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## HAYAVADANA: A BLEND OF MODERN AND FOLK DRAMA



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### ABSTRACT

**G**irish Karnad is a dramatic genius, who blends traditional Indian folk theatre with the modern theatre to give expression to modern man's clash with the dominant traditions and his own individual needs and desires. To give a vivid description to the underlying clashes in human life, Karnad makes use of the various elements of Yakshagana of Karnataka, a lively performance having dance, drama and songs as its main constituent components. He has very finely woven into the fabric of his plot the various elements of folk drama like masks, Bhagavata ( Sutradhara or Commentator), device of half-curtain, talking dolls, chorus, etc.

**KEYWORDS :** *Modern and Folk Drama , modern theatre , various elements .*

### INTRODUCTION :

Girish Karnad is a great dramatic genius who has explored traditional Indian theatre in order to give expression to modern man's dilemma in his *Hayavadana*. In fact he has blended the traditional folk drama with the modern western theatre to dramatise the conflict between tradition and desire, perfection and imperfection, mind and body, repression and expression, social reality and individually experienced reality, rational truth and experiential truth and Dionysian view of life and Apollonian view of life in his play *Hayavadana*. M. K. Naik remarks, "His plays have pioneered a style, which unites the elements of traditional Indian theatre, such as 'Yakshagana' and strikingly modern sensibility for contemporary socio-political realities" (Naik 73). Karnad is a master craftsman, who gives a mythical twist to existential problems of life by mixing traditional myths with modern man's contemporary problems. To give expression to the resultant absurdity of human situation, Karnad evolves a new dramatic technique which is a fine blend of the techniques of traditional and modern drama. S. Ramaswami comments:

Karnad transmutes and transforms his source material to such an extent, being an actor and theatre man himself, that the modern, contemporary, individual talent incorporates the tradition into a trans-creation that is rich and strange. The Rhodes scholar and practical man of theatre and cinema blend into a recreation of the myth and legend of India with a novel blend of traditional material and

contemporary narrative technique which is quite challenging in bringing folk and elite theatres together. (21-22)

In fact Girish Karnad makes use of the elements of folk theatre as a strategy of presenting alternative and contrasting attitudes to social problems. In the "Introduction" to his *Three Plays*, 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 various conventions—the chorus, the masks, the seemingly unrelated comic episodes, the mixing of human and non-human worlds—permit the simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view, of alternative attitudes to the central problem. (Karnad, 14)

The particular form of Indian folk drama that Karnad draws upon in *Hayavadana* is "Yakshagana" of Karnataka, a lively performance having dance, drama and songs as its main constituents. Karnad has made use of all the theatrical devices used in Yakshgana like masks, Bhagavata (the Sutradhara or Commentator), half-curtain, Chorus and story within story or sub-plot.

Karnad was so much fascinated by the use of masks in the plays that he chose the mythical story of Hayavadana as it gave him ample scope for making use of masks in his play. Karnad remarks, "it was not the story of the play but the scope it gave for the use of mask and music that interested him initially" (Karnad, 13). Mask is an excellent device to represent the conflict going within and without a dramatic personage, and Karnad has very well made use of this device to dramatise the conflict between body and mind. R. S. Sharma remarks:

The themes of identity, incompleteness, love, mind body dichotomy, social system and social norms, poetic influence, elements of performance have all been brought together by the dramatist. (70)

Albert Hunt and Geoffrey Reeves in their *Directors in Perspective: Peter Brook* quote Peter Brook, who is otherwise critical of the use of masks, to signify the importance of masks in theatre:

A mask is a two-way traffic all the time, it sends a message in and projects a message out. It operates by the laws of echoes; if the echo-chamber is perfect, the sound going in and the one coming out are reflections: there is a perfect relation between the echo-chamber and the sound; but if it isn't, it's like a distorted mirror. (199)

In *Hayavadana*, Kapila and Devadatta are very close friends but Kapila feels attracted towards Devadatta's wife, Padmini. Out of jealousy and suspicion, Devadatta chops off his head in the temple of Kali. Kapila seeing his close friend lying beheaded feels a deep sense of remorse and cuts off his head too. When asked by Kali, Padmini, out of confusion, transposes the head of Kapila on the body of Devadatta and that of Devadatta on the body of Kapila. At this juncture Karnad has made an artistic use of mask-swapping to signify the switching of Kapila's and Devadatta's head and the consequent conflict between Kapila's head and Devadatta's body and vice versa.

