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Revisiting the Indian Classics: A Postmodern Approach to Select Plays of Kalidasa and Shudraka

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Abstract

Postmodernism is a phenomenon that came into existence in the late 20th century, and brought radical changes in the context of history, economy, society, and culture. Along with criticizing modernism, it dispersed the social system of integration and fragmented the individual's belief system. This movement believes in individuality, diversity, innovation and skepticism, and brings massive changes in an individual's approach and perspectives which become evident in the changes in social structure and traditions. Kalidasa's *Abhijnānaśākuntalam* and Shudraka's *Mrchchakatikam* deal with various aspects of human life. The society, culture, traditions, rituals, moral values and ideologies-all are represented beautifully in these plays by the dramatists. The division among people on the basis of their economic system and according to their social class is also reflected here. These dramatic presentations also represent various dimensions of human relations and sexuality, the empowerment and social treatment of women, and practice of different cultural elements including music, dance, art and literature. Their political conditions and perspectives are also mirrored in these plays. All these aspects not only have relevance in their contemporary time and society but also in the succeeding ages and society. There are many elements in these two works of literature that establish their relevance in this world and society of postmodernity.

Keywords: Postmodernism, society, culture, tradition, human relations, sexuality, politics, women empowerment

Introduction

"Postmodernism", also spelled as "post-modernism", is a philosophical movement or set of ideas that gradually emerged since the late twentieth century in the context of historical, economic and cultural development. From the term itself it is very clear that this movement is succeeding another cultural phenomenon of twentieth century, "Modernism", that "the saw departure from pre-existing modes of aesthetic engagement for reasons that weren't confined to the form of art" and brought changes with the help of technology that "contributed to the erosion of many 'cherished' values", as mentioned by Bibhash Choudhury in his *English Social and Cultural History: An Introductory Guide and Glossary* (260). Choudhury also said,

It broke up the system of social integration-the concepts of 'the happy family,' or 'angel in the house' for instance, were threatened-and fragmented the individual's belief system. Not that simply one credo was replaced by another but there was a change in the pace in which life moved-it became faster, freer, and grossly materialistic.

(*English Social and Cultural History: An Introductory Guide and Glossary*, 260)

Although many characteristic features of postmodernism are similar to that of modernism-like, rejecting distinctive boundaries among various genres and discrimination between

high and low forms of art, reflexing self-consciousness, fragmentation, subjectivity with special emphasis on decentred, destructured and dehumanized subjects-it is considered, by many critics, as a response or rather to say a reaction against the set of ideas and values of modernism. It turns down the 'grand narratives' and the concept of 'canonization' and evokes a 'new sensibility' in the popular modern culture and society through the acceptance of 'meta-narratives'. There are certain features, as stated by M. A. R. Habib in *Literary Criticism from Plato to the Present: An Introduction*, through which these two cultural phenomena can be differentiated. Firstly, postmodernism recognizes and analyses ethnic, sexual, and cultural diversity internally by giving the "others" a voice, while modernism describes them externally. Secondly, postmodernism "deliberately extends into the domain of popular culture" self-consciously with the abolition of distinctions between high and low art and the exposure of "the structures of cultural coercion and domination", whereas modernism, though doesn't accept discrimination between high and low art, highly prides itself with its aristocracy and projects low forms of art as a tragic loss. Finally, "modernism is nostalgic and retrospective toward vanished schemes of unity and order, while postmodernism insists on the heterogeneity of the present."

In India, like the western countries, post 1980 is considered as the postmodern period if the historical and social developments are followed chronologically. However, if we take a closer look at the Indian culture and literary patterns from the very classical period without indulging in their chronological divisions and historical distinctions, we can see that how the litterateurs of that time could think beyond their time in spite of different limitations and boundaries in the then culture and society and create or rather to say gift such great literary specimens to various genres of literature, which are still relevant in our contemporary society and can be seen, as well, from a postmodern point-of-view, despite of various religious and mythological implications in them. Most of the literary works, considered under the vast umbrella of Indian classical literature, are mainly written in the form of poetic verses in Sanskrit and later translated into English. The Sanskrit drama is highly regarded as the richest product of Indian poetry and also as a well-organized representation in itself the final conception of literary art achieved by the very self-conscious creators of Indian literature. As A. B. Keith has said in his *The Sanskrit Drama* that *Natyashastra*, considered being the oldest text comprising the theory of drama, acclaims for the origin of drama and a close connection with the Vedas. Though no mention of drama is found in the two great epics of India, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, there are certain mentions of 'Natas' and 'Nartakas' who delight people during different festivals and occasions. But the practice of reciting these epics has abundant influence on the development of drama. In Patanjali's time the primitive form of drama had come into existence with its various elements being presented on stage which was later deduced to be the dramatic representation of different religious beliefs. These representations in spite of having dramatic elements only contribute in the development of drama are taken as a mere introduction to its popular origin. It is believed that a popular mime existed which along with the epics instigates the origin of Sanskrit drama. Among the most popular dramas in Sanskrit literature, two plays, *Mrchchakatikam* written by Shudraka and *Abhijnānaśākuntalam* written by Kalidasa are highly celebrated till date.

Mrchchakatikam or *The Clay Toy-Cart* is one of the most renowned dramatic works in Sanskrit literature. The play comprises of ten acts of which the first four acts are thought to be the imitation of *Charudattam*, an unaccomplished drama of romance written by the classical playwright Bhasa. The main theme of the play, *The Clay Toy-Cart*, revolves around the love relationship between a poor brahmin merchant, Charudatta, and the aristocratic courtesan of the city of Ujjayini, Vasantasena, and the consequences they had to face. Though Sanskrit dramas are named according to the name of the main protagonists, the hero or the heroine, here the title is related to a toy-cart made of clay, which is introduced in the middle of the play and plays a pivotal role here. Padmini Rajappa in her 'Introduction' to *The Clay Toy-Cart* says it to be "a work almost unique in Sanskrit literature, a work of drama as renowned for its ingenious plotting and memorable characters as it is for the mystery that shrouds the identity of its author." There are many beliefs revolving over ages among peoples regarding the identity of the author of this play, Shudraka. In many places, he is attributed as King Shudraka, a legendary figure, of whom we get a full description in the Prologue to *Mrchchakatikam*, as stated by Padmini Rajappa in her 'Introduction' to *The Clay Toy-Cart*: "handsome, valiant, scholarly, well versed in Vedas, proficient in mathematics, a brahmana who lived to be a hundred years and ten days old

and then 'entered the fire' after placing his son on the throne" (xviii). Again, in the same portion of this book, Shudraka is seen to be assumed as a merchant of the city, Ujjayini, in sixth or seventh century who lived in one of the mansions in the mansion square. Though there was no evidence of his economic condition, it was clear that he had enough knowledge of the dharmashastra and several aspects of human life in his contemporary society. Such knowledge has prominent reflections in his writings as well.

