



Identity, Truth and Binary Instability: A Poststructuralist Reading of Bhasa's *Svapnavasavadattam*

Ratan Mahali

Independent Researcher, West Bengal, India

ratanmahali00123@gmail.com

Received: 28 Nov 2025; Received in revised form: 25 Dec 2025; Accepted: 28 Dec 2025; Available online: 31 Dec 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper aims to analyse Bhasa's *Svapnavasavadattam* through the lens of poststructuralist criticism. It reveals how the play itself constructs identity and truth as unstable and continually shifting. It seems, apparently, a conventional story of separation and reunion; but it is dramatically structured around acts of hiding, masking and withholding information. Drawing on Derrida's concept of *difference*, his critique of binary opposition and Culler's idea of boundless context, the study demonstrates that meaning in the drama is produced by difference, relationality and the interplay between absence and presence. Vasavadatta's shifts from queen to disguised servant girl to image in a dream reveal a subjectivity that is determined by various contexts and perception. Yaugandharayana's political maneuver collapses the distinction between truth and falsehood and reminds us that reality in the play is always mediated and contingent. Further, the ending of the drama contains remnants of uncertainty; the real Vasavadatta is inextricable from the roles she has enacted. This study, thus, situates *Svapnavasavadattam* as a classical text that has the traces of poststructuralist thinking. It argues that the instability of binary opposition and the endless play of meaning are not limited to modern literature but can be found in classical drama as well.



Keywords— Bhasa, Culler, Derrida, *difference*, identity, poststructuralism, *Svapnavasavadattam*

I. INTRODUCTION

Bhasa is one of the earliest known playwrights in Indian classical literature. *Svapnavasavadattam* or *The Vision of Vasavadatta* is one of his most famous plays of all time. The play revolves around King Udayana of Vatsa and his queen Vasavadatta. Initially, Vasavadatta is thought to perish in a fire. Udayana grieves for her and believes that he has lost her for eternity. But she continues to live. His minister, Yaugandharayana, conceals her and decides to secure a virtuous and politically advantageous alliance for Udayana by marrying him to Magadha's princess, Padmavati. Meanwhile, Vasavadatta adopts the guise of Avantika and becomes maid of Padmavati. She serves in silence and hides her grief. She observes her husband getting ready for a new marriage. Her heart is quietly aching, but she clings to the minister's plan. At one point she even appears in Udayana's dreams. The king feels her presence but cannot totally believe whether it is real. Once

the kingdom is secured from attack, Yaugandharayana speaks the truth: Vasavadatta is still alive. Udayana accepts her again and the sadness transforms into happiness. The play concludes with peace; Udayana takes both the queens and the kingdom becomes strong in love and wisdom.

There are several readings of *Svapnavasavadattam* that bring out different aspects of the play.

C. R. Devadhar studies the question of authorship and the original form of the play. Devadhar observes that “nowhere in the anonymous work is there a situation like the one referred to by Saradatanaya” (56). He concludes that the version we have is not the same but probably a later rendering of Bhasa's original. His study draws attention to how the play's text has come down to us.

Dileep Kumar G points to the tension between politics and personal feelings in the play. Kumar notes that it shows “an intense conflict between the world of political

discourses and practical wisdom represented by the clever ministers of King Udayana and king Mahasena, and the 'other' world created by King Udayana and Vasavadatta . . ." (30). His reading reminds us how the drama carries together the traits of love and the demands of rule.

N. R. Gopal explains that the play combines political themes with romance. Gopal calls it "a masterwork of political drama mixed with romance" (508). He shows how Bhasa gives the work both artistic elegance and emotional depth.

Vachaspati Dwivedi looks at the dramatic design and special devices in the play. Dwivedi says that "the prevailing Rasa (sentiment) in *Swapnavasavadattam* is no doubt Vipralambhasringara (love-in-separation) . . ." (14–15). However, the marriage with Padmavati reflects political needs. Dwivedi's remarks bring out the balance of structure and sentiment in the drama.

