

Kālidāsa's Abijñānaśakuntalām: A Romantic Tale of Indian Aesthetics

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Abstract

Kālidāsa's play 'Abijñāna Śakuntalām' has been majorly influenced by the Indian aesthetic theory of art and literature. Right from the literary style of creation of the text to the staging, plot, characterisation and presentation; one can witness the elements and features of NāṭyaŚāstra embodied in this play. Firstly, since the play 'Abijñāna Śakuntalām' is a Romantic play; the article shall focus on how the underpinnings of the two lovers and protagonist Śakuntalā and Duṣyanta are portrayed to reach the stage of fulfilment and the researcher shall exquisitely analyse all the key ideas that make it so special to touch the hearts of the audiences. The global success of the play is attributed not only to its popular theme of love, but all also due to the certain features and elements that were initially created by Bharata Muni, which is perfectly assimilated by the great dramatist Kālidāsa, rendering a realistic touch to the drama.

Key Words: Romantic Tale: A love story: Indian Aesthetic Theory: Indian theory on Drama, especially Bharata Muni's Nāṭyaśāstra

Introduction: The descent of Indian Classical literature presumably in the second century occurred when Bharata Muni composed an elaborate treatise on the *Nāṭyaśāstra* by the instruction of Lord Brahma who intended to extend the heavenly knowledge and wisdom of drama on earth, so that people relish the rasas and entertain themselves. This compendium on dramaturgy become the first extensive work describing the theory on Drama, influencing a generation of critics like *Lollaṭa*, *Śaṃkuka*, *Bhaṭṭanāyaka*, *Abhinavagupta* and others that formed the basis of Indian literary criticism. Studying these rich theories with multiple perspectives gave an opportunity to the budding writers to explore their latent literary talent by the amalgamation of the techniques of the sage Bharata and the knowledge the mythological epics- the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* which

inspired the plot construction of most of the ancient Indian writers.

One among them was the greatest dramatist- Kālidāsa who broke the barriers of geographical boundaries and became world renowned for his classic Sanskrit play- 'Abijñāna Śakuntalām' which got translated into many European languages and was publicly read and performed across the globe; among these the most instrumental was the English translation by Sir William Jones, published in 1789 which established this literary work as the epic work of Indian English literature.

Kālidāsa is the writer of Epic poems like *Meghadūtam* and plays like *Raghuvaṃśam* and *Kumārasaṃbhavam*, during the rule of King *Vikramāditya*, around fourth century. Although being criticised since childhood for being dumb and physically and mentally challenged, treated as a nincompoop, he became the greatest writer

not only of his age, but also a classic writer of all ages. His style is definitely inspired by Bharata Muni's *Nāṭyaśāstra* that enabled him to write with flair and elegance. Praising his poetic genius, a Sanskrit Professor asserts:

“The language of Kālidāsa is so chaste and refined, his thought so pointed and deep, and his information so liberal and profound that it is certain he must have in his early days received education in a systematic manner and not merely gleaned it perfunctorily at random.”ⁱ

The title ‘Abijñāna Śakuntalām’ clearly indicates that Śakuntalā is the central character of the drama, to be precise it means ‘The recognition of Śakuntalā’ by Duṣyanta who had initially made love with the hermit girl and abandoned her with a child. This seems ironical because king Duṣyanta had made efforts to pursue the love of his life, as soon as he got infatuated with passion. But, it must be noted that this loss of memory was precisely due to Śakuntalā's absent-mindedness who was lost in romantic thoughts of her lover and husband king Duṣyanta which made her neglect the duty of welcoming the sage Durvāsā when he arrived at the penance-grove, prompting sage Durvāsā to curse her that her lover will forget her. When his anger subdued and Priyamvadā and Anusūyā convinced him that Śakuntalā's behaviour was only due to love-sickness and not born from an intent to disrespect the sage. Then blessed her that the lover's memory would resume, at the sight of a token of gift received from him. Yet, the play reaches its climatic moment when the ring slips of her hand and falls in the river and King Duṣyanta refuses to accept her as a wife. Impregnated Śakuntalā is taken care by the heavenly nymphs and her

biological mother, until Duṣyanta coincidentally recovers his ring and the memory of his love made in the penance grove becomes fresh and he regrets his action of being cruel to his wife who bears his son Sarvadamana in her womb, who shall become the future of their dynasty. In the end, all the misunderstandings are resolved and the trio is welcomed back into King's palace where his other two queens reside; yet Śakuntalā is crowned as the chief queen who faithfully observes her duties.

