



A practical outlook towards Abhijana Shakuntalam by Kalidasa

Ramen Goswami, English department
Magadh University, Bodh Gaya

Abstract: The play Abhijnana Shakuntalam is written by one of the greatest poets of India, Kalidasa. This play is a beautiful tale of romance between King Dushyanta and Shakuntala. The title of the play, which is originally in Sanskrit actually means “The recognition of Shakuntala” in English. Abhijnanashakuntalam is the first Indian play to be translated into different western languages. Kalidasa had extracted the story of Shakuntala from the great epic Mahabharata and painted it even more widely in his play Abhijnana Shakuntalam. The two protagonists of the play are Dushyanta and Shakuntala. The king of Hastinapur, Dushyanta is a noble and kind ruler who is respected by everyone. Shakuntala is a beautiful maiden who is the daughter of Sage Vishwamitra and Apsara Menaka. Shakuntala has grown up in the hermitage of sage Kanva since she was disposed by her birth parents.

Keywords: love token, distressed, lamenting, apsara, bond of love.

Story of the play: Dushyanta visits the hermitage of Kanva after a day of hunting, where he first gets a glance of the beautiful Shakuntala. He gets attracted to her from the very first moment when his eyes meet her beauty. After Shakuntala’s consent, both get married in the Gandharva mode of wedding. However soon after their marriage, Dushyanta leaves for his kingdom with a promise to return and take Shakuntala back with him. Enchanted by love, Shakuntala keeps on thinking about her husband the entire time, which affects her surrounding. The angry Sage Durvasa visits the hermitage and begs for water at Shakuntala’s door. However, she is so lost in the thoughts of her husband, that she fails to attend to the sage. Feeling insulted Durvasa incurs a curse on Shakuntala, which completely erases the memory of Shakuntala from Dushyanta’s head. However, later he modifies the curse on the request of Anasuya and Priyamvada. He tells them that the lost memory can be revived if Shakuntala shows an ornament which is a token of their love. The token is actually a ring that Dushyanta had gifted to Shakuntala. After months of waiting for Dushyanta, Sage Kanva advises her to visit the court by herself. It is revealed that Shakuntala is heavily pregnant with Dushyanta’s child by then. However while on her way to the kingdom, Shakuntala loses her ring in a lake. In the court, Dushyanta refuses to accept Shakuntala as his wife, as he completely loses his memory about their marriage, under the influence of the curse. He even makes several disparaging remarks about her character, which infuriates her. She is then escorted by the Apsaras into heaven, leaving everyone surprised. Eventually, after months, the ring is found by a fisherman. Dushyanta revives his memory back about Shakuntala when he sees that ring and breaks down in guilt. He becomes lovesick and curses himself for the adversity that he had caused. Later, Dushyanta is reunited with his wife Shakuntala and their son Bharat in the hermitage of Marica. Dushyanta begs for the forgiveness of Shakuntala and asks her to return back with him. Shakuntala forgives him and they both move back to Hastinapur. By critically analyzing, it can be said that Abhijnana Shakuntalam is one of the finest plays of Indian Literature. 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.

Character of Shakuntala: The play Abhigyan Shakuntalam by Kalidasa is one of the best plays in ancient Sanskrit literature. The play is about a beautiful damsel Shakuntala who lives in the hermitage of the sage Kanva. She has been the daughter of sage Vishwamitra and 'Apsara' Menaka. In Abhijnana Sakuntalam, Kalidasa presents Shakuntala as an embodiment of beauty, feminine charm and womanhood. Kalidasa has presented her in the mould of the ideal heroine of Sanskrit literature as laid down in the texts of Sanskrit dramaturgy. Shakuntala has been presented as an ideal woman like Savitri, and Sita. In such a romantic design, the main aim of the dramatist is to evoke the Sringara Rasa. Shakuntala possesses ideal beauty and grace. Unlike other heroines such as Urvashi and Malvika, Shakuntala is a child of Nature. She has been brought up in the lap of Nature and is more close to earthly reality. Shakuntala is a unique creation of Kalidasa who transcends the erotic. Nature also plays an important role in her life.

