



Shakuntala, Miranda and Desdemona

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First: Shakuntala & Miranda

Both are creations of the poetic imagination; Prospero and Vishvamitra both are sage-kings. Born to saintly persons out of the pales of society, both are helped by supernatural beings: Miranda is protected by Ariel, Shakuntala by heavenly sylphs.

Both are brought up by hermits. Both are nature's own, in fairness outshining forest beauty. Seeing Shakuntala Duṣmanta recalls the fading lustre of girls in the royal harem:

śuddhāntadurlabham idam vapur āśramavāśino yadi janasya/

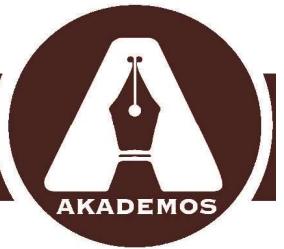
dūrīkṛtāḥ khalu guṇair udyānalatā vanalatābhīḥ //

(‘If such a body, rare even in (my) seraglio, be possessed by one living in a hermitage, then indeed are the creepers of the garden outdone in points of excellence, by the woodland creepers’ – English rendition)

Ferdinand’s reflection, on first seeing Miranda, is also the same:

Full many a lady
I have eyed with best regard and many a time
Th' harmony of their tongues hath into bondage
Brought my too diligent ear. For several virtues
Have I liked several women. ...
But you, O you,





So perfect and so peerless, are created
Of every creature's best.

Both have been brought up in forest. Whatever spell simplicity has, both are mistresses of it. In human society, The sweetness of fair, simple, pure female nature gets soured in society, like the cloud eclipsing the moon, by illusive thoughts like 'who will woo me, admire my beauty and how will I conquer a male heart'. This fault is not to be found in Shakuntala and Miranda, because they have not been reared up in society. Shakuntala has passed her days wearing the bark as dress, and watering plants with her tiny pitcher. Like the drenched and washed jasmine she too is fair, spotless, cheerful, exuding fragrance all around. In affection, the new jasmine is her sister, the mango tree her brother and she is a mother to the baby-deer. At the time of leaving for her husband's palace, due to the inevitable pang of separation from dear ones, Shakuntala is distressed, benumbed, and is in tears. Shakuntala converses with them; she is happy to tease a plant, fondle another or to hold the wedding of creepers. Yet, although Shakuntala is innocent, she is not ignorant of customs. It is modesty that is the proof of her nurture. Modesty is very strong in her character. While speaking to Duṣmanta, she too often hangs her head. It is her bashfulness that prevents her from expressing the deep passion of love in front of her friends. Miranda is not of this type. Miranda is so innocent that she lacks even coyness. Wherefrom will she learn modesty? She had never been close to any male other than her father. On first seeing Ferdinand, Miranda cannot even comprehend what he is:

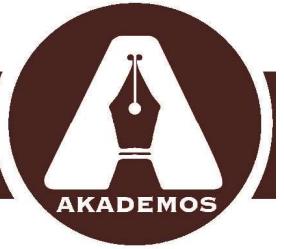
Lord how it looks about! Believe me, sir,
It carries a brave form. But 'tis a spirit.

Shakuntala has learnt all societal customs, Miranda lacks all. As one praises a picture unabashed, she waxes eloquent upon the beauty of Ferdinand before her father without a blush:

I might call him
A thing divine, for nothing natural
I ever saw so noble.

Of course Miranda does not lack the jewel of female nature, the un-self-conscious affection and sympathy. For this, the sweetness of her innocence is greater than that of Shakuntala. When her father is about to inflict punishment upon Ferdinand, she pleads:





O dear father
Make not too rash a trial of him, for
He's gentle and not fearful.

When her father faults the beauty of Ferdinand, she remarks:

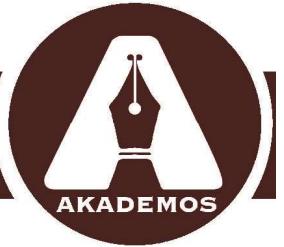
My affections
Are most humble: I have no ambition
To see a goodlier man.

