REPENSER L'ÉDUCATION. LANGUES, AFFAIRES ET COMMUNAUTÉS

SUFFERING: BLESSING IN DISGUISE (EXPLORING KĀLIDĀSA'S ABHIJÑĀNAŚĀKUNTALAM AND SHAKESPEARE'S OTHELLO)

Dr. Naveen K Mehta
Associate Professor & Head
Mahakal Institute of Technology, Ujjain (MP) India
Email: *drnknmehta73@gmail.com*

Abstract

Suffering can be virtuous when a person takes some lessons out of it. In this context, Suffering empowers one to come out from the dreadful clutches of pains and agonies, it leads to attain Moksha[1] which is the ultimate aim of every human being. The consequent suffering in state of knowledge leads to confession, repentance and forgiveness. The redemption is that of liberty from the wrongdoings. The suffering is a purifying agent like fire that burns off whatever is mean and trifling. Once that happens, one returns to the pre-sin state that is freedom from sin or salvation. The present paper is an attempt to study suffering as a blessing in disguise in the select dramas of legendry dramatists Kālidāsa and Shakespeare.

Keywords:
Suffering, blessing, freedom, salvation, courage.

[1] Moksha is the liberation of the soul from the materialistic world, the cycle of death and rebirth or reincarnation and all of the sufferings and limitations of the worldly existence. Moksha is considered as the ultimate goal of human existence rewarded in turn by Supreme Peace and Bliss.

BDD-A3965 © 2014 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:58:57 UTC)

Kālidāsa[2] holds the same position and reputation in Sanskrit and world literature as Shakespeare across the world. He was a brilliant Indian poet and playwright known for his sharp wit, rich humor and brilliant writing style. While little is known about where he was from, scholars believe that the beautiful details he uses in describing the region of Ujjayini[3] suggests that he was either born there or had spent much of his life there (Anderson 1966: 10). His name, which means 'Kali's Slave' reveals that he was a follower of Kali[4] who is a consort of Siva[5]. He was a very good looking person and as such caught the eye of a princess who married him. After marrying Kālidāsa, she realized that he was ignorant and uneducated and was ashamed by that. He was distraught by this and while contemplating committing suicide, called upon his patron goddess Kali, who gave him the reward of extraordinary wit (Miller 1984: 4).

Today six major works are attributed to Kālidāsa because "The coherent language, poetic technique, style and sentiment the works express seem to suggest they are from a single mind" (Miller 1984: 5) but many more short prose works exist that are likely to have been written by him. The six attributed to him are three plays; Malavikagnimitra ('Mlavikā and Agnimitra'), Abhijñānaśākuntalam (The Recognition of Śakuntalā) and Vikramorvasiya (Pertaining to Vikrama and Urvashi), two epic poems Raghuvamsa (The Lineage of Raghu) and Kumarasambhava (Birth of Kumara), as well as one shorter poem Meghaduta (The Cloud Messenger), which is a picturesque description of the seasons through narration of the experience of two lovers (Smith 2005: 15). His literary creations, like most Sanskrit drama, find their origins in the Vedas; it is also probable that the epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata had their influences on the style and content of his works (Anderson 1966: 12).

The play Abhijñānaśākuntalam[6] has been unfolded to the European world by Sir William Jones by bringing out a translation of it.

[2] Kālidāsa was a renowned Classical Sanskrit writer, widely regarded as the greatest poet and dramatist in the Sanskrit language. His place in Sanskrit literature is akin to that of Shakespeare in English. His plays and poetry are primarily based on Hindu mythology and philosophy.

[3] Ujjayini is an ancient city of Malwa region in central India, on the eastern bank of the Kshipra River and today it is the part of the state of Madhya Pradesh.

[4] Kali is the Hindu goddess associated with eternal energy.

[5] Siva is a major Hindu deity, and the Destroyer or transformer of the Trimurti, the Hindu Trinity of the primary aspects of the divine. Shiva or Siva is seen as the Supreme Being.

