

Sudraka's *Mrichchhakatika*: Depicting a Love Story Par Excellence

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Abstract: *Mrichchhakatika*, a well-known Indian classical play written in Sanskrit language is attributed to the ancient playwright named Sudraka. In his magnum opus, *Mrichchhakatika* depicts an immortal love story between Charudatta and Vasantasena. The former is a Brahmana who is impoverished but quite virtuous whereas the latter is a courtesan who is exceedingly rich and breathtakingly beautiful. This love story is full of twists and turns but at the same time, greatly amusing and far elevating. It is based on high moral values such as pure love, loyalty, truth, sacrifice, and selflessness. He has presented the characters from almost all social groups of the contemporary society- gentlemen, monks, courtesans, maids, and servants. This play becomes so popular that it has been translated into many languages including English and French, and it has also been staged on national and international levels several times. The present paper aims at analyzing the love story between Charudatta and Vasantasena with all its delicacies and complexities. The study explores into all the essential factors that make this love story par excellence.

Key Words: Virtuous, Generous, Impoverished, Purity, Honesty, Sacrifice, Selflessness, Par excellence.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Mrichchhakatika, a well-known Indian classical play in Sanskrit literature is attributed to the ancient playwright named Sudraka. He is remembered as a great scholar having a profound knowledge of *The Rigveda*, *The Samveda*, *the Kamasutra*, *Science*, and *Mathematics*. He unlike Ashwaghosha, Bhasa, Kalidasa, Harsha, and Bhawabhuti, portrays the characters being inspired from the mundane life of the contemporary society, not from epics or mythology. He has presented the characters from all social groups including gentlemen, monks, gamblers, servants, courtesans, and thieves. The book *Mrichchhakatika* depicts an extraordinary love story between Charudatta and Vasantasena. Charudatta is a Brahmana- extremely poor, utmost virtuous and exceedingly generous whereas Vasantasena is a courtesan- tremendously wealthy, breathtakingly beautiful, and exceptionally generous. The former is highly respected for his honesty and generosity and the latter is also greatly admired for her beauty and performing arts by the people of Ujjayani. Although their love story bears many twists and turns yet it is greatly amusing and far elevating as it is based on high moral values such as virtue, loyalty, honesty, generosity, sacrifice, and selflessness. The text also deals with other themes like friendship, jealousy, corruption in judiciary, and the role of destiny.

2. Literature Review:

The author of the play is commonly assumed to be Sudraka. However, no clear idea is found in any historical records. Different scholars have different opinions on the authorship of the text. Indologist A.K. Warder proves him to be a legendary figure and hence the existence of Sudraka is doubtful. Some scholars including Farely P. Richmond, regard that Sudraka is simply a mythical figure. Sten Konow holds that Sudraka is the pen name of a 3rd century Abhira king, possibly Shivadutta, the father of Ishvarasena. This theory is supported by a *Skandapurana* legend which calls Sudraka an "Andhrabhrtya" meaning a vassal of the Andhras. The *Skandapurana* places Sudraka in the Kali year 3290, which corresponds to 188 CE, close to the Abira period (Wikipedia).

The play was translated in several languages. It was first translated in English as *The Toy Cart* by Horace Hayman Wilson in 1826. Afterwards, it was translated into English, notably by Arthur W. Ryder in 1905 as *The Little Clay Cart* which was enacted at the Hearst Greek Theatre in Berkeley in 1905. It was also adapted into film versions and enjoyed much popularity on national and international levels. These films include *Mrichha Katika*, a silent film by Suchet Singh made in 1920 and several Hindi films titled *Vasantasena* by Gajanan Jagirdar in 1942; *Sadhna* by B. R. Chopra in 1958 and *Utsav* by Girish Karnad in 1984 (Wikipedia).

3. Objectives:

The present paper aims at analyzing the love story between Charudatta and Vasantasena with all its delicacies and complexities. The study explores into all the essential factors that make this love story par excellence.

4. Research Methodology:

A research method applies certain tools to explore, examine and analyze the text, and identify the problems and find the solution. The present paper is a content based qualitative research. The researcher has deeply studied the primary source, the translated version (tr. M. R. Kale: 2017) of Sudraka's *Mrichchhakatika* in print form as well as the secondary sources which include some relevant books, scholarly writings, reviews, articles, and journals. Some e-contents are also downloaded from authentic online sources. In this research study 'library-based research technique' has been employed. This technique helps in identifying and locating the source that provides factual information or personal expert opinion on the research questions.

