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**HAYAVADANA: STAGE –SPACE AND AESTHETIC RECREATION THROUGH PAN INDIAN  
MYTHS AND MOTIFS**

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**ABSTRACT**

The present paper explicates how in *Hayavadana*, Karnad draws heavily upon the rich resources of the pan -Indian folk theatre- Yakshagana being his mainstay of resources with great deftness and how the element of supernatural plays a significant role in the play. Also how Karnad manages to manipulate on the stage the nuances of sexual repressions through music, gestures and masks and movements. The dramatist employs the conventions of folk tales and motifs of folk theatre, i.e., masks, half- transformation of characters, death and revival; curtains, mime, songs, the commentator-narrator, dolls, horse-man, the story-within a story. Girish Karnad says “the major pre-occupation of the playwrights in India was with the need to draw upon traditional theatre forms in order to revitalize our own work. There were the Sanskrit plays, and hundred reeds of the regional ‘folk’ forms, rasas and bhaktmandal is running alive in multiples streams of culture when Karnad came to the proscenium of Indian theatre. The problem was how to make use of the paraphernalia of mask, mime, half-curtains, dance and music meaningful outside the context of the traditional theatre? (Tutun Mukherjee :A Conversation with Girish Karnad, Page 35-36) .

*Hayavadana* draws upon as world of incomplete individuals, magnanimous gods, of vocal dolls and mute children, a world apathetic to the longings and frustrations, ecstasies and miseries of human beings. In this play Karnad brings back poetry, music, a sense of gaiety, bringing alive a theatrical extravaganza on the stage space. The paper proposes to examine how folk idioms are employed as thematic and technical devices by the dramatist and how they are a means of conveying his ideas and exploring different characters and situations.

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The plot of the play is borrowed from Thomas Mann’s story, “The Transposed Heads,” which in turn, is based on the stories in *Vetal Panchavimshati* and in Somdeva’s *Brihatkatha Saritsagara*. The basic strain of the plot rests on the theme of unrequited sexuality, but Karnad also combines the problem of human identity in a world of confused relationships, juxtaposed with the theme of incompleteness and man’s desire for perfection. The main plot (in the “Transposition of Heads”) and the sub-plot (in the story of Hayavadana)

subtly depict that perfection which is a humanly impossible an ideal. However the play finally fulfills its aesthetic purpose by portraying the absurdity of the ideal of completeness. Girish Karnad says, "In *Vetalapachchisi* this is posed as a riddle but Thomas Mann makes a whole story out of it, and I've only taken the bare out-lines of Mann's plot" (Enact- 54)

Karnad is a past master in negotiating and manipulating the stage space: None better than him knows how to landscape the plays by using front, upperstage, centrestage and the off stage. The play opens with a soothing musical composition accompanied by the bringing on the centrestage the mask of Lord Ganesha, the presiding deity of traditional theatre and in turn with an *aarti* (light offering) a ritual typical to Yakshagana plays. Imperceptibly the character of Ganesha is upstaged and Bhagavata occupies the centrestage. He, accompanied by musicians, sings verses in praise of Ganesha. "When Hayavadna begins, a mask of Ganesha is brought on the stage and the Bagavata ( the Sutradhar or Commentator) sings verses in praise of "*Vakratunda-Mahakaya*" with the crooked face and distorted body who is the lord and master of success and perfection." (*The Plays of Girish Karnad* , Page 63). At the out-set, the theme of the play is explicitly suggested through Ganesha who, possessing the head of an elephant and human body, symbolizes incompleteness. As the Bhagavata comments, "An elephant's head on a human body, a broken tusk and a cracked belly – whichever way you look at him he seems the embodiment of imperfection, of incompleteness ... could it be that this image of purity and holiness, this Mangalamoorti, intends to signify, that the completeness of God is something no poor mortal can comprehend?" (Girish Karnad *Three Plays*, Page 73 )

