



Shakuntala and the Ring of Recognition: A Study in Indian Aesthetics

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Abstract:

The ancient Indian practice of dramaturgy as proposed and promoted by Bharata primarily deals with an urge of delivering a sense of poetry through four kinds of representation - imitation by speech, by costume, by gesture, and by psychic change. This sense of poetry is accomplished through a proportionate mingling of the eight Rasa finally leading to a sublimity of bliss. In this paper I would endeavor to uphold an analysis of the rasa sutra and how it brings out the core essence of Indian aesthetics by presenting an elaborate study of Kalidasa's 'Shakuntala and the Ring of Recognition'. In this respect I would also try to locate the inherent difference between the Indian and Western ideologies as reflected through their dramatic projections. While the Western front thrives on an exclusionary method in order to achieve an absolute knowledge of objective reality, the Indians believe in an all-embracing passion of love that cleanses the individual from all the egotistic limitations and prepares him to get dissolved into the supreme celebration of harmonious bliss. In contrary to the Western world view which isolates the erring individual from the mainstream of society, the ancient Indian dramaturgy focuses on the ignition and gradual attainment of sainthood in the sinner and believes that every soul, however tainted it can be, actually belongs to the nirguna paramatma and finally merges into it. Thus Kalidasa's Dusyanta is not an evil protagonist who disowns his pregnant wife but he is merely shrouded in illusion (maya) which temporarily overshadows his consciousness. The subjective realization of the rasa sheds this curtain from his eyes and paves the way for a self-realization (anagnorisis) leading to the communion of two souls.

Keywords: *Rasa-sutra, Indian aesthetics, catharsis, subjectivity, self-recognition.*

1. Introduction

In the millennium between the Greek drama and the Elizabethan, the only drama of quality in the world is,

according to Berriedale Keith, the Indian drama. An Indian drama is not merely a play. It is poetry, music, symbolism and religion. Images chase one another beyond the speed of thought in the writings of Kalidasa who is known outside our frontiers. He represents the spirit of India, even as Shakespeare England, Goethe Germany and Pushkin Russia.

(Radhakrishnan 110)

Even though the post-modern trend has abandoned the idea of universalism as an improbable rubbish, the appeal of Kalidasa's poetic genius has transcended the barrier of all the dimensions – time, space and narrow locale - and remains relevant even after the passing of more than 2500 years, as a burning passion in all the Indian hearts. It is due to the fact that Kalidasa has chosen a simple, singular but unique moment from the eternal flow of Indian life, views it through different shades of kaleidoscopic mirrors and stretches it into eternity. This deep-rootedness into the tradition of Indian culture and aesthetics supplies the life blood of his magical charm and miraculous superiority of acceptance. Now to trace the basics of this ancient Indian dramaturgy we need to walk back to the days of Bharata Muni and his priceless creation of *Rasa-sutra* in *Natyashastra* – the first successful combination of semantic and affective theories into a systematic poetic principle. The *Rasa* School, literary meaning the taste or savor, denotes the subjective experience that poetry affords us through four kinds of representation – imitation by speech, by costume, by gesture and by psychic change. In this paper I would like to throw some light on the process how Kalidasa is utilizing the medium of *rasa*, although not strictly in terms of Bharata, to illuminate the essential Indian philosophy of existence.

2. Realization of Rasa

I would begin my discussion by showing as to how *rasa* is realized in Indian dramaturgy in various explications. The word in general refers to a mental



state accomplished through three types of acting – ‘*vacika*’, ‘*angika*’, and ‘*satvika*’. In spite of various controversies regarding the true nature of *rasa*, I believe it to have originated in the first speech of Valmiki in a spontaneous overflow of instinctive poetry – “*Ma nishad pratisthang twam agamah swaswatih samah yat krauncha mithunath ek awadhik kama mohitam.*” (Sankaran 7) Bharata also affirms ‘No meaning proceeds from speech without any kind of sentiment’. (Sharma 6) Although we have different meaning of *rasa* in different sources – in *Rigveda* it is ‘*somrasa*’ (reiterating the essential association with the taste and its aftereffects); in *Upanishad* it is essence par excellence – but the way Bharata captured it in his *Natyashastra* it is the *Brahman’s* communion with the metaphysical absolute (*Aum!*) through a synthesis of *vibhaba*, *anubhaba* and *vyabhicari bhava* –