Bhagavata, who acts as the Sutradhara or the Commentator in Yakshagan forms an integral part of *Hayavadana*. Karnad has used this mythical character to depict or comment on the conflicts going on between the minds and bodies of Kapila, Devadatta, Padmini and Hayavadana. In the latter half of the play, when Padmini comes to Kapila in Devadatta's absence and Kapila asks her why she has come to him, Padmini finds herself in utter conflict and is not able to respond to Kapila. Then Bhagavata steps in and speaks for her to Kapila:

How could I make you understand? If Devadatta had changed overnight and had gone back to original form, I would have forgotten you completely. But that's not how it happened. He changed day by day, inch by inch, hair by hair... and I saw him change—I couldn't get rid of you. (Karnad, 125)

In *Hayavadana* Bhagvata plays the multiple roles of a stage manager, a musical director and a narrator. He introduces the characters and comments on the action of the play and also mediates between the audiences and the fictional characters. It is Bhagavata who, in the beginning of the play, brings out the paradox in Lord Ganesha:

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. How indeed can one fathom the mystery that this very Vakratunda–Mahakavya, with his crooked face and distorted body, is Lord and Master of Success and Perfection. (Karnad 73)

Bhagavata plays a crucial role in bringing out the conflict going on in the mind and body of Kapila, Devadatta and Hayavadana.

In Yakshagana, the theatrical device of half-curtain is used to prolong the entry of new characters on the stage. Karnad has made a deft use of this device in *Hayavadana* to introduce the character of Hayavadana so as to make the conflict between Hayavadana's head and body all the more striking:

Two stage-hands enter and hold up a half-curtain, about six feet in height—the sort of curtain used in Yakshagana. The curtain masks the entry of Hayavadana who comes and stands behind it. Only the sound of someone sobbing behind the curtain. The curtain is lowered by about a foot. One sees Hayavadana's head, which is covered by a veil. At a sign from the Bhagavata, one of the stage hands removes the veil, revealing a horse head. He ducks his head behind the curtain.... The curtain is lowered a little more—just enough to show the head again. Again he ducks. Again the curtain is lowered. This goes on till the curtain is lowered right down to the floor. (Karnad 77)

Karnad gives a vivid description of the conflict going on between the head and body of *Hayavadana* by using the technique of half-curtain. Karnad in an interview to Tutun Mukherjee once said, "Using folk elements as mere aesthetic device to ornament the plays with songs, dance and colour was meaningless for me. The technique had to be intrinsic to the plot" (Mukherjee 40).

Karnad has effectively used two talking dolls to highlight Padmini's conflict between the traditional acceptance of her destiny and individual choice of going beyond the marital bond to satisfy her physical desire. Karnad explores Padmini's dreams about Kapila as she sleeps, revealing the illicit desire she feels but cannot express as a married woman in Indian society. The dolls allow Karnad to introduce the voice of "society" into an otherwise three-character story. The dolls have been woven as an integral part into the warp and woof of the plot of *Hayavadana*. Mee remarks:

Their [dolls'] attitude provides some of the motivating force for Padmini's behaviour in what she does because of what society will say, and some of what she does in spite of what society will say. (151)

Karnad has also made use of sub-plot or story-within-story to highlight the conflict in the main plot. The sub-plot of Hayavadana, the man with the horse-head deepens the significance of the main theme of incompleteness. The personality of Hayavadana itself highlights the conflict between the body and the mind. He wants to shed off his horse-head and become a complete human. There is conflict shown between Devadatta's head and Kapila's body and vice versa till the end when his search for completeness ends with his becoming a complete horse. Karnad does succeed in using the techniques of the story-within-story effectively to bring to the fore the core of the main plot.

Karnad has followed the tradition of Yakshagana by introducing chorus in *Hayavadana*. The chorus too, like other dramatic techniques, makes the conflict between tradition and desire more prominent. The chorus very beautifully unravels the muddled desires of Padmini, "A head for each breast. A pupil for each eye. A side for each arm. I have neither regret nor shame" (Karnad 82). Padmini's conflict between her Apollonian desire of being an ideal wife as defined by the traditions of

society and the Dionysian desire of what she wants to achieve, that is, getting the intellectual beauty of Devadatta and the physical attraction of Kapila, has been brought to the fore dramatically by the use of chorus.

Uniting the narration of the Bhagwata with the characteristic masks of the characters and the talking puppets, Karnad has very successfully utilized the various facets of the folk theatre to present the world of incomplete individuals, indifferent gods, unfulfilled desires and the consequent frustrations. G K Nayak remarks, "it must be noted that the plots are encased within a folk form, a mastery fusion of the traditional Indian and the western elements of theatre" (95).

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