabitants as well as other animal species in their natural setting (Plate 4.5). In a way, his approach reminds one of Ashis Nandy's argument that colonization is objectification and western science has built a structure of near-total isolation where human beings themselves—including all their suffering and

12 For a detailed study on different painting styles and schools in Ceylon, see Senaka Bandaranayake, The Rock and Wall Paintings of Sri Lanka (Colombo: Lake House Books, 1986).
13 Interestingly, similar attempts are also reflected in the later paintings on the walls of the wooden hall of the Karagampitiya temple, designated for preaching. This may be due to the popularity of this genre. Also, the same artists could have been involved in the creation of these temple paintings.
moral experience—have been objectified as things, as processes to be vivisected, manipulated or corrected.\textsuperscript{16}

In contrast, John Deschamps, who served as adjutant in the Royal Artillery for nine years from 1824, did a series of watercolours and established a new relationship between the colonial master and his local labourer (Plate 4.6). In the preface of his \textit{Scenery and Reminiscences of Ceylon}, Deschamps writes:

\begin{quote}
The views have been selected to as representing some of the scenes and objects most familiar to those who are acquainted with Ceylon, and as being, from their association, most likely to prove interesting to the generality of them; and, at the time every opportunity has been seized to illustrate various customs as well as the habits and occupation of natives.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

His observation reveals how the attempt to illustrate customs and habits were determined by familiarity and generality. Thus, stereotyping was the underlying principle that marked this genre. In Deschamps’ representations, in contrast to the earlier stylized and objectified representations, the locals appeared the way their colonial masters’ did, involved in day-to-day activities. Here the local activities such as farming, hunting and cattle rearing distinguish the local populace from the colonialist. Masters are engaged in the acts of monitoring, ordering and relaxing. Since the focal point of the painting is on the colonial master, the bodies of locals formed a background camouflaged by nature.

Prince Alexei D. Soltykoff (1806–1859), a traveller, writer and artist, published two illustrated accounts of his travels in India between 1841 and 1846. His documentation reveals an exotic Ceylonese body, particularly the semi-nude bodies of the lower caste Rodi women (Plate 4.7).\textsuperscript{18} He wrote: ‘in jungle there are semi-wild women, almost naked’. Another artist, Eugin De Ransonnet\textsuperscript{19} who mainly documented the bodies of workers in the plantations, described the Rodi women thus:

\begin{quote}
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\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[16]{Ashis Nandy, \textit{Traditions, Tyranny, and Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness} (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 106–107.}
\footnotetext[18]{According to legend, the Rodi clan owes its origins to Rarhnawalli, the daughter of King Parakumba. She was kept under surveillance because of her exquisite beauty. But a prince somehow managed to have sex with her without disclosing his identity to her. The princess conceived and was punished by the angry king who took away her royal jewellery and robes and replaced them with dirty rags. He gave her in marriage to the cleaner of the palace with the order that she had to live begging with him.}
\footnotetext[19]{Landscape and genre painter as well as writer and ambassador born in Vienna in 1838. Member of the Vienna Academy of Arts. He stayed in Ceylon in 1864–1865. Ibid.}
\end{footnotes}

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Sinhalese I have intimated before must be called a fine race, but generally speaking the females are not so good looking as the men. To the eye of a stranger majority of the former seem aged. In reality the period, when the females in Ceylon deserve to be ranked in the category of the fair sex, only last very short time. Still there is an exception to this rule, in as much as in the country near the Ratnapoora and Pelmadula, inhabited by the multitude of low castes and outcastes, many women bear on their countenance the marks of real beauty.

It is very strange that the high castes are generally darker than many lower castes, in spite of the very simple costume of the latter, which leaves the upper part of the body exposed to the scorching influence of the sun.

Some of the lower caste girls between 11 and 14 years are particularly pretty and have a light brown complexion. Their shoulders, breasts and arms being of an exquisitely delicate form, they frequently resemble those antique bronze statues of Psyche, familiar to all lovers of art.20

In this piece of writing, the writer’s racial prejudices connected with skin colour and bodily type were actively employed in visual stereotyping of bodies of low and high caste Sinhalese. ‘While unclothed bodies seemed to connote in some obscure way the world of nature and its wild sexuality21 to these travellers, local women’s bodies were sexualized and made to stand for racial and cultural difference in these documents (Plate 4.8). Both in his writings and visual documentations, the painted Rödi women voluntarily display their unclothed bodies just as costumes were exhibited in colonial photography.

Hippolyte Silvaf, in addition to being a portrait painter, produced drawings of the local costumes of Ceylon. The costumes were representative of those worn by the communities and inhabitants of the country at the time—Kandyan and low country Sinhalese, Tamils, Ceylon Moors, Malays and Indian Cherties. In addition to extensive drawings and sketches of this nature, there were about 15 different illustrations in colour painted by Silvaf. His drawings were reproduced in Souvenirs of Ceylon published in

20 ibid.
1868. Various modes of clothing, by signifying and differentiating the racialized local bodies in Silvaf’s paintings, transformed into costumes.

4.2.3 Documentary Photographs

Among the apparatuses of knowledge that were designed to guide the British ruler in his dealings with natives, the census stood out as a document whose manifest rhetoric was technical but whose subtext was contestory and disciplinary. The first census in Ceylon was conducted in the Maritime Provinces for the purpose of taxation by the Dutch administration under Governor Van der Graff. In 1871, the first modern census was conducted along the lines of most of the provinces and princely states of India, as well as those of Great Britain and Ireland. In 1869, the colonial administration sent a circular requesting that photographs of all castes and races be made in the Island for ethnographical purposes, but the programme does not appear to have been followed methodically. Leading photo studios and amateur photographers comprehensively documented the races of the island in the 1880s for commercial purposes. Thus, the colonial method of ruling implicated with the technique of differentiating, fixing and classifying local inhabitants, was implicitly associated with the introduction of photography in the colony. In this process, technologies for producing the photographic image operated as tools of producing power for the colonial empire. Raheem and Colin-Thome observe:

The terms ethnology and ethnography came into use in photographic jargon in 1850s or thereabouts almost ten years after the invention of photography. The interplay between ethnology and photography dates back to the earliest days of invention of the camera. Both disciplines shared common ground in terms of their practitioners’ conviction that they were pursuing a scientific and objective approach. Photography was readily accepted

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23 The British used different categories to compile the census. In Ceylon, racial difference became the major category. Dipesh Chakrabarthy shows how the categories of caste and religion dominated the census that the British undertook in India in contrast to Britain where religion was never an important category. He further argues counting Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and untouchables then became a critical political exercise, particularly in the twentieth century, as the British began to include Indian representations in the country’s legislative bodies. Dipesh Chakrabarthy, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002), 85.

as an ideal medium for accurate documentation because of its apparent reality of precision.25

Unlike oil painting which imitates the object, visual accuracy between the object and its photographic image drastically altered the notion of representation in art. Pinney identifies photography as a ‘technical practice’ and photography’s ‘data ratio’ depends on growing technical advancement. “Data ratio” brought accuracy to the semiotic and evidential nature of the document.26 Further, with its reproducibility and low cost of production, photography effectively replaced the older tools of anthropological visual documentations. Geeta Kapur states that realism proper is distinguished for establishing the material presence of the subject in an equation with the objective world through embedded structures and their transforming logic.27 Thus, photographs were considered the ‘pencil of nature’ with the ability to represent accurately and realistically. W. J. T. Mitchell pinpoints this accuracy as follows:

The ‘living qualities’ are what, notoriously, the camera captures under the right conditions, so that it seems to come equipped with a historical, documentary claim built in to its mechanism; this really happened, and really looked this way at this time. This is more than the claim to merely optical fidelity, a correct transcription of visual appearances; it is a claim to have captured a piece of the ‘historical life-process’ as well as the ‘physical life-process’.28

Generally, the optical accuracy achieved in the medium of photography is seen as a logical continuation of the illusionism in the medium of oil paint. In India, the local aristocracy while patronizing local and foreign oil painters to produce portraits, sceneries and historic paintings in oil painting, also had themselves photographed by colonialist photographers in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The absence of a similar aristocratic class in nineteenth-century Ceylon channeled colonial/modernist representational art practice differently. Since oil painting gained popularity only in the early decades of the twentieth century among local cultural elites, photography naturally became instrumental for the ubiquity of pictorial illusionism or realism across the social

and cultural boundaries of the local society much before oil painting (apart from the printed reproductions of European illusionist paintings of Christian themes, disseminated by missionaries). Once, the illusionist painter Amarasekara mentioned that he used photography to 'convey such ideas and sentiments that were beyond his ability to express with brush and paint at the time.'

Unlike oil painting which was situated within the highly anglicized, individualized domains of elite culture, diffusion of studios and amateur photography in the colonial towns at the turn of the nineteenth century, allowed a horizontalization of the medium and its illusionism.

From the available accounts of colonial art practices in Ceylon, I would argue that it was not oil painting but photography, which became the magical tool that determined the popular conception of realism. Thus, one could argue that the fixity between the photographic medium and ethnography was further strengthened by realistic representation. Realism, as an attempt to represent the closest appearance, is closely associated with the ruler's attempts to control the native. Dipesh Chakrabarthy argues: 'Measurement is central to our modern ideas about fairness and justice and how we administer them—in short to the idea of good governance.'

He further states that 'a generalized accounting mind-set is what seems to inhabit modernity.' Accurate transformation of body as a visual image or document was associated with the political-social control over the local body. The colonial power's psychological grip over the 'unknown' and the 'other' invariably depended on the precision in visual transcription. Thus, through realistic capturing, the unknown became known and the uncolonized became colonized.

The importance of two Colombo-based studios, Charles Scowen & Co. and W. L. H. Skeen & Co., in the production of ethnicized bodies for local and foreign consumption is evident from the available colonial photographs. Arnold Wright's books on Twentieth-Century Impressions of Ceylon: Its History, People, Commerce, Industries and Resources, published in 1907, documented portraits of men belonging to different

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30 Dipesh Chakrabarthy, Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002), 84.
31 Ibid., 85.
ethnic and caste groups in the 1890s. These photographs embody the general pictorial trend in popular studio portrait photography in India and Europe. Likewise, W. L. H. Skeen & Co., in common with all the major studios, produced portraits illustrating the 'native character'. A genre which constituted a component of stock of almost all photographers in Asia, where European communities came into contact with indigenous populations as visitors or residents. The subjects' looks, customs, dress and way of life appealed to a desire for the exotic and the picturesque. In the search for a 'regional' fixity in colonial visual representations, the 'native body' became a preoccupation within studio photography context.

Besides, early photographs also represent the colonial photographers' inquisitiveness and excitement about recording people, festivals, pageants and rituals in a distant land and to display them in the metropolitan society, as in the case of early engravers and watercolourists. This interest eroticized and fetishized the local body.

