CHAPTER IV

Sublimity of Love:
Sakuntala
Rama Sarma's masterpiece, Sakuntala, is closely modelled on Kalidasa's Sakuntala which is one of the world's greatest classics. It is the story of love at first sight transformed and transmitted into sublime love. In his fairly long 'preface' to Sakuntala, Rama Sarma declares his object in writing the play. He says:

In writing Sakuntala in three acts my object has been to focus the attention of the reader on the sublimity of love, on the juxtaposition of the physical and the spiritual worlds.¹

As Basavaraj S. Naikar observes:

It is presentable on the stage taking on hour and half and is easily manageable by the college students or an amateur dramatic group.²

Though the play is based on Kalidasa's Sakuntala, Rama Sarma concentrates only on its essentials. Rightly remembering that he is writing the play for the modern audience, he brings out the central theme, ignoring the popular dramatic devices of the age which colour the play. He has avoided the scenes of clowning as it is difficult to appreciate the puns and conceits of the clown, especially when they are presented in English. The supernatural element is toned down. However, literary style is particularly used in order to give the play an
atmosphere of antiquity and remoteness. To put it in the words of Rama Sarma himself:

while the thematic content of Kalidasa's Sakuntala is of perennial interest, its language and the apparatus of dramaturgy are bound to be of the past. So a reconciliation is brought about in this play between the universality of the theme and the antiquity of style in using poetic prose on many occasions.³

Sakuntala is a play of three acts, referring to the three aspects of Sakuntala's life “as the maiden, the castaway and the woman, perfect and dignified, chastened and sublimated through patient suffering.”⁴ The first act presents the romantic love of Dushyanta and Sakuntala with all the intoxication of Spring and Summer. The second act starts with the tempestuous winds, producing the dreariness of winter, and ends in the repudiation of Sakuntala by Dushyanta in the open court. The third act introduces Bharata, the offspring of Dushyanta and Sakuntala, in the mellowed fruitfulness of Autumn. Thus, as we witness the play on the stage, we move from colourful hermitage of Kanwa to the hot house atmosphere of the court of Dushyanta. Refreshingly, the scene moves on to another hermitage of Kasyapa, to the open spaces of Nature with its mountainous region. Thus, “Sakuntala grows from the stage of youthful dreamy to a state of

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acceptance of life in its totality with its sorrows and joys." In other words, we see in the play the growth of Sakuntala from a purely physical plane to a highly spiritual plane.

The first act refers to maiden, Sakuntala. It deals with the budding womanhood of Sakuntala with her two maidens – Priyam and Anasuya – repeatedly referring to the auspicious moment of her marriage. For instance, Priyam tells Anasuya:

Truly, Anasuya, she feels the advent of youth. The cuckoo's song makes her enchanted. The wedded tendrils of these creepers reveals to her the harmony of thing in the world.6

Anasuya replies:

Priyam, don't you remember the visit of Dushyanta the other day? How enamoured he was of our maiden! Surely this transformation in Sakuntala is due to his visit. (75)

Sakuntala is mentally prepared for her marriage with Dushyanta. The colourful Kanwa's hermitage with the peacocks dancing and the lovely creepers twining round the sturdy trees teaches Sakuntala the loveliness and the harmony in wedded life.
The episode of the bee brings Sakuntala face to face to Dushyanta. It is love at first sight with all its romantic idealisation as in Shakespeare's romantic comedies like *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*. The tradition of 'gandharva' marriage gives her the sanction to be married to Dushyanta, who says:

> Our marriage will be a 'Gandharva' one. This does not need the sanction of parents. (80)

When Sakuntala says that she should seek her father's consent for the marriage, Dushyanta dispels all doubts from her mind saying:

> Look at these creepers 'Malathi' and 'Madhavi.' Observe how they are intertwined. So shall we be in life, inseparable. (80)

Dushyanta marries Sakuntala with nature as the sole witness, passing his ring on to her. He says:

> Truly dear Sakuntala, you are an angel ministering to the needs of all these birds, fawns and flowers. Sweet maiden, accept my hand and make me happy. (81)

Deeply touched by his sentiments Sakuntala replies:
Gracious lord, your words of profuse praise and intense affection leave me tongue-tied. I feel unequal to the task of expressing my thoughts clearly. (81)

Thus, the first act ends with the idyllic love and marriage between Sakuntala, and Dushyanta. The Gods above and the wind around are the silent witnesses to their ideal marriage based on pure love. Nature seems to be rejoicing in the union of Dushyanta and Sakuntala. Sakuntala is nature's minion. She is like a deer, on the mountain spring with unsullied purity. The theme of love and marriage is made natural with its association with Spring. In the words of Rama Sarma, "it has the loveliness, the freshness and the intoxication of Spring. It exhibits an exuberance of youthful pleasures retaining a certain restraint and grace. There is nothing morbid or sensual about it."7

