

Painted Female Body: Modernity, Tradition and Female Nudity in George Keyts' Paintings

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George Keyt, one of the 'most celebrated' South Asian artists, emerged as an icon after 1930 when nationalism appropriated tradition within the project of modernity. His eclectic style, both in iconography and ideology, became signifiers of modernity and tradition. Hindu and Buddhist mythical characters in their erotic postures have incarnated in his linear signature style. This helped the artist to identify his interests directly with the nationalist/orientalist art discourse of India. 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 is always through the agency of female nudes. Female nudes became a prime visual content in twentieth century, Parisian modernism which coincided with the birth of new male subjectivity. Concomitantly, nationalist and colonialist discourses, by representing a modernized version of local patriarchy, disciplined and reshaped the female body. This paper thus, attempts to map the politics of representation in George Keyt's painting through the contemporary readings on female nudes. In that, the present paper intends to understand the representational politics in colonial modernity by inquiring how the representation of female body in George Keyt's painting gain acceptance in the modernist art world as well as in the nationalist art discourse. Through a comparative visual and textual analysis, this paper attempts to establish a feminist interpretation of George Keyt's paintings.

The paper attempts to argue that as in European Modernist art, the female body became one of the major stylistic and thematic concerns of local modernist. The Female body in Sri Lankan painting is operated through three different discourses: anthropological racial, allegorical/national, gender /sexuality. This shows how local patriarchy and nationalism, by using the frames of colonialism and modernism re-disciplined female body and established new notions of respectability. It also suggested the interplay between male sexuality and creativity in the wake of individualization of art practice. Through the mythical characters Keyt sublimated his own sexuality and female nudity as work of art at the peak of national –colonial and tradition

–modern conflict. The meaning of female body in the colonial modernity was always a mediation between the visual and discourse.

Key words: *Female Body; Modern; Representation; Sexuality; Tradition*

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