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Course Material

Department of English and Modern European Languages

M.A. SEMESTER IV

S M Mirza

Paper-XIV(C) : Comparative Literature

Unit IV : Drama

Aristophanes : *The Frogs*

Shudrak : *Mrichchakatikam (The Clay Cart)*

Moliere : *The Miser*

Luigi Pirandello : *Six Characters in Search of an Author*

Dear Students,

Hello.

Only **the texts highlighted** above remain to be taught.

I'm providing you course material below for **Shudrak : Mrichchakatikam (The Clay Cart)** so that you can understand it and prepare your answers for the exam.

Prepare the following: **major themes of Mrichchakatika, critical appreciation, depiction of women, characters of Vasantsena and Charudatta, depiction of society of the time, the significance of the title, and humor of the play.**

In case you have any doubts you can contact me on phone or send queries to my email.

All the best!

Shudrak : Mrichchakatikam (The Clay Cart)

Biographical note

Next to nothing is known of Śhūdraka except that he must have hailed from Ujjayinī. His is the most charming of all *prakaraṇa* plays (those that are not based on epic material): the *Mṛcchakaṭikā* ("Little Clay Cart"), the story of an impoverished merchant and a courtesan who

love each other but are thwarted by a powerful rival who tries to kill the woman and place the blame on the hero, Cārudatta. The play offers a fascinating view of the different layers of urban society.

Shudraka was an Indian king and playwright. Three Sanskrit plays are ascribed to him - *Mrichchhakatika* (*The Little Clay Cart*), *Vinavasavadatta*, and a *bhāna* (short one-act monologue), *Padmaprabhritaka*.

The prologue of *Mrichchhakatika* states that its poet was a king renowned as "Shudraka". He had performed Ashvamedha (horse sacrifice) ritual to prove his superiority, and immolated himself at the age of 110 years, after crowning his son as the new king. The prologue describes him as a distinguished wise man, who had gained knowledge of the Rigveda, the Samaveda, mathematics, the Kamashastra and the art of training elephants.^[3]

No historical records mention a king by the name Shudraka (which literally means "little servant"). The first four acts of *Mrichchhakatika* are virtually a copy of the corresponding acts from Bhasa's unfinished play *Charudattam*. One theory is that the poet of *Mrichchhakatika* simply finished Bhasa's play out of respect, styling himself as the "little servant" of Bhasa.

A fourteenth century text attributes *Mrichchhakatika* to a duo, Bhartrihemtha and Vikramaditya. The *Mrichchhakatika* is set in Ujjain. It is known that an Ujjain-based poet by the name Bhartrihemtha was a contemporary of Kalidasa; the legendary king Vikramaditya also lived in Ujjain. However, identifying these two as the authors of *Mrichchhakatika* is chronologically impossible.

Publication

It is difficult to assign a particular date to its writing.

The play was translated into English, notably by Arthur W. Ryder in 1905 as *The Little Clay Cart*. (It had previously been translated as *The Toy Cart* by Horace Hayman Wilson in 1826.) Ryder's version was enacted at the Hearst Greek Theatre in Berkeley in 1907.

Overview

Though the date of *The Little Clay Cart* and the particulars of its author are uncertain, it is a major example of Sanskrit drama. The book abounds with cultural rites and customs and the duties of a householder. It paints a vivid picture of life in the ancient and culturally important city of Ujjain, in North Central India. Combination of political and love intrigue gives special value to the play.

The play opens with a traditional benediction in praise of Siva; it is followed by remarks about the audience, details concerning the author, and a witty bit of patter between the stage manager and his pert wife concerning their

poverty.

The plot proceeds to expand upon the theme of material poverty and spiritual wealth.