[6] Abhijnana-Shakuntalam is a drama composed in seven acts by Kalidasa, is one of the best not only in Sanskrit literature, but in the literature of the world.

BDD-A3965 © 2014 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:58:57 UTC)

Abhijñānaśākuntalam is a drama in seven acts based on the eternal love story of King Dushyanta[7] and the maiden Śakuntalā[8], as depicted in the ancient Indian epic, the Mahabharata − a major text of Hinduism. The tone of the play is set by the virtue and piety of Dushyanta while the underlying message is seen through Śakuntalā, a woman who is purified by patience and fidelity and is ultimately rewarded with virtue and love (Anderson 1966: 17).

The play narrates the story of king Dushyanta who falls in love with a beautiful maiden Śakuntalā, who happens to be the daughter of a saint. A sage named Durvasa[9] curses her as she offends him unknowingly by not acknowledging his presence. In fact the story without the curse would have been meaningless because the struggle, the conflict of the innocent girl Śakuntalā, is because of the curse. Due to the curse, Dushyanta's entire memory is wiped off and he doesn't remember his marriage or Śakuntalā. But the sage feels pity for Śakuntalā and gives a solution that Dushyanta will remember everything if he sees the ring given to her by him. But she loses the ring one day in the river while bathing. After a series of incidents, a fisherman who finds the ring inside a fish rushes to the king with the ring. The king then recalls everything and rushes to Śakuntalā to apologize for his actions. She forgives him and they live happily ever after. In ancient Indian culture, sages have a big responsibility and have a very high regards in the society. Their teachings are perpetual and their words are considered enduring in nature. But if they are neglected or humiliated in some or other way they could bring you back on the right path and do not dare to blight the guilty one. The effect/impact of that curse could be lessened or waved off by seeking their blessings and expressing penance. The play also portrays the life style, mannerism, moralities and follies of ancient Indian society.

Śakuntalā underwent misery and suffering not only due to a mere curse but she accepted the faith and fortune, which a woman of her time and age has to face and bear. She was not a sinner as she loved the king beyond ordinary human imagination. Therefore, while Śakuntalā is alone in the hermitage her thoughts being away with her absent husband, she fails to offer hospitality to the choleric sage, Durvasa, who comes to the ashram[10] as

[7] Dushyanta was a great king in classical Indian literature and mythology. He is the husband of Shakuntala and the father of the Emperor Bhara.

[8] Shakuntala is the mother of Emperor Bharata and the wife of Dushyanta.

[9] Durvasa is an ancient sage. He is supposed to be the only sage whose penance goes up whenever he curses somebody. He is known for his short temper.

[10] An *ashram* is a Hindu hermitage in ancient India where sages lived in peace and tranquility amidst nature.

BDD-A3965 © 2014 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:58:57 UTC)

a guest. A young newly married woman is dreaming of her departed husband, and without even being aware of it, she fails to respond to a hermit's appeal for alms. This represents the powerful expression of karma[11]. The lovers are then to be inexorably, cruelly separated. Here, she appears as a dedicated wife. She possesses all the qualities of an ideal wife and daughter. At this point it is very difficult to judge her as a sinner because it is unknowingly or unintentionally that she does not realize the presence of the holy sage Durvasa. Durvasa defines the duty of a woman because Śakuntalā behaviour was a sure indication of lack of culture and not a proper upbringing in the daughter of a hermit. She forgets the basic social obligations which are unpardonable. This unintentional indifference creates chaos in her life. The curse has become an instrument of the invisible elements so that Śakuntalā's suffering will get somewhat lessened.

She does not elope with Dushyanta and never plans such a mean scheme. Her life therefore, is one of feminine purity of mind. At the outset, the imminent marriage gives rise to feelings of uneasiness in Śakuntalā principally because her father is not in the hermitage to bless the union and to solemnize the marriage himself. Her mind is cleared following Dushyanta's explanation, and Kanva's[12] approval of their marriage. Her modesty is so great that when she feels herself invaded by a feeling it is strange to her in her hermit life. She keeps it concealed from her dearest friends even till her love-affects state and the entreaties of her friends compelled her to disclose it to them.

