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FOLK ELEMENTS IN KARNAD'S HAYAVADANA AND NAGAMANDALA



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Short Profile

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ABSTRACT:

Girish Karnad (1938) needs no introduction to the Indian audience. As a playwright, as an actor and as a cinema personality he is well known among the Indians. One of the great achievements of Karnad is that he elevated Indian drama to such a stature that where international audience sit and take notice of Karnad's plays are specially known for their nativity and use of folk elements of India in general and Karnataka in particular. In this essay we shall see some of the important folk elements that Karnad used in his two ground breaking plays Hayavadana and Nagamandala.

KEYWORDS

Folk Elements , Indian audience , terminological differences.

1. INTRODUCTION :

SUTRADHARA/BHAGAVATA

Sutradhara appears both in Sanskrit as well as traditional plays. Bhagavata is the vital soul of Yakshagana. Both discharge more or less same functions and hence these are only terminological differences. We can find sutradhara in Ankiyanat of Assam, in Veethinatakam and Bhagavata Mela of Tamil Nadu. Puppet players are also called Sutradharas for an entirely different reason. The sutradhara in Vethinatakam of Tamilnadu appears only to introduce the principal character, his function resembles that of Ankiyanats. In Yakshagana it is the Bhagavata who performs the same function as the chorus of Greek drama. He moves the story and prompts different characters to perform appropriate dances. He not only provides a suitable frame work to the entire performance but also motivates the rousing of sentiments.

Sutradhara/Bhagavata as an Introducer:

Apart from this, Bhagavata also introduces the main character. Both the plays of Karnad under study Hayavadana and Nagamandala, have either sutradhara or Bhavatha, in Nagamandala the "Story" can be considered sutradhara through it does not have sutradhara as a separate person as in Hayavadana.

Sutradhara/Bhagavata as a Reporter:

Bhagavata describes all the events in a play, whatever the events take place in the play it doesn't pass off without Bhagavata's knowledge. After Kapila and Padmini meet (Hayavadana), Bhagavata sings a song in which he throws light on Kapila's mind. Kapila has contempt for her now. Bhagavata helps audience to understand the character in a better way. In other words, he becomes a means for the playwright to convey things to the audience.

Sutradhara becoming Character:

Many times Sutradhara takes over the mantle of a character. In Hayavadana Bhagavata some times turns into a character in the plays. Bhagavata keeps signing about two friends. Bhagavata becomes a character while talking with actor and Hayavadana. Bhagavata suggests a solution to Hayavadana for removal of his horse head. Bhagavata becomes a means to Hayavadana to disclose his story, hence any other character in the play could not have performed this function of listening to Hayavadana's story. Being one among the characters, he suggests to Hayavadana to go to mount Chitrakoot. Like other characters in the play Bhagavata is informed by Devadatta about his having a child, Bhagavata is the one who informs Kapila about passing away of his parents, he also informs Padmini about Kapila's where about. Bhagavata is of immense value during this kinds of situations. In Nagamandala, the "Story" who discharges the functions of the sutradhara, becomes one of the characters in the preliminary, thereby preparing the audience's mood for the main story.

Bhagavata as Omniscient Narrator:

Bhagavata keeps on changing as different narrator. Sometimes he becomes third person narrator and some times omniscient narrator. Omniscient narrator is a narrator who knows each and everything about the character and he can switch on to past and move on to the future. Following is a brief explanation from the texts of both the plays.

In Hayavadana Bhagavata as narrator begins the play by invoking the God along with the musicians, after invocation he directly narrates the story of Kapila and Devadatta. Now and then Bhagavata keeps singing about the two friends.

He is the one to tell the theme of the play to the audience. He also indirectly hints the nature of Hayavadana and Padmini, he says:

“Each one to his own fate, each one to
His own desire, each one to his own luck”

(Hayavadana Sc I Page 11)

In his songs he hints the story in advance. Bhagavata becomes the omniscient narrator when he narrates the marriage of Padmini and devadatta after Kapila consults Padmini. In act two he narrates how rishi remembering King Vikrama's solution announces that the head is the supreme one, that is, uttamanga. So Devadatta's head is indeed Devadatta, so he is the rightful husband of Padmini.

