

## **Understanding Women's Subordination and Patriarchal Practices in the Context of *Kālidāsa's Śakuntalā*: An Analysis**

S. M. Latiful Khabir\*

### **Abstract**

This paper aims to examine the position of women in the social structure of the time and the issues of discrimination against women within the patriarchal social system of the Indian subcontinent, as portrayed in the play “*Abhijñāna Śākuntalam*”. In these subcontinental societies, women have “traditionally” been considered subordinate to men, where women always had to be under the authority or control of one or multiple men. Men or husbands had the right to exercise a disproportionate power over women or their wives. *Kālidāsa*'s play *Abhijñāna Śākuntalam* gives a detailed picture of the status of women in the subcontinental patriarchal society of India at that period. The author has represented the women through the portrayal of the titular character *Śakuntalā*. The text represents the Vedic period and the social system of that time, where social attitudes are reflected in the journey of our protagonist character. In that social system, the rules and regulations of society were in the hands of men and governed by patriarchy. Women were like puppets tied with strings, controlled by men. In this structure, men had been at the top of power, i.e. the superior ones. Even when the author chooses *Śakuntalā* to be the protagonist, as we will see throughout this discussion, she remains firmly in a place of inferiority, where her position is never accorded equal power to that of King *Dusyanta*. The men are shown as superior in every stratum even in the greatest of Sanskrit plays. Mainly this is a study of contemplating the role of society in creating the distinctions in the status of women and men.

**Key words:** Dependency, Discrimination, Dominance, Patriarchy, Religious Barriers, *Śakuntalā*, Subordination.

### **Introduction**

Every human society is characterized by the solidarity of men and women. Indian subcontinental historical perceptions of the status of women in earlier society show a declining trend in women's position. Analysis of the status of women in the primitive subcontinent of India reveals significant differences between women and men. This difference between men and women in those societies has come up in various ancient writings from the very beginning. Even in older Indian literature, such as ancient essays, stories, plays, novels, myths, and epics, the inequality between men and women

---

\* Lecturer, Department of Theatre and Performance Studies, University of Dhaka, Dhaka-1000, Bangladesh, E-mail: [smlatifulkhabir@gmail.com](mailto:smlatifulkhabir@gmail.com)

has come to the fore. In this case, Indian writers such as *Mahāvīra*, *Bhāsa*, *Patañjali*, *Aśvaghoṣa*, *Śūdraka*, *Kālidāsa*, *Harṣha*, *Bhavabhūti*, etc., can all be put forward as exemplary cases. *Abhijñāna Śākuntalam* is the play of Mahakavi *Kālidāsa* and *Śākuntalā*, the character of this play can be very important if we want to understand the role of women in ancient history. She is the daughter of the great sage *Viśvāmitra* and the heavenly damsel *Menakā*. *Menakā* comes to earth under the instruction of *Indra* to break the intense penance of *Viśvāmitra*, but *Viśvāmitra* and *Menakā* fall in love, as a result, *Śākuntalā* is born. At one point, *Viśvāmitra* refuses to stay with his daughter and wife and *Menakā* leaves *Śākuntalā* in a forest and sage *Kaṇva* finds her and nurtures her like his own daughter. This story has essentially been taken from the epic *Mahābhārata*. Kamana Aryal mentions,

Birth of Shakuntala is the result of Menaka's intriguing seduction to the sage who was in deep penance. The Gods [were] horrifying from the growing powers from his intense meditation and thus they sent a nymph, Menaka, to disrupt his expiation. The sage could not control himself seeing the enticing Menaka and their union gave birth to Shakuntala... Menaka was obliged to return to heaven once God's purpose was satisfied, leaving behind her child with Vishwamitra. Shakuntala was raised by her foster father, Kaṇva, the great sage without motherly love.<sup>1</sup>

Even in the age of the *Rāmāyanam*, the *Mahābhārata*, and the earlier Sanskrit literature, women had no better condition in this society. In *Rāmāyanam*, we find *Sītā* as a woman controlled by patriarchy, and this manifests most fully when she has to face humiliation from her husband even after being considered as an ideal wife, she has to pass through a death test called “*Agni Pariksha*” to prove her fidelity. In the *Mahābhārata* too, *Draupadī* was not treated better than the mere project of patriarchy. According to Kaur Kamaldeep:

Draupadi is portrayed as an enigmatic woman, her experience of being the wife to five husbands, shocking even by today's standards, was never really explored. In most narratives she is the victim of patriarchy who was forced to marry all the five brothers lest they fight among themselves for her... In any case she dared not refuse the decision of her mother-in-law, Kunti, who in one masterstroke ensured that Draupadi would be bound to the Pandavas forever.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the text of *Abhijñāna Śākuntalam*, we see how *Śākuntalā* accepts all the injustice toward her, even after being neglected and deceived by her husband like *Sītā* and *Draupadī*. Despite the ultimate humiliation of womanhood by her husband, she keeps dwelling a solitary life, engrossed in her husband's thoughts. The text is always a replica of the Indian sub-continental society, where the nuances of social life are

<sup>1</sup> Kamana Aryal, “The Subjugated Woman ‘SELF’ in Kalidas’s *Shakuntala*”, *Butwal Campus Journal*, Vol. 7(2), 2024, p. 211.

<sup>2</sup> Kaur Kamaldeep, “Gender and Narrative: A Comparative Analysis of The Penelopiad by Margaret Atwood and The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakurni”, *Caesura*, Vol. 6(1), 2019, p. 33.

meticulously reflected by the authors. The play focuses on the critical conflict between the social system and women run by the patriarchy. From the text that we come across the treatment of women in a male-dominated patriarchal society and know about the position of *Śakuntalā* as a woman wronged by the seemingly infallible patriarchal system in Indian subcontinental society.

The paper intends to analyze the representation of women from the different aspects of society by the authors from ancient times. The sections of the core text provide us with information pertaining to the different social, political, religious, and economic roles occupied by women in the society of that time. Also, the text shows how women had been marginalized across class and caste during the period in question.

### Background

There are a large number of critics who have explored the position of women in Indian subcontinental society. Especially, M. R. Kale<sup>3</sup>, Pankaj Solanki<sup>4</sup>, Dr. Pritilaxmi Swain<sup>5</sup>, Ruksana Sharma Pokhrel<sup>6</sup>, Naresh Rout<sup>7</sup>, Mrs. Sampa Paul<sup>8</sup>, Tanushri Mahata & Bablu Mandi<sup>9</sup>, Kalsang Yangzom<sup>10</sup> have discussed the various aspects of women and women's situation in society on the basis of sex, gender, power, feminist point of view, patriarchal social system, social power relation and how gender affects the power relation between woman and man in the patriarchal society. To explain the situation of women some of them have taken many ancient female characters from ancient text as a reference. Many writers and critics have tried to analyze *Kālidāsa's Abhijñāna Śākuntalam* drama as a reference in discussing the position of women in ancient societies. Dr. Pritilaxmi Swain explains there are certain social, religious taboos which

<sup>3</sup> M. R. Kale, *The Abhijnana Shakuntalam of Kalidasa*. (Delhi: Motilal BanarsiDass, 1969).

<sup>4</sup> P. Solanki, "A Comparative Study of Kalidasa's Abhijnana Shakuntalam and Namita Gokhale's Shakuntala: The Play of Memory", *International Journal of English Language and Humanities*, Vol. 7(12), 2019.

<sup>5</sup> D. P. Swain, "Social Values of Women in Abhijnanasakuntalam: An Analysis", *Inter-national Research Journal of Interdisciplinary & Multidisciplinary Studies (IRJIMS)*, Vol. 1(1), 2015, pp. 69-73. Retrieved from <http://www.irjims.com>

<sup>6</sup> R. S. Pokhrel, *Representation of Women in Ancient Texts with Special Reference to Abhijanan Shakuntalam* [Master's Dissertation], (Sikkim University, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Naresh Rout, "Role of Women in Ancient India", *Journal of Government of Odisha*, (January, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> M. S. Paul, "Unheard Voice and Identity Crisis of Shakuntala: A Study of Abhijnanashakuntala", *India's Higher Education Authority UGC Approved List of Journal*, Vol. 19(4), April, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> T. Mahata, & B. Mandi, "Social Values of Women in 2nd – 4th Century B.C with Special Reference to 'Abhijnana Shakuntalam' by Kalidasa", *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR)*, Vol. 6(6), June, 2019. Retrieved from <http://www.jetir.org>

