

WOMEN CAPTIVES

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[Sanskrit literature talks of women who have become captives, often, for no fault of theirs. Whenever the situation called for revenge on their caretakers, waging of wars or flaunting of might, these women have been taken to custody. Under such circumstances, these women, have either fought with poise and courage or have succumbed to such pressure. This paper shall strive to portray the plight of such women captives as found in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Mahābhārata*, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and plays such as *Mālavikāgnimitram* and *Priyadarśikā*.]

Women become victims of war in very many ways. Often, they are made captives, either abducted and imprisoned or made to yield to the wishes of the captor. All this, usually, for no fault of theirs! Under such trying times, women of different mental make-up face it differently. Some fight back, some take help, some find ways and means out of the difficulties whereas others succumb to pressure. This paper tries to present an outline of the lives of such captive women with Sanskrit literary evidences, starting from the epic times.

In the *Vālmiké Rāmāyaṇa* (VR), Rāvaṇa is reported to have won over the worlds and captured several women and brought them to his harem. These women were blemishless, talented, of decent lineage. Many of them seem to have become fond of Rāvaṇa:

राक्षसीभिश्च पत्नीभी रावणस्य निवेशनम् ।

आहृताभिश्च विक्रम्य राजकन्याभिरावृतम् ॥

अत्यर्थं सक्तमनसो रावणे ता वरस्त्रियः ॥

Encapturing of women is found in the *Māhabhārata* (Mbh.), also. When Duryodhana encroached the Dvaitavana area, the Gandharvās fought with him, captured him and other prominent Kauravās and carried away their maidens by force. Only with the intervention of the Pandavas were they all saved! :

विंशतिं चित्रसेनमादायान्ये विदुद्रुवुः । विन्दानुविन्दावपरे राजदारांश्च सर्वशः ॥
 प्रियदर्शी महाबाहुर्धार्तराष्ट्रो महाबलः । गन्धर्वैर्हियते राजा पार्थास्तमनुधावत ॥
 दुःशासनो दुर्विषहो दुर्मुखो दुर्जयस्तथा । बद्ध्वा ह्यिन्ते गन्धर्वै राजदाराश्च सर्वशः ॥२

Similar abduction of women happens after the Kurukṣetra war. At the collapse of Vṛiṣṇi clan, Arjuna is advised by Kṛṣṇa to take the Vṛiṣṇi women and others to safety. Seeing that there are limited warriors led by Arjuna, a band of robbers fought to loot them. The once mighty Arjuna, now powerless, could not defend the honour of the Vṛiṣṇi ladies. He lost the fight and several thousand women were taken away by the Ābhirās. Arjuna managed to bring the remaining few to Kurukṣetra:

वृष्णियोधाश्च ते सर्वे गजाश्वरथयोधिनः । न शेकुरावर्तयितुं ह्यियमाणं च तं जनम् ॥
 कलत्रस्य बहुत्वाद्धि सम्पत्सु ततस्ततः । पयन्नमकरोत् पार्थो जनस्य परिरक्षणे ॥
 मिषतां सर्वयोधानां ततस्ताः प्रमदोत्तमाः । समन्तोऽवकृष्यन्त कामाच्चन्याः प्रवव्रजुः ॥
 ततो गाण्डीवनिर्मुक्तैः शरैः पार्थो धनंजयः । जघान दस्यून् सोद्वेगो वृष्णिभृत्यैः सहस्रशः ॥
 क्षणेन तस्य ते राजन् क्षयं जग्मुरजिह्मगाः । अक्षया हि पुरा भूत्वा क्षीणाः क्षतजभोजनाः ॥
 स शरक्षयमासाद्य दुःखशोकसमाहतः । धनुष्कोट्या तदा दस्यूनवधीत् पाकशासनिः ॥
 प्रेक्षतस्त्वेव पार्थस्य वृष्ण्यन्धकवरस्त्रियः । जग्मुरादाय ते म्लेच्छाः समन्ताज्जनमेजय ॥३

The *Bhāgavata purāṇa* (BP.) refers to Narakāsura detaining sixteen thousand women as war prisoners. Kṛṣṇa vanquished Bhauma (Narakāsura) and released those women:

शूलं भौमोऽच्युतं हन्तुमाददे वितथोद्यमः । तद्विसर्गात् पूर्वमेव नरकस्य शिरो हरिः ॥
 तत्र राजन्यकन्यानां षट्सहस्राधिकायुतम् । भौमाहतानां विक्रम्य राजभ्यो ददृशे हरिः ॥४

