

## 6 Apabhramsa and Awadhi Romances : Passages Describing the Art of Portraiture

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Evidently, the art of portraiture was known to the Mauryan and Satavahana artists, Kushana sculptors active at Mathura and Gandhara, to the painters of Ajanta and to the Pallava and Chola sculptors. All the surviving examples of portraiture belonging to the early phase of Indian art, in general, have a calculated blend of idealism and observed realistic details. Strangely enough, contemporary Indian literature, both religious and secular, written in Sanskrit, Pali, as well as in later vernaculars namely, Apabhramsa, Awadhi and Brajbhasha, not only provide us with plenty of references to the tradition of idealized depiction but also relate to the tradition of factual representation. Even shilpa texts lay-down distinct canons for the delineation of mirror images, *pratibimbavata*, lit. “as if reflected”. In Sanskrit poetry and drama, one would find numerous descriptions of portrait painting and about the competence of painters, adept at creating a piece of portraiture based on conceptual reality. Interestingly, such descriptions to the art of portrait painting were used repeatedly as a cliché and quite as a literary mannerism. The previous mode of romantic literature in Sanskrit continued to flourish in the medieval era and must have seemed as an inevitable model for Apabhramsa (c. 8<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century CE), Awadhi (c. 14<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century CE), and Brajbhasha (c. 16<sup>th</sup> century) literature. This paper aims at analyzing some of the vivid accounts from the lengthy medieval romances conceived after the model of Sanskrit *akhyanas* and Persian *qasida*.

The portraits in the pre-Mughal illustrated manuscripts in no way correspond to the descriptions from the contemporaneous writings. Such depictions, if compared with the textual descriptions, are in no way closer to the narrative details. Instead of being realistic, as we would expect from the way they are described in the text, they are stylized to the extreme. The Khilji Sultan Gayas Shah or Nasir Shah in the illustrated volume of *Niyamatnama* of c.1490, whose appearance remained stereotyped yet identical in almost all the folios of the manuscript, may be noted as one of the examples of stylized portraiture under the influence of Turkman style of Persian painting, Fig.6.1. Similarly, Maulana Daud, the author of the celebrated *Laur-Chanda* or *Chandayana*, was painted on almost every folio of the Lahore-Chandigarh manuscript of c.1550 with the same stylization used in depicting Laurak and Chand and other supporting characters of the poem, Fig.6.2. Bilhana, who was a historical personality and at the same time the hero and the author of *Chaurapanchasika*, was depicted in the illustrated manuscript of c.1550 with all the stylized features and almost always with a caption for easy identification, Fig.6.3. Champavati, the princess of Kashmir and the chief character against Bilhana in *Chaurapanchasika*, was painted in the same manner with a label attached to her portrayal, Figs.6.3 & 6.4. The profusely illustrated *Mrigavati* manuscript of c.1540 also has three idealized portraits of poet Kutuban depicted as a scribe in seated posture holding manuscript folios and equipped with inkpot and reed pen, Fig.6.5.



**Fig.6.1** : Sultan Gayas Shah overseeing preparation and perfuming of sherbet, folio 76 recto, from the *Ni'mat Nama*, Mandu, c.1505, opaque watercolour and gold on paper, 31x21.5 cms, British Museum, London, Photo-courtesy: Regents of the University of Michigan, Department of the History of Art, Visual Resources Collections

Before we look at Apabhramsa and Awadhi frame of reference, we should first take into consideration their roots, which are to be found in Sanskrit literature. Not only do we find that the basic themes are similar but also some of the minor literary details of Apabhramsa and Awadhi romances have close links with the Sanskrit archetypes. In *Harivamsa Purana* (c.400 BC-400 CE), we come across a lively reference to the portrait painting of Aniruddha, the grandson of Krishna.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, prince Udyana and Vasavadatta's marriage with the help of painted portraits forms a pivotal aspect of the play *Swapna-vasavadatta* (c.2nd century BCE).<sup>2</sup> From the *Nagarakhanda* of *Skanda Purana* (c.3rd-4th century CE) can be quoted a vivid passage describing how king Anartaraja sent a team of artists abroad to produce portraits of competent princes eligible for the marriage of his daughter.<sup>3</sup> In Dandi's *Dasakumar Charita* (c.7th century CE), the prince's friend Upahara Verma prepares his self-portrait and sends it to his beloved.<sup>4</sup> Besides, in *Malti Madhava* of Bhavbhuti (c.8th century CE),<sup>5</sup> Rajashekhar's *Viddhasalabhanjika* (c.9th century CE)<sup>6</sup> and Dhanapala's *Tilakamanjari* we come across a plethora of references to painted portraits.<sup>7</sup> As it has been noted in Sanskrit, Apabhramsa and Awadhi literature, painted portraits played a crucial role in bringing



