



## The Concept of Memory in Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam*

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### Abstract

Memory is the mind's reservoir which preserves the past and helps to remember. To put it very simply, memory signifies something that has occurred before it is remembered. Memory does not possess the future of conjecture and the sensation of the present. Aristotle has significantly commented that memory is of the past. On the other hand, Plato opined that humans have the capacity to preserve the experienced memories. For him, memory is inherently a dialectical form of art. However, present scholars like Paul Ricoeur and Anne Whitehead have given philosophical and scientific insights into the paradoxes of memory with more recent reflections on ethics, representation, and responsibility. Indian Classical literature can also be studied from varied critical perspectives including memory. Kalidasa's immortal classic *Abhijnanasakuntalam* may be critiqued from the aspects of delusion and the loss of memory, remembrance, and recognition. In this classical drama, forgetting and remembering, the integral features of memory, play significant roles. Forgetting, according to Paul Ricoeur "is an attack on the reliability of memory." But forgetting may also be considered as the traces of memory kept in reserve which helps in the process of remembering. Kalidasa's introduction of the curse and King Duhsanta's loss of memory is a way to explore the different states of human consciousness. Duhsanta's forgetfulness is the challenge to memory's claim of reliability. The question of forgiveness arises here when Sakuntala pardons her husband unconditionally to live peacefully. Sakuntala derives joy, love, and wisdom when she forgives her husband Duhsanta. This paper attempts to theorize memory taking into consideration the aporias of forgetting, remembering, and forgiveness, revealing how this symbiosis influences the ethical sensibility of the play.

**Keywords:** memory, forgetting, remembering, forgiveness.



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## Introduction

Memory is the repertoire of past events. The claim of memory is to be faithful to the past. Whenever there is a stimulus, the past event is remembered. To put it very simply, memory signifies something that has occurred before it is remembered. Memory does not possess the future of conjecture and the sensation of the present. The concept of memory has been explained by different scholars from the classical age to the modern times. Aristotle has significantly commented that memory is of the past. Plato has also opined that humans have the capacity to preserve the experienced memories. There are different deficiencies stemming from forgetting which become the shadowy part of memory. According to Augustine, the act of remembering is to struggle against forgetting. Forgetting and remembering go hand in hand. Remembering protects memory from sinking into oblivion. Paul Ricoeur, has opined that the task of memory rests on the idea of not to forget. But forgetting is a natural and complex phenomenon of memory which is bound to happen. Therefore, forgetting is a paradoxical and enigmatic part of memory. Kalidasa's immortal classic *Abhijnanasakuntalam* may be critiqued from the aspects of delusion and the loss of memory, forgetting, remembrance, and recognition. In this classical drama, forgetting and remembering, the integral features of memory, play significant roles. Forgetting, according to Paul Ricoeur, is an attack on the reliability of memory (Ricoeur, 2004, p.442). But, forgetting may also be considered as the traces of memory kept in reserve which helps in the process of remembering. Kalidasa's introduction of the curse and King Duhsanta's loss of memory is a way to explore the different states of human consciousness. Duhsanta's forgetfulness is the challenge to memory's claim of reliability. In this paper an attempt shall be made to theorize memory taking into consideration the aporias of forgetting, remembering, and forgiveness, revealing how this symbiosis influences the ethical sensibility of the play.

## Research Method

The research method to be applied in this paper is analytical which deals with mostly secondary sources. The theoretical framework of memory will be taken into consideration while critiquing *Abhijnanasakuntalam* by Kalidasa.

## Discussion

### The Curse and the Mnemonic Signifier

The medieval Indian poet Jayadeva praised Kalidasa as Kavi-kula-guru (Rajan, 1989, p.21) who conveys how great Kalidasa was as an Indian classical writer. The poet is known for his seven works: three long lyrical poems, three plays, and an incomplete epic. Out of his seven works, *Abhijnanasakuntalam* is one of his great creations. Kalidasa's other play *Meghadutam* is similar to *Abhijnanasakuntalam* in their themes as they move through different worlds and constitute different layers of consciousness. Chandra Rajan, the translator of Kalidasa's work into English has commented,

The action of Sakuntala moves out of the green world of Nature, set apart and centering round the heroine who is presented as the Lady of Nature, into the gilded world of Duhsanta's palace and pleasure gardens (Rajan, 1989, p. 45).