Importantly, the term race appeared for the first time with another vague category 'nationality' in the 1871 and 1881 censuses. The 1881 census rationalized the categories of classification: the number of races was reduced to seven, namely, Europeans, Sinhalese, Tamils, Moormen, Malays, Veddas and others. From here on, race became the main category of classification. In 1921, the census recognized 10 principal races in Ceylon. Most of the portraits taken in the 1880s were overly concerned exhibitionary values and cultural markers of the various stereotypical categories of body. Captions such as Malay girl, Sinhalese headman, Chettiar man, Mudaliars and village blacksmith reveal the ethnographic intention of the photographer.

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35 *Fetishistic* looking, in contrast, involves 'the substitutions of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous. This builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself. The erotic instinct is focused on the look alone.' Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality*, ed. John Caughie, Annette Kuhn and Mandy Merck (London & New York: Routledge, 1992), 29.
37 Information about religion and caste appeared in both the 1814 and 1824 censuses. It seems that at least until 1824, Sinhalese and Tamils were perceived not as clear-cut ethnic groups, but first and foremost as members of caste groups. Nira Wickramasinghe, *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History of Contested Identities* (Sri Lanka: Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2006), 48.
(Plates 4.9, 4.10, 4.11, 4.12). Since most of these photographs were captured within studio settings, the bodies were loaded with ethnic and religious symbols, the people artificially overdressed and overly conscious about the photographer’s gaze and their value of display.

‘Photography froze images of “primitive” people whom the universalizing and homogenizing tides of modernity were otherwise washing away.’ Anthropology’s disciplinary object, ‘the primitive’, is a temporal category that resides in unbridgeable distance. Fabian argues that anthropology emerged and established itself as ‘a science of another man in another time’. Hence, Said pointed out, the representational politics operate from the value judgments based on hierarchy of race, appeal to the erotic-scientific curiosity of the west and confirmation of imperial sovereignty. By stereotyping the local body, these photographs distance them from contemporary space and time. Homi Bhabha observed that ‘stereotype:’

as the primary point of subjectification in colonial discourse, for both colonizer and colonized, is the scene of similar fantasy and defense—the desire for originality which is again threatened by the difference of race, colour and culture.... The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (which the negation through the other permits), constitutes a problem for the representation of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations.

To reiterate this point if one looks at other colonial contexts, we find similar objectives. For example, based on Walter Benjamin’s idea of ‘aura’ and ‘authenticity’, Paul S. Landau offers a reading of the colonial photographs of Africans in which he says: ‘Photography of the authentic was an assertion of a permanent aura, a permanent “instinct distance”. The more remote from the western experience a photographed person appeared

to be, the "truer" because more "authentic," he was regardless of the circumstances of the taking of picture.\footnote{Paul S. Landau, "In Empires of the Visual: The Photography and Colonial Administration in Africa," in \textit{Images and Empire: Visuality in Colonial and Post Colonial Africa}, ed. Paul S. Landau and Deborah D. Kaspin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 154.}

Arnold Wright's portrait photographs of local elites brought another dimension to the medium and its intervention in constructing local authenticities.\footnote{Arnold Wright (comp.), \textit{Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon: Its History, People, Commerce, Industries and Resources} (London: Lloyd's Great Britain Publishing Co., 1907).} In these photographs (Plates 4.13, 4.14, 4.15, 4.16), elites appeared in their ceremonial dress, honorary medals, with furniture and props that publicized their colonial lifestyle, newly acquired position within the colonial administrative machinery and feudalist or capitalist earnings.\footnote{Wickramasinghe observes that nearly half of the Sinhala families represented in Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon, a photographic album, belong to the \textit{Karāva} caste. Nira Wickramasinghe, \textit{Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History of Contested Identities} (Sri Lanka: Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2006), 141.} Furthermore, through their newly tailored, hybrid dress code, they differentiated themselves from others within the same class and the plebeians. Their bodily presence established a sense of boundary. Though, the powerful native men display their colonial earnings in the background, the photographers’ gaze—registered in the consciousness of the sitter—makes the whole photograph an enactment or mimicry. These photographs were also a conscious attempt to museumize the ‘authentic’ in society by the local noble men as well as the colonial photographer, as the British envisioned it. Jan Hacking described this process as ‘dynamic nominalism’: people came to fit the categories that the colonial authorities fashioned for them.\footnote{Ian Hacking, \textit{Making Up people}, quoted in Dipesh Chakrabarty, \textit{Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Woke of Subaltern Studies} (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002), 86.}

Walter Benjamin points out that there is a distinct difference between a person facing another’s gaze and the camera’s gaze. Barthes observed: ‘Once I feel myself observed by the lens everything changes; I constitute my self in the process of “posing”. I instantaneously make another body for my self; I transform myself in advance into an image.’\footnote{Roland Barthes, \textit{Camera Lucida} (London: Flamingo (Fontana), 1984).} The act of transforming the self into an image was further complicated with new political and social aspirations. ‘Photography brought into being new configuration and articulation of the body and new images of masculinity and (especially) femininity which intersect with older mode of representation to produce their own portent and
transfiguring admixtures of modernity.}' In this transformation, social identities were recast visually and became seeable. Seeability demands certain kinds of bodily articulation or performances that construct the social landscape of the colony in visual terms.

Apparently, these ethnographical visual surveys, by adopting different approaches to represent the local elite's mimicry and subalterns' ethnicized posing, characterizes a duality in the colonial photographers' approach. Although the medium of photography encouraged horizontality or the 'sense of sameness' as Benjamin put it, the class disparity that operated through the representational structuring of visual codes, produced a verticality of class difference. In this context, Abigail Solomon Godeau's observation about photography is pertinent. She says 'as a modernist technique of archiving the body, photography is rife with contradictory potentials, as it reveals and conceals, fixes and transforms, subjugates and liberates.'

J. L. K. van Dort's drawings, depicting the various social engagements of the city elite and rural peasant's lifem have a satirical flavour that differentiates them from the static ethnographical representations. A compilation of van Dort's drawings depicting the lives of locals, Ceylon–The Near Past (1951) approaches the subject more subjectively (Plates 4.17, 4.18). In van Dort's representations, the local bodies are liberated from their earlier frozen, ahistorical selves and actively portrayed in their cultural settings. In this dramatic shift, timelessness and frontality in the earlier works give way to action and movement. The most striking feature in van Dort's works is the appearance of European masters with locals in public gatherings. It indicates the new agency gained by local elites. The locals appeared in the official costumes prescribed by the colonialist. It may be relevant to note here that the Gazette which appeared in the 1930s, specifying dress codes for the various ranks of local ceremonial administrative positions as markers of racial difference. Hence, 'it was indeed within the social framework sketched by the

49 Ibid.
50 For a detailed discussion on dress and colonial authenticity, see Nira Wickramasinghe, Dressing the Colonised Body: Politics, Clothing and Identity in Colonial Sri Lanka (Delhi: Orient Longman, 2003).
colonial minds that communities reinvented signs of identity and difference. Further, van Dort, in many of his drawings, caricatured European and Euro-Asian women as a 'sign of overindulgence and absurdity.'

4.3 Oil Portraits

Photography entered the bourgeois domestic space through photo studios in the form of individual and group portraits. Portraits embodied the cultural capital of the 'new rich'. Jani de Silva takes note of this development as follows:

Thus as in Victorian England, capitalist accumulation in colonial Ceylon spawned a desire to found new dynasties in the absence of noble lineage or to restore ancient houses fallen on bad times. This brought a new focus on the family-unit or kin-group (pavula): they became the mirror which reflected the status of its head back to himself. The new status of arriviste groups was now enshrined in 'family photographs', where the grandly-dressed bodies of wives and offspring became sites for the display of the social status of the male head-of-the-house.52

Showing a desire to signify continuity with previous modes of representation as well as owing to limited skills, most studio photographers framed the bodies of local elites within the existing mode of portraiture derived from colonial photography and the European oil painting tradition. This photographic rhetoric operated as a form of mimicry or a mode of role play in which the local elites posed 'like' their colonial masters. But the horizontal spread of the photographic medium within a short span of time, on the other hand, made it more accessible to the plebeians. This posed a challenge to the elites' imagination and monopoly over the medium. Concomitantly, there emerged a class of gentlemen-academic painters from the local elite community, who were invested with the idea of artistic genius premised on the 'uniqueness' of their ability. This helped restrict the practice of portraiture purely along class lines. I would argue that oil portraiture occupied the space already created by photography in the early decades of the twentieth century. It helped elites to transform their economic capital into cultural capital and differentiate

themselves from the lesser social groups which could not afford to have themselves painted in oil.

Even though portraits were originally intended to represent the character and physiognomy of a person in visual terms, in the European colonies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they became a prop for exhibiting imperial authority and proclaiming supremacy over the colonies. The ‘darshan’ of the imperial ruler in the metropolitan centres occurred through ceremonial portraiture in the colony. A combination of colonial buildings in Baroque or Romanesque style with the ceremonial appearance of colonial rulers in portraits produced a new iconography of power. These new icons of rulers were further complicated by the rituals of governance. As in a religious icon, these new objects of reverence demanded of the colonial subject absolute surrender to the power of their masters and command them to obey the masters with ‘uncontestable absoluteness’. Portraits though found a new institutional space when the colonial power discourses were reproduced in the local discourse linked to nationalism. Local elites, by situating themselves within the existing colonial portraiture rhetoric that evolved particularly from the periods of Rococo and Neo Classicism, were able to accumulate power and flaunt their accrued wealth.

In an advertisement in the Ceylon Times (13 October, 1854), for example, Hippolyte Silvaf begs to inform the public that he continues executing portraits in oil painting, miniatures on ivory and in French coloured crayons; he will give lessons at the residence of the pupils. Silvaf struggled early in his career, trying to eke out a living from his work as a portrait painter for which he found little patronage from Colombo’s well-to-do society.53 Due to the lack of patronage and financial failure of his school of drawing in Colombo, Silvaf moved to Kandy around 1854. He tried to restart his school and invited commissions to do portraits in oil and coloured crayons.54 He was also known for his fine coloured miniature portraits on ivory and hand-coloured daguerreotype portraits.55 These accounts show that during the time of Silvaf’s arrival in Colombo in the 1820s, the idea of having portraits painted was hardly popular as also unwelcome among the local elite.

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54 The Times of Ceylon, April 27, 1855.
circles. The economic conditions of the times were not conducive either. Portrait painting did become popular after the 1920s when the local capitalist economy was at its peak.

