

THE ALLURING LADYLOVE

This study explores a favourite theme in Indian literature, that of the intelligent, resourceful woman who manages to preserve her love, or her own life and that of the people she loves, through her intelligence. A related literary motif, the passionate nature of women and their avowedly strong sensual inclinations is also investigated as a counterpoint to the scenes described. To corroborate this idea of female passion, it is interesting to notice that throughout the *Kathāsaritsāgara* many females, and especially the *vidyādhari*, declare their love to the males they wish to marry.

These stories often show also the continuity and development of the ancient figure of the *sakhī*, 'the female friend', usually seen as messenger between two lovers. Here one often sees several women collaborating as friends or helpers in the realisation of a woman's project.

I would also like to contrast the stories of 'good' resourceful women with those of 'dishonest' women. In many stories ready wit is praised and rewarded regardless of circumstances, but in most instances cunning dishonest women ultimately come to a bad end, whereas resourceful honest women always manage to fulfil their wishes. If they want to conquer a lover or win a husband and preserve him, counting on their own forces, they can either resort to asceticism or to cunning.

Finally, of the two conventional modes of portrayal of an erotic situation, *sambhogaśāra* and *vipralambhaśāra*, I would like to

concentrate more on the *sambhoga* aspect (love enjoyed together, in the union of the lovers), rather than on the *vipralambha* or *viraha* one (love suffered in separation). In this regard, I would like to recall that here the usual formula to conclude a romantic story is not "and they lived happily ever after", but "and though on earth, they continually enjoyed divine pleasures".

Examples will be drawn from some late texts, Somadeva's *Kathāsaritsāgara*, Kṣemendra's *Narmamālā* and *Samayamātṛkā*, Bhavabhūti's *Mālatīmādhava*, Īaṣkara's *Īradātilakabhāṣa*, and the *Óvaṣyaka* Commentaries, as well as from the *Sattasaṣ* and Kāḷḍāsa's *Īakuntalā*.

Traditionally the particular sphere of interest of women is *kāma*, rather than *artha* or *dharma*, and the most important aim in the life of a woman is obtaining a husband. To achieve this end women are prepared to undergo the staunchest ascetic practices. The paradigmatic example here is that of Goddess Umā/ Pārvatṣ, who submitted herself to the most severe asceticism in order to obtain Īiva as her husband. Such determination explains well the contrast between the two faces of the customary portrait of a good woman. She is shown as very shy and modest, but at the same time authors stress the fact that she harbours a very passionate nature, capable of expressing the emotion of love in unequivocal physical manifestations. A very elaborate dramatic theory of stage performance classifies the spontaneous physical reactions, to be enacted realistically through *sattvikābhinaya* 'interiorized recitation', that stem from the different situations of a love relationship. This however applies also in the case of male characters, which are often described in parallel agonies of love-fever. Males and females are shown as experiencing constant longing, lack of appetite, and relentless heat, a

fever close to delirium, which is traditionally described to proceed through five stages, the last of which is death.

What is interesting here is to see the most innocent, chaste and demure young women undergoing momentous transformations as soon as they fall in love. Their new condition then, as they become prey to the wildest longings, and are ready to give themselves to their beloved, does not differ from that of 'easy women', such as adulterous wives, unchaste widows, and courtesans. Indian literature presents women who express sexual desire in a more or less open manner, and dwells both on their feelings and their attitudes. In these texts, moreover, the Love god is shown as reigning supreme in all the realms of existence, dictating his laws to humans, gods and demigods alike. A story in the Naravāhanadatta's cycle¹, which narrates the long and painful love sufferings of Padmāvatī, daughter to the king of the *gandharvas*, shows how strongly the influence of love is experienced in all classes of divine and semi-divine beings. At the same time it is an example of female asceticism freely undertaken to bring about sexual union.

The story starts in heaven, when Goddess Pārvatī curses a female *gaṇa* and her beloved who had dared to exchange passionate glances while the goddess was distressed in her longing for absent Śiva. The couple and their friends would have to undergo a series of unhappy rebirths in various different realms before being united again. In her life as a *gandharva* princess Padmāvatī's separation from the *gaṇa*, who in his turn had become the *vidyādhara* prince Muktapthalaketu, betrothed to her, brings

¹ SOMADEVA, *Kathāsaritsāgara*, ed. by Pandit Durgāprasād and Kāṣināth Pāṇḍurājg Parab, Bombay 1889, *lambhaka* XVII, called 'Padmāvatī'.

about such an utter transformation that even her own body marvels and laughs at her:

'The same girl who previously, through shyness, could not even bear any talk of a husband, now, deprived of her beloved, is reduced in this condition! - so her limbs, whitened by the sandal paste dried up through their own high temperature, [seem to] laugh at her.'²

The length of the period of separation Padmāvatī has to suffer is further explained as the result of another meaningful curse. As a young girl she had made fun of *siddhā* maiden, engaged in fierce asceticism to win husband, and the *siddhā* had cursed her to undertake painful asceticism for the same end³ when she came of age.