<sup>10</sup> K. Yangzom, "Abhijnana Shakuntalam: character analysis and critical perspective", *Indira Gandhi National Open University Journal*, April, 2019, pp. 33-43.

operate as social sanctions against the woman in the reference of *Abhijñāna Śākuntalam* and has shown how a woman fully complies with her husband's wishes. Dr. Pritilaxmi Swain argues, "Abhijnanasakuntalam has an iconic status in the history of Indian literature and within the ideologies of nationalism and domesticity of nineteenth century elite Indian societies that drew from Brahmanical social values and still continue to dominate lives and politics in contemporary India."<sup>11</sup>

M. R. Kale gives a clear and vivid idea in his book "*The Abhijnana Shakuntalam of Kalidasa*"<sup>12</sup> about the situation of women in the play and the different sections of this book help to understand the overall idea of the play from the historical considerations to the plot. He has also explained in detail the characteristics of the play and highlighted the different notions of understanding the position of women in early societies, where we can see the inferior position of women in all cases. Also, Pankaj Solanki in his paper "A Comparative Study of Kalidasa's Abhijnana Shakuntalam and Namita Gokhale's Shakuntala: The Play of Memory"<sup>13</sup> analyzed the patriarchal representation of *Śākuntalā* by the authors from ancient times to the present. For this purpose, he has worked on the ancient work *Kālidāsa's "Abhijñāna Śākuntalam"* with the reference of the modern work "*Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*" by Namita Gokhale<sup>14</sup>. Pankaj Solanki mentions, "Shakuntala is representative of women's situation in patriarchal Indian society. In patriarchal Indian society women have been treated as men's subordinate. However, they have been hailed as goddesses all the time but at the same time they have been put under control of men made rules and regulations."<sup>15</sup>

Besides all these works, also Arthur W. Ryder<sup>16</sup>, Oasis Kodila Tedika and Simplice A. Asongu<sup>17</sup>, Tanushri Mahata and Bablu Mandi, D. M. Singh<sup>18</sup>, Aswathy Cherian<sup>19</sup>,

<sup>11</sup> D. P. Swain, "Social Values of Women in Abhijnanasakuntalam: An Analysis", *International Research Journal of Interdisciplinary & Multidisciplinary Studies (IRJIMS)*, Vol. 1(1), 2015, p. 69. Retrieved from <http://www.irjims.com>

<sup>12</sup> M. R. Kale, *The Abhijnana Shakuntalam of Kalidasa*. (Delhi: Motilal BanarsiDass, 1969).

<sup>13</sup> P. Solanki, "A Comparative Study of Kalidasa's Abhijnana Shakuntalam and Namita Gokhale's Shakuntala: The Play of Memory", *International Journal of English Language and Humanities*, Vol. 7(12), 2019

<sup>14</sup> Namita Gokhale, *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, (Viking India, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> P. Solanki, "A Comparative Study of Kalidasa's Abhijnana Shakuntalam and Namita Gokhale's Shakuntala: The Play of Memory", *International Journal of English Language and Humanities*, Vol. 7(12), 2019, p. 222

<sup>16</sup> A. W. Ryder, *Kalidasa Shakuntala*, (Cambridge, Ontario: Parentheses Publications, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> O. K. Tedika & S. A. Asongu, "Women in Power and Power of Women: The Liberian Experience", *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> D. M. Singh, "Understanding Nature Through Literature: An Eco-critical Study of Kalidasa's Abhijnana Shakuntalam", *Journal of Interdisciplinary Cycle Research*, Vol. 11(6), June, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> A. Cherian, "Representation of Harmonious Relation Between Man and Nature in The Abhijnana Shakuntalam", *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies (IJELR)*, Vol. 3(4), 2016. Retrieved from <http://www.irjims.com>

Uma Chakravarti<sup>20</sup>, Dr. Hiren H. Trivedi<sup>21</sup> and more eminent writers have discussed the women's position in society as a place of superiority or inferiority from different points of views. Dr. Hiren H. Trivedi mentions about the time of *Śakuntalā*, "Woman, in those days, considered her husband a deity. Service and obedience to the husband was believed to be the highest ideal of woman's life. She was respected as the mother in the society."<sup>22</sup>

