

## Consider the Deer, and Other Explorations Nature in Kalidasa's Sakuntala

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We can only describe, only remain within the work, if we also decide to go beyond it; to bring out, for example, what the work is compelled to say [... W]e must show a sort of splitting within the work; this division in its unconscious, is so far as it possesses one - the unconscious which is history beyond its edges, encroaching on those edges: this is why it is possible to trace the path which leads from the haunted work to that which haunts it. (p.94)

- Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production* (1978)

Raja Ravi Varma's famous painting *Shakuntala Looking for Dushyanta* (1870) features Shakuntala and her two friends dressed in orange robes- shapely sensual figures foregrounded against a mesh of green. Critical discussions show how she is pinned to a position of erotic desire by the male gaze, causing the active female gaze of Shakuntala to be under-read because she is foregrounded against a green nature. Traditionally Shakuntala is interpreted as the passive female who suffers for the king's amorous pursuit, and must depend on her male child with imperial birth marks to be ultimately recognized. This paper attempts to analyse categories of nature and culture by charting the slippages, the *aporia* of the site occupied by the animals, and re-imagine the relationship between Shakuntala and nature.

Shakuntala is referred to as the 'deer' who 'enticed the hero of our play' signalling an elision of categories. Through the play we encounter nature and the heroine exchanging places, standing in for each other and avoiding easy symbolisms. Thus if we both can exist in the same time-space continuum then we have to attribute more qualities to the deer other than the 'animal' or a 'thingness' (Chakrabarty, 2000, p.77). The deer is not a symbol for Shakuntala; it exists in itself.

The first Act is formulated in the mode of a hunt, with a literal hunt paralleling the figurative pursuit of Shakuntala by Dushyanta. The charioteer sees the King as God who can 'hunt the spotted deer with shafts to end his race'. In the framework of a hunt, the moral responsibility falls on the deer which leads the king on 'a long chase' as if the pursuer is pursuing only because of the pursued. While the deer cannot speak, the narrative suggests that the deer is pursued because it makes the king chase it. This causal relationship is always inverted in the hunt: the hunt derives its meaning from the intended prey, and is a kind of destructive agency- a posthumous agency; an agency granted to foreclose it in the event of its death. Further, to extract rights and responsibilities, the hunted has to be objectified to draw them in relation to the object of the hunt. The narrative thus privileges the rights and duties of the king and the charioteer in styling the hunt as a social custom.

In a causal chain, it is the hunt that moves the story along diegetically by bringing the king to the hermitage. As Romila Thapar (1999) has pointed out, Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* is a variation of the origin myth of the Bharatas and therefore fashions a royal identity that automatically involves turning to the past to highlight lineage and heritage. In such a context, the hunt

becomes very loaded in several ways. In the romantic play as a genre, hunting is the king's supremely male sport to capture and conquer the inferior female. In such a genre, it symbolises love in its trajectory of pursuit and submission. It is a fairly easy way for establishing kingly qualities as part of a character by showcasing the hero as possessing admirable qualities such as courage and masculinity. The hunt is a spectacle for the others to witness the hero, and his powers of capture/conquest/victory.

But this narrative privileging of the hunt and its associated qualities is also seductive in promoting a particular kind of reading: one that suppresses the prey and the pursued in its focus on domination and conquest. That is, in an analysis of the hunt as a pursuit by the king of the deer/Shakuntala/animal, as critics, we may be limiting ourselves in concerning only with the king's motivations and chauvinism. In our preoccupation itself, we deny a voice to the hunted, thereby consigning them further amongst a cast of stereotypes such as inferior or passive or submissive. In a reading that is conscious of the authority of the established logic in the text and the authority behind such a logic, it becomes easier to voice the unvoiced. For instance, the hunt has historical dimensions that as Thapar has pointed out, is much gentler than in the Epic because however serene the forest of Kanva's Ashram is, it is still one that has been tamed by military conquest and administration. The following scene from the *Mahabharata* is a violent spectacle of the power of the king:

“And in this wood, which teemed with herds of deer- and beasts of prey that stalk the forest, Duhsanta, tiger among men, with retainers, escort, and mounts wrought havoc, killing game of many kinds. Many families of tigers he laid low as they came within range of his arrows; he shot them with his shafts. Those that were in the distance the bull among men shot down with his arrows; others that came up close he cut down with his sword; and antelopes he brought down with his spear, the powerful spearman, who also knew all the points of the circular club swing and whose courage was boundless. He stalked about killing wild game and fowl with javelin, sword, mace, bludgeon, halberd. And when the wondrously valiant king and his warlike warriors raided the great forest, the big game fled it.” (1973)

Here there is a privileging of the true subject as the ruler/king as key to understanding history to the detriment of other subjects. Therefore when the King expresses surprise that the deer is running so fast that he can hardly keep him in sight, ought we not to consider the deer?

