

Effect of the female body on visual stimulation: Based on “Kumari Vanum” from the Sinhala Epic Poem (Mahakavya) “Kāvsīlūmiṇa”

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Abstract

Visual stimulation is a mental reaction from seeing or hearing, caused by lustful feelings—also known as visual lust or viewing lust. This viewing occurs with the mind as well as the eyes. Men enjoy the female body visually, prioritizing a woman's appearance over her inner self in relationships. The Sinhala Epic Poem (Mahakavya) “Kāvsīlūmiṇa” examines how the female body affects visual stimulation, with lust as its main flavor. How has the poet used the female body in the two “Kumari Vanum” praises to create visual stimulation and evoke desire? This study examines descriptive and metaphorical techniques in the “Kumari Vanum”, analyzes how they generate mental images and desire via semiotics, and demonstrates their role as a plot device in Kusa’s decision to marry. Using textual analysis, the semiotic approach follows Charles Sanders Peirce’s model: a sign represents an object and creates an interpretant (mental/emotional effect). Here, Object (Princess Pabavati’s idealized beauty), Sign (poetic descriptions/metaphors), Interpretant (mental image, arousal, Kusa’s marriage decision). Pre-seen signs visualize unfamiliar images; the two princess praises serve this purpose, inducing stimulation that matches the poetic content. Vivid imagery stimulates neurohormonal attraction, explaining the effect.

Key Words: *Visual stimulation, female body, Praises of Princess (Kumari Vanum), Kāvsīlūmiṇa, Semiotics*

Introduction

The “Kāvsīlūmiṇa”, written by King Parakramabahu II in the Dambadeniya period, is the first Sinhalese “Mahakavya” (epic poem). It is based on the “Kusa Jataka”, a story from the previous births of the Buddha, that revolves around the marriage between Prince Kusa—who is wise and heroic yet disfigured—and Princess Pabavati, who is renowned for her extraordinary beauty. As

noted by Parnavithana, the main aim of the author is to present a comprehensive interpretation of this marriage (Parnavithana,2001:92).

A remarkable feature of the epic poem is the presence of two separate “Kumari Vanum” (Praises of the Princess) successions, in which Pabavati’s female form is described in ornate, exaggerated detail. Scholars recognize that these praises, which are not found in the original Jataka, are poetically powerful and erotically charged (Wijayasuriya,1966:123; Banda, 1999:56). More importantly, it is through hearing these descriptions—not through seeing her—that Prince Kusa, who had previously abandoned thoughts of marriage, becomes emotionally and sexually awakened (Hewamadduma,1995:55). This narrative mechanism suggests that the poet is deliberately using the description of the female body to generate ‘visual stimulation in the mind’ of the listener/reader.

This process relates conceptually to what Tester terms voyeurism—an “exaggerated interest in viewing certain activities or certain objects... intended to lead to sexual gratification on the part of the viewer (Tester,1994:95).” In “Kāvsīlūmiṇa”, the “viewing” is mediated through poetry, but the intended outcome—arousal and desire—is similar. The poem operates on the premise that detailed visualizable description can excite romantic and sexual attraction, particularly in the male imagination (Farrar, 2009:179). The dual repetition of the praise indicates a strategic poetic design meant to intensify this effect.

Literature Review

Previous studies on “Kāvsīlūmiṇa” have primarily focused on its literary style, authorial skill, structural composition, linguistic features, metaphors, and aesthetic concepts. While many analyses address other forms of praise in the poem, such as the wine festival, morning, and night, the “Kumari Vanum” lines have not received sustained critical attention, despite their evident narrative significance.

According to Kāvsīlūmiṇa, Pabavati's broad hips and breasts are a strong reason for her beauty. Parnavithana observes, that these physical attributes have the power to arouse passion in those who behold them. However, her article limits further examination beyond this point, according to its topic (Parnavithana,2001:98).

In the article “Prathibha and Alankaravada of the Author of Kāvśīlūmiṇa”, Wijayasuriya notes that the praise of the princess is shown as a section that was newly introduced, separate from the Jataka narrative. However, it has not been thoroughly examined (Wijayasuriya,1966:123).

