

From Courtesan to Wife: Exploring Women's Roles in Śūdraka's Mrichchhakatika

Keywords: Mrichchhakatika # ganika # vadhu #
nagarvadhu # Vasantsena # Dhuta # Chandala #
Charudatta #

Archana Kumari

Research Scholer

(Department of History University of Delhi)

Abstract

The play Mrichchhakatika, written by Śūdraka in the 2nd century BCE, serves as a significant historical source, offering insights into the status and roles of women during that period. This article focuses on two central female characters—Dhuta, the wife of the protagonist Charudatta, and Vasantsena, a courtesan (ganika). The play reflects the societal norms and perceptions of women at that time. Dhuta, as Charudatta's wife, embodies the ideal of respectability and devotion to her husband, yet she lacks an independent identity. In contrast, Vasantsena, despite being a courtesan, possesses considerable wealth in the form of property and jewellery. However, she is depicted as being constantly surrounded by an aura of anxiety throughout the play. It is only when she is finally declared the 'vadhu' (wedded wife) of

Charudatta that she gains societal acceptance and respect. This article aims to explore the position of women during the era depicted in *Mrichchhakatika*, particularly examining how the transition from being a 'ganika' to a 'vadhu' alters societal perceptions of a woman's worth and status.

Introduction

King Sudraka wrote the Sanskrit play *Mrichhakatika* in the second century BC. The play opens with a prayer to Lord Shiva, praises King Sudraka, and refers to him as a Kshatriya King of wisdom and knowledge who has lived and performed Ashvamedha Yagya, was knowledgeable in the Rigveda and Samaveda, as well as in mathematics, the arts, and sciences, and has lived for one hundred years plus ten additional days. The poet splits the poem into two halves in the introduction: *Drishya*, which is visible, and *Shravya*, which can only be heard or sung. While "Drama" belongs to the first group. All dramatic compositions, in the author's opinion, fall under the genre of *Rupaka*, which has *rasa* or feelings as its foundation. There are three divisions in *Rupaka*: 1. *Vastu* or narrative 2. *Hero* or *Neta* 3. A concept or *Rasa*, *Adhikarik*, which is the major storyline, and

Prasangik, which is a minor storyline. The first is related to the protagonist, whereas the second is related to the supporting character. Heroic traits like modesty, integrity, generosity, leadership, tact, eloquence, and being from a unique family are all important. The inspiration for Sudraka's *Mrichhakatika* is the completed play by Bhasa called *Daridra Charudatta*, which is about a destitute Brahmin. In the play, Charudatta and Vasantsena's romance in the historic city of Ujjaini is discussed. The hero of this play is a poor Brahmin who is noble, kind, and impoverished, as opposed to a drama where the hero is viewed as being wealthy, powerful, or the monarch or king of the place where he is. Vasantsena, the main character, is a wealthy courtesan. And this essay attempts to critically engage with this love story, which reveals various facets of that time period's society through the interactions of the characters and their effects on the social and cultural spheres of the time.

Famous Sanskrit drama "*Mrichhakatika*" or "*Little clay cart*" is credited to playwright Sudraka. It is regarded as one of the key historical documents for understanding that period's history. Despite the text's age, researchers continue to use it as a crucial research source. It is regarded as a significant contribution to Indian classical literature.

Mrichhakatika offers a mirror of the socio-cultural order of the period by incorporating aspects of romance, social satire, and political intrigue. It is highly regarded for its narrative style and representation of diverse characters from varied social backgrounds. Not only do the principal actors Charudatta and Vasantsena display elements of romance, but also an impoverished Brahmin turned robber named Sarvilaka and a woman named Madanika who was Vasantsena's housemaid.

