

Abhigyan Shakuntalam
The Recognition of Shakuntala
Summary

A Glimpse of Kalidasa's Works

Kālidāsa in the 4th-5th century CE, was arguably one of ancient India's greatest Sanskrit dramatists. He occupies the same position in Sanskrit literature that Shakespeare occupies in English literature.

He deals primarily with famous Hindu legends and themes. Three famous romantic plays written by Kālidāsa are the Mālavikāgnimitram (*Mālavikā and Agnimitra*), Vikramōrvaśīyam (*Pertaining to Vikrama and Urvashi*), and Abhijñānaśākuntalam (*The Recognition of Shakuntala*). The last was inspired by a story in the *Mahabharata* and is the most famous. It was the first to be translated into English and German. Śakuntalā (in English translation) influenced Goethe's Faust (1808–1832).

He also composed *Meghadutam* [*The Cloud Messenger*] and *Rtusamharam* [*The Gathering of the Seasons*].

Introduction

The story of Dushyanta and Shakuntala is in the *Book of the Beginnings* (Adi Parva) of the *Mahabharata*, the epic.

Kalidasa has employed dramatic devices to enhance the poetic and dramatic effect of the narrative. Kalidasa has made some deviations from the main story in the *Mahabharata*.

The episode of the signet ring is an important addition by Kalidasa in Shakuntalam.

Major/ Important Dramatis personae (Characters)

Ashram Dwellers

Shakuntala [Biological Daughter of Vishwamitra and Menaka]

Anasuya [Shakuntala's friend and confidante]

Priyanguva [Shakuntala's friend and confidante]

Gautami

Sharangrav, and Sharadvat

Sages

Rishi Vishwamitra

Rishi Kanva [Foster-father to Shkuntala]

Durvasa muni

Rishi Mareech

Puru Dynasty

Dushyanta

Bharat

Gods, Divinities and Demons

Lord Indra

Menaka

Matali [The charioteer of Indra]

Other Apsaras

Demons

Others

Fisherman

Guard

Vidushaka [The Fool] [Dushyanta's Confidante]

ACT I

It begins with the description of the summer season by the narrator (Sutradhar). He also introduces king **Dushyanta**.

Dushyanta while chasing a deer, enters the ashram of the sage **Kanva** in his Chariot. The king aims at the deer but a monk restricts him to hunt in the premises of sage Kanva. Then on being invited by the monk, Dushyanta enters the ashram. The monk informs the king that sage Kanva is out for some days.

Shakuntala accompanied by two companions, **Priyamvada** and **Anusuya** welcomes the royal guest. The king is mesmerized by the beauty of Shakuntala. Meanwhile, a wasp has been hovering around Shakuntala and she runs towards Dushyanta for safety. Dushyanta talks to Shakuntala and her companions. He also comes to know that Shakuntala is the daughter of a Kshatriya, a warrior king turned a rishi, **Vishwamitra**. The king is informed that Shakuntala is the foster-child of sage Kanva.

Just then an agitated elephant enters the ashram and Dushyanta orders his soldiers to take care of the animal. Shakuntala has also been suffering from the pangs of love. **Cupid** has done his work. Shakuntala leaves the place with her companions burning with a desire for Dushyanta.

ACT II

Dushyanta is also love-sick. He is with the **fool (Vidushaka)**. The fool is fed up with the business of hunting in the forest. The king forbids his general and soldiers to kill any animal and instructs them not to disturb the holy men. He confesses to the fool that he cannot live without **Shakuntala**. He asks the fool to manage his stay there for some more time.

Two ascetics, young ones arrive and request the king to protect their sacred fire-place (**Yajna Shala**) from the plundering of the demons (**rakshas**). The king happily agrees. The messengers from the kingdom inform the king about his mother's instructions to bring back the king. **Dushyanta** sends his army back and himself stays back. He also forbids the fool not to reveal this secret to his other queens in the town. He decides to make **Shakuntala** his **patrani**, the queen of queens.

ACT III

Shakuntala has so far spent her life in the quiet, sylvan environment of the ashram but now her contact with a handsome young king has made her love-sick. She is seen lying on the bed of flowers, thinking of **Dushyanta**. She discusses the matter with her companions. Mean-while **Dushyanta** is hiding in a groove listening to their confessions. **Shakuntala** confesses that **Dushyanta** can be her only mate in this world, and that she will not live without him.

The king appears on the scene and declares his love for **Shakuntala**. The two companions leave the scene and the two lovers have an opportunity to know each other. The king proposes the enactment of the ‘**gandharva**’ marriage yet **Shakuntala** is reluctant. The king leaves the place to protect the ashram from the wrath of the demons.

ACT IV

The ceremony of '**Gandharva**' marriage is solemnized. After spending some time with **Shakuntala**, **Dushyanta** leaves the ashram to look after his kingdom. He assures **Shakuntala** that he would send his men to fetch her to his capital. Since that day, she has been feeling lonely and love sick.

