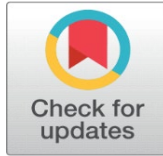


BEYOND THE BINARIES: THE 'OTHER WOMEN' OF THE NĀṬYA LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an honest attempt to bring the 'others' women to main stream history or 'Above History Line' through the study of nāṭya literature. Another purpose is to depart from the *veśyā/gaṇikā-kulavadhū/kulastrī* binaries and explore other women in terms of multiple categories. Nāṭya literature provides ample evidence to restore the history of urban marginalized women of all kinds, especially in the form of maids, slaves, stewardesses etc. This article seeks to highlight the importance of these women not only in the urban landscape but also in the pages of history. The lower folk represented in nāṭya literature, not only completes but complicate the picture of ancient Indian society. The other women represent who were not part of ruling class or propertied class or gift givers or chief courtesan but complete the narratives by being ascetics lady, queen's retinue, female attendants of queens, household maids, personal maids, wardens of the private pleasure gardens of the palace, nurses, slave girls, helpers, guards, natis and even poor friends of heroines etc.

Keywords: Nāṭya, Gaṇikās, Kulavadhū, Antahpura, Kulakanyā, Concubines, Parivrājikā

Nāṭya or *nāṭya* is one of the main but distinct genres of *kāvya*. Visible representations, performing aspects and even its language separate it from other forms of *kāvyas*. *Nāṭya* comprises rich repertoire of narratives ranging from royal to common people. *Nāṭya* literature provides confluence of high and low cultures. The lower folk represented in *nāṭya* literature, not only completes but complicate the picture of ancient Indian society. Though they are not leading characters but their strong presence neither could not be denied nor sidelined. The coming of these hidden 'others' may make things complex not only use of sources but also the re-writing of histories of caste, class, gender or even urban, and many more. These 'others' or what I called 'subalterns' of ancient India are still living 'Below History Line.' This paper is an honest attempt to bring these 'others' to main stream history or 'Above History Line.' Another purpose is to depart from the *veśyā/gaṇikā-kulavadhū/kulastrī* binary and explore other women in terms of multiple categories. The playwrights themselves refer to such categories as concubines, female ascetics/renunciants (*parivrājikās/bhikṣuṇī/bhikṣukī*), female slaves and servants, as well as people of the third gender.

Do women have only binary relationships with history in terms of either their presence or absence? My answer is very simple- there is history beyond these binaries. Visibility and invisibility of women always depended upon historical insights of the readers. In some ways then, these 'others' lost in the re-creation of conventional binaries, such as presence vs absence, men vs women, high vs low status, household vs private, *Gaṇikās* vs *Kulavadhūs*, etc. These others were remained unnoticed below history line. Democratization of history is not possible without their inclusion. These others represent to women who were not part of ruling class or propertied class or gift givers or chief courtesan but complete

the narratives by being ascetics lady, queen's retinue, female attendants of queens, household maids, personal maids, wardens of the private pleasure gardens of the palace, nurses, slave girls, helpers, guards, natis and even poor friends of heroines etc. Their experiences are equally important in the understanding of multilayered gender relations. To me women are playing the game of 'hide and seek' in historical reconstruction. It's momentous task to uncover those hidden women of history who either got ignored or marginalized or suppressed because of myopic visions in rewriting of history of women. These 'hidden' women could be brought to daylight of history by making through the fractured historical binaries. New vantage points are important to locate those fractures both where in historical accounts as well as in historiographies.

The 'other women' are still an overlooked aspect of gender history. Gender studies now has gone far beyond the dichotomy of femininity and masculinity. In the urban scenario, men, women as well as the third gender work in multi-layered social relations. It is also the aim of this article to highlight that accidentally or deliberately they are left out of history as well as history writing. In male written literature, women were given a lesser place. Although the creation of urban gender scenario was not possible without women, as a result they were given second class citizenship, but some women were so influential that the patriarchy was forced to give them place. Some Playwrights also break the patriarchal norms and goes beyond the dichotomy of *kulavadhū* and *gaṇikā* when they characterize their plays. Beyond the binary of *kulavadhū* and *gaṇikā*, playwrights also include *kulakanyā*, concubines, *parivrājikās*, maids, third gender and eunuchs as characters in their plays. Despite their strong presence in nāṭya literature, various types of women have not been able to make their place in the pages of history because they belonged to marginal or oppressed classes. Nāṭya literature provides ample evidence to restore the history of urban marginalized women of all kinds, especially in the form of maids, slaves, stewardesses etc. This article seeks to highlight the importance of these women not only in the urban landscape but also in the pages of history.

