

The Manipulation of Thought and Form in Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads* and Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*

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Abstract: The reworking of the ancient tale by Mann, a distinguished German scholar and novelist of the 20th century, and then by Karnad, the most influential modern dramatist of India, who writes in the Kannada language and then translates them to English is the focus of the present study. Thomas Mann's short novel in the German language *Die vertauschten Köpfe*, or *The Transposed Heads* in English (1940), is based on the myth of Kali which he acknowledged to have read in the work by well-known Indologist, Heinrich Zimmer. Zimmer's source was one of the myriad tales from *Katarisitsagara* which is said to be composed in around 11th century. The present study analyses the narratives of Thomas Mann in the novel *Transposed Heads* and the dramatic representation of the same by Girish Karnad in *Hayavadana*. The study points to the ways in which Mann and Karnad manipulate the myth through tehanalysis of the techniques and forms employed in their narratives

Article :

This paper tries to explore the narratives in a modern European novel and a modern Indian paly, both of which are generally believed to draw from an ancient Indian narrative. Thomas Mann's short novel in the German language *Die vertauschten Köpfe*, or *The Transposed Heads* in English (1940), is based on the myth of Kali which he acknowledged to have read in the work by well-known Indologist, Heinrich Zimmer. The story that Zimmer narrated was one among the myriad tales from *Katarisitsagara* which is said to be composed in around 11th century. It is interesting to note that researchers have shown that the legends in, and also the form of, *Katarisitsagara* are not original compositions, but owe their source to Gunadhya's *Brihatkatha* which was written not in Sanskrit but in the Paishacha language which existed even before the Classical language became the standard for literary expression. Therefore, it may not be wrong to say that the different versions of these tales throw light upon the myth-making process in India. The antiquity of the myth of transposed heads which Thomas Mann rewrites in the modern industrialist and imperialist Europe in a language supposedly 'alien' to India, or its myriad manifestations in different Indian languages across regions are not within the scope of this paper. Nor is the modern, colonial scholarship that took keen interest in imaging India to the self and the others through persistent translations/rewritings of the Ancient Indian myth, a part of the present exploration. The limited study takes into account the two versions of the ancient Indian myth – first, Thomas Mann's short novel- *The Transposed Heads*, second, Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* – a modern Indian drama. It is interesting to note that the Indian dramatist Karnad came to know about the Indian myth because of his reading of the

western novelist, Mann on the other hand, was impressed by the narrative given by the contemporary Indologist, Heinrich Zimmer. From the journey of the myth from Indian, languages to Sanskrit and then to German and English, and again to Kannada and English in India is an illustration of the complex relationship between the West and India- between forces of colonialism, imperialism and modernity. The transformations in the form and content of the myth: as a tale, a 20th century novel and then in the form of a post-independent modern Indian drama offer another trajectory for exploration of the growth of cultural forms across cultures due to the afore mentioned forces that rework cultures in multiple ways.

The reworking of the ancient tale by Mann, a distinguished German scholar and novelist of the 20th century, and then by Karnad, the most influential modern dramatist of India, who writes in the Kannada language and then translates them to English is the focus of the present study. In the introduction to *Hayavadana* Girish Karnad admits that he is heavily influenced by Mann's novel that deals with the questions of supremacy of body or mind. Mann has dedicated *The Transposed Heads* to none other than Zimmer the Indologist, who introduced him to Indian legend that presented different possibilities of exploring, among other things, the very construction of narratives and myths.

The relationship between study of cultures, the desire to 'know' others as well as to rewrite them in the image of the self is one of the most obvious aspirations of cross-cultural narratives. The colours and shades in the narrative details add up to the recasting of the original in different mould. From this point of view, the two works under scrutiny indicate to the desire to know and thereby master the mysteries hidden in the myth which s reworked.

The centre of the debate in the novel as well as the drama is the substitution of heads to different bodies. Generally, the head is the index of intellect and the body signifies the physical/ sensual power. The two are seen as adversaries rather than contrastive binaries. The giants are seen as huge but with little intellectual prowess. The theme of incongruity/congruity between body and head is found frequently, often fantastically, in the ancient myths across cultures. The Greek and Egyptian sphinx, the Minotaurs, the 'Kinnaras' or 'Kimpurushas' in Indian myths are a few of the fantastic combinations of human and animal forms. So are the myriad gods in the ancient civilisations or the early avatars of Vishnu in the myths of Vaishnava cult in India. The examples of such modern myths may be exemplified by W.B. Yeats' poem "The Second Coming" which visualise the modern holocaust prophetically in "A shape with lion body and the head of a man," or the numerous Hollywood Sci-fi movies about aliens.