... *Rasa* to mean the perfect joy that the sage experiences when he perceives the Highest Truth in his meditation, and applied it to that aesthetic pleasure which the cultured spectator with a responsive heart enjoys, when he loses himself completely in the characters, situations and incidents of a play represented by highly talented actors. (Sankaran 3)

It is, therefore, apparent that *rasa* arises from *bhaba* and not the otherwise. The origin of *rasa* is shrouded in a variety of suggestiveness – Bhatta-Lollata’s *utpattivada*, Sankuka’s *anumitivada*, Bhattanayaka’s *Bhaktivada* and Abhinavagupta’s *abhivyaktivada*, and it is Bhattanayaka whose theory first exemplifies the *rasa* as an aesthetic realization of a subjective psychological process on the part of the spectators. Now whatever be the origin of *rasa* aesthetics in Indian context, *rasa* is not a *prameya* and the determinants are not the *pramanaas* or means of knowledge that enlightens something already in existence. It is, rather, engendered in a process as Abhinavagupta suggests – the very life of *rasa* lies in its *rasayata* or having been tasted. So the *rasa nispatti* refers to the *rasana* or tasting whose object is *rasa* and they are not bound by any causal relationship – it is *Sui generis* – a synesthesia where the mind enjoys equilibrium or peace. It is to this interpretation of *rasa* provided by Abhinavagupta that Kalidasa seems mostly to adhere.

This concept of *rasa* aesthetics as anticipated by the ancient sages leads to a pathological consequence much closer to the Greek notion of ‘*catharsis*’. It is the form of ultimate knowledge or *boodha* that inspires the subconscious regions of human mind where lie

dormant various types of emotive complexes through a process of subtle suggestiveness as propounded by Anandavardhana – *rasa abhivyajyate*. Now this arousal of *rasa* in the minds of the spectators and its manifestations depend upon the ingrained skill of the actors as identified by Bhatta Lollata, the earliest commentator of Bharata. The pre-occupations with the role and importance of the actors in producing aesthetic pleasure of the *rasa* implies an extraordinary focus on the drama as a spectacular event (*preksha*) which is very different from the ancient Greek emphasis on the action above all other elements. Bharata in his canonical text on Indian dramaturgy specifies the rules to produce this spectacle in a minute detail, which Kalidasa has followed, of course with some innovative alterations. It is here that the Indian *natya* is different from the mimetic art of poetry, fiction and painting.

Bharata not only specifies the categories of *rasa* – four primary [erotic, pathetic, heroic and odious] and four secondary *rasa* [comic, furious, marvelous and terrible] – but also assigns their corresponding colours, deities, costumes and consequents in order to connect the dramatic performance with an all-round comprehensive overview of the classical Indian culture. Here we see that no play can actually have one sentiment only; rather it is a synthesis of various *rasa*, *bhaba*, styles, local usage and histrionic representations into a predominant taste or savor to be relished – a unique taste altogether different from its ingredients and transformed into a new one. In addition to these eight *rasa* Abhinavagupta introduces a new *rasa* – *santa* *rasa* arising from the *sthayibhaba* of *sama* – which created a great uproar on the part of many critics:

... it is contrary to the teachings of Bharata.... Further in the same way as the spring season flowers, etc., exciting love, austerities and study do not bring about *santarasa* but only *tattavajana* or the knowledge of eternal truths, and so austerities etc. also cannot be the *vibhabas* of *santa*. Absence of *kama* etc. also cannot be *anubhabas*, for how could the absence of *kama* or *krodha*, in other words, the negation of an action be represented on stage? (Sankaran 112)

It is, however, true that since the *sama bhava* or *santa rasa* implies a state of complete inaction – ‘calm of mind all passions spent’ – it would be difficult to present on the stage because the success of the stagecraft mainly depends on the spectacle. But Abhinavagupta calls it the ultimate *rasa* or *maharasa* from which all other subdivisions of *rasa* originate and

into which all are submerged. It leads to the final state of sublime pleasure or 'anandam' through the attainment of the highest *purushartha* or *moksha*. Perhaps this understanding of the essential Indian aesthetics pervades all works of Kalidasa. I would like to establish in this paper how *the play*, though primarily based on *sringara* rasa, takes us to the blissful state of *moksha* through a complete union of the *atma* and *paramatma* in the ultimate spiritual harmony using the *rupak* of a simple love story of Shakuntala and Dusyanta.