Burning and delirium are the usual symptoms of the love fever, especially in the case of lovers in separation but we find also other, more intimate signs of passion. Bhavabhūti's *Mālatīmādhava*⁴ provides a startling picture set in a very embarrassing situation. Not knowing to be in the presence of her lover (disguised as her sleeping girlfriend Mālatī), Madayantikā, the heroine of the subplot, tells her friends Lavaṅgikā and Buddharakṣit the previous night's romantic dream. She tells them how she imagined to be kissed by her lover and to melt with delight, and that just when, dishevelled, she was about to grant him something more, she woke up. This and the

² Idem, *Lambhaka* XVII, called 'Padmāvatī', *taraṅga* 4, vv. 107-108. Notice the usual symbolism of the white colour, that stands for a brilliant laughter. All translations, unless stated otherwise, are mine.

asahīṣṭa na yā pĕrvau hriyā varakathām api |
imām avasthām saiṣādyā prāptā priyatamau vinā ||107||
iti tasyā hasantīva svāny evaṅgāni samprati |
sautāpaṣuṣyacchrīkhaṇḍasitāni kṛtinām vara ||108||

³ Ibidem, *Lambhaka* XVII, *taraṅga* 4, vv. 177-180. Ironically, in the course of the story one learns that the *siddhā* maiden was performing asceticism in order to win exactly the same husband as Padmāvatī (*taraṅga* 6, vv. 199-207).

⁴ BHAVABHŪTI, *Mālatīmādhava*, critically ed. by M. Coulson, Delhi 1989, act VII, pp. 153-158.

following exchange reveal both the naturalness of women's sexual behaviour, and the convention that wants this behaviour to be kept strictly private. Here Lavaṅgikā, the attendant of Mālatī, laughing says:

"Madayantikā dear, go on with the story - the Buddharakṣitā, eyes wide with love and mirth, notices that the mattress you have been laying on is in no fit state to be shown to the servants, and so it is hidden beneath the bedclothes. Am I right?

MADAYANTIKĀ Oh, stop your nonsensical jokes!

BHDDHARĀKṢITĀ My dear, she's Mālatī's friend - that's why such comments come naturally to her.

MADAYANTIKĀ Don't make fun of Mālatī in that way".⁵

Here, as in other texts, the sensual passion expressed by good family women is accompanied by single-mindedness of attachment. Madayantikā is the sister of a King's counsellor, therefore presumably of Kṣatriya or Brahmin family, which demand good behaviour of its women. A much more outrageous image of female sensuality is presented in Kṣemendra's *Narmamālā*,⁶ a witty satire, with the portrayal of a young *raṭhā* 'widow' or 'slut'.⁷ This *raṭhā* is the sister of an odious *Kāyastha*, the evil protagonist of the satire, and as such her extreme sexual promiscuity is the object of Kṣemendra's pointed slander. When circumstances are so dramatically different, even the language has to comply and it becomes quite audacious:

III.23 "The widow's mind is distraught"

⁵ Translation by M. Coulson, in M. COULSON, *Three Sanskrit Plays*, Harmondsworth, 1981, p. 383.

⁶ Cf. KṢEMENDRA, *Deśopadeśa and Narmamālā*, ed. by M. Kaul, KSTS, Poona 1923; A. SHARMA, E.V.V. RÓGHAVÓCHÓRYA, D.G. PADHYE, *Minor Works of Kṣemendra (Kṣemendralaghukāvyaṣaṅgraha)*, Sanskrit Academy Series n. 7, Hyderabad 1961. This translation is conducted on my own edition, cf. F. BALDISSERA, *The Narmamālā of Kṣemendra*, forthcoming.

⁷ *Narmamālā* III, vv. III 21-44.

unless her pleasure box,
intoxicated by passion
and lusting for men with stiff rods,
is violently pounded
in sexual intercourse."

