

Preface

The story of Amrapali has been told million times with different variations. Several films and TV serials have been made based on information available from Buddhist literature and Jataka tales. She remains a very popular character in the history of Buddhism due to association of Gautama Buddha with her. Seeds of conversion of Mauryan Samrat Ashok to Buddhism were sown at the time of Ashok's grandfather Bimbisara and father Ajatasatru. Amrapali 's association with them paved the way for Buddhism gaining royal patronage in the huge Maghada kingdom ruled by Mauryan kings..

The present story of Amrapali narrates the events linking Bimbhisara and Gautama Buddha with Amrapali. Name assumed for Bimbisara in this story is Bindusara. The author has used his own imagination to visualise and present the story of Amrapali and does not offer any historic verification or authentication. so readers are requested to treat this story as a story and nothing more .

Vaishali and Pataliputra are two famous territories that prospered at the time of Buddha's appearance. After one of the frequent clashes between the two states, a female infant of Royal descent was left in the care of a yogi , who brought the child up in the mango grove. Once the child came off age, he left her in the grove and moved on. The writer picks up the story from this moment onwards.

This is the second of 5 short stories written by the author, taking incidents from life of Gautama Buddha. The other books are Budhdha Parting, Rebirth of Ahimsika, Sujata, vishaka and chinchuaa.

Bharatmuni of famous Natyashstra says stories and kavyas are written to provide entertainment and mental peace to the readers. The author hopes that his presentation of Amrapali in his story serves the same purpose.

Thank you

Amra pali

Chapter1

“Dear Child, I will leave you here, knowing very well that all that you learnt in the last twelve years from me would help you to live with out my presence at your side. This world is full of strife and adversities. You are a god given child and when you were born , the wise men of Vaishali had predicted that you will be well respected and will carve a niche for yourself in the history of this land. Your parents had left you in my care as their life was shattered by an ambitious king. As per promise given to them , I have brought you up.It is time for you to make up your own life. This great city of Vaishali will give you the shelter and security that , due to advancing age I am unable to give any more. So forgive me if you can and let me go on my way. Be true to yourself and this city. Never fear .Spread word of love among the people you meet. Let all good things happen to you.”

The young girl smiled at the old man and hugged him for one last time. Then she held his hands together and said ‘Thank you sir. You have prepared me well for this situation. I will now manage my life myself and make the prophesy of those wise men come true. You go peacefully now. Thank you again.

The old man left and the girl found herself alone. She looked around her for the first time. She was in a very beautiful garden , the plants were very tastefully laid out. Flower beds were demarcated with brickwork and as she looked , she saw a variety of flowers , with a bewildering range of colours.Huge trees surrounded the garden throwing wide circle of shade. Green lawn stretched in front in an undulating landscape that made the place look pretty. She was standing under a mango tree. She could see tiny raw green mangoes. She thought very soon these mangoes will ripe and people will come and pluck them and take them out. Their life will soon come to an end.The girl thought her present stage in life was very similar to that of young green mango Small, tender with an enchanting intoxicating smell..She too would ripe into a beautiful lady for some one to pluck and carry her away, she hoped. Till that happens she decided she will stay in this garden.

She then went on to make herself comfortable and familiar with the lay out of the garden. She heard a cuckoo, hiding somewhere in the overhead green leaves, make out a sweet note which thrilled her no end. Delighted, she called out and the bird responded to her huge surprise. She clapped her hands in glee and jumped a few steps. The bird flew out of his hiding place, circled above her head and then disappeared.

