

# **Dialectics of Text and Performance: In G. SankaraPillai's *Wings Flapping Somewhere...***

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## **Abstract of the paper**

Along with redefining Indian mythology the contemporary Indian theatre subsumes ancient folk and classical performance tradition. The visual elements such as gestures, stage props, scenery, lighting and acoustic elements like music, dialogue and sound effects (chants, cries) widen the performative field of discourse. Each prop represented on stage during the performance stands out as a semiotic sign thereby attempting to capture the nuance. The traditional play script gave importance to dialogue delivery. The contemporary performative plays give rise to experimental forms. The metamorphosis of any play happens when the actor gulps down the character with his exaggerated expressions and the director dissects them with his imagination on stage by transforming the play, choosing apt individuals to represent each character, guiding actors through rehearsals etc. G SankaraPillai's *Wings Flapping Somewhere* delves through a series of monologues making the reader comprehend the play. It reworks on the myth of Mahabharata where Kunti is alluded to contemporary woman with conflicts. The transcreated version of the play staged by the students of Madras Christian College, Chennai for World Theatre Day employs the technique of Brecht's "alienation effect" to give a critical banter to the spectator. It also includes experimental modes of play as in breaking the invisible "fourth wall", thereby directly interrogating with

the audience, not explicitly giving them answers but by making them to think. This paper attempts to negotiate the meeting ground of performance as well as textual transformation in *Wings Flapping Somewhere*. Eventually, depicting how a performance enhances the meaning and experience of a text.

**Keywords:** text, performance, contemporary play, myth, alienation, fourth wall, transformation

The dialectical method of text and performance in drama offers a scope for negotiation. Text of a drama includes dialogue, monologue, plot, setting and stage directions whereas the transformation of the play happens in the realm of the director who directs the actors to perform in the play. The performance enhances through gestures, voice modulation and facial expressions. The traditional play script gave importance to dialogue whereas the contemporary plays pave way for experimental forms. Meanwhile, the redefining of Indian mythology in the contemporary Indian theatre subsumes ancient folk and classical performance tradition, one among them being *Wings Flapping Somewhere...*

*Wings Flapping Somewhere...* by G. Sankara Pillai, reverberates the story of Kunti, as the central character and the mother of Pandavas in *The Mahabharata*. In a traditional Indian classical form the play begins with an invocation to Agni, the God of Fire. The drama revolves through the eyes of Kunti, pertaining with the conflicts she had to face as a girl, woman and mother. In addition, the role of Kunti goes through a series of transition from an ordinary actress on stage to Kunti the wife of Pandavas and later on, as a superwoman. The wing beats of the unknown bird brushing past Kunti at the most critical moments in her life denotes the conflicts she had to go through as a mother. However, she pours out the desires of womanhood, which had to remain curtailed in the name of being a woman. Also, the

dilemmas she had to face after invoking the mantra of Agni and becoming pregnant as a result. Despite being a princess and bearing the child of God she too like any woman had the fears an unmarried woman with a child had to face. Moreover, she decides to abandon the child and live the life society commands to behold for her honour. It is this rejection of her first born son Karnawhich haunts Kunti as wings beats forever. When the Kurukshetra war happens between the Pandavas and Kauravas ,Kunti finds herself as the most miserable mother , with her own sons fighting on both sides. By a heart rendering monologue Kunti chooses to untie all knots of love and affection by joining with her funeral pyre the Agni.Agni stands as both source of energy and source of destruction in the play.

The transcreated version of the play *Wings Flapping Somewhere* has been divided into different scenes unlike the one act play of the same by G. Sankara Pillai. The plot of the play not only revolves through the eyes of Kunti, it also shares view points from Karna and the confidante of Kunti. The audience too is involved in the play breaking the conventions of Indian theatre. The oppression of gender and caste is showcased through Kunti and Karna. The play begins with an invocation, followed by a scene in the green room where the characters who enact their respective roles prepare themselves for the drama in action. Lakshmi, Maneesha, and Ashwin take the following roles of Kunti, confidante of Kunti and Karna. The drama proceeds with the dilemmas faced by Kunti through the wings beats of an unknown bird that continuously haunts her. The confusion of Kunti from within arises when she glances herself on a mirror. The reflection of Kunti breaks out rendering the state of helplessness faced by her by the constant flapping of an unknown bird. Kunti's luscious youth, the invoking of mantra from Agni devan and the abandoning of child is also given due importance. Meanwhile, monologues of Karna are also created and his version of story is also taken into account. Scenes from Kurukshetra war and an excerpt from Rohith Vemula's suicide note in the light of Karna's death is seen. In the final scene of the play, the characters

from the play who are sitting amongst the audience speak in their respective language too thus transcending the boundaries of language. The characters share their experience as ordinary beings that had to face similar discrimination.

