

'The known in the Unknown': Abhisarika in Indian miniature Art.



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Abstract

The abhisarika, one of the eight types of nayikas is a heroine classified by Bharata in his Sanskrit treatise on performing arts – the Natya shastra. This paper takes up her form as an erotic mind as the one who moves as she sets her modesty aside to secretly meet her lover the still of the night. She is portrayed as an archetypal state in the Indian Miniature art as a romantic heroine in an erotic theme. Set in different backgrounds visualized by the artist where she is shown on her way to the tryst, defying all kinds of difficulties of the storm, the snakes and dangers of the forest. The 'not so in the face' visual element of the erotic set these series aside while one understands the palpitation of the abhisarika knowing that she is aware of the outcome of the erotic journey.

A visual reflection of the sensual body language and the attire adorn of these masterpieces series form the body of this paper

Keywords: Sensual Art, Natya Shastra, Modesty, Clothing, Themes, Backgrounds, Abhisarika, Body Language

Introduction the Texts

One the one hand from the standpoint of Rhetoric and the Art of Poetry and the Drama, and on the other, from that of the erotic, Indian writers have long been interested in the classification of Heroes and Heroines in well-defined types. Such classifications are typically developed in Sanskrit treatises such as the classical Bharatiya-Natyasastra, in the Sahitya- Darpana, and in the Kama Sutra and in other works, and in the later vernacular literature Hindustan, chiefly the Rasikapriya of Kesava Dasa, the Sat-saiya of Bihari Lal, and the Bhasa-Bhusana of Jaswant Singh.

Thus Bharata defines fourteen Nayakas or types of Hero lover, as: Lover, Beloved, Gentle, Lordly, Possessive, Animated, Pleasing, and Miscreant, Evil, Untruthful, Refractory, Braggart, Shameless, and Brutal (Bharatiya-Natya-Sastra, XXII,286ff).¹

A more frequent classification distinguishes four Nayakas: Anukula or faithful (to one beloved), Daksina or impartial (Kind to one while loving another), Satha or cunning (both unkind and false), and Dhrsta or shameless (indifferent to blame).

'The dates of Kesava Das are not exactly known. His first work was issued in 1543 A.D., the Rasikapriya in 1591A.D., and a third work in 1601 A.D. nor was this the last of his writings, We may take it therefore that he was born about 1520, that the period of his activity more than covered the reign of Akbar, and that he died an old man'.²

The Rasakpriya, like most of Kesava Das'works, is a treatise on rhetoric and literary analysis, it is by far the most authoritative of the many Hindi works on this subject (which is also dealt with at length in the Sanskrit literature on which the Hindi works are founded), and texts from it are frequently found on Pahari paintings illustrating the various classes of Nayakas (heroines). The work itself is long and detailed, and classifies heroes and heroines according to their circumstances, character, age, etc.; it also subdivides very minutely the different emotions and illustrate their expression. The work itself is, of course, in verse, and by no means easy reading; but Kesava Das is a true poet, and many of his descriptions are lyrical gems.³

The Nayakas and her manifestations

One of the most endearing chapters in the entire narrative of the Hindu mythology is the superlative adoration of Radha and Krishna. Over the ages this story has inspired many artists, musicians and dancers of

India. In the depictions of these artists, the central female character that has always been held in high esteem is the Nayika, or the heroine.

The first proper classification of these traditional heroines can be found in Bharat Muni's *Natya Shastra* (composed circa 2nd century BCE) within the 24th chapter of *Natya Shastra* that the eight classes of heroines have been described. According to Bharat Muni, traditional Indian heroines were classified into the following categories:

1. *vasakasajjika*,
2. *virahotkanthita*
3. *swadhinabhartrika*
4. *kalahantarita*
5. *khandita*
6. *vipralabdha*
7. *proshitabhartrika*
8. *abhisarika*.

These eight nayikas are for the most part divided into two classes:

1. *Sambhoga*: where the heroine is united with her paramour. This category includes *vasakasajjika*, *abhisarika* and *swadhinabhartrika*.
2. *Bipralambha*; where the heroine is not united with her paramour. This category includes *virahotkanthita*, *kalahantarita*, *bipralabdha*, *proshitabhartrika*, and *khandita*.

This classification subsequently received a number of additions. As an example, the *vakrotigarbita* was added in the medieval period, was added to the list.

Also, based on *Bhava* and *Rasa*, a number of classifications and sub-classifications of the nayikas can be found in Hindu literature and arts. Further, the varied interpretations of the classification by various artists and scholars have rendered even more variety to the classification.

