

Narratives and the
Making of History

Two Lectures

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Lecture One

Śakuntalā:

Histories of a Narrative

The manner in which we construct the past is now acknowledged as an important process in the writing of history. This involves appropriating the past, an act in which the concerns of the present are apparent. Historical sources are used to construct a link between an event in the past and how we view it today. I would like to argue that there are in addition many representations of an event between the point at which it happened and the present, and that these representations are significant to the eventual understanding of the past. Such representations in the form of a narrative may either be fictional or may claim to embody an event, but in both cases they address themselves to a historical moment. This brings the relationship between narrative and history to the forefront.

In the first lecture I will be looking at this relationship through the different versions of a fictionalized narrative, illustrating my argument with the story of Śakuntalā in its variant forms. Does the retelling of the same narrative help our understanding of historical change in as much as the retelling reflects change in both

society and ideology? Can we treat the act of narrativization or the making of a narrative, as constituting an event? Every narrative has a context which is consciously or subconsciously derived from a world view and an ideology. Let me hastily add however, that this is not to authenticate a story as history, for a story remains fictional. But it can reveal perspectives of a time and a society. I am suggesting that it be analysed as representing such a perspective, which emerges all the more clearly through a comparison of its retellings. A fictionalized narrative cannot be treated as history but it can be an indicator of a past condition. What I am arguing for is the analysis of narratives which become constituents of a historical perception and have therefore a contextual location.

A narrative can have its own biography and the changes it manifests can provide us with a view of historical change. By historical change I do not mean just chronology but rather, the manifold dimensions of the historical context. A narrative frequently recreated over time becomes multi-layered like a palimpsest. One can attempt to reveal the many pasts which went into the making of its present. Where the retellings of a narrative or where narratives implying an event, become contesting versions, the differing perspectives also provide evidence for historical constructions. In my second lecture I shall be discussing the many representations of a well-known event — the raid of Mahmud of Ghazni on the temple of Somanātha in 1026 — to see how the event is viewed from various perspectives. The second lecture is therefore in some ways an inversion of the first. The subject matter of the two lectures is not linked, but there is a methodological link in seeing the relationship of narrative to history.

This relationship has been the subject of lively discussion among historians. Best known perhaps was the discussion between Lawrence Stone on the revival of narrative in history and its critique by Eric Hobsbawm, published in the 1980s in the British

historical journal, *Past and Present*. The discussions focused largely on whether there was a shift away from social and economic history, drawing on the disciplines of the social sciences, towards directing attention to language, culture and ideas and a focus on micro-events. Was this a new way of viewing the structures of the story and of society? The suggested duality was found to be untenable since there was a considerable over-lap in both sources and interpretations. Even narrative history as it has developed in recent times, was not just a bald telling of a story. The new use of narrative incorporated analytical history and the analyses of the micro-event illumined the macro generalization.

The discussion has taken a different form in this decade with the introduction of what has been termed 'the linguistic turn'.¹ Some have stated that history as a discipline has no future given the kind of analyses of narrative which are possible. History in this argument becomes a kind of *pointillist* history — rather like the style of painting — a collection of unconnected dots which taken together compose a picture. Historians have reacted with the logical argument that even these dots have to be contextualized as indeed does the picture itself. However significant the understanding of the fragments may be, history attempts to look at the larger whole. What 'the linguistic turn' has done is to make historians more aware of the nuances of language and words, which far from terminating historical investigation, have added to its precision.

The writing of history has had a continuous interface with literature. Historians have culled literature for information on what may have happened in the past, the statements being juxtaposed with other kinds of evidence. This is a legitimate activity. I would however suggest a sharpening of this interface by changing the

¹ R.J. Evans, *In Defence of History*, London, 1997.

focus somewhat, by searching for the historical perspectives which this interface provides, through examining the representations present in the narrative. The same narrative or approximately the same, can occur in variant forms as different genres of literature — in this case, the story of Śakuntalā in the *Mahābhārata*, the play of Kālidāsa, the prose-poem in Braja-*bhāṣā*. From a different perspective but with a bearing on the narrative, are the many translations of the Kālidāsa play where the act of translation in itself becomes a cultural negotiation, and there is also the commentary in the form of an essay by Rabindranath Tagore. These are significant moments in the biography of a narrative.

