

The Subjugated Woman ‘SELF’ in Kalidas’s ‘Shakuntala’

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Abstract

This research paper tries to inculcate the epiphany Shakuntala experiences once she is insultingly evicted from the palace of the king, Dusyanta. Although she devoted herself to Dusyanta blindly, he denounces to accept Shakuntala his wife. A disparaged betrayed pregnant wife leaves the palace and births the child in the midst of forest. Her real struggle in quest of her ‘self’ and nurturing her son singly is the most captivating scenario of this epic. The king’s abandoning Shakuntala corroborates novice strength in her which leads to her further recognition about her position as a beloved and a wife. The broader umbrella term called “Feminism” somehow nearly ignores the south Asian and Third World feminine traumas. Thus, this research paper uses several transnational feminist theories to justify Shakuntala’s journey of self evolution.

Keywords: Transnational Feminism, Subjugation, Gender, Patriarchy, South Asia

Introduction

This research paper chooses *Shakuntala* to portray the subjugation of the heroine, ‘Shakuntala’, by the patriarchy. How South Asian women are subdued by men is clearly portrayed in this epic. The epic’s setting is ancient India. “However, even till now the history of feminism in India is regarded as mainly a practical effort and mostly non-existent. Compared to some other countries there has been only sparse theoretical writing in feminism” (Thakur, 2012, p. 459). Thakur (2012, p.459) further opines that, “Pre-colonial social structures and women’s role in them reveal that feminism was theorized differently in India than in the west.” Hence, the transnational feminism is the perfect tool to examine the subjugated self of Shakuntala. The objective of this research paper is to justify how transnational feminist perspectives expose hostility to Shakuntala whose vulnerability may not be vindicated through Western feminist concept. This epic is about the love story between Dusyanta, the king of Northern India, and Shakuntala, daughter of royal sage and nymph. Kalidasa’s *AS* is based on the dramaturgy of Sanskrit play, which etymologically means ‘token–recognized - Shakuntala’ (Shakuntala recognized by a token). It is an elaboration upon an episode mentioned in the *Mahabharata*, protagonist of which is Shakuntala, the daughter of Vishwamitra and Menaka (Kandel, 2021, p. 52).

While roaming around in his chariot in the forest, Dusyanta approaches near the hermitage of Kanva, a great sage. While visiting the hermitage, Dusyanta has a lovely encounter with Shakuntala, Kanva’s adopted daughter. He instantaneously became

mad in love with her. Shakuntala was also lovesick and confiding her feelings for him to her friends. Two of them secretly got married. However, before long Shakuntala was pregnant. Dusyanta had to return to his capital due to some emergency. Shakuntala in his absence was in forlorn mood which distracted her to notice Durvasas when he visited the hermitage. In rage, Durvasas cursed her that will cause Dusyanta to forget Shakuntala. After Kanva returned, he sent Shakuntala to her husband's palace, escorted by seers. When Shakuntala arrived at the palace, king Dusyanta denied recognizing her because of that curse of Durvasas. Shakuntala tried to show him the signet ring he handed her before leaving the hermitage, she found her finger naked. It was already lost in Ganga while she dived into the water but she was nascent about it. Humiliated Shakuntala left the palace and she was rescued by the nymphs of celestial realms.

A fisherman discovered the king's signet ring in the belly of a fish which returned all the past memories of king after he saw it. However, Matali, the god Indra's charioteer took Dusyanta away on an urgent mission to fight demons. After six years, while Matali and the king were flying over earth, they descended to Marica's hermitage, a celestial realm of demigods. There, he encountered with a boy and when he touched the boy's amulet he recognized that the boy was his own son, Sarvadamana. Shakuntala and Dusyanta at the end are reunited.

Methodology

Arthur W. Ryder's work of Kalidas, *Shakuntala*, translated from Original Sanskrit into English, (1901) is the basic text for the review of the drama. This research paper applied the transnational feminist theories to justify how western feminism cannot speak for the traumas the South Asian or Third World nations' female are experiencing since ancient periods. Both South Asian and Transnational Feminism helped to justify the article's objective.

