

Eavesdropping: Its Significance to Narrative in “Abhijñānaśākuntala”

Nawin Bosakaranat, Chiang Mai University, Thailand

The Kyoto Conference on Arts, Media & Culture 2024
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Although eavesdropping normally is considered inappropriate, in classical literature like Sanskrit it is interestingly acceptable, which leads to the very objective of this article, i.e. to study the function of eavesdropping in Sanskrit literature, *Abhijñānaśākuntala* or *Śakuntalā* the well-known Sanskrit play as the case study and the narratology as research methodology. The research question is why the author adds the eavesdropping in the play. The findings are as follows: the play *Śakuntalā* has been narrated in many versions. Eavesdropping, which is absent in the former ones, is added in the play by Kālidāsa in many facets. Eavesdropping scenes undeniably play a pivotal role in the play. It introduces the main characters in the first act, builds the rising action in the third, which makes the audience feel superior to the play because they know the solution of the problem before the characters. Furthermore, in the sixth act eavesdropping by the nymph who is the friend of Śakuntalā's mother is not only emotionally effective, but also reminds the audience be aware of the divine situation of the play and not to forget that there is something beyond the human sense above.

Keywords: Eavesdropping, Sanskrit Drama, Hinduism

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Normally eavesdropping is regarded inappropriate because it is the communication that is mostly not allowed to happen directly in the present time. However, the behavior is interestingly acceptable in many stories and it undeniably functions. In my opinion eavesdropping could be divided into intentionally and unintentionally. It doesn't mean that we can evaluate this behavior to be good or bad. Some eavesdropping might possibly happen with good intention. Anyway, it breaks the boundary of communication by the unknown third party.

Abhijñānaśākuntala, normally known in the name *Śakuntalā*, is the well-known Sanskrit drama in the world because of the stream of Orientalism after India was under colonialism. It is composed by Kālidāsa, an Indian poet who lived in the 4th or 5th century in the Gupta era. Actually, he is not the first who creates *Śakuntalā* himself but brings the original plot from *Mahābhārata*, the great Indian epic. In *Mahābhārata* Duṣyanta goes hunting and get lost with his retinue. He goes into the deep wood and finally meets with Śakuntalā who is alone at the time in front of the Kanva's hermitage. Kanva, the great hermit who is her stepfather, is absent. Duṣyanta cannot help falling for her and finally having intercourse with her. In the day of his returning to the city, Duṣyanta tells that if she gives birth to a son, he will be coronated as an emperor and continues his dynasty. After that when a son was born, she raised him until he is three years old and took him to the palace. Unfortunately, the king refuses her and her child in the first place. After the long debate between her and the king, finally there is a voice resounding from the sky confirming that this is the real son of the king and Śakuntalā is right. The king then accepts her and her son by telling that actually he knows the truth but has to refuse at first in order to protect his son from being blamed as a bastard. This tale is to be found and narrated in the first book of *Mahābhārata* or Ādiparvan because this story tells the birth of Bharata, the important forefather of the characters in the *Mahābhārata*, and nowadays Bharata is also believed as a legendary king of the present India, as we can see in the news a few years ago that according to Indian nationalism there was an attempt nationwide in some time to be back to the name *Bharata* instead of *India*.

If we look at the version of Kālidāsa's *Śakuntalā*, some differences that are understood to be acceptable and friendly enough to be performed in the royal court are to be found, because Kālidāsa is under the patronage of a king in the Gupta dynasty. For example, in the play the interpolation of the curse by the sage Durvāsas causes Duṣyanta forget Śakuntalā until the ring that he gave to her once in the past is found, he recognizes her and follows her back to his place, while in *Mahābhārata* he forgets her intentionally and admits her later. The debate between Śakuntalā and the king shows that Śakuntalā in *Mahābhārata* has a strong personality because she is brave enough to argue the king directly at that time, whereas in Kālidāsa's version she appears innocently through the story.

It is interesting to note that in this masterpiece eavesdropping appears in many times almost throughout the play. This leads to the research question about the significance and function of eavesdropping in the play, which is one of the important literatures in the world. This could make us be aware of eavesdropping as a literary technic applied in classical world literature.