*Kālidāsa* has a rich and unique achievement to the Sanskrit literature of the Indian subcontinent. He is considered to be the greatest dramatist and the poet in the Sanskrit literature and *Abhijñāna Śākuntalam* is the marvelous masterpiece work of *Kālidāsa*. Regarding *Kālidāsa*'s period, Santanu Chakraborty mentions,

Kalidasa was a court poet of Agnimitra Sunga (second century BC) who lived during the years of the Sunga Empire 184 BC to 78 BC. According to the belief, Kalidasa made Agnimitra Sunga the protagonist of his first play *Malavikagnimitran*. Another view of Kalidasa's period places him in first century BC during the reign of Vikramaditya of Ujjain, around 57 BCT.<sup>23</sup>

There is a third opinion regarding *Kālidāsa*'s period in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Arthur Berriedale Keith mentions, "Kalidasa lived before A.D. 472, and probably at a considerable distance so that to place him about A.D. 400 seems completely justified."<sup>24</sup> It can be said with some certainty that *Kālidāsa* lived before the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D., i.e., about 1400 years ago. *Abhijñāna Śākuntalam*, the pinnacle of *Kālidāsa*'s works, mirrors the condition of women of conventional subcontinental society. Through this text, we see the social, economic, political, and religious undervaluation of women in that period, as well as men's attitudes towards women in society and their limitations. Based on *Śakuntalā*'s recognition, the play is divided into seven acts.

According to Pritilaxmi Swain, the story was already nascent in *Mahābhārata*, but *Kālidāsa* had embellished it beyond recognition with a lot of innovations. This drama provides a very effective context for dissecting the concept of gender from different perspectives within the Indian subcontinent and explains it in terms of contemporary social structure. According to Ruksana Sharma Pokhrel, in the fourth and fifth centuries AD, the age of Chandra Gupta II, women were the objects of enjoyment, and

<sup>20</sup> U. Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste through Feminist Lens*, (Calcutta: Stree, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> D. H. Trivedi, "Women-Through the Ages: A Literary Study", *International Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 1(7), September, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 32

<sup>23</sup> Santanu Chakraborty, "A Brief Discussion on Kalidas", *International Journal of Humanities Social Science and Management (IJHSSM)*, Vol. 4(5), 2024, p. 102.

<sup>24</sup> Arthur Berriedale Keith, *A History of Sanskrit Literature*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 82.

they did not enjoy a high position in society. In terms of women's condition of that period, the text can be divided into three parts. In the first part of the play, *Śakuntalā* is presented as an ordinary obedient and weak woman in the forest hermitage, she is seen as a provider of nurturing and caring for household items and whose main purpose is solely marriage and husband's service, or in a word, dependency.<sup>25</sup> We also see that she has physical intercourse with *Duṣyanta* only when she is assured of marriage like the conventional and rather convenient (for patriarchy) portrait of a woman of the Indian subcontinent. For a child, only the father can be the main protector, maintainer, and guardian in the family, which has been forcefully implanted in women's heads for ages by the patriarchy. In the second part, we can see the rejection, the ultimate humiliation of femininity and defendant inferiority, which *Śakuntalā* has to accept like a puppet of patriarchy. Here we see that, even after being rejected and humiliated by her husband *Duṣyanta*, she leaves without protesting for her own rights, her unborn child's rights in the royal palace of King *Duṣyanta*. According to patriarchal norms, the husband's house becomes a woman's main address after marriage and remains so even after becoming a widow. Simultaneously, society forces women to stay in their husband's house until their death and do not allow them to remarry, but men can be freely polygamous. In the third part, we see *Duṣyanta*'s acceptance of *Śakuntalā* and *Bharata* as his wife and son, where *Śakuntalā* accepts *Duṣyanta* as her husband without any protest, without any objection, even after living a solitary life in a forest for a long time because of her husband's rejection. This is where the plight of Indian women exceeds that of *Penelope* (*Odyssey*) in the Greek epics. The character *Penelope* is taken from the epic *Odyssey*. *Odyssey* is one of the greatest ancient Greek epic poems of Homer. Later in 1998 Silvana La Spina wrote a novel in that context named *Penelope*. According to Greek mythology, *Penelope* was the daughter of the *Icarius* and the *Periboea* of Sparta and the wife of the greatest Greek hero *Odysseus*. After the Trojan War she waited twenty years for her husband *Odysseus* to return. During that period, she had to fend off more than a hundred suitors and endure persecution from the gods and goddesses. According to Kaur Kamaldeep, "In the myth *Penelope* is shown as a chaste and patient woman who waits endlessly for her husband, while *Odysseus* beds every nymph and siren he can get his hands on."<sup>26</sup> *Penelope* was a woman who sacrificed herself for her husband's satisfaction by repulsing her being, this what a man expects from a woman in every traditional patriarchal society.