King Dushyanta, the king of Hastinapur happens to be in the forest on hunting and enters the hermitage. He removes his royal regalia and encounters Shakuntala who is accompanied by her two companions. The king at once falls in love with her and she too cannot resist. The king requests her for the 'gandharva' form of marriage and she agrees on the condition that her son would be the king of Hastinapur.

The play focuses on the tension between desire and duty, 'Sringara rasa' and 'Vira rasa.' Dushyanta's chase of a deer can be interpreted symbolically as: the parallels between Shakuntala and the deer are frequent: they symbolize the serenity of the asrama, are innocent and given to tenderness, and are also physically close, for the deer the king is hunting is a fawn nurtured by Shakuntala. This seems to hunt at the predator being the king and Shakuntala being the prey.

After the 'gandharva' form of marriage, the king leaves the hermitage. He has promised Shakuntala to send his men to take her to the capital with due honour. All this happens in the absence of the sage Kanva who has been out. When Kanva comes to know about this, he approves of this marriage.

Shakuntala is simple, innocent and easily gullible. She has so far not faced such a situation where the outburst of passions can sway the person. She had not learned how to restrain herself, how to hide her feelings. Shakuntala had not known cupid before; hence her heart was bare of armour, and she could not distrust either the sentiment of love or the character of the lover. The character of Shakuntala has been the pivotal point around which the play revolves. She emerges as the embodiment of Indian womanhood who is ready to make sacrifice when society (Dushyanta) turns indifferent and hostile too. Fairy-tale elements are present in the poem as well as the play. The sacred pool of golden lotuses guarded by a Genius with specific instruments to follow, the failure to carry them out, the curse and consequent loss of love, status and superhuman powers are characterized of folk lore.

Shakuntala's kinship with Nature is evident from her name itself. After her birth, she was protected by 'Shakunta' birds (peacocks). Shakuntala establishes human relations with the object of Nature. When she departs from the hermitage, every object of Nature seems to be mourning. Shakuntala is a wonderful creation of Kalidasa.

When Shakuntala visits the king, she suffers. Her speech is long and impassioned, but rational. She is not whining or begging the king. She boldly tells Dushyanta of the future implications and results of his false action. She further, says, "if you will not follow my advice O Dushyanta, you will reap the results of your present actions a hundred times". Shakuntala's strength echoes in her words at the end of the story. Later when the king is left behind by Shakuntala he is filled with a feeling of remorse. Twice, he enters the sacred region, first the 'tapovan', hermitage of Kanva and later the hermitage of sage Kanva.

Before the king can enter this world he has to be purified. First he proves his worth by battling the forces of darkness and disorder that threaten the order of the universe. For this he has to be roused from the state of

utter despondency into which he had fallen, weighed down by an over whelming sense of guilt. He had become disoriented, nerveless and swooned away. It has rightly been said that words are keys to open doors for the imagination on its journey of exploration into the fictive world. Kalidasa has also employed the device of irony in the play to heighten the emotional impact of the situation. The use of curse motif and the ring justifies it. It provides an explanation to the recognition 'abhijyan' of Shakuntala. This recognition is for Dushyanta who knows the truth only after losing his wife.

When one compares the Shakuntala of the first Act with the Shakuntala of the seventh Act, it shows her passage from innocence of experience, from the abstract to the concrete, from hermitage to Hastinapur and from separation to reunion. In fact, Shakuntala's tale can also be studied in the light of Campbellion stages of initiation, separation and return. In Act V, the repudiation of Shakuntala in the court of Dushyanta arouses the 'karuna-rasa' (pity) when she is literally deserted by her lover and husband who himself sits on the throne of Dharma. Here the motif of curse makes the story psychologically convincing. After their separation, the two lovers undergo a long 'tapasya' and their reunion takes place in the hermitage of sage Marica. Dushyanta's filial love finds a forceful expression when he sees a young boy (Bharat) playing with a lion. The king greets the boy amazed by his boldness and strength.

