



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## Portrayal Of Women In Sanskrit Drama With Special Reference To The Kundamālā Of Diṇnāga

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**Abstract:** According to the dramaturgy, the heroine is of three types viz. *Svakīyā*, *Parakīyā* and *Sādharaṇa strī*. *Svakīyā Nāyikā* should be simple and well mannered. Diṇnāga's *Kundamālā* is a play based on the event of the 'banishment of Sītā'. He takes the plot of the play from the *Rāmāyana*. The plot of his work is women round a theme. The poet has represented all the characters including the Sutrādhāra. Among these characters eleven are male and other seven are female. In the *Kundamālā*, Sītā, the heroine belongs to the *Svakīyā* category. Sītā figures in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyana* as a pathetic image. This paper will project the status of women through the character of Sītā, Yajñavedī, Vedavatī, Kauśalyā, Kaikeyī, Sumitrā and Vasumatī.

**Index Terms** - Drama , Women , Status, Kundamālā, Svakīyā, Sītā.

### I. INTRODUCTION:

Diṇnāga, the dramatist was the creator of the only work i.e. the *Kundamālā*. It is a play of six Acts dealing with the later part of Rāma's life. The story of banishment of Sītā, the re-union of Rāma and Sītā are found to be presented in a dramatic manner. The poet here has deviated from the *Rāmāyana* of Vālmīki in various places. The incidents which are narrated in Act II-IV do not have any reference in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyana*. So these can be treated as the poet's innovations. The drama starts with the scene of Sītā in advanced pregnancy who is being led into exile by Lakṣmaṇa. In Act II, the twin sons of Sītā are named by Vālmīki as Kuśa and Lava. They study the *Rāmāyana* composed by the sage. In Act III the poet presents Rāma in a very pathetic condition. Rāma is coming to the hermitage of Vālmīki. Having reached the bank of the river Gomatī, he takes notice of a garland of Kunda (a kind of jasmine) flowers. The title of the drama has its base in the event. The 4th Act starts with the conversation between the two female ascetics, Yajñavedī and Vedavatī. The 5th Act begins with the announcement from the Vidūṣaka of the congregation time of the ascetics. Act VI opens with the entrance of Rāma in the audience hall. Here the dramatist has utilized the opportunity of the reunion of the hero and the heroine. This Act ends with the usual Bharatavākya. The author Diṇnāga portray all the character beautifully specially the female character.

### II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This research aims to achieve the following goals:

- To critically explore the representation of women in classical Sanskrit drama, emphasizing the linguistic limitations, social positioning, and narrative roles assigned to them within the dramaturgical tradition.
- To study the established classifications of female characters (*Nāyikās*) as outlined in foundational dramaturgical texts like *Nāṭyaśāstra* and Dhanañjaya's *Daśarūpakam*, and to investigate how these typologies are reflected in dramatic works.
- To assess the position and significance of women characters in Diṇnāga's *Kundamālā*, with particular attention to Sītā as a prototypical *Svakīyā Nāyikā*, alongside other female figures such as Yajñavedī, Vedavatī, and Vasumatī.

- To analyze the use of different languages, particularly Prākṛt and Sanskrit, in female dialogues, and to interpret how this multilingual structure mirrors gender-based social stratification within the dramatic narrative.

To evaluate the broader cultural and moral messages regarding ideal womanhood and feminine virtues as conveyed through the structure and themes of *Kundamālā*, especially in relation to its reinterpretation of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The present study employs a **qualitative and analytical framework**, structured around the following methodological components:

- Close Reading and Textual Analysis:**  
Dinnāga's *Kundamālā* is the central text of this inquiry. A detailed act-wise examination is undertaken to analyze character construction, thematic motifs, and patterns in language usage, with particular focus on the representation of female figures.
- Comparative Literary Method:**  
The portrayal of Sītā in *Kundamālā* is juxtaposed with her depiction in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* to highlight narrative deviations, creative adaptations, and thematic emphases introduced by Dinnāga. This approach helps trace how the dramatist reimagines established literary figures in a dramatic format.
- Application of Classical Dramaturgy:**  
The theoretical frameworks of Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* and Dhanañjaya's *Daśarūpakam* provide the lens through which female character types, particularly *Nāyikās*, are understood and interpreted within their dramaturgical context.
- Linguistic Evaluation:**  
The study examines the linguistic stratification in Sanskrit drama, especially the deployment of Prākṛt dialects—such as Saurasenī, Māhārāṣṭrī, and Māgadhī—in women's speech. The implications of this multilingual structure for gender representation and hierarchy are critically assessed.
- Socio-cultural Analysis:**  
The research situates its literary findings within the broader context of ancient Indian gender norms and societal expectations. The silent endurance, moral authority, and resilience of female characters are examined as reflections of contemporary ideals of womanhood.
- Review of Secondary Literature:**  
Scholarly articles, critical essays, and prior research on Sanskrit drama, gender theory, and the *Kundamālā* are incorporated to support the analysis and offer a well-rounded academic perspective.