In the work written by Hewamadduma, titled “Introduction to Classical Literature”, the first princess's praise is included in a chapter called “Sarga”. He states that it is a beautiful praise found in old Sinhala literature, and that it features a multitude of poetic phrases (Hewamadduma,1995:53-54). After the second princess's description, he notes that Kusa, who had previously abandoned thoughts of marriage and sexuality, became enamored with the idea after hearing about Pabavati's extraordinary beauty. This illustrates how the princess's praise sparked visual stimulation. However, the author does not discuss this point further (Hewamadduma, 1995:55). Similarly, Banda praises the author’s creativity in presenting Pabavati’s beauty through the first praise and remarks that the second is “highly effective and arousing, as it evokes erotic feelings (Banda,1999:pp.56,59).”

Collectively, these scholars acknowledge that the dual praises are innovative, artistically definitive, and erotically concentrated, with implications that these praises stimulate the mind’s eye. However, a clear gap remains: no previous study has methodically analyzed how the female body is textually fashioned to produce this effect or has explicitly applied a theoretical framework for explaining the mechanics of such “visual stimulation”. This study addresses that gap by explicitly employing semiotic theory to analyze the function and construction of the two “Kumari Vanum” sequences.

Research Problem and Objectives

How has the poet of “Kāvśīlūmiṇa” used the female body in the two “Kumari Vanum” praises to create visual stimulation and evoke desire?

And this study aims to examine the descriptive and metaphorical techniques in the “Kumari Vanum,” analyze how they generate mental images and desire using semiotics, and demonstrate their role as a plot device in Kusa’s decision to marry.

Methodology

This study uses textual analysis as its primary method. The primary source is the “Kāvsīlūmiṇa” text, focusing on the “Kumari Vanum” sections in chapters 4 and 5. Secondary sources include previous literary criticism on the poem, works on Sanskrit and Sinhalese poetics, and relevant theoretical literature.

The “theoretical approach” is semiotics, based on Charles Sanders Peirce’s model. Peirce explains that a sign represents an object and creates an interpretant (a mental or emotional effect) in the viewer’s mind (Sebeok,2001:27).

In this research:

- Object: The idealized female beauty of Princess Pabavati.
- Sign: The poetic descriptions and metaphors in the “Kumari Vanum”.
- Interpretant: The mental image, arousal, and narrative consequence (Kusa’s arousal and decision to marry) produced by the description.

This framework allows a structured analysis of how verbal portraits act as signs that trigger visual imagination and desire. Supporting insights from psychology note that vivid mental imagery and romantic suggestion can stimulate neurohormonal activity linked to attraction (Robertson,2023:85–86), which helps explain the probable physiological dimension of the described poetic effect.

Analysis: The Two “Kumari Vanum” as Tools of Visual Stimulation

Kāvsīlūmiṇa is composed according to Sanskrit “Maha Kavya” model. “This is an epic poem that embodies one or more of the important elements of Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha” (Suraweera,2005:160). Among its contents are meetings, marriages, separations, ritual praises etc. The main flavor of these details is sensuality.

The two main characters of Kusa Jataka, the basis of Kāvsīlūmiṇa, are Prince Kusa and Princess Pabavati. Jātaka Katha tells the stories of Lord Buddha’s previous births. “Kusa Jātaka is subject to a problem arising between men and women. When taken by the core, it shows about a wife who left her husband. The purpose of Lord Buddha, who recited this Jātaka, was to bring out the calamities that befell men due to women’s interests (Gamlath,1997:5).”

Prince kusa is an energetic prince with a disfigured face, knowledge, talent, heroism and personality. His mother strategically arranged Prince Kusa's marriage, which he had postponed because of his ugly face. Kusa creates a golden statue of an ideal girl. Later, at the Queen Mother's command, messengers travel all over Jambudvipa (India) in search of a young woman matching this statue. It was not difficult because Kusa's father ruled the entire Jambudvipa. Pabavati, daughter of the king of Madu region, matched the golden statue perfectly.