<sup>25</sup> R. S. Pokhrel, *Representation of Women in Ancient Texts with Special Reference to Abhijnana Shakuntalam* [Master's Dissertation], (Sikkim University, 2019).

<sup>26</sup> Kaur Kamaldeep, "Gender and Narrative: A Comparative Analysis of The Penelopiad by Margaret Atwood and The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakurni", *Caesura*, Vol. 6(1), 2019, p. 37.

### The Portrayal of *Śakuntalā* as a Weak Woman

*Kālidāsa* himself has portrayed *Śakuntalā* as a product of the patriarchal society. At the first glance of the play *Abhijñāna Śākuntalam*, we see how our protagonist *Śakuntalā* as a woman becomes a secondary character in the presence of the characteristics of the male character *Dusyanta*. Here in the first few scenes, we see King *Dusyanta* entering while holding a bow and arrow and riding a chariot in pursuit of a deer. The chariot picks up speed and the king prepare to shoot. *Dusyanta* is introduced as a man of power who hunts in the forest. On the other hand, *Śakuntalā* is introduced as a common woman in the forest hermitage, as a character with weak features. Here in the text, she is described as engaged in the cultivation and production process. The women in the text remain engaged in agriculture, where the watering of the plants, the nurturing, and the collection processes are clearly mentioned, while men are portrayed as hunters. *Śakuntalā* is relegated here to a role of nurturing with weak characteristics. Apud Melchiorre (as cited in Angelica Nicoleta Neculaesei) argues:

Differentiation leads also to inequality by provided stereotypes. In general, gender stereotypes devalue woman, who is regarded as being inferior to man, without the capacity to reason, as it appears in Aristotle or Jacque Rousseau's works. They associate her with passivity, renunciation, structural weakness/fragility, or lack of virtues, as opposed to masculine traits seen as positive ones.<sup>27</sup>

By differentiating the stereotypes given in the play, *Śakuntalā* has also been cast into inequality as a female character in *Abhijñāna Śākuntalam*. She is shown inferior in position in front of the character *Dusyanta*. *Śakuntalā*'s first introduction, behavioral features, conversations with her confidants, not protesting even after her husband's rejection, accepting her husband without any objection: all these embodiments of self-abnegation, inertia, tenderness, non-confrontational nature and lack of courage have left *Śakuntalā* in a position of inequality in terms of superior characteristic features. We see in patriarchal society that women have always been kept in a lower place in society in terms of gender stereotypes, and *Kālidāsa* also portrayed *Śakuntalā* in the same way. In terms of social acceptance, these injustices have been taken as positive and *Śakuntalā*'s fate and curse have been blamed rather than the patriarchal social system for the adverse treatment she suffers. Even a great author like *Kālidāsa* comes across as a champion of patriarchy in this play. So, we see how *Śakuntalā* has faced discrimination as a female character in the text by the author himself.

### Religious Barriers and Values

In the play, women are relegated to an inferior position through some Vedic Hindu ritualistic thoughts and it shows how the caste system created inequality in Vedic

---

<sup>27</sup> A. N. Neculaesei, "Culture and Gender Role Differences", *Cross-Cultural Management Journal*, Vol. 17(1), January, 2015, p. 34.

