

When a Mountain Rapes a River, from Bhattumurti's Telugu *Vasu's Life*

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE AND TEXT

The following are two segments from my favorite Telugu book, which purports to tell the tale of Vasu Uparichara, one of the ancestors of the Pandavas, when he falls in love with Girika, daughter of a mountain and a river. The paternal mountain in question, Kolahala (“Clamor”), fell in love with the Shuktimati River when he happened to see her on a visit to heaven and tried to persuade her to marry him; when she refused, he blocked her path and raped her. Vasu interrupted the assault, kicked the mountain with his toe, and sent him flying far from the river, but not before the river became pregnant and gave birth to Girika (“daughter of the mountain”) and her twin brother. This story is briefly told in the *Mahabharata* (Book 1), but it is immensely elaborated by Bhattumurti in verses that are replete with puns and other complex figures as well as near-constant metapoetic reflections. It is a musical work, deeply engaged in the properties and expressive potential of musical sound; less than two centuries ago, scholars in the Godavari region still knew which raga was suited to each verse. This work is included in the canon of major poetic works associated with the Vijayanagara court (in its exilic center of Penugonda, following its decisive defeat in 1565).

In the first section, we hear what Kolahala Mountain says to the river when he first approaches her, and we then hear her response (this section actually appears in the poem in the form of a flashback: it is reported to Vasu's friend by Manjuvani, Girika's maid). The second section describes the moment King Vasu first sets eyes on Girika in the wilderness.

I. VASU'S LIFE (2.125, 128–33): A CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE
KOLAHALA MOUNTAIN AND THE SHUKTIMATI RIVER

Kolahala:

“I saw you when you were leaving
after bowing to the god, you and all the other
lovely rivers—saw your limpid way of being,
your good taste, your depth, the way you contain
us all, your flowing fullness. Since that moment,
in my mind I can imagine
only you. (2.125)

Wise people go to any lengths to celebrate—
indeed to immerse themselves in—whoever has
clarity and sweetness and grace. So I, too,
yearning to be close to you, have come here,
despite the distance, for only you
can quench the fire inside me. (2.128)

What more can I say? I want to give my life
to you, like water gushing down
a mountain. I'll never leave you, and I'll learn how
to make you happy, you whose breasts are round
as the ruddy geese on your waves. Please agree.
Bring me into your innermost heart, where goodness
and love are alive. Do away with my sorrow, make me
a river's husband and lord.” (2.129)

Shuktimati:

“I belong to the bottom, the very lowest level,
where things trickle and flow. My nature
is slow and sluggish and cold.
Even if I happen to be full, at heart
I'm immeasurably shallow, so I've nothing
to be proud of.
In my innermost place you'll find only slime.
My watery life is mostly bubbles, and my only hope
is for a dark, rainy day.
My movements are twisted and crooked.
At my best I'm nothing
but broken waves.
To say I'm even a little bit stable
is an outright lie, and whenever I do stand still,
I stink. Do you really think it's a good idea

for you, with your grandeur and dignity,
 your so-weighty-mind, you who are solid
 and sinless as a rock, to get close
 to someone like me?

On one side: mountains, the kings
 of the earth. On the other: wobbly,
 watery streams. Their union
 doesn't look very likely. Do you think
 my juicy tastes can reach up
 to your infinite height?" (2.131–32)

Kolahala:
 "Lovely river,
 it's all true, but I'm already drowning
 in the flood of your beauty. Are you going to be cruel
 and sink me in your whirling currents, or will you embrace me,
 flow into me, float me on a raft of sheer joy?" (2.133)

II. *VASU'S LIFE* (2.62–70): *VASU SEES GIRIKA FOR THE FIRST TIME*

His two eyes were full of desire.
 More than the two eyes, his mind
 was full of desire in a very strange way.
 Even before his mind, his body was flooded: a wonder.
 Even more than that change in body, hunger,
 agitated and pressing, rushed in. (2.62)

As the king looked at that woman, he wanted never to blink.
 He succeeded in this by joyfully surrendering, with all his memories,
 to her moonlike face. Then he wanted to be king
 of the unblinking gods, with a thousand eyes.
 That's how kings are. They're unstable, always striving
 for a higher station. (2.63)

First lingering at her feet,
 then rising to her thighs,
 then reaching the zone of her belt,
 his glance longed to climb up to the mountain bastion
 of her breasts—which would have made him emperor
 of the whole world. (2.64)

