Myth Revived in *Hayavadana*

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Use of Indian Mythology and Its Adaptation

Karnad's adaptations of myths and legends in his plays are more an act of impulse rather than intention. Karnad himself says in his "Introduction" to *Three Plays*: "The myth had enabled me to articulate to myself a set of values that I had been unable to arrive at rationally" (TP 11).

Though Karnad makes use of Indian mythology, he does not take them in their entirely. He takes them only in parts that are useful to him and the rest he supplements with his imagination. Thus the story in the main plot of *Hayavadana*, as Dhanavel remarks, "… gives expression to the Indian imagination in its richest colours and profound meanings" (9). In his 'Note' to *Hayavadana,* Karnad unambiguously states:

… the central episode in the play, the story of Devadatta and Kapila is based on a tale from the *Kathasaritsagara*, but I have drawn heavily on Thomas Mann's reworking of the tale in *The Transposed Heads …* (TP 68)

In his "Introduction" to *Hayavadana*, Kirtinath Kurtkoti writes: "The source of the plot of *Hayavadana* comes from *Kathasaritsagara*, an ancient collection of stories in Sanskrit". (11)

Vetala Panchavimsati and Somdeva's *Brihat Kathasaritsagara* basically relate the same tale of the transposition of heads. Only certain characters and places have been given fresh names in the latter.

The Story

In both these works, the story runs thus:

In a temple in the city of Shobhavati, through the favour of Goddess Gauri, Prince Dhavala marries Madanasundari, the daughter of the king named Suddapata. Svetapatta, Suddhapata's son, one day proceeds to his own country along with his sister and her husband. On the way they come across another temple of Goddess Gauri. Dhavala goes into the temple to pay homage to the Goddess. There he happens to see a sword, gets obsessed to offer his head to the goddess and does the same. When he does not return for long, Svetapata enters the temple and gets stunned to see Dhavala dead and his head presented to Goddess Gauri. Through some irresistible urge he also cuts off his head and presents it to the Goddess.

After waiting for a long time for her husband and her brother, Madanasundari goes in to beg something of her. She requests the Goddess to restore her husband and her brother. Hearing this Goddess Gauri asks her to

set their heads on their shoulders. But out of excitement Madanasundari puts the head of her husband on the body of her brother and that of her brother on the body of her husband. Both of them come back to life as such.

Madanasundari then realizes her mistake, but what has been done cannot be undone. At this stage Vetala asks Vikram, 'Who is Madanasundari's husband, the man with her husband's head, or the man with her husband's body?' The King's reply is that the person with Dhavala's head on his shoulders is the husband.

In the 'Vetala story' the problem seems to have been solved thus, but in Karnad's *Hayavadana*, the problem begins from this point.

Thomas Mann's Reworking of the Story

The same story has been retold by Thomas Mann in *The Transposed Heads*, which Karnad revives to create his *Hayavadana*. *The Transposed Heads* is about Shridaman and Nanda who are very intimate friends. The former is a Brahmin by birth and the latter is a cow-herd and blacksmith. Shridhaman falls in love with Sita whom he happens to see when he and Nanda are travelling together. He asks Nanda to act as a messenger between him and Sita. First, he laughs at the idea, but for the sake of his friend Nanda agrees to do so. Sita consents to the proposal and marries Shridaman. After sometime, when they (the couple), accompanied by Nanda, are travelling through the forests so as to reach the house of Sita's parents, they lose track. Finding a temple of Kali they take shelter for the night.

Shridaman goes into the temple, sees the Goddess and under some unknown influences cuts off his head and offers it to Kali. Waiting long for Shridaman's return Nanda comes out in search of his friend, goes into the same temple and finds him dead. Out of fear of being accused with the

murder of his friend for the sake of Sita whom he also loves, Nanda kills himself too. When Sita finds both Shridaman and Nanda missing, she reaches the inside of the temple, sees the situation and prepares to put an end to her life. Preventing her from doing so, Goddess Kali appears before her and asks her to beg what she wants. Sita demands of her to fix the heads on their bodies. Sita out of her excitement puts the head of Shridaman on the body of Nanda and that of Nanda's on Shridaman. Both of them are restored to life to create a great problem to Sita to decide who her husband is: the man with Shridaman's head or the one with his body? They seek the advice of sage Kandaman who gives the verdict in favour of Shridaman's head. The man with Nanda's head and Shridaman's body becomes a hermit. Shridaman and Sita live together and she gives birth to a boy baby and named Andhak. After some times Sita suddenly decides to see Nanda, and she, taking her son, reaches Nanda. She spends the day and the night in his company. The next morning Shridaman reaches the place where Sita and Nanda are enjoying heavenly bliss. He challenges Nanda. They fight and kill each other. Sita performs 'Sati' on the funeral pyre of her husband and her friend, Andhak is left behind with improved social recognition as Sati's son.

