

When Shakuntala went abroad: Two cultures and their Perception of the Romanic Sensibility

Sir William Jones, a poet, oriental scholar and the founder of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in Calcutta in 1784, translated one of the most valued and celebrated plays by Kalidasa of 4th Century AD from Sanskrit into Latin and then in English in 1789 as ‘Sacontala or the Fatel Ring’.¹ This he did primarily for two reasons: One, he was enthused by the play which he thought demonstrates the “high quality of Indian civilization and thought” and secondly, the translation of this text of great magnitude was done to understand the high culture of the colony of which he was appointed a Judge to enable him and other rulers to have a better control over the people of the colony.

Jones's translation of Sakuntala was received with such critical acclaim by its 19th Century European audience that in the century itself no fewer than 46 translations in 12 different languages were published either direct from Sanskrit and some from English to German to French to Italian. It was George Forster's translation in German in 1791 that led to the enthusiastic acclamation for the play by the German romantics and the poets of the European Romantic movement. The play's evocation of nature, observes Romila Thapar, came to be reflected in the imagination of the poets of the Romantic Movement².

This was the period when the debate on **Nature & Culture** had begun to convulse the literary scene in Europe but Jones's mind was more akin to the ideas of **neo-classicism** and he saw in Sakuntala a "rustic girl" whereas the German Romantic poets used a phrase 'Child of nature' for Sakuntala and brought the play into their romantic fold³. The reception of the play revealed many

different aspects of the debate on Nature & Culture of which Sakuntala became, if not the central point, at least an important base for discussion.

It was no doubt that Jones's translation took Europe by storm but it was Georg Forster's translation in German which touched the minds of the German and European romantics very deeply. Georg Forster believed that the **child-like and unspoilt relationship which the Hindu had with nature had been lost to the modern Europeans** who had to be reminded of it through Indian Literature. Goethe, after reading the Forster's translation was ecstatic in his praise about the play, which became a standard quotation in any discussion on Sanskrit literature in the first half of the 20th Century India⁴.

Would'st thou the young year's blossoms
and the fruits of its decline,
And all by which the soul is charmed,
enraptured, feasted, fed,
Would'st thou the Earth & Heaven itself

in one sole name combine?

I, name thee, O Sakuntala! And all at once is said. - Goethe

The enthusiastic reaction to the play by Goethe encouraged the play being highlighted by German romantics. Goethe found in it **“the natural state, of the finest way of life, “of the finest moral striving”**, of tShe most dignified majesty and the most **“earnest contemplation of God”**⁵.

European Romanticism was part a reaction to the neo-classicism and also a response to the “discovery” of the Orient, described as Oriental Renaissance. For the Europeans Oriental Renaissance romanticized the world by adding to the (i)usual a noble sense,(ii) the ordinary a mysterious experience,(iii) the well known the dignity of the unknown and(iv) the temporal a perennial aura. The Sakuntala of the play was turned into an **icon of the ideal**

Indian woman encapsulating the beauty of womankind and also an icon of a child of nature to appropriately counter the crafted woman of neo classicism.

J.G. Von Herder used the Kalidasa play to challenge the Aristotelian theories, which was a part of the neo-classicist canons in European writing. **The play, according to Herder, dwells in timelessness and hence beyond history and points to a new vision of life.** To his mind, Sakuntala represents the fairy tale atmosphere of the child like Indian and **can be compared to a flower unfolding its innocence**⁶. Frederick Schlegel, while endorsing this view, said that there was a child-like innocence of the golden age associated with Indians. Herder almost endorsing this view in the foreword to the 2nd edition of Forster's translation in 1803 defines the image of India as **a contact of spirits, where everything is touched gently and tenderly, and perhaps to that extent is an illusion**⁷. The idea of **illusion in the vedantic design** and also the

