

The SPL Journal of Literary Hermeneutics

A Biannual International Journal of Independent Critical Thinking

Double-blind, Peer-reviewed, and Open Access Journal in English

Vol. 6 Issue 2 Monsoon Edition 2026 e-ISSN 2583-1674 Page no. 12-26



www.literaryherm.org
www.cavemarkpublications.com
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64846/SPLJLH.2026.6134>
ORCID <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-2221-9714>



Sacred Ecology and Environmental Consciousness in Kalidasa's *Abhijnanashakuntalam*

Aishwarya Singh

Corresponding Author: Aishwarya Singh, Research Scholar, Maharaja Agrasen Himalaya Garhwal University, Pauri Garhwal University Uttarakhand, India,
aishwaryasingh2101@gmail.com

Research Article

Abstract

Keywords: Ecocriticism;
Abhijnanashakuntalam;
Forest Hermitage
Ecology; Environmental
Consciousness

Article History

Received: June 3, 2026

Revised: June 15, 2026

Accepted: July 1, 2026

Impact Factor
SJIF 3.975



ISSN 2583-1674 (SPLJLH)



This study explores the ecocritical dimensions of Abhijnanashakuntalam by focusing on the idea of sacred ecology and environmental consciousness embedded within the forest hermitage. While the play has traditionally been interpreted through aesthetic, romantic, and dramaturgical frameworks, its ecological vision has not been adequately explored within contemporary environmental humanities scholarship. The study addresses this gap by arguing that Kalidasa transforms nature from a poetic backdrop into an ethical and living presence that regulates human behaviour, emotional balance, and social order. Through close textual reading, the paper analyses representations of forests, rivers, animals, seasons, and ascetic life to examine how ecological consciousness is woven into the dramatic structure of the text. The argument also engages with the concept of forest hermitage ecology to demonstrate how the play resists anthropocentric attitudes and imagines a relational bond between humans and the non-human world. The study finds that Abhijnanashakuntalam presents an early ecological worldview in which ethical living depends upon harmony with nature. The forest emerges not merely as a setting but as a moral and ecological centre shaping human identity and responsibility. What emerges from this study is the recognition that classical Sanskrit literature contains sophisticated ecological insights that remain relevant to present environmental crises. It suggests the need to reposition Indian classical texts within global ecocritical discourse to develop culturally rooted models of environmental ethics and sustainability.

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Recent ecological disruptions have encouraged literary scholars to revisit the relationship between culture, ethics, and the natural world from new critical perspectives. Concerns about climate change, biodiversity loss, ecological degradation, and unsustainable development have contributed to the emergence of Environmental Humanities as an important interdisciplinary field that examines the complex relationship between culture and the natural world. Rather than treating environmental issues as purely scientific concerns, Environmental Humanities investigates how literature, philosophy, history, and cultural practices shape ecological perception and environmental ethics (Heise 3). Within this broader intellectual movement, ecocriticism has become a major critical approach, exploring the ways literary texts imagine, represent, and negotiate human relationships with nature (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii).

Although ecocritical scholarship has expanded considerably over the last three decades, much of its attention has remained focused on modern and contemporary texts. Classical literary traditions, particularly those outside the Western canon, have received comparatively less sustained attention. Sanskrit literature offers a rich archive for ecological inquiry, yet its environmental dimensions often remain overshadowed by aesthetic, religious, or philosophical interpretations. Among the most celebrated works of classical Sanskrit literature, Kalidasa's *Abhijnanashakuntalam* occupies a central position. The play has traditionally been studied for its poetic excellence, romantic narrative, dramatic structure, and rasa aesthetics (Keith 214). Such readings have undoubtedly contributed to our understanding of the text. However, they have also tended to foreground its romantic and aesthetic qualities while leaving its ecological imagination insufficiently explored. Beyond its aesthetic and dramatic appeal, the play also presents a vision of sacred ecology in which the natural world is invested with ethical significance and spiritual value.

