

Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*: A Reader-Response Reading

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Abstract: The present paper is an outcome of my reading of Karnad's *Hayavadana* for several times. Drawing on the ideas of the reader-response critics, the paper attempts to re-read Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*. After reviewing *Hayavadana*, it ventures to come with the different interpretations by the reader i.e. by the author of this paper. The paper claims that Karnad's *Hayavadana* ridicules the contemporary government policies and decisions related to women rights and education of socially deprived. It attempts to resemble the text with the contemporary political history of India. It focuses on the assumption that readings vary with the purpose, needs, experiences, and concerns of the reader and at the same time reasserts the reader's role in the recreation of the text.

Keywords: Hayavadana, Karnad, myth, history

Background: Recently, in my travel, I happened to meet a farmer, who was semi-literate and in his sixties. After realizing that we, my two colleagues and I, are teachers, he politely, peculiarly after begging for a pardon, asked us if we believed in the tales of Changdev, the Marathi saint of 12th century, being survived for fourteen hundred years and Tukaram's, the great Marathi Saint, going to *Vaikuntha* (Heaven) as he himself did not. These two sceptical questions being asked by the man who was fifth class passed (which he told me on asking) was both bolt from the blue and kick in the teeth for me and consequently reminded me of the reader-response criticism. Being prompted by this scrupulous experience, my mind went on rethinking about the text which I was dealing with at B.A. level i.e. Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*, which I had read for several times before. During the same period of reflections over the play, I came across V. S. Kumar's poem "*The Whiner's Plaint: In Search of Identity*", in which the poet depicts the changing identity of the Indian man. The poem is a fascinating account of how our identity as an Indian varies according to nations, regions, religion, caste, creed and race. The speaker of the poem says:

Going by my passport, / They call me Indian abroad,
In my own land, / I don't know who I am?
In America, / I'm minus Red,
In South Africa, / I'm a coloured
And in England I'm a wog. / Do tell me who I am?
... beyond the Vindyas / I am a southie
or most often a Madras, in Madras I am Malayali.
..... to the Muslim, I am a Hindu and
To Hindus I am a Brahmin / Or some other caste name...
Do tell me who I am?

- V. S. Kumar

Just like the varying identity of the speaker of this poem, my interpretation of Karnad's Hayavadana too kept on bringing permutation as per my growing exposure to the literature and literary theory. Having read this play as a student, as a teacher and as a reader with some background in literary theory, my insights of the play varied from time to time. The repeated reading of the play made me to construe it from different standpoint. The text made me to think both 'horizontally' and 'vertically' and come up with different meanings. Of course, the subjectivity of my understanding must be apprehended here. But to hold up my stand, I have sought the help of the views and opinions of the proponents of the reader-response criticism. Hence, in the subsequent section of this paper, the views of post-structuralist thinkers such as Rosenblatt, Roland Barthes, Wolfgang Iser, and Stanley Fish have been briefly explained to provide a brief background to my study.

Reader-response criticism at a glimpse:

"Tis the good reader that makes the good book".

(Ralph Waldo Emerson, American essayist, poet, philosopher).

The survey in the field of literary theory, according to Rosenblatt (1978) reveals that the reader remained always 'invisible'; he was simply treated as the 'passive recipient'. However, with the emergence of 'reader-response' criticism the belief that the meaning of any text is not self-contained received widely. Most of the critics began to think that it is through the interplay between the text and the reader's mind the work of art gains its meaning. Thus, reading, in the view of these critics, became the act of recreation. As Rosenblatt (1978) explained it, 'a given text is not always read in the same way'. Instead, readings vary with the purpose, needs, experiences, and concerns of the reader, who adopts a "stance" toward a text, an attitude that determines what signals to respond to so that certain results can be achieved. According to Rosenblatt, a piece of literature comes into being when it receives an aesthetic reading, which is produced by a merging of reader and text (1978). Roland Barthes's dichotomy of '*readerly text*' and '*writerly text*' is also supportive in the understanding of the considerable role of the reader in this process of recreation. The first system of reading, according to Barthes, totally ignores the play of language and treats the text as transparent whereas the second system sticks to the text, reads with application and transport, and by layering of significance. The creative response to the '*writerly text*' is what transforms the reader from passive consumer into blissful 'scribe' or 'scriptor'. Barthes defines the text as 'a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture' (Patricia Waugh, 2006). Wolfgang Iser too in *The Act of Reading* (1978) explained that the significance of the work does not lie in the meaning sealed within the text, but in the fact that that meaning brings out what had previously been sealed within us. Fish, in his essay "Is their text in this class?" (1980), talks about the *instability* of the text and the *unavailability* of determinate meaning.

