



## Use of Myth in Shakuntala by Kalidasa

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**Abstract:** *Indian English literature refers to the body of work by writers in India, who writes in the English language and whose native or co-native language could be one of the numerous languages of India. Indian writing in English is frequently referred as Indo-Anglian literature. Indian English literature is highly rich with the greatness of historical and religious background of India. The present paper is an attempt to analyze the representation of Shakuntala in Abhijnana Shakuntalam by Kalidasa.*

*In Shakuntala, Kalidasa used myth as a major tool to enrich the traditional history of India. India is known for its mythical background of religious belief. Here Kalidasa has described about the mythical character Shakunthala, who falls in love with the mythical king called Dushyanta, who is considered as the ruler of Puru dynasty. Even their birth, love, marriage, separation and reunion have mythical elements within it. As a result Kalidasa has brought out a great mythical love story which depicts the historical and religious values of India. The present research paper tries to focus on the revival of Hinduism and how, it was executed in the extraordinary play like Shakuntala. How the philosophy of Hinduism propagated via the Sanskrit drama and how it becomes the philosophy of all India for interminable time. These are the issues under the investigation that endeavor to remarkably inspect in the present paper.*

*Shakuntala is one of the most acclaimed women characters of Indian Literature. For the first time Shakuntala's character originated in The Mahabharata. Since then she has been represented in various texts in various languages of India. In Kalidasa's Abhijnana Shakuntalam, Shakuntala is the real daughter of Sage Vishvamitra and nymph Menka. However, she is adopted and brought up by Sage Kanva and his wife Gautmi. She is a rustic girl, brought up in a hermitage. With the progress of the play, she is married to King Dushyanta who forgets her because of a curse. Later, she was adopted by sage Kashyapa and his wife Aditi. She gives birth to a brave child Bharat and finally reunites with her husband.*

**Key Words:** *Revisionist Mythmaking, Mythology, Patriarchy, Cultural Hegemony, Oppression, and Cultural Disintegration.*

Indian Writings are enriched with stories and themes drawn from Vedas, Upanishada, Purana, Geeta, Ramayana, Mahabharata and Buddhist Scriptures. The concept of Hindu culture is founded by many myths and folklores such as Vedic Shloka, Epics, Purana and Regional tales. In Hinduism there are several sets of ideas to define its rules and regulations, belief system, traditions, customs and sacraments etc. Myths and legends are an integral part of human existence. They have been around us all the time. Though their validity is susceptible, nobody seems to mind as they stand as a proof of the human belief in divine powers. Indian mythology is vibrant and colourful and presents some of the world's best ever romantic legends. Sanskrit literature, especially, is a rich treasure trove of love tales that are sensuous and passionate and rouse the romantics in each of us. Epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata comprise several charming stories of love between mortals, kings and queens, Gods and Goddesses. The divine and undying emotion of love is further celebrated by great poets and writers of ancient India.

Feminist Revisionist Mythology is a contemporary genre that lays emphasis to subvert and transcend the focus of feminist literature. It engages mythology, fairy tales, religion, culture and recreate old fact to new ones. The novelist uses multiple methods to revisit mythology. It includes retelling the tale entirely from the perspective of female character, or recreating the story in a way that attempts to break down the treatment of women according to their times.



The Indian stories share many of the more general meanings — of love, marriage and betrayal — that are found throughout the corpus in the Indo-European world, but they have a particular inflection of their own, growing out of ideas, unique to India, about the nature of women, the customs of marriage, the physical process of paternity and the distribution of wealth.

A story of gods, nymphs, ancient Indian mythology, spells and love, the romantic comedy *Shakuntala* by Kalidasa is a timeless classic. Similar plots are still being used in plays, TV shows and movies today, over two thousand years later; man falls in love with girl, something happens that doesn't allow them to be together, another event happens that allows them to be together with a happy ending. *Shakuntala* tells the story of the protagonist, King Dushyanta, falling for a young woman named Shakuntala. Their love brings us on a journey that makes us laugh, cry tears of mirth and sorrow, and even blows us away by some of the beautiful imagery/poetry.

In *Shakuntala*, Kalidasa used myth as a major tool to enrich the traditional history of India. India is known for its mythical background of religious belief. Here Kalidasa has described about the mythical character Shakuntala, who falls in love with the mythical king called Dushyanta, who is considered as the ruler of Puru dynasty. Even their birth, love, marriage, separation and reunion have mythical elements within it. As a result Kalidasa has brought out a great mythical love story which depicts the historical and religious values of India.

