



**ARTISTIC LIBERTY AND THE SLAVERY OF AUTHORITY IN  
*ONE DAY IN ASHADHA***

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**ABSTRACT**

*Mohan Rakesh (1925- 1972) happens to be one of the important dramatists in Hindi. He is a short story writer, who started the movement called Nayi Kahani. He was born in Amritsar, Punjab. After earning his Master's degree in English Literature he taught for some time and then moved to Bombay as the editor of Sarika. Soon he resigned from there, did some free-lance writing and entered the literary scene with short story writing as his chosen genre thereby starting the Nayi Kahani Movement. His complete short stories are available in four volumes. He died young at the age of 47, leaving incomplete his research project on dramatic diction for which he had a Nehru fellowship.*

He is well known for his plays like *One Day in Ashadha* (*Ashad Ka Ek Din*, 1958), *Half-Way House* (*Aadhe Adhure*, 1959), *The Great Swans of Waves* (*Leheronke Rajhamsa*, 1963). Almost all of his plays have been successful on the stage. The great feature about Mohan Rakesh is that he can write plays about old or classical themes as well as about new or modern themes with equal ease, confidence and mastery.

“The author's grasp of the contemporary situation is equally sharp in his novel, *Andhere Bund Kamare*, wherein he tries to depict the alienation of modern man living a life of indecision and rootless-ness. Over-mechanization in the post-war period and the existentialist agony that followed have eroded the simple piety of Indian society. According to Rakesh there is no permanent value called love, as personal ambition invariably overrides all romantic considerations. His other novel, *Na Aanewala Kal* also touches the pulse of contemporary life.”<sup>1</sup>

The present play, *One Day in Ashadha*<sup>2</sup> depicts the anxieties and dilemmas of the famous Sanskrit poet and dramatist, Kalidasa. Hence it may be described as a meta-literary play. In other words, it is a work of art dealing with the life of an artist, or a play delineating the life of a dramatist. Kalidasa, who happens to be the protagonist of the play, was closely connected with Nature like landscape, sky, clouds, animals and stars etc and their beauty, glory and terror. In other words, he was a child of Nature. The month of Ashadha is known



for its dark clouds and heavy rain. Mohan Rakesh has tried to problematize the poetic career of Kalidasa in the play and indirectly shows its relevance even to the present day society.

The play begins with a domestic scene wherein we are shown Ambika and Mallika, mother and daughter respectively who have different approaches to life. Whereas Ambika is practical and down-to-earth, Mallika is romantic and idealistic in her outlook on life. This contrast may be seen in the first scene itself wherein Mallika returns home drenched in the rain of the first day of Ashadha month and tells her mother how she had a thrilling experience of beauty in the pouring rain. But the mother ignores her fussing about the rain as she minds her own business of attending to the household chores like winnowing the paddy.

Like a typical mother, Ambika is worried about her daughter's marriage. She, therefore, tells Mallika that Agnimitra has returned from the place where she had sent him and suggests to her to get married to him. But Mallika does not want to be married so soon. But Ambika is worried about the gossip in the village about Mallika and Kalidasa. She accuses Mallika that she is losing control over herself these days. But Mallika does not feel guilty about her feeling which is pure, tender and immoral. But Ambika interprets Mallika's purity of feeling as a mere illusion or self-deception, because she believes in the material values of life and not in aesthetic values. She makes it clear that she hates the lover of Mallika, i.e. Kalidasa who has ruined her house. She suspects that Mallika was with Kalidasa during the rain and worries about the gossip about them in the village.

By then Kalidasa comes there with a little fawn wounded by an arrow shot by somebody. He wants to save it by applying ghee to its wound and feeding it with some milk. By then Dantul, a gentleman from the royal family comes there in search of the fawn that he has shot by tracing the marks of blood drops up to their house. He does not know the poetic identity of Kalidasa but takes him to be just a villager. He, therefore, accosts Kalidasa and asks him to return the fawn to him as it belongs to him as he has shot it. But Kalidasa refuses to part with the tender creature. Thus there is a simple contrast between Kalidasa as a humanitarian and saviour and Dantul as a callous hunter and destroyer. (This episode easily brings to our mind a similar episode of the encounter between Siddhartha and Devadatta in Buddha's life.)

