

DUṢYANTA AND ŚAKUNTALĀ IN THE 1980S: MĀDHAVA GHIMIRE'S ŚAKUNTALĀ GĪTI-NĀṬAKA

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Treating topics from the store house of classical Sanskrit is one of the characteristic features of Nepali literature.¹ Its very beginning with Bhānubhakta carries a theme from Sanskrit epic literature, namely the famous Rāmāyaṇa. The trend became very strong in the first half of the 20th century and continues even up to the present day. Although in most of the instances the original Sanskrit text has been more or less closely translated into Nepali, a number of works show a shift in form and content from the Sanskrit original. Ghimire's Śakuntalā belongs to the second category and I intend to present in this paper some of the major formal and contentual elements of shift in relation to the historical model of Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśakuntalā nāṭaka*. This will put us in a position to realize the quality of literary change brought about by the author and it will finally lead us to draw conclusions about the ideological attitude it stands for. In my analysis, I will refrain from using remarks and judgments about the author which have been made or developed by others.²

The Śakuntalā topic has long been popular among prominent literary figures in Nepal where it has drawn the attention of writers like Motirāma Bhaṭṭa, Śambhuprasāda Dhuṅgela, Lekhanātha Pauḍyāla, Lakṣmīprasāda Devakoṭā, Khaḍgamāna Malla, and others. Lakṣmīprasāda Devakoṭā was inspired by the Śakuntalā theme repeatedly and even wrote a literary epic in English published posthumously under the title *Shakuntala*³. In the list of remodelling or reshaping the traditional theme, Ghimire's Śakuntalā (abbreviated here as SGN) is the latest. It got published in V.S. 2038 (1981/82). In the foreword of the brochured book, Ghimire himself says, "This *Śakuntalā gīti-nāṭaka* is based on Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśakuntalā* - this is that and yet, not only that" (SGN, foreword (prakāśakīya)).

Formal Elements of Shift

In order to assess the kind of shift on the formal side let us take a short look at the formal elements at first. In the literary genre *gītināṭaka*, song, ballet-like parts and dramatic dialogues are accompanied by musical instruments. The music is a blend of Indian classical and Nepalese folk music. In Nepalese literature, the form of *gītināṭaka* has for the first time been used by Mādhava Ghimire to treat the topic of Śakuntalā. In comparison to Kālidāsa's drama *Abhijñānaśakuntalā nāṭaka*⁴, the number of acts has been reduced from 7 to 6 and their size has considerably been shortened. Preceding all acts is a prologue (*pūrvaraṅga*) which itself is preceded by a traditional benedictory verse (*maṅgalācaraṇa*). In between the title page and the editor's note, six lines extracted from the first canto (*sarga*) of Lakṣmīprasāda's *Nepaliśakuntalāmahākāvya* are presented. Each new act is introduced by an epigram consisting of an original verse of Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśakuntalā* in Sanskrit and its Nepali translation. In the case of the verses selected for the acts four and six, the Nepali translation of *Abhijñānaśakuntalā* by Lekhanātha Pauḍyāla has been given. The text is mostly composed of stanzas of the classical metre *anuṣṭubh* using endrhymes aa, bb, cc, etc. The style of language used is concise, clear, and tender although resounding Bhānubhakta at places.

All of Kālidāsa's major characters belonging to the hermitage (*āśrama*) of the great ascetic (*maharṣi*) Kaṇva including the chief of the army and the king's companion, the *vidūṣaka* alias Mādhavya, have been retained whereas all characters belonging to the supernatural world and to Duṣyanta's palace in Hastinapur have been renounced. Ghimire has invented one new character: Devadūta, who is "Duṣyanta's inner beautiful self"⁵.

Regarding stage directions for music and dance the printed text edition does not give any clues for its realization except for the direction of the *virāḍ*⁶ to be played on a few occasions.

Contentual Elements of Shift

In comparison to the basic dramatic set up as presented by Kālidāsa, Ghimire has introduced major changes in the formation of the plot bringing about a distinctively modified play. The modifications, however, reduce the dramatic impact heavily, but they show us what Ghimire as a writer regards important, where he disagrees with tradition or feels the need for a redefinition.

The most decisive innovation in the plot thread is the omission of the ring-curse motive. The ring-curse motive was the major narrative invention of Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśakuntalā* through which he created the necessary conditions for a remodeling of the two heroes' characters in relation to the epic narrative of the Mahābhārata and what allowed him the addition of new characters and scenes. After Kālidāsa, no version in Sanskrit and Nepalese

literature was able to abandon this device. And by abandoning it the poet does not return to the classic epic model of the Mahābhārata either.⁷

The example of the character Durvāsas may serve to illustrate the style and tone of innovation this new Nepalese Śakuntalā carries with her. Although Ghimire's Śakuntalā does not employ the curse motif, ṛṣi Durvāsas, who is Kālidāsa's creation, remains one of the *dramatis personae*. Durvāsas appears together with Kaṇva in the fourth act where both of them meet on the bank of the river Mālinī, the place of Śakuntalā's birth and the place of the *āśrama* of her foster father ṛṣi Kaṇva. Kaṇva tells Durvāsas about the imminent departure of Śakuntalā for the palace of the king. In reply, Durvāsa, who is not in favour of this move, gets angry but does not speak a curse any more as in Kālidāsa, instead, he utters a wise saying of the value of a prophecy. True to his traditional character it is of negative nature (SGN:31).

