

The Nayikas of Indian Classics

Their Genesis and Rise to Glory

K.S. Srinivasan

The dance tradition cherishes the *nayikas*, cast in eight different moulds conventionally, so as to represent woman in various moods and situations that belong to love. Yet the notion of the *nayika* is traceable to poetry of the earliest times; the *Natyasastra* seems to have classified and incorporated what poets had created and propagated. The *nayika* and her milieu take their origin in bardic poetry.

The genesis of the *ashtanayikas* in Indian art is obscure, notwithstanding the common academic practice of citing the *Natyasastra* of Bharata. What is significant is that Bharata says that he is merely putting down what is widely known (*ashtau nayikah smritaah*, Ch. xxiv : 204). How was it widely known? From which source?

The available treatises on dance—traditional or modern—offer no material evidence which can help trace this fascinating story of the evolution of the 'charming mistress' (the term 'heroine' is inadequate, even misleading). However, when creative arts are viewed integrally it is possible to recognise the fountain-source in the bardic songs of ancient India. A representative anthology is the *Sattasai* in Prakrit which is dated first century AD and ascribed to the ruler Hala Satavahana. Many a song in this collection of 700 couplets, commonly known as *Gathasaptasati*, is like a miniature painting—delicate as well as intricate, but charged with sentiment and suggestion.

A maiden asks her friend (*sakhi*), 'Tell me true, do bangles grow in size and fall off, to every girl whose lover is away?' Another stands at the gate, 'stretching far her lily eyes', to welcome the lover. A third one keeps staring at the sky expectantly; for she sees the gathering clouds as the sign of the monsoon before which the lover was to return. In songs such as these, the portrait is that of the lonely maiden whose lover has gone abroad. Song No. I.70 refers to her as *pautthapaeaa*, which is a Prakrit word that has

yielded the expression for the *nayika* known as *proshitapatika*. This ancient anthology has a large number of songs which depict the moods of the lovelorn maiden, eventually leading to classification; examples of such manifestations are:

<i>Nayika</i>	<i>Song</i>
<i>Proshitapatika</i> (girl whose lover is away on travel)	1.66
<i>Vasakasajja</i> (girl who is decked to meet the lover)	5.82
<i>Abhisarika</i> (adventuress in love)	3.49
<i>Khandita</i> (the admonishing mistress)	5.32
<i>Swadhinapatika</i> (happy, proud wife)	1.13
<i>Vipralabdha</i> (the disappointed one)	5.82
<i>Virahotkanthita</i> (pining in love)	6.33
<i>Kalahantarita</i> (girl who is peeved)	4.84

While these *nayikas* can be discerned in the songs cited, there is no warrant to assume that they were meant to portray or illustrate the conventional mistresses. On the contrary, there is reason to believe that the types (*ashtanayikas*) evolved out of such bardic songs. The late V. Raghavan was of the view that 'while it is not probably true that all of them were written from the point of view of love, and the love context assigned to some categories of these verses by commentators like Gangadhara may be arbitrary, the majority of them are love verses and do betray a knowledge of the classification of *nayikas* and the nomenclature pertaining thereto' (Introduction to *Sringaramanjari*; emphasis added). This view cannot be sustained unless the classification process can be proved to have preceded the bardic songs. There is no evidence to that effect. On the contrary, the terminology for the *nayikas* shows manifest evidence of Prakrit—the language of *gathas*. *Vasakasajja* is not a Sanskrit word, but a Prakrit *tatsama*. As grammar follows language, classification must follow creative output, logically.

The point is important, especially in relation to the format of the songs, the characters that figure therein, their social milieu, and so on. For, it is peoples' poetry which the songs represent—the many moods that love can evoke, the trifles that become tremendously important (both when love is fulfilled or stands unrequited), and the sentiment that lingers—all in rural setting. There are no princes or fairies in these poems of quaint charm, though they were all recited to and duly approved by King Hala. It is love among the common folk—rugged, passionate, yet sensitive and subtle—that is celebrated; but the poetry is sophisticated.