Abhijnānaśākuntalam or *The Recognition of Śakuntalā*, another grand Sanskrit drama, is counted clearly among the last works of the greatest Sanskrit litterateur, Kalidasa. Comprised of seven acts, the main action of the play revolves around the love relationship of Śakuntalā and King Duhsanta, betrayal of Duhsanta and finally the recognition of Śakuntalā as the "Deity of Nature" in the gilded domain of Duhsanta's chivalrous palace and pleasant garden that at the end reaches to another domain, highly inaccessible to the mortals—a fusion of the real and imaginary world which is also reflected in Śakuntalā herself for being the daughter of an apsara, as said by Chandra Ranjan in the 'Introduction' to *The Loom of Time*. This play presents in front of the readers the perfection of Kalidasa, unfortunately, whose personal life remains almost unknown except the things that have been found from the works of Kalidasa himself. There are various legends that have gathered round his name and identity, as also mentioned by Chandra Ranjan in her 'Introduction' to *The Loom of Time*. One of such legends represents Kalidasa as a handsome, graceful, humble and illiterate brahmin youth who was orphaned at the age of six months and brought up by an ox-cart driver. Being impressed by his utter devotion, reverence and prayer the goddess Kali presented him with the gift of immense knowledge and power of poetry; and from that time, he had taken up the name of Kalidasa—'the servant of Time' or 'the servant of Creative Power'.

Both *Abhijnānaśākuntalam* and *Mrchchakatikam* deal with various aspects of human life. The society, culture, traditions, rituals, moral values and ideologies—all are represented beautifully in these plays by the dramatists. They show how people, in their contemporary society, lived their livelihood, followed the social norms and rituals, satisfied their own desires and ambitions, and gained peace and prosperity in their life. The division among people on the basis of their social and them according to their class is also reflected here. These dramatic presentations also represent various dimensions of human relations, the treatment of women, and practice of different cultural elements including music, dance, art and literature. Their political conditions and perspectives are also mirrored in these plays. All these aspects not only have relevance in their contemporary time and society but also in the succeeding ages and society.

The main focus of this project work is to make an attempt to revisit these two masterpieces of Indian Classical literature with a postmodern perspective and reanalyse the relevance of these great literary works in our contemporary world, culture and society.

Socio-Political Scenario: A Postmodern Point-of-View

"A society is a group of individuals involved in persistent social interaction, or a large social group sharing the same spatial or social territory, typically subject to the same political authority and dominant cultural expectations." Society is constructed on the basis of the relations between individuals of distinctive cultures and patterns of behaviour known as social norms which can be changed. The literary

works written throughout the ages after ages are the mirrors of their contemporary society. They reflect various social norms and cultural practices which are not confined within the boundaries of time and can be seen in the succeeding ages as well.

A postmodern society is primarily considered to be a criticism of the preceding modern society evaluating its various social and cultural principles. It is said to be a society which does not have any moral rules or values as the basic norms of leading the life. It rejects the belief that all social systems are running to achieve a goal which will be judged by the social structures on the basis of their rankings and importance. People of various social rankings and class are given equal importance in this society. Any kind of discrimination is rejected by the postmodern social concepts. It breaks the concept of groups like family and gives importance to every individual's experiences. It seeks to change and grow on the basis of a nearly infinite numbers and individual perspectives, and opposes the objective truths established by previous generations.

Postmodern society believes in individuality, diversity, innovations and scepticism. It argues that beliefs, ideas, morals and values are based on an individual's experiences and not on the historical precedent or anecdote. Postmodern society also rejects the "grand-narratives" of the preceding ages like nationalism, religions and accepts the "meta-narratives". It focuses mainly on the increase of connectivity among individuals to spread values and concepts of progressivism, and to discover, shape and improve their own perspectives. This helps them to interact with people being regardless of culture, rankings, tradition and so on. Moreover, it leads to diversity and 'hybridity' or mixing of different cultures. Protest against gender discrimination and promotion of equality is also seen in this society. Various instances of women empowerment and movements for equal rights have come into existence. Still their ample evidences of gender inequality, treating woman as a mere commodity with which man has the right to do anything-right or wrong. However, the situation, in comparison to the preceding ages has changed widely. Apart from that, corrupted, materialistic and self-centred livelihood is a common characteristic of this society. Postmodern society also witnesses remarkable changes in human relationships. Urbanization is a primary cause of such changes. People show more interest in free exploration and experimentation of relationships with others, and give more priority to their individual choice. These ideologies have brought huge changes in the structure of the society.

When a society is going through innumerable changes, it is quite natural that its political equations will also go through some gradual changes. "Politics is the set of activities that are associated with making decisions in groups, or other forms of power relations among individuals, such as the distribution of resources or status." It is an integral part of the social structure. The word 'politics' can be used with both positive and negative connotations. It can be applied to the society in various ways, like promoting one's individual political views among others, exchanging thoughts with other political figures, implication of various laws, exercising of force along with warfare against adversaries. Basically, political system is a structure that defines various methods of politics acceptable in the society.

With the emergence of postmodernism in society, various institutions also got affected by the ideologies and values of it, and politics is not an exception to that. Postmodernists argue that politics does not revolves around the various

political groups, rather it is an experimenting instrument that evaluates the hierarchy of social power, identifies the oppressed communities and helps them to get justice in the society. They observe that, "there is no one 'postmodern politics,' but a rather conflicting set of propositions that emerges from the ambiguities of social change and multiple postmodern theoretical perspectives." It rejects the continuation of the handover of hierarchal political power from one generation to another within a particular family group according to their lineage and argues that social and political power should be given to a properly eligible person, no matters which social community that person belongs to. The sexist and feminist revolutions also left remarkable influences over the postmodern politics as women have also started to take significant initiatives in the contest of achieving social and political power that have changed the entire scenario of the society and its structure.

In the world history, India is considered of having some of the greatest ancient human civilizations. The features and characteristics of these civilizations were so progressive that they make people feel awe about the mindset and thought process of the ancient people being so much up-to-dated and beyond of their time. Their social structure and culture reflect the notions that are found in the postmodern society. The Classic Age of ancient India witnessed urbanization in the Indian subcontinent which was quite rich in its culture and tradition. Indian civilizations also observed diversity and hybridity in culture as various religions emerged from here and with the foreign visitors came new culture and their amalgamation instigated hybridism in Indian society and culture. The custom of having emissaries by the kings of various dynasties shows the tendency of scepticism in the society. The artefacts discovered by various anthropologists and historians stand as the evidence of the innovativeness of the people of ancient India. The treatment of women in the ancient Indian civilizations was quite noteworthy. They were neither discriminated nor exploited by the society like they had to face in the later times. They had equal rights, respect and freedom and enjoyed equal social and political status like men. Their experience, choice and existence as an individual were respected in the society. There are many instances discovered among various elements of ancient Indian civilization where women are found practising gymnastics and learning the skills and tactics of warfare. Still, many instances of women oppression are also found where they are seen to be treated as a mere commodity, a property of man, on which they had the right to do anything-good or bad; right or wrong. The convention of caste system is also evident in ancient India. Though the lower-class people were not extremely tortured and marginalized by the upper class, in some cases they had to face severe discriminations in the society, which the postmodernists criticize deeply.

