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Nature, Nurture, and Empowerment: An Ecofeminist Reading of Utkarsh Patel's Mythological Fiction *Shakuntala: The Woman Wronged*

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Abstract: The present research revisits the mythological fiction of *Shakuntala: The Woman Wronged* (2015) through an ecofeminist lens. Author Utkarsh Patel approaches the legendary tale of submissive Shakuntala and recreates it by arming her with the attributes of resilience, assertiveness, and compassion. Her deep bond with nature equips her with the strength to fight against patriarchal strictures. Based on the study of ecofeminism, this paper draws parallels between the exploitation of women and nature at the hands of mercenary and oppressive forces. An analysis of this work suggests that nature itself provides strength and succour and is also a source of empowerment. The strength gained through communion with nature allows her to make her voice heard. The ecofeminist perspective reveals how Shakuntala's connection with nature offers her a sanctuary where she can explore her identity and voice, unimpeded by the norms that seek to suppress her. Her love for and defence of the environment transcends mere ecological concern—it becomes a catalyst leading to her transformation. Additionally, Shakuntala's deep connection with *Aranyani*, the Forest Goddess, aligns with the concept of nature as a mother figure. By drawing attention to the intertwined dynamics of nature, nurture, and empowerment, this research celebrates and propagates the harmony between nature, feminine forces, and their transformative power.



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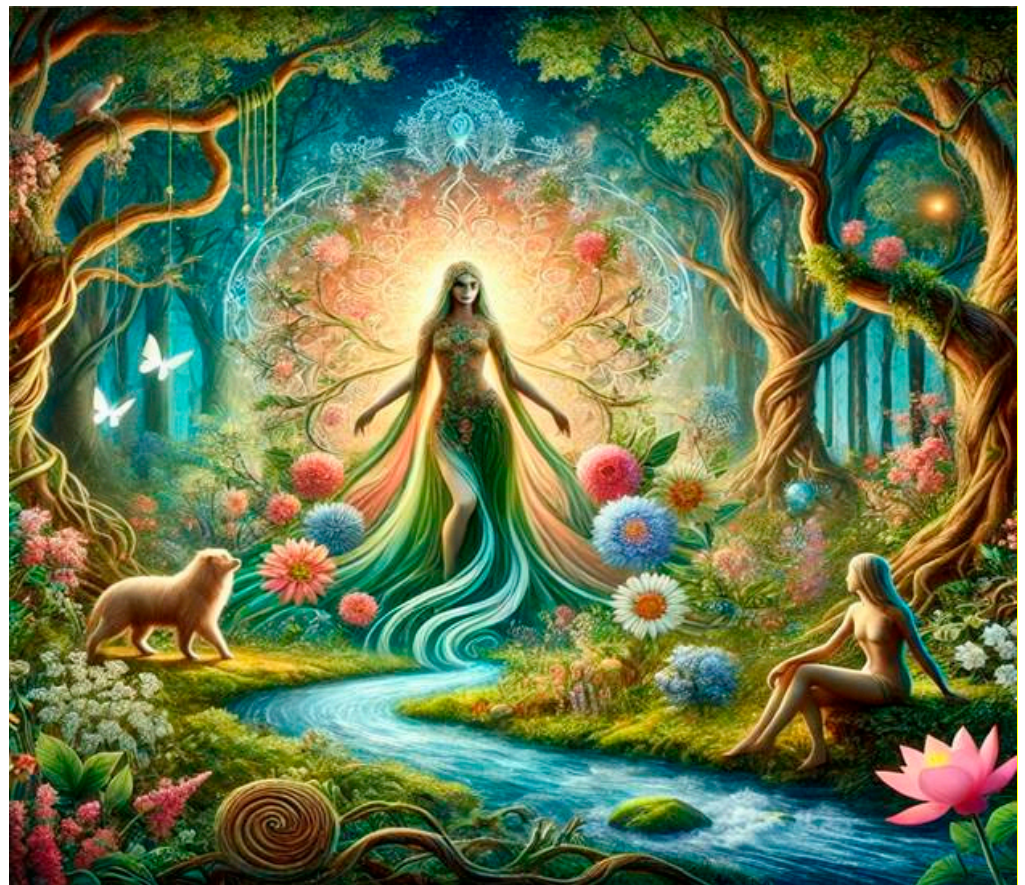
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1. Introduction



Swadofalasyajagadhvayayathakamamnipadhyate

Anjangandhisurabhimbhavyanaamkrishivalampraham

Mriganaammatammaranyanimshansisham

Man eats of savoury fruit and then takes, even as he wills, his rest.

Now have I praised the Forest Queen, sweet-scented, redolent of balm,

The Mother of all sylvan things, who tills not but hath stores of food. (Müller 2009, p. 117)

The hymn dedicated to *Aranyani*, the Forest Goddess, in the *Rigveda*, echoes the ancient ecological consciousness that regards nature as a nurturer. Non-Western thought, religious scriptures, and Samkhya philosophy also regard *Prakriti* as the manifestation of the feminine principle, which creates and sustains life. The parallel thus drawn between nature and *Prakriti* reflects the oneness, the interdependent harmony between *Purusha* (spirit) and *Prakriti* (nature).

The hymn artistically paints an image of the goddess *Aranyani* and depicts her as a serene deity walking silently among the trees with her anklets jingling faintly. Her courage and stoicism are embodied in her untamed spirit, walking bravely amongst wild animals and remaining tranquil amidst the deep silence of the woods. Untouched by human greed and independent of human intervention, *Aranyani*, the guardian spirit of the forest, provides sustenance to all creatures that inhabit her realm without any discrimination. *Aranyani*, a personification of generosity, thus becomes a divine representation of nature's nurturing, feminine aspect. She is the goddess of a realm that sustains human life yet remains distinct from human constructs. More than just a beautifully painted hymn, this ancient ode is an insightful "manifestation of the spiritual connection between human beings and

the environment” (Lincoln 2000), one that harmonises with contemporary ecofeminist discourse and reinforces the magnanimous spirit of both nature and the feminine.

