

USE OF INDIAN MYTHS IN SELECT PLAYS OF GIRISH KARNAD

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Abstract

Girish Karnad's using of myth and legend in his plays was more an operation of inclination rather than desire. Perhaps it was predictable for Karnad who was open to the elements of traditional forms of theatre in his early childhood. The three kinds of theatre between which he moved, observed and wrote plays, were the company Natak, Yakshagana and the Western Theatre, and he had rightly chosen to use myths and legends for his plays. He feels they are very much significant today, and thus, seeks to adapt myths and folk forms in his plays. He has successfully tried to strike a balance between the ancient and the modern to serve his purpose of using the past to illuminate the present. Girish Karnad in his Hayavadana and Naga-Mandala used the same myths to project the theme of fundamental ambiguity of human life. This and more will be probed in the ensuing paper.

Key words: Drama, myths, legends, folktales, patriarchy, chastity.

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Drama in India has experienced a rich and glorious tradition. The contemporary dramatist Girish Karnad has said in his play *The Fire and the Rain*, "Brahma, the Lord of all creation extracted the requisite element from the four Vedas." He borrowed the text from Rig Veda, songs from Sama Veda, the art of acting from the Yajur Veda and Rasa (aesthetic experience) from the Atharva Veda and combined them into a fifth Veda "Natya Veda" and thus gave birth to the art of drama.

Karnad, like his precursors, makes ample use of myths, legends, folktales and histories not only from the academic point of view but also as a tool to display the contemporary situations. In this respect, Karnad is definitely a dramatist with a difference as his plays are exclusively written for the stage. In the Indian theatre tradition there has always been a great use of mythology and history though it has not produced anything impactful and long-lasting. Karnad was very much aware that this tradition has a tremendous potential, if explored in the right direction, as the elements of myth and history are very common to Indian audiences.

Every play of his, beneath a legendary/mythical or historical narration, we notice subtle and constant juxtaposition of the past and present which has been a common feature of Karnad's dramatic art. He has used various forms of the folk tradition in his plays like *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala* to emphasize the central predicament of human existence. He chooses events and 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 of questioning these values, of making them literally stand on their head.”

The play *Hayavadana* begins with the incantation of Lord Ganesha in the folk drama tradition. There is also the suggestion thrown in at the very beginning that the idea of fate is totally best left to the gods, it being a reason beyond human understanding and acquaintance. After the introduction of the sub-plot, 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.” We come to know that Devadatta is fascinated by the bewitching beauty of a girl. He, at once, falls in love with her. He marries Padmini, the daughter of the leading merchant in Dharampura but Kapila also falls in love with Padmini. Their relations get touselled and ultimately the friends kill themselves. Padmini, of course, with the boon of the Goddess Kali, transposes the heads, giving Devadatta, Kapila’s body and vice-versa. This is an absurd situation, which creates the problem of identity. A debate takes place between Devadatta and Kapila as to who would keep Padmini, as his wife. At last, it is decided that the head governs the body. In the sub-plot, Hayavadana, the horseman is completely transformed into a horse.

The mistake in the transposition of the heads of Devadatta and Kapila can be explained in terms of Freudian slip activated by id. In other words, the subconscious desire for Kapila’s body makes Padmini put, albeit unconsciously, the head of Devadatta on Kapila’s body. Furthermore, the ‘mistake’ also absolves her of the responsibility of transgressing the codified morality of her society.

It is interesting to note how Karnad makes use of myth to invalidate the established social code of conduct. In the Indian context it is automatically assumed that a woman will keep all love and loyalty for her husband and safeguard herself from any kind of external lure.

However, in the play this conservative concept of a woman is turned topsy-turvy. The woman in the original myth is instructed that one particular combination of head and body is her husband and she looks no further – the story ends there. Therefore, Padmini's cataleptic magnetism towards Kapila is ingeniously hinted at in the scene before the cart-ride. This attraction becomes actual and substantial during the cart-ride and this leads to the further action in the play. So, Padmini symbolizes the incompleteness of human longing. She fails in getting reunification of the mind and the body in Devadatta and Kapila. Now she expresses her desire to accomplish her search for completeness through her child. Therefore, she requests the Bhagavata that her son should be brought up as the son of Kapila by the hunters in the forest for five years and then as the son of Devadatta, he should be handed over to Vidyasagara, her father-in-law and a revered Brahmin. Thus she wants to provide both physical and mental training for her son so that he may attain perfection in life. Karnad's characters however accept failure stoically and embrace their fate. When the impossible cannot take the shape of reality and opposites cannot be reconciled, for Karnad's character the only alternative is death. For example, Padmini in *Hayavadana* walks boldly to her destiny and emerges thus as a strong character in the bargain. It is Padmini's child who interconnects the main plot with the sub-plot. As decided, Padmini's son is brought to the Bhagavata after five years. He, at first, seems to be an incomplete child, unable to laugh like a normal child. However, he becomes normal when he laughs in response to Hayavadana's laughter. Karnad has very successfully employed the folk drama form in *Hayavadana* to present the perennial problem of identity and search for completeness.

