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Subverting and Redefining Femininity through Indigenous Tropes: Karnad's *Nagamandala* and *Hayavadana*

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Abstract:

Girish Karnad has enabled Indian theatre to re-establish itself and have an identity of its own. Through his kind of drama Karnad has been continually striving to decolonise contemporary Indian theatre. His theatre of roots sheds off the baggage and trappings of the western dramaturgy and asks for a revival of indigenous folk devices and theatre forms. Structurally and thematically his plays envisage decolonising not only the dramaturgy but also the act of seeing, further they go on to subvert the established themes, practices and dramatic styles.

This paper will examine Girish Karnad's plays *Nagamandala* and *Hayavadana* which are woven around female characters of Rani and Padmini; beautifully giving expression to the yearnings, trials and tribulations of a female heart. Through the use of myths and folklores Karnad subverts the role of woman and her perception in the male dominated society. Karnad celebrates womanhood with all her strengths and weaknesses and provides his readers and audience with refreshing models of Indian femininity. By refashioning Indian myths and folklores Karnad is able to project a model of Indian womanhood who is very modern and individualistic but still possesses the charms of quintessential female self. My paper will delve into Karnad's use of indigenous folk devices to give expression to women voices and how far he succeeds in portraying the essence of Indian womanhood with myriads of emotion.

Keywords: Indigenous tropes, Theatre of roots, myths, folklores, femininity, subversion, decolonise.

It is true that the drama is a great peace-maker of the world. It is the best medium to give life to our society and to our people. It is a religious belief with me that it is our stage that will rouse our masses and lead them on to take their place in the comity of nations. It is my firm belief that the stage and the art of acting not only educate society, but also help the artist in his struggles of spiritual evolution and finally make him realize his divinity. (Bellary Raghava: 446)

It is through this medium of Drama that Bellary Raghava calls as "great peace-maker of the world" that Karnad chooses to represent the rich plethora of myths and folklores

embedded in Indian culture. By doing so Karnad creates a bridge of creativity to reach out to the world and also re-establishes himself and his audience to their roots.

Girish Karnad is one of the most important playwrights of the contemporary Indian theatre. Girish Karnad's plays are transcreations into English from the original Kannada. Christopher Balme in his essay "Indian Drama in English" considers that it is through transcreation that syncretic drama can be achieved, he writes that "it is only through the process of transcreation that a form of syncretic drama and theatre is realized that combines the English language with indigenous performance codes" (Christopher Balme: 345). By transcreating his plays into English Karnad reaches out to a global audience and presents characters and themes which are essentially local. He employs techniques and tropes which are indigenous and are deeply embedded in Indian ethos and culture. Karnad's dramaturgy transcends boundaries as he effortlessly moves from familiar space to unfamiliar cultures and makes himself understandable by universalizing human emotions. Karnad essentially relies on myths, folklores and legends for his plays. A.K. Ramanujan while reflecting on the importance and pervasiveness of folklores in Indian psyche observes in the Introduction of his book *Folklores from India*:

Folklore pervades childhoods, families, and communities as the symbolic language of the nonliterate parts of the people and the culture. Even in a large modern city like Madras, Bombay, or Calcutta, even in western-style nuclear families with their well-planned 2.2 children, folklore—proverbs, lullabies, folk medicine, folktales—is only a suburb away, a cousin or a grandmother away. (A. K. Ramanujan: xiii)

The paper examines Karnad's transcreated plays *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala* which are based on stories taken from "Vetala Panchavimsati" and other myths and folklores. *Hayavadana* is based on the story of transposed heads from the collection of Sanskrit tales known as *Kathasaritsagar*, and from Thomas Mann's German novella *Die Vertauschten Köpfe* (The Transposed Heads). Karnad's achievement lies in his ingenuity in manipulating the myth to his own purpose and also refashioning it in doing so. Erin B. Mee observes that "Hayavadana's origins are intergeneric, a folktale transformed into a novella into a play; and intercultural --- the story has traveled from India to Germany and back again. "Inter-ness" pervades *Hayavadana* at every level, from its origins to its thematic content to its production history." (Erin B. Mee 2006: 149)

