

KALI AS 'WOMAN': READING HAYAVADANA IN FEMINIST LINES

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Abstract

The paper tries to read Hayavadana in the feminist lines by drawing comparison between the portrayal of male and female Gods- Lord Ganesha and Goddess Kali. Even the portrayal of the Goddess does not escape the stereotyping that women had to undergo in strictly patriarchal society like India. The portrayal of Kali is unconventional since she is presented as a mere 'woman' who is impatient, jealous and indifferent. There is a loss of identity as far as the character of Kali is concerned. The powerful Kali is showed as having no agency but is made to act according to the whims and fancies of other characters.

Keywords: Identity, womanhood, patriarchy, immanence, stereotypes, completeness, ignorance, other.

The paper attempts to critically examine Girish Raghunath Karnad's third play *Hayavadana* in the light offered by feminist literary theory. It is done by drawing a comparison between the portrayals of male and female Gods, Lord Ganesha and Goddess Kali. The dissertation analyses how even the portrayal of Goddess does not escape the patriarchal norms. M. A. R. Habib notes: "Indeed, the depiction of women in male literature – as angels, goddesses, whores, obedient wives, and mother figures – was an integral means of perpetuating these ideologies of gender" (667).

Girish Karnad, a prominent theatre and film personnel in the post-independence Indian scenario, makes use of mythology, history and folklore when he writes the two-act play, *Hayavadana*. He finds the thread of his play in Thomas Mann's novella, *The Transposed Heads*, which is originally based on the eleventh century Sanskrit text, *Kathasaritsagara*. *Hayavadana* was originally written in Karnad's native tongue, Kannada and was performed in the year 1971. The English translation of the play was done by the author himself in the very next year. The English translation of the play was first published in Rajinder Paul's journal, *Enact*. The play revolves around the central character, Padmini and the two men in her life, Devadatta and Kapila. Devadatta is the only son of the Reverend

Brahmin Vidyasagara while Kapila's father Lohita is an ironsmith. Devadatta is a learned man who rejoices greatly in intellectual pursuits while Kapila excels in physical capacity. Padmini, the wife of Devadatta is attracted to the physique of Kapila, her husband's friend. She wishes to have the combination of strong physique and also intellect in her life partner. So she becomes happy when she mistakenly misplaces the heads of Devadatta and Kapila at the temple of Kali. The play raises the question of identity and also presents a tug of war between the soul and the body. The subplot of 'Hayavadana' is carefully woven into the fabric of the play to enhance the discussion on completeness. Elements of folk theatre like masks, curtains, dolls are made use of in the play. The character of Kali is studied in this paper to delineate the patriarchal undertones of the play as well as the society.

The play commences with the recital of the praise of Ganesha by Bhagavata as is common for a Sanskrit play. Ganesha is addressed as "single-tusked destroyer of incompleteness", the destroyer of obstacles", "the Lord and Master of Success and Perfection", etc. Somewhat detailed description of Ganesha is given in the very beginning of the play. Bhagavata recalls that Ganesha is the husband of Riddhi and Siddhi and is "seated on a mouse and (is) decorated with a snake". He goes on saying that Ganesha shines like a thousand suns and his flag is victory. Several synonyms of Ganesha, like Herambha, Vighneshwara, Vakratunda-Mahakaya and Mangalamoorty, are uttered by Bhagavata. A number of adjectives is showered upon Ganesha while Kali receives none except one, i.e., Mother of all Nature. Pramod K. Nayar notes in his *An Introduction to Cultural Studies*: "The woman is typecast as 'Mother Nature', thus reducing her to the role of the perpetual 'giver'. Religious doctrines aid these representations. Language makes it appear permanent and 'natural' through the use of patriarchal terms like Mother Earth and Mother Nature" (67). Bhagavata ponders over the logic of calling Ganesha, with a crooked face and distorted body, the Lord and Master of Success and Perfection. But he resolves the confusion by declaring that it is not in the power of mortal souls to comprehend this mystery or try to unravel it. The Bhagavata who does not want any talk on the question of completeness of God, gets into the play by paying homage to "the Elephant-headed God".

