NALACARITAM: THE MAKING OF A MORE HUMANE NARRATIVE AT VARIANCE WITH THE EPIC

When Kathakali is brought to the stage, the literary text [Attakkatha] is only a base in the construction of performance. Every aspect of Kathakali performance is shaped by a variety of modes and styles of performative and/or narrative elaboration. It is significant that out of the five hundred Kathakali plays, “only a few still hold the stage with recognizable persistence” (Paniker, Kathakali: The Art of Non-Worldly 21) and among them Nalacaritam is unique with its rich literary and theatrical potential. Interestingly, Nalacaritam has become the arch text of Kathakali with the coming of the twentieth century when love and marriage got redefined with the advent of modernity. Undoubtedly, then Nalacaritam, which is a highly dramatic love story has got acclaim against this context.

Famous critic Joseph Mundassery has stated that:

In the hand of Unnayi Varier, Kathakali has become a drama. It will not be an exaggeration if Nalacaritam is called the Sakuntalam of Kerala. All those exponents till then considered the text as only a Kathakali play. But I say, forget for the time being that it is a text of Kathakali and take up the text and treat the Four Days’ play as four acts and do perform. It is a play which features the universality and individuality
which are necessary to the characters of a play. This is true of Nala, Damayanti and other characters. Varier hasn’t forgotten to illuminate the *rasa* and *bhava* appropriately all along in the text. Great care has been taken to concentrate on the conceptualization of these facets too. (Mundasserry 400)

Kalidasa’s *Sakuntalam* and Unnayi Varier’s *Nalacaritam* are adaptations of the stories recounted in the epic, *Mahabharata* and it is true that these two have variations from the epic. There are certain parallels in these two texts both in its reflections and thematic structure. One reason cited for their acclaim is the love-plane effectively knit in the emotional web. It is against this social plane that *Sakuntalam* has been translated by the fall of the nineteenth century in Kerala and has got acclaim while *Nalacaritam* which was slow to achieve recognition since its production got its acclaim by the rise of the nuclear family in the twentieth century where love and marriage have been redefined.

The concept of “love and marriage had been redefined with the coming of twentieth century, in Kerala as the transition from joint family to nuclear family was happening from the last decade of nineteenth century” (Ramachandran n.p). From the perspective of a social history of emotion it can be seen that the very concept of emotion has undergone transformations with the changes in the society. For instance, love has become more
subjective and less confined to its carnal aspect Romanticism gave rise to
the notion of love in mind.

This absolute love theory was somewhat the foundation of family
and in the Kerala context of matrilineal features with the concept of marital
love there is the love for wealth of woman as they were privileged with the
inheritance of property also. Incidentally, “the structure of the matrilineal
family changed from the eighteenth to nineteenth century, which
concomitantly affected the rights of women with the household” (Arunima,
_The Vindication of the Rights of Women_ 115). Along side, the very structure
of matrilineal kinship itself underwent a continuous change. The reasons
for these changes ranged from the legal redefinition of the family by the
colonial state to economic and ideological pressures.

G. Arunima elaborates this historical context in her book _There
Comes Papa_: the crisis with matrilineal families in the late nineteenth
century was then not merely a set of changes in customs and laws in
Malabar. The search for a wider identity-of caste or nation-among the
Nayars spelt their desire to move out of the narrow confines of the family.
However, these were painful transitions, and the Malayali engagement with
modernity reflected the difficulty of jettisoning an older identity for a new
one, however, desirable it might have been. The emergent aesthetic
sensibilities of this period reflect the complex tensions and dissonance in
this transitional stage. The new identities of self and subject being imagined in this period occurred not just in Kerala but also across the country. The cultural history of late nineteenth century Kerala, which was distinct from the Indian mainstream in many ways, reveals an attempt to negotiate these issues (Arunima 39-70).

In his *Notes on the Making of Feminine Identity in Contemporary Kerala Society*, T.K Ramachandran considers the modernisation process in Kerala society in the early decades of the twentieth century as the product of a three-fold transformation.

In the first place, the anti-colonial, anti-feudal struggle radically transformed the social order and paved the way for profound changes in class relations and societal norms. In the second place, the reform movements which sought to cleanse the society of evils like untouchability, social segregation on the basis of caste, polygamy and so on, dealt a death blow to the oppressive *ancient regimen* with its rigid caste stratification, female servitude and reprehensible practices meant for its perpetuation. In the third place, the struggle against the feudal mores led to a thorough restructuring of the family, not only among the oppressed classes but among the privileged strata.

