



A STUDY OF TRADITION AND CULTURE IN GIRISH KARNAD'S HAYAVADANA

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Abstract

Girish Karnad is the most renowned personality in contemporary India, leading playwright and a very skillful practitioner of the performing arts. His plays are primarily written in Kannada. They have brought him international recognition as the pre-eminent contemporary playwright. He has enriched the Indian literary scene by his contribution to art, culture, theatre and drama. But the most significant contribution which he has made to Indian English Drama is his attempt to retrieve the cultural and mythological rich tradition of the Indian past. In his plays we find that he returns to the roots and tries to revive the local culture and tradition. India is a post-colonial nation having its own distinct culture and colonial histories. It is also multicultural in character in that it has a strong presence of indigenous traditions, culture and ethos which are unfortunately submerged and subjugated by the imported culture of Europe. He makes an attempt to retrieve the treasure of culture and tradition.

Keywords: Girish Karnad, art, culture, theatre, Myth, post-colonial, Multiculturalism.

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 India. 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. He has been rightly called the "Renaissance man", (Kalidas and Merchant) whose celebrity is based on decades of prolific and consistent output on native soil. He has created a national theatre for modern India which is a legacy of his generation. Hence Karnad's return to and discovery of tradition was inspired by a search for roots and a quest for identity. This was part of the whole process of decolonization of our life-style, values, social institutions, creative forms and cultural modes (Goel, 1999:204).

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. Karnad's literature is highly influenced by the renaissance in

Western literature. During his formative years, Karnad went through diverse influences that went long way into shaping his dramatic taste and genius. One of the influences on him was that he was exposed to a literary scene where there was a direct clash between Western and native traditions. As Savita Goel puts it:

During 1960s, dramatists pondered over a significant question, i.e., how to draw upon the various strands in the traditional theatre-some of which had lost contact with urban civilization during the colonial era and many of which seemed deeply rooted in religious sensibility-so as to revitalize and enrich their own work. (Goel 1999:204) Hayavadana (1971) is Karnad's third play which is based on the story *The Transposed Heads* by Thomas Mann. Originally sourced from Vetala Panchavimshti and Somdeva's Brihakatya Saritsagara, Karnad's Hayavadana deals with the complexity of human relationships and man's yearning for perfection. Karnad's remarks about the play: . . . it was when I was focusing on the question of folk forms and the use of masks and their relationship to theatre music that my play Hayavadana suddenly began to take shape in my head (Karnad 1989:346).

Structured on a typical Yakshagana play, Karnad's Hayavadana begins with a traditional worship of Lord Ganesha, the presiding deity of traditional theatre. Use of Ganesha worship symbolically also introduces the main theme of the play that is 'incompleteness' and the quest for 'completeness' or 'perfection'. The manner in which Bhagavata narrates the story is a style adopted from a folktale: this is the city of Dharampura ruled by King Dharamsheela. . . (Karnad 1988: 1).

The play revolves around the myth of Ganesha which operates at several levels. The mythical figure of Lord Ganesha representing a perfect blend of three different worlds of experience-the divine, the human and the animal-becomes central within the frame of sub-plot. The play 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.

Karnad found a new approach of drawing historical and mythological sources to tackle contemporary themes and existential crisis of modern man through characters locked in psychological and philosophical conflicts. His play Hayavadana has various cultural implications, which are relevant even today. The play deals with the central theme of a Man's search for his own self identity among a web of complex relationships. With Hayavadana, Karnad has taken us back to the myths and legends of the Hindu religion and projects the traditional culture of India elaborately. Along with the central theme, there is a sub-plot wherein Hayavadana (the horse-man) reflects incompleteness. With the face of a horse and the body of a man, Hayavadana, the off-spring of a celestial being and a princess, wants to rid of the horse's head and longs to be a complete man. He is symbolic of the identity crisis we face today. Karnad implores Existentialism by intensifying the motif of incompleteness by a broken tusk and a cracked belly is the embodiment of imperfection, or incompleteness. Existentialism implies the quest of the individual for the assertion of the self, despite his limitations and failures. In the play, identity and impersonation have been treated that leads to conflicts between the mind and the body. When Kapila and Devadatta's heads get transposed, the identity crisis further deepens

and the influence of the bodies on the minds is immense. This brings to the fore a conflict that we face in our lives, if the mind is dependent on the body or vice versa. The conflict between the head and the body, is well expressed in Devadatta's (whose head is Devadatta's but body is Kapila's) words:

"I'd always thought one had to use one's brain while wrestling or fencing or swimming. But the irony has been brought out very well by Karnad. We often chose body over mind, Padmini too does the same. This reflects the changing preferences in our lives. In India's cultural and socio-context, mind is given more emphasis over matter and is illustrated through Devadatta's remark in the play which says: According to Shastras, the head is the sign of a man .(Hayavadana) Karnad represents India's erstwhile socio-cultural practices like Sati when Padmini commits Sati in order to prove her chastity, a tradition that was prevalent in India in the ancient times. Karnad reveals the religious sentiments prevalent in our society, psychology and culture by showing the presence of Goddess Kali. Hayavadana begins with an invocation of Lord Ganesha, who is generally worshipped first among the gods. In the beginning, Devadatta worships Kali in order to win Padmini's hand for marriage. Later he offers himself to the goddess by beheading himself and his friend Kapila follows suit. The Hindu rituals and superstitions are very well portrayed by showing people offering themselves to Kali. This was a practice that was followed a few decades back. Now people offer goats and animals to Goddess Kali, who is also known as the goddess of Destruction. The theme also reveals the Upanishad principle that visualizes the human body as a symbol of the organic relationship of the parts to the whole. The sexuality of a woman has been put forth in a very un-assuming way by Karnad.

Padmini though married to Devadatta is attracted to Kapila. Her consistent existence depends on the presence of either of them. She needs both or either of them for her satisfaction and resorts to Goddess Kali. Eventually, she finds herself in intense euphoria when she combines the head of Devadatta and the body of Kapila thereby according herself a high degree of sexual freedom. Padmini's end portrays the subjugation of women in our country wherein they have to time and again prove their chastity. With such references to India's cultural, religious and social context, Karnad does not mean to condemn them, but make readers and viewers understand how even with different human values and behaviours, we seem to follow well set norms. He has blended such issues such as love, identity and sexuality with folk culture and his imagination. Karnad provides us with a glimpse of the past as well as its relevance to understanding the contemporary world.

The characters of Kapila and Devadatta are manifestations of the images of different castes in our society. In our society, a Brahmin is learned and wise but physically weak. Likewise, the image of Devadatta is stereotypical of a male Brahmin whereas Kapila, a Kshatriya, is a wrestler and is not as wise as Devadatta. Here the caste of the men plays a major role in the portrayal of both the men, which is true of our Indian society where we judge people on the basis of their caste and creed. The play opens with a puja to Ganesha, as the Bhagavata asks that Ganesha bless the performance that he and the company are about to put on. Then he places the audience in the setting of the play, Dharmapura, and begins to introduce the central characters. The first is Devadatta, the son of a Brahmin who outshines the other pundits and poets of the kingdom. The second is Kapila, the son of the iron-smith who is skilled at physical feats of strength. The

two are the closest of friends. As the Bhagavata sets up the story, there is a scream of terror off stage. An actor runs onstage screaming that he has seen a creature with a horse's head, a man's body, and the voice of a human. The Bhagavata doesn't believe him, and even when the creature (Hayavadana) enters, the Bhagavata thinks it is a mask and attempts to pull off Hayavadana's head. Upon realizing it's his real head, the Bhagavata listens as Hayavadana explains his origin: he is the son of a princess and a celestial being in horse form, and he is desperate to become a full man. The Bhagavata suggests to go to the temple of Kali, as she grants anything anyone asks for. Hayavadana sets out for the temple, hopeful that Kali will be able to change his head to a human head.

Recovering from the interruption, the Bhagavata returns and begins to sing, explaining that the two heroes fell in love with a girl and forgot themselves. Meanwhile, a female chorus sings in the background about the nature of love. Devadatta and Kapila enter. Devadatta explains his love for Padmini, explaining that he would sacrifice his arms and his head if he could marry her. Kapila at first makes fun of Devadatta but then sees how much his friend is affected by Padmini. He agrees to find out her name and where she lives. Kapila goes to the street where Padmini lives and begins to knock on the doors. When Padmini opens the door to her home, Kapila is immediately love-struck. Padmini asks him what he wants, outwitting him as he tries to come up with reasons why he is there. He eventually explains that he is there to woo her for Devadatta. Kapila says to himself that Padmini really needs a man of steel, and that Devadatta is too sensitive for someone as quick as Padmini.

