

Unheard Voice and Identity Crisis of Shakuntala: A Study of *Abhijnanashakuntala*

Mrs. Sampa Paul
M.A. (Sanskrit), B.Ed., UGB
WBSET-2017 Qualified
UGC NET Qualified (Double, Dec.2017, July-2018))
paulsampa006@gmail.com

Abstract

Abhijnanashakuntala also known as The Recognition of Shakuntala or The Sign of Shakuntala is the best work of Kalidasa. The Sanskrit title Abhijnanashakuntala means pertaining to the recognition of Shakuntala. It is one of the great plays in classical Indian literature. The story of the play is adopted from the epic *Mahabharata*. Kalidasa has dramatized the story of Shakuntala narrated in the epic *Mahabharata*. But Kalidasa has presented the story of Shakuntala with minor changes to the plot. Kalidasa has divided the play Abhijnanashakuntala into seven acts. Act I. The Hunt, Act II. The Secret, Act III. The Love-Making, Act IV. Shakuntala's Departure, Act V. Shakuntala's Rejection, Act VI. Separation from Shakuntala, Act VII. Reunion. It is the first Indian play to be translated into a Western language, i.e. English by Sir William Jones in 1789. The play deals with an accidental love affair between Dushyanta and Shakuntala. The entire atmosphere in the play Abhijnanashakuntala is surcharged with divine love. But love has brought a disaster in Shakuntala's life. A curious undertone of melancholy sounds when Shakuntala says: "You must appoint him crown prince, just as you promised before, when we met." Misunderstanding takes place. When Shakuntala tells Dushyanta all about their love, Dushyanta denies to recognize her any more. Her voice is not heard. Suffering and calamity ultimately result in identity crisis of the protagonist, Shakuntala. Fate, whose wheel turns again and again, vindicates the merry heart. The peculiar circumstances prove fatal for the protagonist, Shakuntala. Finally, Dushyanta realizes his guilt but it is too late. He accepts Shakuntala as his wife and Bharatha as his son to repent and amend his sin. There is much tear and sight before the final union takes place. The reconciliation and reunion of husband and wife lead to happy ending to the play Abhijnanashakuntala. The paper examined how Shakuntala had been neglected in her life and she fought for an identity. This is a battle of dignity.

Keywords: Abhijnanashakuntala, play, Kalidasa, Shakuntala, Dushyanta, Classical Indian Literature, Epic, Atmosphere, Divine Love, Rejection, Suffering, Calamity, Reunion.

Research Methodology

This work is mainly based on secondary source of information, such as published documents, books, literary reviews, autobiography, journals, critiques etc. I have collected some selected documents and records as the major sources of data collection for the study. I have involved myself in intensive and critical reading of *Abhijnanashakuntala* written by Kalidasa, which enabled me to collect information about the heartrending story of the protagonist, Shakuntala. The play centres round love, separation and union and various facts and points relevant to the study. Curses play very significant role in the play. The unheard voice of Shakuntala immediately causes a temporary disturbance of identity crisis. The study has used critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a research tool to know how the voice of Shakuntala is rejected when she is fighting for her rights in the palace of Dushyanta, and she faces the challenges to establish her identity. The departure of Shakuntala from the hermitage rouses deep sympathy for her in the hearts of the readers. The feelings of the readers for Shakuntala climb up to a pitch of great intensity.

Introduction

Abhijnanashakuntala written by great ancient poet of Indian, Kalidasa is one of the most famous literary works in the Sanskrit literature. It is the best play in the Sanskrit literature. Kalidasa has adopted the story of Shakuntala from the epic *Mahabharata*. But he added much to the epic tale of Shakuntala with a new dignity. But his use of the original story is remarkably minute and evergreen. The development of the story reaches to its end in the same way as it described in the epic *Mahabharata*. Kalidasa made the story more appealing to the audience adding some new element in it. The play is a journey full of ups and downs and twists and turns. In a way, it is a view of life and a vision of love. The circumstances transformed Shakuntala into a soft and docile woman. She quested for her identity when she voiced: “You marry me & I am a wife of you.”(Act.V) She went through a test of fire. Though her husband rejected her, she didn’t show any sign of hatred to him; rather she left the palace with the hope of true poetic justice. She lived in the forest dedicating her life to her husband. She hoped that her misery must have come to an end as the wheel of fate moves continuously.

The birth of Shakuntala is a tragedy. Shakuntala is the daughter of the saint, Vishwamitra and Menoka. Vishwamitra had become completely mesmerized by splendid beauty of Menoka. They were busy in love making. Menoka had become pregnant. When Vishwamitra regained his sense, he realized that Menoka had cheated him and spoiled his meditation. Their meeting wasted his meditation. He ordered Menoka to leave the place at once otherwise he would curse her. Menoka asked forgiveness for his misdeed. Menoka was very upset and requested Vishwamitra to allow her to stay there as she was going to give birth to her baby. But Vishwamitra turned his ears to listen to her any more. Menoka was forced to leave the hermitage. Indra, the god of heaven denied to allow Menoka in his palace. She gave birth to a beautiful baby girl and named her Shakuntala. She left Shakuntala with another sage, Kanwa. There Shakuntala

grew up with others children under the protection of Kanwa. In the woods Shakuntala grew up amidst beautiful butterflies, colour birds, friendly rabbits and deer. She possessed peerless beauty and lived in woods. She was so beautiful that anyone who saw her for the first time was taken aback with her great beauty.