According to Philosopher Humboldt;

“Kālidāsa, the celebrated author of the Śakuntalā, is a masterly describer of the influence which nature exercises upon the minds of lovers..... Tenderness in the expression of feeling and richness of creative fancy have assigned to him his lofty place among the poets of all nations.”ⁱⁱ

Hypothesis: It can be assumed that Kālidāsa's ‘Abijñāna Śakuntalām’ has been written after having a thorough analysis of Indian Aesthetic theory on Dramaturgy whose basic foundation lays in Bharata Muni's *Nāṭyaśāstra*. The method of plot development, characterisation, the setting, the stages of development of love, emotional expression through depiction of various rasas and bhāvas, with its determinants and consequents perfectly fall into place, following the theories of the Śāstra.

Arguments and Debates:

While characterising the traditional romantic heroine Śakuntalā, it would be significant to analyse her according to her relationship with her husband; these Avasthas are different states which constitute Ashtanāyikā or the eight types

of heroines. The first kind is known as Vasakasajja Nāyika (one dressed up for a union) and in the play she is described as Goddess Lakshmi with beautiful charms who awaits shyly for the union, although in dual states of mind: one, the shyness due to confrontation with her lover and the other was disobedience towards her father that went against her heart's desire. It can be quoted in words of her love mate, King Duṣyanta:

“King (delighted): Bashful girl! The man you want
Stands here, dying to hold you in his arms.
The wealth-seeker finds her, or not,
As the goddess Lakshmi wills,
But when she herself pursues,
Who can resist her charms?”ⁱⁱⁱ

Second is Virahotkanthita Nāyika (one distressed by separation), Śakuntalā experiences pangs of separation when she doesn't see King Duṣyanta who actually becomes busy to protect the sages of the penance grove from the evil spirits and obeying his religious duties as a king. In fact, the desperation was experienced by both the lovers and it can be well expressed through this verse describing the sorrow of separation on part of the heroine:

“Her cheeks are drawn, her bosom shrinks,
Her waist contracts, her shoulders stoop,
Her colour drains. Love strikes her down –
A beauty sad as spring's young leaves,
Shrivelled in the furnace of the summer's breeze”^{iv}

The female protagonist of the third kind is Svadhinabhartruka Nāyika (the one having her husband in subjection). This form of

Śakuntalā can be witnessed when king begs her pardon:

“King [falling at Śakuntalā' feet]: Let the pain of my rejection
Pass from your heart.
I was deluded, blocked by the dark
From my own good fortune,
Blind as the man who tore at his neck,
Believing his garland a snake.”^v

Fourth, is Kalahantarita Nāyika (one separated by quarrel), this happens during the time of King's lost memory and he claims that Śakuntalā is pretending to be his wife and actually he can't keep a wife impregnated with other man because he doesn't remember marrying her at the first place. This brews up a quarrel between the couple, as Śakuntalā misplaced the signet ring that could represent the symbol of their union which he again dismisses calling Śakuntalā a women of false pretence. This incites anger in Śakuntalā making her Khandita Nāyika (one enraged with her love) which is best expressed in the following dialogue:

“Śakuntalā: Yes, I deserve—I deserve to be called a self-willed wanton, since I put my trust in the Puru dynasty, and gave myself to a man with honey in his mouth but poison in his heart!

Śakuntalā What? Have I been deceived by this fraud, for you to abandon me too?”^{vi}
This, then makes her Vipralabdha Nāyika (one deceived by her lover). The next kind of heroine is Proshitabhartruka Nāyika (One with a sojourning husband). Śakuntalā is depicted as such when she makes love with King Duṣyanta in the penance grove where she actually assumes the position of being a subordinate wife due the presence of his other two wives; until she finally goes to meet King

Duṣyanta in his palace. She becomes Abhisarika Nāyika (One going to meet her lover) when she bids farewell to her father and friends in the penance grove and leaves for her husband's place. But, in true sense, they meet when they suddenly encounter each other in heaven, unite, and come back to the earth with their son. Thus, Śakuntalā has been perfectly depicted in form of all the eight kinds of heroines, in relation to her partner King Duṣyanta.

