



## EXPRESSION OF MOTHERHOOD OF THE COURTESAN *VASANTASENĀ* IN THE EPISODE *MṚCCHAKAṬĪKA*

Dipa Pramanick <sup>1</sup>  & Dr. Madhulika Verma <sup>2</sup>

### RESEARCH ARTICLE



#### Author Details:

<sup>1</sup> Department of Sanskrit, Faculty of Humanities, Ranchi University, Ranchi, Jharkhand, India; <sup>2</sup> Associate Professor, Department of Sanskrit, Faculty of Humanities, Ranchi University, Ranchi, Jharkhand, India

#### Corresponding Author:

Dipa Pramanick

#### DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.260402118>

#### Abstract

In Sanskrit dramaturgy, theatrical performances are divided into ten major and eighteen minor forms, among which *Mṛcchakaṭika* is classified as a *Prakarāṇa* or “episode.” Playwright *Śūdraka* himself identifies the play as such through his *Sūtradhāra*. While episodes are usually named after their protagonists, *Śūdraka*’s choice of the title *Mṛcchakaṭika* – meaning “The Little Clay Cart” – symbolically represents purity, humility, and transformation. The central figure, *Vasantsenā*, is a courtesan who transcends her social status through her moral virtues and maternal instincts. Born into a marginalized class, she embodies the universal essence of womanhood, challenging rigid social hierarchies. Through her compassionate acceptance of *Cārudatta*’s son, *Rohasena*, as her own, *Vasantsenā* attains spiritual motherhood that defies conventional norms. Her character portrays a woman’s struggle to assert dignity, love, and moral worth beyond societal boundaries. *Śūdraka* uses *Vasantsenā*’s transformation – from courtesan to ideal mother – to critique social prejudices and affirm that virtue and humanity are defined by deeds rather than birth or lineage. The playwright thus elevates *Vasantsenā* as a symbol of moral strength, feminine power, and maternal sanctity. Through *Mṛcchakaṭika*, *Śūdraka* articulates a timeless human truth: that the highest form of womanhood is realized not through social position but through compassion, sacrifice, and motherhood – qualities that render *Vasantsenā* an enduring icon of ethical and emotional nobility in Sanskrit literature.

**Keywords:** *Śūdraka*, *Vasantsenā*, *Cārudatta*, *Rohasena*, Sanskrit drama, Motherhood

#### Introduction

For the sake of anything auspicious, being together is called literature. The word *sāhita* is formed by adding the suffix *śyañ* to the word *saha*. The origin of the word *sāhitya* in literature is “*sāhitayoḥ bhāvah sāhityam*” (Verma, 2016), meaning the coexistence of word and meaning, or in other words, being together. One distinction in this literature is *rūpaka*. And one distinction of *rūpaka* is *prakaraṇa*. The heroine of this *prakaraṇa* is the courtesan *Vasantsenā* (Konar, 2024). The meaningfulness of this *prakaraṇa* lies in *Vasantsenā* presenting herself as a mother from being a courtesan (Sharma et al., 2000). When *Vasantsenā* first embraced her son *Rohasena* with affection, *Rohasena* did not accept *Vasantsenā* as his mother in the form of an adorned mother because he had never seen his biological mother in such an adorned state (Pati, 2019). So, the courtesan *Vasantsenā* opened up all her adornments to establish herself as a mother in the eyes of her son. And with all her adornments, she had laid out all the jewellery on the clay cart to make a golden chariot for her son *Rohasena* (Dahal, 2011). It can naturally be understood that *Vasantsenā* had sacrificed her lineage, wealth, everything just to fulfil her desire to be a mother. *Vasantsenā* wanted to be *Rohasena*’s mother at any cost, and she did not just want to be a mother but also presented herself as a bride.

#### Position of Women in social perspective

The emergence of *Śūdraka* occurred during the Christian fourth century. At that time, through the episode named *Mṛcchakaṭika*, a clear idea about women could be obtained in contemporary society. In this episode, much information about the women of *Ujjayinī* can be found. At that time, generally, three types of women were known in society.

