

Girish Karnad's Hayavadana - A Reworking of Myths and Folk Narrative on Contemporary Lines

Maninder Kaur*

Department of English, R. S. D. College, Ferozepur City

Abstract – Girish Karnad's taking to myth and legend in his plays was more an act of impulse rather than intention. Perhaps it was inevitable for Karnad who was exposed to traditional forms of theatre in childhood. The three kinds of theatre between which he moved, swivelled and wrote plays, were the company Natak, Yakshagana and the western theatre, and he must have been influenced by them, whatever the reason, whether it is the influence of traditional theatre upon him or it is his incapacity to invent new stories as he confesses, he had rightly chosen to use myths and legend for his plays. He feels they are very much relevant today, and hence, seeks to adapt myths and folk forms in his plays. Thus he effects a synthesis between the ancient and the modern to serve his purpose of using the past to illuminate the present. Girish Karnad in his 'Hayavadana' used the same myths to project the theme of fundamental ambiguity of human life. He makes the play an interesting study of man's quest for a complete and wholesome experience of life. For this, he combines the transposed heads plot of Mann with Hayavadana story which is entirely Karnad's own invention. This is how Karnad makes use of a myth. He takes them only in parts and the rest he supplements with his imagination.

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Drama, a mimetic representation of life, is a composite art in which the written word attains artistic realization when spoken by the actor on the stage and reciprocated by the audience. A play in order to communicate fully must become a living dramatic experience and so it needs a real theatre and a live audience. It was precisely the lack of these essentials that had hamstrung Indian drama in English all along. One silver lining was that in the recent decades Indian drama in English language had fared sumptuously and put on flesh. Drama was the fifth Veda for the ancient Hindus and Indian classical drama, which flourished for ten centuries or more, could now safely challenge comparison with other genres in Indian Writing.

Drama in India has had a rich and glorious tradition. The contemporary dramatist Girish Karnad has said in *The Fire and the Rain* "Brahma, the Lord of all creation extracted the requisite element from the four Vedas". He culled out the text from Rig Veda, songs from Sama Veda, the art of acting from the Yajur Veda and Rasa (aesthetic experience) from the Atharva Veda and combined them into a fifth Veda "Natya Veda" and thus gave birth to the art of drama.

Initially the Indian playwrights attempted to write plays, which catered to the taste of escapist theatre and occupied themselves with all sorts of romanticism and comic attitude to life. An in-depth study of the playwrights who contributed to Indian dramatic

scenario, namely Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore, reveal the fact that they had influenced Karnad to a great extent. Karnad, like his predecessors, makes use of myths, legends, folktales and histories not only for literary purpose but also as a surrogate to portray the contemporary situations. As literature reflects the society, playwrights like T.P. Kailasam and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya has made use of the sociological aspects, which motivated Karnad to portray the society in his plays. Analyzing the contributions made by the dramatists of the Pre-independence and Post-independence phase, we find that except for Asif Currimbhoy and Girish Karnad, none of the plays of the other dramatists catered to the demands of the stage. In this respect, Karnad is a dramatist with a difference as his plays are exclusively written for the stage. In the Indian theater tradition there has been a strong impact of mythology and history though it has not produced anything of permanent worth. Karnad was aware that this tradition has a tremendous potential, as the elements of myth and history are very common to Indian audiences. So Karnad makes use of such myths and legends as metaphors for contemporary situations and this has induced the present researcher to make a study of his plays.

Any traditional tale is likely to present a combination of reality and fantasy. Drama, one among the literary

genres, pleases all men with an infinite variety of taste. It is considered to be a common entertainment for people of different tastes. Its power is that it lives in the borderline between fantasy and reality. One of the reasons for the invention of tales and myths is that they act as a vehicle for relieving boredom. They are sought by people all over the world and at all times, not only in modern western culture. This is often masked as something that seems more worthy.

Myth is imaginative and it is defined as that which has no real existence in French language. Kirk considers myth as a "sacred or religious story". Northrop Frye asserts, "Myth is primarily a certain type of story... The things that happen in myth are the things that happen only in stories: they are in a self-contained literary world". It is an anonymous story rooted in primitive beliefs. Myths are the tales that have been passed on from one generation to another and they have become traditional. For Plato, the first known user of the term, mythology meant no more than the telling of stories but in actuality they have some serious underlying purpose beyond that of telling a story. It attempts to interpret, create divinity and religion. They deal with love, war, tyranny, courage, fate and with the relation of man to those divine powers which are sometimes felt irrational, sometimes to be cruel and sometimes to be just.