In light of the views of these scholars, the farmer in the above incident seems me to be a very example of the reader who is not ready to accept the sole authority of the writer submissively. His example illustrates the

fact that the reader cannot be understood without his own history, biography, psychology. Hence, the text becomes an endless play of signifiers. It suggests the plurality of meaning. Thus, reading turns into a freedom movement. Once the reader was bound to the intended, objective and fixed meaning of a text, now he/she is free to interpret and see it as per his own purpose, needs, experiences, and concerns. However at this juncture, it is also apt to recognize the controversy over the authenticity and limitations of the reader-response criticism to take a suitable stand. M. H. Abrams in his paper on 'How To Do Things with Texts?' accuses each "Newreader" (Derrida, Harold Bloom and Stanley Fish) of playing a double game of "introducing his own interpretive strategy when reading someone else's text, but tacitly relying on communal norms when undertaking to communicate the methods and results of his interpretations to his own readers" (Patisan Review, 1979, no.4. p. 587). This peculiar opinion of Abrams highlights the extent of subjectivity in reader response reading so its limitation cannot be neglected. With this brief introduction to the occasion for writing this paper and review of the main trends in reader-response reading, I would like to draw readers' attention to my personal interpretations of *Hayavadana*. Nevertheless, I must admit that I am well aware of appreciating the readers' personal reactions to this essay.

Reviewing the studies on *Hayavadana*: In his introduction to Karnad's *Hayavadana* Kirtinath Kurtkoti (1973) appreciates Girish Karnad for "being able to bring to drama a first-hand knowledge of the practical demands of the stage and a better understanding of dramatic style and technique". According to him Karnad's *Yayati*, his first play reinterprets an ancient myth. His second play *Tughlaq* is based on history. In his view both the plays are thoroughly modern in outlook and spirit. In this introduction *per se* we come to know that the plot of *Hayavadana* comes from *Kathasaritasagara*, an ancient collection of stories in Sanskrit. But Karnad, as he himself admits it in his acknowledge to his play, has borrowed it through Thomas Mann's retelling of the story in the *Transposed Heads*. The information discussed above implies that Karnad has dealt with myth, history and folktales in writing his plays. That is to state that Karnad himself has reinterpreted myth and history to meet his aesthetic needs. Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan, a theatre critic in her review to *Hayavadana* writes that it is a play with many layers which can baffle a discerning viewer. Is it a folk tale with a moral in it? Is it a reinterpretation of a folk tale? Is it, like the director Yamuna would like to call it, a classic, "An example of modern India, which retains all the romance of the past, and is aptly contemporary, and further, one which can go securely into the future?" As a theatre piece, it makes you think beyond the actual play. It represents the past and the present, the real and the unreal, the myth as well as the truth (e-STQ / 029 / 21.12.05). The views of both Kirtinath Kurtkoti and Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan are cited here to emphasize on the possible varied perspective, as per the background of the reader, towards a text. Of course, I cannot claim to be having been acquainted to every available material on the interpretation of the text. My

reinterpretation of Karnad is highly shadowed by my own perspectives, concerns and attitudes. So readers will, doubtlessly, have their points of agreement and disagreement with these interpretations.

