

**REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT
TEXTS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO
*ABHIJNANA SHAKUNTALAM***

A Dissertation Submitted

To

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Degree of Master of Philosophy

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Declaration

I, **Ruksana Sharma Pokhrel**, hereby declare that the research work embodied in the dissertation titled “**Representation of Women in Ancient Texts with Special Reference to *Abhijnana Shakuntalam***” submitted to **Sikkim University** for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy**, is my original work. Any content or any part of this dissertation has not been submitted to any other institution or for any academic purposes.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For the reconstruction of ancient history, among many other sources written text has its own significant role to play. Among the text, literature provides an insight into the social, political, religious, economic condition of that period. History and literature are intangible and it has always been the work of the historian to comb out the elements of facts from literature. An item of literature, as a narrative, relates to history, not for what it says which is anyway fictional, but for what it might indicate as being historically significant.¹

There are various literary works which helps in reconstructing the history of India. They are available to us in different forms like Biographies, Chronicles, Epics, Genealogies, and Historical Literatures etc. Among the various literary works, Historical Literatures occupies a special place in providing valuable information of the past. Historical Literatures can be categorised as Lyrical Poems, Dramas and Plays on the basis of the nature of the narration and structure of the texts. Among other things, Dramas had their own specialties that attract the popular masses because of its visualizing ability to reflect the scenario of the prevalent society in the minds and hearts of the audiences. As such, *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* the Drama of Kalidasa is considered as one of the masterpiece of classical Sanskrit literature for

¹ Thapar, Romila. (1999). *Sakuntala Texts, Readings, Histories*. New Delhi: Kali for Women. p.01.

understanding the role of women in ancient history. It is believed to have been composed around the fourth-fifth century CE. This work of Kalidasa is translated into various European languages and is broadly characterized as ‘Dramatic Romances’². The significance of Kalidasa’s *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* lies in the fact that it has a collective concern and ideas of womanhood, gender and romance in contrast to other men centred prominent works of Kalidasa. It described about the dominant role played by women in enduring the pain hardship of love, union, separation and reunion. Also, apart from throwing light on other aspects, it gives an insight for the proper understanding of the gender relations and the contribution of women in the society. Basically, it is known that the narration in Kalidasa’s *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* is taken from the *Mahabharata*. In the *Mahabharata*, the narrative of Shakuntala occurs while tracing the ancestral legends of the Puru lineage in the Adi Parvan or “the book of the beginning”. The narrative of Shakuntala is told by Vaisampayana to Janamejaya, who in turn narrates it in the course of reciting the Epic on the occasion of a major sacrificial ritual. It is in the course of the story trying to trace the lineage of Bharata that the story of Shakuntala occurs. However, the mode of the representation of Shakuntala in the *Mahabharata* tends to vary from that of Kalidasa’s *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*. In the *Mahabharata* Shakuntala is not portrayed as a meek-obedient woman. Instead, Shakuntala is represented as a woman who sees herself in equal status with men. For instance, in the *Mahabharata* Shakuntala says ‘my birth is higher than yours, Dushyanta you walk on earth, great king but I fly the skies’. On the contrary, in the *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* she does not compare herself with the king in terms of her status. Also in the *Mahabharata*, Shakuntala’s origin is described in

² Dramatic Romances-It is a kind of drama whose aim is to present a tale or history in scenes, and whose plays are stories told in dialogue by actors in the stage.

detail. In Mahabharata Shakuntala describes in length about her birth, the condition upon which Menaka was sent by Indra in order to seduce Viswamitra, Viswamitra's austerity their union and finally abandoning the child by both the father and mother, on the other hand in the *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* she describes, why Kanva adopts her, as an abandoned child born of a deity and an apsara.

By and large the narration in Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* is divided into seven acts of play. However, to clearly understand the representation of women, it can be categorised into three sections. The first three sections of the play described Shakuntala as one of the common women of the forest in love with nature. This is indicated by the representation of Shakuntala as nurturing the plants of the forest along with her two fellow companions Anasuya and Priyamvada. Moreover, Shakuntala also figures as daughter and a lover in these sections. Along with such representation of women is the reference to man. This is shown by the introduction of King Dushyanta entering the forest for hunting. In short, these sections wrap up with the meeting of Shakuntala and Dushyanta with their union through the *Gandharva*³ form of marriage. However, embedded within this narration describing particularly about women of different character is the indirect references to specific tasks assigned to men and women as a social norm. The representations of Dushyanta as taking up the tasks of upholding the social norms of protection and Shakuntala with simple and lighter tasks of watering plants can be cited as points here.

³ Gandharva is one form of marriage by consent of two parties which might be solemnized merely by plighting truth. This form of marriage was often clandestine. The other forms of marriage are-Brahma, Daiva, Arsa, Prajapatya, Asura, Raksasa and Paicasa.

In the second section of the play which comprises the acts four to six, the mode of narration shifts in the representation of women from common to royal women. In these sections, attempts have been made to represent Shakuntala as a woman who belongs to the royal lineage. To mention it as a point, we see that major portions of the narrations in these sections narrate about Shakuntala being brought by Gautami (senior aesthetic in the hermitage) and other pupils of Kanva claiming Shakuntala as the legitimate wife of king Dushyanta. Similarly, the attempt to represent Shakuntala as a royal woman is also indicated when Shakuntala is being described as bearing the child of king Dushyanta in her womb. Apart from these, the other sides of the narrations in these sections do convey the message of pain and hardship that a woman faced on being abandoned by her near and dear ones. One of such instances is the reference which describes king Dushyanta refusing to recognize Shakuntala as his wife as Shakuntala fails to produce the ring to prove her words. Another instance was when Shakuntala was not accepted by Kanva's disciple as a family of Kanva on her return from the palace. At the same time Dushyanta and abandon her. However, the significance of the narrations in these sections is that in contrast to the first three sections it describes the plight of both men and the women. As in the case of Shakuntala, the pang of sorrows felt by Dushyanta on being desolated from Shakuntala after he recollects their memories from the ring carries similar representation.

The third section which consists the last part of the play not only highlights the union of two lovers but also the fair side of women that allows them to continue forward the lineage of a clan. To briefly describe, it is narrated that Dushyanta while returning from Indra's palace visits Marica's ashrama. In the ashrama he comes

across a strong boy sparked with fire, named as Sarvadamana bearing a mark of a king. Meanwhile, Dushyanta came to know that he is not an ordinary boy but his own son. One of the ascetics who were assigned to look after the child informed Shakuntala about the arrival of Dushyanta. With the consent of Marica and his wife Aditi both comes to know about the curse of Durvasa. Thus, Dushyanta is forgiven by Shakuntala and the family gets united.

Statement of Problem

Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* a historical text centred around the representation of women in the society, through Shakuntala. The text represents Shakuntala as a symbol of love, innocence, courage, hardship, and as women of a strong character. Through Shakuntala women's different stages of life as a being a daughter, a lover, wife and a mother is clearly depicted. This text is unique because of its representation of women embodying the different character of women into one woman. Through the text we come across the treatment of women by different individuals either be that a foster father or a husband, along with the impact of different institutions in the life of a woman which leads to her misery. The implied notions of gender differences can also be visible in the narration of the text. For instance, from the very beginning of the narration king Dushyanta is described as entering the forest for hunting and took up the task of protecting the hermitage from the evils as well. Such narration in some way or the other indicate about the division of labour based on gender marking the notions of men as 'capable' and women as 'incapable'. This is also evidenced by the representation of Shakuntala as delicate and meek which can be reflected from associating her with watering the plants instead of Dushyanta or any other men. But some form of parallel representation of men and

women can also be seen in between the lines of such narration when we are being told about the love Shakuntala and Dushyanta felt for each other. The text overall tries to highlight the stereotypical nature of Indian women. Another significance of this study is to understand the variation in the mode of representation of Shakuntala in the *Mahabharata* and Kalidasa's work. The differences between the two texts in representing Shakuntala can be evidenced from some of the instances describing about Shakuntala in stronger and lighter note. In the *Mahabharata* the references which described about Shakuntala's claimed to accept her son to Dushyanta in spite of his refusal to recognize her have more a stronger a note as compared to Kalidasa's work. Therefore, this research attempts to do an in depth study to understand the condition of women in a socio-economic and political sphere reflecting it from the written account of a well known work of Kalidasa.

Review of Literature

The work on Shakuntala was addressed by a number of historians in order to understand gender relations in general and the role and position of women in early society in particular. Some of the prominent works on gender issues has been done by Romila Thapar, Kumkum Roy, Uma Chakravarti, Sukumari Bhattacharji, Kunal Chakrabarti etc.

One of the important books regarding Shakuntala is Romila Thapar's *Shakuntala Texts, Readings, History (1999)*. This book gives a clear and a vivid idea about the representation of women in the play of Kalidasa *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*., The other main insight is the description about the origin of the text and the borrowing of the main theme from the Mahabharata. Along with it the way it has been plotted with the required changes has been able to give a clear insight into the origin

of the play. With this it has also been able to trace other stories where the general theme of the loss of the ring which brings a twist in the whole story has been described, motif and curse in the play has been discussed. Thapar's work includes the Colonial, Orientalist, and the Nationalist ideas and their approaches to understand/study the position of women in ancient India. However, this work of Thapar is merely a collection of essay largely in the nature of comment, firstly on the variant versions and then on the readings of Kalidasa's play. She fails to take into account the specific role of Shakuntala along with other women characters in the play which could have helped to understand the nature of women in that period.

Shakuntala had an origin in the epic *Mahabharata*, for the understanding of the representation of women in the *Mahabharata* Kelvin McGrath's work *Stri Feminine Power in the Mahabharata (2011)* helps to understand the position of feminine characters in the epic from Kunti to Draupadi, Shakuntala and Damayanti. He writes about how a son is given an importance in the society ignoring the importance of mother to bring him. Not a son but mother is the actual weaver of clan. How a marriage is different for men and women where a woman is needed to surrender her in marriage. It is Dushyanta who suggest Shakuntala the *Gandharva* form of marriage. She stress on the importance of truth, and the right and wrongs of the wife and husband.

Revisiting Abhijanana Shakuntalam edited by Saswati Sengupta and Deepika Tendon (2011) It is a compilation of various essays, keeping the story of Shakuntala as a central idea. This work consists of the work covering the various aspects of the story of Shakuntala. The book is divided into three sections, one of the essay in the first part have explored the story of Shakuntala in various other versions before Kalidasa's one. These essays have tried to find out the first source of Kalidasa's story

of Shakuntala. The second section of the book have kept the hero of the play as the central theme and looked upon the hero of the play that is Dushyanta from various aspects. In doing so, the representation of Dushyanta in kinship have been explored. The other part of the book have talked on the issues of love, marriage and family, under this section of the book the marriage between Dushyanta and Shakuntala through *Gandharva* form of marriage, is seen in the light of Dushyanta's hunt in the forest. The hunt is seen ironically, where it is for animals or for a women. One of the essay in this section also talks about the motherhood in *Abhijanana Shakuntalam*, where the different forms and nature of mothers are discussed ranging from Menaka, Gautami and Shakuntala.

Kumkum Roy in her work *The Power of Gender and the Gender of Power* (2010) which is a collection of essays highlights the elements of gender to understand the role and the contribution of women to the society. One of the essay named as the representation of gender relations in early India –exploring the plays of Kalidasa particularly talks about the gender relations in the play specifically the visual codes and the aural codes of representation. She explains in detail how the physical description in the plays like the language, gestures, attire helps to understand women and differentiate between men and women and their differences in attitude.

Barbara Stoler Miller's work *The Plays of Kalidasa Theater of Memory* (1999) helps to understand Kalidasa's works in detail. All the three plays (*Abhijnana Shakuntalam*, *Urvashi won by valour* and *Malavika Agnimitram*) of Kalidasa has been discussed in detail with an objective of understanding the three plays in the light of one another. Concerning with the play *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*, Miller has extensively worked from the translation to the study of the poet. Her works helps to understand the overall idea of the play from the historical considerations to the plot,

characters and also the achievement of the play. He had also explained in details the characteristic of the play.

Everyday lives, Everyday Histories beyond Kings and Brahmins of 'Ancient' India (2006) by Uma Chakravarti is a collection of essays which helped to understand the story of the margins especially the women's from outside the framework of brahmanical traditions. This works helps to see how women have been constituted in different time and space depending on the class and caste.

B.D. Chattopadhyaya and Kumkum Roy's edited work *Women in Early Indian Societies (2011)* is a collection of essays which helps to understand how women were represented by different nationalist scholars. The different sections in the book help to understand women from different perspectives. This book highlights the different notions of understanding the position of women in early India. While A.S Altekar argues that the women in the ancient India enjoyed a glorified position, Uma Chakravarti takes a different stand. She strongly criticized the limitations on the study of the earlier works which is studied taking into account the position of women within the family and not beyond the family. Also, how the nationalist had confined their sources entirely based on the brahmanical sources.

Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India, Gender, Caste, Class and State Uma Chakravarti,(1993) this article talks about the relationship between the caste and class hierarchy and how is it connected. In this article Uma Chakravarti talks about the relation between caste and gender, and its impact on the subordination of the women especially the upper caste women. In this essay we can find that Chakravarti has been able to move away from the regular question of the status of women, and have explored the basis of the subordination of women. In doing so she has extensively worked on various religious texts, and other literature of the period

available. In which she has been able to establish that the subordination of the women had its base in the various texts which were applied by the people in their day to day life. Her essay is divided into two sections where the first part of the essay have tried to locate the period from the hunting and gathering society while the second part talks from the agricultural economy. From this essay it is clearly known that the subordination of the women and the purity of caste were the two important aspect which was closely monitored by the society, especially the brahmanical society. And in this process in order to maintain the purity of the caste, women were dominated.

The recent work of Romila Thapar, *The Past as the Present Forging Contemporary Identities through History (2014)* presents an idea about the present condition of the society relating it with the past. The significance of the books is that apart from discussing various themes connected to history and historical writings, it throws new light connecting the issues and problems of women by bringing the element of past comparing with the present scenario.