Gerish Karnad has been regarded as the leading dramatist so far as the use of myth and history is concerned. His plays make the audience to ponder over the human life with a new perspective rather than making him emotional. In other words, like Bertolt Brecht, Karnad makes the audience to respond intellectually rather than emotionally to the action of the play. With his artistic skill, he combines myth and reality, past and present and portrays the complexities of the modern life. The Karnad drama focuses on the complexity of human relationship and contains an indirect critique of modern Indian society. In each of his play, beneath a legendary/mythical or historical story, we notice subtle and constant juxtaposition of the past and present which has been a common feature of Karnad's dramatic art. He has used various forms of the folk tradition in his plays like Hayavadana and Naga-Mandala to reinforce the central problem of human existence. He chooses events/episodes from Indian mythology to question their values and relevance in the present context. Commenting on the use of techniques of the classical and folk theatre of India, Karnad says, "The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values, of making them literally stand on their head."

The play Hayavadana aims at demystification of traditional values and concepts and presents multiple viewpoints that promote a dialogue on the basic accepted tenets of life. This is enhanced by the merging of three levels of experience – the divine,

human and animal and the bringing together of the animate and the inanimate on a common plane. In order to emphasize the central theme of the play i.e. the problem of identity and search for incompleteness, the playwright has introduced the subplot of Hayavadana and the play is written in the folk drama tradition. Of the various visible elements of folk theatre in Karnad, prime importance goes to Yakshagana. Though Yakshagana is a broad term used to cover different types of dance dramas performed in different states of South India, its origin can be traced to Tamil Nadu. Yakshagana in its original form, flavour and vitality can be seen in parts of Karnataka. It was Dr. Karanth who developed Yakshagana as an operatic dance drama. Its themes are taken from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas. The term literally means "Songs of the demi-gods" which is called Yakshagana Bayalata. Bayalata meaning a play performed in open air (bayal-open air, ata-play).

The play Hayavadana begins with the invocation of Lord Ganesha in the folk drama tradition. A mask of Ganesha is placed on a chair in the centre of the stage. While Pooja is done, the Bhagavata sings the benedictory verse in praise of Ganesha with musical accompaniment: In Karnad this ritual invocation seems rich in connotations most appropriate to the thematic and structural unity of the play. Ganesha is established as the presiding deity not just as per convention, he is, in fact, the embodiment of the very idea the play chooses to discuss. Ganesha symbolizes the concepts of completeness and incompleteness. There is also the suggestion thrown in at the very beginning that the idea of totality of being is best left to the gods, it is a goal beyond human comprehension and knowledge.

After the introduction of the sub-plot, the Bhagavata once again picks up the thread of the main story. He reveals the love triangle even before the three characters are presented on stage: "Two friends there were – one mind, one heart. They saw a girl and forgot themselves. But they could not understand the song she sang." We come to know that Devadatta is mesmerized by the bewitching beauty of a girl. He, at once, falls in love with her. He marries Padmini, the daughter of the leading merchant in Dharampura. But Kapila also falls in love with Padmini. Their relations get tangled. The friends kill themselves. Unexpectedly very interesting situation is created in the play. Padmini, of course, with the boon of the Goddess Kali, transposes the heads, giving Devadatta, Kapila's body and vice-versa. This is an absurd situation, which creates the problem of identity. A debate takes place between Devadatta and Kapila as to who would keep Padmini, as his wife. At last, it is decided that the head governs the body. In the subplot, Hayavadana, the horseman is completely transformed into a horse. His search ends comically.

Now, the basic question is why does Padmini wrongly rejoin the heads? In Freud's opinion, most of the human actions are motivated by the unconscious mind. Explaining Freud's theory, Wilfred Guerin says, "Freud provided convincing evidence, through his many carefully recorded case studies that most of our actions are motivated by psychological forces which we have very limited control." The mistake in the transposition of the heads of Devadatta and Kapila can be explained in terms of Freudian slip activated by id. In other words, the subconscious desire for Kapila's body makes Padmini put, albeit unconsciously, the head of Devadatta on Kapila's body. Furthermore, the 'mistake' also absolves her of the responsibility of transgressing the codified morality of her society. In support of the arguments mentioned above the playwright himself says, "The characters are motivated by their own desires. Each character represents not only a complex psychological entity but an ethical archetype."

It is interesting to note how Karnad uses myth to nullify established social code of conduct. In the Indian context it is taken for granted that a woman will keep all love and loyalty for her husband and preserve herself from any kind of outside attraction. However, in the play this conventional concept of a woman is turned upside down. The woman in the original myth is instructed that one particular combination of head and body is her husband and she looks no further – the story ends there. But in the context of the play this type of solution doesn't work. Therefore Padmini's unconscious attraction towards Kapila is subtly hinted at in the scene before the cart-ride. This attraction becomes concrete and tangible during the cart-ride and this leads to the further action in the play.

