

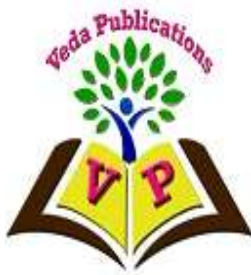


FOLK ELEMENT IN GIRISH KARNAD'S HAYAVADANA AND NAGAMANDALA

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ABSTRACT



The contemporary Indian drama has developed in leaps and bounds. Our modern Indian dramatists have made bold innovations and fruitful experiments which go into the history of Indian drama as the most significant mark of achievement. Indian drama written by Indian playwrights makes immense use of tradition, myths, legends and folklore. Girish Karnad's plays vividly epitomize this trend.

The current research paper deals with the folklore, which is often a dramatic representation of a myth or a legend, accompanied by song and music. According to Girish Karnad, Nagamandala is based on two folk tales from Karnataka. Though it is only a folk-tale, it highlights the necessity of passing one's knowledge on to others, because culture can be enriched only through sharing and transmitting it. Hayavadana on the other hand is influenced by Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads*, which in turn is borrowed from one of the Sanskrit *Kathasaritasagara* stories. Culture defines society and Karnad's plays are a reflection of the culture in our society. Focusing on our folk culture, he takes inspiration from mythology and folklore.

Keywords: Folklore, Mythology, Legends, Reflection of the Culture.

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Indian dramatists made use of ancient themes and techniques in their plays. Very few dramatists made use of modern trends in theatre. These two tendencies can be lured lucidly in theatrical events in 1960's and 1970's. Though plays are written in various Indian languages, they are translated into English. First regional drama gradually paved the way for Indian National Theatre. Major language theatres namely Hindi, Bengali and Kannada are always active even when they faced many troubled situations. Fortunately or unfortunately major Indian dramatists like Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar, Babal Sarkar, Girish Karnad emerged on the horizon of Indian drama.

Girish Karnad is the most prominent playwright of the contemporary Indian stage. Karnad was born on 19th May, 1938 in Matheran, small town near Bombay. He had a very humble beginning. Almost all his childhood was spent at a small village in Karnataka, where he had firsthand experience to folk theatres. Girish Karnad has played many roles in his life time - playwright, poet, actor, director, critic, translator. He has also served as Director of The Film and The Television Institute of India, Chairman of Sangeeth Natak Academy, besides winning innumerable awards for his work in plays and films, like The Jnanpeet award and The Padmashree. The most amazing theme about him is the ease with which he slips from one role to another. For four decades, he has continued to compose top-notch plays, often using history and mythology to tackle contemporary themes. His companionship and encounter with folk theatre and indigenous *Natak Companies* made an indelible impression on the mind of Girish Karnad. A series of Karnad's plays have strong roots in Indian myths.

Often accused by his detractors of the use of myths and folklore in his plays and about a lack of originality, the playwright himself subscribes to the view that there is nothing called originality. He was fascinated by the native traditions more but he learnt many things from the western drama also. He treats the mythological or historical themes in modern context giving them existential touch. He believes that it is nothing but a western concept which came to us as a result of colonization. One of few existing and flourishing playwrights of modern India, Karnad

believes that we have lost the tradition of writing plays. He develops a braided structure to continually interrelate ritual, performance and entertainment. Karnad's plays have been able to strive a balance accommodating both efficacy and entertainment in good measure, because his interest is to urge a socio-cultural interrogation through his plays without burdening them with overt ideology. As a result his plays are universalistic, allegorical, ritualized as well as individualized and entertained show business.

As all great playwrights of the century have done before him, Karnad has undertaken a journey through his plays in search of novel forms to embody his multi-perspectival approach to complex themes. From the use of *Ithihasa* and oral tradition to technology. Karnad's rich repertoire showcases thematic configuration through the performance of techniques. Karnad's plays exemplify his ideal of total theatre that combines drama, dance and music. He also exploits elements of *Yakshagana* and folk theatre in *Hayavadana*. Though he does not want to use this folk theatre anymore, he cannot give it up completely. So, in his *Naga-Mandala* the story plays the role of Bhagavata while the Man and the Flames are very much like the *Hayavadana* and the Dolls of *Hayavadana*.

