

Reimagining Human–Nature Relations in Kalidasa’s Abhijnanashakuntalam: An Ecocritical Study

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Abstract

The paper considers human–nature relations in Kalidasa’s *Abhijnanashakuntalam* through an ecocritical reading. While the play is widely admired for its literary richness, its engagement with nature has often received less attention than its literary and aesthetic achievements. Through a close reading of the play, the paper examines how forests, animals, rivers, and seasonal rhythms shape the dramatic world of the play. Nature becomes an integral part of the narrative, shaping human experience, values, and relationship that influences emotions, conduct, and social life. The hermitage portrays a community sustained by mutual care and a respectful relationship with the surrounding environment. The play also challenges human-centred views by emphasizing the mutual dependence of human and non-human life. Its ecological insights continue to enrich contemporary discussions on responsibility, coexistence, and the future of human–nature relations.

Keywords: Ecocriticism; Kalidasa; *Abhijnanashakuntalam*; Human–Nature Relations; Environmental Ethics.

1. Introduction

In recent years, growing environmental concerns have encouraged scholars to rethink the ways literature represents the relationship between human beings and the natural world. Issues such as climate change, ecological degradation, biodiversity loss, and unsustainable patterns of development have drawn attention to the cultural and ethical dimensions of environmental crises. As a result, the field of environmental humanities has emerged as an important space for examining how literary and cultural texts shape ecological awareness and environmental values (Heise 3). Within this broader intellectual context, ecocriticism has become a significant critical approach that explores the connections between literature, culture, and the environment (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii).

Although ecocritical scholarship has expanded considerably, much of its attention has remained focused on modern and contemporary texts. Classical literary traditions, particularly those outside the Western canon, have received comparatively less attention from ecological perspectives. Sanskrit literature, however, offers rich possibilities for such inquiry. Its narratives frequently portray forests, rivers, animals, and seasonal rhythms not merely as elements of setting but as meaningful participants in human experience.

Among the most celebrated works of classical Sanskrit literature, *Abhijnanashakuntalam* occupies a distinctive place. Written by Kalidasa, the play has long been admired for its poetic elegance, emotional depth, and dramatic artistry (Keith 214). Much of the existing scholarship has concentrated on its aesthetic qualities, romantic narrative, and rasa-based

interpretations. While these approaches have contributed significantly to the understanding of the text, they often leave its ecological dimensions in the background.

A closer engagement with the play reveals a different possibility. Nature in *Abhijnanashakuntalam* is not simply a scenic backdrop against which human events unfold. The forest hermitage, animals, trees, rivers, and changing seasons actively shape the experiences, relationships, and ethical choices of the characters. Human life unfolds in constant interaction with the surrounding environment. This interconnectedness suggests a vision in which the well-being of people and the well-being of nature are closely linked.

The present study approaches *Abhijnanashakuntalam* through an ecocritical lens to explore how the play represents human–nature relationships. Particular attention is given to the forest hermitage as an ecological space sustained through coexistence, care, and mutual responsibility. By examining the interactions between human and non-human life, the study seeks to uncover the environmental consciousness embedded within the text. In doing so, it highlights the continuing relevance of Kalidasa’s ecological imagination for contemporary discussions of environmental ethics and sustainable living.

2. Objectives of the Study

This study explores the relationship between human life and the natural world in Kalidasa’s *Abhijnanashakuntalam*.

Particular attention is given to the forest hermitage as a space shaped by coexistence, care, and environmental responsibility.

The research investigates how animals, plants, rivers, and seasonal cycles contribute to the play’s ecological vision.

Another objective is to understand how nature influences human values and relationships within the narrative.

Through an ecocritical perspective, the study uncovers the environmental consciousness embedded in the text.

The relevance of these ecological insights to contemporary environmental discussions is also considered.

3. Literature Review

Scholarly interest in Kalidasa’s *Abhijnanashakuntalam* spans more than a century. Much of this work has focused on the play’s poetic elegance, dramatic structure, emotional depth, and its portrayal of love and separation. Keith, for instance, regards it as one of the most accomplished works of Sanskrit drama and draws attention to its artistic harmony and aesthetic sophistication (214). While such studies have enriched our understanding of the text, they have generally paid less attention to its ecological dimensions.

