Chapter III


To understand the full range of emotions presented by the text and performance it is necessary to analyse the imagery of Nalacaritam. Several images of the ocean, river, fire, flower, bird, moon, forest et al. appear again and again in the text. In the paradigmatic presentation of emotion, what Roland Barthes calls “the density of the sign” (Barthes, Elements of Semiology 62) is significant because it lends concreteness to the images. These images either appear as a stand in for certain emotions or help in their evocation.

For instance, ocean appears in various contexts in the play. According to Rabindranath Tagore it is not merely a fact of nature: “Sea is not merely topographical in its significance but represents certain ideals of life which still guide the history and inspire the creations of that race” (Tagore, The Religion of the Forest 117). It is in this sense the ocean gets freighted with philosophical implications and becomes the image of the individual self finally merging with the collective self. Romantic poetry in the West is full of allusions to the ocean, as W.H. Auden has brilliantly shown in his Enchafed Flood. In Wordsworth’s Immortality Ode the sound
of the sea that the soul hears even when it is far away in land becomes a promise of the “Oceanic sense” of fulfilment (Wordsworth 29).

It is significant that Damayanti evokes the imagery of river merging with the sea to indicate her natural inclination: “The river only courses towards the sea” (NC 26). The river which flows onto join with its lover, the sea, is symbolic of Damayanti’s love for Nala. Again, in the garden of the palace of King Nala, the Swan pacifies him saying that he no longer has to sink “in the ocean of agony of love” (NC 27).

In Scene VIII, Day Two, Damayanti speaks of her suffering: “My mind is in spate with torrents of grief” (NC 126). In the performance text Damayanti elaborates upon her feeling. The grief is explained in the terms of a swollen stream hurtling on breaking all barriers. In the next scene, though she has reached the safety of palace at Kundina her grief has not abated. She says:

It is better to end one’s life than to live like this immersed in an ocean of grief. (NC 129)

The ocean of grief represents not merely her present miseries but all the trials that she had to suffer after being abandoned by Nala.
In the fourth day of the play, with mixed feelings of grief, doubt and weariness, a frustrated Damayanti conjures up the image of ocean, which is vast and unfathomable, to convey her suffering:

Separation is agonizing; it is like a sea,
fathomless and interminable
harrowing and unbearable as it is, I
sink and drown,
weary and crushed, I writhe in pain. (NC 207)

When Kesini reports to her that Rtuparna’s charioteer must be king Nala in disguise, Damayanti is at once overjoyed and confirmed it. She describes her situation as a “whirlpool of peril” (NC 217). It expresses her dilemma graphically.

Damayanti is pulled in different directions. On the one hand, she has no doubt that he is Naisadha himself and wonders “what does it matter to me now, if he is in disguise” (NC 217). On the other hand, she adds “but when I see his form and attire, I am not so sure” (NC 217). Again she wonders.

Is my husband angry with me? Or
else, why does he behave in this manner?
In the deep and terrible forest, who
was there to attend on me?
Whatever that may be, I have the right
to pay homage to him;
Only my sins are the cause of my grief; 
but all that should end today.
This separation is heart-rending; it is 
better to die a terrible death. (NC 218)

Further, Damayanti is also puzzled by the ethical virtue of choices before her. She doubts: "Whether Bahuka is Nala or not, due to my inability for a proper judgement, because my mind has gone insane with grief? Will I be able to know the truth if I discuss it with my mother? If I decide on my own that he is Nala himself, will it turn out to be a blot on my virtue? Now I am unable to decide what to do" (NC 218).

The image of whirlpool clearly captures the intensity of emotions churning her mind. Significantly the performance text points out that “have all the moods like thought, curiosity, longing, joy, gloom, doubt, anxiety and wonder are present in her” (NC 218).

Again during her meeting with Bahuka the image of the ocean is fused with the image of fire and becomes the emblem of the torments suffered by Damayanti. The incandescence of fire coupled with the turbulence of ocean captures the rare trajectory of emotions:

Failing in my attempt to search him out
I am deeply engulfed in tides of burning embers
I drown in fiery waves and currents;
I am utterly consumed and spent. (NC 219-220)
Of course, the image of the flood appears at other points to suggest a natural force that cannot be shackled or merely illustrative. Thus when he sees Kali and Dwapara hurrying on to the Swayamvara of Damayanti, Indra quips:

What’s this attempt to build a dam
when all the water has ebbed away. (NC 7)

Elsewhere, towards the end of the play Bahuka expresses his love and reverence to Rtuparna by saluting him as “the ocean of valour” (NC 234).

Fire is again a major image in the play and depending upon the context, it acquires iconic, indexical and symbolic dimensions. In the First Day of the play, for Varuna the pangs of love for Damayanti are more fierce than the fire of bedava. Bedava is believed to be a fire burning inside the ocean which dries up the excess of water in it. But here Varuna fears that the pain of love is so intense that it may become hotter than the great fire bedava, and may consume himself completely. [If bedava evaporates all the waters of the sea it would be death to Varuna]. Whereas, fire when it symbolizes burning passion is destructive, in its other aspects it can be beneficial. Thus the god Agni blesses Nala:

This Bhaimi whom I coveted chose you instead, but
I have no malice; on the contrary, I am pleased;
I am at your service for cooking and burning-
Listen now; the dishes you cook
will be as delicious as ambrosia. (NC 61).
It is this boon [as also the boon given by Varuna] that we see in action on Day IV. In Scene V, Kesini spies upon Bahuka from her hiding place. Thinking that she has already left, Bahuka enters the kitchen in Kundina and starts to prepare food for the king. The performance text details the actions thus: “First he takes the proper utensils, and cuts the vegetables and put them into dishes. Then meditates on Varuna. Then meditates on Agni. Then fire burns on its own and the utensils become full with water on their own accord. He takes only what is needed. After checking everything, he is satisfied, and pays respects to Varuna and Agni” (NC 214).

