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Oneness of flora with human emotions in Abhijñānaśākuntalam

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Abstract

Kālidāsa's Abhijñānaśākuntalam is justly one of the most renowned treatises on nature in the world. What makes it so close to human heart is the epitomization of nature as a co-existent in human survival. This paper is an attempt to address the issue of ever-growing human apathy towards our great beneficiary, our very own mother nature. The play presents Śakuntalā and nature representing each other in their attributes. The blending of nature and human feelings is complete and they are inseparable from each other.

Keyword: Nature, flora, emotional bond, sense of oneness, environment

Introduction

Literateurs have always derived inspiration from nature and tried to represent it in their words. Amongst the texts based on the theme of nature, Kālidāsa's Abhijñānaśākuntalam is justly one of the most renowned works all over the world. Here we observe equilibrium, cohesion, serenity, delicacy and an order being carried out. People world over go gaga over the poetic charm as well as the treatment of the plot of this immortal play. But what makes it so close to human heart is the epitomization of nature as a co-existent in human survival.

This paper is an attempt to address the issue of ever-growing apathy towards our great beneficiary, our very own mother nature. It is an attempt to arise human empathy towards nature through the portrayal of Abhijñānaśākuntalam's nature centred approach. The current human centered approach if co-related with Kālidāsa's nature centred system can prove a model to the world literature. The paper is going to discuss the intimate relationship between flora (undoubtedly a part and parcel of nature) and humans.

The play presents nature as a setting for the main action where Śakuntalā is introduced as a child of nature. We get to witness a frequent comparison of her with the delicate jasmine vine. Śakuntalā and nature represent each other in their attributes. Plants, birds and animals are her companions in her forest dwelling. She has established human relationship with them and treats them like her real kin.

Such a loving bond Śakuntalā shares with plants that she doesn't drink a drop of water without watering them; in spite of her love to decorate herself with flowers and leaves, she doesn't pluck any thinking of the pain inflicted upon them while being plucked. First blossom of a tree is an occasion of joyous celebration for her. That's why Kaṇva makes her bid farewell to even the trees and plants of the hermitage^[1]. Kaṇva's words inform us how tenderly Śakuntalā used to take care of the plants and how she was integrated into nature.

Śakuntalā's devotion to the hermitage trees has created a strong bond between her and nature world. The bond establishes a basic correspondence in the play between the natural world and the human emotional state. Śakuntalā's beloved navamālikā whom she says she would only forget to water when she forgot herself^[2] symbolizes her own impending union with king Duṣyanta.

Kālidāsa depicts human feelings through symbolic description of flora. Seeing Śakuntalā gazing at the jasmine vine, Priyamvadā portrays her mental state in the words that she is wondering to be one with the person of her choice as the jasmine vine has got entwined with the mango tree^[3]. The entwining of the jasmine vine with the mango tree indicates the impending union of Śakuntalā and Duṣyanta.

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When Śakuntalā confides in her friend Priyamvadā about her love for king Duṣyanta, Priyamvadā affirms that her attraction to a king is only natural: “Luckily, you’re inclined to the right person. Where should a great river wend, if not to the sea? Which tree is better than the mango to be entwined by the lush jasmine?”^[4]. Nature can manifestly be seen as even more important than the main plot of Abhijñānaśākuntalam. Plants and trees have been projected as a real living force. Śakuntalā’s various states of mind at different stages of the journey of her life are visibly reflected in nature and nature seems to be reflecting her mind sometimes through blossoming, sometimes through auspicious gifts, and sometimes by shedding withered leaves. The blending of nature and human feelings is complete and they are inextricable from each other.

Śākuntalam’s nature is nowhere dumb and lifeless. It’s quite a living force breathing and growing along with humans. Nature intercedes in the life of characters at every stage; and love, separation and reunion are all reflected by it. The very beginning of the play introduces Śakuntalā’s love for nature where she is seen tending the plants in her forest hermitage.

As Duṣyanta enters the hermitage, he sees Śakuntalā with Anusūyā and Priyamvadā watering plants^[5]. Her friend Anusūyā lovingly comments that sage Kaṇva seems to be infatuated with plants even more than her, that’s why such a petite girl has been entrusted with the responsibility of watering plants^[6]. Śakuntalā interrupts by saying that she also feels sibling love for them^[7]. What an affectionate bond she shares with plants that the saffron tree appears to her like it were signaling her to hurry up to come close to it^[8]. As Śakuntalā garners sibling love with plants, so is sage Kaṇva full of fatherly love for them. This love is reflected at the time of Śakuntalā’s departure from the hermitage when he showers equal love on the jasmine vine too^[9].

Kālidāsa connects flora with human emotions and portrays their innate unity. Śakuntalā is so indissoluble from nature that she personifies the pristine beauty of the greenery. The fourth act is exclusively an ode to flora. Owing to the sensitive nature of Śakuntalā, she has been compared with the delicate jasmine vine^[10]. Her pain of being away from Duṣyanta finds expression in the epithet of kumudvatī flower and moon where the kumudvatī has lost all her grandeur after the moon has set^[11]. Śakuntalā’s state of bearing child is conveyed through the simile of fire hidden in the śamī tree^[12]. When after marrying king Duṣyanta in secret, Śakuntalā departs from the hermitage to join him in the capital, the trees bless her with lots of consumables worth a bride. It is so expressed that the trees in the hermitage gifted auspicious items with hands sprouting from their trunks. Some gifted moonwhite silk apparels, another one oozed lākṣārāsa to redden her feet, while some other ones conjured ornaments^[13].

This symbolic elucidation through personification indicates to the real blessings by trees to the humankind where almost each and everything we put to use is either directly or indirectly extracted from trees. Their life sustaining quality gets beautifully mirrored in this verse. The verse presents an alluring instance of realistic account through natural imagery. At the time of Śakuntalā’s departure from the forest, vines and creepers shed tears in the form of withered leaves. Their expressing grief over the departure of their beloved caretaker denotes to the season of fall where everything appears gloomy. Nature is seen empathizing with human beings in all their pursuits. The image of the cakravāka bird crying in anguish when her mate is hidden behind the lotus leaves^[15] symbolizes Śakuntalā’s imminent dissociation from Duṣyanta.

There is not a moment when nature is off the play and there is not a moment when the characters are severed from the flora of the forest. The hermitage culture is preserved in all its chastity. It is the interposition of civilization that brings degradation to nature and this degradation has brought about the crisis in the environment. The basic law of ecology that everything is interrelated gets reflected in Abhijñānaśākuntalam and the play remains a bright star in the galaxy of modern literature.

In the wake of exceedingly frequent natural calamities now a days, we unanimously have to agree to the fact that it is only when humans live in harmony with nature that life becomes blissful. Boundaries between heaven and earth as well as nature and civilization are blurred in the play so as to maintain this harmony.

Abhijñānaśākuntalam remains a work to be discussed and debated by the environmental critics from the point of view of sustainable development. This text manifests not only the ravishing beauty of the forest in its myriad colours but also inculcates amongst us love, respect, consideration and a sense of unanimity with nature. The representation of various emotions through the prism of flora and the enchanting natural landscape in the text add colour and sweetness to kālidāsa’s art. Apart from this, the description holds a lesson of the conservation of nature to the present-day generation.

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