To analyse this further, it's significant and interesting to note various rasas and bhāvas in the text: and to understand the corresponding gait or body posture for the concerned sentiment. Nāṭyaśāstra propounds the nine sentiments, popularly known as the Navarasāḥ, among which the Śāntarasa (the sentiment of peace) was later included:

“The eight Sentiments (rasa) recognised in drama are as follows: Erotic (Śṛṅgāra), Comic (Hāsyā), Pathetic (Karuṇā), Furious (Raudra), Heroic (Vīra), Terrible (Bhayānaka), Odious (Bībhatsa) and Marvellous (Adbhuta).”^{vii}

Since the play ‘Abhijñānaśākuntalam is majorly a romantic tale of the two lovers- Śākuntalā and Duṣyanta; Śṛṅgārarasa or the Erotic sentiment is majorly depicted throughout the play. The dominant state (sthāyibhava) of the erotic sentiment is love. As Bharata Muni theorises,

“*Vibhāvānubhāvavyabhicārasamyogād
Rasaṇṣpattiḥ*”^{viii}

These means that rasa or sentiment is born from a perfect combination of Vibhāva (cause), Anubhāva (involuntary actions), and Vyabhicāribhāva (transitory feelings). This can be studied through Kālidāsa's play

‘Abhijñānaśākuntalam’. The cause or vibhāva of the conjugal love was beautiful summer which is apt for pleasure-making, or the spring where the love can blossom with the new freshness in the air. Literature usually associates the spring season with the young age, and one can witness that the flawless beauty, youth and climatic change drives the lovers to make a physical contact. The growing youth of the love damsel can be seen through this quote:

“Priyamvadā (laughing): It's nothing to do with me! Scold your own youth that makes your breasts swell so.”^{ix}

The involuntary actions result into quick glances through the side of one's eyes, sweet words, kiss etc. Bharata Muni calls the charming look of the eyes as Kāmyā and the glance wherein the corner of the eyes move with swift expressions is called Lalitā. Other signs of love, as mentioned in his book are sweat on the body and face, getting goose bumps etc. The bodily movements and facial expressions made by Śakuntalā which indicate love are reported by King Duṣyanta:

“When she looked lovingly
At someone or something else,
When she moved with heavy hips
As though slowed down by love,
When she spoke so sharply
To the friend who tried to halt her,
I read all these signs
For me alone—
Such is the power that lovers have

To make the world their own.”^x
All these simultaneously result into transitory state (Vyabhicāribhāva) of affection and in some cases feeling of jealousy or suspicion. For instance, Duṣyanta hides the painting from his other

wives, as seeing the painting of Śakuntalā, would make them feel jealous of her.

Bharata Muni also describes suitable gait for the erotic sentiment, which becomes helpful to the actors on stage, depicting romance:

“He should be adorned with lovely garments, perfumes, ornaments and garlands of various sweet-scenting flowers. He should walk with graceful steps in the AtikrāntāCārī, and his limbs should have the Sauṣṭava, and he should move with proper tempo and Tāla. His hands should always follow the feet. The former should be raised along with the falling of the latter and with the raising of the latter the former should fall.”^{xi}

Bharata Muni's Nāṭyaśāstra classifies the Erotic sentiment into two kinds: Unrequited love or separation which is known as Vipralambha and in this play the pangs of separation from the major part of the drama to such an extent that Śakuntalā loses her presence of mind even when the sage Durvāsā curses her husband that he would forget her because it was due to his thoughts that she remained absent-minded and did not attend the sage to show hospitality. The other kind of love is that which occurs after intervals and in scarcity, which is usually due to unmarried status of the women. Bharata Muni enlists these various stages of love as:

“First there will be longing (Abhilāṣā), secondly Anxiety (Cintā), thirdly Recollection (Anusmṛti), fourthly Enumeration of (the beloved one's), Merits (Guṇakīrtana), fifthly Distress (Udvega), sixthly Lamentation (Vilāpa), seventhly Insanity (Unmāda), eighthly Sickness (Vyādhi), ninthly Stupor (Jaḍatā), and tenthly Death (Maraṇa)”^{xii}

Such kind of traits are resounded in both the lovers and they echo each other's desire. As soon as Duṣyanta finds her doing menial tasks and chattering with her friends, he gets absorbed in her beauty.

“King: Then tell me this about your friend:

How long will she keep her love-starved hermit vows—

Till she changes them for the marriage kind?”^{xiii}

Duṣyanta longs to be with Śakuntalā, but realises that she is hermit girl with her own duties. But, he later realises that she is a daughter of Kingly sage and a nymph, which makes her more desirable for him. He looks for reasons like protecting the penance grove or having a ministry of welfare for the forest dwellers etc. that might help him to stay longer to seduce the girl of his heart. In the second stage, he feels anxious whether she will be convinced to marry him and accept the proposal of their union. He also becomes worried and stressed to identify whether she really loves him, assuring himself of her positive response through her stolen glances and slow footsteps, which Bharata believes is perfect tāla for women in love. The third stage is constant remembrance of the lover or recollecting the last meeting with him, the places they had been, the looks exchanged, sweet conversations etc. or her being consumed in their thoughts, owing to which they fail to perform their duties efficiently.

