***Hayavadana***

**Girish Karnad**

Karnad recalls the urge behind the creation of *Hayavadana* in the introduction to *Three Plays*: “The idea of my play *Hayavadana* started crystallizing in my head right in the middle of an argument with B. V. Karanth (who ultimately produced the play) about the meaning of masks in Indian theatre and theatre’s relationship to music” (32). He adds elsewhere, in “Acrobating between the Traditional and the Modern,” that “By the late sixties, any seminar you went to in India, the question was what to do with folk theatre and this problem was endlessly debated” (75).

*Hayavadana* is a wonderful presentation through a modified proscenium-stage-friendly version of Yakshagana of one of the Indian folk-tales which Karnad came across during his reading of a novella by the German author, Thomas Mann. Mann trans-created one of the stories in the *Kathasaritsagar* as the story of *The Transposed Heads.* The *Vetalapanchavimshika* also has a variant of the same essential story of the transposition of the severed heads of two friends leading to a series of complications. Karnad uses neither the *Kathasaritsagar* nor the *Vetalapnchavimshika* as his source. Instead, he uses Mann’s story as his basis. However, he interprets it in a different way. In the original story in the *Vetalapanchavimshika*, Vetala, the ghost, asks King Vikramaditya a question regarding the identity of the husband (out of the two friends whose severed heads have been transposed) of the woman, which involves a moral crisis. The German Nobel Laureate came across the story of the transposed heads in Heinrich Zimmer’s study of the original Sanskrit storehouse of short stories, the *Kathasaritsagar.* Mann’s novella poses the problem of transposition of the heads as a psychological one. Karnad clarifies Mann’s stance in his interview with Mukherjee:

The tale from *Vetala Panchavimsati* had been used by Mann to address the question: after the heads have been attached to wrong bodies, who would be considered the woman’s husband? The tale answers that since the essence of man is represented by the head, the husband’s head will identify the husband. Mann continues the logic to its ultimate end that since the head is the man, the bodies transform themselves to fit the heads so that the men become exactly as they physically were at the start of the story (38).

Having two precedents before him, Karnad uses his sources to pose an existential problem—that of completeness. The confusion of identities problematises the very concept of identity. Thus, the technique of framing which he uses in this play serves a significant purpose because each frame offers a comment on the question of completeness which forms the core of the inner story. There is the central story of Padmini, Kapila and Devadatta. Hayavadana’s story frames this story and comments on its meaning. The invocation to Ganesha serves as the final frame and questions the impeccable completeness of being, towards which all men aspire.

The basic premise of the play deals with various aspects of the concept of the head as the *uttamanga*, the highest of the physical organs—thus, the role of the head in determining identity. However, the outer frame provides an ironical view on the concept of completeness. Men hope for perfection in art and performance and invoke the god who is anything but complete, as one of his names,*vakratunda mahakaya*, suggests*.* In Karnad’s *Hayavadana* the very notion of Lord Ganesha blessing the performance questions the feasibility of its completeness. In the plot dealing with Devadatta, Kapila and Padmini, the misplacement of the displaced heads leads to the conversion of the physical characteristics of the new-found bodies. In the first frame, dealing with Hayavadana’s story, the head, in keeping with the concept of the influence of the *uttamanga*, determines that the horse-headed man, in spite of his craving to become a complete man, becomes a complete horse. In the outer frame, however, there is no change because Ganesha is the divine son of Lord Shiva and Parvati and he has been given the privilege of retaining his elephant head while behaving like a human being. The technique of framing helps the generator of the story to compare and corroborate his main theme.

Karnad’s mentor, A. K. Ramanujan, points out in his *Collected Essays* that “stories about stories, frame stories, and nested ones, as well as various self-referential devices like plays within plays, abound in Indian classical and folk literatures” (21). This has been the primary cause of the great length of the two grand Indian epics, the digressions in them having served as an important repository of source material for other later literary and theatrical works. So, this device of framing and complementary stories being used has been embedded in the rich literary tradition of India, both classical and folk. However, after the first millennium, classical Indian literature lost in importance, particularly in the sphere of drama (which was an urban, and less public, form of entertainment) and folk performances became one of the primary modes of mass entertainment, particularly among the lower sections of the society. Joshi observes that, “Folk theatre has been popular all through the medieval period in many parts of the land” (34). This legacy has been duly used by Karnad whose presentation of Goddess Kali makes one recall Ramanujan’s pertinent observation in *Collected Essays*: “Folk versions embody, domesticate, and humanize the gods, heroes and poets of the classics” (22).

The use of masks forms an intrinsic part of *Hayavadana.* Karnad observes that the decision to use masks led him to question the theme itself in greater depth. All theatrical performances in India begin with the worship of Ganesha, the god who ensures successful completion of any endeavour. According to mythology, Ganesha was beheaded by Shiva, his father, who had failed to recognize his own son (another aggressive father!). In the Sutradhara’s Prologue1 to *Yayati* Karnad cites many instances from mythology to show how divine fathers took advantage of their sons. Anyway, the damage was repaired by substituting an elephant’s head, since the original head could not be found. Ganesha is often represented onstage by a young boy wearing the elephant mask, who then is worshipped as the incarnation of the god himself. Karnad explains his motive in using the mask of Ganesha, in the Introduction to *Three Plays*:

Ganesha’s mask then says nothing about his nature. It is a mask, pure and simple. Right at the start of the play, my theory about masks was getting subverted. But the elephant head also questioned the basic assumption behind the original riddle: that the head represents the thinking part of the person, the intellect.