Kalidasa has also presented the primal world in which the primal parents Marica and Aditi reside amidst the clouds, a world beyond the reach of ordinary humans which is called the golden world. The poet has also portrayed the green world of nature which heightens the loveliness of the heroine Sakuntala. She is the lady guard of nature, the green world with all its magical qualities.

The king's love for Sakuntala becomes intense in the green world situated in the deep forest in which she appears like a goddess of the forest enriched with beauty and gracefulness (Baruah, 2019, p. 63).

Sakuntala and Duhsanta met in Kanva's hermitage, in which Sakuntala was brought up and both fell in love with each other. They got married through *gandharva* ritual, but soon after Duhsanta returned to his kingdom. Before his departure, he gave his wife his signet ring as a sign of love and remembrance promising to return soon and take her to his kingdom. Sakuntala was engrossed in the thought of her departed husband and paid little attention to the surroundings. This might be the premonition of fate that Sakuntala had to face. In Act Four of the play, Anasuya, a close friend of Sakuntala, seems to be disturbed about the future of Sakuntala. She talked to her friend Priyamvada.

Anasuya: Priyamvada, although I rejoice greatly knowing that Sakuntala is happily married to a husband of her own choice who is worthy of her in every aspect, I feel rather uneasy about something.

Anasuya: The Royal Sage has given leave to depart by the sages grateful for the successful completion of the Sacrifice, and he has returned to his capital. Now, in the company of his queens, will he remember all that happened here in the Hermitage...or will he not? (Rajan, 1989, p. 214).

Sakuntala was lost in thought of Duhsanta and the worst happened as sage Durvasa appeared at that moment and seeing Sakuntala disregarding him cursed her,

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 (Rajan, 1989, p.215).

This curse changes the action in the play. The effect of forgetting in Duhsanta took a toll on Sakuntala's self-respect and identity. This shows the temporality of memory. Memory is connected not only to the past but also to the present. So, the present is the temporal context. Duhsanta forgot Sakuntala soon after the curse. Memory operates between the fusion of horizons, the experience between the past and the present. In Act Five, Sakuntala is escorted by Gautami and other ascetics to Duhsanta's court and presents her as his queen, being the wedded wife of Duhsanta. However, the loss of memory in Duhsanta made Sakuntala vulnerable. He did not remember anything regarding his past life, his love

for Sakuntala and his marrying her. Though he did not remember her still there was a mnemonic voice within him:

The reconstruction of a mnemonic signifier calls for tracing subsequent mnemonic interpretations in time. This reconstructive analysis explains how certain interpretations became dominant against others, and demonstrates how later interpretations reappropriate earlier ones anew. This inverted process establishes continuity between two temporal poles—the earliest and the most recent interpretation—and those in between. (Feindt and et al, 2014, p. 36)

Sakuntala was repudiated in the court of Duhsanta. She could never imagine that King Duhsanta would deceive her in such a way. Duhsanta's attitude showed his utter callousness in dealing with a distressed woman.

In the Hermitage you deceived me, a simple girl, trusting and open by nature: then you made a solemn compact...now...to disown me with such words...is this becoming of you? (Rajan, 1989, p. 238).

To make him remember Sakuntala wanted to show the signet ring but failed to do so as the ring was lost. She tried her best to persuade him by narrating some incidents that happened during their courtship but the king did not believe and mocked her by saying that by such honeyed words are pleasure-loving men lured by young women out to gain their own ends (Rajan, 1989, p. 239). The signet ring could have been the single source of recognizing Sakuntala by Duhsanta. This signet ring may be considered to be a semiotic object or a signifier that guards the truth.

Some rings, such as signet rings, are extensions of the hand, with its handwriting and, later, fingerprints; they have the personal emblem of the owner, the stamp of approval (Doniger, 1998, p. 447).

