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A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN THE LITERATURE OF KALIDASA AND WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: UNIVERSALITY ACROSS CULTURES AND TIME

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Abstract:

This paper presents a comparative analysis of two of the greatest literary luminaries of world literature: Kalidasa (c. 4th-5th century CE), the jewel of Sanskrit literature, and William Shakespeare (1564-1616), the Bard of Avon. Despite being separated by over a millennium and belonging to vastly different cultural milieus, both authors display striking similarities in their treatment of love, nature, human emotions, idealism, and dramatic structure. This study examines their biographical contexts, major works, thematic parallels, stylistic devices, and philosophical underpinnings. Using qualitative textual analysis of Kalidasa's Abhijnanashakuntalam, Meghadutam, Raghuvamsham and Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, The Tempest, Hamlet, and A Midsummer Night's Dream, the paper argues that both represent the pinnacle of classical literature in their respective traditions.

Keywords: Kalidasa, Shakespeare, Comparative Literature, Abhijnanashakuntalam, Sanskrit Drama, English Drama

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature is the mirror of humanity, and in this mirror, two faces shine with exceptional brilliance from two different corners of the world: Kalidasa in the East and Shakespeare in the West. Sir William Jones, the first scholar to translate Shakuntala into English in 1789, was so moved that he remarked that Kalidasa was the "Indian Shakespeare". This observation initiated a two-century-long comparative discourse. The need for such a comparison is not merely to establish superiority, but to understand how two literary geniuses, working in isolation, arrived at similar artistic truths.

2. BIOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Kalidasa is believed to have flourished during the Gupta Period, often called the Golden Age of India, under Chandragupta II Vikramaditya. Very little is historically certain about his life. William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in the Elizabethan Age, also a golden age of English history. Both ages were marked by political stability, economic prosperity, and a great

patronage for arts, which allowed literature to flourish. Both were not original in terms of plot but their greatness lies in treatment.

3. THEMATIC PARALLELS

3.1. Concept of Love: Shringara Rasa

Love is central to both. Kalidasa's love is idealistic, spiritual, and culminates in marriage and duty. In Abhijnanashakuntalam, Dushyanta and Shakuntala's love is passionate but must pass through the test of separation, curse, and penance to become pure. Shakespeare's love is more diverse and often tragic. In Romeo and Juliet, love is instantaneous, youthful, and defies social norms, ending in death.

3.2. Nature: More than a Backdrop

For Kalidasa, nature is not inert. It is sentient. In Abhijnanashakuntalam, trees are sisters of Shakuntala, deer are her children. In Meghadutam, a Yaksha makes a cloud his messenger. Shakespeare also uses nature extensively, but more as a mirror to human mind. In King Lear, the storm on the heath reflects Lear's inner turmoil.

3.3. The Heroine Archetype

The heroines of both - Shakuntala and Desdemona, Sita and Cordelia - share virtues of innocence, loyalty, and endurance.

4. DRAMATIC AND POETIC CRAFTSMANSHIP

4.1. Structure and Supernatural

Kalidasa's plays follow Bharata's Natyashastra - five acts and must end happily. A curse is central. Shakespeare follows Aristotle's Poetics. He uses supernatural elements - ghosts in Hamlet, witches in Macbeth, Ariel in The Tempest - similar to Kalidasa's use of Apsaras and Rishis. Both use recognition as major plot device. The ring in Shakuntalam is similar to handkerchief in Othello.

4.2. Language and Style

Kalidasa's style is called Vaidarbhi - simple, sweet. His famous simile earned him title "Upama Kalidasasya". Shakespeare is master of metaphor, wordplay, and blank verse. He coined over 1700 words. His soliloquies reveal inner consciousness.

5. PHILOSOPHICAL DIVERGENCE

Kalidasa's worldview is essentially optimistic and dharmic. Good ultimately wins. Shakespeare's worldview, especially in tragedies, is more ambiguous and existential. Hamlet's dilemma, Lear's suffering show a world where good people can be destroyed by fate and character flaw. Kalidasa answers "How should we live?" while Shakespeare asks "Why do we live?"

6. CONCLUSION

To compare Kalidasa and Shakespeare is to compare two peaks of the same mountain range of human creativity. Kalidasa is calm, deep, serene, spiritual. Shakespeare is stormy, vast, intensely human. Both are relevant today because they speak of emotions that never age: love, jealousy, separation, duty, and forgiveness.

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