Hindu society. We see here how this determines the character traits in this play. In the beginning of the play after seeing *Śakuntalā*, King *Dusyanta* tries to determine *Śakuntalā*'s suitability as his lover and wife and then he thinks about her caste. From the English translation of W. A. Ryder, we can see *Dusyanta* thinks thus, "King: may I hope that she is the hermit's daughter by a mother of a different caste."<sup>28</sup> This is because a man of a higher classes can't marry a girl of the lower class. From the information of K. Yangzom, "A man can marry a woman who is of the same caste or one caste lower."<sup>29</sup> We find *Dusyanta* and *Śakuntalā* belong to the same caste, so as to appease the elite and normative audience of that period. In the Vedic period, social values depended a lot on the caste. Tanushri Mahata & Bablu Mandi argues,

Social values form an important part of the culture of a society. Values account for the stability of social order. They provide the general guidelines for social conduct. Values such as fundamental rights, patriotism, respect for human dignity, rationality, sacrifice, individuality, equality, democracy, etc. guide our behavior in many ways.<sup>30</sup>

*Śakuntalā*'s acceptance as a suitable wife or lover was questioned here also by the caste system in the face of a religious order, which is controlled in hindsight by the male-dominated system. In the case of *Śakuntalā*, her father's main concern was to give her daughter to a well casted worthy husband, thereby restoring her caste in society, and one of the reasons *Kaṇva* accepted *Dusyanta* as his daughter's husband was because of his wealth and his upper caste. Women were seen as an obstacle to society and its religion, as can be seen through this example. They were completely obedient to the male members of her family, like husband, father, son, etc. On the other hand, the husband had jurisdiction to marry more women at the same time. Naresh Rout mentions-

During this period men were polygamous and widow burning was an accepted norm. Arthashastra imposed more stigmas on women as Kautilya dismissed women's liberation and they were not free even to go elsewhere without their husband's permission. They became worse off in the Gupta period. The Smritiśastra abused them; Manu dictated a woman would be dependent on her father in childhood, on her husband in youth, and on her son in old age. Apart from child marriage and Sati, prostitution and the Devadasi system became widespread.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> A. W. Ryder, *Kalidasa Shakuntala*, (Cambridge, Ontario: Parentheses Publications, 1999), p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> K. Yangzom, "Abhijnana Shakuntalam: character analysis and critical perspective", *Indira Gandhi National Open University Journal*, April, 2019, p. 40.

<sup>30</sup> T. Mahata and B. Mandi, "Social Values of Women in 2nd – 4th Century B.C with Special Reference to 'Abhijnana Shakuntalam' by Kalidasa", *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR)*, Vol. 6(6), June, 2019, p. 1417

<sup>31</sup> Naresh Rout, "Role of Women in Ancient India", *Journal of Government of Odisha*, January, 2016, p. 42.

### Dependency and Subordination

We see a kind of practice especially among the Hindus in the Indian subcontinent since Vedic times, where the most senior male person in the family was at the root of all actions and decisions. In that social system, the rules and regulations of society were in the hands of men and governed by patriarchy. Women were like puppets tied with strings, controlled by men. We see in the play *Śakuntalā* was adopted by rishi *Kaṇva* and he became her sole parent. As narrated in the text, we come to know that *Kaṇva* wants her daughter to be married off to a worthy husband so that *Śakuntalā* after her marriage can be in a good position in her husband's house, both financially and socially. From the point of view of Amy Blackstone's paper "Gender Roles and Society"<sup>32</sup>, it can be said that *Śakuntalā* had been considered as a weak woman in her family from the beginning, and the desire of her father to marry her daughter to a wealthy rich man shows her status as a dependent. *Śakuntalā* remains a woman in subordinate roles with elements of serving and nurturing male dreams and desires. It is clearly visible here how gendered norms portrayed women as weak before patriarchal society. Amy Blackstone says at one point-

Gender roles are the roles that men and women are expected to occupy based on their sex.... Therefore, the traditional view of the feminine gender role prescribes that women should behave in ways that are nurturing. One way that a woman might engage in the traditional feminine gender role would be to nurture her family by working full-time within the home rather than taking employment outside of the home.<sup>33</sup>

So, we can see from this concept how the social system presents a woman in society from the patriarchal point of view. On the other hand, the marriage of *Śakuntalā* to *Dusyanta* bestowed upon her the position of a queen, but it did not ensure any form of inheritance to property. There are no indications in the text that women have the right to property under any circumstance. The patriarchal society rules the system in a way so that a woman has to be dependent on a man both before marriage and after marriage, and in this context, D. P. Swain argues, "The widow could not inherit her husband's property in those days; she was simply entitled to maintenance.... They are recognized as the oppressed class of society and merely a puppet in the hands of a male-dominating society."<sup>34</sup> Since Vedic times Hindu women had no right in property and this was one of the major reasons behind their dependence. As a result, they become dependent on

