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## **Liberal Aesthetics: Societal Discourse in Shudraka's *Mrichchakatikam* (The Clay Cart)**

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### **Abstract**

Shudraka's *Mrichchakatikam* (The Clay Cart) is a famous Sanskrit drama that attracts our attention as a unique work of art. It puts forward the vision of a splendid author who tried to give exposure to people from different classes of the then society at a single platform. The worth mentioning thing about the drama is the very love of a courtesan figure Vasantasena for a noble hearted, Charudatta, who had turned poor owing to his amazing charity. The skilful amalgamation of the love story with the political actions is simply awe-inspiring. Taking cognizance of the very text of Shudraka's *Mrichchakatikam*, this research article, hence, attempts to explore sundry dimensions of the characters of the play that are liberal and genuine to the very core of their hearts.

**Key words:** courtesan, mysticism, *nagarvadhu*, Sanskrit, aesthetics

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The “classic” spirit, then, has its true character; and there are also the perversions of it. Its qualities, when aimed at by meaner minds, become defects. And this is true also of the “romantic”; its brilliant qualities pass into

the faults of the exaggerated, the grotesque, the sloppy. But these perversions of type, all the more because they are exaggerations, help us to see the deep-lying distinction between the “classical” and the “romantic” in art. It is not simply a distinction between ancient and modern. There was romanticism, mysticism and grotesque fantasy in ancient literature also.

R.A. Scott James (156)

The true representation of a society can be viewed from the common behavior of its men towards women. Sudraka's *Mrichchakatikam* is a brilliant depiction of various colors of society. Set in the ethnically rich city of Ujjayini, the drama (*Prakaran*) unfurls various dimensions of relationships, love, villainy, and other things. The noteworthy thing about the drama that attracts the common attention is the very love of a courtesan figure Vasantasena for a noble hearted, Charudatta, who had turned poor owing to his extraordinary charity. Dikshit writes, “Vasantasena possesses all the qualities that go to make an ideal lady, viz, nobility of heart, sincerity, constancy, kindness, love for children, and a high sense of dignity. She is described, in the prologue itself, as a courtesan who loves virtues, which sounds paradoxical. It seems to be as non-existent as the flower in the sky. She who is rolling in wealth and is wooed by the brother-in-law of the king himself, with presents worth ten thousand gold coins, is on her part madly in love with a poor Brahmana merchant, who cannot even make both ends meet”( Dikshit 59 ). Charity is good, no doubt, until it doesn't allow a person to lose everything. In the very opening Act, Charudaata tells about the drawbacks of poverty. He is all convinced that it is the sole responsible thing for all the negativities in life. A poor man is nothing but a man without aura. Nobody respects him.

Even he is abhorred by his nearest and dearest relations. Charudatta says in the Act I regarding the abuses of poverty,

As fate decrees, so riches come and vanish.  
 But I lament to find the love of friends  
 Hangs all unstrung because a man is poor.  
 And then with poverty comes disrespect;  
 From disrespect does self-dependence fail,  
 Then scorn and sorrow, following, overwhelm  
 The intellect; and when the judgment fails  
 The being perishes; and thus from poverty  
 Each ill that pains humanity proceeds

(*Mrichchkatikam* 23).

The description of the utter poverty and its consequences has so well not been depicted by any other playwright. This is in keeping with a sense of empathy for the common lot of the society for whom even the highest in the political and social hierarchy are least bothered. However, Vasantasena falls in love with him because of his noble persona. Charudatta is a man who believes in giving to the society, not taking. His noble gestures set example for the ideal manhood. How courteous and humble he is in his head and heart when he says to Vasantsena,

Lady— I knew you not, and thus unwittingly  
 Mistaking you for my attendant, offered you  
 Unmeet indignity, I bend my head,  
 In hope of your forgiveness

(*Mrichchkatikam* 39).

He is a man ever ready to beg pardon for any bad action of his. As a point of fact, Shudraka gives a man more cherished than admired in the persona of Charudatta.

The antagonist of the play, Sansthanaka, who is the brother of the mistress of King Palaka, is also after the seductive attractiveness of Vasantasena. He intends to get the love of the courtesan, Vasantasena, by power of money. A villainous Sansthanaka deems himself wise despite his average acquaintance of myths of India. An example is put here for ready reference. Here, Sansthanaka says to Vasantasena, "What is the use of your bawling there for bud and blossom, or all spring together! Who is to preserve you when I pursue? What could Bhimasena do for you, or the son of Jamdagni, or the son of Kunti, or Dasakandhara himself? I would take them, like Duhsasana, by their hair, and, as you shall see, with one touch of my well-sharpened sword off goes your head. Come, come, we have had enough of your running away. One who is desirous of dying cannot be said to live" (*Mrichchhatikam* 27).

Quite different to the social norm where courtesans love only for money, Vasantasena rejects Sansthanaka ruthlessly. At the very first meeting with Charudatta, the man of her heart's desire, she gives him a casket of ornaments to keep with himself for safety purpose. In fact she wanted to continue the relationship with Charudatta, a happily married man with a son. In fact their love affair becomes the talk of the town as an example of love of true minds. A character Chandanaka says about their relationship, "Do you not know who they are? If you know not Charudatta and Vasantasena, you know not the moon and moonlight when you see them together in the skies" (*Mrichchhatikam* 111). Truly, it speaks for the authenticity of their affection that had reached a lofty status.

