

Appraisal of the Womanhood in Shudraka's 'THE LITTLE CLAY CART'

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Abstract

Since the ancient times, women have been subjected to the gender confined roles by the strictly territorial nature of the patriarchy. The concept of 'New Women' dates back to the end of the 19th century which acted as a catalyst in stirring the movement of feminism in the 20th century. It basically represented a group of women who were liberated physically, psychologically and emotionally; who were ready to shatter the tough walls of patriarchy. *The Little Clay Cart* or *Mrcchakatika* is a ten-act Sanskrit drama written by Shudraka, on rife with romance, intrigue, politics and comedy. This study aims to explore the psychological and emotional development of women characters especially the female protagonist, Vasantsena. The drama is written way before feminism gained momentum and yet the characteristics of feministic ideologies is very much apparent in the character development of the lead female protagonist i.e. Vasantsena.

Keywords: Gender, New Woman, Patriarchy, Feminism, Psychological, Emotional, Intrigue, Ideologies, Slut shaming.

Introduction

Of all the Shudraka's famous Prakaran plays, *The Little Clay Cart* offers a panoramic view of the different layers of the Indian society. It is a love story of poor brahman, Charudatta and a courtesan named Vasantsena. Their love nest is constantly threatened by the antagonist Sansthanaka, brother in law of King Palaka. The play does not follow a conventional path of typical traditional Sanskrit drama. The protagonists are not of heroic stature rather two ordinary human beings with an extraordinary love story.

Aims and Objectives

The main aim of the article is to understand how women characters of Shudraka's *The Little Clay Cart* shape the dramatic structure and to get an insight of the position of women in the Indian society. This study also highlights the female protagonist Vasantsena's strong will and determination to make a unique place for herself in a prejudiced society. She is independent, fierce, confident, caring and a fear-tackler. The main objective of the article is to understand how patriarchy dominates the society and is a gender neutral thing. Another objective of the article is to illustrate how an indigenous text conforms to a foreign concept of feminism and the various aspects of feministic ideas co-relate with the text. It aims to show the relevance of Indian Classics in the global perspective.

Literature Review

Throughout the play Vasantsena, the female protagonist rejected the constant lustful pursuit of Sansthanaka. The strong 'NO' of Vasantsena has a very similar connotation to the Hindi cinema *Pink* directed by Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury, an Indian film director. It is a movie about 3 girls who are molested by a group of boys but they're in return pressed with charges of attacking the molester. The movie has a very powerful dialogue delivered by Amitabh Bachhan, an Indian Bollywood actor which goes: "No means no and when someone says No, you stop." This very dialogue echoes a very strong message of the importance of consensual sex and consent is important even if she is your friend, wife, girlfriend or a sex-worker.

At the Critics' Choice Awards 2020, actress Kristen Bell delivered a powerful speech on womanhood on being awarded the #See Her award. She talked about what is it to be a woman today? Is it just to be brave and courageous? She says that women have been conditioned to fit in the "tiny, pretty sparkly boxes, with bows on them generally." She urged women to embrace their complexities as they too can have their moment of weaknesses.

Being a woman today doesn't necessarily mean to portray oneself strong all the time. Being a woman," "isn't about being anything specific. It is just about giving yourself permission to be the things you already are,"

Barbara Sullivan says, "In the academic literature on prostitution there are very few authors who argue that valid consent to prostitution is possible. Most suggest that consent to prostitution is impossible or at least unlikely." For some writers consent in prostitution is bit problematic and the episodic scenes of Sansthanaka and Vasantsena echoes the same question of consent. Does not a courtesan have a right to say No?

Vasantsena courage speaks volume. She doesn't get influenced by the people around her and neither is afraid of her excellent decision making skills. She stands firm on her beliefs and faced every challenge with guts and glory. In an interview to Bust, Uzo Aduba a Nigerian-American actress said, "It is your definition and it's fine to be strong, it's fine to stand tall, it's fine to speak up for yourself, it's fine to not stand in the back, it's fine to challenge whatever status quo is laid out for you without fear of consequence even though that's what's been dictated to us in the past. I love it. To me, it's standing up for yourself and not being afraid to speak up. I think it's powerful."

