

## A STUDY ON THE KALIDASA'S PLAYS - HIGHLIGHTING POTRAYALS OF DESIRE

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**Abstract:** Kalidasa authored three plays: *Abhijnanashakuntala* ("The Recognition of Shakuntala"), *Vikramorvashi* ("Urvashi Won by Valour"), and *Malavikagnimitra* ("Malavika and Agnimitra"). His plays are marked for their themes, especially that of memory. Heroines in Kalidasa are always portrayed as the objects of desire, with little agency over their bodies. There is always a voyeuristic view of the bodies of these heroines, as the voyeur (mostly the protagonist) watches while hiding behind a tree or creepers. It could be interpreted that the lack of agency to his female characters is a retaliation to the arrogance of his much knowledgeable wife, Vasanti. Kalidasa's portrayal of the hero is always that of a virtuous king. It is speculated that this is because he was part of a king's court.

This paper is an attempt to study agency in the plays of Kalidasa, by doing a close reading focusing on the depiction and description of bodies. In the description of a body, there are two components to be looked at: the object and the subject. The subject is the beholder of the gaze and in most cases a voyeur, while the object is one being gazed upon, oblivious of the gaze.

The paper is divided into an introduction, three sections and a conclusion. The first section deals with *Abhijnanashakuntala* ("The Recognition of Shakuntala"), the second with *Vikramorvashi* ("Urvashi Won by Valour"), and the third section is on *Malavikagnimitra* ("Malavika and Agnimitra"). Each section begins with a brief summary of the play, followed by a close reading with mentions of key passages from the text.

**Keywords:** Agency, Bodies, Kalidasa, Women.

**Introduction:** Kalidasa was an esteemed Sanskrit poet and playwright. Apart from various poems, Kalidasa authored three plays: *Abhijnanashakuntala* ("The Recognition of Shakuntala"), *Vikramorvashi* ("Urvashi Won by Valour"), and *Malavikagnimitra* ("Malavika and Agnimitra"). There are no facts but only speculations and myths when it comes to Kalidasa's life. There are two major events in his life that need to be noted, the first is the tale of his marriage, and second is regarding his position as poet laureate.

It is said that Kalidasa was a fool and he was married off to a knowledgeable woman - Vasanti - by her rival as revenge for his insult. When she found out that he was a fool, she was deeply offended (Miller, Kalidasa's world and his plays 1999). There are many versions of what followed, but in all the various versions, Kalidasa gains knowledge as a boon by worshipping a deity.

Kalidasa, according to some legends is considered to have been part of the "nine gems" in the court of Vikramaditya of Ujjain (Gerow 2010). While some scholars associate him with Chandra Gupta II. It is the latter that suggests Kalidasa belonged to the Gupta Dynasty (Miller 1999).

It is important to note these two events because of their influence on his works. Some myths suggest that the first initials of Kalidasa's works, when put in correct order form a Sanskrit verse that his wife said to insult him. "[...]They (Kalidasa's heroines) are goddess-like but emotionally and sexually vulnerable [...]" (Miller 1999)

Heroines in Kalidasa are always portrayed as the objects of desire, with little agency over their bodies.

There is always a voyeuristic view of the bodies of these heroines, as the voyeur (mostly the protagonist) watches while hiding behind a tree or creepers. This aspect of his plays can be related to the first event, that is his marriage to a knowledgeable woman. It could be interpreted that the lack of agency to his female characters is a retaliation to the arrogance of his much knowledgeable wife, Vasanti.

Kalidasa's portrayal of the hero is always that of a virtuous king. It is speculated that this is because he was part of a king's court.

"The hero in each play is a king whose character is shaped by the poet's view of kingship and its relation to cosmic order." (Miller 1999)

Since the king was a patron of Kalidasa, his characters are shaped with much attention. Kalidasa also provided his own views on kingship and its relation to the cosmic order through his plays. In *Abhijnanashakuntala*, Kalidasa is retelling the story which was originally part of the Mahabharata. What stands out in Kalidasa's retelling is the addition of a curse which helps retain the many virtues of king Dushyanta within the play.