**Unrevealed Woman (Bride):** Women of this unrevealed category could elevate themselves to the position of a high-class bride through marriage. And in society, the honor of the high-class bride was the highest. These women naturally remained modest and disciplined, to whom the husband was an embodiment of adornment. "आर्यपुत्र एव मम आभरणविशेष" – मृच्छकटिकम् षष्ठोऽङ्कः [“*Āryaputra*

eva mama ābharaṇaviśeṣaḥ” – *Mṛcchakaṭikam Śaṣtho ’nkaḥ*] (Dey & Siddhanta, 1999; 342). The place of these women in society was internal. If there was a depiction of women of this category, they were termed as *Dhūtā*.

**Bhujisya (Servant):** These *Bhujisya* women were generally servants. They served both men and women. By exchanging money, these women could be liberated from their servitude. And they could also be engaged in marriage with people of the upper class. If there was a depiction of women of this *Bhujisya* category, they were termed as *Madanikā*.

**Prakāśanārī (Courtesan):** Women of this type were rich in wealth. Through wealth, these women could gain benefits. Women of this category were not bound in the bond of marriage. "ससुवर्णा सहिरण्या नवनाटकदर्शनेतिथितो सुत्रधारीव वसन्तसेना नाम गणिका" ["*Sasuvārṇā sahiranyaṇā navanāṭakadaraśanotthito sūtradhārīva Vasantasenā nāma gaṇikā*"] (Upādhyāya, 2001). An example of a woman of this category was *Vasantasenā*.

**Position of Vasanta Sena in the Social Perspective:** In society's view, *Vasantasenā* was a courtesan or prostitute. Socially, these women held a very low status. In the *Kāruṇa* society, people could indulge in the pleasures of courtesans by paying money. These women's amenities were considered part of society.

“तरुणजनसहायश्चिन्त्यतां वेशवासो  
विगणय गणिका त्वां मार्गजाता लतेवा  
वहसि हि धनहार्यं पण्यभूतं शरीरम्  
सम्मूचर भद्रे सुप्रियं चाप्रियं च”॥ मृच्छकटिकम्, प्रथमोऽङ्कः / श्लोक ३१

["Consider, O courtesan, the company of young men as your livelihood.

Reckon yourself, O *gaṇikā*, as one who walks the public road, like a creeper exposed to all.

For indeed, your body – meant for earning wealth – has become merchandise.

Therefore, O gentle lady, serve alike those who love you and those who do not.”

(*Mṛcchakaṭikam, Prathamo ’nkaḥ, Verse 31*)] (Dey & Siddhanta, 1999; 115)

That means, it's the youth who rely on brothels. You, prostitute, sway along the path. Your body is sold for money. You're the merchandise of the market. Whether it's a lover or a hater, serve them both the same way.

In *Śūdraka's Mṛcchakaṭika*, this statement sheds light on the position of courtesans in contemporary society (Singh, 2021). In today's society, the condition of courtesans remains almost the same. Despite possessing abundant wealth, these women are still deprived of respect. This reflects the enduring norms of society – where even today, the social rules of *Śūdraka's* era continue to prevail.

**The Maternal Instinct of Vasantasenā:** *Vasantasenā* was born into the profession of a courtesan. Her occupation – selling her dignity for money – made it impossible for her to enter into wedlock. Consequently, the experience of motherhood remained beyond her reach. In the eyes of society, *Vasantasenā* held no status as a woman, yet she embodied all the virtues of womanhood. She was, after all, simply a woman – sensitive, virtuous, and deeply human. Born into a family of courtesans, *Vasantasenā's* life ultimately took a different and more meaningful path.