One day, she sits at the door of her hut. A great sage **Durvasa**, known for his anger, arrives and asks for alms but **Shakuntala** is lost in her thoughts. The sage feels offended and becomes annoyed. The enraged rishi, curses **Shakuntala** by saying that whosoever (her husband), she is thinking of, would forget her as due to being engrossed in her thoughts, she has neglected her duties. Her companion **Priyamvada** apologizes to the sage, explains him everything and pleads to him to help **Shakuntala**. The sage tells that the curse can't be undone but its impact can be nullified thus: on showing any **signet ornament** of her lover to him, he will remember her.

Priyamvada and **Anusuya** know about this curse and **Shakuntala** is unaware of all this. They know that the **signet ring** of **Dushyant** is with **Shakuntala**. They assume that the presence of the signet ring will neutralize the impact of the curse. So they don't tell anyone about this.

When sage **Kanva** returns from his pilgrimage, he hears a prophecy from the heavens about the marriage of **Shakuntala** with king **Dushyanta**. He also learns that **Shakuntala** is pregnant. He peeps into the womb of future with his spiritual powers and sees the bright and illustrious career of **Shakuntala's** son. He approves of this marriage.

On the other side, the curse of **Durvasa** shows its power. The king becomes **oblivious of his relationship** with **Shakuntala** and no one comes to the ashram/hermitage to take Shakuntala. Shakuntala is pregnant and the sage makes necessary arrangements to send Shakuntala to her husband.

Here Kalidasa provides a poignant description of the departure of Shakuntala when she bids adieu to her friends, deer, pets and even trees. Sage Kanva is deeply pained to see this but he gives elderly advice to Shakuntala. Along with a woman **Gautami** and two ascetics, Shakuntala arrives the kingdom of king Dushyanta.

ACT V

Shakuntala is accompanied by two young ascetics **Sharangrav, and Sharadvat**, and a woman **Gautami**. They appear before the king. Sharangrav tells the king about the previous development, and that Shakuntala is his wedded wife. The ascetics tell the king that sage Kanva has also approved of their ‘gandharva’ marriage, and so he has sent them to the king. But king Dushyanta is under the spell of the curse, so he fails to recognize Shakuntala.

Gautami shows him the face of Shakuntala but he shows his helplessness. Now Shakuntala is reminded of the signet ring of Dushyanta but that ring is missing.

On the way, the ring slips from her finger, falls into the river, and gets swallowed by a fish. The ascetics try their best to persuade the king but of no use. The ascetics and Gautami leave Shakuntala and depart. Shakuntala weeps and mourns. Then a celestial nymph **Menaka (an apsara in the court of god Indra in heaven and also mother to Shakuntala)** descends from the heavens and takes Shakuntala with her. The king is shocked to see this.

ACT VI

Days later, a fisherman has a good catch in the river and he finds a gold ring in the belly of a fish. He tries to sell it in the market. It is the same signet ring of Dushyanta which he had given to Shakuntala. The soldiers take him to be a thief and bring him to the royal court. When the king sees the ring, the curse loses its potency, and he at once remembers his marriage with Shakuntala. But her mother Menaka has taken her away and the king is now grief-stricken. One nymph (apsara) visits the palace to see the condition of Dushyanta. She is invisible and finds the king grief stricken.

The guard brings a letter from his minister that informs him about the death of a merchant in a boat accident. Now his property would go to the royal treasury. The king now realises if he dies without a son, then his wealth will also go to others. He faints. Then the charioteer (**Sarathi**) of lord **Indra, Matali** arrives from heaven to take Dushyanta to a battle with the demons. Dushyanta at once leaves for heaven to fight with the mighty demons and assist gods.

ACT VII

King Dushyanta defeats the demons and helps the gods to retain supremacy in the three worlds. Lord Indra honours the brave king and bids him farewell to the earth. On his way back to the earth, Dushyanta is attracted by the beauty of Hemkoot mountain where sage Mareech meditates in his ashram. Dushyanta comes down from the chariot to pay his regards to the sage. In the ashram, the king sees a healthy boy playing with a lion. He is trying to count the teeth of the lion. The king is amazed to see this brave boy. The boy resembles the king and instinctively, Dushyanta develops a liking for the boy. The king is informed that the boy's mother's name is Shakuntala and the boy belongs to Puru family. Dushyanta at once realizes that he himself is the father of this boy. Shakuntala appears on the scene and falls on his feet. She weeps bitterly.

The king apologizes for everything that has happened with Shakuntala. The king visits the sage Mareech to pay his regards. The sage tells the king that due to the curse, the king could not remember anything about his marriage with Shakuntala. So the king proves his innocence. The sage blesses both of them and sends them back to their kingdom. This boy is Bharat who becomes a great king and a warrior. The play ends on a happy note.

Reference and Acknowledgement: Various open access internet sources and Kalidasa Abhijnana Shakuntalam, tr. Chandra Rajan, in *Kalidasa: The Loom of Time* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1989)