From such remarks we can well conclude that Miranda may be lacking in nurture, but she has a loving heart and she is sensitive to other's woes: Miranda lacks bashfulness but she has purity, the essence of modesty.

When Miranda meets the prince, her heart is yet to be exposed to love, for she has not seen any male other than her father and Caliban. When Shakuntala sees the king, her heart too is untouched by love, for she has not come across any male other than the hermits. Both of them fall in love in the grove, Shakuntala in Kanwa's hermitage, Miranda in Prospero's forest-dwelling. Think about the wonderful art of poets – they did not consult each other when they set out to portray Shakuntala and Miranda. Yet they are like identical copies made by a single author. If a single author created both of them, what difference in the signs of love of Shakuntala and of Miranda would he have sketched? He would have felt that Shakuntala has imbibed many societal customs, she has learnt modesty. So she would not be so eloquent about her love, rather should express it through her gestures. But Miranda has not been exposed to custom; she has no sense of shyness. So she would be uninhibited in verbal expression of her love. This is exactly how the characters have been portrayed, although by two different dramatists. Shakuntala falls in love at the first sight of Duṣmanta. But, she would not share a bit of her feelings with anybody. Let alone Duṣmanta, she would not confide the secret even to her two playmates, until, on finding her awfully distressed and guessing what might have happened, they importunately press her to the point of confession. It is through non-verbal signs her love gets expressed:

*snigdham vīkṣitam anyato'pi nayane yat prerayantyā tayā/
yātam yacca nitambayor gurutayā mandaṁ vilāsād iva/
māgā (sic) ityuparuddhayā yadati tat sāsūyamuktā sakhī/*





sarvam tat kila matparāyaṇam aho!(sic) kāmaḥ svatāṁ paśyati //

(‘The tender glance that she stole at me, even when casting her eyes towards other (objects); the slow steps that (she took) through the heaviness of her buttocks, as if from dalliance, also the (way) in which the friend (Priyamvadā) was replied in (words of) spite, when stopped saying – ‘you must not go’ – all these indeed had reference to me. Oh! A lover sees his own self (everywhere)’ – English rendition)

As Shakuntala tries to leave Duṣmanta, her bark-apron gets stuck in bushes, her feet, pricked by cordgrass-points, bleed. But Miranda hardly needs such indirectness; such formality is unknown to her. Without any inhibition she tells her father about her love for Ferdinand whom she has just seen:

This
Is the third man that ev'r I saw, the first
That ever I sigh'd for:

When her father is about to punish Ferdinand, in order to move Prospero to pity, she describes him as very dear to her. Thus on the very first occasion she gives her heart to Ferdinand.

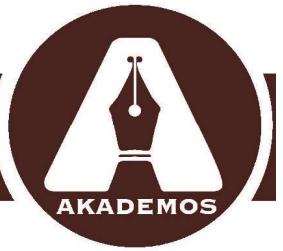
The first episode of love between Duṣmanta and Shakuntala is a sort of hide and seek. ‘Why detain the king, friend’, ‘It’s time for me to leave’, ‘Let me hide behind this tree’ – Shakuntala has such excuses. Miranda has none. All these are not unbecoming of a shy girl of refined breeding. But Miranda lacks this formality; she is a forest bird that is not shy of chanting at the break of dawn. She is a bud that won’t take time to open petals and blossom at the touch of evening breeze. Finding her man Miranda does not hesitate to admit:

but, by my modesty,
The jewel in my dower, I would not wish
Any companion in the world but you,
Nor can imagination form a shape
Besides yourself to like of.

Again:

Hence, bashful cunning!
And prompt me, plain and holy innocence!
I am your wife, if you will marry me,
If not, I'll die your maid. To be your fellow





You may deny me; but I'll be your servant,
Whether you will or no.

