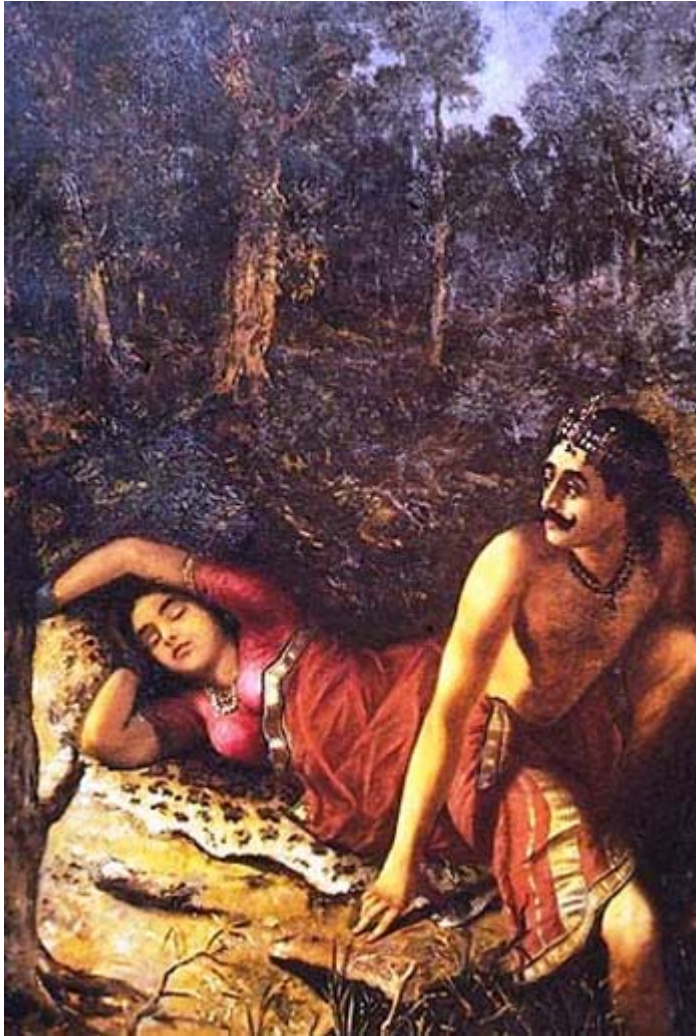


The Nala-Damayanti Katha in Vyasa's Mahabharata

by Maj. Gen. Shekhar Sen



Those who have kept track of Writers Workshop's effort at serving up the *Mahabharata* in small doses to the extremely busy twenty-first century reader through the remarkable *Katha* series will be pleased to know that the latest addition, the eighth, the *Nala-Damayanti Katha*, is now available. Like the earlier books it is a reproduction of the Nala-Damayanti episode in the Vana Parva of Prof. P.Lal's *magnum opus*, the *shloka-by-shloka* transcreation of the *Mahabharata*. And, as with the earlier books, the two very compelling features of this work are the exquisite transcreation of Prof. P.Lal in free-flowing English verse and the splendid introduction by Dr. Prema Nandakumar.

The Nala-Damayanti episode is a curious tale in many ways. It is the entire Kuru-Pandava story in miniature with Nala, the king of the Nishadhas, playing the Pandavas. He is a great king,

very fond like Yudhishtira of playing dice and, like him, not too good at it. He wins Damayanti in the *svayamvara* congregation as the Pandavas do Draupadi. The description of the two ladies, the 'lovely-waisted Damayanti' and the 'slim-waisted Draupadi' is almost the same: Damayanti achieved world-wide fame

*'for her incandescent beauty, grace,
virtue and excellence'
She was faultless-featured;
'with her ornaments she dazzled
like lightening in the sky.*

*A lady of impossible beauty!
Like large-eyed Sri-Lakshmi!
None among the gods or yakshas
could equal her.
None among humans or others
Ever possessed such beauty:
She soothed the eyes,
She was lovelier than a goddess.'* (III.53.10-14, Nala-Damayanti Katha)

And, 'auspicious, eye-ravishing, large-black-eyed Panchali rose from the yajna altar,

*Dark-skinned Panchali
Lotus-eyed lady, wavy-haired Panchali,
Hair like dark blue clouds,
Shining coppery carved nails,
Soft eye-lashes,
Swelling breasts
Shapely thighs.
A girl like goddess
born to humans.
'There was none on earth
to match her loveliness.
Gods, anti-gods, and yakshas
yearned for such celestial beauty.'* (169:45-47, Adi Parva, Mahabharata)

Both were equally beautiful except that Draupadi was 'dark-sinned' and Damayanti was perhaps very fair because interestingly, she has been compared to lightening twice, one in this passage and again at the time of her entry into the city of Subahu 'you dazzle like lightening in the midst of clouds'.

