

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 08

Sanskrit Dramaturgy and Rasa Theory IV

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. So, we are discussing Sanskrit Dramaturgy and Rasa Theory. We have already talked about Bharat Muni's very important work, Natya Shastra. Now we will talk about few plays, Sanskrit plays. The first play that we are going to discuss today is Banabhatta's Kadambari; Kadambari which is a Sanskrit play written in the Katha tradition.

So, even before we get into the plot, the intricacies of the plot, we have to understand what the Katha tradition is and how it is different from other traditions, such as the Akhyayika. So, Kadambari was written by Banabhatta, Banabhatta who is a seventh century poet. It is a romance like narrative which involves, primarily involves the love story of Chandrapeeda, Chandrapeeda who is the prince of Ujjvayini and the princess Kadamvari, Kadamvari who is the princess of Gandharvalok. So, Banabhatta's work follows the Katha tradition where the characters are fictitious.

What are the defining characteristics of the Katha tradition? First we have to understand that.. so, in a Katha tradition, like I said, the characters are fictitious, they do not have any truth claim and they do not have any commitment towards history or towards real events, real chapters in history and the story does not devise any particular meter. So, coined for the first time by Bhāmaha, Katha as a style of writing, as a tradition has been defined by Bhamaha as Kalpanic. Kalpanic or I quote Sushil Kumar De, "...more or less the nature of a fiction, an uninterrupted story or narrative, where the narrator should be some person other than the hero." And here, once we discuss the general characteristics or features of Katha tradition, we will see how interesting the narrative style or the narrative technique of Kadambari is.

It is a very sophisticated literary piece and we will discuss how and why. So, like I was saying, Katha tradition actually dwells on the idea of Kalpana, Kalpanic imagination, fiction. So, while it can sometimes be autobiographical, Katha's uniqueness lies in the author's creative intervention and the author's improvisation. So, the authorial presence is very much there. It is not copying, emulating or reflecting any kind of history.

And so, the loyalty is not with Itihasa. We have already discussed what Itihasa is. Itihasa as a word refers to, thus was a tradition. It is not exactly the western concept of history, we have talked about it. So, in the case of Katha, there is no such loyalty towards Itihasa because imagination here we see is meddling with facts.

There is a constant playing with the.. what the Sanskrit critics like Bhamaha would call as the pralabdhartha. So, Pralabdhartha or the actual meaning. What actually happened in society at some point in time? That is history and the creative imagination or the creative intervention meddles, plays with it. We take some part of history and then we creatively deal with it, play around with it. That is the Katha tradition.

So, as one can see in the case of Subandhu's Basavadatta, it is a masterpiece Katha literature. Subandhu's Basavadatta is a great example of a writing in Katha tradition. So, in Basavadatta we see that the genre is mainly celebrating love and peace as the two prevailing sentiments. So, in Katha tradition, we are mainly.. it is a romantic genre. At the heart of it, we have love, we have peace.

Now, we can make a very quick juxtaposition of Katha with Akhyayika before we actually enter into the text of Kadambari. So, compared to Katha, Akhyayika is a literary composition that is informed by Itihasa and so on Akhyayika, imagination is hard to bear. There is nothing imaginative, it is fact-based, it is factual. Akhyayika professes to unfold the history of the royal personages, it is mainly centered in the king's court. So, it is talking about king, minister and the queen, the courtly people.

And it is mainly based on truth claim. It is coming from the vantage point of eyewitness accounts. So, in Akhyayika, since the hero himself is the narrator, the story is told in first person and the hero's version becomes the Pralabdhartha. What hero is saying is

equivalent to the actual meaning. So, while Katha could be written both in Sanskrit as well as Apabhramsa, Akhyayika has a puritan loyalty towards Sanskrit.

So, the essential components of Akhyayika are the themes of Kanyaharan or abduction of a girl, Sangram or war, Bipralambha or separation and finally, Udaya or the final triumph. All these traits we find, we do not have to go too far, we find all these traits in the most popular epic in Indian tradition, the Ramayana. So, moving on from Katha and Akhyayika, now we are going to discuss Banabhatta's Kadambari, which has been written in the Katha tradition. So, in Kadambari, even before we talk about the characters, we see that there is a notable and a very interesting experimentation going on with respect to the narrative style. As the whole story is punctuated, the whole story is intervened by the shift in the narrator's voice.

There are a number of narrators appearing in the different junctures of this story, they come and go. So, we have story within story within story and the entire plot, the narratorial strategy or technique is so sophisticated and so complex, so layered. So, there is also a change in the authorial identity in addition. So, in addition to the shift in narrative voices or the narrator's voices, we have a number of narrator's voices coming and going, we have in addition a shift in authorial identity, which is a peculiar case with Banabhatta's Kadambari. So, the story is not completed by one author alone, the story is started by Banabhatta, but it is completed by Bana's son Bhushanabhatta after Bana's death.

