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English Literature

MYTHOLOGY AS PEDAGOGY: A CASE STUDY OF KALIDASA'S ABHIGYAN SHAKUNTALAM

KEY WORDS: Mythological Narratives, Socio-Cognitive Constructivism, Vernacular Wisdom, Contemporary Education.

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ABSTRACT

This paper establishes mythology as an effective pedagogical approach through a focused case study of Kalidasa's Abhigyan Shakuntalam. It demonstrates how mythological narratives serve as socio-cognitive constructivist tools that bridge vernacular wisdom with contemporary educational goals. By conducting a qualitative, interpretive analysis of the play's narrative structure, character development, and thematic elements, the study highlights how Abhigyan Shakuntalam facilitates cognitive, emotional, and social learner development. The play's complex characters and moral dilemmas promote critical thinking, emotional regulation, and social understanding, while embedding essential cultural values such as duty, integrity, and ethical decision-making. Furthermore, the paper explores Shakuntala's dual role as a figure of both patriarchal oppression and empowered resilience, emphasizing her connection with nature as a symbol of nurturing strength. The analysis situates the play within broader pedagogical theories, including socio-cognitive constructivism, developmental learning, ecofeminist pedagogy, and moral education, underscoring mythology's multifaceted potential to support holistic education and address contemporary challenges in integrating vernacular knowledge with global perspectives.

Mythology has emerged as a powerful pedagogical approach in modern education, offering a multifaceted framework for teaching, learning, and developing critical competencies across diverse educational contexts. Far from being merely historical artefacts or entertainment, mythological narratives function as sophisticated educational tools that address contemporary pedagogical challenges while connecting learners to universal and culturally specific wisdom. As studied by Kumar, mythology encompasses more than stories; it represents a repository of collective human knowledge and meaning-making. Myths are an anthropological constant that has occurred in all societies and civilizations, constituting man's attempt to interpret the physical and social environment, while depicting the relationship between man and nature and the divine. Beyond their explanatory function, myths serve as a safeguard for social cohesion, establishing mechanisms of cultural transmission. Rashmi Tripathi studies that mythology provides timeless advice from wise sages and gods, offering students a sense of perspective and enabling them to draw on these stories to gain insight into the complexities of operations, team dynamics, and ethical dilemmas. Contemporary scholarship positions mythology as a sophisticated pedagogical methodology. Mythology is established as a socio-cognitive constructivist pedagogy in accordance with developmental learning theories, functioning as cultural narratives rife with vernacular wisdom used to gain insights into abstract conceptions and provide pragmatic guidance towards courses of action. This approach bridges the contemporary educational challenge of balancing vernacular wisdom with preparation for an increasingly globalized world, addressing the call for decolonized knowledge in education. The pedagogical potential of mythology extends to cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of learner development. Mythological narratives provide developmental tools that shape cognitive processes, emotional regulation, and moral understanding, with archetypal patterns—conflicts between good and evil, heroism, sacrifice, transformation, that resonate deeply with young minds navigating their own developmental journeys. These narratives offer more than imaginative engagement; they serve as mechanisms for promoting critical thinking, resilience, and ethical decision-making.

The pedagogical application of mythology extends across multiple domains and educational levels. One significant pedagogical contribution of mythology lies in its capacity to develop higher-order thinking skills as studied by Antonia I Kapeleri in her paper 'Cultivating Critical Thinking' (2025). She documents that mythology is "one underappreciated yet potent resource for fostering critical thinking" (Kapeleri 117).

Teaching mythology offers rich opportunities for students to engage with complex narratives, moral dilemmas, and philosophical inquiries, enabling them to develop essential critical thinking skills such as analysis, interpretation, and ethical reasoning. Myths facilitate the analysis of human behavior by introducing the schema of cause and effect, with mythical thought seeking to understand causality, the primary aim of science, thereby connecting mythical discourse to scientific discourse.

