

Exploration of Tragic Soul in *Abhijnanashakuntalam*

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Abstract

This article explores the tragic tones in Abhijnanashakuntalam (AS) from Aristotelian theory of tragedy. As per this theory, characters confront obstacles, external or from within. It contains characteristics like hamartia, catharsis, consistency, etc. AS too contains all those characteristics. So, this paper explores how Shakuntala confronts tragedies as Aristotle propounds. Karuna rasa suffuses over AS because the farewell scene of Shakuntala predominantly consists of this rasa. The malfesance and injustices she meets in Dushyanta's court further justify the pathos in the play. Thus, the concept of tragic soul dominates throughout the play. The West comes to know the dramatic composition of Kalidasa more after William Jones' translation of AS into English in 1789. The hero and the heroine in it accept their ill fates, dib 'ring' as a source of their long separation. The coupling of the two gives a chirpy ending to the play, but the soul of it is full of commiserations. In Sanskrit, the 'curse' is one of the agencies evolving into a tragedy. Numerous reviewers and commentators make a study of AS, a drama chiefly of Shringar rasa or the sentiment of love. However, this paper finds it predominantly a drama of pathos or Karuna rasa. To explore these issues, this article applies the qualitative approach to the research. It is exploratory.

Keywords: Karuna rasa, pathos, shringar rasa, sublimity, tragedy

Introduction

This article explores the tragic incidents that occur in the life of Shakuntala. AS is a comedy in its structural form but it contains characteristics of a tragic play. So, this paper brings to the light various obstacles the heroine of the play confronts, since her birth till her reunion with her lover. Numerous critics and scholars define the term 'drama' in different lines. S.P. Sengupta defines it as, "an articulate story presented in action" (12). It is a theatrical event — a representational art to be performed and witnessed. It, in fact, comes from a Greek word meaning "thing

done”. Abrams and Harpham analyze it as “the form of composition designed for performance in the theatre, in which actors take the roles of the characters, perform the indicated actions, and utter the written dialogue”(79). It is an imitation of human behavior. Most plays, after all, are written to be performed rather than to be read. There are a few old dramatic pieces from the world literature on which such universal approbation has been bestowed for the sublimity and aesthetic of artistic expression. In Kalidasa, we find the loveliness and sweetness of elegant poetry — breathing pleasant and tender emotions, dainty and rapturous feelings, and deep and sorrowful sentiments. When Europe and the world at large knew practically nothing of the great artistic achievements of the stage in India, it was this play that gave the impression evidence of the wealth of the dramatic composition that India so richly possessed. The study of Sanskrit language and literature receives impetus and opened up new vistas to research work, not long after a translation of *AS* into English by Sir William Jones, in 1789. It reached the shores of Europe. It possesses the same blooming freshness, radiant vitality, enrapturing grace, exhilarating delicacy and conspicuous originality, which it had when it first made its visage.

‘Curse’ as a Source of Pathos

In Greek tragedy, a ‘hero’ and ‘fate’ are in conflict. In *AS*, the heroine, Shakuntala is in conflict with her ‘fate’. In the original story of the *Mahabharata*, the King is responsible for creating the tragedy of Shakuntala’s life. However, in *AS*, Kalidasa makes the curse of Durvasas accountable for all the cruelty that was shown to poor Shakuntala, that leads to disaster. The Indian drama marks its uniqueness in its subjects. However, it stands close to western theatre in the matter of love between man and woman. It contains tragic elements, but it avoids sad ending. *AS* contains elements of *Karuna rasa* more than the *Shringara rasa*. So, it is comic in form but a tragic in its soul. The tragic incidents occur in a play when lovers break promises, when curse befalls to them or heroes and heroines face external obstacles. 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. Although technically it may be called a comedy, it is a tragedy. The happiness which comes in the end is not only unexpected but appears to be bereft of all its innate warmth and charm.

