

Exploring 'Shanderella' through the glass slipper and abhijanashakuntalam

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Abstract: The present paper intends to explore the origins of the two renowned texts, the supernatural fairytale of Cinderella and the traditional drama of Shakuntala. Fairy tales are fabricated stories about superficial, magical and imaginary beings or lands where as Dramas intend to portray a character or to tell a story usually involving conflicts and emotions through action and a series of dialogues. Both of my chosen texts are originated from Mythology as the earliest known variant of the Cinderella story was recorded by a Greek Historian in the late first century and Kalidasa's Abhijanashakuntala though, is a Sanskrit text, since most of the traces of Sanskrit language have been originated from Greek Mythology, so that permits us to claim Shakuntala's origination from Greek Mythology as well. Further, we will explore the origination of both the characters, Cinderella and Shakuntala and how can one conduct a comparative study between the two.

Keywords: glass slipper, supernatural, traditional, Shakuntala.

Introduction

Storytelling including fairy tales have a deep seated place in the minds of the audience and is extremely influential even till date. It is one of the most significant forms of human creativity and on the other hand Dramas intends to portray a character or to tell a story usually involving conflicts and emotions through action and a series of dialogues. *The current literary scenario defines Drama*

as an important literary expression whose grounds are rooted deep in cultural beliefs, empiric mode of knowledge and traditional signs human ethics and emotions. (Dutta, et.al. 2018) *Cinderella* and *Shakuntala*, both narratives have a deep rooted historical origin with certain aspects yet to be discovered.

Once upon a time... those captivating words, spilling out of the pages of a book, let us know that something unimaginable is about to unfold before us that whisks us away to the magic realm of a fairy tale, and this is what the tale of *Cinderella* serves us with. *We cannot imagine the existence of civilization, world, even live without the impression of the language. Perhaps the history of its existence is as old as this universe itself.* (Mishra & Mishra, 2020). The story of *Cinderella* is a popular classic European folk tale that almost everyone in the western world has known since childhood. Every nook and corner of the world talks about the Walt Disney animated adaptation of the story of *Cinderella* in the year 1950 which was based on the French version of the story published in 1697 by a French writer, *Charles Perrault*. In the Disney adaptation of *Cinderella* she overcomes the adversity of her wicked stepmother and her stepsisters who treat her as their maid but, despite all these hardships her tale took a supernatural turn when she met her Prince charming under the adverse timely circumstances. The story of *Cinderella* itself, however, is far, far older than Perrault's version of the story, she is a character who weaves together centuries of storytelling and is divided into two phases, one is the modern European folk tale that evolved into the story of a young girl in a blue ball and the other one is an old Greek plot that has been between cultures. Despite from all these ancient versions of the story of *Cinderella*, in total more than five hundred versions of the *Cinderella* story have been found just in Europe, and the *Cinderella* we know best comes from France. The first version of *Cinderella* that holds a significant similarity with the modern day tale was published in a collection of Italian short stories in the seventeenth century, named '*Cenerentola*'. The only disparity was that instead of two, this version had six wicked step sisters and is more or less about a forced marriage. Six years later, this tale was given a French twist by Charles Perrault, and became the modern day tale we know. Perrault was the inventor of the acclaimed '*glassslipper*' and this version of his is the version Disney later adapted into its animated classic.

Our society and culture, organized on the basis of Chaturverna, patriarchal system and male dominance needs to be explicated in order to mark the women's position in the Indian Social System. (Mishra, et.al. 2014) The character of *Shakuntala* has been canonized as the female protagonist in the famous play '*Abhijanashakuntalam*', written by a fifth century poet and dramatist Kalidasa. The character of *Shakuntala* is quite similar to that of Cinderella as they somewhat share bits and pieces of their respective plots. It is a story about a poor young girl who ends up being a queen, her romantic story ignites many imaginations and has been retold and performed a several times throughout the world. The story of *Shakuntala*, however, stemmed in the Indian epic of Mahabharata, which was written several centuries earlier by Sage Vyasa and *Abhijanashakuntalam* is the inspired version of Shakuntala's story, delivered by Kalidasa.

