

9

Love, Separation and Reconciliation in Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśakuntalam* and Shakespeare's *As You Like It*

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Abstract

Love, being a classic, timeless, and universal theme, has always occupied a distinguished place in literary circles. In literature, it is generally projected in varied forms including familial love, romantic love, platonic love, physical love etc. Authors often use this universal theme to explore the nature and complexities of human relationships. The two towering figures of literature, Kālidāsa and William Shakespeare have given a new paradigm to this much-celebrated subject. In their seminal works, *Abhijñānaśakuntalam* and *As You Like It*, both the dramatists have used love as a driving force in shaping the narrative of the plays. However, the characters in both the plays have to undergo the trials and tribulations of separation, till their subsequent reunion. The present paper attempts to compare and contrast the treatment of the universal themes of love, separation, and reconciliation in both plays. It also depicts the fact that literature treats love as a perennial emotion that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries.

Keywords: Love, separation, reconciliation, reunion, literature

Kalidāsa (5th century BC) and William Shakespeare (1564-1616) are considered to be the greatest luminaries of Sanskrit and English literature respectively. Their contribution in their respective fields is so immense that the scholars of Sanskrit and English literature will always remain indebted to them. They are believed to be the most notable figures that the world has ever produced. The fact that their works have been translated into all the major languages so that they can gain accessibility to the majority of people living in different parts of the world is indicative of the literary brilliance that both of them possessed. Universality and originality are the hallmarks of their writings. Through their artistic creations, they have left an

indelible mark on the entire gamut of literature. Though belonging to different times, nations, and cultures, and writing in different languages, there are certain elements which are found common in their writings.

Kālidāsa, who flourished around the fourth or fifth century BC in India, was a Sanskrit dramatist and poet whose literary genius rests on three plays, namely *Abhijñānaśakuntalam* (*The Recognition of Śakuntalā*), *Vikramōrvaśīyam* (*Ūrvaśī Won by Valour*), and *Mālavikāgnimitram* (*Mālavikā and Agnimitra*), two epic poems *Raghuvamśa* (*The Dynasty of Raghu*) and *Kumārasambhavam* (*The Birth of Kumāra*), and two poems *Ṛtusamhāra* (*Medley of Seasons*) *Meghadūta* (*Cloud Messenger*).

Of all his plays, *Abhijñānaśakuntalam* is considered to be his masterpiece and is widely acknowledged for its metaphorical language used elegantly. It was originally composed in Sanskrit, but it made its appearance before the English audience when it was translated by Sir William Jones in 1789 and became the first Indian play to be translated into any Western language. The story of *Abhijñānaśakuntalam* is taken from the *Adi Parva* of the epic *Mahābhārata*, however, Kālidāsa altered it in his ways which makes the play immortal. The play depicts the love story of Duṣṇanta and Śakuntalā, who experiences the pangs of love at first sight. They marry each other secretly, but before their marriage can be acknowledged publicly, they are separated. Subsequently, they were reunited with the sudden turn of events.

William Shakespeare was an English playwright, actor, and dramatist who contributed significantly to English literature. The body of his literary writings consists of one-hundred and fifty-four sonnets, thirty-seven plays, and two long narrative poems. He was undoubtedly an artist who completely transfigured the field of English literature.

As You Like It is perhaps Shakespeare's greatest and finest romantic play. The elements of romance mingled with certain comic elements in the play delight the readers. The setting of the play is a remote forest named Forest of Arden, which makes it a pastoral comedy. The plot involves the banishment of Duke Senior by his younger brother, Duke Frederick, the deprivation of Orlando by his

elder brother, Oliver, Rosalind and Orlando falling in love at first sight, the unjust banishment of Rosalind by Duke Frederick which forces Rosalind and her cousin Celia to move into the Forest of Arden in disguise, the unexpected meeting of Orlando and Rosalind in the forest, Celia and Oliver falling in love, and the final reconciliation and reunion of all the characters. Though the play has many subplots, they all are connected to the main plot.

The most remarkable feature of *Abhijñānaśakuntalam* and *As You Like It* is the setting. The setting of both the plays is idyllic and the principal action in each one of them takes place in the forest. Love too in both the plays ripens in the lap and charming beauty of nature. In *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*, it is only in the forest that King Duṣanta and Śakuntalā fall in love with each other and marry in secret. Similarly, in *As You Like It*, the love between Orlando and Rosalind reaches its height in the forest of Arden when Orlando comes to woo Ganymede, imagining 'him' to be his Rosalind. The love between Celia and Oliver and Touchstone and Audrey also blossoms in the forest.

