

## The 'Other World' in the Plays of Bhasa

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**Abstract:** One of the major thematic concerns of most of Bhasa's plays is the conflict between grand narratives and alternative voices. 'Dharma' was the word used in ancient days to denote the conglomeration of the rules which prescribed the duties and privileges of various classes of the society. Even though this word does not prominently appear in the plays of Bhasa, the values which this word stands for are problematised in these plays. The author is always aware of the two or more worlds, within which every individual exists. Bhasa's focus is on the dialectic involved in the relationship between the different worlds present in each individual. His endeavor is to ignite the creative tension that exists between the various elements within the plot and texture of the plays.

The above mentioned internal tension is present in various forms in Bhasa's plays. In plays like the *Pratijnayougandharayana* and *Svapnavasavadatta*, the contradiction appears in the form of an intense conflict between the world of political discourses and practical wisdom represented by the clever ministers of King Udayana and king Mahasena, and the 'other' world created by King Udayana and Vasavadatta which is dominated by innate passions, desires and dreams

**Keywords:** conflict, dharma, dialectic, dream, wisdom

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### I. Introduction

Among the plays associated with Traditional Indian Theatre, Bhasa's plays are very popular. Scholars are of the opinion that Bhasa must have lived between the first and the third centuries A.D. After detailed discussions scholars have also concluded that an active Sanskrit theatre with all its components like stage, actors, costumes, acting, text, themes, different types of plays, dance, music etc. had emerged by this period. A close reading of his two major plays focusing on their thematic concerns is done in this paper. The focus of the discussion is on how different worlds are created within the thematic and structural design of the plays, which interact dialectically with each other, thus constituting a unique narrative strategy.

The plays of Bhasa are the re-readings of the legendary stories which were very popular in his days and which had many local variations. Bhasa's plays target an audience which already was acquainted with the themes of those plays. Hence those plays are to be read by placing them within the context of the original narratives. The thematic preoccupations as well as the stylistic configuration of Bhasa's plays represent a period which was undergoing drastic changes in social life. Bhasa, while accepting a popular story as the theme of a play, treats it in such a way that it acts in dialectical relationship with the original story. Bhasa uses highly innovative strategies which prompt his audience to go back to the original sources of his plays and to read them again adopting a different perspective. Bhasa's plays act as alternative voices, that can be included into the polyphonic structure of the original narrative, the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, *Brhatkatha*, *Kathasaritsagara* or the folk lores. The intervention of the new voices or perspectives demolishes the narrative logic which determines the structure of the source narrative thereby destabilizing all the conventions associated with it.

Characters, actions or narrative elements which lie at the periphery of the text tend to move towards the centre or the focal point of the story. This movement demolishes the conventional hierarchies, which lend stability to the original narrative. In those plays we find the insulted, the humiliated and the discarded struggling to strike back. Villains and such other negative characters, who are sidelined in the source narrative, are brought back to the centre stage in these plays and they are presented from an alternative perspective. Outcasts, beggars, drunkards and other representative figures from marginalized sects get prominence in the plays of Bhasa.

### II. The Udayana Plays

Stories of the two Udayana plays of Bhasa- *Pratijnayougandharayana* and *Svapnavasavadatta* - are found in the *Brihathkatha* of Gunadya and the *Kathasaritsagara* of Somadeva.

#### 2.1. *Pratijnayougandharayana*

King Udayana and Vasavadatta pervade the entire plot of the play *Pratijnayougandharayana*, but they do not appear as characters in the play. Much is said about the two characters by others, and the plot revolves around their love and the related events. King Udayana loves music and he is considered as good Veena player.

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In the third act of the play we come to realize that Udayana has fallen in love with Vasavadatta, daughter of Mahasena, the king of Ujjain. His passion towards Vasavadatta is more intense than his passion towards his kingdom and his duties as a King. Udayana, as we hear about his adventures, seems to have created a world of his own, dominated by his innate passions, desires and dreams. But this world of Udayana and Vasavadatta is not a part of the visible world in the play's structure. The visible world of the play is occupied by ministers of King Udayana, like Rumanvaka, Yougandharayana, Vasanthaka and the minister of Mahasena, Baratharohaka. It is a world of political discourses, statecraft and practical wisdom. The rules and regulations regarding the rights and privileges of various professional groups in the society were so rigorous during that period that these relationships were defined and regulated by certain rigid structures termed 'Dharma'.

