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Women in *Pratimānāṭakam of* Bhāsa: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract: *Pratimānāṭakam is one of the most notable works among the thirteen plays attributed to Bhāsa, the eminent dramatist of the second century A.D. In this play based on events from the Rāmāyaṇa, Bhāsa crafts a vivid and realistic portrait of women as they existed in his time. Drawing primarily from the "Ayodhyākāṇḍa" and "Araṇyakāṇḍa" of Vālmīki's Rāmāyaṇa, the playwright moves beyond mere retelling to explore the emotions, motivations, and interpersonal dynamics of his characters. This approach offers deeper insight into how women were perceived in terms of personality, virtue, and social function. In Pratimānāṭakam, women such as Sītā, Kaikeyī, and others are not simply ornamental figures but occupy central roles in shaping the dramatic tension and moral fabric of the narrative. Through them, Bhāsa presents a layered social portrait in which devotion, influence, and human complexity coexist. Their representation reflects both the ideals and the realities of the second-century BCE socio-political landscape, serving as an enduring testament to the dramatist's nuanced understanding of the feminine role in family, religion, and politics. This study examines the characteristics and social status of the women portrayed in Pratimānāṭakam, while also situating them within the broader socio-religious and political context of the period.*

Keywords: *Bhāsa, Pratimānāṭakam, Aristocratic and Working-class Women, Patriarchal Social System, Gender Discrimination, Socio-religious and Political Context*

Introduction

Standing at the threshold of the twenty-first century, we are witnessing unprecedented and dramatic changes unfolding across various strata of society. Although these remarkable transformations are evident in many spheres, scholars and researchers have questioned the extent to which they have truly impacted women and the degree to which women have been able to enjoy their overall benefits. In this connection, it is stated:

> From the beginning of time, oppression has been the common lot of women and the labouring man. In spite of all changes in form, this oppression has remained the same. Only at rare intervals during the long course of history

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> has either woman or the labourer become alive to the consciousness of servitude, woman even more rarely than the labourer, because her position was even lower than his, and even by him was she regarded and treated as an inferior, and continues to be so to this day. …Tacitus, for instance, states distinctly that among the Germans, who, in his time, had already reached a higher degree of civilization than the one under discussion, the women were by no means inferior to the men, either in size or strength. (Bebel, 1885, p. 7)

Furthermore, as the twentieth century French feminist and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir argues:

> … man is consumed by the concern to appear male, important, superior; he playacts so that others will playact with him; he is also aggressive and nervous; he feels hostility for women because he is afraid of them, and he is afraid of them because he is afraid of the character with whom he is assimilated. What time and energy he wastes in getting rid of, idealising and transposing complexes, in speaking about women, seducing and fearing them! He would be liberated with their liberation. But that is exactly what he fears. And he persists in the mystifications meant to maintain women in their chains. (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 772)

In other words, Beauvoir holds that men oppress women by constructing them as inferior and the Other. She pointed out that the social role of femininity was used to position women in an inferior status and to keep them confined in domestic roles, denying them agency and freedom. The connection between marginalization and lack of economic and political rights was also noted by this feminist who wrote: "French law no longer includes obedience among a wife's duties, and every woman citizen has become a voter; these civic liberties remain abstract if there is no corresponding economic autonomy, …work alone can guarantee her concrete freedom." (Beauvoir, 2011, p.737)

As a result, Beauvoir has been a foundational figure in feminist movements, in the country and around the world, and her ideas have propelled research on feminist theory and gender equality The famous quote "one is not born a woman but becomes one" (Beauvoir, 2011, p.330) has been particularly relevant for examinations of the historical and social constructions of femininity. Inspired by the women's movement, I have been motivated to explore the condition and status of women as depicted in the classical Sanskrit drama *Pratimānāṭakam*, especially in the plays attributed to the distinguished playwright Mahāmati Bhāsa, who is widely recognized as one of the earliest known Sanskrit dramatists of around the second century.

Bhasa: The Father of Indian Drama

Among the eminent playwrights of the post-Aśvaghoṣa and pre-Kālidāsa period, Mahākavi Bhāsa holds a distinguished place. In the theatrical landscape preceding

Kālidāsa, Bhāsa was not only a celebrated dramatist but also a figure whose direct or indirect influence on the subsequent dramatic literature of the Indian subcontinent is universally acknowledged. Jhā and Rāthore therefore, refer, to Bhasa as the "Father of Indian Drama" in their work.

Bhāsa was a versatile life-centred playwright. The real story of this world and life is the main subject of his plays. Bhāsa's talent is comparable only to that of the ancient poet Vālmikī, the author of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Just as Vālmikī has crossed the boundaries of time and country and made his place in the hearts of the people of the world, Bhāsa has also transcended the boundaries of time and geography, preserving his eminence with enduring glory.

In this article, I have sought to highlight the condition and status of the female characters in Bhāsa's *Pratimānāṭakam*. The condition and status of significant and representative female characters from various social classes are depicted in the play. Through his female characters, Bhāsa not only portrayed different aspects of the lives of aristocratic women, but also highlighted their relationships with women from the lower strata of society, particularly those from the working class. More than any other dramatist, Bhāsa brought together in his plays a rich array of female characters drawn from diverse social classes, professions, and presented a comprehensive and multifaceted portrait of contemporary womanhood.

Previous Studies

Many renowned researchers at the national and international level have researched about the playwright Bhāsa, women, and *Pratimānāṭakam*. These studies have been published in books and in journal articles. Among them, Veṅkatācalam's *Bhāsa* (1986) translated into Bangla by Bandyapādhyāy (2020), and *Pratimānāṭakam* (2007) edited by Sri Jagadishchandra Tarkatirtha (in Bangla and Sanskrit) are seminal works in this area. Other works that have guided this research on Bhasa are *Bhāsa's works: A Criticism* (1925) by Pishāroty, *Bhasa: A Study* (1940) by Pusalker and *Bhāsa's plays: A Critical Study* (1925) edited by Ganapati Śāstrī. "Women about Town: An Exploration of the Sanskrit *Kāvya* Tradition" (2006) by Kaul, and "*Pratimānāṭakam* Drama of Bhāsa: An Evaluation" (2020) by Chaudhari are notable for their contribution.