Some other key features of his plays that need to be mentioned are his style and themes. His plays begin in medias res, and most of the acts too. There were certain scenes, like depicting violence or acts of affection, that were not allowed to be performed on stage according to the stage rules of those times. It is thus that he chose to begin the plays in medias res. It is significant to note this detail because the audience is constantly being informed of all the action through dialogues. Dialogues therefore become key component of the play. Kalidasa is also considered

the master of dialogues because he uses both Sanskrit and Prakrit in his plays. Following the system of the times, Sanskrit is used by characters of high regard while everyone else uses Prakrit.

Nature and Memory are key themes in Kalidasa's plays, which have received much deserved scholarly attention. In the plays nature is not seen as an entity residing outside the individual, but rather a part of the individual's life. Rabindranath Tagore in an essay wrote about Kalidasa's use of nature and the idea of humans within nature, compared to Shakespeare's representation of nature as something that needs to be tamed, in his play, *The Tempest*. Tagore also refers to *The Recollection of Shakuntala* as a play depicting union between nature and law (Sawhney 2009).

"The heroine is characteristically interchangeable with elements of nature, whose procreative energies she personifies. The parts of her body are conventionally equated with natural objects." (Miller 1999)

As mentioned in the above excerpt, heroines are representatives of nature within the plays. The idea of nature is interlinked with bodies within the plays and is therefore significant to this paper.

Miller subtitles her book on Kalidasa's plays as the "Theatre of Memory". All the plays are progressing towards the re-union of the two individuals and memory is not only a prominent theme but an agent that progresses the plot. All three plays have supernatural elements and ideas of memory lose and recollection. Bodies are also interlinked with memory. This is especially evident in the play, *Urvashi Won by Valour*, as bodies and touch become significant for recollection.

This paper is an attempt to study agency in the plays of Kalidasa, by doing a close reading focusing on the depiction and description of bodies. In the description of a body, there are two components to be looked at: the object and the subject. The subject is the beholder of the gaze and in most cases a voyeur, while the object is one being gazed upon, oblivious of the gaze.

The paper is divided into an introduction, three sections and a conclusion. The first section deals with *Abhijnanashakuntala* ("*The Recognition of Shakuntala*"), the second with *Vikramorvashi* ("*Urvashi Won by Valour*"), and the third section is on *Malavikagnimitra* ("*Malavika and Agnimitra*"). Each section begins with a brief summary of the play, followed by a close reading with mentions of key passages from the text.

**Section I:** *The Recognition of Shakuntala* is a retelling of Shakuntala's story in a seven act play. The story of Shakuntala was originally a part of the epic, Mahabharata. Kalidasa's retelling is focused on the king, Dushyanta, and it elaborates on his many virtues as a king.

In Kalidasa's play, Dushyanta stumbles upon a hermitage on one of his hunting expeditions. At the hermitage, he is taken aback by the beauty of one of the hermitage women. This woman, Shakuntala, soon begins to admire king Dushyanta too. They perform the ritual of gandharva marriage<sup>1</sup>. Dushyanta soon has to return to his duties at the kingdom. One day a lovelorn Shakuntala is lost in the memory of her lover, and in her absent mindedness, she disregards sage Durvasa. An angry Durvasa curses that the lover in whose memory Shakuntala is lost, will have no memory of her. Shakuntala is oblivious of the curse, while her friends apologise on her behalf and request him to uplift the curse. Durvasa incapable of uplifting the curse, then adds a condition to the curse, that on seeing the ring he gave Shakuntala, Dushyanta will regain all memory of her. Everyone soon learns about the affair, as Shakuntala gives birth to their son. When Shakuntala reaches the kingdom, Dushyanta unable to recognise her, refuses to acknowledge the marriage. Only when the ring reaches Dushyanta, through a series of events, does he regain the memory of Shakuntala. He happily accepts her and their son (who is professed to be a great ruler), within the kingdom.

