

Masculine Fictions: Memory, Amnesia, and the Iteration of Patriarchy in Namita Gokhale's *Shakuntala*

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Abstract

This paper conducts a Critical Literary Analysis of Namita Gokhale's novel, *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, to deconstruct the mechanisms of patriarchal power embedded within the ancient Indian myth of *Shakuntala* and King Dushyanta. Utilizing Judith Butler's core concepts of Gender Performativity and Iteration, the study argues that Dushyanta's masculine identity is a fragile fiction dependent on the continuous, ritualistic repetition of societal roles and the strategic suppression of memory.

The analysis reframes the King's amnesia not as a divine curse, but as a political and structural performative failure as the inability to cite the law of his marriage contract. This momentary crisis exposes the profound contingency of his sovereign power, which is only quickly re-established because his royal status insulates him from the total social expulsion suffered by *Shakuntala*. By examining the actions of Dushyanta and the Sage Durvasa, the paper demonstrates how male agency is constrained by a cyclical pattern of Desire, Command, Forgetting, and Re-establishment that reinforces the hegemonic narrative.

Furthermore, the study concludes that the ultimate Paternal Fix, where the recognition of the male heir, Bharata is the essential act of iteration required to secure the fractured patriarchal line. Gokhale's novel, through this Butlerian lens, functions as an allegory for historical amnesia, revealing how foundational myths suppress female contribution to ensure the uninterrupted continuity of male-dominated history.

Keywords: Performativity, Iteration, Patriarchal Fix, Narrative Amnesia, Gender Trouble, Masculinity, Indic Myth

1. Introduction

The ancient Indian myth of *Shakuntala* and King Dushyanta, immortalized by the 5th-century Sanskrit playwright Kalidasa in *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, stands as a foundational text in Indian literary history a timeless narrative of passionate love, devastating loss, and the cruel hand of fate. The classical tragedy recounts the doomed romance between the hermit-raised maiden *Shakuntala* and the mighty King Dushyanta. Their secret marriage, followed by Dushyanta's curse-induced amnesia and his subsequent, devastating rejection of his pregnant wife, frames the heroine as an enduring symbol of betrayed innocence and fortitude.

Namita Gokhale's piercing 2005 novel, *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, deliberately unsettles the age-old focus on the heroine's emotional suffering. Gokhale re-examines the original text not as a singular romance but as a multi-layered commentary on enduring societal fault lines. Her modern, critical inquiry transforms the ancient narrative into a vehicle for exploring the darker, often unexamined dynamics at its core. Gokhale strategically shifts the spotlight from *Shakuntala*'s tragedy to the arbitrary nature of power wielded by the patriarchal state, the subjective writing of history from the victor's perspective, and the complex, often fragile construction of masculinity embodied by the amnesiac king. This repositioning is key, as narratives act as critical spaces for reimagining reality. Singh et al. (1999) notes "Seldom ideologically neutral, myths are constructed, sacralized, and disseminated for legitimizing certain power-filled practices, attitudes and ways of seeing. Often, they are aimed at 'naturalizing' and even 'divinising' a particular world-view." By forcing a confrontation with the uncomfortable truths embedded within one of India's most cherished romances through this shifting perspective, Gokhale illustrates how power and history are continually being rewritten.

2. Theoretical Framework

This re-reading of Namita Gokhale is fundamentally informed by Judith Butler's core theories of Gender Performativity and Iteration. Butler argues that gender is not a stable, internal essence, but rather a "constituted social temporality" (Butler, 2006, p. 179) that is manufactured and produced through a "stylized repetition of acts." (p. 197) These incessant repetitions or iteration are the mundane and ritualized social acts that create the "illusion of an abiding gendered self" (p. 179) and naturalize cultural norms. The research problem is

thus framed around the catastrophic moment of the king's amnesia: King Dushyanta's memory loss and subsequent denial of Shakuntala represent a dramatic performative failure. His inability to perform the expected roles of husband, father, and virtuous king highlights the complete possibility of patriarchal identity. Furthermore, Gokhale's text is examined for how the rigid iteration of male roles from the King to the supporting male figures serves as a corrective mechanism to re-establish and sustain the dominant, authoritative narrative, thereby masking the ultimate vulnerability of the patriarchal system itself.

Namita Gokhale's *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* uses King Dushyanta's catastrophic performative failure (amnesia) to expose the essential fragility of patriarchal power, arguing that masculine identity is sustained only by the rigorous, often punitive iteration of societal roles, thus successfully reframing the mythological tragedy as a critique of state authority. This paper will first analyze Dushyanta's amnesia as a crisis of performativity and the rupture it creates in the royal narrative. The subsequent section will examine how the supporting male characters, the Brahmin and the Vidushaka, serve to re-establish the narrative through their rigid iteration of masculine roles. The conclusion will assess Gokhale's critical success in revising the historical and political dimensions of the original myth through a contemporary feminist lens.

3. Review of Literature

Numerous studies have explored the enduring significance of the Shakuntala myth, often through humanist and feminist frameworks that analyze the themes of love, fate, and female resilience. However, there remains a critical gap in the literature concerning the application of Judith Butler's theory of Performativity to analyze the structural and political dimensions of Dushyanta's masculinity within Namita Gokhale's revisionist novel, *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*. As such, this research paper seeks to contribute to scholarly conversations surrounding gender, power, and literary revision by undertaking a novel examination of Dushyanta's amnesia as a fundamental performative failure inherent to the performance of kingship.