A significant feature of these transformations was the increasingly significant role played by mass action as an agent of change. Whether it be the struggle waged by the
peasants of North Malabar, against the hoarding of grains by the landlords or the movement for the abolition of the purdah system among Namboodiri women or the fights for temple-entry rights for all sections of Hindus, conscious organization was very much in evidence and the struggles inevitably became more and more ideological.

The emergence of public opinion, on the socio-political arena, sounded the death knell of the entrenched elitist ethos and signified an unprecedented democratisation of social life. The effects of this radical process were most visible in the cultural realm. Artistic works imbued with reformist zeal appeared in large numbers and readily found a way into the hearts of the masses, thereby laying the foundation for a genuinely popular culture. In a sense, a 'public sphere' [Habermas], came into existence soon to become the major theatre for ideological struggles. Unlike the 'bourgeois public sphere', in western countries, here it had developed largely under the aegis of the toiling masses contributing to the hegemony of the left in subsequent years.

The spirit of Enlightenment characteristic of the times led to a wholesale critique of the mere playtimes of caste-Hindu overlords. Obnoxious practices like, thirandu kalyanam, Sambandha kalyanam, injunctions against wearing upper garments in temples, all were given a short shrift and a new dignity was conferred upon women. The national movement and the anti feudal struggles attracted women in large numbers and social life was agog with expectancy. It was in this radical climate that 'the women's question' came to be placed squarely
on the political and social agenda, and man-woman relations discussed in a human and enlightened manner.

The essential thrust of the people's movements in the early decades of the country was anti-feudal, and therefore it was feudal decadence, which disrupted the family life of the community, that came in for maximum criticism. This is in turn led to a certain idealization of 'romantic live' and the 'nuclear family' that increasingly came to replace the hated joint family. (Ramachandran 119)

The society, which had achieved a new self and individuality in its transition to modernity, also witnessed a change in the nature of male gaze. This, male gaze on female was first to the body and then to the mind. With this, feeling, affection and desire were also redefined. As Carole Patman argues in her *Sexual Contract*, “readings of classic contact theories have tended to repress the sexual aspects of what is actually a sexual social pact” (Patman 118). She argues that patriarchal rights exist throughout civil society; therefore modern civil society is the result of a contract between the state and men, which excludes women on the grounds of ‘individuality’. Nuclear family as a vital component of state-civil society is to be viewed against this context. Then the arguments of Medick Hans and Sabeen David that the emotional aspects are truly intertwined with the social aspects become substantiated. They argue that “the changes in the
family of both interest and emotion lie at the heart of the changing social landscape in the region” (Hans and Sabean 53).

The changing social landscape has also influenced the writings of that period accentuating on the thematic contention of love, marriage and the individual. The new identities of self and subject being imagined in this period occurred prominently in Kerala. The first modern Malayalam novel, O. Chandu Menon’s *Indulekha*, written in 1889, is indicative of such a crisis in identity. *Indulekha* at first glance is an ordinary love story with a predictable ending. But its significance lies in the fact that at the time *Indulekha* was being written, read and translated, a section of Malabar society was engaged in a feverish debate on the absence of marriage in the matrilineal Nayar community. In that light, a love story with monogamous marriage as its theme becomes as such an attempt at distancing from received gender roles and sexual practices obtaining in Kerala. It was an attempt to imagine of new bodies, subjects, social relations and identities.

It is in the space created by the first Malayalam translation of Kalidasa’s *Sakunthalam* in 1882 that *Indulekha* with its problematic new conception of the individual entered. In this, romance, anguish, love-in-union and love-in-separation are important components and these are set against the characterization of Sakuntala as a romantic ideal of upper caste high culture. Emotional aspects of individual existence go along with these
features. These social and cultural processes help us in understanding the sudden popularity and prestige that Nālacaritam has come to acquire during this period. It is extremely significant that it was after a period of two hundred years since its production on stage that Nālacaritam came into the light. In 1647 Nālacaritam is believed to have been composed and A Sreedhara Menon, refers to its staging in 1744: “There is evidence of its having been staged at the Sri. Padmanabha Swami Temple, Trivandrum in Tulam 820 Kollam Era, 1744” (Menon 78). This new found recognition of Nālacaritam as a popular Kathakali piece and its elevation as the arch Kathakali text in course of time, indicates nothing less than a paradigm shift in social and aesthetic sensibility. A more than usually steep threshold separates Nālacaritam from the celebrated Kathakali texts of the earlier period, especially when we consider that there were pre-conceived notions that monologues on the basis of individual characteristics are not suited for Kathakali. Importantly, Nālacaritam is full of such delineations.

