

The Heroines of the Plays of Kalidasa

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PREFACE

This transaction is a resume of two lectures delivered at the Indian Institute of World Culture by Sri S. Ramachandra Rao before a Ladies' Group.

It is the great good fortune of India that her ablest writers, Valmiki, Vyasa, and the great dramatist, Kalidasa, have not only been consummate artists but also have upheld the highest and noblest moral ideals. While the characters of Kalidasa have exerted less influence in the formation of the Indian character down the ages than the Ramayana of Valmiki and its variants in the different Indian languages, the effect of his plays, and especially of Sakuntalam, with its message of the possibility of transmuting earthly into divine love, has been considerable and ennobling.

THE HEROINES OF THE PLAYS OF KALIDASA

Much of the charm of the dramas of Kalidasa is due to the great women characters of his plays. Indeed, it is a commonplace now to say that Kalidasa is partial to the women characters, particularly to the heroines of the plays. The very titles of his dramas betray this attitude on the part of the playwright. While the titles, “Malavikagnimitram” and “Vikramorvasiyam” name the heroines along with the heroes, the last and best of the dramas is content merely to announce the heroine. It is titled simply but significantly “Abhignana Sakuntalam.” It can even be suggested that Kalidasa so portrays his leading men that they show off his leading women to advantage. The “forgetfulness” of King Dushyanta, bringing into play the nobility of Sakuntala, is a case in point.

Taking into consideration the early plays of Kalidasa, one can classify the leading women of the plays into two groups: the so-called heroines, Malavika and Urvasi and the other important women, Iravati, Dharini and Ausinari. And, even here, the women of the first group are but foils to set off the glory of those that belong to the second. Indeed, to call Malavika or Urvasi the heroines of the respective plays would be to rely merely on technical and traditional grounds.

The two plays no doubt deal with the love and marriage of Malavika and Urvasi with Agnimitra and Pururavas respectively, but to name Malavika and Urvasi as heroines on this count would be a poor support of our contention. Nay, it appears as if it was Kalidasa's desire to tell us that the real heroine is not one who gets the title on traditional grounds, but she who achieves it by the display of noble conduct. The theme, therefore, of the two early plays of Kalidasa is the charming nobility and spirit of self-sacrifice of Dharini and Ausinari, rather than the love and marriage of Malavika and Urvasi. Judged by this standard, it becomes clear that the real heroines of the early plays are Dharini and Ausinari, and not Malavika and Urvasi.

A critical examination of the plays bears out this thesis. When the dramatist introduces Malavika, he mentions repeatedly her personal charm. A great suggestive poem in this connection deserves mention:

“ Friend, when I saw her in a picture, my mind was apprehensive of her real beauty;
but now that I see her in reality, I see that the painter who drew her lacked concentration.”
(Mai. II—2)

Yet another poem, though not so suggestive, describes effectively the excellence of the beauty of Urvasi—“ Friend, she is the ornament of ornaments, decorative of deco- ratives and a standard of comparison for all standards of comparison’ (Vik. II-3). Armed with such exceptional charm, Malavika and Urvasi set out to win the love of their beloved. The only thing in favour of Malavika is that she is unconscious of her gifts, while Urvasi is positively proud of hers. And yet, their approach is the same—each relies on her personal charm in winning the one she loves. Contrast this with the approach of Dharini and Ausinari to their wedded lords. They try to win and retain the affection of their lords, not so much by their beauty as by their selfless devotion. These are introduced in the dramas in striking contrast to the introduction of a Malavika or an Urvasi. When, for example, Dharini enters the stage for the first time, the King talks more of her holy personality than of her charms.