This allusion to the forest deity portrays the creative, life-giving, and self-renewing powers of both nature and the feminine force. Through this hymn, the *Rigveda* invites us to embrace the sacredness of the forest and the nurturing energy it embodies. It also celebrates the resilience, generosity, and beauty that the feminine force of the forest symbolises. The hymn sung in praise of *Aranyani* becomes a timeless call to recognise the divine and to nurture the ecological balance that sustains us all. The ecological balance, sustainable practices, and a deeper respect for forests are further accentuated by Gadgil and Vartak (1975), in “Sacred Groves of India: A Plea for Continued Conservation”. They highlight the importance of sacred groves in India as a vital tool for biodiversity conservation and explain how sacred groves preserve plant species of ecological and economic significance. The authors point out, “Even in cases where species are not endangered, these forests safeguard genetic diversity, which is crucial for future forest tree breeding programs” (pp. 313–20). Additionally, the authors share that sacred forests serve as indicators of a region’s natural productivity. It is, therefore, essential to conserve and preserve them, even if the religious beliefs associated with them weaken.

In today’s modern world, the cosmic balance between nature and humanity has not been negated. It finds its echo in simple everyday acts. For example, Indian women offer water to the *tulsi* plant every morning at sunrise, sweetened water to the banana tree on Thursdays, and water to the *peepal* tree on Saturdays. In Hindu tradition, the *tulsi* plant (holy basil) and all other plants are considered sacred embodiments of the feminine principle that nurtures life with its medicinal and spiritual essence.

A woman’s act of watering these plants is more than a chore; it is a ritual of connection—a reaffirmation of her bond with nature. It is a token of gratitude to Mother Nature. This pious ritual enables a woman to assume the role of a nurturer for her family members and, at the same time, affirms her deep connection with nature. These religious practices have long established that humans and non-humans are like intertwined threads, which, if separated, will destroy the pattern of life that stitches all forms of life together. It is also a humble acknowledgement of ecological harmony, a reminder that humans cannot thrive without respecting and caring for the natural world. Shiva (1988) in *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* shares the following:

The tulsi is sacred not merely as a plant with beneficial properties but as Brindavan, the symbol of the cosmos. In their daily watering and worship women renew the relationship of the home with the cosmos and with the world process. Nature as a creative expression of the feminine principle is both in ontological continuity with humans as well as above them. Ontologically, there is no divide between man and nature, or between man and woman, because life in all its forms arises from the feminine principle. (Shiva 1988, pp. 38–39)

On one hand, contemporary Western thought creates a dualistic divide between man and woman, as well as between humans and nature. Indian cosmology, on the other hand, presents a unified duality in the form of *Purusha* (spirit) and *Prakriti* (nature). These two principles are interdependent complements, reflected in all creation through a harmonious balance of diversity within unity. This interdependence forms the foundation of ecological thought. Here, nature is viewed as integral and sacred, with *Prakriti* being a tangible, everyday concept that shapes both the sacred and secular aspects of life. *Prakriti* embodies creativity, productivity, and diversity, emphasising interconnectedness among all beings and the sanctity of life. This stands in stark contrast to the Cartesian view, which treats nature as inert, uniform, fragmented, and subordinate, leading to its exploitation and degradation.

Bhoi and Rout (2024), in “Blossoming Bonds: Exploring the Intricate Relationship Between Plants and Women”, highlight the symbiotic relationship between the feminine spirit and the botanical world. They state that “The artistic expressions of the relationship between women and plants offer a rich tapestry of symbolism, reflecting themes of fertility, growth, and interconnectedness. Through literature and visual arts, female creators have used this relationship as a powerful muse, exploring the multifaceted nature of femininity and the enduring ties between women and the natural world” (p. 135).

Whether through biological processes like lactation and pregnancy in women or seed protection and phytoremediation in plants, both exhibit remarkable mechanisms to support, sustain, and nourish life. They embody the principles of resilience, adaptability, and care, ensuring continuity and balance in their respective domains.

With time, nature has shifted from being a life-sustaining force to an exploitable resource, leading to its marginalisation. Achieving ecological sustainability requires revisiting the wisdom of ancient civilisations and cultures, which are deeply rooted in the feminine principle and emphasise the seamless relationship between society and nature. The ancient traditions of India, in particular, advocate an interconnected understanding of how society humanises nature, and nature, in turn, shapes societal identity. The mythological character of Shakuntala is thus an apt illustration of how nature influences and shapes individual identity.

Shakuntala, the daughter of Sage Vishwamitra and Menaka, is, in essence, the divine embodiment of the feminine principle. She is a child born of a union between a sage and a celestial nymph raised in a hermitage in the forest. Her story begins in the forest and ends in the forest. She inspires all females to imbibe her core values and arm themselves with the weapon of compassion to fight against the dark patriarchal forces. She symbolizes the balance between the natural and the human worlds and urges women to realign themselves with the laws of the earth and cultivate gratitude for the gifts endowed upon them by Mother Nature. Badola and Sharma (2024), in “Indian Mythology and Ecocriticism”, highlight how nature finds a human embodiment in Shakuntala, a mythological character from the *Mahabharata*. After being abandoned by her biological parents, Shakuntala is raised by Sage Kanva in his ashram, surrounded by nature. They further state that “Humans from mythology, being so close to nature that they appear to be nature itself in human form, make men aware of their oneness with nature. This kind of representation seems to be aimed at inculcating a powerful environmental consciousness” (p. 97).