other essentials of Indian philosophy –(i) **metempsychosis** or transmigration (the supposed passage of somebody's soul after death into the body of another person or an animal) (ii) non-duality, (iii)the unity of man and nature, and the (iv)meaning of renunciation – became central to the idea of neo-Platonists, was actually rooted in early Greek views of India and Indian sources which now interested the romantics. **Romantics rediscovered** in neo-Platonism (‘mystical’ or religious in nature, developed outside the mainstream of Academic Platonism) **an inter-relation with the Indian philosophical view of unity of man and nature of which Sakuntala was the ideal example.** “Sakuntala held the secrets of the universe and was like a mystery which invoked for **Novalis**, (German poet and philosopher of the early German Romanticism) **the symbolism of Blue Flower**, which was referred to in passing in the play. The play Sakuntala gave a call to **return to antiquity and its values** which was regarded as essential to the construction of culture and gave an **added**

flavour to the debate on nature and culture in which because of Herder and Schlegel language also became an important input because for both of them the **interlocking of language and culture was crucial to the human being**, for **language endows humans with consciousness** and Sanskrit, German, and Celtic were found to be the best examples of this dynamic interaction of language and culture⁸.

The views aired by the European romantics, no doubt, betray, on one side, an expectation that Oriental Renaissance via texts like Sakuntala would lead to new experiences of mind and emotion, vastly different from those familiar to Europe but on the other side, all their arguments have an approach of **looking down the culture of the orient**. The insistence on seeing a Sanskrit classic as a eulogy on nature also carries, as says Romila Thapar, some **racist undertones in the 19th Century because of the theories of race and Social Darwinism**⁹. Those

close to nature were the primitive peoples – primitive in the 19th Century sense of being at the start of the evolutionary scale, a notion that has in it an element of contempt. The reference to **child-like Indians** was not entirely complimentary. The problem is of cultural ethos. For the West nature is a source of reference to define one's identity and for the Indian mind self is always self-referential, where nature or the Supreme reality is identified with the Self. Even the view that the Oriental Renaissance would reveal connections with the ancient past of Europe also had a **hint of arrogance**, that all cultures could ultimately, be traced back to Bible. Jones' **Victorian morality** was responsible in deleting or toning down many passages, which was according to him erotic and hence immoral and linked to the primitive¹⁰. In fact this kind of an attitude towards a text like Sakuntala, announced the **birth of Orientalism**, which tried to colonize the oriental texts and define and comprehend the culture of the colonized in European terms. Thus the

colonized are viewed as civilized, but their civilisation may take some unpalatable forms, and these can be corrected or deleted. Jones **colonized the text** in an effort to resolve his individual aesthetic crisis – a crisis that for an Indian was totally absurd. Most important is that Jones's prejudices were liable in mistranslating several passages of Sakuntala to impose a value judgment and tie Sakuntala to a vision of etiquette which was wholly western and according to European societal norms. As a result his work presenting a **tendentious vision of India**, consistently fails to recognize Kalidasa's humor, puns and irony and certain cultural themes.

Orientalism also looked at the Oriental Renaissance for the exotic, **the unusual, the irrational the emotional and the imaginative** and analyzed texts like Sakuntala not under universal category but cultural category by raising pertinent questions concerning race, sex, and hegemony. This being the reason **the exotic becomes**

undistinguishable from racism¹¹. The purpose is to view the **exotic as an ideological artifact to be collected and exhibited and to be distinguished from European literary texts**, which are automatically informed by universality. **Chinua Achebe** therefore says by protesting angrily that he would like to see the word “Universal” banned altogether from the discussions on Asian & African literature, until such time as the people cease to use it as a synonym for the narrow self-serving parochialism of Europe until their horizons extends to include all the world¹².

