

Kalidasa: Exponent of Indian Culture

Dr. Vasudha Maitre¹, Dr. Sangeeta Sharma²

¹Associate Professor, Dept. Of English, Dronacharya Govt. College Gurugram

²Associate Professor, Dept. Of English, Dronacharya Govt. College Gurugram

Abstract:

Kalidasa, the eminent classical Sanskrit poet and dramatist, is widely revered as a profound exponent of Indian culture, aesthetics, and philosophy. His lyrical works—Ritusamhara, Meghaduta, Kumarasambhavam, Raghuvamsa, and the iconic play Abhijnanashakuntalam—interweave nature, mythology, dharma, and poetic beauty. He portrays ideal human virtues through metaphoric richness and subtle emotional depth. His characters embody cultural ideals, while his nature imagery reflects the Indian worldview of harmony between man and nature. Kalidasa's refined diction and mastery in poetic devices like similes and Arthantaranyasa affirm his timeless contribution to Indian literary and cultural heritage.

Keywords: Kalidasa, Sanskrit literature, Indian culture, simile, poetic imagination, Indian aesthetics.

INTRODUCTION

Kalidasa is a distinguished, eminent and worldly acclaimed poet and dramatist in classical Sanskrit literature. His stature is unquestioned. It is said that the works of the great poet and dramatist were original, unique and distinct in its own way. Kalidasa is not only the greatest poet but also the greatest dramatist of Indian literature. Some people say that he excelled himself in the realm of poetry, others say in the realm of drama. But both in diction and content he has no parallel. In diction he is popular because his poetry is simple but lyrical; in content his poetic imagination touches the mind and the soul of the reader. He is often counted as, 'The Poet of Nature' The embellishment in his poetry is natural. Some critics call him, 'Shakespeare of India'. Kalidasa's works are not only literary masterpieces of thoughtfulness but also serve as profound and intense expressions of Indian culture, philosophy, and aesthetics. Here's an overview of why he's considered such an important exponent of Indian culture:

Kalidasa's work is deeply rooted in nature. He expresses wonder at nature and the changing of seasons, suggesting a profound emotional attachment to it. In the poem Ritusamhara ('Garland of the Seasons') the poet has described in detail the six Indian seasons. This is poem that is lyrical in nature and the seasons have described bringing all the five senses together. Another lyric poem, Meghaduta ('The Cloud Messenger'), nature is more than just a backdrop. Nature is given a human-like quality by attributing human feelings to it. He delves deep in each and every aspect of Nature like- India's landscapes, seasons, hills, mountains, flora and fauna. He presents the entire geographical data from Ujjain to Kashmir or more specifically, the city of Alaka (a mythical Himalayan city). Kalidasa covers various geographical features like the Vindhya Range, the Narmada River and the Himalayas. He portrays a quintessential Indian worldview where humans and nature are intertwined. His language is praised for its poetic beauty, elegance, and clarity. He sets unique and elevated standards for literary style, imagery, and metaphor. His works are regarded as masterpieces and are examined as examples of

great poetry. Most of the plays of Kalidasa's have been taken from the Hindu epics and mythology. For instance, the Mahabharata story that serves as the basis for Abhijnanasakuntalam. This play includes romance, yearning, isolation and subsequent reunification as the themes within Shakuntala and King Dushyanta.

Raghuvamsha is an epic poem in which the lineage of Rama is described vividly and brilliantly. The valiant actions, courageous acts, heroic deeds and noble deeds are marvelously delineated. Another significant poem is the Kumarasambhava which focuses on the birth of Kartikeya (Skanda). He is the son of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. In this poem the heroic deeds of Kartikeya and his valor in defeating 'Tarakasura', the demon is narrated in an elevated and grandiose style. All the plays of Kalidasa are rich with profoundness and spiritual depth. Kalidasa explored the concept of dharma (duty), prema (love), and karma in a nuanced way, reflecting the core ideals of Indian thought. His characters often face dilemmas that require them to balance emotionality with societal or spiritual duty. In his plays, Kalidasa often portrays his protagonists as an ideal man (Purusha) and woman (Stree), as envisioned in Indian philosophy. They embody beauty, virtue, elegance, courtesy, wisdom, and grace, making them timeless symbols of Indian ideals.

