



Vol. 10, No. 2  
CLRI May 2023

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# Beyond Romance: Analyzing Feminine and Masculine as Mutually Exclusive Ways Towards Empowerment in *Abhijnanasakuntalam*

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**Abstract:** Present paper undertakes the textual analysis of Kalidasa's play *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, translated in English by Chandra Rajan. To come up with new insights, the paper critically looks at the feminine and masculine virtues represented by the central characters to carefully analyze their interplay and imprinting on mutual relationship as well as the narrative structure. The paper concludes that both the characters exhibit masculine and feminine as different ways of behavior that embark their own individual trajectories towards complete realization. As long as these virtues are less developed, there are conflicts among the characters resulting from mutual dependency. At the point of maturation however, these virtues enable the characters to co-exist in harmony. The paper thereby concludes with the new insights into the reading of the most celebrated text.

**Keywords:** Masculine, Feminine, Empowerment, Mutual-Dependence, Romantic Love.

*Abhijnanasakuntalam*, the celebrated play by Kalidasa, has been looked at from various perspectives. Kalidasa has been amply and justifiably celebrated for his artistic skills that weave even the most mundane into magical, giving plenteous leash to sensory experience. For its lyrical charm, profound comparisons and suggestiveness, *Abhijnanasakuntalam* has enjoyed a great deal of critical acclaim. Comparatively studying the Duhsanta-Sakuntala dyad with its predecessor in the *Mahabharata*, critics have highlighted the romantic element in the later (Singh). While Duhsanta has been praised for masculine virtues, Sakuntala has established herself as an ideal stereotype of a suffering and ideal housewife who embodies feminine virtues. The present paper, however, looks beyond the façade of romance and proposes to critically analyze the differences in the feminine and masculine virtues represented by the central characters as two different norms

of behavior that chart out their individual trajectories towards empowerment. In fact, when these virtues are not fully developed, there is mutual dependency in between the characters which also results in conflicts. At the point of complete realization however, masculine and feminine fructify as mutually supporting virtues at the same time when they retain their mutual independence. The paper thus rejects the reading of the text merely as romance that reads Sakuntala as an ideal stereotype of unjustly suffering, meek, submissive and, at the same time and probably for the same reasons, a lovely and attractive wife.

## **Defining Femininity and Masculinity**

Oxford dictionary vaguely defines Feminine as qualities traditionally related to a woman and Masculine as qualities associated with a typical man. Generally, feminine has association with the qualities like love, care, nurture, politeness, tolerance, restraint, acceptance etc. while masculine qualities are associated with independence, competition, justice, hierarchy based on rewards and punishments, respect, logic and strict ordering of things. In Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna lists “fame, prosperity, perfect speech, memory, intelligence, courage, and forgiveness” as feminine qualities (Mukudananda). The term “Stri-Dharma” in Hinduism connotes to the feminine virtues. The present paper reads masculine and feminine objectively as virtues separate from the biological identities like male or female. Sakuntala has, thus, opted to follow the dharma of feminine virtues, while Duhsanta has opted to follow masculine virtues. Both behavioral traits, like various dharmas, have the potential to lead an individual towards maturity and self-fulfillment.

## **Feminine and Masculine in *Abhijnanasakuntalam***

Kalidasa has set his play *Abhijnanasakuntalam* in the background of three different spaces. It opens up in the green world of nature where Sakuntala not only dwells but is also defined as the guardian deity of this woodland. She is one in spirit with this land and shares a familial relationship with trees and fowls and fawns around. She has similarities with this world of nature which is rich in fertility and vitality. She is spontaneous and instinctive. The present paper wants to highlight, however, that this dramatized world of nature has significant differences from the actual world of nature as human beings know on Earth. This world has a quality of magical charm to it, most of which apparently comes from the dominance of romantic passion herein. Sakuntala invites Anasuya to look at the jasmine: “the jasmine has this very moment entered into her budding youth” and the mango tree standing nearby “is laden with young fruit indicating he is ready for enjoyment” (177). Kalidas personifies nature and gives romantic passion to it and foreshadows Sakuntala’s own romantic union with Duhsanta. In this context, Sakuntala spontaneously gives in to Duhsanta who presents himself in an appropriate time when she has just come of age, much like the Madhavi plant that is “covered with buds... from the root up” (178). However, it was not the appropriate time for Madhavi to bloom, the way it was not appropriate time for even Sakuntala to give in to Duhsanta as she was under the authority of her father, Kanva, who had been away at this time. But Kalidasa makes it appear natural by presenting the natural Madhavi plant hued in the same romantic spirit as Sakuntala. Falling for Duhsanta is not only, thus, natural and instinctive here, but, is also beyond her control as she has not learned any other way than being spontaneous like this supermagical nature. In Orwellian parlance, one can say that

everything in this world is natural but a few things are more natural than others. Sakuntala has to yet grow into a mature female to know the restraint, discipline, sacrifice that are prominent feminine qualities to come to her full glory and development as a woman who achieves self-fulfillment and inspires respect and awe.