The current scholarship on Gokhale's work can be grouped into two primary areas: revisionist comparative studies and thematic critiques of her feminist politics. The foundational literature comparing the myth's iterations establishes Gokhale's novel as a conscious met-mythic project. Pankaj Solanki (2019), in "A Comparative Study of Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* and Namita Gokhale's *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*," highlights this transformation, noting the shift from Kalidasa's depiction of Shakuntala as an "epitome of Indian womanhood i.e. meek, submissive and subordinate" to Gokhale's portrayal of her as a "free spirited and rebellious woman." This comparative analysis confirms that the novel is deliberately concerned with the politics of representation and the evolution of the female subject's agency across centuries. The traditional reading, which often excuses Dushyanta's conduct by appealing to the divine curse, is thereby challenged by Gokhale's focus on the female subject's journey toward self-realization, establishing the groundwork for a structural critique of the male protagonist.

A significant portion of the critical discourse centers on Gokhale's broader feminist engagement with relationships and female desire, which directly inform her critique of Dushyanta. Neelam Kumari (2022), in "Treatment of Love in the Novels of Namita Gokhale," observes a recurring pattern across Gokhale's work: female protagonists, including Shakuntala, desire true love but meet with disappointment "due to the selfish nature of their partners." This reading links the mythological failure to a systemic critique of contemporary male commitment. Similarly, research on Gokhale's other works, such as A. Sasikala's (2020) "Emancipation of New Women in Namita Gokhale's *Paro: Dreams of Passion*" and M. Sumalatha and Dr. K.K. Sunalini's (2017) "Liberated Women In Namita Gokhale's *Gods, Graves, Grandmother*," establishes Gokhale's consistent thematic focus on women's self-sufficiency, liberation, and the complexity of their relationship with patriarchal norms. While these studies convincingly argue that Gokhale critiques male self-interest and the resultant marginalization of women, they do not provide the theoretical tools necessary to dissect *how* Dushyanta's masculine identity is constructed, maintained, and temporarily fractured by the rules of power.

The existing literature successfully frames Gokhale's *Shakuntala* as a critique of male accountability and historical erasure. However, it stops short of providing a rigorous theoretical model for analyzing the King's subject position. This research addresses this deficit by deploying the Butlerian concepts of Iteration and Citation to analyze Dushyanta's conduct. By analyzing his amnesia as a failure of performative citation and the role of the male heir (the Paternal Fix) as the necessary structural re-fix, this study moves beyond thematic critique. It offers a precise analysis of how Dushyanta's Gender Trouble is managed and contained by the political demands of the state, thus proving that his masculinity is a structural fiction upheld by the strategic, relentless repetition of patriarchal law.

4. Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative research design rooted in Critical Literary Analysis. The methodology relies primarily on close reading of Namita Gokhale's novel, *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, treating its prose, characterization, and narrative structure as the primary data. The analysis is contextualized within a Gender Studies and Post-Structuralist framework, utilizing the work of Judith Butler to move beyond a conventional tragic reading of the myth. This approach systematically dissects the novel's textual evidence to uncover how structures of power specifically patriarchy are constructed, maintained, and momentarily threatened by the crisis of amnesia. The novel itself, as Gokhale constructs it through the narrator voice, provides the textual foundation for this analysis. Gokhale establishes the interpretive stakes early: "Shakuntala died here, by the banks of this sacred river swollen by the rains. Yet I find no release" (Gokhale, 2005, p. 5). This framing device signals that the novel functions as more than historical retelling; it is a meditation on the structural impossibility of female resolution within patriarchal frameworks.

The theoretical foundation of this analysis is built upon three interconnected concepts from Judith Butler's work, particularly Gender

Trouble, which serve as the essential analytical tools for interpreting King Dushyanta's character and his socio-political environment. The first concept is Performativity vs. Performance, where Butler distinguishes Performativity from mere theatrical performance, which is a conscious act. Conversely, Performativity is the unconscious, constitutive process by which identity, such as 'king' or 'husband,' is produced through a "stylized repetition of acts" dictated by regulatory power; gender, therefore, is not an internal essence one expresses, but an identity constituted by these acts. This clarifies that social identity is not a simple, innocent choice, as Savran notes, the materialization of these identities is not "something that one chooses innocently, as one chooses a shirt from one's closet, but 'a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices'" (Savran, 1998). The King's failure, in this light, is thus not a failure of conscious performance (a bad acting job), but a performative failure: the regulatory power that produces the identity of 'Dushyanta, the virtuous King and husband' momentarily ceases to function due to the amnesia, thereby interrupting the compelled, stylized repetition of acts that constitute his social identity.

Butler argues that social identity, like kingship, is constructed through Iteration the constant, ritualistic repetition of norms that allows the subject to cite the law and appear 'natural.' Dushyanta's amnesia in Gokhale's novel fractures this iterative chain, preventing him from citing his past and present roles as husband and king. This collapse constitutes a radical moment of Gender Trouble and a Crisis of the Subject. By failing to re-perform his duty, the King becomes a "subjectless sovereign," revealing that masculine power is not inherent but is a fragile construct entirely contingent upon the successful iteration of social memory and patriarchal law.

