

# Rewiring the Paradox: Establishing Shakespeare as the “Kalidasa of United Kingdom”

Ms. Manini Jain

*Asst. Professor, Aggarwal College of Law, Ballabgarh*

**Abstract-** Literary doyens Mahakavi Kalidasa and William Shakespeare have left a permanent mark in the tapestry of literature with their writings that are churned in excellence. Despite being separated by nearly nine centuries, Shakespeare and Kalidasa exhibit notable similarities in their writings, perhaps prompting William Jones to dub Kalidasa the "Shakespeare of India." However, the validity of such Western-centric notions in this post-colonial era should be questioned. This study challenges this established paradigm by proposing a complete 180-degree reversal and thus asserting Shakespeare as the "Kalidasa of the United Kingdom". To substantiate this claim, it employs a comparative lens of Indian and Western aesthetics on the works of Kalidasa and Shakespeare and further analyses the validity of this claim through the theories of Postcolonialism and Deconstruction. While recent scholarly endeavors have engaged in comparative analyses of specialized topics related to Kalidasa and Shakespeare, there remains a paucity of attempts to question Shakespeare's perceived superiority over Kalidasa. The field cultivating Kalidasa and Shakespeare together is therefore rich, but not definitive, and more attention to this research gap is now due.

**Keywords – Shakespeare, Kalidasa, Paradigm Reversal, Aesthetics, Postcolonialism, Deconstruction.**

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Dr. Mainkar in *Kalidasa: His Mind and Thought* extols Kalidasa as “an eternal pleasure and a joy forever” (Mainkar 209). The poetic excellency of Kalidasa is complimented as “excelling in all three departments, viz, lyric, epic and dramatic” (Gajendragadkar 44) by A.B. Gajendragadkar in *Mammata's Kavyaprakasa*. Shakespeare, too, has garnered similar accolades. Dryden in his seminal work *Of Dramatic Poesie* praises Shakespeare as the “Homer or Father of Dramatic poets” (Dryden 71). These literary giants have also been subjected to

comparative analysis by H.H. Haniah Gowda in his work *Shakespeare turned East* where he shows how Shakespeare had a close affinity with Kalidasa.

While both dramatists have faced negative and positive criticism, the comparison made by William Jones in 1789 between Kalidasa and Shakespeare warrants scrutiny. Kalidasa's grandiosity crossed national borders as well. Johann Gottfried von Herder in the book *Translating the Orient*, was enchanted by Kalidasa's works and wrote to Forster that Shakuntala was “a masterpiece that appears once in every two thousand years” (Figueira qtd in Tathagatananda, 5). Thus, it seems paradoxical to address Kalidasa as the “Shakespeare of India” in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century post-colonial world. Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* argued that the Occident West created contradictory paradoxes which “puts Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand” (Said 24). There exists a huge literary gap in tracing and then deconstructing these Occident notions as the meagre studies questioning this superiority if Shakespeare over Kalidasa fail to be an in-depth analysis.

This research paper therefore seeks to cover this research gap and attempts to render prolonged justice to the legacy of Kalidasa by undertaking a comparative analysis of the works of Kalidasa and Shakespeare in light of Indian and Western aesthetics. This paper also incorporates Postcolonial and Deconstruction theories to challenge the Western narrative and establish Shakespeare as the “Kalidasa of United Kingdom”, thus resonating with the argument of Ramanujan in his essay *Is There an Indian Way of Thinking* that states - “Indian literary tradition often possesses a depth and interconnectedness that Western literature lacks” (Ramanujan 51).

## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Art lies in creating the lotus amidst slush. One who does not sink within the slush in the process of creating Art is recognized as a 'real' artist. What makes Kalidasa and Shakespeare exceptional 'real' artists is the fact that not only can they create works which are equivalent to the beauty of several lotuses, but they themselves are the lotuses due to their proficient poetic ability that makes them stand still against the strong winds of the ages. In 1789 a rather slushy comparison was made by William Jones where he dubbed Kalidasa as the "Shakespeare of India". The commoners of India spellbound with the colonial mindset celebrated this comparison and were in awe that their culture posits a writer who can equal the Bard. Without proper criticism and literary analysis of the works of Kalidasa, Shakespeare was given the upper hand by the 'civilizing' forces of the West. It is surprising to note that this comparison was not rectified by either West or Indian intelligentsia when in 1886 itself, Sir Lubbock ranked Kalidasa above Shakespeare in his list of top hundred books to read. It is even more shocking that the Indian textbooks till date are stuck with the same paradox.

