

## Kalidasa – The Recognition of Shakuntala

Kalidasa was a brilliant Indian poet and playwright known for his sharp wit, rich humor and brilliant writing style. While little is known about where he was from, scholars believe that the exquisite detail he uses in describing the region of Ujjayini suggests that he was either born there or had spent much of his life there (Anderson, 10). Once again the details of when he lived are not known for sure either, which adds to the mystery surrounding this great figure, but his work is consonant with the geographic, historical and linguistic factors that support the Indian tradition that puts Kalidasa's life sometime before, after or during the reign of Candragupta the 2<sup>nd</sup>, who ruled North India from about 375 C.E. to 415 C.E. (Smith, 15). [For more on the Candragupta the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the Gupta dynasty, see Majumdar (1971)]. His name, which translated means "Kali's Slave" shows that he was a devout follower of Kali, who is a consort of Siva. His devotion to Siva is quite evident in his plays and poetry as he often brings in the natural world as an integral part and Siva is known through the 8 elements. Although little is known for certain about his life, a popular legend about how he came to possess his talents is still popular to this day. Briefly, the legend goes as follows: Kalidasa was a very good looking man and as such caught the eye of a princess who married him. After marrying him she realized he was ignorant and uneducated and was ashamed by that. Kalidasa was distraught by this and while contemplating committing suicide called upon his patron goddess Kali, who gave him the gift of extraordinary wit (Miller, 4).

Today 6 major works are attributed to Kalidasa because "The coherent language, poetic technique, style and sentiment the works express seem to suggest they are from a single mind" (Miller, 5) but many more short prose works exist that are likely to have

been written by him. The 6 attributed to him are 3 plays; *Malavikagnimitra* (Mlavikā and Agnimitra), *Abhijnanasakuntalam* (The Recognition of Shakuntala) and *Vikramorvasiya* (Pertaining to Vikrama and Urvashi), 2 epic poems *Raghuvamsa* (The Lineage of Raghu) and *Kumarasambhava* (Birth of Kumara), as well as one shorter poem *Meghaduta* (The Cloud Messenger), which is not an epic but a description of the seasons through narration of the experience of two lovers (Smith, 15). Ornge

While some have suggested that Kalidasa's works, like most Sanskrit drama, find their origins in the Vedas, it is also probable that the epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* had their influences on the style and content of his works (Anderson, 12). In all of his dramas, and for that matter all Indian drama from the period, plot is not the central focus of the play but emphasis is put on flavor and emotion [for more on drama in India as a form of religious realization, see Wulff (1984)]. He conveys sentiment not only through clever dialogue, of which there is an abundance, but also through stylized enactment involving dancing, body, hand and facial gestures, make-up and the introduction of natural props such as flowers (Anderson, 13). Throughout Kalidasa's work, love and sensuality play a central role, and following suit all three of his plays involve a love story as its central theme. This being said, he also brings to the forefront other traits and ideas, espoused through his characters, such as honor, *dharma* and the virtuous ruler.

Out of all of Kalidasa's works his most popular and arguably greatest play was *Abhijnanasakuntalam* (The Recognition of Shakuntala) (Smith, 17), one that continues to be performed across India and the world to this day. The story centers on the young woman Shakuntala who is the daughter of a sage but is abandoned at birth and raised in the fashion of a humble life in a secluded hermitage. While the virtuous king, Dushyanta,

who shows himself to be so many times throughout the play, is on a hunting trip he comes across the hermitage after following a deer injured by his arrow. There he sees Shakuntala attending to the injured deer, is amazed by her beauty and poise and falls in love. He then courts her in a way that is becoming of a virtuous king and they are married. Soon after the king is called away to the capital and gives her his signet ring as a sign of his love. He tells her that when it is shown in the court she will be able to take her place as queen. Shakuntala was also in love with Dushyanta and spent much of her time day dreaming about her new husband. Just as she was in one of these daydreams a powerful sage Durvasa came to the hermitage, and because she did not notice him and greet him properly he was enraged. He then cursed her so that whoever she was dreaming about would never recognize her, but at the begging of Shakuntala's friends he lessened the curse so that when she showed a present given to her by the person they would remember.

After a while Shakuntala began to wonder why Dushyanta had not come for her and so she and a couple others headed out for the capital city. Along the way Shakuntala's signet ring, given to her by the king, fell off while running her hands through the water. When she arrived at the court she was saddened and hurt that the king did not recognize her and went out into the forest with her son Bharat, who was also Dushyanta's son. She spent many years there as Bharat grew very strong and bold.

Sometime later a fisherman found a ring inside the belly of a fish and realizing the royal seal took it to king Dushyanta. Immediately the king's memories of his lovely wife Shakuntala came flooding back and he went out searching for her. During his search he came across a young boy who had forced open the mouth of a lion and was amazed by

the child's strength. Feeling somehow drawn to him Dushyanta asked the boy his name. He replied "Bharata, son of king Dushyanta". The boy then took him to his mother and immediately Dushyanta recognized Shakuntala and the family was reunited (Miller, 85-176).

Although this is only a brief overview of *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, it should give the reader an idea of how Kalidasa's works tend to play out. As important as the plot is to the story, just as important is the sentiment and underlying themes that are ever present. Throughout Kalidasa's plays these themes tend to be parting and reconciliation, young love and maternal love, the king as a patron, the heroine and the king and the duties and pleasures of the warrior, among other things. In *Abhijnanasakuntalam* specifically, the tone of the play is set by the virtue and piety of Dushyanta while the underlying message is seen through Shakuntala, a woman who is purified by patience and fidelity and is ultimately rewarded with virtue and love (Anderson, 17).

Kalidasa's works echo the sentiments of Indian society during his life, which were in all aspects religious. Never divorced from his plays are Hindu values, and they are readily apparent in everything he writes (Anderson, 9). Through his wit and humor as well as his genius he has been able to captivate the minds of readers and viewers for the past 1500 years, and his works, being some of the first to be translated from Sanskrit, have played an important part in western understanding of ancient Indian literature.

## References and Further Recommended Reading

Anderson, G. L. (1966) *The Genius of the Oriental Theater: The Complete Texts of Ten Great Plays from the Traditional Indian and Japanese Drama*. New York: The New American Library.

Majumdar, R. C., Raychaudhuri H. C. and Datta Kaukinkar (1946) *An Advanced History of India*. London: Macmillan.

Miller, Barbara S. (1984) *Theater of Memory: The Plays of Kalidasa*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Smith, David (2005) *The Birth of Kumara by Kalidasa*. New York: New York University Press.

Wulff, Donna M. (1984) *Drama as a Mode of Religious Realization: The Vidagdhamadhava of Rupa Gosvami*. Chico, California: Scholars Press.

### **Related Topics for Further Investigation**

Kali

Siva

Chandragupta II

The Gupta Dynasty

*dharma*

*Malavikagnimitra*

*Vikramorvasiya*

*Kumarasambhava*

Written by Mike Kopperud (Spring 2009), who is solely responsible for its content.