RESEARCH
O&G Forum 2024; 34 – 3s: 2610-2616

SPECTATOR AND SPECTACLE: A METATHEATRICAL READING OF ABHIJÑĀNAŚĀKUNTALAM AND NAGAMANDALA

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Abstract
This paper explores the metatheatrical elements in Kalidasa's Abhijñānaśākuntalam and Karnad's Nagamandala through the lens of spectator and spectacle. Metatheatre refers to moments in a play that draw attention to the theatrical nature of the performance itself. The paper aims to uncover the relationship between actors, characters, and audiences by examining how they comment on the act of watching and being watched.
Keywords: Spectator, Spectacle, Metatheatre, Indian drama, Evolution, Spectator theory, Knowledge acquisition, Audience participation, Critical thinking, Imagination, Dramatic irony, Chorus, Fourth wall, Active engagement, Theatrical experience, Intellectual curiosity.

INTRODUCTION

Kalidasa's Abhijñānaśākuntalam

The tragic love tale of Shakuntala, a stunning young woman raised in the beautiful setting of a hermitage, is revealed in Kalidasa's *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*. During hunting, King Dushyanta finds the hermitage and falls deeply in love with Shakuntala. Their love culminates in a marriage that is secret and founded on permission. However, their joy is short. Their good intentions are thrown off balance by a missing ring that is cursed to induce forgetting. King Dushyanta's memory is cruelly obscured by the curse, forcing him to return to his court out of obligation. The timeless themes of love and loss, the influence of fate, and the struggle between one's wishes and social obligations are all explored in *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*. The story is brought to life by Kalidasa's clever use of words, which contrasts greatly with the peace.

Girish Karnad's Nagamandala

The plot of *Nagamandala* by Girish Karnad develops in an engaging framework. A playwright who struggles with insomnia takes comfort in a temple where locals gather around fires to tell stories. One such story takes us to a small Indian village and is told by The Storyteller. Karnad explores gender relations, expectations placed on marriage by society, and the fuzziness of the boundaries between desire and social forces. A lasting impression is left by the play's multi-layered structure and ambiguous ending, which invite viewers to reflect on the intricacies of interpersonal relationships, the strength of belief, and the transformational potential of love—both divine and human.

Spectator Theory of Knowledge

Applying the spectator theory of knowledge in both dramas, the spectator theory of knowledge, championed by figures like John Locke, proposes a simple yet limited view of learning. According to this theory, we gain knowledge solely through observation using our senses like sight and touch. The mind, in this view, starts as a blank slate, recording information from the external world without any active participation. Locke says, our minds are initially blank slates (tabula rasa) and we gain knowledge through our senses (sight, touch, etc.) encountering the world. The mind then processes this sensory information to form ideas. While Locke emphasised on experience, he also acknowledged the role of the mind in processing that experience through a concept called "reflection". John Locke argues in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 'For our understanding wholly depends upon our senses; and for the furniture of the mind with ideas, all the materials of knowledge are without our thoughts, are not innate but come in by the two inlets of sensation and reflection' (Locke).

This theory, however, doesn't fully capture the complexities of knowledge acquisition in plays. Consider *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*, the play unfolds in a visually captivating world, the audience isn't just passive observers. The characters' emotions and experiences, though initially grasped through sight and sound, evoke deeper understanding through emotional intelligence. We connect with their struggles and triumphs, moving beyond mere observation. Similarly, in *Nagamandala*, the Chorus actively questions the narrated stories, challenging the audience to engage critically with the information presented. These plays demonstrate that knowledge acquisition is a more dynamic process, involving reason, critical thinking, and active engagement with the observed world, not just passive spectatorship.

Unveiling Knowledge in Abhijñānaśakuntalam: Beyond the Spectator Theory

The fascinating study of love, grief, and the power of remembrance may be found in Kalidasa's *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*.

The drama eventually surpasses its constraints even though it makes use of sensory experience and observation—two key principles of the spectator theory of knowledge.