In most of the earlier plays, the philosophic and moral theme embedded in the story, is the eternal conflict that goes on between the powers of Good and Evil and the deserved triumph of the former against odds however heavy and formidable. This conflict is, as it were, the centerpiece of most of the dramas and a good deal of dramatic craftsmanship was expended on it. The climax is reached in the elaborate
scene of challenge and fight, the tense struggle and the annihilation of the wicked. It is in this context that the rasas *Vira* [the heroic] and more particularly *Raudra* [fury] are developed fully and delineated with such superb mastery on the Kathakali stage.

K. Bharatha lyer gives details of these delineations in his *Kathakali: The Sacred Dance–Drama of Malabar*. As a preliminary to the actual scene of conflict, *Pada-purappadu* is staged; it means military preparations, such as inspection of weapons in the armoury, testing their efficiency, formation of the forces of attack, so on. This is done with such ingenuity that the sharpened sword gleams and seemingly cuts the fingers, delicately caressing its edge. Another preliminary is the *Por-vili* or the challenge which takes an important place in the depiction of some memorable fights, such as that between Bhima and Dussasana, a very spectacular and stirring incident. Bhima is in a frenzy of anger which is mounting every minute. He stands on the stage on a wooden mortar towering over the squatting audience, brandishing his club and challenging his formidable foe Dussasana, who approaches from the opposite end of the auditorium [generally the open ground]. The latter emerges from darkness preceded by flaming torches, uttering deafening war cries and counter challenges: the very embodiment of fury. A verbal exchange follows, insults and are hurled one another and stage by stage the picture of fury rises. The drum
in the background is spirited and the war cries rise over it like the
rumblings of a monsoon thunder-storm.

The battles are fought out as single combats between the principal
characters, in keeping with the practice in olden days. The provocative
gestures, the pursuits and the retreats, create the illusion of a bitter battle.
The combatants go through the various stages of the fight. Weapons like the
club, sword, bow and arrow are used. We shudder and yet remain captivated
and thrilled. A fight between a *Pacca* character and a *Katti* or a *Tadi* is
clearly indicative of the symbolism of good and evil that is being evoked
(Iyer 80-96).

Usually some extremely gory deaths are graphically depicted on the
stage. The slaying of Dussasana\(^1\) by Bhima and the slaying of demon
Hiranya Kasipu by Nara Simha—the Man-lion incarnation of Vishnu—are
typical. In the slaying of Dussasana, *Raudrabhima* the victor rips open the
abdomen of the fallen foe. His face is contorted by demoniac fury, his hands
and mouth are dyed in the warm blood of the slain enemy. The reckless
frenzy and the consuming wrath then cool slowly.

Equally grim are the ritualistic performances of *Ninam*. The scene
depicts Ravana with Mandodary in a tender love scene. Suddenly with shocking
effect *Ninam* bursts upon the scene. We see a loathsome *raksasi*, all black,
streaming with blood, howling in pain and rage, emerging from the darkness of
night. She approaches from the opposite end of the auditorium, making her way through the audience like the very spirit of evil let loose, and preceded by the lurid glow of torches which, fed with resin powder, shoot out angry tongues of flame. Bhayaanaka [utter fear] and bhibatsa [utter disgust] are graphically depicted in this scene. And even in her tragic state she has not escaped the toil of desire for she asking for pleasure. Attams, kalasams and more parts are narrative in these stories. When comparing these features with Nalacaritam which was different as there is no such fierce battles or terrifying scenes in it. Instead, when the love-lorn king Nala sits pensively in the seclusion of his garden, brooding over Damayanti, [Day One] he embodies the very pain of frustrated passion. All the anguish of an every-deepening but unfulfilled love almost self-destroying in its intensity, and a feeling of absolute loneliness and helplessness are suggested. Such supreme moments of the drama are the focal point of the individual actor’s skill in satvikabhinaya. Mere technical proficiency alone will not create the desired effect.

K. P. S. Menon finds reasons for the ardent recognition of the text in the Travancore region in the twentieth century as the identity of individual and the awareness of the self in the social context had been marked first in this region (KPS Menon 58). A. D. Harisharma feels that Nalacaritam follows closely the procedure of Sanskrit drama of delineating individual essence progressively through the various acts further subdivided into scenes
These derivations on *Nalacaritam* are more specified when Kuttikrishna Marar, the foremost critic in Malayalam stated that “*Nalacaritam* has become the arch text of Kathakali, doubtless” (Marar 253).

