

SHAKUNTALA

Kalidasa

Reading

Shakuntala and other works by Kalidasa, by Arthur Ryder, Everyman Press, 1912 (still the best translation in English)

Cultural significance

The significance that the Shakuntala story has in Indian culture is evident when we realise just how many versions of the story exist. We have here discussed the play by Kalidasa (c. 500 CE), but equally famous versions are found in much earlier texts, such as the *Mahabharata* and the Buddhist *Jataka Tales*. The reasons for such widespread popularity are not hard to identify. First, there is the age-old dramatic sequence of love found, love lost and love restored. There is also the added tension of different social classes between the lovers, and then the clever use of a curse, which exculpates both the man and the woman for any blame for the separation. Instead, it is fate, or an irascible old hermit, who is to blame for everyone's suffering. This way neither the hero nor the heroine is compromised, and yet we have immense pain in both their hearts. At a deeper level, the story appeals because it touches on the question of true and hidden identities. Shakuntala embodies all these ambiguities. As a serving maid at a hermitage, she is not what she appears: she has a celestial parentage. She is also not the 'fallen woman' who simply lies to claim a royal father for her child: she is actually the rightful wife of the king. That is why Kalidasa did not entitle his play 'Shakuntala,' but *Abhijnanasakuntala* ('The Recognition of Shakuntala'). His story is the recognition of her identity, her true self. At the same time, the amnesiac king has become a stock figure and a common expression in all periods and genres of Indian literature, as a satirical label attached to any man who prefers to hide his sexual activity and deny paternity. Throughout Indian literary history, it is the rings, and not kings, who have taken the blame for seducing and abandoning women. Finally, the story of the woman who suffered from her husband's loss of memory has crossed cultural boundaries. Franz Schubert composed an (incomplete) opera called 'Shakuntala' in 1819-1820, and the Italian Franco Alfano created another opera by the same name exactly a hundred years later.

Story

This most loved of all Indian romances begins in a forest, with a king and a young woman. So far, so Grimms fairy tale, but already the plot is freighted with a different cultural ethos. Dushyanta, the king, is on a hunting expedition and has in fact strayed into a stretch of forest that do not belong to him. He is informed by an ascetic that this is the territory of a hermitage and that he, as a king, should protect the welfare of all his subjects, including ascetics and even animals. Suitably chastened, the king dismounts and walks slowly through the forest, listening to the voices of servant women who are watering the flowers growing beneath the trees. When a bee tries to sting one of the women, she calls out the name of the king, almost in gest and without knowing that he is nearby.

Dushyanta then shows and introduces himself, not as the king but as his minister, sent to oversee the protection of the forest and its residents. He then learns that the young woman who cried out is named Shakuntala and that she is no ordinary servant but the daughter of a Brahmin and a water nymph who abandoned her at birth. In other words, she is Cinderella-like, a woman whose true identity is hidden from her suitor. During their conversation, both the king and Shakuntala are struck by the arrows of the love-god, Kama.

The king is then accosted by his court jester, who complains that His Majesty spends too much time in hunting and at the court. Why not take a holiday in this forest? he suggests, and the king is quick

to take up his idea. That way, he can remain close to Shakuntala. The king sets up camp and later meets a wise man called Kanwa, who is Shakuntala's foster-father.

The love-struck pair now suffer the agony of separation; each is in love but doesn't know how the beloved feels. The king manufactures excuses to revisit the sacred grove in hopes of seeing Shakuntala but is unsuccessful. Finally, one of Shakuntala's companions suggests that she send him a letter. As she dictates the letter, the king in hiding overhears her voice and makes a bold declaration of love. He wants to marry her and make her his most important wife. As a token of his sincerity, he gives her a ring. She is overwhelmed and they make love.

Although their liaison is recognised as a marriage by some texts, it is not recognised by society. For that wider recognition, Shakuntala must receive the consent of her foster-father, but he has gone away for some time. The king returns to his palace, saying that he will come back to marry her in a public ceremony. In the meanwhile, however, another hermit, named, Durvasa, comes to stay in the grove and becomes angry with Shakuntala for not showing him the respect that he feels he deserves. Embittered, he curses Shakuntala to be forgotten by whomever it is she is dreaming of. That person, of course, is the king, Dushyanta. When Shakuntala's friends plead with him, Durvasa admits that the curse is harsh and adds a qualification: the man who forgets her will remember everything if he is shown a token that he has given her.