She walked around the garden. In that warm afternoon there were not any visitors in the garden, she was almost all alone, she thought. She saw some deers in the distance and many rabbits in the burrows among the bushes. She ran along the flower beds enjoying the riot of colours and the sublime scent. She stopped at the bush of queen red rose where the roses were in full bloom. She plucked one and put it in her hair. She saw a pond near by and ran to it. Sitting on the parapet wall that ran along the bank, she looked at her image in the still water. A round pretty face with larger black eyes stared back at her. "I have company." She said and laughed aloud. The ring of her laughter went round the garden in a series of waves reflected by trees

Madhav, the gardener working in a far secluded corner heard the laughter and looked in surprise. He saw a young girl of 16 or 17 years dancing under a mango tree close to the pond. 'who is this uncommonly pretty girl?.Is she the Vana devata that people always talk about. Where did she descend from?'.He had not heard any one walking in. To satisfy his curiosity he walked up to her and she too turned and stared at him wondering where he came from. 'WHO ARE YOU?'she asked beating him to the question. The way she put it, it was not really a question but a reaction to his sudden and un expected appearance close to her."I am the gardener here. what are you doing here. who are you and how did you gain entry?"

"How many questions," she said softly 'I am afraid I can not answer any. I just happen to be here. I do not know who I am. All I know is presently I am standing in the shade of a lovely mango tree and that I love mangoes. You can call me Amba. Do you like that name? I just thought it for myself."

The docile gardener said 'who am I to like or dislike your name. You must have a name, parents or somebody. You just can not happen to be here."

‘As I said earlier, I can not answer any of your questions. You simply must allow me to stay here.’

My dear girl. You know how life is. You need food to stay alive. You need water to drink and clean up. you need to dress. You need a place to sleep. You think you will get all that in this garden?

“why not?.I can find all that I need to live. These tall leafy trees give me the shelter I need. They give me fruits for my food. There is a pond with all the water I need. There are birds to keep me company. I also see many deers and lot of rabbits I can befriend. I am sure I will be able to manage as long as you do not drive me away”

She talked very easily. There was a note of assertiveness in all that she said.

It appeared as though she was giving a regal command and not an explanation. The gardener, used to commands by nobles of Vaishali recognised the regal bearing she had displayed. Only great queens and ladies of noble birth talk like this and his natural servile instincts surfaced and he mellowed. ‘Young lady, that is not possible. come evening , this place will be full of people and an unescorted beautiful young lady will become an object of attraction and curiosity that nobles may not approve. I have to report about you.’

The girl smiled at him and said ,”please do so, immediately. Your superiors will find a way for me. I am told that the nobles of Vaishali are very kind. They will not harass a lonely girl. Please tell them that I said that.”

‘I will do that right away. In the meantime do you need anything to eat?’ he asked with lot of concern.’ I do not see you carrying anything. You can share my food if you do not mind.’

She was happy to hear that .She said, ‘you are very observant and most kind. If you have any food to spare, I will take it. If you are going to starve yourselves by giving away what you kept for yourself, I would not like that.’

She was like a proud queen keeping her dignity even when reduced to penury. The gardener obeyed as though he was used to taking orders from her. He went to the nearest house in the Nobles settlement and reported ” Sir, there is an young lady in the garden who wishes to stay there. I have told her that

would not be allowed. She wont listen to me . She says she has faith in the sentiments of nobles who would not harass a lonely girl. What should I do sir?"

The Noble found it strange that a vagrant girl could talk so much. He asked the gardener what she looked like..The gardener went on saying " Sir, she looks like a goddess. She talks like a queen. Her voice will put a cuckoo to shame. The swans in the pond possibly learnt to glide that way after seeing her walk. She is enchanting, sir"

The Noble laughed 'man, you have fallen in love with her already. She is probably a stranger. Did you find out anything at all about her?.'

"That is the strangest thing ,Sir. She does not seem to know anything about herself..She does not who she is."

The noble consulted his friends and soon all of them were marching to the garden. There they saw her sitting on the parapet wall overlooking the pond surveying the bunch of pink Lotuses and white water lilies floating in the water. With one hand in the water she was sweeping the surface and turned to see a team of nobles walking towards her. They all looked at her.

