

Tradition and Modernity in Indian English Theatre: An Analytic study of Girish Karnad's "Hayavadana"

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Abstract

India has a great history of Drama since the ancient era. Indian drama is as old as the Indian traditions. Today, theatre of Indian English is a mirror reflecting the fusion of the tradition and modernity. This paper covers the significant period of time which marks the change in the position of woman in the Indian social life as reflected in the modern age where men suffer from identity crisis, struggle for their existence and women change from their submissive role to the role of an independent woman. In this respect, Girish Karnad's plays present a glaring conflict between indigenous tradition and modernity against the backdrop of mythology and history and how he exploits the traditional myths through the vision of his modern conscience.

Key Words: Tradition, Modernity, Tangle-relationship, Identity crisis, Alienation, Existentialism

Introduction:

Like his contemporary playwrights Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, and Mahesh Dattani Karnad has reshaped Indian English drama related to the present social scenario to bring about social change. But unlike his contemporaries, he adapts mythical and historic material with psychological interpretation. One of such translation is Karnad's *Hayavadana* which delves deep into the traditional myths to spell out modern man's anguish and dilemma. At the same time, the play is a bold and successful experiment on the folk theme like his other plays *Nagamandala*, *Tughlaq* and *Yayati*¹. In the introduction of *Hayavadana*, K. Kurtkoti writes:

The plot of *Hayavadana* comes from *Kathasaritsagara*, an ancient collection of stories in Sanskrit. But Karnad has borrowed it through Thomas Mann's retelling of the story in *The Transposed Heads*.²

Here we see how as a modern playwright, Karnad is always engaged in the act of deconstructing myths. He takes up mythical and legendary tales from his own culture and unfolds them in the light of modern sensibility. In the words of a famous critic M. K. Naik,

Karnad's handling of the sources of his plots makes it abundantly clear that his interpretation of the ancient Indian story not only differs substantially from his originals but also indicates a bold attempt at investigating on an old legend with new meaning.³

The above remark made by Naik is absolutely right. I also agree with him and that is also very clear from the reading of the story where all these difference and newness in meaning are found in a play which has been grounded upon the myth and folk literature.

Traditionality in Hayavadana:

A tradition is a ritual or belief passed down within a society and still maintained in the present, with origins in the past. According to Eliot "Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour... not only the pastness of the past, but of its presence". (296) Tradition-oriented societies have been characterized by piety, harmony and group welfare, emotional stability, and interdependence.

Girish Karnad has used various forms of the folk tradition in his play Hayavadana to reinforce the central problem of human existence. The entire play is cast in the form of traditional Indian folk-drama which Karnad has drawn upon, is the 'Yakshagana'⁴ of Karnataka. 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. (14)

The beginning of Hayavadana with the invocation or *vandana* of Lord Ganesha⁵ is a key feature of Yakshagana. Like all the folk plays, Karnad also follows the same tradition.

The use of mask is another significant tradition of Indian folk theatre also seems in the play. Instances of Indian idioms such as *rishi*, *punyashana*, *pativrata*, *puja*, etc. are also present.

The role of Bhagvata as sutradhara is from a typical Yakshagana play. He plays a multiple role in the play. His role is crucial in the play, since he performs a great variety of functions.

The friendship between Devadutta and Kapila is very strongly pointed here in this play reminding of the great mythical friendship in our traditional myths. As the playwright states in the play *Hayavadana*

The world sees these two young men wandering down the streets of Dharampura, hand in hand and remembers Lava and Kasha, Ram and Laxaman, Krishna and Balaram. The two friends there were-one mind, one heart.⁶

Karnad's remark is completely supported in the play where he shows how two friends like those mythical figures sacrifice themselves at the end when they find that two men can't demand a woman without thinking about Padmini they kill each other.

Rituals of promising to tribute in favour of God before and performing of that after it, is also another traditional based incident pointed by Karnad when we see Devadutta in the play offering his head before the temple of Kali.

