



A portrait of womanhood in Kalidasa's *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*: Tradition, moral dignity, and contemporary relevance

Dr. Md Muntazir Alam

Department of English, R. L. College, Madhawnagar, Purnea University, Purnea, Bihar, India

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Abstract

Kalidasa's *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* occupies a distinguished place in classical Sanskrit literature because it combines lyrical beauty with a searching inquiry into love, memory, duty, justice, and human responsibility. This article examines Shakuntala as a multidimensional portrait of womanhood rather than merely an idealized romantic heroine. It argues that her compassion, self-respect, emotional resilience, spiritual maturity, and intimate relationship with nature make her the moral centre of the drama. Her movement from the innocence of Kanva's hermitage through love, public rejection, motherhood, and eventual recognition reveals womanhood as a process of ethical growth rather than a fixed social role. The study also interprets Dushyanta's recovery of memory as an ethical transformation: *abhigyan* signifies not only recollection through the signet ring but recognition of Shakuntala's truth and of the king's own responsibility. Through close textual analysis informed by Sanskrit aesthetics, Indian feminist criticism, ecofeminism, and ethical criticism, the article explores the symbolism of the ring, forest, court, dharma, and Bharata. It concludes that the play remains relevant to contemporary debates on women's dignity, relational equality, responsible leadership, environmental care, and moral accountability. Kalidasa's heroine is therefore neither a passive victim nor a modern individualist projected backward into antiquity; she is a culturally rooted yet universally intelligible figure whose integrity transforms private suffering into ethical authority.

Keywords: Kalidasa, *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*, Shakuntala, Dushyanta, womanhood, moral dignity, feminism, ecofeminism, Sanskrit drama, contemporary relevance, justice, human responsibility, multidimensional portrait, emotional resilience, recognition, ethical criticism

Introduction

Classical Sanskrit literature is distinguished by its philosophical range, aesthetic discipline, and sustained engagement with human conduct. Among its major writers, Kalidasa occupies an exceptional position because his poetry and drama unite imaginative refinement with psychological observation. Works such as *Raghuvamsha*, *Kumarasambhava*, *Meghaduta*, and *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* have entered both Indian and global literary history. Of these, *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* is especially influential because its apparently simple story of love, separation, and reunion develops into a meditation on memory, moral responsibility, kingship, gender, and the relation between human life and nature.

The play's international reception expanded after William Jones's 1789 translation, *Sacountala; or, The Fatal Ring*, introduced Kalidasa to European readers. Subsequent criticism often praised the drama's formal balance, emotional delicacy, and fusion of natural imagery with human feeling. Such appreciation remains important, but it can obscure the ethical complexity of Shakuntala's character. The drama is not sustained by beauty alone. Its central conflict asks whether institutional authority can recognize truth when evidence fails, whether love survives the interruption of memory, and whether repentance can restore justice after injury.

Shakuntala, born to Vishwamitra and Menaka but raised by Sage Kanva, develops within the disciplined serenity of the hermitage. Her upbringing shapes a personality marked by tenderness toward living beings, modesty without self-erasure, and loyalty without moral dependence. Dushyanta

first perceives her beauty, yet the drama gradually makes her inner qualities more important than appearance. She loves, chooses, suffers, speaks, raises a child, and ultimately confronts a transformed king from a position of ethical strength. Her identity is therefore relational but not reducible to the roles of beloved, wife, or mother.

The plot turns on Dushyanta's loss of memory after Durvasa's curse and Shakuntala's loss of the ring that could have established her claim. In the court, the king possesses political authority while Shakuntala possesses moral certainty. The resulting dramatic irony distinguishes legal caution from ethical truth: Dushyanta cannot responsibly accept an unsupported claim, yet his failure to recognize Shakuntala produces profound injustice. When the ring restores memory, the king's remorse demonstrates that recognition is not merely cognitive. It is the recovery of conscience and the acknowledgement of another person's dignity.

