



## The Concept of True Love in Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Sakuntalam*": A Critical Study (*Abhijnana Sakuntalam*, translated into English by Arthur W. Ryder)

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### ABSTRACT

*Abhijnana Sakuntalam* is a world-famous play to reflect the playwright Kalidasa's great dramatic element, idyllic description of nature, values and aesthetics, virtues and morality, and remarkable handling of true love as merits achieving universal appeal, coherence of tone and quality, and sublime message. The lovers, Dusyanta and Sakuntala in the play are committed to true love. Sakuntala as a child has grown to be in the union of simplicity and purity, nobility and modesty in her character. She develops love for the sights and sounds of nature. Dusyanta, a prince too is flawless in character, thoughts, actions, and manners, happens to have her glimpse in the hermitage of sage Kanva. They fall in love at first sight after having been impressed by their charms and temperaments of each other. They feel fortunate to have their first meeting at the hermitage when their hearts are open for lovemaking. Due to the curse of Durvasa, their union proves to be temporary as the external evil causes their separation as lovers. They prove to be worthy lovers of pure love for their reunion. Their suffering in separation deepens and strengthens their love. It is a temporary separation to lead the lovers to the goal of their reunion as Dusyanta welcomes Sakuntala to his bosom for their happy reunion, letting no Durvasa appear again in the sojourn of their true love like the storm to disrupt calmness. They learn the fact that the curse is responsible for their separation. It in its course purifies their hearts, leading the lovers ultimately to culminate in their happy reunion after the pangs of separation. The play is the loveliest creation of Kalidasa for the cause and welfare of women especially the character of Sakuntala who dominates the play by attracting the utmost attention of spectators or readers. Their love episode simply starts as a small part of *Mahabharata* but significantly adds beauty and glory to be a play par excellence. Kalidasa is so successful in writing the play *Abhijnana Sakuntalam* that it rises high to achieve every spectator's or reader's encomiums for universal acclaims as a play of pure love.

**Key words:** world-famous, play, Sakuntala, love, nature, simplicity, modesty, flawless, character, Dusyanta, lovemaking, first sight, impressions,

As a dramatist of Sanskrit literature, Kalidasa is the Shakespeare of India for his unique dramatic skills, character portrayal, idyllic description of nature, values and aesthetics, virtues and morality, and remarkable handling of true love in his play *Abhijnana Sakuntalam*. It is known for its universal appeal, coherence of tone and quality, and sublime message. His plays deal with diverse subjects in variety styles. He is a dramatist and poet par excellence in surpassing all other literary giants in the extensive use of similes for magnifying effect to impart the pictorial quality to his felicitous expressions and to draw the attention of the audiences or the readers to the play. The lovers in the play Dusyanta and Sakuntala are committed to true love and so they are ready to face odd and untoward situations during their unexpected separation. Kalidasa depicts the sojourn of their love in a natural stint.

Kalidasa undertakes to portray the pure love of Dusyanta and Sakuntala as the focus and fulcrum of the play. Their love reflects the union of sweetness and strength. Sakuntala as the character of tender girl with affable nature is of rare beauty and sensuous charm. She is of her semi-divine stature as she was born to celestial nymph (apsara) Menaka and royal sage Visvamitra. It specially draws the sympathy of all spectators and readers towards the woman character Sakuntala for her intense suffering due to her separation from her husband, Dusyanta for no fault of hers. It marks a clear-cut distinction in depicting the love story of Sakuntala and Dusyanta, the memorable and monumental characters. It with all merits especially the concept of pure love makes a world-famous play.

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Every Sanskrit drama of love concept has special salient features. First, the lovers Sakuntala and Dusyanta fall in love at first sight after having been impressed by their charms and temperaments of each other. They feel fortunate to have their first meeting at the hermitage when their hearts are open for lovemaking. Due to unexpected circumstances, their love proves to be a temporary union for temporary separation due to unexpected turn or twist of events. It is the curse of Durvasa that becomes responsible for their separation

In **Abhijnana Sakuntalam**, Dusyanta and Sakuntala as lovers reunite as worthy lovers of pure love when the external evil, the storm of the curse, is blown away to be calm in the way there is calm after the storm. As per the Sanskrit drama, the pain and suffering in separation between the lovers sweetens, deepens, and strengthens their love. They feel the real charm and spirit of love forever even after their separation. There is a belief that suffering purifies the hearts of lovers. It is a temporary separation to lead the lovers to the goal of permanent reunion like two rivers flowing separately for some time for their communion to flow into the ocean.

