

Character Sketch of Shakuntala:

Kalidasa has borrowed the theme from the Mahabharata and made some interesting changes to the original to give the play a dramatic look, and provide a justification for Dushyanta's behavior. But the main focus is the etching out of Shakuntala's characterization which is very different from the earlier heroines of Sanskrit literature.

SHAKUNTALA'S BEAUTY

Beauty has the power to grasp one's senses / mind. Here in Kalidasa's play, Shakuntala, despite living in an ashrama / forest, looks very beautiful and Dushyanta at first sight is attracted to her and hides behind trees to hear the free conversations of the girls. In the second act, when the Vidusaka asks the reasons for the rejection of other beauties in his court, and falling in love with a forest woman, the king replies by talking about and praising her beauty: "A flower no one has smelled A bud no fingers have plucked 126 an uncut jewel, honey untested unbroken fruits of holy deeds - I don't know who is destined to enjoy her flawless beauty. He continuously praises her beauty to the other people and he desperately wants to marry her.

SHAKUNTALA'S STRENGTH OF MIND

However, Shakuntala is not a mere beauty but a pillar of strength and patience also. Romila Thapar reiterates this when we turn to the play written by Kalidasa, the *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, not only does the context and the story change but, more pertinently, the character of Shakuntala is a contrast to the woman portrayed in the epic. There is a resistance as if to the epic version through the presentation of modern times and the Shakuntala of the epic is seen to be marginalized. As Thapar writes, "in Kalidasa's version we are in the realm of delicacy and romance, imminent tragedy and finally happiness. The emotional range is infinite when compared to the epic narrative, but while intermeshing of the emotions, we can see the image of Shakuntala undergoes a transformation. In the play, Kalidasa's interest lies mainly in portraying the budding development of love between Dushyanta, a sophisticated and noble king and an innocent girl. The journey moves from the hermitage and the bond between the duo is strengthened through separation and suffering. Mahabharata's Shakuntala is a woman in a patriarchal society as is Kalidasa's Shakuntala But in the Mahabharat she seems to have carefully thought over the roles of wife / mother and son in a society dominated by men such as Dushyanta during the six years, when she lived forgotten by her husband. When she goes to Dushyanta's court, she is the mother of a six year old boy but her behaviour at the court shows that she has not lost her strength or hopes for her son. But also her words to Dushyanta are no longer those of a young woman innocently and happily wandering through her father's hermitage. After long separation she tells Dushyanta about their son : "This is your son, O king, he should be consecrated by you as your heir". On the other hand in Kalidasa's play, Shakuntala after the cruel rejection by the king, is stunned, filled with shame and sorrow, followed by anger. There appears to be highlighting of her patience and her verbal skill in her characterization. Then she quickly conceals this anger, and gains control over herself. Her speech is long and impassioned, but rational. She is not whining or begging the king. She boldly tells

Dushyanta of the future implications and results of his false action. "O great king, even though you do recognize me, why do you say:

"I do not know you?" You speak thus carelessly as another, a low-born villain might speak".

She further, says, "if you will not follow my advice O Dushyanta, you will reap the results of your present actions a hundred times". Shakuntala's strength echoes in her words at the end of the story. Divine intervention allows one to believe that God respects and takes due cognizance and care of her words. Shakuntala's skills of argument and of drawing upon associations of memory can be seen in the play when she is in the court, is pregnant and the king refuses to recognise or accept her. She is stunned but does not say a word. But the hermits and Gautami tell the king that a virtuous woman is believed to be evil by the world if she continues to live with her own family. She also first tries to show the ring but discovers it is lost. Then reminds him of the simple forest scene with the buck (fawn). She continues to tell him that she is his wife. Dushyanta at the end of the court scene, does not accept her but she through her argument, verbal skills and emotional appeal puts him in a painful and pensive mood. Dushyanta says "I cannot remember marrying the sage's abandoned daughter, but the pain my heart feels makes me suspect that I did.