Unaware of this curse, Shakuntala goes mad with anxiety wondering why the king has not returned to her. In the end, she decides to act herself and sets out on a journey to the king's palace. She is now also pregnant with the king's child. Unfortunately, on the way, they cross a flood-swollen river, and her ring slips off her finger and is lost in the water. Again, she is unaware of this and arrives at the court expecting her husband to greet her as his wife. But, due to the curse, he remembers nothing about her. Shakuntala then returns to the forest in humiliation, reconciled to live alone for the rest of her life.

Salvation comes in the form of a fisherman who opens up a large fish and discovers the king's ring. As a loyal subject, he takes it to Dushyanta, whose memories are then awakened. Eager to be reunited with his bride, he rides off quickly to find Shakuntala, who has been secreted away to heaven by her celestial mother. While looking for her, he sees a young boy who has pried open the mouth of a tiger and is busy counting its teeth. Amazed at the boy's strength and courage, the king asks who he is. 'I am Bharata,' he says, 'son of king Dushyanta.' His identity is then confirmed by a magical bracelet that only he and his parents can touch without it becoming a serpent. In the end, father, son and mother are reunited.

Themes

Memory At the heart of this most famous of Indian stories is memory, its power and fragility. When the king, Dushyanta, is cursed to forget Shakuntala, it is as if she has lost her identity. Already her identity is somewhat ambiguous since her birth-mother was a nymph who abandoned her to be raised by a hermit foster-father who has no wife. Shakuntala knows who she is, but she cannot 'prove' to the king and his royal court that she is his wife and comes from celestial parentage. In other words, although the curse has been issued against the king, his loss of memory results in her loss of identity. It is also significant that the cure for the curse is a ring, given by the king to Shakuntala, subsequently lost by her and then retrieved, accidentally, by a fisherman. The ring of recognition is a standard motif in Indian and world folk literature, from the Jataka tales to Shakespeare to Tristan and Isolde. In the case of Kalidasa's play, it is noteworthy that the king first gave his ring to Shakuntala to make her remember him, but its loss makes him forget her. Some critics have pointed out that the lost ring provides the king with a convenient excuse for abandoning his low-status lover. This is not as implausible as it sounds for we are told that the king has often left one of his wives, favoured another wife and then shifted yet again. 'We desert our loves after a short spell of love-making,' he is heard to say to his court jester. The idea that the king should have remembered Shakuntala, despite the curse, is expressed within the play by a woman. After the king regains his memory through the ring, the woman comments acidly, 'Such a passion [as you say you had for Shakuntala] should not need a ring for recognition.' This explanation, that the king is simply using the ring as an excuse, gains more credence when we realise that in earlier versions of the Shakuntala storey, the ring is absent: the king simply refuses to recognise the paternity of their child. In other words, Kalidasa has introduced this

'ring of recognition' as a solution to the king's otherwise detestable conduct in refusing to accept that he has a son by an apparently low-status woman.

Paternity Within this hall of mirrors, reflecting shifting identities and failing memories, is the more sociological issue of paternity. This is the question upon which the plot turns. Shakuntala is upset that the king rejects her as his wife, indeed she is desperate to reunite with him. But an even stronger urge is her desire to protect her (unborn) son's future. She knows without a shadow of a doubt that her son's father is the king. If she cannot restore herself to his side in the palace, then at least she must gain recognition of her son. But when the king refuses to acknowledge that he has made her pregnant, we are thrown into the middle of an ancient paternity case: the woman claims the man as the father of her child, and the man rejects her claim. The 'court case', however, ends without a verdict. Instead, the 'judge' (the king's advisor) suggests that they wait until the boy is born and then check his body for 'signs' of royal blood. Before his birth, however, Shakuntala is plucked off the earth by her celestial mother and taken to heaven, where the boy is born. When the king regains his memory and realises that Shakuntala is his wife, he follows her there, still unaware that he has a son. Riding through a field in heaven, he sees a young boy playing with a tiger. Bystanders remark on the resemblance between the boy and the king. The boy's identity is then 'proved' through another lost ornament. He has lost a bracelet, which is so powerful that only he or his parents could pick it up without it turning into a venomous snake. The king sees the bracelet and picks it up, without thinking, and it does not become a viper. Thus, the paternity issue is resolved 'out of court' by means of an object, a third party, as it were, beyond the testimony of either the man or the woman.

