

# Women and Nature in Abhijnanashakuntalam: an Eco-feminist Study

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## Abstract

*This article aims to oversee the relation between women and nature in Kalidasa's play Abhijnanashakuntalam. The researcher has tried to dig upon the concept of eco-feminism seen in the play by depicting the close relationship between women and nature. Kalidasa's Abhijnanashakuntalam underscores the patriarchal structure based on dualisms like men/woman, masculine/ feminine, culture/ nature, and spiritual/material, which destabilizes the system based on the hierarchy of the traditional gender roles. Qualitative analysis has been done by assessing eco-feminist theory as a method of study. It is found that the heroine of the play Shakuntala has been presented as a nature's child as shown her relation with plants, peacocks and deer. It is also the projection on, how the identity, status and destiny of women remain intertwined with those of nature globally as far as their impoverishment, exploitation, marginalization, abrogation, depletion, commoditization and subjugation are concerned. Kalidasa has tried to depict interdependence of two elements; nature and human emotions which has been discussed in this paper.*

## Keywords

Feminine, patriarchy, hermit girl, foster mother, dualism

## Introduction

Kalidasa, the great Indian poet has portrayed an age society when monarchy and polygamy were prevalent practices in India. His orthodox depreciation of women's independence and his repeated stringent comments on women's strict adherence to the principle of chastity are evident in his works. His emphasis upon the virtues of the women as the glory of the ancient race is vividly reflected. Nature provides the background for the play Abhijnanashakuntalam. The Heroine of the play Shakuntala is described as a hermit girl having a close association with the hermitage environment and with the men leading ascetic lives. There are ample examples in the play that describe nature as her foster mother. Other heroines such as Urvashi and Malvika in

other plays by Kalidasa enjoy a life of luxury but Shakuntala has been portrayed as a child of Nature. She represents Nature in her feminine grace whose companions are birds, animals and plants in the forest. She is pictured as a blossoming flower, nimble as a deer, happy as the dew washed leaves of the forest (Biswas, 2013, p. 212). She has love and affection for nature. For instance she does not drink water without watering the plants.

In this research work, by applying the theoretical insights of the eco-feminist theorists, the researcher will contend and establish that Kalidasa's *Abhijnanashakuntalam* an eco-feminist text primarily deals with the issue of nature-women mutualism and its treatment in the andocentric social structure. In other words, the play projects the idea of male domination over nature and women on different grounds. The analysis of the study centers on the depiction of women and nature in the play. It has equally projected the problem, how the identity, status and destiny of women remain intertwined with those of nature globally as far as their impoverishment, exploitation, marginalization, abrogation, depletion, commoditization and subjugation are concerned. The article shows that, in patriarchy, women and nature are treated as feminine and they are dominated and exploited. The analysis is significant as it helps to understand the importance of feminine to maintain harmonious relation between men, women and nature.

### **Methodology**

The research has been coined within the close projection of women and nature. This study basically follows the textual interpretation, literary reviews, and theological aspects being based on textual analysis. To make this study systematic and attain the objectives, the qualitative analysis has been done by assessing eco-feminist theory as a methodology. The qualitative descriptive approach is applied as data analysis design to analyze the text of *Abhijnashakuntalam* from Sir William Johns' translated version (Works of Kalidasa) which forms the primary source of information. Corresponding literature about the play are taken as secondary sources of data collection.

### **Concept of Eco-Feminism**

Eco-feminism is the origination of a new awareness of redefining the intertwined status and role of woman and Nature, a phenomenal humanitarian-discovery. "Eco-feminism describes movements and philosophies that link feminism with ecology (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/ecofeminism>). The term is believed to have been coined by the French writer, Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book, *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* in 1980 (Mies and Shiva, 1993, p. 13). Eco-feminism connects the exploitation and

domination of women with that of the environment, and argues that there is a connection between women and nature that comes from their shared history of oppression by a patriarchal society. Vandana Shiva claims that women have a special connection to the environment through their daily interactions with it that has been ignored. She says that women in subsistence economies who produce "wealth in partnership with nature, have been experts in their own right of holistic and ecological knowledge of nature's processes." However she makes the point that "these alternative modes of knowing, which are oriented to the social benefits and sustenance needs are not recognized by the capitalist reductionist paradigm, because it fails to perceive the interconnectedness of nature, or the connection of women's lives, work and knowledge with the creation of wealth" (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecofeminism>). Eco-feminism is not just a way of analyzing Nature and women together in literature but it extends human ecogitation of worldwide community and recommends simultaneously for cultural transcendence by examining the limitations of cultural suppositions about women and Nature. Karen Warren accentuates not only the significant connections between women and the non-human natural world but also the fact that one should understand the twin domination of women and Nature. Eco-feminism documents protest against mindless and callous annihilation of Nature and women strongly.

Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva in their joint work 'Eco-feminism' claims that patriarchy associates women to nature and believes that "they could be oppressed, exploited and dominated by man. The tools used are science, technology and violence". Eco-feminist ethics are grounded in the assumption that the dominations of women and of nature are morally wrong and ought to be eliminated (Warren and Cheney, 1991, p. 180). Eco-feminists argue that there are conceptual, symbolic, and linguistic connections between feminist and ecological issues (Tong, 2009, p. 237). Thus, eco-feminists suggest that feminists should take the responsibility to solve the environmental problems.

Literally, the play unfolds the act wise story of the relationship between Shakuntala and the king Dushyanta but indirectly it shades light on the issue of nature and women relationship. Throughout the play, many events establish the strong bond between nature and women. On one hand, it exposes the exploitation and oppression of nature and women in the hands of the male characters. On the other hand, the play depicts the caring and life-affirming forces of qualities inherited in nature and women. The situation of the female characters is presented as sufferers and victims. Nature and women both are victimized in the hands of male characters. Apart from such suppression, the play points out the mutual relationship between nature and women.

In addition, nature and women are seen as protectors and savior for each other's co-existence.

### Discussion/ Analysis

#### Representation of Women and Nature in Abhijanashakuntalam

Shakuntala resists patriarchal gender roles based on hierarchy. She denies the viewpoint that women are inferior because of their reproductive function. On the contrary, she insists that it is women's natural function. She suggests that women should accept that they have accomplished their natural task. Her announcement connects the relation between women and nature. Women and nature are connected because of the revitalizing life giving force attached to them.

Shakuntala is the biological daughter of Sage Vishwamitra and Menka, the celestial court dancer. She has been reared and fostered by Sage Kanva and Gautami in their hermitage. Kalidasa has depicted her natural beauty vividly in contrast with the artificial and courtly beauty. Besides, she possesses beauty, charm, delicacy, radiance, patience and dignity, the qualities of stereotyped womanhood. Her virtues and magnificence can be equated with Nature's resourcefulness. She would only feed herself after the plants and the creepers of the hermitage are watered. Though fond of floral decorations, she would not pluck even a flower because of her tender concern for them and she would celebrate the first efflorescence among them as a festival.

Thus Shakuntala represents the women, who, besides being indigenous custodians of seed and biodiversity believe with reverence that the essence of seed followed by the entire vegetation is the continuity of life (Biswas, 2016, p. 112). Her tender care towards the domesticated deer and cattle along with the plants evince that women's work and knowledge in dairy farming and agriculture uniquely maintains ecological stability, sustainability and productivity.

Dushyanta, the representative of the patriarchal capitalist authoritative domain of the civilization remarks about Shakuntala that she is grown as another fawn among the fawns of the forest. The timid, yet restless fawn portrays the harmony, innocence and charm of the hermitage in the peaceful realms of the forest.

*Dusyanta: 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. No man on earth  
deserves to taste her beauty, her blameless loveliness, and worth,  
unless he has fulfilled man's perfect duty- And is there such a one  
on earth? (II.1 21)*

Dushyanta's description of her immaculate beauty as a flower not yet smelt, a delicate shoot not yet torn with nails, an unpolished diamond, or fresh honey whose sweetness is yet to be tasted, associates her with Nature's bewitching freshness and sanctity, which, whenever noticed by the materialistic section of the society, unquestionably becomes a prey to brutal consumption. Dushyanta's such romanticization of Shakuntala's beauty conceals within it his greedy desire of colonizing and consuming. He as a king is hierarchically in charge of protecting the forest and hermitages under his jurisdiction on one hand, and on the other hand, his hunting expedition disrupts the order of the forest, a microcosm of the vast Nature. It is equivalent to an invasion of Shakuntala's body and soul, which is also disgracefully carried out by the King. Thus his exploitation of both, behind the pretentious act of conservation gets evinced. Dushyanta's secret union with Shakuntala by the rites of Gandharva marriage, not favored by society, is a male-created contractual policy to keep women as his private property. Here, her destiny resembles a segment of the earth fenced and controlled by man. The signet ring embossed with the words 'Abhijnana Shakuntalam', put on her finger by the king epitomizes a stamp on the property for recognition. Like Nature, her status gets restricted to that of an object. Dushyanta's sexual intercourse with Shakuntala not only emblemizes his total colonization and domination over her but also is a process in which the farmer ploughs the latter to harvest fruits in the form of sexual pleasure and successors to rule the territory or functionaries for the anarchical bureaucracy. Here her condition again resembles nature that often undergoes ravaging conversion into industrial product and agricultural yield. A gradual change in her body due to her pregnancy becomes visible: "her face has its cheeks excessively emaciated, her bosom has lost the firmness of her breasts; her waist is more slender; her shoulders are very much drooping; her complexion is wan" (Tewari, 1993, p. 238).