Another example of tradition is the habit of giving curse in anger. We find this in the sub-plot of the play when Hayavadan's father (a stallion) his wife to become a mare.

The last but not the least element of Tradition in Karnad's Hayavadana, the ritual of sati performed by Padmini in the fire is reminding of the traditional wife who are *patibratas*. By doing this ritual she joined himself in the array of *patibratas* like Savitri and Sita in ancient Indian mythical stories.

Modernity in Hayavadana:

The modern meant a renewal, a re-knowing, a renaissance, a rebirth of the classical and a purer, uncorrupted tradition. Society exhibiting modernity would value individualism, flexibility and progress.

Karnad's interpretation of the ancient story not only differs substantially from his original traditions but also indicates a bold attempt at investigating an old legend with a new meaning, which has an urgent relevance to present day thinking about man/woman and his/her world. In *Hayavadana* what Karnad wants to suggest is that for us King Vikram's solution does not solve the problem. In fact, the real problem begins when it appears to be solved.

Play begins with the invocation of Lord Ganesha arises the sense of modernity. The idol of Ganesha being an 'embodiment of imperfection' is suggesting of incompleteness in the life of modern men. Commenting on this paradox, Bhagavata rightly states "An elephant body, a broken tusk and a cracked belly - whichever way you look at it he seems to be an embodiment of imperfection, of incompleteness" (quoted in Ray: 202).

Search for completeness or incompleteness in modern life is also presented through and Padmini's strong quest for unattainable perfection in the main plot and Princess of Kanataka and Hayavadana's quest for complete human being in the sub-plot. "The astonishing desire of Padmini and Princess of Kanataka along with the mixed identity of Kapila, Hayavadana and Devadatta baffle the audience." (Jha, 71)

Padmini's drowning towards Kapila and keeping an incestuous relationship with him and the transposition of head unconsciously suggesting her thrust of getting perfection. Moutushi Chakravartee calls it as "man's eternal quest for completeness" (36). Similarly in the sub-plot, Hayavadana wanders from one temple to another for his humanly completeness.

Girish Karnad projects a microscopic picture of man-woman tangle-relationship in conjugal life in modern life through the portraits of Padmini, Devadatta and Kapila. P.D. Nimsarkar's comment on marital life of Devadatta and Padmini, is worth quoting:

The married life between Devadatta and Padmini does not seem to be full of contentment and pleasure though she has conceived from him. She nurtures a secret desire for Kapila, awaits his arrival and becomes restless if he does not visit the house. (100)

Nimaskar's was absolutely right in his comment as Karnad time and again showed this throughout the play and Padmini's attempt to lead a life with both the man suggesting a kind of revolt forwarded by the modern women against the patriarchal society.

Padmini's act of never getting frightened to go the forest to meet Kapila, even at the end her entering into the fire to perform *sate* in her will are nothing but the clear pictures of how modern women are courageous today.

Karnad projects the conflicts between *Dharma* and *Adharma*⁵ through Kapila's character. Kapila exhibits characteristics of *Adharma*, for his illicit act to see friend's wife as beloved or wife. Through this, Karnad transforms religious myths into the non-religious ones through his criticism of Hindu concepts of gods and goddesses. In this context, Mohit Ray rightly puts it:

The demystification & religious beliefs and practices – which must be seen as a reflection of modern sensibility – is at its highest in Hayavadana. (113)

The ritual of tribute to God for fulfilling humans' wish is also given trends of modernity. This gives a comic taste when Devadutt gave his head to goddess Kali though he wished to give it to Lord Rudra. This suggests carelessness and forgot mindedness in modern men. Not only the human beings but also the goddess is symbolic of carelessness and indifference in her waking from sleep and at last in her act of fulfilling the wish of Hayavadana into a complete horse instead of complete human being.