As the story of Shakuntala unfolds, myths, ecocriticism, literature, and ecological responsibility evolve in parallel, bound by a shared focus on the relationship between humanity and the natural world. Mythology, as a repository of ancient wisdom, has long-woven narratives that emphasise nature’s sacredness and its deep influence on human existence. Literature, in turn, serves as a bridge between these age-old myths and contemporary ecological consciousness, allowing for a reinterpretation of environmental values in a modern context.

Ecocriticism, emerging as an academic discipline, provides a critical framework for examining these connections. Cheryll Glotfelty, a pioneering scholar in the field, defines this approach in Glotfelty and Fromm (1996), “Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment... It studies the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature” (pp. 18–19).

Glotfelty’s perspective highlights the fundamental premise of ecocriticism and emphasises that literature is not merely a reflection of human thought and society but also an active participant in shaping environmental awareness. Through myths, poetry, fiction, and philosophical discourse, literature historically reinforces the idea that nature is not separate from culture but is deeply embedded within it. The stories of ancient civilisations—such

as those found in the *Mahabharata* or the *Ramayana*—depict nature as a living, sentient force, emphasising its role in sustaining human life, guiding moral conduct and inspiring spiritual transcendence.

In today's world, where environmental degradation threatens ecosystems and biodiversity, the relevance of ecocriticism has only intensified. The study of literature through an ecological lens reveals how historical narratives, cultural symbols, and artistic expressions have served as cautionary tales about the consequences of environmental negligence. From the veneration of sacred groves in Indian traditions to modern climate fiction that warns of ecological collapse, literature continues to play a pivotal role in promoting environmental responsibility.

By analysing the convergence of myth, literature, and ecological consciousness, ecocriticism urges us to recognise the value of nature beyond its utilitarian purposes. It encourages a shift from an anthropocentric worldview—where nature is merely a resource to be exploited—to an ecocentric perspective that acknowledges the interdependence of all life forms. In doing so, ecocriticism serves as both a theoretical and practical tool for advocating sustainable practices, promoting ecological literacy, and reinforcing humanity's moral obligation towards the planet.

Kalidasa, inspired by the myth of Shakuntala in the *Mahabharata*, composed *Abhijnanashakuntalam* ("The Recognition of Shakuntala"), which presents a more romanticised and aestheticised version of her tale. Here, Shakuntala appears as the ideal of feminine beauty, with her virtue and identity closely tied to love and longing. The play introduces the dramatic trope of a forgotten token—a ring—leading to Dushyanta's amnesia and adds an emotional depth to Shakuntala's character. In the process, her vulnerability is brought forth, making her plight all the more poignant.

Romila Thapar (2011), in her germinal work *Shakuntala: Texts, Readings, Histories*, explores the multifaceted evolution of Shakuntala across time and cultural contexts and traces her journey from her early appearance in the *Mahabharata* to Kalidasa's classical drama *Abhijnanashakuntalam* and beyond. Thapar analyses how these transformations in the depiction of Shakuntala reflect broader societal shifts, particularly in gender dynamics, power structures, and humanity's relationship with nature.

Shakuntala's connection to the forest—her upbringing in the hermitage—depicts her intrinsic bond with nature and elevates her as a symbol of ecological harmony and nurturance. Her journey from the forest to the palace is not just displacement but also embodies the tension between the natural and the civilised, a recurring theme in Indian cultural narratives. Rajan (1989) in *The Loom of Time* writes that "Shakuntala (Lady of Nature) moves out of the 'green world' of Nature into the gilded world of Dushyanta's palace and pleasure garden, and finds its resolution in yet another world—a higher world that is inaccessible to ordinary mortals and which partakes of the quality of timelessness" (p. 45).

2. Story of Shakuntala Rewritten by Utkarsh Patel

Utkarsh Patel, a former corporate professional and now a full-time professor of Comparative Mythology at Mumbai University, reinterprets the journeys of Indian mythical characters in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. His recent works include *Shakuntala: The Woman Wronged* (2015), *Satyavati* (2017), and *Indra: Rise and Fall of a Hero* (2022), among others. In his retelling of Shakuntala's story in *Shakuntala: The Woman Wronged* (2015), Patel deftly adds new layers and perspectives to the story and ushers one of *Mahabharata*'s most courageous yet often overshadowed female figures from forgotten corners to the centre stage. He adroitly weaves Shakuntala's courage, unwavering determination to combat injustice, and assertive nature into the fabric of his retelling. The relentless pursuit of the recognition that she and her son rightfully deserve is depicted with striking depth. Within

this narrative, Shakuntala emerges as a resolute figure who steadfastly refuses to submit to anyone, including the ruler of Hastinapur.

In an interview published on “Sruti’s Blog”, Utkarsh Patel discusses the inspiration behind his retelling of Shakuntala’s story. He shares the following:

I felt that Shakuntala has been a woman wronged, and I could feel that not much has changed in modern times. I also feel that the original Shakuntala as envisaged by Ved Vyasa was a much admirable character and not many knew about her, since majority of us had been brought up on the Kalidasa’s version. Thus, I felt it made sense to write about her. After reading this version, many might be able to change their opinion about the character. Today’s woman might be able to relate with her much more than before. Also, she could be a beacon of hope for many women, who have been left in the lurch by men in whom they had vested all the trust. (Patel 2016)

In the preface to *The Loom of Time* (1989), Chandra Rajan weaves an in-depth portrayal of Shakuntala in Kalidas’s *Abhijnanasakuntalam*. He describes Shakuntala as “not an apsara herself but the daughter of one, and she is presented as such in the play. Kalidasa does not let us forget that the heroine is not wholly of this mortal world of ours. She belongs to two worlds, sharing in the qualities of her parents who belonged to two different worlds, invested with nature’s beauty and spontaneous creative energies, as well as its holiness, and inheriting the ability for ascetic control that makes her a striking presence in the last act though she speaks few words” (p. 49).

