



## REPRODUCING KALIDASA'S "SHAKUNTALA" IN POPULAR CULTURE ART FORMS

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### ABSTRACT

At almost every historical juncture, Kalidasa's *Abhijnansakuntalam* is attempted to be adjusted to the prevailing reality. Thus, the values and traditions conveyed through the play, instead of remaining static and fixed continue to renew themselves according to the existing social conditions. In the present scenario, it is technological intervention in the form of popular culture that has led to mass circulation of the story through its adaptations in films, TV serials, music, comics, cartoon or animation. This digitalization has changed not only the human experience of approaching the play but also transformed it providing a new perspective on it. The research paper intends to explore the adaptations of the play in two forms of popular culture: comics and cartoon animation, providing insights into alterations, deletions, transformations that have occurred in these new-age retellings. The major emphasis of the paper is to explore that how its adaptations in popular culture bring political and ideological angles to this aesthetic literary work.

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### INTRODUCTION

The multiple encounters between ancient classical works and their postmodern adaptation in popular culture in the present era have generated curiosity about the notions of interpretations and transformations that have occurred due to technological intervention. These ancient narratives appear in comic books and graphic novels, animated and live-action serials, adapted for children and adults audience; their characters are remade as men of flesh and blood who stride across silver screens, inhabiting political metaphors.

The first section of the paper focuses on the appropriation of feminism and religion in adaptation of the play in comic art form in the series *Amar Chitra Katha* by Anant Pai, which shows how cultural texts promote ideological and stereotypical images. Through content analysis, it is easy to conclude that the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series conveys a hegemonic conception of

"Indianness" to its readers, one that entails the marginalization of Muslims and other religious and cultural "outsiders" from the national past, the recasting of women in so-called "traditional" roles, and the privileging of middle-class Hindu culture.

### Popular Culture

Raymond Williams suggests that the term popular means 'well liked by many people'; 'work deliberately setting out to win favor with the people'; 'culture actually made by the people for themselves'. Thus popular culture is simply culture that is widely favored and liked by many people. It includes a quantitative dimension as it is appreciated on a mass level. Popular culture as 'mass culture' establishes that it is a commercial culture. It is mass produced for mass consumption. Another way to define, it is the culture that is left over of what we have decided as high culture. Popular culture thus is a mass produced commercial culture unlike high culture which is an act of

individual creation. Popular Culture is thus, as Hall claims, a site where 'collective social understandings are created': a terrain on which the politics of signification are played out in attempts to win people to see particular ways of seeing the world.

#### **Ideology and Representation**

Ideology also refers to ideological form that is the way texts (TV, pop songs, novels, feature films etc) always present a particular image of a world. Contemporary criticism has forced us to acknowledge that there are no "innocent" texts, and that, as artifacts of the established culture and society, all cultural products carry meanings, values, biases, and messages (Kellner & Durham, 2001). Furthermore Kellner and Durham (2001) note that cultural texts (especially entertainment) contain representations, often negative, of class, gender, race, sexuality and other social categories, which are saturated with social meanings and often embody different political discourses, advancing competing positions on topics such as sexuality, the state or religion.

#### **Shakuntala in Popular Comic book form**

Comic books, as a form of public culture that reaches into the everyday lives of millions of middle-class Indian children, are a crucial site for ongoing debate about what it means to be Indian. Like Romila Thapar, I believe we must also examine how such popular products can contribute to the increasingly hegemonic narrative of India's national culture that is being advanced by middle-class Hindus and, in many cases, the state. On the cover and throughout the comic book, Shakuntala is depicted in static poses that allow our eyes to linger upon her body. A fair-skinned, voluptuous woman, she is marked as an idealized Indian woman through her posture and gestures, jewelry and ornamentation, and her sari draping and hairstyles. The cover image illustrates how central the "male gaze" is to the definition of this feminine ideal.

In an essay on visual pleasure in the cinematic context, Laura Mulvey argued that viewing pleasure is traditionally split between the active/male and the passive/female, and that the woman's passive presence in a film functions on two levels: "as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator

within the auditorium". The *Shakuntala* cover and narrative in the comic book presents a frozen narrative moment that reflects the active/passive gendered divide of the male gaze. Another concern is to portray Shakuntala as an ideal wife and the mother of Bharat: an icon of Hindu womanhood. The female figure is "oscillating between woman-as-mother (/of the nation) and woman-as-goddess on the one hand and woman-as-sex-object on the other."

