

Kalidasa's Overpowering Celestial *Shakuntala* Versus Gokhale's Detrimental Namesake *Shakuntala*

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Abstract: The famous dramatist Kalidasa, whose famous play *Shakuntala* was written in Sanskrit is a masterpiece. Though no one can stand before the august playwright, the comparison between the two *Shakuntalas* – one of Kalidasa and the other of Namita Gokhale, gives an interesting turn to this article. Namita Gokhale has very smartly materialized the character of *Shakuntala* by taking away from her the uniqueness and celestial spirit and transforming her into a common person belonging to this mean world.

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Our Indian literature is extensively rich and having many branches, drama being one, is gathering immense attraction in the recent years. Our divine origin in this field is attributed to Sanskrit drama. Sanskrit was the language in which the great educationists of the ancient Indian Literatures conversed and wrote. The renowned Vedas were also written in this language. Drama was the most popular form of literary system since the ancient times. All the important treatises and works conveying messages to the public were written in drama form. It was called 'NATAKA' in the Vedic as well as post Vedic or epic period. Most extracts from Ramayana and Mahabharata were represented through drama and dance. The great pioneers of Indian Drama, responsible for taking it to the pinnacle of renown are – Bhasa, Kalidasa, Ajnaghoshia, Bhabhuto, Sudrak etc. Of these, Kalidasa was the most remarkable who illustrated all the precepts related to the theories of dramaturgy perspicuously in his dramas. Consequently, he stands shining at the top while the others fade out before him. Neither his contemporaries nor his successors could supercede him in his expression of meaning, style, structure and spiritual wholeness. He is like the pole star that stands unclipsed through ages. Though this may look absurd and eccentric to bring in anyone beside Kalidasa, I have dared to make a feeble attempt to bring up Namita Gokhale's '*Shakuntala*' which is a rephrase of the ethereal *Shakuntala* into a mortal *Shakuntala* with all her vices and dereliction. Although the present *Shakuntala* is no comparison to the celestial prototype, the diversity in the personalities and preferences in the two women with the same name, made the study both esoteric and enigmatic.

Shakuntala in its complete and accomplished form is the sole creation of Kalidasa the renowned dramatist, whose renown not only spread in this country but also abroad. This play was widely accepted and eulogized even in those days among men of caliber and acumen. None of his

contemporaries could stand with him in the ranking of this drama. Reckoning this drama, fades out the existence of all his contemporaries just spot-lighting Kalidasa. But behind this wonderful articulation of the story lies the secret of its source, which has been traced to the Adiparvan of the Mahabharata, which is our ancient encyclopedia of history, mythology, philosophy, ethics and politics. Nevertheless, the crude presentation of the story has been picked up roughly and deftly dressed, trimmed, designed and moralized by the expert Kalidasa in such a way that an insignificant incident in one of the folds of the great epic Mahabharata stands scintillating and exuding the pre-eminence of the art of the great dramatist. Shakuntala seems to be a most calculated and worldly-wise woman who does not desist from clinching her compliance of physical submission to Dushyanta by confirming the throne for the child born out of the union and Dushyanta appears to be a lecherous and unscrupulous person whose sole intention was to bed down Shakuntala and enjoy her beauty for which he even promised to sent for her to his kingdom where she will acquire the place of his queen and their issue subsequently inherit the throne. Here the physical attraction and sexual inclination of Dushyanta can be likened to that of Nearchus who took the mortal Shakuntala with him and enjoyed her physical beauty without any futuristic prospect except for lust. Both these male characters stand in sharp contrast to that of Srijan, Shakuntala's husband who married her for an heir but loved her honestly from the beginning. The twist in the two stories is that Dushyanta's love gets waylaid by the curse and hence the ignorance and disfavour towards Shakuntala. The ardour of love is revived with the retrieval of the ring. Gokhale's Shakuntala has no such dramatic twist and turns in the story. Her fall in love and honesty is severely punished by fate in the end.

