

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF KALIDASA'S *ABHIJNANA SHAKUNTALAM*

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ABSTRACT

Kalidasa, aptly called as the "Shakespeare of India" was the greatest writer of the Gupta age. Writers have always derived inspiration from nature and have tried to represent nature in literature. Much of the beauty of Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* lies in its description of nature and the text can be read as one that reflects nature in its entirety. The text also remains one to be discussed and debated by the new environmental critics and those preaching sustainable development. This ancient text shows us not only the beauty of nature but also inculcates in us love and respect for nature.

Key Words: Nature, forest, eco criticism

When Kalidasa views the original Mahabharata story of Shakuntala through the prism of nature, it is transformed into a rainbow tinted story of love, separation and reunion. Nature intervenes in the lives of the characters at every stage in the play and love, separation and reunion are brought about by forces of nature. The paper attempts to see how Kalidasa's work can set a model for the world literature to return from a human centred system to a nature centred system and how Kalidasa can be considered as a romantic poet with romantic notions about nature with its beautiful, biologically diversified natural landscape.

Nature comes alive in the text and the spectator and the reader can never escape the ravishing beauty of the dense forest with wild bucks, mango trees, jasmine flowers, birds and brooks. The different seasons play a significant part in the play. The prologue praises summer as the season of love. The play begins in summer and ends in spring. Kalidasa describes the sensuous beauty of the forest and the seasons with meticulous care and takes the spectator directly into the enchanting beauty of the wilderness.

Kalidasa's subtle portrayal of the invasion of culture into nature through the picturesque description of an antelope with its "haunches folded into his chest" and the "open mouth dropping half chewed grass" on the path not only gives a visual image of the fast running, terrified animal but also a knowledge about the encroachment of king Dushyantha into the forest. The antelope stops at the side of Shakuntala only to get protection from Dushyantha. Though Dushyantha invades the forest as an outsider, he cannot be alienated from the story for it is he who protects the sacred grove from the attack of the demons. The fact that the deer requires thick vegetation for its sustenance gives us a picture of the dense forest. A look into sage Kanwa's ashram reveals the beauty and uniqueness of nature. Kalidasa describes the forest path to the ashram as a path strewn with "wild grain under the trees" where the "parrots nest in hollow trunks". The stones on the path are "stained by the dark oil of crushed *ingudi* nuts" and the deer that trust the human voices "do not break their gait". It is only the presence of Dushyanta who is a perfect stranger to the forest makes the deer run for its life. The paths

from ponds are "streaked by water from wet bark cloth". The nature is undisturbed and the fallen grains and nuts lie under the plants and trees untouched by humans and the deer does not stop in the midst of its movement at the presence of humans around it. The reader can only marvel at the unpolluted environment of the play.

Shakuntala is always referred to as a delicate jasmine flower spreading its fragrance around and is mostly seen tending the plants and feeding the animals in the forest. Jasmine plants grow best in summer and spring seasons. These flowers are used to tie garlands that adorn the images of deities and in sacrifices. The association of Shakuntala as the forest deity cannot go unnoticed here. It is Shakuntala who is entrusted with the charge of Kanwa's ashram in his absence. Thus Shakuntala with her constant association with nature and the grove becomes a deity herself to be worshipped in the sacred grove of Kanwa. Her ethereal beauty is enhanced by her proximity to nature. Her natural ornaments of flowers and leaves and her bark dress add more beauty to her. She blends beautifully with nature and is able to observe and respond to even the slightest movements in nature. The plants and trees beckon her with the movement of their branches. Kalidasa describes Shakuntala as a young woman whose "lips are fresh as buds". The fullness of Shakuntala's youth and beauty is in described in terms of beautiful flowers and plants. Her arms are like tendrils and youth blossoms in her limbs.

The marriage of the jasmine creeper and the mango tree is an indicator to the *gandharva vivaha* that is going to take place between Shakuntala and Dushyanta. Both nature and man abide by the laws of the forest. There are natural and divine mechanisms to check anything that disturbs the equilibrium of nature. It is only when man lives in harmony with nature that life becomes happy and peaceful. Boundaries between heaven and earth, nature and culture are blurred in the play to maintain this harmony. Viswamitra's terrible penance on the banks of river Gautami and the divine powers acquired thus aroused jealousy in the minds of the gods who immediately sent the nymph Menaka to break the penance. The most

intoxicatingly beautiful season of spring was chosen for the seduction. Shakuntala was born of this union. She was being taken care of by the *shakunta* birds when sage Kanwa spotted the baby girl. Thus Shakuntala was born in the lap of nature and she was given a name indicating her nurture by Kanwa, her foster father.

