

DAMAYANTI IN NALACHARITHAM ATTAKATHA

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As a rule *Attakatha* authors have bestowed little care and less thought on characterisation as such. Nor are the reasons far to seek. Even in novels and prose drama skillful characterisation is rare enough. In poetic drama only a genius can deal with it with success. The plays of Shaw, for instance, are deservedly famous mostly for the masterly characterisation of the dramatis personae achieved through a shrewd plot with appropriate situations, highlighted by piquant, brisk and suggestive conversation of a high literary standard. Shakespeare achieves the same results by the same means except that the language used is sublime verse. In fact all great dramatists set great store by characterisation and that is the reason many of their great characters have become more real than historical personages.

In *Attakathas* characterisation seems to have been neglected for two obvious reasons. In the first place the subject matter in Kathakali is borrowed from *puranas* like the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* or the *Bhagavatha*. So the scope to manipulate the plot or the events is very limited. Secondly the actors are dumb and express their ideas by faeial expressions and well regimented gestures while the text (*padas* and *slokas*) is sung by the *Bhagavathas*. To be sure, the author can make deviations from the orthodox story to make the characters stand out or make them more impressive. But with *puranic* or divine characters this is easier said than done. Erayimman Thampi who has written three outstanding *Attakathas* justly famous for their matchless music and literary merit has attempted one such deviation in his *Daksha Yagam* with, to my mind, disastrous consequences. Sati, the spouse of Siva having gone to attend the *yagam* performed by her father, disregarding the advice of her lord, is disowned and, metaphorically, turned out publicly from the *yagasala*

by Daksha. In the original *Bhagavatham*, Sati, consumes herself in *yogagni* and Siva coming to know of it by his divine insight sends his servants to punish Daksha. In the *Attakatha* Sati returns to Siva and complains in language which would not sound well from a noble lady, let alone a divine character, like Sati. Nor is the reply of Siva quite befitting that divine personage. In attempting to humanize divine characters one should not lower them beneath those human characters whose sublimity and idealism bring heaven well within their reach.

Nalacharitham is a classic among *Attakathas*. The literary standard of its composition is so high that it has often been deservedly prescribed as a text for College classes. The music is charming. The rhythm and riot of rhymes of the *padas* and *slokas* and *dandakas* (a sort of tuneful narrative — descriptive prose-verse) surcharged with nuances and a thin veneer of Puck-like humour help the actors and the discerning audience discover fresh vistas of novelty and enjoyment even when the show is repeated for the n'th time. But I am here concerned only with one unique aspect of this *Attakatha* which distinguishes it from other compositions in the field. The characterisation in *Nalacharitham* is superb. A study of a single character should give an insight into what is in store for the student of Unnayi Varier who, like Thoms Gray, established his fame with a single composition.

All the characters in this play are drawn with exquisite care and minute attention to details. The basic limitations of Kathakali in the field of characterisation have been side-tracked by the author by crisp *padas* that invade the actor overflowing from the *Bhagavatha* and a hint for their right interpretation is hidden in the *sloka* that precedes or follows. It is in this context that the rather topsy-turvy practice of the author in clothing many of his *slokas* in *manipravalam* and his Sanskrit-mixing in *padas* has to be viewed. He has made few deviations in the original plot but the details have been carefully rearranged and presented with dramatic effect.

Damayanti is a Desdemona with a trace of Portia thrown in. One may wonder how the meekness and blind adoration of the one could go with the competency and ability of the other. The genius of Varier works the magic without disclosing any incompatibility or divided personality.

Damayanti having heard of the qualities of head and heart of Nala, the king of Nishaada, fell for him while still young, on her own initiative. But she knows how to keep her dignity and hides her secret even from her intimate handmaids. When the Swan-messenger of Nala arrives, Damayanti takes little time to assess him. The *Hamsam* is another character in the play drawn with consummate skill and unexcelled human interest. While Damayanti proves equal to his psychological play of wits, she willingly

gives in, albeit in chaste and suggestive language, when she is sure of his purpose.

