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Revisiting Shakuntala: An Ecofeminist Interpretation of Abhijnanashakuntalam

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Abstract

Ecofeminism, is an interdisciplinary critical framework, that investigates the intertwined subjugation of women and nature within the patriarchal mechanism. While most ecofeminist studies have engaged with modern narratives, classical works rooted in indigenous ecological thought remain underexplored. This paper undertakes an ecofeminist re-evaluation of the play Abhijnanashakuntalam by Kalidasa highlighting the inherent ecofeminist solidarity that shapes the evolutionary sojourn of its central character. By highlighting her transformative journey from a naive maiden to an empowered woman in the lap of nature, this paper argues how nature in this play is not merely a passive backdrop but a living, dynamic force facilitating resistance, regeneration and justice beyond human institutions. Engaging with the theoretical insights of Vandana Shiva, Susan Griffin, Carolyn Merchant, Sherry B. Ortner etc. this article situates the play within the contemporary ecofeminist discussions. Ultimately the paper positions Shakuntala as a proto-ecofeminist figure whose empowerment stems from her alignment with nature.

Keywords: *Ecofeminism; Indian Knowledge System; Abhijnanashakuntalam; Kalidasa; Ecology.*

1.0 Introduction:

In recent decades, ecological sustainability has emerged as a pressing issue and a prominent critical discourse transcending disciplinary boundaries and academic pursuits. Almost all the disciplines starting from science, social science, sociology, management, law, and tourism - are increasingly striving to comprehend and develop frameworks to mitigate ecological degradation. The field of literature is no exception. Literary scholars have joined this global discourse by re-examining the timeless classics and contemporary texts through the lens of environmental consciousness. The growing prominence of ecocriticism as a critical approach in the field of literary studies reflects this significant shift. Ecocriticism explores how literature reflects the complex dynamics between humans and the natural world. Although ecocriticism emerged as a scholarly discourse in the late 1980s, it remained dormant in the critical vocabulary for more than a decade until it gained prominence during the early 1990s.

1.1 Ecofeminism:

One of the groundbreaking milestones in the field of ecocriticism otherwise known as 'Green Studies' is the integration of ecofeminist perspective which significantly expanded the horizon

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of the field and shaped its trajectory. Ecological feminism, popularly known as ecofeminism, is the feminist concern with ecology. In other words, if feminism deals with women, ecofeminism deals with women and nature.

While ecocriticism examines literature through an environmental lens, ecofeminism incorporates a gender-conscious dimension highlighting how patriarchal ideologies like domination, control and exploitation- function similarly in relation to women and the environment. Thus, it establishes the idea that literature is a site where the experience of women and the natural world intersect one another.

1.2 The Genesis, Diversity, and Growing Prominence of Ecofeminism:

The term 'ecofeminism' was coined by Francoise d'Eaubonne who paved the way for the subsequent generations of feminist thinkers to further refine and expand the horizon of the theory. For instance, Sherry B. Ortner, an American cultural anthropologist published her seminal essay "Is Female to Male as Nature to Culture?", in 1974, which reinforced and expanded the theoretical foundation of the ecofeminist movement. In this essay, Ortner uses the structuralist anthropologist approach to explain the historically perceived notion present in various cultures in which women are equated with nature, while men are aligned with culture. She argues that this dichotomy is intentionally employed to justify women's subordination. Nature is viewed as unruly, and in need of support and control, by equating women with nature, women are also presented as passive beings who need to be tamed, controlled and domesticated. In simple words, through her social roles and her physical attributes, she is identified with nature. Ortner remarks, that man thinks of himself not only "[.....] distinct from but superior to nature and that sense of distinction and superiority rests precisely on the ability to transform to socialize and culturalise nature." (73)

Expanding on this idea, a diverse array of scholars and thinkers added depth and diversity to ecofeminist thoughts. Rosemary Redford Ruether's *New Women New Earth - Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (1975), Susan Griffin's *Women and Nature - The Roaring Inside Her* (1978), Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature- Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1980) and Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1989) are just a few worth mentioning works that enriched and expanded the frontiers of ecofeminism through their significant insights and contributions. These works examined not only the philosophical and symbolic implications of the association of women with nature but also highlighted the internal diversity within ecofeminism. Each of the diverse branches of ecofeminism such as radical, liberal, cultural, spiritual and social ecofeminism presents a

distinct shade of ecofeminism by providing unique ways of interpreting the women-nature relationship.

