

‘TAPOVANAM’ AND ECO-SURROUNDINGS

A Study on Kālidāsa’s *Abhijñāna-Śākuntalam*

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1. Introduction: *Vande mātaram*

Bankim Chatterji’s “*Vande mathāram*” echoes the echo-centeredness of Indian heritage:

Vande Mātaram
Sujalām, suphalām, malayaḥja śitalām
*Sasyaśyāmalām mātaram.*¹

The earth is adored and idealized as a mother and from ancient time onwards, India has shown such respect and repute towards her. From time immemorial, India has preserved the interconnectedness and interdependence of the human kind with the cosmos. The *maharṣis* and *saptarṣis* are representatives of our heritage who attained this cosmic harmony. They transcended the world of created variety into a higher form and perceived life in its totality and perfection. But today we are going far away from nature and live completely in our own artificial worlds. More than that due to the over exploitation of the natural resources our planet earth is getting worse and is almost facing a natural catastrophe. Hence, it is high time to return to our echo-heritage and re-capture those age-old eco-friendly cultural paradigms and traditions for renewing the earth as a bio-spiritual planet. In this context, here is an attempt to envisage the eco-surroundings of our Indian *Tapovanam*, with the help of Kālidāsa’s *Abhijñāna-Śākuntalam*.

2. *Tapovanam*

The very word *tapovanam* (grove or ‘penance forest’) is very much ecological and it embodies the very spirit of India. It is a hut or cave in the forest, where a

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¹“I bow to thee Mother / Richly-watered, richly furnished South / Cools with the winds of the Dark / with the cross of the harvest / The Mother!” Bankin Chandra Chatterjee, *Anandamatha*, 1882.

sādu (a religious mendicant) usually dwells and is considered as the cradle in which Hinduism grew up. In India, a hermitage is called differently as *āśrama*, *maṭ*, *tapovanam*, *parṇaśāla*, *munistāna*, etc. Each term emphasizes one or the other aspect of life in hermitage. *Tapas* means heat, glow, austerity, or mortification. In the hot climate of India, heat became a symbol of struggle and mortification. Thus, *tapas* is an intensive spiritual exercise undertaken in the burning desire to realize God. According to Hindu *Varṇāśramadharmā*, everyone, after discharging all the duties of a householder, should retire to forest as a preparation for the final stage of *sanāyasa*. *Tapovanam* is a place where spiritual seekers gather and begin to meditate in solitude on higher spiritual things. “Hinduism is developed by these sages who meditated on the meaning of life and death in the calm atmosphere of their *āśramas* in the forests. Most of the religious classics of Hinduism were written by these sages who lived in their forest dwellings.”²

Tapovanam did not stand for inaccessible jungle far away from human habitation. They were easily accessible by chariot and were close to cities and main roads. Different kinds of people and even the kings went there for their spiritual edification and enrichment. It is held that the educational institutions in ancient India were situated in such forest hermitages. Usually, they were situated on the banks of rivers or lakes, and in peaceful groves of trees. In such surroundings, the steadiness of the mind, which is the object of penance, can be easily attained. According to Kālidāsa, through *tapas* not only steadiness of the mind, but the highest knowledge is also attained. The extraordinary genius of Indians in philosophical thinking is an outcome of such echo surroundings. S. Radhakrishnan, too, acknowledges it:

The huge forests with their wide leafy avenues afforded great opportunities for the devout soul to wander peacefully through them, dream strange dreams, and burst forth into joyous scenes of nature acquire inward peace, listening to the rush of winds and torrents, the music of birds and leaves and return whole of heart and fresh in spirit. It was in the *āśramas* and *tapovanams* or forest hermitages that the thinking men of India meditated on the deeper problem of existence.³

Thus, according to Radhakrishnan, the echo surroundings of Indian *tapovanam* were an important factor for its enlightened spirituality and high

²Jesu Rajan, *Bede Grafiths and Sannyasa*, Bangalore: ATC, 1989, 21.

³S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vol. 1, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004, 22.

philosophical thinking; so also, due to such qualitative enrichment, today they remain as symbols capable of nurturing serious reflective thinking. Therefore, such echo settings should be attached to our surroundings too.

