

**‘LOOK BACK IN WONDER’-- WHAT A WORLD IT WAS! AN
ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF KALIDASA’S *ABHIGYAN SHAKUNTALAM*****DR. HEM RAJ BANSAL**

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India**ABSTRACT**

This paper aims to study the Indian epic poet and playwright Kalidasa’s Sanskrit classic Abhigyan Shakuntalam from the eco-critical perspective. This ancient Indian classic offers a palatable/delectable food to the heart that craves for an unprecedented harmony between human and divine, and man and nature. A plunge in the past makes us wonder on the colonial and postcolonial times where this concern for environment seems to have by and large waned. A time when nature is being tamed, controlled, and eroded for personal and national gain and when global warming largely threatens the deluge of species both human and natural, a lesson can be learnt from the way Kalidasa presents the interface of man and nature. While the colonial avarice for money resulted in the plunder of natural resources, the present lords of the global village, as Ranendra calls the capitalists in his novel in Hindi Global Gaon ke Devta translated in English as Lords of the Global Village (2017), are adding to the woes of tribals in the light of neo-liberal policies. Given such human caused cataclysm of/in natural world, the present paper discusses Abhigyan Shakuntalam as a tale that teaches us to preserve environment by being in complete communion with nature and its creatures. The play orients us towards a better understanding of nature, like the Romantic writers did and the aboriginal authors around the globe do, for a sequestered and peaceful life. Abhigyan Shakuntalam, thus, brings to the fore the benign aspects of nature in many forms. Kalidasa posits that nature never betrays the human beings as it lifts their sagging spirits. Considering nature as an extension of human personality, the characters in the play share an unmitigated bonding with it. The dramatist also explicates that when human beings begin to love nature and its creatures, the latter too reciprocate the same with more intensity. Shakuntala, for example, loves the trees, van-jyotsana and the deer so ardently that all these living and non-living objects of nature share their grief in form or another the moment she leaves for her husband’s palace. Apart from it, we get to know through the protagonist that in state of nature, a human being cannot be corrupt as Gautami interrogates Dushyant when he brands her as a cunning woman. The playwright drives home the point that if we share such bonding with nature and maintain ecological balance, nature will return the bounty profusely.



One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.

(Wordsworth “The Table Turned”)

This paper aims to study the Indian epic poet and playwright Kalidasa’s Sanskrit classic *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* from the eco-critical perspective. This ancient Indian classic offers a palatable/delectable food to the heart that craves for an unprecedented harmony between human and divine, and man and nature. A plunge in the past makes us wonder on the colonial and postcolonial times where this concern for environment seems to have by and large waned. A time when nature is being tamed, controlled, and eroded for personal and national gain and when global warming largely threatens the deluge of species both human and natural, a lesson can be learnt from the way Kalidasa presents the interface of man and nature. While the colonial avarice for money resulted in the plunder of natural resources, the present lords of the global village, as Ranendra calls the capitalists in his novel in Hindi *Global Gaon ke Devta* translated in English as *Lords of the Global Village* (2017), are adding to the woes of tribals in the light of neo-liberal policies. Given such human caused cataclysm of/in natural world, the present paper discusses *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* as a tale that teaches us to preserve environment by being in complete communion with nature and its creatures. The play orients us towards a better understanding of nature, like the Romantic writers did and the aboriginal authors around the globe do, for a sequestered and peaceful life.

The origins of Ecocritical theory can be traced back to William Rueckert who coined the term ‘ecocriticism’ in 1978 in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism.” It was thereafter revived by Cheryl Glotfelty in 1996 when she co-edited a book with Harold Fromm entitled *The Eco-Criticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* in 1996. Back in 1992, Glotfelty had also founded the ASLE, the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, and has its own journal *ISLE, Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. However, the movement still, unlike other theories, “does not have a widely-known set of assumptions, doctrines, or procedures” (Barry 239). Glotfelty defines it as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies” (xviii).

Eco-critics speak from a realist position. The relationship between nature and culture is not as it is viewed by other theories. Ecocriticism propounds that nature does exist and is an inseparable part of our existence and hence the proponents of Ecocriticism “reject the notion that everything is socially and/or linguistically constructed” (Barry 243). Earlier known simply as the study of nature writing, it now concerns with the relation of human beings with nature.

Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) lends importance to the state of nature where man was not corrupted by the feelings of jealousy, hate, and ambition. Rousseau however considered life of man in nature as good and the prehistoric place as unspoiled and unpolluted

by the so called society or civilization. He considers the time when man began to form societies as the one which led to comparing one's merits and demerits with the neighbours and hence a movement away from nature when the man was 'Noble Savage.' It is now acknowledged that such "so-called primitive peoples lived in balance with their environment" (Wall 21). One important aspect of the tribals in general and hunter-gatherer people, Australian Aborigines for example was that they did not believe much in owning but sharing and it was what led to the veneration of nature. It is for this reason that no concept of private property affected these tribals daily lives. Derek Wall writes that "These earlier prehistoric and hunter-gather groups developed economies based on sharing rather than competitive exchange" (21).

The Romantic period in England is specifically known for a heightened perception about and love for nature. Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Romantic Tradition* (1991) focuses on ecological aspects in his poems. In his views on a city in Book VII of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth talks about the alienation of man from man as he is largely away from nature:

Above all, one thought
Baffled my understanding, how men lived
Even next-door neighbours, as we say, yet still
Strangers, and knowing not each other's names.
(*Prel.* vii. 17-20)

This key perception about the eerie nature of man in the modern urban world is picked up towards the end of the book:

How often in the overflowing streets
Have I gone forwards with the crowd, and said
Unto myself, 'The face of every one
That passes by me is a mystery.'
(*Prel.* vii. 5-8 qtd. in Bate 20)

The lines clearly indicate how even neighbours remain strangers to each other as there is not much bonding in cities whereas in nature noble sentiments drive people to get connected to each other. Nature, thus, nurtures bonding and empathy in human beings. This great votary of nature, therefore, demonstrates how man is becoming more materialistic and hence his poems celebrate nature in its highest form so that the troubled soul of human beings may find respite from the pent-up life.

II

In Indian context, the concern for nature dates back to Vedic times. "Vedas, especially the Ayurveda section, demonstrate profound knowledge of biodiversity, the interrelationship between living species and the environment, the need to maintain natural dynamism, the right ways of handling plants and trees, native flora and fauna, or the price one pays for

transgressing the ecological principles” (Bilimouria 4). These ancient texts teach the principle of give and take wherein it is said “Whatever I dig from thee, O Earth, may that have quick recovery again. O purifier, may we not injure thy vitals or thy heart” (Sharma). The Vedas, thus, not only stress the need to preserve nature but also as to how to maintain balance between the need and development as the neglect of the earth may result in natural catastrophes as well. The concept of *bhumi poojan* (earth-worship) before house-building shows again the veneration for the earth. “Bhoom Sukta” in the Atharvaveda has sixty-three verses devoted to nature and on the importance of ecological balance. Sustainable development, as we have the term now, had its genesis in the Rigveda where sapling of plants is given importance as “the trees are regarded to have divine powers due to their medicinal properties” (Baranwal 7).

Kalidasa’s magnum opus *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* foregrounds many earth and nature-friendly concerns. The play is based on a story that takes place in the Mahabharata. While in the above mentioned epic, the king and queen both give more importance to worldly desires instead of love, in the play under discussion it is love which becomes the guiding principle. In the Mahabharata, love happens between the two at first sight but it is more of a selfish nature. Shakuntala agrees to marry Dushyant only if he makes her son the heir to the throne in the future which he accedes to. But when Shakuntala reaches his palace, he refuses to accept her as his wife deliberately as she is of a lower status and thus, fears social mores. He accepts her only when there is *aakashvani* (voice from the sky), leading his on the path of duty. In *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*, Kalidasa invents the curse of sage Durvasa under the spell of which both lovers forget each other and hence, neither of them can be blamed for their sudden haywire disbelief of each other. It is in such an ideal state that materialism does not affect their love at any stage as in the Mahabharata. It is for this reason again, that the readers feel more pain for these estranged lovers than they do for the ones in the epic.

