



Ecological Consciousness in Kālidāsa's Poetry: An Ecocritical Reading of Abhijñānaśākuntalam

Dr. Rajesh Kumar Saxena

Professor of Sociology, Vijayaraje Government Girls Postgraduate College,
Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, India

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Abstract

This paper undertakes an ecocritical reading of Kālidāsa's classical Sanskrit drama Abhijñānaśākuntalam (The Recognition of Śakuntalā) in order to recover the ecological consciousness that animates its poetic world. Working within the interpretive tradition established by Western ecocriticism and extended by scholars of Indian environmental thought, the study argues that nature in the play is not decorative background but an active moral and affective presence that shapes character, plot, and value. Through a qualitative, close-reading methodology, the analysis examines the hermitage of the sage Kaṇva as a biotic community, Śakuntalā's kinship with plants and animals as an ecofeminist ethic of care, King Duṣyanta's hunt as a meditation on restraint and the limits of dominion, the curse of forgetting as a figure for ecological alienation, and the reunion of the lovers as the restoration of a disturbed cosmic harmony. The paper concludes that Kālidāsa's vision anticipates several concerns central to the contemporary environmental humanities—interdependence, biocentric regard, and the moral standing of the more-than-human world—and that Abhijñānaśākuntalam therefore offers a valuable indigenous resource for green literary studies in India.

Keywords: ecocriticism; ecological consciousness; Kālidāsa; Abhijñānaśākuntalam; āśrama ideal; ecofeminism; Indian environmental humanities

1. Introduction

The last three decades have witnessed the consolidation of ecocriticism as a distinct and influential mode of literary inquiry. Broadly defined as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, ecocriticism takes as its founding premise the recognition that human culture is connected to, and dependent upon, the natural world (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). If literary criticism has traditionally read texts against the horizons of history, gender, and ideology, ecocriticism adds a further horizon—the earth itself—and asks how a work imagines the nonhuman world, what values it attaches to that world, and how it positions the human within a larger web of life. Although the movement first crystallised around Anglo-American nature writing, its methods have proved remarkably portable, opening onto literatures far removed from the pastoral traditions of the West (Buell, 2005; Garrard, 2012).

Within this expanding field, the classical literatures of India offer a particularly rich, and still under-explored, archive. Long before the word “environment” entered critical discourse, Sanskrit poetry cultivated an intimate attentiveness to landscape, season, flora, and fauna, and framed the moral life of human beings in explicit relation to the health of the surrounding world. No writer embodies this attentiveness more fully than Kālidāsa, the pre-eminent poet and dramatist of classical Sanskrit, whose works are saturated with the textures of the natural world. His lyric Meghadūta traces a journey along the living geography of the subcontinent; his epic Rtusamhāra is organised entirely around the turning of the seasons; and his masterpiece for the stage, Abhijñānaśākuntalam, unfolds in and around a forest hermitage whose trees, creepers, and animals participate in the drama as fully as its human characters (Rajan, 1989; Miller, 1984).



This paper reads *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* as a text of ecological consciousness. It contends that the play does not merely use nature as a beautiful setting but articulates a coherent, if implicit, environmental sensibility—one grounded in the āśrama (hermitage) ideal, in an ethic of nonviolence and restraint, and in a felt sense of kinship between human and nonhuman life. The argument proceeds in four movements. It first situates the study within the theoretical field of ecocriticism and the parallel tradition of Indian environmental thought. It then sets out the qualitative, close-reading method employed. The central section offers a sustained ecocritical analysis of the play's key scenes and images. A concluding discussion draws out the wider significance of Kālidāsa's ecological vision for the environmental humanities today.

2. Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature

2.1 The Contours of Ecocriticism

The term “ecocriticism” was popularised in the 1990s, and the field acquired its foundational shape with the publication of *The Ecocriticism Reader*, in which Cheryll Glotfelty offered the now-standard definition of the practice as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). Early ecocriticism, often described as its “first wave,” concentrated on realist nature writing and celebrated texts that fostered an ethic of care for wild places, taking Thoreau and the Romantics as exemplary (Buell, 1995; Coupe, 2000). A subsequent “second wave” broadened the field's scope, questioning the nature–culture binary, attending to urban and degraded environments, and insisting that questions of social justice are inseparable from questions of environmental harm (Buell, 2005; Clark, 2011).

