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TRAGIC HEROINES
ON ANCIENT
AND MODERN STAGE



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INNOCENT VICTIM OR SCHEMING SEDUCTRESS?
EURIPIDES' PHAEDRA (*HIPPOLYTUS*)
AND KALIDAS'S URVASHI (*VIKRAMORVASIYAM*):
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TWO TRAGIC HEROINES

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In this presentation, in the time permitted, I want to try and highlight some similarities of Hindu/sophistic thought using stereotypes and imagery from both Greek and Indian mythology. Portrayals of images: in more contemporary art of Phaedra and Urvashi depict them as listless, forlorn, loosely adorned, loosely attired, untied hair etc, matching the language of the original texts.

Urvashi is often portrayed with her lover, Pururavas- she having crossed the boundary from celestial to human being, from purity and chastity to its antithetical state of loss of chastity.

Here, I attempt to use philosophical models from an inherent tradition of Sanskrit thought to inform an interpretation of the Phaedra character from another angle, given that her position and actions represent a familiar model in Sanskrit literature (as an aside, the character of Hippolytus' devotion and worship of one particular goddess conforms with the Hindu Bhramanical tradition represented by his asceticism and vegetarianism. But that is another matter and the subject of another comparative study).

The concepts of **chastity** and **seduction** are considered in terms of an example of the kind of polarities presented under the so-called ‘Binary Opposition’ of Apollonian and Dionysian dynamics, as part of Aristotelian *Metaphysics* and the Pythagorean *Table of Opposites*, later also propounded by Nietzsche.

Drawing from *Hippolytus*, Phaedra’s role as tragic heroine can be argued in terms of Hippolytus, if seen as an incarnation of chastity and Phaedra’s personification as seductress, as part of such Opposition, as well as also being part of a wider dialectical process of thesis, antithesis and, ultimately, synthesis, which ultimately arrives at a point of resolution, but only to be challenged again as part of a cyclic dance of creation, destruction and re-creation.

This philosophy sits well with Ancient Hindu/Sanskritic philosophy of *advaita*, as exemplified in Urvashi, the character from Kalidasa who shares a communality with Phaedra, but unlike Phaedra, this same character is herself eventually transformed – from chaste virgin to seductress and then to a new status quo in which she and the characters in the play are enlightened by dint of her experiences and life’s journey. It would be interesting to speculate on the possibilities of outcomes if Phaedra did not die - how then would such resolution be found. But that dilemma is for another time and place, perhaps.

Hippolytus, although a “complex, multi-layered, and at times unfathomable” play, nonetheless can be

viewed as exemplifying the ‘Binary Opposition’ thought as part of its Sophistic ‘message’. Aphrodite, goddess of sex vs Artemis, goddess of chastity; sexual vs chaste; ‘polar notions of sexual aggression vs repudiation of sexuality’; too much chastity vs too much promiscuity (this duality could also be seen in terms of Euripides’ decision to write two versions on the theme of Hippolytus: *Hippolytus Kaluptomenos* (*Hippolytus Veiled or Hippolytus hiding himself in shame as Phaedra proposes to him on-stage*) and the extant full version that we have today, I would suggest could also be seen as governed by this greater dynamic: the latter version being a ‘chaste’ version of the former, more sexually-daring version, one might say).

Like Phaedra, an analysis of Urvashi shows a highly complex, ambiguous character: mythological figures are often used hermeneutically in the works of Kalidasa. As a woman, she is neither wife, mother, nor daughter. She is too human a woman to be a nymph and either is she completely human. Her relationship with her lover, Pururavas, is bipolar at different times in the play, their relationship is almost electrically charged – a deep mutual attraction, suspicion, infidelity. This creates a dynamic which questions the nature of love: eternal love or passing sexual attraction. It serves, as an overall purpose, to illustrate the constant, changing nature of life, referred to by Nietzsche as that dialectic process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis that can never rest in resolution but be locked in a continuum of ‘light

footed opposition' which in itself is the resolution, encapsulating the Hindu philosophy that *change* itself is the only constant.

Etymologically-speaking, confusion of the terms 'chastity' and 'celibacy' has long existed. 'Chastity' — deriving from the Latin *castitas*, meaning 'cleanliness' or 'purity' — did not, under either philosophical system, necessarily mean the renunciation of all sexual relations, but rather the temperate sexual behaviour as legitimate conjugal rights, for the purpose of procreation, or the sexual continence of the unmarried. One Greek word-equivalent for chastity, *sophrosyne*, means moderation, which in the ancient Greek world was a main philosophical virtue. This entailed proper self-mastery for men, and the virtue appropriate to a devoted and child-bearing (or potentially child-bearing) wife. It did not necessarily mean the avoidance of sex altogether. Hinduism's view on premarital sex is rooted in its concept of the stages of life. The first of these stages, known as *brahmacharya*, roughly translates as chastity.

In conclusion, I would summarise by drawing together the concept of 'duality as polarity' as being the necessary resolution of binary opposition: one cannot exist without the other. Specific characters in each of the works, by displaying a personification of such polarity, display each component of the binary opposition.

The following are some major components of the binary opposition found in *Hippolytus* (the majority of which also occur in *Vikramorvasiyam*):

1. man vs woman
2. lust vs rejection
3. virginity vs marriage
4. purity (Phaedra: of food; Hippolytus: of body)
vs pollution
5. resistance vs surrender
6. Cretan (outsider, lustful, mysterious) vs
Trozen
7. quasi-incestuous relationship between step-mother
and step child.
8. speech & silence opposition, on various levels:
 - social
 - sexual
 - revelation vs concealment
 - interior scenes vs exterior
9. Phaedra dying at the beginning, Hippolytus at
the end
10. a play about 'apparent duality': 2 women, 2
men, and 2 goddesses
11. *semnos* (being virtuous) and *sôphronein*
(chastity) meaning different things to different
characters.

Like *Vikramorvasiyam*, *Hippolytus* is complex play – nothing is what it seems. The ascetic ideal reflects a mode of thinking dividing the world into

Binary Oppositions of good/bad; male/female; being/becoming; reason/emotion; spirit/body; it then validates the poles of opposition and negates each other. French structural anthropologist Levi-Strauss argued that Binary Oppositions are at the heart of people's attempts to come to terms with reality.

The title of this conference, "Tragic heroines" could itself be interpreted in terms of this binary formulaic application: in the term 'heroine', we require the corollary of 'hero', 'villain' or 'other protagonist' against whom the heroine can be compared and contrasted. 'The tragic' (or consequences of the tragedy) requires some form of resolution: in *Hippolytus*, this could, in Sanskritic philosophy, be interpreted as the *enlightenment* of Theseus after the deaths of his wife and son. In *Vikramorvasiyam*, that *enlightenment* comes as the eventual choices that Urvashi and Pururavas make to remain on earth or return to heaven. In simplistic terms, both sets of characters are, under the terms of Greek tragedy, ultimately ruled by the play of gods in which they are all mere pawns.

Such an interpretation finds accord with the philosophy of Nietzsche who sought to encompass all opposites – all the clashing and conflict of life's multivalent urges - and to bring them together into an organic greater whole. This is not a harmony of resolving all tensions, but rather a celebration of dynamic tension itself, a celebration of the rhythm

and pulse of life that creates and destroys and creates again, in joy and sorrow, in a spirit of endless play.

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