Tropes and figures of speech are used by Kalidasa to create a more expressive and engaging language. See for example—Indumati, a princess is on the stage to choose a prince of choice as her husband out of the host of princes. Wherever she goes that place is illuminated. She is compared to a flame of a lamp (Dipashikha) on a road that lights the place where it goes and darkens the place from where it is away. Thus, the prince glows whom she approaches and is pale whom she leaves. It is said that having heard this simile Kalidasa was conferred with the title 'Dipashikha' by the king Vikramaditya. Another simile which is oft quoted by the scholars is contained in the second verse of Meghaduta. "Torn apart from the woman of his desire, he bore it out on that hilltop for eight months and grew so thin that his gold bangle slipped of his wrist. Then on the very first day of the monsoon month of 'Ashadha', Yaksha saw the wonderful sight of a cloud. It seems as if it is clinging to the slope of the hill-like an elephant bent down in the game of rubbing its body against the bank or a tree."¹ Another such simile is—"O Cloud, O giver of water! You are the refugee of harassed ones. Take my news – parted from my wife by Kubera's wrath. The destination where you should go is called 'Alaka'. It is the abode of Yakshas. Shiva resides in its outer garden and its mansions are flooded with the light of the crescent-moon on Shiva's head."² His poetry is filled with such excellent, sublime and exceptional similes.

Kalidasa is popular amongst the Indian readers as a great propounder of Indian culture and civilization. The backbone of Indian culture is the code of conduct enunciated in the Samritis, which is followed by the laity and liturgy of the country. All the kings of Suryavansh whose accounts are delineated in the Raghuvansham conform to the law of the land prepared by the ancient sages. In the beginning of 'Raghuvansham', Kalidasa says that all the kings of Raghu dynasty studied in the 'Ashramas' in their childhood; after leading the 'Grihasta ashrama' as the faithful servants of society they took 'Sanyasa' passing through the 'Vanaprastha' in ideal harmony with their subjects.

Indian culture and tradition are graciously ingrained in the play, Abhijnanashakuntalam. For example—At the time of the departure of Shakuntala; to her husband's home; the message of Kanva Rishi, (the foster-father of Shakuntala) is tuned with the enviable, ethical values of Indian culture. See for example, he gives a piece of advice to Shakuntala by saying that she should obey her elders; love the co-wives of the king; if her husband acts against her wishes she should not retort or go against him; provide generous gifts to servants; she must have control over her passions and so forth. In this way, the women reach the

pinnacle of home-makers and are blessing to the family.

Indian culture firmly believes in the karma of past lives. Kalidasa has stressed upon this postulated belief in the episode of renunciation of Sita when she was at the last stage of her pregnancy in Raghuvansham. Lakshmana breaks the news to her that she is taken away from the palace forever. When Sita descended from the royal chariot in the forest near the hermitage of Valmiki. At first breath she asks Lakshmana to tell his king that he has not done justice to a lady who has already passed through the examination of loyalty having bathed in the fire. But in the next breath she says it is futile to blame anyone. It is the result of accumulated karmas of previous births. It is bolt from the blue which was destined for her.

Kalidasa' diction is simple and straight but is permeated with poetic implications of high order. We refer here to a simple statement of the poet in the context of the proposal of Uma, put forth by Narada to her father, the Himalaya. The scene is depicted in a simple language. Narada and Himalaya are busy in the merits of the case. Uma is sitting by their side with her eyes fixed on the ground and is counting the leaves of lotus plant. Here the eagerness and shyness of the virgin to listen to the qualities of a would- be bridegroom is not mentioned by the written words in the verse but are implied in artistic manner. In the V Canto of Kumarasambhavam, the penance of Uma is delineated by Kalidasa with a high poetic tenor. She is braving all odds of the changing seasons. Squatting in the open after the summer, the rainy season sets in. Kalidasa writes that the first drops of rain rested for a moment on her eyelashes, struck against her lips, fell against her peaked breast and got shattered. Dropping lethargically across the folds of the skin, they reached the navel after a long time. There are two different implied meanings that are oft quoted by Sanskrit commentators of Kalidasa-(1) he speaks of the posture of Uma in her penance. She is sitting alert with her neck straight and eyes half- opened. If her eyes were shut the drops of the rain could not stay on her lashes. The rain drops struck her to her bosom, it alludes to the fact that her back was straight in meditation. (an excellent posture with straight spinal cord). The rain drops after circumambulating the three curves in the belly they reached her navel, also alludes to her straight posture. (2) this verse illustrates to another delectable implication which alludes to her beauty which is a paragon of female charm. Kalidasa does not state all these things in words but the implied meaning gives the real taste of high- ranking poetic delineation.