In the *Mahabharata*, Sakuntala was not romantically motivated to fall in for Duhsanta. On the contrary, she was an independent woman who practically chose Duhsanta on the condition that her first born becomes the sovereign. In that context, the marriage between Duhsanta and Sakuntala was *Gandharv vivah* where both took the individual responsibility towards it. In Kalidasa's version, however, Sakuntala is a helpless victim of her not-so-natural desires that she has not learned to control. The marriage for her is not a responsible decision but a helpless one. She desires permanent place in Duhsanta's life and thus asks her friends:

*“My friends, if you approve, counsel me as to how  
I can find favour in the eyes of the Royal Sage;  
otherwise, I shall be just a memory. (203)*

In a hypothetical situation, if a passionate woman offers herself to a man primarily because she is helpless victim of uncontrolled desire and not because of any prudence or futuristic vision that ensures fructification of the relation in some life-long bond of love or marriage, the later would not find strong reasons himself for future obligations and would be likely to accept her like a favor being done over the helpless one. This would be a typical case of favor being done and forgotten because it is more like a matter of satisfying one's immediate needs than intelligently and sagaciously looking the at the future course and consciously making promises for ensuring the stable relation. However, it is a different matter, here, that Duhsanta himself is willing to marry Sakuntala and accepts her as a fruit of good deeds in previous births. He

takes the responsibility for *Gandhav vivah*. Had Kanva arranged the marriage, he would also have entrusted Dusanta with the special responsibility to take care of Sakuntala. Duhsanta believed in taking the individual responsibility however, and comments about Sakuntala that “A gem is sought for, it does not seek” (204). He even gives the signatory ring to Sakuntala as a token of his love and responsibility towards her. Duhsanta’s responsibility and his willingness remained hidden in this magical and green part of the world which receded to become a part of his subconsciousness like some old office file as this was dominantly a world of romance and had no particular place in the pragmatic world of work and external rules and regulations to which he returns back in the next part of the drama and which is dominated by masculine values and righteous struggle for power. Duhsanta has many other priorities here and he simply forgets about Sakuntala. Kanva was also not there to put a firm seal on this relationship and so it lost the opportunity to become the celebrated part of the masculine world of sanctified rules and regulations that dominated the courtly world of Duhsanta.

Duhsanta is a virtuous and responsible man, otherwise. The spirits in the forest talk of the responsible character of Duhsanta:

*“She holds Duhsanta’s glowing energy/pledged  
for the well-being of the world” (219).*

Duhsanta has immersed himself in the welfare of people and in fulfilling the responsibilities towards them. The second space in the drama is this space of court, work-ethics and its glitters and power. It is a world predominated by masculine virtues. Obviously Duhsanta failed to recognize Sakuntala in this part of the world where he got engaged with courtly affairs. Durvasa’s curse in this context is merely a manifestation of deeper truths. Duhsanta needed the ring as a reminder. His masculine self was dependent upon the logic of

vows, promises, and rings that mark the sealing of relationships and testify to their authenticity. Unfortunately, the ring was lost.

Sakuntla has to go through the process of learning control and restraint to attain feminine dignity that would command respect from Duhsanta. Duhsanta, similarly has to be more cautious about his individual responsibilities and actions and personal promises that he gave to Sakuntala in the first part of the play, and has to grow in to a mature masculine self. When the story shifts to the second-space which is the courtly world ruled by Duhsanta, Sakuntala has no place here and on facing rejection from Duhsanta she returns back to her hermit kins; they teach her otherwise, however:

*“You forward girl, are you asserting your independence” (241)?*

Sakuntala has to now learn the virtues of acceptance and tolerance.

The story now shifts to the third space. Sakuntala has to take recourse to this world of strict vows and penance to overcome her faults and to consequently develop into a mature feminine self who has the qualities of restraint, control and balance.

