

Beyond the Binary: Rethinking Gender and Nature in Kalidasa's *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*

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Abstract

It is interesting to explore the fact that years of academic and intellectual darkness of the West have sometimes coincided with the ages of light in India. Kalidasa, a prominent figure in Indian literature, epitomizes this brilliance. His works reflect the richness of Indian thought and creativity during times when the West faced its own challenges. Kalidasa, a classical Indian writer is known for his works like *Meghdutam*, *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*, *Malvikagnimitram* etc. Kalidasa's *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* has been translated into many Indian and foreign languages. Its translation by Sir William Jones in English took it to the West. It has been equally celebrated in the west as it is in India. It is not just a mere tale of seduction/love; but it is also a narrative that offers the dyadic relationship between Shakuntala and natural world around her; reflecting the Eco-consciousness and its relation to feminine world. Ecofeminism as a movement emerged in the second half of the 20th century. It presents the close connection between Women and Nature because of being the common victim of exploitation by Men and Culture. It further gives rise to the parallel relationship between two dichotomies i.e Women/Men and Nature/Culture amalgamating the disciplines of anthropology, feminism and Environmentalism. Women and nature remain subordinated to men and culture. The present research paper seeks to explore the association between Shakuntala and Nature. It also intends to find out the way they both nurture each other, strengthening the foundations of Ecofeminism, visualizing its existence in literature far before its emergence as a literary theory.

Keywords: Ecofeminism; Intellectual; Nature; Nature/Culture; Women/Men.

The traditions of knowledge, history of ideas, and synchronic and diachronic study of various cultures of the world have reacted to gender as a theoretical concept differently. The binaries of male/female and man/woman have been central in shaping ideas. These concepts are often exam-

ined, challenged, and redefined in various theoretical frameworks. Realist discourses and philosophical perspectives like Structuralism, Post-structuralism, Marxism, Feminism, and Gender Studies explore these binaries. They are also discussed in fields like Cultural Studies, Modernism, and Psychoanalysis. These studies question and analyze traditional notions of gender and identity. The multifaceted ideologies about women are eclectic in nature and are related to social, philosophical, historical and literary movements – Feminism which further extends itself in Womanism, Dalit Feminism, Adivasi Feminism, Tribal Feminism Ecofeminism etc. Broadly, these movements either advocate for gender equality or embrace the differences between men and women. Feminists reject the idea that gender disparities are natural, instead focus on analyzing the material realities of women’s lives to understand and explain the structures of oppression.

Nature and culture are an indispensable part of human life and epistemological structure. They, somewhere or the other depend upon each other. The divide between nature and culture has been the topoi of critical inquiry in hitherto anthropology. Greenwood David, the contemporary anthropologist in his book *Nature, Culture and Human History* (1977) talks about the binary of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ where he designates ‘culture’ as “man’s secret adaptive weapon” and ‘nature’ as “anything that supports life”. Tony Bennett in his text *Cultural Studies* (2015) proclaims ‘nature’ to be the subordinate to ‘culture’. According to him, culture has a wider impact on human life in comparison to Nature. Nature just helps culture develop.

This interaction of anthropology, environment studies and culture studies gave birth to the new branch of feminism called Ecofeminism. Ecofeminism is the theory developed in the the West during the 1970s with the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962). The term was coined by French writer Françoise d’Eaubonne in 1974 in her work *Le Feminisme Ou La Mort* (1974) which was never translated into English. She dedicated this work to women and called them out to save the Earth. Ecofeminism also borrows its theoretical grounds from Ecocriticism, the study that explores the relationship of human and nature. The emergence of Ecocriticism as literary theory suggested by Peter Barry is that the concept first came in the 1960s at a meeting of Western Literature Association in the USA. William Rueckert, the proponent of the word ‘ecocriticism’ extends “application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for human vision) has its greatest relevance to the present and future of the world” (Rueckert 105). Thus, the theory has the high spots of the sym-

biotic relationship between nature and human beings. The deviation of Ecocriticism from the study of human nature relationship to the study of the complex relationship between woman and nature, in particular marks the emergence of Ecofeminism. The whole investigation poses the questions of the association of nature and woman. Why are nature and woman interconnected? The interaction of nature and woman is based on three claims. Firstly, women are the direct victims of ecological degradation due to their close dependence on the environment. Secondly, the 'hierarchy of dualism' identifies patriarchal domination as the root cause of the exploitation of both women and nature. Thirdly, women have historically been agrarian cultivators and are seen as protectors of nature.

