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## **The Evolution of Female Archetypes in S.L. Bhyrappa's *Sartha***

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### **Abstract:**

This research examines S.L. Bhyrappa's portrayal of female characters in his historical novel *Sartha* (*The Caravan*). Set in eighth-century India, a period of cultural and religious transition, the novel presents women characters with notable complexities against a historically authentic backdrop. Through textual analysis, this study explores how Bhyrappa constructs female characters, including Shalini, Chandrika, and Bharati Devi, revealing multidimensional portrayals ranging from scholars and artists to wives and lovers, each demonstrating varying degrees of agency and moral complexity. Bhyrappa's characterization challenges simplistic gender stereotypes while acknowledging historical constraints, creating a nuanced representation of

women in ancient India that significantly contributes to the literary portrayal of female characters in Indian historical fiction.

**Keywords:** Female agency, morality, eighth-century, characterization, narrative complexity.

## Introduction

S.L. Bhyrappa is one of Karnataka's foremost literary figures, renowned for his profound exploration of philosophical questions through narrative fiction. His novel *Sartha* (*The Caravan*), set in eighth-century India, offers readers a panoramic view of the cultural, religious, and intellectual landscape during a critical transitional period characterized by the interaction of Vedic, Jaina, and Buddhist traditions and the earliest encounters with Islam. *Sartha* offers ample scope for examination from multiple perspectives. To begin with, it stands as a quintessential example of the historical novel genre. Certain Western critics have asserted that Indian fiction lacks a historical consciousness. This narrative demonstrates the opposite. The novel meticulously portrays the eighth-century Bharat. *Sartha* may be interpreted as a picaresque novel, as it revolves around the adventures of its protagonist. However, it is important to note that Nagabhatta does not fit the traditional definition of a 'Picaro.' The narrative unfolds as an extensive series of his experiences, presented with a commitment to realism. The structure of its content is episodic. It similarly engages with the theme of appearance and reality, identical to Don Quixote, yet situated within the framework of Indian philosophical and conceptual thought. *Sartha* is a metaphysical novel akin to Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*, which is regarded not merely for its philosophical themes but also for its engagement with specific metaphysical (Advaitic) concepts.

( Suma)

*Sartha (The Caravan)* presents a richly textured portrayal of eighth-century India, a period marked by significant philosophical debates, religious transitions, and cultural exchanges. As translator S. Ramaswamy notes, “*Sartha* can be discussed at several levels. It is a historical novel defying Western critical opinion that Indian fiction lacks a sense of the historical” (Bhyrappa, xii). Beyond its historical authenticity, the novel explores profound philosophical questions through its characters' journeys and interactions. Bhyrappa presents several female characters defying conventional stereotypes within this meticulously crafted historical landscape. As Naikar observes in Pradhan Gurudutta's introduction, “Through this gripping narration which is a spiritual journey of the narrator, we enter the ancient world of kings and concubines, Buddhists and Tantriks, merchants and spies, strange customs, and manners of yore” (qtd.in Naikar 3). The women who inhabit this world are neither one-dimensional symbols nor mere appendages to male characters but complex individuals navigating personal, spiritual, and social challenges with varying degrees of agency.

This article examines four significant female characters in *Sartha* - Chandrika, the actress and spiritual practitioner; Bharati Devi, the scholarly judge; Shalini, the protagonist's unfaithful wife; and Queen Tejeswari, the politically astute royal consort. Through these characters, Bhyrappa offers a nuanced exploration of the female experience in eighth-century India that transcends simplistic stereotypes and reveals the complex interplay between individual agency and societal constraints: "By examining female characters in novels set in pre-modern India, we can uncover hidden narratives of women's agency that challenge simplistic notions of universal oppression." (Chakravarti 147)

Understanding women's roles in this period is crucial for evaluating the authenticity of Bhyrappa's characterization. Historical evidence suggests that women's status varied considerably

depending on region, caste, and religious affiliation. "Women are perhaps the most misunderstood and misrepresented figures in the annals of history. This stands particularly true in male-dominated societies like India where they are completely ignored or mostly seen as carriers of male community values" (Singh and Dubey 62). While Brahmanical texts often prescribed restricted roles, archaeological and literary evidence indicates that women could attain positions of authority, particularly in religious and artistic domains. Bhyrappa's approach to historical fiction involves meticulous research and attention to detail. The author states: "I did a good deal of historical research and field studies in developing this story" (Author's note). This commitment to historical authenticity shapes his portrayal of female characters, who exist within the constraints of their time while developing as complex individuals with distinctive personalities and motivations.