"The title of each play is a composite word that includes the name of the heroine combined with the name of the hero or a central idea in the story [...]" (Miller 1999)

Shakuntala is the grammatical object in the title of the play- *The Recognition of Shakuntala*. The title establishes Shakuntala as the object of desire within the play. Although the story revolves around Shakuntala, she is not the focus of the narrative, but rather she is the protagonist's object of desire. King Dushyanta, the protagonist, is the absent subject in the title, since he is the one who is performing the act of recognition or recollection.

As mentioned earlier, Kalidasa portrays his protagonists to be virtuous since they are kings. The entire play is directed in a way to cater a king with many virtues as the protagonist. For example, Dushyanta's attempt to disguise himself, in order to maintain the peace of the hermitage, is a device used to convey his respect and humility towards the ascetics.

Kalidasa's retelling has the added element of Durvasa's curse. This curse is the reason of all the commotion, i.e., it is due to this curse that Dushyanta forgets about his affair with Shakuntala and refuses to recognise her. This added element of the curse helps maintain Dushyanta's role as the righteous king, because he does not violate the gandharva marriage himself, but rather does so due to the curse. Since the curse is a result of Shakuntala's absent mindedness, Dushyanta is a mere recipient of fate in the play. He is the subject of the play, and at the same time

subjected by fate to the supernatural. By introducing the curse, Kalidasa manages to portray Dushyanta as a virtuous king while also keeping his rejection of Shakuntala in the retelling.

While Dushyanta is not an active agent in the realization of the curse, he is the active holder of the gaze. He is the voyeur in the first act of play. As Dushyanta comes across Shakuntala and her two friends talking, he says:

"King: How lovely they are to behold. I will take to this shade and wait." (Kalidasa and Vasudeva, *The Recognition of Shakuntala* 2006)

He is established as the beholder and the women explicitly the objects to behold, with the above mentioned dialogue. The above line also establishes Dushyanta as a voyeur since the women are unaware of his presence. It becomes evident that he is taken by Shakuntala's figure as he repeatedly comments on it, and refers to it as "guilelessly appealing figure" (Kalidasa and Vasudeva, *The Recognition of Shakuntala* 2006).

Shakuntala, still unaware of the king's presence asks her friend to loosen her bark garment. As a response, both her friends, also unaware of his presence, comment on her adulthood. The king, who is posed as a voyeur in this scene, also comments on Shakuntala's breasts, to himself.

"King: Admitted, the bark-cloth is not apposite to her youthful prime, yet it does not fail to adorn her. How? A lotus entangled with shaivala weed is still attractive, the spot on the moon, though a blemish, sheds beauty, this slender maiden is most captivating even wearing a bark-cloth: For what could not serve as an adornment to sweet figures?" (Kalidasa and Vasudeva, *The Recognition of Shakuntala* 2006)

In the above mentioned scene, with the playful comments on Shakuntala's bodies, the two friends become an extension of Dushyanta's gaze. The dialogue between the two friends regarding Shakuntala's adulthood is giving way to the king's dialogue, i.e. the one mentioned above. There is another instance of the friends acting as an agent to bring forth king Dushyanta's comment:

"Priyamvada: With you standing beside it, the bakula tree seems to me as if it were embraced by a vine.

King: Lower lip has the hue of a sprouting tendril, her arms imitate tender branches. Youth, desirable like a flower, is primed in her physique." (Kalidasa and Vasudeva, *The Recognition of Shakuntala* 2006)

Priyamvada's description, sets the tone for Dushyanta's description of Shakuntala. The detailed description of Shakuntala's body, make her the desired object for the audience as it invites and shares Dushyanta's gaze.