She accepts the separation from Dushyanta in the same manner as she accepts her love for him. She accepts the Gandharva[13] form of marriage and obeys the will of Dushyanta to remain in hermitage till he takes her to the rightful home, i.e. his palace. In Act V when the king denies having had anything to do with her, he does not recognize her even when her veil is removed and Śakuntalā fails to rouse his curse swept memory. Moreover, she also lost the ring of recognition during the journey.

It appears that Dushyanta has intentionally and heartlessly insulted Śakuntalā and her camaraderie, even though they have provided him the

[11] *Karma* is the concept of 'action' or 'deed', understood as that which causes the entire cycle of cause and effect originating in ancient India and treated in Hindu, Jain, Buddhist and Sikh philosophies.

[12] Kanva was a renowned sage and father of adopted daughter Śakuntalā.

[13] When a man and a woman marry with each other consent but may not have the consent of their family or are unable to involve them due to geographical reasons, then this wedding is called *Gandharva Vivah* (Marriage).

BDD-A3965 © 2014 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:58:57 UTC)

pertinent facts: Śakuntalā is his wife and, and their request is that she be received accordingly; with all due courteousness. But all the pleadings go in vain and they have no option but to leave Śakuntalā in the palace, as tradition requires. Within the court itself, a compromise is ultimately attained. She is allowed to stay in the palace until the birth of her child, but not as a wife. The birth of her child would, it is expected, resolve the issue of whether or not the king did marry her. This, of course, does not occur, and she is offended and implores for death when the heavens open to allow her. Her genuineness is confirmed, but her physical disappearance causes difficulties in understanding the plot of drama.

It is apparent that Dushyanta and Śakuntalā are not accountable of anything; as they did not commit any sin. The events that emerge in the palace in Hastinapur[14], when Dushyanta refuses to accept Śakuntalā as his wife, are the results of the curse of Durvasa. Thus, openly discarded by the king she becomes angry with him, but she does not lose her affection for her lord and does not forget her duties as a married woman towards him. As wife she is made to submit to her husband. Yet she counsels him as a friend. She accepts the whole matter as a predestined affair. She does not oppose or blame anybody for her ill fortune. She knows about the human limitations especially about the limitations of a woman's world. She accepts willingly seclusion from her beloved husband. She leads an ascetic's life during her separation, ever keeping the image of her beloved husband in her heart.

Though Śakuntalā is relentlessly hurt, her attempts to persuade her husband are childlike in their virtuousness and straightforwardness, her images of their meetings painted in the gentlest of words in keeping with her own indispensable nature. Both Dushyanta and Śakuntalā experience a series of problems, emotional as well as psychological. She remains in touch with what is happening to Dushyanta, suffers by proxy for him rather than for herself.

The king Dushyanta seems to be more sinful than Śakuntalā but in reality both are not guilty as they are struck by cruel destiny. In Abhijñānaśākuntalam, 'sin' is not committed for the sake of sin. It is somewhat pre destined or falls as a curse and therefore, the characters do not have any direct intention and attitude to commit a sin. After becoming pregnant, she is well prepared to leave her father's ashram. She thinks that her husband's house is the only place on earth where she would get proper recognition as a caring mother and dutiful wife. She considers her husband's

[14] Hastinapur was the capital of the kingdom of the Kauravas, belonging to the Kuru dynasty of kings.

BDD-A3965 © 2014 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:58:57 UTC)

house more pious than a rishi's[15] ashram. Though Dushyanta – due to effect of the curse – is unable to recognize her, he is recognized by Śakuntalā at the ashram of the holy sage Kashyapa[16]. It indicates that Śakuntalā forgives him for everything and accepts him wholeheartedly. It shows her positive attitude even during great suffering. The play mocks – and questions – the unjust values of our patriarchal society. The gripping question is that a woman finds herself almost destitute, forlorn and vulnerable in a callous and sometimes cruel world. She faces the crises but never surrenders. The question is to show her strength under hostile circumstances and her ability to face the crises like part of life. She is a role model of womanhood.