“ Decorated with auspicious ornaments and accompanied by Kausiki in the dress of an ascetic, I see her appear like the triad of the Vedas incarnate, accompanied by metaphysical lore.” {Mai. I-14)

Similar references are made to the daughter of Kasiraja in the Vikramorvasiyam :—

“Clad in white silk, decked with an auspicious ornament, having her braid marked with holy durva grass, she appears to me to be all grace.”
(Vik. III-12)

Such references in respectful terms are made not without purpose. The author expects us to take these women as of more real importance than those who merely are there to marry the heroes.

Kalidasa tests Dharini again, having put her into a very trying situation. She had had the affection of the King all to herself, until the young and charming Malavika came into the picture, Dharini scented danger even at the outset, and tried to put Malavika out of the King's sight. This is a quite natural thing for a woman to do; for, as Bana puts it in the *Kadambari*, “A rival wife is an unparalleled irritant to a woman, the chief cause of estrangement and the main source of insult” (Kad., p. 295). And yet, Dharini refuses to fall victim to this passion of envy. She conquers this jealousy aroused by a rival wife; and that for a second time! Earlier, she had had to reconcile herself to the misconduct of her husband who had married another beauty, *Ira vat i*.

True *Bharya* (sustainer of a family) that she was, she had at heart only the pleasure that would be caused to her husband and, therefore, had allowed a rival wife into the household. She also knew that the King was more affectionate towards *Iravati* than towards herself. Nor did she try to hide the fact that *Iravati* was a *Vallabha*—a beloved of the King. Thus an *Iravati* by herself was a sufficient cause to test Dharini's patience. Imagine, therefore, her mental plight when a newcomer, *Malavika*, was again trying to rob her of her husband! Yet she never succumbed to a feeling of anger or of envy. If she imprisoned *Malavika* at all, it was on the advice of *Iravati* and not of her own accord. Finally* when she found that her repeated efforts to dissuade the King from marrying for the third time had failed, she prepared herself to accept again another rival wife. At last she willingly consented to the marriage of her husband with *Malavika*.

Contrast with this the attitude of *Iravati*—the second wife of the King. Her very introduction in the drama is strange and significant: “Then enters *Iravati* in a state of intoxication “! In addition to the usual source of intoxication, there was yet another cause which had driven her into that state; it was the consciousness of her rare charm. Her pride, therefore, had felt a rude shock, when she had discovered that her husband was exploring a new source of pleasure. Unlike Dharini, who was a typical *Bharya*, she found it hard to accept a rival wife. She desperately fought against it; advised Dharini to imprison *Malavika* and continued to be resentful till the very end. *Iravati* could never swim the ocean of jealousy; she drowned in it. Kalidasa shows that she is a typical instance of a woman who could never play the role of a *Bharya*. She could never conquer *Sapatni Matsarya* as her elder—Dharini—did.

Thus Kalidasa was keen on developing this concept of a *Bharya* in the *Malavikagnimitram* and Dharini served as a typical illustration. Notwithstanding the whimsicalities of her husband, it was given to Dharini as a dutiful wife to run the family and to keep it from collapse. In doing so, it became necessary for her even to conquer the “unconquerable” feeling of jealousy. Dharini conquers it and achieves the impossible. Besides, two other qualities necessary in such a good housewife are also prominent in Dharini. The first is her burning desire not to hurt other's feelings—a quality which is much in evidence in the episode of the jester's being bitten by a snake. That she is responsible, however indirectly, for the snake-bite is a thought which puts her into much distress. The second is the extraordinary patience which she has—a quality which she possesses in common with Mother Earth. It is useful to quote in this connection the words of the Pandita

Kausiki: " May'st thou be for a hundred years the lord of Dharini and of the Earth; the two whose progeny is great and whose forbearance is worthy! " {Mai. I-15)

Therefore, Kalidasa wrote the *Malavikagnimitram* to portray a typical "Bharya" and in doing so chose an Iravati or a Malavika only to bring into bold relief this great trait of Dharini. It is, thus, no mistake to see in the person of Dharini the real heroine of the drama.