Utkarsh Patel presents a bold and fiery Shakuntala, starkly different from Kalidasa’s demure and romanticised protagonist. His retelling challenges conventional narratives by giving Shakuntala a voice that is assertive, resilient, and unyielding. Instead of being portrayed as a passive victim of fate, Patel’s Shakuntala actively confronts injustice and takes control of her destiny. Urmi Chanda Vaz, in her book review of *Shakuntala: The Woman Wronged* (2015), highlights this distinct approach:

Patel revisits this story [*Shakuntala: The Woman Wronged*] with a very strong feminist streak, adds some new dimensions and gives us a fresh new retelling. The author’s USP is the humanisation of divine characters like Menaka and the introduction of a few ancillary myths to drive home the point of women’s exploitation. (Chanda-Vaz 2015)

3. Discussion

Shakuntala, the daughter of Rishi Vishwamitra and the celestial nymph Menaka, is abandoned by her parents after birth. Sage Kanva finds this infant in his forest ashram and raises her with care and love. She grows into a resilient woman, surrounded by the tranquillity and beauty of the wilderness. Deserted by her biological parents, she is nurtured in the embrace of Mother Nature, thus finding sanctuary and solace in the serene environment. Sage Kanva, not only an ardent devotee of nature but also a sage scientist, is profoundly familiar with the mechanisms of the natural world. His deep understanding of the natural world allows him to instil in Shakuntala a reverence for ecological balance and harmony, shaping her identity as a woman closely aligned with the rhythms of the earth.

When Sage Kanva discovers Shakuntala in the forest, she is surrounded by *shakunt* birds, from which her name is derived. According to a legend, after being abandoned by her birth parents, a flock of birds (*shakunt*) protects and nurtures her, which is how she comes to be named Shakuntala. Utkarsh Patel vividly captures this moment in *Shakuntala: The Woman Wronged*:

The sage's peaceful walk was distracted by an unusual sight. A few Shakunt birds seemed to be hovering around something. Stepping closer, he saw a child who was being provided shade by the birds. But where had this child come from? He hadn't heard about any child being born in the ashram! He bent down and picked up the child. She was one of the most beautiful children he had ever seen. (Patel 2015, p. 39)

Sage Kanva's decision to name the baby 'Shakuntala' further reinforces her deep connection with nature. Her name stands as a testament to her origin and her place within the forest's embrace. This act of naming intertwines her identity with the forest and marks her as a child of both the sacred sylvan space and its devotee. The act of naming becomes a declaration of her identity and binds her destiny to the forest and its inhabitants. Kanva joyfully utters, "Shakuntala, yes, Shakuntala! Isn't that an apt name? She who was found protected by the shakunt birds ought to be called Shakuntala" (Patel 2015, p. 41). Her name becomes more than a label—it emerges as a poetic dictum, an announcement that reveals her origin, her protectors, and her role within the natural world, her connection with her fellow sylvan beings.

Shakuntala's connection with nature closely aligns with the ideas in Val Plumwood's essay, "Nature in the Active Voice". Plumwood explores themes of nature's agency, ecological relationality, and the need for a cultural shift in how we perceive and interact with the natural world. She critiques the human-centred worldview that fails to recognize human "embeddedness in and dependency on nature". She argues that this perspective "distorts our perceptions and enframings" by making humans "insensitive to limits, dependencies, and interconnections of a non-human kind". The concept of hyperseparation—where the mind is equated solely with the human—leads to the denial of "both the mind-like aspects of nature and the nature-like aspects of the human". Plumwood further warns that reducing nature to a passive entity results in a false sense of autonomy, making anthropocentric frameworks hazardous to both non-human and human life. She calls for a shift towards relational, ecologically attuned thinking that acknowledges the agency and interconnectedness of all beings (Plumwood 2009).

Shakuntala grows up in an environment where the boundaries between humans and non-humans blend seamlessly. This harmonious coexistence embodies the interconnectedness of all living beings. Donna J. Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* and *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* challenge rigid binaries and emphasise the mutual shaping of human and non-human lives. In "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", Haraway states, "Situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as a slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and his authorship of "objective" knowledge" (Haraway 1988, p. 592). This philosophy reflects the vibrant co-existence of varied life forms in Sage Kanva's ashram, where the natural and human realms intertwine, creating a world rich in mutual respect and shared agency.

In the serene ambience of Kanva's ashram, Shakuntala blossoms like the very flowers she adorns herself with. Clad in a simple white dress, her wrists jingle with delicate flower bangles and anklets. Her actions reflect her profound bond with nature—she tends to plants and flowers with a love that transcends mere care, exemplifying her deep empathy for nature and her understanding of the interconnectedness of all living beings within the lush sanctuary of the ashram. Patel poignantly describes her actions as follows:

Shakuntala also tended to the tulasi, malati, roses, and the numerous flowering shrubs around her cottage. She loved the flowers and their fragrance. She never plucked the flowers from the shrubs as she did not want the flowers to

be separated from the plants which had given birth to them and were nurturing them. She understood the pain of separation. She collected only those flowers which had fallen on the ground as she understood that they needed care, now that they were separated from the plants which had nurtured them till then! All the ashram folk knew that they would be inviting trouble if Shakuntala caught them plucking flowers. She felt the same way towards the deer, cows, calves and goats which roamed around freely in the ashram. No one was allowed to be rude to the animals let alone beat them for any reason. The animals also reciprocated her love and care. The deer, however, were showered with more affection as they were Shakuntala's favourites. (Patel 2015, p. 69)