Duhsanta struggled against forgetting, but the curse operated on him in such an extreme way that his relationship with Sakuntala sunk into oblivion. If Sakuntala could have shown the mnemonic object, Duhsanta's memory would have been alive. According to Paul Ricoeur,

Might we say memento, memory-aid, *pense-bête*, or in the experimental sciences, points of reference, reminders? Indeed, it stands for clues that guard against forgetting (Ricoeur, 2004, p.38).

Memory is understood to operate in the presence of the absence. Mnemonic modes are aids to memory. According to Edward Casey, there are three mnemonic modes. They are reminding, reminiscing, and recognizing. The reminder is a point of connection between the past and the future (Casey, 2000, p.93). Reminding refers to points of reference. There are external points of reference to objects like a photograph, a handkerchief, a diary, a memento, etc. These may be regarded as signposts that help against forgetting. They remind us what is to be done, they admonish us not to forget to do it (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 38). Reminiscence can be counted as a full-fledged reliving of the past (Casey, 2000, p.106). Reminiscing aids in making the past alive again by helping one another by recalling

certain events or happenings of life. This memorial process can, of course, be internalized in the form of meditative memory (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 38). Memoirs are important mnemonic objects in which writing helps people to reminisce, enrich, and preserve important events. Even autobiographies are also important mnemonic objects which may help people to reminisce. When two people meet after a long time they converse on and reminisce about beautiful past times they shared. Memory, during the phase of recognition, is representation. Recognition aids in locking something within our heads and makes us happy. Through recognition, what was evasive and shifting became intact and settled (Casey, 2000, p.124). Thus, these mnemonic modes stated by Casey help in returning beings and objects to the place, space, and time.

After the loss of the mnemonic object, Sakuntala was reduced to nothing. In this connection, Desdemona, the heroine of Shakespeare's play *Othello*, and Kalidasa's Sakuntala can be placed in the same order. Sakuntala is questioned about her marriage with Duhsanta and Desdemona is about her chastity. Sakuntala's love and marriage rest on a ring and Desdemona's chastity on a handkerchief. Both the ladies suffered due to the lack of knowledge of their beloveds. Duhsanta knew Sakuntala first with a carnal desire.

With rounded breasts concealed by cloth of bark  
Fastened at the shoulder in a fine knot,  
Her youthful form enfolded like a flower  
In its pale leafy sheath unfolds not its glory (Rajan, 1989, p. 177).

Thus, Duhsanta first knew her as an object of desire. Towards the end of the play, Duhsanta remembered her. After remembering her, he treated her not as an object of desire but as a person with inner beauty and purity. At this point of time his knowing of Sakuntala is complete as he identifies her as a person and knows her truly. This is also mentioned by K. Krishnamurthy when he states,

Kalidasa's art reaches its apex here in identifying Sakuntala herself as the fairest flower and Dusyanta as a bee that cannot shed his fickleness until he breathes the rarefied spiritual air of heaven (Krishnamurthy, 1994, p.89).

### **Forgetting, Remembering, and Forgiving**

In *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, the king was under the effect of delusion as the curse started operating on him. The curse of Durvasa led Duhsanta to forget Sakuntala. But Kalidasa's introduction of the curse which is not in the *Mahabharata*, source of the story, has a motif. It reveals the personality of Duhsanta. He was regarded as one of the greatest kings of the Puru dynasty. Therefore, there was much expectation from him by the people. His ignoble behavior and his cruelty towards Sakuntala tarnished his otherwise celebrated personality. As a king, he lacked moral obligation while dealing with Sakuntala. When we care for others, we are morally upright. Avishai Margalit has opined,

Our moral obligation should be extended to all: to the near and dear ones. But caring is the attitude at the heart of our thick relations. Such relations call for more than mere moral rights and wrongs. (Margalit, 2004, p. 36-37)

Margalit has very logically discussed the concepts of memory, ethics, and caring. According to him, we care for someone we know but as soon as we forget that person, we stop caring. Love is a form of caring that involves memory. But by forgetting Sakuntala, Duhsanta proved that he lacked the emotion of caring. Forgetting is like an endless vacuum which can be identified with remoteness and distance. Forgetting manifests an aporia questioning the strength of memory. At the most critical point in the life of Sakuntala, a sudden psychological trauma was created in her when Duhsanta forgot her. She came to Duhsanta's court to be recognized as his queen. But on the contrary, she was verbally abused in the court, in front of all the courtiers.

