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Of Being and Becoming: Liberation of the self through Transfiguration in Karnad's Hayavadana and Naga mandala

MITHILA RAJ¹, NEELIMA DEVADASAN²

¹PG Student, Department of English, Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Amritapuri Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Amrita University, India

²Lecturer, Department of English, Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Amritapuri Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Amrita University, India



MITHILA RAJ

ABSTRACT

Girish Karnad's use of Transfiguration as a literary device in Hayavadana and Nagamandala provides the reader with numerous prospects to explore human consciousness from various perspectives. The theme of identity crisis is revealed through transfiguration. Through his imaginative skills, Karnad introduces transfiguration of characters in his plays to entertain his audience. The objective of this study is to highlight the fulfilment of desires of the characters- Padmini in Hyavadana and Rani in Nagamandala. The struggle for love and the resulting storyline is closely analysed through the theory of libido. By applying Mandala theory, this paper also analyses the inner feelings of the characters Padmini and Rani.

Keywords: Transfiguration, Desires, Search for identity.

Transfiguration in simple terms can be defined as 'a change in form or appearance'. Transfiguration or metamorphosis as a literary device is used by Girish Karnad to bring the theme of identity crisis in his plays. As an Indian writer, Karnad is marvelled by the complexities of Indian culture and mythology. Within the mythological frame, Karnad artfully introduces the theme of existentialism and identity crisis. Transfiguration as a literary device helps Karnad to probe deeper into the theme of identity crisis.

The yearning for completion and wholeness springs from the desperate feeling that something is lost or missing. Transfiguration is used as a tool for fulfilment of human desires. Jack Haas, in his book *Transfiguration: The Union of Spirit and Flesh* has said that, "To individuate, which is to become

whole, requires the union of male and female, good and evil, spirit and soul, consciousness and matter, subject and object, self and other, and inside and out"(1).

It is the union of counterparts which makes a man complete. We desire for what is absent in us, which can be attained by transfiguration. Indian epics, *Puranas* and folk tales are impregnated with examples of shape shifting or transfiguration. The elephant headed God Ganesha, Narasimhavatara of Lord Vishnu, Three headed God Brahma and Ardhanareeswara are some examples for shape shifting in Hindu mythology.

Karnad makes use of shape shifting in his plays not merely for entertainment but as a means of reviving the ancient and sacred function of drama as a ritual. In Karnad's first play *Yayati*, an

existentialist drama, he uses transfiguration to amuse the spectators and illuminate the theme of responsibility. Transfiguration, though not physically, take place in his *Tughlaq* also. In actuality, shape-shifting does not occur physically; instead, there is merely acting, disguise, deception and treachery. Tughlaq, the protagonist plays the role of a rescuer, destroyer, philosopher and a dreamer. Transfiguration takes place in actors mind.

In *Hayavadana*, transfiguration is helpful in understanding the plot, as it illumines the major characters. The prominent shape-shifting happens with the misplaced heads of Kapila and Devadatta. The play opens with the invocation of Lord Ganesh who is the God of "destroyer of incompleteness". The description of Lord Ganesh's physical stature serves more than an invocation to the play. It gives a hint to the main theme of the play; the transfiguration of Kapila and Devadatta.

An elephant's head on human body, a broken tusk and a cracked belly whichever way you perceive him, he seems the embodiment of imperfection of incompleteness. How indeed can one fathom the mystery that is 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 *Mangalmoorty*, intends to signify by his very appearance that the completeness of God is something no poor mortal can comprehend? (Karnad1).

Kapila is a man of body and Devadatta, a man of intellect. They are presented as friends with one soul and two bodies. They were not merely friends, but brothers. "The world sees these two young men wandering down the streets of Dharampura, hand in hand and remembers Lava and Kusha, Rama and Laxamana, Krishna and Balarama. The two friends they were-one mind, one heart" (Karnad2).