Feminist studies on women and literature have also been influential in opening space for the study of women in ancient Indian literature. In this regard *Contemporary Feminist Perspectives* (1997) by Guhathākurta, *The Women's History of the World* (1988) by Miles, *The Second Sex* by Beauvoir, *Women in the Past Present and Future* by Bebel (1885), and 'Women in Rabindra Life: An Evolutionary Psychological Exploration" (2015) by Roy are some books that have influenced the analysis in this paper.

Moreover, there are several important research studies on women in ancient India which have been useful. Sen in his book *Hinduism* (1961) has presented a detailed discussion of the status of women. Similarly, Bhattāchārji in *Women and Society in Ancient India* (1960), Ghosh in "Women in Ancient India" in the *Vedas* and *Manusamhitā*" (2001) and "The Embodiment of Women's Lives in the Play *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*" (2013) by Mālabikā Biswās have focused on the portrayal of women in classical Indian literature. Critical studies by Sirāj Sālekin in *Women in Indian Literature* (2010), Sābinā Yāsmin in "The Status and Position of Women in Nazrul's Stories"(2014), as well as *Women's Life and Space in Literature* (2007) edited by Selinā Hossāin and others and *Women's Empowerment: Politics and Movement* (2003)edited by Selinā Hossāin and Māsuduzzāmān have provided important insights in the study of women and literature.

A survey of the research on ancient Indian literature and women in literature shows that though considerable research has been conducted on Bhāsa as well as women in ancient and modern Indian literature, there has not been much research on the female characters in Bhāsa's *Pratimānāṭakam*. This is surprising because Bhāsa has applied a wonderful artistic style to the construction of the female characters in his *Pratimānāṭakam,* and he has embodied each female character like a skilled craftsman. As a result, there is ample scope for research on the female characters in *Pratimānāṭakam*. That is why I became interested in writing an article on the proposed topic.

Pratimānāṭakam

The rise and development of Indian civilization, together with its intellectual enrichment and creative achievements, are vividly reflected in the Sanskrit play *Pratimānāṭakam.* In the preface (prastāvanā) of the drama *Mālavikāgnimitram,* Kālidāsa has praised Bhāsa:

> Pāripārśvikaḥ: Mā tāvat prathitayaśasāṃ Bhāsakaviputrasaumillakādīnāṃ prabandhānatikramya vartamānakaveḥ Kālidāsasya kriyāyāṃ kathaṃ pariṣado bahumānaḥ. (Śāstrī, 1981, p.259)
>
> That is, no no why is the council so interested in the literary works written by Kālidāsa, a modern poet, excluding the literary works written by famous poets like Bhāsa, Kaviputra, Saumillaka, etc? (author's translation).

Not only by Kālidāsa, but also several contemporaries of Bhāsa saw him as a great tree (*mahiruha*) and considered him a source of inspiration. Though there is a dispute among the experts about the exact time of Bhāsa, it is believed that he was a predecessor of Kālidāsa. To justify the fact, we can quote the following statement:

> Before 1912, Bhāsa was known only by reputation, having been honoured by Kālidāsa and Bāṇa as a great predecessor and author of several plays, and praised and cited by a succession of writers in later times; but since then, much discussion has centred round his name with the alleged discovery of his original plays. Between 1912 and 1915, T. Ganapati Sastri published from Trivandrum thirteen plays of varying size and merit, which bore no evidence of authorship, but which, on account of certain remarkable characteristics, he ascribed to the far-famed Bhāsa. (Dasgupta & De, 1947, p.101)

At the beginning of the 20th century, thirteen plays preserved in palm leaves were discovered from Trivāndām of Kerālā by Mahāmahopādhyāya Pandit T. Gaṇapati Śāstrī. All these plays were written in the Mālayālam script. Considering the writing style and etymology of the plays, Śāstrī stated that these plays were written by the same person, and the author was the ancient dramatist Bhāsa. The 13 dramatic texts are as follows:

1. *Pratimānāṭakam* 2. *Abhiṣekaḥ* 3. *Dūtavākyam* 4. *Karṇabhāram* 5. *Paňcarātram* 6. *Dūtaghaṭatkacam* 7. Ūrubhaṅgam 8. *Madhyamavyāyogaḥ* 9. *Vālacaritam* 10. *Pratijňāyaugandharāyaṇam* 11. *Svapnavāsavadattam* 12. *Avimārakam* and 13. *Cārudattam*.

Considering the subject matter, scholars divided the plays of Bhāsa in following ways:

1. *Rāmāyaṇa*-based
2. *Mahābhārata* and Kriṣṇa story-based
3. Historical and folklore-based
4. Mythology and fantasy-based

Among the thirteen plays, Bhāsa composed two plays based on the *Rāmāyaṇa*. They are *Pratimānāṭakam* and *Abhiṣekaḥ*. According to scholars, *Pratimānāṭakam* is one of his finest works. The drama is based on two episodes of Ayodhyā and Araṇyakāṇḍa of *Rāmāyaṇa.* The premise of the drama centers around Queen Kaikeyī, who demanded that Daśaratha, the king of Ayodhyā*,* send his eldest son Rāmacandra into exile for fourteen years as promised, and her son Bharata be enthroned instead of Rāma. According to the demand, Rāma went to the forest along with Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa. King Daśaratha was unable to bear his son's grief and hence became disturbed, both physically and mentally, and subsequently, passed away. At that time, Bharata, who was staying at the house of his maternal uncle, entered a temple on his way to Ayodhyā. There, he came to know the news of his father's death and the exile of Rāma-Sītā. He then set off to the forest with Sumantra in search of Rāmacandra to bring him back home. Upon Rāmacandra's refusal to return home, he expressed his desire to stay in the forest to serve Rāma. When Rāma disagreed with this, Bharata felt helpless. He finally decided to place