The political structure of ancient India was not entirely similar with the present society. Today's India is ruled by a democratic government. But in ancient India, the society was administrated by kingship and monarchy where the king with the highest power and position was the all in all in his kingdom. This represents the patriarchal social structure prevailed from the ancient time in India. However, women also had political power and freedom in ancient India, evident in Indian history. There are some instances of matriarchal society as well. Though the society was run by the king and his family and council of ministers, the change of dynasties proves that the authoritative and hierarchal power was not

entirely confined into a particular family lineage and could be over powered by anyone who was capable of it.

Shudraka's *Mrchchakatikam* is out and out a representation of human life in his contemporary society. In this play he beautifully draws the society, culture, tradition and lifestyle of the people of the city of Ujjayini of his time that are relevant in today's postmodern society as well. The characters, portrayed here in this play, are the representatives of various social classes. The experiences of the common people of Ujjayini are well-depicted in this play. The plot of this play derives from the social issues and livelihood of the ordinary people of Avanti aka Ujjayini and deals with their troubles, miseries and joys.

The title of the play is of literal and metaphorical significance. The word 'Mrchchakatikam' literally suggests a small clay toy-cart that refers to human life and its roots lying deep in this earthly world of realities. Introduced in sixth act of the play, this clay cart has a universal appeal. In the play, Rohasena, the son of Charudatta, refused to play with his clay cart and expressed his desire for a gold cart. Here the gold cart suggests the earthly lusts and desires of human and their eternal longing for power and prosperity. Whereas, the clay cart represents the great and heroic nature of the main protagonists of the play, Charudatta and Vasantasena, and other positive characters like Madanika, Radanika, Dhuta, Maitreya and others. It is a symbol of the goodness that these two protagonists possessed. This clay cart paved a way for Vasantasena to fulfil her passionate love for Charudatta by marrying him.

This play also reflects the class hierarchy and divisions of the ancient Indian society. With help of various characters, the playwright has skilfully represented different economic and social classes. The higher-class people, the aristocrats and especially the royals, holding the main political and authoritative power enjoyed all types of material and physical benefits and special treatment in spite of being corrupted. The Brahmins were given honour and respect by each and every people in the society, but they were also corrupted, greedy and lustful. It is for this economic instability that made Charudatta, the brahmin merchant, become lonely and in a way isolated in the society. The custom of slavery was in practice in the society, as can be seen in the play. People of the lower social class-man and woman in general-were treated as a commodity and were sold and bought by others like animals. Gambling was also prevalent in the society. There are ample references of the characters like gamblers, thieves, slaves and shampooers in the play. The torture of the royals, the authoritative power holders, is also evident here. And at the end of the play, the shifting of this hierarchal power from the King Palaka, the tyrannical king, to Aryaka, the son of a cowherd, shows the acquisition of power by an eligible person of a different social class from an inefficient one. There are several instances of Buddhism as well that project the diversity and hybridity in culture and society. The practice of various art forms including music and dance also represents their cultural and traditional richness.

Various dimensions of man-woman relationship are cultivated in this play by the playwright with great skills. It represents the practices of free sex and the unconventional relations like extra-marital affairs and polygamy along with the conventional relations between a man and a woman. The custom of courtesan culture stands as an example of the practice of free sex in society. The relation that Charudatta and Vasantasena maintained was counted as the

unconventional one. While his relation with Dhuta represents the practice of the conventional relationships in the society.

The treatment of women in the ancient Indian society is also remarkable. A prevalent custom of this society is the courtesan culture which has some resemblance with the profession of prostitution in the postmodern society. This play also carries the instance of this courtesan culture. The main female protagonist, Vasantasena, was a courtesan of Ujjayini who was rich, economically powerful and independent, capable of maintaining her own estate and servants and had her own aristocracy. In spite of having all material and physical benefits and luxuries she was deprived of all the social rights that other women of the society had. A courtesan was never allowed by the society to possess any social rights and to come back to the main-stream of life and live according to their own choice. Rather, they were treated as the property of society which can be used by any man for his purpose of entertainment and sexual pleasure in exchange of money and riches. Various comments passed by Shakara, Cheta, and Vita on Vasantasena are proofs to that. On the other hand, the woman of the society also faced gender discrimination as seen in the play. The character of Dhuta had no power and identity of her own. She lived her life with the identity of her husband, Charudatta, and accepted that situation without any kind of protest against the society.

Social life and art are inseparable notions that reflect, influence and instigate each other and which cannot be confined within the boundaries of culture and time. Kalidasa's *Abhijnānaśākuntalam*, is also not an exception to that. Based on the story of Śakuntalā and Duhsanta from *Mahabharata*, the great Indian epic, this play also deals with the social and political scenario of his contemporary society which has relevance with the present society of postmodern notions.

This play represents the amalgamation of various social classes in a different way. The sexual intercourse between a man and woman of two different classes or two different entities is beautifully sketched by dramatist here. Menaka, Vishwamitra, Śakuntalā and Duhsanta, all are the representatives of either different social class or different cosmos. On one hand, there lies the union of two earthly beings of different social classes-Śakuntalā, the brahmin foundling, and Duhsanta, the king. On the other hand, lies the union of two entities of two different cosmos, Menaka and Vishwamitra. Menaka was a nymph or 'apsara' of heaven, while Vishwamitra was a Royal Sage in this human world who straddled two highest positions in the socio-religious hierarchy, Brahmin and King. If the heaven is considered as the aristocratic class and earth is counted as the lower class in comparison with heaven, then this union can take as the amalgamation of two different classes again.

The main focus of Kalidasa's plays revolves around the treatment of women in the society. In *Abhijnānaśākuntalam* he has represented women empowerment in a different way. The titular character, Śakuntalā, was brought up in a hermitage, also called 'ashrama' which was the centre of education in ancient India and was given education along with other hermit girls. That she was educated and had skills in language was proved by the letter she had written on lotus leaf for Duhsanta. She had the right to choose her husband herself which she had done also. And on being rejected by Duhsanta, her husband-for the sake of his reputation as a king in the society which the playwright has presented dramatically under the veil of the curse of sage Durvasa-she firmly protested and decided to go back to the 'ashrama' and raise her child Bharata on her own. This represents the treatment of

woman as a commodity and women's protest against such concepts of patriarchy. Later the recognition of Śakuntalā and her son by Duhsanta glorifies her as an empowered woman. Her portrayal as a strong, independent woman is truly noteworthy.

Kalidasa has also explored human relationships in its various dimensions with a great expertise. Like Shudraka, he too has represented the practice of free sexual intercourse, the unconventional relations such as, polygamy, extra-marital affairs, 'gandharva vivah', and conventional relations in this dramatic presentation. The relations of Menaka and Vishwamitra, and Śakuntalā and Duhsanta, and their marriage performed following the 'gandharva' rituals are the examples of unconventional relations; while the relation between Duhsanta and his queen Hamsavati represents conventional relations.

