

A STUDY ON MINOR CHARACTERS IN KALIDASA'S *ABHIJNANSAKUNTALAM* AND SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET*

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Abstract: A drama represents scenes which are based on people's actions and interactions, characters play a central role in this regard and hence deserve our close attention for research study. Plays have to have Plot, Character, Thought, Diction and Spectacle. Characters are the mediators who commit the actions that make up the plot, thus one cannot have a play without them. The characters in drama can be divided into major characters and minor characters, depending on how important they are for the plot. Major characters usually have a lot to say and appear frequently throughout the play, while minor characters have less presence or appear only marginally. The present study aims to study minor characters in the Kalidasa's *Abhijnansakuntalam* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Keywords: drama, major, minor, plot, story, character

INTRODUCTION

Both Kalidasa¹ and Shakespeare are world famous dramatists. Kalidasa has not written any tragic play but Shakespeare is more popular on account of his tragedies like *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth* – just to name a few of them. Adya Rangacharya² rightly remarks that “the more we study Kalidasa the more we find that drama as an art is entirely changing into his hands.” In India, "Kalidasa is the Shakespeare of India" is a very common phrase. It means Kalidasa enjoys the same position and status in Sanskrit and world literature as Shakespeare across the globe.

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¹ Kālidāsa was a renowned Classical Sanskrit writer, widely regarded as the greatest poet and dramatist in the Sanskrit language. His place in Sanskrit literature is akin to that of Shakespeare in English. His plays and poetry are primarily based on Hindu mythology and philosophy.

² Adya Rangacharya (1947 / 1988). *Drama in Sanskrit Literature*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, p.117.

Out of all of Kalidasa's works his most popular and arguably greatest play was *Abhijnanasakuntalam*³ (*The Recognition of Shakuntala*⁴), one that continues to be performed across India and the world to this day.

In the *Abhijnansakuntalam*, we have Kanav, Vidushaka, Anasuya, Priyamvada and Gautami as minor characters but they perform their respective roles with utmost sincerity and responsibility.

KANVA

The tone of the play is set by the virtue and piety of Dushyanta⁵ while the underlying message is seen through Śakuntalā⁶, a woman who is purified by patience and fidelity and is ultimately rewarded with virtue and love.⁷ It is revealed that in *Abhijnansakuntalam*, the characters suffer both the forms of suffering but they do not lose their mental balance and summon themselves before vicious circle of suffering. Śakuntalā attains a high level of maturity through suffering and achieves 'the felicity of equilibrium'⁸. Kanva⁹, the foster father of Shakuntala appears more than a real and practical one. He counsels Shakuntala time to time.

Kanva plays an important part in the fourth act of the drama. He is so deeply attached to her daughter, that he is moved to tears on the occasion of his separation from his daughter. The sage Kanva was sighing in grief:

*My lonely sorrow will not go,
for seeds you scattered here
before the cottage door, will grow;
and I shall see them, dear.*

(Act IV, 21)

³ *Abhijnana-Shakuntalam* is a drama composed in seven acts by Kalidasa. It is one of the best not only in Sanskrit literature, but in the literature of the world.

⁴ David Smith (2005). *The Birth of Kumara by Kalidasa*. New York: New York University Press.

⁵ Dushyanta was a great king in classical Indian literature and mythology. He is the husband of Shakuntala and the father of the Emperor Bharata.

⁶ Shakuntala is the mother of Emperor Bharata and the wife of Dushyanta.

⁷ G.L. Anderson (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, p.17.

⁸ H.G. Wells (1963). *The Classical Drama of India*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House, p.32.

⁹ Kanva was a renowned sage and father of adopted daughter Śakuntalā.

Kanva does not create any obstacles between Dushyanta and Shakuntala. Moreover, he sends Rishikumaras along with Shakuntala, when she proceeds to meet the king. Kanva is happy that Shakuntala has chosen a husband of her own will and feels free from all sorts of anxiety. It seems that Kanva knows very well the importance of Kanyadan.

VIDUSHAKA

Vidushaka is the only character who helps to introduce the hero and is the only medium between hero and the other characters on the one hand and between the hero and audience on the other. He introduces not only the characters but the scenes and the situations as well. In the *Abhijnansakuntalam*, Madhavaya acts as a Vidushaka. He appears to be a true friend of king Dushyanta. In the Act VI of the drama, he consoles king Dushyanta, saying that fate is ever powerful.

In the Act V, the Vidushaka's simplicity also allows him to be seized and detained by Hamsapadika who has a very important purpose; for had he been present when Shakuntala was brought in and repudiated, he would have recognized her, as his memory was not cursed. Similarly, in the next act, Vidushaka is a ready instrument in the hands of Matali who is enabled to rouse Dushyanta from his lethargy, only by pretending an attack on the Vidushaka.

ANASUYA AND PRIYAMVADA

Anasuya and Priyamvada are depicted as the best friends of Shakuntala and have sisterly affection towards Shakuntala. Priyamvada shows a disposition, youthful and vivacious while Anasuya is rather serious. Both the girls are quick enough to find that Sakuntala has fallen deeply in love. Priyamvada and Anasuya also well aware about the mental state of love-lorn Shakuntala hence in Act II, it appears that they consider and perceive her state to be liked that of persons afflicted with love such as it heard of in stories. They also gave an excellent idea to Shakuntala to write a love letter to the King and wanted to conceal it in flowers that can be delivered into his hands under the pretext of flowers so that she can foster and strengthen her relationship with her.