But there is more that just an interface between literature and history. The narrative of Śakuntalā, highlights the gender perspective. The same character is depicted differently in the variant forms. Does this reflect different social perceptions, the understanding of which requires some familiarity with the historical context? The form which the variants take — epic fragment, drama, poetry — and the cultural interpretations which they encourage, makes the narrative an item in cultural history.

Choosing a particular item from the past and recreating it as a variant is in part, an act of historical significance. The past is viewed from the present, wherever the present may be located, and that which is selected from the past goes into constructing a tradition or constructing a history. A tradition is never handed down intact from generation to generation, however appealing this idea may seem. Innovation is what gives it vitality. The items selected from the past are often so chosen as to legitimize the values and codes of the present. In selecting and recasting cultural items we highlight some and marginalize others. The act of selection becomes a dialogue with the past.

The point in time at which the selection is being made gives a different value to the selection as a cultural symbol, as an idiom, as

an icon. This has happened throughout our cultural history, although our awareness of this process is perhaps more apparent now. Where the narrative is culturally central to our own present today, we have also to see it as a part of the intervention of the colonial period and recognize the disjuncture this may produce.

The concept of culture in relation to the early past, implies an intersecting of disciplines of which history, it seems to me is foundational. This involves the original text and its historical contexts, as also frequently the Orientalist reading of it and equally frequently, the internalizing of this reading by commentators of the last century or two. And more recently, the questioning of this reading. Inevitably there is a contextualizing of the Orientalist representation and European perspectives brought to bear on the reading. A single item can therefore have multiple identities which change at historical moments. Understanding a cultural item historically requires some comprehension of the world-view which it represented. Each version has some relation with those which preceded it: a relation ranging from endorsement to contestation of earlier versions.

I would like to touch on some of these ideas using the narrative of Śakuntalā. My focus therefore is not on the Kālidāsa play, but on the treatment of the central figure which transforms the narrative in its variant versions; and on the possible historical explanations for the variants and the commentaries.

Let me now turn to the narrative.

The *ākhyāna* or narrative of Śakuntalā as given in the *Ādi parvan* of the *Mahābhārata*² is one among the many bardic fragments which were stitched together in the making of the epic. In many

² *Ādi parvan* 62–9.

of these fragments the morphology of the folk tale is evident. There are other sections of the *Mahābhārata*, such as the *Śānti parvan*, which have been labelled as didactic. These have less to do with the story and more with theories of the ideal society, of social obligations — *dharma*, of government — *rāja-dharma*, of ideas about the liberation of the soul — *mokṣa-dharma*, and such like. The Śakuntalā story occurs in the narrative section.³

Rājā Duṣanta, with the title of *gopīā*, a protector of cows, has conquered widely. One day he goes on a hunt accompanied by a large entourage of soldiers. The hunt turns into a fierce killing of tigers and deer, the wounding of elephants, the uprooting of trees and a general devastation of nature. Duṣanta follows a deer deep into the forest which brings him to the lush and secluded *āśrama* of Kaṇva. On calling out, a young woman answers and performs the ritual of welcome for the guest. She introduces herself as Śakuntalā, the daughter of the *ṛṣi* Kaṇva. On Duṣanta asking her how a *ṛṣi* could have daughter, she explains her parenage in detail. Indra, disturbed by the powers which the *ṛṣi* Viśvāmitra was accumulating through *tapasyā*, sent the *apsarā* Menakā to seduce him. Śakuntalā was born but discarded by Menakā and brought up as a foundling by Kaṇva in his *āśrama*.

Duṣanta, deeply attracted by what he calls 'the flawless girl of the beautiful hips', proposes a *gāndhārvā* marriage. This was a marriage by mutual consent, appropriate it is said, to *ksātriyas*. Śakuntalā agrees but sets a condition that she will only marry him if the son born of this marriage is declared his successor. After a three year pregnancy she gives birth to a boy, Bharata. She takes him at a young age to Hastināpura from where Duṣanta rules, and demands that Duṣanta recognize him as his heir. Duṣanta pretends not to recognize her and rejects them both. Śakuntalā in

³ V. S. Sukthankar, *On the meaning of the Mahābhārata*, Bombay, 1964.

extreme anger, explains why a wife and son are necessary to him, particularly a son to continue the lineage. The exchange is heated with much down-to-earth abuse. Menakā is called a slut. Viśvāmitra a lecher and Śakuntalā a whore. Śakuntalā stands her ground and insists that the boy be given his status and to that end she decides to leave him with Duṣanta. As she is about to return to the *āśrama*, a disembodied celestial voice proclaims that the boy is indeed Duṣanta's son. Duṣanta explains that he had remembered his meeting with her and had no doubt about the veracity of Śakuntalā's claim, but was waiting for this public legitimization of the relationship. Subsequently he accepts them both. Bharata when he comes to rule is acclaimed as a great ruler.

