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## The Plays of Kalidasa: Treading the Line between Constraint and Freedom

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### Abstract

The world of Kalidasa is defined by transgression at many levels. The possibilities of his dramatic world are vast and each level interacts with the other only because of the transgressive power of love and memory, and sometimes, even of forgetfulness. I argue that Kalidasa's plays transcend, rather than establish, the conflicts between love and duty. I establish that the diverse and, often disjunctive, worlds seem to be in conversation in Kalidasa's unifying dramatic realm – in this realm, while everything seems possible, everything possible can be made impossible because of the disruptive power of memory or forgetfulness.

### Keywords

Kalidasa, *rasa*, transgression, love and memory, subversion, constraint and freedom

An idiot aspiring to a poet's fame  
I shall go to ridicule,  
Like a dwarf with outstretched arms  
Greedy for fruit up high. (Kalidasa, *Raghuvamsa* qtd. in Sawhney 295)

“With outstretched arms greedy for fruit up high,” Kalidasa transgresses and transcends socially marked boundaries, in spite (and also because) of the constraints of having been a court poet, supposedly during the Gupta period in Indian history. One can almost see this tension and greed of the “outstretched arms” in all his writings, where the push and pull of desire to transcend socially constructed boundaries, and, at the same time, the compulsion to withhold the urge to transgress play simultaneously in wonderful, counteractive ways. My essay argues that the world of Kalidasa is defined by transgression at many levels. The

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possibilities of Kalidasa's dramatic world are vast and each level interacts with the other only because of the transgressive power of love and memory, and sometimes, even of forgetfulness.

The plots in Kalidasa's plays are driven by the relationship between constraint and freedom. According to Bharatmuni's *Natyasastra*,<sup>2</sup> the ultimate goal of Sanskrit drama is to produce the aesthetic experience in the form of *rasa*. "Rasa" has been explained extensively in *Natyasastra*. It has been broadly translated as "sentiment," but the literal translation of the word is "flavour" (Ghosh 102, 103). According to the *Natyasastra*, there are eight sentiments recognised in drama: the erotic (*srngara*), the comic (*hasya*), the pathetic (*karuna*), the furious (*raudra*), the heroic (*vira*), the terrible (*bhayanaka*), the odious (*bibhatsa*) and the marvellous (*adbhuta*). Arousing these sentiments in the minds of the spectators is the goal of an ideal Sanskrit drama. The transformation of the psychological states (*sthayi bhavas*) into sentiments (*rasas*) in the minds of the spectators marks the success of drama. "Just as a tree grows from a seed, and flowers and fruits from a tree, to the sentiments are the source (lit. root) of all the psychological states, and likewise the psychological states exist [as the source of all the sentiments]" (Ghosh 107). The intense aesthetic experience in the form of *rasas* is created through "the critical tension between desire and duty that is aesthetically manifest in the relation of the erotic sentiment (*srngararasa*) to the heroic (*virarasa*)" (Miller 14). Duty, in Sanskrit drama, is usually held higher than desire, and protagonists are often faced with a choice between the two. In Sanskrit drama, either reward for overcoming desire for the sake of duty, or punishment for yielding to temptations of desire, establishes the superiority of duty over love. But through the course of my essay, I argue that Kalidasa's plays transcend, rather than establish, these conflicts between love and duty. In Kalidasa's plays, the attainment of *kama* (desire) coincides, rather than conflicts, with *dharma* (duty). Kalidasa's plays aim to achieve the transformation of the psychological states (*sthayi bhavas*) into sentiments (*rasas*) through reestablishing harmony by binding the various conflicts of existence. While he builds up different levels and layers of status, class, caste and cosmic and natural worlds, he himself deconstructs, tangles up and confuses these structures he builds so carefully.

For the sake of the plot, whose success depends on the arousal of the appropriate *rasas*, the world in Kalidasa's plays is defined by transgression. The aim is to reach "the fruit up high." Love, in these plays, becomes a tool and a

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<sup>2</sup> *Natyasastra* is an ancient Indian treatise on theatre, dance, music and performance arts, which is believed to have been composed in between 200 BC and 200 AD (although the exact dates have not been ascertained). The authorship is also debated, and even though the work is attributed to Bharatmuni, scholars are of the opinion that more than one person is responsible for the authorship of this complex treatise. The version of the *Natyasastra* that I am referring to throughout the course of my essay is a translation by Manomohan Ghosh.

justification for transgression. My essay establishes that the diverse and, often disjunctive, worlds seem to be in conversation in Kalidasa's unifying dramatic realm – in this realm created by Kalidasa, while everything seems possible (love or desire is established between a king and a servant girl – *Malvikagnimitram*; a king and an adopted daughter of a sage – *Abhigyanashakuntalam*; and a mortal king and a celestial nymph – *Vikramorvasiya*), everything possible can be made impossible because of the disruptive power of memory or forgetfulness. But before I proceed further with my essay, it might be appropriate to look at the historical and cultural context in which Kalidasa's aesthetics and creative choices were situated.