Sakuntala was afraid of Duhsanta's failure of memory. So, when she was presented before Duhsanta in the court she spoke to herself, "Why are you trembling, O heart? Remembering the love my lord has for me, calm yourself." (Rajan, 1989, p. 235) Sakuntala had faith on her love but the situation did not completely convince her about the consummation of love. The distortion and discordances of memory ultimately led her to a catastrophic situation. Duhsanta's response to Sakuntala's plea to accept her as his wife creates an ironic scrutiny in perceiving him as the ideal hero or *dhirodatta nayaka*.

I cannot recall my mind accepting the hand of this lady in marriage at any time. Seeing that she is plainly pregnant, how can I receive her when I have doubts about being the husband? (Rajan, 1989, p. 237)

Avishai Margalit, while discussing voluntary and involuntary muscles, cites the example of forgetting. He states,

Forgetting cannot be voluntary. Just as I cannot voluntarily avoid thinking of a white elephant. I cannot decide to forget something just like that. (Margalit, 2004, p. 201)

From Margalit's point of view, Duhsanta's forgetting is not voluntary. The curse might have been the reason for his forgetfulness. Duhsanta was presented as a *Rajarshi* (royal sage), his appearance was that of a magnificent tusker, and he was compared to the God Shiva. The *Suta* (charioteer) in the play thus said about the king while he chased the deer,

O long-lived Majesty!

I seem to see before my eyes

Pinaki, the Lord, chasing the deer. (Rajan, 1989, p. 172)

The irony is that although the king is compared to Lord Shiva (Pinaki) and is projected as a *Rajarshi*, he failed to meet these ideals while dealing with Sakuntala. By repudiating Sakuntala in the presence of so many people at the court he not only hurt Sakuntala but also disrespected the great sage Kanva, the godfather of Sakuntala. At this point of time, Duhsanta is projected as a philanderer, callous, cruel, and self-indulgent man who does not care about his reputation as a great king instead of being a *Rajarshi*. The helpless

Sakuntala invited death for herself by stretching her hands towards the sky and at that moment a flash of light took her away. This event speaks of the fact that Sakuntala does not fit in the gilded or artificial world of Duhsanta. She wants to be free from the shackles of life and also from patriarchal domination.

To be liberated, a woman must feel free to be herself, not in rivalry to men but in the context of her own capacity and her personality. Women have to realize for their survival that they have to go beyond every barrier. (Darshini, 2014, p. 107)

Sakuntala wanted to leave the society where she had to face domination and humiliation and desired a society where she could feel free and enjoy equal status with men.

The recognition of Sakuntala by Duhsanta is an interesting part of the play. When the signet ring gifted by Duhsanta to Sakuntala was discovered in the belly of a fish caught by a fisherman, it was carried to the king. The king immediately remembered Sakuntala. Thus, remembering is connected to the material memory which symbolizes a lost past, a sense of belonging, and a family/romance history. The ring became a memento of mind and matter which under convenient circumstances was re-articulated. The ring is transformed into more than a gift, it takes the position of the testimonial record and more of a point in memory. Considering the power of an artifact or a memento Aanchal Malhotra has commented,

Such an artifact would be a reservoir of memory and experience, its physical weight outweighed by the emotional weight cached into over the years. It would, in a way, occupy the weight of the past (Malhotra, 2017, p.16).

Paul Ricoeur has also stated,

Recognition can thus draw support from a material basis, from a figured presentation such as a portrait or photograph, the representation inducing an identification with the thing depicted in its absence (Ricoeur, 2004, p.429).

The ring became an active contributor to the act of remembering a past.

Such testimonial objects, lost and again found, structure plots of return: they can embody memory and thus trigger affect shared across generations (Hirsch, 2012, p. 206).

