Six Faces of Love: Shudraka’s Versatile Art in (Mruchhakatika) The Little Clay Cart

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Abstract

In the realm of ancient India’s classical Sanskrit drama, Shudraka’s The Little Clay Cart (Mruchhakatikam, a Sanskrit play first performed in India around two thousand years ago) occupies a special place. Its author has received much praise for “his variety, his skill in the drawing of character, [and] his humor” (Ryder, Kale, Sharma, and Basham). But his treatment of love has not received enough attention. This is where The Little Clay Cart excels. In it, the theme of renewal or “Resurrection” -- literal as well as figurative -- is all pervasive. This transformation occurs as a result of the enlivening and rejuvenating power of love in its various manifestations in this play. Particularly, the last act/Act X abounds in the images of “being saved.” Love works its magic in the form of conjugal love, erotic love, love between friends, filial love, magnanimity -- good deeds done without any expectation of return -- and as a bond between even master and servant. A wealthy courtesan – Vasantasena -- falling passionately in love with a poor man – Charudatta, a “secular Bodhisattva”, -- is in itself an instance of the transformative and ennobling power of love. In fact, all the principal characters have a “rebirth”, an epiphany, of one sort or another and undergo extraordinary renewals because of love. Other Sanskrit dramatists also treat love as a principal theme and a pervasive sentiment (rasa) in their works, for instance, erotic love (shrungaar) in Kalidasa’s Shakuntala, love or loyalty for family and kingship in Bhasa’s The Breaking of the Thigh (Urubhunga) and maturing conjugal love in Bhavabhuti’s The Later Life of Rama (Uttar-Rama-Charit). However, no other Sanskrit play, to my knowledge, revels in so many facets of love as does The Little Clay Cart. In Shudraka’s play, The Little Clay Cart, love is indeed a many-splendored thing.
Introduction and Literature Review

A summary of the play’s plot is attached as an appendix at the end of the essay.

Unless otherwise indicated, all the English translations are from Prof. Ryder’s book. The page numbers refer to his book.

In the realm of India’s classical Sanskrit drama, Shudraka’s The Little Clay Cart occupies a special place. Madhav Deshpande calls it “one of the best Sanskrit plays” (the back cover of A. L. Basham’s adaptation of The Little Clay Cart). It is “justly celebrated as one of the great monuments of Sanskrit literature” (Oliver, p.9). The Little Clay Cart is widely known and popular not just in India but also in the West; it is performed, not just at Western universities by their theatre departments, but by repertory companies, for instance, like the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, which recently performed it from February 17 to November 2 in 2008.

The Little Clay Cart is extolled as “the most realistic of Indian dramas” (Basham, The Wonder That Was India, p. 441). Its author has received much praise for “his variety, his skill in the drawing of character, [and] his humor” (Ryder, p. xvii). M. R. Kale notes the play’s “cleverly conceived and successfully constructed plot” and the realism of its picture of central India’s “contemporary society” (p. liii). Robert E. Goodwin remarks about Charudatta’s “sympathetic generosity” (p. 9) and refers to him as a “secular Bodhisattva” (p. 7). Arvind Sharma follows Goodwin and Basham closely when he says about our play that its humanity is its most striking characteristic (p. 162). The Little Clay Cart “deals with fundamental human emotions and possesses, therefore, the universality which characterizes literature that transcends the limitations of the age and nation in which it was written” (Oliver, pp. 31, 32).

Limaye analyzes Act V and attempts to demonstrate how nuanced and complex the feelings of the heroine Vasantasena are toward her lover, the hero Charudatta, as she goes to meet him in a raging storm. He claims that the audience learns more about the inner self of Vasantasena in this one single act than anywhere else in the play. Regarding the power and beauty of The Little Clay Cart, Oliver says at the end of his prefatory note, “I now present to the reader an English version of a play that was old when the
English language was yet unborn – a drama that won applause from diamond-crested monarchs when the black-sailed ships from Heretheland had not yet brought fire and death to the bleak shores of barbarous Northumbria, -- the Mruchchakatikam in which King Shudraka has ‘exhibited the joys of love, --- the perversity of the wicked, and the ineluctability of the decrees of Destiny’” (P.40).