The last Act shows Shakuntala as one doing rigorous penance that shows her as a matron and as an embodiment of motherhood. Modern readings of the play Shakuntalam have studied the character of Shakuntala from different perspectives like feminism, colonial point of view, moralistic reading, the play as an allegory, Shakuntala as an image of the middle class and the burden of tradition upon a woman in Indian society. The strength of Shankuntala in the play lies in her deep and powerful emotions which feed her strength of mind.

Irony in the play: Kalidasa being a phenomenal writer in Sanskrit literature extracts a simple story from the Mahabharata and gives it a new treatment by introducing the curse motif and the ring motif along with the structural device of irony. Irony has been employed as a powerful literary device to enhance and heighten the emotional impact of the narrative. Irony is the use of words that say the opposite of what one really means in order to make a point. It is used to achieve special rhetorical or poetic effects. Irony employed in Abhigyan Shakuntalam is of different types such as verbal irony, structural irony, sarcasm, dramatic irony, cosmic irony and romantic irony. Verbal irony is a statement in which the meaning that a speaker implies differs from the meaning that is expressed. The ironic statement involves the explicit expression of one attitude. There is an ironic reversal of the surface statement. In structural Irony, the author, instead of using an occasional verbal irony, introduces a structural feature that serves to sustain a duplex meaning.

Dramatic irony involves a situation in a narrative in which the reader shares with the author knowledge of present or future of which a character is ignorant, cosmic irony or irony of fate involves a deity or late that manipulates events so as to lead the protagonist to false hopes. In romantic irony, the author builds up the illusion of representing reality, only to shatter it by revealing that the author is the creator of his characters. This type of irony involves a self conscious narrator in the main plot that brings the revelation.

This token of love is the ring itself which is lost and later found by a fisherman. It is ironical that king's lady-love is before his eyes yet he asks for some proof. Again, he has loved Shakuntala, the child of nature, carnally and it takes a long time for him to recognize her intrinsic beauty and feminine grace. He has to pay a heavy price for this and loses his wife and son. This initiates him on a journey to discover the meaning of beauty and love. Kalidasa lets the established ideals of society to be examined through the use of ironies. When he meets his own son in the hermitage of Marica who plays with a lion cub, Dushyanta describes the boy as 'the young of a black serpent that spoils/for other creatures the pleasant sanctuary that is the fragrant sandal tree.' In Act I and Act VII, one finds graphic descriptions of the 'tapovan', the hermitages of Kanva and Marica. Here, one finds good-humoured irony at play. The 'rishis', seers and other ascetics have been presented as

given to anger and anxiety. Through the undisciplined behaviour of Durvasa, the ideal of asceticism is questioned. Chandra Rajan observes that ascetic claims are subjected to ironic scrutiny in Act V.

A number of disciples of Kanva are given to anger and also suffer from complexes. Sarngarava can be easily provoked and he lacks self-discipline. Other disciple of Kanva is Saradvata who is observed with the idea of cleanliness. Sage Durvasa is the main example of this type of behaviour. Kalidasa also makes use of the device of foreshadowing in the main plot. King Dushyanta refuses to recognize Shakuntala and she is stripped of dignity.

“Such isolation is of the essence of a tragic situation in life. The play is poised on the edge of tragedy from which it must now be retrieved.”

It is not Shakuntala who proves her innocence but a fisherman who by chance produces the signet ring of the king. A great sage like Kanva fails to press upon the king to accept the reality and he leaves it to her destiny. The trial scene presents Shakuntala as an isolated being, abandoned by society. Now she faces the existential limit and look up towards heavens. Suddenly the Apsara Menaka appears and vanishes after taking Shakuntala away. In this regards, the remarks of Chandra Rajan on the tragic tone of the play need attention:

“The reconciliation and reunion of Sakuntala and Dushyanta takes place in another world, the golden world of the primal pair. The resolution of the plot is effected in this mythical world; therefore, one way of reading the play is to see it as having a fictive ending. By introducing the device of a deus et machina, the situation is saved, temporarily; the tragedy is averted, but the tragic tone remains.”

In Sanskrit literature, one does not find pure tragedies like the Greek tragedies but plays with tragic tone.