The messengers met the King of Madu region, where Pabavati's maid "Kudi" was accidentally spotted at a river port. Their first sight of Pabavati was described in the "Kumari Vanum". Later, upon successfully completing their mission, the messengers returned to Kusavati Pura for the second mission, to express Pabavati's beauty to Prince Kusa and the royal family as they had witnessed it. Thus, the poet deliberately exaggerates the entire image of Pabavati to arouse lust not once but twice. The similes and metaphors used here are also similar.

Accordingly, the reader encounters Princess Pabavati's female body first in the first Kumari Venum, and second, through the messengers' report in Prince Kusa's presence upon their arrival at Kusavati Pura. However, the poet uses this opportunity to visual appeal to Prince Kusa's mind, who was disillusioned with life. These two depictions aim to implant lust and seduce the prince into marriage. After hearing the messengers' exaggerated description, Prince Kusa agreed to marry, knowing a beautiful young woman like his creation existed and matched the statue. Desire lingered on the image, leading to mental indulgence in sexual thoughts. Lust feeds on erotic material, as men can quickly transform a visual image—from mere thought to imagination—that generates desire (Farrar, 2009: 181). The poems function as detailed visual descriptions, providing all necessary details for a complete mental image. Desire depends on such imagery, engaging the mind in sexual thoughts.

1. First Praise (Chapter 4): Presenting the Body as a Visual Object

The first praise follows the classical convention of describing a woman from feet to head (Senanayaka, 2016: 178-179). Across verses 205-210, the poet lists Pabavati's body parts—breasts, hips, feet, nails, navel hair, eyes, lips, etc.—but moves beyond mere listing through

metaphorical richness. The poet has reserved 6 poems for that. The body parts praised in each poem are as follows.

Breasts, hips and legs (205)

Nails, belly hair (206)

Eyebrows, Eyes and Ears (208)

Lips, arms, soles (209)

Belly hair, body light (210) (Jayathilaka,1992:21-24)

In verse 210, her body is compared to a ship. This poem says that she is the cause of visual stimulation.

vasā kumbu'thuru saḷu - luvara rasa meṇa niriṅdu mera

saba sayura naṅga kandara - thunū nēv gath nuvan thoṭa (210) (Jayathilaka,1992:24)

The ship's mast is the hairline of the body falling down her navel, the sails are her garment, the gems on board signify her erotic appeal. This ship is led by ananga, the god of lust. She sails into the ocean of the assembly hall, and the eyes of the onlookers are the harbors waiting for her. It means that everyone is looking at her, because of the eroticism of her beautiful body.

The subsequent verses also reinforce the above idea. Messengers “draw her from their gaze” (v. 211), her reflection is in the “mirror of their eyes” (v. 214), Later verses also reinforce the above idea. Messengers “pull her out of their” (v. 211), her reflection is in the “mirror in their eyes” (v. 214), they drink the “ocean of her beauty” and then their skin is filled with “goosebumps”, as physical signs of excitement are expressed. (v. 215) (Jayathilaka, 1992:25–28).

Semiotic interpretation

Here, the object (Pabavati’s beauty) is encoded into a sign (the elaborate poetic description). The interpretant is shown within the text itself: the messengers’ captivated and physically aroused response. This serves to model for the reader how the description should be received—with visual fascination and desire.

Thus, in the first praise of the princess, the poet has repeatedly said how the object has been exaggerated with various allegorical metaphors and that visual stimulation is the result.

2. Second Praise (Chapter 5): Stimulating Desire in the Listener

The second given in front of Kusa and his family is long (verses 227–243). The purpose of this is to seduce Prince Kusa, so it is designed to be relevant. (Jayathilaka, 1992:35–45). Messengers now verbally recreate Pabavati's beauty to Prince Kusa, who has never seen her. The poems in this chapter act as a verbal sign intended to generate a mental image in Kusa's mind.

The metaphor used here intensifies the erotic charge. The Lord of Lust entering her lap is like conquering the whole world. The tower of victory that marked his entrance was Pabavati's thigh (v. 230). The belly hair of the princess is likened to the bowstring of the god of lust (v. 232). As Jayathilaka explains (Jayathilaka,1992:39), “Anyone who sees Pabavati's hips will have erotic feelings. That is the meaning of Anangaya (lord of lust) winning the world from there.” It is apparent from the above statement that the poet's purpose is to create visual stimulation about Pabavati's hip. But here Prince Kusa as well as the reader come together and capture Pabavati's female body in their minds. That is, the mutual connection between the object and the signal creates a mission in the reader's mind about the hormone that causes the sensation of lust. After this praise, Prince Kusa is attracted to Pabavati. Men experience romantic attraction and sexual sensation through visual stimulation. Men love faster than women. It is also known as visual lust, voyeurism. Men use their eyes to appreciate a woman's desire (Duff, 2018:02).

