

## Women Empowerment in Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra* and Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*: A Comparative Study

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### Abstract

*Women Empowerment, a multidimensional concept, is one of the perennially contemporary issues never losing relevance. Woman's role in decision making and her rights are important dimensions in the discourse. To understand the modern issue of Woman Empowerment in traditional context, this paper takes up two ancient Indian landmark Texts – Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra and Kālidāsa's Abhijñānaśākuntalam to investigate and examine the status of women in Ancient India. This paper makes firsthand approach to the Sanskrit Texts and their renowned translations and interpretations in English through comparative, analytical and critical study. Though the texts are two different genres of human creativity situated several centuries apart, there is a link between them in matters of the discourse. Arthaśāstra is a Text of theory on statecraft and economics, but in actuality it is a valuable documentation on ancient society particularly the Post-Buddha phase. Abhijñānaśākuntalam is narrative-literature based on the Mahābhāratan Śakuntalā-Duḥśanta narrative; however, it is an important historical documentation of the Gupta Age including the post-Mauryan age. Exploration of both the texts reveals the Empowered Woman with all Rights that are nowadays regarded as constitutional rights under the broad frame of Human Rights, with simultaneous concern with universal morality and ethics. This author believes that this research, other than its interdisciplinary relevance, would open up new vistas of understanding the modern issue of Women Empowerment in historical and traditional context.*

Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra* and Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* are two different genres of human creativity and different modes of expressions reverberating several centuries apart. Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra* (ca. 4th century BCE, though some parts of it are considered late by some scholars like Jolly, Winternitz, and Keith) is basically a text of theory on statecraft and economics; in actuality, it is a valuable documentation on power, society and ideology in ancient India particularly the post-Buddha and pre-Aśokan phase of history. Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* (ca. 5th century CE) is a narrative literature based on the Mahābhārata narrative of Śakuntalā-Duḥśanta. However, it is indeed an important historical document of ancient India particularly of the Gupta age including post-Mauryan, post-Aśokan age.

The query in this paper begins from the link, I find between them, in matters of women, power, and women empowerment. Empowerment of women is relevant to all ages. In both *Arthaśāstra* and *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, married life is one common site to detect a respectable place of women in society. In this paper, it is from the perspective of women's status that I have chosen these two different genres of texts for discussion. As I would discuss, both texts reflect common values on women's rights indicative of social change as well as something constant through the ages.

Before starting reading Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra* and Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, we have the reminder that women in *Vedic* literature and as depicted in the *Mahākāvya*s, Rāmāyana and Mahābhārata, are bold, firm and self-controlled. They later become an ideal image for the Indian womanhood. All these great women in spite of all their sufferings and sacrifices live their lives with dignity. By the time of classical period i.e. Gupta period (4th century CE), the glorified picture of women emerges courtesy patriarchal values defining the state, law, power, religion and family.

The discussion as reflected in the *Arthaśāstra* regarding empowerment of women, independence of women as well as the rights of women are significant in respect of understanding *then* as well as present social structure. *Arthaśāstra* acknowledges women's right like right to property, right to food, clothing and shelter, right to protection, right to take needful steps against torture, oppression and defamation. However, as I would argue, Women Empowerment reflects in Kālidāsa's drama *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* in related but different ways, social status of women being his concern, as also

evident in his other writings where women achieve their individual identity and redefine the concept of empowerment. In *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, Kālidāsa works on the basic story of Śakuntalā-Duḥṣanta of Mahābhārata with the polish of a sophisticated culture.

The concept and ideology of *Āśrama* has not changed much from Vedic to Kālidāsa's time through Kauṭilya's time. We have seen in the *Śānti-Parvan* of Mahābhārata how the female ascetics were also teachers and took part in the arguments of *Sāṃkhya* Philosophy, particularly in the *Janaka (Dharmadhvaja) and Sulabhā-Bhikṣukī Narrative* (12.308). *Arthaśāstra* also speaks of two types of female ascetics, "Paribrājikas" and "Bhikṣukī". In Kālidāsa's time too, the *Āśramas* were not only the centre of austerity, but also the centre of higher learning and wisdom.