Then the dice game. Both Nala and Yudhishtira play the game and lose everything. Why do they play the game? Why indeed do they feel honor-bound and compelled to play? And that too when, being well-educated, they are surely aware of scriptural injunctions against gambling. The *Aksha Sukta* a rare secular *sukta* of the *Rigveda* condemns the game of dice,

*'Akshairma divyah krishimit krishasva vitte ramasya vahumanyamanah
Tatra gavah kitaba tatra jaya tanme vi chashte Savitayamarshah'* (10:34:13)
(*'Play not with dice, but cultivate thy cornfield; Rejoice in thy goods and fame gained from cultivation, deeming them abundant. From there you will get thy cows and thy wife, O gambler. This counsel Savita gives me.'*)

In spite of such injunctions they resort to some na'ive argument of compulsion of honor, and play. Yudhishtira ignored the fact that there could be no honor in deeds not sanctioned by the Vedas. He knew that it was wrong to play dice yet he says, 'If he challenges me, I will accept the challenge. I have firmly vowed this.' And then he says, 'Like flashing flames blinding the eyes, fate blinds clear thinking.' Again, before the second dice game he says, 'The old monarch commands me to play dice again. I know it means my doom. But I cannot refuse.' Once more, the question of the *Kshatriya* honor. On this Vaishampayana comments, 'When doom is imminent,

thinking gets blurred.' (*Sabha Parva*). This then was Yudhishtira's compulsion' if challenged it was his vow never to refuse.

But what were Nala's compulsions? Nothing much really. When Pushkara 'insistently kept inviting him to a dice-game, the maha-minded raja could not refuse.' So, 'obsessed, he could think only of the dice-game' and 'Damayanti saw the fulsomely-famed, noble-minded king obsessed with gambling, and seemingly bereft of his reason.' He too, like Yudhishtira, lost all and went on exile to the forest. In Yudhishtira's case there was some justification, though fairly vague, that he was one of the chief protagonists of the power struggle of the time and he had to contend with a very strong opposition. He might have considered the dice game to be an acceptable alternative and might have thought of taking this shortcut to success, like most gamblers. Militarily he had no chance as all the kings conquered by him during the *Rajasuya* sacrifice were on the side of the Kauravas, as he himself admits in the *Vana Parva* during a conversation with Draupadi and Bhima. He must have had, at that time, supreme confidence in his own dice-playing abilities. But Nala was not under any such duress. There was no power-struggle, no political necessity 'Pushkara was not a claimant to the throne' and peace and prosperity reigned everywhere. It was just a gambler's urge that made Nala play. But in Nala's case there was also supernatural intervention. Three deadly factors combined against him: an evil god (Kali) possessed him, an evil time (Kali yuga) and the worst throw of dice (the four yugas are named after the four throws of dice, *Krita*, *Trita*, *Dvita* and *Kali* of which *Krita* is the best throw and *Kali* the worst). No such power was operating on Yudhishtira; he played of his own volition. However, both committed political hara-kiri on the dice-board.

Dice were usually made of vibhitaka nuts. In the *Virata Parva* Yudhishtira carries "black and red dice made of gold inset with sapphires and beautiful ivory pawns of blue, yellow, red and white by hue." In the Nala-Pushkara game, "Kali transformed himself into the principal dice to be cast at the game." In the Yudhishtira-Shakuni game, Vyasa merely speaks of Shakuni, a supremely skilled player and Dvapara-incarnate, cheating in the dice-throw.