The format is that of dramatic narrative, common to oral traditions wherein the context and the participants are usually well-known and assumed as such; 'he', 'she' and a *sakhi* are the recurring characters—impersonal, and therefore universal. No names, ever. Nor is it necessary to indicate who says it, to whom, when the audience is part of the *dramatis personae*, so to speak.⁺ All this is characteristic of the Prakrit literary tradition as manifest in the *gathas* of the early Christian era.

Interestingly, the *gathas* have their parallel—often exact—in the Aham songs which represent the earliest poetry in Tamil (known as Sangam literature). Listen to the *proshitapatika* of the Tamil country:

He has gone in search of nobler wealth,
beyond the forest green.
I languish here: my bangles
have become loose, I cannot sleep.
As rain pours more and more,
without a thought for poor me,
Look at the lightning flash;
Ah, my dear life!

Kuruntohai 216.

Or, the *khandita*:

Stop, please stop: don't enter here
Go to your beloved, with tresses sweet
You seem to miss your way.
Go, go away: your feet might hurt!

'Nil āngu . . .'
kalittohai 3.30

How did it happen? A full and proper discussion of such identical manifestation of love poems in different languages is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that it was not by accident.* What is of immediate interest is how this genre of poetry evolved and in what circumstances it gained such stature as to become part of the classical tradition, alike in literature and in dance.

Songs of Troubadours

The dawn of India's cultural history may be seen to coincide

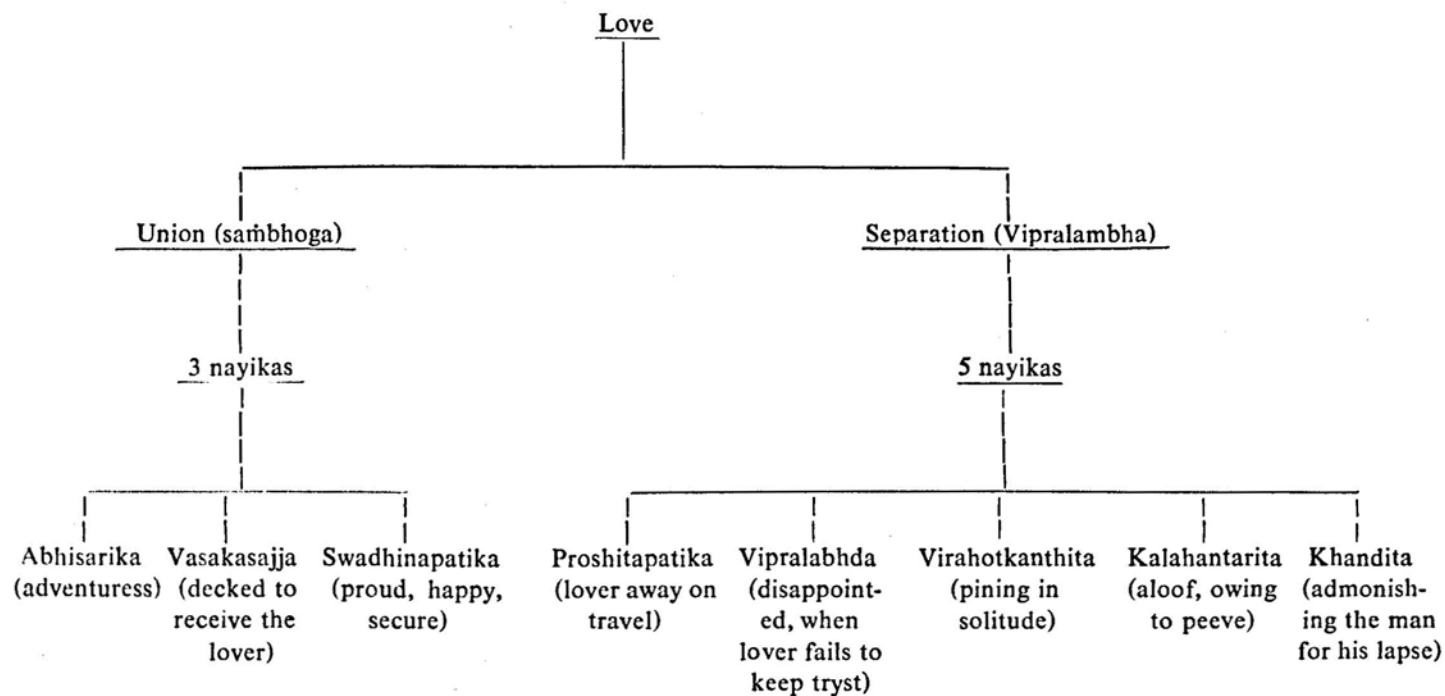
⁺A modern parallel is the *ghazal* in Urdu.