Rāmacandra's shoes on the throne of Ayodhyā and started to rule the country in the name of Rāma. Once Bharata heard the story of Sītā's abduction from Sumantra, he blamed and rebuked Kaikeyī for all the mishaps. Kaikeyī, through Sumantra, claimed that Daśaratha acquired the curse of mourning for killing the son of the blind Muni. It was through the grief of Rāmá's exile that Kaikeyī could free Daśaratha from the curse of the Sage Muni. But since she was overwhelmed with emotions, she accidentally said fourteen years instead of fourteen days. Now, she felt extremely ashamed, shocked, and remorseful. However, all this happened with the approval of the Kulagurus. Bharata was taken aback upon knowing about all the incidents beneath the surface. He apologized to his mother and went ahead to organize a large army rally to rescue Sītā. Rāmacandra, with the help of everyone, defeated and killed Rāvaṇa and returned to the āśrama with Sītā. Finally, Rāma was enthrone in the presence of Vibhīṣaṇa, Sugrīva, Hanumāna, and others.

The play is not only political as Bhāsa has portrayed many complex themes including husbandly love, brotherly bond, the protection of birthland, and patriotism in his *Pratimānāṭakam* in a truly praiseworthy style. Although the original story was taken from *Rāmāyaṇa,* Bhāsa had shown his theatrical talent in terms of setting, characterization, presentation of scenes, application of dialogue, and much more.

In the play, which is based on the *Rāmāyaṇa*, some of the elements of the *Pratimānāṭakam* are entirely Bhāsa's own creation. Among these, the story of the idol house in the third act, the installation of Kaikeyī in the sixth act, and the praise of Kaikeyī are particularly noteworthy. In these cases, Bhāsa did not follow Vālmīki. The subject-matter of the idol house in the third act is a very important aspect of the play, a point highlighted by the dramatist himself by using it in in the play's title. It is by entering this idol house that Bharata comes to know about the news of his father's death, his elder brother Rāmachandra's departure for the forest, and so on. Bharata is also one of the most significant characters in the play. In fact, the story of the entire play revolves around the issue of Rāma's exile to the forest and Bharata becoming the king.

Bhāsa's strong mentality is revealed in his positive and sympathetic treatment of, Kaikeyī, who is regarded as a perverted wife and mother character. She, who is marginalized in the *Rāmāyaṇa,* has been given honour by the playwright. In this case, Bhāsa reminds us of the respect paid to Rāvaṇa by the poet Madhusūdhana, who wrote much later. So, even though the Rāma material is taken from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the playwright has deviated from the *Rāmāyaṇa* in terms of the basic theme of the *Pratimānāṭakam*. Here the exile of Rama by Queen Kaikeyī and the subsequent installation of Bharata on the throne is presented as an attempt to free King Daśaratha from the curse. As a result, the dramatist has portrayed the character of Kaikeyī as a noble woman.

Female Characters in *Pratimānāṭakam*

One of the major changes introduced by Bhāsa in *Pratimānāṭakam* is the addition of several female characters from different levels of the social ladder. The play consisting of has seven acts presents 27 characters, out of which 11 are female and 16 are male. Bhāsa has portrayed various types of female characters, their hopes and aspirations, love and affection, happiness, sadness, laughter, and tears in this play. The eleven female characters found in the *Pratimānāṭakam,* are namely: Naṭī, Sītā, Kauśalyā, Sumitrā, Kaikeyī, Avadātikā, Ceṭī, Pratīhārī, Vijayā, Nandinikā, and Tāpasī. Along with these, the names of Āryārebā, Āryabālā, Mantharā, and Sārasikā are also found. An analysis of these portrayals will shed light on the status and position.

The female characters in Bhāsa's *Pratimānāṭakam* can be divided according to their social status into elite and working classes. The female characters of the elite class in the *Pratimānāṭakam* are: Sītā, Kauśalyā, Kaikeyī and Sumitrā. Among the female characters of the working class, Avadātikā is a female attendant, while Vijayā, Nandinikā, Cetī and Mantharā are mentioned as the maids. There are also Pratihārī, Vijayā, Naṭī and Tāpasī. The following section will elaborate on the social conditions and characters of the women presented in the play.

Women of the Elite Class

Sītā

Sītā, the heroine of *Pratimānāṭakam,* is the same Sītā of the *Rāmāyaṇa* written by the great poet Vālmīki. But in *Pratimānāṭakam* Bhāsa has portrayed Sītā with his own interpretation and technique. She was the wife of Rāmacandra, the daughter-in-law of King Daśaratha and Queen Kauśalyā of Ayodhyā, and the sister-in-law of Lakṣmaṇa and Bharata. Sītā, the symbol of beauty, was the representative of the elite community of society. She was the possessor of generosity, greatness, love, kindness, compassion, and forgiveness. The elite women of society of that time were not exceptions to being possessors of these qualities. However, in the case of Sītā, several exceptional characteristics were noticeable.

Sita did not have any negative demeanor towards her mother, like her mother-in-law, Queen Kaikeyī, who was interfering with her husband's coronation. She had no evil or hidden desire for revenge or malice. Rather, out of respect for her own mother, she received Queen Kaikeyī warmly and carefully. In family conflicts, such behavior and positive attitude of the daughter-in-law were undoubtedly admirable and exemplary. Not only that, Sītā's knowledge, wisdom, and patience in the establishment of family balance and coordination will be perpetuated as a shining example of great guidance.

