



Romance as Dharma: The Ethical Imagination of Love in Kalidasa's Abhijnananshakuntalam

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ABSTRACT

This work examines the ethical or moral imagination of love in Abhijñānaúākuntalam, arguing that Kalidasa structures romance not merely as emotional desire but as a mode of dharma that is an ethical orientation that shapes personal, social and cosmic harmony. This one of the most famous play of Sanskrit presents love (srngara-rasa) as a disciplined sensibility where emotion is refined through responsibility, memory and mutual recognition. Through close observation the study explores how Sakuntala and Ducyanta exemplify moral poetics of one of the most intricate human feelings that is affection, negotiating the tensions between passion and duty. By tracing the interplay of nature, asceticism, kingship and divine order, this study tries to demonstrate that romance in this play of Kalidasa functions as a transformative ethical force rather than a private sentiment. The crisis of recognition in Abhijñānaúākuntalam operates as a test of character and reveals how ethical identity is forged through relational obligations. Exploring through the Sanskrit poetics, Indian philosophy and contemporary literary criticism, this paper argues that Abhijñānaúākuntalam universalizes the ideal of love as dharma that is an affective responsibility that sustains both – individual fulfilment and collective well-being. The study further highlights Kalidasa's narrative strategies that very finely blend with mastery the aesthetic pleasure with moral inquiry and offer a distinctive vision of love that is relevant to modern discussions on ethics, relationships and literary imagination.

KEY WORDS

Srngara-rasa, Dharma, Ethical Imagination, *Kâlidâsa*, *Abhijñânaûâkuntalam*.

INTRODUCTION

Abhijñânaûâkuntalam of *Kalidasa* considered a pinnacle of classical Sanskrit literature is celebrated not only for its lyrical beauty and poetic mastery but also for the profound engagement it has with the ethical, social and philosophical concerns. Almost all classical Sanskrit literature frequently employs *rasa* theory to evoke aesthetic experience, but *Kâlidâsa*'s treatment of *srngara-rasa* (the aesthetic flavor of romantic love) is uniquely integrated with ethical reflection. The lovers *Abhijananshakuntalam* have a unique ability to navigate desire with responsibility and adherence to social and celestial norms (Hiriyanna, 1954/1993; Kane, 1974).

The ethical dimensions of romance are seen in the exchange of emotions and commitments to relationships. The initial forgetfulness of King *Ducyanta* serves as the moral and narrative fulcrum of the narrative. Similarly, *ûâkuntalâ*'s commitment, patience and cultivation of virtue during separation exemplify ethical resilience.

Research Questions

1. How does *Kalidasa* frame love (*prema* or *œ[Egâra]*) as an ethical mode of being rather than a purely emotional or aesthetic experience?
2. In what way does king *Ducyanta*'s failure of memory work as a trial of ethical identity and relational responsibility?
3. How do ecological sensibility, ascetic ideals and cosmic order shape romance as dharma in *Abhijñânaûâkuntalam*?

By raising these questions this paper places its discussion within the larger conversational canvass of Sanskrit poetics, ethics and modern literary criticism.

Literature Review

The study of *Abhijñânaûâkuntalam* has a long and subtle history beginning with early European encounters and reaching up to contemporary analyses that examine ethical, feminist and cultural dimensions of this work. While the play is widely recognized for its poetic brilliance the early scholars primarily focused on its stylistic and dramatic qualities and often overlooked its moral and ethical intricacies. A critical review of this approach situates the present article within a continuum of interpretive inquiry that highlights both foundational insights and existing gaps regarding the ethical imagination of love.

Early Indological Scholarship

The earliest European engagement with *Abhijananshakuntalam* was William Jones's translation (1789) which introduced the text to the Western audiences. Jones celebrated the play's elegance, its lyrical language and the delicate portrayal of romantic emotions but it largely ignored the ethical dimensions of the narrative. Subsequent scholarship by Alfred A. Keith (1920) approached the play through the lens of Sanskrit dramaturgy and emphasized the plot structure, characterization and its adherence to the *Natyashastra*.

Twentieth-Century Scholarship

In the twentieth century, scholars began paying much closer attention to the theoretical foundations of Sanskrit literature, especially *rasa* theory and the ethical questions it raises. Scholars like V. Raghavan (1978), P. V. Kane (1974) and S. K. De (1960) examined how *srngara-rasa* which is the aesthetic flavor of romantic love, operates as a vehicle for moral and emotional refinement. Raghavan (1978) has emphasized that dialogue and imagery of *Kâlidâsa* function not only as ethical but also as aesthetic instruction. Both, De (1960) and Krishnamoorthy (1979) argued that the aesthetic experience in Sanskrit drama, particularly through *srngara* cannot be separated from ethics.