In his article *Shakespeare for Everyman*, Louis B. Wright exclaims that "one can see Shakespeare performed in various languages of India, and in large cities in India, he sometimes maybe heard in English" (Wright 229). In this line and throughout his article, one cannot help but notice the pompous overtones of English superiority, underestimating Indian influence on the Literature of the world. Mahakavi Kalidasa's majesty was such that it helped P.B. Shelley "to overcome his atheistic and materialistic tendencies" (Tathagatananda 3). Will Durant, in *Story of Civilization*, traces how the German translation of *Shakuntala* in 1791 profoundly influenced the Romantic Movement. Based on these international influences and poetic majesty of Kalidasa that existed centuries before Shakespeare, it seems untenable to address Kalidasa as the "Shakespeare of India".

In the *Language of Paradox (The Well-Wrought Urn)*, Cleanth Brooks has described that paradox was essential to the poetic meaning to the extent that paradox was almost identical to poetry. Likewise, Edward Said in *Orientalism* has explained that contradictory paradoxes seemed essential to the Occidental narratives of the West in order to create a

"positional superiority" (Said 24). Attempts were made to rectify these problematic Occidental notions. Professor Hriday Nath, who provided concrete textual evidence of Kalidasa's influence on Shakespeare, as noted by Vijay Mishra in "The influence of Kalidasa on Shakespeare", was disparaged by the renowned critic C.D. Narsimhaiah, who had flagrantly dismissed postcolonial studies as 'commonwealth literature'. A.P. Mukherjee in his work *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* attacks such critics and editors like C.D. Narsimhaiah who consciously or unconsciously created a literary research gap by hiding behind the universal western vocabulary that "mystifies the true nature of reality" (Mukherjee qtd in Waseem, 266). This study therefore attempts to bridge this gap by first analyzing *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the light of both Indian and Western aesthetics, to establish disparity in the argument without sticking to either parental cultural system. It will then proceed to question the idea of Universality through the lens of Postcolonial and Deconstruction theories, attempting to reverse the Occident notions and decolonize the contemporary Indian mindset.

Rasa theory, formulated by the ancient Indian sage Bharata Muni is a part of renowned work *Natyashastra* which is a Sanskrit treatise on performing arts. Rasa is a Sanskrit word that refers to 'juice', 'extract', and/or 'essence' in the aesthetic sense. It refers to a psychological state in which emotions are evoked in the mind of a human being while witnessing the work of art. Bharata Muni has described nine Rasas or Navrasas out of which Sringara Rasa will be used here to do a comparative analysis of the works of Shakespeare and Kalidasa.

According to Bharata, Sringara Rasa is the aesthetic pleasure derived from the emotion related to love. Sringara Rasa is prevalent throughout *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* as it is based on the theme of love. One of the three ways through which Rasa can be evoked in a play is through *anubhavas*. The *vacika* (dialogues) is one of the aspect of *anubhavas* through which Rasa can be evoked on the stage. In order to evoke Sringara Rasa, the *vacika* (dialogues) should relate to the wooing of beloved, showing love and passion.

The dialogues of King Dushyanta in *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* are soaked with the essence of zealous love when he describes the beauty of Shakuntala: "Her lower lip has the rich sheen of young shoots... her limbs enchanting as a lovely flower/ glow with the

radiance of magical youth” (Kalidasa, *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* 177; Act 1). The reader is immediately carried away with the emotional richness that Kalidasa has exemplified, which strikes fervent romantic feelings in the play to illustrate the interconnectedness of human emotions and nature, a hallmark of Indian poetics.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, too, the reader finds *vacika* infused with romantic fervor intermingled with the symbolism of nature. Hermia, after being thwarted by Theseus and Egeus from marrying Lysander is addressed by the latter as: “How now, my love? Why is your cheek so pale? / How chance the roses there do fade so fast?” (1.1. 128-129). From the very first comparative glance between the *vacika* of Shakespeare and Kalidasa, the reader observes a deeper emotional resonance in Kalidasa’s work, as compared to that of Shakespeare’s.