*The reader might refer to the author's book 'The Ethos of Indian Literature: a Study of its Romantic Tradition' (1985), Chanakya Publications.

with the heyday of trade and commerce which lent power to the Mauryan empire. Traditional accounts, preserved in Buddhist and Jain lore, speak of the highways known as Uttarapatha and Dakshinapatha along which caravan traders moved constantly—in groups and by cart—carrying merchandise up and down the country from Purushapura (Peshawar) to Pataliputra (Patna) and from Pataliputra to Madurai via Ujjain and Pratishtana (Paithan). Thus, travel in pursuit of wealth was part of life for any man worth the name (he who shunned travel was looked down upon, socially and culturally). And—as if to relieve the boredom of journey—it was customary to include in the caravan a monk and a minstrel; often it was the same person who played a dual role. In any case, when the caravan rested for the night at a rest-house (*basadi*) there were poets (*Bhāṇa-kavi*) to amuse and entertain with impromptu songs and familiar *gāthas*. To such an audience, what could be more exciting or relevant than to hear of a mistress pining away in loneliness? Thus it is that the *proshita-patika*, in all her infinite variety and charm, evolved as a *nayika* of universal interest among travellers. Significantly, the *gāthas* in Hala's compilation are most often portraits of this type albeit without label or appellation. What is remarkable is that in the succeeding centuries, every time the theoreticians sought to classify the *nayikas*—introducing subtle sub-varieties thereof—it is to the *gāthas* that they harked; it is Hala whom they cite as a model. Thus, a mistress whose lover is about to leave on a journey is designated *pravatsyā-patika* as exemplified in G.S I. 46, 2.43, or 6.2. When the man cancels his trip on seeing her anguish, she is known as *vigalita-prasthāna-patika*, as seen in 5.100. The status of the girl whose lover is returning from abroad is referred to as *avasita-pravasa-patika* as in 6. 37.

If the link between the caravan journeys and these clever sentimental songs is perceived, the next insight that is available pertains to *viraha* (separation) as integral to *sringara*. Travel—the very mention of it—means separation, which can condition the mood of the mistress in myriad ways. One might break down in a flood of tears, another might hold back the tears (and the man) through other means, while a third might seem so stern until she swoons away, and so on. Each of them is tender and charming, in her own way. And what variety in the pangs of loneliness! The kind of suffering felt soon after his departure is not the same as the weary solitude some weeks later which, again, can't be compared with the despair when his return seems overdue. All this stands incorporated in *padams* and *thumris* which provide the lyrical base for *nritya*.

FIG. I(A) : EVOLUTION OF NAYIKAS



Separation need not be caused by physical distance alone. When the man becomes preoccupied elsewhere so as not to bestow attention, he becomes distant. The roused mistress in such a situation becomes *virahotkanthita*. When, however, a tryst is fixed and the man fails to turn up, the disappointed one becomes *vipralabdha*. When neglect or emotional distance is traceable to the 'other woman', the mistress turns into *khandita* (the admonishing woman). When the injury is imaginary and yet the mistress sports a pique she is known as *kalahantarita* (separated by quarrel).

