

Re-presenting Courtesans across Cultures: A Comparative Study of Amrapali and Thais

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Abstract

This paper concerns itself with a relatively underappreciated theme in modern literature - the role and the status of Courtesans. Courtesans were the women who had been often represented or misrepresented as immoral women and were attributed the position of *the other*, vis-à-vis the housewives. They were known by various labels, such as Tawaif, Baiji, Hetaera and Nagarvadhu etc., most of which carry derogatory connotations. A central contention of the article is to assert, in contrast to the commonly held beliefs, that Courtesans played a crucial role in the social life of the bygone times.

The paper makes this point by a comparative study of two famous Courtesans, chosen from the Eastern and Western backdrops: 1. Amrapali, the legendary nagarvadhu of the republic of Vaishali, known for her beauty and intelligence and was eventually influenced by the teachings of Gautama Buddha that made her an arhat or arahant, 2. Thais, a famous Greek Courtesan, or hetaera, who came to repent the life of sensuality and carnality that she had pursued until her moment of realization which turned her towards the path of Christian morality under the influence of a devoted priest.

Both the legendary Courtesans share some conspicuous similarities, notwithstanding the unmistakable disparities in their settings and backdrops. They both led an independent life and had influenced many lives of importance by their beauty and talent. The Present paper tries to draw a comparison between the lives of the two legendary women, and endeavours to throw critical light on the two literary characters transcending the differences in their spacio-cultural settings.

The surprising similarities between the two women characters that defined the trajectories of their chequered careers were brought to sharp relief here, through the insights that were

informed by the methodology of comparativism. This culminates in the concluding discussion of the paper which endeavours to trace out the reasons that made these surprising similarities possible in spite of the wide differences in the settings and backdrops that contextualize the characters under consideration.

Key Words: *Courtesans, immoral, Nagarvadhu, Hetaera, Arahant, comparison.*

It is widely recognised now that hitherto, history has always been partial to women and to their contributions. They have been marginalised based on their gender. Most women have served men in the roles imposed and attributed to them. On the contrary, there is a category of women who challenged patriarchy. Courtesans, as an institution, have mostly resisted patriarchy through their agency. The present paper talks about two courtesans from history who are known for their assertive agency, especially in connection to their decision in taking the path of renunciation after leading a life of promiscuity.

To begin with, who are courtesans? A courtesan is a court woman, who performs in the royal court. They are artists known for their talents in various art forms like dancing, singing, painting, pottery etc and prostitution being optional. They played a crucial role in the society during 18th and the beginning of the 19th century in India. Their chief duty was to entertain Kings, Nawabs and the elite through their dancing and singing. They were the embodiment of art and culture of society, as the author and historian, Moti Chandra puts it in the preface of his book, *The World of Courtesans*, “Courtesans in ancient India did not merely serve the baser needs of society but were also a symbol of culture and ars amoris.” Women expressed their willingness to pursue their careers or lead the life of a courtesan as it was a reputed profession in society. And it was considered prestigious to be found in the company of a courtesan.

The young elite or nawabs were sent to courtesans to learn manners as they were known for their etiquette. They were invited to be a part of family celebrations of nawabs and the elite, and a place was always reserved for them in the family picture of the elite. However, they have come to be misrepresented and misunderstood later on, on various grounds such as immorality and have been attributed to the position of the ‘other’ in the society. Moreover, very little research has been conducted to explore the world of courtesans who have been marginalised and stigmatised due to their profession and could barely claim any room in the annals of history.

Courtesans have been referred to by various terms, Tawaif, Baiji, Randi, Hetaira, Devadasi, and Nagarvadhu according to the region they belong. Tawaifs were renowned courtesans in North India, thrived during the Mughal period and received patronage from royalty. Notable figures such as Anarkali, Umrao Jan, and Begum Jan, etc are well-known tawaifs who left their mark on society in their unique ways. For instance, Gauhar Jan, the first gramophone singer from Kolkata was a courtesan. The term Devadasi, meaning "slave of God," refers to a temple dancer dedicated to the temple or a deity, primarily found in South India. These women were skilled dancers who engaged in the temple's daily rituals and performed in temple processions. A similar kind of tradition is Nagarvadhu, followed in ancient India, especially in South India. The tradition has been mentioned in the Buddhist Jataka tales.

