

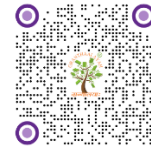


Original Article

INDIGENOUS AESTHETICS IN RECONFIGURING SPECTATORSHIP IN KAVALAM NARAYANA PANIKKAR'S THE LONE TUSKER

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ABSTRACT

The Lone Tusker by Kavalam Narayana Panikkar moves beyond the traditional view of spectators as passive recipients where modern performance practices position the audience as active participants in meaning-making. This paper examines this shift within the post-colonial contexts where theatre practitioners like Panikkar resisted western realist conventions and revitalized indigenous performance traditions to reshape theatrical experience. The study draws on reception theory and Bharata's rasa theory to highlight the interactive and relational nature of performance. This play exemplifies Panikkar's attempt to fuse native aesthetics and modern dramaturgy through stylized acting and metatheatrical techniques. Transformative practices like 'pakarnnattam' blurs the divide between performer and spectator, encouraging collaborative construction of meaning of the text. Ultimately, this paper argues that contemporary Indian theatre is a dynamic, participatory practice that redefines performance as a shared and transformative cultural entity.

Keywords: Indigenous Theatre, Theatre of Roots, Brechtian Theatre, Spectatorship, Performance Studies, Kavalam Narayana Panikkar, The Lone Tusker (Ottayan)

INTRODUCTION

Audience has been the most important factor in the world of theatre since ages and they share a unique relationship. This relationship has undergone a tremendous change in the field of performance studies. Audience has always been conceived as a passive agency meant for appreciation of the craft of theatre, receivers of a finished artistic product expected to receive meaning from the performer and the playwright. Performer and the spectator were never meant to find a meaning together in the world of theatre. Contemporary theatrical traditions have changed the scenario owing to the changes in the post war world. Nations that have come out of the shackles of colonialism and imperialism have assumed their moral right to bring back the traditional elements in theatre which once was their identity and pride. Nations and playwright started contesting the western notions of theatre and the authority of the writer and the stage and started giving right role to the audience, which is not only a passive spectator making them an active participant.

Contemporary theatre practitioners have been redefining theatre practices and has maintained the practice that the role of performance is relational and it brings out the best result when there is a dynamic interaction between the performers and spectators. New artists also try to differentiate between the realistic approach and stylised acting. They reach a stage where theatre

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experiences a multi-dimensional approach to the spectator. This stylized way of presentation is uniquely performer oriented and symbol oriented rather than text oriented. The experimentation in dealing with the text and the performance led to the creative fulfilment of the concepts conceived by the writer.

India received political and creative freedom only after 1947. From time immemorial artists have been using their abilities to communicate with society in the most effective manner. When modernity tries to find its way, theatre also undergoes change. The theatre practitioner started going back to the traditional ways of performances using myths and ritual contents to make it effective. Western notions of theatre practices have strong foundations in the minds of people. Meaning has been overtly verbal and direct lacking depth and knowledge. Indian theatre since 1940s has been very much imitative of the western notions of art. The west has been assumed to be the godfather of drama and have also asserted the fact that drama is synonym for realism. People fail to remember the depth of meaning theatre used to display.

Indian theatre in the 1940's has been very much imitative of the western norms of art. But artists decide to make a relevant change to that approach. From then onwards there starts a slow evolution in Indian theatre. Artists start experimenting on Ibsen's drama culture which in turn are movements that are based on the imitation of the Western theatre. Theatre that is reliant on life experiences seems to lack profundity and knowledge. While imitating the Western style of drama Indian artists fail to realize the remarkable changes that have been happening in the field of literature and drama in the western part of the world. Indian artists have become busy decoding the ideas of the west through their theatre. The west has been assumed to be the godfather of drama and have also asserted the fact that drama is a synonym for realism. People fail to remember the depth of meaning that theatre used to celebrate during the yester years. Dr. Vayala Vasudevan Pillai observes in *Nuances of Performing Arts*:

The ethnic surroundings, sources and fountains appear to be non-realistic in the sense that an atmosphere of magical realism seems to encircle the space. That is clear in all the artistic manifestations of the people. The directors are thus at cross roads, trying to discover the fresh path ahead, untrodden. Unless one finds something new to be conquered there is no pleasure in the process. (11)

There is a paradigm shift in theatre that is particularly noteworthy in the framework of Indian theatre where traditional performance practices have long highlighted the participatory role of the audience. The works of Kavalam Narayana Panikkar, particularly *The Lone Tusker* (Ottayan), offer a persuasive platform for examining the relationship between the audience and the spectator. Through this concept of native theatre (thanathunatakavedi) Panikkar integrated indigenous performance with modern dramaturgical traditions creating a theatrical language which is rooted in culturally rooted and at the same time theoretically sophisticated.