In Kālidāsa and Shakespeare, there is the union of the past and the future, the old and the new with the help of the young. Both Kālidāsa and Shakespeare delineate the characters in an excellent manner and the reader is struck by the thoughts and feelings and expressions of the characters. Shakespeare's dramas are of universal significance and have deep insights into human nature.

Othello is one of the greatest tragedies written by William Shakespeare. Othello is an esteemed general in the services of Venice. Iago is Othello's ambitious friend. Othello promotes Michael Cassio to the position of personal lieutenant and Iago is jealous of this development and begins an evil and malevolent operation against Othello. The moor elopes with Desdemona but Iago starts to plot against them insinuating suspicion and jealousy in Othello, who eventually smothers her to death. Emilia tells Othello the truth about the scheming Iago and Othello wounds Iago then kills himself.

In Shakespeare's Othello, Desdemona suffers the agony because of her father and at a later stage of the story because of her beloved husband, Othello. The name Desdemona derives from Greek for 'unfortunate' or 'ill-fated'. This view of Desdemona's tragic fate is also suggested in Othello's "O ill-starr'd wench…" (V .ii, 315) Desdemona's suffering is not proportional to her faults, she is overpowered by forces that are beyond her control, and she is sacrificed for the benefit of others. She is a kind and friendly individual. Her quandary is that she is too kind. She also lacks the insight to see what severe danger she is in. She wishes Cassio and Othello to be amicable again. Iago persuades Cassio that he can get back into Othello's favour if he gets Desdemona to intercede on his behalf. She pleads on behalf of Cassio making her lover suspicious and extremely jealous. She begins

[15] *Rishi* is a saint or yogi or a great devotee of god.
[16] Kashyapa was an ancient sage.

BDD-A3965 © 2014 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:58:57 UTC)

spending more time with him; unaware that Othello will become jealous. Both Desdemona and Othello were under the impression that Iago was an honest man. Thus, when Othello accused Desdemona of adultery, she went to Iago for help. She does not realize that Othello suspects her. She is abused verbally and physically by Othello and then finally smothered to death. She is innocent and lacks the wisdom to prevent her downfall.

Desdemona can be regarded as a sacrificial heroine. Although she does not sacrifice herself, she is sacrificed by some external forces like fate. Just before her death, when Desdemona says she does not have any love affair with Cassio, Othello still does not believe her. Only when she dies, everyone comes forward with the truth. Desdemona suffers more badly than Śakuntalā. Like Śakuntalā, she too was able to choose a person of her choice. Unlike Śakuntalā she confesses her love for Othello before her father and goes to the extent of eloping with the man whom she loves. She shows more courage though she knows well that she has to pay a heavy price for this act. Othello also pointed out "she had eyes and chose me." (III, ii, 212)

On the other hand, Śakuntalā never openly challenges her father's will. Kanva also approved Śakuntalā's marriage with the king Dushyanta. Kanva does not feel distress that Śakuntalā has surrendered to the pressures exercised by Dushyanta and has married the king without his consent or blessings according to the Ghandarva system. Kanav offers his thanks, and states that the child to be born from this marriage will rule the world. "And may you bear a kingly son, like Puru, who shall rule the earth." (IV, ii)

But Desdemona challenges her father's conservative principles and disobeys. She leaves her father's house to marry Othello; this is the first step in redefining her role as a modern woman. Desdemona, rather asking her father's consent, decides to marry Othello. It appears as though she is breaking away from the strictness forced by Brabantio. She denies her father any right in choosing her bride and she chooses the man whom she wants to marry. She accepts the suffering for a person who later on kills her. But suffering at the hands of her father Brabantio gives her boldness and courage. The eventual price that Desdemona has to pay for her emancipation is death. Desdemona, just before her death, confronts Othello as she had challenged Brabantio and guards herself with the same straightforwardness that she uses before the Senate: "And have you mercy too! I never did offend you in my life; never loved Cassio But with such a general warranty of heaven As I might love; I never gave him token" (V. ii. 68-71). Even in her death, Desdemona proves her liberation by showing that she controlled her desires

