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The Green Consciousness: Sakuntala as the Voice of Nature in Abhijñānaśākuntalam

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Abstract

Kalidasa's Abhijñānaśākuntalam serves as a foundational text for Indian ecocriticism. This article explores the character of Sakuntala not merely as a romantic heroine, but as a biological extension of the Tapovana (penance grove). By analysing the 'voice' of nature as manifested through the physical landscape, this article argues that the play posits an ecological harmony in which the human and non-human worlds are ontologically inseparable. Raised in the serene hermitage of sage Kaṇva, Śākuntalā grows in an environment untouched by worldly corruption. These natural upbringing shapes her personality, making her an embodiment of innocence, compassion, and harmony. Through a close reading of Act IV, the research highlights how Sakuntala embodies the "Prakṛiti" (Nature) that sustains and eventually redeems the "Puruṣa" (Man/Duṣhyanta).

Keywords

Śākuntalā, Prakṛti, Kālidāsa, Nature symbolism, Sanskrit drama, Hermitage culture, ecocriticism.

Introduction

The intersection of literature and ecology, often termed "Ecocriticism," finds one of its most sophisticated early expressions in the Kavya literature of ancient India. Kalidasa's Abhijñānaśākuntalam is not merely a courtly drama of love and loss; it is an ontological exploration of the human-nature continuum. The dramatic scenes are related to the hermitage at the foot of the Himalayas (Act I-IV), the capital, Hastinapura, (Acts V-VI), and lastly Mārica's hermitage on the Hemakūta mountains. In this scenery, 'his description of the nature and of the co-existence of the life of nature and the life of human is quite natural and beautiful¹. Kālidāsa presents Śākuntalā as a gentle and sensitive maiden whose character gradually evolves through trials and experiences. At the heart of this exploration is Sakuntala, the daughter of a nymph and a sage, whose very name derived from the Sakuntas (birds) that protected her at birth, marks her as a child of the wild². This article examines how Sakuntala acts as the "Voice of Nature," representing a bridge between the Aranya (forest) and the Nagara (city), arguing that her identity is inextricably linked to the biological vitality of the hermitage.

Śākuntalā in the Epic Tradition

In the Mahābhārata, Śākuntalā appears as a courageous and self-assertive woman³. When King Duṣyanta refuses to acknowledge her in the royal court, she boldly defends her honour and the legitimacy of her son. Her speech reveals confidence and determination. In the epic narrative she reminds the king of his promise and declares that her son will become a great ruler even without the king's recognition⁴. The epic heroine therefore appears strong, fearless, and argumentative.

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In contrast, Kālidāsa transforms this bold character into a gentle and sensitive maiden. The poet does not remove her dignity or strength, but he presents them in a subtler and more emotional form. This transformation illustrates the creative genius of the dramatist.

Śākuntalā as the daughter of Nature

At the beginning of the play, Śākuntalā is introduced as a simple maiden living in the hermitage of sage Kanva. Her life in the hermitage reflects purity, innocence, and harmony with nature. She lovingly cares for the trees and plants as if they were members of her own family.

In Abhijñānaśākuntalam, Śākuntalā is presented from the very beginning as a true child of nature, whose life is intimately interwoven with the hermitage environment. In the opening acts⁵, she is seen watering plants and caring for creepers with deep affection, treating them almost as living companions (Act I). This emotional kinship with nature is reflected in her gentle interaction with the वनलता: and hermitage life. Kālidāsa reinforces this organic connection when King Duṣyanta beholds her and remarks: “इयं अधिकमनोज्ञा वल्कलेनापि तन्वी किमिव हि मधुराणां मण्डनं नाकृतिनाम्”⁶ (emphasizing that her natural beauty surpasses all artificial ornamentation.)

“न खलु न खलु बाणः सन्निपात्योऽयमस्मिन् मृदुनि मृगशरीरे”⁷ -King Duṣyanta restrains himself from hunting. This shows the non-violent harmony of the forest, a world Śākuntalā belongs to. Her compassion is reflected in such an atmosphere where even animals are protected. Even in her absence, she remains present in Duṣyanta’s mind as part of the forest itself (Act II), showing that she is inseparable from the natural environment. As love awakens in her heart, her emotional condition is expressed through natural imagery, she becomes like a tender creeper weakened by longing, as suggested in her love-lorn expression “सखी! दह्यमानहृदया अस्मि” (Act III). Her absorption in love leads to her neglect of duties, culminating in the sage’s reproach “अतिथिर्नाभ्यर्चितः” (Act III), which causes her eventual separation. Thus, in these acts, Śākuntalā’s beauty, emotions, and destiny are all deeply expressed. Her affection for nature is beautifully expressed when she says that she feels a deep attachment even to the plants of the hermitage:

“न केवलं तातनियोग एव। अस्ति मे सोदरस्नेहोऽप्येतेषु।”

This statement shows that Śākuntalā’s love for the plants is not merely a duty assigned by her father but arises from genuine affection. The hermitage therefore becomes the natural environment that shapes her gentle and compassionate character.