Swapnavasavadattam, thus, has been studied in many ways, as a love story, a tale of sacrifice or a political drama. Yet its relation to poststructuralist thought has not been explored deeply.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Poststructuralism is an approach to language, literature and culture. It emerged during the 1960s and 1970s. It developed out of structuralism but was also against it. Rather than believing language provides us with fixed, determinate meaning, poststructuralism says that meaning is always contingent, shifting and unstable. Here, texts do not possess one stable truth or essence. They have multiple interpretations based on difference, culture and history. Deconstruction, associated mainly with Jacques Derrida, is a major thread within this tapestry. It is both a branch of poststructuralist theory and a reading practice. Poststructuralism is the broader framework. Whereas, deconstruction is one of its most important tools. It analyses how meaning keeps breaking apart and is remade (Leitch 22–24).

It is this concern with meaning that prompts Derrida to formulate the concept of *difference*. He invented the word *différance* to explain how meaning functions in language. By this term, he wanted to show that meaning is never fixed or stable. A word gets its meaning by being different from other words. At the same time, meaning is always delayed, because one word leads to another and thus, it never reaches a final point. For this reason, it is always in the process of being made but never fully complete. Derrida, says "every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by the systematic play of differences" ("Différance" 11).

Meaning, therefore, does not reside in the word itself but is generated by the word's relationship to other words and is continually deferred in an infinite chain of signification. Language does not provide immediate or ultimate access to truth but initiates a continuous play of signifiers. Thus, interpretation of text is an open, infinite process rather than a finite one.

In addition to *différance*, Jacques Derrida's deconstruction also questions the structuring of thought through binary opposition. He demonstrates how Western metaphysics is founded on pairs of oppositional terms: speech/writing, nature/culture, presence/absence, truth/falsehood. Most importantly, neither term in a binary has meaning in isolation; a meaning is always produced by the interrelationships among the terms. For this reason, there is always a bit of the opposite within each concept: "without a trace retaining the other as other in the same, no difference would do its work and no meaning would appear" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 62).

Jonathan Culler brings this discussion further by focusing on the nature of meaning in context. Culler states, "Meaning is context bound, but context is boundless" (123). This observation reveals the impossibility of fixing meaning. Each reading act positions the text in a new horizon. Each new situation is a revising context that recontextualises the text's meaning but does not finally determine it; it makes literature open to all other meanings. In this sense, there are no definitive or absolute truths in a text. Rather, they produce an endless reinterpretations where meaning multiplies, shifts and expands without bound.

III. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The Instability of Identity: Vasavadatta's Shifting Roles

In Bhasa's *Swapnavasavadattam*, Vasavadatta's identity is never stable or fixed. She is always moving. She keeps on exiting one role and entering another; she never rests in one form. At the outset of the play, she appears before us as the proud queen who carries the dignity of her birth as well as the love of devotion to Udayana. But she is quickly convinced to abandon this role and go into hiding as a simple attendant, Avantika. Later she returns again, though not as herself but as a fragile dream-image in Udayana's sleepless night. She is revealed to be Vasavadatta only at the end, and even then she bears the trace of all of these other forms. Each is a moment, but none of them can be her final shape, or her definitive identity. She is always in flux, in-between presence and absence, truth and masquerade. Derrida's idea of *différance* explains this shifting very well. Meaning is never whole, never finished. It is always shaped by relation and delay. Vasavadatta too is

