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### Publication History

Received: 2025-09-04

Reviewed: 2025-09-06

Accepted: 2025-09-08

Published: 2025-10-01

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70042/eroth/90325>

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## Śakuntalā and the Politics of Mythopoeisis: Reimagining Gender, Power and Nation through Narrative

**Abstract:** *This paper explores Śakuntalā as a dynamic site of mythopoeisis, investigating how the narrative has been continually reimagined to reflect shifting discourses of gender, power and nationhood. Tracing the evolution of the Śakuntalā myth from its earliest appearance in the Mahābhārata to its classical reformulation in Kalidasa's Abhijñānaśākuntalam, and further into its modern and postcolonial adaptations, the study reveals how the figure of Śakuntalā has been mythopoetically reconfigured to embody diverse ideological agendas. The paper interrogates how the narrative rearticulates patriarchal and monarchical authority in classical Sanskrit aesthetics while also offering a subtle negotiation of female agency. Through feminist, postcolonial, and cultural lenses, it examines how contemporary reinterpretations – by writers such as Rabindranath Tagore, Bhasa and adaptations in Western Orientalism– transform Śakuntalā into a symbol of national identity, cultural memory, and resistance. Ultimately, the paper argues that the myth of Śakuntalā is not static but is continually remade through mythopoeisis of gender politics and nation-building across temporal and spatial registers.*

**Keywords:** mythopoeisis, gender, power, nationhood, orientalism, postcolonial.

## Śakuntalā and the Politics of Mythopoeisis: Reimagining Gender, Power and Nation through Narrative

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### Introduction

Kalidasa's *Abhijnānaśākuntalam* has witnessed an enduring afterlife through centuries of translation and reinterpretation across diverse linguistic and ideological terrains. Central to this reception is the figure of Śakuntalā, not as a fixed archetype, but as a mutable cultural signifier—continually reimagined in accordance with the aesthetic, political, and moral imperatives of each epoch. In the *Mahābhārata*, Śakuntalā appears as a resolute interlocutor who asserts agency in both her marital negotiations and royal confrontation. Kalidasa's classical Sanskrit reworking, however, transforms her into a symbol of feminine pathos and idealised fidelity—her subjectivity deferred to male recognition and redemptive memory. European Romanticism later adopted her as “Nature's child”—a pastoral emblem of sublime innocence—while colonial discourse positioned her as a metaphor for India's lost cultural vitality. Nationalist reformulations of the nineteenth century further recast Śakuntalā as the chaste *grhalakṣmī*, aligning her with the emergent Hindu bourgeois ideal of womanhood. These transhistorical shifts mark Śakuntalā as a palimpsestic figure through whom changing discourses of gender, power, and identity have been inscribed. Each translational moment refracts her anew—whether as muse, martyr, sovereign mother, or civilizational allegory—revealing how literary texts become sites of ideological contestation. This paper interrogates the myth of Śakuntalā as a locus of mythopoeisis—the ongoing (re)construction of myth in the service of cultural meaning-making. From her epic origins to Kalidasa's Gupta-era reconfiguration, through colonial translations by figures like William Jones and Monier-Williams, to contemporary feminist and postcolonial readings, Śakuntalā's image has continually mediated tensions between memory and modernity, tradition and transformation. The study contends that Kalidasa's drama enacts a courtly mythopoeia, reshaping an assertive epic heroine into a legitimising figure of royal dharma and patriarchal virtue. Later colonial adaptations enlist her into Orientalist narratives, while current reinterpretations seek to reclaim her agency, complexity, and resistance. Thus, Śakuntalā endures as a contested cultural sign—at once literary, ideological, and political—whose evolving representations illuminate the shifting terrains of power, identity, and nationhood.

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### **Theorising Mythopoeisis: A Multidimensional Practice of Meaning-Making**

