



Courtesan to Celibate: A Psychosocial Perspective on Amrapali and Kamala

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Abstract

Despite the work undertaken by humanities, the liberal arts and activism – social, political and spiritual – in multiple issues concerning sex work and women’s liberation, there is a considerable dearth of mainstream scholarship dealing with the process of spiritual awakening of ancient Indian courtesans, especially in relation to Buddhism. Through an exploration of the narratives of two figures – the historical Amrapali of Vaishali and the fictional character Kamala from Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha* (1922) – from the standpoint of feminism and performance theory as detailed by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, this research endeavours to venture into a disconcertingly uncharted territory within Indology, i.e., the necessity for supposed redemption of the aforementioned women by following into the footsteps of a male God-like personage, which can be interpreted as cleansing the female body of literal and salvaging the spirit from figurative impurities. Rather than a simplistic, biased outlook that often tends to be reductive – in that it casts erstwhile Indian courtesans and prostitutes into fixed moulds or extreme unchanging categories – this indagation hopes to advance a layered understanding of the situations surrounding Amrapali and Kamala, and their ultimate repudiation of the sensual, utilizing Butler’s theorizations of the body and the soul.

Keywords: Courtesan, sexuality, autonomy, body, corporeality, agency, performativity, spiritual awakening

Introduction

The prevalence of the culture of courtesanship in India since civilizations of antiquity demands repeated study of the nuanced factors and forces that drive women to be a part of this phenomenon, Amrapali and Kamala being emblematic of the same. They share more than just the nature of their profession despite the disparate eras of their construction and representation, i.e., approximately two and a half millennia ago and twentieth century respectively. Their stories illustrate how women endowed with external beauty were arguably relegated to the position of a *nagarvadhu* or a royal courtesan in the guise of pedestalizing them, an apparently conventional practice during ancient India. The need to ‘purify’ or its inevitability as a consequence of their respective encounters – with Lord Buddha as far as Amrapali’s tale goes and with Siddhartha in Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha* – seems to be a recurrent trope in both the narratives. Additionally, in the ancient Sanskrit play *Mrichchhakatika* by Sudraka, the female protagonist Vasantasena is a courtesan who, after her strangling, is revived and befriended by a Buddhist monk who nurses her back to health towards the conclusion. The statement

of Gautama Buddha in the *Bahudhātuka-sutta* of the Majjhima Niyaka in the Pali Canon propounds that it is impossible that a woman should be "the perfectly rightfully

Enlightened One", "the Universal Monarch", "the King of Gods", "the King of Death" or "Brahmaa". Yet, ironically enough, he seems to be the ‘saviour’ of these women whose profession was premised upon seduction and carnal pleasure.

This research will commence by attempting to adequately and briefly define the terms and labels pertaining to courtesans (past and contemporary) – that have been repeatedly deployed throughout the analysis – to highlight the difference in their origin as well as the implications of their current use. Secondly, by presenting an outline of the male and female characters in *The Legend of Amrapali* and *Siddhartha*, it will seek to answer whether the use of corporeality to gain agency – sexual and spiritual – and retain control over one’s choice of companions shows the political and strategic defiance of female oppression or is it just another manifestation of the patriarchal exploitation which forces a woman to be in the position of, more or less, today’s sex worker in the first place. Additionally, it will study the figure of Amrapali and the character of Kamala in light of the women’s movement – psychosocial as well as spiritual – with respect to feminism in the literature of Indian courtesan culture.

The paper will borrow the theoretical framework from Judith Butler’s groundbreaking text *Gender Trouble* which

examines gender and performativity from a psychosocial perspective, with the last section of the third and final chapter “Subversive Bodily Acts” titled “Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions” being particularly relevant for the scope of this scrutiny.

