



## AN ANALYSIS OF FEMINIST READINGS OF ABHIJNANASAKUNTALAM

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Kalidasa and his magnum opus **Abhijnanasakuntalam** need no introduction not only to the Sanskrit Fraternity but also to the world at large. Introduced to the western world through the translation of Sir William Jones, **Abhijnanasakuntalam** made a deep impact on the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe so much so that Goethe the German writer has this couplet in praise of it:

If in one word of blooms early and fruits of riper years,  
 Of excitement and enchantment I should tell,  
 Of fulfilment and content, of Heaven and Earth;  
 Then will I but say 'Sakuntala' and have said all. [ Indian Review]

The praise, as it is very obvious from the quotation above, is for the magical world of Kalidasa's imagination where he has been able to blend mythology, nature and human emotions in such a manner that they would encompass both Heaven and Earth.

But in recent times, because of theories like feminist literary criticism and gender theory which are ruling the roost in interpreting literature, **Abhijnanasakuntalam** has been looked at and critiqued under different type of lenses than were seen previously. This article is an attempt to critically analyse the feminist approaches to **Abhijnansakuntalam** which have been quite popular lately.

Feminist literary criticism seeks to analyse the representations of women in literature and exposes gender stereotypes and power dynamics within a literary work which represent women in a marginalised position in a patriarchal society. It aims to show that women have been historically objectified and are treated as property or object of male sexual gratification. So, themes like gender bias for male child and against female child, sexual objectification of women, women pushed to a secondary role and seen only in relation to men are frequently explored as part of feminist approaches to literary works.

For these feminist literary critics, the society that the play **Abhijnanasakuntalam** depicts is an out and out patriarchal society where male children are not only preferred but the absence of them is seen as tragedy affecting Dushyanta individually and also the entire kingdom as he is a king and needs an heir. The hermits wishing him to have a male heir is like "...suggesting Dushyanta's worth as a king ... will be determined by his ability to father a male child who will be able to carry on his legacy." [Sidgel, 10]. Kanva's parting message to Sakuntala when she is being sent to her husband's place is seen as patriarchy at work where women are positioned as objects to be protected by the father/ husband, where a woman's position is determined only with reference to her husband; her role in her household is to be pleasing the man of the house and not offending him in any way, reinforcing a woman's marginalized status in patriarchal society. It is Maricha's 'lecturing' to the wives of other rishis that stands out to them as another instance of patriarchal preaching on women's status, when Dushyanta's and Sakuntala's reunion takes place.

The feminist critics also censure the comparison of Sakuntala to the delicate flowers like Jasmine and blue lotus both by Priyamvada and Dushyanta[25] as "objectifying and reducing women to passive objects of beauty" while Dushyanta's description is seen as "objectifying and infantilizing" women, Priyamvada's comparison amounts to "women ...internalising the harmful gender stereotypes"[Sigdel,11] of the prevailing patriarchal society. Sakuntala being described



in terms of sexual imagery by Dushyanta while watching her [without her consent] hiding behind a tree is seen as not only an act of voyeurism but also an act of sexually objectifying her and seeing her for only her body and not the feeling thinking human being behind it. [ Sigdel, 10] The very fact that Sakuntala is rejected for not producing the evidence of her Gandharva Vivaha is declared as a proof for the secondary status of women in Kalidasa's time notwithstanding that there is curse by Durvasa because of which Dushyanta forgets his past with Sakuntala.

The ecofeminists who believe “ ... in patriarchy women and nature are treated as feminine and are dominated and exploited”[Khanal,230] go a step further and declare that Dushyanta description of Sakuntala as a flower yet to be smelt, a delicate shoot yet to be torn apart by a nail, an unpolished diamond, fresh honey yet to be tasted[76] not only associates Sakuntala with Nature's “bewitching freshness and sanctity”[233] but also Dushyanta's greedy desire of “colonizing and consuming” Sakuntala. [233] They go to the extent of calling Gandharva Vivaha that Sakuntala has of her own volition as “a male created contractual policy to keep women as a private property.” [Khanal, 233]