Kālidāsa's Śakuntalā grows in Ṛṣi Kaṇva's *Āśrama* like a flower reaching fructification, and Kālidāsa shows her transition from habituated hermit life to an awakening to life. Her modesty is so great that she feels herself invaded by a feeling which is stranger to her hermit life ever since Duḥṣanta has arrived in Ṛṣi Kaṇva's *Āśrama* (*kiṃ nu khalv imam prekṣya tapovanavirodhino vikārasya gamanīyāsmi samvṛttā*, 1.22). Through events, their love culminates to Gāndharva Marriage (voluntary union of a maiden with her lover). In Mahābhāratan times and in *Arthaśāstra* (3.2, 1) too, Gandharva marriage is accepted form of marriage.

The tradition of woman erudition continues to Kālidāsa's time. In a significant variation from Vyāsa's Śakuntalā, Kālidāsa's Śakuntalā, encouraged by her friends, writes a letter to Duḥṣanta on a lotus-leaf. M.R. Kale observes: "Duḥṣanta himself hears from Śakuntalā's own mouth that she is in deep love with the king. Duḥṣanta listens to her love letter. It is only on verbal and written proof that Duḥṣanta enters and proposes a love-marriage." (Kale 1969, ixix) Besides this, Śakuntalā's friends, Anasūyā and Priyamvadā could also read the name of Duḥṣanta engraved on his ring (1st *Aṃka/Act*). For this reason, Dusyanta conceals his actual identity and introduces himself as *Dharmādhikārī* when he enters Kaṇva's *Āśrama*.

In post Vedic period there were two or three professions open to women in higher section of society. The teaching career was the most common. Though we do not notice Śakuntalā thinking of her profession, but as a hermit daughter she has knowledge of grammar of Prākṛt by which she writes her own words in proper manner.

Womens' participation in music and other cultural events are praise-worthy in Kālidāsa's time. This is evident from Sutradhara's comment that Naṭi's beautiful songs impress audience (Prastāvana, 1.4), as also from Duḥṣanta being charmed with his wife Hamsapadikā's beautiful songs (5.1-2).

Ṛṣi Kaṇva has brought up Śakuntalā like his own daughter and has been anxious to give her away in marriage to a husband worthy of her. When he learns with satisfaction the fact of Śakuntalā's marriage with the king, like a true father he immediately arranges to send her to her husband's place. He believes that daughters are not one's own treasures; rather daughters are refundable treasure (4.22) to be sent to their in-law's house.

Kaṇva's advice to Śakuntalā is really an excellent compendium of every wife's duties and portrays in an elegant and forceful language the *then* Hindu ideal of womanhood. Monier Williams translates Kaṇva's advice as follows:

"Pay respectful attention to (thy) superiors. Act the part of a dear friend towards (thy) fellow-wives (rival wives). Even though wronged (treated harshly) by thy husband, do not out of anger show (go to) a refractory-spirit. Be ever courteous towards (thy) attendants; not puffed up (arrogant) in prosperity. In this manner, young-women attain the station (title) of housewife (matron). Those of an opposite character are house-banes (banes of the family)." (4.18)

From *Arthaśāstra* we come to know that married woman carries out all duties of her family at the age of twelve. If she is reluctant to do her duties, she should be punishable with 12 *panas* (3.3, 1). If a father had a married daughter, it is the duty of a father to return her to husband as per social law. L.N. Rangarajan notes, "The underlying principle in the *Arthaśāstra* is that a woman was always dependent on, or under the control of and subservient to, her father, her husband or her son. In fact, in the chapter on title to property, women are included in the list of property, along with deposits and pledges (3.16.32)." (Rangarajan 1992, 53)

In case of Śakuntalā, after she is rejected by Duḥṣanta, the priest (*Purodhā*), offers refuge to her until the birth of her son so that the child's identity can be ascertained from particular auspicious signs

on his palm (5th Act), that the *R̥ṣi* has earlier predicted. The motive of protecting woman as per social law becomes evident from this. Rangarajan observes, “The overall picture is thus one of woman being placed in a subservient role but given adequate protection to ensure that this did not lead to total exploitation.” (Rangarajan 1992, 54)

The concept of woman as property is found in some in *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*. When Duṣanta fails to recognize Śakuntalā, Śaradvata, disciple of *R̥ṣi* Kaṇva, says that husband is all-round master of wife (5.26). Śaradvata’s voice shows that such notion has social acceptance in Kālidāsa’s time.

*Abhijñānaśākuntalam* reflects various social values of women which are beneficial to human society. Kālidāsa’s Śakuntalā is a representative instance of women who, though brought up and nurtured in a domestic set up of patriarchal exclusion and total surrender and subservience to authority, fight for their social and moral rights.

