



Literary Reception of Kalidas in Mohan Rakesh's 'Ashadh Ka Ek Din'

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Abstract— The paper uses Hans Robert Jauss' reception theory to trace the literary relation between Kalidas' *Abhijnanashakuntalam* with Mohan Rakesh's *Ashadh Ka Ek Din*. It analyses the reception of Kalidas' works and legacy in Rakesh's play and draws out the implications of this literary reception. It points to the rewriting of the common trope of love, remembrance and forgetting by Rakesh that subtends artistic creation itself. This rewriting amounts to a critical reading of Kalidas by Mohan Rakesh and underscores his own views on modernity and tradition. The paper shows that his approach transcends the binary—that either reveres tradition or rejects it— instead, proposing a critical rereading of tradition that makes it productive and alive again. Through tracing the diachronic and synchronic reception, the paper draws out the aesthetic experience of Mohan Rakesh's play by situating it in the horizon of expectations of its time and its historical relevance.



Keywords— Kalidas, Mohan Rakesh, literary reception, tradition, modernity

This paper sheds light on the rewriting of the figure of Kalidas by Mohan Rakesh in his play, *Ashadh Ka Ek Din*. Implicated in this rewriting is the emergence of a newer horizon of expectation for the relation of modernity and tradition. This paper shows how Rakesh's play attempts to reconceptualize this relation from being steeped in antagonistic binaries to that of creative productivity. In order to bring out the productive capacity of Mohan Rakesh's *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* in setting a new horizon of expectation for Kalidas' works as well as tradition, Hans Robert Jauss' theory of literary history and reception will be utilised. This will be done through reading Mohan Rakesh's play, *Ashadh Ka Ek Din*, in its literary relation to Kalidas's play, *Abhijnanashakuntalam* wherein a discussion of common elements between both works would be the focus.

Jauss talks about the notion of "aesthetic distance" by which we can determine the artistic nature of the literary work by reconstructing the horizon of expectation of the audience. He defines it as:

the distance between the given horizon of expectations and the appearance of a new

work, whose reception results in a "horizon change" because it negates a familiar experience or articulates an experience for the first time. (Jauss 14)

It is through this horizon change that the analysis of literary effect can be contextualised in its historical dimension. In simple words, the way the text was constructed, keeping in mind a certain horizon of expectation, and the way that the audience reacts to that new work leading to the horizon change helps us establish the historical experience via the aesthetics of its reception. This horizon change leads to a progressive understanding of the tradition. The "tradition" is made to live again by its mediation in the productive moment of the new work. To understand the historical relevance of this, Jauss proposes three ways (23):

1. Diachronically in the relationship of literary works based upon reception
2. Synchronically within the frame of reference of literature of the same period as well as in the sequence of such frames of reference

3. The relationship of the immanent literary development to the general process of history

I will try to contextualise each of these through the example of Mohan Rakesh's play, *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* as it dialogues with Kalidas and specifically a certain trope from *Abhijnanashakuntalam* that Rakesh critically rewrites. Also of the essence is the fact that these three ways are not necessarily exclusive but interrelated. Thus, the discussion of one would necessarily shed light as well as gain from the other.

In dealing with diachronic reception, it is imperative for us to keep in mind the concept of aesthetic distance mentioned above. It has to do with how the reader of that day viewed and understood the work. This means contending with the "questions" that the literary text is "answering" and the unacceptance of that answer due to a certain horizon of expectation of the audience and the resulting horizon change. In a sense, this follows the principle of literary evolution of the formalists but situates the aesthetic at the level of historical experience. Also, literary evolution despite its name is not concerned with any teleology but rather newness which Jauss, going beyond the formalists, considers not just as an aesthetic category but as a historical one. In understanding this newness as a historical category, the questions that need to be kept in mind include— "which historical forces make the literary work new; to what degree this newness is recognizable in the historical moment of its appearance; what distance, route or circumlocution of understanding were required for its full realisation; whether the moment of this realisation was so effective that it could change the perspective of the old and thereby the canonization of the literary past" (Jauss 27).

