

Block

1

KALIDASA: *Abhijnana Shakuntala*

Unit 1

Indian Aesthetics: An Introduction **5**

Unit 2

Kalidas: An Overview **11**

Unit 3

***Abhijnana Shakuntala*: Textual Analysis** **22**

Unit 4

***Abhijnana Shakuntala*: Character Analysis &
Critical Perspectives** **33**

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COURSE INTRODUCTION

This is a Course that will remind us of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and lying on our grandmother's lap while listening to tales of old. It brings to us old memories of love between a King and a commoner, the mystery of the missing signet ring, a son disowned because of a memory lapse as a result of a curse; of court intrigues and the disrobing of a woman of gentle birth till a grand battle between cousins is waged; and of the love between a young Brahman and a Courtesan who is also pursued by a vile courtier; and last but not the least – one of the “Five Great Epics of Tamil Literature”, *Cilappatikaram*, which is again a story of the love between a married man and a courtesan and her abandonment by him and his eventual death. So, we have three texts in *Sanskrit*, and one in Tamil. Two are epics – The *Mahābhāratam*, and *Cilappatikāram*, which is a Tamil text; while *Abhijñāna Shakuntalā*, and *Mrichchakatika* are *Sanskrit* dramas.

So, we hope you are ready to embark on a magical, mystical journey through the ages.



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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

Block 1 of this course on Classical Indian Literature will begin with **Kalidasa's** best known Sanskrit play *Abhijñāna Shākuntalā*, which tells the tale of a young girl raised in a hermitage by a sage and who is actually, the daughter of an extremely learned sage *Vishwamitra* and a celestial dancer *Menaka*. King *Duhsanta* is hunting in the forest near the hermitage where *Shakuntala* lives with the hermit *Kanva*, raised as his daughter, after being abandoned by *Vishwamitra* and *Menaka* for various reasons. He comes to the hermitage unadorned as a commoner and falls in love with *Shakuntala*. *Shakuntala* and the King get married in the hermitage and she is with child. He has to leave for his Kingdom but he gives *Shakuntala* his signet ring as a token of his love for her. However, as fate would have it, *Shakuntala* is lost in the thought of the King while, *Durvasa Rishi* a learned saint with an extreme temper is calling out to *Shakuntala*. She obviously does not hear him and irritated by her lack of response, he curses her saying:

*You who do not notice me,
A hoard of merit standing at your doorstep,
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.*

When the girls at the hermitage plead with him, he modifies his curse and tells *Shakuntala* that the King will remember her when he sees the ring. Inevitably, en route to the Palace, *Shakuntala* loses the ring. It falls off her finger and is swallowed by a fish which is caught and later gutted by a fisherman who finds the ring and wears it, till he is spotted by a palace guard who recognises the ring and brings the fisherman whom he believes to be a thief, before the King. Meanwhile when *Shakuntala* reaches the Palace the King has no recollection of her but agrees to let her stay in the Palace till the child is born. When the fisherman is brought before the King, *Durvasa Rishi's* curse is lifted and he remembers *Shakuntala*. There are other events at play but this is the main story line of the play. Eventually King *Duhsanta*, *Shakuntala* and their son are reunited and they return to the palace.

So let's now, go through the units in this block for a better understanding of the play, the cultural ethos of a long ago time that may have existed in the world of myths and our collective imagination. Do read the translated text before you start reading the Units as this will give you a better grasp of the play. You are expected to read **Kalidasa's** *Abhijñāna Shākuntalā*, translated by **Chandra Rajan** called **Kalidasa: The Loom of Time**, (New Delhi: Penguin, 1989).

UNIT 1 INDIAN AESTHETICS: AN INTRODUCTION

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Indian Classical Drama
- 1.3 *Sanskrit* Drama
- 1.4 Classical *Sanskrit* Playwrights
- 1.5 Bhasa
- 1.6 Sudraka
- 1.7 Bhavbhuti
- 1.8 Kalidasa
- 1.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.10 Questions

1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will look at drama, specifically Classical Indian drama and its origin, role, and significance. Beginning with its oral tradition to the later religious performances, the unit will examine drama as a performative social activity aimed at particular audiences. We will then discuss *Sanskrit* dramas, its various components and end with an overview of major *Sanskrit* dramatists such as **Bhasa**, **Bhavbhuti** and **Sudraka**. This unit will conclude with a brief discussion on **Kalidasa** as the next unit will deal with him in detail. The objective of this unit is to offer a concise idea about Indian drama with a specific focus on *Sanskrit* plays as I'm sure most of us do not have much knowledge about *Sanskrit* drama *per se*.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Like any literary genre, drama has its own history both in terms of its origin and evolution. The drama that we see or study in classrooms today did not begin as such. As a literary composition, drama usually tells us a story, but not just through words, in the form of dialogues, but also through gestures, movements, and facial expressions of the characters, dances, costumes, background landscape, music, stage setting etc. Drama is, therefore, a performative art that includes many components and participants such as the playwright, actors, director, audience, costume designer, make-up artists etc. In the next section we shall take a look at what is called Indian Classical Drama.

1.2 INDIAN CLASSICAL DRAMA

All major civilisations had their own version of drama such as the Greek, the Chinese and the Indians. One of the major problems in determining an origin date for literary traditions such as drama is that we cannot pinpoint the exact year of its genesis rather, we can trace its influence and evolution to arrive

at a more or less realistic understanding of the origins of drama. The Indian dramatic tradition was influenced by the dramatic elements found in the *Vedas*, in dialogue hymns and *Vedic* rituals. Thus, it is in the *Vedic* era (1500 - 1000 BCE) that we see dramatic elements that will come to define drama in the years to come and eventually usher in a *genre* known as Indian Classical Drama as we know it. Even the epics, such as the *Mahabharata* support the existence of performers or *nata* as early as 400 CE. However, the most extant treatise on Indian drama is the *Natyashastra* by **Bharatamuni**, which emerged in 3rd CE. **Bharata** ascribes a divine origin to the dramatic tradition, which highlights its *Vedic* religious beginnings. The very existence of such a text suggests that it was the culmination of a fairly long process of dramatic development taking place at that time.

The Greek invasion of the Indian subcontinent has led a few critics such as **Weber** to assert a Greek influence on Indian drama. There are certainly some similarities such as the plot being mainly centered on historical, mythical figures but the Indian tradition has the added element of supernatural figures such as gods and goddesses that populate the world of drama. The division of the Play into Acts and Scenes, use of the Chorus, developments of stock characters demonstrate this Greek influence on all drama. However, major differences also exist between the two traditions, specifically the absence of tragedy in the Indian dramatic tradition. Greek drama's adherence to the **Three Unities of time, place and action** is not strictly observed in Indian drama where the action shifts from earthly spaces to heavenly ones, taking place across many years as well. Furthermore, dance and song are an important part of Indian drama and not found in the Greek counterpart. Other scholars highlight the influence of Buddhist and Jain traditions in the formalising of the Indian dramatic tradition. Thus, we can conclude that there might have been a strain of the Greek influence along with influences from other literary traditions and cultures such as the Buddhist and Jain traditions that worked together with ancient *Vedic* ones to create the *Classical Indian drama* as we know it today. This may be particularly true of the Tamil Epic *Cilappatikaram* which is influenced also by the Buddhist and Jain traditions as we shall see in the fourth block. In the next section, we shall look at *Sanskrit* Drama.

1.3 *SANSKRIT* DRAMA

In this section, we shall examine *Sanskrit* drama in a more detailed manner. A vast country like India cannot have a singular dramatic tradition, given as we discussed before the various influences on the *genre* as well as the diversity of the subcontinent and how these communities received and adapted drama. However, one of the most prominent dramatic traditions to have emerged is *Sanskrit* drama. Others include the dance drama of southern India as well the *Sanskrit* tradition of southern India such as the *Koodiyattam* in Kerala.

According to the *Natyashastra*, a dramatic work's purpose was to provide not just entertainment and pleasure but instruction, wealth, justice, and spiritual liberation. That's why *Sanskrit* drama does not have a tragic ending because in Hindu cosmology, death is not the end but a means to either achieve spiritual liberation from the cycle of life or be reborn till it is achieved. Moreover, the *Rasa* or the aesthetic sentiment is an important aspect of *Sanskrit* drama, and

can be best defined as the audience's refined emotional response evoked by the play. *Rasa* is broadly composed of *vibhava*, *anubhava*, *vyabhicharibhava*, and *sthayibhava*, which are the different types of emotional responses to a work of art. Alternatively *rasa* can be explained as a blissful aesthetic experience achieved via drama, and is seen as *Sanskrit* drama's highest purpose.

Natyashastra also elucidates the different types of plays, the major type (*Rupaka*) or the minor type (*uparupaka*). *Rupaka* consists of ten varieties out of which the *Nataka*, are plays based on myths and heroic tales, and the *Prakarana*, are plays based on fictitious stories and where less important characters are dominant. *Sanskrit* drama's idealised plot structure consists of five transitions that lead to a final culmination of the events depicted. The first is the "origin" (*mukha*), which states the seeds or the beginning of the plot; the second is the "incident" (*pratimukha*), which develops the plotline further by showing both good and bad events; the third is "germ" (*garbha*) where good actions/events seem to lead towards the "aim" (*phala*); the fourth is "crisis" (*vimarsa*) where bad actions/events seem to outweigh the good and strays away from the "aim"; the fifth is "completion" (*nirvahana*) that brings together all the different narratives in the play to a definitive conclusion.

One of the unique aspects of *Sanskrit* drama is its bilingual nature. The protagonists who belonged to the upper castes such as *Brahmins* and *Kshatriyas* spoke in *Sanskrit* whereas characters from other sections of society such as soldiers, servants, women and children etc. spoke in the various *Prakrit* languages. The stock characters encountered here such as the *Sutradhar* (director), the *Nayak* (hero), the *Nayaki* (Heroine), and the *Vidusaka* (jester) speak either in *Sanskrit* or *Prakrit* depending on their caste, class, gender, and age. Such a linguistic construction of the play restricted the variety of people who could watch and enjoy it. Thus, the audience was mostly limited to a refined circle of upper castes such as the royalty, aristocrats, *Brahmins* and *Kshatriyas*, leading to royal patronages. Even the *Natyashastra* states that the ideal spectators should be educated and noble men, all four castes could watch a play as long as they were seated separately. It is no surprise then that *Sanskrit* drama failed to be a people's drama such as those in ancient Greece and medieval England. However, this is not to say no other form of drama existed or evolved in India outside of the *Sanskritic* tradition, folk theater and street plays (*nukkad natak*) abound even now and are a testament to the vitality of contemporary Indian theatre.

Another aspect that differentiates *Sanskrit* drama from its European counterpart is the composition of actors. Unlike the ban on female actors in European classical drama, the *Sanskritic* tradition did not have such prohibitions that required male actors to perform the role of female leads, and drama could be performed by men alone, women alone or a mix of both, depending on the plot. Despite its many unique characteristics, the major drawback of *Sanskrit* drama was its linguistic barrier as well as the strict adherence to the rules of dramaturgy that did not leave much space for individual imagination and experiments with the *genre*. Its failure to transition into popular art because of the decline of *Sanskrit* as a living language led to the gradual disinterest in *Sanskritic* works. However, *Sanskrit* plays are still being written and performed in India by playwrights such as **Manmohan Acharya** (*Arjuna-Pratijnaa*, *Shrita-kalam*, *Pada-pallavam*, *Divya-Jayadevam*, *Pingalaa*, *Mrtyuh*, *Sthitaprajnah*, *Tantra-mahasaktih*, *Purva-sakuntalam*, *Uttara-*

sakuntalam and Raavanah); **Vidyadhar Shastri** (*Purnanandam, Kalidainyam and Durbala Balam*) and **Prafulla Kumar Mishra** (*Chitrangada and Karuna*), that are a living testimony to the endurance of the *genre*. *Sanskrit* literature may have failed to become popular literature but it is still studied in academia and seen as an important aspect of Indian culture and tradition. Let us look at the Classical Sanskrit Dramatists of ancient times next.

1.4 CLASSICAL SANSKRIT PLAYWRIGHTS

Sanskrit drama is defined by the works of dramatists such as **Sudraka**, **Bhasa**, **Bhavbhuti**, **Harsha**, and **Kalidasa** to name a few. They have survived through thousands of years because of their literary prowess in depicting characters, settings, plots in their own individualistic way. Almost all the great *Sanskrit* playwrights benefitted from royal patronage or were part of royal households or even of kings. Let us begin by talking about **Bhasa** first.