When sage Durvasa¹⁰ cursed Sakuntala on ignoring his pious presence, it was Priyamvada who pleaded Sakuntala's absent

¹⁰ Durvasa is an ancient sage. He is supposed to be the only sage whose penance goes up whenever he curses somebody. He is known for his short temper.

mindedness and obtained from the sage forgiveness and asked for showing mercy in so far that the curse would cease to have an effect on the production of some token of recognition. In Act IV when Sakuntala was all set to leave depart from hermitage to King Dushyanta palace, both of her friends wept bitterly and felt deserted.

Moreover, both Priyamvada and Anasuya are so dutiful, docile and loyal that they say nothing about sage Durvasas' curse to any one: they do not communicate it even to Sakuntala as they thought it was not advisable to worry her with it especially as some token of recognition could easily be produced when the time is ripped.

GAUTAMI

The minor Character of Gautami has also been portrayed as hermit mother of Shakuntala. Gautami raised Shakuntala with great love and affection. She was having full care and concern for Shakuntala's well being. Gautami wept bitterly when Shakuntala prepared for her departure to visit king Dushyanta's palace but at the thought of reunion of Shakuntala and Dushyanta, she was somewhat content. She also accompanied Shakuntala when later visited palace of King Dushyanta and pleaded him to recognize and accept Shakuntala as his wife.

In the Act IV of the drama, Gautami wept bitterly when Shakuntala prepared for her departure to visit king Dushyanta's palace. But on the other hand, she appeared to be content by the fact that as a hermit mother, she would accompany Shakuntala in her itinerary. Her heart is throbbing with sweet and happy emotions that her daughter Shakuntala would be uniting with her beloved husband.

In the Act V, when Shakuntala was not able to find the ring in her finger as a token of reorganization, it was Gautami who rightly concluded that it fell off, but Dusyanta believed she was entrapping him. It shows that being a mother; she was the first person to identify her daughter's carelessness to lose her valuable ring.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, we have Horatio, Polonius, Laertes, Marcellus, Barnardo, Francisco, Osrick, Fortinbras, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as minor characters.

HORATIO

Horatio may be a minor role in the great Shakespeare play *Hamlet*, however his role is of great importance to not only the readers of the play but also to the good Prince Hamlet.

Horatio as a friend has a special place in Hamlet's heart. Hamlet tells him that his soul has chosen him as a favourite:

*Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice
And could of men distinguish her election.
She hath sealed thee for herself.*

(Act III, Scene II, 59-61)

In Act III, Scene II, Hamlet characterizes Horatio as a man of endurance and as a man who is not a slave of passion and goes on to tell him that he wears him in his "heart's core", in his heart of heart. Horatio was the one to tell Hamlet about the vision of his father that the men had seen the night before. Horatio also discourages Hamlet from following the ghost as he is more concerned with Hamlet's well being and wants nothing catastrophic to happen due to Hamlet's interest with a ghost.

Horatio is highly devoted to his master Hamlet. Therefore, Hamlet before he dies entrusts Horatio with the task of reporting correctly the course of his life and death.

OSRICK, MARCELLUS, BARNARDO AND FRANCISCO

Osrick is a minor character in the play. He is a courtier whose main function is to advance the plot by delivering Claudius' message proposing Hamlet's fencing match with Laertes.

The three soldiers as Marcellus, Barnardo and Francisco are also shown as minor characters. They are seen at the beginning of the play and are instrumental along with Horatio, in alerting Hamlet to the presence of the Ghost. They also provide us with a lot of the background information necessary for an understanding of the events that are to follow.

FORTINBRAS

Fortinbras is the Prince of Norway. Fortinbras is an unseen but has important influence in the play.

In the beginning of the play Fortinbras seems a threat to the kingdom of Denmark, which he appears intent on claiming. Unlike Hamlet, Fortinbras appears to be a man of action, determined to fight over even unimportant things.

ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were school fellows of Hamlet and were brought up together with the Prince Hamlet.

But they do not have the sentiments and friendship for Hamlet like Priyamvada and Anasuya.

King Claudius uses them to spy on Hamlet for him. King Claudius calls them as friends:

Friends both go join you with some further aid
(Act IV, Scene I)

Hamlet considers them as his foes. It is clearly observed in following lines:

*There letters sealed and my two schoolfellows whom I will trust as
I will adders fanged*
(Act III, Scene IV)

Hamlet was greatly annoyed and hurt by the envious and strange behaviour of his past time school mates.

POLONIUS

Polonius is a counsellor to the King who is most eager to help the King and Queen discover the cause of Hamlet's ill-temper, by arranging various plots and schemes to test Hamlet's reactions. He also contrives the meeting between the Queen and Hamlet and offers to spy on them in the Queen's chamber. This last scheme of his, of course, leads to his death.

LAERTES

Laertes is the son of Polonius. When Laertes arrives from France, it is disclosed that Polonius has very little faith in his son, as he orders his servants to go to France and spy on him and make sure Laertes is doing alright. When Polonius is mistakenly murdered by Hamlet, then Laertes came back to Denmark to seek revenge for his father's murderer, Laertes knew what he had lost in his life when his father had been killed:

And so have I a noble father lost
(Act IV, Scene VII)

The sad demise of his father and sister made him realize that he was becoming a man but in the end, it also enabled him to die as a man.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Thus, it is noted that whatever may be nature of characters, major or minor, they have universal appeal. They strengthen the plot and story.

Minor characters just like major characters have personality of their own and have a distinct set of principles and beliefs. They do lots of things in the plays - they reveal information, give us background, and set the tempo.

Truly speaking, in both the dramas, minor characters play major roles in shaping and developing the central theme. They are everywhere in the dramas and are cute, funny, smart, live, intelligent and everything in between. Without the contributions of the minor characters, both the plays would lose their flavor. With the added element of the minor characters the plays' high points are made more intense, the suspense grips tighter, and the love remains longer.

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