In her approach to tending plants, Shakuntala exhibits deep sensitivity. Her refusal to pluck flowers from their parent plants reflects her deep understanding of a child's pain of being separated from the mother. She allows the flowers to remain connected to their parent plants and honours the inherent bonds in the natural world, reiterating the significance of empathy, interconnectedness, and a sense of guardianship in cultivating a harmonious relationship with the environment. Moreover, her choice to collect only fallen flowers demonstrates a nuanced awareness of reciprocity and harmony within the environment. This practice echoes the holistic principle that accepting only what is naturally offered upholds the sustainability of the ecosystem. Sumana Biswas, in "Female Protagonists in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and Kalidasa's *Abhijnanashakuntalam*: An Ecofeminist Reading", concludes, "Shakuntala represents the women who, besides being indigenous custodians of seed and biodiversity, believe with reverence that the essence of seed followed by the entire vegetation is the continuity of life. Her tender care towards the domesticated deer and cattle along with the plants evince that women's work and knowledge in dairy farming and agriculture uniquely maintains ecological stability, sustainability, and productivity" (Biswas 2016, p. 212).

Shakuntala's actions embody the ecofeminist ideal that care, cooperation, and understanding are essential not only in human relationships but also in our connection with the natural world. Her genuine love and unwavering protection make the animals feel safe in her presence. Her affinity for her pet fawn Mrigakshi—a deer—shows her gentle and nurturing nature. This deer remains her constant companion throughout life. As Patel notes, "Mrigakshi was the only one who could claim that she had been with Shakuntala through every episode in her life; that is, if she could speak!" (Patel 2015, p. 69). Mrigakshi symbolises "the harmony, innocence, and charm of the hermitage in the peaceful realms of the forest" (Khanal 2022, p. 232). Her interactions with the non-human forms of life reflect her belief in the sanctity of all life forms and depict a world where humans and animals coexist in peace and harmony.

During challenging times, Shakuntala's devoted pet fawn, Mrigakshi, remains constantly by her side. On Shakuntala's return to the ashram, "Mrigakshi lay at the door of the cottage, unwilling to leave her friend alone in her moment of distress" (Patel 2015, p. 58). The bond between Shakuntala and her pet fawn echoes the sentiments expressed by Walt Whitman in his famous poem "Animals" where the poet writes, "I think I could turn and live with animals. ...they are so placid and self-contained,/I stand and look at them sometimes half the day long" (Whitman 1855, p. 34). The connection also resonates with the belief that animals possess a heightened sensitivity to human emotions, offering a unique form of comfort and understanding that transcends the limitations of human communication. Patel movingly captures, "The best thing about Mrigakshi, thought Shakuntala, was that she never asked questions but understood everything Shakuntala told her" (Patel 2015, p. 57). This dynamic reflects Julia Kristeva's idea of *chora*, a pre-linguistic, rhythmic space where meaning emerges through effect, movement, and intuition rather than a structured

language. Their bond exists within a fluid domain, where emotions and understanding flow beyond the rigid boundaries of speech and reinforce an elemental, maternal bond of comfort and recognition (Kristeva 1984, pp. 25–26).

The bond shared by Shakuntala and Mrigakashi, the deer, echoes the ecofeminist concerns on the interconnectedness of the oppression of women, nonhumans, and the environment, as evinced by scholars like Greta Gaard and Carol J. Adams. Discussing animal rights, Greta Gaard (1993), professor at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls and curator of the anthology *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*, emphasises that the struggle for animal rights cannot be separated from the struggles and exploitation of women and the environment.

Similarly, Carol J. Adams (2016), in her seminal work *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, draws explicit parallels between patriarchy and the exploitation of animals and argues that female oppression and sexual violence have a direct tie to the way humans mistreat other species. Adams highlights how the animal industry systematically exploits female reproductive systems, particularly in the dairy and poultry industries, where cows and hens are repeatedly subjected to violence for their milk and eggs. She also critiques the objectification of both women and animals, asserting that these processes enable systemic violence, either under the guise of scientific testing, entertainment, or industrial production.

Shira Hertzano, spokeswoman for “Anonymous for Animal Rights” (an Israel-based Animal Rights Group), succinctly encapsulates this parallel stating “The woman was measured by the value the man got out of her, the animal was measured according to the value humans got out of it” (Namrata 2020). This sentiment reinforces Adams’s argument that the entitlement humans feel in regard to animals mirrors the entitlement men feel in relation to women in patriarchal societies. Ecofeminist theorists argue that as long as humans perpetuate violence against animals, they will continue to perpetuate violence against one another, linking speciesism to other forms of oppression, such as sexism, racism, classism, and casteism. Together, these ideas call for a more inclusive and intersectional understanding of ecofeminism—one that recognises the shared systems of exploitation affecting women, animals, and the environment.

Animals are commonly viewed as mechanical entities lacking emotions or intrinsic value, which leads to their consistent exploitation and objectification for human interests. Hunting, in the past, served as a means for men to express masculinity and courage. Joan Dunayer notes that “Humans generally justified their exploitation of other species by categorizing ‘animals’ as inferior and therefore rightfully subjugated while categorizing humans as superior and naturally entitled to dominate” (Dunayer 1995, p. 11). King Dushyant of Hastinapur comes to the forest to hunt animals where Shakuntala lives. He epitomises the patriarchal, authoritative figure who exercises his power and privilege through hunting expeditions. Dushyant’s hunting activities disrupt the forest’s natural balance and harmony and favour exploitation over sustainability.