The theme of incompleteness and the expanding perspective: The theme of incompleteness, of course, influenced by the critical analysis by different critics, in the play was my first understanding. Padmini's longing for completeness, Devdatta's physical and Kapila's intellectual incompleteness and Hayavadana's striving for completeness support this understanding. The play starts with a prayer to elephant-headed Lord Ganesha who himself is the symbol of incompleteness. Then we confront Hayavadana, the horse-headed man who is in search of completeness. In his prayer the Bhagavata praises lord Ganesha as '*the embodiment of imperfection; of incompleteness*' (Act I, p.1, 2009). These two symbolic characters, Lord Ganesha and Hayavadana, foreshadow the coming events in the play. Being initially bewildered by its psychological depth, I perceived the play as a tale of the human longing for physical, emotional, and sexual completeness which is often controlled by social norms. Karnad's understanding of human aspirations, emotions and predicament appealed my sensitivity. Hayavadana, from this point of view, represents the predicament of those who undergo a mental torture due to their physical disability and ugliness. Devdatta, although, intellectually blessed and gifted, is deprived of the physical fitness and pleasure. His jealousy for Kapila who is his bosom friend is the outcome of this physical powerlessness. Out of the fear of his object being stolen i.e. loosing Padmini, as he observes her to be drifting towards Kapila, I think, Devdatta suggests Padmini, '*Padmini, Kapila isn't used to women. The only woman he has known in his life is his mother*' (Act I, p.22, 2009). On the other hand, Kapila has no equal in '*daring, in dancing, in strength and in physical skills*' (Act I, p.2, 2009), but he still feels incomplete when he compares himself to Devdatta intellectually. Kapila is the victim of the inferiority complex resulted from the prevailing social conditions. He expresses his indebtedness to Devdatta by saying that he would have been '*no more than the ox in our yard*'. He admits that it was Devdatta who showed him that there were such things as poetry. But my rereading of the play for several times made me take a different stance. I felt that Kapila's conduct is the symbolic representation of mindset of the people from the socially underprivileged which was conditioned by the *varna* system.

The Social Theme in the Play : Karnad claims to have drawn heavily on Thomas Mann's reworking of the tale in *The Transposed Heads*, in which Mann ridicules the mechanical conception of life which differentiates between body and soul. He makes fun of the philosophy which holds the head superior to the body. However, in Karnad's Hayavadana it, in my view, gains different turn. I think Karnad has adhered to this age old philosophy of head-over-body. Can we interpret it from the caste-oriented perspective as an effort to assert the Brahmnical supremacy and underestimate the efforts of downtrodden to come above their traditional roles? Head can be seen as the symbol of higher caste

and body stands for a lower caste. Devdatta, although called as the best friend of Kapila by the Bhagavata, is always seems to be caste-conscious. One may think that it is the gradual outcome of Kapila's infidelity towards his wife Padmini, but I sensed this caste-consciousness of Devdatta right from the time we meet him in the play. He sends Kapila as a messenger to Padmini's place, but he distrusts his ability in doing so. What Devdatta thinks of Kapila in the following lines is supportive to form this opinion:

---Pure gold (*Pause*). But should I have trusted this to him? He means well---and he is a wizard in his smithy, in his farm, in his field. But here? No. He is too rough, too delicate. He was the wrong man send. He's bound to ruin the whole thing (Act I, p.16, 2009).

Further he asks Kapila 'What do you know of poetry and literature? Go back to your smithy---that's where you belong (Act I, p.13, 2009). Kapila, on the other hand, often thinks of Devdatta as his best friend. And he is ready to do anything for him. He is ready to jump into a well---or walk into fire. For him his parents are not close to him as Devdatta is. He would leave them the minute if Devdatta asked him to. In contrast, Devdatta does not take him seriously. Indeed, he feels irritated for this love of Kapila. He says 'Don't start on that now. You've said it fifty times already' (Act I, p.12, 2009). His friendship with Kapila seems to be shallow and practical. Padmini on hearing Devdatta's views about Kapila is shocked; she says 'You mean it's dangerous to be with him? The way you one would never imagine he was your best friend' (Act I, p.22, 2009). Devdatta, the Brahmin, ultimately regains his original body whereas Kapila regains the original shape of his body which proves that it is the head not the body rules the world. Although Kapila gets a chance of being with Devdatta's body, he fails to achieve the intellectual ability. Karnad, I feel, reasserts this supremacy of the Brahmins through the following lines of Kapila:

Kapila ... Your body gave me new feelings, new words-I felt awake as I'd never before... even started... writing poems. Very bad ones, I'm afraid. (Act II, p.60, 2009).

