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# A KETAKA FLOWER BY ANY OTHER NAME: EROTIC DOUBLE-IMAGERY IN KĀLIDĀSA’S MEGHADŪTA

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This paper focuses on the erotic aspects of nature presented poetically in Kālidāsa’s *Meghadūta* (c. fourth/fifth century), as well as the way in which the poet skillfully uses anthropomorphic imagery and surreal description to heighten the aesthetic experience. That a cloud, described in the beginning of the poem as a mere collection of elements, is sent by a lovesick tree-divinity (*yakṣa*) to deliver to his distant lover a message of no less than a hundred Sanskrit verses should serve as an indication of what fantastic and magical realism will follow.

The prevailing feeling (*sthāyibhāva*) of the poem belongs to the mood of eroticism, a poignantly charged state (*rati*) evoked by various poetic images (*vibhāva*). As we will be looking at the first half of the poem in which the entire environment is sexualized, rather than the second half where the attention largely falls on the beloved as the personified object of the cloud’s message, the aesthetic and erotic impact of the imagery can be said to fall largely under the category of exciting a feeling (*uddīpanavibhāva*) rather than being a substantial cause (*ālambanavibhāva*). That is to say, the intimacy of the natural elements serves as a kind of catalyst to excitement in the reader, rather like *krauñca* “mood-music” that sets the tone for the *yakṣa*’s erotic disposition. In fact, Kalidasa’s “playing poem” is not as concerned with a reconciliation of sexual tension as much as its heightening.

One might wonder if the entire poem, a soliloquy overflowing with erotic energy, is merely a mental imagining of the *yakṣa*. As Leonard Nathan (1976: 94) points out, the cloud’s intimate relationship with the environment is in sharp contrast with the *yakṣa*’s own separation from his lover. Yet such distance is necessary, for it makes the poem’s force of erotic description even more poignant, and also allows the *yakṣa* to maintain fidelity, even during his most licentious thoughts, by displacing his own sexual frustration on a seemingly philandering cloud.

Indeed, despite the obvious primacy of the *yakṣa* (explained in Vallabhadeva’s commentary as a necessary ingredient in this new genre of poetry; Hultsch [1911] 1998; Kale 1997), the cloud becomes a dominant character in its own right.

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Expected to speak even if we never hear it do so, the cloud enjoys relationships of its own (even if they are not private) and should not be seen as a mere backdrop. The cloud's predominant role is only compromised by the *yakṣa*'s syntactic choice of imperative and optative moods. Indeed, responding as it does to the storyteller's (i.e. the *yakṣa*'s) own urgings while engaging in a very personal manner with the land, the cloud serves simultaneously as an example of both *ālabhanavibhāva* and *uddīpanavibhāva*.

How features of the environment (such as the cloud) serve a dual function is a reflection of Kālidāsa's poetic genius. Creating subsets of relationships within relationships by means of anthropomorphism, aesthetic distance is kept without losing the powerful effect of the emotion itself. For example, by giving a river a face (v. 24, following Vallabhadeva's tenth-century recension), Kālidāsa uses her expressions of ecstasy as an example of emotion outwardly manifested (*anubhāva*). While some of these emotions seem to be intentional, such as the natural procreative responses of flora to a fecund cloud, other types of erotic responses to the cloud are strictly involuntary (*sāttvikabhāva*). As a side note, while many secondary emotions (*vyabhicāribhāva*) come up transitorily as the cloud makes its way on the campaign of love, they are not as important as understanding how the overall *sthāyibhāva* is steeped primarily in the erotic.

If we are to understand how this poem was meant to stir the blood and pluck the heartstrings of the reader, it is crucial that we try to engage with it on its own terms. While the eroticism prevalent in much Indian art has been the cause for national chagrin, residuals of Victorian ethics ironically bind mores around art more tightly than the aesthetic distance favored in *rasa* theory itself. There are times when Kālidāsa opens his metaphors like a centerfold, plain for all to see. Certain examples in the poem come directly to mind, such as when the cloud settles on the mountain, described like a dark nipple on a pallid breast (v. 18). The colorful flush of ripe mangos there serves as an *uddīpanavibhāva* to the mountain – which, as a breast, is itself an example of *uddīpanavibhāva* for the overall mood. Anthropomorphism does little to defuse the intensely sexual imagery employed by Kālidāsa. Indeed, that the Gambhirā River should be so graphically depicted as a naked woman (v. 41) may be cause for shock, even dismay. Amongst such critiques, V.G. Paranjpe's is archetypal: "This stanza forms probably the worst example of Kālidāsa's license in the Meghaduta" (Ambardekar 1979: 69).