Another agent that shares the king's gaze is the bee who is introduced in the play, buzzing around Shakuntala. The other two plays also have agents like

bees that have access to the body of the heroines, only to cater to the gaze of the hero. When the bee begins to harass Shakuntala, the on-looking king, envying the bees access, voices out his desire as he describes the bee and its movement:

"King: (gazing longingly) You repeatedly touch her darting eye, so that it quivers; approaching her ear you hum sweetly as if confiding a secret; and while she flails her hands you drink from her lower lip the treasure of love. I, perplexed, am foiled by the Gods, while you, bee, enjoy success." (Kalidasa and Vasudeva, *The Recognition of Shakuntala* 2006)

Kalidasa seems to be using the bee, like the friends, to represent the king's desires and provide a space for him to articulate it. The bee is a recurring symbol within the play, especially when Dushyanta wants to express his desires in respect to Shakuntala. Since the dramaturgy of the times did not allow certain acts on the stage, Kalidasa uses the symbol of a bee as a pointer while using Dushyanta's dialogues to describe Shakuntala's body. Shakuntala is not the only one who lacks agency over her body in front of king Dushyanta. Dushyanta being the king, has power over everybody in his kingdom, even his friend, the buffoon.

"Buffoon: Even at night I may not rest my limbs at will, for their joints are knocked out by the horse-cart." (Kalidasa and Vasudeva, *The Recognition of Shakuntala* 2006)

The above lines by the Buffoon, although said in jest, give an insight within the system of those times, on how agency over one's own body functioned during a monarchy. While women were not considered as individuals with agency by anyone, everyone lacked agency over their bodies in front of the king.

"King: That tender look, even when her eyes glanced elsewhere, that gait, slowed by the heaviness of her buttocks, as if deliberately teasing, that angry outburst at her friend who had detained her, saying: "You may not leave!" —All this was really aimed at me! Ah! Love perceives all as its own." (Kalidasa and Vasudeva, *The Recognition of Shakuntala* 2006)

Dushyanta's preoccupation with Shakuntala's body is explicit in the above lines, where he describes her to the Buffoon. This objectification of Shakuntala by the king, in front of his jester, emphasize the king as the subject and Shakuntala as the object of desire. Throughout the play, Dushyanta provides many descriptions of Shakuntala, while there are no descriptions of Dushyanta by Shakuntala. This is precisely because she is powerless and lacks the authority to hold a gaze. There is one description of the king, however, that portrays the king as the object, and someone else as the beholder:

"General: (looking at the king) Though considered a vice, hunting, in fact, has proved beneficial for our Commander. For with his body, its forefront raw from

the ceaseless impact of the bowstring, withstanding the sun's rays without breaking into sweat, though it has lost weight this is not noticeable because of its muscular development, he exhibits a vital force like a mountain-roving elephant!" (Kalidasa and Vasudeva, *The Recognition of Shakuntala* 2006)

The General's dialogue, as mentioned above, is a very detailed description of the king's body. Considering the power relations, it is a radical description and a powerful gaze. It is radical not only for its defiance of authority but also because of the suggestions of homosexuality. One of the reasons homosexuality is feared is because of the turn of gaze, that is to say, the objectification of women by men turns into objectification of men by men. This agency of objectifying another individual and beholding a certain gaze, however, is not extended to the women in the play.

**Section II:** *Urvashi Won by Valour* is a play in five acts. In the play, King Pururavas assists Indra's army, and saves Urvashi from the demons that abducted her. The king is smitten by the beauty of this seductress. Urvashi returns to the domain she belongs to, while Pururavas returns to his own. Both the individuals desire each other and are preoccupied with thoughts of the other. One day while performing a play, Urvashi utters the king Pururavas' name and her master curses her. Indra gives her a boon by sending her to Pururavas till the time he sees the face of their child. The queen, who has come to know of her husband's obsession with the nymph, performs a ritual to allow their marriage. As Urvashi and Pururavas spend time in Kailasha, Urvashi becomes enraged and runs away. She turns into a creeper by stepping into an area forbidden for women. The king is driven to insanity by losing his beloved, he begins to talk to the animals, birds and trees in the forest while searching for her. He comes across the gem of union, with the help of which he is able to locate Urvashi.

They both return to the palace, where the gem of union is stolen by a bird. This time, the gem brings along their son who was sent away to a hermitage by Urvashi, so that she could spend more time with Pururavas. After the family's union, Urvashi is set to depart for her domain and Pururavas to leave his kingdom, but Indra interrupts again. Indra asks Pururavas to join his army for another battle against the demons and extends Urvashi's time with the king to a lifetime.

