The Creation of Feminine Space through Sisterhood in Banabhatta's *Kadambari*: an Analytical Study

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Abstract

The concept of sisterhood is a twentieth century offshoot of the feminist theories which is based on shared objectives and ideals o women as a collective body. A study of ancient classical literature however reveals the vital presence of female bonding as a tool of resistance against patriarchal domination. Banabhatta's *Kadambari* is an ancient Sanskrit classic which examines modalities of female resistance to hegemonic control. In patriarchal societies a feminine space is often created to restrict women to the stereotyped activities of motherhood and domesticity. This article traces how the key female figures in this narrative, bond together in close interpersonal ties of friendship and solidarity, in order to create an exclusive space for self-expression and resistance against societal norms. It goes on to show through a close analysis of the text that the feminine spaces in the narrative, built on the pillars of common pursuits, passions and experiences of women becomes not a restrictive domain, but an alternative site for self-actualisation and agency. It exemplifies how ancient classical texts offered spaces of liberation and emancipation for women. It further suggests that while the concept of sisterhood is a recent area of exploration in feminist scholarship, the

idea of collective identity of woman as a tool against hegemonic control had been successfully explored in ancient literature.Through an exploration the ideals of sisterhood in opening up alternative spaces for resistance, this study encourages re-reading of classical texts from contemporary theoretical perspectives. It is also a value-addition to the study of themes of sisterhood and feminine space in a comparatively unexplored model of ancient Indian classical literature.

Key words: sisterhood, solidarity, feminine space, agency, voice, narrative, female bond

Introduction

The vast corpus of Classical Sanskrit Literature stands as a testimony to the dynamism, complexity and intellectual maturity of the ancient Indian civilisation. It encapsulates our distinctive national heritage in terms of enlightening philosophies, theories of aesthetics, linguistic principles and socio-political documentation. While Sanskrit *kavya* has its rich legacy in the poems and drama of

stalwarts like Kalidasa or Shudraka, the prose narrative or *gadya* blossomed in the memorable works of Dandin and Banabhatta. *Kadambari*, a prose-romance written by Banabhatta in the 7th century CE, is a marvellous tapestry of mysticism, social realism and narrative intricacy.

The narrative explores the mystical themes of death and reincarnation, sin and expiation through a complex narrative structure." *Kadambari* is a time-machine story set within a frame that is expanded by the use of the prism."(Layne). At its core is the principle of Rasa—the effusion of the nine emotional essences that constitutes sublime pleasure in Indian aesthetic theory. Padmini Rajappa points out that the Erotic or the Sringara Rasa in both its

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manifestations-- *sambhoga* (union) and vipralamba (separation)—is the dominant emotion of the narrative.(Rajappa, xv). The most compelling attribute of the work, however, is its realistic representation of society through innumerable characters depicted with a meticulous attention to details. Banabhatta creates an exclusive space for his female characters who, in spite of being rooted in a patriarchal society, attain visibility and voice. One of the effective strategies which brings out this uniquely feminine assertiveness is the strong interpersonal bonds of friendship, dependence, solidarity and loyalty among the women—a veritable sisterhood. Chandra Talpade Mohanty defines solidarity as," mutuality, accountability and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships…"(Mohanty,12).The women in *Kadambari* operate as a collective body who identify their solidarity I their intimate passions, domestic chores and self-sacrifices.

Sisterhood in feminist theory refers not merely to bonds of kinship—it signifies the strong ties between women developed on the basis of shared experiences, goals or interests as a means of resistance to patriarchal oppression. It was the key principle introduced in the first and second waves of feminism, popularised by eminent feminist writers like Robin Morgan, and gave an impetus to women-centric struggles like the suffrage movement. The third wave of feminism however, challenged the feasibility of universal sisterhood on the grounds of intersectional differences based on race, class, gender and other parameters. Bell Hooks points out that there are "biases that uphold and maintain white supremacy" (Hooks,29) which have impeded the pursuit of truth by universities in their research projects. In spite of its changed connotations in the present scenario, it is interesting to note that the strategy of collective resistance to hegemonic control, has been in existence from times immemorial. A retrospective study of various ancient texts, exemplifies this practice. The sympathetic bonding between Medea and the Corinthian women in Euripides' eponymous play or the

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friendship between the captive Sita and Sarama, a woman from the royal family of Ravana who has imprisoned her in the epic *Ramayana*, are instances of this model of sisterhood. Banabhatta's *Kadambari* , too, with its sensitively portrayed women characters, offers a wide canvas for exploration of sisterhood as an ageless strategy of resistance against patriarchy.