In other moments, however, Kālidāsa uses sophisticated techniques of poetic *trompe l'oeil* to paint one action while something else, no less erotic, is hidden between his syntactic strokes. This might be illustrated, for instance, when the cloud is welcomed by the upturned faces of flower-plucking women (v. 26). Not only does he offer them shade but a delicate sprinkling (*siñcan*). The erotic

import of this word is not lost on Mallinātha, who suggests that the water of the cloud is like semen which falls to impregnate the earth. And this verse is but an echo of *tvayyāyatam kṛṣīphalam iti* (v. 16), whereby the thundering of the cloud is held to be responsible for the earth's bounty.

One way or another, the entire land comes to be seen as sensually interpenetrated with the throb of life. This not only heightens the *yakṣa's* own emotional state but takes on the cosmic proportions of an aerial view. As Nathan (1976: 10) notes, "It is a brilliant stroke of Kālidāsa to portray his country from far above, as seen through divine eyes. Such vision puts all in its proper place and gives its witness the aesthetic pleasure of the wholeness that makes all its parts significant. Moreover, from the lofty view the landscape takes on the beauty of idealized distance." What better vantage for readers (or hearers) of the poem, granted a certain proximity to deities by sharing the same celestial perspective, to engage with the sublime double-imagery of a cloud dipping into rivers on his way to Alakā!

It is important to remember that the cloud serves a purpose of love for the gods as well as the immobile tree-spirit. This is evident not only in the interpretation of the cloud's journey as a pilgrimage but in the divine ornamentation which the cloud comes to wear. It takes the dark color of Kṛṣṇa (v. 46), the "throat-luster" of Śiva (v. 33), and the *gopa* dress of Viṣṇu (v. 15). Identification of natural elements with the divine also allows the use of *iva* in *upamā* similes rather than in the *utpekṣa* comparisons of poetic fancy. Thus, a breast-like mountain belongs to Bhudevī herself (at least according to Vallabha's commentary on verse 18), as does the union of the seemingly male cloud and the Sindhu River as a sapphire on a string of pearls (v. 46). Further compounding the complexity of the interpretation of double-imagery among commentators, of course, is the debate between grammarians and logicians whether comparative *karmadhāraya* compounds should be taken more as metaphorical (*rupakāsamāsa*) or as mere similes (*upamitasamāsa*). I should like to turn, then, to a closer analysis of actual double-imagery in the poem.

Rivulets make braids for the river (v. 29), the cloud is compared to Viṣṇu's foot (v. 57), and together they make a pearl necklace with a sapphire pendant (v. 46). Although not specifically erotic, they introduce us to the ornamental use of natural imagery. And if through the poem we can be said to enjoy the same celestial vantage point as the gods, whose relationships are often explicitly sexual, we come to an understanding of how the cloud as mere ornament is meant to serve for our own aesthetic purposes. Thus, our own fancy is tickled to see the cloud reconciling the gods, either by assuming the color and form of Śiva's bloody elephant-cloak, so that Bhavāni may be calmed (v. 36), or by taking the shape of

an undulating staircase to massage Gaudī's feet (no longer frightened by Śiva's snake-bracelet) as she mounts (v. 60).

The cloud, exhorted to remove Śiva's desire for the elephant-hide, does so by changing its color to that of the terrifically red *japa* flower (v. 36). Like Śiva, here we enter into a much closer relationship, albeit virtual, with the erotic imagery of the poem. Flowers, particularly the lotus, have been metaphorically associated with the female organ long before the paintings of Georgia O'Keefe. They arise throughout the poem, exuding their perfume and exciting passions, but for a tree-divinity their sexual symbolism must be especially poignant! In the very beginning of the poem (v. 3), for example, it is the blossoming *ketala* flower that evokes tears of longing in the *yakṣa*. The faces of flowers covered with dew (v. 39) mirror these tears but also hint at the sexual excitement of reunion.

