

**A PROJECT ON**  
**LOVE AND LOSS IN *ABHIJNANA SHAKUNTALAM***

**Submitted as a Project Work for Partial Fulfilment of**

**B.A.-English (H)**



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## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the project entitled, “Love and Loss in *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*” is a bonafide work of Mr. Sourav Kanchan of B.A.-English (H), SEM IV, bearing Regn No. AJU/200638 submitted in partial fulfilment of the Project Work of SEM IV, B.A.-English (H).

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**University seal**

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## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that the project entitled, “Love and Loss in *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*” done at “Arka Jain University”, has not been in any case duplicated to submit to any other university for the award of any degree. To the best of my knowledge other than me, no one has submitted to any other university. This project is done in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Project Work to be submitted as fourth semester project as part of our curriculum.

**Sourav Kanchan**

## LOVE AND LOSS IN *ABHIJNANA SHAKUNTALAM*

*Abhijnana Shakuntala* is one of the most well-known plays by Kalidasa. As most of the Sanskrit dramas of his time, Kalidasa wrote in a mixture of both classical Sanskrit - spoken by the royals, courtly figures, upper caste figures and Prakrit, consisting of different types of vernaculars - spoken by the common people including women and children. What does this sentence say about the times? Does it strike you to find women and children clubbed together? Hold that thought.

The title of the play *Abhijnana Shakuntala* can be translated as The Recognition of Shakuntala. The play, as stated in the earlier unit, is an extension of an episode from the *Mahabharata*. Kalidasa's prowess as an exemplary dramatist can be seen in way he has lent complexity to the characters - to Shakuntala and Duhsanta, adding innovative elements such as the curse and the ring to enhance the rasa of kama /love as well as, making Duhsanta's character more appealing to the audience. Furthermore, the ultimate union of the hero and the heroine does not occur in the royal Palace of the King but in the heavenly hermitage of Marica and Aditi, years after the birth of their son. Thus, his retelling of Shakuntala is significantly different from its original source.

Kalidasa creates a heroic drama of a romantic nature, endearing it to the audience of his day and now readers beyond his time and place. The longing and aches of first love; the trials of love thwarted; the happiness at being reunited; are emotions and feelings that everyone can identify with. However, one cannot deny how the drama is a reflection of particular socio-political and cultural ethos of his time. The very rejection of Shakuntala because of the loss of the token makes us question the position of women in his time (notwithstanding the loss of memory). As Misrakesi asks "does a love such as this really need a token of recognition? How can that be?" .Duhsanta's unhappiness at his inability to have a son is a telling portrayal of the importance of sons in carrying the name of the family forward. Even in the depiction of the fisherman who finds the lost ring, Kalidasa shows the corrupt and brutal nature of the guards/ soldiers/ law enforcers who treat him unfairly and assume his guilt without any proof. Such details help us to imagine the world of Shakuntala and Duhsanta with a clarity and nuance not available in the epic.

The play is available to us in translation, which naturally begs the question of how well can the translated text embody the rasa/essence of the drama? The translation that we are using is the Penguin Classics series titled Kalidasa - The Loom of Time by Chandra Rajan, published in 1989. The text is a beautiful rendering of the original drama, keeping in mind its literary and aesthetic quality.

## **THEMES**

A theme is the central topic of a text. However, since no work of literature can concentrate on just one theme without referencing others, a text will usually have more than one, with some being more essential for the text than others. Abhijnana Shakuntala deals with many themes, such as love, memory, concealment, duty Vs desire and love.

### **THE THEME OF LOVE:**

Abhijnana Shakuntala as stated in the introduction is a heroic drama of a romantic nature. The rasa invoked here is shringara or love and according to the Sanskrit dramatic order, love poetry consists of sambhoga, love in union and vipralambha, love in separation. In the play, Kalidasa first creates a temporary union of the protagonists, King Duhsanta, the hero or nayaka and Shakuntala, the heroine or nayika as the play narratives the burgeoning and consummation of their love (ACT I, II, III). It is then followed by separation caused by the loss of memory and the token ring due to the curse (ACT IV, V, VI) The play ends with the re-union of not only Shakuntala and Duhsanta but also of their son Bharata (ACT VI).