Vandana Shiva in her seminal work Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development (1989) highlights:

Women and nature are intimately related, and their domination and liberation similarly linked. The women and ecology movements are therefore one, and are primarily counter-trends to a patriarchal maldevelopment. Our experience shows that ecology and feminism can combine in the recovery of the feminine principle, and through this recovery, can intellectually and politically restructure and transform maldevelopment. (46)

Hence it can be said that ecofeminism is not only an academic framework but also a social movement engaging both scholarly enquiry and social activism. This movement fosters a holistic approach by bridging the gap between theoretical framework and practical application, merging literature and activism, ecology and gender justice.

1.3 Ecofeminism in Indian Literature:

The ecofeminist intersection takes on added significance and depth in Indian literature. The vivid description of natural landscapes, forests, rivers, mountains, animals, and plants- found in the ancient Indian epics and classics - is a testimony to the fact that nature is not just a passive backdrop but a living and dynamic force and active participant that shapes the lives and experiences of the characters present in the texts. In numerous narratives, nature is portrayed as a realm of profound transformation, facilitating significant evolution in character's mental, spiritual and personal growth. Many mythological characters like Sita and Hanuman from Ramayana, Draupadi, Karna and the Pandavas from Mahabharata etc. are born in the lap of nature and have drawn their strength, courage and valour from nature. Vandana Shiva points out this aspect in her work Staying Alive as follows:

> Indian thinkers were surrounded by and linked to the life of the forest. The living forest was for them their shelter, their source of food. The intimate relationship between human life and living nature became the source of knowledge. Nature was not dead and inert in this knowledge system. (53-54)

Prakriti or nature, in Indian philosophy, is perceived as the manifestation of the divine energy and therefore it has been revered and worshipped in Indian culture, since time immemorial. Situating this study within cultural ecofeminist framework- while remaining informed by constructivist critiques of essentialism, this paper reevaluates the saga of Shakuntala in the play Abhijnanashakuntalam.

While dealing with a classical Sanskrit text like Abhijnanashakuntalam, it is crucial to foreground a critical methodological awareness that ecofeminism is not a single, monolithic interpretive framework. Instead, it is a constellation of diverse theoretical perspectives that needs our careful consideration. The works of Vandana Shiva, and Maria Mier highlight the historical and cultural connections between the subjugation of women and the exploitation of nature. However, many thinkers such as Sherry B. Ortner, Rosemary Ruether warn against the essentialist formulations that oversimplify the association between women and nature and reinforce stereotypes. Such diversity has fuelled intense debates and discussions within ecofeminism, especially among cultural and spiritual ecofeminism that celebrate the association between women and nature; and social, radical ecofeminism that critique the relationship between nature and women as a product of social norms and power dynamics. Therefore, ecofeminism is a constantly evolving field of intersectionality among nature, gender, race, ethnicity, class, culture and social factors. It is within this complex interplay that the nuanced ecofeminist reading gains depth and meaning, uncovering not only the ecological consciousness embedded within the play but also its complex intersection with gender, power and epistemology. It is for this reason that, the journey of Shakuntala should not be reduced to a straightforward narrative of evolution; but rather, as a dynamic process of intersection of ecological and patriarchal forces.

The present study situates itself within this critical tension by interpreting Shakuntala's affinity with nature as a symbolic construction and a narrative strategy. While acknowledging this, the study notes that such representation can operate as a strategic essentialism without dealing with the nuances of gender binaries, if not read carefully.

2.0 Re-examining Abhijnanashakuntalam from an Ecofeminist Perspective:

Kalidasa was the greatest writer of the Gupta age. He masterfully blends human emotions with various shades of nature. Through his poetic genius he elevates the most mundane narrative to memorable episodes. Composed between the third century and the fourth century AD, his masterpiece Abhijnanashakuntalam is based on an episode depicted in the Adiparva of Mahabharat known as 'Shakuntalopakhyana'.