### IV. ANALYSIS:

According to the dramaturgy, the women characters do not get a special position. The main female character of drama plays the role of heroine (Nayikā) but they cannot able to speak in Sanskrit. They usually speak the Prakrit language. Use of Prākṛt in dramas is a common characteristics of Sanskrit dramas. Prākṛt is happened to be a communicate language and perhaps for this reason, Sanskrit dramatist used Prākṛt along with Sanskrit, for giving a realistic touch to the works. The women who are educated and of high family generally use the *Saurasenī Prākṛt*. But when they sing some songs or use verses, they use only *Mahārāṣṭrī Prākṛt*.<sup>1</sup> The people who work in the inner apartment of royal palace, use *Magadhī*. In the KM, Sītā is the main female character, who belonged to a high family. So the author uses *Saurasenī* in her speech. The heroine is of three types viz. *Svakīyā*, *Parakīyā* and *Sādhāraṇa Strī*.<sup>2</sup> *Svakīyā nāyikā* should be simple and well mannered. According to Dhanañjaya this type is also divided into three. They are *Mugdhā*, *Madhyā* and *Pragalbhā*.<sup>3</sup>

#### 4.1 Status of women in the Kundamālā:

The poet has represented all the characters skillfully. Dinnāga draws eighteen characters, among these seven are female. One female ascetic and two nymphs are referred to, but they do not appear on the stage. Sītā is presented as the heroine, and she belongs to the *Svakīyā* category. Sītā figures in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* as a 'pathetic image'.

Dinnāga's *Kundamālā* (KM) is also based on the event of the 'banishment of Sītā'. Her physical beauty is very much attractive. Her complexion is the luster of pure or burnished gold, or the light –red- hue of tender twigs. The drama KM starts with the second exile of Sītā. She is the very embodiment of all feminine excellence and is characterized by the highest degree of self sacrifice, purity, courage and patience. Being the

victim of a baseless scandal, she is exiled from the state. The shocking news is conveyed to her by Lakṣmaṇa in a scene full of tender pathos. She is bewildered and falls down senseless. After regaining the consciousness, she enquires about the charge against her painfully regrets to find herself abandoned without the slightest accusation.<sup>4</sup> She blames to her fates that she has been punished without even the slightest accusation.<sup>5</sup>

The idea of a life of disgrace would incite her to commit suicide but thought of protecting the scions of the Ikṣāku race in her womb, happily prevents the consummation of her deadly resolve. She finds great consolation in the message conveyed to her that her Lord loves her dearly and is against the espousal of any other woman. She mentions that by sending this message her Lord has entirely removed her grief at being abandoned.<sup>6</sup> But even in moments of deepest distress, she can never be blind to the comforts of her Lord and the words of her messages that neglecting the protection of the Varṇas and Āśramas, he should not afflict his person bewailing the loss of her, the ill starred one and that he should pay full attention to the duty to his person are really of genuine pathos indicating high sense of duty and her great solicitude for her Lord whose happiness she would prize over everything else. Duty and discipline, as indicated by her generous appreciation of the thankless task of Lakṣmaṇa in abandoning her, were greatly valued by her. But despite her ideal merits, Sītā of Diṇnāga, is not altogether above human emotions. She is noble but not 'ethereal and spiritual, removed from the gross things of earth. She submits with resignation to the cruel fate forced upon her but not without a protest. She feels very bitterly the great injustice done to her against which she registers a strong protest, when she says that it ill- becomes her to banish all of a sudden, this innocent person from his heart, and what is worse from the state.<sup>7</sup>