We notice how these different stages of love occur in different places in the play. The initial courting and marriage takes place in the forest of the Hermitage, where the King had come to hunt. It's a world that is an intrinsic part of Shakuntala's character; even the plants and animals are her kin. Duhsanta has thus entered her world. The interruption of this love happens when Duhsanta leave this world to go back to the Royal Palace, where his duties as a king await. When Shakuntala goes to claim her right to be by his side at his Court, the device of the curse delays that union and both the ascetic companions and Duhsanta desert her. Their final union happens around six years later in the celestial realm on a heavenly mountain in the Hermitage of Marica and Aditi. In portraying the development of their love in such a way Kalidasa highlights the

differences between the world of the Hermitage and the world of the Royal Court. Paradoxically, it is in the world of the Hermitage, a place for austerities and meditation that Shakuntala and Duhsanta find love and it is the Royal Court, a place ideal for the intrigues of love that their separation occurs.

Shakuntala born and bred in the innocent and pure world of nature puts her faith in words rather than objects thus, consenting to a Gandharva marriage. This form of marriage does not require the consent of the parents/elders and is primarily foregrounded on the desires of the lovers. However, this love cannot disrupt the established caste hierarchy and therefore, we see how Duhsanta pursues Shakuntala once he ascertains her Kshatriya varna. Duhsanta represents the world outside the secluded and protected Hermitage, which is filled with deceit and cunning. In this world, Shakuntala's word is not sufficient but needs tangible proof to be validated, in the form of the ring, in front of everyone in the Royal Court. The contrasting nature of their worlds necessitates that their union occurs in a different world altogether, moreover specifically after Duhsanta becomes a more considerate and compassionate man.

Kalidasa seems to bring in an element of sadness in the prologue and some might even say unnecessary delaying of their union. Kalidasa shows us the intoxicating nature of passion and love and how it might lead to a neglect of one's duty/dharma. For Shakuntala that results in the curse which leads to her repudiation. This curse can only be broken on the presentation of a token of recognition, which is the royal signet ring.

Though the curse complicates our understanding of love, we nonetheless see how Shakuntala is unwavering in her love for Duhsanta, which ascribes her as the ideal heroine. The ring too complicates our understanding of love by making us question the veracity of love itself, if such love needs inanimate objects to validate it.

Kalidasa's depiction of love is thus nuanced and complicated and does not shy away from making his audience ask uncomfortable questions regarding it.

### **DUTY VS LOVE:**

Throughout Shakuntala, duty and love are closely intertwined. This connection is in keeping with the importance of dharma (duty) in Hindu practice at the time. Dharma, along with artha

(material success) and kama (desire), was understood to be one of the primary goals of human existence, while the ultimate goal of that existence was to attain moksha, or liberation from worldly existence. In the play, there is particular tension between dharma and kama. The structure of the play—from opposition between duty and love during Shakuntala’s courtship, to failed efforts to harmonize them in the middle of the play, to reconciliation between them in the final act—suggests that reconciling the competing goals of human existence is a lifelong journey, but that when that struggle is faithfully undertaken, it eventually proceeds toward spiritual liberation.

Early in the play, love and duty are seen as being at odds with each other, and duty is even used as an excuse to pursue love. For example, when Duhsanta first sees Shakuntala, the king sees something incongruous about Shakuntala’s devotion to religious duty. To him, Shakuntala’s desirable physical beauty seems wasted in her life of ascetic striving. Meanwhile, Shakuntala’s first experience of passion seems to her to be incompatible with her lifelong religious piety. As soon as Duhsanta reveals himself in the ascetic grove, Shakuntala thinks, “But how can it have happened that, simply at the sight of this man, I am shaken with a passion so at odds with the religious life?”

