



Sudraka's *Mrichhakatika*: Humanizing the Current Society

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ABSTRACT

In ancient India there were several authors in Indian classical literature Ashwaghosha, Bhasa, Sudraka, Kalidasa, Harsha, Bhawabhuti and a few others who gave immortal works to this world. Among them Sudraka holds a very distinctive position. He is famous for his magnum opus, Mrichhakatika which depicts an extraordinary love story between Charudatta, the poor but virtuous Brahmana and Vasantasena, the exquisitely beautiful and rich courtesan. The story bears many twists and turns but at the same time, it is great amusing and far elevating. It is based on high moral values i.e. love, loyalty, honesty, sacrifice and selflessness. The main purpose of this research study is to explore all the possible issues in the form of themes, incidents, statements and actions which reflect the great human values humanizing the current society. The paper also examines the ideal portrayal of husband, wife, beloved, friend, father, and son which humanizes the people of the current society. It also delves into the corrupt and manipulating behavior of the people of today's world and offers a comparative analysis with the attitude and action of the people in ancient India.

KEY WORDS

Honesty, Sacrifice, Generosity, Selflessness, Love, The Law of Karma.

INTRODUCTION

Sudraka, as an ancient Indian playwright, holds a very distinctive place among Indian classical authors in Sanskrit literature. He had a powerful literary imagination apart from having the profound knowledge of Sanskrit language. His study was very deep and wide of Sanskrit literature of his contemporary periods. According to the prologue of the play, he was described as a renowned and wise king. He had

performed Ashwamegha ritual to prove his might and superiority. He immolated himself at the age of 110 years after passing the throne to his son. He was a great scholar and had proficient knowledge of many subjects apart from being a great ruler and fine statesman, “*Was a famous scholar, Sudraka by name, who was the very best of the twice-born (Kshatriyas), and of unfathomable mental caliber. His gait was like that of an excellent elephant; his eyes resembled those of a chakora bird; his face vied with the full moon (in beauty); and he possessed a handsome body.. ...He knew the Rigveda, the Samveda, mathematics, the (fine) arts (practiced by courtesans), and the science of (the training and management of) elephants; and he obtained, through Shiva’s favor, eyes from which the darkness (of ignorance) (or, blindness) had departed*” (*Mrichhakatika*,9). He is well-known for his magnum opus, *Mrichhakatika* which depicts an extraordinary love story between Charudatta, the poor but virtuous Brahmin and Vasantasena, the exquisitely beautiful and rich courtesan. The story bears many twists and turns but at the same time, greatly amusing and far elevating as it is based on high values i.e. purity, honesty, sacrifice and selflessness. The popularity of the drama lies in the fact that it has been staged on national and international levels several times. Unlike other classical plays in Sanskrit literature, the playwright has portrayed characters not inspired from epics or mythology but from the mundane life of the contemporary society - gentlemen, gamblers, courtesans, thieves and so on. He has presented the characters from all social groups in the play.

Objectives

The present paper aims at studying Sudraka’s *Mrichhakatika* comprehensively and exploring all the possible points which reflect great values that help in humanizing the current society. As we know that the playwright earned a great popularity through his magnum opus, *Mrichhakatika*. The present paper aims at analyzing how the play plays a crucial role in humanizing society through high morals displayed by different characters in the play. It humanizes the people of the current society through the ideal portrayal of husband, wife, beloved, friend, father, and son. It also delves into the corrupt and manipulating behavior of the people of these days.

Literature Review

The term Indian classical drama refers to the tradition of dramatic literature and performance in ancient India. The roots of drama in the Indian subcontinent can be traced back to the Rigveda (1200-1500 BCE), which contains a number of hymns in the form of dialogues, or even scenes, as well as hymns that make use of other literary forms such as animal fables. However, Indian drama begins its classical stage in the 3rd-4th century BCE with the composition of the *Natyashastra* (*lit. The Science of Drama*). Indian classical drama is regarded as the highest achievement of Sanskrit literature (Wikipedia). Bharat Muni’s *Natyashastra* worked as guiding stars for the contemporary playwrights who got to know all the tips and techniques for writing plays. It addresses acting, dance, music, dramatic construction, architecture, costuming, make-up, props, the organization of companies, the audience, competitions, and offers a mythological account of the origin of theatre. In doing so, it provides indications about the nature of actual theatrical practices. Sanskrit theatre was performed on sacred ground by priests who had been trained in the necessary skills (dance, music, and recitation) in a hereditary process. Its aim was both to educate and to entertain. It is a compendium whose date of composition is uncertain. It is estimated that has been written between 200 BCE to 200 CE (Wikipedia). The audience enjoyed the plays much as they were already familiar with the stories which were generally taken from histories, folk legends and epics.