Let us turn to a like character sketched in the *Vikramorvasiyam*. It is that of Ausinari, daughter of Kasiraja. Here again, it is the intent of Kalidasa to show that Ausinari is more the real character to reckon with in the play than the divine apsaras, Urvasi, after whom the play is named. The situation described here is much the same as in the *Malavikagnimitram*; in the place of Malavika is substituted Urvasi, in the place of Agnimitra, Pururavas, and in the place of Dharini, the daughter of Kasiraja. The difference consists in this, that the like of Iravati is not to be found in this drama and that the daughter of Kasiraja is a very much improved edition of Dharini.

Indeed, the towering personality of the play is this Ausinari, the daughter of Kasiraja and the first love of the King. She has many things in common with her counterpart in the *Malavikagnimitram*; the same passionate desire to be courteous, the same forbearance and the same anxiety to accommodate her husband. Like Dharini, she tries in vain to stop the King from his romantic adventure with the divine damsel Urvasi; but instead of becoming a victim of jealousy, she overcomes the passion and welcomes her rival in all sincerity. Thus she is as far away from Iravati as Dharini is.

In spite of this similitude between Dharini and Ausinari, there is a subtle difference between them—a difference which is to the advantage of Ausinari. In short, Ausinari is definitely an improved version of Dharini. If, for example, Dharini finally consented to allow the King to marry Malavika, it was because she realized that such an action was inevitable. She came to this position not without a struggle. In fact, all the Acts of the play, except the last, depict the many attempts of Queen Dharini to keep pretty Malavika away from the King. Hence, it was by no means a voluntary act on her part to have allowed the King to wed Malavika. Then again, she had to stand by her promise made to Malavika. Had she not promised Malavika a boon, whatever it might be, if only she performed successfully the *Dohada*, or the ceremony of gratifying the longing of a tree, thereby making the golden colored Asoka look delightful with flowers ?

Such, however, is not the case with Ausinari. Not that this woman is willing to give away her husband to her rival; but that she is not willfully going all the way, like Dharini, to put obstacles in his or her way. When for the first time she learns of the King's affection for Urvasi, upon seeing the love-letter she becomes angry, rejects the King's prostration made to her and walks away. The next minute she is in the throes of repentance. Is it really proper for a good wife to be discourteous to her husband? This thought greatly agitates her cultured mind. And from this moment her constant endeavour is to please her husband. What better thing could she do to please him than to satisfy his one great desire? Thus she undertakes a vow called the *priyanuprasadana vrata*—a vow to become reconciled with her husband!

Accordingly, she invites the King to the *Maniharmya* terrace; there calls the divine couple Rohini and the Moon to witness and declares that she "will behave amicably towards the woman whom her lord loves." It is evident, therefore, that the only consideration which urges her to consent to the King's marriage with Urvasi is her intense desire to keep her husband in good humour. Thus Kalidasa wants to show in the person of Ausinari a *Pativrata*—a wife ever eager to keep her husband in a happy mood.

This voluntary effort on the part of Ausinari to allow her husband to marry Urvasi is a distinct improvement upon Dharini. If, therefore, Kalidasa developed the concept of a Bharya in the *Malavikagnimitram*, he was developing the concept of a Pativrata in the second drama—*Vikramorvasiyam*. If it is granted that the theme of the *Vikramorvasiyam* is the “pativratya” of Ausinari, then who else other than the dignified daughter of Kasiraja could be the real heroine of the play?

This apart, it is most interesting to see, in both dramas, the gradual development of the love of the heroes into regard and respect for these great women. It has always been the Indian view that the respect bestowed by a husband upon the woman of his choice is the true test of his sincere love for her. This regard is the psychological change which comes over a husband towards the object of his adoration upon witnessing her many acts of devotion and sacrifice.