In such a situation, any common lady, who is exiled by her husband in advance pregnancy is sure leave her hope for living. But Sītā sends a message to her husband in that crucial period with endurance that with folded hands placed on the parting line of braided hair, she dwelling in the acquaintance sake, for helplessness. She thinks about Rāma's health and advises Lakṣmaṇa that as to how can there be found, even in a vast kingdom, those who can partake of troubles as wives. Intensity of her grief remains undiluted even ten years after her exile. Sometimes she blames the untrustworthiness of the hearts of men but again she thinks of the perilous campaigns undertaken by Rāma for her sake. The reminiscences of pleasures enjoyed in his company only add fuel to the fire of separation. Sītā's conversation with her friend Vedavātī indicates that in spite of the wrong done to her she has a high regard for Lord. The meetings of Rāma and Sītā in the Naimiṣa forest are full of delicate scenes. In an admirable passage, Sītā lays bare the conflicting emotions of her tormented heart. She cannot control her to see her beloved husband. On hearing the piteous moaning of Rāma, she remarks it 'say not thus, my Lord,' that Sītā is lamentable. A person, whose lover is thus grieving for her, cannot, indeed be deplorable'. The poet has here created an exquisite scene unparalleled perhaps for its beauty and depth of feeling in the whole range of Sanskrit drama. Sītā always exhibits great regard for her mother- in -law and almost motherly affection for Lakṣmaṇa. The scene of re-union is full of tenderness and the unfortunate queen, stands out, after all with an unblemished character. Sītā is a perfect mother also. She never says about her personal life to her sons also. Sītā is portrayed by the dramatist as a caring wife, for whom the physical and mental welfare of her husband is of primary concern. As a mother also, Sītā upholds the high standards of motherhood. The brilliant character of Sītā, penned down by Vālmīki, has not all suffered in the pages of the KM.

#### 4.2 Women in Classical Sanskrit Drama: Linguistic and Social Dimensions with Reference to *Kundamālā*

Classical Sanskrit drama, a significant component of India's literary and performative heritage, offers profound insights into ancient Indian social structures, gender roles, and linguistic practices. Women characters, particularly heroines (*nāyikās*), are often central to the narrative and emotional core of Sanskrit plays. However, despite their narrative centrality, they remain subject to distinct linguistic and social constraints that mirror the societal attitudes of their time. These limitations are evident in the dramatic works themselves, in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, and in dramaturgical texts such as Dhanañjaya's *Daśarūpakam*. A close examination of these conventions, especially through the portrayal of Sītā in Diṇnāga's *Kundamālā*, reveals a complex intersection of gender, language, and dramaturgy.



### 4.3 Linguistic Stratification in Sanskrit Drama

One of the most striking features of classical Sanskrit drama is its *diglossic* structure—that is, the use of multiple languages within the same text, determined by the character's gender, social status, occupation, and emotional situation. While Sanskrit is the primary language of male protagonists, sages, kings, and ministers, women and certain other classes of characters are usually assigned various dialects of *Prākṛt*—a group of Middle Indo-Aryan vernaculars derived from and considered inferior to Sanskrit.

This linguistic division is not arbitrary but rather rooted in the hierarchical social structures of ancient India. It reflects both the aesthetic goals of the dramatists and the linguistic reality of ancient Indian society. As per *Nāṭyaśāstra* and subsequent dramaturgical manuals, different forms of *Prākṛt* are designated for specific characters and settings:

- **Saurasenī Prākṛt:** Typically spoken by noblewomen and high-born ladies. It is the most commonly used *Prākṛt* in dramas and is considered refined and elegant. In *Kundamālā*, Sītā—being a queen and the central heroine—appropriately speaks in Saurasenī, reinforcing her noble status and cultured disposition.
- **Māhārāṣṭrī Prākṛt:** Frequently used in songs, lyrical expressions, and romantic or emotional scenes. It is often associated with heroines or companions of the heroine during *lāsyā* (graceful, romantic) sequences.
- **Māgadhi Prākṛt:** Used by female attendants, palace servants, and those of relatively lower rank in the royal household.
- **Śaurasenī and Ardhamāgadhi:** Occasionally employed by monks, ascetics, or female ascetics, depending on their context and status.

