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Re-reading the story of Shakuntala: A comparative study of Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata & Kalidasa's Abhijanashakuntala

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Abstract

Epic is always the great source of World Literature. Ramayan and Mahabharata, the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India, are the treasure house of literary elements. Based on Ramayan and Mahabharata, many works in different genres of literature have been developed over time. The Indian Sanskrit drama has made a significant contribution to the study of Classical Indian Literature. Kalidasa's Abhijanashakuntala is one of them. Abhijanashakuntala is also known as The Recognition of Shakuntala or The Sign of Shakuntala. It is the best drama of Kalidasa. The story of the play is adopted from the epic Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata. Kalidasa has dramatized the story of Shakuntala narrated in the epic Mahabharata. Though the source of the drama is Mahabharata, Kalidasa has presented the story of Shakuntala with minor changes in the plot. In the epic Mahabharata and in the play Abhijanashakuntala, the story of Shakuntala is presented with thematic diversity. 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 Mahabharata and Abhijanashakuntala, it has been presented with greater moral value. Since identity forms the basis of exploitation as well as struggle, this process is begun to be called "identitism". The present paper is an attempt to form a comparative perspective on the story of Shakuntala and a significant attempt to give a literary representation to the study.

Keyword: Epic, drama, classical Indian literature, divine love, reunion

Introduction

The story of Shakuntala can be found both in the epic Mahabharata and in the play Abhijanashakuntala. Though the source of the story is Mahabharata, Kalidasa has presented the story of Shakuntala 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 union at the end. There is much tear and sight before the final union taken place. The original story in Mahabharata is minute and evergreen. Kalidasa has made the story more appealing to the audience adding some new elements in it. But the development of the story reaches to its end in the same way as it described in the epic Mahabharat. The adaptation of stories from the epics and their presentation in various literary forms like drama, fantasy, fiction etc. is one of the emerging areas of critical discussion. The present paper primarily focuses on the adaptation of the story of Shakuntala from the epic Mahabharata to dramatic text in Abhijanashakuntala. Kalidasa has done the re-functioning of the text from the page to stage. When the form or genre of the story changes, the plot assumes a new pattern.

Objectives

Main Objectives of my study is to focus on the story of Shakuntala narrated in Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata and presented in Kalidasa's Abhijanashakuntala, and examine the inter-relationship between two different literary genres i.e. Epic and Drama. At the same time I have tried to examine how Ved Vyasa and Kalidasa have presented the content of the story of Shakuntala from different angles in their texts. And finally I have tried to examine existence of some common events in both the texts. Finally an attempt has been made to provide an overview of Kalidasa' creative oeuvre - re-functioning of the story of Shakuntala from the page to stage.

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Research Methodology

This study is descriptive and comparative in nature and based on primary data. I have involved myself in intensive and critical reading of Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata & Kalidasa's Abhijnanashakuntala, which enabled me to collect information about the heartrending story of the protagonist, Shakuntala. The study will share specific research in this area based on in-depth study. I have collected secondary data by analyzing various published documents, books, literary reviews, autobiography, journals, websites, online data based etc. I have collected some selected documents and records as the major sources of data collection for the study.

The story of Shakuntala in Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata

The original story of Shakuntala is narrated in the epic Mahabharata. Ved Vyasa's divided the epic Mahabharata into 18 parvas. The story of Shakuntala can be found in 1st. Parvas i.e. Adi Parva or the "Book of the Beginning", under the section 'Sakuntalopakhyana'. It is the glorious story of Dushyanta and Shakuntala. Love is the prime subject of the story. The hero, Dushyanta, a king, is smitten at first sight with the charms of Shakuntala, the heroine. He saw that "she had beautiful hips, a lustrous appearance, and a charming smile. She was radiant with beauty, with the sheen of austerities and the calm of self-restraint." (Vyasa, 161) She was a dazzling maiden with a charming smile and a well proportioned physical form. Her attractiveness was defined not only by her graceful physical beauty but also by her charming personality.