Ring is a formal witness to Duhsanta-Sakuntala relationship and is a symbol of remembrance. “Memory” is one of the feminine virtues explained by Lord Krishna as mentioned above. Rajneesh, the renowned Indian mystic who is popularly known as Osho, opines that the woman’s memory is an integrated part of her body and unlike the masculine principle that needs to memorize things in mind and needs ring-like witnesses to remember, women keep significant memories stored within her heart and body. Thus, a mother instinctively knows about the time of feeding her child and doesn’t need to keep track of external time (Osho). Sakuntala, as such, never felt any need for the ring and never understood its

importance. She was, naturally, not very careful about it and, thus, lost it on the journey to Duhsanta's court. Duhsanta, one the other hand, needed this token to keep track of his memories. It was Duhsanta's responsibility. Duhsanta too will have to go through the penance for ignoring his personal responsibility towards Sakuntala.

It is only after a period of agony and suffering that they could meet. Duhsanta realizes his responsibilities and develops into a mature male. The quality of their relationship now changes from being passionate to a sublime experience of spiritual union. Ring, as mentioned in the last Act, presents itself as a symbol of not only Duhsanta's responsibility but also of their romantic passion. When finally, Duhsanta asks Sakuntala to accept the lost ring, he says:

*"Let the vine receive once more the blossom that is the symbol of its union with the springtime."*

Sakuntala, however, is a completely a changed person now and refuses while saying:

*"No, no, my lord, I don't trust it. Let my lord wear it himself" (277). Ideally, Duhsanta, as embodying masculine virtues, needed to keep the score and recording of memories in the form of ring.*

The third space visualizes an ideal space where yin and yang complete each other and are in supportive harmony with each other. In Hegelian terminology, Duhsanta and Sakuntala both individually struggle with their own antithetical behaviors and reach an ideal state of completion.

Kalidasa's take on the chemistry of masculine and feminine has this typical character where these principles entangle in romantic conflict when they are not fully developed but eventually rise above the mere physical when attain maturity. *Meghadutam*, though written in the genre of poetry, fits well in comparison with *Abhijnanasakuntalam* and throws clearer

light on the writers' similar take on man-woman relationship. Here again the romantic passion has to find satisfaction only in the spiritual realm where Yaksha's love transmutes into the love of a cloud for entire earth and Yaksha himself finds satisfaction in this love for the entire earth rather than the individual lover.

Tagore aptly writes in his essay "Sakuntala: Its Inner Meaning" that "in truth there are two unions in Sakuntala, and the motif of the play is the progress from the earlier union of the First Act with its earthly unstable beauty and romance, to the higher union in the heavenly hermitage of eternal bliss described in the last Act (Thapar). Tagore, but, reads Sakuntala as an innocent deer in the forest who is unaware of the vices and crooked ways of courtly life of which Duhsanta himself is a part.

Romila Thapar, while analyzing the history of different adaptations of Sakuntala writes:

*"Sakuntala had by now changed many roles. The mother of a hero in an akhyana and the self-reliant woman of the Mahabharata had been transmuted into the romantic ideal of upper caste high culture in the play by Kalidasa, then cast as the child of nature in German Romanticism, and ended up as the ideal Hindu wife from the perspective of Indian nationalism and its perceptions of Hindu tradition. Such transmutations are closely linked to historical change which influenced the widely different forms and readings to which she had been subjected. The more recent projections of Sakuntala proceeded essentially from a middle-class perspective- subaltern women remain outside its picture" (Thapar, 243-258).*

A careful and deeper reading of Kalidas, however, rejects such reading of Sakuntala as a romantic ideal. It weaves a different story in which Sakuntala traverse her individual journey towards growth; the way Duhsanta traverses his own. Both actors are different but equal companions in this work.

## Conclusion

It might be easier to see Sakuntala-Duhsanta dyad in romantic hue, but the careful reading suggests deeper meanings embedded down the surface of romance. Kalidasa converted the simple and straightforward episode from *the Mahabharata* into a complex and highly original narrative that impinges on the romantic that easily gets accepted as natural and spontaneous, but, nonetheless, brings suffering. Emancipation lies in spiritual recourse and uplifting personal to impersonal. The three different spaces picturized by the writer connote to the different levels of consciousness and third ideal space is the space of ideal union of masculine and feminine that are fully developed and are independent of each other. Neither is Sakuntala as simple, meek and deer-like as many critics viewed her, nor is Duhsanta crafty and power-monger representative of the world of court. Both are different, however, as far as they manifest typical feminine and masculine traits that needed development and maturation to realize their space in completely harmonious and peaceful existence.

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