3. Kālidāsa: A High Priest of Nature

Kālidāsa, the greatest of all Indian poets, is a poet of nature. He is a true devotee and worshipper of nature. His attitude towards nature is very peculiar and novel. He has unlimited knowledge about Indian geography and its naturalistic peculiarities. "The sandal of Kashmir, the pearl fisheries of the Tamraparni the deodar of the Himālayas, the betel and coco-palms of Kalinga, the sand of the Indus, all are familiar to him."⁴ In his works he portrays them with a loving passion. According to his philosophy, nature is the embodiment of divine spirit. The whole world of created beings is permeated through the same eternal spirit and is grounded on oneness of its cause. It can be observed from the invocation of *Śākuntalam*, which is usually performed by Sanskrit authors for the purpose of the successful completion of a work.

That which is the first creation of the Creator; that which bears the offering made according to due rites; that which is the offerer; those to which make time; that which pervades all space, having for its quality what is perceived by the ear; that which is the womb of all seeds; that by which all living brings breath; endowed with these eight visible forms, may the supreme Lord protect you!⁵

This benedictory stanza praises God Śiva and invokes his blessing and protection. Its meaning can be summarized as "May God Śiva, pleased, protect you with his eight manifested forms." These eight manifested forms corresponded to the eight visible forms, viz., water, the sun, the moon, earth, fire, air, ether, and the breath. According to the *purāṇic* conception of the creation of the universe, water was created first. *Agni* does the duty of delivering the offerings to various gods. The day and night is calculated by sun and moon and, therefore, they make time. The object of sound characterizes ether. The source of all seeds is the earth. Beings have life in them because of the five vital breaths, i.e., *prāṇa*, *apāna*, *vyāna*, *udāna*, and *samāna*. The existence of God is inferred from these forms, which are directly perceived. Through this prayer Kālidāsa establishes the essential unity of the

⁴Sarma, *An Interpretative Study of Kālidāsa*, Calcutta: Chowkhampa, 1968, 216.

⁵C. R. Devadhar, *Abhijñāna-Śākuntalam of Kālidāsa*, Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas, 1991, 3.

entire creation with the Supreme Being. Not only humans, but also the entire created order is made in God's image. Of course, it does not deny the fact that humanity holds a privileged position in the midst of the biotic community created by God. What the poet believes is that God shines through all the objects of nature and there is a profound interdependence between the creator and creation. In the coming pages we shall see how he explains this interdependence.

4. *Abhijñāna-Śākuntalam*

Kālidāsa's love for nature reaches its qualitative and evocative zenith in *Śākuntalam*, which is the last and the best of his plays. It is regarded as a masterpiece in the whole range of Sanskrit literature. It is one of the first works of Indian literature, which became known to Europe. Goethe has all praise for it: "In case you desire to rejoice in the blossoms of early years, the fruit of the age advanced, in case you want to call both the heaven and earth by a common name I refer you to the '*Śākuntalam* and, thus, I describe these all."⁶ According to Indian *paṇḍitās*,

Kāveṣu nāṭakam
tatrā ramyā śākuntala
tatrā ramyā ścaturthonkāś-
tatrāpi śloka catuṣṭayam

Among different types of poetry, drama is the most beautiful; among the dramas, the *Śākuntalam* in it, the forth act, and there too the four famous *ślokās* are the best.⁷ It is a portrayal of human emotion on the canvas of natural loveliness. The width of Kālidāsa's knowledge and the depth of his observation of nature and life are shown to the highest advantage. According to Goethe, "it contains the history of a development – the development of flower into fruit, of earth into heaven, of matter into spirit. It elevates love from the sphere of physical beauty to the eternal heaven of moral beauty."⁸

The plot of the drama is taken from the *Śākuntalopākhyāna* that occurs in the *Ādiparva* of *Mahābhāratha*. The play falls into three divisions, each having a distinct atmosphere of its own. The first four acts constitute the first

⁶*Encyclopedia of Indian Heritage*, 2000, s.v. "Classical Dramas of Kālidāsa Harṣadeva, Bhavabhūti and Bhaṭṭa-Nārāyaṇa," vol. 65, 104.

⁷*Encyclopedia of Indian Heritage*, 2000, s.v. "Classical Dramas of Kālidāsa Harṣadeva, Bhavabhūti and Bhaṭṭa-Nārāyaṇa," vol. 65, 105.

