

## Myth and Folklore in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*, *Bali: The Sacrifice* and *Flowers*

Trayee Sinha

Ph.d Scholar

Women's Studies Research Centre

University of Calcutta

"Please give us something which would not only teach us but be pleasing both to eyes and ears".  
(Adya Rangacharya, 1)

This is the way how Lord Indra requested Lord Brahma to bring change in the society which was infested with tyranny, hypocrisy, jealousy, anger, sensual pleasure and with many more nerve storming passions. Then Brahma gave the pious idea of Natya Veda which is the combined essence of four Vedas- dance from the Rig Veda, song from Sama Veda, mimicry from Yajur Veda and passion from Atharva Veda. Going back to the history of Indian drama, it had a flourishing phase in the Vedic ages. The subject matter of the plays was based on the great Indian epics like the Ramayana, the Mahabharata. The performances were enacted out in front of the public.

Drama was one of the popular forms of entertainment during the Vedic ages and Sanskrit drama continued with its glory up to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Reading a book was not accessible to all. Watching a drama was an easier option for most of the people in society. It was refreshing enough for them to get rid of the drudgery and monotony of daily life. The dramas which were performed depicted different situations relating to the life of men. The performers got immense appreciation from the viewers as the acting was realistic enough.

Drama is an ancient form of entertainment mentioned in the scriptures. There is the reflection of Bharat Muni's concept of dramatic theory in the sixth chapter of Natyashastra:

"The combination called Natya is a mixture of rasa, bhavas, abhinayas, dharmics, vrittis, provrittis, siddhis, avaras, instruments, song and theatre house". (Bharat Gupta: 86)

Indian drama was in a state of decline from the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards. But it regained its lost glory during the 1920s. On one hand, it was the period when the First World War already spread out its impacts in different fields. Drama in England was much more realistic and close to life. As far as the field of Indian drama is concerned it had its heyday again with the establishment of Kendriya Natak Sangeet Akademi in 1953. When drama got such institutional affiliations people were more interested in this culturally enriched form of amusement. 1972 was the landmark year for Indian theatre. The modernization of Indian theatre was done with the literary excellence of playwrights like Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad.

These dramatists have approached with their innovative ideas to present in front of the larger audience. There were bold innovations. They made fruitful experiments with the thematic concerns and technical virtuositities. Indian English drama got some innovative thematic concerns which were able to explore the possibilities of drama and to communicate with the truth of things. Tracing the drama of these maestros we get the reflection of Bharat's Natyashastra. Stage setting, music, plot construction, characterization, dialogue, and acting - everything had its

innovative outputs. Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad- these trio dramatists have made different experimentations as far as the theme, setting, plot, acting are concerned.

Badal Sircar depicts the existential attitude of modern man in the postcolonial India. The concept of modern man representing a new generation was challenging enough for dramatists like Badal Sircar to take up as the subject matter of his drama. Vijay Tendulkar focuses on the middle class life in India and he tried to show the confrontation of the isolated individuals with the hard core reality of life. He has focused on the adverse circumstances of human life. Man's struggle for survival even in the hostile surroundings and his ultimate potential in achieving something is highly recognized in the plays of Tendulkar.

The present paper attempts to focus on the thematic concerns of Indian English drama with special reference to the plays of Girish Karnad. He is the great Indian playwright, poet, actor, director, critic and translator. Born in 1938 Karnad gave a clarion call to his audience to face the challenges of human life to be enacted in front of the public. His experimentations with history, myth and folk culture gave him enough success. He has written a number of plays in Kannada which have also been translated into English and several major Indian languages. Karnad's wide handling of history, myth and folklore to tackle contemporary issues has been widely appreciated by the contemporary dramatists as well as the huge audience throughout the world.