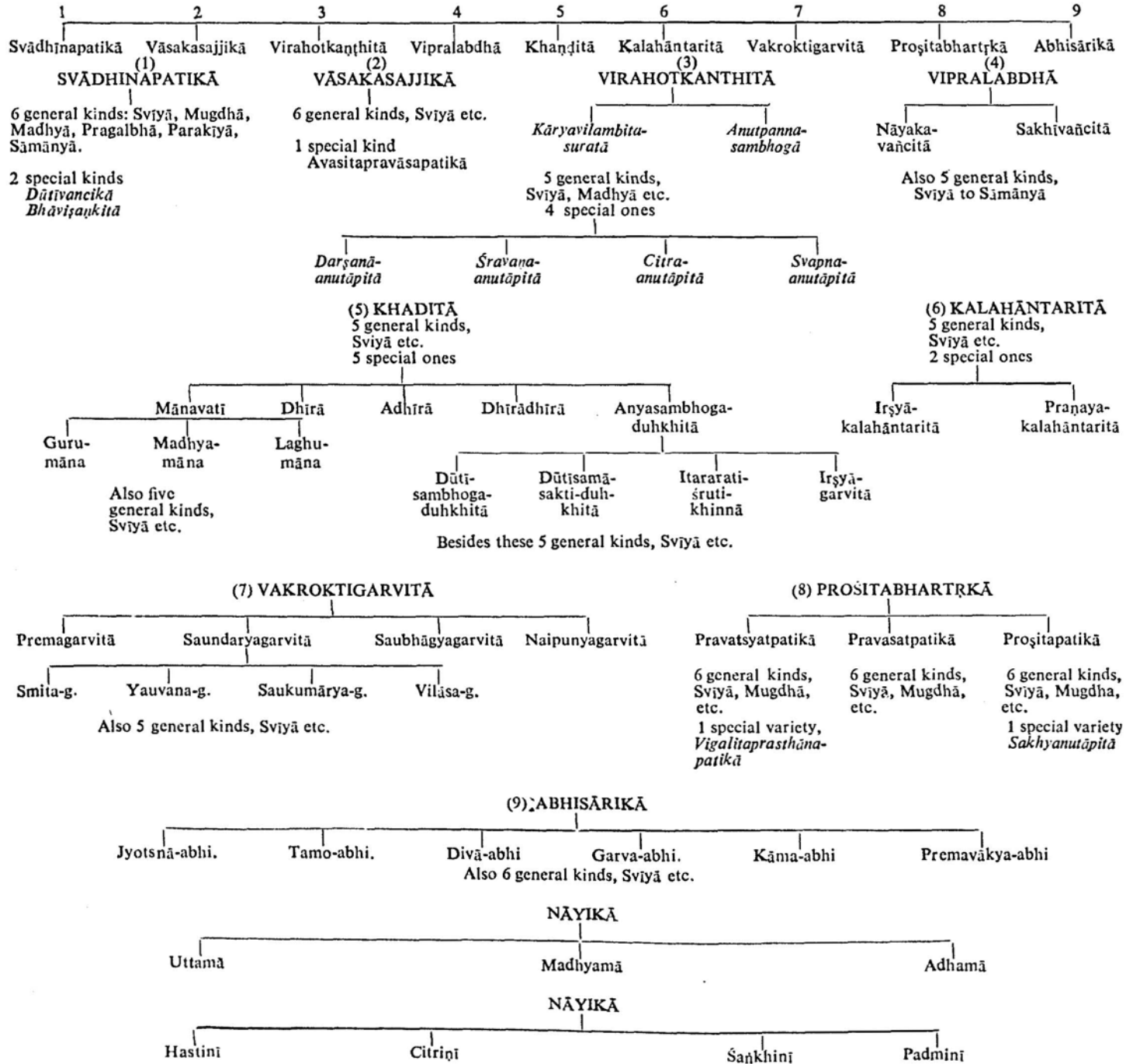
Yet, separation is meaningful only when it presupposes a strong union and leads to a reunion. The interesting facets of such a state are crystallised in three *nayikas*: *vasakasajja*, the girl who is fully decked to receive the lover; *abhisarika*, the daring adventuress who goes to meet her lover; and *swadhinapatika*, the proud, happily matched woman (see Fig. 1A & B).

