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## Antarmukhi

### Aryan Kunti

Vidisha Devi had only one trouble in her life. Her daughter was too introvert. She was gentle, calm, witty and charming, yes, but very shy.

Her demeanour might have impressed most people in the world, but in the merchant town *Dashamukuta*, this trait of her did not earn her much praise. She had turned sixteen last year, and sixteen marriage negotiations had ended in failure for her within the year.

The virtue of being outspoken in a bride was something demanded by merchant grooms who sailed or journeyed on

roads for six months. At the outset of *Magha* travelling merchants returned home. A period known as the *Babruh Agama*.

The early months of their home stay are witnessed with a flooding of marriage ceremonies.

They leave their homes in the month of *Shravan*, they leave it the hands of their spouses, owing to this a merchant wife was always expected to be authoritative, how otherwise would a lady of the house, the *grihapatni* would command the servants and take care of the household affairs and local commerce for her family. It was least expected of a bride in *Dashamukuta*, named after the eight mounts and the two rivers that surround it.

Vidisha Devi found a key to unlocking her daughter's reserved – ness in the seventy second year since Nara Narayan's accession.

She discovered a hidden obsession of her daughter's during the last *agama*.

A troupe of dancers was residing in their mansion during that time, who performed for the men in the evenings. All the women of the household, including Vidisha Devi would sit beside their husbands and sons during these performances, but her daughter always stayed behind. Which greatly contributed to her annoyance, until one day when she noticed her, trying to imitate the moves of the dancers, while hiding behind a door in the room adjacent to the hallway where the performances took place.

The whole town had become a spectator when the Devi had dragged her daughter through the streets on a fine *Panchami* morning.

Her daughter, although unwilling at first, was ashamed at being jeered at by the public, and accepted her mother's mandate with dejected shoulders.

For the *devi*, her daughter finding a new interest was a ghost of a chance. She viewed it as an opportunity to bring her out of her shell.

If veritably her intrigue turns into a passion, she might be willing to open up more, plus spending time at a academy would constantly force her engage with the others. Such was the plan, such was her prayer.

There was another person in the town who separated himself from it's ways. He too was the son of a trading family, and had never shown any flair in being a man of commerce. His father felt often, and said that by all rights he ought to have been born in a pandit's family with his interests in the *itihasa* and *sahitya*. But he always said that was happy to be born in that family he called his own. Besides social structures weren't as rigid in those days, that a merchant's son could not have a scholarly aspiration or an ambition of an artisan.

He never faced any discrimination or othering from his family for selecting his choice of vocation. Although deep down he has always felt that his family wished for him to become a *Vaidya*, him being in the pursuit of having erudition. Even so in his 20 years of life he has never been able to achieve anything significant.

He had all the qualities of a *Ronin*. He was criticised by his parents from time to time, but he was still a youth and had more of the world to see. But even he realised that he won't be a youth forever, but the realisation never provided him any motivation. He was lost and hopeless.

He spent a lot of time reading erotic literature and looking at erotic art. He had understood that the virtuous and the pious women in the *Kavyas* and *Gadyas* he so dearly cherished were not to be found in the world he lived in. He did not spite the

Women of his town or any other women in the world for not fitting into his imagination, they had their own world and he

had his own. It's just that in his own world he was lonely and sad.

It was a chance encounter.

But not truly though.

For all occurrences in life are part of God's plan or the scheme of the large universe. Your fate is decided the moment you are born, or the moment you step out of your house, you step on a dry leaf, see a flock of birds flying above, and your fate is fixed. Nothing is truly an accident.

And him seeing her was not either.

There was visible tension on her face, a drop of sweat trickled by her ear. She didn't seem to him like the other dancers. The separation, he understood, was caused by the fact that it was her first day there, much like him. Her hair was not tied like the other dancers. A older lady stood in front the girl.

Whom he assumed would be her new *Nrtyasikshika*.

