

# Ecological Consciousness in Ancient Sanskrit Plays: A Study of Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, Bhasa's *Svapnavasavadattam* and Shudraka's *Mrichhakatikam*

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## Abstract:

This research paper explores the relationship between human beings and nature in ancient Sanskrit plays. This ecological consciousness can be decoded using theories like ecofeminism, class and caste Hierarchies, and the observations made on the basis of theories like feminism, hegemony and communism. Ecofeminism draws connections between the exploitation of nature and the subjugation of women and we can thus interpret the treatment of the natural world in classical Indian literature. By examining eminent Sanskrit plays such as Kalidasa's *\*Abhijnanasakuntalam\** and Bhasa's *\*Svapnavasavadattam\**, we can decode that how nature is portrayed, personified, and aligned with feminine principles, revealing the underlying ecological, social and cultural constructs. The research paper tries to decode the man- woman relationship, the man- nature relationship and woman- nature parallels through the use of mentioned critical theories.

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism, feminism, Sanskrit drama, nature, gender, human-nature relationship, ecological consciousness.

## PAPER

Ecofeminism emerged as a powerful interdisciplinary critique of patriarchal structures that dominated both women and nature. Environmental degradation and gender oppression have had eternal connections. Ancient Sanskrit drama is rich with depictions of nature and natural substances as a part of the life of the male or female protagonist. This active presence is often in alignment with feminine qualities and this observation can lead to new literary analysis. This paper investigates the human-nature relationship in classical Sanskrit plays to uncover how ecological and gender ideologies have similarities. For this analysis, Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, *Vikramorvashiyam* and Bhasa's *Swapnavasavadatta* have been taken into consideration.

Drama has been a rigorous form of art and literature in ancient Indian civilization since Vedic times. By deconstructing these ages old testaments to life, we can uncover various facets of a woman's most intimate interactions with nature. On revisiting these ancient plays, we come to know that nature played a great role in the life of human beings. While we see men revering nature through various rituals and ceremonies,

we can also trace hegemonic relationship between them. The parallels between the oppression of women and nature, under the authority of man as a monarch is also evident.

Ecofeminism combines ecological concerns with feminist perspectives, asserting that the domination of women and the degradation of nature are rooted in patriarchal ideologies (Shiva, 1988; Plumwood, 1993). Thinkers like Vandana Shiva and Carolyn Merchant argue for a re-evaluation of traditional knowledge systems that value interconnectedness, empathy, and sustainability. The ecofeminist theories can prove that ancient Sanskrit texts not only have nature as a backdrop but also an active participant along with the protagonists. We see life and its philosophical concepts deeply rooted in Dharma while observing Sanskrit plays into consideration. We observe a lifestyle which respects life in every *jada*<sup>1</sup> and *chetan*<sup>3</sup> form. *Natya Shastra* by Bharatmuni rightly emphasizes the interrelatedness of human experience, art, and nature (Bharata, trans. 200 BCE). Nature in these plays is often personified and thus become an integral part of the plot development and the character formation.

When we take into consideration Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, we see nature intricately woven in the life of the female protagonist, Shakuntala. The story of a beautiful celestial nymph Menaka, seducing sage Vishwamitra in forests ends in the birth of a baby girl. Since an *apsara*<sup>3</sup> had to return to heaven, the abode of God Indra and the sage had to continue his penance, the baby girl was left in the forest to be fed by *Shakunta*, i.e. birds, hence the name given to her is Shakuntala. (*Mahabharat*, Aadi Parva) The fauna rightfully saving the feminine energy 'Sakuntala' in a jungle tells a story of benevolent nature. Shakuntala was reared by sage Kanva. She is raised in his hermitage, and is shown as part of the natural world. Her relationship with flora and fauna—nurturing plants, talking care of the deer underlines the ecofeminist principle of symbiosis between women and nature. The disruption of this harmony through her departure to the king's palace signifies a rupture in the ecological and emotional balance (Thapar, 2002).

In *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, the interaction between humans and flora/fauna is a beautiful aspect of the play. In the hermitage garden, Sakuntala takes care of the young deer like a mother. The deer is a symbol of innocence and natural beauty. The lush green hermitage surrounded by trees and plants is symbolizing harmony with nature. Flowers play a significant role in the play, often symbolizing love and beauty. Shakuntala is compared to a flower, "soft as a jasmine" (Ryder, Shakuntala) highlighting her beauty and innocence. She wears garments made of tree bark. She is constantly compared with the spring creeper by her friends Priyamwada and Anusuya. (Kale, P-) When Shakuntala falls in love, she is compared to the sulky lily flower. The love letter that she writes is on the lotus leaf. (P-)

Surprisingly, the first meeting of Padmavati with Vasavadatta in the very first act of *Svapnvasavadatta* by Bhasa is also in the hermitage. The hermitage life is completely devoid of rush and evils of cities. The royal people, constantly visiting such holy places signify the ancient Indian values of coexistence. In *Svapnavasavadattam*, nature provides refuge and becomes a silent witness to human suffering and endurance. Vasavadatta's retreat into the forest parallels her emotional journey, suggesting a therapeutic bond between nature and femininity. The forest serves as a space of healing, echoing ecofeminist calls for environmental and social harmony (Devy, 1992). The brahmchari also praises the penance Grove in these words,

"The Deer roam about freely without getting frightened owing to confidence created by the place ....the trees, all tendered with care, have their branches laden with flowers and fruits; herds of twany cows, the wealth (of penance grove) are in plenty, the lands on either side are uncultivated; and the yonder smoke arises from many fire- places: (13) ( 18-21)