> When Kalidasa views the original Mahabharata story of Shakuntala through the prism of nature, it is transformed into a rainbow-tinted story of love, separation and reunion. Nature intervenes in the lives of the characters at every stage in the play and love, separation and reunion are brought about by forces of nature. (Alapatt 633)

The central figure of the play Shakuntala is considered the loveliest of all the poetic creations of Kalidasa. “Kavyeshu Nataka Ramya Tatra Ramyaa Shakuntala”.

The play Abhijnanashakuntalam is traditionally perceived as a love story and romanticized as a tale of the unfortunate separation and then the eventual union of the two passionate lovers Shakuntala and King Dushyanta. However, a closer observation of the play, using the lens of an ecofeminist perspective gives us a profound understanding of Shakuntala's journey - not as a love-sick maiden waiting for her lover to validate her love and her existence or complete her as an individual; rather it is an inspiring sojourn of a self-made woman who nurtured in the lap of the nature and evolved into a strong, independent woman who conquered her inner fears and limitations to create a distinct identity for herself.

Jasbir Jain in her book Indigenous Roots of Feminism highlights this aspect by saying:

> ….feminism is more than a voice of protest or questioning. It is moral self-reflection, conquering of inner fears and the realization of self-worth. It doesn't abandon values or relationships but it goes on to create one. (45).

Throughout the play, we get to experience the intimate bond shared between women and nature. Women and nature are seen as both protector and survivor for each other's co-existence (Khanal 87). While this reading aligns with ecofeminist parallels between women and nature, it remains alert to the risks of essentialism, recognizing that such association is not inherent but discursively produced within specific literary and cultural contexts.

The play is also notable for the exceptional and vivid description of nature that breathes life into it, creating a beautiful synergy between the natural world and the feminine experience. Nature, in this play does not function as a background for events to unfold; rather, it is constructed as a breathing and living entity that significantly contributes to the evolution and empowerment of Shakuntala. The parallel drawn between nature and Shakuntala suggests a symbolic alignment through which her evolution is articulated.

2.1 Shakuntala: The daughter of Prakriti:

Shakuntala, the iconic character born from the poetic imagination of Kalidas was the biological daughter of the great sage Vishwamitra and the celestial court dancer Menaka. After her birth, she was abandoned by her mother. Left to fate, the infant was discovered by sage Kanva, surrounded by the Shakunta birds. Kanva lovingly accepted her as a blessing of mother nature. Along with his wife Gautami, he raised Shakuntala as their foster child.

While Kalidasa has portrayed women characters as Urvashi, Malavika, Haimaprabha etc. as individuals who enjoyed the life of absolute luxury, Shakuntala, in contrary to them, has been presented as a child of nature. And for that reason, the narrative constructs her as embodying qualities culturally attributed to nature such as fortitude, resilience, courage, strength and

regeneration. From the beginning, Shakuntala, is found being raised in a tranquil and pristine natural setting, the hermitage of Rishi Kanva, far from the man-made social structure and patriarchal order. The bond she shares with nature is not only physical but also emotional and spiritual. Nature becomes her mirror, mentor and her constant companion. Kalidasa describes Shakuntala's care and compassion for nature in such a way that it gives the readers an impression of how she treats them as her own children.

She would only feed herself after the plants and creepers of the hermitage were watered. Though fond of floral decoration, she would not pluck even a flower because of her love and concern for them and she would celebrate the first efflorescence among them as a festival. (Khanal 88-96)

Thus, Shakuntala represents the woman, who, besides being indigenous custodian of seed and biodiversity believe with reverence that the essence of seed followed by the entire vegetation is the continuity of life. (Biswas 101-110)

Shakuntala's identity as the foster child of Kanva along with her close engagement with the animals of the hermitage, construct a relational framework that blurs the boundary between human and non-human life, a dynamic that ecofeminist theory identifies as central to critiques of anthropocentrism. As an adopted child, Shakuntala doesn't know the boundaries of class, caste or community. The narrative frames nature as a symbolic space of ecofeminist solidarity. Her spontaneous love and compassion for the wild animals, the cattle, deer, birds, and trees of the hermitage are vividly depicted by Kalidas in the following words:

> It is the fawn whose lip, when
>
> torn
>
> By kusha-grass, you soothed
>
> with oil; The fawn who gladly nibbled corn
>
> Held in your hand; with loving toil
>
> You have adopted him, and he
>
> Would never leave you willingly. (Ryder 47)

Furthermore, her deep emotional attachment with nature is not to be considered as feminine weakness rather as a spiritual wisdom which prepares her for the unforeseen challenges in her way ahead. Shakuntala's intimate association with nature suggests a form of ecological sensitivity that, while not explicitly theorized within the text, aligns with key concerns of spiritual and cultural ecofeminist discourse.

Throughout the play, Shakuntala is referred to as a Mallika or Jasmine flower spreading the sweet fragrance throughout the forest. The Jasmine flower is always used for sacred purposes as an offering to the deities. Shakuntala's association with the Vana devi in the play cannot go unnoticed. In the absence of Kanva, she is entrusted with the responsibilities of the hermitage. Her divine beauty is enhanced by her natural ornaments of flowers and leaves and her dress made of bark. Thus, she blends seamlessly with nature, as the very embodiment of nature itself. The marriage of the jasmine creeper with the mango tree foreshadows the unconventional Gandharva marriage that is going to take place between Dushyanta and Shakuntala. The pristine beauty of Shakuntala as a maiden girl has been vividly portrayed in the play. Furthermore, the intimate bond that Shakuntala shares with the wilderness is vivid from the depiction of nature participating in bidding farewell to Shakuntala on her departure from the hermitage. Another frequently mentioned plant in the play is the Mimosa or the touch-me-not plant. This plant is known for its high sensibility. By drawing a parallel between Shakuntala and the Mimosa plant, Kalidasa foregrounds qualities such as sensitivity, responsiveness, and delicacy. While these traits are conventionally coded as signs of vulnerability, this alignment also allows for a revaluation of vulnerability as a mode of strength, particularly within cultural and spiritual ecofeminist discourse which equates Prakriti or nature with Shakti or the divine feminine.

2.3 Dushyanta: The symbol of oppressive patriarchy:

While Shakuntala's characterization is closely aligned with the natural world, King Dushyanta's role within the narrative reflects forms of royal authority, a dynamic that can be interpreted as reflecting tensions between ecological relationality and patriarchal authority. He appears in the play while he is on a hunting expedition which is deeply symbolic. The play opens with the following words:

> His neck in beauty bends
>
> As backward looks he sends
>
> At my pursuit car
>
> That threatens death from far.
>
> Fear shrinks to half the body small;
>
> See how he fears the arrow's fall!
>
> The path he takes is strewed
>
> With blades of grass half-chewed
>
> From jaws wide with the stress
>
> Of fevered weariness.

He leaps so often and so high,

He does not seem to run, but fly. (Ryder 5)

Kalidasa's subtle portrayal of the invasion of culture into nature through the picturesque description of an antelope with its "haunches folded into his chest" and the "open mouth dropping half-chewed grass" on the path not only gives a visual image of the fast-running, terrified animal but also a knowledge about the encroachment of king Dushyanta into the forest. The antelope stops at the side of Shakuntala only to get protection from Dushyanta (Alapatt 634).

The serene wilderness, a microcosm of a natural world and a space of ecological equilibrium is violently intruded by a patriarchal authority, who disrupted the natural harmony of the space. The hunting expedition of Dushyanta can be seen as a violent intrusion of human civilization into the harmonious natural world and a violent display of masculine dominance over nature, thereby introducing a tension between ecological and patriarchal structures. Furthermore, King Dushyanta's violent intrusion acts as a metaphor for his relationship with Shakuntala. His pursuit of the innocent antelope foreshadows his pursuit of Shakuntala and how he is going to disrupt Shakuntala's life just like he disrupted the harmony of the forest. 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 (Khanal).

In the words of Dushyanta:

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? (Ryder 22)

Such romanticized words of the love smitten Dushyanta conceal within it his desire to own Shakuntala as an object of desire and pleasure.