This article argues that Kalidasa presents womanhood as a synthesis of emotional intelligence, moral courage, nurturing creativity, and spiritual autonomy. It also contends that Dushyanta's ethical transformation is inseparable from Shakuntala's unwavering integrity. By bringing classical aesthetics into dialogue with feminist and ecofeminist criticism, the study seeks neither to idealize ancient social structures nor to impose contemporary categories mechanically upon the text. Instead, it identifies a historically situated vision of feminine dignity whose ethical force remains meaningful in discussions of equality, leadership, family responsibility, and ecological coexistence.

Review of Literature

The critical history of *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* extends across Sanskrit poetics, colonial translation, comparative literature, theatre studies, and modern gender criticism. Jones's translation established the work's early European reputation and encouraged Romantic admiration of its emotional unity and natural imagery. Traditional literary histories later treated the play as a culminating achievement of Sanskrit drama. A. B. Keith, for example, emphasized Kalidasa's dramatic construction, characterization, and emotional refinement in *The Sanskrit Drama*. Such accounts secured the play's canonical status, although their principal concerns were literary form and historical development rather than gendered power or feminine agency.

Indian aesthetic scholarship has explained the drama through *rasa*, *dhvani*, and the conventions of Sanskrit dramaturgy. Bharata Muni's *Natyasastra* provides the conceptual basis for understanding the movement between *shringara* (love), *karuṇa* (pathos), and the tranquillity of final reconciliation. The drama's power depends on the transformation of private emotion into shared aesthetic experience: love becomes profound because it is tested by separation, and sorrow becomes meaningful because it leads to ethical recognition rather than despair. Studies of Sanskrit poetics by Sushil Kumar De and the *rasa* analysis of J. L. Masson and M. V. Patwardhan help clarify this aesthetic organization.

Cultural and philological scholarship has also situated Kalidasa within broader histories of Sanskrit literary culture. Surendranath Dasgupta and K. Krishnamoorthy discuss the poet's synthesis of courtly refinement, philosophical thought, and natural imagery, while Sheldon Pollock's account of Sanskrit as a language of literary and political power encourages attention to the relationship between poetry, kingship, and cultural authority. These approaches make it possible to read the royal court not merely as a setting but as an institution whose legitimacy depends on ethical judgment.

Modern feminist and ecological readings have shifted attention from Shakuntala's beauty and devotion to her agency, vulnerability, and relation to nature. Indian feminist criticism, represented here by Malashri Lal's insistence on culturally attentive approaches to women's writing and representation, cautions against equating agency only with overt rebellion. Ecofeminist thinkers such as Vandana Shiva and Carolyn Merchant provide a framework for examining the parallel devaluation of women and the natural world. Applied carefully, these perspectives illuminate Shakuntala's nurturing relation to plants and animals without reducing her to a biological symbol. Existing scholarship, however, often treats aesthetics, gender, ecology, and ethics as separate fields. The present study brings them together around the concepts of moral dignity and recognition.

Research Gap

Previous criticism has established the play's poetic excellence, dramatic structure, *rasa* composition, and cultural importance. Yet Shakuntala is frequently approached through a single interpretive frame: as an aesthetic ideal, a devoted wife, a victim of patriarchy, or an ecological figure. These readings identify important features but can fragment a character whose significance lies in the

interaction of beauty, emotional intelligence, moral autonomy, motherhood, and spiritual endurance.

A second gap concerns Dushyanta. Studies often examine his forgetfulness as a plot mechanism or judge him separately from Shakuntala's development. Less attention is given to the way his moral awakening depends upon recognition of her integrity. Similarly, the signet ring is commonly understood as proof of identity rather than as a symbol of responsibility. This article therefore integrates Shakuntala's ethical agency, Dushyanta's transformation, classical aesthetics, feminist criticism, and ecological thought, while also evaluating their relevance to contemporary debates on dignity, equality, leadership, and environmental responsibility.