One day, Dushyanta, the king of Hasthinapura, came to the forest on a hunt. He entered into the deep woods with his troops and his chariots. Suddenly his eyes fell on a handsome male deer. He pursued the deer to capture it. A hermit stopped him from the chase and warned that all animals were under the protection of a hermitage. As the place was under the protection of the hermitage, any animal that entered the place should not be harmed. Dushyanta honoured the words of the hermit and took back his arrow and put it back into the quiver. The hermit blessed the king with a boon to have a noble son and asked him to visit the hermitage of Kanva. Dushyanta reached to the ashram of Kanwa, where Shakuntala lived. It was a beautiful hermitage on the bank of the sacred river Malini. Dushyanta determined to meet the great sage Kanva, rich in holiness. He laid aside the insignia of royalty and went on alone but did not see the austere sage in the hermitage. He felt a sudden vibrant in his right arm which indicated fortune of getting a woman. The hermitage was almost deserted. The king heard the sweet voice of Shakuntala and other companions at the right end of the ashram, where they were pouring water on the trees in the garden. Dushyanta decided to hide behind a tree and observed the beautiful maidens. When he was Shakuntala, he was stunned to see the beauty, youthfulness, and innocence of Shakuntala. Shakuntala possessed graceful mind and body in her youth. The king fell in love with Shakuntala at first sight. He wanted to know identity of this beautiful girl: “Can this be the daughter of Kanwa?”(Act.1)

Shakuntala, Priyamvada and Anasuya conversed with each other in the garden while a bee troubled Shakuntala. Seeing this, Dushyanta came out from hiding place to save Shakuntala from the foraging thief. Shakuntala got scared of seeing a man whom she had not seen in the hermitage before; she tried to run away from there at once. Dushyanta revealed his true identity to the ladies. Dushyanta was graciously invited to the hermitage. Dushyanta went into the hermitage. Shakuntala fell in love with the king as his delightful words and his face attracted her very much. She welcomed Dushyanta warmly in the hermitage and took care of him: “Sakuntala: My movements are no longer under my own control.(Aloud) Pray, what authority have you over me, either to send me away or keep me back?”(Act.1)

Dushyanta was captivated with the charm of Shakuntala. Dushyanta’s affection for Shakuntala grew into love: “King: My limbs drawn onward, leave my heart behind like silken pennon borne against the wind.”(Act.-1, Page.33) He gave Shakuntala his own ring as a token of love. Soon they came close to each other. Dushyanta could not resist himself from visiting to the hermitage to see Dushyanta. He could get as close as possible to the beautiful lady, Shakuntala.

He often hid and watched the beautiful lady, Shakuntala and her companions. Shakuntala often lost herself with the thought of Dushyanta and she began to sing of love. Other hermit girls slipped away leaving the pair in solitary independence. Finally, they got married and Shakuntala found a loving husband. Dushyanta stayed with her for few days. Shakuntala had become pregnant. Dushyanta had to return to his kingdom. He returned with the promise of quick return making all arrangement so that Shakuntala would be received in the traditional manner befitting a queen. Shakuntala immersed in the thoughts of her husband's quick return.

After Dushyanta's return to his kingdom, Shakuntala felt for solitariness in the hermitage. She often lost in the deep thoughts of king Dushyanta. She was in her own world and deeply disturbed by the sweet memories of love. She was thinking of Dushyanta's quick return. One day the guest Durvasa, a great saint with intense anger visited the ashram of sage Kanwa. Shakuntala did not see the sage Durvasa as she was completely absorbed in her thoughts of Dushyanta. Durvasa became frustrated to see Shakuntala not receiving him properly and cursed her as thus:

“You who do not notice me,
A hoard of holy merit standing at your door,
Because you are lost in thoughts of one.
To the exclusion of all else,
You shall be lost in his thoughts:
Though you goad his memory hard,
He shall fail to remember you,
Even as a man drunk remembers not
Thereafter, the tale he told before.”(Act.-IV)

Shakuntala came back to her senses when she heard this curse. Shakuntala realized her fault and asked for forgiveness. As Durvasa is very powerful, there was nothing anyone could do about the curse. So, Shakuntala pleaded for consolation. Durvasa said that the curse would be removed if she showed Dushyanta the ring which he had given to her. This token of the king (the ring) would enable the king to restore all the lost memories about Shakuntala and his swears.