In Kalidasa's play, Dushyanta blames her for her untrustworthy character and her parentage, Dushyanta insulting remarks to Shakuntala that women are born cunning, This unrighteous action of Dushyanta draws out an angry response and one can see Shakuntala head held high, her eyes flashing when she answers the king. "You point out the faults of others, even though they are as small as mustard seeds, but you do not notice your own faults, which are as big as vilwa fruits". She further says, "my mother Menka is a celestial. My birth, therefore. Dushyanta, is far higher than yours. Your place is earth, but mine is in the sky." Shakuntala, after Dushyanta's rejection warm-hearted tells him " I was in infancy cast away by my parents, and now I am cast away by you ! Well I am ready now to return to the ashrama of my father, but you must not cast away this child who is your own." Kalidasa's Shakuntala is different from earlier heroines of Sanskrit literature. Even though Dushyanta does not recognize her, her reaction is different. She is not angry and does not shout at the king but says she caused her situation herself that she trusted the king and starts weeping. She does not beg for pity from the king but weeps and cries out :

"O mother earth, give me room (in your bosom)"

These words echo those of Sita of the Ramayana rather than Vyasa's Shakuntala but in Kalidasa, Shakuntala is whisked away by her apsara mother Menka to heaven. Her caring and nurturing quality, her key strengths are beautifully described in the opening scene of the play when she is watering the plants / flowers in the hermitage and that is why Kanva at the the time of departure to palace address the trees that. "This Shakuntala, who ever wished to drink water while you are all yet un-watered; who fond though she is of decorating, never plucks a prout from you through affection, who enjoys festal celebration on the occasion of your first blossoming she, this Shakuntala, is today leaving for her husband's palace. Pray, let her receive the permission of you all. According to Brodback in the Mahabharata, Shakuntala's boldness is seen at Dushyanta's court when Dushyanta does not accept his son, terms of duty pleasure or profit saying Shakuntala is lying :

“Women don’t tell the truth. Who will take your word for it?” He casts doubt upon the story of her birth and says she is rather of low birth, an evil ascetic.”

Shakuntala tells him again and again that she is well born and he is being obtuse and finally she boldly answers, “This broad four-edged earth crested by regal crags, will be governed by my son whether you like it or not, Dushyanta !” After this a disembodied voice in the sky announces that the son is Dushyanta’s and that he must accept him and Sakuntala. In Vyas’s Shakuntala, she is reunited with her husband in the palace itself. But in Kalidasa’s play she breaks down and in her anger and distress calls for her mother earth to give space in her bosom and finally her mother Menaka protect her by vanishes with “a flash of light in a woman’s shape”.

STRENGTH OF KALIDASA’S SHAKUNTALA SEEN IN HER VIRTUES

Shakuntala in Kanva’s ashrama was the child of nature, for Indian nationalism it was Shakuntala of Marica’s ashrama who epitomised the virtues of a good Hindu woman. Curiously, the link between the two ashramas is Shakuntala, a woman, who was a child of the first ashrama and personification of innocence. She has now been through the travails of an unrecognised marriage and motherhood to arrive at an eventual recognition in the second ashrama. Yet another German scholar to express his pleasure was Herder to whom Shakuntala was an “Indian Flower, an Epic drama and a Symbol of naivety. Her virtue, forbearance and kindness are clearly seen when, after so much suffering, meted out by the king, she meets the king but does not hesitate to welcome him, continually, referring to him as her “noble husband”, and addressing him as Aryaputra. A good example of Shakuntala’s virtues to others is seen in the middle of Act IV, at her departure from the hermitage to the palace of the king. Kalidasa here gives a very beautiful description that Kanva’s eyes filled with tears of joy and gives her advice. For the trees of the forest family have blessed Shakuntala and the cuckoo’s melodious song announces their response, wishes her a safe and pleasant journey. She bids farewell to the vanajyotsana addressing the creeper as my sister. The entire hermitage feels sorrowful at her departure:

“Grazing deer drop grass, Peacocks stop dancing, Vines lose pale leaves Falling like tears”

All the people and even nature in the forest are sad because of her departure. Savitri is, in many ways, similar to Sita and Kalidasa’s Shakuntala. These women are dominated by their love for their husbands and they look similar in their patience and gentle use of strength. They do not lose their hope but try to face their problems with tenacious courage. Kalidasa in his play gives a heart moving picture of a devoted wife. She pining in separation, wearing a pair of dusky garments, with a face emaciated by her observance of vows, and of pure conduct, Shakuntala has been practising a long vow of separation. She though the daughter of an Apsara, did not keep any other person in mind except Dushyanta.

Conclusion

Kalidasa has done his job of a playwright with extraordinary talent. He has used an existing piece of narrative and elaborated and expanded it in a fully grown play where characters have beautiful details and mannerism. All the characters of this play and specially Shakuntala is so close to the majority of modern Indian women that even now a sensitive reader or viewer would definitely feel a connection

with her. The strength of Shankuntala in the play lies in her deep and powerful emotions which feed her strength of mind.