

The Sahrdaya's Space in Kavalam's *Kallurutti*

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Abstract

The article discusses the space of Sahrdaya in Kavalam Narayana Panikkar's famous production *Kallurutti*. The play is noted for its experimentalism and thanathu aspects, which insists that we should not forget our traditional performing arts as they are rich in classical, traditional and indigenous values. The article looks into the relation between written text and performance text, the changes the written text undergoes in the production of a play and the argument whether the written text or the performance text is important. In Sopanam (Kavalam's theatre) the written text undergoes continuous improvisations and changes. In the rehearsal camp the author and the director sit together and make changes in the text in order to make it appealing to the spectator. The article also discusses the results of these productions and the effect it created after such improvisations. All these things are analyzed by collecting the opinions from general audience, esteemed spectators including the writer, director, actors and the artists of Sopanam. The methodology I used includes direct interaction with the persons associated with the productions and interviews.

"Facts are only random detritus of our lives until they are connected by story. Stories, to paraphrase Robert Kroetsch, make us real. If there is anything like truth accessible to us in the world, it must be through the ways we tell of ourselves to each other. For such sharing, we use words, design images, make music and dance, we make what is elsewhere accepted as the warp in the fabric of life, the weft is the time of our hearing, or watching, or listening" (Moss 9). I prefer to relate the literature as the warp and the performance as the weft in the process of drama transmission. To generalize, the warp is the literary text and weft is the way of telling and its perception. Both are complimentary to each other and for the right perception of drama we also need the right sahrdayaⁱ. Perception differs in accordance with the taste and talent of the sahrdaya. The play takes place in the mind of the spectator when he watches it. Hence the mind of Sahrdaya is also a space of drama.

Every writer has his own way of telling stories. Some clad the stories in realistic events, some tell it with historical facts, and some others say it through simple narratives. Some say these stories through myths and rituals, some others through native threads. Whatever it may be, their main aim is communication and perception. Here I wish to analyze the space of Sahrdaya in Kavalam's *Kallurutti*. I also wish to analyze how far the strategies and techniques (theatrical experiments) adopted by the famous dramaturge Sri. Kavalam Narayana Panikkar is effective in fulfilling the purpose of communication and perception in the play *Kallurutti*. Kavalam, through his life as a poet, musician, writer, dramaturge, shares truth that we know since we feel it within and where it fascinates and mesmerizes us. Stories and plays of Kavalam prepare us to realize what we are or were, in the words of Kroetschⁱⁱ. They take us back to our former traditions, rituals, and culture, and remind us of the rich theatrical elements they have and the need to stick to them.

Our world has changed a lot. In ancient days it was the habit of grandparents to tell their grandchildren stories about our rituals, traditions, gods, folk tales, myths, supernatural figures, often in the form of bedtime stories. On account of this the young generation of those days was familiar with our culture and its roots. Now electronic media including mobiles and tabs assume the role of

grandparents. The real grandparents remain silent in a corner striving hard to make out the new equipment and the new generation children. It is not right to undermine the importance of these electronic equipment upon children, but to a considerable extent they are successful in diminishing our valuable cultural identity. They always try to project the stories from European or Western culture, especially Whiteman's culture. This might be a spontaneous phenomenon, though not a deliberate one. It is also a kind of e-colonization. Nowadays most of the Indians are not aware of the stories and myths related to their gods and goddesses. At the same time they know more about Greek and Roman gods, American heroes and English trickster or mythical figures like goblin, sylphs, faeries, lady of the lake to name a few. Though they do not know Jatayu and Garuda, they know angry birds popular in e-games. Instead of knowing Sanskrit works like *Vikramorvaseeyam*, *Malavikagnimitram* they know *Julius Caesar*, and *King Lear* from their tender ages. Hamsa, Mayura, Narasimha, avatar, yaksha are not familiar with them, but they know its parallels in the western mythologies and cultures. In this context the sahrdaya (spectator) remains only a silent observer and an appreciator of all these things. Knowingly or unknowingly the sahrdaya's mind adapts itself to the modern context and understands and appreciates these stories and figures from the European culture.

Sopanam Institute of Performing Arts is strongly rooted in the concept of imparting our native dramatic aspects to the new generation through its productions. The founder as well as the artists of this theatre believe that drama is basically a spectacle and should be viewed directly and appreciated in the theatre. Schechner's etymology of theatre will underpin this. The word 'theatre' is cognate with 'theory', 'theorem', etc. Greek 'theatron' derived from 'thea' means 'a sight' and 'theasthai' means 'to view', 'theorem' is 'a thing compelling the gaze, a wonder' (Schechner 337). So drama is a thing that should be viewed, experienced and understood in the theatre and not from the media. Kavalam Narayana Panikkar never tried to flourish or market these native productions with the support of today's visual media as he strongly believes that people should come and see the play where it takes place. Even then, many theatre enthusiasts got interested and motivated by Kavalam's experimental theatre.