Vandana Shiva is the most eminent ecofeminist and social activist of India who has done extensive work on nature with her major contribution like Ecofeminism (Mies & Shiva, 1993), *The Violence of the Green Revolution* (1993), *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (2010), and *Biotopiracy* (2012). She holds responsible the emergence of new world orders like modernization, development and advancement of science and technology for the exploitation of nature as well as a woman. She claims that these advancements have uprooted woman and indigenous people from their ancestral soil. She condemns modernization for negatively affecting the human tribe in general and woman in particular.

The portrayal of woman has been evident and explicit in Indian literature. It has evolved over a period of time, reflecting the changing social, cultural, and political landscape of India. Indian authors writing in English have offered diverse and nuanced depictions of women, showcasing their strength, struggles, and agency. In early Indian English literature, women were often portrayed within traditional roles, reflecting the patriarchal society. They were depicted as dutiful daughters, obedient wives, and caring mothers, adhering to societal expectations and norms. As Indian society went through significant transformations, especially during and after the Independence movement, Indian English literature began to reflect women's rebellion against societal norms. Further, it expanded its approach to address intersectionality, regional diversity, breaking stereotypes and challenges faced by the queer community.

Ancient Indian literature also has enough to contribute to the field. While ancient Indian literature shows glimpses of progressive ideas related to women's rights and empowerment, it is essential to recognize that societal norms and practices varied across different regions and time periods. Gender roles were often shaped by cultural, religious, and social factors,

and there were also instances of regressive practices. *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* is a renowned seven-act play that revolves around the themes of love, marriage, separation, and eventual reunion of King Dushyanta and Shakuntala, the daughter of the sage Muni. The play's author, Kalidasa, gained immense popularity due to this masterpiece, which is named after its central character, Shakuntala.

According to the narration in the Adi Parva of the *Mahabharata*, Shakuntala was discovered in a solitary wilderness, where she was surrounded and protected by Sakunta birds. In recognition of this protective environment provided by the birds, the sage Kanava named her "Shakuntala," which means "the one who is taken care of by birds." This name aptly reflects her connection to the natural world and highlights the unique circumstances of her upbringing.

The play *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* is set against the backdrop of nature, and the protagonist, Shakuntala, is depicted as a hermit girl who is intimately connected to the environment of the hermitage and the ascetic men living there. Nature plays a significant role in her life, and she is portrayed as if Nature itself has nurtured and raised her. Unlike other heroines of Kalidasa, such as Urvashi and Malvika, who lead lives of luxury, Shakuntala is portrayed as a child of Nature.

Shakuntala's bond with nature is emphasized throughout the play. She epitomizes nature's feminine grace and finds companionship in the birds, animals, and plants of the forest. She is often compared to the beauty and the delicacy of a blossoming flower and the agility of a deer, and she is described as happy and content like the dew-washed leaves of the forest. Her deep love and affection for Nature are evident in her actions. For example, she shows her care for the environment by watering plants before drinking water herself. This gesture illustrates her harmonious relationship with Nature and her sense of responsibility towards the natural world around her. Shakuntala symbolizes women who not only act as the custodians of seeds and biodiversity but also hold a deep belief in the sacred importance of seeds, which are the foundation of all vegetation and represent the continuity of life. Her nurturing and caring nature extends not only to plants but also to domesticated animals like deer and cattle, showcasing her expertise and knowledge in dairy farming and agriculture. Through her actions, she demonstrates how women's work and wisdom in these fields play a crucial role in preserving ecological balance, ensuring sustainability, and enhancing productivity in agricultural practices. She shares an intimate relationship with nature as if she is the part