The contrast between Dushyant and Shakuntala illustrates a profound nature-versus-culture dynamic that aligns with the ecofeminist viewpoint. Shakuntala’s protest and Dushyant’s violent and exploitative behaviour highlight her deep love and care for animals, positioning her as a voice for a more compassionate and interconnected relationship with the natural world. Her stance echoes Josephine Donovan’s assertion, “We should not kill, eat, torture, and exploit animals because they do not want to be so treated, and we know that. If we listen, we can hear them” (Donovan 1990, p. 375).

When Dushyant declares that, as the king of Hastinapur, he has the right to hunt and no one can stop him, Shakuntala objects, “This place does not belong to him, it belongs to my father. My father has nurtured this entire place like his personal garden. In this forest,

you won't even find a tiger hunting for deer or a lesser animal. No one sheds blood here; at least not animals!" (Patel 2015, p. 121). This statement highlights the stark contrast between Dushyant's exploitation of nature and Shakuntala's protection of it, emphasising her firm belief in harmonious coexistence with the environment. The portrayal of Dushyant and Shakuntala clearly illustrates the conflict between greed and compassion, conquest and cooperation, violence, and harmony.

Anita Nair elaborates on the relationship between women and nature, stating "[W]hether it is environmental protection or anything, women are the primary agents of change. Whatever rules are made, ultimately, women are the practitioners of change as they are engaged with the daily aspects of life in a daily basis... [W]omen, whether they belong to rural or urban areas, they can initiate change" (Krishna and Jha 2013, p. 148). Nair's perspective highlights the significant role women play in shaping attitudes and actions towards environmental conservation and sustainability.

Dushyant's attempts to justify his hunting by invoking the mythological figure Lord Rudra, associated with hunting a deer, reflects a common patriarchal tactic of using established narratives to justify harmful actions. Shakuntala, however, challenges this interpretation, offering an alternative reading of the myth in which Lord Rudra's actions symbolise protecting a daughter from unwanted advances rather than glorifying hunting. Her refusal to allow Dushyant to manipulate such narratives highlights the importance of rejecting patriarchal interpretations that seek to legitimise exploitation.

The logic behind Dushyant's hunting as a test of knowledge, concentration, judgment, or skill reveals a patriarchal perspective that positions humans, particularly those in power, above nature. This hierarchical mindset justifies the subjugation of animals for entertainment or the validation of human prowess. Shakuntala's response, specifically her comparison of animal behaviour with human behaviour, exposes this objectification of nature. She questions the following:

Alas, times have come to such a state that kings have to practice killing mute and harmless animals to test their skills. Can't the royal class, who have access to so much learning, devise new methods of testing their skills? Is wasting a life the only way to save more lives? What are we discussing, my dear Mrigakshi? What then will be the difference between a hungry tiger and a human being, except that the former hunts to stay alive, but the latter hunts to kill!. (Patel 2015, p. 135)

This critique highlights the fundamental flaws in viewing animals as mere objects for human experimentation, urging a shift towards a more empathetic and sustainable worldview. Vandana Shiva explores the significance of nature in Indian cosmology in her essay *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (1988):

Women in India are an intimate part of nature, both in imagination and in practice. At, one level nature is symbolised as the embodiment of the feminine principle, and at another, she is nurtured by the feminine to produce life and provide sustenance. From the point of view of Indian cosmology, in both the exoteric and esoteric traditions, the world is produced and renewed by the dialectical play of creation and destruction, cohesion and disintegration. The tension between the opposites from which motion and movement arises is depicted as the first appearance of dynamic energy (Shakti). All existence arises from this primordial energy, which is the substance of everything, pervading everything. The manifestation of this power, this energy, is called nature (Prakriti). Nature, both animate and inanimate, is thus an expression of Shakti, the feminine and creative principle of the cosmos; in conjunction with the masculine principle (Purusha), Prakriti creates the world. Nature as Prakriti is inherently active, a powerful, productive

force in the dialectic of the creation, renewal and sustenance of all life. (Shiva 1988, p. 37)

Nature's powers are immense. The way nature absorbs and neutralises negativity from Shakuntala's life can be likened to the remarkable ability of plants to absorb toxins from their surroundings, purify the environment, and restore balance through processes like phytoextraction, phytostabilization, rhizofiltration, and phytovolatilization. When Shakuntala learns about her parentage and subsequent abandonment, she feels shattered and, in her remorse, turns to the one constant in her life—the forest, a sanctuary that has cradled her since birth. Nature embraces Shakuntala like a mother and soothes away her fears, anger, and grief. The forest enfolds Shakuntala's emotional burdens, assuaging the pain of her suffering.

By stabilising Shakuntala's inner turmoil, the forest ensures that her grief does not spread further and affects her physical health. This is akin to the mechanism of phytostabilization, in which metal-tolerant plants immobilize harmful elements in contaminated soils, as plants prevent heavy metals from migrating into groundwater or contaminating food chains (Ali et al. 2013; Yan et al. 2020). This scientific mechanism reinforces the enabling powers of the forest to provide solace to homo sapiens. Another parallel drawn is with that of Rhizofiltration, in which plant roots purify water by absorbing pollutants (Yan et al. 2020). Raised in the sylvan innocence and serenity, Shakuntala's roots are entwined with the roots of the trees in the forest, which makes her resilient to face the odds and atrocities of life. As roots transform wastewater into a pure form by altering the rhizosphere's pH, the forest's engulfing and unwavering presence serves as a steadfast anchor for the challenges to be faced throughout her life. Phytovolatilization—where plants convert pollutants into less harmful volatiles and release them into the atmosphere (Yan et al. 2020)—also explains how the forest enables Shakuntala to get rid of her pain. Much like the plants disperse lighter, purified elements into the air, the forest transforms Shakuntala's despair into buoyancy, enabling her to embrace hope and regain her strength.

