



International Journal of Sanskrit Research

अनन्ता

ISSN: 2394-7519

IJSR 2024; 10(3): 19-21

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www.anantaajournal.com

Received: 25-02-2024

Accepted: 30-03-2024

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Kālidāsa's Śakuntalā: An Irsome Ideal of Femininity

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Abstract

Abhijñānaśakuntalam, undoubtedly a masterpiece of the great poet Kālidāsa presents Śakuntalā as the main protagonist. This paper is an effort to identify the stereotype Indian women with Śakuntalā whose womanhood is marked by coyness and submissiveness. She is portrayed as an epitome of physical beauty, and her femininity is defined by her being an object of male desire, male dependence, endurance of pain in silence, responsibility towards the welfare of her family, and so on. The main protagonist of the play seems to be merely reduced to an assertive character. All these are the traits that are considered must for an ideal woman in the patriarchal societies. Through her portrayal, the play puts forward a gloomy picture of the cotemporary women who had no say in the affairs household or public.

Keyword: Śakuntalā, physical beauty, coyness, submissiveness, miserable, male dependence

Introduction

It's generally agreed upon that women in Vedic and early Vedic era enjoyed rights equal to their male counterparts. We can find many hymns in the R̥gveda ascribed to the female sages; Lopāmudrā, Gārgī, Ghoṣā, Maitreyī are to name a few. As goes general belief, women during the early Vedic period enjoyed equal status with men in all aspects of life. Works by ancient Indian grammarians such as Patanjali and Kātyāyana suggest that women were highly educated in the early Vedic period. They were not treated as inferior or subordinate but equal to men in all matters of life. But in post Vedic period, their social status gradually deteriorated. Moving on to kālidāsa's literature, it is found that most of his works represent two different aspects of woman, one in the form of the poetic and artistic depiction of woman, and the other in the form of her status in the prevailing society.

Methodology

The present paper through the critical study of Abhijñānaśakuntalam seeks to explore how our beloved poet Kālidāsa portrayed Indian women as subdued and socially oppressed subaltern subject under the patriarchal supervision. Objective of this paper is to present the position of women during that period through the treatment of Śakuntalā in his world famous drama Abhijñānaśakuntalam. This article without intending to underestimate the play in any way, attempts to bring forth biased social attitude, and cultural domination over women rampant at the time. Honour, shame, modesty, decorum, submissiveness and sacrifice are described as qualities ingrained into the feminine psyche since childhood. Śakuntalā is crafted and created into an epitome of virtue; an ideal of selflessness, love and compassion, and most importantly upholding the golden virtue of silence.

Discussion and Findings

Abhijñānaśakuntalam, undoubtedly a masterpiece of the great poet Kālidāsa is supposed to have been composed during 4th century or even earlier at a time when the society was deeply patriarchal. This paper is an effort to identify the stereotype Indian women with Śakuntalā whose womanhood is marked by coyness and submissiveness. Stereotype Indian women over centuries in Indian society convey a close resemblance to the protagonist Śakuntalā whose ideal womanhood is traditionally marked by timidity and loyalty. Śakuntalā displays coyness and politeness as imperative traits of women. It becomes enduringly explicit in the words of the king when he says that she avoids eye contact with him—“Abhimukhemayisamhṛtamīṣaṇam”^[1]. From classical period onwards, women look

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compellingly dependant on men for their protection and social status. The marriage of a woman is determined by the approval and disapproval of the patriarchal authority. In response to the suggestion of Clown to marry Śakuntalā, king Duṣyanta says that she is not self dependent regarding this decision, “Paravatī khalu tatrabhavatī. Na ca sannihito atra gurujanah.” [2] The degree of female marginalization under the patriarchal supervision turns more prominent as Sāmāgarava claims to the king that she is his wife, he may leave her or keep her as husbands have power for good or ill over wife’s life-

Tadeṣā bhavatah kāntā tyaja vainām gr̥hāṇa vā
Upaṇnā hi dāreṣu prabhutā sarvatomukhī [3].

Humans by nature enjoy aesthetic sense. Poetry, prose or drama prepared artistically with such content tends to fetch wider readership or audience. Literature being a mirror of societal behaviour can’t be immune to such illustrations. Aesthetic description of women is a pervasive issue in literature, but the unjust and worth criticism part is the commoditization of women, underestimation of their feelings, denial of power and position and constant marginalization. Abhijñānaśākuntalam depicts males directly connected with power and authority; and femininity, however is linked with a submissive and seductively appealing feature. Śakuntalā is portrayed as an epitome of exquisiteness. Description of body parts especially erotically stimulating ones appeals to the readers, at the same time reducing her to merely an object of male desire, as is visible in the king’s statement where he pines to enjoy her physical beauty-

Na jāne bhoktāram kamihasamupasthāsyati vidhih?