The Erotic one: Abhisarika

Out of the various types of Nayikas, the *Abhisarika* is probably the one that attracts the greatest interest from the beholder due to her quiet erotic mindset. She breaks the shackles of tradition and she sets her 'Indian' modesty aside to secretly meet her lover. Traditional Indian paintings, music and poetry often depict the feeling of romantic desperation through the *Abhisarika* Nayika. This paper focusses on this most interesting sensual form of the traditional Indian heroine.

Interestingly it is the artist's vision which sets her figure aside and portrays her in the setup which is erotic and sensual in nature. In traditional Indian Miniature art, the *Abhisarika* is represented as a romantic heroine in an erotic theme. She is often shown in different backgrounds visualized by the artist. The hallmark of these paintings is that she is shown making her way to the tryst. The *Abhisarika* usually appears to be in a hurry to meet her lover. In her passion, she overcomes all kinds of difficulties, including storms, snakes, ghosts, and other dangers of the forest. The paintings are often remarkable in their ability to reflect the sensual body language and the attire of the *Abhisarika*. She steps out to meet her lover, leaving modesty behind, uncaring of the world and intoxicated with the feeling of love, overcoming all

obstacles happily. The dark of the night does little to dent her passion, or to smother her morale which is a really bold step keeping in mind the Indian mindset and how women were supposed to be demure and not be vocal about their sexual urges.

Art historically various representations of the *Abhisarika* have been classified which are as follows:

1. *Divyaabhisarika*- She goes out in the day light, wears any clothes and pretends to go to draw water or attend some festival.
2. *Jyotsnaabhisarika*- She goes out in the moon light, wears white clothes scented with camphor.
3. *Tamobhisarika*- She goes in the darkness of the night, wears black, blue and red clothes, holding a blue lotus scented with *kasturi*.

The Poets and the Artists behind the making of the sensual *Abhisarika*:

The famous poets of ancient India Kalidasa and Soordas wrote in detail about *abhisarika* and to understand her it is important to see her from her angle to fully understand the concept of this heroine to examine the description of the *Abhisarika* in poetries of these poets and the artists depiction of the *Abhisarika* in various paintings of ancient India.

The Poets

Kalidasa's romantic poetry was always a clever interplay of individuals, emotions and elements of nature. The emotions of his *nayaka* and *nayika* are shared by birds and animals. In his poetry, lifeless looking trees appear to be as much in love with the *nayika* as the *nayaka* himself. The song of the peacock seems to be mirroring the lament of the lover. The clouds appear to be conveying the messages of love. The *nayika* herself uses the various elements of the nature to beautify her. Her jewellery is made of real fresh flowers, not metallic, and her feet are decorated with herbal dyes namely *alta*. In line with this, the nocturnal path of the *Abhisarika* *nayika* is traced by the *Manadara* flowers that have fallen from her hair, and by golden lotuses that have likely slipped off her ears.

Similarly, poetry by Soordas often mentions the *Abhisarika*.

'Overwhelmed with love, she who leaves behind her family and shame to go and meet her beloved is to be considered as an *abhisarika*.'⁴

When the *gopis* hear the flute of Krishna, they rush towards him and the poet sings:

'When she heard the sound of the flute, she rushed towards the forest. The family members showed anger and asked, where do you hurry to? She did heed to any of their words and got out of the household, breaking all other associations. It appeared as if the unstoppable rains of the rainy season are moving forth. She gave up all other relations and ran towards the Lord, like a bee flies with all love towards the fully blossomed lotus. After all, she has completely surrendered herself to the Lord of Soordas!'⁵ This poem beautifully depicts an *Abhisarika* *Nayika* looking forward to association with her beloved. She is willing to

sacrifice anything and everything in order to come to her Lord.

A few verses from the abhisarika poems included in Vidyapati's Bangiya Padavali;

Gainlier than a royal elephant, more graceful than the swan,

"She goes to keep her tryst:
Her glorious body far surpasses any golden bud,
Or flawless flash of lightening."

The painting also depicts two snakes, which are representative of more than just danger.

'Lying on their bed the two embrace
The girl is lovely as a cobra'
'A snake shines like lightning in the stream'
'Your body is soft and lustrous as a snake'
Or again,
Radha's love is new, No obstacle can stay her:
She has started all alone, Reckless of any road

She casts away her jewelled neckless That weighed upon her jutting breasts : She casts the rings and bracelets from her hands And leaves them all along the way. The jewelled anklets from her feet She flings afar and hurries on: The night is very thick and black, But love lights up the gloom.