The term Nagarvadhu is translated to "bride of the city." In ancient India, it was common for talented and attractive women to vie for the title of Nagarvadhu and no taboo was attached to it. Amrapali, a celebrated Nagarvadhu from the kingdom of Vaishali, is a notable courtesan in the Jataka tales in connection with Lord Buddha. Additionally, Vasantasena, a character from the Sanskrit play *Mricchakatika* by Sudraka written around the 2nd century BC is another prominent Nagarvadhu. Similarly, the term Hetaira denotes a royal courtesan in ancient Greece, who was esteemed for her beauty and artistic abilities. From whichever region they belong, one common trait or quality or feature they share is that they are trained artists who enjoyed a reputation in society and simultaneously marginalised and stigmatised since there was a change in time and the attitude of the people around them and also the downfall of the class of the elite and the Nawabs who patronised them.

The present paper aims to explore the world of these representatives of culture and the position they enjoyed in society by drawing a comparison between the two characters i.e. Amrapali from the East and Thais from the West in the light of the qualities a courtesan generally possesses, and try to analyse the reasons that led them to take shelter under religion, and the circumstances that led them to seek the path of renunciation. By drawing a comparison between the two aforementioned characters and throwing light on the kind of lives they led, the paper tries to achieve the set goal by depicting and proving that despite the difference in settings and situations the life of a courtesan is similar in many ways.

The two selected texts are historical fiction by two different writers from different backgrounds. The first set of selected novels is in two volumes by Anurag Anand, the first volume is *The Legend of Amrapali: An Enchanting Saga Buried within the Sands of Time*

(2012) and its sequel, *Birth of the Bastard Prince* (2014). Anurag Anand (born 2 November, 1978) is an Indian artist, corporate professional and author. He started his career in writing at the age of 25. His works are lauded for their realistic treatment of subjects and the life like interplay between characters. He has authored books spanning across genres such as self - help, contemporary fiction and historical fiction. Some of his better-known titles include *The Legend of Amrapali*, its sequel *Birth of the Bastard Prince*, *The Quest for Nothing*, *Where the Rainbow Ends* and *Tattoos and Taboos*.

Amrapali or Ambapali is a historical character who existed around 500 BC and has been mentioned in the Buddhist Jataka tales and old Pali texts written around 1500 years ago. As the Legend has it, she was found at the foot of a mango tree and so she was named Amrapali (amra means mango and pallawa means leaves). Anurag Anand in his twin novels portrays the life of Amrapali, the forgotten Nagarvadhu of Vaishali, the capital city of the Lichhavi clan, one of the eight Kshatriya clans that united to form the Vajji confederacy. He has given a vivid picture of the life of Amrapali. As historical fiction written in the third person narrative, the two volumes portrayed Amrapali not only as a noted Nagarvadhu of Vaishali but also in the influential role she has assumed in the social, political and economic matters of the kingdom.

The other novel selected for comparison is the French novel, *Thais* (1890) by a Nobel laureate, Anatole France. He was a French poet, journalist, and novelist with several best sellers. Due to his ironic and sceptical character, he was considered as the ideal French man of letters. He won the 1921 Nobel Prize in Literature. Besides a novel, he has composed a poem with the same title, *Thais*. The details provided in the novel is an important feature that separate it from the other versions of the story of Thais. It is a historical fiction divided into three parts, *The Lotus*, *The Papyrus*, *The Banquet* and *The Euphorbia* respectively. The novel is set in 4th century Egypt and traces the life of a famous Egyptian courtesan, Thais. The novel portrays the life of Thais in relation to a Christian monk Paphnuce, an abbot of Antinoe who led a secluded life. Paphnuce influenced by the memory of his meeting with Thais resolved to save Thais from her sinful life and to convince her to turn towards God. The novel depicts the dilemma of an ascetic, whose faith has come into clash with earthly love, and failed to chose between Heaven or Earth, the good or the bad, his love for a hetaera as well as his quest for salvation.