I

Plays such as the *Avimāraka*, *Mṛcchakaṭika*, *Mālavikāgnimitra*, *Svapnavāsavadatta*, *Pratijñāyauhandharāyaṇa*, *Priyadarśikā*, *Ratnāvalī*, *Karpūramañjarī*, and *Viddhaśālabañjikā* provide several references to the *antaḥpura* and its residents including several 'other women'. Despite their strong presence inside the *antaḥpura*, they could not make to the pages of history. This article is an attempt to make them visible. Besides wives, concubines, and daughters; the *antaḥpura* was also inhabited by various other women such as actresses, dancers, portresses, and different types of maids. Normative literature like *Nāṭyaśāstra* also talks about the presence of spectrum of women of the *antaḥpura* which include the chief queen (*mahādevī*), other queens (*devī*), other highborn wives (*svāminī*), ordinary wives (*sthāyinī*), concubines (*bhoginī*), crafts-women (*śilpakārīṇī*), actresses (*nāṭakīyā*), dancers (*nartakī*), maids in constant attendance (*anucārikā*), maids of special work (*paricārikā*), maids in constant movement (*sañcārikā*), maids for running errands (*preṣaṇa-cārikā*), *Mahattarīs* (matrons), *Pratihārīs* (ushers) and maidens (*kumārī*) and *Sthavirās* (old dames) and *Āyuktikās* (female overseers).

According to the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, crafts-women (*śilpakārīkā*), who are conversant with multiple arts and crafts (*nana-kalā-viśeṣajñā*, *nana-śilpa-vicakṣaṇā*) such as perfume making, paintings, etc., are to be employed in the royal *antaḥpura*. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* also prescribes their characters. They are also expected to be sweet in manners, clever, honest, pleasant-looking, and modest.ⁱ Actresses (*nāṭakīyā*) of the *antaḥpura* are expected to have knowledge of notes (*svara*), time-beat (*tāla*), and caesura (*gatī*), be associated with a master (*ācārya*) and be clever, skilled in acting (*nāṭya*), and capable of speaking according to the occasion.ⁱⁱ Women who are experts in the representation of passion (*helā*) and feeling (*bhāva*) and temperament (*sattva*), skilled in playing a musical instrument, conversant with sixty-four arts and crafts, clever, bold, free from indolence, inured to hard work, beauty and brilliance in appearance are to be employed as dancers (*nartakī*).ⁱⁱⁱ

Besides these *śilpakārīkās*, in the royal *antaḥpuras*, there were matrons (*mahattarī*), ushers (*pratihārī*), old dames (*vṛddhā*), and officials (*āyuktikā*). Matrons primarily dealt with royal affairs in various capacities. According to the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the *mahattarīs* were employed to sing hymns and perform auspicious ceremonies for the immunities of the entire *antaḥpura*.^{iv} In the Jaina tradition, the Vasudevahindi of Sanghadasa also shows the presence of mahattaris in the royal harem, along with other women. In Vasudevahindi, Sanghadasa gives a great description of the royal *antaḥpura* of king haricamda of Pedhalapura.

Old dames knew the manners of the departed king and the character of the old members of the *antaḥpura*. The *āyuktikās* were given the charge of stores, weapons, fruits, roots and grains, scents, ornaments, garlands, and clothes. They were supposed to examine the food and clothes of the king before he used them. They were expected to be clever.^v