Harsacarita (HC.), narrates the difficulties undergone by Harṣa's sister, Rājyashrī. Her husband Gṛhavarman was murdered and though a queen, she was imprisoned and her legs were fettered with iron balls:

...भर्तृदारिकापि राज्यश्रीः कालायसनिगड युगलचुम्बितचरणा चौराङ्गनेव संयता कान्यकुब्जे कारायां निक्षिप्ता ॥ ...५

Fortunately, she managed to escape when Kānyakūbja was seized by Gupta. She roamed in the Vindhyā forests without food. Dejected with life, she decided to give up her life. Harṣavardhana intervened at that moment and saved his sister:

...कान्यकुब्जाद्रौडसंभ्रमं गुप्तितो गुप्तितो गुप्तनाम्ना कुलपुत्रेण निष्कासनं निर्गतायाश्च राज्यवर्धनमरणश्रवणं श्रुत्वा चाहारनिराकरणमहारपराहतायाश्च विन्ध्याटवीपर्यटनखेदं...६

Mālavikā, heroine of the play *Mālavikāgnimitra* (Mā.), was the sister of Mādhasena who wanted to negotiate a marriage alliance between her and Agnimitra. While he was proceeding along with his sister to meet Agnimitra, his rival Yajñasena's vassal king attacked and imprisoned him. Mālavikā escaped in the melee. She was lost in the forest. From there queen Dhāriṇī's brother, Vīrasena rescued her and sent her to his sister :

...सोदर्या पुनरस्य ग्रहणविप्लवे विनष्टा। तदन्वेषणाय प्रयतिष्ये अथावश्यमेव माधवसेनो मया पूज्येन मोचयितव्यः श्रूयतामभिसन्धिः ॥... 7

Towards the end of the play, when Vīrasena returns from his Vidarbha expedition with two women captives, the identity of Mālavikā is revealed:

...यः स भर्त्रा विजयदण्डैर्विदर्भनाथं वशीकृत्य बन्धनान्मोचितः कुमारो माधवसेनो नाम तस्येयं कनीयसी भगिनी मालविका नाम ॥... 8

Knowing about the interesting turn of events, the queen also consents for the marriage of Agnimitra with Mālavikā.

Another play also presents a similar plot where the heroine escapes captivity and lives in disguise – *Priyadarśikā*. It narrates the happenings in the life of Priyadarśikā. When king Dṛḥavarman decides to marry off his daughter Priyadarśikā to King Vatsa of Kauśāmbi, the Kalinga king, who was eager to marry her, was enraged. He waged a war against Dṛḥavarman and imprisoned him. The faithful chamberlain of Dṛḥavarman was quick to understand the turn of events. He entrusted Priyadarśikā to her father's ally Vindhyketu. After a while, when he returned from his bath, he was shocked to find the whole place consigned to flames with no trace of Priyadarśikā. Actually, Vijayasena, the chief commander of King Vatsa had attacked Vindhyaketu and assuming Priyadarśikā to be his daughter, brought her as a captive-cum-maid to the palace of Vatsa. She continued to live there as Āraṇyikā and only in Act IV, she is identified as Priyadarśikā, the daughter of Dṛḥavarman by the chamberlain. The queen Vāsavadatta understands that it is her own cousin and happily consents for her marriage with Vatsa.

...येन सापि राजपुत्री यथाकथंचिदेनां। वत्सराजोपनीय स्वामिनमनृणं करिष्यामीति मत्वा मया तादृशापि प्रलयकालदारुणातदवस्कन्दसंभ्रमादपवाह्य देवस्य दृढवर्मणो... 9

...राजपुत्रि तस्मिन्कलिङ्गहतकावस्कन्दे विदुतेष्वितस्ततोऽन्तःपुरजनेषु दिष्ट्य दृष्ट्यमिदानीं न युक्तमत्र स्थातुमिति तामहं गृहीत्वा वत्सराजान्तिकं प्रस्थितः। ततः संचिन्त्य तां विन्ध्यकेतोर्हस्ते निक्षिप्य निर्गतोऽस्मि।...¹⁰