The development of ecocriticism created new possibilities for literary interpretation. Rather than treating nature as a decorative backdrop, ecocritical scholars began to examine how texts imagine relationships between humans and the physical environment. Glotfelty’s influential definition of ecocriticism foregrounds this connection and encourages readers to consider environmental concerns as central to literary analysis (xviii). Buell extends this discussion by arguing that environmentally oriented texts often present the non-human world as an active presence within the narrative rather than a passive setting (7).

Recent developments have further broadened the field. Iovino and Oppermann emphasize the interconnected nature of human and non-human existence, drawing attention to the material relationships that link ecological and social worlds (2). Such perspectives have encouraged more relational approaches to literary study. Even so, classical Sanskrit literature remains relatively underrepresented within contemporary ecocritical scholarship.

Environmental humanities scholars have similarly highlighted the role of culture, imagination, and ethics in shaping ecological understanding. Heise argues that environmental thought is inseparable from broader cultural narratives and value systems (56). These insights open productive ways of reading premodern texts, including those that imagine close relationships between human communities and the natural world.

Plumwood's critique of anthropocentrism offers another important perspective. By questioning rigid divisions between humans and nature, she foregrounds interdependence and ecological reciprocity (41). Such ideas resonate strongly with Kalidasa's portrayal of the forest hermitage, where everyday life unfolds through continuous interaction with animals, plants, and seasonal cycles.

A small but growing body of recent scholarship has begun to address these concerns directly. Bhusal explores the agency of trees in *Abhijnanashakuntalam* through the lens of plant humanities and shows how the natural world participates actively in the play's ecological imagination (Bhusal). Likewise, Attri, Singh, and Mathur examine ecology and landscape in Indian classical drama, emphasizing the role of natural spaces in shaping meaning and ecological values (Attri et al.).

Despite these contributions, sustained ecocritical studies of *Abhijnanashakuntalam* remain limited. Existing scholarship often acknowledges the beauty of Kalidasa's natural descriptions but gives less attention to their broader ecological significance. This study builds on emerging conversations by examining how the play imagines human–nature relationships through interconnectedness, reciprocity, and ecological responsibility.

4. Research Gap

Although *Abhijnanashakuntalam* has attracted considerable scholarly attention, most studies have focused on its poetic beauty, dramatic structure, symbolism, and romantic themes. The ecological dimensions of the play have received far less sustained attention. As Keith observes, critical discussions have largely emphasized its literary and aesthetic achievements rather than its environmental significance (214).

The growth of ecocriticism has opened new ways of reading literary texts. Glotfelty and Fromm foreground the relationship between literature and the physical environment (xviii), while Buell emphasizes the active presence of the non-human world in literary representation (7). More recent work by Iovino and Oppermann further expands these discussions by drawing attention to the interconnected material realities of human and ecological life (2). Yet these perspectives have seldom been applied in depth to Kalidasa's dramatic works.

Environmental humanities scholarship has also highlighted the role of culture, ethics, and imagination in shaping ecological understanding. Heise argues that environmental thought is inseparable from broader cultural narratives (56). Despite these developments, classical Sanskrit literature remains relatively marginal within contemporary ecocritical debates.

Recent studies have begun to address this gap. Khanal's ecofeminist reading explores the relationship between women and nature in Abhijnanashakuntalam and demonstrates the interconnectedness of Shakuntala and the natural world (Khanal). Although the study sheds light on gender-nature relationships, the play's larger environmental vision receives less sustained attention.

Consequently, there remains a need for a focused ecocritical reading that foregrounds environmental relationships, ecological ethics, and human-nature interdependence. By revisiting the play through ecological perspectives, this study brings its environmental concerns into sharper focus.

5. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach informed by ecocriticism, environmental humanities, and literary analysis. It reads Abhijnanashakuntalam as a text that offers valuable insights into the relationship between human life and the natural world.

The analysis is based on close reading of the play. Particular attention is given to the forest hermitage, animals, rivers, trees, seasonal cycles, and ascetic life. Rather than treating these elements as background details, the study examines how they contribute to the play's ecological vision and ethical concerns.