III.30 "When the widow gazes at a youth,
she pretends to knit her eyebrows,
but she is thrilled
to think about clasping his neck".⁸

III.31 "Recalling the joys of lovemaking,
the widow, with her plump thighs and breasts,
kneads her pussy by night, panting all the while."

III.32 "Gazing at her handsome young lover
the widow bends slightly,
oozing juice in streams,
as a cow gushes milk."

III. 34 "If a man had a long and erect penis,
which he had begged and obtained from a horse
then he might be able to satisfy the widow.
Or perhaps not!"

Her scandalous relationship with a young *brahmacâri*
becomes the object of a further description:

III.39 "These two by night,
the widow and the *brahmacârin*,
in their mutual desire
make the earth quake
with their well-shaven vulva and penis.'

III.40'Obeisance to the *brahmacârin*,
that treasure house of hypocrisy,
who by day worships in the holy fords,

⁸ An expression which has the further connotation of "making love".

and by night is intoxicated
through drinking from the widow's cunt!"

The last verse plays on a double entendre: the word *tālaka* means both 'door lock' and 'tantric adept', so the *ra^ṭā* here is seen as either engaged in onanism, or in secret love affair, both undertaken under the cover of *liṣga* worship.

III.44 'Having locked the door	'Having introduced
tantric adept	
to her house	into her
house	
under the pretext of performing	
<i>liṣga</i> worship,	
the widow eases her itch	
with a skin <i>liṣga</i> .'	

This extreme description is better understood when one considers that the word *ra^ṭā* itself alludes to an unprincipled woman, which is therefore deemed to be *labhyā* '[easily] conquerable'. In the literature a figure endowed with similar characteristics is the adulterous wife, *pāradārikā*, also depicted as *labhyā*. Social restrictions induced by strict marriage rules did not leave much room for romantic attachments and love marriages. A large part of the fictional literature is concerned with adulterous love as the only form of true love. This is particularly obvious in the divine loves of Kṛṣṇa and the Gopis, a well-known theme, and one that does not need to be further discussed here. I would like to point out, instead, that in order to be "conquerable" a married woman has to be very resourceful, as her daily life is usually crowded with family members, and fraught with family obligations. The late *bhāṭa Īradātilaka* shows a few instances of this plight. A particularly

⁹ ĪRAKARA, *Īradātilakabhāṭa*, ed. and trsl. by F. Baldissera, B.O.R.I., Poona, 1980.

sympathetic view for the difficult situation of young women in the house of their fathers-in-law is expressed in the following verse¹⁰:

96. "The husband does not tolerate
any free going [of his wife] under any pretext,
his brothers grumble when she puts on all the ornaments
to be worn on festive occasions,
she does not dare to stay
even for a moment in the house of others
because of the red eyes of her mother-in-law,
and so how could the time of the deer-eyed ones
be spent in the house of their in-laws ?"

In the same work a man tells a friend his recent adventure with his neighbour's wife. Here the right mood is suggested by a clever allusion understood by both parties. The stanzas conveying the secret love messages furthermore, are subtle variations of verses from older texts. The man decides to try his luck, and recites this verse in the garden:

tatra kiṃ vartase bhṛṅgi nṛṣe sārṣe mudhā |
nirgaccha tiṣṭhate ko'pi cĕtas tvaccumbanonmukha' ||157||

157. "O female bee, why do you stay in vain in the lotus
that has no nectar [/passion] ?
come out, there is a certain mango tree
which longs for your kisses."

This theme recalls that of a Prakrit verse in *Īkuntalā'* Fifth Act¹¹ (v.1, sung offstage by Hapsapadikā, a previous lover of the king):

¹⁰ *svairāṃ sañjaritāṃ patir na sahate vyājāntare'āpi vā*
kṛtsne'ĕtsavama'ṭane'u ca tathā garjanti tadbhrātara' |
sthātup na kṣamate kṣa'ap̄ paraghe ḅvaḅrĕka'āyeka'āt
tat kena ḅvaḅrur ālaye mṛgadḅḅ jāyeta kālakrama' || 96||

¹¹ KÓLÁDÓSA, *Abhijñānaḅākuntalam*, ed. by M.R.Kale,
Delhi/Patna/Varanasi 1969.

ahi^avamahuloluvo tumapu taha paricumbia cĒamañjar¥µ |
kamalavasaimetta^ivvudo mahuar vimhario si ^apu kaha
 ||1||

1. "O [male] bee, how [can it be that],
 in your desire for fresh honey,
 after you kissed in that way the mango blossom,
 you have [then] forgotten it, being happy
 with a mere residence in a lotus!"

