

Cultural Appropriation and Adaptation: Mann's The Transposed Heads' and Karnad's 'Hayavadana.'

Kavitharam T.R.*

*Assistant Professor of English, Panampilly Memorial Government College,Chalakudy. Potta.

Citation: Kavitharam T.R. (2023) Cultural Appropriation and Adaptation: Mann's The Transposed Heads' and Karnad's 'Hayavadana.', *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 29(3) 1560-1563
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v29i3.10301

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The ontological interrogation of being and becoming has been always evoked curiosity in human psyche. An Indian folklore posing the existential dilemma was taken by Thomas Mann in his novella 'The Transposed Heads' with a western's orientalist fascination and exoticism; while the same story was developed in to a drama proclaiming the thoughts of post-colonial India as critique of its cultural ideals and of the spiritual enlightenment by Karnad in his two act play 'Hayavadana'. This article proposes an exploration of the mode of presentation of the same narrative in the light of different consciousness. For a European the Orient has always been their '... invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experience...' as Edward Said words it, while Karnad seizes the mythological themes to blend it with coeval era of postcolonial India

Key Terms: orientalism, post colonialism, cultural appropriation, cultural adaptation,

Introduction

Fables wanders around the world like exiles, searching for homes land, yet always bearing the remnants of land they depart from. When a simple Indian folktale retold by a two genius minds, it takes a peculiar turn in Thomas Mann's 'Transposed heads' and also in Girish Karnad's 'Hayavadana'. Though both works inspired the ancient Indian story it diverged in to different modes of thought just the swapped heads of their protagonist Mann's work build upon the light of European existentialism and psycho analysis and also in to the dilemma of identity crisis the westerners faced in that era. The novella is a European contemplation of identity and intellect.

Mann's novella written in 1940, exemplifies what Edward Said terms "orientalism"— the Western gaze reconstructing the East to suit its intellectual and aesthetic frameworks. Though the root of the story is taken from the Sanskrit text 'Kathasarit Sagara', he interpreted the story in European perspective that matched that period of utter despair. "What I saw in it," Mann once reflected, "was a philosophical parable of the duality of life, of spirit and flesh, intellect and instinct." The original legend's playful mysticism becomes, in Mann's hands, a somber exploration of human alienation. This shift arouses the risks of cultural appropriation, as Mann's story uprooted from its soil and but has to carry the burden of the philosophical weight and remain there as a show piece item to the Western audience and remained as repository to the exotic imaginary spiritual land. On the other hand Karnad's play reclaims the tale; embed with in it the rich, performative traditions of Indian theatre (*Yakshagana*) to explore questions of hybridity, incompleteness, as the humanity. The result is an extraordinary dialogue between East and West, modernity and tradition, appropriation and adaptation.

Karnad's *Hayavadana* is an attempt to replant the story in to Indian soil but not without modification "The past is not a dead weight but a rich source" Karnad reflects his philosophy and realized that through his play. Though he uses the turn of the story just as in Mann's novella but places it in the middle of various other Indian myths of transformed heads come to the stage and alive on stage presenting a canvas to the Indian notions of identity and imperfection.

In 'Hayavadana', the myth unfolds through the folk traditions of 'Yakshagana', imbued with humor, music, and ritual. The conflict between head and body—mind and desire—retains its philosophical gravity but is reframed within an Indian cultural ethos that embraces ambiguity and hybridity. In this sense, Karnad's work exemplifies cultural adaptation the borrowed myth was brought back in to its locus and revitalised it.

Karnad's *Hayavadana* illustrates cultural adaptation—a process where borrowed components are reinterpreted to connect with the receiving culture. Karnad, a trailblazer of contemporary Indian theatre, utilizes the structure of Mann's narrative while recontextualising it within the context of Indian performance arts like Yakshagana and traditional storytelling. In this way, he rejuvenates the story's foundational cultural spirit while tackling modern concerns of identity, hybridity, and human imperfection. Karnad's play explores the philosophical issue of mind-body duality, a theme crucial to the narrative, yet he integrates it into a distinctly Indian perspective, highlighting how myth, ritual, and cultural norms influence human experiences.

