



## Mythology and Identity: A Study of Karnad's *Hayavadana*

SHWETA TIWARI

M.A. English, GuruGobind Singh Indraprastha University, New Delhi.

### ABSTRACT

*In the post-Independent India the translation of drama from vernacular languages into English became a popular phenomenon. Girish Karnad, as a playwright has carved a niche for himself in the contemporary Indian stage. The plays of Karnad present a conflict between modernity and indigenous tradition against the backdrop of mythology and history. Along with the use of innovative dramatic techniques, Karnad's plays also offer a socio-psychological exploration of the characters.*

**KEYWORDS :** Mythology, Identity, Religion, Transposition, Indian drama

A myth can be defined as a traditional belief or a legendary tale delineating the lives of heroes or illustrating the rituals and practices of a society. A myth is propagated to convey religious or idealized experiences in order to establish behavioral models for human beings. Myths have always relished a place of prominence in the Indian cultural milieu. The epics like Ramayana, Mahabharata and the Puranas have perpetually been source materials for literature and performing arts. The ambit, efficacy and domain of an argument are increased if it is situated in mythology because mythology epitomizes the Jungian archetype of the "collective". Mythology has got a religious sanctification and hence it is a permanent part of the social memory. Myths achieve a great rhetorical rigor and emotional poignancy in the plays of Girish Raghunath Karnad, a modern Indian playwright writing in Kannada. Kailasam and Adya Rangacharya, the two most prominent playwrights in Kannada rejected the traditional or professional theater but failed to offer a substitute for the same but Karnad ushered the dilapidated Kannada drama in the era of 'new drama' with a better understanding of dramatic techniques.

Girish Karnad, after exploring the genre of mythic existentialist and historical drama in his plays *Yayati* and *Tughlaq*, turned his focus to experimental traditional drama. *Hayavadana* by Karnad is an innovative experiment both in terms of thematic and technical strategies. In the play the age old conventions of drama undergo a process of drastic change. The entire play is cast in the form of traditional Indian folk drama, precisely *Yakshangana* of Karnataka and yet the modern themes like identity crisis, ethical ambiguity, dissatisfaction with human limitedness make it suitable for the urban Indian audience.

The plot of *Hayavadana* is based on 'The Heads That Got Switched' of *Kathasaritasagara*, an ancient collection of stories in Sanskrit. However, Karnad has borrowed the idea of the play from Thomas Mann's philosophical novella, 'The Transposed Heads'. The Sanskrit tale is narrated by the captive spirit *Vetala* to the king *Vikramaditya* and poses a simple moral riddle of true identity. On the other hand Mann's version ridicules the belief of body and soul being independent entities. The originality of *Hayavadana* lies in the reflexive frames that Karnad constructs for the story that foregrounds the issues of identity, desire and ambivalence. An important aspect of the play is that the playwright uses multiple contexts in which the problem of incongruity (symbolized by the disjunction between the head and the body) appears. In the play the question of identity is enmeshed with mythology and the action takes place in mythic time. The precise demarcation between space and time is also blurred as *Hayavadana* features characters like a horse headed man, goddess *Kali*, speaking dolls etc.

The play begins with the tradition worship of the patron deity of folk theatre, Lord *Ganesha*. Despite his anomalous appearance i.e. an elephant head and a human body *Ganesha* is the most revered God and is regarded as the remover of all the obstacles. After the invocation of Lord *Ganesha*, *Hayavadana*, meaning the horse headed one enters the stage but unlike Lord *Ganesha* he is immensely dissatisfied on account of being critically suspended between the human and animal world. He tries to achieve completeness either by relinquishing his human attributes or completely transforming into a quadruped. This implies that in the mortal world, unlike mythology, the identity of an individual does not necessarily center around the head even if

that means victory of an animal over the human. In this context Karnad said in an interview, "Each one of us is torn between human and animal instincts. To essentially have an animal head like *Hayavadana* is not necessary." *Hayavadana* visits all the religious sites to acquire perfectness of form. He says, "Banaras, Rameshwar, Gokarn, Haridwar - Dargah of Khwaja, Yusuf Baba, the Grotto of our Virgin Mary- I've tried them all." Karnad criticizes the indiscriminate adherence of man to myths and religious institutions in order to seek a solution to his problems.

Mythology operates on the ethos of '*Karma*' so *Bhagvata* tries to explain the unusual appearance of *Hayavadana* as "the errors committed in the last birth." However, *Hayavadana* vehemently objects to these accusations because his curse does not stem from his '*Karma*' but his lineage, inverting the belief of the "*karma* theory".