The research draws on key ecocritical perspectives. Glotfelty's understanding of ecocriticism provides the foundation for examining the connection between literature and the environment (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii). Insights from Buell and Garrard further support the analysis of environmental representation and ecological imagination (Buell 7; Garrard 5). Plumwood's critique of anthropocentric thinking helps illuminate the play's emphasis on interconnected life and respect for the non-human world (Plumwood 41).

The study also engages with Indian ecological thought. Shiva's reflections on interdependence, ecological balance, and environmental responsibility offer a useful framework for understanding the ethical values embedded in the hermitage (Shiva 23).

Ecological hermeneutics serves as the primary interpretive lens. The hermitage is viewed as a space where spiritual practice, ethical conduct, and environmental responsibility come together. Through this approach, the study highlights ideas of care, coexistence, restraint, and mutual dependence that shape the play's ecological imagination.

The research is analytical rather than empirical. It offers a theoretically informed reading of Abhijnanashakuntalam and contributes to ongoing discussions in ecocriticism, environmental humanities, and Sanskrit literary studies.

6. Theoretical Framework

This study approaches Abhijnanashakuntalam through an interdisciplinary framework that brings together ecocriticism, environmental humanities, sacred ecology, and Indian ecological thought. Such a perspective is particularly relevant because the play presents nature as an integral part of human life rather than a passive backdrop. Across the play, human engagement with the environment shapes emotional life, moral responsibility, and spiritual reflection.

Ecocriticism provides the primary theoretical foundation. Glotfelty views ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii). This perspective enables a reading of *Abhijanashakuntalam* that foregrounds ecological interconnectedness and moves beyond strictly human-centered interpretations. The forest hermitage functions as more than a setting; it becomes a space where environmental values guide everyday life.

Buell further suggests that nature in literature often participates in the narrative itself, rather than remaining a silent background to human experience (Buell 7).

In Kalidasa's play, forests, animals, plants, and seasonal rhythms influence both action and meaning. Nature participates in the moral and emotional life of the narrative.

The framework also benefits from environmental humanities, which explore how environmental issues intersect with culture, ethics, and human values. This perspective encourages attention to how literary texts imagine relationships between humans and the natural world.

Sacred ecology provides another important dimension. The hermitage reflects a way of life shaped by care, restraint, and respect for interconnected existence.

Plumwood's critique of anthropocentrism further informs the analysis. She contends that ecological crises are reinforced by ways of thinking that separate humans from nature and legitimize domination over the non-human world (Plumwood 41). The play offers an alternative vision grounded in connection rather than separation.

Indian ecological philosophy complements these perspectives through its emphasis on coexistence, moderation, non-violence, and respect for life. Together, these approaches provide a framework for understanding *Abhijanashakuntalam* as a literary expression of ecological awareness, ethical responsibility, and human–nature interconnectedness.

7. Ecological Interconnectedness and Environmental Ethics in *Abhijanashakuntalam*

In *Abhijanashakuntalam*, human life takes shape through its relationship with the natural world. The forest hermitage is not merely a dramatic setting. It functions as a living ecological space where ethical conduct, spiritual discipline, and environmental awareness come together. Human life unfolds alongside animals, trees, rivers, and seasonal rhythms. The boundaries between human and non-human existence remain fluid, creating a vision of interconnected life grounded in care and mutual dependence.

This ecological vision reflects what ecocriticism identifies as the close relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii). The hermitage thrives through restraint rather than control. Its inhabitants do not seek mastery over nature. Instead, they adapt themselves to ecological rhythms and recognize their place within a larger community of life. Such a perspective challenges anthropocentric assumptions and foregrounds coexistence as an ethical principle.

Kanva's role is especially significant in this regard. His relationship with the forest is shaped by responsibility rather than ownership. Authority within the hermitage emerges through care, protection, and stewardship. Ecological responsibility therefore appears not as an external obligation but as a way of life closely tied to spiritual practice.