The lady uttered a command. And the girl lifted her hands, her fingers making a symbol.

Her feet moved too. He had no idea what any of it meant. She spun around her axis and when her face came in his fore again, it had transformed. A broad smile had formed on trembling lips, which caused clefts to appear in both her cheeks, they had the shape a thin *stambha*.

He had witnessed a spell before his eyes.

That's recreational activity could have such influence on a person, he learned that day.

From that day he frequented that place regularly.

He composed a poetry that evening, he had picked up the pen after a long time, yet it took him almost no time to fill the page. Sitting on the open, parapet – less roof on his house, he

sketched his thoughts. The leaves of a coconut tree waved over his head in the windy night, as if it took part in his muse too, yet the shadow of the same in front, filled him with certain doubt and angst. He felt a little choked, he was feeling things he never thought he could feel.

He had not expected to end his writer's block in such way. He felt a little drunk, but he had not consumed a drop ever in his life. It was a

Disparate intoxication. The kind from which some never achieve sobriety in their lifetime.

Yet, it was only the beginning of his life.

Should he commit himself to such perpetual devotion?

He could not find for himself an answer. He need not. For he could only think of the present, none could say of future. So it's not worth pondering over. He only knew for certain that he was elated after what he witnessed the past afternoon.

So he wrote the following:

*How freely the limbs moved,  
Was a veteran in that move, she proved!  
The toes and fingers followed suit,  
The eyes and lips had a heart to loot.*

He looked at the sentences for a while and judged that it was not his best work.

He walked into that hall again, the next afternoon.

He found the courage to ask someone, only after the sun had gone down, as he was unable to place his glint in daylight.

His description of hers proved worthy, as the person he asked was quick to recognise and he soon informed that she was not to come that day.

Dejected he walked towards his house. Perhaps he could write something on his estrangement.

He walked through the market square for a while as the lights were lit up on the edges of the street. But without realising he had stepped on the grassy earth. He deduced that he was not drawn to it by his unmindfulness but because it had what he was looking for. He bent on one knee to pick up the white flower and brought it close to his nose gently. He followed the scent presuming it would bring him to his muse. He walked far on the grass then without realising that the sounds of the town had started fading.

He stopped before two large trees whose leaves and branches were hugging each other above his head.

Between the bodies of the tree he noticed the moon and the complete orb of night above her.

There was no light upon her, but for the moves he had no doubt. Her dark figure in the orchard looked like a spirit sent to heal, not haunt him.

Again the hands moved like they had no bone, her foot had its own gravity. He wished he could watch it more, watch it many times over and over.

But he knew he could see it only once for now and then after returning to his house, he will play the scene over and over in his head, lastly he would write about it for eternity to see.

Did she realise that she had an audience in the darkness? He sincerely hoped that she did.

When he got back to his home, he left the white flower at the family altar, at the feet of the gods.

*The night was clear,*

*Cloudy was but my head*

*It was in front of me, my life so dear*

*As lonely as I feel in my bed,  
In the outside world, I have no fear*

The stage was built right in the middle of the road. Passerby's had to turn a left around Vinayak square to go to the other side.

For it was the end of *Jyestha* festival. And the men would leave before the rains come.

It was a celebration of the arrival of monsoon and a send-off for the big boys. The women, the young and old men who ought not to make the journey for trade took part in arranging the festivities. And every year, this part in the centre of the city, the performing artists showed their talents.

Some juggled with torches, some tried to swallow a sword, some made children disappear.

Some made jokes at the expense of the audience.

But the most famous attraction of day was the musical cooked by one of the most prestigious culture schools in the town.

And he had remained seated in his place the entire day for that performance only.

Only if he had wits to know that such performances were preserved for the last. But then again he won't have found a proper seat for viewing later. Sometimes ignorance can be a blessing for the fools.

If was well into the night when the performers of the musical started putting their feet on the stage. A monsoon wind embraced that part of the town, yet there was no sign of rain.

