

Semiotic Analysis of The Ragini(s) of Raga Deepak Through Ragamala Paintings

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Abstract: Hindustani classical music is a very expressive art form. Through its development during medieval times, the melodic mode (also known as the Raga) has been expressed through paintings. These raga(s) along with their consort, the Ragini (s) are picturised beautifully by artists in the ragamala paintings. This study aims to delve into one such parent raga Deepak, and its Ragini (s), and study it through the semiotic analysis of the paintings.

Introduction : Semiosis is a study relating to signs and symbols; visuals and their meaning. Merriam-Webster Dictionary describes Semiosis as a general philosophical theory of signs and symbols that deals especially with their function in both artificially constructed and natural languages and comprises syntactics¹, semantics², and pragmatics³; the word finds its origin in Greek *semeiotikos* observant of signs, from *semeiousthai* to interpret signs, from *semeion* sign, and *sc̄ma* sign.⁴

A *ragamala*, (translated from Sanskrit as “garland of *ragas*,” is a series of paintings depicting Indian musical modes or *ragas*. The depiction of these raga moods was a favoured subject in Indian courts and can be traced to the 5th to 7th-century *Brihaddeshi* treatise. Often, one finds poetry describing the raga and its mood on the margins of the painting called *Raga-dhyana*(s). These works thus evocatively express the intersections of painting, poetry, and

¹ a branch of semiotics that deals with the formal relations between signs or expressions in abstraction from their signification and their interpreters.

² a branch of semiotics dealing with the relations between signs and what they refer to.

³ a branch of semiotics that deals with the relation between signs or linguistic expressions and their users.

⁴ “Semiotics” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/semiotics>.

music in Indian court art.⁵ Besides the oral traditions (of which there are no records), *ragamala* miniatures seem to have been the primary means for transmitting the aesthetic features of *raga(s)* and *Ragini(s)* from the 15th to the 19th century. These paintings depict *raga* visuals which in turn humanises the *raga*. *Raga(s)* is generally understood to denote the male protagonist and *Ragini* the female. It is supposed that the Hindu deity *Shiva* has created the five *raga(s)* from his five mouths and the sixth one is created by *Parvati*.

A few musicologists like Damodara and Lochana developed the concept of the *Raga-Ragini* Classification. The four different tenets (or *mat*) were *Shiv-mat* and *Krishna-mat* of six *Raga(s)* and thirty-six *Ragini(s)* and *Hanu-mat* and *Bharata-mat* established the concept of six *Raga(s)* and thirty *Ragini(s)*. Here, *Raga(s)* are supposed to be as Husband and *Ragini(s)* are supposed to be the wife of particular *Raga*. This means each *Raga* has six or five wives per the classification.

Tenets/ <i>mat</i>	Raga(s)
<i>Shiva-mat</i>	<i>Shri, Vasant, Bhairav, Pancham, Natnarayan, Megh</i>
<i>Hanu-mat</i>	<i>Bhairav, Kaushik, Hindol, Deepak, Shri Megh</i>
<i>Krishna-mat</i>	<i>Shri, Vasant, Bhairav, Pancham Natnarayan Megh</i>
<i>Bharata-mat</i>	<i>Bhairav, Malkauns, Hindol, Deepak, Shri, Megh</i>

Table 1: Tenets of Raga-Ragini Classification

According to *Bharata-mat* and *Hanu-mat*, *Raga Deepak* has been listed as one of the six parent *Raga(s)*. In this paper *Raga, Deepak* and its *Ragini(s)* would be studied and analysed through a few specimen *Ragamala* illustrations.

Raga Deepak

Deepak means lamp or flame; this *raga* is a celebration of light. The *raga* is associated with night and is meant to evoke the mood of intimacy between lovers. Legend has it that one of Emperor Akbar’s musicians started a palace fire after being forced to play this *raga* against his better judgment.



Fig. 1: Ragamala painting depicting Raga Deepak.⁵

⁵<https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2014/ragamala>.