Role of Rasa in the Creation of Sahrdaya

As communication is the main aim of theatre it needs persons to communicate. Where does communication take place in theatres? Of course it is between the spectators and the actors or characters. An effective communication helps the spectator to appreciate a play better. It is possible only with a good and learned Sahrdaya around (Schechner 343).ⁱⁱⁱ An effective communication is always happening between the actors and the spectators in the theatre of Kavalam. Even the passive spectator also communicates here. The spectators are not just watching the play. Here, in this theatre the sahrdaya actually turns into a 'partaker'^{iv} in the true sense of the word as used by Richard Schechner. In experiencing the productions of Sopanam the spectators also have to perform something. In this theatre the spectator is not away from the theatre or from the cast. Yet he is also a part of it totally involving in its progress. When we are involved in something we become part of it and we cannot escape from its impact. It is just like being involved in a fight or a sport. We may be led by the actors/characters and sometimes the actors are led by the characters. The use of rasa in theatre has a major role in transforming a spectator to partaker. Richard Schechner's statement in this context is noticeable. He says that when a person acts as a character not only the audience who sees that character but also the person who acts the role will get 'rasanubhuthi' (realization of rasa). This rasanubhuthi is one of the foremost goals of drama. This rasa and its use are absent in most of the professional theatres today, but it is very much evident in

the productions of Kavalam (e.g. *Kallurutti*, *Thiruvazhithan*, *Karimkutti*, *Jabala Sathyakaman* etc). A trend in recent professional theatres is that they perform the plays as if they only wanted to tell a story. Here drama has been limited to the purpose of conveying tales of some sort. "India today is less open to the basic mix of art, sensuousity, and feasting than before the advent of the Mughals and the British" (Schechner 344). The cultural transmission comes at a secondary level in these theatres. Through this rasanubhuthi knowingly or unknowingly some sort of transformation has been taken place in our mind and body (pity, disgust, wonder, fear etc.). A person who sees 20th century Fox films will definitely place himself in that background and gets absorbed in that setting with the help of his imagination. But, a person who watches professional stage plays always places himself in there with his imagination wandering in that realm. Similarly, a person who sees drama or performing arts definitely places himself in that context and many a time identifies himself with the character.

Natyasastra says "there is no natya without rasa". Rasa is the cumulative result of vibhava (stimulus), anubhava (involuntary action) and vyabhichari bhava (voluntary reaction). Along with these different bhavas (emotions), the sthaya bhava (permanent emotions experienced inside) becomes a rasa. Sensitive spectators, after enjoying the various emotions expressed by the actors through words, gestures and feelings feel pleasure. This feeling by the spectators is explained as rasas of natya" (Schechner 336). The concept of Rasa is less applicable in the western context vis-à-vis Indian. According to Kavalam if we narrate the story in our traditional way rasa is definitely produced. We need not create rasa, he says, it comes spontaneously. Kavalam started writing for the sake of writing. He wanted to create plays in his own style and methods. He strongly believed in the inherent effect of dramatic elements of our performing arts.

The setting of these performing arts, including the selected arena, where it is being played and viewed has many layers of meanings in this theatre. Kavalam selected the shade of a tree as the space for the performance of *Kallurutti*. It gives a special attraction to the play as the sahrdaya of this play never feels that he is watching a play. He gets involved with nature and forest automatically when the arena is lighted with rag-torches. When we visualize Kathakali performance in an open street at noon or in the sunlight, without the atmosphere of a temple, nilavilakku, darkness, it gives us an entirely different (or very low) rasanubhuthi. Our mind is not accepting Kathakali in such a space; because it is already adapted with the earlier mentioned space in our mind. We cannot imagine playing Kathakali without the light from Attavilakku. The presence of Attavilakku, the dark cloth that makes the background, the traditional costumes of the singers etc. will drag our mind towards a temple atmosphere and to our valuable rituals. Apart from the story all these things give a special feel to the spectator. The spectator is charmed by the costumes, the rhythmic movement and songs. Thus setting has a vital role to play in the creation and transmission of rasa and culture.

Rhythm and songs in *Kallurutti* – paradigmatic shift of ideas

Kallurutti, like any other play of Kavalam, moves through the magical mixing of rhythm and songs. Here the dramatist adapted and used the rhythms we usually hear in nature. These natural rhythms give life to the play and keep it vibrant in every production. He adopted these rhythms and steps from his own native village Kavalam. He has close contact with the farming community of Kavalam and is acquainted with their music, rhythm, songs, dance etc. More than its scope as an accompaniment of steps or dance, the rhythm has so many other functions to perform in this theatre. In the written text itself the dramatist gives the possible rhythms and songs that accompany the movement of the actors. But it is perceived in the mind of the reader differently. When it comes to the execution of the play there arose various changes from the part of the same writer.

