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Hayavadana as Syncretic Theatre

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Abstract:

The paper begins by trying to define syncretic theatre or theatrical syncreticism highlighting the fact that by syncretic theatre, leading theatre scholars like Christopher *Balme*, means evolution of a performative form open to both Western and traditional practices. This has necessitated a shift in our understanding of theatre making us conscious of the fact that theatre is no longer just a secular entertainment but in postcolonial contexts an activity far more intertwined with the daily life of the people. Moving on to a specific text, Karnad's *Hayavadana*, the paper attempts to show how syncreticity in *Hayavadana* resides in the ability of the play to draw upon multiple influences. Moreover, even when making use of a particular tradition, the play inventively plays with that tradition in order to bring in significant departures and deviations. The result is a play that, to quote Erin B. Mee, "is *neither* 'Western' *nor* 'Indian', *both* 'Western' *and* 'Indian'; a new kind of play that is more than and different from the sum of its parts".

Keywords: Theatre, Transcreation, Syncretic, Yakshagana, Rituals, Masks.

Christopher Balme, a leading syncretic theatre scholar in his book *Decolonizing the Stage Theatrical Syncretism and Post-colonial Drama* (1999) defines theatrical syncreticism as a "process whereby culturally heterogeneous signs and codes are merged together" (1). Explicating further, Balme describes syncretic theatre as codes utilizing "the performance forms of both European and indigenous cultures in a creative recombination of their respective elements, without slavish adherence to the one tradition or the other" ("Syncretic Theatre"). What it effectively means is that syncretic theatre is catholic in spirit, drawing influences from all quarters without making any value distinctions between influences from the West and those which are more traditional in nature. Mostly observed in dramatists and playwrights emerging from colonized countries who have had to bear the yoke of forced westernization, it has meant an intermixture of western and native elements in their theatre.

More importantly, it has also brought about a necessary shift in our understanding of the function and aim of theatre. From secular entertainment catering to an urban population, theatre has come to be seen today in postcolonial contexts as an activity closely connected to community practices and daily life carrying within itself vestiges of religious ritual and the power to evoke

magical possibilities. This presence of rituals in a performative space is a feature of traditional, colonized societies. And the reappearance of it in contemporary productions as the postcolonial comes to terms with its pre-colonial origins in order to shake off the colonial hangover is an example of theatrical syncretism. For example, traditional Indian theatrical performances began with an invocation to Lord Ganesha as Karnad's *Hayavadana* (1975) does with an appeal to Vighneshwara, one of Lord Ganesha's many names – that literally means remover of obstacles – to guarantee successful production of the play.

What we will do now is to make sense of rituals in the context of theatrical performance and acknowledge its presence in theatrical syncretism. Performance theorists like Richard Schechner and Victor Turner who have tried to map all known rituals worldwide and extract their commonalities are of the opinion that ritual forms the basis of all theatre activity (Gilbert and Tompkins 55). However, in making such facile generalizations about rituals and in foregrounding only similarities, Schechner and Turner are really being naive to the complexities present and the individual distinctions. As Gilbert and Tompkins maintain, “the difference between African and Indian rituals and western forms of worship and/or entertainment and/or representation are too often overlooked in critical analysis which attempts to mark only similarities” (55). Richard Schechner, for example, does not distinguish between “secular” rituals like sports events and sacred devotional rituals. His theory overlooks the forms and meanings of specific rituals among, say, the Hausa people, which cannot be equated with those of the Igbo (Gilbert and Tompkins 55).

As far as the connection between rituals and theatrical performance is concerned, we have moved away from the earlier notion of the clear distinction between the two as present in Western theatre. Christopher Balme in *Decolonizing the Stage: Theatrical Syncretism and Post-Colonial Drama* shows that amongst indigenous races and cultures theatre and ritual are not “two phenomenologically mutually exclusive activities” but are “two phenomena located . . . on a performative continuum” (67). Referring to Anthony Graham White's contention regarding African cultures, Balme makes the point that whatever distinction there is lies only on the level of reception and not in the organization of the performed ritual: “the ultimate distinction lies in the attitudes of the performers and spectators”; a ritual contains ‘expectations of consequences beyond itself’” (*Decolonizing* 68). According to Balme, Graham White seems to be implying “that a ritual is determined primarily by the horizon of expectation brought to it by the participants who expect some kind of efficacy from it” (*Decolonizing* 68).