When Ambika rebukes him and refuses to provide a bed for the fawn, Kalidasa starts going away from the house along with the fawn, without caring for Dantul's demand. Both of them are ignorant of each other's identity and importance. Then Dantul angrily draws his sword and wants to follow Kalidasa, but then Mallika prevents Dantul from chasing Kalidasa and tells him that Kalidasa's sensitivity is not frightened by Dantul's authority. At the mention of the name, 'Kalidasa' Dantul is deeply surprised and tells Mallika that Kalidasa is the author of *Ritusamhar*; that the court of Ujjayini wants to honour him and appoint him to the position



of Poet Laureate and that Acharya Vasumitra came that day for that very purpose. He, therefore, wants to go and apologize to Kalidasa.

Recognition has come to Kalidasa's door without his having to manipulate for it. His beloved Mallika naturally feels proud of him who is going to be honoured at the court of Ujjayini and tells her mother about it. But Ambika, with her robust sense of reality, does not show any response to the news as it is not important or relevant to her. Being a practical lady, she does not want to imagine things unnecessarily. She even complains that Kalidasa is self-centred and cares for nobody in the world.

There is a contrast between Ambika and Mallika. Whereas Ambika is a down-to-earth, practical lady, Mallika is aesthetic, emotional and romantic in her temperament. That is why there is a difference between them in their assessment of the character and behaviour of Kalidasa. Ambika, for example, cannot understand Mallika's so-called emotional or aesthetic relationship with Kalidasa or the reason why Kalidasa is not willing to marry Mallika. But Mallika understands the economic crisis and psychological problem of Kalidasa and hence sympathizes with his present helpless condition. For example, she explains to her mother that Kalidasa has been crushed by poverty and been ill-treated by his uncle at home, which is the reason for his not thinking about the marriage. Ambika is worried about Mallika's livelihood and security in future when she is dead and gone. But Mallika, who is sympathetic about Kalidasa's condition, does not want to pester him for marriage when life is about to take a new direction.

Though the Government officials have come to the village to take Kalidasa to the capital city of Ujjayini for honouring him as the Poet Laureate of the Gupta court, Kalidasa is not willing to receive the honour for fear of being bought by the Government and losing his identity as well as liberty as a poet.

Ambika and Matul do not have good opinion about Kalidasa due to their own personal reasons like distrust and jealousy respectively. But Mallika always wishes Kalidasa well in his future career.

Kalidasa goes to the Jagadamba temple just to avoid the government officials who want to take him to the capital city of Ujjayini. He is so much attached to his land that he does not wish to leave it. But Ambika in her distrustful way opines that Kalidasa is merely play-acting indifference to the State honour and that nobody is going to persuade him to go to the capital city. Vilom, the family friend, also thinks along the line of Ambika. He thinks that Mallika is very young and innocent and therefore knows nothing about the ways of the world; and that she does not like him (Vilom) to come to her house because Kalidasa does not like it and that he can easily see through Kalidasa's hypocrisy. There is a streak of hidden sexual jealousy



between Vilom and Kalidasa. Vilom knows that Ambika has suffered a lot in her life and alerts her to see that Mallika is married to Kalidasa before the latter leaves for Ujjayini.

Nikeshep and Mallika hold opposite views as they happen to be sympathizers and well-wishers of Kalidasa. For example, Nikeshep opines that Kalidasa will lose a great opportunity in his life if he does not go to Ujjayini; and that talent constitutes only one quarter of a man but recognition constitutes the remainder (What he says about Kalidasa holds good in modern times also. That is why many modern Indian writers pull all kinds of wires – communal, regional, linguistic and gender - to get prestigious awards like Jnanapith and Sahitya Akademi etc) and that Kalidasa must go to the capital.

