

Compelled by Convention: The Conscious Choices of Playwrights in *Ollantay* and *Mṛcchakatika*

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ABSTRACT

The present article explores the conscious thematic choices of playwrights within the constraints of societal conventions, which influence their choices. It does so by focusing on a comparative analysis of love and forgiveness in *Ollantay*, an 18th-century Peruvian play, and *Mṛcchakatika* (*The Little Clay Cart*), a 5th-century CE Indian play by Śūdraka. It argues that, though the playwrights are well within their rights to challenge prevailing sociocultural norms, they often use this right sparingly and calculatedly, crafting obstacles and resolutions that are in line with the dominant cultural values. Using this approach, the analysis demonstrates how the two works carefully advocate change within what can be called acceptable boundaries. Through a meticulous examination of the plays – with emphasis on themes of love and forgiveness as two particularly sensitive sites where audiences negotiate ideals of morality and ethics – the article highlights the potential of theatrical dramas to be preservers of cultural norms and, at the same time, to serve as agents of social change. The study also illustrates the bidirectional engagement between performance and spectatorship.

Keywords: *Ollantay*, *Mṛcchakatika*, Playwrights, Crafting obstacles

INTRODUCTION

This study examines the playwrights' deliberate thematic choices within a societal framework, focusing on a comparative analysis of love and forgiveness in two plays: *Ollantay*, an anonymous 18th-century work from Peru, and *Mṛcchakatika* (*The Little Clay Cart*), a 5th-century CE play from India by Śūdraka. The comparison highlights how both playwrights skilfully balanced with normative laws and aspirations for change to reflect and influence their respective societies.

Writers across various literary genres often serve as representatives of society, acting as negotiators of societal norms. Some go beyond conventional boundaries, introducing challenging and disruptive ideas to inspire the change they believe is necessary. Conversely, many writers also strive to uphold societal traditions, promoting and affirming them through their work. Performance literature is no exception.

Apart from their role as a medium for retaining and sharing cultural memories, theatrical plays have long been recognized as potential agents of social change. The influence of plays on society is deep and lasting. Plays help us explore, illustrate, and even critique culture, customs, norms, and traditions, while also examining subjective and complex topics like identity, gender, exploitation, love, and vengeance.

In addition to the farsighted, contentious, and revolutionary plays we often hear about, there are plays produced to maintain and promote the power dynamics and societal structures of a given time. In every piece of literature where there is a hero, a heroine, or both, they must overcome obstacles. These obstacles may arise from villains blocking their pursuits or from existing societal norms that impede their endeavours. Only when these characters are required to surmount barriers that directly oppose societal norms does the literary work become revolutionary and act as an agent of change.

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Conversely, in most literary works, the obstacles are carefully crafted to align with societal norms while subtly depicting the changes necessary for the time. Furthermore, these challenges and conflicts are designed to promote specific ideas and notions, making them acceptable within the prevailing social framework.

It is precisely because of the power of theatrical works to potentially sway societal opinion that they hold an important place in society. Playwrights, as representative authorities with power over literary production, influence the content of their works. It is through this content that narratives are created, altered, and sustained. The imaginative engagement of these theatrical works is not built out of thin air. They directly relate to interpersonal relationships within their communities.

As Haedicke and Nellhaus point out, “Spectators are induced to turn their imagination to the ethical relation that might constitute their local, face-to-face lives” (p.42). Drawing on Anthony Cohen’s observations, they also note, “...audiences use symbolic exchange of theatrical experience to make judgments about the kinds of images to include or exclude from their ideal community” (p.42).

Drawing on their observation on audience’s role we can say that watching theatrical performances is a bidirectional process. The audience reflects on the actions presented in the play. In this two-way engagement, the spectator evaluates the values depicted in the performance.

The two themes, namely love and forgiveness, are arguably among the most sensitive and frequently discussed topics in theatrical works. These concepts hold a special place in the spectator’s vision of an ideal community and prompt the audience to examine their own communities. This is the principal reason why we chose these subjective concepts for the present analysis.

Love and Forgiveness:

Love has always been one of the central themes of literary works globally. Through this theme, various other topics have been brought forth in literature. In many literary works worldwide, we observe different important themes woven around stories of love. It is perhaps the most significant theme that has consistently attracted the attention of audiences. Therefore, we can say that the theme of love in literature serves as an axis around which other themes revolve.

