
An Indian Aesthetic Probe of Rasa and Dhvani in *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*

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Abstract

The paper aims at a comprehensive re-reading of *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* through the lens of classical Indian aesthetic theory emphasising on interdependent categories of *rasa* (aesthetic pleasure) and *dhvani* (suggestion). Although the text has been analysed with the tool of variant modern paradigms of philology, structuralism etc. yet the current study enhances the aesthetic beauty by centring indigenous poetics as main interpretive methodology. The treatises such as *Natyashastra* and *Dhvanyaloka* have provided the aesthetic excellence and minute coordination of suggestion to the play of Kalidasa- *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*. The whole play is woven with the threads of *shringara Rasa* assisted by *Karuna Rasa* and ultimately culminating in *Santa Rasa*. This all smoothly happened through a network of suggestive devices including nature imagery, symbolic objects, silence and gesture. This paper focuses that *Shakuntalam* is not merely a narrative of love and separation but a solid artistic composition in which meaning is finely amalgamated into emotion and experience and where the unsaid is revealed as the locus of poetic potential.

Keywords: *Rasa, Dhvani*, Indian Aesthetics, Poetics, *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*

In order to elevate the ordinary experience through literature, one may enhance the artistic taste and understanding of nature as well as the function of art. In this procedure, Indian aesthetics assist to a great extent along with a deep and indelible impression on the mind and heart of a sophisticated reader or a spectator. In the framework of Indian poetics, literature becomes the means for arousing a candid emotional state that excels common experience and converts into somewhat unsaid experience. Within this tradition, *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* penned by eminent poet Kalidasa, emerges as a unique composition in which the layers of meanings are unfolded through suggestion and emotional resonance. The plot is knitted with the vast range of emotions experienced by Dushyanta and Shakuntala. Their love story passes through infatuation, love, desire, commitment, separation and reconciliation. However, the lasting allure of this drama lies not in its plot constructions only rather the aesthetic coherence and poetic ornamentation intensify the perennial beauty of the text. A close analysis of the narrative reveals that the key carriers of *dhvani* like nature imagery, symbolic gestures and moments of silence create ‘unheard melodies’ and enrich artistic integrity of the play. Simultaneously, the evocation and realization of *rasa* assist to access the ultimate motto of poetic art. In this way, the reader or the spectator relishes *rasa* as a purgative emotional state (*rasanubhava*) ruminated by suggestion rather than direct expression. This approach enables the concerned person to engage with the text on an experiential level at its apex. As Bharat Muni conceptualises-

विभावानुभावव्यभिचारिसंयोगात् रसनिष्पत्तिः

(Natyashastra ch. VI)

The present study elucidates how aesthetic experience is produced through the dynamic interplay of suggestion and emotional realisation and how new dimensions of meaning are fumbled in this perspective. In this transformation from linguistic expression into experiential meaning, dexterity of *Kalidasa*' dramaturgy is notable and laudable. Two cornerstones of Indian poetics *Natyashastra* and *Dhvanyaloka* provide the foundation insights in order to comprehend the unsaid and to realise the latent meaning spontaneously. Some important scenes and unique structural movements within the drama are scrutinized to exhibit the progression of emotions crafted intricacies.

The opening act manifests the emotional foundation of the drama through the first meeting of *Dushyanta* and *Shakuntala*. This scene is crucial because it introduces *Shringara Rasa* in its nascent form even though it constitutes a seminal moment in the aesthetic architecture of the drama. There is no direct declaration of amorous feelings rather the emergence of *Shringara Rasa* is produced through a mode of refined suggestion. *Kalidasa* carefully constructs this scene within the peaceful pastoral ambience of the hermitage, where the natural environment itself functions as a conductive *vibhava* for the awakening of love. *Dushyanta*'s perception of *Shakuntala* is articulated through a series of evocative metaphors, most notably in the famous description-

अनाघ्रातम् पुष्पं किसलयमलूनं कररुहैः
अनाविद्धं रत्नं मधु नवमनास्वादितरसम्।
(*Abhigyan Shakuntalam* Act I)

(An unblemished flower, tender and innocent, untainted by others, a gem untouched, sweet as fresh honey)