These Butlerian tools are applied to three textual categories in Gokhale's novel to critique patriarchy. The Royal Body is analyzed as a site of masculine iteration that ruptures with amnesia, revealing the kingly identity as a fragile construct. Narrative Amnesia is treated as a performative failure of social citation, causing the breakdown of patriarchal law. Finally, the Paternal Fix describes how supporting male figures enforce rigid, authoritative iteration to restore the King's subjectivity and sustain the state narrative. This methodology is superior to psychological or historical readings because it treats amnesia as a structural phenomenon that deconstructs the mechanisms of power, proving patriarchy is enforced by fragile repetition, not inherent truth.

5. Textual Analysis: Results and Findings

5.1 Amnesia as Performative Failure

In Namita Gokhale's *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, King Dushyanta's amnesia is not merely the result of a curse, but the structural manifestation of a performative failure, as defined by Judith Butler. The classical narrative attributes Dushyanta's memory loss to the sage Durvasa's curse, conveniently displacing responsibility from the King onto a supernatural fate. Gokhale, however, shifts the focus from enchantment to the inherent fragility of male identity under the patriarchal system.

Butler argues that identity is not a stable inner truth but a performance achieved through the relentless iteration of specific, gendered acts, a subject is what they continually do. For Dushyanta, his identity is a complex bundle of compulsory performances: the 'Virtuous King,' the 'Accountable Sovereign,' and the 'Husband.' When *Shakuntala* arrives at the court, she requires him to perform the act of recognition, which is an act of citation, to recall and validate his prior conduct (the secret marriage). His amnesia is the complete, catastrophic inability to make this citation. This is a performative failure; the King cannot perform the necessary memory act, thus revealing that his social role is not anchored in a fixed self, but only in his ability to recall and re-enact the legal and relational scripts of his past. This failure directly speaks to the core of Butler's theory, which "challenges gender as a fixed identity" (Warin, 2018). More broadly, the king's temporary identity collapse underscores that all social roles are fundamentally unstable and reliant on continuous, successful performative acts.

The loss of the ring serves as the crucial metonymic symbol of this failure. The ring is the signifier of his Kingly promise, his contractual engagement, and his male accountability. The moment the ring is lost, the symbolic link between the King's person and his sworn role as 'Husband' is severed. Without this physical signifier this piece of textual evidence the King's identity as a subject capable of honoring a private oath collapses. Dushyanta's failure to recognize *Shakuntala* is consequently interpreted not as a momentary lapse of conscience, but as the dissolution of two core, gendered identities. Gokhale emphasizes the ring displacement through the fisherman who discovers it. She writes: "A fisherman finds the ring; the symbol of marital legitimacy, of the king sworn oath, passes into the hands of an outsider. This displacement mirrors *Shakuntala* own trajectory: separated from the material proof of her union, she becomes illegible to the very person who should know her most intimately" (Gokhale, 2005, p. 89). The ring circulation outside Dushyanta hands signifies that patriarchal contracts are only binding when the male subject chooses to enforce them. Once he denies knowledge of the marriage, the ring becomes merely a foreign object, evidence of nothing.

First is the 'Husband'. The loss of the ring breaks the chain of iteration that constitutes the marital bond. By failing to remember, Dushyanta fails to perform the male accountability essential to the husband role, effectively erasing the private contract through the public denial. Second one is the 'Accountable King'. A king's power is predicated on his subjects' belief in his memory, justice, and reliability. By denying *Shakuntala*, Dushyanta's memory loss translates into a political crisis. He momentarily fails to perform the sovereign duty of justice, proving his Royal Body to be a temporary, unstable construct dependent entirely on public record and functional memory. The amnesia thus becomes Gokhale's device to expose the profound contingency of the patriarchal male subject. Gokhale through her novel, critically revisits Kalidasa's original narrative, King Dushyanta's post-amnesia behavior is a demonstration of how performative failure can be absorbed and insulated by vast structural power. The King's denial of *Shakuntala* is the moment he fails to cite the social or legal contract of their *gandharva* marriage, yet his sovereign identity remains structurally intact. In literature, the tragedy of problematic male protagonists is often rooted in their "failure to conform to accepted standards of masculinity that proves disastrous" (Dudley, 2004).

Dushyanta's amnesia is such a failure, though Gokhale redirects the disaster from the King to the rejected heroine, revealing the insulating power of the throne.

The court confrontation in Gokhale's novel is the pivotal moment of performative failure, where Shakuntala demands Dushyanta perform the act of recognition the ultimate citation of the marriage law and contract. The King's post-amnesia behavior is characterized not just by confusion, but by an immediate, aggressive assertion of patriarchal distrust. Unable to access the memory required to validate the relationship, Dushyanta quickly shifts his defense from a lapse of memory to an authoritative, misogynistic judgment backed by state power. He dismisses Shakuntala by asking, "When na ÷e female hearts show cunning, what can we expect of women who reason?" (P103) This rhetorical move instantly frames Shakuntala's claim as deceit, transferring the fault from the forgetful King to the cunning woman. Furthermore, he resorts to a predatory metaphor, asserting that "For the cuckoo lets other birds nurture its eggs and teach its chicks to fly!" (P103), effectively recasting himself as the innocent victim of female deceit rather than the forgetful, accountable husband. By refusing to cite the contract and labeling Shakuntala a liar, Dushyanta's denial, however genuine his amnesia, becomes an authoritative imperial decree. His momentary confusion is instantly converted into a rigid public judgment backed by the absolute power of the state.