Apart from these, this play also represents the political structure of the then society which was governed by the monarchs. Though the authoritative power was handed over to generations after generations according to the family lineage, sometime this lineage is disrupted, according to the society, through certain relations and marriages. Here this has also happened in the case of Duhsanta and Śakuntalā, and as a result, their son Bharata became the heir of the lunar dynasty of Puru.

To conclude, both *Mrchchakatikam* and *Abhijnānaśākuntalam* consist in themselves innumerable elements that beautifully project the society and culture of the ancient India. The dramatists with their skills and expertise denotes various social and cultural issues and customs prevalent in the society, and their good and bad effects that leaves deep impacts on the lives of common people of the society. The self-centred, materialized and corrupted society represented in *Mrchchakatikam* shows the gradual decline social and cultural norms and traditions. The treatment of women, human relationships, and political issues shown by the dramatists in both plays projects how they directly and indirectly affect the life of every individual. These notions and customs are also relevant in the postmodern society of the present time. Though the present society is ruled by government of various ideologies, the problems and issues are almost same as they were in the ancient time. But such decline has left the society to face the question whether it will improve or will be destroyed from the base of its structure.

Postmodern Representation of Man-Woman Relationship in Classical Philosophical Discourse

The relationship between a man and a woman is primarily based on love, indomitable passion and desire that make them feel attracted and attached to each other. Various scientific theories, most importantly Darwinism-where Darwin keeps the process of reproduction at the very basic stage of struggle for existence-considers this relationship, mainly its sexual approach as the core of this human world. But if we go through various mythical and religious approaches to man-woman relationship, we find something different to cultivate as some of these perspectives differ widely from the scientific ones. Various religions over the world have some reservations regarding this man-woman relationship, especially the sexual aspects in spite of accepting such relations as the base of human civilization. Religions like Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism only approve sexual intercourse between a man and a woman when they are in a formal marital status and of a certain age, i.e., the conventional relationship. These religious beliefs have

projected sexual activities outside marriage as a sin, and discourage as well as prohibit humans from indulging in such activities. They are very much rigid with their ideologies. As seen in various religious books of Christianity, the mother of Jesus Christ is referred to as the Virgin Mary, believing that the Holy Spirit impregnated her with Christ, without any sexual intercourse with her husband Joseph.

With the progress of time, human civilization has gone through many developments which have initiated great changes in human values and moralities leaving a vivid impact on their sexual desire and perspectives as well. Such changes are very much reflected in this postmodern culture, tradition and society throughout the world. Postmodernism does not degrade the religious and traditional concepts of man-woman relationship or rather to say the conventional relationships. But at the same time, it also glorifies the unconventional ones that are rejected by the religious and socio-cultural notions. These relationships can be differentiated in consideration to distance, ideologies, and religious, cultural and family backgrounds. Postmodern theories consider individuality, self-development and sexual desire, intimacy and satisfaction as the foundation of man-woman relationships. Boundless sexual experimentation and exploration of married and unmarried people according to their way of living and financial feasibility is consented by postmodernism. It approves as well as prioritizes each and every kind of freedom to one-self and self-importance of every individual. Such attitudes have explored and emanated human sexual relationships in various dimensions-authorizing and legalizing multiple casual sexual intercourses, e.g., one-night stands, prostitution, escort services; divorce and multiple marriages, extra-marital affairs, polygamous relations with transparency to their marital partners, living-apart-together relations etc. So, it can be easily accepted, as mentioned by Giuliana Helm in the first chapter, 'The Difficulties in Achieving Happiness in Postmodernity', of her seminar paper *Love in Postmodernity. Zadie Smith's Approach of Unconventional Postmodern Relationship in Novel "N-W"*, that:

...postmodernity is the time for free experimentation, diversity, the time of myriads of possibilities, and the time where people respect the choice of the single individual for individualization and self-development.

Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, considered as Indian religions, also carry reservations about human sexuality like Christianity, Islam and Judaism, considered as Abrahamic religions, as mentioned earlier. But such conservative mindset overpowered Indian tradition and culture after it became a colony of the British community, a representative of the Abrahamic religious beliefs, which was later instigated by various revolutionary parties like Brahma Samaj and so on. However, if we go through the Indian cultural and traditional history from the very primitive times, it can be prominently seen that these religious reservations and the conservative Victorian values of the colonizers were not present there. Modern Indian civilization is considered to be one of the oldest civilizations in the world. From the time immemorial, the artefacts and archaeological and architectural specimens discovered from different places all over this Indian continent have been a testament to the antiquity of this civilization. These specimens not only carry the historical evidences but also represent Indian tradition, culture and society from the prehistoric times. Among these there are many sculptures and architectures that are considered to be the emblem of love relationship between a man and a woman. The Taj Mahal in

Agra, Bibi Ka Maqbara in Aurangabad, the erotic sculptures on various temples, like Khajuraho Temples in Madhya Pradesh, Sun temple of Orissa and Gujarat, Virupaksha Temple in Karnataka, Jain Temple in Rajasthan, Sathyamurthi Perumal Temple in Tamil Nadu, and Lingaraj Temple in Orissa and so on, reflects the attitude of Indian culture and society to the concept of love and sexuality in various dimensions. While these temples ask people to lead a spiritual life, the erotic sculptures on them instigates people to satisfy their passion and sexual desires before entering the life of spirituality by spiritualizing sexuality and projecting it as not a sin but the very basic need of human to regenerate and reproduce generations of mankind on the earth. The paintings of Ajanta also carry some instances of such eroticism which act as evidences to the sexual concepts and activities accredited in Indian social and cultural practices.

So, it is quite clear that India played a significant role in the history of human sexuality. This is not only evident in the art architectures and sculptures but also in the literature written throughout ages, from writing the very first literary work that accepts sexual intercourse as science, and develops the attitudes of present generation towards sex. From Vedas, considered to be the most ancient text of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, various perspectives on sexuality, marriage and fertility prayers are found. The practice of polygamy was evident in the society. Prostitution was also legitimized. Various instances of courtesan-culture are found in various literary works as well. Apart from the conventional relationship and polygamous marriage, another type of marriage was in practice, i.e., "gandharva vivah", where a man and a woman are involved in consensual sex with no rituals, witnesses or family participation. Even living-apart-together relations and one-night stands were also evident. There are certain evidences of such relations in the classical literature. The great epic of India, the *Mahabharata*, is carrying various evidences of such practices in the then culture and society.

The *Kama Sutra*, written by Vātsyāyana, is accepted as the first literary work dealing with human sexuality, eroticism and fulfilment of emotion, passion and desire as one of the proper goals in life. Projecting sexual activities as a science this book is not only a sex manual but it also talks about the philosophical and theatrical aspect of love, the art of living life by maintaining one's sexual desires and other aspects related to the pleasure-oriented faculties of human life-to precise it represents Indian attitude towards sex as a basic element of Indian life and philosophy. Again, in Vishnusharma's *Panchatantra*, it is rendered that for having optimum sexual performance humans need to be physically, economically and psychologically in a healthier condition. So, it can aptly be said that ancient Indian culture and tradition was very progressive. Its attitude towards the relationship between a man and a woman was quite liberal and we can see various similarities with that of this postmodern culture. Various instances of such attitudes are also seen in the literary works of Shudraka and Kalidasa as well.