Local painters like Mudaliar Theodor Rajapaksa (Plate 4.19), Mudaliar Amarasekara (Plate 4.20), J. D. A. Perera (Plate 4.21) and David Paynter (Plate 4.22) later popularized this genre. Unlike Silvaf, these painters operated in a period that registered significant social and economic upward mobility of the local elites in the colonial political and administrative spheres. This period also registered the emergence of representational politics based on language, race, religion and caste with the proceedings of Donoughmore commission on constitutional reforms. These developments coexisted with the process of the institutionalization of Victorian art practices, within which, portrait painting was an important genre.

Except Amarasekara, the others were trained academically in western art institutions or under European artists. Amarasekara managed to receive all state commissions although his later works lack the palpability of the oil medium and liveliness of the sitter. The local political and professional elites became the central themes of his portraits. Further, he also painted the portraits of Indian nationalists like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya and Rabindranath Tagore (Plate 4.24) during their visits to Colombo. The artist rendered these portraits purely out of personal interest. Thus, they signify the new social position of the elitist portrait painter within the upper class and nationalist social network.

As opposed to the nineteenth-century portraits of maharajas in colonial India by European painters, these portraits were rooted in a different power dynamics. Indian maharajas who had surrendered their power to the British Raj, employed European oil painters and photographers to restore their lost prestige by using the visual exhibitionism of material wealth. They appeared in their courtly attire with an excess display of jewellery, clothes, weaponry and turbans. Here, the excess display of material wealth and the act of posing actively transformed the maharaja to a character from the theatre or a proxy power. The cultural distance between the artist and the patron also play a part in this transformation. However, in Colombo, the artist and his subject belonged to the same class, and in many cases, were related by kinship. Thus, there is a certain overlap between the artist and the sitter's subjectivity. Hence, I would argue that these portraits indirectly represent the artist's self.
Portrait painting became the prime genre through which the well-to-do in the city found and articulated their subjectivity and status. As Partha Chatterjee argues in the case of autobiographies, these portraits in the context of Colombo ‘seem to be obvious materials for studying the emergence of “modern” forms of self representation.’ These portraits represent the images of professional elites, nationalist leaders, and respectable ladies of their families. ‘The “new individual,” it would seem, could represent the history of his life only by inscribing it in the narratives of the nation.’ They represent and construct a new form of consciousness called ‘individual’ within the city elites. The personal histories of the sitters in the portraits painted by Harry Pieris (Plate 4.23) and Ivan Peries will reveal how the upper class social and cultural network of Colombo operated through the form of portraiture. Lionel Wendt’s photographs of elite men and a few women break away considerably from rigid posing, to encompass liveliness and the character of the sitter (Plate 4.26). Paradoxically, in his photographs, the subaltern bodies were violently cut into pieces through close-up shots suggesting the elitist gaze (Plate 4.25). Earlier identity consciousness, rooted in the display of dress, shifted to individual characterization. A similar approach could be noticed in the portraits done by David Paynter, Mudaliar Theodor Rajapakse, J. D. A. Perera and Harry Pieris. Sustained by the open technique of the impressionists and expressionists, casualness of the sitter in their portraits displaced the earlier rigid posing. In contrast, Amarasekara’s approach to capture the sitter in the photographic realism mode is evident in his painstaking attempt to articulate the tactile quality of drapery. Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that ‘British colonialism…[was]…first to introduce the idea that the body and character were intimately connected…. In creating a public culture based on the theme of racial superiority, however, the British conflated character and physical strength, claiming to have excess of both, unlike Indians.’ The same notion of character was reflected in local bourgeoisie public culture and portraits became the indicators of their imagined superiority. The emergence of self respectability and individuality in the colonial period was further implicated with English public school education, colonial sports activities,

57 Ibid., 138.
capitalist competition, Victorian ethics and nationalist claims on identity. The elites in Wendt's photographs and the portraits by the above mentioned painters displaying a similar conviction, propose a new sense of being and becoming.

W. G. Beling, inspired by Parisian modernist art, worked against photographic illusionism and portrayed the character of his sitter in greater simplicity (Plate 4.27). Here, the portrait is approached more as an arrangement of colour planes, as a two-dimensional design. The artistic individuality, expressed through a specific way of handling, replaces the visual accuracy between the sitter and his/her image. Justin Daraniyagala's emotionally charged brush strokes and splashes of colour brought out the artist's self reflection of the sitter at the expense of optical illusionism.

4.4 'Local' Genres

As in several colonial bourgeois societies, cultural differences were played out over the realistic mode of representation in Ceylon too. As John Tagg has observed:

The dominant form of signification in bourgeois society is the realist mode, which is fixed and curtailed, which is complicit with dominant sociolects and repeated across the dominant ideological forms. Realism offers a fixity in which the signifier is treated as if it were identical with a pre-existent signified and in which the reader's role is purely that of consumer.... In realism, the process of production of a signifier through the action of a signifying chain is not seen. It is the product that is stressed, and production that is repressed.59

Geeta Kapur connects the realistic genre with the bourgeois desire.

Realism flowing from such material possibilities of paint is a way of appropriating the world, saturating the consciousness with it. It is also a way of acquisitive impulse. This realism is then inalienably related to bourgeois desire, bourgeois ideology, and ethics.60 Geeta Kapur continues her argument by saying 'realism fulfils the mission of the Indian elite to adopt European means to Indian needs, to become historically viable through the use of the realistic genre.'61 It was not just oil portraits, but oil painting itself, that was the

61 Ibid., 152.
most important contribution of western art to colonial India. It transformed Indian art in terms of scale, style and subject matter. Palpability of oil paint became the prime tool in achieving visual illusionism. In addition, within colonial art practice, the medium of oil painting and easel painting were seen as signs of modernity. Therefore the local artist’s attempt to master the medium, as Kapur argues in the Indian context, ‘is not only the struggle of the artist to gain a technique but a struggle of a native to gain the source of the master’s superior knowledge, and the struggle of the prodigy to steal the fire for his own people.’ However, as I have discussed earlier, realism was popularized in the colony as a mode of anthropological gaze, thus the mastering of mode was coupled with the mastering of gaze.

Known portrait painters like Theodor Rajapakse, Amarasekara, David Paynter and J. D. A. Perera, did a few figure compositions of rural bodies, with the ambition of showcasing the oriental scene. Selection and handling of themes reveals how their idea of ‘local’ is a colonial/orientalist construct and how nationalism internalized the colonial racial difference as beauty of the oriental. These gentlemen artists, by employing the colonial anthropological gaze as well as realism, objectified the subaltern body for the European/Europeanized viewer. In this oriental enactment, artificiality in the posing of ethnographic document transformed into a language of pantomime.

Amarasekara’s ‘Devil Dancer’s Daughter’ (Plate 4.28) was the most controversial as well as celebrated icon of this genre in Ceylon. The painting shows the devil dancer’s daughter who attempted to play the magical ritual drum, inadvertently encountering fire. Inspiration for this painting came from the sound of the ritual drum that the artist heard from a distance. The artist recalled his earlier experience of the ritual where the chief exorcist flung a fistful of resin into the fire and a young girl recoiled in fear. The dancer’s daughter is shown playfully wearing the lower portion of a

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64 For detailed exchanges on this painting in the newspapers, see Chapter 3 in this dissertation.
65 A newly wed bride of a rickshaw coolie was hired as a model for this painting. Her husband escorted her to Amarasekara’s studio and after an hour’s work, insisted that they must leave. The painting had just begun. Upset, the Mudaliar paid the man handsomely to persuade him to give them more time. The man was, however, reluctant. He was furious and yelled: ‘I will kill the woman if she does not come with me!’ The woman was startled, the horror reflected on her face as it grew taut with fear—just the expression that
traditional dancer's dress over her usual one. In the painting, the woman has locked herself up in a room with a traditional ritualistic ‘devil’ mask, fire and the monstrous image of a shadow cast by her own body. Dramatization of the whole theme translated the magical experience of the traditional Thovil ritual as an incident of horror associated with the devil. Colonial anthropologists’ usage of the word ‘devil’ to denote the Sinhala ‘yakka’ has a derogatory meaning. Generally, devils and demons are considered to be malevolent in nature but in the Sinhalese spirit religion, yakku are not always harmful and are usually benevolent. Hence, yakka does not connote the devil to a believer of Sinhalese spirit religion. Therefore, Amarasekara’s usage of the term devil to define the yakka is the result of prejudices and cultural misreading. It is relevant to remember here that Amarasekara’s Mudaliar clan enjoyed colonial patronage which helped transform the clan into landed aristocrats in the early nineteenth century. The painting displays an anglicized middle class attitude and understanding of local folk culture. In this particular painting, the body of the woman as cultural marker participates in a role play that represents the colonial idea about local traditions being superstitious and ritualistic as opposed to the modernist engagement with progress. And the innocent woman is represented as a victim of her own tradition and ignorance.

Amarasekara’s two other paintings convey similar attitudes. ‘Steps to the Shrine’ (Plate 4.29) and ‘Invocation’ (displayed at the Royal Institute, Royal Empire society, 1932) depict musicians and pilgrims at the Temple of Tooth in Kandy. His selection of the Tooth Temple—a symbol of the ‘pure’ Sinhala Buddhist tradition in the nationalist imagination, and the most popular tourist site—reveals the artist’s premeditated attempt to showcase ‘Ceylonese culture’ as being of Buddhist origin. Further, alms givers and local drummers in these paintings romanticized the local Buddhists’ cultural life. On the other hand, Rajapakse distinguished himself from other artists through his casual brush strokes, evident in his works titled ‘The Ace’ and ‘Kavadi’. His painterly approach and compositions based on the photographic ‘close-up shot’ gives a sense of immediacy and actuality, while at the same time tending towards the imagery of a picture postcard. In contrast, J. D. A. Perera’s ‘Karunavai’ and Amarasekara’s ‘Unemployment’ display

66 Plural of ‘yakka’.
rigidly posed local bodies as in proscenium theatre. A cerebral attempt to capture the
‘local’ with illusionist finality produced this artificiality with frozen bodily postures.
Here, the subaltern bodies were uprooted from their own sense of history and placed in a
theatrical space, directed by the gentlemen artists. Nochlin identifies a similar position in
the paintings of oriental scenes of Jean-Leon Gerome.67 She argues that for the orientalist
painters who carried their bias with them, the ‘oriental world is a world without change, a
world of timeless, atemporal customs and rituals, untouched by the historical process that
were “afflicting” or “improving” but, at any rate, drastically altering western society at
any time.68 Paintings in this genre implicitly suggest the superiority of city-based
bourgeois in opposition to ‘unprogressive’ subalterns.