The only error committed by Shakuntala unmindfully under the ascending pressure of such crucial circumstances is not conforming to her duty of hospitality and reverence towards her guest Maharshi Durvasa who in turn misconceives the situation and irrationally hurls curses upon her. The sage personifies male chauvinism and destructive male entity. His curse symbolizes a weapon that destroys the life of Shakuntala by deactivating the memory of the king about her. The later distress of Shakuntala has been justified as a punishment, for having neglected the duty of maintaining the indigenous characteristic of woman and Nature. Dushyanta's unhesitating denial of recognizing her, his brutal abrogation and indifference towards her plea, his spiteful insinuations upon her failure to produce the token of evidence,

the signet ring and cruel rejection of her, marginalizes her as an abandoned object. She becomes a prey to his irresponsibility, suspicion and indifference. Here again, her position is similar to a piece of land that is deliberately dumped by commercially inclined men after undermining it to the verge of barrenness and then perceiving it as a useless alien to their declared province. The shame that comes by such misbehavior of the king overshadows her unborn child along with her. Shakuntala's womb is the environment for her infant Sarvadamana (Bharat) who turns out to be brave and radiant. Sanctified seclusion of Sage Maricha's hermitage where she finds shelter during her ripe periods of pregnancy also plays an important role in protecting her womb from being inflicted by any more tortures and injuries. Similar is the relation of Nature with its fellow creatures, proposes eco-feminist ideology. Her fortitude and acceptance of all injustice as her misfortune without any protest against her husband Dushyanta, returns her to the traditional characteristics of woman that is, self-annihilation and surrender to the male-built whirlpool of tradition and conservatism. Shakuntala's keenness to take her father's consent as a part of her moral duty, her foster mother Gautami's remorse at Shakuntala's independent decision pertaining to a serious institution like marriage imply that it is the father who has the right to exercise his authority upon his unmarried daughter and decide her future.

Kanva: My beloved child: Be held in high esteem by your lord as Sarmistta was by Yayati; as she bore Puru, may you too bear a son to whom the whole world will bow. My child, you are now leaving for your husband's home; when you enter it: Serve your elders with diligence; be a friend to your co-wives; even if wronged by your husband do not cross him through anger; (p. 227)

Sage Kanva's initiation in sending Shakuntala to her husband's place when no escort from the palace arrives to impart the honor she is entitled to indicates her position as property, the custody of which gets automatically transferred from her paternal family to the husband after marriage.

Shakuntala is treated as a commodity. Dushyanta's recollection of all the past events surrounding Shakuntala at the sight of the lost ring has been justified as an effect of curse, yet the possibility of viewing a lifeless object 'ring' as a reliable and valuable signifier to nullify the authentic version of woman 'Shakuntala' reveals the status of woman in the patriarchal regime. Gautami's humble pleadings before Dushyanta to accept Shakuntala reflects her natural flair of trying to resist and nullify the conflicts in order to preserve Shakuntala's existence. Even Anusuya and Priyamvada had begged mercy for Shakuntala from Durvasa out of the same attitude of conservation.

They desperately request him to deactivate the curse because they want to prevent any adversity that would devastate the life of their dear friend and which would be unbearable and unpleasant experiences for them too. Sage Kashyap's advice to Shakuntala at the time of her departure after being reunited with Dushyanta, strictly manifested the doctrines of ideal 'Grihini' (wifehood). Kalidasa has subtly highlighted the remarkable contribution and painstaking sacrifices of Shakuntala as a woman.

### **Conclusion**

This article has subtly highlighted the remarkable contribution and painstaking sacrifices of Shakuntala as a woman whose participation and endeavors in general are deprived of remuneration and recognition like that of Nature. Kalidasa has focused upon her mental strength and power which enables her to face all adversities but an important feature related to the reawakening of her consciousness has been neglected. All measures oriented towards her restoration pushes her into more complicated bailiwicks of ascending impoverishment and subjugation instead of emancipation of her in real sense. Nature too undergoes similar crises. Thus in all phases Shakuntala and the eco-domain are both symbolically and materially associated with each other. The entire research revolves around the issue of intermingling of nature and women. It has tried to establish the relationship between nature and women on the ground of their inferiorization by naturalizing women and feminizing nature. In addition their relation is viewed by projecting women as a complete manifestation of entire nature and natural entities. Moreover, their connection is understood in terms of male domination over nature and women. Finally, their interconnectedness is highlighted as both of them are life-affirming forces. As a whole, the text has incorporated textual evidence connecting them with the theoretical insights of the eco-feminist theorists to show nature and women as an interlinked subject.

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