Objectives

- To identify the origin of both the characters and explore the transformation of *Rhodopis* to *Cinderella* and Sage Vyasa's *Shakuntala* to that of Kalidasa
- To explore how the two texts are identical in some aspects
- To realize the importance of change due to the spontaneity of changing scenarios

Literature review

Johri (2017) in *The Unfolding of Shakuntala: From Kalidasa to Sage Vyasa* initially tends to originate the tale of Shakuntala by providing the summarized description of both the existing versions of Shakuntala's story. The essay distinguishes between sage Vyasa's excerpt from Mahabharata and Kalidasa's *Abhijanashakuntala*. Criticism of Dushyant's flawed character is quite evident throughout the essay. In the latter half of the essay, the author illustrates the power and transformation of Shakuntala from Sage Vyasa's version to that of Kalidasa's. Feminist dramatization, *gandharva vivah*, patriarchal influence and generally challenging the woman or waiting for the 'real' Shakuntala to speak up, are some of the topics enclosed within this essay.

Kumar (2014) in *Narrating Dharma: Story of Shakuntala in Mahabharata* provides a detailed description of the actual story of *Shakuntala*, derived from *Mahabharata*, written by sage Vyasa. Each and every detail about the original love story of *Shakuntala* and King Dushyant has been deeply fabricated in this essay. The primary aim of this text is to teach us the nuances of Dharma through the poignant love story of *Shakuntala* and Dushyant.

Kim (2015) in *The Study Of Cross Cultural Encounters in Pre-modern Societies* addresses that this study was an attempt to reintroduce and reinvestigate the the possible origins and version of *Cinderella*. Three versions of the earliest *Cinderella* variants were examined in order to understand the evolution between versions and to analyze each and every adaptation through a deep lense. The paper discusses the major elements involved in very first addition of Cinderella's story, *Rhodopis*. Sanskrit, Greek and French are the three variants majorly discussed, in order to locate the cross cultural encounters in the modern day scenario.

Mckinney (2015) in *Disney Didn't Invent Cinderella!* poses that this essay is an extremely descriptive essay, it provides us with the four major versions of Cinderella's tale, *Rhodopis*, *Ye Xian*, *Cenerentola* and *Cindrellon*. It delivers detailed descriptions of all the recorded versions of Cinderella till date. The fact that Walt Disney wasn't the one to introduce us to the tale of Cinderella has been thoroughly proven throughout the essay.

Swain (2015) *Social Values of Women in Abhijanasakuntalam* focuses on the hardships of the maiden *Sakuntala* and it tends to throw some light on values, emotions, feelings, attitudes, quality of forgiveness and mental states of women in *Abhijanasakuntalam*.

Figueroa (2019) *Cinderella Embodies Feminism Through Kindness and Strength* provides us with a modern approach towards the long known fairy tale of *Cinderella*. It gives us an optimistic view point of *Cinderella's* struggling character.

Research gap identified

There have been a number of valuable studies and researches about the origination and evolution of *Cinderella* and *Shakuntala's* tale by using several historical records. All of these studies provide us with sufficient information about the very first edition of the fairytale of Cinderella and the drama of Shakuntala. However, these studies missed out on the fact that how perfectly both the female protagonists, of the chosen texts compliment each other's identity.

Research question

With reference to research work involved for both of the chosen texts is it credible to claim that despite different origins, the two characters perfectly compliment each other's identity?

Methodology

This is a qualitative research, which comprises of a detailed description of the origination of the chosen texts. Apart from the primary texts the rest of the matter has been extracted from a number of research papers, secondary readings, blogs, articles and essays as well. It was necessary to consult several literary readings in order to provide an accurate analysis of the chosen topic. Reading and understanding each and every literary work was one of the major approaches towards the completion of this research paper, so as to provide precise and accurate information regarding the chosen affair.

Findings

Having closely examined the characters of *Shakuntala* and *Cinderella* one could easily conclude that, both the characters are delicately fabricated and elaborated in each and every existing adaptations of both the texts. *Cinderella* and *Shakuntala*, both of them have a deeply rooted historic origin.

Friedman (2010) in his research states that, *Cinderella tales are one of the most popular types of fairy tales known today. The popularity of Cinderella tales is not new but rather has existed for centuries. Cinderella tales are found throughout many different regions of the world as well as in different time periods. The passing on of Cinderella tales has served many different purposes for different people throughout time. Storytellers, writers, and collectors have used the tale as a social criticism, as a tool to teach lessons or morals, as a tale to entertain in which audiences create sympathetic bonds with characters, as a method of preserving culture, as a medium to express intellect, and for many other purposes and devices. Studying the history of the tale as well as the differences between versions of the tale as they are connected to different authors and time periods allows for trends and themes dealing with gender and class relations as well as other important issues to come to light. Cinderella tales are cyclic tales in which the character of the female protagonist is introduced as living in the middle to the upper class society. Various literary sources of the Cinderella story make use of changes in status of the main character as well as societal expectations considering behavior, but, at the center of most Cinderella stories, one factor which is common is a persecuted heroine who rises above her social status through marriage. The first recorded story featuring a Cinderella like figure dates back to Greece in the sixth century BCE, the*