A counter argument would suggest that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is romantic comedy in which emotions of love, humor, and enchantment are interwoven, therefore, the absence of passionate love imagery is justified. However, this argument is rendered baseless as *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* is also considered a romantic comedy. The play is adorned with comic reliefs provided by the character of Vidusaka. Considering Iyengar’s remark that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was the first marvel to come out of the forge of Shakespeare, and the fact that Kalidasa, almost nine century before Shakespeare could construct a play that is infused with the essence of passionate love and gentle comedy, shouldn’t the narrative of Kalidasa as the “Shakespeare of India” be reversed?

Dhvani theory is another Sanskrit Aesthetic theory that focuses on the meaning beyond denotation and connotation. In terms of Dhvani, Kalidasa’s subtlety stands out. Kalidasa turns the sorrowful separations of Shakuntala and Dushyanta into a cosmic event rather than a personal tragedy, thus symbolizing the eternal struggle and eventual reunion of the soul with the divine. In the line, “O king, my heart feels, but my tongue utters not what is within” (Kalidasa, *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* 212; Act 4), the implicit communication through suggestion deepens the emotional impact on the audience. Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, too, tries to employ suggestion, particularly in the depiction of enchanted forest, where the boundary between the reality and illusion blurs creating a

dreamlike atmosphere. The line, “The lunatic, the lover, and the poet/ Are of imagination all compact” (5.1. 7-8), suggests the Shakespearian use of the intangible nature of love and creative. However, while it may seem effective, Shakespeare’s approach is more of surface-level comedic nature compared to the deeper emotionally resonating and spiritually inculcated approach of Kalidasa.

Critics such as V.K. Chari have argued that the real essence of Indian aesthetics lies in its ability to transform the most ordinary experiences into profound emotional states (Chari 146). In *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*, the experience of characters is elevated to a divine level through the use of Dhvani and Rasa theories. M. Srinivas Mallai states that Kalidasa’s poetry “penetrates the heart and the soul, evoking a spiritual awakening that transcends the temporal world” (Mallai 87) which gives a relative edge to Kalidasa over Shakespeare.

Moving on to Western Knowledge Ecosystem, one observes that it was Alexander Bomgarten who first used the term ‘aesthetics’ back in 1935. The term initially meant to stand for the science of sensory consciousness but later it came to signify the science and philosophy of fine arts. Western aesthetics are predominantly based on Greco-Roman traditions, Renaissance humanism and Enlightenment movements. As some critics have pointed out, Aristotle’s concept of three unities although being central to Western criticism, was misread by the Neoclassical writers which restricted dramatic industry. Traditional understanding of Unity of Action for example suggested that there should be no subplots in a play, however, “the true unity of action is the unity possible due to the imagination” (Stayan 91).

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the reader observes Shakespeare’s brilliant use of this interpretation of Unity of Action. The three subplots of the play are exemplarily drawn together to create a bewitching last scene of the three marriages with supernatural element of fairies who have come to bless the newlyweds. This summarized action creates ‘wholeness’ within the play, thus adhering to the Aristotelian principles in which he exclaims “A whole is what has a beginning and middle and end” (Aristotle qtd in Petrosino, 11).

Kalidasa’s narrative structure is more fluid than the rigid classical unities, but *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*, follows the Unity of Action in a broader sense. During the time frame of six or seven years, the progression

of events in the play is quite logical and coherent in the play. Aligning with the Aristotle's notion of Unity of Action, Kalidasa's narrative style reflects a deeper understanding of life's cyclical nature.

Shakespeare's mastery of the English Language, with his clever wordplay and rhythm is well-documented in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. His use of metaphor and simile in the lines, "Hang off, thou cat, thou burr! Vile thing let loose, / or I will shake thee from me like a serpent" (3.2. 260-261), adds humor and emotional complexity to both the play and its characters.

In *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*, on one hand one finds a series of ascetic symbols – the leaves of the hermitage discolored from the fire of *yajna* (offering in fire), on the other hand a series of symbols portraying life's fulfilment – nature beckoning the fresh blooming *mallika* (jasmine) with breeze beruffled fingers, sending messages to *Vanajyotsana* (message not of ascetic mantras but the impatient beckoning of the beloved). Kalidasa combined these twin concepts of enjoyments and renunciation, rendering a rare depth to the play that underscores a higher level of artistic sophistication, leading to the enjoyment of the aesthetic beauty of the play.

