

Recognizing Shakuntala: Legitimacy & Liminality

(A study based on Kalidasa's 'Abhijnanshakuntalam')

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Abstract: The play "Abhijnanshakuntalam" by Kalidasa is known for its sentiments and poetic ability. It revolves around the characters Shakuntala and Dushyanta following their first meeting, eventful separation, and fateful reunion. However, it also subtly asks bigger questions about authority and legitimacy. Shakuntala was raised in a hermitage, living a life of simplicity. Everything changes when she attends the royal court, where she must prove herself and gain validation.

This paper approaches 'Abhijnanshakuntalam' through a feminist lens, examining how aesthetics have structured patriarchal notions, recognition as a tool for male validation, and the portrayal of liminal aspects of womanhood. Dushyanta and Shakuntala got into a Gandharva marriage; Even though it was consensual and mutual, Shakuntala faced direct consequences. It examines how the lost ring is represented as a token for love, recognition, and memory. Her testimony and pregnancy weren't validated until the recovery of material proof and return of his memory; this showcases the conditional agency the women had. She also embodies liminal womanhood, as she transcends from forest to court and later to the celestial realm; she is still defined by her father, husband, and son rather than her autonomous self. This paper emphasizes on how the play acknowledges female agency, yet through the constraints of a male-centric system.

Keywords: Female legitimacy, cosmic, natural and political realms, liminal womanhood, recognition, Conditional Agency

Introduction: As Simone de Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex*, "Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth."¹ This statement highlights how male-centred systems often shape socio-cultural narratives for their own benefits and privileges. This idea can also be observed in the play 'Abhijnanshakuntalam', written by Kalidasa, a classical Sanskrit drama celebrated for its aesthetic beauty and poetic sentiment. Yet one that also reflects constrained agency, female subjectivity and authority, which are often overlooked under the cover of aesthetics. This paper analyses 'Abhijnanshakuntalam' through feminist frameworks and examines how it presents gender-based stereotypes, Silence, and the idea of justice in the form of recognition. The story moves across different spaces, from the peaceful yet guarded hermitage to the chaos of the royal court and, at last, reconciliation in the Celestial realm. This study focuses on the character of Shakuntala, who represents the liminality of

womanhood as the narrative unfolds through her moving across natural, social, and cosmic spaces, situated between her truth and need for acknowledgement.

Main Text: The play begins in the hermitage of sage Kanva, where Shakuntala is introduced as a nurturing figure, taking care of plants and animals, inseparable from the natural environment. She is praised for her femininity and idealised for her beauty and virtues, subtly reinforcing the conservative notions of womanhood. Upon seeing her, King Dushyanta described her as:

“How utterly lacking in Judgment is the venerable Kanva, imprisoning such beauty in a bark-garment. Her lower lip has the rich sheen of young shoots, her arms the very grace of tender twining stems; her limbs enchanting as a lovely flower glow with the radiance of magical youth.”²

These poetic descriptions add to the lyrical sentiments for which *‘Abhijnanashakuntalam’* is renowned; however, they also portray Shakuntala as an object for aesthetic admiration. By comparing her to delicate flowers and young shoots, it reduces her individual identity and moulds her into an image of fertility and beauty. This kind of representation can be understood through what modern thinkers have conceptualised as the male gaze, where women are presented as spectacles to be observed and admired, while men take on the role of the viewer, reinforcing the idea of women as objects within a patriarchal framework. He even critiques Kanva's upbringing, as he supposedly confined such beauty in a simple bark garment, implying she should be more ornamented to amplify her beauty. Sumana Biswas's observation on this is:

“Dushyanta’s such romanticisation of Shakuntala’s beauty conceals within it his greedy desire to colonise and consume the same. As a king, he is hierarchically in charge of protecting the forest and hermitages under his jurisdiction... It is equivalent to an invasion of Shakuntala’s body and soul, which is also disgracefully carried out by the King.”³