The title again places Urvashi as the grammatical object, and Pururavas as the subject that won her with his display of valour. Urvashi is one of the most famous seductresses in Hindu mythology. She was created by Sage Narayana, from his thigh. The irony is that an ascetic created the most erotic object of desire out of himself. King Pururavas also comments

on the same, and then proceeds to describe the more appropriate way of creating someone so desirable:

"King: [...]In creating her, surely the luster-giving moon was the progenitor, of Love himself, who has only one mood, the erotic, or flowering spring, how could the ancient sage, cold and dry from studying scripture, his mind withdrawn from worldly things, create this enchanting form?" (Kalidasa and Gitomer, *Urvashi Won By Valor* 1999)

The above line represent the idea of an ascetic creating a desirable nymph as a clear dichotomy between asceticism and desire. The line also establishes Urvashi as the object of desire for Pururavas. It becomes even more evident as Pururavas takes joy in jolts that make their shoulders touch:

"King: So! This rough landing has yielded a fine reward for me! From the chariot's jolt my shoulder brushed the shoulder of this nymph with hips like bows; the touch of our bodies made my hair stand on end as if the god of love had sprouted within me." (Kalidasa and Gitomer, *Urvashi Won By Valor* 1999)

Touch is important in this play as it is interlinked with memory and emotions. There are many embraces within the play, like Urvashi embracing her friend on account of her return. Pururavas, when in search of Urvashi comes across her creeper form, embraces her:

"King: Oh my body is blissfully soothed, as if from the touch of Urvashi's limbs. " (Kalidasa and Gitomer, *Urvashi Won By Valor* 1999)

He is able to recognise the embrace, her touch even as she is transformed from a nymph to a creeper. Throughout the play, there is a constant worry about the king's heir, as he is childless. In all the plays, the heir is important, so the woman of desire must also be the mother of a son that has exceptional powers and will be the ruler. When Indra sent Urvashi to the king, his condition was that she may return once Pururavas sees his son. Their son is introduced in the final act of the play. The desire for son that was present throughout the play comes to an end with the re-union of all three.

"King: It is said that the touch of a son thrills every limb of the body - come, then, gladden me now, like a moonbeam melting a moonstone." (Kalidasa and Gitomer, *Urvashi Won By Valor* 1999)

Touch here seems to be accessible through kinship ties. Even though the father and son meet for the first time, their kinship tie requires them to embrace each other. Also, this represents completion of Pururavas' desire for a child.

Another noteworthy idea is that of the god of love, which is repeatedly invoked within the play. This love is the erotic love, and not the romantic love. It is important to separate the two because the king's descriptions are always about the body in a sexual



manner. The King's bodily reaction (hair standing up) is also significant as it expresses his desire and mood. This is seen multiple times within the play. Once in response to Urvashi's doubts about the king's affection towards her, Chitrlekha says "Didn't he answer when the hair on his arms sprang up like the down on a lotus stalk?" (Kalidasa and Gitomer, *Urvashi Won By Valor* 1999). There is one instance where the king is reading the body language of the queen to determine her mood.

"King: [...]Her bodice is white, her only ornaments the auspicious signs of a married woman's fortune, and blades of ritual grass embellishing her hair; she's abandoned her pride on the pretext of a vow- her beauty shows she's softened toward me." (Kalidasa and Gitomer, *Urvashi Won By Valor* 1999)

The above description not only shares the body language of the queen, but the change in gaze too. The way he describes the queen, is different than the way he describes Urvashi. This difference marks the change in gaze, while Urvashi is the object of her desire, the queen is his respectful wife but not someone he desires sexually after meeting Urvashi. It is also because Urvashi is a divine seductress, which makes her the object of desire for all.