Writing in the postcolonial space Karnad adapts the indigenous theatre form of Yakshagana performances to give shape to classical Indian mythology. He extensively makes use of conventions of folk performances like masks, dolls, music, curtains; and succeeds in creating meaningful theatre. Karnad's use of folk device itself subverts the interpretation of the play and presents 'alternative points of view'. Commenting on this particular aspect, 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. The various conventions --- the chorus, the masks, the

seemingly unrelated comic episodes, the mixing of human and non-human worlds --- permit the simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view, of alternative attitudes to central problem. To use a phrase from Bertolt Brecht, these conventions then allow for ‘complex seeing’. (Girish Karnad 2006 : 14)

Karnad excels as a playwright since he continually strives through his plays to achieve a consensus between drama and theatre. His plays are first produced, put to the touchstone of theatre, before they are published. Karnad’s plays are not only important texts of literature but they possess great performative value which gets enhanced with each production. His plays are very popular with theatre groups and directors like B.V. Karanth, Shivram Karanth, Satyadev Dubey, Vijaya Mehta, Ebrahim Alkazi and Alyque Padamsee; and have the capacity to transcend the barriers of countries, cultures, and languages.

Hayavadana possesses all the traits of superior Indian theatre. It came to be associated with ‘Theatre of Roots’ movement because of its use of folk forms and indigenous elements. Talking about B.V. Karanth’s 1972 production in Delhi, Dr. Suresh Awasthi quips that it “reversed the colonial course of contemporary theatre” (1989:48). Karnad’s plays breathe with Indianness as is evinced by P. Dhanavel :

Karnad is the first Indian dramatist to reflect really typical Indian characteristic in his plays, as he has consciously resisted the influence of the western theatre, which fails to take cognizance of the Indian milieu in its entirety, (P. Dhanavel 2001: 98)

The main plot of *Hayavadana* deals with Padmini, a young spirited woman who gets married to Devadutta, but nurtures a fatal attraction towards his friend Kapila. The threesomes undertake a journey. Padmini exuberant and full of life wants to explore nature and indulge in a bit of flirtation with Kapila, goes off to see the temple of Rudra. Devadutta is totally shattered and in a fit of desperation and jealousy beheads himself in front of goddess Kali. Kapila fathoming the trouble that he is in also follows suit and cuts off his head, professing his love for his friend. Padmini cursing the two men and finding it difficult to face the society, appeals for help from Kali. Kali appreciating the honesty of Padmini agrees to bring the two men back to life. But Padmini in her excitement “accidentally” switches the heads, which brings forth the central dilemma: who is her husband, the one with Devadutta’s body or the one with his head. Finally the problem is resolved (only temporarily) by a Rishi who says that since head is the *uttam ang* (supreme part of the body) and personal identity depends on it so one with Devadutta’s head is Devadutta and is the husband of Padmini. Padmini feels elated and goes off happily with Devadutta. While Kapila (one with Kapila’s head) severs all ties with society and goes off into the forest. This central tale is wrapped up by another tale of a horse headed man Hayavadana, who also lends the play its title and also gives newer dimensions to the central story.

In *Hayavadana* the audience is asked to participate in the whole event which commences with a ritual---Ganeshvandana. The play works on different levels. The frame story of Hayavadana not only reinstates the theme of completeness but also comments on the

perception of it. Hayavadana with a horse's head and a human body yearns for completeness and this eternal search brings him to the stage where Bhagvata is about to begin the play dealing with Devadutta and Kapila and their tragic predicament. Hayavadana is initially ashamed of his horse's head and toils a great deal to get rid from it. Finally it's the goddess Kali who grants him the boon of completeness and he becomes a complete horse, but still retaining the human voice. Hayavadana neighs with contentment and elation when finally his human laughter changes into proper neighing in the company of innocence. Even the son of Padmini regains his ability to laugh when he shirks off artificiality, as symbolized by dolls. The child's gesture is full of abandon and uncurbed gaiety on watching the horse laugh. The return of the child and of the horse to their respective spheres of existence conveys the true meaning of the play. Completeness does not lie in duality but purity.