never entirely herself. As queen, she is defined in relation to Padmavati. As Avantika, she gains meaning because the minister requires her to hide herself to accomplish his plan. As a dream, she is half-real, a fragile sign of longing that Udayana cannot fully grasp. She says “the more they hasten, the deeper the gloom in my heart” (Bhāsa 2). It shows how her sense of self keeps slipping through what she is and what she must become. At that time she plays the role of Avantika, but her heart aches seeing the hasty preparation of Udayana’s second marriage. She feels pain inside as she is actually Vasavadatta, king Udayana’s wife and is still alive. Her inner self continues to shatter. The play itself shows this again and again. She is asked to prepare the garland for her husband’s second marriage and she cries: “Must I do even this? The Gods are indeed cruel” (Bhāsa 3). It shows the cruelty of her unstable identity. Here she is not simply queen, rival or dream-image. She carries all of these together. But she cannot settle into any one role. All of these make it clear that Vasavadatta’s identity is never natural or stable in this play. It does not refer to the truth beneath the mask. Her identity is always relational and formed by situations. Vasavadatta is made queen in the place of Padmavati, servant, through Yaugandharayana’s plot, dream through Udayana’s sorrow.

Truth, Deception and the Collapse of Binary Oppositions

One of the most striking tensions in *Svapnavasavadattam* is the constant play between truth and deception. The entire narrative begins with a false report, the rumour of Vasavadatta’s death in a fire. At first it appears barbaric, but it is a deliberate act by Yaugandharayana to preserve the kingdom. The apparent lie is actually Udayana’s only opportunity to marry Padmavati and regain his kingship. In this case, the act of deception or false report itself bears the truth. It becomes the very ground on which the truth of Udayana’s kingship is restored. Poststructuralist thinking assists us in interpreting this play of opposites. Derrida teaches us that notions of truth and falsehood or presence and absence are never absolute. These are always influenced by difference and deferral. And this is exactly what occurs here. This is the point where binaries begin to break down. Vasavadatta’s false death is not the opposite of truth, but rather the means by which the kingdom is able to survive. The survival of the kingdom is true. Deception in one shot becomes revelation in another. This play, this, does not allow us to comfortably exist in binaries. Lies give birth to truth, illusion uncovers reality and disguise contains presence. Or, to quote Derrida, it is always in the “trace,” never absolute and never present. The restoration of the kingdom is true and it lies in the trace of Vasavadatta’s false death. In this movement *Svapnavasavadattam* reveals that truth and deception are not actually opposites. They lean, fold and flow into each other. The play does not allow us to

draw neat boundaries. Instead, it reveals the fragile interdependence of binary categories. It shows us that meaning, like identity, is never final but always shifting and always alive in context.

Dream and Differance: The Play of Presence and Absence

The very title *Svapnavasavadattam* or *The Vision of Vasavadatta* suggests that the dream is not a fleeting instant but, in fact, the center of the play. A dream is intrinsically unstable. It reveals and it conceals; it allows the figure to be held close but also to remain at a distance. It always struggles between absence and presence. Derrida’s concept of *differance* is helpful here because he points out that meaning is always deferred and marked by difference. For most of the drama *Vasavadatta* never appears directly to Udayana. She comes in the form of a substitute, the rumour of her death, Avantika’s part and the tenuous sighting in his dream. No one is the whole but they all offer a glimpse. Of course she is always near and far. Only parts of herself are always visible. This is most evident in the dreaming scene. Udayana in his sleep calls for her “O Vasavadatta” (Bhāsa 5). She is there, but also not there for him. He reaches for her but confesses, “I have no clear idea whether or no this was really my heart’s desire” (Bhāsa 5). The dream does not provide certainty, but it allows meaning to be generated by simultaneously holding her alive and dead, there and not there. Even as Avantika she exists in the body but not in the name until her ultimate revelation. Her identity is always postponed. Derrida reminds us, meaning is “a systematic play of differences” (“Differance” 11). And *Vasavadatta*, too, only exists in opposition: between wife and attendant, life and death, dream and reality. From this perspective, the dream is not peripheral to meaning, but rather the place where meaning occurs. Absence always tinges presence and, importantly, Udayana does not view the entire truth, but rather a remnant that sustains meaning. In fact, in *Svapnavasavadattam*, it is reality itself that is dream-like. It is not only fragile but perpetually deferred.