### **Introduction: Historical Background**

Although Kalidasa is often placed at the pinnacle of ancient Sanskrit poetry and literature, very little is known about the exact dates of his compositions. Scholars have debated and based their understanding of his life and times only on conjecture and peripheral evidence. While Kalidasa has been unanimously thought of as a court poet because of the numerous courtly references in his plays, which always have a king as their central protagonist, what still remains uncertain and debatable is the name of the king who patronised him. Some evidence suggests that he was the court poet of King Vikramaditya, “who started an era of his own, the Vikrama or Samvat era in 57 B.C., after freeing the country from the menace of the Sakas” (Krishnamoorthy 12). Some other scholars suggest that since one of his plays, *Malvikagnimitram*, is about King Agnimitra of the Sunga dynasty who flourished about 150 B.C., he was a court poet of Agnimitra himself. Most scholars, however, are of the opinion that Kalidasa was affiliated to the court of Chandragupta II of the Gupta dynasty (4<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) because of the pomp, splendour and prosperity that his plays suggest (the Gupta era was considered the Golden Age in the history of India). Even some of the geographical and linguistic factors in his plays seem to suggest that he belonged to the court of Chandragupta II, who ruled most of northern India from about 375 A.D. to 415 A.D. Although there is no way of establishing Kalidasa's exact dates, an upper limit can be set as the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D., since the Huns had destroyed Ujjain by 510 A.D., which has been described as a flourishing city by Kalidasa in many of his works (Ingalls 15). Also, the Aihole inscription, dated 634 A.D., and Banabhatta's 7<sup>th</sup> century epic *Harsacarita* have traces of his name, where he has been praised as a great poet (Miller 9). Other clues that help to establish that Kalidasa was a court poet in the time of Chandragupta II come from the naming of the kings in his plays. In his play *Vikramorvasiya*, King Vikrama has been conjectured to be Chandragupta II, whose royal epithets contained the word “*vikrama*.” Besides, Vishakhadutta – another playwright of the Gupta period – wrote a play called *Devichandragupta*, which was about the king's heroic rescue of his wife; and its plot is very similar to the way *Vikramorvasiya* begins (Miller 12).

In addition, the name Kumara in Kalidasa's *Kumarasambhava*, and in Acts Four and Five of *Vikramorvasiya* may refer to the king's son and successor, Kumaragupta.

Even though the early Gupta rulers were worshippers of Visnu, the worship of Kali and Siva was equally prevalent during the Gupta period. The era was emancipated in terms of acceptance of different and diverse religions. Kalidasa, as his name suggests ("dasa" means "servant" or "devotee"; therefore, Kalidasa means "the devotee of Kali"), was a worshipper of Siva and Kali, and many of his works have references to the great Siva temple of Mahakala in Ujjain (*Meghaduta – The Cloud Messenger*) and the doctrine of Siva's *astamurti*, eight manifest forms (*Sakuntala*). The relationship between Siva and Parvati, or *purusa* and *prakriti* (the masculine and the feminine aspects of Siva, whose androgynous figure, *ardhanarisvara*, combines the two) inform and influence Kalidasa's aesthetic choices in setting up a romantic relationship between the hero and the heroine in his plays.

The thematic and formal complexities in Kalidasa's plays are in alignment with the dramatic theories propounded by Bharatmuni in *Natyasastra*. In its discussion of the ideal drama, the book emphasises the religious intent and quality of performances. The dramatic form is considered *Natyaveda*, a fifth Veda, which is created by taking different forms of knowledge from the four existing Vedas.<sup>3</sup> It is a means to educate people in ethics and religion through diversion and storytelling, poetry and music – "a fifth Veda on the Natya with the semi-historical tales (*itihasa*), which will conduce to duty (*dharmā*), wealth (*artha*) as well as fame, will contain good counsel and collection [of traditional maxims], will give guidance to people of the future as well, in all their actions, will be enriched by the teaching of all authoritative works (*sastra*) and will give a review of all arts and crafts" (Ghosh 15). Even though according to Kalidasa, the first production took place in celebration of the marriage between the Hindu god Siva and goddess Parvati, for centuries thereafter, Indian dramas have been more secularised and performed in seasonal festivals and household events such as birth of a son, a marriage, a royal consecration, or any other auspicious event (Ghosh 15).

Drama is a representation of the emotional states of the threefold universe. It includes concerns of duty (*dharmā*), play (*krida*), material gain (*artha*), peace (*sama*), mirth (*hasya*), war (*yudhha*), desire (*kama*), and death (*vadha*). It teaches duty to those who violate duty, desire to those addicted to love; reprimands those who behave rudely, promotes restraint in those who are

<sup>3</sup> The four existing Vedas were *Rigveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Samaveda* and *Atharvaveda*. Since these were composed in Sanskrit, they were comprehensible only to the Brahmins, to whom Sanskrit was accessible exclusively. According to the *Natyasastra*, the fifth Veda was conceptualised by Brahma, after all the gods headed by Indra requested Brahma to formulate a body of knowledge that would be accessible and available to non-Brahmins.