Though love remains the pivotal aspect in *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*, nature adds to the beauty of this universal human emotion. To tell briefly about the plot, the tale features Dushyant, king of Hastinapur chasing a deer and eventually landing in the hermitage of sage Kanav. He falls in love with the foster daughter of Kanava at first sight and longs to marry her. When he appears before Shankutala in the disguise of Dushyant’s commander, she also equally falls in love with him. Eventually revealing him to be the king, both of them marry in *gandharva* tradition (marriage without parents’ consent) after he persuades her of its wide acceptance. Before leaving, he gives her his ring in the form of a souvenir and promises to write to her and to take her back after the arrival of her father. However, when months pass and the king does not return, Shakuntala becomes worried and baffled. When the sage Durvasa appears for alms at this juncture, she is so lost in the memory of the king that she gives no heed, thereby inviting the curse of the sage: “You are not paying heed to a hermit like me. The person you are trying to remember would forget you in spite of immense efforts of recollection in the same way as an insane person forgets his past” (AS 62). Her confidantes, Ansooya and Priyambada do not tell Shakuntala anything about the curse but ask her to show the ring to the king when she reaches there as they know that it would revoke Durvasa’s curse. However, the king does not accept her as he is under the spell of the curse and cannot accept someone else’s wife. Since Shakuntala loses her ring, all efforts to remind the king about the marriage go futile and eventually Shakuntala has to depart with a celestial damsel. It is only after the ring is found in the possession of a fisherman that the influence of the curse



diminishes and the king becomes grief stricken for having turned out his love, his wife from his door so foolishly. However, it is after his fight with the demons that he finds a young kid playing with a cub who eventually turns out to be his son. Both the lovers then get reunited and it is here that the whole story of the curse is yarned to them by lord Mareechi. The play thus ends on a happy note. The further discussion is centred on ecological aspects of the play.

The play opens with an invocation to the lord Brahma which shows the Indian Sanskrit theatrical practice where a god is invoked to ensure the success of a play. As in the Greek drama, the Muses inspire the poets, artists, painters or philosophers in their respective pursuits; similarly here the Sanskrit drama embodies this cult of the divine. Second tradition of the Sutraddhar in the Greek plays who introduces the play to the audience is also like the tradition we have in Sanskrit theatre. The very first song introduces the protagonist of the play king Dushyant who chases a deer. The “half chewed straw of sacrificial grass” in the jaw of the deer shows the fear gripping it. Human-nature relationship here sets off on a bleak note as the deer tries to protect itself from the arrow. The horses are shown stronger than the horses of Sun and Indra, the mythical gods in Hindu religion.

Sage Kanav’s hermitage brims with natural life. Concern for ecology and its creatures is clearly reflected in Kanav’s disciples’ advice to king Dushyant when he is about to kill the deer: “This deer belongs to our ashram. It should not be hunted for ashram’s animals are not executable. Deer’s body happens to be very soft for which your arrow proves to be as dreadful as fire for a cushion of cotton” (21). The ‘sacrificial grass’ drops a hint to the divine radiance which illuminates the hermitage as its inhabitants share a special bond with its flora and fauna.

The ashram (hermitage) situated on the river Malini (a geographical place in Uttarakhand) expresses a greater concern for all forms of nature. Rice for parrots and the presence of fearless deer in the ashram indicate how these creatures have no sense of fear in this harmonious ambience. Shakuntala, the female protagonist admits to her confidante Ansooya that she waters the trees not out of any obligation but love: “I myself love them like my kin and therefore I do all this” (AS 23). Dushyant, on the other hand, thinks it ‘a lowly deed’ to water the trees. It is where signs of associating cities with a lack of concern for nature can be discerned as for the king, who hails from a city, watering trees is the work of a gardener, considered to be a low caste. The 18th century philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau’s teachings about the life of man in nature and Wordsworth’s praise of the rustic, the cottagedwellers in his many a poems indicate the benign influence that nature casts on man. Whether as ‘healing balm’ or as ‘the anchor of purest thoughts’, nature does produce ‘purest’ and serene thoughts like the ones expressed by Shakuntala for the tress and creatures of the hermitage. The king, however, fails to associate with nature as he somewhere is a symbol of town which, steeped in its blind pursuit of development and artificial decor, is away from bounteous aspects of nature. Like tribals/aborigines across the world, Shakuntala and other forest-dwellers wear *valkal* (garments made from bark of tress and leaves) and do not evince any interest in artificial jewellery. Shakuntala adorns her ears with *siras* flowers. Thus, nature provides for all their needs as they are away from greed, as has famously been said by Mahatama Gandhi that nature has enough for our needs but not enough for everyone’s greed.