Ecocriticism is less a single theory than a shared orientation, and it has drawn productively on adjacent frameworks. Deep ecology and biocentrism supply the conviction that nonhuman beings possess intrinsic value independent of their usefulness to humans; ecofeminism links the domination of nature to the domination of women, tracing both to a shared logic of hierarchy and mastery (Plumwood, 1993; Gaard, 1993); and environmental justice criticism, exemplified by the concept of “slow violence,” foregrounds the uneven distribution of ecological damage across time and populations (Nixon, 2011). What unites these strands is a refusal to treat the nonhuman world as mere backdrop, and a corresponding attention to the agency, presence, and moral standing of that world within the literary text (Garrard, 2012).

2.2 Indian Environmental Thought and the Āśrama Ideal

Reading a classical Sanskrit text through an ecocritical lens requires a framework attentive to indigenous conceptions of nature rather than the imported assumptions of Anglo-American pastoral. Scholars of religion and ecology have shown that the Indic traditions contain deep resources for environmental thought: a cosmology of interdependence, a reverence for rivers, mountains, and trees as sacred presences, and an ethic of *ahiṃsā* (nonviolence) that extends moral consideration to all living beings (Chapple & Tucker, 2000; Nelson, 1998). The forest, in particular, occupies a distinctive place in this imagination. Far from being a wilderness to be conquered, the *vana* is the site of the āśrama, the hermitage where sages, students, and animals live in disciplined harmony, and where the pursuit of spiritual knowledge is inseparable from a gentle stewardship of the surrounding ecology.

This āśrama ideal is central to any ecocritical account of Kālidāsa. The hermitage is imagined as a community of beings in which the boundary between human and nonhuman is porous and permeable: sages cultivate plants, animals graze without fear, and the moral atmosphere of the place is registered in the flourishing of its living things. Indian ecocritics have increasingly argued that such culturally specific formations must be recovered on their own terms rather than assimilated to Western models, and that classical literature offers a storehouse of ecological wisdom for the present (Rangarajan, 2018; Mukherjee,



2010). The present study builds on this insight, treating the hermitage of Abhijñānaśākuntalam not as a poetic convention to be admired but as an ecological vision to be interpreted.

2.3 Situating Kālidāsa and the Play

Kālidāsa is conventionally assigned to the Gupta period (c. fourth to fifth century CE), the classical high-water mark of Sanskrit court culture. Abhijñānaśākuntalam, a drama in seven acts, dramatises an episode drawn from the Mahābhārata: King Duṣyanta, while hunting, enters the forest hermitage of the sage Kaṇva, falls in love with the sage's foster-daughter Śakuntalā, and secretly marries her. A curse pronounced by the irascible sage Durvāsas causes the king to forget her; the loss of a token ring deepens the estrangement; and only after long suffering, and the ring's eventual recovery, are the lovers reunited in a celestial hermitage (Kale, 1969; Devadhar, 1966). Around this human plot Kālidāsa weaves an extraordinarily dense fabric of natural imagery, so that the story of love, loss, and recognition is also, at every turn, a story about the living world. The history of the play's reception—including its celebrated reception in European Romanticism—has tended to foreground its erotic and aesthetic dimensions; the ecological dimension, though everywhere present in the text, has received comparatively little sustained attention (Thapar, 1999).

3. Objectives and Methodology

This study is qualitative and interpretive in design. It does not seek to measure or quantify, but to read closely, drawing meaning from the language, imagery, and structure of the dramatic text. Its principal objectives are threefold: first, to identify and analyse the representations of the natural world in Abhijñānaśākuntalam; second, to interpret these representations through the conceptual apparatus of ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and Indian environmental thought; and third, to assess the significance of Kālidāsa's ecological vision for contemporary green literary studies.