The story in the epic is the origin myth of Bharata and therefore also tied into the ancestry of the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas, central to the events in the *Mahābhārata*. Divine proclamation establishes status and legitimacy because the relationship has also to be accepted by the clansmen. It is a society of clans and heroes, a lineage-based society, where ancestry, genealogy and origins are vital.⁴ It is also a cattle-keeping society requiring extensive grazing grounds. Hence the respect for the title of *gopīā*. The clearing of land and of forest for agriculture was recognized as a source of wealth. The hunt is a surrogate raid, a war against nature but also a means of establishing claims to territory. So dominance over the forest is beginning to assume importance.

The depiction of Śakuntalā is central to the story. She is forthright, free, high-spirited and assertive. She makes her marriage conditional and then demands that the promise be honoured. She accuses Duṣanta of behaving unrighteously. She is the reverse of the *pativrata*, the ideal wife as described in the didactic sections of the epic. The dispute is clearly over the paternity of the child. The

⁴ Romila Thapar, *From Lineage to State*, Delhi, 1984.

condition she imposed at the time of the *gāndhārva* marriage hinged on the status of her son, characteristic of a patriarchal society. This was also crucial to the status of the woman in a such a society even if it was a clan-based society: she was the link to kinship and alliances, and her son ensured her membership of the clan. The celestial voice describes the mother as the receptacle, for it is the father who begets the son, and the son frees the father from the abode of the dead. Implicit in this utterance is the statement that Duṣṣanta accept responsibility for the child.

The period of the composition of the epic remains controversial but generally it is thought that the composition and the interpolations can be placed between 400 BC and AD 400, the narrative sections possibly being earlier than the didactic sections.⁵ The epic continues to have an audience well into the centuries AD. It is part of ancestral mythology and provides links with the heroes of old. The epic was added to often enough, and presumably when it was converted to sacred literature it became part of brahmanical high culture. However, the hierarchy in this high culture would have placed the epics and *Purāṇas* in what some regarded as the not-so-high culture, perhaps because of their links with folk culture.

I would now like to turn to the play, the *Abhijñāna-śākuntalam* of Kālidāsa.⁶ It reflects a different historical scene. It was written subsequent to the story in the epic and is generally dated to about the fourth century AD although the date is controversial. Kālidāsa selects a fragment from the epic, converts the narrative into a

⁵ Sukthankar, op. cit.

⁶ M.R. Kale, *The Abhijñāna-śākuntalam* of Kālidāsa, Bombay, 1961. A discussion and translation of the play is included in B. Storer Miller (ed.), *Theater of Memory*, New York, 1984.

nāṭaka/a play, which is a different genre of literature from the poetry of the epic. To the original narrative he adds other sub-themes. One is the story of the ring as a token of recognition which seems to have come from the Buddhist *Kaṭīahāri Jātaka*.⁷ The other is the theme of the curse which is frequent in folk literature. There is, as a result, the creating of a new tradition. An item, selected from the past, is moulded to suit the cultural expression of the later time. It could be seen almost as a contestation with the epic version, the norms of which undergo changes in the play.

The play is no longer concerned with lineage-based societies and clans but carries the rhetoric of the political power of monarchical states. These were well established, legitimizing the concentration of power in a single family and the authority of upper caste society. The state had its appurtenances of administration, revenue, coercive agencies and such like. There is also the visibility of brahmanical high culture which was dominant in the construction of classicism and therefore familiar to Kālidāsa. It is evident in the use of language and in the nuanced relationship between the characters. Kingship is approximate to deity and kings and gods intermingled. The *āśrama* of the Kanyas carries traces of a new incipient institution which was to develop into the *agrabhāras* of post-Gupta times, institutions which changed the socio-economic landscape. Tax-free land was donated by the king for settlement by *brāhmanas* which could be in areas already under cultivation or newly opened to cultivation. These were to become powerful nuclei and networks of brahmanical culture.

