FROM : SHAKUNTALA TO SHAKUNTALA : A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SHAKUNTALA’S STRENGTH OF MIND IN THE MAHABHARATA & IN KALIDAS’S PLAY

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INTRODUCTION

In her thought provoking essay on Shakuntala Roshni Rustomji mentioned that most of the heroines of Sanskrit literature appear to possess two common characteristics. She says that, “First, they are beautiful to look at and second, they seem to play a passive role in the events of the narratives where they feature. But, when we look deeper, we find something more than the mere attributes of conventional beauty and traditional feminine passivity which is her strength of mind.”

Most people believe that Kalidasa’s plays are only about nature and beauty. Even I believed that, but while I was reading Kalidasa’s Abhijananasakuntalam or earlier Vyasa’s Mahabharata, I found some attributes that go beyond mere nature or beauty that is strength and strength of mind in the character of Shakuntala, the lead female protagonist in the play.

The strength takes different forms from other such protagonists in epics or Sanskrit literature. Draupadi in the Mahabharata becomes extremely vocal when wronged and feels that the right decision was not taken by others on her behalf. She constantly uses her verbal skills to participate in the events of the epic. Sita in the Ramayana is quieter and more self controlled than Draupadi. She is not weak or passive but she firmly persuades her husband Ram to let her follow him in his exile.
My project work is about revealing the strength of mind of Shakuntala through the examples from the text itself and in the light of Draupadi’s and Sita’s suffering and fights which they experienced as seen in the epics and Kavyas. I worked on the Shakuntala of Mahabharata’s who stands her ground and speaks up for her rights and on Kalidasa’s Shakuntala who is not independent or an autonomous assertive figure as in the Mahabharata but tries to argue her case, her faith, self confidence, patience, virtues all shine through. Her quiet suffering and her refusal to beg for kindness from the king which lend her an aura of victorious strength when she appears in the last act. Thus, the paper attempts a comparative study.

Kalidasa has borrowed the theme from the Mahabharata and made some interesting changes to the original to give the play a dramatic look, and provide a justification for Dushyanta’s behavior. But the main focus is the etching out of Shakuntala’s characterization which is very different from the earlier heroines of Sanskrit literature.

The Mahabharata precedes Kalidasa’s play since it existed in the oral tradition. Kalidasa wrote in the period of the Gupta kings. Not only in the Mahabharata epic or Kalidasa’s play, but Shakuntala is also mentioned in the Padma Purana version. However, for the purpose of this study, I am not referring to it.

My main focus in this research paper is to reveal the strength of mind in Shakuntala’s characterisation, despite her being characterised as independent and submissive, respectively in the two version.

SHAKUNTALA’S BEAUTY

Beauty has the power to grasp one’s senses / mind. Here in Kalidasa’s play, Shakuntala, despite living in an ashrama / forest, looks very beautiful and Dushyanta at first sight is attracted to her and hides behind trees to hear the free conversations of the girls. In the second act, when the Vidusaka asks the reasons for the rejection of other beauties in his court, and falling in love with a forest woman, the king replies by talking about and praising her beauty.

“A flower no one has smelled
A bud no fingers have plucked
an uncut jewel, honey untasted
unbroken fruits of holy deeds -
I don’t know who is destined
to enjoy her flawless beauty.”
(Thapar Romila. Sakuntala. Pg no. 103)

He continuously praises her beauty to the other people and he desperately wants to marry her.

**SHAKUNTALA’S STRENGTH OF MIND**

However, Shakuntala is not a mere beauty but a pillar of strength and patience also. Romila Thapar reiterates this when we turn to the play written by Kalidasa, the *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, not only does the context and the story change but, more pertinently, the character of Shakuntala is a contrast to the woman portrayed in the epic. There is a resistance as if to the epic version through the presentation of modern times and the Shakuntala of the epic is seen to be marginalized. As Thapar writes, “in Kalidas’s version we are in the realm of delicacy and romance, imminent tragedy and finally happiness. The emotional range is infinite when compared to the epic narrative, but while intermeshing of the emotions, we can see the image of Shakuntala undergoes a transformation.
(Thapar, Romila. Pg-44)

In the play, Kalidasa’s interest lies mainly in portraying the budding development of love between Dushyanta, a sophisticated and noble king and an innocent girl. The journey moves from the hermitage and the bond between the duo is strengthened through separation and suffering.

*Mahabharata’s* Shakuntala is a woman in a patriarchal society as is Kalidasa’s Shakuntala But in the *Mahabharat* she seems to have carefully thought over the roles of wife / mother and son in a society dominated by men such as Dushyanta during the six years, when she lived forgotten by her husband. When she goes to Dushyanta’s court, she is the mother of a six year old boy but her behaviour at the court shows that she has not lost her strength or hopes for her son But also her words to Dushyanta are no longer those of a
young woman innocently and happily wandering through her father’s hermitage. After long separation she tells Dushyanta about their son:

“This is your son, O king, he should be consecrated by you as your heir”.