Rasa (Sentiment/Emotion)

In the West, drama has been chiefly divided into two classes — comedy and tragedy. In the East, it has been divided into eight classes, as per the number of *rasas* in dramatic theory. According to sage Bharatmuni, “*rasas* eight in number- sentiments remembered in the dramatic art are eight viz. *Sringara* (the erotic), *Hasya* (humorous), *Karuna* (pathos), *Raudra* (impetuous anger), *Vira* (heroic), *Bhayanaka* (terrific), *Bibhatsa* (the odious) and *Adbhuta* (the mysterious)” (71). The class of a drama is determined by the *rasa* or sentiment which the poet or playwright chiefly intends to embody in his play. Bharatmuni propounds the theory of *rasa* in *Natyashastra*. It is a term that basically refers to the delight that the audience derives from its experience of the generalized emotions presented in the drama. Seeing any evil or good action, one gets sorrow or delight. This sorrow or delight is known as *rasa* in literature. “The *sthayi* (the base of *rasas*) is awakened and intensified by *vibhavas* (determinants), *anubhavas* (consequents), etc. that becomes the *rasa*” (Marasinghe 158). In other words, *rasa* gets expressed through *Vibhavas*, *anubhavas* and *vyebhicharibhavas*. Audiences derive meaning of a *rasa* through those expressions. Characters that suit the situations in a play refer to *vibhavas*. Their actions in a play signify

anubhavas. Their experiences, feelings, thinking, etc. that torment them to achieve their goals relate to the concept of *vyebhicharibhavas*.

Karuna Rasa (Tragedy)

Karuna rasa (sentiment of pathos) predominantly portrays and evokes the emotions or sentiments of pathos in a drama. As tragedy invokes the feelings of pity, naturally it comes under the category of the drama of *Karuna*. Sentiment of pathos originates from the permanent mood of sorrow. This sorrow results from curse, calamity, separation from relatives, and loss of property, murder, defeat, disease, and ill-luck. Vishwanatha Kaviraja sums up *karuna* as “from the ruin of the desired and from the happening of the undesired the sentiment of pathos springs” (52). This pathetic sentiment emerges from a combination of determinants, consequents and complementary psychological states. Dramatists consider ‘death’ as a result of either disease or killing. A Board of Scholar asserts, “*Marana* (death) may be the result of ailment or violent attack. Its *vibhavas* (determinants) are disturbance in the intestines, the liver, tumors, boils, fever, cholera, etc. *Abhigatasam* (accidental or violent attack) is caused by weapons, serpent bite, drinking poison, beasts of prey, vehicles drawn by elephants, horses, chariots, and falls from these” (107). Sanskrit dramatists like Bhasa, Bana, Bhavabhuti, Saumilla, Sutradhara, Shudraka, and Vishwanatha Kaviraja attempt to demonstrate ‘death’ on the stage, citing different reasons, but some others object it. They claim that, it simply mars the development of a sentiment. The diverse opinions on or against presenting ‘death’ on the stage have remained controversial.

Unsated Love in AS

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. It portrays a tale of love which on one side is innocent, chaste, unsophisticated and romantic, and on the other artful, frail, insidious and unimaginative. It strikes a note which is serene and shocking, but is at the same time tragic and tearful. Nowhere has love been demonstrated in such attractive and repulsive colors. Love appears to be nothing but a shocking and painful contradiction in this drama. The third Act of *AS* explores the union in love between Dushyanta and Shakuntala. It also displays the separation between the two, with a promise from the king to come back to her, to take her to his kingdom. However, he fails to fulfill his promises. In her pregnancy, Kanva sends her to Dushyanta, to claim her lost love. To her surprise, he fails to recognize her. Instead, he questions, “who is she, shrouded in the veil” (Ryder 55). It is a blow to her tormented love. Later, they reunite, but she does not get the altitude and original position of love she deserves of. It is tragic to find in this story that love knocks at its own door and miserably fails to get a spontaneous response. When somehow the response comes, all its warmth, enthusiasm and spontaneity appears to have been vanished.