In traditional Indian society, especially in a joint family, family members undertake responsibilities and duties towards the family and mutually perform them. This was a social and familial feature in those days. Sītā did not forget these responsibilities and duties even during the turbulent times of her life. On the one hand, she felt the desire to be her husband's partner in his lonely journey to the forest, while on the other hand, she felt guilty for not serving her in-laws. In the end, she decided to choose the former and accompanied her husband to the forest to serve him, while entrusting her responsibility and duty to her elders to God. In the conversation of *Pratimānāṭakam* between Rāma-Sītā, the above example was highlighted:

> Rāmaḥ: Maithili! kiṃ vyavasitam?
> Sītā: Ṇaṃ sahadhammaāriṇā kkhu ahaṃ (Nanu sahadharmacāriṇī khalvaham)
> Rāmaḥ: Mayaikākinā kila gantavyam.
> Sītā: Ado ṇu khu aṇugacchāmi (Ato nu khalvanugacchāmi).
> Rāmaḥ: Vane khalu vastavyam.
> Sītā: Taṃ khu me pāsādo (Tat khalu me prāsādaḥ).
> Rāmaḥ: Śvaśrūśvaśura śuśrūṣāmapi ca te nirvatayitavyā.
> Sītā: Ṇaṃ uddisiyā devadāṇaṃ paṇāmo karīadi (Enāmuddiśya devatānāṃ praṇāmaḥ kriyate). (Śāstrī, 1978, p. 333)
>
> That is, Rāma – Sītā! Do you think what you did was right?
> Sītā – Why? I am your wife.
> Rāma – I have to go alone.
> Sītā – That's why I'm going.
> Rāma – But we have to stay in the forest
> Sītā – That is my palace.
> Rāma – But you should serve your father-in-law and mother-in-law also!
> Sītā – Well, that's why I'm bowing to the gods.

This dialogue revealed not only her dedication to her husband but also her unwavering devotion to her religion. In the end, she was able to save both sides. This is an apt example of her sapience.

Fraternal love and affection are significant features of Indian family life. In this context, Rāma did not want Lakṣmaṇa to accompany him at first, but he agreed to the request of Sītā. Similarly, the presence of Bharata in the forest to bring back Rāma and Sītā did not arouse any jealousy or sorrow in Sītā's mind. On the contrary, she greeted him warmly and expressed her sorrow at the news of Bharata's immediate return.

In family life, such demeanor of Sītā garners the attention of all. In yet another example, her characteristic generosity can be witnessed in the story of the curse of Daśaratha's mourning for his son when Queen Kaikeyī went to the forest to bring

back Rāma-Sītā. Instead of reprimanding her, Sītā greeted her respectfully. This was the moment where Sītā's greatness was revealed. It should also be mentioned that Sītā was the wife of the future king of Ayodhyā and lived in Rājantaḥpur. The family events of Rājantaḥpur were not unknown to her, and she was aware of several incidents of rājā and rājprāsād. While many were surprised at the sudden suspension of her husband's coronation at the last moment, which was a mystery to many, Sītā accepted it without hesitation and claimed that all was well in the rājpurī. Sītā's esoteric remarks on the various events of the state administration indicate that she was aware of the politics inside her palace. In ancient India, women could not participate in politics due to social norms. Yet, it is clear from the play that they were still aware of the ongoing politics and sometimes even played important roles in it. Sītā's conversation in *Pratimānāṭakam* with her maid servant (Ceṭī) supports the argument that women were politically aware. This is evident in the following remarks:

> Ceṭī: Bhaṭṭiṇi! paṭahasaddo via (Bhaṭṭini! paṭahaśabda iva).
> Sītā: So evva (Sa eva).
> Ceṭī: Ekkapade oghaṭṭiatuhnīo paṭahasaddo saṃvutto (Ekapade avaghaṭṭitatūṣṇīkaḥ paṭahaśabdaḥ saṃvṛttaḥ).
> Sītā: Koṇu khu ugghādo ahiseassa (Konu khalu udghātaḥ abhiṣekasya).
> Ceṭī: Bhaṭṭiṇi! evvaṃ mae sudaṃ—bhaṭṭidāraaṃ ahisiñciya mahārāo vaṇaṃ gamissadi tti. (Bhaṭṭini! evaṃ mayā śrutaṃ—bhartṛdārakam-bhaṣicya mahārājo vanaṃ gamiṣyatīti).
> Sītā: Jai evvaṃ ṇa so ahiseodaaṃ muhodaaṃ ṇāma (Yadyevaṃ na tadabhiṣekodakaṃ, mukhodakaṃ nāma). (Śāstrī, 1978, p. 329)

> That is, Ceṭī - Bhattinī. As if I heard the sound of pataha?
> Sītā — Yes, so.
> Ceṭī —Pataha may stop once the bell rings. What's the matter?
> Sītā — What if one of the obstacles to the debut? In rājpurī, of course, nothing happens.
> Ceṭī—Bhaṭṭinī! I heard that after Kumāra's inauguration, Māhārāja will go to the forest.
> Sītā — If so, it is not the water of the anointing, it is the water for washing our tear-stained face.

The conversation shows that Sītā was able to foresee the obstacles to the coronation of her husband Rāmachandra. This reflects her political foresight.

In ancient Indian society, the life of a woman was bound in a long and complex chain. This was the tragic outcome of the life of a woman. There was no hierarchy of women, whether they belonged to the elite, the middle, or the working class. But, at the same time, there was ample opportunity for women to play a significant role in society. Just as Vālmīki did not bring the queen out of her family life, the dramatist Bhāsa did not take an initiative to bring women out of their limited

lives with the magic of his imagination. In some cases, he even deviated from the original story of *Rāmāyaṇa*, but in the case of the women, he did not more to do beyond convention. Hence, it can be seen that Sītā had no role in the social, economic, and political life despite being the prince's bride or the bride of the future king.

Kauśalyā

The character of Kauśalyā embodied in the *Pratimānāṭakam* of Bhāsa was similar to the character of Kauśalyā portrayed in *Rāmāyaṇa*. Kauśalyā was the chief queen of Ayodhyā's king Daśaratha. She was also Rāmacandrā's mother, Sītā's mother-in-law, and simultaneously Bharata, Lakṣamaṇa, and Śatrughna's stepmother. As a result of Rāma's vanavāsa (leaving for the forest), King Daśaratha became ill due to his yearning for his son. Despite such a dire situation, she, being the head queen of her husband, fulfilled her duties and responsibilities with utmost sincerity and devotion. She took care of her husband, gave him comfort in grief, and tried her best to heal him. This stood to be a perfect example of a wife's love for her husband. It goes to show that Kauśalyā was always aware of her role as a successful wife. Indian society has been imparting this knowledge to women for ages. That is why her dedication to her husband was not an exception.

