

A Painted Wooden Cover in the Jñāna-Pravāha Museum : A Re-appraisal

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One of the finest painted wooden covers from the Sri Suresh Neotia Collection, is now on display in the Jñāna-Pravāha Museum, Varanasi (fig.1). This has been indentified as a scene from the *Abhijñāna Śākuntalam*, the masterpiece play by the celebrated Kālidāsa. Generally this is interpreted as the *Nāyaka* (here, king Duṣyanta) being struck by the beauty of the *Nāyikā* (here, Śakuntalā) at first sight. However, the above identification failed to satisfy me from the very first day I saw it.

If we refer to the Act-I of the play, we find that the Rājā (*Nāyaka*) accidentally entered the *Ṛṣi's Āśrama*, chasing his quarry, a pet deer. In the next act, he relates the incident to his intimate companion and *Vidūṣaka* (court jester), while the *Rājā* completely takes an about turn in the concluding statements of the Act-II: "... (the infatuation episode)", says the Rājā to the jester, "As told to you, was in lighter vein, and thus, may not be taken seriously" (purport) (*śloka* 18, Act-II), This (situation) is underscored by the *Vidūṣaka's* statement in Act-VI while conversing with his patron Rājā in the *Mādhavī Maṇḍapam*, as *Caturikā*, the maid, enters carrying the Rājā's painterly creation. During the conversation, the Rājā asks, "... did you fail to remember (like me) my infatuation, etc.?" (purport), as *Sānumatī* incognito, overhears the conversation. Here, the *Vidūṣaka* innocently replies, "No. I didn't forget; however, after relating the episode you concluded that those were no facts (fiction) or a piece of joke, said in a lighter vein", (the dialogue before prior to *śloka* no. 9, Act-VI: *Itaḥ pratyadeśat...*, etc.). These (and other related passages) clearly show that the *Vidūṣaka* had not physically seen Śakuntalā in the *āśrama*, perhaps saw her for the first time as she appeared in the king's court (Act-V). Hence he could not identify her in her depiction in the Rājā's painting (Act-VI, *ślokas* 8 and 9), or even attempted to do it circumstantially.

Thus referring back to the Nepalese painted wooden cover in the Neotia Collection, we find that this can well be the depiction of any other similar narrative,

or any other version of the Śakuntalā narrative itself, but not in the least, depiction of the *Abhijñāna Śākuntalam* scene. Since, here we find a court jester attending upon the Rājā. The above surmise is reinforced by other internal evidences.

The painting, by Duṣyanta, showing the first sight of Śakuntalā event, as depicted in the play (Act-VI) is of help to us. Besides its locale, it gives certain other signals to the *Vidūṣaka* as he attempts to identify her in the Rājā's visual composition. He enquires, "Here we have three beautiful damsels, who is Śakuntalā among them?" (purport), The Rājā counters, "Whom do you consider (her)?" The *Vidūṣaka's* detailed statement is of help to us: "The damsel exhausted due to watering the trees, with flowers dropping from her coiffure..." (purport) (Act-VI, before the *śloka* 15: *svinnaṅguli-viniveśo...*). Here again we find floral decoration of Śakuntalā. This is still more vivid in *śloka* 18 of the same Act: *kṛtaṁ na karṇārpita-bandhanaṁ sakhe....*, where Śakuntalā was to be shown with a *śirīṣa* flowers in her ears and 'moon-ray like breast-band' made of lotus-stalk rayon (purport). These are far from high valued yellow metal jewellery etc. In case it was intended to show the first glance's episode, as it is intended here, these natural outfits should have been in place. Kālidāsa had a soft corner for these natural make-ups, as we find in *Uttaramegha śloka* 2: *haste līlākamalaṁ... yatra nīpaṁ vadhūnām*. This shows a preference for natural embellishment *vis-a-vis* artificial ornaments, as is echoed in the *Caturbhāṇī*, where it is remarked that the heavenly trees, with flowers made in (eternal) gold thus did not follow the natural cycle of evolution and decay (were inferior).

In such an open society, to think of Śakuntalā in her *āśrama* days loaded with heavy ornaments and jewellery is profane. Kālidāsa would have never entertained such a concept. How people got the identification here, (questioned by me) is beyond my understanding in the light of the text.

The setting presented in the painted wooden cover mismatches with the Kālidāsa's depiction. Fortunately, this is delineated in a *śloka*: *kāryā saikatalinahaṁsa-mithunāḥ....*, *śloka* 17, Act-VI (reference its depiction in Duṣyanta's painting). Noteworthy is that besides the landscape, the Rājā would not fail to introduce the *valkala* (bark) garment hung (for drying) from the tree branches. The *āśrama* environs start appearing in Act-I, as the Rājā enters, itself developing step by step: Śakuntalā and her *sakhīs* were in the process of watering the plants. This setting was recreated in the painting by the Rājā. In Act-VI, when it comes

to identifying Śakuntalā by *Vidūṣaka*, the same scene served as its backdrop. On the other hand, this tell-tale element is totally absent in the wooden cover depiction, where she is shown preparing for a bath, in a solitary environment (with no trace of the *āśrama*).

Obviously, like any *āśrama*-girl, Śakuntalā had no jewellery on her body, this was palyed up by Kālidāsa in *śloka* 19, Act-I, *Sarasijamanuviddham...*, etc. The Rājā clearly states that Śakuntalā was clad in *valkala* (bark) drapery (being devoid of ornaments); he observes that a (natural) beauty, without any accrument, is an ornament in itself, whatsoever insignificant ir is (purport), like *valkala* in this case, which enhanced her charm. Or in case of (natural) beauty even a sundry embellishment enhances the charm, ... *kimiva hi madhurāṇām maṇḍanaṁ nākṛtīnām* (*śloka* 19, Act-I). This *arthāntara nyāsa* expresses the Gupta period aesthetics.

On the other hand, on the above wooden cover, we find, besides the luxury scattered all around, a large collection of the jewels cast off by the damsel.

Finally, Kālidāsa has not referred to a bathing scene in the present context in his play, which is central to the painted panel scene. Thus, I feel uneasy with the given identification of the painted scene as illustration to the *Abhijñāna Śākuntalam*.

END NOTE :

The present painted wooden cover in the collection of Jñāna-Pravāha has also been discussed earlier by Gautam V. Vajracharya (*Indian Art Treasures - Suresh Neotia Collection*, p.75, Varanasi, 2006) and its corresponding book cover by Martin Lerner (*The Frame and the Lotus*, p.91, New York, 1984) (fig. 2) - Editors



4.1: Scene from *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, Jñāna-Pravāha collection



4.2: Scene from *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York