Great literary works are often followed with pungent criticism and so was the case with Shakespeare and Kalidasa. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the technique used by Shakespeare to make characters forcefully love someone else was seen as a slap in the face by some critics. Charles Isherwood, a critic of NY Times, exclaimed that the dream sequence "doesn't nail at least these bits" in the play (Isherwood). However, this criticism can be countered by Harold Bloom's description of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as the "first undoubted masterwork, without flaw, and one of his dozen or so plays of overwhelming originality and power." (Bloom 148).

In case of Kalidasa, some critics are of the opinion that he lacked a sense of realism which explains why his plays do not conform to the modern concept of aesthetics. Keith, influenced by naturalism of Victorian era, said that "realistic drama was totally incompatible with their temperament" while referring to the Sanskrit playwrights (Keith 276). It can be argued that first, Kalidasa never called himself a realist and second, that a play cannot itself be a part of reality, it brings about an illusion of reality as the stage itself comes in between and separates the play from reality. The creation of Kalidasa is a blend of realism and

imagination as the characters created by him are not the carbon copies of actual characters, but they appear to be far more real and with greater depth – fact which gives them a transcendental dimension. A.L. Basham notes that Kalidasa's Poetry "reflects a worldview where the mundane and the sacred are seamlessly intertwined" (Basham 332), thus providing a much richer and layered narrative. It should be then debated why Kalidasa even with such meritorious background does not enjoy the Universal appeal the way Shakespeare does.

It is lurid of the Western Criticism to hold the viewpoint that the entire humanity should be able to relate to the experiences impounded in the Western literary texts. This myth of Universality is so embedded in European literary criticism that it has become the hallmark of a great literature. Louis B. Wright in *Shakespeare for Everyman* explained that the Shakespeare's Universal acceptance was because his writings that were "not for a small group of intellectuals but for everyman" (Wright 232). The Western Culture should not be the standard of measurement because it has been used by colonizers to exploit the culture and language of colonies. Ania Looma pointed out how Shakespeare has been used by the colonialists of his time and afterwards as an "emblem/proof of superiority of English Literature in general" (Looma qtd in Waseem, 263). Under the guise of 'advancement' of the natives, Macaulay's educators because of socio-political control propounded western values through the texts of Shakespeare, Dickens and Hardy as being universal or normative. This in turn created "surrogate gentlemen" (Waseem 263), who were removed from any consideration of the present experience of colonialization and exploitation.

The Postmodern theory of Deconstruction postulates that any text can be deconstructed to reveal an opposite meaning or perspective. Both Powell and Derrida hold the idea that Western Culture is based on the idea of a 'Center' – a fixed point that guarantees all meaning. Powell further postulated that these centers "spawn binary opposites, with one term of the opposition central, and the other marginal" (Powell qtd in Waseem 264). This postulation fits best in the underlying colonial mindset of William Jones who consciously/unconsciously created Shakespeare as the oppositional colonizer center, rendering Kalidasa the position of marginal colonized.

Keeping in mind the time frame of both Kalidasa and Shakespeare, and the scrutiny of their respective texts in the light of Indian and western aesthetics, this research paper deconstructs the superior perspective of Shakespeare over Kalidasa, thus emphasizing Shakespeare to be addressed as the “Kalidasa of United Kingdom” and not otherwise. “Comparison is the death of Joy” said Mark Twain, but a comparison that echoes colonial mindset is even worse. Each literary artist is a lotus of their own age and geographical ponds, therefore their beauty should be individually praised. But, if certain situation demands a comparison, it should be executed in a way that the pond of one artist should not appear muckier than the other.

#### CONCLUSION

This research paper challenges the long-standing and erroneous comparison of Kalidasa to Shakespeare, thus offering compelling arguments that position Shakespeare as the “Kalidasa of the United Kingdom”. By identifying a poignant research gap concerning the perceived superiority of Shakespeare over Kalidasa, it challenges the Westernized notions still prevalent in the Indian knowledge ecosystem. This study might also serve both as a foundation and a precursor for future research that interrogates multiple Occident narratives that remain unrectified. Ultimately, this study proposes that such literary comparisons should be avoided altogether, however, if such comparisons are to be attempted, they should not underscore the grandiosity of either literary artist.