Depicting Pabavati's body as a symbol of the power of the god of lust is a powerful metaphor for the poet from the messenger's point of view. It was an awakening of the signs of lust that had been suppressed in Kusa's mind until then. According to Peirce, “three types of signs are classified as icons, indicators and symbols.” An index is a sign that refers to something or someone by its existence or time or location in space, or by reference to something or someone else (Sebeok, 2001:10). The poet has made Pabavati an indicator here. She is a sign referring to the god of lust.

Peirce notes that “a symbol is a sign that stands for its referent in an arbitrary, conventional way.” Words in general are symbolic signs. But any signifier object, sound, figure, etc. can be symbolic (Sebeok, 2001:11). All symbols used in literature are established by artistic convention. Accordingly, Pabavati is symbolized by lust. It is through the symbols of the god of lust in the

mythology. Pabavati is implied to have been praised at this point in a way that flares the listener's desire to achieve the respective objective.

Semiotic interpretation

Kusa's reaction is the decisive proof of the description's power. Having heard the messengers' report, he— who was previously indifferent to marriage, but became eager to wed Pabavati. The verbal sign (the praise) successfully produces the desired interpretant in Kusa: an internal visual image accompanied by sexual desire, leading to narrative action. This situation shows the entire symbolic chain: the object of Pabavati's beauty, the sign of the messengers' verbal description, which has led to the decision to marry. This is because the desire associated with Kusa's mental image is the sign.

Discussion: Visual Stimulation as a Poetic and Narrative Device

The dual structure of the “Kumari Vanum” is not redundant but strategic. The first praise establishes the female body as an object of visual and erotic attention. The second praise uses that established image to awaken desire in the protagonist, thereby advancing the plot. The reader undergoes a similar process—receiving the same vivid descriptions and forming mental images that evoke sensual interest.

This poetic strategy aligns with the concept that visual or vividly imagined stimuli can trigger emotional and physiological responses related to attraction (Robertson, 2023:85–86). While avoiding broad generalizations, the text itself assumes that detailed visualization of feminine beauty can excite “kama” (desire) in the male observer, a core principle of the erotic sentiment in classical poetics.

The female body in these passages is therefore not merely described; it is "poetically engineered" to function as a source of visual stimulation. This stimulation operates first within the story (affecting Kusa) and simultaneously within the experience of reading (affecting the reader). It confirms that the poet's insertion of two elaborate praises was a deliberate technique to generate desire through the power of verbal visualization.

According to Peirce, “the direct effect actually produced by a sign upon an interpreter of it, that which is experienced in each act of interpretation and is different in each form that of any other” (Noth,1990:44). The strong effect given by this poetic text’s sign is visual stimulation, which is the decisive factor for the whole story. Kusa's marriage is essential to this narrative power factor. The praises of the princess in the epic poem work to justify that fact.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that in “Kāvsīlūmiṇa”, the female body is systematically used as a poetic device for creating visual stimulation. Through the two “Kumari Vanum” sequences, the poet deploys detailed, metaphorical descriptions that invite the listener/reader to visualize Pabavati’s form. By applying Peircean semiotics, we can see how these descriptions act as signs that produce clear interpretants: fascination and arousal in the messengers, and awakened desire and decisive action in Prince Kusa.

The repetition of the praise is a calculated narrative device. It first presents the body as an object of beauty, then uses that presentation to stimulate the central character’s psyche, thereby driving the marital plot forward. In this way, the poet skillfully employs the description of the female body to achieve both aesthetic (erotic) and narrative objectives. This study therefore clarifies the mechanism behind the “visual stimulation” noted by earlier scholars. It confirms that the dual “Kumari Vanum” is central to the poem’s structure and its evocation of desire.

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