Panikkar reconfigures audience engagement through indigenous aesthetics, stylized performance and meta-theatrical strategies. Here Panikkar exemplifies the potential of theatre as transformative theatre as a collaborative and culturally embedded practice. The concept of reception theory also finds a place in the theatre performance of Kavalam Narayana Panikkar. Reception theory foregrounds the meaning produced by the spectator rather than one rendered by the writer or director. Hans Robert Jauss's concept of the "horizon of expectations" suggests that audiences interpret performances based on their cultural background, prior experiences, and historical context. By producing meaning the performance emerges through interaction between the work and audience.

Richard Schechner conceptualizes performance as "restored behaviour", a process which can be completed only in the presence of an audience. Performance is not static but an event shaped by the interaction of the performance, spectators and context. These theoretical perspectives reposition audience as a co-creator of meaning which emphasizes the relational and dynamic nature of performance. This framework is crucial in understanding the theatrical practices of Panikkar.

Audience engagement operates in multiple dimensions encompassing emotional, intellectual and cultural modes of participation. The notions of *rasa* play a vital role in seminal the spectator's experience. Bharata's *Natyashastra*, expresses that theatre evokes aesthetic emotions that are relished by the Sahrdaya or the sensitive spectator. This process leads to the transformation of individual emotions into the realization of universal understanding of issues and concerns. Abhinavagupta's emphasis on *Rasa* further contemplates the aspect of this engagement. Contesting the Aristotelian catharsis, contemporary playwrights dismiss emotional purgation where *rasa* theory prioritizes aesthetic enjoyment and reflective experience. Audience acquires a significant position completing the emotional circuit of performance.

In contrast to Aristotelean drama theory, Brechtian theory of Epic theatre advocates for critical estrangement rather than emotional engagement. Different techniques are employed like direct address, narrative interruption and visible stage mechanics. Brecht pursues to avert identification with the characters encouraging analytical thinking. The audience attains the position of the critical observer proficient of interrogative concerns dealing with the social and political implications of the performance. The playwright here synthesizes visibly opposing models by combining emotional engagement with critical awareness.

Kavalam Narayana Panikkar stands as an important and inevitable figure in The Theatre of Roots movement seeking to reclaim indigenous performance traditions in post-independence India. Panikkar developed a theatrical idiom rejecting the dominance of western realism. Kerala's ritualistic and classical forms found a demonstration of a theatrical idiom through Kavalam's Native theatre. His concept thanathunatakavedi (Native Theatre) emphasizing the primacy of performance over the written text. In this

framework presented through the actor's body, voice and gestures become the prime vehicles of countenance. Theatre is conceived as multisensory experience that integrates music, movement and visual imagery.

This approach of Kavalam aligns with that of Schechner's concept of performance as a holistic event and challenges the text centric orientation of Western theatre. Panikkar reasserts the cultural importance of performance while simultaneously engaging with modern and contemporary theoretical concerns.

The Lone Tusker departs from conventional narrative-driven drama and moves towards foregrounding the process of performance itself. The play revolves around Pramaeswaran, A Chakyar performer who experiences a crisis of artistic confidence and ultimately rediscovering the strength and majestic craft of his art in the most realistic of situation. The situational demands make him believe and rediscover his craft. Nevertheless, the narrative and the plot assist a primary framework exploring the act of performance he was about to explore.

The play commences when the actor directly addressing the audience familiarizing the performance and the elucidation of the structure. This direct venture of the artist and the protagonist disrupts the misapprehension of realism and launches a participatory relationship of the audience. The actor assumes multiple roles as a protagonist performer -as a narrator, character and a commentator – reverberating the function of the Sutradhara in the conventional Indian theatre. The legendary Malayalam Film and Theatre actor late Sri Narendra Prasad expresses his view in A Discussion on Kavalam Narayana Panikkar's Play Ottayan:

Stylization is employed in art with the intention that the audience will not become personally involved in the story. The audience should be able to keep away from the life experience. When a character speaks in lines, he tries to communicate the feelings with the same energy as the text envisages. This was the old practice. But today, it is not like this. Sometimes the audience may have to take the opposite meaning from the character's dialogue. For this, the audience requires an intellectual approach. This should be the yardstick to appreciate stylised plays. There is no need for any emotional communication. This is not expected in a stylized play. (Vajpeyi 107)

The meta theatrical structure resonates with Brechtian dramaturgy and it exposes the functioning of performance and reassures the critical reflection. At the same time the play draws on traditional and ritualistic forms where the performer-audience interaction is important to the theatrical experience. The defining feature of Panikkar's theatre is the use of Natyadharmi (stylized acting) contrasting with Lokadharmi (realistic acting). In The Lone Tusker, the actor explicitly authenticates these techniques while making the audience aware of the constructed nature of dramatic recital.

