

EXISTENTIALISM AND MARXISM IN GIRISH KARNAD'S HAYAVADANA

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Abstract

Born on 19th May 1938, Girish Karnad is a playwright screen writer, actor and movie director. He is by all critical voices considered to one of the doyens of modern theatre: BadalSircar, Vijay Tendulkar, and Mohan Rakesh. He is the recipient of Jnanpith award. He uses history and mythology as a tool for his social radicalism. His plays have been with pride produced and directed by EbrahimAlkazi, B.V. Karanth, AlyquePadmsee, Prasanna, Arvind Gaur, Shyamanand Jalan and AmalAllana. The present paper explores the Existentialism and Marxism in Hayavadana. Although there is a thin filmline difference between Marxism and Existentialism. In Hayavadana these two opposing philosophies clash and coexist within the play. The paper aims at first finding the elements of Marxism and Existentialism. It then explores the Marxist elements which willy-nilly infiltrates into the dramatic structures of Girish Karnad's plays. These thematic structures expose the Indian institutions of marriage and family; hegemony of patriarchy; irrepressible female erotica; existential revolt' and extreme faith in religion; feudal hierarchies; social myth making; and lastly the evil of Sati. Existentialism ends in the tragedy of incompleteness. Marxism ends in structural inevitability. The physical mixing of Devadatta and Kapila's bodies showcases the existential struggle between mind and physical.

Keywords: Existentialism, Marxism, Hegemony of Patriarchy, Feudal Hierarchies.

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The present paper explores the *Existentialism and Marxism in Hayavadana*. Although there is a thin filmline difference between Marxism and Existentialism. In Hayavadana these two opposing philosophies clash and coexist within the play. These thematic structures expose the Indian institutions of marriage and family; hegemony of patriarchy; irrepressible female erotica; existential revolt' and extreme faith in religion; feudal hierarchies; social myth making; and lastly the evil of Sati. The paper also attempts to bring out the elements of Marxism with the help of the elements Yakschagaan theatre and the pan-Indian classical theatre. The introduction of Ganesha in Mangalacharan does not predict auspiciousness but only hints at the inefficacy of such invocations. The Sutradhar Bhagwata intermittently breaks the empathy of the emotions and thereby achieve Brechtian alienation. Selection of the very Indian folk idiom serves Karnad's purpose of treating a theme which is psychological and would not be explained without the help of Indian myths and motifs.

In Girish Karnad's play Hayavadana, the philosophical tension between Existentialism and Marxism forms a dual framework for exploring human identity, social hierarchies, and the ultimate tragedy of incompleteness. While Existentialism addresses the internal, psychological crisis of the individual, Marxism focuses on external socioeconomic structures and class conflicts that dictate human lives. Karnad seems to share the Marxist views regarding the marriage and family, when he gives a frivolous treatment to the ancient practice of the 'sati' practice, in which the widows were supposed to immolate themselves on the funeral pyres of their husbands. Though 'sati' is now a relic of the past, it was once considered to be the noblest duty of a wife towards her dead husband. Padmini immolates herself, not only with her dead husband, but also with her dead

paramour. This act certainly question the logic of committing 'sati'. The scene, instead of creating pathos, creates a humorous situation, it in no way appears tragic, even when three human beings are charred to death. Kiritmath Kurtkoti writes, "Neither the death of lovers, nor the subsequent "sati" is presented as something tragic; the death serves only to emphasize the absurdity of their situation" (Kurtkoti, p.70)

The institution of marriage is again attacked, this time, through the songs of female chorus who under the garb of music expounds one of the message of the play; the message of the abolishment of Marriage and family. The pervasive presence of music and songs taken from the traditional folk theatre adds an element of mystery to the political propaganda, as propounded by Girish Karnad. (Shukla Chatterjee, B.C.)

The theme of human desire for perfection, feminine frailty and tragic love is drawn on ancient, medieval and modern mythical heritage. Padmini's portrayal also brings to mind a range of modern characters such as Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary and Tagore's Vimla in the " Home and the world", who have raised several questions and forced us to re-vision quite a few dogmatic assumptions defining the institution of marriage." (Vanashree Tripathy, p. 60)

Girish Karnad follows the Marxist ideology in attacking the religion too. He lampoons the God of the Hindu pantheon and all the other myths that have made themselves revered all over the Universe. Karnad, while staying abroad for higher studies, also seems to have been influenced by the philosophy of 'Existentialism'. He became a great follower of Jean-Paul-Sartre, whose influence is more than visible in his Dramas like *Tughlaq*, *Yayati*, *Naga-Mandala* and *Hayavadana*.

The central doctrine of "existentialism" is that, the man is the master of his destiny; his life is not pre-destined by the God, or by society, or by biology. He has a free will, and the responsibility for forming his own nature as well as his own personal decision, personal freedom and personal goals lies unto himself. Marxism practices almost the similar tenets, when they rebuff religion and any other guiding spirit which makes the people feel that everything is destined and the world is not alterable.

Karnad seems to be mocking the idea of the deity Vighn-Vinashak (one who removes all obstacles): at the start of the play, Karnad gives us an ironic account of Lord Ganesha. At surface level the Karnad seems to be praising the Lord. But underneath is a dig at the efficacy of the Ganesha's the powers:

O Elephant-headed Herambha
Whose flag is victory
And who shines like a thousand suns,
O husband of Riddhi and Siddhi,
Seated on a mouse and decorated with a snake,
O single-tusked destroyer of incompleteness,
We pay homage to you and start our play.
(*Hayavadana*, *Three Plays*, p.73)

Girish Karnad here logically questions how a God (Lord Ganesha), who is so imperfect and incongruous in his outlook, can ever be a God of perfection. And without whose grace and interference, a work would never be accomplished. Karnad here follows the Indian tradition of *Nandi* or *Manglacharan* which are sung in the poorvaranga. Karnad ironically uses the dramatic technique, for his mock- heroic work.

