

ENGH SEM 2: PAPER HCC-T-3

Contributor: Partha Pratim Bandyopadhyay, Department of English

Critical issues in Hayavadana

- 1) **The plot structure:** The play has a triple-plot framework, in a one within another pattern, each commenting on the one it subsumes. First there is Karnad's play, within it Hayavadana's story, within it Bhagavata's play performing the story of the three humans:

In this structure, Bhagavata's and Hayavadana's stories have different timeframes: Bhagavata's story is situated in an ancient Indian kingdom, while Hayavadana's spans from ancient, mythical India to a modern, postcolonial India. Conversely, Bhagavata's story upholds the timeless human urge to become complete, while Hayavadana's story becomes a critique of the ideological chaos of postcolonial India.

There is a self-conscious character in Bhagavata's arranged performance of his play – he and his actors and stage hands openly talk about it as a performance, make funny gestures and comments between each other, and show mocking respect to the audience before whom they are preparing to perform. Hayavadana's entry before the human story begins is an interruption that deflects attention by design, and playing with the audience's belief in what it sees. All these create an awareness in the audience that it is a play and not reality – something that is to be thought upon and critically judged. This is intended to create a distance that both provokes thought and analysis and suspends the

yardstick of realism, preparing the audience for the magical realism that is to follow. The effect is like the alienation effect Bertolt Brecht used to create for his political theatre.

Hayavadana appears at the beginning and the end of the human story narrated by Bhagavata, framing the play and presenting an oblique commentary on its central theme of completeness/incompleteness. What happens in the human story by the transposition of heads is reflected in Hayavadana's quasi-human existence: the same urge for completeness drives both stories and in the end, the human failure is parodied by the animal completeness.

Apart from this, the human story is interrupted frequently by Bhagavata's choric narration and ponder.

- 2) **Chorus:** It consists of a team led by Bhagavata – the musicians and female singers in the background and Bhagavata doing the narration, filling up gaps and uttering the inarticulate thoughts of the humans. As leader of the chorus and a holy man, Bhagavata also represents traditional Indian society with its sexual conservatism, exaggerated religious faith and communal value systems against which the machinations of sexual desire are to be measured. In a way Bhagavata therefore represents the audience too, as part of his choric duty. In Act 2, the dolls perform a choric function when they comment upon the physical and psychological changes in Devadatta and Padmini. They (the dolls) extend the range of choric knowledge and add criticism to commentary. At a point the dolls fight, when one goes to reveal Padmini's lustful dreams and the other is shocked and ashamed of such immorality. Here they have become the subconscious and conscious layers of Padmini's mind (the Id and the Superego) and achieved a penetration of the chorus into the character. Hayavadana also does some choric service by letting his predicament play the role of a subplot interpreting the human plot.
- 3) **Sexuality:** The central theme of the play is the effort to achieve completeness of being through evolution, and such evolution may happen only through sexual procreation. Sexuality therefore is principally a tool for progress, and a means to rise to a higher order of being. It is manifested chiefly in the character of Padmini (the embodiment of the creative principle), but also in nature of which Padmini is a symbol, and in goddess Kali. The male and the female forces of creativity are thus immanent – they exist as principles of natural growth and decay, and as love in the human agents. Padmini (her name recalls the ideal woman according to ancient Indian thought – she is the lotus-woman whose womb is the most eugenic) to a large extent represents the female principle, and that is why she performs a double task of mothering: she gives birth to a son and to a seemingly perfect man, combining Devadatta's head with Kapila's body. Her union with Devadatta happens on the level of intellect; from there she moves to unite with Kapila on the level of instinct – thus creating an ironic rift between the head and body of the woman who is supposed to unite the male qualities and produce the ideal human. She is Mother Nature (suggested by her love for free, wild life) and shares the

endless fecundity of Mother Kali (who gives to all and whose miraculous aid helps Padmini further her eugenic purpose). The male principle on the other hand is broken – the dichotomy of body (Kapila) and head (Devadatta) must be resolved, and this is done by Padmini's desire. Desire works in her automatically, trans-individually (all her individual traits may be explained as nature's spontaneous creative urges), and draws all three humans to complete the vortex. Padmini's oscillation between the men and her anguished realization of change signals the failure of human sexuality to transport humanity to the realm of completeness – when the three die together it is a philosophic admittance of that failure. Altogether therefore, sexuality is a path in the play for man to reach godhood, and it fails due to the inherent incoherence of human nature. This failure is sardonically reflected in Hayavadana's predicament – his human mother copulated with his animal father to create him, a freak of nature, and his quest for completeness ends in turning into a complete horse. Thus the bestiality in human sexuality triumphs, driving man down instead of raising him.