The forest is not merely a backdrop but a living, nurturing force for Shakuntala. It serves both as a sanctuary and a guide, helping her transform pain into strength, much like plants purify their surroundings. Nature's capacity to heal, both physically and emotionally, reiterates the profound symbiosis between humans and the natural world. In the embrace of the forest, Shakuntala finds not just solace but resilience to rebuild her shattered world.

When Dushyant sees Shakuntala in the forest for the first time, he is enchanted by her beauty. Raised in a patriarchal world where the subjugation and control of the female body are accepted norms, he immediately proposes marriage and even suggests that they unite through Gandharva marriage. "Gandharva" derives from the Sanskrit word *gandharva*, meaning "fragrance" (New World Encyclopedia 2025), and refers to marriages of mutual consent, symbolising the free will of both partners. King Dushyant and Shakuntala, too, choose Gandharva marriage, which Catherine Benton in her book *Gods of Desire: Tales of Kamdeva* (2006) describes as a system as follows:

Male counterparts of apsaras, gandharvas are known to love women; and women fall instantly for the charms of gandharva men... In a gandharva marriage, a man and woman are so drawn to one another in mutual passion that they run off together without ceremony or consent of their families. (Benton 2006)

While Gandharva's marriage aligns well with the free spirit of nature, Shakuntala and Dushyant's marriage is not blessed with the comforting and healing powers of Mother Nature. After consummating their marriage, King Dushyant departs for his kingdom and forgets all about her. According to Ved Vyas's version of the story, Dushyant is too shy to accept and declare his love for a woman raised in the forest. Kalidasa, in his story, depicts

Dushyant suffering from partial amnesia, an effect of Saint Durvasa's curse, which erases all memories of his wife. Left with no choice, Shakuntala gives birth to a son and is left to raise the child alone. Sita, the devoted wife of Rama in the *Ramayana*, is unjustly banished to the forest when a washerman questions her purity. In the solitude of Sage Valmiki's *ashram*, she gives birth to twins, Lava and Kusha, and raises them alone as a single parent. Shakuntala too rears her son in the forest alone. R. Borah discusses the similarity, "Sita too played her part by teaching her sons, Lav and Kush the importance of nature and how to coexist peacefully without conflict with nature. They grew up to love and respect nature in all its forms, something their civilized palace would have failed to teach them" (Borah 2019, p. 469). Forest serves both as a physical and symbolic space of empowerment for Shakuntala and provides her with strength and courage, thus enabling her to raise her son in a supportive environment.

Six years pass, and Shakuntala hears nothing from Dushyant. She decides to visit Dushyant's kingdom, Hastinapur, not for her own sake but for the sake of her son, Sarvadaman. She wants to secure a better education and stronger skills for her son. The inmates of the ashram, along with the forest and animals, grieve at her departure:

The morning was gloomy, as if heralding the sadness of the day. The ashram had seen the child brought up on its premises but now had to make peace with the idea that Shakuntala was moving on. Mrigakashi refused to budge from her spot, as if to lodge a silent protest on her being left alone, which she had never been in her long life. The plants woke up in tears and the birds declined to chirp. (Patel 2015, p. 233)

In Utkarsh Patel's retelling, readers hear Shakuntala's voice—her counsel challenges societal norms that perpetuate the mistreatment of women and prompts a re-evaluation of collective values. She articulates, "Remember, my son, it is a woman who brings you on earth and it is the same woman who holds your finger and teaches you to walk. Later, another woman befriends you and journeys the world with you and makes your life heaven on earth. At every stage of your life, respect the woman for who she is to you" (Patel 2015, p. 259). Her advice to her son upholds the worldview that seeks to dismantle hierarchical and exploitative systems in favour of nurturing, equitable relationships with both women and the environment. By echoing the interconnectedness of women and nature, Shakuntala's guidance embodies a holistic perspective reminiscent of the principles of ecofeminism. In the age-old epic, Shakuntala is also depicted as a strong, confident, and independent woman capable of defending herself. However, her voice and feelings are never made known to the readers. She fights for her rights, argues, and debates, yet it is only through divine intervention that Dushyant ultimately consents to accept her as his wife and Bharata as his son.

In Patel's retelling, Shakuntala—long portrayed as the demure and submissive one—finally finds her voice, "I can't imagine spending my life with a man who loved me not for what I am, but for my body" (Patel 2015, p. 257). The forest, thus, becomes her lyre, enabling her to liberate herself from the constraints of patriarchal norms that tend to commodify and exploit women. It serves as a heaven where Shakuntala can reclaim her autonomy and individuality, "to employ the power to act, speak or think without externally imposed restraints" (Kane 2017, p. 182). Shakuntala's refusal to conform to the rigid expectations of the Hastinapur palace can be interpreted as a powerful act of resistance against the patriarchal society's attempts to confine her within boundaries, "I didn't come here for myself; I came here only to ensure that our son gets his rightful due. Having done that, I have no urge or need to stay here. One more moment and it would mean compromising with my self-esteem" (Patel 2015, p. 257).

Shakuntala's journey highlights the parallel struggles of women and nature as both seek liberation and restoration within a patriarchal paradigm, striving to break free from systems of control and exploitation. By choosing an independent life in the forest over the life of a queen in Hastinapur's palace, the titular figure asserts her desire for a more harmonious and interconnected existence, rejecting the notion of human dominance over nature and women. William Cronon critiques the wilderness trope, arguing that it perpetuates the illusion that nature is the unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilisation that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover our true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives. Most of all, it is the ultimate landscape of authenticity (Cronon 1996, p. 80). In the heart of the forest, far from the pretences of the king's palace, Shakuntala finds not just freedom but discovers her true self. In Mother Nature's embrace, she discovers solace, serenity, and power more profound than kingdoms and kingship could offer. She remains a child of nature.