Kapila and Devadutta have been variously described as soulmates and friends at the beginning of the play by Bhagvata. But there is a dichotomy in what is told by Bhagvata and what we actually find in the course of the play. It is Devadutta who sits on the chair and Kapila who squats on the floor. The two are aware of their respective places in society and thus behave accordingly. Their behaviour, their accomplishments and their physique is not of their own making but rather it reflects their position and their profession. Kapila, "the only son of the ironsmith, Lohita" is strong but "dark and plain to look at". Devadutta, "the only son of the revered Brahmin, Vidyasagara, is fair in colour, unrivalled in intelligence" (73-74) but not so strong in body.

Karnad calls for "complex seeing" in this seemingly simple characterization. The agility of Kapila's body fails to permeate through his mind and in the case of Devadutta the toned brain fails to translate itself through the body. The two friends were incomplete even before their heads were swapped.

Kapila and Devadutta suffer from the predicament of modern day man they suffer from fragmentation of their own selves like Eliot's Prufrock. Karnad, in subverting the Indian myth also subverts the hegemony of mind, human mind and human existence for that matter. Hayavadana's mother opts for the white stallion as her husband than the handsome prince. After fifteen years of companionship the horse get transformed into gandharva, but she insisted for the former shape of the horse, thus enraging the gandharva and bringing forth his wrath, who in turn curses her to become a horse herself. This curse is more than a blessing for Hayavadana's mother and she in her contentment gallops "away happily" (80) into her own world.

Karnad subverts the role of woman and her perception through the character of Padmini. Padmini, 'the daughter of the leading merchant in Dharmapura (90)', is not only intelligent and witty but is also smart and beautiful. Karnad places Padmini, the woman, at the centre of the things. Devadutta and Kapila have been pushed to the margins. They are the ones who have been assigned the role of annihilation and self-destruction. It is Padmini who with her honesty and unabashed behaviour impresses the goddess Kali and brings the two men back to life, albeit with swapped heads. But actually it's not the heads rather the bodies which are swapped. She wins back her husband Devadutta with a new much perfect body. Karnad's

Padmini defies all previous models of Indian femininity. She is a woman of flesh and blood and reaps for her own follies. She understands that there is no retrieving from the situation that she finds herself in along with Devadutta and Kapila and thus forces the two men for final combat.

Hayavadana is a play which gives an ironic commentary by subverting not only the femininity of the woman but also by reversing the romantic ideas of love, marriage, children and even friendship. It is a play which depicts religion with a pinch of salt--- there is goddess Kali who is “collapsing with sleep” (102). Girish Karnad’s effort is not only to demystify religion but also to symbolically strip off masks from all familial, social and religious notions. The stage directions and notes provided by Karnad relating to the transposition of heads hold great importance in making the play plausible on stage. When Devadutta and Kapila cut off their heads then significantly enough “(t)he head ---that is the mask--- rolls off and blood flows...” (99). A little later when goddess Kali instructs Padmini to join their heads, the narration goes on as follows:

...Padmini puts the heads---that is, the masks---back. But in her excitement she mixes them up so that Devadutta’s mask goes to Kapila’s body and vice versa...(103)

Padmini’s story is interlaced with other performance genres which give different perspectives for interpreting and commenting on her dilemma. The role of dolls is one such device put to use by Karnad. The dolls comment on physical changes that come in Devadutta (after the transposition of heads) with the passage of time:

Doll I : He touched me , and...

Doll II Yes ?

Doll I : His palms ! They were so rough, when he first brought us here, Like a labourer’s. But now they are soft---sickly soft---like a young girl’s.

Doll II : I know. I ‘ve noticed something too.

Doll I : What ?

Doll II : His stomach . It was so tight and muscular. Now...

Doll I : I know. Its loose... (116)

The dreams of Padmini about the strong bodied Kapila are conveyed through the medium of dolls and reflect the hidden desires of Padmini which otherwise are impossible to be conveyed on stage. The dolls have another important role to play, they represent society at the microcosmic level. Instead of being innocent and cute playthings the dolls are shrewd, bitchy, quarrelsome and even class conscious.