Characters

Shakuntala Shakuntala is the child of a nymph and a Brahmin, who abandoned her at birth. She is then raised by Kanwa, a hermit, and lives with him and others in his forest retreat.

Dushyanta Dushyanta is the king who falls in love with Shakuntala and gives her a child but then is cursed to forget her.

Durvasa Durvasa is an irascible hermit who is angered by Shakuntala's failure to show him a proper welcome and curses her to be forgotten by the person she is thinking of. That person is Dushyanta.

Kanwa Kanwa is the kind Brahmin, or hermit, who finds Shakuntala abandoned as a baby and raises her as his own daughter.

Bharata Bharata is the son of Shakuntala and Dushyanta, although his father denies his paternity, due to the curse that he will lose his memory.



(Shakuntala with attendants in the forest, Oleography by Raja Rama Varma, 1930s).

MAJOR CHARACTER

Shakuntala (Determined)

Character Shakuntala is a woman of great beauty and virtue. She has a sweet nature, is kind to everyone, treats animals as friends and tends her garden with care. She is, however, a person of misfortune. Although her mother was a celestial being, she was abandoned at birth and raised by a foster-father in a forest hermitage. Instead of living a life of privilege, she has become a servant, however well-treated. Later, after meeting the king, she thinks she is abandoned by him, too, although we know that the king has forgotten her due to a curse. She is also unsuccessful in her attempts to have the king at least recognise her son as his child. As the poet Kalidasa describes her, 'She had lost all protection. She was a child without her parents, a queen without her king, a wife without her husband.' Throughout these misfortunes, Shakuntala rarely complains or blames anyone. Instead, she rather meekly accepts her 'fate.' It is only the 'crunch time' scene, when she confronts the king in the palace, that she finds her voice and speaks her mind. As the story progresses, we

realise that this contrast between the sweet, innocent girl and the outspoken, wronged woman is not as sharp as it first appears. Shakuntala's earlier kindness is the underlying layer of her later determination.

Activities While living at the hermitage in the forest, Shakuntala is responsible for domestic tasks, such as cleaning and cooking, but her real love is her garden, where she carefully waters her flowering plants and bushes. She also likes to wander in the forest, listening to bird calls, petting deer and sitting by a stream.

Illustrative moments

Strong-minded One of Shakuntala's prominent traits in Kalidasa's play is her strength of will. A memorable demonstration of her resolute character is seen when she goes to find the king, Dushyanta, her husband and father of her son. Several months have elapsed since their meeting, during which time Shakuntala has felt abandoned by the king. She is unaware of the curse that prevents him from remembering her and his promise to return to her forest home. Finally, she decides that she must go to him and discover the reason for his silence. She is also heavily pregnant with the king's child. Having made the long journey from forest to place, and having secured an audience with the king, she is stunned by his failure to remember her, which she interprets as a refusal to acknowledge her. It is a public humiliation that fills her with shame, but she does not remain silent. Instead, she speaks with surprising firmness. 'Great king!' she says, 'I may be a low serving maid, but my mother was a celestial. My birth, therefore, is far higher than yours. Your place is on earth, but mine is in the sky.' In the same scene, after the king insults her and calls her a liar, she responds with even greater fury. 'You are quick to point out the faults of others, even though they are as small as mustard seeds, but you do not notice your own faults, which are as large as *bilwa* fruits [similar to a grapefruit].' The king repeats his (honest) claim that he does not know her, and then she unleashes her own curse on him. 'If you do not do the honourable thing and recognise your wife and son, then you will reap the results of your actions and suffer.' These are not the words of the innocent young person that the king first met in the forest. Shakuntala has undergone a transformation from that naive girl to a world-wise mother. Although she is angry, she quickly gains control of her emotions and speaks rationally. Shakuntala, in her own understanding, has been cruelly rejected by her husband and the father of her son, but she has the presence of mind to remain cool and speak with steely determination.