Pratihārīs were most prolifically mentioned women officers at the royal place. *Pratihārīs* were one of the close and most trustworthy kings. As the post suggests, they were supposed to guard the kings and inmates of the *antaḥpura*. However, *pratihārīs* took care of the king's business related to the affairs of the state, such as treaties (*samadhī*) and war (*vigraha*). *Pratihārīs* was the only woman in the court who singlehandedly operated in male-dominated court affairs. Almost every play refers to the presence of *pratihārīs* in the royal household. They were deployed along with the kings and queens inside the *antaḥpura*. They were named Vijayā in the *Pratijñāyugandharāyaṇa* and *Svapnavāsavadatta*, Jayasenā in the *Mālavikāgnimitra*, Vasundharā in the *Ratnāvalī*, Yaśodharā in the *Priyadarśikā*, and Vijayā and Śoṇattrā in the *Mudrārākṣasa*. Names of *pratihārīs* suggest that they were brave, and henceforth, they were kept as guards. In the *Ratnāvalī*, Vasundhara walks with a bamboo staff (*vetra*).^{vi} A bamboo staff was the symbol of authority. The king's private compartment was not open to inferior officers who had no direct access to the king but the *pratihārīs*. Portresses were used to communicate or mediate between the queens, the ministers, and other inferior officials. The king spoke with officials via the portresses.

The *Nāṭya* literature uses terms to denote collective identity for the attendant or servant class. In collective terms, they were mostly called *parivāra* and *parijana* by the playwrights. The attendants of the queens and princesses called themselves *goṣṭhijana*, not *parijana*. For example, in *Avimāraka*, the members of the retinue of the queen or queen's daughter called themselves *goṣṭhijana*.^{vii} The heroine Malavikā, too, calls herself a member of *goṣṭhijana*.^{viii} Pusalkar argues that the members of *goṣṭhijana* were cultured, talented and possessed great conversational power.^{ix} Maids, attendants, or servants were collectively called *preṣyajana* for spreading rumours (*pravāda*).^x Attendants have to prepare or arrange the palace before the sunrise.^{xi} The lady-in-waiting is referred to as bringing flowers and toiletry for her princess in the *Avimāraka*.^{xii} Maidservants provided also an immediate alternative to companionship to their ladies. For example, in the *Avimāraka*, the princess asks her lady-in-waiting to suppress her sexual desires by embracing her. When the Nalinikā embraces the princess, the princess says, 'friend, your physical constitution is so cool and pleasing. My bodily heat vanishes now, as it were. Alas! I have made love with a maid of mine.'^{xiii} In her article titled '*Homosexuality in Ancient Indian Literature*', Shalini Shah provides a similar example from the *kathāsaritsāgara* involving a princess and her maid.^{xiv} Normative literature such as the *Nāṭyaśāstra* allows kings to make love with queen's maids. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* prescribes that out of respect for the queens and for fear of their favourite women, kings are to secretly make love to the queen's maids.^{xv} For example, in the *Mālavikāgnimitra*, the king makes love to Mālavikā, who was staying in the royal household in the guise of a maid. However, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* prohibits *sañcārikas* from intercourse.^{xvi}

II

Apart from the 'other women' present in the royal *antaḥpura*, many other types of women had a joint contribution in the formation of the gender landscape of the city, which included *Parivrājikās*, working women, naṭī, duti, maids, slaves, and courtesans. However, the contribution of these women in the formation of womanhood is yet to be included in history. Many women like *parivrājikā*, *saṃnyāsini*, *yoginī*, *bhikṣuṇī*, *Śākyabhikṣu*, *bhikṣukī*, etc. were publicly present in the city and forming distinct class of wandering female mendicants or renunciators. However, Brahmanical literature does not allow renunciation to Śūdras and women to become *saṃnyāsi* or *parivrājikās*.^{xvii} The social reality of *nāṭyas* was different. Ignoring Brahmanical dictate, many women from lower castes became *parivrājikās*. *Nāṭya* literature such as *Mālavikāgnimitra*, *Ubhayābhisārikā*, *Padmaprābhṛtaka*, *Mālatīmādhava*, *Mattavilāsa-Prahaasana*, *Kaumudī-mahotsva*, etc. gives frequent references of female mendicants. Even widows were allowed to become *parivrājikā*. *Arthaśāstra* lays down certain rules of renunciation. It required renouncement from temptation or pleasure, active life, all possessions, worldly ties, living by charity, never staying in one place for long, and maintaining inner and outer purity.^{xviii} Widows were allowed to become wandering nuns or *parivrājikā* or *Vṛṣala* (with their heads shaven). The *Arthaśāstra* recommends to recruits these intrepid widows turned *parivrājikā* as agents of the state. The *Arthaśāstra* says that they shall be treated with honour in the palaces so that they may go to the house of high officials freely.^{xix} On the question why did these women choose to renounce the world, Arvind Sharma argues that the domestic discord, conjugal disharmony, and sheer disgust with home life seem to have turned the thoughts of some women towards the life of a nun. After becoming nuns, they celebrated their emancipation from the domestic thralldom.^{xx} In the words of Arvind Sharma, 'the carrots of Buddhism seem to have been oftener the predominant factor leading to ordination than the sticks of circumstances.'^{xxi}