Bana dies midway and his son takes over and completes the writing. So, the story begins with this omniscient or ubiquitous narrator who describes the court of King Sudraka, King Sudhrakar who is the king of Bidisha. Here, the ubiquitous narrative voice is describing the entrance of a woman with a caged bird, a suka bird, basically a parrot and this parrot is attributed with the power of speech. So, the second narrator after the ubiquitous, the omniscient narrator's voice, the parrot becomes the second narrator, it takes over the narration in the story. So, the parrot narrates the entire account of his previous birth where a curse had already ordained that in the next birth he will become a bird, he will be born in the bird's form.

So, this entire story of the two couples Chandrapeeda and Kadambari as well as Pundarik and Mahashweta is told by the suka bird, the parrot to King Sudraka. In the course of this

narration, the reader also gets to know so many things, the entire story unfolds in this process. And further, in turn within the bird's storytelling a larger portion is occupied by Mahashweta's voice who is recounting her own story. So, within suka bird's account we have a portion which is autobiographical in nature, where Mahashweta is taking... Mahasweta's voice is taking over and she is recounting her own tale. So, although we find that there is no break as such within the gross structure of the plot, there is a stark shift in the narratorial voice.

Bana himself had died at a turning point where in the story we find Chandrapeeda is returning to Ujjayini after his romantic encounter with Kadambari. At this point Bana had died. Bhushanabatta begins the writing, he continues the writing and he begins with his own authorial voice, where he is first addressing to the readers. Subsequently, we see Bhushan is moving on to his narratorial self which is that of the voice of this bird, the suka bird or the parrot. So, while the parrot was already one of the narrators introduced right at the beginning of the plot by Bana, this parrot's voice makes a comeback with the authorship and the narratorial self of Bhushanabatta.

At this point the bird is replacing the sub-narrator Mahashweta's voice and takes over the narration at the end of Mahashweta's autobiography. Till the point where Bana Bhatta was writing and he stopped writing, it was Mahashweta's voice going on. Sub-narrative within the narrative of the suka bird, which in turn is implotted within the narrative of the ubiquitous narrator.. So, here we see story within story within story which is a very layered and a very, you know, it is a very difficult style of narration, it is not very easy to understand. So, the story is based on the multiple births of the two male protagonists, Chandrapeeda and Pundarik.

The story goes like this. God Chandra or moon had cursed his friend Pundarik to be born as an ephemeral being or an earthly being and the same curse was also reciprocated to him by his friend. So, the two friends basically curse each other and they are born as Chandrapeeda and Pundarik respectively. So, the different incarnations of God Chandra are as Chandrapeeda and as King Sudraka. In the end we will discover that the king's court where the entire narration starts unfolding is none other than Chandrapeeda himself in the next birth. So, it is a story about incarnations and reincarnations.

On the other hand, Pundarik is born, the celestial form of Pundarik is born as the ephemeral or the earthly Pundarik and in another birth he is born as Baisampayana and further, we know that the cursed parrot, the suka bird is none other than Pundarik himself. So, these are the stories of different births that we have here being unfolded. The entire plot of Bana is speculated to have been adapted from the third Taranga of Satyajash Rambak in Somdeva's Kathasarita Sagar or Kathacharitha Sagar. So, it is drawing on Kathasarita Sagar basically. However, there is also a departure from Somdev's work because this is the parent plot that we find in Saktijash Rambak, from where this entire story is inspired.

In that plot, in Somdev's plot, we have only one of the couples named Rasmiman and Makarandika who undergo the process of rebirth, who undergo the rebirth cycle, the reincarnation process and they become.. Rasmiman and Makarandika become the new identities of Sumanas and Muktalata; whereas, Somaprabha and Manoharprabha, the other couple, their identity remain unaltered. Here in the case of Kadamvari, we see that in Bana's plot in Kadambari, both the male characters transform their names through a succession of births, whereas the women characters, the female characters remain unaltered. So, Kadambari and Mahashweta, the lovers of Chandrapeda and Pundarik respectively, remain unaltered. Their names do not change throughout the story.

This also goes on to show that we are celebrating... since this is a Sanskrit piece, we are celebrating some very high virtues among the women. Although their husbands or their consort, their love interests die and they are reborn, the women are following the virtues of penance and patience. They are patiently waiting for their lovers to come back and take them. So, this is something kind of being celebrated here.

The patience and the virtue of the woman austerity and the firmness in a woman's character. So, Kadamvari has a unique prose style following the Panchali Gadyariti. So, it is unlike the narrative style of Europe where the action is depicted through the outward density of incidents. We see, for example, I have in mind, Ariosto's, you know, epic romance, Orlando Furioso. So many things are physically happening, happening at the physical level externally where the hero Orlando is travelling across three continents.