The Bhagavata, moving across the stage with his small drum, narrates the story with a formalistic expression in the manner of a folk tale, "this is the city of Dharmapura ruled by King Dharmasheela whose fame and empire...." (Girish Karnad *Three Plays*, page73) and so on. The protagonists Devadatta and Kapila are intimate friends. Devadatta , an intelligent son of a learned Brahmin Vidyasagara, comely in appearance and fair in colour, has succeeded in defeating the mightiest pundits of the kingdom in debates on logic and love, and is an excellent poet and adored by everyone in Dharmapura. Kapila, the only son of an ironsmith Lohita, possesses an agile and handsome body and is skilled in activities which require physical strength. Devadatta is deeply in love with a bright, beautiful girl, Padmini, who seems to him, to be "Yakshini, Shakuntala, Urvashi, Indumati – all rolled into one"( Girish Karnad *Three Plays*, Page 87) He swears that if he does not succeed in getting her as his wife, he will sacrifice his two arms to the goddess Kali and his head to Lord Rudra. Kapila arranges for their marriage and the three seem to be like Rama, Sita and Lakshmana. At this moment the play acquires a naturalistic tone of histrionics. However, as the play proceeds, the interrelationship between the three, Devadatta, Kapila and Padmini becomes tangled. Kapila is drawn towards Padmini and admits, "Devadatta, my friend, I confess to you I'm feeling uneasy. You are a gentle soul. But this one is fast and sharp as lightning- . She is not for the likes of you"( Girish Karnad *Three Plays*, Page 90) He feels that she needs a man of steel like him. Devadatta notices that Kapila was never the sort to blush, but now, "he only has to see her and he begins to wag his tail, sits up on his hind legs as though he were afraid to let her words fall to the ground. And 'that pleading in his eyes'- can't she really see that."( Girish Karnad *Three Plays*, Page 92) .Padmini, too, is fascinated by his physical charm. When she impatiently waits for him, constantly looking out of the window, her husband's jealousy is aroused and he remarks, "you drool over Kapila all day. (Girish Karnad *Three Plays*, Page91)

Their journey to Ujjain created with the help of miming the ride , is a vital scene in the play. Devadatta perceives the fire in the ambers of love in his wife's eyes and takes a crucial decision. As Kapila climbs the tree like an ape to procure the fortunate lady's flower for her, she admires his ethereal shape and broad back "like an ocean with muscles ripping across"( Girish Karnad *Three Plays*, Page 96) and in an aside expresses her psychic state, "He is like a Celestial Being re-born as a hunter...How his body sways, his limbs curve... No woman could resist him."( Girish Karnad *Three Plays*, page 96) Devadatta, too, observes his strong body and manly muscles and realizes that he has been so innocent, so naïve all these days. It is interesting to note that the dialogues are framed in isolated pieces of music in Yaksgaan style so that the impact comes full driving on the audience.

Unable to endure this, an envious Devadatta cannot make the agonizing choice of sharing Padmini with Kapila. So he decides to visit the Kali temple and kills himself, while Padmini and Kapila are on their way to Rudra temple. He prostrates himself before the goddess and remarks that as she has fulfilled his deepest desire by giving Padmini to him, so to carry out his promise, he is offering his head. He bids adieu to Padmini and Kapila and say, "May the Lord Rudra bless you. You are the two pieces of my heart- live happily together. I shall find my happiness in that".(Girsh karnad *Three Plays*, Page 98) When Kapila returns, he is shocked to find that due to intense feeling of abhorrence for him, Devadatta has committed suicide. He, too, picks up his sword, "You spurned me in this world. Accept me as your brother at least in the next. Here friend, here I come" (Girsh karnad *Three Plays*, Page 100) However, Goddess Kali knows the truth and points out, "The rascals! They were lying to their last breaths.(Girsh karnad *Three Plays*, Page 103). Kapila said that he is dying for friendship but deep in his heart he knew perfectly well that he would be accused of killing Devadatta for Padmini.