These *parivrājikās* were free to roam freely in the city and visit the royal palaces without any restriction. Many *parivrājikā* worked as relatives and right-chests of the queen. As holders of a moral religious position, they had a higher status than other public women. *Parivrājikā* was an important link between the private and public spaces of cities.

Parivrājikās would constantly wander from one house to another in search of alms. They did not hesitate to even go to the houses of prostitutes. For example, in *Ubhayābhisārikā*, a *parivrājikā* named Vilaskundini is roaming around in disguise when she encounters a *vita*.

After acquiring the status of *parivrājikā*, some of them returned to their world. They joined the royal household or any high household as a retinue of a queen, close confidant of a queen, or nurse of a royal daughter. As an upholder of moral authority, they were given space in the royal and high households. For example, Kāmandakī is a Buddhist ascetic (*Śākyabhikṣa*) in the *Mālatīmādhava*, who is employed by a minister and resides in the city. The *Padmaprābhṛtaka* also refers to a *Śākyabhikṣa* residing near Śaiṣikaka's house (a *dvija-kumāra* or *brāhmaṇa*'s son) house. She works as a messenger of Mālatikā (daughter of *mālākāra*).^{xxii} The high households not only provided them 'with bread and butter but also protection. Most of them took refuge in Buddhist *saṃgha* because organised *saṃgha* could provide some sort of protection to these women. Other non-organised sects failed to offer them protection. For example, in the *Kaumudī-mahotsva*, Vinayadharā becomes a *parivrājikā* after renouncing worldly life. Before the renunciation, she was the foster sister and companion of queen Madirāvati of Magadha. Later, after the eclipse of the ruling dynasty, she adopted the *parivrājikā* way of life. She wandered from country to country and later developed friendships by staying together with Rājanvati, the crown queen of kīrtisena of Mathura.^{xxiii}

The city also housed some independent or working women. In *Mr̥cchakaṭika*, such women have been called 'Narīnātha'^{xxiv}. Perhaps because of the ownership of some houses or businesses by these women, they would have been called 'Narīnātha'. The context of Narīnātha shows that some women participated in economic activities and were financially independent. These women were financially better off than the matriarchs. However, they may have been looked down upon for coming out in public and earning a living. *Pratijñāyugandharāyaṇa* provides a reference to a hairless woman (*śauṇḍikī*) who runs her own tavern in the city of Ujjayinī and dares to mortgage the royal elephant named Bhadravati^{xxv}. Women placed lower on the moral scale than matriarchs, such as maids, nurses, maids, and slaves became more visible not only in the urban landscape but also enjoyed greater economic and personal freedom. These women contributed to their family's earnings and had a greater say. For example, in *Mr̥cchakaṭika*, Sutradhar's wife, naṭī, participated in theatrical productions with her husband. Here, naṭī observes a fast called 'Abhirupa' for her husband to prove her devotion. This reference goes against the normative authors who classify naṭī in the category of prostitute. A *naṭī* is called accomplisher (*sādhikā*) of the three duties or ends (*trivarga*, viz. *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma*) in the first act of *Mudrārākṣasa*.

Besides their low social respectability, these working women of lower social orders such as actresses/dancers (*naṭī*) and tavern-keepers (*śauṇḍikī*), and maids enjoyed more freedom and mobility. For example, the *naṭī*, the *sūtradhārā*'s wife, participated in festivity along without any male companion.

