

Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* : Debunking Religious Beliefs and Practices

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Abstract: Karnad is India's leading playwright and one of the most outstanding practitioners of performing arts.

His plays are steeped in Indian culture for the themes are taken from myths, legends, folktales; prove his debt to Hindu lineage and the rich heirlooms that Kannada folk lore has. In his plays one finds revealed nature of human consciousness – the cognitive life, the life of desire in a socio-cultural context. Like all cultural texts, *Hayavadana* is resonant with multi-layered social message. It revisions all eternal issues featuring in traditional Indian thought and literature:- man-woman relationship , virtue-sin, duty-desire, casteism, monogamy, Varna system, sati; and moreover demystification of religious beliefs and practices. In his plays Karnad did not leave any belief or practice unchallenged .He has questioned all kinds of superstitious and supernatural beliefs and practices , both secular and spiritual ,directly as well as indirectly.

Keywords: Culture, Myths, Folktales, Superstitions, Religious Beliefs and Practices.

Introduction: Girish Karnad, recipient of Gyanpith award is a living legend in the arena of contemporary Indian-English Drama. His journey from *Yayati* to *The Fire in the Rain* holds a mirror to the very evolution of Indian theatre during nearby four decades. Karnad is India's leading playwright and one of the most outstanding practitioners of performing arts. He is a playwright, actor critic and emissary of Indian art and culture. He is among the foremost media persons of our time. He accepts;

I have been fairly lucky in having a multi-pronged career. You know, I've been an actor, a publisher, a film-maker , But in none of these I felt quite as much at home as in playwriting.(
Karnad 362)

His five plays *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala*, *Tau-Danda* and *The Fire and the Rain* have been translated into English; the first two by Karnad himself. His plays are steeped in Indian culture for the themes are taken from myths, legends, folktales ; prove his debt to Hindu lineage and the rich heirlooms that Kannada folk lore has. In his plays one finds revealed nature of human consciousness – the cognitive life, the life of desire in a socio-cultural context.Like all cultural texts, *Hayavadana* is resonant with multi-layered social message. It revisions all eternal issues featuring in traditional Indian thought and literature:- man-woman relationship , virtue-sin, duty-desire, casteism, monogamy, Varna system, sati; and moreover demystification of religious beliefs and practices.

Hayavadana is based on a story from a collection of tales, Kathasaritsagar, that also appeared in the Sanskrit tale of Betal Pachchisi. Thomas Mann, fascinated by the metaphysical potential rewrote it as 'The Transposed Heads' Karnad's version of the same encloses in the story the episode of the Hayavadana, a horse-headman that derives its motif from Robinson Jeffer's *The Roanhorse*. The transcription of the tale into drama inscribes multitudes of metaphysical as well as psychological dimensions to the story. Its framework subsumes the most popular as well as obscure or even extinct classical, ethnic and rural conventions. Myths, legend, mimes, ballad, mask, magic, music, parable, puppetry; scores of stage effect intersect to construct the story of Hayavadana, a horse headman and the story of Padmini, Devdatta and Kapila.

Auboyer's intensive study in 'Daily Life in Ancient India' illuminates some interesting beliefs embedded in Hindu myths. Horse is considered to be a sacred animal- a benign spirit when it serves the king as a mascot. The God Vishnu incarnated himself in the form of a horse during the course of one of his descents (Avataras) into the world of man. Buddhism also has its divine horse in the person of *Bodhisattva*, "Batala" whose mission consisted in saving travelers in distress. The Hindu law of transmigration invested all animals with a migratory soul, supposed to have the same sensitivity as man and the same capacity to express it.

The Kali-motif in *Hayavadana* is representative of *Lila*, an important of semi-classical aesthetics in Vaishnava poetry, performance of Gods in dramatic enactment describes the term. Analogies of Krishna Lila appear in the form of Kalilika in *Hayavadana*. In drawing Padmini; the playwright takes an irretrievably compromised position of a man bound to patriarchal concept of womanhood. Padmini figures as a "court poet's muse-Vatsayana's symbol of erotic desire and titillation – a gender in a set of universal stereotypes". The audience in the semblance of courtiers find themselves assigned with the privilege of casting judgment on her actions and destiny. And through this Karnad has artistically portrayed before us the various social features or thinking pattern where a member is supposed to cast judgement on the other member of the society. One being scrutinized or criticized by all the other members even if they were not that related to the person itself.