The second act pertains to Sakuntala as a 'castaway.' If the first act is full of warmth, loveliness and freshness, the second act is fraught with chilliness and coldness. The atmosphere is also changed so as to suggest in a symbolic way the agonising experience of Sakuntala in the court of Dushyanta.
The act opens with the parting scene Sakuntala is being sent to her husband Dushyanta. Kanwa, the foster father of Sakuntala, saying to himself:

My heart is full affection birds me make Sakuntala stay here. But duty demands that I should send her away to her lord as she is big with child. The very thought of separation unnerves me...... If is an irony of fate that parents should part with their daughters after having brought them up for a number of years. It was only by a strange coincidence that I had the good fortune of treating Sakuntala as my daughter. Even then the leave-taking is too hard for me.(86-87)

Nature is also afflicted like Kanwa. The animals in the forest look forlorn. The peacock desists from dancing. The lovely fawn beckon's Sakuntala almost suggesting that she should not leave Priyam and Anasuya lose all their mirth. However, Sakuntala comforts herself with the thought of revisiting the hermitage. She says:

The idyllic mirth of those days has left on indelible impression upon me. My memory is green with all these experiences. How long to be back here? (90)
Sakuntala reaches the Dushyanta's palace accompanied by two Hermit Boys. The first Hermit Boy presents Sakuntala to Dushyanta in his open court. He says:

We carry a message from Kanwa, this lady his daughter, whom you married without his knowledge is your queen. Accept her. The sage exhorts you to renovate the ascetics. (95)

Dushyanta who is greatly surprised, says:

It is our duty to define the `ashramas' from all disturbing elements. But Kanwa imposes a strange imperative on me. How can I accept a woman whom I have not married as my queen? Is not this strange? (95)

Equally surprised to hear such words from Dushyanta, the second Hermit Boy questions the stand taken by Dushyanta:

O king, you administer justice. But where is justice? Does it consist in abandoning your wife? (96)

At once stunned and irritated by the boy's accusation Dushyanta says:

Mistake me not for a vain, sensual king. Stamp not on me the detestable blot of repudiation. (96)
The strange behaviour of the Dushyanta is due to the curse of Durvasa which is only referred to, if not presented on the stage. As a court poet, Kalidasa cannot present the king as a contemptible figure. He upholds and maintains the image of kingship with its magnanimity and magnificence. Kalidasa also introduces innovatively the ring episode with a view to protecting the honour of Dushyanta. As Rama Sarma himself points out in his 'Preface':

Lest any blame should be heaped on the king curse of Durvasa and the ring episode are introduced thereby saving the king from any odium of having neglected Sakuntala.8

As Dushyanta refuses to take Sakuntala as his wife, the second Hermit Boy requests her to remind him of the past happenings so that he may recognise her. Accordingly, Sakuntala recapitulates:

Mighty king, don't you remember the first occasion when by accident you stepped into the garden and spoke with us in a friendly manner. By your bewitching looks and elegant compliments you won my heart. Now you reject me. Is it just? (98)

Dushyanta, who is not able to recognise her because of the curse of Durvasa, is enraged and replies to her change:
Hermit woman, with your artful speeches don’t try to captivate me and thereby ruins me of my kingship. Talk not of love and marriage. There are more things in our life than dreamt of in your everyday life of unmitigated love. (98)

However, Dushyantara asks Sakuntala for any proof of her tale of love. Sakuntala looks for Dushyantara’s ring but she does not find it. She becomes pale and stupefied. She tells the king that she is unlucky in losing the ring. She says:

Please don’t insult me. Perhaps the ring slipped out of my finger while I was crossing the stream.

(99)

Then Sakuntala recalls to him those joyous moments which they spent together in Kanwa’s Hermitage. But Dushyantara is not convinced and pleads that he is never married to any woman, and he finally rejects Sakuntala. He asks his attendants to take Sakuntala to the interior of the place and shelter her till she is delivered of a child. Sakuntala at once bemoans and protests in deep despair:

O how treacherous is this world! A curse upon this life! I am a castaway, a miserable wretch. I have fallen upon the thorns of life. I have entered a house encircled by fire. Let me go out into the vast
The third act glorifies the Indian womanhood. The moment the fisherman brings the ring to Dushyanta, he is brought back to reality. Looking at this ring he says to himself:

O blessed ring, you have roused me from a mysterious dream. I now realise my mistake in treating Sakuntala with indifference. O how cruel I was then? I adjured her and taunted her vilely in the court. Blessed ins the fisherman that brought the ring to me. Sakuntala did say that she might have lost it in the stream. But then I did not believe her words. Now my memory is green with all the joyous past. The curtain is removed. It was years ago that I abandoned her. (104)

As Rama Sarma points out in the 'Preface,' Dushyanta Realises to his consternation that he has treated Sakuntala abominably and humiliated her in the open court. He has to atone for his foolish deed and repent of his negligence of a chaste woman. Years of penitence and a saint-like sorrow cure him of his excesses of kingly pride and haughtiness. (9)
After that unfortunate experience in the court Sakuntala comes back to the comforting bosom of Nature – Kasyapa’s hermitage which is more serene than Kanwa’s hermitage. She gives birth to Bharata who is growing in the new hermitage. After having rendered invaluable service to Indra, Dushyanta halts his chariot near Kasyapa’s hermitage. When he sees Bharata playing with a cub twisting its tail, he is greatly astonished. He feels affinity to boy. He says to himself:

This boy evaders himself to me. He is the man in miniature. He will become a great warrior. What a bitter fate to me! I am deprived of all the prizes of love – all the kisses for which a father, heart may be athirst perhaps I may die without a heir. (106)

The play comes to a close with reconciliation between love-lorn Sakuntala and penitent Dushyanta through their son, Bharata, the offspring of their love and marriage. Dushyanta repents before Sakuntala for the sin he committed in rejecting her when she came to his court as a pregnant woman after their marriage at Kanwa’s hermitage. He expiates:

Sweetheart, I have committed a deplorable sin. It is horrible to think of that monstrous day when I drove you out of the court like a tyrant. I dishonoured you in the court. Pardon me. (109)
Sakuntala forgives him saying:

My lord, I must curse my hard fate, not you. I am indeed happy to behold your august face once again ....... (109)

The past is past. Let us not think of it. It is the hermitage of mortals to suffer and to bear with patience the trials and tribulations of life. (109-110)

Kasyapa enters at this critical juncture and reveals how Dushyanta and Sakuntala are ignorant of their own fate. He says that it is the curse of Durvasa that has put them to the hardship. He finally blesses them with his message:

Truly, the course of true love is never smooth. You have gone through that eddying force. Now you are chastened and sublimated. The intoxication of youth, of Spring is over. It is the mellow Autumn with its ripened fruits that is to be found in you ....

Love of the highest type is one that is strengthened by the advent of offspring. The ties of domestic life enable men and women in thought and action. From the purely earthly life the ascent of spiritual
life is made possible through the sobering influence of wedded love. (111)

Thus the dramatist's intention to show physical love as transformed into spiritual love, is realised through the patient and uncomplaining suffering undergone by Sakuntala. Particularly the last scene of reconciliation "raises to lofty heights of rarefied sanctity and heavenly bliss."10 In other words, the story of love at first sight is transformed and transmuted into sublime love.

Interestingly enough, Rama Sarma's Sakuntala has quite a few reminiscences of Shakespeare's plays like The Merchant of Venice, The Winters Tale and Pericles. The ring episode in Sakuntala invariably reminds us of the ring episode in the Merchant of Venice. As in the Shakespeare's play, the ring episode leads to complications. With the lose of the ring the romantic tale of Sakuntala is lost. Dushyanta can neither recognise her most accept her as his wife. However, the restorations of the ring brings back to him vivid memories of his love and marriage with Sakuntala. The curse of Dushyanta is also linked to the ring episode. The supernatural is thus made natural. The moment Dushyanta sees the ring, he remembers Sakuntala. The whole scene of love-making in the forest comes back to him nostalgically as through he wakeup "from a deep dream or slumber."
The reconciliation scene in *Sakuntala* also reminds us of scenes of recognition and reconciliation in Shakespeare's tragi-comedies like *The Winter Tale* and *Pericles*. Just as Leontes and Hermione are finally reconciled through their daughter, Perdita, Dushyanta and Sakuntala are reconciled through their son, Bharata. Just as Shakespeare introduces Perdita as a connecting link between Leontes and Hermione, Kalidasa's introduces Bharata as a connecting link between Dushyanta and Sakuntala. Dushyanta sees Sakuntala in Kasyapa's hermitage in dusty robes, pale face and kneels before her. Like Hermione, Sakuntala is generous and gracious enough to accept him. Bharata, as a connecting link between Dushyanta and Sakuntala also reminds us of Marina in Shakespeare's *Pericles* who is responsible for bringing together her separated parents for years.

Rama Sarma displays remarkable skill in the treatment of the source - Kalidasa's *Sakuntala*. Keeping the modern audience in mind, he carefully avoids popular dramatic devices of the age like clowning and supernatural elements. Similarly, the scenes of ordinary life of fisherman are avoided. He has avoided some scenes like Durvasa cursing Sakuntala, and Sakuntala losing the ring in the river in order to achieve a cohesiveness that is needed on the modern stage. As Basavaraj Naikar points out,
"some of the ascetic and the supernatural scenes have been relegated to the background with the main focus on the importance of love, patience, forbearance and sacrifice in life." ¹¹

Rama Sarma deliberately makes the scenes short so that they could be managed easily by the modern actors. Similarly the dialogues are short, simple and direct without the stilted wordings of many Sanskrit scholars in India who write about such themes. He has also avoided the lengthy dialogues of Kalidasa so to make the play more dramatic. But, at the same time, he has rightly retained the original symbol of Kalidasa – the bees, the flowers the spring and the ring in order to give his play a ring of authenticity.
REFERENCES:


4. Ibid., p.59.

5. Ibid., p.59.


All the references to the text are from this edition and the page numbers are given parenthetically at the end of each passage.


8. Ibid., p.57.

9. Ibid., p.57.

10. Ibid., p.57.