The spectator theory places a strong emphasis on how important senses are to learning. *Abhijñānaśakuntalam* skillfully gives the audience a multi-sensory experience. We are taken to ashrams, sumptuous palaces, and surreal settings by the play's evocative descriptions. Through Kalidasa's descriptive language, we can "see" the beauty of the forest and "hear" the lovely songs of the birds as well as the whispers of nature. This multisensory experience is essential to engrossing the audience in the play's universe.

The spectator idea is supported by Shakuntala and Dushyanta's first meeting. Shakuntala's physical beauty (sight) and her lovely voice (sound) enthralled Dushyanta. These noted characteristics seem to blossom their attractiveness. But the story goes beyond, implying that love is more than just seeing. As the characters interact, we witness their developing emotional connection, hinting at a deeper understanding that transcends the physical.

Through observation and interaction, the characters in *Abhijñānaśakuntalam* learn things about each other and the surrounding universe. Raised in the haven of the ashram, Shakuntala gains knowledge of the aristocratic ways through her contacts with Dushyanta and his companions. Dushyanta, on the other hand, changes his outlook on life as a result of his experiences in the ashram. These exchanges demonstrate how social contact and observation aid in knowledge creation.

In the same way, one cannot fully understand concepts like love, sorrow, and redemption by looking at them. The drama makes the audience feel various emotions, including empathy, rage, sadness, and delight. The audience must connect emotionally with the play to comprehend these feelings and how they affect the characters.

According to certain readings of *Abhijñānasakuntalam*, the drama uses a "celestial messenger" that speaks to the audience directly. Breaking the fourth wall is a method that puts the audience's status as an objective observer to the test. The messenger encourages active involvement with the message of the play by asking them to consider the topics that are being conveyed.

The *Abhijñānaśakuntala*, like all plays that survive from the pre-modern Sanskrit corpus, begins with a nāndī, or benediction to a deity followed by a prastāvanā, or prologue. The conventions of the prologue are fairly consistent across the canon: two to three characters representing members of a theatrical ensemble enter the stage to provide some fundamental information about the performance to take place and to transition the audience into the world of the play. These characters—usually a sūtradhāra, or director (literally "string-bearer") and a naṭa (actor) or naṭī (actress)—exist between the quotidian life of the performers and the characters in the drama proper (Culp,27).

Abhijñānaśakuntalam is a theatrical production that effectively demonstrates the impact of sensory experiences. Nevertheless, by highlighting the importance of creativity, emotional intelligence, and engaged audience participation, the play transcends the constraints of the spectator theory. Using these components, the play asks us to participate in the events taking place on stage more profoundly and intimately. The role of observers shifts from being passive to co-creators of meaning.

The prologue to Shakuntala begins when the sūtradhāra walks onstage, calling into the wings for the naṭī to finish dressing and come join him. When she does he informs her that their esteemed audience has assembled, and that tonight they are attend to that audience with a performance of the "new nāṭaka (heroic drama), called The Recognition of Shakuntala, the narrative of which has been prepared by Kalidasa (Culp,27).

Unveiling Knowledge in *Nagamandala*: Challenging the Spectator Theory

The *Nagamandala* by Girish Karnad explores the intricacies of memory, narrative, and the creation of knowledge. The play questions the spectator theory of knowledge's passive approach to learning, even as it makes use of components that support it.

At first glance, *Nagamandala* seems to be in favour of emphasizing the senses' function in learning. Rani learns about the Behula narrative for the first time by hearing the Storyteller narrating it. Words are used to convey details about the mystical serpent Lakhindar and Behula's unshakable loyalty, which sparks Rani's imagination and helps her interpret the tale. Rani actively participates in the narrative rather than just watching it unfold. She imagines herself as Behula, overcoming death for her spouse, and her imagination soars. This creative act of engagement emphasizes how important the mind is to the process of creating knowledge.

In *Nagamandala*, the Chorus performs a crucial function that extends beyond merely telling the tale. They analyze and probe the occurrences, presenting counter arguments and refuting the presumptions of the viewers. The idea of the audience as passive spectators is challenged by this active participation. Instead of merely listening to the story without question, the Chorus challenges the listener to consider it critically.