(Rustomji Rohini. “Strength rather than Beauty” Pg. 48)

On the other hand in Kalidasa’s play, Shakuntala after the cruel rejection by the king, is stunned, filled with shame and sorrow, followed by anger. There appears to be highlighting of her patience and her verbal skill in her characterization. Then she quickly conceals this anger, and gains control over herself. Her speech is long and impassioned, but rational. She is not whining or begging the king. She boldly tells Dushyanta of the future implications and results of his false action.

“O great king, even though you do recognize me, why do you say, “I do not know you?” You speak thus carelessly as another, a low-born villain might speak”.

She further, says, “if you will not follow my advice O Dushyanta, you will reap the results of your present actions a hundred times”. (Rustomji, Rohini. Pg. 48)

Shakuntala’s strength echoes in her words at the end of the story. Divine intervention allows one to believe that God respects and takes due cognizance and care of her words.

Shakuntala’s skills of argument and of drawing upon associations of memory can be seen in the play when she is in the court, is pregnant and the king refuses to recognise or accept her. She is stunned but does not say a word. But the hermits and Gautami tell the king that a virtuous woman is believed to be evil by the world if she continues to live with her own family. She also first tries to show the ring but discovers it is lost. Then reminds him of the simple forest scene with the buck (fawn). She continues to tell him that she is his wife. Dushyanta at the end of the court scene, does not accept her but she through her argument, verbal skills and emotional appeal puts him in a painful and pensive mood. Dushyant says
“I cannot remember marrying the sage’s abandoned daughter, but the pain my heart feels makes me suspect that I did.

(Thapar, Romila. Sakuntala. Pg. 139)

In Kalidasa’s play, Dushyanta blames her for her untrustworthy character and her parentage, dusyanta insulting remarks to Shakuntala that women are born cunning. This unrighteous action of Dusyanta draws out an angry response and one can see Shakuntala head held high, her eyes flashing when she answers the king.

“You point out the faults of others, even though they are as small as mustard seeds, but you do not notice your own faults, which are as big as vilwa fruits”. (Rustomji, Rohini. Pg. 51)

She further says, “my mother Menka is a celestial. My birth, therefore. Dushyanta, is far higher than yours. Your place is earth, but mine is in the sky.”

Shakuntala, after Dushyanta’s rejection warm-hearted tells him “I was in infancy cast away by my parents, and now I am cast away by you! Well I am ready now to return to the ashrama of my father, but you must not cast away this child who is your own.”

Kalidasa’s Shakuntala is different from earlier heroines of Sanskrit literature. Even though Dushyanta does not recognize her, her reaction is different. She is not angry and does not shout at the king but says she caused her situation herself that she trusted the king and starts weeping. She does not beg for pity from the king but weeps and cries out “O mother earth, give me room (in your bosom)”

(Jhala, G.C. Kalidasa. Pg No. 163)

These words echo those of Sita of the Ramayana rather than Vyasa’s Shakuntala but in Kalidasa, Shakuntala is whisked away by her apsara mother Menka to heaven.

Her caring and nurturing quality, her key strengths are beautifully described in the opening scene of the play when she is watering the plants / flowers in the hermitage and that is why Kanva at the the time of departure to palace
address the trees that. “This Shakuntala, who ever wished to drink water while you are all yet un-watered; who fond though she is of decorating, never plucks a prout from you through affection, who enjoys festal celebration on the occasion of your first blossoming she, this Shakuntals, is today leaving for her husband’s palace. Pray, let her receive the permission of you all.

According to Brodback in the Mahabharata, Shakuntala’s boldness is seen at Dusyanta’s court when Dusyanta does not accept his son, terms of duty pleasure or profit saying Shakuntala is lying “Women don’t tell the truth. Who will take your word for it?” He casts doubt upon the story of her birth and says she is rather of low birth, an evil ascetic.” Shakuntala tells him again and again that she is well born and he is being obtuse and finally she boldly answers,

“This broad four-edged earth crested by regal crags, will be governed by my son whether you like it or not, Dushyanta !”

(Brodback, Simon Pears. Pg. No. 59)

After this a disembodied voice in the sky announces that the son is Dushyanta’s and that he must accept him and Sakuntala.

In Vyas’s Shakuntala, she is reunited with her husband in the palace itself. But in Kalidasa’s play she breaks down and in her anger and distress call sfor her mother earth to give space in her bosom and finally her mother Menaka protect her by vanishes with “a flash of light in a woman’s shape”.

