

Remapping of Mythology in Girish Karnad's Plays

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Abstract

Girish Karnad has harboured a distinct flavour for mythology. His two plays for instance, *Hayavadana* and *Naga Mandala* focus on mythology but with a distinct flavour and also following a peculiar roadmap. His mythological characters don't limit themselves to mere script reading of ancient texts rather they accord their respective input to shape up their unique identity. *Hayavadana*, the character is hybrid -half horse and half human, so is son of Padmini, female protagonist of *Hayavadana*, the play. Misplaced transposition of heads of Devdatt and Kapil, male characters in *Hayavadana* leads to confusion and ultimate tragedy of all and the confused identity of son of Padmini who is brought up by two sets of people entirely different in culture and learning. In *Naga Mandala* also Girish Karnad gives a special hue to mythology as here omnipotent Nag dev is projected as a human, procreating a child with human participation. Here, not as a divine agency but as a human figure he establishes the purity of Rani, female protagonist who suffers utter neglect with no conjugal life from her husband. Nag is not pleased by her devotion but is conjured by the magical herb which she poured on ant hill, the abode of Nag dev not by choice but by chance. Mythology is surely remapped because Karnad has selectively used mythological agent with scientific and human touchups. My study will elaborate how Karnad rewrites mythology in modern vein.

Keywords: Remapping, mythology

Girish Raghunath Karnad is a renowned contemporary writer, playwright, actor and movie director in Kannada language. He is the one of seven recipients of Jnanpith Award for Kannada, the highest literary honour conferred in India. Not only this, he also conferred Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan award for his contribution in various fields. In spite of writing in Kannada language, he earned literary fame of international repute. His works have been translated into various languages. His plays have a flavour of historical myths dealing with the

contemporary issues in a significant way. “Girish Karnad makes use of myths, mythologies and folklore as his source for his plays, not for the glorification of the chosen myths but to relate the myths to the present and to the past beliefs found in these myths” (qtd in Ghanshyam n.p.).

His two famous works *Hayavadana* (1971) and *Naga Mandala* (1988) explore the present, using myths of past giving a new interpretation. The vibrant nuance of rich tradition still alive in his plays using myth and folklore as an eminent tool. Religion and rituals are interwoven in the threads of psychology of Indian people. Religion shapes and constructs the identity of individual and remains deeply embedded in all his plays. In *Hayavadana*, the presence of goddess Kali and in *Naga Mandala*, Kurudeva gives the aphrodisiac root to Rani suggest the element of religious sentiment prevalent in Indian folklore. Life of an individual is governed by societal roles. Padmini and Rani could not come out of their assigned roles of as imposed wifehood as their social obligations.

Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* is a play in two acts is his third play originally written in Kannada. The playwright himself translated it into English retaining its original title *Hayavadana*. *Hayavadana* literally mean ‘one with horse’s head’. Although switching of heads of two people are relatively rare in the myths, legends and folk tales of most cultures, Indian myth provides a rich source of these stories. *Hayavadana* has one main protagonist Padmini having strong moral codes of purity simultaneously strong innate desire for brain and brawn. Girish Karnad's vision of Goddess Kali giving her the blessing of life actually portrays the vision of conflicted life. Padmini admires Devdatta's brain and Kapila's body. Karnad, as a keen observer of human psyche presents the dolls's scene which reminds Padmini again and again about human society, present around us provoking and affecting our decisions. Further the playwright documents the mythical device as a theatrical success when Padmini gives birth to a disfigured son. Karnad reciprocates the old myth of a man with a horse head aspires for a singular life of human beings but the Goddess grants human body with him the unending desires in one's life.