Kālidāsa portrays Śakuntalā as meek and loving woman in the first four Acts of his drama. But in the rest of three Acts, Śakuntalā is capable enough to challenge the patriarchy. At first, despite being unrecognized, she never utters any word against Duṣanta until in the fifth Act of the drama. M.R. Kale observes, “Śakuntalā’s patience is skillfully delineated here. She does not lose her courage at the King’s repudiation. Controlling her feelings, she politely and patiently tries her best to remind Duṣanta for the earlier incidents. She blames her misfortune, for her failure and never utters a word against her husband.” (Kale, 2017 ixxxiii)

In the fifth Act of the play, the drama steps to climax, as Śakuntalā reveals herself as a determined and revolting personality. Duṣanta insults her when she fails to prove herself as his wife:

“Intuitive cleverness is observed amongst females other than human. What then in the case of those that are gifted with intelligence? The female cuckoos, as is well known, cause their own young ones to be reared by other birds, before soaring in the sky.” (5.22) (trans. Bose 1978, 492)

Being insulted by Duṣanta, Śakuntalā replies to him in wrath. She loses her temper and calls the King “*Anārya*”: “Ignobleman! (Thou) judgest of others, often the manner of (thy) own (evil) heart. Who else will act (so basely) in imitation of thee, that donning the grab of virtue, resembles a straw-covered pit.” (5.23) (trans. Bose 1978, 492)

Śakuntalā’s reply portrays her as a sensitive woman with self-respect raising her voice against her husband as well as ruler of the country. Here Śakuntalā is seen as a representative of *then* Hindu woman who is very much conscious about her dignity, chastity and self-status despite being in patriarchal setting.

The general picture in those days is that women have no power to disobey their husbands. Even being rejected, woman would treat themselves as slave to their husbands. They would even have no right to take free decision without the permission of their husbands. Śāṅgarava, another disciple of *R̥ṣi* Kaṇva, condemns Śakuntalā in discouraging tone outlining this value: “Even slavery in the house of thy husband is proper for thee.” (5.27; trans. Bose 1960, 506)

Being rejected by her husband, Śakuntalā is ready to walk straight back to the penance grove. She has right to choose her life-style. Though scriptures sanction no liberty in case of women, Kālidāsa gives Śakuntalā enough freedom to think freely and go forward. The curse of Durvāsā is not a mere accident, for Śakuntalā, the curse is to lead to a spiritual reawakening in which she is to go forward.

Kālidāsa could not avoid polygamous heroes, because polygamy was the prevailing order of the day and had social and religious sanction behind it. Duṣanta has other wives too from which we know that Polygamy was common practice of kings. In Kauṭilya’s *Arthaśāstra*, kings entered into polygamy for the sake of obtaining sons (3.2.7). However, other than the exceptional polyandrous marriage of Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī in Mahābhārata, we have no other reference of polyandry in either *Arthaśāstra* or Kālidāsa.

In Śakuntalā, Kālidāsa keeps one queen behind the curtain and skillfully avoids the stage appearance of the elder queen. Kālidāsa projects Śakuntalā as the only heroine in the entire drama. There is something very touching and absolute humane in Duṣanta bending at the feet of Śakuntalā, apologizing to her for his forgetfulness for which he is not really responsible and tenderly wiping the tear in Śakuntalā’s eye. In a male-dominated polygamous society such a picture is startling. When Kālidāsa’s art makes it possible, it is not only a satisfaction to the woman but also a gratification and assurance to humanity.

At the end of the drama Śakuntalā appears as the image of patience, sobriety and dignity of mother. Her soul is purified by her long penance. Though Śakuntalā has no financial authority, she has every right to rear her child alone after being abandoned by her husband. Simplicity and purity are deep-seated in her nature and these are the direct outcome of her truthfulness which allows her to be carried away by the passion of love without the least suspicion, resulting in her humiliation and disgrace.

Kālidāsa, the great poet, seems to have been fairly acquainted with the principles of the age of *Arthaśāstra* and occasionally his language bears a close similarity to that work. Many later authorities have regarded Kauṭilya as a great teacher and utilized materials drawn from his work. *Arthaśāstra* creates an interest in men of the modern age with its new angle of vision and modified objectives and ideals.

*Arthaśāstra* teaches laws against the oppression of woman. Dramatist Kālidāsa also renders justice to the victimized woman and also sets through art some high moral value of life which is universal. This unique aspect of Kālidāsa's art places him among the real great artists of all times.

