

THE THEORY OF POSSIBLE WORLDS AND HAYABADANA: A REINTERPRETATION

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Girish Karnad's '*Hayabadana*' (1975) marks a grand resurgence of Indian theatre with its various nuances, characteristic styles, techniques and motifs that attempts to reclaim the glory of Indian theatre in European psyche who were lost in the exuberant and almost pastoral panorama of Kalidas's '*Avhiganyam Sakuntalam*'. Folktale, myth undoubtedly reserves its basic source in 'Hayabadana', but it has also a rich multiplicity of texture and multiple layers of meaning with its various re-interpretations. With each telling, the story changes and gains a new permutation and momentum. The dictionary definition of 'absurd' is 'something that is completely stupid and unreasonable'. In a musical context it means 'out of harmony'. However the definition of 'absurd' derives into the literature from the mid 20th century essay '*Myth of Sisyphus*' by the French author and philosopher Albert Camus. In 1962, Martin Esslin wrote his book on the topic entitled simply '*The Theatre of the Absurd*'. In this book Esslin mentions the Romanian Eugen Ionesco's definition for the 'absurd',

"Absurd is that which devoid of purpose...cut off from his religions metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost, all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless."

The absurd is a phenomenon that resides neither in man nor in the world but as man's dominant characteristic is 'being in the world', the absurd is in the end an inseparable part of the essential human condition. Keeping aside the theories of religion or existential philosophies we can say certain and obvious fact about 'absurd'-the world is chaos, a 'divine equivalence born of anomaly', tomorrow does not exist since we all die'. Camu invariably presents Sisyphus, the archetypal absurd hero as a reflection of the absurdity that pervades the human that can be called as the alienation of human from their respective universe and their eventual condemnation to be pointlessly preoccupied with perpetual action while accomplishing almost nothing in the true sense of the term. The representations of absurd drama aim directly at startling their readers and audiences and unsettling them and shaking them out of their mechanical and trite existence that they are prone to inhabit with in this universe. The notion of possible world can be traced back to the 17th century and the philosophy of Leibniz, who expressed the belief that our actual world was chosen as the best among infinity of other possible worlds that exist as thoughts in God's mind. This notion is broadly exploited and explored in the field of philosophical logic to deal with some important logical issues to which the one world model could not provide solutions. Taking the actual world as the only frame of reference creates problems for example in the attribution of truth values to propositions of the type (1), 'The Lalkila is not in Delhi' or (2). 'The Lalkila is in Delhi and the Lalkila is not in Delhi', which should then be inevitably described as nothing but the false. Therefore logicians adopted a frame of reference where apart from the actual world there are also an infinite number of possible worlds surrounding it that are defined as abstract and complete sets of states of affairs. Most

fictional worlds can be described as universes that are the system of worlds that function as non-actualized alternatives of the actual world. Thus system to classify a proposition as either true or false is extended as the system that also includes the modal operators of necessity and possibility. Both operators lie beyond the limits of the actual world, while possible falsity to propositions that are false in all possible worlds. Seen under this light proposition (1) is possibly false, because it is false in our actual world, although it may be true in an alternative world, while proposition (2) is necessarily false, since it contains a logical contradiction and thus cannot be true in any logically possible worlds. A sentence of the type 'Macbeth murdered Duncan' even though it accords with Shakespeare's book would have to be interpreted either as false, it assumes the existence of a fictional character, i.e. a non-existent individual or as neither true nor false, because it refers to an imaginary entity with no referent in the actual world. Therefore since the late 1970's literary theorists like Dolezel, Pavel etc. have developed semantics of fictionality based on the idea that the semantic domain projected by the literary text is an alternative possible world. (APW) that acts as actual the moment we are immersed in a fiction. In one sense concrete possible worlds are like big planets within the actual world and each possible world is inevitably isolated from each other. Through this act of 're-centering' which is an essential part of fiction-making, the actual world of the readers becomes only one of the many alternative possible worlds that revolve around the world that the narrator presents as actual. In this sense the above proposition (Macbeth murdered Duncan) is true in relation to the world of Shakespeare's drama, whereas a proposition to the type 'Macbeth did not murder Duncan' is false because it does not accord with the plot of the text.

Within the limits at logic, the term 'possible' describes those sets of states of affairs that do not break the logical laws of non-contradiction given proposition x it is not possible that both x and not- x are true, only one must apply in a given world. In crossing over from logic to the field of literary studies possible worlds theory has undergone a drastic change so as to deal with precisely with impossibility in fiction. Fictional worlds can thus be perceived as possible even when they are inconsistent namely when they violate the laws of non-contradiction, whereas in logic such worlds would be considered impossible. It is this broadening of the theory that establishes its applicability to absurdist drama. Ryan (1991) suggests a typology that is expressed in texts which belong to different genres. She develops her specific typology with the aim to complement the deficits previous approaches and to provide a theory of fictional genres because an interpretation of fiction within the limits of logically possible worlds cannot fully cover the wide range of worlds, exhibited in fiction because it excludes worlds that contain logical impossibilities. Possibility or impossibility is rather a matter of degree. In order to avoid talking about an 'impossible possible world' in fiction, a wider range of accessibility relations is required. These accessibility relations exhibit the various ways in which the textual actual world (TAW) can be associated with the actual world of (AW) of the readers. As Ryan suggests the world of absurdist texts results from the relaxation of logical compatibility which leads to types of worlds that are described not as wholly impossible but only as logically impossible, because for example something has both happened and not happened. Dolezel refers to the degree of trustworthiness of a narrator or character's words in this context.