Kapila having no equals in strength and in physical skills represents the ultimate in physical powers while Devadatta, a Brahmin scholar represents the intellectual power. Despite both of them belonging to different backgrounds, they merge well. The union of Kapila and Devadatta is

perfect, in the sense that they complement each other in their skills. Their relation gets complicated when Devadatta marries Padmini. Kapila falls in love with Padmini and she too starts falling for him. The friends kill themselves in a scene full of dramatic connotation, at a Kali temple. In a fit of tension, Padmini joins Devadatta's head with Kapila's body. Both of them come back to life. Each becomes a blend of both. Though in reality it is impossible for such things to occur, but when it is shown to happen on the stage, it amuses the audiences. Devadatta confesses: "You know, I'd always thought one had to use one's brain while wrestling or fencing or swimming. But this body just doesn't, wait for thoughts - it acts!" (2.113).

As a result Padmini gets the desired 'Man', a man with Kapila's body and Devadatta's intellect. Padmini later reveals to Devadatta, "Fabulous body-fabulous brain- fabulous Devadatta." (Karnad43) For Padmini, Devadatta becomes a complete man, a man of her desires. Padmini is fully satisfied as she has a whole man as her husband. But this ideal situation does not last long. Kapila's body gives way to the desk-bound life imposed on it by Devadatta, and Padmini is yet again left unfulfilled.

Karnad appears to suggest that such totality, although immensely anticipated, is seldom promising for human beings and it could only be fantasized as a means of wish fulfillment. Dolls are also used as a device by Karnad to unravel the psyche of Padmini. When Devadatta and Padmini go for swimming, the dolls are left in the house. Dolls feel that they "should have got a palace. A real palace and a Prince to play with. A real 'Prince' (Karnad44). Using these toys, Karnad is able to describe the sub-conscious images and dreams that cannot be represented visually. The toys discover that in Padmini's reveries, she sees a man, not her husband, who appears rougher and darker. They watch him climb a tree and dive into a river. Devadatta's transfiguration is also conversed through the dolls. When Devadatta touches Doll 1, it senses the transformation and reflects, "His palms! They were so rough, like a labourer's when he first brought us here. But now they are soft- sickly soft-like a young girl's" (Karnad 47). Doll 2 notices that

his stomach, which was so fitted and well-built, has now become loose.

Transfiguration functioned as a vehicle for the playwright to develop and project his ideas about the fulfilment of human desires. The theme of transfiguration, in the play, is a kind of misdemeanour, which has tragic outcomes as well. As Markarand R. Paranjape has said, "The artifice of shape shifting is traditional, ritualistic, mythical, but the outcome is tragic" (91). Usually there is death or destruction. In the end all three of them, Kapila, Devadatta and Padmini end their lives tragically in the woods. Death scenarios serve mainly to highlight the absurdity of the situation.

Karnad takes the title of the play from the sub plot; 'Hayavadana' which is an amalgamation of two terms- 'Haya' and 'Vadana', which together means 'Horse Face'. Hayavadana's parents are an example for shape-shifting. His mother, a beautiful princess of Karnataka, was all set to get married; a *swayamvara* (the freedom of choosing her husband) was arranged. His mother did not feel driven to choose any of the suitors who had come to marry her, as she had already found no man who was capable to fulfil her desires. Eventually, she found herself an appropriate cavalier the white stallion of the Prince of Arabia. Disregarding the calls of the sayers, she married the stallion. After living with the horse for fifteen years, one fine morning the horse transfigured into a beautiful celestial being. A curse by God Kubera had turned him into a stallion. The *gandharva* (a name used for distinct heavenly beings in Hinduism and Buddhism) had asked the princess to accompany him to the celestial abode. Padmini denied him, and asked him to turn back into the stallion that she loved. This angered him, and therefore he cursed her to become a horse. Narrating the story in detail, Hayavadana conveys his crisis to Bhagavata, "So my mother became a horse and ran away prancing happily. My father went back to his Heavenly Abode. Only I – the child of their marriage – was left behind" (Karnad9). This episode, illustrative of transfiguration, was widely acclaimed by viewers.