The Creation of Patriarchy, (1986) Gerda Lenda puts up a historical context in order to explain women's subordination. The sources for the book are largely derived from the Mesopotamian sources. Lerner's work throws light into how the centuries old subordination of women had led to the creation of patriarchy. The denial of women to religion and education slowly led to cut off of women from history making. The denial to women of their history has reinforced their acceptance of the ideology of patriarchy.⁴ Starting from the prehistoric period Lenda had established that how the biological differences between the men and women led to the first division of labour, where the women preferred those economic activities which could be easily combined

⁴ Lerner, Gerda. (1986). *The Creation of Patriarchy*. New York: Oxford University Press. p. 223.

with their motherly duties. It was not the biological differences but also the various institutions which led to the subordination of the women, like the Patrilocality. Her works also highlights that the subordination of the women began from an early law in the Hamurabi code of law, where the codification began with the institutionalization of the patriarchal family as an aspect of state power.

Objectives

The objectives of this research is

- To study Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* as a historical text.
- To understand the representation of women in Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*.
- To examine the differences and similarities between the *Mahabharata* and Kalidasa's version of narration.

Methodology

The methodology to conduct this research is a critical study of the selected historical text. The socio-economic and political background of the author will also be taken into account and will be carefully examine. The research will also critically analyse and study the text alongside other contemporary texts. Therefore, a comparative method of studying the text in parallel with the other relevant texts of the period will be followed.

The primary sources for the research are Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* and the *Mahabharata*. Here, both the Sanskrit version of *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* and various translated versions will be used. The secondary sources include the works done by various eminent persons, published in the forms of books, articles and journals.

Tentative Chapterization

Chapter I: Introduction

This chapter will deal with the framework of the study, scope, statement of the problem, literature review, objectives and methodology of the study.

Chapter II: Studying *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* as a historical text.

This chapter will study *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* as a historical text. It will look into the nature, structure, narration, language and different terms used in the text.

Chapter III: Role and Status of Women in the Text

This chapter will focus on the role played by women. Here, the main protagonist Shakuntala will primarily represent the various roles played by women on the one hand while on the other hand attempt also will be made to locate different other characters of women represented in the text.

Chapter IV: Studying the Character of *Shakuntala* in the *Mahabharata* version and Kalidasa's Play

This chapter will compare and contrast the nature of representing *Shakuntala* in the Epic (*Mahabharata*) and in the Kalidasa's Play. In doing so, it will also try to find out the similarities and differences in the mode of narration.

Chapter V: Conclusion

The concluding chapter will critically summarize the important role and contribution of women reflected in the Sanskrit literature in general and Kalidasa's work *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* in particular.

CHAPTER II

STUDYING *ABHIJNANA SHAKUNTALAM* AS A HISTORICAL TEXT

Abhijnana Shakuntalm is one of the most celebrated texts. It is considered as the masterpiece of classical Sanskrit literature, translated into various European languages. It is believed to be composed in an around the fourth to fifth century CE in India during the Gupta period. The origin of Classical Sanskrit Indian drama can be traced long before the Gupta period. But the Gupta period saw the rise of many authors and their literary works. Most literary compositions traditionally placed during the Gupta period are complex, multilayered works that display and play with conflicting philosophies of life and art. It was during the Gupta period that drama seems to have emerged as a sophisticated form of public literature.¹ Drama represents a generalized view of the world and the actions of the persons divested of particularities of the character; it does not deal with the individuals and their specific situations and emotions. The chief goal of drama is to produce *rasa*,² the aesthetic emotion, evoked by the appropriate mood built cumulatively through not only words, but also by mimes and gestures, music and dance, costume and jewellery. Sanskrit drama is therefore the blend of many elements.³

¹Miller, B. S. (1999).*The Plays of Kalidasa*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarididass Publishers Private limited. p.13.

²*Rasa*- Indian heroic romances represents human emotions in order to lead the audience in a state of extraordinary pleasure and insight. The goal of the Sanskrit drama is to establish emotional harmony among the audience by exploring the conflict of feelings of the existence. The manifestation of the relations produces the intense aesthetic experiences called *rasa*.

³Chandra, Rajan.(2002).*The complete work of Kalidasa*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi. p . 62.

The majority of information from Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* is about women. As a result, the central portion of the text deals with women. The most important feature of *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* is a proper fusion of the ideas of gender, womanhood, and romance on a whole. Also, among the various other male centric works of Kalidasa and even of the other works of the period *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* is successful in providing the hardship of women in a society, especially as being a daughter, an unrecognized or a discarded wife, and a mother of a son. It is not only the hardship that is depicted in the text but also the privileges and the source of satisfaction being enjoyed by a woman over a period of time. The simple life of women, their innocent playfulness, their frankness of their minds, and above all their sincere nature also forms an important part of the narration in the text. Moreover, from the text one can establish the contribution of woman towards the family and the society. *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* aims at giving a realistic picture of life of the people in a more marked degree.⁴ However, it is not only the account of women that is provided in text, the role and contribution of men also forms an important part of the narration.

Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* being one of the important literary works is represented in the form of Drama. It is said that the main characteristics of the classical Sanskrit drama is that the theme may have been taken from the well known epics, invented or may be a combination of the two. The story of Shakuntala is believed to have been taken by Kalidasa from the *Mahabharata*.

⁴Kale, M.R. (1969). *The Abhijnana Shakuntalam of Kalidasa*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass. p. 53.

Some of the scholars have held that the epic story is the source, much altered, for the play. Others have found Kalidasa's source in the Padmapurana. The most conspicuous proponent of the latter view is of M. Winternitz whose chief argument is that the Padmapurana story of Shakuntala is very close in detail to Kalidasa's plot, while the epic version is rather unlike both, and that consequently Kalidasa must have borrowed from the *Purana* and not from the epic. It is, however, made clear by Sarma that the Anandasrama edition of the Padmapurana does not contain the Shakuntala episode.⁵ A close examination between the epic and Kalidasa's version shows a divergence in the language and the structure but there is a remarkable closeness in its plot. Apart from Winternitz and Sarma, then, scholars generally hold the view that Kalidasa took his plot from the Shakuntala episode of the epic, making very radical changes in it to adapt it to his dramatic purposes.⁶

According to M.B Emereau, One text has borrowed from the other, and considering the chronological priority of our critically established *Mahabharata* text to Kalidasa, we must conclude that Kalidasa has borrowed from the *Mahabharata*.⁷

Romila Thapar asserts that the earliest narration occurs in the epic, the *Mahabharata*, in the form of *Kavya*/ poetry. An expanded treatment of the narrative is

⁵Emeneau, M. B. (1962). *Kalidasa's Sakuntala and the Mahabharata*. American Oriental Society. p. 41.

⁶*Ibid*, p. 41.

⁷*Ibid*, p. 44.

best known in the play, *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* by Kalidasa which, although it borrows the story from the epic, nevertheless differs from it significantly.⁸

B S Miller argues that the *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* belongs to the nataka category, and a nataka is characterized chiefly by its subject matter: a “well-known” story, invariably epic, involving a suitable hero and opposite action.⁹ The characteristic of well known story, invariably epic suggest that Kalidasa’s version of Shakuntala being borrowed from epic that is *Mahabharata*.

T. G Mannikar in his work *Kalidasa his Art and Thought* writes that before Kalidasa, the story was given in the *Mahabharata*, the Padmapurana and a pretty similar story occurs in the Buddhist *Katthari Jataka*. The Buddhist story resembles the *Mahabharata* story and the Padmapurana appears to be a mixture of *Mahabharata* and the poet’s account, while Kalidasa goes to pick the story from *Mahabharata*.¹⁰ Therefore, it is generally accepted that Kalidasa had borrowed the story of Shakuntala from *Mahabharata*, and improved it with his artistic qualities along with the additions of some new features as per the need of the period.

Apart from the general perception of treating Kalidasa’s *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* as a Drama, it is also considered as one of the important historical text that provides useful historical information. It is an item of literature, as a narrative, relates to history,

⁸Thapar, R. (1999). *Sakuntala Texts, Readings, Histories*. New Delhi: Kali for Women. p. 5.

⁹Miller, B. S. (1999). Op.cit. p. 43.

¹⁰Mainkar, T. G. (1962). *Kalidasa His Art and Thought*, Poona: Deshmukh Prakashan. p. 142.

not for what it says which is anyway fictional but for what it might indicate as being historically significant.¹¹

As mentioned, the text is a complete package of history, literature, gender and culture. It has been established that the text *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* was composed during the Gupta period in the form of a drama. It is said that Kalidasa is associated with the great moments of Gupta period. Kalidasa is always taken as a court poet because of the frequent mention of court life in his works, where the main protagonist in all his works is always a king, but the king who patronized him is still unknown and is a debatable issue among the various scholars. The basic argument is itself circuitous, in that Kalidasa is associated with the Gupta period in order to prove the theory of its being the 'Golden age'.¹²

In addition to the representation of the women in Kalidasa's narration it also reflects the time period of the text. The historical information provided to us about the Gupta period as a period of brahmanical revival, the production of fine works of Sanskrit literature, political unification, royal land grants, and the decline in the position of women is supported by the work of Kalidasa. The Gupta Empire signified a distinct revival of Brahmanism and a reassertion of Indian nationality as opposed to the somewhat cosmopolitan Kushan regime, under which Buddhism was decidedly in chief favour.¹³ Far from criticising brahmanical social thought, Kalidasa creates a poetic milieu in which

¹¹Thapar, Romila. (1999). Op. cit. p.42.

¹²*Ibid*, p.46.

¹³Keith, A. Berriedale. (2010). *A History of Sanskrit Literature*. Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited. Delhi: pp.74-75.

the brahmanical world view forms the basis of the idealized life.¹⁴ Various instances can be picked up from the text where it indicates the impact of brahmanical influences and ideology in the society. The establishment of the ashramas in the outskirts, where the Brahmins were indulged in Vedic learning and recitation, the air was filled with smoke issuing from sacrificial fires into which the brahmanas constantly offer oblations are found.

From the text we can pick up the forms of government that existed and their political activities. The fourth century was a period of well established monarchies with their appurtenances of administration, revenue, and coercive agencies.¹⁵ The period witnessed the emergence of the strong monarchy where the divine rights of the king were recognized.

Kalidasa, no doubt thought that he was writing the historical and so perhaps the authors of the Smritis, but they are now read as a 'fact' by some and as a 'fiction' by others. If literature includes much factual writing, it also excludes quite a lot of fiction. If literature is 'creative' or 'imaginative' writing, does that imply that history, philosophy and natural science are uncreative and unimaginative.¹⁶

Generally, the king was the supreme head of the state, with his power in the centre. Kalidasa in his *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* portrayed Dushyanta was the head of the state, a monarchical head, a king who was not only the supreme head of the state but also

¹⁴Bisgaard, Daniel James. (1994). *Social Conscience in Sanskrit Literature*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited. p. 21.

¹⁵Thapar Romila.(1999). Op. cit, p. 48.

¹⁶Ortner, Sherry B. (1972). Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?. *Feminist Studies*. p. 2.

the protector of the state and its people. We can find the instances in the text, where the king is asked by the pupils of the Kanva's ashrama to protect the ashramas from the demons. "Demons are taking advantage of the sage Kanva's absence to harass us. You must come with your charioteer to protect the hermitage for a few days."¹⁷ Royal Lands were granted to the brahmanas as a form of gift, and land was considered as best form of gift. Villages granted to brahmanas were known as Agraharas, Brahmadeyas or Shasanas. There was an increase in the land grants from the fourth century. The asrama is an incipient Agrahara settlement of the brahmanas on land donated by the king.¹⁸ In the post Gupta period settlement such as the Agraharas became powerful nuclei and network of upper caste culture and learning.¹⁹ Some of the land donated was of waste land so that the brahmana settlement also functioned to open up to cultivation and to Sanskritic culture. The ashrama with its self contained activities suggest a parallel with an Agrahara.²⁰ There is a clear assertion that land gifted by the kings to the brahmanas should be tax free. King Dushyanta in the text refuses to collect the taxes from the ashrama when suggest by the buffoon. "Aren't you the king? Collect a sixth of their wild rice as tax! These ascetic pay tribute that pleases me more than mounds of jewels."²¹ Dushyanta apart from protecting the land and people was also entrusted with the task of

¹⁷Miller, B.S. (1999). Op. cit. p. 108.

¹⁸Thapar, Romila.(1999). Op.cit. p. 49.

¹⁹*Ibid*, p.49.

²⁰*Ibid*, p. 49.

²¹Miller, B. S. Op. cit.p. 107.

providing justice. The king even acts as a judicial head. “You punish villains with your rod of justice, you reconcile disputes, and you grant protection.”²²

The form of governance was a hierarchical one where the court of the king forms the apex in the hierarchy followed by other forms. Along with this one of the major needs of the dynastic rule was the succession of the throne by his offspring. We can see in the text that king Dushyanta directly or indirectly was in need of a son who could handle the throne. We can find a number of instances in the text where the need of the son as a successor is mentioned.

When we see into the relationship between the text and the society we find a close link between the two. A text is always a replica of the society, where the happenings of the society are jolted down by the authors. Kalidasa himself is placed during the Gupta rule in India, and his works obviously can be placed during the period of Guptas in India. The sense of the world that one get from Kalidasa’s works is consonant with historical, geographical, and linguistic factors supporting the Indian tradition that associates the poet with the Gupta monarch Candra Gupta II, who ruled most of northern India around the early 4th century AD.²³ When we talk about Society the different aspects and different elements that make up the society can be looked upon.

From the initial narration of the text we can see that the importance of various relation and family ties. The whole account in the initial narration in itself is the search and the struggle for a family to get united, the societal need where a father needs a son in

²²*Ibid*, p. 135.

²³*Ibid*, p. 9

order to take the lineage of the family, where a wife needs a husband for a social recognition, and for her son to be recognized. Apart from these the relation of a daughter and a father though a foster has been depicted properly. For instance, the members of the Kanva's ashrama were represented like a family member to Shakuntala.

When we talk about social elements in the text one of the most important pieces that pops up is the idea of patriarchal society. A male dominated society can be taken as a synonym of a patriarchal society, where the subjugation of the women is a necessary criterion. A family in such a society is always headed by the male member, where his voice is louder than the other female member of the family. One of such instances, the instances is the reference to Kanva who is the head of the ashrama and not Gautamai, despite of her seniority in the ashrama.

The other major institution of society which is visible in the text is marriage. In the text the marriage between king Dushyanta and Shakuntala is the only marriage which has been mentioned. Among the eight form of marriage they tie their knot with the *Gandharva* form of marriage. The *ĀśvalāyanaGr̥hyasūtra* states that in the *Gandharva* marriage man and women entered into contract, approach each other.²⁴ *Gandharva* form of marriage and the *Swayambara*²⁵ which is also a type of marriage has some similarities. The *Swayambara* form of marriages does not fall into the category of marriages laid down in Sutras and Smritis. However, the *Swayamvara* form of marriage was stated in

²⁴Sharma.N.N. (1997).*Āśvalāyana Gr̥hya sūtram*. New Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers. p. 16.