This codified linguistic usage reinforces a performative hierarchy: language becomes a visible and audible marker of class, gender, and propriety. Women, even when central to the narrative, are not permitted the prestige language of Sanskrit, except in highly exceptional circumstances. This linguistic stratification reflects patriarchal limitations on female agency, suggesting that women's voices were not meant to occupy the highest registers of intellectual or philosophical discourse.

### 4.4 Linguistic Identity and Social Position of the Nāyikā

In Sanskrit dramaturgy, the *nāyikā* is a carefully categorized character type. Despite occupying the emotional epicenter of the play—motivating the hero's actions, symbolizing moral integrity, or catalyzing dramatic conflict—she rarely speaks Sanskrit. This linguistic restraint implies that while women could embody virtue, beauty, and emotional depth, they were excluded from the authoritative and sacred realms associated with Sanskrit.

However, this does not necessarily imply a lack of complexity or dignity. The use of *Prākṛt* for women, particularly noble ones like Sītā, was not viewed by dramaturgy as a degradation, but rather as a form of emotional authenticity. *Prākṛt* was believed to be more fluid, melodious, and natural—suitable for expressing love, sorrow, tenderness, and other emotional states. This aligns with Bharata's conception in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* that theater must evoke *rasa* (aesthetic emotion), and that language must be suited to character and mood.

Yet, from a modern feminist or linguistic perspective, this relegation reflects the sociolinguistic marginalization of women. Women in classical Sanskrit drama, though often noble and virtuous, are restricted from accessing the intellectual or philosophical authority embedded in Sanskrit. Thus, the language of a woman character becomes a mirror of the societal limitations imposed upon her.

In this drama KM we get six other female character except Sītā. Yajñavedī is one of the female ascetics, is a resident of Vālmīki's hermitage. This character helps the heroine in the time of her exile and gives a message that king is entering to the hermitage. The female character Vedavatī is also a female ascetic of Vālmīki's hermitage. She is also another friend of Sītā. Kauśalyā, Kaikeyī and Sumitrā the three queens of Ayodhyā were present on the stage on Act VI for hearing the Rāmāyana, which was recited by Lava and Kuśa. But the dramatist does not put any word to the lips of the three queens. Hence these three ladies bear little significance in the play. Vasumatī is a super natural character presented in Act VI of the drama. Vasumatī or Prthvī is the mother of Sītā. Vasumatī's role in the drama helps to raise the status of Sītā to all associated with her. Vasumatī is the only female character who uses Sanskrit.

#### 4.5 Dramaturgical Classification of Nāyikās

The dramaturgical tradition, particularly as elaborated by Dhanañjaya in the *Daśarūpakam*, classifies heroines not just by their marital status, but also by their age, emotional maturity, and demeanor. The primary classification divides them into three types:

- **Svakīyā Nāyikā:** The lawful wife of the hero. She is modest, dignified, loyal, and morally upright. Her love is socially sanctioned and based on *dharma* (righteousness).
- **Parakīyā Nāyikā:** A woman in love with someone other than her husband. This type is often the focus of romantic or erotic drama. She is passionate and transgressive, embodying desire that crosses social boundaries.
- **Sādhārāṇā Nāyikā:** A public or courtesan figure, often accessible to many. Despite her social status, she can possess emotional depth and dramatic significance.

Within the *Svakīyā* type, Dhanañjaya further outlines three subtypes based on emotional maturity:

- **Mugdhā:** Innocent, shy, and naïve. Often depicted as newlywed or young girls.
- **Madhyā:** Balanced in emotion, of middle age or moderate experience, expressing love with restraint.
- **Pragalbhā:** Bold, experienced, and confident. She can express her feelings openly and articulately.

Sītā in *Kundamālā* clearly fits into the *Svakīyā–Madhyā* or *Svakīyā–Pragalbhā* category. She is the lawful wife of Rāma, exhibits deep emotional intelligence, and, though reserved, occasionally speaks out in protest against her unjust treatment. Her portrayal by Diñnāga adds complexity to the archetype: she is noble yet human, dignified yet expressive of pain, adhering to duty yet unafraid to question fate and injustice.

#### 4.6 Sītā's Linguistic Role in *Kundamālā*

In *Kundamālā*, Sītā's speech is rendered in *Saurasenī Prākṛt*, marking her noble lineage and high moral standing. This aligns with traditional practice, as noted above, where *Prākṛt* serves to express softer, more emotional registers. However, this linguistic choice also has layered implications. On one hand, it allows her character to express sorrow, longing, and resilience with poetic fluidity. On the other hand, it subtly reinforces her distance from the centers of power and authority represented by male characters who speak Sanskrit.

