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Intersemiotic Translation of “the Switched Heads”: Reading in Tandem

The Transposed Heads and Hayavadana

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Abstract:

Drawing on Roman Jakobson’s views on “intersemiotic translation,” the paper tries to interrogate the trope of “switched heads” found in the Somadeva’s *Kathāsaritsāgara*, Thomas Mann’s *The Transposed Heads* and Girish Karnad’s *Hayavadana*. The transmutation of the tale through “time” and “space,” over the years, and through different cultures is detailed. While doing this, the paper also attempts to analyse the elements of plot in the latter two texts using the Freytag’s pyramid, thus foregrounding the contrasting episodes and subversive elements.

Keywords: Intersemiotic translation, *Kathāsaritsāgara*, transposed heads, folk theatre, elements of plot, Freytag’s pyramid.

The twentieth century witnessed the rise and reign of the Russian born American linguist and literary theorist Roman Osipovich Jakobson who pioneered structural linguistics. In his essay “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation,” Jakobson has made use of C. S. Peirce’s idea that, “the meaning of any linguistic sign is its translation into some further, alternative sign, especially a sign ‘in which it is more fully developed’” (232-33). Jakobson proposes three ways of interpreting verbal signs or rather three kinds of translation---intralingual translation, interlingual translation and intersemiotic translation. These three labels of translation are specifically distinguished and defined by Jakobson as follows:

- 1) Intralingual translation or *rewording* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language.
- 2) Interlingual translation or *translation proper* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language.

- 3) Intersemiotic translation or *transmutation* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems. (233)

In interlingual translation, the translator either resorts to the use of synonymous words or confines to circumlocution. But complete equivalence is not achieved by employing synonymy in translation. Similarly, no full equivalence is to be witnessed among code units while undertaking an interlingual translation as “messages may serve as the adequate interpretations of alien code-units or messages” (Jakobson 233). Jakobson is of the opinion that “no linguistic specimen may be interpreted by the science of language without a translation of its signs into other signs of the same system or into signs of another system” (233). In the final method of analysing verbal signs as proposed by Jakobson, the translator will have to deal with signs from two different sign systems which may also include cultural factors or even religious, political and social implications (Dayyeh 82). Here, the translator instead of prioritizing words, focuses on the idea that is to be delivered from source language to target language. “A translation mechanism can actually be discerned at the heart of the interrelationship between all the semiotic systems and not just the linguistic one, for example in the intersemiotic transmutations or translations between cinema and theatre . . . painting and cinema . . . and literature and cinema” (Dusi 181). Nicola Dusi further posits that:

it can be said that one of the functions of the aesthetic text is to produce new meanings. While every text creates its own semiotic space in which hierarchically organized languages interact, it is also a ‘generator of sense’ that requires a dialogic relationship with other texts in order to function . . . Therefore, intersemiotic translation is a complex ‘form of action,’ not a simple transcodification but a transcultural, dynamic and functional event caught between the requirement to remain faithful to the source and the need to transform it into a text that is understood and accepted in the target culture . . . This dynamic dimension exists because the different languages are viewed as systems that permit translatability, as partially open systems, given that the boundaries between the systems themselves remain in place and function as filters, maintaining their own differences. (182)

This “transcultural, dynamic and functional event” of intersemiotic translation or transmutation is carried out with great brilliance by Thomas Mann using the eleventh century Somadeva’s *Kathāsaritsāgara* as source text for his *The Transposed Heads* and later by Girish Karnad in his *Hayavadana*. A Kashmir Shaivite Brahmin Somadeva’s massive compilation of

stories *Kathāsaritsāgara* (*Ocean of the Streams of Stories*), that portrays earthly pleasures and desires of people in the then Indian society had already carried out intersemiotic translation, centuries before Jakobson had formulated it; the *Kathāsaritsāgara* being a condensed translation of Gunadhya's *Bṛhatkathā* (*Great Tale*) and consisting of "18 books comprising of 124 chapters and approximately 22,000 ślokas in addition to prose sections" (Penzer xxxi).