Mallika, the beloved of Kalidasa, naturally wants to persuade Kalidasa to go to the capital to receive the honour. Otherwise, she thinks, he will miss a great chance. She, therefore, goes to the temple of Jagadamba along with Nikeshep, in spite of her mother's disapproval and returns home along with Kalidasa. By that time Vilom is already present there. So both Mallika and Kalidasa are angry with Vilom and ask him to leave the house. But in spite of this insult, Vilom expresses his own sincere feelings. He tells Kalidasa that he is rather sad to be separated from Kalidasa if the latter goes away to the capital, become preoccupied and be among so many attractions like theatres, taverns and other things.

But Kalidasa asks Vilom not to interfere with his private life. He refuses to go to the capital because he does not want to part from Mallika and be separated from his native village, land and mountains. But Mallika, like a true beloved, encourages him to go to the capital in order to grab the opportunity, although his absence may cause suffering to her in the form of loneliness, pangs of separation and emptiness. In order to overcome that loneliness she wants to wander through the countryside and watch the sunset from the temple. After the departure of Kalidasa from her house, she begins to sob and shed tears of joy.

The Second Act shows the next phase of Mallika's and Kalidasa's life. Now Ambika is sick, perhaps due to old age and Mallika prepares a medicine by pounding a few herbs and administers it to her mother, who has been suffering from fever for the last two years. Besides, she, being careless about her health, does not take the medicine regularly.

Mallika is not disheartened by the ill-health of her old mother. She seems to have only positive thinking and optimistic outlook on life. For example when Nikeshep tells her that Kalidasa has settled down in Ujjayini permanently, she feels proud of him because he wrote only *Ritusamhar* when he was in the village, but now after settling down in the capital he has written many plays and poems like *Kumarasambhavam* and *Meghadutam* and one more poem which is widely discussed.





Nikshap tells Mallika another news i.e., that Kalidasa has married the Gupta princess, who is educated and learned in many *sastras*. Instead of feeling shocked and insecure, she justifies that also by saying that a great genius should marry an extraordinary lady like the princess and that she herself is very ordinary. She knows the limitations of her life, i.e. her poverty, her humble domestic background and her illiteracy. Nikshap points out that there is a great change in her household, but Mallika replies that there is no change except the fact that she has to do the domestic work which her mother used to do earlier. Nikshap tells her one more thing that he has seen the government officers coming to the village and also Kalidasa in royal robes riding towards the mountain-top. Even then Mallika does not complain against Kalidasa for having not visited her before riding towards the mountain-top. But still she collects blank pages and keeps them bound so that Kalidasa may write his poetry in them whenever he likes. Thus Mallika happens to be an embodiment of acceptance of the harsh reality of life and her love for Kalidasa is strong that she is not ready to find fault with any acts of Kalidasa. Her love for him is too pure to be tarnished by any doubt about his integrity. She is ready to sacrifice her personal happiness for the sake of his love. She does not rave and rant like a modern feminist girl who is interested in asserting her identity and seeking her own fulfillment. In fact she is too good for a selfish lover like Kalidasa.

The playwright highlights the yawning gap between reality and imaginative poetry through the scene in which the art-students visit Mallika. Rangini and Sangini are the art-students learning dance, vocal and instrumental music at the Centre for Dance and Drama at Ujjayini. They meet Mallika at her house and tell her that they have come to study the background of Kalidasa. They ask her about the herbs that give off light, but they feel utterly disappointed when Mallika gives them a negative answer. They find nothing romantic there in the village unlike the picture painted by Kalidasa in his poetry. Hence they excuse themselves and go away from there. They want to know if Kalidasa has written false. Obviously these art-students fail to understand that beauty lies in the beholder's eyes. They are not able to distinguish between photographic beauty and poetic or imaginative beauty. They are incapable of discriminating between *laukik* reality (of the mundane world) and *lokottara* (or artistic/poetic) truth. Their entire attempt is ironical. The playwright's depiction of this scene is obviously satirical and universally relevant.

By now conspicuous changes have happened in Kalidasa's life. He has not remained a mere Poet Laureate of the Gupta court but has been promoted as the King of Kashmir. The details of these remarkable changes are offered by two characters, Anuswar and Anunasik. They come and knock at the door of Mallika and introduce themselves as the servants of Lord Matrugupta, the author of *Ritusamhar* and other poems; that his queen, Priyanguamanjari is going to visit her house; that Matrugupta is the new name of Kalidasa, who is going to rule over the Kingdom of Kashmir. Mallika is really surprised to hear this news but she never shows any psychological perturbation over that. She seems to have remarkable self-control.