BDD-A3965 © 2014 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:58:57 UTC)

Desdemona's suffering possesses superiority of will power. She is bolder than Śakuntalā, who is typically traditional and culture bound. During suffering she behaves with calm, dignity and takes a bold stand about her love for Othello. Her courageous nature symbolizes her experience of suffering and unpleasant incidents of her life. She rebels against the conventions of the society to elope with Othello. Her decision to marry her choice of husband is an act of disobedience as during the 17th century, women, particularly women of noble birth, married men of their fathers' choice.

She is loyal to her father but she is not afraid of him and her bold declarations are not the sign of her fickleness. Although she is young, her decision to marry appears to be solely motivated out of love, rather than a desire to distress her father. This is made clear in her heartfelt statement, "I saw Othello's visage in his mind, And to his honours and his valiant parts Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate." (I. iii, 268-70)

Śakuntalā also attains enough boldness to face the world after being not recognized by the king Dushyanta due to the affect of curse. She gives birth to a boy and rears him under her motherly care, affection and protection. Her suffering enables her to transform into a woman who is pure, confident and calm, looking ahead for the future, not just the future in Dushyanta's palace or even at the hermitage where she and Dushyanta will retire, but to a future away from all the cycles of time and surpass all the incarnations. For Śakuntalā suffering becomes a tool to overcome pains of separation from her beloved husband. Suffering brings out the hidden traits of her feminine character. Thus, in Abhijñānaśākuntalam suffering has not only affected the mental state of the characters but it has also helped the dramatist to develop the plot and story.

Both Śakuntalā and Desdemona keep the feelings of love high even in their adverse circumstances. Their love was not worldly, nor physical and not simply romantic. For the sake of their love they show courage and firmness which is most unexpected. In Othello, Desdemona's love is based on sacrifice, suffering, renunciation and divine aspects of life. She is the very picture of innocence − she remains to the end, whiter than driven snow. In her love, in her suffering, in her death, her innocence never leaves her. Innocence and gentleness are the main features of her character. Śakuntalā submits herself to her husband with just one sentence: "Victory to my Lord."(Act VII) Śakuntalā has the same simplicity and nobility which suffering has gifted her. She does not know about the Rishi Durvasa's curse and how to cease the effect of the curse. It shows that she is very innocent and docile. Moments of great joy and misery leave her at a loss and she does not know how to express herself. Despite Desdemona's loyalty to her husband, Othello physically and verbally abuses Desdemona, slapping her and calling her a prostitute in public. At the culmination of the story, when

BDD-A3965 © 2014 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:58:57 UTC)

Othello strangles her and with her dying breath, she blames herself for Othello's physical and emotional abuse. This reflects that Desdemona is the real victim in this tragic drama. Othello believes that his black skin color turns him contaminated and contaminating. When he has sex with Desdemona, Othello thinks he has polluted her pure, white body, and he just can't stand it.

On the contrary, Desdemona never questions Othello about his strange behavior but most meekly submits to his foulest abuse and resentment. When Othello strikes her in the presence of Venetian courtier, she only says − "I have not deserved this" (IV, I, 256). And when Othello tirades against her, she quietly moves away with these words − "I will not stay to offend you" (IV, I, 264). Even her last line "Commend me to my kind Lord" indicates her loyalty and love for Othello (V, ii, 149). Śakuntalā too keeps the picture of an ideal wife and daughter clear and visible. Śakuntalā's suffering brings its reward in the form of her reunion with the king Dushyanta. To this respect Desdemona is unlucky. Suffering does not provide her renunciation completely. Moreover, Othello's suspicion intensifies her suffering. But her suffering becomes a great virtue of her love. No unkindness, however great, or harshness, however unjust, can shake her mighty love.