It seemed unfair, however, to challenge the thesis of the riddle by using a god. God, after all, is beyond human logic, indeed beyond human comprehension itself. The dialectic had to grow out of grosser ground, and I sensed a third being hovering in the spaces between the divine and the human, a horse-headed man. The play *Hayavadana*, meaning ‘the one with a horse’s head,’ is named after this character. The story of this horse-headed man, who wants to shed his horse’s head and become human, provides the outer panel—as in a mural—within which the tale of the two friends is framed. Hayavadana, too, goes to the same Goddess Kali and wins a boon from her that he should become complete. Logic takes over. The head is the person: Hayavadana becomes a complete horse. The central logic of the tale remains intact, while its basic premise is denied (33).

The basic idea of the play rests on the quest for completion. The two friends are happy with their existence. Devadatta is engrossed with his studies and Kapila is happy to admire his vast erudition. It is Padmini who is unhappy to find that the friends separately possess the two traits she would like to find in the same man—a sharp intellect and a strong brawny physique. It is ironical that she lays her eyes on Kapila’s healthy body (when he comes with the proposal for marriage with Devadatta) even before she is acquainted with the name of her would-be husband. Vatsayan, the author of the famous work on the art of living, the *Kamasutra*, writes that the work of the messenger is done by someone who has the friendship and respect of both partners, but is especially well trusted by the woman (27). Therefore, in spite of her marriage with Devadatta she cannot ignore the attraction she feels for Kapila’s body. She experiences a strange, yet complex tussle between her dedication towards her husband and a powerful attraction for Kapila. She teases Devadatta for his physical weakness. This makes her husband suspicious and jealous. The complications begin.

The chief part of the story deals with the young and sensuous Padmini who, discovering the severed heads of her insecure and jealous husband and his rather attractive friend in a dark abandoned Kali temple, is distraught. Karnad mentions in the Introduction to the text of the play that “Offering one’s head, either on completion of a vow or in penitence, was a common practice in medieval Karnataka” (n.p.). This knowledge is used very wisely by Karnad in his play, which adds another dimension to the already known story of the transposed heads. Her wailings and attempted suicide attract the attention of the deity who commands her to replace the severed heads. However, in the darkness the heads get transposed. The story ends with the question: who is now the real husband, the one with the husband’s head or the one with his body? The answer given in the *Kathasaritsagar* is, since the head (the *uttamanga*) represents the man, the person with the husband’s head is the husband. Mann brings his relentless logic to bear upon this solution. If the head is the determining limb, then the body should change to complement the head. At the end of Mann’s version the bodies have changed again and adjusted themselves to the heads so perfectly that the men are physically exactly as they were at the beginning. We are back to square one—Padmini’s problem remains unsolved.

Karnad has taken into account the problem which would crop up at this juncture of the play when it would be staged. So, he recommended the use of masks for the characters of Devadatta and Kapila. The formula was simple. The actor with a pale coloured mask is Devadatta; he is slender looking. The actor wearing a dark mask is powerfully built—he is Kapila.

When Padmini replaces (or misplaces) the severed heads of the two men in the Kali temple on Mount Chitrakoot, she cannot see what she is doing because the temple is dark and it is night. All that the actors playing Devadatta and Kapila have to do is change the masks they are wearing: for them the mask is the face which is the head. It is very easy for the audience to recognize what has happened. Devadatta’s body has Kapila’s head and Kapila’s body has Devadatta’s head. The situation is comic and very serious at the same time. The rare phenomenon of coming back to life with someone else’s head on one’s shoulders is strange and full of comic possibilities. On the other hand, the grave problem which faces the three chief characters has every chance of verging on the tragic. It is the playwright’s dexterity by virtue of which he balances the two. The Bhagavata’s comments remind the audience that they are watching a play. This provides the auditors the scope for detached observation.

With their heads transposed, Devadatta’s and Kapila’s bodies find it extremely difficult to adjust to the new situation. A further crisis arises with the question of Padmini’s marital status: whose wife is she? For her, as a wife, the head and the body are of equal significance. It concerns her dedication to her husband and her integrity as a good Hindu woman. The three-some decide to seek the advice of a learned sage. The *rishi* gives them a simple solution. He argues that since the *Kalpa* *Vriksha* is the supreme among trees, so is the head among the limbs—it is the *uttamanga*. Therefore, the head is the man. The man with Devadatta’s head is Padmini’s husband.

It cannot be said that the characters of Devadatta and Kapila develop in a big way in *Hayavadana*. One must remember that the story is more important here. Devadatta is the typical name of a Brahmin and Kapila, the dark one, has physical strength and beauty. Padmini’s name draws directly from classical erotic (or, more correctly, ‘the art of living’) literature like Kukkoka’s *Ratirahasya*,2 Sovideva III’s *Manasollasa*3 and Vatsayana’s *Kamasutra*. Some of the things treated in the *Ratirahasya* are also found in Vatsyayana’s *Kamasutra*, such as the four classes of women, the *Padmini*, *Chitrini*, *Shankhini* and *Hastini*. Padmini4 is the epitome of the sexually attractive woman; much sought after. Her passionate requirements are, therefore, more than ordinary.

After the transposition, what is important is the common desire for Padmini which the erstwhile friends experience. None wishes to let the other have her. However, they receive the sage’s advice with composure. The duel which could have taken place right at the point of the transposition of their heads, had to wait for a few more years. All of them had to recognize the fact that none of them could find peace and happiness after what had come to pass in the Kali temple.

