

## Visualizing Literary Memory: Ravishankar Raval and the Formation of Cultural Identity in Gujarat

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### Abstract

The essential contribution of the artist Ravishankar Raval to the formation of modern Gujarati cultural identity is questioned in this paper, namely, through the visual images of literary and historical figures created by him. The paper will use four landmark portraits, including Munjal Mehta, Jhansi Ki Rani Laxmibai, Mirabai, and Manbhatty to explain how Raval turned verbatim textual representations especially those of the novelist Kanaiyalal Munshi into permanent visual symbols. The integration of Western ideals of realism and the native traditions of revival aesthetics, including miniature traditions and the wash technique, by Raval created a unique visual language between the tradition and modernity. These portraits are not only the illustrative supplements, but rather cultural records, which actively form the memory of people and local pride. The paucity of setting, the restraint of symbolic decoration, the considerations of composition, bring historical persons from personalities into archetypal forms of political wisdom, martial opposition, religious obedience, and acting custom. Publication in the powerful journals like Kumar helped Raval spread the imagery through the large portion of the population and ingrained it in the visual lexicon of Gujarat. The paper argues that the works of Raval are clear instances of regional modernism and it shows how artistic practice can be involved in nationalist discourse without losing cultural rootedness. This interdisciplinary discourse between literature and visual art thus unveils the power behind intermedial translation in the development of communal memory and identification with their history.

**Keywords:** Ravishankar Raval, Gujarati cultural identity, literary-visual dialogue, regional modernism, intermedial translation.

The two-way interaction between literature and visual art has served in the course of the centuries as a major means of communal memory. When historical and cultural characters are initially created by the means of text and then translated into a painted or sculpted shape, they gain a new life and power in a collective memory. This opposition between text description and pictorial presentation gained a specific weight in the context of the Gujarat of the early twentieth century. Authors created elaborate so-called word-portraits (shabda chitra), and artists translated them into powerful visual texts. The list of the most influential protagonists

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of such cultural exchange includes the portrait of literary and historical figures created by Kalaguru Ravishankar Raval (1892-1977), which had a critical impact on the direction of the visual culture of modern Gujarati.

Ravishankar Raval was not just a painter but a cultural architect who was able to understand the semiotic power of imagery in identity formation. Raval habituated readers to the visualisation of writers, saints, historical figures and cultural heroes through the powerful Gujarati periodical that he created and edited called Kumar. His masterpiece work, Gujarat na Sahitya Sarjako -Chitro ma ane Shabdo ma (Literary creators of Gujarat in pictures and words), was not an anthology of likenesses, but rather a conscious attempt to show the literary and cultural heritage of Gujarat through a complex image-text paradigm. Combining portraits with explanatory exegeses, Raval allowed people to picture the characters that had created Gujarati literature and history, thus filling in the gap between what people could imagine and see.

Many of the themes depicted by Raval had already been depicted in Gujarati prose literature with great color, most famously by Kanaiyalal Munshi. Munshi (1887-1971) was a renowned novelist and historian that was known due to his psychologically rich characterisation. His historical epics, as in the case of Patan ni Prabhuta, represent medieval Gujarat, not as an abstraction of the past but as a culture in the present. Kanaiyalal created vivid and human characters through careful treatment in terms of gesture, regalia, temperament and internal conflict. These word-portraits of the text provided a strong imaginative frame-work around which Raval could project his visual interpretations. However, Raval did not apolitely copy the textual tropes but reconstructed them as cultural images, giving them the visual shapes that summarised the moral, political and spiritual principles which they represented.

An ideal illustration of a shift in text to image is the translation of Munjal Mehta by Raval. Munjal in the story of Munshi is an intelligent, restrained and authoritative minister of the Solanki period who embodies wisdom, control and power. Raval expresses these qualities by a calm dignity of expression in a profile portrait, a manner recollective of Indian miniature painting traditions, which anticipate clarity of expression and calm absolute mastery of dramatic action. The background is very sparse and harsh on purpose, resulting in a simple shift of the attention of the viewer directly to the figure. By using delicate tonal modeling, Raval gives the face and torso of Munjal volume and presence to create an image of reality which is symbolically resonant.