Indian mythology provides valuable insights into the importance of values such as honesty, integrity, and respect, which are essential for effective management education, with stories such as the Mahabharata teaching about leadership, decision-making, and team building, and the Ramayana offering lessons on conflict resolution and negotiation (Aithal et al.). Scholars have concluded that no single theoretical framework can fully describe the intricate phenomenon known as mythology and its importance in various domains, suggesting that diverse readings aid in deeper comprehension of the complexity of myth and its objectives.

Indian mythology in literature plays a crucial role in pedagogy by embedding essential values such as honesty, integrity, and respect within rich narratives. Texts like the Mahabharata and Ramayana offer profound lessons on leadership, decision-making, conflict resolution, and team building. These mythological stories foster critical thinking and ethical reasoning by presenting complex moral dilemmas and archetypal patterns. Through Indian literary mythology, learners engage with culturally specific wisdom while developing cognitive, emotional, and social skills, supporting holistic educational goals and addressing contemporary challenges in management and ethical education. Indian mythology in literature, exemplified by Kalidasa's Abhigyan Shakuntalam, powerfully reinforces the pedagogical functions discussed in the selected text. Abhigyan Shakuntalam embodies essential cultural values such as duty, love, honor, and ethical decision-making through its rich narrative and complex characters. The play's exploration of human emotions, relationships, and moral dilemmas provides learners with concrete examples to develop critical thinking, emotional regulation, and social understanding. Using Abhigyan Shakuntalam as a lens highlights how Indian mythological literature facilitates cognitive and ethical growth by presenting archetypal patterns and culturally specific wisdom, thereby supporting holistic education and addressing contemporary challenges in integrating vernacular knowledge with global perspectives.

This paper aims to establish mythology as an effective pedagogical approach through a focused case study of Kalidasa's *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*. By analyzing this classical Indian literary work, the paper demonstrates how mythological narratives embody essential cultural values that are integral to holistic education. The study highlights how *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* facilitates cognitive, emotional, and social learner development by presenting complex characters and moral dilemmas that promote critical thinking, emotional regulation, and social understanding. Through this case study, the paper underscores the role of Indian mythological literature in bridging vernacular wisdom with contemporary educational goals, reinforcing mythology's pedagogical functions as a socio-cognitive constructivist tool that addresses both cultural specificity and universal developmental needs. The methodology for this paper involves a qualitative, interpretive case study approach centered on Kalidasa's *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*. The study conducts a close textual analysis of the play, examining its narrative structure, character development, and thematic elements to identify how mythological storytelling conveys essential cultural values. This analysis focuses on the cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of learner development by exploring the moral dilemmas and archetypal patterns presented in the text. The methodology also contextualizes the play within broader pedagogical theories, particularly socio-cognitive constructivism and developmental learning frameworks, to demonstrate how *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* functions as an educational tool that bridges vernacular wisdom with contemporary educational goals. Secondary sources on mythology's pedagogical role and Indian mythological literature support the interpretive analysis, reinforcing the paper's argument regarding mythology's multifaceted educational potential.

In 1966, Jerome Bruner introduced the theory of constructivism, suggesting that education comes from perceiving the world around us. Piaget further developed this idea, proposing that knowledge acquisition arises from synthesizing our prior beliefs, asking questions, and investigating them. The concept of constructivism emerges from these two perspectives. Knowledge is gained through experiences that are refined by exploring them. In this manner, every individual becomes an active creator of knowledge. Vygotsky proposed the theory of Social constructivism in 1968, elaborating that language and culture are indispensable in knowledge construction and influence people's intellectual growth and perception of their environment. Knowledge is a construction of society and is co-produced in the presence of people who share similar language and culture.

Nietzsche designates myths as crucial factors to cultural flourishing in his text *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). He frees myths from the primitive relics of the past and provides them with cultural vitality. He writes, "without myth every culture loses the healthy natural power of its creativity: only a horizon defined by myths completes and unifies a whole cultural movement. (Nietzsche 24). He establishes that myths provide a symbolic horizon within any culture, and these symbolic entities define identity, values, collective memory and creative expression. A culture without myths lacks the unifying interpretive lens through which the contradictions can be understood. They encode historical anxieties, aspirations and ethical dilemmas into symbolic form. In these ways, myths act as symbolic archives transmitting inherited historical wisdom across generations.