The play is in a *Prakarana*. The hero of the play is a Brahmin merchant-prince Carudatta who has become penniless due to his excessive generosity and the heroine of the play is a hetaira Vasantasena, a rich courtesan of rare qualities. When Carudatta is in a mood of despair due to his poverty, Vasantasena enters his house hurriedly from Samstanaka, the King's wicked brother-in-law, and two of his cronies. Carudatta offers the frightened Vasantasena refuge, and thus begins an intense love affair. As a reward for protecting her from Samsthanaka's advances, Vasantasena leaves her jewels in the custody of Carudatta for safekeeping. But the jewels are stolen by an artful thief Sarvilaka. Carudatta's wife fearing that her husband's reputation will be ruined sends her only possession, a necklace of pearls through Maitreya, Carudatta's Brahmin friend. Maitreya hands over the necklace to Vasantasena and narrates a fabricated story that Carudatta has lost his jewel in a gambling house. But before he reaches to her house Sarvilaka has given the stolen jewels to Vasantasena to buy freedom of a slave girl with whom he is in love. Even after knowing the truth she accepts the necklace, taking it as another opportunity to visit her lover Carudatta. She goes to his house and stays in Carudatta's house due to heavy rain. In the next morning Vasantasena returns the necklace to Carudatta's wife but she rejects to take it. The child of Carudatta appears, complaining that he has only a little clay cart (Mrcchakatika), whence the name the play. Vasantasena is moved to tears and out of pity she gives him her jewels that he may buy one of gold. She is to rejoin Carudatta in a neighbouring park, the property of Samstanaka, but by error she enters the car of Samsthanaka while Aryaka, who has been seeking a hiding place, leaps into that of Carudatta and is driven away, two police men stop the cart, and one recognizes Aryaka, but protects him from the other with whom he contrives a quarrel. In the meantime, Carudatta, who is conversing with the Vidusaka seeks his cart driven up, discovers Aryaka, and permits him to go off in it. He himself leaves to find Vasantasena. Meanwhile Vasantasena is delivered by mistake to the evil Samsthanaka elsewhere in the public garden, after she mistakes his coach for that of Carudatta. The angry Samsthanaka first tries to win her by fair words, then, repulsed, orders the vita and the slave to slay her. They indignantly refuse. He pretends to grow clam, dismisses them, and then rains blows on Vasantasena, who falls apparently dead. Samsthanaka buries her body under a pile of dead leaves. The shampooer turned Buddhist monk finds Vasantasena in pathetic condition revives her and takes her to a Buddhist cloister where she is attended by the nuns.

Samsthanaka denounces Carudatta as the murderer of Vasantasena to the court. The judge is inclined to believe under Samsthanaka's political pressure and circumstantial evidences seem to point conclusively to Carudatta's guilt. Carudatta is parodied through the streets of the city by his executioners, who

proclaim aloud his guilt. In a moment of extreme pathos, as Carudatta is about to be impaled upon the stakes, Vasantasena enters and saves his life. Like a *deus ex machine* the thief who stole the jewels from Carudatta's house enters, having just come from slaying the wicked king and placing Aryaka on the throne. He bears the news that Carudatta has been made the viceroy of the neighbouring city. The thief also proclaims that Aryaka has released Vasantasena from her obligations as a courtesan and given her the right to marry Carudatta. The play ends with the union of Carudatta and Vasantasena. The two main sentiments of the play are love and pathos and an appalling feature of the play is the use of a courtesan as the heroine with the exception of *Carudatta* of Bhasa, this is the only play in Sanskrit dramatic literature in which courtesan is a heroine.

Background

The first four acts of *The Little Clay Cart* virtually duplicate those of Bhasa's unfinished play *Carudatta*.

Some scholars have gone so far as to suggest that the poet found Bhasa's play and, out of respect for his work, continued where Bhasa left off, styling himself as the 'Little servant' of Bhasa.

Notes and Analysis

Nowhere else in the hundreds of Sanskrit dramas do we find such variety, and such drawing of character, as in *The Little Clay Cart*; and nowhere else, in the drama at least, is there such humor. Let us consider, a little more in detail, these three characteristics of our author; his variety, his skill in the drawing of character, his humor.

To gain a rough idea of Shūdraka's variety, we have only to recall the names of the acts of the play. Here *The Shampooer who Gambled* and *The Hole in the Wall* are shortly followed by *The Storm*; and *The Swapping of the Bullock-carts* is closely succeeded by *The Strangling of Vasantasenā*. From farce to tragedy, from satire to pathos, runs the story, with a breadth truly Shaksperian. Here we have philosophy:

The lack of money is the root of all evil. (i. 14)

And pathos:

*My body wet by tear-drops falling, falling;
My limbs polluted by the clinging mud;
Flowers from the graveyard torn, my wreath appalling;
For ghastly sacrifice hoarse ravens calling,
And for the fragrant incense of my blood. (x. 3)*

And nature description:

*But mistress, do not scold the lightning. She is your friend,
This golden cord that trembles on the breast
Of great Airāvata; upon the crest
Of rocky hills this banner all ablaze;
This lamp in Indra's palace; but most blest
As telling where your most beloved stays. (v. 33)*

And genuine bitterness:

*Pride and tricks and lies and fraud
Are in your face;
False playground of the lustful god,
Such is your face;
The wench's stock in trade, in fine,
Epitome of joys divine,
I mean your face—
For sale! the price is courtesy.
I trust you'll find a man to buy
Your face. (v. 36)*