Mrchchakatikam or *The Clay Toy-Cart*, a masterpiece by Shudraka, was not written only for the purpose entertainment, but the play itself is a mirror to the tradition, culture and livelihood of the people of Ujjayini in the age of the playwright. In the *Natyashastra*, Bharata has divided Indian classical drama in ten types or subdivisions depending on their presentation, length and dominant emotions that the play seeks to portray. Among these, one of the main classifications was the prakaranam that represents various dimensions of

man-woman relationship, especially the romantic love which has relevance to real life as well as a universal appeal-the most importance feature of prakaranam. Shudraka's *Mrchchakatikam* is classified to be a prakaranam, as it beautifully and vividly portrays the life of the people of Ujjayini with relevance to their real livelihood and appropriate representation of their various social, cultural and traditional practices that are relevant in this postmodern society as well. This play surely depicts as well as cultivates man-woman relationship in its various dimensions that are also reflected in our postmodern culture.

The first instance of such relationships found in this play is the unconventional one-the love affair of a beautiful courtesan, Vasantasena, and a poor brahmin of generous disposition, Charudatta. The main plot of the play revolves around their relationship and their struggle to get social acceptance. Charudatta, though being a happily married brahmin, was enamoured of the beauty of Vasantasena who also was in love with him for his kindness, honesty, wisdom and generosity and wanted to marry him and become a part of his family. But in those days the society did not allow a courtesan to make a family. And in the form of such obstruction the dramatist has used the character of Samsthanka, also mentioned as Shakara. Moreover, Charudatta's nobility and moral values, structured by the society, also initially forbade him to get involved in his extra-marital affair with Vasantasena. Maitreya also tried to restrict Charudatta assuming the obstacles he was going to face as the society did not give allowance to the courtesans to return to the main-stream of life. But finally, by giving importance to their own desire and choice they succeeded in overcoming all the calamities and united.

This play also represents the courtesan culture that was in practice in that era in India. The heroine here herself is a courtesan who beholds her own estate, attendants and also her aristocracy. Their main work was to entertain people, their suitors, sexually for money and riches only, no matters whether these suitors were married or unmarried. They were not allowed by the society to come back to the main-stream of life, to marry a man and to have a family. They were called 'nagarvadhu'-'the wife of the city'-suggesting them as to be the sexual entertainer for all men in the society. This practice has resemblance with the prostitution culture of the postmodern society. Though in that era, these courtesans were admired by society they were never glorified.

Besides these unconventional relationships, this play also represents the conventional relationship between Charudatta and his wife Dhuta. Though their relationship is not very much explored here but it is quite clear that conventional relation is always prioritized by the society of any era. Dhuta is projected here as a devoted wife who can even sacrifice her life for the sake of her husband or can perform the rituals of "Satee" on the death of her husband without keeping any kind of hesitation in heart, and is committed to fulfil her relation with Charudatta in spite of any kind of obstacles that they face together or individually.

The greatest dramatist of India, Kalidasa, who is also considered by many as the Shakespeare of India, has shown drama to be the projection of human life from each and every angle. His *Abhijnānaśākuntalam* or *The Recognition of Śakuntalā*, which is taken from the great epic legend, *Mahabharata*, and is considered to be the greatest dramatic work in Indian literature, also shows human life in its different aspects. From the very beginning, it projects as well as cultivates various dimensions of man woman-woman

relationship. Even, if the life history of the titular character, Śakuntalā, is considered, there are ample examples that indicate towards the unconventional sexual intercourses that were practised along with the conventional ones in the ancient Indian culture and mythology and can be seen in our postmodern culture as well.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, in the ancient Indian society 'gandharva vivah' was in practice. This play carries multiple examples of such unconventional relationships. The first one is the relationship between the parents of Śakuntalā-Menaka, the beautiful apsara of heaven, and Vishwamitra, the Royal Sage of Kausika clan. To divert the Royal Sage from his practice of the most formidable austerities and to disturb his single-minded concentration the Gods sent Menaka to the earth. Being mesmerized by her incomparable beauty the Sage performed the rituals of 'gandharva vivah' and got involved in sexual intercourse with her. As a result, she gave birth to Śakuntalā. Similarly, Duhsanta, the monarch of the lunar dynasty of Puru, also being captivated by the unnatural beauty of Śakuntalā, fell in love with her on seeing her for the first time in the pristine hermitage. He also performed 'gandharva vivah' and got involved in sex with her, giving birth to their son Bharata. And in both these two cases the partners are seen to get parted from each other for various reasons. The practice of this type of relationship in the ancient Indian society can be considered as quite similar with the 'living-apart-together' relations that are practised in the postmodern culture. Ample examples of such type of relation are also found in the greatest epic of India, *Mahabharata*, if the birth histories of various legendary characters are cultivated.

Abhijnānaśākuntalam also represents the convention of courtesan culture. The nymphs or rather to be said the 'apsara's are the replica of the courtesans of human world in heaven who were used for the entertainment of Gods as well as in other purposes for the sake of gods and heaven. In this play, we find the mention of Menaka, one of the most beautiful nymphs of heaven, who was sent by the Gods to break the 'tapasya'-the mindful concentration-of the Royal Sage, Vishwamitra. Whether in heaven or on the earth, the courtesans were never allowed to live a life of their own choice. They had no right to be involved in a conventional relationship with a man and to have a family of their own. They were always bound to provide physical entertainment to the males and follow their rules without any kind of protest. Menaka was also not allowed to have a conventional relationship with Sage Vishwamitra. Though she had given birth to a little daughter she had to leave her on this mortal earth, alienated in a dense forest among the wilds, and return to the heaven according to the instructions of gods. Though she had some powers-like the courtesans on the earth-all of them were puppets in the hands of their almighty and they were given not a single chance to go against them. Moreover, this play also bears the example of conventional relation that is shown between king Duhsanta and his queen Hamsavati, though not explored in details.