The play demonstrates how information may be shaped by storytelling. Although Rani did not personally see Behula's story, it nevertheless provided her with a wealth of information. It influences not just her actions and ideas but also her perspective on reality. This illustrates how learning can take place without reference to the present sensory experience.

According to this theory, every person perceives in the same way. *Nagamandala* disputes this idea. The Behula story is told in the play in a number of different ways, each with its own interpretation. It is up to the spectator to decide which version—if any—is "true." This highlights how perception can be a subjective process and how it can be of the world, which is shaped by our unique experiences.

In order to immerse the audience in the narrative, *Nagamandala* makes use of sensory experience and observation. Nevertheless, by emphasizing the active role of imagination, critical thinking, and interpretation in the construction of knowledge, the play eventually undermines the shortcomings of spectator theory. It shows that knowledge is actively created by interaction with stories, inquiring, and contemplating the world around us, rather than being passively received. By actively participating, the audience co-creates meaning, assembling the story and its ramifications.

The Shifting Stage: A Look at Metatheatre in *Abhijñānaśakuntalam* and *Nagamandala*

The play's admission of its own theatricality, or metatheatre, has taken an interesting turn over the ages. Literary critic Richard Hornby named five metatheatre or metadrama techniques: a) play inside a play; b) ambiguity of identities; c) reference to reality; d) self-reference to the drama; and e) temporal distortion (Zatlin 55).

A comparative analysis of Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* and Kalidasa's *Abhijñānaūakuntalam* uncovers an intriguing difference in the use of metatheatre. This contrast illustrates how the theatrical setting has changed over the ages, moving from

subtle hinting at audience participation to being more overtly assertive.

A classic Sanskrit play, *Abhijñānaśakuntalam*, employs a metatheatre with a subtle and elegant touch. The fourth wall—the fictitious partition that separates the audience and the stage—is not explicitly broken. But the play makes use of a few devices that allude to a consciousness of its own existence. Dramatic irony's potency is important. The viewer knows things that certain characters don't, like Dushyanta in particular. This raises the suspense and suggests possible conflicts. For example, we know about Shakuntala's curse, but Dushyanta doesn't. We are compelled to watch closely and participate more in the play because of the dramatic tension, curious to see how the characters' different knowing will be revealed. *Abhijñānaśākuntalam's* Chorus serves as a compass, offering historical context and poignant comments. Their presence acts as a subdued reminder to the audience that they are watching a manufactured world being performed. Despite their lack of instantaneous commentary on the event, their presence prompts viewers to consider the drama's emotional significance and moves them beyond simple spectatorship.

Moving through the elements of Metatheatre in both the Plays.

Abhijñānaśakuntalam

Play within a play - A stage direction advising the actor playing Dushyanta to deliver a line "with a flicker of uncertainty crossing his face" while accepting the ring from Shakuntala. This not only guides the actor's performance but also subtly influences the audience's interpretation. By emphasizing Dushyanta's internal struggle, the stage direction creates a shared understanding of the character's complex emotions. Similarly, a stage direction describing Shakuntala's "downcast eyes brimming with tears" as she bids farewell to the ashram adds another dimension to the scene, prompting the audience to empathise with her grief.

These detailed stage directions, meant to be interpreted by the actors, also become a subtle form of communication with the audience. They paint a vivid picture of the characters' inner world, adding depth and value to the performance. In essence, the stage directions become a play within a play, offering a behind-the-scenes glimpse into the characters' motivations and emotional states.

The act of storytelling itself, by the Vidushaka to Dushyanta and indirectly to the audience, encourages a meta-theatrical experience. The audience is no longer just passively consuming the main story; they are presented with a secondary narrative that prompts them to draw parallels and reflect on the characters' actions.

The tale told by the Vidushaka about King Dasharatha and his sons is the most well-known example. This nested tale serves as a meta-commentary on the main story, even though it isn't a stand-alone performance within the play. The rivalry that is developing between Dushyanta and Shakuntala is well reflected in the tale of King Dasharatha, who favours one son and subsequently regrets it. It functions as a warning story, emphasising the perils of arrogance and rash choices, and portraying the possible repercussions of Dushyanta's forgetfulness and disdain for his pledge. A meta-theatrical experience is encouraged by the act of storytelling itself, which is done by the Vidushaka to Dushyanta and indirectly to the audience. The audience is exposed to a secondary narrative that encourages them to get involved in the main plot instead of merely passively ingesting it.