Defination

The term **transnational** is an umbrella concept that emerged as "a way to name the dramatically increasing flows of people, things, images, and ideas across the borders of nation-states in an era of 'globalization'" (Conway, [2019](#), p. 43). Western feminists' approach for gender equality only relates the pathetic struggle of those white American women. It does not correlate with the women who are out of European and American territory. The White Feminism cannot speak for the problems of Third World Females. The foremost obstruction is that western countries are far developed than eastern/third world nations. Thus, they do not know what it is to be married prior menstruation; how it feels to live behind veil; what is polygamy and brutal physical-sexual violence. Thus, transnational feminist perspectives focus on the diverse experiences of women who live within, between, and at the margins or boundaries of nation-states around the globe; they transcend nation-state boundaries and speak to a wide range of interacting forces that have an impact on gendered relationships and experiences in a geopolitical context (Enns et.al., 2021, p.11). They

also encompass “border work” and communication across traditional global boundaries; may occur in global, regional, and local contexts; and include the experiences of immigrants, refugees, displaced persons, those who have experienced forced migration, members of a cultural diaspora who may be dispersed across multiple regions, as well as those who identify themselves as third-culture persons and persons who are attempting to integrate multiple cultural identities (Horne & Arora, 2013). In this case, Simon de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Susan Bordo and many other white feminists cannot relate with the micro violence that the South Asian/ Third World nations’ females are suffering. While they are exclaiming for the global and political rights, other women from rest of the nations are struggling for minimal basic requirements from their husband, family and society.

Discussion

Shakuntala’s subjugation to different patriarchal forces can be elaborated in extended analysis dividing them into major subordinate topics.

Shauntala

Kalidas is prejudiced while characterizing the hero and heroine of this epic. Even the birth of Shakuntala is the result of Menaka’s intriguing seduction to the sage who was in deep penance. The Gods were horrified from the growing powers from his intense meditation and thus they sent a nymph, Menaka, to disrupt his expiation. The sage could not control himself seeing the enticing Menaka and their union gave birth to Shakuntala. Spivak (2010, p. 52) argues:

Women in India are subalterns since ages. The goddesses in Hindu religion are brutally suppressed which paved way for the colonization of ordinary women of the nation. “Imperialism’s (or globalization’s) image as the establisher of good society is marked by the espousal of the woman as object of protection from her own kind”

The women even during the God’s time were used only as the seductive force. Not only this, Menaka was obliged to return to heaven once Gods’ purpose was satisfied, leaving behind her child with Vishwamitra (Shakuntala’s biological father). Shakuntala was raised by her foster father, Kanva, the great sage without motherly love. She could be brought up in wealthy privileged family if her real parents stayed together. She had to spend her childhood and youth in the hermitage surrounded by the forest. She did not have her own rights to act as she followed every order of Kanva to act according wise. Vrinda Narayan (2008) argues:

In the Hindu religion, there has been partial success in terms of gender equality reform laws and family law. While this is a major advancement relative to other religions in India, it is still not a complete triumph in terms of feminism and relieving “oppression.”

However, she followed her heart, in the absence of Kanva, to love and marry Dushyanta that turned to be catastrophic. Despite being the daughter of nymph, she lives as a commoner because Menaka could not dare to deny Gods’ decision.

Dusyanata was another patriarch who had sheer control over Shakuntala. She fell in his love despite knowing his reality because his machination trapped her blindly. Despite knowing who Dusyanta was in real, Shakuntala crazily started loving him. Dusyanta, not the sacred love, was tempted highly by the beauty and slender physicality of Shakuntala. As per etymology, the word Shakuntala is formed with the union of two- i.e. Shakunta; the bird and la; nourishment (Khanal, 2021, p. 91). Kalidas is conveying that true definition of beauty is Shakuntala. He even imagines of their physical proximity. Therefore, even before marriage, Shakuntala was impregnated. Generally, all woman characters appear at the marriageable age as wives or loved ones. But the commonality in most of the female characters in the works of Kalidasa is the benevolence and mercifulness, the persistence and patience, the desire for happy love (Khanal, 2021, p. 88). Although, Dusyanta disclosed his identity during marriage, Shakuntala surrendered herself to him despite recognizing his identity. Both of them were full of sexual appetite but Dusyanta was openly frivolous and flirtatious to Shakuntala. As a woman, she was tamed to conceal her desire.