⁸Devadhar, *Abhijñāna-Śākuntalam of Kālidāsa*, xxviii.

division, the fifth and sixth the second, and the seventh act the last. The hermitage of Kaṇva is laid as the scene for the first four acts, and here Kālidāsa gives a wide description of the eco surroundings of an Indian hermitage. It is also continued in the final act, where he portrays the *Mārichāśrama*.

5. The Tranquillity of Kaṇvāśrama

The play begins with the hunting expedition of the king Duṣyanta in the forest near the hermitage of Kaṇva. From the forest, gradually, he approaches to the hermitage:

Under the trees are the grains of wild rice fallen from the openings of the hollow trunks filled with parrots; in other places are seen the polished stones which have bruised the fruit of the Ingudī; and the fawns, too from having acquired confidence bear the sound without varying their course; and the paths of the reservoirs are marked with lines by the drippings from the fringes of bark-garments (I.14).

Seeing them, which are marks of a typical *āśram*, the king concludes that surely it is a hermitage. The *āśram* is situated on the banks of the river Mālinī. The Ingudī fruit is commonly used by the ascetics for extracting oil, which is used for lamps. Parrots are not disturbed by the noise of the chariot, because of the sense of security created in them by the affectionate behaviour of the sages. According to Indian understanding, an *āśram* is a place where all kinds of people can go at any time and be there, at their disposal. In that atmosphere, they are free and enjoy all kinds of freedom and happiness. The animal world is also not an exception to this. It's an abode of universal love and brotherhood. The whole atmosphere is fragrant by their contact with the trumpet flowers. Moreover,

The roots of yon trees are bathed in the waters of canals which quiver as the wind plays upon them; the glowing lustre of the fresh leaves is partially obscured by the smoke that rises from clarified butter; and grazing without fear on the garden-grass have been cut away. How tranquil is this hermitage! (I.15)

It again describes the features of the vicinity of the hermitage. The smoke that rises from sacrifices is the symbol of the prayer that rises from human heart. In other words, an *āśram* is always regarded as a centre of deep prayer and spirituality. Kālidāsa regards an *āśram* as another heaven. In the seventh act,

through the words of Matali, he expresses it: “how grand, how noble is the earth!” The king is also having the same opinion:

It’s a place more delightful than heaven. Indeed I am looking on with amazement. Here in this forest of Kalpa-trees, they draw from air life’s necessary sustenance; in waters yellow with the golden dust of the lotus, they perform ablutions for religious vows; on jewelled slabs, they meditate; and restrain their passions in the midst of celestial nymphs: they practise penance in a place which other sages by their austerities seek to win (VII.12).

6. Eco-Fraternity

A close reading of the text can further support the idea of the interdependence of humans with creation. For example, see how the hermits appeal to the king for the life of animals:

O king that is a deer of the hermitage; he must not be slain, he must not be slain. Not indeed, must this arrow be allowed to fall upon this tender body of the deer, like fire upon a heap of flowers (I.10).

These words remind us of our serious obligation to respect and watch over the animals and everything in nature with care, in light of that greater and higher fraternity that exists within the cosmic family. The ‘king with his weapon’ can be seen as a symbol of modern man with all his advanced tools. When man was merely a hunter with primitive weapons, he did not wipe out natural resources and a vast number of animals. Today, however, his weapons are becoming more and more deadly. The chemicals and the fertilizers that modern man uses in the fields are washed into the streams and rivers, and then into the lakes and seas. Thus, they poison the water and kill the fishes and other creatures too. Hence, the call from the hermitage should be interpreted in this wider context.

Killing is the root of all evils. The Sāṅkhya, the Yoga, Buddhism, and Jainism agree on this point. The remedy suggested by them is absolute non-injury or *ahimsā*. “Non-injury (*ahimsā*) consists in the absence of cruelty to all creatures in all possible ways and at all times. It is tenderness, good will, and kindness for all living beings.”⁹ Thus, *ahimsā* is the root of all other negative and positive virtues. Negatively, it means non-violence, non-injury to living beings in deed, word, and thought. Positively, however, it is universal love. A *sannyāsin* practises such *ahimsā*, which is total love for all creatures. He

⁹Judunata Sinha, *Indian philosophy*, vol. 2, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1999, 51.

devotes himself to the wellbeing of not only human beings but all the living creatures. "His practice of *ahimsā* leads him to express his contemplative experience of God in active service to all creation"¹⁰ Again, if we observe the conversations of the servants, we will come to know how the hermits love and look after the plants and creepers of the *āśram*!