Chapter 26 of Book 12 comprising the tale of King Vikramaditya and Vetala from the giant text, grabbed the attention of the German Indologist Heinrich Zimmer who in turn influenced Thomas Mann. Vikramaditya is asked to fetch a corpse for a religious ritual. This corpse is, however, possessed by a demon, and the demon recites a series of tales to the king, each with a riddle at the end. If the king answers the riddle, then the corpse flies away from the king, but if the king knowingly remains silent, he will be killed. After twenty-five nights, the corpse-demon proclaims the king's righteousness, helps him escape death, and rewards him with prosperity and divine wisdom.

Among these twenty-five riddle-stories is "The Heads That Got Switched," which describes how a washerman, Dhavala, falls in love with Madanasundari, the beautiful daughter of another washerman. Since the class and financial status of both the families matched, Dhavala and Madanasundari tie the knot. Some days after the wedding, Madanasundari's brother arrives and shortly all three of them leave for the festival devoted to Goddess Durga. They approach the temple of Durga and Dhavala, greatly moved by the urge to pay his reverence for Kali, beheads himself to pay due respect to the Goddess. His brother-in-law who entered the temple in search of him sees the beheaded Dhavala and soon follows the same path. Madanasundari growing impatient waiting for the two, enters the temple and alas, witnesses the decapitated heads of her dear ones and is convinced that she too must die. When Madanasundari is about to hang herself, the Goddess Durga appears, immensely impressed by her devotees, and tells Madanasundari that Dhavala and her brother can be revived if she places their heads over their respective bodies. But, unfortunately, due to the great excitement, she accidentally misplaces the heads and Dhavala is reborn with his brother-in-law's body while her brother gets Dhavala's body. Thus, both Dhavala and his brother-in-law regained life in new bodies and Madanasundari later realises her mistake. Vetala poses his question to King Vikramaditya: "Who is Madansundari's husband and who is her brother after the exchange of heads has taken place?" Vikramaditya instantaneously replies with great confidence that the body to which Dhavala's head is placed is the husband and the body with brother's head is Madanasundari's brother. "The purported obviousness of Vikramaditya's solution never lets

the question of incest arise. In addition, this tale treats the question of identity as non-problematic: its underlying ethos dictates that identity is derived from the seat of reason, which is the head, and the body is seen largely as an appendage to the head” (Siddiqui 133).

The source text, i.e Book 12 of *Kathāsaritsāgara* which involves the frame story of King Vikramaditya and Vetala was retold by Heinrich Zimmer in his work *The King and the Corpse: Tales of the Soul’s Conquest of Evil*. Zimmer added sourness to the marriage of Dhavala and Madanasundari which was portrayed as happy and blissful in the source text. He sought reasons for the switching of heads by Madanasundari, as if she had intentionally, with solid purpose, committed the act and also speculates that Dhavala committed suicide in order to free himself from a miserable marital relationship. Anand Mahadevan notes about Zimmer’s contribution to the myth as:

In his version, the wife for the first time assumes a certain degree of culpability for the deed. In effect, Zimmer adds a touch of ‘Western realism’ to the myth, and his alterations mark the beginning of the transposition of this ancient tale from parable to ‘metaphysical joke,’ the label Thomas Mann gave to his 1940 version of the story, *Die vertauschten Köpfe*, which was inspired in large part by Zimmer’s research. (25)

Thomas Mann on reworking the tale, dropped the entire frame story of King Vikramaditya and Vetala and incorporated a second part apparently critiquing and subverting “the Legend of India” as well as the established norms of Hinduism in general and Brahmanism in particular. “Mann not only retells the story but also refutes Zimmer’s viewpoint. He found the dichotomy between the head and the body depicted in Vetala story a suspect concept, and attempted to metamorphose the story to fully expose the faulty logic inherent in its metaphysical implications” (Umashankar).