Both the selected novels deal with the lives of courtesans from history. Both Amrapali and Thais are remembered for their repentance and audacity in accepting a life of asceticism. Though they are from different backgrounds and settings, they share some interesting similarities which would be brought to light through the method of comparativism.

Amrapali and Thais: Parallels and Divergences

A courtesan acquires a diverse array of skills, which sets her apart from other women in the society, i.e. house wives. Vatsyayana, an ancient Indian philosopher has provided a detailed description of the qualities a courtesan is supposed to acquire. Chapter VI of *Kamasutra* deals with the details of the conduct of a courtesan, and the qualities that differentiate a courtesan from an ordinary woman. As defined in *Kamasutra*, a courtesan “should be possessed of beauty, and amiability, with auspicious body marks” (134). Amrapali has been portrayed as a beautiful woman known for her beauty and charm. Her beauty has influenced many people including the King Manudeva, he expresses his condition in his own words “her image has got so deeply embedded in my mind that I could barely get any sleep. Oh, what an exquisite creation of the almighty” (Anand 68). In the novel *Thais*, the eponymous character, Thais also grew into a beautiful woman. It was her beautiful appearance that compelled the ascetic Paphnuce to move to Alexandria. As the novel describes “he remembered that he had seen at the theatre at Alexandria, a very beautiful actress, named Thais” (France 11).

According to *Kamasutra*, a courtesan is trained in sixty-four distinct disciplines, including pottery, dance, music, poetry, embroidery, economics, and arithmetic. This extensive training is conducted rigorously before a courtesan’s public debut through a formal ceremony. Mohammed HadiRuswa, in his novel *Umarao Jan Ada*, gives a vivid description of the kind of training a courtesan undergoes through the protagonist of the novel Umarao Jan. Similar kind of training is observed in the novel, *Amrapali, A Legendary Courtesan*. Since her childhood, Amrapali exhibited interest in learning various skills. Her enthusiasm and dedication in learning compelled the guru, Acharya Narhari to instruct her in various skills, including Kootniti and ranniti, the skills generally taught to the boys and not to the girls of the time she belonged. Apart from aforementioned skills Amrapali was also a charismatic dancer and could enthralled audience by her performance (Anand 68). Conversely, Thais was subjected to a strict regimen of learning various artistic skills under the supervision of the elderly bawd, Moeroe, who used a whip to enforce discipline. Moeroe taught Thais the art of

pantomime and the ability to express various emotions, particularly associated with love (France101).

Courtesans were satisfied with the kind of profession they were involved. In this context an American Historian, Veena Talwar Oldenburg in her essay, *Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow*” has mentioned during her interview with courtesans of Lucknow that many expressed a preference for the profession due to the financial independence it afforded to them, allowing them to avoid reliance on men. A significant number of these women came from affluent families and chose this path over traditional marriage. Both the characters, however, were compelled by their circumstances to opt for the profession. They put themselves in the role of courtesans due to a lack of alternative. Amrapali became the victim of male hegemony, having lost her childhood friend and love Pushpkumar, and being hailed from a lower socioeconomic background, she resigned herself to her circumstances and became the Nagarvadhu of the kingdom of Vaishali. Similarly, Thais accepted her fate at a young age due to her impoverished upbringing and troubled family life. This portrayal of the personal loss and the socioeconomic background suggests that the authors have depicted these characters as surrendering themselves to the circumstances as there was no choice left for them.