Mythopoeisis—the making or remaking of myth—is a complex, interdisciplinary concept that cuts across literature, philosophy, psychoanalysis, anthropology, and cultural theory. It refers to the dynamic process through which myths are created, reconfigured, and repurposed to reflect and construct cultural meaning. In literature, J.R.R. Tolkien popularised the term, defining it as a “sub-creative” act in *On Fairy-Stories*, whereby writers fashion secondary worlds that resonate with archetypal truth. Authors like William Blake, James Joyce, and Derek Walcott have similarly engaged in mythopoeisis, reworking classical or indigenous myths to interrogate questions of identity, history, and cosmology. Structuralist approaches, notably those of Claude Lévi-Strauss, view myth as a cultural language shaped by binary oppositions (e.g., nature/culture, life/death), arguing that mythopoeisis resolves ideological contradictions through narrative form. Roland Barthes expands this further in *Mythologies*, emphasising how modern myths naturalise dominant ideologies, making mythopoeisis a key mechanism of cultural reproduction. Psychoanalytic theories, particularly those of Freud and Jung, see myths as expressions of the unconscious. For Jung, they give form to archetypes embedded in the collective unconscious; for Freud, they symbolise repressed desires. Mythopoeisis thus becomes a means of mediating psychic tension and cultural anxieties. In postcolonial contexts, mythopoeisis is a tool of resistance. Writers like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Aimé Césaire re-mythologise folklore and history to reclaim indigenous voices and challenge colonial narratives. Scholars such as Gayatri Spivak and Trinh T. Minh-ha argue that myth-making in postcolonial literature enables alternative epistemologies and liberatory imaginaries. Feminist theorists highlight how myth has historically constructed and constrained gender roles. Writers such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray advocate for *écriture féminine* (Cixous 880) as a mythopoetic act that subverts phallogocentric discourse. Feminist rewritings (e.g., Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* 2005) reimagine canonical myths to centre female agency and suppressed histories. Nation-building too is steeped in mythopoeisis. Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983) and Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) illustrate how nations are imagined through mythic symbols, rituals, and narratives that often mask recent political invention. In contemporary media, mythopoeisis extends to transmedia storytelling. As Henry Jenkins notes, myths today unfold across platforms—film, games, fanfiction—inviting participatory world-building and collective authorship. Ultimately, mythopoeisis is not merely creative—it is political. It shapes collective consciousness, sustains ideological power, and enables the articulation of alternative futures.

In the context of Śakuntalā, mythopoeisis entails selective appropriation and reinvention of narrative elements to sustain or subvert hegemonic ideologies. Roland Barthes observes, “Myth transforms history into nature” (Barthes 129) implying that myths naturalise specific socio-political orders. Kalidasa’s *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* exemplifies this transformation by transforming Vyasa’s assertive, forest-dwelling Śakuntalā into a modest, courtly heroine emblematic of Gupta ideals. The

myth of Śakuntalā exemplifies such a tradition, existing not as a fixed story but as a mobile text constantly rewritten across time and space. This paper proposes to trace how the figure of Sakuntala undergoes ideological reinvention in different eras— from the epic *Mahabharata* and Kalidasa’s classical drama to colonial translations and postcolonial rewritings. Each retelling performs a form of mythopoeisis, encoding shifting discourses of gender, kingship and cultural identity.

### **From Epic to Court-Drama: Kalidasa’s Mythopoeic Refashioning of Śakuntalā**

The evolving representations of Śakuntalā across textual traditions exemplify how mythopoeisis operates as a mode of ideological adaptation. While the story of Śakuntalā and her son Bharata is traceable to early sources such as the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, *Padma Purāṇa*, and *Kathā Sarit Sāgara*, Kalidasa’s *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* draws principally from the *Śākuntalopākhyāna* episode of the *Mahābhārata*. In the epic, Muni Vaiśampāyana recounts to Janamejaya the tale of Bharata’s birth, marking the foundational genealogy of the Kuru lineage and the symbolic origins of the nation itself. Within this lineage of epic heroines—Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari—Śakuntalā emerges not as a passive consort but as a fiercely autonomous figure. Before consenting to her union with King Duśyanta, she asserts a contractual condition: that any male heir must be recognised as the rightful successor to Hastināpura’s throne. When subsequently disavowed, Śakuntalā appears at court, accompanied by her son, and delivers an unflinching demand for justice. Her invocation of her celestial lineage (as daughter of Menakā) and her refusal to submit to abandonment destabilise patriarchal authority and foreground maternal sovereignty as an alternate locus of legitimacy. Her threat to raise her son as a *cakravartin*—a universal monarch—regardless of paternal acknowledgement, further asserts this radical vision.