Objectives of the Study

The study has six related objectives: to examine Kalidasa's representation of womanhood through Shakuntala; to analyse the moral, emotional, and spiritual qualities that shape her identity; to explain how Dushyanta's transformation contributes to the play's ethics of relationship and kingship; to interpret the symbolic association among womanhood, nature, *dharma*, and recognition; to evaluate the play through Indian feminist, ecofeminist, and aesthetic perspectives without ignoring its historical context; and to assess Shakuntala's continuing relevance to women's dignity, relational equality, leadership, and empowerment. These objectives address the central questions of how feminine agency is represented, why moral authority exceeds political authority in the court scene, and how an ancient drama can enter responsible dialogue with twenty-first-century concerns.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative, and text-centred methodology. Its primary text is Kalidasa's *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*, principally in Chandra Rajan's translation in *The Loom of Time*, with attention to the seven-act dramatic structure, characterization, dialogue, imagery, and symbolic objects. Close reading is used to trace Shakuntala's development and Dushyanta's movement from royal confidence through moral crisis to repentance and recognition. References to acts rather than invented page numbers allow the analysis to remain applicable to different editions.

The theoretical framework combines Sanskrit aesthetics, ethical criticism, Indian feminist interpretation, and ecofeminism. *Rasa* theory explains the aesthetic shaping of love and pathos; *dharma* provides an ethical vocabulary for personal and political responsibility; feminist criticism clarifies issues of testimony, power, dignity, and agency; and ecofeminism illuminates the drama's association of feminine care with ecological interdependence. These approaches are used dialogically rather than imposed as mutually exclusive systems. The study is limited to the principal characters and symbols most relevant to its thesis; it does not attempt a comprehensive philological, performance, psychoanalytic, or postcolonial analysis.

Shakuntala as the Ideal of Womanhood

1. Daughter of Nature and Participant in Love

Shakuntala's first identity is formed in Kanva's hermitage, where discipline and tenderness coexist. She waters plants, protects young animals, and treats the natural world as a

community of living relations. Kalidasa repeatedly connects her with creepers, flowers, deer, and seasonal renewal, but these comparisons are not merely decorative *alankara*. They establish a moral environment in which care, restraint, and interdependence are ordinary habits. Her beauty reflects this environment, yet her importance lies in the ethical disposition that the forest nurtures.

The hermitage also complicates the opposition between nature and culture. It is not an uncivilized wilderness but an ordered spiritual community governed by hospitality, learning, and non-violence. When Dushyanta enters, he must restrain the violence of the hunt and respect the sanctuary's ethical law. Shakuntala therefore belongs to a cultivated nature rather than to instinct alone. Her association with Prakriti signifies creativity and life-sustaining energy, while her education under Kanva gives that energy moral direction.

Her love for Dushyanta grows through attention, conversation, and reciprocal attraction. The Gandharva marriage is significant because it depends upon mutual consent rather than dynastic negotiation. Shakuntala is not simply selected; she participates in the relationship and accepts its emotional and ethical implications. Her modesty does not eliminate desire, and her devotion does not erase choice. Kalidasa thus portrays romantic love as ethically valid only when attraction is joined to trust, responsibility, and recognition of character.

2. Wife, Rejected Woman, and Moral Authority

After marriage, Shakuntala's absorption in thoughts of Dushyanta causes her to overlook Durvasa's arrival, and the sage's curse makes her vulnerable to forgetfulness. The episode can be read as a supernatural device, but it also dramatizes the fragility of relationships when attention and communication fail. Her lost ring intensifies this vulnerability because the burden of proof falls upon the person with least institutional power. Yet the play never allows the audience to doubt her truth. Her moral identity remains continuous even when memory and evidence collapse.

The court scene is therefore the decisive test of her dignity. Dushyanta, acting without memory, demands verification before accepting a claim that has political and dynastic consequences. His caution may be intelligible as royal procedure, but it becomes ethically insufficient because the institution cannot perceive the truth embodied before it. Shakuntala speaks from a position of injury, yet she refuses to purchase acceptance through falsehood or self-abasement. She does not possess the king's legal authority, but she retains command of her own narrative and conscience.

This contrast reverses the visible hierarchy. Dushyanta controls the court; Shakuntala controls the moral meaning of the scene. Her anger and grief prevent her from being reduced to an image of passive patience. At the same time, Kalidasa does not define agency only as successful public resistance. Shakuntala's authority lies in her refusal to surrender truth when neither memory nor evidence protects her. Her silence at certain moments is therefore not automatically submission; it can also mark the limit beyond which dignity will not continue to plead before uncomprehending power.

