

## Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

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Similarities and parallels so striking as to constitute a memorable chapter in cross-cultural literary history exist between Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Kalidasa's *Abhi jnana-Sakuntala* (henceforth referred to as *Sakuntala*),<sup>1</sup> perhaps the most celebrated play of classical Sanskrit antiquity, and the best known in India and abroad. Far removed in space and time, significantly different in theme, form, and style, Kalidasa's play and Hawthorne's novel are nevertheless so remarkably similar in numerous ways as to make a comparison between them not only profitable but inevitable.

Kalidasa, who probably lived and wrote in the fifth century, was the foremost poet and playwright of ancient India. Often called the Shakespeare of India, he has left behind three plays, two narrative poems, a long lyric, and a descriptive poem. *Sakuntala*, his masterpiece, is a play in seven acts. Although the basic story of *Sakuntala* is taken from the celebrated Indian epic *The Mahabharata*, Kalidasa transformed the somewhat undistinguished original into something complex and rich in dramatic possibilities, as Shakespeare was repeatedly to do later in his own plays. Straying into sage Kanva's forest hermitage on the banks of the river Malini during a hunting expedition, King Dusyanta is struck by the beauty and grace of Sakuntala (the daughter of nymph Menaka and sage Visvamitra, abandoned by her divine mother, and brought up by sage Kanva as his foster daughter), whom he sees watering the plants with two girl companions. He marries her according to the Gandharva mode (marriage without scriptural rites, but permitted by the social conventions of the period), even though Kanva happens to be away at the time. After living with Sakuntala for a few days, Dusyanta leaves for his kingdom, arranging for her to follow him later. Dusyanta gives Sakuntala a royal ring as a parting souvenir.

One day, while lost in thoughts of Dusyanta, Sakuntala fails to pay due homage to the irascible hermit Durvasa who comes for a visit. Durvasa lays a curse on her: "He on whom thou art meditating with a mind that is regardless of everything else, while thou perceivest not me, rich in penance, to have arrived, will not remember thee" (IV: 1). Later, at the intercession of Sakuntala's friends, Durvasa relents sufficiently to stipulate that the sight of the ring the King has left with Sakuntala will restore his memory. Sakuntala herself, however, remains ignorant of the curse. On his return, Kanva approves and blesses the marriage, and sends Sakuntala, who has conceived, to Dusyanta's place escorted by some inmates of the hermitage. On the way, Sakuntala loses the ring, which falls in a river. Dusyanta, his memory clouded by the curse, completely fails to recognize Sakuntala, and repudiates her. Sakuntala's plight so moves her divine mother Menaka that she takes her away. Sakuntala gives birth to a son, Bharat (the leg-

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<sup>1</sup> C.R. Devadhara and N.G. Suru, eds., *Abhi jnana-Sakuntala of Kalidasa* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980). All citations from *Sakuntala* are from this edition and will be included in the text.

endary king after whom India is named as "Bharatvarsha"). In the meantime, a fisherman is brought before the King for trying to sell the royal ring. The sight of the ring restores the King's memory of Sakuntala, and he is inconsolable with grief and remorse. He is, however, ultimately united with Sakuntala and Bharat at the hermitage of the divine sage Marica where they have been staying all these years.

At first sight, *Sakuntala* seems far removed from Hawthorne's nineteenth century American Puritan fable, "a tale of human frailty and sorrow."<sup>2</sup> Separated by more than a thousand years, and located in social and cultural contexts vastly dissimilar, there is no denying that the differences between the two are great and many. While *The Scarlet Letter* probes the moral and psychological effects of sin, *Sakuntala* is a romance in which things turn out happily for the lovers in the end. *The Scarlet Letter* remains unrelievedly gloomy in tone and atmosphere, whereas *Sakuntala* seesaws between sunshine and shade, joy and sorrow. However, in spite of substantial differences, similarities of situation, character, and form between the two are so numerous and significant as to merit study in depth and detail.