One may like to accept the views of Dorothy, Matilda Figueira given in her book ‘**Translating the Orient**’ that **the criticism of Orientalism is often unreflective fragmentary and anecdotal and unnecessarily political in its approach¹³**. But When one goes through the content of the **second Anniversary Discourse** to the Asiatic Society of Bengal where Jones, in search of the history of

India, makes a comment that he would go to remote antiquity but restrict his researches downwards only up to 11th Century, one realizes that Edward Said's attempt to view Western Literary approaches to the East in terms of political discourse cannot be ignored completely¹⁴ Jones' statement has two hidden meanings:

i) That **pre-British India had no history**. It was the dark period of India and with the advent of British the darkness faded;

ii) In the process Jones tried to obliterate a part of the history of India, medieval bhakti (devotional) period, which was, in fact, the golden period of India and as a result created **historigraphical inversions** by wiping out a portion from its history to suit his hidden agenda¹⁵. John Drew in his book 'India and the Romantic Imagination' presents a similar view about Jones that the curious way in which Jones is absorbed in Asian Civilization even while he asserts the superiority of the European is equally

evident in his work including ‘**On the philosophy of the Asiatics**’. In his perspective on India, Drew says that Jones sometimes appears to have been as hedged in as any man by his sense of the superiority of European culture and by his acknowledgement of the prior claims of Christian revelation¹⁶.

All said and done, one cannot deny the fact that Sakuntala offered inspiration to 19th Century European romanticism and Jones could not resist but say though backhandedly (double meaning) **that the reasons and taste are the grand prerogatives of European minds the Asiatics have soared to loftier heights in the sphere of imagination**¹⁷. Herder and Friedrich Schlegel responded to the idea that Sanskrit literature had an immediate relevance for European writers & Thomas Maurice, who followed Jones’s researches very closely could conceive of his ‘Indian Antiquities’ as exploring a new path in literature.

Tagore says, I am a born romantic and his romanticism is **in fact a search for the self in nature or the identification of the self with the supreme reality whereas the western romanticism is the establishment of individualism where nature is a source of reference to define one's own identity and for Indian romantics self is always accepted as self-referential, where nature or the supreme reality is identified with the self.**

But there is an important difference between Tagore and the major moderns of Europe – James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Stravinsky, Picasso – all have built on romanticism but at the same time tried to break away from it – break away from established rules, traditions and conventions and imply fresh ways of looking at man's position and function in the universe. Subsequent generations of artists have cut their links with romanticism completely.

Tagore, however, carried his romanticism intact into the modern world, used it as a scepter and a torch.

In fact in every age some new insights covering the sensibility of the age are added to our understanding of a past concept.

i) In modern times with Tagore romanticism indicates the Vedantic oneness between man and nature along the lines of Vedic symbolism and not paganism.

ii) It is not Western romantic ideal of return to nature, to unconscious or to the realm of imagination and feeling (for Keats love for nature is for nature's sake, Wordsworth spiritualizes nature, Coleridge finds some supernatural elements in nature, Shelley intellectualizes nature and Byron is interested in the vigorous aspect of nature) but an affirmation of the organic relation of man and nature, of the microcosm and the macrocosm, of the inner and the outer world and the interior and the transcendent imagination.

iii) Its emotionalism lent itself to reformism and patriotism which could be contrasted sharply with the public rhetoric and nationalist literature and anti-industrial thrust.

Hence it is not merely a literary attitude but a popular programme for National autonomy and social uplift and therefore having a bigger perspective than the British romantics but similar to German romantics.

Indian romantic poetry became a document of the experience of the

1) poet's search for the unknown (self's longing for the unknown or a feeling of separation from the loved ones),

2) longing for joy and beauty,

3) brooding over death,

4) challenging the very scheme of things,

5) drawing sustenance from ancient texts and 6) and

moving from theocentricism to anthropocentricism from

devotion to God to devotion to the world. Tagore moved

easily from romantic experience to God as experience and

then to affirmation of life.