Not that there is no feeling of affection for the wife at this stage of admiration; indeed, this regard is merely a deepened state of love. For instance, while the Kings of the early plays are ever eager to taste the fresh beauty of a Malavika or an Urvasi, they are at the same time conscious of all the sacrifices which the two elder Queens are willingly making to give them happiness. Naturally, their love deepens into admiration and regard. This is a state devoid of all sense of carnality; a state where there is the appreciation of nobility and the consequent deepening of affection. It is this special feature in the relationship between the husband and the wife in an Indian household that Kalidasa portrays faithfully in the dramas.

This is known by the attitude of the two heroes towards their respective Queens. Agnimitra no doubt desires Malavika and Pururavas, Urvasi; but once the Kings succeed in marrying them, nothing special is heard about them. In fact, Agnimitra even treats Iravati with indifference, for there is nothing in her to compel his attention after his marriage with her. The King says on a certain occasion : “I consider Iravati’s rejection of my supplication as a service; for thus I can neglect the angry one, though she is so full of love for me” (Mal III-23). The King again finds it quite easy to break an engagement made earlier with Iravati. Her anger, therefore, is not of much consequence to him.

Such, however, is not his attitude towards Dharini; whatever may happen, the King is always in great need of the good-will of his Queen. “O Queen, be always favourably disposed towards me!” is the King’s final request of the Queen, In the *Vikramorvasiyam*, Pururavas expresses a similar sentiment. Addressing his friend who counsels him to set at naught the Queen’s feelings, the King declares, after reprimanding the jester, “Nay, say not so. Though my mind is engrossed by Urvasi, I have still the same respect for the Queen.” This attitude of regard of the two heroes towards their respective Queens represents love in its highest sense. It is not a desire to possess them as objects of charm but accepting them as good wives, bringing prosperity to the family. In short, it is a Bharya and a Pativrata that command the real love of a husband.

The same theme of love developing into regard is again the subject-matter of the *Abhignana Sakuntalam*. This is clear from the stanza where Dushyanta gives his word or promise to Anasuya that he would treat Sakuntala on a special basis. “Though possessed of many wives, two are the mainstays of my family—the earth girded with oceans and this friend of yours” (Sak. III-19). While this theme was rendered in a sketchy manner in the two early dramas, Kalidasa thought that it deserved a fuller treatment and took it up in the *Sakuntalam*. The crowding of too many women into the life of the Kings of the early plays had considerably distracted the reader’s attention from an appreciation of this fact. Kalidasa,

therefore, focused the reader's attention on only one woman character in his last drama. The earlier plays spoke of Malavika and Urvashi as brides but reserved Dharini and Ausinari for illustrating the "good wife." In the Sakuntalam, however, the poet deals with the theme of the bride developing into an ideal wife. And this development traced in a single character goes to make the Sakuntalam a drama of color and beauty.

As a bride, Sakuntala was by no means inferior either to Malavika or to Urvashi. She had all the personal charm of these and something more in addition. Sakuntala's natural beauty stood in great contrast with that of the artificial and courtly type. The King exclaims upon seeing Sakuntala for the first time:—

"If to people living in a hermitage "belongs this beauty difficult to be found in a harem, then indeed are garden creepers outdistanced in virtues by forest creepers." (Sak. I-17)

As for Iravati, it would be odd to mention her name in the same breath with Sakuntala; they are poles asunder. To clinch the point, it was the misfortune of Iravati to be ever youthful but never wise. Sakuntala outclasses the older women of the other dramas too. Dharini and Ausinari were no doubt sober and wise, but they were not youthful. Sakuntala, on the other hand, combined youth with wisdom. The quality of tenderness which the young Sakuntala displays, the self-control she exercises and the sweet love of nature she exhibits as a "child of nature"—these are all excellent qualities which a Dharini or an Ausinari never possesses.