These artists’ fantasy and romanticism about the subaltern or the working class
did not exist in a vacuum but was structured by a particular cultural milieu that allowed
and controlled a certain kind of representation. While the well-to-do elites in Colombo
were busy presenting themselves in portrait oil paintings, the elite artists represented the
subalterns with an orientalist gaze. The elite body was authenticated in their portraits as
a symbol of colonial progress, self respect and individual character. The plebian body
represents the authentic local culture which belongs to past, rural and religious. The
plebian, in these paintings, represents a counter-modernity untouched by colonialism.
Thus, both these artistic activities of the elitist painters in the colonial era have grappled
with different political and social meanings, and different kinds of agency. The genre
paintings were mainly produced for the exhibitions in Colombo or abroad to enhance
the artists’ standings. Viewers or buyers for these paintings were from the European or
Europeanized local middle class. Like portraits and landscapes, these paintings too
represent the tastes and artistic expectations of bourgeois gallery goers. Since these artists
belonged to a similar cultural background, they employed the earlier skills of the colonial
anthropological documentary artists and the romanticism of orientalist painters. They did
not in actuality destabilize the existing power balance. In fact, they helped to exert
colonial hegemony in the national terrain. Donald Rosenthal points out:

67 Nochlin’s observations are based on the paintings titled ‘Snake Charmer’, ‘The Slave Market’ and
68 Ibid., 36.

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The unifying characteristic of nineteenth century orientalism was its attempt at documentary realism.... The flow of Orientalist painting... was closely associated with the apogee of European colonialist expansion in the nineteenth century.69

Amarasekara identifies himself as a realistic painter and argues that nationalism in art is possible only in terms of the selection of content.70 The oriental body thus became a space in which European means and techniques of representation like oil painting and realism could be appropriated and played out within the nationalist paradigm. Realism and orientalism, technically and ideologically, operated closely in the objectification of the 'other'. Nochlin says that 'the strategies of "realist" (or perhaps "pseudo-realist", "authenticist" or "naturalist" would be better terms) mystification go hand and hand with those of Orientalist mythification.71 Orientalism is a way of first alienating and then eroticizing (and exoticizing) cultures of the east so as to fulfill at once the sense of western primacy, the sense of sovereign I, and the longing for the unknown other, says Edward Said.72 Further, this mystification has been actively harnessed to produce the other as ahistorical; the temporal distance creates a colonial desire. By casting the orientalist gaze on the plebian, the local elites placed themselves in a privileged position closer to their colonial counterparts.

During the 1930s, cultural nationalism and revivalism were at their peak. The rural body and the past were constructed as signs of tradition and considered as being unpolluted by the colonial experience. Hence, the longing for authenticity and the need to document the local vanishing traditions could have been the other driving forces behind the production of these paintings. Ironically, determining the 'authentic' itself was an orientalist construction. Linda Nochlin contextualized the orientalist politics of documentation as follows:

The very notion of picturesque in its nineteenth century manifestations is premised on the fact of destruction, only on the brink of destruction, in the course of incipient modification and cultural dilution, are customs, costumes, and religious rituals of the

dominated finally seen as picturesque. Reinterpreted as precious remnants of disappearing ways of life, worth hunting down and preserving, they are finally transformed into subjects of aesthetic delectation in an imagery in which exotic human beings are integrated with presumably defining and overtly limited decor. Another important function, then, of the picturesque—orientalizing in this case—is to certify that the people encapsulated by it, defined by its presence, are irredeemably different from, more backward than, and culturally inferior to those who construct and consume the picturesque product, the irrevocably 'Other'.

Further, as Said pointed out, the production of such ‘living tableau of queerness’ seems to require preservation and documentation but is also involved with policing and regulation as in the case of colonial ordering. Thus, it is evident that the colonial politics of difference was rooted in the early photographs and caste and costume paintings and the idea of orient was without doubt re-institutionalized in the paintings of local elites. As Nira Wickramasinghe points out, it was indeed within the social framework sketched by colonial minds that the communities reinvented signs of identity and difference. A pertinent point is made by Homi Bhabha as he argues that the colonized subject is produced as ‘almost the same but not quite’...so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace. While mimicry helped local elites to reaffirm the colonial hegemonic relationship with the subaltern, it menaced the imperial power. This duality represents ambivalence; an attraction as well as repulsion. This particular mode, on the other hand, signified the character of subjectivity among local elites with their new roles of domination and negotiation.

4.5 Burden of Modernity and the Painted Female Body

George Keyt, one of the ‘most celebrated’ South Asian artists of the time, emerged as an icon after 1930 when nationalism appropriated tradition within the project of modernity. His eclectic style, both in iconography and ideology, became a signifier of both modernity and tradition. Hindu and Buddhist mythical characters in their erotic postures

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76 Homi K. Bhabha, Location of Culture (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), 87.
were incarnated in Keyt’s ‘Picassoesque’ linear signature style. Hindu and Buddhist myths as content, while distinguishing Keyt’s work from rest of the 43 Group’s Europeanized art practices, helped the artist to identify his interests directly with the nationalist/orientalist art discourse of India, implicated with the Hindu past. George Keyt, a Dutch burgher by birth, later identified himself with India given his Marathi Brahmin lineage. Orientalists and the advocates of ‘Indian art’ recognized Keyt as the ‘true’ south Asian modernist in the high days of cultural revivalism.

Keyt’s preoccupation with tradition and modernity is always projected through female nudity. Female nudes became a prime visual content of Parisian modernism which coincided with the birth of new male subjectivity. Concomitantly, colonialist and nationalist discourses, by representing a modernized version of local patriarchy, actively disciplined and reframed the female body. The appropriation of female nudes in colonial art practice was not a smooth process, but subject for constant contestations and mediations at various levels. In the colonial-national conflict, the artistic representation of female body is associated with the changing notions of female subjectivity, artistic modernity and the artist’s creativity. Linda Nead explains the transformation of female body into a form:

As female body has become art by containing and controlling the limits of the form—precisely by framing it. And by giving a frame to the female body, the female nude symbolizes the transforming effects of art generally. It is complete; it is its own picture, with inside, outside and frame. The female nude encapsulates art’s transformation of unformed matter into integral form.

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Hence, any attempt to discuss the female nude is inevitably connected with its mode of framing that make it as a work of art. I would argue that female nudes in Keyt’s paintings are framed by an eclectic artistic paradigm of Parisian modernism and the orientalist’s invented ‘classicism’ to contain nationalism’s idealized image of woman.

George Keyt was a self-taught artist. His association with Winzer and Wendt was the major source of inspiration and influence that introduced him to the reprinted images of the art works of the Parisian school. Even though he first visited India in the 1930s, his major exposure to medieval Indian art was through printed images-pictures of Hindu sculpture and architecture in Indological publications available in Ceylon. Thus, images circulated through print capitalism emerged as a major source that shaped his sensibility, ideas and imagination. Mechanically reproduced images connect with fashion, democratized visual consumption. Thus, printed images constituted a new phenomenology of modernity in which the female body underwent layered discursive transformations. Through these printed images, on the other hand, photographic surveillance that established control over the female body in late nineteenth century was further disseminated and institutionalized in the languages of pornography and commercial advertisements. Visually, they made the female body available for erotic fantasy and pleasure. The popularity of Keyt’s images lies in their indexical association with popular and familiar iconographies of a wide rage of printed images ranging from pornography to artistic representations of the female nude. Thus, his painted female nudes are situated in a liminal space between art and pornography, obscene and aesthetic, elite and popular, as well as spiritual and physical realm.

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81 Partha Chatterjee says that ‘nationalism adopted several elements from tradition as marks of native cultural identity, but this was now a “classicized” tradition—reformed, reconstructed, fortified against charges of barbarism and irrationality.’ Partha Chatterjee, The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Post Colonial Histories, in The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 127.
84 Tamar Garb, in her seminal study on George Seurat’s painting ‘Young Women Powdering’, brought out the role of cosmetic advertisements and fashion magazines in shaping the new ideals of the female body and their implications in Seurat’s imagery. Tamar Garb, Bodies of Modernity: Figure and Flesh in Fin-de-Siecle France (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1998), 143–144.
4.5.1 Nudity and the 'Other'

One of Keyt's earlier paintings 'Portraiture of Govindamma' (1928) (Plate 4.30) became a pretext for his later stylistic and thematic preoccupation or visual and cultural implications. The painting displays a dark female seated nude with an image of her fully clothed female attendant. Though there is an attempt at realistic rendering, it is only at a very suggestive level. The painting almost appears two dimensional. The theme and posture of the female nude in the painting are reminiscent of French impressionist painter Edouard Manet's painting titled 'Olympia', which Keyt would have known from the reproductions belonging to Winzer or Lionel Wendt.

While T. J. Clark associates the nudity of Olympia with the bourgeois class of Paris at the turn of the nineteenth century, Pollock maintains that it is a meeting of discourse on art, class and female sexuality. Linda Nead further extends these arguments by saying that 'the stylistic experimentation of modernism works to revitalize and extend the tradition of the female nude and, on the other hand, the representation of the female body in these images functions as a critical sign of male sexuality and artistic avant gardism.' Hence, as many feminist writers point out, the male artists do not present the nude, they represent her.

Unlike Olympia who fearlessly meets the gaze of her onlooker, Keyt's Govidamma, by consciously avoiding the onlooker's eye, invites further surveillance and completely surrenders her body to the artist or the viewer who stands in front of the canvas. Although the role of the attendant figure is not comprehensible in the painting, the contrast between the clothed and unclothed female bodies could be read as difference in sexuality as in the case of the clothed artist and his nude female subject. It brings to our mind the bare-breasted heroine and her attendant in a blouse in the fifth century AD Sigiriya frescos. This particular indexical reference to 'past culture' and a most celebrated object of national heritage conversely help the artist to turn the exogenous Parisian modernist representation into the endogenous traditional portrayal. Parul Dave Mukherji, based on a scene that depicts the bare-breasted female audience in prince Sidhartha’s court while dancers are clad in blouses in the frescoes of Cave no. 1 in

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Ajantha, points out the role of clothing in the arousal of the erotic. In this way, the artist's erotic intention in the representation of the attendant's clothed body is not negligible.

Further, Govidamma's body is strongly marked by cultural symbols like the 'pottu' on her forehead, flowers in her hair and jewellery, which in a Ceylonese context, connotes this woman's ethnic identity as Tamil. Van Gyzel, in his article, confirms this model to be a Tamil dancer. Similarly, Keyt's close associate, Lionel Wendt utilized Tamil women as models for several of his nude photographs (Plate 4.31). Keyt's earlier paintings such as 'Tamils by the Sea' (1926), 'Nageshwaram' (1927) (Plate 4.32) and 'Portrait of Nadaswaram Player' (1927) connote something more than a female nude study and brought a tricky combination of colonial anthropological interest and the nationalist search for the oriental body to the surface. It established/re-established an ambiguous relationship between the elitist, Euro-Asian male artist and the anonymous Tamil (mostly migrants who came after the capitalist growth in the early decades of the twentieth century in Ceylon, as 'coolies' [wage labourers] from south India) female as model. Thus there is constant interplay between the sense of 'we' and 'they'. It is also important to note here that during this time traditional temple dancers of south India, who transformed themselves into public women due to lack of traditional patronage, regularly visited Ceylon in the early decades of the twentieth century as public entertainers and were also involved in prostitution. In addition, Manet's Olympia is also identified by art historians as a prostitute from the growing urban environment of Paris. In Ceylon, these Indian entertainers were popularly recognized as public women without 'shame' or 'fear of shame'.