While flowers set the *uddīpanavibhāva* tone of eroticism, the cloud moves throughout the first half of the poem as a protagonist primarily in union with rivers and mountains. The sexual undertones are not automatic. Rather, the cloud tends to survey a river, such as the sweetly murmuring Betwa (v. 24), before moving in for such a fulfilling drink (attaining the "goal of an amorous one") that her brow is knit with the agitation of her waves. This same sequence is found in the cloud's ever so polemic tryst with the Gambhīra River (vv. 40–41). The cloud first enters her tranquil water with its reflection alone, but enjoined not to disappoint her (literally, deprive her of the fruit) with firmness of heart, it soon works her into a froth of glances (like a row of bees, how sharp they have become!) akin to the roiling of fish all a'quiver.

Having come to enjoy "the taste of the river's loins", how would the cloud be able to forsake her lovely waters for the sake of the *yakṣa*'s mission without some assistance? Possessing its own arsenal of sensory pleasures, the wind comes to gently move the messenger along (v. 42). Smell, particularly that musky odor associated with the sex of animals (note v. 19, leading to v. 20 and v. 52, among others), is used repeatedly in connection with the cloud's elephant-like nature. Mounting on the wind, the cloud also brings fertility with the full sensory experience of the rainy season on the ripening earth.

One aspect of the beauty of natural elements lies in their ability to move back and forth between gender. Mountains are generally masculine, being friends with whom the cloud may sojourn and recuperate, yet at times they are also described as being embraced or excited by the cloud. For instance, the first mountain of the poem, Rāmagiri, endures the brunt of the cloud's violent sport (v. 2). Similarly, the low hill of Nīcai experiences horripilatory goose-bumps from contact with the cloud (v. 25). One might be tempted to suggest that the cloud assumes female aspects here, being associated with the feminine womb of fertility (v. 10) or the

luscious *japa* flower mentioned above, if it were not for Kālidāsa's clear comparison of the mountain with the bosom of the earth (v. 18). In yet another titillating example (v. 74), the "pleasure-hill" (*krīdāśaila*) of the *yakṣa*'s beloved can be read as topped with sapphires, which are either very beautiful or soft and tender, depending on how one takes *peśala* (see Roychowdhury 1991: 44). It is also of note that the *Raghuvamśa* (IV.51) makes mention of the mountains of Malaya and Dardura as a pair of breasts (see Ambardekar 1979: 52).

Another example of shifting gender is expressed by the lightning found in the womb (*vidyutgarbhe*) of the cloud. Whereas the lightning which is the cloud's consort is usually understood to be his wife (v. 38), perhaps as an indicator of *śakti*, even if the cloud is not female here (although these verses do follow directly on the *japa* flower metaphor), its lightning can be likened to a phallus that pierces the shadows like a needle (v. 38) and, tired from sporting/flashing so long (*ciravilasanātkhinna*), will take its rest before moving on (v. 39).

That the word for "lightning" (*saudāminī*) is in the feminine case (v. 38) is no help. Moreover, the word for "wife" or "consort" (*kalatram*), usually in the neuter, is here in the masculine due to the *bahuvrīhi* compound. This is just one illustration of how the gender of substantives could be shifted in accord with the clever poet's intent, although it is probably more necessary here to point out that grammatical gender does not limit an object's sexual symbolism. In other words, despite the fact that "flower" is generally neuter in Sanskrit, it often works (as mentioned above) as a double-image for a clearly feminine anatomical feature.

Although Ambardekar (1979: 14) suggests that there are two major themes in the poem, erotic and devotional, I would conclude by arguing that the dominant mood decidedly leans toward the former, even as there is evidence of the fusion of the two in the classical aesthetic: in the cloud's relationship with the gods, nature serves as a link between mortals and the divine. As it reflects both macrocosmic powers and the play of our own hearts, nature is an ideal poetic staging ground, a sensual template for spiritual exploration, which comes to the fore in the erotic double-imagery employed in the *Meghadūta*.

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