This highlights how men in power often view women as objects to display and acquire. King Dushyanata’s authority is absolute and his desire becomes a tool for asserting control. As the story progresses, Dushyanta falls in love with Shakuntala on the basis of her appearance and feminine qualities. While the play continues to depict Shakuntala through an aesthetic lens, it also features her personal desires and anxieties, as her feelings for Dushyanta are revealed through conversations with her friends and her ongoing internal conflict between moral restraints and emotions. Even though she remains hesitant, this allows her to express emotional autonomy within a confined, male-dominated structure. Even so this autonomy is limited as she is concerned about her foster father, Rishi Kanva's approval, indicating her constrained agency as a woman. On the contrary, Dushyanta has the mobility and power to govern and act on his own will. Eventually, Dushyanta manages to persuade her: “Many are the daughters of sages, married by Gandharva rite, we hear; and once married, felicitated with joyful acceptance by their fathers.”⁴ Through this he justifies their union and lack of social validation. They marry secretly through Gandharva rite without taking societal approval. Yet, the play quickly establishes how conditional women's agency is, even if the Gandharva marriage between Dushyanta and Shakuntala is consensual and reciprocated by both; its legitimacy still depends on societal recognition.

This momentary autonomy is soon interrupted by the curse of Sage Durvasa. Lost in thoughts of Dushyanta, Shakuntala fails to welcome the sage properly in accordance with the hospitality of hermitage. Offended by her improper manner, he curses her, “You who do not notice me. A hoard of holy merit Standing at your door Because you are lost in thought 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.”⁵ The curse he puts on Shakuntala ensures that the person she is thinking of will forget her. Her friends pleaded for mercy on shakuntala behalf; he refused to revoke it, as once the curse is said, it cannot be taken back, though he told them a condition that the person would recognize her if shown a token. The curse functions as a

crucial narrative device that Kalidasa uses to mark the beginning of the central conflict of the play, '*Abhijnanashakuntalam*', the recognition of Shakuntala. This incident highlights Shakuntala's weak agency, as even a moment of distraction brought misfortune upon her that does not resolve until her recognition, again emphasising the need for external validation.

Still unaware of the curse cast upon her by Durvasa. Shakuntala learns that she will be sent to Dushyanta's kingdom following the decision of her foster father, Rishi Kanva, who recognised that she was pregnant with the offspring of King Dushyanta, the one who is destined to rule the kingdom. Before sending her away from the hermitage, Kanva gives her a few words of advice, more so instructions on how to act and behave as a dutiful wife:

“Serve your elders with diligence; be a friend to your co-wives; even if wronged by your husband, do not cross him through anger; treat those who serve you with the utmost courtesy; be not puffed up with pride by wealth and pleasures: thus do girls attain the status of mistress of the home; those who act contrary are the bane of their families.”⁶

These instructions are rooted in patriarchal ideals that women are expected to obediently follow, removing their individual selves. The advice focuses on being in service to elders, accommodating other co-wives of her husband and treating them as companions, not rivals. This reflects the normalisation of polygamous relations that “prevailed” in the noble families, and perhaps the most gendered aspect of this advice lies in the instruction to accept that even if your husband does anything wrong, the wife must not be angered by it and remain unconditionally obedient reinforcing the ideal of submission to the husband. At the same time, he advises her to treat the servants kindly and not be arrogant; it also represents the class hierarchy present in the society, and finally, he reminds Shakuntala of her position in society. If you are chosen as mistress, behave like it. If you act out of order, it puts shame on the family name. These rules are instituted in Hindu ideology, as Dr Pritilaxmi Swain points out:

“To abide entirely by the wishes of her husband and to be devoted to his well-being alone, is considered to be the highest duty of a Hindu woman. There is an abiding faith in the institution of marriage as not just a private affair. but as a sacrament, a mystic unifying force that builds society.”⁷