The story of *Naga-Mandala* is an inspiration from Kannada folklore which Karnad had himself heard from the poet and academic A.K. Ramanujan. It reflects Karnad's deference for the technological elements of theatrical art and also for the Indian tradition of storytelling although he innovates and experiments by sharing twentieth century views. The summary of this personified story goes like this. The young bride Rani is married to an apathetic man Appanna who always ill-treats her. Rani being always locked inside the house by her

husband whenever he goes out feels depressed for not having any freedom. Appanna treats his wife as a servant and meanwhile he keeps a concubine. The other two characters in the play, the blind woman– Kurudavva and her son Kappanna, play a significant task by helping Rani, the protagonist of the story in gratifying her needs and aspirations.

Kurudavva, who always supports her son Kappanna, gives Rani a potion and asks her to feed Appanna while serving food, so that, he might fall in love with her. Newly married Rani, who craves for her husband's love, is tempted enough to use the potion given by the old woman. Not being able to summon enough courage to feed her husband with the potion, she ultimately pours it into an anthill which is the dwelling place of the king cobra– the Naga. Preposterously, the king cobra falls in love with Rani, enters the house through the bathroom drain during the nights and takes the appearance of Appanna once he is inside. Disguised Naga in the form of Appanna establishes relationship with the innocent Rani which soon results in Rani getting pregnant.

Thus, the protagonist in the story is treated as a mere property by an indifferent husband Appanna, and by night, a goddess treasured by cobra (in Appanna's form). Appanna is enraged as he discovers Rani's pregnancy, takes up the issue in front of the elders of the village so that they may help him to determine her guilt or innocence. As Rani's innocence is proved as she takes the snake ordeal and holds the king cobra in her hand. Surprisingly, the cobra instead of biting her, slides up her shoulder and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head. The villagers are panic-stricken. Henceforth, Rani is considered as a Goddess and Appanna was left with nothing but just to accept her as his virtuous wife.

The Rational Myth Theory states that myths were made to understand the natural events and forces that occurred in the everyday lives of people in a better way. There is a myth in the village that after the lamps are put out, the flames join together in a remote area and gossip about their own houses and masters. The dramatist or the man who comes in the

prologue sees and listens to the talking of the flames. This shows the occurrence of natural events in that village.

The Functional Myth Theory consists of morality and social behaviour and consequences of not having it. The woman who comes in the prologue never said the story to anyone or sang any song, so it escaped from her and took the form of a woman which resulted in the family feud of suspicion on the part of her husband. This shows the consequences of not having the social behaviour of telling story to others.

The Structural Myth Theory is the myth based on human emotions and mind, which shows its two sides- the good and the bad. Naga's visit to Rani's house consoled her from isolation and mental distress and his way of speaking (good mind) gave her solace from her agony and anguish. Though Naga knows that Rani is not his wife, he indulges in sin, physical contact (bad mind). Rani becomes pregnant which earns her the name of a whore.

The Psychological Myth Theory states how myths are based on human emotions and that they come from human subconscious mind as archetypes. Rani's isolation leads her to reveries in which she questions Appanna and gets answer from an eagle. There she craves for parental affection. This shows the universal feeling for a child and Rani's quest for companionship from her subconscious mind.

The significant myth in *Naga-Mandala* is "Snake ordeal" and "Holding red hot iron". When Rani is brought before the elders for proving her chastity, she chooses the snake ordeal and then plunges her hand into the ant-hill and pulls out the cobra and says, "Since coming to this village, I have by this hand, only my husband and this cobra. If I lie, let this cobra bite me." Holding red hot iron is another myth followed in that village. Myth is an effective tool which Karnad dexterously uses to eradicate the socio-cultural events of preventing women from freedom in male-dominated society. This play showcases the agony and anguish experienced

by Rani which stands as a paradox for the predicament of a young girl trapped in the net of the male-dominated society. Karnad makes an extensive use of myths to frame the plots in his play and also skillfully weaves the psychological, social and cultural understanding afforded by them. The play *Naga-Mandala* combines male chauvinism, oppression of women and the great injustice done to them by patriarchal dominion. Myths and folktales used not only frame the plot but also focus on the human psychology and the relationship that exists between them.

Borrowing a phrase from Bertolt Brecht, Karnad says that use of myths and folk techniques allow for "Complex Seeing", although the myths have traditional and religious sanction, they have the means of questioning these values. Added to this he believes that the various folk conventions like the chorus, the music, the mixing of human and non-human worlds permit a simultaneous presentation of alternate points of view. Thus, the myth acquires new dimensions in the creative hands of Karnad, and the plays unfold rich strands of meaning. What Karnad tries to do in these plays is to reveal the archetypal structure of the society. Myths and folktales always interpret human life, and in the contemporary context they interpret modern sensibility or the modern consciousness.

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