It is natural that Shūdraka should choose for the expression of matters so diverse that type of drama which gives the greatest scope to the author's creative power. This type is the so-called "drama of invention,"^[8] a category curiously subordinated in India to the heroic drama, the plot of which is drawn from history or mythology. Indeed, The Little Clay Cart is the only extant drama which fulfils the spirit of the drama of invention, as defined by the Sanskrit canons of dramaturgy. The plot of the "Mālatī and Mādhava," or of the "Mallikā and Māruta," is in no true sense the invention of the author; and The Little Clay Cart is the only drama of invention which is "full of rascals."^[9]

But a spirit so powerful as that of King Shūdraka could not be confined within the strait-jacket of the minute, and sometimes puerile, rules of the technical works. In the very title of the drama, he has disregarded the rule^[10] that the name of a drama of invention should be formed by compounding the names of heroine and hero.^[11] Again, the books prescribe^[12] that the hero shall appear in every act; yet Chārudatta does not appear in acts ii., iv., vi., and viii. And further, various characters, Vasantasenā, Maitreya, the courtier, and others, have vastly gained because they do not conform too closely to the technical definitions.

The characters of The Little Clay Cart are living men and women. Even when the type makes no strong appeal to Western minds, as in the case of Chārudatta, the character lives, in a sense in which Dushyanta^[13] or even Rāma^[14] can hardly be said to live. Shūdraka's men are better individualized than his women; this fact alone differentiates him sharply from other Indian dramatists. He draws on every class of society, from the high-souled Brahman to the executioner and the housemaid.

His greatest character is unquestionably Sansthānaka, this combination of ignorant conceit, brutal lust, and cunning, this greater than Cloten, who, after strangling an innocent woman, can say:^[15] "Oh, come! Let's go and play in the pond." Most attractive characters are the five^[16] conspirators, men whose home is "east of Suez and the ten commandments." They live from

hand to mouth, ready at any moment to steal a gem-casket or to take part in a revolution, and preserving through it all their character as gentlemen and their irresistible conceit. And side by side with them moves the hero Chārudatta, the Buddhist beau-ideal of manhood,

*A tree of life to them whose sorrows grow,
Beneath its fruit of virtue bending low. (i. 48)*

To him, life itself is not dear, but only honor.^[17] He values wealth only as it supplies him with the means of serving others. We may, with some justice, compare him with Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*. There is some inconsistency, from our point of view, in making such a character the hero of a love-drama; and indeed, it is Vasantasenā who does most of the love-making.^[18]

Vasantasenā is a character with neither the girlish charm of Shakuntalā^[19] nor the mature womanly dignity of Sītā.^[20] She is more admirable than lovable. Witty and wise she is, and in her love as true as steel; this too, in a social position which makes such constancy difficult. Yet she cannot be called a great character; she does not seem so true to life as her clever maid, Madanikā. In making the heroine of his play a courtesan, Shūdraka follows a suggestion of the technical works on the drama; he does not thereby cast any imputation of ill on Vasantasenā's character. The courtesan class in India corresponded roughly to the hetærae of ancient Greece or the geishas of Japan; it was possible to be a courtesan and retain one's self-respect. Yet the inherited^[21] way of life proves distasteful to Vasantasenā; her one desire is to escape its limitations and its dangers by becoming a legal wife.^[22]

In Maitreya, the Vidūshaka, we find an instance of our author's masterly skill in giving life to the dry bones of a rhetorical definition. The Vidūshaka is a stock character who has something in common with a jester; and in Maitreya the essential traits of the character—eagerness for good food and other creature comforts, and blundering devotion to his friend—are retained, to be sure, but clarified and elevated by his quaint humor and his readiness to follow Chārudatta even in death. The grosser traits of the typical Vidūshaka are lacking. Maitreya is neither a glutton nor a fool, but a simple-minded, whole-hearted friend.

The courtier is another character suggested by the technical works, and transformed by the genius of Shūdraka. He is a man not only of education and social refinement, but also of real nobility of nature. But he is in a false position from the first, this true gentleman at the wretched court of King Pālaka; at last he finds the courage to break away, and risks life, and all that makes life attractive, by backing Aryaka. Of all the conspirators, it is he who runs the greatest risk. To his protection of Vasantasenā is added a touch of infinite pathos when we remember that he was himself in love with her.^[23] Only when Vasantasenā leaves him^[24] without a thought, to enter Chārudatta's house, does he realize how much he loves her; then, indeed, he breaks forth in words of the most passionate jealousy. We need not linger over the other characters, except to observe that each has his marked individuality, and that each helps to make vivid this picture of a society that seems at first so remote.