In this verse, *Shakuntala* is compared to an untouched flower and unplucked gem, images that suggest not only physical beauty but also innocence, purity and latent emotional potential. The poetic force of the passage lies in its *Dhvani*, wherein the literal imagery paves the path to a deeper suggestive resonance that evokes the incipient stirrings of desire. The king's admiration is thus not a direct confession but an aesthetic response mediated through perception, inviting the spectator to intuit the unfolding of love. Furthermore, *Shakuntala*'s own demeanor- marked by modesty, hesitation and inward sensitivity- complements this suggestive framework. Her restrained gestures and minimal speech operate as *anubhavas*, subtly reflecting an emerging emotional state without overt articulation. The surrounding natural imagery- trees, creepers and the quiet vitality of the forest- intensifies the mood of harmony and latent union, reinforcing the emotional texture of the scene. How beautifully this genuine line reflects *Dhvani* of union and *shringara rasa*.

सखि! पश्य- अयं तरुः प्रियतमामिव लतामालिङ्गति। (*Abhigyan Shakuntalam* Act I)

The imagery of creepers embracing trees and bees circling flowers is not confined to a single verse but diffused across the dramatic texture, exemplifying how *Dhvani* functions as a pervasive aesthetic principle rather than an isolated poetic device. Nature here is not merely a backdrop but an active aesthetic agent. This integration of human emotion with natural imagery exemplifies *Kalidasa*'s mastery in employing environmental *Dhvani*.

From the perspective of *Rasa* theory, this moment exemplifies the convergence of determinants, consequent and transitory states, culminating in the evocation of *shringara*. However, what distinguishes *Kalidasa's* treatment is the absence of dramatic excess; emotion is not imposed but allowed to arise through suggestion and aesthetic participation. In contrast to more declarative modes of romantic expression, the first encounter in *Shakuntalam* embodies the classical Indian ideal wherein the beauty of love resides in its gradual revelation through *Dhvani*, rendering the experience both intimate and universal.

As the dramatic movement progresses beyond the initial encounter, the experience of love undergoes a subtle yet significant transformation from external admiration to inward absorption. In *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*, this phase marks the emergence of *Vipralambha shringara* (love in separation) in its embryonic form, even before physical separation takes place. Shakuntala's emotional state becomes increasingly interiorised, characterised by contemplative withdrawal and psychological preoccupation with *Dushyanta*. *Kalidasa* showcases this transition with remarkable restraint; instead of explicit declarations, he foregrounds silence, distraction and emotional inwardness as expressive modes. *Shakuntala's* failure to attend to her surroundings - most crucially her neglect in receiving the visiting sage - functions as a powerful instance of *dhvani* operating through absence. Her inattention is not only a lapse in conduct but a suggestive indicator of the depth of her emotional engagement. The aesthetic force of the scene lies in this displacement of expression, where what is not said or done acquires greater attention rather than overt articulation. From the perspective of *rasa* theory, the determinants (*vibhavas*)- the memory of the beloved and the solitude of the hermitage- combine with subtle consequents (*anubhavas*) such as absent-mindedness and emotional withdrawal, along with transitory states (*vyabhichari bhavas*) like penchant and worries to evoke a refined experience of *shringara* in its introspective dimension. Thus, love in *Shakuntalam* is not merely enacted but internalized, acquiring psychological depth through the suggestive power of *Dhvani*.

The episode of *Durvasa's* curse constitutes a decisive turning point in the aesthetic trajectory of the drama, indicating the transfer from *Shringara* to *Karuna Rasa* (pathos). Significantly, there is no dramatic situation, over reaction or excess of sentimental expressions; rather, the intensity of the situation is exposed through controlled narration and suggestive understatement, allowing the emotional impact to reveal step by step. The sage's anger stimulated by *Shakuntala's* inattentiveness- herself absorbed in thoughts of *Dushyanta*- is encapsulated in the well known imprecatory utterance-

विचिन्तयन्ती यमनन्यमानसा तपोधनं वेत्सि न मामुपस्थितम्।
स्मरिष्यति त्वां न स बोधितो अपि सन् कथां प्रमत्तः प्रथमं कृतामिव।

(*Abhigyan Shakuntalam* 4/1)

(Thinking of whom with a mind fixed on no other, you do not notice me, a sage, who has arrived. He, even when reminded, will not remember you, just as the drunkard does not remember a story told before.)