Contextual Meaning and the Unfinished Ending

Jonathan Culler reminds us that “Meaning is context bound, but context is boundless” (123). It means that a text can never be closed by a single reading. Each new context provides new meaning to the text. Bhāsa’s *Svapnavasavadattam* provides a subtle glimpse of this principle. As Yaugandharayana announces the death of Vasavadatta, the meaning of this news is context-dependent. To the subjects and political supporters this is received as the truth. For Udayana that same report becomes unbearable grief. To Vasavadatta, specifically, it is not deceit, but sacrifice; she willingly commits to vanish in order to secure her husband’s throne. But this shifting of meaning is not accidental but rather integral to the play. This is what Culler

refers to as boundless context. The text does not close. It is not a fixed object. It is open, alive and infinitely interpretable. Meaning is not determined once for all time. It is rewritten each time based on history, culture and point of view.

The drama, thus, also reflects the movement of textuality itself. Vasavadatta exists as a queen, a disguise, a dream, a revelation and similarly the play exists as many things, is never final, always becoming. In this way Bhasa's text is a representation of the poststructuralist reality that a text is not a completed object, but a continual rewriting. The drama ends with a reunion. Vasavadatta is finally unveiled. Udayana is reunited with his wife and he regains his throne. But even there is no neat resolution. The ending does not present pure closure but rather a fragile stitching together which is still haunted by that which has passed. Vasavadatta can never again be simply the queen for the audience. Avantika is still remembered as the disguised servant who created the wedding garland. Her memory holds tightly to that last revelation; it cannot be erased. The Yaugandharayana's deception does not disappear either. It lingers. The same instability exists in Udayana. Vasavadatta is now unveiled in front of him, yet he still retains the memory of her dream. This is where Derrida's use of the term "trace" begins to make sense. The final harmony of the play is also cast in shadow by disguise, deception and dream. Closure is never really closure. It carries within it that which it attempted to closet. Thus *Svapnavasavadattam* does not end with a firm circle but an open spiral. The resolution is multi-tiered and ambiguous.

IV. CONCLUSION

Svapnavasavadattam shows that identity, truth and meaning never remain fixed or final. They shift with roles, disguises and dreams. Vasavadatta is queen, attendant and effete dream image. Each role is significant only temporarily, but none of these roles is her complete self. She is always haunted by absence. Her identity is both what others perceive and what circumstances demand. The minister's plan similarly blurs the line between truth and falsehood because the false report of her death secures the survival of the kingdom while disguise and dream reveal a different kind of reality. Even the reunion that closes the play carries within it traces of deception, grief and memory. The closure feels unsettled rather than absolute. Meaning in the play is never fixed. Every context whether political or emotional reshapes how the story speaks. The play closes but its meaning does not; there are new meanings to be made and the play lives on in its changing lights and infinite interpretations.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bhasa. *The Vision of Vasavadatta (Svapna-Vasavadattam)*. Translated by A. C. Woolner and Lakshman Sarup, In Parentheses Publications, 1999.
- [2] Culler, Jonathan. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. 25th anniv. ed., Cornell University Press, 2007.
- [3] Derrida, Jacques. "Différance." *Théorie d'ensemble*, Éditions du Seuil, 1968.
- [4] ———. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Johns Hopkins University Press*, 1997.
- [5] Devadhar, C. R. "The *Svapnavasavadatta* of Bhasa." *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, vol. 6, no. 1, July 1924, pp. 55–57. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44082662>.
- [6] Dwivedi, Vachaspati. "The Dramatic Structure of Bhasha's *Svapnavasavadattam*." *International Journal of English Research*, vol. 5, no. 6, Nov. 2019, pp. 13–15.
- [7] Gopal, N. R. "Beyond Convention: Bhasa's Revolutionary Impact on Sanskrit Theatre." *EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR)*, vol. 10, no. 12, Dec. 2024, pp. 508–512.
- [8] Kumar, Dileep G. "'Other World' in the Plays of Bhasa." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 19, no. 8, ver. VI, Aug. 2014, pp. 30–34.
- [9] Leitch, Vincent B., editor. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. 3rd ed., W. W. Norton & Company, 2018.