Her social, emotional and intellectual qualities as a human being have not been given due place.

A meek and demure girl, she succumbs to her sexual desire at the sight of the king. She doesn’t oppose the king over his erratic remarks. The salacious words used at her don’t stir her up against the king. She is such a feeble minded girl that she even daren’t defend herself against the vilification by the king in public when he refuses to recognize her as his wife in the full view of his court. Despite receiving immense humiliation from the king, she just cries and curses her fate for this condition of hers. Here she is portrayed as completely helpless, and in this miserable state of being unable to bear her misfortune, she has no desire to live anymore when she says- “Bhagavati vasudhe, dehi me vivaram” and saying so, she leaves the courtroom in tears.

Social values, norms and attitude of modern developed society starkly contrast with that of king Duṣyanta who makes explicit sexual remarks against Śakuntalā. What’s worth mentioning here is the praise of Śakuntalā’s physical beauty, youth and body parts; not of her talent, skill, intelligence or anything that as an individual one possess. The tendency to judge or praise a woman for her physical appearance is pervasive. What the king falls for her is the physical beauty she possesses as is witnessed in his comments such as-
Śuddhāntadurlabhamidamvapurāśramavāsinoyadijanasya [4]

Idam kilāvyājamanoharam vapuh [5]

Iyamadhikamanojñya valkalenāpi tanvī [6]

Adharah kisalayarāgah komalavitapakānukārīṇau bāhū

Kusumamiva lobhaniyam yauvanamangeṣu sannaddham [7].

Almost nowhere has she been evaluated for her virtues and character. She symbolizes love and purity, and her character represents the power of selfless love. She is portrayed just as an attractive damsel. She has congenital this exquisiteness from her fairy mother Menakā. King Duṣyanta falls in love with her at the very first sight. Her divine exquisiteness makes him incapable to restraint his desire for her. The II and III Acts of the play are abundant with such illustrations where he makes many a lewd remark in praise of her physical appearance. She seems to be quite dumb in accepting his proposal without giving a thought to the pros and cons of her secret marriage with him, and puts her honour at stake. Easily taken into by Duṣyanta’s lustful talk and mannerisms, she enters into Gāndharvavivāha with him.

She is illustrative of women’s condition in a male-controlled society. In patriarchal societies, women have been preserved as men’s subsidiary. Though, they have been addressed as revered being constantly but at the equivalent period, they have been laid beneath resistor of manmade guidelines besides principles. Śakuntalā’s father exposes her to the King Duṣyanta as though she were an entity. Furthermore, he clarifies to her that she must obey her elders, be friendly with the other wives of her husband, and never be perversely angry with her husband even though he proves less faithful than a man should, be as courteous to servants as she could, not get puffed with pride in her happy days. She is instructed that this behaviour defines a wife; and that self-willed women bring doom to their family-

Śūsṛśasva gurūn kuru priyasakhīvṛttim sapatnījane
Bharturviprakṛtāpi roṣanātayā mā sma pratīpam gamah
bhūyīṣtham bhava dakṣiṇā parijane bhāgyeṣvanutsekinī
yāntyvam gr̥hīṇīpadamy uvatayo vāmāh kulasyādhayah [8].

Śakuntalā, virtually all the times remains a submissive protagonist. When the King Duṣyanta repudiates identifying her, she wishes to go back to her father Kaṇva’s hermitage. But denied of her rightful place by Duṣyanta, she is left there only by her accomplices; Gautamī, Śārangarava and Śāradvata. Here she is portrayed as a very miserable creature who follows these people but rebuked hard by Śāradvata for trying to behave on her own will what she is not supposed to- kimpurobhāge, svātantrayamavalambase? [9] At this moment, Śārangarava goes a step ahead in declaring that even the life of a servant is good in her husband’s house- Patikule tava dāsyamapi kṣamam [10]. She is simply eliminated at the mercy of her spouse. Leaving her behind, as they move, Duṣyanta declares he is never going to accept her as his wife as he doesn’t consider it righteousness-

Kumudānyeva śaśānkah savitā bodhayati pankajānyeva
Vāśiṇām hi paraparigrahasamśleṣaparāṅgmukhī vṛttih [11].