Basically, he is furious and he is travelling across Asia, Europe and Africa, right? Here, in the Sanskrit tradition, the actions are not so outwardly depicted. It does not necessarily

mean that action is not happening. Action is happening more psychically. So, it is an inner process. Kadambari's process of progression adheres with the dictates of India's dramaturgy.

So, here we are thinking of Bharat Muni's Natyasastra again, where the actions are more of an internal nature than an external physical manifestation. The greater part of the plot is dealing with Kadambari's abstract emotional state of mind. So, we are, as readers, we are dwelling in Kadambari's mind. What is happening in each of the characters' mind? Rather than doing something, they are thinking, right? There is a psychic world and the way they are indulging in a romantic affair and such, you know, involvement, psychic involvement can hardly be understood through external physical actions. The Indian approach towards narrative has a different standpoint as compared to that of the European concept.

In the Indian context, nature has a paramount role to play as it becomes the outward signifier of complex human emotions. An array of emotions can be, you know, can resonate with, can be echoed in the outer nature. The human emotions are translated through the variegated moods of the nature. And we see that the slow progression of narrative in the Indian storytelling style is deeply entrenched in its own geographical and natural milieu, where the seasonal changes are also happening very slowly. We see a lot of, you know, natural descriptions, descriptions of the nature around the lake, right? The milieu where the lovers meet for the first time is, we find some ethereal descriptions and it's a wealth of, you know, stylistic devices that we find through these descriptions.

We have simile, we have metaphors, we have hyperboles. Hyperboles is something very frequently referred to in Sanskrit writings, some very extreme enlarged, you know, imageries, you know, which is almost larger than life. And it gives sheer delight to the readers, to the audience when encountering that kind of description, right? So, in India the continuity within a series of events is not an outwardly defined feature because the focus rests more on the internal picture of human psyche rather than the external dealing of events. So, in this sense it is similar to the streams of consciousness.

So, in Kadambari the Sringar rasa is very much present, it is a romantic story, it is an epic romance basically following the Katha tradition and yet it is not as prevalent as the Santarasa, right? The ninth rasa that we talked about, the state of Shanti or Santi

predominates through tranquility. There is a prevalent tranquility and there is no reference to any form of violence that is raudra or bhayanaka in the entire narration. There are no violent acts and the protagonist's identities are mainly shaped through their representations as lovers. So, although we are dealing with royal personages, we are not talking about warriors, their, you know, valorous acts in the battlefield. We just see the lover facet of these princes. The princes not as, you know, valiant warriors, as very hypermasculine characters but as lovers, right? They are wistful, they are pensive, they are thinking of their beloved constantly and the entire story revolves around the love interest. So, there is no stock negative or pejorative character who promotes stereotypes of villains in order to steer up or provoke some kind of goriness or bloodshed.

Only there is just one instance where Baisampayana, in Pundarik's birth as Baisampayana, we see that he is trying to disgrace Mahashweta, he is making some forceful romantic overture towards Mahashweta, which is not reciprocated by the woman and here for once the bibhatsa rasa, the bibhatsa rasa and its ensuing bhav jugupsa, right? The state of disgust on the part of Mahashweta becomes prominent, and that is the only instance in the entire plot where something negative is happening. However, we know that Baisampayana is no one other than her own lover Pundarik. Pundarik in another birth, he is trying to approach his own beloved; it is just because Mahashweta does not recognize him that she spurns him. She spurns him, she is disgusted because she does not recognize that Baisampayana is none other than Pundarik. So, talking about the nature's participation in human life, it can be understood through the pattern of curses also.

This pattern of oracles and curses is very much there in Sanskrit literature. Sanskrit artworks where a man Pundarik is basically converted into a bird by Mahashweta's curse. When Baisampayana tries to approach Mahashweta, she is an ascetic woman, she is a sage-like woman doing her penance. So, she has the power to curse even a man and she converts him into a bird, not knowing that it is her own lover, and converting to non-human forms is something very specific to Indian tradition. It does not so much happen in the Greek plays.. for example, in the Greek tradition. This further verifies the proximity of the bond between nature and humanity, as is depicted by the ancient Indian philosophers.

So, since Greek dramaturgy does not involve such human-nature or human-animal links, hence a conversion from one order to another is precluded in the Greek concept. In Kathasaritsagar, we see so many ... in the fables, in the Indian fables we see so many you know speaking animals, it is a very common or a very stock motif. Bharat's Natyashastra

has a role to play in Kadambari, which establishes the Indian theatrical ground without any tragedy. So, Bharat always insists that these plays end in happy union, and this is seen through the death of both Chandrapeda and Pundarik because their respective consorts Kadambari and Mahashweta are told there is a divine ordinance, there is a divine oracle that tells them to wait patiently in their corporeal forms till they are again reunited with their respective lovers. So, this is like I said forecasted through an oracle, such kinds of prophecies become a harbinger of hope, of optimism in Kadambari.