**Fig.6.2 :** Poet Maulana Daud Laur-Chanda, painted probably in Jaunpur, Uttar Pradesh, c.1525-1570, opaque watercolour on paper, 22.8x14.7 cms, Photo-courtesy: Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh, Acc. No. 368-K-7-30-A(1)

together lovers. We also find in the 15th century Sanskrit and Hindi *Riti Kavya*, poetry of mannerism, which dealt especially with the theme of love, a portrait referred to as a prime means of encountering a lover along with other prevalent means.<sup>8</sup> It has been mentioned during this period that there are several means of introduction or *darshan* of which the portrait has been referred to as *chitra darshan*. Poet Bhanudatta in his *Rasamanjari* (c.15th century) stated:

“There are three ways of encountering (the lover), in dream, through painted portraits, or face to face.”<sup>9</sup>

Poet Keshava Das in his *Rasikapriya* (1591 CE), written at a rather later period than *Rasamanjari*, describes four ways of getting introduced to prospective lovers. Though inspired initially by *Rasamanjari*, Keshava added one more mode of encountering the lover. The relevant passage from *Rasikapriya* is quoted below:

“The first encounter is possible by face to face, the second by a painted-portrait, the third by dream and the fourth by hearing the qualities from a friend.”<sup>10</sup>

Assimilation of these archetypes in vernacular literary forms of successive centuries points to prevailing canons of Sanskrit poetry influencing the literary style in general.

In the majority of Apabhramsa romances (c.8th-13th centuries) we find a distinct influence of Sanskrit archetypes on style and subject, imagery and descriptive details. The stories revolve around people of high birth mainly princes and princesses, real or imaginary. All these stories relate to the fact that as a prince comes to know about a princess, falls in love with what he hears and sees, and then faces many trials and tribulations to achieve his goal of marrying the princess. Finally, all these poems have a happy ending where both the lovers meet and live together in great happiness.

Many of the Apabhramsa stories written by Jain poets, of course carry and underline religious and moral objective in popularizing their religion viz. *Lilavaikaha*, *Nayakumarachariu*, etc. The initial meeting of hero and heroine in these poems is usually through word of mouth, painted portraits or by direct meetings. These being the three mediums known by which the hero or heroine come to know about their respective counterparts. In the narrative of *Nayakumarachariu* (972 CE) one Jain *tirthankara*, to express the importance of *Sripanchami* fast, used this story as a medium. A certain king Jayandhar of Kanakpur whilst conversing with a visiting merchant was presented with a portrait painted on scroll, *pata*, of princess Prithvidevi of Girinagar. Not recognizing the face but being enamoured by the beauty, the king makes further inquiry as to the name of the lady. The merchant then goes on to explain to the king how he came by the portrait. He tells him that he had asked for this portrait to be made with the specific intention of introducing the young lady to the king for marriage.<sup>11</sup> In another example from the same narrative a serpent falls in love with an Ujjain princess. Unfortunately, he was spurned by her and returned disappointed to his brother's house. He demanded a portrait of Nagakumara, hero of the story and son of king Jayandhar, whom he sees as a perfect match for the princess. When his brother entered the palace, he saw Nagakumara in an aggressive mood carrying a knife. He then goes on to instruct the artist to draw a portrait on scroll of the prince with all the masculine attributes of a brave and honourable man. Accordingly, the artist painted the *pata* and seeing the portrait, the princess of Ujjain falls in love with Nagakumara and following the general trends of these poems, again the narrative culminates in a happy ending.<sup>12</sup> In *Lilavaikaha* (8th century CE)<sup>13</sup> and *Karakandachariu* (11th century CE)<sup>14</sup>, narrated

in a similar fashion, it is again through the medium of a painted portrait the hero-heroine fell in love and eventually got married.