The word 'Dharma' is used to mean 'ordinance, usage, duty, right, justice, morality, virtue, religion, good works, function or characteristic'. P V Kane says that the word Dharma is used in Rig Veda in most cases to mean 'religious ordinances or rites. In some passages where the sense 'religious rites' would not suit the context, the meaning seems to be 'fixed principles or rules of conduct'. After a detailed discussion on the meaning of the word as used in the Vedas and Upanishads, Kane says,

The foregoing brief discussion establishes how the word *dharma* passed through several transitions of meaning and how ultimately its most prominent significance came to be 'the privileges, duties and obligations of a man, his standard of conduct as a member of the Aryan community, as a member of one of the castes, as a person in a particular stage of life. (Kane 3)

Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is an important text compiled in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B C. In this famous treatise on statecraft, economic policy and military strategy, Kautilya gives an elaborate description on the duties of a king. The text deals in detail about the qualities and discipline required for a wise and virtuous king, a Rajarshi. Kautilya says in the treatise that a lazy king will easily fall into the hands of the enemy and hence he should always be energetic. For this he prescribes a detailed time-table for the king dividing his day and night into equal units of one and a half hour each, and fixing the duties to be done in each unit. According to Kautilya, an ideal king is one who has achieved self control, having conquered the inimical temptations of the senses.

*Arthashastra* emphasizes the strategic importance given to ministers during the period under discussion. Carefully chosen and repeatedly tested for integrity at regular intervals, the ministers and councilors act as a restraining force on the kings who face the possibility of being led into the temptations of blindly following their innate passions and desires. Dharma acted as a rigid structure at a time when certain tendencies were visible in the social and political structures which shook the pillars of established conventions and social hierarchies.

The play begins with the news about King Udayana's lonely journey into the 'other' world- a world away from and opposed to the world of dharma. He is in pursuit of a dream goal, 'blue lotus', a divine elephant about which he has read in a treatise on elephants. It could even be an illusion, for, nobody has seen the blue elephant ever before. We hear the messenger telling Yougandharayana how Udayana dissuaded his soldiers from accompanying him and how the king, taking only twenty soldiers, going against the pleadings of his loyal minister, Rumanvan, went into the forest to capture the blue elephant. As we have heard at the beginning of the play from Yougandharayana himself, it is a trap set by Mahasena to defeat Udayana. The resourceful minister, feeling defeated, sets out to his task of liberating Udayana (Bhasa 1:14). With this the play moves to the world of intense political manoeuvres. In his efforts to save the king, Yougandharayana mainly contrives three plans on various occasions in the play. On all these occasions new and more intricate problems arise sabotaging those plans or making them irrelevant. The first of those failed plots is devised when the news comes about the capture of the King Udayana by Mahasena's men. The minister had already received information about Mahasena's attempt from spies, and he had sent messengers to Udayana to inform him of the plot. But before they could reach there, Udayana is caught by Mahasena's men. This is the occasion for the first oath taken by the loyal minister. He swears that overcoming all risks and dangers, he will save the king from Mahasena's captivity. For accomplishing this task, he goes to Mahasena's kingdom disguised as a lunatic. He is aided by two other ministers who are also disguised as a tramp and a monk respectively and there are also a number of other soldiers in disguise.

The third act of the play becomes the site for a group performance by the three ministers in disguise. The group performance of those three 'outcasts'-a lunatic, a tramp and a Buddhist monk - is the key which opens the door to the submerged or invisible structures of the play. It may be seen that the first part of the third act is without any function, except for the above recounted purpose of bringing out the hidden structures to the fore. After the thrilling performance of those figures that remain at the periphery of the conventional social order, the entire play attains a new dimension. Even the language used by them is different. They speak Prakrit, the language of the outcasts and women in the ancient Sanskrit plays. This part of the act appears to be a primitive ritual which transcends the meanings of the play and takes it to another realm - a realm which subverts all established hierarchies and conventions and joins hands with the 'other' world of Udayana.

Beyond the sublime structure which is dominated by the dictates of dharma, there is another world of marginalized voices, that of the outcasts and women. It is the assembly of these voices from the periphery that we hear in the above mentioned ritualistic group performance. Towards the latter end of this act, after the three ministers have entered the Agnigraha for secret parleys, it is revealed that King Udayana has fallen in love with Vasavadatta, the beautiful daughter of Mahasena. Yougandharayana's plans receive yet another blow. Udayana is not enthusiastic about the prospect of being saved from the captivity without his love. The resourceful minister, willing to accommodate the creative impulse of love, comes to terms with the changed environment and vows to help the king escape with Vasavadatta. The third act is one of the most ingenious creations of Bhasa's art, says Venkitachalam,

... the triangular conversation of Yougandharayana, disguised as a mad man; the jester Vasantaka, disguised as a beggar and the other minister Rumanvan, disguised as a Buddhist monk, in a secret code language announces the details of the conspiracy hatched by Yougandharayana's mastermind; though it will not be possible even for an incisive audience to fully comprehend, much less appreciate, the nuances and meanings between the lines of its highly intricate dialogue, straight as it is shot from the stage (86).