Eagerly entering the tunnel of her navel,
 grasping the ladder of her three folds of skin,
 pulling himself up by the ropes that were the hairs
 on her tummy, and finally conquering the high fortress

of her breasts: the king's vision fulfilled
 a soldier's mission. Is there anything that can't be achieved
 by one who delights in battle? (2.65)

His glance fell upon her face, like a wild garden,
 with the fragrant *tilaka* mark on her forehead
 (or was he seeing dark *tilaka* trees?),
 then it slipped from her cheeks that were glossy
 with the fresh honey of her smile
 and slipped again, over and over, as if seeking a footing
 on smooth moonstones, until, desperate,
 it found the vines of her long, thick hair
 and held on for dear life. (2.66)

Once more, that royal glance:
 it turned her feet into fresh buds,
 revealed her thighs, like the stem of the banana plant,
 as the site of all happy beginnings,
 showed an elephant's back in her buttocks,
 caused her nonexistent waist to merge with the sky
 and her breasts to touch the mountain peaks,
 drew the conch, one of the nine treasures, on her neck,
 let him find whatever fruit he desired in her sweet lips,
 disclosed the shape of the syllable *Shri* in her ears,
 transformed her lovely face so that it could rule over the moon
 (and all other kings), and as for her dark curls—
 they were rainclouds, or any other rich
 wondrous thing. (2.67)

He was a king all right, even the best of them all,
 but he was drowning in dense wonder,
 an ocean of driving passion where all
 was one, beyond word or mind.
 He praised her beauty deep in his heart
 that now depended on no
 other object. (2.68)

[Now a typical metalinguistic verse (2.69), which allows only for
 prose translation:]

Her dark curls, which we call *bhramaraka*, have given bees their
 name and helped them proliferate. Her face, which menaces the lo-
 tus, justifies the title we give the moon: *san-mitruḍu*, “a true friend”
 (also: friend of the stars). If people call the *dōṇḍa* fruit *bimba*, that's
 because it's a pale reflection (*bimba*) of her sweet lips. Her breasts

are golden mountains, which is why people affectionately call mountains *gotra*—(their) “relatives.” Necklaces are so similar to her arms that they are called *sarulu*, “equals.” Wheels, being round, are *cakra*—that is, an army subservient to her buttocks. Do you know why lotuses are called *tammulu*, “younger brothers”? It’s because they were born as the younger siblings of her feet. As for flowers, named *prasavamulu*, “pupils”—that’s because they learned to be flowers by studying her fingernails.

Darkness had a problem. The girl’s face
had defeated his enemy, the moon,
using her eyebrows as its bow, and her glances
as arrows. Her smile stole the ambrosia,
her gleaming cheeks took the radiance,
her forehead the moon’s slim slices
of loveliness. And Darkness saw it all.
Still afraid, even more frightened,
he took refuge in her full black hair. (2.70)

IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES
AND (UN)CONVENTIONAL LOVE
IN BHATTUMURTI’S *VASU’S LIFE*

Ilanit Loewy Shacham (Near Reader)

David Shulman calls Bhattumurti’s *Vasu’s Life* (*Vasucaritramu*) his “favorite Telugu book.” There are many readers of classical Telugu literature who share Shulman’s love and appreciation for *Vasu’s Life* in general and for Bhattumurti’s poetic artistry and mastery in particular. Yet there seem to be different opinions as to just what the text is about. Whereas most readers talk about *Vasu’s Life* as a conventional love story between a man (King Vasu) and a woman (Girika), Shulman has argued that, “the real heroine of the work is none other than Nature herself in the infinite varieties of form made manifest to the receptive observer.”¹ Taking these views into consideration and using Shulman’s selections, I propose that a painful separation between Nature and convention governs the narrative core of *Vasu’s Life*.

In South Asian literature, within the domain of love, conventions often signify harmony, order, and compatibility, but for the protagonists of our story, incompatibility is not merely a break from convention. Rather, incompatibility is a force so powerful it brings about natural and personal disasters. Although there is indeed a love story at the center of *Vasu’s Life*, conventional it is not.