Both *Abhijnānaśākuntalam* and *Mrchchakatikam* reflect the practice of polygamous marriages in the ancient Indian society among all the social classes. These types of evidences are found in *Mahabharata* as well. Polygamy was practised in that society for various reasons. People got involved in polygamous marriages to increase and protect their properties. To acquire and increase political and social power polygamy was common among the aristocrats of ruling class. Apart from these, such relation was in practice in the society also as a

way-out for people to fulfil their sexual desires and execute marital frustrations for divorce was not allowed in that society. As it is seen in *Abhijnānaśākuntalam*, King Duhsanta married Śakuntalā secretly at the hermitage by performing 'gandharva' rituals when his first wife, Queen Hamsavati, was alive and present in his Royal Palace. Again, in *Mrchchakatikam*, as seen in the final act of the play, Charudatta, apart from acknowledging Dhuta as his first wife, also accepted Vasantasena as his another wife along with his name and identity, and the three declares them as a family. Thus, in these two dramas, the relationship between a man and a woman, especially the sexual aspects of such relations, is quite clearly and aptly depicted by the dramatists. Apart from the conventional relations, the depiction of the unconventional relations and free sexual intercourses are absolutely thought provoking. The way they are represented in these plays in such time of antiquity make the readers awful and bound to think about the dramatists' courage and capability of thinking beyond their time and analysing various aspects of man-woman relationship from a different point-of-view in that pre-historic times which concepts are quite common in this postmodern society. But at same time, these unconventional relations and free sex, though not prohibited literally, are never widely accepted and glorified by the society neither in the ancient days nor in the postmodern era. For, conventional relation between a man and a woman is always considered as the very base of the structure-the institution of marriage-that forms and holds the society; and if unconventional relations receive acceptance and dignity, the base of social structure will be completely ruined and society will get scattered. That's why these relations were always stigmatized and demeaned, and even in this era of postmodernity they are unable to overcome their stigma and are still considered as a matter of shame and derogation. But what would be the status of these women who are deceived and exploited under the veil of human relations?

Women Empowerment: A Representation of Postmodern Feminism in Classical Literature

Feminism is a remarkable social phenomenon that first came into the limelight in the late 19th century and early 20th century all over the world and which introduces "an old tradition of thought and action already possessing its classic books which had diagnosed the problem of women's inequality in society, and (in some cases) proposed solutions" (123). It was the result of the movement happened in 1960s that raises questions on the authority and coherence of women in the society and literature of patriarchal dominance. The emergence of feminism was first noticed in the western countries that primarily shed light on the discrimination, marginalization faced by women as a result of the patriarchal dominance and the way of their emancipation. It is a political stance as well as a theory that focuses mainly on the gender while reading various traditional and cultural practices and also is a platform that gives an individual the space to demand equality, rights and justice in the society, as said by P. K. Nair in *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*.

There are ample evidences found in various social practices of many ancient civilizations that aptly establish the concept that women are always discriminated and marginalized in the society by the patriarchal values and dominance. In the ancient Roman civilization women were allowed to use expensive goods within certain limitation by the patriarchal social structure with the help of certain laws and rules. Moreover, diminishing the educational right of women was a

quite common factor in many of the ancient human civilizations of the western countries. In pre-Mendelian days, as written in *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, men considered transferring sperm into a woman's ovum as to give a woman an identity which they were lacking without a male's impress (125). In ancient Greek civilization as well, the females were always dominated. Though the Greek mythology draws certain references of the people of Greece worshipping many goddesses, the women in their culture and society were also discriminated and marginalized. Various works from the Greek literature also enhances the veracity of male domination in the society.

Feminism, therefore, proclaims that the representation of women as fragile, compliant, over-emotional and irrationally sentimental has emerged from the superstitions, narrowness and patriarchal values that consider women to be a sex-object and a reproductive machine. It shows how women are never given political and financial power and freedom, and are exploited both materially and psychologically. This theory argues that such treatment of woman is also reflected in the cultural elements of the society, like literature, cinema, art, paintings, music and so on, which cannot be denied. This representation of the oppression of women is naturalized by the patriarchal values and ideologies which feminism highly criticizes by saying that these inequalities created by society and not nature must be abolished.

Feminism movement is mainly divided into three 'waves'. The first movement occurred in the late 19th or early 20th century to promote voting rights for women. This movement also encouraged women to raise their voice for their rights of equal contract, marriage, parenting, and property rights which they are always deprived of. The second wave of feminist movement began in the mid-20th century and is continuing parallel with the third wave feminism till date. This movement basically deals with women's social, cultural and political inequality and tries to draw an end to the gender discrimination in this patriarchal society. The third wave feminism has begun in the late 20th century and is still continuing in the present time. This movement also deals with the same issues like the second wave but with a post-structuralist point-of-view to gender and sexuality, and over emphasizing the experiences of upper middle-class white women which is later questioned. "Third-wave feminism also contained internal debates between difference feminists, who believe that there are important psychological differences between the sexes, and those who believe that there are no inherent psychological differences between the sexes and contend that gender roles are due to social conditioning." Thus, it can be said that the main focus of feminism is to abolish the social and cultural inequality of gender, to establish the existence of woman not as a part of a male entity but as an individual self and the empowerment of women.

Postmodern feminism also deals with the same issues as feminism does. But its approach is little different. Postmodern feminism raises question on the oppression, discrimination and marginalization of women with special importance to their individual experience and existence while feminism does same but by considering all the women of different culture and society as one and the same. Postmodern feminists talk about the notions that lead to gender inequality and reject essentialism, philosophy and universal truths that present all women in the society as the same and ignore individual experiences and existence of woman. They also highlight that how the use of languages can influence discrimination and inequality between genders. "They warn women to be aware

of ideas displayed as the norms in the society since it may stem from masculine notions of how women should be portrayed."

The tides of feminist movements also affected Indian culture and society. In India as well, the main moto of these movements is to define, establish, and defend equal political, economic and social rights and opportunities for women who are always suppressed, exploited, discriminated and marginalized by the values and ideologies of the patriarchal society. Like the feminists all over the world, the Indian feminists have also raised their voice against gender inequality and representation of women as weak, fragile, compliant over-emotional and irrationally sentimental being by the various cultural elements like literature, art, cinema, music, paintings etc. Indian history also divides the feminist movements in three phases: the first phase, mid-19th century; the second phase from 1915 to Indian independence; and the third phase, post-independence.

The major issues faced by women in the patriarchal society of India came into limelight in the 19th century and instigated the feminist movements that was started by the educated men of India and later was joined by their wives, daughters, mothers, sisters, protégées and other individuals directly affected by these movements. The condition of women changed after these movements slightly but not entirely. Though after independence the Indian constitution has included many laws for the sake of women and their equal rights in the society, they are not made aware of these laws fully and still discriminated and oppressed under the veil of age-old traditional and religious rules created by the patriarchal social structure. These rules, ritual and beliefs are so conservative that this male-dominated society is still ignorant and indifferent to provide as well as allow a woman to have economic and political power and freedom. Even the society has always set boundaries in whatever they want to. In some places of India people are ignorant to accept a girl-child and want to kill them in the mother's womb. However, now-a-days women are themselves, being affected and inspired by feminism, fighting for their rights and gender inequality. But it is basically seen in the upper and middle classes of the society. Among the lower-class people such oppression and exploitation are still prominent, though things are changing slowly.