In Mann’s version, the readers come across two friends Shridhaman and Nanda who “were like Siva in his double manifestation . . . But after all they were not one like Siva, who is life and death, world and eternity in the Mother, but manifested as two entities here below; thus they were to each other like images” (9). The frail Brahmin Shridhaman falls in love with “Sita of the beautiful hips, the daughter of the cattle-breeder Sumantra” (Mann 5). Nanda arranges his friend’s marriage to Sita. The trio on their way to visit Sita’s parents, after six months of the marriage, come across the abandoned Kali temple where Shridhaman beheads himself and Nanda too follows his friend. On seeing the decapitated bodies of the two men, Sita prepares to hang herself when suddenly, Goddess Kali appears and gives her boon, by

which both the men could be brought back to life if Sita placed the heads back on the respective bodies. But, as in Somadeva's text, Sita misplaces the heads and the two men are revived but in the wrong bodies. The solution of the frame story of King Vikramaditya and Vetala is reinforced in Kamadamana's verdict proclaiming the superiority and authority of the head over the body. Sita lives with the person who has Shridhaman's head and Nanda's body and she benefits greatly from the transposition which later proves to be a momentary bliss. Tension brews as Shridhaman's body wears, and Sita visits Nanda. Mann concludes his novella as the friends kill each other leading to Sita performing Sati and Samadhi being blessed with great fortune.

Karnad's *Hayavadana* draws from the same story in *Kathāsaritsāgara* that immensely influenced Mann's *The Transposed Heads*. The story of Devadatta and Kapila forms the principal plot of the play, and is based on the tale from the *Vetala-Panchavinsatika* of *Kathāsaritsāgara*. Hayavadana is a man with a horse's head who is in desperate search for his completeness, when he stumbles on to the stage interrupting the Bhagavata who is seeking blessings from Lord Ganesha for the successful completion of the play on the transposed heads. The main crux of the play includes the story of two friends Devadutta and Kapila, and the former falling in love with Padmini is similar to Mann's version. The trio leaves for the Ujjain fair and as in Mann's text, they reach the Kali temple. Devadutta decapitates his head on remembering his pledge to Kali and Kapila follows the same deed leaving Padmini dumbfounded on witnessing the bloodied bodies of the two. The pregnant Padmini, in fear of being blamed for the death of the two men, decides to kill herself and is suddenly stopped by Goddess Kali who assures Padmini that the two men can be brought back to life. As the story progresses, one finds that Padmini lives with the person who has Devadutta's head and Kapila's body and at a later part, Karnad introduces two dolls in order to mark the wearing away of the body of Devadutta. The climax is the same as that of Mann's novella, as the two friends kill each other and Padmini performs Sati. The play conducted by Bhagavata winds up as Hayavadana achieves completeness and Padmini's son is sent to Vidyasagara.

The two works discussed above serve as a good example of "intersemiotic translation" (multiple transmutations). An analysis of the various elements of the plot involving a comparative and contrastive study of Mann's version and Karnad's version of the source text would be enlightening. Aristotle, while discussing narrative structure in Western tradition, points out that actions in a narrative should be properly assembled in such a way that "if any one of them is displaced or taken away, the whole will be shaken and put out of joint" (54). "A

simple way to analyse a plotline is to divide it into four main stages: “exposition – complication – climax or turning point – resolution” (Klarer 18). This paper foregrounds the contrasting episodes in *The Transposed Heads* and *Hayavadana* by analysing various elements of plot using the Freytag’s Pyramid. Gustave Freytag had identified the parts of drama as “(a) introduction, (b) rise, (c) climax, (d) return or fall, (e) catastrophe” with “the exciting moment” between the introduction and the rise, “the tragic moment” between the climax and the return, and “the moment or force of the last suspense” between the return and the catastrophe.