Moon like face with shining dark eyes that seemed to bore into you. Her lips small red and opened a little revealing set of pearly white teeth, a mouth seemingly ready to say something they would listen to and obey with out a question. Her bearing gave an impression that she had no worry. Her skin spotless and ivory white. She had long black hair that fell at her back like a cascade of river.

The nobles looked transfixed. They had never seen a beauty like this one. In wonder and thrill their mouths opened to say wow.

The girl with a gay abandon laughed, the laughter putting all of them at ease instantly

"It is not considered very polite to stare at a young girl this way. Do you have anything to tell me?"Her beautifully arched eyebrow lifted up in a question.

They could not bring themselves to respond.

“The gentle gardener must have already told you about me. I would like to stay here.”

The Nobles talked among themselves in low tones. Then their spokesman said “we can not allow a lonely girl to live here. You have to move into some house. You have to marry some one if you don’t have any one to care for you.”

‘I will marry her now’ said one eager noble.

“Not when I am alive” said another in a challenging tone. Very soon they became a bunch of hot overbearing quarrelsome lot clamouring for her hand. They came very close to blows jostling one another to reach her and take her hand.

She found it very amusing. She calmed them down like the legendary Mohini and said smartly, “Do not quarrel this way. I shall not belong to anybody. I am here to serve people of this city, the nobles and others. So nobody takes me home. I shall stay here in this spacious garden. You may please make suitable arrangement for my stay here.”

The nobles were not sure in what way she could serve them. She said softly “you are all hot and tense , off your normal cheerful mood. Let me help you to relax .”Then she began to sing an ancient Vaishali song that was normally sung in houses where a marriage has just taken place and the bride was all set to go out with her bridegroom to his house. The song conveyed happiness about the marriage, pain of separation from the parents who had brought up the bride so lovingly till this date and the house where she had grown up. The song climbed to higher tempo at the hope for lasting love and happiness in the new house in the company of one whom she had chosen as life partner. Nobles who heard that song found their own moods change, tensions eased and hope sprang in every heart. As she sang she moved about reaching every one of the nobles, touching their hands softly, putting her own face close to their tense faces and with some young hopefuls she also danced few steps .When she finished the song every one experienced a strange sense of fulfilment and all animosity had vapourised in the face of sublime love she displayed towards all of them. They clapped their hands in joy filled gratitude. If this was the way she was going to take care of them, nobody seemed to have any objection to her presence in the garden. An elderly noble took her face in

his hands and said with feeling "my dear girl, we were all blind with our ego and behaved foolishly to acquire you .You have shown you will care for all of us in your own way. We accept you as one of us and will build a place for you in this very garden. It will be a place unique in conception and use, it will be a place where love and concern will dominate and understanding will envelope warmly any one who visits your place The walls will vibrate with your sublime music and floors will resonate your fleeting dancing steps. Moods will change as per season outside, reflecting friendship, dignity and sense of give and take with no physical domination of any one."

Amba hugged the elderly noble and said, 'That was said very well sir, thank you. Here let me lay the first brick for the building" As she said these words she picked up a stray brick and placed at a site she thought was most suitable for the pavilion that she will live in once it is constructed. She continued, "This is the highest point in the landscape, dominating the garden. The flower beds in front with the lotus filled pond to one side and the tall trees in the back ground will make this place perfectly harmonious with the garden green. This house will have doors that will not close on any one. People visiting this place will carry back the warmth of love and care that I will provide..Their tension filled mind will find a release in this house and the vibration of exotic music and dancing will fill them with a contentment they never experience anywhere else. This will be a very special house indeed."

For the nobles and town people this was a new concept. They had heard of courtesans and devadasis but what Amba had suggested was something different and they wondered if it would turn into an abode of sophisticated courtesan for carnal pleasures. They hoped it would not be so because the bearing of Amba was such that baser thoughts seemed to have no place in any ones mind.

