

## Themes in Abhijnana Shakuntalam=

### The Hermitage and the Court=

The Hermitage and the Court are two diametrically opposed spaces in the play. The Hermitage is a secluded space devoted to holy pursuits by the ascetics. They choose to live away from society and its problems. The people there live a simple life and are closer to their natural surroundings, living in harmony with nature as they are dependent on it for their survival. Furthermore, they are under the protection of the king and call upon him for assistance during their rituals. The holy grooves of the Hermitage are safe spaces, where even the king must not hunt animals. Shakuntala, Priyamvada, Anasuya, Kanva, Gautami etc all belong to this world.

The Court is the worldly world, a society with strict rules and regulations, functioning under social codes that dictate the code of court etiquette to people. Corruption and abuse of power is a part of this world as seen in the fisherman episode. The Palace itself is filled with intrigues and suspicions among Duhsanta's wives. Duhsanta himself is beset with kingly duties. Duhsanta, Madhavya, Vasumati, Hamsavati, and the High Priest belong to this world.

The king falls in love at the Hermitage and he not only extends his stay there but also neglects his duty. The Gandharva marriage between Shakuntala and Duhsanta, a marriage contracted on word alone with no witnesses or material proof can be sustained in the hermitage because it's a world that exists outside of the strict moral codes of society. Taken out of this context, such marriages are doubted and we see that in the epic where Duhsanta refuses to acknowledge Shakuntala out of fear of what his subjects might think of him. In the play the loss of memory dilutes the effect of the rejection but Duhsanta does demand proof of their marriage and the paternity of the child in accordance to the codes of the courtly world. Wealth is another factor that marks the difference between the two worlds.

The women in the hermitage wear clothes made of bark and adorn themselves with flowers but when Shakuntala leaves for the Court, Kanva procures precious jewels from the trees to beautify his daughter in accordance with the outside world. Throughout the play, we see how the King is forced to choose between the two worlds and must sacrifice or neglect one for the other. Similarly Shakuntala too must sever her contact with the hermitage if she is to be accepted into the courtly world. Her return can only be realised once she reaches the third stage of her life, i.e, vanaprastha, where both she and the king will give up and retire from the worldly world. Therefore, we see how characters in the play cannot inhabit both the world simultaneously and how one must carefully navigate the two worlds because they function on different principles and in different levels.

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### Duty Vs Love=

Throughout the play, duty and love are closely intertwined. This connection is in keeping with the importance of dharma (duty) in Hindu practice at the time. Dharma, along with artha (material success) and kama (desire), was understood to be one of the primary goals of human existence, while the ultimate goal of that existence was to attain moksha, or liberation from worldly existence. In the play, there is particular tension between dharma and love. The structure of the play—from opposition between duty and love during Shakuntala's courtship, to failed efforts to harmonize them in the middle of the play, to reconciliation between them in the final act—suggests that reconciling the competing goals of human existence is a lifelong journey, but that when that struggle is faithfully undertaken, it eventually proceeds toward spiritual liberation.

Early in the play, love and duty are seen as being at odds with each other, and duty is even used as an excuse to pursue love. For example, when Dusyanta first sees Shakuntala, the king sees something incongruous about Shakuntala's devotion to religious duty. To him, Shakuntala's desirable physical beauty seems wasted in her life of ascetic striving. Meanwhile, Shakuntala's first experience of passion seems to her to be incompatible with her lifelong religious piety. As soon as Dusyanta reveals himself in the ascetic grove, Shakuntala thinks, "But how can it have happened that, simply at the sight of this man, I am shaken with a passion so at odds with the religious life?"

Rather transparently, Dusyanta then uses his sacred royal duties (kings were to defend the oppressed, with special care for safeguarding the rites of religious practitioners) as a cover for romantic desire. He tells Shakuntala and her friends, "I have been appointed [...] as Minister for Religious Welfare. And in that capacity I've come to this sacred forest to ensure your rituals are not obstructed in any way." Dusyanta, here, is not actually connecting duty and love. Rather, he is using duty as a lie to pursue love. At this point, as described in the stage direction, Shakuntala "displays all the embarrassment of erotic attraction." She apparently sees through Dusyanta's ruse, and at any rate, she's aware that her own religious devotion is more likely to be obstructed, not helped, by her attraction to this man.

Before leaving the grove, Dusyanta reflects to himself, "Suddenly, the city doesn't seem so attractive [...]. The truth is, I can't get Shakuntala out of my head." Dusyanta's responsibilities

in the capital city no longer appeal to him, going against the grain of the erotic desire he now feels. Duty and desire, seemingly, don't go together.

In the middle acts of the play, there's a struggle to harmonize love and duty. In Act II, Dusyanta is asked to protect the ashram for a few nights in the sage Kanva's absence. But no sooner has he agreed to this than a messenger arrives with a competing obligation, a request from his mother to participate in a ritual fast in the capital. "I have to weigh my duty to the ascetics against the request of a revered parent—and neither can be ignored." He finally decides in favor of staying close to Shakuntala in the ashram, though he knows duty will eventually tear him away.

In Act III, Priyamvada somewhat coyly brings love and duty together by casting Shakuntala's lovesickness in terms of the king's duty: "They say it is the king's duty to relieve the pain of those who live in his realm [...] So, if you would save [Shakuntala's] life, you must take her under your protection." Dusyanta acts on this advice to contract a secret marriage with Shakuntala, trying to hastily circumvent any conflicts between his royal duties and his bride's religious ones.

In Act IV, Anasuya worries that once the King returns to his capital, "who can say whether he'll remember what's happened in the forest?" While Anasuya means that Dusyanta's passion might fade under the pressures of royal duty, the audience knows that Dusyanta will literally forget Shakuntala because of a curse. But even this literal forgetting can be seen, by extension, to symbolize the subordination of desire to duty. In fact, when Shakuntala journeys to reunite with Dusyanta in the capital, the busy king is pointedly described as "the guardian of the sacred and social orders;" in this realm, he proves unable to recognize her or desire's claim on him.

In Act VI, he hears about the death of a childless merchant and is overcome with grief about his own (so he thinks) childlessness. Since he has no children, his own ancestors must be wondering, "Who will feed us in the afterlife / As he does now, if there is no heir?" In this context, having sons isn't just a sign of earthly prosperity, but a guarantee that one's forebears will continue to be honored in perpetuity. Put another way, in the creation of children, love and duty are intertwined. Thus Dusyanta's lack of a child is a great shame for him, an indication of his failure in both duty and love.

In the play's final act, love and duty finally achieve harmony. Indra's charioteer interrupts Dusyanta's grief with a summons to fulfill his kingly duty of demon-fighting, and Dusyanta is later rewarded for his work with a tour of the heavens in a winged chariot. They descend to the mountain of the demigods, where the sage Marica leads a life of asceticism. Here, Dusyanta discovers his son, Sarvadamana, which leads to his and Shakuntala's recognition of one another. The three are finally united as a family unit, and their son, the fruit of their passion, is prophesied to become a world ruler—thus, the three of them together constitute the fulfillment of duty as well as of love, and all in a place oriented toward spiritual liberation. Harmony between duty and love is finally being achieved.

As Dusyanta prepares to return to his capital—the worldly realm of duty—with his wife and son, Marica blesses them: "And so let time and seasons pass / In mutual service, / A benefit to both our realms." No longer is there tension between love and duty; they've been

integrated, such that Dusyanta can fulfill his duties as husband, king, and religious devotee without a sense of strain or disharmony.