Anasūyā: "Friend Śākuntalā I think the trees in the hermitage are dearer to father Kāśyapa than your own self, since he has appointed even you, who are soft like a Navamālika flower to fill their basins."

Śākuntalā: "It's not only in obedience to our father, but I really feel the affection of a sister for them."

In another occasion, she says: "I shall even forget my own self for the sake of the plants." The serene life depicted in the hermitage seems to communicate that all of them saw the self in all beings and all beings in the self. Naturally, every creature in this universe is a manifestation of the divine for them. Hence, they cannot isolate themselves from the rest of the creation. Thus, Kālidāsa describes them as the true models of genuine and deep love for the integrity of creation.

7. Responsibility of the Rulers

The play also speaks about the responsibility of the rulers to look after the nature. For example, analyze the servants' plea to the king: "Holy groves are to be protected by the king." To this King responds: "Ye, hermits keep close at hand defending the creatures in the grove and forbidding my soldiers to vex this hallowed grove."¹¹ By this the king promises safety to all created beings. *Avanīpati* is the other name for king. *Avanī* means earth and *pati* means husband.¹² Thus, according to the tradition depicted by Kālidāsa, a king is the husband of earth and, hence, he should consider and look after her as his own wife. So great is the love and duty of a ruler and he can never ignore it.

Kālidāsa takes special interest to show the respect of rulers towards *āśram* and its inhabitants there. For example, consider the following:

King: "Let the dwellers of the sacred grove be not disturbed. Stop the chariot just here that I may descend."

¹⁰Rajan, *Bede Graffiths and Sannāyasa*, 70.

¹¹Devadhar, *Abhijñāna-Śākuntalam of Kālidāsa*, 89.

¹²In Indian tradition, a king is supposed to consider his kingdom or country as his second wife, by which is meant that the king has to love and protect the kingdom just as he would do with his beloved wife.

King (having descended, and looking at himself): Charioteer, sacred groves must indeed be entered in humble habiliments; therefore, take these (giving his ornaments and bowing to the charioteer).

The hermits are sure to be disturbed in their daily routine by the unusual advent of the king in his chariot. That is why he refuses it and wears the dress of a humble ordinary gentleman.

8. Atmospheric Subjectivity

Śākuntalām is a portrayal of human emotions on the canvas of natural loveliness. In it nature is the background for reflecting human emotions. This ‘atmospheric subjectivity’ is one of the features of Kālidāsa’s nature poetry. According to him, “nature is not something outside of man with a life-spirit and purpose of its own; but it is a background for reflecting human emotion.”¹³ For example, to describe the love of Duṣyanta towards Śākuntalā, Kālidāsa first creates a background with nature.

Śākuntalā (approaching the creeper and looking at it she says): “Friend, at a charming season, indeed, has the union between the pair – the creeper and the tree – taken place. Vanajyotsnā shows her youth in her fresh blossoms; and the Sahakāre his readiness to enjoy, in his sprouting young leaves.”

Priyaṁvadā (smiling): “Do you know, my Anasūyā, why Śākuntalā is gazing so intently at Vanajyotsnā?”

Anasūyā: “No, I cannot guess. Pray tell me.”

Priyaṁvadā “As the Vanajyotsna is united to a suitable tree, thus, may I too, hope for a bridegroom to my mind.”

The union of creepers and trees indicates that the union of Śākuntalā with somebody is long overdue. All the actions of human life are effected in nature. By incorporating such atmospheric scenes to the play, Kālidāsa “has fully painted all the blandishments, playfulness and fluttering of the intoxicating sense of youth.”¹⁴ Not only that the atmosphere in the hermitage has a definite influence in concretization and sublimation of the sentiment of love. The idea of love is fostered and nourished by nature and is given a concrete form. This atmospheric subjectivity can be observed in the sixth act in another form.

¹³Devadhar, *Abhijñāna-Śākuntalam of Kālidāsa*, xx.