In the original story in *Mahabharata*, Indra's messenger discloses himself as Nala to Damayanti. In the play he deliberately hides his identity and Damayanti only notes the resemblance to her hearsay image. To all the eloquent pleadings of the messenger her capable mind is ready with crushing answers. When he threatens her finally on behalf of the *devas*, she meets it with the unanswerable retort that those to whom their lords are gods are bound to be protected by the *devas*. With the same sense of bizarre humour she prays to the very *devas* who have taken on the guise of Nala to help her spot the genuine Nala to wed him at the *swayamvara*.

The orthodox *Attakathas* begin with a love scene which is scarcely decent either in the *padas* or the acting. If they do not look positively vulgar, that is because of the supra-human make up of the actors and the time-lag in the apperception of the modern audience. In *Nalacharitham*, as a welcome contrast, there is only a single love scene in all the four parts, together. And that scene is so chaste and psychological that it could well be a model for all newly-weds in the world. Nala begins the scene by relating how their true love had to face various hindrances and how all of them except one have been overcome. He hopes that that too would disappear in the course of time. Put like this not many would guess that Nala refers to the natural shyness that is nature's gift to Eve. He goes on in the same delicate strain and the poet in the succeeding *manipravala sloka* hints that Damayanti was favourably moved by his '*chatuvakyam*', a key word implying the kind of wooing. Damayanti's reply is quite in keeping with her dignity and at the same time, warmth of feeling. Ostensibly she describes the garden but there are indirect references to the god of love and her excitement.

When she found her husband was losing everything in dice play she quietly arranged to send her children to her parents and remained herself to share the fortunes of her lord. When Nala suggested she could go back to her parents she recalls the laws of *dharma* like a Daniel come to judgement. Even when he deserts her in the forest while asleep she is unable to blame him. To her, her lord and master can do no wrong. It does not take long for her shrewd mind to guess the real culprit and curse that evil spirit. Even in her helpless state, her worry is only for the safety of her lord.

In her forlorn wanderings in the forest the heroine is caught in the coils of a python and cries out for help from her lord. A *Kattalan* (forest-dweller) hears her and comes to her help. The author has painted even

Illustrations: P. 33. Nala and Damayanti from "Nalacharitham Attakatha". A female impersonator plays the part of Damayanti in traditional Kathakali. P. 34. Damayanti is confused by the gods made up to look like Nala — "Swyambara" scene.









this minor character with meticulous care and delicacy of touch. In the original, the *kattalan* saves her from the snake and attempts to embrace her and is promptly killed by her curse. Varier on the other hand, makes the *kattalan* a refined fellow in his own way. He is attracted by the sweetness of the sound, the beauty of the person and makes tentative overtures to her to rest on his body while freeing her from the snake and even hints that no one could be expected to come to her help in the forest. But the author makes him scrupulously eschew force. Damayanti with feminine insight reads the signs, thanks him hurriedly, says that being saved from death is too great a gift to be requited and requests him to leave her alone. It is only when he begins to plead his cause and persists, that Damayanti thinks of the boon given by Indra that anyone who attempts to besmirch her chastity would be burned out. Notice that here there is no question of a curse. The feelings of Damayanti are only pity for the infatuated, erring fool and sorrow at her own predicament that she should become the unwitting cause of the demise of a benefactor. Lest the point should be missed by the actor or the audience, the author has carefully mentioned in the succeeding *sloka* that half-way through the thought of the boon the *kattalan* was burned up. (No doubt there is the word '*Chapam*' in the *sloka* but that refers only to the result). The episode illustrates the author's delicacy of touch regarding details of characterisation.

The *puranic* version of her interview with the queen of Chedi is that Damayanti says she is a servant-girl born, but Varier advisedly makes her own she is a King's daughter and cleverly side-tracks the conversation to avoid the identity of her husband and her self. Were she to pose as a plebeian it would have been difficult for her to secure asylum there with her uncommon and uncompromising conditions that she would not eat left-over food, that she would not even converse with males and that anybody making overtures to her should be summarily done to death.

