

**Cognition of Religious and Cultural values in Barbara Stoler Miller's translation of  
*Abhijnanshakuntalam***

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**INTRODUCTION**

*Abhijnanashakuntalam* of Kalidasa is the best-known Sanskrit drama, and universally considered a masterpiece. It is a drama in seven acts, based on the love-story of king Dushyanta and Shakuntala. It is based loosely on a minor episode in the Mahabharata. The aadiparva (ch. 62-69) of Mahabharata narrates the love-story of king Dushyanta and Shakuntala but Kalidasa takes significant liberties in his version and reformed the plot. The plot mentioned in the *Abhijnanashakuntalam*, however, is different in many spheres from the original template in the Mahabharata. The unique idea of incorporating ring and the curse episode makes this drama powerful and a celebrated one. By the nineteenth century, this Sanskrit play was well known to western audiences. Sir William Jones in 1789 translated this ancient Sanskrit drama into English. It was the first Indian drama to be translated into English. After Jones, Monier-Williams in 1872 also translated it into English. The translation work done in different languages has made it even more glorious. More than fifty translations of this work have been done so far, only in the English language, reflecting the greatness of this work as well as a deep love for it among literature lovers. After first translation of Jones, new editions continue to appear till now.

Barbara Stoler Miller, a scholar of Sanskrit literature, is well-known in the literary world as a noted writer and a successful translator. She was born on 8 August 1940 in New York City. She has successfully translated many Sanskrit books into English. Her translation of the Bhagavad Gita is extremely successful. In 1984, she edited a book titled *The Plays of Kalidasa, Theater of memory*. In her own edited volume, she has translated *Abhijnanashakuntalam* into English as *Shakuntala and the Ring of Recollection*. In this edited volume, she has also narrated the personality and work of Kalidasa under the title 'Kalidasa's World and His Plays'. The book, *The Plays of Kalidasa, Theater of memory*, edited by Miller, contains translations of all three of Kalidasa's plays. Two other scholars of contemporary American literature - David Gitomer, and Edwin Gerow, have translated the *Urvashi Won by Valor*, and the *Malavika and Agnimitra*, respectively.

Kalidasa's drama *Abhijnanashakuntalam* contains a detailed description of religious and spiritual values which are practiced and prevailed in his time. Each and every language has its own unique feature. The world for each society is different in terms of practicing religious

and spiritual norms. When a text is translated from one language to another, the crux of the source and translated text is likely to be different. It occurs due to the inter-cultural difference of the life style of the two countries/ Societies. *Abhijnanashakuntalam*, which emerged out of a distinctive culture, seems alien to the American readers. An understanding of culture requires an understanding not only of language differences, but also differences in knowledge, perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

This paper tries to shade lights on Indian religious and spiritual values represented in translated text by Barbara Stoler Miller. Through this paper, we may know that to what extent is Indian religious and spiritual values have been represented in translated text? To what degree is the translation adopted by the intended audience? Chandra Rajan clearly states that “Translation is like serving two masters at the same time. Languages do differ widely in their grammatical structures and though one hopes to meet the demands of the source and receiving languages in a balanced manner, it is a fact that compromises have to be made one way or the other. We endeavour to provide the best approximation to the original not only within the limitations set by our own abilities but more so within those set by the receiving language.”<sup>1</sup>

### THE CONTEXT OF RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL VALUES

Religion, in one form or another, has been found in all human societies and is mostly shaped by its social context. Through culture and religion, people and groups define themselves. *Abhijnanashakuntalam* begins with a prologue that frames the rest of the play. Just prior to showing the play, Kalidasa remembers the eight forms of Shiva through his short benediction. The benediction is composed in verse to honor a deity. Kalidasa used Patravali Nandi (benediction) in order to show that seven cantos would be there in his drama. The Nandi is as follows:

yā sṛṣṭiḥ sraṣṭurādyā vahati vidhihutaṃ yā haviryā ca hotrī  
ye dve kālaṃ vidhattaḥ śrutiviṣayaḡuṇā yā sthitā vyāpya viśvam  
yāmāhuḥ sarvabījaparakṛtiriti yayā prāṇinaḥ prāṇavantaḥ  
pratyakṣābhiḥ prapannastanubhiravatu vastābhiraṣṭābhirīśaḥ

