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PERFORMANCE OF KINGLY MASCULINITY IN TWO SANSKRIT PLAYS: ABHIJÑĀNAŚĀKUNTALAM AND UTTARRĀMCHARITAM

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ABSTRACT :

In Sanskrit plays, attributes of manhood inculcated in the king-heroes (Nāyaka) have always been displayed prominently. The attributes are visible through the Nāyaka's performance of justice, his relations of kinship, of succession and between family members, and emotions, all of which are put forth as the measurement for defining greatness of a king in ancient society affirming the succession of the lineage play key a role in the constitution of kingly masculinity. This paper examines these attributes that comprise kingly masculinity in two of the most celebrated Sanskrit plays: Abhijñānaśākuntalam and Uttarāmcharitam, written by prominent dramatists Kālidāsa and Bhavabhūti, respectively. It studies the elements of ancient masculinity and analyses the actions through which the two Nāyakas—Duśyanta and Rāma—feel, performance, and exhibit it in these select plays. It also examines that how this form of masculinity constitutes a gendered, hierarchal, and oppressive social system in the plays.



KEYWORDS : Sanskrit Play, Kingly Masculinity, Nāyaka, Duśyanta, Rāma.

MASCULINITY: THE CONCEPT

Scholars of masculinity have revealed that masculinity is a quality that pertains to a male body. Connell (1995) has stated that the meaning of masculinity is encapsulated in the way men behave, clearly differentiated and contrasted from femininity, the ways in which women behave. The word 'masculinity' is often denoted in plural sense, i.e., 'masculinities'. Masculinity is a mannerism that men have and exhibit it in common. It is the recent historical phenomena in academia, however, sociological way of looking at it is through the more fluid concept of gender. Gender is influenced by historical, social and cultural factors rather than anatomical factors, and is not part of a person's essential 'natural', 'true' self, as Moynihan Clare (1998) also suggests. Judith Butler (1988) has addressed the idea of gender as a social formation of masculinity and femininity. She explains that any gender is not natural or fixed but is a historical idea to classify an anatomical body into the categories of male, female and so on. Therefore, attributes such as independence, aggression, inexpression of emotions, ambition and stoicism are perceived as fixed to the male anatomy. The *signifiers* of masculinity were historically considered as essential and fixed, and were required to be performed by men in their lifetimes in their public and private lives.

According to Moynihan, contradiction between masculine traits that are essentially fluid, such as showing strength and weakness together, being aggressive and gentle and loving women but not caring about them, creates a gap between the ideal of masculinity and its practice in a society (p. 1998, 1073). Overall, masculinity (and, by extension, performance of any gender) is not something naturally

fixed or static but it is learned and, thus, theatrical. Connecting it with performance, Jonathan Bollen, Bruce Parr and Adrian Kiernander (2008) have stated about masculinity that, "It is constantly in the process of being watched and critically evaluated by its audience—an audience of men as much as of women" (p. 2).

Sanskrit Nāyakas (Heroes) and Masculinity

Kumkum Roy (2010) has argued that drama and theatre arts in Sanskrit era were to "deal most explicitly with the representation of kingship" (p. 131). The hero of Nātaka (play) is a superior man, ideally *dhīrōddhata* (superior, vehement and firm) and *dhīrōdātta* (superior, noble and steady). The *dhīrōddhata* is the most respectable hero of the two selected plays due to his attributes of firmness, passion and bravery, which intend to depict *vīra* (bravery) prominently. The word 'dhīra' stands for superiority and sportiness. The quality of being sporty helps the Nātaka with love affairs, which evokes *śṅgāra* (erotic) Rasa: the erotic sentiment in the play to please the audience, which is said to be the ultimate objective of a Sanskrit Nātaka performance. This is the reason behind the Nātaka being the most popular type of rūpaka. The most celebrated Sanskrit playwrights like Kālidāsa and Bhavabhūti have constructed the *dhīrōdātta* type of heroes to evoke *vīra* Rasa followed by *śṅgāra* in their dramatic and poetic works. Rāma and Duśyanta in *UttarRāmcharitam* and *Abhijñanaśākuntalam*, respectively, can be considered as the great examples of *dhīrōdātta* heroes.