In this article, I have looked into the text from the perspective of the strong bonds of solidarity and mutual dependance shared by the key women figures, who build a distinct space of self-actualisation.I have tried to assess how the strategy of sisterhood is used for self-assertion and resistance at the face of challenges posited by societal norms, personal relationships or twisted interventions by the divinity. As one of the very few ancient classical texts named after a female protagonist, *Kadambari* creates a feminine space with feisty women like princess Kadambari, Mahashveta or Queen Vilasavathi who contribute actively to the development and the resolution of the plot through their strong collaborative sisterhood.

Position of Women in Ancient India: A Literary Perspective

Recent analytical researchers like Uma Chakravarti, Kumkum Roy and Shalini Shah have highlighted the commodification and subjugation of women in ancient India under the patriarchal hegemony. Their selfhood was subordinated to the nearest male relative—father, brother, husband or son. They were denied the right to freedom, property rights and even the right to pursue an independent career. They were schooled into restricting themselves to their stereotypical roles of mother, care-giver and house-keeper. Every male was the patriarch of his household, irrespective of class, caste or economic status and every female was a body to be dominated and exploited both physically and emotionally. A woman was the symbol of honour, both personal and national and therefore the abduction of a woman for matrimonial

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alliance or redressal of grievances was legally sanctioned. Both the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* illustrate the vulnerability of women in the patriarchal society. Sita had to pass through a fire-test to meet the social expectation of a woman's chastity . Kunti had to use her empowering boon to continue the lineage of her husband's family. Draupadi was pawned off publicly to meet the conditions of a game of chess played by her husbands. In spite of being powerful princesses, each of these characters acquires her agency only after a long-standing battle with family and society.

Kadambari: Celebration of the Feminine Space by a Male Author

Banabhatta was the court poet of King Harshavardhana,, the emperor of Kannauj. His literary fame rests on his akshyayika or historical account *Harshacharita* and the katha kavya or fictional narrative *Kadambari*. The former is a biography which documents the life and times of King Harsha from a public standpoint. *Kadambari* on the other hand is an intimately woven fiction about tangled human relationships. Etymologically, the word 'kadambari' in Sanskrit has multiple connotations. It stands for the female cuckoo bird as well an intoxicating liquor extracted from the kadamba tree. The term is also associated with Saraswati, the goddess of music. The term in itself is an iconic representation of femininity. The author's focus on the private world of human emotions rather than physical action permits the creation of a space driven by women characters. His use of female narrative voices, a convoluted storyline, frenzied passions or 'rasa' and a flowery, ornate style are deliberate stances to uphold the

exclusivity of this space. This intimate world of women and womanhood fosters the bond of togetherness and solidarity that is the essence of sisterhood.

Centrality of Female Figures in Plot Development

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Kadambari is an intriguing tale of the reincarnation cycles of the moon-god Chandramas and the divinely born sage Pundarika in the aftermath of a volley of curses. Significantly enough , the resolution of the plot is brought forward by the female characters who dominate the central action. Princess Kadambari , the protagonist is the key mover in the main plot. Her enduring love , loyalty and steadfastness paves the way for the unravelling of the complications.Her physical touch makes the body of her lover indestructible—paving heway for his eventual resurrection. The Gandharva princess Mahashveta, the second lead, is not merely the love-interest of Pundarika. She plays a crucial role in the central action – by cursing Vaishampayana to be re-born as a parrot, she effectively paves the way for the Parrot's storytelling before King Shudraka, which is a crucial step in the final resolution of the crises. Another key figure ,the charming Patralekha is ostensibly the betel-box bearer of Prince Chandrapida. But in this cosmic tale of dual identity, she is also Rohini, the divine consort of Chandramas. She too contributes to the plot-development by leading Chandrapida's horse Indrayudha into the lake, thus releasing Kapinjala from the cycle of curses. Above all, the Chandala woman who brings the parrot Vaishampayana to the court of King Shudraka, thus initiating the story-telling saga, is revealed to be goddess Shri herself, the divine mother of Pundarika She is the main orchestrator behind the complex process of expiation that ensures the salvation of the male protagonists.. The intertwining collaboration finally brings about the resolution of the plot.