The story is narrated in the ancient Indian epic Mahabharata. Once, Vishwamitra started to meditate to earn the status of a Brahmarshi. The intensity of his penance frightened Indra. He feared that Vishwamitra might want his throne. To end his penance, Indra sent Menaka, an apsara, to lure him and bring him out of his penance. Menaka reached Vishwamitra's meditating spot and started to seduce him. Vishwamitra could not control his lust and desire and his penance was broken. Vishwamitra and Menaka lived together for ten years and a daughter and a son was born to them. Later, Vishwamitra realized that all those things were Indra's tricks. He realized that he needed to control his emotions. So, he told Menaka that she would be separated from him forever. Vishwamitra left Menaka and Menaka left the baby near Rishi Kanva's hermitage before returning to heaven. Rishi Kanva found that two babies in his hermitage surrounded by Shakunta birds. Therefore he named a baby girl to Shakuntala. In the Adi Parva of Mahabharata, Kanva says: "She was surrounded in the solitude of the wilderness by śakuntas, therefore, hath she been named by me Shakuntala (Shakunta-protected)." And he named the baby boy Pramati. Shakuntala and Pramati grew up in Sage Kanva's ashrama; later Pramati became an acharya himself.

The main event of the story of Shakuntala centres in the forest. King Dushyanta first encountered Shakuntala while travelling through the forest with his army. He was pursuing a male deer wounded by his weapon. Shakuntala and Dushyanta fell in love with each other and got married as per Gandharva marriage system. Before returning to his kingdom, Dushyanta gave his personal royal ring to Shakuntala as a symbol of his promise to his wife and bring her to his palace as queen. This promise has created a situation of tremendous fear and uncertainty in the life of Shakuntala.

Shakuntala spent much time dreaming of Dushyant, her new husband. She was often distracted by her daydreams. One

day, a powerful rishi, Durvasa, came to the ashrama but, lost in her thoughts about Dushyanta, Shakuntala failed to greet him properly. Incensed by this slight, the rishi cursed Shakuntala, saying that the person she was dreaming of would forget about her altogether. As he departed in a rage, one of Shakuntala's friends quickly explained to him the reason for her friend's distraction. The rishi, realizing that his extreme wrath was not justified, modified his curse saying that the person who had forgotten Shakuntala would remember everything again if she showed him a personal token that had been given to her. This conflict made her to struggle for identity.

Dushyant had to leave the forest for his Kingdom. Time passed but he did not return. He became too busy for many years in affairs of the state. Shakuntala waited for Dushyant and became despair. The vision of Dushyant haunted her. Shakuntala was wondering why Dushyanta did not return for her, and finally she decided to set out for the capital city with her foster father and some of her companions. On the way, they had to cross a river by a canoe ferry and, seduced by the deep blue waters of the river, Shakuntala ran her fingers through the water. Her ring (Dushyanta's ring) slipped off her finger without her realizing it. Thus she has lost the token of love before reaching at Dushyanta's court and faced a lot of humiliation and disrespect.

Arriving at Dushyanta's court, Shakuntala was hurt and surprised when her husband did not recognize her, nor recollected anything about her. She tried to remind him that she was his wife but without the ring, Dushyanta did not recognize her. She was humiliated in the court. She was shocked to hear when Dushyanta denied her. This ignorance had created a situation of tremendous fear and uncertainty in the life of Shakuntala. She returned to the forests and, collecting her son, settled in a wild part of the forest by herself. Though she was rejected by her husband, she did not hate him. Here she had to survive alone, without any support from husband. She spent her days in a meaningless and endless waiting while Bharata, her son, grew older. Her frustration led her to live with insecurity and uncertainty. Surrounded only by wild animals, Bharata grew to be a strong youth and made a sport of opening the mouths of tigers and lions and counting their teeth.

Meanwhile, a fisherman was surprised to find a royal ring in the belly of a fish he had caught. Recognizing the royal seal, he took the ring to the palace and, upon seeing his ring, Dushyanta's memories of his lovely bride came rushing back to him. He immediately set out to find her and, arriving at her father's ashram, discovered that she was no longer there. He continued deeper into the forest to find his wife and came upon a surprising scene in the forest: a young boy had pried open the mouth of a lion and was busy counting its teeth. Seeing the boy's superhuman exploits, usually god-given powers, the king greeted the boy and asked his name. He was surprised when the boy answered that he was Bharata, the son of King Dushyanta. Amazed by his boldness and strength, the king asked the boy to take him to his mother. The boy took him to Shakuntala, and their ultimate knowledge helped to reunite the family. The conflict has the potential to soften up humiliations and hopelessness of Shakuntala. The story poignantly illustrates the plight of Shakuntala who hoped against the hope for the return of her husband. She tried to assert her existence in the face of social repression and distrust.

In Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata all these poignant incidents of pain and grief have been depicted in a narrative manner.

Shakuntala wanted to convey that a husband to a woman is the most important person and the support to lean against in the ups and downs of life especially when the relationship is the paragon of love and mutual understanding. But after the denial of her husband, she lost all the interests in life and remains indifferent to everyone. Women typically are considered as a mute sufferer but Shakuntala ought to have our appreciation because of her dedication. Occasionally, sorrow may be rigid and stressful, but we ought not to breakdown.