Over next few months the building came up majestically with Amba supervising the construction and every one contributing. The place looked as though it belonged there. When the day for moving in came, the whole town rejoiced and they felt that Amba was the best thing that ever happened to the ancient city. When ever people talked about the city of Vaishali , they also spoke about Amrapali and the two went together occupying every ones mind. They all gained some thing from her. For young boys and girls it was a place of

learning art and music , for the elderly it was a place of reminiscing and for the youth and nobles it was a place of meeting , decisions and leisure.

For all the ladies of Vaishali it was a place where they learnt about equality of genders, their rights and duties apart from the impact they made in their homes bringing in harmony of purpose and thought.

Apart from displaying her vast knowledge in art, music and dance She also proved how accomplished she was in fields of philosophy, grammar and logic. She could win her arguments with out hurting her opponents ego. She won over her detractors by her magnanimity..Nobody felt they had lost to her.

Chapter2

King Bimbisara of Magadha had heard about Amba from many travellers and scholars. He sent a messenger to Vaishali expressing his wish to meet with Amrapali. When the nobles received the message, they were very much concerned because Bimbisara was a powerful and very ambitious king. He had attempted to take control of Vaishali and all his attempts were thwarted by the loyal citizens of Vaishali led by very committed nobles. So they felt this could be a ruse to take over their city. Also they did not want Amba to be exposed to the Magadha king..Amba appreciated all their concerns and agreed to go by whatever decision taken by the nobles of the city. At the same time she advised them not to disregard any opportunity to establish friendly relations with Magadha kingdom. An outright no would make the king angry. So after great deliberations they decided to send a reply which read "If you wish to enter Vaishali as a friend and noble man, it will be a pleasure for us to arrange for a meeting with our precious jewel Amrapali. On the other if you have any designs or vested interest to take her away from Vaishali, we have to firmly say no to your visit." Bimbisara, the arrogant monarch he was, roared with laughter when he heard of the response, "look at their cheekiness. You would get the impression Magadha is a weak and Vaishali is manned by giants. I shall visit Vaishali as a conqueror and not as an admirer

Certain things are easier said than done. He mobilised his army and deployed against Vaishali in a show of strength..There was a celebration going on at Amba's house when message came through that the massive Magadha army was marching towards the borders of Vaishali. Amba stopped her recital midway and began to help the nobles to organise the defences. She moved among the young soldiers and told them, It is our duty to protect our land. While killing is bad, remaining passive in the face of aggression is nothing short of cowardice. My Vaishali is not a land of cowards. Fight with an intensity that will deter further aggression..Her words inspired the soldiers who routed the on coming Magadha army stopping them on their tracks.

Bimbisara had not committed his elite forces as this was merely an exercise in sabre rattling and to assess the capability of the defenders. He stopped the advance and decided to enter Vaishali alone in disguise. Amrapali warned the

soldiers that one should not be fooled by enemy's strategy. The halt of the army may be a play to cover some other design." Be vigilant was her advise.

Bimbisara dressed as a scholar turned trader and made his way to AmraPali's abode by making proper enquiries . His disguise was masterly and no one recognised the king. When he entered the garden , she was inside the house tuning a veena. She saw a particularly handsome young man walking towards her , holding a bunch of colourful and aromatic flowers. He saw her put the veena down and stand up to welcome him. She smiled at him. He was really a very charming person. He looked like a soldier but his face had the shine of a learned man. She said softly "welcome to Amba's place, stranger. May your arrival bring happiness to the fair city Of Vaishali"

Bimbisara was glad that his disguise was holding. He said reciprocating her greetings, "I am a trader from Magadha kingdom. Can I rest here for a few days."

You are welcome. We will try to make your stay as comfortable as possible.

"You were playing the veena when I came in. I am sorry I interrupted your sadhana"

Oh , it was not a sadhana. I was just trying to tune it. You see , it is a new equipment, that arrived only recently. A nobleman presented it to me. Do you know anything about Veenas?