Kind-hearted At the same time, despite her anger and distress, Shakuntala is a soft-hearted person. Not only does she remain calm during the turbulent audience with the king, who rejects her, but throughout the epic she shows sympathy to people, to animals and to the world of nature. A good illustration of her rapport with natural beauty occurs in the scene where Shakuntala tells her foster-father that she will undertake the long journey to the palace of the king. It is a sad scene, in which the flowers and trees and birds in the forest lament her departure, for they will miss her gentle presence and they fear for her safety along the route. As Shakuntala steps away from her father's hermitage, she hears the melodious song of the cuckoo and stops. Tears fall from her eyes as she looks around and sees that every part of the forest is concerned for her safety. Then, in soft words, she addresses a fragrant creeper plant, calling it 'my sister' and asking it to look after her foster-father. Listening to her speak with such compassion, 'the grazing deer drop the grass they are chewing; the peacocks stop dancing and the trees drop their leaves like falling tears.' Shakuntala is a child of the forest, who revels in its beauty and shares its gentle spirit. Her affinity with the earth is also beautifully revealed when, at the depth of her despair and rejected by the king, she calls on the earth to 'find room for me in your bosom.'

Maternal The two traits described above combine in a third prominent aspect of Shakuntala's character, her maternal instinct. From the moment she realises that she is pregnant and the sages predict a son, she vows that she will protect him 'as fiercely as a mother tiger does its cub.' This quality is most vividly displayed in the famous scene when she confronts the king in his palace. After the king says he does not recognise her (as a result of a curse, of which Shakuntala is unaware), she is stunned but does not argue on her own behalf. Instead, her main concern is for her son, the result of her love-making with the king six long years ago. 'I can live with this humiliation,' she tells herself, 'but I owe to him [her son] to fight for his rightful place in this palace.' Again and again the king refuses to believe her story (that they met in the forest and were married), so she changes tact and makes a final plea: 'I was cast away by my parents, and now I am cast away by you. But you must at

least accept your son as your legitimate heir. Do not deny him, also.' Still, however, the cursed king is unable (or unwilling, as it seems to Shakuntala) to accept responsibility for her pregnancy. But the resolute Shakuntala is not willing to discard her son's future. With the determination of a mistreated wife and the pride of a mother, she makes her final declaration: 'This broad and four-edged earth, with its towering mountains, will be governed by my son, whether you like it or not, my king!' These forceful words then appear to create a tiny hole in the wall that blocks the king's memory; he wavers for a moment, impressed her sincerity, but then falls back under the spell of the curse. She does not succeed, but Shakuntala has shown her ferocious maternal feelings.

Durvasa (Short-tempered)

Character Durvasa is a dark character, who unexpectedly emerges out of the shadows of the forest and approaches the hermitage where Shakuntala lives. Although he is a hermit, there is a suggestion that his powers are not always employed for a benign purpose. When he first appears, he is said to be 'choleric', a man 'who has the power to burn in flames whoever offends him.' Despite this irascibility and dark powers, Durvasa is capable of compassion. After he has cursed Shakuntala to be forgotten by the king, he is approached by one of the heroine's companions, who pleads with him to modify his terrible curse. He listens to the plea—that Shakuntala was merely thoughtless in not showing him proper attention when he arrived at the hermitage and that she meant him disrespect. Feeling contrite, he agrees to change the conditions of the curse. Now, she will be remembered if the king is shown the ring he once gave to her.

Activities Durvasa appears in only one scene, but we are told that he is a hermit who has come from far away and likes to wander the countryside. While at the hermitage, he, like the other ascetics, spends time in meditation and prayer.