disciplined; it gives courage to cowards, energy to heroes; it enlightens fools and gives learning to learned men. (Ghosh 106-09)

Drama has not only been considered as a means to impart knowledge and values to people, it has also been considered a ritual offering to the Gods. Thus, the King, considered the representative of God on earth, is deemed responsible for the production of drama. Bharatmuni stresses that a king's rewards are heightened if he presents dramatic performances as a gift to his subjects and an offering to the gods (Ghosh 80-81). Set in this context, it is not a surprise that all of Kalidasa's heroes in his plays are kings. On the other hand, Kalidasa has experimented with every other character in terms of positioning them in various class-based and caste-based statuses. That Kalidasa was perhaps a court poet also contributes to this factor, since we almost sense an obligation to honour and defend the king in all his plays, despite various complex plots and sub-plots that often tend towards questioning a king's moral merits. All of Kalidasa's plays are, therefore, metaplays – a play within a play, usually performed or produced in a king's court, which usually describes the various heroic exploits of the king. The plot thickens and complicates due to conflict between a king's desire and his duty, and the conflict usually resolves by the conclusion of the play. Since these plays were meant for the king's court, the location of the outer play coincides with the real location, where the plays are actually performed. In a way, what the performers offered to the king and his people as education and entertainment became an offering of the king to the gods.

For a fuller understanding of Kalidasa's plays, it might be necessary to look at his work in relation to other prevalent dramatic works of his times. Bhasa might be considered one of the most significant forerunners of Kalidasa. In his prologue to *Malavikagnimitram*, Kalidasa mentions three "celebrated poets" in the conversation between the director and his assistant – "Why ignore works of celebrated poets like Bhasa, Saumilla, and Kaviputra to bestow honor on a modern writer?" (Miller 255). The difference between "celebrated" and "modern" establishes the fact that Kalidasa was newer in comparison to Bhasa. Bhasa wrote about a dozen plays, which deal with some of the important episodes in the two famous Indian epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. While most pre-Kalidasa plays were religious and didactic, "Bhasa's *Svapnavasavadatta* is the first romantic comedy in Sanskrit, and his *Carudatta* is the first play to introduce intrigue and social comedy in a realistic way. While Kalidasa is undoubtedly influenced by Bhasa in devising romantic plots with an element of intrigue, he went beyond Bhasa in his treatment of love as a ruling sentiment" (Krishnamoorthy 18). Kalidasa's strengths are in his lyricism and his depiction of longing as a form of love, while Bhasa's works deal with the political implications of romantic relationships between people from different royal families.

Another playwright whose work is worth comparing with Kalidasa's is King Harsa (c. 600 A.D.), who wrote three plays. In one of his plays, *Nagananda*, the hero, Jimutavahana, is a Buddhist monk who sacrifices his love and his life for the sake of others. The other extreme example is found in the rest of Harsa's plays, where the romantic excesses of the King Udayana (appearing in both his plays) bring about the downfall of his kingdom. It is important to note how Kalidasa, with his poetic skills and lyrical capabilities, achieves a fine balance between the two extremes. His heroes are seen torn between desire and duty, but no one element takes precedence over the other. Kalidasa unites desire and duty in his carefully crafted plots, where loving becomes equivalent to being dutiful, and vice versa. Kalidasa's kings do their kingly duties, but at the same time, win their loves along with the approval of those whose opinions matter in establishing their own honour.<sup>4</sup>

## Transgressions, Crossovers and Blurring Borders

### I

Kalidasa's literary reputation is based on six surviving works attributed to him, three of which are plays – *Malavikagnimitram*, *Abhigyanashakuntalam* and *Vikramorvasiya*. Each of these begins with prologues that mention Kalidasa as their author. Of all these three plays, *Abhigyanashakuntalam* is the most popular and most often produced even in modern, popular culture such as films, comic books and bedtime stories for children. The play is most commonly referred to as *Sakuntala*, and it is based on a short episode described in the ancient Indian epic, *Mahabharata*. All these three plays begin with a prayer to Lord Siva, which marks the ritual beginning of the plays. This marking of a beginning becomes necessary in a context where the boundaries between the real and the performative space blur because of the metatheatrical elements present in all the three plays. While all of them begin with a conversation between a director and his assistant regarding the staging of the respective plays, no clear distinction is

<sup>4</sup> Shanta Gandhi, a professor at the National School of Drama, first revived the works of Bhasa, by directing and producing *Madhyamvyayoga* (*The Middle One*) and *Urubhanga* (*The Broken Thigh*) in Hindi, in 1966. Some of the other playwrights and directors who revived Bhasa's and Kalidasa's works are Kavalam Narayan Panikkar and Ratan Thiyam. Panikkar, who worked with the form of Kutiyattam (traditional Sanskrit dance drama), directed and produced *Madhyamvyayoga* in 1991. *Swapnavasavadatta* was produced in Marathi by Goa-based theatre group, Prabhakar Sanskritik Sanstha, in 2003. Mani Madhava Chakyar (1899–1990), Kutiyattam artist and *Natyasastra* scholar, choreographed and performed all three Kālidāsā plays all over India, and tried to revive the ancient Sanskrit plays by performing them in Kutiyattam tradition. Some of the contemporary playwrights, directors and dramatists, who have been experimenting with and producing ancient Sanskrit plays, especially the ones by Kalidasa, are Mohan Rakesh, Girish Karnad, M.K. Raina, Surendra Verma and Suresh Awasthi. Erin B. Mee, author of *Theatre of Roots*, studied and directed some of the ancient Sanskrit plays (and those influenced by the ancient dramatic traditions) even in the West.