The play tells us the story of Padmini, Kapila and Devadutta where Padmini desperately interchanges the head of Kapila, represents physical beauty, with that of Devadutta, represents intellectual beauty, in her search for completeness. The sub-plot talks about the character of *Hayavadana* who succeeds in his search for completeness at the end of the play by becoming a

complete horse. So, the sub-plot very artistically parodies the main-plot. Thus, *Hayavadana* most effectively subverts the accepted notion of the superiority of head over the body. In order to do this Karnad has chosen the technique of magic realism which itself subverts the hierarchy of magic and realism, emotion and rationality. The play deals with the realms of complete individuals, longings frustrations, ecstasies and miseries of human life. The problem of *Hayavadana* is incompleteness wrapped in alienation as an inescapable and insurmountable reality. Padmini admits this truth:” Why should one tolerate this mad dance of incompleteness” (*Hayavadana* 57).

Karnad portrays superimposed stories with a unifying vision of theatrical aspect having graphics of surprise and controversy. His play *Naga Mandala* combines conventional and subversive modes of oral tradition of storytelling. The plot of Rani’s marriage with Appana relates the harsh truth of Indian society where marriage is imposed as mere social tradition. But the relevance of old blind woman helps Rani by giving her potion to seek her husband’s love is an another instance that exemplifies the orthodox tradition of believing old tales, consequently Nag dev comes in disguise of Appana and develops a fruitful relationship with her. Surprisingly, Karnad portrays Naga as a propellant of ancient myth to solve Rani’s disheartening situation. Still she keeps the truth of Naga before Rani at last. She confronts all the ordeals bravely and successfully comes out of it but the actual cause shudder her conscience. When she goes through the snake ordeal she holds the snake in her hand to prove her innocence and the cobra: “slides up her shoulder and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head.” (*Naga- Mandala* 58). Though Rani is considered as a Goddess but Appana’s truth lies at stake. We can imagine clearly that mandala creates chaos and disorder. Karnad presents the character of married woman from an unconventional perspective and treats her adultery as normal and in a sympathetic viewpoint. He creates a space for freedom for woman and counterattacks the standard codes of conduct decided for women. In a way this tale of ancient mythical folklore deals with free thinking and discloses the hidden motifs. In this regard A. K. Ramanujan says: “Tales speak of what cannot usually be spoken. Ordinary decencies are violated. Incest, cannibalism, pitiless revenge are explicit motif in this fantasy world, which help us face ourselves, envisage shameless wish fulfillments and sometimes ‘by indirection find direction out’” (qtd in *collellmiro* 6).

The zest of the play can be well observed as the playwright implanted the role of cobra symbolically to defy the orthodoxy of Indian epic stories. He retains the idea of long prevalent *Sati Savitri* image set for woman from the ancient times but Rani did not abnegate the prescribed social codes. Still she is found repudiating the codes of purity and that becomes the spine of the whole play where readers find it justified. The cobra gives her cause to achieve integration at different levels. Rani liberates herself at emotional, physical and spiritual level.

Karnad uses myths in his plays to express new meaning and interpretations for contemporary life. He utterly believes that significance of can never dies in this postmodern world where we are living in the age of globalization. Thus, his mythological works creates curiosity, new directions and interpretations of the folk tales. Investing his witty bits of myths he produces the rich tradition of ancient myths in a significant way. Through the interesting blend of history and myth, he talks about socio-cultural issues of the India and provides a new scope of choice for woman when Rani does not seek escape from reality.

Conclusion

Both the plays mentioned above deal with theme of quest for completeness; however this legacy of quest has been handed over to the next generation by their heroines. Padmini in *Hayavadana* aspires for her son to be brought up in a jungle among tribal like Kapila and later on sent to the city to the family of Devdatta. In the same manner Rani requests her husband to permit her son to perform the last ritual of Naga. Both the plays delineate human problems in the best artistic manner. Karnad has successfully exploited myths. Social problems and identity crisis have been projected and institutions scrutinised but Karnad's aim appears to be greater than that he explores the nature of human relationships through these myths with a new substantive meaning. This mythological agent enlivens the plays of Karnad giving special hue and interpretation to the Indian theatre.

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