The rigid and fixed norms, codes and conducts of masculinity of the Sanskrit times demand very dramatic performative actions at every moment from a man. In the plays, the physical appearances are important for a king. Board of Scholars (1987, p. 329-30) and Shastri (2009, p. 299-302) have stated that according to *Nātyaśāstra*, the Nāyaka must have a tall, strong, fit, muscular body to look dominant and controlling along with the ability to perform prescribed male temperaments and sentiments in different situations. The body is the prime site of gendered training and performance. Every Nāyaka had to perform predefined, prescribed attributes of masculinity such as aggression, firmness, sportiness, eroticism and calmness. These masculine traits were compulsorily associated with the Nāyaka division based on varna, caste and social strata.

Moynihan has argued that "aggression, reason, a need for control, competitiveness, and emotional reticence are thought to be natural attributes for man" (p. 1072). Masculinity was shaped, produced and reproduced by accomplishing the compliance of prescribed attributes for a king Nāyaka, which were considered ideal regardless of their theoretical nature. The compliance with ideal masculinity forces and conditions a man to become a man who is always controlling, strong, brave and ready to bear arms. These qualities help him maintain power and 'Varnāśrāma' system in ancient India. The need of the king for dominance and control often ends up presenting itself in his subordination of women and lower castes, and his physical strength makes him powerful, edgy, unemotional and less approachable.

The king-heroes in Sanskrit plays very often demonstrate Moynihan's concept of "self-control" and a "constant re-enactment of stereotype masculine identity" (p. 1074) through decision making and by law enforcement. Rāma's decision of exiling Sītā to the jungle might not be self-motivated, and he might have felt sad or guilty about it, but he performed the duty of a king, and doing so gave him the identity of a great controller and tough patriarch. He could become a man of virtue only if he followed the rules of patriarchy and could perform the expected royal duties before his subject to remain as a *dhīrōddhata*. This performance of high-born royal manhood expects public values to surpass personal emotions. Hence, the protagonist performs these desired ideal attributes of masculinity very rigidly, which means that the man has to be extra human, larger than life and should compulsorily overcome humanly muscular and emotional pain.

CASE OF TWO ROYAL NĀYAKAS

Abhijñanaśākuntalam

Kālidāsa's play *Abhijñanaśākuntalam* revolves around desires and feat of king Duśyanta. "Duśyanta is the subject of *Abhijñanaśākuntalam* and he is the most powerful subject of all" (Bose 2011,

49). He is the hero of the play and, according to *Nāṭyaśāstra*, for whom the entire play was supposed to have been created by the playwright. Duśyanta embodied the prescribed qualities of an erotic hero, who is supposed to be born in upper caste/varna and who is 'udātta' (superior) due to his high-born status by the rules of Sanskrit dramaturgy. Duśyanta is a king: a superior masculine hero who is a 'kshatriya' by 'varna' and, therefore, 'rasika' (someone with aesthetic taste), 'dānavīra' (someone who gives gifts and favours) and 'yuddhavīra' (a warrior). Sengupta and Purkayasth (2011) write that he has an exalted nature, which he has inherited from his lineage.

His (Duśyanta) prowess as a warrior, his compassion, and munificence as a king, his appreciation of arts including that of love, represent his mystique as yuddhavīra, dayāvīra, dānavīra, and Rasika. Within Rasa aesthetics, these qualities are suggestive of vīra Rasa, the heroic sentiment, which is usually stated and developed through the character of a king. (p. 148-49)

Duśyanta appears as a man (a concealed king) centrally preoccupied with hunting and infatuated by sexual union with Śakuntalā. At the first sight of Śakuntalā, he finds her charming, attractive and youthful. David L. Gitomer (2011) observes that Duśyanta wants a union with her—an obvious, permitted desire of a king: “The well-known behaviour of the king, with multiple wives and the right to go 'hunting', so to speak, anywhere, in his domain except on sacred grounds” (p. 173). Romila Thapar (2010), a historian specialising in ancient and early medieval India, affirms these constituent characteristics of masculinity while talking about Duśyanta. Ryder (1999) writes that, “he [Duśyanta] is also enamoured by her virginal beauty, comparing her to a flower that has not yet been smelt and an un-perforated gem” (p. 72). But ironically, he is aware of the possible consequences of a sexual union with a woman outside of his harem, few of which are the woman's right to ask for a position as his wife in his harem, and her right to have her son as the heir to the throne. Ryder later observes that keeping this in his mind, he [Duśyanta] measures Śakuntalā's features, looks and manners on the grounds of varna and caste. He estimates her varna as Kshatriya because according to him, only a Kshatriya born woman can make him fall in love at first sight (, 1999, p. 1). But, he rejects Śakuntalā after she becomes pregnant and remembers her again when he has no hope of having a son for his lineage. Finally, he finds Śakuntalā with Bharata in an āśrama (hermitage) and takes her along with her son to his royal harem happily.