The songs, dance and rhythm are used not for their own sake but they have various meanings and feelings to impart in the action of the play. They are not like the dance and songs mentioned in the written text. All these media achieve new levels of meaning in the productions by undergoing specific and controlled changes in the theatre itself. Kavalam always gives maximum importance to rhythm than any other aspect. So here the actor has to use his body language to the greatest extent along with the language of the mind. This does not happen in any other theatre.

Body and mind have their own languages and importance as songs and dances in Kavalam theatre. They spread their wings when taken out of the literary context and reach climax in the performance. The natural rhythm employed in this theatre (avoiding most modern drums or keyboards, here the artists use udukku, nagada and chenda) gives strength to the action, facilitating a forward thrust to the play. This characteristic rhythm never becomes a hindrance to the actors. Nevertheless, they feel more confident in their steps. It also helps to capture attention from the spectators when they render dialogues or move on the stage. Spectators focus on the movements according to the rhythms.

Written text and performance text

One of the most important aspects of this theatre is that there is sufficient space for the artists to develop and channelize their talents. In the formation of the play *Kallurutti* each and every artist has got opportunities to modify the written text. They are not forced to follow the written text rigidly. The text changes slightly in every production. The actor gets an upper hand over the director, even though he is guided by him. Here drama is not the director's art; it becomes the art of the actor. The performance looks better and better and it achieves perfection. The performance text modifies the written text even though it is guided by the written text. Written text is the result of what a writer has known, seen, experienced, or imagined in the mind. In the process of writing there is a recreation - recreation and re arrangement of events. Here the performance text distances itself from the written text. But the most important phase of a drama is its finale i.e. performance, where it acquires its freedom. The written text, its notes, its reports, its commentary by various personalities, its feedback from the readers all comprise only one aspect of drama – vachikam. Here vachikam is the text. This vachikam has no existence or survival when without considering its angika, aharya, and satvika abhinayas (chadhurvidabhinayas). *Kallurutti* made use of these four kinds of abhinayas which enhances the beauty and perception of the play. The costume of the characters are made or woven in the theatre itself by the artists. The crown and ear rings worn by the characters (Panchurulis) were made by the actors themselves in the theatre. Though the written text is sometimes published and is read by many people it cannot be considered complete. Hence the written text doesn't make a full drama. It assumes its form only in the production text and achieves perfection in its performance. Kavalam himself has acknowledged that the written text is very much important. He asks "how can we value this importance when we show this text to a human being who doesn't know any languages?" Here comes the importance of performance. Both are equally important and complementary.

The Sahrdaya's space in *Kallurutti*

In the plays of Kavalam the spectator has a big role to play. It is inadequate to address them as 'audience' or 'spectators'. They are 'partakers' in its true sense of the word as conceived by Schechner. "The more knowledgeable the partakers, the better the experience.... As wine tasters

need to know vintages, bottling procedures and ways of sampling in order to appreciate the wine” (Schechner³⁴²). The actors need the support and participation of the spectators. Occasionally the actors openly address the spectators and sometimes they question them. These actors will change their voice modulation and dialogue presentation according to the response of the spectators. The director, sometimes, selects a person from the audience just before the commencement of the drama and makes him seated near to the stage. He often mentions this matter to that person that during the play an actor will come and ask him something. These practices are not incorporated as gimmicks to enrich the presentation as is done in most of the proscenium stage plays. But they are essential for the effective presentation of the play. All these innovative ideas will give the audience a sense of involvement and make them feel that they are also part of the play. Likewise each and every activity, every article used in the theatre has a specific and forceful purpose. For instance the usage of curtain on the stage is very much typical and has various levels of meaning and effect. For example *Kallurutti* the chorus uses curtain to produce the effect of sea. The moving of the water is portrayed through the waving of these colorful light blue curtains. Kavalam also uses the curtain to show the pomp and splendor of the character like that of Kathakali. In Kathakali the curtain is used for the projection of the character. In the play *Theyyatheyyam*, by placing the curtain in a simple slanting position the dramatist creates the flight of Ravana along with Sita in the plane. Rama stands beneath i.e. at the other end of the curtain. This is clearly a new and most effective technique to show the distance between Rama and Ravana. One is over the sky and another is on the earth. The spectator clearly appreciates the pictorial beauty of this abduction. We feel a very long distance between Rama and Ravana in that scene. This scene is created simply with the positioning or waving of curtain like clothes.