Narrative Voices of Female Characters

Even though the text operates within a patriarchal structure, the women characters are endowed with remarkable powers of articulation and self-expression. The layered narrative structure precludes a polyphonic representation, thereby securing an equitable representation for the female voices. The romantic passion of Kadambari, the mature wisdom of Queen

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Vilasavathi, the painful agony of Mahashveta combine with the distinctive voices of innumerable minor female figures to exert considerable impact on the narrative. Mahashvetha's narrative account occupies an integral space in the text in terms of plot-development as well as thematic alignment. The interactive feminine voices facilitate the emotional exchanges and sharing of interests that combine to build a feeling of solidarity among the women characters.

The Need for a Feminine Space

The female characters of *Kadambari* hail from different backgrounds, social ranks and educational privileges. The Queen, the princesses and the aristocratic maidens are sophisticated

and self-confident. The professional women like the pratihari of King Shudraka or the betel-box carrier of Queen Vilasavathi are loyal and servile. The ladies-in-waiting of Kadambari are skilled and deferential. In spite of their differences, they share common interests to situations or objectives which unite them together. Strong attachment, a deep feeling of protectiveness and ardent devotion towards the loved ones, are some of the most common sentiments shared by these women. Restricted by societal norms, these women are often caught between loyalty towards family and passion for the beloved. Chained by social demands of chastity and reserve, these women are not free to articulate their inner passions, fears or dreams. In spite of their politically empowered status as princesses, even Kadambari and Mahashveta struggle with the patriarchal codes of womanly virtuousity which have been fed into them. The women characters in the narrative demonstrate strong passions and desires, but being conscious about their subjugated position as women, they desist from making a public spectacle of themselves. The requirement for an exclusive space which can shelter them from masculine control and protect their private sensibilities, becomes essential. The antapura or the inner quarters becomes one of the most important feminine space in this

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text, where the women can be themselves. It is in this private space that the female characters share their intimate feelings, desires and dreams. This is the space which is the centre of their feminine skills and activities, The inbuilt grace, sensitivity and motherliness of these women finds a free self- expression in these quarters.

The royal antapuras in *Kadambari are sumptuous* spaces, lavishly decorated with a focus on feminine tastes and preferences. King Shudraka's inner chamber is resplendent with golden pillars, spotlessly white bed-linens, a collection of dolls, a thick carpet of flowers and scented joss-sticks.(Rajappa,15). Queen Vilasavathi's private quarters are specially prepared when she becomes pregnant. I t is freshly whitewashed, lit with auspicious lamps, strewn with mustard seeds and different medicinal herbs and furnished with a 'nidra kalasha' or sleep-inducing pot.(Rajappa,72-73).Kadambari's palace on Hemakuta appears to be " a world altogether composed only of women…………it was a palace made of romance,of beauty. It was crowded with the gods of pleasure, filled with the floral arrows of Kama. It was of he stuff of softness and sweetness, it was a place of wonder."(Rajappa,187). Thus the text identifies the antapura as the exclusive site for pleasure and imagination, the erotic and the marvellous, a blending of the rasas of Sringara and Adbhuta.

The antapura has been represented by Banabhatta as an exclusively feminine domain, peopled by the aristocratic women and children. The attending maids, serving eunuchs dressed like women and the aged 'kanchukis'- officers-in-charge (Rajappa,94-97). The author does not portay it as a site of patriarchal control or feminine otherisation. Instead , it is represented as a site for safety, security, fulfilment and freedom for the women inmates. Bana describes," In the antapura the queen was surrounded by the white-clad kanchukis and looked like the goddess

Lakshmi in the midst of the white waves of the ocean"(Rajappa,96). The allusion to the rise of Goddess Lakshmi from the Churning mythology (Samudramanthana) is

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deliberately used to suggest the sovereignty of Queen Vilasavathi. Kadambari seated on a raised platform surrounded by her bejewelled women attendants seems to constitute " a bower of kalpalata, a dense growth of the wish-fulfilling creeper". The sheer exotic lushness of the interiors is breathtaking9Rajappa, 189-190). The blooming gardens with mango fruits , bakula trees, champa booms, ashoka trees , hovering bees and charming koel bieds is a veritable oriental paradise.