- 4) Completeness/incompleteness: The central theme of the play, its *raison d'être* is the idea of completeness, recurring through images, motifs, and the key motive driving the plot. In fact, the play is based on the philosophical debate of whether completeness is achievable by man. The elusive completeness of the Lord Ganesha beneath his exterior incompleteness is set up as the paradoxical aim, and the eternal existential urge to become whole (achieve godhood), working through sexuality, is the driving force of the plot. The transposition of heads provides an opportunity for human sexuality to rise from physical to a metaphysical plane, which creates a temporary delusion that completeness has been achieved. Then, experiences of change beyond control set in, and change is a mark of incompleteness. The debate seems to propose that completeness is beyond man, but his eternal striving towards it makes him an existential hero looking tirelessly for meaning in a chaotic world.
- 5) Symbolism: A network of symbols, each conveying an aspect of the core theme of completeness, is strewn through the play. The figure of Ganesha, the three humans, Hayavadana the horse-man, Bhagavata the narrator/chorus, the tree of the fortunate lady's flower, the forest fair with its chariot of gold are all symbols of various degrees of completeness. One very important and recurrent symbol is that of the rider of the white stallion in the lullaby – the imagined human incarnation of perfection tragically dead and heading for the land of nothingness. The symbolic network by itself constitutes a pattern of developing ideas – while Ganesha as the paradox of completeness looms over the whole, the woman (symbol of feminine productivity/motherhood/nature) and the men (symbols of civilization and animalism) join to pursue completeness whose bliss (symbolized by the flower) and vital energy (symbolized by the flowing river/witching forest fair) come together in an earthly heaven (symbolized by the happy couple with child). Haayavadana as a symbol parodies this seeming heaven and points at its shortcomings. Bhagavata stands for society – the witness of human evolutionary effort

and of the philosophical debate it raises.

- 6) Time: There is a play over the time-scale – we move between two Indias – ancient and modern. The story of the humans is placed in distant past and Hayavadana's story moves across the time-scale, so that the former is static in time and the latter dynamic. Hayavadana's story is used to critically comment on the human endeavor for completeness, and interpret it in terms of our own existential aspirations. Thus the time-bound story is really timeless, and the time-travelling one is contemporary in significance.
- 7) The dolls: the speaking dolls are a metaphysical level of the chorus, they comment on minds rather than characters. They are self-indulgent and display human vanities – as such they stand between the conventional chorus and the audience (reflecting many of their reactionary observations on the characters). When they talk about Padmini's dreams, they represent her conscious and unconscious drives between them, and prompt the audience to read into her psychic schisms. Their fight stands for the psychic process of repression and revolt that Padmini's life evokes in the audience. They also record change, both in themselves (they grow tattered and rejected) and in the humans, seeing the human drift towards incompleteness as a grotesque, putrid failure and creating the effect of a metaphysical shudder.
- 8) The gods: there are two divine beings – Ganesha as the presiding deity casting the dubious blessing of success over the performance and the failed human endeavor within it, and Kali on Mount Chitrakoot, an abandoned goddess. The onward march of 'civilization' has rejected her as the dark 'other', the organic animal fecundity unashamed of its raw carnal nature. She is thus sleeping ever, hidden in the recesses of human unconscious. However, men turn to her yet for vitality. Her wry, cynical approach at human motives is in part a criticism of hypocritical 'civilizing' ideas, and her comic hurry to return to sleep and weariness are pessimistic comments on the limitations of human thought. Both the deities are created by Karnad on an anthropomorphic mode – they display human attributes and symbolize natural extensions of human philosophies.