The act began with an applause.

The story of the play was about a young prince, who struggles to make a decision regarding his beloved. He is unsure whether to confess his heart to a daughter of a noble family.

He is afraid, there will be indifference in their sensibility. Because in his eyes she was purer than a lotus, wittier than *Narada* and virtuous than *veenapani*. Yet, he had never once met or spoken with her. He was afraid of rejection, but he was more afraid that the image of her in his mind could be destroyed if he got to know her. He felt like the most selfish person in the world. How could he want something from someone, whom he had provided with none? Dejected, he covered his skull within his palms and sat under a *Brisakkhya* tree.

And then came the gentler nymphs from the sky, to soothe his soul. The group of *Gandharvis* descended to his side and began their eternal dance.

A dance to commemorate his love, his passion and to encourage him to follow his heart and not his mind.

And so his mind swung like a cradle, and soon lost all its strength. The heart reached for the *Sengol* then and grabbed it better than the mind ever could.

*She wore the Makuta, a tall pointed crown of gold,  
Finely so, it seemed she was the potentate of  
bhuvar – loka from times old  
A peach in colour of the saree felt so sweet to my  
eyes  
The lightness of her moves cherished my senses,  
freed me of all lies*

The verse composed itself, or mishaps the swift perfusion in his veins did.

The blood was the ink, the veins the *lekhani*,

The kernel became the parchment.

The words were done, but the act was not.

His eyes remained affixed as it got wet.

His overwhelmed figure was not noticed, as water touched everyone.

Could find no reason, how he could have offended Indra deva on such day. A blessed moment he was having.

The townsfolk ran around to find shelter. Some got inside the tents of the performers behind the stage. He found himself in one too.

But the one in which he found himself was dark and devoid of any noticeable living creature.

Short of a deterrent, the place was radiated with a luminescence. He saw the moon, reflected by the small lamp in her hand. Divine the sight was, divine her demeanour. He spoke not a word for a second. And the moment passed on like it came. He was left alone there for the rest of the rain.

He found courage after much assertion.

He walked up to the only person he ever spoke to.

In that school, who upon hearing his question betrayed confusion and asked for the attributes to place the person.

Upon confirming the person with his descriptions, he asked for a name.

“Antarmukhi”, she was called. Her real name that was not. “The one who looked inward”. A name she received for her reserved nature. But her real name, he knew not.

So he named his book after that name.

It wasn't just a mere collection of poetry, but an account of his experiences written in prose too.

Only a few nights ago he had no words, now he lacked pages. How one small encounter, one small event could become such a great inspiration? Only the inspirited would know!

He decided to publish only one volume of his book. The other he would keep to himself for the time being, he wanted to see how the rest of the story would unfold.

He walked the market side that evening. He was pretty pleased with himself, he finally did something worthy he felt. Rain would come that night too as a heavy breeze flowed and the sky cuddled with the hues of dark orange and purple skins. He liked the atmosphere, the winds just before the rain, but there was dust flowing in his eyes. And there was an unbecoming sight, with the shopkeepers were running after their products claimed by the *Kalbaishakhi* winds. Even stalls with heavy cloth and strong wood stands seem to be flowing.

He decided to turn around towards his to house, but could only turn only halfway.

She was dressed in homely clothes, but still had that amiable look. She noticed him for a second then passed by him. He wondered if in his moments of devotion, when she danced with the grace of *Ambavalan*, did she for even once recognise his sight?

Her most dedicated and honest admirer he was. And that presumption pleased him.

Will she ever know how she affected him?

Will she ever speak to him in a kindly tone? He declined that aspiration himself.

“She has already given me lot”, he breathed under the howls of the wind. “In this floating life”

A small cup of made of clay flew from nowhere and hit his head.

## **Aryan Kunti**

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Aryan is a student of history and loves reading and writing historical fiction. His inspirations include Ancient Indian history and Japanese culture.

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