

*Performing Women: A Critical Study of Construction of 'Woman' in  
Ancient Indian Drama*

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*Abstract*

It is obvious that representation of women in Ancient Indian Drama and Sanskrit dramaturgy was not as powerful and iconic as men though woman have been integral part of Indian drama and dramaturgy since its inception. The question is not about assigning greater roles to women characters but the question is the mere representation of the 'women'. The 'women' of the most of the Sanskrit plays have been shown as passive and at the receiving end while their 'men' counterparts have been shown active and doers, barring few exceptions. And as Bharata in his first chapter of Natyasastra written, Drama is mere representation of the real world. In that sense whether the kind of representation given to 'Woman' in Sanskrit Drama/Ancient Indian Drama do signify anything or suggest about the real well being of the 'woman' in society.

**Keywords:** Sanskrit Drama, Ancient Indian Drama, Performing Women, Woman Performers, Feminism

**Introduction**

The question keep occurring in my mind that whether the walking, talking and co-living women folk we indulge with in our daily life from our own family to our office spaces to the wider society are real ones or the represented ones? Whether

the women we interact with in our life are real women or they are the gender constructs of the society? These questions comes to my mind as I have felt that most of them are just shadow of themselves, as if they are not leading their lives but representing somebody else. They might be co-living, co-existing and breathing beside their male counterparts in a family, office or society but they have nothing leading life of their own. Sometimes, it feels like they are programmed like any robot or computer to perform certain tasks in certain manner and are no living beings like their male counterparts, as we see that even their wishes are mostly not for themselves but for their loved ones or closed family members or others. From where this ‘woman’ folk has arrived? The answer is that this woman folk has been created through a lot of efforts, deliberation and designing which controls not only their behaviour but also their thinking and mind. This becomes more real, specially, when we talk about the older times or ancient India.

In the ancient times, which was a predominant men’s world, woman presence was as good as being absent. They were always there but their presence was hardly felt apart from the roles assigned to them. This is how history has been made and this is what we got through different available literatures. Though, literature has not been considered as authentic source of history but they do signify the reality of the world in their own way. The representation of ‘woman’ in ancient texts specifically Ancient Indian Drama or Sanskrit plays have a lot to say not only about the plight of ‘woman’ in society as subject but also the construction of ‘woman’ as an object. How these are inter-related or connected and how these things started interpolating with each-other, and what are its impact or after-effects are the main concerns of this paper.

## Representation of Woman in Ancient Indian Drama

It is obvious that representation of women in Ancient Indian Drama or Sanskrit dramaturgy was not as powerful and iconic as men though woman have been integral part of Indian drama and dramaturgy since its inception. The question is not about assigning greater roles to women characters but the question is the mere representation of 'women'. The 'women' of the most of the Sanskrit plays have been shown as passive and at the receiving end while their 'men' counterparts have been shown active and doers, barring few exceptions. This is what feminist scholar Laura Mulvey observes, *In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been spilt between active/male and passive/female*, in her article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' published in *Screen (16(3): 6-18)*. Here, the portrayal of 'women' in many sense is as good as 'performing' them as these women are created through the lens of men's gaze and desire.

Most of the women characters of Ancient Indian Plays or Sanskrit plays (Though, I will be limiting myself to the Sanskrit plays written till 12<sup>th</sup> century AD) seem to be developed as desired by men. The presentation of 'women' here is limited to their physicality in many senses. In many cases even in love stories, which is a predominant theme of Sanskrit drama, 'women' are portrayed as 'beloved' or 'love interest' rather than projected them, too, as lovers. Love is supposed to be the equalizer of men and women but here, too, they are at the receiving end. This is what I call objectification of women subject. In a way, the representation of 'women' in Sanskrit plays looks similar to what the feminist scholars Propp and De Lauretis discuss as objectification of 'women', utilizing the actantial model of Geimas, which proposes a schema based on six functions (Sender, Subject, Object,

