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ROLE OF MYTH IN GIRISH KARNAD'S PLAYS

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Abstract:

Karnad was able to integrate the native way of life performance into the modern post-colonial playwriting in India.

. . . it is impossible to write the pleasurable embodiments we call performance without tangling with the cultural stories, traditions, and political contestations that comprise our sense of history. (George, C. Jacob.)

At any point of time, all performance carries a tinge of the customs, culture, history, and ethics of the land. Every performance stands as a window, to light the world, with the cultural practices which evolve as social practices with nativity. It is impracticable to detach performance from culture and tradition of the nation. Anthony D. Smith describes the role of history and culture in escalating the notion of nationalism as “historical ethno-symbolism”. Absorption of the folklore, myth and history of the nation into postcolonial theatre signals the restructuring of the nation’s traditional past. The present paper explores the historicity of the nation. A nation is built on and strengthened by the myths and memories of the past. The modern national distinctiveness is restored in each generation, from these essentials of myth, tradition, symbol and memory that as the nation copes with new challenge.

Key Words: Myth, Traditional and Modern, History, Post Modern colonial.

Indian Drama in English is soaring high making bold innovations and fruitful steps, progressively more of history, folklore, myth and legend striking the chord of life and recognition with ease., Moutushi Chakravartee observes:

A search for authentic 'Indian Theatre has begun ... This search had two distinct features. It postulated a comparable if not uniform 'Indian' theatre. It also postulated a notion of theatre which is civilization-specific. It would be a theatre of Indian forms which would be completely understandable; it would also be theatre of 'Indian timeless content' which is not easily understandable (Deshpande, x).

The plays have been written in their native tongue and later translated into English by the authors themselves. These works cannot be called as fully English plays but though still can be viewed as such, as most of them are transcriptions rather than mere translations. Rabindranath Tagore, Mohan Rakesh, GirishKarnad and many more have set foot as representatives of Indian English Drama.

Karnad describes himself as the first generation playwrights after India got Independence. He has spent his childhood in Karnataka and grew up watching two types of theatres, touring productions or natak companies and the folk theatre performance called the Yakshagana. Karnad recognizes the role of the Natak Mandalis and says:

It may have something to do with the year that in the small town of Sirsi... Natak 'companies, would come, set up a stage, present a few plays... I loved going to see them and the magic has stayed with me. (Karnad, Three Plays, Vol.1, vi)

This explains how Karnad was able to integrate the native way of life performance into the modern post-colonial playwriting in India.

. . . it is impossible to write the pleasurable embodiments we call performance without tangling with the cultural stories, traditions, and political contestations that comprise our sense of history. (Goodman and Gay, 66)

Demonstration such as Myths, history and folklores echo the cultural tradition of India and are inherently connected to the performance traditions of Indian culture which also serve to remind the ancient, pre-modern and pre-colonial past. Myths are fictions about divine and heroic human negotiator of Indian culture. The mythic characters are very powerful with which the Indian mind has always been identified with and its presence is felt through different aspects in the Indian culture.

History signifies the verbal and printed account of lives, both pre-modern and modern times. Folktales are another set of illusory narratives. Folk Lore's often hint to the magical world of humans and animals of a place. Their charisma in postcolonial plays express "... the ubiquity of the past in the theatre of a new nation" (Phand. A.S., 168).

Karnad writes his plays in regional language and then translates them to English to make it popular worldwide. Historical works in recent outlook becomes supreme delight when Karnad emphasizes the existing issues creatively by taking up a historical subject and giving it a symbolical remark.

Karnad by compiling the three brilliant masterpieces due to his navigation through a vast and wide range of history has fabulously plugged the emptiness of glorious historical plays in Indian literature. The procession of history plays progress from *Tughlaq* (1964) to *Tale – Danda* (Death by Decapitation, 1990) and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (1997).

For Indians the pre-modern past is the part of real life experience. The Indian culture reflects through performance arts the myths like the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the national history, the affluent regional folklores and the very old ethnicity and mores. On the whole they cannot be adjudged as fabricated and their existence goes beyond the frontiers of myths, as Phand. A.S observes:

In India, the pre-modern past is not in itself either merely "invented" or merely "imagined": as the accumulation of the complex political, religious, social, and cultural formations of three millennia, it has an archival, textual, and cultural existence independent of its modern uses. (169)

History of English reveals that it has never shied at mixing or even borrowing. The growth of language and the variety of literature available in it is primarily due to its resilience and inherent charm. According to Srinivasa Iyengar, “Indian English is a child of the illegitimate marriage between British presence and Indian sensibility” (48). It will continue to be loved by Indians for its fine charms of expression and rich collection of vocabulary. Dr.Mulk Raj Anand had said that “English was the language of the intellectual make-up of many Indians” (49).