It is evident that the theme of love has always been

subject to supervision and censorship, not only for its potential to influence dynamics between a man and a woman but also for its far-reaching impact on other relationships and power structures in society. Similarly, the theme of forgiveness has been crafted carefully to sustain and create narratives that delineate the limits of transgressing societal laws and the consequences of such transgressions.

In this study, we focus on the themes of love and forgiveness, which have been essential elements of human society. By examining two plays from different cultures and traditions, we aim to demonstrate that societal conventions and trends have significantly shaped the writing of literary works. Additionally, we analyse how these two works conformed to societal norms and gained acceptance within their respective societies.

Love and forgiveness are arguably two of the most discussed and written-about subjects, especially in the realm of literature. Poetry, stories, and novels from various parts of the world have devoted considerable space to these themes. Although the feelings of love and the acts of forgiveness may be universal, their definitions and expressions have always varied across cultures and time periods.

In essence, love and forgiveness have always been shaped by societal norms since ancient times. What is considered love in one society might be perceived differently in another.

Similarly, forgiveness may be expressed one way in one society and entirely differently in another. These values have never been homogeneous across the world and have evolved over time and space. At certain times, fatalistic love was accentuated as the ideal, while in other periods, love was more about survival. Forgiveness, whether in romantic relationships or hierarchical dynamics like those between master and servant, has also been defined differently depending on the cultural and temporal context.

In this study, rather than merely understanding the differences in these concepts across societies, we examine how these two universally relevant themes have been employed to narrate tales that advocate for change without being overtly disruptive. By analysing the use of love and forgiveness in two distinct contexts—spatially and temporally—we explore how playwrights aligned their narratives with societal norms while subtly appealing for transformation.

***Ollantay* and *Mrcchakatika* and the Playwrights Calculated Transgressions:**

The two literary works—*Ollantay* and *Mrcchakatika*—selected for this analysis come from vastly different places and times, which is precisely why we have juxtaposed them to examine how the values of love and forgiveness are depicted and used by the playwrights to send a message of change without disrupting societal norms. It must be noted that, regardless of the temporal and spatial differences between the two plays, they are both essentially works of precolonial times that reflect societies flourishing independently before the Christian and Muslim invasions. The Inca society, one of the greatest civilizations of South America, experienced European conquest. Likewise, India had its unique way of life before the onset of the Muslim invasions. These societies were undergoing natural processes of transformation, like all others across the world, before their course of change was abruptly altered.

During the time of the great Incas, who ruled vast territories in the Andes region of South America for hundreds of years, society reached a remarkable level of sophistication. Great cities with impressive infrastructure emerged, governed by laws, regulations, and a hierarchical system that ensured the smooth functioning of daily life. Within these cities, where norms dictated human interaction, love often blossomed—sometimes in defiance of rules and societal expectations. *Ollantay*, a renowned Peruvian drama, tells one such story of love that defied societal norms. Similarly, in ancient India, playwright Śūdraka crafted a tale of love in *Mrcchakatika*, constrained by its time and context. In the class-based society of the 5th century C.E., where interactions between the rich and the poor were expected to remain purely transactional, love still emerged. In both plays, we observe distinct reactions to these “undesirable love affairs.”

Ollantay was anonymously written, but it references concrete places that existed and still exist, as well as historical figures, allowing us to more or less ascertain its origin—during the 17th century. *Ollantay* is a die-hard soldier in the empire of the mighty emperor Pachacuti. He rises through the ranks to become the most important vassal. The emperor relies on him greatly, and the people of the empire adore *Ollantay* for his courage and forgiving nature. Even Pachacuti is very fond of him. However, *Ollantay* is secretly in love with Pachacuti’s beloved daughter, Cusi-Coyllur. When

Ollantay learns that Cusi-Coyllur is expecting his child, he decides to confess their love to the emperor. Unfortunately, when he reveals the truth, Pachacuti reacts with anger, reminding *Ollantay* of his lower social status.

Similarly, in *Mrcchakatika*, the hero, Chārudatta, is a poor Brahmin (impoverished due to his extreme generosity) who falls in love with a beautiful courtesan of extraordinary virtues, Vasantsena. The play is set in ancient times in the city of Ujjain. Chārudatta’s poverty and Vasantsena’s social position as a courtesan make their union difficult to accept within society. Vasantsena disappears after being attacked by Sansthānaka, the villain of the play, who is also in love with her.

Before we delve into the fate of these two couples and their audacity to engage in forbidden love, we must first ask why these characters fell in love in the first place. Was it merely the playwrights’ intent to depict a love story, or were these characters consciously chosen to reflect certain social norms?