1.5 BHASA

Bhasa (3rd- 4th CE) was a *Sanskrit* playwright, preceding **Kalidasa**, believed to have lived in the city of *Ujjain*. Relatively unknown to *Sanskrit* scholars except through references in other dramatic works, **Bhasa**'s works saw the light of the day in 1909 when the play *Swapnavasavadatta* (*Vision of Vasavadatta*) was discovered by **Pandit Anandalvar** of the Archaeological Survey of Mysore. In 1913 a total of thirteen plays were discovered in an old library in Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum) by **T Ganapati Shastri**.

Bhasa drew his inspiration from epics such as the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, the *Purana* and semi-historical legends and figures. **Bhasa**'s plays do not follow the *Natyashastra* very strictly, even breaking dramatic conventions. This has led some critics to conclude that **Bhasa**'s plays were written before **Bharatamuni**'s treatise, others see this as an indication of **Bhasa**'s poetic experiments and disregard for dramatic conventions.

Swapnavasavadatta is his most famous play that depicts the story of King *Udayana*, who must choose between marrying for love his beloved *Vasavadatta* or the daughter of a neighboring king, Princess *Padmavati*, for political gain. In the play **Bhasa** combines romance with political intrigue creating a new kind of drama. Along with traditional dramas, **Bhasa** also wrote short plays, one act plays, and monologues.

Among the many dramatic conventions that **Bhasa** broke was depicting a tragic ending in his plays. Both *Uru-bhanga* (*Breaking of the Thighs*) and *Karna-bhara* (*Karna's Task*), which deal with the stories of *Duryodhana* and *Karna* respectively, end on tragic notes. The heroes of these two plays are traditionally seen as villains or anti-heroes in the *Mahabharata* however, **Bhasa** treats them with sympathy and shows a side of their character hitherto not dealt with in the epic. Furthermore, **Bhasa** does not shy away from showing violent acts on stage, which was another *Natyashastra* convention that he disregards. We shall take a quick look at **Sudraka** next.

1.6 SUDRAKA

Sudraka, literally translated as the little servant, was a poet-king who lived in *Ujjain* in the 2nd CE. He is well known for his *Prakarana* play,

Mrichchhakatika (The Little Clay Cart), which is an extended version of **Bhasa**'s incomplete play *Charudattam* (Charudatta). The ten act play tells the love story of a Brahmin merchant, *Charudatta* and a courtesan *Vasantasenâ*, whose union is thwarted by a jealous suitor. Even with a few serious elements, the play ends happily and is primarily seen as a mix of romance and humour. It also offers an interesting and realistic picture of urban society and the complex social structure of that time. We will be studying **Sudraka**'s *Mrichhakatika* in Block III of this course. His other plays include *Vinavasavadatta*, and a *Bhana* (short one-act monologue), and *Padmaprabhritaka*. Incidentally, the 1984 Hindi movie *Utsav*, directed by Girish Karnad is believed to have been based largely on *Mrichhakatika*. **Bhavbhuti** will be examined in the subsequent section.

1.7 BHAVBHUTI

Bhavabhuti, a major dramatist of the later *Sanskrit* dramatic period, was the court poet of King *Yashovarman* of *Kannauj*, in north India in 8th CE. He too wrote plays based on the *Ramayana*, such as the *Mahaviracharita* (Exploits of a Great Hero), which depicts the early life of Rama and *Uttaramcharita* (The Latter History of Rama), which shows the final years of Rama's life as written in the *Uttara Kanda* of the *Ramayana*. Both the plays consist of seven acts written in the *Nataka* style.

His third drama, *Malatimadhava* (*Malati and Madhava*), is a *Prakarana* play centered on the love story of *Malati*, the daughter of a minister and *Madhavya*, her beloved. *Malati* is set to be married off to *Nandana* in accordance with the king's wishes. The powerful suitor as well as a mix-up with another couple interrupts the union of *Malati* and *Madhava*, which is finally resolved with the aid of magic. The use of the supernatural makes this play a one of a kind drama that skillfully combines romance with horror.

Bhavabhuti's long poetic descriptions are seen as mere embellishment that does not add anything to the drama, but tends to obfuscate his clear and simple diction. He is known for completely doing away with the *vidusaka* and thus eliminating the comic element in his plays. Critics see this as a reflection of his temperament that could not portray humour effectively. **Bhavabhuti** instead compensates for it by highlighting the supernatural and the grotesque thus evoking the *rasa Bibhasta* (disgust) and *Raudra* (anger) in his works. His plays have the unique combination of heroism, romance and horror unrivaled in *Sanskrit* literature. The next section will deal with a brief look at **Kalidasa** as we place him in the tradition.

1.8 KALIDASA

One of best-known *Sanskrit* dramatists in the world, whose works have been adapted and translated into numerous languages and forms, **Kalidasa**'s poetic skills are unparalleled even today. Basing his works on the *Vedas*, the *Purana* and the epics, **Kalidasa** reimagined and breathed new life into the plots that he took from these works.

His works include notable plays, such as *Mâlâvikâgnimitram* (*Pertaining to Mâlâvikâ and Agnimitra*), and *Vikramorvasiyam* (*Pertaining to Vikrama and Urvashi*). He also wrote epic poems such as *Raghuvamśa* (*Dynasty of*

Kalidasa: *Abhijnana Shakuntala*

Raghu) and *Kumârasambhava* (Birth of 'Kumara' or *Śubrahmanya*) along with *Khandakavyas* (minor poems). However, his most popular and famous work remains the *Abhijñāna Shākuntalam* (*The Recognition of Shakuntala*). We will not discuss the details of his work and aesthetics here. This will be dealt with in the next unit.

1.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have learnt about the history and development of Indian Classical drama. Special focus has been given to *Sanskrit* drama, with comparisons and differences drawn between the Indian and European dramatic tradition to give an overall awareness about drama. We have also been apprised of other important *Sanskrit* playwrights and that has helped us understand the tradition beyond **Kalidasa** and has offered us an appreciation on the diversity and range of classical *Sanskrit* literature.

1.10 QUESTIONS

1. What do you think is the origin of Indian Classical Drama?
2. What do you understand by the term Sanskrit Drama?
3. Name some of the prominent Classical Sanskrit playwrights and attempt a critical analysis of their works.

UNIT 2 KALIDASA: AN OVERVIEW

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Kalidasa's Background
 - 2.2.1 The Problem of Date
 - 2.2.2 The City of *Ujjain* and its Relevance in Kalidasa
- 2.3 Kalidasa's Literary Background
- 2.4 Kalidasa and his Works
- 2.5 Epic and Drama
 - 2.5.1 The Original story of *Shakuntala* from the Epic *Mahabharata*
 - 2.5.2 The Question of Form
- 2.6 Ancient Indian Aesthetics
 - 2.6.1 Dramatic Art
 - 2.6.2 Bharata's *Natyashastra*
- 2.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.8 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 2.9 Glossary

2.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will acquaint you with **Kalidasa**, the man, the myth and the creative genius. It will also lead us into a discussion on the probable time of **Kalidasa** and the place where he lived. In addition, **Kalidasa's** literary influences would be mapped to help us place the poet in the vast expanse of ancient literature. For a precise understanding of **Kalidasa's** art, attempt has also been made in this unit to take a closer look at the original story of *Shakuntala* available in the epic *Mahabharata*. We will also see, at a more general level, how the play, *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* of **Kalidasa** departs from the original source of the epic. A critical discussion on aspects of epic and drama might make us aware about the workings of the two forms/ *genres* in question – the epic and the drama. Finally, a view of ancient Indian aesthetics will apprise us of what was being written during the ancient period and the parameters against which literary texts were judged.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Very little information is available on **Kalidasa** the person. The result of research done on him is based on associations and references that are available in works identified to have been written by him. **Kalidasa's** texts help us understand his world and they give us clues to his time. Generally, in approaching a text our movement of inquiry is from the outside world of the writer to the inside world of the text. In the case of **Kalidasa**, however, the opposite takes place. Because we have scarce information about his surroundings we are forced to look at his text first and then make our impression about the world he inhabited. Hence, an inversion takes place in the case of **Kalidasa**. In **Kalidasa**, the movement is thus, from inside the textual world outwards and it makes interpreting and finding meaning more exploratory and open-ended, there being no pre-determined ideas influencing the view of **Kalidasa**. Secondly, **Kalidasa**

appears conscious about the existing literary trends and stylistics. This helped him focus on the themes associated with courtly life as well as with the gods. His subject was lofty (it is believed he was among the nine gems/ *navratnas*, in the court of **Chandragupta II**) and as a court poet he followed the tradition of courtly drama with an eye on the whims and fancies of the nobility. Was, then, **Kalidasa** an elitist poet? Interestingly, **Kalidasa** emphasises poignant human emotions in his works; this might have struck a chord with the ordinary people. Yet, **Kalidasa** should be seen under the larger paradigm of classical writing.

2.2 KALIDASA'S BACKGROUND

It is still important that we try and place **Kalidasa**, and locate him in some time frame so, let's try and do that. Since **Kalidasa** belonged to the ancient period and much of information about it has been lost over centuries, it is difficult to gain the required details. In fact, dates alluding to his time of birth span centuries. Scholarship on his probable dates varies.

2.2.1 The Problem of Date

It is believed, for instance, that **Kalidasa** was a court poet of **Agnimitra Sunga** (second century BC) who lived during the years of the **Sunga** Empire 184 BC to 78 BC. According to the belief, **Kalidasa** made **Agnimitra Sunga** the protagonist of his first play *Malavikagnimitran*. Another view of **Kalidasa's** period places him in first century BC during the reign of **Vikramaditya** of *Ujjain*, around 57 BCT. Thus, **Kalidasa** was associated with King **Vikramaditya** who was the poet's patron. A third opinion establishes **Kalidasa's** date between the fourth and fifth centuries AD—the age of **Chandra Gupta II** who assumed the title of **Chandra Gupta Vikramaditya** after his winning spree in western India.

The lack of knowledge about **Kalidasa** works both as an advantage and disadvantage. The disadvantage is that it leaves us completely in the dark about the writer's ethos. We cannot take help from his surroundings to correlate them with events that take place in his works. It restricts us to the text *per se*. However, the advantage is that knowing little about **Kalidasa's** time frees us from the binds of historicity and we are constrained to delve deeper into his texts.

2.2.2 The City of *Ujjain* and its Relevance in **Kalidasa**

It emerges from the settings of **Kalidasa's** works that he was greatly inspired by the natural beauty of the *Malwa* region in central India. His fondness for *Ujjain* particularly comes to the fore in the way he describes the city. **Chandra Rajan** has keenly delineated how the topography of *Malwa* might have shaped **Kalidasa's** imagination. She says:

The poet describes the topography of the Vindhya and the Malwa region with a loving exactitude as if the landscape lay on the palm of his hand. Malwa, in central India (now part of Madhya Pradesh) is watered by many rivers and streams, rising from the Vindhya ranges and draining its slopes and valleys. Malwa's landscapes streaked by its many rivers and streams with glades and pleasure-gardens on their banks; dotted with groves and meadows and woodlands stretching

along the slopes of the hills; its holy spots and long low hills containing caves overgrown with bushes, stir the poet's imagination and evoke in us the beauty that once was.

The Loom of Time, (26)

This tells us that **Kalidasa** has depicted with immense pride scenes from *Ujjain* in his works. It has made **Kalidasa's** imagery highly evocative. *Ujjain* with its picturesque sights was also a cultural and commercial hub. It was the centre of learning and intellectual movements where music and the arts were given primacy. While living in *Ujjain*, **Kalidasa** was directly in touch with the harmony of nature and the world of art associated with the court. The latter also lent high aesthetic appeal to his works.

Additionally, *Ujjain* was a centre of scientific learning during the period. **Amartya Sen** importantly brings to our notice the fact that the city of *Ujjain* "in the early centuries of the first millennium CE" was "the location of the 'principal meridian' for Indian calendars, serving for Indian astronomers as something like an Indian Greenwich". Talking of astronomy, **Sen** adds,

Technical development clearly had much to do with the location of imperial power as well as scientific research at the time. Ujjain (or Ujjayini as it was then called), as an ancient city moved from its role as the capital of Avanti (later Malwa) in the seventh century BCE to become the capital of the Saka royalty, and most prominently served as the base of the later Gupta dynasty, in the period of the flowering of Indian Mathematics and science.