Garments and accessories also help to unify the historical setting of Munjal. The portrait shows that he is wearing crimson turban, pearls, gold ornaments, and a white garment, all of which are symbolic of high social and political status. He carries a sword in his hand, and this symbolizes responsibility and leadership but not aggression. To provide the composition with a solid background of the medieval traditions of Gujarat, decorative motifs are used, reminiscent of Solanki architectural forms. Therefore, the painting, instead of one being a representation of a character in a work of literature, the work of art builds a visual representation of a local history politically based visual archetype.

The resistance and heroism are dynamic in the stark opposition of Munjal and Raval, where the former is depicted as quite an authority, and the latter as a representation of the heroine Jhansi Ki Rani Laxmibai. Whereas Munjal is the emblem of the medieval Gujarat, Laxmibai is the anti-colonial effort of the nineteenth century. Raval shows Laxmibai with martial equipment, a sword in her hand and in a dominant pose. The music is full of the kinetic drive and movement and determination. The fort in the background also builds up historical reference to the 1857 rebellion against the British rule.



Figure 1: Ravishankar Raval, “Munjal”,  
 Watercolour on Paper (Wash Technique), mid20th century.

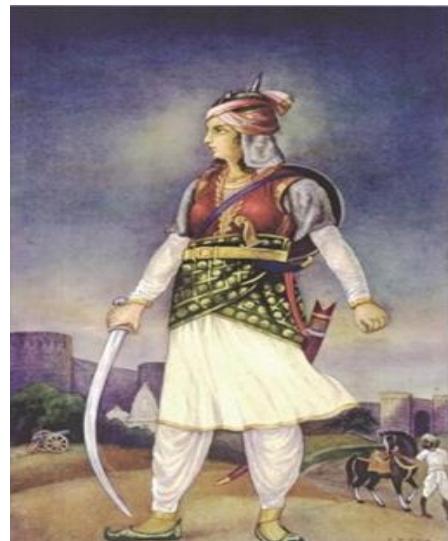


Figure 2: Ravishankar Raval, “Jhansi Ki Rani Laxmibai”, Watercolour on Paper (Wash Technique),  
 mid-20th century

Raval is courageous and rebellious through the decisive lines and a resolute pose. The look of Laxmibai is intense, and eyes her power. The artist in this tableau identifies her image with nationalist symbolism that permeated the Indian intellectual community in the first half of the twentieth century. Thus, she goes beyond that of a historical queen to be a representation of

nationwide resistance and sacrifice. The composition of Laxmibai is much more energetic than the inward composure of Munjal, and this contrast makes us realize how important Raval is to the divergence in the historical performance of his subjects and to the skill with which he can tune his compositional language to it.

When Munjal is the ideal of political wisdom and Laxmibai the ideal of martial disobedience, the Bhakti saint Mirabai is the ideal of the devotion to the God. Mirabai has her niche in the Indian cultural memory. Raval depicts her sitting against a tanpura in a state of devotional music. She has a calm and introspective posture. The image of the temple around her and the light representation of the environment promote the atmosphere of sanctity, which adds to her spiritual orientation.



Figure 3: Ravishankar Raval, “Mirabai”,  
Watercolour on Paper (Wash Technique), mid20th century.