The Story as Retold in the Novella
The Transposed Heads' Thomas Mann's novella is the philosophical version of an old Indian folklore which was compiled in '*Kathasarith Sagara*' by Somadatta as puzzle of identity myth. In transposed heads it is a hooking plot with a love triangle of friends Sridaman and Nanda. In which Sridaman is learned person who represent the elite category as he considered himself supreme and placed in the upper most tire of the societal stratification and he is the man of head while the Nanda is dark with muscular body as he is a smith .They both attracted towards beautiful Sita in their fight glance. As Sridaman was more got married to Sita in which Nanda is the envoy. Though she was attracted to Nanda's muscular body she was happy to be married to Sridaman as he is representative of high birth and learnedness.

On journey to Visit her parental house the couple were accompanied by Nanda who drives their cart. In the cart the tension of the travellers mounts up as they recognized the complexity of their love. To ease the tension both the men visit the Kali temple and behead themselves in a moment of awe in front of the Goddess. The young wife who had caught the sight of these beheaded bodies attempted suicide and in that spur moment the Goddess asked her to keep their head in their position to bring them back their life to them. Thus they came back alive but with a twist to the story Sita the wife in her confusion transposed their heads and the question arises who is the husband of Sita and they went to a *Rishi* (a Hindu sage) in seeking help to this puzzle who clarifies that who carries the head is the husband. The husband wife returned happily as the head Sridaman carries the perfect body of Nanda, Sita was happy because the coveted body of Nanda has now her husband head so she can enjoy the marital bliss in the way she imagined. Nanda who remained as the pity party here left to the forest to live a secluded life.

As the story evolves as the heads that controls the body transforms that in to its earlier condition. Nanda's body even though he lives as an ascetic in the forest regained its previous muscular glory while Sridaman's body went back to the same weakling condition as it was earlier. Sita who is mother now was in search of Nanda whom she thinks the father of her son as Nanda's body gave her the child. Sridaman who finds them happily together again there is a sacrifice of killing each other when they understood the life cannot go on as it once used to be. In to their funeral pyre Sita follows as Sati as it was a customary ritual of self-immolation by Hindu widows. Her son who was left on was admired and was the focal attention as he is the son of Sati.

The Root Form of the Story and Presentation of the Theme by Karnad

Indian folktale was simple in its structure as the persons involved in the story were not friends but brothers in law ,the husband of the woman and the other is her own brother and when the heads were swapped there was no other question other than that of the identity .When Vikram answers to '*Vetal*' the person who carried the head of her husband is the husband and the story ends there without much confusion about incest or the like as Indian belief is steadfast in the authority of the head and intellect as they are staunch believers of *Varna system* in which they believe Brahmins came out from the head of *Adipurusha* and they came to be the head or the intellectual leads of the society.

A simple love triangle ends in a comedic and confusing twist of fate in Karnad's *Hayavadana*. Devadatta and his beautiful wife Padmini find themselves traveling with their faithful friend Kapila. The suspicious husband, convinced of his wife's love for Kapila, beheads himself. The distraught friend, upon learning of Devadatta's deed, takes his own head as well. Only the goddess Kali can remedy the situation and bring the men back from the dead-but just whose head is on whose body?

The play *Hayavadana* - meaning the horse headed person – starts in Indian story telling tradition Bhagavatha who proclaims the Indian oral tradition enters the stage reciting stories from epics.

The play starts with an Invocation to Lord Ganesha: "An elephant's head on a human body, a broken tusk, and a cracked belly—whichever way you look at him, he seems the embodiment of imperfection, of incompleteness. How does one understand such a god?"

This invocation to Ganesha establishes the play's Indian cultural grounding while introducing the theme of imperfection, questioning societal ideals of wholeness and divinity. The back ground to the main theme was set in a firm ground as the transposing heads and this motif was not alien concept.

The tale of the transposed heads, found within the *Kathasaritsagara*, serves as more than just a narrative oddity; it illustrates the deep Indian fascination with metaphysical dualities. The narrative engages with the age-old philosophical inquiry of *tat tvam asi*—"You are that"—from the *Chandogya Upanishad*. It reflects on the connection between mind and body, self and others, while playfully interacting with human foolishness. The woman's predicament—deciding between her husband's body and his transplanted head—turns into a whimsical yet deep metaphor for the inseparability of human identity.