Contrastingly, Duśyanta in the epic is rendered morally dubious, attempting to evade responsibility through strategic denial. Only a divine pronouncement restores familial and dynastic order, revealing the episode’s embedded critique of patriarchal erasure and moral ambivalence. Kalidasa’s *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, however, significantly recasts this narrative. As a poet in the Gupta court—an era marked by consolidated monarchy, Brahmanical orthodoxy, and the codification of *dharma*—Kalidasa transforms the epic tale into a romantic *nāṭaka* tailored to the tastes of a refined aristocracy. The egalitarian impulse of the Vedic world gives way to a courtly cosmos governed by caste hierarchies and gender norms articulated in *Manusmṛiti* and *Dharmasāstra*. To absolve the monarch of any ethical lapse, Kalidasa introduces narrative devices—the curse of Sage Durvāsas and the lost signet ring—that externalise Duśyanta’s failure as fated misfortune rather than moral choice. This absolution aligns with the Gupta ideal of kingship: divinely sanctioned, infallible, and dharmically oriented. Kalidasa’s Duśyanta is a mythopoeic idealisation. No longer a clan chief, he is “Mahārāja Adhirāja,” a sovereign infused with quasi-divine qualities. His love for Śakuntalā is framed as an ethical

attraction, ennobling her status. Even his restraint in court—refusing to gaze upon her—is presented as a dharmic virtue. The drama, thus, shifts from the confrontational moralism of the epic to the aestheticised realm of *śṛṅgāra rasa*, royal sport, and emotional refinement.

Śakuntalā, too, is transformed. Her epic assertiveness is softened into lyrical sensitivity and quiet suffering. No longer a mother demanding justice, she becomes a figure of feminine *karuṇā* and *pativrata* devotion. Kalidasa mythopoetically recasts her into the courtly ideal: emotionally disciplined, spiritually radiant, and socially compliant. Ultimately, Kalidasa’s adaptation exemplifies how mythopoeisis functions not as a passive transmission of inherited narratives but as an active reconfiguration aligned with contemporary ideological imperatives. His *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* enacts a cultural shift—from the egalitarian assertions of epic womanhood to the ornamentalized ideal of Gupta femininity—while reinforcing a vision of kingship anchored in divine ordination and moral perfection. In doing so, Kalidasa not only reimagines Śakuntalā but reconstitutes the very grammar of myth itself for the imperial court.

### **Colonial Translations: Śakuntalā and the Imperial Gaze**

The figure of Śakuntalā, once inscribed within the dharmic cosmologies and aesthetic sensibilities of classical Sanskrit drama, underwent a radical metamorphosis as she crossed into Western literary and intellectual consciousness. In this cultural migration, she was not simply translated, but transfigured—her voice, agency, and symbolic meanings rearticulated to align with the philosophical imperatives and aesthetic codes of European Romanticism and colonial ideology. Kalidasa’s *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, once steeped in the tensions between divine will, human agency, and social duty, was reimagined through the prism of the colonial and Romantic imagination, where Śakuntalā became a passive Oriental muse, aestheticised and idealised as the emblem of a lost, pure, and feminised East.

### **Jones’s “Sacontala”: Translation as Colonial Appropriation**

The seminal moment in this cross-cultural journey occurred in 1789, when Sir William Jones—jurist, philologist, and founder of the Asiatic Society—published *Sacontala or the Fatal Ring* (1789), the first English translation of a Sanskrit play. This act of translation was far from neutral. It was embedded within the larger epistemological project of the British Empire, which sought to catalogue, codify, and ultimately govern its colonial subjects through textual mastery. Translation, in this context, was a tool of empire—a means of domesticating the cultural Other while reaffirming the moral and aesthetic superiority of the West. Jones’s rendition of *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, informed by his deep fascination with Hindu mythology and Sanskrit poetics, presents the play as a window into a bygone golden age of Indian civilisation. His version, however, strategically suppresses certain elements: the eroticism is muted, the jester excised, and the sensual texture of Kalidasa’s verse is sanitised to suit British moral

sensibilities. These editorial choices reveal an ideological investment in recoding Indian antiquity into a noble yet childlike civilisation—one worthy of scholarly admiration but in need of Western moral guidance. By choosing the Bengali recension and rendering it first into Latin, then into English, Jones effectively positioned Śakuntalā as a cultural offering mediated by Western intellectual structures. His translation sparked a wave of enthusiasm across Europe, leading to over forty-six versions in twelve languages throughout the 19th century. Yet, the widespread appeal of Śakuntalā in the West did not signify a faithful engagement with the original, but rather a mythopoeic reinvention of India itself.