"King: She is the ornament of her ornaments, the crowning jewel of her jeweled display. Friend, even the standard of perfection finds its ideal in her form." (Kalidasa and Gitomer, *Urvashi Won By Valor* 1999)

The king is referring to Urvashi in the above dialogue. He is praising her form's perfection by calling it an ornament in itself. Miller, in her essay works with the idea of heroine's body and she says, "The heroine's body is an object of worship; poetic ornaments are like the auspicious ornaments placed on an image in religious ritual or on a bride for her marriage ritual." (Miller, *Kalidasa's world and his plays* 1999). The heroine would more aptly be termed as the object of desire rather than the object of worship. The description of Urvashi's body is through the male gaze, that sexualises and objectifies her body. The king mostly refers to her goose like gait or swollen breasts or round hips.

"Chitraratha: [...] Long ago Urvashi was first presented to storm-god Indra by Narayana, and now by you who rescued her, breaking the demon's mighty grip." (Kalidasa and Gitomer, *Urvashi Won By Valor* 1999)

Urvashi lacks agency over her body, and this is emphasised on multiple times within the play as well. King Pururavas also says, "[...] She is not the mistress of her body but only the heart she gave to me- this trust was signed in sighs betrayed by the trembling rise and fall of her breast" (Kalidasa and Gitomer, *Urvashi Won By Valor* 1999). Urvashi is constantly offered to one by another as desired by her master.

Considering the title as well, Urvashi is seen as an object by everyone, and not only the king.

Even though she lacks agency, her supernatural powers as a nymph allow her the pleasure of a voyeur. In one scene, Urvashi spies on Pururavas to know of his desires. On learning that it is she, he desires, she becomes visible to him. Although a voyeur looking at the unsuspecting king, Urvashi does not provide any descriptions of his body, so there is no presence of gaze.

**Section III:** "In *Malvikagnimitra*, Kalidasa invokes the view of the ancient sages that drama, though men have many tastes, can delight everyone: it is balanced visual rite of the gods; its wild and gentle modes appear in Siva's androgynous body; and human action, arising from the three strands of Nature, produces its various forms of rasa." (Miller, *Kalidasa's world and his plays* 1999)

*Malavika and Agnimitra* is also a five act play. Through the chitchat of the house maids, the audience learns that king Agnimitra finds Malavika, a part of the queen's staff, beautiful. The audience also learns that Malavika is a great performer. One day, a fight between two dance masters leads to a dance off. The judges, i.e. a nun, the king and his first queen, are not satisfied, and request the masters to call upon their students to perform. Malavika is the first performer. This is the first time Agnimitra looks at her in person. He begins to contemplate upon ways to meet Malavika and convey his feelings to her along with his friend, the fool. It so happens that due to a leg injury, the first queen cannot perform her duty for the blossoming of the Bakula tree and in her stead, Malavika is asked to perform the ritual. The king is present, and so is his second queen. The second queen is enraged with envy when she listens to Bakulavalika convey the king's desire for Malavika. On her request, the first queen imprisons both Bakulavalika and Malavika, till the time her ring is presented to the guard. When Agnimitra learns about the imprisonment of his beloved, he begins to plot an escape plan for them with the fool. They both trick the queen into giving them the ring, and they successfully free the two girls.

Agnimitra and Malavika share a moment of privacy only to be interrupted by the second queen, Iravati. Malavika is saved from Iravati's wrath by the princess's distress that both the king and queen need to attend to. At the ceremony of the Bakula tree, Malavika is recognised as a princess of another kingdom by visitors. The nun explains that Malavika was disguised as a maid because according to a prophecy, she would find the right man only after serving as a maid for a year. When the first queen learns about this, after taking the second queen's permission, she requests Agnimitra to marry Malavika.