Kalidasa's dramatic skills excel all others in leading the audiences or readers to the world of romance depicted in lively scenes with life-like characters in the drama of **Abhijnana Sakuntalam**. The play begins, invoking the blessings of Lord Shiva for the success of both spectators and actors or of readers and characters. The stage director declares the drama open to go on in the pleasant summer, the outset of the year as it is the most convenient time for its staging,

A mid-day plunge will temper heat;  
The breeze is rich with foreseen flowers;  
To slumber in the shade is sweet. 'Prologue'

In this season, all are in the spirit of joy and many beautiful maids wear Sirisha flowers in their hair-knots. Bees hover round and suck honey from their decked flowers without harming them.

### **Love Theme in the Play Adds Beauty to Mahabharata:**

The love episode of Dusyanta and Shakuntala simply starts as a small part but significantly adds beauty and glory to **Mahabharata** to be a drama par excellence. It is the loveliest creation of Kalidasa for the cause and welfare of women especially the character of Sakuntala who dominates the whole play, attracting the utmost attention of spectators or readers.

It is delightful to know the character of Sakuntala appears on the scene in the play. Kanva adopts her as a baby, found, and looked after by birds, naming the baby Sakuntala. He brings her up in the hermitage, the pious grove of Kanva amidst flora and fauna, the rich treasure trove of lovely nature and she grows into a rare sweet-loving girl in his loving care and concern,

To beauty such as this  
No woman could give birth;  
The quivering lighting flash  
Is not a child of earth. Act-1

Sakuntala has grown to be in the union of simplicity and purity and that of nobility and modesty, in her character. As a child, she develops love for singing birds, humming bees, fluttering butterflies, gentle breezes, dreaming buds, blooming blossoms, leaping cascades, lovely fawns, dancing peacocks, and others for their charms, lovely sounds and so on in the lap of nature. She 'presides, so to speak, as guardian deity' as per 'pious rites' of the hermitage.

### **Love at First Sight: Love Union**



King Dusyanta in his chariot with the charioteer Madhavya appears in the forest for hunting as a king-warrior. He spots a running spotted deer for his hunting expedition. It leads him to ‘a long chase’. He assesses its speed that its speed is faster than its usual speed,

‘He leaps so often and so high/ He does not seem to run, but fly.’ Act-1

The chariot enters the Kanva’s hermitage. Dushyanta gets ready to shoot the spotted deer there. Meanwhile, the King heard the voice, ‘O King, this deer belongs to the hermitage and must not be killed’. He learns that there is a prohibition on hunting in the pious grove of holy sage Kanva. Arrows are meant for killing evil doers but not the innocent deer.

King Dusyanta respects the prohibition of killing innocent animals and stops hunting the deer in the hermitage. Then a hermitage ascetic blesses the king to be blessed with a warrior-like son with all virtues to rule the world as a sovereign. For the sacrificial fire. the hermit along with his followers is to collect wood on the banks of the river Malini. He invites the king of the Kanva to the hermitage where Sakuntala lives with her foster father Kanva. The king, to respect the hermitage, removes all his royal signs and gives all of them to the charioteer and proceeds to the hermitage as a simple man. Then Kanva is on his tour to Somatirta. Dusyanta finds the hermitage pious, calm and quiet to fill his heart with pleasure,

A tranquil spot! Why should I thrill?

I cannot enter there

Yet to inevitable things

Doors open everywhere.

