



The Portrayal Of Pre-Marital Love In Bhavabhūti's Mahāvīracaritam

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Abstract:

This paper examines the subtle portrayal of romantic affection in Bhavabhūti's Mahāvīracarita, focusing on the delicate rendering of pūrvarāga—the initial stirrings of love—between Rāma and Sītā. While the play is predominantly centered on the heroic (vīra) rasa, Bhavabhūti skilfully carves out space for emotionally rich, virtue-based affection (sneha), distinct from sensual desire (vasanā). The paper analyzes how the poet highlights spiritual love, visual delight (cakṣuḥ-prīti), mutual respect (śraddhā), and moral admiration as essential foundations for an ideal conjugal bond. The study contrasts this restrained romanticism with the more passion-infused love in Mālatīmādhava, positioning Bhavabhūti as a literary forerunner who anticipates later dramatic expressions of refined emotional realism. Ultimately, the analysis underscores the poet's emphasis on inner virtue (guṇa), lineage, and ethical conduct over physical beauty as the basis for enduring love and marriage.

Key Words:

Mahāvīracarita, Bhavabhūti, Rāma and Sītā, pūrvarāga, sneha, cakṣuḥ-prīti, vīrarasa, virtue (guṇa), spiritual love, mutual respect (śraddhā), vasanā, conjugal affection, Sanskrit dRāma, emotional realism.

This literary analysis explores the nuanced depiction of love between Rāma and Sītā in Bhavabhūti's Mahāvīracarita, highlighting how the poet masterfully integrates subtle expressions of early romantic emotion (pūrvarāga) within a play primarily devoted to the heroic (vīra) rasa. Unlike conventional portrayals steeped in sensuality, Bhavabhūti emphasizes a pure, virtue-based affection (sneha) that transcends physical desire. The narrative underscores how mutual admiration, rooted in qualities such as nobility, lineage, valour, and moral conduct, fosters a dignified and spiritually elevated form of love. Through restrained yet emotionally resonant language, Bhavabhūti delicately captures visual delight (cakṣuḥ-prīti), early longing, and soul-deep admiration between the couples—Rāma and Sītā, Lakṣmaṇa and Urmilā—laying a foundation for enduring marital bonds based on mutual respect (śraddhā). The study also contrasts this treatment with the more passion-driven love in Mālatīmādhava, and situates Mahāvīracarita as a precursor to later Sanskrit drama s that privilege emotional realism and virtue-centered affection.

Introduction:

Bhavabhūti, one of the greatest dramatists of classical Sanskrit literature, is renowned for his emotional sensitivity, philosophical depth, and masterful poetic expression. Among his three major plays—Mahāvīracaritam, Mālatīmādhavam, and Uttararāmacaritam—the Mahāvīracaritam offers a significant portrayal of early romantic feelings between Rāma and Sītā, set within the larger framework of Rāma's heroic deeds. While primarily an epic drama of valour, this work subtly captures the essence of pūrvārāga—the tender emotions of love that blossom before marriage. Bhavabhūti's approach to romantic love in Mahāvīracaritam contrasts with the more externalized portrayals of love in the works of Kālidāsa and Bhāsa, where love is often portrayed as a dramatic spectacle. Bhavabhūti's emotional realism suggests that love, especially in the early stages, is a complex inner journey of self-awareness and mutual respect, rather than a simple romantic chase or conquest. This shift marks a significant contribution to Sanskrit dramaturgy.

Bhavabhūti's Emotional Realism:

Unlike many earlier dramatists who focused on external action and formalized courtship, Bhavabhūti turns inward to depict the psychological realities of love. In Mahāvīracaritam, the attraction between Rāma and Sītā is not dramatized through overt declarations but is revealed gradually through glances, gestures, and restrained dialogue. This treatment aligns with the classical Sanskrit aesthetic principle of rasa, particularly śṛṅgāra-rasa (the aesthetic of love), in its sādharmaṇīkaraṇa or universalization, allowing the audience to emotionally identify with the characters. The scenes of emotional depth between Rāma and Sītā exemplify Bhavabhūti's skill in building romantic tension. In the context of Sanskrit drama, love is often portrayed through ritualized gestures and symbols. Bhavabhūti, however, chooses subtle emotional exchanges over overt declarations, using minimal dialogue to evoke powerful emotional responses from the audience. This technique invites the audience to engage with the characters' inner lives more directly.

Characterization of Rāma and Sītā:

Rāma is portrayed not merely as a valiant hero but also as a sensitive youth experiencing the stirrings of love for the first time. His emotions are noble, dignified, and restrained, consistent with his dharmic character. Sītā, too, is presented with emotional grace—she is modest, observant, and spiritually inclined. Their mutual attraction develops within the confines of dharma and cultural decorum, reflecting Bhavabhūti's ideal of love as a sacred bond.