Shūdraka's humor is the third of his vitally distinguishing qualities. This humor has an American flavor, both in its puns and in its situations. The plays on words can seldom be adequately reproduced in translation, but the situations are independent of language. And Shūdraka's humor

runs the whole gamut, from grim to farcical, from satirical to quaint. Its variety and keenness are such that King Shūdraka need not fear a comparison with the greatest of Occidental writers of comedies.

It remains to say a word about the construction of the play. Obviously, it is too long. More than this, the main action halts through acts ii. to v., and during these episodic acts we almost forget that the main plot concerns the love of Vasantasenā and Chārudatta. Indeed, we have in *The Little Clay Cart* the material for two plays. The larger part of act i. forms with acts vi. to x. a consistent and ingenious plot; while the remainder of act i. might be combined with acts iii. to v. to make a pleasing comedy of lighter tone. The second act, clever as it is, has little real connection either with the main plot or with the story of the gems. The breadth of treatment which is observable in this play is found in many other specimens of the Sanskrit drama, which has set itself an ideal different from that of our own drama. The lack of dramatic unity and consistency is often compensated, indeed, by lyrical beauty and charms of style; but it suggests the question whether we might not more justly speak of the Sanskrit plays as dramatic poems than as dramas. In *The Little Clay Cart*, at any rate, we could ill afford to spare a single scene, even though the very richness and variety of the play remove it from the class of the world's greatest dramas.

III. AN OUTLINE OF THE PLOT

ACT I., entitled *The Gems are left Behind*. Evening of the first day.—After the prologue, Chārudatta, who is within his house, converses with his friend Maitreya, and deplures his poverty. While they are speaking, Vasantasenā appears in the street outside. She is pursued by the courtier and Sansthānaka; the latter makes her degrading offers of his love, which she indignantly rejects. Chārudatta sends Maitreya from the house to offer sacrifice, and through the open door Vasantasenā slips unobserved into the house. Maitreya returns after an altercation with Sansthānaka, and recognizes Vasantasenā. Vasantasenā leaves a casket of gems in the house for safe keeping and returns to her home.

ACT II., entitled *The Shampooer who Gambled*. Second day.—The act opens in Vasantasenā's house. Vasantasenā confesses to her maid Madanikā her love for Chārudatta. Then a shampooer appears in the street, pursued by the gambling-master and a gambler, who demand of him ten gold-pieces which he has lost in the gambling-house. At this point Darduraka enters, and engages the gambling-master and the gambler in an angry discussion, during which the shampooer escapes into Vasantasenā's house. When Vasantasenā learns that the shampooer had once served Chārudatta, she pays his debt; the grateful shampooer resolves to turn monk. As he leaves the house he is attacked by a runaway elephant, and saved by Karnapūraka, a servant of Vasantasenā.

ACT III., entitled *The Hole in the Wall*. The night following the second day.—Chārudatta and Maitreya return home after midnight from a concert, and go to sleep. Maitreya has in his hand the gem-casket which Vasantasenā has left behind. Sharvilaka enters. He is in love with Madanikā, a maid of Vasantasenā's, and is resolved to acquire by theft the means of buying her freedom. He makes a hole in the wall of the house, enters, and

steals the casket of gems which Vasantasenā had left. Chārudatta wakes to find casket and thief gone. His wife gives him her pearl necklace with which to make restitution.

ACT IV., entitled *Madanikā and Sharvilaka*. Third day.—Sharvilaka comes to Vasantasenā's house to buy Madanikā's freedom. Vasantasenā overhears the facts concerning the theft of her gem-casket from Chārudatta's house, but accepts the casket, and gives Madanikā her freedom. As Sharvilaka leaves the house, he hears that his friend Aryaka, who had been imprisoned by the king, has escaped and is being pursued. Sharvilaka departs to help him. Maitreya comes from Chārudatta with the pearl necklace, to repay Vasantasenā for the gem-casket. She accepts the necklace also, as giving her an excuse for a visit to Chārudatta.

ACT V., entitled *The Storm*. Evening of the third day.—Chārudatta appears in the garden of his house. Here he receives a servant of Vasantasenā, who announces that Vasantasenā is on her way to visit him. Vasantasenā then appears in the street with the courtier; the two describe alternately the violence and beauty of the storm which has suddenly arisen. Vasantasenā dismisses the courtier, enters the garden, and explains to Chārudatta how she has again come into possession of the gem-casket. Meanwhile, the storm has so increased in violence that she is compelled to spend the night at Chārudatta's house.