Another important performative device used by Karnad in the play is the role of Bhagyata. Bhagyata can move freely between the two tales and likewise he can also move in and out of the play with ease. Further, his importance lies in voicing the inner desires and feelings of Padmini, when she herself is unable to communicate. In Act II Padmini undertakes the journey into the forest, with her small child, in search of Kapila. Finally when the two

encounter each other, it is Kapila who asks her why she has come again leaving Devadutta. At this moment Bhagvata steps in and gives voice to Padmini's thoughts:

Bhagvata : How could I make you understand? If Devadutta had changed overnight and had gone back to his original form, I would have forgotten you completely. But that's not how it happened. He changed day by day. Inch by inch. Hair by hair... And as I saw him change--- I couldn't get rid of you. That's what Padmini must tell Kapila. (125)

Bhagvata who also acts as an anchor or sutradhar starts narrating the tale of Devadutta and Kapila, but he is interrupted in his narration first by the actor then by Hayavadana himself. It is Bhagvata who directs Hayavadana to go to the temple of Kali, here Bhagvata is himself an actor in the frame tale of Hayavadana. The complexity of Bhagvata's role can be felt at all the levels of the play.

Chorus is also an important performative device used in the play. Padmini's story begins and ends with the song of the chorus:

Why should love stick to the sap of a single body? When the stem is drunk with the thick yearning of the many-petalled, many flowered lantana, why should it be tied down to the relation of a single flower? (82)

The chorus calls for more humane approach in understanding the yearnings of Padmini, who embodies new woman. The chorus asks for that "complex seeing", in order to understand the complex and spirited personality of Padmini.

For a fuller understanding of Karnad's dramaturgy and his reliance on Indian folklores to make his point I move on to discuss another of his transcreated play *Nagamandala*. In the introduction to his *Three Plays: Naga-Mandala, Hayavadana, Tughlaq* Karnad while writing about *Naga-Mandala* mentions that the play is inspired by two oral tales from Karnataka which were told to him by A. K. Ramanujan. He goes on to write that these tales were usually narrated by older women of the family while feeding the children but these narrations also helped the women to communicate with other women of the house, thus the tales served the dual purpose and represented dual meaning as well.

The Prologue of the play takes the audience into a make believe world – "The inner sanctum of a ruined temple" (23) – where they encounter a Man, some flames and a Story dressed as a woman. In this surrealistic setting we come to know that the Man; a playwright by profession and a sutradhara in the present context has committed the most serious crime by writing plays which failed to engage the audience thus leading them to fall asleep and now in turn he has been cursed to death by a mendicant unless he remains awake one whole night. Adding to the weird situation the flames also gather at the ruined temple chatting and giggling with girlish mirth and gay abandon – pure flames without any wicks and lamps. The flames are joined by a Story who significantly enough is projected on the stage in the form of woman and the Man agrees to listen to her as he has to remain awake the whole night in

order to save his life. But the story also has her own condition that the Man has to pass on the story to someone else thus continuing the cycle of creativity which is an ongoing process wherein Karnad as a dramatist is also playing his part.

In the Introduction to his *Three Plays: Nagamandala, Hayavadana, Tughlaq* Karnad while discussing about the paradoxical nature of oral tales writes:

The story of the flames comments on the paradoxical nature of oral tales in general: they have an existence of their own, independent of the teller and yet live only when they are passed on from the possessor of the tale to the listener. Seen thus, the status of a tale becomes akin to that of a daughter, for traditionally a daughter too is not meant to be kept at home too long but has to be passed on. This identity adds poignant and ironic undertones to the relationship of the teller to the tales. (Karnad: 17).