#### REFERENCE

- [1] Basham, A.L. *The Wonder That Was India*. Sidgwick & Jackson, 1954, pp. 332.
- [2] Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. Riverhead Books, 1998, pp. 148.
- [3] Chari, V.K. *Sanskrit Criticism*. University of Hawaii Press, 1990, pp. 146.
- [4] Clemen, Wolfgang. *The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery*. Taylor and Francis, 2013, pp. 118.
- [5] Dryden. *An Essay on Dramatic Poesy*. Atlantic Publishers, 2021, pp. 71.
- [6] Gajendragadkar, A.B. *The Sakuntalam. Popular Prakasana Bhandar*, 1950, pp. 44.
- [7] Isherwood, Charles. “Love Trouble.” *The New York Times*, 31 Oct. 2013, [www.nytimes.com/2013/10/31/theater/the-light-and-dark-of-a-midsummer-nights-dream.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/31/theater/the-light-and-dark-of-a-midsummer-nights-dream.html).
- [8] Kalidasa. *Kalidasa: The Loom of Time*. translated by Chandra Rajan, Penguin Classics, 1999.
- [9] Keith, Arthur Berriedale. *The Sanskrit Drama: In Its Origin, Development, Theory and Practice*. Oxford University Press, 1924, pp. 276.
- [10] Mainkar, T.G. *Kalidas: His Art and Thought. Deshamukha Prakasana*. 1962, pp. 209.
- [11] Mallai, M. Srinivas. *Kalidasa: The Master Poet*. Sahitya Akademi, 2001, pp. 87.
- [12] Petrosino, Michele. “The Classical Unities of Time, Space and Action in William Shakespeare's a Midsummer Night's Dream.” *Academia.edu*, 3 Aug. 2016, [www.academia.edu/27509438/The\\_Classical\\_Unities\\_of\\_Time\\_Space\\_and\\_Action\\_in\\_William\\_Shakespeare\\_s\\_A\\_Midsummer\\_Night\\_s\\_Dream](http://www.academia.edu/27509438/The_Classical_Unities_of_Time_Space_and_Action_in_William_Shakespeare_s_A_Midsummer_Night_s_Dream). Accessed 3rd Nov. 2024.
- [13] Ramanujan, A.K. *Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?* Contributions to Indian Sociology, vol. 23, no. 1, 1989, pp. 41-58.
- [14] Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, 1978, pp. 24.
- [15] Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Edited by Stanley Wells, Penguin Classics, 2005.
- [16] Styban, John L. *The Dramatic Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965, pp. 91.
- [17] Tathagatananda, Swami. “Abhijnana Sakuntalam ‘a Wonder Coming from a Land of Wonders.’” *Vedantany.org*, [www.vedantany.org/articles/blog-post-title-one-rp3gp](http://www.vedantany.org/articles/blog-post-title-one-rp3gp). Accessed 10 Oct. 2024.
- [18] Waseem, Filza. “The Theme of Universality in the English Literary Text and Criticism”. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* (2013): pp. 261-68.
- [19] Wright, Louis B. “Shakespeare for Everyman.” *The English Journal*, vol. 53, no. 4, 1964, pp. 229–39. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/810319>. Accessed 15 Nov. 2024.
- [20] Brooks, Cleanth. *The Language of Paradox (The Well-Wrought Urn)*, Methuen Co. Ltd, 1968, pp. 1-16.

- [21] Durant, Will. *The Story of Civilization: Our Oriental Heritage*. Simon and Schuster, 2011.
- [22] Iyengar, K.R., Srinivasa. *Shakespeare: His World and His Art*. Sterling Publishers, 1984.
- [23] Mishra, Vijay. "The Influence of Kalidasa on Shakespeare". *DoubleDialogues*, March 2008, <https://doubledialogues.com/article/the-influence-of-kalidasa-on-shakespeare-the-genre-of-the-keynote-address-and-the-story-of-a-lie/>. Accessed 10 Oct. 2024.