ACT VI., entitled *The Swapping of the Bullock-carts*. Morning of the fourth day.—Here she meets Chārudatta's little son, Rohasena. The boy is peevish because he can now have only a little clay cart to play with, instead of finer toys. Vasantasenā gives him her gems to buy a toy cart of gold. Chārudatta's servant drives up to take Vasantasenā in Chārudatta's bullock-cart to the park, where she is to meet Chārudatta; but while Vasantasenā is making ready, he drives away to get a cushion. Then Sansthānaka's servant drives up with his master's cart, which Vasantasenā enters by mistake. Soon after, Chārudatta's servant returns with his cart. Then the escaped prisoner Aryaka appears and enters Chārudatta's cart. Two policemen come on the scene; they are searching for Aryaka. One of them looks into the cart and discovers Aryaka, but agrees to protect him. This he does by deceiving and finally maltreating his companion.

ACT VII., entitled *Aryaka's Escape*. Fourth day.—Chārudatta is awaiting Vasantasenā in the park. His cart, in which Aryaka lies hidden, appears. Chārudatta discovers the fugitive, removes his fetters, lends him the cart, and leaves the park.

ACT VIII., entitled *The Strangling of Vasantasenā*. Fourth day.—A Buddhist monk, the shampooer of the second act, enters the park. He has difficulty in escaping from Sansthānaka, who appears with the courtier. Sansthānaka's servant drives in with the cart which Vasantasenā had entered by mistake. She is discovered by Sansthānaka, who pursues her with insulting offers of love. When she repulses him, Sansthānaka gets rid of all witnesses, strangles her, and leaves her for dead. The Buddhist monk enters again, revives Vasantasenā, and conducts her to a monastery.

ACT IX., entitled *The Trial*. Fifth day.—Sansthānaka accuses Chārudatta of murdering Vasantasenā for her money. In the course of the trial, it appears that Vasantasenā had

spent the night of the storm at Chārudatta's house; that she had left the house the next morning to meet Chārudatta in the park; that there had been a struggle in the park, which apparently ended in the murder of a woman. Chārudatta's friend, Maitreya, enters with the gems which Vasantasenā had left to buy Chārudatta's son a toy cart of gold. These gems fall to the floor during a scuffle between Maitreya and Sansthānaka. In view of Chārudatta's poverty, this seems to establish the motive for the crime, and Chārudatta is condemned to death.

ACT X., entitled *The End*. Sixth day.—Two headsmen are conducting Chārudatta to the place of execution. Chārudatta takes his last leave of his son and his friend Maitreya. But Sansthānaka's servant escapes from confinement and betrays the truth; yet he is not believed, owing to the cunning displayed by his master. The headsmen are preparing to execute Chārudatta, when Vasantasenā herself appears upon the scene, accompanied by the Buddhist monk. Her appearance puts a summary end to the proceedings. Then news is brought that Aryaka has killed and supplanted the former king, that he wishes to reward Chārudatta, and that he has by royal edict freed Vasantasenā from the necessity of living as a courtesan. Sansthānaka is brought before Chārudatta for sentence, but is pardoned by the man whom he had so grievously injured. The play ends with the usual Epilogue.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

CHĀRUDATTA, *a Brahman merchant*

ROHASENA, *his son*

MAITREYA, *his friend*

VARDHAMĀNAKA, *a servant in his house*

SANSTHĀNAKA, *brother-in-law of King PĀLAKA*

STHĀVARAKA, *his servant*

Another Servant of SANSTHĀNAKA

A Courtier

ARYAKA, *a herdsman who becomes king*

SHARVILAKA, *a Brahman, in love with MADANIKĀ*

A Shampooer, who becomes a Buddhist monk

MĀTHURA, *a gambling-master*

DARDURAKA, *a gambler*

Another Gambler

KARNAPŪRAKA

servants of VASANTASENĀ

KUMBHĪLAKA

VĪRAKA

policemen

CHANDANAKA

GOHA
AHĪNTA

headsmen

VASANTASENĀ, *a courtesan*

Her Mother

MADANIKĀ, *maid to VASANTASENĀ*

Another Maid to VASANTASENĀ

The Wife of CHĀRUDATTA

RADANIKĀ, *a maid in CHĀRUDATTA's house*

The main plot of the play revolves around the passionate love between the protagonist, Carudatta-a prominent but poor Brahmin merchant of Ujjain-and the veritably beautiful Ganika, a courtesan but with a noble mind of the same city. Several exquisitely interwoven subplots portraying the contemporary society-a tyrannical king, an overbearing brother-in-law of the king, the political upheaval, and the resultant rebellion waiting to erupt-pepper the play.