In order to understand the question in the context of Mohan Rakesh's play, we need to pay attention to the newness and to the question to which this newness was the answer. Rakesh's play takes the figure of the Sanskrit playwright Kalidas as well as his process of creation and creates a complex image of it in his fictionalised narrative. This narrative clearly borrows from that of Kalidas's own plays in general and *Abhijnanashakuntalam* in particular. Although the title of Rakesh's play is borrowed from a line from one of the lyric poems by Kalidas, *Meghdootam*, the plot starkly resonates with that of *Abhijnanashakuntalam*. Kalidas's play was adapted from an episode of the epic *Mahabharata* but had made an important alteration to it. Where in the epic, the king had not forgotten Shakuntala but acted like he did until a divine voice confirmed that the son Shakuntala was carrying, was actually his own; in Kalidas's version, it is sage Durvasa's curse upon Shakuntala that makes the king forget her. While there are various critiques

and interpretations of this alteration by Kalidas— Tagore and Thapar being the prominent ones— our focus would only be on those aspects which pertain to Rakesh's rewriting of this trope. The trope is that of the romantic hero, first enamoured by the heroine, then forgetting and forsaking her, and then remembering her again, and getting united. Romilla Thapar in her commentary on Kalidas's play points out how sage Durvasa's curse introduced by Kalidas absolves the male protagonist of the guilt and responsibility of forsaking his lover. It is this absolution that Rakesh takes away in his play. However, it is not limited to that. Kalidas's play while dealing with themes of courtly life of conceit and aggression in contrast to the simple life of nature or city against village, is also and much more significantly about love and the implication of forgetting and remembering for love. The play, after all, is titled *Abhijnanashakuntalam* meaning 'The Recognition of Shakuntala.' Various elements in the play function to fix remembrances of love— the king's ring, the painting of Shakuntala, etc. makes the act of love entangled with the objects of remembrance that serves not just the purpose of memory but also crucially, identity. It is this intermixing of love, memory and identity and the manifestation of these relations into objects of remembrance that gets newly framed in Rakesh's play. This can be seen through the fact that the manuscripts of Kalidas's plays themselves become the objects of remembrance and love through which Kalidas inscribes Mallika's memory, as well as his love for her, in his writing and Mallika fills the void of Kalidas's presence through religiously reading his plays.

By now we can establish the "problem" (in Jauss' terms) that Rakesh is answering and raising further questions on is that of forgetting and remembering— of memory, of love and identity. However, by making Kalidas the protagonist of the play, he is also attaching these questions to the question of artistic creation as well as of modernity's relation to tradition. These are the historical forces that animate the world of Rakesh— it is a world defined through binarical approaches that either tend towards a revivalist urge that denies modernity or that of accepting modernity blindly. Rakesh through his play breaks apart with both approaches. While sustaining the various oppositional themes from Kalidas's play, Rakesh makes various important changes. One is obviously of the artist. Kalidas takes the place of the noble and where in Kalidas's *Abhijnanashakuntalam*, the king is the deer hunter in the beginning; Kalidas (in Rakesh's play) is the deer saviour (saving it, in fact, from the courtly official himself who had come to offer Kalidas a position at court). Yet the most crucial change is in the perspective of the play— we see the whole trope of love, forgetting and remembering as it plays out for Mallika, Kalidas's lover,