In cultural terms, the domination of the head over the body is accepted as a matter of 'common sense'. It is said that the caste hierarchy maintains the supremacy of the brahmins who are said to have born from the face/head. One of the vociferous objections to Brahmanism challenges the *Sooktha* which states that Brahmins were born of the 'face' of *Purusha* and others from the lower limbs- the lower the limb, the inferior is the caste. Interestingly, as a deviation, Aesop's parable of the belly justifies the belly- the ruling class who, like Menenius Agrippa, argued that the leaders (belly) must be fed to energise other classes (limbs), whether the head or the shoulder. The supremacy of the head (the intellectual class or the philosophers) does not figure in any version of the fable.

One of the remarkable challenges to the 'common-sense' narrative of supremacy of the head over other parts of the human body is found in the myth of the elephant-headed god, Ganesha. The myth of Ganesha has it that Shiva endowed an elephant's head to the human body and resurrected the boy slain by him to pacify his consort, Parvati. The myths about Ganesha celebrate him as the lord of Knowledge. It is a common ritual in Indian theatre traditions to invoke him along with Nataraja, in the beginning of a performance. He is considered the lord of *siddhi* (accomplishments) and *buddhi* (intellect). It may be seen that the animal head does not dominate the abilities of His body or mind. The relationship between head and the body, has complex reverberations in different cultures. The hierarchy of limbs is not a given fact even in Indian myths. But a select prejudice can turn a blind eye to the complexities and establish a monolithic view of any narrative.

The discussion of myth of Ganesha is particularly relevant to the present discussion. The prayer to Ganesha in Karnad's *Hayavadana*, the play which deals with transposed heads and its implications, is significant in the light of identity issues raised in the narrative of the play. The invocation in *Hayavadana* highlights the paradoxes and the assumptions of the unity of perfect body and mind, and of a perfect identity based on the appearance or the image. It challenges the accepted notions about the supremacy of the head over the body. The subject of the play is inspired by the novel by Mann which is based on the modern translation of *Vetala Stories* which were translated during the period of colonial modernity. Zimmer recites the story within the context of Somadeva's *Kathasaritsagara*. Thomas Mann adapts it into the novel form. Karnad's drama *Hayavadana*, goes a step further and narrates the myth by representing the issues of appearance and identity and the question of supremacy of the head in a different form. It situates the western narrative of *The Transposed Heads* in a dramatic form which uses a variety of Indian folk theatre traditions and retells the story from a different perspective.

The Transposed Heads relies on one of the twenty-five riddle-stories narrated by Vetala to the ever persistent Vikramaditya who carries Vetala on his back. The seemingly illogical endings of these stories give rise to questions which Vikramaditya has to answer convincingly and rationally. The seeming absurdities in the stories are explained by the riddle-solver King who has an excellent ability to deduce conclusions. In one of the most popular versions of the tale, the plot of the story deals with two men who kill themselves in a temple. Dhavala, the washerman marries Madanasundari, the beautiful daughter of another washerman. The happy marriage ends up in a tragedy when they visit the temple with Madanasundari's brother. Dhavala, overcome by his devotion to Parvati, the goddess, beheads himself. Unable to explain the tragedy to his sister, Madanasundari's brother too kills himself with the same sword. When Madanasundari finds the corpses inside the temple, she too decides to offer her life by hanging. However, pleased with their devotion, the goddess stops Madanasundari from the act. She pronounces recovery of life to both men. But Madanasundari, attaches her brother's head on the husband's body and that of her husband on the body of her brother. In the end, Vetala asks the king Vikramaditya, about the identity of the resurrected men. "Which of these two mixed up people is now her husband?" The king replies, "The one with the husband's head is her husband *because the head rules the limbs and the*

personal identity depends on the head," The tale accepts the supremacy of intellect over emotion, spirit and over body.

Zimmer recounts the story within the context of Somadeva's *Kathasarisagara*. But in his retelling the happy marriage of Davala and Madanasundari is suspect. Zimmer explores if the wife intentionally and secretly substituted the heads. He explores the psychology of a secretly depressed husband who committed suicide because of an unhappy marriage. Zimmer comments about the actions of the characters and tries to fix the responsibility for the death of two men. His narrative differs from the Indian tale because, he tries to find '*motives*' and *reasons* for the actions of the three characters. The desire to explain the deaths betrays his assumptions that there should be a coherent explanation for all human actions. The assumption is a part of the western rationality which believes that even in the stories, the fictitious characters, like human beings, must have a logical/ psychological reason for their actions. It is interesting to note that Mann uses the term "metaphysical joke," to refer to the unexplainable actions, deaths and the confusions created by the three characters.

