

Significance of Myth in Modern Context: Solving the Conundrum of Identity in Karnad's *Hayavadana*

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Abstract. The Jnanpith award winner Girish Raghunath Karnad is an acclaimed dramatist who went back to the roots of Indian myth and tradition in order to paint a vibrant picture of the Indian society. He uses myths which are believed to be an inseparable part of the fabric of our culture. Karnad deserves much appreciation and applause for making an attempt to preserve them through his works. In his famous play *Hayavadana* Karnad takes inspiration from mythology and folklore to address a conundrum of identity and the quest of modern man to achieve perfection. He represents the problems faced by man regarding his existence in this world full of tangled relationships. The world is made up of incomplete men, incomplete animals and even incomplete Gods. The paper aims at exploring the significance of myth in modern context and tries to solve the conundrum of identity in Karnad's *Hayavadana*.

Keywords : Myth; identity; existential crisis; social conventions.

Since time immemorial myths hold a special place in each and every society. They are believed to be significant since they are an inseparable part of the fabric that makes up the human culture. Their existence has been there since primordial times but it is now that the world has opened its eyes to realise the significance as well as the value of their symbolic meaning. There is an increasing tendency in the attempt to preserve them. India has been a land with an extremely rich heritage and culture as well as a rich mythological history. A number of modern Indian contemporary writers have started to delve into this ancient world of mythology in order to get inspiration for their works. They employ these myths in their contemporary writings and thereby contribute in their preservation and retrieval for future generations. Girish Raghunath Karnad is one such internationally recognized and celebrated writer who uses myth to address contemporary issues of not only modern men but women too, telling history as well as her story. In the field myth and history, Karnad is considered to be one of the leading dramatists. He is known for bringing into focus and addressing the existential crisis faced by a modern man through his plays. Girish Karnad is an important literary figure of post-independent Indian literature and has been the recipient of the prestigious literary honour, Jnanpith award. *Hayavadana* is one such play in which he uses myth to address a conundrum or crisis of identity and the eternal quest of man to achieve that elusive quality desired by all, perfection. The central problem in the play *Hayavadana* (1971) is the existential issues of man as well as the problem of human existence in a world of tangled relationships. His perspective on human relationships is actually an indirect critique of modern Indian society. We see a

world of incomplete men, incomplete animal, even incomplete gods, a world and a deity in different to the existence and issues faced by men. An absurd world where dolls speak and children are mute. Even though there is use of myth, we find the approach of Karnad to be very modern. One can find issues being presented on stage to resonate in the lives of modern men. The myth seems to be very relevant even today as the contemporary society can relate with the issues presented on stage.

Hayavadana originally written in Karnad's adopted tongue Kannada was translated into English by the playwright himself. The play is apparently based upon a tale from *Kathasaritasagar*, a collection of stories in Sanskrit written by Somadeva in the 11th century. The Sanskrit tale is narrated by Vetala who poses a difficult question to a wise king. The question is centered on a certain moral issue which the king ultimately resolves. The tale relates to how Kapila and Devadutta, the two friends who embodied one heart and one soul, fall apart on an issue related to a third person, incidentally a woman named Padmini. They kill themselves and Padmini transposes their heads. The question that arises is that who should be considered as the actual husband of Padmini. The conventional wisdom is that the head being superior to the body should be the decisive factor. Girish Karnad however in the context of the new scientific theories and the loss of identity in this existential world is more influenced by Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads*. Thomas Mann in his work lends a mock-heroic dimension to the mythical story. Karnad in his play has made use of this mythological story to ridicule the philosophy that head is superior to the body. He in fact addresses the issue of real identity of man in a world of tangled relationships. He portrays how a confusion of identities is created and reveals that it is so because the human personality is itself ambiguous by nature.

The play begins with the invocation of Lord Ganesha. Bhagvata is the Sutradhar in terms of Indian classical dramatology where the Sutradhar is believed to be an informer, interpreter as well as an opinion builder. He is the exact counterpart and serves the same purpose as that of chorus in the Greek drama. In keeping with the Indian tradition, the invocation of Vakratunda Maharaja is quite curiously academic. The God himself is invoked for a successful play similar to the invocation of muses in Greek epics. Lord Ganesha is considered to be a destroyer of incompleteness and thereby it becomes a matter of faith that somebody who is himself incomplete should be prayed to and worshipped. It has a relevance to the context of the play because while the incompleteness of man can be questioned, the incompleteness of God is a matter of faith which is beyond any question.