According to the rules and regulations of the state, it was customary for the eldest son of the family to ascend the throne. However, due to familial conflict, Rāma, the eldest son of chief queen Kauśalyā and the eldest son of the king's family, was deprived of the throne. As a mother, it was normal for Kauśalyā to suffer anxiety. But for the stability of the state and the peace of the family, she accepted the situation with a generous heart. Although King Daśaratha showed a hostile attitude towards his wife Kaikeyī, she tried to diffuse the situation and his hostility. Not only this, she skillfully dealt with several pressing matters such as her husband's well-being, quarrels between the other wives, and the fraternity of the kingdom, as well as continuing to play the role of being the head of the queens gracefully. Her demeanor through such hurdles reflected her maternal attributes. A princess herself, mother of the king, and the protector of the subjects, her wisdom and grace showcased her strong character. Some other aspects of Kauśalyā's character were highlighted through the Kauśalyā-Daśaratha dialogues mentioned in the *Pratimānāṭakam* of Bhāsa:

> Kauśalyā: (Saruditam) Alaṃ dāṇi mahārāo adimattaṃ santappia paravasaṃ attāṇaṃ kāduṃ. Ṇaṃ sā te a kumārā mahārāassa samaāvasāṇe pekkhidavvā bhavissanti (Alamidānīṃ mahārājaḥ atimātraṃ santapya paravaśamātmānaṃ kartum. Nanu sā tau ca kumārau mahārājasya samayāvasāne prekṣitavyā bhaviṣyanti).
> Rājā: Kā tvaṃ bho!
> Kauśalyā: Asiniddhaputtappasaviṇī khu ahaṃ (Asnigdhaputraprasavinī khalvaham).

> Rājā: Kiṃ kiṃ sarvajanahṛdayanayanābhirāmasya rāmasya jananī tamasi Kauśalyā?
> Kauśalyā: Mahārāa! Sā eva mandabhāiṇī khu ahaṃ (Mahārāja! Saiva mandabhāginī khalvaham).
> Rājā: Kauśalye! Sāravatī khalvasi. Tvayā hi khalu rāmo garbhe dhṛtaḥ. (Śāstrī, 1978, p. 336)

> That is, Kauśalyā – (Crying) Mahāraja! Do not make yourself so sad. After the banishment, you will see the bride and your son again.
> King – who are you?
> Kauśalyā – I am the mother of that loveless son.
> King – What, what! You are Kauśalyā? Who is the mother of everyone's heart-fascinating Rāma?
> Kauśalyā – Mahārāja! I am that wretched woman.
> King – Kauśalyā! You are a perfect mother! You conceived Rāma.

Here, King Daśaratha's genuine respect for Kauśalyā as the mother of the heart-entertaining Rāma is revealed.

In a polygamous and patriarchal society, Kauśalyā was a prime example of an ideal first wife who prioritized family peace and balance among the women. Despite being aware that her husband's other wife, Kaikeyī, was responsible for the vanavāsa (exile) of her son and daughter-in-law to the forest and his deprivation of his rightful throne, Kauśalyā treated Kaikeyī with a very calm and friendly attitude. She also did not appreciate Kaikeyī's own son Bharata's mistreatment of his mother and vocalized his need to show respect. It is stated in *Pratimānāṭakam*:

> Kauśalyā: Jāda! Savvasamudāāramaṇjhatho kiṃ ṅa vandasi mādaraṃ (Jāta! Sarvasamudācāramadhyasthaḥ kiṃ na vandase mātaram).
> Bharataḥ: Mātaramiti. Amva! Tvameva me mātā. Amva! Abhivādaye.
> Kauśalyā: Ṇahi ṇahi. Iaṃ de jaṇaṇī (Nahi nahi. Iyaṃ te jananī). (Śāstrī, 1978, p. 345)

> That is, Kauśalyā- Dear son! You are well-versed in all good deeds, so why don't you worship your mother?
> Bharata- Mother! Who is the mother? You are my mother. I worship you.
> Kauśalyā- No, no. This is your mother.

Here too, her innate maternal warmth was reflected.

The character of Kauśalyā in the *Pratimānāṭakam* of Bhāsa was successful and exemplary as a wife and mother. However, we have to keep in mind that the characters of Kauśalyā of *Rāmāyaṇa* and Bhāsa's *Pratimānāṭakam* were symbols of the queen, princess, king's mother, as well as a wife who was a part of polygamy in a patriarchal society. In this society, men would naturally want such a woman, especially as the chief queen who would prioritize loyalty to the state, society,

and family, irrespective of the dynamics involved. She would also take care of her family and put in effort to maintain peace in any adverse situation. Kauśalyā did just that. She believed in a stable, calm, peaceful coexistence and did not hesitate to give up her self-interest for the good of the kingdom. Besides, her unconditional loyalty was unquestionable.

Kaikeyī

The character of Kaikeyī in the *Pratimānāṭakam,* composed by Bhāsa, is slightly different from that of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Here we see Kaikeyī mainly as a bride and mother. She was one of the chief queens of Daśaratha, the king of Ayodhyā. In *Rāmāyaṇa* it was mentioned that King Daśaratha was attracted to Kaikeyī because of her youth and beauty. In her married life, Kaikeyī played her due role as a wife by taking care of her husband with utmost fidelity. King Daśaratha was not only fascinated by the beauty but also by the sincerity of his wife.

Kaikeyī did not hesitate to accept King Daśaratha as her husband and acquiesced to the custom of polygamy prevalent in the patriarchal society of ancient Indian aristocracy. Among the three queens of Daśaratha, she was an influential queen and the mother of Bharata. Simultaneously, she was also the stepmother of Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, and Śatrughna. Similar to other women in Indian society, Kaikeyī was devoted to her son's affection, but she was not indifferent to the sons of her husband's other wives. Rather, she saw them as her sons as well. She also did not harbour any negative demeanor or jealousy towards her husband's other wives.