The theoretical analysis of the individual in the literature traces its origin in novels. Georg Lukacs describes these aspects in his *The Theory of the Novel*:

> It is an attempt by the modern man to reconcile life [existence] true self [essence] through a form of epic narration. In the epic, hero is never an individual, for the epic must describe not his destiny but that of the community. The novelistic hero is the product of man’s alienation from the world, a world in which values are no longer universally binding and where the individual is no longer bound to a closed community. (Lukacs 11)

*Nalacaritam* which raises these problems in the form of drama about two centuries back found its space in Kerala when these aspects have raised significantly by the first Malayalam novel *Indulekha*.

It is also significant to note that almost all the famous actors in Malabar and Travancore regions have acted the leading roles in *Nalacaritam* since its recognition. According to Panmana Ramachandran Nair, Kidangoor Krishnan Unni alias Nalanunni [1815-1860], Kunhukkarthavu [1829-97], Damayanti Narayana Pillai [1834-1903], Ampattu Sankara Menon [1851-94], Mathur Kunju Pillai Panikker[1873-1929], Kavungal

While Abhinjana Sakuntalam of Kalidasa not only has the context and story changed out but more pertinently, the character of Sakuntala is a contrast to the woman in epic, Nalacaritam on the other hand which is the Kathakali version of the Nala-Damayanti story makes a number of changes in the original Mahabharata version which enhance the dramatic nature of the story of love, separation and eventual reunion. The playwright/composer has authored a text which focuses much more sharply on the individual characters than does the Mahabharata original. “The performance score developed for the presentation of the text provides the actors with specific
opportunities for fleshing out and exploring in detail the nuance of each individual character’s moods with the given dramatic context” (Zarrilli, *Kathakali Complex* 60).

Romila Thapar, in her study of *Sakuntalam* which is primarily concerned with the interface between literature and history attempts to analyse the historical changes through the narrative. According to her the play is an elaboration of the skeletal story in the *Mahabharata*. Kalidasa takes the theme from the epic but fills it out with subplots involving a curse and a signet ring [The translation of the play by Barbara Stoler Miller, is entitled *Sakuntala and the Ring of Recollection*]. In Kalidasa’s version we are in the realm of delicacy and romance, of anguish and imminent tragedy, of pathos and finally of happiness. Love -in- union and love-in-separation are important components in romantic plays, and more so in those of Kalidasa.

The play follows the outline of the epic story but introduces some changes by weaving in elements of stereotypes from other sources, the whole being structured into a sophisticated dramatic form. The emotional range is infinite when compared to the epic narrative, but in the intermingling of the emotions, the image of Sakuntala undergoes a transformation. The tautness of the play and the interlocking of locations were intended for audiences appreciative of these elements. The action is set in an earlier period but
Kalidasa introduces features from his own times, particularly when he indirectly endorses requirements stated in the *Dharma Sastras*, as for example, in references to the behaviour of a wife in her husband’s home or the duties of the king. The play opens with a brief hunting scene, far gentler and less destructive than that of the epic. Dusyanta, eventually narrows the hunt to a deer, significantly the much valued blackbuck, and the chase takes him to the *asrama*. The parallels between Sakuntala and the deer are frequent: they symbolise the serenity of the *asrama* and innocence and tenderness and they are also physically close, for the deer the king is hunting, is a fawn nurtured by Sakuntala. This seems to hint at the predator being the king and Sakuntala being the prey, as is mentioned in passing by the *Vidusaka*. It also hints again in passing at the possibility of Sakuntala becoming the mother of the King’s son. Curiously, although the last Act is set in an *asrama*, there are no deer in it and this has been read as suggestive of the change that Sakuntala has undergone. The meekness and gentleness implicit in the analogy to the deer have vanished, and she is now presented as a woman who has experienced the vicissitudes of life.

On entering the *asrama* the King leaves his array behind, removes his royal regalia and weapons and hands them over to the charioteer. This has been interpreted as symbolising the renunciation of the royal image by the king as he is entering another world, presumably one which is the antonym
of the royal court. But at the same time this was almost a fantasy world, the
threshold of romantic imaginings and magic enhanced by the nayika/
heroine being not an ordinary woman but one born of an *apsara*.