Richard Hoffman describes the Freytag’s pyramid as below:

According to this model, a narrative usually begins with an introduction or exposition that sets the stage and provides background or atmosphere. The end of the introduction will be marked by an inciting moment or ‘force,’ which signals the beginning of conflict and propels the action onward. The second section is often referred to as the rising action. In this section the writer defines the conflict through a series of actions or complications. At the height of the complication lies the climax or the peak moment. Depending on the nature of the narrative, the climax might be a moment of crisis, an epiphany, or a reversal of fortune. Following the climax is a section of falling action or denouement (literally ‘unknotting’), leading to a conclusion or resolution. (107-108)

In the exposition (the first element of plot according to Freytag’s Pyramid) of *The Transposed Heads*, Mann equips the readers towards the unfolding of an unusual tale which is specifically described in the commencing paragraph of the novella as:

The story of Sita of the beautiful hips, daughter of the cattle-breeder Sumantra of the warrior caste, and of her two husbands (if one may put it like that) is so sanguinary, so amazing to the senses, that it makes the greatest demands on the hearer’s strength of mind and his power to resist the gruesome guiles of Maya. It would be well for the listener to take pattern from the fortitude of the teller, for it requires, if anything, more courage to tell such a tale than to hear it. (5)

In the following paragraphs of chapter 1, the true friends are introduced, their appearance, occupation, status and more importantly their remarkable friendship is discussed as:

The friendship between the two youths was based on the diversity in their I- and my- feelings, those of the one yearning towards those of the other. Incorporation, that is,

makes for isolation, isolation for difference; difference makes for comparisons, comparisons give rise to uneasiness, uneasiness to wonderment, wonderment tends to admiration; and finally, admiration turns to a yearning for mutual exchange and unity. (Mann 6)

Mann had extensively studied the Indian legends, epics, *Ramayana*, *Bhagavata Purana*, Indus Valley civilization of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro and Aryan invasion of the Indian subcontinent. Reworking the source text, Mann brilliantly subverts the then existent notion of the superiority of the Aryan race and inferiority of the Dravidians. The conglomeration of Aryan and Dravidian race is depicted throughout the novella which is also reflected in the nomenclature as well as the description of the characters, particularly Nanda. Anand Mahadevan points out that “the dark-skinned, sexy cowherd god whose playful antics drive women crazy with desire also serves to remind that, like Nanda, Krishna is a god of the Dravidian people incorporated into the later Hindu pantheon” (Mahadevan 28). The name Nanda itself is reminiscent of the surrogate father of Krishna who is the cowherd Yadava chief. Thus, “Nanda in Mann’s *The Transposed Heads* functions as the Aryanized divine seducer, Krishna’s mortal counterpart” (Mahadevan 28).

Mann makes use of the *Bhagavata Purana* in the exposition of his novella to mark the intermingling of Aryan and Dravidian elements (Mahadevan 28). Before the duo’s encounter with Sita, they discuss an incident at the village that marked the displacement of the tradition of worshipping Indra, King of the Aryan gods, replacing it with the worship of the lands and the mountain, Bright Peak. In the *Bhagavat Purana*, it is Krishna who effected the worship of land and mountain, triggering Lord Indra to cause a torrential downpour destroying the village, but in Mann’s tale it is, subversively, the Brahmin Shridhaman, who proposes the worship of the mountain, instead of Nanda who is actually the counterpart of Krishna (Mahadevan 28).

The exposition of *Hayavadana* is entirely different from that of Mann’s novella. *Hayavadana* commences by invoking Lord Ganesha in the folk drama tradition and Bhagavata sings the benedictory verse in praise of Ganesha, who is established as the presiding deity manifesting the very idea that the play intends to establish and convey; the idea of “completeness” which is incomprehensible to humans (Kaur 362). Then Bhagavata starts to narrate the tale of Devadutta and Kapila. Karnad, like Mann, introduces the two heroes in the exposition of the play itself, through the narrator Bhagavata who describes them as:

One is Devadutta. Comely in appearance, fair in colour, unrivalled in intelligence . . . Having felled the mightiest pundits of the kingdom in debates on logic and love, having blinded the greatest poets of the world with his poetry and wit, Devadutta is as it were the apple of every eye in Dharmapura. The other youth is Kapila . . . He is dark and plain to look at, yet in deeds which require drive and daring, in dancing, in strength and in the physical skills he has no equal. (2)

Bhagavata is suddenly interrupted by one of the actors who is terrified on seeing “Hayavadana, who has a man’s body but a horse’s head” (5). Karnad introduces the subplot of the character Hayavadana, who reveals to Bhagavata the story behind his birth. This subplot is a significant contrary element that distinguishes Karnad’s play from Mann’s novella. While Mann tries to subvert the notion of the supremacy of the Aryan race over the Dravidian, Karnad pays due respect to Mann’s intention, by drawing from the *Yakshagana*, which is the Dravidian theatre “for the lower classes” rather than collaborating with the “*natak* companies for the rich” (Mahadevan 36).