Though the characters entered into the profession due to various reasons both the protagonists have depicted the strength of their character by not only accepting the profession but also achieving the highest benchmark in it. It was the magic that they had created that people fought with each other to be in their company. For instance, whenever Amrapali gave a public appearance or performance for the common public of the kingdom of Vaishali, everyone from the kingdom was ready to kill each other to just have a glance of her (Anand 119). Nobles as well as common people longed to be in her company. Such was the impact of Amrapali on the inhabitants of the kingdom of Vaishali. It is important to bear in mind that Courtesans have always enjoyed autonomy in the selection of their clients. They enjoyed the freedom to say whether they were willing to entertain a client or not and no client could force them to perform or entertain and usually the Courtesans charged high for a meeting. Anurag Anand has narrated an incident where Amrapali denied a meeting with Manudeva, the king of vaishali. And she charged 50 karshapanas for a meeting which was very high for a common man of Vaishali. Similarly, Thais also preferred to entertain only one

client at a time, and always boldly expressed her will in the case of choosing a client. In this regard, she expressed her unwillingness to be in the company of a philosopher, Nicias.

Courtesans are also known for their services to society. AzizunNisa, a courtesan from Kanpur is remembered for her role in the First War of Independence of India (1857 Revolt). This feature of their contribution to society can be witnessed in the case of Amrapali who constructed schools for girls, temples, and roads. Another important characteristic of Courtesans was that they were mostly empowered and financially independent women who challenged the institution of marriage, thereby challenging the norms of patriarchy. Anurag Anand portrayed Amrapali as a brave and intelligent protagonist of the novel as she was aware of the privileges enjoyed by a Nagarvadhū and her intelligence is witnessed in dethroning the king Manudeva. Thais, on the other hand, participated in the intellectual discourses of her philosopher-clients in the novel. Amrapali is depicted as a socially and politically influential character in the novel as she successfully convinces Bidusen, the enemy king to cease the war against Vaishali, this also brings her patriotic spirit to light. Though she was in love with Bindusen and bore a son for him she had proved her loyalty towards her motherland and protected it from the enemy. Thais, however, is known for her beauty in Alexandria but not much influential in political terms.

Additionally, Amrapali and Thais share a common belief in God. After leading prosperous lives as courtesans, both willingly turned their attention towards spirituality and started leading a spiritual life. They were not atheists; Thais was baptized in her youth, and Amrapali's faith is evident in her consistent charitable actions. Each character articulates their views on God while interacting with religious figures i.e. monks. Thais is depicted as a firm believer in spirituality as it is stated that, “[s]he believed in divine providence, in the omnipotence of evil spirit, in spells, exorcisms, and eternal justice; she believed in Jesus Christ....” (France 109). In another instance, Thais contends that her life is guided by divine will. Amrapali also shares a similar faith. Although both characters are portrayed as victims of their circumstances, with their acceptance of the courtesan lifestyle stemming from a lack of options, they ultimately emerge as symbols of resistance and service to humanity. Their decision to submit to God reflects the strength and resilience of their characters. After attaining success in their earthly lives, they aspire to achieve fulfilment in the spiritual realm as well. And have also proved their agency to bring a change in their lives. In a way, their

eventual turn to spirituality can be taken as their swan-song to challenge the male hegemony in the last sphere of life, i.e., religion and spirituality.

Conclusion:

Despite different backgrounds and life experiences, the characters exhibit interesting similarities, primarily stemming from their shared profession. As the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser states in his famous essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in 1970: "The process of interpellation of subjects involves a "recognition" that constantly transforms individuals into subjects". It is not difficult to see the source of these similarities of the protagonists in the interpellation of the societies that carved the subject positions of courtesans through structural determinism of the patriarchal societies.

Although their settings and circumstances diverge significantly, their parallel journeys ultimately culminate in lasting legacies. Amrapali, for instance, achieved renown as the first bhikshuni in Buddhism, a testament to her spiritual transformation. Conversely, Thais, while remembered for her fervent devotion, ultimately found heavenly peace after death, her repentance overshadowing her earlier zealousness.

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