²⁵*Swayambara*- it was a special form of marriage and was a marriage of self choice. The law book lay down that if a girl is not married by her parents soon after the age of puberty she may choose her own husband.

the Dharmasatrastra as practically the Gandharva form of marriage²⁶. In both the marriages that is the *Swayambara* and *Gandharva*, the girl has the freedom to choose her own husband.

Another interesting information we get from *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* is extensive description of nature. The depiction of the nature begins from the beginning of the narration, in the benediction itself the five important elements i.e. air, water, space, earth and fire is mentioned. The beginning of the narration opens with the hunting scene which is plotted in the forest, which is led by the hunt of an antelope. As Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* is accounted in the form of a Drama, it personifies the ideas and aspects of nature and makes them part of the dramatic persona. Looking from the point of Drama/play, except for the act five, the whole narration in the text has its setting amidst nature. Natural elements like rivers, deer, wild rice, grass, trees, creepers, flowers, etc. are described in detail. The fifth act has the scenes of the royal court of Dushyanta at Hastinapur. Shakuntala is the daughter of nature. Nature is like a mother to her and has a close affectionate about every creeper, tree and every sprout. It is not only that Shakuntala is affectionate about the nature but in return the nature had the same affectionate back for her.

The other aspect regarding the description of the nature in the text is that, everything including human is compared with natural entities. In the text, Shakuntala is

²⁶ Kane, P.V. (1941). *History of the Dharmasastra*. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute. p. 523.

compared with various natural entities. One such instance is-“Shakuntala- her lips are fresh red buds, her arms are tendrils.”²⁷ Also, the marriage between two humans is seen between the twining of jasmine tree with the mango tree. The relationship between the nature and human runs hand in hand, where both are needed by each other in their daily life. We can also see that the nature is always subjugated by the humans. One form of subjugation was hunting. In *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*, Dushyanta is introduced as a hunter and hunting is one important event which led Dushyanta into the forest, where he meets Shakuntala, which paves the way for the story. Hunting among the *Kshatriyas* was taken as a form of sport. And also skill in hunting would have been the mark of leadership in the primitive societies.²⁸ Hunting is retained in *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* as a powerful symbol of masculinity and the hunter’s body is described as light, manly, ready for action.²⁹ Hunting can also be seen as a caste specific. For the *Kshatriyas*³⁰ it is a sport, while for the low positioned caste like *Vyadhas* and *Kiratas* it was an occupation.

A text is much more than a written, linguistic phenomenon. Contrary to most of the objects of many of the sciences, a text is produced by humans, and as a human- made

²⁷Miller, B S. (1999). Op. cit. p.95.

²⁸Saswati, Sengupta and Tandon, Deepika (ed). (2011). *Revisiting Abhijanana Sakuntalam Love Lineage, and Language in Kalidasa’s Nataka*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan. p. 5.

²⁹*Ibid*, p. 5.

³⁰*Kshatriyas*- Sanskrit tern for men belonging to the second category of the fourfold Varna order, increasingly used from the mid- first millennium BCE onward. Their duty included protecting the people, collecting taxes and tribute, and administering justice.

object it is radically informed by all the forces that condition and shape our societies and histories.³¹

Regarding the time period of the *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*, it was during fourth to fifth century C.E. when the Gupta rule flourished in India which formed the background for the play *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*. The Gupta period which is also known as the ‘Golden Period’ in the history of India for many reasons and one among them is that it witnessed the revival of Sanskrit language, arts and literature flourished. Various works like the *Narada*, *Vishnu*, *Brihaspati* and *Katyayana Smritis*, along with *Kamasutra* and the *Amarakosha*, were produced during the Gupta period. Epics and major Puranas were also given final shape in this period. Kalidasa’s *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* is considered as the masterpiece of Sanskrit literature. It is a perfect blend of romance and fairy tale with elements of comedy. The fine quality of its form is also one of the important aspects to make *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* a popular and a perfect item of literature. The fine quality of the play in terms of language, and structure, and the evocations of masterly metaphors, it is not surprising that it has always been held as an exemplar of Sanskrit drama.³²

Kalidasa’s *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* we can see that he strictly follows and illustrates the essentials of the theory presented by Bharata in his *Natyasastra*³³. The

³¹ Veenstra, Jan R. (1995). *The New Historicism of Stephen Greenblatt: On Poetics of Culture and the Interpretation of Shakespeare Source: History and Theory. Wiley for Wesleyan University*.p. 177.

³²Thapar, Romila. (1999). *Op.cit.* p. 60.

³³*Natyasastra* is an ancient Indian treatise on theatre, dance, music and performance arts, which is believed to have been composed in between 200 BC and 200 AD (although the exact dates have not been ascertained). The authorship is also debated, and even though the work is

Natyasastra of Bharata is generally considered to be a compilation of settled traditions rather than an authored work and roughly contemporaneous with Kalidasa.³⁴ The theorists recognize at least eight stages of *rasa* and ten modes, or genres, of representation which are universal to animate a play. Among the ten genres, the *Nataka* is chiefly characterized by its subject matter: a well-known story, invariably epic, involving a suitable hero and opposite action. It must be treated fully, that is, in at least five acts, but not prolixly, not exceeding ten. Its dominant *rasa* can be only being the erotic (*srngarasa*) or the heroic (*virarasa*).

As per these principles *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* is derived from a well known epic that is *Mahabharata*. The text which is accounted in the form of a play is divided into seven acts with which it fulfills the other criterion of *Nataka* which is not less than five acts and not more than ten acts. In the context of the third criterion that is *rasa* B. S. Miller writes –Kalidasa’s plays focuses on the critical tension between desire and duty that is aesthetically manifest in the relation of the erotic sentiment (*srngarasa*) to the heroic(*virarasa*). Therefore, it can be counted in the *nataka* model.

Abhijnana Shakuntalam starts with a general introduction of the drama and also of the characters and their nature, their background and their family. It is structured in such a way that it makes it a play of excellence. The text begins with a prologue and is

attributed to Bharata, scholars are of the opinion that more than one person is responsible for the authorship of this complex treatise.

³⁴Miller, B.S. (1999). Op. cit. p. 20.

followed by seven acts. Each and every act is divided into several scenes. We can find connectivity in each and every act.

The communication among the *dramatis personae* is dialogic and not narrative.³⁵ In the text we can see that the mode of narration is dialogue in form, and also with lyrical verses. All the characters speak of own, and are assigned with their specific lines. It is the first person who speaks the lines. This makes the text lively one and gives the impact that it is real happening and not a staged one. When we see the communication between the characters, their dialogues are lyrical at times. When king enters the ashrama, king finds out that the grove is an ashrama and he describes it as-“Don’t you see-wild rice grains under trees where parrots nest in hollow trunks, stones stained by the dark oil of crushed Ingudi nuts, trusting deer who hear human voices yet don’t break their gait, and paths from pods streaked by water from wet bark cloth.”³⁶ According to Rimmon Kenan- Narrative is omnipresent. It can be verbal or non-verbal, true or untrue, realistic or unrealistic, fictional or non-fictional, and literary or non-literary.

Abhijnana Shakuntalam’s central theme as mentioned earlier is the treatment of the central figure that is a woman. It is from the text that we can come across the treatment of women in a male dominated patriarchal society. Through the text we can come to know about the position of women in the society, their struggle for an identity. The title of the play, *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*, itself has the theme hidden in it.

³⁵Saswati, Sengupta and Tandon, Deepika .(ed). (2011). Op. cit. p. 3.

³⁶Miller, B.S. (1999). Op. cit. p. 93.

Etymologically *Abhigyana* means “Recognition”. Thus translated into English the title means “Recognition Shakuntala”.

Rabindranath Tagore has explained this theme of Love in Kalidasa’s *Shakuntala*: “Kalidasa has shown that while infatuation leads to failure beneficence achieves complete Fruition, that beauty is constant only when upheld by virtue, that the highest form of love is the tranquil, controlled and beneficent form, that in regulation lies the true charm and lawless excess, the speedy corruption of beauty. He refuses to acknowledge passion as the supreme glory of love; he proclaims goodness as the final goal of love”.³⁷

The sub-theme introduced in the text is a major addition by Kalidasa as compared to the epic. The introduction of the two motifs of the curse and the signet ring changes the course of the narration and also adds some twist and turns. It is with the help of these motifs that the idea of the separation of the lovers is witnessed for a brief period of time. The idea of separation is essential in order to make the union of the lovers a joyful, ultimate and satisfactory event in the text. The love and the trust among the lovers are determined by a materialist thing that is a ring. In the first act of the text the ring is actually offered as a pledge to Shakuntala’s companion, then as a token of love to Shakuntala which she loses and is later discovered by a fisherman. It is that token of love which solves all the problems where the memory and the ring are closely associated. The

³⁷Singh, Neeti. (2014). A reading of Kalidasa’s *Abhijanana Shakuntalam* as a Cultural Text. *The Vedic Path: A quarterly English Journal of Gurukul Kangri Vishwavidlaya*. p. 4.

concept of the signet ring becomes a fashionable with the coming of the Yavanas- the Indo Greeks- and those associated with the Mediterranean trade.³⁸

The concept of the signet ring and its theme is familiar in other texts – Sita recognizing the signet ring of Rama in the *Ramayana*, and it's even more central role in the play by Vishakadatta, the *Mudrarakasa*.³⁹ The use of the token ring in a story is well known and occurs in many folk tales as well as other narratives.⁴⁰ The idea of borrowing the concept of the signet ring into a known story is to create a subplot. There is the possibility of borrowing the signet ring by Kalidasa into the story from the *katthahari-Jataka*, or that it may have come from the common source of an oral tradition.⁴¹

As far as the structure of the text is concerned, *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* can be studied by dividing it into three sections; the categorization can also be made as according to the theme narrated in the text i.e. the union, separation, and the re-union. The first section of the text can be seen by bringing the first three acts together, where we can find the introduction of the main protagonist of the narration. Shakuntala is introduced as a common woman of the forest, where she is seen as nurturing and taking care of the plants. While on the other hand Dushyanta is introduced as a man of power who hunts in the forest, who is entrusted with the task of protecting the people and the forest. On a whole, in this section Shakuntala and Dushyanta meets up, gets united with the *Gandharva* form of marriage. The union of the lovers by the *Gandharva* form of

³⁸Thapar, Romila. (1999). Op.cit. p. 54.

³⁹*Ibid*, p.54.

⁴⁰*Ibid*, p.56.

⁴¹*Ibid*, p.56.

marriage is only after the mutual love. The union is gradual and not a rush development of love cumulating into marriage. This section of the text gives rise to series of events which are of great interest, it is a series of happenings that begins immediately with the introduction and which leads to the other stage that is the climax.

The other section of the text engulfs in itself the fourth, fifth and the sixth acts. Here we can see that Shakuntala is deeply in love with Dushyanta, where Shakuntala is tried to be brought into the domain of royal family. It is in this section of the text that the concept of rejection is established by Kalidasa. The second main theme of the text that is the separation is well established here. The seed of separation is sown in the beginning of the fourth act, which takes its shape in this entire section. Various sub plots which are of great interest changes the courses of the text is been established here. The section highlights the pain and hardship that Shakuntala undergoes when she is being rejected by the man with whom she is married, where her image and her innocence is being contaminated by Dushyanta's words. Shakuntala faces rejection not only from Dushyanta's side but also from her own family's side, when she is left alone in the court of Dushyanta. This part of the text is the most important part since the entire events that are of great interest which leads to the climax is based here. It is the core element in the text.

The third section of the text consists of the last act of the narration. Here we can see that Dushyanta and Shakuntala are united through a series of events leading from the invitation that Dushyanta receives from lord Indra, to the identification of son by the father and the clearance of the curse upon Shakuntala.

In the text we can find a connectivity, continuation and similarities in every act and scenes. There is a close similarity in the construction of the first two and the last two acts. In the first act- king enters the hermitage of Kanva with a throbbing in his right arm and meets Shakuntala. In the seventh act also the king enters the hermitage of Marica, experiences the throbbing in his right arm and reunites with Shakuntala. In the second and the sixth act the king and his friend Vidusaka talks about Shakuntala. In both these acts the king is eager to meet Shakuntala. At the end of the second act the sages comes with a request which help him to meet Shakuntala. And the end of the sixth act also Matali comes with a request which helps the king to reunite with Shakuntala.

The broad framework of the play, shows a close-knit symmetry, through the acts differs to a great extend in many other ways. The sentiment, the background, the situation, etc. are not similar, but the structural arrangement of the play is no doubt a conscious effort.⁴²

The second and the sixth acts are the acts of great importance. In the first act, the lovers come to see each other and there is hardly any conversation between them. In the third act they meet and are spiritually united. The second act stands between the two acts. In the fifth act they are separated and in the seventh act they are united. Here the sixth act stands between the fifth and the seventh act. In the second and the sixth acts, which thus mediate, we have a delineation of the king's feelings.

A proper analysis of the whole text reveals that the second and the sixth acts are indispensable. Without the second act, the union between Dushyanta and Shakuntala

⁴²Kale, M.R. (1969). Op. cit. p. 74.

would appear to be impelled by sense and without proper scrutinization of each other's feelings. To bring out Dushyanta's nobility and restrained passion, the second act is absolutely necessary. Between the separation and there-union, some longer, effective scene must intervene to suggest the gap of time, and hence the sixth act is essential. It makes us familiar with the innermost recesses of Dushyanta's heart in remorse. The second act justifies the union in the third act and the sixth act justifies the re-union in the seventh act.⁴³

The major part of the narration in the text is divided into two locations the ashrama and the royal court. The ashrama represents the forest which is natural, out of the direct control of any governing body, a free and wild. The other location is the royal court which has been disciplined, ordered and settled properly. The two different locations also serves their own functions-the ashrama provides the context for the *Srngararasa* and becomes the location of love in union and the royal court serves the location for *Virarasa* that is of separation. In the text the ashramas of Kanva as well as Marica serves the purpose of the union of the lovers and the royal court of Dushyanta serves the purpose of the separation of the lovers.

One of the important feature of the text is that it has introduced several 'worlds' beginning from the hermitage which is innocent and full of lives, forest and a sense of belongings towards nature. The second world is the royal court, the mythic palace of Indra, and finally the hermitage of Marica and Aditi. Different 'worlds' that are seen in

⁴³*Ibid.* p.75.

the play are the 'Green World' of nature in the forest and hermitages, the 'Gilded world' of the royal court, the mythic regions, the 'Golden world' of the parents of the universe, Marica and Aditi.⁴⁴ It is in these worlds that the action of the text revolves.