But where Sakuntala really excels Dharini and Ausinari is in her infinite capacity for silent suffering. Dharini and Ausinari may at their best be good to their husbands but they are not indeed prepared to suffer for them. Sakuntala's, on the other hand, is a life of continuous suffering. She was abandoned by her parents in her childhood; and in her prime of life by her husband, who forced her out of the hermitage in which she had found shelter only to abandon her in the capital. Nor was fate favourable to her; for it robbed her of her ring—the only thing which could have saved her from distress at a critical hour. But all this suffering did not make her bitter or cynical. Not a word of abuse ever escapes her lips. It is this silent suffering and continued good-will towards her husband, who has betrayed her, that qualifies her for the part of an ideal wife.

In fact, it is this concept of a Grihini, or an ideal wife, that Kalidasa was trying to portray in this last and best of his dramas. His treatment of a Bharya or a Pativrata in the earlier dramas presents pronounced particular aspects of an ideal wife—a Grihini. To the Indian mind, the Grihini represents a "complete woman" —a repository of all the qualities necessary to make a perfect woman. And Sakuntala is this Grihini. The great sage, Kasyapa, wants her to be this; and definitely mentions the word during the advise he gives to Sakuntala at the time of her departure to her husband's house:—

" Serve your elders; act the part of a dear friend towards your " co-wives " ;.. .be not puffed up in fortune,—in this way do young women attain the position of a Grihini; the perverse are the bane of their family." (Sok. IV-18)

Another grand poem belonging to the same act of the play mentions not only the word Grihini but also two other features that go to make up such a woman. Kasyapa again is the adviser and Sakuntala, the listener:—

" Stationed in the honorable position of a Grihini of a husband of noble birth; and distracted every moment with his activities—grand, by reason of his prosperity; and having in a short time given birth to a holy son, like the east giving birth to the Sun, you will not,

daughter, mind the sorrow arising from the separation from me.” (Sak. IV-19)

The Sage Kanva mentions here that an ideal wife is one who is ever eager to see that her husband treads the moral path. Sakuntala thus shares with her husband all the cares and responsibilities in the discharge of the kingly duties enjoined upon her husband. A greater feature than this is the motherhood referred to in the poem. A woman’s personality is never complete without her attaining motherhood; and Sakuntala did become a mother and the mother of a mighty son. It is true that Dharini is spoken of as the mother of Vasumitra but, beyond certain martial exploits of the young hero, nothing of much consequence is ever heard of the motherhood of Dharini. It is true, again, that Urvasi is referred to as the mother of a great son, Ayus; but the moment when the son was announced to the father, Pururavas, was not a moment of pure joy to him. The mind of Pururavas was then distracted by the thought that he had to Part Company with his dear wife, Urvasi, for such were the orders of Indra.

This disharmony was set right by the dramatist in the case of the motherhood of Sakuntala. For her son, Sarvadamana, not only brings complete joy to the father but also leads him to his mother, Sakuntala. The sight of the son, Sarvadamana, was responsible for the reunion of the separated loving couple—Dushyanta and Sakuntala. Sakuntala’s motherhood, therefore, was most fruitful, glorious and of great consequence.

This, indeed, is what is meant by the oft-repeated statement that in the *Abhignana Sakuntalam*; there is the “transformation of the earthly love into divine love.” When Dushyanta saw the charming bride in the *Kanvasrama*, it was earthly love that he cherished towards her; but when he met the mother of Sarvadamana in the holy groves of *Maricha*, the love of Dushyanta had become divine. It is in the state of such a divine feeling of love that Dushyanta falls prostrate before the great

Grihini— Sakuntala. Dushyanta falling prostrate before Sakuntala thus is a sure symbol of a husband’s love deepening into regard for an ideal wife.

No wonder, therefore, that the contemplation of such and like heroines of the plays of Kalidasa—of a *Bharya* in the *Malavikagnimitram*, of a *Pativrata* in the *Vikramorvasiyam*, of a *Grihini* in the *Abhignana Sakuntalam* —makes the reader taste the ecstasy of literary joy, besides ennobling the mind.