Despite this growing enlightenment about the importance of ritual in a pre-colonial environment and its connection to theatre, some misunderstandings still remain. The first one, as the French ethnographer Jean Laude stresses is that the Western dualistic notions such as sacred–profane, religious–secular do not exist as such binaries in African cultures (Balme, *Decolonizing* 68). The other important one, Balme mentions, to which Victor Turner draws our attention, is the

fallacious notion that the rituals are necessarily “rigid, repetitive and resistant to alteration” (Decolonizing 69). Mentioning that this is a typical Western prejudice about rituals, Turner contends that ritualized performances in many cultures have been known to be highly flexible making adequate allowances for improvisation and innovation (Balme, *Decolonizing* 69).

What now concerns us is the way rituals find a place in modern theatre. Erving Goffman has come up with a useful theory. According to Goffman, theatre and ritual, distinct as they are in Western culture are governed by two separate frames that regulate not only our responses to these events but also our attitude towards them. The word “frame” as used by Erving Goffman means “principles of organization which govern [social] events and our subjective involvement in them” (qtd. in Balme, *Decolonizing* 69). Goffman refers to the process whereby one set of conventions that govern one kind of frame is applied to another mode of action not generally defined by that frame as “keying”. Balme, therefore, feels that “an attempt to ritualize theatre would involve the performers and spectators keying the conventions of ritual into theatre” (*Decolonizing* 70).

All this theorizing becomes interesting once we try to understand the practical implications of such an exercise. Christopher Balme in his “Indian Drama in English: Transcreation and the Indigenous Performance Tradition” has shown how it works in writers such as Tagore and Girish Karnad. Referring to the form of drama and theatre which combines English language with indigenous performance codes as “syncretic theatre”, he describes the practice of translating or adapting a work from one language and performance tradition to another as “transcreation”. Balme refers to Tagore’s transcreational practice as an early form of syncretic theatre, “rewriting his plays partly in the linguistic and performance codes of Western theatrical sensibility, yet retaining the unmistakable signature of Indian performance aesthetics” (“Transcreation” 355). Though Balme has not in so many words used the word “ritual”, but it is quite clear from the context that by words like “indigenous performance codes” and “Indian performance aesthetics” he is referring to among other things to ritual elements present in such performances. Balme explains that syncretic theatre i.e. English language theatre that encoded indigenous performance features did not progress on expected lines in India in the aftermath of the independence because of the strong Western orientation among most Indian intellectuals and opinion-makers.

Hayavadana offers a particularly interesting example of syncretic theatre. In the words of Balme, it is “an eminently successful and subtle realization of syncretic dramaturgy” (“Transcreation” 356). First written in Kannada and then translated into English within a year by the author himself, the play which is predominantly associated with the folk form Yakshagana is also influenced by other traditions, whether they are folk forms like Tamasha or dramatic techniques associated with Brecht and Badal Sircar. “So, while one confesses that one went consciously to some of the folk theatre, Yakshagana and others, one cannot deny that Brecht as

well as Badal Sircar were haunting one, and that went some way in the shaping of *Hayavadana*” (Karnad, “Acrobating” 76). Karnad has categorically acknowledged the influences of Brecht and Badal Sircar in the theatrical execution of *Hayavadana*. “And it must be admitted that Brecht’s influence, received mainly through his writings and without the benefit of his theatrical productions, went some way in making us realize what could be done with the design of traditional theatre. . . . What he did was to sensitize us to the potentialities of non-naturalistic techniques available in our own theatre” (Karnad, “Introduction” 14-15). “But I doubt if I could even have thought of this play [*Hayavadana*] if I hadn’t been involved with *Evam Indrajit*. The open, fluid form of Sircar’s play changed or rather expanded my feeling for the stage enormously” (Agrawal 12). Also, B.V. Karanth directing the play for the 1972 Dishanter production makes the point that to connect the play only to Yakshagana form “is wrong”. He goes on to say: “In Yakshagana, the Bhagavat reads out of a special book, and the stories are only from Ramayana and Mahabharat or other religious books. The dancing too [in *Hayavadana*] is more like Tamasha. The . . . music has . . . Pahari tunes, and some folk tunes from the south” (11).