It obviously demonstrates the subsidiary situation of a woman in the contemporary society

We only get to see her speak up for herself when the king humiliates her by calling her a cunning woman in the fifth canto. At this moment, she calls him a wretch who judges all by his own false heart. But for a few bitter statements towards the king in the Vth Act, she is displayed as a subdued character. King Duṣyanta himself elaborates her miserable state when he is immersed in remorse by saying that having been discarded by him, she tried to follow her accomplice but rebuked by them too [12].

Hence, in spite of her self-esteem, she is not so much established in her uniqueness. All over the drama, she is celebrated in terms of her exquisiteness and sense of responsibility. She adores Duṣyanta right from her first sight of him. Even after he discards her, she leaves the courtroom in tears instead of rebelling for her rights. Besides, when he reclaims his remembrance and comes to her, she agrees to take him without any grievance. Śakuntalā epitomizes humble, subservient and subordinate and the feminine supreme of the submissive woman in a few ways. She has so much of faithfulness to Duṣyanta that even after he bluntly refuses to recognize her as his wife, she agonizes for her love. When the king recognizes her in the VIIIth Act, she shows no sign of anger for his willfulness, exposes her vulnerability, and simply hails him for this kind act on his part –Jayatu, jayatvāryaputrah (ityardhokte vāspakaṅthī viramati). She places him in very high esteem that he at last got to remember her- Atha kathamāryaputreṇa smṛto dukhabhāgyayam janah? All this makes her demonstrative of ample of the feminine custom in the society prevailing at that time. It is problematic to recognize where she would fall short of the dimension of what the contemporary literature expresses as an 'ideal' woman. Perhaps, a minor dispute can be made that when she fails to receive the sage appropriately and act in accordance to the custom that a guest deserves, one could recommend that this is where she falls short of this theoretical ideal. All of this presumes an exterior standard that has been well-defined through the literature.

Although Śakuntalā is very much the heroine of the play and is intended to be a focus for admiration and even veneration, the play mainly focuses on her loyalty and gentleness rather than her strong will. In Kālidāsa's version, Śakuntalā is a sweet, innocent, pious girl who is not nearly so robust in standing up for her rights. She is shy and deferential in dealing with Duṣyanta, seeking help from her mother, the nymph Menakā, rather than confronting the king directly. Kālidāsa's Śakuntalā is crafted as an epitome of virtue, modesty, subservience, and sacrifice. These characteristics are meant to conform to the perception of 'the feminine ideal of Indian women' in a patriarchal culture.

Disclosure statement

Śakuntalā represents the feminine ideal of the Indian woman in staying passive and submissive in almost all situations. On one hand, she has much in way of loyalty to Duṣyanta. Even after he cannot recognize her, she is completely devoted to him and maintains her high sense of virtue and loyalty to her one and true love. In this light, she suffers for her love, which makes her representative of much of the feminine tradition in the contemporary literature.

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, Kaṇva in Act IV declares women as others' wealth; to be taken care of till they are given away and is relieved that he has finally given Śakuntalā away to Duṣyanta ^[13]. She represents the class of women who are strictly restricted in every sphere to breathe an independent life. They are recognized as the oppressed class of the society and merely a puppet in the hands of male dominating society. Being in this line, Śakuntalā has been depicted as beautiful, virtuous, amiable, submissive and self-sacrificing.

References

1. Abhijñānaśākuntalam 2/11
2. Abhijñānaśākuntalam, Act II
3. Abhijñānaśākuntalam, 5/26
4. Abhijñānaśākuntalam, 1/15
5. Abhijñānaśākuntalam, 1/16
6. Abhijñānaśākuntalam, 1/17
7. Abhijñānaśākuntalam, 1/18
8. Abhijñānaśākuntalam, 4/18
9. Abhijñānaśākuntalam, Act V
10. Abhijñānaśākuntalam, Act V
11. Abhijñānaśākuntalam, 5/28
12. Itah pratyādeśāt svajanamanugantum vyavasitā
Sthitā tiṣṭhetyuccairvadati guruśiṣye gurusame
Punarḍṣṭim vāspaprasarakaluśām arpitavatī
Mayi krūre yattatsaviṣamiva śalyam dahati mām.
Abhijñānaśākuntalam, 6/9
13. Artho hi kanyā parakīya eva
Tāmadya sampreṣya parigrahītuh
Jāto mamāyam viśadah prakāmam
Pratyarpitanyāsa ivāntarātmā. Abhijñānaśākuntalam, 4/22