

Breaking Stereotypes of Hiḍimbā in Bhāsa's Madhyama-vyāyoga

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Abstract

Bhāsa, a renowned playwright in Sanskrit literature, is celebrated for his thirteen unique plays, each distinguished by its characterization, themes, and narration. Among these, Madhyama vyāyoga stands out as a significant work based on the epic Mahābhārata, challenging socially constructed stereotypes about Rākṣasas and offering a novel portrayal of Hiḍimbā. In the Mahābhārata, Hiḍimbā is often depicted as a demoness or a primitive tribal woman, primarily recognized for her association with Bhīma, one of the Pāṇḍava brothers. However, Bhāsa's depiction diverges from these stereotypes, presenting Hiḍimbā as a multifaceted character with depth and complexity. In the play, Bhīma delivers a dialogue in which he acknowledges Hiḍimbā's humanity, emphasizing her behaviour rather than her birth as a demon. This reconstructs Hiḍimbā's nature as humane, thereby breaking the conventional image of her as a demon. This paper aims to deconstruct the image of Hiḍimbā by analyzing Bhāsa's Madhyama-vyāyoga, which portrays her as a humane, intelligent, and strong matriarch.

Keywords: Stereotype, Deconstruction, Matriarch, Humane, Demon

A stereotype in society is an oversimplified and widely held belief about a specific group of people, attributing certain traits to all members and disregarding individual differences. These assumptions can be positive or negative and often reinforce biases and misconceptions, persisting despite contrary evidence and contributing to prejudice and discrimination. In his article "Stereotypes and Stereotyping: A Moral Analysis," Lawrence Blum explores the nature and impact of stereotypes. Blum provides examples of stereotypes, highlighting society's rigid and oversimplified perceptions of specific groups. For instance, Jews are often labelled as greedy, Blacks as violent, and women as emotional (252). Blum asserts that "stereotypes are false or misleading generalizations about groups held in a manner that renders them largely, though not entirely, immune to counterevidence" (251). Drawing on Blum's discussions, one can understand stereotypes as inaccurate or misleading generalizations about a group perpetuated by another group despite evidence to the contrary. This process shapes perceptions of individuals within the stereotyped group, prioritizing group

characteristics over individual traits. However, this also suggests the potential for negating stereotypes and reconstructing individual identities based on personal characteristics. This paper examines the play *Madhyama-vyāyoga* as an experiment by the playwright Bhāsa, who challenges long-held social opinions about Hidimbā and, by extension, Rākṣasas, by depicting her as a being with human qualities. Bhāsa is a renowned playwright in Indian Sanskrit literature, although the exact dates of his life remain obscure. Scholars have attempted to place him in various centuries. A.D. Pusalker, in his research work *Bhāsa – A Study*, suggests that based on available evidence and references made to Bhāsa by other poets, as well as elements within his plays, Bhāsa likely lived between the 4th century B.C. and the 4th century A.D. This period was marked by significant socio-political changes, including the desire of small kingdoms to become part of a unified territory. In the religious sphere, the rise of Buddhism and Jainism as reformist movements characterized Bhāsa's era. The period was also notable for its prosperity in literature, art, politics, religion, and philosophy, with significant works like the *Arthasāstra* by Kauṭilya and the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* by Pāṇini in grammar emerging during this time. Bhāsa's works provide insight into the socio-political conditions of his time, reflecting aspects of political life, the status of women, and the caste system. His dramas often highlight the Varna system, which was predominant, and the reverence given to the Brahman caste. Despite this, Bhāsa subtly depicts the shifts occurring in the caste system during his period. This subtle portrayal is evident in his play *Madhyama-vyāyoga*, where he reflects on the evolving societal norms and practices. According to manuscripts discovered by M.T. Ganapati Shastri in 1909, Bhāsa authored thirteen plays. He drew on mythological, historical, and folklore tales as sources for his dramatic works. Among these plays, six are based on the epic *Mahābhārata*: *Madhyama- vyāyoga*, *Pañcarātram*, *Dūtavākya*, *Dūta-Ghaṭotkaca*, *Karṇa-Bhāram*, and *Ūrubhaṅgam*. Each of these plays is distinctive in terms of plot, characterization, and themes. Bhāsa exercised considerable creative liberty, often deviating from the original *Mahābhārata* narrative to reflect the socio-political conditions of his time and to resonate with his contemporary audience. For instance, in *Pañcarātram*, Bhāsa diverges from the epic by having Duryodhana accept Droṇācārya's proposal to share the kingdom with the Pāṇḍavas. This alteration leads to a no-war scenario, thereby preventing the Kurukṣetra war from occurring, a significant departure from the traditional narrative. Such deviations are present across all six plays, showcasing Bhāsa's unique interpretation of the *Mahābhārata*. His adaptations not only provide a fresh perspective on well-known stories but also offer insights into the cultural and political milieu of his era. Through these creative reinterpretations, Bhāsa's

works contribute to the rich tradition of Sanskrit literature, illustrating his ability to blend timeless epics with the contemporary issues of his period.

