

The Influences of Both the East and the West in the Making of Girish Karnad's Plays - *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala*

- Fathema Begum

Abstract: In this article is explored how the literary influences from both the East and the West work in the formation of Girish Karnad's plays, *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala*. The literary influence of the East is felt when Karnad cultivates Indian myths and folkloric elements in the plays. The Western influence is recognized when Karnad casts the plays in the complex form of German playwright, Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre. Under the influence of Brecht, Karnad moulds the plays into complex structural patterns in order to generate critical response of the audience to, and dispel the Aristotelian identification with, the situations and events in the plays.

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The inception of Indian English Drama lies in Krishna Mohan Banerji's *The Persecuted or Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of the Present State of Hindu Society in Calcutta* (1831). K. M. Banerji, in the field of Indian English Drama, was followed by the stalwarts like A. S. P. Ayyar, T. P. Kailasam, and Rabindranath Tagore in the pre-independence period but the works in those playwrights' hands turned out to be the imitative models of the Western plays. The Theatre of Roots Movement in 1970s and 1980s attempted to render native touch to Indian English Drama and make it free from the act of emulating the Western plays. Girish Karnad, the contemporary Indian dramatist accelerates the Theatre of Roots movement by cultivating the indigenous or ancient Indian myths, history, folk tale, legends in his plays. Karnad proves to be an ambassador of Indian culture in foreign lands through his plays like *Yayati* (1961) and *The Fire and The Rain* (1998) which dramatize episodes from *Mahabharata*, *Tughlaq* (1964) and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (2000) which cultivate Indian history, *Tale-Danda* (1993) that retells the life of Basavesvara, the Virasaiva social reformer, *Hayavadana* (1971) which is modeled upon an anecdote from *Vetalapanchavimshika*, a collection of ancient Sanskrit stories each of which concludes with the solution of a riddle by king Vikrama which (the riddle) is initially questioned by the demon, Vetala in the story and *Nagamandala* (1990), based upon folk belief and myth. Having a strong inclination to native or Indian tradition, Karnad dramatizes in *Hayavadana* the tale of transposed heads which occurs in *Vetalapanchavimshika* but Karnad has mostly drawn the story of transposed heads in his play from Thomas Mann's version of the Sanskrit tale in the latter's short story, "The Transposed Heads". In this

context it is pertinent to quote Karnad, "The central episode in the play – the story of Devadatta and Kapila – is based on a tale from the Vetlapanchavimshika, but I have drawn heavily on Thomas Mann's reworking of the tale in *The Transposed Heads* and am grateful to Mrs Mann for permission to do so" (Karnad "Note" to *Hayavadana*, no pagination). The play *Hayavadana* incorporates in it, in the manner its source texts – the Sanskrit tale and Mann's short story do, the incident of the transposition of heads. The act of transposition of heads takes place when Padmini, the female protagonist in urgency, wrongly affixes the heads of Devadatta and Kapila on each other's torsos after goddess Kali grants her the boon to revive the two male figures who chopped off their heads in the Kali temple of Mount Chitrakoot in the play. Thomas Mann cultivates the Sanskrit tale of transposition of heads in his story to mock at the traditional philosophy that separates human body from its head and grants the superior position to the head. In this context, the words of Kirtinath Kurtkoti are worth quoting, "The Sanskrit tale, told by a ghost to an adventurous king, gains a further mock heroic dimension in Mann's version. The original poses a moral problem while Mann uses it to ridicule the mechanical conception of life which differentiates between body and soul. He ridicules the philosophy which holds the head superior to the body" (*Hayavadana* v) Girish Karnad takes the myths only in parts, rather than taking them in entirety, which are useful to him and the rest he supplements with his imagination in his plays. Karnad makes his play *Hayavadana* a study of man's quest for completeness and wholesome experience of life and to accomplish this feat, he combines Thomas Mann's plot of transposed heads with Hayavadana story, which is entirely Karnad's own invention, in the play. The play, *Hayavadana* combines Padmini's quest for a complete partner who should unite in him both her husband Devadatta's intellect and his friend Kapila's well built physique in its main plot with Hayavadana's (a man with horse's head) search for a complete human form but ironically becoming a complete horse in the sub plot of the play.