This imbalance points toward a significant critical problem. Nature in *Abhijnanashakuntalam* is frequently treated as a decorative backdrop that enhances the emotional atmosphere of the narrative. Yet a closer reading suggests that the natural world performs a far more complex function. Forests, rivers, animals, plants, and seasonal cycles actively participate in shaping human

experience and ethical conduct. The hermitage, in particular, emerges not merely as a physical setting but as a space structured by ecological reciprocity, restraint, and coexistence. Despite these dimensions, the ecological hermeneutics of the text has not received adequate scholarly attention within contemporary environmental humanities discourse. The present study approaches the text through an ecological hermeneutic framework that interprets nature not as a decorative setting but as a site of ethical meaning and environmental consciousness.

This research fills this void by analysing the play through the relationship between sacred ecology and environmental consciousness. It asks the following questions: How does *Abhijnanashakuntalam* construct an ecological relationship between humans and the non-human world? In what ways does the forest hermitage function as a sacred ecological space? How do the text resist anthropocentric assumptions that place human interests above all other forms of life? And how can an ecocritical reading contribute to a deeper understanding of Kalidasa's literary vision?

Drawing upon ecocriticism, cultural ecology, and environmental humanities, this study suggests that *Abhijnanashakuntalam* presents a sophisticated ecological imagination in which nature functions as an ethical and living presence rather than a passive background. The play challenges anthropocentric modes of thought by depicting human life as fundamentally interconnected with forests, animals, rivers, and seasonal rhythms. Through its representation of the forest hermitage, Kalidasa articulates a model of sacred ecology grounded in mutual dependence, ecological balance, and moral responsibility. Such a reading not only expands existing interpretations of the play but also demonstrates the continuing relevance of classical Sanskrit literature within contemporary discussions of environmental ethics and sustainability.

The rapid growth of environmental humanities has encouraged scholars to revisit literary traditions from ecological perspectives. Within this broader intellectual movement, ecocriticism has become an influential approach for examining how literary texts imagine relationships between human beings and the natural world. Early ecocritical scholars such as Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell challenged the tendency to treat nature merely as a background for human

action. Instead, they emphasized that the environment actively participates in the production of cultural meaning and literary imagination (Glottfelty and Fromm xviii; Buell 2). Although ecocriticism initially focused on modern environmental writing, the field has gradually expanded to include classical and premodern texts, creating new opportunities for studying ecological thought across different literary traditions.

This development is particularly significant for Sanskrit literature, where nature frequently appears as more than a scenic setting. Forests, rivers, animals, and seasonal cycles are often integrated into ethical, spiritual, and cultural frameworks. Yet classical Indian texts have not received the same level of ecocritical attention as modern environmental literature. As a result, many ecological dimensions of Sanskrit works remain underexplored. Among classical Sanskrit authors, Kalidasa occupies a distinctive position. His works have long been celebrated for their poetic brilliance, emotional depth, and aesthetic sophistication. Traditional scholarship on Kalidasa has largely concentrated on literary artistry, dramatic structure, *rasa* theory, and poetic imagery. Arthur Berriedale Keith's study of Sanskrit drama and Daniel H. H. Ingalls's work on classical Sanskrit poetry remain foundational in this regard (Keith 214; Ingalls 37). These scholars established the literary significance of *Abhijnanashakuntalam* and highlighted Kalidasa's remarkable ability to harmonize human emotions with the natural world.

However, much of this earlier criticism approaches nature primarily through aesthetic categories. Landscapes are often discussed as devices that intensify emotion, reinforce mood, or contribute to dramatic beauty. While such interpretations illuminate Kalidasa's artistic achievement, they do not fully explain the deeper role of nature within the play. In *Abhijnanashakuntalam*, the natural world is not merely decorative. The hermitage environment shapes character formation, ethical conduct, and spiritual experience. Human and non-human life appear interconnected through relationships of care, restraint, and mutual dependence.

The emergence of environmental humanities has encouraged scholars to reconsider these dimensions. Environmental humanities scholars argue that ecological questions are inseparable from culture, ethics, religion, and historical

imagination (Heise 5). Such an approach is particularly useful for the study of *Abhijnanashakuntalam*, where nature functions within a larger philosophical framework. The forest hermitage is not simply a physical location. It represents a moral and spiritual landscape governed by principles of harmony and coexistence.