As part of the protocol of the royal visit to Mallika's house Anuswar and Anunasik want to rearrange the things and pieces of furniture of her house systematically to receive the royal guest and make her comfortable. But after a lot of experimenting with the rearrangement, they revert to the old arrangement itself. After they ascertain that everything is arranged properly in Mallika's house, Matul ushers Queen Priyangumanjari into the house. The Queen reciprocates Mallika's greeting. It is very strange that Mallika never shows her jealous or anger at the Queen who has snatched her own (Mallika's) place in Kalidasa's heart. She asks Matul to go and rest as she has already tired him. But Matul replies that he is not tired at all and flatters her unnecessarily. Matul easily represents the servile behaviour, sycophancy and flatter of the subordinate workers in the presence of the higher officers in the bureaucratic set-up of India.

The Queen, Priyangumanjari does not seem to know Kalidasa's pre-marital love affair with Mallika. Hence she cannot understand how much Mallika would be disturbed by her own presence. She talks amicably with Mallika that her lord, Matrugupta (erstwhile Kalidasa) is always reminded of this place and that that is why she wanted to see the place and brought him here while he was on his way to Kashmir. She wants to take some of the atmosphere of this place.

The Queen explains the difficulty of being the ruler of any province as it involves so much responsibility, alertness, tension and restlessness. She says that the political life in Kashmir is so unstable.

The Queen compliments Mallika for her love of poetry and sees Kalidasa's books on her laps. She does not like King Matrugupta to feel the absence of this place. So she wants to take some fawns, local herbs etc to her place so that Kalidasa may feel happy.

She is so generous that she offers to get Mallika's old house demolished and rebuilt. She even volunteers to take Mallika and her mother, Ambika to Kashmir to live with her as her companions and arrange the marriage of Mallika with some official of her choice. Mallika is so gentle and sensitive that she does not want to hurt the Queen, who has come to visit her as a guest.

But by that time Ambika comes out and tells the Queen that her daughter has no desire for material comforts as she dwells in her life of feelings. The Queen volunteers to help them in some way or other, if they want. She tells them that Kalidasa went to the mountain and in the meanwhile she came to visit Mallika here. After the departure of the Queen, Ambika taunts Mallika and asks her to accept the help and payment from Kalidasa for her life of feelings.



Then Vilom comes and tells Mallika how the entire village is excited by the royal visit and how the officials are collecting stones and fawns and drawing pictures of everything – trees and mountain etc – in sight, which is so unusual to them. He says that they want to take these things and show them to others.

The main point that the dramatist wants to highlight here is that Kalidasa, who was not willing to part from Mallika once, has not bothered to come to her house to meet her, perhaps because of his superior political status now. The dramatist has shown how power of any kind, especially the political one, makes a man conceited. Ambika and Vilom seem to be quite right in their assessment of Kalidasa's character, his selfishness and egotism. For example Vilom waits for some time in Mallika's house thinking that Kalidasa might come there, but the hoof beats of the horses come near and fade out gradually. Now it becomes clear to Vilom that Kalidasa does not want to come there. But Ambika is not surprised by Kalidasa's behaviour as she knows his selfish nature and egoism instinctively. Vilom is also disappointed to learn that Kalidasa did not come to meet him as a friend, perhaps because the latter does not consider the former worth his friendship. Obviously the new status of a king with political power has brought in a conspicuous change in his behaviour. Ambika, who had expected this kind of reaction from Kalidasa, hugs Mallika and asks her not to cry for Kalidasa even now. Mallika bears the shock stoically and silently.

In the Third Act the playwright shows many conspicuous changes in the life of many characters. Incidentally he highlights the contrast between the rural life and the urban life; between the life of poverty and the life of luxury and power. Indirectly he shows the eternal flux of life and rotation of the wheel of fate.