The origin of Indian drama may be considered to be Bharatha’s *NatyaShastra*, a complete work of dramaturgy produced in the 2nd century B.C. The plays written by Bhasha, Kalidasa and Sri Harsha served as models for the later modern Indian theatre both for practical uses and techniques.

In ancient days a drama was to be performed as an occasion of special rejoicing and solemnity such as a holy festival, a royal marriage or the celebration of victory. The aim of drama, according to Bharatha, and his successors is to enthrall and delight the spectators by an artistic representation of human emotions and passions. *NatyaShastra* gives us the minute details of Sanskrit tradition and theatre house. In the Indian drama, all acts open with a prelude in which we come to know about the author, his work, the dramatis personae and the details about the prior events. As Talekar observes,

Sutradhara is the producer – manager of Indian drama. He is the chief actor as well as the architect of the theatre. He holds the most important position in the entire scheme of the play. *NatyaShastra* was considered as the fifth Veda of the Hindus. (3)

It is widely known that Karnad is a multi-levelled personality. First and foremost, he is a playwright. Though devoted to drama, Karnad turned to other fields for earning a livelihood. In 1960, while still in Bombay, he received the prestigious ‘Rhodes scholarship’ to study at Oxford University Press, Madras as an assistant manager. His stay there proved him very fruitful. He could actively participate as an actor, playwright and a director. He could also publish his plays in English from Oxford, India. Later, he rose to the position of manager. He went to Pune as the Director of the Central Institute of Film and Television Technology at Pune in India. He did not leave the films or T.V either. Action,

Direction, Script writing all come as grist to his mill. He has held important administrative posts like the Chairmanship of 'SangeethNatakAkademi' and 'Children's Film Society'.

His contribution to Indian literature has brought an immense consideration. All his plays earned him immediate success, mainly because he has dealt and used many contemporary social issues. The people are very much interested and fascinated by watching and reading their own life. Karnad, Infact, has played a vital role in the life of people by pulling them out of their resolute conventions and introducing them to the modern sophisticated life with the radical change and development. He has borrowed some of his ideas from the old myth to make the plays effective and interesting. He takes up every sphere of one's life- especially the social and religious part where he deals with customs, practices and the life style of people. As Shyam Benegal observes,

He is a man of large presence far larger than his physical frame and his novelty; anyone can be caught by his charisma, the resonant voice, the persona and his dramatic flair.

(12)

Karnad's plays can be watched or read by every section of the society, as every section is being portrayed through the characters in his plays. If any author wishes that all his writings to be read everywhere, by everybody and at any situation then the writer must be certainly careful of his language which has to be simple as well as effective and particular to the point. This is what one can find in Karnad's plays. Karnad's language is very simple and lucid and he has a command over his language. Words are apt and well chosen. He is completely successful in communicating what he has in his mind. He is able to give the mood and feeling of characters. His style of writing is straight forward and creates a strong impression in the minds of the people. The standard of his language is to the level to be read not only in India but also by the readers outside India.

Karnad in his '*Hayavadana*' used the myths to project the theme of fundamental ambiguity of human life. He makes the play an interesting study of man's quest for a complete and wholesome experience of life. For this, he combines *The Transposed Heads* of Mann with Hayavadana story which is entirely Karnad's own invention. This is how Karnad makes use of a myth. He takes them only in parts and the rest he supplements with his imagination.

In other words, the mythic in *Hayavadana* aims at transformation of the fractured self into a composite whole. Hence the search motif becomes a metaphor for 'wholeness'. It is not important whether or not Karnad borrowed it (the plot) from Thomas Mann's re-telling of the story in *The Transposed Heads*. What is important is that the playwright succeeds in involving the audience in a play that is a metaphor for 'identity' in a world enmeshed with confusion and knotty relationships.

In *Hayavadana* language and style create an impression of absurdity. The prayer song in praise of Lord Ganesh and Bhagavata's long choric comment, written in clear and straight forward language, convey the feeling of irony, contradiction and absurdity which form an essential part in human life. Structurally, the play has three major frames: the main plot, the sub-plot, and as the folk tale has pointed out the incompleteness of the two plots the necessity of combining them together to make the play complete. If we take the theme of incompleteness as the major theme, we may find that the entire play is incomplete both structurally and thematically.