It is interesting to notice that the *Īradātilak* uses the same setting of Kālṽdāsa's verse, mango, lotus flower, bee (that is now called *bhṚṣgi*, not *mahuar*), to convey a covered love-message. Here however the circumstances are slightly different. The gender role is reversed: the verse is sung by the man, so now the mango tree (and not its blossom) represents the prospective male lover, not the woman, and the lotus (now called *sārasa*, not *kamala*) stands for the husband, not for the queen. Moreover, as this is apparently his first approach to the woman, there cannot be mention of forgetfulness neither any hint of jealousy.

The following verse reveals the cunning of the woman, who replies to his suggestions by addressing these words to the woman next door:

ḐvaḐrĒr andhatarā patiḐ ca bhavane Ḑete sapatnyā samapu
ceṡ¥ kvāpi gatā na ko'pi vipa^iµ gantup samāste jana' |
vidyante kramukā' sudhā ca bhavane dvitrā^i santy atr
cet
tāmbĒlacchadanāni samprati diḐa prāta' pradāsyāmi t
 ||158||

158. "My mother-in-law is completely blind,
 my husband sleeps in the house with my co-wife,
 our servant is gone somewhere,
 there is not a single person who could go to the market.
 In the house there are betel nuts and lime powder.

If you have there two or three betel leaves,
give them [to me] just now.
Tomorrow morning I shall give them back to you."

This verse seems to echo a famous Prakrit verse of the
*Sattasaṭ*¹², discussed in Ónandavardhana's *Dhvanyāloka*¹³:

atthā ettha nimajjai ettha aham ettha pariya^o saalo |
mā pahia rattandhaa sejjāe maha nimajjihisi ||669||

"My mother-in-law goes to bed here,
here I do, [and] here all the servants.
Traveller, blinded by darkness
do not lie down on my bed!"

The suggestion in these stanzas is two different types.
The Prakrit verse is a more open invitation, but the
description of the sleeping places suggests only that the
husband is absent. The *Īradātilaka*'s is more veiled, but
gives a psychological reason for the woman's wish to meet
a lover, for her husband is described as sleeping with
her rival. The two then take advantage of this
opportunity, and the lover's description of the couple's
first love making recalls mainly the woman's passion:

159. "When I loved that deer-eyed woman very tenderly,
her vine-like arms made a tinkling sound from her moving
bracelets,
and she became soft with delight;
she embraced me with her limbs
blossoming with horripilation in love-making,
with eyes half closed in pleasure,
and murmured "Don't, don't! Let me go!"

¹² It is v. 669 in A. WEBER, *Das Saptacatakam des Hāla*:
Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes VII.4, Leipzig (repr.,
Nendeln 1966).

¹³ ÓNANDAVARDHANA, *Dhvanyāloka*, ed. with the *Locana* of Abhinava and
the *Bālapriyā* of Rāmaśāraṅka, by Patthabhirama Shastri, Haridas SK.
Series n. 135, Varanasi 1940, p.71.

Don't leave me! Well done! Gently! Harder!"

"From then on our mutual love became more and more intense".

Finally the man concludes his story with a declaration of sorts:

"Such in fact is the love of these women:

160. Whether they have a wife or not,
men acquire the love of courtesans
by paying a price,
but the love they make to someone else's wife
is in any case true love".

Stories of resourceful adulteresses are found throughout Indian literature. Often an interesting feature is their ability to use language in such a way as to appear to tell the truth. This happens already in the ancient story of Ahalyā, the wife of sage Gautama, who had betrayed him with Indra¹⁴. When Gautama asked her "What is there?" she replied in Prakrit "majjao", an utterance that could be read as "a cat", or "my lover". The curse she got was mild and did not last long, as she had managed to preserve somehow the truth. A story of an even more cunning wife is told in the *Óvaßyaka* Commentaries (6th or 7th century). It presents some interesting connotations found also in the famous story of the ivory sculptor's intelligent daughter of the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, whereas the trick of the ordeal in its end is very similar to the one resorted to by Tristan and Yseult. I

¹⁴ Cf. for instance *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Bālakāṇḍa*, *Adhyāya* 4, v. 6 seqq., Critical Edition, Oriental Institute of Baroda, 1969.