One of the distinguishing features of Karnad's dramatic style is that he creates his plots in such a manner so that it can work as a mirror in which the society can be reflected. The art of storytelling, which has been the practice of many writers, is also followed by Karnad in his subjective style. In the *Introduction to Three Plays* Karnad observes:

"The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it has also the means of questioning these values, of making them literally strand 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". (1999: 14)

Karnad uses a means of autonomy in writing his plays. They are independent in their respective structure and style. Although Karnad has not confined those stories within himself- those stories become alive by being told and shared by the dramatist. Karnad's self- conscious effort as a post independent playwright developed an experimental outlook in the field of drama. Karnad, like his contemporaries such as Dharamvir Bharati, Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar, Utpal Dutt, Habib Tanvir

"...approach playwriting as a serious literary activity and drama as a complex verbal art, potentially connected to, but also independent of, theatrical practice: the play- as- meaningful- text is thus detached equally from the genres of commercialized entertainment and topical political performance". (Dharwadker viii)

Karnad has artistically used history, myth and folk lore in his dramas and that makes the thematic reflections very much lively, widely acclaimed by the audience. Karnad's chosen literary form was drama and he selected Kannada to be his principal language of original composition. Although his mother tongue was Kannada and his first phase of plays was first written in Kannada but he himself translated his plays into English to catch the wider audience.

As far as subject matter, dramatic style and authorial identity are concerned Karnad made a distinctive treatment which is subjective in its nature. Karnad's yearning to remake the past in the image of the present is evident in many of his plays.

Karnad's handling of myth is evident in his plays like *Yayati* (1961), *Hittina Hunja* (The Dough Rooster, 1980; rewritten in English as *Bali: The Sacrifice*, 2002), *Agni Mattu Male* (The Fire and the Rain, 1994). History as a theme is reflected in his plays like *Tughlaq* (1964), *Tale – Danda* (Death by Decapitation, 1990) and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (1997). Again, plays like *Hayavadana* (Horse- Head, 1971), *Naga Mandala* (Play With a Cobra, 1988) and *Flowers: A Monologue* (2004) deal with Karnad's explorations of myth and folklore. Karnad's plays contain the dominant presence of the ancient and medieval past. Karnad had the precision of an artist while incorporating history, myth and folklore in his plays.

The present paper will focus on the specific three plays by Karnad - **Hayavadana**, **Bali: The Sacrifice** and **Flowers** to deal with Karnad's post-modernist interpretation of myths and folklore.

**Hayavadana** is a re-shaping of an ancient Indian myth from Thomas Mann's translation of the Sanskrit *Vetal Panchavimshati* which forms part of Kshemendra's *Brihat Katha Manjari* and Somadeva's *Kathasaritsagara* to point out a man's eternal quest for self realization. The theme also reveals the Upanishad's principle that visualizes the human body as a symbol of organic relationship of the parts to the whole. The issue of the transposition of heads is the significant issue in this drama. Karnad dramatically exposes the "incompleteness" of the human being by referring to some of the stylized actions from the drama. Kapila and Devadatta's fight in the Kali temple bears that stylized action. Padmini is represented as a model of selfishness and sexuality. She had the limitless urge to quench her thirst through the means of brain and body – she is married to Devadatta but she craves for Kapila.

One of the significant skills of Karnad while dealing with myth is the transformation of religious myths into the non-religious ones. In India most of the mythological stories are centered on religion. But Karnad is not a blind imitator. Here lies the individual quality of Karnad as a dramatist. He transforms the religious myths to question as well as critique those myths. He makes certain changes in the names of the characters. He wanted the names not to be the reflection of the ancient myth entirely, he wanted the names to be generic. Karnad's logic behind the change of names can be justified from the above remark made by him:

"In Sanskrit, any person whose name you do not know is addressed as 'Devadatta'. Kapila means dark and therefore earthy and Padmini is the name of one class of women in Vatsayana's *Kamasutra*". (Bernett, 1982)

In **Hayavadana** the presence of the goddess Kali presents the religious sentiment of the Indian society. It also focuses on the cultural and psychological interpretations of the goddess Kali to be representative of a deity as well as a destroyer and preserver. Going back to the age of Pope and Milton it was the tradition to seek divine intervention before beginning any grand venture. Coming back to the post independence playwrights, Karnad makes that issue prevalent in *Hayavadana*. In this drama divine intervention unfolds the central theme, the "incompleteness" of the human beings (the fight between Devadatta and Kapila at the Kali temple) and the same man's quest to active completion. Karnad develops various folk conventions like music, chorus, and the amalgamation of human and non-human worlds in order to permit a simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view.