Act-1

Sakuntala waters the plants and creepers in the hermitage. She feels that they are ‘like a real sister’ to her. She does these works as regular activities on the hermitage with Priyamvada and Anusuya her maids. When they are together, king Dushyanta glimpses Sakuntala. She looks extremely beautiful. He at heart adores her as a maiden in youthful charms. He is struck by her angelic beauty,

She is quite right

Beneath the barken dress

Upon the shoulder tied,

In maiden loveliness

Her young breast seems to hide

As when a flower amid

The leaves by autumn tossed—

Act-1

Dusyanta learns the truth that the ‘bark dress is not an enemy to her beauty. It serves as an added ornament’ to her. Kalidasa uses apt similes in profusion to heighten the intensity of his expressions and draw the rapt attention of his readers.

King Dusyanta, in boundless rapture, admires Shakuntala’s beauty even in bark dress comparing her to ‘that of the lotus’ amid the weeds of dull looks. The bark dress covering her bosom, her breasts, maiden looks, hides her real charm as a nubile virgin. The dress, in the other way, looks more beautiful than any fashionable dress,

Yet more the maiden slender

Charms in her dress of bark.

Act-1

King Dusyanta adores Sakuntala’s beauty in elaboration that it reflects in the poet’s choice use of a metaphor,

Her charms are tender shoots, her lips,

Ate blossoms red and warm;

Bewitching youth begins to flower,

Is beauty on her form.

Act-1

The king ardently admires Sakuntala’s charming face. He compares the lovely face with fully bloomed jasmine flowers. Once a bee hovers round her beautiful face with lovely eyes in its utmost fascination,



As the bee about her flies,  
Swiftly her bewitching eyes  
Turn to watch his flight.  
She is practicing to-day  
Coquetry and glances' play  
Not from love, but fright. Act-1

... ..  
Love's all a honey-maker.  
I know nothing but her name,  
Not her caste, nor whence she came--  
You, my rival, take her. Act-1

The king Dusyanta is in the capture of Shakuntala's 'matchless beauty'. He expresses his will to himself in a joyful manner,

O heart, your wish is won!  
All doubt at last is done;

The thing you feared as fire, Act-1

Dusyanta learns about Sakuntala's parentage that she is the daughter of heavenly nymph, Menaka and royal Sage Viswamitra, but she is adopted by Sage Kanva to bring her up in his hermitage. He helps her by doing her duty of watering when she looks tired. She retires from work. She keeps gazing at Dusyanta. He stays close to the pious grove near the hermitage so as to be near her without going back to his capital. He admits the fact that he cannot leave for his capital as he cannot turn his thoughts from her,

It is my body leaves my love, not I;  
My body moves away, but not my mind;  
For back to hear my struggling fancies fly  
Like silken banners borne against the wind. Act-1

Dusyanta is happy by seeing Sakuntala and her emotions and feelings of love towards him. She does not express her love towards him openly, but he has bright hopes about her love for him,

Although my darling is not lightly won,  
She seemed to love me, and my hopes are bright;  
Though love be balked ere joy be well begun,  
A common longing is itself delight. Act-2

Dushyanta feels soft corner for the fawns of Sakuntala as her fawns offer their soft glances at her with love. He, therefore, does not kill them and hurt her. His decision of not killing and showing concern with the fawns shows that he has deep love for Sakuntala. When he is ready with the bow and arrow, aiming at her fawn, he says to himself,

The bow is strong, its narrow near  
And yet I cannot bend,  
That bow against the fawns who share,  
Soft glances with their friends. Act-2

Love is a supreme emotion as it is the emotion created by the Supreme. Dusyanta admires the greatness of God for creating Sakuntala with flawless beauty when he looks at her first. In the same breath he admires her unsurpassed beauty. She is a flower that no one has smelt it so far. She is not a plucked flower but a flesh flower with fresh honey untasted.