The author represents the inner quarters as a site for entertainment, relaxation and creative pursuits." In the women's quarters the young girls played with balls and dolls or sat in the swings that swung ceaselessly…………..The women were engrossed in enacting the life-story of their great king Tarapida."(Rajappa, 94). The antapura gives the ladies a scope to pursue their artistic inclinations freely—many of them are expert singers, dancers, musicians, painters or seamstresses. Even the most servile occupations of the women are presented with great flourish and fanfare. The ladies engaged in bathing King Shudraka are compared to water nymphs and goddesses.(Rajappa,14}. The rites of pregnancy and motherhood performed by married women during the birth of Prince Chandrapida, are depicted with meticulous detail, underlining the sacred significance.(Rajappa,76). The womanly preoccupation with cosmetics and beautification in Kadambari's bower, is deliberately glamorised. The metaphorical language used to describe the female body turns it not into a usable commodity but to the god of Love himself. "So many arched eyebrows created the illusion of a thousand moving bows of Manmatha……………..,.The rays shooting out of their nails were a thousand arrows of Manmatha covering all he directions."(Rajappa,187,188).The list of most humble , childish tasks to be performed by the companions of Kadambari acquire the semblance of a heroic ordeal :" Make a bund around the lavali creeper with the pollen dust of the ketaki….Colour the toy chakravaka pair in the pond of

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artificial lotuses with kumkum…….Teach the parrots and mynas in the cage."(Rajappa,189). The antapura in *Kadambari* is evidently not a space of mere domesticity and subjugation. The author's imaginative representation transforms it into an alternative universe with its own distinct codes. It becomes the space where the women can resist patriarchal control , set their own rules and establish their agency.

Role of Sisterhood in the Creation of a Feminine Space in *Kadambari*

 The enclosed space of the antapura in *Kadambari* symbolises their otherness and restrictiveness in terms of the macro patriarchal structure. But it also represents the micro structure within which they can pursue their distinctive dreams and aspirations. Their co-habitation infuses the women with a sacred bond of togetherness with shared dreams, ideals

and aspirations. The antapura thus becomes a space to fight and resist the stringencies of hegemonic control by presenting a united front of solidarity and sisterhood. It is through a mutual protection of shared goals and interests in th antapura that the women in *Kadambari* assert their selfhood and establish their identity. The strong collaborative front empowers the ladies with their own identity and agency which is recognised and respected by the male patriarchs. Even the powerful kings Tarapida and Shudraka as well as Prince Chandrapida acknowledge the sovereignty and solidarity of the women's quarters.

The women in Vilasavathi's quarters empathise with their queen's childlessness. Makarika, her elderly companion eloquently reports the Queen's despondency to Tarapida because sterility in a woman is a shared phobia in the patriarchal society. The fertility rites and the childbirth rituals performed in Vilasavathi's chamber are all collective performances by married women sharing their common feelings around the birth of a child. (Rajappa,65,76). The young girls who rush to witness the return of Prince Chandrapida from his university,

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share their curiosity and passion in the safety of their togetherness. Their collective voices emanating from the inner palace register a resistance against the patriarchal control." In that instant a flood of conversation arose from among the women, teasing, confiding, expressing jealousy, coquetry, longing and desire."(Rajappa,89). Forbidden pleasures and attractions which cannot be expressed publicly, find a collective expression.

Banabhatta explores the turmoil of women who fall in love and are unable to pursue or express their passion openly under social obligations of feminine modesty and self-control. The antapura becomes their shelter, shielding them from probing eyes and offering them a private space where they can articulate their innermost thoughts. The steadfast support of the ladies to each other, their sympathy and understanding paves the way for the resolution of the crises. When Mahashvetha falls in love with Pundarika, she is torn between her natural modesty and overwhelming passion. Her maid Taralika offers her the unconditional support that she needs and through their mutual bond of togetherness create a space of resistance against social expectations. Taralika asserts:" Why are you worried about shame or about the approval of your parents? Please do send me, I shall go and fetch him[Pundarika] your beloved, over here. Or you get up and go there yourself. I cannot bear to see your agony increasing………."(Rajappa,167). On her wise advice, Mahashveta decides to live on after the miraculous disappearance of her lover's body and Taralika remains her faithful companion in her life of self-renunciation.