Barbara Stoler Miller translates this verse as follows:

The water that was first created,  
the sacrifice-bearing fire, the priest,  
the time-setting sun and moon,  
audible space that fills the universe,

<sup>1</sup> Kalidasa. *The Loom of Time: A Selection of His Plays and Poem*, p.17

what men call nature, the source of all seeds,  
the air that living creatures breathe  
through his eight embodied forms,  
may Lord Shiva come to bless you!<sup>2</sup>

In this translation, translator has beautifully depicted the crux of source verse. This translation is not word to word translation and provides summary of the sense. Four stanzas become eight in translation and also does not give rhyming. In the original sloka, Kalidasa used Chekanuprasa (a special kind of simile) but in translation it vanished away.

In most of the Sanskrit drama, there is a character called Vidūṣaka. He plays an important role in drama and sometimes serves the purpose of dramatic conventions like pravesaka. He is not a mere comedian, he acts as the friend and the companion of the hero. He is quite intelligent and many times advises hero in personal, political and administrative strategies. Barbara Stoler Miller translates him to be a 'buffon' which is not up to the level. Either she fails to understand the special characteristics of Vidūṣaka or she appropriated it as per the demand of her target audience. Other than laughing and make the audience laugh, the buffon has not another task. Vidūṣaka is protected by Omkara, the ultimate in Vedantic thinking.<sup>3</sup> This cultural context is not there in western thought, so, in order to give the similar meaning Miller has used buffon. She should have used the original word and could give the foot-notes, so that her target audience can understand it in proper way.

When Shakuntala is about to leave for husband's home, Kanva performed a Yajña and offer prayer to the divine. In Hinduism, yajña is a ritual of offerings accompanied by chanting of Vedic mantras (also "worship, prayer, praise, offering and oblation, sacrifice" according to Monier-Williams) derived from the practice in Vedic times. Yajna is an ancient ritual of offering and sublimating the havana sāmāgrī (herbal preparations) in the fire. The sublime meaning of the word yajna is derived from the Sanskrit verb yaj, which has a three-fold meaning of worship of deities (devapujana), unity (sangatikarana) and charity (dāna). An essential element is the ritual fire – the divine Agni – into which oblations are poured, as everything that is offered into the fire is believed to reach God.<sup>4</sup> Yajña is a broad concept which is hard to translate into English. In 4<sup>th</sup> canto of the drama, Kanva says the following verse:

amī vediṃ paritaḥ kṛptadhiṣṇyāḥ samidvantaḥ prāntasamstīṇadarbhāḥ  
apaghnanto duritaṃ havayagandhairvaitānāstvām vahnayaḥ pāvayantu.<sup>5</sup>

Barbara Stoler Miller translates this verse as follows:

<sup>2</sup> The Plays of Kalidasa, Theater of memory, P. 29

<sup>3</sup> Natya Shastra, 1.97

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.wisdomlib.org/definition/yajna>

<sup>5</sup> Abhijanashakuntalam, 4.8

Perfectly placed around the main altar,  
fed with fuel, strewn with holi grass,  
destroying sin by incense from oblations,  
may this sacred fire purify you!

Miller used 'fed with fuel' which is not the exact translation of Samidha. Samidha means the wood which should be burnt or put into the sacrificial fire. The provision of burning different wood for the Navagraha (peace) is specified in the scriptures. There is a fundamental difference between the common grain of rice and Akshat, the same distinction is visible here.

There are eight types of Hindu matrimonies in ancient India, these are; Brahma, Daiva, Arsha, Prajapatya, Gandharva, Asura, Rakshasa and Paishaca. Shakuntala-Dushyant's marriage comes under the category of Gandharva marriage. The culmination of the relationship established by the desire and mutual consent of the bride and groom, which can reach physical contact is called 'Gandharva' marriage.<sup>6</sup> King Dushyanta tells Shakuntala that there is no any problem in 'Gandharva' marriage. He tells thus:

gāndharveṇa vivāhena bahvayo rājarṣikanyakāḥ  
śrūyante pariṇītāstāḥ pitṛbhiścābhinanditāḥ.<sup>7</sup>

Barbara Stoler Miller translates this verse as follows:

The daughters of royal sages often marry  
in secret and then their fathers bless them.