Both Hester and Sakuntala are women of great beauty. Hester is tall, "with a figure of perfect elegance, on a large scale," and "dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam" (55). Sakuntala is "soft like a Navamali flower," says Anasuya (I: 18). Dusyanta describes her thus to Vidusaka (the jester): "Was she delineated in a picture and then endowed with life? Or was she moulded in the Creator's mind from an assemblage . . . of all lovely forms?" (II: 9). They both make an overpowering impact on their lovers, who are swept headlong by the tumult of their passion, Dusyanta explicitly, and Dimmesdale inferentially. Both Sakuntala and Hester are of an impulsive and passionate nature and give themselves unreservedly to the men they love. The nature of their relationship with their lovers also has much in common. Hester's relationship with Dimmesdale, though sinful in the eyes of the Puritan community, is in their own view sacred and has "a consecration of its own" (194). Although Dimmesdale revises his view later, Hester remains steadfast in her belief that theirs was a noble relationship which only an imperfect state of society prevented from concluding more auspiciously. For Hester, then, trapped in a loveless marriage with Chillingworth of whom she had no tidings "in some two years, or less" (63), union with Dimmesdale, though not sanctioned by society, yet amounts to a kind of Gandharva marriage, that rite which knows no rite but perfect dedication of hearts. Sakuntala's Gandharva marriage with Dusyanta, although socially sanctioned, yet involves her in a Hester-like situation when Dusyanta disowns her in public, making it seem that she was carrying an illegitimate child. Thus, like Hester, Sakuntala becomes a sinner in the eyes of society, and, like her, is subjected to public disgrace. Sakuntala has in fact the added mortification of being publicly admonished by her own escort from the hermitage, Sarngarva.

Both Sakuntala and Hester bear adversity and public disgrace with remarkable courage, showing grace under pressure. Hester's "natural dignity and force of character" (54) do not desert her even when she has to stand on the scaffold as a

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<sup>2</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter and Other Tales of the Puritans*, ed. Harry Levin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961) 50. All citations from *The Scarlet Letter* are from this edition and will be included in the text.

sinner in full public view, and it is "with almost a serene deportment" (57) that she walks to the scaffold. Sakuntala also shows exemplary fortitude when Dusyanta refuses to acknowledge her, and in the celebrated repudiation scene, she acquits herself with admirable equanimity and self-control. Hester and Sakuntala are equally generous and forgiving towards their lovers. Dimmesdale speaks of the "wondrous strength and generosity of a woman's heart" (69) when Hester refuses to divulge the name of her lover. Surprisingly, Hester, who has the makings of a feminist, refrains, for all her "freedom of speculation" (163), from showing the least anger or rancor towards Dimmesdale. Even when Dimmesdale vacillates or seems supine and despicably weak, Hester never blames him in thought, word, or deed, her attitude being consistently protective and compassionate. Although Sakuntala does flare up in the repudiation scene, calling Dusyanta a "wicked man" (V: 23) with "honey in his mouth, but poison in his heart" (V: 24), it is only when he accuses the entire female race of "untaught cunning" (V: 22), of being scheming and manipulative. She, however, harbors no malice against him, forgiving him when they meet after several years, without an attempt to exact even verbal satisfaction for his earlier ill treatment of her.

Like Hester, Sakuntala grows in depth and maturity in the course of the action. If Hester was youthful and innocent like Sakuntala when inveigled by Chillingworth into marrying him, the later Sakuntala sheds her ebullience and becomes chastened and thoughtful like Hester after the ordeal. In their period of disgrace, they live as outcasts, in virtual isolation from human society, Hester on the outskirts of the town, Sakuntala on the outskirts of human habitation itself. In Hester as in Sakuntala, passion becomes refined and spiritualized. As Rama Rao remarks, "the creators of both these memorable characters . . . have made the physical union of the lovers tread the path of sorrow and penitence and thereby chastened and sublimated it into a moral union—one paradise lost and another, a higher one, regained."<sup>3</sup>

Sakuntala is the pivotal figure in the play. Not only is the play named after her, but all the characters are seen in relation to her and revolve around her. In Kalidasa's other two plays, *Malavikagnimitra* and *Vikramorvasiya*, there are women characters who compete with the heroine for attention. But in *Sakuntala* there is no major woman character to divert attention from the heroine. As Devadhar and Suru remark, "with true poetic insight Kalidasa has avoided the temptation of bringing any other woman into competition with Sakuntala."<sup>4</sup> Hester is similarly the central figure in *The Scarlet Letter*, which also happens to be the only Hawthorne novel with a single dominating woman character. The indecisive and eternally wavering Dimmesdale would at first sight seem to have hardly anything in common with the strong, assertive, and self-assured Dusyanta. But a deeper probing would reveal many similarities of character and situation. Like Dusyanta, Dimmesdale has an intense and passionate nature which he finds it difficult to keep under leash. With remarkable insight Chillingworth sees through his apparent composure and self-control: "This man, pure as they deem him,—all spiritual as he seems,—hath inherited a strong animal nature from his father or his mother" (129). It is, however, in their strong feelings of guilt and remorse that