To have a better understanding of the ancient Indian society at that time, historians analyze this work in the perspective of its historical setting. Scholars engage with the text, language, themes, and characters to establish a historical understanding of the social, political, and cultural context in which it was produced. Through the investigation of this literature, the numerous social classes of that era are revealed, including courtesans, merchants, kings, Buddhist monks, ministers, lawyers, Chandala, police, and gamblers. Through numerous interactions that represent social hierarchies and ties, it also provides us with insight into their relationships. As an example, King Palak's command to have Charudatta put to death in Act 9 was viewed as the final word of a King in Act 10. However, when Arayak became king, he appointed Charudatta as the ruler of Kusavati and

proclaimed Vasantsena to be his "Vadhu" or "wedded wife."

The portrayal of women in this work should be examined as well. Vasantsena and Dhuta, two women who stand out as being very different from one another, are mentioned. Vasantsena was Charudatta's lover and courtesan, yet the text exhibits some unease with Vasantsena's persona. One example of how a woman character was portrayed is when Sakara objectified her identity in act 1 by calling her a destroyer of families, an untameable casket of love, and by equating her with a creeper, well, and boat. She is even referred to as "slave-born" in certain acts. Despite her modesty, she is depicted in act 5 as possessing money and is called "Dhanika" or a "Dhanika" or a rich person. Vasantsena even lends Rohasena her necklace to help him build a cart, demonstrating the ambivalence of her character. On the one hand, Charudatta professes to be a lover, but on the other, he forbids Maitreya from storing her jewellery in the inner quadrangle (which is depicted as a sacred space). In contrast to this, Dhuta is shown as Charudatta's faithful wife who, despite being aware of Charudatta's affection for Vasantsena, presents her jewellery to Vasantsena. She is even depicted in act 10 doing sati for her husband. She is regarded as the ideal lady since she possesses

traits that make a good wife and mother.

In addition to the areas mentioned above, in this section we can analyze how political power and government are portrayed in the text. The plotlines of corruption and the quest for power are reflected in this text. For instance, Sansthanaka, King Palaka's brother-in-law, could be seen engaging in immoral behaviour in the name of their bond. We may also observe Arayaka's battles for the throne and how, after ascending to it, he altered Vasantsena's status. The political climate of the era and the opinions of the populace toward the ruling class can both be better understood through this literature. One could have a deeper understanding of that era's legal history and apply it to the current situation while reading this literature. For instance, in Act 9's court scene, the judge can be seen describing two types of complaints legislation, one based on oral arguments or assertions that must be resolved between the plaintiff and the defendant. Second, depending on the evidence, that is decided by the judge's wisdom. In addition to this, the text deepens our comprehension of the caste structure that ruled that time. The Kshatriya clan stood for the kings' ruling elite. Even when they were found to have committed a crime and it was proven, Brahmins were seen as honourable, charitable people who deserved the benefit of the doubt. The

Chandala were depicted as the representatives of the lower/untouchable class, and their role in an execution was to behead a victim—a trivial task for the upper classes. There may be disagreement among academics over the precise historical analysis of this piece, and as knowledge grows, so do fresh interpretations and insights.

WOMEN AS WIFE

Any time we discuss a woman, regardless of the time, we automatically attribute virtue, chastity, and purity to her. In *Mrichchakatika*, the role of the wife is one of unconditional devotion to her husband. She is expected to encourage her spouse in all his endeavours. She must split both her husband's good and bad fortune. In this book, the wife is portrayed using patriarchal mindset. May your honour command what duty is to be carried out, the Nati wife of Sutradhara may be seen saying in the play's very first act. This assertion suggests that a husband is superior to a woman. As this behaviour continues, Nati notices that she is joking with her which he becomes upset over. This suggested that ladies should practice the act of deference when conversing with their husbands. She is performing the *Abhirupa Pati Vrata* in hopes of obtaining a charming husband or her husband in the afterlife. This is referring to the idea of *Pativrata Stree*, who desires her husband in afterlives, and is

illustrative of the idea of a devoted wife who has given herself to her husband for more than just this life.