So, Padmini symbolizes the incompleteness of human desire. She fails in getting reunification of the mind and the body in Devadatta and Kapila. Now she expresses her wish to accomplish her search for completeness through her child. Therefore, she requests the Bhagavata that her son should be brought up as the son of Kapila by the hunters in the forest for five years and then as the son of Devadatta, he should be handed over to Vidyasagara, her father-in-law and revered Brahmin. Thus she wants to provide both physical and mental training for her son so that he may attain perfection in life. Karnad's characters however accept failure stoically and embrace their fate. When the impossible cannot take the shape of reality and opposites cannot be reconciled, for Karnad's character the only alternative is death. For example, Padmini in Hayavadana walks boldly to her fate and emerges thus as a strong character. It is Padmini's child who inter-connects the main plot with the sub-plot. As decided, Padmini's son is brought to the Bhagavata after five years. He, at first, seems to be incomplete child, unable to laugh like a normal child. However, he

becomes normal when he laughs in response to Hayavadana's laughter. Karnad has very successfully employed the folk drama form in Hayavadana to present the perennial problem of identity and search for completeness. He reveals the impact of Brecht's theatrical teachings on him especially with regard to his use of indigenous dramatic forms. Karnad comments, "I read the basic Western canon – the Greek plays, Shakespeare, Shaw, O' Neill, Anouilh, Brecht, Beckett, Sartre, Camus. Brecht's technique influenced me a great deal in the earlier years." An old story gives the dramatist the opportunity to elaborate his thesis to focus on a hitherto unnoticed aspect. The dramatist is able to expose outdated notions and in the process create a contemporary consciousness. Karnad recognizes such a principle and uses familiar tales in all his plays. Hayavadana most effectively subverts the accepted notion of the superiority of head over body, brain over brawn, while making a critique of futile and unreasonable human hopes and aspirations.

Karnad makes a selection of myths/folktales relevant and suitable for his dramatic purpose and strips them of their spatio-temporal bearings. His mythical characters emerge as archetypes, manifestations of general human characteristics, placed in a contemporary context and dealing with contemporary situations. What can thus be observed in Karnad's plays is a reworking of myths on contemporary lines, the myth serving as a parallel and a contrast not limited to the individual characters but encompassing entire epochs. Karnad therefore carefully edits out those aspects of myth not conducive to his purpose and makes deviations in detail. Karnad says that the use of myths and folk techniques allow for 'complex seeing'. Although the myths have traditional and religious sanction, they pave the way for the questioning of human values. The play reveals the essential ambiguity of human personality which is apparently shaped or shattered by the human environment. Fundamentally incomplete and imperfect, human beings search and yearn for attaining the unattainable ideal of completeness and perfection. They usually tend to seek the support of some supernatural beings or the other to succeed in their endeavor. However these external agencies, in their effort to help, seem to cause and complicate the identity crisis of the seekers further. It leads the seekers to tragic or comic ends. Padmini, for instance ruins herself and all her relations. Even the child that she leaves under the Bhagavata's care is not normal because of her own compulsions. Hayavadana, for another instance, does not bring destruction to himself as Padmini does, but suffers the drastic consequences of his search for completeness by going down the ladder of existence from man to horse.

Borrowing a phrase from Bertolt Brecht, Karnad says that use of myths and folk techniques allow for "Complex Seeing", although the myths have traditional and religious sanction, they have the means of questioning these values. Added to this Karnad believes that the various folk conventions like the chorus, the music, the mixing of human and non-human worlds permit a simultaneous presentation of alternate points of view. Thus, the myth acquires new dimensions in the creative hands of Karnad, and the play unfolds rich strands of meaning. What Karnad tries to do in this play is to reveal the archetypal structure of the society. Myths and folktales always interpret human life, and in the contemporary context they interpret modern sensibility or the modern consciousness. In this way by exploiting myth and folktale in Hayavadana, Karnad presents various problems of contemporary society. As M. K. Naik says, "Hayavadana presents the typical existential anguish, but does not stop at the existential despair, going beyond it, the play suggests a strategy for the achievement of integration in a world inevitably cursed with absurdity and irrationality". Prof. G. S. Amur opines that "Karnad's reworking of myths relates him to Kailasam and Adya Rangachary as much as to these European dramatists who remake their myths, particularly Karnad and Adya loved to evolve". A symbolic form out of a tension between the archetypal and mythical experience and a living response of life and its values." He further finds that contemporaneity in Karnad's plays manifests itself through the operative sensibility. "If Adya's attempt is to discover the usable past to make sense of the challenging present, Karnad's attempt is to give new meanings to the past from the vantage point of the present."

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Corresponding Author

Maninder Kaur*

Department of English, R. S. D. College, Ferozepur City