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<sup>3</sup> P.G. Rama Rao, "Woman Undefeated: Sakuntala and Hester Prynne," *Journal of Literary Studies* (Utkal University Bhubaneswar, India) 14 (1990) 17.

<sup>4</sup> Devadhara and Suru xxvii.

Dusyanta and Dimmesdale seem most similar. Dimmesdale's feelings of guilt are of course of an entirely different order and spring from an entirely different source than Dusyanta's, originating from an overwhelming sense of having violated a sacred moral code and in fact the law of God himself. But the feelings of guilt are similar in their intensity, turning into an obsession and darkening the whole world for the sufferer. Dimmesdale's feelings of guilt pervade the novel but are most explicitly analyzed in the chapter "The Interior of a Heart." For Dusyanta also, once the sight of the ring restores his memory of Sakuntala, there is no escape from the gnawings of remorse. He not only suffers from sleeplessness but is unable to concentrate on the affairs of state and to transact everyday business. He tries to "sit and recreate [his] sight with the slender shrubs which bear a faint resemblance to [his] beloved" (VI: 9). The recollection of his shabby treatment of Sakuntala "burns" him "like an envenomed shaft" (VI:9).

The similarity of character also extends to Bharat and Pearl who, although significantly different in certain ways, still share some important traits. Both Bharat and Pearl are volatile, somewhat wayward, and difficult to control or discipline. In courage and intelligence they are far ahead of children of their age. Hester is fully aware of Pearl's "remarkable precocity and acuteness" (178). Bharat shows his courage in action, being given to playing with and taming wild animals, so that he has been named *Sarvadamana*—"All-Tamer." The King sees him forcibly dragging towards him, "for sport, a lion's whelp that has but half-sucked its mother's dug, and has its mane ruffled by pulling" (VII: 14). Bharat says: "Open thy mouth, lion, that I may count thy teeth" (VII: 15). Pearl does not go quite so far, but a wolf is said to have come up, and "smelt of Pearl's robe, and offered his savage head to be patted by her hand" (203). The broad canvas of the novel, of course, enables Hawthorne to present Pearl much more amply than Kalidasa could do within the limited and constraining domain of the play.

Kalidasa was essentially a poet and a dramatist, Hawthorne a novelist and a writer of tales. *Sakuntala* is a play in seven acts constructed according to the principles of Sanskrit dramaturgy. Although *The Scarlet Letter* is a novel, many critics have commented upon the essentially dramatic nature of its structure. Thus Schubert points out how the story is "built around the scaffold" in a beautifully symmetrical manner: "At the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the story the scaffold is the dominating point."<sup>5</sup> The scaffold scenes thus give the novel a clearly recognizable beginning, middle, and end. Maclean sees the novel structured around three epic "quests"—Dimmesdale's for salvation, Chillingworth's for Dimmesdale's soul, and Pearl's for a father. "The structure is thoroughly balanced and ordered," he says,<sup>6</sup> finding in the novel the tightness and intense concentration of drama. Cowley goes so far as to find a five-act structure in the novel consistent with the dramatic form.<sup>7</sup> Just as the scarlet "A" plays a crucial role in the novel, the ring plays a pivotal role in the drama. Both the scarlet letter and the ring function as dominant motifs, rich in symbolic overtones. They also materially affect the course of events. Pearl's refusal to accept her mother without the scarlet letter in the forest scene dampens the romantic ebullience of the lovers and indicates that

<sup>5</sup> Leland Schubert, *Hawthorne The Artist* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944) 138.

<sup>6</sup> Hugh N. Maclean, "Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*: The Dark Problem of this Life," *American Literature* 27 (1955) 15.