Since the story is about the transposed heads of Devadatta and Kapila, they have to be studied together. The more one thinks about them, the more does one find intriguing elements in the complex nature of their existence in relational terms. The framing of their story is done by that of the horse-headed man, Hayavadana. The two men are dissatisfied with the bodies they newly possess. Hayavadana is happy to become a complete horse, although he wanted to become a complete man. He wishes to get rid of his human voice in order to become a perfect and normal horse. This serves to highlight the characters of Devadatta and Kapila, who cannot reconcile themselves with the idea that the head is the man. Men are supposed to be the most intelligent of animals. This play reveals that the horse is way ahead of the two men in his ability to accept the situation in which he finds himself instead of sulking for something he desires and knows is impossible to get. The play is named after Hayavadana to emphasize this very idea.

The crisis of the entire play revolves around the transposition of the heads of the two men who possess two important aspects of manly existence—a brawny physique (preferably dark, implying strength grown out of continuous hard labour) and an intelligent head. The transposition of the heads of the two men and the sage’s dictum that the head is the man, made it possible for Padmini to have Devadatta’s brain and Kapila’s body in the same man— her husband. What she secretly desired and knew was simply impossible suddenly come to her so easily that there was no reason for her to reject the wonderful combination while remaining within the socially sanctioned bond of marriage.

The Bhagavata intervenes, advising the audience to have tea and brood over the possible solution to this unique problem. Folk theatre encompasses the entire gamut of performing arts, including magic, acrobatics, martial arts or any other device it deems useful. Often this theatre, vast in scope, does not remain confined to a small stage, but converts the entire locality into a theatre. Action flows from people and their environment to the performing arena and from there back to the source in a single sweep. This is indicated by the Bhagavata’s direct address to the audience, after the trio is made to freeze:

Must their fate remain a mystery? And if so shall we not be insulting our audience bytying a question-mark round its neck and bidding it good-bye? We have to face the problem. . . . So there’s a break of ten minutes now. Please have some tea, ponder over this situation and come back with your own solutions. We shall then continue with our enquiry (39).

Act Two begins, after the short break, with the Bhagavata’s search for the solution to the problem, in the course of which he refers to one of the original sources (the *Vetalapanchavimshika*) of the story:

Way back in the ages, when King Vikrama was ruling the world, shining in glory like the earth’s challenge to the sun, he was asked the same question by the demon Vetala. And the king offered a solution even without, as it were, batting an eyelid (40).

Padmini remained a *pativrata* while she enjoyed the intimacy of a strong male body which the original Devadatta lacked. However the irony lies in the fact that the experience of an intimacy with a strong body makes Padmini yearn for it when Devadatta’s head compels Kapila’s original body to lose its manly strength and become as flaccid as Devadatta’s original body was before the transposition. On the one hand it has to be remembered that the head is the man. On the other Padmini is unable to accept the head as the sole determining factor of her conjugal life where the body plays a more significant role. The dialectic which arises out of this crisis forms the staple of the play, making Padmini’s personal crisis so very significant.

Although society would call her an unfaithful wife and spurn her, Padmini felt that she was going back to Devadatta’s original body. When Devadatta was brought back to life with Kapila’s body and was declared to be her legal husband, she accepted the decision with joy because the body was strong then. When that same body changed into a weak one by following the dictates of the *uttamanga*, she went in search of the strong body. It shows that in spite of her attempts at being a *pativrata* woman, she fails to become one, simply for her physical needs. Devadatta and Kapila make their new bodies become what their respective heads want—the head is the man, and the head is the supreme limb. For Padmini, the head is overpowered by her physical desires. This leads to the tragic deaths of the three of them. They are united in the child, whose mother is Padmini, who has been fathered by the body which now belongs to Kapila and who inherits the identity of Devadatta.

It is interesting to note that Padmini performs *sati* after the deaths of Devadatta and Kapila. In the Indian society, a ‘sati’ is considered to be a devoted wife who has the courage to plunge into the funeral pyre of her husband so that even death cannot part them. Padmini’s performance of *sati* may be an attempt on her part to prove her devotion to her husband. But, it appears that she herself is uncertain about who her husband is. Her dilemma complicates the drama and makes her a complex character that is torn between her faithfulness to her husband and her craving for a virulent lover.

**II**

Karnad, like others involved with performance, has had his share of memorable moments. One of these was his experience of watching a stage performance of *The Canterbury Tales* in London in the 1970s, which made him seriously consider indigenous folk theatre for his own plays. He has said in an interview that he wondered what he should do with the traditional theatre in India. That was when he was tempted to try something like *Hayavadana*, which was probably the first play written by an urban playwright using folk conventions. It must be mentioned here that *Hayavadana* resulted from Karnad’s disagreement with B. V. Karanth about the use of masks and music on the stage. Incidentally, Karanth is one of the exponents of the modernization of Kannada folk-theatre, particularly Yakshagana, the traditional musical dance-drama, popular with both the learned and the laity in coastal Karnataka. This gorgeous folk theatre literally means ‘music of the heavenly Yakshas’ and its operatic dance-drama depends heavily upon expressions of valour, wrath and terror. All the plays, thus, have battle scenes. It is a very complex and compact form of theatre. The bright costume, towering headgears, high-pitched singing, wild drumming of the *chende*, and vigorous dancing comprise the hallmark of Yakshagana. The Bhagavata narrates and directs the entire performance, singing for himself as well as the other characters, to the accompaniment of percussion instruments like a *mrdanga*, cymbals and the *chende*. Most of the Yakshagana performances are based on the two Indian epics and the Puranas. A Yakshagana performance starts at about nine in the evening and lasts all night. The stage is sixteen feet square at ground level. A pole is fixed in each of the four corners with plantains tied to them. Their large leaves sway and bend and meet high up in the air, forming a feathery canopy. The audience sits on three sides. The Bhagavata (Director and Singing Chorus) sits up-stage, on a large table, holding tiny cymbals. He is accompanied by three instrumentalists: one plays the *maddale* (drum), one plays a pipe and another, the *chende* (a barrel-like drum with a sharp clattering sound, particularly effective in battle scenes).