The scene exposes a structural problem that remains recognizable: testimony is often evaluated through unequal institutions. A feminist reading rightly notes that the woman

must prove an intimate truth before a male ruler and his court. Nevertheless, the drama's ethical design does not validate the court's judgment. It places the audience in advance of the institution and makes the king's later remorse inevitable. Shakuntala's suffering becomes an indictment of authority disconnected from empathy and memory.

3. Motherhood, Resilience, and Spiritual Maturity

In Sage Maricha's celestial hermitage, Shakuntala raises Bharata without allowing rejection to destroy her capacity for care. Motherhood does not merely restore her through a domestic role; it demonstrates self-reliance, endurance, and the ability to transmit values beyond personal injury. Bharata's courage and vitality suggest that the future ruler has been formed by an environment combining maternal guidance with the discipline of the hermitage.

By the time Dushyanta returns, Shakuntala is no longer the untested maiden of the opening acts. Suffering has deepened her judgment and made external recognition less necessary to her identity. She neither seeks revenge nor erases the past. Her willingness to reconcile follows the king's remorse and restored awareness; it is not an approval of injustice. Forgiveness becomes an expression of strength because it occurs without the surrender of self-respect.

Kalidasa's portrait of womanhood is consequently dynamic. Shakuntala moves through daughterhood, desire, marriage, rejection, motherhood, and reconciliation, yet no single role exhausts her. Her virtues are not isolated qualities arranged for idealization; they are tested under pressure. Compassion survives humiliation, patience coexists with protest, and love matures into ethical discernment. For this reason, she functions as the moral and spiritual centre of the drama rather than merely its romantic object.

Dushyanta's Ethical Transformation

1. Kingship, Forgetfulness, and the Crisis of Judgment

Dushyanta initially appears as a disciplined ruler who respects the hermitage and restrains the violence of the hunt. His conduct reflects the ideal of the *rajarshi*, the king whose temporal authority is governed by ethical and spiritual limits. His attraction to Shakuntala also reveals an ability to perceive virtue beyond courtly status. Yet these strengths make his later failure more significant: Kalidasa tests an apparently ideal king by separating institutional reason from personal memory.

The curse externalizes a universal ethical danger. Individuals may forget promises not only through magic but through distraction, power, competing obligations, or the convenience of institutional roles. Dushyanta's literal amnesia absolves him of deliberate deceit, but it does not eliminate the suffering caused by his decision. In the court he attempts to protect royal legitimacy from an unverified claim, yet his legal caution produces moral injustice. The scene shows that procedure is necessary but cannot replace conscience.

Modern criticism should therefore avoid two extremes. Dushyanta is neither a simple villain who knowingly exploits Shakuntala nor an entirely blameless hero whose curse makes ethical evaluation irrelevant. He is a fallible ruler whose limitation becomes visible when power lacks memory and empathy. Kalidasa's psychological subtlety lies in making the king's conduct understandable without making its consequences acceptable.

2. Repentance, Recognition, and Reconciliation

The recovery of the ring returns Dushyanta's memory, but his immediate response is grief rather than relief. He recognizes the promises attached to the object and the suffering produced by his denial. This remorse marks a movement from royal self-confidence to moral self-examination. Ethical leadership begins when authority acknowledges that good intentions or external circumstances do not erase the consequences of action.

The title's key term, *Abhigyan*, thus signifies more than recollection. Dushyanta recognizes Shakuntala's identity, the truth of her testimony, and the inadequacy of his earlier judgment; simultaneously, he recognizes himself as morally answerable. The ring does not create truth but removes the obstruction that prevented him from seeing it. Shakuntala remains constant while the king's consciousness changes, so the dramatic movement is fundamentally from ignorance to ethical insight.

Their reunion is meaningful because it follows repentance. Dushyanta approaches Shakuntala without the pride of the court, and she responds without vindictiveness. Reconciliation restores the family and the legitimacy of Bharata, but it also reunites political authority with moral responsibility. Dushyanta's heroism therefore lies less in martial power than in humility, accountability, and the capacity for renewal. Kalidasa expands masculinity beyond courage and command to include vulnerability, self-criticism, and respect for feminine dignity.