The Bhagavata reveals that Devadatta and Padmini were quickly married, and that all three remained friends. The story then jumps forward six months, when Padmini is pregnant with a son, and the three friends are meant to go on a trip to Ujjain together. Devadatta expresses jealousy that Padmini seems to have some affection for Kapila, which Padmini denies. She says that she will cancel the trip so that the two of them can spend more time together, but when Kapila arrives, ready to leave, Padmini changes her mind and decides to go, much to Devadatta's dismay. As the three of them travel together, Padmini remarks how well Kapila drives the cart. She points out a tree with the Fortunate Lady's flower, and Kapila rushes off to grab flowers for her. Padmini remarks to herself how muscular Kapila is, and Devadatta sees Padmini watching him with desire. When they pass the temple of Rudra and Kali, Devadatta is reminded of his old promise and sneaks away to cut off his head. Kapila goes to look for him, and upon discovering Devadatta's headless body is struck with grief. He decides to cut off his head as well.

Padmini begins to get worried about the two men and goes after them. She sees their two headless bodies on the ground and attempts to commit suicide as well. The goddess Kali stops her and tells her she will revive the men if Padmini replaces their heads on their bodies. Padmini, in her excitement, accidentally switches the two heads when she replaces them. The two men are revived: one with Devadatta's head and Kapila's body, and the other with Kapila's head and Devadatta's body. At first, the three of them are amused by the mix-up, but when they try to return home, they discover issues. Each man believes that Padmini is his wife. Devadatta's head claims that the head rules the body, and so she is his wife. Kapila's head argues that his hand accepted hers at the wedding ceremony, and that the child she is carrying came from his

body. Padmini is aghast, but decides to go with Devadatta's head. Kapila does not return with them.

As the second act opens, Padmini and Devadatta are happier than they've ever been. She loves his newfound strength, and the two of them prepare for their child. They buy two dolls for their son. The dolls speak to the audience and reveal that over time, how to treat their son, as she believes that Devadatta coddles him. The dolls tell the audience that Padmini begins to dream of Kapila. When the dolls begin to show signs of wear, Kapila asks Devadatta to get new ones and goes to show her son the forest.

As Padmini travels through the woods, she discovers Kapila living there. He has regained his strength, just as Devadatta has lost his. He explains how he had to war against his body, and how he has come to accept that he is, in fact, Kapila. Padmini implies that she is attracted to him, and spends several nights with him. Devadatta returns with the dolls and tries to find Padmini in the woods. He discovers her with Kapila, and the two decide to kill each other to put an end to the struggle between their heads and their bodies. After they have killed each other, Padmini decides to perform sati, throwing herself on their funeral pyre. The Bhagavata explains that Padmini was, in her own way, a devoted wife.

Just as the audience believes the play has ended, a second actor comes onstage saying that there was a horse walking down the street singing the national anthem. The first actor also enters, with a young boy in tow. The boy is very serious, and does not speak, laugh, or cry. It is revealed the child is Padmini's son. At that point, Hayavadana returns. He explains that he had asked Kali to make him complete, but instead of making him a complete human, she has made him a complete horse. Padmini's son begins to laugh at Hayavadana, and the two sing together. Hayavadana still wishes to rid himself of his human voice and the boy encourage him to laugh. As Hayavadana laughs more and more, his laughter turns into a horse's neigh, and he thus becomes a complete horse. The Bhagavata concludes the story by marveling at the mercy of Ganesha, who has fulfilled the desires of Hayavadana and the young boy. He says that it is time to pray, and Padmini, Devadatta, and Kapila join in thanking the Lord for ensuring the completion and success of the play.

The main plot of the play begins with Kapila, who finds his best friend Devadatta despondently dreaming about Padmini. Kapila, who is a Kshatriya, is a wrestler whereas Devadatta is a learned Brahmin and poet but is physically weak. 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 arranges the match, and Devadatta and Padmini are married.

After the wedding, Padmini finds herself getting attracted to the strong-bodied Kapila, and Devadatta is consumed by jealousy. A few months into the marriage, the three travel to Ujjain. On the way, they rest between two temples, one devoted to Rudra (The Howler-a form of Shiva) and the other to Kali. Devadatta decided to offer himself to Kali, but Kapila too is not left behind. 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.

In this play, Karnad has presented the theme of incompleteness at three levels- Divine, Human and Animal. When the play begins, “ a mask of Ganesha is brought on the stage and kept on the chair. The Bhagavata sings verses in praise of Ganesha, accompanied by his musicians. From the very beginning we see the use of the word ‘incompleteness’. Ganesha is worshipped as the destroyer of incompleteness. Here the Bhagavatta regards Ganesha the embodiment of incompleteness because Ganesha has an elephant head and a human body. In the case of Devadatta, Kapila and Padmini, we see that they fail to achieve completeness. They all die. But Hayavadana achieves completeness. He wanted to become a man. But he becomes a complete horse. So the theme of incompleteness has been nicely presented in this

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