Theme of love: It is a beautiful tale of love and romance written by one of the greatest poets of India, Kalidasa, one of the greatest Sanskrit poet that India ever had and his life history is absolutely fascinating and interesting. Perhaps the most famous and beautiful work of his is Shakuntalam. This is a love drama and we can feel love showering throughout the play. Their love brings us on a journey that makes us laugh, cry tears of happiness and sorrow, and even blows us away by their love. This story basically focuses on the theme of love. It centralizes on the thought that ‘We are born alone, we live alone, we die alone. Only through our love and friendship can we create the illusion for the moment that we are not alone.’ It defines love very well as we can feel a very different kind of sensation in almost every aspect of this play. According to me love can not only in between a girl and a boy who are planning to get married, infact love is everywhere. It can be between us and god or between us and our parents. Similarly even in this play when sage kanava spotted the new born child, surrounded by shakuntala birds then taken by kindness, he decides to take the child home and name her shakuntala. This shows how love does not bothers about blood relation or anything and can make someone adopt a child out of love.

Even when we move further in this play, we can see how Shakuntala grows up to be a beautiful young lady just like her mother Menaka. One day, King Dushyant, while returning from a deer hunt, happens to stop by the hermit’s cottage. There he saw Sakuntala engaged in a friendly banter with her friends. Shakuntala found her deer whimpering in pain and tried to comfort it. Shakuntala very much loved the animals of the forest and her attachment for the animal touched Dushyanta’s heart and he asked her to forgive him for his cruel behaviour. She forgave him and he asked to stay in the forest for a few days to tend the wounded deer. They fell in love and they decided to marry.

Their love was so deep that for instance at the beautiful surrounding, the inner joy of Dushyanta and of the beauty of shakuntala triggers the feeling of love in him. Though standing behind the bushes he too is unable to control himself from adoring and appreciating Shakuntala’s magical youth. On the proposal of marriage Shakuntala asked the king to wait for the sage kanava to return, but the strong love between them did not let them wait as both of them were willing to marry this is when in the absence of the sage, they secretly married in the ceremony of “Gandharva Vivaha” with Mother Nature as the witness.

After some days, the King got news of unrest in his city and is summoned to return. He leaves sadly, but promises to return soon and take his beloved with him. As a token of love, he gives her a signet ring and promises to send an envoy to escort her to the palace. But then the king did not keep his promise and from here begins the waiting period of Shakuntala which is the actual test of her true love. Shakuntala waits for Dushyanta's people to come and take her to his palace. But they do not come.

Every love story is not always a straight road which means that in every love story the lovers have to face many difficulties to get their love and become one. It is not always easy to achieve what you want and one needs to fight for his or her love. Same was in the case of Shakuntala. She was already suffering from so much pain of separation and waiting, but as said earlier it is not easy to get one's love, so here comes one more obstacle.

One day, sage Durvasa, famous for anger, stops by the hut for hospitality. Lost in her love thoughts, Sakuntala fails to acknowledge his presence. This rises the temperamental sage and he curses Shakuntala, that the one whom she is thinking about will forget her. Sakuntala begs for mercy and explains her situation. On the plea of Shakuntala and her friends, the sage agrees and says that if the king sees any significant thing that he gave her, he will remember everything.

Now we again are confronted with the love of sage Kanava towards Shakuntala. When he returned he knew by his spiritual insight that Shakuntala and Dushyanta were united by Gandharva vivaaha and his daughter was pregnant. The sage puts his seal approval on the marriage as divinely ordained and, in due course Shakuntala delivers a male child. After so many months of waiting, when she fails to hear anything from the king, Sage Kanava arranges for the visit of Sakuntala to the court of King Dushyant. On her way, she stops by a lake to drink water and unfortunately the ring slips out of her finger and suddenly a fish swallows it. She reaches the royal palace, but Dushyant did not recognize her because of the curse given to her earlier. She then remembers the ring but realizes that she has lost it somewhere. With disappointment, she returns back to the forest.