### **Chandrika: The Spiritual Artist**

Chandrika emerges as one of the most complex and compelling female characters in *Sartha*. As an accomplished actress, musician, and spiritual practitioner, she embodies the intersection of artistic excellence and spiritual depth. As Bose states, the "representations of women's spiritual authority in literature can provide a window into alternative power structures that existed alongside patriarchal institutions." (p. 203). Her character challenges conventional notions of female sexuality and agency through her deliberate choice to practice celibacy while maintaining close emotional bonds. When the protagonist Nagabhatta first encounters Chandrika, he is immediately struck by her artistic talents and physical beauty: "After I saw her, after I started rehearsing, after having acted with her on stage and after having talked to her, I discussed the secret of physical beauty with the sculptor" (Bhyrappa 39). This initial description establishes Chandrika not merely as an object of beauty but as someone whose entire being exudes artistic expression.

What distinguishes Chandrika is her embodiment, which is described as *Shakti*- divine feminine energy expressed through artistic creation and spiritual discipline. She practices meditation diligently, explaining to Nagabhata: "As one progresses in meditation, these by-products come up automatically. One should not try to acquire them consciously. Even trying is forbidden" (Bhyrappa 44). This statement reveals her sophisticated understanding of spiritual practices and commitment to authentic spiritual development. Chandrika's agency is particularly evident in her relationship with Nagabhata. She maintains boundaries when he expresses romantic interest while showing deep affection: "I will serve you. I will massage you with oil and clean your toes. But why marriage? As the injunction goes, dharma, arthecha, kamecha—togetherness in religious duties, in worldly affairs and in carnal love. But without physical union, how can there be a marriage? The enjoyment of the senses is just not possible in my life" (Bhyrappa 142). This response demonstrates her ability to define relationships according to her spiritual principles.

Chandrika's backstory further complicates her characterization, revealing how her experiences shaped her outlook. She tells Nagabhata about her marriage to a blind music teacher, her affair with his nephew, and her subsequent imprisonment: "I accepted my punishment with the feeling that God had inflicted it on me for the sins I had committed... I had caused distress to my parents by eloping with a blind singer, cheated on the man who was both a husband and guru and had taught me music, showed my naked body to another man, these were big sins" (Bhyrappa 133). This reflection shows her capacity for moral introspection and personal growth through suffering. Despite her strict adherence to celibacy, Chandrika later agrees to participate in Nagabhata's tantric ritual as his *shakti* in the Yoni worship. She explains her decision: "If you remember I went to the stream and took a bath after the worship? That was to get rid of my feeling of being dirty. If my lack of involvement, why would I have felt contaminated?" (Bhyrappa 138-

139). This episode illustrates the complexity of her character and her willingness to help Nagabhatta while maintaining her spiritual integrity.

As an actress, singer, and yoga practitioner, Chandrika embodies the integration of artistic talent and spiritual aspiration. Her journey illustrates one path of female agency available within the constraints of eighth-century society and mastery of artistic performance combined with yogic discipline. The novel emphasizes that "in addition to her charm and physical attraction [she] brings out at the same time her *yoga siddhi* and essential nobility and learning, showing how highly evolved some Indian women were in the eighth century" (Introduction, xlv). As Sinha asserts that "the portrayal of female performers and artists in historical novels often reflects tensions between women's public roles and societal expectations of female modesty and domesticity." (76)

Chandrika's character arc includes initially rejecting Nagabhatta's advances based on philosophical principles related to controlling desire. She later serves as his spiritual guide, steering him away from tantric practices toward a more ascetic path. This portrayal subverts traditional gender dynamics by positioning a woman as the spiritual authority rather than merely a love interest. Her journey includes profound suffering when she is abducted and raped by a Muslim invader. However, even through this trauma, she maintains her spiritual agency, eventually rejoining Nagabhatta while continuing her spiritual practices. This portrayal challenges simplified notions of victimhood, presenting instead a woman who reclaims agency through spiritual resilience.

### **Bharati Devi: Intellectual Authority and Judicial Impartiality**

Bharati Devi represents another facet of female experience in the novel, that of the woman scholar whose intellectual abilities earn her respect in the male-dominated world of Vedic learning.

As the sister of the renowned scholar Kumarila Bhatta and wife of Mandana Mishra, she occupies a unique position at the intersection of familial relationships and scholarly authority. Her intellectual prowess is established when she is chosen as the judge for the philosophical debate between her husband and the young ascetic Shankaracharya. Bhyrappa gives life to strong women in his novel, breaking the stereotypes. As Thapar observes, "the inclusion of exceptional female intellectuals in historical fiction should not obscure the systemic barriers most women faced, but rather highlight the potential for female achievement despite constraints." (89). When questions arise about her impartiality, given her relationship with one of the contestants, she responds with dignity:

I respect the oath of the Govinda Bhagavatpada's student and the oath of his contestant. I also appreciate the sharp mind which has suggested me as the judge. I was first the student of my brother, and after marriage, continued to study under my husband. Now if I refuse this appointment, I will be showing disrespect to both my teachers (Bhyrappa 209).