Madhyama-vyāyoga, as the title suggests, comprises two terms: *Madhyama*, which means the middle one, and *Vyāyoga* is a type of drama among ten in Sanskrit dramaturgy. Keith refers to the term *Vyāyoga* in his work, *The Sanskrit Drama in its Origin, Development Theory and Practice*, as a spectacle about the military, has the elements of battle and strife as part of it. A play in one act, the action which will not extend over a day, the subject is of legendary tales, and its hero must be a god or royal sage. *Madhyama-vyāyoga* is a significant work among Bhāsa's *Mahābhārata* plays. Notably, the play is an original creation by Bhāsa, as the epic itself contains no references to the reunion of *Hiḍimbā* and *Bhīma* depicted in this drama. The play is set in a forest, where a Brahman priest named *Keśavadāsa*, accompanied by his wife and three sons, is on their way to attend a ceremony. To reach their destination, they must cross the forest. During their journey, they encounter *Ghaṭotkaca*, who has been tasked with procuring food for his mother, *Hiḍimbā*'s breakfast. *Ghaṭotkaca* reveals his intentions to the Brahman family, who plead for their safety. *Ghaṭotkaca* consents, on the condition that one of them accompanies him as food for his mother, allowing the others to go free. The priest agrees to sacrifice their middle son. Before departing, the middle son requests permission to quench his thirst at a nearby river. *Ghaṭotkaca* agrees and waits for a long time, growing anxious about the delay, as it would affect his mother's meal. Calling out for the boy, whom he refers to as the Middle One, *Ghaṭotkaca* inadvertently summons *Bhīma*, who shares the same epithet in the play. *Bhīma* arrives on the scene, recognizes *Ghaṭotkaca* as his son with *Hiḍimbā*, and intervenes. He requests *Ghaṭotkaca* to release the Brahman family and offers himself as a substitute meal for *Hiḍimbā*. *Bhīma*, wanting to test his son's strength, engages in a playful fight with *Ghaṭotkaca*. Ultimately, the play concludes with the reunion of *Bhīma*, *Hiḍimbā*, and their son *Ghaṭotkaca*.

The play *Madhyama-vyāyoga* presents a significant departure from traditional portrayals of *Rākṣasas* by depicting *Hiḍimbā* with human traits, challenging established societal norms. In ancient times, *Rākṣasas* were often viewed as societal outcasts, marginalized from mainstream society. Scholars from both India and the West have delved into Sanskrit literature and archaeological evidence to gain insights into the caste system of that era. Their research frequently characterizes *Rākṣasas* as outcasts or forest dwellers endowed with human qualities. Madhubanti Banerjee, in her essay "Rakshasas and Asuras in Hindu Epic Tales," sheds further light on this portrayal, describing *Rākṣasas* as non-Aryans: The environment in

which these non-Aryans were forced to live and the fact that they had a significantly different appearance from the Aryans gave rise to folk characters called rakshasas (demons) and asuras (ungodly creatures). According to Sanskrit epic tales, Hindu folklore, and many mythological stories of later centuries, these rakshasas were vicious human flesh eaters, duplicitous, unlawful, and repulsive (Banerjee 147). These non-Aryans inhabited an environment distinct from that of the Aryans and possessed markedly different appearances, leading to their classification as folk characters known as Rākṣasas or Asuras.

In Sanskrit epic tales, Hindu folklore, and later mythological stories, Rākṣasas were commonly portrayed as savage human flesh eaters, characterized by traits such as deceitfulness, lawlessness, and repugnance. However, the portrayal of Hiḍimbā in *Madhyama-vyāyoga* challenges this stereotype by presenting her as a figure imbued with human qualities, diverging from the conventional image of Rākṣasas as demonic beings. This interpretation not only offers a new perspective on Hiḍimbā's character but also prompts a reassessment of broader societal perceptions of Rākṣasas. By endowing Rākṣasas with human traits, the play encourages the audience to reconsider deep-rooted stereotypes and fosters a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics of ancient society.

The portrayal of certain classes, castes, or communities in a negative light often serves political agendas. According to Banerjee, Aryans sought to establish themselves as divine beings while depicting non-Aryans as Rākṣasas, a characterization prevalent in much of the literature they produced. Throughout her analysis, Banerjee reveals that the Aryans constructed this image of non-Aryans as Rākṣasas as a means of self-protection. She provides an example from the *Ramayana* to support her argument that Rākṣasas are indeed human beings. She gives an example from the *Sundara Kanda* of the *Ramayana*, wherein Hanuman mistakes Mandodari for Sita and describes her as a beautiful woman with a moon-like face, radiant, and eyes like lotus flowers. Banerjee also talks about Ravana, who is usually depicted with ten heads and twenty hands. But when Hanuman describes a sleeping Ravana, he only mentions two arms and one head (Banerjee 149), suggesting that these mythological creatures might be humans but were exaggerated in stories.