The Argumentative Indian (40-1)

Along with mathematical and scientific studies *Ujjain* had to its credit a rich literary tradition of which **Kalidasa** was a part. This is corroborated by **E M Forster** in his essay "Nine Gems of Ujjain." Certainly, there was no dearth of wealth in *Ujjain*, in fact the palaces and gardens described in **Kalidasa** convey the sense of that splendour which the city carried. We note that **Kalidasa** instills both optimism and pride in his characters that seem to be leading organised lives and amassing resources at the same time. An immense scope for progress and riches is discernible in **Kalidasa's** works that conveys the sense of optimism that the period conveyed. This lends an epic quality to his works as the great feats of kings and the glory of their kingdom become important markers of assertion in **Kalidasa**. The great poet was guided in this by the patronage he received from his benefactors. The plays of **Kalidasa** were performed in court during festivities. This made his preference for lofty subjects justifiable.

Even though **Kalidasa** was a court poet, he was extremely sensitive to the emotions, feelings of those who lived in humble dwellings, in distant corners of the land, away from the court and where the king resided. We note often that **Kalidasa** presents a critique of duty and decorum that represses the passions of an individual. What makes **Kalidasa** stand out amongst writers is that he expresses nuances of human emotions buried deep in the heart of simple men and women. Let us examine **Kalidasa's** literary background next.

2.3 KALIDASA'S LITERARY BACKGROUND

Kalidasa as a literateur was steeped in philosophy, aesthetics, and grammar. We know this after a careful reading of his *The Loom of Time* and other works.

He was influenced by the epics – the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* from which he often drew material for his compositions. Borrowing tales and stories from popular epics was a regular practice among writers of ancient India. **Bhasa**, for instance, deployed tales from the *Mahabharata* and wove dramatic plots around them. **Bhasa**'s plays *Urubhangam*, *Karnabharam* are examples of this. **Kalidasa** in his prologue to his first play *Malavikagnimitram* acknowledges **Bhasa**, the ancient dramatist, as one of the greatest playwrights of *Sanskrit* Literature, saying, “How can the work of the modern poet **Kalidasa** be more esteemed than the works of **Bhasa**, **Kaviputra**, **Saumillaka** and others of established fame?” The issue is explained thus by **Kalidasa**—“Everything is not praiseworthy, just because it is old; nor should a poetical work be dismissed just because it is new” (qtd. in **Haksar**). **Kalidasa** is conscious of the value of art and asserts that it is not dependent on antiquity. He uses the rational principal to derive at what is praiseworthy in literature. He emphasised the great value of **Bhasa**'s works. **Haksar** has observed, “**Bhasa** was already well known on the Indian scene over fifteen hundred years ago, when **Kalidasa** had just begun to make his mark” (**Haksar** ix). Both **Bhasa** and **Kalidasa**, along with **Bana Bhatta** (the first *Sanskrit* novelist and court poet of 7th century *Kanauj*, north India) contributed to the literary canon of classical *Sanskrit* literature. **Jayadeva** of the 13th century had the following to say of the trio in his work *Prasanna Raghava*— “Who will not delight in the Muse of Poetry ... the lovely maid whose laughter is **Bhasa**, the guru of poets, whose sport of pleasure is **Kalidasa**, whose Cupid is **Bana**” (qtd. in **Haksar**, x).

It is evident that **Kalidasa** had studied **Bharata**'s *Natyashastra* as well, although the other theory that goes around suggests that it was **Bharata** that learnt from **Kalidasa** and wrote a treatise on drama based on representations in **Kalidasa**'s plays. **Chandra Rajan** has said this emphatically. To quote:

*It is possible that the author of the Natyashastra sat down to compose his treatise with **Kalidasa**'s plays before him. That a writer of **Kalidasa**'s genius and accomplishment would write according to the book is not very likely; it seems more plausible that a critic and theorist would draw upon the work of a great writer to formulate his theories.* (Rajan, 29)

Nonetheless, **Kalidasa** successfully evokes the various *rasas* in his plays that add value to a scene or character. This aspect would be discussed in some detail later. In the next section we shall take a quick look at **Kalidasa**'s other works.

2.4 KALIDASA AND HIS WORKS

Kalidasa was a dramatist, an epic writer and a poet. The plots of his plays are based on the known adventures of Kings, even as legends and folk tales inspired his poetic works. **Kalidasa** gave depth to his works by making his characters multi-dimensional and expanding their scope with imaginative flights. In his writing, characters appear layered, and their actions are governed by well-conceived notions of beauty. Importantly, **Kalidasa** is a secular voice in a largely conservative culture. His secular sense comes from his emphasis on the rational approach to life that consciously integrated pleasure with lofty ideals. This made the writer look at events from a specific view of reality as it was

being lived out at the time, and not through the lens of fossilised ideas borrowed from the past. It is **Kalidasa**'s humanism that makes his works secular. His works are largely relatable. Even as **Kalidasa** wrote in the ancient period we identify with the pains and joys of his characters as well as situations because the writer stirs our basic emotions and feelings. This connects us to the world of **Kalidasa**. As a playwright, he gives voice to his characters that remained insignificant in common life but gain significance in his hands.

Seven of **Kalidasa**'s works have survived the test of time. Among these we have three long lyrical poems, three plays, and an incomplete epic. The poems believed to have been written by **Kalidasa** include: *Ritusamharam* (*Gathering of the Seasons*); *Kumarasambhavam* (*The Birth of Kumara*); and *Meghadutam* (*The Cloud Messenger*). **Kalidasa** is best known for the long lyrical poem *Meghadutam*. Among the plays, we have *Malavikagnimitram* (*Malavika and Agnimitra*), his first play; *Vikramorvasiyam* (*Urvashi won by Valour*); *Abhijnana Shakuntala* (*The recognition of Shakuntala*), the third in the order. Finally, **Kalidasa** wrote an epic he could not complete, titled *Raghuvamsam* (*Raghu's Dynasty*).

Ritusamharam being **Kalidasa**'s early work appears to be art in the making. In it, the poet brings to life each season and its impact on the landscape. He captures the beautiful imagery in a stylised form while attempting to make it appear natural in the poem. Such experiments with the lyric form refined the literary art of **Kalidasa** further. His skills as a creative writer and particularly a poet were perfected by the time he wrote his last poem *Meghadutam* which is a *duta-kavyam* or messenger-poem. Here, **Kalidasa** charts out the agony of a *yaksha* who has been separated from his beloved due to a curse (he being cursed by his lord *Kubera* for neglecting his duties). The *Yaksha* persuades the cloud to take his message to his wife. Hence, the poem's title "The Cloud Messenger". Duty and human will/desire always clash with one another in **Kalidasa**. In fact, in his play *Vikramorvasiyam*, **Kalidasa** projects a double curse directed at *Urvashi* for the neglect of work/duty, because she is caught up in deep passionate thoughts about the king. The curse element in **Kalidasa** is important because it is a form of punishment given to characters that become 'disoriented' towards duty and follow their passions—just as the *Yaksa* in *Meghadootam* or *Shakuntala* in *Abhijnana Shakuntala* or *Urvashi* in *Vikramorvasiyam*. In the next section we shall look at the difference between the two *genres* – the Epic and the drama and also see how the *Shakuntala* story in the *Mahabharata* differs or is the same as the play *Shakuntala*.

Check Your Progress 1

1. What makes Kalidasa a secular humanist? Give reasons for your answer.

.....

2.5 EPIC AND DRAMA

Shakuntala's narrative is described at length in the epic *Mahabharata* under the section '*Sakuntalopakhyana*' from the *Adi Parva* or the "Book of the Beginning". It is recounted as one among the many ancestral legends of the *Puru* lineage by *Vaisampayana* to *Janamejaya* on the occasion of a sacrificial ritual.

2.5.1 The Original Story of *Shakuntala* from the Epic *Mahabharata*

This narrative is focused on discovering who the *Bharatas* were. The answer is - they were descendants of *Bharata*, born of *Shakuntala* and *Duhsanta* (a *Paurava* king). The focus of the narrative is on *Duhsanta* and the significance of *Shakuntala* is limited to her son who would be the prospective heir to *Duhsanta*'s throne. In the epic, *Duhsanta* is projected as the "triumphant king" who is the "equal of Indra, slayer of foes, warder-off of enemy elephants, they thought of him as the Thunderbolt-Wielder himself" (Buitenen 57). The story in the epic goes as follows. King *Duhsanta* while pursuing a deer enters "the depths of forest" and chances upon a holy hermitage that appears to him as "*Indira's paradise*". Here "no tree lacked bloom or fruit" and "no tree was thorny". The wilderness was an idyllic picture. *Duhsanta* reaches the sanctum of the ascetic *Kanva Kasyapa* to pay his respects. But there instead of *Kanva* he finds his adopted daughter *Shakuntala*. *Duhsanta* is immediately smitten by the beauty of the maiden. 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. (161)

He then asks her about her parentage. *Shakuntala* narrates the story of her birth as she heard it from *Kanva* once upon a time. She is the daughter of an *apsara*, *Menaka* and the austere ascetic *Vishwamitra*. On birth, *Menaka* abandons her and goes back to the realm of the gods, to *Indra*. *Shakuntala* according to her own narrative is then found by the saint *Kanva*. Having heard her tale King *Duhsanta* reaffirms that *Shakuntala* couldn't have been an ordinary maiden. He coaxes her to enter into a *Gandharva* marriage with him, a marriage "done in secret" with rituals "between a loving man and a loving woman". *Shakuntala* agrees on one condition—she asks the King to promise that the son that may be "born from me shall be Young King to succeed you, great King, declare this to me as the truth! If it is to be thus, *Duhsanta*, you may lie with me". He agrees and the two consummate their marriage. Thereafter, the king returns to court. *Shakuntala* in the following year gives birth to a son at saint *Kanva*'s hermitage. The child "radiant like a blazing fire" grows up in the hermitage for six years—he "would fether lions and tigers" to the trees around the hermitage. Watching his "superhuman exploits" *Kanva* decides to send him to the King's palace with *Shakuntala*. At the King's palace, *Duhsanta* refuses to acknowledge *Shakuntala*, calling her an "evil ascetic". *Shakuntala* "stunned with grief" pleads her case emphasising the importance of a son for the king – she says "a son is a putra because he saves his father from the hell named Put" and calls herself the dutiful wife, stating that "she is a wife who is handy in the house, she is a wife who bears children, she is a wife whose life is her husband" (167). *Duhsanta* humiliates *Shakuntala* in the following way:

I do not know that this is my son you have born, *Shakuntala*. Women are liars—who will trust your word? *Menaka*, your mother, was a merciless slut who cast you off like a faded garland on a peak of the Himalayas! *Viswamitra*, your merciless father, who born a baron, reached for brahminhood, was a lecher! (168)

Shakuntala hears out *Duhsanta*, points out his forgetfulness and describes her higher lineage— “*My birth is higher than yours Duhsanta! You walk on earth, great king, but I fly the skies*”. She finally, comes back to the issue of her son and warns *Duhsanta* – “*The ancestors call a son the foundation of family, and lineage, the highest of all merits of Law—therefore one should never abandon a son*” (168). Having said all this, *Shakuntala* departs and a celestial voice warns *Duhsanta* of his wrong deed. At this, *Duhsanta* changes his stance suggesting – “*I myself knew very well he was my son. But if I had taken him as my son on her word alone, suspicion would have been rife among the people and he would never have been cleared of it.*” (169) Therefore, *Duhsanta* suggests, that he has to play the fraudulent game of rebuking her. With this, *Duhsanta* accepts his son and *Shakuntala* and brings them both to the court declaring the latter the young King.

Check Your Progress 2

1. How was the story of *Shakuntala* narrated in the *Mahabharata*? Who was the central figure in that narrative?

.....

2.5.2 The Question of Form

Is there a difference between the story narrated in the *Mahabharata* and its representation in **Kalidasa**'s play? **Kalidasa** takes up the story from the *Mahabharata*, works on it, fleshes it out and makes it into a play. The basic difference is that the form of the legend is different. In the *Mahabharata*, the story is narrated in an epic fashion, and in the play the plot is laid out for use on the stage. As we read the play, we recognise, that there is a basic difference in ‘telling’ and ‘showing’ in the two forms respectively.