There are various traits that are associated with women which categorizes her to various categories. If a woman is good in sport she must not be good in studies, if a girl likes to dress up nicely she must be into fashion, if a woman parties late at night she must not have a good character, women are expected to like the color pink because it's feminine. What people fail to perceive is that a woman can excel both in sports and studies; if she dresses nicely, it doesn't necessarily mean she wants to enter in a show-biz industry. Being feminine does not connote to weakness. Priyanka Chopra, an Indian-American actress, gives a beautiful definition of what being an absolute woman is all about. She said, "You can be an absolute woman and also be smart and tough and not lose your femininity."

According to Barbara Stoler Miller, Barnard College, Columbia University, "Basham's translation is lively and accurate, offering fresh perspectives on the play. He clearly knew and appreciated it well." Bhasam was Professor of Asian Civilization at Australian National University and his English adaptation of *Mrcchakatika*, which translates into English as *The Little Clay Cart* makes the play very accessible to the readers all across the world.

According to Madhav M. Deshpande, The University of Michigan, the Sanskrit version of the play has a greater fluidity in its diction, perfectly sketching its characters from all the stratas of society and Bhasam's "renditions have retained these nuances in English."

According to *The Book Review*, *The Little Clay Cart* is a Sanskrit play highlighting a love story of the high-born man for a courtesan. The dramatic developments keep the story intact with its tenderness, humors and political intrigue. It also

contains realistic portrayals of a wide range of characters giving it a contemporary appeal. "The modern appeal of *Mrcchakatika* also derives, it must be noted, from its praise and acceptance in the West. According to literary historian Winternitz, while the older Sanskrit works on poetics and criticism did not seem to consider this play important enough for quoting examples from it, in Europe it was well received from the beginning. First published in Bonn in 1847, its German translations appeared in the subsequent seventies, followed by those in English, French and other European languages; some also have been enacted on the stage. In the words of Indologist A.L. Basham, 'to a Western audience, it is certainly the most appreciated of Indian plays'."

Vasantsena is a courtesan who enjoys all the worldly pleasures and luxuries of life. Despite being rich, some sort of voidness can be felt in her life which is ultimately filled with the passionate love of Charudatta. The position of courtesans in ancient India was not of high reputation. They were highly successful entertainer who catered to the nobility of the Indian subcontinent and this put them in a highly vulnerable position of being exploited by the unscrupulous people. The position of a courtesan is highlighted during the conversation between Vasantsena and Sansthanaka when Sansthanaka says to Vasantsena:

Which, as you know, is friend to every youth;
Remember, you are common as the flower
That grows beside the road; in bitter truth,
Your body has its price; your beauty's dower
Is his, who pays the market's current rate:
Then serve the man you love, and him you hate.

In Shudraka's play, Vasantsena's character offers a bold and rebellious personality which is in sharp contrast to the women's freedom of choice making in ancient India. The analysis of Vasantsena's character fills us with argumentative questions: Is Vasantsena really a new woman? ; Can *The Little Clay Cart* be treated as a feminist study? ; Was Shudraka's handling of rebellious and strong headed Vasantsena intentional?

The ideologies of feminism dates back to late 19th century and it is not an indigenous movement and the fact that Vasantsena seamlessly blends in with the core characteristic features of feminism is quite interesting. She is the Indian 'New Woman' in the literary perspective .A feminist is someone who believes in gender equality, is someone who looks beyond the tough exteriors of patriarchy with the intention of shattering it, is someone who's constantly pushing the boundaries which society has imposed on women, is someone who has an independent role in choice making and shaping a life of their own and is someone who Breaks the stereotype gender roles and walks hand in hand with their gender counterparts. In her book *Women in Modern Drama*, Gail Finney describes the New Woman:

One of the primary factors motivating the typical New Woman is rebellion against the 'old woman,' described by one member of an 1890s women's club as 'bounded on the north by servants, on the south by children, on the east by ailments and

on the west by clothes.' The conventional Victorian woman is accustomed to self-sacrifice; the New Woman pursues self-fulfillment and independence, often choosing to work for a living. She typically strives for equality in her relationships with men, seeking to eliminate the double standard that shaped the sexual mores of the time, and is in general much more frank about sexuality than the old woman. (Finney 195-96).