Shakuntala's Subjugation to Father

Shakuntala is subjugated to her father. Her biological mother, Menaka, was not allowed to live on the earth because she belonged to celestial realm. Shakuntala was raised by her foster father Kanva and thus she had to live according to Kanva. Nevertheless, the subjugation is in the blood as Menaka was used by gods to shatter the penance of a mortal sage, similarly Shakuntala was obliged to follow the orders of Kanva. In this regard Dr. Malika Begum (2022, p. 99) argues that, "Shakuntala is illustrative of women's condition in male-controlled Indian civilization. In patriarchal Indian culture women have been preserved as men's subsidiary. However, they have been addressed as supernatural being all the time but at the equivalent time they have been put beneath control of men made guidelines and principles". Shakuntala was not allowed to act as per her wish; she lives in the midst of forest in the isolated Kanva's hermitage.

Shakuntala's beauty is shown to be more appealing in the epic. Her lips are compared with flowers and her bodily motions with the branches of flowers and trees. Her feminine nature of calling flowers, trees, and friends shows Kalidas's portraying of Shakuntala as a demure girl. Dr. Pooja Kushwaha (2022, p. 172) argues that, "Shakuntala's childhood is dominated by the conventions and norms of a patriarchal society. Her mother is a typical upholder cultural hegemony. According to her mother, a women life is meant only to be happy with feminine roles. So she insisted Shakunthala to be an ideal girl with all feminine qualities such as, an obedient daughter a faithful wife and a loving mother". Shakuntala's task is to clean the house, prepare food, serving father and nurturing the plants.

Kalidas uses very erotic words to describe her each seductive organ. Shankuntala is presented no more than a sexual commodity. Dusyanta acts as William Blake (1794,

lines 1-8, p. 31) recites “An invisible worm, That flies in the night In the howling Storm: Has found out thy bed of Crimson joy: And his dark secret love Does thy life destroy.” He is that intimidating worm whom none can stop to see and meet his beloved and enters into the hermit. He even says that, “I believe that the slender maiden has just passed through this corridor of young trees” (Kalidas, 1999, p. 27). He even reads the fresh footprints on white sand in the “toe lightly outlined the heel deep and clear” (Kalidas, 1999, p. 27). He beholds her Shakuntala and she is lovesick and he notices her breast which “with loosened lotus-chain, My darling, sore oppressed, Is lovely in her pain” (Kalidas, 1999, p. 7). When the king teasingly tries to help her friends to find out the cause of her sickness, Dusyanta says, “See! Her chicks grow thin; her breast and shoulder fail; her waist is weary and her face is pale” (Kalidas, 1999, p. 27). Kalidas presents Shakuntala as an erotic feminine figure whose glowing cheeks, lifted eyebrow, breast full of lotus petals, fevered limbs and stumbling feet are the factors to eroticize Dusyanta more. The words and speech used for women, since history, symbolizes their passivity as Kumar (1994, p. 54) argues, “Colonial documents, as evidence of female passivity and submission to the dictates of ‘tradition’ and of the oppression of women in India.” The so called western feminism fails here to study how the women of classical period of South Asia were sexually treated. Transnational feminisms are an intersectional set of understandings, tools and practices that can too racialized, classed, masculinised, and hetero-normative logics and practices of globalization and capitalist patriarchies (Nagar and Swarr, p. 5).

