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Urvashi: The celestial nymph

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Abstract

Urvashi was a celestial nymph who came to earth after being cursed by Lord Indra. She is one who becomes wife of King Pururuvasa.

Keywords: Nymph, king, Urvashi

Introduction

Kavikulguru Kalidasa once again proves his craftsmanship in painting the character of Urvashi in his play Vikramorvasiyam. Vikramorvasiyam or Urvashi won by valour is a five act play written in 5th century CE and is second in a series of three plays composed by Kalidasa. The story appears in the Vedas and Puranas, and is based on the love story of King Pururavasa and Urvashi- an Apsara. She is the personification of dawn. According to Bhagvata Purana since she was born from the thigh 'uru' of divine God Narayan hence called Urvashi which is also the reason that she is the only apsara to be specially named in Rigveda. King Pururavasa rescues the celestial nymph Urvashi from the demons. The valour and heroism of the King wins her love for him. By accident the lovers are separated, but after various vicissitudes are reunited in the presence of their twelve year old son Aayush. This play was first translated into English by Horace Hayman Wilson, an English Oriental professor of Sanskrit at Oxford in 1827. The play has been adapted into various celluloid productions and theatrical productions.

The legend of Vikramorvasiyam occurs in embryonic form in a hymn of Rigveda and in a much amplified version in the Satapatha Brahmana. Kalidasa took the germ of the plot from them but had deviated from original story a lot to suit the presentation aspect of the drama. He has made evident adaptations to suit his own purpose and Vikramorvasiyam is remarkable for its characterization of the divine nymph Urvashi.

Indian culture excels in endowing anthropomorphic traits to its divinities. Following this trait Kalidasa brought the immortal celestial nymph Urvashi to the mortal world and immortalized her through his drama. Apsaras or celestial beings in Indian mythology and culture are a type of female spirits constituted of clouds and water. The Rigveda mentions apsaras as aquatic beings. Atharaveda tells about the apsaras being fond of and excelling in the game of dice. The Bhagvata Purana states that there are twenty-six apsaras at the court of Lord Indra. They were born in Kashyapa and Muni. Apsaras are of two types- the 'Aloukika' [worldly] and 'Daivika' [divine]. Some of the most famous apsaras are Menaka, Urvashi, Rambha, Tilottama and Ghritachi to name a few. They are extremely beautiful, forever youthful and personify elegance in all its aspects. They excel in the art of dance and music and are employed in the celestial court of Lord Indra where they along with their husbands -the Gandharvas entertain Indra, Devtaas and the divine courtiers. They are also employed to seduce the Gods, Sages, or mortal men if needed. Apsaras could transform themselves into any shape and form. They have strong association with rain, stars, and clouds. They excelled in 64 'Kalaas', that is 64 forms of performing arts as enumerated in 'Natyasasthra'. In Mahabharata, numerous descriptions of the apsaras are made. At one place it is said:

Ghritachi and Menaka and Rambha and Purvachitti and Swayamprabha and Urvashi and Misrakeshi and Dandagauri and Varuthini and Gopali and Sahajanya and Kumbhayoni and Prajagara and Chitrasena and Chitralkha and Saha and Madhuraswana, these and others by thousands, possessed of eyes like lotus leaves, who were employed in enticing the hearts of persons practising rigid austerities, danced there.

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And possessing slim waists and fair large hips, they began to perform various evolutions, shaking their deep bosoms, and casting their glances around, and exhibiting other attractive attitudes capable of stealing the hearts and resolutions and minds of the spectators. (Mahabharata, Book III: Vana Parva, Section 43).

Indian culture is replete with numerous references of the apsaras. They are found in form of paintings in temples and caves. Indian Literature is replete with the portrayal of apsaras in its poetry, play and stories. Folklores narrate the stories of love between apsaras and mortal men. Apsaras are the source of a painter's muse. The apsaras dominate the paintings of Raja Ravi Verma. Theatrical productions, Nritya Natikas and Indian cinema bring alive the story and character of major apsaras like Menka, Shakuntala and Urvashi. Even Buddhist religion literature and art is full of references made to apsaras. Though celestial apsaras are an indispensable part of Indian culture and heritage.