Does something change if the form of the plot is a narrative or a drama? When the story is narrated in an epic and later acted out as a play, does it undergo modification? What exactly alters with the change of the form/*genre*? Let us bear in mind that when the form/ *genre* of the plot changes, the story assumes a new pattern. In the case of drama, dialogues become central and for that reason a character's inner dynamics comes to the fore. The epic may have dialogues, too, but it is governed by the requirements of the narrative. As far as the play is concerned, characters take over and speak that which follows their motivation. Later, in view of different motivations clashing with one another, the dramatic action moves following the dictates of the changing scenario. The play, thus, invites the reader /viewer to imaginatively participate in the action on stage. In the play, there is no direct judgment to tell the audience what is to be followed and why. This is at variance with what happens in an epic, where the narrative has the reins on the evolving action, at each stage interpreting the goings on. The play works as a stimulus for intellectual debate that is played out on the stage as well as in the minds of the audience. Also, characters in a play are allowed more space to live out the moment which is not possible in the epic. Further, the play is a continuum, unlike the epic where episodes have a character of their own. These are interpreted by the audience depending on their individual merit at the specific moment.

While changing the form/*genre*, **Kalidasa** retells the story differently with this, the emphases of his work changes. As he lays out the story from the *Mahabharata* for representation on stage, he assigns to it new parameters involving scenes, small acts of individual characters, and the interplay of situations in the format of showing and representing. What does one mean by the playwright's emphases here? It is those aspects in a text that receive special focus at the cost of those that are pushed into the background. The playwright consciously picks up a point for expansion and gives more space to it than others. Emphases are based on the playwright's sympathies and preferences. Think of the title of the work, *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* i.e. "*The Recognition of Shakuntala*". **Kalidasa** makes it clear where his sympathies lie and who the protagonist of the play will be. That a woman will be the hero of the story reveals the position of the playwright. In the *Mahabharata*, the section of "*Shakuntala*" comes under the head of "*The Origins*". Even as the title of the section is "*Shakuntala*" in the *Mahabharata*, it is *Shakuntala* as the beautiful maiden and later *Bharata*'s mother that gets foregrounded. As a consequence, the king is at the centre, he is the active agent in the episode. That is not the case with **Kalidasa's** *Shakuntala*.

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. For now, suffice it to say that the story of *Shakuntala* undergoes a sea of change in the hands of **Kalidasa**—both because the emphases of the text shifts and because the form of representation changes. Let us now take a look at the dramatic art more specifically. We should also look at ancient Indian aesthetics as aesthetics dictate to aspects of drama.

Check Your Progress 3

1. Write a comparative note on the epic and the drama keeping in mind their specific features.

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2.6 ANCIENT INDIAN AESTHETICS

Dramatic art in ancient India held an appeal as no other art form did. Recitations of folk tales and epics gradually came to include enactments. The form of drama in *Sanskrit* literature particularly included aspects of dance, music and acting. It was performative in an inclusive sense as it freely used gestures, mimes and dance postures. Dance and drama during the period were not viewed as distinct forms.

2.6.1 Dramatic Art

Drama was a mix of many elements. It was an art form that included lyrical and narrative modes; verse and prose; speech, song and acting; masks, costume and ornaments. Together these provided a distinct stylisation to drama in the ancient period.

At the point of time when **Kalidasa** wrote his plays, the dramatic form had emerged on the literary horizon. The process has been observed as follows:

*Many of the elements of drama were already in place at a very early time, perhaps by the middle of the first millennium BC, at the time of **Panini**, the great grammarian who was also a poet. With various traditions converging around this time: the literary tradition of the Vedas and epics, the popular and folk play traditions centering perhaps around vegetation rites and festivals such as sowing and harvesting, the ritual drama and the dance with its story-line, it was inevitable that drama as we understand it should have been evolving into its final form.* (Rajan 33)

It is suggested that in the ancient period the popular and folk traditions were extensively deployed in performances during festivals. These popular forms close to the life of everyday people were used even in court dramas that eventually took shape over the centuries to follow. Court drama took elements from the four *Vedas* so that it became a source of high learning as well. **Amartya Sen**'s comment on the *Vedas* offers a useful insight into the nature of writing at the time. For **Sen**,

The Vedas may be full of hymns and religious invocations, but they also tell stories, speculate about the world and—true to the argumentative propensity already in view—ask difficult questions. A basic doubt concerns the very creation of the world: did someone make it, was it a spontaneous emergence, and is there a God who knows what really happened? (132)

To be sure, the way we visualise the ancient past of India is different from the way the ancients looked at themselves. Far from being rigid, the *Vedas* appear to be open-ended and preserves the exploratory spirit. Speaking specifically about the *Rigveda*, **Sen** has added:

The Rigveda goes on to express radical doubts on these issues: 'who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? ...perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not—the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows—or perhaps he does not know'. These doubts from the second millennium BCE would recur again and again in India's long argumentative history, along with a great many other questions about epistemology and ethics. (132)

That the *Rigveda*, the first *Veda*, expresses “radical doubts” about the basic questions of life makes it clear that India's ancient past was more heterogeneous and secular. The aesthetic of the period reflects that spirit, too. This gets projected in the theory of drama presented as a treatise by **Bharata** in the *Natyashastra*. This obviously demands a brief look at the *Natyashastra* next

2.6.2 **Bharata's *Natyashastra***

Natyashastra (the poetics of drama) is a treatise on the dramatic art that attempts to outline the aim, purpose and role of drama in ancient India. The treatise includes specific features and elements considered integral to *Sanskrit* drama. '*Natya*' carries the root word '*nat*' which means to act or emote. It may be applied to both drama and dance, as '*natya*' is also the word for dancing or dramatic representation and '*natak*' denotes a play. *Natyashastra* is the oldest text on the theory of drama that has survived for centuries. **Bharata** termed it the fifth *Veda*. He has claimed:

I shall make a fifth Veda on the Natya with the Semi-historical Tales (itihasa) which will conduce to duty (dharma), wealth (artha) as well as fame, will contain good counsel and collection [of other material for human well-being], will give guidance to people of the future as well in all their actions, will be enriched by the teaching of all scriptures (sastra) and will give a review of all arts and crafts (silpa). (qtd, in Nagpal 55)

Note that it is meant to be a *Veda* i.e. crystallised knowledge of supreme importance on the aspect of *natya* that is drama. Drama occupied an important position in the ancient period. It was an essential source of learning. For this reason, **Bharata** claimed that drama based on his treatise “will conduce”... people “to duty” bring them on the path of *dharma* and “provide guidance to people of the future”. The suggestion here is that **Bharata** pictures the afterlife of his text much like the *Vedas* were considered in his own time. He believes that *Natyashastra* too would hold similar importance. Nonetheless, the focus is on offering knowledge through the agency of drama. Thus, drama was meant to be didactic in nature even as it entertained the audience in the process. To teach and to delight became the central aim of dramatic art in the hands of critics and writers of *Sanskrit* literature. Interestingly, **Bharata** notes that the fifth Veda, *Natyashastra*, would be accessible to all unlike the first four *Vedas* that were and maybe still are denied to women and *shudras*. For **Bharata**, *Natyashastra* could be read by anyone. What is the significance of this? Such an exercise would make scriptures and literature human-centred and approachable.

The *Natyashastra* provides ten different types of dramatic representations that are determined by factors of length of a play, theme, plot and characters. *Nataka* and *Prakarna* belong to the category of full length plays of five to ten acts that have as their subject plots taken from histories and fictional stories respectively. On the other hand, there are *bhanas* that are satirical monologues and dwell on superficial or less important themes. Between these extremes, the treatise fits in tragedies and comedies that may have one to four acts and the subject is of relative importance. These include among others, *samavakara* and *ihamrga* (that have less than five acts but deal with divine themes); *vyayog* and *anka* (one act plays based on a single day’s event).

The *Natyashastra* was meant to take elements from the first four *Vedas* and include these under one head. It ventured to draw from the *Rigveda* the “recitative” quality, from the *Yajurveda* “histrionic representation”, from the *Atharvaveda* “rituals and style” and from the *Samaveda* the “*rasas*”. Importantly, the *Natyashastra* is best known for expounding the theory of *rasas* which is particularly relevant for us in understanding the aesthetic sensibility of **Kalidasa**. The peculiar sensibility of **Kalidasa** will be focused in the next section. Let us first understand the theory of *rasa*. For **Sheldon Pollock** *rasa* is that which can be “savoured”. To him:

Bharata’s language often clearly suggests that his analytical focus is on rasa in the character. The comic, for example, ‘is seen to exist for the most part in women and characters of low status’, not in the response of the viewer. Moreover, Bharata’s conception of the casual process—bhavas, or emotions, are the factors that ‘manifest’ the rasa—implies, or at least later is taken to imply, the pre-existence of rasa in the character and hence the character’s analytical primacy. (49)

Bharata provides us with a list of eight *rasas* —the erotic (*srngar*); the comic (*hasya*); the furious (*raudra*); the pathetic (*karuna*); the heroic (*vir*); the marvelous (*adhbhut*); the odious (*bibhatsa*); and the terrible (*bhayanak*). All these have their specific importance in the writer’s scheme of things. Among these, the *rasa* of *srngar* reigns supreme. This is because *srngar* is the *rasa* of pleasure and beauty.

Check Your Progress 4

1. What was the purpose of dramatic art in the ancient period as discussed by Bharat Muni in his *Natyashastra*?

.....

2.7 LET US SUM UP

This unit has brought into focus aspects of ancient Indian drama. It has offered a discussion on **Kalidasa**’s probable time and culture. In this discussion, an attempt has been made to provide a view of **Kalidasa**’s literary background that would enable us to understand the larger context of ancient Indian aesthetics, this in turn led us to an overview of **Kalidasa**’ creative oeuvre. A general view of **Bharata**’s *Natyashastra* has been provided and his concepts of drama touched upon since they make the backbone of ancient *Sanskrit* drama. Apart from these, the question of form has been taken up and particularly the forms of epic and drama have been compared in the context of **Kalidasa**. We also gained a view of the original story that was written in the *Mahabharata* and later adapted by **Kalidasa** for his dramatic work.

2.8 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. Read Section 2.4

Check Your Progress 2

1. Read Section 2.5.1

Check Your Progress 3

1. Read Section 2.5.2

Check Your Progress 4

1. Read Section 2.6, 2.6.1 & 2.6.2

2.9 GLOSSARY

Topography—the material place with its specific features/ the physical characteristics of a region.

Yaksa—is an ancient spirit that guarded nature and was worshipped as a deity of groves and water sources.

UNIT 3 ABHIJNANA SHAKUNTALA: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Summary & Analysis Acts I-IV
 - 3.2.1 Prologue
 - 3.2.2 Act I: The Chase
 - 3.2.3 Act II: Concealment of the Telling
 - 3.2.4 Act III: Love's Fruition
 - 3.2.5 Act IV: *Shakuntala's* Departure
- 3.3 Summary and Analysis Acts V- VII
 - 3.3.1 Act V: The Repudiation of *Shakuntala*
 - 3.3.2 Act VI: Separation from *Shakuntala*
 - 3.3.3 Act VII: *Shakuntala's* Prosperity
- 3.4 Themes
 - 3.4.1 The Theme of Love
 - 3.4.2 The Theme of Concealment
 - 3.4.3 The Hermitage and the Court
- 3.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.6 Hints to Check Your Progress

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we will be analysing the text / play *Abhijnana Shakuntala* critically. We will begin with a brief explanation on how to read the play. This will help us to understand the play and enjoy its full aesthetic appeal. This will be followed by a detailed summary of the seven Acts. In addition to this, we will also discuss the major themes and characters in the play.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Abhijnana Shakuntala is one of the most well-known plays by **Kalidasa**. As most of the *Sanskrit* dramas of his time, **Kalidasa** wrote in a mixture of both classical *Sanskrit* - spoken by the royals, courtly figures, upper caste figures and *Prakrit*, consisting of different types of vernaculars - spoken by the common people including women and children. What does this sentence say about the times? Does it strike you to find women and children clubbed together? Hold that thought.

The title of the play *Abhijnana Shakuntala* can be translated as *The Recognition of Shakuntala*. The play, as stated in the earlier unit, is an extension of an episode from the *Mahabharata*. **Kalidasa's** prowess as an exemplary dramatist can be seen in way he has lent complexity to the characters - to *Shakuntala* and *Duhsanta*, adding innovative elements such as the curse and the ring to enhance the *rasa* of *kama* /love as well as, making *Duhsanta's* character more appealing to the audience. 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.