Greek historian Strabo recorded the tale of Greco-Egyptian girl '*Rhodopis*' which is considered to be the very first version of the story of Cinderella. *Rhodopis* was born in Greece but, had been kidnapped by pirates and sold into Egyptian slavery and one evening she was more energetic than usual, as the day had been particularly more joyous and cool, that even her master had been enjoying the weather and had fallen asleep under a tree. When the day was done, *Rhodopis* went to the river near her animals, and danced and sang so lightly and so well that even the old man woke up from his sleep to admire her talents and felt that someone so talented should not be without shoes so, in appreciation he ordered a special pair of slippers for her. A little while after this word spread that Pharaoh was holding court and all the kingdom were invited and naturally *Rhodopis* wanted to be there but, it was not meant to be that way. While the servant girls prepared to leave in their finest clothes they turned to *Rhodopis* and gave her more clothes to wash making it impossible for her to reach on time for the event. While she was washing the clothes with utmost disappointment, she saw a falcon approaching towards her and snatched one of her slippers and flew away. The falcon swooped down in the court and dropped the rose-red golden slipper in the Pharaoh's lap, he held the slipper and examined it closely and declared that he would take the owner of this slipper to be his queen. This resulted in the Pharaoh marrying *Rhodopis* and raising her social strata to new heights, and this tale marked the beginning of a popular fairy tale with numerable adaptations since then.

Another one of the earliest known Cinderella adaptations is the ninth century Chinese fairytale '*YeXian*', in which a young girl named *YeXian* is granted one wish from some magical fishbones which is the reincarnation of her dead mother who was killed by her stepmother. She uses that wish to create a gown in the hopes of finding a husband, and just like *Rhodopis*' tale, a majesty went in search of the rightful owner of the shoe and *YeXian*'s beauty strongly convinced the prince which resulted in their marriage and lifting *YeXian* from her lowly status to the throne.

Although, the great heroine *Shakuntala* has become a part of our popular imagination because of the play by Kalidasa, a world renowned Sanskrit dramatist, the original story of this acclaimed lady was derived from Mahabharata. *There has been enough literature, glorifying the enslaving value and deifying the women characters to observe it faithfully.* (Mishra, et.al. 2014) The story in Mahabharata begins with King Dushyant, a powerful virtuous King lost in a dense

forest while hunting, he witnesses a picturesque hermitage and is greeted by a back-eyed girl, with flawless beauty. She introduced herself as *Shakuntala*, the daughter of sage Kanva and the biological daughter of Menaka, the most beautiful Apsara who abandoned Shakuntala after giving birth to her. While waiting for sage Kanva to arrive, King Dushyant proclaims his love for Shakuntala and asks her to be his wife. While, Shakuntala reciprocates his feelings, the King consensually marries her as per the traditions of *Gandharvavivah*. Though, *Shakuntala* readily agrees to a secret marriage, but, she cleverly commands the king that the son born with their union will be the heir to his throne. After consummating the marriage Dushyant leaves the hermitage and promises to send for his new bride with footmen, horses, chariot and elephants, which he never does. After a few years of giving birth to their son Bharat, sage Kanva commands that both, the mother and the child be sent to the land of King Dushyant. After arriving at Hastinapur, Shakuntala proudly enters the court with her young son but, to her misfortune King Dushyant deliberately refuses to recognise her and insults her and her parentage. *Shakuntala* strongly condemns Dushyant and storms out of the court, and in that very moment an invisible and divine voice commands Dushyant to accept *Shakuntala* as his lawfully wedded wife and Bharat as his son, because *Shakuntala* has spoken the truth. After this Dushyant readily accepts Shakuntala and their son which he couldn't do earlier due to societal fears.