However, in spite of all these complimentary reviews, Shudraka’s wide-and-deep treatment of love has not received enough attention. This is where The Little Clay Cart excels. Love’s various manifestations in it earn it, in my estimate, the honor of uniqueness.

**Love Saves Charudatta’s Life.**

Toward the end of the play, Shudraka’s The Little Clay Cart (Mruchchakatikam), Charudatta, the hero, is framed by Samsthanaka for the murder of the heroine Vasantasena. Charudatta, a young Brahmin merchant, has become poor because of his excessive generosity. It is this virtue of his, however, which endears him to Vasantasena, a beautiful and very wealthy courtesan. Samsthanaka, the brother-in-law of the King, is also known as Shakara (and referred to as such in the rest of this essay). In truth, it is the villain Shakara who strangles Vasantasena because she spurns his brutish and demeaning advances. The circumstantial evidence against Charudatta piles up, and he is sentenced to death. He is about to lose his life. In the meantime, Samvaahak (the gambler, who had become a Buddhist monk) revives the strangled Vasantasena, left for dead by Shakara. Vasantasena and Samvaahak arrive on the scene in the nick of time and save Charudatta’s life. This is the literal resurrection of the hero.

**Love’s Redeeming Prowess**

Charudatta exclaims:

(त्वदर्थमेतदववनिपात्यमािं
देहं
त्वयैव
प्रनतमोचितं
मे
अहो
प्रभाव:
वप्रय
संगमस्य म्रुतोवप
को
िाम
पुिचरथयेत

Behold the wondrous power of love-
For who once dead may live again?

(Act X, stanza 43; van Buitenen’s translation, p.176. See Note 1.)
Like someone who has seen a miracle happen before his own eyes, Charudatta says,
(मनय मृत्युवशं प्राप्ते विद्येव समुपागता)
When I was in the grip of death, she (Vasantasena) came as enlivening magic, as saving grace, *vidyaa.*”
(Act X, stanza, 42)

In another well-fitting simile, he says,
(अनावृष्टिहते सस्ये द्रोणवृष्टिरिवागता)
Like a showering cloud on parched crop, she has come (to give me life).
(Act X, stanza 39)

Charudatta also exclaims that the preparations for his execution have turned into a bridegroom’s procession with various wedding decorations.

(रक्तं तदेव --- यथा विभाति)

My blood-red garment seems a bridegroom’s cloak,
Death’s garland seems to me a bridal wreath.”
(Act X, stanza 44)

And, as he is being led to the execution grounds, he equates Vasantasena’s nature, her essence, with pure Love incarnate which, he is confident, will wash away the stigma of his wrongful conviction as her murderer:

(सुरपातिभवनस्था यत्र तत्र स्थिता वा,
व्यपियतु कलंक स्वस्वभावेन सैव).

If that my virtue yet regarded be,
Then she who dwells with gods above
Or wheresoever else – my love –
By her sweet nature wipe the stain from me.
All the above verses have the poignancy of utterances that issue forth from the bottom of one’s heart, strongly indicative of Charudatta’s emotional state when he gets a renewed lease on life at the arrival of the heroine Vasantasena to the execution grounds.

Charudatta’s Epiphany

But the play also depicts a figurative resurrection of Charudatta. He realizes toward the end of the play what true wealth is. Until Act III, he keeps bemoaning and blaming his ill luck, his karma or daiva (Providence), that he is too poor to continue to be generous. His whining reaches a climax when he claims that he prefers death to poverty. He doesn’t understand the depth and sincerity of Vasantasena’s love for him. He thinks that because he is poor he will not win her. He stereotypes Vasantasena as a common gold-digging prostitute. He was, however, missing the point. He was blind to the fact that money is only one kind of wealth. His constant lament that because of his poverty people will shun him shows his shortsightedness. Not until Act III does Charudatta “get it.” He says, “Poor I am not, my friend. For I have a wife:

Whose love outlasts my wealthy day;
In thee a friend through good and ill;

(विभावानुगता भार्या सुखद्क्खसुहृदभवान --- दारिद्रे दुर्लभां)

(Act III, 28)

Initially, his reaction was that he was unfortunate because even his wife takes pity on him. That meant for him his emasculation. But then he has his full “epiphany” that he is not really poor when he has a wife so self-denying that she literally lives for her husband and guards his honor by sacrificing her only possession, the necklace she received from her parents, to save his reputation. He then realizes he is not poor when he has a friend like Maitreya who is ready to give up his life for the sake of his friend, and when Vasantasena loves him dearly in spite of his material wants, his poverty. His discovery of love as true wealth renews his thinking about the meaning of life.
Vasantasena’s Figurative Rebirth

Vasantasena’s deep love for Charudatta gives her the courage to spurn Shakara’s advances even in the face of (potentially extreme) physical harm to her. Before she enters Charudatta’s house during a raging storm, she washes the mud off her feet—a symbolic act—representing her determination to give up her lucrative life as a very desirable courtesan:

(पादां नूपरलग्नकर्मधयोः प्रक्षालयण्ती स्थिता)

It is love that thus inspires her to remake herself in an altogether new form and spirit. Rinsing the dirt off her feet is analogous to purifying herself, rubbing the stain of prostitution off of her and readying herself to take on the wholesome role of a wife—a vadhoo—to Charudatta.

Love’s Other Transformations

Love’s transformative power is not, however, confined to just erotic or sexual love. Several other transformations, touching almost all the characters in the play, take place during the course of the play as consequences of love’s magic.

Maitreya, the Vidooshaka (clown), is transformed from being a garrulous, lighthearted, unsubstantial person in the household of his patron Charudatta to becoming a devoted friend of his, loyal to the point of offering his life as a trade for the condemned hero (Act X).

Sharvilaka, the house-breaker, turns into a warrior eager to assist his friend Aryaka in a revolution. One could argue that his love for his new bride Madanika transforms him—a kind of erotic love’s displacement by loyalty to one’s friend and to a cause.

Samvaahaka, the gambler, overcome by Vasantasena’s generosity—love with no expectation of return—“resurrects” himself as a Buddhist monk and pays her back by reviving her after she was strangled and left for dead by the villain of the piece—Shakara, the king’s brother-in-law.
Even **the servants of Charudatta** are bought by his love and his kindness. Vardhamaanaka, for instance, exclaims:

(सुजन: खलु भृत्यानुकामक स्वामी निधनकोपि शोभते)

A master, kindly and benevolent,
His servants love, however poor he be.
(Act III, 1)

And, finally, **Charudatta’s little son Rohasena**, who was crying because he only had a little clay cart, grows up -- rather too mature for his age -- and toward the end of the play offers to die for his father, a somewhat melodramatic model for today’s Bollywood movies. Rohasena exclaims, “Oh, headsmen, kill me and let father go free” (Ryder, P. 163).

Some renewals and transformations, however, are not love’s consequence: **Shakara’s vita** (a hanger-on and companion) was always aware, deep down, that his patron was morally depraved and reprehensible, and also over-pampered because he was a relative of the King by marriage (That is why he thinks he can have any woman he wants). When Shakara and his vita are in hot pursuit of Vasantasena in the dark (in Act I), the vita uses a telling simile to describe the thickening darkness that is making it hard to see where Vasantasena is.

(असत्पुरुष सेवेव दृष्टि: विफलतां गता).

