

Augmenting Imaginary Visual Planes through Sounds: Acoustic Aesthetics of Malayalam Radio Plays

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Radio as a medium of entertainment is presently being considered as a grandmother's tale basked in yesteryear's glory. What makes the radio unique is the fact that it talked privately to each of its listeners – something that cannot be replaced by the media boom in the post the internet era. The radio produced programmes that are exceptional and cannot be replanted to any other medium. One such form of art is the radio drama which stands distinct from its visual counterpart, right from its inception, production, and transmission. Malayalam radio drama can boast of unanimous monopoly during its conception in the early 1940s on the backdrop of Travancore Radio. The first radio drama in Malayalam was aired from Madras All India Radio in the year 1940. Through these eight decades the trail of Malayalam radio drama had its own thrusts and falls. Each phase of this genre marks diverse sociological, cultural, ideological, and technological purposes. This paper aims at identifying how radio drama acted as a bridge between this popular medium and the society and presupposes the relevance of radio drama in the present age. A much-acclaimed radio play 'Otta' has been studied here to analyze the technological and thematic shifts that have embraced the medium. K.V.Sarathchandran a contemporary radio playwright produced 'Otta' for presenting it in the radio drama festival of 2009. He could be

hailed as an experimental playwright who is experienced in the field of radio productions. 'Otta' is his masterpiece work that utilizes only a single character throughout the play. An hour length play is taken forward by the monologues of a single character and his occasional conversations with his pet dog. The play which could be categorized as a thriller is an example of how an audio medium creates a unique world of imagination for its listeners. This paper digs deeper into the acoustic aesthetics created by 'Otta'.

Keywords: Radio, Radio drama, Audio plays, Aesthetics of sound, Audionarratology

Introduction

The experience offered by the radio drama from its auditory plane is unique. "I live right inside the radio when I listen" (McLuhan 325), comments Marshall McLuhan which states the impact of this medium on the listeners. Hence a radio drama which constructs a distinct mode of a visual space within each listener's mind is in fact creating the theatre within the psyche of them. Hence the classification as 'theatre of mind' for this medium is truly justifiable.

Is sound drama only a sound phenomenon delineated and separated from image-based narration? This is the common question everyone dealing with this medium commonly faces. The answer to this is no. The statement 'even blind people see' is a paradoxical statement which has a creative and philosophical authenticity. Hence when it is stated that this blind medium has immense capacity to see beyond everything that any visual medium can offer could be understood not as a hyperbole but one that justifies the scope of human mind to visualise in sheer darkness.

Auditory Landscape of Radio Drama

The saying 'nothing is bloodier than the blood you see in your mind' encapsulates the enormous possibility of human imagination. With this unique set of qualities all radio dramas are bound to follow a set of features which will evade ambiguity in its presentation and thereby making it successful. A clear script that can communicate to the listeners without any obscurity is the first step towards the making of a successful radio drama. Radio drama conveys every single detail

within it through auditory symbols. Andrew Crissell divides the sound used in radio plays to four: words, sound, music, and silence. In detail the elements “that can create narrative meaning in a radio piece are voice, music, noise, fading, cutting, mixing, the (stereophonic) positioning of the signals, electro-acoustic manipulation, original sound (actuality) and silence.” (Huwiler 102) Each of these auditory symbols plays the role of an *icon* or *index* and has a different representation in the codes of the radio. The spoken word can be equated, masqueraded and even manipulated according to various factors: apart from the literal meaning of the text, it is affected by the speaker/character’s idiolect, pronunciation including accent, tone, modulation, and intonation. Similarly, setting can be denoted through external noise as the sound of traffic signifies a scene on road and music can be used to detail the atmosphere and tone. In conventional radio plays cutting and fading are used to structure the play. It is through these editing techniques the director brings clarity in scene-shifts, narrative time and dramatic spaces within a play. In the production of a radio play mixing of acoustic elements play a vital role. It generates an auricular environment of the audio play. The position, the distance, the direction, and the number of the elements in the play are measured and assured in this stage. When an actor on stage has innumerable options of visually projecting anything towards his audience with the aid of dialogues, facial and bodily gestures, actions and movements, make up and stage props (according to the instruction of the director), in a radio play the voice of the actor is of paramount importance in conveying the intended meanings of the text enacted which is supported by the other acoustic elements.

Words in radio drama speak volumes, especially in the script of a Malayalam radio play the regional slangs and sociolects do play a major role. The tone and articulation can draw for the listeners the age of the character, educational background or even the character’s attitude. For example, a younger sound with an urban slang can be a suggestion towards the frivolous attitude of the character, where someone with a serious outlook towards life may prefer using a calculated formal tone in articulation. Use of specific tones and jargons

can also be suggestions towards the social conditioning of the characters.