In the Sinhalese Buddhist society, a female character called *Pāḷāccāra* in one of the *Jātaka* stories, who was afflicted with a mental disorder due to the tragic death of

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86 Parul Dave Mukherjee, Personal Communication, 2010.
88 Sunil Goonasekera explains Keyt's ethnic identity as follows: "Ethnically, he was an Indo-Dutch Burgher, but he has never been a member of the local Dutch Burgher Union. He was raised by an English nanny and he grew up as an Anglican in a strongly anglophilic family. Socially he moved in colonial and native elite circles. The English, who had contempt for the natives, considered his kind as either equal or slightly inferior to themselves, but superior to natives. Kandyan aristocracy, who generally defended the native culture but had social ambitions in the colonial milieu, looked up to the Burghers as social and cultural superiors and as a reference group. They associated with the Burghers and absorbed elements of European culture, the status symbol of the times, from them." Sunil Goonasekera, *George Keyt: Interpretations* (Kandy: Institute of Fundamental Studies, 1991), 49.
her family members, got acceptance for nude portrayal. That very sanction connotes nudity as human disorder in the values of Ceylonese modern Buddhism which was invented within Protestant ideals. By portraying a Tamil migrant public entertainer in the nude, Keyt successfully adopted the European mode of nude in oil painting, without challenging the social beliefs. Generally, traditional musicians like the Nadaswaram players and this sadir dancer were closely associated as performers apart from being related by kinship. Thus, by combining European academic and modernist tradition of painting nude figures with the colonial anthropological gaze and nationalist expectations, Keyt’s female nude emerged as marker of ambivalence of colonial modernity.

At this point, it may be worthwhile to examine J. F. Lorenz (Jr.)’s water colour painting ‘A Fair Contrast’ (Plate 4.33) and the Dutch engraving by Jacob Haafner ‘Mestice Women going to Church in State’ (1808) (Plate 4.34), both painted in Ceylon. The former, even though not a nude painting, is thematically connected with ‘Govidamma’. Here, a noble white lady, probably a Burgher, is attended to by a local woman in European attire. Similarly, in the Dutch engraving, the European woman is depicted with her local male and female attendants. These two works bring the discourse of racial superiority into the history of colonial ‘difference’ through the clearly displayed natural and cultural signifiers of body. This strategy is employed in European paintings where the ‘black servant somehow enhances the pearly beauty of her white mistress—astutely employed from the time of Ingres, in an Orientalist mood, to that of Manet’s Olympia, in which the black figure of the maid seems to be an indicator of sexual naughtiness’. The hegemonic relationship between the colonial master and the local inhabitants, operating in these paintings, in a way transformed into the relationship of the gentleman artist with his model in Keyt’s ‘Govidamma’. ‘Colonial ideology was not only based on asserting racial superiority and purity, but was implicated in upholding male hegemony, argues Jayawardena. ‘Ethnicity has always been determined by paternal descent under the patriarchal laws of the country during and after colonial rule.’

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90 I am thankful to Prof. Sasanka Perera for bringing this point to my notice.
91 See Chapter 5 in this dissertation for a detailed discussion on Protestant Buddhism.
94 Ibid., i.
Hence, Keyt’s Burgher origin and his Marathi Brahmin lineage identify him with the superior Aryan race and the elite class. Thus the model’s uncomfortable pose suggests the powerful absent presence of the dominant figure of the artist in front of her. Thus, the body of Govindamma becomes a point of convergence for the modernist idiom, references of the local ‘classical’ past, colonial racial politics of difference as well as the artist’s male sexuality.

4.5.2 Female Nude and National Allegory
George Keyt produced several images of embracing couples wearing the mantle of characters in Hindu mythology and epics in the 1930s, based on the traditional iconography of the Mithuna figures. Although these representations referred to mythological characters, unlike his Gotami Vihara murals, they hardly come under the visual schema of historical paintings. They are also reminiscent of caste and costume paintings of the company school where the locals are stereotyped in pairs of opposite gender. Close framing of these couples always reveals the female body, or the female body is arranged in such a way within the picture frame, as to obtain heterosexual male erotic pleasure.

His painting ‘Viharamahadevi’ (1936) (Plate 4.35) represents the queen and her attendants as a group of semi nude females. Keyt’s painting depicted the final moment of queen Viharamahadevi giving birth to Dutagammunu who is celebrated as a ‘national hero’ by the Sinhala Buddhist nationalists for his victory over a Tamil King, Ellala, as narrated in a Pali chronicle. Here, by bringing history, mythology, art and nation within the vocabulary of the female nude, the artist transformed the female body from its earlier colonial anthropological gaze into a national allegory. This shift was also marked by his signature linear approach to the painting with distortion and abstraction. The theme is implicated with the very nature of production of the Buddhist Sinhala nation state and the nationalist imagination of pure, masculine Aryan race. The seated posture of the couples has a direct reference to classical art; the mithuna images, particularly the one in Vessanthara Jātaka at Ajantha or the couples of Isurumuniya, Polannaruwa.

Naked or nude, semi-clothed or fully clothed, the female body is rarely an innocent category, beyond cultural definitions; and as we will see, it is an eternal
container of excessively male signs. Partha Chatterjee says that 'anti colonial nationalism was in its core a male discourse.' He further argues that nationalism separated the domain of culture into two spheres—the material and the spiritual, and placed women in the domestic sphere.

The world is the external domain of the material: the home represents one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity. The home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and women must take the main responsibility for protecting and nurturing this quality.

On the other hand, within Victorian ideals, social roles of the individuals were divided along gender lines. Women belonged to the domestic realm and were assigned the role of reproducing, nurturing and protecting the family. Nationalist thought accommodated these Victorian ideals and connected it with serving the nation. Based on Obeyesekere and Gombrich's arguments that Protestant Buddhism reflected the need of the time, and provided a 'value system to a new class, an emerging bourgeoisie', Jayawardena argues that 'its message to women included (somewhat Calvinist) duties of a wife, based on thrift, protecting property, and entertaining kith and kin 'correctly.' Further, feminist writings point out that women were traditionally looked upon as guardians of the ethnoreligious and cultural identity. They were also seen as symbols of the 'mother nation', its actual biological reproducer, with the responsibility to ensure the unblemished continuity of ethnic, religious and caste identities. Therefore, Viharamahadevi allegorically represents the mother of the Sinhalese Buddhist nation. 'As a property of the national collective, the woman mother symbolizes the secret, inviolable borders of the nation.' Although the pictorial composition suggests a group of semi-nude women, a study of the painting's title and the artist's interpretation places the figures firmly

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97 Ibid., 126.
100 Kumari Jayawardena and Malathi de Alwis, ed. Embodied Violence: Communalizing Women's Sexuality in South Asia (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996), x.
within the nationalist invented past and tradition which sanctioned nudity. Here, the high art pretensions are suggested by the epic tone of its title.

Keyt’s preoccupation with the female body as content appeared broadly through the themes of mother and child, saints, devotees, lover and beloved. These themes position the woman and her body within the domestic domain or tradition. Although his nude couples are titled as Krishna/Radha, Yama/Savitri and Shiva/Shakti, they are not part of any epic narration (Plates 4.36, 4.37). Therefore Keyt removed the mythic characters from their larger narrative framework and charged them with his personal erotic meaning. This removal allowed the artist to localize and rephrase the modernist’s popular theme of ‘artist and the model’. Mythologizing the modernist content, in a way, distances it spatially and temporally from the present and places the image in the terrains of past and ‘art’. By discussing Keyt’s painting ‘Krishna Painting the Image of Radha’ (Plate 4.38), I shall examine how the modernist artistic theme of ‘artist and the model’ achieved a metaphoric or metronomic meaning in Keyt’s imagery. In the production of authentic modern art in Ceylon, the sexual and political economy of the Parisian modernist art has been re-invested in these ‘traditional’ themes.

4.5.3 Artist and the Model
The art historian Carol Duncan has extensively discussed the ‘sexualization of artistic creativity’, by showing how modernists like Picasso, Matisse and Edward Munch played with the theme of artist and model and portrayed themselves as active creators as opposed to their passive subjects, the female nude models.101 As part of the hypocritical morality of the bourgeoisie, they nourished an image of themselves as sexually proficient and emphasized male sexuality as an expression of artistic potency.102 Linda Nead argues that ‘the mythology of artistic genius proposed a model of masculinity and male sexuality that is free-ranging, unbounded, needing to be contained within forms.’103 The strong alliance

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102 The female nude, then, is more than just a formal site of modernity—a place where modernists experiment with technical radicalism; the female nude is the very site on which male fears, fantasies and projections are played out. Pam Meecham and Julie Sheldon, Modern Art: A Critical Introduction (London & New York: Routledge, 2000), 102.
between artistic geniality and male sexuality in the modernist era, made many of these artists eager to express their own sexual proficiency through art. In this context, the woman's body in art became a container of the artist's potent sexuality and creativity. More than any other theme, the nude could demonstrate that art originated in, and is sustained by, male erotic energy. Linda Nead further points out that 'this is why many “seminal” works of the period are nudes, when an artist had some new or major artistic statement to make, when he wanted to authenticate to himself or others his identity as an artist, or when he wanted to get back to “basics” he turned to the nude.' Carol Duncan shows us how the artist makes visible his own claim as a sexually dominating presence, even if he himself does not appear in the picture. In this visual discourse and its strategies of representation, women's bodies became passive objects that could be made, handled, shaped, appropriated and owned by the active creative male artist. Hence, Keyt's mythical pairs in the modernist's idiom conversely marked the birth of new subjectivity and the self-conscious modernist artist's identity in colonial Ceylon. Keyt's 'Krishna' represents the Hindu mythological character Krishna as the artist creator, lover and erotic manipulator of Radha who is an object waiting to be modelled or nayika longing for the love of the nayaka. Thus, the female sitter fulfils a triple role as a model, mistress and muse but, in addition, she becomes an important sign of the male artist's modernity. Further, the orientalist interpretation of this theme may read Radha as part of Krishna, hence not just an independent 'female body'.