The *raga* is mainly depicted with red, yellow and black colours. The red background, in Central Indian tradition, symbolises passion. The painting (*fig.1*) is in strict frontal view, with no attempt at perspective. A man and woman, are seated, listening to music played by a figure sitting on the left. The *Nayaka* is shown as young, brave, calm and royal. Instead of fire, the artist has chosen to depict the scenery with a soft, candlelight-like warmth, which in turn heightens the seductive feel of the painting. *Raga-prabhava* or the warmth is felt through surroundings, and in the body.

The Ragini(s) of Raga Deepak

The notion of *Ragini* as a graceful phase of a raga, appointed with a feminine ending appears as characteristic of the Hindustani Classical Music system. *Sangita Makaranda* also marks the beginning of the distinction between *raga(s)* and *Ragini (s)* – a classification of the melodies into masculine and feminine groups, or in some cases even three groups of masculine melodies (or *pullinga raga*), feminine melodies (or *stree raga*) and neuter melodies (or *napunsaka raga*), according to the character of the feeling (or *rasa*). This classification elucidated to *Brahma*, allocates the sentiments of wonder, courage, or anger to male melodies; the female melodies are assigned the sentiments of love, laughter, and sorrow; while the neuter melodies are assigned the sentiments of terror, fear, disgust, and peace.⁶

The Five *Ragini (s)* of *Raga Deepak* are-

1. *Ragini Todi*
2. *Ragini Kamodini*
3. *Ragini Gujri*
4. *Ragini Kachheli*
5. *Ragini Patamanjari*

Ragini Todi

The *Ragini Todi* is pictured by an anonymous Artist from Bundi (*fig. 2*). *Nayika* here is a beautiful



Fig.2: Raganala painting depicting Ragini Todi⁶

⁶ Gangoly, O.C., *Ragas & Raginis*, 1935, Calcutta, Nalanda Books on Asian Art, Page 71.

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maiden, alone in a dark forest. Her body is adorned and anointed with saffron. The *nayika Abhisarika* (or the one who moves), and moves out to meet her husband. She is pictured defying all kinds of tribulations, dangers and risks of the forest. She is portrayed in motion towards her destination, staying in the groove, moving hither and thither like a snake. She is much attached to her husband and her hue is saffron due to being overwhelmed by love. The deers here are seen symbolising purity, innocence, playfulness and movement.

Ragini Kamodini

The *Ragini Kamodini* is imagined as a princess who is in waiting for her lover to return. The lady depicted holds two garlands in her hand (*fig.3*), possibly of *champaka* flowers, a tree, a flowing rivulet, some cottages and six palm trees against the sombre blue background are part of the composition. She has made the leis of flowers for her lover. She is supposed to excite the onlookers as she waits for her beloved.

The *Ragini* is a captivating, young, lovelorn lady with a complexion like *Druva* grass whose body is adorned with the most pleasing *shringara*. But this does little to assuage her grief. She goes into the woods without a confidante (or *sakhi*) by her side. She has no other desire but to meet her lover.

Ragini Gujri

Depicted as a lady seated on a carpet (*fig.4*), playing the Veena the *Ragini Gujri* awaits her absent betrothed. She seems to point at a large bird, symbolising her lover's absence, and looks over longingly. Pairs of reunited birds, symbolic of the reunited human lovers fly overhead. Representing *Virahotkanthita Nayika*⁷.

She is depicted playing the melody of love, the fieriest of all emotions, on the veena. She awaits her lover, the distressed heroine. Due to his preoccupation, he has failed to return home. The time depicted is daytime but the background is red, and fiery depicting an association with *Deepak Raga*.



*Fig.3: Ragamala painting depicting Ragini Kamodini*⁴

⁷ *nayika* steeped in similar anguish induced by *viraha*, or a parting from her lover, and experiences a grief of a kind that envelopes her in feelings of longing and melancholy.

Ragini Kachheli

Texts describe Ragini Kachheli as the song of the tortoise. A youthful damsel is seen, she is beautiful and elegantly bejewelled. The painting suggests that like the notes of the tortoise Ragini Kachheli is a low-pitched but formidable melody with sharp notes vibrating correspondingly with the brook. The tortoise in Indian fables is seen as endowed with divine spirit, always helping a cause and the *ragini* too recreates spirit by always being pleasant.