made between the world of the play to be performed and the world to which the director belongs. The director and his assistant almost seamlessly become a part of the story that they had set out to narrate (although Kalidasa, with his excellent sense of stagecraft, removes them physically from the stage as the story unfolds, perhaps to avoid distraction). Often, even the characters in the plays are performers. In *Malavikagnimitram*, the queen and many other court members study dance and drama. Malavika, the central heroine of the play, is a dancer and a student of the central dancing master, Ganadasa. The second act of the play begins with a dancing competition, where Malavika performs a dance for an audience that is constituted of different levels of spectatorship – the king, the people in the court, the nun who is called to actually judge the performance, the god (in this case, Lord Siva, to whom the play is dedicated right at the outset), the director and his assistant, and finally, the audience, which forms the outermost circle in this complex concentric web of metatheatricality.

Kalidasa not only constructs different levels of performance and tangles the levels through transgression of either the characters, or the intersecting levels of spectatorship, he also creates possibilities of crossovers in the case of class and caste. The king is accompanied by a buffoon figure, quite evidently lower in class than the king, both in *Malavikagnimitram* and *Vikramorvasiya*. Often, the buffoon becomes the king's best friend, advisor and even defendant. He is also an accomplice in the king's efforts at winning the heroine's love. In *Malavikagnimitram*, when the buffoon successfully employs a set of tricks to release Malavika from the prison, the king embraces him and exclaims joyfully, "You are indeed my friend! Sharp wits alone cannot assure success. The road must also pass through sympathy" (Gerow 293).

While the king remains a constant figure in all his plays, the figure of the lover is drawn from various classes or castes, at least apparently. The plays, however, through their course, subvert these transgressive acts by finally acquiescing to the societal norms of class/caste divisions. In *Malavikagnimitram*, the king falls in love with Malavika, who is, at the beginning of the play, the queen's servant. Later, however, it is discovered that Malavika was of noble birth, but was a servant in the king's court as a lost princess in disguise. Unions and marriages take place between men and women from different registers in Kalidasa's world – nymphs marry sages, celestial beings marry mortals and kings marry maids.

Also, the relationship between the human world and the natural world is intimate, and the boundaries are porous. Animals, plants, fish and insects appear both physically as well as metaphorically in Kalidasa's plays. In *Malavikagnimitram*, for instance, we find that Malavika takes agency in the blossoming of the asoka tree. The hermitage or the forests in the plays become metaphors of a primordial state of existence, untainted by civilisation. In that world, deer, antelopes, fish, snakes, peacocks and bees occupy the same space and importance as that of

humans. No real distinction is made between the animal world and the human world, since humans become only one kind amongst them.

Malavika, in Act Three of *Malvikagnimitram*, sent by Queen Dharini to conduct the ritual in which she needs to kick an asoka tree to see it blossom, experiences somewhat a threat of transgression. Malavika, being a queen's servant, has been appointed to perform a ritual originally meant to be performed by the queen. The queen had to delegate the work to Malavika because of her injured foot. Her first transgression lies here. When the buffoon accuses Malavika of "committing this impropriety" (Gerow 284), Bakulavalika, Malavika's friend, clarifies: "Please sir! She's performing the queen's command; the transgression is not really hers! Please forgive her!" (Gerow 284). All "improprieties" and "transgressions" are forgiven and justified with the aid of royal intent. These instances are those loopholes in the plots through which Kalidasa's constraints as a court poet are made visible. Her second transgression lies in her falling in love with the king. The union and the consummation of their love finally depend on approval and acceptance by the queens Iravati and Dharini, the king's existing wives. More than establishing the importance of fidelity and loyalty in marriage, Kalidasa seems to be upholding the power and potency of royalty by allowing their union to take place only after acceptance and blessings from the queens. Kalidasa, therefore, swings between his desire to transgress and his compulsion to capitulate, as he carefully works out his routes of escape and transgression even within the matrix of constraints.