Kallurutti is a play based on the myth prevalent in the Payyannur region of Kannur district in Kerala. Kallurutti has a magical power of controlling the nature by simply rolling small stones from her hand on to the earth, chanting a hymn. The myth is a forgotten one and not familiar in the Southern regions of Kerala. But through the play Kavalam not only immortalized the mythical theyyams^{vi} but also made the myth popular. The Kallurutti and Panchuruli are theyyams. Their stories are often performed through theyyam performances by the aboriginals of Kannur regions. Kavalam took this story and dramatized it in his own way. The myth works at various levels in the drama. First, it imparts a strong lesson to the audience that Panchurulis and Kallurutti are essential part of our Earth and it is our duty to protect them. Second, they are the embodiment of goodness, light, treasures of forest (nature); they tell us that the survival of city or village closely depend upon the survival of forest. Thirdly, the play reminds us of our rich and valuable mythical background and culture. The play portrays the exploitation of forest and the evil effects of urbanization. In this exploitation the role played by various sections of the society - law makers, law executors, religious heads, saints, politicians etc. are portrayed in a fantastic manner. These have contemporary relevance when examined in the contemporary context. The ferryman connects the forest with the village and with the city. Hence he acts as a connecting link between the goodness and the evil. The exploitation of women (Kallurutti) by the powerful people of the society is also portrayed through the characters of Chunkakaran, Umbrassan and Ugrani. The play comes to an end with an exhortation that the exploitation of women and nature will lead us to total destruction of the village, city and human beings.

The costumes and scenery are noticeable in the play. The costumes are made by the artists themselves. During leisure time they come together, sit in groups and make caps, ornaments, swords, shields, dresses etc. They don't purchase these things from any stores. Most of these articles are handmade suitable to impart the theme connected with nature. The stage is transformed into an area suitable for some sort of ritual performance, when Umbrassan, the village wizard enters.

Before the beginning of the play, the decoration and preparation of the stage is being done by the actors during which the audience also can participate. Another level of transformation occurs in the attitude of the spectator when they enter the theatre. They are also transformed into active subjects by seeing the total atmosphere of the theatre decorated with tender coconut leaves or lighted with mud lamps or rag-torches. It will definitely ensure a strong sense of participation and self-imposed discipline in the audience throughout the performance. They remain silent and watch the play with curiosity and a ritualistic attitude. These are some of the techniques used by Kavalam Narayana Panikkar in his experimental theatre Sopanam. It is often described as ‘Panikkarism’^{vii} by the members of the troupe.

Kavalam always catches the attraction of the partakers from the beginning of the play itself. Many of his plays begin with background music or dance or sometimes both. The entrance of the actors on to the stage is also enchanting. Most of the characters enter the stage dancing or singing. They move according to the accompaniment of music and to the rhythm of udukku, chenda, or nagada. All these constitute a real dramatic atmosphere with a rural ambience in his plays. The movements of all the characters are controlled by the rhythm of udukku and nagada.

In the productions of Kavalam starting from *Sakshi* to *Muktadara* (a translation of Tagore’s play) we can see the thread of stories of our past clothed in mythologies. We have to go through these mythical backgrounds in order to understand and appreciate these plays fully. Though cultural transmission is not the chief objective of Kavalam theatre it actually does it. Everything that happens in this theatre is strictly connected to our culture and tradition. Through the identification of theatrical elements rich in our culture and performing arts Sopanam transmits a new style of storytelling that makes or identifies with our self. Through the play *Kallurutti* the dramatist leads each one of us to our real and original theatrical abode. Traditions, myth, culture, language, literature, music, song, rhythm, costumes, rasa theory, all are fused into one in correct proportion in the productions of Kavalam. He adopts a different and novel method of storytelling that touches our life in many ways giving us a sense of the truth.

Notes

ⁱ Sahrdaya – a trained and cultivated reader is called sahrdaya meaning ‘one of the same heart’. For a detailed definition of the term, see Prasad 143.

ⁱⁱ Robert Kroetsch is one of the most notable writer, teacher and novelist of Canada. He powerfully influenced recent writing on Canada and the world. For more details, see Barbour.

ⁱⁱⁱ“ In the rasic system, each person enjoys according to her abilities; the higher the level of knowledge, the greater the enjoyment (or disappointment, if the performance is not up to standards)”

^{iv}‘Partaker’ is the word used by Schechner to denote a true and right spectator. He feels that it is a more accurate term than ‘audience’ or ‘spectator’ words that privilege ear or eye. See Schechner 340.

^v The play *Kallurutti* was also performed on proscenium stages.

^{vi} Theyyam is a popular ritual form of worship of North Malabar in Kerala.

^{vii} A term revealed to me by Manikantan, one of the actors of Sopanam in a friendly chat with me.

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