The major events of the play are the capture of Udayana, Udayana's love affair with Vasavadatta and Udayana's escape from Mahasena's prison with her. But the romantic pair is absent in the play even though they are repeatedly referred to by other characters. They remain invisible in the 'unreal' world of dream, music, love and madness. The visible world of social hierarchies and other conventions is silently being challenged by this 'underworld'.

For Udayana, Love, Music and Dreams are as real and as concrete material practices as ruling a kingdom and waging heroic battles. It is to be noted that the first part of 'Mantranka' (the third act) serves as a prologue to the minister's transformation. From the intricacies of statecraft, he has to recreate his consciousness to accommodate the lunatic frenzies of love and music. The primitive group performance of the trio is aimed at presenting the dawning of a new consciousness in Yougandharayana. This part of the play thus, takes us to the submerged realms of the play. Until then the form of the play is determined by the dominant structures of political intrigues and statecraft. But the grouping of the marginalised voices which make their appearance, even though only for a brief moment, creates a different way of seeing the world. The act imbibes a 'carnival' spirit turning established hierarchies upside-down, casting aside conventional rules of dominant discourse and interrogating traditional canons. Yougandharayana takes one more bitter oath, that, he would save the king along with Vasavadatta, his elephant and the precious veena. Amidst a lot of confusion which follows, Udayana manages to escape with Vasavadatta; but the minister is caught and detained by Mahasena's soldiers.

The final act of the play presents a face-to-face confrontation between the two resourceful ministers - Yougandharayana of King Udayana and Bharatarohaka of king Mahasena. They face an ambiguous situation. Yougandharayana's aim was to liberate Udayana with Vasavadatta which he accomplishes, but in the effort he is caught and imprisoned. Bharatarohaka's intention was to prevent the escape of Udayana, in which he fails but he detains Yougandharayana. Both of them accept their failure with dignity and humility. Soon it is revealed that the failure has turned into victory for both with Mahasena's decision to conduct the marriage ceremony of Udayana and Vasavadatta painted in a picture, in their absence.

The crisis and conflict between the world of dharma and that of innate passions and desires is thus brought to a dialectic resolution. Mantranka, which is the third act of the play acts as the turning point of which leads the story to a transcended resolution. The third act presents the conscious struggle undertaken by Yougandharayana to reach the world of Udayana which lay beyond the limits of the play's visible structure. The real conflict in the play is not between Udayana and Mahasena or between Yougandharayana and Bharatarohaka, but the conflict is between the rigid structures of dharma represented by conventions and political expediency, and the tender petals of passion and desire represented by love and music.

## 2.2 Svapnavasavadatta

*Svapnavasavadatta* is a sequel to *Pratijnayougandharayana*. It also narrates the story of King Udayana, but, structurally the play reverses the internal movement of the latter play. In *Pratijnayougandharayana*, we find the strong pillars of convention and political expediency being challenged by the innate passions and impulsive urges of individuals. We also find the latter associating with the outcasts and the rejected lot. Venkitachalam observes that, as against *Pratijnayougandharayana*,

*Svapnavasavadatta* is a play of tender love, in both its phases of union and separation. Here we see gay girls playing with balls, sephalika plants in rich florescence with jolly girls gazing at their beauty, betrothals, wedding - portraits, vina melodies, a dreaming-lover whispering his love in a weird sleep-talking scene. Touching elopements with the beloved's tears washing the lover's breasts; heart-rending cries of a man tearing his soul at the tragic

death of his wife, the apple of his eye; the mighty sacrifice of a self - effacing wife for her husband's weal *et hoc genus omne*. (86)

He traces tenderness and love in their various manifestations pervading the visible structure of the play. Udayana and Vasavadatta dominate the play's structure. Yougandharayana, in this play, after a brief appearance in the first part of the play, silently disappears only to reappear at the end of the play. Vasavadatta is visible, but masking her real identity and associating herself with the designs of Yougandharayana. All the other characters including King Udayana believe that Vasavadatta and Yougandharayana are dead.

Analysing *Svapanavasavadatta* at length, Maria Christopher Byrski says that the germinal matter of this play has two interlinked aspects:

One is victory (of King Udayana) associated with the person of Padmavati and another is a return of Vasavadatta to her former position of the most beloved wife of Udayana. (Byrski 22)

In the first act, the minister and Vasavadatta, near a forest hermitage meet Padmavati. She is there to stay one night at the hermitage Padmavati, who is very generous, makes a declaration that anyone there may claim a boon. Taking this opportunity he puts Vasavadatta into the secure custody of Padmavaty pretending that she is his sister.