So, with death nothing is lost, only deferred, right? And the treatment of oracle and death is starkly different from that of the Greek tradition. The Greek perspective does not attach any optimism with the oracular happenings. As Natyashastra does not prescribe any tragic end, death in Kadambari is only an alternative version of a prolonged wait. Death means a wait, a difference, a procrastination of union through several births and reincarnations, patiently waiting for the companion to come back again; whereas in the Greek tradition, death or curse are very destructive in their implication, very irreparable motifs that lead to a no-exit situation and hence a tragedy.

So, curse or death mark the end of the Greek tradition and thereby, we see that the Greek plots have a.. they follow a linear progression; whereas the Indian thoughts, the Indian metaphysics incorporate the concept of incarnation and reincarnation, a space like Chandra Mandala is available in the case of Kadambari, where the dead bodies of Chandrapeda and Pundarika are going. Even their horse Indrayudh, all their bodies can be preserved and recuperated again. Thus, a cyclic existence is introduced which is dealing with multiple births where happy ending or union can be delayed but not shunned absolutely once and for all. Similarly, the plot of Kadambari deals with some fallible beings who are not superheroes, right.

We do not have you know, extraordinary characteristics being depicted through Chandrapeda or Pundarika. In fact, Pundarika's birth as Baisampayana, like I said, Baisampayana's attempt at maligning Mahashweta's dignity can in a way be justified as a minor wrongdoing since he is her lover that she does not recognize. He is not a villain as such because he is only the reincarnation of Pundarik, Mahashweta's love interest but Mahashweta does not recognize that. The significance of a cyclic narrative strategy unfolds itself as the story begins as well as ends in the same court of King Sudraka. In the end, we see the cage-bearing woman reveals her identity as Lakshmi, who is the mother of Pundarika.

So, in the end, all the loose ends, all the suspense are kind of resolved. So, who is this woman? She reveals herself as Lakshmi, mother of Pundarika in the previous birth, the Suka bird or the parrot turns out to be none other than Pundarika himself, whereas King Sudraka turns out to be Chandrapeda actually. At the end of this entire story, on hearing the entire story and upon the revelation by this woman, both the parrot and King Sudraka recollect the memory from their previous births and they die on the spot. It is just the death of their physical, earthly, you know, being. And so, we see, like I said, the loose ends are tied, all the answers to different questions are given and the reader knows that happy union becomes imminent.

There is finally a, you know, a consummation of love in both the couples, in both the Nayaks and Nayikas. Thus, through the death of the Suka bird or the parrot, one of the narrative voices that had been active for so long is overtaken by the omniscient narrator. So, we had come, just to harken back, we had come from the omniscient narrator to the Suka bird and then to Mahashweta's voice, which is going back to the Suka bird again narrating the entire story. The story is primarily told by this talking parrot until the parrot dies, and once the parrot dies, the story is once again taken over by the omniscient narrative voice. The last thing I would like to discuss here is why Kadambari is the female protagonist.

So, Kadambari we have to remember.. and this is something in adherence with the dictats of.. the dictats of Sanskrit dramaturgy, something that is prescribed by Natyashastra. Kadambari is the daughter of a Gandharva king, she belongs to the regal lineage, she is the daughter of King Chitraratha and his queen Madira, and so she has a kind of rightful place beside or alongside Chandrapeda who is also a prince, he is the, he is from a royal background, he is the prince of Ujjvayini. Mahashweta is only a Gandharva Kanya. Next we see that Kadambari adheres better with the idea of you know a passive heroine, the typical Sanskrit Nayika with all her coyness and her passive nature, she is the typical Sanskrit Nayika.

She is one of the Ashtanayikas. In Bipralambha, in Sambhog, she is the typical figure of heroine. This is opposed to a little unusual depiction of Mahashweta who is a saintly figure, she exudes, she emanates austerity and although a female, we see Mahashweta is one of the sub-narrators in the work, she is the only female voice that can speak in the entire plot. She has the power to curse a man. By virtue of her penance and her spiritual

you know level that she has attained, she can curse a man, turn him into a parrot and she has the agency to express her love directly not through a Sakhi or a friend. So, she has a lot of agency and so Mahashweta does not fit the typical traits that are set for the Sanskrit Nayika, both in terms of her lineage and in terms of her human nature. Here we are going to stop our lecture today and let us meet with another round of discussions in another lecture. Thank you. Thank you.