UttarRāmacharitam

Rāma is the Nāyaka of Bhavabhūti's play *UttarRāmacharitam*. He is a high-born king with superior masculine qualities, the ability and desire to put courtly law before his own emotions and power of self-control. He goes in exile to the jungle for fourteen years just to honour his father's words. After returning from exile, he exiles his wife to the jungle because of her abduction by Rāvana. Sītā's banishment intends to demonstrate his idealism, greatness, authenticity and worthiness as ruler before the people of his kingdom. He believes in the Brahminical hierarchy and the varna system. For him, Sītā had always been a medium for asserting his masculinity, through either rescuing her from Rāvana or banishing her to jungle while she was pregnant with his children. He goes to extreme lengths to ensure that his lineage pure and authentic.

Gangasagar Rai (2001) comments that “Rāma decides to banish Sītā because his father was committed to social values and had died for it, and so Rāma had to follow in his footsteps” (p. 293). Rāma also orders to send Sītā to the jungle while she was pregnant and expecting a child's birth soon, indicating that Rāma had to be brutal and emotionless in order to assert his greatness and superiority as the king.

Rāma felt sad and guilty about his decision to banish Sītā, but as an ideal king of Brahminical caste patriarchy, he had to follow the rules of kinship to confirm sexual chastity of his wife, and most importantly, blood purity of the future heir to his kingdom. Sītā could not prove her sexual purity after returning from Ravana's palace and, thus, Rāma as the father of her yet-to-be-born son was also doubted by Rāma and his people. This was the performance of royal masculinity that assures power for the king and his heir. It also becomes a major means to maintain patriarchal courtly law and order.

The masculinity of the kings in the Sanskrit era was earned, and often affirmed, through the compliance of household relations, succession to the throne, execution of courtly law and order, maintenance of caste hierarchy and iconization of themselves as the idea at all these positions, along with acquiring masculine traits such as strength, bravery, dominance and readiness to bear arms. These are integral components of the fabric of kingly masculinity of Sanskrit heroes, and are also the key elements of gender and caste identities.

Courtly Law, Justice and Performance of Masculinity

The idea of royal manliness was full of inconsistencies and tensions. Often, the court scenes in the plays depict the Nāyaka taking tough decisions and compromising with their own emotions to ensure the continuity of the Brahminical patriarchal laws, all centred on court and governance of law.

In the second act of *UttarRāmacharitam*, a Brahmin throws his dead son at the doorsteps of king Rāma's palace complaining about the Shudra Śambōka, who is inappropriately doing 'Tapa': a custom only Brahmin men were allowed. Shudras were not allowed to perform such customs by the law of caste patriarchy, but Śambōka dared to do it. Then, as early medieval historians like Kumkum Roy (2001, p. 142-54) and Daud Ali (2006, p. 29-50) have enlightened a similar idea in this context that, it was a king's duty to maintain the law and order of caste and gender hierarchy in an upper-caste dominated society. Rāma, being a high-born ideal ruler, was expected to take a lawful action immediately against Śambōka. Thus, Rāma himself went and beheaded him. He gave Śambōka the highest form of punishment for committing a crime against caste patriarchy. In other words, 'Tapa' was the greatest symbol of being Brahmin, and moving it to unauthorised hands was breaking the caste rules of the patriarchal society. Consequently, the only punishment Śambōka could have been dealt was death. Rāma performed his duty as an ideal king of a caste-run society to maintain his reputation of a rigid caste and gender oriented hegemonic lawmaker.