Apart from *parivrājikās* and working women, servant and slave women were most visible and mobile in the urban landscape. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* characterizes maids as public (*bāhyā*) women, along with courtesans.^{xxvi} The *Nāṭyaśāstra* talks about different kinds of maids present in the royal antaḥpura, such as maids in constant attendance (*anucārikā*), maids of special work (*paricārikā*), maids in constant movement (*sañcārikā*), and maids for running errands (*preṣaṇacārikā*). Plays, however, do not attest to the use of the same categories. Out of the four terms for maids, playwrights use only one, viz. *paricārikā*, along with its male counterpart, *paricāraka*. However, they use other terms such as *ceṭa/ceṭī* and *bhṛtya* (only male) for servants. A household female slave is called *grhadāsī* in the *Mr̥cchakaṭika*.^{xxvii} The *Mālatīmādhava* refers to a female slave (*viḥaradāsī*) named Mandārikā working as *paricārikā* under a Buddhist female mendicant Kamandakī.^{xxviii}

Servants were mostly assigned gender-specific tasks. In the *Mudrārākṣasa*, attendants of the *sūtradhārā*'s house are busy with their appointed tasks. One is busy fetching water, another is preparing fragrant paints (or grinding some aromatic substance), a third is weaving fine garlands, and one is working with the pestle accompanied by a sweet hum.^{xxix} These women were used by their masters for various purposes. Householders used them for household works, lovers used them as their messengers or *dūtīs*, and some wicked masters exploited them as pleasure tools. In the *Avimāra*, the maidservant prepares bathing water and the bed for the householders.^{xxx}

High-born' men and women had few opportunities to go into public. They employed messengers to deliver their messages. Messengers had a very important role to play in the cities. They helped in forging new forms of social relations in the city. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* prefers females over males for the role of messengers. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* prescribes the employment of a wise woman, a female ascetic, a female neighbour, a female friend, a maidservant, an unmarried girl, a craft woman, a foster mother, a nun or a female fortune teller as *dūtī*.^{xxxi} However, being vulnerable, the *dūtīs* were occasionally not treated well in the city. Sometimes, they were molested by unsavoury elements, such as the gamblers

and *viṭas*. For example, in the *Padmaprābhṛtaka*, the *viṭa* sees the Mālatikā's *dūtī* being molested by gambler Śaiṣilaka behind the pillars of the gambling salon (*dhūrtasabhālinda*).^{xxxii}

Maids were used for work both inside and outside the house. Maids were identified with their owners or they were their owner's property. Perhaps for this reason in *Mṛcchakaṭika*, in the darkness of night when Saṁsthānaka and His cheat catches Charudutta's maid Radanikā mistaking her for Vasantasenā. He takes it and apologizes to Charudatta for this act. In *Avimāraka*, royal maids visit the house of Swapakas (untouchables) settled outside the city as messengers of the princess. Owing to their low social status, maids do not hesitate visiting untouchables houses. Beyond the domestic uses, maids also provided company to the householders. They worked as retinue. Some masters also exploited maids sexually. For example, in *Pādatāḍitaka*, Vita Malla Swamy talks about drinking with his maid. Vita presents this with pride in the assembly of Vitas. He says, 'On the fifth day of my father's death, at night, when friends were sad and relatives were crying, keeping the crying child aside, I enjoyed drinking alcohol with the maid.

Maids were also used as messengers. *Natyashastra* forbids the inclusion of the beautiful, the wealthy and the diseased as messengers. On the contrary, it instructs an intelligent woman, an ascetic woman, a neighbor woman, a maid, an unmarried girl, a craftsman woman, an astrologer, a wet nurse, and a parivrājikā to be made messengers. Female messengers were used to facilitate the union of lovers. Apart from the message, the messengers were supposed to know additional things about the lover's birth, wealth, and happiness in life. they were supposed to be expert in the art of gentle persuasion. Like maids, messengers were recognized by their masters. Being dynamic in the city, messengers were not treated well. Jesters, wits, gamblers, and other vulgar elements of the city used to tease him. In *Padmaprābhṛtaka*, Vita sees the gambler Shishilak behind the atrium of Dhūrta Sabha tampering with Malavika's duti.