Mrichchhakatika as an Immortal Story:

The play depicts a memorable love story between Charudatta and Vasantasena. Charudatta is presented as a noble and sensitive man holding a very respectable position in society. He belonged to a rich mercantile class with a glorious lineage. His excessive generosity in charity makes him poor: "*He has dried up (i.e. become poor) by having satisfied the thirst (i.e. needs) of men, like a reservoir, full of water, in the hot season*" (Kale, 51). But, even in his poverty he maintains his honesty, tolerance, and balance of his mind however he sometimes gets disgusted with his extreme poverty. He pensively utters: "*when a man is reduced to penury after he has enjoyed luxury, he lives a dead man, existing only by keeping up his body*" (23). He sometimes becomes very sad to think that he is unable to help others due to his extreme poverty.

Through the portrayal of his character the playwright has tried to present the utmost virtues and generosity in a human being. Vasantasena, the heroine of the play has been presented as a wealthy courtesan who is uncommonly beautiful and well-versed in performing arts like singing, dancing, and acting. She has been also presented as an object of desire as well as an independent person who believes in the freedom of choice. Her youth and good look enhance her value in society. She entertains her clients in complete professional manner and earns much wealth and popularity but she never submits herself to anybody. She has drawn a clear line between her professional life and personal life. Indeed, she is a virtuous character even being a courtesan. She loves her self-esteem most. The youths from the rich and aristocracy has a deep yearning for her companionship but most of them have their lusty eyes on her youth and beautiful body and so she never loves them. The rich ladies have apprehension that their husbands may fall in love with her:

"She is the goddess Lakshmi, without the lotus (in her hand); she is the lovely weapon or the bodiless one (Cupid); she is the (cause of) grief to high-born (chaste) ladies; and she is the flower of the excellent tree in the form of Love. Exhibiting bashfulness at the time of amorous sports, she is followed by hosts of gallants wandering after her, as she walks gracefully over the stage in the form of Love's field." (191)

Now let us explore their love story with a few key questions: Where did Charudatta and Vasantasena meet each other? How did they fall in love with each other? what qualities did they find in each other? What makes this love story par excellence? Such several relevant questions need to be discussed while making a systematic enquiry into the core concerns of the research topic. We know that Charudatta is a very noble, kind, and co-operative person who has great respect in the heart the people of Ujjayini. Once he visits the garden of Cupid's shrine with his friend, Vidushaka. Vasantasena also visits there with her attendant, Madanika. The lady falls in love with him when she looks at him for the first time. The noble man's behavior impresses her very much when she seeks some help from him. Moreover, she finds in him the same noble qualities as she has already heard about him. Thus, his respectful behavior and his spotless image win the lady's heart. Her love is clearly reflected in a private conversation with her attendant, Madanika:

Vasantasena- Girl, you visited with me the garden of Cupid's shrine?

Madanika- I did, Madam.

Vasantasena- And still you ask me (about it), as if you are a stranger (in the matter)?

Madanika- I have it! Is he that the same gentleman who favourably received my mistress when she sought his help?

Vasantasena- Well, what is his name?

Madanika- My lady, he, of auspicious name, is called the noble Charudatta.

Vasantasena- (Joyfully). Excellent, Madanika, excellent! You know it rightly. (69-71)

Vasantasena knows well that Charudatta is an impoverished man, despite it she falls in love with him. Why does she fall in love with such an extremely poor fellow? Is it her a conscious decision or just a whim of her fancy? Her attendant is much excited to know the answers of such questions. Any curious mind would like to satisfy his curiosity. It becomes quite clear through her further conversation:

Madanika: (To herself) I will thus (speak to her) now. (Aloud) My lady, it is heard that he is a poor man.

Vasantasena: Hence it is that I love him. For a courtesan who fixes her affections on a poor lover would not incur censure from the world.

Madanika: But Madam, do the female honey-bees frequent a mango tree which has lost its blossoms?

Vasantasena: [No, they do not;] and hence they are known as 'honey-makers.' (71).