The scene of the play offers a profound understanding of the ancient royal masculinity. Before killing Śambōka, Rāma feels uncomfortable, anxious and unpleasant, but to prove himself as a great ruler of the Brahminical patriarchal system, he must perform this act of punishing a Shudra who dared to take the law in his hands by disobeying the rules of Manu, Kautilya and so on. At this point, Rāma remembers his banishment of Sītā and laments in monologue, "O my hands! You have abolished Sītā then how come you feel pathos! Let's attack (kill) the Shudra saint to give a new life to the dead Brahmin boy" (Rai 2006, p. 296). Rāma knows that being Udāta (a superior king) of truth and virtue, he has to be brave and violent to not only maintain the law of the society but also to symbolise it as a proof of his royal masculinity—the controller of the public, as observed by Moynihan earlier.

Justice was regulated by the rules of the hierarchal system of caste/varna, kinship and gender. Roy 2011(a) has revealed that woman's or Shudra's words were not self-authentic before the court; in some cases, the words of the greater relatives of a woman were also not considered as authentic. In *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, Śakuntalā's declaration as Duśyanta's lawful wife before the court was not believed authentic. Moreover, the young sage Śārangrāva's words were also not believed to be true, though he was given respect and audience by the king for being Brahmin born and for his connection to Sage Kanva. He is not heeded because he advocates a woman's highly sensitive words of her secret marriage to a king and having a child in her womb at the court.

Rāma's greater attention to the words of random people of his kingdom about Sītā's sexual purity and yet-unborn child's legitimacy instead of considering her words and her given test of entering the fire to prove her chastity are very similar to Duśyanta's actions. Rāma decided to exile a pregnant Sītā to the jungle. Roy (2011[b]) argues that this was his self-claimed justice to the people of his kingdom, while Sītā was not asked or considered in the whole matter because she was a woman and her words are considered inauthentic (p. 151).

Duśyanta's court has a scene where a fisherman was caught with an expensive royal ring by his police officials. The fisherman tells the story of finding it, but the words of a poor, lower-caste man were not believable for the officials. Meanwhile, two thieves converse about corruption and nepotism of law

and justice. They inform the audience about the king's brother-in-law's demand of bribe for releasing him from jail.

Thapar (2010) argues that the desire for land acquisition of kings like Duśyanta, Rāma, etc., is a well-known fact, which has also been put forth by the modern historians of ancient and early medieval Indian kingdoms. Royal masculinity also meant that the king had to acquire lands and jungles and expand his kingdom, their rules and social systems guided by the politics of power and marginalisation. She has shown that the violence of clearing jungles—clearing of natives, lower castes and matrilineal social systems—is a concealed feature of these plays (p. 17-49). Duśyanta's famous opening scene of hunting in *Abhijñanaśākuntalam*, the story of Śambōka's killing in *UttarRāmacharitam* and Bali's murder in the Rāmāyana are instances of land and jungle acquisition and empire expansion portrayed as the necessary exercises of royal masculinity.

Jonathan Bollen and Adrian Kiernander et.al (2008), in the context of Australian plays, have stated that "Masculinity is theatrical. It is constantly in the process of being watched and critically evaluated by its audience" (p. 2). Considering this idea into the ancient Indian context, it can be said that the audience of a king's actions is the general folk, the law and justice a king performs are watched by the common people. Therefore, he is always expected to be more masculine, firm, just and lawful. Rāma's treatment of Sītā and Śambōka and Duśyanta's treatment of Śakuntalā and other hermits are theatrical gender performances fuelled by the gaze of their subjects; these performances demand Rāma and Duśyanta to be extra firm and perform other masculine qualities. A king's masculinity is measured on the scales of existing socio-political and cultural norms by people of the kingdom. Thus, both kings perform the toughest deeds in their personal lives. Besides, setting the example of law and social norms for the people, the act of exiling wives (Sītā and Śakuntalā) by both heroes also was a symbolic expression of bravery and leadership, perpetuating that Rāma and Duśyanta valued qualities of masculinity and patriarchal norms more than their own emotions.