Matul, for example, symbolizes the truth that a life of luxury demands its own discipline and adjustment and that political power demands the exercise of one's public self and suppression of one's private self. Matul, who is drenched in the rain, comes leaning on his crutches to Mallika's house. His experience testifies to his peculiar suffering in the midst of luxury. He tells Mallika how he broke his leg on the marble floor of the palace in Ujjayini; how his old house in the village is also reconstructed and covered with marble flooring and how he cannot live in it comfortably. He confesses that he prefers the old type of mud flooring for his house.

Matul tells her further that his life in the palace was most uncomfortable because wherever he went, he was followed or preceded by guards and that everybody used to bow down to him in deference to him and that even his discarded clothing was to be honoured by them. But he confesses that he is happy to be back in this village, but he finds that only the rain is unbearable. The contrast between the country and the city is presented effectively by the dramatist here. Matul has paid the price for living in the palace by getting his leg broken.



A slight difference may be seen between Matul and Mallika. Whereas Matul is disillusioned after going through the experience of living in the luxury of palace life, Mallika is never tempted by the desire for riches, comforts or luxuries of the palace life. She seems to be content with her given situation of poverty, insecurity and helplessness. She has the existential courage to be herself. Even after the death of her mother, she does not feel disheartened. When Matul asks her if it was correct for her to return the gifts and the gold sent by the Queen, she replies that she did not need them and that she did not allow her rural house to be remodeled by the Queen's architects. She is admirable for her non-possessiveness, absence of attraction for gold and her strong sense of self-respect and dignity as a human being.

Before returning to his own house, Matul tells Mallika a shocking rumour that he has heard. According to this rumour there was a rebellion in Kashmir, as a consequence of which Kalidasa left Kashmir, has taken the vows of a *sanyasi* and gone to Banaras, but not to Ujjayini. But Mallika does not believe this rumour.

Mallika's deep love for Kalidasa has not diminished at all in spite of all the vicissitudes of her life. That is why, after the departure of Matul, she looks at Kalidasa's book and addresses it as though it is the author himself. She introspects herself and realizes that he is present in her life, but she is not present in his life. In other words, their love affair has been a one-way-traffic. She understands that her life has been utterly meaningless now; that she has suffered a lot; that she has a child of her destitution and that she has lost her name and become a mere adjective. She is unhappy to hear the rumours that Kalidasa spends much of his time with prostitutes in Ujjayini; that he has become a *sanyasi* and that she has suffered so much pain of destitution due to his indifference to her.

But when Mallika is brooding about her bad luck, Kalidasa has already returned to the village and meets her, who cannot believe her eyes. Kalidasa tells her that everything in the village has changed or perhaps his own vision has changed. He tells her that he left Kashmir as he wanted to be free from his love of power and authority and because of his attachment and bondage to his homeland.

He explains his own behaviour further. Initially he hesitated to accept the honour due to his lack of self-confidence and fear that it may change the direction of his life. He confesses that he accepted the responsibility of ruling over Kashmir because of his dire poverty and humiliation here. But in course of time, he says, he realized his shortcomings and could not change his nature. He says that his poetic career conflicted with his administrative duties; that he felt disgusted with himself and disliked those who celebrated his coming as a festival and that his mind longed for freedom.





He tells her further that although he wrote many plays and poems in Ujjayini, he wrote them only by recollecting his own experiences in the village and his separation from Mallika.

But Mallika is such a good girl that she does not complain against or shout at Kalidasa like a modern young lady. She has borne her suffering silently and stoically. She shows him all the copies of his poems that she has bought from the traders. Kalidasa takes a book from Mallika and finds it blank, but stained with her tears. She wanted him to write his greatest epic in that book. But instead of Kalidasa writing his epic on these pages, it is Mallika who seems to have written her epic of suffering by staining them with her tears. Had she been a modern feminist girl she would have asserted her identity by choosing another man and married him as soon as Kalidasa left for Ujjayini. But Mallika is cast in the traditional mould. She has a lot of self-control and contains a lot of sorrow within her. That is why she has sacrificed her life, her personal pleasures and comforts because of her good wishes for Kalidasa. She stands for pure and complete love, whereas Kalidasa stands for false and incomplete love. That is why he could marry Queen Priyangumanjari in spite of his so-called love for Mallika. In a way Ambika's assessment of Kalidasa as a selfish and egoistic and hypocritical man has come true, but Mallika is not willing to complain against him as she loves too deeply, but not wisely.