A wild bee brings Dushyanta to Shakuntala. The wild passion in the minds of the hero and the heroine takes the form and shape of wild elephants charging into the hermitage. The wild elephant that charges into the hermitage with its tusks garlanded with branches from a tree and its feet tangled in vines personifies the human passions. The love making of Dushyanta and Shakuntala is described beautifully in the images of a bee sipping nectar from a "fragile virgin blossom". It is appropriate to think that Shakuntala's union with Dushyanta is a holy act which will result in the birth of a ruler child. Dushyanta was already blessed by the hermits to be the father of a son who will turn the wheel of his empire. This prediction gets fulfilled when Dushyanta marries Shakuntala.

The love letter which Shakuntala scripts with her nail on the lotus leaf as "delicate as a parrot's breast" is hidden in the lotus flower. The panacea for Shakuntala's love sickness is found in nature. She is treated with lotus root fibres and leaves and she spends most of the time in the "bower of vines on the Malini river bank". Her old maid treats her body with 'kusa' grass and water. The 'kusa' grass is normally used in sacrifices and other religious ceremonies. Kalidasa is perhaps exploiting the basic tenets of Ayurveda which believes in the interrelationship between nature and human beings. Kusa grass is also a good fodder. We can now imagine the environment of the forest where the animals get plenty of grass to eat. Another frequently mentioned plant in the play is the mimosa. Mimosa or the touch - me - not is a sleepy plant that grows under the shade of trees and shrubs. The constant references to the mimosa plant give us a picture of the thick vegetation in the forest. We thus see a symbiotic relationship of the forest dwellers with all the endemic species of plants and animals of the forest.

The scene which narrates the preparations of pregnant Shakuntala to go to Dushyanta's palace is elaborated in great detail by Kalidasa. Shakuntala is smeared with special ointments of deer musk, sacred earth and *dharba* grass which are actually items used in sacrifices. Women were given great respect and this particular scene gives us an idea of how a pregnant woman was treated in the past. Pregnancy which is actually a sign of new birth is celebrated here. Nature bids adieu to Shakuntala when she goes to Dushyanta's palace. The trees produce the white silk cloth, another tree produces the resinous lac to redden her feet and the tree nymphs produce the jewels for her. Kanwa makes Shakuntala bid farewell to even the trees and plants in the forest. Kanwa's words inform us how Shakuntala used to tenderly take care of the plants and how she used to refuse to drink a drop of water before watering the plants, how she used to be overjoyed at the sight of blooming buds and how she used to be integrated into nature. The sylvan gods bless Shakuntala and the cuckoos sing farewell songs to her. Every element of nature responds to Shakuntala. The jasmine plant which Shakuntala had named 'The light of the forest' is her sister. She asks her sister jasmine plant to turn her tendrils to embrace her before she went to Dushyanta's palace and she feels 'orphaned' on leaving this sacred grove. Shakuntala's adopted son the buck whose mouth was wounded by a blade of Kusa grass was healed with oil applied by Shakuntala. The bond between women and nature is not rare in literature. Kalidasa has only foregrounded this relationship in the play.

Water is important for the sustenance of life. It is essential for sacrifices. Sarangarava, a messenger of the grove quotes the scriptures which state that the dear ones should be escorted only up to the water's edge. Water plays a significant role in the play. It is in the holy river that Shakuntala loses her signet ring given to her by king Dushyanta. Shakuntala's dip in the sacred river and coming into contact with the fertilising water is only meant to highlight the necessity of remaining in contact with nature. Nature is seen to empathise with human beings almost always in the play. The image of the wild goose that cries in anguish when her mate is

hidden by the lotus leaves is a symbol of Shakuntala who is going to be soon abandoned by Dushyanta. The foreboding of disaster strikes Shakuntala in the form of the twitching of her right eye. There is no better physical symptom than this to express the fear of this young woman. When Shakuntala presents herself in front of Dushyanta he forgets her totally because of Durvasa's curse. Shakuntala had already lost her ring in the holy river and she has nothing with her now to prove that she is Dushyanta's wife. It is a fisherman who later gets the lost ring. Water and fish are fertility symbols from times immemorial and Kalidasa has incorporated these images to make the situation truly dramatic. Thus nature plays a crucial role in various situations in the play.