Bharati Devi's educational background points out that women in Bharat were intellectually on par with their male counterparts and were not prevented from acquiring knowledge. "In our house, Vedic recitations went on continuously. Students came from all over the place... Through intermittent listening, I can faultlessly recite a good part of it. I knew a major part of the Samhita—the literary section—by the time I was eight" (Bhyrappa 199). Women had access to education despite formal restrictions, often through family connections and informal learning.

What makes Bharati Devi particularly remarkable is her impartiality in judging the debate between her husband and Shankaracharya. The debate was not merely an intellectual exercise but



a high-stakes engagement requiring profound understanding. It is emphasized that "only Bharati Devi... had the depth of knowledge, the clarity of mind, and the wisdom to preside over it" (Pattanaik). Bharati Devi expanded the debate beyond philosophical arguments into practical life experiences, challenging Shankaracharya with questions about human relationships: "To claim mastery over knowledge... one must have wisdom that encompasses all aspects of life—not just the realm of the ascetic" (Pattanaik).

When she ultimately declares Shankaracharya the winner, she demonstrates her commitment to intellectual honesty above personal loyalty: "I do not perhaps have the sharpness of intellect to vanquish you in argument. As for my husband, he has been totally mesmerized by the power of your argument" (Bhyrappa 234). This declaration represents a significant exercise of intellectual authority that transcends gender and marital bonds. Even after her husband takes up *sanyas* (renunciation) following his defeat, Bharati Devi maintains her commitment to family responsibilities: "We who had no male issue had decided to adopt our daughter's son so that the duty of maintaining the sacred family fire for worship would continue uninterrupted. Now, even with the departure of the husband, I will assume full responsibility to carry on the family tradition" (Bhyrappa 234). This statement reveals her resilience and determination to uphold traditions even as she accepts the philosophical outcome of the debate.

Bharati Devi's characterization also serves as a counter-narrative to the versions that women were under subjugation in India. They earned respect through their knowledge and quest for spiritual enlightenment. Bharati Devi's role as judge in a high-stakes philosophical debate between two male scholars challenges simplistic views of women's intellectual capabilities and social roles during this period. Additionally, Bharati Devi's character serves as Bhyrappa's exploration of gender dynamics in ancient Indian intellectual traditions. By portraying her as

intellectually equal (or even superior) to the male philosophers, the novel highlights the often-overlooked contributions of women to India's philosophical heritage. Her character challenges modern readers to reconsider simplistic assumptions about gender roles in ancient Indian society.

### **Shalini and Queen Tejeswari: Contrasting Portraits of Female Sexuality and Power:**

In contrast to Chandrika and Bharati Devi, the characters of Shalini and Queen Tejeswari represent different aspects of female sexuality and power dynamics within marital relationships. Through these characters, Bhyrappa explores the complexities of female desire, infidelity, and political ambition. This is evident in how Bhyrappa uses these characters to examine issues of female agency and power that remain relevant today. Shalini, Nagabhata's wife, is introduced primarily through her betrayal. While her husband is away studying the secrets of caravans, she engages in an affair with King Amaruka, resulting in pregnancy and scandal. This situation, revealed to Nagabhata by Narayana Dikshit, catalyzes much of the novel's plot.

The portrayal of Shalini offers psychological complexity. She is described through Nagabhata's recollections as having tearfully bid him farewell, saying: "Dear one, should I say in so many words how difficult it is for me to be without you? However, for the sake of your advancement, I must make a sacrifice. Should I not see the day when you are appointed the Dharmadhikari of this kingdom upon your return from Kashi?" (Bhyrappa 10). This statement acquires ironic significance, given her subsequent infidelity. When Nagabhata learns of this betrayal, he is devastated: "The king noticed Shalini. And she wanted to get to know him. It was he who filled your head with the attractive notion of studying in Kashi and sent you away so that it would be easy for him to have a relationship with your wife" (Bhyrappa, 4). This revelation sets Nagabhata's spiritual journey and search for meaning in motion.

Later, when Nagabhatta uses his yogic powers to enter Shalini's mind, he discovers her bitter regret: "As soon as my body thickened after childbirth, he put me aside. This remote haven of a house where we could meet without anybody being the wiser became my prison of solitary confinement" (Bhyrappa 86). This glimpse into her consciousness reveals her as more than simply an unfaithful wife—she is also a victim of the king's callousness and the patriarchal power structure that allows him to discard her.