### **Śakuntalā and German Romanticism: Nature, Myth, and Memory**

The German Romantics embraced Śakuntalā with an intensity that surpassed their British counterparts. To them, she was not merely an exotic literary figure but a manifestation of a lost unity between humanity and nature. In 1791, Georg Forster produced a German translation of Jones's version, recasting Śakuntalā as a symbol of primordial innocence and elemental purity. Her alignment with the natural world, far removed from European industrial modernity, allowed the Romantics to project onto her an Edenic vision of humanity's uncorrupted past. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, enthralled by this vision, famously lauded Śakuntalā and echoed its aesthetic strategies in his *Vorspiel auf dem Theater*, the prologue to *Faust* (1808). Goethe's self-reflexive engagement with theatrical conventions mirrors Kalidasa's own invocation of elite spectatorship, suggesting a transhistorical dialogue between two cultural aristocracies. For Johann Gottfried Herder, Śakuntalā represented not a historical figure but a mythopoeic archetype: she evoked an enchanted worldview untouched by Enlightenment rationalism. Friedrich Schlegel, similarly, interpreted the text as a remnant of an Indian *Urzeit*—a Golden Age where spiritual nobility and emotional innocence still prevailed. Kanva's hermitage became, in this Romantic imaginary, a *locus amoenus*—a pastoral space of ecological harmony and ethical balance. In these readings, however, Śakuntalā was removed from the moral complexity of Kalidasa's drama. She was no longer a woman negotiating dharma and desire, but a figuration of idealised femininity—passive, pure, and natural. This reframing, while ostensibly celebratory, reinforced orientalist tropes that feminised and infantilised India itself, positioning it as a civilisation in need of Western cultural stewardship.

### **Sakoontala and British Colonial Pedagogy: Monier-Williams's Didactic Recasting**

The next pivotal moment in the colonial reception of Śakuntalā occurred with Sir Monier Monier-Williams's 1855 translation, *Sakoontala or the Lost Ring*. Unlike Jones's Romanticised engagement, Monier-Williams approached the text through the lens of colonial pedagogy and institutional Orientalism. As a Sanskrit professor at Haileybury and later the Boden Chair at Oxford, his work was embedded in the ideological apparatus of the British Empire, aimed at producing knowledge to govern

colonial subjects more effectively. Monier-Williams viewed *Śakuntalā* not merely as literature but as a didactic instrument—a repository of “Hindu moral sentiment.” His translation actively promoted a Hindu-centric vision of Indian civilisation, portraying it as a civilizational essence purified from the “muddy rivulets” of Islamic influence. This essentialist framing—combined with the erasure of the text’s sensual and dialogic complexity—allowed the British to position themselves as custodians of a lost Hindu antiquity. Such translations functioned dually: for British administrators, they provided cultural literacy necessary for effective governance; for Indian readers, they offered a curated and sanitised reflection of their own heritage. The 1898 edition of *Sakoontala*, published during the height of the Empire, crystallised this strategy, transforming Kalidasa’s play into a moral exemplar, a civilizational artefact, and a colonial manual. The text became both a mirror and a mask: reflecting a nostalgic image of Indian antiquity while concealing the ideological distortions of colonial power.

### **Reframing Myth, Reinventing Empire**

The Western reception of *Śakuntalā*, particularly in its British and German incarnations, reveals how mythopoeia functions not only as a mode of literary adaptation but as a strategy of cultural power. *Śakuntalā* was recast to resonate with European ideals of beauty, nature, and morality—but in doing so, she was stripped of her indigenous agency and ethical complexity. She became the “noble savage” of Sanskrit drama: a tragic figure suspended between remembrance and erasure, sublime beauty and melancholic passivity. This reimagining aligned seamlessly with the colonial project. India, feminised through the figure of *Śakuntalā*, was rendered spiritually rich but politically helpless—a civilisation waiting to be rescued from its own forgetfulness. The translations thus did not merely introduce Indian literature to the West; they encoded it with ideological assumptions that justified cultural intervention and imperial control. *Śakuntalā*’s journey from Vedic forest to European salon—from Kalidasa’s layered dramaturgy to Jones’s aesthetic curation and Monier-Williams’s civilizational manifesto—exemplifies the politics of translation under empire. What was once a narrative of agency, negotiation, and dharma became a tableau of passivity and pathos. The myth endured, but its meanings were rewritten to serve a different sovereign.