3. Love and Separation: Complexities of the Plot Structure

The play opens in the traditional prescription of the *Natyaveda* – with a benediction and an invocation to Lord Shiva, the lord of all lords. It is not merely due to the fact that Kalidasa was a Saivite or to cling to the customary practice of Indian dramaturgy where Shiva is worshipped as the god of *nritya (tandava)* and the harbinger of new creation after the old decadence. In this play Shiva, I suppose, stands for the symbol of 'nirguna sage', the eternally meditating soul of tranquil pleasure to which we begin our journey along with Shakuntala and Dusyanta. As the curtain rises we see the king Dusyanta is riding on his chariot pursuing a deer near *maharshi Kanva's tapovan* with an arrow and bow ready in his hands. Although he resists himself when the hermit reminds him of his *rajdharmas*: "To you were weapons lent/ The broken hearted to deliver,/ Not strike the innocent." (Ryder 6) – but it could not pacify his instinctive self-pride. The first act of the play presents the taste of *santa* rasa where the invading chariot of Dusyanta penetrating into the deepest core of the forest may well imply the phallic symbol of the 'purush' impregnating the 'prakriti', - more so because Shakuntala is the 'lady of nature'. She is the microcosmic container of the eternal art of creation. But it is this *veera* rasa of Dusyanta, accompanied with snobbery and 'rajoh guna', that puts up a hindrance for the complete realization of the self. The king forsakes his royal dress and jewelries to enter the hermitage in a humble gesture and it almost anticipates his final abandonment of the fleshly existence to gain spiritual glory in Kasyapa's *ashrama*. The tranquil environment of the hermitage leads us to the predominant sentiment of the play, the *sringara* rasa:

A tranquil spot! Why should I thrill?

Love cannot enter there -

Yet to inevitable things

Doors open everywhere. (Ryder 8)

The *sringara* rasa proceeds from the dominant state of love or *rati* which owes its origin to the fullness of youth. Bharata specifies the colour green or *shyama* and the Lord Vishnu, the preserver of eternal creation, corresponding to this sentiment. Here the green nature infuses with the bright attires of Shakuntala and her friends to invigorate a sense of deep desire in the mind of Dusyanta:

Beneath the barked dress

Upon the shoulder tied,

In maiden loveliness

Her young breast seems to hide

/.../

Her arms are tender shoots; her lips

Are blossoms red and warm;

Bewitching youth begins to flower

In beauty on her form. (Ryder 9)

In his discussion Bharata divides *sringara* rasa into two types – *sambhoga* (union) and *vipralambha* (separation). Although Dhanajaya has introduced a new category – *ayoga* – this *ayoga* ultimately corresponds to the *vipralambha* of Bharata. Now the apparent ambiguity of the fact that if the erotic sentiment has its origin in love then why does manifest itself through pathetic conditions has been explained by Bharata when he says that the pathetic sentiment and *vipralambha* are different – the first one relates to a condition of despair owing to affliction while the second retains an optimism arising out of yearning and anxiety. In the play we see that the final consummation of the love of Shakuntala and Dusyanta is lingered and delayed so that the emotion can be heightened to the point of burning desperation of love –

Shiva's devouring wrath still burns in thee,

As burns the eternal fire beneath the sea;

Else how couldst thou, thyself long since consumed,

Kindle the fire that flames so ruthlessly?

(Ryder 26)



Then we see lovelorn Shakuntala is caught in a heat stroke – the heat of nature is in compatibility with the sighs of the ‘lady of nature’. Her wretchedness is represented on stage through her gestures – quick movement of eyes, fainting, gasping – and costumes – the bruised lotus chain in her hair and the disheveled barks of her dress. Then they get vowed to a secret marriage (*gandharva-riti*) and consummate their love into a union. Here the two friends of Shakuntala – Anusuya and Priyamvada – play the significant role of positive catalyst hastening the process of their union as prescribed in the *Natyaveda*.