## II

In *Vikramorvasiya*, Urvashi, a celestial being, is to play the role of goddess Lakshmi in a play called "Lakshmi's Bridegroom Choice" presented before Indra, who is the king of all gods. This play, just like Kalidasa's other plays, has spectatorship at different levels. There are also different directors for these different levels of performance. Bharata, an offstage character in the play, is the director of the play within the play. But *Vikramorvasiya* itself begins with the invocation to Lord Siva by the two stereotypical characters – the director and his assistant. There is also the sense of Fate being another director in these different levels of performance. In Urvashi's performance in the play within the play, goddess Sarasvati has composed the songs. As Urvashi was too preoccupied with thoughts of Pururavas during the performance, when asked to name her husband in the play, she utters Pururavas' name, instead of Purushottama, which is what had been written in the script. Because of this mistake of allowing personal emotions to interfere with her role as an actress, Urvashi is cursed by Bharata and loses her celestial place in heaven. This may be interesting to note, since Kalidasa himself purposefully often blurs the line between the levels of performance, by making one of the characters a conduit for this transgression.

In *Vikramorvasiya*, the king is in love with the celestial Urvasi, who gets banished from heaven for being in love with a mortal. The only way she can go back to heaven is by consummating their love. The condition imposed on her is that only when the king sees their son will Urvasi's curse be taken away, and she would be able to return to heaven. The irony of union and separation plays strongly throughout the course of the story. Urvasi's union with the king can only be possible with her separation from heaven, and the only way for her to return is by her husband's laying sight on their son – the proof of their union.

Kalidasa also troubles the definitions of “duty” and “desire,” and challenges the implications that these choices may bear. Urvasi is banished from heaven, as she fails to do her “duty” as an actress, when she lets her “desire” or her personal emotions interfere during her performance. By constructing these consequences in his plot, Kalidasa is remaining within the norms of Sanskrit drama, established by the *Natyasastra*. In Sanskrit drama, in the duel between duty and desire, duty always has to win. These ideas were meant to impart moral education to the spectators, who were expected to learn the superiority of duty over desire. But on the other hand, Kalidasa also complicates these tropes, as Urvasi's banishment from heaven, even though it appears to be a punishment from the gods, results in the union between the king and Urvasi (interrupted briefly by her transformation into a vine due to a curse). The play, however, ends with the king and Urvasi uniting as Indra withdraws his curse. So Kalidasa both transgresses the lines of morality that were usually drawn by Sanskrit drama of his times, and at the same time, he makes the King reap the fruits of this transgression, thus securing his position as the court poet. In Kalidasa's world, the king is a figure of ultimate success and splendour – the king cannot lose.

Uniting the worlds of the court, nature and the heavens, Kalidasa records and relays the reactions of different animals and birds to describe the time and temperature of day in the end of Act Two in *Vikramorvasiyam*.

Tormented by heat, a peacock sits down  
In the cool water trough beneath a tree;  
The bee splits open the tip of a red bud  
And hides himself in dark cavity;  
A duck abandons the lake's burning water  
And rests in the shade of shore lotuses,  
And a parrot caged in the pleasure house  
Begs for water, exhausted. (Gitomer 203)

In Act Four of *Vikramorvasiya*, Urvasi is turned into a tendril, when she steps into the grove of Sage Kumara by mistake. The physical transgression is translated into an actual punishment and transformation. Urvasi, therefore, transcends twice – once from her heavenly abode, having been banished because of her love for mortal Pururavas; and the second time, when she crosses over the boundaries of

Sage Kumara's grove, thus turning into a tendril. She, therefore, becomes Kalidasa's agent of transgression, travelling through all the three worlds of heaven, the court and nature.

### III

While the earthly world is simply divided into the world of the court on the one hand, and the world of the hermitage (*ashram*) on another, there is a third world of heavens, creating a third point of a triangle. The third point is elevated and equidistant from the court and the hermitage, which seem to form the base level of the triangle, each lying on either end of the spectrum. But these worlds are not independent of each other; rather, we see them interdependent on each other in all the three plays. We witness an intermingling of the royal world and the natural world often in Kalidasa's plays. While the "swift dark antelope enchanted King Dusyanta" (Miller 90), King Pururavas brings in royal metaphors into the world of the forest.

This lightning-streaked cloud becomes  
 My *golden-threaded canopy*;  
 Blossom sprays of nicula trees fan me  
 Like the *royal fly* whisks of yak tail;  
 Peacock bards sing my praise more piercingly,  
 Inspired by the dark skies' quenching of summer;  
 The mountains are merchants *proffering treasures*  
 From *caravans* of streams on rain-splashed ridges. (Gitomer 221)

In *Sakuntala*, we find the king falling in love with Sakuntala, an adopted daughter of Sage Kanva. As the plot unfolds, we realise that Sakuntala was born of the union between a nymph, Menaka and Sage Visvamitra. In Act Three, King Dusyanta steps down from his royal stature, only to proclaim himself Sakuntala's "servant":

Don't be alarmed! I am your servant.  
 Shall I set moist winds in motion  
 With lotus-leaf fans to cool your pain.  
 Or rest your soft feet lotus feet  
 On my lap to stroke them, my love? (Miller 118)