Although the role of the queens in the decision-making of the kingdom was not recognized in society, in the case of Kaikeyī we see how her actions impact on politics and dynastic rule. She played an important role in governing the state at a particular time. In his play, Bhasa has tried to present a rationale for Kaikeyī's aspirations by offering a reason for Rāma's vanavāsa. The play shows that Kaikeyī' chose to exile Rāma to the forest instead of death to therefore preferred going to the forest of her son (Rāma) instead of resorting to death to ward off the curse placed on King Daśaratha. In this way, Bhasa portrays Kaikeyī' as a kind noble woman. Her actions appear to be motivated not just out of love and grief for her husband and son but also affection towards her stepson Rāma. Furthermore, Kaikeyī's simplicity and honestly is revealed when she admits that she was ashamed for stating the period of Ramā's exile to be fourteen years instead of fourteen days. She further added that she had volunteered for the same despite being reprimanded and cursed to free her husband from the accursed life, and not out of greed, revenge, or any other worldly motive. It is stated in *Pratimānāṭakam*:

> Kaikeyī: Jāda! Edaṇiṇamittaṃ avarāhe maṃ nikkhivia puttao Rāmo vaṇaṃ pesido, ṇahu raja loheṇa. Apariharaṇīo maharisisāvo puttavippavāsaṃ viṇā ṇa hoi. … Jāda! Cauddasa diasa tti vattukāmāye payyāulahiaāe cauddasa

> varisāṇi tti uttaṃ (Jāta! Etannimittamaparādhe māṃ nikṣipya putrako Rāmo vanaṃ preṣitaḥ, na khalu, rājyalobhena. Apariharaṇīyo maharṣiśāpaḥ putravipravāsaṃ vinā na bhavati.…Jāta! Caturdaśa divasā iti vaktukāmayā paryākulahṛdayayā caturdaśa varṣāṇītyuktam). (Śāstrī, 1978, pp. 362-363)
>
> That is - Kaikeyī: This is why the arrangement was made to send Rāma to exile, making her a criminal. Not for the sake of gaining the kingdom, the curse of the Maharṣi is infallible; it cannot be possible without the exile of the son.

Kaikeyī explains here that she wanted to save her husband from danger and to secure a long life for him. The lines quoted above convey her sincerity, devotion and good understanding, traits which Bhāsa's added in his portrayal of the queen.

At first Bharata was indignant and critical of his mother's actions, however, when he saw the public acknowledgement of her motives and learnt the truth behind her intentions, he undergoes a change of heart. V. Veṅkaṭācalam, a reputed researcher on Bhāsa's drama, has presented the matter as follows:

> This amazing revelation was a very pleasant surprise for Bharata. Kaikeyī was not only acquitted, but she was elevated to the seat of glory. She was lifted from the depths of hell to the heights of heaven by Bhāsa, as if by a miracle. This time Bharata fell at her feet and apologized for the unjust, cruel treatment he had inflicted on her. This was the greatest moment in the life of Bhāsa's Kaikeyī. She stood completely free before the eyes of the whole world and her own son. She felt overwhelmed with strong emotion. This is a thrilling story of the glorious victory of motherhood through deadly conflict. She hugged Bharata tightly and said in a trembling voice. "The mother who cannot forgive her son's atrocity is cruel." Bhāsa's Kaikeyī was an accurate mother among the nation of mothers. [Veṅkatācalam (Translated), 1995, pp. 80-81]

In *Pratimānāṭakam*, the playwright Bhasa has tried to explore the inner conflicts of a woman torn between maternal love and family duty. Kaikeyī was not only a woman but also a human, which made her not an exception to human desires, hopes, and aspirations. As a mother it is quite possible Kaikeyī had an innate weakness and bias for her own son. Thus, her role as a mother and her maternal instincts became embroiled in the turmoil of politics. So naturally, she felt an innate weakness towards her son. As a mother, this weakness was not to be blamed. Maternal love for a son is eternal. While Kaikeyī was a successful mother, the whirlwind of monarchy in the turmoil of society and family, and above all in the question of justice, her filial piety (affection for her son) faced a great question. What role should a woman play as a mother in this dilemma? What does society and family expect from a woman in such a critical situation? In the play we see that Bhasa attempts to justify Kaikeyī's actions.

As in the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki, the emancipation of such a passive or powerless woman in *Pratimānāṭakam* of Bhāsa was through compromise and surrender to patriarchy. Kaikeyī does not emerge as powerful or even admirable despite her noble intentions and goodness. Ultimately her aspirations are shown to be part of her unconditional loyalty and surrender to the husband. She is presented as accepting of the patriarchal society with equal affection towards the husband's other wives and stepsons in the polygamous society. She also works towards gaining public approval and ensuring that justice, principle, and balance of punishment were all directly or indirectly realized. Keeping these in mind, Kaikeyī was a successful mother, bride, and an admirable princess to everyone in the society and family.

Vālmīki of *Rāmāyaṇa* or Bhāsa of *Pratimānāṭakam* were the representatives of the same society, with only the difference in name and time. Consequently, Kaikeyī does not emerge as a heroic figure in spite of the sympathetic portrayal. Therefore, in such a patriarchal society a tactical agreement was made to suppress the hopes and aspirations of only one woman by keeping the state, society, religion, and policy in favor and putting the helpless woman in a retrograde position. Kaikeyī's son does not appreciate her efforts and condemns her actions. Kaikeyī's desires were further deprived by the statehood, her son did not accept the kingly rule and ruled by placing shoes on the throne to express respect for Rāma and protect his dignity. Moreover, neither writer gave Kaikeyī the position of royal mother.

