



Decolonizing theatre: Cultural hybridity in Girish Karnad's Hayavadana

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Abstract

The Prominent Indian playwright, Girish Karnad, plays a very significant role in the progression of postcolonial Indian theatre. The most captivating part of his plays is the blend of indigenous traditional forms into modern dramatic art to challenge the ideas of hybridity, lost identity and cultural reclamation. The play throws light on the notion of incomplete selves which is symbolized through the horse headed man and it reflects the struggles faced by the colonized to find their identity and reclaim wholeness. This paper explores how one of the most famous plays Hayavadana challenges the Colonial theatrical art by incorporating Indian folk forms like Yakshagana, prioritizing intercultural artistic forms instead of western narratives. This paper seeks to delve into how the popular play Hayavadana by Girish Karnad is significant to the postcolonial theatre. It examines how the play addresses issues of fragmented identity, cultural hybridity and the tension between tradition and modernity. It also aims to analyse Karnad's use of indigenous theatrical forms alongside western techniques to show the complex realities of a postcolonial society seeking self-definition.

Through a play like Hayavadana, this paper focuses on identity and the yearning for completeness in a society that is shattered by colonialism, as a form of political resistance within postcolonial Indian theatre, examining how Girish Karnad uses folk traditions, mythology to challenge the lingering effects of colonial cultural domination and assert a reclaimed Indian identity.

Keywords: Girish Karnad, post-colonial, theatre, cultural hybridity, Indian drama

Introduction

Girish Karnad is one of the most important figures in modern Indian theatre and Drama. His work deeply mirrors the concerns of postcolonial India. As a significant playwright, Karnad navigated the complexities of cultural identity, tradition, modernity and hybridity making his voice central to postcolonial discourse. His plays, written originally in Kannada and later translated into English by himself reflect the conflict between Indian cultural forms and the influences of western education. Karnad was influenced by western dramatic structures, especially when it comes to Brechtian theatre techniques like alienation. Karnad revised these western influences within Indian context. Many of his works also showcase how colonized societies could fight domination by adapting and 'indianizing' foreign ways. His plays also put forward issues of personal freedom and societal oppression and other themes relevant to postcolonial nations grappling with the consequences of colonialism. His influence encouraged other playwrights to redefine indigenous storytelling methods, making Indian theatre a striking and autonomous artistic form rather than a colonial imitation.

Karnad grew up in an India that was newly independent from the British rule. He was educated both in India and at Oxford and was deeply aware of the colonial legacy that this country went through. Karnad's characters are often hybrid identities, even in Hayavadana, the horse man is a literal reflection of hybridity, mirroring the fragmented self that postcolonial subjects frequently experience. He also incorporated traditional Indian theatrical forms such as Yakshagana, mythical creatures, and folklore into his dramas. He reimagines myths to address contemporary issues. Through this act, he reclaimed the precolonial forms of narrative and performance that had been ignored and pushed back under the British influence. Even when we talk about his choice of language, Karnad's decision to choose

his native language Kannada as a form of expression reflected a commitment to indigenous and regional languages and a form of resistance to the English language, which was a remnant of colonial power. Although Karnad drew upon history and mythology, which can be seen in his other plays like Tughlaq and Nagamandala, he used these narratives to explore issues of identity, gender and existentialism, problems that were a part of a postcolonial society.

Postcolonialism basically refers to a critical way of thinking that focuses on how colonialism affected different cultures and societies and how its effects still linger after independence. It looks at what happens to people and nations after they were controlled by colonial powers like Britain, Spain, France and other European countries. Colonialism didn't just take land, it also directed power towards the native language, religion, traditions and the way people looked at themselves and their lives. Colonizers forced the colonized people to look at themselves as "the other", further making them feel inferior. According to Robert Young's definition of postcolonialism, he says: "Post-colonial is a dialectical concept that marks the broad historical facts of decolonization and the determined achievement of sovereignty but also the reality of nations and people emerging into a new imperialistic context of economic and sometimes political domination" Post coloniality is a complex concept that presents to us the ongoing legacies of colonialism, in the form of neo colonialism and imperialism and the challenges and possibilities of the contemporary world. Postcolonialism challenges the way history was written by the colonizers and gives voice to those who were silenced. Aparna Das and Dr. Dipendu Das described post colonialism in their essay named, "Identity: a postcolonial perspective in Girish Karnad's Hayavadana" as: "The complex phase that politically engages the erstwhile colonies after the cessation

