ABSTRACT

Drama is a composite art in which the written word of the playwright is concretized when it becomes the spoken word of the actor on the stage. Indian drama written in English and translated in English by Indian playwrights has registered a remarkable growth recent decades. Contemporary Indian drama in English translation has made bold innovations and fruitful experiments in terms of both thematic concerns and technical virtuosities. It has been increasingly turning to history, legend, myth and folklore, tapping their springs of vitality and vocal cords of popularity with splendid results. Girish Karnad, Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar and Vijay Tendulkar have remained the most representative of the contemporary Indian drama not only in Hindi, Bengali, Marathi and Kannada respectively but also on the pan-Indian level. Among the major dramatists mentioned above, Girish Karnad has been regarded as the leading dramatist so far as the use of myth and history is concerned and his plays vividly represent this trend. In all his plays—mythical, historical or legendary—Karnad’s approach is modern. In his play, Hayavadana, he reinforces the central problem of human existence in a world of tangled relationships. In Hayavadana, he skillfully uses the principles and theme of Indian mythology, folk tales and folk theatre—masks, curtains, dolls, the story-within-a-story—to create a bizarre world of incomplete individuals, indifferent gods, dolls that speak and children who cannot—the world which appears to be indifferent to the desires and frustrations, joys and sorrows of human beings. In this paper an attempt has been made to study how successfully Karnad has used myth, folk tales and history to represent his theme in his play.

Key words- Indian Drama, mythology, legendary, folk tales, folk theatre, history.
In Indian literary history, myth and folklore have always kept prominent positions. The two epics Ramayana and Mahabharata as well as the Purana have been an unending resource for literature as well as plays. But after the advent of British rule, the themes of Indian Drama changed due to increased knowledge of the option of use of themes other than myth, and drama moved its concentration towards social and political themes. There was a reversal in this trend in a kind of secondary renaissance period when Indian dramatists turned once more to myth. In her essay “Folk Theatre Strategies in Hayavadana” Savita Goal says:

“their return to and discovery of tradition was inspired by a search for roots and a quest for identity. This was part of the whole process of decolonization of our life-style, values, social institutions, creative forms and cultural modes.”

Indian drama written in English and translated in English by Indian playwrights has registered a remarkable growth recent decades. Contemporary Indian drama in English translation has made bold innovations and fruitful experiments in terms of both thematic concerns and technical virtuosities. It has been increasingly turning to history, legend, myth and folklore, tapping their springs of vitality and vocal cords of popularity with splendid results. Girish Karnad, Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar and Vijay Tendulkar have remained the most representative of the contemporary Indian drama not only in Hindi, Bengali, Marathi and Kannada respectively but also on the pan-Indian level. Among the major dramatists mentioned above, Girish Karnad has been regarded as the leading dramatist so far as the use of myth and history is concerned and his plays vividly represent this trend.

Girish Karnad has written eight plays in Kannada and translated four of them into English. The English plays are Tuglaq, Hayavadana, Naga-Mandala and Tale-Danda. He borrows his themes from history in Tuglaq and Tale-Danda, from myth in Hayavadana and from folklore in Naga-Mandala. He makes uses of Yakshagana bayalata, a Kannada folk-theatre, in Hayavadana. In all his plays- be mythical, historical or legendary – Karnad’s approach is modern. In his play, Hayavadana, he reinforces the central problem of human existence in a world of tangled relationships.

A Man’s search for his own self among a web of complex relationships, Girish Karnad’s Hayavadana was influenced by Thomas Mann’s The Transposed Heads, which in turn is borrowed from one of the Sanskrit Kathasaritasagara stories. While the Sanskrit tale poses a moral riddle, Mann uses it to question the logic that holds the head superior to the body. Karnad builds on Mann’s line to explore the theme of identity in a world of confused relationships. The play aims at demystification of traditional values and concepts and presents multiple viewpoints that promote a dialogue on the basic accepted tenets of life. This is enhanced by the merging of three levels of experience – the divine, human and animal and the bringing together of the animate and the inanimate on a common plane.