Rather transparently, Duhsanta then uses his sacred royal duties (kings were to defend the oppressed, with special care for safeguarding the rites of religious practitioners) as a cover for romantic desire. He tells Shakuntala and her friends, “I have been appointed [...] as Minister for Religious Welfare. And in that capacity I’ve come to this sacred forest to ensure your rituals are not obstructed in any way.” Duhsanta, here, is not actually connecting duty and love. Rather, he is using duty as a lie to pursue love. At this point, as described in the stage direction, Shakuntala “displays all the embarrassment of erotic attraction.” She apparently sees through Dusyanta’s ruse, and at any rate, she’s aware that her own religious devotion is more likely to be obstructed, not helped, by her attraction to this man!

Before leaving the grove, Dusyanta reflects to himself, “Suddenly, the city doesn’t seem so attractive [...] the truth is, I can’t get Shakuntala out of my head.” Duhsanta’s responsibilities in the capital city no longer appeal to him, going against the grain of the erotic desire he now feels. Duty and desire, seemingly, don’t go together.

In the middle acts of the play, there's a struggle to harmonize love and duty. In Act II, Dusyanta is asked to protect the ashram for a few nights in the sage Kanva's absence. But no sooner has he agreed to this than a messenger arrives with a competing obligation, a request from his mother to participate in a ritual fast in the capital. "I have to weigh my duty to the ascetics against the request of a revered parent—and neither can be ignored." He finally decides in favor of staying close to Shakuntala in the ashram, though he knows duty will eventually tear him away.

In Act III, Priyamvada somewhat coyly brings love and duty together by casting Shakuntala's lovesickness in terms of the king's duty: "They say it is the king's duty to relieve the pain of those who live in his realm [...] so, if you would save [Shakuntala's] life, you must take her under your protection." Duhsanta acts on this advice to contract a secret marriage with Shakuntala, trying to hastily circumvent any conflicts between his royal duties and his bride's religious ones.

In Act IV, Anusuya worries that once the King returns to his capital, "who can say whether he'll remember what's happened in the forest?" While Anasuya means that Duhsanta's passion might fade under the pressures of royal duty, the audience knows that Duhsanta will literally forget Shakuntala because of a curse. But even this literal forgetting can be seen, by extension, to symbolize the subordination of desire to duty. In fact, when Shakuntala journeys to reunite with Dusyanta in the capital, the busy king is pointedly described as "the guardian of the sacred and social orders;" in this realm, he proves unable to recognize her or desire's claim on him.

In Act VI, he hears about the death of a childless merchant and is overcome with grief about his own (so he thinks) childlessness. Since he has no children, his own ancestors must be wondering, "Who will feed us in the afterlife /as he does now, if there is no heir?" In this context, having sons isn't just a sign of earthly prosperity, but a guarantee that one's forebears will continue to be honored in perpetuity. Put another way, in the creation of children, love and duty are intertwined. Thus Duhsanta's lack of a child is a great shame for him, an indication of his failure in both duty and love.

In the play's final act, love and duty finally achieve harmony. Indra's charioteer interrupts Duhsanta's grief with a summons to fulfill his kingly duty of demon-fighting, and Duhsanta is later rewarded for his work with a tour of the heavens in a winged chariot. They descend to the

mountain of the demigods, where the sage Marica leads a life of asceticism. Here, Duhsanta discovers his son, Sarvadamana, which leads to his and Shakuntala's recognition of one another. The three are finally united as a family unit, and their son, the fruit of their passion, is prophesied to become a world ruler—thus, the three of them together constitute the fulfillment of duty as well as of love, and all in a place oriented toward spiritual liberation. Harmony between duty and love is finally being achieved.

As Duhsanta prepares to return to his capital—the worldly realm of duty—with his wife and son, Marica blesses them: “And so let time and seasons pass / In mutual service, / A benefit to both our realms.” No longer is there tension between love and duty; they've been integrated, such that Dusyanta can fulfill his duties as husband, king, and religious devotee without a sense of strain or disharmony.