The play further delves deep into the question of human identity in the chaotic scenario of the present world. The friendship of *Devdatta* and *Kapila* is the pinnacle of complementarity of the opposites. *Devdatta* being a Brahmin is stereotyped as intellectual, delicate and sensitive whereas *Kapila* is a Kshatriya hence boisterous, visceral and crude. The marital bliss of *Devdatta* and *Padmini* soon begins to collapse owing to the strong attraction between *Kapila* and *Padmini*. Consumed by passion, *Devdatta* beheads himself at the *Kali* temple. *Kapila* too follows the suit out of guilt and fear. Later *Padmini* also prepares to die to avoid ignominy on her and her child. This is the crucial juncture when goddess *Kali* intervenes and asks *Padmini* to attach the severed heads back to their bodies. The mythical representation of goddess *Kali* portrays her as the deity of terror and destroyer of evil who is ever vigilant and always pulsating with life. However, in the play *Kali* appears with her arms stretched and vigorously yawning. Despite understanding the moral dilemma of all the three characters, she does not actively participate in the affair. As instructed, *Padmini* eagerly attaches the heads back to the bodies of the men but in her anxiety she swaps them. Resultantly, *Devdatta's* head now belongs to *Kapila* and vice versa. Thus, hapless *Padmini* is immediately confronted with the question that who out of the two is her lawful husband?

The mythic genealogy as offered by the *Rigveda* states that the Brahmins emerged from the head of the *Brahma*, thus establishing the supremacy of the head over other body parts. Therefore, *Padmini* is bound with the man having the head of *Devdatta*. The arrangement may be ethically ambiguous but socially incontestable. For a brief tenure *Devdatta-Kapila* poses an ideal mind and as well as a perfect body while *Kapila-Devdatta* is deficient in both the respects. However, when each of them return back to their original wisdom and shape, the question of mind-body dualism looms large. Karnad tries to suggest that this kind of transposition can offer a transient escape from the crisis of identity but human beings are destined to be imperfect and replete with limitations imposed by nature. The play also subverts the mythological belief of the head being the "*Uttamanga*" or the chief of all the limbs.

Later in the play both the friends kill each other in a duel but ironically neither the death of the friends nor the subsequent predicament of *Padmini* is treated as tragic by the playwright. On the contrary,

Karnad uses their deaths as a tool to emphasize the absurdity of the situation and the lack of discretion in human beings.

Even today the mythological images of Sita and Savitri proliferates the Indian literature. Self-negation, restraint, docility are the traits that are not only desirable in a woman in a patriarchal society but also valorized. Padimini is a capricious and passionate woman who stakes her conjugal happiness for her lover. She violates the norms of marriage in order to seek fulfillment for herself. However, in the end, she is disillusioned by both Devdatta and Kapila because among the three of them only she is capable of a wholesome experience. Padmini is defeated by the turn of events and succumbs to Sati but neither out of the affection for her husband nor under the threat of social obligation. She is left with no alternative and helplessly contends, "If I'd said, yes I'll be with you both, perhaps they would have been alive yet I had to drive you to death. You forgave each other but again-left me out."

Though the inner story of the three characters does not contribute to the outer frame directly yet it connects them at the level of ideas and substantiates the theme of the incompleteness of man. The inventive frames produced by Karnad and the unique use of mythology re-contextualize the story of the transposed heads and distinguish the play from its sources. Myths cannot be dismissed as stories belonging to the past because they continuously repeat themselves and confront us in a new disguise even today. *Hayavadana* weaves a rich tapestry and tackles the issues of fidelity, appropriateness of authority and completeness/ incompleteness of being. The horse-man's quest for completeness is treated with a touch of dark humor as he achieves totality by completely transforming into a horse. The erratic but energetic trotting of the horse on the stage signifies the powerful but mechanical and morose rhythm of human life. The play may not offer any direct solutions to the problems of dualism of identity but it certainly induces the desire to contemplate in the audience. *Hayavadana* also reiterates that mythology is a potential background against which a social message can be delivered effectively. In the play, Karnad demystifies the accepted tenets of life by presenting the interaction of three domains namely divine, man and animal.

## REFERENCES

- Dass Veena Noble (2004) *A Re-reading of Girish Karnad's Plays with Reference to Myth and Folktale*, New Delhi : Prestige. | Kurtkoti, Kirtinath (1994) *Introduction to Hayavadana*, New Delhi : OUP. | Mukherjee Tutun (2006) *A Conversation with Girish Karnad in Girish Karnad's Plays Performance and Critical Perspectives*, New Delhi : Pencraft International.