In the first selection (2.125–33) an infatuated (Mountain) Kolahala is telling (River) Shuktimati about his desire to be with her. His words are heavy with double

entendre or *śleṣa* (lit., embrace), a figure of speech used extensively throughout *Vasu's Life*. For example, he begins by praising her as having fine qualities that describe her both as a river and a woman, such as her "limpid way of being," her "good taste," and her "depth" (2.125). His final plea, also couched in double entendre (unpacked into two separate statements in the translation), is a request to "do away with my sorrow" and make him "a river's husband and lord" (*nannu[n] adīnu ceyave*, 2.129). Shuktimati's immediate response is a two-verse rejection in which she articulates their stark incompatibility. In the first verse (2.131), she takes the time to negatively outline various aspects of her physical attributes and nature: as a river, she belongs to the lowest level, and in her there is crookedness and instability, whereas he, the mountain, belongs to lofty domains and in him there is dignity, sinlessness, and stability. In the second verse (2.132), she succinctly concludes that the immeasurable disparity between rivers and mountains makes their union unlikely. Within this short section, Bhattumurti creates layers and textures, all of which highlight his complete control over language: the density and volume of the mountain's punned speech is in stark contrast to the river's light and crisp rejection, which, as if moving away from the implicit "embrace" of *śleṣa*, primarily features a figure of speech that highlights "discrepancy" (*viṣama*), which has incompatibility or incongruity as its core theme.

Somewhat surprising here is that in her initial rejection of Kolahala's advances, Shuktimati does not mention an obvious fact, namely, that she is already married. Indeed, in India all rivers are female (except for one, the Brahmaputra), and they are all married to the ocean as indicated by the numerous epithets for "ocean" which mean "river's husband," or "the husband of rivers." Bearing this in mind, Kolahala's request to become the "river's husband and lord" already encapsulates its own futility: a mountain's request to become the ocean. Yet, Shuktimati does not make that obvious counterargument to Kolahala's advances; instead, she rejects him only on the basis of incompatibility as seen from her own personal perspective. In the last verse given here from Kolahala and Shuktimati's exchange (2.133), Kolahala basically agrees with Shuktimati regarding their incompatibility but states that he is already drowning and asks her to save his life by uniting with him. Shuktimati's second response (2.134–35, not given here) adds depth to the initial claim of incompatibility by invoking physical attributes, character, and marital status. Physically, she explains, they would be an impossible match; a heavy mountain, not to mention his relatives, will not be able to stay afloat in a river such as herself. She then suggests that lofty Kolahala (who is described as "blinded by desire") might be better matched with beautiful heavenly women, if sexual pleasures are what he is after. Utilizing double entendre in Telugu, she describes herself as a river/ascetic that wanders from one holy place to another and dries up in the hot season/grows thin as the result of austerities. She concludes her double speech by describing herself in an epithet that means both an ascetic who "dwells in forests" and as one who is "married to the ocean" (2.135). By using

śleṣa here, Shuktimati is able to provide a perfectly tailored response to Kolahala's initial double-tongued requests: to the one that she give him pleasure, Shuktimati responds by saying she is an ascetic; to the other, that she make him a river's husband, Shuktimati responds by stating she is already married.

One could argue that the reason that Shuktimati did not mention her marriage to the ocean at first is because, as other examples in South Asian literature show, the union between the ocean and rivers is often not strictly monogamous, and there are precedents of erotic encounters between mountains and rivers (as they flow on land en route to the ocean). Thus if Shuktimati wanted to be with Kolahala, her marriage could conveniently not be a problem, and elsewhere in the text (verse 2.137, not translated here), Kolahala invokes examples in which rivers took on extramarital lovers (such as the case of the river Ganges and the god Shiva). However, Shuktimati is not interested in Kolahala, and this is a focal point in Bhattumurti's text. Thus, the fact that she brings up her marriage last should not be taken lightly. In similar cases of unwanted advances in South Asian texts (such as Ravana's abduction of Sita in the *Ramayana*), marriage and loyalty to the husband are the core vocabulary through which women articulate their rejection of unwelcome suitors.² Shuktimati's rejection, however, is articulated from the perspective of an individual. The central reason she rejects Kolahala is that she sees this as a match of two beings whose differences cannot be reconciled. Thus, although Shuktimati eventually mentions her marriage, her being married is secondary to the argument about her and Kolahala's fundamental personal incompatibility.