The outstanding quality of **Hayavadana** as an urban folk play is that “it joins the conventions of Yakshagana folk performance( stock characters, music, dance, mask, talking dolls etc.) with a core narrative that poses philosophical riddles about the nature of identity and reality”.( Dharwadker:xxv). While discussing the story of Hayavadana, the myth of lord Ganesha would be brought into discourse. The lord, with His human body and elephant head closely resembles to the horse-headed man. This man gives the play its title but lacks any element of divinity and it appears painfully suspended between the human and animal worlds.

Lord Ganesha can endure to remain mix up but Hayavadana cannot do so. He does not possess a prior self which can re-assert itself. The wholeness achieved by Hayavadana owes to his human characteristics and he turns completely into a horse. Karnad gives a comic touch to this play by bringing close together the human and the non-human worlds. Talking about the complexity of **Hayavadana** Dharwadker comments:

While the action of folk theatre moves between a frame and the inner play, in Hayavadana there are two outer frames, both belonging to the historical present, which interest unpredictably with each other and with the action of the inner play. The first frame consists of the Bhagavata, the female chorus, and the two male actors who are not merely characters in a folk performance but performers in a provincial troupe preparing to enact the story of Padmini and her two husbands of a contemporary audience. (Dharwadker, xxix)

Karnad makes an experiment with the conventional folk structure of a play-within-a-play in Hayavadana. In this play it is transformed into a reflexive rehearsal format. Its function is to subjectify the defining conventions of folk performance to ironic scrutiny.

Culture is one of the parameters to represent a society. Each and every society has its own cultural ethos and their very essence represents the pulse of its people, their customs, their rituals and their beliefs. Myths, legends, folklores are the embodiments of these cultural ethos. The ethos signifies the values of life, the rules of society and above all the shared relationship between different races. Girish Karnad has repeatedly returned to this cultural ethos to merge tradition with modernity. That is why the ancient meanings in his plays take a new dimension having diverse meanings. So M.K. Naik had aptly commented that

“Hayavadana presents the typical existential anguish, but does not stop at the existential despair”.

Taking up one of his latest published dramas based on the theme of myth is **Bali: the Sacrifice** which was written first in Kannada entitled Hittina Hunja (1980) but rewritten in English and published much later, in 2002. India is a land enriched with different mythological stories and Karnad is one of the writers having the urge of exploring it into his works. Bali was acclaimed in English rather than as Hittina Hunja. **Bali** has an ancient source, the thirteenth century Kannada epic, Yashodhara Charite, which can be traced back to the two Sanskrit epics on the ninth and eleventh centuries. Karnad draws the reference of both Hinduism and Jainism and the different cultural ethos related to them in **Bali: the Sacrifice**. The Jain princess marries a Hindu king and she cannot bear up the significance of Bali which is synonymous to sacrifice.

Karnad has explored the sacrificial myth of the Hindu culture in this play. In this play femininity has been represented as bold, assertive and self-oriented. The queen did not have a child from her husband. But the queen’s desire for sexual gratification is absolutely personal. That is why she showed her bold and resolute nature to go to the mahout, a lower class man, to have a sexual union. It is not her conscious attempt to produce children rather she wanted to



fulfill her frustrated sexuality by means of the body of the mahout. When the king and his mother comes to know about the queen's adultery the queen- mother needed a ritual cleansing to get rid of the sin. Sacrificing an animal was the best option provided by her to her daughter-in-law.