Contemporary Scholarship

Contemporary scholars have prolonged these inquiries to include feminist, cultural and socio-political interpretations of the play. R. S. Rajan (1999) cross-examined *Sakuntala's* agency and noted that her ethical and emotional conduct questions patriarchal assumptions about female inactiveness. Rajan's analysis highlights the relational dimension of ethical action according to which love functions as a site of moral negotiation and empowerment particularly for women in classical narratives.

Sheldon Pollock (2006) places *Abhijnananshakuntalam* in a wider cultural and political setting that shows how the Sanskrit literature imagines ethical life as something that is deeply connected to social structures, kingship and the cosmic order.

Thematic Synthesis

Across historical and contemporary scholarships there are several themes that constantly appear which are directly relevant to the ethical interpretation of romance in *Abhijnananshakuntalam*:

- 1. Dharma as Relational Ethics:** Hiriyantha (1954/1993) and Kane (1974) emphasize that ethical conduct is defined by context, duty and the harmonization of personal desire with relational responsibilities.
- 2. Love as Moral Refinement:** De (1960) and Raghavan (1978) emphasize that *sringara-rasa* nurtures virtue by integrating aesthetic understanding with ethical awareness.
- 3. Memory, Recognition and Responsibility:** Rajan (2011) and Pollock (2006) underline that the crisis of recognition is not dramatic but wise mechanism implying moral testing and relational vigilance.
- 4. Nature and Asceticism as Ethical Paradigms:** Coomaraswamy (1916) and Warder (1977) illustrate that *Úâkuntalâ's* environmental sensitivity and ascetic surroundings are essential to ethical development, suggesting that love is inseparable from ecological and spiritual consciousness.

Gap and Contribution

Under this study we found that the early scholarship concentrated on aesthetics and narrative structure and contemporary studies have examined the feminist and socio-political dimensions but the ethical imagination of romance as dharma has remained underexplored. There are a very few studies which comprehensively articulate how love in *Abhijñânaúâkuntalam* simultaneously engages aesthetic sensibility, moral duty and social responsibility.

Theoretical Framework

This study makes an attempt to place *Abhijnananshakuntalam* at the intersection of Sanskrit literary theory, classical Indian ethical philosophy and contemporary literary criticism. The theoretical framework is crucial for interpreting romance as *dharma* and paves the path for moving beyond conventional interpretations of love as emotional or aesthetic indulgence. Three conceptual pillars i.e. *dharma* as ethical orientation, *rasa* theory as moral cultivation and relational ethics as a framework for moral identity, form the backbone of this analysis.

- 1. Dharma as Ethical Orientation:** In the classical Indian thought, *dharma* (धर्म) includes duty i.e. moral obligation and alignment with cosmic order. Kane (1974) emphasizes that *dharma* is not merely legal or ritualistic duty or task but fundamentally relational that entails responsibilities toward oneself, others and also the universe. In *Abhijnananshakuntalam* *dharma* is the ethical scaffolding of romance. *Úâkuntalâ* and *Ducyanta's* love is not a private affair. It is multiple steps beyond that in being bound not only by relational and societal imperatives but also by ecological awareness.
- 2. Rasa Theory and Ethical Effect:** *Rasa* theory, as pronounced in the *Natyashastra* and later Sanskrit poetics, offers a critical lens that helps understanding how aesthetic experience shapes moral consciousness. *Sringara-rasa* (शृंगार-रस) that is traditionally associated with love, beauty and aesthetic

pleasure is central to *Kalidasa's* ethical project. Hirianna (1954/1993) and De (1960) argue that *rasa* functions as more than an instrument of aesthetic enjoyment. In *Abhijnananshakuntalam*, *āsrngara-rasa* is deeply entwined with ethical imagination. The audience's engagement with longings of *Sakuntala*, remorse of *Ducyanta* and the surrounding natural and ascetic settings nurture vicarious moral reflection.

- 3. Relational Ethics and Moral Identity:** A third pillar of theoretical framework is the concept of relational ethics. Rajam (2011) highlights that ethical identity emerges in relational contexts. He also reiterates that moral awareness is inseparable from interactions with others and from responsibilities grounded in memory, recognition and attentiveness. In *Abhijñānauākuntalam* the crisis of recognition i.e. *Ducyanta's* forgetting *Sakuntala*, exemplifies the vulnerability of ethical identity when relational mindfulness is disrupted. The lovers' actions affect not only each other but also their families.
- 4. Asceticism, Nature and Ethical Sensibility:** The forest hermitage (*vana*) serves as a pedagogical environment where ethical and aesthetic refinement takes place. *Sakuntala's* care for plants and animals is an example of an ethical ecology. It demonstrates that dharma extends beyond human-to-human relationships (Coomaraswamy, 1916). The disciplined life of the hermitage cultivates into the dwellers kind of self-control and reflective consciousness.
- 5. Methodological Approach:** This article employs close reading of the text, examines key dialogues, narrative arcs and scenic depictions to discover the ethical dimensions of romance. Intertextual references to Sanskrit poetics, *dharmashastra* and philosophical commentaries try to contextualize the discussion. This framework allows for an integrated analysis of the play where romance is simultaneously aesthetic, ethical and relational.