Another example is the playful banter and interactions between Shakuntala and her friends within the ashram. The scene where Shakuntala and her friends perform a small skit or reenact a mythological story for their amusement. While not a formal play within play, this act of playfulness highlights the performative aspect of human behavior. It subtly reminds the audience that the story unfolding on stage is itself a performance, a reenactment of human emotions and relationships.

Breaking the 4th wall - Characters may present themselves to the audience; one could be Shakuntala's gregarious companion Madanika, who would speak to the audience directly and tell about their life in the calm ashram. This fosters a feeling of unity and draws the audience into the play's world. Madanika immediately engages the audience with her lighthearted conversation, which instantly transports them from their seats to the ashram's verdant surroundings.

More importantly, characters may speak directly to the listener during soliloquies rather than merely internal monologues. A broken-hearted Shakuntala, pining for Dushyanta's lost love, would turn to the crowd and share her suffering. This gives the audience and the actors a sense of complicity. The audience takes on an active role in the narrative, making it more than merely a theatrical production.

In Kalidasa's work, as translated by Ryder, the king's emotion on seeing Shakunthala leaving, as he falls in love with her. "It is my body leaves my love, not I;My body moves away, but not my mind;For back to her my struggling fancies fly, Like silken banners borne against the wind" (Ryder,16)

While speaking to Priyamvada about gathering flowers, Anusuya reveals her inner concern for Shakuntala's well-being and the success of her marriage. She doesn't directly address the audience, but her words showcase her anxieties about the future. "But we must make an offering to the gods that watch over Shakuntala's marriage. We had better gather more"(Ryder,39). After hearing the voice behind the scene, Priyamvada speaks about Shakuntala's situation. This reveals her initial thought process and concern for Shakuntala's social etiquette. "Oh, dear! The very thing has happened. The dear, absent-minded girl has offended some worthy man" (Ryder, 40). "We can breathe again. When the good king went away, he put a ring, engraved with his own name, on Shakuntala's finger to remember him. That will save her"(Ryder, 41). Priyamvada expresses her relief after learning about the ring. She speaks her thoughts aloud, revealing a sense of hope for Shakuntala's future.

Dushyanta's court jester, the Vidushaka, is likewise skilled at breaking the fourth wall. In the scenario where Dushyanta tries to defend his conduct while stuck in denial over the missing ring. Standing apart, the Vidushaka may raise an eyebrow and address the audience directly with a sharp observation: "Ah, the power of selective memory! It appears that our honorable king has completely forgotten his pledges." In addition to bringing some humor to the scene, this lighthearted speech also acts as a meta-commentary on Dushyanta's ignorance. Recognizing Dushyanta's shortcomings and delighting in the jester's astute observation, the audience joins the Vidushaka as a co-conspirator.

Asides - To further obfuscate the boundaries between performance and reality and immerse the audience in the characters' inner lives, Kalidasa cleverly uses "asides." The other characters on stage do not hear these asides, which are said by characters to the audience directly. Let us examine the use of

asides in Abhijñānaśākuntalam as a potent metatheatrical technique.

Shakuntala hesitates to bring water to King Dushyatha because she is deeply in love with him. She might express her inner conflict in passing, saying something like, "My heart yearns to serve him, yet social propriety dictates otherwise." Shakuntala's persona is given more complexity by this unsaid idea that is only revealed to the audience. It displays her reticence and conformity to social conventions despite her wanting to show her love. The audience becomes a confidante, privy to Shakuntala's true feelings hidden beneath the surface.

Shakuntala's close friend Anasuya can also make lighthearted remarks with asides. With a playful gleam in her eye, Anasuya could make a playful comment as Dushyanta gets ready to leave the ashram following their marriage: "Ah, the king looks smitten! It appears that our Shakuntala has won his heart at last." This aside functions as a meta-commentary on the developing love tale in addition to bringing a lighthearted touch to the situation. It encourages the viewer to take part in the happiness and humor of the circumstance.