Nevertheless, the scenario of ancient India was quite different. The gradual decline in the status of women is witnessed after the invasions of the Muslims and British. To protect the woman and their honour from the hands of the invaders, the society set numberless boundaries and limitations for them which later turned into male-domination and oppression on the females. But before these invasions, the treatment of women in Indian society was entirely different. In ancient India, they hold equal social position and reputation like men. They were given all types of right and liberty for which they are fighting today. They were neither discriminated nor oppressed in the way seen in today's society. They had their educational rights and political and economic power and freedom. There are several instances of empowerment of women in the educational field found in ancient Indian history. The mention of several women like Gargi, Maitreyi in the Vedic literature is a proof to that. Even they had the right and freedom to choose their life-partner after a certain age and having a 'living-apart-together' relationship known as 'gandharva vivah'. The people of ancient India worshipped the idols of both gods and goddesses with equal respect and devotion which shows equal treatment of gender in the

society. In many dynasties women were seen to have the training of the art of using various weapons and warfare, as mentioned in the *Rig Veda*. There are instances of some matriarchal society found in the Indian history as well. The existence and experiences of each and every individual woman were given importance in the society which the postmodern feminist critics specially demanded for.

Women empowerment is a predominant theme that Kalidasa has found on throughout most of his literary works. *Abhijnānaśākuntalam* is not an exception to that. But in this drama, the empowerment of women is represented in a different way. The titular character of this play, Śākuntalā, was brought up by Sage Kanva in his hermitage, also called 'ashrama'. In the ancient Indian society, these 'ashrama's were considered to be the main centre of education and culture. And as a part of living in the hermitage all the hermit girls along with Śākuntalā, Anasuya and Priyamvada received education. Śākuntalā's writing a love-letter on a lotus-leaf for feeling shy to confess her true feelings for King Duhsanta, and Priyamvada and Anasuya's reading out of the name of Duhsanta carved on the ring stand as proofs of female education in the ancient India. And the love-letter of Śākuntalā is considered as the only written proof of her relation with Duhsanta.

Again, this play shows women's skills in language, as a proper emotional and sensuous letter cannot be written by any person without a proper precision of language which Kalidasa's Śākuntalā had. But at the same time, the use of Prakrit by Śākuntalā instead of pure Sanskrit, used by the men of upper strata, shows the discrimination that post postmodern feminism highlights.

Śākuntalā has been portrayed by Kalidasa as an independent woman who has the right to choose her husband according to her own choice. She married Duhsanta by performing the 'gandharva' rituals when Sage Kanva was away from the hermitage, after which he had to leave her at the hermitage and return to his palace. On his return, when Kanva got to know about her marriage, he happily accepted that without any kind of objections. This shows that women were accepted as individuals and the choice of every individual woman was respected. But at the same time his decision of sending Śākuntalā to her husband's house and Duhsanta's rejection of Śākuntalā unveils the fact that women were also treated as a commodity, a property of man in the male dominated society. Being brought up in an 'ashrama' by a hermit, Śākuntalā is portrayed as a meek, fragile, and loving woman who can be easily oppressed and exploited by the patriarchal dominance. As the play progresses, she eventually became a strong and sensitive woman with terrible life experience who has the courage enough to raise her voice against the injustice done to her by the male-dominated society. Her wrathful reply to the King shows her as a woman who had the power to protest against the exploitation of her husband as well as the ruler of the country. She is projected as a representative of the women of the ancient Indian Hindu society who were very much aware about their dignity, chastity and self-respect in spite of being present and a part of a patriarchal culture and society. After being abandoned by Duhsanta she decided to return to her penance grove by her own choice and raised her child on her own in a society where husband is the all in all for women. The curse of Sage Durvasa has worked in the play as an instigator that ultimately purifies the spiritual self of Śākuntalā and also as a veil that covers the failure of the patriarchal society in showing respect towards women in the form of King Duhsanta. At the end of the play, through the

recognition of Śākuntalā and her son by Duhsanta, Kalidasa celebrates the glorification and empowerment of women in the society of male dominance. Moreover, women's participation in music and various cultural events at different phases of life in the classical age is also evident in this play from the praise of Nati's performance by the Sutradhara and also from Hamsavati's practice of melancholic music to attract the attention of the King Duhsanta, her husband.

Shudraka's *Mrchchakatikam* is unquestionably considered as a masterpiece for its depiction of human life. As the title itself means, the plays main theme deals with human life, its root that is embedded deeply in the world filled with both love and despair. It beautifully represents its main protagonists' life, how they face and deal with the ups and downs and achieve their goals of life. In this portrayal of human life, the dramatist has also succeeded in depicting the treatment of women in that society.

One of the main protagonists, Vasantasena, is the centre of the feminine world created in this play. She is not represented as the women with the traditional image of mother, daughter, sister, or wife. The way she has been sketched resembles the concept of working women of the society. She is presented here as a courtesan-a profession which was common in that time in the society-with multiple layers in her character. She is rich and has economic freedom and power. She has the capacity to have her own estate and servants. Moreover, she is an owner of incomparable physical beauty. To be said at once she is an individual who has the power to take her own decisions herself and is desirable to all men in the society. But her profession has taken to a complex position of being cursed and blessed at the same time. For she has the access of each and every kind of material benefits she wants, but is deprived of various social rights that any other person in the society has the access of. In spite of all her wealth and power, she remains just a courtesan whose main business is to entertain the males, especially the aristocrats of the society. Being a courtesan, she is also deprived of the rights that a married woman in the society enjoys. She is not allowed by the society to come back to the main-stream of life and like other women to marry a man and have a family of her own. She cannot nurture love for any individual man. She has to entertain each and every man who desires her and gives her money and riches. Basically, she is also facing discrimination in the society but in a different way.

However, the courtesan culture of the ancient society does not resemble the culture of prostitution entirely. A courtesan is one of the main sources of entertainment for the aristocrats of the society. Being a courtesan, Vasantasena, has to hold the precision of sixty-four languages and expertise in the field of fine arts including music and dance. She enjoys all types of material benefits and comforts that are kept reserved in the society for the upper-class people. But for attending these pleasures she has to sacrifice herself in a way and is never allowed to have a private life of her own choice. In spite of these obstacles, being a strong headed, progressive and powerful woman she stands against society, breaks all the rules and fulfills all her desires that she longs for.

Another evidence of gender discrimination is found in the use of language. While the upper-class characters including all men of the society speak in pure Sanskrit, the woman of all social strata speak in Prakrit. Even Vasantasena, who has skills in sixty-four languages, speaks in Prakrit. Even, Dhuta, though belonging to the brahmin society, speaks in Prakrit.

Apart from the courtesans, other women characters, Madanika, Dhuta also faces various obstacles to establish

their existence in the society. Madanika, who also wants to lead a life like other women of the society, cannot free herself because being a slave of Vasantasena she does not have the capability of paying money for that. To make her free, her lover pays Vasantasena the money, though by the means of stealing. Again, Dhuta, Charudatta's wife, is another character who faces the treatments of discrimination that women normally face in their households. Though she is never treated badly, she is never given all those rights which women are deprived of in general.