The nativity or Indianness is discerned in the play *Nagamandala* when it seems to be an adaptation of Indian myths and folk belief. Karnad seems to construct the play, *Nagamandala* out of Ahalya myth. In Valmiki's *Ramayana* Ahalya commits adultery consciously but folk belief modifies the myth terming Ahalya to be a virtuous woman whose chastity is violated by Indra, impersonating her husband, Gautama. In *Nagamandala*, it is the snake, King cobra which transforms itself into Rani's, the female protagonist of the play, husband at night, makes love to her with the consequence of Rani becoming pregnant. The episode of cobra's falling in love with Rani in the play also seems to be an adaptation of a folk belief and its ritual, much in common practice in India. According to the belief that pleasing cobra or Naga leads to material benefits as a Naga (king snake) is thought to bestow, "... the boons of earthly happiness- abundance of crops and cattle, prosperity, offspring, health, long life..." (Zimmer 59- 60). Therefore, both the unmarried and married women perform the ritual of milk pouring in ant hills (inhabited by

cobras) on Fridays of a certain month in various sites of India to please the cobra to be blessed by a good husband and to get over barrenness respectively. In *Nagamandala*, Rani mixes the love potion (provided by Kuruddava or the blind woman) with the curry to serve her atrocious husband with it, tasting which, according to the blind woman, the husband will start loving Rani. But when the mixing of love potion turns the curry into blood red colour, Rani out of fright pours it in the ant hill where Naga, the king cobra resides. Swallowing the love potion, the Naga falls in love with Rani followed by his daily visit to her house at night masquerading as her husband, Appanna when the husband is absent at home seeking carnal pleasures outside in the arms of a concubine. The king cobra or the snake lover of Rani, like the beneficial Naga or snake figure in folk belief, eventually becomes instrumental in bringing happiness to her life. It seems to pay back to the due of his swallowing love potion poured by Rani in the ant hill. He brings happiness to Rani's life completing her womanhood i.e. bestowing her with maternity, installs her in the position of a deity which turns the wife beating husband, Appanna into the deity (Rani) serving devotee overnight in the play. Therefore, in *Nagamandala* the episode of Rani's mixing love potion with the curry and then throwing it in an ant hill where a cobra tasting the curry falls in love with her and subsequently brings happiness to her life seems to originate from the Indian ritual of pouring milk in ant hill.

The intertext of the play, *Nagamandala* weaves the Ahalya myth with the myth of Kunti. Like Kunti, Kuruddava, the blind woman in *Nagamandala*, possesses magical power and as Kunti shares the power with another woman, Madri, the second wife of her husband in *Mahabharata* so also Kuruddava shares it with Rani in the play. Karnad cultivates the mythical and folkloric elements in *Nagamandala* to turn the play basically into a woman centric one focusing on the liberation of the female protagonist, Rani from her enslaved wifely position and subsequently installing her into the position of a deity. In addition to the native touch, produced by the cultivation of myth and folkloric elements in *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala*, the plays also bear the influence of literary tradition from the West. A stark influence of German playwright, Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre is felt upon Karnad. Brecht's Epic Theatre is characterized by its,

... deliberately anti-realist and anti-naturalist approach. It aims to shatter the sometimes stupefying 'spell' theatre can cast over its audience by constantly reminding the audience that what they are seeing is both artificial and contrived and something that should be evaluated and judged. Brecht rejected theatre that was spectacular or melodramatic; he wanted theatre that made people think" (Buchanan 152).

According to Brecht, states Buchanan "... theatre should be like a car crash with the audience called on to bear witness to what happened and determine for themselves how the event should be assessed" (152). Unlike Aristotelian plays, the purpose of Brecht's Epic Theatre is to create a distancing effect in lieu of identification between the audience and the actors which helps the

audience to critically evaluate the issues or events, without being emotionally involved with it, presented on the stage. Karnad, like Brecht, wants his audience to critically assess the contemporary issues presented in his plays for which he uses the device of ancient myth to focus on those issues in his dramas. Karnad replies in the quoted words to the question that why he doesn't set his plays in the present, "...distancing is pivotal if one wants to look at the present critically." (Jain 161). The cultivation of ancient myths in Karnad's plays takes his audience to far off setting from their present day society and helps them to critically evaluate the contemporary issues presented in the context of those myths in the plays. Through the tools of ancient story, myth or folk belief in *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala*, Karnad highlights the contemporary issues of man's quest for wholesome experience of life and of gender reality respectively in the plays. Under the influence of Brecht, Karnad perceives that the complex gamut of the play makes the audience critically evaluate the characters, situations or events and debars any identification with it in the play. The use of myth and folk-lore, apart from sending the audience into a distant time, also builds Karnad's plays into complex ones and generates the audience's thoughtful response towards the events and situations presented in the plays. Both *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala* are complex plays due to the blending of myths and folkloric elements in them.

The play *Hayavadana* also has a complex framework due to the presence of narrator cum actor, chorus and intricate plot structure with both main plot and subplot having seemingly unrelated comic scenes. In *Hayavadana*, the narrator is presented in the role of Bhagavata whose task is not only to focus on the story or the proceedings of the play as an outsider but also plays an active role in the play. It is Bhagavata who directs *Hayavadana*, the leading character of the sub-plot of the play, to visit the Kali temple of Mount Chitrakoot to get rid of his incompleteness. When Padmini, the female protagonist of the main plot of *Hayavadana*, decides to perform 'sati' or accompany both Kapila and Devadatta to the pyre, she entrusts her son to Bhagavata and instructs him to leave the boy to the custody of hunters in the forest. The introduction of the female chorus towards the close of the play, along with the narrator cum actor - Bhagavata, throwing light on the events in *Hayavadana* makes the play more complex for the audience. The play, *Hayavadana* lacks in a single unified plot and parallels a sub-plot formed of the character, *Hayavadana*'s quest for completeness along with the main plot of Padmini's search for a complete partner who should unite in him both the superb brain of her husband Devadatta and his friend, Kapila's well built physique. Often the seemingly unnecessary comic episodes like the scene of *Hayavadana*, with horse head scaring the actor in the sub plot adds more complexity to the play.