The image of Ganesha is worshipped by the actors in the dressing room, where it remains throughout the night. The opening song, Purvaranga, by the Bhagavata is also in praise of Ganesha. He is the remover of obstacles and the god of intellect. In his Vinayaka form, he very much resembles the Greek god of theatre, Dionysus. Prayers are offered to him for the successful completion of the performance. However, in practically all the folk theatre forms of the country Ganesha is remembered at the beginning for the successful completion of the performance.

There are three main forms of Ganesha worship adhered to in folk dramatic performances. In some performances only elaborate prayers are offered to him by the chorus of actors and musicians. Different kinds of devotional prayer songs are sung and his blessing is sought. However, in some performances his symbol—an idol or elephant mask—is brought on the stage and worshipped apart from offering him prayers. The third form of Ganesha worship is still more interesting. Here an actor wearing a Ganesha mask or guise appears on the stage and sometimes performs beautiful dance too. In the second and third types of Ganesha worship the jester character Vidushaka also participates at times making the proceedings very lively. This pot-bellied deity of the common folk enjoys the humour created by the jester at his own cost.

After Ganesha is worshipped and invoked for an unhindered performance of the play, two men hold a brightly embroidered curtain in order to partially conceal a character (or many characters) during the first entry on the stage. Ganesha is never impersonated. He is not a character; he is the deity to be worshipped for inspiration.

The climax is reached when the inevitable battle ensues between the hero and his foe. Accompanied by the severe beating of the *chende* and *maddale* at varying rhythms, the characters perform the war dance with all the rustic vigour and grandeur, until the ‘foe’ is overpowered. The performance continues into the early hours of dawn and stops only with day-break after an invocation to the Sun God, seeking his blessings.

The Yakshagana is a feast of colour, dance and music presented through the theatrical mode. Karnad recalls his childhood experiences of watching *Yakshagana* performances with the servants in petromax-lit open spaces in “Acrobating Between the Traditional and the Modern.” In those days, *Yakshagana* was “considered a very low form of art. It hadn’t become purified or acknowledged or accepted as an art form” (63). Karanth transformed the Yakshagana into a modern ballet by incorporating aspects of modern theatre into it. He made it the exclusive entertainment of the sophisticated and elite urban audience. In attempting to counter the challenge posed by Karanth, Karnad was on the lookout for a suitable theme for his play. He fondly recalls the gradual development of *Hayavadana* in the Introduction to *Three Plays*:

. . . the story initially interested me for the scope it gave for the use of masks and music. Western theatre has developed a contrast between the *face* and the *mask*—the real inner person and the exterior one presents, or wishes to present, to the world outside. But in traditional Indian theatre, the mask is only the face ‘writ large’; since a character represents not a complex psychological entity but an ethical archetype, the mask merely presents in enlarged detail its essential moral nature. (This is why characters in *Hayavadana* have no real names. The heroine is called Padmini after one of the six types into which Vatsayana classified all women. Her husband is Devadatta, a formal mode of addressing a stranger. His friend is Kapila, simply ‘the dark one’). Music—usually percussion—then further distances the action, placing it in the realm of the mythical and elemental (32-33).

Thus, he had hit upon a subject which would allow him to use both the mask and music (folk) in his play. The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values, of making them literally stand on their head. The various conventions—the chorus, the masks, the seemingly unrelated comic episodes, the mixing of human and non-human worlds—permit the simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view, of alternative attitudes to the central problem. To use a phrase from Bertolt Brecht, these conventions then allow for ‘complex seeing.’ Karnad points out that Brecht’s theory of drama was making us conscious of our own rich cultural heritage. In the same Introduction, he says, “What [Brecht] did was to sensitize us to the potentialities of non-naturalistic techniques available in our own theatre” (34). So, now one could appreciate the value of traditional Indian folk theatre. Its use in modern drama gained popularity. Karnad goes on to write, “Music, mime and exotic imagery open up vast opportunities for colourful improvisation” (35-36). The next step was to make these elements used in open-air ill-lit performances relevant on the modern urban stage. Karnad came face to face with it as he confesses in his interview with Tutun Mukherjee, “The problem was how to make this paraphernalia of masks, mime, half-curtains, dance and music meaningful outside its own context” (37-38). This must not be misinterpreted as an enforced attempt on the part of the playwright. He was merely searching for an appropriate form for his play which could accommodate the use of masks and music, which Karnad admits in the same interview, “Yes, to some extent the play represented my search for possibilities of form for my ideas. I was looking for suitable techniques and modes to express what I felt. I wasn’t trying to consciously revive any form. It was part of my theatrical perception” (39). What emerged was a landmark in the history of Indian theatre. He goes on, “For the first time in the history of Indian theatre an urban playwright had consciously used folk techniques and folk philosophy to speak to a contemporary audience” (40).