Dramatization of the story of Shakuntala by Kalidasa in Abhijnanashakuntala: Abhijnanashakuntala brings to us old memories of love between Dushyanta and Shakuntala. Kalidasa has adopted the story from Mahabharata and dramatized it. He has executed the story in a polished literary mould. Hence the presentation of the story bears some uniqueness. Kalidasa has divided the play Abhijnanashakuntala into seven acts-

- Act-I The Hunt
- Act-II The Secret
- Act-III The Love Making
- Act-I V Shukuntala's Departure
- Act-V Shukuntala's Rejection
- Act-VI Separation from Shukuntala
- Act-VIII Reunion

The entire atmosphere in the play Abhijnanashakuntala is linked with divine love. But love has brought a disaster in Shakuntala's life. She was given birth a baby and named him Bharatha. A curious undertone of melancholy sounds when Shakuntala says: "You must appoint him crown prince, just as you promised before, when we met." When Shakuntala tells Dushyanta all about their love, Dushyanta denies to recognize her any more. But in course of time truth comes in light. Long gap of separation vanishes with the return of Dushyanta to 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. It offers to the readers a heartbreaking story of Shakuntala who battle for her right to dignity and life.

Abhijnana Shakuntala contains the staples of Sanskrit drama with the hero and his entourage, heroine and her companions, jester and court officials etc. The play is a beautiful mixture of the rasa of love (srngara) and heroism (vira) and we can see how they play out in the actions and dialogues of the characters. Being part human and part apsara, Shakuntala inherits her mother's otherworldly beauty and grace, which is what, attracts Duhsanta in the first place. Shakuntala is portrayed as an exceptionally beautiful young woman who is loved by everyone in the hermitage, including the animals, trees, and plant life.

Dear Anasuya, it is not merely a matter of Father's injunction; I love them like a sister. (Kalidasa, 176)

She is first shown to us watering the plants and treating them like her kin. Similarly, when she leaves the hermitage, the animals and trees show their sorrow as well. Therefore, we are not surprised when Duhsanta has felt love for Shakuntala in their very first meeting.

Only after Shakuntala had departed the capital did the king's ring find its way back into his hands. When the ring was placed in the king's hand, his memories of Shakuntala

returned in a flash and his heart was plunged into unfathomable grief.

The king could do to restore his peace of mind when his memory was restored. One day Dushyanta was travelling about his realm and passed to a mountain hermitage, he came across two hermit maidens watching a young boy play with a lion cub. The young boy carried on teasing the lion cub, despite the increasingly distressed pleas of the two maidens. To restrain the child, they looked around for help and spotted the king watching nearby. They called to him, 'Sir, would you please release the poor cub from the grip of this child?' The king immediately obliged by stepping forward and calling to the boy, 'Say there, young sage.' At this the maidens gave a laugh. 'This is no sage's child', they said. 'He belongs to the lineage of Puru and only came here because his mother was cast off by a heartless ruler whose name we cannot bear to mention.' The king felt an immediate and unexpected affection for the child. The king was about to ask the mother's name when Shakuntala herself stepped into view. Dushyanta says:

"Beloved, on the day I spurned you I took no heed of the streams of tears that flowed from your eyes. Since then, my heart has been torn apart by pain. Now, as I wipe the tears from your eyes I shall drive away all that sorrow." (Kalidasa, 27)

Shakuntala's grief and suffering are resolved through Dushyanta's act of recognition. The two lovers were joyously reunited; the time came for Shakuntala to rejoin Dushyanta in his capital. It is a journey of a woman, who after initial hardships finds love, affection and a comfortable home of her own. Kalidasa has presented king Dushyanta and Shakuntala as an epitome of love.

Comparative study

Like classical western drama, Kalidasa has maintained three unities- Unity of time, Unity of place and Unity of action in his play. In Sanskrit drama heroes belonged to the upper castes such as Brahmins or Kshatriyas. They must be king or noble men leading to royal patronages. They had to be handsome, intelligent, daring, and filled with courage and fortitude. Duhsanta, the King of the Puru clan in the city of Hastinapur, is an ideal hero, loved and venerated by everyone in the kingdom.