The play itself is intended for performance at the court before a small, sophisticated, urban audience and not as part of a popular

⁷ E.B. Cowell (ed.), *The Jātakas*, vol. 1, no. 7, London, 1969 (repr.) See also Storer Miller, op. cit.

recitation. It reflects the values of upper caste society although there may implicitly on occasion be some questioning of these. Intended as entertainment, the theme was inevitably romantic.

The changes introduced by Kālidāsa are significant to more than just the story-line. Duḥśanta/Duśyanta leaves his ring with Śakuntalā as a token of his promise to send for her on his return to Hastināpura. Deep in thought one day, Śakuntalā neglects to receive with appropriate ceremony an irascible *ṛṣi* Durvasas who therefore spews out his curse that the person she is thinking of will not remember her. Her friends plead for at least a modification of the curse and the *ṛṣi* then says that the ring will provide the remembrance. Śakuntalā leaves for the court and on the way loses the ring. On arriving there, she is not recognized by Duḥśanta and no amount of persuasion convinces him that she is his legally wedded wife bearing his son. Śakuntalā in despair calls upon Mother Earth and there is a flash of lightning and she is whisked away to the *āśrama* of Mānīca. Here she gives birth to her son Bharata. Meanwhile the ring is found in the belly of a fish, and since it is his signet ring, it is brought to Duḥśanta. On seeing it he recollects his relationship with Śakuntalā. He is now full of remorse at having lost both a wife and a son. The eventual happy outcome occurs when the king is called to Indra's aid in a campaign against the demons. On his return he stops at the *āśrama* of Mānīca where he is united with his wife and son.

The story of the play is an elaboration of the skeletal story in the epic. Courty drama requires a romantic mood and dramatic effects. The teasing out of the narrative is done through the sub-plots of the curse and the ring. There is a contrapuntal relationship between the two; the curse impedes action and is a barrier, the ring resolves the barrier so that the action can move.

The curse and the ring gloss over the tension between Duḥśanta and Śakuntalā, both over the paternity of the child and the

responsibility of the father. But Śakuntalā in the play cannot defend the right of her son because the flow of events is beyond human control and she had made no conditions to the marriage. Duḥśanta cannot be blamed for rejecting her as he is under a spell. Is Kālidāsa therefore avoiding the moral issue of condemning Duḥśanta's action in rejecting Śakuntalā? Or would this not have been regarded as irresponsible in those times and in that society? The epic version does at least raise the issue through the celestial voice.

The structure of the play seems to be based on a duality which comes to be associated with an increasingly common view of the world. It is expressed in terms of the dichotomy of the *grāma* and the *aranya* or the *keśava* and the *vana* — the settlement and the forest.⁸ It is generic to the epic where the broader action moves back and forth from settlement to forest. But it is strongly indented in the play as well. One of the reasons for this may be that by the Gupta period attitudes towards the forest were beginning to change. Whereas earlier the settlement was the ordered society and the forest the habitat of the unknown, and the wild, now the forest was beginning to be seen differently: as a source of revenue through its natural products of timber and elephants; its potential as agricultural land after clearing; and as the location of *brāhmaṇa* settlements, in the form of *agravāras*. The society of the forest was no longer entirely unknown, but it was still different from village settlements and the difference continued to be emphasized.

The dichotomy is highlighted in the play between the *āśrama* of Kanva and the court at Hastināpura. It is further underlined in the depiction of Śakuntalā as the woman of the *āśrama* and

⁸ C. Malamoud, *Cooking the World*, Delhi, 1996, 87–8; 'Village et Forêt dans l'Idéologie de l'Inde Brahmanique', *Archives Sociologie Européenne*, July 1976.

Duḥsanta as the man of the court. The *āstrama* in the play is the liminal area, the threshold between the settlement and the forest, for although it is set deep in the forest, the people who live there attuned to nature, are nevertheless also aware of the mores and customs of the settled society, from where they have come. They are not *āśvīkas*, forest dwellers, in origin.

Kālidāsa seems to use this duality to reverse the activities associated with each. The *āstrama* becomes the location for what has been called love-in-union — *sambhoga śringāra*, generally not associated with *āstramas*. The court is the location for love-in-separation — *vipralamba śringāra*, where she is rejected and leaves, although most romances achieve fruition at the court.⁹

From the epic narrative to the play there is a change in the conceptualizing of the woman. Śakuntalā is now the child of nature and identifies with plants and animals. She dresses in bark clothes, adorns herself with flowers which miraculously turn into jewels at the time of her departure. Nature weeps at her going away. Her innocence is heightened by her grappling with the emotions of romantic love, leading her to the *gāndhāra* marriage. She is shy, retiring, modest and generally submissive. In the last act she excuses Duḥsanta's action because of his being under a spell, and instead explains to herself that she is reaping the consequences of some wrong doing on her part in a previous birth.