One of the contemporary performative experimental forms is the breaking of fourth wall:

Brecht regarded 'breaking down the fourth wall' as an important principle for achieving alienation effect. To break down the fourth wall is to strip away the 'mysteriousness' of stage art and to establish a natural relationship with the audience. Only after the fourth wall is broken down can principles of acting before an audience be clearly established and the techniques employed by Brecht such as singing, reading [in loud voice], subtitle screening, self-introduction of characters and commentary to achieve the alienation effect, be justified in terms of stage production. (Yangzhong 35)

The actors engage in a conversation where they exchange words about the roles they take up in the play. The 'breaking of fourth wall' is represented after the invocation, wherein a scene from the green room is staged to introduce the characters from their actual identity. An exchange of conversation between the make-up artist and the performer reveals the fear of forgetting dialogues faced by any actor. Thus breaking the conflicts faced by an actor to the audience. Meanwhile the title of the play to be staged is also addressed. Thus the audience is made to be alienated from the play just after it has begun reminding them that, all drama is a drama about a drama. In a further scene the confidante tells the story of Kunti by walking down from the stage, she says the story of Pritha or the story of Kunti is not mere myth, it still breathes down her neck. And interrogates the audience to hear and understand if they have got ears. Another instance, of the same is seen in the final scene where the characters sit

amongst the audience and comes to the forefront speaking in their respective language. Thus the boundaries of language are transcended on stage. The impulse of 'fourth wall' creates an impact to the audience when it is performed on stage.

Every object on the stage acts as a semiotic sign for the spectator. From the beginning scenes where Karna is seen, the spectator locates a folded paper tied on to the upper portion of hand which is quite unusual: "I would not be around you when you read this letter... I know some of you truly cared for me, loved me and treated me very well... Our feelings are second handed. Our love is constructed. Our beliefs colored. Our originality valid through artificial art... Never is a man treated as a mind." (from the letter of Vemula published in the Indian Express, New Delhi, January 19, 2016). As Karna dies, Kunti takes the folded paper from his hands and reads the afore mentioned lines. The spectator is left to wonder why Karna had to carry the suicidal note of Rohith Vemula with him.

At this juncture, there is also a mirror scene in which Kunti reflects her own self by looking into a mirror and the image reflected speaks to the audience about the haunting of wing beats that followed Kunti throughout the life after abandoning her first born child Karna. The impact of the mirror scene accompanied by acoustic elements like chants and cries make the spectator involved too. Thus the mirror scene performance brings a visual treat too.

Dance is a form of self-expression, communicative phenomena and social interaction exercised in a performance setting. The expressions conveyed through the performance of dance in drama captures the attention of spectator:

The culture

That within the bud

Of these folded hands,  
In this harmony of love,  
Has absorbed and tamed  
In the middle of the familiar kalam  
The great force  
That spreads like wildfire  
And, with demonic power,  
Can reduce to ashes( Harris 48)

In the transcreated play, the confidante of Kunti and the attendants articulate through non-verbal gestures the desires of womanhood that 'spreads like wildfire' but at the same time with patriarchal indoctrinations like 'demonic power reduces to ashes'. When performed, dance instigates the spectator and arouses her/his emotions by providing a collective experience whereas text holds up the imagination of the reader thereby giving subjective experience. Dance also thrills the audience and serves as force of attraction which influences the perception. When dialogues are rendered to the audience with a musical note it catches attention of every spectator. Furthermore, music is that genre which appeals all kinds of audience. Thus performance enhances the spectator in a better way through dance and music.

The battle of Kurukshetra mainly between Karna and Arjuna is portrayed in slow motion to grab the attention of the audience. War is depicted in a subtle way so as to create a critical banter on the spectator. It provides a realization that at the end of the war there are no winners or losers but guilt ridden sorrowful souls.

On the whole, the paper negotiates the meeting ground of textual dimension and performance in G. Sankara Pillai's *Wings Flapping Somewhere...* and the transcreated version of the same staged by the students of Madras Christian College, Chennai. The experimental forms employed in the transcreated version tracks down the techniques like alienation effect by breaking of the fourth wall, semiotic signs like letter, mirror image etc in theatre. The visual impact of bodily movements, impressions created by acoustic elements, costumes, musical motifs also supplements the performance. Moreover, experience of a reader while reading the text of a play appears subjective whereas, the spectator who views the play onstage receives a collective experience.

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