All this was part of *abhinaya.* In the *Natyashastra*, Bharata has conceived *abhinaya* (histrionic art) as four-fold. They are related to speech, bodily movements, costume, make-up, and expression of psychic states. Make-up, masks and head-dresses play an important role in the art of the actor. In traditional Indian theatre, the mask is the face writ large. Karnad has observed in “Is Theatre Dead?” that in Indian theatre, “The mask is the face, is the man, in fact is more, for in folk rituals, the mask represents the spirit by whom the dancer seeks to be possessed” (*The Indian Post*. 31 December 1989)

Another folk convention which Karnad found useful for this play is the puppet theatre. The puppets have a broad social base. They have a great absorbing capacity and keep incorporating new thematic and textual material drawn from social life, customs and beliefs. The puppet tradition is an integral part of the performance tradition of India and it forms an important segment of contemporary theatrical activity. Symbolically transforming the patterns of human experiences, puppets have the same importance in giving meaning and beauty to life as many other forms of artistic expression like dance, song and sculpture. In *Hayavadana* Karnad modifies the puppet theatre by using a pair of dolls which serve the same function as the puppets which comment on the activities of human beings in contemporary situations. The folklore content of the play grows with the doll motif. We are inclined to see them variously as: gossiping neighbours or jealous sisters-in-law or spinster old maids in a parochial patriarchal set up. Tripathy observes that “Their disparaging gaze undermines both Padmini as a two timing whore and Devadatta as a ridiculous villain and also more decisively anticipates the futility of Padmini’s quest” (55).

A word must be added on Karnad’s use of the Bhagavata who is an avatar of the Sutradhar in ancient Sanskrit drama. Traditionally, the Bhagavata opens the play with the offering of worship to the God Ganesha accompanied by signs, for ritual worship, for the God with his human body and animal head aptly suggests a major development in the action as well as the central theme of completeness of being. However, the Bhagavata in *Hayavadana* is different as Karnad points out to Mukherjee: “But the Bhagavat of *Hayavadana* is identical neither with the Sutradhar of Sanskrit plays nor with the Bhagavat of Yakshagana” (39).

While assessing the various aspects of Karnad’s presentation of *Hayavadana*, it is important to discuss the origin and role of the Bhagavata, or Sutradhara, who plays a key function in the progress of *Hayavadana*. In the course of the growth and development of Indian theatre, *Nata*, the folk comedian, became the royal jester, Vidushaka. The Vidushaka, as a ‘simpleton whose imbecility, real or assumed, is utilized for entertainment’, appears in folk theatre in various forms and under different names. He is very dear to village audiences. He is a shrewd person with wide experience and keen observation under the garb of simplicity. All through his evolution he never lost contact with contemporary life. He has shown tremendous capacity to change with the times and remain eternally fresh. The Vidushaka is dear to the audiences because they feel that he is one of them, going through the same experiences of life. He is a link between the past and the present. Sometimes he acts as a Sutradhara and guides the flow of the story with ease. He introduces the characters to the audience. He also works as a stage-manager and makes necessary stage arrangements while the play is in progress. The sudden transformation from one role into another is the magic of wonderful flexibility inherent in folk theatre. He tirelessly carries on his work of holding a mirror up to the foolish world and thereby reveals its true image. In the Indian folk theatre, the Sutradhara, who is known by different names in the different regional varieties, holds the most important position in the entire scheme of the play. In a way he may be called the focal point of the evolution of folk theatre itself. Hence, in the Yakshagana theatre in Karnataka, he is respectfully called *Prathama Vesha*—the first character. Folk theatre owes its origin to the efforts of the narrator of the folk lore to make his art more visual in its impact. He pressed into service puppets, picture-scrolls and even shadows on the screen. In the folk theatre the Sutradhara, became an excellent device for translating any story into a coherent dramatic production. In classical Sanskrit theatre, he (along with his two associates) appears in the *Purvaranga* of the play with the very limited function of performing puja and informing the audience about the name of the author and the gist of the play. But the folk entertainers found the direct intervention of the narrator to carry out many important dramatic functions more convenient because here he straightaway established rapport with the audience across the stage and explained things in a much more intimate manner. A folk play is basically narrative in character with a social, religious or moral message to deliver. The Sutradhara keeps up the tone of narration of the folk play. He performs the dual function of breaking as well as maintaining the continuity of the play.

It is the *Bhagavata’s* presence which enables the play to become interesting. Any kind of diffuseness is evaded by means of his interventions. He is a very important link between the different characters of the play as well as the play and its audience. His role is that of a catalyst when he inspires the audience to think over the events of the play, thereby involving them as active participants in the action of the drama and making them aware of the fact that they are watching a play. The *Bhagavata* and his function in the play serve as a fine example of Karnad’s blending of Indian folk drama and the western theatre of Brecht, Anouilh and Strindberg.

The Bhagavata addresses the audience directly in a brief tête-à-tête which falls back upon folk drama as well as Karnad’s recent translation of Badal Sircar’s *Evam Indrajit* which did leave its mark upon the writing of *Hayavadana*, about which Karnad admits in “Acrobating between the traditional and the Modern,” when he says, “But I must confess that the fluidity of *Evam Indrajit* had a lot to do with my writing *Hayavadana*. . . . one cannot deny that Brecht as well as Badal Sarkar were haunting one, and that went some way in the shaping of *Hayavadana*” (76). The Bhagavata’s address reminds one of Manasi’s direct reference to the audience in Sircar’s play, as she speaks to the Writer. Karnad translates the dialogue like this:

MANASI. [*pointing to the audience*] There are all these people. Don’t you know any of them?

Don’t you know anything about any one of them?

WRITER . Them? Oh yes. I do know a couple of them. A few like us. But they won’t make a play.

MANASI. Try.

WRITER. I have tried. (198)

The Writer in *Evam Indrajit* is a modified Bhagavata, who sees the characters Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Indrajit are merely prototypes, just as Karnad sees Devadatta, Kapila and Padmini as prototypes. The Writer soliloquises, “There is no beauty in the people around me, no splendour, no substance. Only the undramatic material—Amal, Vimal, Kamal and Indrajit” (200). Karnad, while explaining to Mukherjee the creation of his characters in *Hayavadana*, says, “The characters are motivated by their own desires. Each character represents not only a complex psychological entity but an ethical archetype. This is why they are so named. Padmini, one of the six types of women from *Kamasutra*; her husband is Devadutta, a formal name for any stranger; his friend is Kapila or the ‘dark one’” (38-39). Thus, it is clear that Karnad was more interested in portraying the existential crisis that arose out of the strange circumstances which involved the trio, rather than in studying the characters as individuals, for which archetypal characters are preferable.