### **Nationalist Internalisations and the Censoring of Desire**

The internalisation of colonial hermeneutics is evident in Indian responses to *Śakuntalā*. In a 1893 letter, V. Padmanabha Aiyer praised the play’s moral instruction for Hindu audiences, echoing the civilizational framing imposed by British scholarship. This didactic lens was mirrored by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, one of 19th-century India’s foremost Sanskrit scholars and social reformers, who produced a Bengali edition of *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* in 1854, based on Devanagari manuscripts and Raghavabhaṭṭa’s commentary. Despite Vidyasagar’s progressive advocacy for widow remarriage and

female education, his treatment of Kalidāsa's play reflects Victorian prudery and discomfort with sensuality. Passages deemed erotically charged were either muted or excluded altogether, resulting in a version that aligned with emergent middle-class Hindu respectability. This moralising adaptation was not simply personal discretion but symptomatic of a larger cultural shift. Under the twin pressures of colonial surveillance and nationalist aspirations, Indian reformers began to articulate tradition through a lens that emphasised domesticity, chastity, and moral virtue. Vidyasagar's *Śakuntalā* thus became an ideological artefact—reshaped to reflect not the aesthetics of *rasa*, but the imperatives of social reform and cultural respectability. In effect, Vidyasagar's edition participated in the colonial project of gendered standardisation, despite his reformist credentials. Published the same year as his *Bidhobā Bibāha Prostab (Proposal for Widow Remarriage)*, his retelling of *Śakuntalā* illustrates the contradictions of liberal nationalism: it sought progress but through forms intelligible and acceptable to Victorian moral codes. The assertive *Śakuntalā* of the *Mahābhārata*, who boldly claims her place and her son's legitimacy, gives way here to a restrained figure of wifely devotion—an icon fit for the nationalist imagination.

### **Tagore's *Śakuntalā*: A Spiritual Allegory**

Rabindranath Tagore's 1907 essay, "*Śakuntalā: Its Inner Meaning*," exemplifies the nationalist re-signification of the myth. Published in *Prachin Sahitya* and later translated into English, the essay interprets *Śakuntalā*'s union with Duṣyanta as a moral fall, necessitating spiritual redemption through *tapasya* (penance). Tagore reads the play as an allegory of ethical evolution—from desire to renunciation, from sensual union to spiritual motherhood. In Tagore's hands, Kalidāsa becomes a moral philosopher, *Śakuntalā* a paragon of inner purity and redemptive suffering. While modern in tone, this reading reflects dominant nationalist ideologies that valorise feminine virtue, emotional depth, and moral endurance as pillars of Indian identity. The *Mahābhārata*'s assertive *Śakuntalā*—who publicly demands justice—is displaced by Kalidāsa's penitent *Śakuntalā*, now reframed as the spiritual mother of the nation.

### **Postcolonial Reclamation and Feminist Interventions**

In the postcolonial era, the figure of *Śakuntalā* has become a site of critical reclamation. Writers such as Nabaneeta Dev Sen, Chitra Banerjee, Divakaruni, and Anasuya Sengupta challenge both classical idealisations and colonial appropriations. Their feminist retellings restore *Śakuntalā*'s agency, voice, and corporeal presence. No longer a mute muse or domesticated ideal, she emerges as a woman navigating love, memory, and autonomy. Bharati Shivaji and V. Kaladgaran's dance-drama *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* (2000) subverts traditional performance to centre *Śakuntalā*'s subjective experience. Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) reimagines epic women—

Śakuntalā among them—as narrators of their own stories, rejecting the masculine epic gaze. These works exemplify a mythopoeic praxis of resistance: reclaiming canonical figures to contest gendered silences and rearticulate cultural meaning. As feminist scholar Kumkum Sangari notes, “Women are either erased or transformed into symbols in nationalist narratives” (*Recasting Women*, 1989). Śakuntalā has historically functioned as such a symbol—whether of classical purity, colonial enchantment, or nationalist virtue. Contemporary interventions expose these layers of inscription, treating the figure as a palimpsest shaped by empire, reform, and memory.

### **Conclusion: Sakuntala as a Living Myth**

The myth of Śakuntalā endures not due to a timeless essence, but because of its continual reinvention across shifting cultural terrains. From the epic Mahābhārata to Kalidasa’s classical idealisation, from colonial appropriations to feminist reimaginations, each retelling of Śakuntalā constitutes an act of mythopoeisis—an ideologically charged rewriting that reflects and refracts the politics of its time. This study reveals how *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* and its afterlives are not merely aesthetic artefacts but dynamic interventions into debates around gender, power, and nation. Myth-making, as shown here, is never neutral; it is a narrative strategy of world-making—capable of both legitimising authority and envisioning resistance. Śakuntalā, thus, is not a static symbol of ideal womanhood, but a cultural palimpsest through which competing ideologies continue to speak. As a living myth, Śakuntalā remains a contested and creative site where memory, identity, and power are negotiated. Her persistent re-inscription across history testifies not to the permanence of myth, but to its political plasticity—its ability to shape and be shaped by the exigencies of each historical moment.

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