The wife of Charudatta, Dhuta, is regarded as an incredibly virtuous woman who has dedicated her entire life to her husband. She is shown as a devout woman who is deserving of all respect. She is depicted as being concerned that when the artifacts were taken from the house, questions about her husband's character would be raised. Additionally, she was willing to part with the one jewellery she inherited from her mother to uphold her husband's honour. This reflects a wife's condition at the period when they were not permitted to possess property. A great deal of concern for women's property is also evident in Kautilya's Arthashastra; a woman's property consists of her means of subsistence and her decorations; the amount of her means of subsistence is limited to 2000 panas, while the amount of her ornaments is unlimited (depending on her will). In addition, a woman can utilize her property to help support her husband, son, and daughter-in-law in hard times, but if she marries again, the law stipulates that her property will be forfeited. We can witness Dhuta giving away endowments in Mirichchhakatika as well to help her husband through his difficult times. Dhuta is viewed

as a supporting wife, and although being aware of her husband's extramarital affair, she has no issues with it. Act 3 shows her advising Maitreya to give Vasantsena her jewellery and speak to her with respect and a noble spirit. In the end, when Vasantsena was awarded the title of "wedded wife" by Aryaka, she even acknowledged Vasantsena as her husband's wife. In contrast, we can observe Dharini and Iravati, the wives of King Agnimitra, in Kalidasa's work *Malvikagnimitram*. Malvika (who initially appeared to be a slave girl) was imprisoned by them because they were jealous of their husband's relationship with her but later discovered that she was the sister of King Madhavsena. When her husband is hanged for the murder of Vasantsena and leaves her son behind, Dhuta is shown in the text's act 10 as being sati, with the help of her maid and Maitreya. In this case, a wife's duty overrode her motherly compassion and feeling, and she was willing to give her life for her husband while leaving her son behind. Vasantsena is given the title of "Vadhu" or "wedded wife" toward the end of the poem, and she thereafter transforms into a virtue and a person of moral character. Despite being objectified the entire play, she underwent a rapid shift in personality when she became a wife. A woman of good character needed to be turned into a wife to strengthen her character

because remaining a courtesan is immoral. Therefore, a perfect woman should be willing to accept the repercussions of her husband's actions and to give up her own happiness and well-being for her husband's.

POSITION OF COURTESAN/GANIKAS

In her article, Monika Saxena claims that because of the patriarchal structure of society, women have been confined to the private sphere and tend to live under the protection of male family members. They are regarded as "men's property." Prostitution and polygamy are patriarchal institutions designed to gratify men's sexual desires. The women who defied these patriarchal expectations and began to live in the public eye were prostitutes, or as they are known in ancient Indian literature, Ganikas. There are many theories as to how these women enter this realm, including broken marriages, sales to well-known individuals, abductions, and the possibility that ladies without brothers may have done so because of poverty. However, there is a sense of unease about them because just being in their company can make someone look bad. Vasantsena, the play's heroine, fell in love with Charudatta after meeting him during the festival of Cupid's shrine at Mirichchhkatika. Vasantsena is described as a Ganika of good morals who is kind-hearted, noble, and benevolent

in the characters part of the introduction. Although Ganikas were given a prominent status in society, they were also viewed as dishonourable. Vasantsena was represented by Sansthanak or Sakara, the rival of King Palak's brother-in-law, throughout the play. Act 1 began with Vasantsena being pursued by Sakara, along with his two pals Vita and Cheta. She was referred to in several ways, including as a resident of the fine harlot's quarter, a coin thief, an enemy of the family, and an inciter of passion. The purpose of the ganikas' dance and singing is to soothe their clients. They were gorgeous, with a voluptuous figure and endearing facial features; as a result, she ignites their passion. She offers her clients sexual favours or simply her company in exchange for money, which is why she is called a coin thief. Some of her clients were married, which is why she broke up families. They had a high level of artistic and intellectual proficiency. Vasantsena is compared to a creeper growing by the roadside in this act by Vita, who also claims that the courtesan's section is mostly dependent on young men for financial support. She also has a body that can be purchased for money and is for sale. The first occupation in India was prostitution, which developed as trade and commerce increased because most of the clients came from this

community who were relocating away from their homes. The fixed charge for Ganikas in Kamasutra depends on a variety of factors, including the location, regional customs, season, societal customs, the individual's wealth, and her reputation among other courtesans. Vasantsena is then compared to a well where a brahman and a member of a lower caste bathe, a creeper whose petals were bent by both a crow and a peacock, and a boat used to cross a river by a Chandal, a Vaishya, and a Kshatriya. Therefore, there is no restriction on courtesan clients based on status or caste.