The worlds of the forest, hermitage and the court again become intricately linked with each other. While Sakuntala has antelopes as her adopted children, in the final act of the play, we see her son (born of her union with Dusyanta) playing with a lion cub. In the first act, we see Dusyanta in pursuit of a deer, which marks the beginning of the plot. A bee becomes almost the driving factor in the plot of *Sakuntala*, since we see the love between Dusyanta and Sakuntala blossoming only

after he frees and saves her from the sting of bees. The king's ring that Sakuntala loses later is found in the stomach of a fish. The women in all the three plays are described in metaphors taken from nature. While Urvashi becomes the "fawn-eyed love" (Miller 220) of Pururavas (in *Vikramorvasija*), King Dusyanta describes Sakuntala in the following manner:

Her lips are fresh red buds,  
Her arms are tendrils,  
Impatient youth is poised  
To blossom in her limbs. (Miller 1984, 95)

Women are often described as creepers and tendrils; men are likened with mango trees with broad barks. Just as humans are naturalised through their comparisons with the natural world, nature is humanised through various personifications – "The new branches on this mimosa tree are like fingers moving in the wind, calling to me. I must go to it!" (Miller 95). Therefore, the two worlds are inextricably linked and entwined in intimate physical, metaphorical as well as literary relationships through transgressions that Kalidasa makes with his inimitable poetic gift.

We often find Kalidasa manipulating his plots with the help of dramatic tools such as curses to defend or uphold the king's reputation or indomitability. As I will discuss later in my essay, the theme of the curse in *Sakuntala* is almost central and pivotal in defending King Dusyanta's honour and reputation. Kalidasa's tendency of valorising the king can be read as an obligation of having been a court poet. However, Kalidasa works within these constraints through transgressions that he makes himself as an author – he creates opportunities for his characters to transgress in a well-defined, well-categorised society marked by laws and customs, compulsions and obligations, and makes his plays a playground for these experimentations in blurring of these boundaries. But the transgressions in the plays are temporary and not without consequences. When Dusyanta proclaims himself Sakuntala's "servant," it is almost impossible to ignore the fact that Dusyanta is desperate in convincing her to enter into a sexual liaison with him. There is a sense of urgency and temporariness of pleasure in the scene, which gets confirmed later with the king's return to his courtly life after Sakuntala has relented in the act.

#### IV

Another interesting point of transgression can be found in Kalidasa's use of language(s). In the Gupta period, Sanskrit was considered the language of the priestly and the royal classes. There is an obvious sense of hierarchy attached with the notion of language. Having been deemed the 'Classical language' of India, and also been made the official language of the country during the Gupta period,

Sanskrit unquestionably enjoyed a dominant position amongst the languages used, and was accepted as the language of the privileged class.

During the Gupta period, it was promoted as the courtly language of literature and official communications, such as inscriptions on monuments, land-grant plates, seals, and coins. The widespread use of Sanskrit is at least partially responsible for the term “Classical Age” that is given to the Gupta period. (Miller 22)

In spite of the dominance of Sanskrit, Kalidasa produced work that was more diverse in terms of its linguistic qualities. Even though Kalidasa composed both poetry and plays, and dominated the literary scene of the Gupta period, his plays incorporated both Sanskrit as well as the more commonly spoken language of Prakrit. He made efforts to be more inclusive rather than elitist, incorporating both languages used across different classes in society as well as stories and plots derived from epics and everyday folklores.

The art of Kalidasa’s plays is deliberately more eclectic than that of his poems. Languages, characters, and plots from the idealized epic universe are juxtaposed with elements from popular literature and everyday life. A fundamental clue to this is the language of his dramas. (Miller 1984, 23)

Even though Kalidasa cannot be considered an iconoclastic author, he made certain minor, yet significant, adjustments in categories and boundaries, while not completely overthrowing them. While remaining in the socially accepted class categorizations of allowing characters of high-class men to speak in verse (*padya*), and therefore, in Sanskrit, he inserted some characters who mixed up and confused these conflicting class boundaries. The nun in *Malavikagnimitram*, even though she is a woman who is usually considered outside the privileges of the Sanskrit-speaking class, has been assigned lines in Sanskrit. On the other hand, the Brahman buffoon has been given lines that are in prose (*gadya*), and therefore, in Prakrit. Kalidasa, therefore, not only subverts the dominant use of Sanskrit as the primary language of literature by making his plays deliberately multilingual, he also destabilizes class boundaries by challenging the hierarchical structure of these different languages.

## Conflict

### I

Kalidasa dramatises a constant negotiation between different worlds, where the royal world often dominates or superimposes itself onto other domains. The setting of the play itself shifts from the heaven to the court (in *Vikramorvasiyam*), or from the hermitage to the court (in *Sakuntala*), or takes place in the court (in

*Malavikagnimitram*). This tendency of the courtly world to dominate over the others in his plays can be read as Kalidasa's conflicts as a court poet.

In *Malavikagnimitram*, a similar conflict takes place between desire and propriety. Malavika, being a servant girl in the king's court, is considered to be performing an act of impropriety by falling in love with the king. But in Kalidasa's world, nothing ends without the establishment of honour and duty. Her love is only fulfilled and validated at the end with the coincidence of love and duty, with the discovery of her royal background. She being a princess is absolved of the guilt of "impropriety" that may have hindered her union with the king on grounds of "duty." On the other hand, the king can only be united with her without guilt of having violated his duty as a husband, when his queens accept and acknowledge Malavika as the king's lover.