The above lines forced me categorically to understand the presumption of the so called higher caste people that the downtrodden, despite the opportunities provided, can never equal them intellectually. I wonder if it is to suggest that the people from so called lower caste are born for the physical labour only. Kapila represents the class of people who have been victimized and exploited by the people who could always '*twist* the so called *Sacred Texts to suit their needs*' (Act I, p.38, 2009). Devdatta's argument over the importance of head among the human limbs by referring the scriptures to prove that he is the true husband of Padmini reminds me the Brahmnical tendency of manipulating the religious ideologies to suit their needs. Traditionally, they held themselves at the topmost position in the social hierarchy. Kapila, the blacksmith, is utilized by Devdatta, the Brahmin, and Padmini, the Vaishya (a daughter of a businessman) for their purposes. And it is Kapila who is the loser. He loses his attractive body, his parents, and his people for the sake of a superficial friendship and love. Hayavadana, who is in search of

completeness eventually transforms into a complete horse, again symbolizes the vain efforts of the downtrodden man to uplift himself.

The play *Hayavadana* as an allegory of the Political History of Post Independent India: The political background of India from 1950 to 1969 would certainly provide us with some insights in understanding this play as an allegorical representation of the Indian political history after independence. It is during this period many revolutionary decisions, which brought drastic changes on the social frontier of India, were made by the Indian Government. Congress won 1957 and 1962 elections under the leadership of Prime Minister Nehru. The Parliament passed panoptic reforms to give more legal rights to women, and also framed laws against caste discrimination and untouchability. Many schools, colleges and institutions for providing primary and advanced learning, such as the Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) were founded across the nation. Nehru firmly advocated socialist model for Indian economy. No taxes were imposed on Indian farmers, minimum wage and benefits for working-class were fixed, and the nationalization of steel, aviation, shipping, electricity and mining industries took place. States Reorganization Act was passed in 1956 by the States Reorganization Commission, who directed the creation of new states on the basis of spoken language and ethnic demographics. Lal Bahadur Shastri succeeded Jawaharlal Nehru after his demise as Prime Minister. The Tashkent Agreement was signed on January 10, 1966 between India and Pakistan under the mediation of the Soviet government for establishing peace. Then as a result of the elections nation saw the rise of Indira Gandhi after the death of Lal Bhadur Shastri. She put an end to the Privy Purse guarantee for former Indian royalty, and waged a major offensive against party hierarchy over the nationalization of India's banks.

Through the close analysis of the play by keeping these national events in my mind, I dare to feel (not I think!) that the playwright might be mocking at some of the decisions of Indian Government through this play allegorically. There is a space to assume that through the lusty character of Padmini, he might be focusing on the consequence of the reforms to give more legal rights to women. Padmini seems to have a skill of deviating from the social norms by being within the norms. She fulfils her desire to possess the hold of Kapila's body and Devdatta's mind together by exchanging their heads. Padmini reminds us the character of Draupadi from the Mahabharata. She not only befools her husband, Devdatta but also the society. She has neither '*shame*' nor '*regret*' in having '*a head for each breast.....a side for each arm*' (Act I, p.11, 2009). Kapila, with Devdatta's body, realizes Padmini's tricky behaviour. He out of the frustration of being victimized says '*I know what you want, Padmini. Devdatta's clever head and Kapila's strong body...*' (Act I, p.38, 2009).

In addition to that Devdatta's friendship with Kapila and its outcomes might be interpreted as the fear for the government's laws against caste discrimination and untouchability. Kapila is shown to be taking disadvantage of Devdatta's goodness through his unlawful attraction towards Padmini, his wife. The Government policy of bringing the

educational reforms in the country are mocked at by making Hayavadana, a horse-headed man to be talk about Civics, Politics, Patriotism, Nationalism, Indianization, the Socialist Pattern of Society etc. Hayavadana's incompleteness can be viewed as the production of the people with incomplete capabilities to meet the challenges in the field of knowledge. In short, Karnad's *Hayavadana* reasserts the brahmnical supremacy in the social system. Thus, from this perspective Padmini, Kapila, and Hayavadana, all representing the victims of patriarchal, caste-oriented and socially marginalized people seem to be taking disadvantage of the liberty allotted to them through reformative policies of the Indian Government.