If Śakuntalā claims to be the wife of Duḥsanta she has to conform to the *pativrata* ideal. Although both Kanva and Duḥsanta refer to her as the lawfully wedded wife, one of Kanva's disciples hints at the *gāndhāra* marriage being a seduction. One wonders whether this is resentment against a woman's transgression of patriarchy and her taking an independent decision, for he insists that she must suffer the consequences of such a decision.

⁹ B. Stoler Miller, op. cit.

She is told that she cannot return to the *āstrama* and has to remain at the court because the husband's authority over the wife is unlimited. He has the right to accept her or abandon her. It is better that a wife be a servant in her husband's home than live away from him.

The epic version had underlined the centrality of the son and the empowerment of the woman, both in herself and as the mother of a son. In the play romantic love seems to supersede this, and the question of empowerment fades away. The king does not taunt her for her illegitimacy but is uncomplimentary about women in general. Eventually the desire for an heir drives the king to as much grief as the disappearance of his beloved.

Subsequent to the Kālidāsa play there were now two versions of the story in circulation. Briefly narrated in the *Purāṇas* as an ancestral myth of the Pūrus it was important to the legitimization of dynasties of the post-Gupta period.¹⁰ The recitations of the *paundarikas* and the *kabhākāras* kept these stories alive among audiences more comfortable with the oral tradition. That it became something of a folk stereotype is evident from the *Kabhāsarvāgāna* which includes a charming story using the same theme but replete with folk motifs.¹¹ Interpretations of visual forms as pictorial representations of the story have also been suggested.¹²

¹⁰ E.g. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, 9.20.7–32; *Matsya Purāṇa*, 49, 11–15.

¹¹ C.H. Tawney, (ed. and tr.), 1968 (repr.), *The Kabhāsarvāgāna*, Ch. xxxii, 306–90.

¹² V.S. Agrawala, 'Vāsavadattā and Śakuntalā: Scenes in the Ranigumpha cave in Orissa', *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, 14, 1946, 102–9; C. Rapin, *Indian Art from Afghanistan*, Delhi, 1996; J.H. Marshall, 'Excavations at Bhitia', *ASIAR*, 1911–12, Calcutta, 1915, 29–49, Plates XXIII–XXIV, No. 17.

At a somewhat later period the play becomes an item for discussion in a variety of theoretical works on literature and aesthetics. Taking off from the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, there were wide-ranging views on what constitutes good poetry and drama, discussed in the works of theoreticians such as Abhinavagupta and Ānandavardhana at the end of the first millennium AD. More specific to the Kālidāsa play is the commentary of Rāghavabhaṭṭa in the sixteenth century. Much of the discussion was in the context of the evolving theories of *rasa*, central to Indian aesthetics. Gradually the Kālidāsa play became central to analysing both poetry and drama and was judged as the exemplar in the Sanskrit *nāṭika* tradition.

It was doubtless both its reputation as the finest Sanskrit play and the popularity of the story, that led to its being adapted to yet another literary form which was to reach a still wider audience. In 1716, the Mughal emperor Farrukh Siyar bestowed a title on a nobleman at the court. To celebrate this, the court poet, Navāz Kavīśvara, was asked to render — not to translate — the story of Śakuntalā from Sanskrit into Braj-*bhāṣā*, the language of much of the Hindi poetry at the time. The story now becomes a *kathā* in verse. The theme of love and separation and the style of the rendering, gives it a quality which recalls the dominant form in Braj poetry at that time — the *bārahmāsā*. This is not to suggest that it was actually a *bārahmāsā*, but shorn of the borrowings from the play, it was a *kathā* concerned with lovers, partings and reunions, characteristic of this kind of Braj poetry.¹³ The language is earthy, the poetry sounds like doggerel verse at times. Śakuntalā emerges as less given to romanticism and more down-to-earth, a

¹³ C. Vaudville, *Bārahmāsā in Indian Literature*, Delhi, 1986; 'A Note on the *Chaturpārṇava* and the *Meghadūtā*', JOL(B), 1959, 9, 2, 129–34.

distinct echo of the Śakuntalā of the epic. In some ways this is a mediation between the epic version and the play.