The secondary rasa arising from the erotic is *hasya* or comic. We have the figure of Madhvya, the court jester, who also functions as a confidante to the king. The comic sentiment arises from the dominant state of laughter and leads to the transitory states of indolence, sleep, dreaming etc. According to *Natyashastra* the laughter [with all its sub-categories of *smita*, *hasita*, *apahasita*, *upahasita* and *atihatita*] arises from certain unseemly dress, impudence, strange movement, uncouth behavior etc. So we have our fool as a hunchback who is irritated enough by this long phase of hunting and wants to be retired to the cozy warmth of the palace. Apart from this apparent role of generating laughter and entertaining the audience, the jester also plays a serious role as well. He is the only man whom Dusyanta opens his mind to and hence he provides him consolation along with wise counsels. He is perhaps as wise as a Shakespearean fool serving as a foil to Dusyanta – the fact more openly revealed when Dusyanta sends him to his mother on behalf of himself. He is the final witness of Dusyanta’s desperate attempts to ventilate his agonies through his conversation with the painting of Shakuntala. Thus he remains more than a mere entertainer – he is the alter-ego of the king in his attainment of the selfhood.

The pathetic sentiment begins after the departure of Dusyanta for his kingdom with an elaborate promise of taking away her majesty with proper royal courtesy. This sentiment is aroused by determinants such as, curse, separation, reversal of situation and is presented on stage by consequents such as sighs of lamentation, shedding tears, loss of memory, depression, delusion etc. As we see our heroine is lamenting over her separation from the king and is so overtaken that she is even unaware of the welcoming of saint Durvasa finally leading to a fatal consequence of his curse that brings about the reversal of situation for her. This story of Durvasa and the ensuing curse was not originally there in *Mahabharata* and it was the brain child of Kalidasa himself. Although Kalidasa was much

indebted to *Mahabharata* for the construction of his play he did not strictly adhere to the original work for the sake of dramatic urgency and greater psychological impact upon the audience. In *Mahabharata* Shakuntala and Dusyanta were married for love and pleasure but in Kalidasa we see Dusyanta as a childless king so marriage becomes a necessity for him. Kalidasa deliberately uses this trick to establish the fact that marriage is not about a physical union based on a mere utilitarian ground but rather it requires a perfect harmony of spiritual unification as well which is attained at the end of the play.

Now all these innovations of the curse of Durvasa and the signet ring episode are skillfully carved out to accelerate a dramatic urgency. In *Mahabharata* Shakuntala gave birth to the child Sarvadamana who grew up for six years and then starts questioning about his father when Shakuntala goes to seek for Dusyanta. But in this play Kalidasa makes Kanva send the pregnant Shakuntala in search of Dusyanta not only to intensify the audience’s compassion for her but his primary focus remains on the development of love relationship of Shakuntala and Dusyanta. Here Shakuntala comes not to look for her son’s father and to gain social recognition but to look for her lover and husband in an unquestioning compulsion of love: “Thus Kalidasa has represented the old theme according to the high ideals of Hindu Religion. He has modified the story with his poetic imagination. His *Abhijnanasakuntala* occupies the supreme rank in the presentation of ideal love in the whole range of Sanskrit Dramatic literature.” (Singh 56)

The scene of Shakuntala’s departure from Maharshi Kanva’s hermitage is also infused with a high degree of *karuna rasa*. The entire hermitage with all its trees, vines, flowers, fruits, deer, cows and all other creatures seem to weep their loss from the affectionate care – *vatsalya* – of Shakuntala. Even the great sage Kanva, who has overcome all sensory drives, falls apart from all his fortification:

Shakuntala must go to-day;

I miss her now at heart;

I dare not speak a loving word

Or choking tears will start. (Ryder 44)

The two dearest friends of hers are also heart broken. It is as if the macrocosm is not only submerging with the microcosm but also emerges as a distinct character participating in human action.

