



## Reflections

### Contents

Dalit Literature, Theory and Practice: An Interpretation  
**M. B. Gaijan 1**

Charles Fourier and His Utopian Socialism  
**T. Taloh 9**

Violence, Protest and Survival in Vijay Tendulkar's Theatre : A Critical Analysis of *The Vultures*  
**Mithlesh Kumar Chaudhari 13**

Concept of the Absolute in Radhakrishnan and Tagore: A Rhetorical Analysis  
**Dipali Dhaul 21**

G. S. Sarat Chandra: Nostalgia, Displacement and Dilemma  
**Gauri Shankar Jha 29**

Theorizing Cultural Identity and Diaspora: A Case Study of M.G.Vassanji's Fiction  
**Kiran Kalra 37**

The Changing Contours of Womanhood in India: An Overview  
**Harpreet Kour 47**

Adventure Postcolonial Journeys of Naipaul  
**Kumar Parag 57**

Locating Culture Translating Diversity in a Multilayered Narrative with Familial desires and Historical Perspective: A Comparative Study of "Aankhon DekhaGadar" (Hindi) and "Adventures of A Brahmin Priest" (English), Translation of Vishnu BhatGodse's "MazhaPravas".  
**C.S.Dubey 63**

Memory Mechanics in Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories From A War Zone*  
**Imtjungla Jamir & Dwijen Sharma 73**

Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*: Reworking with Folk Elements  
**Anil Kumar & C L Khatri 81**

BEING AND NOTHING  
**CHANDR SHEKHAR DUBEY 87**

The Silent Day----  
**Gauri Shankar Jha 88**

**BOOK REVIEW 89**

## Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*: Reworking with Folk Elements

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Folk drama or for that matter any folk art expresses orally the primitive mindset and life style of the people of a specific region and their unified perspective of caste, class and gender and a world view of the common folk. Folk art is transmitted from one generation to another orally or through performances and practices. However, it is not exclusively oral; *Panchatantra Jataka Tales*, *Kathasaritsagar* which are written narratives are also folk because of their mode of narration. M.H. Abrams says "Folktales include legends, superstitions, songs, tales, proverbs, riddles, spells and nursery rhymes; pseudoscientific lore about the weather, plants and animals; customary activities at births, marriages and deaths and traditional dances and forms of drama performed on holidays or at communal gatherings." (Abrams, 105).

Every state in India has its own distinctive forms of folk theatre for example *Jatra* in Orissa, Bengal and Eastern Bihar, *Tamasha* in Maharashtra, *Nautanki* in Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Punjab, *Bhavai* in Gujarat, *Yakshagana* in Karnataka, *Therubuttu* in Tamil Nadu. Simplicity and the use of local resources have been the hallmark of folk stagecraft. Here actors and the audience are the basic things; action is generally performed on the makeshift stage in the open space. It facilitates actors and Sutradhar to have greater connect with the audience in the course of the play as the stage for the folk theatre is generally a colossal empty space. Audience participation in performance, elaborate make-ups, masks, puppets, chorus, loud music and folk dance are indeed some of the remarkable features of Indian folk theatre.

"A folktale is a poetic text that carries some of its cultural contexts within it, it is also a travelling metaphor that finds a new meaning with each new telling. (Ramanujan, Preface to *Folk Tales from India*). 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

## Reflections

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 brilliantly reworks with Indian folktales as he does with Indian myths. He finds Brechtian equivalents in Indian folk theatre and efficiently reorients them to echo contemporary realities. However, folktales have been in use in Indian theatre since the time of 'Bhasa' plays and has been copiously used in regional and Hindi theatres. But in Indian English drama Karnad was the first playwright to reorient and recontextualize myths and folktales for articulation contemporary problems / issues with universal relevance--be it the feminist issue in *Naga Mandala* (1985) or human quest for completeness or perfection in *Hayavadana* (1970) or Postmodern conflict between spirituality and sensuality in *Flowers*. Bhagabat Nayak rightly comments on Karnad's reworking with the folktales:

"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 transcreated 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

## Reflections

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)

Hayavadana's transposition of head reinforces the central thesis:the conflict between brain and brawn, and feminine sexual desire and marital bindings in the main plot. Devadatta, the husband of Padmini, and Kapila, the blacksmith, a devotee of Devadatta offer their heads to goddess Kali and end their life. When Padmini goes there looking for her husband and lover she finds them beheaded there. She tries to chop her head with the same sword but Kali intervenes and grants live to them asking her to put heads on their bodies properly to bring them back to life. Padmini in a state of confusion or unrest puts Devadatta's head on Kapila's body and Kapila's head on Devadatta's. They come to life and Padmini's desire of having a husband as muscular as Kapila and as intelligent and wise as Devadatta gets fulfilled for some time.