The counter between two different religions is shown through the single act of bali which represents violence. In Jainism sacrifice of lives is prohibited. In Hindu culture, referring to the mother goddess Kali or Chamunda, animals were sacrificed from the ancient times. So this play is based on the issue of violence vs. non-violence. In Karnad's plays religion plays a very significant role. The gods and goddesses are repeatedly invoked by Karnad but not in the way Milton or Pope had invoked the Muse. Karnad has referred to the gods not its strictest religious sense; it gets a multidisciplinary dimension in Karnad's hands.

The characters of **Bali** are not the conventional ones; rather they are treated from a post-modern dimension by Karnad. The queen is the perfect example of Karnad's unconventional experiment. She was childless till she had a physical union with a mahout, a man lower than her status. But that is not the ultimate aim of her life. The conventional notion of womanhood is not strictly followed by Karnad as far as the characterization of the queen is concerned. She craves for physical union not for the sake of child but to satisfy her female lust. Another noteworthy point is that she is not traumatized by the burden of sin. Her physical union with a man other than her husband was not a sin to her at all. Even when she discloses it to her husband she is not at all repentant. Karnad questions the myth of a woman – is she to cater to the needs of her husband and in-laws even if she feels reluctant to do that? Although the queen is blessed with the sacrificial end of her life (as most of the women do in myths and reality) still she becomes an example created by Karnad to question the so called notion of patriarchy.

The queen being a Jain by birth rejected the idea of sacrificing animals in favour of god although she sacrifices herself at last. So Karnad here sarcastically shows how the title of the play is justified - crushing pitifully helpless mortals by gods- either directly or indirectly. The queen made a dough cock to sacrifice in front of god to abide by the law of non-violence but ultimately ends her life to make herself free from all these rituals which are mostly developed by human beings- not gods. Again, Karnad is questioning the prejudice stricken society- how far these sacrificial rituals bring salvation to mankind?

**Flowers** (2004) is an absolutely different treatment by Karnad. The play is a dramatic monologue that questions the conflict between duty and desire. The story is a journey to the world of folk lore. Karnad's dramaturgy makes a slight shift from the normative pattern of his plays. In this play Karnad has emphasized a man's desire for physical lust. Karnad is questioning the religion and in some ways he tries to focus on the system where the priests were satisfied by the courtesans in the name of their service to god. But that is the myth related to the system of Devdasi. **Flowers** has a slightly different touch as far as this type of relationship is concerned. This monologue is based on a folk lore on the Chitradurga region of Karnataka.

Karnad creates a conflict between religious devotion and erotic love through the characterization of the priest. The priest in **Flowers** worships the non-living lingam but his carnal desire for the living female body is gratified by his attachment to a courtesan named Ranganayaki. Although the priest was married but he could not resist himself to make love to the courtesan. He violates his dharma and bhakti for the love of a courtesan and such relationships were not sanctioned by the society. In this way he violates both of his duties- his duty to the chieftain and his duty to his wife. Karnad artistically portrays the metaphysical dilemma of the priest.

Karnad's superficial but deeply entrenched modes of thought are clearly revealed through his treatment of the priest. The priest used to decorate Ranganayaki's body with different types of flowers according to her demand as he decorates the shivalinga. Karnad traces the change within the priest's wife as she finds out something is wrong. The priest's words bear ample relevance at this juncture:

"My wife had caught on to the new element in my daily pooja. I looked for a wider variety of flowers now, chose them with greater care and experimented with floral motifs on the linga which would be distinct from those I would devise later on Ranga. The garlands were the same, inevitably, but God was not to be a preliminary model for what I would do with her body. Each day I coaxed the flowers to say something special to God and then something entirely different to Ranga." (251)

The priest's interest was transformed from the stone linga into the living yoni. So he could easily decorate Ranganayaki's body with the flowers which was offered to the body of the shivalinga. The erotic pleasure that the priest was getting with Ranganayaki was more than whatever he got from his wife. One day the chieftain arrived late at the temple and the priest had already finished his worship and went to Ranga with the same flowers that he offered to the temple God. He decorated Ranga's body with those flowers with a sudden call that the chieftain was coming to the temple. This made him puzzled enough because there was no fresh flower to offer to the linga. So he decorated the linga for the second time with the flowers that had been used to decorate Ranganayaki's body also.

