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The politics of the absent-present: The theatrical devices used by Kalidasa in *Abhijnanasakuntalam*

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Abstract

Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* is a fine instance of Classical Indian drama experimenting with and using to a great advantage many clever stage devices hinging upon the dualism of absence-presence. It is the absence of a considerable number of persons as well as factors which contributes to the coming together and subsequent separation of the king Dushanta and the hermit girl Sakuntala. There are also many off-stage presences that leave a considerable impact on the proceeding of events in the play. The element of voyeurism too adds to the understanding of the mechanism of knowledge-ignorance in the play. In short, the play charts a steady movement from absence to presence, from darkness to illumination, from rejection to acceptance. Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* is a fine instance of Classical Indian drama experimenting with and using to a great advantage many clever stage devices hinging upon the dualism of absence-presence. It is the absence of a considerable number of persons as well as factors which contributes to the coming together and subsequent separation of the king Dushanta and the hermit girl Sakuntala. There are also many off-stage presences that leave a considerable impact on the proceeding of events in the play. The element of voyeurism too adds to the understanding of the mechanism of knowledge-ignorance in the play. In short, the play charts a steady movement from absence to presence, from darkness to illumination, from rejection to acceptance.

Keyword: Off-stage, absence, presence, dharma, voyeurism, knowledge, ignorance, tragedy

Introduction

The ancient Sanskrit drama, as pointed out in *The Natyasastra*, relied upon various dramatic conventions to unfold the story in front of the spectators in a verbal-visual mode. Kalidasa's play *Abhijnanasakuntalam* is often considered as one of the fine specimens of the dramatic genre known as the *nataka* (Ghosh, 1967) [4]. It is primarily considered as *natya-dharmi* (i.e. conventional or theatrical in nature), and as a result it is free to indulge in 'a certain degree of artificiality' in the use of conventional practices such as speeches uttered 'aside' or as soliloquy (Ghosh, 1967) [4]. However, *Abhijnanasakuntalam* is also rooted into the *loka-dharmi* (i.e. realistic or popular) tradition in the playwright's careful omission of the supernatural at least on the visual level on multiple accounts. Kalidasa has maintained a beautiful balance between things that are visually present before the *preksaka* or the spectators (and not *srotr* or audiences, as per the 'rule' of *The Natyasastra*) and things which are carefully kept off the sight (Ghosh, 1967) [4]. This interplay or dualism between the absent and the present leaves a considerable impression on the mind of the spectators. The present article aims to discuss the above-mentioned dramatic innovations successfully practiced in *Abhijnanasakuntalam* by Kalidasa with the intention of shaping the collective perceptions of the spectators regarding the characters present on the stage.

The Present and the Absent

The 'off-the-stage' technique has been explored to its considerable utility in Kalidasa's play *Abhijnanasakuntalam* for serving numerous obvious dramatic purposes. The very dramatic personae of the play reveals a set of off-stage characters (Durvasa, Hamsavati, Aerial Voices of the Nymphs, and the Voice of the Cuckoo), and a long list of persons mentioned during the course of the drama (Kausika/Visvamisra, Menaka, Indra, Jayanta, Narada, Vasumati, Mitra-Vasu, Pisuna and Dhana-Vrddhi) (Kalidasa, 2005) [5]. In a play which is still lauded all over the world for its remarkable thematic focus and considerable organic unity, as it seems only obvious, all the allusions and off-stage absence-presence are undeniably crucial in the play.

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Even if one considers Dushanta and Sakuntala as merely theatrical metaphors, they represent two separate worldviews with distinct values attached to each of them. Their union in the drama (which happens all too early; perhaps in a premature way) does take place *because* of the absence of restricting patriarchal figures from both sides. As far as Sakuntala is concerned, it is the absence of the patriarch Kanva (who has “gone not long back to Soma-tirtha, to propitiate the adverse fate threatening [Sakuntala’s] happiness) which ironically leads to her ‘adverse fate threatening her happiness’ (Kalidasa, 2005)^[5]. This ‘absence’ must be compensated only through the terrible suffering on the part of both characters; and this is the simplest logic behind the series of events which verge on tragedy till a considerable point of the play. This absence of the outside forces, however, does not let the spectators forget even for a moment that this dream with its subtle core will soon be invaded by harsh realities of the outside world. And this is exactly where the off-stage devices become very important.