In the scene VIII, Day One the destructive aspect of fire is evoked by Indra who calls Nala “the fire to the forest of foes” (NC 36). Interestingly, this salutation is echoed by Puṣkara in Scene V of Day Two:

Son of Virasena, [you] pestilent fire to the forest of foes! (NC 87)

It is interesting again to note that these images do not operate in isolation but slowly weave a web of associations as the play progresses. Thus when we came to Scene I, Day Three we see in actuality the forest fire and Karkotaka crying for help within it:
Please come to me, and relieve my suffering,
how is this, haven’t you heard me,
blessed soul!
I’ve fallen into this forest fire; this is
no joke,
I am being roasted; please take me out.
Son of Virasena, aren’t you in good cheer?
My body is half-burnt; enough now,
everyone is subject to fate.
There’s none to protect me except
you; you can end my suffering.
Husband of Bhaimi, I know all about your life;
Please do not delay anymore, I am
suffering this mortal agony. (NC 140)

Armed as he is with the boon of Agni, the forest fire causes no threat to Nala. He enters fire with the words:

Do not be alarmed, I’ll come to you,
even if I jump into this terrible forest-fire
I’ll not be harmed, nor shall those whom I touch. (NC 141)

At this juncture it is significant to note that the curious juxtaposition between the fire as metaphor and fire as object. Performance text enjoins in Scene II. Day Three. “Each and every word
of Karkotaka should be as though the pain due to burning in the fire is getting more and more intense" (NC 141). This further emphasizes the inner, outer dualism and the illusion/reality dichotomy that is the key aspect of the semantic structure of the text.

Another reference to fire is in Day Two when Damayanti curses Kali:

   My noble lord is under the spell of an evil spirit,
   for he did not think either of me or his wealth.
   For [being the cause of] this heedless action,
   let that villain [the devil-Kali] fall
   into burning fire. (NC 108)

In a strange way Karkotaka becomes instrumental in fulfilling the curse of Damayanti, for Karkotaka tells Nala:

   Kali who dwells inside you presently
   is writhing and burning due to my poison
   However, he will leave you soon. (NC 147)

Another important twist to the fire imagery occurs in the performance text:

   Here, this place is totally dark because of the density of the foliage. It has completely shut off the sun’s rays. [Looking]
   There, the thick fumes from the forest-fire looks like the sky full of clouds in the rainy season. The birds flying far above get burnt by the fire and they fall into the fire. [Another side]
There, different kinds of animals run about, afraid of the fire, and take shelter in the caves. [Still another place] A doe has its tender hair burnt and is running about, in search of water. What a pity, almost all the birds and animals in this forest have perished in this fire. [Walking on] Here, this female deer, about to give birth to a child, is running about, with intense labour pain. Why does it gallop here and there, as though with great fear? [Looking far]. (NC 151)

The fumes from the forest fire appearing as rainy clouds in the eyes of Nala on his ways to Ṛtuparna’s palace further underscores its ambivalent nature; as fire that burns it is destructive, but it can be a purifier and benevolent. Again in the performance text, the great conflagration that spells destruction to both flora and fauna is put out by a heavy down pour, the female deer gives birth to a child, the mother licked the child clean and suckles the infant with love.

Both as image and symbol the forest is a crucial presence in the play. Many of the scenes in Day Two and Three are located in the forest. After the game of dice it is to the forest that Puṣkara manages to drive away Nala and Damayanti. Gloatingly, Puṣkara says:

Hold your tongue and proceed to the forest, for
if you stay in my country any longer
you will be a sinner and liar
[... ... ...]
All these glories now no doubt belong to me;
do not set foot in my country anymore;
instead do penance in the forest. (NC 94-95)

In the forest terrible ordeals lay in wait for Nala and Damayanti. Under the spell of Kali, Nala discards all his wealth and his throne. And finally in the forest he even leaves Damayanti. Thus Nala with his sense of judgement impaired, roams about aimlessly in the uninhabited and terrifying forest. Adding to the pathos, Nala even loses his clothes, Kali and Dwapara having snatched them away disguised as birds. The performance text gives in graphic detail his tragic state:

The uninhabited and terrifying forest. The frightening sounds of crickets and other animals. As though cutting across them, the roar of animals like tiger, leopard, lion and elephant can be heard. It is dusk. The pathways are not clear. Darkness is closing in. Which way leads to rescue? Thirst and hunger take their toll. The mighty forest, filled with thorns and stones, inflict severe pain to the legs. Nala and Damayanti cannot talk to each other. Both of them are just walking on, unable to see what is going to happen the next moment. Nala breaks the silence thus: “Darling! This darkness which overpowered our minds has spread to the world also. We don’t know where this is going to lead us. [They go on walking. Seeing a shadow ahead, walking towards it]. This is a resting place in the forest. Let us sleep here tonight.” While saying this, both of them shudder at the sound of a terrible roar nearby. In the dark,
they grope about and go inside a rest house. While they explore the place, they find that it is full of thorns and stones. Acting as though they clear the place, Nala says: “My dear, we have no other place but this at the moment. So let us rest our heads a little here”.

Both of them lie down. Either of fear or doubt, Damayanti sleeps with her head reclining on Nala’s left knee. Both of them fall asleep. After a while, Nala wakes up with a start, due to the influence of Kali and looks at Damayanti closely, and says, “she is fast asleep”. Slowly he tires to keep her head down. Damayanti starts, and holds on more firmly to Nala’s knee. She again slips to sleep, exhausted. After she is fast asleep, Nala again puts her head down and looks her over: “Ha, this beautiful lady has been enjoying the constant attention of many ladies-in-waiting in the palace. She led her life in sheer comfort, not even troubled by the rays of the sun. My mind shatters into pieces, seeing her sleep in this forest, full of thorns, stones, and animals. [After some time, lost in sorrow, on second thoughts]. “What shall I do now? Should I discard her here, or continue to live together like this? No, if she accompanies me like this existing without food and suffering all these hardships, she may not survive for long. It is not certain, for how many days I will have to lead this life, or even whether this is to be my plight for all my life. So if I am separated from her, she may wander about and eventually reach Kundina. It is better that I discard her here”.