The Theme of Incomplete Democracy and Nationhood: Karnad's *Hayavadana* for me is not simply the story of incomplete Gods and humans. At the beginning of the play Bhagvata's remark, And there is our large-hearted audience. It may be ever alert when asleep during a play sometimes. But they are ever alert when someone is in trouble..... (Act I, p.3, 2009). in my view, make us ponder over the passiveness and ignorance of the masses in the democratic system. I think Karnad mocks at the incomplete and ineffective laws in India and also our "inbetween citizenship" through the character of Hayavadana who himself is horse-headed i.e. incomplete. I could not help but laugh when Hayavadana scolds the Actor for doing *nuisance on the road* (Act I, pp.3, 2009). Hayavadana says, "You irresponsible fellow, can't you understand you are not to commit nuisance on the main road?" (Act I, p.3, 2009). The way Karnad fuses myth, history, fact and fiction through different characters and situations in the play must be admired. One must really respect his understanding of the future. India's determined efforts for taking itself to the status of a complete democracy and nationhood are symbolically represented through the character of Hayavadana who is in search of completeness. He claims to have visited the sacred religious places like,

Banaras, Rameshwar, Gokarn, Haridwar, Gaya, Kedarnath—not only those but the *Dargah* of Khwaja Yusuf Baba, the Grotto of Our Virgin Mary—I've tried them all. Magicians, mendicants, maharishis, fakirs, saints and sadhus—sadhus with short hair, sadhus with beards—sadhus in saffron, sadhus in the altogether—hanging, singing rotating, gyrating—on the spikes, in the air, under water, under the ground... (Act II, p.9, 2009).

to get rid of his horse head. Horizontally, these lines throw light on India's cultural and religious hybridity, but at the same time they suggest India's inability to get rid of superstitions, illiteracy, poverty and communal differences. The lines also focus on India's efforts to become a complete nation. Further, Hayavadana represents the predicament of those who believe in the democratic system in the effective functioning of the nation. However, these people do not have any prominent position in this system as the majority politics controls democracy. Hence, what Hayavadana says is significant to note here:

'So I took interest in the social life of the Nation—Civics, Politics,

Patriotism, Nationalism, Indianization, the Socialist Pattern of Society...I have tried everything. But where's my society? Where?' (Act I, p.9, 2009).

Padmini as Kashmir: It may be rather controversial to resemble Padmini's character to that of Kashmir. But as I have mentioned earlier that this is highly personal observation, I dare to put forth my views with the sincere apology for the readers who may take it sentimentally! Padmini's attraction for both Devdatta and Kapila for their intellectual and physical potentials respectively might be viewed as confused state of Kashmir. India and Pakistan fought over Kashmir again in 1965. A UN cease-fire took effect in September, 1965. Prime Minister Lal Bhadur Shastri of India and President Ayub Khan of Pakistan signed the Tashkent agreement on 1st January 1966. They resolved to try to end the dispute by peaceful means. The allegorical representation of this historical event can be found in the conflict, for the possession of Padmini, between Devdatta and Kapila after their heads being exchanged. Being unable to resolve the problem by heated argument, they finally decide to seek the advice of the *rishi* to find the way out peacefully. And Padmini happily prefers to live with the man Devdatta's body and Kapila's body, but soon she discovers the deteriorating body of this man and again starts drifting towards Kapila.

Conclusion: The above interpretations, although based on the personal feelings, thoughts, concerns and idiosyncrasy of the reader, might help us understand the role of a reader in giving meaning to a text. The main contention of this paper is that as the writer's perspectives, perceptions and contemporary socio-political circumstances are relevant in the creation of a text, the reader's perceptions, his socio-political understanding contribute in the re-creation of a text.

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Internet Resources :

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