It would have been better if the whole of this conversation could be quoted, but that is not strictly required, for Shakespeare's works are there in every house-rack and hence this can be read at will. You will see that this conversation is in no way inferior to the famous love exchanges of Romeo and Juliet in the orchard scene, learnt by heart by most college students. What Juliet says – 'My bounty is as boundless as the sea, / My love as deep' – is also true of Miranda, for she is also in the grip of the same passion at this stage. The words exchanged between Duṣmanta and Shakuntala at their first meeting in the forest bower – a meeting which helps the bud of Shakuntala's heart to unfold and smile – are not that exciting. The ripples of passion overflowing brims of the heart are not seen in Shakuntala. So one notes sort of artful hide and seek of expression, evident from articulations like 'shame, shame', 'let me go'. Consider, for example, the words: '*addhapadhe sumaria edassa hatthabbhaṇsiṇo miṇālabala-assa kade paṇībuttahmi*' ('Considering even our half union (I would be sorry) as to how I would get back my bangle of lotus stalk detached from my hand!' – English rendition). Of course Duṣmanta tries to make overtures: '*nanu kamalasya madhukarāḥ santuṣyati gandhamātreṇā*' ('Can a honey bee be satisfied with the mere fragrance of the lotus?' – English rendition). Hearing this Shakuntala asks, '*asantose uṇa kim karedi?*' ('If not satisfied , what else can be done?' – English rendition). Apart from this, there is nothing worthy of mention. But this absence does not mean that as an artist Kalidasa is inferior. Rather just the opposite. Poor Shakuntala is almost drowned here in the charisma of famous Duṣmanta. Ferdinand or Romeo are not big shots, they are almost of the same age as their heroines, almost equal and without great achievement for flaunting. Shakuntala is almost a non-entity beside Duṣmanta, who is the lord of the world and a friend of Indra, the king of the gods. Here Shakuntala, a small bud, cannot unfold her petals well, because she is shrouded by the giant-shadow of Duṣmanta. This is no tender love episode – this is a royal sport; the great king trying to divert himself with a game of love in a forest grove. He engages himself in his forest spree, and like an elephant running amok, picks up with his huge trunk the frail Shakuntala, softer than a bud of lotus. How can the bud bloom then?

One who forgets this would not be able to properly judge the character of Shakuntala. The watering that helps the bud of Miranda and Juliet to unfold their petals does not work here. In the love-tinged heart of Shakuntala one finds the restlessness, the timidity, the bashfulness of a young girl, not the reserve and affection of a mature woman. People may think that this is due to





the difference in culture and habitation. But it is wrong to claim that, as Shakuntala is an Indian woman, she breaks down in bashfulness; on the other hand, as Miranda and Juliet are rather forward western girls, they easily uncork their heart before their suitors. The narrow minded critics fail to understand that the difference of space & time is just external; the basic human feeling is universal. Rather of the three it is Shakuntala who is somewhat lacking in coyness, as borne out by the sentence, '*asantose uṇa kim karedi?*' ('If not satisfied, what else can be done?' – English rendition). The same Shakuntala after a few months would chidingly charge Duṣmanta in his own court: 'Oh ignoble man, do you judge everything in you're the light of your heart?' That she remains just a girl in the grove is not due to the modesty becoming of a girl of society. The reason is the overshadowing personality of Duṣmanta. When Shakuntala is at the court, deserted by Duṣmanta, she is the king's spouse, about to give birth to child and to experience motherhood; hence there she is an assertive woman. Here in the grove, she is a hermit's daughter, aspiring to taste the forbidden royal grace. Isn't she just a lotus-bud in the trunk of an elephant? The foregoing discussion bears ample testimony to the fact that in poetic power, the poet of *Shakuntala* is not at all inferior to the poet of *The Tempest*.

Second: Shakuntala & Desdemona

Shakuntala has been compared with Miranda and it has also been established that she is not wholly Miranda-like. Yet the comparison helps us understand half of her character. The other half remains to be understood. I propose to shed light on that part by comparing Shakuntala with Desdemona.