Helper, Opponent, Receiver) in any narrative, and which had a wider application in dramatic and theatrical contexts, as discussed by Elaine Aston [1988: 39]:

*To give an example of the actantial model: in a traditional love narrative the hero (Subject), under the influence of love (Sender), seeks the heroine (Object), as a result of his own desire (Receiver), and is aided by friends (Helper/s), or opposed by his adversaries, often the heroine's father/guardian (Opponent/s).<sup>i</sup>*

This is exactly how 'women' have been objectified in most of the narratives of Ancient Indian Drama/Sanskrit plays. In the absence of women playwrights, performers (?), producers, directors, organizers and viewers this was very much expected, as the women voice/presence was either hidden or totally absent. They are being represented as mere victims of the choices the protagonists made or their fates, whether it's plays like *Abhijnanasakuntal*, *Malvikaagnimitram*, *Vikramourvasiyam*, *Swapanvasavdatta*, *Ratnavali*, *Priyadarsika*, *Uttarramcharitam* or any other play.

### **Examples of Women Characters in Ancient Indian Drama**

Let's take examples of woman characters from the play texts which are part of Ancient Indian Drama or Sanskrit Drama. I will try to establish what I have said earlier in this article through the examples of woman characters of the plays, which are supposed to be the representation of the actual woman folk of that time. Through, these characters we will not only get the hint towards what I was talking about but also the proof of the same. I will try here to establish my notion through

some of the important woman characters of Ancient Indian Drama, as taking each and every character and talking about them would be not feasible.

Let's take first the most prominent woman character *Sakuntala*, as example, portrayed in Ancient Indian Drama by none other than *Kalidasa*, one of the greatest poet and playwright of the period. *Sakuntala* became the archetype of woman figure through the play *Abhijnanasakuntal* in ancient India. She became the most sought after female protagonist after that and many poets later tried to re-create her look alike under different names and figures in later phases. *Sakuntala* of the play *Abhijnanasakuntal* is probably the ideal woman figure and wish of every male of Indian society. She is young (sweet sixteen), charming, alluring, loving, caring, and devoted. She is playful as a lover and dutiful as wife to her husband. She remains faithful towards her husband, even if she had gone through a lot of miseries from his own hands. What else a male can demand from his beloved? She possess all five qualities prescribed by *Chanakya Neeti* to be an ideal woman.

According to *Chanakya Neeti* there are five qualities prescribed by Chanakya, which makes a woman best among the lot. They are being compassionate and polite (Daya aur Vinamrta), following dharma (Dharm ka palan), habit of hoarding (Sanchay karne ki pravriti), sweet voice (Vani ki madhurata) and being six times more courageous than male (Purushon se chhah guna sahas). If we analyse the character of *Sakuntala* in the light of *Chanakya Neeti*, we will find that she quite fit in the frame developed by Chanakya in his *Chanakya Neeti*.

In the play once Dusyanta goes away from Ashrama after making merry with her, he didn't even worry to get back to her, neither has he remembered her when she approaches him with colleagues from Ashrama, as saint Kanya had sent her to the

King once he finds out that she has done *gandarva vivaha* and she is now pregnant. Though, in the narrative *Kalidasa* had rescued him from his deeds with the use of dramatic convention of ‘curse’ given by *Durvasa* rishi, but we all know that in the actual narrative of Mahabharata, nothing this sort happens. And even if this was due to the curse itself how *Sakuntala* could be knowing and being considerate about the same. With all humiliation she had felt, she had to leave the palace with the baby in her womb. She faced her agony without any complain. Does she look like a real woman? I think, absolutely not. She is the creation of man’s desire and that’s why she is the most desirable and sought after character of Indian mythology and society. This is what I call ‘construction’ of woman for consumption of the male ego and desire.