Talking in terms of different 'worlds' two different types of worlds are described by Kalidasa in the context of the origin of Shakuntala. Shakuntala who is born of an *Apsara*⁴⁵ is said to belong from different world. Here it is generally believed that the celestial beings like the *Apsaras, Gandharvas*,⁴⁶ are believed to be from the different world and on the other hand the human beings from different worlds. The images of heaven and earth are frequently jotted down by Kalidasa, of earth as women; women as fertile source of power- are as typical of Kalidasa as the theme of abandonment and restoration.

One of the most important elements in a narration of the text is the mode of communication in which the language serves the main purpose. The text is voiced through two primary languages, Sanskrit and Prakrit.⁴⁷ In the text, the king, his advisors, the asthetic speaks Sanskrit, the language of the elite while all the women, the Vidusaka

⁴⁴Chandra, Rajan.(2002). Op. cit. p. 32.

⁴⁵*Apsara*- In the Vedic times they were connected with water, but later translated to heaven. They were beautiful and libidinous and were especially designated in tempting ascetics in their meditations. They were the female counterparts of the gandharvas.

⁴⁶*Gandharvas*- The Gandharvas survived from the Vedic times as a servants of Indra and were heavenly musicians The Gandharvas were all male.

⁴⁷*Prakrit*- it is a term derived from Sanskrit word *Prakrit*, meaning "natural," used to designate several languages and dialects. Prakrit was used in inscriptions, being gradually replaced by Sanskrit and regional languages. It was also a language of literary compositions.

and the minor character such as the fisherman speak different forms of Prakrit. Sanskrit being deemed as the ‘classical language’ of India and also regarded as the official language during the Gupta period in India, enjoyed the superiority among the various other languages and also can be accepted as the language of the privileged class. During the Gupta period, it was promoted as the courtly language of the literature and official communications, such as inscriptions on monuments, land- grant plates, seals and coins. The widespread use of Sanskrit is at least partially responsible for the term “classical Age” that it is given to the Gupta period.⁴⁸ It is generally believed that the tradition of literary writings in India began when Sanskrit was employed as a language of the court and learned men, unlike the earlier tradition where access to Sanskrit was reserved for a particular section of the society and was used predominantly in connection with the liturgy of Vedic rituals.⁴⁹ Sanskrit functioned as a communicative medium that was restricted both in terms of who was permitted to make use of the language and which purposes the language could sub serve.⁵⁰ In most of the early literary works like Drama or Kavya, men of the upper classes speaks in Sanskrit, but the women and men of the lower classes speaks various forms of Prakrit, proving thereby that the distinctions which arouse in the forms of speech of the people were due to their social status, sex and locality.

The artistic qualities of Kalidasa lies in the fact that though Sanskrit being the popular and the dominant language of the period, Kalidasa not only in dramas but also in

⁴⁸Miller B.S. (1999). Op.cit. p.22.

⁴⁹Sheldon, Pollock. (2007). Op. cit. p. 39.

⁵⁰*Ibid*, p. 45.

poetry integrated Sanskrit as well as the widely spoken language that is Prakrit which means “original” or “natural”.

The growing popularity of Prakrit was mainly due to the patronage of the Buddhist and Jains, Sanskrit from the ancient times faced continuous challenges, the most significant of this was Buddhism, which remained strong through the Gupta period,⁵¹ which gave a temporary setback to Sanskrit. In the literary field, Prakrit did not enjoy the same status of Sanskrit and was neglected. It became a secondary language for the secondary characters. The most widely accepted etymology of Prakrit current in India treats the name as detaching derivative, the primary source of Prakrit being the Sanskrit. Another view reverses the position; Prakrit is what comes at once from nature, what all people without special instruction can easily understand and use.⁵² Prakrit is simpler than Sanskrit both in sound and also in grammar.

As such, we see that language was not only a medium of communication but denoted some forms of social hierarchy, among the society. The mixture of language represents the multilingual nature of Indian society, where the contrasting languages have served to define layers of the social hierarchy.⁵³ Social status of a person could be easily understood with the use of language in their day to day life. Talking about the social hierarchy among the people on the basis of language, only the men of the higher class who were educated fell on the first rank while the rest fall on the other rank. The second rank consisted of all the other remaining persons of the society including the women of

⁵¹Miller ,B.S. (1999). Op. cit. 23.

⁵²Keith,A. Berriedale. (2010). Op. cit. p. 15.

⁵³Miller, B. S. (1999). Op. cit. p. 24.

the high born class. The women of the high born class were in similar position with the people of the lower class in the terms of the use of the language. These indicate that Kalidasa used Prakrit in conventional ways as verbal signs of gender and social rank.

In the *Abhijana Shakuntalam* language and gender are closely linked and related. B Stoler Miller writes that Kalidasa used various Prakrits in conventional ways as verbal signs of gender and social rank, but he also used them to complicate and enrich the verbal expressions of complex psychological states.

Stoler Miller notes that the role of gesture is paramount in the *Shakuntala*: “Kalidasa’s plays, so rich in verbal images, depend on gesture for the full expression of their texts. In the first meeting of Sakuntala and Dusyanta, the heroine barely speaks...While [the king’s] verbal poetry is being presented; the heroine represents her responses through gesture and dance, visually expressing the text through her movements.⁵⁴ Gestures are made up of both natural and conventional movements.

Abhijnana Shakuntalam has a main plot and a sub-plot. The main plot is concerned with the hero and heroine of the text whereas the subplot is concerned with the act. The hero and the heroine of the text represent two different angles. Hero or the main actor in the text is a king and his is the culture of townsmen. The poet’s perception of the kingship can be clearly seen in the character of the main actor or the hero who is the king. In *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*, king Dushyanta seems to have been portrayed as being physically strong, martially strong and spiritually too, the one who has the power to control the conflict between desire and duty.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p. 27.

Similarly, the main heroine in the text is also not a common lady, but of born of high status. She is the daughter of a great sage and an *Apasara* and the child of the Ashrama. She is seen in the text as a woman of high stature with beauty, innocence, and a woman having a self respect and the one who can stand of her own.

It is through the hero and the heroine in the text that the poet has tried to establish the two different strata in a region. The region from where the king come the palace which can be said to be urbanized and also a man made which a centre of governance with a king to rule has accompanied by the ministers, magistrates along with the security to guard that is the police, the place which is resided by tax collectors. Whereas the heroine of the text belongs to the place which is natural in its nature, where everything is original, free not being controlled. It is the places where the rishis or the learned men resided, who were religiously disciplined and produced the men to rule the empire. Therefore, it can be argued that patriarchal ideologies project “nature” as feminized and “culture” as masculine. Where nature is passive and culture, authoritative.⁵⁵

In finding out the audiences for whom was this piece composed for, the discussions laid down by various historians have established that Kalidasa was a court poet in the court of the Gupta and obviously the text was composed for the court audiences. The text was intended to be performed. The play which was composed for the entertainment of the people theme is then organized into acts called as *ankas*, ranging from four to ten.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Ortner, Sherry B. (1972). Op. cit. p. 7.

⁵⁶ V. Raghavam. (1967) . Op. cit. p. 39.

According to Romila Thapar the play was intended for performance, not for recitation, and was performed at the court or at a court festival for a small, discerning and sophisticated audience.⁵⁷ The existence and the function of the court have been attested in the number of literary texts which were produced under the patronage of the men of rank. The culture of the court can be documented by two great arenas of discourse: treatises advising men and sometimes women or rank on conduct and policy, and a voluminous of verse and prose literature which depicted the lives of these people.⁵⁸ The genres of writings were not limited to the court only; they were produced and circulated in the locales. The cultural formation and the rise of Sanskrit as a lingua franca in the royal court started from the first centuries of the Common Era. Learning of Sanskrit formed an integral part of the education of noble rank and high birth, and was a prerequisite for acquiring the worldly knowledge of Sastras.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is established that Kalidasa belonged to the Gupta period. When we analyze the work of Kalidasa, it somehow resembles the Gupta period. The work of Kalidasa thus can be taken as a source to study the Gupta period. *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* is in a form of fine literary work, the narration, structure, language on a whole makes the text a work of excellence. The dramatic eminence of Kalidasa is

⁵⁷Thapar, Romila. (1999). Op. cit. p. 46.

⁵⁸Ali, D. (2002). *Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India*. United Kingdom: The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge. p. 69.

reflected in this work which has been properly explored above. It is because of the excellence of Kalidasa in his work which makes him renowned beyond the country.

CHAPTER III

Role and Status of Women in the Text

One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one. Simone De Beauvoir.

Abhijnana Shakuntalam provides a great light to understand the various roles of women. It is in *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* woman's are depicted in a way which helps us to understand the position of women in a society. The very well known fact of *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* is that it does not directly talk about women in particular; it is from between the lines that we are able to pick up the words, actions and treatment that help us to understand the women characters of the text. It is from such representation that we can find the simple living of the women, their innocence, and playfulness, the frankness which they have in their minds and above everything their sincerity.

As far as the roles of women in *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* is concerned, it represents the multiple roles of women in life as mothers, daughters, sisters, friends and councillors besides their role as devoted wife.¹When we divide the text into three sections, to clearly understand the representation of women, we can find three different roles played by Shakuntala in each of the sections. It is in general that we can see that the different phases and the lives lived by a women are as a daughter which is the first stage and then as a wife, after the marriage and finally as a mother.

¹K. Krishnamoorthy.(1994). *Kalidasa*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.p. 6.

Shakuntala as a Daughter

The first section of the text narrates the story of Shakuntala in the ashrama² of Kanva representing her as the daughter of the ashrama. It is through the story narrated by Shakuntala's friend to Dushyanta that we come to know about the parents of Shakuntala and her adoption by rishi Kanva. The phase of daughter in Shakuntala's life is narrated in the text in two ways. Firstly, the story of her genetical parents and how she was being abandoned by her parents. It is here that we come to know about how and why was Shakuntala being abandoned by her parents. Though the narratives of Shakuntala's birth is not directly narrated in the text, but is represented in a way indicating the reason about her abandoned. When we try to locate the mother of Shakuntala, she is implicitly represented as an apsara, a celestial woman who is blessed by enormous power, and is being sent on earth in order to control the austericity of a meditating sage. Here, the meditating sage rishi Viswamitra is represented as Shakuntala's father who is disturbed by the apsara. The union of the sage and the apsara led to the birth of Shakuntala. The saddening part in this section is that both the parents could not accept the child because of their own commitments. As such, Shakuntala is being abandoned and left in the forest in between the wild.

The second part of the story about Shakuntala's journey as a daughter is her adoption by sage Kanva. It is in this part of the story that we find the actual execution of the daughter's role played by Shakuntala. Shakuntala is brought up in the ashrama. She has the every right and power received from her father Kanva in the ashrama. She is trusted with the task of receiving guest in the ashrama, and looking after them, which was

²Ashrama- A spiritual hermitage or a monastery in Hindu religion.

earlier exercised by Kanva. When we see the part of receiving the guest it is clear that the job of hospitality is generally entrusted to the female members of the family. For instance, when Dushyanta enters the ashrama, Anasuya says-“now that we have a special guest. Shakuntala, go to our hut and bring ripe fruits. We’ll use this water to bathe his feet.”³ And Dushyanta replies as “Your kind speech is hospitality enough.”⁴

Apart from this, through many instances we come to know that Shakuntala was provided with the basic education in the ashrama. It can be understood that she was trained to write which can be clearly reflected from what, Shakuntala says in the text “I’ve thought of a verse, but I have nothing to write it on.”⁵ Priyamvada replies as “engrave the letters with your nail on this lotus leaf!”⁶

When we examine the text we can see that Shakuntala and her friends are entrusted with the jobs which seem to be uncomplicated, like watering the plants looking after the animals and plants as compared to the role of the Dushyanta. Who in the beginning is introduced as a strong person who is out on a hunt, which is regarded as a heavy task that needs action with power. It is also clearly visible that Shakuntala who is the foster daughter of Kanva is loved and cared wholeheartedly. It is not only Kanva who provides fatherly love to Shakuntala, but also the other members of the ashrama love her equally. For instance, when Shakuntala falls ill, it’s Priyamvada, Anasuya, and the senior aesthetic Gautamai who take cares of her. Moreover, Gautamai is even assigned to

³Miller, B. S.(1999).*The Plays of Kalidasa Theatre of Memory*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass. p.97.

⁴*Ibid*,p.97.

⁵*Ibid*, p.116.

⁶*Ibid*, p.116.

Shakuntala when she leaves the ashrama and heads towards the court of the palace of Dushyanta.

In examining the role of Shakuntala as a daughter, it also indicates that the father plays an equally important role in shaping the life of his daughter. This is visible in the text particularly in terms of marriage. As narrated in the text, we come to know that Kanva wants her daughter to be married off to a worthy husband. To give away the daughter in marriage is considered as one of the major duty, and right of the parents. When Kanva returns from pilgrimage he comes to know about Shakuntala's marriage to Dushyanta and also her pregnancy. Kanva says that he will not mourn for Shakuntala departure to her husband/ or her absence in the ashrama. Thus, it is clearly visible that marriage is considered as a most important task assigned to the parents about their children, we can see that Kanva forgives Shakuntala about her marriage to Dushyanta in secret. It is noteworthy that the reiteration of the sastric models of the daughter as (*parakiyaartha*) another's wealth, with Kanva expressing his relief at being able to hand her over to her husband.⁷ The blessings that Shakuntala receives in her departure from her paternal home to her martial home is that she should be fruitful and subservient. The blessings that Shakuntala receives itself shows that the motive and the purpose of living changing from daughter to being the wife of someone. For instance, the blessings that Shakuntala receives from the first ascetic are "child, win the title of 'chief queen' as a sigh of your husband's high esteem!" the second ascetic blesses as "child, be the mother

⁷ Sengupta, Saswati and Tendon, Deepika.(ed). (2011). *Revisiting Abhijanana Shakuntalam love, Lineage and Language in Kalidasa's Nataka*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan. p.141.

to the heroes!” and the third ascetic blesses as “be honoured by your husband.”⁸ Kanva her foster father himself advises Shakuntala to serve her elders, never go against her husband, to treat her co-wives as friends, and to be gentle with servants. This ideally will ensure that she will attain the status of *grhini* (the lady of the house).⁹

Sage Kanva assures Shakuntala that she can return back to the hermitage when the assigned duties of being wife is being fulfilled “when you have lived for many years as a queen equal to the earth and raised Dushyanta’s son to be a matchless warrior, your husband will entrust him with the burdens of the kingdom and will return with you to the calm of this hermitage.”¹⁰

Shakuntala through some of her dialogues in the text puts forward the idea that she is free and not under the subjugation of any. In the text when Dushyanta tries to free Shakuntala from the task assigned to her of watering the plants, Shakuntala replies as “who are you to keep me or release me?”¹¹ The marriage between Shakuntala and Dushyanta which is a *Gandharva* form of marriage shows that Shakuntala was given the complete freedom to choose her own husband. The decision to marry Dushyanta was hers own. However, in terms of the responsibilities of a daughter towards her parents in the text, there are no such duties assigned. The duties that are assigned are on a whole for the family or community as a whole.