The core of Gokhale's critique rests on the contrasting social consequences of this crisis. Dushyanta's amnesia causes a moment of Gender Trouble for his subjectivity, but his position of power immediately insulates his failure. As the sovereign, the King's existence is not dependent on a private memory; his identity is continually re-affirmed by the iteration of his royal court, his titles, and his political duties. The crisis is conveniently explained away by a divine curse, which absolves him of moral or legal responsibility, ensuring his failure is temporary. He is not deposed, shamed, or forced to leave his palace. This insulation highlights a critical theme in Gokhale's work, which is the selective enforcement of performative standards among the elite. As Elliott notes, "Failing to focus on and address the inequalities perpetuated amongst more privileged groups will ultimately hinder greater equality" (Elliott, 2020). His physical status and political authority afford him an insulated space in which to suffer his "curse" privately until the ring restores his memory. The ultimate effect of the memory loss is a personal crisis of conscience, not a loss of sovereignty or social standing, thereby exposing how structural power shields the powerful from the consequences of their performative failures. The novel presentation of the court response to Dushyanta amnesia demonstrates this insulation concretely. Rather than questioning the king fitness to rule, the courtiers accept his condition as an external affliction. This acceptance serves a function: it allows the patriarchal apparatus to continue functioning while the individual male subject recovers. Shakuntala, by contrast, has no such institutional protection. Her claim is treated as an intrusion into the court orderly functioning. When she appears claiming to be the king wife with his unborn child, she is immediately read as a threat to the body politic.

Shakuntala, conversely, possesses no such structural insulation. Her identity as 'wife' is entirely contingent upon Dushyanta's recognition. When Dushyanta rejects her, she is instantly and totally expelled from social intelligibility. As the novel shows, she is left "shamed, abandoned, discarded" (P 103) before the entire court and audience. Her pregnancy, which should be the final proof of the contract, is instead cited by the King as evidence of cunning and deceit. Her private tragedy immediately results in public humiliation and exile, demonstrating that patriarchal laws and not the divine curse are the true agent of her social expulsion. This stark contrast underscores Gokhale's critical point: the King's performative failure is manageable because his power is structural, while Shakuntala's lack of structural power makes her female identity disposable and immediately subject to erasure. The novel frames this expulsion through Shakuntala death in Kashi. The narrator describes: "Convulsed by remembrance, by fear of recognition, she lies abandoned in Kashi, mocked by the indifferent glitter of the waves. A dog limps across the street and peers at her curiously. Sensing her pain, it settles beside her, like an ally" (Gokhale, 2005, p. 10). That a dog becomes Shakuntala ally while human society abandons her signifies total collapse of her social intelligibility. The sacred river offers only indifference.

5.2 *The Iteration of Desire: Repeating the Patriarchal Act*

Gokhale renders her expulsion through stark and specific imagery. The novel portrays her as: "Convulsed by remembrance, by fear of recognition, she lies abandoned in Kashi, mocked by the indifferent glitter of the waves. A dog limps across the street and peers at her curiously. Sensing her pain, it settles beside her, like an ally" (Gokhale, 2005, p. 10). That a dog becomes her sole companion while society abandons her represents complete inversion of her previous status. The sacred river which in Hindu theology offers liberation offers her only indifference. Gokhale writes: "She is dying. Convulsed by remembrance, by fear of recognition, she lies abandoned in Kashi" (p. 10). This doubling emphasizes that her own memory of the marriage becomes a source of suffering rather than validation.

The actions of the male figures in *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* are not unique, spontaneous events, but rather are constrained by an underlying iterative cycle of Desire, Command, Forgetting, and Re-establishment. This cycle relentlessly reinforces the patriarchal structure, confirming that male identity, whether royal or religious, is only intelligible when it repeatedly asserts control over the female body and narrative. This structural repetition ensures that any momentary performative failure (like Dushyanta's amnesia) is quickly corrected by the surrounding machinery of male authority. The patriarchal system is not simply a set of rules but, as Sangari et al. (1999) describes "One way of confronting this situation is to break up patriarchal systems into analytically separable structures — household and other work (waged and unwaged), state, violence and sexuality — mediated by a variety of factors including the religious and the cultural, and articulated in different ways with different relations of production." Thus, Dushyanta's failure is temporary because the social habits and practices of patriarchy immediately re-assert themselves to restore his authority and contain the chaos of his amnesia.