Rangan's characterization of folk imagination and folk play and their interplay with magic is easily applicable to Karnad's plays:

Folk imagination is at once mythopoeic and magical. In the folk mind, one subsumes the other. Folk belief, besides being naïve, has a touch of poetry about it which works towards a psychic adjustment. All folklore is religious, often based on animism because the primitive imagination extends its vision from the natural, in which it is steeped and with which it is saturated, to the supernatural, which to the folk mind is only an extension of the former. (Rangan 199)

Karnad's plays are based on ancient folk stories and historical figures. The main plot of *Hayavadana* is based on "THE STORY OF THE TRANSPOSED HEADS" in the Sanskrit *Vetala Panchavimsathi*, 25 stories about king Vikrama and Vetala, the Goblin, which forms part of Kshemendra's *Brihat Katha Manjari* and Somadeva's *Kathasarit*



Sagara. These stories were written about in the eleventh century. The Vetala concludes his telling of a tale with a question that demands an answer. He creates in each tale a situation that rises a question, poses a problem or riddle. Karnad's Hayavadana is based on number six story of Vetala Panchavimsati. A modern source of plot of Hayavadana is Thomas Mann's narrative *The Transposed Heads*.

Karnad combines the transposed heads plot with Hayavadana's story which is entirely his own. This added part is important because the play gets the title from it. Hayavadana story tells the story of a man with the head of a horse (Haya = Horse, Vadana= Face). He is the son of a Princess who had fallen in love with a horse. Karnad's A Gandharva is cursed to be a horse for some mis-behaviour. Hayavadana's problem is how to get rid of the horses head. He goes to Kali temple and threatens to chop off his head. Then he picks the sword lying there and is about to chop off his head when Kali appears. He falls at her feet and says 'Mother, make me complete'. She says, 'so be it' and disappears. This motif establishes a strong link between the Hayavadana story and the transposed head plot. Once again as in the main plot the goddess' boon 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 in addition to this Hayavadana still retains his human voice. When a five year old son in transposed head plot asks him to laugh the laughter turns into proper neigh. Now Hayavadana becomes a complete horse. It also brings a tremendous transformation in the boy who is very abnormal who has forgotten how to laugh. It is Hayavadana's laughter that has resorted the boy to normality. The two friends, the woman and her son in transposed head plot have been given new names and they also carry similar symbolic similarities and differences from those in Mann's story. Shridaman is now called Devadatta, his friend Nanda becomes Kapila; Seetha becomes Padmini and Samadhi-Andhaka becomes a boy with no name.

Hayavadana embodies the theme in his physical appearance of equine head and anthropic body. Devadatta and Kapila exact the theme in the transformation of their heads. Padmini, on the other

hand, illustrates the psychological and philosophical lack in her through her quest for a complete man. Hayavadana is thus modeled on Yakshagana Bayalata. Yet the play betrays the influences of classical Sanskrit theatre, Western theatre and the third theatre. It is rather difficult to trace the individual influence of each theatre since they are all amalgamated. The play ends on a happy note like a classical Sanskrit play. The beginning of the first act and the end of the second act resemble the Nandi Prasthavana and the Bharatavakyam of the classical Sanskrit Drama. The anachronism of Hayavadana, the macabre nature of Kaddess like and the talking dolls, and the transpositions of heads bring about dissimilitude. The Bhagavata now and then comes and comments and there are songs here and there in the play and they constantly disturb the continuity of the play. The dissimilitude and the disturbance of the continuity through Bhagavata's frequent intrusions spoil the identification of the audience with the characters and make them look at the play objectively and understand the significance of the theme. Karnad is thus able to provide the Indian model of Brechtian epic- theatre and achieve that Alienation effect. Moreover, this treatment averts the danger of the plays becoming a melodrama on account of the deaths of Devadatta, Kapila and Padmini. The economy and the fluidity in the play already discussed are due to the influence of the third theatre.

Nagamandala is based on two folk tales from Karnataka which Karnad first heard several years ago from Prof. A.K. Ramanujan, whom he considers his friend, guru and hero and to whom he reverently dedicated the play. Persuading by Prof. C.M. Naim he translated the play into English. Apart from the two Kannada folk tales, Karnad acknowledges the influences of Jean Anouilh on the long speech of Naga. It is a deceptively simple play whose complexity consists the elements of myth, magic, folk, belief and romance. Nagamandala is divided into three parts: Prologue, Act- I and Act- II. The prologue sets the tone and mood of the play. The audience is taken into a make-believe world, drama itself being such a world. The play opens in a surrealistic setting- a dilapidated temple, a broken idol that is hard to identify, the time of late night



with the moonlight creeping in through the crevices on the walls and the roof.

