

A Study of Hindu Mythology in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala*

Mrs. S.RAMYA, M.A.,M.Phil.,B.Ed.,SET.,
Asst. Prof. of English,
E Mail: roshyaramya@gmail.com
Idhaya College for Women, Kumbakonam.

Abstract

Indian writers in English especially dramatists were on the search for new avenues for their creation. Folk tales, mythologies, episodes from epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata lent themselves admirably to their cause. During the late nineteenth century professional companies in Karnataka and Maharashtra began to stage mythological plays. A myth is defined as a legend, a story, a saga of superhuman will, courage and strength handed down to the people by word of mouth over a long period of time, and put it into written form by poets who made changes in theme whenever it suited their purposes to do so. Karnad widely uses episodes from Indian mythology as a base for his plays. Myths and legends have an enduring significance for the fundamental human obsessions. Indian writing in English is a product of our history. It is a product of our culture. Drama cannot be thought of without the possibility of its performance. All Indian literature for centuries had been drawing on myths. The plays taken for this study both *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala* are mythical and folkloristic. While *Nagamandala* is formed on two Kannada folk-tales, *Hayavadana* is moulded from the story of the Vetala-panchavimsati, of Thomas Mann and of Karnad's invention. This paper concentrates on these famous plays in terms of the use of Hindu mythology. It also focuses on the use of Hindu mythological elements like Gods and Goddesses, animals etc. It further verifies the mythological authenticity by comparing the Hindu mythology and Karnad's use of it.

Girish Karnad was born on 19th May in Matheran, a town near Bombay. He spent his childhood in a village in Karnataka. A Rhodes Scholar, a Homi Bhaba Fellow, fluent in several Indian languages, Karnad became playwright at 23. *Hayavadana* won the Sangeeth Natak Academy Award. All his nine plays are highly successful both on stage and among literary critics. He is the recipient of the Sahitya Academy Award for his play *Tale Danda*. Karnad compulsively uses mythical, historical and oral tales for his themes as well as characters and situations. He is no stranger to the world of Indian myths, including epics and puranas. He was groomed in mythology. He grew up with a lot of myths. Like Shakespeare and Kalidasa,

Karnad has mostly adopted his plots from various sources. He has also endowed his borrowed stories with a new lease of life by adding his own share of myths.

This paper traces the mythological background of his two famous plays *Hayavana* and *Nagamandala*. It will analyze and compare the characters, situations used in the play with Hindu Mythology and the setting, mythological references, mythical figures, places, Indian customs and beliefs. *Hayavana* explores the dramatic potential of the ancient Indian myths, legends and folk traditions. Of the twin plots which constitute the fabric of *Hayavana*, the main one comes from Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads* which is based on *Katha Sarit Sagara*, an ancient collection of short stories. Devadatta and Kapila are bosom friends, one the rational and scholarly, while the other is the sensual and illiterate. Devadatta falls in love with Padmini and marries her. Later Kapila too falls in love with Padmini. The two friends, as a way out of this stalemate, kill themselves, Goddess Kali restores them to life, but in her excitement Padmini transposes their heads. The confusion and identity crisis which ensue torment them until they cut the Gordian knot in a duel.

The sub-plot, despite its vague familiarity and with several Indian legends, is mostly invented by Karnad himself. A beautiful Karnataka princess falls in love with a white stallion. She marries the horse and lives with him for fifteen years. The horse turns into a Gandharva (a celestial Being) and when the princess refuses to accept his new form, curses her to be a horse. She happily gallops away ignoring her horse-faced (Hayavana) yet human-boiled child. The two plots come together when Hayavana, in his quest to become a complete being, meets the five year old son of Padmini who is also in search of completeness. It is faced with the mythical idea about Gods and Goddesses, besides the folk legends. At the beginning of the play Bhagavata sings verses in praises of Lord Ganesha. Bhagavata also praises Ganesha's glory as "the destroyer or obstacles, which removes all hurdles and crowns all endeavors with success. Karnad begins his play with the Nandi (Singing of benedictory verse) and concludes it with the Bharatavakya (valedictory prayer), recalling the tradition of ancient Sanskrit tradition. In this play, the image of the Lord Ganesha suggests a major development in the action as well as the central theme of completeness of being. The play revolves around the myth of Ganesha which operates at several levels. (Jacob C.George).

The figure of Lord Ganesha which represents a perfect blend of three different worlds of experience- the divine, the human and the animal become central within the frame of the sub-plot too, since it foreshadows the character of Hayavana. Hayavana's problem is one of alienation as well as incompleteness. The incompatibility of his head and body and his inability to find his society, haunt him. He cannot join the world of the Divine since he is rejected by his father; the animal world is denied to him because he has not his mother's advantage of having a

complete animal body; and the equine face makes him a stranger among men. The introduction of Lord Ganesha in *Hayavadana* is appropriate to enact a play about transposed heads.

While talking about the friendship of Devadatta and Kapila, the two principal characters of the play, Karnad compares them with the mythological characters of Ramayana and Mahabharatha. The character of Hayavadana, who has a man's body but a horse's head, is truly a mythological creation Karnad has made.

Devadatta wishes to marry Padmini. He swears to Kapila that he will sacrifice his two arms to the Goddess Kali and his head to Lord Rudra, if he gets Padmini as his wife. Goddess Kali plays a major role in this play. In Hindu, mythology Kali is an important Goddess. They both married. As Padmini and Kapila go to see the temple of Rudra, Devadatta excuses himself for a moment to go to the temple alone. Then in sudden outburst of emotion he decides to sacrifice his head to Kali. He prostrates himself before the Goddess and chants the various names of Kali and offers sacrifice. He picks up a sword, cuts off his head and dies.