There is an interesting point about the dices used in the game of the two kings. Even though Kali had earlier asked his friend Dvapara to enter the dice, during the actual game 'Kali transformed himself into the principal dice to be cast at the game.' So the dice here was cleverly doctored. A similar charge of doctoring the dice in the Yudhishtira game too has been raised by Parashuram, the well-known satirist of Bengali literature, in his story, 'The Third Dice-game' (translated into English by Dr. Pradip Bhattacharya) - Shakuni hid a beetle inside his dice. So, in whichever way one threw the dice it would always fall the right-side up due to the obstinate beetle inside which 'being of extremely intractable nature could not be overturned or turned on its side.' The concept of doctored or enchanted dice made of the bones of Shakuni's father is a later vernacular addition. However, cutting out all the frills of Kali and the beetle, there is no doubt that both Nala and Yudhishtira were cast against much stronger adversaries and were soundly thrashed. The only thing that can be said for Nala, if that is any consolation, is that he was a much better player than Yudhishtira since he could continue playing for months whereas Yudhishtira lasted not even a day' and he played twice in that single day.

The Nala story reflects most of the important events of the Pandava story in some way or the other. The Draupadi-vastraharana episode is considered to be an interpolation

by some. If so, Vyasa would not have written about the birds flying away with Nala's cloth, his cutting Damayanti's cloth in two with the magically appearing sword and disappearing, leaving her wearing just half of it. The similarity between the two stories indicates that both are integral to the original, though some details may have been interpolated.

Both the kings went to the forest thereafter with their wives. Like the thirteenth year of the Pandavas, Nala spent the last period of his exile incognito in the court of Rituparna as his charioteer. Like Yudhishtira he also obtained the *Aksha-hridaya*, expert knowledge of the game of dice. Damayanti too spent some time with the princess of Chedi, Sunanda, in the kingdom of Subahu as Sairindhri, just as Draupadi spent the last year of exile with Sudeshna, the Virata queen, disguised as Sairindhri. Both of them put up the same terms as conditions of their service. Prema Nandakumar has very perceptively pointed out in her introduction that this story 'also gave insights to the Pandavas and Draupadi when they wished to disguise themselves and live in an alien land for one whole year.' Yudhishtira became Kanka, a companion to the king who would play dice with him (in which he had already become an expert like Nala by learning *Aksha-hridaya* from sage Brihadashva); Bhima became Ballabha, the cook (an expert chef like Nala who got his expertise in cooking from Yama-Dharma during the *svayamvara* congregation); Arjuna became Brihannala, transforming himself into a transvestite using the curse of Urvashi just as Nala's appearance was changed by Karkotaka's bite; Nakula became Granthika, the expert in horses like Nala; and Sahadeva took the name, Arishtanemi, the keeper of cattle, the sole exception who did not take a pointer from the story of Nala. Nandakumar gives a reason: 'The youngest brother, wise, intelligent and an unequal devotee of Krishna, it was natural for him to become the guardian of the cow.' However, there is no evidence of Sahadeva's unequalled Krishan-bhakti in Vyasa. The remark is based on Villi's Tamil version of the epic where Sahadeva is so depicted.

Brihadashva was a wise old seer. He had seen the world. Not for nothing he chose this tale to console Yudhishtira in an effort to draw him out of his massive self-pity. This story, while it provided some succor to Yudhishtira, was also an indictment. Yudhishtira, in his blind headlong plunge into self-destruction, not only staked himself and his brothers but also Draupadi. Was this shameful act in consonance with his much vaunted idea of *Kshatriya* 'honor'? Nandakumar writes, 'Not all tomes expounding the significance of the term 'honor-bound' can wipe away their shame of considering one's wife as disposable chattel!' Even if we accept Yudhishtira's argument of *Kshatriya*-dharma, his action of staking Draupadi can never be a part of that dharma. It merely exposes the extent to which he had fallen at that moment of madness, the depths of his frightening and compulsive addiction. Nala, on the other hand, knew his limits. When he heard Pushkara say, 'How about staking Damayanti?' his heart broke. He looked painfully at Pushkara, took off all his ornaments and left silently, wearing a single piece of cloth, with Damayanti. And in that moment of silence, Brihadashva placed the Dharmaraja squarely in the dock in utter condemnation. He showed him that even a king of Nishadhas, a tribal king, can rise above a *Kshatriya* king who is none other than the son of Dharma.