No man on earth deserves to taste her beauty,  
Her blameless loveliness and worth  
Unless he has fulfilled man's perfect duty---  
And is there such a one on earth? Act-2



The Clown advises Dusyanta to marry Sakuntala before ‘the poor girl falls into the hands of some oily headed hermit’. Dusyanta does not proceed to do so in her father Kanva’s absence. He feels sorry for Sakuntala when she is seriously ill due to summer heat. He shows concern with her and shares her suffering from sickness,

With salve upon her breast,  
With loosened lotus-chain,  
My darling, sore oppressed,  
Is lovely in her pain  
Though love and summer heat  
May work an equal woe  
No maiden seems so sweet  
When summer lays her low? Act-3

When Priyamvada too feels sorry for Sakuntala’s weakness in the wake of her serious illness, ‘beautiful shadow’. Dushyanta supports the idea, saying she has become very weak and much withered like wine-leaves in the scorching heat,

Priyamvada is right. See!  
Her cheeks grown thin; her breast and shoulders fail;  
Her waist is weary and her face is pale:  
She fades for love, oh pitifully sweet!  
As vine leaves wither in the scorching heat. Act-3

Dusyanta feels happy for Sakuntala’s feeling of accepting him as her comforter, ‘The God of Love who was the cause of my affliction, has himself become my comforter.’ Priyamvada and Anusuya feel happiness for the positive and affirmative turn of events. They wish that Sakuntala should share her feelings to Dusyanta. They advise her to write a love letter to him. She does so with her nail on the lotus leaf and they pass it on to him. The letter truly states her feelings in flow as she reads,

I know not if I read your heart aright;  
Why, pitiless, do you distress me so?  
I only know that longing day and night,  
Tosses my restless body to and fro,  
That yearns for you, the source of all its woe. Act-3

Dusyanta expresses that his love for Sakuntala is flawless and knows no failure. His love is not devoted to anybody else. It is devoted to Sakuntala alone. He further says that he has already been slain by the arrow of the god of Love. That is the unquestionable truth of his love,

Bewitching eyes that found my heart,  
You surely see  
It could no longer live apart,  
Not faithless be,  
I bear Love’s arrows as I can;  
Wound not with doubt a wounded Act- 3

When Anusuya says that kings have many favourites, Dusyanta relies on the thought that there are many wives in his court. He has two, the chief glories of his race: the earth amid the sea, his kingdom and Sakuntala alone. She seeks forgiveness on behalf her and her friends for baseless and rude questions to know his true love. He forgives them all for their questions. He further gives an assurance about his love for her,

When evening comes, the shadow of the tree  
Is cast far forward, yet does not depart;



Even so beloved, wheresoe'er you be  
The thought of you can never leave my heart. Act-3

Dusyanta says that his love for Sakuntala is for his whole life. Her body is soft like siris flowers, but her heart is as hard as their stacks that guard the flowers. He says he cannot break the body of 'this sweet servitude'. His love for her is so deep that there is no need for her fear,

Her sweetly trembling lip  
With virgin invitation  
Provokes my soul to sip  
Delighted fascination. Act- 3

When Dusyanta expresses his true and deep love for Sakuntala, she says that she can 'see unite well now'. She ascertains her pure love for him. The lovers are in fact in deep love for each other. Their love leads them to their love marriage, the Gandharva mode of union on mutual consent without any ceremony and green signal of parents.

### **Separation of Lovers: the curse of Durvasa**

While Priyamvada and Anusuya are found collecting flowers in their conversation, they learn that Dusyanta and Sakuntala have been married in the Gandharva mode of union. Dushyanta is permitted to leave the hermitage to go to his capital on the permission of hermits, presenting a signet ring to her as a token of his love and marriage with her.

There is news about the arrival of quick-tempered sage Durvasa to the hermitage. Sakuntala is lost in deep thought, and so she does not notice his arrival there. All, except Sakuntala, rush to receive him for hospitality. He feels it lapse on her part and curses her in great anger that her husband shall fail to remember her and his love for her like a drunken man who fails to tell the tale he has already told,

Because your heart, by loving fancies blinded  
Has scorned a guest in pious life grown old,  
Your lover shall forget you though reminded,  
Or think of you as of a story told. Act-4

Priyamvada feels that the curse will result as an ill omen and so she asks Anusuya to appeal to Durvasa to feel pity on Sakuntala and revoke the curse considering her usual good manner of receiving the guest with due respect and hospitality and ignoring it as it is her only present lapse. He says he cannot revoke the curse. After repeated appeals to him, he says that the curse will cease to work when she shows a token of recognition to her husband. The event of being cursed happens against her wish. Subsequently he, the sage Durvasa leaves the hermitage.