2.4 The Gandharva Vivaha and its implications:

Eventually, he secretly married Shakuntala through the process of Gandharva marriage- a form of marriage that does not involve the permission of family, rituals or social acknowledgement.

However, this form of union where the relationship is kept secret, are highly susceptible to public scrutiny, future denial and societal disgrace. Which was proven to be aptly correct in the case of Shakuntala. Despite being a powerful king, Dushyanta chose to conceal his marriage. This decision highlights the double standard of a patriarchal society where men seek pleasure but evade responsibility. The signet ring, carved with "Abhijnanashakuntalam" which literally means recognition of Shakuntala was put on the finger of Shakuntala by Dushyanta for the future recognition. This is a powerful metaphor which is often overlooked by the readers. This ring serves as an example of a stamp that is put on the property to identify the owner of the land (Arzoo).

She is reduced to a commodity, controlled and colonized by her master. Like a piece of ravaged land is left barren and depleted after being extracted of all its precious resources, Shakuntala too is abandoned and forgotten, once her beauty and desirability is ravaged by her lover, Dushyanta. Both Shakuntala and nature are valued for their usefulness, illustrating the parallel between women's commodification and nature's exploitation.

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, p. 238)

2.5 The Ring of Memory: A Royal Insignia or A Metaphor of Patriarchal Amnesia:

The signet ring given to Shakuntala operates beyond its sentimental value as an emblem of love. It serves as a complex symbolic device within the narrative, as an instrument of recognition that has the power to legitimize human relationship. It exposes a rigid patriarchal power structure where identity is constructed and legitimised through institutional validation rather than self-assertion. Furthermore, Shakuntala’s rejection at court, caused by her inability to produce the ring reflects the rigidity of patriarchal structure that silences both women and nature by privileging proof over presence.

At the same time, the inclusion of Durvasa's curse complicates a surface level interpretation of the episode, presenting Dushyanta's amnesia as cosmically imposed, rather than a voluntary choice. This dual framing introduces an interpretive tension: while the king’s failure to recognize Shakuntala can be attributed to supernatural causality, his reliance on

the ring as the sole means of authentication highlights his deep-rooted adherence to structured systems of validation.

The recovery of the ring and the subsequent restoration of memory further reinforce its function as a mediator between personal truth and public legitimacy. By doing so, the episode moves beyond a unidimensional representation of Dushyanta as a patriarchal authority, revealing him as a figure operating within a broader framework of cosmic, institutional and epistemic power structure.

2.6 The River As an Active Agent of Separation and Union:

In the play, Abhijnanashakuntalam, Kalidas uses the imagery of the river not just as a natural element but also as a profound metaphor. The role of the river is pivotal in the play. It plays a dual role, as it not only separates Shakuntala and Dushyanta but also facilitates their ultimate reunion. Thus, it represents the eternal cycle of nature where every end heralds a new beginning and every phase of destruction leads to the possibilities of rejuvenation.

The river appears in the narrative as Shakuntala sets out for Hastinapur, the capital of King Dushyanta. As she starts crossing the river, she embarks on a journey that not only takes away her memories and freedom of childhood, but also her identity that was deeply intertwined with nature. Thus, the river serves as a boundary between the natural world she is departing and the realm of royal life she is entering. This transition from a space of ecological relationality to a structure of patriarchal authority is crucial to understand the play's central tension around identity; one which is self-articulated, and another mediated through normative systems of validation.

As Shakuntala crosses the river, she inadvertently loses the ring. It slips into the womb of the water and swiftly engulfed by a fish. Within an ecofeminist framework, the river may function as a space of regeneration and the submergence of the ring within the river may be read as a symbolic dissolution of fixed identity, as it moves into a fluid ecological realm, where established signs of recognition cease to carry meaning. The absence of a ring renders Shakuntala invisible, her chastity is suspected, her purity is scrutinized and her role as the wife of Dushyanta is denied.

