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Dr. Arghyadip Roy

Assistant Professor,
Department of Sanskrit,
Khalisani Mahavidyalaya,
Chandannagar, Hooghly (W.B.)

Injustice to Śakuntalā in the play of Kālidāsa: A critical analysis with respect to Vyāsa's Mahābhārata

Dr. Arghyadip Roy

Abstract: Epic is always the great source of World Literature. Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata, the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India, are the treasure house of literary elements. Based on these two epics, many works in different languages, in different genres of literature have been developed over time. Kālidāsa's Abhijñānaśakuntalam (*The Recognition of Śakuntalā* or *The Sign of Śakuntalā*) is one of them. It is the best drama of Kālidāsa and the story of the play is adopted from the epic Ved Vyāsa's Mahābhārata. Kālidāsa has dramatized the story of Śakuntalā as narrated in the epic Mahābhārata. Though the source of the drama is Mahābhārata, Kālidāsa has presented the story with minor changes in the plot. It is the story of divine love which has brought a disaster as well as a sweet fruit of reunion. This is not something new. It has been presented in Classical Indian Literature many times. But in comparison to the story of Mahābhārata, the play Abhijñānaśakuntalam has been presented with greater moral values. And, to present these moral values before the audience, Śakuntalā has been victimized in a very urbane way. The present paper is an attempt to form a comparative perspective on the character of Śakuntalā found both in the Mahābhārata and in the play Abhijñānaśakuntalam and to justify the attempt of Kālidāsa, who tried to establish social and moral values through his plays by using dramatic characters.

Keywords: Rājacakravarti, Gāndharva marriage, Untarnished, Latākunja, Hermitage.

Mahākavi Kālidāsa has composed extraordinary dramas and epics based on the apparently minor incidents of Purāṇas, Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata. His Abhijñānaśakuntalam is such an invaluable treasure of classical Sanskrit literature, based on the Duṣyanta-Śakuntalā story of Mahābhārata (*Ādiparvan Ch.69-74*), scholars have been singing the praises of which for two thousand years. The poet has presented its content so beautifully that its appeal to the audience and reader is immense. However, by writing this play, Kālidāsa has exposed the nature of the male-centric society of that time in a very stripped way, which degrades us into a society of gender discrimination. Although the name of the play mentions the heroine Śakuntalā, but the play has an ample of deprivation, shame and institutional conservatism for her. From the very beginning of the play, Kālidāsa portrayed Duṣyanta, the hero as very sensible, well-spoken, sober, religious emperor of the world¹. On the other hand, Śakuntalā is portrayed as the epitome of beauty, patience, and virtue, who constantly needs others to protect and defend her. When Duṣyanta sees Śakuntalā, his internal monologue is not one of pure love but of political and social calculation. As we note, he questioned her lineage ("*Is she a kṣatriya?*") and weighed the feasibility of the match against his royal duty and the laws of the hermitage². He represented the state of rational, calculating, and driven by institutional conservatism. His 'sensitivity' is actually a manifestation of male privilege; he has the luxury to assess, judge, and ultimately decide. By contrast, Śakuntalā was aligned with the rhythms of nature, and her love emerges instinctively, without

Correspondence:**Dr. Arghyadip Roy**

Assistant Professor,
Department of Sanskrit,
Khalisani Mahavidyalaya,
Chandannagar, Hooghly (W.B.)

calculation or restraint. Her emotional response was immediate and deeply felt, unmediated by concerns of status or consequence³. In fact, the proposal for Gandharva marriage also initially came from Śakuntalā at the end of third act⁴.

Kālidāsa's attempt to demystify a male character in the patriarchal society of that time has been clearly found through bare eyes. In the Mahābhārata, Duṣyanta could recognize Śakuntalā at his court, but he simply rejected her in fear of shame⁵. However, in the play, the poet very skillfully created a memory-illusion of Duṣyanta and put the entire accountability of her rejection upon Śakuntalā. Why the curse of Durvāsā fell on Śakuntalā? Because, when Duṣyanta leaved Śakuntalā, she pined for him all day. Engrossed in his thoughts, she forgot to honour the sage Durvāsā, who visited the hermitage soon after the King had departed. The short-tempered (*sulabhakopa*) sage felt insulted and cursed Śakuntalā, that the person she was thinking of, would forget her⁶. Whereas, Kālidāsa has several times intimated the fact that any disobedience to the sages may invite disaster⁷ and as an instance, he exposed that, when Rājamātā summoned Duṣyanta to the capital for some ritual, he did not obey the order of his mother and sent Vidūṣaka there instead to show more importance to the request from the sages of the hermitage of Kaṇva, to stay there for a few nights and protect the sacrificial ceremonies from the attacking demons. Although the audience did not find it difficult to understand that the actual reason for King's stay at hermitage was to meet Śakuntalā again and again, but the poet in a very sophisticated way, has given a hint that the appeal of the sages was more important than one's personal duties related to family or beloved one. The irony is that, Śakuntalā being grownup in a hermitage did not bother about the matter, whereas Duṣyanta being an emperor, honored this in all situations.