Sumitrā

Sumitrā was another woman of traditional Indian aristocracy. She also accepted the custom of polygamy prevalent in the society and accepted King Daśaratha as her husband. She was the mother of Lakṣmaṇa and Śatrughna, but also loved by stepsons Rāma and Bharata. As a queen, Sumitrā was greatly devoted to her husband and was also liked by the other wives of her husband. She played the befitting role of a wife by comforting, reassuring, and caring for the mourning King in the face of his calamity. She did not misbehave with Queen Kaikeyī even in the face of a family catastrophe caused by Kaikeyī herself. In addition, she did not support Bharata's mistreatment of his mother; rather she instructed Bharata to treat his mother with honour and fairness and to give her maternal status. She harboured absolute affection for Kauśalyā, who was the other wife of her husband and was an empathizer of her happiness and sorrow. She stood by her side in all the family endeavors. Thus, we can see that Sumitrā embodied in the *Rāmāyaṇa* by Vālmīki and the Sumitrā embodied in the *Pratimānāṭakam* were the same. Like the character portrayed in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Sumitrā was a royal queen and majestic woman who was sympathetic and sensitive to the other queens. She was generous as she showered a similar affection on her own sons and stepsons. For these reasons, Sumitrā was an ideal representative of the upper caste elite of the society of that time.

Queen Sumitrā unlike Queen Kaikeyī had no direct role in the rise and fall of the monarchy. As a mother, she played a pivotal role in maintaining family peace and aiding Kauśalyā. She did not discriminate between the love and affection of the children. In addition, she did not hesitate to send her son Lakṣmaṇa to accompany Rāma. Some aspects of the above character of Sumitrā are highlighted from some dialogues of the *Pratimānāṭakam*:

> Kauśalyā: Mahārāa! Vacchalakkhaṇa-(Ityardhaukte) (Mahārāja! Vatsa Lakṣaṇa-)
> Rājā: (Sahasotthāya) Kkāsaou kkāsau Lakṣaṇaḥ? Na dṛśyate. Bhoḥ kaṣṭam! (Devyau sasaṃbhramamutthāya rājānamavalambete)
> Kauśalyā: Mahārāa! Vacchalakkhaṇassa jaṇaṇī Sumittetti vattuṃ mae uvakkandaṃ (Mahārāja! Vatsa Lakṣaṇasya jananī Sumitreti vaktuṃ mayopakrāntam).
> Rājā: Ayi Sumitre!
> Tavaiva putraḥ satputro yena naktandivaṃ vane.
> Rāmo raghukulaśreṣṭhaśchāyayevānugamyate. (Śāstrī,1978, p. 336)

> That is, Kauśalyā – (His excellency) Mahāraja! Dear child, Lakṣmaṇa – (to pronounce half)
> King – (Suddenly, he got up) Where – where is that Lakśmaṇa? Didn't you see? Aḥ, what do I do now? (The queens got up in awe and grabbed the king.)
> Kauśalyā – Mahārāja! (his excellency) I wanted to say, 'This is Sumitrā, the mother of dear child Lakṣmaṇa.'
> King – Sumitrā! Your son is the worthy son who is following Raghukulaśreṣtha (the best one of the Raghufamily), Rāma, like a shadow in the forest day and night.

Furthermore,

> Sumantraḥ: Iyaṃ tatrabhavato Lakṣaṇasya jananī devī Sumitrā.
> Bharataḥ: Amba! Lakṣaṇenātisandhitohamabhivādaye.
> Sumitrā: Jāda! Jasobhāi hohi (Jāta! Yaśobhāgī bhava). (Śāstrī, 1978: 344)

> That is, Sumantrā – This is respected Sumitrā, who is the mother of respected
> Lakṣmaṇa.
> Bharata – Mother! Deprived by Lakṣmaṇa, I greet (Lakṣmaṇa is lucky, assuming the eldest).
> Sumitrā – Dear child! Be glorious.

In other words,

> Sumitrā: Paidīo paricāraā sajjaṇāa puttaassa me vijaaṃ vaddhajanti (Prakṛtayaḥ paricārikāḥ sajjanāśca putrakasya me vijayaṃ vardhayanti). (Nepathye)

> Bho bho janasthānanivāsinastapasvinaḥ. Śṛṇvantu Śṛṇvantu bhavantaḥ.
> Hatvā ripuprabhavamapratimaṃ tamaughaṃ
> Sūryondhakāramiva śouryamayairmayukhaiḥ,
> Sītāmavāpya sakalāśubhavarjanīyāṃ
> Rāmo mahīṃ jayati sarvajanābhirāmaḥ. (Śāstrī, 1978, p.367)
>
> That is, Sumitrā – The tenants, servants, and gentlemen are announcing the victory of my son.
> (Behind the scenes) Janasthānavāsī ascetic people! You listen, such as the sun destroys the darkness with a ray, like that, by bravely destroying the great crisis created by the enemy and rescuing good luck Sītā, the beautiful Rāma conquered the world.

The above quotes show that Sumitrā did not hesitate to send her own son Lakṣmaṇa, to the forest to take care of her stepson Rāma. She also felt the victory of her stepson Rāma as a victory for her own son and blessed her stepson Bharata from the bottom of her heart. Through all this, her generous motherhood is reflected.

Like Kauśalyā and Kaikeyī in traditional polygamy, Sumitrā was yet another woman who, just like them, accepted the societal norms and King Daśaratha as her husband. In a patriarchal society, women are faithful to their husbands, loyal, loving, and encourage a peaceful coexistence amongst everyone. Sumitrā possessed these qualities and again was by no means exceptional. In a patriarchal society, it was customary for men to ascend the throne by heredity or inheritance. Therefore, after the death of King Daśaratha, it was well known that none of his wives would be seen ascending the throne. Only the king's sons or men, even if he was just mere minors, would sit on the throne. This was the result of being part of a patriarchal society.

Women of the Working Class

Avadātikā, Vijayā, Nandinikā, Ceṭī, Pratihārī, Tāpasī

Although the *Pratimānāṭakam* of Bhāsa was originally based on the *Rāmāyaṇa*, in order to present a holistic drama, Bhāsa created several characters outside of the characters of *Rāmāyaṇa* with his poetic imagination. Among these characters, a few notable women were: Avadātikā, Vijayā, and Nandinikā. Furthermore, he also mentioned three more characters, namely, Ceṭī (female servant) and Pratihārī (gatekeeper), named Vijayā and Tāpasī. These new characters are maids and assistants to the royal women such as Avadātikā , Sītā's assistant, and Vijayā and Nandinikā, Kaikeyī's maids. Other females include Ceṭī a maid, Pratihārī the gatekeeper of the palace, and a female devotee in the hermitage who was the caretaker of Sītā in the forest. It is pertinent to note that there are two female characters named Vijayā in the play. One was a maid; the other was Pratihārī (gatekeeper). These characters in the *Pratimānāṭakam* were completely novel and imaginary creations of Bhāsa.