Further, in Kalidasa's 'Shakuntala', their marriage was not as a result of a contract based on selfish gains but pure love and devotion for each other. This is obvious by the lapse of time, which sees both the lovers pinning and paling for each other. Unlike the source, the lovers give each other ample time to judge the intensity of love between them. This time was given to them by the long absence of Kanva Rishi from the ashram for the purpose of satisfying the stars, which were to play havoc in Shakuntala's life. Whereas dubiously, in the original story, Kanva Rishi goes to the forest to gather fruits and within this short span, both fall for each other and quickly abed each other and Dushyanta perfunctorily promising Shakuntala, rushes out of the ashram lest Kanva Muni sees him there and curses him for molesting his treasure. Everything seems unrealistic and illogical in the original text. Kalidasa through his expertise notches all the flaws and steers through commendably, in transforming the whole story remarkably. Touch of Kalidasa's high intention in filtering the source of his masterpiece through rigorous shuffling and reshuffling has almost rejuvenated the whole story and ricocheted it to the public consideration and appreciation, which, it in its original form wouldn't have achieved ever. The characters were insignificant naturally-selfish fools which received a complete physical, mental and emotional

transformation in the hands of the great dramatist. Shakuntala, in the original text has been shown as a selfish and coquettish woman; whereas, the great dramatist has escalated her position in his drama by highlighting her innocence and beauty strikingly out-placed in the ascetic precincts which further lead to her ignorance of worldly hazards and consequent waylay by Dushyanta's magnetic personality. Gokhale's Shakuntala has no such master-craftsmanship. Her story revolves round four main characters: Shakuntala, Srijan, Kamalini and Nearchus. All the characters being mere mortals had every characteristic of a mortal while Kalidasa had celestial and divine souls for his character-cast.

Dushyanta has been presented as a philanderer and an unscrupulous person who steeped low as to coax a humble forest girl into submitting herself before him just as Nearchus, the Yadur, who exploited the insecurity in Shakuntala's life coupled with an inner revolt against her husband bringing in Kamalini from nowhere between them. Here Kalidasa with his expertise softens the incisiveness in the character of Dushyanta, who as in the original text was not projected acceptably. Reference to Kalidasa's 'Shakuntala' has been made by Gokhale in her 'Shakuntala' making the difference more pronounced. The mortal Shakuntala was impressed with the love story of the celestial Shakuntala and yearned for her Dushyanta to come and take her away from the monotonous and drudgerous life in the unchanging hills. Such an unnatural dream makes Gokhale's Shakuntala very much a part of this materialistic world and a human-being in the true sense who lives in a world of fantasy and clutching onto it, tries to fly away from the hazards of the life. Gokhale's Shakuntala was a village girl and a novice with regard to the reality of life looking through rose-tinted glasses. Little did she know about the pernicious life ahead? She had no proper friends or guide who would direct her to the right path. Even her mother who could have been an appropriate guide and a friend to her, treated her roughly. Her imaginative man-woman relationship was never shown the reality and hence her dreams of a smooth and lovable life with her dream man, was dashed into smithereens. In reality, a man-woman relationship was not only physical and romantic; it has many twists and turns which she came to realize with time but not until she had ruined her life irreparably. Even Shakuntala and Dushyanta had to undergo pangs of separation and insult in their life on this earth.

Besides romance, another aspect of Kalidasa's 'Shakuntala' caught the mortal Shakuntala's fancy was the explicit description of her beauty. She had a persistent desired to be called as beautiful as the celestial Shakuntala and hence when her mother mentioned her resemblance to herself while her brother's to divinity, she was filled with disgust and utter disappointment. Gokhale's Shakuntala was a prey to a society where male-chauvinism was predominant whereas Kalidasa's Shakuntala was loved at her foster father's ashram but too could not stay free from the evil impact of the male predominance when she was turned out of the court with disgrace by Dushyanta. Gokhale's Shakuntala pinned for all such things that a mortal would always desire out of life. In one respect, both