Eavesdropping in Kālidāsa's *Śakuntalā*

Eavesdropping is interpolated by Kālidāsa and absent in Mahabharata. It appears from the beginning of the play in the act one. The important incident at the moment is Duṣyanta

meeting with Śakuntalā. When Duśyanta is approaching the area of hermitage alone, he unintentionally meets with Śakuntalā watering the trees with her friends. He hides himself behind the bush and observes what is happening. While eavesdropping he has a doubt about her birth how it is possible for the sage to have a daughter like her because she is very beautiful and born from the military caste while the sage Kanva is born from Lord Brahma so he is made to be a Brahmin by birth.

King: Can it be that she is born in a caste different from the patriarch's?

(Vasudeva, 2006, p. 75)

Later when Duśyanta reveals himself there, he has a chance to have a conversation to Śakuntalā's friends except for Śakuntalā who does not say anything but body language due to her innocence. At the time he finally knows that actually she is just a stepdaughter of the sage. Actually, she was born from the same caste or varṇa as the king; that is the military one, before was adopted by Kanva. This comforts Duśyanta worry from the prohibited marriage that is wrong. According to Hinduism, there are four castes by birth; i.e. Brahmin (the priest), Kshatriya (the military), Vaiśya (the merchant), and Śūdra (the slaves). Traditionally speaking, the marriage across the castes is not accepted among the Hindu. Eavesdropping shows his doubt to the audience before he is relieved later.

In act three Duśyanta decided to see Śakuntalā again. While he is walking to the garden in the area of hermitage, by eavesdropping he finds her having conversation with her friends about her love at first sight. After knowing their heart, each other, she and the king decide to marry willingly without consent of parent.

King: I will peer through the branches. (*does so, joyfully*) Ah! My eyes have received their alms. My darling, the ground of my love lies upon a flower-strewn stone slab, together with her two friends. Good, concealed by vines I will eavesdrop on their private conversation. (*Watches.*)

Before act four that is about Śakuntalā's departure from the forest, there is a short incident interpolated. Durvāsas, an angry sage, has come to the hermitage to see Kanva. He did not see anybody but Śakuntalā sitting hopelessly near the window because her lover went back to the palace while she is pregnant. Because of her sadness she did not welcome Durvāsas. That makes him terribly angry and curse her not to be remembered by her lover whom she is thinking of. Her two friends, Anasuya as well as Pruyamvada, who are eavesdropping unintentionally and see all the incident ask him to forgive her. Therefore, he tells that if Duśyanta sees what he gave to her, he will recognize her eventually.

Behind the Scenes: Ah! Derider of guests!

He on whom you mused so single-mindedly,
wherefore you did not perceive me, come as a guest,
he will not remember you even if reminded,
just as a drunkard does not recall what was just said.

Both: (*listening, dejected*) Alas! It has already happened! Our empty-hearted friend has offended someone worthy of respect.

Anasuya: (*looking*) Oh no! Not just anyone-it is the great seer Durvāsas. Quick to lose his temper, he is making off with unfaltering strides like a fire.

- Priyamvada: Who other than fire himself has power to burn? Anasuya! Throw yourself at his feet to calm him while I prepare the welcome-water.
- Anasuya: (*Exit.*)
- Priyamvada: (*takes a step and stumbles*) Oh no! Stumbling in my haste, the flower basket has slipped through my fingers. I will have to gather them again. (*does so.*)
- (*enter*) Anasuya: My dear, he is like an incarnation of wrath: Whose apologies will he accept? But he showed some mercy.
- Priyamvada: For him that is quite a lot. Tell me, how did it happen?
- Anasuya: When he did not want to come back I said to him: “Your holiness! Consider her former devotion, forgive this now this offence of your daughter whose worthiness you can perceive by your powers.”
- Priyamvada: What then?
- Anasuya: Then, saying, “What I have said cannot but come true; my cursed will be lifted by the sight of a token of recognition”, he vanished.
- Priyamvada: We can breathe now. There is a ring that the departing royal sage himself put on Śakuntalā’s hand as a memento. As long as it stays with her this remedy will work. (*Walk about.*)
- (Vasudeva, 2006, pp. 179-181)

Unfortunately, after she departs from the forest, she loses the ring in the river. In act five before the king meets with Śakuntalā there is a little scene of eavesdropping again. The king and the buffoon are eavesdropping a song sung by Hamsapadikā, one of Duṣyanta’s concubines. The song is as follows:

After you kissed the mango-blossoms,
the way you did, lusting for fresh honey;
how have you forgotten it, O bee,
contented to just linger on the lotus?