In folkloric terms, story-telling is often a dramatic representation of a myth or a legend, accompanied by song and music. In the dilapidated temple comes flames and story to share some gossip. A story cannot be bottled up but would escape at the earliest opportunity, as the story and the song do from the snoring old woman's open mouth in this play. A "mandala" consists of a triangle and a square: a triangle with in a square. The zeitgeist of the play is the mandala. The three points of the triangle are Rani, Appanna and Naga, thus illustrating the eternal triangle of an adulterous situation presenting the wife, the husband and the lover. The four sides of the square provide the dramatic framing and stand for the flames, the tale, the Man and the audience. The structure of the play has two receptors of the story: The Man who listens to the flames and the audience before whom the entire performance unfolds. The story unravels itself and acts as the Bhagavata in the Yakshagana style of presentation. It also acts as the chorus, commenting on the ongoing action and the characters, besides providing narrative links.

The dramatis personae are not given specific names and as in morality plays are allegorical, reinforcing the mythical base of the play. The female protagonist is Rani, it is not just a name but an epithet from the folk vocabulary that describes any beautiful woman as 'queen-like'. Appanna is any man or everyman; Kappanna is the dark one and his mother Kurudavva is a blind old woman. She is old because she is worldly-wise and blind because she represents Rani's unconscious. She makes Rani realize her sexuality by giving her magic roots to attract her husband and to wean her husband away from his concubine. Appanna the dark one is haunted by the spectre of a Yaskhi, a snake-woman, floating out of the well or walking out of a cemetery, both standing for dark, nether regions. His sudden disappearance is equally intriguing and mysterious.

Though it is only a folk-tale it high lights the necessity of passing one's knowledge on to others, because culture can be enriched only through sharing and transmitting it. The flames comment on the contemporary conditions such as caste system. They set the background for the play and prepared the

mood of the audience to chime with the theme. They describe the bed manners of various couples. The episode of the old couple hints at the problems in marital life. The flames bring to our mind the dolls of Hayavadana. They relate and share their experiences like those extra-ordinary dolls that Karnad presented in Hayavadana. The story and the song begin. The story and the song long choked find and escape and live again among the people. The story is described as a young woman and the song as her sari.

The play proper seems a remythification of the Ahalya myth. In Valmiki's Ramayana, Ahalya commits adultery knowingly but the folk mind equates Ahalya with the chaste women and therefore cannot allow her to sin deliberately. So Indra, the Zeus-like profligate, is shown to have perpetrated a fraud on her by impersonating her husband Gautama. In the play "Nagamandala", Rani is innocent, it is Naga in the form of her husband Appanna who makes love to her. She thinks that she bears her husband's child and does not suspect Naga's identity till the very end.

The action just starts in Act-I and is to develop in Act-II. Rani is a passive counterpart of Padmini of Hayavadana. Here Kali is Kurudavva who grants her, her wish through the root. By the root hangs a myth: the Kunti myth. In the earliest received versions and also in its present version, a virgin Kunti (Kurudavva) gets magical power from a mendicant for serving him devotedly with mind and body. She shares the power with another woman: Kunti shares it with sister Madri, the second wife of her husband; Kurudavva shares it with Rani, Kurudavva begets a strong son, Kappanna. When she loses him mysteriously at the end of the story, she cries piteously at the loss of her son. Kurudavva tells Rani, that she is 'mother-like' to Appanna and the later acknowledges it as much when he says:

"In my sleep it sounded like my mother calling me" ... (3)

In short, she is the 'mother' of all males and it is her duty as the 'mother-in-law' to initiate Rani into family life (as Kunti does with Draupadi) and that is what she does. Rani's experience with Naga borders on a dream-like situation; and sleep and dream are constantly alluded to by Rani. She asks herself whether her experience with Naga is real or a



waking dream. Accustomed as she is to dreaming about damsels in distress, their being imprisoned by demons and rescued by princes, the borderline between illusion and reality is blurred. And not only that: reality is reversed when Appanna hisses like Naga and Naga talks sweetly like a husband. The folk belief is that a snake is in capable of love, but here Naga is Rani's lover. The irony lies in the image of the "caged bird".