After this, when he slowly tries to get up, he hears the roar of a herd of elephants nearby and embraces her. Because of the
influence of Kali, he overcomes the fear, gets up, looks at himself and then at her. Then he becomes conscious of his nudity. "Nude as I am, how can I go anywhere else?" [As though as idea strikes him] "Let me take a half of the cloth she is wearing". (NC 104-105)

The performance text lingers hauntingly on the terrible inner conflict within Nala. His mind is literally a battlefield between his innate goodness and the evil influence of Kali. Through out the rest of the Day's actions Nala is plagued by this inner schism. Finally, as the text concludes, Nala runs away aimlessly into the forest as though possessed by madness.

Learning of Damayanti's firm decision that she would not part with her husband in danger, tearing off half her garment, and discarding her, while she fell asleep out of exhaustion, Nala, with his mind distraught under the influence of Kali set out alone at night. (NC 107)

Damayanti wakes up alone lamenting:

Languishing in lassitude, I fell asleep;
but enough of these comic pranks.
My fear is boundless; I have no maids,
Nala, lotus-eyed, why do you hide yourself? (NC 107)

In the next scene [Scene VII] we have the Woodsman being woken up by the cries of Damayanti emanating from the deep forest. Soon her words become audible.
Alas, my lord, the ocean of kindness,
how could you go away, leaving me alone?
Falling into the gushing stream of stupor
I am now about to drown……
Luck has forsaken us in the game of dice;
has your mind gone astray, here in
this thick forest?
Has affection for your beloved ones
perished in your noble mind, my lord! (NC 111)

The Woodsman rushes towards the voice only to find Damayanti in
the coils of a snake. The performance text explains the sequence.
“Damayanti comes to the stage acting the pada: ‘the python swallows’.
Along with intense sorrow, the pain of the snake bite is also evident on her
face” (NC 113). The Woodsman kills the snake and rescues Damayanti.
Damayanti thanks him profusely for saving her life and blesses him with
good luck. However, the Woodsman has become enamoured of the beauty
of Damayanti. He tarries saying:

Lady, how can I go away, thus?
There are so many dreams here
listen to all of them. (NC 114)

He explains that he has been exmitten by arrows of Kama and proposes
love towards Damayanti:
You will live in comfort, lassie, for I have built for me
a house, without leaks in the roof and protected by walls;
we will dwell there; who’s known the pleasures of forest life?
Isn’t this union due to the grace of God?
Aren’t you grateful? Aren’t we well suited?
Make up your mind; what more can be said now? (NC 115)

Damayanti is aghast at the sudden turn of events. In despair and
helplessness she laments:

My god, lord of Naisadha,
what can be more incredible than this?
Noble king, you disappeared, discardng your country.
Not finding you, I set out to search for you;
I fell into the mouth of a snake, but did not perish.
Now in solitude, the woodsman draws
near, blabbering nonsense.
What should I say to keep him at bay,
irrational as he is? (NC 116)

Ultimately she ends by invoking the boon of Indra that “whoever tries to
violate your penance shall be burned to ashes”. Even as she utters half of
the curse the Woodsman is burnt to ashes.

In the episode of the Woodsman, it is interesting to note that even
Kali and Puṣkara, arguably the most malevolent figures in play, are
forgiven in the end. The fate of the well meaning but naïve Woodsman,
gives us the picture of rigours of the caste system prevalent in those times.
The dramatic irony of the scene [unintended perhaps] lies in the fact that
the Woodsman is burnt into ashes soon after Damayanti declares that “You
will be blessed with good luck” (NC 113). Distraught, Damayanti wanders
in the forest and reaches the bank of a river, and decides to cross the river
with the help of the people assembled there. Again, it is worth noting that
the Nalacaritam text departs from the Mahabharata in which after the
Woodsman episode Damayanti wanders in the forest lamenting. As it is the
Day Two ends with Damayanti safely in Kundina under the protection of
her father.

The Day Three opens with Nala “who averse to go back to his
kingdom” (NC 135) prostrating before the gods and imploring them to
spare him from grief. He ruminates over his situation and examines his past
deeds in critical light, calling upon the Mighty Rulers of the world whom
he accuses of indifference towards his present plight. He declares with the
certain degree of composure:

I have worshipped you day after day
And you also seemed to be benevolent towards me.
My heart burns now, being defeated
by my younger brother;
who will ever again sing your praise anymore?
I was led to believe that it’s proper to play dice, but
even my subjects started hating me.

Abandoning my spouse, I sit here in this forest
brooding on the rotation of the wheel of fate. (NC 135)

Thus in Day Three we see the beginning of Nala’s process of regeneration. As the text asserts:

Being blessed by the lords of heaven,
and engrossed in the experience of spiritual bliss,
Nala pondered on the nature of truth,
and considered home to be forest and forest, home. (NC 137)

In this soliloquy Nala is attesting to what Tagore calls the religion of the forest. The apparent paradox of the assertion that the city [home] is forest and forest, city [home] goes back to the divergent responses of the two disciples of Kanva who accompanied Sakuntala to the Court of Dusyanta. To one the city appears to be engulfed in fire and naturally his heart goes out to the people caught up in the fire and he is full of pity for them. The other disciple is full of disdain for the inhabitants of the city and their sinful ways. He tries to understand the situation and its ethics in terms of the simple categories of purity and impurity. It is perhaps worth remembering that, at least according to certain authorities, the celebrated Fire Sermon of Buddha was delivered when the city of Magadha was destroyed by a fire. Apparently, it is against the backdrop of the city on fire
that Buddha said ‘the eye is burning, all the visible objects are burning; the ear is burning all sounds are burning; the nose is burning, odours are burning.....everything is burning with lusts, desire and avarice’. So Buddha’s middle path clearly was a negation of the world renouncing asceticism characteristic of certain sects within the Aranyakas.