The two friends [Priyamvada and Anasuya] mediates between
Sakuntala and Dusyanta and in this too, the play differs from the epic where
the story is told virtually as a dialogue between the protagonists, with almost
no participation by other persons either of the *asrama* or the court.

Sakuntala reciprocates his sentiment, and is so motivated by romantic
love that after only an initial hesitation, she accepts his offer of a *gandharva*
marriage. The erotic undertones are evidenced in various ways: the motif of
the bee hovering around Sakuntala’s face which makes Dusyanta envious of
the bee; or Sakuntala asking her friends to loosen her bark clothing; or the
creeper entwining itself around the mango tree. These undertones build up
to the more open expression of the erotic in Act III. In signalling the erotic,
glomerates initially replace the desire to touch the contrast between eroticism in
Act III and its absence in the final Act VII when the hero and heroine are re-
united, provides a tension even to the erotic. In this version she makes no
conditions. The initiative is repeatedly taken by the King. The ring causes a
double disappearance: for Sakuntala the King disappears symbolically; for
him, she disappears literally. The ring also highlights the centrality of
memory in the play, where remembering becomes a device for recalling emotion, both the emotion of union and of separation (Thapar 44-82).

The Sakuntala from the image of a self-reliant woman of the Mahabharata had been transmuted into the romantic ideal of upper caste high culture in the play by Kalidasa. But to Tagore, who turns repeatedly to Kalidasa, “the intrinsic virtue of Sakuntala lays in the transmuting of the dross into something luminous through penance. In fact, both have to do penance” (Tagore, Selected Poems 180), in order that the marriage be acceptable. And, connected to penance the experience of Sakuntala’s life in the asrama of Marica and Dusyanta’s remorse when he sees the ring remembering Sakuntala are both treated as acts of penance.

The changes from the Mahabharata effected in Nalacaritam are largely prompted by the requirements of performance. Since this form is deliberately, distancing itself from the epic, the story becomes more dramatic and emotional. In his treatment of Nala’s story, the author draws on the Mahabharata as well as Naishadhiyacarita, but he has remodelled these versions, by interlinking different strands of the story, inventing new situations and dramatising those situations having theatrical potential. In the Mahabharata, “the story of Nala appears as a secondary episode in Vana Parva chapters 52-79 (28) when Yudhishtira asks Sage Brhadasva, ‘Have you come across anyone more unfortunate than me, on this earth? He tells
him the story of Nala to convince him that Nala’s misfortunes were far
greater than those of Yudhishtira, and that, in course of time, like Nala, he
would also be released from his misfortunes” (Gopalakrishnan xxiv).

A.R. Raja Raja Varma discusses the changes Unnayi Varier makes in
his introduction to Kantharatharaka with commentary and interpretation of
Nalacaritam. An important change is the introduction of Sage Narada in the
story. In the Mahabharata version there is no mention of Narada and in
Nalacaritam, Narada is given a decisive role as he appears in the opening,
middle and end of the text. In a sense, Narada can be considered as the
Suthradhara [director] of the play. It is Narada who tells Nala of Damayanti
and encourages him to possess Damayanti. Again, Narada is the person who
informs Indra about the Swayamvara of Damayanti and gives him hints of
her love with a person whose name cannot be guessed.

He even tries to tempt Indra by elaborately describing her beauty. His
real purpose in enticing Indra to swayamvara is to avert any calamitous
events occurring during swayamvara as several valiant kings and demons
are at thronged there with the desire to win the hand of Damayanti.
However, seeing Indra and other gods blessed Nala and Damayanti they find
comfort in the thought that the marriage is after all divinely ordained so they
swallowed the discomfiture and depart peacefully.
The divine serpent Karkotaka happens to be the saviour of Nala, because of the reprieve given to him by Narada. At the end Narada conveys the blessings of Lord Brahma to Nala and Damayanti. Towards the close he appears to pronounce that all the sufferings of Nala and Damayanti are at an end. Thus the insertion of Narada in the role of a *suthradhara* imparts dramatic cohesion to the performance and accentuates its theatrical effect.

The Swan in *Nalacaritam* a highly sensitive character full of charm and wit. In the *Mahabharata* too we had the Swan but he just a common bird whom Nala happens to catch. He commands the frightened Swan to be his envoy to Damayanti. However, the Swan in *Nalacaritam* is no longer just a common bird. The touch of romance has transformed him into a bird with golden feathers. Apparently, he dwells in some exotic world of fantasy. It is interesting that in *Nalacaritam* Swan undertakes the task of pleading the case of Nala with Damayanti in his own, in return for the generosity shown by the king in freeing him.