Unkindness may do much,
and this unkindness may defeat my life,
But never taint my love. (IV, ii, 179- 181).

The concept of suffering is broadened in Abhijnansakuntalam and Othello in two distinct forms; physical suffering and emotional suffering. Physical suffering is inflicted with physical pain and agony in which the leading characters of the plays appear to be very feeble and mere victim of cruel fate whereas in emotional suffering, the characters suffer on account of emotional loss. Suffering can be blessing in disguise as it may produce, purity, patience, hope and shape the character as a whole. The very experience of suffering is not same for everyone. Suffering brings one more close to the biting realities of life. Suffering can elevate or degrade one according to the manner in which he/she meets to it.

In case of Śakuntalā, suffering brings out her personality as a woman with substance. She is deeply hurt by the strange and curse-affected behavior of her beloved husband, yet, she is generous in forgiving him. Suffering generates a sense of self control and high level of confidence in her character. Dushyanta also suffers due to separation from Śakuntalā. He appears to be struggling against the supernatural forces that are beyond his control. His suffering parallels that of Śakuntalā. It is revealed that in Abhijnansakuntalam, the characters suffer both the forms of suffering but they do not lose their mental balance and summon themselves before the vicious circle of suffering. Śakuntalā attains a high level of maturity through

BDD-A3965 © 2014 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:58:57 UTC)

suffering and achieves 'the felicity of equilibrium' (Wells 1963: 32). In Abhijnansakuntalam, suffering helps the protagonists to bring out their hidden potentials bravely and to face the adverse situations with conviction and confidence. Śakuntalā bears adversity and disgrace in public with indomitable courage and faith that clearly indicates the immense power of tolerance that suffering bestowed upon her.

Desdemona suffers as Othello suspects her loyalty. Desdemona looks to be very pure and innocent as she states "a guiltless death I die"(V, ii, 146) Here, it seems that the saga of suffering culminates on a very tragic note. The intensity of suffering leads the characters to realize their follies and becomes the main reason of downfall. On the contrary, Othello appears to feel regret on his action as he outbursts "O, insupportable! O heavy hour!" (V, ii, 117). Moreover, Othello's last line: I kiss'd thee, ere I kill'd thee: no way but; this killing myself to die upon a kiss" (V, ii, 408-9) indicates a kind of redemption both his soul and his suffering. Similarly, suffering provides Desdemona an opportunity to prove herself as a virtuous person in which she succeeds at large extent but fails miserably to read out the evil intentions of Iago due to her jovial nature. She attains salvation from the suffering in the hands of destiny.

However, Kālidāsa and Shakespeare have successfully described the position of women in society by highlighting a problem of universal significance that is the suffering and injustice associated with women for ages. But nowhere Śakuntalā and Desdemona appear to be weak. The eternal tales of Śakuntalā and Desdemona are sagas of suffering yet their suffering has virtues of sacrifice and devotion which makes their character sublime and noble in the history of world literature.

References

Anderson, G.L., 1966 *The Genius of the Oriental Theater: The Complete Texts of Ten Great Plays from the Traditional Indian and Japanese Drama*, New York: The New American Library.

Bradley, A.C., 1965 *Shakespearean Tragedy*, London: MacMillan.

Brandes, G., 1926 *William Shakespeare*, London: Heinemann.

Kālidāsa, 1920 *The Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, Kale, M.R. (ed.), Bombay: Gopal Narayan and Co.

Lewes, L., 1993 *The Women of Shakespeare, Hodder Brother*, London.

Miller, B.S., 1984 *Theater of Memory: The Plays of Kālidāsa,* New York: Columbia University Press.

Rangacharya, A., 1947 *Drama in Sanskrit Literature*, Bombay Popular Prakashan.

Smith, D., 2005 *The Birth of Kumara by Kālidāsa*, New York: New York University Press.

Shakespeare, 2010 *Othello*, e-notes. com.

Wells, H. G., 1963 *The Classical Drama of India*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House.

BDD-A3965 © 2014 Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:58:57 UTC)