¹⁵ *ÓvaßyakacĒrī*, 2 vols. (1-11). Ratlam, 1928-29. English translation of Nalini Balbir in P. GRANOFF (ed.) *The Clever Adulteress and Other Stories, A Treasury of Jain Literature*, Delhi 1993, pp. 21-22.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, *Lambhaka* XII, called *Íaßāṣkavatī*, *taraṣga* 8, First Story of the *vetāla*, vv.60-185.

the *ÓvaḥyakacĒr̥i* the coveted woman managed to convey secret messages to her prospective lover by mistreating go-between, a young Buddhist nun. She beat her and left the imprint of her five blackened fingers on her back suggesting that she would meet her lover on the fifth night of the dark fortnight. Next time the nun came, she beat her and threw her out, by a gap in the fence, into a clump of *aḥoka* trees - thereby indicating the place of the rendez-vous. But her most ingenious trick was the staging of a false ordeal, to defend herself from the accusations of her father-in-law, who had managed to spy on her. She asked her lover to help her, and he stood ready, disguised as a demon. She then ran towards the gigantic statue of a *yakṣa*: "(It was like this: a guilty person could not walk between the legs of the *yakṣa* without being trapped between the *yakṣa*'s testicles. An innocent person would be released)"¹⁷. As she ran, the disguised lover appeared, and caught her by her sari. Then she told the *yakṣa* that she had not been touched by anyone other than her husband and that demon, and he had to let her pass between his legs.

A similar presence of mind in the face of death is shown by the faithful bride *Rēpavatī* in order to rescue her husband in the *Kathāsaritsāgara*¹⁸. Her bridegroom *Keṣata* was caught by a *rākṣasa*, who had allowed him to fulfil his obligations (getting married) before eating him. When *Keṣata*, faithful to his word, returned to the *rākṣasa*, *Rēpavatī* begged the monster to eat her in his stead, for what would she do without him? The *rākṣasa* suggested she could beg, and when she replied that nobody would give alms to a woman, he said: "If somebody refuses to give you the alms you beg for his head will shatter into a hundred pieces". After the *rākṣasa* spoke, she replied: "Then do you give me m

¹⁷ P. GRANOFF, *op. cit.*, p.22.

¹⁸ SOMADEVA, *op. cit.*, *Lambhaka* VXVIII, called *Viṣamaḥṣṭa*, *taraṅga* 4, vv. 186-190.

husband as alms!" The *rākṣasa* refused to give him, and a once his head burst and he died"¹⁹.

Other women in the *Kathāsaritsāgara* had to pretend to be in love with a villain in order to escape him. This occurred both to honest and dishonest women. An instance of the latter presents the motif of the cut tongue, which shall be found later also in the *Canterbury Tales*. In the Indian story²⁰ a cunning woman, Siddhikarṣ, the pupil of a corrupt buddhist nun, uses two different devices to save her life and her stolen wealth.

Disguised as a servant she robs a rich merchant. As she runs away with his gold, a *ḍomba* follows her to steal it. She notices him, so she stops under a tree and tries to tie a rope to a branch in order to hang herself. Then she asks him to help her fix the knot, and begs him to show her how to proceed. The *ḍomba* puts his head in the noose and Siddhikarṣ removes his foothold and has him hanged. But the merchant and his servants are coming in hot pursuit. She hides in the tree, and soon one of the servant climbs up. Immediately she tells him she is in love with him, and shall share the gold with him. She embraces him, and cuts his tongue with her teeth. The man falls down, full of blood and incapable of speaking, and all the others run away, thinking he is possessed by a demon.

A similar situation occurs in Kṣemendra's *Samayamātṛkā*. The protagonist, a wily *kuṭṭan* who changes her name at every turn in her story, at some stage in her career as a prostitute ends up in jail. There she befriends a gaoler and once, kissing him while he is drunk, without stopping the kiss she bites off his tongue. Then, as he is weakened and incapable of shouting, she exchanges her own

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, vv. 188-189:

yo na dāsyati bhikṣuṃ te yācitas tasya yāsyati |
 Batadhā Bira ity ukte rākṣasena ca sābravṛt || 188||
 tarhi tvam eva me dehi bhartṛbhikṣum imam iti |
 adadac ca mamārāḥu Bṛ̃amĒrdhā rākṣasa' || 189||

²⁰ *Ibidem*, *Lambhaka* II, called *Kathāmukha*, *taraṅga* 5, vv. 94-112.

clothes for his and departs²¹. The whole satire shows her tremendous initiative: she goes from work to work, always ready to invent new devices. It is difficult to believe that such a cunning person seems to always end up in trouble, and has to start anew every time. The beginning of the *Samayamātā* sees her in what is perhaps her last job, keeping house and accounts for a young and beautiful courtesan whom she undertakes to instruct in the ways of the world.