Marriage, therefore, becomes a sacred act that constructs society rather than a union of two individuals, that regulates women role as obedient and dutiful under male authority

Furthermore, this reinstates the position of women within patriarchal society, where they are defined through their relationship to fathers, husbands, and sons rather than as themselves. This social expectation becomes more significant as Shakuntala moves from the hermitage, where she is under the protection of her foster father, to the Royal court, to reunite with Dushyanta as his wife. However, due to the curse of Durvasa, and the loss of the signet ring given by Dushyanta, the sole proof of their marriage. Dushyanta fails to recognise Shakuntala and even chastises her for imposing herself upon him. He accuses her of lying and questions her intentions, blatantly dismissing her truth. The courtiers ridicule her for Gandharva marriage, judging her desires and agency to get married without societal approval, thereby reflecting broader society opinion. Shakuntala's attempts to defend herself fail due to lack of material proof, the signet ring; even her pregnancy and claims fail to prove her truth, emphasising that female testimony is given no value in the public sphere, the ring therefore plays a symbolic role in recognition of Shakuntala, as that is the only way Dushyanta can recognise her and legitimise her stance.

The conditioning of Shakuntala's agency can be understood through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern, particularly through “Epistemic Violence” which she defines as the systematic invalidation of marginalized knowledge and lived experience by dominant systems. Even when

Shakuntala speaks her truth, her voice is not silenced but remains unheard; her words carry no authority within patriarchal institutions. Shakuntala thus highlights the conditional nature of women's agency that is dependent on male-centred systems of recognition. Moreover, as a woman and as someone without influence in the court, Shakuntala occupies a doubly marginalized position, reflecting Spivak's understanding of subaltern women. This marginalization extends beyond the royal court to abandonment from her kinsmen. This abandonment intensifies her isolation from society. While the play reflects patriarchal norms, it also showcases the injustice women face and the denied authority to present their opinions. Shakuntala's suffering, isolation, and liminality are not recognised by male primacy, reflecting male-dominated assertion of female subjectivity. Her isolation is further exemplified as her ascetic companions who accompanied her from the hermitage abandoned her in the court.

As Saradvata asserts that the husband has control over his wife, and Shakuntala is left bewildered as she is betrayed by both Dushyanta and the ascetics who once supported her; "This then is your wife; accept her, or abandon her; a husband's dominion over his wife is absolute... What is this? Here I am, betrayed by this cheat; are you also abandoning me?"⁸ Sarngarva further suggests that if she is indeed what the king claims her to be, it would bring dishonour to Rishi Kanva, yet if she is really pure and truthful, even servitude in her husband's house is acceptable. This interaction brings out the instrumental female agency, as even those from hermitage prioritise honour and male authority over Shakuntala's truth, despite the presence of female ascetic; even her opinion wasn't given any thought, and only the male ascetic asserted their choice to abandon Shakuntala then and there, reflecting the ground reality as Women's agency continues to be legitimised by society.

Shakuntala, upon losing the ring and being abandoned by her kin, is left helpless in the court. At that moment, divine intervention occurs, as celestial nymph Misrakesi descends and takes her away. This resolution suggests that society's injustice towards women is resolved through supernatural agency rather than accountability. Instead of confrontation, the narrative removes her from the earthly realm altogether. Even here, Shakuntala is saved by an outside force; her autonomy remains dependent on power beyond her control.

Later, the lost signet ring is miraculously found by a fisherman, and when Dushyanta sees the ring, his memory of Shakuntala returns. This reveals that their relationship ultimately depends on the recognition of a material token. Only after that, he acknowledged Shakuntala and his past actions. Yet, he still doesn't acknowledge his wrongdoings and blames it on fate.