<sup>7</sup> Malcolm Cowley, "Five Acts of *The Scarlet Letter*," *College English* 19 (1956) 11-16.

the burden of sin cannot be cast away so easily. In *Sakuntala* the ring is of great importance, symbolizing the union of the lovers, and affecting the course of events even more crucially than the scarlet letter.

The supernatural and the superstitious figure prominently in *Sakuntala* as in *The Scarlet Letter*. In *Sakuntala* the curse is of course a central supernatural element which sows the seeds of conflict in what would otherwise have been the smooth course of love. Moreover, Dusyanta often speaks of fate and predestination. *The Scarlet Letter* is also full of witchcraft, omens, and portents. Mistress Hibbins, the Governor's sister, is reputed to be a witch and acts like one. After Hester's meeting with Governor Bellingham, when Pearl goes capering down the hall, the Reverend Mr. Wilson wonders whether even her tiptoes touch the floor: "The little baggage hath witchcraft in her, I profess," he says to Dimmesdale. "She needs no old woman's broomstick to fly withal!" (115). The night Governor Winthrop dies, a portent is seen by the townsmen—"A great red letter in the sky,—the letter A,—which we interpret to stand for Angel," says the old sexton (157).

Thematically, *The Scarlet Letter* inhabits a vastly different universe from that of *Sakuntala*. *The Scarlet Letter* is essentially a study of sin and its consequences, and the situations are therefore so ordered as to highlight the moral and psychological consequences of sin and the depredations it makes on the human soul. In *Sakuntala*, although feelings of guilt and remorse appear prominently, the deeply tragic aspects of sin, or the relentless working out of its consequences, which in the novel are seen as irreversible, do not find a place. Similarly, while *The Scarlet Letter* is written in a restrained and intensely concentrated style, *Sakuntala* has a rich and densely poetic and metaphorical texture, at times inclining to the florid. At the same time, it may not be altogether fanciful to suggest the existence of similarities between *Sakuntala* and *The Scarlet Letter* even at the deeper, more profound level of theme and vision. Ancient Indian aesthetics envisions all literature and art, including drama, dance, painting, and sculpture, as essentially acts and gestures in the worship of God. In one of the most celebrated works of Sanskrit aesthetics, Bharata's *Natyasastra*, all artistic activity is shown to justify itself only as ritualistic divine worship. Colonial American society also stressed the use of art primarily as an instrument to worship God, adding serviceability to human beings as an additional and secondary dimension. In "The Custom-House" Hawthorne imagines his forefathers wondering thus about his vocation as a writer of fiction: "What is he? A writer of story-books! What kind of business in life,—what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind in his day and generation,—may that be? Why, the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler" (12). With such a pietistic interpretation of literature and art, it is no wonder that moral and religious values should loom large in both *Sakuntala* and *The Scarlet Letter*. In *The Scarlet Letter* the moral law is finally held superior to the happiness of the individual, and even the romantic Hester, saddened and matured by experience, seems at least to acquiesce in such a view. In *Sakuntala* also the supremacy of ethical values remains unquestioned, and the play embodies the Vedantic view which insists on the operation of these values even in the sphere of love.

Like *The Scarlet Letter*, *Sakuntala* shows suffering as bringing wisdom and maturity and as refining character. Suffering embitters Hester but also brings her in-

sight into human nature. Sakuntala also matures through suffering and achieves what Wells calls "the felicity of equilibrium"<sup>8</sup> typical of Sanskrit drama. Thus both *Sakuntala* and *The Scarlet Letter* stress the spiritual above the material. There is in fact a strong ascetic note in both of them. Hester virtually renounces the world and lives a life of self-abnegation and all but monastic seclusion. Dimmesdale's penance involves practises of self-torture similar to those of Indian ascetics. In *Sakuntala* the heroine, after being rejected by Dusyanta, leads the life of a *tapaswini*—an ascetic—in a hermitage, abjuring worldly pleasure, and dedicating herself completely to ascetic practises and to bringing up her son.