“King: Suddenly, the city doesn't seem so attractive. I'll link up with my followers and camp just outside this sacred grove. The truth is, I can't get Śakuntalā out of my head.”^{xiv}

Then, in the fourth state of love, the lovers start noting the good qualities in their lovers that make them more desperate to attain their love. King refers Śakuntalā as ‘the jewel of the ashram’ and appreciates her virgin beauty; and as Nāṭyaśāstra suggests that women usually are charmed by seeing men with physical beauty and strength or by hearing about their virtues from someone; which was exactly the case with Śakuntalā. Distress, is the fifth stage where a lover gets extremely desperate to see her beloved and awaits for her next appearance; like in the case of King Duṣyanta:

“And yet:
I’ll love the God of Love
If all my mental anguish
Stems from nothing but this lady
And her almond eyes.

[Walking in a depressed state] Now the riots are over and, and I’m no longer needed by the priests, how shall I revive myself? (sighing) I can’t – unless I see my love, my only refuge. I shall seek her out.”^{xv}

Sixthly, the lovers lament when they can’t immediately meet their lover due to various reasons; whereas in the second last stage they become insane and extremely crazy in love, as in Śakuntalā’s case her insanity can be seen through following lines:

“Śakuntalā: So, darlings, if you think it proper, help me to the king’s pity,
Otherwise—prepare my body for the fire.”^{xvi}

In the final stage, the lover goes into stupor, experiences love-sickness or death. Śakuntalā falls ill and becomes down with fever and her relatives assume the reason

to be the heat stroke; but only Duṣyanta realises the cause of her sickness:

“King: Śakuntalā seems to be very ill.
[Pondering] Now, is it the heat, or is it the heart, as it is with me?”^{xvii}

The Indian Aesthetic theory also mentions the reasons for sexual intercourse:

“The following six are reasons for the Conjugal Union (rāsaka): scheduled order (paripāti), (desire for) progeny (phala), newness of relation (Navatva), birth of a child (Prasāra), time of sorrow (Duḥkha) and of joy (Pramoda).”^{xviii}

Moreover, it also suggests the methodology of union, borrowed from Kāmasutra and is written in Nāṭyaśāstra as:

“At the time of Conjugal Union (lit. union of love) there should be amorous feelings, gestures, words, and sporty movements of the sweetest kind (lit. having a special quality of sweetness) and especially looking at each other with love.”^{xix}

The woman, according to the theorist should make special arrangements for the union. She should dress simply, with minimum ornaments like the tinkling anklets. She should look into the mirror and await for him and wonder for reasons of his delay. But, the sage Bharata is strongly against portrayal of vulgarity or showing excessive skin on screen and believes that the bed-scenes must not be depicted, but only intended when necessary.

Conclusion:

Hence, the concept of Ashtanāyikā, clearly introduces the different states of women in love. It can be further expressed through

the emotions and sentiments; along with various gaits, postures and movements of eyes and limbs that lead to effective expression of rasa. The consequents and determinants of the erotic sentiment, the

reasons for love and it's fulfilment in the play 'Abhijñānaśākuntalam by Kālidāsa perfectly synchronises with Bharata Muni's Nāṭyaśāstra.

ⁱVasudev Mirashi and Narayan Raghunath Navlekar, Kālidāsa Date, Life and Works, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1969, Page 94-95

ⁱⁱM.R Kale, Kālidāsa's Mālavikāgnimitram, Motilal Banarsidass publishers private limited, Delhi, 1960, Page no. 12

ⁱⁱⁱKālidāsa, translated by W.J Johnson, The Recognition of Śākuntala, Oxford University Press, Page 36

^{iv}ibid. Page 35

^vibid. Page 99 & 100

^{vi}ibid., Page 66 & 67

^{vii}ibid. Page 102

^{viii}Original text, Nāṭyaśāstra By Bharata Muni

^{ix}Kālidāsa, translated by W.J Johnson, The Recognition of Śākuntalā, Oxford University Press, Page 12

^xibid. pg no: 22

^{xi}Manmohan Ghosh, The Nāṭyaśāstra, Asiatic society of Bengal, Calcutta, 1951, Page 217

^{xii}Manmohan Ghosh, The Nāṭyaśāstra, Asiatic society of Bengal, Calcutta, 1951, Page 462

^{xiii}Kālidāsa, translated by W.J Johnson, The Recognition of Śākuntalā, Oxford University Press, Page 17

^{xiv}ibid., Page 20

^{xv}ibid., Page 33

^{xvi}ibid. Page no.35

^{xvii}ibid, Page no.34

^{xviii}Manmohan Ghosh, The Nāṭyaśāstra, Asiatic society of Bengal, Calcutta, 1951, Page 467

^{xix}ibid. page no. 471