Symbolism of Nature, Dharma, and Womanhood

1. The Ring and the Meaning of Recognition

The signet ring is the play's central object because it connects memory, identity, fidelity, and responsibility. Its circular form suggests continuity: separation and forgetfulness interrupt the relationship but do not annihilate its truth. When the ring falls into the river, the loss symbolizes the disappearance of experience beneath conscious awareness and the failure of private commitment to enter public recognition.

Its recovery from a fish gives the object a second life. Water is associated with concealment, transition, and purification; what has been submerged returns through an unforeseen route. More importantly, the ring restores the moral content of Dushyanta's promise. It is not merely evidence that convinces the court. By the time it reappears, Shakuntala is absent, and the king must confront truth internally. The symbol therefore shifts the drama from proof to conscience.

2. Forest, Court, and Dharma

The forest and royal court form a symbolic opposition without becoming a simple contrast between good and evil. Kanva's hermitage represents restraint, hospitality, ecological balance, and moral education. The court represents administration, law, dynastic continuity, and the burdens of public judgment. Each is necessary, but the court becomes unjust when it loses contact with the ethical values embodied by the forest.

Shakuntala carries the hermitage's moral discipline into the political world, while Dushyanta must learn that kingship cannot be secured by procedure alone. Their final reconciliation symbolically brings the two spaces into balance: compassion enters governance, and private love is acknowledged within public responsibility. Kalidasa's political insight is that institutions possess legitimacy only

when authority remains answerable to truth and humane judgment.

Dharma unites these symbolic spaces. It is not presented as a rigid code confined to social roles but as the living order created by truthful, responsible action. Kanva fulfills parental and spiritual duty; Shakuntala preserves truth and self-respect; Dushyanta must reconcile royal duty with personal obligation. The crisis occurs because these dimensions become separated. Recognition restores dharma by reconnecting memory, justice, family, and kingship.

3. Bharata and Cultural Continuity

Bharata embodies renewal and the future of civilization. His fearless play with animals recalls Shakuntala's forest upbringing, while his royal lineage anticipates political responsibility. He therefore synthesizes the hermitage and the court, nature and governance, maternal formation and dynastic continuity.

The child's presence also widens the scale of the drama. The reconciliation of Shakuntala and Dushyanta is not merely private happiness; it secures the ethical education of a future ruler. Kalidasa suggests that civilization depends on the transmission of courage, compassion, discipline, and justice across generations. Shakuntala's motherhood becomes culturally significant because it shapes the character through which political power will continue.

Feminist and Ecofeminist Perspectives

A feminist interpretation must hold together Shakuntala's agency and her vulnerability. The court scene clearly reveals a patriarchal asymmetry: Dushyanta's position enables him to demand proof, while Shakuntala's truthful testimony lacks institutional force. Her marriage, pregnancy, and public identity are placed under judgment by male authority. A critical reading should not romanticize this inequality or treat suffering as inherently ennobling.

At the same time, agency in a classical Indian text cannot be measured only by the model of direct political rebellion. Shakuntala chooses love, affirms her marriage, confronts denial, protects her self-respect, raises Bharata, and decides how to respond to Dushyanta's repentance. Her ethical autonomy operates through constancy, speech, refusal, care, and judgment. In this respect, an Indian feminist approach is valuable because it recognizes culturally specific forms of power without confusing patience with passivity or relational identity with dependence.

The play nevertheless remains open to critique. The curse places narrative responsibility on Shakuntala's momentary failure of hospitality, and the lost ring makes a woman's truth dependent on an object associated with male authority. Such elements reflect the gendered conditions of the story's world. Kalidasa's achievement is not that he escapes history, but that his dramatic irony repeatedly places moral authority with the woman whom the institution fails to recognize.

Ecofeminism further illuminates Shakuntala's relation to the forest. Shiva and Merchant show how systems of domination can treat both women and nature as passive resources. Kalidasa offers a contrasting ethic in which plants and animals are companions, the forest is sacred rather than exploitable, and care signifies participation in a shared order. Shakuntala's farewell to the hermitage expresses reciprocal attachment: she nurtures nature, and nature responds to her departure.