Moreover, kings as public figures had to act what was perceived as ideal because, as Jonathan Bollen, Adrian Kiernander, and Bruce Parr have articulated, "the word masculinity refer not to something that exists, but rather to a set of images and values which are commonly recognized, and valued or contested" (p. 5). This martial royal masculinity had assured the common public a nominal safety, protection of their values and maintained caste hierarchy. Kings had to strictly monitor the chastity of their wives and ensure their purity to assure the authenticity of the heir and the succession of the lineage, and thus the kingdom and the property which in the Brahminical patriarchy necessarily had to be a Kshatriya. This also helped set an example of social values among ordinary folks. In other words, there are always gaps between the theoretical ideas of gender and its practices, which have to be bridged by a society to set examples and also to maintain its patriarchal system. In such a society, a king's performance of masculinity nearly follows the theoretical, ideal rules of patriarchy to set examples for the ordinary people, and also to affirm power among men of royal kinship.

Beloved Women and Household Relations

The kingly masculinity does not appear uniform. Rather, it is fluid in terms of dealing with queens, courtesans and other household relations. The Nāyaka was expected to conserve the sanctity of his harem and his household. Education of dispositions introduced them to carry erotic relationships with women with many sexual privileges. Roy (2001) states, "He was permitted access women, whom he found attractive, is expected to use slave women to lure them into the palace" (p. 27). Kings use force in case of resistance, as prescribed by *Nāṭyaśāstra* in Chapter 25 titled 'Kāmōpchāra' (Board of Scholars, 1987, p. 25, Shloka 67-71), which is borrowed directly from '*Kamasāstra*' (Bharat uses the name *Kamasāstra*, not *Kamasutra*, perhaps because *śāstra* came before *sutra* chronologically) and mentioned as *sāma* (to praise or flatter), *pradān* (pretence), *dand* (punishing, including usage of violence like binding with rope or beating) and *bhed* (warning and tricks): elements recommended to use against a woman if she denies him erotic relations or sexual intercourse. David L. Gitomer (2011) writes, "The king was permitted to take wives from allies and vassal kings, and to have other women for his pleasure

from a variety of social backgrounds” (p. 173). Duśyanta uses *sāma* and *pradān* to pleasure himself with multiple women, catch Śakuntalā in the āśrama and please his first wife back at the palace.

The mannerism of Rāma and Duśyanta’s in performing both forms of śrngāra—the union and separation sentiments—are visibly different in the plays. Rāma prefers to have only one wife, while Duśyanta had multiple wives/women. Both Rāma’s and Duśyanta’s approaches with their wives are the same—both demand the proof of their wives’ chastity and authenticity of the heir, and failing to prove it, both wives are exiled by the kings. The two kings also get their wives back once they realise, they need the heir for the continuity of their lineages (it may or may not be authentic) on the approval of Lōka and gurus: Duśyanta gets the approval of Ŗiśi Mārīch and Rāma gets the approval of Bālmīki.

Rāma and Duśyanta both first exile their wives and then take them back to the royal harem after their chastity and purity is proved. In both instances, the women were played for king’s political advances and affirming their masculine power. Hence, it can be argued that kings accumulated their wives for political advantage, as per the lawful kingly practice. Roy (2011[b]) states, “The royal household was conceived of as providing a model for the rest of the society ... normally they were expected to maintain the sanctity of other households” (p. 27).

The manhood of the kings was often felt valued and satisfied by the surrounding of their beloved wives and maidens. A king’s popularity in the harem and women’s affection towards him was often a matter of pride and emotion, which ultimately ensured the good character and kind-heartedness of the king in the play. A king’s household and his erotic relations came immediately after the court and public justice in terms of his priorities and position in kingly life. Eroticism was after bravery and control. Therefore, women have been always secondary and often mistreated, exiled and sacrificed. Consequently, men are considered higher than women and other genders; they uphold the superior and controlling positions in society, which makes them privileged.

The Kingly Matter of the Heir/Successor

According to Ali (2006), the most pressing issue for the king concerning the royal household relations was the transmission of the power and authority from one generation to the next: a process that, by no means, was straightforward, and often involved competing claims of co-wives and their sons.

The matter of a male successor for transmitting power and furthering the lineage has been portrayed as one of the major concerns of kingly life in *Abhijñanaśākuntalam* and *UttarRāmacharitam*. This need for succession in a prescribed Sastric way had led to the control of royal women’s sexuality and wombs. Wives had to maintain chastity, monogamy and hierarchy within the harem, and, therefore, the choosing of an heir or successor was not easy: there were many claims for succession, as it happened in the case of Rāma’s half-brothers, especially in case of Bharata.