⁸Miller, B. S. (1999). Op.cit. p.125.

⁹Sengupta, Saswati and Tendon, Deepika. (2011). Op.cit. p.141.

¹⁰Miller, B. S. (1999). Op.cit. p.131.

¹¹*Ibid*, p.100.

Shakuntala as a Wife

The transformation of Shakuntala from the daughter to a wife is marked by many of the instances. The first is marked by her attire. Dress is an extremely important component in the *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*.¹² When we encounter Shakuntala for the first time she is dressed as an aesthetic, in a bark dress, the jewelleries of flowers. When Shakuntala is to leave the forest, and enter the new world of court and wife she is to change her attire, which comes in the form of white silk clothes, resinous lac to redden her feet and jewels. Shakuntala's transformation from a young girl (daughter) in the forest to a queen (wife) is indicated, through the change of attire.¹³

Such transformation also marked a shift in the roles of Shakuntala from being a daughter to the task of a wife. It begins with Dushyanta admiring the beauty of Shakuntala in the hermitage and asserts that Shakuntala is a suitable and perfect bride for him by birth as well as by the intentions of Kanva. Shakuntala is married to Dushyanta in secret through the *Gaandharva* form of marriage. *Gandharva* form of marriage is described in the *Manavadharmasastra*¹⁴ as "the mutual union by the inclination of a girl and a lover, that is to be known as the *Gandharva* rite, arising from desire caused by lust."¹⁵ After being convinced by Dushyanta, Shakuntala gives herself in marriage in absence of her guardian through the *Gandharva* form of marriage. However, the irony of

¹²Roy, Kumkum. (2010). *The Power of Gender and The Gender of Power*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. p.34.

¹³*Ibid*, p.134.

¹⁴*Manavadharmasastra*- Sanskrit text, one of the most important Dharmasastras, also known as Manusmriti, attributed to Manu.

¹⁵Kevin, McGrath. (2011). *STRI Feminine Power in the Mahabharata*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, p.63.

Shakuntala's marriage to Dushyanta is that king Dushyanta has no recollection of the marriage when Shakuntala arrives in his court with a full hope to meet her husband. Such changes in the course of the narration in the text were visible with the arrival of Durvasa in the ashrama. Here, the curse of Durvasa plays a pivotal role in changing the course of the narration which temporarily altered the relation of Shakuntala and Dushyanta. It is said that Shakuntala was cursed by Durvasa for neglecting her service to him. This makes the king forget about Shakuntala and their marriage. The only remedy of the curse, the ring, a token of remembrance is also conveniently lost. As a result there is a total transformation in Dushyanta's behaviour towards Shakuntala. He calls Shakuntala as a cunning woman when Shakuntala came to the palace to recognize her as his wife.

The sage conveys the message of Kanva when Dushyanta fails to identify Shakuntala, as a result of the curse. After which allegation and counter allegations begins among them, trying to put the blame on each other. The righteous king Dushyanta though affected by Shakuntala's towering beauty refuses to accept her. On this point, Dushyanta explicitly expresses his view, "The Moon causes only the moon-lotuses to bloom, and the Sun the sun lotuses alone. The inclination of self-restrained persons is averse to embrace another man's wife."¹⁶

Dushyanta being the king and the protector of justice in his court expresses no interest in Shakuntala. On the contrary he chides her saying that she had already tarnished his family name and that she should desist from ruining the good name of the Puru dynasty. In order to counter the claim of Shakuntala's innocence, Dushyanta compares female with the cuckoo bird as "when naive female beasts show cunning, what can we

¹⁶Miller, Barbara Stoler. (1999). Op.cit p.142.

expect of women who reason? Don't cuckoos let other birds nurture their eggs and teach the chicks to fly?"¹⁷ Shakuntala being the wife and above all who is bearing the child of Dushyanta, does not plead anymore, instead she compares him as a, "a man whose mouth is honey, but whose heart is stone."¹⁸ Also, the pain of denial by Dushyanta could be seen when Shakuntala prayed "O gracious goddess, mother earth, open wide and take me in."¹⁹

From the various instance mentioned above, it can be indirectly understood that Dushyanta was a husband to other women before marrying Shakuntala. This shows the practice of polygamy in general and particularly by the royal bloodline. Polygamy was practiced by all the spheres of people from the royals to the commoners. There is an element of truth in Strabo's statement that the men married many wives, some "for the sake of prompt obedience and the others for the sake of pleasures and numerous offspring."²⁰ In this case, Dushyanta marrying Shakuntala might be for the sake of pleasure and for the hope of the offspring of getting a son, who could be an heir to his throne, which seems to be missing from his life. The experience of the wife (*patni*), demonstrates that a woman, idealized but no doubt real, was married, a bearer of children, and purveyor of hospitality and authority. Jamison mentions that in hospitality and exchange relations women pay a significant role. As such, she plays a crucial role in knitting together her community. By producing sons, she insures the linkage of

¹⁷*Ibid*,p.141.

¹⁸*Ibid*,p.141.

¹⁹*Ibid*,p.143.

²⁰Roy, Kumkum.(2011). *Womens of Early Indian societies*. New Delhi: Manohar. p.14.

generations and the continued veneration of the ancestors. By dispensing food and hospitality, she forges harmonious links between different segments of secular society.²¹

Moreover, the concern for the importance towards preserving the chastity of women is also clearly reflected in the text. This is evidence from the references when Samgarava (sage from Kanva's ashrama) gives full expression to social attitudes towards married women to appraise Dushyanta's responsibility towards Shakuntala. He says: People suspect a married woman who stays with her kinsmen, even if she is chaste - A young wife should stay with her husband, no matter how he despises her.²² According to Uma Chakravarti the effective controls of women, the purity of caste are the requirement of all patriarchal societies, and an institution unique to Hindu society.

At the same time, Dushyanta's priest in the court suggests Dushyanta to allow Shakuntala to stay in the house until the child is born. And if the child is as per the predictions of the wise men, that the son of Dushyanta will be born of some marks, she would be welcomed in the family otherwise will be send back to her father's house. This act of priest laying down the conditions for Shakuntala to some extent shows that the chastity of Shakuntala is been examined. The condition that if the son born of Shakuntala have some marks, would be accepted.

According to the *Medhatithi* which is the earliest commentaries on the *Manusmriti* assigned to the ninth century AD²³ Central to the existence of wife was *grha*

²¹Jamison, Stephanie W. (1998). *Sacrificed Wife, Sacrificer's Wife: Women, Ritual, and Hospitality in Ancient India*. Journal of the American Oriental Society. Vol. 118, No. 3. p.423.

²²Miller, Barbara Stoler. (1999). op.cit. p.138.

²³ Roy, Kumkum.(2010). Op.cit. p.71.

(household), where the wife and the household were occasionally equated.²⁴ *Medhatithi* remarks that it is well known that there is no comfort in the *grha* without the *stri* (women) as a man is not able to provide food to guests, including friends and kinsfolk, in the absence of his wife.²⁵ The important role of women as a wife according to the various *Dharmasastras* and other text is in the households. The *grha*, the household was controlled by the patriarch, the *Grhapati* and is recognized as the central institution in the *Manusmriti*.²⁶ In the text we can find that the ashrama was under the control of rishi Kanva, wherein in his absence the task of receiving guest was assigned to Shakuntala.

However, in the text we do not find any instances where the women are assigned to the duties of household. Kalidasa, knowingly or unknowingly have tried to place the women of the text outside the realm of household.

Shakuntala as a Mother

Motherhood played a significant role in the ancient Indian social life.²⁷ In the text, Shakuntala's role as a mother is indicated by Kalidasa's anxiety for the birth of a son and heir.²⁸ Central to this process is Shakuntala- not as a beloved, but as a mother.²⁹ The

²⁴*Ibid*, p.72.

²⁵*Ibid*,p.73.

²⁶*Ibid*,p.72.

²⁷Bhattacharji, Sukumari. (1990). Motherhood in Ancient India. *Economic and Political Weekly*.p.WS 50.

²⁸Sengupta, Saswati and Tendon, Deepika.(2011). *Op.cit.* p. 255.

²⁹*Ibid*, p.255.

Shakuntala of *Abhijanana Shakuntalam* is however not just a *janani* (mother) but a *viraprasavani* (the giver of the hero.)³⁰

The roles of Shakuntala as a mother in the text can be evidence not only as one who nurtures her own son but also from her love and care shown towards the offspring of the dead doe. Also, the text tries to link the reproduction of the child, its care and nurture as the mother's work confining women within the domestic sphere making their identity that of mothers and wives.³¹

It was a general assumption made that the ideal of womanhood was to be a mother, which could be achieved only through marriage. It was obligatory; a girl was trained to be a good wife and a good mother and was blessed with "the motherhood of 'sons'".³² After being abandoned by king Dushyanta Shakuntala is left alone, in a state of pregnancy. It is not mentioned in the text that Shakuntala does deliver the baby but it can be clearly understood that it might be in the ashrama of sage Marica. In the text Shakuntala's son is described be a strong and ferocious one when he grown up. The absence of father from the life of Shakuntala's son does not seem to affect the upbringing of a son. It is here we notice the concept of single parenthood in the text even in the case of Shakuntala's own son.

There are also curious instances of motherhood in the text. One of such instances is the case of Menaka who abandoned the girl child after her task is accomplished. It is said that she was send by Indra to distract sage Viswamitra. Therefore, in Menaka's case

³⁰*Ibid*, p. 256.

³¹*Ibid*, p. 261.

³²Bhattacharji, Sukumari.(1990). *Op.cit.* p.WS-50.

motherhood is depicted as a means in order to fulfil the need and requirement of someone's wishes.

Interestingly, in locating the different roles played by Shakuntala in the text, the struggle and pain that women faced in carrying out these tasks are clearly reflected. These can be understood from the multiple references of abandoning Shakuntala in the text. Firstly, Shakuntala was abandoned as a daughter by her parents as they are not able to accept her as a child. Secondly, as a wife when Dushyanta fails to recognise her as his wife with whom he once got married. And finally, she is also abandoned by Kanva's family along with his disciples. In all the three cases, Shakuntala is abandoned when her presence is not accepted by the society.

Apart from the different roles of Shakuntala, there are important roles played by other women in the text. It is here we find both divine and human's roles weaving in together. The role of the celestial nymph Menaka (Shakuntala's mother) and her companion Sanumati can be cited here as a point that relates us with the divine intervention with their roles in the human world. D.D. Kosambi observes that in Uruvashi- Pururavas myth in the Rig Veda, the Satapatha Brahamana and the Mahabharata, and the Vikramorvasiyam, 'several apsaras occupy a prominent place near the beginning of some royal geaealogy' and list Menaka as the mother of Shakuntala, and many others as an examples.³³ In the text, Menaka as a mother of Shakuntala, whose role is developed in such a way which makes her essential in narrating the storyline of Shakuntala. She appears in a point of crisis, plays a significant role in reaching Shakuntala to the desired conclusion. She is the mother who rescues the abandoned

³³Kosambi, D.D. (1962). *Myth and Reality; Study in the Formation of Indian Culture*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.p. 84.

Shakuntala with the help of her companion Sanumati, during the trauma and hardship of rejection of Shakuntala by Dushyanta. Menaka most importantly saves Shakuntala from the humiliation and pain of being rejected by her husband, saves her from the eye of the society. But despite of the pivotal role of Menaka in the life of Shakuntala as well as in the text, her absence from the stage suggest that the celestial nymph as the ‘good’ mother of the daughter, but with no husband or father continues to be too a troublesome a figure to bring into spectacle. To give her a stage presence as mother would too powerfully validate forms of female sexuality and motherhood that were resistant to Brahmanical patriarchy.³⁴

Moving away from the context of divine roles, it is the roles of the other women depicted in the text which is worth mentioning. One of such roles is the role played by Anasuya and Priyamvada. Anasuya and Priyamvada are the two young ascetics’ friends of Shakuntala, who were the product of Kalidasa’s poetic imagination. It is evident from the text that Shakuntala was not independent enough to confront her love towards Dushyanta. Anasuya and Priyamvada embody aspects of femininity, speech and action.³⁵ Priyamvada (literally meaning sweet talk) as her name suggest is cheerful. Priyamvada with her sweet talk proves to be most valuable when she is somewhat able to pacify the irate sage Durvasa and mitigate the effects of his curse. Anasuya (literally, without envy) who Kale says is older than two.³⁶ She being a forest girl seems to have a worldly knowledge and also much practical and far sighted in nature. Kale remarks that the former is characterized by strong feeling and the latter by a mature

³⁴Sengupta, Saswati and Tendon, Deepika. (2011). Op.cit. p.274.

³⁵*Ibid*, p. 28.

³⁶Kale, M.R. (1969). *The Abhijnana Shakuntalam of Kalidasa*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass. p.59.

understanding.³⁷ Anasuya doubts and fears the love of Dushyanta for Shakuntala when she says ‘now that he has returned to his palace women in the city, will he remember us here?’³⁸

Another similar role is the significant role played by Gautami. She is represented in the text as the non-biological mother of Shakuntala. She is the foster mother of Shakuntala, Anasuya and Priyamvada, who performs the daily work of parenting in the Kanva’s ashrama. Her sphere of influence is limited to interpersonal and emotive relationship with her daughters.³⁹ As a mother she looks after when Shakuntala falls ill and takes medicine to her, and sees for her safe return to home when night falls. She is also the mother as moral authority from whom the romance between Shakuntala and Dushyanta is to be kept secret. Her representation provides insights into relationship between mothers and daughters, a grey area in *sastric* texts according to Sukumari Bhattacharji.