But then the story does not exculpate Nala completely. He too on his part has failed Damayanti. He left her to fend for herself in the wilderness on the flimsy ground,

'if I leave her she will probably go to her parents'

*If she remains with me
she will suffer more;
if I leave her, it is possible
she will find some happiness'*

He never paused to think that even if Damayanti decided to go to her parents, how she was going to find her way through this perilous forest infested with wild creatures and men of evil temperament. It was surely a childish and irresponsible decision which ultimately caused Damayanti untold misery. And in the final moment of truth, Nala too falls prey to the folly of Yudhishtira: he stakes Damayanti in the final game of dice with Pushkara. Granted that by this time he was the master of the *Aksha-hridaya* and he knew that he would never lose, but it was a principle that was compromised by that deed. The knowledge of *Aksha-hridaya* gave him supreme confidence, in fact, it made him vain, but it also clouded his sense of values. Even if you are one hundred per cent sure, you do not use your wife as stake in gambling. If Brihadashva was trying to pass a message of this kind indirectly to Yudhishtira to begin with, he failed by narrating this last game of dice in which Nala was guilty of the same offence as Yudhishtira. Well, every cloud has a silver lining. Perhaps it was due to this part of the story that we do not see another command performance by Yudhishtira in the *Mahabharata* on the dice board, even though, like Nala, he too at that time was armed with the *Aksha-hridaya* and had every reason to feel confident enough to take on Shakuni. Perhaps that was the objective of that wise man, Brihadashva: Yudhishtira must learn about the pitfalls that arrogance of learning holds. We have seen that Yudhishtira did learn his lesson well.

In fact, the entire *Vana Parva* contains the progress of Yudhishtira's education. He had two big problems. He had to be first helped to get over his gigantic self-pity. Secondly, he had to be trained to become a king ' a kind of advanced course in administration that included acquiring administrative skills and power in the form of weaponry and political alliances. At the time of the dice game, he was young, inexperienced and had no political ally except Krishna and the Panchalas. The kings they defeated during the *Rajasuya yajna*, were naturally not friendly. His was a new kingdom, yet to find its political and diplomatic feet and all the alliances were with the established Hastinapur kingdom which was inimical to him. At this juncture he was exiled before he could organize himself politically. In addition to this predicament, he fell into a bitter depression and wallowed in self-pity, a luxury that he could ill-afford. So the benevolent forces more or less combined together and got busy in reconstructing Yudhishtira. Shiva, Indra and other gods gave Arjuna many weapons. The sages, the seers, conducted a severe regimen of education, one after the other. Vyasa came and gave him the *Pratismriti* spell. Shaunaka, Dhaumya, Markandeya, Baka, Brihadashva and Lomasha continued his education through a series of *kathas* and didactic discourses. Ajagara-Nahusha had a fruitful didactic discussion with him. He learnt about environmental balance through the deer who appeared in his dream. And finally, as an end-of-course examination, he had the famous encounter with the Baka-Yaksha-Dharma. With this encounter in the last chapter of *Vana Parva*, Yudhishtira's education was complete.

The problem of his self-indulgence was also handled in the process. First, Shaunaka advises him how to handle grief, fear and greed. He was the one who advised him on *Nishkama Karma*, much before Krishna recited the Gita to Arjuna. Apparently, he was not convinced. He seemed to be fairly desperate when confronted by Draupadi