'Take me to a country that I have never seen,
Where, O my love, the thunder roars,
Where, O my love, the lightning flickers,
And the rain pours down'.⁶— (rain, storm and lightning all symbolizing the climax of desire.)

The sakhi describes the nayika: Serpents twine about her ankles, snakes are trampled underfoot, diverse ghosts she sees on every hand, she takes no keep for pelting rain, nor hosts of locusts screaming midst the roaring of the storm. She does not heed her jewels falling nor her torn dress, the thorns that pierce her breast do not delay her;—The goblin wives are asking her whence have you learnt this yoga? Oh abhisarika, how marvelous this trysting!

It is not to be over looked that these are actual songs, while kesava dasa's work is strictly speaking, an analysis.

Following is a brief description of few paintings from ancient India that vividly describe the emotions of the Abhisarika by the hands of various painters prevailing during the times, now housed in private collections and Museums.



Nayak-Nayika series, c.1750. Kotah, Rajasthan

This painting is from a *Nayak-Nayika* series, and is dated to c.1750. It shows an Abhisarika Nayika, dressed in bright orange, on her way to keep her tryst with her lover. The dangers of the night such as snakes crawling in the woodland, one of which has coiled around her leg, does not affect her enthusiasm. The scene is set amid a grove lush with vegetation, while a small stream is

flowing by the palace pavilion. The setting is reminiscent of the Umed Ganj pleasure palace situated eight miles east of Kotah, Rajasthan.



Artist Mola Ram: Abhisarika nayika. Indian, Rajput c.1800 AD

This painting catches the whole essence of the concept of the Abhisarika, with the representation of a beautifully dressed maiden, apparently in a hurry. The background is dark and scary, lightening in the backdrop which seems to have little effect on the heroine. She turns back to look at a golden anklet, which has just fallen off. There are also snakes below and lightning above. It is made using opaque water colour and gold on paper.



Abhisarika Nayika: mid-18th century, Everett and Ann McNear collection.

Part of the Everett and Ann McNear Collection, this Indian painting from the mid-18th century is titled the Abhisarika Nayika. It is made using opaque watercolor and gold on woven paper. It shows the Abhisarika rushing to meet her lover through dense foliage, unconcerned about the late hour. Two maidens can be seen watching her, while the apparent lover waits. Clad in her finest which is a ghagra with an opaque fan like pleats running down the middle. Wearing, a miniscule, choli which reveals more than hides her bosom. She is shown clutching on to a shiny, transparent dupatta over her head in the hope to cover her face.



A Night of storm: Kangra painting from c.1780

Titled "A NIGHT OF STORM", this painting depicts a lady, Abhisarika Nayika, going through the dark to meet her lover. It is a Kangra painting from c.1780., and as in many Kangra paintings, all images in this picture are drawn from poetry. It is housed at the British Museum. Again the artist depicts her in warm colored clothing which keeps her in the dark while the red flowers from the tree are have no effect of the dark of the night as well as the owl and the birds who are looking at her. An orange for her full ghagra and a deep maroon for her small choli while a butidaar dupatta with golden edging to hide her face and keep her covered from the flies of the dark. Her feet and hands are adorned with the vermilion also called 'alta' to be used for special occasions speaks of her willing to brave the weather yet not deter in her dressing up for her lover.



Abhisarika Nayika:by Nainsukh, museum of fine arts, Boston. Kangra; later 18th century

Titled the *Abhisarika Nayika*, this painting is attributed to the family of 'Nainsukh'. It is an opaque watercolor and gold on paper painting from the late 18th century. It is housed at the museum of fine arts, Boston. Inscribed with the text above quoted, beginning Kari Ghana Ghata. Kangra; later 18th century. The original measures 11.5 x 7.5 inches . This is one of the only two pahari pictures seen in which pine trees are represented. The deodar forest lay beyond the ken of most of the painters.