Attempts are also made to juxtapose the subdued femininity of Sakuntala and the dangerous and deviant femininity of her mother Menaka to show that Kalidasa is at pains to show that Sakuntala may have the ‘apsara like’ beauty of her mother but very unlike her mother in her behaviour. They point out that Menaka is a dangerous and deviant femininity who does not fit into the Patriarchal structure because she not only leaves her child but also Viswamitra and never to return into his life. To overturn ‘the stigma of promiscuity and assertive individuality of apsaras’[Yangzom, 39] like Menaka, Sakuntala, the feminist critics, claim is projected as a *pativrata stree* by Kalidasa who does not fall out of love with her husband even after her public and very humiliating rejection but waits for him to take her back as a wife. Sakuntala is made to be the ‘domesticated femininity’ that fits into a patriarchal society.[ Yangzom,39] She thus is invested with the qualities of a typical *nayaki* of a Sanskrit nataka.

Dushyanta himself is not seen as a noble king but one who is given to philandering, maintaining a harem full of queens yet trying his luck when he comes across Sakuntala. Madhavya mocks at the king saying that just as one who is satiated by sweets would love to taste tamarind, he is running after a hermit girl when he has a harem full of voluptuous women at his disposal.[71] Harem is seen as an extreme form of sexual objectification of women. [ Sigdel,11] The feminists further point out that the callousness with which Dushyanta treats his other queens only show that he is an agent of patriarchy. He is seen as product of patriarchal Brahminical order who follows rules prescribed by that order at the cost of hurting others which includes animals he hunts and wives he ignores. [ Yangzom,39] The curse and the ring are also considered just ploys introduced by Kalidasa to gloss over the blatant unpleasant nature of Dushyanta's personality.

Having mentioned the points to show how the feminist critics perceive **Abhijnanasakuntalam**, it is essential that a detailed analysis is made of the play to enquire whether the perceptions are valid or not. Kalidasa breaks new ground in dramatization of **Abhijnanasakuntalam**. Let us begin with the title of the play – **Abhijnanasakuntalam** – Recognition of Sakuntala. With the title itself Kalidasa makes sure that his audience know that Sakuntala is the centre of his drama even though according to the tenets of Sanskrit Nataka which Kalidasa follows, Dushyanta the *dhirodatta* type of hero should be the centre. Sakuntala remains the focus of attention from the time she is introduced whether she is on the stage or not. Her presence and even more her absence matters.

The way Sakuntala's character is presented and developed also shows that Kalidasa was going against the grain of the tenets of Sanskrit drama. Unlike a traditional *nayika* of a nataka, Sakuntala is not presented only in terms of the actions of the hero. Nor Kalidasa does present her only as a second fiddle to the hero. Sakuntala as envisaged by Kalidasa is not a demure innocent girl who couldn't fend for herself. It has to be remembered that she, not the elderly Gouthami or even other hermits



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like Sarnggrava are made in charge of the hermitage in the absence of Kanva which emphasises her capabilities. When she falls in love with Dushyanta, she is the first one to confess. Even though she keeps it a secret within her. Her friends' encouragement makes her courageously confess her love to him through a letter even though she may face rejection. "I know not your mind, O cruel one but day and night, Cupid causes acute pain to the limbs of me whose affection is centred in you" [ 107] The letter reflects her 'agency' – her ability to decide for herself her life, fate and future. Not even once she has misgivings or fears that she may be doing something wrong. Nor she waits for approval of anyone – not even of her father. It is one of her friends Priyamvada who worries but not her. " I do not know what Father [Kaashyapa] will do on hearing this affair." [ 121] Sakuntala is sure of herself. She shows awareness of the world when she comments on Dushyanta's harem full of queens. She tells Priyamvada "Why do you detain the royal sage, who is pining on account of his separation from the ladies of his harem" [109] It is her intelligent way to elicit a promise from him that he wouldn't neglect her which makes Dushyanta promise that only two women are going to be in his life one Sakuntala and other – Rajyalakshmi his kingdom. "Not withstanding the multitude of wives (only) two (will be ) the glory (or mainstay) of my line, the sea-girt earth, and this friend of yours." [ 111] Independent of thought, she is aware of the circumstances of her life and is not blindly lead or controlled by Dushyanta. When he tries to kiss her before the Gandharva Vivaha she softly but surely stops him from taking advantage of her even though she is head over heels in love with him. "King of Puru race, keep to decorum.." [113]