"Yes .In fact I know a great deal. Actually , I can say proudly this particular Veena was made very close to my home in the capital of Magadha kingdom.'

Is that so? Now tell me what does a veena represent

"It is the ultimate musical equipment ever designed by man. He has produced something that can almost reach human voice. I can give you a great deal of information about the physical attributes of the equipment. The type of strings to be used and the limits of tension. How the bridges are aligned etc. But the most appealing aspect of the instrument is the harmony of tunes you can produce. The strings of Veena are like the people in the hands of a real leader, a visionary. You deal with people well, they will do wonders .In the same way you deal well with strings, they will produce most inspiring tunes. You mess

with people , they will bring you disaster. The strings also are same. When you play foul, it produces discordant notes capable of ruining your reputation.'

My, I don't think about such aspects of Veena. For me Veena represents Knowledge. Goddess Saraswathy is always visualised with veena in her hand. For me it is an instrument of love and compassion. You handle it with love and care ,it brings harmony to your life. When I tune Veena it is as though I tune myself.

'What a lovely concept. Can You play it for me, please?'

She sat down and plucked at the strings, the primary notes jumped in their sequences , bounced off the walls filling the room with its magical sound. The ups and downs of the tune seemed to be naturally blending in a meaningful Way as per the lyrics. He was impressed .It was a great exhibition on a rare verse on Saraswathi about which he was aware.

He sat behind her, putting his hands around her to reach the instrument to guide her hand movement for making an improvement, which surprised her. The brief contact with her body seemed to electrify her. She allowed him to complete the verse. She was impressed with the fact that he could play the Veena so expertly and that he knew the verse also. He said

'That was a composition by sage Agasthya' he said with a smile

Who told you that , she asked, with genuine curiosity

Agasthya himself ,' he said seriously and they burst into laughter. She clapped her hands appreciatively and said "you are uniquely gifted for a trader"

"I said , a scholar turned trader. I found very soon that my knowledge was not sufficient to feed a huge family."

He stayed in her house for a few days and every day she discovered something new in him that excited her. If one day he displayed vast knowledge of music, next day he surprised her with a long lecture on religious philosophy and education. He knew all about Nalandha and its great library. Then she heard him mention Buddha. She said, "you know Buddha? have you really met him in person? How does he look? I have heard people say some great things about

him. I wish to meet him. Please tell me about him and his views on current state of religion.”

Amra Pali, I am surprised you are so keen to know about him. Yes I know him rather intimately. He has been my advisor, a well wisher and a good friend. Would you believe me if I say that on my request he will come here and meet you

“No I wont believe he will ever want to come and meet with me. He won’t have any time for people like me. Tell me, please, what are his views about life?”

Oh, there is nothing complicated about his views of life. In fact they are very simple. That is why people are impressed by him.

‘what does he advocate?’

He is against all dogmas and rituals. He looks at all people in the same way with out any distinction. For him a King and a Pauper are subject to very similar type of problems. According to him the problems faced by men have no relation to social standing. King and poor man fall sick in the same manner, feel the pain in the same way and are keen on seeking solution to their problems. with same intensity. Are you surprised?

No, not at all. I also believe that every one is same and life situation may vary but problems are similar , so solutions could be similar.

Tell me, according to Him, how the present life can be enjoyed with out feeling of guilt.

That is a tough one. Answering that would take long time. As I can’t answer that, I will request Buddha to take you on that.

‘Can you really tell Buddha to meet me?’

Yes, most definitely, I can.

How nice it would be, if it can happen .

If you really want , it can happen.

The days went by. One day he told Amba ' I think, I have over stayed. It is time I moved along.'

Yes. You have spent a good amount of time here. I was wondering whether, you have forgotten your basic profession. I did not ask because, i thought it would not be too polite.

Yes, I must return to my work. I have spent so much time with you that I can't imagine a life with out you. Will you come with me to my house in Magadha. I promise I will take good care of you.