In Nagamandala it is the 'story' which narrates Rani's story throughout the play to 'man'. The story narrates Appanna's bringing of Mongoose and its being becomes omniscient narrator by knowing Rani inside out i.e., Rani doesn't want to question Naga though he has not turned up for fifteen days is conveyed by story. Apart from them some important incidents like the couple getting a child and their leading happy life are conveyed by "story" only. The presence of the story can be found from the beginning to the end of the play.

Bhagavata as Alienation Device/Technique:

At the beginning Bhagavata reminds the audience of their watching of the play. Karnad uses Bhagavata as a device to foreground the fictionality of the story i.e., it is something which has been put together by the dramatist. Therefore, the audience should not identify themselves with characters and their plight. This helps the audience to keep the necessary critical distance while watching the play. For instance, Bhagavata poses a question to the audience as to who is the husband of Padmini, the Kapila's body which bears and Devadatta's head or vice-versa. The audience is curious to know, mean while he asks them to have a cup of tea and ponder. Since he is the stage manager, he performs all the functions like, starting play, announcing interval, giving conclusion etc. These functions and rituals, performed by the Bhagavata also highlight the plays functionality.

Use of Folk Stories

Karnad's most important feature in folk drama techniques is borrowing of folk stories to draw his plots. As modern dramatist, however, he has drawn up on more than one source of story and

combined them. I shall briefly discuss each play in terms of its source story/stories and discuss the dramatist's motivation in handling folk plots.

The plot of Hayavadana comes from Katha Sarita Sagara an ancient collection of folk stories in Sanskrit. But Karnad has borrowed it from Thomas Mann's retelling of the story in "The Transposed Heads". A problem arises in the play, who is the husband of Padmini, whether Devadatta's body which bears the head of Kapila or vice-versa. Vetala Panchavimshati has the story with different names, but there instead of two friends, the characters involved are a husband, a wife and her brother. There arises the same problem of transportation of heads but significantly it involves incest. Karnad makes significant departure from Thomas Mann's story too. The sub plot of Hayavadana is entirely Karnad's invention. In the play the story of sub plot throughout supports the main plot. Hayavadana's story complements Padmini's story. His search for completeness is fulfilled where as Padmini's search ends in failure and suicide.

In Nagamandala too two stories are used. The man's story is influenced by one of the folk tales in "Folk Tales from India", selected and edited by A.K.Ramunjan. except for the Naga coming through the drain, the rest of story as it appears in Ramanujan is different. In Karnad there is no king and queen as in Ramanujan. Karnad's story is closer to common people's experience. In Ramanujan's story the wizard with the help of the old woman gains the queen's love but in the play Rani gets Naga's love by Kurudavva's aphrodisiac root which was given a Kurudavva by a hermit. It is the root which creates a love bond between Rani and Naga. The queen is quite aware of the fact that she has a lover, but in Karnad Rani gets involved with Naga is not killed, he himself commits suicide, in Ramanujan's the wizard, lover of queen is killed. She takes revenge against the king in the folk story, for having killed her lover, but in Nagamandala, Rani lives with her husband and son happily. Thus Karnad changes that folk story a great deal to suit his need.

The reason for changing the story so extensively are many. Karnad tries the characters to search for truth, which is complex. In both the plays no character understands the truth properly, neither Hayavadana, Rani, Appanna nor people. The snake has a unique place since it has a transforming property. For this reason it is chosen. The plays pose challenge to the male dominated society, for this reason, Karnad chooses these stories. This cant be handled in realistic way so it is full of fiction.

Songs:

Songs are major elements in dramas that can be found in both classical and folk drama. Songs had been a part of folk and urban dramas in India. From the days of Kalidasa, Bhavabuti to present day one can find songs in the dramas including some contemporary dramas. What follows is a discussion of the various ways the songs are used in Indian drama.

Songs Serve as Lullaby:

In Hayavadana Padmini sings a lullaby describing a person, obviously Kapila, riding on a white horse from a far off land. The Lullaby here is at the same time expressive of theme and action.

To describe scenes in vivid detail:

In Hayavadana in a song Padmini is compared to a scare crow on the bank which has a fading face and Kapila's body is torn with memories. After exchange of heads in a song the enmity between the two friends is described. How both of them becomes foes and its inevitability is also described.

To describe in a dignified style:

In Hayavadana, the female chorus sings a song and bids good bye to Padmini while she performs sati. Such grand situation calls for a song. Such things can well be expressed in songs than in prosaic prose.