Ecocritical discussions have also broadened through the influence of environmental philosophy. Lawrence Buell argues that environmental imagination in literature can reshape the ways societies perceive their relationship with the natural world (7). Similarly, Greg Garrard emphasizes that ecocriticism must move beyond simplistic representations of nature and explore the cultural meanings attached to environmental experience (9). These perspectives provide important tools for examining Kalidasa's treatment of forests, animals, and sacred landscapes. Rather than existing outside human life, nature in *Abhijnanashakuntalam* becomes an active participant in ethical and emotional processes.

The concept of sacred ecology offers an especially productive framework for understanding this relationship. Fikret Berkes defines sacred ecology as ecological knowledge embedded within cultural traditions, ethical values, and spiritual practices (7). This concept challenges modern assumptions that separate environmental concerns from religious or philosophical thought. Instead, sacred ecology emphasizes reciprocity, respect, and responsibility in human interactions with the natural world. Such ideas resonate strongly with the world of Kalidasa's play, where the hermitage operates as a space of ecological balance rather than human domination. Indian philosophical traditions further strengthen this perspective. Classical Hindu thought frequently stresses interconnectedness among living beings and recognizes the moral significance of non-human life. Christopher Key Chapple emphasizes that concepts such as non-violence, restraint, and reverence for life offer important foundations for ecological ethics (19). These values are visible throughout *Abhijnanashakuntalam*. The relationship between the hermitage community and its surrounding environment is characterized by care rather than exploitation. Plants, animals, and human beings coexist within a shared moral universe.

At the same time, scholars caution against reading modern environmental concerns directly into ancient texts. Ecocritical interpretations must remain

attentive to historical and cultural contexts. The aim is not to portray Kalidasa as a modern environmental activist but to understand how his literary imagination conceptualizes relationships between humans, nature, and the sacred. Such an approach avoids anachronistic readings while still recognizing the ecological significance of the text.

Existing scholarship has therefore generated valuable insights into Kalidasa's aesthetics, poetics, and philosophical vision. Ecocritical theory has expanded possibilities for interpreting nature in literature, while environmental humanities and sacred ecology have provided broader conceptual frameworks for understanding environmental values. Nevertheless, these perspectives have rarely been brought together in a sustained analysis of *Abhijnanashakuntalam*. Most studies continue to focus on its aesthetic beauty, romantic sentiment, or dramatic technique, leaving the ecological and sacred dimensions of the hermitage comparatively underexamined. This gap is particularly important because the hermitage constitutes the ecological and ethical centre of the play. It is a space where human beings live in close relationship with animals, plants, and natural cycles. Yet its significance as a model of sacred ecology has received limited scholarly attention. This study seeks to fill that gap by integrating ecocriticism, environmental humanities, sacred ecology, and Indian ecological philosophy into a single analytical framework.

This study follows a qualitative, interpretive, and text-centered methodology situated within the fields of ecocriticism, environmental humanities, and literary hermeneutics. The research approaches *Abhijnanashakuntalam* not merely as a classical Sanskrit drama but as a literary text that articulates a distinct ecological imagination. This study explores how *Abhijnanashakuntalam* presents human–nature interconnectedness as a form of environmental consciousness. The study relies on a close reading of the text. Particular attention is given to the representation of the forest hermitage, human–nature interactions, animal life, seasonal imagery, rivers, trees, and ascetic practices. Rather than treating these elements as decorative features, the study examines how they contribute to the ecological vision of the text. This interpretive approach makes it possible to uncover meanings that extend beyond aesthetic appreciation and reveal broader environmental values operating within the dramatic narrative.

The theoretical orientation of the research draws upon key concepts from ecocritical scholarship. Cheryll Glotfelty's understanding of ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment provides an important foundation for the analysis (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii). Lawrence Buell's emphasis on environmental representation and ethical engagement with the non-human world further informs the reading of the text (Buell 7). Greg Garrard's ecocritical perspectives on environmental imagination and cultural representation offer additional interpretive tools (Garrard 5). The discussion is further informed by Val Plumwood's critique of anthropocentrism, which helps illuminate the play's emphasis on ecological interconnectedness and respect for non-human life (Plumwood 41).