the Shakuntalas identified each other – one was intoxicated with love for Dushyanta, eager to be with him so much that she carelessly neglected the importance of his gift and lost it by her absentmindedness and the other was eager to associate herself to a man and run away from the boring life which she was leading, to a changed life irrespective of love. Gokhale's Shakuntala had no idea about love and there was no mention of any pangs of love that she did feel for her husband except for a feeling of jealousy for the second woman brought in their life by her husband whereas Kalidasa's Shakuntala was deeply in love with Dushyanta and experienced the sweet and sour feeling for him throughout. Due to absence of such a feeling, Gokhale's Shakuntala did not have serious feelings for Srijan and had no qualms in indulging in the debasing act of eloping with Nearchus. Both the Shakuntalas disregarded the feelings of their other half; one by losing the ring and the other by losing the honour though Kalidasa's Shakuntala loved her Dushyanta with a pure heart and soul and was lost in his dreams when she lost the ring whereas Gokhale's Shakuntala eloped with Nearchus in her full senses and their association was nowhere based on love except on sexual desire and animal instinct. Both Shakuntalas come from rustic background but the stark difference between a mortal and an immortal being can be seen in their thoughts and approach towards life. One was extremely beautiful, pure and loving with helping friends in an ascetic environment while the other was ordinary, poor, differentiated from her brother, living in extreme want and deprivation, pinning for worldly pleasures and having no moral values. Both longed for the company of their husbands at a certain point of time. Shakuntala, the wife of mahasamant Srijan cribbed for his love and togetherness denied to her after the rituals just as Shakuntala, the wife of king Dushyanta was denied his love and togetherness after he was called back to his kingly affairs of the state and later due to Shakuntala losing the fateful ring given to her by Dushyanta as a token of love and remembrance. Giving herself the privilege of being called Shakuntala as the celestial namesake, she expected her life to take a romantic course as the other. The story of the celestial Shakuntala brought in her untread mind the yearning for a lover turned husband who would not only love her immensely but also take her away from the boring life that she was leading. The excitement and budding desire mixed with lust made her menstruate for the first time and turn into a woman in the true sense. Nevertheless, the celestial being was nowhere identically related to Gokhale's Shakuntala; was totally given to duty and decorum and her love for Dushyanta was more spiritual and platonic than sexual and lustful like her mortal counterpart. Gokhale's Shakuntala was on the other hand, totally given to lustful and sexual love and had nothing in common to Kalidasa's Shakuntala. Moreover Kalidasa's Shakuntala was a sober, elegant and docile woman whereas the mortal counterpart was absolutely different with an incisive hunger for freedom, lust and information. She had no qualms about leaving her nuptial home and relationship behind. Her identification with Kalidasa's Shakuntala further proved to be a hoax when she saw the play staged on her jealousy

with her paramour. Though Shakuntala was surprised and a bit taken aback because she had to recall herself as Shakuntala for her association with the Yadur Nearchus had changed her into a Yaduri. Even Nearchus did not react on hearing the name Shakuntala as for him Shakuntala had transformed into a yaduri after her elopement with him. The revelation though shocking was both alarming and saddening for Shakuntala as she had lost every bit of trace of resemblance to the celestial being by her derogatory actions.

Nevertheless, in both the cases, the woman named Shakuntala fall prey to the ambition of man. Dushyanta had to leave in haste for his kingdom for looking into its affairs while Nearchus had his unending expedition to unknown lands for which the pregnant Shakuntala was proving a hurdle. Another similarity in both the cases is their situational union. The celestial Shakuntala got into a hasty gandharva marriage with Dushyanta in absence of Kanva Rishi, her guardian and the namesake Shakuntala got into a clandestine relationship with Nearchus without the knowledge of her husband. Though both the unions were made without a proper condition, the namesake Shakuntala did a hateful and discrediting act, by flouncing the restraints of marriage and eloping with a stranger for just to satiate her lustful desire. In this condemnable pursuit, she kills herself and her unborn babies. It can be said that the namesake Shakuntala is the distorted form of the celestial Shakuntala, who was far enhanced in her position in Indian history for her sanctity and forbearance.

Subsequently, namesake Shakuntala's sin dawned on her and she realized the blunder done by her but it was too late for her to retract. Realizing the greatness of the name of Shakuntala, she lamented over the defamation caused to the sanctity of the name by herself who had the luck to own it. Her eyes opened to the awareness of her failing the name 'Shakuntala' who had maintained the sanctity of her love and marriage even after she was disgraced and ousted by king Dushyanta from his court denying her the lawful position as his wife. She on the other hand had betrayed everything and everyone in return belying the greatness of her name; has likened herself to a Yaduri, the unmentionable one. Thus we see that both the persons with the name of Shakuntala are poles apart. There is more dissimilarity between them than similarities. One had the mind ruling over her body while the other had the body ruling over her mind. One accepted the suffering as a penance for carelessness and disregard while the other overshadowed the realization of sanctity and stifled the voice of the conscience and took to a mad pursuit of sexual satisfaction irrespective of disastrous consequences.

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