Kanva hears the divine voice while preparing sacrifice, informing him of Shakuntala's pregnancy and baby 'seed of Dusyanta' in the womb to be born for the welfare of the earth,

Know Brahmin, that your child  
Like the fire-pregnant tree,  
Bears kingly seed that shall be born Act-4

Kanva coming back to hermitage learns all about Sakuntala's past and present and thinks of her future. He feels that she must be in her in-laws' royal home as a daughter-in-law,

Shakuntala must go to-day;  
I miss her now at heart;  
I dare not speak a loving word





Or choking tears will start  
My eyes are dim with anxious thought;  
Love strikes me to the life:  
And yet I strove for pious peace--  
I have no child, no wife.  
What must a father feel, when come  
The pangs of parting from his child at home. Act-4

Sakuntala takes steps around the sacred fire on the command of her father Kanva with a view to averting all evil forces. He, at the same time, blesses her with bright future.

The holy fires around the altar kindle.  
And at their margins sacred grass is piled,  
Beneath their sacrificial odours dwindle  
Misfortunes. May the fires protect you, child! Act-4

Kanva announces Sakuntala's journey in search of her husband Dusyanta to her dear companions, all objects of nature: trees, plants, creepers, birds like peacocks, animals like fawns, pious grove and so on. All including the objects of nature offer their hearty farewell to her, the child of nature. Trees offers gifts to her. Peacocks stop dancing, the deer are reluctant to eat grass. The trees start to weep. Love birds stop their lovemaking as their dear Sakuntala is ready to leave the hermitage. They all offer her their permission to her to leave the hermitage, blessing her a fruitful journey for her reunion with her husband Dusyanta. All from sky to earth seem to bless her with wishes to her for reuniting with Dusyanta. Priyamvada and Anusuya feel like accompanying her in the journey. She is given warm farewell with their wishes to her for all success. Mainly Kanva takes a message with him to be given to the king, reminding him of Sakuntala, married to him. Before starting the journey, Sakuntala prostrates before her father's feet with tears welled in her eyes. He feels responsibility bestowed by heaven on him to perform it as a parent,

A girl is held in trust, another's treasure;  
To arms of love my child to-day is given;  
And now I feel a calm and a sacred pleasure'  
I have restored the pledge that came from heaven Act-4

Sakuntala is advised by her friends to use the signet ring to make Dusyanta recollect his secret marriage with her at the hermitage to the witness of nature. They undertake the journey and have bath in the Ganges at Sakravatara.

Now it is the stage of Dusyanta's palace at Hastinapura, the capital of his kingdom as per the drama. Vetravati assures the king that the sages have come on a peaceful mission. Kanva presents himself before the palace and sends a message to the king. Meanwhile the king enters while bards go on praising him. When the king gets permission for Kanva, he enters as a group of ascetics with some women. King Dusyanta wonders why Kanva has sent the ascetics to him. Vetravai tells the king that they have a mission to visit him. Sakuntala's right eye throbs not as a sign of good women. Anyhow, the king refers to Sakuntala asking them who she is,

Who is she, shrouded in the veil,  
That dims her beauty's lustre,  
Among the hermits like a flower  
Round which the dead leaves cluster? Act-5

The king feels as if he had seen another man's wife. Then Sakuntala's heart throbs fast in fear. Sarngarava is happy that king Dusyantha has married Kanva's daughter, Sakuntala as she has womanly virtues. He feels they are of equal virtues, 'bride and groom of equal merit'. Kanva's pupil, sage Sarngarava says that Dusyanta does not remember anything about his marriage with her.