Shakuntala’s Subjugation to Dusyanta

Shakuntala’s beauty makes Dusyanta passionate. He gets attracted instantly as he beholds Shakuntala. All the time, he dreams of kissing her lips and of coitus. He longs to be with her. His has immense desire of copulation than of celestial love. Shakuntala’s coyness does not permit her to vomit her feelings. It is because back then in the South Asian countries like Nepal, India, Sri Lanka women’s “expressions of agency can even be seen in some suicide-like acts, which may fulfil the goals of expressing shame when a family’s face may be lost and/or maintaining family or community harmony” (Abeyasekera and Marecek, 2020). Hence, Dusyanta takes the initiation for marriage proposal. Immediately, after their marriage Shakuntala is pregnant. However, Dusyanta has to leave for his kingdom due to some emergency. Shakuntala, innocently, trusts him and waits for his retrieval keeping his souvenir of signet ring. Is it Shakuntala’s ingenuousness or her foolishness? Despite knowing much about Dusyanta, she fell in his love; married him and even conceived. They had clandestine wedding. She did not think once, if her husband would not retrieve, how she would face her father and society. She will have no answer to her child’s question about his father.

Shakuntala’s Sin

Shakuntala was deeply lost recalling her husband. She did not even notice that the sage, Durvasas was at her door. She did not answer him in his calling. In rage, the sage

cursed her, “Do you dare despise a guest like me? Because your heart, by loving fancies blinded, has scorned a guest in pious life grown old, your lover shall forget you though reminded, or think of you as of a story told” (Kalidas, 1999, p. 40). Neither she misbehaved, nor did she disrespect the sage. She failed to hear him. Durvasas enraged that Shakuntala neglected to welcome him and in wrath he cursed her not to be united with her lover. She was thinking about Dusyanta and thus how could she notice a guest when had forgotten herself? She was unaware even while the sage was cursing her. Churamoni Kandel (2021, p. 51) argues that, “In *AS*, the curse of Durvasas becomes a source of sufferings for Shakuntala and Dushyanta. The very feeling of love receives such a heavy blow in this play, which though not fatal, is not therefore less tragic and fearful.” Forgetting one’s self in the blind love for that husband who left her behind despite taking her to his kingdom illustrates Kalidas’s representation of woman as sensible, mindless and irrational. Another consideration is that whereas in the West the notion of “self” rests in competitive individualism where people are described as “born free yet everywhere in chains”, by contrast in India the individual is usually considered to be just one part of the larger social collective, dependent for its survival upon cooperation and self-denial for the greater good (Thakur, 2012, p.459).

Shakuntala’s Epiphany

Shakuntala reaches to the king’s palace at Hastinapur. The king, Dusyanta, denies recognizing her. Monona Wali says that, “This is the poignant moment where we feel Shakuntala’s pain – by denying paternity, the king has denied her any legitimacy in this very strict society.” Shakuntala’s effort to make him recognize her fails because she does not have that signet ring whereas king has forgotten everything of his past. It is all because Durvasas’s curse. It shows the negligence of Shakuntala to protect that ring. While bathing in Ganges, she lost the ring. However, she was solely oblivious of this. King Dusyanta even insults her for charging falsity to him. Thakur (2012, p. 461) explains that, “Religions, like Hinduism, call for women to be faithful servants to God and their husbands. They have a term called *pativrata* that describes a wife who has accepted service and devotion to her husband and her family as her ultimate religion and duty.” A bold argument of Spivak (1996, p. 248) truly substantiates this case:

I will later place the mobilizing of woman into *sati* with the place of the epic instance of “heroism”- suicide in the name of “nation”; “martyrdom”- suicide in the name of “God”; and other species of self-“sacrifice.” These are the transcendental figurations of the (agent of the) gift of time. The feminist project is not simply to stage the woman as victim; but to ask: why does “husband” become an appropriate name for *radical* alterity? Why is “to be” equal “to be wife?” This may even lead to such questions as the contemporary equation “to be” with “to be gainfully employed.”

