LITERARY QUEST

(Re)negotiating Culture: Cultural Reconnaissance in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*

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Abstract

Theatrical representation is a place of perpetual reinvention. Cultures are most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their ritual and theatrical performances. This provides a perspective on Indian Culture as a category which is deeply imbricated in the living cultures of contemporary Indian society. In *Hayavadana* cultural identities, densely ambiguous, are revealed, masked, fabricated or stolen. The conflated notions of "Indian tradition" and "Indian culture" as homogenous identities are used frequently here. The play is a damning indictment of the moribund Indian culture mired in the thraldom of spiritual bankruptcy and casteist prejudices. Substantive representation and reconnaissance of culture which has its ramifications in the cultural realm of *Hayavadana* will be examined.

Keywords

Indian culture; Theatre; Identity; Folklore; Myth; Girish Karnad; *Hayavadana*.

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In the Indian civil society, literature has a large role in setting the social agenda by reflecting (and reflecting on) the social conflicts that have a bearing on the democratic process. This provides a perspective on Indian culture in particular which is deeply implicated in the living cultures of contemporary Indian society, where religious institutions have become festering sores of debauchery and depravity, and cultural schemas are drowned in a quagmire of crass ritualism and a quotidian routine of deeds. The codification of knowledge has resulted in the stratification of the society. The suppression of local differences in the interest of cultural homogeneity and political centralization meant that the plurality of the cultural discourses in the vast literary traditions was edited out of view. These debates, conducted around the binaries of tradition and modernity, have contributed to our understanding of the complex nature of Colonial modernity that shaped 'culture' in the Indian context of the late nineteenth-century society.

Girish Karnad's theatre is a contest over nature, identity and the ultimate destiny of modern India. *Hayavadana* (first performed in 1972), a so-called folk play – written, performed and consumed primarily by the urbanites – illustrates the turn towards neo-traditionalism in the post-Independence theatre. The structure of the play as a whole, however, is not derived from any particular regional tradition, and a philosophical exploration of its problems of wholeness and identity has a modern interpretation. Karnad based this play on the native theatrical modes *Yakshagana* theatre and the irreverent inversion of mock-heroic mores.

The play is based on a tale from *Kathasaritsagara,* an ancient compilation of stories in Sanskrit. The central episode of the play – the story of Devadatta and Kapila- is based on a tale (the sixth story) from the *Vetalapanchavimsati* and is heavily indebted to Thomas Mann's reworking of the tale in his "The Transposed Heads". Devadatta, the poet and 'man of intellect' and Kapila, the wrestler and 'man of body' are thick friends. Padmini marries Devadatta but is

increasingly attracted to the more boisterous, physical Kapila. Devadatta's vituperous animosity towards Kapila reaches a climax in the deserted temple where the two men decapitate themselves, one after the other. At goddess Kali's command, Padmini replaces their heads only to realize, too late, that she has switched heads and bodies. Faced with the choice of two composite men, she chooses to stay with Devadatta's head on Kapila's body on the grounds that the head is the thinking part of the individual and, thus, the 'real' person. By the end of the play, the two bodies have been transformed to match the heads and, by implication, the 'persons' to which they are now attached. The sub-plot of Hayavadana (the man with the horse's head) is Karnad's own invention.

The result is a play in which three of the main actors wear masks: the character of the title and the characters of the two men whose heads are transposed. The juxtaposition of the efficacy of the masks foregrounds the significance of the mask as a theatrical device. Karnad opines:

> 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. ("Theatre in India" 346)

He believed that in the Indian traditional theatre, as in the Greek, the mask is only the face writ large. One of Karnad's major concerns in this play is how to draw on traditional theatrical forms – what he terms 'this paraphernalia of masks, half-curtains, mimes, dances and music' in the writing of contemporary drama (*Three Plays* 37). While the basic premise of the play – that the head is the thinking 'person' – is supported by the main plot, it is simultaneously subverted by the subplot. The horse-headed man (with a human body, human voice and mind) seeks to become fully man but ends up all horse. The intriguing transformation combines an ancient lore and a traditional art form with the contemporary issue of trappings of personal identity. As Karnad explains, "to have any value at all, drama must at some level engage honestly with the

contradictions that lie at the heart of the society it talks to and about" ("Theatre in India" 336).

Hayavadana is construed to be concerned with the conflict of Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of human nature and is strongly influenced by an India oscillating between its colonial past and its new independence within the framework of an overarching tradition. Padmini represents the newly independent India, as yet unable to choose between tradition and its (comparatively) recent Western history. Likewise, when the horse-headed man Hayavadana sings the national anthem, he evokes the empty regurgitation of nationalistic feelings following independence. Karnad's characters seek happiness at whatever level of 'completeness' they are able to achieve rather than strive for a unified source of identity for themselves. Hayavadana bridges the racial and class divide Thomas Mann emphasized in his own work in order to show how the socio-cultural differences created by casteist prejudices are amplified by modern socio-economic and political structures in a fragmented post-colonial Indian society. Foregrounding the importance of the evolutionary aspect of myths, Karnad subverts the form and content of the play in order to allow the traditional folk theatre forms accessible to upper-caste audiences.