The chieftain's discovery of a hair in the flowers is the turning point of the drama. "I didn't know God had long hair" (256) and the repetition of the same words in the very next page reveal the anger and disgust of the chieftain. But the priest, endlessly worshipping the linga for a long time would not hesitate to give the daring reply:

'If we believe that God has long hair', I said, 'He will have long hair'. (257)

The priest's challenge to show that the God had long hair is the manifestation of his deep religious belief in the linga. But the readers may ask a question – how was it possible for him to take such a challenge? The priest himself is giving the answer:

I don't know whether prayer is the right word. I had known the linga since m birth. My association with it was the longest and the closest in my life. As a child I had peed on it, and then in remorse wept on it. Even as an adult, I had poured out my woes to it, bragged about how my success with flowers had turned to save my face. Just that. I had disgraced myself and trembled at the thought of facing the world in that state. I didn't know what God could do. I had created a situation which was now beyond even His tinkering. But there was nothing else for me to do except surrender to Him. For twelve days, I cleansed my existence of everything, every name or person, except the linga. (257-258)

So this was the source of his challenge to the chieftain to show that God has long hair. Due to the touch of deep mythological belief such impossible venture can be made possible. The priest's incidence coincided at this point. When the chieftain came to check if the linga really had long hair he found "the long and thick hair that came cascading from the linga, hiding it completely." (258). The myth grows into a deeper level, the chieftain wanted to test if the hair

“could be glued” with the result that “one of his Brahmin courtiers moved it, twisted a tuft of hair round his finger and tugged”. He put all his strength into it and suddenly the tuft came out of his hand. He brought the tuft to the chieftain who observed it closely and discovered blood on his fingers. It signifies how God responded to the call of his devotee.

The priest, though blessed by God, caught up in a dilemma of violating the sanctity by offering Him the flowers already used. But that creates no difference within the linga – the priest is still blessed and is saved from being thrown out of the temple due to this blasphemy. The priest’s final words make the readers think about Karnad’s artistic handling of the element of folklore;

I am guilty of gross dereliction, of sacrilege. Guilty of cruelty to the two women I loved. Why then should God cast His vote on my behalf? Because I loved Him? Has God the right to mock justice in favour of love for him? Or does he have a different logic? If He does, it’s not fair that He should expect me to abide by it, not demanding to know what that logic is. Such grace is condescension even it comes from God. Why am I worthy of this burden He has placed on my shoulders? I refuse to bear it. God must understand I simply cannot live on His terms. (260)

An analysis of Karnad’s three plays based on myth and folk culture – **Hayavadana**, **Bali: The Sacrifice** and **Flowers** reminds us of V. Rangan’s characterization of folk imagination and folk play and their interplay with magic. Rangan’s art of characterization can easily be applied to Karnad’s plays. Rangan comments:

Folk imagination is at once mythopoeic and magical. In the folk mind one subsumes the other. Folk belief, besides being naïve, has a touch of poetry about it which works toward a psychic adjustment. All folklore is religious, often based on animism because the primitive imagination extends its vision from the natural, in which it is steeped and with which it is saturated, which to the folk mind is only an extension of the former.

Karnad has successfully placed himself within that cultural set up where the post-independence playwrights have made their space. Death, doubt, uncertainty- these triadic signs of life have been stylistically pointed out and discussed by Karnad in his handling of myth and folklore in the three plays mentioned above.

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