Again, the encounter between Nala and the Swan adds more flavour to the context as well as it heightens the effect of love-in-separation in Nala. At the end also the Swan is introduced first to dissuade Nala from his resolve to kill Puśkara and then to remind Nala of his displeasure at the absence of Damayanti on that auspicious occasion.
In his act as an envoy to Damayanti, Nala is much bewildered and then acquires courage as he craves to get a sight of the idol of beauty whom he worships for a long time in mind. Here, contrary to the original version, Nala is not revealing the fact that he is the same person to whom Damayanti has affection and love, even though she re-iterates that he bore a close resemblance to the Nala of her dreams. Both Nala and Damayanti are moved by tender passions. Nala on seeing Damayanti for the first time in her full splendour is bewildered, pulled his eyes in opposite direction by his love for Damayanti and the commitment he has made with gods. Damayanti on the other hand is overjoyed to recognise in the messenger the features of Nala. So she asks him to forget the message and spend some time talking with her. The fact that Damayanti is able to identify Nala who appears among the gods who have taken on his form is a measure of the depth and intensity of her love for him. In the scene of the swayamvara, we are once again confronted with the problems of appearance and reality.

Obviously, episodes like the encounter of the Asuras and Raksas and the plot to abduct Damayanti by slaying the kings and deceiving the gods were added by Unnayi Varier by way of concession to the taste of an audience nurtured on an attakkatha fare consisting of spectacular battles and elaborate encounters. Yet he skilfully weaves it into the texture of the love story without marring its architectonic beauty.
The fortunes of Nala and Damayanti reach their nadir in the scene of separation; after that they both pass through a series of trying situations both in the forest and in the palace. They constitute, as it were, a purgatory process through which they have to pass before they can be re-united. In this part, Unnayi Varier takes many liberties with the sequence of events narrated in the *Mahabharata*.

According to the *Mahabharata*, Kali has to wait for twelve years to possess Nala, as he remains too pure to be assailed by evil. Finally, he gets the chance on an evening when Nala who goes to perform the twilight obeisance rituals neglects to wash the sole of his feet. This is noticed by Kali and he enters Nala's body through the sole which had not been purified. Unnayi Varier didn't include these details in the text. But the performance manual based on Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair's performance contains this and is widely used in modern presentations. However, during the course of the play, it is quite evident that Nala has been possessed by Kali. This is further emphasized in the *sloka* at the outset of the scene in which Nala and Puškara play the game of dice:

Under the influence of vile Kali, Nala
falling on evil days, losing his good sense
being defeated by the villainous Puškara
still continued to play. (NC 92)
Even though it is stated in the *Mahabharata* that Indra and other gods who return after the wedding confront Kali and Dwapara, in the play they meet only Kali. The interpolation can be justified because, when Indra and others leave, Kali discusses with Dwapara a strategy for revenge on Nala due to jealousy.

The emotional plane of the play becomes more vitriolic after the separation. Here both Damayanti and Nala undergo a series of situations starting from penance in the forest to the servitude in other palace. But the playwright takes freedom with the unity of time in this part: in the *Mahabharata* narrative Damayanti takes many months to reach the Cedi palace. Whereas, in the play she meets with the merchant gang and arrives at the palace within three days after the separation. Again, according to the *Mahabharata* after the curse when Damayanti wanders about in the forest lamenting, some Sages appear before her to comfort her. In the play this is not depicted, instead in the *sloka* before this scene there is only a hint of it as “and in the middle of forest, consoled by some sages, wandered about” (NC 117). The journey of Rtuparna in the chariot driven by Bahuka has taken ten days according to the *Mahabharata* but in this text it is given as taking only a few days. By telescoping the events, Varier achieves greater dramatic intensity.
In the episode of the Woodsman also Nañacaritam deviates from the *Mahabharata* narrative. For instance, the *Mahabharata* narrative indicates that Damanyanti turns the Woodsman into ashes taking recourse to the Indra’s boon. However, Nañacaritam does not allude to any such boon granted by Indra. Further, in the *Mahabharata* narrative the Woodsman is portrayed as a lascivious person who is intend on possessing Damayanti as soon as he saved her from the coils of the snake. But, Varier’s Nishada is a much more human and refined figure, though the fate he meets with is no different from the fate of his counter part in the *Mahabharata*.