Kālidāsa's own additions to the story of the Mahābhārata has given the play a new dimension. Within the story of Mahābhārata, the poet has made all such changes to make the story more dramatic, which impress the readers and audiences. Kālidāsa transformed the Mahābhārata episode of Śakuntalā into the play *Abhijñānaśakuntalam* by introducing the curse of Durvāsā and the signet ring to absolve King Duṣyanta of moral blame. While the epic version depicts the king knowingly rejecting Śakuntalā, Kālidāsa's version uses these additions to make the separation a tragic misunderstanding rather than a callous act on the part of Duṣyanta. In the Duṣyanta-Śakuntalā saga of the Mahābhārata, we find Mahārāja Duṣyanta more as an ideal king than as a lover. But in the play, he is a dutiful king as well as a 'devoted lover'. Although he has many consorts in royal-apartments, yet when he met a new lady, he got engrossed in her, forgetting the others, and it can easily be

deduced from various incidents in the play⁸. Kālidāsa has always wanted to highlight the character of Duṣyanta, so when he appeared in the drama, the poet introduced him as the ideal character. As a king, a lover, a husband, a son or a father, in all the roles, Duṣyanta played the character of ideal hero. He never deviated from his royal duties (*Rājadharmā*), apologized even for his unknowing mistakes, burst on tears when felt guilty⁹. Thus, by glorifying the character of the king, the poet actually wanted to establish Duṣyanta as the hero of the patriarchal society much higher than that in the Mahābhārata.

Certainly, there is no mention of Mahārṣi Durvāsā's curse in the story of Mahābhārata. This is a novel addition by Kālidāsa in the drama. The end of the play became beautiful for this curse and a good message is also given to the society that one must suffer the consequences of one's misdeeds. But it is worth noting that by cursing the innocent Śakuntalā of the Mahābhārata, Kālidāsa actually exonerated Duṣyanta in the drama. In the Mahābhārata, Duṣyanta rejected Śakuntalā because of the fear of public shame, who came to the royal court claiming her right to be the consort of the king¹⁰. For a king sitting on the throne, it is his most difficult task to accept an unknown lady with a child on her laps as a wife. But when the truth was revealed through divine oracles, Duṣyanta had to admit his mistake¹¹. There is no doubt that the incident tarnished the character of a "*Cakravarti*" emperor in his royal court. Whereas, in the play, the poet exonerated the king by introducing the curse of Durvāsā on Śakuntalā. The fact, due to the curse of Durvasa the king did not recognize Śakuntalā and that Śakuntalā herself was responsible for it, was very skillfully explained to the audience. Śakuntalā's curse for dereliction of duty and Duṣyanta's oblivion due to the curse have somehow reconstructed the character of Duṣyanta in the mind of society. Therefore, Duṣyanta could no longer be held responsible for Śakuntalā's rejection, rather, he kept himself a hundred miles away from the crime of touching a woman¹². He did not even want to know the identity of an unknown woman. Hence, to keep the character of Duṣyanta unblemished, or to be more precise, to make untarnished the character of a *Cakravarti* emperor of the Mahābhārata, Kālidāsa defiled the character of Śakuntalā. In a male-dominated society, Kālidāsa's writing never once trembled to corrupt the character of a woman in order to make a man's character pure.

Śakuntalā not only committed the severe misconduct of disrespecting Sage Durvāsā, but her interest in marrying Duṣyanta by gāndharva ritual, without her father's permission was also cleverly brought out by Kālidāsa. The King, who enjoyed the company of many wives in his palace, who always wandered for a new love, became impressed by a forest-girl at his first sight, but did not

reveal his intension until her identity as a kṣatriya was confirmed. On the contrary, Śakuntalā, as soon as saw the king, was obsessed with a lust, which was against the customs of a hermitage¹³. The third act shows Duṣyanta has spent many gloomy nights over Śakuntalā's thought, the jewels in his ring being faded in tears¹⁴; but on the other hand, more surprisingly, Śakuntalā was completely affected by the lust of the king and literally she was attacked of fever so much that she had to lay-down on the bed of lotus leaves inside 'Latākunja' to reduce her body heat! Where the king thought twice to offer his love publicly, Śakuntalā spontaneously wrote a love letter (*madanalekha*) on a lotus-leaf to express her emotions¹⁵. Even, the proposal for Gandharva marriage was also initially summoned by Śakuntalā as Kālidāsa has suggested. It was she, who urged the king to reconcile while leaving the 'Latākunja' with Mātā Gautami at the end of third act. Isn't it really unusual for a maiden residing in a hermitage to become so bold in taking decisions for her entire life? In the Mahābhārata, Śakuntalā being proposed for a marry, at first urged Duṣyanta to wait for some time, until her father returned and could take the decision of her marriage¹⁶; but in the play, she herself took the decision and not even asked Mātā Gautami, who remained attached with her all the time¹⁷! In all the dangerous activities the poet put Śakuntalā at the forefront, so that the king's character might not get corrupted at all. In the Mahābhārata, Śakuntalā appeared in the royal court before all the ministers and other courtiers, but in the play Kālidāsa brought her to the place of alter (*agniśaraṇa*) to avoid the embarrassing situation. Even when Śakuntalā was carried away by a disembodied idol, the king immediately put the incident out of his mind so that the matter would not arise again.