The use of archetypal characters would take away much of the charm of theatrical presentation, for which Karnad resorted to the use of Yakshagana, a musical extravaganza. Although Karnad used the form of the Company Natak in *Tughlaq*, he did not use music and song in the play in the way in which the Parsi theatre used them. This, according to the playwright, was due to the exposure to Western theatre, particularly that of Anouilh and Sartre. The absence of music and song in *Tughlaq* convinced Karnad of the centrality of music in the Indian cultural milieu. This propelled him towards a search for a different mode of theatrical communication. As a result he went back to classical Sanskrit drama, studied it, both as text and performance, explored its possibilities in the modern ethos and finally settled down with the folk tradition of the Yakshagana which is a practical modification of the classical conventions of Sanskrit drama.

The energy of folk theatre, according to Karnad, comes from the fact that while it seems to support traditional values, it is also capable of subverting them, looking at them from various points of view. The conventions of folk drama permit the simultaneous presentation of widely divergent points of view, some of them even irreconcilable with each other. The form can give rise to a genuine dialectic. Folk theatre is the theatre which originated and evolved among, and has been transmitted through, the common people. Its relationship with the common people is deep, multiple and multi-layered. It is a kind of entertainment which is not entertainment alone. It carries within it the entire folk culture with all its social and religious institutions. We find reflected in folk theatre the cults, customs, rituals and beliefs of common people. It assumes different forms and fulfils multiple functions. Traditions of Indian theatrical arts are of great antiquity and make their existence felt right from the Indus Valley Civilization.

Perhaps the most important influence on Karnad was the theatre of Bertolt Brecht, as far as the modern theatre of the west was concerned. Brecht’s theory of *epic theatre* rejected Aristotelian principles and regarded a play as a series of loosely connected scenes, dispensed with dramatic climaxes and used songs to comment on the action. Brecht discards the notion that drama should create an illusion of reality. So, it is clear that Brecht’s career marked the re-emergence of the playwright as the creative centre of theatre. He wanted to create a radically different type of dramatic character from the coherent individual of naturalism; and this was accompanied by extreme simplification in staging, together with overt theatricality. Settings are stripped down and placards indicate the scene or give information to remove suspense. Machinery and lights are exposed to prevent illusion, stage-hands work in full view, and instrumentalists playing the music for the songs that punctuate his plays are visible to the audience. A half-curtain replaces the solid drapes that customarily close the proscenium arch to emphasize that the stage is not a special or magical space, but part of the everyday world. At the same time, his actors were frequently masked, and were required to demonstrate the act of acting instead of pretending to *be* the characters. According to theory, all this was supposed to distance spectators from the drama, turning the audience into objective observers. Certain basic similarities may be observed in the staging techniques adopted by Brecht and the Yakshagana performers, although for different reasons and different circumstances. This technical device was used because, as Schechner points out, “In orthodox proscenium theatre, there is less opportunity for the audience to become aware of itself” (32). So, the Bhagavata tells Hayavadana, “We have a play to perform today, you know” (6).

It is in *Hayavadana* that Karnad uses the technique of framing for the first time: a method he uses in most of his subsequent plays. In this play the form of Yakshagana is followed very closely after adapting it for presentation in the proscenium stage. The *Bhagavata* initiates the play by seeking the blessings of Lord Ganesha, who is a god with a human body that has a cracked belly kept together by a snake, and an elephant-head with a broken tusk—he is the bestower of artistic completeness and perfection (ironically) in spite of being incomplete himself. There is a prayer to Ganesha at the end of the performance, in thanksgiving for the successful and unhindered performance. This is one frame.

The next frame is provided by the subplot. Hayavadana disturbs the theatrical performance with his sudden unexpected entry and tells his sad story. The *Bhagavata* sends him away to the Kali temple on Mount Chitrakoot where his quest for completeness may be fulfilled because something similar happens in the main plot. Hayavadana reappears after the deaths of the three characters in the main plot when the *Bhagavata* is about to perform the closing formalities of the performance.

The innermost core of the play is the main plot in two acts, the first ending with the transposition of the heads of the two men.

The comic presentation of the two deities, Ganesha and Kali expresses the typical tendency to make sly jokes at the expense of the divine. The ruins of the Kali temple, in spite of her being so generous with boons, seems to serve as a pointer towards the decline in religious devotion amongst modern Indian Hindus.

Thus, *Hayavadana*, by virtue of its having three frames of reference regarding the importance of the head—Ganesha, the divine protector of the acting space, Hayavadana, the man with a horse’s head, and the transposed heads of Devadatta and Kapila—provides a multi-layered prospect of enquiry and assessment of the condition of man’s predicament in this mysterious world of being.

The use of the Bhagavata’s interventions in the performance is primarily to direct the audience’s perception. At the same time the audience is reminded that it is once removed from the performance. Besides, the Bhagavata offers certain details in the storyline and cuts short all the unnecessary prolongation in the presentation, thereby making the plot a well-knit one. His deference for the audience is noteworthy when he warns Actor I, at the very beginning of the performance, “What do you mean by all this shouting and screaming? In front of our audience too!” (2) He goes on to make a sly comment on the audience-response to such performances: “And there is our large-hearted audience. It may be that they fall asleep during a play sometimes. But they are ever alert when someone is in trouble” (3). and repeats the same words again (7), to emphasize the audience’s behavioural pattern.