Illustrative moments

Short-tempered The defining element of Durvasa's character is his irascibility. Although he is a Brahmin sage, a man of great knowledge and spiritual power, he is still a man who can feel offended. This shortcoming in the hermit's character is illustrated in a scene that is key to the unfolding of the plot. Shakuntala and her companions are in the forest, taking care of the garden and the hermitage in the absence of Kanwa, the leader of the hermitage and Shakuntala's foster-father. Shakuntala has met and fallen in love with Dushyanta, the king, who has left her and promised to return. As a long afternoon stretches out, she sits and daydreams of her absent lover, oblivious to the unseen arrival of Durvasa. He approaches the hermitage but is not welcomed by Shakuntala, whom he sees sitting idly under a tree. With his powers of mental penetration, he realises that she is unaware of him because she is thinking of someone else. His sense of propriety is hurt, and he declares, 'You do not notice me, a holy Brahmin come to your door, because you are lost in thought about someone. As a just punishment, you now will be lost to that person's thoughts.' This is the famous curse that causes all the subsequent pain to both Shakuntala and the king. It is a well-balanced curse, with careful symmetry between cause and consequence, but it is also destructive to the lives of innocent people. Only a man of considerable power—whether magical or mental does not matter—a man such as the great sage Durvasa could utter such an effective curse. And only the short-tempered Durvasa would think of uttering it.

Contrite Durvasa's burst of anger does not display the whole of his character, however. He may be short-tempered, but he is also capable of realising a mistake. In this instance, his contrition follows rather quickly on his anger. Once his terrible curse has been issued, one of Shakuntala's companions speaks to him and asks for him to show compassion. 'She was only thinking of one who loves her,' the female friend says in her defence. 'She meant you no harm.' At first Durvasa is inclined to dismiss her explanation but then he sees that he has acted too hastily and that the curse is too severe. The punishment does not, in fact, fit the crime. Upon reflection, and feeling shame that he acted impulsively, he agrees to modify his curse. Now, he allows that the person condemned to forget Shakuntala will remember her if, and only if, she shows him a token of recognition. That token is the ring that the king has given her. As things turn out, Shakuntala loses the ring and cannot therefore free the king from his memory loss. In the end, however, the ring is found inside a fish by a fisherman who takes it to the king. In this roundabout manner, the qualification allowed by Durvasa cancels the curse and leads to a happy-ever-after ending. Even a sage, the poet shows us, must have the capacity to show contrition if he makes a mistake.

Dushyanta

(Proud)

Character Dushyanta is the male protagonist of this famous Sanskrit romance. As the king, he is a royal personage, a lover of the arts and proud of his heritage, the line of Puru kings that stretches back to ancient days. He has great skill and courage as a warrior, and it is said that he even assisted Indra, the god of war, in defeating his celestial enemies. More than just a great warrior, Dushyanta is also presented as an intelligent man, who has immense respect for Brahmin sages. At least, he is smart enough to take their advice when faced with a difficult decision. He is also a romantic, a man who is swept off his feet by Shakuntala, who rearranges his life to be with her, only to be thwarted by a curse. In this respect, he is a tragic hero, although his tragedy is not of his own making. As a king with immense power, however, he is prone to consider his own needs first, to expect others to defer to him and to take pleasure when he wants. These cracks in the hero's character make him susceptible to a charge of misconduct in his dealings with Shakuntala. This moral ambiguity in the king's character makes him a fascinating figure, whom we as readers of the text (or audience of a play) are constantly evaluating.

Activities Dushyanta is a king who spends hours in council, listening to advisors, discussing strategies and making decisions. His chief pastime is hunting, and he appears on the first page of the story in his royal role of leading a hunting expedition. He is said to enjoy the 'sport' of killing animals, but he is also quick to call off the hunting when told he has strayed into the sacred grounds of a hermitage, a sort of ancient animal sanctuary. In addition, the king enjoys listening to poetry and music in his palace. He also sometimes paints in a private room, and after he loses memory of Shakuntala he tries to paint her portrait.