and Bhima. So, when Brihadashva came the first question he asked was, 'Is there any raja on earth more miserable than me? Have you heard of one, seen one? I can think of none.' Brihadashva's was swift in administering a rather severe reprimand, 'There was a raja on this earth who suffered more than you' In the forest, O raja, Nala had neither servants nor chariots; he had no brother and no friends to console him. But you have heroic brothers, equal to gods, and the best of Brahmins, equal to Brahma. You should not be sad.' Then he launched into the narration of the Nala-Damayanti tale. Whether the story had any effect on him or not is not clear, but one thing is absolutely clear 'it made no dent in his impregnable self-pity. We find him carrying this burden till almost the end of *Vana Parva* and asking Markandeya after the Jayadratha episode, 'Is there anyone in the world as unfortunate as I am? Have you heard of such a man? Have you seen one?' Markandeya said Rama was such a king and began the narration of the Ramayana. After completing the story, he said, 'This was how Rama endured such agonizing exile' O foe-tormentor, why do you grieve? You have supporters who can vanquish the thunder-wielder Indra and the Maruts' Rama without such help, killed the ten-necked *rakshasa* of tremendous valor and rescued Vaidehi Sita. Rama's only allies were black-faced bears and beast-like tree-men' do not grieve' mahatmas like you must never despair.' After this tale, we find a dent in Yudhishtira's self-pity and see him looking around and becoming conscious about the problems of others, especially of his wife. So he asks Markandeya, 'Maha-muni, I am not sorry (?) for myself' I feel sorry for Draupadi' Have you ever heard of a woman as maha-fortune-favored and husband-devoted as Draupadi? Have you seen one?' So, this brings forth the story of Savitri-Satyavan from Markandeya. With Nala too the same thing happened. He too wallowed in self-pity during exile for deserting Damayanti, reciting a *shloka* every evening lamenting her fate. He too acquired power in the form of *Aksha-hridaya* from King Rituparna with which he would be able to handle Pushkara.

The Nala-Damayanti tale is a romantic story 'the story of immortal love between a love-struck husband and his wife, steadfast in her love for her husband. They fall in love when they had not even seen each other through the intervention of the divine postman, the golden swan. Thereafter it continues unswervingly through a myriad trials and tribulations till it reaches a happy conclusion. There is certain softness in the treatment of the character of Damayanti which sets her apart from Draupadi. She gives an impression of being like a creeper that is entirely and unconditionally dependant on the Nala-tree. She has a different, a stronger facet but, first and foremost, she is the beloved of Nala and is head over heels in love with Nala. She never complains when Nala deserts her except once during her helpless wanderings in the wilderness and is always worried about his well-being because she believes that a man is the happiest when he is with his wife, 'What medicine is there for misery more healing than a wife?' she asks Nala. In the most heart-rending scene in the forest, which is very unlike Vyasa, she runs from tree to tree and asks them about her Nala. It reminds one of Rama doing the same thing after Sita's abduction. This kind of treatment of a female character persuaded Sri Aurobindo to comment that Nala-Damayanti is the creation of a young Vyasa when he was still under Valmiki's influence. In the core *Mahabharata*, Vyasa is the stern and high epic poet. Perhaps that is why we do not see another instance of possession after Nala's by Kali except when king Kalmashpada is possessed by a demon sent by Vishvamitra.

But then, Damayanti after all is a Vyas character. It cannot be all milk and honey. The spark of fire, the strength of the obelisk must be there somewhere, lying dormant. She is intelligent and fearless. That strength peeps through the veneer of soft romance

time and again. The first time we see this strength is when Nala meets her for the first time, not on his own behalf but on behalf of the gods. Nala tries to persuade her to choose a god as he is scared for his life. But Damayanti puts her foot down and says, 'I would like all the gods to come with you to my *svayamvara*. Nishada king, at that time I will choose you for my husband. O maha-muscled one, I do not see anything wrong in this.' End of conversation. A princess has decided to exercise her rights as a bride going to *svayamvara* even against the opinion of her beloved whom she has met for the first time. She handles the gods who presented themselves like Nala in the assembly very cleverly and with 'lan, throwing the ball into their court: 'And she decided finally to seek help from the gods themselves' saying, 'The gods were the ones who settled that he be my husband. That is the truth; therefore, O gods, point him out to me.' This capacity of thinking on her feet, shows her to be an intelligent and creative woman with an extraordinary personality. A strong woman who would refuse even gods for her beloved even though he has established himself to be slightly wanting in matters of love and intelligence. Later, when she saw that Nala was losing badly in the dice-game, once again she gave proof of her foresight and decision-making by deciding to send the children to her father's place. By burning the Vyadha in the forest for making lewd advances, she made it clear that she was not one to be trifled with. Her conditions of service placed before the Rajmata at Chedi displayed her self-respect, personality and strength of character. Her proactive nature comes out very strongly when we see her sending out messengers to search for Nala, playing the ruse of the second *svayamvara* as a means of bringing Nala to her, in establishing his identity and meeting him in person when he did not look at all like the Nala she knew. Through all this, Nala did nothing except to sigh and lament. I think in his eagerness in portraying Damayanti in brilliant light, Vyasa painted Nala as more daft than necessary.