Let us explore the metaphor of the 'honey-bees' that Madanika uses to comment on the love of her mistress. She uses 'honey-bees' for common women and 'blossoms' for material affluence and luxuries. She means to say that woman is generally not interested in the man who has lost his fortunes and become poor. On the contrary, her mistress gives a different meaning of the same metaphor. She interprets that 'honey-bees' are honey-makers. Women with nice heart are 'honey-bees' or 'honey-makers.' They are interested only in honey i.e. virtue. She views that 'honey-maker' types of lovers are generally considered genuine and true as their observant eyes are always fixed upon their men's virtues, not their wealth. Here we get the two different opinions of love. To Madanika, a woman loves a man due to his wealth and social status in society but to her mistress a nice-hearted woman loves a man due to his good character and spotless image only.

It is generally said that love is blind; it happens to anyone, anytime; it is not done consciously. It is also said that the role of mind in this matter is quite negligible but here in the Vasantasena's case it is not applicable. She listens to her mind as well as her heart. She has apparently two ideas in her mind about the man whom she loves - first, the man's most respectable position in society due to his virtuous and charitable nature; and second, the man's poverty as '*a poor lover would not incur censure from the world.*' (71) The man's spotless image and his impoverished position become the sole reasons behind her love. If she marries him, she will enjoy the status of the wedded wife of the most respectable man of the city, and at the same time she will escape from the castigation of the world. On the contrary, if she loves a rich man, people may denunciate her for avaricious nature. Generally, a courtesan or a woman belonging to the profession of entertainment industry gets attracted to rich clients or customers due to their money; no matter how their character is. But, Vasantasena unlike such women gives more value to character than financial status of a person. Her love unlike the superficial love of today's women is pure and genuine. She loves Charudatta from the core of her heart. She dreams to marry him and becomes the legal wife of the most admirable man of the city. Anyhow she wants to come out of her foul identity of a courtesan. As an artist her companionship is welcomed but she is denied inside the domesticity.

Vasantasena's love is tested many times and she always emerges victorious. When her casket of jewellery is stolen from Charudatta's house, the man goes into utter tension assuming what people may think about him as "*inglorious poverty is always prone to be suspected*" (125). Fortunately, it is discovered later. Sarvilaka has stolen it in order to buy the freedom of his beloved, Madanika from the slavery of Vasantasena. Thus, the jewellery comes back to its real owner. She becomes extremely worried to think about her lover's mental suffering and so she decides to inform her lover about the jewellery as soon as possible however the weather is not suitable. The day when she goes to meet him, it is a heavy rainstorm, thunders and lightening but she does not care such obstacles. She challenges the situations: "*Let clouds gather as they will; let it turn night; (or) let rain fall incessantly. With my heart yearning for my beloved, I care not for*

all of them" (175). She is determined to fight all the odds and difficulties for the sake of her love. Her indomitable spirit is well reflected in her assertive voice: "You may thunder, O Indra, or pour down showers, or send down hundreds of thunderbolts: you cannot stop women who have started to meet their lovers" (199). She loves her noble man tremendously and is desperate to protect him at any cost just like a mother who gives birth to a baby and looks after it at any rate. Of course, no difficulties matter on the way of true love.

In the play there is a villain named Samasthanaka, also known as Sakara, the half-mad brother-in-law of King Palaka causes much difficulty in the journey of love of the protagonists. He tries to win her love several times but always remains unsuccessful. Every time he faces her strong negative responses. The fact is that her heart is already booked for the virtuous Brahmana whom she loves wholeheartedly. Now she cannot imagine any other man in her life. Moreover, she has a very low opinion about this debauchee. When she is tempted with money, her anger mounts very high:

*"You man of evil deeds, your wretch! Full of sin that you are, why do you tempt with money, in this matter? For the bees never abandon a lotus of graceful actions and pure (beautiful)
An effort should be made to serve a man of (good) family and (virtuous) character, even though he may be in reduced circumstances. For, love for a worthy personage constitutes the glory of courtesans.
Moreover, having resorted to the mango-tree, I shall not betake myself to the Palasa tree"* (287).