Other stories show chaste women who pretend to fall in love with men in order to protect their chastity. One of the most articulate of the *Kathāsaritsāgara* is the story of Upakośā, the intelligent wife of Vararuci²². This story is also an example of team-work by a group of women. During a long absence of her husband Upakośā is coveted by four suitors: the *rājapurodhas*, 'the king's chaplain', the *daśādhipati*, 'the high magistrate', the *kumārasaciva*, 'the prince's counsellor' and the great merchant Hira'yagupta, with whom her husband had left money for her maintenance. Caught at different times by each of them as she comes back from her ritual bath in the Ganges, Upakośā manages to avoid rape by promising each of them a secret rendez-vous at different times of the same night. With the help of her female servants, she manages to lay a sophisticated trap. Each man, upon arrival, is delayed by a bath and a massage in a darkened room, then is scared by the arrival of the next suitor and persuaded by the servants to hide in the same giant chest, which then gets bolted. The last to arrive, in the last vigil of the night, is merchant Hira'yagupta, who had refused Upakośā her money. She shows him into the empty, darkened room and asks for her money back, to which the merchant replies that he will indeed give it back. Upakośā then, talking to the chest, says: "Listen o divinities, to the words of Hira'yagupta", then leave him to her servants for the bath and the massage. This

²¹ A.SHARMA, E.V.V. RÓGHAVÓCHÓRYA, D.G. PADHYE, *op. cit.*, vv. 48-50.

²² *Ibidem*, *Lambhaka* I, called *Kathāpñtha*, *taraṅga* 4, vv. 30-85.

takes so long that when it is over the sun is about to rise, and so, almost naked, he is thrown out of the house by the servants. Once outside, he realises that they have massaged all his body with lamp black, and rushes home in dismay. Next morning Upakoṣṭhā goes to the king to complain about the unreliability of the merchant. The merchant appears in court and denies owing her anything. No Upakoṣṭhā asks for her household divine images to be brought as witnesses. Ushers bring in the heavy chest and Upakoṣṭhā says: "O divinities, tell in truth what the merchant said, and then go to your dwellings. Otherwise I shall burn you, or I shall open the chest in front of the assembly". The three frightened prisoners in the chest speak and tell what they heard, and the merchant, astonished, confesses. The king then asks for the chest to be opened, and is very surprised to see those three important men "reduced like three blocks of darkness".

Here the female servants help a faithful wife to remain chaste to her husband and to protect his property without having to embarrass the family of her in-laws. Throughout Indian literature the figure of the *sakhī* 'female friend, confidante' helps bringing together lovers in many situations. She conveys messages between lovers, informs the girl's parents of her wishes, helps to arrange elopements, brings about reconciliation between estranged lovers. In many of the late stories the *sakhī* is a semidivine being, capable of carrying her lover to the girl who longs for him. In the *Kathāsaritsāgara*²³ Princess Kaliṅgasenā asks her *asur* friend Somaprabhā to carry the King of Vatsa to her presence, and tells her the story of Aniruddha, taken through the skies to her beloved Uśā by her *apsara* friend Citralekhā. Here we learn that *asur* women consider themselves much more proper than *apsaras*, the wanton heavenly nymphs. Somaprabhā is married, and could never touch a man other than her husband. She agrees instead to take Kaliṅgasenā to see first her promise

²³ *Ibidem*, *Lambhaka* VI, called *Madanamañcukā*, *taraṅga* 5, vv.10-45.

bridegroom, old King Prasenajit, and then the King of Vatsa.

The *Īradātilaka* presents a similar story of lover helped by a semidivine *sakhī*. Here it is a fairy *yakṣiṇī* "who swoops down from the pinnacle of the palace like a hawk", and then transports the princess, together with her bed, out of the palace window and onto the lover's terrace.

Stolen love is the favourite protagonist of these romantic stories, where women, in the role of heroines or female friends, have to use all their ingenuity to get the beloved they want rather than the one appointed to them. In this, their life is in their eloquence. Their language, which can be sometimes sign language, is suggestive in the most sophisticated way, full of metaphors and innuendoes. As in the story of the *yakṣiṇī* ordeal, in certain circumstances the important matter is not only truth, but its interpretation and how one tells it.

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