Kalidasa creates a heroic drama of a romantic nature, endearing it to the audience of his day and now readers beyond his time and place. The longing and aches of first love; the trials of love thwarted; the happiness at being reunited; are emotions and feelings that everyone can identify with. However, one cannot deny how the drama is a reflection of particular socio-political and cultural ethos of his time. The very rejection of *Shakuntala* because of the loss of the token makes us question the position of women in his time (notwithstanding the loss of memory). As *Misrakesi* asks “does a love such as this really need a token of recognition? How can that be?” (254). *Duhsanta*’s unhappiness at his inability to have a son is a telling portrayal of the importance of sons in carrying the name of the family forward. Even in the depiction of the fisherman who finds the lost ring, **Kalidasa** shows the corrupt and brutal nature of the guards/ soldiers/ law enforcers who treat him unfairly and assume his guilt without any proof. Such details help us to imagine the world of *Shakuntala* and *Duhsanta* with a clarity and nuance not available in the epic.

The play is available to us in translation, which naturally begs the question of how well can the translated text embody the *rasa*/essence of the drama? The translation that we are using is the Penguin Classics series titled **Kalidasa - The Loom of Time** by **Chandra Rajan**, published in 1989. The text is a beautiful rendering of the original drama, keeping in mind its literary and aesthetic quality. When we read the play, we are able to imagine the cool wooded groove where *Duhsanta* first meets *Shakuntala*,

*Rippling beneath a passing breeze, waters flow
in deep channels to lave the roots of trees;
smoke drifts up from oblations to the Sacred Fire
to dim the soft sheen of tender leafbuds;
free from fearm fawns browse lazily in meadows
beyond, where darbha-shoots are closely cropped.* (p.175)

- feel *Shakuntala*’s crushing agony when she leaves the Hermitage for the royal palace,

*Rent from my dear father’s lap like a sapling of the sandlewood tree
uprooted from the side of the Malaya mountain, how can I survive
in an alien soil?* (p. 227)

and visualise the splendor of *Indra*’s chariot as it travels in the sky. To enjoy the play, we must imagine as we read and keep in mind the fact that *Sanskrit* drama does not just include dialogues but also includes subtle gestures and postures, singing, dancing, and miming to bring about a holistic performance and enjoyment of the narrative. For the sake of consistency, all spellings, references, and page numbers referred to follow the said edition.

Check Your Progress 1

1. What is the difference between the *Shakuntala* episode in the *Mahabharata* and in *Kalidasa*’s play?

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3.2 SUMMARY & ANALYSIS ACTS I-IV

In this section we shall try and summarise the play, for convenience sake we have split the play into two segments – Acts I – IV and Acts V – VII. Let us begin with the Prologue and summarise each act as we go along. Needless to say we hope everyone has read the play by now.

3.2.1 Prologue

The play opens with a benediction or a prayer to Lord *Shiva*.

*That first creator of the Creator
That Bearer of oblations offered with Holy Rites:
That one who utters the Holy Chants:
Those two that order Time:
That which extends, World – Pervading,
In which sound flows impinging on the ear:
That which is proclaimed the Universal Womb of Seeds:
That which fills all forms that breathe
with the Breath of Life.
May the supreme Lord of the Universe
who stands revealed in these eights Forms*
perceptible preserve you.*

*The eight forms are in order: Water, Fire, The Priest, Sun and Moon, Space, Earth, Air (p. 169)

This invocation follows the Epic tradition and seeks blessing and inspiration from the divine, thereby sanctifying the play. The *Sutradhar*/Narrator/ Director, then, addresses the Actress/wife, introducing in the progress of the dialogue the play being performed for the audience. The Narrator/ Director deftly moves to presenting the Hero/*Nayank* of the play- King *Duhsanta*- as the latter arrives on stage in full hunting regalia chasing a fleet of antelope.

3.2.2 Act I: The Chase

Act 1 takes place in the forest on the foothills of the Himalayas and moves to the hermitage of the great sage *Kanva*, by the river *Malini*. The King *Duhsanta* appears, followed by his Charioteer, in hot pursuit of a deer, specifically a Blackbuck, which is a sacred animal. *Duhsanta* is stopped in his hunt by an ascetic who reminds him of his duty

*This deer is of the Hermitage, O King! He should not be
killed...no...no...do not strike him down.
How fragile the life of this deer!
How cruel your sharp- pointed arrows, swift-winged!
Never should they fall on his tender frame
like tongues of flame on a heap of flowers.
Quickly withdraw your well-aimed arrow, bound
to protect the distressed, not strike the pure.* (p. 173)

Furthermore, *Duhsanta* has entered the sacred Hermitage, where such slaughter is sacrilegious. At the ascetics urging, *Duhsanta* decides to go to the Hermitage of *Kanva*, to pay his respect as well enjoy the hospitality offered there. As they near the Hermitage, *Duhsanta* takes of his royal ornaments and weapons,

as it seems unfit for such a spiritual space. On entering he sees three women watering plants and one of them is *Shakuntala* whose extraordinary beauty immediately captivates *Duhsanta*. He hides behind some trees to further observe the trio and finally reveals himself to them. The women welcome a disguised *Duhsanta* into their midst, where he learns that *Shakuntala* is the adopted daughter of the sage *Kanva*. She is in fact the daughter of the *Apsara*/celestial nymph, *Menaka* and the seer *Visvamisra*. *Duhsanta*'s questions lead him to figuring out her *Kshatriya* origin, which makes *Shakuntala* a suitable bride for him. Before *Duhsanta* can learn of *Shakuntala*'s feelings for him, they hear the news of how the arrival of *Duhsanta*'s hunting party has frightened an elephant and that the elephant is now wreaking havoc in the forest. As the party splits, *Shakuntala* realises that she has fallen in love with *Duhsanta*, and the two depart with longing for the other in their hearts.

3.2.3 Act II: Concealment of the Telling

Act II takes place in the forest and introduces *Madhavya*, the Court Jester, and a close friend of *Duhsanta*, who complains about the physical pains he is undergoing because of following *Duhsanta* on his hunting expeditions. *Duhsanta* is presented as suffering from lovesickness, and describes *Shakuntala* to *Madhavya* in sensual terms. He then asks *Madhavya* to help him gain entry into the hermitage on some pretext or the other. Characteristic of a jester, *Madhavya* is quick to respond in a witty manner and tells *Duhsanta* that as the King, he can rightfully enter the hermitage to demand the royal tax owed to him by the ascetics. Their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of two ascetics who request *Duhsanta* to protect their sacred rites from demons bent on disturbing them. *Duhsanta* readily agrees as it complements his desire to visit the Hermitage without arousing any suspicion. However, his joy is cut short by the arrival of *Karabhaka* with a message from the Queen Mother asking for his immediate return to *Hastinapur*. Torn between his duty towards the ascetics and his mother, *Duhsanta* finally decides to go to the hermitage and sends *Madhavya* in his stead to *Hastinapur*. *Duhsanta*, however, is careful to mask his interest in *Shakuntala* and tells *Madhavya* that his interest in her was a just "a whim" (197).

3.2.4 Act III: Love's Fruition

This Act continues in the forest and opens with a Prelude which functions to inform the audience of events that have occurred off stage. Here the audience is told of *Duhsanta*'s success at thwarting the demons and how *Shakuntala* is suffering from a 'heat stroke' making her feel hot and feverish. *Shakuntala* is actually shown to be suffering from lovesickness, unable to keep *Duhsanta* out of her thoughts, she longs for his company. Her two companions, *Priyamvada* and *Anasuya* try to soothe her. *Duhsanta* presently arrives at the bower where the three women are resting and on hearing *Shakuntala* confess her love for him, reveals himself to them. *Shakuntala*'s companions leave the two lovers alone and in the process *Duhsanta* tries to woo *Shakuntala*. However, their love play is interrupted by the arrival of *Gautami*, the Matron of the Hermitage, and the lovers separate. A despondent *Duhsanta* is called to fight the demons tormenting the ascetics.

3.2.5 Act IV: *Shakuntala*'s Departure

The scene is still the forest and much has happened in the meantime. The Prelude in this Act reveals that *Shakuntala* and *Duhsanta* have married according to the *Gandharva* rites. *Duhsanta* has since then left for *Hastinapur*. While

Shakuntala's companions discuss *Duhsanta's* dedication to her, the great sage *Durvasa Rishi* arrives at the Hermitage. *Shakuntala*, distracted by the thoughts of *Duhsanta*, does not attend to the great sage.

Durvasa Rishi, known for his temper, immediately curses her saying:
... you shall be lost in his thoughts:
though you goad his memory hard
he shall fail to remember you, (215)

As *Durvasa Rishi* storms off, *Anasuya* attempts to plead with the sage and manages to extract a reprieve wherein, at the presentation of a token of recognition, the curse will be lifted. The companions are reassured at this because *Duhsanta* had given a ring to *Shakuntala* as a token of his love and so believe that the curse will be broken without much harm. The Prelude ends with both the companions deciding to spare *Shakuntala* from the knowledge of the curse.

Worried for *Shakuntala*, *Anasuya* begins to question *Duhsanta's* actions and wonders how to inform *Kanva* of his daughter's marriage and pregnancy. The resolution arrives in the form of a spiritual voice that announces the union of *Shakuntala* and *Duhsanta* to the great sage. *Kanva* is overjoyed at this and decides to send *Shakuntala* to *Duhsanta's* court with a few ascetic escorts. *Shakuntala's* departure from the Hermitage is poignantly described. Everyone is filled with sorrow seeing her leave even the plants and animals forsake their natural routines and grieve her absence from the holy Grove. As *Shakuntala* bids farewell to her home and embraces her family and friends for the last time, *Kanva* instructs her on her duty to the King and other's at the palace. The finality of *Shakuntala's* separation from the world of the Hermitage is established through *Kanva's* words where he says that she can only return after fulfilling her duties as wife and mother, in the final years of her of her life with her husband.

Check Your Progress 2

1. What is the function of the Prologue at the beginning of the play?

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3.3 SUMMARY & ANALYSIS OF ACTS V–VII

The next few sections will deal with the remaining portions of the *Sanskrit* drama *Abhijnana Shakuntala* by **Kalidasa**. As mentioned earlier, for convenience sake we have divided the play into two segments – Acts I to IV and Acts V – VII. Let's move on with our summary and analysis without wasting time.

3.3.1 Act V: The Repudiation of *Shakuntala*

The Prelude takes place in *Duhsanta's* Royal Palace and begins with the Chamberlain praising the King's hard work in maintaining peace and prosperity in the kingdom and his exemplary behavior in all things concerned with the welfare of the state and his subjects. *Shakuntala* and her entourage appear at the Royal Palace and wait for an audience with *Duhsanta*. One of the ascetics, *Sarngarava*, relays *Kanva's* message and asks him to accept *Shakuntala* as his wife. *Duhsanta*, under the influence of the curse does not remember *Shakuntala* and refuses to acknowledge her as his wife. *Shakuntala* tries to prove her claim by presenting the token of recognition but realises instead that

she has lost it. *Duhsanta* casts doubts on *Shakuntala*'s virtuosity and honesty and tells the accompanying ascetics to take her back with them. The ascetics, however, refuse to take her back, saying that if she is lying then she will be a stain on *Kanva*'s honour and therefore, cannot be allowed to go back and, if she is indeed speaking the truth then she must be with her husband, even if it means living in servitude to him. *Shakuntala* is thus, left stranded and alone with no one by her side and she cries for Mother Earth/ *Dharti Mata* to open up and swallow her whole. Note, three important issues here: a) women's position in society; b) the notion of honour; c) the similarity between this particular episode and a similar scene from another famous epic. Women were positioned in the safe keeping of their father or the husband as it is clear from the various references in the text. Secondly, if a woman were not married conventionally as is the case with *Shakuntala* and the husband refused to acknowledge her then she would be a stain on the honour of the father. Thirdly, *Sita* in the *Ramayana* is faced with a similar situation when a washer man/ *dhobi* casts aspersions on her chastity on her return from *Lanka*.

Finally the King's High Priest comes up with a solution to let her remain in the King's palace till she gives birth and should the child she bear be the son prophesised (King *Bharata*) to *Duhsanta*, then *Shakuntala* may be accepted as his lawful wife and take her rightful place by his side. No sooner do the ascetics, High Priest, and *Shakuntala* leave that the High Priest rushes back to *Duhsanta* and tells him how as *Shakuntala* wept, a bright light in the form of a woman from the *Apsara Pool* came and took *Shakuntala* with her. *Duhsanta* dismisses the whole affair and yet he feels a strange sensation of missing something and a "poignant ache" (243) in his heart that seems to validate *Shakuntala*'s claim.