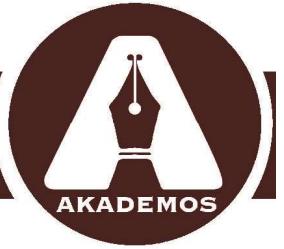
Shakuntala and Desdemona have points of affinity as well as of difference. Parallelism is there as each resigned herself to her suitor without getting the permission of elders. What Goutami said to Duṣmanta about Shakuntala, may be said to Othello about Desdemona:

'nāvekkhido guruano imāi na tue bi pucchido bandhuḥ/

ekkakkassa ca carie bhanādu kim ekka ekkassim//'

[('She did not wait for her elders, nor did you confer with (her) kinsmen. In such a *tête-à-tête* what need another say to either?' – English rendition]





They may be compared because both have surrendered to their heroes at first sight – the ‘hope- creeper of both heart climb up the firm tree trunk. But the infatuation with the gallant which is so explicit in the case of Desdemona, is not so in the case of Shakuntala. Othello is dark-complexioned, so not to be deemed as fair in the eye of an Italian girl. But on the female heart prowess exerts stronger influence than beauty. The great poet (Vyasa) who makes Draupadi of her five husbands partial to Arjuna, which is why she cannot reach heaven in person, is well conversant with this secret. This recondite idea has also been expressed by the poet creating Desdemona.

They may be compared, because the slender twig of both the heroines eventually gets snipped – each is deserted by her spouse. Life is full of inattention and oppression. And often it is seen that one who deserves care and affection has to suffer most apathy and infliction. This is not always bad, for the higher faculties of human mind properly manifest in adversity. In the human world this is the seed of good nurture – the principal ingredient of poetry. Thanks to the curse or blessings of fortune, the qualities that get expressed in the life of Desdemona, also do in the life of Shakuntala in an identical circumstance. So, there is ample testimony that there is a resemblance between these two characters.

And they may be compared, for both are affectionate, both chaste. But who is not affectionate and chaste? The heroines of novels, plays and worthless pieces written today by any Tom, Dick and Harry are all chaste and full of affection. But these so called chaste women forget all about their husband even if a pet cat draws their attention. But Shakuntala is so absorbed in the thoughts of Duṣmanta that the terrible ‘*ayam aham bhoḥ*’ (‘It is I, ho there!’ – English rendition) of Durvāsā remains unheard. All are chaste, but who can fathom the depth of the firm conviction of Desdemona that there is no unchaste woman, that women cannot be unchaste at all. If unshakable devotion to husband – a devotion that is not affected by assault, torture, abandonment and stigma – be the hallmark of chastity, then Desdemona is superior to Shakuntala. Un-acknowledged as wife, Shakuntala raises her voice against her husband, like a snake whose hood has been trodden upon. When the King mocks at Shakuntala saying that she may be illiterate but she is shrewd as a speaker, shaking off her previous bashfulness and ready to protect her self-esteem, Shakuntala angrily says – ‘Oh ignoble man, do you judge everything in your heart’s light?’ In reply the King says with royal dignity, ‘Lady, everybody knows what is the character of Duṣmanta.’ In reply Shakuntala banteringly remarks:





'tuhme jjeva pamāṇam jānadha dhammatthidiñca loassa/

lajjā vinijjidāo jāṇanti na kimpi mahilāo//'

[‘what you consider to be one’s righteous conduct is not acceptable to the disgracefully insulted woman folk’ – English rendition)

This anger, this sentiment, this banter, is not characteristic of Desdemona. When Othello beats her in public and dismisses her, she says, ‘I will not stay to offend you.’ She says this and is about to leave but the moment she hears Othello’s call, ‘Mistress’, she turns back saying, ‘My Lord?’ When, despite her innocence, Othello blames her as ‘false’, she says nothing to justify her honesty but, ‘Heaven doth truly know it’. Even after that, deprived of her husband’s love, she finds her world empty and tells Iago:

O good Iago
What shall I do to win my lord again?
Good friend, go to him; for by this light of heaven,
I know not how I lost him. Here I kneel.

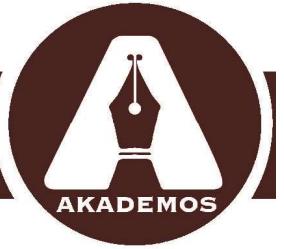
When like a terrible monster Othello comes to sleeping Desdemona and says ‘I will kill thee’, even then Desdemona is not angry or piqued, nor is she lacking in courtesy or love. She just says, “Then heaven/ Have mercy on me!” When, afraid of death, Desdemona implores Othello to let her live for a day, for one night, for half an hour, and Othello is still unrelenting, then also she is not angry or piqued or lacking in gentleness or love. Even at the moment of death when Emilia drops in and asks her, ‘O who hath done this deed?’, she says:

‘Nobody; I myself. Farewell.
Commend me to my kind lord: O, farewell!