Illustrative moments

Sensitive As befits his royal personage, Dushyanta is a sensitive man, schooled in the arts and trained to recognise beauty in all its forms. His susceptibility to female beauty is illustrated in the scene, in which he first meets Shakuntala. The martial king is on a hunting expedition and about to kill a deer with an arrow, when a woman admonishes him. 'This is not a hunting ground, my king,' the gentle voice says. 'It is the protected grove of our hermitage. No hunting is allowed here.' The mighty king is moved by these words and abandons his blood-sport. The poet makes it clear that the ambience of the forest, with its quiet and beauty, has quelled his hunter's instinct to kill. The king's sensitivity is further revealed when he meets Shakuntala, who is busy tending to the jasmine bushes in her garden. Asked why he is attracted to her, the king replies because she 'is a flower no one has smelled, a bud no finger has plucked, an uncut jewel, untasted honey. She is a woman of flawless beauty.' Even allowing for the poetic excesses of Sanskrit court drama, it is clear that the king is moved by her physical form. This moment is central to the whole story because the king's sensitivity will later be blocked by a curse, which then propels the rest of the dramatic action. Thus, even when we hear the king speak cruel words of rejection, we feel for him because we know that beneath that cold exterior he has a heart that responds to kindness and to beauty.

Proud While Dushyanta is a sensitive man, he is also a king who is proud of his lineage and his position in society. He has standards to maintain, a public image to protect, and he cannot let even his infatuation with a beautiful woman in a forest compromise his kingly status. This pride is demonstrated in the key scene when Shakuntala comes to the king's palace, bearing his child and carrying (she thinks) his ring, which has in fact been lost en route. When she makes her claim publicly in the royal court, the king is shocked. How dare this low status woman burst into his chamber and claim that she is his wife? That she carries his child? Preposterous! The king is aware that the entire royal court, including his many wives, would lose respect for him if he had, in fact, lost his heart to such a common woman. Recoiling, he then goes on to accuse her of lying in order to raise her status. 'She is a scheming woman,' he says. Later, he makes a telling simile, comparing Shakuntala to 'the cunning cuckoo birds, who let others nurture their eggs.' Shakuntala, of course, is trying to do the opposite—to raise her own 'egg'—but the king's point is that women are deceptive by nature. Here, then, is a classic paternity case, in ancient India. A woman claims that a powerful man has had sex with her and given her a child. The man—exposed, afraid and proud—refutes her charge in the strongest terms. In contemporary times, at least in the West, we try to reserve judgement in such cases about who is telling the truth. In this case, of Kalidasa's play, however, we know who is telling the truth. It is Shakuntala. But we also know that the man, Dushyanta, is not

lying. He has simply lost his memory. This is why the scene is so moving. Both parties suffer. Both deserve our sympathy.

Reflective The king is also capable of reflection. Yes, he is proud, and can speak cruel words, but those are the exceptions. Even when he is put under great strain by the seemingly deceitful claims made by Shakuntala, he is a thoughtful man. This quality, which reveals the complexity of his character, is illustrated, once again, in the central scene that takes place in the palace between him and Shakuntala. She openly declares that she is his wife, and he honestly cannot remember their meeting and their love-making. But he has the ability, the desire, to reflect and consider her claim. Even though his conscious mind has no recollection of the woman who claims him, he cannot altogether dismiss her. As he remarks to his royal advisor, 'I cannot remember marrying her, but there is some pain in my heart, and it makes me suspect that perhaps I did.' A little shard of a broken memory has lodged in his mind and will not let him reject her out of hand. As he tells himself, a king 'should not act impulsively, for that path leads to evil. Decisions should be considered, slowly, patiently, before action is taken.' In the midst of his mental confusion, he turns to his advisor and asks for some resolution. The advisor suggests that Shakuntala be allowed to stay in his house until the child is born. Then he can be examined to determine if he shows any signs of royalty (physiognomy was an important science in ancient India). The king weighs up this plan. It would mean a public 'climb-down' from his initial and complete rejection of her. But his thoughtfulness has created doubt in his memory-numbed mind, and he will not allow himself to make a definitive judgement, lest it harm an innocent person. He agrees to the advisor's plan because it reflects precisely the ambiguity in his own mind.