The play opens, as mentioned earlier, with the Bhagavata following the Yakshagana tradition in singing an invocation to Ganesha who is mythically represented as the remover of all obstacles and the facilitator of completeness and perfection. “O single-tusked destroyer of incompleteness, / we pay homage to you and start our play.” (Karnad, *Hayavadana* 1). This invocation of rituals to Ganesha, the god who ensures completion of any endeavour at the beginning of a play is found in both classical and folk dramas and establishes a link with traditional theatre. As Suresh Awasthi comments, “Girish Karnad’s famous *Hayavadana*, inspired by the Yakshagana of Karnataka, begins with the prayer ‘Jai Gajavadane’ – ‘Victory to Ganesha,’ the elephant headed god . . . herald[ing] the return of Lord Ganesha, the presiding deity of traditional theatre” (86). But Karnad just does not leave the reference to Ganesha limited only to a reminiscence of traditional practice. In a particularly syncretic dramatic manoeuvre, Karnad plays on the fact that Ganesha himself incomplete, imperfect and deformed “Vakratunda-Mahakaya” will ensure completion, perfection and success thus anticipating and complicating the play’s thematic exploration of the human search for wholeness (Gilbert 180). Lord Ganesha therefore, according to Suman Bala, with human body and animal head becomes an apt representation of the central theme of incompleteness of being (165-176).

A very important part of the Yakshagana performance is the Bhagavata himself who holds the narrative together by picking up the thread of the narrative between dances and improvised scenes performed by the actors and keep the performance moving about. A similarity with the Sutradhar of Sanskrit drama can be found here. *Hayavadana* makes use of the Bhagavata who as the narrator at the same time introduces the story, comments on the events, conducts the dances and the prose exchanges of the performers and also slips into the shoes of the characters revealing their thoughts. But as Erin B. Mee points out, “there is a difference between the

Bhagavata of Yakshagana and *Hayavadana*, the difference that lies between an oral unscripted performance and a written scripted drama” (167). Whereas the Bhagavata in the Yakshagana is really a kind of director who gives shape to his production by combining different elements of his production as a stage manager, here in *Hayavadana* he is simply another of the characters who is playing a set role, in his case, the role is that of Bhagavata. Karnad’s genius lies in that he makes the Bhagavata’s dialogue seem “improvised” and endow it with the “sensibility of improvisation”. If there is indeed a real Bhagavata in the play *Hayavadana*, according to Erin B. Mee it is Karanth, the director. (Erin B. Mee is here specifically talking about the 1989 Kannada production of *Hayavadana* put on by Karanth for the Nehru Shatabdi Natya Samaroh in Delhi). She goes on to show how the Bhagavata, in the play, performs theatrical pyrotechnics in that the “Bhagavata has no trouble jumping in and out of different realities, time frames, personae and characters” (168).

The play goes on to use many others of Yakshagana features but still ,at the same time,managing to bring in significant deviations. Hayavadana’s entrance in the play follows the Yakshagana tradition in that he enters from behind the half-curtain. In *Yakshagana*, the plot comes to a standstill as important characters after an impromptu jig oddolaga appear little by little from behind the curtain originally known as yavanika held by two stage hands - an exercise that stretches up to thirty minutes (Crow and Banfield 147). The half-curtain is a standard Yakshagana device used to prolong the entrance of new characters to be revealed in all their glory. However, at the start of our play, instead of revealing Hayavadana in all his splendour, the half-curtain turns out to be a prop for him to hide behind. An inventive and unfamiliar use of the half-curtain, ultimately however; the curtain is lowered to the ground to reveal this man with a horse’s head. The Bhagavata cautions the audience of the strange spectacle they are to confront while ushering in Hayavadana. “What’s coming? Whatever or whoever it is, the Actor has obviously been frightened by its sight. If even a hardened actor like him gets frightened, it’s more than likely that our gentle audience may get frightened too. It’s not proper to let such a sight walk on stage unchallenged. [To the wings]. Hold up the entry-curtain!” (Karnad, *Hayavadana* 5). Erin B. Mee, thus, observes that Hayavadana’s entrance though modelled on Yakshagana practice is yet different, “his curtain entrance introduces an unfamiliar character” (149). This device is repeated in the same ironic way for the appearance of Kali before the beheading scene: “The terrifying revelation of the goddess Kali with her mouth opened wide is anti-climactic once the audience realizes she was merely yawning” (Gilbert 181).