This curse does not only function as a narrative catalyst but introduces a deeper sense of tragic inevitability, transforming the emotional register of the play. *Shakuntala's* vulnerability at this juncture is not expressed through overt lamentation; rather, it is implicitly

communicated, allowing the spectator to anticipate the far-reaching consequences of sage's words. This anticipatory dimension is central to the evocation of *Karuna Rasa*, as it extends the moment of crisis into a sustained emotional condition marked by separation, loss and keen longing. From a *rasa*-theoretical perspective, the curse operates as the primary *vibhava*, while *Shakuntala's* subdued response and the altered emotional atmosphere function as *anubhavas*, supported by transitory states *vyabhichari bhavas* such as fear, despondency and apprehension. The resultant aesthetic experience is one of the deep pathos, not because sorrow is explicitly dramatized but because it is suggested through implication and emotional foresight. In this context, *Dhvani* serves as the primary aesthetic mechanism, enabling a seamless transition from *shringara* to *Karuna* without abrupt disruption. The emotional shift is thus rendered fluid and organic, demonstrating Kalidasa's dexterity in amalgamating narrative development with suggestive expression in single lineage. The curse, in this sense, acts not merely as a plot device but as an aesthetic and iconoclastic resonance of the drama and marking the beginning of its most violent phase.

Another the most emotionally charged moment in the drama can be perceived in the departure of *Shakuntala* from the hermitage. In this scene, the full emergence of *Karuna Rasa* is firmly grounded in the refined aesthetic strategy of *Dhvani*. Unlike conventional dramatic representations of woeful expressions, *Kalidasa* bypasses the excessive verbal reactions and takes nature as a source to provide the intensity of sorrow that shakes the whole entity of *Shakuntala*. Such aesthetic technique is most vividly delineated in the oft-quoted verse-

उद्गलितर्दभकवला मृग्यः परित्यक्तनर्तना मयूराः।
अपसृतपांडुपत्रा मुंचयन्त्यश्रूणीव लताः।

(*Abhigyan Shakuntalam* 4/10)

(The deer drop the mouthfuls of grass and cease their playful movements; the creeper, shedding pale leaves, appears as though they are shedding tears.)

Here the natural phenomena itself becomes an emotional participant. The animals and plants, though inanimate or non-human, are imbued with affective significance, functioning as suggestive correlatives of *Shakuntala's* inner state. This is not a literal anthropomorphism but a sophisticated instance of environmental *Dhvani*, where the natural world reflects and amplifies human emotion without explicit articulation. As Pollock notes-

Aesthetic emotion transcends individuality and becomes a shared contemplative experience. (Pollock 25)

From the perspective of *rasa* theory, the scene exemplifies the integration of *vibhava* (*Shakuntala's* departure), *anubhava* (the stillness of animals, falling leaves), and *vyabhichari bhavas* (sorrow, anxiety, attachment) culminating in the evocation of *Karuna Rasa*. The emotional force of the scene lies in its suggestive restraint, where melancholy is not declared but allowed to permeate the atmosphere. Thus, *Kalidasa* generalizes the moment from a personal farewell to a cosmetic experience of separation, reinforcing the universality of aesthetic emotion.

What makes the court scene significant is a dual emotional reality enhancing the complexity of the aesthetic experience. The ambiguity particularly at two points allows *Dhvani* to operate at multiple levels. The first is that *Shakuntala's* pain is conspicuous yet dignified and the secondary object is that *Dushyanta's* uncertainty indicates an underlying

emotional disturbance as well as confusion but not cruelty. When *Dushyanta* fails to recognise *Shakuntala*, a crucial moment of dramatic tension and psychological complexity emerges. This scene is depicted through ambiguity, restraint and suggestive indirection making it a profound example of *Dhvani* at work within the dramatic structure. The consequence of the curse results in a state of cognitive dissonance and emotional uncertainty. The spectator is positioned in a space of heightened awareness perceiving both the truth of *Shakuntala's* claim and the inevitability of *Dushyanta's* denial. Simultaneously, it intensifies *Karuna Rasa* by foregrounding emotional injustice and separation. In this way, the unsaid- the emotional truth that remains acknowledged within the dramatic action- becomes the primary source of aesthetic experience. Moreover, *Shakuntala's* restrained responses function as *anubhavas*, while her inner turmoil is suggested through minimal expression, reinforcing the principle that suggestion enhances emotional depth. The court, as a formal and public space, further contrasts with the intimacy of the hermitage thereby intensifying the sense of alienation and loss.