Methodologically, the paper employs ecocritical close reading as its primary instrument. Selected scenes, speeches, and images—the opening hunt, the hermitage of Kaṇva, Śakuntalā's bond with the plants and the fawn, her departure, the curse, and the final reunion—are examined in detail for the ways in which they construct the relationship between human and nonhuman life. The analysis draws upon standard scholarly translations and editions of the play (Kale, 1969; Miller, 1984; Rajan, 1989), while remaining attentive to the connotations of the Sanskrit original. The reading is framed throughout by the theoretical sources reviewed above, allowing the text and the theory to illuminate one another. As the study is textual and interpretive, it involves no human participants, no empirical data collection, and no statistical procedure.

4. Ecological Consciousness in Abhijñānaśākuntalam: A Close Reading

4.1 The Hermitage as Biotic Community

From its opening scene, Abhijñānaśākuntalam establishes the forest hermitage as a moral and ecological centre against which all other spaces are measured. When Duṣyanta's chariot crosses the boundary of Kaṇva's tapovana (grove of penance), the very atmosphere changes: the king perceives a place where deer graze without alarm, where trees are tended like children, and where the fierce energies of the court give way to a pervasive tranquillity. The hermitage is not empty scenery but a densely populated community of beings—sages and their pupils, but also fawns, peacocks, bees, and above all the trees and creepers that the residents nurture. In ecocritical terms, the āśrama functions as a biotic community in which human and nonhuman members are bound by relations of care and reciprocity rather than of use and mastery (Chapple & Tucker, 2000; Nelson, 1998).

The ethical charge of this space is dramatised at the very threshold of the action. As the king raises his bow against a fleeing antelope, a hermit intervenes to forbid the killing, insisting that the deer of the sacred grove must not be harmed. The scene stages, in miniature, a confrontation between two orders of value: the royal, martial ethos of the hunt, which treats the animal as quarry, and the hermitage ethos of ahimsā, which



recognises the animal as a fellow inhabitant of a shared world deserving of protection. That the king yields, lowering his weapon, signals the moral authority of the ecological order the hermitage embodies. The nonhuman world here is not a passive resource but a community whose flourishing carries genuine ethical weight (Rangarajan, 2018).

4.2 Śakuntalā and the Kinship of Beings

If the hermitage is the play's ecological centre, Śakuntalā is its living embodiment. Kālidāsa characterises his heroine less through courtly accomplishment than through her intimacy with the natural world. She waters the young saplings before drinking herself; she treats a flowering jasmine creeper, which she has named "Light of the Grove," as a beloved sister and rejoices to see it embrace a neighbouring mango tree as though celebrating a marriage; and she raises an orphaned fawn as tenderly as a child, the animal following her, nuzzling her, and grieving at her departure. These are not sentimental flourishes. They constitute a sustained portrait of a human being whose identity is constituted through relationship with nonhuman kin, a self extended outward into the web of living things.

This kinship invites an ecofeminist reading. Ecofeminist theory identifies a shared cultural logic in which women and nature are simultaneously feminised, naturalised, and subordinated to a masculine order of reason and control (Plumwood, 1993; Gaard, 1993; Warren, 2000). Kālidāsa's Śakuntalā, however, resists reduction to a mere object of the male gaze precisely because she is bound so completely to the nonhuman world; her worth is figured through the flourishing of the plants and creatures she nurtures, and the natural world in turn responds to her with a reciprocal tenderness that no other character commands. The play thus imagines a mode of being in which the feminine and the natural are sources of value and agency rather than of subordination, even as the intrusion of royal power will strain and threaten that mode.

The ecofeminist charge of this portrait becomes most poignant in the fourth act, at Śakuntalā's departure from the hermitage for her husband's court. Here Kālidāsa achieves one of the great scenes of world drama, and it is above all an ecological scene. The trees are said to release their leaves in a kind of weeping; the creepers loosen their withered blossoms; the deer let the mouthfuls of grass fall from their mouths; and the sage Kaṇva declares that the whole grove grieves the parting of its child. The nonhuman community mourns as one of its own is taken from it. In this reciprocity of grief, the boundary between human and nonhuman all but dissolves, and the play affirms a vision of interdependence in which the departure of a single being is felt as a wound to the entire living fabric of the forest (Miller, 1984; Rajan, 1989).