The inciting incident of both the works, at the temple of Kali where both the pair of characters of *The Transposed Heads* and *Hayavadana* decapitate their heads are almost similar, with minute differences. While Mann’s characters travel to visit Sita’s parents, the trio in *Hayavadana* go attend the Ujjain fair. The whole episode of “beheading,” too has contrasts. While in *The Transposed Heads*, Shridhaman beheads himself in a fit of religious fervour thereby freeing Sita, Padmini and Kapila in *Hayavadana*, visit the temple of Lord Indra while Devadutta is in the Kali temple and pleads for forgiveness for having forgotten his promise to the Goddess. Devadutta suddenly beheads himself while he had actually promised to sacrifice his head to Lord Indra and two arms to Kali (Karnad 14,29).

The rising action of both the texts incur complications once Sita/ Padmini transposes the heads of the two friends. Here there is the interaction of the mortal and immortal; between Sita/Padmini and the Goddess Kali. By introducing the aggressive form of Parvati, both Mann and Karnad subvert the stereotypes of femininity that are established in the patriarchal society, and through Goddess Kali, they both establish agency and power for their female characters Sita and Padmini who break away from the set framework of “a docile wife.” Mann’s Sita is entirely in contrast with the epitome of the “spousified” goddess of *Ramayana* (Mahadevan 31). Likewise, Karnad’s Padmini is not the usual symbol of fidelity, loyalty and docility in a wife.

The climax of Mann's novella and Karnad's play is similar, as the friends kill each other to end the confusion or rivalry, and both the heroines perform Sati. But Karnad's Padmini tries to secure the life of her son:

Padmini: My son is sleeping in the hut. Take him under your care. Give him to the hunters who live in this forest and tell them it's Kapila's son. They loved Kapila and will bring the child up. Let the child grow up in the forest with the rivers and the trees. When he's five take him to the Revered Brahmin Vidyasagara of Dharmapura. Tell him it's Devadutta's son. (Karnad 62)

On the contrary, Mann's Sita never bothered about her son Andhaka and the child had to fire the funeral pyre of his father and father's friend.

The falling action or denouement of both the works do differ. In *The Transposed Heads*, Samadhi (Andhaka) is left alone:

But the little fruit of her womb, Samadhi, who was soon called nothing but Andhaka, he prospered upon earth. He enjoyed fame and favour as the son of a monument-widow, and that to was added a love called forth by his increasing beauty . . . His poor eyesight, far from being a handicap, kept him from living too much in the body's concerns and directed his head towards the things of mind . . . At the youthful age of twenty he was already reader to the King of Benares. (Mann 158-159)

On the contrary, in the denouement of *Hayavadana*, Hayavadana who returns from the temple of Kali, being transformed into a complete horse, but with a human voice, gains horse neigh and becomes a complete being. Bhagavata asks one of the actors to inform Vidyasagara of the arrival of his grandson on a great horse and thanks Lord Ganesha for the successful performance of the play.

The resolution in both the texts show both Andhaka and the boy of Padmini, as victims of a weird love triangle that culminate in the death of the trio in both the works, and as time progressed, they attain completeness both in intellect and strength. Karnad's subplot too culminates on a positive note, as a complete form is achieved by Hayavadana who now no longer can be identified with the meaning of his name.

Both Mann and Karnad have tried to convey the message of the source story "The Heads that got Transposed" from *Kathāsaritsāgara*. While Mann tries to subvert the notion of Aryan supremacy over the Dravidians, Karnad's "*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” (Kaur 364). Thus, intersemiotic translation has enabled the transformation of a short Brahmin parable into an ironic German novella, which returns later to India as folk theatre.

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