The introduction of Kali is to be given special attention since it lacks the splendour that the introduction of Ganesha receives. Bhagavata asks Hayavadana to 'try' the Kali of Mount Chitrakoot to get cured of incompleteness. Even though Ganesha is worshipped as the Master of perfection in the beginning of the play, Bhagavata advises Hayavadana to visit Kali instead of Ganesha. Bhagavata suggests Kali to Hayavadana as the last resort when Hayavadana says that he has tried all the means to get rid of his incompleteness caused by his human body with horse's head. The word 'try' that Bhagavata uses has numerous implications and in common parlance, it is not used to talk about Gods. It hints minutely at the commercialisation of things in modern society where women are objectified and commercialised. Bhagavata mentions that the Goddess is "famous for being ever awake to the call of devotees" but also adds that thousands used to flock to the temple once. This

forgetfulness or ignorance of Kali even though she is awake to the calls of her devotees draws a comparison between an 'ideal' wife who receives the same contempt even after she runs after her children, husband and in-laws.

The description of the temples of Rudra and Kali is sufficient to reveal the patriarchal prejudices of the caste-ridden Indian society. Kapila says that the temple of Rudra is beautiful and the temple of Kali is quite terrible. He adds that the temple of Rudra is "not half as ruined as the Kali temple" (28). He admits that he has gone to the temple of Kali once and it is full of bats, snakes and all sorts of poisonous insects. It is beyond the hill and has no proper roads to reach there. "It was very prosperous once. But now it's quite dilapidated" (27). The negligence bestowed upon the temple of Kali can be seen as the inattention that women receive from the patriarchal society. Earlier in the play Bhagavata cautions Hayavadana not to go to the temple of Kali alone as the road to the temple is wild and there is no highway but at best, a cart tract leading to the temple. Kapila also notes: "It's very thickly wooded there. If he gets lost, he'll have to spend the whole night in the jungle" (30). Women is often associated with the wild. The society, with its several intrinsic mechanisms, makes sure that woman is tamed so that she will stick on to the gender stereotypes furnished for them. And also woman is equated to land and is penetrated and exploited. Again, woman's nature is viewed as wild and the attempts to venture into the depths of female psyche without any prejudice is labelled as suicidal.

The cutting of heads of Devadatta and Kapila by themselves at the temple of Kali and Kali's response to the incident can be read in feminist lines. Padmini, on seeing both the men with severed heads, lifts the sword to kill herself to which Kali promptly intervenes to save Padmini. Her appearance is rather unconventional. She is often showcased as a vengeful lady who has a necklace of heads and a knife dripping with blood. But the character of the Goddess is consciously subverted in the play so as to portray her as a mere woman. Kali is presented as a terrifying figure with her arms stretched out, her mouth wide open and her tongue lolling out. The palms of the Goddess is blood-red. She drops her arms and shuts her mouth and it becomes clear that she is yawning. Human attributes like tiredness, impatience and jealousy are ascribed to Kali. Her impatience gets evident when she asks Padmini not to waste time. She openly marks her displeasure in people not visiting her temple when she reminisces about the times when devotees used to make a deafening racket with drums and conch-shells and cymbals. Kali warns Padmini to avoid repetition and wants Padmini to skip the praises of her. Kali agrees that she is collapsing with sleep and demands Padmini's question to her to be short. Kali is the Goddess of death and violence but is also portrayed as a strong mother. Here, Kali is not shown as benevolent.

Kali: There was a time-many years ago-when at this hour they would have the *mangalarati*. The devotees used to make a deafening racket with drums and conch-shells and cymbals. So I used to be wide awake around now. I've lost the habit. (Yawns). Right. What do you want? Tell me. (32)

Kali is showcased as a jealous woman who complains of Devadatta giving prime importance to Rudra. Kali bursts out to Padmini thus: “The rascals! They were lying to their last breaths. That fellow Devadatta-he had once promised his head to Rudra and his arms to me! Think of it-head to him and arms to me! Then because you insisted on going to the Rudra temple, he comes here and offers his head” (33). Devadatta has promised earlier that he will offer his head to Rudra and his arms to Kali if he wins Padmini’s hand in marriage which he conveniently forgets. In Eastern philosophy head is given prominence over body. The society views men as the head while women is looked down upon as a ‘dirty’ body. Society holds the view that men are fit for intellectual stuffs while women are apt for mundane activities. Women are indoctrinated by the society to believe that they should be inquisitive about fashion, jewellery and the like and never about politics, arts or philosophy. Pioneers in feminist movement like Mary Wollstonecraft felt that women should be educated just like men because she viewed Education as a means of widening the mind and thoughts of women to the outside world. Simon de Beauvoir in *Second Sex* criticises the relegation of women to the position of the other where man transcends his environment while women is enslaved by reproductive and familial functions. Confining women to the ‘private’ sphere and allowing men to thrive in the ‘public’ sphere accounts for women’s marginality.