The most interesting thing in this regard was the view of Sisir Kumar Das that new romantic poetry emerging in the last two decades of 20th Century India of which Tagore was the most distinguished creator, can be claimed with some justification as the **final phase of the Romantic Movement that started in Germany** and appeared in different countries in Europe in successive stages¹⁸. It was, according to Sisir Kumar Das, was **not an imitation** of Western poetry; but **a spontaneous expression of a particular state of mind and experience of the Indian poets**, however, small be their number. The whole issue now takes a full circle. The “romantic comedy” of Kalidasa influenced the German romanticism and now that comes back to have its spell on Indian poets of the modern times. But in what way is German Romanticism at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th Century related to Romanticism in India?

Namwar Singh, in his well documented and insightful paper on ‘Colonial Romanticism and the Challenges of

Modernity”, says that in the **19th Century Feudal India intelligentsia was weak and the ground situation was somewhat similar to that of Germany of the 18th Century**, though the French Revolution had taken place in its neighbourhood¹⁹. The state of the German intellectuals of that time may be comparable to that of the Indian intelligencia. **During the period a special type of German Romanticism was born which started its political struggle through aesthetic struggle.** Tagore at 19th Century end through *Prabhat Sangeet* (1882) gave the call for freedom in the words “bhang, bhang, bhang kara” (break, break, break the prison) and in the words of *Sonar Tari*, (Golden Boat, a collection of Tagore’s poetry) “Niruddeshye Yatra Kothaye aamake niye jabe re-swapan Sundari?” – “where will this journey to an unknown destination take me – oh beautiful dream?”

The journey had to have an unknown destination because far and wide the end of the colonial domination was not in sight²⁰. This is the period when the Romantic Movement

becomes **directly political** reflecting the aspirations of a colonial people; hence the mood of revolt and the feeling of patriotism gained predominance, which became an all-India phenomenon during the non-cooperation movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. The political shape it took shows **the limit and universal conflicts of Romanticism** that became apparent in the Tagore-Gandhi controversial debate of 1921 on Charkha and boycott and burning of foreign made clothes. In his speech on “Call of Truth” at the University Institute in Calcutta Tagore spoke against it. He said, “When the early morning bird awakens, its awakening is not merely for the purpose of looking for food. Its two untiring wings accept the call of the sky. The joy of seeing the light makes him burst out into song. The consciousness of the universal man of today calls out to our consciousness”²⁰. Tagore made at least one thing clear that if Romanticism is a movement for national freedom, then it also accepts the universalism of the Enlightenment.

Mahatma Gandhi in his reply in ‘Young India’ chose to point only to that bird which flies in the sky early in the morning and said, “But I have had the pain of watching birds who for want of strength could not be coaxed into a flutter of their wings”. In Indian Romanticism, around 1920-21 and thereafter as well, the hungry bird also finds its place.

Tagore calls himself a born romantic but this romanticism, I would agree with Sisir Das had a strong link with Western romanticism and at the same time it drew inspiration and sustenance from ancient texts religious and secular. But surprisingly instead of calling Kalidasa a romantic or his play as a ‘romantic comedy’, Tagore places his poetry in the category of **poetry of an individual poet and who has the power to sound, through his own joys and sorrows, his imagination and experiences, the eternal emotion of universal man and the inner most truth of human life.** Tagore says that

Kalidasa can be called a poet of the enjoyment of beauty as well as the cessation of that enjoyment. In the play Sakuntala, thus, one can experience the worldly and the social dimension or the linear movement of time matching so well with the timelessness or the eternal as said in the last line of Bharatavakya (Benedictory epilogue):

Mamapi ksapayatu Neelalohitah

Punar bhabam parigata Saktiratmabhuh²¹

“May the self-existent Siva will all pervasive power destroy my cycle of rebirths.”

This unity of the self with the Supreme is expressive of a deep philosophical meaning but more than that the objective of the play is to maximize the aesthetic reward it could offer to the readers by freeing the play from contexts and turn it into a master metaphor of love and beauty.