“कामः खलु नामैष भगवाननुगृहीतो महोत्सवस्तरुणजनस्या तत् कथयत्वार्था किं राजा राजवल्लभो वा सेव्यते”। द्वितीयोऽङ्कः

["Indeed, this god called Kāma (Love) is a divine festival bestowed upon the youth by the Blessed Lord.

So, tell me, noble lady — whom do you serve?

Is it the king, or the king's beloved?”

(*Mṛcchakaṭikam, Dvītyo ’nkaḥ*)]. (Dey & Siddhanta, 1999; 158)

However, *Vasantasenā* harbored the desire to be a bride in her heart at all times. Yet she never sold herself to any man for money. This is evident from her conduct, as mentioned by the director in the *Mṛcchakaṭika*. Like a bride, she wished to live a life of dignity and purity; hence, she had no true inclination toward the profession of a courtesan. In society, however, no man could marry her, nor could she ever truly become a bride – though she remained unaware of that reality. Therefore, the feeling of motherhood was nothing more than a distant dream for her. Yet, when she saw *Cārudatta's* son *Rohasena*, the latent sense of motherhood within her awakened and found expression. This episode beautifully illustrates the maternal instincts deeply embedded within *Vasantasenā*, as portrayed by the playwright *Śūdraka*. *Vasantasenā* accepted *Cārudatta's* son *Rohasena* as her own, showering him with all her affection. This is further evidenced by a statement made by *Vasantasenā* in the play.

“हा धिक् वा धिक्। अयमपि नाम परसम्पत्त्या सन्तप्यते। भगवान् कृतान्त पुष्करपत्रपतितजलविन्दुसदृशैः क्रीडसि त्वं पुरुषभागधेयैः । जात मा रुदिहि। सौवर्णशकटिकया क्रीडिष्यसि”। च्छकटिकम् षष्ठोऽङ्कः,

["Ah! Alas, shame – shame indeed!

Even this child grieves over another's misfortune.

O Lord Death (Kṛtānta), you play with the fates of men

as though they were drops of water fallen on a lotus leaf!

My child, do not weep – soon you shall play with a golden toy-cart.”

(*Mṛcchakaṭikam, Śaṣtho ’nkaḥ* )]. (Dey & Siddhanta, 1999; 334)

**Evaluation of Vasantasenā's Personality:** *Vasantasenā* was renowned for her intelligence, artistic talent, and devotion. She left a lasting impression as a clever, cultured, and refined woman. Her character embodies both grace and strength – qualities that distinguish her not merely as a courtesan but as a woman of deep moral consciousness and emotional sensitivity.

“कामं प्रदोषतिमिरेण न दुश्यसे त्वं”। मृच्छकटिकम्, प्रथमोऽङ्कः / श्लोक ३५

["Truly, you are not seen in the darkness of night's passion."  
(*Mṛcchakaṭikam*, *Prathamo 'ṅkaḥ*, Verse 35)] (Dey & Siddhanta, 1999; 116)

When the thief hinted at her true identity by saying, "You are not seen in the darkness of lust," *Vasantasenā* immediately understood his implication and arranged her ornaments so that he could not recognize her social position. This incident is highlighted in the first part, verse 35. Perhaps the image in *Cārudatta's* painting in the fourth act was modeled after her. Additionally, in the fifth act, the description of her noticing the untimely rain reflects her keen perception and refined sensibility. The news of her self-sacrifice to save *Cārudatta* upon hearing about his arrest – an act rare for any woman, let alone a courtesan – is particularly remarkable. Despite her immense wealth, *Vasantasenā's* generosity was equally great. She freed a debtor who sought refuge in her (Act IV). She released *Madanikā* from her life as a servant (Act IV). She adorned *Cārudatta's* son *Rohasena* with maternal affection (Act VI). She even introduced herself as a servant of *Cārudatta* and his wife, *Dhūtapāpa* (Act VI). Through these deeds, *Vasantasenā's* importance in *Śūdraka's Mṛcchakaṭika* becomes evident. The harmonious blending of numerous noble virtues in her character makes her truly worthy of admiration. Therefore, it may be said that *Vasantasenā* resides not only within the four walls of the stage but also within the hearts of all who behold her.