3.3.2 Act VI: Separation from *Shakuntala*

The Prelude informs us about a fisherman who has been found with the lost royal ring (originally given to *Shakuntala*). The guards/ soldiers/ law enforcers accuse him of stealing the ring, but he claims to have found it in the stomach of a fish he caught. The fisherman's innocence is proven once *Duhsanta* sees the ring, and rewards the man for finding it. *Duhsanta* then remembers *Shakuntala*, their marriage, and his promise to bring her to his palace. He is ashamed of his behavior and cannot figure out why his memory lapsed at that particular moment. He is distraught about how he repudiated *Shakuntala* and the cruel ways in which he doubted her. His sorrow at having lost his beloved is so severe that he orders the cancellation of the celebration of the Spring Festival. *Duhsanta* tries to recreate his first encounter with *Shakuntala* by painting it and conversing with the painting. *Madhavya* laments how the king has become so despondent that he has lost all vitality. Meanwhile, *Misrakesi*, a friend of *Shakuntala*'s mother *Menaka*, quietly observes *Duhsanta*'s behavior. Finding his remorse genuine, she goes back to the *Apsara Pool* to report her findings to *Shakuntala*. Even as *Duhsanta* is wracked with remorse, he deals with matters of the state and is approached with the problem of solving the inheritance rights of a rich merchant who dies without a legal heir. The merchant's wealth is set to be appropriated by the royal treasury but *Duhsanta* asks for the wealth to be given to one of the merchant's pregnant wife, thereby ensuring that the child to be born is not left penniless.

Duhsanta feels bad for his ancestors as he himself is without any issue, which will leave them without anyone to perform sacred rites and rituals. This adds to his misery and he faints. On waking *Duhsanta* learns that some invisible entity is threatening *Madhavya*. As he rushes to save his friend, it is revealed that the entity is *Matali*, Lord *Indra*'s charioteer, who on seeing a dejected *Duhsanta*, devises this plan to rouse him into action. *Matali* requests *Duhsanta* to fight on the behalf of the gods against demons bent on destroying them. *Duhsanta* readily agrees and they leave on *Indra*'s chariot.

3.3.3 Act VII - *Shakuntala*'s Prosperity

This Act occurs in the realm of the celestial beings and then moves to the Hermitage of *Marica/Prajapati* and *Aditi* (*Indra*'s father and mother). After defeating the demons, *Duhsanta* and *Matali* are on their way back to earth when *Duhsanta* sees the holy Hermitage of sage *Marica* and expresses his desire to seek his blessings. At the Hermitage, *Matali* requests an audience with *Marica* and in the ensuing wait *Duhsanta* comes across a young boy playing with a lion's cub and playfully tormenting his caretakers. He notices the mark prophesised that was meant to be on his son, on the young boy and begins to yearn for a child. In the course of the conversation with the caretakers, *Duhsanta* realises that the boy might indeed be his son and after picking up the boy's magical amulet that only his parents or *Marica* could touch, it cements *Duhsanta*'s belief of being the father. *Shakuntala* appears at the news of a stranger's arrival and at first is unable to recognise *Duhsanta*. In a touch of irony, it is *Duhsanta* now who asks to be recognised as the boy's father. *Duhsanta* explains his loss of memory and how he regained it at the sight of the ring and a happy *Shakuntala* accepts his explanation. The reunited family goes to *Marica* to seek his blessings where *Marica* reveals the truth about *Durvasa Rishi*'s curse. *Duhsanta* is relieved at this revelation and is absolved of his cruel behavior. *Kanva* is also informed of the events and the family leaves for earth from the celestial realm. The play ends here. In the next sections we will take a look at the critical themes that the play deals with.

3.4 THEMES

A theme is the central topic of a text. However, since no work of literature can concentrate on just one theme without referencing others, a text will usually have more than one, with some being more essential for the text than others. *Abhijnana Shakuntala* deals with many themes, such as love, memory, concealment, duty *Vs* desire, courtly world *Vs* the hermitage etc. Let us begin with the theme of Love.

3.4.1 The Theme of Love

Abhijnana Shakuntala as stated in the introduction is a heroic drama of a romantic nature. The *rasa* invoked here is *srngara* or love and according to the *Sanskritic* dramatic order, love poetry consists of *sambhoga*, love in union and *vipralambha*, love in separation. In the play, **Kalidasa** first creates a temporary union of the protagonists, King *Duhsanta*, the hero or *nayaka* and *Shakuntala*, the heroine or *nayaki*, as the play narrativises the burgeoning and consummation of their love (ACT I, II, III). It is then followed by separation caused by the loss of memory and the token ring due to the curse (ACT IV,

V, & VI). The play ends with the re-union of not only *Shakuntala* and *Duhsanta* but also of their son *Bharata* (ACT VI).

We notice how these different stages of love occur in different places in the play. The initial courting and marriage takes place in the forest of the Hermitage, where the King had come to hunt. It's a world that is an intrinsic part of *Shakuntala's* character; even the plants and animals are her kin. *Duhsanta* has thus entered her world. The interruption of this love happens when *Duhsanta* leave this world to go back to the Royal Palace, where his duties as a king await. When *Shakuntala* goes to claim her right to be by his side at his Court, the device of the curse delays that union and both the ascetic companions and *Duhsanta* desert her. Their final union happens around six years later in the celestial realm on a heavenly mountain in the Hermitage of *Marica* and *Aditi*. In portraying the development of their love in such a way **Kalidasa** highlights the differences between the world of the Hermitage and the world of the Royal Court. Paradoxically, it is in the world of the Hermitage, a place for austerities and meditation that *Shakuntala* and *Duhsanta* find love and it is the Royal Court, a place ideal for the intrigues of love that their separation occurs.

Shakuntala born and bred in the innocent and pure world of nature puts her faith in words rather than objects thus, consenting to a *Gandharva* marriage. This form of marriage does not require the consent of the parents/elders and is primarily foregrounded on the desires of the lovers. However, this love cannot disrupt the established caste hierarchy and therefore, we see how *Duhsanta* pursues *Shakuntala* once he ascertains her *Kshatriya varna*. *Duhsanta* represents the world outside the secluded and protected Hermitage, which is filled with deceit and cunning. In this world, *Shakuntala's* word is not sufficient but needs tangible proof to be validated, in the form of the ring, in front of everyone in the Royal Court. The contrasting nature of their worlds necessitates that their union occurs in a different world altogether, moreover specifically after *Duhsanta* becomes a more considerate and compassionate man.

Kalidasa seems to bring in an element of sadness in the prologue and some might even say unnecessary delaying of their union. **Kalidasa** shows us the intoxicating nature of passion and love and how it might lead to a neglect of one's duty/*dharm*a. For *Shakuntala* that results in the curse which leads to her repudiation. This curse can only be broken on the presentation of a token of recognition, which is the royal signet ring.

Though the curse complicates our understanding of love, we nonetheless see how *Shakuntala* is unwavering in her love for *Duhsanta*, which ascribes her as the ideal heroine. The ring too complicates our understanding of love by making us question the veracity of love itself, if such love needs inanimate objects to validate it.

Kalidasa's depiction of love is thus nuanced and complicated and does not shy away from making his audience ask uncomfortable questions regarding it.

3.4.2 The Theme of Concealment

The theme of concealment becomes evident in Act 1 itself when *Duhsanta* takes off his royal garments and weapons on entering the Hermitage of *Kanva*. Even though he undertakes this action as a sign of respect for the sacred space, it allows him to take off the mask of a king and conceal his real identity. He introduces himself to *Shakuntala* as a court official out inspecting the penance grooves. This deception makes space for a much more relaxed interaction

between *Duhsanta* and *Shakuntala* and her companions, without the strict rules of engagement mandated for royals. Literally throwing off the mantle of his kingship, *Duhsanta* presents himself as a man first and *Shakuntala* is attracted to this noble court official at first. When *Duhsanta* comes again to woo her, he can no longer hide his true identity as he is performing his kingly duty of protecting the Hermitage from demons.

The second act of concealment occurs in Act II when *Duhsanta* is urgently called by his mother to the Royal Palace. He is torn between his duty towards his mother and his kingdom, and his desire to see *Shakuntala* again. The dilemma is solved when the ascetics' request his help. As he sends *Madhavya* in his stead to the capital city, he tells *Madhavya* that he is staying back to do his duty towards these ascetics and not out of his desire for *Shakuntala*. He further tells his friend to consider all he said about *Shakuntala* as a joke. *Duhsanta* therefore, conceals his true feelings for *Shakuntala* as well as his reason for staying back at the Hermitage. This concealment creates a sense of foreboding in the play as it allows their marriage to be a secret from everyone outside the Hermitage and therefore, there are no witnesses who can support *Shakuntala* when she comes to the Royal Court.

The next concealment takes place in Act III when a lovesick *Shakuntala* writes a love letter to *Duhsanta*. The problem, however, is its delivery since *Duhsanta* is busy protecting the ascetics in their ritual. It is *Priyamvada* who devises a plan to disguise the letter with other offerings for the ritual, thus allowing her to give it to *Duhsanta*. *Duhsanta*'s timely appearance saves them from actualising the plan. This event again points to the incongruity of love's actualisation in the hermitage, where such actions don't sit well with a holy space established on abstinence and austerity.

In the same act we see one of the most important scenes of concealment. *Shakuntala* is so disheartened and distracted by the thoughts of *Duhsanta* that she unknowingly angers the sage *Durvasa Rishi*, who then curses her. She also fails to register the curse and is oblivious of it. It is her companions who hear the curse and on receiving the reprieve from the sage decide not to inform *Shakuntala* about the curse. Thus, it is their concealment of the truth of the curse that leads her to arrive at *Duhsanta*'s court unaware of the reason why he no longer remembers her. Had she been warned, perhaps *Kanva* would have gone with his daughter to the court to help her or *Shakuntala* herself would have been more careful with the ring and not lost it in the river. With the ring as a token that would break the curse, *Duhsanta* and *Shakuntala*'s union would have occurred much earlier and without so much pain on both sides.

The final concealment occurs in Act VI, where *Misrakesi* hides herself to observe the repenting king. She observes how deeply *Duhsanta* regrets not just his rejection of *Shakuntala* but also the loss of the son who could have continued the *Puru* clan. Even as *Misrakesi* feels sad for both the suffering lovers, she does not intervene because the gods have a plan for *Duhsanta* and have devised their reunion in accordance to *Indra*'s wishes. Here we see how the events of the story are not completely in the hands of the two protagonists. The reunion only occurs according to the plans of the gods. Even the curse and the subsequent loss of memory cannot be controlled by either of the two, as both are unaware of it. This makes the audience aware of the ambiguous and complex nature of Fate.

3.4.3 The Hermitage and the Court

The Hermitage and the Court are two diametrically opposed spaces in the play. The Hermitage is a secluded space devoted to sacred pursuits by the ascetics. They choose to live away from society and its problems. The people there live a simple life and are closer to their natural surroundings, living in harmony with nature as they are dependent on it for their survival. Furthermore, they are under the protection of the king and call upon him for assistance during their rituals. The sacred grooves of the Hermitage are safe spaces, where even the king must not hunt animals. *Shakuntala, Priyamvada, Anasuya, Kanva, Gautami* etc all belong to this world.

The Court is the worldly world, a society with strict rules and regulations, functioning under social codes that dictate the code of court etiquette to people. Corruption and abuse of power is a part of this world as seen in the fisherman episode. The Palace itself is filled with intrigues and suspicions among *Duhsanta's* wives. *Duhsanta* himself is beset with kingly duties. *Duhsanta, Madhavya, Vasumati, Hamsavati*, and the High Priest belong to this world.

The king falls in love at the Hermitage and he not only extends his stay there but also neglects his duty. The *Gandharva* marriage between *Shakuntala* and *Duhsanta*, a marriage contracted on word alone with no witnesses or material proof can be sustained in the hermitage because it's a world that exists outside of the strict moral codes of society. Taken out of this context, such marriages are suspect and we see that in the epic where *Duhsanta* refuses to acknowledge *Shakuntala* out of fear of what his subjects might think of him. In the play the loss of memory dilutes the effect of the rejection but *Duhsanta* does demand proof of their marriage and the paternity of the child in accordance to the codes of the courtly world.

Wealth is another factor that marks the difference between the two worlds. The women in the hermitage wear clothes made of bark and adorn themselves with flowers but when *Shakuntala* leaves for the Court, *Kanva* procures precious jewels from the trees to beautify his daughter in accordance with the outside world.