It is generally accepted that the tradition of Awadhi romances really came into being in the late 14th century with the writings of Maulana Daud, to be precise, with his celebrated poem *Chandayan*, dated 1379 CE. Like Apabhramsa literature, which we discussed earlier, there is again a religious purpose behind the story-line, a certain mystical vision of love between mortals and the divinity. This was the result of Sufi tradition introduced by the migrant poets and mystics from West Asia. This persisting Sufi element manifest in a mystical approach to the love is to be found in almost every poetic example though narrated with localized contextual details. In *Chitravali* of 1513 CE, the very first reference from the Apabhramsa romance, the poet Usman follows the Sufi archetype for his poem and has both the lovers meeting each other through the medium of their self-portraits:

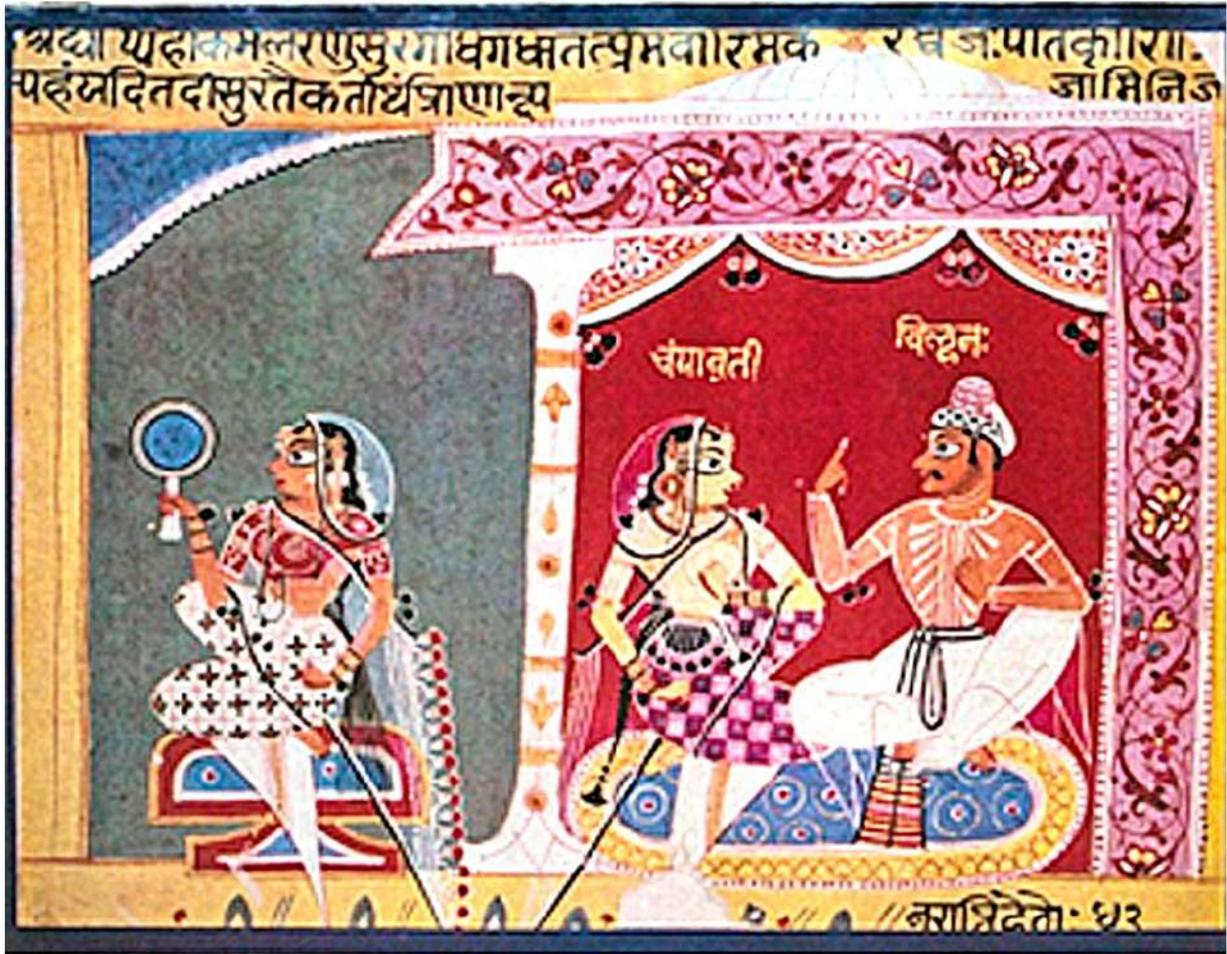
“The prince in the throes of waking stretched and slowly opened his eyes and to his astonishment found himself in the princess’s (Chitravali’s) atelier. As he turned around, he saw a portrait of an exquisite beauty the kind of which he had never seen before. So enamoured was he by the realism of this portrait that he at once stood up. As he studied it, he began to wonder whether it was a portrait of a witch or goddess. Wondering whether tomorrow would ever come he felt compelled to paint his own portrait alongside that of the princess. Later, one of the princess’s companions came and told the princess of a strange phenomenon she had seen in the studio. She told the princess that overnight someone had painted a portrait of a handsome youth alongside her portrait. And expressed her incapability of describing the young prince as though he were a magical character present in the room. She further tells her that she had never seen anything like this before and had come to her at once with this news. Hearing of this portrait the princess went immediately to her atelier and on seeing the portrait was so enamoured by its beauty that she immediately fell into a swoon. Later, as she began to consider the merits of this portrait of its style, composition, and perfection, she began to wonder who had painted this and where he had learnt to paint in such a manner and how he had come to paint in her studio. Her friend then encouraged her by saying that if she (princess) could not find this out then who was clever enough to do so.”<sup>15</sup>