The very idea of a courtesan figure falling in love with a poor but highly benign man Charudatta invites the common interest of all and sundry. Vasantasena is hell bent upon

getting the love of her heart's craving at any cost. Her vey character is revealing. When we see that Rohasena, the son of Charudatta was unhappy with the clay cart he was playing with, then Vasantasena gives her own ornaments to him so that he could get a toy made of gold. Shudraka has given his lady protagonist a generous countenance. Like Amrapali, the *nagarvadhū* of the kingdom of Vaishali, she displays a majestic sense of morality. She is not the sort of woman who can be emotionally hunted by certain show off gestures. She heartlessly rejects Sansthanka's lecherous advances. Undoubtedly she displays a character rarely found in world literature.

Charudatta's feelings for Vasantasena are adorned with love and wisdom. The way, in which he reciprocated Vasantasena's amours, it is quite suggestive of the fact that keeping a beloved along with a wife was quite common those days. H. H. Wilson writes in *the Dramatic System of the Hindus*, "...in the *Mrichchakati*, a Brahman, a man of family and repute, incurs apparently no discredit from his love for a courtesan. A still more curious feature is, that his passion for such an object seems to excite no sensation in his family nor uneasiness in his wife, and the nurse presents his child to his mistress, as to its mother; and his wife besides interchanging civilities (a little coldly, perhaps, but not compulsively), finishes by calling her "sister," and acquiescing therefore in her legal union with her lord. It must be acknowledged that the poet has managed his story with great dexterity, and the interest with which he has invested his heroine prevents manners so revolting to our notions from being obtrusively offensive. No art was necessary, in the estimation of a Hindu writer, to provide his hero with a wife or two, more or less, and the acquisition of an additional bride is the ordinary catastrophe of the lighter dramas" (Wilson xlv). Sarvilaka

who attempts theft in the house of Charudatta to get his lady love Mdanaika, the maid of Vasantasena, leaves to get his friend Aryaka freed from the hands of the then king. To him *Rajadharm*a is preferable to *Premdharm*a.

The very trial of Charudatta being accused of the false murder of Vasantasena, is emblematical of the common war between good and bad. As usual for Indian dramas, the play too ends at a happy note. The fortune that Charudatta's over charity had lost was restored when he was given prime position with the accession of Aryaka to the throne. Victory of good takes place in the final scene.

Shudraka, a champion of Indian drama, has done a great job in bringing characters from all strata of society together. Like the characters of Chaucer's General Prologue to "The Canterbury Tales", Shudraka's characters are both individual and typical. Thieves, villains, courtesans, and others find due coverage in *Mrichchakatikam*. Whatsoever the play is all about, the magnanimously liberal disposition of Charudatta is rarest of rare in the history of world drama. That even a penniless person can receive the genuine heart of a courtesan figure is all suggestive of the moral standard even the courtesans held. The common notion that a well off person can only have the mind and body of a *nagarvadhu* gets badly thwarted in *Mrichchakatikam*. The final scene again makes us firmly believe in the celestial justice in which the life of Charudatta was saved from execution; therefore rendering a happy note to the drama. Charudatta says,

Since my fair fame again is clear, and this  
Dear girl, my wife, and all I cherish most,  
Are mine once more, I have no further suit  
That asks for your indulgence, and no wish  
That is not gratified. Fate views the world

A scene of mutual and perpetual struggle,  
 And sports with life as if it were the wheel  
 That draws the limpid waters from the well

( *Mrichchkatikam* 180)

In fine, we can say that the play under consideration invites several opinions owing to its long lasting luminosity. Nehru writes, “An English translation of Shudraka’s *Mrichchkatika* was staged in New York in 1924. Mr Joseph Wood Krutch, the dramatic critic of the *Nation*, wrote of it as follows:

‘Here, if anywhere, the spectator will be able to see genuine example of that pure art theatre of which theorists talk, and here, too, he will be led to meditate upon the real wisdom of the East which lies not in esoteric doctrine but in tenderness far deeper and truer than that of the traditional Christianity which has been so thoroughly corrupted by the hard righteousness of Hebraism. A play wholly artificial yet profoundly moving because it is not realistic but real. Whoever the author may have been, and whether he lived in the fourth century or the eighth, he was a man good and wise with the goodness and wisdom which come not from the lips or the smoothly flowing pen of the moralist but from the heart. An exquisite sympathy with the fresh beauty of youth and love tempered his serenity, and he was old enough to understand that a light- hearted story of ingenious complication could be made the vehicle of tender humanity and confident goodness” ( Nehru 169-70). Sudraka’s approach towards the prevailing norms was something that of a revolutionary. He utilized drama as a means to connect emotionally with the feelings of one and all as a gesture to give tongue to the mute subalterns as well. However his universal outlook finds little compliments owing to



whatsoever reasons. Indu Shekhar observes, “Whatever his merits it is evident that , for his willful breach of regulations, deviations from the beaten track, and total disregard for established Brahmanical traditions, he had to pay a heavy penalty as he was seldom quoted in the anthologies and treatises on poetics. It is intriguing that KALIDASA takes no notice of him but then the SHAKESPEARE of India is equally reticent about ASVAGHOSA who certainly flourished before him. Strange though it may appear, it is a hard fact that the first dramatist of Sanskrit literature was a Buddhist, and a close second hails, as far as can be seen, from a non –Aryan stock of which so little is known”(Shekhar 121). However there is no denying the fact that *Mrichchakatikam* is fascinating, appealing and viable even in our times.

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