Being an apsara, Urvashi is known for her ravishing beauty so much so that it is said she surpasses the beauty of Laxmi in her loveliness. Kalidasa also imparts unprecedented cosmic beauty to her:

Kalidasa's Urvashi is a dominating woman when it comes to love and courtship. Completely mature in love-affairs she initiates bold advances towards her lover. She is seen as an "abhisarika" and passionately loves the King.

According to Kalidasa's plot of the play, Urvashi is the dancer in the court of Lord Indra. One day while enacting the role of Laxmi in a play titled 'Laxmi Swayamvara' directed by Bharat Muni she loses her concentration and in a fit of confusion between herself and her role, she ends up taking the name of Pururuvasa instead of Purushottam. This angers Bharat Muni who curses her and banishes her to earth. The curse becomes a boon for her as she is smitten by Pururuvasa and desperately wants to be with him, which could have not been possible with her being in heaven as an Apsara. So she is sent to the mortal world and is denied of true love of the Devataas. Unsatisfied and jilted by the devtaas and confined to the curse, Urvashi reaches out to the mortal King Pururuvasa whom she secretly loves. The King rescues her from the demons by valour, takes her with him and marries her.

Under the love and influence of Pururuvaasa, Urvashi undergoes a drastic transformation. On the psychic level, she transforms from an apsara to a human being. Emotions of love care and jealousy now dominate her. She is envious of any other woman who tries to reach for her husband's heart. At Mount Gandhamadana when Pururuvasa stares at the Gandharva girl Udayavati, she enraged by anger and jealousy storms out of the place. This emotion of her's is her ethereal quality for as an apsara she had no right to any mortal man or mortal emotions. In the abode of Indra, there were no moral codes for men, no ethics, no boundaries. But here as a wife of mortal Pururuvasa, she justifies her right to her husband.

Urvashi experiences all the feelings and emotions which she was denied in heaven. She experiences the pains and joys of motherhood with the birth of her son Aayush. But destiny forces her to delegate the responsibility of rearing up Aayush to Chyavan Rishi. Urvashi is bound with the curse under which after delivering the child if Pururuvasa sees the face of their son then she was bound to return to heaven. She secretly completes the term of her pregnancy and

secretly delivers her child. Pururuvasa is kept ignorant of all this. By this act of giving the care of Aayush to the Rishi, Urvashi very intelligently, avoids her separation from Pururuvasa, and arranges for proper rearing and development of her son. But in all these developments and separation from her son Urvashi, the mother suffers in agony silently. But this does not mean that Urvashi lacks maternal instincts or was not a responsible mother and was inhuman. Years later when Aayush is sent to king Pururuvasa's court, Urvashi at once recognises him and her maternal love and emotions flow in the form of milk from her bosom.

Throughout the play, the two lovers struggle to be with each other, and this desperation has been very effectively portrayed by the dramatist. Urvashi in her plight earns our sympathy too. Her suffering since the very beginning of the play brings about a cathartic effect in us. A vicious cycle of ups and downs in the life of the two lovers, their happiness and sufferings make the story quintessentially a delightful one.

Though Urvashi has been portrayed as a wicked, imperious, self centred greedy lover in many texts like Sathapatha-Brahmana or Brahaddevta but Kalidasa modifies her character because he revered and venerated women. Kalidasa instead paints his celestial muse as a spell-bound beautiful nymph endowed with qualities like meekness, earnestness and a heart brimming with love and disposition full of duty and sacrifice. Kalidasa portrays her as an ideal mother and ideal beloved. Kalidasa was perhaps moved by the plight of Urvashi as a nymph, so in his play, as mortal Urvashi, Kalidasa endows her with all ethereal sentiments and qualities. She enjoys all the aspects of womanhood. Through her character, the poet celebrates the essence of womanhood in the form of an ideal of motherhood and beloved.

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