

Mythical structure of the plays of Girish Karnad

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Abstract: *It is common place among the Modern Archetypal creative writers and critics to explore ancient myths and through them to create new ideas, and to critically analyse the material in the light of these myths. In this paper I am going to explore the myths in various plays of Girish Karnad.*

Keywords: *Archetypal, Karnad, myth*

Myth is a favourite term in modern “archetypal” criticism which points to an important area of meaning, shared by religion, folklore, anthropology, sociology, and psychology. It may be defined as a story or a complex yarn or a story, expressing or implicitly symbolising certain deep aspects of human experience or a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group²⁴. For example; In the Wasteland, T.S Eliot explores the ancient myth of the Grail legend on the basis of Jessie Weston’s book ‘From Ritual to Romance’. He includes in this poem another work of anthropology containing references to vegetation myths. It has been considered “a miniature epic of spiritual death or death in life”²⁵. The symbols, images and allusions used in the poem are from mythology, religions, and languages, dialects, giving it an extraordinary range of direct and suggestive meanings. The Wasteland is a twentieth century meditation on the fertility myth of a living death and hope for rebirth, by a narrator who is both a participant and a passive witness of the activity. This participant is the dual sexed, Tiresias who moves freely from the past to the present to annihilate time and space, and to confuse character and to jumble scene with scene. Out of these activities he builds up his vivid picture of the Wasteland, waiting in the dry summer for the quester to come and ask his necessary questions like the mythical Grail bearer Knight.

W.B Yeats explores in his poetry myths from the Irish and the classical sources, the myth of Leda and the Swan being most favourite with him. It is no wonder that the Indo-English writers also follow the western writers in exploring the myths. R .K Narayana, an Indian writer best known for his works set in the fictional town of Malgudi , explores the myth of Bhasmasur in the Man Eater of Malgudi and a couple of other myths.

Exactly on the lines of these Eastern and Western writers Girish Karnad (1938 to present), a well-known 20th century Indian playwright makes use of the ancient Hindu myths in his plays; Hayavadana and Naga-Mandala. In Hayavadana (1971) the play revolves around the problem of ‘incompleteness’ he explores the ancient myth of “the Exchange of Heads”²⁶ through divine,

²⁴ Abrams, M.H; Harphman, Geoffrey. *HANDBOOK OF LITERARY TERMS*. Wadsworth, 2009. p 179.

²⁵ ELIOT, T.S. *Selected Poems*, London: Faber and Faber, 2002. p 41-54

²⁶ Karnad, Girish. *Hayavadana*. New Delhi: Oxford, 1971.

human and animal figures. Karnad has borrowed this myth from Thomas Mann 's book," The Transposed Heads"²⁷, Mann uses it to ridicule the mechanical conception of life which differentiates between body and soul. This has originally been found in the 11th century Sanskrit text 'kathasaritsagara' an ancient compilation of stories in Sanskrit. When the play starts, a statue of Lord Ganesha is brought on the stage and the Bhagavata sings the following lines "May lord Vigneshwara , the destroyer of all obstacles , who removes all hurdles from our path and crowns all efforts with success, bless our performance today"²⁸. However,11 Karnath says that "for the first time I have seen a decorative song which is interpretive and functional also, we expect completeness from a god who is incomplete in himself. When the play starts Hayavadana enters with his own problem he tells Bhagavata how this curse of being horse headed has fallen upon him.

Both the main plot and the sub plot are drawn from the rich tradition of the native folk theatre Yakashagana and other traditional form that have been used with enormous skill but mask,curtains, songs, commentator- narrator dolls, horse -man the flames, the story within story are used wonderfully. B.V Karnath, a director who collaborated with Karnad in many plays, feels that in an oral tradition everything is possible – dolls can speak, flames can walk and talk with human passion. Karnad seems to be very much influenced by Epic theatre tradition of Bertolt Brecht. The play begins in style of alienation "this city of Dharampura ruled by king Dharma Sheela"²⁹.

The plot of this mock-epic play runs through the story of contrast between two persons of different natures. Devdatta is an intellectual, whereas his friend Kapila is interested in material gains and bodily achievements as told by Bhagavata, they are "one body one soul"³⁰. Devdatta marries Padmini, whereas Padmini falls in love with Kapila. On the question of Padmini, both friends turn rivals and kill each other. In a highly great scene, Padmini transposes their heads giving Devdatta, Kapila's head and vice-versa. This action results into utter confusion and reveals man's ambiguous nature. Through this plot which is not believable, Karnad wishes to convey that idealism and materialism are amalgamated. It also reveals the materialistic nature of women like Padmini who sacrifices the social institution of marriage or society.

