

# Abhijnanasakuntalam and the scarlet letter



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Abhijnanasakuntalam and The Scarlet Letter : A critical analysis ENG 434

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Neelankantan G. Introduction: Abhijnanasakuntalam is a well known Sanskrit play written by Kalidasa. It means “ token-recognised- Sakuntala” (“ Sakuntala recognized by a token”). It is an elaboration upon an episode mentioned in the Mahabharata, protagonist of which is Sakuntala, the daughter of Vishwamitra and Menaka .

Its date is uncertain, but Kalidasa is often placed in the period between the 1st century BC and 4th century AD. In this paper the thematic, structural and other similarities and differences between the play and the modernist novel The Scarlet Letter (1850) written by Nathaniel Hawthorne are discussed. Also, the other literary aspects of the play are critically analysed. Elements of Similarity: There is a great deal of similarity between the play and the novel. To begin with, both of them are adaptations of the previously existing stories.

In the case of the play the source was an episode from the Mahabharata whilst for the novel the source was a set of papers found by the author about a woman who lived about two hundred years ago (from novelist’s time) in New England.

The protagonists in both the literary masterpieces are women, Sakuntala and Hester Prynne respectively. They both are characterised as sweet, loving women, trustful, forging despite cruelest breaches of confidence - models of devoted wives with their reserve endurance of sorrow and spiritual discipline.

Sakuntala entered into a “gandharva vivaha” (an instant marriage by mutual consent of participants only, without any need for even a single third person as witness) with Dushyanta whilst her counterpart Hester was involved in a secret albeit sinful (in the puritanical society) relationship with Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale. A component each of King Dushyanta’s character can be viewed as the traits of the characters of Roger Chillingworth and Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale sans the former’s rage and quest for revenge.

But the King’s character is much nobler than both of the above characters courtesy the playwright who spared him from the blame of repudiation of Sakuntala by introducing clouded memory due to the sage Durvasa’s curse. Another striking similarity is between the children born to the female leads, Bharata and Pearl respectively. They both are vivacious, willful, impish children and are revolutionary in their actions and always seem to question the established set of beliefs and etiquette of the respective times. So much that Bharata was fondly called “Sarvadamana”(tamer of all) by the people in the hermitage.

Analysis of the plots: As Tagore remarks that there are two unions in Sakuntala and the central motif of the play is the progress from the earlier union of the first three acts with the youthful beauty and romance through an interval of separation and intense and speechless agony to the ultimate union in the Elysian regions of eternal bliss described in the last act.

In the case of The Scarlet Letter the similar structure can be clearly noticed. There is an early union between Hester and Dimmesdale followed by the

semi-exile of Hester for a long period which gives way to bliss in their union in the forest scene.

But succeeding this scene is the finale of the novel in which the Reverend dies and Hester leaves the town. This may be attributed to the allegorical Puritanical society to which Hawthorne belonged which was stricken by the all-pervasive sense of Sin which forms the central theme of the novel. Hence, the novel is full of feelings of remorse and guilt which are absent in the play.

The anger-prone sage Durvasa arrives when Sakuntala is lost in her fantasies, so that when she fails to attend to him, he curses her by bewitching Dushyanta into forgetting her existence.

The only cure is for Sakuntala to show him the signet ring that he gave her. She later travels to meet him, and has to cross a river. The ring is lost when it slips off her hand when she dips her hand in the water playfully.

On arrival the king refuses to acknowledge her. The rejection of Sakuntala by Dushyanta for reasons anything but convincing is the fatal flaw of the original story. They give him the character of a rake who would feign hide the folly of his youth and degrade his love into lust, rank and disgusting - a mere diversion in the enforced separation from his harem-love.

Thus Dushyanta of the epic is decidedly contemptible.

The great change which the poet introduces into the story is the curse of Durvasa which clouds the king's memory - as supernatural element whose influence is of a compulsive kind and we feel it has removed the king's capacity or responsibility for dealing with the situation; so that what is base

and unconscionable betrayal of trustful innocence becomes only a tragic error involving no conscious breach of right- but on the other hand accompanied by a full conviction of right.

This influence of the supernatural thus saves the king from the moral responsibility in his repudiation of Sakuntala. Comparing this part of the play with the novel the shadow of Dushyanta can be clearly found in Chillingworth in his action of leaving Hester and not fulfilling his vow to return to her on time. The scene of Dushyanta repudiating Sakuntala can be directly related to that of Dimmesdale breaching the confidence of Hester.

But the author Nathaniel Hawthorne, himself being a part of the allegorical Puritan society did not grant Dimmesdale redemption absolving him of his sins even during the time of his death leave alone granting him the luxury of any protective shield like that of a sage's curse wielded by Kalidasa for saving Dushyanta from the blame of repudiating Sakuntala. It is noteworthy that after being repudiated by the king Sakuntala does not return to the hermitage of Kanva rather choosing to stay at another hermitage.

This scene is starkly similar to Hester not returning to her parents after being punished by the puritans of the town and instead choosing to live mid way between the marketplace and the forest. Some of the dialogues of the play(when translated to English) like " wicked man, you measure( all this) by your own heart. What other man would act like you, who wearing the garb of virtue, resemble a grass-concealed well? ", " well I have been made(to appear) a wanton woman" and " honey in his mouth, poison in heart" (fifth act) are tailor made for a hypothetical play enacting The Scarlet Letter.

Fortunately, the ring is discovered by a fisherman in the belly of a fish, and Dushyanta realises his mistake - too late. The newly wise Dushyanta defeats an army of asuras led by Kalanemi and is rewarded by Indra with a journey through the heaven. Returned to Earth years later, Dushyanta finds Sakuntala and their son by chance, and recognizes them. The scene in which Dushyanta sees Bharata for the first time and says to himself " what fire is in the child ! " is reminiscent of the corresponding scene between Dimmesdale and Pearl.

Also, the forest scene of final union between Sakuntala and Dushyanta is agonizingly close to the forest union between Dimmesdale and Hester. In fact, it is pretty clear that the novel can easily be enacted into a five act play. On the basis numerous similarities some of which have been elucidated above, the correlation between the play and the novel is there to be seen but for the theme of sin and expiation which is the only notable addition to the plot of the play. This addition may be attributed to the puritanical background of the author Nathaniel Hawthorne in which sin and redemption are ubiquitous.

It may also be safely assumed that Hawthorne had indeed had an exposure to the play because the play was first translated into English by Sir William Jones of the Asiatic Society in 1789 and the Boston Brahmins of the 19th century were known to study Sanskrit Literature. Imagery of Kalidasa in Abhijnanasakuntalam: As the popular Sanskrit saying "[p]maa kailadasasya" goes, Kalidasa is famous for his exemplary usage of imagery as a highly effective narrative method.

His one of the most famous verses is from the first canto of the poem

RaghuvamSa. vaagaqa-aivava saMpR> aO vaagaqa-p`itp