Kalidasa is widely regarded as the greatest poet of Sanskrit literature. He lived in the fifth century of the Christian era when Rome was tottering under barbarian assault, making his literary achievements all the more remarkable. Kalidasa left a significant literary legacy with seven works: three dramas, two epics, one elegiac poem, and one descriptive poem.

Among his extensive works, Kalidasa is celebrated for masterpieces such as *Meghdutam*, *Malvikagnimitram*, and most prominently, *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*. His works reflect the richness of Indian thought and creativity during times when the West faced its own challenges, epitomizing the brilliance of classical Indian literature. *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* (meaning "The Recognition of Shakuntala" in English) stands as Kalidasa's masterpiece in Sanskrit literature. This renowned seven-act play was composed around the 4th or 5th century CE and exhibits the literary excellence and cultural depth of the Sanskrit heritage. The play is a tale of passionate romance between King Dushyanta of Hastinapur, a noble and kind ruler respected by everyone, and Shakuntala, a beautiful maiden who is the daughter of Sage Vishwamitra and Apsara Menaka. The narrative revolves around themes of love, marriage, separation, and eventual reunion, exploring their blooming romance and covering deeper themes of love, fate, morality, and relationships.

Abhigyan Shakuntalam as Pedagogical Tool

Beyond being a celebrated work by Kalidasa, *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* is a rich pedagogical tool that can be understood through the light of the above-mentioned theories in various educational contexts to cultivate interdisciplinary learning pertaining to Indian dramaturgy and its aesthetics, particularly *rasa* theory. It can be used as a text to introduce students to cultural traditions, environmental consciousness, discussions about human relationships, and responsibility. In modern classrooms, it can also facilitate interdisciplinary teaching linking literature with history, philosophy, social sciences and the pedagogical exercises involving observation, interpretation and creative expression so that students may appreciate literary richness but also develop broader intellectual and cultural awareness.

Shakuntala as a Figure of Women's Empowerment

Darshini Dadawala exposes the importance of literature across various feminist movements and elaborates upon the contribution of literature in understanding women's agency. She talks about six ways through which literature empowers women, including writing as expression as a core human need, writing as activism, exploration of women's experiences, understanding gender role construction, identifying micro-realities and transformation through literary process. She concludes that building spaces and institutions where women's voices are cultivated and heard is significant for women's empowerment. Opening and promoting access to creation, identification, interpretation, and transmission of literature for, by, and of women would have far-reaching effects on both women's power and societal well-being. From Indian mythology, Durga, Draupadi, Urvashi, Uma, Sita, and Kalidasa's Shakuntala are all empowered women who exhibited the ability to overcome restrictions and constraints imposed by social customs, beliefs, and practices. In the play, Shakuntala is not the victim of the wrongdoings of the male characters; instead, she courageously overcomes the hardships of her life and lives her life on her own terms.

In his play, Kalidasa reinterprets Shakuntala as an obedient and virtuous woman, steadfast in her love even after being abandoned, contrasting with the traditional depiction of apsaras. Through this portrayal, Kalidasa constructs the image of a dutiful wife who, despite facing injustice, remains committed to her responsibilities. Shakuntala exemplifies Kalidasa's effort to redefine apsara femininity by presenting a compliant and devoted *pativrata* wife, serving as a model of ideal womanhood. Consequently, Shakuntala is divested of any deviant femininity and is celebrated as the heroine of the play. The play also provides insight into the expected female behavior during the Vedic period through the repeated instructions on how to be an ideal wife, as seen in Kanva's advice in Act IV.