Unlike the two men, Padmini is intrepid, audacious and candid in pleading for what she desires to attain fulfillment. Unlike an archetypal Indian woman, she does not suppress her desire for Kapila and wants both of them alive, although she is fully aware that her living with two men would be socially unacceptable. She seeks a boon from the Goddess, who admires her for her candidness and says, "Only you spoke the truth because you are selfish" (Girsh karnad *Three Plays*, Page 103) Padmini desires for Devadatta's clever head and Kapila's strong body, i.e. a perfect man, and in her excitement creates such a man by transposing the two heads. The Goddess knows what Padmini has done and remarks that there should be a limit even to honesty ,and disappears after granting the boon, "Anyway –so be it!(Girsh karnad *Three Plays*, Page 103) For some time Padmini succeeds in having both the intellect and the flesh, "Fabulous body- fabulous brain- fabulous Devadatta.(Girsh karnad *Three Plays*, Page113)

Throughout the play Padmini appears as a symbol of emancipated woman. She does not play the part of a demure wife and refuses to accept the passive feminine role. When she is pregnant, both friends express their deep concern for her well-being, but chides them and asserts her will. Karnad depicts her unrepressed nature and her inner feelings through the use of a folk device, i.e., the female chorus. The Chorus chants, "Why should love stick to the sap of a single body?(Girsh karnad *Three Plays*, Page 82) And "A head for each breast. A pupil for each eye. A side for each arm. I have neither regret nor shame."(Girsh karnad *Three Plays* Page 82) Kapila epitomizes her character when he says that she is bright like lightning and as sharp.

In *Hayavadana*, as in a folk play, there is no formal division of acts into scenes. Act I concludes on a controversial note as to who is the rightful husband of Padmini and Act II initiates with the Bhagavata posing a question directly to the audience, "What indeed is the solution to the problem, which holds the entire future of these three unfortunate beings in a balance?"(Girsh karnad *Three Plays*, Page 108). Karnad traces the situation back to the story of King Vikrama and demon Vetal. Padmini's resolve to go with Devadatta's head is based on the solution of the Rishi who in fact repeats King Vikram's solution. However, the solution Vikram offered to the problem is not adequate in the present context because if head controls the body it logically follows that it will transform the body. Kirtinath Kurtkoti, in the 'Introduction' to the play, asserts, "The original poses a moral problem while Manu uses it to ridicule the mechanical conception of life which differentiates between soul and body. He ridicules the philosophy which holds the head superior to the body. The human body, Manu argues, is a fit instrument for the fulfillment of human destiny. Even the transposition of heads will not liberate the protagonists from the psychological limits imposed by nature."(Kurtkoti 69)

Padmini is gradually disillusioned and undergoes extreme mental agony as she watches the transformation of her husband's body and loss of Kapila's physicality day by day, inch by inch. Her intense love for her 'perfect' husband diminishes as he goes soft again. Towards the end, their bodies transform again and adjust themselves to the heads so perfectly that the men are physically exactly as they were at the beginning and the problem remains unresolved.

Karnad, through the strategy of the borrowed stories, examines the concept of the rational and the physical and weaves a mazy pattern of relationships. Padmini is quite resolute that she will not let passion overpower her sense of reason. She says, "I'm not going to be stupid again. Kapila's gone out of my life-

forever. I won't let him come back"( Girsih karnad *Three Plays*, Page 119) However, she cannot act rationally. Her thoughts constantly drift around Kapila. She wonders, "What could he be doing now? Where could he be? Could his body be still fair and his face dark?( Girsih karnad *Three Plays*, Page 119) When Devadatta goes to Ujjain to buy new dolls for the child, she undertakes a hazardous journey to meet Kapila, who has been in a state of amnesia. He is distressed as the past is revoked in his mind. He remarks, "why should one tolerate this mad dance of incompleteness?"( Girsih karnad *Three Plays*, Page 126)