**STRENGTH OF KALIDASA’S SHAKUNTALA**

**SEEN IN HER VIRTUES**

George Foster’s German translater of the play Shakuntala and Romila Thapar Book’s *Shakuntala* point out that whereas for, German romanticism *Shakuntala* in Kanva’s ashrama was the child of nature, for Indian nationalism it was Shakuntala of Marica’s ashrama who epitomised the virtues of a good Hindu woman. Curiously, the link between the two
ashramas is Shakuntala, a woman, who was a child of the first ashram and personification of innocence. She has now been through the travails of an unrecognized marriage and motherhood to arrive at an eventual recognition in the second ashram.

Yet another German scholar to express his pleasure was herder to whom Shakuntala was an “Indian Flower, an Epic drama and a Symbol of naivety.” (Thaper, Romila. Pg. 208)

Her virtue, forbearance and kindness are clearly seen when, after so much suffering, meted out by the king, she meets the king but does not hesitate to welcome him, continually, referring to him as her “noble husband”, and addressing him as Aryaputra.

A good example of Shakuntala’s virtues to others is seen in the middle of Act IV, at her departure from the hermitage to the palace of the king. Kalidasa here gives a very beautiful description that Kanva’s eyes filled with tears of joy and gives her advice. For the trees of the forest family have blessed Shakuntala and the cuckoo’s melodious song announces their response, wishes her a safe and pleasant journey. She bids farewell to the vanajyotsana addressing the creeper as my sister. The entire hermitage feels sorrowful at her departure.

“Grazing deer drop grass,
Peacocks stop dancing,
Vines lose pale leaves
Falling like tears”
(Thapar Romila. Shakuntala. Pg. 124)

All the people and even nature in the forest are sad because of her departure.
Savitri is, in many ways, similar to Sita and Kalidasa’s Shakuntala. These women are dominated by their love for their husbands and they look similar in their patience and gentle use of strength. They donot lose their hope but try to face their problems with tenacious courage.

Kalidasa in his play gives a heart moving picture of a devoted wife. She pining in separation, wearing a pair of dusky garments, with a face emaciated by her observance of vows, and of pure conduct, Shakuntala has
been practising a long vow of separation. She though the daughter of an Apsara, did not keep any other person in mind except Dushyanta.

In the book “The Imagery of Kalidasa”, Aggarwal beautifully defines and explains the meaning of virtue through the characterization of Shakuntala. He says that, the subjective appreciation of beauty is comprised of certain qualities. The person appreciating the beauties appreciates virtues that accompany the object of beauty. Here we see that the physical beauty of Shakuntala has merited no consideration to the king. She appears graceful to Dusyanta only by her virtue of asceticism and faithfulness etc.

Aggrawal considers that, it is significant that women, however beautiful, cannot be deemed as such if they lacks the virtues of womanhood. Faithfulness to her husband is the greatest and noblest of virtues which enhances the beauty of woman in the patriarchal world of the play and also that of the critics only Thapar seems to be exceptional here because she does not extoll this qualities.

MORE EVIDENCE OF HER STRENGTH

Thapar point out a significant difference between Shakuntala of the Mahabharata and of Kalidasa. In the Mahabharata, because of the presence of only four characters, she is fighting alone or She is independent. But here in Kalidasa’s dramatic version, she is nearly always surrounded by other people. She is always with Ansuya and Priyamvada when she first appears on the stage and they are constantly by her side until she leaves for Dushyanta’s court. When Kanva sends her to the king, her son is not yet born, and she is suitably chaperoned by the hermits Sharngarva and Sharadvata, and mother Gautami. Interestingly, the two scenes in which she does meet the king, without any friends or guardians around her, are very important in the development of both the plot and the main characters. In Act III there is a brief love scene between the timid young Shakuntala and the more experienced king.

The affectionate protection with which Kalidasa’s Shakuntala is surrounded sets off her unique strength, which is rooted in her innocence and her romantic introspective nature. She does not possess any trace of the Mahabharata’s Shakuntala’s self confident, promptness in seizing the
opportunity for her future son. But the Shakuntala of the play is certainly not a self-effacing meek and mild young woman. She remains the centre of attention because of her gentle rebukes to her friends, asides to herself and her feigned anger but she does not seem really capable of acting on her own until the final act of the play.

In the Mahabharata, Shakuntala never shows signs of fear but in Kalidas’s play in Act III, when her friends plan to leave them alone, Shakuntala says - “Come back! Don’t leave me unprotected”. This shows she is genuinely terrified to face the king and his confession of love and again she looks fearful at the end of Act V, after the king’s rejection, when she is again abandoned by the self-righteous young hermits and sad Gautami at the king’s court, she says -

“What? Am I deceived by this cruel man and then abandoned by you?

Shakuntala follows them and cries pitifully, So Gautami says,

“What will my child do now that her husband has refused her?”