Gautami mildly resists brahmanical dominance when she hesitates in abandoning Shakuntala in her moment of crisis.⁴⁰ When Shakuntala is abandoned by both Dushyanta and the two asthetics of Kanva, Gautami seems to be in pain when she is left behind alone. Gautami says “Shakuntala is following us, crying pitifully. What will my child do now that her husband has refused her?”⁴¹ however the order by the aesthetic of Kanva to lead the way she does not further intervene, following the *sastric* injunction that ‘a girl, a young woman, or even an old woman should not do anything independently, even in her

³⁷*Ibid*, p.59.

³⁸Miller, Barbara Stoler.(1999). *Op.cit.* p.121.

³⁹ Sengupta, Saswati and Tendon, Deepika. (2011). *Op.cit.* p.271.

⁴⁰*Ibid*, p.272.

⁴¹Miller, Barbara Stoler.(1999). *Op. cit.* p. 141.

own house.’⁴² In addition to these, the important contribution of women like Netravati, the door keeper (female attendant) who ushers in visitors and presents messages; Parabhrtika and Madhukarika, the two maids assigned to the Dushyanta’s garden and Gaturika, a maid servant also appeared in the text. When we categorise the women according to their role in the text, one important category of women lacks behind apart from daughter, wife, mother, widows that is of the working women, it was Horner who introduced the new category of working women in his work ‘Women in Primitive Buddhism’.⁴³

While examining the various roles of women in text, one important category of women lacks behind apart from daughter, wife, mother, widows that is of the working women, it was Horner who introduced the new category of working women in his work Women in Primitive Buddhism.⁴⁴ Working women in the text represents the role played by them outside their domestic sphere, these women represents an independent category of women of a wider society. Such category of women can be related to the various women entrusted with the task as a door keeper, maids, and female attendants in the palace. The host of female characters in Dushyanta’s court, who are employed in the service of the king, and the palace, mostly belong to the lower classes of society gives evidence of women active in society and economy.

⁴²Sengupta, Saswati and Tendon, Deepika. (2011). Op. cit. p.272.

⁴³ Chakravarti, Uma and Roy, Kumkum.(1988). *In Search of Our Past A Review of the Limitations and Possibilities of the Historiography of Women in Early Past*, Economic and Political Weekly. p.WS-2.

⁴⁴*Ibid*, p. WS-2.

After carefully examining the various roles played by the women in the text within the household and outside it, the status of women in the society can be understood from the text as well. Here, the status of women can be understood socially, politically and economically and also within the family. Looking at the social status of women represented in the text, their status can be related from their exclusion and inclusion to public and private spaces. In terms of public space we can relate it with their right to education and participation in the religious ceremonies. However we find that not all the women in the text enjoyed such privileges. As described in text, the women in the text do not seem to have acquired education, with an exception of Shakuntala and Dushyanta's wife in the palace. It is evident from the text that Shakuntala seems to have the knowledge of writing, when she is asked to compose a letter to Dushyanta expressing her love as advised by her companion. Similarly, the reference to Dushyanta's wife in the palace singing a song playing an instrument indirectly indicates about her accessed to such knowledge.

The most important activity that was regarded important in the religious sphere was the sacrifice. Women as a wife were a necessary companion for her husband in the sacrifice. But in the text Women did not have a direct participation in the sacrificial ritual, but contributed by gathering the required essentials for the same. In terms of the religious status of women in the ancient texts, we find that in the early period the *Upanayana*⁴⁵ of the girls were in common as that of boys and there is an ample evidence to show. In the *Atharvaveda* there is the mention of the maidens undergoing the

⁴⁵*Upanayana*- It is one of the traditional *samskaras* (rites of passage) that marked the acceptance of a student by a guru (teacher) and an individual's entrance to a school in Hinduism. The sacred thread is received by the boy during this ceremony.

*Bharmacharya*⁴⁶ discipline. Even Manu includes *Upayanana* among the *Sanskaras* (rituals) obligatory for girls.⁴⁷ The *Upanayana* ceremony gave the granted a gateway to the women to study the Vedas. The text is silent about undergoing such ceremonies by women. With the dying of the *Upanayana* ceremonies among the girls, their possibility of getting education also seems to have demise. As such, we find that the social position of the women is usually visualised in terms of their inclusion and exclusion from the public assemblies and their right to education.⁴⁸ What we can see in the society is the social hierarchy where men and women are placed in different point. In a wider social context men can be located at the top of the socio-political hierarchy, such as the king is visualised as possessing virtually unrestricted access to women.⁴⁹ As mentioned above the women after being absent from performing the *Upanayana*, were more or less can be understood as being treated equal in status to that of the shudras. Shudras in the social hierarchy is always placed on the lowest level and is denied restrictions on various spheres in the society. When compared the men and women in the text regarding their

⁴⁶*Bharmacharya*- It is a Sanskrit term that gained currency from c. First millennium BCE, used to designate a state of celibacy, either temporarily or permanently. By the mid- first millienium BCE it was used in the Dharmasastras for a mode or stage of life meant for men belonged to the first three varnas. *Bharmacharya* began with an initiatory ritual and was devoted to learning of the Vedas from a brahmana preceptor. The initiate or brahmana was expected to lead a carefully regulated life, offering worship to his preceptor, tending the sacrificial fire, and living on alms. The successful completion of *brahmacharya* was followed by a bath ritual, after which the initiate was free to the world and adopt a life of domesticity.

⁴⁷ Altekar, A.S.(1944). *The Education of Women in Early India*, Benares: Nand kishore and Bros Educational Publishers. p.206.

⁴⁸Chakravarti, Uma and Roy, Kumkum.(1988). *Op.cit.* p.WS-3.

⁴⁹Kumkum, Roy.(2010). *Op.cit.* p.114.

social position, we can see that the women were treated unequally. Also, the text is indicative enough to highlight the points about the unequal status of women described in the narration. The absence of the references about education and religious participation to the other women apart from Shakuntala can be cited here as point.

Moreover, an attempt to socially idealize the position of women particularly in the Shakuntala's case can be seen in the text. The concept of *prativrata* was an ideal objective among the every woman, which brought an eagerness among every woman to attain the status of *grihini* or *pativrata*. One of the great mechanisms used in the subordination of women was through *stridharma*, or *pativratadharm*. Through this ideology women even aspired to chastity and wifely fidelity as the highest expression of their selfhood.⁵⁰

In the text Shakuntala is blessed by Kanva and other members to attain the status of an ideal wife i.e. *prativrata*. The idea of *pativrata* as a specific dharma of the Hindu wives was mapped out by the Brahmins, in order to establish a control over women. Such institutions led to the deterioration of the status of women in the society as that of men. The representation of women in the text itself shows that how the roles have been classified as according to the gender lines. Shakuntala the main protagonist of the text is been tried to be projected as an ideal example of womanhood as envisaged by Brahmanical culture.⁵¹

Politically, the text fails to share the equal narration regarding the position of women with that of men. Unlike men, participation of women in the affairs of the state is few and less. The women in the text do not seem to have any political power. None of the

⁵⁰Chakravarti, Uma.Op.cit. pp.582-583.

⁵¹ K, Krishnamoorthy,(1994). Op.cit. p.115.

women is represented as playing an active role in any of the courtly matters in comparison to men. The duty of safeguarding the society, along with the responsibility of their welfare and also maintaining equilibrium in the society is entrusted upon the king. This duty of a king is facilitated by a hierarchy of administration where the court is central.⁵² In the whole hierarchy of administrators the presence of any women seems to be missing. The succession of the throne was based on the birth of a worthy son, a male heir which was also the crux of the text *Abhijanana Shakuntalam*. We do not find any women who are active in the political activities, though Prabhavati Gupta ruled as a regent queen over a large portion of central India.⁵³ But there are references to women speaking in front of the court. This is with reference to Shakuntala and Gautami, who were granted the full right to speak in Dushyanta's court place their ideas and fight for their rights when Dushyanta fails to accept Shakuntala as his wife.

Economically, the status of women in the text can be reflected particularly from the point of inheritance and right to property. It is here that marriage plays one of the significant roles in understanding the economic status of women. The marriage of Shakuntala to Dushyanta though in one way make her position to recognise as a queen, it does not ensure any form of inheritance to property. Instead, marriage of Shakuntala draws as a line to fulfil the obligation of women of bearing a male child in the society. Also there are no indications to mark that women have the right to property in the text.

⁵² Thapar, Romila. ((1999). *Sakuntala Texts, Readings, Histories*. New Delhi: Kali for Women. p.48.

⁵³ Ingalls, Daniel H.H. (1976). *Kalidasa and the Attitudes of the Golden Age*. Journal of the American Oriental Society. p.17.

However, we find that *Stridana*⁵⁴ exist in some form or the other in the text. For instance, Shakuntala was given clothes of silk and some jewellery by Kanva when she was about to leave to the Palace.

Most of the well known modern treatise on Hindu law purport in a subtle ways to devise endless ways and means to deprive the women of their property rights. And the best way to deprive women of her-property right is to make the scope of *Stridana* as narrow as possible so that it might comprise no more than a few clothes and ornaments.⁵⁵ The deprivation of women in the property right automatically led to the patrilineal form of inheritance. The legal text like *Dharmasastras* are openly in favour of an extremely patrilineal form of inheritance in which in the absence of the son the property will rather go to the near and remote agnates of the property holder than to the daughters of his own seed.⁵⁶ However on the whole, the women in the text seem to have contributed equally in the economic sphere. The women in the text are described as engaged in cultivation and production process. Thus the women in the text were engaged in agriculture, where the watering of the plants, looking after them, and gathering them for various purposes are clearly mentioned. Apart from these they seem to be having a sound knowledge of the valuable and medicinal plants. The absence of men from such activity somehow reflects the well known tradition of the primitive days where women were active in the gathering process and the men in hunting.

⁵⁴Stridana was the earliest form of women's property that was given to the bride at the time of marriage.

⁵⁵Roy, Kumkum.(2011). Op.cit. p. 115.

⁵⁶*Ibid*, pp. 117-118.

Sukumari Bhattacharji writes that there has never been a time when women's labour at home, however heavy was regarded as productive. Women's sole worth lay in their reproductive role and even there she was seen as the 'field', the 'harvest' belonging to the seed owner.⁵⁷

Thus, the discussions regarding the status of women from the text more or less connect us with the status of women that determined on the background of Hindu ideas; Brahmanical sources since all the traditional work on the status of women in India exist entirely within the context of Hinduism.⁵⁸ Uma Chakravarti writes that almost all the works on the position of women in ancient India have been written by the scholars who fall within the nationalist school of history. These scholars worked hard to show that the position of the women in India's ancient past was high. These historians in order to glorify Indian womanhood have led to the selective focus on certain aspects of the ancient texts, along with the most celebrated example of women learning of the Gargi-Yajnavalkya debate. The general idea about the position of women was high in the Vedic period, and it was only after the foreign invasion that the position of women declined. It was after these foreign invasion that that various evils such as the Purdah, sati and female infanticide came up.

However, as seen from the representation of women in the text, the whole discussion clearly shows that women do not enjoyed a high position in the society. The declining position of the women also can be reflected from the time period of the text i.e.

⁵⁷Bhattacharji, Sukumari. (1991). *Economic Rights of Ancient Indian Women*. Economic and Political Weekly. p. 512.

⁵⁸Chakravarti, Uma.(1988).*Beyond the Altekarian Paradigm: Towards a New Understanding of Gender Relations in Early Indian History*.Social Scientist. p.45.

the Gupta period. It was in the Gupta period women were the objects of enjoyment. It was during this age that the dreams of getting charming heavenly damsels were infused in the hearts of the men.⁵⁹ It is said that the Gupta period marks the position of women as deteriorating comparing to the Vedic age where women enjoyed a higher position in the society. According to Bader, 'the decline in the status of women in a long run is the preference for sons over daughters in the terms of the requirement of a son for funeral rites.'⁶⁰ Shakuntala might have been ignored because she was a daughter and not a son. The preference of sons over daughter was also one of the factors which led to the low status of women in their society.

The subordination of women is a common feature of almost all stages of history, and is prevalent in large parts of the world, the extent and form of that subordination has been conditioned by the social and cultural environment in which women have been placed.⁶¹ When we try to move a little bit away from the status of women that is either high or low and try to find out basis of sub-ordination and the extend and specific form which generally determines the status of women we can find out that in India that religious instruments has shaped the social practices. As the purity of the women had a centrality in brahmanical patriarchy.⁶²

The subordination of women in India had its base from the hunting gathering society where the reproductive power was regarded valuable where the very survival of the community depended on it. With a shift to an agricultural economy patrilineal

⁵⁹ Roy, Kumkum.(2011). Op.cit. p.147.

⁶⁰ Chakravarti, Uma and Roy, Kumkum.(1988). Op.cit. p. WS-3.

⁶¹Chakravarti, Uma.(1993). *Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State*. Economic and Political Weekly. p.579.

⁶²*Ibid*, p. 579.

succession was fairly established within the larger context of well defined society. May it be the Jatakas, the great epics, the *Dharmasatras*, the basis of subordination of the women are grounded on it, where taking an example of *Satapatha Brahamana* where it is told that a woman, a Sudra, a dog and a crow are the embodiment of untruth, sin and darkness.⁶³

The extend of the subordination of the women can be seen from the position and the statues that the women had politically, socially and economically, thus the story of Shakuntala clearly portrays the subordination of the women in the society. One of the great mechanisms used in the subordination of women was through *stridharma*, or *pativrata dharma*. Through this ideology women even aspired to chastity and wifely fidelity as the highest expression of their selfhood.⁶⁴

Conclusion

Shakuntala is represented in the text with the role as a daughter, wife and mother. It is with the help of Shakuntala in the text we can understand the roles played by women in a society. Their role in the society revolved around the family and the household. An ideal woman was calculated on the basis of their contribution and their devotion towards the well being of the family. It is with the help of the roles that they had in the society we can find out their status. The status of the women seems to be very low as compared with the other section of the society. Also, the status of the women seems to have degraded as being influenced by many factors which have been discussed. The disability of the

⁶³*Ibid*, p. 581.

⁶⁴*Ibid*, pp. 582-583.

society to see women beyond the household and their monotonous area of influence from a long past affected the status of women.