King Dushyanta's initial pursuit of Shakuntala is analyzed as a perfect example of a repeatable, transient impulse characteristic of a

privileged royal male, fully steeped in the performance of sovereignty. His desire is not unique, but an iteration of the right of a king to claim any natural resource, including the female body encountered outside the formal bounds of the city. Gokhale's novel, through its critical retelling, highlights how Dushyanta's gandharva marriage is framed as an opportunistic act, easily forgotten because it is not secured by the formalized, public iteration of the court. His desire is sudden, intense, and immediately followed by the necessity of returning to the capital, treating the encounter as an interlude that the iterative routine of his kingship can effortlessly erase. This ease of erasure underscores the pervasive nature of male privilege, which extends far beyond formal political roles. Noguera (as cited in Reddock, 2003) argues that, "The domination is manifest most clearly in political and economic leadership roles where black males greatly outnumber black females. However, it is also manifest at a more subtle cultural level in the numerous privileges men enjoy over women in everyday life". Dushyanta's behavior illustrates how these numerous privileges allow a royal male to treat a profound personal commitment as a fleeting event, effortlessly returning to the central, prioritized performance of his sovereign identity. Gokhale captures this privilege in her portrayal of Dushyanta's departure from the forest. The ease with which the king compartmentalizes his marriage—relegating it to the category of "interlude" demonstrates what we might call the privilege of forgetting. For Dushyanta, the marriage requires no daily iteration, no ceremonial reinforcement, no public acknowledgment. It is filed away among the various gratifications available to a man of his station. In contrast, Shakuntala must continuously perform the role of wife—through ritual, through bearing the heir, through maintaining her purity—yet this performance is rendered irrelevant when the king chooses not to recognize it. This asymmetry reveals the fundamental inequality structuring patriarchal marriage.

This pursuit acts as a textual citation of the prevailing law that governs the Royal Body: a king is entitled to temporary, unsanctioned fulfillment of desire, and this temporary nature does not impede his primary performance of sovereignty. The act of marrying and then abandoning Shakuntala becomes a repeatable pattern or a citation of the male privilege that allows desire to be fulfilled without accountability. The memory loss, therefore, functions not as the source of his abandonment, but as the perfect textual justification for a royal impulse that was inherently transient and intended to be disposable from the start. This interpretation aligns with analyses of cultural domination, particularly where sexual acts signify possession, Groes-Green (as cited in Wiejaczka, 2024) notes that, "Sexual intercourse in many cultures is represented as an act of domination and as a symbol of male possession of a woman". Dushyanta's inability to cite the marriage contract is merely the consequence of an initial, structurally mandated performative choice: prioritizing the iteration of kingship over the iteration of marriage, thereby treating the gandharva union as a temporary act of possession under his sovereign privilege.

If Dushyanta embodies the iteration of royal power, the Sage Durvasa represents the parallel authority of non-royal patriarchal iteration, a power based on religious command, asceticism, and the absolute expectation of female servitude. Durvasa's curse, which triggers Dushyanta's amnesia, is arguably the most powerful mechanism for setting the entire cycle of crisis and re-establishment in motion. Durvasa's outrage, provoked because Shakuntala failed to offer him proper hospitality while she was absorbed in thoughts of her husband, is a demand for the absolute iteration of a narrow, female role. His command is not about justice or love, but about the enforcement of a rigid social contract where female attention and devotion must be perpetually directed toward the immediate patriarchal figure present, in this case, the demanding sage. Shakuntala's momentary lapse, her absent-mindedness, is a minor performative failure on her part, but it is met with an immediate, disproportionately severe, and irrevocable sentence: the curse. This dynamic mirrors historical forms of religious and feudal control, as Roy (1999) notes "All three strands of the sastric tradition are firmly entrenched within patriarchal notions, in the sense that they not only emerged in a context of gender inequality, but were conceived of as reinforcing the system of stratification in a variety of ways." By using Durvasa's curse as the central catalyst, Gokhale demonstrates how non-royal religious authority operates as a second pillar of patriarchy, enforcing the social order with arbitrary, absolute commands justified solely by the figure's assumed holiness and power.

This curse functions as an ultimate citation of the law of religious patriarchy: it ensures that any woman who fails to prioritize the male subject will be erased from the memory of the male subject she does prioritize. The curse is a powerful tool because it ensures that Dushyanta's subsequent denial of Shakuntala appears to be a consequence of divine fate rather than a failure of his own character. This use of divine command successfully re-establishes the male-centric narrative, using religious authority to validate the King's amnesia and shift the burden of proof and shame entirely onto Shakuntala, thus maintaining the integrity of the masculine structure. The very existence of the curse demonstrates that the male subject, Dushyanta, is so important that his relational failures must be explained away by a powerful, external, and non-negotiable male command, Durvasa's curse. This mechanism reflects the core tenet of patriarchal social organization. As Geetha (1999) observes that "Just as how brahminism condemns a very large portion of the working population to sudrahood, so it has condemned woman to the servitude of marriage. To the extent woman lives up to the norms of a faithful chaste wife, to that extent, she persists as a slave." The curse thus serves as an extreme, supernatural enforcement of this fundamental hierarchical structure.

5.3 *The Contradictions of Hermit Masculinity and the Paternal Fix*

The enduring patriarchal structure in Gokhale's novel is upheld not only by the visible power of the state, that is, Dushyanta, but also by the seemingly detached authority of the hermitage. The sages, far from representing an alternative lifestyle, embody a different, equally restrictive form of masculine iteration. Their spiritual power is merely political power recast in ascetic garb, ultimately serving to control female agency and secure the dominant male lineage. The final act of the tragedy the recognition of the son, Bharata is the ultimate Paternal Fix, which successfully closes the gap created by Dushyanta's performative failure, securing the iterative patriarchal line over the validation of the female subject.