Literature Review

Given the significance of the affiliation between Buddhist monks and Indian courtesans, the connection has attracted surprisingly little scholarly attention, specifically with reference to gender, sexuality and power. With rare exceptions, the Indian academic community’s involvement in dialogues delineating the representation of and the roles assigned to Amrapali and Kamala continues to be marginal, despite the contribution of the former to Vaishali’s glory as well as the Bhikkuni Sangha (group of higher ordained women) and Hesse’s popularity as a writer in the latter’s case.

Amrapali’s absence from the written word of Indian non-scriptural literature for two thousand years, after her disappearance into the ascetic life, came to halt in the 1948 Hindi novel *Vaishali ki Nagarvadhu* by Acharya Chaturseen. Here, she is modelled not as the self-reliant revered courtesan but a woman who incessantly laments the injustice perpetrated by the clansmen of Vaishali in making her a *nagarvadhu* – an explicit indication of the influence of nineteenth century Indian and Victorian notions of morality and sexuality on the author.

In *Heroines* (2017) – where eight female mytho-historical characters rise to reclaim their rightful place in history and reconceive heroism – Ira Mukhoty takes an alternate approach to that of Chaturseen in dealing with Amrapali (called Ambapali in the book). She asserts that Ambapali’s twentieth century avatar ought to be agential as she “invented and reinvented herself twice in her life... [using] her intelligence and talent to shape an incandescent destiny far removed from the vulnerable and uncertain beginnings she had” (Mukhoty 55).

Furthermore, recent writing on the same is “A Tryst with Amrapali” (2019) by Amlan Home Chowdhury. It is an account of Chowdhury’s visit to Vaishali – Aryavarta’s supposed first democratic republic – and its fall following the terrible war with the Magadhan monarchy,

which is to date partly attributed to Amrapali.

Speaking on the concept of courtesans more broadly, Devdutt Pattanaik’s “Remembering the Contribution of Courtesans” (2019) has been summarized by the author himself by arguing how “Rich and single women well versed in fine arts held a position in ancient times, but in modern literature, they have been described as

prostitutes.” He maintains that the idea of the independent woman as someone to be feared has continued in the present too.

“The Courtesan and the Birth of Ars Erotica in the Kāmasūtra : A History of Erotics in the Wake of Foucault” (2014) by Sanjay K. Gautam investigates the role played by the courtesan in the genesis of the ancient Sanskrit treatise on pleasure, *Kamasutra*, in critical engagement with the theory of *ars erotica* as proposed by Michel Foucault. Gautam posits the courtesan as a historical anchor of the crucial affinity between erotics and the discourse and practice of the theatre of pleasure, the issue of identity being situated at the core of this affinity.

Additionally, the two essays – “Trading Sex for Karma in Thailand: An Analysis of the Reciprocal Relationship Between Buddhist Monastics and Thai Prostitutes” by Amy Proskow and “Buddhism and its relation to women and prostitution in Thai society” by Sandra Avila – examine how Buddhism affects the status of Thai women. Avila deliberates on Buddhism not directly addressing the sex trade industry concerns, denying them access to education and other fundamental rights as well as privileges and “systematically failing to provide the same religious outlets for women that men are allowed” (v). Proskow elucidates on the existence of “a sort of reciprocal relationship between Buddhist monks and Thai prostitutes...in that the monks seem to condone the practice of prostitution, though it is viewed...“immoral”...when they accept prostitutes' gifts with no mind toward encouraging them to choose an alternative

profession” (Proskow 2). She states that the prostitutes are motivated to make such donations in order to improve their karma. Arguably, such inspections and data are almost negligible or inaccessible within the Indian context, including the public health sector.

Contextualizing the Terms

For an enhanced historical and socio-politico-cultural understanding of the motif at hand, it is essential to comprehensibly distinguish between the use of terminology around 500BC and the contemporary era. Therefore, it becomes indispensable to delve deeper into the meanings of as well as the milieu in which the terms *nagarvadhu*, ‘devadasi’, ‘ganika’, ‘*rajanartiki*’, ‘courtesan’ and ‘sex worker’ were coined in, the first three being in circulation simultaneously.