Further indicating Shuktimati's determination to reject this match in her own terms is that she refrains from discussing her husband—unlike women in other South Asian texts who, in similar circumstances, often compare their husband favorably with the unwanted suitor. Instead, Shuktimati compares herself and Kolahala, initially suggesting that she is just not good enough for him. Yet, as her response unfolds, it is clear that she means the opposite (one of many reversals in the text)—he is not good enough for her. She first highlights her unstable and base nature as set against Kolahala's solidity and grandeur, but then goes on to describe herself as an ascetic, the epitome of steady self-control. Conversely, although she initially describes Kolahala as a lofty, dignified, and stable mountain, it is clear that what she sees in him is uncontrollable desire, and that she wants nothing to do with it.

In her responses, Shuktimati delineates this match as something that goes against her nature and against Nature in general, as implied in her question to Kolahala whether a river can be made to flow up the hill and reach his infinite heights. It should come as no surprise then, that when Kolahala forces himself upon Shuktimati, he dams her flow and brings about a natural disaster in the form of terrible floods; following this, the citizens of the Chedi Kingdom are forced to beg Vasu for help. With one toe, he flicks Kolahala away from Shuktimati, restoring

her flow to its natural course. But at this point, she is already pregnant with Girika and her twin brother.

Here I would like to pause for a moment to focus on the *Mahabharata*'s version of this story. In the *Mahabharata*, both the rape of Shuktimati and the love story of Vasu and Girika are narrated in extreme brevity (in chapter 57 of Book One). There Shuktimati presents Vasu with her twins, a boy and a girl, by way of thanking him for freeing her from Kolahala. Vasu makes the son a general in his army and takes the daughter, Girika, as his wife. After the two wed, Vasu goes out to hunt. Thinking about Girika while away, Vasu is overcome with desire and ejaculates. He collects his semen on a leaf and asks a bird to carry it to Girika so that she can conceive through insemination. After a string of somewhat comic events, Vasu's seed ends up in a river, impregnating a fish (who is really a heavenly nymph under a curse) that gives birth to twins—one of whom (Satyavati) later gives birth to Vyasa, the author of the *Mahabharata* and the father of the main protagonists of the epic. Thus, in the *Mahabharata* this entire episode is presented as embedded in the epic heroes' genealogy. Shuktimati's rape explains Girika's birth, and Girika is simply a catalyst who is no longer relevant once her husband ejaculates while thinking of her.

Bhattumurti's *Vasu's Life* presents interesting changes that impact the core of the epic story. Recall that in *Vasu's Life*, the story of Kolahala and Shuktimati is not presented in sequence but rather as a flashback, within the context of Vasu and Girika's own love story. Specifically, we learn about the rape that led to the birth of Girika only *after* Vasu has seen and fallen in love with her, as he learns more about Girika's background. In South Asian narratives, information about one's parentage is often offered as a way of indicating the compatibility of a match (social background is key in determining mutual suitability). Girika's origin is anything but typical, and Bhattumurti does not mute or minimize the terrible story of rape behind her birth. Instead, he takes the time to develop it by elaborating on the victim's rejection, the offender's use of force, and the ways in which Kolahala is acting against nature. In Sanskrit, the birth of a child to a couple in which the mother is of a higher social standing than the father is called "against the grain" (*pratiloma*). Although in *Vasu's Life*, the (mis)match is not determined by social standing but rather by the natural order, the warning against transgressing social order is understood by extension: a match that violates this order has repercussions in the following generations. This narrative thus provides a productive explanatory framework for the later problems that children born into Shuktimati's line have with consummating their marriages, beginning with Girika herself. Thus, if in the *Mahabharata* Shuktimati was simply the mother of Girika, in *Vasu's Life*, her articulation of incompatibility reflects her strong singular voice and also explains the DNA of the lineage. Similarly, this same DNA prevents Girika from being a fully developed love interest in the *Mahabharata*, but in *Vasu's Life*, the story ends

with her marriage to Vasu in a way that allows the poet to avoid the entire spilled semen episode. Thus in *Vasu's Life*, Girika is cast as the heroine in her story against all odds.