Karnad moves one step forward with his excellent skill of dramatic technique named "alienation effect". This effect is well used through the character of Bhagavata. Midway through the drama, we find him signaling the end of the action by telling the audience, "So there's a break of ten minutes now. Please have dome tea, ponder over this situation and come back with your solutions. We shall then continue with our enquiry". (Karnad, 39)

Karnad's craftsmanship of how to make a tradition based story into a grave modern story is well manifested when Padmini performs *sati* in fire. Here, Karnad shows that Padmini is not at all a *patibrata* and she hasn't any *pati bhakti*. Padmini willingly enters into the fire because she knew very well if she remained alive everyone would questions on her morality, virtue, chastity which she could never tolerate. She decided to kill herself in fire as a means of escape not because of her *pati bhakti*. Kirtinath Kurtkoti in his "Introduction" to Hayavadana makes this remark:

Neither the death of the lovers nor the subsequent *sutee* of Padmini is presented as tragic; the deaths serve only to emphasize the logic behind the absurdity of the situation (vi).

Both Padmini and Hayavadana suffer from identity crisis. While Padmini enters sati, she is painfully aware of her identity crisis⁶. As KirtinathKurtkoti, 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.

Identity crisis modern life is also vivified by the son of Padmini who was not given any name.

Karnad's characters however accept failure socially 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 existential character. Though, she fails in getting reunification of the mind and the body in Devadatta and Kapila. She now expresses her wish to accomplish her search for completeness through her child.

Conclusion:

To conclude, Karnad's *Hayavadana* is a perfect specimen of having both the theatrical element of tradition and modernity in it. To present it he makes use of myths, mythologies and folklore as his source for his plays, not for the glorification of the chosen myths but to relate the myths to the present and to the past beliefs found in these myths. The myth requires new dimensions in the creative hands of Karnad, and the play unfolds rich stanzas of meaning. 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. (197)

Naik was truly right in his own words where he put out what Karnad provides us with a glimpse of the past as well as its relevance to an understanding of the contemporary world.

Notes:

1. *Yayati* is a play in which the Indian mythical king Yayati is a representative of modern man portrayed in contemporary literature. Karnad has borrowed the myth from great Indian epic *Mahabharata* and other *Puranas*.
2. Girish. Karnad, *Hayavadana*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2010, p. v (Introduction).
3. Naik, M. K., "From the Horse Mouth", A Study of *Hayavadana*". *Girish Karnad's Play's: Performance and Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Tutun Mukherjee. Delhi: Pen Craft International, 2008. Web.
4. *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* and *Mahabharata* and *Puranas*.

5. The playwright has taken this extra ordinary technique of Ganesh vandana from Hindu tradition, where Shri Ganesh is always worshipped in the beginning of every auspicious occasion. The great epic poet John Milton also used this technique of invocation to God and Muses in his epic the *Paradise Lost*. But such type of practice cannot be observed in English drama. Therefore, Karnad follows tradition of Ganesh Vandana in this play which is purely Indian.
6. Girish. Karnad, *Hayavadana*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1998, p.(Introduction).
7. Girish Karnad goes back to the rich traditions of the *Vedas*, the *Purusharthas* and *Bhagavad-Gita* in order to dramatize moral fables and social virtues of Gods (popularized by legends, mythology) to people on the earth.
8. He transforms the religious myths to question as well as critique those myths. He makes certain changes in the names of the characters. He wanted the names not to be the reflection of the ancient myth entirely, he wanted the names to be generic. Karnad's logic behind the change of names can be justified from the above remark made by him: "In Sanskrit, any person whose name you do not know is addressed as 'Devadatta'. Kapila means dark and therefore earthy and Padmini is the name of one class of women in Vatsyana's *Kamasutra*".
9. Padmini's identity crisis is found when she prays to her prototype: "Kali, mother of all nature, you must joke even now. Other women can die praying that they should get the same husband in all the lives to come. You haven't left me even that little consolation". (TP 131)

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