Kalidasa was a well-known figure in the Classical Indian History and intellectual being in the period of 15th AD century. He was the best jewel among the nine jewels of Gupta Empire. He has composed the play for the Gupta court that sets up new standard of the society. Goethe celebrated *Shakuntala* put on his head and dancing with overflow of joy and ecstasy. *Shakuntala* is unquestionably a sentimental romantic play. Apart from that, there are a couple of other huge subjects like heroism, nature, the idea of a perfect ruler. It is additionally certain that dharma and karma plays significantly. Another remarkable subject is that of extension of religious philosophy, so, it is hard to escape from the principle of Hinduism.

Another pervading note of Kalidasa's writing is his love of external nature. No doubt it is easier for a Hindu, with his almost instinctive belief in reincarnation, to feel that all life, from plant to god, is truly one; yet none, even among the Hindus, has expressed this feeling with such convincing beauty as has Kalidasa. It is hardly true to say that he personifies rivers and mountains and trees; to him they have a conscious individuality as truly and as certainly as animals or men or gods. Fully to appreciate Kalidasa's writings one must have spent some weeks at least among wild mountains and forests untouched by man; there the conviction grows that trees and flowers are indeed individuals, fully conscious of a personal life and happy in that life. The return to urban surroundings makes the vision fade; yet the memory remains, like a great love or a glimpse of mystic insight, as an intuitive conviction of a higher truth. Kalidasa created his *Shakuntala* at a time when the power of women — which was fairly robust in the Mahabharata; think of Draupadi! — had significantly waned. The perfect heroine would no longer be able to defend herself as the Mahabharata's *Shakuntala* was able to do, to chastise King Dushyanta and teach him a lesson in dharma. So Kalidasa had to give his heroine some help, in the form of the magic ring that first erased and then restored Dushyanta's memory of her.

Rings signify an enduring promise of love, but they also signify the identity of the lover. The idea of endurance is suggested by the material that the ring is made of, usually a form of metal. And the idea of sexual love is suggested by the relationship between the ring and the finger. Given as an emotional pledge of affection, rings often end up as vital legal evidence of marriage and paternity. The ring was the token of love given to *Shakuntala* by Dushyanta. The curse was given by Durvasa rishi to *Shakuntala* that she will not be recognized by her beloved, later on this curse was diluted and she was recognized by Dushyanta. Now this ring which was a token of love suddenly is transformed into an instrument through which Dushyanta forgets and then recognizes *Shakuntala* later on thus fulfilling the curse of Durvasa. In short we can say that the curse acts as an impediment to the action and the ring acts as the token of recognition to resolve the problem.

The book delves into two other characters that have either been forgotten or misunderstood in the popular cultural milieu. These two characters, Ahalya and Madhavi, have been introduced in this novel and debated about. "Besides making for a wonderful addition to the main plot, it brings out a healthy debate about the status of women in those days, and how popular cultures have led to incorrect notions about them or the fact that the true nature of the characters has not been discussed. It gives modern women an opportunity to analyse and give their take on it, which enhances *Shakuntala*'s story," adds Utkarsh, who has also added a few fictional characters but kept the story very close to the original.

It can be seen that all the eight types of Rasas are present in this play. 'Shringar Rasa' or love/erotic is more commonly apparent in the play. The carnal attraction of Dushyanta reflects the erotic form of love. 'Hasya Rasa' is presented through the character of Madhavya who is a court jester or through the characters of *Shakuntala*'s friends. 'Bhayanaka Rasa' is not present strongly like the others. In the court when *Shakuntala* and Dushyanta engage in an argument about their marriage, it creates an environment of horror and fear among the people present there. This can be related to the 'Bhayanaka Rasa', which means fear. 'Viram Rasa' is presented through the character of Dushyanta, who is



a brave king. He fights bravely with the demons, and represents valour or 'Veerta'. Advuta Rasa signifies Wonder. This Rasa is depicted through scenes like the cursing of Durvasa or when Dushyanta agrees to keep Shakuntala at the palace till the birth of the baby. 'Bibhistsa Rasa' is found in scenes like when Dushyanta refuses to accept Shakuntala as his wife and in return throws several immoral allegations. This builds up an emotional disgust among the readers. 'Karuna Rasa' is reflected through the act of Dushyanta's refusal to accept Shakuntala as his wife, which builds up sadness among the readers. 'Rudra Rasa' is expressed through Durvasa, who reflects anger. In this way, all the eight 'Rasas' are perfectly presented in the play.

One such legend is that of Shakuntala, the daughter of sage Vishwamitra and the beautiful Apsara, Menaka. This tale revolves round the love of Shakuntala and the mighty king, Dushyanta. By critically analyzing, it can be said that Abhijnana Shakuntalam is one of the finest plays of Indian Literature. Ironically, Shakuntala, the heroine of perhaps one of the best-known love stories in Hindu mythology, was not born from a place of love. The theme of love and romance is very well evident in the play. Not just love, but other types of emotions are reflected as well in this play. Different bonds like friendship, love, fatherly love, etc. are well established in this play.