With the full trajectory of Girika's story in mind, we can now turn to the second selection provided here—an earlier episode in *Vasu's Life* where Vasu gets his first direct glimpse of Girika. Bhattumurti describes Vasu's gaze as it sweeps from Girika's feet to the top of her head. This type of description is extremely common in South Asian literature and generally involves various conventions, such as the direction of the gaze (either bottom-up or top-down), the body parts that can be described (feet, thighs, breasts, face, etc.), and the standards of comparison to which each body part is compared (breasts to geese or mountains; face to the moon, and so on). Such descriptions indicate the heroine's extreme physical beauty but are often utilized for other purposes as well. In the second selection, Bhattumurti uses this depiction to weave in echoes of Girika's past (which has not yet been narrated) and future (which is beyond the narrative of *Vasu's Life*).

For example, consider the first two verses in the second passage that provide the framework for Vasu's gaze. The first (2.62) describes a flood that begins with the king's eyes and takes him over completely. Bhattumurti describes Vasu as one whose "body was flooded" and who was "drowning in dense wonder, an ocean of driving passion." Furthermore, in an epithet not translated here, Bhattumurti refers to Vasu as the "person who defeated the mountain" (Kolahala). The combination of water imagery, flooding, desire, and Kolahala foreshadows Shuktimati's story (as a river whose flow was tampered with as a result of Kolahala's lust), as well as Vasu's future (as a man whose desire resulted in spilled seed and the impregnation of a fish). In the second of the two framing verses (2.63), Bhattumurti describes Vasu as someone who "wanted to be king of the unblinking gods"—a playful way to suggest the notion of a thirst that cannot be satiated (in South Asian literature, gods never blink). He uses the term "unblinking" more than once within the same verse—a clear indication that Vasu's wish to gaze uninterrupted at Girika is paradoxically interrupted by the torrent of his rushing desire. Now, Vasu doesn't just want to be unblinking like a god; in order to drink up more of Girika's beauty, he wants to be the king of the unblinking (gods), Indra, who has "a thousand eyes." This is a seemingly odd request, given that Indra's thousand eyes were a punishment and a reminder of his inability to control his own desire toward Ahalya, another man's wife (he was initially punished by having one thousand vaginas attached to his body, and only later were these replaced by eyes).

The poet concludes that kings are "unstable" and "always striving for a higher station," even though it is quite clear that when it comes to the domain of desire, being like Indra is perhaps not quite a step up. Indra aside, both of the verses that set up the description of Girika reflect a tension between the dynamic and the static, thereby echoing the clash of the river and the mountain, and are powered by the disfiguring force of desire.

We then witness the physical, mental, and poetic manifestations of desire, as Vasu runs his gaze three full times from Girika's feet to her head. Each time, the quality of his desire changes. First (2.64–66) is a gaze stripped of all embellishments—all the components that make a woman beautiful are there, but his desire prevents Vasu from seeing anything beyond the body parts. Reflected by the vocabulary of military conquest (climbing up mountain bastions, grasping ladders, delighting in battle, etc.), this first gaze not only highlights the physical struggle that such a desire-fueled conquest entails, but also its thrills and joys. The second sweep of the eyes (2.67), “that royal glance,” is more refined and involves poetic comparisons between Girika's body parts and various standards of comparison, such as flower buds and the conch. All of the elements in this verse are conventional and found in almost any poetic description of women in South Asian literature. Note, however, that here Vasu's gaze activates these conventions, not the poet. Indeed, the poetic conventions are framed as something revealed, discovered, and transformed by his desire-filled gaze. Between the second and last sweep, Vasu internalizes everything; his desire no longer depends on a gaze, an object, or even on language, which paves the way for one last sweep—a metapoetic contemplation on his love interest, Girika, speech, and the relationship between the two. Bhattumurti's exploration of the mechanics of desire and its unintended results is interesting in its own right but is also an indirect reference to (and even an explanation of) Vasu's spilled seed incident—the water imagery and the fact that his desire is internalized and no longer depends on her physical presence allude to this story, untold in *Vasu's Life*. Although base desire was transformed into something internal, elevated, and refined, its problematic nature remains.

Modern scholars have read *Vasu's Life* as a conventional, archetypal, and even stereotypical love story. However, even from this brief discussion, the limited nature of such readings is clear. Nature and culture are deeply intertwined (and not just in the poetic domains of South Asia), and Kolahala's attack marks the falling apart of the order upon which both rest. Girika's birth, the outcome of this attack, thus marks the end of the familiar and the beginning of the unknown, and Bhattumurti's tale can be seen as an attempt to connect the two in a meaningful way. Indeed, even though Girika and her story stem from an act against nature, Bhattumurti does not try to intervene or change the flow of the story, highlighting instead both its productive and destructive potentials. By subjugating Vasu and Girika's story to the conventions of a love story, Bhattumurti heightens its unnatural aspects. In doing so, he creates a story in which an individuality outside of order is key.