Somewhere, the crux of original sloka is present in translation, but cultural significance of this kind of marriage is absent. As, there is no concept of eight types of marriages in west society, then how a translator conveys the real essence? In that situation, the translator either omit some essence or can further add some meaning in order to find the summery of sense. Nida in his text 'Language structure and Translation' says:

“Translating consists in producing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent to the message of the source language, first in meaning and second in style.”<sup>8</sup>

Drama is the most charming form of literature, containing theatrical aspects as well as the good combination of prose and verse in it. To translate a dramatic text of alien culture is a ticklish task. Jones observed this and told:

“This only I may add, that if Sacontalá should ever be acted in India, where alone it could be acted with perfect knowledge of Indian dresses, manners, and scenery.”<sup>9</sup>

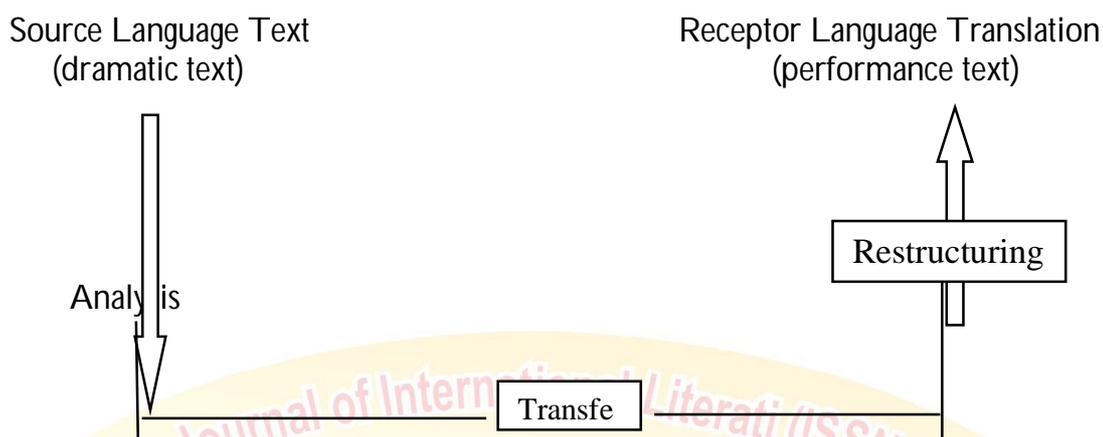
<sup>6</sup> icchayā'anyonyasaṃyogaḥ kanyāyāśca varasya ca, gāṃdharvaḥ sa tu vijñeyo maithunyaḥ kāmasambhavaḥ. Manusmriti, 3.32

<sup>7</sup> Abhijanashakuntalam, 3.20

<sup>8</sup> Nida, Language structure and Translation, p.33

<sup>9</sup> Sir William Jones, Sacontalá or The Fatal Ring, preface.

Here a question arises that if a dramatic text cannot be performed in alien culture, then what is the need of doing several translations? Many scholars after observing this, gave their views. Most of them opined that transcreation can become the effective tool and translators should be the transcreator. It is through translation; we became familiar to the great treatise of the world. Nida gave a model<sup>10</sup>, which is as follows:



Nature plays a significant role in human life. Living in harmony with Nature has been an integral part of Indian culture. Kalidasa gives so much value to the nature. Shakuntala treats trees and animals as they are their real brothers. In 4<sup>th</sup> canto, trees provide different types of ornament to Shakuntala. They shower their blessings upon Shakuntala and shows incredible love for her:

kṣaumaṃ kenacidindupāḍu taruṇā māṅgalyamāviṣkṛtaṃ  
niṣṭhyūtaścaraṇopabhogasulabho lākṣārasaḥ kena cit  
anyebhyo vanadevatākaraṭalerāparvabhāgotthitai-  
rdattānyābharaṇāni tatkisalayodbhedapratidvandibhiḥ.<sup>11</sup>

Barbara Stoler Miller translates this verse as follows:

One tree produced this white silk cloth,  
another poured resinous lac to redden her feet-  
the tree nymphs produced jewels in hands  
that stretched from branches like young shoots.