Important incidents in act 4 and 5:

Act IV of "Shakunthalam" contains the most touching scenes in the play. The act brings home the truth that separation is always melancholic. Accompanied by Gautami, Shargavara and Shardvata, Shakunthala is being sent by Tata Kanva to Dushyantha's

Palace at Hastinapura. She is bidding farewell to the plants, trees, birds and animals and to her hand maids at the ashram, Anasooya and Priyamvada whom she has so far treated as her own sisters and with whom she has lived without being separated even for

A single moment in her life. Even sage Kanva is so overcome with emotion that his voice staggers. He is seen behaving as if he were a Grihasthasrami (Head of House Hold). It is in this act that Kalidasa has endowed the young one of the stag Deegapanga and the

Wild Jasmine plant, Vana Josna with sensations and emotions of human beings. The act begins with a conversation between Anasooya and Priyamvada. They are talking about Dushyantha Maharaja who has courted Shakunthala as per Gandharva mode of vivaha. They are anxious that nothing is heard about the king who has gone to his palace to take care of the affairs in the capital after the Yaga having been performed.

In the meanwhile, it appears that a guest has arrived at the hermitage. The maids console themselves at the thought that Shakunthala will be at the hermitage to welcome the guest. By this time, the guest burns with rage and goes away showering words of curse upon Shakunthala "Thou hath failed to see me on account of thy fantasies. So let him, whom thou hath been thinking of, forget thee." The handmaids realize with a shock that Shakunthala is unaware of Durvasa's arrival as she has been lost in day dreams. Anasuya requests Priyamvada to follow Durvasa and to entreat him to pardon Sakunthala.

On seeing Anasooya's humility, Durvasa sympathizes a little. He allows a concession that the curse will be lifted on showing the signet ring that Dushyanta had given her as a token and that he will be released of his

forgetfulness. It is only out of sheer luck that such a concession is granted by Durvasav who is adamant and hot tempered by nature.

After all, Anasooya and Priyamvada make up their mind not to let Sakunthla know anything about the curse and the means for lifting the same. Their decision has a great dramatic significance. Sage Kanva who has returned from the forest comes to know of Sakunthala's Gandharva Vivaaha with Dushyanta with the help of his divine vision. He makes arrangements for Shakunthala to be sent to the palace of Dushyantha, along with the inmates of the hermitage. While Anasooya and Priyamvada brings in garlands made of elanji flowers, and mixtures of sandal and kunkumas for Shankuthala to be adorned with, the young disciples of Kanva brings in silken clothes and ornaments given by the forest nymphs with words of blessings. The pieces of advice and words of consolation that Kanva gives Sankunthala when she turns to prostrate before him is a real blessing. The permission that the flora and fauna of the hermitage grant Sankuthala to take leave is echoed in the songs of shama birds. When she tries to set out, the tip of her garment is stuck on something. When she turns and looks back she finds that it was the fawn (the young one of the stag) called Deergapanga. When Sankunthala is gone, the dejected Kanva returns to the hermitage accompanied by Anasooya and Priyamvada. He feels relieved as though a great debt had being paid off.

Maharshi Durvasav's curse.

We hear the intense curse showered upon Shakuntala by Sage Durvasa who is burning with rage on account of the fact that she failed to greet him as she is lost in fantasies. Shakuntala who has courted Dushyantha as per the Gandharva mode of vivaha remains lost in thought the very moment when the angry-prone Durvasav pays a visit to Kanvaasram. Durvasav showers a curse on Shakuntala by bewitching Dushyanta in to forgetting her. The curse runs as follows. 'Let him ,whom thou hath been thinking of, forgetful of everyone else and fails to see me who is a sage, be forgetful of thy existence even when he is reminded of, like a lunatic who is not able to recollect anything that has happened before'. [It is because Shakuntala has been lost in thoughts about Dushyantha that she failed to see sage Durvasa, when he visits the hermitage. The sage becomes so angry that he curses her that Dushyanta will forget her, even when he is reminded of her.His forgetfulness will be that of a mad man who cannot recollect anything that has happened in his life before he runs mad]

The picture of the morning as painted by the disciple of Kanva.