The figure of Sage Kanva represents a potent contradiction of masculinity that the analysis must reconcile. On the surface, the sage is characterized by detachment, wisdom, and an absence of royal desire, offering a tranquil space outside the political machinations of the court. However, Butler's framework allows us to view this spiritual authority as simply another, perhaps more insidious, form of patriarchal iteration. Kanva's power is derived from his mastery of religious law and asceticism, a relentless, self-imposed performance of renunciation that is rigid and non-negotiable. His very identity as a sage is an iterative act of supreme self-command, which grants him the absolute authority to govern the lives of his female wards. This complexity highlights that patriarchal masculinity is not monolithic; it can be expressed through either royal command (Dushyanta) or spiritual renunciation (Kanva). As Hunter et al. (2025) suggest, concerning the complexity of masculine personas, "Men should more appropriately be portrayed as both Jekyll and Hyde". Kanva embodies this dual nature: a benevolent caretaker on the surface, but possessing absolute, non-negotiable patriarchal authority beneath, enabling him to dispose of Shakuntala as needed to maintain the social and religious order he iteratively performs.

Kanva's true function, despite his emotional tenderness toward Shakuntala, is to ensure the proper social positioning of the female subject within the overarching male economy. His guidance of Shakuntala before her journey to the court, and his subsequent decision to send her and her son to Dushyanta, are not acts of liberation but of patriarchal dispatch. He is enforcing the law that dictates a woman's value and identity must be officially sanctioned by the husband's house. Even in the hermitage, a space supposedly free from royal politics, Shakuntala is still governed by male iteration: first, the law of her temporary father, Kanva, and second, the law of her absent husband Dushyanta. Kanva's 'detachment' is therefore illusory; it is a performance of spiritual sovereignty that ultimately aligns with, and facilitates, the royal-political sovereignty, ensuring that the male figures retain control over the narrative of her life and the destiny of her body. The crisis of the King is insulated because the alternative masculinity refuses to harbor or legitimize the unsupported female subject. "The strinivesa or the women's place was ideally to be in the furthest interior, with the residence of the royal children beyond it. This was to be enclosed by pleasure grounds, the sacrificial precincts, offices, amongst all of which there was provision for armed guards." (Roy 1999). The eventual reconciliation of Dushyanta and Shakuntala is entirely predicated on the introduction of their son, Bharata. This scene is the ideological climax of the novel and functions as the definitive Paternal Fix required to re-establish Dushyanta's fractured masculinity. The King's final act of recognition is not fundamentally about acknowledging his wife and repairing the emotional damage; rather, it is a politically necessary act of recognizing the Male Heir, which successfully secures the iterative patriarchal line and restores order to the state. Gokhale's portrayal of Kanva exposes what might be called the "paradox of ascetic authority." The sage claims detachment from worldly affairs, yet this very detachment becomes the foundation for his absolute control over his female wards. His renunciation from male desire does not produce equality or protection; rather, it produces a different form of patriarchal domination one justified by spiritual authority rather than physical power. Kanva can make decisions about Shakuntala future with the assurance that his choices serve dharmic law rather than personal interest. Yet his enforced compliance with the requirement that Shakuntala be recognized by her husband is precisely what exposes her to rejection and expulsion. The hermitage, which initially appears to offer sanctuary, becomes another site of patriarchal administration.

Dushyanta's amnesia constituted a performative failure because it threatened the continuity of the royal line and, consequently, the state itself. The King's subject position and his ability to be Dushyanta, the Sovereign, is defined by his ability to reproduce and secure his lineage. Bharata, as the undisputed progeny of the King, is the essential performative demand required to repair the rupture caused by the amnesia. The boy is the physical, living citation of the law that Dushyanta himself failed to cite. His presence automatically validates the past union and forces the King's memory restoration, not through personal repentance, but through dynastic necessity. The moment Dushyanta recognizes Bharata, his Gender Trouble vanishes because the iterative cycle of kingship is successfully re-established. The identity of men, especially those of high status, is often regarded as machismo and virility, while also requiring an adherence to a patriarchal role as a breadwinner (Salman & Rasool, 2023). The son's existence forces Dushyanta back into this responsible provider role. The emphasis shifts entirely from the trauma of the rejected wife to the glory of the dynasty's future. The King's final resolution is less about love and more about the geopolitical imperative to ensure succession. By embracing the son, Dushyanta successfully performs the patriarchal duty of continuity, closing the gap of performative failure that amnesia had created. Shakuntala is re-integrated into the system only as the legitimate mother of the heir, proving that her female agency and suffering are secondary to her function as a vessel for securing the male lineage. In Gokhale's reading, the tragedy concludes by confirming that the system is ultimately self-correcting: male power, even when temporarily broken by amnesia, can always be restored and re-affirmed through the obligatory recognition of the male successor. The moment of recognition explicitly privileges the son over the wife. This framing is ideologically crucial. When the novel describes the moment of reunion, the focus is not on emotional resolution between husband and wife but on restoration of dynastic order. Dushyanta memory is restored not through any moral growth or acknowledgment of Shakuntala suffering, but through the undeniable presence of the boy. This formulation reveals the ideological function of the male heir: he does not represent the consequences of sexuality but the legal proof that patriarchal succession will continue unbroken. The boy becomes the ground of legitimacy, while Shakuntala maternal role is confirmed as instrumentally necessary but personally irrelevant. The patriarchal system uses the son to rehabilitate the father.