Asvaghosa the Buddhist playwright, poet and philosopher who composed *Budhcharita* and some other works and Bhasa who wrote thirteen plays including *Swapnavasavadattam* and *Charudatta* are considered the forerunners of Indian classical drama. Sudraka, a great scholar and ruler has written *Mrichhakatika* (The Little Clay Cart). These playwrights likely to have lived between the 1st and 3rd century, Kalidasa is the most renowned Sanskrit playwright in the 4th-5th centuries CE. He is popularly known for his three major works- *Malvikagnimitram* (Malvika and Agnimitra), *Vikramorvasiya* (Urvashi

won by valour), and *Abhijnanashakuntalala* (The Recognition of Shakuntala) which depicts the themes of royalty, beauty, love and romance. He has derived the subject matter from the epics and mythology. He enjoyed much popularity with his immortal work *Abhijnanasakuntalam* which is deeply inspired by the stories of *Mahabharata*. For his outstanding contribution in the growth and development of Sanskrit literature he is often compared with Shakespeare. The next great Indian dramatist was Bhavbhuti (7th century CE) who is best known for his three plays- *Malati-Madhava*, *Mahaviracharita* and *Uttararamacharita*. The last two plays are inspired from the great epic The Ramayana. Harsha (606-648), a great Indian emperor has written three plays- *Ratnawali*, *Priyadarsika* and *Nagananda*, the Buddhist play.

Before we discuss Sudraka's *Mrichchhakatika*, we must not forget to mention Bhasa's *Charudatta* as both the dramatists have adopted the two central characters- Charudatta and Vasantasena. But, the difference lies in the fact that Bhasa's play is short having only four acts and Sudraka's play has ten acts. In substance and texture and division of acts too, Sudraka's play stands superior. The play *Mrichchhakatika* has been translated in many Indian and Western languages and earned immense popularity. It has been first translated as The Toy Cart by Horace Hayman Wilson in 1826. Later it was translated as The Little Clay Cart by Arthur W. Ryder in 1905. Ryder's version was enacted at the Neighborhood Playhouse at the Theatre de Lys in 1953, and at the Potboiler Art Theatre in Los Angles in 1926. The play has several film adaptations in Indian languages as well including *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).

Methodology

A research method applies certain tools to explore, examine and analyze the text, identify the problems and find the solution. The present paper is a content based qualitative research. The researcher has deeply and critically studied both primary and secondary sources in to meet the requirements of the present research problem. Sudraka's *Mrichchhakatika* tr. M. R. Kale has been taken as the primary source and several other related published books, scholarly writings, reviews, articles, journals along with online materials as the secondary sources. 'Library based research technique' has been employed in this research study. This technique helps in identifying and locating the source that provides factual information or personal expert opinion on the research question. MLA style sheet 8th edition has been used for citation of the relevant sources.

Literature as a Humanizing Tool

Literature is the most powerful tool in the hands of creative writers to humanize the society as it has reformative and transformative traits being satirical, reflective and informative. A good literature is of timeless significance as it, unlike philosophy and theology corrects the ways of human beings effectively and healthily giving them delight and amusement.

Now let's analyze the text and find out how, through the speeches, actions and behavior of different characters, it humanizes the people of the current society. A common reader while going through the text may encounter great values i.e. love, virtue, generosity, friendship, sacrifice etc. He will get inspired from the role of a father, a son, a husband, a wife, a lover, a beloved and a friend. He will also introspect in his life and correct his ways of thinking, acting and behaving. In this way the play *Mrichchhakatika* may prove to be a great humanizing force to change the current society.

Love and Affection

As we know that the play depicts an immortal love story between Charudatta, a virtuous Brahmana and Vasantasena, a beautiful courtesan. The love story unlike the superficial love of today is based on high values like loyalty, faithfulness, devotion, selflessness and sacrifice. This love story is greatly delighting and elevating. Charudatta belongs to the high caste having a very honorable position in society whereas Vasantasena is a courtesan desired by numerous people of the rich, aristocratic class. The former is miserably poor whereas

the latter is exceedingly rich. If their position is so different, then what makes them to love each other? Of course, their virtue and innate goodness. Through the portrayal of the character of Vasantasena, the playwright has presented the true nature of love. As a courtesan, she is breathtakingly beautiful and exceedingly rich, accomplished in singing, dancing and several other arts. The youths from the rich and aristocracy covet for her companionship but most of them have their lusty eyes on her youth and beautiful flesh. None of them have true love for her as their eyes are fixed on her physical beauty only. This is the reason that Vasantasena does not love anyone of them. She falls in love with Charudatta at her very first sight when she meets him in the garden of Cupid. Let's observe her views on him *through her conversation with her attendant*:

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)

When Madanika says that Charudatta is a very poor man; how he can be her lover. The lady replies to her saying that she loves the man for the same reason. Perhaps she means to say that the man maintains patience, composure and honesty even in his acute poverty. Now let's explore the metaphor of the 'honey-bees' that Madanka has used 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 a woman is generally not interested in the man who has lost his fortunes and become poor. Vasantasena gives a different meaning of the same metaphor. She might have interpreted that 'honey-bees' are honey-makers; they are interested only in honey. She opines that 'honey-maker' types of lovers are generally considered genuine and true as their observant eyes are always fixed upon their men's virtues. Here we observe the two different opinions of love from two different women. In the eyes of Madanika woman's love gets attracted towards man's wealth only and nothing else but for her mistress woman's true love appreciates man's virtues only and nothing else. To Vasantasena love is a matter of soul, self-realization and spiritual elevation. In today's world mostly men and women do not love genuinely. Men's eyes are generally fixed on women's physical beauty and women's eyes on men's wealth only. The value of virtues and character finds no place in their life. Today's men and women can learn a lot from their ideals of their true love.

Vasantasena's love for Charudatta is firm and unwavering. She has displayed her solidarity in love even in the most critical situations of her life. The wicked Sakara, the villain of the play once tries to force her to love him and diverts her mind from her lover. He also gives her temptation of money but she does not change her mind rather bursts at him:

You man of evil deeds, you 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) form.

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)

Generosity and Charity

Charudatta is 'high-minded, a man of unbending principle and self-righteous.' He has inherited a large fortune from his ancestors, but became poor just because of extreme generosity. "*He has become impoverished by (granting) the prayers of persons like us; never did he insult anyone in his (pride of) wealth. 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.*" (51). Even in his state of poverty he maintains his virtues, tolerance, and balance of mind. His extreme poverty after enjoying the prosperity made to think: "*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). The metaphor hints that such a poor person lives a very cold and passive life. He anyhow survives himself physically but finds himself dead emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. He laments a great

length over his poverty. Some critics view that he should not be rendered just because of poverty but the fact is that he mourns his condition because he is deprived of the opportunities of doing good to others. He never lusts after pleasures, comforts, and luxuries in his life.

Charudatta is thoroughly a virtuous character. To him character is everything. He believes if he loses character, he loses everything. When the golden casket was (which was deposited by Vasantasena) stolen, he becomes restless thinking what might his beloved be thinking. The friend Vidushaka suggests him not to worry as nobody has seen when the lady deposited the ornaments. He means to say that it is very easy to tell a lie as there is no witness but Charudatta dislikes this idea. The honest man angrily says:

“Am I now to tell a lie? (No).

I’ll again acquire the means of returning the deposit, even by begging (if necessary); but I’ll never utter a falsehood, which would lead to loss of character.” (127)

Today’s people can learn many great values such as honesty, tolerance, complacency, and several other virtues from the character of Charudatta. Of Course, he is an epitome of great virtues and may prove to be a reservoir of rare qualities for modern men. The playwright appreciates her generosity in his highly valuable words:

“To the distressed, he is the wish-yielding tree, bent down with (the load of) the fruit of his virtues. To the virtuous he is a family-head. To the learned he is a mirror (reflecting learning). He is the touchstone of moral conduct, and the ocean having righteousness for its coast-line (i.e. never transgressing it). He is (ever) hospitable, and never shows disrespect. He is a treasure of all manly virtues, and courteous and magnanimous by nature. By reason of manifold virtues, he alone, deserving of praise, really lives; while others are (merely) breathing as it were.” (53).

When we observe modern society, we meet disloyalty and unfaithfulness everywhere. Nowadays live-in-relationship, extra-marital relation, gay marriage, and lesbian marriage have become very common. At this critical situation, the portrayal of the leading characters of the play can show the light to the people of today’s world.

Sacrifice and Selflessness

This play attempts to humanize the current society through the great value of sacrifice. Dhuta as an ideal wife shows the mirror to the married women of today’s world. She loves her husband from every inch of her heart. She always wants to see him happy. When Vasantasena’s golden casket is stolen from her home, she becomes very upset assuming what people may think about her husband. Generally, at such situations people doubt the honesty of a poor person as *‘inglorious poverty is always prone to be suspected’* (125). To protect her husband’s image, she hands over her only necklace to Vidushaka to give away to Vasantasena. She says to the courtesan, *“My husband himself is my best ornament”* (217).