Demystification of religious beliefs and practices is at its height in *Hayavadana*. First the incomplete and imperfect Lord Ganeshsa is exposed and then Hayavadana recounts his authentic experiences of wasteful pilgrimage that he had undertaken to all holy places, holy people, gods and goddesses. Tirupati comes in for special skepticism due to its celebrated hair offerings. In the beginning of the play a mask of Ganesha is brought on the stage. Pooja is performed Bhagavta's signs verses in the praise of Ganesha, the sings;

O single-tusked destroyer of incompleteness, we pay homage to you and start our play. (Karnad
136)

All the good actions begin with the prayer to Lord Ganesha but here the purpose of Girish Karnad is to initiate the theme of incompleteness from the beginning. Ganesha himself has an elephants head on a human body. Whichever way one looks, he seems the embodiment of imperfection; of incompleteness. Bhagvata asks, How indeed can one fathom the mystery thod this very Vakratunda-Mahakaya, with his crooked face and distorted body, is the Lord and Master of Success and Perfection ?

His prayer to the Goddess at Mount Chitrakoot brings him more trouble than he has suffered so far. Finally, he is turned into a complete horse. Thus, with the intervention of the supernatural beings Hayavadana's life proves to be disastrous. This ironic presentation of the divine intervention negates the need for gods and goddesses. Thus, Karnad suggests that it is better for human beings not to seek divine guidance because both the mediators and the divinities are sadistic and exploiters.

Of all the mythical and legendary figures, Goddess Kali of Mount Chitrakoot plays a decisive role in both the plots of *Hayavadna*, for she appears as a character in the play, though briefly. First, she is indifferent to the suicides of Devdatta and Kapila but interferes in Padmini's attempt to kill herself. Thus she helps Padmini to revive the dead man but his indifferent when the heads are mixed up. The Goddess plays a negative role in the case of both Hayavadana and Padmini; for no specific reason but her lethargy and perpetual stupor. Obviously, Karnad has painted Kali black to portray the sufferings of human beings in an indifferent and hostile world. Karnad continues to question Hinduism.

In subtle exposure, Karnad has debunked some undesirable habits. As the horse-headed Hayavadana points to the lack of civic sense in Actor-I who sits on the roadside to relieve himself. Likewise, Bhagwata reveals the

drunken life of the lower classes through Actor-I who swears that he has not been near a toddy shop. A number of Indian habits and beliefs are reflected in this play. A.K. Ramanujan's observation on the Indian characteristic of inconsistency and hypocrisy is largely true. Devdatta does not like the Ujjain trip, but he never tells his wife, nor his friend, in black and white. Instead, he goes on sulking and pretending to care for the health of his wife. At one point, Padmini explodes when the situation is unbearable:

What's happened to you today? At other times you are so full of
 Are so full of your books, you even forget to wash your hands
 After a meal. But today you have been going on and on all
 Morning. (*Hayavadana* 96).

Like Devdatta, Kapila too indulges in such pretentious actions. He dies not so much for the sake of friendship as for fear of punishment. Surprisingly, it is Goddess who openly criticizes all the three of them for their unhealthy habits. Comparatively, Padmini is brave and forthright but she too is not free from hypocrisy. She is well aware that she wants a man of sound brain and sound body; though she can't have such a single person. Later she cheats on her husband and wants to meet Kapila. She persuades Devdatta to go to Ujjain fair on the pretext of buying dolls for their son. And gave reference to the belief that it is unlucky to keep torn dolls at home. Padmini may have her own reasons but she is no different from Devdatta and Kapila in her inconsistency and hypocrisy.

Conclusion: In his plays Karnad did not leave any belief or practice unchallenged. He has questioned all kinds of superstitious and supernatural beliefs and practices, both secular and spiritual, directly as well as indirectly. A certain amount of skepticism, even bordering of cynicism runs through the tragic, pathetic, comic and ludicrous characters and situations. Consequently, Karnad has

come to depend heavily on irony at the conceptional and technical level ,achieving incredible dramatic scores .A truthful Indian dramatist, Karnad engages , in the existential sense of the term ,the dominant and destructive notion of caste and religion in these plays .

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