As regards to the experience of Damayanti at the Cedi palace also Nañacaritam is different from the earlier narrative. In the text it is described in a *sloka* as:

Damañanti, accompanied by the merchant leader
reached the land of Cedi in the evening.
The queen-mother questioned the grief-stricken lady
Who had come to live there, clad in half a piece of cloth.

(NC 123)

In the *Mahabharata*, the Queen of Cedi sees Damayanti through a window of her palace opening to the street. She appears to her to be a celestial beauty wandering with the merchant gang dressed in shabby clothes and ridiculed
by the street urchins. The queen summons her to the palace and gives shelter. In the scene in which Kesini tests the identity of Bahuka the Kathakali text deviates from the *Mahabharata*. According to the *Mahabharata*, Damayanti sends Kesini again and again to him and she even tastes the meals prepared by him. She also sends her children to him. Their trips come to an end only when Bahuka sends her away saying that her frequent visits might lead to scandal. However, in the Kathakali text these details are omitted and the scene in which Kesini confronts Bahuka is a masterpiece of dramatic tension and intensity. There, the sardonic but dignified utterances of Bahuka give us a glimpse of his inner turmoil and existential dilemmas.

According to the *Mahabharata*, Nala and Damayanti separated in the forest find the refuge at the same time. But in the play Damayanti returns finally to Kundina after a series of episodes in the Day Two, itself. On the other hand, Nala reaches the palace of Rtuparna only at the opening of Day Three of the play. This also makes the closing scene of second day and opening scene of third day more striking. Further, the monologues of Nala, Rtuparna and Damayanti help to delineate in sharp outline the emotional contours of the unfolding events (Varma 198-208).

From the time of the *Mahabharata*, the story of Nala and Damayanti has been retold innumerable times. There are more than twenty-five texts in
Sanskrit and other Indian languages. Among them Harsha’s *Naishadhiyacarita*, Trivikramabhatta’s *Nala Campu*, Harichandra *Nalopakhyana* and *Nalaparijatiyam* in Telungu *Bhasha Naishadam Campu* are important. Apart from the *Mahabharata*, Unnayi Varier draws upon *Naishadhiyacarita* in his version of Nala’s story. A.R. Raja Raja Varma has given a detailed account of the parts and sequences of *Naishadhiyacarita* that is being used in *Najañacaritam* in its attempt to make it more potential in theatre. Particularly in Day One of *Najañacaritam*, the playwright draws heavily upon *Naishadhiyacarita*. Of the four days’ play the playwright is found relying more on *Naishadhiyacarita* for the Day One. Especially, the wedding scene is heavily depended on that text. The outstanding features of this scene such as the insertion of gods and demons, and the appearance of goddess Saraswati to assist Damayanti are all drawn from *Naishadhiyacarita*. The parade of gods and other worldly characters according to Raja Raja Varma may have been a concession to the accepted conventions of Kathakali performances of the time, which sought after the colourful and the spectacular (Varma 209).
II

What sets apart Nalacaritam from the other attakkathas with their larger than life figures is its essential human content. Primarily, it is an essay upon the human condition. Various interpretations suggest that it is a full-scale dramatisation of human life:

love, separation and reunion on the one hand; the rise fall and restitution of political authority on the other; inadvertent sin, punishment and rehabilitation on other level; corruption, suffering and chastening on yet another level. No attakatha has been subjected to such close interpretation and commentary as Nalacaritam. Many passages have become household expressions and fascinate even the layman in everyday situations. Nala and Damayanti have entered into the popular imagination as proverbial lovers both in union and in separation. (Paniker, Nalcaritam: A Re-Reading xi)

A key to open this specifically human plot is the wonder expressed by Kali in Day Two of the play: “did she really choose a worm of a man” (NC 78). Kali can’t believe that Damayanti, whom even gods desired, chose to marry a mere human being. The human drama that develops hinges upon this crucial choice of Damayanti. When we approach Nalacaritam from this perspective it is possible to see all the emotions depicted in it are bound up with what is humane.
We can see that in Day One of the play, when Nala himself goes to her as the envoy of gods who desire her. Damayanti rejects all heavenly pleasures on the ground that she is essentially human:

Damayanti asks:

Why are the gods without any thought whatsoever attempting to indulge in such indecent actions?
Don’t they understand that I, a mortal princess,
Will become the consort of a king? (NC 45)

Damayanti is indifferent to the pleasures of heaven reiterated by Nala. The attractions of heaven as proposed by Nala is as follows:

You will feast on the sweetest ambrosia, you will fleet time in various sports, you will enjoy all divine pleasures, you will have eternal life, too. (NC 45)

Damayanti is not tempted by the offers, instead, she expresses her ardent wish and attraction for a human being and she even goes to the extent of saying that she will permit him to spend some more time with her since he resembles her lover, provided he refrains from urging upon her the suit of the gods. What is earthly is suitable enough to Damayanti. Love, affection and other passions are worldly and only human beings can
indulge in them. The duty of gods is to protect the earthlings, look after their welfare, receiving obeisance from men and women. This aspect is also evident from Narada’s attempt to encourage Nala to win the hand of Damayanti, for according to the ethical treatises, gods, human and other beings have their separate *dharmas* and their separate codes of conduct. However, powerful the gods might be, only a human being has the right to seek the hand of a maid who belongs to the earth. It is also meaningful that gods are also employing a human being as their envoy to convey their passions for Damayanti. When Nala was on the way to Kundina to take part in the wedding he meets with the gods who are on their way to *swayamvara*. He looks at them with wonder and doubt, and sees the symbols of divinity in them. For example, they do not bat their eyelids, and stand with their feet not touching the ground. From these signs he infers that they are gods and pays obeisance to them.

This divide between gods and human beings is presented in the wedding scene also, there the gods are forced to assume their respective divine signs before Damayanti in order to save her from confusion and apprehension caused by the appearance of all four gods disguised as Nala. The significance of human elements are emphasized here as when the appeal of Damayanti to the gods to appear with their own symbols. She asks what sins she has committed to them to deserve the kind of a trial she has been forced to
undergone. She insists that she had never neglected to the obeisance to gods. It
appears Nala too is as much devoted to the gods and had meticulously
performed the rites in time. Because of this, Kali had to wait for twelve years
to find an excuse, albeit a lame one, to possess him.

In his deeply aggrieved and restless mood in the opening of Day Three, Nala prays to the gods, the Mighty Rulers of the world, asking them
why they are indifferent to him when he is afflicted with great sorrow. He
reiterates that he has worshipped them everyday without fail. Moreover,
the gods have blessed him with true generosity.

Though poetry and other artistic qualities are treated as divinely
ordained, goddess Saraswati herself in her blessings shortly after the
marriage, sticks to the human aspect of these, as she blesses Nala and
Damayanti with the power of expression and poetic embellishments like
alliteration, simile and metaphor. Further, she wishes that not only they but
those who think of them would have a rich vocabulary imbued with
meaning. In a sense, the poet is hinting that not only the text, but all those
who read it would also possess the linguistic and artistic quality, thus
making the human space more wide and deep in the text.

When Indra tells Kali of the futility of his attempt to marry
Damayanti as she is married to Nala, a virtuous king on earth, he become
enraged and desires to take revenge on the couple immediately. In fact, the
whole story turns on this decision of Kali. His main grievance is that Damayanti has married a human being; especially he regards with contempt. Since the whole story hinges on this the play itself can be regarded revolving around the human, non-human element. Viewing through the mirror of human concerns the playwright is narrating a story of love, separation and reunion. All emotions are measured on a human scale and passions produced by the chemistry of instincts and thoughts become the hallmark of the text. Structurally speaking, the text etches out new humane perspective with its specific emotive dimensions.

There are occasions on which Nala and Damayanti reveal human frailties though it can be argued that being human beings that is but natural. When Nala reports to the gods, of the indifference Damayanti showed when he conveyed the suit he requests them to court her by any other means at their disposal adding that women are by nature vain and fickle. In Day Four, Nala utters harsh and bitter words to Damayanti on her attempted second marriage. He sarcastically asks whether is there anyone who has ever found out the deceits embedded in the minds of women.

The story of love of Nala and Damayanti acquires a special poignancy when viewed in the context of the social reform movement in Kerala in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There was widespread anger in the younger generation cutting across communities against
the reprehensible feudal marriage rituals. Moreover, that anarchic sexual life imposed on the lower castes by the strict patriarchy observed by the Nambuthiri Brahmin feudal lords had led to a series of social movements for reforms of the rules governing family life. The colonial modernity had provided the bourgeois notions of the nuclear family with an aura of romantic idealisation. Much in the same way as Kalidasa’s Sakuntala became an iconic figure among educated Hindu upper castes in North India, Nādacaritam too acquired a new significance in Kerala’s social life.