What kind of time has come, who is loving whom?

What he welcomes today, that he will negate tomorrow.⁸

After this meeting, Durvāsas and Kaṇva part into different directions. This can be regarded as a symbol of their contrary attitude towards the present and the future: Durvāsas, the unbending pessimist, Kaṇva, the adjusting optimist. The figure invented by Kālidāsa remains, but it has been set into a new environment and its former function has drastically been changed. Durvāsas former role as an effective power has been reduced to that of a mere forecaster of the future. He is no longer the visible cause of the suffering of Śakuntalā as in *Abhijñānaśakuntalā* but only a medium predicting a negative development, which is of a very short duration in SGN when compared to her long period of suffering in *Abhijñānaśakuntalā*.

The second important novelty is the complete omission of Śakuntalā's son Bharata alias Sarvadamana whose birth now happens outside the play's timely frame. While in Duṣyanta's palace, Śakuntalā's pregnancy is referred to by Gautamī, a female ascetic living in Kaṇva's *āśrama* who is his "adopted sister" (*dharmabhaginī*), but the expected child plays no role in the *gīti-nāṭaka*.

These two almost revolutionary innovations allowed a complete abstention from any scene taking place in the supernatural world. Only one referential word has survived from the overwhelming role of the supernatural in Kālidāsa. It is the heavenly voice (*ākāśavānī*) known from the *Śakuntalopākhyāna* of the *Mahābhārata* which gets reintroduced by Ghimire. Its realization and message, however, are entirely new: the *gīti-nāṭaka* ends with voices from heaven pronouncing a blessing (*āśirvādako ākāśavānī*) to Duṣyanta and Śakuntalā. These heavenly voices are Kaṇva's pupils conveying the message of the *maharṣi*.

The expositional stanza to these 3 verses of 4 lines each contains in its second line a refrain repeated at the end of each verse. It says:

Śakuntalā and Duṣyanta, Duṣyanta and Śakuntalā

May the vast earth be a place of great reunion.⁹

The first of the three verses is identical with the opening verse (*maṅgalācaraṇa*) of the play and thus joins the new beginning and the new end:

Having mounted even winged horses and having strolled
even the milky way

Having collected even the flowers from the stars in his lap

Moving hither and thither man of today is lonely - as if lost

May the vast earth be a place of great reunion.¹⁰

Along with the following two verses these last lines mirror the abstract message of Ghimire's Śakuntalā leaving the historical plane of genealogy completely and exchanging it for an all comprising, humanistic appeal. Because of the fundamental value of these lines for the philosophy proclaimed they are therefore quoted here:

May the path of every journey end at the door of man¹¹

May the object of the whole life end in the same love

May not the earth become a horde, may not man be alone

May the vast earth be a place of great reunion.

The soul full of the drink of immortality, the eyes of a
beautiful glaze

The entire world grows steadily towards perfection

May the world become [like] a full moon, may every man be
[like a piece of] art.

May the vast earth be a place of great reunion.¹²

In Ghimire, the topic of Śakuntalā takes on a dimension of humanistic-philosophical reflection. The whole play is framed with an existentialist point of view and coloured with an optimistic outlook towards the future. Thus, Duṣyanta and Śakuntalā become representatives of individuals experiencing life basically as loneliness, a loneliness, however, which longs and strives for interaction, union, love. Śakuntalā and Duṣyanta finally become the manifestations of a natural, blissful, happy, human reunion symbolizing civilizing progress and global brotherhood.

Psychologizing the Main Characters in Relation to the Model of Abhijñānaśakuntalā Leads to Greater Psychological Credibility :

A closer analysis of the two main characters reveals the substantial shift from their classical model: fate as the dominant factor of Kālidāsa's ring-Śakuntalā has been given up in favour of a psychological turn producing a modern and higher degree of credibility. In Ghimire's Śakuntalā, Duṣyanta is portrayed as a king and lover running into a psychological conflict and crisis which he finally

overcomes through introspection and contemplation. The hero's *katharsis* happens after his breakdown in an interior monologue which is dramatically enhanced through the creation of the new *dramatis persona*, Devadūta. When Duṣyanta finally follows his conscience drawing the line between hollow pretention and meaningful being and acting, between estrangement from his self and sticking to himself, he realizes his wrong doing in rejecting Śakuntalā. Waking up from a faint he searches her asking pilgrims about a pregnant woman. After some time, he finds her on a platform beneath a tree (*cautārī*) on the bank of the river Yamunā.