The technique of Pakarnnattam (transformation) is particularly significant. Through controlled physical and vocal expression, the actor transforms into an elephant symbolically without relying on elaborate props or stage effects. This transformation is witnessed as a visible process, accenting the actor's skill and inviting the spectators to engage inventively. This approach very much aligns with Brecht's principle of "showing" rather than "becoming" where audience's awareness of the performance process enhances their involvement transforming them into active participants in the conception of meaning.

In Kavalam's theatre, the audience plays a seminal role in shaping the meaning of the performance. The author-director uses direct address, humor and improvisational elements associated with the Chakyar tradition encouraging the spectators to respond actively. This interaction of the actor and the spectators display the concept of the "emancipated spectator" who argues that audiences are fundamentally capable of interpreting and constructing meaning.

The engagement of emotional reflection critically creates a complex spectatorship experience where the audience is not merely watching but participating in a dynamic exchange that influences the performance and the script. Here the audience becomes the co-creator the outcome intended through an artistic creation. This dual engagement creates a unique performance aesthetics altogether.

The participatory nature of the play performance resonates with the Augusto Baol's notion of the "spect-actor" in which audience becomes active contributor to the theatrical event. Panikkar's theatre does not involve direct intervention or contribution to the narrative of the text, but it fosters and develops an enhanced and heightened level of engagement that blurs the boundary between the performer and the audience, by making it a single entity of craft.

The Chakyar also acts the part of the lone tusker along with his role of a chakyar, a performance that transcends the mere possibility of an imitative act and moves far beyond its conception to a different arena of the artistic performance. Kerala's culture of acting and performance always gives the freedom to the artist not to remain confined to the limitations of the text and go outside the text at the same time without making it look out of place. A single artist is empowered to portray the protagonist as the real character and the make belief character like a play within a play.

The impact of Panikkar's theatre is dependent upon the awareness and education of the audience with indigenous and tradition art forms of Kerala. One must know one's own traditional base in order to enjoy it fully. The conventions are not familiar with most of the modern audience as they have access only to the western norms of dramaturgy. Unlike conventional western mode of drama, the traditional and ritualistic forms adopted by Panikkar uses codified gestures, rhythmic patterns, and symbolic language that requires a certain level of cultural literacy.

Here the audience performs the role of Sahrdaya, who is capable of decoding and appreciating the nuances of the traditional native performance. The cultural framework thus shared with the audience reinforces the idea that theatre is a communal practice, not limited within the curtains where meaning is co-created through collective understanding and knowledge.

Panikkar's work and craft is accessible to diverse audience which helps in foregrounding the process of performance which invite open discussion and interpretation. There exist a perfect balance and flexibility in the conception of meaning and between specificity and universality contributing to the richness of the theatrical experience. The use of folk forms is not merely aesthetic but also political. Panikkar reclaims traditional performance practices challenging the dominance of Western theatrical models and asserts a unique cultural identity.

In *The Lone Tusker*, the protagonist's struggle can be interpreted as a metaphor for a broader issue similar to the tensions faced in the field of art by artists who depend on their artistic legacy for a living. The Kerala or India, coming out of the shackles of western hegemony, both culturally and politically need to find a space well placed in the modern world. The recovery of the confidence in the art and craft of the artist is symbolic of the recovery of the traditional forms of performance long forgotten from the psyche of the nation, which is only growing.

The demand for audience participation further enhances the political dimension which invites critical viewership from the audience, giving a space for dialogue and critical reflection. The audience is no longer a passive viewer by an active participant in the journey pursued by the play, text, the author and even the artist. The insights thus offered by Panikkar's theatre remain very much relevant in contemporary performance practices and the experimental nature of contemporary theatre still continues. Theatre practitioner still try to challenge the spectator and encourage more possibilities of interaction and critical perspectives.

Kavalam Narayana Panikkar's *The Lone Tusker* exemplifies the fact that performance emerges not as a fixed product but as a collaborative process shaped by the dialogue between the performer and audience. This understanding brings in the power of theater as a strong medium for not only cultural expression, critical enquiry but also a platform for collective experience.

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