

Token of Love in Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* and Shakespeare's *Othello*

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In Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* (*The Recognition of Sakuntala*) and William Shakespeare's *Othello*, the development of plots greatly depends on a token of love. In Kalidasa's play, the royal signet ring solves the tangle in the relationship between Sakuntala and Duhsanta and on the other hand, in Shakespeare's *Othello*, when Desdemona cannot produce the handkerchief, Othello's first token of love to her, she is killed brutally by Othello. Both the playwrights have shown how important a token of love is in the lives of the heroines.

Keywords: Token of love, Desdemona, Sakuntala, Ring, Handkerchief.

Introduction

Kalidasa and William Shakespeare belonged to two different ages. Kalidasa was a Classical Sanskrit author. He was actually a great dramatist, an ingenious lyric poet and an eminent writer of epic. Kalidasa's artistry is praised unanimously. On the other hand, William Shakespeare, who is widely regarded as the world's preeminent dramatist, was a great English poet, actor and playwright. It is undeniable that Shakespeare has carried tragic drama to a new height. He has presented the great issues of human life from different angles through his tragic characters and his tragedies are primarily the tragedies of characters. His tragedies reveal the hidden depths of the human mind unknown to literature before and present profound understanding of the human souls in pain. Harold Bloom wrote, "Shakespeare was larger than Plato and than St. Augustine. He encloses us, because we see with his fundamental perceptions."⁽¹⁾ Kalidasa, in his master piece, *Abhijnanasakuntalam* (*The Recognition of Sakuntala*), and Shakespeare, in one of his most acclaimed tragedies, *Othello*, have shown the importance of token of love. The token of love in both of the plays creates a chain of events. Both the playwrights have placed special emphasis on it and their plays also show that destiny of the heroines and their love hangs on a mere token of love.

Objective of the Study

This article would show the importance of token of love in the plot construction of Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* and William Shakespeare's *Othello*. The article would also show the importance of token of love in the lives of both the heroines—Sakuntala and Desdemona.

Review of Literature

Innumerable studies have been made on Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* and William Shakespeare's *Othello*. N. Asharudeen and S. Florence in their article, "A Portrayal of Classical Love against Imprecation in Kalidasa's Shakuntala" (*Contemporary Discourse*, 7, 1(2016): 37-39 ISSN 0976-3686) have shown that true love is immortal. In "A Reading of Kalidasa's *AbhijnanaShakuntalam* as a Cultural Text" (*The Vedic Path: A Quarterly English Journal of Gurukul Kangri Vishwavidyalaya*, Haridwar (India). Vol LXXXVIII (No. 1 & 2) June 2014), Neeti Singh has attempted to revisit Kalidasa's *Abhijnanashakuntalam* to examine, reread and reinterpret the myth of Shakuntala and see if Kalidasa's Shakuntala still breathes into modern Indian ideas of womanhood and the feminine construct. On the other hand, Nitin Singh in his paper "Love, hate, conspiracy, and racism in Shakespeare's *Othello*", (*Zenith International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*. ISSN 2231-5780 Vol.10 (2), February 2020), has highlighted the theme of love and hate and the nature of jealousy, hatred, conspiracy and greed for power, love and sex in Shakespeare's *Othello*. *Katia Mitova's* article, "Fear of



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Doubt in Shakespeare's *Othello* focuses on the non-sceptical characters' fear of doubt and on the discord between their beliefs and Iago's incredulity. But no article directly presents the significance of token of love in Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* and Shakespeare's *Othello*. The present article would try to highlight the importance of token of love in the plot construction of Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* and William Shakespeare's *Othello* and also in the lives of Sakuntala and Desdemona.

Main Article

Kalidasa is often considered the greatest playwright of ancient India. We know that he has made a distinct and opulent contribution to Sanskrit literature. He is also often called the Shakespeare of India. MR Kale writes "the very comparison of Kalidasa to Shakespeare is the highest form of eulogy that could be bestowed upon him." (2) The stories of the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Puranas* and the *Vedas* primarily inspired Kalidasa to write his plays and poetry. The main source for his master piece, *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, which has been translated into many languages around the world, is the story of Sakuntala and Duhsanta in the *Mahabharata*. Neeti Singh has written, "By introducing the sub text of Durvasa's curse, lose and recovery of memory and ring, Kalidasa the court poet and dramatist, brings an element of refinement, romance and magic to the myth." (3) However, his *Abhijnanasakuntalam* is generally considered to be the greatest Indian literary work of any period.

We see that the charm of Kalidasa's dramas depends on his engrossing creation of women characters. Sakuntala is one of the most fascinating characters in Sanskrit dramas. She is daughter of the sage Vishwamitra and the apsara Menaka. After her birth she was abandoned by her parents. Sage Kanva brought her up. When Duhsanta sees the beautiful daughter of Menaka, Sakuntala in the hermitage of Kanva, he is struck by the arrows of Cupid. Now Sakuntala is merely an object of pleasure to Duhsanta. The King courts her and marries her as per Gandharva marriage system. But then the king has to return to his palace to take care of some affairs in the capital. Before returning Duhsanta gives royal signet ring to Sakuntala as a token of love and as a symbol of his promise to return and bring her to his palace.