According to Ryder (1905), it is the variety of issues-such as a Ganika's ardent love for a virtuous but a married man, the married man's silent passion for the Ganika, a shampooer 's gambling, the making of a hole in the wall by a thief to steal a gold casket, Abhisarika's proceeding to her lover 's abode under a storm, the swapping of bullock-carts that led to the strangulation of Vasantasena in the garden, and the escape of an imprisoned rebel from the jail to finally replace the despotic king-expounded in the different Acts of the play; the skill with which different characters such as Samsthanaka, Sarvilaka, Maitreya, Madanika, and Dhuta, the silent wife of Carudatta are drawn from every class of society to expound the socio-politico-cultural issues; and the infusion of subtle humor, that too, through the foolish utterances of the villain of the play, Samsthanaka- that make Mrichchhakatika stand out as a preeminent Sanskrit play.

To appreciate Sudr aka's ingenuity in characterization, one example is enough: Samsthanaka, the antihero of the play, who is an amalgamation of ignorant conceit, brutal lust, and animal-spirits in abusing his nearness to the power-center, has the cheek to say, after strangulating an innocent woman, to his Vita: "Yehi! Nalinyam pravesya kredavaha -Oh, come! Let's plunge into the pond and play" (1937, 8).¹

That aside, King Sudraka, being highly creative, could flout the technical prescriptions of the Sanskrit dramaturgy: disregarding the rule that a prakarana should be named by compounding the names of the hero and the heroine, he named it Mrichchhakatika, which indeed elevated the curiosity of the audience to know as to what the play was all about. Similarly, Sanskrit dramaturgy prescribes that the hero of the play must appear in every Act, as against which Carudatta does not appear in Acts 2, 4, and 8 of this play. In the same vein, the Vidushaka, Maitreya, of this play differs from the Vidushaka of traditional Sanskrit plays where he is often portrayed as a glutton and a buffoon-mostly to entertain the hero. In Mrichchhakatika, the Vidushaka behaves very sensibly, cautioning his friend against his reckless philanthropy and his relationship with a courtesan, without of course offending him. Sudraka has indeed vested each

of his characters with a special trait that distinguishes each from the other characters of the play.

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Vasantasena was a courtesan of Ujjayini according to ancient Indian literature, who earned fame and prosperity due to her finesse in various art forms such as singing, dancing, poetry, courting, etc. and her beauty. She is the protagonist of the Sanskrit play Mṛcchakaṭīka (The Little Clay Cart) written by Śūdraka.

Character in the Play

In the play, Vasantasena is depicted as a strong character. She is not a conventional heroine waiting for a hero to come woo her.

According to the play, Vasantasena falls in love with Chārudatta, a young Brahmin who loses all his wealth due to his philanthropic and altruistic nature and is seriously impoverished. The rich courtesan lives a life of utmost luxury but falls in love with Chārudatta for his extremely noble

nature. Despite being happily married and having a son, Chārudatta also falls in love with Vasantasena for her beauty, her refined personality, and her noble nature.^[2]

In the play, she is shown to be very bold and courageous in expressing her love for Chārudatta, approaching him. The strength of her character is shown in full fervour when she goes to visit his house despite a raging storm, resembling an Abhisarika nayika. It is her, and not Chārudatta who plays the dominant role in their love affair. Thus, she stands out as an unconventional figure of agency and strength in ancient Indian literature and medieval legend.

From [Cafe Dissensus](#)

Vasantasena in Mrcchakatika: A ‘New Woman’ in Sanskrit Drama?

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By **Pritha Kundu**

Mrcchakatika, attributed to the ancient Sanskrit playwright Śudraka, falls in the category of ‘Prakarana’ – that is, ‘play of inventions’¹. In many ways, *Mrcchakatika* is a successful invention, for it deals with several issues that are ‘atypical’ for Sanskrit drama, including a courtesan’s marriage with a poor Brahmin and a political uprising at the backdrop, which overturns the Brāhmaṇa-Kṣatrīya regime. Instead of godlike characters, epic heroes and legendary noble kings as ‘nāyaka’ (the male protagonist), and idealised, virtuous princesses or noble queens as nāyikā (female protagonist), Śudraka’s play chooses a good-natured but impoverished merchant as its nāyaka, and an intelligent, resourceful and passionate courtesan as its nāyikā. The play handles a number of social, economic and political issues like gambling, prostitution, property matters, crime and corruption and penal justice (daṇḍa-vidhi). This leads to the conception of a play where several ‘new’ things occur– ‘new’ in comparison with other Sanskrit plays. Modern playwrights and directors have found in this text ample scope for reworking, so that it can be adapted to voice contemporary social and political issues.