Queen Tejeswari presents another facet of female sexuality and power. As the senior queen of King Amaruka, she navigates a complex political landscape while dealing with personal rejection: "There was authority, there was the glamour of sharing the throne and yes, there was a whole array of shining ornaments, diamonds, rubies, and emeralds. That was all. I did not have the freedom to talk to another man" (Bhyrappa 223). Her confession to Nagabhatta reveals the limitations of her royal status and the emotional cost of her husband's philandering. Unlike Shalini, however, Tejeswari actively works to secure political power: "The king has passed strict orders that without the permission of the crowned queen nothing should move in the affairs of the state and that all officers should be obedient to her" (Bhyrappa 222). This statement demonstrates her political acumen and ability to leverage her position despite her husband's neglect. Women's activities in pre-modern societies were significant yet often under-represented in traditional narratives and historical records.

For instance, Emma Rothschild illuminates women's pervasive but frequently undocumented roles in pre-modern economies ( *The Hidden Economic Lives of Women*). When she attempts to seduce Nagabhatta, she explicitly connects sexual desire with political ambition: "Punditji, there is no need for dissimulation. I understood later why I had broken into uncontrollable tears when I was talking to you the day before yesterday... You should become the

chief minister of this kingdom. We should meet every day for consultation” (Bhyrappa 224). This direct proposition reveals her understanding of how sexual relationships can be used to cement political alliances. This tension is evident in Tejeswari's character as she navigates her public role as a queen with her desires.

Shalini and Tejeswari illustrate the complex relationship between female sexuality and power in eighth-century India. While Shalini's sexuality leads to her downfall and isolation, Tejeswari attempts to use her sexuality strategically to secure political power. Both characters are constrained by patriarchal structures but exercise agency within those constraints in different ways. As Kumar notes, “By imagining the inner lives of historical women, novelists can help recover female subjectivity and agency in eras where women's voices were often silenced or ignored in official records” (213). Through these characters, Bhyrappa provides insight into how women navigated power structures in pre-modern India, challenging simplistic narratives of universal female oppression while highlighting their constraints. By portraying the complex inner lives and motivations of Shalini and Tejeswari, Bhyrappa contributes to a more nuanced understanding of women's experiences in eighth-century India.

The moral complexity of Bhyrappa's female characters contributes significantly to the novel's philosophical depth. Shalini's betrayal raises questions about loyalty, desire, and manipulation that resist simplistic judgment. Chandrika's spiritual dedication and subsequent sacrifice create a moral ambiguity that challenges conventional notions of female virtue. Bharati Devi's commitment to intellectual integrity over marital loyalty presents a model of female ethics grounded in principles rather than relationships. This moral complexity allows female characters to participate in the novel's broader philosophical explorations rather than serving merely as

objects of male ethical deliberation. Their dilemmas and decisions contribute substantially to the novel's examination of duty, desire, and spiritual truth.

### **Conclusion:**

Bhyrappa's portrayal of female characters in *Sartha* achieves a delicate balance between historical authenticity and narrative complexity. His female characters are neither anachronistically modern nor reductively traditional; instead, they occupy the complex middle ground where historical possibilities for female agency and achievement intersect with the cultural constraints of their time. The significance of Bhyrappa's female characterization extends beyond literary aesthetics to questions of historical understanding. By presenting women as active participants in the period's intellectual, religious, and cultural developments, he challenges simplistic narratives of female oppression while acknowledging the constraints that shaped women's lives.

From a feminist literary perspective, Bhyrappa's portrayal of women in *Sartha* demonstrates strengths and limitations. While his female characters possess significant agency and complexity, their stories remain connected to and often dependent on male characters. The novel's main narrative follows Nagabhatta's journey, with female characters primarily defined through their relationships with him. This structural limitation reflects the historical reality of patriarchal social organization and the conventions of the historical novel genre. Nevertheless, within these constraints, Bhyrappa creates female characters of remarkable depth and vitality. Characters like Chandrika stand among the most fully realized female figures in historical fiction set in classical India, combining artistic accomplishment, spiritual depth, and moral complexity in a historically plausible yet literarily compelling portrayal.

As Gurudutta notes in the introduction of the Book, “Sartha can be discussed at several levels” (Bhyrappa xl), and the portrayal of women is undoubtedly one of its most fascinating aspects. By presenting women characters with intellectual depth, spiritual insight, and complex motivations, Bhyrappa enriches our understanding of the historical period and challenges us to recognize the multifaceted nature of women's experiences across time and culture. The novel's exploration of female agency within patriarchal constraints remains relevant to contemporary discussions of gender and power. While acknowledging the historical limitations placed on women in eighth-century India, Bhyrappa refuses to portray his female characters as passive victims. Instead, he reveals how women navigated these constraints, creating spaces for self-expression, intellectual growth, spiritual development, and political influence. As Chakraborty asserts, "the portrayal of female religious devotion in literature can highlight how spiritual practice offered women alternative paths to authority when institutional power was largely denied to them." (167)

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