This association must be handled carefully because identifying women too completely with nature can reproduce essentialist stereotypes. Shakuntala is not valuable simply because she is nurturing or 'natural.' She is also reflective, articulate, morally decisive, and capable of surviving beyond the forest. The strongest ecofeminist reading therefore emphasizes an ethic of interdependence rather than a fixed equation between femininity and biology. Her character links respect for women with respect for life while preserving her status as an autonomous moral person.

Contemporary Relevance

Shakuntala remains relevant because her strength is not limited to external power. Contemporary discussions of empowerment rightly emphasize education, rights, economic independence, and political participation, yet empowerment also requires self-respect, emotional intelligence, and the ability to maintain truth under pressure. Shakuntala's refusal to let public rejection define her identity illustrates an inner dimension of agency that complements institutional equality rather than replacing it. The drama also speaks to relationships and leadership. Dushyanta's transformation shows that authority without accountability is incomplete. His remorse, admission of failure, and willingness to seek reconciliation offer a model of ethical masculinity based on responsibility rather than infallibility. In personal relationships, the play insists that love cannot be separated from trust, communication, and public acknowledgement. Forgiveness becomes credible only after sincere recognition of harm.

The hermitage offers an equally contemporary ecological lesson. It represents sustainable coexistence, restraint, and respect for non-human life at a time when climate change, deforestation, and environmental degradation expose the consequences of domination. Kalidasa does not provide a modern environmental programme, but his imaginative world encourages readers to see ecological care as an ethical relation rather than a technical afterthought.

Finally, the play's relevance lies in its capacity to sustain disagreement. Modern readers need not accept every social assumption of the ancient narrative. They can criticize the unequal burden placed upon Shakuntala while also recognizing her moral agency; they can value family reconciliation without treating marriage as the sole measure of female fulfilment; and they can admire forgiveness without denying injustice. Such critical continuity allows classical literature to remain a dialogue between past and present rather than a monument protected from questioning.

Findings

The analysis establishes that Shakuntala is a dynamic representation of womanhood whose identity develops through multiple roles without being exhausted by any one of them. Her beauty is integrated with compassion, judgment, resilience, maternal responsibility, and spiritual maturity. Her greatest authority appears not when institutions validate her but when she preserves truth despite their failure.

The study also finds that Dushyanta's transformation is structurally essential to Kalidasa's concept of recognition. Abhigyan is at once recovered memory, acknowledgement

of Shakuntala's dignity, self-recognition, and restoration of ethical responsibility. The king becomes worthy of reunion only when political authority is humbled before moral truth. The ring, forest, court, dharma, and Bharata form a coherent symbolic system. Together they connect private love with public justice, ecological care with human dignity, and family continuity with political responsibility. Feminist and ecofeminist readings reveal both the historical inequalities surrounding Shakuntala and the ethical resources through which she exceeds them. The play's continuing relevance therefore lies not in offering a ready-made modern ideology but in dramatizing the enduring need for recognition, accountability, compassion, and responsible coexistence.

Conclusion

Kalidasa's *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* endures because poetic beauty and ethical inquiry are inseparable within it. Shakuntala is not merely the ideal woman of a distant age, nor can she be reduced to a passive victim. She is a complex figure whose love, suffering, motherhood, and forgiveness reveal an integrity that survives the failure of memory and law. Compassion does not weaken her, patience does not silence her moral judgment, and reconciliation does not erase the injustice she endured.

Dushyanta's journey confirms the play's ethical structure. The ring restores memory, but repentance converts memory into recognition. By acknowledging Shakuntala, the king also confronts the limitations of authority and recovers the moral basis of kingship. Their reunion restores harmony because it reconnects love with duty, family with public legitimacy, and power with conscience.

The drama's symbolic and theoretical richness explains its contemporary force. The forest proposes an ethic of ecological reciprocity; the court exposes the insufficiency of procedure without empathy; dharma joins private and public responsibility; and Bharata represents the transmission of values into the future. Read through classical aesthetics, feminism, and ecofeminism, Shakuntala emerges as a culturally rooted yet universal figure of moral dignity. Her enduring lesson is that civilization depends not only on institutions and authority but on the capacity to recognize truth, respect human dignity, admit failure, and preserve compassion without surrendering self-respect.

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