<sup>32</sup> Amy Blackstone, "Gender Roles and Society", *An Encyclopedia of Children, Families, Communities, and Environments*, 2003, pp. 335–338.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 337

<sup>34</sup> D. P. Swain, "Social Values of Women in Abhijnanasakuntalam: An Analysis", *International Research Journal of Interdisciplinary & Multidisciplinary Studies (IRJIMS)*, Vol. 1(1), 2015, p. 72.

their male family members, such as son, father, and husband. They always had to be subservient to men and freedom was controlled by patriarchy. Society was following the patriarchal posterity women were subjected to gender discrimination socially, politically, culturally and economically in subcontinental Indian society. Here, the male members of a family exert greater control over the economy than the female members, and men consequently experience greater power in society than women. Throughout the entire play, *Śakuntalā* remains a victim of this situation. Being a woman, she could not free or independent to do anything of her own accord, and neither does it cross her mind. In this system women were controlled by certain social and religious restrictions controlled by men which she had to follow.

#### **Male Dominance and *Pativrata***

*Śakuntalā* is portrayed as a woman living firmly under the frame of Patriarchy. But on the other side, *Śakuntalā*'s mother was an Apsara/Celestial being. According to K. Yangzom, "Apsaras are known for their disorderly femininity, in the sense that these women are not controlled by the strictures of the patriarchal mortal world. They are, mostly, free to act on their own accord and are seen as more sexually free than mortal women."<sup>35</sup> In the play we see *Śakuntalā* once went to the *Dusyanta*'s house and claims her status as his wife. He regards her as another's wife and when she tells him about her pregnancy, he accuses *Śakuntalā* of being opportunistic and falsely claiming another's child as the King's. This statement shows how a man in a patriarchal society exercises patriarchal power over a woman and *Śakuntalā* falls victim to that power. Amy Blackstone argues, "A feminist perspective would assert that men tend to hold more power in their marriages than women since men are less likely to lose power or social status if their marriages dissolve"<sup>36</sup> and *Dusyanta* has used that power over *Śakuntalā* as a practitioner of patriarchy. It is clear that the actual position of a female protagonist in the play and her situation reflect the status of women in the Indian subcontinental society of that period, where the female protagonist becomes a puppet of the patriarchal social system. At that period, women were comparatively subordinate to men and powerless being.

The play shows how *Śakuntalā* has been neglected in her life and struggled for an identity of husband. Even *Śakuntalā*'s companions who grew up together in the

---

<sup>35</sup> K. Yangzom, "Abhijnana Shakuntalam: character analysis and critical perspective", *Indira Gandhi National Open University Journal*, April, 2019, p. 38.

<sup>36</sup> Amy Blackstone, "Gender Roles and Society", *An Encyclopedia of Children, Families, Communities, and Environments*, 2003, p. 337.

hermitage house, try to convince her that now her husband is everything in her life, her only goal is to get his husband's recognition as a wife and to take care of him. In the fifth act, we see King *Duṣyanta* denying her existence, and then *Śakuntalā*'s plan to return to hermit house but her companions *Sarangrava* and *Gautami* refuse to take *Śakuntalā* to the hermitage. According to the translation by W. A. Ryder, *Sarangrava* and *Gautami* tell *Śakuntalā*: "If you deserve such scorn and blame what will your father do with your shame but if you know your vows are pure, obey your husband and endure."<sup>37</sup> After that *Śakuntalā* goes to the forest and lives a solitary life with the desire to get her husband back again. So, we see here the inferior position of women formed by patriarchy in the play. Amy Blackstone argues, "Because men are expected to be the primary breadwinners for their families, women often find themselves to be in poverty if their marriages dissolve."<sup>38</sup> These issues of patriarchy point to women to be loyal to their husband and achieve the husband's devotion by nurturing the senior members, husband and children of the family in maintenance and domestic work. The reason here is that woman has been seen only from the male point of view. Here she is an element of the society formed by male dominated society and patriarchal values. They are shaped as maidservants of men within the framework of religious and social norms covered by patriarchy for the man. Where a woman is advised to be dependent on her husband's house even after accepting all the discrimination and inattention. After her rejection by *Duṣyanta*, she leaves her husband's house and does not even fight to assert her rights there. After leaving and being unrecognized by her husband, she lives an ascetic life and does penance to get her husband back. She lived in the forest dedicating her life to her husband and blames her fate for this situation. She was a representative of a typical and expected Indian woman, who herself carried the idea of a patriarchal social system. Also in the epic *Rāmāyaṇam*, especially in *Uttara Kanda*, *Sītā*'s ordeal and her exile, which was done to prove her chastity and purity, show twice the conquest and complete subordination of a woman. Another example is *Lakṣmaṇa*'s wife, *Urmilā*, who set a dignified example of the sacrifices a woman had to make in ancient India. *Śakuntalā* is another succession in these tales told by men to appease their conscience regarding how they had enslaved women. *Śakuntalā* hits harder as she is a character in literature, not mythos or religious tales. She waits for a long time for a husband who has disavowed her. And when *Dusyanta* comes to take