Moments of Emotional Depth:

Several scenes in the drama subtly highlight the emotional bond between Rāma and Sītā. For instance, their first meeting in Janaka's garden, Sītā's inward stirrings upon seeing Rāma, and Rāma's chivalrous demeanour in her presence—these episodes carry deep emotional undercurrents. Though words are few, Bhavabhūti's refined use of imagery and gesture-rich stagecraft allows love to emerge through implication rather than exposition.

Bhavabhūti's Contribution to the Depiction of Pūrvārāga:

Bhavabhūti's handling of pūrvārāga in Mahāvīracaritam marks a turning point in Sanskrit drama. Rather than portraying love as immediate or passionate, he depicts it as a gradual, evolving realization. This psychological subtlety anticipates modern literary sensibilities, placing Bhavabhūti ahead of his time. His portrayal resonates with the Indian ideal of maryādā—dignity and restraint in love, especially in royal or divine contexts. In Mahāvīracarita, though the love between Rāma and Sītā is steeped in deep conjugal affection, the space for pūrvārāga—that tender blossoming of love before union—is but slight. Yet even this sliver of romantic anticipation calls for our careful reflection. At the outset, Bhavabhūti subtly unveils a mutual attraction between the hero and heroine—Rāma and Sītā—rooted in the early stirrings of love. Within this, he weaves a delicate realism, portraying emotions true to life.

Though the play is primarily devoted to the heroic rasa (vīrarasa), and thus offers limited room for romance, Bhavabhūti, with exquisite finesse, evokes scenes of profound, soul-rich love between Rāma and Sītā—even within these narrow confines. These glimpses, while akin in spirit, differ in character from those found in his Mālatīmādhava.

With an economy of words, the poet evokes the early attraction (pūrvarāga), the sacred bond of marriage, Rāma's grief-stricken vulnerability in the desolate forest following Sītā's abduction, and the silent communion of hearts upon their return to Ayodhyā. Even the briefest spark of early love between them, in this context, is worthy of contemplation. Importantly, their love is untouched by bodily desire. Rāma and Sītā dwell in the collective consciousness of the people as embodiments of sanctity. Hence, the poet refrains from portraying sensual stirrings within their hearts. Instead, he roots their love in inner nobility, upholding the dignity that their divine roles demand. Drawing from the well of spiritual affection, he paints their love in hues of quiet devotion.

Their love, in Mahāvīracarita, unfolds from the very moment their eyes meet. The sight of Rāma's serene visage leaves Sītā entranced. She whispers, “सौम्यदर्शनोऽयम्”—a tender sentiment that gently ripens into love. Watching Rāma restore Ahalyā, she gazes at him with awe and growing affection, softly declaring, “His presence befits the form he wears.” Her modest tone reflects her innate grace.

Later, when Rāma is appointed by Viśvāmitra to slay the demoness Tāṭakā, Sītā's heart trembles with dread. Lost in anxious thought, she cries, 'हा धिक्, हा धिक् । एष एवात्र नियुक्तः' ।

Hearing the marvelous account of Sita's divine birth, Rāma, filled with affection for her, says:

"उत्पत्तिर्देवयजनाद् ब्रह्मवादी नृपः पिता । सुप्रसन्नोज्ज्वला मूर्तिरस्यां स्नेहं करोति मे" ।¹

(महावीरचरितम् / प्रथमाङ्कः / श्लोकः २१)

In this, Rāma's affection toward Sītā stems not only from her radiant appearance but also from her divine origin from a sacrificial fire and her lineage from a Brahman-knowing father. This means that the cause of attraction in love is not solely rooted in physical beauty; true affection (sneha) differs from mere sensual desire (vasana-based love). While beauty plays a role in affection, a skilful poet also weaves in factors such as education, lineage, and moral conduct of the hero and heroine.

In contrast to Mālatīmādhava, where the hero and heroine are equally influenced by both affection and sensual desire, in the love between Rāma and Sītā, we experience an overwhelming sense of pure affection (sneha) more than mere passion. When Sītā and Urmilā see Rāma and Lakshmana, they say: 'तत्किमियममृतवर्तिरिव मे चक्षुराप्यायति' । Similarly, regarding Rāma and Lakshmana, Sītā and Urmilā express: 'किमिति सज्जतेऽस्मिल्लोचनानन्दे मे दृष्टिः' ।