In ancient Indian history, the Ganikas typically had a good socioeconomic standing. They used to have an opulent lifestyle, dressing up in decorations and being surrounded by maids and attendants. Only one group of women, the Ganikas, who fall under the economic category, is mentioned in the Arthashastra. Superintendents maintained an eye on their earnings, outgoings, and interactions with customers while supervising them. Rupajivas, who were the highest taxpayers and of enormous importance to the state since they served as spies for it, are also mentioned in the Arthashastra. In this play, ornaments—which may be women's property or Streedhana—play an important part. This property comes in the form of ornaments as well as

other endowments, unlike other women's courtesans who possessed property that was theirs and over which they had jurisdiction. Vasantsena surrenders her jewellery to Charudatta in Act 1 as a sign of respect. According to Kautilya's Arthashastra, a courtesan must pay a fee of four and a half panas if she deposits her jewellery with someone other than her madam (leader of the brothel). The Arthashastra's laws must not have been in effect at that time, or if they had been, they must not have been owing to love, to her claim to her property, or to her being the director of her brothel. Vasantsena has maintained her jewellery under Charudatta's protection. Once more, in play's sixth act, Vasantsena offered her jewellery to Rohasena, Charudatta's son, so he could make a golden cart in place of a clay one. Vasantsena had a sense of dominance over her decorations, and she is not responsible for this. When Maitreya visits Vasantsena's home in act 4 of the play to deliver the jewellery as requested by Dhuta, he describes the setting as magnificent, large, and luxurious. Her house appears to be divided into eight quadrangles, which are equivalent to Indian homes' aangans. There are rows of balconies that are painted the colours of a lotus flower, moon, or conches. painted or coloured and embellished with lovely stones. Maitreya mentions elephants,

buffaloes, horses, monkeys, and chained carriage ox in the second quadrant. The fact that Maitreya describes Vasantsena's home as being comparable to a king's palace in this act suggests that courtesans of that era frequently acquired property that is completely theirs and that they are members of a wealthy social class. As in act 1, Charudatta stated that it is not in a Ganika's line of work to become attached to a destitute guy. This suggests that most of their customers were from wealthy social classes.

In Vatsyayan's Kamasutra, where he describes nine different kinds of courtesans, the term "Ganika" is mentioned for the first time. Water is served by Kumbhadasi, a servant woman who sacrificed her happiness to meet a necessity. Paricarika is tasked with monitoring the queen as she spends the night with the king. Nati is an actor who makes a living by performing dramatic roles. The women known as Rupajivas lived of their own natural beauty and spent most of their wealth preserving and enhancing their homes and households. The highest-ranking courtesan is Ganikas, who is skilled in sixty-four skills, has a nice attitude, is beautiful, and possesses good traits. Her intelligence was refined by the scriptures. There were four further types: Kulata, Svairini, Silpakarika, and Prakasavinasta. The

Dharmashastras despise these women, and the Smritis indicate that their only consistent friends are thieves and other criminals. It is also illegal for people to consume food prepared by Ganikas. Manu even says that Brahmans shouldn't eat anything that comes from a Ganika. According to the Puranas, a woman who devotes her entire being to just one man is known as a pativrata, whereas those who have two lovers are Kulatas, three lovers are Dharsinis, four lovers are Pungschalees, and those who have five lovers are Vesyas. Women who give themselves to more than five individuals are Vungi, and if they do it more frequently than that, they are Mahavesya. Vasantsena fell in love with Charudatta in Mirichchkatika after seeing him at a festival at Cupid's shrine. From that point on, she detested the idea of being associated with any other males, as seen by her rejection of Sakara. However, Charudatta exhibits an idea of ambivalence that captures the social attitude toward the company of Ganikas. Act 3 of the play has Charudatta ordering Maitreya to retain the ornaments Vasantsena had left in the inner quadrangle (perhaps a place of prayer) because they were worn by a harlot and therefore couldn't be pure. After that, in Act 9, when the judge asked him if he was with Vasantsena, he responded, "How could I say such a thing? A