So, it can be said finally that though women are given importance in the ancient society and never given entire freedom and is always tried to be suppressed, exploited, dominated, discriminated and marginalized by the society that runs following the values and ideologies of patriarchy. Men have always the fear of women surpassing and over-powering them, and from those insecurities they try to keep women under their control and dominance, and to force them to lead their life according to their terms and wishes. This mentality is protested by women in the society. As seen in various literary works of different ages women have always raised their voice against any type of injustice done to them as a strong and powerful individual who have the courage enough to do whatever they want and to stand against anything that is unjust and hurts their dignity, chastity, and honour. They have proved that they are not unequal socially from men and not a commodity with which men have the rights to do anything of their wish

Conclusion

Any literary work is actually the representation of human life, society and culture. Whatever they show through their words and phrases, all are related to every human on this earth in some way or other. It is true that any piece of literature is a mirror to its contemporary culture and age, but at the same time, the fact that no literary work is confined into a particular era or culture cannot be denied as well. They can be related to any individual of any culture and society of any period of time.

Postmodernism has observed human life from a different point-of-view. It believes in diversity, hybridity, individuality, innovations and scepticism. Though its ideologies are fragmented and have no moral values, it gives importance to each and every individual in the society, being ignorant of class and gender distinctions. It argues that any individual should build their perspectives on the basis of their own experiences and not of historical notions. It also disgraces the shift of authoritative and hierarchal power according to family lineage, and considers that any individual eligible and capable of handling such power can hold it as their right. Traces of some of these characteristics are found in the ancient Indian society that is mainly discussed in this paper of study.

Ancient Indian society was very rich in its culture and tradition. The ancient dramatists of India have enriched this culture with their contribution of innumerable glorious works in various ancient languages in the field of literature. The way they think and present their ideas mesmerizes the reader with each and every line of their works. The ideologies and concepts that the litterateurs have reflected in their works through the themes, plot-structures, and character-portrayals show the readers how much the people of the ancient Indian society were capable of thinking something that surpasses the boundaries of time whether taken under consideration of social structures, religions, tradition, economy, politics, philosophy and gender. There are ample instances in these

ancient literary works that reflect and establish a relation between the ancient Indian society and the society of postmodern culture and tradition.

Both Kalidasa and Shudraka, two great dramatists of ancient India, have focused mainly on the different aspects of human life in various dimensions. The two famous dramas, *Abhijnānaśākuntalam* and *Mrchchakatikam*-written by these two dramatists respectively-that are cultivated in this study, are two remarkable specimens from the Sanskrit literature that not only represent the human life and society of that era but are also relevant in today's postmodern society as well.

Kalidasa has always satisfied his readers through his depiction of humanity and their moral values and ideologies. His plays always focus on the various aspects of human life, their culture, society, customs, traditions, rituals, ideologies, moral values and politics. His *Abhijnānaśākuntalam* is not an exception to that. On one hand, the portrayal of the characters and their approaches to life truly fulfil his aims. On the other hand, it shows how, in spite of being created in that ancient time, this play lives in the age of postmodernity as well.

The main plot of *Abhijnānaśākuntalam* revolves around the tale of Śakuntalā and Duhsanta from one of the greatest epics of India, *Mahabharata*. The main protagonist of the play Śakuntalā, the brahmin foundling, is the daughter of the entities of two different cosmos-Menaka, the celestial nymph, and Vishwamitra, the Royal Sage. She was brought up by sage Kanva in his hermitage. She married Duhsanta according to the 'gandharva' rituals and then was left by him at the hermitage with the assurance of love and identity, and was forgotten by him years later. And when she went to Duhsanta with their grown-up son he refused to accept their relation and rejected her in his court front of his councils. But at the end of the play, Duhsanta recognizes and accepts them socially.

This play reflects the distinction among people on the basis of social and economic standards. It is seen that people who had political and economic power exploited others, especially women. For example, the rejection and insult of Śakuntalā by Duhsanta in the royal court of Hastinapur just for the sake of his self-esteem and prestige among his subjects stirs the heart of the readers. However, it is a fact that the choice of every individual was respected and given importance in that society including women. The women were allowed to take decisions by themselves and even had the right to choose the life partner of their own choice. They were also allowed to have educational rights, and political and economic power and freedom. As seen in this play Śakuntalā and her friends, Priyamvada and Anasuya had received education from the hermitage they lived in which are considered to be the temple of education in the ancient society of India. Their reading of and writing capacity is a proof to that. Śakuntalā's protest against Duhsanta, the king and her husband, shows that women of that society were not meek and fragile. They had the courage to raise their voice against their husband, lord and authority of the society-the representatives of patriarchy. This incident also shows the treatment of women as a commodity. Human relationships with its various dynamics-conventional and unconventional-are presented here through the relations of its characters, like, Śakuntalā, Hamsavati, Menaka and Vishwamitra. It also shows the political and social upheaval different classes in the form of a forest foundling and her son. Like Kalidasa, the main focus of Shudraka in his plays is also to represent different aspects of human life seen in his contemporary society. His plays reflect social norms and customs which were practised in that era. *Mrchchakatikam* also follows this tradition. Along with depicting its

contemporary world, it also establishes its relevance in this postmodern society.

Shudraka's *Mrchchakatikam* portrays the society, culture, tradition and livelihood of the people of the city of Ujjayini. The story mainly revolves around the love intrigue of the two protagonists, Vasantasena, the 'nagarvadhu' of Ujjayini, and Charudatta, the poor brahmin merchant. Though both of them were deeply in love with each other and marrying more than one woman was not a crime in that society, they had to face many obstacles to fulfil their love. For, the society allowed not a single courtesan to come back to the main stream of life and have a family of their own.

This play depicts the class division and discrimination with minute details. The society was divided in several classes on the basis of power and money. The lower-class people were tortured badly by the upper class. The custom of slavery was prevalent and the lower-class people were sold and bought like animals. The lack of riches was the only reason of Charudatta's loneliness and alienation. The commoners were tortured by the royals and as a result revolutions took place and dynasty changed. Aryaka, the son of a cowherd, was bestowed to the throne. The treatment of women in that society is another thing to be mentioned. The ordinary women were neither given education nor social rights. As seen in the character of Dhuta, they had to tackle their household and children only. They had neither their own identity, nor the choice of their own. Dhuta's life was also limited within the hold and she kept her at the position of her lord and can sacrifice her life for him as well. The character Vasantasena represents another trait of the society, where women, in spite of having economic power and freedom, basic education with good skills in various languages and entertainment field like music, dance and art, were treated like a commodity. Being a courtesan, she had all the material benefits but not the basic rights that other men and women in the society enjoyed. She was treated like a property of the city, which men can use anytime for the fulfilment of their sexual desires in the exchange of money and riches. This play also represents various dimensions of human relations and their sexual intercourse. The practice of different unconventional relations like extra-marital affair, 'living-in-together' relations, courtesan culture, polygamous marriages along with the practice of conventional ones, all are evident in the various relations between the characters like Vasantasena, Charudatta, Dhuta, Shakara and others.

These notions and incidents, portrayed in these two plays, show that the ideologies and perspectives of postmodern culture and society were evident in the society of ancient India. The approach of the ancient people to their social norms, customs, rituals, and human life and relations resembles the postmodern perspectives of today's society and make these two pieces of literature relevant in our contemporary world and society of postmodernity

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