To talk directly about subjects considered taboo:

A subject such as sexual feeling especially on the part of women is not discussed or dramatized, hence a song is more suitable.

In Hayavadana after exchanging of heads all the three sing
"What a good mix!
No more tricks!
Is this one that
Or that one this?
Ho! Ho!
(Sc I Page 11)

As a refrain to underline the theme of the play: The song in the play Hayavadana

"Two friends were there, one mind, one heart"
(Sc I Page 2)

Is repeatedly sung as a refrain and serves to underline the close friendship that exists between Kapila and Devadatta.

To reveal the action which can't be shown on the stage:

The fighting between Kapila and Devadatta is expressed through a song. They know that some witch causes this fight and it is blood thirsty fighting scene which cant be shown on the stage is conveyed through a song.

For an expert folk drama technique employee of this stature, Karnad uses songs less often than others.

MOTIFS

Yet another folk element used in these plays is the motif. Motif refers to conspicuous element such as type of incident, device, reference or formula which occurs frequently. Some common motifs we see in folklore are an "Ugly Lady" becoming beautiful princess, a man fatally attracted towards a fair lady etc. Motifs play an important role in Karnad's plays also. Motifs such as Naga motif and the contrast between the sacred and the profane are derived from folklore and provided authentic folk atmosphere in his plays.

Naga Motif:

Indians consider the serpent as a God it is also a symbol of sexuality people have a belief that if naga is worshiped on Nagapanchami day they get what they want.

Nagamandala is a magico-religious ritual involving Naga, the snake God of Hindus, who grants wishes of his devotees especially the wish of fertility. In the play Naga gives to his devotee love and son. After the ordeal scene he even makes her a sacred person in the eyes of the people. Naga is often chosen as a motif or character in folk literature.

Transformation Motif

It is also called metamorphosis or shape shifting which is common to folk plays. These transformations are common in myths and folklore and folk tales of most cultures. Many transformations like a woman becoming a bird, a statue becoming a man occur in folk tales. In Nagamandala Naga appears to be Appanna but in his behaviour he is quite different with Appanna. As far as Nagamandala and Hayavadana area concerned this transformation is inevitable. In fact the plot of Nagamandala hinges on the transformation of the serpent turning into Naga i.e., into a human being.

Chastity Motif:

In primitive society chastity was given an ever a great significance than life. This motif is as important in literature as in society. Once a woman has undergone the chastity test, and proved that she is chaste, people start worshipping her like a goddess. This happens in Nagamandala, chastity is regarded as important in a traditional society because it is one of the means by which society exercises control over a woman's sexuality (after all the test of chastity is not applied to a man). The chastity test occurs in Nagamandala and Hayavadana. It is in Nagamandala, the scene of the chastity test is very important from the point of view of upholding the dignity of heroine. Once Rani proved chaste, people worship her. In Hayavadana we don't have the ordeal scene as such but it is for chastity's sake that Padmini can't marry both Kapila and Devadatta. That is why she wants to have both mental and physical potentiality in a single person. It is sexual jealousy which causes the end of Kapila and devadatta and which there by leads to Padmini's death i.e., she undergoes sati. Padmini could have both Kapila and Devadatta and would have led a happy life.

Sacred and Profane Motif

There are both sacred and profane loves in these two plays. In Nagamandala one finds more sacred love than profane love, except Appanna's frequenting of harlots. All the episodes deal with the sacred love. Naga's love for Rani is the most sacred one. He is the one who comes in the time of distress, when she is gloomy. Like God, he cures her of frigidity in the process of impregnating her. Even Kurudavva's love for Rani and her love for Kappanna are equally sacred.

Hayavadana is a story of profane love with exceptions. Kapila's and Devadatta's love for padmini is profane. From the moment Devadatta sees padmini, he thinks of her for ever. Even kapila also unconsciously falls in love with her. A traditionalist would see her wish to see both Kapila's physique and Devadatta's intellect captured in a single person itself as quite profane. This kind of desire is a taboo in our society. But it may not be right to consider this a profane love because her search is for a god like creature that will have both great intellect and great physique. That is why we see in this play both sacred and profane love at the same time. Though Karnad uses folk elements which may appear traditional, yet they derive new meanings for the contemporary society.

NOTES:

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2. IBID Sc I Page 11
3. IBID Sc I Page 2

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