

Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*: A Thematic Analysis

Dr. Anil Kumar

Associate Professor, (Department of English), Sheodeni Sao College, Kaler (Arwal), Magadh University, Bodh-Gaya, Bihar

Abstract

The essence of folk drama and its expressions, particularly within the context of Indian theatre, using Girish Karnad's play "*Hayavadana*" as a case study. It highlights how folk drama encapsulates the mindset, lifestyle, and societal perspectives of specific regions, transmitted orally or through performances. Karnad's reworking of folktales and myths for contemporary issues is discussed, emphasizing his fusion of classical and folk elements in his plays. The abstract explores the use of various folk theatrical devices such as Sutradhar, masks, dolls, and actor-audience interaction in "*Hayavadana*" to convey complex themes of identity, completeness, and the human condition. It also touches upon the adaptability and improvisational nature of folk stories and their relevance across time and space. Overall, it presents a comprehensive analysis of theme of folk traditions inform and enrich contemporary theatre practices.

Keywords: Societal perspectives, identity, completeness, improvisational nature, folk traditions

Introduction

Folk drama and other forms of folk art serve as windows into the collective consciousness of a specific region, offering insights into the mindset, lifestyle, and worldview of its people. These artistic expressions, whether transmitted orally or through written narratives like the *Panchatantra* and *Jataka Tales*, encapsulate the cultural heritage and traditions of a community. M.H. Abrams' characterization of folktales further underscores the diverse range of elements encompassed within these narratives, from legends and superstitions to songs, proverbs, and customary activities.

India, with its rich cultural diversity, boasts a plethora of distinctive folk theatre traditions across its states. From the vibrant *Jatra* of Orissa, Bengal, and Eastern Bihar to the lively *Tamasha* of Maharashtra and the colorful *Nautanki* of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Punjab, *Bhavai* in Gujrat, *Yakshagana* in Karnataka, *Therubuttu* in Tamilnadu, each region showcases its unique forms of performance art. The hallmark of folk stagecraft lies in its simplicity and utilization of local resources, creating an intimate connection between actors and audiences. Whether performed on makeshift stages in open spaces or communal gatherings, Indian folk theatre captivates spectators with its immersive experience, characterized by audience participation, elaborate make-up, masks, puppets, choruses, and dynamic folk dances.

Indian folk theatre serves as a dynamic reflection of the cultural heritage and artistic traditions of its diverse regions, celebrating the shared narratives, customs, and values of communities across the country.

It is this characteristic of folk theatre that caught Girish Karnad's imagination as he remarks: "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 of the central problem." (Karnad: Three Plays, 14).

Girish Karnad's modification of Indian folktales and myths within the context of contemporary realities is indeed remarkable. Drawing inspiration from Brechtian techniques, he skillfully reorients these traditional narratives to address modern-day issues with universal significance. While folktales have long been integral to Indian theatre, Karnad's contributions to Indian English drama stand out for their innovative recontextualization of these tales.

Karnad's plays, such as "*Naga Mandala*," "*Hayavadana*," and "*Flowers*," demonstrate his ability to infuse traditional narratives with fresh perspectives, tackling themes ranging from feminism to the human quest for completeness and the clash between spirituality and sensuality in a postmodern world. By weaving these timeless tales into contemporary narratives, Karnad bridges the gap between past and present, offering audiences a lens through which to explore enduring human concerns.

Bhagabat Nayak's commentary on Karnad's work highlights the significance of his reworking of folktales, recognizing Karnad's pioneering role in Indian English drama. Through his plays, Karnad not only revitalizes these age-old stories but also brings them into dialogue with the complexities of modern life, enriching the theatrical landscape with his nuanced exploration of timeless themes.

"Karnad reworks with the folktales which are quintessentially a new trend in Indian English drama. In the presentation of tradition and convention in Indian social life he revitalizes them for the better purpose of human life. In the dramatic paraphernalia of his theatrical devices and use of masks, half- curtains, improvisation, music, mime and magic or miracle his folk plays present 'magic realism' upholding the native tradition. In choice of theme and treatment of magic realism he enunciates his ideas of contemporary reality which are essentially post-colonial. In treatment of folk elements he takes up the problems of identity crisis and individual's split persona. In his conscious attempt of manipulation of folk elements in his plays he associates them with Bertolt Brecht's notion of 'complex seeing, and mixes the high and low, superior and subaltern, human and non human, and presents them in human characteristics.'" (Nayak, 86-87)

Hayavadana is the reworking of the sixth story of *Vetalparchavimishika* in Sanskrit and Somadeva's *Brihatkathasaritasagar*. Thomas Mann transcribed the story of *Hayavadana* in English as "*The Transposed Heads*." Karnad uses it as the archetype for his play *Hayavadana*. As he writes:

"The play *Hayavadana*, meaning 'the one with a horse's head', is named after this character. The story of this horse-headed man, who wants to shed the horse's head and become human, provides the outer panel - as in a mural- within which the tale of the two friends is framed. *Hayavadana*, too, goes to the same Goddess Kali and wins a boon from her that he should become complete. Logic takes over. The head is the person: *Hayavadana* becomes a complete horse. The central logic of the tale remains intact, while its basic premise is denied." (Karnad: CP: Vol. 1, 312-313)

Karnad's "*Hayavadana*" indeed delves deep into the complexities of human desires and relationships, particularly highlighting the conflict between societal norms and individual desires. The transposition of heads in the play serves as a metaphor for the inherent tension between different aspects of human identity, such as intellect and physicality, as well as the desires of the heart and the constraints of societal expectations.

Padmini's dilemma regarding the identity of her husband reflects a broader societal expectation that a woman's happiness and fulfillment should be derived from her relationship with a man. Karnad challenges this patriarchal notion by giving agency to Padmini, allowing her to make her own decisions and pursue her desires, even if they deviate from societal norms. Her unconventional choice to merge the heads of Devadatta and Kapila symbolizes her quest for completeness and her refusal to conform to traditional gender roles.

Moreover, Karnad subverts the traditional narrative by portraying Padmini as a decisive and independent character who navigates her own path, even in the face of societal judgment. Her willingness to engage in an extramarital relationship with Kapila demonstrates her agency and autonomy, challenging the traditional notion of female passivity and obedience. The tragic outcome of the conflict between Devadatta and Kapila underscores the limitations of patriarchal structures and the destructive consequences of imposing male dominance over female agency. Karnad's portrayal of Padmini as the orchestrator of their fate highlights the complexities of human relationships and the inherent power struggles within them.

"PADMINI: They borne, lived, fought, embraced and died. I stood silent. If I'd said, 'yes, I'll live with you both', perhaps they would have been alive yet. But I couldn't say it. I couldn't say, 'yes'. No, Kapila, no, Devadatta. I know it in my blood you couldn't have lived together. You would've had to share not only me but your bodies as well. Because you knew death, you died in each other's arms. You could only have lived ripping each other to pieces. I had to drive you to death. You forgave each other, but again, left me out." (*Hayavadana*, 176).

Not only this she decides the fate of her child in a way that suggests that her child is the son of both Kapila and Devadatta:

"PADMINI (without looking at him): Yes, please. My son is sleeping in the hut. Take him under your care. Give him to the hunters who live in this forest and tell them it's Kapila son. They loved Kapila and will bring the child up. Let the child grow up in the forest with the rivers and the trees. When he's five take him to the Revered Brahmin Vidyasagara of Dharmaputra. Tell him it's Devadatta's son." (Karnad: *Hayavadana*, 176).

The ending of "*Hayavadana*" indeed raises thought-provoking questions about the roles and responsibilities of the characters involved, particularly Padmini's agency and the consequences of her actions. The tragic outcome, where Padmini chooses to become sati on the combined pyre of Devadatta and Kapila, prompts reflection on the power dynamics within relationships and the societal expectations placed on women.

Padmini's decision to become sati could be interpreted as a manifestation of her agency, as she takes control of her own fate and refuses to live without the two men who are integral to her identity and desires. However, one could also question whether Padmini's actions are a result of societal pressures or a genuine

expression of her own desires. Is she truly empowered in her decision, or is she constrained by patriarchal norms that dictate women's roles and behaviors?

The portrayal of Padmini as a complex and multifaceted character challenges traditional notions of female identity and agency. While her actions may seem drastic or even questionable, they reflect the internal struggles and conflicts faced by individuals navigating societal expectations and personal desires.

The subplot involving *Hayavadana* further reinforces the theme of the quest for completeness and the elusive nature of perfection. Hayavadana's transformation into a complete horse, albeit with a human voice, highlights the inherent contradictions and limitations of human existence. Despite his physical transformation, Hayavadana remains incomplete in some sense, suggesting that true fulfillment may be unattainable.

At the level of stagecraft, "*Hayavadana*" incorporates elements of folk tradition to enhance the storytelling and engage the audience. The use of masks, dolls, and other theatrical devices adds depth and richness to the narrative, while also drawing on cultural traditions and symbolism. These elements not only enrich the audience's experience but also contribute to the broader themes of the play, emphasizing the interplay between tradition and innovation, identity and transformation.