Karnad's use of the character Bhagavata contributes a lot to the formal aspects (achievement) of the play. He does not merely borrow the character of Bhagavata from a typical Yakshagana play. He increases the scope of the role by making the Bhagavata not a mere commentator – narrator but also by making him one of the characters. The scene between the Bhagavata and Kapila, before Padmini reaches Kapila's hut and the scene between the Bhagavata and Padmini when she prepares to perform 'Sati' are good examples of it. This helps him achieve in a play what Mann achieves in the story through the third person narrator. The supernatural, the Goddess Kali, is also used as a device. She is 'terrible' in appearance but is given all the characteristics of a human being. She is angry at the thought that Devadatta should promise his 'head' to Rudra and only his 'arms' to her. She is vexed when aroused from her sleep. Through the use of this device Karnad asserts that there are no ready - made solutions for human problems. The solution offered by the Goddess is no solution at all. She only does what she is asked to do and allows Padmini to carry on her mistake even when she has seen through Padmini's honesty. In short the problem is unresolved and will be solved only through human effort - by changing the relationships and concepts of relationships which can be done only by the human beings themselves.

One of the striking features of *Hayavadana* is the introduction of the device of making inanimate objects animate. This is a frequent feature in folk literature but not in folk drama. The device, also like the device of Bhagavata, helps Karnad to prove the psychological reality of the characters in the dramatic

form which was achieved through the narrator in Mann's story. He has used the female chorus which is absent in the Yakshagana play.

The ludicrous song given to the female chorus when Padmini performs "Sati" is striking. In addition to the song, the half curtains and painted curtains, verbalization of the situation through narration, the continuation of the action without any formal break-up of scenes, the total absence of the front curtain are all devices carefully used to create the effect of alienation.

The theme of the play *Hayavadana* is suggested in the play itself in phrases such as, "search for completeness" (11) and "this mad dance of incompleteness" (57). Karnad's handling of the sources of his plot in the play makes it clear that his interpretation of the ancient Indian myth differs substantially from his originals. It also indicates a bold attempt at investing an old legend with a new meaning which has an urgent relevance to present day thinking about man and his world. As Rajendran Paul rightly observes,

If Mann's aim was to stress the ironic impossibility of uniting perfectly the spirit and the flesh in human life, Karnad tries to pose existential ideas like the problem of being and the metaphysical anguish of the human condition. (82)

In addition to its thematic richness, *Hayavadana* is also a bold experiment in dramatic technique. The modernity of its theme is admirably matched by the antiquity of its dramatic model. The entire play is cast in the form of traditional Indian folk-drama which took several features of 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 but this form has much in common with traditional folk drama in other Indian languages also.

In *Havavadana*, Karnad has made use of the ancient myth and attempted to solve the problem of man's identity in a world of complicated relationships. Karnad does not use the myth merely to modernize the situation and characters to show their pertinence to our own day. He seeks to portray a new human reaction to basic situations. He has interpreted Padmini, a mythical character, as a modern woman. She is placed in an extreme situation when she has to love her husband and at the same time cannot control her desire for the strong body of Kapila. Her problem is a basic one. Karnad has presented this situation, having social dimensions in his mind. In an interview, he has mentioned,

I actually knew a woman who has fallen in love with a man but she was not exactly out of love with her husband. She was under tremendous stress and on the verge of a nervous breakdown. (37)

By making Padmini go against the moral law, Karnad presents a new human reaction to basic situations. Myth is a complex phenomenon. Every myth can yield several interpretations. Among the possible approaches, the existential interpretation of myth would seem to be of quite basic importance, for the question of finding an identity for him or of gaining a self-understanding would seem to be inherent in man's very mode of existence and to be more fundamental than questions about how things began. Through the existential interpretation of Padmini, Karnad has unlocked great areas of meaning and revealed the complexity of Man's self-understanding.

GirishKarnad's *Hayavadana*, explores the complex psychosocial dimension of the problem of human identity crisis, as different from the moral aspect of the Indian story and the philosophical purport of Mann's story, in both tangled and untangled relationships. The play reveals the essential ambiguity of human personality which is apparently shaped or shattered by the human environment.

Fundamentally incomplete and imperfect, the human beings search and strive for attaining the unattainable ideal of completeness and perfection. They usually tend to seek the assistance of some supernatural beings or the other to succeed in their endeavour. However these external agencies, in their effort to help, seem to cause and complicate the identity crisis of the seekers further, leading the latter to tragic and/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 compulsion.

Hayavadana, for another instance, does not destroy 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. A close examination of Karnad's presentation of the supernatural beings especially that of Kali, in *Hayavadana*, points to the playwright's atheistic learning's and suggests 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 Girish Karnad, is reconciliation with one's self and the environment.

By writing in Kannada and then translating his works into English, Karnad succeeds in surmounting at least to a certain extent, the cultural barrier posed by English; the discourse evolved is a superb example of adapting English to the texture of Indian folklore and myth. By the use of myths that have timeless

relevance and are a part of the consciousness of a people, Karnad's plays establish a contextual continuity with the best works in world literature. Thus the plays of Girish Raghunath Karnad are imbued with Social, Existentialism Feminism, and Elements of Myth.

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