Shakuntala’s Farewell

AS has been translated in twelve European languages. Critics examine it as one of the mostly read plays. Its fourth Act expresses the farewell of Shakuntala. Upadhyaya asserts, “*Kavyeshu natakam ramyam/ tatra ramya Shakuntala/ Tatrapi cha charthonkastatra slokaschatustayam*” (169). In other words, among the *Kavyas*, the drama is the most charming. Among the dramas, *AS* is especially charming. Even there, the fourth Act is the best. The four *slokas* therein are

beautiful. The poet portrays the remorse/ harsh scene of Shakuntala when she leaves the house of her parents and bids them farewell with discontentment, “I’m torn from my father’s breast like a vine stripped from a sandal tree on the Malabar hills. How can I live in another soil? (Ryder 48-49). Not only has she, Kanva’s remarks too, on seeing off his daughter, leaves sentiment of pathos in the play. Ryder asserts:

Shakuntala must go to-day;
I miss her now at heart;
I dare not speak a loving word
Or choking tears will start. (44)

Undoubtedly this is a pathetic scene. There is hardly a man so stone-hearted as not to melt into tears on such an occasion. Kalidasa’s skill in presenting this scene on the stage claims accolades from far and wide. He exhibits the deep touch of pathos in the fifth Act of this drama, too. The fourth Act is pathetic, but the fifth Act is most cruelly tragic. The pathos, which has its beginning in the fourth, reaches its climax in the fifth.

Sage Kanva bids farewell to Shakuntala with a heavy heart. “The condition of the atmosphere of the hermitage becomes gloomy after she leaves the place” (Kumar 140). Kalidasa portrays animate and inanimate objects in the play that equally express their sadness on her departure. Kanva sees her off with a heavy heart on the one hand but he feels happy on the other, as she goes to her husband’s house. She too feels uneasy and unhappy to part away from them but equally experiences in the corner of her heart, a thrilling sensation of joy, while going to her beloved. This sensation brings consolation and comfort, and instinctively makes all the pain and distress of parting from parents light and endurable. Kanva further expresses his contentment in fulfilling his duty as a father, in these words:

A girl is held in trust, another’s treasure;
To arms of love my child to-day is given;
And now I feel a calm and sacred pleasure;
I have restored the pledge that came from heaven. (Ryder 50)

Kanva portrays the household life of parents on this earth. They give their daughters’ hand with their heavy heart. However, they feel pleasure as their daughters find their suitable grooms. Being an ascetic, Kanva performs his duties as per orders he receives from the Heaven, but a father of a daughter performs his duty on this earth as per familial and societal rules.

Treatment to Shakuntala

With two disciples of Kanva and Gautami, the matron of the Ashram, Shakuntala goes to the court of King Dushyanta. Her hope of his quick recognition to her fails, with the annoyance and common accolade. She feels pain in her heart. She wonders, how he annoys her, remains strange to her. He remains indifferent, and asks, who she is:

Who is she, shrouded in the veil
That dims her beauty’s luster,
Among the hermits like a flower
Round which the dead leaves cluster? (Ryder 55)

The king’s queries of her identity give a heart blow to an innocent and pregnant woman. She cannot believe her eyes and ears. She is in confusion how he, who has given everything to her, in words, while making love sports, shows such ill treatment towards her. The sea of love with its rolling waves has got so suddenly dried up that not a drop is left.

Malfeasance to Shakuntala!

What a pity! Even one's own sweetheart is to be recognized and needs a formal introduction. Sage Kanva's disciples introduce Shakuntala to Dushyanta as his beloved, and his lawful wife. But he sits silent, and is unable to know the reality. He ruthlessly puts the question, "you cannot mean that this young woman is my wife" (Miller 56). Gautami removes the veil from the face of Shakuntala so that he can see her clearly and can recognize her. "Forget your shame, my child. I will remove your veil. Then your husband will recognize you" (ibid 57). But it is to no purpose. She and her companions are unaware of the curse of Durvasas, the irascible sage who threatens her separation from her husband. Miller asserts, "Until she presents to him the ring he gave her in token of their union, he won't recognize her" (ibid 122). Shakuntala begins to deplore her fate. She recollects the sign of love, a ring, the king presented her at his departure, which may remind him, and she is his beloved. "I will remove your doubts with a token you gave me" (ibid 58). But she discovers that the ring is no more on her finger - as perhaps it had slipped off while she offered homage to the water of Shachiteertha. If the poet had intended to make this drama a comedy, he would not have made Shakuntala lose that token of recognition. All misgivings about her would have been dissipated at once. She admits "fate is too strong for me" (Miller 58). It is clear that, by doing so, Kalidasa wanted to close all avenues of saving Shakuntala from the impending catastrophe. Hitherto, Shakuntala was helpless, but now she becomes hopeless.