Rājatarāṅginī (RT.), mentions Queen Sugandhā (10th cen. A.D) who was ousted by prince Pārtha and his supporters. Her supporters in turn brought her back from Huṣkapura. On hearing about her return, the tantrin foot soldiers, who supported Partha marched in fury, captured her and let her die in the Niṣpālākavihāra:

निष्पालकविहारान्तस्तैर्बध्ना सा व्यपद्यत ॥¹¹

Then, we find the Śāhi princesses (11th cent. A.D) giving up their lives fearing that they might be captured. When their palace was under siege and set to fire, these royal ladies had locked themselves up in a room. When their maid servants tried to bring them out by breaking open the door, they assumed that the enemies were trying to open the door and immolated themselves!:

शाहिफुयस्तदज्ञात्वा शत्रवः पतिता इति। मत्वा चतुष्किकाशृङ्गे ततोऽग्रिमुददीपयन् ॥¹²

In the *Daśakumāracarita*, King Rājahamsa, who ruled over Magadha kingdom with Puśpapurī as his capital had won over his adversary Mānasāra, ruler of Mālva country and re-established him again in his kingdom. The smitten king takes revenge on Rājahamsa and attacks him after attaining the divine club from Lord Śiva. Since he is invincible at this juncture, the ministers of Rājahamsa advise him to take refuge in the fort but he refuses, retaliates and loses. To secure the queen and other royal maidens, the ministers persuade the king to put the ladies under the protection of a reserve force in the Vindhya mountains, inaccessible to foes:

...तदा तदाकर्ण्य मन्त्रिणो भूमहेन्द्रं कथंचिदनुनीय रिपुभिरसाध्ये विन्ध्याटवीमध्ये अवरोधान्मूलबलरक्षितान्निवेशयामासुः।...¹³

Analysis

A study on the above instances leaves us with varied insights. The capture mostly was a means of revenge on the women's caretaker or on the woman herself as in the case of queen Sugandhā of Rājatarāṅginī. The queen was killed in the Niṣpālākavihāra. She

could not save herself despite having ruled a country and having supporters. The same work presents the entirely different case of Śāhi princesses who immolated themselves based on the belief that they were about to be captured.

Mālavikā and Priyadarśikā were better off comparatively, as they could both escape captivity and live in disguise for some time. Their identity is revealed only towards the end when somebody from their own country identifies them. The case of Rājyashrī, Harṣavardhana's sister is somewhat similar. Initially she was imprisoned and chained but later she escaped from the prison and roamed in the Vindhya forest till she was saved by her brother.

Women captured by Rāvaṇa and Narakāsura seem to have succumbed to pressure. The women detained in Rāvaṇa's harem behaved as if they had Stockholm syndrome, considering Rāvaṇa, their saviour. Narakāsura's women captives had to wait till Kṛṣṇa killed him, for their release. Kaurava women were fortunate to have been rescued immediately on abduction. Arjuna's intervention saved them from the consequence of Duryodhana's unnecessary display of haughtiness. The Vṛiṣṇi women, whom Kṛṣṇa entrusted to Arjuna's custody were not so lucky. These women were taken away by mere robbers from Arjuna, who had by now, become powerless and meek. The royal ladies of *Daśakumāracarita*, were privileged comparatively. Under threat, these ladies were moved to a safe location and had a designated reserve force engaged in their protection.

It can be concluded from the above analysis that women were often put to trouble without good reason and the trouble-makers did face the consequence of their actions. For instance, Rāvaṇa and Narakāsura faced death; Duryodhana was humiliated and King Rājahansa woke up to reality. Moreover, it is clear that those women who developed good understanding of the tough times eventually won over the unfortunate events. For example, Rājyashrī utilized the chaos in her captor's kingdom and fled from captivity. Similarly, Mālavikā and Priyadarśikā found solace by uniting themselves with another family.

References :

¹ VR., Sundara. 9. 6, 60

- ² *Mbh.*, Vanaparva. 242. 8, 11-2
³ *Ibid.*, Mausala. 7. 57-63
⁴ *BP.*, 10. 59. 21, 33
⁵ *HC.*, V uchvāsa
⁶ *Ibid.*, VIII uchvāsa
⁷ *Mā.* I act
⁸ *Ibid.*, V Act
⁹ *Priyadarśikā*, I act
¹⁰ *Ibid.*, IV act
¹¹ *RT.*, V. 262
¹² *Ibid.*, VII. 1571
¹³ *Daśakumāracarita*, p. 12

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