No. I can't leave Vaishali. I have a duty towards the people of Vaishali

What will you do if my king Bimbisara decides to take over Vaishali?

He can not. I will stop him. He has already tried once. Our soldiers and nobles made sure that his efforts to invade our country failed. I do not like war. It results in loss of precious young lives. Bimbisara would like to be remembered as a king who loved people and not as one who enjoyed subjugating people to his whims and fancy.

She said it with so much emotion and conviction that he was staggered. He reminded himself how lucky he was that his disguise had lasted this long. He said , 'So Amrapali, you would not come with me to Magadha, even if I offer to place entire Magadha at your feet.?

You are very right. I belong here. I have no use of Magadha. It was nice knowing you. When do you wish to leave?

Right away, if you will permit me.

Amrapali, thought for some time. This gentleman was definitely very different from so many other young people she had entertained in the past. He was leaving for good. Why was she feeling sad about his departure, She asked herself. She realised she did not know his name also. She said " I never got to know your name. You were very nice to me, taught me many new things. I would like to remember you. Can you give me your name?"

You may not like to hear the name, dear.

Why NOT?.Rose by any name smells the same. you are a good man. Your name will be nice which ever way it is pronounced..

I was not referring to pronunciation. I am not afraid to utter my name. Still I feel you would be better off not knowing my name.

Why all this build up. It is just a name. Come on .Out with it. She commanded
Don't say I did not warn you.

Yes, yes, the name please.

Bimbisara

She took it easily. What she had heard about Bimbisara was that he was an arrogant , ambitious and cruel king. But here he is , so lovable, kind, well informed human being.

She made a face. He kept one hand over his heart, waiting for her to explode

Is it true that you are a friend of Buddha?

Yes ,all that I said about my relationship with Him are true.

And He allowed you to wage a war against Vaishali. Then He may not be a person I would ever want to meet.

No, please do not put the blame on him. I wanted Vaishali in my palm. I wanted Amrapali in my arms, close to my heart. I came here with his permission to try and take you away , peacefully. He warned me I would fail

You defeated me so easily with your concern and commitment towards this place

I will leave you now in peace.

He walked away quickly. Her heart cried out to him to stop, but she maintained stony silence.

Chapter3

The nobles and soldiers returned from the war front to the great delight of the people. They had stopped the dreaded Magadha Army in their tracks. There was celebrations all over Vaishali. The nobles assembled at Amba's house in the garden to celebrate their victory and Amba tried to be as joyful as others but somehow she could not. She allowed her girls to sing and dance with nobles. A lavish dinner was organised but Amba's heart was not there. Even when she sang she felt it was all coming out flat without any life. Why was her heart not so keen on celebrating this victory. She knew the answer but somehow she did not relish it. She felt one's victory is another man's defeat and enjoying success meant hurting someone else. She brushed all such unsavoury thoughts out of her mind to join the celebrations showing some degree of enthusiasm. One of the nobles came up to her and asked if she was not so happy about the victory. She told him "Why Sir, I am as happy as anyone else that Vaishali has been saved from a major war. I dread all sorts of war. So many youngsters in their prime get killed in war and that thought makes it difficult for me to really enjoy"

This victory was won by her. A gentleman was brave enough to swallow the defeat for her sake, respecting her independence and concern for the welfare of the city she loved. How many of these nobles knew about this. If they believed their strategy of defensive showdown had led to the victory they were right. But behind their action, was the stubborn spirit of a frail girl. She would not leave the garden house to enjoy pleasures of palaces of Magadha. She closed her eyes and thought about him. She asked herself would he also be thinking about her. She retired to her room after the last of the revellers left. She put her head to the pillow thinking about the king who had so suddenly invaded her heart and she threw him out so cruelly. Would he ever understand? A tear formed at the corner of eyes and as she tried to brush it away it came in torrents. She closed her eyes and forced her mind to think of something different and strangely she zeroed in on Buddha. In that thought she found peace.

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