It is not necessary to set the mind inquiring if these *nayikas* are drawn from real life; nor is it desirable. Let them be fanciful creatures, suggestive of the plausible. Fiction superimposed on a little truth is infinitely more attractive, at all times. Moreover, stylisation lends magic, as when the iconography of India instils divinity in the stylised representation of the human form. If the *nritya* of Indian dance evokes beauty and grace in stylised movement, then it is *nritya* that conjures *sringara* through stylised portraits of charming women.

Full Stature

Notwithstanding the charm of the *gathas* and their popular appeal, the *nayikas* figuring in these songs would never have acquired full stature and classical status but for two important phenomena in medieval times. The first is the entry of the *gatha* style, with all its conventions, into the Sanskrit tradition, resulting in the form known as *muktaka*. The finest example is *Amarusatakam*, a compilation of a hundred erotic stanzas, celebrating love (*sringara*) in the footsteps of Hala. The emphasis shifts from separation to union (*vipralamba* to *sambhoga*) but the types are the same; commentators on Amaru invariably indicate which *nayika* each song depicts and which is the mood that is dominant. Besides, treatises on literary criticism beginning with *Dhwanyaloka* cite passages from Amaru as well as Hala to illustrate poetic devices known as *alankara*. What is interesting is that while such works uphold the literary charm of those anthologies, treatises on the aesthetics of erotics (*sringara*)

FIG. I(B) : MEDIEVAL CLASSIFICATION OF NAYIKAS



Note: Nayikas grew in variety and distinctness. This figure shows a late medieval classification into nine major categories, with the addition of *Vakroktigarvitā*. From a Chart by V. Raghavan in his introduction to *Sringara Manjarī* of Akbar Shah—Ed.

SRINGARA

The etymology of the word *sringara*, denoting love in its erotic aspect, is significant, though variously derived. The simplest is to look upon the word as a variant of *sringa* (literally horn, summit) which also denotes the arousal of desire. Derived from the verb *sri*, which means to be devoted, it denotes mutual involvement.

The verb *sri* also means 'to trouble', 'to kill', in which sense it imparts to the word *sringara* the idea of a deadly force. This meaning of the word makes it easy to understand why death-swoon (*marana*) is the ultimate stage in love when it stands unrequited.

The notion of love as deadly is also embodied in the word *mara* (literally, killer) for the god of love. And a mere look can be a spear or an arrow, in this deadly game of love. The phrases *strivedha* and *purushavedha*, which became obsolete in medieval times, recognise the torturous power of erotic love.

cite those very passages to lend greater precision to the portrait of a *nayika* or the intensity of a *rasa*. Amaru's oft-quoted stanza '*nih seshachyuta chandanam. . .*' is a classic example.

Next in sequence, but more important in terms of influence, is the elevation of the *nayika* by the devotional poets, from the position of a woman in love with a man to that of the human soul longing for divine grace. It is this extended symbolism and sublimation that has ennobled and perpetuated a character that was born in the brilliant imagination of the bardic singer. Thus, the devotee is the eternal *proshitapatika* waiting for union with the cosmic Lover; the intimacy is so great as to enable the devotee to feel the pangs of a *vipralabdha* or even assume the role of a *khandita* in relation to the Lord. Vidyapati, Jayadeva, Kshetragna, Meerabai, Surdas, Narsi Mehta, Nammalvar, all are products of this school.

Gone are the days of caravan trade and minstrels singing of lonely maidens in 'full-throated ease' (though the folk-tradition preserves the *virahigeet*). Today's city-dweller (*nagarika*) is a stranger to the *nayika* and her *sakhi*, to the symbols of love such as the lotus and the bee, the black cloud and the southern breeze and so on. For a richer appreciation of any representation of the *nayika*, either in song or on the stage, the citizen must imbibe something of the ethos of the poetry that contains the treasure known as *sringara*. □