Beginning chronologically, *nagarvadhu* – being noteworthy with respect to Amrapali – can be literally translated as ‘bride of the city’ and was supposedly not an uncommon position for an exceptionally beautiful young woman to be assigned within an Indian kingdom two thousand and five hundred years ago. The fundamental thinking behind this oppressive conventional practice – put in place by and for the gratification of tyrannical ruling men who established it as a law that can be implemented at their whim – could have probably been intolerance at seeing the woman belonging to a sole man. The legal sanction or backing provided an extremely efficient, tactical and well-planned execution of oppression as can be evidenced by the fact that Manudeva, the Licchavi dynasty monarch of the Vajji Confederacy of which Vaishali was the capital, implements it with immediate effect through the help of the assembly vote in the parliament of Vajji. He was fuelled by anger because Amrapali’s father, Somdutt refuses his request to marry his daughter to the king who was entranced by her ethereal form.

In addition to being the courtesan, Amrapali adopted the part of the performer or a *rajanartiki*, a typical royal court dancer. Subhadra Mitra Channa articulates in *Gender in SouthAsia: Social Imagination and Constructed Realities* that her talent, brilliance and beauty attracted so many men that the glory of Vaishali during the stated period is often attributed to

Amrapali's fame. The price to see her art form was fifty Karshapanas (Indian coins current during the sixth century BCE) per night, and her treasury grew much larger than the treasuries of some kings. The classical dance tradition as well was integrally linked to that of the Devadasi (literally translated as “servant of God”) or “the sacred prostitute” in South Indian temple towns and prominent sites of worship in Hinduism. Thus, one can point out the presence of dualism as manifested in the performing female body or the dualistic nature of their performativity – on one hand, dancing for the deity as the devotee with a *bhakti* bhava, while on the other, putting on a show for consumption by the male gaze in the royal court.

For the duration that she was a *nagarvadhu*, Amrapali was labelled and addressed derogatorily as a ‘ganika’ or a “low or loose woman” by a few of the noble princes of Vaishali. The modern-day equivalent of a ganika can be called a prostitute. Juxtaposing ‘ganika’ with ‘courtesan’, the latter’s dictionary definition as broadly used in modern times is

“a euphemism for a prostitute, particularly one with wealthy, powerful, or influential clients.” Historically, the term referred to a ‘courtier’, one who attended the court of a monarch or of another with similar status. Hence, it can be deduced that within the status quo, the *nagarvadhu* was considered to be on a much higher level in the hierarchy than an ordinary courtesan or a *ganika*.

Examining the terminology of ‘sex worker’, it was coined in 1978 by sex worker activist Carol Leigh and became popularized after the publication of the anthology, *Sex Work: Writings By Women In The Sex Industry* in 1987. The use of ‘sex worker’ is – firstly, deemed more neutral and liberating than “prostitute” as it is able to avoid the taboo and discrimination that are attached to the latter; secondly, inclusive as it allows greater representation of members of the sex industry. Furthermore, it ensures individuality and emphasizes that the person and

their personality precedes as well as are separate from their chosen profession.

Autonomy of Characters within Patriarchy

Comparing the male and female characters in both the texts, i.e., *The Legend of Amrapali: An Enchanting Saga Buried within the Sands of Time* by Anurag Anand and *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse is necessary in order to discern certain variations and similarities between the two as well as to underscore the contrast in limitations within which both the sexes function.

According to Anand's narrative, Amrapali is adopted by Somdutt and his wife Saudamini – a childless couple – as a blessing. Somdutt is portrayed as a mature, affectionate family man and a doting father who constantly encourages his daughter to be educated in a variety of disciplines and procures the best available resources for fulfilling the same, thus deviating from the norm of the age in his thought and action. Pushpakumar is painted along similar lines of temperament and ideology. He was one of the two close childhood friends of Amrapali and later becomes her intended when they declare their love for each other.