*** Romantic sensibility is i) oneness of the self with nature; ii) mystic manifestation in Biraha(the self's longing) for the unknown through the known. It is not like English romantics wanted to break the puritanical shackles and seek joy in Hellenism but it indicates the Vedantic oneness between man and nature along the lines of Vedantic symbolism and not paganism, iii)and a humanist concept of universal man(a renaissance man) though an age old concept indicating the continuity of the poetic experience.

References & Notes

1. The story of Sakuntala, as it was extrapolated by Kalidasa from the Mahabharata (Mahabharata, trans. Attrib. to Pratap Chandra Roy,"¹¹ (unnumbered) Vols. (1884-6), pp. 211-28), is that of the foster daughter of a sage and a heavenly nymph who, discovered in a forest hermitage by a King (Dushyanta) out hunting, falls in love and marries the King in the Gandharva style, is given a ring by the king as a token of love and for remembrance before he returns to his palace. Sakuntala, her mind so taken up by thought of the King, over looks the arrival of a

visiting sage who, thus neglected, lays the Curse on her that whoever has so firmly taken hold of her mind will forget her, a curse modified later by the sage by the proviso that it will be lifted when the bestower again sees his ring. Sakuntala sets out for the King's palace but mislays the ring while crossing a river. The King laid under the curse, fails to recognize her and a tragic ending seems inevitable. However, the disowned Sakuntala is transported in the mean time to another hermitage where she bears the king a son. In the course of events, a fisherman finds the ring inside a fish and brings it to market to sell and is caught by a soldier and brought before the king, and the sight of the ring restores the King's memory. Eventually King lands in the hermitage and sees his son and Sakuntala and all are reconciled.

2. Romila Thapar, *Sakuntala: Texts, Readings, Histories*, (1929), p. 198.

3. *Ibid*, p. 200

4. Would'st thou the young year's blossoms
and the fruits of its decline,
And all by which the soul is charmed,
enraptured, feasted, fed,
Would'st thou the Earth & Heaven itself
in one sole name combine?
I, name thee, O Sakuntala! And all at

once is said. - Goethe

5. A Leslie Willson, *A Mythical Image: The Idea of India in German Romanticism* (1964), p. 69. Translation and quotation.

6. *Ibid*, 49 ff

7. *Ibid*, 221 ff

8. T.B. Hanson, "Inside the Romanticist Episteme", *Thesis Eleven*, (1995) p. 48.

9. Romila Thapar, *Sakuntala: Texts, Readings, Histories*, (1999), p. 213.

10. *Ibid*, p. 214.

11. Dorothy Matilda Figueira, *Translation the Orient*, (1991), p. 4.

12. Chinua Achebe, "Colonial Criticism"

13. See note 10, p. 5

14. E.W. Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic*, (1983), p. 267

15. See, William Jones, *Asiatic Researches*, 1, ‘The Second Anniversary Discourse, (1794-1812) p. 406.

16. John Drew, *India and the Romantic Imagination* (1987), p. 46.

17. William Jones, See note 14, p. 407.

18. Sisir Kumar Das, *A History of Indian Literature, 1800-1910, Western Impact: Indian Response* (1991) p. 320.

19. Namwar Singh, “Colonial Romanticism and the Challenges of Modernity”, *Romanticism and Modernity*, (eds), S. Majumdar, C. Wenner, S. Lahiri (2007), pp 17-31.

20. Ibid

21. *Abhijnanaskuntalam* (Original name of the play) Last line of the *Bharatvakya*. (Benedictory epilogue)

Tagore on Shakuntla

Tagore’s appreciation of kalidasa’s play draws on principles that are diametrically opposite to Romila

Thaper's (Sakuntala: Texts, Readings, Histories, (1999) analysis of Kalidasa and his Shakuntala.