Kumar (2018) claims that *The very work which has been tailored by Kalidasa from the Indian epic Mahabharata by Vyasa has "transformed the somewhat unremarkable original into something multifaceted*. While in Mahabharata, sage Vyasa depicts King Dushyant's character as humanly flawed, whereas Kalidasa's genius expands the story to fill that gap, making it more engaging to the live audience for whom it was written. *Abhijnanasakuntalam is one of the best not only in Sanskrit literature, but in the literature of the world. The story was already in Mahabharata in the form of a dull narrative; but, Kalidasa turned the same into an elegant work of art with a lot of innovations*. (Swain, 2015). *Classical Indian literature is a medium through which one is offering a sneak peek into the ancient times. Kalidasa's characters are not just characters playing their part. They are the perfect representation of the inner self, feelings, emotions that are relevant in today's time. It is perhaps an inevitable consequence of Kalidasa's subject that his women appeal more strongly to a modern reader than his men*. (Sinha, 2019). In the Kalidasa'

version of the story when Dushyant leaves the hermitage, *Shakuntala* yearns for him all day. While she's drowning in the deep thoughts of her new love, she fails to notice the arrival of the famous Sage Durvasa in the hermitage. Sage Durvasa felt insulted by the ignorant behavior of *Shakuntala* and in turn curses her that the person she is thinking of will forget her unless, the sight of the momentum given to her by her beloved is shown. Which in this case was the ring given to *Shakuntala* by Dushyant as his token of love. While on her way to the court, *Shakuntala* loses her ring while she bathes in the Ganges. Without realising her loss she enters into the court of King Dushyant where he refuses to recognize her. Her attempt to convince Dushyant by showing him the ring he gave her as a token of their love also failed due to her ringless finger. *Shakuntala* curses her fate and storms out of the court, wailing for her mother Menaka who suddenly appears from the skies and whisks her away. After a few days a loyal fisherman approaches to the King in order to submit the ring with royal insignia that he found in the gut of a fish. The sight of the ring immediately restored the King's memory, and he bemoans the loss of *Shakuntala* and his unborn child. Dushyant eventually discovers them, years later, in a far-off hermitage where *Shakuntala* has given birth to Bharat and the family is reunited. Kalidasa dramatically softens the character of *Shakuntala* in his version and drops a pinch of dramatic element through the advent of the 'ring' making his work a timeless one.

Natya Shastra deals with every facet of ancient Indian dramaturgy discoursing both heroes and heroines almost similar in a play, however, it is problematic to find such elaborate philosophies in the Western classical literature but the heroines of Greek and Roman drama have become commendable archetypes. They are ardent women blessed with attractiveness, knowledge, intellect and valour, however, they have no place in the society because they risked to cross the narrow frame of their time (Rozario. 2019). Kalidasa has done his job of a playwright with commendable talent and has successfully used an existing piece of narrative to create a new one. *Shakuntala's* character in Mahabharata seems more independent and autonomous, whereas Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* is strong only while expressing her emotions, not despite them. On the other hand, *Cinderella's* character is portrayed as a meek one in every adaptation, be it *Rhodopis* or the modern day tale of *Cinderella*. In each and every altered story that *Cinderella* went through, the one thing which remained constant

apart from other characters was the oppressive circumstances *Cinderella* was living in, until her Prince charming came in search of her. One factor which is common in both the tales is the fact that, both the persecuted heroines rise above their social status through marriage. *Cinderella* and *Shakuntala*'s characters compliment each other's identity in terms of their misfortune and the agony in their life. Sage Vyasa, Kalidasa and all the other writers involved in rewriting all the versions of *Cinderella*, their major concern was to provide a 'happily ever after' end in their adaptations.

Conclusion

While examining both the tales, it became evident that there is no single 'definitive' Cinderella or Shakuntala, there are hundreds of different variations from around the world. With every passing version of Cinderella, from Rhodopis to Charles Perrault's version, her character has evolved and has been preserved for centuries through its abilities to make a home within every culture it entered and found a generation of listening ears. Whether circulated through literature or television, the tales may change to fit a new audience, but the meanings within them have remained constant. Cinderella's story is still one of redemption and the triumph of good over evil, in spite of all that is taken from her or the abuses she receives along the way. On the other hand, the celebrated Shakuntala created by Kalidas, however, is markedly different from the original template in the Mahabharata. In this earlier avatar, Shakuntala is a remarkably direct and confident figure and she is no meek character like Cinderella. So, we observe that with every passing century or even a year the audience yearns for modification and adventure due to the spontaneity of changing trends. The tales of Shakuntala and Cinderella underwent several changes in order to satisfy their audience. So, to conclude, we may say that both the characters compliment each other's identity in terms of misfortune, patriarchal pressure and lack of familial support or somewhere in some form are influenced with each other's identity.

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