Kapila who is in search of Devadatta goes to the Kali temple and finds him dead. He comes to the conclusion that he cannot live without his friend. Thus saying he picks up the sword and cuts off his head. Padmini is shocked to find both Devadatta and Kapila dead. Staring out the body she lets out a terrible scream.

Padmini decides to kill herself with the very same sword but it is stopped by the Goddess who asks her to put it down. Padmini pleads with the Goddess who asks her to put it down. Padmini pleads with the Goddess to bring Devadatta and Kapila back to life. Kali advises her to put the heads properly, attach them to their bodies and then press the sword on their necks. She does as she is told and both of them are brought back to life.

There are references in mythology to the human sacrifice made to Kali to satisfy her. Wilkins traces the Hindu mythology as

“There can be no doubt that human sacrifices were formerly offered to Kali, though now they are forbidden both by British law and the Hindus scriptures; the prohibition in Hindu books, however, is in a more recent class of books than those in which they ordained. In the Kalika Purana, from which the following extracts are made, nothing could practice, gleaned than the instruction regarding this cruel practice. Siva is address in his sons the Bhairavas, imitating them in these terrible mysteries.”

Thus in the play *Hayavadana*, Karnad widely uses Hindu mythology, in terms of plot, characters, Hindu Gods and Goddesses, mythological beliefs customs, etc., *Hayavadana* encompasses the three worlds of experience: the divine, the human, and the animal.

Karnad's another famous play *Nagamandala* (1990) with the sub-title in English, *Play with a Cobra*, is also rich in the use of Hindu mythology. It is based on two Kannada folk tales which Karnad heard from his friend A.K.Ramanujam.

In *Nagamandala*, Karnad weaves together two Kannada folk tales, the first reveals the paradoxical nature of oral tales and the second tells the story of Rani whose predicament reflects the human need to live by fiction and half-truths. The drama is enacted in a temple at night, in the presence of three naked flames, in front of a man cursed to die within the next few hours. The play is about Rani, the Queen of long tresses, whose hair tied up in a knot looks as though a black king cobra lie curled on the nape of her neck. Rani's husband Appanna, proud and jealous, ill-treats her, coming home only for lunch and staying away with a concubine at night. Kurudavva the best friend of Appanna's mother gives Rani a piece of root to give her husband to win him over. Rani boiled the roots and mixed it with the food. It turns red as a brook.

Rani, horrified at the sight of the food throws into the ant hill and the King Cobra who lives there eats the food. Enamoured by the charm, the cobra enters Rani's room at night and takes, as he can, the form of Appanna. Their meetings at night continue; Rani cannot understand why Appanna so nice at night is rough and rude hissing like a stupid snake during the day.

Appanna gets furious when Rani gets pregnant. The village elders sit in judgement and Rani swears that she has not touched anyone except her husband and the cobra, nor has she allowed any male to touch her. She added that if she told lie the cobra could bite her. The cobra does not bite her, but slides up her shoulder and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head. The crowd is stunned, while the elders declare her a Devi, a divine being. Appanna, too asking for forgiveness takes her fondly into his arms. Rani gives birth to a beautiful son, but Appanna is aware that he is not the father of the child. The cobra, unable to bear separation, ties a stress on Rani's hair round its neck and strangles itself to death hiding in her hair. The dead cobra falls on the ground when Appanna combs her hair. Rani, who now understands all about the cobra, wishes him to be cremated by their son and rites to be performed to commemorate the cobra's death. Appanna agrees to the wishes of Rani as he regards her Goddess incarnate.

In *Nagamandala*, the human and the non-human worlds enter into one another's lives to reveal the playwright's vision of reality. In our Hindu mythology, the Naga represents several images. In south India, many houses have their own shrine which is often a grove for snakes, consisting of trees, festooned with creepers, situated in a corner of the garden. Snakes are the symbols of human maleness and strength. Nagas are sometimes portrayed as handsome men, or as half-man and half-snake, the top half using the torso of a man, the lower half a coiled snake.

Karnad in *Nagamandala* has made use of the folk tales and the mixing of 'human worlds and non-human worlds' as a distancing device which brings in the element of alienation in the play. The folk tale element of *Nagamandala* and the magical power which the cobra possesses remind us that we are watching a play. The play revolves round a woman and a serpent.

Veena Noble Dass states: "This play is based on folk tale and it is interesting to observe that the serpent forms as important ingredient in most narratives all over the world".

The cobra assuming the form of Rani's husband is truly mythical in nature. Rani pours the magic potion into the ant-hill. A king cobra comes out of the ant-hill. If we go to Hindu mythology to know about the serpent we get some interesting information as snake is a closely connected with Lord Siva. Nagas or serpents are Siva's weapons in disguise, and Siva is connected with them.

Popular mythology in India has it that the naga Vasuki holds the earth on its many hooded head, and when he is tired and shifts the burden from one hood to another, we have an earthquake. In ancient India snakes were the Dravidian emblem of death and fertility and in some archaeological specimens of the linga five headed snakes formed a company of the linga. In iconography and literature Siva is associated with snake and poison. The artifice of metamorphosis in *Nagamandala* is mythical ritualistic and traditional and the playwright seems to endorse traditional and the playwright seems it endorse traditional values, yet transformation is employed as a means of interrogating these values.

The plays taken up for the present study *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala* illustrate Karnad's interest in Hindu mythology and how he uses it in his plays. Karnad by using mythology has given the Indian theatre richness and a new dimension. Thus Karnad extensively uses Hindu mythology in his plays *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala*. Karnad by using the Hindu mythology and by reinterpreting them in his plays helps the posterity in inculcating the values of rich cultural heritage.

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