Taking its inspiration from folktales and folk traditions the play *Nagamandala* has multiple layers of meaning but at the same time can be seen or read for pleasure as well. It has a simplicity and complexity which goes hand in hand and it is up to the audience to unravel the possible meanings or meaning. As the play progresses the Story unravels itself with some essential inputs from the Man who acts as the Sutradhar. Commenting about the organic and ever evolving nature of oral tales A.K. Ramanujan observes in his book *Folktales from India*, “A folktale is a poetic text that carries some of its cultural contexts within it: it is also a traveling metaphor that finds a new meaning with each new telling.” (A.K. Ramanujan: xi)

The plot of *Nagamandala* essentially revolves around three characters – Rani, Appanna and Naga. Kurudavva and Kappanna provide the necessary stimulus to the play as of course it is Kurudavva the wise old blind woman who understands the plight of Rani and hands over the magic root to her to win the love of her husband. The Prologue acts as the frame tale and enacts the whole tradition of oral tales. The play portrays Rani; the eternal woman in waiting; thrown into the world of loneliness abuse and depravity. As already mentioned she is given a magic root by Kurudavva in order to win back her husband who keeps her under lock and key and himself visits a concubine. Disturbed by the red colour and doubting the efficacy of the herb while considering it to be an evil potion Rani pours it over the ant hill in a state of confusion. The Naga or the King Cobra who resides in the ant hill takes the love potion and visits Rani at night in the shape of her husband Appanna.

The act of transformation lies at the core of the play and leads to a complex situation in the life of Rani. On one hand Naga in the shape of Appanna provides love and companionship to Rani and soothes her sorrows and tortures of the day but on the other Rani unknowingly lands herself in mess where the society puts her to test and she has to prove her chastity. According to some critics the play is about love and fulfillment which a woman might get outside a loveless marriage. But plays of Karnad call for Brechtian “complex seeing” and the play grows in meaning and significance each time one reads it or watches in performance. Karnad himself observes:

The position of Rani in the story of *Naga-Mandala*, for instance, can be seen as a metaphor for the situation of a young girl in the bosom of a joint family where she sees her husband only in two unconnected roles—as a stranger during the day and as lover at night.... The empty house Rani is locked in could be the family she is married into. (Karnad: 17)

Things are beyond comprehension for Rani when she becomes pregnant and her husband accuses her of infidelity and claims that he had never touched her. The play also deals with the moral hypocrisy of the male dominated society which does not find anything wrong in Appanna visiting a concubine but expects Rani to undergo the ‘agni priksha’ i.e. in this case the snake ordeal. Rani although petrified in the beginning ultimately takes oath holding the King Cobra that she has touched only two of the male sex – her husband and the King Cobra. As predicted by the Naga; Rani is immediately raised to the pedestal of a goddess and is ultimately united with her husband. The play offers multiple endings while the above mentioned one is only one of it. The second ending is the most elaborate and balanced in its approach. Appanna has to live with the reality that he is not the father of Rani’s child and Rani too will never get answers to some of her questions realizing the difference between Naga and Appanna. But as in life one has to move on making certain adjustments in order to lead a happy married life. The second ending also deals with Naga who entangles himself in Rani’s long hair; thus sacrificing his life for her and Rani planning to give him a funeral befitting enough for a father to be given by her son. The third ending is given by the Man as the flames are not satisfied by this unhappy ending of Naga’s death. Herein comes the role of Man, the Sutradhar or the playwright who can always get his inspiration from his cultural past but has got the freedom to remould and refashion the raw material to suit his times and sensibility. Thus the Man comes up with an unconventional ending wherein the live Cobra drops off from the Rani’s hair and in order to save his life she gives him shelter in her long tresses. Here it can be recalled that at the beginning of the play Rani’s long tresses when tied at her nape were compared to a coiled king cobra and finally Rani has awakened herself to the latent energies which a coiled cobra signifies. Now she has translated herself as a true Rani or a Queen who knows how to tame her husband and thus has created a perfect mandala or circle for a harmonious living.

In *Decolonizing the Mind* , Ngugi writes:

Drama encapsulates within itself this principle of the struggle of opposites which generates movement. There is in drama a movement from apparent harmony, a kind of rest, through conflict. We end with harmony at a different level, a kind of temporary rest, which of course is the beginning of another movement.....(Ngugi 2003 : 54)

Both *Nagamandala* and *Hayavadana* end with a unique sense of harmony. In *Hayavadana* Lord Ganesha is thanked for restoring “ a grandson to a grandfather, a smile to a child, a neigh to a horse.” (139) and in *Nagamandala* with or without Naga a much mature Rani is blessed with a son and is united forever with her husband.

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