Bhāsa's *Pratimānāṭakam* depicts the segregation of society back then into communities and castes. Just as there were people of higher and elite communities in the upper-class society, there were also people of lower and working class for their care and attention. This classification applied equally to women, not just men. Although women of this level worked as maids, they developed friendships with the royal women of the palace. For example, Avadātikā, the attendant of Princess Sītā, shared the joys and sorrows of the besieged women of the palace. Although the women of this level were not directly involved in the functioning of the palace, they are seen to be a part of the complex social structure of the palace. Moreover, a sense of principle and morality was equally present among these working women. So, we see that Vijayā and Nandinikā, despite being maids, do not look favorably on Rāmacandra's deprivation of the throne. As a result of this, they also termed the family chaos as 'destruction of the people of the country,' which caused suffering in the lives of the people, and they regarded this as the sin of their guardian. Not only that, but the unjust feeling also that awakened in the mind of Avadātikā due to the invisibility of the shell was clearly manifested in the following dialogue of Avadātikā in *Pratimānāṭakam*:

> Avadātikā: Aho accāhidaṃ. Parihāseṇa vi imaṃ vakkalaṃ uvaṇaantīe mama ettiaṃ bhaaṃ āsī, kiṃ puṇa lobheṇa paradhaṇaṃ harantassa. (Aho atyāhitam. Parihāsenāpīmaṃ valkalamupanayantyā mamaitāvad bhayamāsīt, kiṃ punarlobhena paradhanaṃ haratah). (Śāstrī, 1978, p. 327)
>
> That is, Avadātikā – What a disaster! I am also afraid of bringing the tree barks of others in ridicule. I wonder what happened to them when they fell into greed and stole the others' treasure.

Here, the honest and noble character of Sītā's assistant Avadātikā is reflected. That is why, even though she hides her bark garment in a humorous way, she is afraid of being accused of being a thief and exhibits the characteristics of a real thief.

One of the bold steps of the dramatist Bhāsa was to cast a woman as a gatekeeper. A normal phenomenon in the olden society was to hire men in the role of gatekeepers. But Bhāsa shows women in this profession and he also gives them some agency by employing as trustworthy channels of news. In light of the above discussion, we can say that in a hierarchical society, Bhāsa did not underestimate the importance of women in the working profession; rather, he placed a high regard for their minds, thoughts, intellect, and morality. Not only that, Bhāsa also emphasized the concern of the working class with respect to the rise and fall of the state.

Naṭī

A notable feature of Sanskrit drama was that he part of prastāvanā or sthāpanā, the Sūtradhāra who introduced the drama-story in the context of talking to the Naṭī or

her collaborator and hinting at the dramatic actor-actress to enter the stage. This was a strategy to introduce the plot and to introduce actors and actresses on the stage. Thus, Naṭī was a vital character in Sanskrit dramatic texts. However, this character was not a part of the story or plot; in the Prastāvanā, that means sthāpanā part, Naṭī started the drama by having a conversation with Sūtradhāra.

In *Pratimānāṭakam,* Naṭī was the wife of Sūtradhāra and the assistant director of the drama. This character was also Bhasa's own creation. Bhāsa presented Naṭī's character in this *Pratimānāṭakam* as per the rules in Prastāvanā, that means sthāpanā with Sūtradhāra. In this drama, Sūtradhāra asked Naṭī to perform a song with the support of a soft, beautiful, pleasant autumn. Naṭī agreed and started singing. At this moment, Sūtradhāra compared the speed of the movement of Pratihārī of the palace with the speed of the white ducks roaming the riverbank like the cashew flowers blooming in autumn. Then both Sūtradhāra and Naṭī left, and the drama began with the entry of Pratihārī in the act. In addition to social and family fire, the dramatist had portrayed his aesthetic facet in the role of the Naṭī character. One of the features of human life that was not only materially controlled but also aesthetically pleasing was expressed through the character of Naṭī.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that in the history of Sanskrit drama, the *Pratimānāṭakam* was a successful drama with many aspects. Although the play was based on the story of the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*, the playwright's imagination transformed the story through new additions and deviations. One major change was the presentation of female characters which I have tried to highlight by focusing on their family, social, political, and cultural status and position. The examination indicates that the position of women in the society of the time was not at the desired level. Analysis of the female characters in Bhāsa's *Pratimānāṭakam* women of the aristocratic class enjoyed a comparatively better position. However, in terms of social standing, both aristocratic and working-class women were essentially on an equal footing. Neither group was entirely free from male dominance; rather, in certain circumstances, women from both classes fell victim to male oppression.

The opportunities for aristocratic women to engage in social activities beyond their familial roles often arose due to rare and exceptional circumstances. Such occurrences, though infrequent, cannot be dismissed as insignificant. Even in the twenty-first century, an era of unprecedented scientific and technological achievements and notable progress in our social and political life, the overall condition and status of women remain largely unchanged. The minor improvements that have emerged are neither at the desired level nor as promising as one might hope.

In a patriarchal social system, genuine change in the condition and position of women is unlikely without a fundamental shift in men's attitudes toward them. We expect that these attitudes will change promptly. With this hope, I have endeavored to present a detailed account of the condition and status of women in Bhāsa's play *Pratimānāṭakam*. Just as society changes over time, so do human thoughts and perceptions. It is through this process of change that human civilization has advanced and evolved into its present state. In today's progressive society, individuals should be regarded simply as human beings, without judgment based on gender. Primarily, a human is a human being. Just as men have their hopes, aspirations, preferences, and individuality, women, too, naturally possess the same desires, ambitions, and personal identity. Therefore, a woman is not merely defined by her gender; she is, like a man, a dignified and noble human being. Once this awareness takes root, women will attain equal rights with men, gender discrimination will disappear, and a stable, well-ordered social system will be established.

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