--- till mine eye
Is all unprofitable grown to me,
Like service done to them who cheat and lie.
(Emphasis added)
(Act I, 34)

To the audience, this sounds like a premonition on the part of Shakara’s vita of his master’s impending villainy, the strangling of Vasantasena, in Act VIII. But the vita’s real eye opener or his moment of awakening occurs when he realizes that his patron is capable of murder. Only then does he muster the courage, the will power, to leave his patron for good.
The dramatist leaves it to the audience to imagine how Shakara, the wicked guy, will live his life after Charudatta repays his villainy with kindness, that is, whether Shakara is capable of being reformed because of love. There is nothing in the play such as any redeeming quality attributed to Shakara’s character that might suggest there is hope for his future, that he might mend his evil ways. In fact, Shakara is the only principal character in the play who does not have the slightest notion of what love is. Not that he is not advised about the distinction between love and lust or between love and rape: Vasantasena admonishes him (when he is pursuing her in the first act) by telling him

“True love would be won by virtue, not violence” (P.14)

(गुण: खलु अनुरागस्य कारण न पुन: बलात्कार:) (Act I, after stanza 32)

_Love Drives both the Main and the Subsidiary Plots._

It is noteworthy that, in _The Little Clay Cart_, love is the prime mover that drives forward the action in both the main and the subsidiary plots. In the principal plot, Vasantasena’s visit to Charudatta in the rain storm is inspired by her passionate love for him – a visit which, by twists of fate, eventually leads to her being strangled by Shakara. The jewelry she bestows upon her lover’s little son Rohasena to have a gold cart made for him, unwittingly, furnishes an alleged motive that gets Charudatta convicted of Vasantasena’s murder. Her magnanimous action (another avatar or manifestation of love) toward Samvahaka in paying off his gambling debt results in his loving gesture toward _her_ as he revives her life when she was left for dead by Shakara. And all these acts of love ultimately save Charudatta from the gallows, uniting the two lovers at the end of the play.

In the subsidiary (political) plot, the swapping of the carts takes Aryaka -- the prison-escapee destined to be the future king -- to Charudatta, who in loving kindness, offers protection to the one seeking “asylum.” Later, when Aryaka succeeds to the throne, he returns the love by granting a fiefdom to Charudatta, our impoverished hero. Love is the link that binds the two plots.

_Six Faces of Love_
To sum up, *The Little Clay Cart* lays out a veritable banquet of love before us – love in a very broad sense with a whole gamut of its manifold facets: erotic love between Charudatta and Vasantasena, and between Sharvilaka and Madanika; conjugal love of Dhoota for her husband Charudatta; love between two friends – Maitreya and Charudatta as also between Sharvilaka and Aryaka; filial love of Rohasena for his father Charudatta; love in the form of generosity between Vasantasena and Samvahaka; and a bond of love between servant and master – six faces of love.

Shudraka’s *The Little Clay Cart* makes a point that the awareness and the discovery of the transformative and ennobling power of love is a mark of being truly human. At the end of the play, such awareness and such discovery are the acquisitions of all the principal characters – at least of all those whom we love and think redeemable.

Many other Sanskrit dramatists also treat love as a principal theme and a pervasive sentiment (*rasa*) in their works, for instance, erotic love (*shringara*) in Kalidasa’s *Shakuntala*, love or loyalty for family and kingship in Bhasa’s *The Breaking of the Thigh (Urubhunga)* and maturing conjugal love in Bhavabhuti’s *The Later Life of Rama (Uttar-Rama-Charit)*. However, no other Sanskrit play, to my knowledge, revels in so many facets of love as does *The Little Clay Cart*. In Shudraka’s play, love is indeed a many-splendored thing.