The Off-Stage Devices

The off-stage techniques have often been used to serve the practical motive of minimizing the number of dramatic personae and dispensing with spectacles hard to enact on stage. Of course, there is much left for the creative imagination of the spectator, and the non-existing agreement between the playwright and the spectator regarding the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ plays a very crucial role in this context. For instance, there is no visible deer that Dushanta chases, and its presence is constructed through the collaborative participation of the actors and the spectator. The same is true about the king’s chariot which is next to impossible to bring on the stage for obvious reasons. The well-rehearsed coordination between the actors playing the King and the Charioteer is instrumental in reproducing the momentum of the chariot without using one: “[Suta] mimes increased speed of the chariot” (Kalidasa, 2005)^[5]. *The Natyasastra* did mention that “a locality might change with the actor walking a few steps over the stage”, but it is Kalidasa’s craft which beautifully turned the theory into praxis (Ghosh, 1967)^[4].

Now, the imaginary deer being chased by an imaginary chariot might carry some philosophical bearings to the spectator as well. In *Ramayana*, it is the mirage-like golden deer Maaricha (a word which has spawned the Sanskrit word *Marichika*; i.e. a mirage) which led to the human error committed by the protagonists further leading to the grand-scale catastrophe. In Kalidasa’s play, however, it is the deer which ushers the world of Nurture (represented by the King himself) into the world of Nature; the *tapovana* or the penance grove. The deer is also instrumental in bringing the two lovers representing the two distinct worlds together. But it is not merely a story of simple union of two lovers; it also delineates separation and consequent suffering. The coming together of the two distinct worlds cannot go without severe repercussions. In the absence of well-defined Fate, which plays a considerable role in the European tragic pantheon, it is rather *dharma* which leaves its undeniable impact on the fate of the unlikely couple.

The Absent-Present Dharma

Dharma, in the Classical context, does not necessarily mean organized religion, as in the present interpretation of the term. Etymologically *dharma* means ‘that which upholds or supports’ (Wiktionary). Karl Friedrich Geldner in his

translation of the Rig-Veda employs 20 different translations for *dharma*, including meanings such as “law”, “order”, “duty”, “custom”, “quality”, and “model”, among others (Wikipedia). In the Classical context, however, it rather refers to a system, a prevalent code of conduct, the violation of which must subject an individual to serious consequences. Although not perceived in a very tangible manner, the *dharma* must be considered as by far the most influential off-stage presence in *Abhijnanasakuntalam*. Since *dharma* refers to the individual’s contribution to the upholding of the established order of the society, Dushanta must be held guilty. As the King, he must set a precedence by observing the stringent ‘rules’ of the Classical Indian society neatly divided into the four *varnas*. Yet, he is the one who not only disturbs the sanctity of the penance grove by bringing his imaginary chariot (a symbol of battle or hunting associated with the *kshatriya-dharma* or the natural discourse of the warrior), but also by instantly falling in love with an innocent girl belonging to the *brahmana varna*.

Dushanta and Voyeurism

It is only natural for the spectator to admire Dushanta as a doting lover due to the prevalent *sringara-rasa* (erotic vein) of Kalidasa’s play. Yet the playwright has used the metaphor of the King being the bee which ruffles the sweetness of the flower; i.e. Sakuntala. Sakuntala, referring to the bee, once says: “This impudent fellow will not leave me alone...O help! He follows me”, as if foreshadowing the hasty advancement about to be made by the King very soon (Kalidasa, 2005)^[5]. From a psychological point of view, the spectators readily associate themselves with the penance grove which is the backdrop of the play from its very opening. The city life or the world of Nurture is therefore the ‘other’ world (almost projected as a harsh world breeding all types of vices and trampling all that is natural) and the binary opposition of Nature and Nurture is in function inside the mind of the spectator even before the story unfolds. The very visual of the King hiding himself behind some shades (he says: “I think I shall wait here in the shade and watch them.” *Stands observing them*) and keeping a voyeuristic eye on the tender exchanges among the hermit girls leaves the spectator divided as for how to react to the whole situation (Kalidasa, 2005)^[5]. One might feel indulgent and allow the King to taste the sweetness of romantic love from behind some sort of screen. And yet the entire passage is an instance of the authority unethically penetrating into the private zone of its subjects. This is what Michel Foucault had considered as the Panopticon which helps the authority to keep an eye on the activities of its people without being seen (Selden, 2005)^[7]. The *tapovana* thus immediately becomes an Orwellian society in which no activity of the people should pass the vigil of the authority. The touch (or rather the eyes) of the world of Nurture thus corrupts the pristine quality of the world of Nature.