The modernized portrayal and upliftment of Duṣyanta's character along with the new shape of the happy end set up pillars of an ideologically new story. Its make up is guided by a concern for an intelligible and reconstructable psychological constellation when compared to Kālidāsa's composition where we find central scenes employing the *deus ex machina* device as, for example, the appearance of god Indra's charioteer Mātali in act VI. With Kālidās, this scene complies with the rules of Sanskrit poetics for the evocation of the *adbhuta* rasa as laid down in *Nāṭyaśāstra*, but it is no longer desired now.

In Ghimire's rendering, Duṣyanta's behaviour in the *āśrama* does not remain free from outspoken criticism unlike to Kālidāsa where it has to be inferred. In the beginning of the play, this is reservedly but unmistakably expressed by the words of Anasūyā, Śakuntalā's companion in the *āśrama*, when she says,

"Young persons tend to do be inattentive, ... is he

[Duṣyanta] going to break the rules of the *āśrama* today?"¹³

By pointing clearly to Duṣyanta's religious-morally unlawful acting Ghimire brings the hero nearer to the mind set of the modern spectator or reader of the play and in order to make him more acceptable he transforms Duṣyanta's character substantially through a higher degree of psychologizing.

In contrast, Śakuntalā's character remains throughout above all doubts and second thoughts. Kālidāsa's erstwhile concern for caste seems to be of no more importance. Śakuntalā is the embodiment of female virtue whose main feature is endurance, as it was in Kālidāsa. Endurance, however, is now further enhanced and takes on even a stronger form what is forgiveness. This is expressed through the mouth of Mādhavya, who is Duṣyanta's relative and company on the hunt, when he says,

"Women are the embodiment of forgiveness, in the end, she [Śakuntalā] will forgive."¹⁴

In addition to that, her simlicity (*saratā*) along with her virginity (*kumārīpana*) (SGN: 27) are emphasized thus making her also a perfect match to the present standard ideal of a Nepalese bride.

Elimination of the Supernatural and Reintroduction of the Element of Truth as Means for Achieving Realism and Proximity of the Present : Contrary to Kālidāsa's Śakuntalā, Ghimire's Śakuntalā is stripped of all supernatural elements. The reunion of Duṣyanta and Śakuntalā on the bank of the river Yamuna allows even the birth of Bharata to be imagined as taking place in an earthly environment, as it had been the case in the *Mahābhārata* story (*Ādiparvan, Śakuntalopākhyāna*). From the side of the author, there seems to be no more interest in any kind of magic happening or fairy tale atmosphere, as partly evoked by Devakoṭā in his English language epic *Shakuntala*. Ghimire promotes an immediately intelligible, realistic scenario which helps the modern reader identify with the heroes' psychology and stage actions.

The value of truth which was of major concern in the *Mahābhārata*, but did not feature prominently with Kālidāsa, has been reintroduced as a topic of relevance, for example, in the case when Devadūta speaks to Duṣyanta,

"Nobody can permanently go on lying to oneself /
nobody can go on living with two personalities."¹⁵

In addition to the individual-psychological level, truth is now referred to on a literary-social level, where it carries with it the whole depth and weight of the still contemporary figure of the great poet Lakṣmīprasāda Devakoṭā.¹⁶ When Duṣyanta in his palace pretends to be unable to remember anything concerning Śakuntalā, he also expresses his fears regarding the possible reaction of the people who might doubt his honesty, similar to Duḥṣanta of the *Mahābhārata*. Turning towards Kaṇva's pupils he says,

"What are you doing? What will the people say?"¹⁷

and his rhetorical question is answered by Śaradvata with the words,

"The truth is always honourable, this is what the people will say."¹⁸

"The Truth is Honourable"¹⁹ is the title of a famous essay of social criticism by Lakṣmīprasāda Devakoṭā which is echoed by Ghimire's pen in an allegedly ancient context. Ghimire thus cuts off from the long coat of distanceness of the classical subject and joins to it the proximity of contemporary Nepali literature and the reader's present.

Ideological Expression

After having introduced so much of change and innovation the question might arise whether the author should be called revolutionary. Judging from Ghimire's treatment of the literary tradition or past the formal and contentual changes seem to justify the granting of the *epitheton*. Judging from an implicit leaning towards radical-futuristic social concepts, however, a different picture appears.