**Appendix**

**A PLOT SUMMARY OF SHUDRAKA’S *THE LITTLE CLAY CART***

Adapted by Mohan R. Limaye from Prof. J. A. B. van Buitenens’s translation

**Act I**, entitled *The Gems are left Behind*: The hero of the play is **Charudatta** whose governing virtue is generosity: it pervades the entire play and his relations with everyone, except his wife (The
wife, true to long standing Indian tradition, is taken for granted). He had been a rich man, but has now fallen on hard times, because he has doled out all his wealth to hangers-on and solicitors. His constant companion is the buffoon Maitreya, who lives with him. The play opens with Maitreya bringing Charudatta a present from a rich acquaintance: a sad reversal of roles for the once-liberal Charudatta, who describes his poverty as "the deadly sin they forgot to count." It is evening. Suddenly, the focus is upon a chase which occurs close to Charudatta’s house: the courtesan Vasantasena, the heroine of the play, is being pursued by Sansthanaka, also known as Shakara, who is the villainous brother-in-law of the king. Shakara is crass, uncouth and wicked, an antithesis to Charudatta. He is accompanied by his urbane companion and a servant. Vasantasena, however, has fallen in love with Charudatta ever since she saw him at the temple of Cupid and detests Shakara’s “courtship”. She stumbles through a door into safety in Charudatta’s house. Before leaving, she deposits a gold box with some jewelry at Charudatta’s house for safekeeping (and as an excuse to return to him).

Act II, entitled The Shampooer who Gambled, is a series of sketches, illustrating the lowly but fascinating life which flows around a courtesan's establishment. While Vasantasena is musing lovingly of Charudatta, a barber-masseur comes seeking refuge: he has lost ten gold pieces gambling, cannot pay his debt, and is now pursued by the winners -- a banker and a gambler-- to a temple, and finally to the courtesan's door. This barber-masseur proves to be one of Charudatta's old retainers; Vasantasena pays his debt, unheard of generosity in a courtesan (a member of a group proverbial for its greed). The experience of being manhandled by his creditors creates a feeling of loathing
and disgust in the barber about his life style. He decides to take the Buddhist cloth, and immediately gets embroiled with an elephant, which he hopes to tame with his monastic serenity, as the Buddha once did. A retainer of Vasantasena rescues him, in reward for which a stranger throws the rescuer his cloak. The beneficent stranger is Charudatta.

**Act III, The Hole in the Wall**, introduces a learned, Sanskrit-speaking burglar, Sharvilaka, who gives an erudite running commentary on his craft. The burglar breaks into the house and steals the golden box which Vasantasena had entrusted to Charudatta. On waking up, the generous victim is saddened that the thief has had to leave empty-handed, until it dawns on him that the box has been stolen. It was a sacred trust, and he fears that his poverty will immediately make him suspect. In a very touching scene, Charudatta's wife, the mother of his son, gives Maitreya a pearl necklace, her sole remaining property and incomparably more valuable than Vasantasena's box, to pass on to Charudatta for Vasantasena. The thief, incidentally, is in love with one of Vasantasena’s hand-maidens, Madanika.

In **Act IV, Madanika and Sharvilaka**, the thief wants to buy the freedom of Madanika, Vasantasena’s hand-maiden/slave and Confidante, with his plunder [Apparently, ancient India had slavery]. Vasantasena, who, in a favorite dramatic device, has been eavesdropping on the conversation between Madanika and Sharvilaka, learns the truth but, generously, sets the handmaiden free. Now a political subplot starts shaping up: Aryaka, a pretender to the throne, has been jailed. The thief, a friend of Aryaka, decides to join his party, leaving behind his newly married bride. Duty calls, he thinks. Meanwhile, the Fool/ Maitreya arrives with the
necklace to replace the box, which Charudatta pretends he lost at gambling. Vasantasena accepts, because it gives her a pretext to return to Charudatta.

Act V, entitled *The Storm*, finds a (male) retainer/Companion of Vasantasena, escorting her to Charudatta’s house [Incidentally, Prof. Van Buitenen thinks that the Companion of the villain and that of Vasantasena are the same person, which is not the case]. The monsoon is about to break, though untimely; and the coming of the monsoon, when travelers rejoined their wives, was ever the time for love-making. Vasantasena’s Companion and Vasantasena engage in a veritable duet of poetry, describing the storm. Finally the courtesan reaches Charudatta’s house, where she spends the night.