Culture defines society and Karnad’s plays are a reflection of the culture in our society. Focusing on our folk culture, he takes inspiration from mythology and folklore. With Hayavadana, Karnad has taken us back to the myths and legends of the Hindu religion. In the essay “A Re-reading of Girish Karnad’s Plays with Reference to Myth and Folktale” Veena Noble Dass says:

“Hayavadana is based on Indian myth. The’ play tells a story embellished with the harsh truths of life and the incongruities of our existence capsule in fantasy. It is simultaneously a
story, a social satire and the psychological study of a woman. It is a comment on blind faith devoid of any reason.”  

Rangan’s characterization of folk imagination and folk play and their interplay with magic is easily applicable to Karnad’s plays:

“Folk imagination is at once mythopoeic and magical. In the folk mind, one subsumes the other. Folk belief, besides being naïve, has a touch of poetry about it which works towards a psychic adjustment. All folklore is religious, often based on animism because the primitive imagination extends its vision from the natural, in which it is steeped and with which it is saturated, to the supernatural, which to the folk mind is only an extension of the former.”

The main plot of the play begins with Kapila, who finds his best friend Devadatta despondently dreaming about Padmini. Kapila, who is a Kshatriya, is a wrestler whereas Devadatta is a learned Brahmin and poet but is physically weak. Kapila goes to arrange Devadatta’s marriage to her and realizes that Padmini is as clever as she is beautiful. Although Kapila is attracted to her, he arranges the match, and Devadatta and Padmini are married.

After the wedding, Padmini finds herself getting attracted to the strong-bodied Kapila, and Devadatta is consumed by jealousy. A few months into the marriage, the three travel to Ujjain. On the way, they rest between two temples, one devoted to Rudra (The Howler-a form of Shiva) and the other to Kali. Devadatta decided to offer himself to Kali, but Kapila too is not left behind. The two men behead themselves in the Kali temple. The pregnant Padmini, afraid that she might be blamed for their deaths, then decides to kill herself. However, Kali stops her and offers to bring the men back to life. Padmini rearranges the heads so that Devadatta’s head is on Kapila’s body and vice versa and asks the goddess to do her magic.

Along with the central theme, there is a sub-plot wherein Hayavadana (the horse-man) reflects incompleteness. With the face of a horse and the body of a man, Hayavadana, the off-spring of a celestial being and a princess, loathes and wants to rid of the horse’s head and longs to be a complete man. He is symbolic of the identity crisis we face today. Karnad implores Existentialism by intensifying the motif of incompleteness by a broken tusk and a cracked belly - which other way you look at him he seems the embodiment of imperfection, of incompletion.

Karnad reveals the religious sentiments prevalent in our society, psychology and culture by showing the presence of Goddess Kali. Hayavadana begins with an invocation of Lord Ganesha, who is generally worshipped first among the gods. In the beginning, Devadatta worships Kali in order to win Padmini’s hand for marriage. Later in the course of time, he offers himself to the goddess by beheading himself and his friend Kapila follows suit. The Hindu rituals and superstitions are very well portrayed by showing people offering themselves to Kali. This was a practice that was followed a few decades back. Now people offer goats and animals to Goddess Kali, who is also known as the goddess of Destruction. The theme also reveals the Upanishad principle that visualizes the human body as a symbol of the organic relationship of the parts to the whole.

Hayavadana deals most explicitly with the question of human selfhood beyond our everyday socially constructed identities. Karnad shows that while identity depends on the materialism of the mind/body, it also extends beyond this to include witnessing consciousness. In trying to identify solely with mind and body, both of which are essentially physical, the characters end up feeling confused and frustrated. In taking the audience toward a sense of completion, Hayavadana illustrates that while a mystery in terms of theoretical understanding, completion can be known through direct experience. He has used various forms of folk tradition in his plays like Hayavadana and
Naga-Mangala to reinforce the central problem of human existence. Very artistically, Karnad interconnects the subplot of Hayavadana’s desperate search for completeness with that of Devadatta, Padmini and Kapila in the main plot.

