



## ***Abhijnana-sakuntalam* as a story of love**

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*Abhijnana-sakuntalam*, the 7 act play by Kalidasa is considered to be a gem of Indian drama. The story was already present in traditional oral narratives. Even the *Mahabharata* has a reference to the story. What Kalidasa did, was to take the traditional story as the *bija*, or germ, and weave around it a complex plot in high poetry, that would easily impress the minds of his audience. In the hands of Kalidasa an ordinary story was converted into an extraordinary tale of love and longing. There was a lot of innovations by the dramatist to give birth to one of the most elegant works of art. The play is dominated by love, both in union and in separation; but, this is not a tale simply of love. It leaves behind a strong moral and social message. Love should never come in the way of responsibilities and social obligations.

The *Prologue* prepares the audience for the action that is to follow. The ethereal singing in the Prologue, by the *Nati*, sets in the romantic aura of the play. The action begins on a note of picture perfectness: a beautiful king is in the forest pursuing an antelope. The king is stopped by a group of ascetics who inform him that the deer belongs to the hermitage of Rishi Kanva. The King alights from the chariot as the ascetics pass on into the forest after inviting him to the ashram. They also inform him of the absence of the patriarch of the



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ashram. However, the king passes into a bower where the beautiful maiden Sakuntala is the butt of the jokes of her friends, Anusuya, and Priyamvada. He learns of her birth by listening to the conversation of the girls from his hiding. He also learns that she is to be married to a suitable groom. As he emerges from his hiding, Dushyanta and Sakuntala fall madly in love with each other. The king is so enamored by the beauty of the maiden, that he calls off the hunt, sends Vidushaka and the army back to the capital, but himself stays back and marries Sakuntala in secret.

After this the king leaves with the promise of returning to take back Sakuntala with him to his palace. The maiden is sad and is lost in thoughts of her lover. So lost is she in her longing that she fails to receive the sage Durvasa with all due attention and he is enraged. The sage curses that the lover for whom she has neglected her duties (it was the responsibility of Sakuntala to receive the guests at the Ashram in the absence of her father), will forget her. Finally at the desperate requests of her friends the Sage relents, the now gone lover will remember Sakuntala if he sees something that he had given her. Everyone is relieved as the King had given his ring to Sakuntala before he went away. In the meantime, Rishi Kanva learns from a divine oracle about Sakuntala's secret



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marriage and her impending pregnancy. Rishi Kanva decides to send Sakuntala to her husband's house under escort. Here we have a scene of intense pathos as the aged Rishi suffers to part with his darling foster-daughter. However, he does so with sound advice for her future life. Sakuntala too feels desolate and suffers immense grief when parting with the hermitage and all that belonged to it. She is deeply pained to be separated from her friends and all that she knew as her own from the time she was a baby.

Under the influence of the curse the King does not remember anything about Rishi Kanva's hermitage, or about his secret marriage with Sakuntala. Sakuntala too realizes that she has lost the ring that could be her salvation. The King refuses to have to do anything about Sakuntala. The Hermits who had accompanied her refuses to take her back as they feel it is now her duty to be by her husband's side whatever may come. The royal priest persuades the King to allow her to stay at the Palace until the baby is born. However a female figure appears and carries Sakuntala away, leaving the King in wonder.

A fisherman has been arrested for being found with the King's ring. The poor man protests that he has found it in the stomach of a big fish he has caught. This is the ring that had slipped from Sakuntala's finger while bathing in the



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river while on her way to the royal court. The sight of the ring floods back all memories of his wife he has shunned. Remorse and repentance tortures but nothing can be mended at this moment. He wakes from despair hearing the cries of Vidusakha who is being roughly handled by Matali, Indra's charioteer, come to fetch Dushyanta.

On his way back, after emerging victorious in the war against the *Asura*, he passes the ashram of the seer Maricha and his wife Aditi. It is believed to be the abode of perfect bliss. In the ashram he is attracted to a little boy gallantly pulling a lion by its mane to the terror of two young maidens. He intervenes and picks up the lad who turns out to be his own son by Sakuntala. The latter meets him in an ascetic's attire. The sage Maricha crowns their happiness by revealing to Shakuntala the curse of Rishi Durvasa and its fallout. Her husband is not to blame. He has suffered equally.

Dushyanta had made the mistake by getting married without the permission of the guardians of Sakuntala. He proved irresponsible as he had left without making any provisions for his wife and their unborn child. Thus his suffering is justified. Sakuntala neglects her duty towards Rishi Durvasa, the guest at their father's ashram. Thus she too has to undergo suffering as a means



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of purification. The love of Dusyanta and Sakuntala was initially the unseeing inconsiderate love of the young that has to be purified by suffering and austerity. When the two first met desire was primarily carnal. When they finally meet at Maricha's hermitage it is the deeper conjugal love, purified by separation and suffering, not dependent on any external factors.