In radio plays, it is through these auditory images that all essential factors like the plot of the play, characters, situations, time, period, place, psychology of characters, relationships or even the minutest details about the weather or climate are to be conveyed. All the audio cues used has strong cultural significance as well: for instance, the piece of musical element to show the morning sunrise or evening sunset to clarify the time of action has strong cultural adherence as well according to the plot. The suggestion of temple bells and music might have a different tale to tell which is closely suggestive of the plot's take on religion or tradition. Similarly, the acoustic representation of opening a door can indicate the condition of the door: how antiquated it is (denoting the situation), what kind of door it is (denoting the location) or even the mental status of the character who opened the door.

We could of course say that recorded sound on the radio is iconic in the elementary sense that it is an icon or image of the original sound or that a sound in a radio play is an icon of a sound in the real world, but if we do we are still faced with the question of what the sound *signifies*, what it is that is *making* the sound. Thus, sounds such as the ringing of a door-bell or the grating of a key in a lock are indexical in signifying someone's presence. (Crissel 44)

Apart from that a radio play should be devoid of unclear suggestions capable of arousing confusion in listeners' mind and should be mended with utmost precision of signs and signifiers. Moreover, the radio play is enacted not on a proscenium stage but rather in the minds of the audiences. As Tim Crook states "It is auditory in the physical dimension but casually powerful as a visual force in the psychological dimension." (Crook 8) The director of the radio play need not focus on costume or facial expression of the actor. An actor in his teens can be the sound of a 90 year old, there is no correlation between their age or appearance and the character they play. They

do not need to by heart the dialogs but just need to read it out from script.

Creation of radio plays can be a one man's art. This is also the most cost effectively produced art form as it can even be produced without elaborate technical support. The playwright should keenly focus on the exposition of the play. The audience makes the decision to listen or not to listen at this phase itself. Care should be taken to keep the number of characters to the minimum. An hour-long play shall ideally not have more than seven characters and each character should be distinctly identified through his/her voice. Only then the listeners would be able to identify the characters. The characters should be identified at the beginning itself to avoid confusion and intermittently calling the names of characters present on the scene will help the listener to identify them. The actors must be careful on the clarity of rendering their dialogues. The playwright should take necessary steps to avoid long-winding dialogues as it can create ambiguity. Use short and precise dialogues in a conversational tone. A sound actor must be capable of understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the medium and should be capable of using his/her voice to the maximum versatility. Delivery of emotions through voice modulation coupled with precise diction and intonation is essential in establishing the plot of the radio drama as the mental canvass of each listener may vary allowing them to draw pictures according to their creativity though not deviating from the plot as well.

The notion of considering radio drama as a mere literary form is demeaning as it involves a wide range of technical details including noises to music and even electro-acoustic manipulations. A large array of experiments is happening around the globe including interactive radio plays, radio play performances and pedagogical radio plays and this field is surging in search of new advancements. According to Huwiler, considering the general nature of radio plays two tendencies of production could be derived.

First: most of them can be defined as narrative, yet they tell stories not merely with words, but by using all possible acoustic features as storytelling devices. And second: there is an increasing emphasis

on the representational devices involved in the narrating process in acoustic storytelling. The act of storytelling is fore-grounded by means of all kinds of different technologies and forms of expression, as opposed to imitating 'reality' and relying on language. Storytelling by sound is no longer based on the spoken word, imitating literature in an oral manner, but it integrates all aural and technical features that the medium affords. (Huwiler, 100)

'Otta': Utilization of Voice & Silence

K.V.Sarathchandran is a unique name in the field of contemporary radio drama who had effortlessly experimented with the large possibilities of sound in his radio play productions. '*Shathru*' (2007), '*Otta*' (2014) and '*VithaykkunnavanteUpama*' (2018) are the three publications of radio dramas produced by K.V. Sarathchandran. Being a Programme Executive who serves All India Radio he is well accustomed with this media and all his productions were both scripted and directed by him. His choice of themes and the selection of voice artists make his productions exceptionable in its form and content. Popular Malayalam film actors like Thilakan, Siddique and N.F.Vargheese had contributed much to his plays. K.V.Sarathchandran is also a recipient of several National accolades for his plays. *Otta*, *Shanthasamudram*, *Piano*, *Hathya* and *VithaykkunnavanteUpama* are some of his prominent works that has earned him supreme position in the arena of audio drama.

Otta used the tagline 'One actor as one character for an hour-long play' that stressed on its novelty and significance. The veteran actor Thilakan enacted the role of Govindankutty the central and only character of the play. The play had also won national award for the best radio play in 2009, for the playwright as well as the actor. In a medium where words and conversations play the prime role, limiting the scope of both by avoiding a second character to facilitate dialogues will put out the primordial purpose of the same that is exercised in every radio play. Thus, one could easily say that '*Otta*' challenges even the greatest challenge of audio plays. This play is also a fine example that showcases how technological advancements have favoured the experimentations in the field of radio plays.