The masculinist model of progress prioritises the accumulation of wealth, often at the expense of destroying the 'other' kinds of wealth produced by women and nature. King Dushyant rules over Hastinapur, while Shakuntala resides in Rishi Kanva's ashram and nurtures the plants and animals around the sacred space. Dushyant arrives in the forest to hunt, viewing its flora and fauna as valuable only when controlled or subdued. He attacks and injures a deer, which fills Shakuntala with sorrow. To him, women—like nature—hold no intellectual or economic significance; both are perceived as passive and ignorant. Confident as the bearer of knowledge and power, he does not think twice before exploiting the wealth of nature (deer) and the body of Shakuntala.

Shakuntala, having imbibed lessons of resilience and strength from Mother Nature, firmly challenges Dushyant, who, drunk with power and masculine dominance, uses selfish logic to seek her consent and then subjugates and exploits her. In her defiance, Shakuntala declares, "I am Shakuntala and I am not someone who suffers in silence and sheds tears in isolation. I am like the snake that opens up its hood, and strikes, strikes the fear of life and God in men like you. I am the lightning, the sound of which reverberates the world over and not just at the place it strikes" (Patel 2015, p. 244). Shakuntala's assertion closely mirrors the dissent expressed by Drishadvati in Madhavi Mahadevan's (2020) novel *Bride of the Forest: The Untold Story of Yayati's Daughter*, wherein Drishadvati rejects the idea of living in the palace and returns to the womb of the forest stating, "I want to be free, then how can I spend a lifetime in a palace?" (p. 319). Seeking liberation from the dominant exploitative forces, Drishadvati and many other mythological women sought solace in the lap of nature.

Shakuntala, as depicted in various texts, either agrees to her husband's proposal to live with him in his palace or readily forgives Dushyant and says, "O Lord It must be that I had to reap the consequences of some wrongdoing on my part in a former birth; otherwise, how could my noble Lord, so compassionate by nature, have acted in such an unfeeling manner towards me" (Rajan 1989, p. 276). Shakuntala in Utkarsh Patel's retelling is unforgiving. She leaves her son in Dushyant's care and, just as her sisters Sita and Drishadvati, departs into the embrace of Mother Nature. Her once-muted voice challenges the masculine culture for structuring the world in a way where women and nature are considered as "worthless and waste, that they are obstacles to Progress and must be sacrificed" (Shiva 1988, p. 214). Seeking feminine solace, she retreats to the forest, away from the masculine world.

Women withdraw from male-dominated spaces not in surrender, but in quiet defiance, hoping their absence will force patriarchy to confront its fragmented worldview and reconstruct itself into a more inclusive system. The suffocating grip of a self-serving, capitalist patriarchy leaves women gasping for breath, yearning for liberation, peace, and the sanctuary of nature—a space untouched by oppression. Rajan observes, "[Shakuntala]

a fiery and spirited girl who fights tenaciously for her son's rights. She literally reads the Law to the king when she finds him obdurate, gives him such a tongue-lashing that we practically see him squirming on his bejewelled throne" (Rajan 1989, p. 94). After winning her battle, Shakuntala does not return to the king; instead, she discards him forever, letting her absence serve as a form of retribution. Her departure, like that of countless other women, carries with it the hope that patriarchy, shaken by their retreat, will finally recognize its fissures and be compelled to change. In stepping away, women like Shakuntala do not simply escape—they reclaim. They seek not just refuge, but renewal, believing that one day, their absence will urge patriarchy to integrate men, women, and nature into a shared, harmonious existence.

Shakuntala is determined to leave Sarvadaman, her son, in Dushyant's care. She has learned that there was a dearth of boys raised by empowered women and understood how such individuals could bring meaningful change. Before returning to the forest, Shakuntala roars:

I leave Sarvadaman with you, as he is your responsibility and the heir to the throne and thus, the hope of Hastinapur. But, from today onwards, he will remind you of all the wrongs heaped on me. Every day, he will remind you of my existence and refusal to bear injustices meted out to me. O king of Hastinapur, it's your turn to feel the pain of love, if there was any, and separation, which is for sure. From today, you will feel the pain of being abandoned, with a difference though...because in your case, you will know the cause of being abandoned. (Patel 2015, p. 259)

While bidding farewell to her son, Shakuntala gifts him with a piece of advice. She tells him that "'the earth tears herself to allow the sapling to sprout, but if man hurts mother earth, she opens her mouth and swallows all in her bottomless pits'" (Patel 2015, p. 260). She wants her son to be respectful towards nature and women.

4. Conclusions

Shakuntala finds true power not in the grandeur of palaces but in the quiet solitude of nature. She discards the confines of royal luxury and instead chooses an ecological existence, aligning her life with the rhythms of the earth. In doing so, she reaffirms an ancient truth—that nature is not merely a backdrop to human existence but a living, breathing force of sustenance and renewal.

Her return to the wilderness is more than a physical retreat; it is a spiritual homecoming. Mother Earth, ever-nurturing, welcomes her back into her embrace. The forest, the wisdom of the rivers, and her sylvan sisters provide her with solace. This union with the natural world is not just symbolic—it actively strengthens biodiversity and reinforces the delicate balance of life where every element coexists in harmony. The forest becomes her teacher, showing her a path beyond human conflicts—a way of being that is sustainable, just, and deeply fulfilling. Inclusivity in the green space leads to the recovery of the feminine principle, which implies creating life-enhancing societies where all human and non-human forms live in peaceful coexistence. Nature becomes a hallowed space for Shakuntala, which allows her to turn inwards and draw spiritual strength. The constant support of her sylvan sisters and the unconditional love of Mother Nature works as a catalyst for her transformation from a submissive woman to one who defies patriarchal norms.

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