Indian Myth in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*

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On Defining Myth

Generally, a myth is a tale or a narrative with a symbolic meaning. Human, non – human and super-human characters appear in myths. And the presence of these super-natural agencies endows myth with a numinous character. Likewise, as these characters are transcendent, they raise 'awe and fear' in us (Barthes 1957).

Myths are considered to be pre-historical, and, therefore, they belong to no specific author. They have a social or collective authorship. The most remarkable characteristic of myth is its normative nature. It sets down rules which specifically
apply to the moral realm (Chakravartee 1991).

Myths and Moral Problems in Karnad's Plays

Karnad's plays take up the moral problems that are left unresolved in myths, legends and folktales. In Karnad's opinion, myths and legends have an enduring significance, for they thematize fundamental human obsessions. Their logical conclusions are often open-ended, leaving immense scope for reworking the whole story and arguing out a moral, philosophical or psychological point.

It has to be underlined that Karnad has probed our rich heritage for his source materials. He believes that there are plots in our mythology and folklore that are in themselves very

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11 : 6 June 2011
S. Krishnamoorthy, M.A., M.Phil. and K. S. Thirunavukkarsu, Ph.D.
Indian Myth in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*   164

dramatic and which lend themselves to adaptation on the stage. What he does in his plays is to examine ancient myths in the light of contemporary realities so that they are made meaningful and relevant.

Hayavadana – Reshaping a Myth

In *Hayavadana,* Karnad re-shapes an ancient Indian myth from the *veralapanchavimsati* to point to man's eternal quest for completeness, or self-realization. With its highly stylized action and mimicry, especially the scene at the temple of *Kali* and the sword fight between Devadatta and Kapila in the second act, Karnad invests the play with a significance, which brings out the emptiness of the "incomplete" human being.

Padmini – An Archetypal Figure

In this play, the central figure is a woman, Padmini. Selfishness and sensuality find expression in her insatiable desire for both brain and brawn, which are symbolized by Devadatta and Kapila respectively. Married to Devadatta, Padmini craves for the 'muscle' and 'body' of Kapila.

In the myth, and in the play as well, the craving is not explicit, it runs as an undercurrent in Padmini's sub-conscious. She desires deeply for both the body and the intellect, though sub-consciously. It is difficult to prophesy whether or not she would have behaved differently had there been a proper equation of physical strength and intellectualism in either Devadatta or Kapila. The happenings in the Kali temple, where she transposes the heads of Devadatta and Kapila, reveal her sub- conscious desire. Padmini's act, though unintentional, is indicative of the 'incomplete' human beings' silent cry for 'wholeness.'

Reconstructing Fractured Self into a Composite Whole

In other words, the re-enactment of the ancient myth in *Hayavadana* aims at the transformation of the fractured self into a composite whole. It has to be underlined that the transposition of heads, fails to solve Padmini's problem of identity, which is at bottom a universal human problem of *Who am I ? What am I?*

Padmini's desires are not stated explicitly even after the transposition of heads. The tension between moral right and wrong pervades her whole being. Immediately after finding out what she had done hastily and unintentionally, although she actually desires for Kapila's body, she is in utter confusion: "*What have I done? What have I done? What should I do? Mother-mother!*"

The myth in the words of the Bhagavata offers the solution to Padmini's predicament: "As the Heavenly *Kalpa vriksha* is supreme among trees, so is the head among human limbs. Therefore the man with Devadatta's head is indeed Devadatta and he is the rightful husband of Padmini's". Thus the tale of the *Vetalapanchavimsati* acts as a metaphor for Karnad's narration of the psychological predicament of the modern man bound by social and moral norms and inhibitions.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
11 : 6 June 2011
S. Krishnamoorthy, M.A., M.Phil. and K. S. Thirunavukkarsu, Ph.D.
Indian Myth in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*   165

Karnad's Creative Intervention into Myths

Karnad does not take myths in their entirety. He takes them only in parts that are useful to him and the rest he supplements with his imagination. He combines the story of the transposed heads taken from Thomas Mann with the story of Hayavadana which is, in part, Karnad's own imagination and invention.

While making use of an ancient myth, Karnad makes certain changes in the original myth. For example, he has changed the names of characters. He remarked that he had changed the names deliberately, for he wanted the names to be 'generic' terms applying to all human beings, because the characters are all types. "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 Vatsayana's *Kamasutra*" (Bernett 1982).

Karnad's Preference for the Non-religious Dimension of Myths

Although, in Indian context, most myths are related to religion, Karnad is interested in the non-religious dimension of myths. Most myths have a strong emotional significance and the audiences have set responses towards them. Karnad re-interprets these myths from a non-religious dimension and exploits their inherent potential to arouse and sustain human emotions (Revathi Rangan, 1997).

Complex-seeing as the Goal

Borrowing a phrase from Bertolt Brecht, Karnad writes that the use of myths and folk techniques allows for "complex-seeing." Although the myths have traditional and religious sanction, they have the means of questioning these values. Karnad believes that the various folk conventions like the chorus, the music, the mixing of human and non-human worlds permit a simultaneous presentation of alternate points of view.

Thus, an ancient myth acquires new dimensions in the creative hands of Karnad, and the play throws up diverse meanings. As M. K. Naik writes, "*Hayavadana* presents the typical existential anguish, but does not stop at the existential despair" (Naik 1968).

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com
11 : 6 June 2011
S. Krishnamoorthy, M.A., M.Phil. and K. S. Thirunavukkarsu, Ph.D.
Indian Myth in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*   166

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com
11 : 6 June 2011
S. Krishnamoorthy, M.A., M.Phil. and K. S. Thirunavukkarsu, Ph.D.
Indian Myth in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*   167