### **CONCEALMENT, SEPARATION AND LOVE:**

In Shakuntala, there is a multi-layered exploration of concealment and revelation, which occurs most clearly in the complete hiddenness of Shakuntala and Duhsanta from one another during their six-year separation brought about by a curse. The lesser concealments in the story, such as hidden emotions, the ring swallowed by the fish, and people's grief-altered appearances, mirror the central one: the secret of the couple's marriage giving way, at last, to public acknowledgement of their union and royal reign. Through this complex interplay, Kalidasa suggests that the truth will always come to light, no matter what hardships (even supernatural obstacles) seem to obscure the truth along the way.

The couple's initial courtship is marked by the interplay of clarity and concealment. For example, the King's identity is concealed at first. Duhsanta hands over his insignia and bow to his driver before entering the hermitage so that he'll appear modest and humble while there, thus concealing his royal identity. Then, as soon as the king enters the hermitage grounds, he sees Shakuntala and her friends at a distance and waits in the shadow of the trees to admire them. The king thus shields his identity both symbolically and physically at the outset of the play.

The feelings of the two eventual lovers are also hidden from one another at first. Despite flirting during their initial meeting, both Duhsanta and Shakuntala languish with symptoms of lovesickness, each unsure of the other's true feelings. Later, after hearing Shakuntala reading a

love poem she's composed for him, the eavesdropping King abruptly reveals himself, confessing his own love. These teasing concealments and subsequent revelations set the tone for the weightier concealments to come. Shakuntala's and Duhsanta's marriage is initially secret as well. The two are secretly married according to a gandharva marriage, which is effectively a declaration of love that is not solemnized by formal vows. Though genuine according to traditional law, their marriage itself therefore has a hidden character, which leads to the ambiguity of the middle part of the play, when they are separated for a time by Duhsanta's royal duties.

In Act V, when Shakuntala arrives in the capital following a separation much grieved on her side, the king, thanks to a previous curse, has no memory of her or their marriage. Furthermore, the signet ring he'd given her as a keepsake marking their union slipped from Shakuntala's finger and vanished when she was bathing in the Ganges. When she arrives in the capital, Shakuntala expects that her secret marriage will be publicly acknowledged. However, its reality is now concealed even from one of its parties (Duhsanta), resulting in an even greater estrangement—Shakuntala is spirited to a celestial realm by nymphs and hidden there for the next six years.

After Shakuntala leaves the earthly realm, the separation of the two lovers is so complete that they have to remember each other only through mere symbols. In Act VI, a fisherman finds Shakuntala's lost ring concealed in the belly of a fish. When the King sees the ring, "he [becomes] really agitated for a while. Just as though he'd remembered someone out of the blue—someone he really cared for, perhaps." He is so distraught when he remembers the truth about his marriage—and realizes he'd unknowingly rejected his own wife—that he cancels the spring festival, "mortified by regret." The ring, which was intended to seal their promises to one another and confirm their reunion, instead only accentuates their separation.

Duhsanta assumes that the separation will be permanent. When he's at the height of his lovesickness, Duhsanta looks at a portrait of Shakuntala he painted himself. "I rejected my love when she stood before me, Yet now I'm obsessed by her painted image: I crossed the stream of living water, To drink from a mirage." In other words, Duhsanta failed to recognize reality, so he becomes fixated on the illusory likeness in the absence of the real thing.

When the lovers are finally reunited, their familiar appearances are obscured by years of grief and distance. After six years—during which time Shakuntala has lived with her son in the demigod Marica’s celestial hermitage, and Duhsanta has been dutifully fighting demons—the two are so much changed that they don’t recognize each other easily. Shakuntala is especially startled by her husband’s changed appearance, prompting the king to say, “My dear, that crueltyI practiced on you has come full circle, since now it is I who need to be recognized by you.” Shakuntala, too, looks different from her youthful appearance—the six years’ separation have inscribed themselves on her body and dress: “Her robes are dusky, drab, Her hair a single braid, Her cheeks drawn in by penance— She’s been so pure and constant ,In that vow of separation , I so callously began.”