The same case can be seen in the character of *Vasavadatta* in the narrative of *Swapnavasavadatta* written by one of the oldest playwright of Ancient Indian Drama named *Bhasa*. The narrative of Ujjain’s princess Vasavadatta’s *gandharva vivaha* with king Udayana, king of Kosal, has been told in the earlier play titled *Pratigyayougandhrayan* by Bhasa. In *Swapanvasavadatta* Bhasa comes up with the story of their falling apart as in the very first act of the play it has been established that *Vasavadatta* has become victim of a great fire and thus *Udayana* has lost her as his kingdom, which has been snatched by his enemy. This has been planned by Udayana able minister *Yougandhrayan*, as he believes that in the presence of *Vasavadatta*, he will not act accordingly, as the time demands. And to win back his kingdom he has to be in action and marry the *Padmavati*, princess of Magadh, to gather and take support of army of Magadha to win back his state. The play depicts the story of their *Viyoga* (separation) and ultimately they come together in the end when *Udayana* wins back his kingdom with the support of Magadha army. In this

text also not only the character of *Vasavadatta* but also of *Padmavati* are being used by the playwright as if they are here merely as wish fulfilling creatures of *Udayana*, not the real human beings, who have their own desires and thinking. And this is true for most of the other plays of Ancient Indian Drama. This is also very much evident through the concept of *Nayika Bheda* developed by *Bharata* in *Natysastra*.

### **The Concept of *Nayika Bheda***

If, we see, the categorization of women characters portrayed in Sanskrit plays or advised to portray in such light through some dramaturgical texts and other sources through the concept of *Nayika-Bheda*, we will come to know that even these categorization has been done keeping men at centre of the discourse. Be it the differentiation of *Nayikas* by *Bharata* in his famous dramaturgical text *Natyashastra* or by *Agnipurana*, women here are differentiated according to their relation with their men and their mental or emotional state. They are eight in numbers; *Vasaksajja Nayika*, *Virahotkanthita Nayika*, *Svadhinabhartruka Nayika*, *Kalahantarita Nayika*, *Khandita Nayika*, *Vipralabdha Nayika*, *Proshitabhartruka Nayika* and *Abhisarika Nayika*, as defined in sloka number 210-211 of chapter twenty four of *Natyastra*.<sup>ii</sup>

Here, *Vasaksajja Nayika* is the one who is ready or dressed up for the union, *Virahotkanthita Nayika* is the one who is distressed by separation, *Svadhinabhartruka Nayika* is the one who is having her husband in subjection, *Kalahantarita Nayika* is the one who separated by quarrel, *Khandita Nayika* is the one who is enraged with her lover, *Vipralabdha Nayika* is the one who is deceived

by her lover, *Proshita Bhartruka Nayika* is the one who has a sojourning husband and *Abhisarika Nayika* is the one who is going to meet her lover. Thus, we see that all this classification is based on the 'women' relationship and emotional state with their 'men'. If, I argue on the basis of the characters like *Sakuntala*, *Malavika*, *Urvashi*, *Padmavati*, *Vasavadatta*, *Vasantsena*, *Tapti*, *Sita*, *Draupadi*, *Hidimba*, *Dharni* and other main characters introduced in different plays by various playwrights like *Kalidas*, *Bhas*, *Bhavbhuti* & others, these characters have either been woven around *Nayika-Bheda* or provided authenticity to those categorization.

### **Woman as part of Theatre Repertory**

Though, it is believed that women were part of the performing troupes in ancient times and they used to play women characters represented in the Sanskrit plays but there is hardly any fact available regarding the same. Either the aestheticians, philosophers and critics of Indian dramaturgy are silent on the issue or they haven't found any practice. The practitioners are supposed to be degenerated and not suitable to live in civil society, as suggested by Indian politician cum philosopher *Kautilya* in his text *Arthashastra*.