Sage Kanva's disciples return to the Ashrama, leaving Shakuntala at her husband's palace. They do not utter even a single word of consolation to her. As she follows them, they in turn rebuke her, and accuse her a girl of her own will, who attempts to seek independence. They further threaten her:

If you deserve such scorn and blame,
What will your father with your shame?
But if you know your vows are pure,
Obey your husband and endure (Ryder 60)

The acerbity displayed by Shakuntala's own people, refusing to take her along with them is as unexpected as it is inhuman. Perhaps without it the whole scene would not have reached this height of cruel pathos. She is pregnant, but has been ruthlessly spurned by her husband and her people alike. Though she has a father, she becomes worse than a widow.

Forsaken Shakuntala

No other poet than Kalidasa can demonstrate a scene of miserable helplessness of Shakuntala so touchingly. At her dejection by the king, she has no place to live on this earth. She begins to cry aloud, throwing up her hands and praying to Mother Earth to open a grave for her, "Mother Earth, open to receive me!" (Miller 143). At last, to relieve her of this unbearable agony, her mother, Menaka descends like a flash of lightning and takes her to heaven. King's men, to their utmost surprise, report him in these words:

She tossed her arms, bemoaned her plight,
Accused her crushing fate
Before our eyes a heavenly light
In woman's form, but shining bright,
Seized her and vanished straight (Ryder 61)

Menaka comes to help Shakuntala, taking her to the hermitage of the celestial sage Kashyapa, father of the gods and Aditi, mother of the gods, where "the pregnant Shakuntala takes shelter"

(Tiwari 300). The poet takes his heroine from a holy hermitage so that her transparent innocence, unquestionable chastity, utter simplicity and total ignorance of evil or sin might make this story all the more pathetic. The dramatic skills and poetic diction heighten the pathos and tender emotions of the heroine. The description of her matchless beauty, the bewitching pictures of spontaneous love and the fact that she is pregnant adds to the pity that we feel for her. The pathetic scene of loneliness and deserted life of her strikes the mind of the poet. So he brilliantly presents such a pathetic character like Shakuntala.

Kalidasa explores a tumultuous life of Shakuntala from the outset of the play. He introduces her as a daughter born from the union between the nymph Menaka and the royal sage Visvamisra. The gods fear the ascetic powers of Visvamisra. So, they send Menaka to him, to seduce him. As a result, she conceives a child. She leaves the child under the protection of Sakunta birds near a river. They protect her until Kanva finds her and brings her to live in his forest hermitage. This play portrays her character as a forsaken child born only to bear sorrows and sufferings. The sorrows and sufferings she undergoes become severe when she enters her adulthood. She falls in love with Dushyanta, with a hope to lead a happy life. However, it turns to a bleak to her. The poet portrays her as a living picture of the infinite helplessness, an irremediable weakness of human kind. Thus, he has made this play a pathetic one.

The fourth Act of *AS* appears to be nothing but a short prelude to the fifth Act. In the sixth Act, Dushyanta's memory of his beloved, Shakuntala comes back to him. He vividly calls to his mind that picture of Shakuntala when she stood condemned and deserted by all:

When I rejected her from here, she made an attempt to follow her kinsfolk; and when her father's pupil, revered as her father himself, repeatedly cried "stay" in a loud voice, then once more she fixed on me, who had become inexorable, a glance be dimmed with gushing tears; (the idea of) it all burns me like an envenomed shaft (Devadhar 181)

Dushyanta repents for what he has done to Shakuntala. An identity crisis and a pang of separation which she has felt, occurs to him now in a greater degree. He bans the festival of spring. He despises what he once enjoyed, and rejects his regal jewels. He blames to his own lost memory for her repudiation and recklessness even by her kith and kin.

