"Abhijanasakuntala"- Study material for sem II

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Drama as a distinct genre of Sanskrit literature emerges in the final centuries BC, influenced partly by Vedic mythology. It reaches its peak between the 4th and 7th centuries before declining together with Sanskrit literature as a whole.

Famous Sanskrit dramatists include Śhudraka, Bhasa, Asvaghosa and Kālidāsa. Though numerous plays written by these playwrights are still available, little is known about the authors themselves.

One of the earliest known Sanskrit plays is the Mrichakatika, thought to have been composed by Śhudraka in the 2nd century BC. The Natya Shastra (ca. 2nd century AD, literally "Scripture of Dance," though it sometimes translated as "Science of Theatre") is a keystone work in Sanskrit literature on the subject of stagecraft. Bhasa and Kālidāsa are major early authors of the first centuries AD, Kālidāsa qualifying easily as the greatest poet and playwright in Sanskrit. He deals primarily with famous Hindu legends and themes; three famous plays by Kālidāsa are Vikramōrvaśīyam (Vikrama and Urvashi), Mālavikāgnimitram (Malavika and Agnimitra), and the play that he is most known for: Abhijñānasākuntalam (The Recognition of Shakuntala).

Abhijñānasākuntala or Abhijñānasākuntalam (Devanagari: अभिज्ञान शाकुंतलम्), is a well-known Sanskrit play by Kālidāsa, dramatizing the story of Shakuntala told in the epic Mahabharata. It is considered to be the best of Kālidāsa's works. Its date is uncertain, but Kālidāsa is often placed in the period between the 1st century BCE and 4th century CE.

The Sanskrit title means "pertaining to token-recognized-Śākuntalā", so a literal translation could be Of Śākuntalā who is recognized by a token. The title is sometimes translated as The Recognition of Śākuntalā or The Sign of Śākuntalā.

This play is a nataka or a traditional epical play. It is a stage adaptation of an episode from the Mahābhārata and the Purāṇas. The heroine of this play is Sakuntala. She is a daughter of the nymph Menak and the sage Visvmitra, but is raised by her foster father, the ascetic Kṣiyapa, in his hermitage. She grows up as an innocent young Lady who lives in close contact with nature. In spite of her simple garments and austere lifestyle, she is extremely beautiful. The names of her two young female companions are Anasūy and Priyamvadā. The female ascetic who is in
charge of her welfare during the absence of her foster father, and who accompanies her to the
court later on, is called Gautami. During a hunting party in the forest where the hermitage is
located, the king of Hastin pura, named Dusyanta, meets her and is absolutely infatuated with
her. The locals provide him with a good excuse to hang on for a while in the vicinity of the
hermitage (they need his protection) and he coaxes Sakuntal, whose resistance is soon broken,
into a Ga ndharva marriage (an impulsive, non-arranged love marriage). He gives her a ring as a
token of his love and returns to the city with the promise that he will soon send for her. In the
meantime, love-smitten as she is, Sakuntalā forsakes to properly welcome the ascetic Durv sas
who fumingly curses her, the curse being that her husband will instantaneously forget about the
wedding. Thanks to the pleas of one of her female companions, the sage somehow modifies his
curse: The king will recognize her when she shows a recognition sign. Since the king's ring is in
Sakuntal’s possession, her friends are not in the least worried about this rather sinister event,
and even decide to let the case rest. As the king fails to come and pick up his bride (who turns
out to be pregnant), her foster father sends her to the court with a small delegation of his
confidants (the ascetics S radvata, S rngarava and Gautami). As foretold by the sage Durv sas,
the king does not recognize her and thinks she is an impostor. The only thing that could have
triggered his memory, i.e. the ring, got lost during the journey. Even though the king rejects her,
the hermits decide to leave her behind at the court. Her mother, a nymph, however, takes pity on
her and takes her to heaven where she gives birth to a son. Meanwhile the ring has been found
by a fishmonger in the belly of a fish and the king is painfully confronted with his erroneous
judgement. Consumed by remorse he searches for her, but all his efforts are in vain. Finally,
during a sky-ride (he has defeated some demons for Indra) he runs into a little boy who turns
out to be his son. All is well that ends well: The king and Sakuntal are reunited and the sage
Marica explains the curse of Durvāsas.

we can say that the central tension in the story – framed in terms of forgetting and
remembering – is one of misrecognition/recognition. Most significantly, Shakuntala’s grief and
suffering are resolved through Dushyanta’s act of recognition. It is this fundamental dynamic of
forgetting, separation, and restoration. Fraser and Honneth invite us to think about the centrality
of recognition for overcoming situations of inequality and in addressing social injustice. 29 What
emerges from their work is the fundamental awareness that recognition of the other is the first
step toward offering marginalised, excluded, or disadvantaged groups full entry into the life of
the public sphere; recognition opens up possibilities for addressing any number of past
injustices whose perpetuation depends upon patterns of misrecognition, prejudice or moral
blindness. Misrecognition is not wrong because it merely harms subjective integrity, but because
it denies other persons ‘the status of full partners in social interaction’. As she puts it,
‘misrecognition is wrong because it constitutes a form of institutionalized subordination’. As
Romila Thapar has shown in her study of the beloved heroine, depictions of Shakuntala have
varied over time. When she made her debut in the ancient Indian epic, the Mahabharata (ca. 100
BCE to 100 CE), it was as something like an autonomous agent, an actor in her own story rather
than a mere victim of fate and the forgetfulness of others. However, when re-imagined by
Kalidasa in his fifth-century drama, she was transformed into something more like a figure of
female subservience. For instance, in Kalidasa’s version of the story after Shakuntala’s friends convince the angry sage to mitigate his curse, they remain confident that their friend possessed all she needed to control her own destiny. Of course the audience knows otherwise Shakuntala will remain powerless until she is remembered by Dushyanta. A rather simplistic reading onto the narrative of the heroine who is forgotten and then remembered. In reality, Shakuntala’s story and her fate present a range of tensions and ambiguities. To begin with in Kalidasa’s drama it is Shakuntala’s own forgetfulness that prompts the curse from Durvasas, since she is so lost in dreams of her beloved that she fails to greet the sage. Then again, by boldly setting off for Dushyanta’s capital and confronting the forgetful king, not to mention by committing to raise her son without the aid of his father, Shakuntala demonstrates considerable emotional strength and practical ability.

While portraying the character of Sakuntala, Kalidasa uses various flower imagery because she is the Lady of the Nature. He stages her life as a young innocent, a denied wife and a mother. She has been related to Jasmine, lotus or vines. With respect to the consummation of love again she has been compared to "Navamalika Creepers". It is also the symbol of the offspring to come and therefore is reared as a son by her as if she is being trained in motherhood. Because for Kalidasa the purpose of love is marriage and of marriage progeny which is both the centre of suffusion and diffusion of love. Sakuntala is the daughter of Spring and she has to suffer the heat of an Indian Summer and her union is effected at the close of the day’s toil and sweat. Union in love not complete without it.