Karnad makes a selection of myths/folktales relevant and suitable for his dramatic purpose and strips off their spatio-temporal bearings. His mythical characters emerge as archetypes, manifestations of general human characteristics, placed in a contemporary context and dealing with contemporary situations. He chooses events/episodes from Indian mythology to question their values and relevance in the present context. Commenting on the use of techniques of the classical and folk theatre of India, Karnad says,

“The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means ofquestioning these values, of making them literally stand on their head.”

Girish Karnad has been regarded as the leading dramatist so far as the use of myth and history is concerned. With his artistic skill, he combines myth and reality, past and present and portrays the complexities of the modern life. The Karnad drama focuses on the complexity of human relationship and contains an indirect critique of modern Indian society. In each of his play, beneath a legendary/mythical or historical story, one can notice “subtle and constant juxtaposition of the past and present” which has been “a common feature of Karnad’s dramatic art.”

As is the practice in other dramatic forms in India, every Yakshagana performance too begins with a host of preliminary rites. The play Hayavadana begins with the invocation of Lord Ganesha in the folk drama tradition. A mask of Ganesha is placed on a chair in the centre of the stage. The opening narration of Bhagavata not only quickly introduces the characters, the background and the essential rudiments of the plot, but also the central dilemma of the play which is Padmini’s dissatisfaction with human limitedness. Even before the characters of the main plot appear, Bhagavata has disclosed the tragic outcome – the inevitable death of Devadatta and Kapila. Bhagavata who is an avatar of the Sutradhar in ancient Sanskrit drama opens the play with the offering of worship accompanied by signs to the God Ganesha, for ritual worship, for the God with his human body and animal head aptly suggests a major development in the action as well as the central of completeness of being. In choosing to open with Ganesh Puja, a ritual found both in classical and folk drama, the dramatist shows both his non-western approach to theatrical activity. In his prayer to Ganesha Bhagavata stresses the point of completion of being:

“This Mangalamoorthy intends to signify his very appearance that the completeness of God is something no poor mortal can comprehend.”

While Pooja is done, the Bhagavata sings the benedictory verse in praise of Ganesha with musical accompaniment. In Karnad this ritual invocation seems rich in connotations most appropriate to the thematic and structural unity of the play. Ganesha is established at the presiding deity not just as per convention, he is, in fact, the embodiment of the very idea the play chooses to discuss. Ganesha symbolizes the concepts of completeness and incompleteness. There is also the suggestion thrown in at the very beginning that the idea of totally of being is best left to the gods, it is a goal beyond human comprehension and knowledge. After the introduction of the subplot, the Bhagavata once again picks up the thread of the main story. He reveals the love triangle even before the three characters are presented on stage:
“Two friends there were – one mind, one heart. They saw a girl and forgot themselves. But they could not understand the song she sang.”

Karnad also uses dolls to describe subconscious images and dreams that cannot be represented visually. The dolls—a child’s discarded playthings, tattle and chuckle like scandalized crones as they look into and describe Padmini’s dreams about Kapila. In so doing, they prepare the audience for her action later in the play.

In Hayavadana, the presence of goddess Kali reveals the religious sentiment prevalent in Indian society, culture and psychology. Devadutta prays to the goddess to win the hand of Padmini in marriage. Later he beheads himself as an offering to the goddess. Divine intervention unfolds the central theme of the play, ‘incompleteness’ and quest for completion. The theme also reveals the Upanishadic principle that visualizes the human body as a symbol of the organic relationship of the parts to the whole. Religion and ritual not only forms a part of the narrative of Karnad’s plays but is also integral to the dramatic representation of the plays, a take-off of the folk theatrical tradition of the country.

In Hayavadana, Karnadmocks at the religious beliefs and practices. He boldly questions all the outdated practices and traditional mindset. This is best conveyed in Hayavadana’s visits to different religious places to achieve perfection. As Hayavadana says: “Banaras, Rameshwar, Gokarn, Haridwar – Dargah of Khwaja, Yusuf Baba, the Grotto of our Virgin Mary – I’ve tried them all. Magicians, mendicants -- saints and sadhus – I’ve covered them all.” Here, Karnad makes fun of the Indian belief that we can obtain anything if we visit such holy places as mentioned above. Through ironic presentation of Hayavadana’s endeavours to be a complete man, Karnad criticizes the Hindu concept of gods and goddesses. In this context, Mohit Ray rightly puts it:

“The demystification & religious beliefs and practices -- which must be seen as a reflection of modern sensibility – is at its highest in Hayavadana.”

