Myth and Tradition in Karnad’s Hayavadana

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents how Girish Karnad makes an attempt to retrieve the treasure of culture and tradition that lost its significance in colonization. It is important to understand that during the Fifties and Sixties in India there were two streams of thought in all walks of life like the adoption of new modernist techniques and adherence to the rich cultural past of the country. Cultural and social colonization of the native culture by the dominant foreign influence has not only resulted in unprecedented change in social and cultural ethos of India but it has also been accompanied by an alteration of the economic scenario of our nation. And the worst affected are the traditional arts and crafts. It is because of this that writers like Girish Karnad make an attempt in their writings to bring about a ‘cultural renaissance’ on the Indian literary scene. One of such resultant plays is Hayavadana. He has been recognized throughout the country with his plays.

Key words: Myth and Tradition, Switching of Heads, Combining Spirit and Flesh, inflicted moral codes,

KARNAD AS A PLAYWRIGHT:

Girish Karnad a recipient of the Jnanpith Award, an actor, a film producer is regarded as a very significant playwright of the post-independent Indian Literature. Unlike Badal Sarkar and Vijay Tendulkar, who delved into the problems of middle class man; Girish Karnad went back to myth and legends and made them a vehicle of a new vision. By using these myths, he tried to show the absurdity of life, with all its elemental passions and conflicts and man’s eternal struggle to achieve perfection. Karnad’s whole corpus divided into two broad categories. Myth plays and History plays. In Nagamandala, Yayati, Hayavadana and the Fire and Rain we find the
predominance of mythical elements. In Tal-Danda and Tughlaq we find the pre-dominant historical structure.

HAYAVADANA:

Girish Karnad’s *Hayavadana* is a play in two acts is his third play originally written in Kannada. The play was an immediate success on the stage and received the prestigious Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya award of 1971. The play Wright himself translated it into English retaining, however the original title *Hayavadana*. Hayavadana literally mean ‘one with horse’s head’. The precursor text is the *Transposed Heads* by Thomas Mann. Although switching of heads of two people are relatively rare in the myths, legends and folk tales of most cultures, Indian myth provides a fairly rich source of these stories. The most Indian example of this narrative concerns the origin of the elephant headed God Ganesha.

*Hayavadana* has one main plot and one sub-plot. The story of *Hayavadana* constitutes the sub-plot while the main-plot is based on the story of *Transposed Heads*. It’s obvious that the main theme of *Hayavadana* is derived from one of the stories from Sanskrit *VetalaPanchavimshati* which forms part of Kshemendra’s, *Brihat Katha Manjari* and Somadeva’s *KathaSaritSagara* written around 1070 A.D. Each of these stories poses a riddle at the end which Vetala challenges the King to solve. All the riddles are capital brain teasers. A modern source of *Hayavadana* is Thomas Mann’s long short story *The Transposed Heads* which the author himself called a “metaphysical jest”.

If Mann’s aim was to stress the ironic impossibility of combining perfectly the spirit and the flesh in human life, Karnad tries to pose existential ideas like the problem of being and the metaphysical anguish of the human condition. For this he combines the plot of the transposed heads with the *Hayavadana* story which is entirely his own invention. The importance of this addition is clear from the fact that the play derives its title from it. The under plot at *Hayavadana*, the horseman provides the frame work of the play both as a prologue and as an epilogue. The story of Devedatta, Kapila and Padmini in Karnad’s *Hayavadana* follows elements of characterization and the order of events in Mann’s story. But Karnad tries to pose existential ideas like the problem of human condition as appears as essential; one of disunity and imperfection culminating in death. For this it seems that he combines the human condition of transposed heads with the *Hayavadana* story which is entirely his own invention. Karnad’s *Hayavadana* raises a few relevant questions such as what determines the identity of a person, is it head or the body? Is it facial beauty and intelligence or strength and physical prowess? The plot also revolves around the query of what appeals to a woman
intellect or physical skill? Then the valid questions arise which might sound a bit philosophical but, yet to be addressed. What is your real self? What do you think you are? What do others think you are?

_Hayavadana_ tells a story embellished with the harsh truths of life and the incongruities of our existence capsule in fantasy. It’s simultaneously a story of a woman. It’s a comment on blind faith devoid of any reason. Karnad characteristically handles a riddle which has plagued mankind in wanting to break out of society, inflicted moral codes. Karnad’s protagonist is Padmini, the woman and not Kapila or Devadutta, because social beliefs put such a price on her purity. Padmini epitomizes the eternal desiderative wish of a human being for the acquisition of a substantial idea. Padmini wants both brain and brawn as her companion in life. Karnad’s own vision does not let her succeed. Mankind cannot live with perfection. On the other hand, Karnad allows half man, half - horse Hayavadana to evolve into a full horse because he tries his sights lower down the ladder. Karnad’s handling of the sources of his plot in the play makes it abundantly clear that this interpretation of the ancient Indian history not only differs substantially from the originals but also indicates a bold attempt at investing an old legend with a new meaning which has an urgent relevance to present day thinking about man and his world. As Kirtinath Kurtkoti, in his ‘Introduction to _Hayavadana_’, has accurately remarked: “Karnad’s play poses a different problem, that of human identity in a world of tangled relationships. The result is a confusion of identities which reveals the ambiguous nature of human personality.”