Chapter IV

Studying the Character of Shakuntala in the *Mahabharata*

Version and Kalidasa's play

Abhijnana Shakuntalam is taken from the *Mahabharata*. The narrative of Shakuntala appears in the Adi Parvan or “the book of the beginning”. Apart from the reference of Shakuntala's story in *Mahabharata*, a passing reference of Shakuntala is made in the *Satapatha Brahmana*, where she is linked to the preeminent clan of the Bharatas. Another reference is made to Bharata in the *Aitareya Brahmana*.¹ Finally, it is in the *Mahabharata* that the story is related in length. Scholars agree that Kalidasa's nataka was inspired by the Shakuntala episode of the epic *Mahabharata*.² We can find various instances upon which the scholars have put forward their argument about the adoption of the story from various sources. However there are scholars like Maurice Winternitz who argue that the story may have been taken from the *Padmapurana*.³ According to Romila Thapar, in writing *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*, Kalidasa selected the theme from the epic, but the subtheme may have come from folk literature. Some of which are found in the Jatakas.⁴ It is possible that the idea of introducing the signet ring

¹Thapar,Romila.(1999). *Sakuntala Texts,Readings, Histories*.New Delhi: Kali for Women. p.10.

²Sengupta, Saswati and Tandon, Deepika (ed). (2011). *Revisiting Abhijanana Sakuntalam Love Lineage, and Language in Kalidasa's Nataka*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan. p. 2.

³*Ibid*, p.2.

⁴Thapar,Romila.(1999). *Op.cit*. p. 45.

was borrowed by Kalidasa from the *Katthahari- Jataka*.⁵ Although, Kalidasa borrows the story from the epic, it differs in different ways along with various similarities.

One of the basic differences between the *Mahabharata* version of Shakuntala's story and *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* is that they belong to two different historical time period, where the epic version predated the play⁶ and relate to diverse social background.⁷ The *Mahabharata* and the *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* belong to two different literary forms, *kavya*/ poetry and *nataka*/ play, two different genres and also their literary and social purpose differs. The epic version was initially bardic recitation, as part of oral performance of such narratives for an audience of chiefs and clansman. There are different sections in the *Mahabharata*, the Shakuntala story occurs in the narrative section, while the other section has been labelled as didactic⁸. Whereas, the Kalidasa's version was a court drama written in finely honed and crafted language, performed before a selected audience on a special occasion, and familiar to a literate, formally educated, sophisticated segment of the society-the urban *nagarakas*.⁹ This highlights the importance and the growth of courtly culture.

The story of Shakuntala finds a place in the *Mahabharata* for tracing the genealogy of Bharata, the son born to Dushyanta and Shakuntala. Thus, the story of Shakuntala is a part of *Mahabharata*, which is narrated by Vaisampayana to Janamejaya,

⁵*Ibid*, p.56.

⁶*Ibid*, p. 7.

⁷*Ibid*, p. 6.

⁸Thapar,Romila. (2013). *Readings in Early Indian History*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. p.439.

⁹*Ibid*, p. 8.

who in turn narrates it in the course of reciting the epic on the occasion of a major sacrificial ritual.¹⁰ The episode of Shakuntala is the first comprehensive narrative of the women in the epic where certain aspects of feminine, especially in a social settings are established.¹¹ Here the story is narrated virtually as a dialogue between the protagonists, with-almost no participation by other persons either of the ashrama or of the court.¹² Whereas the Kalidasa's text is in the form of dialogue where the every characters has a voice. The epic originating in forms that facilitated recitation with a frequent resort to dialogue was easy to follow. With the emergence of courtly literature, the language became more complex.¹³

One of the dramatic qualities of Kalidasa lies in the fact that he has been able to introduce various new characters in his version keeping the base of the story intact. In the Kalidasa's version the two friends of Shakuntala, Anasuya and Priyamvada plays a crucial role who mediates between Dushyanta and Shakuntala, in this too the play differs from the epic where we do not find any companion of Shakuntala. In the epic version Shakuntala is alone with no mediators and the task that is done by her companions in the other versions is done by her own. It is not only Anasuya and Priyamvada that is added by Kalidasa in his version but many other new subordinate characters have been added. Vidusaka is another privileged buffoon who is often the arranger and conspires to bring

¹⁰Thapar,Romila.(1999). Op.cit. p.15.

¹¹Kevin, McGrath. (2011). *STRI Feminine Power in the Mahabharata* .New Delhi: Orient Backswan Private Limited. p.157.

¹²Thapar,Romila.(1999). Op.cit. p.52.

¹³*Ibid*, p.12.

the hero and the heroine together¹⁴ as in the act two of Kalidasa's version. In the epic Shakuntala receives Dushyanta alone and explains in length to his queries and without any shyness or embarrassment describes him about her birth. The background of her birth is described in length, by Shakuntala. In the Kalidasa's version when Dushyanta arrives to the forest he is welcomed by Shakuntala along with her friends Anasuya and Priyamvada. The birth of Shakuntala is also explained by her companions. Kalidasa's Shakuntala constantly needs others to protect and defend her. She forgets to honour the great Durvasa because she is engrossed in her thoughts of the king, and the sage curses her. Fortunately, her friends hear Durvasa's angry words and intercede on her behalf. He cannot take back his curse, but he modifies it. Instead of being completely forgotten by her husband, Shakuntala will not be recognized by him until she shows him a token he has given her.

Kalidasa keeping the basic story line intact adds other sub-themes. One of the sub-theme is the story of the ring as the token of recognition and the other is the theme of the curse. The subtheme introduced by Kalidasa played a major role in changing the course of the story. It is also responsible for a more dramatic story, and a justification for Dushyanta's behavior.¹⁵ By introducing these two sub-themes Kalidasa knowingly or

¹⁴Miller, Barbara Stoler. (1999) *The Plays of Kalidasa Theatre of Memory*. Delhi: MotilalBanarsidass. p. 49.

¹⁵Rustomji, Roshni. (1975). *From Shakuntala to Shakuntala: Strength Rather Than Beauty*. Penn State University Press on behalf of the Pacific Ancient and Modern Language Association. Vol. 10.p. 49.

unknowingly is trying to put the blame on Shakuntala, and making her responsible for her own despair.

Apart from various dissimilarities we can find a number of similarities in the *Mahabharata* version and the Kalidasa's version. The most important among it is the story line. Kalidasa follows the same story line as available in the *Mahabharata*.

The representations of Shakuntala as a central figure in different versions alters, it highlights the position of women in the society which is determined as according to the society. Different versions of the story presents to us the different form of Shakuntala.

The historical context in the epic version of Shakuntala is a lineage based society, with chiefdoms moving towards incipient kingdoms. Authority is concentrated in the ruling clans and its distribution is linked to the birth and closeness to such societies.¹⁶ Therefore in such societies genealogies and family are of great importance to trace the family lineage. In the epic Bharata is a key figure in the genealogical record as he is among those who consolidate the clans. The story of Shakuntala is significant in the narrative of their ancestors, because she was the mother of Bharata.¹⁷ In such political systems the status of raja was not absolute, and required the approval of clansman. An instance can be taken from the epic, where Dushyanta was troubled to accept Shakuntala's son as his own because of the menace of the society. It was only after a proclamation made by divine voice that Dushyanta was ready to accept Bharata.

Women in such societies are important whose sons play a crucial role in the lineage either continuing it or to consolidate it. The women of the *Mahabharata* are

¹⁶ Thapar, Romila.(1999).Op.cit. p. 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 13.

strong personalities, cherishing their autonomy and willing to argue for their rights.¹⁸ In the epic there were also the celestial women, the apsaras. They had their own code of behaviour and were not subjected to the rules of the human society, although a quite played an ancestral role in genealogies.¹⁹

The women of the epic are strong who as mothers and wives dominate the story. The depiction of Shakuntala is the central of the story. Shakuntala of the epic is not a submissive woman. She is strong and fiery. She is forth-right, free, high spirited and assertive.²⁰ She is a woman from different society who sees herself as equal in status to those of man. In the epic, the identity of Shakuntala as an apsara is reiterated by the small details which make her different from an ordinary woman.

Shakuntala brings to Dushyanta a son, who was unique in the lineage of the purus.²¹ Shakuntala's proposal placed before Dushyanta during the time of her *Gandharva* marriage as "The son that shall be begotten on me shall become thy heir-apparent. This, O king, is my fixed resolve. O Dushmanta, if thou grant this, then let our union take place!"²² This marks the strength and farsighted nature of Shakuntala. Here Shakuntala from the very beginning wanted power for her son, and may be through that power for herself. The condition placed by Shakuntala about the status of her son, is also a characteristic of patriarchal society. This was also crucial to the status of the women in such societies even if it was a clan based society: she was the link to kinship and

¹⁸*Ibid*, p. 15.

¹⁹*Ibid*, p. 15.

²⁰Thapar, Romila.(2013). *Op.cit*.p. 440.

²¹Thapar,Romila. (1999). *Op.cit*.p. 41.

²²Roy, P.C.(1889).*The Mahabharata* (Vol. I). Calcutta: Oriental Publishing Co. p. 173.

alliances, and her son ensured her membership of the clan.²³ When the promise made to her by Dushyanta is not full filled she comes to the court, she says “ This is thy son, O king! Let him be installed as thy heir- apparent ! O king, this child, like unto a celestial, hath been begotten by thee upon me !therefore, O best of men, fulfil now the promise thou gavest me ! call to mind, O thou of good fortune, the agreement thou hadst made on the occasion of thy union with me in the asylum of Kanva !”²⁴ In saying so she is asserting the claim of her love or her husband but of the son who to his rightful place. Despite of the allegations put up by Dushyanta into Shakuntala and also on Menaka and Viswamitra, she stand on her ground and insists that the boy be given his status and to that end she decides to leave him with Dushyanta.²⁵ The differences that we can find from the demand made in Shakuntala in the court in the two different versions we can see that, Vyasa’s Shakuntala seeks her son’s father while Kalidasa’s Shakuntala seeks her husband.

Shakuntala of the *Mahabharata* is not conscious of the social stigma, she is autonomous and dignified. Instances to prove out these qualities in her are seen in the court, when she says that “O Dushmanta, that when thou art gone, this son of mine shall rule the whole earth surrounded by the four seas and adorned with the king of the mountains !”²⁶ The shift in the use of her words from ‘our son’ to ‘my son’ shows the ability and the courage of Shakuntala to nurture her son alone. Single parenting does not seem to be impossible for Shakuntala. In the *Mahabharata* version Shakuntala says that

²³Thapar,Romila. (2013). Op. cit. p. 440.

²⁴Roy, P.C.(1889). Op. cit. pp. 175-176.

²⁵Thapar, Romila. (2013). Op. cit. p. 440.

²⁶Roy, P.C.(1889). Op.cit. p. 180.

“sweet speech wives are friends on occasion of joy. They are fathers on occasion of religious acts. They are mothers in sickness and woe.”²⁷ Here Shakuntala speaks that a woman can even be a father in order to full fill the religious demands.

The status of women in the *Mahabharata* was in an elevated position, where the experience of the *patni* (wife), as well as of other woman depicted in the *Mahabharata*, demonstrates that such a woman, idealized but no doubt real, was married, a bearer of children, and purveyor of hospitality. Jamison demonstrates that women are pivotal links in establishing bonds between men and their gods, their ancestors, their guests, and their social counterparts: Thus she plays a crucial role in knitting together her community. By producing sons, she ensures the linkage of generations and the continued veneration of the ancestors. By dispensing food and hospitality, she forges harmonious links between different segments of secular Aryan society. By her role in srauta ritual (and by making such a ritual possible), she links gods and men and allows the religious life of the community to proceed.²⁸

While the episode of Shakuntala in the epic, *Mahabharata*, did not have Durvasa’s curse as a part of the story, Kalidasa makes these insertions quite clearly in defense of the king. As the king refuses to recognize Shakuntala when she visits the court with hopes of reunion with her lover/husband (wedded in the *Gandharva* tradition), the curse of Durvasa inflicted on Shakuntala for not paying attention to him during his visit to the hermitage absolves the king of all guilt. Not only is the king freed from the guilt,

²⁷*Ibid*,p.177.

²⁸Jamison, Stephanie W. (1997). *Sacrificed Wife / Sacrificer's Wife: Women, Ritual, and Hospitality in Ancient India*, Springer. Vol. 1, No. 1. pp. 198-199.

the guilt is passed on to Shakuntala, as she becomes the bearer of the curse, which proclaimed that king Dusyanta will have no remembrance of their union.

In the *Mahabharata* story Shakuntala is portrayed as ‘a fiery and a spirited girl who a fight tenaciously for her son’s right. She literally reads the law to the king when she finds him obdurate, gives him such a tongue lashing that we practically see him squirming on his jewel throne Kalidasa has drastically changed his source to convey his own vision of life and his view of certain problems.’²⁹

We can here discover in which version of the play that is the epic version or the play provides justice to Shakuntala or more to male whims and desire. It can be clearly understood that in both the versions it is Shakuntala who suffers and is subjected to single parenthood. According to Chandra Rajan the *Mahbharata* version of the story provides justice to the character of Shakuntala than the Kalidasa’s version. As it shows her as a fiery young women conscious alike of her birth, status, identity, and rights, located in the spirit of matriarclal society,³⁰ while Kalidasa’s heroine is timid and obedient. Women are clearly subordinate ³¹ in Kalidasa’s version Shakuntala is like a deer, a captive, surrenders to king’s persuasion, ending up being humiliated, and is finally being rescued through divine intervention.

Questions of legitimacy are one of the most important elements in the *Mahabharata*. In *Mahabharata* it is clearly indicated that the political power is extremely

²⁹Rajan, C. (2002). *The Complete Works of Kalidasa*. Volume II. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi. p. 94.

³⁰*Ibid*, pp. 47-48.

³¹*Ibid*, pp. 48-49.

fragile, is deeply contested from within the lineage as much as from non-kin, and the performance of ritual, which all claimants use with equal frenzy, is no guarantee to the stability of political power.³²

Among the eight form of marriage *Gandharva* form of marriage seems to dominate in both the versions. *Gandharva* form of marriage gives the freedom to choose the partners. Marriage was generally appreciated between the equals. In the *Mahabharata* version as well as in Kalidasa's version Dushyanta is caught enquiring about the caste status of Shakuntala where he is relieved to hear the origin of Shakuntala, where she was the daughter of the champion of ascetics and Dushyanta a king. In *Mahabharata* marriage is entered into subject to a contractual understanding that the son born of this union will be crowned king during the lifetime of his father. Shakuntala herself negotiates her marriage, when the king advocates the *Gandharva* marriage; he tells her that she can give herself away, thereby ignoring the role of the father (depriving the father the ceremony of *kanyadana*). Shakuntala responds to this by saying that if this was accepted by religion, and she had the right to give herself away, she had a condition. In Kalidasa's version Shakuntala does negotiates and does not place any conditions before Dushyanta.