Later, Vasavadata weaves garlands for Padmavati 's wedding with Udayana, her own husband. The variety of flowers with herbaceous properties have been mentioned by Bhasa. There is a flower, *Avidhwakarana*, (Act3, 50) , the preventer of widowhood(p-51) , kasha flower, which is used as an excuse for emotional Udayana in the pleasure-garden. The blooming of red coloured *Shefalika* flower signifies the blooming of love between major characters. In the sixth act , the Chamberlain makes a comparison between men and trees. (135)

In *Abijnanasakuntalam*, when King Dushyanta when sees Sakuntala fading in love, says, “ She fades for love; oh, pitifully sweet! As vine- leaves wither in the scorching heat” (Ryder, 29). The king constantly compares the body of Sakuntala with flowers, “ Your body, soft as siris- flowers Engages passion's utmost powers;

How comes it that your heart is hard

As stalks that siris- blossoms guard? (35)

The hero and heroine of the play get married according to *Gandharva* rites, with only nature as their witness. Natural elements play a great deal of influence on human beings and their behaviours. When Sakuntala is departing to her husband's abode, we see nature bestowing rarest of ornaments and garment for her.

“ One tree bore fruit, a silken marriage dress

That shamed the moon in its white loveliness

Another gave us lac-dye for the feet;

From others, fairy hands extended, sweet

Like flowering twigs, as far as to the wrist,

And gave us gems, to adorn her as we list.” (Ryder, )

In Sanskrit drama, nature is often personified as a feminine force, embodying qualities of fertility, nurturing, and resilience. This personification aligns with ecofeminist perspectives that view nature and women as interconnected entities subjected to similar forms of exploitation. For instance, in '*Abhijnanashakuntalam*', the forest is not merely a backdrop but an active participant in the narrative, influencing the characters' fates and reflecting the state of the natural world.([Research Gate][1]) In many Sanskrit plays, natural elements act as moral agents. Rivers, animals,birds, and trees communicate warnings or blessings. This animistic view aligns with ecofeminist perspectives that reject the objectification of nature. The human characters' fortunes often change in tandem with natural signs, suggesting a symbiotic ethical relationship (Dissanayake, ) Sakuntala's ring lost at holy Ganges is itself a foreboding. She is repudiated in Dushyanta's court. Dushyanta compares her to female cuckoo, who is eager to put her eggs in someone's else's nest.

The female's untaught cunning may be seen

In beasts, far more in women selfish-wise;

The cuckoo's eggs are left to hatch and rear

By foster- parents, and away she flies.(Ryder,59)

In the original story of Sakuntala in the epic *Mahabharat*, Sakuntala is not so weak and fragile. She has the power to fly like her celestial-nymph mother Menaka. She speaks her mind and boldly moves out after coward king refuses to accept her. Dushyanta, in the epic is afraid of the curse of Kanva, the sire of Sakuntala and thus refuses to accept his Gandharva<sup>4</sup> marriage. But, the patriarchal writer Kalidasa, here , tries to save Dushyanta by including curse motif and ring motif in his text *Abhijnanasakuntalam*. The insult of the female protagonist here tells us that female species is recognized as long as it is nurturing and

accepts the glorified role of an ideal wife and mother. The repudiation scene can also signify that as long as the protagonist is in the sanctum sanctorum of nature i.e. hermitage, she is protected and cherished, but when she moves out to the hustle bustle of town, she is insulted. Shakuntala is recognized by the king when fisherman gets the ring inside a fish, thus breaking sage Durvasa's curse. (Act VI, 64, Ryder) Thus, fauna saves her again. We see Sakuntala participating in many rituals related to nature, offering water to sun in Shachitirtha, collecting flowers for worship with Priyamwada and Anusuya. We also see Vasavadatta and Padmavati doing rituals related to nature. Ritual practices depicted in Sanskrit plays frequently involve women interacting with nature—worshipping trees, performing river rites, or collecting flowers for puja. These acts symbolize reverence for life and highlight the cultural embodiment of ecofeminist ethics (Sharma, 2004). On the other hand, we see King Dushyanta putting an end to the celebration of spring festival in his kingdom when he missed Shakuntala, symbolizing patriarchal control over nature. (67, Ryder) He paints the picture of Sakuntala amidst flowers and other natural things. In Act VII, King finally meets Sakuntala along with his son amidst flora and fauna of nature. The son, Sarvadamana, is trying to count the teeth of a lion cub. (Ryder, 85)

Women are the custodians of ecological wisdom, as judged by their close relationship with nature. We see Sakuntala watering plants, Anusuya and Priyamvada giving rice to birds. Vasantsena is making wedding garland because she is of high birth and is considered lucky. Vasavadatta has to sacrifice her marital happiness for saving the kingdom for her husband Udayana. She needs to be happy for Padmavati at her alliance with her own husband. On the other hand, Padmavati is shown courteous and sweet because she listens to love tales of her husband with the dead first wife. Surely, the ideal wife standards have to be achieved by women only. In *Malvikagnimitram* by Bhasa, we see Malvika kicking Ashoka-tree, so that it bears flowers. So, nature is in sync with women in the creations of Kalidasa and Bhasa. However, this synchronization often leads to her marginalization in a society made by man. An ecocritical reading of *Abhijnanasakuntalam* may highlight the beauty of natural descriptions, but an ecofeminist approach interprets Shakuntala's alienation from nature as symbolic of her marginalization within patriarchal society (Merchant, 80)

Ancient Sanskrit plays, when examined through ecofeminist theory, reveal a profound intertwining of ecological and gender consciousness. Characters like Shakuntala, Padmavati and Vasavadatta are not just literary figures but representations of nature's beauty and perseverance. These texts advocate a world view that recognizes the sanctity of both women and the environment, offering a rich archive for contemporary ecological ethics.

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