In *Hayavadana* Karnad projects the story of the transposition of heads through characters with different names and identities. The sub-plot of Hayavadana is purely his own invention which adds to the total impression and significance of the play. Kurtkoti says:

> The sub-plot of Hayavadana, the horse-man, deepens the significance of the main theme of incompleteness by treating it on a different plane. The horse-man's search for completeness ends comically, with his becoming a complete horse. The animal body triumphs over what is

considered to be best in man, 'the uttamanga', the human head (102).

Using Myth to Portray Modern Man's Anguish and Dilemma

Karnad delves deep into the traditional myths to spell out modern man's anguish and dilemma. By his effective use of the myths, legends and stories he interprets the age-old human situation with reference to contemporary experience. In *Hayavadana*, he seems to play with the theme of incompleteness through Padmini's strong quest for unattainable perfection.

According to Chakravartee:

> … in *Hayavadana*, the theme of the play is an old one --- man's yearning for completeness, for perfection. It is this yearning which makes people restless in their ordinary existence and makes them reach out for extraordinary things… (37)

Karnad's *Hayavadana*

Karnad's *Hayavadana* opens with the projection of the myth of Lord Ganesha who himself being an 'embodiment of imperfection', of incompleteness', is worshipped as the destroyer of incompleteness. The Bhagavata sings verses in praise of Ganesha, accompanied by his musicians:

> O Elephant headed Herambha whose flag is victory and who shines like a thousand suns, O husband of Riddhi and Siddhi, seated on a mouse and decorated with a snake O single-tusked destroyer of incompleteness… (TP 73).

The Central Theme – Completeness and Incompleteness

The Central theme of incompleteness is foreshadowed in Bhagavata's worship. Karnad is seized of the theme of incompleteness and depicts the protagonist Padmini's yearning for completeness and perfection. K. Narasimhamurthy writes:

> *Hayavadana* is a Brechtian kind of play employing native folk theatre strategies to present through a folk tale man's tragically futile aspiration for perfection (81).

Superficial and Deeper Levels - Psychological Thrust

There is a covert suggestion that women are mainfestations of 'divine energy' or 'life force' and it is they who hold the centre stage. Into the basic fabric of the stories which he has taken from myths, Karnad weaves new patterns. In *Hayavadana*, the thrust is made more psychological, and thereby the mythic content of the transposed heads is given a turn of the screw.

On the superficial level, it is the tale of three lovers, Devadatta-Padmini-Kapila. Padmini who is initially very happy after her marriage with Devadatta, is gradually attracted by Kapila's strong physique. However, her inner urge must remain repressed and her fidelity as a good Hindu wife must never be in question. The irony lies in the fact that neither dramatist has ever taken strides beyond the basic story material.

It seems difficult to blame Padmini, the protagonist who yearns for completeness and perfection. She, in a state of paroxysm, attaches the heads to the wrong bodies. She is unnerved, by the sequence of events. It is not surprising that when she rushes to attach the severed heads as soon as her prayers are answered, she would commit such an error in the darkness of the temple. As soon as she realizes the mistake that is too late to mend, she cries repeatedly in helplessness and despair:

> What have I done? What have I done! What have I done?
> Mother Kali, Only you can save me now-only you can help
> me-what have I done? (TP 104)

Predicament and Partial Fulfillment

Whereas Devadatta and Kapila rejoice that they have now become one, Padmini realizes the complexity of the situation: Who would now be her husband? The three unfortunate seek the help of a rishi in search of a solution to their problem. The rishi, remembering perhaps what king Vikrama had said, gives the solution: "… the man with Devadatta's head is indeed Devadatta and he is the rightful husband of Padmini". (TP 110)

Not only is Padmini's desire for Kapila's body fulfilled, Kapila's body also finds the pleasure of joining with Padmini. It is demonstrated by Devadatta's (with Kapila's body) 'joyous dance and amatory utterance' (TP 111).

Ideal-Real Conflict, Nature-Culture Conflict

While such an incident is possible within the dramatic world of make-believe, everyone is aware that it is not possible in the everyday world. Society functions within the frame work of certain norms that have to be followed by all its members. If Padmini represents the erotic principle or the life force, her nature may not easily accept the curbs put on the instinctual urges.

Karnad's play refers to the complex human predicaments that can have no easy solutions. Mankind cannot bear too much reality. A myth helps to dramatize the ideal-real conflict, or the nature-culture conflict.

Padmini is enabled with the opportunity of having the best of the two men, Devadatta's head and Kapila's body. This extraordinary situation helps Padmini to breach the moral codes framed by society. She wants Devadatta's mind and Kapila's body while the society forces her to seek these qualities in one man. But since such a perfect man does not exist, she creates such a man by transposing the heads.