courtesan was my friend. Instead, it is the youth who is at fault and not my character." This leads us to the conclusion that being in a courtesan's company can affect a person's character.

The representation of Ganikas is discussed by Seema Bawa in her book *God, Men and Women: Gender and Sexuality in Early Indian Art*, with reference to Mirichchkatika's Vasantsena. She claims that courtesans, or Ganikas, hold a dubious place in Indian literature. These women acted both within and outside of patriarchal conventions, according to Buddhist and Brahmanical traditions. She notably discusses the impact of two Ganikas: Vasantsena, a Mirichchkatika heroine, and Amrapali, a former courtesan who became a nun and gave mango trees to the Buddhist Samgha. She claims that other academics including Sivaramamurti, Czuma, T. X. Maxwell, and Stadtner have approved the depiction of Vasantsena in Indian art. There have been discovered eleven images of Mirichchkatika in stone, terracotta, and stucco. On the reverse of the Maholi relief, there is a scenario showing a wealthy woman fleeing from young men who are after her. She has tightened her anklets, so they don't jingle by pulling them up. Seema Bawa claims that this scenario is the first act of Mirichchkatika, in which Sakara chases Vasantsena and she takes off

her jewellery to avoid being caught. Act 8 of the drama, in which a Buddhist monk helped Vasantsena, is depicted by a woman figure being supported by a man to stand on the reverse of the Maholi relief (Samvahak the gambler whom Vasantsena helped by clearing his debt turned into monk) when Sakara kills her by strangling her at Pushpakarandaka garden. The moment from act 6 where Rohasena, the son of Charudatta, cries out for a golden cart instead of a clay cart is shown on the ivory panels of Begram by two women and a kid. Vasantsena offers her jewels for the scenario. The two female figures in this panel are Vasantsena and Radanika, the Charudatta maid. As a result, courtesans, or Ganikas, played an important role in ancient Indian society. In addition to Sudraka's Mrichchhkatika, we can find references to them in other writings including Vatsyayana's Kamasutra, Kautilya's Arthashastra, and Damodaragupta's Kuttanimata. They had a significant role in the socioeconomic structure of the state and were well-versed in creative and literary intelligence.

CONCLUSION

In addition to this, there are numerous more factors that are crucial to the play's writing style. First, there is the humour, which is a major component of this drama. The character of Maitreya, Charudatta's buddy, provides most of the

humour. The second is emotion, which includes feelings of love and other emotions like those of motherhood. For instance, in Act 6 when Vasantsena witnesses Charudatta's son pleading for a golden cart, she immediately experiences the emotion that a mother feels for her child, prompting her to donate all her ornaments to the creation of the golden cart. Act 10 also shows the emotion of a son toward his father, When Charudatta was put to death, his young son, who was unable to witness his father's execution, cried out, "Kill me and let my papa go." The third is friendship. Madanika and Vasantsena, who set her free and allowed her to go with him after learning about her love for Sarvilaka, and Maitreya and Charudatta, who were like shadows who were constantly together. Finally, the Pushpakarandaka garden, where Vasantsena travels to meet Charudatta and is killed by Sakara, who then blames Charudatta, is significant for the significance that flora and animals play in the plot. There have been eleven adaptations of this drama in popular culture, but the most well-known ones are *Mrichha Katika*, a 1920 silent film by Suchet Singh, *Vasantsena*, a 1929 play by Dadasaheb Phalke, and *Utsav*, a 1984 film by Girish Karnad.

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