Shakuntala is highly anxious about the vine sister when Kanva assures her: "I'll give the vine a lover true,/ This handsome mango tree." (Ryder 46) Even at this crucial moment of separation Kalidasa talks about harmony and unification, the soul of Indian cultural faith. In her final embrace Kanva and Goutami give her the counsel about family maintenance and courtly life, which she was completely unaware of, and this reflect a partial view of the custom of *chaturashrama* in Aryan social structure –

When you have shared for many years
The king's thought with the earth,
When to a son who knows no fears
You shall have given birth,
When trusted to son you love,
Your royal labour cease,
Come with your husband to the grove
And end your days in peace. (Ryder 49)

The next scene, i.e. the court room scene, is a combination of several sentiments – *karuna rasa*, *roudra rasa* and *adbhuta rasa*. As the king, under the spell of Durvasa's curse, is unable to recognize Shakuntala and therefore rejects her, the king is severely chastised by the two young hermits – Sharadvata and Sharnagarava – who try to remind him of his *rajdharma* (royal responsibilities) in vain. In this scene we witness, for the first time, how Shakuntala, a simple innocent soul unaware of the tricky ways of power, quickly shakes off her sweet spoken nature and approaches the king in a fierce gesture when the chastity of her womanhood is being questioned:

Her glance is straight; her eyes are flashing red;
Her speech is harsh, not drawlingly well-bred;
Her whole lip quivers, seems to shake with cold;
Her frown has straightened eyebrows arching bold.
(Ryder 59)

Here Kalidasa does not allow Shakuntala to put a curse on the king as it was in *Mahabharata* and this, according to many critics, presents a frail portrayal of Shakuntala. But this deliberate omission, I suppose, is made only to further strengthen the true nature of love

that requires unconditional and unquestioning submission of the two souls where the curse could have put up a real technical hindrance. In this scene when Shakuntala, rejected by the king and forsaken by the ashramites pray to mother earth for a clean burial [reminding the audience about another epic character Sita in *Ramayana*] the common feminist criticism arises as to how a woman's identity is determined by her role as a daughter or wife with no self-respect to evade this humiliation. In spite of this patriarchal structure Kalidasa, perhaps, also focuses on the fact that Shakuntala is an individual, strong enough to sustain all humiliations only to rise more glorious – more fortified in a spiritual transcendence, more purified a gold passing through the fire of greatest Indian virtue – patience and mercy.

Shakuntala, however, is rescued from this state of utter humiliation through a divine intervention – a shaft of light, probably sent from her *apsara* mother Menaka to carry her to the heaven – which again paves the way for *adbhuta rasa*: "Before our eyes a heavenly light/ In woman's form, but shining bright,/ Seized her and vanished straight." (Ryder 61) This incident also provides a guarantee of divine sanction of Shakuntala's claim to the people of the court. After the scene is over we come to a moment of epiphany in the fisherman episode leading to a phase of self-realization (anagnorisis) followed by heart wrenching lamentation on the part of the king. A strong fit of guilt-ridden remorse and painful memories overcome him so much so that he forbids the spring festival:

He hates the things he loved; he intermits
The daily audience, nor in judgment sits;
Spends sleepless nights in tossing on his bed;
At times, when he by courtesy is led
To address a lady, speaks another name,
Then stands for minutes, sunk in helpless shame.
(Ryder 67)

This state of his mind is reflected in his costumes and gestures as well:

All ornament is laid aside; he wears
One golden bracelet on his wasted arm;
His lip is scorched by sighs; and sleepless cares
Redden his eyes.... (Ryder 67)

The court jester Madhvya reappears her again to console his fevered heart and Kalidasa tries to intermingle the *hasya* and *karuna* rasa which, though, in no ways dilutes the tragic impact upon the audiences (as was anticipated by Aristotle) but rather sharpens the edges by contrasting juxtaposition.

The king chooses the escape route from his grief by concentrating on the painting of a picture of his beloved wife, as if a compensation for the real one. But with all his creative efforts he is unable to capture the essence of her in the hues of the brushes. This innovation of Kalidasa all the more emphatically proves the fact that the imitative creation can never match the ideal conception of the mind – “Things lifeless know not beauty.” (Ryder 71) The lamentation goes on until the king is called for to fight a battle on behalf of *Indra*. The scene of the battle is not enacted on stage but reported, in keeping with the traditional grammar of *Natyaveda* (which in a way corresponds to the Aristotelian prescription). The scene, however, introduces an element of *veera rasa* but it is more instrumental in preparing a final re-union of Dusyanta and Shakuntala in Kasyapa’s hermitage.