In the Tapovana, Sakuntala’s relationship with the plants transcends simple maintenance; it is a kinship of shared life-force. In Act IV, Kalidasa establishes her "Green Ethic" through the words of Sage Kanva:

पातुं न प्रथमं व्यवस्यति जलं युष्मास्वपीतेषु या
नादत्ते प्रियमण्डनापि भवतां स्नेहेन या पल्लवम्।
आद्ये वः कुसुमप्रसूतिसमये यस्याः भवत्युत्सवः
सेयं याति शकुन्तला पतिगृहं सर्वैरनुज्ञायताम्⁸॥

This verse reveals a non-exploitative relationship: Sakuntala refuses to quench her own thirst until the trees are watered and refuses to pluck blossoms for decoration out of "affection" for the plants. She views the jasmine vine, Vanajyotsna, as a sister

अनुमतगमना शकुन्तला तरुभिरियं वनवासबन्धुभिः।

This passage is from Abhijñānaśākuntalam, where Śākuntalā is being sent from the hermitage to her husband’s home. Nature itself seems to bid her farewell. “Having been formally announced and permitted to depart, Śākuntalā themaiden who has lived in the forest, among the trees that are like her kinsmen.

As if responding to her, the sweet notes of the cuckoos (forest birds)

seem to form a gentle reply from these companions of the woodland.”

Śākuntalā is not leaving just a place, but a family of nature. The trees, birds, breeze, and landscape are personified as her companions. Even the sky seems to bless her journey, wishing her comfort, beauty, and peace along the way.

क्षौमं केनचिदिन्दुपाण्डुतरुणा माङ्गल्यमाविष्कृतम् केनचित्। निष्ठूत-
श्वरणोपभोगसुलभोलाक्षारसः अन्येभ्यो वनदेवताकरतलैरापर्वभागोत्थितैः

The verse describes how various forest deities contribute to her adornment. One offers a garment of delicate texture, white as moonlight, symbolizing purity and auspiciousness. Another provides sacred and मंगल (auspicious) elements appropriate for a bride. From elsewhere comes the lac-dye, gently applied to her feet, signifying traditional feminine grace. Meanwhile, the forest deities, extending their hands from the tips of branches, present ornaments that rival the tender brilliance of newly sprouting leaves.

In the words of A.W.Ryder to Kalidasa’s treatment of nature: ‘rarely has a man walked our earth who observed the phenomena of living nature as accurately as he, though his accuracy was of course that of the poet, not that of the scientist’⁹.

The Sympathetic Mourning of the Forest

The most poignant evidence of Sakuntala as the "Voice of Nature" occurs during her departure. The forest does not remain a silent backdrop; it reacts with physical grief. Kalidasa write

उद्गलितदर्भकवलाः मृग्यः परित्यक्तनर्तनाः मयूराः।

अपसृतपाण्डुपत्रामुञ्चन्त्यश्रूणीव लताः¹⁰॥

The deer dropping their food and the creepers shedding leaves as "tears" signify a biological synchronicity. Nature here is a sentient participant in the human drama, signaling that the removal of Sakuntala is a wound to the ecosystem itself.

किं नु खलु विटपी विटपान्ते इव निवसने मे सज्जति

Śakuntalā (pausing and adjusting her movement): Why is it that my garment keeps getting caught here and there on the branches, as though some travellers were holding me back? This conveys her hesitation and emotional reluctance to leave the forest, subtly expressed through nature.

Through this poetic device, Kālidāsa underscores a central theme of the drama: the inseparability of human life from nature. Śakuntalā is not merely a resident of the forest; she is its daughter. Thus, her departure becomes an emotional moment not only for the sages but for the entire natural world, which expresses its affection through acts of adornment and blessing.

Conclusion

According to Kalidasa all natural resources that assist in sustaining the lives of beings on the planets may be included in the field of Green Consciousness. We find this very concept in the terms 'praninaḥ prāṇavantah¹¹ used by him in the benedictory verse of Abhijñānaśakuntalam¹².

Sakuntala represents the "Ecofeminist" ideal where the female identity and the natural environment are unified against the artificial constructs of the city. When King Dushyanta forgets Sakuntala, he effectively forgets his connection to the earth. It is only through the intervention of nature—the river and the fish returning the lost ring—that truth is restored. Ultimately, Kalidasa suggests that human civilization can only find redemption by listening to the "Voice of Nature" embodied in Sakuntala.

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6. A. S 1/20.
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11. या सृष्टिः स्रष्टुराद्या वहति विधिहुतं या हविर्या च होत्री
ये द्वे कालं विधत्तः श्रुतिविषयगुणा या स्थिता व्याप्य विश्वम् ।
यामाहुः सर्वबीजप्रकृतिरिति यया प्राणिनः प्राणवन्तः
प्रत्यक्षाभिः प्रसन्नस्तनुभिरवतु वस्ताभिरष्टाभिरीशः॥

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