The fire which takes away Vasavadatta and Yougandharayana from Udayana is the starting point of a new consciousness which gradually transforms the king. From then onwards his movement is towards Padmavaty, the person in whom is included the combination of Vasavadatta and Yougandharayana. Udayana's return to his original self and the defeat of Aruni depend on his new alliance with Darsaka, king of Magadha and the brother of Padmavati. Even though Udayana, prompted by his ministers including Rumanvan, marries Padmavaty, his quest for Vasavadatta continues. The fire that triggered all these events happens when Udayana is facing defeat from neighbouring kingdoms. Hence the fire becomes a significant moment which represents the dawning of a new realization in Udayana. The highly passionate element which he desires to embrace blindly forgetting everything – Vasavadatta, moves away from Udayana. But Vasavadatta is now restrained and directed by the pragmatism of Yougandharayana. Udayana moves in to a new phase of political expediency which is represented by his marriage alliance with Padmavathi. But, he longs for Vasavadatta, the passionate aspect of his own self. One day, quite accidentally, he recognises the presence of Vasavadatta. While he was sleeping in the Samudragriha, Vasavadatta, thinking that it was Padmavati, comes and lies beside him. As Udayana wakes up, Vasavadatta realizes her mistake and suddenly disappears. Udayana could not make out whether it was a dream or not. The play moves from the fire to the dream – from the world of statecraft to the 'unreal' world of passions and dreams

As a preface to the dream sequence, there occurs an interesting interaction between King Udayana and the Vidushaka. As they are about to enter the Samudragriha, Vidushaka suddenly cries out that they should not enter. It seems to him that he saw a snake on the floor. The king searches for the snake and to his amazement, he realizes that, what Vidushaka saw was only a garland of flowers that was moving in the gentle breeze of the night. This juxtaposition of 'illusion' and 'reality' is further developed in the dream sequence.

To the king awakened by the vision of Vasavadatta comes his chamberlain announcing the readiness of the entire army for the final battle with Aruni. (Bhasa 1:63)

Hearing this, the spirited king braces himself up for the great battle:

King: (rising) Very good. Now I shall see that Aruni, adept in dreadful deeds and in the battle field, surging like a mighty ocean with huge elephant and horses, with lashing spray of arrows on the wing - I will destroy him. (Bhasa 1:13)

Vasavadatta, who comes back to Udayana through the dream, is qualitatively different from what she was before the fire episode. At first she represented Udayana's wild and passionate love. But by now, Udayana has reached a realm where he could accommodate Padmavathi whose alliance was decided on grounds of statecraft along with Vasavadatta. Udayana, by then has acquired a consciousness which can induce passion and creative fire even into his minister's ways of logic and pragmatism.

### III. Conclusion

It should be admitted that Udayana's marriage with Padmavathi is because of political compulsions which is a part of Yougandharayana's calculated and strategic moves to save the kingdom and not because of Udayana's passion towards her. But his quest for Vasavadatta continues. Udayana's willingness to accept practical wisdom and statecraft is manifest in his readiness to accept Padmavathi, but he is not willing to let his innate feelings, dream and love to fade away. Barnett pronounces Udayana to be "a flabby sensualist who has been unfaithful to Vasavadatta in the old days and after her supposed death allows himself for political reasons to be affianced to another lady for whom he cares little or nothing, while he sheds at intervals maudlin tears over his first love". (Pusalkar 90). Udayana's impulsive nature and his longing for the fulfillment of his innate passions and desires cannot be rejected as 'flabby sensualism'.

The major conflict which is presented in both the Udayana plays is between the conventions of dharma, that try to defend the pillars of customs and conventions, represented by ministers like Yougandharayana and the impulses of innate passion, desire and the upsurge of submerged voices represented by King Udayana's passionate love for Vasavadatta. The dialectic involved in this conflict between the two worlds problematizes many dichotomies like dream - reality, real - unreal and practical - visionary. In the conventional systems, the comparatively minor or undeveloped but radical worlds are mediated to conform to the totalizing attitudes of the dominant structure. Individual elements lose their autonomy and potential to interact with other elements.

Bhasa's focus is on the dialectic involved in the relationship between the different worlds present in each individual. His endeavor is to ignite the creative tension that exists between the various elements within the plot and texture of the plays. The final resolution of the play is not a negation or rejection of any of the two worlds or innumerable worlds created within the play. The play doesn't move to any one of the worlds, but the conflicting worlds are allowed to engage in creative interaction and conflict. Bhasa's endeavor is to highlight the internal dialectic at the thematic and the stylistic levels of his plays which would subvert all chances of the fossilization of the external structures.

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