Throughout the play, we see how the King is forced to choose between the two worlds and must sacrifice or neglect one for the other. Similarly *Shakuntala* too must sever her contact with the hermitage if she is to be accepted into the courtly world. Her return can only be realised once she reaches the third stage of her life, i.e, *vanaprastha*, where both she and the king will give up and retire from the worldly world. Therefore, we see how characters in the play cannot inhabit both the world simultaneously and how one must carefully navigate the two worlds because they function on different principles and in different levels.

Check Your Progress 3

1. Discuss the theme of love and marriage.

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3.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have focused on the text and introduced the play within the context of *Sanskrit* drama. This has been followed by a detailed and comprehensive summary and examination of all the seven acts. The next section gives us a critical understanding of the major themes, which will allow us to understand the play and the purpose to which **Kalidasa** has used them. The Unit has attempted to give a concise and succinct understanding of the play to help us grapple with *Sanskrit* drama in translation for the first time.

3.6 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

Read Section 3.1

Check Your Progress 2

Read Section 3.2.1

Check Your Progress 3

Read Section 3.4.1



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UNIT 4 *ABHIJNANA SHAKUNTALAM*: CHARACTER ANALYSIS AND CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Character Analysis
 - 4.2.1 *Sutradhar*
 - 4.2.2 *Shakuntala*
 - 4.2.3 *Duhsanta*
 - 4.2.4 *Madhavya*
- 4.3 Critical Perspectives
 - 4.3.1 Gender
 - 4.3.2 Caste
 - 4.3.3 Kingship
- 4.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.5 Questions
- 4.6 Suggested Readings and References

4.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit is aimed at giving a deeper understanding of the play by analysing the characters and providing critical perspectives on the play. The first section examines important characters and their function in the play. The second section provides key criticisms on the play that include and are not limited to gender, caste, and kingship. Finally we will end with a few questions, which will help us to encapsulate what we have studied so far.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we'll look at what *Sanskrit* drama denotes and how characters have certain functions and roles to play. *Sanskrit* drama delineates the characters and their roles in combination with the use of various *rasas*. Let's take a deeper look at character analysis in the sections that follow.

4.2 CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Sanskrit drama has many stock characters and the audience who were familiar with its structure could easily figure out the function of these characters. *Abhijnana Shakuntala* contains the staples of *Sanskritic* drama with the *nayanka*/hero and his entourage, *nayaki*/heroine and her companions, *Vidusaka* (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.

4.2.1 *Sutradhar*

As the name suggests, the *Sutradhar* is someone who holds the thread of the story. He is the one who introduces the play to the audience and in essence can be considered the narrator or if we stretch the analogy a bit even the director

of the play and **Chandra Rajan** has translated the *Sutradhar* as Director. His role is usually restricted to introductions- of characters and acts. He guides the audience towards the proper enjoyment of the play as well as guides the play to its proper and logical ending. His role begins as soon as the Benediction ends.

Director: Lady! If the preparations in the dressing room are completed, would you be pleased to attend us?...

Director: Lady, we have here before us, an august audience that is highly educated and most discerning. This evening we wait upon it with a new play composed by Kalidasa, entitled The Recognition of Sakuntala. Will you see to it that all the actors do their very best? (p. 169)

At one point the *Sutradhar*/ Narrator/ Director is so carried away by the actress's song that he forgets what they had intended to do as stated above:

Director: Beautifully sung, dear lady; aha – just look around you; the audience is still, as if drawn in a picture – spellbound, caught in the web of beauty woven by your singing. Now then, what play shall we put on to honour and entertain them further?

Actress: Why, Sir, what you mentioned right at the beginning – the new play entitled The Recognition of Āakuntalā.

Director: You do well to remind me, dear lady. Indeed, my memory failed me for an instant; because,

*I was carried far, far away, lured
By your impassioned song, compelling,
(looks towards the wings)
even as the King, Duhsanta here,
was, by the fleet fleeing antelope.* (pp. 170-71)

4.2.2 *Shakuntala*

Shakuntala, the heroine or *nayaki* of the play, was born of the *apsara* Menaka and the sage *Visvamitra* and abandoned at birth. *Kanva* finds her in the forest, protected by birds and adopts her as his daughter. Being part human and part *apsara*, she 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. (p. 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.

Anasuya: Shakuntala dearest, have you noticed that there is not one sentient being in the Hermitage that is not sorrowful now at the thought of losing you. See:

*The cakravaka answers not the call of his love
hidden behind lotus - leaves:
with lotus – fibre dangling from his beak,
he gazes only at you.* (p. 225-26)

Kalidasa describes *Shakuntala* in traditional feminine terms of beauty as being slender waisted, smooth skin, dark hair etc. but he adds erotic terms too to her description through images drawn from the natural world.

*Duhsanta: ...With rounded breasts concealed by cloth of bark
fastened at the shoulder in a fine knot,
her youthful form enfolded like a flower
in its pale leafy sheath unfolds not its glory.* (p. 177)

Especially through *Duhsanta*'s words we are given a sensual physical picture of the heroine. She is equated to lovely flowers, blooming with magical youth, with doe like eyes that radiate beauty, with sensuous lips, rounded breasts etc.

*Though inlaid in duck weed the lotus glows;
a dusky spot enhances the moon's radiance;
this lissome girl is lovelier far dressed in bark!
... Her lower lip has the rich sheen of young shoots,
her arms the very grace of tender twinning stems;
her limbs enchanting as a lovely flower
glow with the radiance of magical youth.* (p. 177)

In **Kalidasa**'s play, *Shakuntala* is therefore a young girl, yet to experience the vicissitudes of the worldly world.

The *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.

Shakuntala, in accordance to the character of *nayaki*, is therefore steadfast in her love for *Duhsanta*. Her loyalty to her husband is what ennobles *Shakuntala* as an exemplary woman, the ideal *pativrata stri*. Thus the play offers us a *Shakuntala* who will be celebrated as a virtuous woman, being both a good wife and mother.

4.2.3 *Duhsanta*

The *Nayank* or the Hero is the main protagonist of the play. Heroes in *Sanskrit* drama belonged to the upper castes such as *Brahmins* or *Kshatriyas*. Since these figures embodied the *vira rasa*, they had to be handsome without any disfigurements, be intelligent, daring, and filled with courage and fortitude, making such men worthy of the heroic mantle. *Duhsanta*, the King of the *Puru* clan in the city of *Hastinapur*, is an ideal hero, loved and venerated by everyone in the kingdom, even by the ascetics in the secluded Hermitage. As a king, *Duhsanta* is the upholder of Law, and it is his sacred duty to maintain order in his kingdom and protect his subjects. The hermits who come to request *Duhsanta* to protect the ritual in Act II compare him to a Royal Sage, who has the qualities of a king as well as a holy sage.

How admirable! His person radiates such majesty; yet one feels at ease. But that is not surprising in a king who is almost a sage.
(p. 194)

*What wonder then that this heroic King
with arms strong as massive iron beams
that bar the city's great gates should hold
single sway over the all supporting Earth
bounded by the dark – blue oceans?*
(p. 195)

Thus, *Duhsanta* is presented to us as an extremely likeable character that can do no wrong. Therefore, we are not surprised when *Shakuntala* begins to have feeling for the disguised king after their very first meeting. However, when we further analyse his actions we realise that he is a product of a patriarchal Brahminical order and follows the rules prescribed therein at the cost of hurting others such as the animals he hunts or his other wives whom he ignores.

The play opens with the King chasing a beautiful blackbuck, wreaking havoc in the scared forest so much so that a scared elephant runs amok in the forest causing more destruction. *Duhsanta* only stops when the ascetics request him to. In the pursuit of the deer, *Duhsanta* forgets his duty to protect the weak and creates fear instead. The metaphor of the hunt can be applied to his pursuit of *Shakuntala* as well when he hides behind a tree to observe her much like how a hunter would observe its prey. His initial appreciation of *Shakuntala* is purely physical. He is enchanted by her beauty and demure mannerisms, which are so different from the women in the court. Even *Madhavya* comments and ridicules *Duhsanta*'s sudden desire for the "taste of the sour tamarind" in contrast to the sweet delicacies available at the court. Nonetheless, *Duhsanta* first confirms *Shakuntala*'s caste before beginning wooing her. As such we can see how the king is acutely aware of caste positions and doesn't dare to upset them even when it comes to love.

Duhsanta's *Gandharva* marriage is another example of the king neglecting his duty and forgetting his heroic conduct.

*Duhsanta: Many are the daughters of sages,
married by the Gandharva rite, we hear;
and once married, felicitated
with joyful acceptance by their fathers.*
(p. 209)

Even though this type of marriage is allowed it is nevertheless a marriage whose legitimacy can be challenged and it is later on in the play. Furthermore, *Duhsanta* is in such a hurry to marry and consummate the marriage with *Shakuntala* that he does not wait for *Kanva* to return and also neglects to inform *Kanva* or even *Gautami* about it. This as we see is crucial in leaving *Shakuntala* without any material witnesses to prove her marriage to him.

*Duhsanta: Are you saying that this lady is already married to me?
... O, hermits, rich in holiness, try as I might, I cannot recall to my
mind accepting the hand of this lady in marriage at any time. Seeing
that she is plainly pregnant, how can I receive her when I have doubts
about being the husband?*
(p. 237)

Duhsanta's repudiation of *Shakuntala* provides us with yet another glimpse into the man. Since the curse has made him forget *Shakuntala*, he refuses to

acknowledge her and the unborn child, calling her a cuckoo for trying to pass of another man's child as his. He further insults her by insinuating that all women are sly and cunning.

*Ascetic matron, listen:
intuitive cunning is seen even in females
of lower creatures: what then of those
endowed with reason and understanding:
the cuckoo, as we know, has her young reared
by other birds before they take to the air.* (p. 239)

We can excuse *Duhsanta's* memory loss but we cannot excuse his harsh and sexist rejection.

*Perish the sinful thought,
Why are you out to sully your family's honour,
and to make me fall; you are like a river
that crumbles its banks to muddy its crystal stream,
and uproots the tree growing by its edge.* (p.238)

Even as *Duhsanta* regrets his actions later when his memory is restored, such remorse seems lacking in sincerity if this is how *Duhsanta* behaves with women in general. **Kalisada** has portrayed a king whose actions is not above criticisms and thus provides us with a nuanced depiction of a hero that allows for a reconsideration of the hero figure.

4.2.4 *Madhavya*

The jester is a stock figure in *Sanskrit* drama and is portrayed here by *Madhavya*. He is *Duhsanta's* constant companion and friend and is the only other character from the world of *Hastinapur* who knows about *Shakuntala*. *Madhavya* is depicted as a frail, hunchback with a staff, weak because of the physical strains of following the king in his hunts. He is thus a perfect foil to the handsome king. *Madhavya's* role as the jester is not limited to providing witty humour that highlights the flaws of the people around him. He is also *Duhsanta's* friend and confidant. He provides a helpful ear to the king, who unburdens himself on *Madhavya*, giving advice as well as providing solutions. Their friendship is so close that *Duhsanta* sends *Madhavya* in his stead for the completion of his mother's ritual. It is to *Madhavya* that *Duhsanta* reveals his true self and feelings.

*O, this cruel play of Fate: I am reduced to a state of such misery;
and why – because I am the friend and constant companion of the
King – he is obsessed with the chase.*

*... Then, what happened – as my ill - luck would have it, he chanced
upon a beautiful hermit-girl – Shakuntala is the name. From that
moment, Sirs, the very idea of returning to the Capital finds no place
in his thoughts.* (p. 187)

Despite being the King's friend, *Madhavya* does not shy away from poking fun at the lovesick king, even interrogating *Duhsanta's* desire for *Shakuntala* or satirically reminding him of his duties. Thus, *Madhavya* provides comic relief in the play that would otherwise become too serious. His words show his witty humour, which does not disparage anyone. Perhaps this is why *Duhsanta*, despite being the king, is indulgent of his friend and does not mind *Madhavya's* humorous barbs, at himself or others.

4.3 CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The next section will deal with the critical analysis of the play from the point of view of gender, caste and the notion of kingship.

4.3.1 Gender

The play has been scrutinised under various critical lenses, one of them being gender. The play provides a very fertile space to examine the concept of gender in the *Vedic* society and what it means today, in our contemporary world, to read such works. We will look at the role of gender as well as study its implications on the actions undertaken by the characters in the play.