The Female Chorus accompanies the Bhagavata in song, which is both narrative and commentary in nature:

FEMALE CHORUS [*sings*]. Why should love stick to the sap of a single body? When the stem is drunk with the thick yearning of the many-petalled, many- flowered lantana, why should it be tied down to the relation of a single flower?

BHAGAVATA [*sings*]. They forgot themselves and took off their bodies. And she took the laughing heads, and held them high so the pouring blood bathed her, coloured her red. Then she danced around and sang.

FEMALE CHORUS [*sings*]. A head for each breast. A pupil for each eye. A side for each arm. I have neither regret nor shame. The blood pours into the earth and a song branches out in the sky (11).

These words of the chorus, divided between the Bhagavata and the Female singers, succinctly expose the sensuous yearning of young people which forms the essence of the study of the complexity that grows out of the story of Devadatta—Padmini—Kapila. It seems that the severing of the heads and their subsequent transposition in the abandoned Kali temple is deeply symbolic. According to Indian mythology, Goddess Kali is a fertility deity who demands blood for the rejuvenation-through-purification of the earth. The exchange between the Bhagavata and the Female singers brings out the relevance of this fertility cult. The song of the Female Chorus:

FEMALE CHORUS [*sings*]. Why should love stick to the sap of a single body? When the stem is drunk with the thick yearning of the many-petalled, many- flowered lantana, why should it be tied down to the relation of a single flower? A head for each breast. A pupil for each eye. A side for each arm. I have neither regret nor shame. The blood pours into the earth and a song branches out in the sky (64).

is repeated after Padmini commits *sati* and the performance comes to an end. So the song acts as the frame of the inner core of the actual theatrical performance of the story of Devadatta—Padmini—Kapila.

Kapila’s brief soliloquy in Act One points out that he has a premonition about Devadatta’s incapability of handling an overtly sensuous woman like Padmini: “She is not for the likes of you. What she needs is a man of steel.” (19) Or, rather could it be a man of iron—the blacksmith’s son—Kapila? On the other hand, as Kapila climbs the Fortunate Lady tree to bring flowers for Padmini on their way to Ujjain through the forest, she makes a pertinent aside which matches his early observation, “No woman could resist [Kapila]” (26).

Karnad also makes use of mime in this play. In Act One, the cart-ride to Ujjain is presented in mime, according to the stage direction, where “*Kapila, followed by Padmini and Devadatta, enter, miming a cart-ride*” (25).

Thus, Karnad makes use of a variety of theatrical techniques in *Hayavadana,* which is regarded as one of his most successful plays.

**III**

Karnad’s use of language in this play is obviously different from that in *Tughlaq*. Here, the language is more colloquial, particularly that of the Bhagavata, whose comments and interventions guide the audience during the play’s performance, right from the beginning. The Bhagavata, unable to believe Actor I’s report of a talking horse, alleges that the man has been drinking a lot, to which the man protests saying, “I haven’t been near a toddy-shop for a whole week” (4). The entire play abounds in references drawn from the collective unconscious of the typically Indian cultural ethos. For example, Kapila tells Devadatta in Act One that he could “Jump into a well—or walk into fire” (12) for his sake. These are typical methods of proving purity and faithfulness, usually by wives (the proverbial Sita and Savitri archetypes). Again, Devadatta says to his dear friend, “I have no cloud for a messenger” (14) when he reveals his love-at-first-sight for Padmini, obviously referring to the *Meghdoot* of Kalidasa. Kapila’s aside, when he sees Padmini, is full of classical Indian references to beautiful women: “she is Yakshini, Shakuntala, Urvashi, Indumati—all rolled into one” (16). The Bhagavata’s use of the image of the scarecrow on the bank with its mudpot head and a body torn with memories is significant. The head seems to be the origin of all the problems because the bodies of the two men crave for the intimacy of Padmini.

Padmini’s infatuation with Kapila’s brawny figure is expressed in the best possible way, when she admires him saying, “And what an ethereal shape! Such a broad back—like an ocean with muscles rippling across it—and then the small, feminine waist which looks so helpless” (25). After the *rishi’s* solution is accepted by the trio, following the transposition, Padmini is overjoyed to be sent off with the man with Devadatta’s head just as he is delirious to have the woman. They seem to be relieved to be united to each other, to the exclusion of the man with his body. Padmini welcomes this new body (which is actually the attractive Kapila’s) in a language which is remarkable: “My Devadatta comes like a bridegroom with the ornament of a new body . . .” (41) To this Devadatta makes an equal riposte, “And who should wear the ornaments but the eager bride . . .” (41)

The playwright’s early infatuation with T.S. Eliot’s work and his desire to write English poetry remained somewhere at the back of his consciousness. So, we have Padmini articulating:

What a good mix—

No more tricks—

Is this one that

Or that one this? (56)

The meter is much after Eliot’s ‘The Hollow Men.’5 This is when Padmini visits Kapila’s forest dwelling, and his body, originally Devadatta’s, recognizes Padmini’s intimate touch. He expresses his cerebral experience of this passion saying, “I have never touched you, but this body, this appendage laughed and flowered out in a festival of memories to which I am an outcaste . . .” (58) Kapila’s crisis lies in the inability of his *uttamanga* to come to terms with the intense desire felt by his body. Padmini, the essence of eroticism incarnate, cajoles him towards oblivion, saying:

Your body bathed in a river, swam and danced in it. Shouldn’t your head know what river it was, what swim? Your head too must submerge in that river—the flow must rumple your hair, run its tongue in your ears and press your head to its bosom (58).