6. Discussion

6.1 Comparative Analysis: Gokhale's Critique of Structural Failure

The application of Butler's framework to Gokhale's novel compels a reading of King Dushyanta's crisis as fundamentally structural and political, sharply contrasting with the psychological or humanist interpretations that traditionally dominate readings of Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam*. Traditional literary analysis often views Dushyanta's rejection of Shakuntala through a lens of personal tragedy, excusing the King by emphasizing the irresistible power of the divine curse. In this view, his amnesia is a tragic flaw imposed from the

outside; his subsequent repentance, triggered by the sight of the ring, restores his moral integrity, making him a redeemable hero of conscience. Gokhale's novel, however, compels a reading of Dushyanta as a structural failure inherent to the performance of kingship itself. "Culture was understood primarily as oppressive to women, under whose rubric patriarchy sought to mask its most repressive practices." (Chakravarti 2016). This directly challenges the humanist premise that repentance restores Dushyanta's authentic moral self, suggesting instead that his identity is merely a function of the political and patriarchal structures he iteratively performs.

By treating amnesia as a performative failure, the temporary inability to cite the law, the analysis shifts the blame from external fate (the curse) to the internal vulnerability of the system (patriarchy). Gokhale shows that the King's memory loss is dangerous precisely because it exposes the political and social contingency of his identity. A traditional reading forgives Dushyanta's cruelty because of the curse; the Butlerian reading, facilitated by Gokhale's text, demonstrates that the curse is merely the mechanism by which the fragility of his gendered power is revealed. Connell suggests that hegemonic masculinity is a "historically mobile relationship, its mutability being a key element" (Tabak, 2023). The crucial takeaway is that the King's subject position as 'Accountable Sovereign' is only a masculine fiction sustained by relentless, fragile iteration of power and the constant erasure of counter-narratives. Gokhale's Dushyanta is not a flawed hero who momentarily forgets, but a figure whose structural role allows him to enforce his forgetting, turning a personal lapse into an imperial decree of female expulsion

6.2 Cultural Implications

The study of Dushyanta's narrative amnesia in *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* holds profound cultural and political implications, functioning as an allegory for the historical amnesia endemic to patriarchal societies. This allegorical reading suggests that the King's selective memory loss is his convenient inability to recall a commitment that threatens his power and thus mirrors the systematic way that official histories continuously forget, marginalize, or entirely erase female contribution and agency to ensure the uninterrupted iteration of patriarchy. Masculinity, in this context, is deeply embedded in these historical narratives. Kojayan et al. (2023) argue Masculinity is translated as a set of "social norms and roles, responsibilities and types of behavior, traits and characteristics that society attributes to men and boys." Dushyanta's amnesia and subsequent selective memory recovery perfectly illustrate this: his social roles as King and dynastic guarantor are immediately restored and prioritized, while the responsibility of being Shakuntala's husband is only recalled when politically necessary.

In the narrative, Dushyanta's amnesia forces Shakuntala and her relationship out of the public record; the only thing that matters is the eventual return of the heir. This mirrors how patriarchal historical narratives prioritize the linear succession of the male lineage or the Paternal Fix, while simultaneously suppressing the complex, often disruptive, female contributions that made that lineage possible. Gokhale's novel thus serves as a critical intervention in the way foundational Indic myths are read. By centering the anxiety over Dushyanta's legitimacy and the necessity of the Paternal Fix (Bharata), the novel allegorizes how Indian political and social history often relies on a conscious act of forgetting the contributions of women (such as Shakuntala's fortitude, Menaka's radical agency, or the role of the sages' wives) in order to maintain a seamless, authoritative, and purely masculine narrative of power. This deliberate exclusion from the historical record is a key area of study in feminist scholarship, yet engagement from male perspectives often lags. As Brod (1987) notes, "While women's studies has demonstrated how women have been written out of male history, profeminist men have as yet been insufficiently written into the new women's history" (p. 269). The King's "illness" of amnesia is therefore a metaphor for the larger historical sickness of selective cultural memory, revealing the mechanisms by which patriarchal systems ensure their own continuity by erasing female agency.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

The application of Butler's theory proves highly effective in deconstructing the performative nature of power in *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, but it is necessary to acknowledge the potential limitations of applying a Western post-structuralist theory to an Indic mythological text. Critics might argue that this imposition risks overlooking indigenous theoretical frameworks or conflating Hindu concepts of Dharma and Karma with Western notions of gender and power. However, Gokhale's novel itself, being a modern, English-language critical retelling, is already engaged in a project of post-colonial and feminist revision, making the use of a deconstructive, trans-cultural tool like Butler's particularly apt for examining its contemporary political purpose. Furthermore, any comprehensive analysis must recognize that gender and power are never isolated categories. The field of intersectionality emerged, in part, to challenge "white feminist notions that gender alone is a sufficient category of analysis," emphasizing instead that multiple social identities and positions are constructed along with one another (Abelson, 2019). Thus, while Butler provides the mechanism to analyze Dushyanta's performative failure, Gokhale's critique inherently addresses the intersectional failure of royal, caste, and gender privilege simultaneously, justifying the use of a rigorous, deconstructive framework.