Padmini exhibits her desires that later develops her Hamartia. Her desires for physical and mental wholeness can be defined with reference to

the Mandala Theory, which articulates two phases of human life; divine and physical. Here, the circles are suggestive of divine aspects and rectangles are stating the physical aspects of the world. Like other protagonists of Karnad, Padmini may be explained by "Dim Circles and Sharp Rectangles". Indeed, her craving for a complete man i.e. 'Fabulous brain and fabulous body' raises dilemma for her. She was gifted with fabulous brain in the form of Devadatta. If she had been satisfied with the Devadatta she married, her present plight, that is, her love for another man other than her husband, could have been avoided. In our society, a woman cannot desire for another man, other than her husband; if it is disrupted there will be a turmoil and chaos in the social system. But on the contrary, her ambition spurred and she violated the norms of the society by placing Devadatta's head on Kapila's body and vice-versa. Even though, she restricted her desires for a man with 'Fabulous brain and fabulous body', her repressed desires found their way out through the act of transposition of heads. This is what Freud termed as the libido.

Libido is an expression taken from the theory of emotions. We call by that name the energy, regarded as a quantitative magnitude (though not at present actually measurable), and of those instincts which have to do with all that may be comprised under the word 'love'. The nucleus of what we mean by love naturally consists of (is what is commonly called 'love', and what the poets sing of) in sexual love with sexual union as its aim. (12)

Karnad tried to present Padmini as a puppet of her physical desire. As throughout her characteristic development, she seems to be obsessed by the physical desires and not liable towards the divine aspect, hence it can be said that her circles on Mandala theory which denotes second thought would be dimmer for her and rectangles which indicates subconscious zone and worldly pleasures would be sharper and bold on Mandala Theory. Mandalas are circular designs that reflect the wholeness of the person creating them. According to Carl Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist exposed the significance of mandalas through his own work.

A "mandala is the psychological expression of the totality of the self" (Jung 20). Mandalas communicate complex philosophical ideas and convey the visions of sages. Mandalas are used in special meditation practices for attaining and mixing non-ordinary states of consciousness. Carl Jung explored the psychological meaning of mandalas. He saw mandalas as symbolic of the inner process by which individuals grow toward fulfilling their ability for wholeness. Mandalas are important as it indicates the process of personal growth that moves you towards fulfilling your particular identity and purpose in life. Jung found that, "mandalas usually appear in situations of psychic confusion and perplexity" (Jung vi).

Mandalas carry information about the conscious and unconscious, between ego and self. A question can be framed why Devadatta did not make effort to fight for, as per the desires and demands of his wife, Padmini. As per the wedding oath, it was the responsibility of Devadatta to fulfil every kind of requirement and necessity of his better half, Padmini. Another character, Kapila may be held responsible for this state. Though he has been described less intelligent and learned than Devadatta, he has analysed and recognised the very nature of Padmini. But he did not expose it in front of his friend. There may be a hidden and suppressed desire for the beauty of Padmini in his mind. Later due to this suppressed desire, he exploited Padmini by displaying his physical strength and virility. As seen in Greek tragedies, here in the play, *Hayavadana*, "Stage is scattered with dead bodies". All the three major characters become the target of tragedy of distinctive trends.

Hayavadana appears in the beginning of the play in a state of utter despair. He was neither a man nor a horse and he aspired for wholeness in his life. Identity crisis could be seen in its worse form in Hayavadana. He cries to the Bhagavata,

"If it was a forehead like yours, I would have accepted anything. But this! I have tried to accept my fate. My personal life has naturally been blameless. So I took interest in the social life of the Nation-Civics, Politics, Patriotism, Nationalism, Indianization, and the Socialist Pattern of

Society... I have tried everything. But where's my society? Where? You must help me to become a complete man, Bhagavata sir." (9)

Even though the Bhagavata addresses Hayavadana as "poor man", Hayavadana's identity as human being is questionable. He aspired for a human life but in the end he becomes a horse. Though he didn't become what he aspired for, he was happy to become complete. His craving for wholeness was fulfilled but not in the way he desired. Karnad tries to convince his audience that, no one can attain wholeness as desired in one's life.