It is important to note that *Ollantay* was written during a time when war and conflict were common among different polities in the Andean and Amazonian regions, and good warriors were highly valued in society. These warriors were crucial for kings to protect and expand their borders, and they commanded great respect. In Incan society, being a warrior was a path to upward social mobility, and the aspiration to join the ranks of these respected and skilled warriors was widespread. A skilled warrior, therefore, was considered theoretically indispensable.

In *Mrcchakatika*, Chārudatta, though poor, is a Brahmin—a high-born man who, by virtue of his birth, holds an inherently superior status regardless of his economic condition. The high status of Brahmins in ancient India was indisputable, and even a poor Brahmin commanded respect. Brahmins were believed to possess supernatural powers, and their curses were thought to be so potent that they could spell doom. They belonged to a class of people whom it was forbidden to harm or kill.

We see that the challenges both heroes face stem from reasons beyond their control—circumstances they did not deliberately create. It is simply destiny that Chārudatta became poor in a society where wealth mattered greatly. Likewise, it is destiny that *Ollantay*, despite his superior skills as a warrior, was not born into a noble family. On one hand, Chārudatta’s poverty makes him meek in openly expressing his love for Vasantsena;

on the other hand, Ollantay's bloodline prevents him from marrying Cusi-Coyllur. In both cases, we find that class and caste impede the possibility of love between the heroes and the heroines. To Ollantay's request, Emperor Pachacuti responds:

Ollantay, thou dost now presume.
Thou art a subject, nothing more.
Remember, bold one, who thou art,
And learn to keep thy proper place (Apu Ollantay).
The emperor reminds Ollantay of his inferior bloodline and warn him.

In same way Maitreya, Chārudatta's servant, responds to Vasantsena's wish to meet Chārudatta:

Maitreya [Aside]. What else does she expect to get out of a visit to our house? *[Aloud].* Madam, I will tell him—*[Aside]* to have nothing more to do with this courtesan (p.74).

We notice that the love of the couples in both plays is forbidden in the eyes of society.

However, both heroes are virtuous despite the challenges they face, and their love is not doomed but instead holds a glimmer of hope, which the playwrights exploit.

In both plays, along with the heroes, the heroines suffer greatly because of societal prejudices. Cusi-Coyllur is locked away for years, guarded by a strict woman named Nana Yaca, while Vasantsena is harassed by Sansthānaka, who takes undue advantage of his power and position. Yet both women remain absolutely committed to their love. Though they have transgressed the social law by desiring a partner not of their social status, they are unconditionally committed and thus are virtuous even in their transgression. They have been shown to be stoic and tenacious, but these tough attributes do not compromise their kindness and resolve to do good.

The clouds may come, the rain may fall forever,
The night may blacken in the sky above;
For this I care not, nor I will not waver;
My heart is journeying to him I love (p.74)

Similarly, Cusi – Coyllur imprisoned and emaciated, still recalls her lover when introduces herself to her daughter Yma Sumac:

...The King know not that we were joined
By such indissoluble bonds,
And when he came to ask my hand,
That King dismissed him in a rage,
And cruelly confined me here (Apu Ollantay).
Both Cusi-Coyllur and Vasantsena, despite their

hardships, remain demure and empathetic, resonating with the desired traits of female nature of their times.

When Ollantay is denied Cusi-Coyllur's hand, he rebels against the king, while Chārudatta's hopes are marred by Vasantsena's disappearance.

At a certain point, both heroes believe they are doomed to live without their beloveds. Ollantay lives as a rebel in a fortified town before being captured and brought to trial by a new king. Chārudatta, despairing and clueless, faces a murder trial for the supposed killing of Vasantsena. However, in a twist of fate, both heroes see their beloveds appear during the course of their trials. The king grants pardon to Ollantay, allowing him to reunite with Cusi-Coyllur and their daughter.

Chārudatta, similarly, is absolved of the murder accusation, and Sansthānaka, the plotter, is forgiven by Chārudatta.

What is noteworthy here is that the playwrights create tension in their respective plays but do not go beyond challenging societal norms. Instead, they work within these frameworks. They craft the challenges faced by the characters in a manner that allows the possibility of accommodating such deviations in society. Both playwrights carefully give attributes to their heroes to compensate for what they lack. Though Ollantay lacks a noble lineage, he is an extraordinarily brave warrior and a faithful partner. Similarly, though Chārudatta is poor in a highly commerce-oriented society, he belongs to a learned class and is a noble, virtuous, generous man (we have already discussed what it meant to be a Brahmin in ancient India and a skilled warrior in the Incan empire).