Kanva: My beloved child: Be held in high esteem by your lord

as Sarmistha was by Yayati; as she bore Puru, may you too bear a son to whom the whole world will bow. My child, you are now leaving for your husband's home; when you enter it: Serve your elders with diligence; be a friend to your co-wives; even if wronged by your husband do not cross him through anger; (Kalidasa 227)

Patriarchal control over women's identity and the construction of their destiny is evident in the play. Shakuntala's life is largely affected by male entities, such as her father and her husband in the play, and her social legitimacy depends upon King Dushyant's recognition of her. When he fails to recognise her, she is left rejected and vulnerable. This reflects the traditional notion that the status of women was dependent upon male validation. Further, her suffering during her pregnancy highlights the lack of agency given to women in public spheres where her truth is silenced in the social structure of patriarchy.

Despite these limitations, Shakuntala is a woman of dignity, emotional strength, and integrity. She does not beg for acceptance. She accepts her fate gracefully and moves on. Her character was resilient and strong. The environment around her nurtures her, making her natural, independent and compassionate, suggesting a model of womanhood rooted in harmony with nature. At the end of the play, when Dushyant recognises her, Shakuntala emerges as a figure of restored dignity and maternal power. Abhigyan Shakuntalam emerges as a text that has a dual narrative of oppression and empowerment. While it mirrors the patriarchal control over the lives of women, it also celebrates moral authority, integrity, emotional strength, and strong endurance embodied by Shakuntala.'

Shakuntala and her Association with Natural Order

In their paper, Houde and Bullis explore a case study of ecofeminist pedagogy, recognising the classroom as a "contested terrain" where dominant ideologies can be questioned through critical pedagogy. Within academic contexts, ecofeminist pedagogy encourages ecological awareness and gender justice as interdependent concepts. The interconnectedness of women and nature offers a powerful pedagogical framework for challenging hierarchical systems that normalise the exploitation of all kinds, including the environment, marginalised communities, or women. Existing scholarship in communication studies highlights that adopting ecofeminist insights allows teachers and students to interrogate the ways in which power operates through language, media and culture. Closely aligned with this approach is eco-pedagogy, a pedagogical movement that seeks to foster ecological consciousness, ethical responsibility toward the environment, and a holistic understanding of the human-nature relationship. Eco-pedagogy expands classroom learning beyond anthropocentric perspectives and encourages students to see themselves as active participants in sustaining ecological balance. When ecofeminism and eco-pedagogy intersect, the classroom becomes a transformative space where discussions about gender, culture, power, and ecology converge.

Sharma and Mishra investigated the importance of nature in the character development of Shakuntala. They wrote, "Nature plays a significant role in her life, and she is portrayed as if Nature itself has nurtured and raised her" (Sharma and Mishra 285). Sharma and Mishra conducted an in-depth study on the role of nature in shaping the character of Shakuntala. They emphasize that nature is not just a background element but a vital force intricately linked to her identity and growth. According to them, Shakuntala's character is profoundly influenced by the natural environment around her, to the extent that she appears as if she has been nurtured and raised directly by nature itself. This portrayal highlights a deep bond between Shakuntala and the natural world, suggesting that

her qualities, behaviors, and overall personality are reflections of the care and influence that nature has bestowed upon her. Their work sheds light on how this connection with nature enriches the narrative and adds layers of meaning to Shakuntala's character development. In the first act, during her conversation with Priyavanda, she references her dialogue with the mango tree, "Oh girls, the mango tree is trying to tell me something with his branches that move in the wind like the fingers. I must go on and see him" (Kalidasa 9). The play employs Shakuntala's connection with nature as a potent metaphor to illustrate the nurturing and life-sustaining attributes shared by women and the Earth. Shakuntala emerges as an embodiment of nurturing strength and vitality, enriching the narrative with a deeper symbolic resonance that underscores the thematic unity of life, growth, and renewal.