In addition to such stage techniques, Karnad also gives a spin to popular performance segments, for example Karnad reworks elements from the Tamasha. Erin B. Mee shows (150-154) that the extract where Kapila is at Padmini’s door asking for her hand in marriage on behalf of the lovelorn Devadatta (Karnad, *Hayavadana* 16-18) is a rehashed version of the typical Tamasha episode as quoted in Balwant Gargi (79). The difference lies in the fact that whereas in

the Tamasha the woman gets outwitted here in *Hayavadana*, Kapila is at the receiving end of Padmini's wit.

The play uses masks, dolls, chorus and miming as other dramatic devices that make it different from standard Yakshagana fare. The idea of masks was there in Karnad from the very beginning. As he says in his "Introduction" to *Three Plays*, "The idea of my play *Hayavadana* started crystallizing in my head right in the middle of an argument with B.V. Karanth about the meaning of masks in Indian theatre" (12). Masks are worn by the two friends Kapila and Devadatta and Hayavadana himself. The head swap of the two main characters lead to the exchange of masks, thus it necessitates that each actor take on the vocal characteristic of the other actor-speech and delivery consistent with the new mask, while retaining the original physical characteristic (Crow and Banfield 148-49). However, in the famous 1972 Dishanter production, Karanth did not use masks for the central duo. Rather than use masks, he used mask like paint and reasons thus: "I had originally suggested masks, but in the course of production I changed my mind. I feel it is the change of body that has importance, so I made the characters exchange their dress" (11).

The two doll characters which are such a strong presence in Act 2 have, as Karnad explains, a specific purpose:

I had a definite reason for using them. In the first half, the Devadatta-Kapila-Padmini story goes on without interruptions. Even the Bhagavata sings or comments only where there's no character on stage. No song interrupts the flow of the story. In the second half the story is continually interrupted by the dolls, the songs and the Bhagavata interferes in the action, talks to the characters, comments on their mental state. This is done merely to bring out the disintegrated state of the three people's lives. In the first half everything is neat and clear, but in the second I wanted to create the impression of a reflection in a broken mirror - all fragmented, repetitious, out-of-focus, all bits and pieces. ("Letter to Pratibha Agrawal" 18-19)

Erin B. Mee, however, finds a definite purpose in the introduction of dolls. "The dolls", she feels, "allow Karnad to introduce the voice of 'society' into what is otherwise a three-character story. . . they are important because they remind spectators of the presence of society-- and of propriety" (146). While the dolls, in voicing the concerns of society, are critical of Padmini's actions. The female chorus is far more sympathetic and considerate in its view of her. They sing: 'Why should love stick to the sap of a single body? When the stem is drunk with the thick yearning of the many-petalled flower, many-flowered lantana, why should it be tied down to the relation of a single flower?' (Karnad, *Hayavadana* 11)

Karnad also makes use of the device of miming in the play. The trip Padmini, Kapila and Devadatta take together is in Karanth's *Natya Samaroh* (1989) production shown as a mimed ride around the stage in a mimed cart driven by Kapila. Other instances include Kapila miming knocking on Padmini's door, Padmini miming looking out of the window. We also find Kapila mimes bringing flowers for Padmini just as she mimes sewing clothes (Mee 166). These instances of mime, Balme feels, "belong to the code repertoire of mime, a Western convention which is not known in traditional Indian folk theatre" ("Transcreation" 361). Another pointer to the hybrid nature of this play, it emphasizes the fact that the "play combines elements of modern urban theatre with elements of Yakshagana to create a new genre of theatre" (Mee 169).

Drawing upon influences from multiple sources, sources both western and traditional in nature, *Hayavadana*, therefore, represents a particularly effective example of syncretic theatre - "which result from the interplay between the Western theatrico-dramatic tradition and the indigenous performance forms" (Balme, "Transcreation" 345). In the words of Erin B. Mee: "By weaving together structures, aesthetics and techniques of Western theatre and traditional Indian performance, specifically Yakshagana, the well-known genre of dance-drama performed in Karnataka, Karnad creates a play that is *neither* 'Western' *nor* 'Indian', *both* 'Western' *and* 'Indian'; a new kind of play that is more than and different from the sum of its parts" (142).

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