Shakuntala's friend Priyamvada may also employ an aside to increase the tension. Priyamvada might say, worried, when Shakuntala realizes she has misplaced the ring Dushyanta gave her as a memento of their union: "The missing ring — a dreadful omen! Will it lead to discord between them? This unsaid idea hints at the impending confrontation and makes the viewer feel anxious.

By employing asides, Kalidasa achieves several things. He allows for greater character development, revealing the characters' inner thoughts and motivations that might not be outwardly expressed. He creates a sense of intimacy with the audience, establishing a bond where they become privy to the characters' unspoken emotions. Finally, asides can be used to add humour or suspense, further engaging the audience with the play's emotional flow.

The difference between involvement and observation is further muddled by Kalidasa's vivid descriptions of the scene and the characters. His vivid language immerses the audience in the play's world. This emphasis on summoning up a strong mental picture may be interpreted as a meta-commentary on the ability of theater to conjure up other worlds. The audience transforms from passive viewers into co-creators of the universe presented to them as they actively visualize the scenes based on the explanations.

Another aside is taken from the translated version by Ryder. “Though deeply longing, maids are coy And bid their wooers wait; Though eager for united joy In love, they hesitate. Love cannot torture them, nor move Their hearts to sudden mating; Perhaps they even torture love By their procrastinating" (Ryder, 38).

Nagamandala

Shattering the Fourth Wall and Embracing Audience Participation - A more overt and dynamic acceptance of metatheatre can be found in the modern Indian play Nagamandala. Several aspects of the play question the idea of passive spectatorship by immediately addressing the audience. Nagamandala smashes the fourth wall right away with The Man's Prologue. In this opening scene, a disheartened playwright fleeing from a curse takes sanctuary in a shrine. By addressing the difficulties of playwriting head-on, Nagamandala challenges the audience to think of the play as an artistic endeavor as opposed to merely a narrative. The play frequently reminds the audience of its theatricality, beginning with its self-referential opening act. "Since coming to this village, I have held by this hand only two, my husband and this King Cobra. Except for these two, I have not touched any one in the male sex. Nor have I allowed any other male to touch me. If I lie, let the Cobra bite me" (Karnad, 42-43). Here, speaker directly addresses the audience by stating the consequence of a lie ("Let the cobra bite me"). This breaks the fourth wall, acknowledging the audience's presence and their role in judging the truthfulness of her statement. By introducing the possibility of a lie and its dramatic consequence, the play creates a layer of doubt about the truth being presented. This challenges the audience to question the characters' words and actions, and the nature of truth within the theatrical space.

The Chorus in *Nagamandala* is far more active than its counterpart in *Abhijñānaśākuntalam.* They not only narrate the story but also question the characters’ actions and offer alternative perspectives. This active engagement disrupts the traditional flow of a play and compels the audience to critically analyse the events unfolding on stage. They are no longer simply observers; they are participants in the process of meaning-making. By prompting the audience to question and analyse, *Nagamandala* fosters a more engaged and critical approach to theatre.

The play opens with a conversation between the Stage Manager and the "sutradhara" figure, Janaki. This initial exchange itself breaks the fourth wall. Janaki, a character within the play, questions the very purpose of the performance. She asks, "Are we here to enact a myth or to analyse it?" This opens the question of whether the performance is a retelling of a myth or a commentary on the act of storytelling itself. The lines between reality, myth, and performance become blurred from the outset.

Myth as Performance: The characters themselves recognize that myth is performative throughout the play. The scenario in which the main character Rani talks with her friends about the Behula story. She remarks on the embellishments made to the story throughout time, adding dramatic elements to increase the story's emotional impact. This self-reflexive critique calls attention to how myths are created and challenges the audience's belief in their veracity.