The exchanges made between Sakuntala (who is obviously a girl in her teens) and her female compatriots or *sakhis* Anasuya and Priyamvada (who are slightly elder and definitely much more experienced than the heroine) are globally held as one of the most beautiful erotic passages ever written in any language. What turns them into ‘erotic’, however, is the typically ‘male’ gaze of Dushanta. The otherwise light-hearted teasing on the part of the two *sakhis* ends up becoming a memorable and sensual passage on the budding of female youth and beauty. Of course, the King is

now acting as an intermediary entity bringing together the delicate world of the hermit girls and the more prosaic, matter-of-fact world of the spectator. The assumed association of the King with the spectators immediately distances the latter from the world of Nature. The continuous back and forth on the part of the spectator keeps running throughout the play as far as their relation with the two worlds is concerned. The asides made by the King are important in setting the tone for the spectator. The King thus becomes an extension of the collective subconscious of the spectator which always wishes to experience what is forbidden. Indeed, this is part of the very experience of watching this play being enacted, and is therefore self-reflexive in a manner. How can the spectators dissociate themselves from a person who enables them the voyeuristic entry into a forbidden world of innocence and virginity? The phallogocentric knowledge (a term coined by Jacques Derrida) is undeniably delicious (Derrida, 1991) ^[1].

Dushanta's invasion as well as his vehement desire to win what he aspires is fit for the *kshatriya* discourse which is prevalent in the urban world, but in the *tapovana* he must pass through different stages of penance before receiving his cherished object. This he skips willingly, and *Abhijnanasakuntalam* becomes a morality play underscoring the consequences of hasty, premature acts guided by unsolicited passion. The element of non-conformism embedded within the very act of two lovers coming from two different *varnas* can be felt even by our contemporary spectator. Kalidasa has consciously toned down all the rough edges and crude elements present in the original Sakuntala-story in Vyasa's *Mahabharata*. Now it is well expected from the dramatist to make sure that the play must not encourage the members of its society to challenge its *varna*-based codes as prescribed by the *dharma*. This is exactly why both Dushanta and Sakuntala are subsequently subjected to a long-drawn series of sufferings.

The Absence of the Patriarch Kanva

It is the absence of the sage Kanva which makes possible much of what happens in the penance grove since the entry of the King. Kanva the patriarch should hold complete supremacy over the proceedings of events inside the *tapovana*. The protection of the grove from the outside forces, however, is the duty of the King Dushanta. During the course of the play, indeed, the King performs his *kshatriya-dharma* by getting the grove rid of mad elephants and other disturbances. But what happens when the protector himself becomes the reason behind the chaos introduced into the erstwhile peaceful world of Nature? Sakuntala, with her well-known delicacy and other feminine charms, is not fit for handling the daily affairs of the grove, even though her father has entrusted her with them. This is evidenced early as she appears as an excessively passive and fragile character. The bold and vocal Sakuntala of *Mahabharata* thus transforms into a character which pathetically suffers without being able to do anything to change the course of events. May be the passivity itself was a model of feminine virtues while the play was being written, and this only reflects the way the then society wanted its women to behave. Even the two minor characters Anasuya and Priyamvada seem to have much more active role in the plot of the story than the eponymous heroine. Perhaps the sufferings of Sakuntala have been necessitated *because* of her passivity, and Kalidasa is thus critiquing her feminine nature in the most subdued way possible.

The Off-Stage Presence of the Sage Durvasa

Another absent-present character that gets represented through the off-the-stage technique in the play is that of the sage Durvasa. Of course the act of cursing cannot or should not be shown on the stage as per the dramatic convention of Classical India (Mukhopadhyay, 2013) ^[6]. This also adds to the verisimilitude of the play which is remarkably realistic, and should not rely heavily upon the supernatural for carrying forward the plot movement. Even though *Abhijnanasakuntalam* has been highly acclaimed for its *kavya* style, it is a play grounded into reality (a *natya-dharmi* drama with *loka-dharmi* elements too, as already mentioned). The sufferings of Sakuntala and Dushanta are largely due to their rash judgement and human error, and not because of some whimsical Fate playing with the expectations and aspirations of human beings. In order to humanize and perhaps even substantiate Dushanta's loss of memory (which was purposeful in *Mahabharata*), the device of Durvasa's curse has been invented by Kalidasa. Still, on a visual level Durvasa should not appear, primarily because the spectator must be torn apart between the dichotomies of Fate vs. Individual Responsibility only to enhance the philosophical as well as psychological intricacies.