Despite this linguistic restriction, Diñnāga's Sītā is portrayed as intellectually and emotionally articulate. She reflects on her suffering, questions her exile, expresses devotion to Rāma, and upholds her moral values without overt rebellion. Her speech is marked by lyrical intensity and philosophical insight, suggesting that the vernacular medium does not diminish her rhetorical power but localizes it in a different aesthetic register.

Moreover, her exchanges with characters like Vedavātī and Yajñavedī reflect a nuanced emotional world where women support and console each other within the limitations of their social roles. This "feminine" space of discourse, though linguistically bounded by *Prākṛt*, becomes a powerful domain of solidarity, emotional expression, and resistance.

#### 4.7 Exception to the Rule: Vasumatī and the Use of Sanskrit

A notable exception in *Kundamālā* is the character of Vasumatī (Mother Earth), who speaks Sanskrit. As a divine figure, her access to Sanskrit is justified within the dramaturgical conventions. This reinforces the hierarchy wherein only divine women or goddesses—beings above human frailty—are permitted to speak the language of gods and learned men.

Vasumatī's speech, rich in cosmic imagery and philosophical assertion, legitimizes Sītā's purity in the court-like atmosphere of Act VI. Her Sanskrit utterances contrast sharply with the *Prākṛt* spoken by Sītā, despite the latter's superior moral character. This dissonance emphasizes how even in idealized portrayals, mortal women remain linguistically subaltern.

#### 4.8 Social Constraints and Gendered Silencing

Beyond language, the role of women in classical Sanskrit drama is constrained by the norms of gendered behavior. Women are often depicted as loyal, patient, and submissive, even in the face of extreme injustice. Sītā's exile during pregnancy, her silent endurance, and eventual disappearance into the earth are all framed as virtues of ideal womanhood—*pativrata dharma* (devotion to the husband) being paramount.

The dramaturgical silence imposed on queens like Kauśalyā, Kaikeyī, and Sumitrā in *Kundamālā* is telling. Though present during the critical events of Lava and Kuśa's performance, they are given no dialogue, reinforcing their symbolic rather than participatory role in public discourse. Their muteness contrasts with Sītā's quiet voice of protest, suggesting a spectrum of female visibility that is carefully regulated by dramaturgical norms.

## V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION:

The linguistic and social limitations placed upon women in classical Sanskrit drama are both reflective and constitutive of the patriarchal society in which these works were composed. Women, even when central to the emotional narrative, are linguistically silenced from accessing the language of intellectual and spiritual authority. Through the codified use of Prākṛt, their voices are aestheticized but simultaneously segregated.

Sītā's character in *Kundamālā*, however, reveals the possibility of moral strength, emotional depth, and narrative centrality within these constraints. Diñnāga's dramatization does not subvert the linguistic hierarchy, but it does amplify Sītā's dignity and resilience within the existing framework. Her speech, though in Prākṛt, carries immense emotional and ethical weight, proving that narrative power need not always coincide with linguistic prestige.

Nevertheless, from a modern perspective, the systematic exclusion of women from Sanskrit in drama symbolically reinforces their exclusion from authority, public discourse, and philosophical dialogue. The linguistic structures of Sanskrit drama, therefore, offer a critical lens through which to understand the embedded gender ideologies of ancient Indian culture and literature.

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4. ibid (pratyāgamyā) ka eṣa māṅg vīkṣate. Na ko'pi, ājñaptikara lakṣmaṇavijñāptyā anucarantī taraṅgaimārmanugṛhanāti. (KM. I P. 36) bhāgavatī bhāgirathī
5. aho me adharaṇattaṇaṁ kiṁvālabhamettaeṇa viṇā ṇigahidamhmi (ibid. I, p. 19)
6. evaṁ saṁdiśamteṇa amautteṇa pariccādukkarṁ mayi niravasesaṁ avadīdam. (ibid, I. 22)
7. na yuktaṁ tava niraparādhamināṁ janāṁ sapadi dṛdayato nirvāsayitum kiṁ punarviṣayata iti. (ibid, I. p. 24)

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