Devadatta visits Kapila but they meditate over the possibility whether the three of them could live together like the Pandavas and Draupadi, but conclude that it is not feasible. "No grounds for friendship now. No question of mercy. We must fight like lions and kill like cobras"( Girsih karnad *Three Plays* Page 130) The idea of sharing a woman is unendurable to them and results in their annihilation. Padmini's quest for perfection is not satisfied till the end and she decides to perform Sati. She knows that she will not succeed in attaining completeness in the next birth too. She invokes Goddess Kali and says that other women can die praying that they should get the same husband in all the lives to come but she does not have even that little consolation. As Padmini's body blazes, the female musicians sing a chorus painfully ironic intensifying the agony of death. The soft and haunting melody of the song heightens the irony of the situation:

"our sister is leaving in a palanquin of sandalwood. Her mattress is studded with rubies which burn and glow. She is decked in flowers which blossom on tinder wood and whose petals are made of molten gold. How the garlands leap and cover her, aflame with love. Good-bye, dear sister. Go you without fear. The Lord of Death will be pleased with the offering of three coconuts."( Girsih karnad *Three Plays*, Page 131)

The institution of sati is mocked but with the agonizing music, and the audience do not get emotionally involved in this tragic scene. Kurtkoti points out, "Neither the death of the lovers nor the subsequent suttee(?) of Padmini is presented as tragic, the deaths serve only to emphasize the logic behind the absurdity of the situation."(Kurtkoti 70)

Padmini endeavors to fulfill her dream of perfection through her son. She entreats the Bhagavata to give him to the hunters residing in the forest, tell them it's Kapila's son and they will bring him up. When the child is five years old, he should take him to the revered Brahmin Vidyasagara of Dharmapura and tell him it's Devadatta's son.

The character of Hayavadana serves as a *vishkambhaka* of the Sanskrit plays and unravels his own painful story setting it as a contrast to the main theme of the play. It also gives a time relief to the action of the plays. The presence of a horse headed character centre stage jolts the audience all through. Through the use of stories, Karnad provides a profound insight into the meaning and significance of the play and portrays that the perfect union of the spirit and flesh in human life is not possible. The device of folk tale helps the playwright in transcending the limitations of time and place. At the beginning of the play Hayavadana narrates his tragic story- how his mother, the beautiful princess of Karnataka, married a white stallion, who is transfigured into a Celestial Being, a gandharva after fifteen years how her mother is transformed into a horse by the curse of her husband and she runs away abandoning her child. Hayavadana longs to get rid of his horse' head and metamorphose into a complete man--- which itself would be a wish fulfillment.

Towards the end of the play, he tells the Bhagavatta that in the temple of Goddess Kali, he prayed, "Mother, make me complete" and even before he could say, "Make me a complete man."( Girsih karnad *Three Plays*, Page 136) The Goddess granted him the boon and he was transmuted into a complete horse, not a complete being as he still possessed the cursed human voice. When Padmini's child asks Hayavadana to laugh, he realizes that his laughter has altered into a neigh and thus he achieves completeness, but not in the shape of a human being. Kurtkoti asserts that Hayavadana's quest for completeness ends comically, with his becoming a complete horse. "The animal body triumphs over what is considered the best in man, the Uttamanga, the human head."(Kurtkoti 70) Padmini's child links the main and the subplot. It grows up into an abnormal, incomplete child, unable to smile or laugh like human beings, does not cry or speak and constantly plays with dolls. The Bhagavatta says. "There is obviously something wrong with him."( Girsih Karnad *Three*

*Plays*, Page 134) However, he transforms into a complete child when he starts laughing and clapping his hands in response to Hayavadana's laughter.

The playwright, in an interview, asserts that in the manner of folk theatre, Hayavadana depicts "a world of inarticulate and non-human beings who create a typology of functional characters." (Girish Karnad interview with Kirtinath Kurtkoti, Page 82) The dolls speak more fluently than human beings. The character of Bhagavata is functional in the sense that he simply narrates what he sees. The horseman is not a complete human being and the inarticulate son of Padmini rides him. Goddess Kali mindlessly gives away boons.