Vasantsena is an epitome of new woman as laid down by Finney. It becomes inevitable to first discuss how women were perceived and their position in ancient India through Shudraka's play *The Little Clay Cart*. Sansthanaka isn't just a character, in fact, he represents a group of men or a group of society to be more precise, who set standards for women and expected them to act in that capacity. Critics can argue that Vasantsena wasn't an ordinary woman but a courtesan and hence, the exploitation of a courtesan without her choice is justifiable. In this speech of Vasantsena, we can trace the historiography of how women were subdued and how it sets examples for men to perceive their opposite sex. Sansthanaka is pursuing Vasantsena and the latter is rejecting his forceful affection and out of sheer frustration Sansthanaka leaves no chance unturned to degrade and dishonor Vasantsena. First he threatens her as is evident from the lines below:

You wake my passion, my desire, my love;
You drive away my sleep in bed at night;
Both fear and terror seem your heart to move;
You trip and stumble in your headlong flight.
But Ravana forced Sita to his will;
Just so shall I enjoy you to the fill.

Sansthanaka eroticism doesn't shock the modern readers for the obvious reason that our brain and mind are conditioned in such a fashion that we are implicitly or explicitly influenced by the world around us and the gender norms set up by the society. Sansthanaka used the reference of Ramayana, the incident where Ravana abducted Sita, to feel the gender superiority complex that women are under man's control and if she's a courtesan there's no debate about it. When Vasantsena declined his erotic love even after the threat, Sansthanaka does what every other misogynists would do i.e. slut shaming.

Sansthānaka. Lishten to me, shir!
Thish whip of robber Love, thish dancing-girl,
Eater of fish, deshtroyer of her kin,
Thish shnubnose, shtubborn, love-box, courtezan,
Thish clothes-line, wanton creature, maid of sin—
I gave her ten shweet names, and shtill She will not bend her to my will.

Even after the constant threats, Vasantsena stood firm on her ground of not being pursued by Sanshtanaka. The strong 'NO' of Vasantsena is very similar to connotation in the Hindi cinema *Pink* directed by Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury, an Indian film director. It is a movie about 3 girls who are molested by a group of boys but they're in return pressed with charges of attacking the molester. The movie has a very powerful dialogue delivered by Amitabh Bachhan, an Indian Bollywood actor which goes: "No

means no and when someone says No, you stop." This very dialogue echoes a very strong message the importance of consensual sex and consent is important even if she is your friend, wife, girlfriend or a sex-worker. Vasantsena courage speaks volume, she didn't accept the love even after knowing that she'll be murdered in a solitary grove and like a brave woman she replies, "And I, who have loved the mango tree, I can't cling to the locust tree." The play hints at the role of a woman in the society and in a very subtle manner brought the important social issues to the forefront.

There is plethora of examples suggesting the hypocrisy of men and how women were degraded time to time, but they restore their grace with powerful will and determination. Sharvilaka comparing a woman to 'gold', to a 'snake' who are false and cold, to a 'bird' who pecks the man and 'leave him bare'; Charudatta who is a virtuous man and also who loves Vasantsena with his whole heart disrespects Vasantsena by comparing her love to materialistic benefits. He says to Maitreya, "If wealth is thine, the maid is thine/ For maids are won by gold." ; Maitreya is also one of those men in society who generalize people based on how they look and what they do. He tells Charudatta that it is very difficult to find "a courtesan without avarice"; when Charudatta was in dire need of help and had no option other than to seek help from his wife, he started feeling less of a man and says that his wife, "the woman is the man" a woman is not a woman if she helps a man rather she becomes a man which suggests how were women perceived in the society and what were the limits set for them. Like a hypocrite, Charudatta takes help from his wife and consoles himself by saying that the love of his wife is tremendous and hence he is not poor. It is very ironic to point out that though he takes pride in having a wife who helped him in the time of need, Charudatta had extra marital affair with Vasantsena. Charudatta's wife doesn't object to his husband's infidelity which shows how patriarchy is a gender neutral thing. It is safe to say not only men but women too exhibit internalize patriarchal values. These examples are enough to suggest that women were seen as a tool or anything except as humans having feelings and dignity.