Queen (*embracing Malavika*): Now will the king accept her?

King: My queen, I find no words to respond to your command.

Nun: At last! He accepts her!

Buffoon: Such is his respect for Queen Dharini.

Attendant: Victory to the queen.

Nun: In this behaviour, Your Majesty, I find nothing remarkable.

The faithful wife does not refuse her lord

The rival he esteems;

A great river conveys to the mighty ocean

The waters of lesser streams. (Gerow 311, 312)

While "victory to the queen" (symbolising order and duty) is hailed and acknowledged, this victory coincides with the victory of love too. In a way, by assigning acceptance of the king's *desire* as wifely *duty*, Kalidasa resolves and removes the conflict between desire and duty.

## II

In *Vikramorvasiya*, Kalidasa makes Indra withdraw his curse that had originally banished Urvasi from heaven and had promised a return only upon the king's acknowledgement of their son. The return would imply another separation from the king, which would in turn imply an incomplete relationship between them. But the king must win over all difficulties by the end of the play, and therefore, Indra takes away the curse at the end, uniting the two lovers, and reestablishing the king's supremacy.

In *Vikramorvasiya*, the conflict between desire and duty is experienced both by Pururavas and Urvasi, as both of them realise their duties towards the places where they belong – heaven and the earth. A sense of tension is built up in the plot with constant negotiation between the desire to transgress and the duty to overcome the curse resulting out of such transgressions. Their frequent separations are often caused by their adherence to their respective duties of living

through their curses, which are in turn often the result of the desires and longings of love.

What my desire craves is impossible.  
 Flying into the sky her father's footsteps conquered,  
 This divine nymph violently tears my mind  
 From my body, like a wild goose  
 Tearing a thread from a lotus stalk's broken tip. (Gitomer 188)

### III

While Kalidasa operates as an independent poet, one has to take into account the tradition of royal patronage prevalent during the Gupta period. Court poets were often expected to compose literature that immortalised the power and the valour of the king. Kalidasa employs different tropes and methods in the construction of his plots that establish these conflicts. While the episode of Sakuntala in the epic, *Mahabharata*, did not have Durvasa's curse as a part of the story, Kalidasa makes these insertions quite clearly in defense of the king. As the king refuses to recognise Sakuntala when she visits the court with hopes of reunion with her lover/husband (wedded in the Gandharva tradition<sup>5</sup>), the curse of Durvasa inflicted on Sakuntala for not paying attention to him during his visit to the hermitage absolves the king of all guilt. Not only is the king freed from the guilt, the guilt is passed on to Sakuntala, as she becomes the bearer of the curse, which proclaimed that king Dusyanta will have no remembrance of their union.

Kalidasa's own conflict as a court poet is often transmitted to the characters in his plays, who are also torn between these two factors of constraint and freedom. The plot complicates only when the king is torn between his desire (*kama*) and his duty (*dharma*). In *Sakuntala*, the king does seem to struggle to take a decision to leave the hermitage, at the end of Act One. The split between the heart and the body, between intention and compulsion, marks the conflict between desire and duty.

I have little desire to return to the city. I'll join my men and have them  
 camp near the grove. I can't control my feelings for Sakuntala.  
 My body turns to go,  
 My heart pulls me back,  
 Like a silk banner  
 Buffeted by the wind. (Miller 101)

<sup>5</sup> Gandharva tradition of marriage was based on mutual attraction between men and women without any rituals or the presence of witnesses. Dusyanta, after having convinced Sakuntala to enter into a Gandharva marriage with him, leaves the hermitage to return to his kingly duties. Since there were no witnesses to the marriage, it was also easier for Dusyanta to reject Sakuntala later, when she visits him in his court.

### Love, Memory and Forgetfulness

The idea of the curse helps Kalidasa to introduce the concepts of memory and forgetfulness. While the curse becomes a reason for Dusyanta's forgetfulness, forgetfulness also becomes a reason for Urvashi's curse of turning into a tendril – "Then, because sage Bharata's curse had rendered me mortally ignorant, I slipped into the grove, forgetting the divine ordinance that women are forbidden to enter it" (Gitomer 237). While the curse justifies the king's actions in the first case, the curse is doubled in the case of the latter, when one curse of ignorance leads to another curse of transforming into a tendril. Kalidasa takes away agency from the king; but he places Urvashi in the zone in between agency and non-agency. Even though she is made responsible for her first curse, the second curse is simply a result of the first one, and a result of her ignorance or forgetfulness.