Here, the first stage of romantic emotion—visual delight or eye-affection (cakṣuḥ-prīti)—between Rāma and Sītā, and Lakshmana and Urmilā, is subtly expressed by the poet in a few restrained words. The first meeting of both couples brought joy, and that joy originated from affection. Though Sītā is influenced by Rāma's beauty, she is even more impressed by his valour and conduct. Even when ordered by his teacher Viśvāmitra to kill the demoness Tātaka, Rāma hesitates because she is a woman. Sītā is so struck by Rāma's declaration—" भगवन्! स्त्री खल्वियम्"—that she expresses a wonder-filled fondness for him: 'अन्यतोमुख एवास्य चित्तभेदः' ।

Indeed, love rooted in affection can only be strengthened by virtue (guṇa), not by mere infatuation with physical form. In love where affection (sneha) dominates, the emphasis lies more on virtues than on appearance. This kind of noble balance is especially evident in Bhavabhūti's two plays based on the Rāmāyana. Mutual respect (śraddhā), like affection, is a foundational element of a successful marriage.

Such respect, rooted in a combination of virtues, grows over time. Even in the early stages of love (pūrvārāga), the recognition of each other's qualities is essential for a healthy and enduring marital relationship. Thus, Bhavabhuti deliberately emphasizes that mutual recognition of virtues is essential for a successful union.

In this regard, it can be considered that Bhavabhuti, predating Kōlidāsa, provides guidance for future playwrights. In the first act of Svapnavāsavadatta, the portrayal of King Udayana's intense grief, mistakenly believing his wife Vāsavadattā to be dead, establishes his profound and steadfast love. This emotional depiction also firmly establishes Padmāvatī's prior affection for him. When Padmāvatī, reassured by a student's account that Udayana has gradually regained consciousness from the stupor of grief, she exclaims: 'दिष्ट्या धियते । मोहं गत इति श्रुत्वा शून्यमिव मे हृदयम्' । When Rāma, acting on Viśvāmitra's command to protect the Brahmins, prepares to slay Tōtakō, Sita troubled in her heart reproaches fate, saying: 'अहो । परागत एव । हा धिक् हा धिक् । उत्पातपातावलिखि सा हताशा महानुभावमभिद्रवति' । Here the repetition of "अहो!" expresses her intense distress and love for Rāma . Indeed, at first sight itself, Sitā became so deeply affectionate toward Rāma that she could not bear even the thought of harm befalling him.

Though Rāma is drawn to Sita, when he hears the demon Ravana seeking her hand, he remains utterly composed and, with a heavy heart, says to Lakshmana:

"साधारण्यान्निरातंकः कन्यामन्योऽपि याचते किं पुनर्जगतां जेता प्रपौत्रः परमेष्ठिनः ।"

This also illustrates Rāma's nobility of character—that he does not act to obtain Sitā without the permission of his elders. The portrayal of their mutual affection and recognition of each other's virtues leads appropriately to marriage, as presented by the playwright in the first act of Mahāvīracarita. The deeper expressions of their flawless conjugal love, however, are to be discussed in another chapter. Since Uttararāmacarita focuses exclusively on the theme of marital love, it has been intentionally left out of this current discussion.

In this play, Bhavabhuti writes about the incident where, in the hermitage of Viśvāmitra, to protect the yajna, Rāma and Lakshmana are sent by the sage Viśvāmitra to his ashram.

In that sacrifice, the younger brother of King Seeradhwaja, Kushadhwaja, arrived accompanied by Sitā and Urmilā. Upon seeing the rescue of Ahilyā by Rāma, Kushadhwaja was greatly astonished and thought, "If the vow of breaking the bow was not made, then surely Rāma would have married Sitā without any hindrance." At that very moment, a messenger of Rāvaṇa arrived, intending to inform the demon king of his desire to abduct Sitā. It is noteworthy that in the epic by the ancient poet Vālmīki, there is no interference by Rāvaṇa in the marriage of Sitā. However, due to the beauty of Rāma, Śūrpaṇakhā, insulted by Lakshmana, went to Rāvaṇa to narrate the beauty of Sitā, inciting him to abduct her.

In contrast, in the play by Bhavabhuti, Rāvaṇa's invincible power is shown defeated by Rāma, and the story of Sitā's marriage is presented. The romantic aspect is not the focus of this play, but the love between Rāma and Sitā is still given importance. The prominence of marital affection, which Bhavabhuti emphasized with great effort in the Uttararāmacharita, is also evident here. This can be understood as one of the reasons why we deduce that Mahāvīracarita is a precursor to Uttararāmacharita. The marriage of Rāma and Sitā is not merely an ordinary event but is imbued with deep affection.