Śakuntalā’s son Bharata and Sītā’s sons Lava and Kuśa had learnt the arts of arms, war and politics as a part of their compulsory and important education, like other princes of royal lineage. Additionally, Lava and Kuśa were taught to have great respect for their father Rāma by Sītā, despite living in the āśrama somewhere in the jungle, far away from the kingly or courtly atmosphere. This illustrates that the heir needed to be trained as a king, including in arts and crafts of arms, war, politics and courtly matters, to claim their position of power in the kingdom. The part of education of Lava, Kuśa and Bharata that emphasised on being skilled and expert in armoury, war techniques and politics appropriates Ali’s point regarding the pressure and complexities of male succession. In the education of princes’ disposition, discipline and loyalty were emphasised in most cases to stabilise royal relations and power transfer because crowning the next king was not easy. Many sons of a king from multiple wives competed with each other for the throne, which was a possible threat for the peace and organisation of the courtly household.

Rāma’s obedience to his father was a necessary performance of masculine prestige of a prince—a potential successor of Daśaratha’s kingdom—to claim his right to be a king after Daśaratha. His intentions were apparent as per courtly culture: “the display of ‘self-control’ and love for one’s father was as necessary for any ambitious prince as it was of the stability of the household” (Ali 2006, p. 55).

Rāma had to perform many acts to display his love and concern for and loyalty to King Daśaratha and the people of the kingdom. Ali further articulates, that these learnt attributes of a prince had to be performed so that their claims could be strong enough for succession because “succession was usually a complex affair.... Not only eldest son passed over or displaced through uterine or half-brothers, but succession often went to brother rather than sons” (p. 54). But the paradox is that while a royal prince needed training in the arts and war skills to inherit the throne, the acquisition of power and throne were not always dependent upon the same qualities. The uncertainty of power and a constant need of control often the guiding forces of many forms of violence features as the major elements of royal masculinity from an early age, as visible in the depictions of Bharata, Lava and Kuśa.

Control of masculine hierarchy

Royal *Nāyakas* were considered more superior, great, ideal and powerful based on their competence of governance and war, their ability to control and win women and political alliances and their expertise at courtly law and order. All of these qualities were denied to the Shudras. Consequently, Upadhyay (2006) has pronounced that the lower-caste men have been marginalised in Brahminical patriarchy. They are neither heroes nor the centre of any Sanskrit plays. If they are present, they are to serve the superior *Nāyakas* in the attainment of love, fame, social control, property and governance. They are observed as lesser men: less masculine, and consequently, less capable of controlling, enjoying and governing. Neither kingly heroes nor the dramatists or theatre makers of selected plays appear to be concerned about lower-caste masculinity in the cultural space. Both king heroes seem to reify ‘sporting chest’ masculinity as static and powerful, which holds a controlling position in the hierarchical society.

In situations when the ideological control over lower castes was ineffective, courtly law and customs of the Brahminical social code were induced by the masculine heroes to keep the lower castes firmly under the control of the caste patriarchy. Socially, caste hierarchy was achieved through keeping strict rules about what a caste can do and what cannot, and the violator of caste rules were awarded punishment in several ways, including corporal punishment. (The case of Śambōka was an extreme one, wherein the Shudra is beheaded by Rāma for his transgression.) Culturally, it was maintained by restricting their representation in cultural performance such as dramas. The Shudras were not placed as *Nāyakas*, nor were they allowed to read and write (Roy, 2011a, p. 143). Thus, they remained on cultural margins and never took the role of a hero, not even in the poetic imagination. Apart from the *Arthśāstra* and the *Manusmṛiti*, *Nāṭyaśāstra* also made a clear recommendation about who can be the ruler/hero and how they will be presented in the drama and performance; it recommends only three types of *Nāyakas* on the basis of their high caste. Several shlokas in different chapters of *Nāṭyaśāstra* indicate varna discrimination. For example, in Chapter 2, which addresses the making of playhouse, Shudras have been recommended the last place, offered with the cheapest metal and no food during the making of the playhouse’s pillars (Ghosh, 1951, p. 25). *Nāṭyaśāstra* also prescribes purification methods in case a Shudra enters the place where the auditorium is being set up. Upadhyay (2006) also states that Shudras are also not allowed to speak Sanskrit as the royal/upper-caste characters do. The analysis of *Nāṭyaśāstric* parameters of constructing king-*Nāyakas* and their portrayal, exploring a comparative existence of men in the plays and practices of various cultures reveal the courtly hierarchy and marginalisation of *Nimna varnas*—the lower castes in the select plays. Sengupta and Purkayastha (2011) have observed the role of *Nāṭyaśāstra*, and poetic aesthetics have made upper-caste men the hero of the *Nāṭaka*, leaving no room for the lower-caste men in Sanskrit theatre: a practice that continues to the present times in the various performances of Sanskrit plays. At the level of language, play was voiced through primarily Sanskrit and Prakrit; which had subdivisions like Maharshtri, Maghadhi, and Sauraseni etc. Sanskrit is spoken by the Kings, his advisor, and the ascetic, while all the women and minor characters such as fisherman of *Abhijñanaśākuntalam* speak Prakrit. Sengupta and Tondon argue that, “the articulations in Sanskrit represent sectorial and political power, while those in Prakrit, the lackof” (2011, p. 3). Lower varna fisherman and women were the subordinates of the Kshatriya kings, and Brahmin ascetics therefore, not allowed to speak Sanskrit; the language of elite and