The penitent Dushyanta comes back to the forest on remembering his marriage with Shakuntala after the recovery of the signet ring. When he reaches the forest he recollects a previous incident in which he chased a bee to rescue Shakuntala from its sting with the power and authority of the king. Dushyanta does not kill the bee instead he reprimands the bee mildly. He plans to punish the bee for its mischief by holding it a captive in a lotus flower cage. No amount of violence or harm is done to nature and the beauty of nature is captured in its fullness in the play.

Charms and miracles are part of the forest culture. Back in the grove, the king takes rest under an *ashoka* tree which is again a symbol of fertility and love. This tree also has the capacity to remove sorrow. While sitting under this tree he spots a smart little boy who drags a lion cub from its mother's half- full teat and plays with it by tugging its mane violently. The boy who is nurtured in the forest does not know any fear. Dushyanta accidentally picks up the amulet fallen off from the small boy's hand. It was Marica, who tied the amulet with a magical herb *aparajitha* on the boy's hand. The amulet will transform into a snake and bite the stranger who touched this. This amulet can be touched without any consequences only by the child's parents. Complications are resolved and it is now clear the boy is the king's son. This child later became king Bharata who was a great ruler of India. The remorse struck Dushyanta falls at Shakuntala's

feet as a blind man "who tears off her garland fearing the bite of the snake". Thus, from the beginning to the end of the play we see the author using images culled from nature and what we see throughout the play is an evocation of the richness, variety and abundance of nature in literature.

Human emotions are objectified in terms of objects of nature. The buck, the wild elephants, the *chakravaka* birds, the cuckoos, the bee, the *kusa* grass, the *dharba* grass, the jasmine creeper, the mimosa plants, the mango trees and the *ashoka* trees integral to the forest are mentioned in the play several times. The playwright connects these objects of wilderness with the human beings for he detected the innate unity of nature with human beings. The reader experiences the journey through the forest in the play and feels refreshed after moving through Kanwa's sacred grove listening to the sounds of birds and animals and streams. Kanwa's ashram thus remains a spot of biodiversity or ecological hub where we can find abundance of life and a remedy for everything.

Our ancestors knew the essential invincibility of nature and hence didn't try to subdue it. This knowledge helped them sustain the precious wealth of the forests and wild life. Women had a prominent place in literatures that worshipped nature. There were no concerns about nature and women because both nature and women were respected in practice and in literature. Shakuntala, who was the personification of the pristine beauty of the forest, was always glorified in the text.

Kalidasa encapsulates the beauty and the beast of nature in his great literary work just as Dushyanta tries to hold the bee in a lotus bud. The ravishing beauty of the *aranyaka* with its myriad colours, fragrances and sounds makes the reader fall in love with the forest of Kalidasa. The representation of various emotions through the descriptions of nature, the lyrical beauty of the songs, the sweet fragrance of the flowers and the pollen, the enchanting landscape with gurgling brooks add colour and sweetness to Kalidasa's art. The glorious comment made by the German poet Goethe on *Shakuntalam* was that one can find the "bloom of youth and fruit of later years" and "the heaven and earth" in this work of Kalidasa.

Banabhatta in *Harshacharita* paying tribute to Kalidasa states that Kalidasa's verses are sweet like "clusters of buds". The opinions of these two writers of diverse periods and countries show that the portrayal of nature in literature will make any reader a *sahrdaya* capable of enjoying all the different *rasas* of the play.

There is not a moment when nature is absent from the text and there is not a moment when the characters are severed from the flora and fauna of the forest. The *aranyaka* culture is preserved in all its chastity and the text remains a true depiction of nature in art. It is mostly the intervention of culture that breaks the links with nature. The degradation of nature has brought about the crisis in the environment. The only alternative way out of this crisis is the return to nature. Left to themselves, there are ample provisions in nature to set everything right. Kalidasa understands the intrinsic value of nature and his text does not pose any challenges on environmental issues. There is abundance of forest wealth and no species is facing a threat of extinction and there is no cry heard in the text regarding the protection of the forest or the sacred grove. Kalidasa's devotion to nature went up to the heights of spiritual reverence and adoration and Kalidasa's work acquires rare beauty when he views it through the kaleidoscope of nature. The recent ecocritical, ecofeminist, ecospiritual concerns find no place in the text. The basic law of ecology that everything in nature is interconnected remains a fact in the text and Kalidasa's play remains an evergreen text in the wilderness of modern literature.

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