*There shall be no grounds or buildings intended for recreation [in the new settlements]. Actors, dancers, singers, musicians, professional story tellers, and minstrels shall not obstruct the work [of the people], because in villages which provide no shelter [to outsiders], the people will be {fully} involved in the work of fields. [Consequently] there will be an increase in the supply of labour, money, commodities, grains and liquid products. {2.1.33-35}.<sup>iii</sup>*

The deliberate marginalization of performer community, which is still obvious in the present society, was very much there in ancient times and this must be the reason behind the silencing of ‘women’ performers in the history. As, ‘women’ performers must have faced two layered marginalization, first as being performer and second being a women. Thus, we need to focus on the issue of marginalization of women performers as a whole and unearth the ‘hidden’ or ‘silenced’ voice of women and their reasons in particular as suggested by Elaine Aston in feminist method of theatre studies:

*The ‘new direction’ in theatre history was exposing the history of male domination of the stage and recovering women’s performances which, like so much of women’s culture, had been ‘hidden’ and silenced by a body of conservative, male criticism.<sup>iv</sup>*

### **Woman as Performed Entity**

There is hardly any doubt about it that any art practice in general or performance in particular has its roots in the immediate setting of the society. The society influence the art practices and performances in various ways which is not just limited to acquiring narratives and forms from them. In the same way art practices or performances also influence the society in long terms. In connection to that it is also interesting to note that whether the ‘women’ represented as ‘object’ in Sanskrit performances and dramatic texts had played any role in ‘objectification’ of ‘women’ in society. This is the central thrust of this research.

The theatre history and dramaturgy of Ancient Indian Drama and study of it shows that ‘woman’ has been constructed as other than ‘man’ and it has been represented

in various Sanskrit play texts. As feminist scholar De Lauretis mentions that historically woman has been represented as other than man and how feminist scholarship is trying to identify and analyze it:

*Feminist scholarship in recent years has been centrally concerned with the theoretical discourses of representation articulated through the texts of a number of cultural fields: art, cinema, media, advertising, theatre, etc. In consequence, feminist analysis of representation has identified the oppressive discourse of engendered representation which constructs and positions 'woman' as 'the other-from-man'.*<sup>v</sup>

In the light of this new thinking when we try to analyse the same various questions arise about the woman folk and its representation in Ancient India and Ancient Indian Drama. Some of these are;

Whether the portrayal of women in Sanskrit drama subjective or objective? Whether the image of the 'objectified' women also reflected in 'subjective' women or just 'subjective' women got 'objectified' in the portrayal of the characters? Did the 'Performed Women' became the prototype of society women and sooner or later their characteristics have been adopted by them? Does the portrayal of women in plays and literature of Sanskrit texts are mere representation of women of the society or these performed women have constituted the women of the society in longer period. Have performed women played any role in developing the women kind in general society?

And surprisingly answers to all these questions are in affirmative. The Performed entity of 'woman' later get translated into real 'woman' as society has set the expectation from them in the similar fashion and because of the resonance of the

same was everywhere and the society was predominantly run by the dictums of the men, the woman kid of the society had no option but to follow the suit. And thus slowly the real woman got transformed into the performed entity, because the society had different expectations from them and they have no other option than accepting the same as they were devoid of the property rights and they can't even have proper education.

## **Conclusion**

Thus, it can be argued safely that Ancient Indian Drama and its dramaturgical texts and their performances had played a vital role in construction of the women of our society. The role assigned to them and expectations from the women characters in a play was always to please the 'man' of the family or society. The portrayal of women in plays and literatures of Ancient Indian Drama and various Sanskrit texts are not mere representation of women of the society but these performed women have framed and constituted the women of the society in the longer period. Here, the performed entity of women overshadowed the women of the society and sooner or later they got transformed into performed entities.

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<sup>i</sup> Elaine, A. (1995) *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre*, Routledge: London and New York, 39.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.wisdomlib.org/hinduism/book/the-natyashastra/d/doc210156.html> 21.02.2022

<sup>iii</sup> Kautilya *The Arthashastra* (1982) (edi.) N. Rangarajan, Penguin Books: New Delhi, 180.

<sup>iv</sup> Elaine, A. (1995) *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre*, Routledge: London and New York, 3.

<sup>v</sup> Laurotis, T. D. (1984) *Alice Doesn't: Feminism Semiotics Cinema*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 5.

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