We learn soon from ‘A Voice behind the Scenes’, that the King cannot hunt the deer as the deer belongs to the hermitage and cannot be killed. A simple division of power between the King and his dominion is undercut, and the binary between nature and nurture dissolved. Such a move does several things. First of all, a common association of the deer with the forest is severed; secondly, the deer ceases to be a metonym for the forest and consequently calls into question related attributes of a deer in a forest such as innocence or simplicity or gracefulness; thirdly, the deer moves across social boundaries and classes in its unique subject position vis a vis Shakuntala, the King and the hermitage. In ways I shall discuss below, animal and nature disrupt the smooth unfolding of an imperialist, superior King come to conquer Shakuntala. As Donna Haraway (1998) has assigned the coyote, the flashing deer shows agency as a ‘coding trickster’ that helps in the recognition of Shakuntala.

Haraway has extended this metaphor to nature and called it ‘a coding trickster with whom we must converse’ and a ‘witty agent and actor’. She cautions us against anthropomorphism, and in assessing Shakuntala's kinship with Nature, we must not frame them as a symbolic as a kind of ‘outscape’ for Shakuntala's feminine qualities. For Haraway, ‘the trickster figure is about the world that is also nonhuman, about all that which is not us, with whom we are enmeshed, making articulations all the time’.

“Restore your arrow to the quiver,

To you were weapons lent  
 The broken hearted to deliver  
 Not strike the innocent”

This is how 2 hermits come to save the deer at the moment, and the King obliges naturally for a Brahmin's blessing is of great value. Animals challenge notions of knowledge and communication, and the animal is said to lack a capacity for communication; then speechlessness should not be equated with disappearance and accepted. While speechlessness should not be considered authorial intent to use animals as symbols, Akira Lippit (2000) has shown how the animal functions as an exemplary 'originary' metaphor for the same reason: "One finds a phantasmic transversality at work between the animal and the metaphor- the animal is already a metaphor, the metaphor an animal."

The 'trustful deer' do not run away as the King and his men approach. They occupy a liminal place-a threshold- domesticated but in the wild. This paradox challenges a neatly arranged 'anthroparchy' which is defined as socially formed relational power over other species (Cudworth, 2005). This challenge is prefaced by Shakuntala's kinship with the natural world. Comparisons and actions make it abundantly clear that there is no dominatory aspect to Shakuntala's relationship with the natural world, be it animals or plants. This is not to say 'anthroparchy' does not exist in the text, but that there is a parallel discourse where it is subverted. This has serious implications on identity: the hunted deer giving the King a chase becomes the deer that is Shakuntala's friend: an identity that is liberating and far less subaltern and closer to Haraway's (2003) 'companion species'. A corollary to this is Shakuntala need not take on qualities of passivity and inferiority in her link with nature; instead it can be seen as a kinship or a friendship with different social structures and power relations. For instance, the fawn that tugs at Shakuntala's dress to stop her from leaving is described as adopted by her and 'would never leave you willingly.'

These are articulated in the spatial divisions in the text as well. A rather obvious way has been to distinguish between the spaces of duty and erotic desire- the palace and forest. But if we have established that a neat division is not possible because of existing inter-personal relations, where nature is not the passive, subjugated entity, then can we also conclude that the existence of varied kinship relations make possible structured social spaces that are not binaries? Then, in the face of paradoxes and unreliable categories, it is also unwarranted to continue subsuming the animals in *Shakuntala* under Nature just because of their animality. Indeed, this has been identified as a myth of spatial immanence, where it is assumed that there is a 'singular, true reading of any specific landscape involved in the mediation of identity'(Keith, Pile, 2004).