In stark divergence to the two men discussed above is the sovereign Manudeva who had insisted upon marrying Amrapali when he first saw her and had asked Somdutt for her hand but the father denied, stating that she is too young to wed. However, Manudeva sees through his unwillingness and asks his subordinates to conduct an inquiry to find out the true reason. On the day of the nuptials of Amrapali and Pushpa, Manudeva apprehends, imprisons and murders the groom in cold blood on false charges of treason and conveniently invokes the law of *nagarvadhu* as well:

Figuratively, the *Nagarvadhu* was to be the most beautiful woman in the entire kingdom...A candidate successfully elected by the Vajji assembly as the *Nagarvadhu* would have access to all perks available to the members of the council – security, stature and a handsome remuneration from the royal treasury. In turn, she would be

expected to entertain members from higher echelons of the society and other prominent guests of the crown – a licensed blasphemy of sorts. (Anand 79)

The entire incident is a vivid testament to abuse and brutal authority dictating the lives of hapless men and women by absolute stripping off of their independence to the extent of dehumanization.

In the case of Hesse's protagonist Siddhartha, after approximately half a decade of having embarked on a soul-searching quest and refusing to accept Gautam Buddha as his guru, he arrives on Kamala's doorstep, having been enamoured by her appearance and expresses "...Kamala, I would like to ask you to be my friend and teacher, for I know nothing yet of that art which you have mastered in the highest degree" (Hesse 62). Initially dismissed by her as a vagabond who can offer her nothing in return for her favours, he amasses wealth to please her and be capable of her company. Upon being asked if she is frightful of him, Kamala wittily retorts "'Why ever should I be afraid of a Samana, a stupid Samana from the forest, who is coming from the jackals and doesn't even know yet what women are?'" (Hesse 63). Her tone and language in their first couple of encounters indicates that it is she who is more powerful in the relationship for now when she agrees to become his sexual instructor – a dimension of life he was previously ignorant about.

However, the power equation changes once she starts falling for him romantically and recognizes that he will be unable to fulfill her psycho-spiritual and emotional needs: "When she was told that Siddhartha had disappeared, she was not astonished. Did she not always expect it? Was he not a Samana, a man who was at nowhere, a pilgrim...From this day on, she received no more visitors and kept her house locked. But after some time, she became aware that she was pregnant..." (Hesse 93). Siddhartha abandons his responsibility and fatherly duties as he

leaves without knowing he has impregnated her. Before deserting Kamala, he likens lust to death. “...Siddhartha...had lain by her side...and next to the corners of her mouth he had...read a fearful inscription, an inscription of small lines, of slight grooves...reminiscent of autumn and old age...With a sigh, he had bid his farewell to her, the soul full of reluctance, and...concealed anxiety” (Hesse 89).

The final act of their intercourse resulting in conception can be interpreted as pointing towards Siddhartha being permanently inscribed on (the flesh) as well as inside the body of Kamala. Butler ponders upon the cultural, political, biological and epistemic bearings of such an inscription on the female body and vice versa:

...is it a political shaping that takes the very morphology and boundary of the sexed body as the ground, surface, or site of cultural inscription? What circumscribes that site as “the female body”? Is “the body” or “the sexed body” the firm foundation on which gender and systems of compulsory sexuality operate? Or is “the body” itself shaped by political forces with strategic interests in keeping that body bounded and constituted by the markers of sex? (164)

Thus, Kamala’s state solidifies that while commenting on autonomy and liberation as directly influenced by patriarchy, the lived experience of reality – constituting the lack of safety and the stigma associated with a non-widowed single mother – cannot be neglected, despite the presence of numerous material comforts.

Agency – What, Who and How Much?