The most significant aspect of both the plays is that all the lovers fall in love at first sight, though in different ways. Love, at first sight, finds its best abode in *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*. When Duṣanta watches Śakuntalā for the first time, he is beguiled by her beauty. He goes on to describe the different organs of her body by employing enchanting metaphors. He says to himself "my noble heart yearns deeply for her." (Kālidāsa 251)

The same is the case with Śakuntalā. When Duṣanta appears before her to cure her of a bee sting, Śakuntalā experiences the same emotions as experienced by Duṣanta. Her friends easily guess the magical impact of Duṣanta which made Śakuntalā blind in love for him. She was not able to hide her feelings as according to Duṣanta, "love neither shone radiant nor was it concealed." (Kālidāsa 264) She asks herself:

"How is it that seeing this person, I am overcome by an emotion wholly inappropriate in hermit groves." (Kālidāsa 252)

Mādhavya, the court jester and the closest friend of Duṣanta reveals Duṣanta's condition after meeting Śakuntalā. According to him, from the moment Duṣanta met the "beautiful hermit girl"

(Kālidāsa 258), he has forgotten everything including sleep. He no longer wishes to return to the capital but keeps on thinking and admiring her beauty all the time. The same condition of Śakuntalā has been described by Pruiyamvaadā. According to her, Śakuntalā has become restless and dejected after meeting Duḥṣanta. Śakuntalā too confesses her deep love before her friends. She says that from the very moment she saw Duḥṣanta, she has become lovesick. She was so much deeply in love that she longed to marry him as soon as possible. She says “Every part of me/ yearns to be one with you.” (Kālidāsa 275). Most of the time she becomes speechless and spellbound when she sees Duḥṣanta. After realising their true love for each other, they marry in secret according to the *Gandharva* rite.

Shakespeare has immortalised the concept of love in his writings. The element of love is present not only in his comedies but also in his tragedies. No other English writer before him has presented love in such a brilliant manner as Shakespeare. However, love is given a new angle in *As You Like It*. The charm of the play lies in the different kinds of love it presents which include courtly love, romantic love, realistic love, and sexual love. Though the play presents love in its varied forms, the lovers fall in love with each other at first sight. Phebe’s remarks “Dear shepherd, now I find thy saw of might/Who ever lov’d that lov’d not at first sight?” (Shakespeare 112) apply to all the characters of the play. As soon as the hero and heroine, Orlando and Rosalind, see each other, they are maddened at each other’s sight. It is only love that compels Rosalind to persuade Orlando to withdraw himself from the wrestling match when she learns that the latter has challenged Charles to a duel. She says:

“The little strength that I have, I would it were with you.” (Shakespeare 30)

When Orlando wins the wrestling match, Rosalind is so overjoyed that she gifts her necklace to him. Orlando too in turn is captivated by Rosalind’s beauty. He becomes speechless and overwhelmed:

“What passion hangs these weights upon my tongue?
I cannot speak to her, yet she urg’d conference.
O poor Orlando, thou art overthrown!
Or Charles, or something weaker matters thee.” (Shakespeare 34)

Throughout the play, both of them show their deep love and devotion to each other. For instance, Orlando's true feelings are revealed when Rosalind in her disguise says to him that she will not marry him. He shows his true love saying that he is even ready to sacrifice his life for the sake of love. Similarly, Rosalind becoming unconscious after seeing the blood-stained napkin indicates her true love towards Orlando.

Celia and Oliver too fall in love with each other at first sight. Rosalind gives a beautiful account of their love for Orlando in the following words:

"For your brother and my sister no sooner met but, they looked; no sooner looked, but they loved; no sooner loved, but they sighed; no sooner sighed, but they asked one another for reason; no sooner knew the reason, but they sought the remedy." (Shakespeare 147)

The comedy in the play reaches its zenith when Phebe writes a long love letter to Rosalind. She has fallen in love with her (in her disguise as Ganymede). Her love letter made Rosalind furious. Hence, the principal characters in both plays are swayed by their deep love for each other.

However, in both the plays, the happiness caused by love is short-lived. The playwrights have tried to show the fact that one has to undergo the pains of loss, separation, and sadness if he/she wants to achieve true love. In *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*, the couple was separated soon after their marriage. Duṣanta returned to the capital, while Śakuntalā remained in the hermitage, deeply lost all the time engrossed in the thoughts of her lover. On the other hand, Duṣanta, after reaching the capital gets himself engaged in the affairs of the state and completely forgets about Śakuntalā. He had the least remembrance of the fact that once he married the hermitage girl. When Śakuntalā comes to the capital, accompanied by the holy hermits with the motive of reuniting with her husband, Duṣanta fails to recognise her. Thus, instead of acceptance, she received rejection. To fill the cup of her sorrow, she realized that the ring (which could have played the part of a recognition sign) had been lost. Śakuntalā was so grief-stricken by the repudiation that she wished to bury herself deep into the core of the earth. She could not imagine herself being separated from Duṣanta.