Thus, for a short while, she succeeds in having both brain and body, the spirit and flesh. "My celestial bodied Gandharva…my sun-faced Indra". (TP 111) She is overjoyed to have her 'Fabulous body – fabulous brain– fabulous Devadatta's (TP 113), and so is her revived husband. Kapila retires to the deep forest with his friend's body.

Psychological Problem Still Remains

Though the moral problem of identity crisis is solved, the psychological problem remains. Further biological transformations take place in both Devadatta and Kapila, as they reach their former self of distinct head and body. Gradually Padmini's disenchanted with her transposed husband. In fact, she speaks to Devadatta about the increasing loss of Kapila's vitality in him. He brushes aside the question but she becomes obsessed with the memories of Kapila.

Karnad has significantly introduced the two dolls to express effectively the feelings of Padmini.

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. It's loose… (TP 116).

The Question of *'Artha' 'Kama'*, *'Dharma'* and *'Moksha'*

Padmini once again finds herself in a predicament. The urge in her, to find a complete being as a partner, motivates her actions. She goes again in search of Kapila. In the framework of these emotions related to '*artha'* and '*Kama',* the playwright raises questions about '*dharma'* and '*moksha'*.

The four '*purusharthas'* (values/goals of life): *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha* play a significant role in various degrees and become either intrinsic or instrumental to the causation of action and effect in myths and tales. The play presents the conflict between the *adhama* and the *Uttama* values. *Artha* and *kama* considered as lower values are termed *adhama* while *dharma* and *moksha* are considered *Uttama* or higher values.

Padmini's dilemma of choice between Devadatta and Kapila is akin to such a movement. It is the ever-present existential conflict of a human mind to overcome pain and suffering that leads to the gradual movements of *adhama* towards *Uttama*. On the one hand, the human mind reveals itself as rational and self-conscious, while on the other hand it exhibits characteristics that are animal-like and instinctive. Human reasoning and instinct go together; whereas in other creatures, instinct is the only motivation of their choice. Although there is in both man and the beast the instinct to be comfortable, it is only man who can reach out to the values of

dharma and *moksha*, 'Reason', a specific and a special characteristic of man, is also the cause of his pain and suffering.

In Pursuit of Perfection That Is Short-lived

The animal-like instinct in Padmini makes her go in search of Kapila inside the deep and dark forest; She finds him at last. She also takes her son along with her. At first Kapila is upset by Padmini's arrival; Kapila begs her to go back - "… I had buried all those faceless memories… Why should one tolerate this mad dance of incompleteness?" (TP 126)

But he accepts her to become a complete man as suggested by Padmini. However, their happiness is short-lived, as Devadatta comes after them to put an end to their unsettled triangular life. Devadatta and Kapila realize that they love Padmini deeply but cannot live together 'like the Pandavas and Draupadi' (TP 129) Hence they fight with each other and kill themselves. Padmini stands a mute spectator to this deadly fight because she also knows in her blood that they cannot live together. Inevitably, she enters the funeral pyre as a sati. The identity crises of Padmini, of Devadatta as well as of Kapila lead all of them to find liberation in fire. Their "mad dance of incompleteness" (TP 126) comes to an end.

Karnad strongly projects that Padmini needs 'a man of steel' (TP 90). Devadatta is not the man for her. Even the transposed Devadatta loses charm for her. The two men change to their 'original self' but Padmini remains in her primordial procreative self. Karnad examines the psychological and sociological identity of these characters but has no method to cure them. She hands over her son to the Bhagavata to whom she says:

Give him to the hunters who live in this forest and tell them it's Kapila's son…. When he's five take him to the revered Brahmin Vidyasagara of Dharmapur. Tell him it's Devatta's son (TP 131).

Even as she enters sati, Padmini is painfully aware of her identity crisis. She prays to her prototype:

Kali, mother of all nature, you must have your joke even now. Other women can die praying that they should get the same husband in all the lives to come. You haven't left me even that little consolation. (TP 131)

The Sub-plot

The tragic identity crisis of Padmini is presented in the main plot. The sub-plot unravels the comic identity crisis in Hayavadana. The identity crisis in Hayavadana, the horse-man of the sup-plot, is physically manifested as an objective correlative for Padmini, in a strange and distorted form. He has a horse's head on his human body. Hayavadana is strikingly similar to Lord Ganesha "who has an elephant's head on a human body, a broken tusk and cracked belly" (TP 73). Hayavadana's interference is as meaningful as that of the presence of Ganesha. For instance, Hayavadana is mistaken to have been put on a mask by the Bhagavatha, who soon realizes that" … this isn't mask. It's his real head" (TP 78). The mask is reality in the case of both Hayavadana and Ganesha. In contrast, the human beings exhibit no such correlation between physical appearance and reality.