It might be interesting to note that the Sanskrit word for "love" is "*smara*," which is also the word for "remembrance." "Even at the level of the plot, we notice that in this corpus of texts, love is frequently that which is remembered, and remembered as loss" (Sawney 42). Also, the test of love in Kalidasa's plays is in the ability to remember. Therefore, forgetfulness looms large as a threat and an adversary to love. Only by overcoming forgetfulness will one pass the test of love. Separation (*vijyoga*), therefore, becomes important in all the plots to prove, strengthen or reaffirm the power of love. While the king and Urvashi go through several phases of separation, and Dusyanta and Sakuntala are separated because of a curse, the lovers are united at the end having gone through these tests of remembrance. Simona Sawney complicates and elaborates the nature of the curse that causes these separations to occur:

From a moral perspective, it is the antidote to excess. It befalls the lover who is entirely occupied with her love, who is *ananyamanasa* – one whose mind has no room for another – and robs her of her love. From a psychoanalytic perspective, it enacts the Father's apparent prohibition, which in fact intensifies the movement of love and becomes a crucial element of the story of desire. And on the narrative level, it enables love to emerge as memory by staging the banishing of love. (Sawney 43)

The love between the king and the heroine, therefore, emerges not only *in spite of* the curse and the subsequent separation, but also *because of* the separation and the remembrance or longing due to it. Different images of remembering are conjured up by Kalidasa through the images of the backward glance thus signifying the "looking back" inherent in the act of remembering. The figure of the fleeing deer glancing backward summarises Kalidasa's plot structures of all his plays. Even as the plot unfolds and moves forward, the movement is accompanied by a backward glance in the form of remembering.

Creeper, you favour me by contriving

A moment's hindrance to her leaving;  
 Again I see her, turning back,  
 Casting sidelong glances toward me. (Gitomer 188)

The pauses and interruptions in the plot are marked by temporary forgetfulness or distraction. Sakuntala is distracted and *forgets* to acknowledge Durvasa, when he appears in the hermitage; Pururavas gets distracted by a nymph in the forest and loses his mindfulness towards Urvashi for a while, which results in her subsequent transformation into a tendril; and the people in the court have *forgotten* that Malavika is a princess by birth, which is why the fact is concealed even from the spectators/readers till the very end. We realise that the curses in the plots are as much a *result* of forgetfulness or distraction as much as they are their cause.

This brings us to question the nature of love in these plays. We realise that love can blossom and increase only with the act of remembering, and the act of remembering is only followed by separation. Therefore, in all these three plays, we see that Kalidasa's kings are in love with those women who are not their wives. There is an element of unattainability in all the instances right from the very beginning. There is a threat of separation because of class, caste, status differences, which is further intensified with the subsequent curses.

Love exists either in its pursuits propelled by remembrance, or by longing due to nostalgic recollections. The love propagated is, therefore, a higher, more divine form of love, which has its existence only in its absence. In this respect, Kalidasa may be considered the first Bhakti poet<sup>6</sup> to suggest that the coincidence of the object of devotion and the object of desire is the ultimate form of spiritual union. By creating the figure of the king as the common protagonist in all his plays, Kalidasa works almost in metaphorical levels. The figure of the king, considered to be the representative of god on earth, signifies supreme, spiritual power. The women in his plays, Malavika, Urvashi and Shakuntala, seem to embody creativity and passion. In their union, Kalidasa draws a spiritual parallel with the union between divinity and desire, devotion and love. Through the possibilities of them being unrequited, Kalidasa reestablishes the spiritual nature of love. And the love that is present is considered sexual and attainable, and therefore not spiritual enough. But at the same time, he combines the sensual and

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<sup>6</sup> The word "bhakti" is derived from the Sanskrit root "*bhaj*," which means "to belong to" or "to worship." Although "bhakti" as a concept, meaning "devotion," is already central in the *Bhagavad Gita*, it became a movement in the medieval history of Hinduism. The movement began in South India around 8th century AD, and spread across northern and central India between the 12th and the 16th century. The movement saw Saiva (worshippers of Siva) and Vaisnava (worshippers of Visnu) saints preaching the concept of love as devotion, where love and devotion become inseparably linked to each other. Later, other religions, such as Sikhism and Islam, also adopted this concept of bhakti, and it spread as both a religious and a cultural phenomenon. Several bhakti poets wrote songs and poems propagating this relatively new concept of devotion. See Neeti M. Sadarangani's *Bhakti Poetry in Medieval India: Its Inception, Cultural Encounter and Impact*.

the divine, the sexual and the spiritual through the description of their longing by employing sensory and sexual imageries.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Kalidasa is able to subvert and reaffirm social conventions of the Gupta period as a court poet. Keeping the character of the king as the primary figure, he explores various competing themes within the arc of love and duty such as theatrical boundaries, social barriers of caste, the collusion and collision of the three worlds of nature, royal court and heaven, the idea of love as memory and time as non-linear. These themes are explored while reinforcing the moral authority of the king and patron within his plays.

The acts of pursuit and remembrance are closely related to the idea of time, where time exists in all its elements – the past, the present and the future. In combining these three in his plays, Kalidasa also ruptures the linearity of time. The act of looking back is a metaphor that keeps repeating itself in his plays to establish the push and pull of time and that of memory and forgetfulness. The encounter between different classes, statuses, times and between desire and duty, memory and forgetfulness, in Kalidasa's world, takes place at the "meeting point of constraint and freedom."

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