One of the messengers (spy) sent by King Bhima to find out the whereabouts of his daughter and her husband spots her and Damayanti returns home to her children and parents. Immediately she takes charge of the arrangements to search for her husband throughout the land. The instructions she gives her messengers are worthy of a Scotland Yard Chief. Apart from using their eyes and ears they are to recite a sort of code message of a provocative nature to all and sundry and should make a special note of any response thereto. Parnadhan, one of the messengers gets a response from Bahuka, the chariot-driver of King Rythuparna.

Too capable to be betrayed into any hasty conclusions, Damayanti plans her next step with great care and finesse to clinch the issue, Uttara

Illustrations : P. 35. Above: The Parting. Nala takes leave of the sleeping Damayanti. Below: Nala, Pushtara and Damayanti in a scene from the same play. P. 36. The moods of love. Two scenes depicting the varying moods of love between Nala and Damayanti.

Kosalam, the land of Rythuparna was far away and (in those days) the journey would take at least two or three days. She would so arrange things that a rumour that Damayanti proposes a remarriage for herself, reaches the ears of Rythuparna, a candidate for her hand even at the time of her *swayamvara*. The catch would be that he would have barely a few hours to reach Kundinapura. If his charioteer were Nala it would be child's play for him with his knowledge of *aswahrydaya*, a magic spell which could make horses of the right type, almost fly. Because the ruse was somewhat unorthodox and capable of misinterpretation Damayanti is careful to take her mother into her confidence and procure her previous consent to the scheme. But with the self assurance of a Portia she keeps her father in the dark lest that august personality should object. She selects Sudeva who had proved his shrewdness and tact by discovering her in the court of the Chedi queen, as her messenger.

In this context one unique skill that Varier displays in planning his narrative deserves special notice. In many Attakathas a messenger is given detailed instructions by the sender in one place and when he delivers the message to another the same is repeated again causing loss of interest in the audience. Varier, in delightful contrast, not only avoids repetition but rouses fresh interest and admiration by the novelty of his treatment of such situations. For instance, Damayanti praises Sudeva and simply tells him that he should undertake a journey to Rythuparna for her sake. In his reply the brahmin briefly refers to the task set him but makes plain the vital aspects of the message. The audience gets a full picture of the message only when Sudeva actually delivers the message to Rythuparna in which, as an encore, is added a pregnant hint that the second marriage date is postponed for a day for the sake of a particular person. This delightful pattern is adopted by the author when Nala asks the *Hamsam* about details of his interview with Damayanti. In the reply of the Swan there is not only no repetition but there is a help (to the audience also) for a right interpretation of his conversation with her. (The Swan says he has shaken her love for him to fix it more firmly).

When towards evenfall of the day previous to the one fixed for the alleged second marriage Bhaimi heard the roar of Rythuparna's chariot, she was beside herself with joy with the expectation of meeting her heart's idol. When the chariot arrived she found to her utter despair, Nala was not there. It is a tribute to her capacity and competency that, torn between these extreme emotions, she could summon her intelligence to probe the mystery to the very end. She sends her trusted companion Kesini to sound Bahuka thoroughly and also to get confirmation about his response to her coded message once communicated through Parnadhan. As an additional precaution Kesini was to observe unnoticed Bahuka's ways. Her favourable report confirming the special attributes of Nala like calling up fire or water at will, drooping flowers blooming at his touch etc., convinced Damayanti

that Bhahuka was Nala in fact except for his physical appearance. Damayanti, immediately sought the permission of her parents — this time she included her father too, presumably because it was a crucial step — and sent for Bhahuka and their interview is one of the highlights of the drama. Finally when Bhahuka becomes Nala wearing the dress presented by the snake Karkotaka, and accuses her of mental lack of chastity because the thought of a remarriage had passed through her mind, Damayanti's defence is a masterpiece of affection and eloquence, emotion and logic, meekness and dignity, leading to the climax that just as she had once ignored even the *devas* to win him for herself she now did sin, if she sinned at all, to get him back.

Damayanti in *Nalacaritham Attakatha* has a place in the galaxy of world-famous women in literature.