The story of Shakuntala of the epic is slightly different from the one in the play. In the epic, Shakuntala arrives with her son at the court. When rejected, she fights for herself and her son, quoting the Law to counter Duhsanta's lies and insults. She argues her case in front of Duhsanta and prepares to leave after asserting that her son will reign sovereign. However, a heavenly voice affirms Shakuntala's words and the King accepts her. The play therefore departs firstly in showing Shakuntala as arriving before the birth of the son. At the face of Duhsanta's insults, Shakuntala does indeed, like her epic counterpart, assert her truthfulness but there is no heavenly voice to validate her words and both Duhsanta and her ascetic companions reject her. The rejection is crucial in elevating Shakuntala's status as a pious woman because even after being humiliated in front of everyone, she remains faithful to her husband and suffers with quite dignity rather than fighting further for her rights.

The Mahabharata story is slightly different from Kalidasa's version. The primary thrust in the Mahabharata is to teach us the nuances of dharma through the poignant love story of

Shakuntala and king Dushyanta. Abhijnana Shakuntala is a heroic drama of a romantic nature.

In the Mahabharata, though the title of the section is "Shakuntala," the king Dushyanta is at the centre. He is the active agent in the episode. But in Kalidasa's Abhijnana Shakuntalam, Shakuntala is the central character -whose feelings and thoughts are elaborated in great detail by the playwright. The play revolves around her travails and fights.

Kalidasa shows considerable skill in weaving the incidents in the plot and in the portrayal of individual character. He breathed new life into the plots that he took from others works. But he does not show much fertility of invention in theme and borrow the story from the epic Mahabharata.

Another aspect that differentiates the epic Mahabharata and Abhijnanashakuntala is the composition of actors. Ved Vyasa has drawn only four characters- Dushyanta, Shakuntala, Sage Kanwa and Sarvadaman in Mahabharata. Kalidasa modifies the story and introduces some new characters- Sage Vishwamitra, Sage Durvasa, Menoka, Goutami, Court jester, Matli, Priyamvada and Anasuya. Beside hero and heroine he introduced jester.

The story of Shakuntala is narrated in the epic Mahabharata in poetic form. Kalidasa has presented the story in Abhijnanashakuntala in dramatic form. There is a basic difference in 'telling' and 'showing' the story in the two forms respectively. The story is narrated in the epic Mahabharata and the story is acted out in the play Abhijnanashakuntala. Kalidasa includes dialogues, subtle gestures and postures, singing, dancing, and miming to bring about a holistic performance and enjoyment of the narrative.

Furthermore, the ultimate union of the hero and the heroine does not occur in the royal Palace of the King but in the heavenly hermitage of Marica and Aditi, years after the birth of their son. Thus, his retelling of Shakuntala is significantly different from its original source.

Nature occupies a much more important place in the story of Shakuntala. The hero and heroine are surrounded by nature with which they are in constant communication. Nature forms an essential part of their love. The story is presented in the ideal setting of natural beauty.

Both Ved Vyasa and Kalidasa deal with an accidental love affair between Dushyanta and Shakuntala. Shakuntala is a good and religious woman. These authors are much more successful in depicting the vibrant shades of the story. Though the story has been presented in two different literary forms, the story reaches to its end in the same way. Kalidasa did not leave much space for individual imagination and experiments with the genre.

Both the texts are the store-house and preserver of the highest moral, cultural, ideological and aesthetic values and tradition of mankind. Continuation and development of the story Strike the readers.

In both the texts Love which is a noble thing turns into a terrible thing in the life of Shakuntala. All the obstacles and triangles that have come in the path of true love are resolved and the lovers get happily reunited. The story ends with the note of fulfillment.

Conclusion

The story of Shakuntala's encounter, marriage, separation and reunion with her husband, Dushyanta, has been immortalized in the Mahabharata and in Abhijnanashakuntala. In both texts the protagonist Shakuntala is an embodiment of pain, hardship and helpless woman. She was a poor woman who struggled for the acknowledgement of her love, marriage and

identity in order to establish the parental identity of her son which is very importance in the eye of the society. She is a representative of a typical Indian woman. Her loyalty to her husband ennoble her as an exemplary woman, the ideal 'pativrata stri'. Her Love is real and divine. It has been tested in both the texts. The ardour of her love has turned down to a profound and touching melancholy. To make Duhsanta's character more appealing to the audience both the authors have introduced tragic element in the story of Shakuntala. Dushyanta is presented as a model king but a bit fickle in love. We all know that true love ennoble mankind; but the path of true lovers is beset with difficulties. The story of Shakuntala ends not with the celebration of reunion, but with a message to the readers that true love is spiritual and fruitful. There is no western influence in the development of the story. The story ends with Hindu Mythological art- 'virtue is rewarded', which throws a powerful effect on the audience.

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