The Chorus as Storytellers and Observer**s:** In Nagamandala, the Chorus is very important. In addition to telling the tale, they interact with the characters and occasionally even challenge their decisions. Look at how the Chorus criticizes Rani's choices and interrupts a scene with her. This act of intervention not only adds another layer to the narrative but also reminds the audience that they are witnessing a performance, a constructed reality shaped by the storytellers.

Music and Dance as Commentary: Karnad includes performances of traditional folk music and dance in the show. In the play's scene, a colorful Yakshagana performance is given. This performance could be a meta-commentary on the themes of desire, deception, and the power of storytelling, even if it has no direct bearing on the main plot.

The Power of Imagination: The play includes repeated references to how imagination shapes stories. In the instance where Rani imagines a scene from the myth while lost in thought. When performed on stage, this depiction makes it difficult to distinguish between the myth's imagined world and reality. It serves to remind viewers that the narrative they are currently experiencing is, at its core, the result of human creativity and storytelling.The act of storytelling is at the center of Nagamandala. The play's narration of Behula's story takes center stage. This self-referential structure demonstrates how efficient theater is in telling tales and influencing public opinion.

Nagamandala invites viewers to consider the nature of theater and how it affects their comprehension by recognizing its function in the narrative.

Subverting Expectations (Double-layered) - "Scowls in the day. Embraces at night. The face in the morning unrelated to the touch at night. But day or night, one motto does not change: Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you. I was a stupid, ignorant girl when you brought me here. But now I am a woman, a wife, and I am going to be a mother. I am not a parrot. Not a cat or a sparrow. Why don't you take it on trust that I have a mind and explain this charade to me? Why do you play these games? Why do you change like a chameleon from day to night? Even if I understood a little, a tiny bit--I could bear it. But now--sometimes I feel my head is going to burst!" (Karnad, 34-35). Here, on the surface level, Rani seems to be confronting her human husband. However, the audience knows it's the Naga. This creates a double subversion. First, Rani challenges the expected behavior of a submissive wife. Second, the audience grapples with the blurred lines between reality and illusion – Is she unknowingly confronting the true source of her confusion?.Rani's emotional outburst could be seen as both an internal and external struggle. She directly confronts the Naga (disguised as her husband), externalizing her confusion about their relationship. However, this could also be interpreted as a way of grappling with her own internal desires and fears, projected onto the figure of her husband/Naga. The audience witnesses both the external confrontation and the internal battle raging within Rani.

The Audience as Witness: The scene in which the Chorus addresses directly to the audience, discussing and questioning the accuracy of multiple versions of the Behula tale. By questioning the narratives that are told to them and delving into their deeper implications, this act encourages the audience to take part actively. "No, I can't. My love has stitched up my lips. Pulled out my fangs. Torn out my sac of poison. Withdraw your veils of light, Flames. Let my shame float away in the darkness. Don't mock, gecko. Yes, this King Cobra is now no better than a grass snake. Yes, that is it. A grass snake. A common reptile" (Karnad, 45). Here, Naga doesn't directly address the audience with phrases like "you" or "listen," the entire monologue functions as a form of indirect audience address. The audience is the only one privy to the Naga's inner thoughts and emotional turmoil. This creates a sense of intimacy and allows the audience to understand the character's motivations on a deeper level. The Naga's descriptions ("stitched up my lips...Pulled out my fangs...Torn out my sac of poison") can be seen as metaphors. His physical limitations symbolize the loss of his power and agency due to love. This metaphorical language invites the audience to interpret the scene beyond the literal and consider the broader themes of love, sacrifice, and the loss of identity. The audience knows the truth about the Naga's disguise, while Rani remains oblivious. This irony creates a sense of tension and anticipation. The audience waits to see if the truth will be revealed and how it will impact the characters and the play's events.

The Power of Performance: Throughout the play, the characters themselves acknowledge the power of performance. In the scene where Rani, desperate for change, utilises the magical roots provided by Kurudavva. This act can be seen as a performance, a desperate attempt to alter her reality through a symbolic act. Similarly, the Panchayat trial can be viewed as a theatrical spectacle, where Rani must perform her innocence and plead her case before the assembled audience.