The existential problems found throughout Karnad's plays are plenty. He used existential crisis and the quest for identity in "*Naga-Mandala*" (the story of cobra) to show-case problems faced by women in society. From the oppressed to the dominant, the transfiguration that takes place in the play is not purely physical, rather a mental and moral transfiguration. The physical transfiguration of the cobra assists or triggers the moral transfiguration of the protagonist, Rani. The Naga crafts a protective shield for Rani and from an innocent girl longing for her parents; she is transformed into a strong woman, a loving wife and eventually transmuted into the Divine Mother at the end of the play. Appanna, Rani's husband too changes from a hostile husband into a doting one.

Snake myths are found extensively in Hindu, Buddhist, and Japanese writings. "We are forced to believe that there exists a theory that the mothers of great men in history such as Scipio, Alexander the great, and Augustus Caesar were all impregnated by serpents" (Budholia 82). Karnad used the mythical transfiguration of the snake to fulfil the desires of Rani, as a woman. It is the accomplishment of her desires which transfigures her into a bold woman.

Karnad's *Naga-mandala*, the story of a cobra suggests that the play is intended not only to dramatize the folk tales, but also to indicate a deeper meaning at various levels. The play is based on two oral tales from Karnataka. As the title suggests, the play revolves around a woman and a serpent. Transfiguration in the play helps fulfil the

desires of Rani. As the play opens Appanna, Rani's husband is portrayed as a very unruly and unkind husband. He locks up Rani in the house, flirts with another woman, and arrives home every day only for lunch, refusing her to enjoy companionship with any male. Initially Rani is seen as a lifeless victim of her husband's oppression. Confined within the four walls of her home, she feels isolated, lonely and unfulfilled. Transformation takes place in her life by the entry of a snake. The snake, after consuming charisma, a magical potion, poured by her into the anthill, gets attracted to her.

Naga transforms into Appanna's figure and stealthily enters the house every night; its passionate and sincere love fulfils Rani's desire. She is tormented and hurt when her pregnancy is revealed. By performing the snake ordeal, she is forced to prove her chastity. By the shape-shifting of the cobra, Karnad enables Rani and Appanna transformation into better human beings. Rani emerges from a very feeble, pathetic, archetypal Indian woman metamorphosed as a powerful bold person, quite familiar with the habits of the world. She chides her husband, "I was a stupid, ignorant girl when you brought me here. But now I am a woman, a wife, and I am going to be a mother. I am not a parrot, not a cat or a sparrow" (2.51). Transfiguration happens in Appanna also. He apologises and accepts his wife's superiority, "Forgive me, I am a sinner. I was blind ..." (2.59). Naga, through transfiguration, provides everything Rani desires for - a beautiful child and a loyal husband.

In *Nagamandala*, transfiguration results in role-shifting. Physical transfiguration of the snake leads to psychological transfiguration of Rani, who has been a commonplace village woman carrying out the domestic responsibilities and leading a prisoner like life, now occupies an elated position as the head of the family. She is astonishingly elevated to the position of a living Goddess, an object of admiration and worship. Appanna becomes a devoted husband to Rani and in addition, Rani gets a servant also. Appanna's harlot, as a mark of repentance, volunteers to perform tedious tasks in Rani's house.

Yet another example of transfiguration which takes place in the play, is the flames taking on human shapes and conversing in the temple. When a new flame comes and joins the other flames, it narrates a story of the old woman who knew a story and a song. The story becomes a young woman and the song a sari. Wearing the sari, the story walks out of the old woman's house. Karnad used transfiguration of the flames to entertain and amuse readers. Flames play the role, similar to the Bhagavata in *Hayavadana*.

In both these plays, we can apply the concept of 'Poorna Purusha' (perfect man). We can derive examples from Vedas and Puranas where Sree Ramachandra is said to be the perfect man. According to Karnad, Padmini is attracted towards both Kapila's body and Devadatta's intellect. But, as Draupadi had to marry five persons to assemble all the qualities, Padmini had to combine the Kapila's body and Devadatta's head to make a 'Poorn Purush'.