This *ragini* has been categorised as one of the consorts of *Raga Deepak*; and is the melody of love like other *Deepak Ragini(s)*, but neither of the love in separation nor of the love in union. *Ragini* instead reveals love's great intensity and mind-tossing with the heat of passion. But yet she does not have her lover to quench it. He is neither with her nor far away from her. Hence the *Ragini* reveals a mind that would not like to have its love away from it even for a little time.

Seen seated on her terrace; viewing two rams fight this *Virahotkanthita Nayika* is depicted interestingly and differently. The fight symbolises a rampant passion for love which plagues her heart and shows her mind in a contest (as rams in a fight symbolise conflict). She seems tranquil but is swirled by emotions.

She is depicted as a lady with henna on her hands. The 'song of the tortoise' or *Kachheli* reveals the unity of tough and tender like that of the metaphorical reptile.



Fig.4: Ragamala painting depicting Ragini Gujri¹¹



Fig. 5: Ragamala painting depicting Ragini Kachheli¹²

Ragini Patamanjari

The Patmanjari Ragini is a sombre but beautiful melody, that stands to symbolise the anguish of a woman separated from her lover. In the painting, the woman is shown as being reassured and attended to by her two servants, while the lover is depicted in a window above, removed from the action happening below. In this way, the painting alludes to the narrative of love and separation, further intensified by the atmosphere of nighttime loneliness and gloom.

A female figure (the *Virahokanthita nayika*), with her two attendants, is depicted in the bottom left of the image. The embers of anger glow as her lover prepares to leave. Reminded of his affection, she feels all the more mortified. She casts her face down and is speechless, but she sheds torrents of tears. A male figure appears in the window above, also accompanied by a female attendant who appears to be in conversation with him. The red-coloured clothes of the Nayaka represent a connection with Raga Deepak. He is shown holding a small flower in his hand, possibly a rose. The architectural space is divided skilfully, with distinct scenes or motifs taking place in each quadrant of the depicted scene. The background of the sky is dark depicting sadness.

Conclusion

Through this analysis of the ragamala paintings of *Raga Deepak*, one can easily analyse the constant mood of the lovelorn.

The *Ragini(s)* as represented by the *nayika(s)* in the paintings represent *Viraha Shringara*. The different settings and moods of the *ragini(s)* as represented by the *nayika* set out to explain the different moods of *viyoga*. The fiery red colour in all the paintings shows the relationality of the consorts of the *Raga Deepak*.

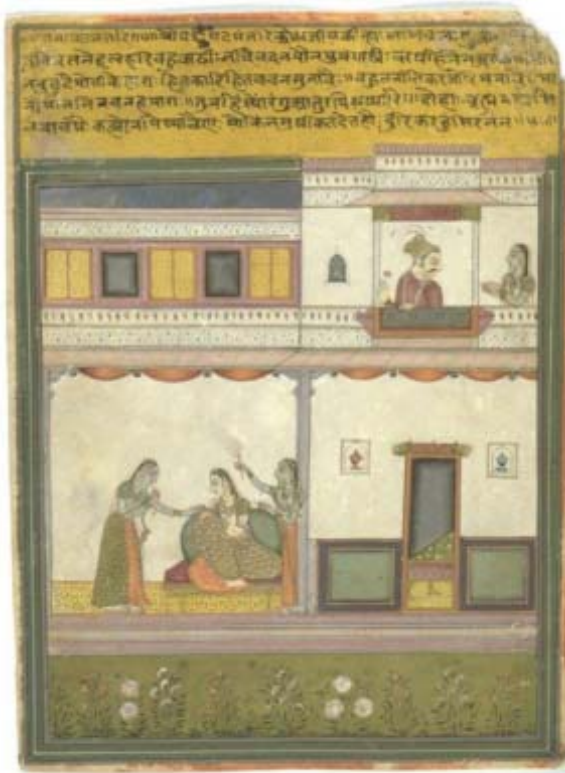


Fig. 5: Ragamala painting depicting Ragini Patamanjari¹²

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