Even at this point Desdemona refuses to accuse Othello by divulging that although she is guiltless her husband has strangled her.

Hence I contend that Shakuntala and Desdemona have many similarities as well as differences. Shakuntala cannot be compared with Desdemona as analogies cannot be drawn between things that are dissimilar. Shakespeare’s play is like a sea, Kalidasa’s play is like a heavenly garden. The sea cannot be compared with the forest. What is fair, pleasant to sight,





fragrant, melodious, enchanting and agreeable is found in this bower in plenty, lying stratified in uncountable layers. And what is deep, hard to cross, restless, full of noise is found in this ocean. Shakespeare's outstanding play is sea-like – tossed by the moving waves of the heart, jerked by the tempest of anger, hatred and jealousy. The high speed of the play, its loud tumult, its restless waves, are balanced by its sweet sky-like stretch, its endless meteor-showers, its effulgence, its shade, its gems, its sweet melody. Such a perfect fusion is rare in entire world of literature. Hence I argue that Desdemona and Shakuntala are not mirror-images of each other. Disparate things cannot be compared. Why I call them non-identical has enough justification.

What we Indians call drama and what Europeans call drama are different. True, spectacle is common to both. But by play European critics understand something more. They claim that there are many works which use spectacle as mode of presentation but such works are not plays. It is not that these are inferior because they are not plays. There are many works which belong to the class of great poetry, for instance, Goethe's *Faust*, Byron's *Manfred*. Great or inferior, these works are not plays. Shakespeare's *The Tempest* or Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* both belong to this category. They are great poems written in dramatic form, but they are not plays. To question their status as 'plays', however, is not to disparage them. Such poetry is rare in the world; we may even call them nonpareil. We Indians may call both plays, for all features of a play as mentioned in Indian aesthetics are found in both these works. But the features of a play as mentioned in European aesthetics are not found in these works, although they abound in *Othello*. Judged thus, *Othello* is a play, *Shakuntala* a narrative poem. As a result, the prominence with which Desdemona's character is portrayed is found missing in the portrayal of the characters of Miranda and Shakuntala. Desdemona is vibrant with life, Shakuntala and Miranda are fruits of meditation. The speeches of Desdemona reveal her woeful state – we can see tears flowing down her cheeks; the pitiful, raised eyes of Desdemona, lying on floor, rend our heart. But we cannot know anything about Shakuntala's red eyes till we hear about them from Duṣmanta:

‘na tiryag avalokitaṁ bhavati cakṣur ālohitam/
vaco’pi paruṣākṣaram na ca padeśu saṃsajjate/
himārta iva vepate sakala eṣa bimbādharaḥ/
svabhāvavinate bhruvau yugapad eva bhedaṁ gate//’

((She) is not looking askance, but (her) eyes have become extremely red, (her) speech though (fraught with) rough wordings is not wavering. The whole of (her) under-lip





imitating the (red) Bimba fruit is trembling like one bitten with frost. (Her) eyebrows, naturally curved, have been synchronously turned wry' – English rendition).

We cannot see the extent of Shakuntala's sorrow, its rolling motion or intensity. However, in the case of Desdemona, all these are explicit. Shakuntala is the sketch of a painter; Desdemona is an animated sculpture. The heart of Desdemona with all its extension is fully open to us. Shakuntala's heart is expressed through suggestions only.

As Desdemona's tale is brighter, Shakuntala cannot stand in comparison with her. Otherwise, in their inner selves, both are one. Shakuntala is half Miranda, half Desdemona. After her marriage Shakuntala resembles Desdemona, before it, she is more like Miranda.

For English rendition of quotes from Sanskrit/Prakrit, I am indebted to Dr Shrimanta Chattopadhyay, Associate Professor of Sanskrit, Burdwan Raj College. He has also taken the help of *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*, (Ed.) Ramendra Mohan Bose, 6th Edn., Modern Book Agency Pvt Ltd, Calcutta, 1976.