Karnad also questions the genesis and reverence paid to Lord Ganesha, this time, under the grab of a story, the dramatic form taken from the ancient Yakshagana theatre. The story of

Hayavadana (the horse headed man), has put the myth of Lord Ganesha under investigation. The term 'Hayavadana' has been used to impart subtlety to the theme. A literal use of Lord Ganesha, would have been counter productive, as it would have been a blatant attack on the religious beliefs of a country, whose very existence lies in the system of Panchdevas (five principal deities) He himself writes:

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 dialectics has to grow out of grosser ground, and I sensed a third being hovering in the spaces between human and divine, a horse headed man. (*Three Plays*, p. 14)

God occupies a position at the transcendental level and any act that makes them to behave according to humanistic terms is sure to be taken as a sacrilege. Karnad commits a sort of blasphemy when he makes Goddess Kali to delve into human affairs directly. The situation is tricky and at once ludicrous interference in these situations is not considered compatible with the proper classical treatment of a subject. When God's are taken out of their high pedestal and are made to speak in mundane terms, then the intention is quite certain that the writer wants to deprive Gods of their grandiose and divinity.

The speeches given to Goddess Kali in every way prove them to be a megalomaniac; an autocrat or a feudal that has the capacity but not the will to bail out characters from their tricky situations. Goddess Kali is one of the manifestations of "Maa" Shakti who killed many demons, in her foray, that were a threat to the peace and prosperity of the three worlds. She symbolizes both creative and destructive energy of this universe. The crudity of the speeches made by Goddess Kali shows Karnad's disdain towards any form of religious practice. It also indicates that he is subservient to his political ideology, that abhors every ecclesiastical authority and the subservient reverence paid to them. The various speeches of Goddess Kali are written as:

KALI :(Sleepy) Yes it's me. There was a time-many many years ago when at this hour they would have the Mangalratri. The devotees to make a deafening racket with drums and conch- shells and cymbals. So I used to be wide awake around now. I have lost the habit (Yawns) Right. What do you want? (*Three Plays*, p.102)

The Marxists consider historical, political and religious myths as unique transitory events associated with particular periods. They demonstrate that how this "myth making" process is connected with related transformations in such concepts as "culture" and 'civilization'. Myth being a cultural construction of the dominant ideology, is a subject of despise for the Marxists. Myths, especially those which provide grandeur to the culturally established tradition, are attacked by the Marxists. They allege that those beliefs create a fallacy in the mind of revolutionary classes that 'all is well' in the society and any radical change will result in chaos. As myths provide meaning and value to religion and all other established offices, an attack on myths is an attack on all associated establishment. Thus in the works of a Marxist there is a deliberate attempt to mystify the sanctified, the most revered establishment of our society.

Another subversion is that of the Brahmanical myth; the myth of the head being superior to the body or the importance of soul over body. In Hindu mythology the head is the representative of 'Brahmans'; shoulders represents the warrior class, the 'Kshatriyas'; and the feet stand for the 'Sudras' or the lowest downtrodden class. The classification of the different class structure of a society based upon human anatomy might have provoked Karnad to react against the castiest hegemony.

Karnad took the idea of Hayavadana from 'Kathasaritasagar', but he followed the treatment of Thomas Mann's version of it in his "*The transposed head*". The final solution in the

ancient tale is that, since the head is the determining limb, then the body should fit according to the head. At the end of Mann's version, the body has adjusted to the heads and the persons are again the same. Karnad has followed the Mann's logic on the dichotomy between head and mind; he seems to have been seriously concerned with the western cultural questioning of the sharp schism between mind and body:

He (Karnad) rejects the mechanical conception of life, which differentiated body and soul. In rewriting the story he seems to be pitting himself directly against the abstractness and emptiness of the Cartesian cogito- "I think therefore I am". (Vanashree Tripathy 73)

When questions regarding the question regarding the ontological status of a being are raised the scholars are quite unanimous in suggesting that how one's body is internal to oneself. Expert Merleau Ponty writes about the relative importance of body as, "perception is always an embodied perception, one that is only within a specific context of a situation. Perception in itself does not exist" (Ponty, p. 148). In the oriental philosophy, this life is considered to be a preparation for the next; the physical being only an instrument of imperishable absolute spirit. While the western thoughts consider man as a psychosomatic unit, in which the body is an inseparable part of our total being.

After discussing all the tenets of Marxism in the context of *Hayavadana* only suggests that Girish Karnad unwittingly betrays his ideology of a non-believer, an iconoclast, and a Marxist. He always deconstructs the history and myth in his plays and establishes a scientific and logical temper. Even the theatrical style preferred is that of Bertolt Brecht. In order to maintain the flavor of Marxist intellectualism, Karnad follows the Indian style of Sutradhara and his narrations which come so close to the theory of alienation. Wherever the action graph seems to be reaching a point where empathy begins to build, Karnad breaks it with the shooting entry of the Sutradhara. Existentialism ends in the tragedy of incompleteness. Marxism ends in structural inevitability. The physical mixing of Devadatta and Kapila's bodies showcases the existential struggle between mind and physical.

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