In Mann's narrative, the focus is on the love between the young man and the girl. Shridaman is a brahmin youth who has close friend, Nanda. Shridaman loves Sita and Nanda helps in their marriage. After the marriage, they decide to go to Sita's village. On their way, they visit a Kali temple. The two friends kill themselves; and grief stricken Sita too prepares to die. Goddess Kali asks her to stop and explain herself. Sita reveals her love for Nanda, the strong bodied cow-grazer. She believes that her husband committed suicide because he suspected her. Kali is pleased with the honesty of Sita and asks Sita to join the severed heads of the two friends. Confused and overjoyed, Sita transposes the heads, the consequences of which are explored in the later part of the novel.

In Mann's narrative, the transposition of heads does not look like an accident because we already know that Sita has a reason, *a motive*, to mix up the heads. However, the Sita's action does not conclude her plight. The mix-up leads to the inevitable question about the husband of Sita: Who is real husband?, Nanda or Shridaman. And the more serious question is about the identity itself: Who is Shridaman after the transposition of the heads? The three approach an ascetic who gives the verdict that one who is with the head of the previous Shridaman is the real husband *because head determines the body*. Sita gets a husband of her choice: the perfect match of head and body- the one with a strong body and the head of the brahmin Shridaman. But Sita's satisfaction is short lived because the head of her present husband influences the body and it loses its vigour. On the other hand, the friend's head tones up the body of the other. Sita has become a mother of a child. Unable to withstand the consequences of the choice they made, the three decide to kill themselves. The two friends kill themselves and Sita commits Sati on the pyre of the two. The orphan boy who suffers from poor vision remains as the proof of the love and conflict between the three. He is called Andhaka, a metaphor for short-sighted choice of Sita.

In the rewritten myth, the departures from the Indian legend is apparent. It grows in to that phase which examines the lives of the three after their revival by Kali. The life for the second time drags the characters to death their death again. Mann tests the belief that head gives the identity and details on the

changes in the body after the friends are brought back to life. More importantly the caste markers in the story reveal the caste and social differences between the two friends. Mann raises moral and social questions in the assumptions about the head and body. The idea of masculinity and femineity are challenged by the aggressive choices of Sita and the victimisation expressed by Shridaman.

Mann privileges Kali and her sympathy for Sita who is assisted by Kali to recover her husband/lover who is dead. The empathy between the human and divine female characters point to the affinity between them. Sita represents female sexuality and female aggression which tries to break free from the confinements of traditional marriage. She chooses freely. But the limitations of such choices which are narrated at length raise questions regarding the attitude of the female desire. The Indian story is given a new turn to challenge the common-sense belief in the head as the symbol of identity. After describing the physical and spiritual inclinations of the two friends, Mann comments on the closeness of their friendship. He says that they are *considered two forms of the same being*. But Sita tries to unify the best in both. She transposes the heads deliberately. In her new husband, she tries to see both- the Brahmin husband and the strong bodied Nanda, the lover. But her choice seems immoral as well as threatening the accepted social norms. In addition, the novel exposes the illusion of the perfect man.

Further, Mann shows the consequences of the choice by endowing a child to Sita. The visual impairment in the child points to the lack of far-sightedness in human choices. As such, the child is the synthesis of Sita's longing and desire. Sita's attempt at combining the physical beauty of Nanda and the intellectual prowess of Shridaman may also be regarded as the failure of female sensibility which lacks farsightedness. Therefore, what appears to be emancipation of female sexuality also implies its destructive ability when it finds free expression as in the case of Sita. The narrative strikes a fine balance between female sexuality, modern sensibility about supremacy, femineity and unavoidable deterioration.

Girish Karnad is regarded as one of the most dramatic personality who defined the contours of the modern Indian theatre. He is widely accepted as the pioneer of modernity in Indian theatre. Karnad's *Hayavadana* received immediate attention on its first production in 1972. The play enacts the narrative set by Mann. The play is considered the revival of native theatres of India. It is interesting to note that Karnad uses the native theatre practices to represent the story from *Kathasaritsagara* from the ancient India to its return to modern India, unsettling some of the basic premises of supremacy and superiority. Karnad's play, is an example of a synthesis of the modern drama with the ancient and the folk theatre on the one hand and the western and Indian concerns about supremacy and domination of the upper-caste and the intellectually powerful. However, the narrative of the play is more complex than the narrative in the novel. Mann worked only on the inner plot of love triangle in the story he heard from Zimmer, and ignored the tale of Vetala and Vikramaditya. Even there, he added significant changes to assert the unromantic side of the romantic relationship between man and woman. Karnad weaves a complex plot by shifting freely between the story of the lovers and the episodes involving the Sutradhara and the horse. He reconstructs the plot in the typical India way by inserting a story within a story. The story which Sutradhara purports to perform,

the story of the horse and the boy, the stories of the puppets are merged with the romantic story of the three characters- Padmini, Devadatta and Kapila

The title of the play *Hayavadana*, suggests, is a man with a horse's head. The story of the Hayavadana, the character, as revealed by the Sutradhara is that “ His mother, a princess, had fallen in love with and been impregnated by a stallion. Hayavadana is desperately seeking to get rid of this strange head when he stumbles on to the stage where the play about the transposed heads is about to be performed. The Bhagavata of the play then guides him to the same temple of Kali where the heads are transposed. This establishes a strong bond between the story of the lovers in the past and the story narrated by the Bhagavatha of Hayavadana. The fantastic and romantic union of man, woman and animal are privileged equally in the play.