Karnad was influenced by Brechtian theatre, In Naga-Mandala, the Brechtian influence and the guidance of Indian folk theatre are manifested through folklore, myths, song (song of the flames) and magic realism. The whole play is based on this. The whole play is based on this.

Bertolt Brecht, the eminent German playwright, caused a great sway in the world theatre. He rejected the Aristotelian Dramatic theatre and formed a theatre of his which met the need of the hour. A change was inevitable then from the kind of plays that presented the illusion of reality. His epic theatre thus disregarded aesthetics. In his study, Awanish Rai observes the features of Brechtian theatre: "The audience, thus, is expected to function as an active participant in place of a passive spectator who used to forget things the moment s/he came out of the theatre because the aim of the traditional Dramatic Theatre was to arouse cathartic emotion, 'clam of mind, all passions spent.' Brechtian Theatre, essentially non-Aristotelian, advocates repeated disruptions in order to avoid a linear progression of action on the stage (Awanish Rai 969). In Brecht's words, as translated by John Willet in "The Street Scene", from The Theory of the Modern Stage: "What is involved here is, briefly, a technique of taking the human social incidents to be portrayed and labelling them as something striking, something that calls for explanation, is not to be taken for granted, not just natural. The object of this 'effect' is to allow the spectator to criticize constructively from a social point of view" (Eric Bentley 91). This influence of Alienation effect is seen in Nagamandala also, Karnad tries to make the familiar things strange, on analysing the play as portraying the issues of society, this comes true. Karnad is actually showing the Indian Patriarchal society through characters like Appana. Karnad, inspired from the Brechtian ideas, derives the techniques used from the Indian folk tradition and culture. The rich Indian heritage is thus exposed through the play.

The presence of magic realism using the two folklores and myths from Karnataka, which forms the significant part, in the play is examined to explain the play as a metathe atre.

The ways he followed the hornby's technique of metatheatre, his influence of Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre and his alienation effect on Karnad's plays, specifically, Naga-Mandala, is thrown into light which adds to the understanding of the play as a metatheatre.

Beyond Observation: How Metatheatre Challenges the Spectator Theory in Shakuntalam and Nagamandala

The concept of the spectator theory of knowledge posits that learning happens solely through passive observation. The mind acts as a blank slate, recording information received through the senses. While both *Shakuntalam* and *Nagamandala* utilise elements that engage the audience's senses, a closer look reveals a fascinating contrast in their use of metatheatre. This contrast ultimately challenges the limitations of the spectator theory, demonstrating how theatrical experiences can move beyond passive observation and foster a more active approach to knowledge acquisition.

*Abhijñānaśakuntalam***,** a classical Sanskrit play, employs metatheatre with a touch of subtlety. There are no overt disruptions of the fourth wall, but the play uses a few techniques that nudge the audience beyond simply absorbing sensory information. Dramatic irony plays a key role. The audience possesses knowledge that some characters, particularly Dushyanta, lack. This disparity creates a sense of anticipation and foreshadows potential conflicts. For instance, we are aware of Shakuntala's curse, while Dushyanta remains oblivious. This

dramatic tension compels the audience to lean in and engage more actively with the play, eager to see how the characters' contrasting knowledge will unfold.

The Chorus in *Shakuntalam* acts as a guiding voice, providing context and emotional commentary. Their presence serves as a gentle reminder to the audience of the artificiality of the performance. While they don't directly comment on the action, their role subtly nudges the audience beyond passive observation. By offering emotional commentary, the Chorus encourages the audience to reflect on the play's themes and connect with the characters on a deeper level.

Nagamandala, a contemporary Indian play, embraces metatheatre in a more overt and dynamic way. The play features several elements that directly address the audience and challenge the traditional notion of passive spectatorship. From the very beginning, *Nagamandala* breaks the fourth wall with The Man's Prologue. This introductory scene features a dejected playwright seeking refuge in a temple due to a curse. By directly acknowledging the struggles of playwriting, *Nagamandala* invites the audience to consider the play not just as a story, but as a product of artistic creation. This self-referential opening act sets the stage for a play that constantly reminds the audience of its own theatricality.