The title of the present paper suggests that it attempts to read the characteristics of a ‘new woman’ in Vasantasenā, a character in a Sanskrit play. Now, the question is, can we expect to find a ‘foreign’ concept thus conforming to an indigenous text and its characterisation? Of course, that expectation may be too much. However, we can take up a comparative approach as an interesting exercise, while broadening the meaning of the affiliation, ‘new woman’. In general, we understand the term as a late Victorian and early twentieth century description of those educated, professional, Anglo-American women who dared to cross the boundaries of the traditional home, who are not bound to the institution of marriage. They often cross-dressed and indulged in a life of self-sufficient, free behaviour, having necessary intellect and ability to take decisions for themselves. Of course, the term is culture-specific. Now, if we try to find some of these characteristics in the character of a nāyikā of an ancient Sanskrit play, can we really be able

to find a new cultural understanding of ‘new woman’.

Vasantasenā is a ‘vāraṅganā’, that is, a courtesan. The position of a courtesan in ancient Indian society was a problematic phenomenon between ‘liminality’ and ‘communitas’ – to borrow the terms from Victor Turner (95-130). Such *vāranarīs* were free from the marital bond, they were nobody’s property; their talents were meant for the entertainment of the public, the community. In this regard, their ‘liminal’ position also gave them a “rite of passage” towards a larger notion of community-service. Their profession of course had the risk of throwing them to a vulnerable position; they were under a threat of being exploited and losing their ‘modesty’ at the hand of some unscrupulous people. However, there had been iconic figures of such courtesans who were so well-trained in fine arts and performance, in knowledge of *kāvya* and *śāstras* – that they were considered to be assets to particular cities and honoured by kings and aristocrats. Amrapālī and Sālavatī of the Buddhist era were among such legendary figures in the profession. In Sudraka’s play, Vasantasenā has money and power, she keeps a large house and controls her servants and maids with an efficient hand. She entertains people with her beauty, her singing and dancing – in a professional manner and earns money, but never gives herself to anybody. Her choice of such a profession, while trying to remain steadfast in her dignity and honour, is remarkable. However, before the play actually begins, Vasantasena has already seen Cārudatta, a poor but virtuous Brahmin, on the day of the spring festival and got attracted to him from a distance. Unlike a *mugdā* (young, innocent and passive) *nāyikā*, she does not wait for the *nāyaka* to come and approach her. Rather she begins to think of an opportunity to meet Cārudatta. The opportunity comes by chance and at a moment of crisis. Samsthānaka, the king’s brother-in-law through some illegitimate relation, is after Vasantasenā. He, accompanied by his followers, Vita and Ceta, chases Vasantasenā in a night of heavy rains. Vasantasenā, carrying a casket of her jewellery, desperate to save her honour, enters into the house of Cārudatta, and using her presence of mind puts out the light with a blow of her flowing garments. Her active nature and intelligence shine out through this dramatic sequence in the play.

The danger being over, Vasantasenā reveals herself to Cārudatta who treats her with honour, addressing her as “Aryā Vasantasenā” (which may be roughly translated as “Noble lady Vasantasena”). Seeking Cārudatta’s pardon for this untimely intrusion into his house, and requests him to keep her jewels in his custody. She knows that the scoundrels are not only after her youth, but they also seek to plunder her wealth. Her trust in Cārudatta, at least at this point, is not a matter of blind love. She decides to entrust her jewellery to an honest man, from a practical perspective. Vasantasenā is the woman of the world; she knows what do, and when; whom to trust and whom to avoid. Her sense of honour, coupled with her practical intelligence, has really given her a position of novelty and uniqueness.

As far as her love is concerned, it is Vasantasenā who takes the initiative. Her handmaid, Madanikā, recognizes in her some symptoms of falling in love, and questions her with a curiosity to know the name of the man. Here is a glimpse of her conversation.

Madanikā. ... But tell me, mistress, is it a king, or a king’s favorite, whom you worship?*Vasantasenā*. Girl, I wish to love, not to worship. (Śudraka 28; trans. Ryder)

Most of the *nāyikās* in Sanskrit literature are devoted to their lovers/husbands in a mode of

worship. Love is there, but it is generally through the initiative of the nāyaka, that the nāyikā's expression of love comes to our notice. Bhāsa's Vasavadattā, Kālidāsa's Śakuntalā, Bhavabhūti's Sītā – all of such iconic nāyikās express their love in a way that is almost inseparable from worship. Even Kālidāsa's representation of Urvaśī, in his *Vikramorvaśiyam*, is rather mellowed and idealized – very different from that of the disengaged, self-sufficient Vedic Urvaśī or the Urvaśī in the *Mahābhārata* – a bold and forward woman full of desire. Śudraka's Vasantasenā chooses her own way, distinguishing 'love' from 'worship'.

