

Abhisarika Nayika in Indian Painting and Her Pictorial Values

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Our *shastras* talk about the female leading role in works of art in great detail. Based on the emotions of her love life, a *nayikas* are classified under eight types. In Indian art, the *nayika* figure holds a pivotal position in the vast majority of Indian miniatures and wall paintings that portray her many-splendored facets. The different phases that she experiences and her responses towards them are depicted in various romantic dispositions called *Ashtanayika*. Of the eight *nayikas* *abhisarika* remained a great favourite with the authors of poetic works on rhetoric. The *abhisarika nayika*, an ancient icon of love in Sanskrit poetics is portrayed as abundant with desire, which is profuse in interpretation. Of all the *nayikas* in *vipralambha sringar*, love in longing, the *abhisarika nayika* is the most striking. She could be described in today's terminology as a proactive *nayika*.

The *abhisarika nayika* is a woman who decides to do something about her state of separation from her lover. Her name derives from the Sanskrit verb meaning 'to go towards'. She has been depicted as a woman who is going out in search of her beloved or setting off for a pre-decided destination. She appears and reappears in our various art forms as an image of transgression, desire embedded in her beautiful form, always journeying, signifying a path beyond. In several paintings she appears as a pale figure lighting the fearful darkness of a stormy, demon-infested night and in other few paintings she could be as tranquil as the moonlight through which she journeys, resolved in her quest. She could be carrying flower garlands as gifts for her secret lover while each creature of the night is vivid with expectation, rejoicing in her every step. Of course the outer landscape she traverses is a metaphor of the inner, within her frail, fast-beating heart.

There are a few types of *abhisarika* that give a variety of situations to work upon, like *Jyotsnabhisarika* who wears white and goes out in the moonlight to meet her hero. *Divabhisarika* pretends to be going to perform her daily chores

but instead goes to meet her secret lover. Thamoabhisarika wears dark clothes (black, red or blue) to camouflage herself in the night and then sets out to meet her hero. Kamabhisarika goes out to meet her hero with great passion. Gharvabhisarika's intention is to go to where he is, to meet him. However, to hide her pride, she pretends that she has come for some other task or talks to someone else instead of her hero. Premavakyabhisarika talks nicely, and is full of love. The Svakiya abhisarika is shown decorated with ornaments, walking to her tryst with faltering steps, accompanied by her friend or sakhi, with great bashfulness. The Samanya nayika dresses in blue clothes, goes adorned with cosmetics and ornaments, dauntlessly, laughing and walking slowly with a flower in hand accompanied by her companions. There are some places mentioned by Vishvanath and Keshavadasa where abhisarika meets her lover, like fields, large wells in which there are steps to descend and bathe, funeral places and cemeteries, forests, temples, the house of a female messenger, riversides, lonely houses far from the city or town and so on. Such help the artists to imagine and portray the nayika at suitable places.

The overlapping and intertextuality of the abhisarika nayika's myth is more than a fluid, mingled within the traditions and the arts; it speaks of the ground from which it took birth, the womb of the vision. This is of a world where profusion and abundance are expressions of the underlying harmony of all life forms. It is this idea that has frothed over in the arts as an extravagant animation of thought and gesture, as a jumble of multiple narratives and diverse interpretations that allow many points of view to be held simultaneously without evident contradiction.



This is why, initially, the form of many art works seems like liquid chaos. There are multiple points of entry into paintings where even the borders of the frame can unfurl parallel narratives. There is constant movement back and forth, in the space-time of narrations and there are stories within stories, as if a thousand stories are knitted together. Something is there that is circling round and round in the sea of perception that confuses: is it the object that is moving or is it the sea, or are they both not, but it is the observer who is moving? Or is it a kind of wonder of the creativity with the plurality of form and interpretation. Fluid, multiple narratives echoing with the concept of harmony play a crucial part in the treatment of these narratives resisting easy encoding. Embedded into these narratives is not only the creative presence of the receiver, but

also that of the storyteller who happens to be a painter here. The challenge for each artist during each recreation of the narrative is to give it a fresh luminosity, whereby the narrative is taken a new birth in the mind of the receiver, for making a new layer of contemporary meanings. All literatures try to explore a whole new world of pictorial endeavour, but they are just concerned with aesthetic symbolism.