The play also encapsulates a moment when the powerful woman of the epic makes way for a new ideal—an ideal that was embraced by Western audiences in Goethe's day, and which Indians too have accepted, forgetting the more remarkable woman who first appears in the epic, one who does not conform to notions of patriarchal correctness, but stands proud, instead, as a challenge to the world of men.

This book portrays the life of Shakuntala, a young spirited, imaginative and freedom loving women. She is a carefree and very ambitious, eager and restless to see the world. However, Shakuntala's childhood is dominated by the conventions and norms of a patriarchal society. Her mother is a typical upholder cultural hegemony. According to her mother, a women life is meant only to be happy with feminine roles. So she insisted Shakuntala to be an ideal girl with all feminine qualities such as, an obedient daughter a faithful wife and a loving mother. Commenting on what sets this book apart from what has been portrayed earlier, Utkarsh states:

This book compares Shakuntala to today's modern-day woman and wife. A woman who is independent, assertive, courageous and yet endowed with tenderness, the capability of great love and the ability to take risks as well as give of oneself unreservedly, and a wife who insisted on equality and respect from her man; who reminded her husband of his duty towards her; who told him what honour is and what an honourable man should do.

Kanchana Mahadevan writes, "the assertive woman of the epic". Unlike in the Mahabharat, she barely even talks to him directly—she is too innocent and sweet. Indeed, as a companion explains, she is "as delicate as a jasmine". She falls in love with the king, who is tempted by this "flower that no one has smelled". Either way, their mutual attraction results in a consummation, and in what might have been inspired by a Buddhist tale, the king departs after handing over to Shakuntala his ring. While she is lost in romantic dreams one day, a sage with a legendary temper appears. And not finding her up to the mark in his service, he issues a curse that her lover will forget her. Following entreaties by others, he subsequently allows a caveat that when the king sees the ring, he will remember Shakuntala. And so, in this version, matters are taken beyond human control to the realm of fate that serves, in essence, to absolve our male lead of his subsequent betrayal.

In Kalidasa's play, there are lots of references to the painterly quality of Shakuntala's beauty (Thapar, 1999). With her head resting on her hand, she looks like a painting. The friends put the ornaments on her the way they have seen it done in paintings. However, the apsara (celestial nymph) Sanumati recognizes the visceral quality of the painting, and can see why the king might delude himself that the real Shakuntala is sitting in front of him. It is clear that beauty, in order to be effectively represented, has to be both still life and visceral, to conjure the illusion of a physical presence.

Hearing the harsh words spoken by the King, Shakuntala fainted. When she awoke from her swoon, burning with righteous anger, she said:

O King, You thought that when you made your promise, there were no witnesses other than our two selves. You forget that Mitra and Varuna and other Gods are always witnesses to a promise. For some reason best known to them the Devas are not coming to my rescue. You ought to have been struck down with their wrath, when you spoke those harsh words and broke your promise. The Gods shall always punish the breaker of oaths. I will not stay one instant in this place where I have been insulted thus.

Kalidasa has made an extensive use of symbols and motifs. The narrative opens in the forest where Shakuntala dwells in the hermitage of sage Kanva. King Dushyanta arrives in the forest while on a hunting trip. He is greatly impressed with the natural environment and peaceful ambience of the hermitage. The description of the hermitage, its dwellers, the flora and the fauna is elaborated in detail by the poet. These descriptions are rich in sensuous images, metaphors and symbols that heighten the poetic and emotional impact of the story.



Kalidasa describes the power of the ascetics and this theme has been a recurring theme and a motif in Hindu mythology. Kalidasa has made use of motifs like the, ‘curse motif’ and ‘the signet ring motif’, along with the use of ‘memory and recollection,’ in the play. The curse motif is an important recurrent motif in Indian mythology, where the curse by an ascetic determines the fate of the individual. It also affects the course of action. The two motifs- the curse motif and the signet ring motif guide the course of the narrative in the Shakunta. After her Gandharva form of marriage with king Dushyanta, Shakuntala is totally lost in her dreams of love and companionship. When Dushyanta leaves for Hastinapur, he assures Shakuntala about her place in his household. He promises to send his men to take her to her real home with dignity. Meanwhile Shakuntala waits for the messengers.

Shakuntala waits and waits but no messenger appears at her door. She is pregnant and this worries her. One day, she stands on her threshold, lost in the sweet memories of her lover Dushyanta, sage Durvasa happens to pass by that route. He asks for alms but his words do not disturb her reverie. On seeing the indifference of Shakuntala towards an ascetic, the sage Durvasa is enraged and hurls a curse upon her that her lover would forget her. Shakuntala is so much engrossed in her thoughts that she does not know about this incident. Her companions Priyamvada and Anusuya are a witness to all this. They request the angry sage to make some amendment in the curse. The sage makes a provision that on seeing some ornament of Shakuntala, her husband will be able to recognize her.