Carol Duncan observes that in contrast to the classical nude which was generally depicted in a way that retained a distance between the artist and the model, the avant-gardists often emphasized the physical presence and sexual availability of the model by

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104 Feminist art historians, who connect the individual creator of modernism with the notion of geniality, trace the process of sexualization of geniality to pre-modern Europe. Its earlier meaning of superior artistic skill in the technical sense later gained metaphysical connotations, with divine dimensions. Martin Friedriksson. "The Avant-Gardist, the Male Genius and the Proprietor," Nordliit 21 (2007).


108 I am indebted to Dr. Rakhee Balaram for bringing this point into my discussion.
suggesting a ‘blatant pre- or postcoital personal experience’. In this case, the interest is not in the model but in the artist himself. As Martin Fredriksson shows us, the visual device helps build up a romantic idea of the artist and his autonomous, creative masculine omnipotence. In the case of Krishna painting Radha, the artist’s hand which holds the brush, is placed erotically against the breast of the female nude creating a constant interplay between myth and reality, between the myth of Krishna and the myth of artistic genius, between the creative act of painting and the erotic act of lovemaking. Within this semiotic structure, the artist’s control over his medium is synonymous with his mastery over the model. Here, the male artist’s creative urge merges with his erotic impulse. The sexually provocative aspect in painting is decoratively sublimated as ‘art’ through the reference of ‘tradition’.

It may be relevant to look at Justin Daraniyagala’s female nudes at this point. As a painter trained in the academic tradition at the Slade School of Art and a member of the 43 Group, Daraniyagala’s works continuously engaged with the female body as a site for modernist abstraction and distortion as in the case of the American abstract expressionist painter William de Kooning. It is important to note here that both Daraniyagala and William de Kooning were contemporaries and shared similarities in their approaches. Unlike Keyt’s linear approach, Daraniyagala demonstrates a more painterly approach. His emotionally charged dry brush strokes distorted the contours of the female body and retained the breast as a minimal reference to the gender identity of his model. Even though a literal theme became secondary, the nudes revolve around the spaces of family as is evident in the paintings ‘Three Figures, Body and Tortoise’ (Plate 4.39) and ‘Blind Women’, or within the studio setting, like in the paintings such as ‘Girl with Musical Instrument’, ‘Girl with Bull’ (Plate 4.41), and ‘The Studio’ (Plate 4.40). The earlier discussion about the artist and his model could be easily extended to Daraniyagala’s female nudes in the studio setting, both in terms of artistic engagement as well as formal arrangements. Although the artist is not present within the picture frame, the location and erotic symbols such as the bull allude to his sexual instincts. On the other hand, his own

absence permits the artist to handle the female body as a still life for his artistic
effort. Here, the female body becomes a field where all modernist
experimentations, distortions and actions are played out. Contrarily, it becomes
the register of artistic as well as erotic act of creation and destruction or the male
artist’s sexualized creative dominance.

4.5.4 Authenticating Nudity
Amarasekara once commented that the nude study was viewed with holy horror. 111
Goonasekera writing on Keyt shares a similar sentiment.

Early in his career Keyt, for the first time in Sri Lankan studio art, painted nudes and
ignored the philosophically positivist preoccupations with accurate representation of
natural details. Pre-colonial native art was not prudish. A quick glance at native
iconography in Sri Lanka and India proves that the shape of the women was a native
artistic concern. What the Victorian morality suppressed, Keyt re-introduced to local
audiences. 112

His writing reveals the hesitance prevalent in the bourgeois cultural sphere against the
making and displaying of nude representations. Similarly, other writers on Keyt’s work
have either attempted to validate his art by locating it within past traditions and/or
draping Keyt’s female nudes with the invented spiritualism in the erotic art of medieval
India. Some writers are comfortably and completely silent about this aspect. These
writings obviously reveal an uneasy dialogue between female nudity and male sexuality
in the wake of nationalism. 113 Keyt too insisted upon the spiritual quality projected as the
identity of Indian art by orientalist and nationalist scholars in his art. He commented:

Although there have been sometimes certain superficial influences from with out
...basically I have (naturally) always been Asiatic—what someone called spiritual
voluptuousness. 114

If the act of representation is itself an act of regulation, the Indian classical tradition
became a mode of framing, that regulated the female nude and configured it as an

111 L. P. Goonetilleke, ed. The Doyen of Painters in Ceylon: Felicitation Volume—Presented on the
113 Goonasekera argues that Keyt used the female nude as the convention of pseudo Victorian realism and
through his paintings, reconstituted the local body in the domains of art. Ibid.
object for aesthetic consumption. Hence, nationalist and orientalist discourses around female nude representations, while fashioning Keyt’s interest, also substantiated his sensual and erotic expressions in the realm of art. From 1935, with the artistic revivalism, the epics come to the foreground and ‘timeless’ themes associated with erotic ascetic, the gods of love and lustful apsaras became the content. Tapati Guha-Thakurta says, ‘by the 1930s and 40s, growing interest in the symbolism and stylistics of large body of female images would place the ‘feminine ideal’ at the foreground of the Indian artistic canon.’

The nationalist project of authenticating the present through ‘invented’ tradition fell into an epistemological and ethical trap when it had to deal with medieval erotic sculptures and the sensuous bodies of women. While most of the early nationalists were silent about the sensuous presence of the female body, a few desexualized those images as goddesses, mother goddesses and fertility symbols. In this process of appropriation, the medieval representation of women underwent a successive discursive change that, as Chatterjee points out, ‘erased female sexuality in a world outside the home’.

Tapati Guha-Thakurta argues that the ‘early nationalist scholars of Indian arts would be at pains to show how the bare bodies of women in Indian art remained discretely covered by layers of emotion and feeling (bhava), and how the bodily proportions of these figures signified the wholly different canons of the “Indian artistic anatomy”’. Their attempts largely focus on contextualizing the physicality and worldliness that appeared in the sculptures of Konark and Khajuraho, within their imagined identity of art based on the qualities of spirituality and otherworldliness. Mulk Raj Anand’s Marg magazine, in which Keyt was an editorial board member, promoted his art in the 1950s and became one of the major defenders of the erotic and the nude in Indian art. Alain Danielou in his essay ‘An approach to Hindu Erotic Sculpture’ that appeared in Marg, talked about evolving an attitude to approach ancient Indian art without ‘complexes or ambiguity’ and without the uncomfortable feeling that there is something to be ashamed of. He further argued that ‘the attempt to clarify this issue may

115 Tapati Guha-Thakurta, Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), 256.
be also providing a useful means towards freeing ourselves from western prejudice.\footnote{118} This leads us to examine the factors that led to the ‘nude’ being considered shameful in the age of modernity. Danielou’s emphasis on developing an attitude towards acceptance of sexuality and nudity in art in association with tradition, and thus decolonization, is interesting. He questioned the dichotomy between the religious and the profane and argued that there is no aspect of life that is not part of religion, no action that is not rite. ‘The sexual act is a sacred rite.’ Mulk Raj Anand expressed similar sentiments in his essay, ten years later in 1957, when Keyt’s erotic compositions were at their peak.\footnote{119} Anand brought the interpretation of the spiritual and metaphysical into the sexual act to defend the erotic in medieval depictions. He argued that the prejudice against love, particularly in its sexual form, was more deeply rooted in Christian Puritanism based on the doctrine of original sin.\footnote{120}

One could argue that the ambiguity towards these images among the English educated bourgeois gentlemen in the early decades of the twentieth century was a construct of the Victorian ideal of gentlemanliness. As Foucault reveals, in the Victorian imagination, ‘sexuality was no longer an idiom of pleasure or a form of self-fulfilment. It was confined to purely reproductive tasks. Sexuality has to be confined to reproduction and the bedroom.’\footnote{121} These writings clearly show an attempt to transform the public representation of nudity and sensuality into the domestic sphere that was connected to tradition and spirituality by the traditionalist enmeshed in Victorian gentlemanly identity. Malathi de Alwis elaborates on how the sensuality in the painted voluptuous bodies of the Sigiriya women threatened Ceylonese nationalist consciousness and forced them to

\footnote{118} He represents the dilemma of accepting them by cautioning that they are not actually meant to be practised or feel concerned about. Rather, the viewer should see the divine underlying it. By referring to Kama Sutra, he further argues that the seekers of liberation achieve their aim through detachment which can only follow attachment. For, the mind of human beings are, by their nature, inclined towards objects of sense. Alain Danielou, “An Approach to Hindu Erotic Sculpture,” Marg 2, no. 1 (1947).


\footnote{120} Ibid.

invent new narrations around these images. She argues that by marrying these painted ladies to their patrons, rulers and gods in their discourses, nationalist historians established a new kinship and enslaved them within the domestic domain.

In general, Keyt's female bodies would have challenged Anagarika Dharmapala's project of disciplining and regulating the colonized Buddhist Sinhala female body. Since Dharmapala's anti-colonial Buddhist revivalism was based on the principles of protestant Puritanism, the notion of sin associated with the sexual and erotic found its way into 'Protestant Buddhism'. Interestingly, when Keyt began painting these bodies, the dress reform movement was underway and the popular paintings in the Buddhist temples in the suburbs of Colombo showed traces of this movement. The female characters in the Buddhist jātakas were consciously draped in the newly invented 'national dress'. Since most of Keyt's paintings illustrate the Hindu mythical and epical characters, they tactfully maintain a distance from the morals of reformed Buddhism. While constructing a pan Indian identity, these paintings tactically leave the new Buddhist conservatism untouched.

Malathi de Alwis, by probing the terms Kula Kāntāva and Kulaṅgana, explores the negotiation between sexuality and morality. The word Kāntāva (women), with its root Kāntā (attractive), featured prominently in debates in the 1920s when it became associated with prostitutes. In order to make the distinction absolutely clear, kula was added to Kāntāva. It thus suggested a woman who was noble, led an unblemished life, and safeguarded as well as followed age old traditions, while also being attractive. De Alwis concludes with the note that 'while assiduously foregrounding the moral and the traditional qualities of respectable women, the Sinhala pundits of this period were nevertheless clear that they wish to retain the suggestion of sexual attractiveness in such women.' Tapati Guha-Thakurta points out:

122 For example, Coomaraswamy argued that the Sigiriya paintings are somewhat sensuous, and though apparently representing goddesses and attendants, are not marked by religious feelings. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Medieval Sinhalese Art (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956 [1908]), 178.
For all the call for ‘frankness’, ‘boldness’ and ‘elemental honesty’ in facing up to the central place of sex in Indian art and religion, the physicality of the human body, like the sexual act, had to be strategically sublimated and allegorised.\(^{125}\) In this allegorical translation, the artist’s heterosexual eroticism has also been sublimated into an ‘artistic’ form. Sunil Goonasekera states that ‘it was the myths that led Keyt to the balanced coupling of the mood and the image. Keyt used the “theatrical” personalities in the myths in new choreographs to re-enact experiences and those of others.’\(^{126}\) Further, Guha-Thakurta finds that ‘the theme of female sexuality has required the continuous negotiation of a new set of distinctions between what is “art” and what is not—between the “aesthetic” and the “obscene”, between the “spiritual” and the “physical”’.\(^{127}\) In the case of Keyt, the confluence of nationalist imagination of the mythological past and the modernist’s romanticized myth of the male artist’s freedom, actively transformed the Kāntāva bodies into those of the respectable Kula Kāntāva. However, showing the Kula Kāntāva bodies in nude form is self-contradictory, but modernist aesthetics help the artist to drape and elevate them as artistic bodies.