The philosophical issues raised by Nala’s soliloquy are of central significance to his regenerative process and therefore, requires a detailed analysis. Nala’s argument is this:

This terrible forest is indeed a city
found in the seven worlds.
Women, nine rasas, diplomacy,
victory, fear, trade-
all these are the pursuits of those who
govern the land.
Here are huge caves, inaccessible,
and inside dwell wild animals, fierce and dreadful;
But let me speak out what I feel right now;
to think of it more deeply, emotions like desire
are a man’s most monstrous enemies.
There are lovely resting-places, courts
and grand assemblies too
The running brook full of water, and
studded with rocks,
is [like] the mother herself.

These trees, naturally elegant and
yielding rich fruits are surely [like] kings. (NC 137)

The performance text provides this gloss to the passage:

Nala overcomes the experience of agony with mental control and spiritual faith. It should be surmised that in that state of excessive grief he has reached a level of detachment. That is why he comes to the conclusion that the forest is actually like a city with all material comforts, and the city, in its turn, is nothing but a forest.

The philosophic insight he acquires describes the material pleasures of the palace as transitory. The essence is born out of detachment. Evidently the rulers of country are always pre-occupied with thoughts of women and their dalliances in love, diplomatic strategies like truce [sama] reward [dana] as well as thoughts of victory and loss. These are completely absent in forest. Here the rasas are expressed as diplomacy [naya] victory [jaya] fear [bhaya] and expenditure [vyaya] Nala’s ideas of the forest as the country and the country as the forest is further elaborated in “Here are huge caves, inaccessible”. The wild and terrible animals inhabit the caves but wild passions that characterise human beings are more terrible. The passions denoted are desire [Kama] anger [Krodha] avarice [lobha] pride [mada] stupor [moha] and jealousy [matsarya]. The trees, rock, river, birds, sound which resemble ‘ohm’ all are devoid of human
interventions, so are pure according to Nala in the context of forest. Nala should enact the meaning of the sloka “Being blessed by the lords of heaven”. In his acting [abhinaya], the fact that the material pleasures of the palace are transitory and that ‘sat’ [essence] is the quintessence of happiness born out of detachment, should become evident. It is at the height of this philosophic insight that he compares the city with the forest. (NC 138)

In the eyes of Nala the terrible forest comes to resemble the densely populated city. In a sense, he comes to realise that the forest is a better place to live than the city. This realisation arises from the recognition that material pleasures are transitory. Thus the loss of all material possessions even to the point of losing his clothes makes Nala view the world from a new light, from the perspective of the “un accommodated man” as described by Shakespeare. In Act III. Scene IV of King Lear, Lear asks:

Why, thou wert better in a grave than to answer with thy uncover’d body this extremity of the skies. Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow’st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! here’s three on’s are sophisticated! Thou art the thing itself: un accommodated man is no more but such a poor bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come unbutton here. (Shakespeare 1094)

This re-volarisation of the forest at the expense of the city leads him to evaluate each in terms of binary oppositions. Thus he finds that cities are
full of huge caves ["there"] inside which dwell fierce and dreadful wild animals, arguing that, when we consider deeply, emotions like desire and lust are the worst enemies of man. In contrast, the forests are endowed with lovely places for rest, and grand assemblies watched over by kingly trees yielding rich fruits. This brings to mind the nature / culture opposition which is pivotal in the English Romantic tradition so assiduously traced by Raymond Williams in his The Country and the City.

Further, the intense suffering that he undergoes in the forest makes Nala to realise the value of renunciation and detachment. He comes to know the essential wisdom of the Upanishadic dictum that it is by renouncing everything that one becomes the master of everything:

Isavasyam idam Sarvam
Yat kin Ca jogatyam jagat
Tena tyaktena bhunjitha
Ma grdhah kasya vid dhanam.

[All this, whatever moves in this moving world, is enveloped by God. Therefore find your enjoyment in renunciation; do not covet what belongs to others]. (Radhakrishnan 56)

From this perspective the rulers of the land who have gone after women, the nine rasas and who are always embedded in the tangles of diplomacy appeared to be devalued. Their’s is an empty quest of winning
and spending. Once his realisation dawns on him, Nala’s sufferings are at an end and he declares triumphantly:

My travails are over now, affliction is ended, and my sins have perished. Now, thanks to the kindness of fate, my mounting sorrows have disappeared, at last. (NC 138)

The metaphysical underpinnings of Nala’s transformation are emphasized by the performance text:

Thus when he understands the transitory nature of earthly comforts, Nala, is comforted by the fact that he has reached a level of detachment, and therefore these hardships do not affect him deeply anymore. ‘Because of the mercy of fate, my sins have perished.’ [I have reached a state when I do not have to experience the result of my bad deeds]. Now there is no cause to think that I may be under the influence of mental strain. (NC 139)

According to the Performance Text, after the pada, when he is wandering about here and there, he hears a sweet sound, listens and says:

Oh, this is the sweet sound emanating from a bamboo, when a bee has made a hole in it and wind passes through the hole.
This ‘om’ sound, which is the manifestation of Sound Absolute [sabda brahma] makes this place divine. [Going further, reaches, the banks of a river] On both sides of the river, many animals quench their thirst by drinking water from the river. [Hearing a sound] There, many birds perched on a tree are singing in different musical notes. [Going on] This place is very enchanting. One can lead a comfortable life with the produce of this forest. There are many ripe fruits in the trees. There are many tubers also. The barks of trees can be crushed and made into cloth. There are streams with pure water, for drinking and washing. [Looking closely] This rock is very smooth, and so it can be used as a bed. Here one is not affected by passion like desire, anger, avarice and stupor. None indulges in base actions like gossip and slander. (NC 139)

Significantly, it is at this juncture of his regenerative phase that Nala sees the forest fire and the wailing voice besieging help. In a sense, the appearance of Karkotaka is a direct answer to Nala’s prayers to the Mighty Rulers of the world at the opening of the scene. The suffering the Karkotaka undergoes is in many ways similar to that of Nala. Declaring that “the power of fate is great, indeed”, Karkotaka recounts his tale:

Enough of your doubts, my mother is Kadru, the serpent queen.