Yet, ecofeminists interpret this moment not as a downfall but as a turning point for Shakuntala's metamorphosis. This moment serves as a catalyst for her growth as she embarks on a path of self-realization beyond patriarchal validation. She emerges with a reconfigured sense of selfhood that is no longer contingent upon patriarchal systems of recognition. This is when she finds her way back to nature, a space that exists outside the mechanisms of courtly

validation. Upon her return to the forest, Shakuntala's loss of the ring triggers a series of trials, as if the forces of nature are testing her resolve and resilience. And she is left with no choice but to bravely confront her vulnerability and emerge stronger and wiser. Thus begins Shakuntala's solitary odyssey, an evolutionary saga from desperation to empowerment, from vulnerability to autonomy.

The concept of "empowerment" as used in this study must be understood carefully. Rather than denoting as an external or social condition, the play approaches empowerment as a complex and internal process. The trajectory of Shakuntala, therefore, exemplifies primarily a form of psychological and epistemic empowerment, wherein selfhood is reconstituted independently of external recognition, rather than through the acquisition of institutional validation. Her empowerment remains internally constituted rather than institutionally conferred.

Within ecofeminist frameworks, water is frequently associated with cyclical regeneration. The presence of the river becomes inevitable in the evolution of Shakuntala. The timely intervention of the river as an agent of nature brings natural justice to Shakuntala. In a remarkable turn of events, the same river that had separated Shakuntala from Dushyanta, ultimately becomes the catalyst of their reunion. Thus, the river as a force of nature is not indifferent to the sufferings of the protagonist rather it purposefully navigates her journey towards self-discovery.

Another striking aspect of the narrative is that the restoration of the ring was not the result of the effort or search by Shakuntala or Dushyanta. The ring was brought to Dushyanta by natural forces. The narrative, thus highlights that justice was served to Shakuntala not through the human agency but through the natural world. The womb of the river engulfed the ring as an effect of the unavoidable curse of Rishi. Yet the same river played a crucial role in reproducing the ring at the right time and in restoring her dignity. Evaluated through an ecofeminist lens, the river assumes the regenerative and cyclical role of a womb, within which identity undergoes a temporary suspension, enabling its subsequent renewal in a reconfigured form. Shakuntala's story bears a notable resemblance to the journey of the river. It begins with turbulence in its early stages, meanders through a period of stagnation and ultimately finds its way forward with a renewed sense of purpose and direction.

2.7 The Solitary Odyssey: From A Naïve Maiden To An Empowered Woman:

The tale of Shakuntala did not end with the disgrace and rejection that she faced at the court of Dushyanta. Rather it is marked as a turning point in her life. It heralds a profound transformative journey- a journey towards self-realization, independence and empowerment.

As she was refused to be recognized by the man for whom she had left behind her world, her life turned upside down and she was left devastated and shattered. Having left with no choice she forces herself to the solitude of nature again, this time in the hermitage of Rishi Maricha. However, her return to nature, to the secluded and spiritually vibrant hermitage of Maricha is not a retreat, it is a rebirth.

Betty Friedan in her 1963 work The Feminine Mystique challenges the traditional roles assigned to a woman. In this context, she talks about a concept called 'relative identity'. In this work, she discusses how a woman is always perceived through the relationships that she shares with others - as a mother to a child, a daughter to a father, a sister to siblings and a wife to a husband. As she has her existence only in relation to others, she does not possess her own individual identity. Her existence, therefore, is validated through the needs, accomplishments and identities of the 'others'. She is defined by the success, ambitions and status of others; rather than her own dreams, ambitions, fears or failures. In the process, a woman loses her individuality, dreams and passions and gets reduced to a nameless existence. While the concept of Betty Friedan arises from a historically specific socio-cultural milieu, it remains relevant for interpreting female subjectivity across various literary traditions. Therefore, it can be used carefully as a guiding idea, as a heuristic tool, rather than a rigid interpretive framework to explore certain patterns of identity formation in Abhijnanashakuntalam.

The symbolic second life of Shakuntala in a natural environment, that the text constructs as protective and restorative is the turning point in the play when Shakuntala, for the first time casts away all her 'relative identities' as mother, wife, daughter, friend etc. and resolves to build her own identity. She refuses to be viewed through the lens of patriarchal expectations; rather as an individual capable of rejuvenation, transformation and healing.