The theme of working with conventions is also suggested in the beginning of *Vasu's Life*, when Bhattumurti (through the words of his patron) tells the readers that invented stories are like “artificial diamonds” whereas old stories are like authentic gemstones in the rough; the former are of little value, but the latter, when “reworked by good poets with their irresistible imagination, are precious gems

perfectly cut” (1.19). Finding a balance between the old and new and between reality and imagination is what poets during Bhattumurti’s time were seeking—each in radically different ways. For Bhattumurti, the key is located within certain conventions that provide both the raw materials and the tools of the trade; through inspired craftsmanship, conventions then can be meaningfully broken in a way that creates space for the old and the new, for love that brings about pain, and for desire that is both productive and destructive.

DESIRE, PERCEPTION, AND THE POETRY OF DESIRE:
A READING OF VASU’S LIFE

Deven M. Patel (Far Reader)

In the introduction to these short excerpts from Bhattumurti’s *Vasu’s Life* (Vasucaritramu), we learn that the story of the mountain, the river, the king, and the daughter of mountain and river comes to us from the immensely long, complicated, and shockingly violent Sanskrit (and Telugu) epic poem *Mahabharata*. The fifteen verses given in this selection undoubtedly intersect with the broader systems of significance in that epic and in Bhattumurti’s shorter court epic. These stanzas may also form, however, a system in their own right, especially if we take parts 1 and 2 as homologous to each other, as allied variants of the same meaning-structure, and even as contrasting poles of that same structure.

Upon first reading and, in fact, upon subsequent readings as well, the selected stanzas are scant on narrative action. An amorous mountain sees a diffident river, falls in love, and announces his desire. The river politely declines the mountain’s proposal, arguing that they would not make a good couple—he is, after all, lofty and stable, the river says, while she is lowly and erratic. The mountain seems to agree with this analysis but verbally persists in his pursuit, before the six conversational verses of part 1 trail off into the nine verses of part 2. In the first seven of these verses, a narrator describes how the desire-filled King Vasu’s glance—imagined as a conquistador scaling a mountain—travels (twice) up the body of an ethereal woman named Girika. The eighth and ninth verse of part 2 paint a startling portrait of Girika not as the otherworldly object of desire, but as the enigmatic standard against which all metaphorical statements about Nature are measured.

Love at First Sight. Part 1, “A Conversation between Kolahala Mountain and Shuktimati River,” begins with a familiar type of anthropomorphism. The “clamorous” (Kolahala) mountain seeks to romance a shiny, silvery river (Shuktimati) unluckily caught in the crosshairs of his glance during a pious moment (“I saw you when you were leaving / after bowing to the god”). He follows with a string of double-meaning pearls meant to flatter all rivers—and Shuktimati, in particular—praising her physique and flavor alongside her moral clarity and aesthetic sophistication. He specially notes her “limpid way of being” (transparency?),

her “good taste” (or that she tastes good?), and her “depth” (thoughtfulness?). The mountain candidly admires all rivers for their “flowing fullness” (down mountain slopes?) and their inscrutable capacity to “contain” mountains (by forming gorges?). This is all prelude to a gallant declaration, anchored by two “only you”:

Since that moment, in my mind I can imagine only you.
 . . . for only you can quench the fire inside me. (2.128)

Then comes a proposal, with an outpouring of metaphor (“I want to give my life to you, like water gushing down a mountain . . . you whose breasts are round / as the ruddy geese on your waves”) punctuated with a desperate promise (2.129): “I’ll never leave you, and I’ll learn how / to make you happy.” Finally, the rhetorical nod toward submission and fidelity comes with a clinching request rendered in a cold imperative mood: “Please agree. . . . Do away with my sorrow, make me / a river’s husband and lord.” In between the moments of clarity in this lover’s discourse, which began with “What more can I say?” there is cryptic hyperbole (2.129): “Bring me into your innermost heart, where goodness / and love are alive.” He just saw her—how does he know about her innermost heart? How is goodness and love alive there? For that matter, how does he judge her “good taste” or her “depth”? He cannot, of course, and admits as much: “Since that moment, in my mind I can imagine / only you” (2.125). Can anything be more mysterious than a lover’s imagination?