"न केवलमभ्यन्तरचतुः शालकम्। सर्वजनस्यापि हृदयं प्रविष्टा"। मृच्छकटिकम्, षष्ठोऽङ्कः  
["She has not only entered the inner chambers of the house, but also the hearts of all people."  
(*Mṛcchakaṭikam*, *Ṣaṣṭho 'ṅkaḥ*)]. (Dey & Siddhanta, 1999; 339)

In this way, a character once condemned by society has been celebrated for her profound literary and moral qualities.

**Financial Status of Charudatta and Vasantasenā:** *Cārudatta*, the grandson of *Vinayadatta* and a resident of *Ujjayinī*, is the protagonist of this tale. Despite being born into a *Brāhmaṇa* family, he engaged in trade as his profession. Initially, he inherited the wealth accumulated by his ancestors and earned a substantial fortune in his early life. He was renowned for his generosity, often providing financial assistance to relatives, friends, and various petitioners without discrimination. However, due to his excessive charity, he eventually fell into poverty. Thus, in this narrative, the playwright *Śūdraka* portrays *Cārudatta* as impoverished. Despite his lack of wealth, *Cārudatta's* reputation as a noble and benefactor of the entire city surpasses even that of the king himself. His virtues are proclaimed aloud from the very beginning of the play through the voice of *Vīṭa*.

दीनानां कल्पवृक्षः स्वगुणफलनतः सज्जनानां कुटुंबो  
आदर्शः शिक्षितानां सुचरितनिकषः शीलवेलासमुद्रः  
सत्कर्ता नावमन्ता पुरुषगुणनिधिर्दक्षिणोदारसत्त्वो  
ह्येकः श्लाघ्यः स जीवत्यधिकगुणतया चोच्छवसन्तीव चान्ये। मृच्छकटिकम्, प्रथमोऽङ्कः / श्लोक ४८

["He is the wish-fulfilling tree for the poor, bearing the fruits of his own virtues.  
A model for the virtuous, the touchstone of good conduct for the learned,  
an ocean bounded by the shore of modesty.

He honors the worthy and never scorns anyone—  
a treasure-house of noble qualities, endowed with generosity and grace.  
Truly, such a man alone lives in glory,  
while others merely exist, fading away like withered beings."

(*Mṛcchakaṭikam*, *Prathamo 'ṅkaḥ*, Verse 48)] (Dey & Siddhanta, 1999; 130)

On the other hand, *Vasantasenā*, a courtesan from *Ujjayinī*, belongs to a similar social stratum. She is an affluent mistress of immense wealth and resides in several sprawling mansions located in the elite quarters of the city. *Vasantasenā's* prosperity is so vast that the witty rogue *Maitreya* once compared her household to the pleasure gardens of *Nandanavana* and, at other times, to the mansion of the wealthy god *Kubera*.

Thus, the financial conditions of *Cārudatta* and *Vasantasenā* stand in sharp contrast. Yet, despite their differing circumstances, *Vasantasenā* admires *Cārudatta's* virtues. Through this narrative, *Śūdraka* demonstrates that a person's moral worth is not determined by their material possessions. This truth holds not only in the ancient society depicted by *Śūdraka* but also in the context of contemporary human values.

**Vasantasenā as the Bride of the Brāhmaṇa Cārudatta:** In the play *Mṛcchakaṭika*, written by the playwright *Śūdraka*, the character *Vasantasenā* is portrayed as a bride in the tenth act of the drama. The *Brāhmaṇa Cārudatta* and the courtesan *Vasantasenā* together embody a union that transcends social conventions, as *Cārudatta* honors *Vasantasenā* as his bride. The respect and dignity he accords her, despite prevailing societal barriers, are exceptionally rare and significant.