Arguably, one of the most complicated motifs regarding the said subject matter is that of agency, predicated on the respective journeys of Amrapali and Kamala. The primary questions such as how does one define agency and does it already exist in the case of the courtesans underdiscussion? Furthermore, if it exists, to what extent is it actually exercised? These will ever hardly be answered in an unequivocal manner, especially in a psychosocial study which by nature is personal and subjective. Nevertheless, the status of Amrapali and Kamala was indeed the product of male hegemony. Not having any other choice apart from marriage or being a *nagarvadhu* is the real robbery of agency. Not being allowed to marry one's beloved in the case of Amrapali and Kamala having stopped entertaining visitors after Siddhartha comes to her can be read as proof of them having gone against the calling of their heart and having gradually adapted to their inevitable lifestyle, unlike the impression provided by Devdutt Pattanaik, i.e., their inclination towards and contentment with being a courtesan. Maria Frederika Malmstrom in "Gender, agency, and embodiment theories in relation to space" articulates that "the body is acted upon by others and by a conscious self, through the techniques and practices of learning to be a woman." Kamala eventually consoles herself about Siddhartha having chosen a life of absolute renunciation over matrimony.

Contrarily, their undertaking the path of an *arahant* to accomplish *nirvana* should not merely be seen in patriarchal terms as it is unfair to their autonomy of choice. Kamala indulges in wishful thinking and voices her desire "One day, perhaps soon, I'll also follow that Buddha. I'll give him my pleasure garden for a gift and take my refuge in his teachings" (Hesse 89).

Nonetheless, the fact that their narratives conclude with complete surrender to a male figure is striking as it brings to the fore an alarming absence of a leading female or the feminine presence in the space of collective spiritual consciousness. This showcases that women neither possessed rights over their bodies, nor the luxury to retire from their homes and domesticity by giving up the life to go on a 'journey to find oneself and the ultimate truth' like for example, Gautam Buddha or Hesse's protagonist Siddhartha.

It can be argued that perhaps agency can be asserted and exercised more as a courtesan if one possesses the freedom to choose one's sexual partners and rights over the body. When viewed positively as dignified and empowered, the two women confront their destiny, initially using their sexuality to gain riches and respect, while later relinquishing it in their quest for immortal life to break free from the corporeality they were unwillingly

subjected to – assuming for Kamala too since we are kept in the dark about the conditions that propelled her to become a courtesan – subjected to in the first place. Amrapali, Kamala and Vasantasena have been instrumental in blurring the rigid dichotomy between the body and the soul, a misconstrued binary opposition as Butler emphasizes:

The figure of the interior soul understood as “within” the body is signified through its inscription on the body...The soul is precisely what the body lacks; hence, the body presents itself as a signifying lack. That lack which is the body signifies the soul as that which cannot show. In this sense, then, the soul is a surface signification that contests and displaces the inner/outer distinction itself, a figure of interior psychic space inscribed on the body as a social signification that perpetually renounces itself as such. (172)

Therefore, the three have been exemplar in showcasing the journey from sexual to spiritual awakening, taking along and foregrounding the corporeal aspect of their being in each instance. In fact, it wouldn't be incorrect to state that they use knowledge of the material and the physical precisely to transcend these and achieve the “soul.”

Conclusion

Contemplating on the issues of freedom of choice, identity, gender, performance and sexual politics within the structure of courtesan culture, calls for the establishment of multiple contextual as well as textual complexities. The debates in the intellectual sphere concerning liberation and equality of a specific group or community cannot be conducted in isolation as they are intrinsically linked to and characterized by a plethora of aspects – legal, psychological, religious, socio-cultural and historical – and therefore require their cooperation too in taking any movement forward.

To accurately fathom the spatio-temporal realities of women like Amrapali and Kamala – who were not given an alternate possibility – from a nuanced standpoint, this dissertation anticipates that the relationship between Buddhism as well as other organized religions, antique cultures and sex workers in India becomes the area of increased interest and involvement within the academic circle. The legacy of Amrapali – one who took the unfortunate circumstances in her stride and made them lucrative – deserves to be celebrated. However, one can interrogate if the turning away of Amrapali and Kamala from the materialistic facets of the world was a natural transcendental progression or a reaction against their state of affairs since there was seemingly no other way out for them from the suffocating, domineering institutions and systems of subservience created as ramifications of the double-edged sword of autocratic patriarchies.

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