The play opens with the sound of the clock ticking which continues all through the play and acts as a symbol for the passage of time and registers the tension which is part of this thriller. This sound is followed by the intense barking of the domestic dog Kaiser and is immediately accompanied by the main and the only character Govindankutty. The dog dons the role of a second character and serves a major dramatic purpose. The plot of the play advances mainly through the monologues and the conversations Govindankutty have with Kaiser who is a non-responding listener. Kaiser replaces the role of a human character with whom the protagonist has conversations. It is through these conversations that the background of the plot and characters are revealed. Kaiser also encapsulates the relationship between the master and the servant which Govindankutty once had with his lord. Govindankutty chides, advises, assaults and even pampers the dog at various situations and the dog growls and whines in return. Each response represents the helplessness of its serfdom and the animal's sound communicates well and enough his emotions to the human listeners as well.

The play that opens with ticking of the clock followed by the loud barks of the dog makes its first verbal statement "Da... Kaiser..." (Sarathchandran, 1) addressing the dog. The opening tone of the protagonist is arrogant towards the dog who describes the state of the lord, Govindankutty's relationship with him and the dog as well. The licentious activities of the dog are compared with that of the lord as well. Each monologue is long and carefully narrates every detail of the plot. The chime of the clock is a calculated inclusion through which the dramatic time is described, and the protagonist explains the imminent occurrence of the calling bell which signals the paralysed lord's call who can only slightly move his hand to press the bell. Here each nonverbal cue is a symbol that is transcoded into a message which is informed to the listener through the protagonist himself.

The opening itself exposes next character 'the lord' Mukundan Menon who has a loathsome past of a tormentor, who found pleasure in abusing his servants, his wife and even his children. Now bedridden with all senses intact but can hardly move, his wife is dead and children are living at different places, and he is now under the care of his

servant and the plot brings to light how Govindankutty utilizes every single instance to take revenge upon his lord MukundanMenon. As this character is immobile and is not able to speak makes him also a mute listener to the words of Govindankutty. The playwright employs audio cues to denote the change in scenes. Musical chants are continuously played in the lord's room which makes the listeners aware of the place when Govindankutty enters the lord's room.

Govindankutty in the exposition scene uses the dog to compare the womanizing instincts of his lord. Such comparisons are examples of cultural transcodification where the playwright employs local usages and images to localize the experience. The clock chime acts as a boundary line that separates the scenes in play. It also alerts the characters along with the listeners that the night is long. The single character's shift in attitude- how he behaves as a loyal servant in front of his lord, how in his absence abuses him and takes revenge of the insults he had to endure because of his lord's actions is dramatically portrayed without fail through the tone of Govindankutty. The revenge is not explicit but subtle like serving the river fish to the lord which he hates but Govindankutty likes and finishing off the lord's foreign Scotch Whisky without his knowledge. The plot in course of time brings out the children's attitude towards their bedridden father through the one-sided telephonic conversations Govindankutty have with them.

The elder sons loathe their father and await his death to get hold of his immense wealth. The eldest one, Dr.Vamanakumar hands over poison pills to feed his father which Govindankutty tactfully avoids as he does not want to plot an easy death for his master, rather would contrive a slow painful one while he amuses himself in the luxuries of the bungalow. The youngest daughter Sudharani who is presented in a Cordelia image is the one who cares for her father and occasionally instructs the servant on her father's health care. She also plans to visit the house on the death anniversary of her mother. The events take a turn when Govindankutty chances to see the will prepared by his lord in which a lion share is kept away for his harlot Maggie miss who was a tutor to his children. This irks the children immensely and brings in a shift in plot. The dramatic temper is succinctly brought out through the voice modulation of the actor and the music effects

employed. The play finally ends with the loud bang of the gunshot that kills the lord and brings out the culprit as Sudharani from the words of Govindankutty itself.

Otta is a finely structured play that utilizes all the qualities of the medium by arresting the attention of the listener. Similar experiments have happened in the history of radio drama as well. Andrew Sach in his play '*Revenge*' (1978) uses only sound effects and no dialogue to tell a thrilling tale of revenge. This play was recorded on location using the naturalistic recording techniques of binaural stereo. The plot follows the odyssey of a man who breaks the jail and is then chased by cops and dogs. The play follows the dangerous trails he takes to avenge, by killing another. The listeners hear exactly what the protagonist hears during the escapade. Similarly, a very popular film director and stage producer Ingmar Bergman wrote a radio monodrama in 1972. It follows the internal monologues of Victoria, a middle aged woman who is tormented by her loneliness. The other characters that bypass the plot are those that appear within her thoughts.

Conclusion

With the advancement of technology radio drama could be considered as a medium which has unending possibilities to evolve and arrest audiences' attention. As a radio drama, '*Otta*' stands as a beacon which radically focuses on the opportunities this medium of sound can offer. *Otta* stands distinct in the treatment of the theme of revenge, presentation of characters which are exposed before the listeners through the single character, each element of sounds, innuendos through emoted dialogs etc. It could also be noted that when placed outside the medium of radio '*Otta*' will definitely lose all its lustre and would become a plain colourless, odourless tale.

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