रक्तं तदेव वरवस्त्रमियं च माला  
कान्तागमेन हि वरस्य यथा विभाति  
एते च वध्यपटऽध्वनयस्तथैव  
जाता विवाहपटऽध्वनिभिः समानाः। मृच्छकटिकम्, दशमोऽङ्कः / श्लोक ४४

["This red blood itself has become the bridal garment,  
and this garland too – all shine as in a bridegroom's adornment,  
for just as a bridegroom gleam upon the arrival of his beloved,  
so do these marks of execution appear like the sounds of wedding drums."  
(*Mṛcchakaṭikam*, *Daśamo 'ṅkaḥ*, Verse 44)]. (Dey & Siddhanta, 1999; 548)

Furthermore, *Vasantasenā's* fortune in attaining the status of a bride is joyfully acknowledged by *Rohasena's* mother. This incident stands as a shining example of nobility and moral elevation – one that resonates not only in the society of *Śūdraka's* time but also holds relevance in the ethical consciousness of the modern world.

### Conclusion

Whether in ancient or modern times, every society functions within its own defined boundaries. Customs, superstitions, and social norms are deeply ingrained within these boundaries, binding individuals to specific modes of thought and behaviour. Ordinary people often find it difficult to break free from these constraints. Consequently, while some individuals benefit from these social structures, others suffer under their weight. In this context, despite being a woman of high virtue, the courtesan *Vasantasenā* was demeaned and marginalized by society. Yet, the protagonist *Cārudatta*, breaking through the rigid conventions of his time with moral courage, honored *Vasantasenā* as his bride. Likewise, *Cārudatta's* wife, *Dhūtā*, extended her respect toward *Vasantasenā*, acknowledging her purity of heart. Furthermore, by recognizing the profound significance of womanhood and motherhood, *Cārudatta* affirmed the sacredness of the maternal role. His acceptance of his son *Rohasena* and the courtesan *Vasantasenā* as mother and child symbolizes a new moral direction for society. Through this episode, the playwright *Śūdraka* offers an enduring message for ancient, contemporary, and future societies alike: a person's worth is not determined by birth or lineage but by their deeds and character. Thus, *Śūdraka* establishes an ethical foundation that transcends time – urging society to honour individuals not for their origins but for the nobility of their actions.

**Acknowledgment:** No

**Author's Contribution:** *Dipa Pramanick:* Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing;  
*Dr. Madhulika Verma:* Drafting

**Funding:** No

**Declaration:** The authors have given consent for the publication.

**Competing Interest:** No

### References

1. Dahal, A. L. M. (2011). *Vākrokti-jīvitam*. Chaukhamba Amarbharti Prakashan.
2. Dey, A. C., & Siddhanta, S. K. (1999). *Mṛcchakaṭikam*. Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar.
3. Konar, A. (2024). Mṛcchakaṭika: The triumph of love and a “new world order.” In *Indian classical literature* (pp. 126–134). Routledge India.
4. Pati, M. (2019). Thematic and tonal patterns in *Mṛcchakaṭikam*. In *The Mṛcchakaṭika of Śūdraka: With introduction, critical essays and a photo-essay* (p. 243).
5. Sharma, T. R. S., Seshdri, C. K., & Gaur, J. (2000). *Ancient Indian literature: Classical Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Apabhraṃśa*. Sahitya Akademi.
6. Singh, J. (2021). Women in public space: Socio-cultural and political undertones in *Śūdraka's Mṛcchakaṭika*. *Literary Studies*, 34(1), 47–56.
7. Upādhyāya, A. B. (2001). *History of Sanskrit literature*. Sharda Niketan.
8. Verma, M. (2016). *Significance of Sūtyaṃśa in Sanskrit plays*. Eastern Book Linkers.

### Publisher's Note

*The Social Science Review A Multidisciplinary Journal* remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published data, map and institutional affiliations.

### ©The Author(s) 2026. Open Access.

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>