In 1806, the Braj-*kathā* was translated into an Urdu prose-poem, *Shakuntala*, by Mirza Qasim Ali Dehlavi, an Urdu poet teaching at the recently established Fort William College at Calcutta. This brings an infusion of the Persian *dhātān* style with its world of fables and exaggerated emotions. Śakuntalā, in embarrassment, constantly hides behind her *ghunghat*, and the king in true Majnu or Farhad style, swoons almost every time he sees her. But the dialogue remains earthy and the exchanges between the king and Śakuntalā make for racy reading. The narrative moves away from being a court play and its more accessible language gives it a greater universality. Presumably its performance was accompanied by music, dance and mime. The feel of eighteenth century late Mughal society pervades this version.

At this point, the biography of this narrative takes another turn. There are no further literary genres for the retellings, but it entered the world stage through translations. And translation changes the cultural role of the narrative, for it introduces into the play, the culture and the world views of the society using the language of the translation and of its ideologies.

William Jones, often described as the father of British Indology, was an officer of the East India Company at Calcutta, and spent much time in reading and translating Sanskrit texts. He was enthused by the play, and translated it, first into Latin which was linguistically closer to Sanskrit, and then from Latin into English. In 1789 it was published as *Shakountala or the Fatal Ring*.¹⁴ He

¹⁴ G. Canon and S. Pandey, 'Sir William Jones Revisited: On His Translation of the Śakuntalā', *JAOS*, 1976, 96, 4, 530–37; G. Canon, *The Life and Mind of Oriental Jones*, Cambridge, 1977; S.N. Mukherjee, *Sir William Jones*, Delhi, 1987 (2nd edn).

gave currency to the phrase that Kālidāsa was the Indian Shaka-spear. He maintained that the play demonstrates the height of Indian civilization, all the more remarkable because it was written at a time when the Britons were as unpolished and unlettered as the army of Hanuman. His more significant comment was that he had been disturbed by some of the more erotic passages which would be unacceptable to European taste. And for the first time, the erotic in the play became a matter for debate.

Nevertheless, the play took Europe by storm. It was translated into German and acclaimed by the German poet Goethe in a verse which has since been repeated *ad nauseum*. There followed a succession of ballets and operas on the theme, including an incomplete attempt by Frans Schubert. In each decade of the nineteenth century there was yet another translation in yet another language, even Icelandic. The experimental theatre of Tairoff in Moscow made it the opening presentation with an enthusiastic reception from the Symbolist poets, just prior to the Bolshevik revolution.

Throughout the nineteenth century in European literary circles, and most particularly in the German Romantic Movement, Śakuntalā was projected as the child of nature and the ideal Indian woman encapsulating the beauty of woman kind.¹⁵ Her closeness to nature was particularly important to literary Romanticism distancing itself from the formalism of neo-classicism. This was also in part a response to what was referred to as the 'discovery' of the orient or the Oriental Renaissance. European Romanticism was inter-twined with Orientalism. To understand the construction of Orientalism and its fusion with European Romanticism, requires a familiarity with the images, created as part of the intellectual history of Europe in the nineteenth century, and the politics of

¹⁵ A. Leslie Willson, *A Mythical Image: The Ideal of India in German Romanticism*, Durham, 1964; J. Sedlar, *India in the Mind of Germany*, Washington, 1982; H. Drew, *India and the Romantic Imagination*, Delhi, 1987.

these images. The Oriental Renaissance it was believed, would provide new visions of how man should perceive the world.¹⁶ But the images were what Europe projected onto the Orient. These were crystallized as the duality of the Orient and of Europe as expressed in the preference of Romanticism for the less orderly aspect of the past and its search for the exotic, the irrational, and the imaginative as against the rational and the real, thought to be typical of European classicism.

The creation of what has been called the ideal of India in German Romanticism was also conditioned by early Greek stories of Alexander of Macedon's meetings with Indian philosophers. This was said to explain the presence in substratum European thought of ideas on metempsychosis, the unity of man and nature, and the meaning of renunciation. These were central to the theories of the Neo-Platonists who believed that much of the philosophy alternative to the Judaeco-Christian tradition in Europe, came from Indian sources. Romanticism therefore was also questioning the theories of the European mainstream.