Hayavadana

Hayavadana is the offspring of a celestial being in the form of a horse and the Princess of Karnataka. Not surprisingly then, he is born with a horse

head and a human body. Perhaps there is a biological association between male and head on the one hand, and female and body on the other. Such an association seems to be true in the case of Padmini's son who is as sulky and morose as his father but as lively and exuberant as his mother. Nevertheless, the sexual symbolism is obvious but it has a mythical base. After fifteen years of having the human love of the princess, the celestial father who had been cursed by the God Kubera to be born a horse for some act of misbehaviour becomes a celestial being again. He wants his wife to go with him to Heaven but she urges him to be the same horse. Disappointed, he curses her to be a horse and disappears. The cursed princess joins the horse family. Only Hayavadana is left alone to search his completeness. Not belonging to any group of his own in his problem of identity, he is more than compensated for that with his intelligence.

Despite the physical identity crisis and the sense of alienation, Hayavadana seems to be superior to all the major and minor characters in the play. The horse head appears to symbolize plain common sense. He asks intelligent questions and points to several loopholes in the individual and social systems. His actual problem seems to be that he is not adequately aware of his superior intelligence. As a result, he is carried away by the deceptive figure of a complete man and finally changed into a complete horse, but with human voice with the blessings of Goddess Kali. The dramatist emphasizes the way our desires are fraught with anxiety and lack proper articulation that often complicates the human situation further. "Mother, make me complete!" She said, 'so be it', and disappeared even before I could say 'Make me a complete man!' I became a horse!" (TP 136).

By a strange coincidence, finally Padmini's son, grave and unresponsive to human questions and requests, gladly responds to Hayavadana and sings a song that he had learnt from his mother. He even

laughs in the company of Hayavadana, who is apparently uncorrupted by avarice, greed, lust and human frailties.

Reconciliation – The Best Course

Karnad had plainly suggested that reconciliation with one's self and one's environment is the best course of action for the incomplete and insatiable human beings. For the attempts of persons to achieve completeness and perfections usually end tragically or comically. However, the pathetic and ludicrous results are caused by certain external agents who may be described as supernatural beings, for they stand for superstitious beliefs. An examination of the catalytic agents of transformations in *Hayavadana* points to Karnad's humanism and his valuable solution to the problem of human identity crisis.

The Supernatural

In *Hayavadana*, the elements of the supernatural play a significant role. The dramatist employs the conventions of folktales and motifs of folk theatre - masks, curtains, mime, songs, the narrator, dolls, horseman, the story within a story, facilitating a mixture of the human and non-human to create a magical world. It is a realm of incomplete individuals, magnanimous gods, vocal dolls and mute children, a world apathetic to the longings and frustrations, ecstasies and miseries of human beings.

Karnad begins his play with *nandi* (singing of benedictory verse) and concludes it with the *Bharatavakaya* (valedictory verse) recalling the tradition of ancient Sanskrit drama. The ritualistic invocation of Lord Ganesha, the elephant headed God in the *nandi* and the *Bharatavakaya* fulfill the traditional prescription and assume symbolic significance. The play revolves around the myth of Ganesha which operates at several levels.

Lord Ganesha, the embodiment of imperfection suggests a major development in the action as well as in the central theme of completeness of beings.

> The mythical figure of Lord Ganesha representing a perfect blend of three different worlds of experience – the divine, the human and the animal – becomes central within the frame of the sub plot too, since it foreshadows the character of Hayavadana. (Jacob 10)

Complex Seeing, Perception

Karnad says that the use of myths and folk techniques allow for 'complex seeing'. Although the myths have traditional and religious sanction, they pave the way for the questioning of human values.

The play reveals the essential ambiguity of human personality which is apparently shaped or shattered by the human environment. Fundamentally incomplete and imperfect, human beings search and yearn for attaining the unattainable ideal of completeness and perfection. They usually tend to seek the support of some supernatural beings or the other to succeed in their endeavor. However these external agencies, in their effort to help, seem to cause and complicate the identity crisis of the seekers further. It leads the seekers to tragic or comic ends. Padmini, for instance ruins herself and all her relations. Even the child that she leaves under the Bhagavata's care is not normal because of her own compulsions. Hayavadana, for another instance, does not bring destruction to himself as Padmini does, but suffers the drastic consequences of his search for completeness by going down the ladder of existence from man to horse.

Humans Need to Help Themselves

A close examination of Karnad's presentation of the supernatural beings, especially that of Kali, in *Hayavadana*, points to the playwright's suggestions that they cannot help human beings unless the latter help themselves by accepting the psychological limitations imposed by nature. The best solution for the problem of identity crisis then, according to Karnad, is reconciliation with one's own self and the environment.

Thus the myth requires new dimensions in the creative hands of Karnad, and the play unfolds rich strands of meaning. As M. K. Naik says:

> *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. (197)

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