. "To appropriate a story," writes Edward Said, "is to domesticate it, to make it serve the purposes of the new culture." Mann's purpose was to explore the existential fragmentation of the self, a concern deeply rooted in 20th-century European thought. Shridama, the intellectual, and Nanda, the physical ideal, embody the Western dichotomy of mind and body, spirit and flesh. The tragedy of their transposed identities was highlighted in Mann's pessimistic view of human incompleteness: "Who we are and what we are destined to become are forever at odds."

"Orientalism is based on externality," he states, "meaning that the Orientalist... allows the Orient to express itself, depicts the Orient, and clarifies its enigmas." Mann's novella, despite its philosophical richness, simplifies the Eastern mysticism of its origin by viewing it through a Western intellectual perspective.

In contrast to it Karnad once commented, "The challenge for me was finding a way to utilize this myth to address the contemporary Indian psyche." By incorporating the story into the structure of folk performance, Karnad revitalizes its cultural and philosophical significance.

Orientalist perspective as Edward Said explains was revealed through a mystified romanticised view of what is unknown to them the interest in 'the otherness' of the European mind. Transposed head explicitly this character of Orientalism. His use of lush, poetic language to describe the setting and exoticism of India:

"The land where rivers flow like liquid jade and temples rise as if carved from the dreams of gods—here, the mysteries of the East unfold with a serenity that baffles the restless Western mind."

On spirituality and their perception of India as the land of half-naked saints who wears ashes all over their body and the ascetic life and their wisdom of universal truth all that fascinating accounts revealed through these lines "The yogis with their tangled locks and ash-smeared faces seemed to embody wisdom beyond time, a detachment so profound it bordered on the absurd."

He wonders "What could be more Indian, more saturated with the bizarre logic of this land, than a story where heads and bodies, mind and flesh, could be interchanged like the masks of a divine play?" It is the question of identity. While Karnad has confidence in What Indians can accept - all these unnatural wonder of Indian mythologies - just as one believes the magical realism the 'willing suspension of disbelief'. The exotic feelings of an Orientalist in Mann is revealed through the narration of the beauty and the purity of Sita who has got no agency to decide her life. While Karnad uses the passion of Padmini and her desires as more deciding factors of their fate than that of her male counter parts Karnad critiques the Indian Patriarchal mind and also over emphasizing the spiritualism in the mere bodily passion as thus:

"Padmini belongs to Devadatta, the poet. But her heart flutters at Kapila's strength. In our society, how often does the heart win over the mind?"

While Mann's intellect wanders around the quest for Perfection Girish Karnad with the proper mindset of an Indian accept the imperfections of life.

Conclusion

This comparative study of *Hayavadana* and *The Transposed Heads* reveals the cultural approbation and the cultural adaption in retelling a mythical story which has been deep rooted in a culture. While Mann's work reflects the European gaze, exoticising India and using its mythology to satisfy the Western intellectual queries, Karnad reclaims the narrative, embedding it within an authentic Indian context and challenging colonial stereotypes. The rendering of the story in the western and eastern philosophical lights assert the fact the need of reinventing the numerous indigenous narratives in the postcolonial context so as to analyse and to utilize them as a self-modifying tool. It invokes the postcolonial India to awake from its slumber to act in a manner that will help to redesign it the morn Era. Indians should not revel in the exoticism and the orientalism which are more beneficial to the European than that to Indians. This inactive slumber is a danger which can lead Indians to a cultural colonialism. This comparison reaffirms the importance of reclaiming indigenous narratives in postcolonial contexts and highlights the adaptability of myths as tools for cultural expression.

Work cited

1. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994
2. Karnad, Girish. *Hayavadana*. Oxford University Press, 1975.
3. Mann, Thomas. *The Transposed Heads: A Legend of India*. Vintage, 1940.
4. Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, 1978.
5. Tharoor, Shashi. *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did and What We Can Do About It*. Penguin, 2018.

Bio-Note of the Author

KAVITHARAM T.R. Assistant Professor of English, Panampilly memorial Government College, Chalakudy, Potta, thrissur Kerala. This college is affiliated to Calicut University. She is ardently interested in Interdisciplinary areas like ethnic studies especially Dalit and Tribal people, Women, Differently abled people who are in need of immediate attention of the predominant mainstream. At present she is conducting her research on Dalit Memoirs