Nature in the play also performs functions that extend beyond aesthetic description. Kalidasa's landscapes carry emotional, ethical, and symbolic significance. The forest shapes

character formation, social relationships, and moral understanding. Shakuntala's identity develops within an environment where daily interactions with plants, animals, and seasonal changes foster a deep sense of belonging (Kalidasa Act 1). Her departure from the hermitage consequently represents more than physical separation. It marks a disruption of ecological and emotional continuity (Kalidasa, Act 4).

Buell argues that environmentally oriented texts often portray the non-human world as an active presence within the narrative rather than a passive backdrop (Buell 7). Kalidasa's dramatic imagination reflects this principle. Forests, rivers, animals, and changing seasons participate in the movement of the story. They influence emotional experience and contribute to the ethical texture of the narrative.

The play repeatedly portrays human life as closely connected with forests, animals, rivers, and seasonal rhythms (Kalidasa, Act 1-4). One of the clearest moments occurs when Dushyanta enters the forest in pursuit of a deer. The ascetics intervene immediately, reminding him that the animals of the hermitage deserve protection (Kalidasa, Act 1). The episode contrasts royal authority with an ethic of ecological care. The deer is not treated as property or prey. It is acknowledged as a living being worthy of moral consideration.

Plants occupy a similarly important position. Shakuntala's affection for trees and flowering plants reflects a relationship built on reciprocity rather than utility. These moments reveal an understanding that human well-being is inseparable from ecological well-being. Garrard notes that ecocriticism encourages renewed ways of thinking about human-nature relationships (Garrard 5). Kalidasa's representation of the forest exemplifies such a reorientation.

Seasonal cycles further reinforce this ecological interconnectedness. Changes in the environment often parallel shifts in emotional experience and narrative development. Rivers symbolize continuity and renewal, while forests provide both shelter and ethical guidance.

The natural world is woven into everyday life, affecting how characters think, act, and relate to one another. The ecological vision of the play is closely linked to ascetic consciousness. Ascetic life is not portrayed as withdrawal from the world. Instead, it embodies an ethic of moderation, responsibility, and respect for all forms of life. The inhabitants of the hermitage engage actively with their surroundings through protection, care, and stewardship. Their daily practices reflect environmental values grounded in restraint rather than domination.

This perspective resonates with Plumwood's critique of anthropocentric thinking. She argues that ecological crises emerge from forms of reasoning that separate humans from nature and justify domination over the non-human world (Plumwood 41). *Abhijanashakuntalam* offers an alternative vision. Human fulfillment arises through connection, reciprocity, and ecological balance rather than control.

Written centuries ago, the play nonetheless engages ideas that remain strikingly relevant to contemporary environmental thought. The contrast between the forest hermitage and the royal court is especially revealing. Life in the hermitage is shaped by cooperation, care, and shared responsibility, while the royal court operates through hierarchy and separation. Through this contrast, Kalidasa suggests that ecological well-being depends upon sustaining relationships of care and interdependence.

Ultimately, *Abhijanashakuntalam* presents an ecological ethic grounded in responsibility, moderation, and respect for life. The play reminds readers that human flourishing cannot be

separated from the well-being of the larger ecological community. Its vision of interconnected existence remains relevant to contemporary discussions on environmental ethics and sustainable coexistence.

8. Conclusion

An ecocritical reading of *Abhijnanashakuntalam* reveals a vision of life grounded in connection rather than separation. Nature in the play is far more than a setting. It shapes emotions, values, relationships, and everyday experience. The forest hermitage emerges as a space where care, restraint, and coexistence guide human conduct, creating a way of life rooted in ecological awareness.

The analysis highlights the close relationship between human and non-human existence. Shakuntala's bond with the natural world reflects a form of belonging that extends beyond social identity. Her movement away from the hermitage marks not only a change of place but also a shift in ecological and emotional experience. Through such moments, Kalidasa challenges human-centred perspectives and presents life as part of a wider network of interdependent relationships.

The contrast between the hermitage and the royal court brings this ecological vision in to sharper focus. One values reciprocity and balance; the other reflects distance from the natural world.

At its core, *Abhijnanashakuntalam* offers an enduring reflection on coexistence and environmental responsibility. Its ecological insights remain meaningful today, reminding readers that human well-being is inseparable from the well-being of the larger world we inhabit.

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