4.3 The Hunt and the Ethics of Restraint

The motif of the hunt, with which the play opens, provides Kālidāsa with a sustained meditation on the ethics of human power over the nonhuman world. The chase of the antelope displays the king at the height of his martial vigour, yet the poet frames the pursuit ambivalently. The terrified animal, straining its neck to glance back at the pursuing chariot, is rendered with such sympathy that the reader's allegiance shifts from hunter to hunted; the beauty and vulnerability of the creature call the violence of the hunt into question even as its excitement is conveyed. When the hermit halts the kill, the king does not merely obey a rule; he is brought to recognise a limit to his dominion, an ethical boundary that the sacred ecology of the grove imposes upon royal will.

Read ecocritically, this movement from pursuit to restraint enacts a critique of the anthropocentric assumption that the nonhuman world exists simply to be used. The hunt is not condemned outright—Kālidāsa is no polemicist—but it is subordinated to a higher value, that of ahimsā, and the king's greatness is shown to consist not in his capacity to kill but in his capacity to refrain. The play thereby dramatises what deep ecology would call a shift from a merely instrumental to an intrinsic valuation of nonhuman life



(Garrard, 2012). That the very king who spares the deer will later, under the curse, forget the woman most bound to the deer and the grove, gives this opening its full structural irony: the failure of memory that drives the tragedy is, at some level, a failure of the ecological attentiveness the hermitage had briefly taught him.

4.4 The Curse, Forgetting, and Ecological Alienation

The turning point of the drama is the curse of the sage Durvāsas. Absorbed in her longing for the absent king, Śakuntalā fails to notice the arrival of the formidable ascetic and neglects the duty of hospitality; in his anger he curses her to be forgotten by the one of whom she is thinking. The curse operates as the play's engine of estrangement, severing Duṣyanta's memory of his beloved and casting Śakuntalā into exile and sorrow. But the curse can also be read, ecocritically, as a figure for a deeper alienation—the sundering of the human from the world of living relationship that the hermitage embodies.

Śakuntalā's tragedy begins the moment her attention is drawn away from the immediate, embodied world of the grove and fixed instead upon an absent object of desire associated with the distant court. Her lapse is a lapse of presence, of that grounded attentiveness to the here-and-now of the living world which had defined her. The king's forgetting, in turn, is the forgetting of one who has left the hermitage behind and re-entered the enclosed, self-referential world of the palace, where nature is reduced to ornament and the moral clarity of the grove has faded. The curse, then, allegorises what an ecological reading might call the estrangement of civilisation from the web of life—a forgetting of interdependence whose consequence is suffering, and whose cure, the play insists, lies in a return (Buell, 1995).

4.5 The Ring, the River, and the Web of Consequence

The mechanism by which the curse is at length lifted is itself deeply ecological. The token of recognition—the ring given by the king—slips from Śakuntalā's finger into the waters of a sacred river as she offers her respects, and is swallowed by a fish. Only when a fisherman later catches the fish and discovers the ring is the king's memory restored. The plot thus turns upon a chain of connection that runs through water, fish, and human labour: the recovery of love depends upon the mediation of the nonhuman world and of those who live in daily contact with it. Kālidāsa quietly affirms that human fate is enmeshed in natural processes, that the river and its creatures are participants in the moral order rather than mere scenery, and that even the humblest worker at the water's edge is a link in the web of consequence (Nixon, 2011).

This episode rewards attention because it resists the hierarchy that would place the royal and the human securely above the natural and the low. The ring must pass through the river's depths and the fisherman's net before it can do its work; grace arrives, as it were, from below and from without, through the very ecological network that courtly life had forgotten. The play's resolution is thus prepared not by royal power but by the patient operation of the more-than-human world upon human affairs.