Moral Values in Abhigyan Shakuntam

The relationship between mythology and moral education has long been a subject of discussion in educational and cultural studies. In his paper, James Hemming argues that traditional systems of education assumed that moral maturity in children developed through exposure to established religions, supported by moral instruction from parents and schools. These values were frequently sustained and communicated through myths, which served as symbolic narratives reinforcing ethical principles, cultural norms, and collective ideals. Mythological narratives provide symbolic frameworks through which societies articulate ideals such as justice, duty, compassion, and responsibility. They function as fantastical stories but as cultural texts that convey moral dilemmas and ethical insights in ways that resonate with learners across generations.

Abhigyan Shakuntalam is one of the texts of this kind. It conveys deep moral and ethical lessons through its characters and conflicts. The character of King Dushyanta highlights the importance of dharma (duty and moral responsibility). His failure to recognize Shakuntala due to the curse leads to suffering for both of them. The narrative ultimately emphasizes that a ruler must act responsibly and uphold ethical duties toward others. Shakuntala's neglect of visiting Durvasa teaches a moral lesson that carelessness and disregard of social obligations can have serious consequences. The eventual recognition of Shakuntala by Dushyant conveys that truth and justice ultimately prevail. Abhigyan Shakuntalam negotiates the relationship between free choice and determinism. Although the characters make free choices, cosmic order has its own authority and role to play in determining people's fate. Redemption and moral development are the overwhelming themes. The character of Shakuntala goes through transformational experiences in which she learns to acknowledge her errors, accept responsibility, and seek atonement. In Abhigyan Shakuntalam, the ideas of fate and karma are closely connected with the lives of the main characters, shaping their experiences and testing their moral integrity. Shakuntala's life, in particular, reflects the delicate balance between destiny and the consequences of one's actions. Her meeting with King Dushyanta and the love that develops between them appears to be guided by fate. Their union seems destined, yet it is also influenced by the intervention of the sage Durvasa.

As Shakuntala becomes deeply absorbed in her love for Dushyanta, she unintentionally neglects her responsibility as a host when the sage arrives at the hermitage. This lapse leads to Durvasa's curse, because of which Dushyanta temporarily forgets her. The curse becomes the turning point in Shakuntala's life and demonstrates how a moment of negligence can bring serious consequences.

Her separation from Dushyanta and the hardships she later endures can be understood as karmic outcomes of that moment of forgetfulness. Through her suffering, the play

highlights the importance of duty and mindfulness, suggesting that neglecting one's responsibilities may lead to unforeseen trials. At the same time, the narrative also emphasizes the role of destiny in guiding human lives. This idea is reflected in Shakuntala's own words when she speaks to Dushyanta: "Shakuntala: I do not reproach the king, but fate. King: Why should you reproach fate so favors you?" (Kalidasa 110)

Thus, the interplay of fate and karma in Abhigyan Shakuntalam highlights a profound moral philosophy. While destiny plays an important role in shaping the lives of Shakuntala and Dushyanta, their experiences also reveal that human actions carry inevitable consequences. Shakuntala's momentary neglect leads to suffering, yet her patience, virtue, and steadfast love ultimately restore harmony in her life. The play, therefore, suggests that fate may guide the course of events, but moral conduct and righteous behavior remain essential in overcoming adversity. Through this delicate balance of destiny and karma, Kalidasa presents a timeless message about responsibility, endurance, and the ultimate triumph of truth and virtue.

Kalidasa's Abhigyan Shakuntalam exemplifies the pedagogical power of mythological narratives by illustrating the interplay of duty, mindfulness, and destiny through its rich narrative and complex characters, fostering cognitive, emotional, and social development in learners. The play's moral dilemmas and archetypal patterns encourage critical thinking, emotional regulation, and ethical reasoning, while embedding essential cultural values such as integrity and responsibility. Shakuntala's dual portrayal as both a figure constrained by patriarchal structures and an emblem of empowered resilience, closely linked to nature, highlights the text's capacity to engage with ecofeminist pedagogy and moral education. This case study underscores mythology's role as a socio-cognitive constructivist tool that bridges vernacular wisdom with contemporary educational goals, supporting holistic learner development and addressing challenges in integrating culturally rooted knowledge within globalized education contexts.

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