'Ring' as a Source of Pathos

A serial of inopportune situations make Shakuntala dolorous. The curse of Durvasas holds a major responsibility. It is a source of the sentiment of pathos. Dushyanta discards her in his court, out of his innocence, "With a hermit-wife I had no part, / All memories evade me" (Ryder 62). Shakuntala's woes grow with the parting of her lover. She incurs a curse from Durvasas that deepens her anxieties. The curse becomes effective when Dushynata refuses to recognize her. Sharngarava conveys a message of Kanva to Dushyanta, to accept her as his wife. At this, he responds, "you cannot mean that this young woman is my wife" (ibid 56). It is his painful remarks to Shakuntala instead of a solace, she has expected. The lost ring becomes a harbinger of love to the lovers only, with its recovery by a fisherman. All the faded memory of her comes back to him. The king is in deep thought, as he adduces:

This cursed heart slept
when my love came to wake it,
and now it stays awake
to suffer the pain of remorse. (Miller 150)

Dushyanta gathers the memory of shakuntala, and tears flow through his eyes. He recalls how

his heart did not melt at the begging of Shakuntala, to accept her as his wife. The faded memory rolls back now only to make him feel the pain of separation and repentance.

Indra's charioteer, Matali takes Dushyanta to heaven. With the help of the gods and supernatural forces, the hope of the reunion of Dushyanta and Shakuntala come to life again. In the seventh Act, on his returning back to earth, his sojourn on the Hemkuta Mountain helps him to get reunion with his deserted wife, and his prowess son, Sarvadaman (later known as Bharata). He recounts how the lost ring becomes a medium of separation, pain and suffering for them. She recognizes the ring at her glance. She claims, "It has acted wickedly, since it was not found at the time of convincing my husband" (Ryder 25). She rejects his offer to wear the ring again on her finger. "I do not trust it. I would rather you wore it" (ibid). Her fear doesn't go away for its long impending danger lurking on her mind. The 'ring' as a medium of such tortures and separation to the couple, is no more a case of repentance now. The source of their happiness is their son, a gift of their love. Ryder adduces, "My dear wife, bring our son" (90). It reflects Dushyanta's repentance on his past deeds as well as a victory of their true love.

Conclusion

There are tragic incidents in *AS*. They explore the sorrows and sufferings of the female protagonist—Shakuntala. She is in conflict with her fate. Though the play introduces harmony at the end, it contains tragic elements. The East classifies *nataka* as per the number of *rasas*. *Karuna rasa* is one of them. It portrays and evokes the emotions or sentiments of pathos in a *nataka*. It originates from the permanent mood of sorrow. *AS* follows the parameters of Sanskrit dramaturgy. At the outset, Kalidasa introduces the love between Dushyanta and Shakuntala as innocent, chaste and romantic, but it turns into an artful, frail and insidious later on. The hero departs but fails to come back to her. In her pregnancy, Kanva bids farewell to gain her lost love. To her surprise, he refuses to recognize her. She is unaware of a curse Durvasas bestows on her. It results in the loss of memory of her beloved. She fails to produce a ring as his token of love, as it has already slipped from her finger. She curses her fate for her deplorable condition. She prays to Mother Earth to open a grave for her. At last, Menaka takes her to Heaven. Dushyanta regains his lost memory at the sight of the lost ring. However, it gives him pains and regressions for his mistreatments towards her. He goes to Heaven on Matali's chariot to help Indra in fighting against the demons. He meets his lost love as well as his son. The delectation of Dushyanta and Shakuntala appear to be more a heavenly phenomenon than an earthly one. Although they are united, there is a workableness of such a calamity falling to the lot of others who are not providential as the hero and heroine of this drama. This workableness keeps ever fresh the tragic feelings of pity and terror. Though this play is apparently a comedy, the happiness that it brings in the end appears to be uneasy and disgruntled in it. Kalidasa's mastery of presenting the outer body of this drama as a happy one has a tragedy in its soul. In peroration, this study opens doors to researchers to explore tragic elements in Sanskrit dramas.

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