

A Comparative Study of Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* and
Namita Gokhale's *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*

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Abstract

Shakuntala is one of the most acclaimed women characters of Indian Literature. For the first time Shakuntala's character originated in *The Mahabharata*. Since then she has been represented in various texts in various languages of India. The present paper is an attempt to analyze the representation of Shakuntala by the authors from ancient times to the present. For this purpose ancient work *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* by Kalidasa and the modern work *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* by Namita Gokhale are studied.

In Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* Shakuntala is the real daughter of Sage Vishvamitra and nymph Menka. However, she is adopted and brought up by Sage Kanva and his wife Gautmi. She is a rustic girl, brought up in a hermitage. With the progress of the play, she is married to King Dushyanta who forgets her because of a curse. Later, she was adopted by sage Kashyapa and his wife Aditi. She gives birth to a brave child Bharat and finally reunites with her husband.

Shakuntala: The Play of Memory by Namita Gokhale was Published in 2005 and it is a challenging work of Indian English fiction. Like the remakes of films there may be re-invention and re-interpretation of old myths embodied in literary works. In her masterpiece *Shakuntala*, Namita Gokhale has portrayed the story of a woman named after the heroine of Kalidasa's classic drama *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*. In contrast to her legendary namesake, she is bold, spirited and imaginative. Right from her childhood she is conscious of the discrimination towards female. In her marriage with a mahasamant, Srijan, she feels suffocated by social customs. Hungry for experience she deserts home to travel with a Greek horse merchant, Nearchus. Together they travel far and wide and surrender to unbridled pleasures. Shakuntala assumes the identity of Yaduri: the 'fallen woman.' But she forsakes this life as well to meet her salvation in her death at Kashi.

Keywords: Representation, Subordination, Identity, Feminism

Kalidasa has portrayed Shakuntala as a beautiful maiden. She has inherited this beauty from her nymph mother Menka. King Dushyanta falls in love with her at the very first sight. Her heavenly beauty makes him unable to control his desires. He praises her beauty in the words that she appears to me to be quite different creation of the jewel of mankind.

Kalidasa has presented Shakuntala as a duty bound daughter and as well aware of social prohibitions. She loves her family and takes care of her parents' honour. Though she loves Dushyanta and gives herself to him, yet she does not go with him in the absence of her parents. She is portrayed as a typical Indian woman. She is bold as well as shy at the same time. She tries to come close to the king but does not reveal her feelings. She is so shy that she cannot look straight into Dushyanta's eyes. He describes her position:

“Although she doesn't speak to me,

she listens while I speak

Her eyes turn not to see my face

yet nothing else they seek.” (15)

Shakuntala is representative of women’s situation in patriarchal Indian society. In patriarchal Indian society women have been treated as men’s subordinate. However, they have been hailed as goddesses all the time but at the same time they have been put under control of men made rules and regulations. Shakuntala’s father presents her to the king as if she is a thing. Moreover, he teaches her that

“Thus does a maiden grow into a wife

But self willed women are the curse of life.” (48)

Shakuntala, almost all the times remains in a subservient role. When the king Dushyanta denies recognizing her, she wants to go back to her parents’ hermitage. But Gautami and Sarangrava denies taking her back with them. They ask Shakuntala:

“If you deserve such scorn and blame

what will your father with your shame

But if you know your vows are pure

obey your husband and endure.” (60)

She is left behind at the mercy of her husband. It clearly shows the subordinate position of a woman in Indian society.

However, to whatever extent Shakuntala may be vulnerable but she has a strong sense of self-respect. When the king rejects her and blames her as “intuitive cunning of the womanhood”, she gets terribly angry and retorts saying:

“O wicked one, you judge after the manner of your own heart;

who else will act (so basely) as you,

putting on the garbs of virtue and resembling a well covered with grass?” (59)

Dushyanta gets startled and convinced by her answers and says “her anger seems to be unfeigned.” She takes upon herself the responsibility of bearing and rearing her child who is predicted to be the king of the earth. With her head held high, she leaves the palace to be snatched by a celestial light.

Thus Kalidasa has portrayed Shakuntala in true Indian spirit. Despite her self-respect, she is not so much developed in her identity. Throughout the play she is praised in terms of her beauty and duty. She loves Dushyanta from very beginning. Even after he rejects her, she leaves the palace instead of fighting for her right. Moreover, when he regains his memory and comes to her, she accepts him without any complaint. Shakuntala thus befits the image of a traditional and ideal Indian woman.

However, Shakuntala, the narrator and the protagonist of *Shakuntala—The Play of Memory* is the most rebellious woman character of Namita Gokhale’s novels. She has created this character in contrast to that of Shakuntala of Kalidasa’s famous play *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*. Unlike her legendary namesake, she comes out of the conventional images of daughter, sister, wife and mother.

She is the daughter of a widow. She lives with her mother and brother in mountain regions. Right from her childhood she hates restrictions. Instead of playing indoor games she goes out into forests and hills to play. She is supportive and playful. She does not like household chores. Her mother is not happy with her and finds her a nuisance, “You wicked, heartless girl!” she shrieks. ‘Were you born only to trouble and torment me?’ (6).