But Damayanti, though strong, cannot be compared fairly with Draupadi. It is a matter of scale. If Damayanti is an unswerving bright lamp, Draupadi is a conflagration, proud flames rising from the sacrificial altar. From the time she, born of fire, appears in the epic she blazes through the rest of the story as the cause celebre of the destruction of the Kaurava clan. Damayanti is the heroine of a small tale, the product of a young and romantic mind but Draupadi is an epic heroine, conceived by a matured mind that is honed by experience and refined by the fire of asceticism, described by Sri Aurobindo as 'the pale and marble rishi, the austere philosopher, the great statesman, the strong and stern poet of war and empire' Damayanti's tragic moments are underlined deliberately whereas Draupadi's moments of pathos, her softer moments, are overwhelmed by her tremendous personality, her pride, passion and unforgiving temper.

This is perhaps the reason that persuaded Sri Aurobindo, who, unlike many, was convinced that 'These poems (Nala and Savitri) are very Vyasa', to write, 'Here we have the very morning of Vyasa's genius, when he was young and ardent, perhaps still under the immediate influence of Valmiki (one of the most pathetic touches in the Nala is borrowed straight out of the Ramayana {*Sri Aurobindo is probably referring to the scene where Damayanti, like Rama, is asking the trees the whereabouts of Nala*}); at any rate without ceasing to be finely restrained to give some rein to his fancy. The Nala therefore has the delicate & unusual romantic grace of a romantic and severe classic who has permitted himself to go-a-maying in the field of romance. There is a remote charm of restraint in the midst of abandon, of vigilance in the play of fancy which is passing sweet and strange.'

Therefore being young and 'with Valmiki's mighty stanzas in his mind' he created a

fairy tale ambience in the Nala story with people having lots of magical powers thrown in. So, we have golden swans talking in a human voice, talking birds fleeing with clothes, a sword appearing from nowhere with which Nala would cut the cloth, burning of the hunter, Karkotaka Naga changing his size at will, hermitage appearing and disappearing, Nala's magical powers over nature as a result of the gods' boons, Rituparna's ability to count leaves, etc. A lot of shape-shifting is also going on, like, the gods take on Nala's form, Karkotaka becomes small and large, Nala, a handsome man, becomes ugly with Karkotaka's bite and regains his original form later, Kali becomes the dice, etc. In the main tale of the *Mahabharata*, obviously a much later work, we see much restraint in Vyasa; here he has become the stern and high poet of the epic. He still loves the wonderful and the strange, but the touches of wonder and strangeness here are fleeting, 'gone as soon as glimpsed'. So this weakness, coming down from the younger days still exists but severely 'bitted and reined in.' In any case, a romantic tale, severely influenced by Valmiki, ornamented with Valmikian frills and infested with fairy tales and magic, does surprise us.

Prof. Lal has captured the typical Nala-Damayanti ambience, most unusual for a Vyasan creation, admirably in his transcreation of the tale in free-flowing English verse, his hall-mark. But that is only expected. The text therefore does not require any comment, neither do the readers need any encouraging nudge from a review. One has to merely catch hold of a copy, sit back and enjoy some brilliant poetry describing one lovely story from Indian mythology without getting hindered by any intellectual road-block. To quote one remarkable passage, Damayanti imploring the gods,

*'And, trembling with fear, in pranjali, said:
'The words of the swans
made me choose the prince of the Nishadhas
as my husband.
In speech and in thought,
I am devoted to him.
That is the truth; therefore, O gods,
point him out to me.
The gods were the ones who settled
that he be my husband.
That is the truth; therefore, O gods,
point him out to me.
I have already commenced
my total dedication to Nala.
That is the truth; therefore, O gods,
point him out to me.'*

There are of course some minor mistakes that have crept in. Like, why at one place, he keeps referring to Nala as Varshneya is not very clear. Nala's father is Virasena and Varshneya is the name of Nala's charioteer. It must be an oversight.