Claude Levi Strauss (1969) defines kinship as a system of categories and statuses which define a group of people according to their relationships and interactions often contradicting actual genetic relationships. If we were to see the text through this critical prism, Shakuntala forges a kinship with Nature that further destabilizes the Nature-Culture divide. "I feel like a real sister to them", she says watering the trees, affirming her friendship to a kinship. Indeed it is not just Shakuntala that partakes of this arrangement. For example, Kanva takes care of a spring keeper that he tends to just like he took care of Shakuntala. Shakuntala says goodbye to the spring creeper which she calls her 'sister among the vines'. The whole grove expresses sadness at parting from Shakuntala:

The grass drops from the feeding doe;  
 The peahen stops her dance;  
 Pale, trembling leaves are falling slow;

### The tears of clinging plants

This has 2 aspects: one where Nature is a place where nature *is* and one where Nature is constructed as constituted by the grass and the peahen and deer. The natural world is very much a parallel space in the play; the usefulness of the binary between forest and court thus grants it its own features and population. In her kinship with the deer, Shakuntala enters this space, aligning herself with other inhabitants of the space. This entry is radical because this friendship is a recognition that grants the 'other' a subjectivity, and consequently identity; making it more than a mere alterity or background.

Nature fully participates in these social customs. In this very participation, Nature loses its passivity that is contagious to women or in this case, Shakuntala. Shakuntala is never feminized to a muteness or inaction because of her friendship with Nature. In this we are rescued by the fawn, which has incredible agency in the text. The fawn may move freely, and as noted above may even try to stop the bride from leaving.

The trees give her ornaments to wear along with a silken marriage dress and lac-dye for the feet as a gesture of their love for Shakuntala. Levi Strauss identifies gift-giving as a means of social commerce, and from the principle of reciprocity, marriage is one of the basic forms of gift exchange. As Levi Strauss points out men as givers of these gifts become exchange partners and exclusive beneficiaries of the product of these exchanges and this agreement of partnership helps them gain from this social organization. Ostensibly it is Kanva who gives her away, but the gift giving Nature subtly subverts the Law of the Father in staking equal claims to Shakuntala, so to speak. Thus while Kanva can say that a 'self-willed woman is the curse of life', and Sharngarava asks Shakuntala to 'obey her husband and endure', these unwritten social laws don't apply to Mother Earth. Maybe because of Shakuntala's celestial origin, Mother Earth can take direct action to take her back. Thus the rejected 'sheldrake bride' finds a home with her mother, not her father or her husband. In this direct action, Nature is not a passive sanctuary, but an active protector.

But as I have shown, Shakuntala and the hermitage inform Nature as well so it is a symbiotic relationship; mutual in its kinship. The King cannot hunt the deer in the vicinity of the hermitage and later we see new perspectives in the Clown who abhors hunting, and a changed King who does not want to hunt the fawns as they 'share soft glances with their friend'. It is this kinship that saves the deer.

The spatial metaphor of forest and palace therefore underline two modes of being. Memory is lost when the King moves from one domain to another. Could the rootedness of Nature help us formulate an identity that is an intersection of space and memory? Shakuntala has a token of the ring, but perhaps the identities of animals and the spring-creepers can be configured only in terms of place and memory to be understood as entities beyond symbols, metaphors.

Yet by the end of the play there is a synthesis that is dissatisfying. In the new Ashram, Shakuntala's son plays with lion cubs and lions hold symbolic meanings for royal lineage and identity. He is called the All-Tamer, and his 'rough play' with the cubs is marked by domination and show of strength, unlike his mother's friendship with natural beings. Though there is the sign of *Shakunta*, the King collects different proof to confirm her identity, but the cynosure is the new son who can make the King 'blameless' before his ancestors. This is in direct contrast with the King's earlier acknowledgement of Shakuntala's closeness to Nature. In requiring other proof, the King rejects the authority of Nature; a preliminary step that ends with the ejection of Nature and Shakuntala from her narrative. In this new theme, Shakuntala becomes a proud mother and a happy wife, ready to submit to the King's selfish prayer:

May Kingship benefit the land,  
And wisdom grow in scholars' band;

May Shiva see my faith on earth

And make me free of all rebirth.

The story of Shakuntala has subtly turned into the father's story. The king finds his son, and is promised prosperity and legacy. The male son is very visibly the heir to the king, and as such receives and upholds the kingly qualities that prove themselves in a solipsism: domination, conquest and its resultant maleness. Earlier the deer and the nature are liminal because they cannot be bracketed in categories such as nature or forest. But with the resurgence of the man in the son, nature sides with Shakuntala and surrenders its agency and individuality for the enthroning of the son in the narrative.

In such a harmonious picture, categories cease to matter; Nature is erased, the deer skips away, the spring-creepers and the mango blossoms stay out of the picture. There are no degrees of discourses in a happy ending other than one that is established by the logic of the text, which reconfigures Shakuntala to an ideal womanhood, with a husband and a child, and at the helm of a kingdom that vies for glory and prosperity.

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