(Thapar Romila. Sakuntala. Pg. No. 137)

The love sickness and day dreaming of Kalidasa’s Shakuntala shows one a basic difference between the two heroines and their stories. One feels that the Shakuntala, of the epic is always in command of the situation, would never have been caught day dreaming about the king. But in Kalidasa’s play’s Act IV, she sits near a cottage door, completely lost in the thoughts of her lover, Dushyanta. At such a time, the angry sage, Durvasa comes and asks about possible hospitality. But she can neither see nor hear Durvasa. The sage cannot control his temper and curses her,

“Since you blindly ignore a great sage like me, the lover you worship with mindless devotion will not remember you, even when awakened - like a drunkard who forgets a story he just composed.”

(Thaper Romila. Sakuntala. Pg No. 107/108)

However, the day dreaming is not to be considered a flaw in her nature but shows the extent to which she loves and feels connected to Dushyant. When at the court, Dushyanta refuses to accept her, a pregnant woman,
whom he does not remember because of Durvasa’s curse at this time. She unsure of herself, begins to speak hesitantly to the king but the king does not listen to her. She tries to remind the king of her place in his personal affection. Something the Shakuntala of the epic does not even touch upon. She first tries to show him the ring and discovers it has fallen off in the holy waters at the shrine of the goddess near Indra’s grove. Then she reminds about a simple scene between them and a buck (Fawn) in the hermitage but at last he is angry and speaks of the deviousness of women. Thus, she appeals to his emotions but remains strong in her conviction.

Although, Shakuntala in the Mahabharata, is independent, Kalidasa’s Shakuntala constantly needs others to protect and defend her. When, she forgets to honour the sage Durvasa because she is engrossed in her thoughts of the king, the sage curses her. Fortunately her friends Ansuya and Priyamvada hear his angry words and intercede on her behalf. He cannot take back his curse, but he modifies it. That when Shakuntala shows him a token, he will recognise her.

Kalidasa’s Shakuntala has no quick word of greeting like Mahabharata’s Shakuntala, when Kanva’s pupils invite Dushyanta at the hermitage. Her friends have to remind her of the welcoming rites which she owes the visitor. When Dushyanta asks how Shakuntala could be the daughter of an ascetic like Kanva, Ansuya tells the story of her birth.

Rustumji says that heroines in Sanskrit literature have their limitations in the patriarchal system / society and have to play their strictly-defined roles as mothers, wives, mistresses and sometimes sisters and daughters of the heroes. They do not really step beyond these boundaries and break the laws of men and gods. Shakuntala’s disapperance from the world when rejected by Dushyanta denotes a scapegoat ritual. Shakuntala is shown as a victim of the unknown and mysterious powers which govern the lives of the people. She has been used as a scapegoat to personify humanity as a whole which is subjected to the grand mechanism of this universe. This is clearly shown in Act V, at the court scene, when she stands before the king Dushyant, a figure of womanly helplessness. When Dushyanta rejects her, she could not speak more or even her own hermitage people - Sarangava, Saradvata and Gautami left her at that time only. Ultimately, Saradvata says to the king:
“Here she is your wife. Receive her or turn her out as you please. For, absolute is the power of husband over their wives”.

(Jhala. GC. Kalidasa. Pg. No. 163 & Dr. Unni, N.P. Pg. No. 338)

But as pointed out earlier in this paper in this paper Shakuntala, in both instances- of the epic and the play emerges strong by finding a way out of the patriarchal set up. She may be emotional but this by no means takes away her determination or patience to fight the situation.

CONCLUSION

At last, I could say that, Shakuntala in Kalidasa’s version seems at first to be the perfect example of a submissive woman. While in Mahabharata she seems more independent and an autonomous assertive figure. But if we read Kalidasa’s texts closely, kalidasa’s Shakuntala is strong because of her emotions not despite them.

I think, people of modern generation after reading or understanding both Vyasa’s and Kalidasa’s Shakuntala, will not remember her only for her beauty or her independent characterisation and submissiveness but also her strength in the form of Virtues such as beauty, forbearance, patience, loving vulnerable, protected by others, as weapons to deal with predicaments.

Kalidasa has done his job of a playwright with extraordinary talent. He has used an existing piece of narrative and elaborated and expanded it in a fully grown play where characters have beautiful details and mannerism. All the characters of this play and specially Shakuntala is so close to the majority of modern Indian women that even now a sensitive reader or viewer would definitely feel a connection with her.

To conclude, while Shakuntala, in both the Mahabharata and Kalidasa’s play is portrayed as a strong woman, the interesting aspect to study is the differences in this similarity. Both characterisations are about her strength but the approaches of the poet or playwright are different. The strength of Shankuntala in the epic lies in her independent mind while the strength of Shankuntala in the play lies in her deep and powerful emotions which feed her strength of mind.
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