When she learns that the court has found him guilty of murdering Vasantasena and her husband is being taken to the execution ground, she decides to immolate herself in the burning fire. Perhaps she thinks that there is no meaning of her life without her husband. She starts moving towards the burning fire leaving her child aside. She tearfully says, *“Leave me child! Do not hinder me! I am afraid lest I hear the evil tidings concerning my husband.”* (400-401)

A careful examination of the character of Dhuta shows that she is an ideal. She is a very true mate for her husband, always ready to help him in every situation. She is extremely sensitive to the pains and pleasures of her life partner. Her joys and sorrows have intensely assimilated with her husband’s. She has shown unwavering loyalty in her relation. She is always ready to sacrifice her pleasures, comforts, and even her life for the sake of her husband. Modern women can learn a lot from her devotion to her husband as well as from her sacrificing nature. They can enrich their lives with such great and rare virtues.

Rohasena also proves an ideal son even in the very young age. He loves his father more than his own life. When Charudatta is being taken to the place of execution, he asks the chandals, “*where are you taking my father?...Then why are you killing my father?...Kill me, and let my papa go!*” (363-365). He wants to save his father at the cost of his own life. His sacrificing attitude towards his father also shows mirror to the today’s youths who have forgotten their obligations and moral duties towards their parents.

Loyalty and Faithfulness

In the play Vidushaka appears in the role of a loyal and faithful friend, a friend of all times- good or bad. His sorrows and joys correspond with those of his friend, “*He is a simple minded, guileless and lovable companion*” (ixiv). He is always ready to protect his friend. When Sakara forcibly enters Charudatta’s house to search out for Vasantasena, he insults the noble man. Vidushaka says to Sakara that he has no right to insult anyone because of his poverty. Charudatta is still an ornament in Ujjayini. He further says: “*Insult no man because he is poor: for indeed fate treats none as poor; moreover, even a rich person is poor if he is destitute of good character*” (49). He is always ready to lay down his life for the sake of his friend. When Charudatta was being taken to the execution ground, he requests the chandals to release his friend and take away his life. “*You gentle ones, let go my dear friend Charudatta, and kill me (in his stead)!*” (365).

The Law of Karma

The intensive study of the text inspires the reader to have a good intention and to do good actions in life. The final consequence of the different characters itself reflect The Law of Karma which functions as a central motif in Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist thought. According to this principle, all actions have their consequences. At the end of the play, all the characters reap the consequences as per their actions. The cruel King Palaka is killed by Aryaka. Aryaka is declared as the king of the sovereign state of Ujjayani.. Sakara was punished. Charudatta is bestowed the kingdom of Kusavati. Vasantasena is bestowed the cherished title of the wedded wife of Charudatta. Samavahaka is made the head of Buddhist monasteries. Chandanaka is appointed the head of the police. The chandals are made the chiefs of their clan. Charudatta, at the strength of his virtues, achieves everything in his life- the wealth, honor, and love. Let’s see his conversation with Sarvilaka to know how happy he is:

Sarvilaka: Then please say what further pleasure of yours shall be done by me.

Charudatta: Is there any further pleasure beyond this?

The purity of my character is restored; this enemy of mine, too, who had fallen at my feet (for protection), has been allowed to go free. My dear friend Aryaka, who has destroyed his foe from his very roots, is now the king and the ruler of the earth. I have gained this beloved (Vasantasena) of mine. And you, that are in union with your dear friend (Aryaka), have become my friend. What more then, remains there to be obtained, that I should now ask of you? (405).

CONCLUSION

Thus, the play, Mrichhakatika impresses the readers through the great virtues and generosity of Charudatta, the true friendship of Vidushaka, the genuine love of Vasantasena, and the sacrificing nature of Dhuta and Rohasena. The Law of Karma also teaches people that nobody can escape from the consequences of one’s action. All the desirable characters of the play have the immense potentials to inspire, ignite, and transform the people of today. The play is unquestionably in the true role of humanizing the current society with its extraordinary merits and sparkling virtues, giving the sole message that “*Men, should always make an effort to acquire virtues. A virtuous person, poor though he may be, cannot be the equal of (i.e. is superior to) person who are rich, but not virtuous..... the moon, on account of the excellence of his merits, came to occupy Siva’s head which is (otherwise) inaccessible*” (151).

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