When she is repudiated by Dushyanta who under a curse does not remember her and mocks her, she faces him with dignity and stands for her honour trying to clear her name of deception. "What good, indeed will a reminder do, when that sort of love has undergone such a change? ... Still this must be done as my own self has to be cleared by me." [ 141] Kalidasa's Sakuntala is often compared to the Sakuntala of the **Mahabharata** in this aspect. As it well known, Kalidasa seems to have derived the idea of the story from the **Mahabharata**. It is often projected that the **Mahabharata's** Sakuntala shows feisty nature argues and demands recognition due to her and her son. In comparison, it is often said that in trying to ennoble Dushyanta, Kalidasa has made Sakuntala a pale and insignificant one as against very independent Sakuntala of the Mahabharata. It has to be remembered that Sakuntala's cries in the court of Dushyanta in Kalidasa's play are not cries of mere helplessness as it is often interpreted but of shock which shatters her like a bolt from the blue. It has to be remembered that she calling Dushyanta 'anarya' is of great significance. It is not just a word of blame but a word to remind him that he is safekeeper of honoured tradition of Aryans which he is flouting by rejecting her. It is a warning to him not to cross the line. It is an admonition that he is breaking the dhrama. For, Sakuntala the harsher punishment comes from her own people Sarnggrava and Saradvata who in their self-righteous pomposity leave her to fend for herself. It cannot be generalised to say that she is treated that way because she chose to marry without the consent. Kalidasa, through the use of irony makes sure that Sakuntala's repudiation by her own people is seen not in a generalised sense but as an instance of lacking of qualities empathy and humility of asceticism in Sarnggrava and Saradvata. The way both of them talk and comment on everything in a very condescending manner prepares the spectators to the highhanded sanctimonious behaviour that is seen in their interaction with Dushyanta and then their repudiation of Sakuntala. Sakuntala allows her sorrow to overwhelm her only when she goes out of the court. In her cry for the earth to pave and take her in, as in the case of Sita in the **Ramayana**, it is her dignity that stands out not her helplessness. She is rescued by Menaka her mother who comes back do her motherly duties and takes her to safe haven of Maricha hermitage. She even sends Sanumati to gather information on Dushyanta. It is to be remembered that 'motherly' Menaka is designated a symbol of 'dangerous femininity' and a contrast to Sakuntala by some feminist critics.

The reunion of Sakuntala and Dushyanta also comes under the critical lenses of the feminist critics. Though not her vivacious self any longer, Sakuntala is still in love with Dushyanta because through Sanumati her mother's friend she is aware of



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Dushyanta's remorse at repudiating her. Yet, it has to be reiterated that when Dushyanta meets her in the Maricha ashrama and her son Sarvadaman asks her about the identity of Dushyanta, she does not acknowledge Dushyanta as her husband. She waits for Dushyanta to admit and accept before the hermits that she and Sarvadaman are his wife and son. It is only after Dushyanta *kneels* before her that Kalidasa makes her accept Dushyanta and greet him as a husband is greeted by a wife. Imagine the dramatic impact of Dushyanta kneeling before her seeking pardon and reconciliation with her. Sakuntala makes sure that if she is repudiated publicly, her reconciliation with her husband can happen only after apology and reconciliation in public by him. Her happiness gets accentuated when she comes to know from Maricha that Dushyanta did not forget her on his own but because of the curse.