It happened that my honour came to be sullied

I am of the lineage of great serpents,
My name is Karkotaka.

Think of this, I deceived a sage on his way......

In great rage, the sage punished me
with a long-lasting curse;
then relenting, he ordained that Nala
would deliver me from my sorrow. (NC 143-144)

At the symbolic level the appearance of Karkotaka, who is iconically connected to Siva, is appropriate indeed, in so far as, throughout the play Nala appears as an ardent devotee of Siva. Characteristically, Nala in his monologue of Day Three in the palace of Rtuparna says:

If the one whom the snake adorns [Siva] is favourable towards me,
I’ve no fear of having committed sin. (NC 159)

Karkotaka clearly points out to him his future course of action.

Now you should strive for your own progress.
Discard these frenzied thoughts in
this forest, and
worship Lord Siva, the lord of bhutas.
Go to Saketa, meet Rtuparna
and live there incognito as his valet.
Thus will your sorrows end, and
you’ll achieve your desire by and by,
noble king!
Discard your kingly demeanour,
Adopt the name of Bahuka.

Make the King of Saketa your master-
today he’s the only worthy person on earth.
If you earn his trust,
and teach him the secret Hymn of horse-lore [asvahrdaya]
he’ll impart the Hymn of dice
[aksahrdaya] to you.
When you acquire mastery over dice
Kali will also leave you in desperation. (NC 147-148)

A significant feature of Nalacaritam is the felicity with which the inner and outer are dovetailed in its narrative. One is often left wondering whether the action proper and the *dramatis personae* like Kali, Puṣkara, Karkotaka and the rest are merely emanations of the inner quest of Nala and its various vicissitudes. One is reminded of the puzzlement of the old Chinese Sage who dreams that he was a butterfly and woke up wondering whether he was a butterfly which had dreamt that he was a man. In fact, such existential puzzles confront us at every turn in the text and even turn up where we least expect them. When Kesini asks Bahuka in Scene V, Day Four

Are the good tidings of Nala heard
anywhere in the world.

He replies
Is he there in hiding, I wonder
Has anyone sees him in this earth. (NC 212)
The literal translation fails to convey the existential connotations with which the passage is pregnant. Nala is apparently trying to convey in epigrammatic form the problematic feature of “knowing”. That, these words are spoken by Nala himself ‘in disguise’ adds to the dramatic irony of the utterance. The fragile nature of identity is further emphasized by the scene in which Kesini “reports” to Damyanti what she had learnt in her meeting with Nala. Kesini’s reportage is a fine example of an alienation device in Kathakali where a character acts out a message communicated by another character. In this instance of Pakarnattom [Interpolation] Kesini hovers tantalisingly between Nala’s self and her own:

Nala is not at fault, it seems; even if he is,
A chaste women should not bear malice, he says.
He isn’t vicious, and to judge by his words,
He didn’t appear to be crooked either.
Then he narrated several stories; everything considered,
our mission seems successful. (NC 215)

In the Mahabharata narrative, Damayanti sends Kesini again and again to Nala and even tastes the meals prepared by him before she becomes convinced of his identity. However, the Nalacaritam narrative which telescopes this into a single scene emphasizes the existential rather than the empirical aspects of the recognition. This is reflected in Damayanti’s declaration:
In this terrible dilemma, my best guide
is Nala himself,
renowned and immortal for his noble
deeds,
[Who is] being shackled by the cord of
misfortune,
And committed to the cause of destruction
of vile enemies.
[who] cannot be rejected, though he
is in disguise at present. (NC 217-218)

Unlike the Damayanti of the epic, the Damayanti in Nalacaritam is choosing
Nala not merely on the basis of his external attributes but on the basis of his
inner essence. And it is this that makes Nalacaritam a modern text.

In its iconic presentation, the forest stands for penance in
Nalacaritam. In Day Two, Scene V of the play, Puṣkara commands Nala
to “do penance” in the forest. Ironically the penance done by Nala triggers
of the regenerative process in the play. The idea that forest stands for
penance is amply detailed by Rabindranath Tagore in his analysis of
Kumara Sambhava of Kalidasa. He writes:

in the commencement of the poem we find that the God
Shiva, the Good had remained for long lost in the self-centred
solitude of his asceticism, detached from the world of
reality. And then Paradise was lost. But *Kumarasambhava* is the poem of Paradise Regained. How was it regained? When Sati, the spirit, through humiliation suffering and penance, won the heart of Shiva, the Spirit of Goodness (Tagore, *Religion of the Forest* 119).

In his analysis of penance, he further draws on *Sakuntala* and *Ramayana* to establish that purification through penance is central to the religion of the forest.

According to the true Indian view, our consciousness of the world merely as the sum total of things that exist and as governed by laws is imperfect. But it is perfect when one realises all things as spiritually one with it and therefore capable of giving us joy. For us the highest purpose of this world is not merely living in it, knowing in it and making use of it, but realizing our own selves, in it through expansion of sympathy, not alienating ourselves from it and dominating it, but comprehending and uniting it with ourselves in perfect union.

In all our dramas which still retain their fame, such as *Mrit-shakatika*, *Sakunthalam*, *Uttararamcharitam*, nature stands in her own right proving that she has a great function, to impart the peace of the eternal to human emotions.

In Kalidasa's drama *Sakuntala*, the hermitage which dominates the play, over shadowing the King's palace, has
the same idea running through it – recognition of the kinship of man with conscious and unconscious creation alike. The hermitage shines out, in all our ancient literature, as the place where the clash between man and rest of creation has been bridged.