The Chorus in *Nagamandala* is far more active than in *Shakuntalam*. They not only narrate the story but also question the characters' actions and offer alternative perspectives. This active engagement disrupts the traditional flow of a play and compels the audience to critically analyse the events unfolding on stage. They are no longer simply observers; they are participants in the process of meaning-making. By prompting the audience to question and analyse, *Nagamandala* fosters a more engaged and critical approach to theatre, moving away from the limitations of passive observation.

While *Shakuntalam* utilises subtler techniques to nudge the audience beyond passivity, *Nagamandala* directly confronts the limitations of the spectator theory. Both *Shakuntalam* and *Nagamandala* encourage the audience to use their imagination to fill in the gaps and visualise the characters and settings. This active mental engagement is crucial for constructing knowledge from the play's narrative. Kalidasa's rich descriptions in *Shakuntalam* and the play-within-a-play structure in *Nagamandala* both require the audience to imagine and participate in creating the world of the play. The use of metatheatre, particularly in *Nagamandala*, encourages the audience to analyse the information presented, question assumptions, and consider multiple perspectives. The audience becomes an active participant in the play, drawn into the emotional world of the characters and compelled to reflect on the play's themes. This technique fosters a sense of intimacy and connection, blurring the lines between reality and the performance.

Dramatic irony in *Shakuntalam* and the active Chorus in *Nagamandala* both prompt the audience to think critically about the characters' motivations, the plot's development, and the play's themes. This critical thinking is essential for forming a deeper understanding of the play's message. Both plays evoke a range of emotions in the audience – joy, sorrow, anger, and empathy. Understanding these emotions and their impact on the characters requires the audience to go beyond passive observation and engage with the play on an emotional level. *Shakuntalam* explores the power of love and loss, while *Nagamandala* delves into themes of faith and devotion.

Evolution and Impact: A More Engaged Theatre Experience

The contrasting approaches to metatheatre in *Abhijñānaśakuntalam* and *Nagamandala* reflect the evolution of theatrical styles. Shakuntalam represents a more classical approach, where metatheatre serves to enhance the story without disrupting the flow. *Nagamandala*, on the other hand, exemplifies a contemporary trend of using metatheatre to challenge conventions and directly engage the audience in the theatrical experience.

This evolution in metatheatre has significant impacts on how audiences experience plays. Overt metatheatre encourages the audience to become active participants in the play. By questioning assumptions, offering alternative perspectives, and reflecting on the themes presented, the audience becomes co-creators of meaning. Playwrights can utilise metatheatre to comment on the nature of theatre itself, its limitations, and its potential as a storytelling tool.

CONCLUSION

From Spectators to Participants – The Enduring Power of Metatheatre

The analysis of *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* and *Nagamandala* reveals a fascinating interplay between metatheatre and the spectator theory of knowledge. While both plays utilise elements that engage the senses, their contrasting approaches to Metatheater ultimately challenge the limitations of this theory. *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* employs metatheatre with a subtle touch, nudging the audience beyond passive observation through techniques like dramatic irony and the Chorus's emotional commentary. This gentle nudge encourages the audience to use their imagination, engage in critical thinking about the characters' motivations, and connect with the play on an emotional level. *Nagamandala* takes a more confrontational approach to metatheatre. By breaking the fourth wall from the outset and featuring an active Chorus that questions the narrative, Nagamandala demands active participation from the audience. This approach fosters a deeper level of critical thinking, prompting the audience to analyse the play's construction, consider multiple perspectives, and engage with the themes on a more intellectual level. The evolution of metatheatre, from the subtle to the overt, reflects a shift in how theatrical experiences can foster knowledge acquisition. Both *Shakuntalam* and *Nagamandala* move beyond the spectator theory, transforming the audience from passive observers into active participants. Through a combination of imagination, critical thinking, and emotional engagement, audiences are empowered to co-create meaning from the plays' narratives and delve deeper into their thematic complexities. Ultimately, this active participation in the theatrical experience underscores the enduring power of Metatheater to challenge assumptions, spark intellectual curiosity, and foster a richer understanding of the world we inhabit.

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