A one-way mirror, as it were, divides mountain and river. The river sees the reality that faces her from the darker side. The mountain reflects himself, on the brightly lit side of the mirror. He *feels* reality without envisioning anything other than himself. The river, it is clear, feels his words like a coarse, craggy finger brushing against her moist cheek. She senses the subtle violence of the mountain’s language, disguised brightly as romantic gesture, and covertly tries to fight back with language, discerning the mountain’s true nature. However, what good does language do her? Language gives the illusion, often through praise of itself through itself, that it is powerful. Just as no amount of language in the *Mahabharata* averts the war, nor the violent impulses that prompt it, the river is helpless with her words. Her “It’s not you, it’s me” tack only buys her time. The mountain, in contrast, arms himself with words, like the god of love (Kamadeva) with his flowery arrows. In the end, the words hardly matter. Do the god of love’s arrows really matter? What are the god of love’s flowery arrows, after all, but flowery words? Upon further reflection, we anticipate what a dark conversation this will turn out to be, between mountain and river.

Love Is a Battlefield: Love Is Like Climbing a Mountain. In part 2, we do not have a conversation. It is doubtful if we even have a beloved. We only seem to have a lover and, that too, only the imagined voyeurism of a lover presented to us by a narrator in a frenzy of words and metaphors. Desire still dominates the semantic

structure established in part 1, and images of being “flooded” and “drowning” or “yearning” continue to signify a meaningful range of a lover’s feelings of surge and excess, suffocation, and hunger. What changes in part 2 is the lover’s vision and the discourse around it. Whereas the mountain’s perception of the river—buried in his own words—imply a stark optics of domination, Vasu seems robbed of his own perceptions. In compensation for this loss, however, the poet enriches his experience as a lover with a far more wide-ranging and textured sensorium.

Vasu’s experience is indeed rich (2.62). The sensory experience (“His two eyes were full of desire”; “his body was flooded”) allows him to discriminate, recognize, and appreciate. The mental experience (“his mind was full of desire in a very strange way”) intellectualizes, psychologizes, spiritualizes, and ultimately dematerializes. He has a memory-consciousness (“joyfully surrendering, with all his memories”) that allows him to recapture, recall, and perhaps access subconscious states (2.63). Above all, he has imagination (2.64–67) that can conceptualize, create, fabricate, and fantasize. Finally, he tastes transcendence (“an ocean of driving passion where all / was one, beyond word or mind”) that takes him to the supernatural and the sublime. Both lovers are aware of the inadequacy of language and, in the case of Vasu, even the inadequacy of thought when it comes to being in love.

The mountain places faith in the efficacy and immediacy of straightforward linguistic communicability, even when he seems to articulate an inadequacy of language. When the mountain says, “What more can I say?” he is content that he has made himself clear and, therefore, present in the situation. The account of Vasu’s experience, set in a past time, represents the memory and imagination of a feeling already experienced. The very act of representing these feelings suggests, however, that the voice describing Vasu’s inner movements cannot withdraw into silence in the face of emotional or imaginative ineffability and must struggle, through every linguistic means available, to confront the impenetrability of the experience. Vasu may be aware of the limitations of ordinary (physical) love, unlike the mountain, but why does he not see the correlative to this proposition: the limitations of *describing* ordinary love? What drives the narrator to verbalize, in Vasu’s name, what he knows to be beyond words? Is it an escape into the poetic and the imaginative? We are to assume (from the third-person narration and preterite verbal constructions) that Vasu, the human king, makes no pretense of believing in ordinary communication. He, therefore, takes refuge in a hyperlinguistic communication of feeling through the marshalling of tropes and allusions that do not even seem to map onto his actual reality but emerge rather from an inherited canon of experiences not entirely his own.

With his plain speech and earnest inability to read the signs, the mountain exhibits the appealing confidence of both a childish and mature lover. As a childish lover, he is pathetic in his naïvete and, as an adult, admirable in his persistence. Kolahala recognizes Shuktimati as a unique lover, to match the specific requirements of his desire, and believes her to be the “only” one who can

“quench the fire inside.” In doing so, he humanizes both himself and Shuktimati the river.