¹⁴Devadhar, *Abhijñāna-Śākuntalam of Kālidāsa*, xx.

When the king forgets Śākuntalā due to the curse of Durvāsa, their separation is reflected in nature too:

The mango-buds, which have long appeared do not yet form their own pollen; the Kurabaka flower also, though all-ready to bloom, remains in the state of a bud; the voice of the male-cuckoos, though the cold season is gone, falters in the throat; while I suspect even Smara, being awed, replaces the shaft half-drawn from his quiver (VI.4).

What a fine and moving irony is there! It gives us rude shock. By drawing on the natural but unnatural scenes and with such touches as these, the poet prepares us for the crises for which he has secured an effective setting.

9. The Farewell of Nature

The scene of the fourth act is one of the most masterly scenes in the whole range of literature. Here, nature not only echoes the feelings of the persons and even the progress of the thought but also effectively partakes of man's joys and sorrows. Kālidāsa vividly depicts it during the farewell of Śākuntalā when sage Kaṇva ordered to bring flowers for Śākuntalā from the trees at that time:

By a certain tree was exhibited an auspicious silken garment white as the moon; another distilled the lace-dye so excellent to stain her feet; and from others were presented ornaments by fairy-hands extending as far as the wrist that rivalled the first sprouting of delicate leaves of those trees (IV.4).

The minds of all the inmates of the hermitage are overcast with grief and sorrow. Look at the thought of Kaṇva: "This day Śākuntalā depart: at such my heart is smitten with anguish; my voice is choked by suppressing the floe of rears; and my senses paralyzed by anxious thought" (IV.5). Nature has also partaken in it; it is very clear from the following statements:

Priyamvadā "It is not our friend alone [Śākuntalā] that is grieved at the separation from the penance forests; the same is seen to be the condition of the penance-forest also, whose separation from you is at hand: the female deer have dropped down their cud of darbhā grass; the peacocks have given up their dancing; and the creepers with their yellow leaves falling off, seem as if to be shedding tears" (IV.11).

Śākuntalā also testifies to it: "Look, friend, the female Cakravāka, not perceiving her dear mate when only hidden behind lotus-leaves is crying in her anguish 'how hard is my lot'!" (IV.14).

Nature has a responsive character and it readily responds to the feelings and sentiments of the human heart. “Life here in the *āśrama* has so intimately been linked up that no thread for discrimination between plant and animal life, on the one hand, and human life, on the other, is left.”¹⁵ The jasmine creeper has acquired for Śākuntalā the same sisterly concern as Anasūyā or Priyamvadā. Therefore, she is to take leave of her as she has taken leave from Anasūyā or Priyamvadā.

Śākuntalā (remembering): “Father, I will bid adieu to my creeper sister Vanajyotsna.”

Kaṇva: “I am aware of your sisterly affection for it. Here is it to your right.”

Śākuntalā (approaching and embracing the creeper): “O Vanajyotsna, although you are united with the mango-tree, do you embrace me, in return, with your arm-like twigs that point in this direction. From today I part from you.”

Thus, Kālidāsa has eliminated all difference between the so-called sentient and insentient objects, and sometimes insentient objects are over-dominating the other. Nature speaks more loudly than human tongues in Śākuntalā. That is the beauty of Śākuntalā.

10. Kaṇva as a Great Patriarch of Nature

According to Belvalkar, nature not only speaks but also is the source and inspiration of human thoughts.

The thoughts and impulses that man is apt to derive from nature, she really has the power to communicate to him because between nature and man there is at work one self-same soul or spirit, so that an inward communion between the two is as readily and legitimately possible as between two sympathizing human friends; and for such communion, there is not always required the use of articulate language.¹⁶

The sage Kaṇva is presented as a divine connecting link between nature and human life. For him, the whole creation including the vegetative kingdom is living and vibrating with the cosmic harmony and there is no difference between Śākuntalā and the Navamālika creeper. Both have been fostered up with the same care and concern. “He rises above the petty distinction of a tree

¹⁵Sarma, *An Interpretative Study of Kālidāsa*, 218.