Romance as Ethical Sensibility

In *Abhijnananshakuntalam*, *Kalidasa* successfully constructs love (*prema*, प्रेम) not merely as a private emotional indulgence but elevates it as a sophisticated ethical sensibility. *Sakuntala's* character embodies an affective discipline where emotion is refined through attentiveness, restraint and awareness about relationship. Her interactions with the natural objects and living beings, her care for plants, animals and the harmony of the forest hermitage, signal that ethical development extends beyond human relationships as well. Coomaraswamy (1916) interprets this ecological sensibility as an extension of *dharmā* (धर्म) into the non-human domain.

Nature and Asceticism as Ethical Contexts

The forest hermitage (*vana*, वन) in which *Sakuntala* resides functions as a moral and aesthetic ecosystem that offers both a literal and metaphorical space cultivating ethical practices. The spatial and temporal structure of the hermitage encourages deliberate action and contemplation which can foster a consciousness that is attuned to *dharmic* principles. Romantic affection, then, takes shape within an ethical setting.

Literary Depiction of Ethical Growth

Literary strategies of *Kalidasa* further underscore the ethics of romance. The poet employs poetic imagery, metaphor and scenography to render ethical sensibility. For example, the description of the flowering hermitage, birdsong and flowing streams draws parallels between the budding emotional and moral awareness of the protagonists. Raghavan (1978) observes that such imagery is not ornamental. It functions as a pedagogical instrument guiding the audience to perceive romance as an ethical practice.

Integration of *Srngara-Rasa* and Moral Philosophy

Srngara-rasa (शृंगार-रस) the aesthetic flavour of romantic love is central to this ethical vision. Unlike Western conceptions of romance as emotional intensity divorced from ethical consequence, *Kalidasa's* treatment aligns aesthetic pleasure with moral education. The love of *Sakuntala* and *Ducyanta* shows how aesthetic joy and emotional tension can blend with moral reflection to produce empathy and uphold dharma.

Memory, Recognition, Kingship and Cosmic Order

The Crisis of Recognition as Ethical Trial

One of the most profound ethical moments in *Abhijnananshakuntalam* is the crisis of recognition. This is catalysed by the curse of rishi Durvâsas. In classical Indian thought, *smriti* (स्मृति) or memory is not merely cognitive recall but a foundation on which the principle of moral consciousness is based. Rajam (2011) emphasizes that memory functions as a medium for ethical selfhood that anchors individuals to general duty, social bonds and relational integrity. *Ducyanta*'s lapse of memory represents a temporary collapse of ethical awareness, depicting that love without mindfulness and relational vigilance tends to fail its *dharmic* purpose.

Memory, Recognition and Moral Identity

The exchange between memory and recognition highlights the relational formation of ethical identity. The ethical lapse of *Ducyanta* disrupts not only his personal affection but also the social and cosmic equilibrium. Recognition (*sansmarana*, संस्मरण) is a medium through which moral accountability is ensured. By remembering *Ūâkuntalâ*, *Ducyanta* fulfils his duties towards relationship, restores social order and honours the cosmic *dharma*.

Kingship and Ethical Responsibility

The role of *Ducyanta* as a king provides a crucial political dimension to romance. In Sanskrit dramaturgy, the ruler's ethical integrity (*niti*, नीति) is very often linked to societal welfare. Kane (1974) notes that the moral character of a sovereign ruler cannot be separated from the legitimacy of political authority. Forgetfulness of king *Ducyanta*, therefore, has ramifications beyond personal relationships. The restoration of memory symbolizes not only personal reunion but also the re-establishment of ethical governance. The narrative suggests that private virtue and public responsibility are deeply connected with each other.

Cosmic Order and Divine Intervention

The ethical stakes of romance in the play are extended to the cosmic plane, mediated through divine intervention. The incidents like reconciliation of *Sakuntala* and *Ducyanta* and the birth of *Bharata*, the future founder of the *Kuru* dynasty, illustrate that ethically aligned love is sanctioned by cosmic order. According to Winternitz (1927/1985) the divine mediation is not mere narrative contrivance but a reflection of the classical Indian philosophy. Divine elements such as *Durvasas*'s curse and celestial reconciliation are thus ethical instruments.