She feels sorry for his forgetting her. Then her hermit-mother, Gautami removes Sakuntala's veil, thinking that he would recognise her as his wife. He watches her angelic beauty but wonders whether he has met her or not so far,

As my heart ponders whether I could ever  
Have wed this woman that has come to me  
In tortured loveliness as I endeavour  
To bring it back to mind, then like a bee  
That hovers round a jasmine flower at dawn,  
While frosty dews of morning still o'er weave it  
And hesitates to sip ere they be gone,  
I cannot taste the sweet and cannot leave it.      Act-5

Dusyanta tells the disciples of Kanva that he cannot recall his marrying the lady at any time in life. Seeing that she is pregnant, he asks others how he can accept her as his wife. For all are to say that he has married her, but he negatively answers every time, disobeying their views. In that helpless condition, Sakuntala remembers Priyamvada's advice to produce the signet ring offered to her as a token of his love for her. At that time, she does not find it to her finger. The hermit-mother, Gautami thinks that she must have lost it while offering worship to Indra's wife at Suchithirta after bathing in the river. She fails to remind him of their love marriage by telling a valid reason nor does he recall it to serve the purpose. All the time she addresses him in polite ways, 'your majesty', 'My dear', 'Dear Lord', 'Prince of Purus; and so on. All trials end to result still in their separation. She tries her best impressing him to recognise her as his wife but fails to suffer further in consolable. The people who have tried to remind him of his marriage, feel crest fallen. Kanva's disciple Sarngarava feels angry with the king for not accepting her as his wife.

### **Reunion of Lovers: Signet Ring's Role:**

Sakuntala's failure to remind Dusyanta of their love marriage, she feels angry for the king's response to her pleas, she says angrily,

'Wretch! You judge all this by your own false heart. Would say any other man do what you have done? To hide behind virtue. Like a yawning well covered with grass!' (Act-5)

The king's police brought the fisherman to the king arresting him for having the signet ring in possession. When enquires about the ring, the fisherman tells them that he has got it from the maw of the carp, the fish he has caught in the river at Sakravatara but the police do not feel convinced by his story. Then the Chief of the police produces him to say it at the king's palace.

Dusyanta feels convinced and releases the fisherman. The king sights the ring and recalls a person related to it. He feels depressed much at its sight. He repents for his cruel repudiation of his wife when she is pregnant. He slowly recalls his happy life at hermitage and believes in her pleadings. He learns that he loved and married her at that time and left the hermitage, giving her the signet ring. He tells Madhavya that the love story is a fact. He feels like decking his wife, Sakuntala's finger again with the signet ring again. It is the signet ring which causes their happy reunion, playing the crucial role as a plot, befitting to the play, **Abhijnana Sakuntalam**. The ring episode, used as a sign of Kalidasa's extraordinary genius and magnificent imagination serves, as the greatest potential for the drama.

Dusyanta destroys a brood of demons called Kanemi and receives the highest honour from Indra for that brave act. He enters the abode of Marica, the father of Indra. There he sees a young boy in his looks with royal marks of the Purus on him. Meanwhile Sakuntala appears on the scene. The boy runs to her saying that 'he is a man belongs to no other people'. The king addresses her as his darling. Sakuntala responds to him saying, 'Oh my heart, believe it. Fate struck hard but its envy is gone, and pity takes its place. It is my husband.' The king replies stating their plight,

'Black madness flies



... ..  
Light follows soon/The loving star/ Draws to the moon.’ Act-7

Dusyanta learns the fact and welcomes Sakuntala to his bosom for their happy reunion, letting no Durvasa appear again in the sojourn of their love and no eclipse of the light of their true love. They prove to be model lovers of true love.

Kalidasa is so successful in writing the play **Adhijnana Sakuntalam** that it rises high to achieve every spectator's or reader's encomiums for universal acclaims. It is the play significantly known for its concept of pure love. Both Sakuntala and Dusyanta deserve to enjoy unblemished love as true lovers. But there is a storm created by sage Durvasa to rage in their love a storm that leads them to their separation as lovers. Sage Kashyapa ultimately tells them that Durvasa's curse was responsible for their separation that in its course purifies their hearts, leading the lovers ultimately to culminate in their happy reunion. There is a calm and quiet reward of the happy reunion after the pangs of separation like calm after the storm. All spectators and readers find the episode of pure love very interesting, involving them into the play. I brand the play, **Abhijnana Sakuntalam** Kalidasa's masterpiece and the world's one of the best plays for its highly merited skills to enrich the literary firmament.

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