The lady gives more value to Charudatta's virtuous character than Sakara's huge money. The beast villain gets furious at her unyielding nature about her love. He goes mad when the lady compares him with 'the Palasa tree' and Charudatta with 'the mango tree.' Now he starts threatening to kill her. He seizes her by the throat and strangulates her. She faints down. Sakara thinks that she is dead. Then he frames a conspiracy that Charudatta has murdered his beloved, Vasantasena. The judiciary also gets influenced as he is the brother-in-law of King Palak. When the lady is lying unconscious, she is recognized by Samvahaka, the Buddhist monk who revives her and restores to her normal health. When she comes to know that her noble man is brought to the execution ground in the charge of killing her, she hurriedly approaches on the spot and saves his life. Her desperation to meet her lover reminds Shakuntala's passion for King Dushyanta.

*I do not know your heart,
But my nights and days, O pitiless one!
Are haunted by Love,
As every part of me
Yearns to be one with you. (Rajan, 1999:205)*

Vasantasena touches Charudatta lovingly, the latter's joy knows no bounds and utters a few words in his faltering voice: "Beloved mine, are you really Vasantasena?..(Observing: joyfully) How! She is Vasantasena and none else! Bathing your breasts with the streams of the water of tears, whence did you come, like the divine (re-vivifying) lore, when I was in the grasp of Death?" (387). He gives credit to his beloved and the power of love for getting his life once again: "Beloved Vasantasena ! This body of mine, which was about to be destroyed on your account, was saved by yourself (from that fate). Oh, the power of union with one's beloved person! (Else) who, being dead, could ever be brought back to life again?" (389). Thus, Charudatta gets his life back, becomes free from all charges and gets his beloved. Not only so, he is also made the king of the kingdom Kushavati. The lady is given the title of the legal wife of Charudatta. Her joy is beyond description. She expresses her feelings in ecstasy: "Sir, my wishes are fulfilled!" (403).

5. Criticisms on the Protagonists:

Let us have a close look on the character of Vasantasena as a beloved. She stands out as an unconventional figure in ancient Indian Literature and medieval legends. Unlike a conventional heroine, she does not wait for a hero to come and woo her. She herself takes initiative and carries on her relation. Indeed, she is a very strong character. Her strength lies in her mental toughness and emotional stability. When she makes decision for her love, she does not listen to anybody. She remains firm and constant till the end of the story. She remains loyal and faithful through all odd situations. No hurdles unsettle her. The most cruel and influential villain proves very dwarf before her. Neither his power nor his wealth shatters her spirit. Monami Mukherjee also remarks: "What makes Vasantasena an admirable character is the fact that she does not submit to society without a fight."

Now let us analyze the character of Charudatta. About him some critics argue that Charudatta is not heroic; he plays quite a passive role in the love episode of his life but, the fact is that his munificence has impoverished him to a great deal. He has the burden to look after his family by noble means. How can he be heroic? However, he is heroic not in terms of bravery, courage, or strength but in some deeper sense. He maintains tolerance, patience, and balance of mind even in the most critical phase of his life. He never tries to adopt any dishonest means to achieve prosperity. He values virtues more than wealth. The other allegation on him is that he is a very passive character; he does not take initiative in his love with Vasantasena; he allows things happen to him, but the fact is that he is a married man reeling under extreme poverty as well as the father of one child also. At this situation, if he desires for another woman and takes initiative in it, he can be called a debauchee, and cannot be placed in the category of an ideal hero of Indian classical literature. His activeness can be explored in his respectful response to a good-natured courtesan and remains constant and faithful till the end of the story. As a lover he shows intensity no less than his lady. Viewing her pious nature and character, he compares her with a goddess: “*She is indeed a lady fit to be waited upon (worshiped) like a goddess*” (61). To him, life is meaningless without her. His simplicity, honesty, and generosity certainly cast a magical effect on her head and heart and finally, becomes successful in winning her heart competing with all the youths of the rich and aristocratic class of the city. Thus, the allegation that Charudatta is a passive character and not a heroic one is completely baseless.

6. Conclusion:

To sum up, *Mrichchhakatika* depicts a very sweet and pure love story tenderly woven between a poor, noble Brahmana and a rich, beautiful courtesan. Such level of true love is rarely found in today's materialistic world. Here love is solely based on virtues and spirituality, not on any material gains or physical pleasures. Both the characters-Charudatta and Vasantasena have incomparably love and respect for each other. Both admire and adore each other's merits and strengths. They occupy their pious place in each other's pure heart. They remain firm and resolute in their commitment for love against all odds. For them love is a matter of soul, self-realization, and spiritual elevation. Thus, the play depicts the love story par excellence.

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