At this time Kalidasa hears the cry of a baby inside the house. Mallika tells him that it is her gift to him. By that time Vilom comes in fully drunk and is surprised to find Kalidasa there and asks him to embrace him and tells him the philosophical truth that time does not wait for anyone and that it creates privileges and opportunities for others also. He asks Kalidasa to look at Mallika's child whose eyes are as beautiful as a fawn's. When Mallika goes inside to bring the crying baby, Kalidasa leaves her house without even telling her because he has realized that time does not wait for anyone. He has no moral courage to see the child of another man, i.e. Vilom and becomes speechless with a deep sense of shame and embarrassment. But Mallika cannot follow Kalidasa as there is thunder and lightning. It is very ironical that Mallika, who used to dislike and avoid the company of Vilom in the past, has now been forced by the circumstances to marry him only, as she has no choice. She has accepted the harsh reality of life and realized that love and marriage do not always go together.

Vilom provides a sharp contrast to Kalidasa. Whereas Kalidasa is a poet, Vilom is a non-poet and a very practical man. He frequently intermeddles and interferes with the daily life of Mallika and her mother Ambika. He is a bitter critic of Kalidasa's selfish nature and egotism. As some Hindi critics have suggested, Vilom is an alter ego of Kalidasa. Whereas Mallika, with a poetic heart and romantic temperament is unlucky to marry a drunkard like Vilom, Vilom is lucky to marry Mallika who is far above him in cultural aspect. The main factors



that have brought these two individuals of unequal cultural levels and equalized them are the economic condition of poverty and the pressures of circumstances.

The play may be described as a satire on a great poet's life. While the playwright highlights the purity of Mallika's love for Kalidasa, he concurrently satirizes Kalidasa's callous indifference to her love. Similarly the dramatist foregrounds the conflict between the artistic liberty and the administrative responsibility and bondage in the life of a poet and shows that the two cannot go together and that one of them has to be forfeited for the accomplishment of the other. This universal truth is applicable not only to Kalidasa's life but also to the life of modern writers and artists as well.

It is said that Mohan Rakesh did some historical research in order to write this play, but there are a few unconvincing things in the play, which leave the modern reader rather disappointed. For example, he has kept the village anonymous. One wonders why he has not mentioned the actual name of the village. The mention of the proper name of the village would have added to the geographical particularity and historical authenticity. Mentioning an anonymous village would be preferable in an allegorical work rather than a historically realistic play such as this.

Another disappointing deficiency in the play is the blatant lack of clarity of motivation or logical continuity of events. One may detect a few contradictions in the presentation of characters and dialogues. For example, how can Kalidasa visit the prostitutes and yet become a *sanyasi*? Another major lacuna in the logical development of the plot is about Kalidasa's marriage. For example, the reader wants to know what happened to Kalidasa's marriage with Queen Priyanganumanjari when he left Kashmir and went to Banaras to become a *sanyasi*? If he did so without telling the queen about it, is it not tantamount to cheating her also in addition to already cheated Mallika? If the play happens to be a product of historical research, these logical gaps should not be there.

One more problem in the play is that the character of Vilom and his behaviour are not sufficiently convincing. The reason why Mallika had to marry Vilom in spite of her earlier dislike for him is not examined or presented convincingly. Most of the collusive action and tension is presented either prospectively or retrospectively through indirect action (or off stage) and never through direct action. The silence of Mallika about Kalidasa's betrayal of love and Kalidasa's silent departure after hearing the cry of Mallika's baby is not in keeping with the articulate aspect of drama.

Yet another disconcerting thing about the play is the lack of consistency in the choice of characters and their proper names. The character of Vilom is said to be an invented or imaginary one. The characters like Anuswar and Anunasik happen to be allegorical and



borrowed from the field of linguistics. One wonders why they should have linguistic terms for their names, if at all the play is based on historical research and evidence? Similarly the characters of Rangini and Sangini seem to be just imaginary characters. Why should there be imaginary characters in a historical play?

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(All the page references are to this edition.)