The relationship between Shakuntala and nature is not a one-way relationship. She does not drink water prior to watering the plants. A buck whose mouth was pierced by a blade of kusa grass, Shakuntala immediately poured ingudi oil over there and healed the wound. Kalidasa mentions thus:

yasya tvayā vranaviropaṇāmiṅgudīnām  
tailaṃ nyaṣicyata mukhe kuśasūcividhde

<sup>10</sup> Dramatic Theory and Practice, Indian and Western, Ed. M. S. Kushwaha, Creative Books, New Delhi, P. 142

<sup>11</sup> Abhijnanashakuntalam, 4.5

śyāmākamuṣṭiparivardhitako jahāti  
so'yaṃ na putrakṛtakaḥ padavīm mṛgaste.<sup>12</sup>

Barbara Stoler Miller translates this verse as follows:

The buck whose mouth you healed with oil  
when it was pierced by a blade of kusa grass  
and whom you fed with grains of rice -  
your adopted son will not leave the path.

There is no notion of kanyadan in western society. Therefore, they could not be able to feel the sorrow of a father who is giving his own daughter to a person who is out of his family. Kanva says that after living an ascetic life, If I am feeling such kind of pain then what would be of general father. He says:

yāsyatyadya śakuntaleti hṛdayaṃ saṃspṛṣṭamutkaṇṭhayā  
kaṇṭhaḥ stambitabāspavṛttikaluṣāścintājaḍaṃ darśanam ।  
vaiklavyaṃ mama tāvadīdṛśamidaṃ snehādaranyaukasah  
pīḍyante gṛhiṇaḥ kathaṃ nu tanayāviśeṣaduḥkhairnavaiḥ

Barbara Stoler Miller translates this verse as follows:

My heart is touched with sadness  
since Sakuntala must go today,  
my throat is choked with sobs,  
my eyes are dulled by worry -  
if a disciplined ascetic  
suffers so deeply from love,  
how do fathers bear the pain  
of each daughter's parting?<sup>13</sup>

At the time of departure of Shakuntala, whole nature showed their pain. The grass drops from the feeding doe, the peacock stops his dance, leaves are becoming pale and falling to the ground. Kalidas narrated this as follows:

udgalitadarbhakavalā mṛgyaḥ parityaktanartanā mayūrāḥ  
apasṛtapāṇḍupatrā muñcantlyaśrūṇīva latāḥ.<sup>14</sup>

Barbara Stoler Miller translates this verse as follows:

Grazing deer  
drop grass,

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 4.14

<sup>13</sup> *The Plays of Kalidasa, Theater of memory, P.126*

<sup>14</sup> *Abhijnanashakuntalam, 4.12*

peacocks  
stop dancing.  
vines loose  
pale leaves  
falling like tears.

On several places, Miller has produced a bad translation. It is expected from the good translator that he/she delves deeper into the main content of the source language then produce the translation. Many words have been taken in wrong context by the Miller. One such word is `Chakravarti`. Miller translates this word as `to turn the wheel of your empire`. Vagish Shukla pointed out this and writes:

“Barbara Miller has totally misunderstood this word and translates it as somebody who ‘turns the wheel of the empire’ because chakra does mean wheel. However, chakra means “kingdom” also and that is the relevant meaning here. A chakravarti is one who is in his kingdom (no matter where he is), that is, whose empire extends to all of this earth. It is a very distinguished term from political science and there is a complete list of the chakravartis given in many Indian texts, usually ending with Yudhishthira.”<sup>15</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Kalidasa’s *Abhijnanashakuntalam* is known to be the greatest repository of our national heritage. Cultural and religious elements, in the form of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behavioral scripts, are represented in his seminal work. The notion of culture is quite difficult to understand; therefore, translation of cultures is certainly limited. Words related to cultural ethos pose more difficulty than others due to interesting cultural differences. When there is sufficient distinction between the two traditions about the form of the play, the translator has to recreate the original work according to his own tradition and as per the demand of his target audience. He should try his best to incorporate the essence of source text as much as possible. In the process of translation, if he finds several words for which no equivalent can be found, in that case he should give the original words and in the foot-notes he should clarify the notions associated with that particular word.

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<sup>15</sup> Sanskrit studies, Vol- 2, Ed. By Vagish Shukla, D.K. Printworld, New Delhi, 2006, P. 280

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