4. Maturity of Love in Perfect Harmony and Bliss

Now we enter into the closing chapter of the play, act vii, which begins with victorious Dusyanta and Matali on their way back home. Dusyanta enters into the hermitage of Kasyapa and finds a boy playing with a lion cub. This incident overflows his heart with a spontaneous affection and we remember how the king in Kalidasa had a deep craving for a son. The play began with the description of a hermitage and now again we come to a grove but with a major difference: “The difference in tone and character of the two worlds – the initial green world and this golden world which is the artifice of eternity.” (Rajan 85) - the fresh green lusture of Kanva’s ashrama – suitable for the arousal of bright fire of desire – is now turned into golden beauty (golden lotus, rivers glittering with golden hues); the emerald forest is substituted with the melted gold of the setting Sun: “... a world of austere beauty, luminous with the light of the spirit; it is not a world of nature, spontaneous, informed by instinct, but of Nature perfected by restraint and discipline.” (Rajan 85) Both Shakuntala and Dusyanta have now lost their youthful glow; the long phase of grief and repentance has purged Dusyanta of all his egotistic obstinacy (*aham*) and he is now a transformed man who can see beyond the fleshly screen of ephemeral beauty and look into the spiritual identity of human soul. The

journey that he began in his chariot-of-life has now come to a metaphoric end when he finds his true love and is re-united with her:

Faithful Shakuntala, the boy,

And you, O king, I see

A trinity to bless the world

Faith, Treasure, Piety. (Ryder 91)

This reference to the trinity completes the circle of the Holy Trinity in Hindu philosophy. We begin with the benediction of Lord Shiva, come forward to the reference to Lord Vishnu as the preserver of all creation in the love-making of Shakuntala and Dusyanta and then take the final leap to Lord Brahma as in the re-union of the lovers who now realize that the essence of *tyaga* is the ultimate *purushartha* in human life. Shakuntala is endowed with the virtue of forgiveness (*kshama*), the essential quality of Brahman, and Dusyanta tears off the garb of *rajoh guna* (regal pride) to excavate the pure essence of *satva guna*, the quality of a sage and they both are united into a harmony of *nirguna brahma* – the complete submersion of the body and the soul. The very title of the play, *Shakuntala and the Ring of Recognition*, reveals this intention of Kalidasa to plant the audience into the roots of Indian aesthetics. It is not merely the story of love-rejection-reunion of two lovers rather the main theme lies in the ‘recognition’ of the true worth of Shakuntala for Dusyanta and the attainment of the sublime experience of spiritual love.

5. Conclusion

However the portrayal of Shakuntala has infuriated many critics to vehement frowning as if she is the traditional representation of weak womanhood caught in the sneers of patriarchal subordination:

[The play] might be made effective in producing aesthetic experience, if presented from the point of view of the suffering heroine.... Unfortunately Kalidasa has not done this but has the king dominate the stage throughout.... In short the play does not deal with human experience. It is a fairy story, which perhaps has religious or philosophical significance.

(Warder 149)

The play actually presents several layers of ‘recognition’ – at first it is the recognition for Shakuntala, the hermit girl maintaining the ideologies of restraint and completely unaware of the pleasures of



flesh to undergo a phase of intense passion culminating in a rigorous physical union; the recognition for a *jitendriya* (a man with a complete command over his senses) like Kanva as to how he falls prey to the influence of *vatsalya rasa* almost like that of a domestic man; and curiously a recognition for Shakuntala as to how to live independently not under the garb of a daughter or wife and how to rear a child completely on her own self. “Shakuntala, having delineated love’s ecstasy and fulfilment as well as its anguish in the separation that follows the anger and bitterness of its cruel betrayal, finally gathers it all in the closing scene in an epiphanic moment of recognition, restoration and reunion.” (Rajan 41) It is, therefore not only the journey of Dusyanta from the status of a king to an ultimate sainthood but also the journey of Shakuntala from the innocent girlhood to the realm of the experience of mature womanhood and independent motherhood. The story of their self-recognition is vibrantly woven into a structure of ancient Indian aesthetics that breathes life into a simple love story to endow it with a majestic halo illuminating the deepest core of each and every Indian heart.

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