According to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic principles, personality is built upon three parts: Id, Ego and Super Ego. Human behaviour is controlled by Id that consists of instincts which always pursues fulfilment, irrespective of peripheral reality and cultural values that is called pleasure principle. The ego, perceives reality and reacts to it as the reality principle. Ego being the leader, tries to please the Id and the Super Ego within the boundaries of external reality. The Super Ego, irrespective of external reality and biological impulses comprises ideals, values and morals and urges the Ego to lead an ideal life. When the Ego perseveres to be ideal under the pressure of Super Ego, the mind starts functioning independent of the body. This naturally leads to a split between the mind and the body. Consequently, they become strangers to each other. In this phenomenon the experiences of the body do not reach the mind, and the feelings of the mind do not spread through the body. This is what is shown in the case of Kapila and Devadatta.

In *Naga-Mandala*, Rani is afraid of her husband. She pictured her husband, Appanna as the demon who refuses to talk and takes his house as the 'castle' in which she is locked up. She fantasies

the appearance of a 'prince' who rescues her. Her inner desires and thoughts are directly represented in dreams as well as in 'slips of tongue and jokes'. According to Freud, "the Emperor and the Empress as a rule, represents the dreamer's parents; and a Prince or Princess represents the dreamer himself or herself". Her dreams are her 'wish-fulfilments'. Even though weak in body, unconsciously, she was finding ways for her escape. Dreams are the royal paths to the unconscious as Freud holds. M. Sarat Babu is of the opinion,

Mandala is a tantric concept indicating inner concentration; a source of energy, *Naga-Mandala* is a magical-religious ritual involving Naga, the snake God of Hindus who grants the wishes of his devotees, especially the wish for fertility. In the play, Naga grants Rani all her wishes which she does not express openly. She grows mentally and becomes a confident lady. She is cured of her frigidity. She gets a devoted husband. Her husband's concubine becomes a lifelong servant maid for her. And she begets a good son. Naga, in addition, makes Appanna's heart fertile with love and affection for his wife. At a higher level of symbolism, Naga represents a cultural leader who is instrumental in bringing about a socio-cultural reform (248)

Transformation of Rani, its outcome and the characteristic development of Naga-Mandala can be analysed on Mandala Theory. Mandala theory mentions about two aspects of human life divine and physical. Both the leading characters, Appanna and Rani are induced into illicit, extra marital relationships. Neither follows the spiritual knot and sacred oaths, at the time of marriage. Above all, the most interesting fact is that, even the Naga (Cobra) who is considered divine is not spiritual and ethical. Rani tells Naga Appanna:

I am sick of being alone. And tonight, I was terrified you might not come home, that what I recall from last night may have been just a dream. I was desperate that you should come again tonight. But, what am I to say, if you spin riddles like this? (23)

Though the Naga helps Rani in many ways, his actions cannot be justified based on ethical

codes. On the basis of above mentioned illustrations, it can be said that the spiritual and divine elements are weaker in this play. On the contrary, squares which are the symbols of Corporeal, sexual and physical actions are sharper. The relationship of "Naga- Rani- Appanna- Concubine" makes a concrete square, is the basic theme of the play.

Nagamandala, the transformation naaga (Appanna) from a cobra leads to identity crisis. Naga, in the disguise of Appanna, exploits Rani at sexual level. After admitting his position in the married life of Appanna and Rani, he proceeds towards death and hence commits suicide. Like a true lover, he feels delighted in the satisfaction of his beloved, Rani.

The emergence of Kurudavva and Cobra bring a drastic change in Rani's life. Towards the end of the play she is a new woman helped by Cobra's love, she builds up confidence to face the life and the society. When she becomes pregnant, she seems courageous and she has elevated her womanhood by becoming a mother, the completion of herself. Naga is Appanna himself who mimes his inhibitions.

Human beings are such that, imperfection is the only perfection in them. Every human being is gifted as well as deprived of some or the other thing. Eventually, every human being is interdependent. Through the reading of the plays one can say that man wants to be perfect i.e. Poorna, but Hindu Mythology says 'Poorna' is only one i.e. God the Almighty. It is impossible to get perfection for a man like God. With the help of Mythological setting Karnad has succeeded to present human's age old longing of desires. Man is a puppet in the hands of desires. A man of letters like Karnad is worried about the present day moral and ethical layout therefore he brings forward the new concept of perfection in a unique style. Thematically and technically these are masterpieces produced from Karnad's pen.

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