Socio-Cultural practices like Sati, Varna and the Patriarchial moral codes are portrayed with remarkable clarity and precision by the playwright in plays Yayati, Nagamandala, Tale-Danda, The Fire and the Rain, etc. The Bhagavata thus says in Hayavadana, ”...Padmini became a sati. India is known for its pativratas, wives who dedicated their whole existence to the service of their husbands.”

Karnad has very successfully employed the folk drama form in Hayavadana to present the perennial problem of identity and search for completeness. He reveals the impact of Brecht’s theatrical teachings on him especially with regard to his use of indigenous dramatic forms. Karnad comments,

“I read the basic Western canon – the Greek plays, Shakespeare, Shaw, O’ Neill, Anouilh, Brecht, Beckett, Sartre, Camus. Brecht’s technique influenced me a great deal in the earlier years.”

An old story gives the dramatist the opportunity to elaborate his thesis to focus on a hitherto unnoticed aspect. The dramatist is able to expose outdated notions and in the process create a contemporary consciousness. Karnad recognizes such a principle and uses familiar tales in all his plays. Hayavadana most effectively subverts the accepted notion of the superiority of head over body, brain over brawn, while making a critique of futile and unreasonable human hopes and aspirations.
The quest for identity or the problem of identity forms a major part of Karnad’s thematic concerns. Hayavadana is concerned entirely with the question of “human identity in a world of tangled relationship.” Most of the characters in the play are haunted with the problem of identity. “The astonishing desire of Padmini and Princess of Karnataka along with the mixed identity of Kapila, Hayavadana and Devadatta baffle the audience.” Padmini’s act of transposition of the heads creates the identity crisis of Devadatta, Kapila and of her own. Her going back to Kapila and the fight between Devadatta and Kapila and her final sacrifice – all this creates an acute sense of identity crisis in her. It is Hayavadana who desperately struggles to know his ‘society.’ In the post-colonial society the identity crisis has become a major issue. As K. Rajendran observes,

“Mann’s version of the tale treats the spirit versus the flesh theme. Karnad handles the tale to relate the problem of identity. After the transposition of the heads, Devadatta and Kapila lose their individual identities. Padmini is torn between the two men. Her son becomes an orphan. He also becomes an alienated creature without a child’s privilege to laugh.”

Hayavadana is a bold experiment in dramatic technique and thematically rich play. the entire play is cast in the form of traditional Indian folk drama which took several features of the ancient Sanskrit drama, but adapted them to its own special needs as a popular form of art. The particular form of folk drama which Karnad has drawn upon is the Yakshagana of Karnataka, which means music of the heavenly Yaksha, but this form has much in common with traditional folk drama in other Indian languages also. About the thematic and technical strategies of Hayavadana, Veena Noble Dass says:

“Thus both in its thematic and technical strategies, Hayavadana is an innovative experiment that offers a new direction to modern Indian theatre. This experiment proves that the traditional form need not be treated as precious artifacts but can be adopted to treat modern themes suitable for the urban Indian audience.”

Girish Karnad makes use of myths, mythologies and folklore as his source for his plays, not for the glorification of the chosen myths but to relate the myths to the present and to the past beliefs found in these myths. Karnad provides us with a glimpse of the past as well as its relevance to an understanding of the contemporary world. In conclusion it can be said that myth and folktale merge and come together and weave a rich tapestry of meaning that explore the modern predicament. Myth can never be dismissed as belonging to the past, because a great deal of its charm lies in its principal quality - that of repeating itself. Thus the old-aged myth reappears in disguise form to confront us. Myths and folktales always interpret human life, and in the contemporary context they interpret modern sensibility or the modern consciousness. In this way by exploiting myth and folktale in Hayavadana, Karnad presents various problems of contemporary society.

References


7. Ibid. pp. 82.

8. Ibid. pp. 81.


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