Separation from Duhsanta intensifies Sakuntala's love for him. She becomes deeply engrossed in the thoughts of Duhsanta. So she fails to attend to the anger-prone sage Durvasa. Enraged Durvasa curses her:

*"You who do not notice me,
a hoard of holy merit
Standing at your door,
because you are lost in thought of one
to the exclusion of all else,
you shall be lost in his thoughts;
though you goad his memory hard,
he shall fail to remember you,
even as a man drunk remembers not
thereafter, the tale he told before."* (4)

We see that Durvasa later modifies his curse saying that when Sakuntala will present some ornament as a token of recognition, the power of the curse will cease. Sakuntala loses the ring and the ring is not available when Sakuntala wants to furnish proof of her marriage to the King. She tries to remind him that she is his wife but without the ring, Duhsanta cannot recognize her. The ring is miraculously recovered after a lapse of several years and Duhsanta's memories of Sakuntala come rushing back to him. Misrakesi thinks, "does a love such as this really need a token of recognition? How can that be?" Actually Kalidasa has not wanted the reunion of Sakuntala and Duhsanta, till their passion has been purified by suffering and repentance, and so the ring has to go astray. The royal signet ring acts like a powerful character. In Act VII, the King wants Sakuntala to wear the ring once again, but Sakuntala politely refuses the offer and asks the King, Duhsanta to wear it himself.

The token of love, the royal signet ring plays a significant role in Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* (*The Recognition of Sakuntala*). The ring thus directly or indirectly influences the events in the play throughout. The fortune of the passionate love between Sakuntala and Duhsanta hinges on a token of love. Sakuntala's recognition depends on a ring. We know that Sakuntala is recognized by virtue of a royal signet ring, a token of love, not by love itself. In the absence of this token of love, Sakuntala is lost; she is nothing. However, the royal signet ring binds the events of the play and its centrality is clear from the title of the play: *The Recognition of Sakuntala*. The royal signet ring has really gained a special importance and status here and the ring ultimately resolves the problem of the play.

We see love plays a vital role in many tragedies of Shakespeare. The way Shakespeare has portrayed the love story of Othello and Desdemona is really mind blowing. Not only we see here how a token of love becomes so important in the lives of Othello and Desdemona but we also realize how this handkerchief plays a vital role in the plot construction of the play, *Othello*.

Othello is obviously one of the greatest romantic lovers in English literature. A.C. Bradley says, "Othello is, in one sense of the word, by far the most romantic figure among Shakespeare's heroes". (5) He is a man of respect and dignity. There is no doubt that Othello loves Desdemona profoundly. He finds in Desdemona the main source of his romantic life. But his love for Desdemona is not based only on passion. He has a great respect for the qualities of Desdemona. The spell of Desdemona's presence in the life of Othello is very powerful. Her presence, her appealing glance can change so many things in the heart of Othello. Othello has committed his body and soul to her, has placed what was formerly his own wholly in her power. The childlike purity of Desdemona's mind really mesmerizes him and his sense of his own worth as a lover and husband is dependent on Desdemona's love. The beauty of this woman really ravishes him:

"Yet I'll not shed her blood,
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow
And smooth as monumental alabaster:" (6)

We see that before strangling her, Othello kisses her passionately. With this kiss, he tries to restore, although tragically too late, the concord between himself and Desdemona, that Iago had turned to discord.

Desdemona is the embodiment of virtue, purity, greatness and kind heartedness. We know that the stories of Othello's hazardous journeys and risky enterprises have nourished Desdemona's romantic imagination. Her love for Othello is very pure and it is not produced by lust, and that is why she does not hesitate to fall in love with someone who is a Moor. She openly confesses her love for Othello and requests the Duke to allow her to accompany Othello to Cyprus. This really makes the Elizabethan audience puzzled. She has the power to see him in a way that even Othello himself cannot.

In this romantic love story of Othello and Desdemona, Othello's first token of love to Desdemona plays a very important role. We can easily realize that how important this token of love is to Shakespeare to construct the plot of the tragedy. Othello tells that his mother originally received this handkerchief from an Egyptian and when Othello's mother died, she gave this handkerchief to Othello and Othello gave it to Desdemona as his love-token. It is the handkerchief with magical properties, able to ward off disaster to both giver and receiver, and to lose this handkerchief is to invite trouble. Iago knows the importance of the handkerchief and so plans to turn the token of love into a tool of destruction. When one day Othello complains of headache, Desdemona tries to bind his head with this handkerchief. But Othello declares that the handkerchief is too small and innocent Desdemona accidentally drops the precious handkerchief. Emilia, the lady attendant of Desdemona, picks up the handkerchief promptly because many times her husband, Iago urged her to steal it, but she could not do it because Desdemona always cherishes it closely. Iago now snatches it from Emilia and sends her away. He manages to pass it into Cassio's possession. Iago cunningly informs Othello that he has seen Cassio wiping his beard with the handkerchief. We see that later Othello, pretending to be suffering from a distressing head cold, asks for her handkerchief to wipe the mucus off. When Desdemona offers him one, Othello asks for the handkerchief which he has given her as a token of

love. Desdemona fails to produce the handkerchief. We know that Cassio gives it to Bianca, his mistress. Iago, by various contrivances, manages to have Othello observe Cassio handling the handkerchief and joking about it. Othello mistakenly believes that Cassio is joking about his lewd behavior with Desdemona. Now there is no doubt in his mind that Desdemona and Cassio are carrying on an affair. This handkerchief episode has been used by Shakespeare in such a way that it later motivates Othello to murder the wife he adores. The handkerchief is a dominant symbol of love here and helps Shakespeare to build the structure of the plot of his great tragedy.

Conclusion

In both the plays, *Abhijnanasakuntalam* and *Othello*, token of love has been given special importance. The episode of token of love is so indispensable that without it, it was not possible for both Kalidasa and Shakespeare to build the structure of the plays successfully. Token of love also controls affair in the lives of the heroines. "In Othello, proof of the heroine's chastity and love is demanded. Desdemona's chastity hangs on a handkerchief; Sakuntala's on a ring. Both heroines are blissfully unaware of the importance of the token. To them love is its own proof and a witness to their charity". (4) Sakuntala and Desdemona have never thought that love to prove itself has to take the help of an additional thing.

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