In *Sakuntala*, this conflict of ideals has been shown, all through the drama by the contrast of the pompous heartlessness of the King’s court and the natural purity of the forest hermitage. The drama opens with a hunting scene, where the King is in a pursuit of an antelope. The cruelty of the chase appears like menace symbolizing the spirit of the King’s life clashing against the spirit of the forest retreat which is *Sharanyam Sarvabhoothanam* [where all creatures find their protection of love] and the pleading of the forest dwellers with the King to spare the life of the deer, helplessly innocent and beautiful, is the pleading that rises from the heart of the whole drama. ‘Never, oh never is the arrow meant to pierce the tender body of a deer, even as the fire is not for the burning of flowers’. (Tagore, *The Religion of the Forest* 120)

In the third canto of *Kumarasambhava*, Madana, the God Eros, enters the forest sanctuary to set free a sudden flood of desire and break the serenity of the ascetics’ meditation. But the boisterous outbreak of passion so caused is shown against a background of universal life. The divine love-thrills of Sati and Shiva find their resonance in everything that is youthful from animals and trees to the humans. But in the poems of
Kalidasa it is evident that this magnificent wealth of enjoyment \[\textit{joissance}\]
spings and flowers forth from the sacred solitude of the forest.

In the \textit{Reghuvamsa} narrative too we encounter this theme. King Dileepa with Queen Sudakshina who are sad because of their lack of progeny, upon the advice of Sages, retreat to the forest hermitage. The King and Queen are busy tending the cattle of the hermitage. Their life in the hermitage is marked by rigorous self denial and unstinted devotion. For this, they are blessed with an illustrious son after whom the dynasty is known. The message that success will come only to those who have self control and the purity of mind runs through the narrative.

In the \textit{Ramayana}, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana after their banishment from Ayodhya had to traverse forest after forest. They had to live in thatched huts and to sleep on the bare ground. But in their heart they feel a deep sense of kinship with woodland, hill and stream. In that sense, they are no exiles amidst these. In \textit{Ramayana}, we are led to see the greatness of the hero not in a fierce struggle with nature but in sympathy with it. Tagore tells us that:

\begin{quote}
When Rama first took his abode in the \textit{Chitrakuta} peak, that delightful \textit{Chitrakuta} by the Malyavathi river with its easy slopes for landing he forgot all the pain of leaving his home in the capital at the sight of those woodlands alive with beast and bird. Having lived on that hill for long Rama who was
\end{quote}
girivana priya [lover of mountain and the forest] said one day to Sita: ‘When I look up on the beauties of this hill, the loss of my kingdom troubles me no longer, nor does the separation from friends cause me any pang.’ Thus passed Ramachandra’s exile now in woodland, now in hermitage. The love which Rama and Sita bore to each other united them not only to each other, but to the universe of life. That is why when Sita was taken away, loss seemed to be so great to the forest itself.” (Tagore, *The Religion of the Forest* 128)

In the beginning of Day Three of *Nalacaritam*, we see Nala who is averse to go back to his kingdom deciding to stay in the forest engrossed in the new found experience of spiritual bliss. In this state, he realises that life in the terrible forest is preferable to the life in the palace with its cunning corridors and treacherous pit falls. To Nala, who has lost everything, the forest provides a sweet shelter. As the performance text points out:

Nala discovers that the comforts of the forest are in no degree lesser than the comforts of the country; he also starts believing that perhaps the forest is a better place to live. The beautiful areas in the forest can take the place of the houses and courts. The stream that offers clear water protects with love, like a mother. The great trees are like kings who offer delicious fruits and beautiful flowers. (NC 139)

There are many allusions to the vegetative nature in *Nalacaritam* and floral imagery is integral to it. Flowers appear as both indexical and
symbolic signs in the text. Lotus, for instance, symbolizes love: in Day One, we find Nala referring to the “lotus-like love of a woman for a man” (NC 5). The performance text identifies Damayanti with lotus flowers:

“Nala says: After applying oil on my body for taking a bath, I go to the pond for taking a dip in the water, but I see her face in the lotus flowers and her brows in the small waves. I imagine the dark fish as her eyes and the lotus-buds, which are about to bloom, as her breasts” (NC 15). In Day Two, Scene XI of the play Damayanti asserts “My grief surpasses that of a lotus during the time of dusk” (NC 129).

In Day Two of the play Nala addresses her as ‘lotus eyed Bhaimi’. Here the basic bhava is sringara rasa [erotic] and is depicted as pure, soft and overtones of rich in sambhoga sringara [love-in-union].

In the interpolation of this part flower lotus is presented in the specific lotus mudra [sign]. “Further it has to be enacted through several bhavana dristis [imaginary], rati dristis [love] lajja dristis [shyness] Visada dristis [detailed]. It is impossible to find another such Sringara pada of the same order, rendered in slow syllables of rhythm” (NC 68). Love is in full bloom with a touch of erotic passion but restrained in its nature.

In Day Three of the play Nala who becomes Bahuka in his manodharma [improvisation] of the awe and gloom in the forest, thinks of the
state of Damayanti whom he discarded. There also the feet of Damayanti is compared to with lotus-petals; he feels that Damayanti had to bear severe pain in her feet tender like lotus-petals due to the walking in the forest. In the opening of the Day Two of the play Nala is in a hurry to embrace her “body tender and soft like fresh blossoms” (NC 67). After reunion, when Nala challenges Puṣkara for the game of dice in revenge Puṣkara expresses his wishes for Damayanti who is “with a body as delicate as a flower” (NC 240).

In Day Four of the play, Nala again addresses Damayanti as the lotus-eyed one in his declaration of his determination of defeating Puṣkara and getting his kingdom back. Here the image has the intensity of deep love as Nala has to convince Damayanti of the necessity of a confrontation with Puṣkara and for the same a separation for a short while is not inevitable to which Damayanti may not be agreed to as it may rekindles the memories of her sufferings and grief.