of European colonization. Post colonialism designates the terrain of discourse that consists of reactions to, and analysis of, the cultural legacy of colonialism. It foregrounds the cultural transformation effected by European colonisation and the struggles endured by the once colonised subjects to reclaim their cultural identity prior to colonisation" (Das 3) When we look at Karnad's postcoloniality, it is demonstrated through his traditional dramatic forms. Karnad's plays are textual framework of postcolonial Indian theatre. He has successfully indianised all the western forms found in postcolonial Indian theatre. Many of his plays also critique the use and abuse of power, not just western but even Indian forms of power like patriarchy, and caste oppression, demonstrating how colonialism and pre-colonial systems contributed to subjugation of those less privileged. Hayavadana is based on a story from Kathasaritsagar, an ancient Sanskrit collection of stories and a version of that play is in Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads*. By going back to Indian oral traditions and folklores, Karnad is reclaiming the Indian way of storytelling, which is a key postcolonial feature, resisting the dominance of western narrative. Karnad begins the play with the description of the Elephant headed God. The first dialogue by Bhagavat: "An elephant's head on a human body, a broken rusk and a cracked belly- whichever way you look at him he seems the embodiment of imperfection, of incompleteness. How indeed can one fathom the mystery that this very Vakratunda- Mahakaya, with his crooked face and distorted body, is the Lord and Master of Success and Perfection? Could it be that this Image of Purity and Holiness, this Mangalamoorty, intends to signify by his very Appearance that the completeness of God is something no poor mortal can comprehend?"

This is the first time we come across the question of incompleteness and imperfection. It challenges the notion of identity. The character of Hayavadana, a man with a horse head, does not have a clear identity because of his incomplete body structure. He is frustrated about his lack of identity and finds himself rootless and meaningless. It mirrors the confusion of postcolonial societies and their loss of cultural identity, caught between their old traditions and the colonizer's ways. Hayavadana tries to get rid of his head, it can be seen when he says "All my life I've been trying to get rid of this head" The character of Hayavadana reflects the inner questions that the colonized had. After the colonial rule, Indians had to ask, Are we still the same people? Are we the body of ancient India or the head full of western notions? Post-colonial theorists like Homi Bhabha talk about hybridity, cultures mixing under colonialism and after. Karnad shows this through characters that are part one thing, part another and confused about belonging. His use of Yakshagana style with music, masks and audience address, non-realistic elements, instead of western realistic drama techniques demonstrate a postcolonial assertion of indigenous cultural forms.

Yakshagana is a traditional folk theatre form of Karnataka featuring vibrant costumes, blend of music, dance, drama. It draws heavily from myths and epics and the performances are highly interactive with performers engaging the audience directly. The play begins with the Bhagavata, a narrator singer drawn directly from Yakshagana. He not only introduces the plot but also breaks the fourth wall to speak directly to the audience. It is a Brechtian technique but is done through Indian lens. This form reflects

traditional Indian way of storytelling, rejecting western realism. The form of Yakshagana is famous for its exaggerated gestures and symbolic representation. The presence of a man with a horse head and the talking dolls who converse about the emotional state of Padmini would seem out of the place in western theatre but here it is perfectly natural with the non-realistic, imaginative world. Through this way, this style also resists the colonial impact of realism and naturalism and embraces a unique Indian aesthetic. Karnad's choice of using Yakshagana is a deliberate postcolonial statement which asserts that Indian stories should be told in Indian ways. The character of Hayavadana is the most direct and visually symbolic representation of hybrid identity in the play. His very existence is a contradiction, he is neither fully human nor fully animal, caught in an intangible state. He seeks wholeness by wanting to become a complete human being but he ends up transforming into a complete horse, finally forming his identity. This makes Hayavadana a powerful symbol of postcolonial identity, much like post-independence India, he is fragmented and incomplete. His hybridity reflects the confusion that Indians felt between cultures and traditions, divided between part Indian and part western.