Further, we also have the episode of *Hayavadana* which constitutes the sub-plot of the play. It functions as a prologue as well as an epilogue. *Hayavadana* is introduced early because it has a bearing on the main plot of the play. The

Hayavadana from the myth narrates its woeful tale of how his mother had married a Gandharva (a celestial being) on marrying a white stallion, however, when the Gandharva's curse comes to an end after fifteen years, she refuses to follow him to heaven. Hence, this sad story of Hayavadana – half horse and half man, who can still speak in man's language at once becomes a character leaving all confused. Hayavadana symbolically represents the confused identity of human beings which Girish Karnad has primarily focussed upon in this play. Hayavadana tells that its personal life has been blameless and that it has taken interest in the social life of the nation – civics, politics, patriotism, nationalism and the socialist pattern of the society. What Hayavadana speaks for himself is applicable to man in general who delves in too many things and in the process forgets about his own identity. So, the primary concern of this play is to voice the issue of identity. It deals with the identity of man- is he any better from the mythological Hayavadana? Like Hayavadana, man too tries everything to the best of his abilities- visiting all pilgrim places, tries magicians, mendicants, maharishis, saints and sadhus but to what effect? Hayavadana is incomplete and without identity but he refuses to accept his fate. He loathes his life as half horse and half man and wants to get rid of the horse's head. He longs to be a complete man. Hayavadana becomes symbolic of the identity crisis man faces. Everywhere he goes he has to cover his head with a veil like Hayavadana. In the process he starts getting bald, as Hayavadana admits. The baldness too is again symbolic of the intellectual vacuity of man in the course of his existential struggle, the quest of man for the assertion of self, despite his limitations. Hayavadana's tale ends comically with him becoming a complete horse rather than a complete man.

The weird case of Hayavadana becomes equally weird in terms of human beings. They become inexplicable as their fate is not in their own hands. Man is driven by his destiny over which he has absolutely no control. We find man running after something impossible and utterly elusive called perfection.

The central plot of this play involving Devadutta, Padmini and Kapila arouses as much concern. Devadutta and Kapila excel in different faculties, one in the intellectual faculty and the other in terms of physical prowess and strength. Yet they are one heart and one soul, but with Padmini coming into the picture, the scenario changes. Devadutta can't concentrate because his whole being is thinking of her alone, but he thinks she is beyond his wildest dreams. But for Kapila he couldn't have achieved his goal of marrying her. Devadutta accepts,

how fortunate I am to have a friend like him,
pure gold. (*Hayavadana*, 10)

But then the basic human nature begins to express itself – doubt and scepticism,

but why should I have trusted him...he is a
wizard in his smithy. (15)

And still his ambiguous nature continues to torture him. He tells Padmini, "...one has to collect merit in seven lives, to get a friend like him" (Karnad, 21). The whole issue up to now establishes beyond doubt that the exact identity of Devadutta can never be known. Same is the case with Padmini. She has to tell Devadutta,

you are my saffron, my marriage thread, my
deity... I like making fun of Kapila, he is such
an innocent. (21)

As the story goes on Padmini has a growing leaning towards Kapila and becomes his admirer. There are several passages to confirm her growing obsession with Kapila. Padmini pines for a complete man and she in a way tries to fulfil this desire when she transposes the heads. She becomes elated when she thinks that she has got the perfect man with the head of Devadutta and body of Kapila, but her happiness is short lived. With the heads being transposed, the identity crisis only deepens and the influence of body on mind increases. The ambiguous nature of human personality is revealed. Devadutta with the body of Kapila starts to behave differently from what he was before but he slowly returns back to his former self. It is the same with Kapila. But there is a difference. Devadutta stops reading texts and Kapila is haunted by memories in Devadutta's body. This brings forth a conflict, is the mind dependant on the body or vice versa. We see Karnad ridiculing the philosophy which differentiates between body and soul and which holds the head superior. As man in present times often chooses body over mind Padmini too does the same but ends up being disappointed in her quest for that complete 'Man'.

Padmini is torn between the two and ultimately performs 'Sati' when Devadutta and Kapila chose to die. The crisis does not end even after the death of the protagonists. It is carried over to the son of Padmini. Padmini had instructed Bhagvata to handover her child to the hunters in the forest and to tell them that he was Kapila's son. She wanted the child to stay with them for five years and after that to be handed over the Brahmin Vidyasagara of Dharmapura as Devadutta's son. The child is an orphan who meets rejection at every corner. He also turns out to be incomplete as he appears dumb, morose and mute. Uninterested in communicating with anybody, it is the sight of the laughing horse head, Hayavadana which brings him back to normalcy, into the fold to society from which he was once alienated.

To conclude, we see that Karnad uses myth but only in part and the rest he supplements with his own imagination. The main plot as well as the sub-plot addresses the issue of identity as Kaustav Chakraborty says, "the two threads of action woven together in *Hayavadana* together present a theme, which may be summed up as the totality of being to be achieved through the integration of the

self and wholeness of personality” (131). Man like the characters in the play is driven to search for the unattainable ideal but this impossible search only ends up in inevitable annihilation.

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