In my analysis, I did not trace any evidence or indication contradictive to the statement claiming that the author does not go beyond the frame of the present prevailing when his work was published, rather does he reflect the modern present of Nepal in respect to social values and norms in this work. In his Śakuntalā, Ghimire seems to favour a devaluation of the magic and supernatural, a disconcern for caste, a removal of traditional preconditions and dealings with the institution of marriage, and a decrease in the importance attached to the value of owning male children. It may be recalled that in Kālidāsa Duṣyanta reunites with Śakuntalā only after meeting his son. The former explicit concern for the male issue has shifted towards a higher degree of self-achieved personal integrity and responsibility. More emphasis has been laid on individual feeling and mutual understanding and the congruence between word and action. While granting the characters their radius of ideological movement in the play, the poet does not transgress the forward looking social-legal limits of his present. However, equally characteristic and important appears to me the fact that he does not fall behind them.

Duṣyanta and Śakuntalā seem to be perfectly adjusted to the predominant ideological condition of the Nepal of the author's social present: on the path of modernisation or assimilating a Western value system. The two main characters no longer behave like extraordinary beings from a distant heroic past, but like humane people of the world of today with natural passions, weaknesses, a wish for self-determination, and an ability and strive for positive thinking. Although placed in an almost antique, in the context of modern Nepal if not an exotic than at least a romantic setting, Duṣyanta and Śakuntalā have become spiritual contemporaries of the 1980s.

Notes

1. This paper was presented at the 1998 Annual Conference of the Literary Association of Nepal held at Padma Kanya Campus, T.U.
2. For a recent appreciation of the poet Mādhava Ghimire see Yadunātha Khanāla "Mādhava Ghimirekā kavītāko sāno parikrama" in: *Samakālina sāhitya, varṣa 7, aṅka 3, pūrṇa aṅka 27, sāuna, bhadau, asoja 2054, pp. 16-26.*
3. Devakota, Lakshmi Prasad. *Shakuntala*. Kathmandu: Cultural Association 1991.
4. Compare for instance the edition by M.R. Kale, *The Abhijñānaśākuntalam of Kālidāsa*, 10th edition 1969 (1977)
5. Devadūta: Duṣyantabhitrako sundara rūpa (SGN: (8))
6. Name of an Indian string instrument, preferably used in South Indian music

7. An overview and a discussion of the different versions has been presented in my dissertation *Śakuntalā Complex: The Development of the Śakuntalā Theme in Sanskrit and Nepalese Literature with Special Reference to the Śakuntalopākhyāna of the Mahābhārata*, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, 1994.
8. Kasto samaya yo āyo, kallāi pyāra garcha ko?/
āja jo garcha svikāra, bhola inkāra garcha tyo/ (SGN: 31)
9. Śakuntalā ra Duṣyanta , Duṣyanta ra Śakuntalā/
Viśāla dharti hoos mahāmilanako thalā// (SGN: 50)
10. Bāyupaṁkhi caḍhi ghoḍā chāyāpatha ḍule pani/
Tārāmaṇḍalakā phula poltāmā baṭule pani/
Hiṁḍḍā hiṁḍḍai harāe jhaiṁ āja mānche cha ekalā/
Viśāla dharti hoos mahāmilanako thalā// (ibid.)
11. Emphasis Ghimire's, underline mine
12. Mārga pratyeka yātrāko mānchekai dvāramā pugos/
Sārā jivanāko dhoko eṭai pyāramā pugos/
Samāja nabanos hūla, nabanos vyakti ekalā/
Viśāla dharti hoos mahāmilanako thalā//
Bharī amṛta ātmāmā āṁkhāmā jyoti sundara/
Pūrṇatātira saṁsāra baḍhirai' cha nirantara/
Pūrṇa candra banos loka, ekaeka vyakti hos kalā/
Viśāla dharti hoos mahāmilanako thalā// (ibid.)
13. Aṭerī garcha tanderi, ...
Yalle āśramako āja niyamaī bhaṅga garcha ki? (SGN: 15)
14. Nārī hun yī kṣamāmūrti kṣamā ākhir gardachin. (SGN: 43)
15. Āphūlai sadhaiṁ ḍhāmṭi ḍhāmṭna saktaina kvai pani/
Duī vyaktitvamā bāṁcī bāṁcna saktaina kvai pani// (SGN: 48)
16. For a brief introduction to the poet and an annotated translation of his first essay together with a commentary see my : "Lakṣmīprāsāda Devakoṭa's 'The Fifteenth of the Month of Āṣāḍha' ", in : *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, Vol. 20, No.2, 1993, pp. 149-164.
17. Yo ke garirahekā chau? Ke bhanlā naralokale (SGN: 42)
18. Satya huncha sadhaiṁ sojho, tyai bhancha naralokale (SGN: 42)
19. "Satya sojho huncha", in: *Lakṣmīnibandhasaṁgraha*, Kāṭhamāḍaṁ: Sājhā Prakāśana, B.S. 2044, pp. 236-238.

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