Bearing a child in her womb and unwavering hope and patience in the heart she seeks sanctuary in the secluded hermitage of Maricha. At this point, Kalidas has subtly highlighted her mental fortitude and inner resilience, which gives her the strength to transform her despair into an opportunity for empowerment. Instead of ruminating over the situation as a pathetic victim of it, she decides to embrace it gracefully. Therefore, her transformation is not marked by vengeance, protest or hatred, but rather by internal growth, regeneration and empowerment. She is no more the love-stricken, naive maiden of Kanva's hermitage, she is the evolved woman of Maricha's hermitage.

Shakuntala breaks the traditional norm with her bold decision of raising Sarvadaman (who was later known as Bharat), as a single mother. In a male-dominated society that

acknowledges only the patriarchal lineage system, Shakuntala's determination to nurture her child independently outside of the validation of the masculine society is a testimony of her inner strength and indomitable fortitude. Far from the political complexities of the royal palace, Bharat grows amidst the purity of nature. Her mother's chastity, purity and inner strength are evident in the legacy she nurtured. The valour of the little Bharata is depicted in the play as follows:

> He drags a struggling lion cub,
>
> The lioness' milk half-sucked, half-missed,
>
> Towzles his mane, and tries to drub
>
> Him tame with small, imperious fist.
>
> (Enter a small boy, as described, and two hermit-women.)
>
> BOY. Open your mouth, cub. I want to count your teeth. (Ryder 85)

Bharat's courage, strength and valor do not reflect the absence of a father figure because Shakuntala plays the role of both mother and father. From his mother, Bharat imbibes the virtue of strength, courage and deep love for nature. Sarvadaman, who eventually becomes one of the greatest Indian rulers, becomes a living testimony to her mother's moral integrity and spiritual resilience.

From an ecofeminist perspective, this is the ultimate expression of Shakuntala's empowerment. Her evolution does not lie in resisting or destroying the existing patriarchal power structure, rather it lies in her determination to foster a bright future that will outshine it. Bharat, her son represents that bright future that she nurtures successfully as a single mother.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that Dushyanta's eventual regain of memory and his recognition and acceptance of Shakuntala do not occur through human intervention, but rather through natural justice. And what is more inspiring is that, by this time, Shakuntala no more needs any external acknowledgement to validate her existence. She has turned her despair into her strength and has restored her dignity- all on her own.

While the narrative concludes with harmonious reunion of the two lovers, this resolution should not be misread as Shakuntala's submission to patriarchal authority; rather, it simply affirms the dignity she has already secured through her own evolution. The conclusion of the play, shaped by a sense of poetic justice, restores her dignified position in the society, without diminishing the integrity of her autonomy she has cultivated for herself.

3.0 Conclusion:

Shakuntala's journey from innocence to experience, from a naive maiden to an empowered woman, from a dependent and helpless wife to an independent and self-sufficient human shows that empowerment does not necessarily come from direct confrontation, aggressive rebellion, or vengeful violence. It can be acquired through reclaiming one's roots, and one's identity; and by realizing one's innate power. It envisions societal structure where ecological sustainability and gender justice are complementary to each other and thus it offers solution to the modern power structure that rely on domination, control and exploitation in the name of progress and development. By revisiting the tattered pages of this ancient text, we realize that empowerment comes from the harmonious interplay between humans and nature.

In an era where the exploitation of the environment and subjugation of women continue to be pressing global issues, an unbiased study of the journey of Shakuntala can inspire scholars, thinkers, activists and the society to move beyond the conventional reading of the play as a romantic love story and look at it as a play within a broader intellectual continuum. This approach contributes to ecofeminist discourse by complicating the essentialist assumption regarding the association between woman and nature. It explores how this solidarity operates as a literary and symbolic strategy within specific socio-cultural contexts. By situating Shakuntala's transformation within this framework, the current study illustrates how Indian classical texts can be reevaluated to uncover complex interactions between gender, ecology, and power; thereby expanding the frontiers of ecofeminist discourse beyond modern narratives.

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