4.6 Reunion and the Restoration of Harmony

The final act removes the action from the earthly hermitage to the celestial retreat of the sage Mārīca, high among the clouds, where Duṣyanta is at last reunited with Śakuntalā and their son. Significantly, the reconciliation occurs not in the palace but in another āśrama—a return, at a higher and sanctified register, to the ecological space with which the play began. The movement of the whole drama is therefore circular and restorative: from the hermitage, through the disturbance of curse and forgetting, and back to a hermitage in which harmony is renewed. The child Bharata, who plays fearlessly with lion cubs in the celestial grove, embodies the restored condition—a human being once more at home among animals, unafraid and unthreatening, an emblem of the reconciled relation between humankind and the living world.

In ecocritical terms, the play's resolution enacts the healing of the alienation figured by the curse. What was sundered—the human from the natural, memory from presence, the court from the grove—is made



whole through a return to the ecological order. Kālidāsa thus imagines not only the disturbance of harmony but its restoration, and locates the possibility of human flourishing squarely within, rather than apart from, the community of living beings. The drama closes with a benediction that extends its concern outward to the welfare of the world, confirming that the well-being of the human and the well-being of the earth are, for this poet, a single question (Clark, 2011).

5. Findings and Discussion

The foregoing analysis yields several interrelated findings. First, nature in *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* is not a passive setting but an active presence endowed with agency, feeling, and moral standing; the grove tends, grieves, mediates, and blesses, participating in the action as fully as any human character. Second, the play articulates a coherent environmental ethic grounded in the āśrama ideal and the principle of *ahimsā*, an ethic that values restraint over dominion and kinship over mastery. Third, the drama's treatment of *Śakuntalā* offers an ecofeminist vision in which the feminine and the natural are figured as sources of value and reciprocal care rather than of subordination. Fourth, the central mechanism of curse, forgetting, and recovery may be read as an allegory of ecological alienation and return—of the estrangement of civilisation from the web of life, and of the healing that a renewed attentiveness makes possible.

These findings position Kālidāsa's drama as a significant, and specifically Indian, resource for the environmental humanities. Where much Western ecocriticism has had to work against a deeply entrenched dualism separating humanity from nature, *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* proceeds from a cultural matrix in which that separation is never absolute and in which the sacred, the human, and the natural interpenetrate (Chapple & Tucker, 2000; Rangarajan, 2018). To read the play ecocritically is therefore not to impose an alien framework upon it but to recover a sensibility that the text has always possessed. At the same time, the analysis suggests the value of a postcolonial ecocriticism attentive to indigenous forms of environmental knowledge, which refuses to treat the Western pastoral as the universal standard of ecological writing (Mukherjee, 2010; Nixon, 2011).

It should be acknowledged that this reading is interpretive and thus provisional; a classical text sustains many readings, and the ecological one advanced here does not exhaust or displace the aesthetic, erotic, and political interpretations the play has long invited (Thapar, 1999). Nor should the hermitage ideal be sentimentalised: it is an idealised, courtly image of the forest, not an ethnographic record. What the reading claims, more modestly, is that an ecological consciousness is genuinely constitutive of the play's imaginative world, and that recovering it enriches both our understanding of Kālidāsa and our sense of the deep history of environmental thought.

6. Conclusion

Abhijñānaśākuntalam repays ecocritical reading because it is, at its core, a drama about the bond between human beings and the living world—its making, its rupture, and its repair. In the hermitage of Kaṇva, Kālidāsa imagines a community in which humans, animals, and plants live in relations of care and reciprocity; in *Śakuntalā* he creates a heroine whose very identity is woven into the nonhuman world; in the hunt and the curse he explores the dangers of dominion and forgetting; and in the reunion he affirms the possibility of a restored harmony between humankind and the earth. Across these movements the play sustains an ecological consciousness that is remarkable for its coherence and its tenderness.

To read the play in this way is to recognise that the concerns of contemporary environmental thought—interdependence, restraint, the intrinsic worth of nonhuman life, the peril of alienation from the natural world—are not the invention of a late-modern crisis alone but have a long and dignified history in the literary traditions of India. Kālidāsa's masterpiece, composed some fifteen centuries ago, speaks with unexpected directness to a present increasingly aware of its ecological predicament. In recovering the green wisdom of



Abhijñānaśākuntalam, the environmental humanities gain not only a beautiful text but a usable past, and a reminder that the flourishing of the human has always been bound up with the flourishing of the world that sustains it.

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