

Nancy Heckel
Instructional Design Portfolio

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Annie Heckel

Professor Harper

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Love Over All: Love's Triumph over Dharma in *The Sakuntala*

In Hindu culture and belief, the idea of “dharma” or duty is an important concept that shapes the life of individuals on many levels. When viewed through the lens of an individual’s caste, it dictates what sorts of work that individual can do, as well as how the person must respond to others of higher or lower castes, something shown in *The Sakuntala* in the scene with the fisherman. In the individual’s personal life, dharma can require a person to respond in certain ways to family members or other members of society, as shown in the section of *The Ramayana* where King Dasaratha must grant Queen Kaikeyi’s request that he exile his beloved son Rama even though the exile is unfair and against Dasaratha’s wishes. When considering *The Sakuntala* and *The Ramayana* together, however, there are significant differences in the role that dharma plays in the story. Duty in the *Sakuntala* is more of backdrop in the setting of the story, an assumed quantity, and only when it is violated does it really become noticeable. Rather than the emphasis being on dharma, as it is in *The Ramayana*, the main focus of *The Sakuntala* is on love, and dharma’s influence is secondary to the power of love.

Commented [NH2]: The title is informative—giving a snapshot of major concerns of the essay—and fairly interesting.

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Early on in *The Sakuntala*, dharma is featured as a way to establish the main characters as upright and good people. Dushyanta's acquiescence to the hermits' requests, and deference to the hermits is an example of this (Kalidasa 379-382). Dushyanta's honorable response to the hermits, who as priests are of a higher social status than Dushyanta, can be seen as a manifestation of dharma because it shows Dushyanta knows and respects his place in the caste system. This knowledge and respect of the caste system is also shown in Dushyanta's wish that Sakuntala might be "sprung from a caste different from that of the Head of the hermitage" (Kalidasa 384); cross-caste marriages are not considered appropriate, and Dushyanta hopes that dharma will not prevent their union. He knows that if Sakuntala is of the same caste as Kanwa, the head of the hermitage, then Dushyanta, being of a different caste, cannot marry Sakuntala without violating social restrictions, something he is not willing to do.

Another manifestation of dharma in *The Sakuntala* is shown through the importance of Sakuntala's proper observance of the rites of hospitality. Correct adherence to rites of hospitality is shown on p. 386, when Sakuntala and her attendants are careful to offer Dushyanta the appropriate greetings and actions of welcome. However, later on in the play, it is these same rites that become the main cause of conflict when they are not observed. Sakuntala is daydreaming of Dushyanta, and therefore the duty of respectful greeting owed to Durvasas is neglected, causing Durvasas to utter the curse that makes Dushyanta forget Sakuntala:

He, even he of whom thou thinkest, he
 Shall think no more of thee; nor in his heart
 Retain thine image. Vainly shalt thou strive
 To waken his remembrance of the past;
 He shall disown thee, even as the sot,

Commented [NH4]: This sentence is a good example of a summary—notes that it's just one sentence, but it references several pages of the play.

Commented [NH5]: This is a well-integrated and correctly marked quotation; notes the signal phrase leading into the quotation and quotation marks around the quoted passage. The quotation is also followed by discussion that helps readers to understand why it's significant in light of the essay's main argument.

Roused from his midnight drunkenness, denies

The words he uttered in his revellings. (Kalidasa 415)

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Durvasas' curse here specifically focuses on the object of Sakuntala's daydream—it is an “eye for an eye” kind of punishment that could be considered “instant karma” for her neglect of duty. Love has caused duty to be forgotten, so in order to enforce the importance of duty, love must be forgotten in turn.

This “eye for an eye” curse for violating dharma might seem to indicate that duty is considered more important than love since at this point in the play, neglect of duty causes love to be lost. Love, however, and the romantic relationship between Dushyanta and Sakuntala, triumph in the end; duty becomes just an agent used to add the conflict that drives the plot. In the conflict between love and duty, love ends up winning out; Durvasas, being somewhat mollified by Priyamvada, is willing to provide a way for his curse to be broken, even though Sakuntala never actually rouses *herself* to greet him or beg forgiveness.

In the *Ramayana*, by contrast, duty seems to be a much stronger theme; it is duty, not love, that drives the characters themselves the most, and duty will even interfere with the motivations driven by love, as is the case with Dasaratha's constraint by duty to Queen Kaikeyi when he is forced to exile his beloved son Rama. If duty were not paramount, Dasaratha would not give in to what he knows to be Kaikeyi's jealousy—his love and respect for Rama would instead win. However, because Dasaratha has made an oath to grant Kaikeyi's request, he is forced by his duty to fulfill his word to do something repugnant to him and his love for his son. Similarly, the problems with Rama and Sita's relationships after each time she has been kidnapped show this issue of duty winning over love. Where in a love-focused story the expected theme might be that “love conquers all” and Rama would have faith that Sita was pure, here

Sita must instead fulfill the demands of duty and prove her purity. By contrast, in *Sakuntala*, love is the primary motivation, driver of action, and ideal. In the end, Sakuntala does not have to prove her purity; it is instead Dushyanta must prove his love, as the audience eavesdrops on his lamentations along with the nymph Sanumati in Act VI (Kalidasa 446-460). Dushyanta's lovesick behavior and his subsequent obedience to the gods are what prove him worthy of recovering his lost wife and meeting his superhuman son.

All in all, love is the focus in *Sakuntala*, and while dharma has a place, it is more as a backdrop than as a central theme. When reading *The Sakuntala* in conjunction with *The Ramayana*, where dharma is the main theme, it is very clear how small a role dharma and karma play in the story of Dushyanta and Sakuntala. Though duty drives the action of *The Sakuntala* and helps to show the audience what the characters are like, love is the main theme and the final triumphant force of the play.

Works Cited

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Kalidasa. *The Sakuntala*. Trans. Sir Monier Monier-Williams. *World Literature Through the Renaissance*. Ed. William Overton and Linda Silva. Vol. 2. Charles Town, WV: APUS E-Press, 2011. 375-480. Web. 5 September 2011.

Commented [NH8]: Note the hanging indentation—the second and subsequent lines are indented 1 inch from the left margin.

Valmiki. *The Ramayana*. Trans. Romesh C. Dutt. *World Literature Through the Renaissance*. Ed. William Overton and Linda Silva. Vol. 2. Charles Town, WV: APUS E-Press, 2011. 323-372. Web. 5 September 2011.