In light of these references, it becomes evident that Rākṣasas are not inherently demonic but rather human beings with human qualities. Similarly, in the play *Madhyama-vyāyoga*, Bhāsa interprets the character of Hiḍimbā with human traits, which in turn breaks the stereotypical notion of Rākṣasas. Bhāsa's artistic innovation lies in his ability to both portray and subvert these stereotypes simultaneously.

One of the primary methods through which Bhāsa defies stereotypes is by humanizing Hiḍimbā. Rather than portraying her solely as a monstrous entity, he portrays her as a woman with genuine emotions and familial affection. In the play, she is not defined solely by her physical appearance or tribal identity but rather by her inner thoughts, actions, and relationships. Her appearance towards the conclusion of the play serves to deconstruct the prevailing image of a demon. The dynamic exchanges between Ghaṭotkaca, the Brahman family, and Bhīma contribute significantly to this re-evaluation of Hiḍimbā's character, ultimately challenging entrenched stereotypes and offering a more nuanced understanding of her persona.

Rākṣasas are demonic is a stereotypical notion that has developed over a period of time; the subversion of this notion is achieved through Hiḍimbā. Bhāsa gives agency to Hiḍimbā represents herself as a human, and the way Bhāsa pictures her makes it possible. Hiḍimbā does not appear on the stage until the end of the play. All the action is centered on Ghaṭotkaca, the Brahman family and Bhīma. The revelation of Ghaṭotkaca's character brings out the role of Hiḍimbā, a mother, in moulding the behaviour and conduct of Ghaṭotkaca. Through Ghaṭotkaca's character, Bhāsa depicts the strength of Hiḍimbā as a mother, preceptor, and a person with intellect and moral qualities, which is usually not seen in Rākṣasas. At the beginning of the action, Bhāsa paints the stereotypical image of Ghaṭotkaca as a demon through the words of Sutrādharma: "This is an aged Brahman and his wife, with their weary children around them, followed by a monster of the night" (Bhāsa 144). The description depicts Ghaṭotkaca as a monster, which resonates with the stereotypical image of Rākṣasas. The same impression is carried in the descriptions of Keśavadāsa: Old Man (Keśavadāsa is referred to as Old Man in the play):

Oh! Who indeed, is this,

With hair streaming like the morning rays, with long yellow

Eyes blazing in their frowning sockets, with necklet of gold,

looking like a lightning cloud, the very image of the Destroyer

at the annihilation of an Age? (Bhāsa 145).

Apart from Keśavadāsa, the other members of his family also describe Ghaṭotkaca as a monster. The descriptions such as "black as a mass of darkness ... he resembles a storm" (Bhāsa 145), "with a snout as long as a plough" (Bhāsa 145) and

“Death in a human form” (Bhāsa 145) portray Ghaṭotkaca as a demon, though he is a human being, he is perceived by them as a demon. Banerjee, in her article, explains as to why the Rākṣasas are depicted in such a way: Why did Hindu mythology portray non-Aryans as evil rakshasas and asuras and give them animal characteristics and tendencies? The answer lies again in the Ramayana, which shows that Rāvaṇa’s rakshasa army is composed of many men who wear masks of tigers, camels, stags, and other animals, provoking fear and concealing their identity (Banerjee 150). The encounter of the Brahman family with Ghaṭotkaca and their immediate response to the situation hints at how stereotypical images of a certain community that are constructed pave the way for us to judge an individual of that community without coming in close contact with that person. Here, the Brahman family is aware of the Rākṣasas even before the encounter with Ghaṭotkaca, and the image that they carry makes them conceive Ghaṭotkaca as a demon; they have not talked to him or do not know what he is and his behaviour or the reason for his encounter with them. Bhāsa highlights this element, the very ignorance of individual traits of a person over the constructed image of a group to which that individual belongs. The next course of Bhāsa is to hint at this stereotypical image of Rākṣasas and, at the same time, subvert it. Bhāsa reveals the true self of Ghaṭotkaca as a being with human qualities. The way Ghaṭotkaca behaves with Keśavadāsa reconstructs the very image of who he is:

Ghaṭotkaca: Ho, Brahman, stay,

Why dost thou flee, thy fortitude destroyed by fear of me;

devoid of ability to protect thy frightened wife and sons?

...

Ho, Brahman, do not go...

Old Man: Do not be afraid, my dear. Fear not, my sons, fear not.

His speech is kindly (Bhāsa 145).