The distancing effect between the audience and the actors is very deftly created when the narrator, Bhagavata at the outset of the play, *Hayavadana* constantly reminds the audience that whatever they are watching on the stage is just a show performed by the actors. In Act One

of the play, when the actor is frightened by Hayavadana, a man with horse's head, and screams, Bhagavata, the narrator cum actor gives vent to his ire, "Who could that be- creating a disturbance at the very outset of our performance?" (2). The words of Bhagavata creates an awareness in the audience that the spectacle to be followed on the stage is not a piece of reality which demands no emotional involvement of the onlookers with it. A gap between the actor/ stage and audience is created when Bhagavata, in the midst of the show, refers to the audience, "And there is our large- hearted audience"(7) and admonishes the performers to be wary in the use of words because they are on stage, "Watch what you are saying! Remember you are on stage . . ." (3). The words of Bhagavata make the audience and actors aware of their respective spaces or roles, disallows the audience's identification with the actors in the play and help the former in building a critical viewpoint of all the proceedings on stage.

The prologue in *Nagamandala* is also instrumental in adding complexity to the play which features the characters like Man, the Story (personified as a woman and is clad in a rich sari which is viewed as a song accompanying the Story) and the flames which can move and speak. The character - Man, a dramatist to avoid death, with which he is cursed for making the audience 'fall asleep twisted in miserable chairs'(2) by staging boring plays, is to keep himself awake for one night. To avoid sleep or death, Man decides to listen and narrate to others the Story which along with the song has escaped from the mouth of an old lady who gagged both the story and song inside of her and never attempted to tell or sing them. The Story personified as a woman relates to Man, the tale of *Nagamandala* or sets the play on the stage. The flames listen to the Story from distance and throughout the play the Man and the Story remain on the stage. The presence of Man and Story on the stage is an indication to the audience that whatever happens on the stage is just a show. The whole play is presented from the point of view of the character-Story and the play occasionally bears the comments of the Story on some of its situations and events. The flames, who play both the roles of passive listeners to the Story and of singers who sing melodiously at the unification of Naga and Rani in the play, express their dissatisfaction at the tragic conclusion of the play. They force Man, who has vowed to pass on to others the Story he has listened to, to redirect the play towards a happy conclusion. Therefore, the prologue or all the above events in the play lend a complex touch to *Nagamandala* which induces the audience to reflect on the play without having any emotional involvement with its characters and situations .

The influence of Brecht on Karnad sensitizes the latter to project the creepy things in *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala* which build alien or unnatural worlds for the audience in the plays. *Hayavadana* presents the weird dolls which can speak, curse, fight and giggle. The play presents an eerie world in which the dolls can laugh but a child, Padmini's son, cannot and no human effort but the horse's neigh restores the child to normalcy or makes it smile. The audience finds an unnatural world spectacted in *Hayavadana* when the princess of Karnataka marries a

white stallion rebuffing many handsome princes, gives birth to a son with horse's head, declines to leave for heavenly abode with the stallion after it gets back its celestial form of gandharva and is cursed to live the rest of her life as a horse on earth. *Nagamandala* presents a bizarre world in which the flames can dance and speak, the snake metamorphoses it into a human being and is bestowed with the capacity to love whereas the human being, Appanna is full of venom and cruelty. In *Nagamandala*, the extra-terrestrial things dwell along with the human beings. A woman from nether world continuously pursues Kurudavva's son Kappanna and he vanishes with her from human society in the play. The uncanny atmosphere of the play is heightened by its snake ordeal scene in which the female protagonist, Rani lifts her snake lover, cobra from the ant hill with her hands which climbs her body and encircles her neck like a garland. The cultivation of Indian myths or folkloric elements in Karnad's plays *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala* gives the native touch to the plays. But Karnad while giving the touch of Indianness to his plays is not avert to the congenial literary influences from the West. Karnad wishes his audience to critically evaluate his plays and in this context he finds the German playwright, Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre as valuable to be emulated. Along with the utilization of indigenous materials in *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala*, Karnad casts the plays in the complex structural pattern of Brecht's Epic Theatre which produces critical response of the audience towards the plays. Therefore, the influences of both the literary traditions of the East and the West are discerned in the making of *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala* when Girish Karnad casts the Indian mythical and folkloric elements in the complex structural pattern of German playwright, Bertolt Brecht's Epic theatre in the plays.

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