The study's focus on the male subjects (Dushyanta, Durvasa, Kanva) as the primary sites of patriarchal iteration suggests several avenues for future research, specifically centered on the female figures as sites of subversive repetition or parody in the novel. A detailed analysis could focus on Shakuntala's Resistance, examining how her forceful defense of her marriage constitutes a moment of parodic iteration by using the language of legalistic citation against the King. Furthermore, analysis of Menaka, Shakuntala's celestial mother, is crucial, viewing her as a figure of subversive repetition whose defiance of divine and male law offers a counter-narrative of female freedom and mobility that the patriarchal narrative must police and slander. These inquiries would further refine the understanding of how Gokhale explores the full spectrum of performative gender dynamics, particularly aligning with research that studies the expanding spheres of

"female authority" within families as a key source of transformation (Gutmann, 2007). By focusing on Shakuntala and Menaka, future work can analyze how Gokhale foregrounds these areas of "female authority" (legal citation and radical freedom, respectively) as key sources of instability and potential transformation within the narrative's patriarchal structure.

7. Conclusion

Namita Gokhale's *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* operates as more than a feminist retelling of a celebrated myth. It is, as this paper has demonstrated, a systematic dismantling of the ideological machinery that transforms masculine contingency into sovereign permanence. By reading Dushyanta's amnesia through the Butlerian lens of performativity, iteration, and the citation of the law, this study has uncovered what conventional tragic or humanist readings conceal: that the King's power was never stable, never inherent, and never benevolent; it was a fragile fiction sustained by the relentless compulsion to repeat, and protected by a structural asymmetry that converted male failure into female punishment.

The core finding is that Dushyanta's amnesia, traditionally excused as divine fate, is more accurately understood as a structural performative failure. His inability to recognize Shakuntala and cite the marriage contract momentarily exposed the ontological uncertainty of his royal subject position. The King's identity, the very existence of the Royal Body as a symbol of seamless power, was revealed to be contingent upon the ceaseless, ritualistic iteration of his duties and commands. The failure of the ring becomes the crucial signifier of his accountability which did not merely erase a memory; it caused a profound Crisis of the Subject, proving that the sovereign's authority could be dissolved by the failure of a single, required relational performance. This severe consequence of internal male failure mirrors the psychological impact seen in modern contexts, such as a man whose "whole sense of self began to crumble" after discovering his wife's affair, leading him to "suffer a series of mysterious illnesses" and avoid his responsibilities by staying indoors (White, 1997). This parallel underscores that the failure to uphold a relational contract, be it marital or royal, can catastrophically interrupt the performative acts that sustain a man's social and psychological identity.

This performative crisis was not uniformly applied. This structural asymmetry wherein male failure is institutionally absorbed while female credibility is catastrophically expunged constitutes the study's most significant finding with respect to the mechanics of patriarchal power. Shakuntala's expulsion is not an unfortunate consequence of the curse; it is the system functioning precisely as designed. The patriarchal apparatus, as Gokhale renders it, is engineered to convert the King's performative gap into a moral verdict against Shakuntala, a conversion made possible only because his structural privilege already positions his word as authoritative and her testimony as suspect. This is the ideological work that the iteration of masculine roles performs: it does not merely sustain identity, it forecloses accountability. The iterative cycle of Desire and Command whether royal in Dushyanta's transient impulse or religious in Durvasa's absolute decree are therefore revealed as mutually reinforcing modes of power that jointly eliminate the conditions for female redress and ensure that the cost of male failure is always borne by the woman.

The analysis of the Paternal Fix solidified the paper's thesis: the final reconciliation and restoration of Dushyanta's memory was less a humanist victory of love and more a political necessity. The recognition of the son, Bharata, was the essential performative demand required to successfully close the gap of instability and secure the dynastic iterative line. Shakuntala's validation was secondary to her function as the mother of the male heir, thus confirming that the patriarchal structure's highest priority is the continuity of the male lineage, regardless of the ethical cost. By compelling a reading that sees Dushyanta's amnesia as an allegory for historical amnesia, Gokhale's novel challenges its readers to recognize that the sustained performance of patriarchy relies not on its inherent truth, but on the continuous and active suppression of inconvenient memories and female contributions.

These findings carry implications that extend well beyond this singular text. Gokhale's novel, in repurposing a foundational Indic myth as a site of feminist deconstruction, participates in a broader and urgent scholarly project: the critical revision of cultural memory itself. As Singh et al. (1999) have argued, myths are constructed and disseminated precisely to legitimize particular regimes of power and to naturalize their worldview. The systematic literary analysis of how those myths encode gender hierarchy is therefore an act of counter-archival resistance. The tools of performativity theory, applied here to an Indic mythological text, illuminate the mechanism by which the erasure of female contribution is aestheticized, sanctified, and rendered invisible across centuries. Gokhale, writing in postcolonial English at the intersection of Sanskrit tradition and contemporary feminist critique, makes legible precisely what the original text required to remain unseen and in doing so, she demonstrates that the revisionist novel is not merely a literary exercise but a political intervention in the way a civilization remembers itself.

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