She is obviously trying to force Kapila’s head to respond like his body, highlighting the crisis of the play.

A fragment from Karnad’s autobiography may be useful in understanding the use of romantic songs in  *Hayavadana.* It is in Madras that he meets his future wife Saraswati Ganapati. She leaves for her higher studies in America and they continue to meet on and off for fifteen years. During the initial period of his stay in Madras, Karnad avoids physical relations and this is how he describes its consequences: “They were the darkest years of my life. By this voluntary practice of continence I would remain dull for weeks together. Now and then I would even contemplate suicide.” (*Aadaadta Aayushya*, trnsl. Swami Mahamedhananda) Once an unknown lady calls Karnad to complement him on the staging of *Yayati* in Bombay and urges him to see it once. Karnad goes to Bombay on her insistence to see the presentation. After returning he contacts her. She is a married lady with her own small business. The two soon enter into a physical relationship. Within a few months Karnad writes *Hayavadana*. His love songs for her are used in the play.

The river image continues in Karnad’s use of poetry on the lips of the Female Chorus:

The river only feels the

pull of the waterfall.

She giggles, and tickles and rushes

on the banks, then turns

a top of dry leaves

in the navel of the whirlpool, weaves

a water-snake in the net of silver strands . . . (58)

These lines are a clear echo of ‘The River’6  by one of the significant influences on Karnad, A. K. Ramanujan. Karnad seems to use plenty of poetry in the play, particularly in the Bhagavata’s commentaries in Act Two. It may be because of the rising action which gradually draws to a crescendo of harmony to the loud and fast beating of the chende, that ends with the duel and eventual deaths of the two erstwhile friends, now turned foes. The Bhagavata’s poetic exuberance ends with:

The *rishi* who said ‘Knowledge gives rise to

forgiveness’ had no knowledge of death (62).

The translational problems crop up, particularly during translating poetry from the Kannada to the English version of the play. So, at times Karnad directly writes in the stage direction, or rather, the dramatist’s intervention (a rare phenomenon in drama) that “*The following is a prose rendering of* [*the song sung by the female musicians*]” (63) and goes on to write the prose rendering of the Kannada song in English: “Our sister is leaving in a palanquin of sandalwood. . . . The Lord of Death will be pleased with the offering of three coconuts” (63).

A furtive hint is made on the irreverence exhibited towards the National Anthem, which was sung after every public performance, be it theatre or a film show, during the post-Independence period upto the 1970s. Hayavadana points out that he has “noticed that the people singing the National Anthem always seem to have ruined their voices” (69) and so he has tried to lose his human voice by singing it. This is not all. Karnad seems to have a fling at the theatre critics as well. Actor I says that Padmini’s son has “No response—no reactions. When he grows up he should make a good theatre critic” (66).

The final words of the play are, quite obviously, uttered by the Bhagavata. It is a prayer of thanksgiving to Lord Ganesha, for his benevolent supervision over the presentation of the play. However, there is an ironic undercurrent in his articulation:

Grant us, O Lord, good rains, good crop,

Prosperity in poetry, science, industry and other affairs

Give the rulers of our country success in all endeavours,

And along with it, a little bit of sense (71).

*Hayavadana*, drawing largely for its technique on folk traditions of performance including Yakshagana, the use of masks, the puppet theatre and mime, is a remarkable play in which Karnad experiments freely with form and language. The play is the first of those in which Karnad knits two stories into one play by using the technique of framing. The success of this play inspired Karnad to write *Naga-Mandala*, another play which falls upon the *desi* tradition from the Carnatic region.

**Notes and References**

1As found in the Typescript version of the English translation of *Yayati.*

2*Ratirahasya* (meaning: the 'Secrets of Love') written by a poet named Kukkoka, was composed to please one Venudutta, who was perhaps a king. The work contains nearly eight hundred verses, and is divided into ten chapters, which are called Pachivedas. Some of the things treated of in this work are not to be found in the Vatsyayana, such as the four classes of women, the Padmini, Chitrini, Shankini and Hastini, as also the enumeration of the days and hours on which the women of the different classes become subject to love, The author adds that he wrote these things from the opinions of Gonikaputra and Nandikeshwara, both of whom are mentioned by Vatsyayana, but their works are not now extant. It is only to be presumed that it was written after that of Vatsyayana.

3*Manasollasa* (Happy State of Mind) is an ancient treatise written by King Sovideva III, son of the Chalukyan emperor Vikramaditya.

4As Venus was represented by the Greeks to stand forth as the type of the beauty of woman, so the Hindus describe Padmini or Lotus woman as the type of most perfect feminine excellence. She in whom the following signs and symptoms appear is called a Padmini. Her face is pleasing as the full moon; her body, well clothed with flesh, is soft as the Shiras or mustard flower, her skin is fine, tender and fair as the yellow lotus, never dark coloured. Her eyes are bright and beautiful as the orbs of the fawn, well cut, and with reddish corners. She walks with swan-like gait, and her voice is low and musical, she delights in white raiment, in fine jewels, and in rich dresses. She eats little, sleeps lightly, and being as respectful and religious as she is clever and courteous.

5*The Hollow Men*, Stanza I:

We are the hollow men

We are the stuffed men

Leaning together

Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!

6‘A River’: Stanza 1:

In Madurai,

city of temples and poets

who sang of cities and temples:

every summer

a river dries to a trickle

in the sand,

baring the sand-ribs,

straw and women’s hair

clogging the Watergates

as the rusty bars

under the bridges with patches

of repair all over them,

the wet stones glistening like sleepy

crocodiles, the dry ones

shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun.

The poets sang only of the floods.