rather than Kalidas. There is no curse to absolve the male protagonist— Kalidas— in Rakesh's play either, therefore, he is not absolved from the guilt and responsibility of abandonment. It is in this recontextualization of the effects of forgetting and remembering of love that we see the new figure of Kalidas. While Mallika sustains the fantasy of the romantic hero just as the plot of Kalidas's play makes the audience sustain it, we see the decrepitude that surrounds Mallika as a bleak contrast to the fantasy sustained by Kalidas's plays, the audience and Mallika herself too. In fact, Mallika throughout the play deals with her forsakenness as well as her distance from Kalidas by somehow getting hold of Kalidas's 'great' poetic creations. She reads them avidly and they serve as her connection to the memory of Kalidas (or more accurately, Kalidas of her imagination). The play then offers a counter-reading of Kalidas's plays in itself. As Kalidas confesses that the source of all his poetic creations was the experience of love that he had with Mallika before he left for court, we see how the turning of this forgetting and remembering and the accompanying pain into the beautiful poetic creations hides the emotional violence of its experience. Crucially, we see this not through the life of the 'successful' artist but through the suffering of his 'object' of love and poetry. Rakesh's play complicates not just the process of creation in this way but also complicates the relation of love, memory and identity through the object of remembrance. Kalidas's 'plays' in Rakesh's play serve as such objects in which not just the memory of Kalidas and Mallika's love is inscribed but also for both of them, they serve as a means of fixing each other's identity through the transfixed memory. Where Mallika sustains her memory of Kalidas as the romantic hero as well as the great poet, Kalidas too sustains the memory of the village, of Mallika's house and of Mallika's identity bound in the memory of his love. It is as if he is unable to realise the bearing of time, the passing of the life of Mallika. As the play ends, there is no union precisely because of this disjuncture. There is remembering and recognition but no union because Rakesh foregrounds the futility of recognition that is stuck with the memory that is already past and the inability to accept the changed identity in the present while imagining a future based on an idealised past made atemporal. Kalidas confesses all his guilt, and his angst yet remains stuck in the fallacy I mentioned above. While he changed so much and much for the worse, he imagines Mallika to be living in an atemporal world. He is taken aback by the decrepitude fallen on Mallika's house. He recognizes the pain he has caused Mallika yet is unable to imagine Mallika's life having moved ahead without him while his own had done the same without Mallika. As he hopes to reproduce that experience of love, to go back to their union again, he hears a baby cry in the back, and

unable to accept but forced to, he realises Mallika has married and has a family. He realises that time does not wait and that what is gone cannot be revived.

It was in this portrayal of Kalidas that the aesthetic distance manifested itself. Writing in his diary on 29 September 1959, a year after having published his play, Rakesh mentions:

Now the play producers are running down the play precisely on the basis that Babu Sampurnanand in Lucknow denied staging the play because he had been told Kalidas is shown in an inferior light in the play. (Rakesh 106, *English translation mine*)

The futility of recognition, that I describe above, not just critically reconceptualises and questions the relation of love, memory and identity, of objects of remembrance, of the process of creation, of the undermining of the experiential in the poetic; but also the relation of modernity with tradition. In contrast to the reverent frame of reference that others at the time put Kalidas in, Rakesh was interested in a much more critical reading of 'Kalidas' and by extension, of tradition too. It was in this critical reading itself that Rakesh defined tradition for himself, not in revival or denial but in creative remediation.

This kind of relation with tradition for Rakesh then was already modern because, unlike the revivalist reverence, it had the possibility of redefinition by way of question, negation or recreation. While the above points to the synchronic frame of reference, the third thing that Jauss focuses on— the relationship of the immanent literary development to the general process of history— can be read in the horizon change in relation to tradition that Rakesh's play brings about. For him, this also serves as the basis for imagining literature in relation to history. As he puts it:

History collects facts and presents them in temporal sequence. This has never been the aim of literature. Nor does literature aspire to fill in the blank spaces of history. Literature is not bound by the time of history, it enlarges the span of history in time; it does not separate one era from another, but joins many eras close together. In this way, the 'today' and 'yesterday' of history do not remain the same for literature. They somehow become such conjoined moments in the limitlessness of time that they are inseparable in view of indicating a direction for life. (as qtd. in Sawhney 310)

While history's task was of reality, literature for Rakesh, as did tradition, concerns itself with possibility. Therefore, we see the place of the literary work in literary history and tradition can be better understood as an 'event' than an inevitable fact written in most of the positivistic accounts of literary history. By putting a logic of inevitability to the literary work, most positivistic accounts prescribe cause and effects which discount the productive capacity of the literary event. In contrast, focussing on its productive capacity, the fecundity of its experience allows us to understand the historical significance of a literary text. This is done by tracing the history of its receptions i.e. through a process of "continuous horizon setting and horizon changing" that determines the successive literary experiences of a text from the point of its creation by the writer (Jauss 13). This paper has attempted to illustrate this by reading the figure of Kalidas through Mohan Rakesh's *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* with all the questions that it raises and some of the answers that it provides.

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