Ollantay is forgiven not only because of the suffering he has endured but also because he was once a great warrior who contributed significantly to Pachacuti's empire. As Bertazoni mentions,

There is evidence showing that forgiving rebels, on behalf of diplomacy and the wellbeing of the Inca Pax, was a common practice among the Incas. The Incas would only annihilate their enemies in case of a complete refusal in recognising Inca power. Often, when rebels accepted the laws of the empire, the Inca Emperor would allow them to take back their local leadership (p. 34).

Similarly, Chārudatta request the judge to forgive Sansthānaka:

Sansthānaka. You shlave-wench, be merciful, be merciful!

I 'll never murder you again. Protect me!

Sharvilaka. Come, take him away!

Noble Chārudatta, say what shall be done with the wretch.

Chārudatta. Will you do as I say?

Sharvilaka. How can you doubt it?

Chārudatta. Really?

Sharvilaka. Really.

Chārudatta. Then let him be immediately—

Sharvilaka. Killed?

Chārudatta. No, no! Set free.

Sharvilaka. What for?

Chārud.

The humbled foe who seeks thine aid,

Thou mayst not smite with steely blade—(p.174)

The enemies of the union of the couples in both cases are, again, the forces in power. In *Ollantay*, Pachacuti, the emperor himself, is against the union of Ollantay with Cusi-Coyullur, his daughter. Likewise, Sansthānaka, who loves Vasantsena, belongs to the royal family and thus holds considerable power over the subjects. We notice that the enemies in both works have an honorable social standing. They are not ordinary people; they command respect.

The successor of King Pachacuti is shown to be a just and compassionate man. It is when he sees his niece and his sister that he realizes the extent of the sacrifice Ollantay and Cusi-Coyullur have made for love. Similarly, the aggressor who had assaulted Vasantsena realizes his mistake at the end and is forgiven. These adversaries of love are those who also hold the power to change and, therefore, are deemed worthy of being forgiven. Here, we are referring to the a Pachacuti's son who is the new Emperor, and Sansthānaka. They are the ones actually erring by not allowing the lovers to unite. While in the play *Ollantay*, the New Emperor, finally out of compassion, forgives Ollantay and rewards him, in *Mrcchakaṭika*, Sansthānaka, the aggressor, is pardoned. He realizes his mistake and is happy to be alive. Thus, justice is done with compassion. All ends well, even for the adversaries.

Both playwrights, to ease the tension among the audiences, introduce a comic character in their respective plays. In *Ollantay*, Piqui Chaqui, the servant of Ollantay, plays the role of one who relaxes the audience from their anxiety and worry. The playwright subtly introduces serious and consequential themes in the play and balances them by incorporating the silly acts of Piqui Chaqui. These lighter and funny moments in the play help ease the

tension that could build up.

In *Mrcchakaṭika*, Maitreya plays a similar role to ease the tension built in the play.

The introduction of these comic elements is, in a way, a strategy to make things appear normal, which otherwise would become heavy due to the serious nature of the societal deviances presented in the plays.

Conclusion:

Thus, we see that these two playwrights introduce relatively contentious themes, but they do so deftly. While there is an aberration from the general norms followed by the societies of their times, the triumph of love and unconditional forgiveness sets everything right for the introduction of a theme that might otherwise offend a large portion of the audience of their respective eras. The presentation of love and forgiveness is subtle and crafted with sensitivity to both the masses and the elites.

Styan notes, "To whatever extent the spectator is limited, to that extent the drama will be limited. The dramatist will always be asking himself how far imaginatively, emotionally, or intellectually he can take him, and to what depth he dare explore. Audience participation is a problem envisaged in the play's inception" (p. 236). This is precisely what both playwrights demonstrate. They know the exact limits to which they could bend societal norms within the audience's capacity to accept.

The heroes and heroines endure extreme pain due to the preconceived notions of society, but, in the end, society itself sets everything right and legitimizes their union. The villains in both plays undergo a change of heart, as their misdeeds are portrayed as more circumstantial than inherently malicious. The happy endings in both plays were only possible because the villains were forgiven, which ensured the legitimacy of the narratives. By any means, in *Ollantay*, the Inca's honour was to be preserved, and in *Mrcchakaṭika* the king's brother-in-law's notoriety was to be corrected without harm and disgrace to the authority of court and the king. The objectives of both plays were fulfilled.

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