Memory, Recognition and Rasa Ethics

The ethical dimensions of memory and recognition are closely tied to the *rasa* theory. The expression of *sringara-rasa* in *Shakuntala*'s longing and *Ducyanta*'s remorse works as a medium for moral reflection. Hirianna (1954/1993) highlights that *rasa* provokes both aesthetic pleasure as well as moral contemplation. The play demonstrates that emotional engagement (*bhava*, भाव) is instructive. It teaches the audiences empathy, alerts them about the consequences of ethical lapses and reminds them about the necessity of relational vigilance.

Restoration of Dharma through Ethical Love

The reunion of *Shakuntala*'s and *Ducyanta* also represents the restoration of *dharma* at multiple levels. Their personal reunion signifies ethical maturity. Recognition of *Bharata*'s legitimacy further strengthens a sense of social justice and cosmic balance that is rooted in divine approval while the romance itself acts as a gentle moral guide that shapes behaviour and upholds the larger social order. By linking love with duty and cosmic alignment, *Kâlidâsa* portrays romance like an ethical practice that has potential to transform.

Integration with Political and Social Ethics

The ethical imagination in romance extends to political philosophy of the land. Ethical conduct of the ruler *Ducyanta* or lack thereof, impacts societal norms and the legitimacy of the governance. The play thus

presents romance as a medium for ethical civic education, illustrating how personal virtue sustains the social institutions. The ethical framework encourages the audience to look at love as relationally and socially responsible.

Ethical Implications for Contemporary Readership

Act-wise understanding of *Abhijnananshakuntalam* shows how *Kalidasa* weaves ethical imagination into the experience of love, presenting romance as a disciplined practice which shapes all - personal virtue, emotional maturity and social responsibility. Through *Sakuntala* and *Ducyanta*, the play reminds us that love is never only private feeling but a relationship rooted in duty, awareness and a larger cosmic order. The poet's careful use of dialogue and imagery demonstrates how love is tested through separation and uncertainty and how these trials cultivate ethical sensitivity.

CRITICAL DISCUSSION, SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSION

Integrating Aesthetics and Ethics

Kalidasa's Abhijnananshakuntalam beautifully blends aesthetic pleasure with ethical reflection. Love in the play is never just an emotion but a way of nurturing moral awareness and responsibility. Through its vivid imagery, lyrical moments and situations of tension, the play makes *Srngara* not simply a source of delight but a means of cultivating empathy and discernment. As we follow *Shakuntala's* patience and *Ducyanta's* lapse of memory and eventual restoration, we are drawn into an emotional journey that doubles as quiet moral instruction, reminding us that the joy and pain of romance are tied to larger questions of conduct and duty.

Romance as Relational Ethics

The core ethical message of the play lies in its view of *dharma* shaped through relationships rather than abstract ideals. *Shakuntala's* and *Ducyanta* show that qualities like patience, empathy, restraint and fidelity gain meaning only in real human bonds. As Rajam (2011) notes, classical Indian stories mostly root virtue in mutual responsibility. *Kalidasa* follows this tradition by portraying love as something ethically built by both partners. *Shakuntala's* steady devotion and *Ducyanta's* eventual recognition and repair reveal how moral character grows through interaction, accountability and shared efforts.

Kingship, Social Order and Moral Responsibility

Ducyanta's role as a king adds a political layer to the play's exploration of ethical love. His failure to recognize *Sakuntala* and his later redemption shows how a ruler's personal mistakes carry social consequences, echoing insights from scholars like Kane and Pollock that a king's private virtue shapes the legitimacy of his rule. By placing romance within the frame of kingship, *Kalidasa* suggests that ethical love is also a civic duty: it supports social harmony, justice and good governance. *Ducyanta's* growth reveals how personal integrity, relational commitment and public responsibility are intertwined.

Ethical Implications for Contemporary Readers

Reading *Kalidasa* today still offers valuable guidance for anyone navigating emotional and ethical complexities. *Sakuntala* and *Ducyanta's* story shows that love flourishes when it is mindful, reciprocal and grounded in responsibility. It is not just personally meaningful but socially and even cosmically significant. Their journey reminds us that ethical love builds empathy, strengthens relationships and supports a wider moral order. This makes the play's insights both timeless and relevant to contemporary life.

Conclusion

In *Abhijnananshakuntalam*, *Kalidasa* creates a world where love becomes both an ethical practice and an aesthetic experience. It is tested through memory, duty, divine influence and the challenges of intricacies of human relationships. The final reunion of *Sakuntala* and *Ducyanta* shows how personal desire can be aligned with social and cosmic order if guided by responsibility and self-awareness. *Abhijnananshakuntalam's* vision of romance is far more than mere private emotion. It is a disciplined, relational and morally meaningful

path. Its ethical imagination remains deeply relevant today which offers insight into how beauty, virtue and responsibility can shape our relationships and our lives.

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