The main plot of the play begins with Kapila, who finds his best friend Devadatta despondently dreaming about Padmini. Kapila goes to arrange Devadatta’s marriage to her and realizes that Padmini is as clever as she is beautiful. Although Kapila is attracted to her, he nonetheless finalizes the match, and Devadatta and Padmini are married. The marriage is unhappy from the beginning. Padmini is herself attracted to the strong – bodied Kapila, and Devadatta is consumed by jealousy. A few months into the marriage the three travel to Ujjain to afair. On the way, they rest between two temples, one devoted to Rudra (The Howler – form of Shiva) and the other to Kali. As in the other versions, the two men behead themselves in the Kali temple. The pregnant Padmini, afraid that she might be blamed for their deaths, then decides to kill herself. However, Kali stops her and offers to bring the men back to life. Padmini rearranges the heads so that Devadatta’s head is on Kapila’s body and vice versa and asks the goddess to do her magic. Kali resignedly comments “there should be a limit even to honesty” and brings the two men back to life.
In the confusion that ensues after the transposition of heads, Padmini makes it clear that she wants to be with the Devadatta head/Kapila body. Her wish is granted by an ascetic who mediates the conflicting claims from both men to be her husband. The ascetic’s decision is the same as that given by King Vikramaditya in the *Katha sarit sagara* by SomaDeva and Mann’s “Transposed Heads”. With his new body Devadatta returns to the city with Padmini and they begin a blissful marital life. At this point Karnad introduces two dolls that Devadatta presents to Padmini as gifts for the expected child. Karnad through the use of dolls reveals very effectively to the audience the thought processes and inner psyche of character. The two Dolls brought by Devadatta from the Ujjain fair talk with each other but their conversation is inaudible to the other characters. It seems that the dolls allow Karnad to introduce the voice of “society” in the play. The dolls are not at all necessary to the plot, which can move forward without them, but they are important because they remind audience, the presence of society. Their attitudes provide some of the motivating force for Padmini’s behaviour in that she does some of what she does because of what society will say, and some of what she does inspiteof what society will say.

Through their own dialogues, the dolls describe the dynamic changes occurring in the family. They document the change of Devadatta’s body from its rough muscular Kapila-nature to a soft, pot-bellied Brahmin body. They reveal that Padmini has given birth to a disfigured son and that she has now begun dreaming about Kapila again. The dolls also become the theatrical device through which Padmini sends Devadatta to Ujjain, so she can use his absence to sneak away with the child to the forest where Kapila resides. Back in the forest, Padmini finds the rough and muscular Kapila again. He is surprised to see Padmini, and she reveals her desire for his well-muscled body. Devadatta, armed with a sword and two new dolls, finds the lovers, and the two men decide to kill each other since their love for Padmini cannot be reconciled. Padmini then decides to commit Sati. She entrusts the boy to Bhagavata and leaves instructions for him to be raised both as Kapila’s son and as Devadatta’s son.

Between the polarity of the mind and the body, we have the theme of love which acts as the basic motivating factor in all human interaction; Hayavadana is the son of a prince who had fallen in love with a horse. It is a Gandharva cursed to be horse for a misdemeanour. His problem is how to get rid of his horse’s head. He goes to the Kali temple and threatens to chop off his head (a motif which establishes a link between the *Hayavadana* story and the plot of the transposed heads) and once again, as in the main plot the goddess grants the boon, but creates another, problem while solving one. In response to Hayavadana’s prayer “make me complete” the goddess makes him a
complete horse, not a complete man and into this, Hayavadana still remains with his human voice. His liberation is complete only when the five year child of the woman in the transposed heads story (he has significantly, no name) asks to laugh and the laugh soon turns into a proper neigh.

Karnad thus uses the logic of myth to create a double reciprocal exchange of functions that allows for resolution. Hayavadana and the boy in effect complete each other the one as a human child returned to the fold of society and the other as fully animal.

**Conclusion:**

The entire play is cast in the form of traditional Indian folk drama which took several features of ancient Sanskrit drama but adapted them to its own special needs as a popular form of art. The particular form of drama that Karnad draws upon is Yakshagana of Karnataka but this form has much in common with other traditional forms extant in the different parts of the country. In this respect, though a multi-dimensional personality, Girish Karnad is at his best in playwriting.
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