upper caste men. Taxonomy of language spoken in the plays reveals hierarchy, social control and position of the characters.

CONCLUSION

Muscular power, aggression and skilled with armament were the major qualities indicative of the ancient ideas of masculinities. A king-Nāyaka is prescribed as powerful, aggressive, superior and playful. The implementation of Nātyaśāstric prescriptions in Sanskrit plays has facilitated patriarchal aesthetics, which perpetuate strict gender stereotype characters in the plays. Men have the burden to perform power, control and bravery in the public. They are given the pleasure of erotic Rasa but they have to pay it back by performing masculinity, violence and bravery. Keeping women only for producing a male heir for the continuation of kinship and portraying them as sexual objects was a construct of the male gaze in the selected Sanskrit plays. These practices positioned the kings as the 'subjects' of the plays and the women as 'objects' that have to be achieved by the 'subject'. Their masculinity gave them supremacy and power, visible in their juxtaposition with subordinated women and lower castes, but the kings had to pay a high cost for the privilege. As Uma Chakravarti (2003) has articulated, kings had to be trained intensively in theories and ideas of masculinity, that are, physical strength, bravery, arms handling and controlling and oppressive behaviour towards lower castes and women. This training was required so that they could construct themselves as superior heroes, occupying the highest rung of the ladder of hierarchical masculinity, and assert their power over their subjects. Consequently, they had to overcome human fears and physical pain as well as develop an ignorance of their emotions in order to remain a superior king.

Ultimately, Rāma and Duśyanta are both concerned with having an heir to their lineage, assuring the chastity of queens and respective wives because they were the kings, the regulators of the society. Nāyakas had to force women and other lower-caste men to maintain the caste and patriarchal rules in society. The banishment of their wives seems usual practice. In lieu of becoming kings and heroes, they have to practice a very hard, rigid and oppressive form of masculinity, the performance of which is a burden.

To articulate their gender and caste identity, a kingly Nāyaka is always assigned with the bravery and strength, with the erotic love and securing kingdoms and caste norms through his arm-bearing and political skill. A Nāyaka's qualities like seriousness, firmness, the absence of sadness, care and emotional depth and his dedication to his job of guarding the kingdom and ensuring a successor for his lineage perform an integral role in making them ideal masculine heroes. The reason behind not prescribing soft-hearted nature like that of the heroine of a Sanskrit drama to the Nāyaka is governed by the patriarchal politics of the objectification of women and distinguishing them sharply from men, where women are assigned to perform sadness, care and the erotic to make the hero happy at any cost. According to Manmohan Ghosh, women are considered the roots of pleasure for the heroes in *Nātyaśāstra* (1951, p. 454); thus, intended to please male gaze. Making kingly masculinity as heroic and ideal in the mainstream Sanskrit plays was driven by the politics of caste. The upper-caste men are depicted as superior and their masculinity as the ideal one that controls the lower-caste Shurdras, and this masculinity is rewarded with women for the men to enjoy eroticism with and for succession. Putting forth kingly masculinity in the plays inherently marginalises the masculinity of the lower castes. They are discriminated against in the poetic imagination and in cultural representation in the dramatic tradition.

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