Duhsanta was grief stricken and felt guilty when he realized that he had committed a grave mistake by not recognizing Sakuntala. The sense of innocence and guilt are characteristics of memory. The fault belongs to the phenomenology of memory. The fault of not remembering Sakuntala haunted the king that he suffered and considered himself to be a failure and lived in solitude engrossing himself in drawing the portrait of his wife.

Memory, our common sense tells us, is a fundamentally individual phenomenon. What could be more individual than remembering, which we seem to do in the solitary world of our own heads as much as in conversation with others? Even when we reminisce, we often experience this as a process of offering up to the external world the images of the past locked away in the recesses of our own minds (Olick & et al, 2011, p.10).

The recesses of Duhsanta's mind opened up to guilty consciousness when he remembered Sakuntala. But, slowly and steadily he learnt to be compassionate and caring for others. He started to learn the true value of love. He also felt Sakuntala's worth which may be called as recognition or *Abhijnanam*.

Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* deals not only with forgetting and remembering but also with forgiveness. Forgiveness is an integral feature of memory. Forgetting and forgiveness go hand in hand. Ricoeur and Derrida have stated similarly that forgiveness should be unconditional and forgiving should take place by forgetting past deeds. These two terms are mistaken with amnesty and amnesia. Amnesty is forgiving someone officially who commits a certain political offence for example if any militant wants to come back to the mainstream and the government amnesties him. Amnesia refers to certain illnesses and amnesty refers to forgiving the political prisoners for civil peace. *Abhijnanasakuntalam* does not conform to either amnesia or amnesty since Sakuntala or Duhsanta were not political criminals. When Duhsanta met Sakuntala in Marica's hermitage, he recognized her immediately and asked her forgiveness. Sakuntala showed excellent instance of forgiving her husband even though he humiliated her and treated her cruelly in the court. Sakuntala displayed unconditional forgiveness by erasing the traces of past sad memories. Sakuntala did not blame her husband for not recognizing her instead she blamed herself, it must be that I had to reap the consequences of some wrongdoing on my part in a former birth (Rajan, 1989, p. 276). She had a large heart and expressed the tremendous power of endurance. Reconciliation and reunion are parts of the aesthetics of remembering and forgetting in *Abhijnanasakuntalam*.

## Conclusion

*Abhijnanasakuntalam* thus deals with the theme of failure of memory and its consequences. Through this play a living connection through material memory is established. The symbol of the ring suggests how the past is re-activated and re-embodied. It also symbolizes relationship between forgetting, remembering and forgiving. Forgetting is important for those who are survivors of traumatic and horrific events in history. The play which is studied here is a classical Indian play which does not deal with any such historical traumatic event of a nation or a society. It deals with a mythological story of the epic Mahabharata. Therefore, memory is not collective here but individual. We also cannot consider the forgetting in the play as ordinary forgetting because due to Duhsanta's forgetfulness not only Sakuntala suffers but also the king himself. Ordinary forgetting is innocuous, such as forgetting someone's name or forgetting to do a particular household chore. Ordinary forgetting may lead to happy memory. Forgetting, an integral part of memory plays an active role in the formation of memories. In *Abhijnanasakuntalam* forgetting leads to obstacles. Duhsanta's fault is not unforgivable as his forgetfulness is devised by the author through the agency of the curse. He is haunted throughout by his guilty consciousness for his action in the court but the



forgiving nature of Sakuntala gives Duhsanta the impetus of beginning again. Therefore, Paul Ricoeur has rightly opined,

to be sure, if there a forgiveness, "it remains", as is said of love in the hymn that celebrates its greatness" (Ricoeur,2004, p.491).

Duhsanta's greatness lies in his response to repentance which occurs soon after the discovery of the ring and the greatness of Sakuntala is expressed in her forgiving Duhsanta and accepting him as her husband. Thus the play is a perfect example of exploring the veiled and unveiled states of goodness of human beings during which memory plays a significant role.

### **Declaration of Conflicts of Interests**

I declare that there is no potential conflict of interest in the publication of this research paper since this is my personal research work.

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