In Day Two of the play, the Woodsman when he declares the intensity of his love openly says

The wielder of lotus arrow has to settle scores with me

in ever so many ways he tries to conquer me. (NC 115)

The love almost on the border of lust is expressed as the lotus arrow which is one of the arrows of Kamadeva, the deity of love. If lotus is symbolic of
love, other flowers are indexical or metaphorical. They become indices of the degree of passion.

To cite an instance from the opening of Day Two of the play, in the palace garden of Nala, Damayanti who is in a state of *Sambhoga sringara* [love- in- union] says:

A garden beyond compare, this is surely captivating and lovely.

Plain seems the Nandana garden, and Caitraratha too; to think of them now, both seem [to be] inferior.

The trees of *asoka* and *campaka* are in full bloom; it is as though spring has set in...

Flocks of bees throng in *patali* flowers, why is'nt that the moon rising in the *ketaka* blossoms? (NC 70)

All trees are laden with flowers and tender blossoms. Damayanti is describing the beauty of the garden. *Asoka* and *cambaka* which usually blossom in spring are flowers with a sweet fragrance. Their flowering indicates the arrival of spring. They aresuggestive of the pangs of love which Damayanti is too modest to express. But the blooming of *patali* and *ketaka* with their heady fragrance suggests the gradual heightening of emotion and its transformation into erotic passion. The hosts of cooing
cuckoos and clusters of humming bees that are thronging these flowers appears to Damayanti to be praising the “glory of madana” (NC 71). Again the choice of flowers which blossom in different seasons – cambaka and asoka in spring, patali in summer and ketaka in the rainy season – makes the garden unique with their simultaneous presence. Further, the blossoming of ketaka flowers is described in terms of the moon rise. In the culminating passage, the images of the pleasure mountain covered with golden flowers and the little lake with its proud swans and goose are added to evoke the summit of rapture. However, pretty as the picturesque garden is, its primarily purpose is figurative. It becomes the emblem of love-in-union and subtly develops shy love into erotic passion, which has been hinted at in the sloka with which the scene opens.

Hearing the kind diverting words of her husband, the honey-worded daughter of the king of Vidarbha discarded the dark veil of shyness, like the night with the moon, and with great joy, enjoyed the pleasures of love in the palace garden. (NC 70)

Again one of the boons given to Nala by Varuna is that: “any flower that is touched by your hand will shine like the kalpa flower” (NC 62). This boon is in accord with the description of the strange powers of Bahuka by Kesini:
Then he returned to his chariot. Seeing some flowers, shrivelled and withered, he crushed them in his hand, and they bloomed again in full splendour. (NC 216)

In love-in-separation flowers which spur erotic pleasure have the opposite impact.

Flowers become indexical in their emotional aspects in two other instances also. In their love-lorn state, both Nala and Damayanti find the fragrance of the lovely flowers unbearable. While to Nala “the flowers emit the glitter of weapons” (NC 8) to Damayanti the “fragrance of flowers are bulls in the pools” (NC 18), of her nostrils. Further, the flowers evoke in the mind of the protagonists memories of the loved ones from whom they are separated. Thus on his way to Saketa, Nala sees a konna tree full of golden flowers. It evokes in him the memories of the beautiful body of Damayanti. Again in the interpolation in Scene I, Day One, taking his cue from the face of the dark haired damsel “Nala muses whether he should seek comfort by fondly caressing, braiding and tying her hair and adorning it with flowers or take refuge in the forest” (NC 6).

A remarkable array of birds appear in the text. The pride of place, of course, is occupied by the Swan with his resplendened, golden feathers.
But he is an anthropomorphic figure, playful and serious by turns, and warm hearted in his affection towards the couple. When he is caught by Nala in Scene III, Day One, his lamentation sounds almost human:

Lord Siva, Siva, what shall I do now?
The great king kills me through treacherous means.
My family is doomed and ruined now.
Father having gone, I am left alone,
as for mother, she’s in such a state.
And, my wife, having just had a baby
will end her life – my race is perished
with me! (NC 11)

His reference in the last stanza to the wings inlaid with jewels and gold makes us remember his birdly identity. His wit and cleverness is amply evident in his meeting with Damayanti. The manner in which he tries to prise open Damayanti’s secret desire for Nala is indeed masterly. In Day Four Nala is over charged:

I was dejected and sad, with the feeling that you had forgotten me.
Noble one, it is wonderful that you have come here today.
You who once rescued me from distress, have come to me again;
Today, for sure, I’ve been reprieved from all grief. (NC 247)
The blithe and sprightly bird is more like a guardian spirit in the play spreading joy and warmth in each one of his appearances. In this sense, he is more a symbolic, even divine, presence than a bird.

Only next in importance to the Swan is the Cuckoo. Its sweet mellifluous voice is heard at many points in the play. Nala and Damayanti, thanks to Narada and the Swan, have heard of each other and are suffering from intense pangs of love. The beautiful garden appears to be the war-camp of the God of love, where “flowers emit the glitter of weapons and the Cuckoos provide trumpets” (NC 8). To Damayanti, on the other hand, “song of Cuckoos is like spears” (NC 18). In the interpolation in Scene II, Day One, the set piece called Pakshiviraham [love-in-separation among birds] is usually presented.

so many swans of different hues
are flocked together in great merriment. (NC 8)

Taking the cue from the above lines in the text, the actor elaborately describes a family scene of the swan couple:

Lady Swan: “My lord, I can’t bear this hunger. There is nothing to eat in this pond. Will you get me some food from somewhere?

Husband: “Darling, don’t worry. I’ll go to another pond and collect some food for you”.