#### **Shakuntala in animation**

In the second section of the paper, I will discuss its adaptation in animated movie. In order to be a commercial success there is a need to adapt the play for public consumption. Certain facets of the play would have to be altered slightly to make the piece more accessible to modern audiences. It is important to question this technique as it is continually occurring in our society. The values and messages we insert to and remove from works in our modern adaptations have the ability to shape our society, as well as the added possibility of re-writing our histories. It is important to note what is changed, why these changes are made and how does these changes affect the original work.

#### **Animation Technique**

Animation is an act of producing moving pictures; the technique by means of which movement is given, on film, to a series of drawings. Jan Gartenberg defines animation as "the arts, techniques and processes involved in giving apparent movement and life to inanimate objects by means of cinematography. In film animation, small changes in position, recorded frame by frame, create the illusion of movement". Literally it gives the illusion of life to representations of objects, people and animals by recording them on film and then projecting them at such a speed as to give a sense of real movement. Computer animation has an elastic quality that allows forms or drawings to move and change in such a way that the ordinary objects transform magically, movement is synchronized to music and inanimate objects become humanized. The viewer creates for himself/herself the illusion of a living, moving object.

### Modifications in animated version

The emphasis in this animated version like the comics is on the retrieval and presentation of the cultural heritage of ancient India. The heroine is still the beautiful and gentle Sakuntala, and while she is the illegitimate child of an aesthetic and a nymph, the circumstances surrounding her conception and birth are cleaned up. Not only the circumstances of her beginnings are altered, but also the crucial moments of Sakuntala's passion towards Dusyant are also left out. Anything that gives the audience a chance to judge Sakuntala and Dusyant are left out because characters in the animated productions are not meant to be judged. The King, Dusyant, is also adapted; his harem of wives is done away with. Dusyant is portrayed as a man who is noble and courageous.

In the original work Dusyant is "...a figure of enormous physical strength and energy who also has the power to control his senses. The conflict between desire (kama) and duty (dharma) that is enacted in each of Kalidasa's dramas involves a tension between the energy of physical passion and the constraints of self-control...the tension (In Sakuntala) is resolved in the king's recognition of his son and heir" (Miller). Intense physical passion and cosmic duty are not the ideas found in animated movie, so these motivations are replaced. Abiding love and family duty are substituted for them. The male heir Bharata, appears in the play with a conclusion of happily ever after and an informational message that it is on Sakuntala's and Dusyant's son name Bharata that our country is named as Bharat. As the movie is adapted for children, with an educational purpose to make them aware of Indian mythical history, the entire episode of Dusyant and Sakuntala's *gandharva vivah* is side-lined, although they still marry in secret but there is no description of this, no fears of Sakuntala are spoken off.

The theme in the adaptation differs greatly from Kalidasa's original intent. Critics argue that "this drama was meant not for dealing with a particular passion, not for developing a particular character, but for translating the whole subject for one world to another—to elevate love from the sphere of physical beauty to the eternal heaven of

moral beauty" (Tagore). These ideas are lost in animated adaptation of this work. How could the audience even begin to understand the idea of *nataka*—the rasa of love—if Sakuntala and Dusyant's passion and the implications about secret marriage are removed? It is these events which create the original work's theme.

### CONCLUSION

No doubt, these popular culture adaptations of *Abhijnanasakuntalam* have made it accessible beyond the frontiers of hard cover of literary book which was available to only a few. The play is presented in a new vein- as the history of ancient India. Technological intervention definitely altered the critical response and meaning of the play by bringing new ideological and political dimensions. The story of Shakuntala by establishing her as an icon of strong, independent womanhood offers all kinds of suggestions for foundational myth of Hindu India. So Shakuntala's story is used as a beautiful way to introduce Bharata as our ancestor and to introduce us to India's mythological history. The comic book and animated mediums are used as pedagogical tools, but they also endorse the particular vision of "Indianness" that is constructed by these adaptations. This concept of "Indianness" – aligns with the hegemonic Hindu nationalist conception of Indian identity in that it entails the marginalization of Muslims and other religious and cultural "outsiders" from the national past, the recasting of women in so-called "traditional" roles, and the privileging of middle-class, upper-caste Hindu culture – does not just exist passively, but has instead been actively created.

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