It is nature which eventually transforms the king. The same deer that he earlier wanted to hunt melts his heart now. Kalidasa depicts the transformative influence of natural creatures on human beings and how harmony exists between the two as Dushyant is not able to “arch the bowstring” (37). However, it happens only when he falls ardently in love with Shakuntala who, having been brought up in nature, nurtures love for natural creatures in the king’s heart. Under such effect, Dushyant also commands the Army Commander to let the flock of deer, buffaloes, and boars roam freely and fearlessly throughout the length and breadth of that place.

Another important aspect of nature comes to the fore where jasmine is married off to a mango tree and hence called ‘van-jyotsana’. This marriage of the natural world, i.e. of vine with a tree is symbolic or a prototype of the later marriage of Shankuntala and Dushyant.

Nature time and again placates the troubled soul of the love-lorn couple. When it is said that Shakuntala has become pale and wan due to sunstroke, she is administered an ayurvedic treatment with the anointment of paste made of scented grass and lotus leaf. Similarly the cool wind of the forest brings along relief as the king moans: “The wind seems to be very pleasant to body that is feverish due to lust” (50). When Dushyant goes stealthily to Shakuntala’s arbour in the wood, she is shown as having formed for herself a stone platform which is softened by the flowers. Nature, thus, provides succour to these lovers in one way or another, thereby acting as the true companion of human beings. Again when Priyambada shows concern for a little one of deer gone astray from its mother and looks bewildered, it is again indicative of the human concern for the wild.

The greatest eco-centred concerns find place in the play at the time of Shakuntala’s departure for her husband’s palace in Hastinapur. It is again flowers and leaves that she is adorned with. Kanav at this time recalls Shakuntala’s concern for trees and invokes them to bless her in her new endeavour in life. He says: “She never used to drink water without watering you. She never touched your delicate leaves, despite the fact that she loves ornaments. She was always delighted on seeing your new buds” (72). While the voice from the sky blesses her, the sound of the cuckoo bird further adds to her joy. She tearfully embraces *vanjyotsna*, the vine as her ‘true sister.’ The whole nature and its inhabitants share the grief of the parting moments in one way or another. The deer regurgitate the chewed grass, peacocks no longer dance and trees shed their leaves. For the whole natural world of the Kanav’s hermitage, spring turns into autumn as their beloved Shakuntala departs. Overwhelmed at such scene, she also shows concern for a doe and wants to be informed when it delivers a young one. The scene is so touching that the deer that she loved and cared for stops her from leaving. It is on this occasion only that the natural world forewarns Shakuntala of the events that would follow. Ruddy goose screaming for the gander that is out of sight of the goose is an ill-omen and indicative of Shakuntala and Dushyant’s later perplexion under the spell of the curse.

When Dushyant under the spell of the curse refuses to recognise Shakuntala as his wife and accuses her of being “pregnant due to some other man” (88), Gautami, a female ascetic, defends her. Eventually when Shakuntala tries to remind him of the deer Ghapang, he dismisses and calls her false and corrupt, Gautami speaks high of nature and its influence on Shakuntala: “This girl, grown up in the sacred grove, is completely ignorant of fraud and

deceit” (91). Again like the Romantics, there resonates a firm belief in Gautami’s affirmation in the positive aspects of nature as it ennobles the soul and purifies the heart which can never stoop to ‘deceit’ or cunningness.

Abhigyan Shakuntalam, thus, brings to the fore the benign aspects of nature in many forms. Kalidasa posits that nature never betrays the human beings as it lifts their sagging spirits. Considering nature as an extension of human personality, the characters in the play share an unmitigated bonding with it. The dramatist also explicates that when human beings begin to love nature and its creatures, the latter too reciprocate the same with more intensity. Shakuntala, for example, loves the trees, van-jyotsana and the deer so ardently that all these living and non-living objects of nature share their grief in form or another the moment she leaves for her husband’s palace. Apart from it, we get to know through the protagonist that in state of nature, a human being cannot be corrupt as Gautami interrogates Dushyant when he brands her as a cunning woman. The playwright drives home the point that if we share such bonding with nature and maintain ecological balance, nature will return the bounty profusely.

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