With the growth of notions of race and the wide acceptance of what came to be called 'race science' in the later nineteenth century, a touch of racism entered the idyllic picture of a closeness to nature.¹⁷ The children of nature were the primitive peoples, at the foot of the evolutionary ladder. Eroticism therefore was an aspect of their unawareness of the need for moral laws.

But the not-so-idyllic relationship between colonizers and the colonized in the nineteenth century contributed to a fading out of the enthusiasm for Romanticism. If in the early nineteenth century there was a concern to reform the native to the ways of the

¹⁶ R. Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880*, New York, 1984 (trans.).

¹⁷ T.B. Hanson, 'Inside the Romanticist Episteme', *Thesis Eleven*, 1997, 48, 21-41.

colonizer, by the latter part of the century this was seen as an impossibility because the native was believed to be racially inferior. By the end of the nineteenth century, Śakuntalā had become a collector's item in Europe.

Not so in India. It was in the nineteenth century that the play became important both to debates on colonial cultural policy and to the self-definition of the Indian middle-class. James Mill, writing as a liberal utilitarian, in the early nineteenth century, saw little that was worthwhile in Indian culture, opposed Orientalism, and argued that Sanskrit literature was the literature of a self-indulgent society. It is only nations in their infancy who produce literature which is in praise of the pastoral, for such societies are fettered by despots and they can only indulge in light romances, rather than analysing their condition. The *gāndhārva* marriage, the curse, the authority of the *brāhmanas*, were for him, signs of Indian degradation.¹⁸

But there was a tradition among British administrators with a bent for scholarship and working in India, of a more ambiguous view. They felt that those who governed India had to be familiar with its culture and this coincided with forms of exercising power. The so-called 'rediscovery' of the Indian past was in part directed towards this end. But it was also an attempt to revive Indian culture in the format of Orientalist scholarship. This is perhaps best stated in the introduction to yet another translation of the play, published by Monier-Williams in 1855, which superseded the translation of Jones. Where Jones in his writing was representing India both to the Indians and to Europe, now there was a subordination of cultural representation to the politics of

governance. The attempt was to mould the Indian understanding of its cultural past in the way in which the colonizer intended.¹⁹

Monier-Williams states in the Introduction to the eighth edition of his translation published in 1898, that it was intended for a variety of purposes. It would enable the British to familiarize themselves with the life of the Hindus. It was also part of British policy to rediscover the Indian past for the Indian, to revive Indian culture as defined by Orientalist scholarship, to make the Indian middle-class aware of this culture and to imprint on the mind of the Indian middle-class, the interpretation given to the culture by Orientalist scholarship. The impression conveyed is that the acclamation for the play should be attributed to Orientalist scholarship, thus forgetting or ignoring, the extensive analyses of earlier literary theorists who wrote some centuries before.

There was now a shift of emphasis and the play was viewed as an item of Hindu culture, explaining the condition of the Hindu subjects of the empire. The reading of the play was moving from Śakuntalā being the child of nature to her being what Monier-Williams calls, the 'rustic maiden'. Nature and culture were no longer juxtaposed for nature had receded and the mores of 'civilization' had become essential to assessing the actions of the play. Initially the play was not selected as a text for the teaching of Sanskrit at college level because it was said to support immorality. Eventually the supposedly erotic passages were deleted and it came to be prescribed. Implicit in this argument is the question of morality — but it is not a comment on the moral decision on which the earlier tradition had focused, that of Duṣanta's rejection of Śakuntalā. The question of morality as related to eroticism, which had not been a concern earlier, was now made the central issue and impinged on the projection of Śakuntalā.

¹⁸ J. Mill, 1823, *History of British India*, London, II. 2. 111.

¹⁹ G. Visvanathan, 1989, *Masks of Conquest*, New York, 121 ff.

These ideas had an influence on the emerging Indian middle class. Nineteenth century nationalism in India is thought to have fostered a conservative attitude towards tradition, because to question it was a concession to western ideas.²⁰ The broader middle-class codes were also being forged with the emergence of a new class, associated with the upper castes. These drew from both the new historical situation of colonialism and what was described as the Indian tradition. But in relation to the perspective on women in society, the particular conservatism of Victorian morals had also entered Indian society. There was an appropriation of some of the attitudes of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, attitudes generally absent in early Indian texts. Gradually the definition of womanly virtues focused on modesty, chastity, self-sacrifice, devotion and patience. These were the virtues recognized in the Śakuntalā of the play but these would have been unfamiliar to the Śakuntalā of the epic.