Another quality on account of which Kalidasa is often quoted by Sanskrit poets and critics is his deftness in putting the universal truths in simple and lucid language. He is therefore, quoted in different treatises and anthologies. In this context many critics say that Kalidasa is best in 'Arthantaranyasa' – a figure of speech in which after the narration of a particular picture, the same is confirmed by a universal idea or vice-versa.

“Seeing Madana, thus, burnt by Shiva right in front of her. Parvati, thinks that now her dreams are broken and she blames her beauty in her heart. What is the beauty if it fails to win the favour of the beloved?” (Canto V, Kumarasambhavam)

Kalidasas' depiction of nature is highly praise worthy. Many accounts of the depiction of mountains, rivers, forests, ashramas are seen in the treatises of Kalidasa. The most oft quoted depiction of Himalayas is really superb. In Canto I, in the context of the lineage of Uma—

“There exists in the North a mountain named Himalayas, the abode of snow. It is the king among mountains and a divinity at the core. Reaching up to the oceans in the east and the west, it stands like the measuring- rod of Prithvi, the earth.” (Canto I, Kumarasambhavam)

Lotuses bloom in lakes located on high Himalayan peaks. Saptarishi, the seven great sages pick them with their own hands.

So exotic is the high- flown imagery of Kalidasa. In the IV Act of Abhigyan Shakuntalam the has shown a great relationship of man and nature which is found rare in other poets. When Shakuntala is going to her husband's home and leaving the ashrama, she tells her friends Anusuya and Priyamvada to look after the fawn and water the plants without fail. The young one of the deer comes and touches her. That scene becomes more pathetic when Kanva, her foster father asks the 'Vanadevis' to bade farewell to the departing Shakuntala-

"Ye neighboring trees of pious grove! She who would not take water first, prior to you being ornaments: she whose dearest pleasure was in the season of first sight of the bloom; even that very Shakuntala is proceeding toward the palace of her husband or her wedded lord. Let all give her assent." She acts as if he heard the note of a cuckoo bird.(Koil)

Shakuntala is permitted to leave by the forest's companions—like trees, plants, flowers, deer and so on. For such farewell, the song of a sweet cuckoo bird (Koil) was used as a reply by them. There are flashes of impending gloom and even dark episodes in the play, Abhigyanashakuntalam; there are flashes also of bitter irony with flashes of sheer good humor. But the play though it has had its tragic moments, ends on a note of peace, reflecting the poet's vision of peace and harmony in a world where order has been resorted.

Kalidasa's poetry is untainted with involved constructions, strained wit and exotic similes. His style is straightforward and simple, his insights are fresh and innovative and his imagery is vivid and realistic. Thus, Tagore has noted the poet and playwright (Kalidasa) has richly sketched all the blandishments, playfulness, cajolery and fluttering of the inebriating sense of youth, the conflict between intense bashfulness and intense self-expression. Kalidasa's knowledge of many different rhythmic patterns makes his compositions both a joy to read and recite. He finds a good balance between musicality and grandeur.

References

1. Kalidasa's Trilogy, Dipavli Debroy, Winsome Books India, 2009.
2. Abigyan Shakuntalam of Kalidasa, C.R Devadhar, N.G Suru, 2009.
3. Kalidasa: The Loom of Time by Chandra Rajan, Penguin Books India. ,1999
4. Abhigyan Shakuntalam, ed. S. K, Belvalkar, Sahitya Akademi, Delhi, 1963.
5. Megha- Dutam, ed. S. K De, Sahitya Akademi, Delhi, 1957.
6. Natyashastra of Bharata Muni, ed.M.M Batuk Nath Sharma and M.M Baldeva Upadhyaya, Kashi Sanskrit Series, Chaukhamba, Varanasi, 1929.
7. Birds in Sanskrit Literature, Dave, K.N., Motilal Banarasidass, Delhi, 1985.
8. The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline, Kosambi, D.D., Vikas Publishing House, 1970.