Images of the abhisarika include her leaving her house in secret, turning her back on the warm interiors of home to merge with the dark glow of forbidden desires; she sheds her earlier identity, removing her dark coloured dupatta generally blue, a veil or a miasma, uncovering deeper levels of self as her love deepens. She stands parting veils of rain, which fall like teardrops, like pearls from a dark yet gracious sky, parting the rain, parting her fears from her desire. Hands reddened with tenderness, eyes lined black with hope, bejeweled by her own splendor, she stands on the threshold of transfiguration. Though a full moon night is apt for romance, the journey of the abhisarika is helped by a moonless or cloudy night, when extra light does not threaten to give her away. Driven by her relentless love and her overwhelming desire to meet her beloved, the abhisarika is not deterred by anything, not the raging storm nor the dark night, neither ghosts and goblins or snakes that thwart her path. Her mind is resolute, her determination is very strong, her commitment is unshakeable, her love abiding. Nothing will stop her, no hazard will deter her, no danger will frighten her, no obstacle will obstruct her and no difficulty will weaken her desire to be with her beloved.

Colours in the Rajput school including Kangra and Bundi constitute an important factor in conveying to the observer the fleeting psychological mood of the subject of a portrait or the atmosphere of the scene depicted. The colours convey an essential message, *rasa* or emotion which produces a psychological sensation, *bhava* or feelings in the observer. The Kangra school distinguishes itself by a vivid use of colour. The backgrounds in Bundi paintings possess a lush exuberance with a predominant use of orange and green colour. The kangra artist uses the well worn idioms of his atelier to depict a love-driven nayika who is rushing against all odds to meet her beloved. Adorned and bedecked, she looks back only momentarily at the snake but will not be deterred by it. Birds of the night, chirping crickets and the lightning complete the foreboding darkness of the night, but while she flirts with danger, the night blossoms reach out to touch her, wishing her godspeed in her courageous journey, as do we.

Miniature paintings from the Rajput and Pahari states show an interest in the depiction of the Krishna legend and love seems to be their primary source of inspiration. The literature of the Bhakti cult and the *sringar* (love) poetry have inspired patrons and poets alike to have these works illustrated with paintings. In fact the transfer to colour and lively forms gave these verbal images strikingly new dimensions. Works like Bhanudatta's *Rasamanjari* and Keshav Das's *Rasikpriya* and *Kavipriya* were a gold mine for painters who appreciated graphic descriptions of Krishna and Radha whose endearing divine qualities were fashioned after familiar human likenesses.

A very common depiction of this nayika is of a girl trying to dislodge a thorn from the sole of her foot. Also, she chides her tinkling anklets and bangles, whose sound might disclose her wanderings to prying neighbours or family members. The need for secrecy is due to several factors. Traditionally, a woman is supposed to be the retiring, shy partner, whose venturing out alone is considered brash and bold. Also, as in the case of Radha and the other gopis, she is not married to her lover but to someone else, so she has to endure the censure of

society over this liaison. Therefore, depending on her age and life experience, the abhisarika is assailed by two conflicting concepts. One is her innate hesitation to defy convention (and often, brave the dangers of the forest too). The other is the overpowering love that makes her fearless, convincing her that there is no need to hide her feelings.

In poems and legends the abhisarika journeys across the forbidden to clandestinely meet her lover for a night of joy, her desire supreme. We can see her in sculptures, arms swaying, her body corroded by sunlight and touch yet alive with movement and passion. And in music and dance she rises with notes and words, with gesture and movement, with breath and improvisations to once again sing the song of rebellion, of refusing to be moored to social mores and conventions. She consistently walks through the centuries and the arts carrying with her the fragrance of difference.

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