Devadatta, the Brahmin and Kapila, of lower caste are friends who share everything they have. Padmini, conceived in terms of a romantic heroine, is not impressed by the foolish poems written by Devadatta to express his love. But she loves the physically strong Kapila who is the Devadatta's messenger to her. Although Kapila is attracted to Padmini, he nonetheless, finalizes the marriage between Devadatta and Padmini. The marriage is unhappy from the beginning: Padmini fancies strong-bodied Kapila, and Devadatta grows jealous. On their path to Ujjain to watch a fair, they rest near the Kali temple. Devadatta strays into the temple, and in a fit of jealousy and helplessness due to friendship, he kills himself. Kapila too follows his action. Padmini, who is pregnant, is frightened that she might be blamed for the death of the two friends, decides to kill herself. However, Kali stops her and offers to bring the men back to life. Padmini transposes the heads to the bodies of different men.. Upon her request Kali revives the two men back to life, advising Sita that "there should be a limit even to honesty".

Padmini and Devadatta in his new body begin a new marital life. The dolls which Devadatta gifts to Padmini turn into narrators and gossip about physical changes in Devadatta and in Padmini's thoughts. The dolls describe the changes in Devadatta's body. In the pretext of getting new dolls Padmini sends Devadatta to Ujjain, and she uses his absence to meet Kapila in the forest whose body has now grown muscular. When Devadatta returns to the forest, the two men decide to kill each other since their love for Padmini cannot be reconciled. Padmini then decides to commit Sati. She entrusts the boy to Bhagavata and leaves instructions for him to be raised both as Kapila's son and as Devadatta's son.

The story would end here according to Bhagavata. The stage directions too suggest that audience should feel that the play has ended. But the play moves on to narrate the story of the Padmini's child and the horse. The story of Hayavadana begins again. The horse singing the National Anthem becomes the centre of attraction. The tragedy of the lovers is drowned in the comic scene. Padmini's son--a mute, serious boy who never smiles for anything responds to the horse with human voice. Hayavadana is happy that Kali has answered his prayers to turn him to a complete form. But his human voice has become a source of wonder and laughter to many. Hayavadana's voice affects the mute child with laughter. The laughter in the child brings its speech back. As if a reversal, the child's speech changes Hayavadana to a complete horse.

Hayavadana and the boy in effect complete each other: the one, as a human child returned to the fold of society and the other, as fully animal.

It is obvious that there is neither seeming rationality nor the questions of motivation to any of these actions in the second plot or the frame narrative in the play. Karnad breaks the myth free from Mann's narration. He not only situates in the form of drama, but redefines the idea of drama. Karnad's uses the folk theatre forms such as Bhagavatha tradition, Yakshagana and puppet show to voice the common people. These forms of folk theatres shape the content of the play. The medium changes the perceptions of morality and acceptability. The myth is not challenged for its lack of rationality, but is rewritten to highlight the multiple meanings it can inherit.

It is said that *Hayavadana* represents the conflict of Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of human nature as explained in the western philosophy beginning from Plato. But the philosophical issues about life are similar to other Indian traditions like Sankhya. On the political level, Padmini's struggle represents the newly independent India, which is unable to choose between its visible Brahmanical tradition and the vigorous popular tradition as the national face. The fact that the "horse" Hayavadana sings the national anthem evokes the hollowness of exhibitory national feelings. Karnad's characters finally seek happiness at whatever level of "completeness" they can achieve. Those who tried for more ended up tragically.

The use of Indian Myths at different places by the two writers shows that the popular representation of the myths through folk and marginal traditions render them more complex yet perceptible. Mann uses the philosophical traditions as understood by him through other writers from the West. The questions he raises are also philosophical. But Karnad narrates the myths powerfully by taking recourse to popular theatre traditions and parallel myths such as Ganesha's. This gives formal brilliance as well as native vigour to the narrative.

Both Mann and Karnad use myths as a statement about the present social life which is rooted in an ancient cultural period. The myths attain different connotations if the inner logic is exposed by narrating them through a different idiom. Such narratives challenge the common sense based acceptance of the values in myths. The values in any myth are determined by the narrative styles rather than the inherent content in the myths.

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