In the end of the play Vasantsena becomes the wife of Charudatta but this doesn't mean that she has settled for something unworthy. She from the beginning till the end oozes the same courage, strong determination and a strong individuality. She isn't a chosen bride, rather someone, who chose a partner well suited for herself unlikely conforming to the popular traditions of the family choosing the partner for their daughters without her choice or consent. A free spirited courtesan became a mother to Charudatta's son. These feminine qualities of Vasantsena don't interfere with her being rightly described as a strong woman. It is a lesson for the society to understand that a woman can be smart, tough and yet she cannot lose her femininity. It can't be associated as a weakness rather it is one's powerful weapon from which one derives strength.

Literature is one of the powerful mediums through which writers have propagated their ideas,

woven beautiful plots and sketched their memorable characters. The characters in general become the driving force of the plot and message the writer intends to impart. The strong and powerful female characters throughout the different ages have become a guiding light to understand the position of women in the society and their rebels to change the conventional narrative. Shakespeare's powerful feminist characters like Rosalind, Lady Macbeth and Viola are fine examples of subverting the patriarchal structure of the society. However, it is arguable that during Elizabethan reign women were not allowed to act their parts in the play and in addition, Shakespeare's treatment of most of the women characters as damsel in distress is quite an exception. However, these delicate and yet strong female characters were to serve examples and inspiration for the generation of writers and the society to come. Later in the 18th century Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* is ground breaking work on feminist philosophy. It argues for the rights of women for education against the educational and political theorists of the eighteenth century who wanted to deny education to women. It emphasizes the importance of position of women, for they are integral part of the family, a companion to their husband and the creator of new life. She goes on to say, revolutionarily, that 'I shall first consider women in the grand light of human creatures, who, in common with men, are placed on this earth to unfold their faculties ...'. Victorian society was a patriarchal society and they considered women as subservient to men and their roles were restricted to become an ideal wives and mothers. However writers like Jane Austen, Sojourner Truth, Charlotte Bronte etc contributed immensely for the emancipation of women rights. Elizabeth Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice* dominates the plot with her spectacular rebellious and strong personality. She defies traditional gender norms and affirms her feministic perspective by speaking her own mind and by looking for an equal partnership in marriage. She says, "He is a gentleman, and I am a gentleman's daughter. So far we are equal." She believes in equality of gender and considers herself equivalent to Darcy. George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* and Mrs. Warren's *Profession* are excellent example of feminist criticism. In *Pygmalion* we see male dominance and the influence they exert on the women characters. Eliza the female character is throughout dominated by the men. We see how the Victorian women were supposed to behave in a lady-like fashion to be accepted in the society and in Mrs. Warren's *Profession* G.B. Shaw explore the problem of the prostitution and in the preface he writes:

Mrs Warren's *Profession* was written in 1894 to draw the attention to the truth that prostitution is caused, not by female depravity and male

licentiousness, but simply by underpaying, undervaluing and over-working women so shamefully that the poorest of them are forced to resort to prostitution to keep body and soul together.

Henrick Ibsen in his famous play *A Doll's House* narrates a story of a domesticated woman, Nora Helmer who thought the purpose of her life was to serve her husband and her children. Throughout the journey of being a faithful and obedient wife to her husband Nora experienced an epiphany that all her life she was living with a stranger who treated her like a doll and she much more than being just a wife or mother to somebody, above all she is a human being and she needs to be treated with dignity and respect. She makes a decision to leave the family obligations behind and make a new start for herself. The following words of NORA exemplify the same:

NORA: I must stand on my own two feet if I'm to get to know myself and the world outside. That's why I can't stay here with you any longer.

Shudraka's treatment of Women in *The Little Clay Cart* bears echoes in G.B.Shaw's in *MAN AND SUPERMAN* and the 'Life Force' theory in the Victorian era. In *MAN AND SUPERMAN* Shaw presents the conflict between man as spiritual creator and woman as guardian of the biological continuity of human race. Verily, it represents the relationship between sexes and the supremacy challenge between *MAN* and *SUPERMAN*.

Conclusion

Shudraka's *The Little Clay Cart* is an indispensable work and exemplary in portraying the womanhood in its prophetic colour which continues to inspire the authors of all ages and champion the cause of emancipation of women.

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