It may be thought that Kālidāsa wanted to present the play in a completely new form, not even related to Mahābhārata or any other story; still the poet could not do justice to Śakuntalā. First, it was in no way appropriate for Maharṣi Kaṇva to pass on the responsibility of hospitality to Śakuntalā at a time when he was not present in the hermitage. With ten thousand disciples living in his hermitage, he could assign the serious responsibility of hospitality to a sage, or even to an old ascetic lady. But he gave this grave responsibility to his beloved young lady Śakuntalā, whose impending doom was known to him very well. However, the hermitages of sages are still the epitome of conservative society, it is still awe-inspiring that a Vedic sage like Kaṇva could be so liberal in thoughts thousands of years ago. The incident of Durvāsā's curse Anasūya and Priyamvada did not immediately disclose to Śakuntalā for very appropriate reason. But when Duṣyanta did not send anybody to the hermitage to take Śakuntalā to his palace after a long time, they were

sure about the fact that Durvāsā's curse had worked. But despite that, why did they not reveal the curse-story during the journey of Śakuntalā to the royal palace, in the fourth act? At least they should have clearly mention the importance of the ring gifted by the king, as they knew that it was the only thing to get rid of the curse. They did not! They only said, if at all the king be slow to recognize you, show him he ring marked with his own name. Śakuntalā got frightened by these words, but the consolation was "*atisneha papasanki*" (excessive affection suspects evil).

The language in which the king scolds Śakuntalā in the fifth act was exaggerated compared to the Mahābhārata. Moreover, the firmness shown by Śakuntalā in defending herself in the Mahābhārata was not seen as fluent in the play. Especially Śakuntalā became completely helpless being unable to show the ring of Duṣyanta. We cannot imagine what would have happened to Śakuntalā if her mother Menakā did not come and rescued her at that time. The king's rejection on the one hand and the insults by the sages on the other; still Śakuntalā's invectives were not over. The culmination came when the royal priest decreed that, if Śakuntalā's son would bear the signs of a 'Rājacakravarti', the king would welcome her, otherwise he would not. What could be more humiliating for a mother to judge the identity of her son's father on the basis of his appearance? Never the less, what would happen if the child was a daughter instead of a son! Neither the king nor the king's priest thought about the fact that, there was no question of the daughter becoming a 'Rājacakravarti'! How the king could gladly accept the priest's judgment! Being unable to bear the insult, Sitā entered the underworld in the Rāmāyaṇa, hence Śakuntalā's insult was more than that. Yet Śakuntalā lived; or Kālidāsa kept her alive for a special purpose. It was very much necessary to prove that all the allegations Śakuntalā had made to the king at the time of rejection were not true at all. If Śakuntalā was alive only for the play's amicable ending, then what was the need to drag the matter of Durvāsā's curse at the end of last act? All her complaints against the king were answered by blaming Śakuntalā for the king's forgetfulness and thus the character of a Mahābhārata-King also expurgated in Abhijñānaśakuntalam.

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Foot note

1. *Priyamvadā* : (Janāntikam) *Anasuye, ko nu khalvesa caturgambhiraktirmadhuram priyamālapam prabhāvavāniva laksyte*. [Abhijñānaśakuntalam; Ed. M.R. Kale, page 33]
2. *Rājā* : *Api nāma kulapateriyamasavarnaketrasambhavā syāt, athavā krtam sandehena* .. [ibid. page 30]
3. *Sakuntalā* : (Atmagatam) *Kim nu khalvimam preksaya tapovanavirodhino vikārasya gamaniyāsmi samvrtā*. [ibid. page 36]
4. *Sakuntalā*: ... *latāvalaya santāpaharaka āmantraye tvam bhuyopi paribhogāya* [ibid. page 116]
5. Mahābhārata, Ādiparvan, Ch. 74, verse. 21
6. Abhijñānaśakuntalam, Act IV, Viskambhaka, verse 1.
7. Abhijñānaśakuntalam, Act II, verse 7.
8. Abhijñānaśakuntalam, Act V, verse 1.
9. Abhijñānaśakuntalam, Act VI, verse 22.
10. Mahābhārata, Ādiparvan, Ch. 74, verse. 15
11. *ibid. verse. 110-114*
12. *Rājā* : *Bhavatu! Avarṇaniyam parakalatram* [Abhijñānaśakuntalam; Ed. M.R. Kale, page 172]
13. *Sakuntalā* : *Sakhi, yatah prabhrti mama darsanapathamāgata sa tapovanaraksitā rājarsi (iti ardhokte)* [Abhijñānaśakuntalam; Ed. M.R. Kale, page 98]
14. Abhijñānaśakuntalam, Act III, verse 11
15. Abhijñānaśakuntalam, Act III, verse 14
16. Mahābhārata, Ādiparvan, Ch. 73, verse. 5
17. Abhijñānaśakuntalam, Act V, verse 16