The second important motif in the play is that of the signet ring (nam-mudra) which is given by Dushyanta to Shakuntala. A long time has passed yet no messenger comes from the royal court. Due to the effect of the curse, Dushyanta has forgotten everything about Shakuntala. Realizing that Shakuntala is pregnant, her foster father sage Kanva decides to send her to her husband’s house. He sends some of his disciples and ascetics as escorts with her to Hastinapur. When they reach the court in Hastinapur, Dushyanta is surprised to see a woman claiming to be his wife.

Dushyanta refuses to recognize Shakuntala because of the effect of the curse. Her companions Priyamvada and Anusuya ask Shakuntala to produce the signet ring given to her by the king himself. But the ring is missing and this complicates the matter. Her companions and ascetics leave her in the court and return to the hermitage. Shakuntala stands alone in the court with her head bowed down with humiliation. Kalidasa has presented this Repudiation Scene with unmatched artistic skill. Kalidasa's use of language is luminous with Sanskrit words and sounds, her invocation of trees and flowers, of birds and fruit, of starry constellations, of textiles and pieces of jewellery that Shakuntala wears as a young bride. She is so winsome in her need to be loved, so coy and cuddly in her desires, that she could be, perish the thought, a Banarasi Bridget Jones!

Shakuntala’s real mother Menaka, a celestial nymph (an Apsara) is agonized to see all this. She descends from heaven and takes Shakuntala with her. Everyone is amazed to see this incident. Dushyanta is amazed as well as shocked but couldn’t recall anything. One day, his soldiers bring a fisherman with the king’s ‘nam mudra’ in his hand. According to him, he had found this ring in the belly of a fish. Now on seeing his signet-ring, Dushyanta at once remembers Shakuntala and the effect of the curse is over. Dushyanta is filled with a sense of remorse and guilt for the ill-treatment with Shakuntala.

Now the reader or spectator learns that this ring had slipped off from her finger while washing her hands in the river. Again, chance plays its role in the play. The curse provides a turning point in the play and later the recovery of the lost ring leads to recognition. So these two motifs have been employed by the writer to bring about the desired poetic effect in the play. These motifs are also an integral part of the structure of the play.

Another important device used in the play in the use of ‘memory and recollection.’ Kalidasa has used a number of structural devices to enhance the emotional impact of the narrative. In Shakuntalam, memory and love are interlinked. In Shakunta, memory and forgetting have been employed to justify the action of the hero. The use of the curse motif and forgetting are a part of the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ on the part of the dramatist. This gives credibility to the story. The dramatist has to create a dramatic illusion to make his story convincing and real. Romila Thapar observes:

The ring causes a double disappearance: for Shakuntala the king disappears symbolically, for him she disappears literally. The ring also highlights the centrality of memory in the play where remembering becomes a device for





recalling emotion of union and of separation. It hints at two kinds of power: that of rishi and that of king. In the conflict between the two, the power of the rishi would seem greater...

In the novel 'Shakuntala: The Play of Memory', the writer Namita Gokhale has voiced the anguish and struggle of a woman for liberation. She says, of her novel 'Shakuntala', "I had not imagined that youngsters would like this novel so much. It shows that I am living in my own set of assumptions" (1). The celebrated Shakuntala created by Kalidas, however, is markedly different from the original template in the Mahabharat. In this earlier avatar, Shakuntala is a remarkably direct and confident figure. When Dushyanta, who has killed "thousands of deer" in the course of his royal hunt, arrives at her adoptive father's hermitage, he calls out, "Who is here?" Shakuntala appears and after welcoming him, asks how she may be of service. With the father away, Dushyanta notices her "beautiful hips", "lustrous appearance" and "charming smile". After she explains her half-celestial origins, the king is moved to declare, "Be my wife, buxom woman!" and suggests to this "girl of the lovely thighs" that they ought to marry right away, in the gandharva style where passion makes up for lack of ceremony. Shakuntala initially asks him to wait, but is eventually persuaded that this is indeed a legitimate form of marriage. But first she seeks a promise: Her son from this union must be the king's heir. "If it is to be thus, Duhsanta, you may lie with me." The ring and the curse are interesting additions by Kalidas.

Kalidas' immortal tale of love and betrayal to explore her ideas of how women have engaged in their own enslavement and liberation with the picaresque adventures of a tempestuous wild girl from the hills whom she has named Shakuntala.

True, there is a certain simplification in the duality of choices that she presents: brother-sister, tame Indian husband-wild Greek lover, the garden of her heroine's Himalayan childhood against the turmoil of medieval Varanasi, Hinduism versus Buddhism, good girl-erotically charged woman that can be wearying for being so predictable.

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