### 4.6 Gazing the ‘Other’: ‘Effeminate’ Male Bodies

Although twentieth century European art was preoccupied with the female nude, the Ceylonese painter David Paynter and the photographer Lionel Wendt predominantly employed the local male body to articulate the personal as well as exhibit the ‘rural’. By doing that they implicated the local male body with the bourgeois male gaze. My curiosity was aroused by the fact that both these artists were born in the same year (1901), were contemporaries, belonged to the Euro-Asian community and conveyed a quality of effeminacy through their representations of the male body.

Though their male characters appear against the local landscape, engaged in mundane activities, the focal point is on the textural and structural aspects of the male body rather than the stories they narrate or activities they are engaged in. The sensuality of these figures, voluntarily or involuntarily, invites the onlooker to consume them. In

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\(^{125}\) Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), 244.


these representations, the brown/black sculpturesque full/semi-nude bodies of the adolescent rural men are, in a way, stereotyped. But instead of unrestrained heterosexual virility, the figures were configured using feminine codes of representation, indicative of the artists’ own projection of sexual preferences. These male images provide an erotic pleasure to their homosexual spectator. Hence, the earlier anthropological gaze operating in the works of colonial photographers was further complicated by the homoerotic sensibility of the artists. Even though the homosexual eroticism, voyeurism and fetishism in these works is worth investigating¹²⁸, my attempt here is to understand the artist’s subjectivity in the matrix of the colonial consciousness of ‘difference’ based on class, race and sexuality.

John Berger’s observation on European oil paintings reveals how the act of seeing operates along gender differences; ‘men act and women appear’.

Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves.

The surveyor of woman in herself is male; the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision, a sight.¹²⁹ Through this observation, he has shown seeing as a hegemonic act in which men are always active onlookers and the women are passive objects to be looked at. Further, Berger has explained how a nude woman in the oil painting through her actions, gestures and postures, directly or indirectly presents herself to the surveillance of the viewer, placed inside or outside the picture frame. Since she herself is shown immersed in enjoying her own nude body, it encourages the male viewer to look at her without feeling guilty of being seen. As many film theorists foreground, seeing without being seen arouses voyeuristic pleasure in the viewer. Thus, in the act of seeing, the woman’s body is transformed into an object that may be handled, possessed and governed.¹³⁰


¹³⁰ Mulvey notes that Freud referred to (infantile) scopophilia—the pleasure involved in looking at other people’s bodies as (particularly, erotic) objects. In the darkness of the cinema auditorium, it is notable that one may look without being seen either by the object/person on screen or by other members of the audience. Mulvey argues that various features of cinema viewing conditions facilitate for the viewer both
When these oil paintings represent male figures, Berger observes:

A man’s presence is dependent upon the promise of power which he embodies...the promised power may be moral, physical, temperamental, economic, social, sexual—but its object is always exterior to the man. A man’s presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. His presence may be fabricated, in the sense that he pretends to be capable of what he is not. But the pretence is always towards a power which he exercises on others.\(^{131}\)

If we were to carefully examine the works of these two Ceylonese artists, the above observation of Berger on the act of seeing based on gender division operates at a different rhetorical level. The male bodies represented in Paynter and Wendt’s works bear the qualities that Berger identified as being represented by the female body.

### 4.6.1 Paintings of David Paynter

Trained in the academic tradition in Europe, he later assimilated a Gauguinesque style combined with western classical bodily postures and gestures. Although his paintings thematically varied from Christian mythology to local rural life, his primary interest was the male body. Rural themes naturally allowed the artist to handle semi-nude male bodies, which was not possible with biblical themes. The artist’s selection of bodily types and themes like farmers, cartmen, fishermen and swineherds demonstrate the artist’s interest in documenting local male bodies with their caste, costume and occupational reference (Plates 4.42, 4.43, 4.44). In addition, his paintings were exhibited every year from 1923 to 1940 at the Royal Academy exhibitions. He held a one-man exhibition at Wertheim Galleries, London and participated in four important international shows in Pittsburg, Rome, New Delhi and New York.\(^{132}\) He also mentioned in one of his radio talks that most of his buyers were foreigners.\(^{133}\) Hence, one could argue that these local bodies were shaped for the non-native viewer immersed in orientalist expectations and fantasies about the East.

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\(^{133}\) *The Ceylon Observer*, March 29, 1939.
Paynter’s pictures are imaginary compositions rather than scenes directly painted from life. Bodies are composed and shown in either frontal or posterior views to consciously showcase modulation and contours of the well-toned bodies; as if they were posing for a camera (Plate 4.45). The age, class, race of the figures suggest the artist’s preference for a certain kind of local bodily type. Oiled hair, either tightly combed or tied at the back; a piece of cloth clinging to the lower half of the body, helping to delineate the contours of the invisible body structure. The lustre of the oily skin and brown colour transformed the body into a bronze sculpture. Ironically, facial features and bodily gestures of these taut male bodies, carved in light and shade, convey a quite ‘feminine’ nature; hence they ‘appear’ rather than ‘act.’ Like the female nudes, these males are aware of the surveillance of the onlooker’s gaze. Thus, they do not represent power but subjection, and are not inscribed by the expected qualities of masculinity and manliness.

4.6.2 Photographs of Lionel Wendt
Lionel Wendt’s oeuvre includes portraits, documents of historical monuments, female and male nudes, surrealistic figurative compositions and landscape compositions. The present reading focuses on his male nudes. In his black and white photographs depicting various positions and actions of the male body, the colonial anthropological gaze, orientalist search for authentic local body and homoerotic pleasure of the artist are fused together, coated with modernist aesthetics. In contrast, his female nude photographs simply objectify the female body as an ethnographic document without voyeuristic pleasure.

Light, shade and texture played a vital role in visual regulation that transforms man into body and body into an object for aesthetic consumption. Equally, these visual elements helped to mask the homoerotic intention of the photographer’s eyes hidden behind the lens. Kobena Mercer’s observations on the works of gay photographer Robert Mapplethorpe comes close to the visual field of Lionel Wendt. In these photographs, he observes, the camera cuts away the body like a knife and allows the spectator to inspect the goods—the torso, the chest, the buttocks and the genitals.\textsuperscript{134} He further reveals how photographic shots turn the black/brown male flesh into stone; fixed, frozen in space and

time, away from its 'actual' political, historical, economic space, and is made into an aesthetic object for erotic consumption.\footnote{Ibid.} Similarly, nudes placed against the black background of a studio setting in Wendt’s photographs cut the male body into pieces and serve them for capitalist-modernist aesthetic consumption. This aestheticization or commoditization was made possible by isolating the body from the person and from its actual temporal and spatial realities.

Visual tactics are akin to the photographs of rural scenes. In addition, the rural scenes offer an exotic background with rich tonal and textural variation that increases the commodity value of the body (Plate 4.46). Although they represent the everyday activities of rural life, they are not randomly shot pictures of reality; rather these are products of arranged settings or unusual enactments for the camera, directed by the photographer. As in the case of the studio settings, the bodies are posed to get a clear and graphic erotic angle. Therefore, the gaze of the outsider/photographer/surveyor is deeply inscribed in the consciousness of models (Plate 4.48). That brings the power disparity into play.

Scenes like men fetching water from the well and bathing (Plates 4.49, 4.50), relate to similar voyeuristic inquisitiveness in the images of female bathers painted by impressionists Edgar Degas and Jean Renoir, or the painted men of Gustave Caillebotte. Here, the act as well as the body became the site of homoerotic fantasy. Looking not only subjects the unknown wet body to the surveillance of the viewer, but also probes other private activities in voyeuristic pleasure. Similarly minimal clothing was used by Wendt to eroticize the private parts of the male body (Plate 4.47). In many of his photographic shots, the clothing itself is an erotic act through which the invisible parts of the body gain visibility for erotic imagination. What is evident in the picture plan is not the sexuality of the local men but the artist’s sexual and social identity.

\section*{4.6.3 Effeminate Male Body and the Gender-Based Way of Seeing}

Just as patriarchy operates differently in different cultures, the politics of seeing too differs culturally. The way of seeing that operated through the European oil paintings, as discussed by John Berger, was introduced to Ceylon through colonialism. Geeta Kapur
argues that oil painting was not only seen as a technique and artistic medium in India but conceived as a way of seeing. I would argue that the local artists' attempt to master realism in the medium of oil painting and photography is an attempt to imbibe and localize the power discourse that operates through these genres and media. Thus, realism and its mechanics of viewing and representing reinvested and institutionalized the project of differentiating the 'others' from 'us' by the colonial local elite artists.

Feminist thought has defined spectatorship as a perspective of the heterosexual male. This perspective, Barber argues, constructs the female body as an object for consumption and identifies it with passive sexuality. Kobena Mercer's arguments help place in context some of my observations regarding the works of the Ceylonese artists being discussed here. Mercer, while reading the black male bodies represented in the white photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs, shows how ethnic differences and homoeroticism play a part through gaze. He also observes the passive and effeminate nature of these black bodies. Richard Dyer suggests that when male subjects assume the 'feminized' position of being looked at, the threat or risk to traditional definitions of masculinity is counteracted by the roles of certain codes and conventions such as taut, rigid or straining bodily postures, character types and narratives plots, all of which aim to stabilize the gender-based dichotomy of seeing/being seen. Based on this observation, I would argue that the disparity in the relationship between the westernized, city-based elite Euro-Asian artist and the rural Sinhalese or Tamil model and the homoerotic desire of the artist produced the subversive as effeminate, weak and passive object. Thus, Berger's gender-based framework of seeing was appropriated within local art practice to accommodate other socio-cultural disparities and was further convoluted with the artist's sexuality.