Kālidāsa's women appeal stronger than men. R.M. Bose writes:

“It is perhaps an inevitable consequence of Kālidāsa's subject and his manner of handling it, that his women appeal more strongly to a modern reader than his men. The man is the more veritable phenomenon, and though manly virtues are the same in all countries and in all eyes, emphasis has always been variously laid on some of them in preference to others. But the true woman seems timeless, universal. We know of no poet, unless it be Shakespeare, who has given the world a group of heroines so individual yet so universal; heroines are true as tender, as selfless are Indumati, Sita, Parvati, the Yaksa's bride and Śakuntalā.” (trans. Bose, 1978 xx, Introduction).

Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśakuntalam* reflects the culture prevalent in society and happens to indicate the attitude and degree of patriarchy existing in the society at that time. However, through Śakuntalā, Kālidāsa's voices the necessity for art to step forward and render at least poetic justice to the wronged woman. This is precisely what our Dramatists do in their plays of union and reunion.

In the scene of public repudiation of Śakuntalā (5th Act), Kālidāsa deviates from Mahābhārata in considerable and significant way. In the Mahābhārata, the King deliberately feigns ignorance of the Gandharva marriage and repudiates his forest bride with abuses. Here, the separation ends with Śakuntalā's meeting with Duṣṇanta. Śakuntalā has waited for six years, then brings her son to his father and establishes her position. But Kālidāsa leads the pregnant Śakuntalā to be brought to the King without his recognizing her and then composes a second separation where pregnant Śakuntalā is carried off by Sānumatī, a friend of Śakuntalā's mother Menakā. Śakuntalā brings up the child, and when the boy grows up strong and healthy, the reunion takes place.

Western dramatists have given us tragic heroines and dramas with tragic endings. But Kālidāsa is different. His heroine Śakuntalā undertakes a soul's pilgrimage from earthly delights to heavenly bliss, love's flowing into spiritual joy. Śakuntalā leads ascetic life during her separation, ever keeping the image of her beloved husband in her heart (7.21). Thus, she presents greatness of *then* Hindu womanhood as bold and determined in her decision of rearing her child alone. This is no doubt Kālidāsa's message on Women Empowerment in that age.

In *Arthaśāstra* we see a widow does not inherit all the property of her husband. If there is no heir, the King would take the property leaving only the amounts needed for her maintenance (3.5.28). In *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*, however, we find that when Dhanamitra, an affluent sailor of Kuru region, dies without son (6th Act), Duṣṇanta, in an act of generosity declares that whether Dhanamitra has any pregnant wife should be found out; and if any, her child will be the heir of his father's property.

According to *Arthaśāstra*, a wife should not conceal her fertile period and a husband should not fail to do his duty to try to get a son during his wife's fertile period (3.2.43-44). In *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*, we see that since Duṣṇanta fails to recognize his wife, he cannot attend his pregnant wife. Here Kālidāsa improvises Durvasa's curse to cover up Duṣṇanta's major fault to his wife as he forgets Śakuntalā.

In *Arthaśāstra*, we find when a man has more than one wife, the earliest surviving wife or the one who has borne many sons is given priority (3.2.43-44). Similarly, in fifth Act, when Duṣṇanta hears of Śakuntalā's pregnancy and after remembering her, he wants to give priority to her because of her child who will be his only heir.

In *Arthaśāstra*, Adultery is treated as a serious crime, the punishment for the wife being the amputation of her nose and ear (4.12.33). Regarding husband-wife matter in *Arthaśāstra*, Rangarajan notes, “The physical punishment which a husband could inflict on his wife was limited to three slaps (3.3.8.). She could run away from home if ill-treated (3.4.1). Widows or wives whose husbands had gone on long journey could remarry, subject to specified condition. Divorce was possible only in four of the eight forms of marriage (3.3.19).” (Rangarajan 1992, 53-54)

However, though Kālidāsa’s Śakuntalā has every right to choose any other man to be her life-partner; she never considers any one as her partner except Duḥśanta though rejected by him.

In Śakuntalā, Kālidāsa portrays Śakuntalā as a pure character in love. Though there are other options for her to enjoy life, Śakuntalā prefers to remain a devoted woman rearing her child alone in austerity. Since there is no question of adultery, Duḥśanta requests her to return to Hastināpura with their son. This reunion is a significant instance of glorification of Hindu marriage. However, as Kālidāsa shows, the bliss finally attained in the marriage is not through the wife’s subservience to her husband, but through the empowered wife.

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