of its world. In the play she is often seen talking to the trees, honeybees flowers and animals. In the first act, in her discussion with Priyavanda, she refers to her dialogue with mango tree "Oh girls, the mango tree is trying to tell me something with his branches that move in the wind like the fingers. I must go on and see him" (Kalidasa 9). Through Shakuntala's bond with nature, the play presents a powerful metaphor for the nurturing and life-giving qualities that women and the Earth share. The degradation of both Shakuntala and the forest mirror the consequences of patriarchal dominance and ecological degradation.

Dushyanta, as the representative of the patriarchal capitalist authoritative domain in the civilization, observes that Shakuntala has grown up amidst the fawns of the forest, appearing like just another one of them. The timid yet restless nature of Shakuntala reflects the harmony, innocence, and charm of the hermitage set in the tranquil and peaceful realms of the forest. "She seems a flower whose fragrance none has tasted, A gem uncut by a workman's tool, A branch no desecrating hands have wasted, Fresh honey, beautifully cool" (Kalidasa 21). The play sets its stage when Dushyanta is chasing a deer for hunt. He represents a typical male dominating entity who feels no guilt in hunting and killing animals although he refrains to do so to persuade Shakuntala. Dushyanta's description of Shakuntala's beauty compares her to pristine and untouched elements of Nature, such as an unsmelt flower, a delicate shoot, an unpolished diamond, or fresh honey with untasted sweetness. This association highlights her captivating freshness and purity, which often attracts the attention of materialistic individuals. However, this romanticization of Shakuntala's beauty also conceals Dushyanta's selfish and greedy desires of colonization and consumption. As a king, Dushyanta holds hierarchical power and is responsible for protecting the forests and hermitages under his rule. However, his hunting expeditions disrupt the natural order of the forest, which represents a microcosm of the vast Nature.

In doing so, he invades Shakuntala's body and soul, exploiting her behind a pretense of conservation. Their secret union through the rites of Gandharva marriage, which is not favored by society, reflects a male-created contractual policy to possess women as private property. This highlights the oppressive and possessive nature of Dushyanta's actions, where he considers Shakuntala as his possession rather than an equal partner. In this way, Dushyanta's behavior showcases the dichotomy between his public image of a protector and his private actions of exploitation, which undermine the rights and agency of women like Shakuntala. The play subtly critiques the societal norms and gender dynamics prevalent in its

time, shedding light on the oppressive treatment of women by those in positions of power. In this context, Shakuntala's destiny is likened to a segment of the earth that is fenced and controlled by man, symbolizing her restricted and objectified status. She admits "Oh, oh, oh! He even casts doubt on our marriage. The vine of my hope climbed high, but it is broken now" (Kalidasa 57) The signet ring with the inscription "Abhigyan Shakuntalam", which Dushyanta puts on her finger, serves as a stamp of recognition, further reducing her to a possession and reinforcing the idea of her being controlled and owned by the king.

Dushyanta's sexual relationship with Shakuntala is portrayed as an act of total colonization and domination over her, drawing a parallel to a farmer plowing the land to harvest fruits in the form of sexual pleasure and successors to rule the territory or serve the bureaucratic system. This comparison portrays the dehumanization of Shakuntala and her reduction to a means for satisfying Dushyanta's desires and perpetuating his power. Similar to how Nature often undergoes ravaging conversion into industrial products and agricultural yields, Shakuntala's body undergoes visible changes due to her pregnancy. Her physical appearance transforms, with her face becoming emaciated, her bosom losing firmness, her waist becoming more slender, her shoulders drooping, and her complexion appearing wan. These changes serve as a representation of her vulnerability and the toll that her relationship with Dushyanta takes on her physical and emotional well-being.