Could Hawthorne have possibly known about, or even read, Kalidasa's play? Is there a possibility, even a remote one, of actual influence of the play upon the novel? It is certainly true that Hawthorne's orientalism was not as deep or pervasive as that of Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, or Melville. In fact, Hawthorne derived most of his knowledge of the East from European interpreters and intermediaries, such as Voltaire, Robert Southey, and Thomas Moore, and there is no conclusive evidence of his direct exposure to Indian writings. But he did read Reginald Heber's *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Province of India, from Calcutta to Bombay, 1824-1825* (published posthumously in 1828), and was for some time employed as Surveyor of the Custom House at Salem which, as is well known, had been a major center of trade with India. Hawthorne's aunt Sarah had married John Crowninshield, a member of an illustrious mercantile family, and Hawthorne particularly treasured the 1785-86 logbook relating his father's voyage from Bengal to Salem aboard the Crowninshield ship *America*. Moreover, since there was considerable interest in Hindu literature and philosophy among the Transcendentalists, it is entirely possible that Hawthorne, who was on friendly terms with many of them, should have acquired some knowledge of Hindu texts through them.

In a fine study, Luedtke argues that contrary to what is commonly held, Hawthorne's "world, in fact and imagination, was larger, richer, and more chromatic than we have known,"<sup>9</sup> and that the richness and complexity of this world owe not a little to his exploration of the East which "played a significant role both in Hawthorne's choice of life and in the development of his tales and romances," helping "shape the form, characters, and themes of his writing."<sup>10</sup> Jac Tharpe in fact has gone so far as to make a very persuasive case that in "Rappaccini's Daughter" and "Roger Malvin's Burial" Hawthorne used motifs and situations drawn from Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* and the Indian epic *The Ramayana*. The similarities, Tharpe points out, "are not in . . . general plot but in details of setting and incident,"<sup>11</sup> the most important parallels hinging on plant symbolism. In both *Sakuntala* and "Rappaccini's Daughter" the writers stress the very close affinity, amounting to an integral and organic relationship, between the heroine and the plants she nurtures. As Sakuntala is ready to leave the hermitage to go to Dusyanta's kingdom, Kanva thus apostrophizes: "Ye neighbouring trees of the pious grove! She who would not drink water first, before you were watered; she who

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<sup>8</sup> H.W. Wells, *The Classical Drama of India* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1963) 32.

<sup>9</sup> Luther S. Luedtke, *Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Romance of the Orient* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989) xxiv.

<sup>10</sup> Luedtke xvi.

<sup>11</sup> Jac Tharpe, "Hawthorne and Hindu Literature," *The Southern Quarterly* 10 (1972) 107-08.

cropped not through affection for you one of your fresh leaves, though she is so fond of ornaments: she whose chief delight was in the season of the first appearance of your bloom; even that same Sakuntala is going to the palace of her wedded lord. Let all give their consent" (IV: 8). Sakuntala is especially keen to say goodbye to "Vanajyotsna, my sister among the creepers," at which Kanva comments: "I know thou lovest her as thy sister" (IV: 12). Beatrice also has a close relationship with the plants and shrubs in her garden, although with her it is not a benign one but rather dark and sinister. The concept of *visakanya* (poison-girl) around which the story of "Rappaccini's Daughter" is woven is also a common one in Indian literature.

It is well known that Sir William Jones's translation of *Sakuntala* (1789) was republished in *The Emerald*, a Boston periodical, and as early as 1791 Thomas Jefferson acquired a copy of the 1790 reprint of the book. Act I of Jones's translation was published in the *Monthly Anthology and Boston Review*, a magazine Emerson is known to have read during his Harvard years. Thoreau refers to *Sakuntala* in *Walden*. There is, of course, no definitive evidence of Hawthorne having read Kalidasa's play, but there seems ample basis for Tharpe's view that "Hawthorne scholarship too much inclines to confine Hawthorne's reading to the list of books borrowed from the library."<sup>12</sup>

If Tharpe's thesis is correct, then, it is interesting to note that Hawthorne, who of all the major writers of the American Renaissance seemed the least drawn to Hindu writings which had excited and captured the imagination of some of his illustrious contemporaries, was the one to put Hindu material to the most directly literary—as opposed to philosophical—use. In the last analysis, however, the possibility of Hawthorne's knowing, or knowing about, Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* remains a possibility, or at best a probability. At the same time, the remarkable similarities between writers as far removed in time, space, and social and cultural environments as Kalidasa and Hawthorne add up to an interesting and illuminating chapter in comparative literary and cultural studies.

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<sup>12</sup> Tharpe 115.