But seeing Shakuntala this way prompts the recognition that Duhsanta failed to achieve when his bride stood before him earlier: “For in looking on your pale ,Unpainted lips, I have at last, Recalled your face.” Furthermore, the secret marriage of the two is now publicly confirmed in the person of their son, the future emperor, and by Marica’s charge to them to rule on earth.

The trajectory of Kalidasa’s play—from a playful courtship in the obscurity of the hermitage forest, to a divinely prophesied marriage that ultimately rules over the whole realm—suggests that the play is about more than just one couple’s complicated romance. Rather than simply being complicated, the play suggests that this romance has a place in the cosmic order of things and thus can’t be permanently thwarted by human or supernatural opposition, no matter how it may have been hidden at various points.

### **PROPHICIES AND CURSES:**

Throughout *Shakuntala*, supernatural beings like gods and nymphs, powerful utterances like sages’ prophecies and curses, and even bodily omens experienced by the main characters are ever-present. In fact, none of the main events would take place if it weren’t for such supernatural interventions into human events. Such interventions appear to work outside the limits of human plans and intentions, suggesting that, in the play, they’re meant to signal to audiences the inscrutability—and inevitability—of divine plans.

Prophecy frames the entire play—specifically, the prophecy that Duhsanta will father a world emperor. When Duhsanta refrains from shooting the deer belonging to the hermitage, one of the

forest-dwelling ascetics voices the prophetic wish, “Great Lord of the Lunar Dynasty; May you have a son, with all your virtues, destined to rule the world.” Duhsanta merely thanks the brahmin at the time, not thinking much about it.

At the end of the play, however, when Dusyanta sees the little boy, Sarvadamana, playing with a lion cub in Marica’s realm, he notices the marks of a world ruler on the boy’s body. When his paternity of the child is established, the Brahmin’s prediction at the very beginning of the play is likewise confirmed. Therefore, the play’s entire sequence of events—from Duhsanta’s detour into the hermitage, to his marriage to Shakuntala, to Shakuntala’s removal to the celestial realm—is shown to have been directed toward a specific, higher purpose—namely, the future emperor’s birth and celestial upbringing.

In a similar way, the central drama of the play is driven by a curse that estranges the heroic couple, but ultimately can’t prevent their spiritually powerful reunion. The reason Shakuntala and the King initially meet is because her father, the sage Kanva, who would normally have met the King, is not at home, because he has gone on a pilgrimage “to appease the gods on her behalf, and avert her hostile fate.” Though this fate is not named, it’s presumably the curse that will soon be pronounced against Shakuntala by Durvasas. When Shakuntala, distracted after Dusyanta has returned to the business of the capital, accidentally slights the short-tempered sage, he utters: “That man whose brilliance / Robs your thought of everything, including me, / A great ascetic fired by penance— That man, though prompted, shall not remember you at all, like a drunken sot, who cannot recall; What he said in his cups the night before.” If Shakuntala hadn’t been distracted by lovesickness and accidentally offended the sage, this curse wouldn’t have been spoken. Yet if her father hadn’t had some premonition of the curse and gone on pilgrimage to avert it, she wouldn’t have been home alone to meet and fall in love with Duhsanta in the first place. When the curse goes into effect, it results in the couple’s agonizing yet spiritually fruitful separation—and ultimately leads to their more triumphant reunion in the celestial realm. Like the prophecy of their son’s birth, the curse reverberates across time, seemingly out of proportion to the event that prompted it. These seemingly unavoidable sequences of events suggest that supernatural pronouncements like curses don’t operate according to human intention and can lead to greater consequences (even good ones) than anyone foresees.

Audiences watching *Shakuntala* would likely have been familiar with the cultural meanings behind prophecies, curses, and many other supernatural signs, like evil omens, that occur in the play. But even without that familiarity, the complexity of these recurring, overlapping signs in the play shows that there are mysterious powers at work, which bring about events much bigger than the mundane circumstances in which they first appear.

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