Karnad presents a composite Indian dramatic form that incorporates the elements of both classical and folk theatre with ample improvisations of his own. The blood you couldn't have lived together. You would've had to share not only me but your bodies as well. Because you knew death you died in each other's arms. You could only have lived ripping each other to pieces. I had to drive you to death. You forgave each other, but again, left me out. (*Hayavadana*, 176).

Not only this she decides the fate of her child in a way that suggests that her child is the son of both Kapila and Devadatta:

PADMINI (without looking at him): Yes, please. My son is sleeping in the hut. Take him under your care. Give him to the hunters who live in this forest and tell them it's Kapila son. They loved Kapila and will bring the child up. Let the child grow up in the forest with the rivers and the trees. When he's five take him to the Revered Brahmin Vidyasagara of Dharmaputra. Tell him it's Devadatta's son. (Karnad: *Hayavadana*, 176).

Karnad's incorporation of folk elements in "*Hayavadana*" serves to contextualize the narrative within India's cultural landscape while also deepening its thematic resonance. By drawing on a diverse range of theatrical traditions, Karnad creates a rich tapestry of imagery and symbolism that resonates with audiences and invites them to explore the complexities of the human condition.

Doll I: Each one to his fate.

Doll II: Each one to her problems.

Doll I: As the doll maker used to say,

"What are things coming to!" (Karnad: *Three Plays*. 120)

They are personified and are able to understand the humans but the humans are oblivious of this quality of the Dolls. Hence the audience knows about them through the Dolls. For example we learn about the

changes taking place in Devadatta's body after transportation of head through Dolls.

Actors-audience contact a Brechtian device to break empathy of the audience and found in Indian folk theatre is facilitated by Bhagavata. At one occasion in the play when the conventional solution of the supremacy of head over body is given, Bhagavata invites audiences solution.

BHAGAVATA: What? What indeed is the solution to this problem, which holds the entire future of these three unfortunate beings in a balance? Must their fate remain a mystery? And if so shall we not be insulting our audience by trying a question mark round its neck and bidding it good-bye? We have to face the problems. But it's a deep one and the answer must be sought with the greatest caution. Haste would be disastrous. So there's a break of ten minutes now. Please have some tea, ponder over this situation and come back with your own solutions. We shall then continue with our enquiry. (*Hayvandana*, 149)

Similarly, story within the story is a folk as well as Brechtian device that is useful for complex viewing and it is adroitly used in the play. We come across four stories within the larger canvas of the play. They are the story of Bhagavata (of Devadatta, Kapila and Padimini) and of Dolls. They all reinforce the central idea of incompleteness, quest for completeness and identity and the mystery enshrined in the ways of god. The web of intricacies is also in accordance to his desire for adopting a multifaceted attitude towards a particular problem. Hence he uses these devices in such a way that the play breaks the limitation of time and space and can be relished by the audience of all time and place.

Conclusion

The discussion on folk drama and its manifestation in Indian theater, particularly through the works of Girish Karnad, is multifaceted. Folk drama, along with other forms of folk art, serves as a window into the primitive mindset and lifestyle of people in specific regions. It reflects their unified perspective on caste, class, gender, and their worldview. It often takes place in makeshift stages in open spaces, facilitating greater interaction between actors and the audience. Indian playwrights like Girish Karnad have skillfully reworked Indian folktales and myths to address contemporary issues. Karnad's use of folk elements, such as Sutradhar, masks, dolls, mime, and music, enriches the theatrical experience and connects with audiences on multiple levels. Karnad's reworking of folktales allows for the questioning of traditional values while upholding native traditions. Through his plays like "*Hayavadana*," Karnad explores themes of identity crisis, individuality, and the quest for completeness. Karnad's use of folk elements in his plays demonstrates the adaptability and innovation within Indian theater. By blending classical and folk traditions with his own improvisations, Karnad creates a unique dramatic form that resonates with audiences across time and space. Overall, the analysis underscores the richness and diversity of Indian folk theater and its continued relevance in contemporary theater practices. Through the reworking of folk elements, playwrights like Girish Karnad not only preserve traditional cultural expressions but also offer fresh insights into timeless human dilemmas.

References:

1. Karnad, Girish. *Hayavadana*, in *Collected Plays*, vol. New Delhi, OUP, 2012.
2. Karnad, Girish. *Three Plays*, New Delhi, OUP, 1994.

3. Nayak, Bhagabat. Girish Karnad's Plays: Archetypal and Aesthetical Presentations, New Delhi Authorspress, 2011
4. Abrams, MH. A Glossary of Literary Terms, Delhi, Macmillan 1979.
5. Ramanujan, AK. Folktales from India, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 2014.