Focussing on the next master piece of Girish Karnad 'Naga-Mandala (1988)³¹, a surrealistic or a play with a cobra, is based on a folktale told by A.K Ramanujan. In Naga-Mandala he uses the ancient myth of 'Naga', found in Brahman, Buddhist and Islamic literatures. It is a common belief among Modern writers that whatsoever is happening in the modern times it has its connection with some myth or folklore of the past. In fact it becomes easy for the modern writers

²⁷ Mann, Thomas. *The Transposed Heads: A legend of India*. London: Vintage, 1959

²⁸ Karnad. *Hayavandana*. p 7

²⁹ KARNATH, B.V. *The Plays of Girish Karnad*, ed. Manoj K. Pandey.

³⁰ Karnath, B.V. *The Plays of Girish Karnad*. p 54

³¹ Karnad, Girish. *Naga-Mandala*. New Delhi: Oxford,1988.

to handle their content and form strictly in accordance with the myth. According to B.V Karnath, Naga-Mandala, a play with a cobra is based on the ancient folklore and fertility myth to grant it a mystically romantic colour.

The audience is transported into a world which is not believable but the audience believes and listens like the 'wedding guest'³² in the ancient mariner listens like a three year old child. The audience appears to have been under the spell of magic and enters the world of fantasy. The play opens in surrealistic setting. There is dilapidated temple, having in it a broken idol which is hard to identify. It is night and moonlight seeps through the roofs and cracks the wall. In this limbo like situation is the man, the playwright suspended between life and death. He is cursed for making his spectator asleep while watching his plays. He promises: "I swear by this absent God, if I survive this night. I shall have no relations with themes, plots and stories".³³

The play is also a study of psychological transformation of man and woman from 'innocence' to 'experience' from ignorance to knowledge from the institution of marriage to consummation of love. In the midst of the play which fails to lure up Appanna, Rani finds the taste of the second root turning blood red in colour. She is afraid to administer to her husband and throws it upon the ant hill. As a result, the cobra gets propitiated and falls in love with Rani. The play contains the stark reality of inner life of man and woman as illustrated in the Bible as also through the Hindu Parana's.

It is observable that the myth of Naga-Mandala is parallel to the representation of the myth of 'Ahlaya'. In Valmiki's Ramayana, Ahalya commits suicide knowingly but the folks believe that she is a chaste woman and as such they do not allow her to commit sin deliberately. Indra perpetrates a fraud on her husband Gautam. In Naga- Mandala, Rani is innocent it is naga in the impersonation of her husband Appanna who makes love to her.

The book of Genesis opens with the serpents theme, no plot and no story. According to Northrop Fyre "a ritual is a sacred manifestation"³⁴. Similarly the play reminds us the myth of Lord Shiva, the creator, the operator and the destroyer. The cobra that Lord Shiva wears around his neck is a phallus symbol and who symbolises the desire of sex and fertility. So long, as the desire of sex remains unexpressed the family life of Rani and Appana remains unsatisfied. Just after the consummation of husband wife relationship gets satiated Appanna forgets his concubine and remains a slave to Rani. This inner reality of marital relationship has been dramatized by Girish Karnad through the tale of Naga.

Karnad is similar to Shakespeare in his universality of man- woman relationship. His concept of human completeness is a bit like that of Shakespeare as set out in *The Tempest*, for where

³² Fifteen Poets. New Delhi: Oxford, 2010. p 257-275

³³ Karnad, Girish. *Naga-Mandala*. New Delhi: Oxford,1988. p 2

³⁴ Fyre, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Theory of Myth*. New Jersey: Princeton, 1957

“Shakespeare makes his point of ending is the Karnad’s point of beginning”³⁵. Both the plays mentioned above deal with theme of quest for completeness; however this 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 like manner Rani requested her husband to permit her son to perform the last ritual of Naga. The playwright has suggested two endings and both the endings are meaningful. Both the plays delineate human problems in the best artistic manner; Karnad has successfully exploited myths. Social problems 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.

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³⁵ KARNATH, B.V. *The Plays of Girish Karnad*, ed. Manoj K. Pandey. p 6