However, when Duḥṣanta sees the ring and regains his memory, he cannot bear the pain of separation from Śakuntalā. He becomes sleepless and loses interest in the affairs of the state. He simply pines for Śakuntalā. He no longer seems to enjoy the company of nature and, therefore has cancelled the celebration of the spring. Miśrakeṣī, an *Apsara*, who was eavesdropping on the entire scene reveals that Śakuntalā too is in the same miserable condition as Duḥṣanta. Thus, both lovers were not able to endure the pains and agonies of separation.

Similarly, in the play, *As You Like It*, the condition of the pivotal characters becomes pathetic in the absence of each other. When Rosalind reaches the Forest of Arden after being banished by Duke Frederick, she longs to be in the company of Orlando. When Silvius describes his unrequited love towards Phebe to Corin, Rosalind is reminded of her love towards Orlando. She says:

“Alas, poor shepherd, searching of thy wound,
I have my hard adventure found mine own.” (Shakespeare 56)

Her words reflect the depressed condition of a beloved in the absence of her lover. Orlando too can be seen in the same miserable condition when he reaches the Forest of Arden. He keeps missing his beloved Rosalind badly. He is so distressed at his separation from her that he writes verses in praise of her charm and beauty and hangs them on the trees. When Rosalind learns that Orlando too is in the forest, her joy knows no bounds. But she considers herself to be quite unfortunate as she is disguised as a male and Orlando would never be able to recognize her in this disguise. However, she finds a remedy. When she meets Orlando, she asks him to come and woo her and consider ‘him’ as his Rosalind. It was just to cope with the trauma of separation that Rosalind devised such a hilarious plan. They both enjoy the love game.

Though Rosalind has found a solution to her problem, Orlando hasn’t. His sadness due to his separation from Rosalind is evident when he reveals to Ganymede that he can no longer imagine ‘him’ to be Rosalind and make love to him. His brother will be married soon, but he is the one who is experiencing the utmost grief. His sadness compels Rosalind to reveal her identity to everyone. But before revealing her identity, she takes full consent from Duke Senior,

Orlando, and Phebe. She asks Duke Senior to allow Rosalind to marry Orlando if she produces Rosalind before him. She even reminds Orlando of his promise to marry Rosalind if she appears before him in person. She asks Phebe to marry Silvius if Phebe herself refuses to marry Ganymede. Everyone agrees and finally, Rosalind and Celia shed their disguises and appear before them which makes everybody surprised as well as happy. Thus, the reconciliation between the lovers takes place and the play ends in a flurry of marriages on a happy note.

However, the treatment of the theme of separation by both the playwrights is quite different. The characters of Shakespeare in *As You Like It* are separated due to certain situations. But in *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*, the separation of Duṣanta and Śakuntalā is not due to any particular circumstances, but their separation is the result of the curse of sage Durvasā. Under the influence of the sage's curse, Duṣanta forgets his memories associated with Śakuntalā after reaching the town and fails to recognise her when she appears before him after several years. Thus, the lovers or other characters in the play are not responsible for themselves as Duke Frederick is responsible in *As You Like It*.

The scene of reconciliation between the lovers in *Abhijñānaśakuntalam* is the most overwhelming and sublime of all the scenes in the play. Duṣanta at one moment felt that his separation is permanent. For him to get his love again was merely a pipe dream. But when he was coming back to the earthly realm after fighting the demons, he stopped at the hermitage of the holy sage Mārīca. He meets his son Sarvadama (Bharata) and wife Śakuntalā. The body of Duṣanta in these miserable years has become pale, and Śakuntalā therefore feels doubtful of his appearance at first. But as soon as she recognises him, she cries:

“Take courage, O my heart; envious Fate seems to have relented at last; this is indeed my noble Lord.” (Kālidāsa 338)

It is quite interesting to note that in both the plays, supernatural agents aid in the reconciliation and reunion of characters. In *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*, the reconciliation takes place in the realm of celestial hermitage in the presence of a heavenly couple, Mārīca and Aditi, while in *As You Like It*, Hymen, the God of marriage appears in

the last scene and facilitates the marriage and reunites all the characters.

Hence, it can be asserted that both *Abhijñānaśakuntalam* and *As You Like It* validates the literary genius of their respective playwrights. The themes of love, separation, and reconciliation are handled by Kālidāsa and Shakespeare gracefully and artistically which give a universal appeal to both the plays. The playwrights have proved successful in depicting the fact that life is not always the same; it is neither black nor white, but grey. It has shades of happiness as well as sadness. To achieve their true love, the characters in both plays have to suffer the trials of separation. But their separation was not permanent, they were consequently reunited by the unexpected turn of events.

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