(Vasudeva, 2006, p. 223)

In the play the king understands he is now reproached by the concubine because he cares another woman than her. But the audience will understand that the song hints the later incident; that is Duṣyanta forgets Śakuntalā when she appears in the front of him in the act five.

Besides, in act six the audience is going to see a long scene of eavesdropping by a nymph named Sānumati, or Akṣamālā in another recension. She is a friend of Śakuntalā and is sent by her to observe her lover secretly. While the nymph is hiding herself in the proximity of the royal garden, the king, after having remembered Śakuntalā already, is lamenting in the same place. By her magical power she is considered the powerful eavesdropper because she becomes invisible and makes herself know everything that is happening there and will relate the king’s sorrow to Śakuntalā in the heaven later without the awareness of the king. The appearance of the nymph in the scene, therefore, is important as being the linkage of the character and story. It makes act seven, which is the last act, ending completely. All the character has nothing left in their minds because they know everything in the end.

Overall, we can see that the last eavesdropping by the nymph is intentional because she was sent to do that by Śakuntalā herself while the rest are unintentional. Why the eavesdropping? It is clear that it introduces the characters into the scenes, as could be seen in the first and

third act. It makes Duṣyanta see and get to know something about Śakuntalā before he meets with her later. It gives the king a little time to think about her and avoid the encounter frankly and also make the audience prepare themselves sentimentally because they know for sure that what is happening next. The eavesdropping therefore is regarded communicable to something as well.

More importantly, it gives the way out to the story, as could be seen in the act three. Eavesdropping forms the rising action, which also makes the audience feel superior to the play because they know the solution of the problem before the characters. If Śakuntalā's friends were not eavesdropping and decided to ask forgiveness for Śakuntalā without her knowing, the story would be tragedy and there would be no solution of the play. But traditionally there is a condition in Sanskrit drama not to end the story with tragedy because it is inauspicious. So, eavesdropping is the key factor that allows the poet to add the motif of the ring that is the recognition of the king, or '*abhijñāna*' according to the name of the play '*Abhijñānasākuntala*.'

Lastly eavesdropping might happen by the supernatural being. In act six the nymph uses her magical power to hide herself from being seen by the king and the buffoon. It shows another role of eavesdropping to connect the world of human being and the heaven together. The world in the perception of ancient people is surrounded by the invisible things who are able to witness or eavesdrop our lives in good or bad time in every minute. This concept actually could be traced back to the Vedic period or approximately 3000 years ago in the concept of *ṛta*, which means divine law (Monier-Williams, 2008: 223). The divine being who is in charge of this type of law is the god Varuna who can spy on human deeds (Monier-Williams, 2008: 921). It is understandable to be the way to socialize people in the Aryan society.

The role of eavesdropping in the play is the way to make the audience feel superior to the characters because when the eavesdropping occurs, there would be at least a character who has no way to know what is happening at that time, while the audience know everything. It is to be considered the eavesdropping is the way to create the story to be more likable to some extent.

Conclusion

All in all, the eavesdropping that appears many times in the play is able to be considered as one of literary technic in the composition of classical literature, which makes the play different from the original version of *Mahābhārata*. It links everything in the play interestingly and communicates to the audience at the very moment. Moreover, it is undeniable to see the eavesdropping in some contemporary literatures such as Indian or even Thai melodrama. Hence, it is possible to continue the study about the concept of eavesdropping comparatively in order to understand the eavesdropping more widely.

References

Monier-Williams, M. (2008). *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Vasudeva, S. (2006). *The Recognition of Shakuntala*. New York: New York University Press & JJC Foundation.

Contact email: nawin.b@cmu.ac.th