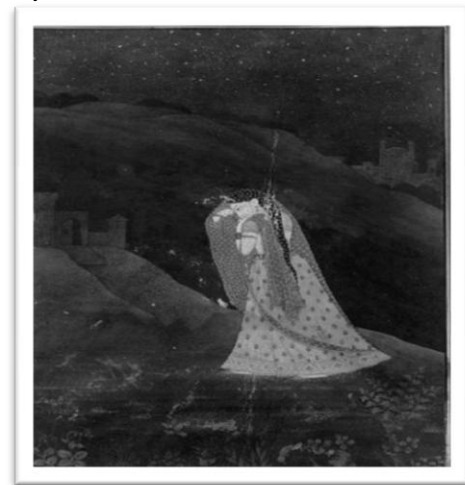
At its reverse, it carries the following inscription in Devanagari script:

"Leaden and lowering and heavy-laden clouds -- light in a robe of black -- dark collyrium is seen upon thine eyes. All thy limbs o'erspread with one dark hue -- thy bodice deeply dyed in dark cova. Lovely the jet-black silken robe, and all they gear becoming -- the black braid beauteous on they back let fall. At such times, in such a guise, when you meet your Krishna, all your efforts will bear fruit."



Unknown artist from Guler, India (c. 1970) pahari painting.

This is a masterpiece by an unknown artist from Guler, India (c. 1970) it is painted in opaque watercolor on paper. The painting is 'Pahari', or from the Punjab Hills



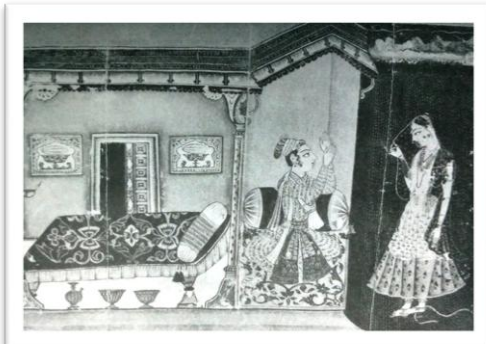
Abhisarika Nayika: A Lady Hazards the Dangers of the Night to Meet her Love, c. 1790

This is an 18th century Indian painting with opaque watercolor and gold on paper. The painting is housed at Harvard Art Museum. Like many other similar paintings of the time, it shows an Abhisarika rushing in the dead of night to meet her parrmour. Abisarika the magical, brave, sensually daring woman who adorns herself with thoughts of what lies ahead. The desperation and love of the nayika provokes her to compromise her honour and she moves on surpassing all obstacles. Clearly abhisarika is not one person but a whole concept that, through these paintings lives on to this date.



A Ramachandaran. Year: 1980 Medium: Oil on canvas Dimensions: 5'11" x 5'7"

Painter A. Ramachandaran painted a series of the Nayikas. In the above manifestation he has painted her carrying her cot along with her to meet her lover. In a night which is full of ready to burst clouds and her ankles entwined with snakes which can pass of as anklets. She rushes along; conveniently hiding her face with the weight of the cot is the representation of this contemporary artist.



Jammu district; seventeenth century. 7.4 X 11 in . Collection of the Chandigarh Museum.

The Nayaka has come through rain and danger, at which the nayaka lifet his hands in surprise. Inscribed with a short text in a character allied to Sarada. Jammu district; seventeenth century. The original measures 7.4 X 11 in . Collection of the Chandigarh Museum. An example of the Jammu district primitives. These are called 'Tibati' pictures by Amritsar dealers, but have nothing to do with Tibet.

Many a times the painters did not care to distinguish the different species of abhisarika, and that this was a nicety reserved for the rhetoricians Percy brown has described a typical abhisarika picture in the Indian Museum, Calcutta, as "the spirit of poetry passing through an enchanted forest" – (modern review, April 1914, p. 405). The words *pracchanna* and *prakasa* are rendered above by 'thoughts unspoken' and 'thoughts outspoken'. The literal meaning of *pracchanna* is 'secret' and of *prakasa*, 'manifest'.⁷ Priya Sakukai, an art historian with her contemporary mind, addresses and in my opinion I do let her conclude with a thought to let us drift-

"Didn't we last see her standing on the threshold of transfiguration, sure only of her passionate love?"

The legacy of Radha and the many anonymous *abhisarika nayikas* is sporadic and transformed by commerce and religiosity. But the trail is decipherable even in our best-loved medium. In commercial films the love-call still occurs in the gardens, in sylvan settings of forests and glades, rarely indoors. The exquisitely dressed heroine, the 'good girl', still needs the ambience of the outdoors, the suggestion of transgressing the threshold of the home to declare herself in love – in order to live happily ever after indoors."⁸

Moreover one needs to wander through the heady fragrance of difference and equanimity, through garden and forest, by the riverside, even through a desert if necessary, seeking the faint far flowering of a cactus blossom overwhelmed with erotica.

After all it's all in your mind!

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