4.6.4 Otherness and Gender-Based Representations

Being products of interaction between Europeans and Asians, Burghers and other Euro-Asian communities attained a new agency to mediate both with the rulers and the ruled. In contrast, they also formed a new 'impure' mixed category of race, 'subversive' to both

white and local identity. However, the position they achieved through their English language skills and allegiance to Christianity within the colonial administrative machinery gave them social, political and economic advantages. This allowed them to emerge as the earliest members of the local bourgeoisie.\textsuperscript{138} But this mobility, along with the prejudice against mixed communities, could arouse hostility among other groups towards the 'People Inbetween'.\textsuperscript{139} These Euro-Asians, who were in modern parlance 'public intellectuals,' questioned both foreign domination and oppressive local structures and played an important part in modernizing society. 'Rather than being "marginal" to society, they were utopian-like visionaries and agitators, active on important political and social issues long before the time was ripe for major reforms or social reform.'\textsuperscript{140} Hence, as R. K. Park points out, the 'Euro-Asian was said to live in two worlds, in both of which he is more or less a stranger'.\textsuperscript{141}

David Paynter was the Euro-Asian son of missionary parents. His father was English and mother Sinhalese belonging to southern Ceylon. Lionel Wendt has a Burgher-Sinhalese ancestry. Burghers in Ceylon considered themselves as superior to other Portuguese, English and French Euro-Asians and most of them belonged to the elite class.\textsuperscript{142} By the mid-nineteenth century, Jayawardena argues, they looked upon England rather than Holland as their 'mother country', the wealthier among them visiting Britain when possible. Further, as Digby mentions, Burghers thought like English subjects;

\textsuperscript{138} Portuguese policy had been one of actively promoting conversion to Catholicism and inter-marriage with the local inhabitants. The Dutch and British, who followed the Portuguese, frequently married into this mixed community during the years when there were few European women in Sri Lanka. With the surrender of the maritime regions by the Dutch to the British in 1796, many people of Dutch origin chose to leave the country, but others such as traders, priests and government employees stayed on, and were designated as 'Burghers'. To the British, the presence of such a population, literate in English, and Christian in faith, was a great asset, and this group of Burghers and Euro-Asians became an important segment of the local bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie. Kumari Jayawardena, \textit{Nobodies to Somebodies: The Rise of the Colonial Bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka} (Delhi: Leftword, 2001).


\textsuperscript{140} Kumari Jayawardena, \textit{Erasure of the Euro-Asian: Recovering Early Radicalism and Feminism in South Asia} (Colombo: Social Scientist Association, 2007), ii.


\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.
Queen Victoria was their Queen, and the English parliament was their parliament. The Burghers' English imagination, while helping them project a progressive identity, distinguished and distanced them from the local community. In the peak period of representational politics in colonial Ceylon, the Burghers' 'imagined superiority' produced the Sinhalese, Tamils and other Euro-Asians as the feeble 'others'.

David Paynter was trained at the Royal Academy School in England and stayed a further two years in Italy. Lionel Wendt went to England to study law. He used the opportunity for advanced training at the Royal Academy of Music in London under several renowned masters: Oscar Beringer, the famous pianist Mark Hambourg, and Hambourg's pupil, Gerald Moore. Their art training, elitist life style and exposure to European art world largely frame their practice and aesthetic sensibilities and priorities. Orientalist views, embedded in Eurocentric views, contributed significantly in 'artistically' framing the local bodies. Further, the hierarchical relationship between the urban, individual artist and the rural, anonymous, bodily type, along with the artists' homoerotic gaze, contributed in the production of the local male body as seeable, flimsy, passive and 'effeminate'. In this visual transaction, existing dichotomies operating through categories such as seer and seen, ruler and ruled, surveyor and surveyed and, male and female were reformulated as a sense of 'us' and 'other'. Jordanova argues:

The idea of otherness is complicated, but certain themes are common: the treatments of other as more like an object, something to be managed and possessed, and dangerous, wild, threatening. At the same time the other becomes an entity whose very separateness inspires curiosity, invites inquiring knowledge.

In this context, as Mercer shows, the bodies of the local men became an exchangeable commodity, waiting to be framed, read and exploited. The racial and sexual body of the local transformed into an object of erotic and aesthetic consumption by the elites.

4.6.5 Effeminate Male Body: A Colonial Stereotype

Colonial fixity about the Indian male had a considerable impact on the artistic depiction of the body of local men. Homi Bhabha points out that fixity is the sign of cultural/historical/racial differences in the discourse of colonialism. He further elaborates:

...a paradoxical mode of representation; it connotes rigidity and unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy, demonic repetition. Likewise, the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place' already known and something that must be anxiously repeated.147

He explains:

The construction of colonial subject in discourse and the exercise of colonial power through discourse, demands an articulation of forms of difference—racial and sexual. Such an articulation becomes crucial if it is held that the body is always simultaneously inscribed in both the economy of pleasure and desire and the economy of discourse, domination and power.148

Creating 'differences' became a crucial aspect of the practice of power in the colonial era in which constructing unchangeable stereotypes evolved into an important practice. The colonialist’s fix on Ceylonese men is part of a larger idea they had about South Asian men. As Nandy observes, the British always described (in derogatory terms) the Tamil and Bengali intellectual male as feminized, passive, inactive.149 Sikhs, Rajputs and some of the Muslim groups represented the ideal of Victorian masculinity and manliness.150 Similarly, Nira Wickramasinghe foregrounds the fixity about Sinhalese men in the French Novel ‘Le Feeric Cinghalise’ written by a French traveller, Francoise de Croisset in 1926. Wickramasinghe correctly asserted that the book expressed French prejudices and British mentality rather than the customs of the Sinhalese society. An underlying theme is the long hair of Sinhalese men, their wearing of a comb, and their sexually feminine and provocative characteristics such as long eyelashes, oiled bodies and nudity.151

148 Ibid.
149 Ashis Nandy, At the Edge of Psychology (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980).
A young Sinhalese man, with girlish hair, naked under a sarong that sweat placates to his back.\(^{152}\)

In white dress, his oiled hair kept up by a forked comb, a boy sculptured in a brown nut, whose eyelashes seems false.\(^{153}\)

Here, the Sinhalese men were described as ‘feminine’ through the mutilization of gendered characteristics. Gender, in fact, helped define the contrast between the rulers and the ruled and provided a way to order Britain’s relation with Indian or Ceylonese subjects, says Wickramasinghe.\(^{154}\) Even though Croisset is a woman, her identification with the colonial power allowed her to occupy a male position that saw the local men as effeminate. While these accounts, from the perspective of the imagined American traveller character in the novel, reveals the relationship between gender identity and power in the colonial era, they go hand in hand with the male visual representations of the Euro-Asian artists discussed here. Further, Jani de Silva shows how Victorian ideals of manliness and masculinity transformed the bourgeois men and traders into proper ‘gentlemen’ in Ceylon. It is evident that the personhood produced through this transformation among the gentlemen artists could have contributed to the objectification.

4.6.6 Ambivalence of Colonial Representation

Based on the display of male and female bodies in cinema, Laura Mulvey has written at length about the relationship between the body and the film shot. She observes that while the female body is cut off from its background and made available for consumption part by part through ‘close ups’, the male body, on the other hand, is always shown in long shot against the landscape.\(^{155}\) Based on her observation, if one looks at the picture plans of Lionel Wendt and David Paynter, we find that they are situated in middle frames. This middle grounding constructively has a mediatory role in transforming the male body into a ‘feminized’ object. This can also be read as a way of representing the colonial ambivalence of ‘People Inbetween’.

\(^{152}\) Francoise de Croisset, quoted in Ibid.
\(^{153}\) Ibid.
\(^{154}\) Ibid., 99.
Representation of the nude in art was largely fixated on the female body. Right through the nineteenth century, the status of the male nude was steadily marginalized in avant-garde art.\textsuperscript{156} Previously, it had occupied a prime position within the neo-classical history of painting at the time of the French revolution when representations of heroic masculinity were paramount.\textsuperscript{157} Since the emergence of the male body in the first half of the twentieth century in Ceylonese art coincided with the colonial-national conflict, it demands much deeper attention. Citizenship, nationalism, militarism, revolution, political violence, dictatorship and dominance—are all best understood as masculine projects, involving masculine institutions, masculine processes and masculine activities, argues Joane Nagel.\textsuperscript{158} In this context, one could read these Ceylonese male bodies as indexical to the emerging nation. Paradoxically, the rhetoric embedded in the representation of male bodies in the art of Wendt and Paynter highlights the very opposite traits of passivity and ‘feminine’ attitudes. Further, this also represents the predicaments of the mixed Euro-Asian race, which identified itself as an outsider as well as insider, in the emerging nation inscribed along ‘pure’ Sinhala Buddhist lines.

### 4.6.7 ‘The Third Body’

Thomas Waugh, based on nineteenth century homoerotic Victorian photography, identified the construction of three types of male bodies. While ‘ephebe’ (adolescent) and ‘he-man’ (athlete) were represented in the colonial photographs as objects of homoerotic gaze, the ‘third body was predicated by these two as an implied gay subject, the invisible desiring body of producer-spectator behind the camera, in front of the photograph, but rarely visualized within the frame. The third body, the looking, representing subject, stood in for the authorial self as well as for the assumed gay spectator.\textsuperscript{159}


\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 150.


His observation throws light upon the aspect of the artists' sexuality as the hidden half of these 'effeminate' male bodies. Steve Neale argues that in a heterosexual and patriarchal society, the male body cannot be marked explicitly as the erotic object of another male look: that look must be motivated, its erotic component repressed.\textsuperscript{160}

Mulvey's ideas of female spectatorship in films being always from the masculine position, falls short in the context of the lesbian viewer. It came under criticism for never challenging the normativity of dominant gender construction. A similar criticism is unavoidable in the case of gay spectatorship. Miriam Hansen reworks the Mulveyen paradigm and reveals various oscillations in spectatorship between masculine and feminine.\textsuperscript{161} Hansen argues that the gaze is never fixed but instead always vacillates and is potentially transformative in its possibilities. That shows how gaze could operate in terms of sexuality, different from the gender position charted by John Berger. This suggests a more multifaceted and inter-dependent viewership. In the case of Paynter and Wendt, the effeminate characters of the represented male body, while revealing the politics of gaze between 'us' and 'them', situate the artist subject in a queer position. Sexual attraction between the same genders is not solely determined by the power dynamics between the seer and the seen.

\textbf{4.7 Conclusion}

By probing colonial ethnographical representations, portraits, figure compositions and the representation of female and male bodies, this chapter foregrounds how power discourse is implicated with pictorial conventions, and relativization of one, connected to the other. Fixity, thus established in colonial ethnographic realistic mode, provided the structure for later appropriation and reworking. This was further reproduced in later anti-representational works and multiplied in the construction of difference of race, class, caste, gender and sexuality. In the Ceylonese context, race remains the prime mode of establishing difference, subject to further contestation and competition. The colonial anthropological gaze achieved an artistic body through the nationalist and orientalist


\textsuperscript{161} Jose Munoz, \textit{Disidentification: Cultural Studies of Americans, Vol-2} (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 27.
imagination and its search for the authentic local. The 'local body' emerged from the nationalism concomitantly driven in two directions: by the Parisian and popular aesthetics that informed easel painting and the temple murals from the colonial period respectively.