In *Malavika and Agnimitra*, Kalidasa uses the staff of the kingdom as active agents for the progression of the play. Audience learns about the plot through the chit chat of maids, the fool helps the king plot and through another maid Malavika is sent the message of the king's love. On seeing a portrait of Malavika, king Agnimitra inquires about her from his queen, referring to Malavika as an "unprecedented beauty" (Kalidasa and Gerow, Malvika and Agnimitra 1999). He is smitten by her beauty by seeing the portrait, and when the dance masters are asked to call upon their pupils, an eager king thinks to himself:

"King: The hurried passion of the drumbeat drives on - it is the sound of my desire reaching satisfaction." (Kalidasa and Gerow, Malvika and Agnimitra 1999)

His eagerness to set his eyes on Malavika is made more evident with the further dialogue:

"King: [...] My eyes are eager for a vision of the girl waiting backstage. They lose restraint, they rush headlong to seize the curtain's cloth." (Kalidasa and Gerow, Malvika and Agnimitra 1999)

The king is constantly conscious of his desire, and controls his expressions in order to hide his lust for Malavika from his other queens. He cannot like the other kings (Dushyanta and Pururavas) explicitly voice out his desire for Malavika because of her position as the first queen's staff.

"King: [...] More lovely than her dance this stance erect and motionless- left arm akimbo, bracelets silent on her wrist, the other arm languid like a fruit-dark branch, eyes fixed on flowers that lie crushed at her feet." (Kalidasa and Gerow, Malvika and Agnimitra 1999)

The king seems to enjoy the motionless image of Malavika, replicating something like a painting. One could interpret that the king is attracted to the feebleness of Malavika. His description represents her as an object to behold, while he is the beholder. Another instance where king Agnimitra explicitly refers to Malavika as an object is the following:

"King: At last my eye has found its true object: Now that I've seen her smile, lips half hiding lovely teeth like an unfolding lotus whose filaments peek out, half seen" (Kalidasa and Gerow, Malvika and Agnimitra 1999)

The king also seems to take it for granted that Malavika has fallen for him. Although Malavika too is interested in him, considering the political power structure, Malavika having been placed at a lower station, does not have any say. While queen Iravati, like the king, shares the pleasures of a voyeur by looking at Malavika in the garden, her perspective is different than that of the king. In no part does anyone become an extension of the king's gaze in this play.

**Conclusion:** "Kalidasa's heroes are not just kings and lovers, but connoisseurs of natural beauty and art." (Miller 1999)

Kalidasa successfully depicts the kings in a certain light. In all the plays, the kings are smitten by the beauties at the very first sight of them. It is not a coincidence that the kings are able to appreciate the beauty of the heroines at the first glimpse of them, this is a conscious attempt that denotes the king as a connoisseur of natural beauty. It is important how the king expresses his desire for the heroine, and this occurs in the first act itself. Representation of bodies, their description and their depiction are crucial in expressing desire in these plays.

In *The Recognition of Shakuntala*, while for the most part Kalidasa narrates the tale through Dushyanta's perspective, there are two moments, that with the Buffoon and the commander, that provide an insight or a radical shift in gaze, respectively. However, throughout the play Dushyanta is the only true agent who possesses the gaze, even if he is subjected to the curse by fate.

In *Urvashi won by Valour* the gaze becomes more evident with the distinction between the way the queen is described and the way Urvashi is described. Even though Urvashi, using her powers, plays the voyeur, she has no agency over her body, nor does she have a gaze. Urvashi's lack of agency over her body is emphasised on many times within the play, however the play also provides other dynamics of power. The queen, for one, seems to have some agency due to her position as a queen and nothing more. However, she too has to succumb to the desire of his husband and accept Urvashi.

In *Malavika and Agnimitra*, even though the king is the top most person in the power structure, due to his duties, and other moral rules, he is bound to his wives. He cannot publically be associated with Malavika who is a staff member to his first queen. It is only when she is revealed to be a princess, that they can unite publically through the ritual of marriage. Even though the two queens in this play hold on to different levels of power, Malavika's status as a princess elevates her to the status of the queens, and they both end up succumbing to the desire of their king and accept Malavika.

The power structures are complex with the intersections of gender, class and status of the character within the society. Even with the various intersections, in all of Kalidasa's plays, one can see through the depictions and descriptions of bodies that the king, that is the protagonist of the play, is the possessor of a powerful gaze, and therefore the only one with complete agency not only over his own body but every other body as well.

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