Alongside these perspectives, the research incorporates insights from Indian ecological thought. Vandana Shiva's critique of exploitative models of development and her emphasis on ecological balance, interdependence, and environmental responsibility provide a valuable framework for understanding the ethical dimensions of the hermitage environment represented in the play (Shiva 23). These ideas help situate the text within broader traditions of ecological thinking that recognize the interconnectedness of all forms of life. Methodologically, the study employs ecological hermeneutics as its central interpretive approach. Through this framework, the forest hermitage is examined as a sacred ecological space where ethical conduct, spiritual discipline, and environmental responsibility intersect. The analysis therefore focuses on concepts such as restraint, reciprocity, coexistence, and ecological harmony as recurring principles within the text. The research remains analytical rather than empirical. Instead, it develops a theoretically informed interpretation of *Abhijnanashakuntalam* in order to contribute to contemporary discussions in ecocriticism, environmental humanities, and Sanskrit literary studies.

This study explores *Abhijnanashakuntalam* through an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that brings together ecocriticism, environmental humanities, sacred ecology, non-anthropocentric thought, and Indian ecological philosophy. Such a framework is particularly relevant because Kalidasa's play presents nature not as a decorative background but as an active force that shapes ethical values, social relationships, and spiritual understanding. The ecological

significance of the text emerges through its representation of interconnected life forms and the reciprocal relationship between humans and the natural world.

Ecocriticism provides the primary analytical lens for this study. Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as an approach concerned with the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii). This perspective enables a reading of *Abhijnanashakuntalam* that moves beyond human-centred interpretations and foregrounds the ecological dimensions of the text. The forest hermitage functions as more than a dramatic setting; it becomes a space where human conduct is shaped by environmental values and relationships. Buell views the non-human world as an active presence rather than a mere backdrop to human experience (7). In Kalidasa's play, forests, animals, plants, and seasonal rhythms actively participate in the moral and emotional structure of the narrative. Ecological interdependence shapes the play's broader vision. The framework is further informed by environmental humanities, a field that understands environmental issues as cultural and ethical concerns rather than purely scientific problems. Environmental humanities scholars emphasize the importance of examining how different societies imagine their relationship with the natural world (Irr 205).

The concept of sacred ecology provides another important dimension of analysis. Sacred ecology highlights the ways environmental knowledge and ethical responsibility are sustained through spiritual and cultural traditions. Within *Abhijnanashakuntalam*, the hermitage embodies such a worldview. Human beings coexist with animals, plants, and natural forces through practices of care, restraint, and reciprocity. Nature possesses value beyond its utility and is treated as part of a larger moral order. The study also draws upon Val Plumwood's critique of anthropocentrism. Plumwood argues that ecological crises are closely linked to ideologies that separate humans from the rest of nature and justify domination over non-human life (41). The play envisions humans and nature as mutually connected within a common ecological worldview.

Finally, Indian ecological philosophy provides a culturally grounded context for interpretation. Ideas associated with coexistence, non-violence, moderation, and respect for life reveal an ecological ethic that resonates throughout the play. Taken together, these theoretical perspectives enable a

comprehensive understanding of *Abhijnanashakuntalam* as a literary articulation of sacred ecology and environmental consciousness, demonstrating the continuing relevance of its ecological vision in contemporary environmental discourse.

In *Abhijnanashakuntalam*, the forest hermitage functions as far more than a dramatic setting. Kalidasa presents it as a sacred ecological space where human life is woven into the rhythms of the natural world. The hermitage is sustained through restraint, reciprocity, and care rather than control or exploitation. Its inhabitants do not seek mastery over nature; instead, they live in accordance with ecological cycles and ethical responsibilities. The sacred quality of this environment emerges through the harmonious coexistence of ascetics, animals, trees, birds, and rivers. Human beings are not positioned at the centre of existence but appear as participants within a larger community of life. Such a vision challenges anthropocentric assumptions and foregrounds ecological interconnectedness.

Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as the study of literature's relationship with the environment, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all forms of life (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii). The hermitage embodies precisely this ecological principle. Kanva plays a crucial role in shaping this environmental ethos. His relationship with the forest is defined by stewardship rather than ownership. Authority within the hermitage derives from responsibility and care, not domination. Through Kanva's example, ecological responsibility becomes inseparable from spiritual discipline. The hermitage therefore emerges as an ethical and ecological community sustained by balance, moderation, and mutual respect.

Kalidasa's reputation as a master of nature description is well established. Yet limiting his landscapes to aesthetic beauty alone obscures their deeper significance. In *Abhijnanashakuntalam*, nature performs ethical, emotional, and philosophical functions that shape the movement of the narrative itself. The natural world contributes directly to character formation. Shakuntala grows within the nurturing environment of the hermitage, and her identity develops through intimate relationships with plants, animals, and seasonal cycles. Consequently, her departure from the forest signifies more than physical separation. Buell observes that environmentally oriented texts often depict the non-human

environment as an active presence rather than a passive backdrop (7). Kalidasa's dramatic vision reflects this insight. The forest participates in emotional growth, moral perception, and social relationships. Nature does not merely frame human action; it influences and guides it.

A defining feature of *Abhijnanashakuntalam* is its sustained emphasis on interdependence between human and non-human life. This vision becomes evident when King Dushyanta enters the forest while pursuing a deer. The ascetics immediately intervene, reminding him that the animals of the hermitage deserve protection. The episode contrasts the culture of royal hunting with the ethic of ecological care that governs forest life. The deer is not treated as property or prey but as a living being worthy of moral consideration. Kalidasa thus extends ethical concern beyond human society and challenges utilitarian attitudes toward nature.

Trees occupy an equally important position within the play. Shakuntala's care for saplings and flowering creepers reflects an ethic of environmental responsibility grounded in affection and reciprocity. These actions are not decorative narrative details. They emphasize the interdependence of human well-being and ecological health. Plants emerge as living companions within a shared ecological community.

As Garrard explains, ecocriticism explores how literature reimagines relationships between humans and the natural world (5). Kalidasa's representation of the forest illustrates such a reimagining. Human identity evolves through continuous interaction with the natural world. Seasonal change further reinforces ecological interconnectedness. Emotional experiences and narrative developments unfold alongside transformations in the natural world. Spring landscapes accompany intimacy and renewal, while moments of uncertainty often coincide with altered environmental conditions. Rivers similarly symbolize continuity, nourishment, and renewal. Together, animals, plants, rivers, and seasons create an ecological framework in which human and environmental well-being remain inseparable.

The ecological vision of the play is closely linked to ascetic consciousness. Ascetic life in the hermitage involves more than spiritual discipline; it reflects a distinctive environmental ethic based on moderation, self-

restraint, and respect for all forms of life. The ascetics do not regard the forest as a resource to be exploited. Instead, they understand themselves as members of a larger ecological community. Such attitudes resonate with Val Plumwood's critique of anthropocentrism and her call for ecological relationships grounded in mutual recognition rather than human superiority (41).

Importantly, ascetic restraint does not imply withdrawal from environmental life. The inhabitants of the hermitage remain actively engaged with their surroundings through practices of protection, care, and stewardship. Ecological values are expressed through daily conduct rather than abstract principles. The play suggests that meaningful coexistence depends not upon domination but upon responsibility and restraint. This ethical orientation also reflects broader currents within Indian ecological thought. Human fulfilment is achieved through harmony with the natural world rather than through its conquest. Kalidasa thus presents an ecological order sustained by balance and reciprocity rather than accumulation and control.