Vasu, by contrast, seems helplessly confused by the upward forces that compel him to climb the mountain of Love while coming to grips with the friction his glance causes as it rubs up against Girika’s magical body:

He was king all right, even the best of them all,
 but he was drowning in dense wonder,
 an ocean of driving passion where all
 was one, beyond word or mind.
 He praised her beauty deep in his heart
 that now depended on no
 other object. (2.68)

In a startling reversal of anthropomorphism, Vasu’s voyeuristic impulses, sharpened to extraordinary clarity, root out, in effect, whatever humanity Girika had acquired and returns her to her wild nature:

Once more, that royal glance:
 it turned her feet into fresh buds,
 revealed her thighs, like the stem of the banana plant,
 as the site of all happy beginnings . . . (2.67)

In not being able to comprehend her, he seeks instead to survey her, as a conqueror would an alien landscape:

First lingering at her feet,
 then rising to her thighs,
 then reaching the zone of her belt,
 his glance longed to climb up to the mountain bastion
 of her breasts—which would have made him emperor
 of the whole world. (2.64)

And again: “. . . the king’s vision fulfilled / a soldier’s mission. Is there anything that can’t be achieved / by one who delights in battle?” (2.65)

Though the “king’s vision fulfilled a soldier’s mission,” there is no need for Vasu to act out any desire and the need for a lover’s language—so central to Kolahala’s mission—is altogether absent in part 2, as metaphors stand in for release into an objective domain of literary signs that exclusively operate external to Vasu. Vasu, as subject, has lost agency. Explicitly or implicitly, the second-person pronoun “you” is invoked by Kolahala in his address to Shuktimati some twenty-five times. That she is his object of affection/possession is not in doubt. With the absence of the “you” and, perforce, the “I,” with Vasu’s ascent to Oneness (“her beauty deep in his heart / that now depended on no / other object”), all trace of human love has dissolved into impersonal, fragmentary memories of personhood: body parts and their flimsy associations (2.68). Vasu himself has encased himself in solitude,

and his experience of the beloved Girika is locked up in his heart with the debris of all other lived experiences.

More alarming is Girika's fate. Whereas her mother, even as an object of desire, maintained a tenuous subjectivity, Girika's identity completely vanishes. Kolahala's fantasy—of Shuktimati's potential to transform his life for the better—constructs his desire. Hyperbole in praising the river merely underscores his objectification of her. Vasu does not seem to seek fulfillment in the Other but instead chooses to assimilate the Other into himself. He does this through transforming himself, a human, into his beloved, Nature's child, to achieve his "mission." Though conveyed in third-person narration, we are to understand that Vasu has obliterated the subjectivity of his object of affection/possession, rendered it as either nothingness or as something that is neither cognizable nor uncognizable. Having done this, he has achieved harmony, unanimity, wholeness, and peace, but at what cost? In what sense has he truly attained union with Girika?

Love Is Love Poetry. The final two verses of part 2—drawing on the extraordinary powers of language to collapse dualities into unities—completes the re-absorption of Girika to her preanthropomorphic state, among the mountains and rivers. These verses also suggest that perhaps whatever it is that Vasu and Kolahala experience (love?) exists in its mimetic representation or in the poetic language that redirects or threatens that representation. In other words, perhaps love exists because love poetry exists. The homology would be with Girika and the natural world (2.69). Her dark curls (*bhramaraka*) name the bees. Her moon face—rival to the lotus in beauty—"justifies" being called, simply, moon and, by extension, a "friend of the stars" (*san-mitruḍu*). The metapoetic transformation of reality—of bees, the moon, mountains—into a *literary* reality, through rhetorical techniques such as double-meaning constructions (*śleṣa*), also mirrors Vasu's ultimate triumph of union with Girika, a singular being where stability and instability harmonize.

Perplexed by the chasm that separates realities and the powers of language to describe them, the reader finds himself in the position of darkness. First, there is confusion. How is it that the girl's face defeats darkness' enemy—the moon—but that the girl's face, in another semantic system, is itself the moon? Does her face defeat itself? Is it that she is both a rival of the moon, in the first place, and then, once defeating it, her face becomes the moon? This is the kind of circularity typical of the literary sign, changing meanings or disappearing altogether as it shifts from one semantic field to the other. Finding ourselves on such uneven ground, what recourse do we have but to seek refuge in the literary imagination, just as the darkness takes refuge in Girika's "full black hair" (1.70)?