Act VI, *The Swapping of the Bullock carts*: Vasantasena is trying to return the necklace to Charudatta’s wife, who declines. The merchant’s little son enters, crying because he has only a little toy clay cart to play with, while his neighbor’s son has a *gold* toy cart. Vasantasena stuffs it with pearls, so that he may buy a cart of gold. This little cart -- from which the play derives its name -- thus becomes the sudden symbol of Charudatta’s poverty and of the generosity of both his wife and his mistress (the latter might well have been expected to consider the pearls as payment for services rendered). Thereupon, confusion at once ensues. The courtesan is to join her lover in a park. Meanwhile, the pretender Aryaka has escaped and is abroad. Vasantasena takes the wrong carriage, while the escaping Aryaka leaps into the carriage of Charudatta, which was to carry Vasantasena to her rendezvous.

In Act VII, *Aryaka’s Escape*: The fugitive Aryaka meets Charudatta and asks for his protection. Charudatta, ever a noble and magnanimous gentleman, lets him go, offering him his covered carriage. Charudatta’s mind is intent upon finding his mistress because she was supposed to meet him in the park. She, meanwhile, is being carried off in a coach on its way to her erstwhile pursuer, Shakara.
Act VIII, *The Strangling of Vasantasena*, finds Shakara talking with his Libertine/Companion and abusing a Buddhist monk (none other than the barber-masseur whom we noticed taking the Buddhist vows earlier). Sanstanaka tries to win Vasantasena, but she refuses him. No wonder; he is boorish while Vasantasena is deeply in love with Charudatta. Enraged because he is spurned, Shakara then orders his Libertine and his slave to kill her. They refuse. Feigning calm, he sends them on their way. When they are gone, he begins to beat Vasantasena, who collapses. Taking her for dead, he covers her with leaves and departs. The masseur-turned-monk reappears, to hang out his robe to dry which he has been laundering. He finds Vasantasena, restores her to consciousness, and takes her to his monastery -- basically an act of gratitude, for she had been his benefactress paying his debt.

Act IX, *The Trial*, takes place in a court of justice. The villain accuses Charudatta of the murder of Vasantasena. The circumstantial evidence against Charudatta is overwhelming. An interesting parade of witnesses now appears, bearing testimony which seems to incriminate Charudatta: First comes Vasantasena’s mother, an old harlot who has fattened on brandy and rum. Then one of the constables, involved in the fracas centering on Aryaka's escape in Charudatta’s coach, testifies to the pretender's movements. All this reflects badly on Charudatta. To make matters worse, Charudatta’s friend Maitreya, on his way to return to Vasantasena the pears which she had given to Charudatta’s son, comes by the court and, in his flustered indignation on hearing the charges, drops the pears. Further evidence shows that Vasantasena had spent the night at Charudatta’s house, and that they had had an assignation in the park. All this, plus the intimidating presence of Shakara, brother-in-law of the king, convinces the judge that Charudatta has murdered and robbed Vasantasena. He sentences Charudatta to exile. The king, however, understandably
concerned with Charudatta's apparent role in Aryaka's escape, converts the verdict into a death sentence.

**Act X, the last act**, entitled *The End/Denouement*, sees Charudatta being led to his death by two outcastes. The Shakara's servant, who had witnessed his master's assault on Vasantasena and had been put in chains, manages to escape and tell his story, but his master discredits him. While the act is melodramatically lengthened [Even today we witness the influence of *TLCC* on Bollywood movies which revel in pathos and tear-jerking] in order to increase the suspense, all kinds of things happen at once: the courtesan and the monk appear in time to stave off the execution, and the lovers are reunited; while Aryaka kills the king, succeeds to the throne, and grants Charudatta a fief, a little kingdom. The crowd demands Shakara's death -- not only did he commit murder, he is no longer the king's brother-in-law -- but Charudatta once more demonstrates his generosity by granting the villain a pardon. All's well that ends well: the lowly monk is appointed by the new king as Chief Abbot of all the kingdom's monasteries, and Vasantasena is by royal decree elevated from her caste and thereby made an honest gentlewoman, so that she can become Charudatta's legal wife [Polygamy was practiced in India by the wealthy and the aristocracy until recent times].

**Works Cited**


Shudraka. *Mrichchhhatrakatika (The Little Clay Cart)*.


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