The wife’s role is ever considered to be the slavery. Her purity is tasted whether she is virgin for the man but man’s character is never question even if he is promiscuous.

Although, Dusyanta gets ready to provide sepulchre to Shakuntala until she gives birth, Shakuntala's epiphany of her own depreciation does not allow her to shelter in king's palace. Menaka comes to help Shakuntala. She takes her to the hermitage of celestial sage, Kashyapa, where "the pregnant Shakuntala takes shelter" (Tiwari, 2011, p. 300). Regarding this, Utkarsh (2024) views:

This book compares Shakuntala to today's modern-day woman and wife. A woman who is independent, assertive, courageous and yet endowed with tenderness, the capability of great love and the ability to take risks as well as give of oneself unreservedly, and a wife who insisted on equality and respect from her man; who reminded her husband of his duty towards her; who told him what honour is and what an honourable man should do.

Dusyanta's denial somehow parallels with Ram's rejection to accept Sita in Ramayana. As the epitome of female virtue, Sita's presence in the epic paradoxically serves to reinforce her absence (Paul et.al., 2022, p. 7). Kalidas has partial presentation for Shakuntala's wrestle of her self development and nurturing her son. Indian literary representation shows the woman only as the astray. Shakuntala births to the son who is depicted as more powerful than her.

She is circumscribed the by male's hegemony. This proves that "even more unanimous than the rejection of discrimination against women by law is the rejection of the idea of the biological inferiority of women to men and condemnation of the subordination of women by men, particularly when it is violent" (Mackinnon, 2006, p. 10). Shakuntala cannot recognize Dushyanta at first, "It is not my husband. Who is the man that soils my boy with his caresses? The amulet should protect him" (Kalidas, 1999, p. 88). As Dushyanta spells, "My darling, the cruelty i showed you has to turned to happiness. Will you not recognize me?" (Kalidas, 1999, p. 88), Shakuntala's emotions flow instantaneously due to the years of departure and she easily forgives him.

Dushyanta immediately feels that Sarvadamana is his son by seeing his bravery and fearless nature. The boy is trying to tame a lion cub by dragging him and forcing his to open its mouth and count its teeth. Dushyanta after watching this scene says, "Why should my hearth go out to this boy as if he were my own son?" (Kalidas, 1999, p. 85). "The boy is seed of fire" (Kalidas, 1999, p. 85) as like him as Dushyanta means. Kalidas has not left a single space to confess that boys do have innate different aura of strength and audacity. Even after having the strong anticipation about the boy's mother, Dushyanta asks, "What was the name of good king whose wife she was?" Thus, by looking at the nature and survival skills of boy, Dusyanta speculates that the boy might be born in the pious grove of father of gods. Although, some kind of intuition makes him to accept the boy as his son but still he is suspicious because lots of the women may have the same name. The doubt he showed to his pregnant wife years back is still rooted inside him. Collins (2000) argues that, "Those who have been colonized or have historically held less power offer a valuable "outsider" perspective that supports agency and resistance. As "outsiders," women of color have typically

developed an intimate knowledge of the dominant culture in order to develop coping and survival skills.” Although, Shakuntala raised Sarvadamana singly she is marginalized in an every way. The bitter pain, isolation and brutal insult Shakuntala endures are placidly cornered.

Gods’ Betrayal to Shakuntala.

The gods even guarded Shakuntala’s son allowing Marichi’s holy son, Kashyap, to offer “Invincible” to the baby when the birth ceremony was performed. None can approach it except his parents and if any outsider tries to touch it, it becomes serpent and stings the person. Dushyanta easily touches it. He is almost assured about the farther-son relationship. When Shakuntala enters he again concentrates on her physicality, “I see your face again, no Jewels but lips are red” (Kalidas, 1999, p. 89). Kashyap and his wife, Aditi, descend from the heaven. Kashyap reveals the secrecy behind their separation. The question is that why the Gods scheme such plan selecting Dushyanta to kill the demon, while his presence is utmost need for his pregnant wife? Either it is God or demon, heaven or earth women are always in periphery. Nita Kumar argues:

The irony is that we in the South Asian social sciences are particularly well placed to develop such a praxis of the subject, given the parallel situation of the colonized subject, a peasant or a worker in an incompletely formed class society, an untouchable in a caste structure, and a woman in a patriarchy; each at the bottom of his or her own hierarchy. (p.n. 2)

Woman’s life is a circus and its master is the man. Dushyanta comes to know everything once he sees that signet ring and then he falls into depression. Rather to unite the husband and wife, Matali flees him away for urgent mission to defeat the demons. The prior thing is to resolve the conflict of the couple. Other missions are secondary. Gods meddled in the married life of Dushyanta and Shakuntala. The Shakuntala suffers vehemently from begetting to giving birth and raising her son alone in hermit. The victim Shakuntala lives a poor life whereas her perpetrator, her husband, lives in affluence. However, she fights for her dignity and shows her audacity to raise her son alone while compelling Gods to plot further conspiracies about her life.

Kalida’s injustice toward Shakuntala is sexist. In *A Roof of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf argues “women have served all these centuries as looking glasses..... Reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (Woolf, 1929, p. 5). Despite being a white woman, her notion mirrors the plight of Shakuntala. By critically analyzing, it can be said that *Abhijnanasakuntalam* is one of the finest plays of Indian Literature. Ironically, Shakuntala, the heroine of perhaps one of the best-known love stories in Hindu mythology, was not born from a place of love (Kushwaha, 2022, p. 172). Therefore, she is loathed by the males; Durvasas and Dusyanta.

Son’s Supremacy

While Dusyanta is trying to kill a deer in the forest, which is under the realm of sage Kanva, but two sages stop him from committing the sin. One of the sages blesses him to “beget a son to rule earth and heaven” (Kalidas, 199, p. 6). Kalidas’s message of having son is prioritized significantly. Only male can be the emperor not the woman and it is being said since history. Religion is even unjust towards women. Therefore, the protection of woman (today the “third- world woman”) becomes a signifier for the establishment of a good society (now a good planet) which must, at such inaugurative moment, transgress mere legality, or equity of policy (Spivak, 2010, p. 50-51). While talking about the history of gods, demigods and human civilization, patriarchy is ever at the centre and women suffer in margin. Therefore, women have only subordinate roles in the epic. Although the title of the epic is on a woman’s name, the heroic features are centred to Dusyanta. Shakuntala is portrayed as pathetic, poor and helpless character. She is doubly marginalized: she cannot be helped even being a nymph’s daughter and the prime marginalization is obviously by patriarchy.

Conclusion

Still the Indian (and many other South Asian) women are suffering from the brutal patriarchal hegemony. Western nations are way more forward than others. Hence, only the feminists of the Indian Territory or South Asian nations can speak for Shakuntala. It is because from the minimal right of freedom of expression to getting small portion of love from husband is enough for these women. Their household onerous chores along with almost sole parental duties are not considered to be valuable. Even the women forget all these physical hassles and emotional ruptures if they receive petty humbleness from their husbands. The depreciation that Shakuntala bears when Dusyanta denies to accept his pregnant wife publicly, she leaves the palace with the perseverance of struggling alone to raise her would be child. Such micro domestic abuses and female’s lone dependency on her father and husband can only be understood by those who live in colossally male dominant societies. Kalidas’s interpretation reflects gender discrimination in eastern countries, mostly in India, commenced from god’s time. The Hindu holy books even mentioned the abuse of goddesses by the gods. Shakuntala’s suppression ranging from her father to husband and to society speaks of the oppression of all the South Asian women. Shakuntala is given importance as barely a seductive source. Shakuntala’s epiphany makes her tenacious yet still submissive to males otherwise there are many choices instead of reuniting with her husband. Merely the males are prioritized in the epic even if that could be Shakuntala’s son whose bravery is shown to protect his mother despite his small age.

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