Overall, this portrayal in the play highlights the subjugation and exploitation of women like Shakuntala by those in positions of power, drawing powerful parallels between the treatment of women and the exploitation of Nature for human gain. It underscores the need to challenge patriarchal and colonial mindsets that objectify and dominate both women and the natural world.

Culture also plays a dominant role in defining the gender norms in the play. Women are expected to adhere to traditional norms, including modesty, obedience, and devotion to their families. Shakuntala, as a young woman of noble birth, embodies these cultural expectations. She is portrayed as virtuous, respectful, and subservient to her elders. The only error Shakuntala commits in her lifetime is to accidentally ignore the arrival of sage Durvasa and failing to offer him hospitality. She is expected to warmly host Sage Durvasa being the woman of the house as designated by the socio-cultural structure. Sage Durvasa misinterprets the situation and hurls the curse upon Shakuntala. By doing this, he personifies en-

do-centricism and foreshadows his supremacy of being a male. He uses his curse as a weapon to destroy Shakuntala's life. The later distress of Shakuntala in the play may be depicted as a form of punishment for supposedly neglecting her duty of maintaining the indigenous characteristics of women and nature. In ancient Indian society, women were expected to fulfill specific roles and duties, which were typically aligned with traditional values and customs. Shakuntala's distress might be interpreted as a consequence of her perceived failure to adhere to these societal expectations. As a woman, she may have been expected to prioritize her duties within the hermitage and fulfill her role as a wife and mother, conforming to the established norms.

Likewise, the connection between Shakuntala's distress and Nature could also be viewed through the lens of her relationship with the environment. As someone deeply connected to nature, her actions and behavior might have been held to higher standards, and any perceived deviation from those expectations could be seen as deserving of punishment. Dushyanta's unhesitating denial of recognizing Shakuntala, his cruel rejection and indifference towards her plea, and his spiteful insinuations upon her failure to produce the signet ring as evidence, all marginalize her as an abandoned object. She becomes a victim of his irresponsibility, suspicion, and indifference, leaving her in a state of emotional turmoil and vulnerability. In this situation, Shakuntala's position can be compared to a piece of land that is exploited and undermined by commercially inclined men until it reaches the verge of barrenness. Once considered useless and alien to their interests, they discard it without regard for its well-being. Similarly, Dushyanta's mistreatment of Shakuntala leaves her feeling abandoned and rejected, adding to her sense of shame and humiliation. This mistreatment also affects Shakuntala's unborn child, Bharat, who later emerges as a brave and radiant individual. The sanctified seclusion of Sage Maricha's hermitage, where she finds shelter during her pregnancy, plays a vital role in protecting her and her unborn child from further harm and injury. The description emphasizes the theme of exploitation and mistreatment faced by women in positions of vulnerability, drawing parallels between Shakuntala's experiences and the degradation of Nature due to human actions. It highlights the importance of safe spaces and supportive environments, like the hermitage, in protecting the well-being and dignity of women during challenging times.

Furthermore, the play's narrative serves as a reminder of the devastating impact of human actions on the environment. The consequences faced by characters, such as King Dushyanta, underscore the repercussions of dis-

regarding the interconnectedness of all living beings and ecosystems. This aligns with ecofeminism's call for recognizing the intrinsic value of nature and acknowledging the rights and agency of all living entities.

In essence, "Abhigyan Shakuntalam" offers a captivating canvas on which the principles of ecofeminism are vividly portrayed. Shakuntala's character embodies the profound connection between women and the natural world, and the vital role they play in maintaining harmonious relationships with the environment and all living beings. The play invites readers and audiences alike to contemplate the parallels between the subjugation of women and the degradation of the natural world, urging the society to embrace a more inclusive and sustainable approach to existence. By embracing ecofeminist ideals, the readers can aspire to heal not only the societal imbalances but also the relationship of humanity with the Earth, fostering a future that is more harmonious, just, and in tune with the rhythms of Nature.

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