So the husband sets out to seek food for his beloved, wanders about here and there, eats his fill. He drowses for sometime, sitting on a lotus-leaf. The lady swan waits eagerly for her husband, and gets very anxious and irritated at her husband’s delay. Meanwhile, the husband wakes up and with a start, thinks, “Dear god, I dozed off, unmindful of my duty to feed her”. He gathers lotus-stems and returns to his hungry wife. The husband, guilty and loving, approaches her. The wife with the thought, “what can I do! I have to forgive him, even if he did something wrong”, makes up her quarrel and with great love, eats off his beak. They feed each other and remain happily.

Seeing the swan-couple, content and happy, Nala thinks, “Oh my god, will I ever be so lucky?” (NC 9)

There are two references to emotion expressed by birds in the interpolation of Day Three of the play. There, Nala tries to find solace in the terrible forest and birds perched on a tree singing in different musical notes, comes to his attention and the place become enchanting to him. Here the birds carry a connotative meaning: of his attempts at self consolation amidst the misfortune. In the same day of the play, after he gets some instructions from Karkotaka, again he encounters the birds which are twittering sweetly, perched on the branches of trees. It also reminds him of the sweet voice of Damayanti. But in his attempt to catch some magnificent birds by throwing his own cloth as a net in the second day of the play he was being deceived by Kali and Dwapara disguised as birds. And
when they tell the same to Nala scornfully, he thinks of the reason for that much enmity on him and finds it as his marriage to Damayanti. Thus Nala’s affection towards Damayanti becomes the cause of this episode also.

Doe and deer are two other images used repeatedly in the play to denote Damayanti’s beauty. In more than eight parts this image carries meaning or identity and every instances denotes almost the same meaning or identity. The doe or deer is symbolic in its usage. It appears at several points in the play and can be tabulated as follows:

**Table 1.**

| “due to the separation from that doe-eyed damsel” | Nala Soliloquy | Day One Scene i |
| “doe-eyed, do not hesitate” | The Swan to Damayanti | Day One Scene iv |
| “I went to the doe-eyed damsel” | Nala to Indra and other gods | Day One Scene ix |
| “and doe-eyed, the charming Kundina is also not too far” | Nala to Damayanti | Day Two Scene vi |
| “doe-eyed stay here until you find your husband” | Queen of Cedi to Damayanti | Day Two Scene ix |
| “Jewel of doe-eyed damsel, gracious lady good luck to you” | Merchant leader to Damayanti | Day Two Scene viii |
| “Who knows about the designs of that doe-eyed damsel” | Bahuka Soliloquy | Day Three Scene ix |
| “Now please remain by my side till the doe-eyed Damayanti arrives” | Nala to the Swan | Day Four Scene xii |
Moon in the play is a symbol of love, hope, brightness, fascination and the like. Some times it stands for beauty especially of heroines. In this text, out of seven instances in which the image of the moon is evoked to refer to a character in six the reference is to Damayanti.

Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Did we come here to go back, moon-radiant one’</th>
<th>Maid to Damayanti</th>
<th>Day One Scene IV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Hearing of the beauty of that moon-radiant one”</td>
<td>Nala Monologue</td>
<td>Day One Scene V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Damayanti, having a moon-radiant face”</td>
<td>Goddess Saraswati to Damayanti</td>
<td>Day One Scene XIII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Moon-radiant one what did you do in distress?”</td>
<td>Bahuka Monologue</td>
<td>Day Three Scene IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“When will I ever see your face, glowing like the moon?”</td>
<td>Bahuka Monologue</td>
<td>Day Three Scene IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Diadem of damsels, courteous and well – mannered, with a moon-radiant face”</td>
<td>Mother to Damayanti</td>
<td>Day Three Scene VI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Just like the dark night dotes on the moon”</td>
<td>Damayanti to Bahuka</td>
<td>Day Four Scene VII</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Along with flowers, bees especially honeybees act as images of love, love-in union and erotic excitement. In the interpolation scene in the Day One of the play, Nala who is restless with the love-in separation feels that he will find solace only in the touch of his beloved. He ponders over the charms of Damayanti.
He dwells at length on her physical beauty, with great longing. 'What can I resort to, so that I can win the hand of the daughter of King Bhima, who surpasses even the celestial damsels, in her beauty and charm?' The curls that flutter on her forehead like bees thronging on the petals of a flower. Her long hair which excels the darkness of bees, cascades down, covering her back, her eye-brows more like waves in the sea. (NC 6)

What is striking about **Naļacaritam** is its exquisite architectonic unity. With remarkable felicity the author has managed to fuse the macrostructure with the microstructure, creating a holistic structure which is perhaps unprecedented and unsurpassed in Kathakali literature. A. R. Raja Raja Varma and Kuttikrishna Marar have cited various instances where Unnayi Varier improves upon the received narratives on Nala right from the *Mahabharata*. Kuttikrishna Marar even opines that “the characterization of women in Indian poets right from sage Valmiki is superior to the characterization of men and that Damayanti of **Naļacaritam** is a good example of this” (Marar 22). However, the vision of love which becomes ideal and purified through suffering which is the central picture of the text is articulated through the minutiae both verbal and semiotic. One instance from Day One illustrates this point amply. Nala in whom love for Damayanti had been kindled by Narada is soliloquising on his yearning for Damayanti and casually, he drops the phrase, “the lotus-like love of a women for a man” (NC 5). Expatiating on the appropriateness of the
phrase ‘lotus love’ and its connotative richness, Desamangalath Rama Varier says in his interpretation of the text:

through the metaphor of lotus love the poet indicates how love which is secretly born in the bottom of heart achieves full growth in time and becomes pure and eternal love and that only such love can be considered real and acceptable...the lotus which originates at the bottom of the pond and rises up and losing its relation to the mud at the bottom of pond is according to him the fit metaphor for the sublime emotion described by Kalidasa in *Kumarasambhava*, *Sakuntala* and *Malavikagnimitram*. (Varier 10)

It is this essential dialectics between the micro and macro which is discernible even at the level of chance phrases that makes *Nalacaritam* the great work of art that it is.