Let us begin with the titular character, *Shakuntala*. *Shakuntala*, as we discussed earlier, is of semi-divine parentage as her mother is an *apsara*/ celestial being. Her ethereal and enchanting beauty is a testament to her *apsara* heritage. *Apsaras* are known for their beauty but are also known for their disorderly femininity, in the sense that these women are not controlled by the strictures of the patriarchal mortal world. They are, mostly, free to act on their own accord and are seen as more sexually free than mortal women. These celestial beings were adept at music and dance and the gods used them to disrupt the meditations of powerful ascetics, which was the case with the *apsara Menaka* who is *Shakuntala*'s mother as she was sent by the God *Indra* to distract the sage *Viswamitra* from his penance. It is not surprising that the *apsara*' image is that of uncontrolled women, who abandon their children, and take on multiple lovers etc.

Shakuntala's *apsara* legacy is something that the audience would be acutely aware of and **Kalidasa** uses their dangerous femininity to show *Shakuntala* as a *pativrata* woman unlike her mother. It creates a neat contrast between women who disrupt society (*apsaras*) and women who uphold the mores of society (*Shakuntala*). In the play, when *Shakuntala* goes to *Duhsanta*'s court, he accuses her of trying to pass off another man's child as his when she tells him of her pregnancy. This statement is in line with the actions expected out of *apsaras*, who do not behave responsibly towards children born from their encounters with men. Looking at *Shakuntala*'s own history at being abandoned at birth and her *apsara* lineage, *Duhsanta*'s accusation, though not acceptable or warranted, cannot be seen as completely ungrounded.

However, **Kalidasa** does offer a redemptive understanding of *apsaras* right after *Duhsanta* rejects *Shakuntala*. Abandoned by everyone, a distraught *Shakuntala* asks the earth to swallow her, which is reminiscent of *Sita*'s request in the *Ramayana* when her chastity is questioned, and as she leaves the court her mother transports her to her heavenly hermitage.

*High Priest: No sooner had Kanva's disciples left on their journey
back than:*

*The young girl cursing her stars,
Wept aloud, flinging her hands up.*

King: And then?

*High Priest: A flash of light in a woman's shape
From Apsara Pool, snatched her up*

And vanished straightaway.

(p.242)

This event shows us the protective and caring side of *Menaka*, who though an *Apsara* feels a sense of responsibility for her daughter *Shakuntala*'s plight.

Her mother even instructs her friend, *Misrakesi*, to keep an eye on *Shakuntala* as well as on the events unfolding in the mortal realm with *Duhsanta*. These actions are a departure from the general understanding of these supernatural women and show a much more agreeable angle to them.

However, this is not enough to overturn the stigma of promiscuity and assertive individuality associated with *apsaras* and so **Kalidasa** recreates *Shakuntala* in the play as an obedient, virtuous woman who is steadfast in her love (unlike *apsaras*) even after being abandoned. Thus, **Kalidasa** creates an image of the dutiful wife, who even in the face of injustice does not abandon her responsibilities.

Through *Shakuntala* we see **Kalidasa**'s attempt at rewriting *apsara* femininity in creating a compliant, dutiful, *pativrata* wife who would serve as an exemplary of ideal womanhood. *Shakuntala* is purged of her deviant femininity and can therefore be celebrated in the play as the heroine.

The play also offers us a look into the expected female behaviour in the *Vedic* period through the repeated instructions on how to be an ideal wife which we see in *Kanva*'s advice in Act IV.

*Kanva: My beloved child:
Be held in high esteem by your lord
as Sarmistha was by Yayati;
as she bore Puru, may you too bear
a son to whom the whole world will bow
.... My child, you are now leaving for your husband's home; when
you enter it:
Serve your elders with diligence; be a friend to your co-wives;
even if wronged by your husband do not cross him through anger;
... thus do girls attain the status of mistress of the home;
those who act contrary are the bane of their families.
What does our Gautami think of this?*

The matron Gautami too confirms the point of view of Kanva implying that that was how young girls were trained to behave in their marital homes.

*Gautami: The best advice for a young bride. (to Shakuntala) Dear
daughter, keep these precepts always in mine. (p. 227)*

Gautami and the other female ascetics reiterate this advice as well. Even as her hermit companions abandon *Shakuntala*, these ascetics do so by telling her to do her duty as a wife and stay with the husband, even though it is clearly visible that the husband does not want her.

*Sarngarava: If you are what the King says you are,
what will your father have to do with you –
a stain on his family? But, as you know
your own conduct to be pure, even servitude
in your husband's house will be welcome to you.
Stay here; we are leaving. (p. 241)*

These wifely duties are referenced to in the final act where *Marica* is said to be busy preaching to *Aditi* and the wives of other sages on the conduct of a virtuous wife. So we can see a running preoccupation with women's behaviour and how to create ideal women in the play. These dictates essentially tell women

to obey their husbands and to bear them sons to carry forward the lineage, outlining their duties as mothers and wives. Nowhere do these dictates incorporate women's feelings or their personal desires. In fact, *Kanva* in Act IV considers women as other's wealth, to be taken care of till they are given away and is relieved that he has finally given *Shakuntala* away to *Duhsanta*. The blatant objectification of women and their secondary position is visible here. This helps us to understand the position that women occupied and the powers that, at least upper caste women, were allowed to exercise.

Compared to the disorderly femininity of the *apsara* is the patriarchal sanctioned femininity embodied in the figure of *Aditi*, *Marica's* wife and *Indra's* mother. It is important to note that it is in the ordered patriarchal world of the sacred Hermitage that *Shakuntala* regains her marital happiness. Unlike the epic where a celestial voice asserts *Shakuntala's* claims and helps her to reclaim her rightful place as *Duhsanta's* wife, in the play their union occurs after a break of six years. This union is sanctified in the sacred Hermitage as compared to the *Gandharva* marriage, which was rejected.

The heavenly couple, *Marica* and *Aditi*, serve as a model for *Duhsanta* and *Shakuntala* and it is apt that their familial union occurs here. We must not forget that it is not simply the union of two lovers but of a family, which includes their son, *Bharata*. Thus, the play's end undercuts the romantic aspirations of the text and takes its conclusion in the fulfillment of family life by reasserting upper caste feminine ideal. *Shakuntala* has thereby fulfilled her duty as a wife and mother by providing a son to continue the *Puru* line, which was a deep concern for the childless *Duhsanta*.

In this analysis we have seen how the play takes from its surrounding and influences it as well. The play's remodeling of *Shakuntala* as the ideal wife is a good example of how 'proper' feminine behavior is articulated and propagated.

4.3.2 Caste

Caste played a huge role in the *Vedic* Hindu society and it still does in today's Indian society. The four-fold structure of caste regulates everything from marriage, occupation, education, food, and religious rituals etc. In the play, right from Act I, we see how caste determines the actions of the characters. Before *Duhsanta* begins to actively pursue *Shakuntala*, he wants to ascertain her caste/*varna*. A *Kshatriya* king cannot marry a woman of unknown caste and as stated in the *Manusmriti*, a man can marry a woman who is of the same caste or one caste lower, known as *anuloma*. Once *Shakuntala's* friends confirm her *Kshatriya* caste, *Duhsanta* is relieved and proceeds to woo her. *Duhsanta's* love for *Shakuntala*, whether genuine or a passing whim, cannot fall outside of the *varna* order and hence knowing where she stands in the *varna* system is important for him. This preoccupation with caste shows its central place in the society and more so for the king as the continuation of his lineage depends on the birth of sons who will carry on the father's caste.

In accordance to the caste system, sons are important as they ensure the continuation of the family's name/caste line. As such, another preoccupation in the play is the birth of a son to continue the *Puru* line. *Duhsanta's* mother is shown as keeping a fast to ensure the succession of her family and in the episode regarding the distribution of a recently deceased merchant's wealth in Act VI, *Duhsanta* faints at the realisation that unlike the merchant, he might

not beget a son to ensure the continuation of the *Puru* clan. The blessings given by *Kanva* and *Gautami* to *Shakuntala* also pertain to giving birth to sons for the same purpose.

Another incident that shows caste prejudice is the fisherman episode where he is treated with disdain and called a thief for having found the cursed ring. The guards abuse and beat him and threaten to hang him without any proof because of their own caste superiority over the fisherman's. They assume that he must have stolen the ring because of his lower caste position. Even after *Duhsanta* rewards the fisherman for having found the ring, the guards do not apologise for their cruel behaviour but are instead irritated at the reward being given to him. It is only when the fisherman offers to share the reward by buying alcohol for them that, they become friendly. This incident displays the hypocrisy of the caste system where differences can easily be surpassed when it comes to money. Greed seems to know no caste.

As we have seen till now, caste is not overtly noticeable in the play but if we peel back the layers and examine the text, we find caste assumptions and prejudices that underlie the actions of the characters.

4.3.3 Kingship

The play is not just a romance between a man and a woman but of a king and a semi-divine woman. *Duhsanta* is also described as the sage king, having the virtue, wisdom as well as the power to rule over his kingdom. Therefore, it is *Duhsanta's* duty to protect those in need, which is what gives him the opportunity to woo *Shakuntala* in the Hermitage. He is also responsible for maintaining order in his kingdom and *Indra* even calls upon him to help them defeat the demons/*asuras* and help restore cosmic order. His confirmation of *Shakuntala's* caste, as discussed above is also in keeping with his duty to maintain the social order.

When he departs the forest, he gives *Shakuntala* his signet ring with his name on it. The ring is a symbol of his kingship and a surety of his promise to send for her and make her his queen. The loss of the ring combined with the curse puts into doubt the veracity of *Shakuntala's* claims and thus *Shakuntala's* rejection is seen as justified by the people in the court. In the epic, *Duhsanta* rejects both *Shakuntala* and his son, but here it is a lonely *Shakuntala* with her unborn son. However, it is *Duhsanta's* duty to also provide an heir to continue the *Puru* line.

The King's desire for a son is of paramount importance for the benefit of the kingdom as well. Thus, when he rejects *Shakuntala* and the unborn son, he is doing so not just as a man but also as a king. Being the king, he cannot accept any child as his without confirming the parentage. Nonetheless, we see how desperate *Duhsanta* is for a son when he agrees to the High Priest's idea that if the child bears the auspicious marks prophesied for his son, he will accept both *Shakuntala* and the child as his. Thus, the need for a son to bequeath the kingdom to and insure its safety and prosperity far outweigh the truth of *Shakuntala's* claims and the justice denied to her.

As a king, there are times when *Duhsanta* forgets his duty, specifically before the consummation of his desire for *Shakuntala* and after the revelation of the curse. In both these instances, he languishes firstly, in his unfulfilled desire and later in his remorse for treating *Shakuntala* so cruelly. He becomes dejected and has to be roused from this lethargy as such prolonged neglect of his duty

is not only bad for the kingdom but also can incite criticism and rebellion. The resolution in the play is therefore not just for *Duhsanta*, *Shakuntala*, and *Bharata* to achieve the required happy familial union but also for the smooth functioning of the kingdom and for its secure future.

4.4 LET US SUM UP

By this time we have finished reading the text *The Loom of Time*, we have gone through each unit and are now in a position to see how **Kalidasa** has used his characters to narrate the story of *Shakuntala* and how he deviates from the *Sanskritic* norms as well as the epic by playing with the audiences expectations of the characters. The critical analysis will equip us to understand the various lenses through which the play can be read and will help us expand our understanding of the play. However, we should keep in mind the fact that though we as 21st Century readers analyse the play from our point in time and our location, and through various 20th and 21st Century critical tools, what we see as blatant disregard for a woman's honour and dignity was the norm and even today in many parts of the country it still is how women are regarded. For instance, we may recall hearing women in our own families or women who work for us say things like a daughter cannot stay forever in her parental home or that a daughter's *Dholi* (wedding entourage) leaves her parental home and her *arthi* (Funeral procession) will leave from her marital home. Or even that their burdens will become lighter once the daughter(s) are married off. Then again, we keep reading about honour killings and of deaths related to inter caste marriages so the question really is have we really moved away from the time of *Shakuntala* and **Kalidasa**? Just leaving you with food for thought!

4.5 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the points of contrast between the two *Shakuntala* episodes in the *Mahabharata* and the *Loom of Time/ Abhijnana Shakuntala*.
2. Discuss the evocation of the *vira* (heroism) and the *srngara* (love) *rasa* in the play.
3. *Abhijana Shakuntalam* is a dramatisation of the conflicts of the private and the public and of desire and duty. Discuss.
4. Discuss the rejection and recognition scene in the play.
5. What is the relevance of the curse and the ring in the play?
6. *Duhsanta* leaves his kingly authority behind when he enters the Hermitage. Do you agree?
7. Comment on the treatment of women in play with reference to any three female characters.
8. Write a note on the role of *Madhavya* as *Vidusaka*.

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