"The cobra simply looks at the bird's eyes with its own sight.

The bird stares and stares.....

Unable to move its eyes. It doesn't feel any fear either.

It stands fascinated, watching the changing colours in the

eyes of the cobra. It just stares, its wings half-opened as

though it was sculpted in the sunlight". (4)

Naga, in turn, employs the myth of life to educate her about sex. Sleep (nidra), food (ahara), and cobulation (Maithuna) are common to man and animal. Naga as the phallic symbol performs as per his nature or Swadharma and initiates her into sex. He comes disguised as her husband but he cannot change what he is. This is beautifully described by the playwright:

"Frogs croaking in belting rain, tortoises singing soundlessly

in the dark, foxes, crab's ants, rattlers sharks, swallows- even the geese!

The female begins to smell like wet earth.

And stung by her smell,

the king cobra starts searching for his mate.

When the flame-of-

forest blossoms into a fountain of red and the earth cracks open

at the touch of the aereal roots of the banyan, it moves in the

hollow of the cottonwood, in the flow of the estuary, the dark

netherworlds, with in everything that sprouts, grows, stretches,

creaks and blooms- everywhere, those who come together, cling,

fall apart lazily! It is there and there and there everywhere... (5)

Rani enjoys Naga's company so much that she wants the night to last forever, as though she was in search of carpediem. For her, the day is the 'unmasker', while night brings her masked delight.

Appanna is a male chauvinist. He treats Rani as if she were an object without life and feelings. He has cold contempt for her. While he enjoys extra marital sex, he does not like anybody even to talk to her. By endouring Naga with the feelings of genuine love and making him in the process the sorrowing lover whose cruel mistress is Rani, Karnad de-mythicizes the husband-wife marital love and re-mythicizes the beauty-beast myth. Naga suffers from the pangs of separation or viraha like a human lover when the villagers unite Rani with her husband after she goes through the 'snake ordeal'. Realizing too well that he could no longer assume Appanna's form and as a snake could not have a human mistress, he decided to end his life so that his lover might live in happiness. Sex between human and non-human militates against nature.

The Eros-Thanatos syndrome works in the case of Naga when he commits suicides by entangling himself in Rani's tresses. It seems, that one may live in the nether worlds like Naga or in the upper worlds like Indra, the pleasure of sex can be had only with a human. Whatever are the limitations and imperfections of being human, certain experiences can only be had in the middle world. Naga belongs to the sub-human world and Appanna, the human world. The idyllic world provides peace, security and happiness. In Naga's company Rani finds all these.

The demonic world brings loneliness, separation, humiliation, pain and the threat of more pain. Husband Appanna's company gives her nothing but these. Lover Naga who comes from the dark animal world provides peace and joy. That Appanna brings pain and humiliation, presents the inversion of the romance tradition. Day becomes night and night turns into day. Romance also presents a polarization of the two worlds that permits a transit from one to the other. This is manifest in the play with a rather syngé-ian touch when Naga-Appanna coalesces with Husband-Appanna.

This happens when Rani tells Naga that she is pregnant. As Appanna, his behaviour becomes predictably harsh. He pushes her down and beats



her. The shift from night to midday and what it means to Rani connotes the subversion of Romance. The interregnum enacts exciting events or collision with external Phenomena, as for example, Naga's encounters with the dog and the mongoose and the breath-taking shifts for Rani when the cruel Appanna changes into loving Naga and vice-versa. The recovery of identity is a release from the tyranny of these circumstances.

Karnad gives a twist to these conventions. It is an illusion that gives Rani her identity as a 'wife' and the reality that makes her lose it. Again, during the 'snake ordeal', her illusion saves her because that becomes her truth. As though this subversion is not enough, there waits another reversal at the end. Naga the rescuer dies while Appanna the persecutor survives. Poetic justice is the law of Romance because it depicts the ideal situation. By the end of the play Rani has traveled a long route from innocence to experience. When she finds the dead Naga in her hair, she has acquired enough cunning to successfully persuades her husband to allow her son to perform the last rites for Naga, as a father is entitled to receive from his son. The scope of Nagamandala extends beyond feminism into matriarchy.

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