Finally, the episode of the Ring in the play facilitates the transition from separation to recognition and becomes a powerful symbolic locus of *Dhvani* embodying themes of memory, identity and emotional continuity. This process aligns with the aesthetic principle that external objects can function as *vibhavas*, triggering the reemergence of suppressed emotional conditions. The ring, therefore, is not only an object but a carrier of suggestive meaning, mediating between past and present, absence and presence, separation and reconciliation. Its significance is realised through its effects on the characters and the narrative. This is a quintessential instance of *Dhvani*, where the implied meaning surpasses the literal. As Krishnamoorthy observes, "Dhvani enables objects to function as carriers of deeper emotional meaning." (Krishnamoorthy 56) In interpretive terms, the ring may be understood as a symbol of memory and recognition, suggesting that emotional truth persists beyond temporal disruption. Its recovery thus symbolises not only the restoration of personal relationships but also the reconstitution of aesthetic harmony.

Now this transition from *Karuna* to *Shringara* leads to prepare ground for the emergence of *Shanta Rasa* in the final act, where emotional resolution is accompanied by a sense of tranquility and fulfillment. It is followed by the long-delayed recognition (*Abhigyan*) and reunion of *Dushyanta* and *Shakuntala*. Vinay Dharwadker encapsulates this notion-

The symmetrical structure of *Shakuntala* actually contains three unions. The first is the consummation at the end of Act III, an 'initial union' based on sexual desire and mutual infatuation that embodies the idea of *sambhoga shringara*; the second is the 'failed union' of Act V, when *Shakuntala* attempts to reunite with *Dushyanta* but is rebuffed comprehensively, which stands for the core of *vipralambha shringara*; and the third is the 'final union' of Act VII, which unifies them in a child and represents the structural principle of *nirvahana*, 'the cessation of the flow' of action. (Dharwadker 273)

This transformation is quite significant as it reflects the deeper motto of Indian aesthetic- to transit emotional experience into a state of contemplative harmony. In this sense the recognition scene is not simply an instance of recovered memory but an aesthetic reconstitution of experience where past error is integrated into present understanding. *Shakuntala*, too, is no longer the innocent maiden of the hermitage; her suffering has endowed her with emotional maturity and quiet dignity. Their reunion, therefore, is marked by restraint rather than exuberance, aligning with the classical principle of *Auchitya* (propriety). From the

perspective of *rasa* theory, this scene represents a transmutation of emotional states. The determinants (*vibhavas*)- the recovered ring, the presence of the child, and the sacred setting- combine with subdued consequents (*Anubhavas*) such as composed speech and gentle gestures, while transitory states like repentance, relief, and affection contribute to a stabilized emotional condition. The result is not an intensification of passion but its aesthetic sublimation, wherein the spectator experiences a sense of balance, fulfillment and inner calm.

In *Shakuntalam*, *Rasa*, the experiential culmination of aesthetic emotion, finds its fullest articulation only through the suggestive power of *Dhvani*. Here silence becomes expressive, nature becomes emotive and objects become symbolic carriers of meaning. The result is an aesthetic mode in which the unsaid acquires primacy over the said, and where emotional experience is refined into a universal form. In this light, *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* may be understood not only as a masterpiece of Sanskrit drama but as a paradigmatic illustration of Indian poetics in practice. By employing *Rasa* and *Dhvani* as complementary analytical lenses, this study reaffirms the enduring relevance of indigenous aesthetic theory and demonstrates its capacity to yield nuanced and profound interpretations. Ultimately, *Kalidasa's* dramaturgy reveals that literature attains its highest form not in the direct communication of meaning but in the evocation of an experience that transcends language, culture and time.

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