 Kadambari's living quarters too fosters an intimate bonding between the princess and her close attendants . With their active assistance and understanding, the bashful Kadambari finally gains control over her emotions and can pursue her passion for Chandrapida. Madalekha, her best friend,, her acts as the mediator between the lovers and as the chief

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spokesperson for the bashful princess, she communicates her feelings to him and imparts to him her gift of a precious jewellery. Compelled by a patriarchal society to suppress their natural feelings, these ladies use the shelter of the antapura to build up their resistance, bolstered by sisterly support towards each other. When Kadambari is traumatised by Chandrapida's sudden death, Madalekha 's steady support helps her to streamline her emotions and prepare herself for the future.

Queen Vilasavathi and Manorama, the mother of Vaisampayana share a bond of motherhood. Manorama seeks a private audience with the Queen when she hears rumours about her missing son. As women forbidden to interact in the public space, they negotiate with their private emotions by holding on to each other, The firm bond of emotional dependence bridges their hierarchical differences.

Kadambari and Mahasvetha: Sisters of the Heart

Both the Gandharva princesses share an intimate bond of friendship which empowers them to override societal restrictions and assert selfhood. Their bond is strengthened by their romantic passion and tragic losses. Their momentous experiences give them narrative voices as they reach out to each other. Together they create a feminine space which not only liberates them from societal expectations but also critiques patriarchal assumptions. An interesting contrast emerges through a contrast with their male counterparts—Chandrapida dies out of heartbreak at Vaishampayana's death and Pundarika cannot bear the conflict between his dharma and passion. In a way, both seem to succumb to the pressures of love. The princesses on the other hand challenge society, but they hold on to their respective identities through their fierce protection of each other and their unwavering loyalty to the ideals of love.

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Kadambari overrides her natural frailty and takes a vow of chastity as a mark of solidarity towards her grieving friend. Mahashetha instinctively understands her growing passion for the prince and helps her to overcome her bashfulness by guiding her through the rituals of hospitality.{ Rajappa,197). Kadambari understands the true nature of Mahashveta's eternal waiting: " …you have been blessed with hope; by the strength of that hope you are putting up with suffering worse than death."(Rajappa,321}. After hearing the miraculous prophecy about Chandrapida's rejuvenation, the princess realises the strength of the bond that now ties them together:"My dear friend, the creator wishing to give me a sorrow equal to yours may have thrust me into this situation ……….no longer am I ashamed to look you in the face and address you as dear friend, for it is only now that I have truly become your friend."(Rajappa,327). Mahashveta's steadfast support enables Kadambari to step out of her stereotyped role of a sheltered princess and assume selfhood. She renounces her antapura and makes Chandrapida's resting-place her own home. She becomes the care-giver not only for the prince, but for both his parents as well. The princesses live on, surrounded by their supportive sisters to complete

their narrative and finally are rewarded with a redemption of the curses and the rejuvenation of Chandramas and Pundarika.

Conclusion

Even though *Kadambari* is an ancient text documenting the patriarchal society under King Harshavardhana, it contains ample manifestations of the creation of independent feminist spaces through a bond of sisterhood. Through their common interests, goals, losses and pains, the women are tied together in a bond which transcends their social status or economic background. Through their collective rituals and communal gatherings, shared emotions and common experiences, these women carve out a niche of collective resistance to patriarchal

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domination where they can lead their lives on their own terms. Strong sisterly bonds, shared sufferings of separation and pain, give agency and narrative voice to these female figures. Mahashveta and Patralekha have their own narrative spaces while Kadambari through her empathetic listening completes the cycle of narration and works out the resolution.

The feminine space in *Kadambari* is a critique of the patriarchal codes of domination and aggression. It celebrates the feminine codes of harmony, felicity, sustenance and protection of all life-forms. Womanly engagements with the trivia of life—the domestic chores, nurturing of the children, collective mourning for separation or death, the collaborative pleasure in self-beautification—are observed with earnestness and zeal. The novel ultimately celebrates the magic and felicity of the feminine space worked out by a togetherness that unites the divine mother Shri with the earthly mother Vilasavathi or the divine lover in separation—Rohini— with her earthly counterparts Kadambari and Mahashveta. History documents the marginalisation and silencing of women by hegemonic forces.. But literature provides spaces of interrogation, negotiation and resistance by the marginalised sections. Banabhatta stands ahead of his times in his sensitive picturisation of a woman's utopia standing on the pedestals of female solidrity and freedom. His magnum opus *Kadambari* is an illustration of the timelessness and universality of the strategy of sisterhood to create spaces of feminine agency over patriarchal domination.

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