and,

“When the queen Hira heard about this portrait, in order to stop rumors spreading she washed out the portrait of the prince with water leaving no trace of painting; it was like a snake swallowing up the jewel.”<sup>16</sup>

The reference to the painting being washed clean clearly hints at the fact that the artist of the time most probably used water soluble paints as their medium rather than dyes and stains. Usman seems to have been well acquainted with such techniques of painting, how these could be washed away and remade.

In another example, *Chhitavarta*, 1590 CE, by poet Narayan, we have the unusual story of Allauddin Khilji’s unrequited love for princess Chhitai, the daughter of King Ramdeva Yadav. As described in the text, once during his visit to Allauddin’s court Ramdeva invited one of his court artists. The painter was commissioned to paint some pictures inside Ramadeva’s palace and whilst carrying out his commission, a chance meeting with the princess Chhitai inspired him to paint also her portrait:



**Fig.6.3 :** Labelled likenesses of Princess Champavati and poet Bilhana, Chaurapanchasika, probably Uttar Pradesh-Delhi, c.1525-1570, opaque watercolour on paper, 21.8x16.4 cms, Bharat Kala Bhavan, Accession no. BKB 10515, Photo-courtesy: Regents of the University of Michigan, Department of the History of Art, Visual Resources Collections

“The moment the skilled artist got a chance he made a quick portrait of the princess on a paper in a happier mood and depicted her smiling. Stunned by her beauty when the artist gained his composure made a portrait of her from memory, and every time he looked at this portrait he possessed, the artist painted the portrait of the princess Chhitai secretly with great concentration.”<sup>17</sup>

Enamoured by her beauty the artist falls in love with Chhitai and on returning to Khilji’s court showed him the portrait. Since, describing the innumerable qualities of the princess became almost impossible, the artist was sensible to seek Khilji’s permission for painting a much-detailed portrait of Chhitai:

“The countless shades of (her) grace cannot be described with merely one tongue and thus he (the painter) painted her portrait representing all her bodily features.”<sup>18</sup>