¹⁶S. K. Belvalkar, *Śākuntalā the Child of Nature*, part I, 9, cited in Sarma, *An Interpretative Study of Kālidāsa*, 227.

and a creeper, a bird and a beast, a man and a God.”¹⁷ The mind of the sage Kaṇva is highly integrated. With the trained and integrated mind he can divinize the nature of things:

“The resonant and ever-vibrating heart of the sage has become susceptible to the slightest movement in the external nature. This has found expression in his sensitiveness to the call of the cuckoo.”

“Here is Śākuntalā permitted to depart by the trees, her companions during her residence in the forest, since the sweet note of the cuckoo has been employed as a reply to them” (IV.10).

To an ordinary man a call to nature to approve of the departure of Śākuntalā for her husband’s home never contemplated of issuing that call to nature. This has become testimony to the high significance, which Kaṇva has witnessed in creation. Therefore, we see that all his addresses to nature are marked by a certain dignity; it is characterized by an utter want of self-centeredness.¹⁸ Kaṇva has developed a love for nature, which has deeply rooted itself in his heart. So, it is genuine and not moved by any superficial beauty. Training of the mind – a detachment developed through non-selfishness helps realization of the nature of the world. This helped Kaṇva to comprehend the real nature of worldly things in a detached way. Kaṇva has perceived life in its grandeur of totality and perfection. In the play, he is seen in the midst of innumerable diversities of life and creation. To him the whole creation, including the vegetative kingdom, is living and vibrating with the cosmic harmony. The vibration of the vegetative life has raised a wave of similar sensations in man and has founded life on a unity of experiences as it were.

To the sage Kaṇva, there is no difference between Śākuntalā the Navamālika creepers. Both have been fostered up with the same care and affection. Kaṇva has seen it clearly that the same spirit has permeated through the entire creation, vegetative and human. This understanding of creation, in its true bearings, has enabled him to rise above the petty distinctions of a tree and a creeper, a bird and beast, a man and a god.

11. Conclusion

Spirituality is oneness to reality and reality is a network of relationships: cosmic, human, and divine relationships. Raimundo Panikkar better expresses

¹⁷Sarma, *An Interpretative Study of Kālidāsa*, 219.

¹⁸Sarma, *An Interpretative Study of Kālidāsa*, 122-123.

it as “the cosmotheandric relationships.”¹⁹ Ancient Indian ashrams were *cosmotheandric* centres of holistic spirituality and they reflect the beauty and vitality of Indian life and culture. As the Greek word ‘*oikos*’ (from which the word ecology is derived) indicates that Indian *āśrams* are houses of ecological bearings. There is a cosmic unity in which man and nature are sustained by the all pervading spirit. The *Maharṣis* are architects in building up an echo-sensitive culture that can live in harmony with all creations. As an after effect of it, gradually, the whole country became a sanctuary. As Bede Griffiths puts it,

The earth is sacred and no ploughing or sowing or reaping can take place without some religious rite. Eating is a sacred action and every meal is conceived as a sacrifice to God. Water is sacred and no religious Hindu will take a bath without invoking the sacred power of the water, which descends from heaven and caught on the head of Shiva, is distributed in the fertilizing streams of the Ganges and other rivers. Air is sacred, the breath of all life which comes from God and sustains all living creatures. Fire is sacred, especially in its source in the sun, which brings light and life to all creatures. So also with plants like the tulsi plant and certain trees like banyan. Animals are sacred, especially the cow which gives her milk as a mother, but also the elephant, the monkey and the snake. Finally, man is sacred; every man is a manifestation of God but especially a holy man, in whom the divine presence can be more clearly seen.²⁰

In short, there is a story behind the story. Through the story of *Abhijñāna-Śākuntalam* Kālidāsa tells us the story of the echo-surroundings of Indian *Tapovanam*; through the *Kaṇvāśrama* he tells about those sacred places of India that existed in time and space whether we may believe it or not; through the sage Kaṇva he tells about the great *Maharṣis* of the Indian tradition. Indeed, in many respects the teachings of *Śākuntalam* are very much ecological and, thus, a challenge to our modern times.

¹⁹Raimundo Panikkar, “Colligite Fragmenta: For an Integration of Reality,” in *Alienation to At-Oneness*, eds. F. A. Figo and S. E. Fittipaldi, Willanova, Penn.: Willanova University Press, 1977, 19.

²⁰Bede Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, London: Fount Paperbacks, 1983, 10-11.