Another instance in the play which serves as a crucial part about the fragmented identity of humans is the point where Padmini swaps the heads of Devadutta and Kapila. It creates an existential dilemma. The division between mind, that is Devadutta and the heart or body, that is Kapila symbolizes the shattered identity. Devadutta reflects intellectual and spiritualism, while Kapila represents passion and physical strength. Neither of them is complete on their own and their identities fall apart when they are unnaturally merged. This mirrors the postcolonial struggle to reconcile tradition with modernity, emotion with reason. Padmini desires the mind of Devadutta and the heart of Kapila, yearning for an ideal combination that does not and cannot exist in reality. Her desires reflect a deep disappointment with societal roles and relationships. She, too is shattered and torn between cultural expectations and personal desires. The Dolls in Padmini's room act as a psychological commentary, expressing her repressed feelings and internal dilemma. The dolls show how even the internal self of characters are divided. In the play, every major character represents a fragmented identity, longing for wholeness in a world where it is an illusion. Karnad makes use of hybridity, incompleteness and identity confusion to portray the fractured postcolonial psyche, a society and individual torn between past and present, mind and body. Through this approach, the play moves beyond mythology and becomes an important exploration of what it means to be human in a world shaped by displacement and duality.

Aparna Das writes in her essay: "Karnad's play, Hayavadana, is in fact his understanding of the Indian theatre where each character seeks a completeness of experience. It has been gradually ridding himself of the western influence he has incorporated in his early plays. Karnad has revived and improvised Indian folk tradition to produce alienation effect in his plays. He has reconstructed the past on the stage and reinvented its meaning in the context of the present. He has contemporised mythologies and mythologised human concerns in his plays. Karnad has

developed a new performance aesthetics that resonates with the postcolonial identity of Indian nation” (Das 3)

Girish Karnad often gave space to marginalized voices, including women, tribal People or mythic figures, as a way of challenging constructed power notions like colonialism and patriarchy. Karnad’s use of his native kannada language was an attempt on challenging the colonial hierarchy of language by asserting regional Indian languages. In the play, it is shown that going to Kali’s temple can treat Hayavadana and grant him wholeness, the same way Karnad’s plays can bring a sense of completeness to the people who are unable to find their fragmented identity. After the partition of 1947, the British rulers left the country and the achievement was to be celebrated but the trauma of colonization was still seeped in people’s blood, it appears through these plays so it becomes relatable to the audience to feel the characters on the stage and in a sense, relive their past. Asim Lodhi and Fiza Butt wrote in their essay titled: “A Phenomenal Phenomenon of Post-Colonial Trauma: The Appearance of the Past in the Present through Hayavadana” “Moreover, the actual victims who were present during colonial period did not encounter the event actually. They just had an experience of being colonized and, consequently, went into historical, political and cultural isolation. The real trauma of colonialism appears later on through literature which takes the responsibility to speak the unspeakable dimensions of the traumatic event. Mere witnessing of the event does not help bring any transformation.

Change requires a comprehensive understanding of the traumatic event of the objective or public history” (Lodhi and Butt 11)

Literature has long been a powerful medium for exploring the trauma of colonialism often using character conflict and cultural fragmentation to reflect deep psychological and societal wounds left by colonization. This trauma is not always represented through direct colonial narratives but also through symbolic and thematic representation of identity and hybridity and disintegration.

Hayavadana’s transformation into a complete horse, instead of human, first seems like failure to seek wholeness but it actually portrays a form of completeness. Since the beginning of the play, we see Hayavadana yearning for a complete identity, to become fully human. But ironically, the Gods grant him his wish not by making him human, but a horse. In this sense, completeness is attained but not in human form which he desired, however, he is no longer fragmented. Through this act, Karnad also comments on the futility of human desire, suggesting that humans longing for an ideal identity is often misdirected. Hayavadana believes that being a human is a superior state, but Gods’ decision shows the absurdity and futility of such fixed notions. It mocks the colonial era’s obsession with fixed and ‘perfect’ identity. The play embraces the idea that completeness may arrive in form that one does not expect. It also makes us question our own identity, do we have a complete identity? Does being a human makes us complete? After turning into a full horse, Hayavadana attains the ability to sing, a human trait, despite his animal form. This bizarre event is meaningful as it suggests that freedom, expression and identity can transcend physical and cultural boundaries. His singing suggests a new harmony and being a horse frees him from mental conflict of being a hybrid. Looking at it from a Postcolonial perspective, Hayavadana’s journey shows how colonial subjects often cannot return to their original, pre-

colonial identity, just like he cannot become a fully human, despite having a human body. Colonized individuals often found themselves caught between the native and the colonizer’s ways, neither fully belonging to one nor the other. The play suggests that they must find their identity in new, altered forms of self. The complete horse is a symbol of new identity even if it does not match traditional expectations. Hayavadana’s initial discomfort with his dual identity reflects the alienation and confusion experienced by postcolonial societies trying to define themselves after the collapse of colonial rule. We need to question ourselves, Are we finally free of the colonialism and its impacts? If no, how can we move forward carrying the trauma of colonialism?

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