In a later phase of nationalism, a certain liberalism towards women was encouraged and women began to tentatively assert what they saw as their rights. Participation in the national movement was not intended to emancipate women but to encourage a sense of partnership. With rare exceptions, most women remained the subordinate partners. Victorian attitudes and social conservatism could not be set aside so easily.

It was only a matter of time therefore, before someone would declare Śakuntalā's actions as 'the fall of Śakuntalā'. What is surprising is that this comment comes from Rabindranath Tagore. In 1907 he published an essay in Bengali which was later translated

²⁰ P. Charterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question', in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds), *Resisting Women*, Delhi, 1993; 'Colonialism, Nationalism and Coloured Women: The Contest in India', *American Ethnologist*, 1989, 16, 4, 622–33; K. Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden*, London, 1995.

into English with the title, 'Śakuntalā: Its Inner Meaning'.²¹ He takes Goethe's verse on Śakuntalā as his starting point and argues that the play is a series of developments from the lesser to the finer, from the flower to the fruit, earth to heaven and matter to spirit. From a young, passionate woman Śakuntalā becomes the model of a devoted wife with qualities of reserve, endurance of sorrow, rigid discipline and piety. According to him, the play focuses on two unions: one is the gross, earthy, physical union with desire contributing to the fall of Śakuntalā — and he uses the words *patana* and *patta* in association with her actions; and the other is the moral union when both Duṣanta and Śakuntalā have been cleansed through a long period of separation. Their *tapasya* takes the form of grief, remorse and penance and is necessary to a true and eternal union. Love is not its own highest glory, for goodness is the final goal of love.

This is Tagore's reading of the inner meaning of the play and he sees it as an allegory. Tagore's reading reflects the moral concerns of his time, influenced it would seem by the perspectives of Indian nationalism and also Orientalism. In this reading the empowerment of a woman through the birth of her son, which was significant to the epic story, now becomes unimportant. The woman's morality is the central question.

Let me return to the relationship of narrative and history. If I am reading history into the context of the different versions and commentaries, it is because they are distinct in form and ideology, and when seen in sequence, represent historical changes. I have tried to demonstrate the interface between literature and history not by limiting myself to garnering historical information from

²¹ *Modern Review*, 1911, IX, 171 ff.

the texts but by trying to see the texts as representing historical contexts. I have tried to show that the narrative of Śakuntalā changes, either in itself, or through the many translations of one version, and it becomes an icon of varying concerns. Underlying the sequence is what seems to me to be a transformation of these concerns from earlier times to colonial times: a transformation which shifts the focus quite strikingly. Its visibility is clearest in the treatment of gender.

This is evident in the portrayal of Śakuntalā. She is ostensibly the same character in the variant versions but is in effect, perceived differently in each. The perception is not unrelated to a shifting social and moral focus of the story, shifting in accordance with historical demands. She is the mother of an epic hero in the *Mahābhārata* where the main issue is the paternity of her child and the father's responsibility in recognizing this. In the play she is the romantic ideal of upper-caste high culture, where moral responsibility is misted over by the introduction of the extraneous factors of the curse and the ring. In the *Braj-bhāṣā kathā*, she is not cowed down by the king — if anything it may be the reverse — and insists on his behaving in a just manner. German Romanticism sees her as the child of nature, the personification of innocence and pays little attention to problems of paternity and responsibility. The 'rustic maiden' from the colonial perspective, becomes enmeshed in colonial readings of the erotic in the culture of the colonized. The ideal wife within a nationalism reaching back to what it sees as tradition, raises the question of morality but the problem now devolves around the woman always having to exercise restraint. This is a middle-class perspective since subaltern perspectives remain outside the picture.

I have tried to show that each version comes out of a process of selection and implicit in this is the contemporizing of the icon. We select from the past those images which we want from the

present. These contribute to the construction of the self-image of our contemporary culture and its projection back into what is believed to be 'tradition'. From the gender perspective we have in the last two centuries, ignored the Śakuntalā of the *Mahābhārata*, the liberated woman demanding to be justly treated, and have endorsed the Śakuntalā of Kālidāsa, the woman waiting patiently for a recognition of her virtue.