

# Ramayana and shakuntala: a comparison

Literature



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Ramayana and Shakuntala: A Comparison Both Ramayana and Shakuntala are great works of artistic and philosophical merit. Originally written in Sanskrit close to two millennia ago, their authorship and date of origin are both speculative and mythologized. Yet, these ambiguities do not detract from their unique contributions to Eastern philosophy and literature. Both are great dramatic narratives and are integral to Indian folklore and tradition. The two works offer a glimpse into the social, political and philosophical currents affecting India two millennia ago. In this sense, they can be treated as fictionalized yet historically informative documents. Though, both Ramayana and Shakuntala are different in scope and historical setting, they share a common focus on philosophical questions pertaining to morality, choice (freewill) and chance (opportunity). This essay will argue that, though the two works are narrative stories set in ancient India, their scales, characters, themes and tones are dissimilar. The rest of this essay will flesh out this position. In Shakuntala, a salient philosophical debate is whether the titular character is a victim of misfortune (as in encountering an ill-tempered Sage Durvasa) or had let herself down (by living in her fantasies when Sage Durvasa visits her hermitage). Author Kalidasa doesn't concern himself with answering this question, making it less philosophically investigative than the Ramayana. In other words, a concrete answer to the causes of Shakuntala's misfortune is less important than its recognition as a real and plausible fact of life. What led to Durvasa's cursing of Shakuntala is a moot question, than acknowledgment of such occurrences as painful yet common part of human lives. In this sense, this great play offers a cathartic experience of the highest order to the audience. In contrast, in the Ramayana, the central and most dramatic moment in the narrative is when Ram and his faithful brothers

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are mandated to spend 14 years in the wilderness. The hardships and challenges they face during this period as well as the valuable friends they acquire on course showcase morals, values and virtues that are integral to Hindu Dharma. In this sense, this great Indian epic serves as a theatrical illustration of ideal Hindu life, with a comprehensive list of moral codes to abide by. In the Ramayana, a recurrent theme is one of maintenance of honor and virtue. This is amply evident through the lives of Ram, Lakshman, Sita, Hanuman, etc. All these characters go to great lengths in keeping their promises and upholding their loyalties. Ram, for example, stands firm in his commitment to Sita, even when he is tempted by attractive women like Surpanak after Sita's abduction by Ravan. Sita, likewise is a model of restraint and fidelity, as she spurns Ravana's repeated attempts to seduce her. Hanuman's whole life is devoted to the service of his master and lord Ram. His loyalty exceeds even that of Ram's younger brothers. Hence, the various characters in this great epic show how they overcome challenges in maintaining their honor and loyalty. In Shakuntala, in contrast, this showcase of virtue is not so pronounced, except tenuously. For example, one could see parallels between Shakuntala's years of lament and longing for Dushyanta as similar to that experienced by Sita. But Shakuntala's virtue and fidelity were not as severely tested as that confronted by Sita. After Ram defeats Ravan and Sita rejoins with her beloved, as a proof of her chastity, she even steps into fire as part of a symbolic cleansing ritual. In terms of their scale and grandeur too there are differences between the two works. Shakuntala is a shorter narrative when compared to the lengthier and broad-scoped epic that is the Ramayana. The latter, believed to be written by Sage Valmiki, is a genuine epic, comparable to the Odyssey, Iliad or Beowulf of the Western

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literary canon. Moreover, Ramayana is a more complete story compared to Shakuntala. Indeed, every common human crisis can be found at some stage in its narrative. The thoughts, actions and decisions of characters at various such moments of crisis serve as guidance and moral lesson to the reader of the text. In this way, the Ramayana is comparable to sacred texts of other major religions, in terms of the breadth of its scope and the profundity of wisdom contained within. In this regard the Shakuntala is quite limited.

Written in the form of a play, its primary purpose is entertainment, although it contains some elements of didacticism (related to Hindu Dharma). Hence, in conclusion, though the Ramayana and the Shakuntala are two narrative stories set in ancient India, their scales, characters, themes and tones are largely dissimilar. Reference: Fred Stielow (Editor), Judith M

Novak (Editor), Linda Silva(Preface), World Literature Anthology Through the Renaissance: Volumes 1, 2 & 3, Published by American Public University in 2011, ISBN-10: 1937381005