She is not ready to accept the role of a conventional Indian daughter who helps her mother in domestic chores. She is not submissive and disciplined. Her mother tries to teach her the meager knowledge she has about the medicinal plants and domestic chores, but Shakuntala resists the attempt with anger. She narrates that:

She tried to teach me something of this meager knowledge but I resisted her attempts with an anger so violent that it sometimes surprised me. I hated everything about my mother, from her tangled hair to her shuffling gait and her cracked, dirty feet. I did not ever want to become like her. (8)

She is a sensitive child. She is aware of her mother's biased behavior towards her. Her mother puts all her attention to her son Govinda, who later becomes a sage Guresvara. Shakuntala is hurt at her mother's behavior and hates her for this. She narrates an incident when her brother comes back home after becoming a saint:

With Guresvara back, my mother had no affection to spare for me. I found an abandoned childhood toy . . . and wandered forlornly around the garden all morning, but nobody seemed to notice my absence. I would never treat my daughter so, I resolved. (30-31)

Shakuntala, unlike any other daughter, does not bear this discrimination silently. She shows her rage time and again. When she asks her mother about her father that whether he looked like her (Shakuntala); her mother rebukes her saying that he looked like her brother Govinda. She becomes angry and vented out this rage out at plants. She recounts:

It was fond mother speaking, but I dissolved into jealous rage. Plucking all the marigolds in the garden, I stamped on them until they were interred in the damp earth. It was so like my brother, with his piety and noble ways, to intrude into my hard-earned happiness. (27)

When Shakuntala begins her first menstruation, her mother chides her for defiling the purity of the household fires when a holy man is there. She takes her to the cowshed and imprisons her there. But Shakuntala is not ready to accept this imprisonment. Her spirit revolts and she manages to come out. However, instead of going back to her mother, she

leaves for the woods, “. . . I would not go back to my mother. Driven by anger, by shame, by pride, I walked the reverse path, away from the home that had rejected me” (32).

Soon Shakuntala is married to Srijan, a mahasamant, much older than her. Shakuntala is his third wife, the earlier two wives having died without Srijan tries to womanize her from the very first day of their marriage. He tries to teach her the importance of fidelity. Shakuntala narrates the incidence of her wedding night when Srijan tries to show her the star of Arundhati, the symbol of fidelity. Shakuntala being rebellious by nature, lies that she cannot see the star. For many years after their marriage, Shakuntala is unable to conceive. However, a man can also be barren but in our traditional families it is always woman who is held responsible for non-conceiving. Shakuntala too is tormented mentally of this expectation.

The situation becomes worst when Srijan, returning from his journey of hills, brings a woman, Kamalini with him. He brings her in the name of a handmaiden. However, she hardly works or behaves like a handmaiden. Moreover, Shakuntala feels no need of her. She becomes suspicious of Kamalini. The presence of another woman in the house lets off a kind of rebellion in Shakuntala. At this point, Shakuntala comes out of the role of a domesticated goddess, Gauri; and she begins to assume the role of Kali, the free goddess.

“Kali and Gauri are the untamed and domestic forms of the Goddess. One is naked, the other fully dressed. One’s hair is unbound. The other’s is tied with a string of flowers” (Pattanaik, 186). Shakuntala too starts becoming Kali, the symbol of liberation. She narrates that “It was oppressive in the house, for she was there. I did not braid my hair again; I would not let her. I left it loose and flowing about my shoulders.” (97)

Though she becomes pregnant but the inner rage and spirit of rebellion compels her to transcend the familial barriers and leads her to start a new life in search of her identity. She finds an opportunity to free herself of her present situation in the form a Greek traveler,

Nearchus. She abandons her husband and elopes with Nearchus “to travel to distant lands and experience an entirely different kind of love” (Gupta, 56-57). Before running away with Nearchus, Shakuntala throws away in river her ‘silver anklets’ which are the symbols of bondage and domesticity. She recounts that “Taking off my silver anklets, I flung them into the water and ran towards him . . . On that pebbled shore I left Shakuntala and all her memories” (115).

Shakuntala leaves behind her identity and name that was a cultural weight on her. Now she renames herself as ‘Yaduri’. With Nearchus she travels from city to city and acquires knowledge. However, after a short period, Nearchus too, tries to womanize her. One day, he marries her by a strange custom, of which she is unaware, of cutting a loaf of bread. He tells her that “You are my wife now, my delicious Yaduri!” (103). When one of his friends tries to flirt with Shakuntala, he says “I have married her! . . . Do not play with her virtue!” (104). It surprises Shakuntala. However, she is not a woman to accept domestication. She leaves Nearchus too, and moves ahead to Kashi, the city of her dreams, to find her spiritual self. She goes on her own and feels “revived, redeemed” (174). Wandering alone in Kashi, she contemplates:

I thought, unaccountably of Srijan, where he must be and what he would be doing. I tried to think of Nearchus as well . . . Both of these men seemed like shadows, I could not believe that they had existed, that my life had once been a part of theirs. Now I was alone, no one’s wife or mistress, nor sister. (181)

Thus Shakuntala transcends all those familial barriers which mar her way towards self realization.

To sum up Shakuntala is represented in different lights by different authors. Shakuntala from male writer (Kalidasa) is portrayed as an epitome of Indian womanhood i.e. meek, submissive and subordinate while Namita Gokhale, who is leading feminist writer of present

day, has portrayed Shakuntala as a free spirited and rebellious woman who transcends all barriers to live her life as her own wish. However, it took Shakuntala centuries' time to complete her odyssey from Kalidas to Namita Gokhale i.e. an odyssey of representation of a woman in male dominated literature to the representation of a woman in literature written by a woman.

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