Both of them were bound by mutual love and affection. The primary expression of their mutual affection was formed before their marriage. Their affection, not as a mere inclination, but as a profound love, was understood by us. Their marriage was solemnized only after the breaking of the divine bow. After the breaking of the bow, when Parashurāma came to confront Rāma, it was Rāma's words, spoken within the inner chambers, that beautifully portrayed the love between the couple, as the poet wrote:

महाभाग्यमहानिधिर्भगवतो देवस्य दग्धुः पुरा माम्नायेन विशुद्धसत्वचरितः शिष्यो भृगूणां पतिः ।

द्रष्टव्यः स च मां दिदृक्षुरपि च त्यक्त्वा द्वियं मुग्धया सन्नासाद्यमाभिजात्यनिभृतस्नेहो मयि द्योत्यते ।¹²

(महावीरचरितम् / प्रथमाङ्कः / श्लोकः ३१)

Here, Rāma, who is attached to the bliss of newlywed happiness, has taken it upon himself to protect everything. He says: 'Festivals are of no worth, nor do adversaries have any meaning.' As Rāma, eager to seek out Parashurāma, is ready to go to him, Sitā's anxious description reveals her intense love for him. She says to her friend: 'So, hastening, we may expect the arrival of the noble son of the sage, with all speed. She rushes to prevent her husband from leaving.' Thus, through her friends, she informs Rāma: 'Kumar, Kumar! Look! See how the bride, hurriedly, bids farewell, in distress, to her husband.'

Sitā knows that her husband is not only a benefactor of the three worlds, the lord of all gods and demons, but also a victorious and gloriously adorned figure. The poet skilfully captures Rāma's internal conflict, on one side the attraction of his newlywed love, and on the other, the summons of Parashurāma, who has come for a battle.

This passage intricately portrays the themes of love, affection, and internal conflict between the duties and emotions of the characters.

In the Rāmāyana, after the marriage of Lord Rāma and Sitā, the newlywed couple, along with their relatives, went to Ayodhya. There, Rāma, along with Sitā and Lakshmana, spent several joyful days. However, in the Mahāvīracarita. play, the poet does not describe the kind of marital bliss that Rāma and Sitā experienced. At the time of their marriage, the māṅgalika (auspicious) marriage knot was never untied. Yet, for Rāma's departure to the forest, a formal decree from the queen mother was received. This marks the beginning of a more intense and challenging phase of Rāma's life. The sorrow caused by the abduction of his wife created a situation for him that resembled the fierce wave of an ocean, as if the treasure in the middle were being consumed by a blazing fire.

It is seen that Rāma, who is tormented by the sorrow of separation from his wife, is eagerly longing to hear the sweet words of his beloved.

न्यक्कारो हृदि वज्रकील इव मे तीव्रः परिस्पन्दते घोराब्धे तमसीव मज्जति मनः समीलितं लज्जया ।

शोकस्तातविपत्तिजो दहति मां नास्त्येव यस्मिन् क्रिया मर्माणीव पुनश्छिनत्ति करुणा सीतां वराकीं प्रति ।¹³

(महावीरचरितम् / पञ्चमाङ्कः / श्लोकः २२)

Sitā is not only Rāma's wife but also his beloved companion in the forest, someone dear to him in every way. 'प्रिये हा हा क्वासि प्रकिर मधुरां वाचमथवा पराभूतैरित्यं विलपनविनोदोऽप्यसुलभः' ।

After defeating Ravana in battle, returns to Ayodhya with Sitā. At the conclusion of the battle, Sitā is brought before Rāma, and harsh words are directed toward her in the Rāmāyana. However, these words do not appear in Bhavabhuti's play, where the character of Sitā is treated with great compassion, embodying the gentle and serious nature of a representative of women. In the Rāmāyana, harsh words spoken by Rāma in the play are absent. Instead, Sitā's purity is depicted through her trial by fire, and in the end, she is comforted by the Aryan prince, her fear of the demon king dispelled, and she remains unwavering in her love for her husband. Thus, Rāma, returning to Ayodhya, reminisces about past events and reflects on his wife with deep affection.

Conclusion:

In Mahāvīracaritam, Bhavabhūti successfully blends the grandeur of epic narrative with the intimacy of human emotion. The depiction of Rāma and Sītā's pre-marital love stands out for its elegance, depth, and emotional authenticity. His portrayal of the early love between Rāma and Sītā—subtle, spiritual, and dignified—marks a defining moment in classical Sanskrit dramaturgy. The restraint with which pūrvārāga is depicted becomes a poetic strength, allowing Bhavabhūti to blend the heroic with the humane, and the divine with the emotionally real. It adds a unique dimension to Rāma's character—highlighting not just his heroic valour but also his inner emotional life. In doing so, Bhavabhūti not only enriches the tradition of Sanskrit drama but also offers a timeless reflection on love, virtue, and human connection.

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