One of Tagore's many writings on Shakuntala theme, entitled 'The Religion of the Forest'(1922) engages with the 'realization of the truth of existence', dwelling on the oppositional relationship between the 'principle of dualism' and the 'principle of unity'. He says, 'In Kalidasa's drama, Shakuntala, the hermitage, which dominates the play, overshadowing the king's palace, has the same idea running through it – the recognition of the kinship of man with conscious and unconscious creation alike.

Whereas in Thaper's reading of the play, 'kinship is approximate (nearly equal) to deity and kings and gods intermingle', and ashrams (hermitage) such as that of Kanva are the future 'nuclei of brahmanical culture', Tagore feels that Kalidasa yearns for 'the simplicity of India's past age of spiritual striving': 'kalidasa in almost all his works represented the unbound impetuosity of Kingly splendor on one side and the serene strength of regulated desires on the other'.

Thapar seems to locate Tagore in an intellectual milieu that is attitudinally Victorian, where 'nature and culture were no longer juxtaposed for nature has receded and the

more of “civilization” had become essential to assessing the actions of the play’.

Tagore, on the other hand, approves of ‘the contrast of the pompous heartlessness of the king’s court and the natural purity of the forest hermitage’.

The hunting scene depicts the dangerous consequences that royal whims portended (to indicate something unpleasant going to happen) for the forest on the urban margins, and the ‘pleading of the forest-dwellers with the king to spare the life of the deer, helplessly innocent and beautiful, is the pleading that rise from the whole drama’.

Tagore introduces the concept of the hermitage in understanding Kalidasa in an earlier Bangla essay, Tapovan. Ideally, the concept of Tapovan (hermitage) cannot serve as a site for debating the relative virtues of either asceticism and hedonism, or renunciation and societal leaving because the emotional quality peculiar to the forest retreat is peace, peace which is the emotional counterpart of perfection.

The curse of Shakuntala is a metaphor for suffering, caused by her indifference to the ascetic who embodies the ‘duty of higher life’, in contrast with her earlier attentiveness towards the other guest, the king, who is the

embodiment of worldly passion. It indicates the affront that the 'eternal in man' has forever has suffered because of the materialism of human life. The play is in fact a criticism of kings, 'deeply drawn into the eddy of self-indulgence.... fighting each other for power, the love of which leads men into insanity of suicide'.

For Tagore, Shakuntala remains a symbol of resilience and poise, qualities which enable her to survive the cruel ordeal to which she is subjected, personifying the divine beauty of the play', sublimely great through her frailness. The king's insatiable hunger for hunting, on the other hand, is paralleled in the modern age by the 'ugly greed of commercialism... its mailed fist of hunger'. Kalidasa protest against this hunger retains its relevance, particularly in the modern age when things beautiful and delicate suffer the onslaught unleashed by the 'ruthless machines' of the 'lords of earth', celebrating the 'reckless carnival of modern empire.

Tagore's commentary regarding Kalidasa's relationship with nature on the one hand and the royal court on the other takes on board a similar arraignment by Shakespeare in 'The Tempest'. In Shakespeare's plays there is generally a 'secret vein of complaint against the

artificial life of the King's court', whereas nature as the Forest of Arden is didactic in its lessons'.

Tagore makes an interesting remark on the Prospero-Ariel-Caliban relationship, a metaphor for the colonizer-colonized relationship in postcolonial theory: 'In the *Tempest*, through Prospero's treatment of Ariel and Caliban we realize man's struggle with nature and his longing to sever connection with her'. In this remark, as in the symbolism of the forest, Tagore's cognisance of the connections between technological power, cultural imposition and the expropriation of natural resources is perhaps visible.

Cesaire, Lamming and Retamar all view Caliban and Ariel as colonial symbols, as receptacles of the molten lead of acculturations that seeks to mould them into insignias of enslavement. They seek to explode Prospero's 'old myth' by providing a language to those who are still regarded as slaves. Caliban is preferred as the symbol of hybridity over Ariel, who was once seen as a bright and willing pupil by the civilized masters.