The behaviour of Ghaṭotkaca reveals not just his character but at the back, it is of Hiḍimbā too. She has raised him to be a gentleman with good behaviour and morality; this highlights herself as a person of good nature. In the above dialogue, when Keśavadāsa refers to Ghaṭotkaca’s speech as kindly, it gives room for reflection on the image of Rākṣasas. The playwright strikes a contrast between the appearance and behaviour of the Rākṣasas. The way

Keśavadāsa describes the appearance of Ghaṭotkaca in a negative term strikes a contrast to the descriptions of Bhīma when he first encounters Ghaṭotkaca, “Oh here’s a handsome fellow-Lion-faced and lion-jawed, with eyes like sparkling wine, his voice is soft though deep” (Bhāsa 149), here Bhāsa gives Protagoras, a Greek philosopher’s concept of relativism. Wherein both Keśavadāsa’s and Bhīma’s descriptions of Ghaṭotkaca are true to their context. By bringing this duality in the appearance of Ghaṭotkaca, Bhāsa disturbs the audience to reflect on their perceptions of the Rākṣasas, not through the appearance or the general stereotypical depiction of them. But through the study of individual character.

Bhāsa gives importance to the behaviour of an individual. He depicts the conscience of Ghaṭotkaca in taking any one of the Brahmin family members to feed his mother, “Ghaṭotkaca: Ah me! ... This is a foul deed I must do to-day, but it is my mother’s Behest, and that removes all hesitation” (Bhāsa 145). The above lines deconstruct the very image of the Ghaṭotkaca as a being with human qualities. The playwright makes Ghaṭotkaca as a conscious being who knows what is right and what is wrong. His devotion towards his mother strikes a similarity between Bhīma and Ghaṭotkaca. The way Pandavas obey their mother is the same way Ghaṭotkaca and even the sons of Keśavadāsa do. This removes the barrier between picturing the demons as evil and the feelings that they have. Though Ghaṭotkaca is the main character here, Hiḍimbā lies in every action and behaviour of Ghaṭotkaca. This brings out another shade of Hiḍimbā’s character; she raised Ghaṭotkaca with etiquettes, and she taught him how to behave. Thus, she takes the form of preceptor to Ghaṭotkaca. In all his actions, Ghaṭotkaca refers to his mother, “Oh, no, my worthy mother does not want a woman” (Bhāsa 147). He follows the commands of his mother at every step; this highlights the character of Hiḍimbā. This subtle act of Bhāsa’s depiction brings out Hiḍimbā as a person with love and emotion, a sensible mother, and a wife who is waiting to rejoin her husband. Bhāsa left no coins unturned in taking a chance to depict the humane behaviour of Ghaṭotkaca and Hiḍimbā: At the end of the play, it is revealed that Hiḍimbā does not want to eat any human; all that she does is for her reunion with Bhīma. The conversation between Bhīma and Hiḍimbā acts as a testimony to the idea of considering Hiḍimbā as humane,

“Bhīma: What is this Hiḍimbā?

Hiḍimbā: (Whispers) That’s how it was, my lord. Bhīma: By birth, of the demons, not by behaviour” (Bhāsa 154).

Bhāsa gives agency to Hiḍimbā to assert her nature as a humane, intelligent, and strong mother. He gives a touch of humanity to her character. Her act of sending Ghaṭotkaca to fetch food for her and her commands to bring a healthy and strong male, no old person or female. This specification of hers reveals that she knew Bhīma resided nearby. To reunite with him she plots the act of getting food for her. This brings out the character of Hiḍimbā as a chaste lady who loves her husband dearly and is anxious to reunite with him. Thus, Bhāsa moulds that character of Hiḍimbā to bring out the human qualities within her. This breaks the stereotypical image of Hiḍimbā as a demon and guises her with human qualities. The words of Pusalker support the argument made in the article when he refers to Bhāsa as:

“Bhāsa being a realist portrays men and women of this world. His characters do not wear the aspect of fairyland. He does not invest the characters with superhuman, imaginary, or inconceivable qualities, and hence the spectators and also readers for the matter of that find themselves quite in tune with their psychology and can easily follow and sympathise with them in their ups and downs. The divinities such as Rama, Lakshmana, Sita, etc., also the Rākṣasas and Vanaras such as Ravana, Vali, Sugirva, etc., are placed before us with human sentiments and characteristics” (Pusalker 89).

Thus, through the play *Madhyama-vyāyoga*, Bhāsa deconstructs the image of a demon of his characters Hiḍimbā and Ghaṭotkaca and presents their individual traits over the general assumptions of society, “It is a peculiarity of our poet that he paints individuals, not types” (Pusalker 90). This hints at the definition of stereotype made by Lawrence Blum, wherein he emphasises individual characteristics over the general assumptions of a certain group on some group of society.



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