Days turned into months and still Dushyanta did not return. Shakuntala was deeply worried. Shakuntala was deeply disturbed. Her husband was not with her and she was expecting a child. Shakuntala heaving waited for so long for her husband, decided to meet her husband in the palace of king Dushyanta. Shakuntala took her belongings and left the Ashram. On the way she had to travel by a boat to reach the kingdom. She was carried away with the beauty of the clear and colourful water of the river. She began playing with the water, dipping her hands in it. The ring which king Dushyanta gifted her slipped and fell into the water. But Shakuntala did not know it. When she reached Dushyanta's palace, she was expecting a warm reception from

Dushyanta. She forgot all the suffering she had undergone in his absence. Because of sage Durvasa's curse, Dushyanta had completely forgotten what he had done with Shakuntala. He did not even recognize Shakuntala. Shakuntala made Dushyanta aware of the secret marriage and her pregnancy: "Do you remember me? I am your wife, and this is your son. Accept him as your heir."(Act.V) Dushyanta was so busy to perform his royal duty that he told Shakuntala not to embarrass him anymore. He could not remember anything and refused to acknowledge her. Human emotions like tear, grief, pity etc. do not soft him. Then Shakuntala tried to produce the ring which the king had given her as token of love. But the ring surprisingly was not on her hand. Shakuntala shattered by the absence of the ring and stood in the court without any proof. Shakuntala left the palace with broken heart and went into the nearby forest, near the hermitage of sage Maricha, where she lived alone. She hoped to restore the memories of her husband someday and would accept her with honour and dignity. After a month Shakuntala gave birth to a boy of unmeasured power. The hands of the boy were marked with the wheel, and he quickly grew to be a glorious boy. She named the boy Bharatha. Mother and son lived in the forest amidst the wild animals. The boy rode on the backs of lions, tigers, and boars near the hermitage, and tamed them, and ran about playing with them. Shakuntala dreamt that Dushyanta must come one day to take them to his kingdom.

One day a fisherman caught a fish in the river and found a ring with the royal signet in the stomach of the fish. As it had the king's emblem on it, he handed it over to king Dushyanta. As soon as king Dushyanta saw the ring, everything he had forgotten as a result of the sage's curse, came rushing back to him. But it was too late. Dushyanta felt sorry for his misdeed. Dushyanta expressed his grief to Madhavya, the court-jester. The thought of his pregnant wife who was about to produce the heir of his family and the future king of Hasthinapura disturbed him. He lamented heavily for the loss of Shakuntala and his unborn child.

Dushyanta heard a cry of anguish and found Madhavya is taken by a demon form. He chased the demon and freed his friend only to find that the demon was Matali who had come to take Dushyanta to assist in battle against demon Kalanemi. Later it was revealed that Matali intentionally apprehended Madhavya to distract king Dushyanta from his misery. Both Matali and Dushyanta mounted the chariot as the act ended. After the defeating the demons, Dushyanta and other warriors returned. As they travelled through the path of Heaven, Dushyanta expressed his desire to pay homage at the hermitage of Maricha. Matali took king Dushyanta to the hermitage and left the king in the serene place. Suddenly the king's eyes turned toward a young boy playing with lion cube. The boy tried to open the mouth of the lion cube so that he could count the number of teeth. King Dushyanta surprised seeing that the boy felt comfort with the wild animals. He eagerly waited to know the true identity of the brave boy. Dushyanta enquired about his parents to the young boy and found that the boy - Bharata was indeed his own son. King Dushyanta immediately recognized the identity of the strange boy. However, Dushyanta

and Shakuntala united in tears. The king explained how his lost memory got restored once he saw the signet ring found by a fisherman. Though the play moves towards the happy ending at last, Shakuntala had to fight a lot to establish her identity.

Conclusion

In *Abhijnanashakuntala*, Kalidasa has presented his protagonist Shakuntala as an embodiment of pain, hardship and helpless woman. She was a poor woman who struggled for her identity. She is a representative of a typical Indian woman. Here Love is a test. True love ennobles mankind. But the path of true lovers is beset with difficulties. The play ends not with the celebration of reunion, but with a message to the readers, i.e. true love is spiritual. It is the union of great mind and great heart. Shakuntala is an embodiment of those noble qualities of head and heart. The king took the faultlessly graceful maiden by the hand and dwelt with her. She didn't curse her husband even after the king rejected her. The union of love at the end of the play lifts Dushyanta and Shakuntala to a richer life. Redemption takes place. Dushyanta looks back to glimpse his love affair with Shakuntala, whom he has promised to accept as his life. The tragic note does not dominate and the play ends on the note of joy. Though it is late, all these complications and difficulties are unexpectedly removed by the benign power of fortune. Dushyanta and Shakuntala unite in a blissful reunion and the family is seen to return to the palace of Hasthinapur.

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M.A. (Sanskrit), B Ed., UGB
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paulsampa006@gmail.com