For most this long history women were not only deprived of education and financial independence, they also had to struggle against a male ideology condemning them to virtual silence and obedience, as well as a male literary establishment that poured scorn on their literary endeavours. (Habib 667)

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* points out:

John Ruskin affirmed in 1865 that the woman’s ‘power is not for rule, not for battle, and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet orderings’ of domesticity. Plainly, both writers mean that, enshrined within her home, a Victorian angel-woman should become her husband’s holy refuge from the blood and sweat that inevitably accompanies a ‘life of significant action,’ as well as, in her ‘contemplative purity,’ a living *memento* of the otherness of the divine. (24)

Mary Wollstonecraft in her *Vindications* writes:

Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison. Men have various employments and pursuits which engage their attention, and give a character to the opening mind; but women, confined to one, and having their thoughts constantly directed to the most insignificant part of themselves, seldom extend their views beyond the triumph of the hour. (3.21)

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar also have similar kind of opinion:

...the aesthetic cult of ladylike fragility and delicate beauty-no doubt associated with the moral cult of the angel-woman-obliged 'genteel' women to 'kill' themselves into art objects: slim, pale, passive beings whose 'charms' eerily recalled the snowy, porcelain immobility of the dead. (25)

Men are considered to be active while women are viewed as passive objects who do not have minds, hearts or souls. Kali projects the hypocrisy behind Kapila's cutting off his head for the sake of friendship. "And what lies! Says he is dying for friendship. He must have known perfectly well he would be accused of killing Devadatta for you" (33). She bluntly remarks that Kapila died because he knew perfectly well that he will be accused of killing Devadatta. Women who utter truth or express themselves are viewed in contempt and are hunted down as witches. Kali disappears without pausing to receive thanks or praise. Kali does not stay back till the dead bodies becomes alive and walk. The society fails largely to honour women and to acknowledge their services in their own families as well as the society. Often the services by women are seen as duties mandatory to them.

Kali believes that Padmini had purposely switched the heads of her husband and his friend. Padmini dares to question Kali about her indifference towards the cutting of heads by Devadatta and Kapila. A woman is always held in suspicion by the society. Kali's reply to Padmini's query presents her as cruel and insensitive. Kali says: Actually if it hadn't been that I was so sleepy, I would have thrown them out by the scruff of their necks" (33).

Devadatta prays to Rudra instead of Kali to strengthen him when he finds out that his wife, Padmini, fondles affection for his friend, Kapila. Kali is put to blame by Padmini towards the end of the play when Kapila and Devadatta kill each other. Towards the very end of the play, Hayavadana quotes his experience of going to the temple of Kali. When Hayavadana says that he will chop off his head if Kali does not help him, the Goddess appears promptly. She looks rather put out and she says peevishly, "Why don't you people go somewhere else if you want to chop off your stupid heads? Why do you have to come to me?" (68). Kali is shown to be in a haste and disappears without letting Hayavadana complete his plea. Hayavadana wanted to be a complete man but he was made a horse but with man's voice.

Play ends when Bhagavata adores Ganesha again: "Unfathomable indeed is the mercy of the elephant-headed Ganesha. He fulfils the desires of all-a grandson to a grandfather, a smile to a child, a neigh to a horse. How indeed can one describe His glory in our poor, disabled words?...it's time we all prayed and thanked the Lord for having ensured the completion and success of our play" (71). Kali who plays a pivotal role in the course of action of the play is not thanked or praised. She is not even mentioned in the climax of the play which accounts for the patriarchal bindings of the play's consciousness. Kali, who always has an agency, is not shown to be acting according to her will. She becomes a puppet in the hands of others. When Padmini pleads for the lives of the men, she fulfills her wish; when Padmini criticises her, she does not pay her back; when devotees desolated her, she

does not wreak vengeance on the people by punishing them and so on. Kali's identity as the destroyer of evil is lost in the play. Instead, she is confined to her solitude with no scope of self-expression.

Women are always doomed to be 'the angel of the house' as Coventry Patmore puts it. When they fail to act according to the expectations of the society, they are stamped as monsters. Women are denied the freedom to express themselves, to have an identity of their own or to enjoy freedom. They are always tied down with the iron chains of family bonding. "Women are subjected to artificially constructed ideas of the feminine and that all aspects of society and culture functioned according to a sexual politics that encourage women to internalise their inferiority until it becomes psychologically rooted in them" (Vallath 194).

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