In the *Mahabharata* story, Shakuntala's pregnancy lasts for three years; it is only after the birth of the son that she visits the place, with an urge to recognize her son as a heir of the empire. The son that Shakuntala gives birth to is not ordinary; he is of unusual prowess and grows up to be brave, fearless and courageous. When Shakuntala visit the court to present their son as a heir, king feign ignorance. The *Mahabharata* text effectively states that he did so as he wanted a public affirmation of the legitimacy of the

³² Sengupta, Saswati and Tendon, Deepika.(edt). (2011). Op. cit. pp. 240-241.

child's lineage.³³ Shakuntala's reaction to this act of Dushyanta is full of anger as she tells him to consult his conscience; his actions have reduced his stature and dignity. This is then followed by a lengthy discourse on the importance of a wife in a man's life. The superiority of the paternal right over the maternal nurture is proclaimed by the sage.³⁴ Kalidasa in his version had been able to move away from the improbability and absurdity, like the birth of a son after three years of conception.

The story of Shakuntala recognizes the agency of women, the association of female virtue with birthing and continuity, the proxy nature of power that women acquire through motherhood and the contractual nature of marriage, which places it firmly rather than hierarchy. Kalidasa's revisionary rewriting retains only some elements of Shakuntala's fiery independence, but he compensates by giving Shakuntala a degree of freedom which she opts out of the marriage; unfortunately, both these versions highlight romance and procreative relationship.³⁵

In both the versions it is clear that the Dushyanta is sonless and is in dire need of a son in order to run the lineage. Shakuntala in both the versions unlike apsaras does not set whimsical conditions that leave them free from permanent obligations to men/ kings. Indeed, Shakuntala makes a very human secret Compact; in the *Mahabharata* version she demands the throne for her son, just as Satyawati will set conditions for Santanu a few

³³Jain, Jasbir. (2011). *Indigenous Roots of Feminism Culture, Subjectivity and Agency*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India Private Ltd. p. 105.

³⁴*Ibid*, p. 105.

³⁵*Ibid*, p. 106.

generations down the line. In sum, Shakuntala uses the ‘legal rightness’ of her giving herself to Dushyanta as a moment to settle the terms of their marriage.³⁶

The consequence of the *Gandharva* form of marriage is the denial of the union by the king. In the *Mahabharata* version of the story, when Shakuntala presents herself and her son to Dushyanta in court, there is a blunt denial by the king Dushyanta. He says he cannot remember having been with Shakuntala, even though he does remember as the text makes quite clear.³⁷ The kings in the two different versions have their own interest in rejecting Shakuntala and her offspring. The king in the Kalidasa’s version is the aestheticised hero who must be noble in every way, and also the proceedings in the court of Hastinapura are dramatically different in the *Mahabharata* from that in the *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*.³⁸ In the *Mahabharata* Shakuntala presents her son, rather than herself to king Dushyanta and practically demands that he be consecrated. Whereas, in the *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*, the two disciplines of rishi Kanva and the female aesthetic Gautami speaks on her behalf.

In the *Mahabharata*, Dushyanta doesn’t actually forget his marriage to Shakuntala, but pretends to do so.³⁹ While in the Kalidasa’s version he falls under the spell, the curse of Durvasa.

The epic version of the story shows that the status of the king was not absolute. A divine proclamation was needed in order to be approved by the clansmen. The epic version sets out the origin myth of the founder of the Bharata clan.⁴⁰

³⁶Sengupta, Saswati and Tendon, Deepika.(edt). (2011). op. cit. pp.249-250.

³⁷*Ibid*, p. 250.

³⁸*Ibid*, p. 250.

³⁹*Ibid*, p. 276.

The nature of the representation of Shakuntala varies in the two different versions. From the epic narrative to the play there is a change in the conceptualization of the women.⁴¹ In the Kalidasa's version of the text Shakuntala is described as the child of the nature, and is been identified with the plants and the animals. She is dressed in bark clothes, and flowers which is replaced by fine clothes and jewellery at the time of her departure. Shy is shy, retiring, modest and generally submissive.⁴² In the last act she forgives Dushyanta's action because of him being under a spell, and instead tries to take the blame on herself that she is reaping the consequences of some wrong doing on her part in a previous birth. Kanva's disciples hints that the *Gandharva* marriage being the cause of all evils, leading to the misery of Shakuntala. One wonders whether this is the resentment against a women's transgression of patriarchy and taking an independent decision, for he insists that she must suffer the consequence of such decisions.⁴³

The virtues of the modesty, chastity, self sacrifice, devotion were the virtues recognized in the Shakuntala of the Kalidasa's version which is unfamiliar with the Shakuntala of the epic.⁴⁴ Kalidasa's version she is the romantic ideal of upper- high culture, where moral responsibility is misted over by the introduction of the extraneous factors of the curse and the ring.⁴⁵

⁴⁰Thapar,Romila. (1999). Op. cit. p. 35.

⁴¹Thapar,Romila. (2013). Op. cit. p. 444.

⁴²*Ibid*,p. 444.

⁴³*Ibid*, p. 444.

⁴⁴*Ibid*, p. 450.

⁴⁵*Ibid*, p. 451.

Shakuntala in both the versions are a semi-celestial being, and often an apsara. The apsara was a liberated women, coming and going as she pleased and not as ordered by the hero.⁴⁶ Shakuntala being an apsara in both the versions is a personification of the freedom of the women. The apsaras of the *Mahabharata* tend to be outspoken and more independent, perhaps because patriarchy and caste rule were still flexible in the earlier period.⁴⁷ The strong women character of the *Mahabharata* suggest an earlier stage of social development, when women were less subordinate to men as compared to the latter times.⁴⁸

The change in the representation of Shakuntala in the Kalidasa version as compared to the *Mahabharata* version seems to have been greatly influenced by the various texts that were written in between the two. The impact of the Dharmasatras which laid down the rules of conduct for a person living in the society, which also divided the society into various sections seems to be the factor for the change.

It is in both the versions that we can see that the women after the marriage had to leave her maternal home for the house of her husband. this was the general law set up, which to some extent have led to the deterioration in the status of women in the society. This idea of leaving one's home is termed as Patrilocality as according to Gerda Lenda which structures kinship in such a way that a women must leave her family of birth and

⁴⁶Thapar, Romila. (2014). *The Past as Present*. New Delhi: Rupa Publication. p. 271.

⁴⁷*Ibid*, pp. 271-272.

⁴⁸Singh, U. (2016). *A History of ancient and Early Medieval India From the Stone Age to the 12th Century*. India: Pearson. p. 19.

reside with her husband or husband's family. The preference of Patriliney over Matriliney, must be a coincident with the sub-ordination of women.⁴⁹

Where we try to see both the versions we can see that, the central theme of the story differs. The main thrust of the story in the *Mahabharata* is the conception, early childhood and heir ship claim of Bharata the first born of Shakuntala and Dushyanta. In contrast Kalidasa's Shakuntala is a sophisticated sensuous retention that attempts to please and entertain the court audience at the same time it attempts to project Dushyanta and Shakuntala as archetypal models of masculine and feminine.⁵⁰ In the Kalidasa's version it is clearly seen the differences in the portrayal of Dushyanta as compared to Shakuntala.

CONCLUSION

The different versions of the story represents the different section of the society, and Kalidasa in adopting the storyline from the epic and adding some more in his own versions shows the change in the structure of the society, which left an impact on which is clearly reflected in his work.

Regarding the nature of the two different genres there seems to have been an improvement in the latter work that is of Kalidasa's as compared to the former one. on the other hand position of women it seems to have been degraded as compared to the

⁴⁹Lerner, Gerda. (1986). *The creation of patriarchy*. New York: Oxford University Press. p. 47.

⁵⁰Singh, Neeti. (2014). A reading of Kalidasa's Abhijanana Shakuntalam as a Cultural Text. *The Vedic path*. p. 4.

earlier one. Shakuntala of *Mahabharata* seems to have enjoyed a greater freedom, and a better position than the Shakuntala of Kalidasa. The impact of the various rules and regulations laid upon the women is clearly seen on the position of the women.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Abhijnanan shakuntalam of Kalidasa has been able to provide us with a wide range of historical information. The text gives us incidents and hints about descriptions about the Gupta period. One can also study the status of women from this text. The information can be gathered through the descriptions of the events and incidents in the course of the narration of the text. Various sections of the text provide us with information pertaining to the different roles of women, the role of society, the differences in status of men and women etc. It is through the narration of events in the text that we find the information of the Gupta period and as well as the position of women in the period through the representation of women in the text.

Abhijnana shakuntalam is a proper fusion of literature, history, womanhood, gender and culture and narrates the accounts of the love union between king Dushyanta and Shakuntala. Since it is established that the text was composed during the Gupta period around the fourth- fifth century CE, it somehow reflects the Gupta period. Some similar features of the Gupta period were reflected in the text, which were seen through the depiction like the form of governance, land grants, taxation, religion, in the form of literature, linguistic factors and also the position of women.

It is established that Kalidasa served as a court poet during the Gupta period and that form of governance, society is depicted in his works. The instances in the play where we see that king Dushyanta represents monarchical king who is not only the ruler of the land but also the protector of it. The existence of the ashramas on the outskirts of the city

somehow reflects the land granted to the Brahamanas, which was a tax free land. The position of women in the Gupta period was regarded to be low as compared to the women of the earlier period. It is evidenced from the text how the women have been marginalised as compared to the male members in that period. It can be clearly seen from the text the women had been kept away from the politics and the state affairs. With an exception of few instances in the text, it is evidenced that the position of women was low as compared to men in the society.

In the process of studying the *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* as a historical text, a thorough study of its form is done. In doing so, we found out that the work of Kalidasa is exceptional and the dramatic proficiency of Kalidasa is reflected in the *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* which justifies itself to be regarded as a masterpiece in Sanskrit literature. One of the main reasons in making the *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* an exceptional work is that, Kalidasa has tried to keep the story of Shakuntala from the epic alive in his work. It had been clearly established that Kalidasa have borrowed the main story from the Mahabharata. While keeping the story intact, Kalidasa have introduced sub- themes making it more fascinating and dramatic too. The efficiency of Kalidasa is reflected in the use of language, in the text. By using Sanskrit and Prakrit Kalidasa has somehow tried to bring together the major part of audiences. The stratification of the society by then on the basis of language can be understood, where the people, mostly men of the upper class used Sanskrit as a medium of communication, while on the other hand the lower class along with women used Prakrit as a medium.

The narrations in the text are connected in such a way that it makes the flow of the story even. It is a perfect combination of different world including the heaven and

earth, various natural and supernatural powers. The lyrical narrative of the text in the form of play makes it an item of interest. Kalidasa's use of the main protagonists in the play represents the two different categories of people. Shakuntala and Dushyanta are considered as the ideal heroine and hero of Sanskrit drama. Dushyanta represents royal line whereas Shakuntala represents a common girl having a privileged born. They also represent the two different strata of society, male and the female. The protagonists of the text represent their status in the society. A thorough study of the text presents us an idea that to an extent it give impetus to Shakuntala, who is subjugated and also the sufferer to the impact of events.

Interestingly, the central theme of the text apart from providing the historical information also indicates the position of women in the society. Kalidasa in the text have been able to present a lucid picture of women. Women in the text have occupied enough space in the text. It is through the representation of Shakuntala in the text the position of women can be understood. The role assigned to Shakuntala is limited in the text; the stereotyped role of women as a daughter, wife and a mother is assigned to Shakuntala. Shakuntala somehow represents the women bounded to the household, and also is made incapable to the task beyond it. Looking from the role assigned to Shakuntala it can be clearly understood the status of the women. On the one hand, the limited participation of women in the social, political, economical and religious spheres shows the poor status of the women. On the other hand, it indicates about the unequal status of women as compared to men.

It is also evident from the representation of Shakuntala in the text that the position of the women was determined by the birth of a son. Shakuntala received

importance in the society only because she is the birth giver of a son, an heir to the throne. As evidenced from the text, the other queens in the palace received no importance as they were unable to provide a son. This somehow indicates the patriarchal form of society.

With the help of various arguments put forward by the historians it has been established that Kalidasa has borrowed the story of Shakuntala from the *Mahabharata*. While examining the two different versions various similarities and differences are found. Two versions show two different time period, along with diverse culture and social structures. In terms of the representation of Shakuntala there are some parallels in the *Mahabharata* version and the kalidasa's version. It is through Shakuntala that provides a great insight into the position of women in two different societies. It is found that the Shakuntala of the *Mahabharata* is stronger, outspoken, having a worldly knowledge as compared to that of Kalidasa's where she fights for the right of her son. The absence of companion, the motif of ring and the curse is also one of the reasons to make Shakuntala stronger in the text. It is evident that in the *Mahabharata* version also the position of Shakuntala is given an impetus with the birth of a son, as it is in Kalidasa's version.

The change in the time period in the composition of the two different versions might be a reason for Kalidasa to symbolize Shakuntala as weak, submissive and fragile. The impact of various ideas and institutions that grew up in between the two time period is one of the major factors in the decline of the position of the women.

The *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* of Kalidasa is regarded as a master piece by eminent historians giving insights about the role of women, the society then and the depiction of wide range of ideas on various themes especially the position of women which is

represented by the protagonist, Shakuntala. Having said so, the text is not free from limitations.

The characters such as Indra, Apsara, Menaka are attributed with extraordinary powers that exist in a timeless world. The extraction of the Shakuntala episode from the *Mahabhrata* by Kalidasa can also be attributed as a legendary aspect. Moreover, weaving in elements from literature with various depictions give historical descriptions a setback.

Though Shakuntala is the main character in the text, her position is not shown as powerful as the position of Dushyanta. The men are shown as superior in every stratum. The tradition of women not making a part of state and other public affairs is clearly shown by the representation of the domestic roles of women. The episode of Kanva being the head of the ashrama despite Gautami being the senior most reinforced that the society was a patriarchal one.

Shakuntala, the main character cannot represent the condition of all the women belonging to that age. She is said to be an Apsara, a child of an Apsara and a Rishi who may have a better life than many women in the society then. The freedom to perform the *Gandharva* form of marriage is not a privilege to everyone. Kalidasa has described some of the characters at length, whereas others receive a brief mention in the text. Despite such limitations Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* still served as one of the valuable work that centred around the importance of women.

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