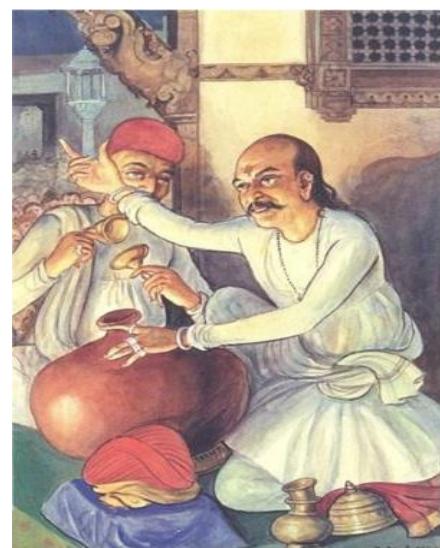


Figure 4: Ravishankar Raval, “Manhatt-Premanand”, Watercolour on Paper (Wash Technique), mid-20th century.

Mirabai in contrast to the martial strength of Laxmibai is spiritual and individual. Her renouncement of the accepted social standards and her unswerving loyalty to Krishna are not expressed in physical conflict but in religious expression and song. Raval conveys this inner strength by soft modelling, bright tones, and peaceful look. The music gives the impression of transcendence rather than action. In such a way of visual interpretation of Mirabai, Raval anticipates the spiritual aspect of the cultural identity, reminding the viewers that the resistance could also be created through devotion and moral belief.

One more important depiction is the character of Manhatt and Premanand- the mythical characters who are involved in the oral and written Gujarati customs. In this writing, Raval

anticipates performative energy and gesture. These figures have been produced in animated positions reflecting the motion flair of the narration and music recitation. The emotional intensity and the narrative engagement are expressed through the facial expression and the body gestures. This painting glorifies motion and communication unlike the majesty or solemnity of Munjal or the silent meditation of Mirabai.

In this piece, Raval pays tribute to the supremacy of oral tradition in the development of Gujarati culture. The literature in Gujarat does not exist in the written form; it is established in the form of performance. Raval takes the narration and music to the next level by visualizing the characters of Manbhatt and Premanand as a heritage of the culture. The composition plays the balance between kinetic energy and structural harmony so that the expression dynamism does not break aesthetic harmony. Such harmony demonstrates the adult sense of art of Raval.

Stylistic analysis shows that the oeuvre of Raval is the synthesis of the Western academic realism and the Indian revivalism aesthetics. His education led to exposure of naturalistic modelling, anatomical accuracy and rigid shading that were considered aspects of European academic art. At the same time, the focus on native themes and spiritual sensitivity of the Bengal School affected him immensely. This amalgamation made him create realistic and symbolic portraits. His characters display physical existence, but they serve as symbols of culture.

The contribution of Raval is not confined to isolated portraits but it is a larger venture of the culture. He spread his works in various magazines, especially in the magazine called Kumar, and by publishing his works in book form he guaranteed the universal distribution of his works. The audience reading literary treatment of historical people were now able to see them through the work of Raval. This was a synergetic interplay of word and image that strengthened the memory of the culture and gave regional pride. His portraits became the part of visual lexicon of contemporary Gujarat.

Furthermore, the work by Raval participated in the greater nationalist movement of the first half of the twentieth century India. He helped to create a modern identity by offering traditionalism to his spiritual saints, literary glamour, and historical heroes. His art shows how the regional modernism in Gujarat developed not by rejecting the past but by reinterpretation of the same. By making an appropriate choice of the objects of interest and considering the compositional techniques, Raval transformed literary figures into timeless visual icons.

To conclude, the portrait of Munjal Mehta, Jhansi Ki Rani Laxmibai, Mirabai, and Manbhatterpremanand by Ravishankar Raval is an impressive literary and visual art dialogue in the Gujarat of the twentieth century. Based on literary word-portraits, especially those of authors like Kanhaiyalal Munshi, Raval transliterates the narrative characterisation into the visual one. His portraits are not only illustrative but also cultural documents preserving and recreating history. He creates a visual vernacular through stylistic synthesis and symbolic depth that builds up the regional identity and leads to national consciousness. His work is an educative model of how art may be engaged in the process of building the collective memory where literary and historical characters will survive in the cultural memory of society.

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