Vasantasenā is a professional courtesan, she knows the art of her profession quite well. In most cases, Sanskrit plays depict the nāyikās talking to their sakhīs (confidantes) about their love-interest, or how to dress up, and, as for general topics – the beauty of nature. Vasantasenā is remarkably 'new' in this regard: she initiates professional talks with her maids. Illustration from a portion of such a conversation may be helpful to appreciate the character:

Vasantasenā. Madanikā girl, do you say this because courtesan courtesy demands it?
Madanikā. But mistress, is the courtesy of a girl who lives in a courtesan's house, necessarily false?

Vasantasenā. Girl, courtesans meet so many kinds of men that they do learn a false courtesy.
(58)

However, Vasantasenā knows how to draw a line between professional courtesy and true love. At first, she was attracted to the poor Brahmin Cārudatta's kindness and honesty. The jewels she entrusted to Cārudatta, have been stolen, and Cārudatta, out of his noble nature, sends a necklace of his own wife to repay Vasantasenā's loss, asking forgiveness for his inability to keep her jewels safe. Vasantasenā appreciates his goodness, and gets determined to have such a man. Thus, her choice is marked by a perfect balance of passion and reason. Now, the loss and restoration of the casket of jewels marks an important turn in the play. Śarvilaka, basically a good man who turns a thief for sheer want of money, wishes to marry Vasantasenā's maid Madanikā. He steals the jewels from Cārudatta's house, without knowing that they are actually Vasantasenā's. With those jewels, he goes to buy the freedom of his beloved, who recognizes them and asks him to return them to her mistress. Overhearing their conversation, Vasantasenā releases Madanikā to marry Śarvilaka. In this, she behaves like a figure of authority. Praising her maid's honesty, she calls her a "free woman", which indicates how much importance she herself sets upon the freedom and dignity of a woman. At the same time, she prepares herself to meet Cārudatta. She sends him a message and goes to meet him like a bold, abhisārikā² – at night, through thunder and rains.

Vasantasenā's courage speaks volumes about her character. At one point, when Samsthānaka tries to molest her for a second time, she escapes, kicking him off. Outstanding are her words even at the face of death: when the villain finally catches her, and is about to strangle her in a solitary grove, she uses her calm of mind and gathers all her faith and courage, to overcome her instinct to cry out, because "It would bring shame on Vasantasenā, should she scream for help" (125). However, she is saved and appears on stage right at the moment to save her lover as well. Though she enjoys becoming a 'wife' at the end, that title does not belittle her strong individuality. In fact, she is not a 'chosen' bride: she herself chooses her man, saves him from dishonour and death, and finally marries him, demanding the approval of a 'changed' society,

under the leadership of a new ruler who rises from the populace.

Vasantasenā, however, is a strong woman who also longs for family-life and motherhood. Spending one night with Cārudatta, in the morning she finds that his son is weeping because he does not have a golden toy-cart like the one belonging to a rich neighbour's son. Vasantasenā come forward and fills the little clay-cart of Cārudatta's son – with all her golden ornaments, to enjoy the bliss of motherly affection. Thus the free-willing courtesan of the last night becomes a 'mother' in the next morning. Though not submissive and passive, she is nevertheless faithful and passionate in her love, and her desire for motherhood, which even Cārudatta's first wife Dhūta has to accept and appreciate at the end. Her steadfast love and motherly feelings place her in the tradition of ideal womanhood as traditionally depicted in other Sanskrit play-texts.

It may be argued that such ideally 'feminine' characteristics, notwithstanding all her boldness, independence and professionalism, finally mark her basic difference from the Western notion of the 'new woman' – and this is very natural indeed. A comparative approach to literature and trying to compare different cultural notions, and seeking to understand a dynamic literary representation of womanhood in a particular text using that comparison – all these do not point towards any exact claim of affinity between cultural patterns, ideas or conception of characters. The 'new woman' in Anglo-American literature is a character-type corresponding to the topical cause of women's emancipation in society, whereas Vasantasenā is *sui generis* as an individual character, who is both traditional and unconventionally dynamic at the same time. She is indeed what we may call 'abhinavā nāyikā' (a heroine with uniqueness and novelty), if not a 'new woman' in a culture-specific sense.

Notes:

1. "Prakaraṇa" is the type of a play based on a *laukika vṛtta* (tale of a common life), presented through the poet's imaginative invention" – this one of the characteristics of such plays (*Sāhityadarpaṇa*, p. 434, my translation)
2. The woman who makes her lover come to her, through messengers, or herself goes alone to meet his lover (*Sāhityadarpaṇa*, p. 127, my translation)

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