But the question remains. Who is her husband? The problem starts as the bodies gradually accept the supremacy of the heads and converted forms refuse to their originals. The problem of the head being the master of the body as offered in the two versions of the story does not resolve his dilemma and he offers a new interpretation. It is in fact, a patriarchal design in which a male's decision is imposed on a woman; and she is supposed to be happy with that. Karnad questions it and continues the quest for completeness and for that he departs from both versions of the tale. In Karnad's *Hayavadana* it is the women who act as the deciding force- be it the princess's stubborn decision to marry the horse that results in the birth of Hayavadana or Padmini's decision to have both Devadatta's head and Kapila's body that takes her to extra - marital relationship with Kapila and for some time she enjoyed completeness in conventional illicit relationship. When it is discovered, it is not she who is accused of by Devadatta. He accuses Kapila; and they end their life fighting. She does not intervene. She lives by her own whims and fancies. Even their death is decided by her.

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

## Reflections

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).

Thus giving charge of her son to Bhagavata she decides to become sati on the combined pyre of Devadatta and Kapila. One wonders if the two friends are not the victim of the female protagonist. Does she have the license of playing fatal games with her husband who loves her honestly or with her husband's friend who devotedly serve them as Hanuman served Sita and Ram? Who is responsible for the tragic end? Is this the healthy way to create female identity? However, one thing that comes out explicitly is that the quest for perfection/ completeness is illusive and untenable. This view is supported by the subplot of *Hayavadana* (a Karnad's creation) in which Hayavadana before becoming a complete man undergoes its ordeal, meets several wise men and finally goes to the goddess Kali where Devadatta and Kapila had offered their heads. Hayavadana gets the blessing to become horse instead of man because of a linguistic lapse. But Hayavadana's voice remains human till he is purged of it by the grace of Padmini's boy at the place of Bhagavata. With the dichotomy in his body and voice he makes the boy laugh and sing who has never laughed in his age of five years. And the play ends here in consolation. Vidyasagara gets an heir (his grandson) and loses his son; Hayavadana becomes a complete horse if not a complete man.

Now the dynamics of folk can be seen at two levels: at the level of story, its adaptability and its improvisation and innovation that has already been discussed; and secondly at the level of stagecraft.

Karnad presents a composite Indian dramatic form that incorporates the elements of both classical and folk theatre with ample improvisations of his own. The

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## Reflections

important folk elements used in the play are Sutradhar, masks, dolls, miming dance and music, actor - audience contact, communal performance, colourful costumes, the use of humans, animal, supernatural and inanimate.

In Sanskrit plays Sutradhar epitomizes the actor-manager role and in folk theatre he initiates and introduces the play. In *Hayavadana* Bhagavata performs the role of actor- manager, executor and introducer. But he is also an actor and has a recurrent presence as a guiding force in the play. The change of setting indicated by the actors taking a full round on the stage as we find in this play is a popular folk dramatic device. It can be identified with *Parikrama* as found in *Kakshya Vidhana* or change of locale suggested by the movement of actor on the stage in Sanskrit theatre as well as in mobile folk dramatic performance. Bhagavata also lends the effect of *katha vachana*, a folk tradition in India.

Mask is a popular folk device with cultural connotation in dance and drama. In the west it is a means to disguise but in India it assumes a different meaning of simply being the 'writ large' (Karnad, 346) or the exterior appearance. It is the mask of Haya (horse) or of elephant in Ganesh that helps in communicating pictorially the logic of head vs. body and the inevitable human existence of imperfection and the quest for completeness however futile it may be.

Dolls do not find place in Bharata's *Natyashastra* and similarly puppets are entirely of folk origin. Dolls are essentially children playthings and have largely decorative role of entertainment. But in *Hayavadana* 'Dolls' offer an insight into Padmini's and Devadatta's psyche and reinforce the effect and logic of the main plot. They indirectly pose a question if humans are like dolls in the hands of god/fate or nature by reflecting on their predicaments.

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

## Reflections

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. (*Hayavadana*, 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.

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