Knowledge and Ignorance

The tragic irony, as mastered by Sophocles in Classical Europe, hinged upon the knowledge of the spectator, as contrasted with the ignorance of the character/s. In *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, though not a tragedy, the knowledge of the spectator is important in magnifying the impending plights of Sakuntala. In this respect, Anasuya and Priyamvada are 'spectators' as well, since they are the only ones to have 'seen' the act of curse. Their knowledge is not shared even by the actual spectator who has experienced the entire act as an off-the-stage event. Anyway, it is the ignorance of the heroine (combined with her innocence) which leaves her at the least advantageous position. The extent of her passivity is unfathomable, and this is further aggravated by her not knowing the prospect of the curse that has befallen her. The fact that the consummation of this pregnant wife with her husband is not going to take place is known to the spectator not because of their familiarity with the Sakuntala-myth (because alterations have been made by Kalidasa to the original story), but because of purely dramatic reasons. Even the two *sakhis* know things better than the heroine does. They don't share their knowledge with their dear friend primarily with the intention of not hurting her subtle feelings. Also, from the standpoint of *dharma*-induced sense of justice, Sakuntala must undergo her share of mental and physical suffering for what she has done by rashly falling in love with practically an unknown person belonging to another *varna*. This interplay of knowledge-ignorance is therefore absolutely crucial in highlighting the moral issues of the play.

Conclusion: Rejection of the Tragic Trajectory

It is as per the trajectory of the *Mahabharata* storyline that a pregnant Sakuntala ends up in the court of King Dushanta (although in the original story she is accompanied by her son Bharata) only to be subjected to rejection and public humiliation on the part of the King. Being the passive heroine that she is, Sakuntala finds this rejection an end in itself (Kalidasa 235). Once she discovers that the *abhijnana* (token of love; i.e. the signet-ring) is lost as well, after a desperate attempt to remind him of some glimpses of the world of Nature, she finally gives in. Sakuntala, being 'a stranger to

guile' finds it difficult to fit in this ruthless world of Nurture. Being abandoned by her own people as well, Sakuntala is now a de-classed protagonist whose very existence is now at stake. In her appeal to Mother Earth (Kalidasa, 2005) ^[5], Sakuntala has finally destabilized the reality-based equilibrium of the entire play and the supernatural has finally set in with considerable impact on the course of events. It is later confirmed that she has been carried away by 'some celestial being'; that 'one of [Menaka's] companions took her away' (Kalidasa, 2005) ^[5]. She is now beyond the restrictions of this human society divided by *varna*. But Kalidasa has once again kept the whole thing off the stage, thus allowing the High Priest, the only evidence of this extraordinary event, to narrate everything from his perspective (Kalidasa, 2005) ^[5]. The involvement of the supernatural has half convinced the King into believing in the validity of the story narrated by the people who accompanied Sakuntala. In the next Act, after seeing the *abhijnana* or the signet-ring, the King remembers everything. As per the logic introduced by Kalidasa, this act of remembrance solely takes place because of the pleadings of Anasuya and Priyamvada which softened Durvasa to some extent and made him provide some remedy to end the curse (Kalidasa, 2005) ^[5]. Unfortunately, the King finds no possible way to get reunited with his wife, and this is where his share of tragic suffering begins. Oblivion, in this respect, would have been a blessing for Dushanta, as remembrance has only filled his heart with scars that are beyond healing. Had this play ended here, with Sakuntala having practically left the mortal world, and Dushanta having remembered everything but in vein, the story would have been a perfect example of tragedy. The end of Sakuntala's share of sufferings (who is supposedly dead by now) thus marks the beginning of the arc of the King's suffering. But Kalidasa, despite exploring the sweetness of the *biraha-rasa* (i.e. tragic emotion spawned by separation), must ensure the reunion of the hero and the heroine when their respective share of suffering is endured in due time. Also, this reunion must not take place in this mundane, materialistic world, and the King must elevate himself to the ethereal order to get back his lost wife. So this is where the story-arc entirely shifts towards the supernatural, as if to validate and sanction the ultimate consummation of the hero and the heroine who had earlier committed 'violations' on multiple accounts.

The final consummation of Sakuntala and Dushanta is significant because finally there is nothing hidden or absent in between the two individuals. They have been reallocated into the communal existence through prolonged suffering and all their 'secretive' activities, which had a subversive bearing upon the *dharma*, have clearly been forgiven and forgotten by the collective judgement of the spectators.

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