<sup>37</sup> A. W. Ryder, *Kalidasa Shakuntala*, (Cambridge, Ontario: Parentheses Publications, 1999), p. 60.

<sup>38</sup> Amy Blackstone, "Gender Roles and Society", *An Encyclopedia of Children, Families, Communities, and Environments*, 2003, p. 337.

her back, she forgives him without a word. Here *Śakuntalā* characterized herself as a *Pativrata* woman, whose main purpose is to take care of the family members, husband, and raise children. *Kālidāsa* portrayed the character in the shape of an Indian subcontinental *Pativrata* woman who turned her husband's wishes into her own, even after being neglected and cheated by her husband. This is exactly how *Śakuntalā* portrays herself as a traditional, conventional subcontinental Indian woman.

We know that in patriarchal societies, women are treated as men's subordinates. Women are like puppets tied with strings controlled by men. They are not allowed to be free or independent to pursue their wishes. They are rather elements of serving and nurturing male dreams and desires. This discussion will help us explore the various positions of women in our society through the perspectives and characteristics of *Śakuntalā* as described in the play.

### Conclusion

*Kālidāsa* presents a realistic picture of the subcontinental Indian woman in *Abhijñāna Śākuntalam*, where the inferior position of women in the patriarchal social system is poignantly revealed. It can be understood through an analysis of the protagonist, *Śakuntalā*, in the play. She was an obedient element of Patriarchal society, where she acted as a puppet in a man's control. She is portrayed as a woman who accepts all the discrimination, inequality, and humiliation that society inflicts upon her. She remains an enchanted woman in that system, where women were recognized only as daughters, wives, or mothers. From the point of view of the prevailing society at that time, she is an ideal woman, but in the question of equality as a daughter, as a mother, and as a wife, she becomes a living martyr of the patriarchal system. We see how the patriarchal system and the thought work to make women inferior in society and *Śakuntalā* represents a victimized woman of that system.

Since the social system of the Indian subcontinent during the Vedic period was patriarchal, only men consistently sought high status and respect. A woman was considered her husband's or her father's property, and thus their identity and respect became her own identity and honor. They were not allowed to be conscious of their own identity, and the system has never allowed women to leave the place of housework or family nurturing and work with equal dignity to men; they were never considered equal. In this text, *Śakuntalā* represents a far wider class. She struggles to establish her husband's identity as her own and repeatedly fails. We find *Śakuntalā* as a conventional *Pativrata* woman who is bound in the frame of patriarchy. As a representative of the subcontinental traditional Hindu woman, *Śakuntalā*'s position

was in an inferior place as compared to men. In this article, we see how the social values and beliefs of a male-dominated society turned Śakuntalā into a gendered subservient figure. However, as the text's position on women shows, the discussion clearly shows that Śakuntalā represents the women of conventional Indian subcontinental society. As a female character of the play, she has been a victim of identity crises, gender discrimination, and religious and patriarchal power politics in her whole journey. Therefore, it is quite clear to understand that Śakuntalā is an example of this system and the women of that time were in an inferior position, treated as bearers of serving and nurturing male dreams and desires, always controlled by men and embodying the idea of a patriarchal social system. Kālidāsa's Śakuntalā is the perennial representative of this woman-victim, immortalized in the subcontinental patriarchal society.