Just as Kalidasa breaks tradition in the conceiving Sakuntala, he breaks new path in designing the character of Dushyanta. Kalidasa presents Dushyanta, unlike the usual heroes of Sanskrit drama, "as human and fallible" [Rajan, 89] Kalidasa creates a much complex and interesting character of Dushyanta than one would expect in a *dhirodhata* character. He is no doubt presented as majestic and strong in person with graceful manner. Among his courtiers and the public there is a perception of he being a '*rajarshi*' but Kalidasa very cleverly puts him under his ironic scrutiny especially in the earlier part of the play so that we become aware of his weaknesses. The way Dushyanta falls in love with Sakuntala and observes her beauty in sexual terms eagerly waiting to enjoy certainly makes him look a 'philanderer'. Madhavya's comments when Dushyanta praises Sakuntala as 'the jewel of womankind'[ 73] on him corroborate our perception of him. "If so all fair ladies are now thrown into the background." [73]

But it would be wrong to fix our opinion of Dushyanta only on the earlier part of the play especially on the repudiation scene where Dushyanta seems to repudiate Sakuntala rather cruelly. Because of the curse which is Kalidasa's invention Dushyanta forgets about his marriage to Sakuntala and when she reaches his palace, refuses to acknowledge her as his wife. Dushyanta's repudiation is not only called 'callous and cruel'[Rajan, 92] but has been termed 'sexist'[ Yangzom,37] forgetting the fact that Dushyanta is pushed to speak harsh mostly because of, 'not partly because of' [Rajan, 93] the sanctimonious way Sarngraha and Saradvata behave with the king making unfounded accusations not only at him but dragging his ancestors into the conversation. When Sakuntala fails to provide the ring as an evidence, the enraged Dushyanta takes it on her and makes the comment that she is trying to palm off someone else's child as his and generalises about the deceit of women. The so called 'sexist remarks' have to be seen in the context of the heated debate that happens.

No doubt, as Rajan says, in the beginning Dushyanta knows Sakuntala only carnally [ 86] but on the discovery of the ring and his realisation of what happened, his remorse which makes him neglect his kingly duties, through his intense sense of guilt, through his fear of never be able to meet his wife or son again, Dushyanta changes for the better. So, when he sees Sakuntala in the Maricha's hermitage, it is not the 'roving eye for beauty' that sees her but for the first time he sees her as the 'person of intrinsic beauty not merely a beautiful object' [Rajan, 86] His grief and guilt making him not only a better person but also a better king. Losing his wife and child makes him empathetic towards all those who have lost their dear ones. He becomes respectful towards his queen Vasumati even as he grieves the loss of Sakuntala. It would be a great disservice to Kalidasa's impeccable dramatic sense if one forgets to acknowledge and appreciate this arc of transformation that he brings about in the characterisation of Dushyanta and thus in his (Kalidasa's) take on the repudiation of Sakuntala.

Sakuntala's repudiation in the absence of the ring also has made feminists complain that inanimate objects are given importance over and above what a woman says by Kalidasa reflecting gender bias. It has to be remembered that Kalidasa himself brings the ironic perspective whether true love requires an evidence by making Sanumati the friend of Menaka say "...how is it that love of such a type requires a token of recognition" [ 224] when she comes to see how Dushyanta is faring.





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Sakuntala being the child of Nature, doesn't care for the objects before repudiation. Nor she cares for it after the reconciliation because she refuses to take back the ring from the King. Thus, the recognition of Sakuntala that the title talks about, goes beyond recognition of Sakuntala with the help of a ring. The 'abhijanana' in the title, with a little more symbolic extension, could also be referring to Dushyanta recognising the true worth of Sakuntala.

No doubt, seen from the lens of feminist literary criticism certain parts of the play especially preference for male child, woman treated as a property of the man etc. would lend themselves to criticism. But it has to be noted and appreciated that Kalidasa stretches the boundaries of the art form which he inherited to imaginatively present Sakuntala as a woman who is independent, courageous and one who wouldn't bog down when faced with difficulties. Though critics like Sigdel talk in a passing manner about the presence of "of female agency" in the play, the emphasis given is to foreground "the subjugation women to male authority" "gender discrimination and sexual objectification of women" as the "primary drawback of the play". [Abstract] Such critics fail to see the enormity of achievement of Kalidasa - the way Kalidasa maps out Sakuntala's character as one with intelligence, courage, dignity and more than anything else 'agency' and the way he brings in the character development of Dushyanta as the play progresses. One can only marvel at how subtly but surely, he expands the boundaries of Sanskrit drama and the roles of *Nayaka* and *Nayaki* in it. In this matter, he seems to be akin to Shakespeare who created intelligent brave and beautiful heroines in his romantic comedies while the society itself did not present any role models among women.

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