The disciple of Kanva gives a beautiful description of the setting of the moon and the rising of the sun simultaneously and the moral conveyed by the sight. On the one side, the moon is seen sinking and on the other side the sun, being driven in chariot by his chariot driver Aruna, is being manifested on its own. Does the rise and fall of the two jyotis i.e. the sun and moon, at the same time tell the word of the universal law that change of fortune (i.e. change from one dasha to another) is indispensable? With the setting of the moon, the night flower pleases no more. The ruddy morning impurples the dew drops on the branches of Vadari. The peacock, shaking off sleep, hastens from the cottages of hermits. The antelope, springing hastily from the place of sacrifice, raises himself on high, and stretches his graceful limbs. The moon has fallen from the sky with diminished beams. It seems to the disciple that the moon and the sun the two great men of this world ascend with extreme labour to the summit of ambition only to descend from it easily and quickly.

Melancholy of Kanva at the thought of separation from his daughter

The intense sorrow that engulfs Kanva on account of the thought of separation from his daughter Shakuntala is dealt vividly in Act IV of 'Shakunthalam'. He is anxious on account of the thought of separation from his daughter. His eyes are filled with tears, and the throat stammers. His sight is paralysed with thoughts. He asks, "If the condition of a tapasi like me is this, what would be the condition of a father who leads the life of a grihasthasrami, on thinking of separation from the daughter for the first occasion.

The advice Maharishi Kanva gives to Shakuntala before her departure to Hastinapura.

When Shakuntala prostrates in front of Kanva, he blesses her with his advice and words of consolation. He says “Let you be worthy of being adorned by your husband as Sharmishta by Yayathi [as per the legend ,the real wife (i.e. patta maharshi) of king Yayathi is Devayani, however,his son born of Sarmishta is proclaimed as the Yuvraj even though Yayathi is married to Sharmishta only through the Gandharva mode. The implication is that Sakuntala’s son also, in due course, would become Yuvraj.] Kanva advises Sakuntala as to the duties she has to perform and the norms she has to observe on reaching her husband’s home. “Look after the parents of your

Husband. Treat your co-wives as if they were your own friends with love and respect and faith. Even when your beloved is displeased, do not be displeased. Be sympathetic to the servants. Never be proud of your luck. It is thus that the young wife becomes a real

House wife who is able to look after the affairs of the household in a better way. Those who behave in contradiction to the norms are sure to bring about destruction to the kula”

Personification of the flora and fauna in the hermitage.

Act IV of “Sakunthalam” contains the most touching scenes in the play. The act brings home the truth that separation is always melancholic. Accompanied by Gautami, Shargavara and Shardvata, Shakunthala is being sent by Tata Kanva to Dushyantha’s palace at Hastinapura. She is bidding farewell to the plants, trees, birds and animals and to her hand maids, Anasooya and Priyamvada whom she has so far treated as her own sisters and with whom she has lived without being separated even for a single moment in her life. Even sage Kanva is so overcome with emotion that his voice staggers. He is seen behaving as if he were a Grihasthasrami (Head of House Hold). It is in this act that Kalidasa has endowed the fawn(the young one of the stag) Deegapanga and the wild Jasmine plant, Vana Josna with sensations and emotions of human beings. Kanva requests the plants and trees of the Tapovans

To grant Sakuntala permission to take leave of. He says to them: “She who refuses to take any drink without you being watered and she who is hesitant to pluck tender buds and she who celebrates it a festivity, when you blossom for the first time that Sakuntala is leaving for her husband’s palace. Let everyone grant her permission to take leave of.”It seems to Sakuntala that something hinders the tip of her silken clothes when she is about to set out to Hasthinapura. She turns and looks back. Then Kanva tells her it is the young one of the stag named Deergapanga,whose mouth ,when injured with the dharbha grass, she smeared with a herbal oil and Cured the wound and whom you have fed with the chama rice asif it were your own most beloved young one.

References:

The Loom of Time- Chandar Rajan, penguin publishing: 2000

Abhijana Shakuntalam- Biren Saraswati, Bhagya press, publishing : 1990