Karnad's theatrical concerns are both traditional and contemporary. He believes that live theatre can survive only by doing non-realistic theatre which has a composite character like the traditional theatre. Karnad's technique of using the issue of 'splitting of self' attests to this. This split sometimes gives rise to binary opposites, effectively irreconcilable and in Hayavadana, the split itself becomes the theme – like Kapila and Devadatta, body and mind, changing minds. The impeccable insight he offers into the tangled web of human relationships is complemented beautifully by the texture of his plays. The psychological depth of the treatment of Devadatta's envy in the play is commendable.

Karnad uses the motifs of folklore and myths in the play. The mythical quest for perfection and completeness (revealing an ambiguous nature of human personality) and the blending of folktales and myths with reality is marvellously

affected by Karnad. The opening as well as the closing of the play with an invocation to Lord Ganesha the elephant-headed God exemplifies the mores of traditional Indian culture at its best. The folklore surrounding the tree of the Fortunate Lady is also an important example. They evidence traditional Hindu culture at its best. The living continuations of the lore of the transposed heads are dealt with beautifully. Karnad, thus, uses the logic of myth to create a double, reciprocal exchange of functions that allows for resolution. He observes:

> The energy of the folk theatre comes from the fact that while it seems to support traditional values, it is also capable of subverting them, looking at them from various points of views...The form can give rise to a genuine dialectic. (*Three Plays* 64)

Padmini's mute son and Hayavadana complement each other: the one, as a human child, returned to the fold of society and the other, as fully animal.

Karnad uses his knowledge of Indian myths to draw parallels with other Hindu legends and thereby strengthens his case against the Brahminical claim that mind is superior over the body. He believes that true Brahminhood is more a function of one's devotion and spiritual mindset rather than bigoted caste positions. One of the defining characteristics of Brahminism is its persistent attempts at intellectual hegemony. Devadatta's reservations regarding Kapila attests to this. Hayavadana quips, "do you think just because you know the Puranas you can go about showering your Sanskrit on everyone on sight?" (*Three Plays* 44). Kapila-turned-Devadatta's penchant for studying the Sacred Texts also exemplifies this. The trope of undermining the sacred texts further attests to Karnad's flair for documenting Indian culture. Kapila's exhortation – "don't tell me about your sacred texts. You can always twist them to suit your needs" – in the altercation following the transposition is an example (*Three Plays* 41). A few transformative changes are also visible. Goddess Kali wryly laments the loss of devotion in the contemporary scenario, underlining the adaptive changes in the visage of Indian culture.

The mythical quest for completeness, which provides succour to a sense of personal identity, is persistently explored in the play. *Hayavadana* presents the conflict between Apollonian and Dionysian polarities both at a socio-cultural and metaphysical level, suggesting that "completeness" or "perfection" is not possible if it is defined as a fusion of these two extreme polarities (Goel 177). Kapila (in Devadatta's body) quips, "one beats the body into shape, but one can't beat away the memories trapped in it. Isn't it surprising? That the body should have its own ghosts, its own secrets…this body, this appendage, laughed and flowered out in festival of memories to which I'm an outcaste" (*Three Plays* 49). The myth of the composite men is another example. The use of songs and dance movements further underline the prevalence of Indian culture in the play. For instance, we have this song by Bhagavata:

> You cannot engrave on water
>
> Nor wound it with a knife
>
> Which is why
>
> The river
>
> Has no fear
>
> Of memories… (*Three Plays* 27)

Dance movements are an integral component of Karnad's theatre, an essential means of expression. The final struggle between Devadatta and Kapila is stylized like a dance, with perfection.

Karnad's use of 'sutradhar', masks, and dolls in a metanarrative fashion exemplifies Indian theatre at its best. His subversion of myth and its juxtaposition against the contemporary scenario necessitates the presence of such dramatic flair. The mask, used to problematize the appearance-and-reality divide, is the method of projecting the personality of a character to a vast audience. The conventions of the chorus and masks permit the simultaneous presentation of widely divergent points of view, some of them even irreconcilable to each other.

Karnad's theatre draws heavily from India's historical past, mythological episodes from the epic tradition, regional and pan-Indian folk tales. Both in spirit and in language, Karnad's drama re-clothe the past in the emotional realities of the present day.

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MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

Chatterjee, Tanuka. "(Re)negotiating Culture: Cultural Reconnaissance in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana.*" *Literary Quest* 1.6 (2014): 1-7. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.