Although *Abhijnanashakuntalam* belongs to a classical literary tradition, its ecological insights remain relevant today. The play is not a modern environmental manifesto, yet it offers a compelling vision of environmental responsibility rooted in ethical relationships. The contrast between the forest hermitage and the royal court is particularly significant. The hermitage is organized around coexistence, interdependence, and care, whereas the court reflects hierarchy, authority, and social distance. Instead, he explores different ways of relating to the world. The movement from forest to court reveals how ecological balance becomes vulnerable when human life is separated from relationships of reciprocity and environmental responsibility. The values embodied in the hermitage—restraint, mutual care, and respect for non-human life—stand in sharp contrast to contemporary patterns of environmental exploitation driven by excessive consumption and resource extraction. Rather than offering direct solutions, the play encourages reflection on alternative models of coexistence. *Abhijnanashakuntalam* presents a vision of relational existence in which human well-being is inseparable from ecological well-being. The forest hermitage functions not only as a literary setting but also as an ethical model grounded in harmony, responsibility, and coexistence. Through this eco-centric

outlook, Kalidasa offers a powerful reflection on the interconnectedness of life, a reflection that continues to resonate in contemporary environmental discourse.

The findings indicate that *Abhijnanashakuntalam* offers a sophisticated ecological vision that extends far beyond the aesthetic appreciation of nature. Kalidasa presents the natural world as an active ethical presence that shapes human relationships, values, and ways of living. Through the interconnected concepts of sacred ecology, environmental consciousness, and human–nonhuman reciprocity, the play constructs a worldview in which ecological well-being and human well-being remain deeply intertwined. A central argument of this study has been the reinterpretation of the forest hermitage as a sacred ecological community rather than a mere narrative setting. Governed by coexistence, moderation, and reciprocal care, the hermitage fosters harmony among humans, animals, plants, rivers, and seasonal rhythms within an interconnected ecological community. The play challenges human-centered perspectives by foregrounding interdependence and shared responsibility (Plumwood 41).

Ecological values in the play take shape through everyday interactions, relationships, and acts of care. Shakuntala’s care for plants, Kanva’s stewardship of the forest, and the protection extended to animals collectively reflect an environmental ethic based on attentiveness, reciprocity, and respect for non-human life. Nature is not reduced to decorative scenery; it actively contributes to ethical reflection, emotional development, and social conduct. In this respect, Kalidasa’s dramatic imagination anticipates concerns that remain central to contemporary ecocritical discourse (Garrard 24).

The study also highlights the significance of the contrast between the forest hermitage and the royal court. Rather than presenting a simple opposition between nature and civilization, Kalidasa explores different modes of inhabiting the world. Environmental consciousness emerges as a question of ethical orientation, cultural values, and the quality of human relationships with the natural environment. From a broader scholarly perspective, this study contributes to ecocriticism and environmental humanities by demonstrating that ecological thinking occupies an important place within classical Sanskrit literature. The idea of sacred ecology helps illuminate the close connection between environmental values, spiritual thought, and cultural traditions in the play (Sponsel 8). At its

core, *Abhijnanashakuntalam* portrays a way of life in which human well-being depends on harmony with the natural world. Although it does not provide direct solutions to contemporary environmental crises, it offers an enduring model of coexistence, moderation, and environmental responsibility that continues to enrich present-day ecological thought (Buell 2; Glotfelty and Fromm xviii).

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Aishwarya Singh

Aishwarya Singh is a dedicated Research Scholar in the Department of English Literature at Maharaja Agrasen Himalayan Garhwal University, Pauri Garhwal, Uttarakhand. She holds an M.A. in English Literature from Doon University, Dehradun. Her research engages with ecocriticism, environmental humanities, and postcolonial literary studies. She has also worked on themes related to environmental imagination, cultural memory, and marginal ecologies. Her academic work seeks to explore the intersections of literature, environment, and society within both global and region-specific contexts. She has also presented her research papers in both national seminars and international conferences. Her research papers are published in both national and international journals.

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1. **Originality:** This manuscript is an original work and has not been previously published, nor is it under consideration for publication elsewhere in the same or substantially similar form at the time of submission.
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5. **Funding:** All sources of financial support have been fully disclosed in the manuscript. Where no external funding was received, this research was conducted without specific financial support from any public, commercial, or not-for-profit funding agency.
6. **Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare that all financial and non-financial competing interests have been disclosed. Where no such interests exist, the authors declare that they have no known conflicts of interest that could have influenced the work reported in this manuscript.

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