Alauddin fell in love instantly and made plans to make Chhitai a member of his seraglio. Narayan further describes how Alauddin conquered Ramdeva’s kingdom and abducted the princess. Finally, Chhitai made clear that she saw from the very outset the Khilji King as her brother and the latter, much ashamed of his



**Fig. 6.4 :** Labelled likeness of Princess Champavati, Chaurapanchasika, verse 40, probably Uttar Pradesh-Delhi, c.1525-1570, opaque watercolour on paper, 21.8x16.4 cms, Photo-courtesy: N.C. Mehta Collection, Ahmedabad, Acc. No. NCM 78

intentions, decided for her return to her husband's home.<sup>19</sup>

Poet Puhakar in his poem *Rasaratan*, 1618 CE, categorically mentioned the three possible modes by which lovers get unified. Kamadeva, the Indian personification of cupid, relates to his consort Rati the following three modes:

“Kamadeva says O darling, there are three ways of encounter which causes the beginning and the eventual advancement of passion. These are encounters in dreams, through painted images and face to face.”<sup>20</sup>

All the above literary references culled from the sources namely, dramas and romances in Sanskrit, Apabhramsa and Awadhi are full of details regarding portraits being very close to the actual appearances of the persons portrayed. But since none of such portraits survive to support the literary details, we are unable to draw any conclusion regarding the actual nature of such “described portraits”.



**Fig.6.5 :** Kutuban, poet of Mrigavati, c. 1540, opaque watercolour on paper, 20.3x18.1 cms, Photo-courtesy: Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi, Acc. No. BKB 7937

However, based on the idealized depictions of likenesses in contemporary illustrated manuscripts, one may be tempted to suggest that with the help of *lakshanas* or qualities codified in the *shilpa* texts, the artists succeeded in modelling out certain personalities. Such personalities were grouped or classified according to the *lakshanas* into categories like, *Sasakapurusha*, *Ruchaka purusha*, *Chitrini nari*, or *Hastini nari*, etc., and then transformed into painted or carved images.<sup>21</sup> The spectators were equally conversant with such standard norms of classification of *nayakas*, ideal heroes, and *nayikas*, ideal heroines, and thus could spontaneously react to every painted detail of such idealized portraiture that aimed at transforming the mere visual. Equally important is the fact that portrait painters played a major role in bringing the lovers together and some of them were itinerant also. Portraits were painted on commission or at times ready-made portraits were offered for sale to royal patrons by the clever painters who invariably succeeded in having a lucrative deal. Finally, the portraits were painted in a water-soluble media, maybe with gum-tempered pigments. Impact of European naturalism became consistently pronounced in the painted portraits from the Akbar period onwards. Some of the descriptions in late Awadhi romances are thus very much in keeping with the spirit of the era. From *lakhsana*-based portraiture to naturalistic depiction remained a journey in terms of painters' changing perception and correspondingly, patrons' altering preference. Some of the literary details help us considerably to judge the dynamics controlling the popular appeal of portraits in life at the courts of medieval India.

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17. Gupta, Mata Prasad, *Chhitaivarta of Narayandas*, Varanasi, 1958, pp.13, 14, 20, 30.
18. *Ibid.* pp.13, 14, 20, 30.
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20. Singh, Shivaprasad, *Rasaratan by Puhakar*, Kashi (Varanasi), 1963, p.30.
21. Shastri, Devadatta, *The Kamasutram*, Varanasi, 1964, p.163. Keshava Dasa in his *Rasikapriya* describes these four types of *nayikas* thus: "*Padmini* is a beautiful *nayika*, emitting the fragrance of lotus from her body, modest, affectionate and generous, slim, free from anger, she is soft skinned and has a golden complexion; *Chitrini* is adorned with diverse beauties and accomplishments, tremulous eyed, possessing a sweet-smelling mouth; *Sankhini* has a luxuriant growth of hair, likes red garments; *Hastini* has thick fingers, a fat face and large feet, her lower lip and eyebrows are thick, the hairs on her person are thick, sharp and pointed."

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