Hayavadana is full of mystical wonder and is enshrouded in a realm of magic and supernatural, which is a frequent feature in a folk play. Goddess Kali, a supernatural element in the play, is portrayed as a terrifying figure, her mouth wide open with the tongue lolling out but possesses human attributes, too. She is vexed when she is disturbed in sleep and wakes up yawning and wonders why Devadatta should sacrifice his head to Rudra and his arms to her. The Goddess fully comprehends the motives behind the actions of the characters and is fully aware that the two friends were lying to their last breaths. By employing this strategy, the playwright also stresses the fact that there are no smooth and practical solutions to human problems. She grants boon to human beings when they pray sincerely but ultimately the problem remains unsolved as revealed in the case of Padmini and also Hayavadana.

Karnad, through the use of dolls, who possess a special insight, reveals very effectively to the audience the thought processes and inner psyche of Padmini as she visualizes the gradual metamorphosis of Devadatta's body into its original form and dreams of Kapila's strong body. They report that in her reveries she perceives a man, not her husband, who looks rougher and darker, climbs a tree and dives into a river. Devadatta's transfiguration is also communicated through the dolls. When he touches doll I, it feels the change and says. "His palms! They were so rough, when he first brought us here. Like a labourer's. But now they are soft-sickly soft- like a young girl's." (Girish Karnad *Three Plays*, Page 116) Doll II notices that his stomach which was so light and muscular has now become so loose. The strategy of dolls helps in developing the plot further. Padmini asks her husband to go to Ujjain and get new dolls, as the old ones have been worn out and Padmini gets an opportunity to meet Kapila.

There is a superb technical achievement in the way in which Karnad uses Brechtian narrator figure in the role of the Bhagavata, primarily intended to draw the audience into the play. He finds space to step out of the play, talk to the audience, explaining the action with his insightful comments. The playwright widens the scope of his role: he is not only the commentator and omniscient narrator but also one of the characters. This is amply portrayed in Act II, when the Bhagavata and Kapila exchange views before Padmini arrives at Kapila's hut and also when the Bhagavata talks to Padmini before she performs Sati. The efficacy in the experiment operates because the dramatist had emphatic experiences, during his childhood, with the *mise en scene* of Yakshagana theatre.

The device of masks, a typical feature of 'Yakshagana', brings alive on stage the personalities of different characters. The masks are loaded with colour symbolism too. In the opening of the play, Devadatta appears on the stage wearing a pale-coloured mask and Kapila a dark mask. Later on, to signify the transposed heads, their masks too are transposed. Lord Ganesha wears an elephant-headed mask and Kali, a terrible black mask. Hayavadana, initially, appears wearing the mask of a man and in the end that of a horse.

In the play, various conventional elements of stagecraft are used which are integral to the action of the play and the actors stage business. Half-curtains and painted curtains carried by stage hands are used to convey some semiotic facts. For instance, when Padmini performs Sati, the curtain has a blazing fire painted on it and as it is lifted, the flames seem to leap up. The front curtain is totally absent and there is no elaborate stage set up.

The action of the play is mime: for example, when the three characters proceed to Ujjain, a cart does not appear on the stage, rather, "Kapila followed by Padmini and Devadatta, enter miming a cart ride. Kapila is driving the cart." (Girish Karnad *Three Plays*, Page 95) The play is replete with instances of miming. For all these techniques, Karnad owes a great deal to folk theatre.

In *Hayavadana*, this theatre idiom assimilates into itself the pan Indian motifs and yet stands rooted in Yaksgaan style. It sometimes even transcends its own idiom and by using it as an ironical device. Karnad seems less interested in reviving the folk theatre traditions per se. He is more interested in using such mediums at the universal scale—sometimes for empathy and at others for focusing on the irony of the contemporary human situation. Thus, through the use of folk theatre strategies, Karnad succeeds in achieving the highest goals of art—that is a perfect aesthetic artifact. Like Marshall McLuhan he sticks to the medium which is the ultimate goal of a theatre director and which in fact differentiates him from a novelist. While watching Karnad's *Hayavadana* the audience tastes the *rasaanubhuti* as much from the medium as from the thematic brilliance of the play.

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