The conversation between Dushyanta and the court jester Madhavya further showcases how males selectively choose to evade accountability. When the king asks Madhavya, you could have reminded me about Shakuntala, and he replies with "fate is all powerful"⁹, completely dismissing the possibility of intervention, suggesting that it wouldn't have changed anything. They never took into account the misery inflicted upon Shakuntala. Following the restoration of his memory, Dushyanata longs for Shakuntala, and their Reunion appears as if destined in the celestial hermitage of Sage Marica, where Shakuntala was taken by the nymph Misrakesi. Dushyanata there encounters his son Bharata, confirming the familial bond, and it is Sage Mariachi who reveals the curse of Durvasa. Thereafter, Dushyanta immediately declares, "Then I am free from blame."¹⁰ This reaction portrays how the male protagonist escapes the blame and any responsibility, rather than confronting or providing justification for his actions. It is also significant how Sage Marica discloses this information only after the king's arrival, not to Shakuntala, earlier, who was withering away in isolation and distress, which once again shows how patriarchy overlooks women's emotions.

As Shyama Khanal also observes: "Her fortitude and acceptance of all injustice as her misfortune without any protest against her husband Dushyanta, returns her to the traditional characteristics of a woman, that is, self-annihilation and surrender to the male-built whirlpool of tradition and

conservatism.”¹¹ While Shakuntala never questions Dushyanta’s authority, she instead internalizes her suffering as misfortune; this attitude is conventional within the play.

The narrative of abandonment, rescue, and eventual reunion places Shakuntala within a state of liminality. After being rejected in the royal court, Shakuntala was neither able to go back to hermitage, the place where she was raised and belonged, nor was she recognised in the royal court as a legitimate wife of Dushyanta. Her transcending to the celestial realm situates her outside the social and political confines of the mortal world. She was not acknowledged by society and nor virtuous enough to return to hermitage; the only refuge she was given was in cosmic space beyond the public sphere. As Ankur Betagiri states:

“Her naturalness has to be sacrificed to uphold the conventions of culture, but she is also required by culture as a liminal being, as that phenomenon at the horizon from which its own impossible heroes arise, and out of the sacred abomination called Shakuntala is born Sarva-damana, the all-oppressor, who is also called Bharata.”¹²

Shakuntala is described as “sacred abomination” because she herself is born through disrupted penance, and after marrying Dushyanta through a gandharva marriage, their son Bharata is born. This reinforces her position as a liminal Figure in the play; it reveals how her identity remains dependent on male acknowledgment; her displacement from one place to another highlights the limited agency women have, where legitimacy is constantly questioned and approved through male validation. Thus, the narrative of *Abhijnanshantalam* not only focuses on love but also exposes the position of women in a male-dominated society.

In conclusion, Kalidasa’s *‘Abhijnanashakuntalam’* reflects the socio-cultural conventions of the time period it was written in, especially the portrayal of gender-based bias and the construction of legitimacy. The play is filled with poetic metaphors and scenic imagery; around the separation of lovers and their eventual reunion, this aestheticisation also undermines the inequalities of social structure. The hardships that Shakuntala goes through are overlooked as inevitable rather than consequences of an unjust, male-oriented society.

When analysing *‘Abhijnanashakuntalam’* through feminist point of view, it extends beyond the theme of romance to a play that exposes how male-centric society regulates recognition, agency and belonging. Shakuntala’s shift from the hermitage to the royal court and eventually to the celestial realm; presents the unstable nature of women’s belonging in such a system. Furthermore, *‘Abhijnanashakuntalam’* shows us how storytelling can shape our ability to perceive right and wrong. The romance between Dushyanta and Shakuntala, divine intervention, and the reunion are factors that create a sense of relief, which is expected. Yet, this makes Shakuntala being treated unfairly oblivious; the play makes everything seem normalised without questioning the system that made Shakuntala suffer in the first place. Thus, *‘Abhijnanashakuntalam’* remains an important literary work, not only for its brilliance but also for the critical questioning of society. It prompts us to ask deeper questions that go beyond the narrative itself: Why should female identity depend upon male memory?

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