III

Gaṇikās were not a monolithic class- they had their spectrum too. It includes *gaṇikā*, *prākṛta-gaṇikās*, *gaṇikādārikā*, *gaṇikāmātura*, *kuttanīmata*, *gaṇikā-paricārikā*, *kumbhadāsī*, *Vandhakīs/bandhakīs*, and *Patākā-veśyas*. *Patākā-veśyas* were placed at the bottom of the spectrum, and outside the city landscape. Bhāsa in the *Avimāraka* refers to another category of courtesans, namely the *prākṛta-gaṇikās*, who did not get their fees.^{xxxiii} The *gaṇikās* and *prākṛta-gaṇikās* were two distinct categories of the courtesan, which the latter was held low in ranking and social esteem. In the *Ubhayābhisārikā*, the courtesan girls (*gaṇikā-dārikā*) are called *nagaravarayuvati*.^{xxxiv} The term *gaṇikā-dārikā* was used for the young daughters of courtesans who were not yet brought into the profession but were always looked at as future courtesan. The term *gaṇikā-duhitā* was used for daughters of a courtesan who had already entered the profession. The figure of *kāminyā* represents an intermediate stage between a courtesan and *kulavadhū*. The *kāminyās* were identified by their lovers. In the *Padmaprābhṛtaka*, Tāmbūsenā is said to be a *kāminyā* of Irina and Śoṇadāsī, of Chandradhara. ere portrayed as low in social esteem for transgressing the social norms. The courtesanal households headed by the chief courtesans were inhabited by a large number of maidservants and slaves who, too, worked as prostitutes (*gaṇikā-paricārikā*). These slaves- or servant prostitutes did not adopt the same titles as their mistresses. In the *Dhūrta-viṭa-saṁvāda*, the maid courtesans are called the victory flag of the cupid god (*kāma-vijaya-patākā*).^{xxxv} Ratilatikā is a maidservant of courtesans in the *Ubhayābhisārikā* who falls in love with Rāmasena, the brother-in-law of the king.^{xxxvi} Though courtesans did not generally belong to any *varṇa-jāti* category, some of them were identified based on the social status of their clientele and were physically segregated. These were *patākāveśyās* or flag-/pennant-prostitutes, i.e., low-class prostitutes who attracted their low-class clients by putting up flags/pennants/signs (*patākā*) at convenient places.^{xxxvii} Evidently, they were at the bottom of the courtesan class. They are described as living in the forest (*araṇyavāsini*) on the outskirts of a city along with 'barbarians' and untouchables (*mlecchas*, *śvapacas*). They were even portrayed as no worse than a hunch-backed maidservant named *kubjā* in the *Pādatāḍitaka*.^{xxxviii} The *Pādatāḍitaka* depicts them as madly in passion or intoxicated (*mattā*) charging only one cowry (*kākiṇīmātrapanyā*), accessible to the low-class people (*nīcairgamyā*), and controlled by sweet words (*sopacārair-niyamyā*).^{xxxix} Both untouchables and *patākāveśyās* were located outside the city, and the former seems to have claimed exclusive rights of sexual access to the later.^{xl}

CONCLUSION

The *nāṭya* literature goes beyond the conventional gender binaries of the *kulavadhū* and the *gaṇikā*, the *nāgaraka* and the *gaṇikā*, and the 'public' and 'private' women. It projects a wide spectrum of women (e.g., *kulavadhū*, *kulakanyā*, *devī*, *parivrājikā*, *dutī*, *naṭī*, *paricārikā*, *gaṇikā*, etc.), locating them in different but overlapping spaces within the urban society and allowing them a certain degree of 'voice' and 'agency'. Beyond the binary of *kulavadhū* and *gaṇikā*, these other women not contribute towards the making of urban gendered landscape but also womanhood. Sources register social mobility

across different spectrums of women. For example, in *Mr̥cchakaṭika*, courtesans like Vasantasenā and her maid Madanikā become *kulavadhūs*. In *Mr̥cchakaṭika*, the king bestows the title of a wedded wife (*kulavadhū*) to courtesan Vasantasenā. Here, the king deviated from his dharmic duty and promoted promotes *varnasamkara* through mixed marriages. At the other hand, in case of maid girl Madanikā, her mistress *gaṇikā* Vasantasenā not only grants her freedom but also bestows her the title of *Vadhū*. Being in-between the two poles or binary, these 'other women' not only proved binding force of society but also provided the social dynamism or mobility to it.

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