Karnad's *Hayabadana* clearly leans towards a possible absurdist text and can be interpreted in the light of the theory of possible worlds. In the very opening of Act 1 the mask of Ganesha is brought on the stage and it is very noteworthy that the whole body idol is not brought, the image with elephant head and human body. Karnad used this actual world impossible, incomplete, absurdist figure to open a play

dealing with incompleteness. The prayer or chanting to Lord Ganesha is itself very suggestive and hints at the absurdist techniques that are going to be used in the play.

“O elephant Heramba

Whose flag is victory,

.....

Seated on a mouse and decorated with a snake.

O single-tasked destroyer of incompleteness

We pay homage to you and start our play.”

Bhagbata further says, “an elephant’s head on a human body, a broken task and a cracked belly – whichever way you look at him he seems the embodiment of imperfection of incompleteness. How indeed can one fathom the mystery that this very vakratunda-mahakaya, with his crooked face and distorted belly is the lord and master of success and perfection?” Soon we see the nata or actor runs into the stage being frightened by a horse like figure. He has become afraid by hearing the horse’s reprimand, “you irresponsible fellow, can’t you understand you are not to commit nuisance on the main road”. But the scene changes dramatically and Bhagbata remarks at the sound of sobbing coming from the horse figure- “How strange! Someone sobbing behind the curtain. It looks as though the terror which frightened our actor is itself now crying”. Soon we come to know about Hayabadana’s birth history. His mother was the princess of Karnataka and was very beautiful girl. When she came of age her father eventually decided that she should chose her own husband. So princes of every kingdom in the world were invited and they all came from china, from Persia, from Africa. But she did not like any of them; ‘the last one to come was the prince of Araby’. This is very important since we know that the actual country is named as Arabia or Arab located in Middle East of Asia. On the other hand the name ‘araby’ clearly suggests the non-actual dream world as projected in Joyce’s story ‘Araby’, where the boy-narrator’s fantasy is bound to break. But this is also a possible world in which Hayabadana’s mother gets into and cannot return. So it has a clear digression from actual world and further absurdity larks in when Hayabadana says. “My mother took one look at that handsome prince sitting on his great white stallion and she fainted”, and she decided, “She would only marry that horse”. Hayabadana further says. “So ultimately she was married off to the white stallion”, which is non-possible in the actual world. Requested by Hayabadana, Bhagbata suggests him to go to Mount Chitrokoot to Goddess Kali for asking boon so that he can get his complete self and he says:

“The goddess there is famous for being ever awake to the call of the devotees. Thousands used to flock to her temple once. No one goes now, though.

Hayabadana: why not?

Bhagbata: She used to give anything anyone asked for. As the people become aware of this they stopped going”.

Bhagbata soon realized “each one to his own fate. Each one to his own desires. Each one to his own lack. Let’s turn to our story”, and he is going to tell the story of two friends in Dharmapura-

“Two friends there were

One mind. One heart”.

Is it possible?

This confrontation of the actual and the possible world recurs through the play and creates the layers of meaning. Again Padmini says to Devdutta, “But you are so fragile! I don’t know how you’re going to go through life wrapped in silk like this! You are still a baby” and again said about Kapila, “Looks a proper devil but the way he blushes and giggles and turns red he might have been a bride”. Now

one cannot be a proper devil and bride at once, especially at first it is known that he is the son of the iron smith and a wrestler also had an iron like figure. Devdutta focuses the inner reality so he said, “Well this bride didn’t blush”, Hayabadana also says to Bhagbata, “So I took interest in the social life of the nation-civics-politics-patriotism, nationalism, indianization, the socialist pattern of society...I have tried everything.” So the person who is devoid of any proper identity is interested in these subjects. Does it mean that the author wanted to infer that these are not the subjects for any proper complete being? The question is tricky and at once important. On the other hand in the very first appearance of Debdutta and Kapila it is said that they wore mask. A complete human figure which they are representing, they need not to wear masks. While sacrificing the head to Goddess Kali, Devdutta’s mask rolls off. Does the dramatist intend to say that despite having their human figure they are incomplete? And in that case it is surely away from the actual world but reside in the realm of possible world.

In act 2, Devdutta is enlivened with the head of Devdutta and the body of Kapila with his ‘wide chest’ and become ‘celestial-bodied gandharva’ and after the decision has been given by the sage that as head is supreme in the body so the person with Devdutta’s head is the rightful husband of Padmini. We see with amusement Padmini refers to Devdutta as “my Devdutta comes like a bridegroom with the ornament of a heavenly body”, which she had previously used for Kapila. The impossible dreamland of the ‘prince of Araby’ with his white stallion is further invoked in Act 2 in Padmini’s song when she sings a lullaby to his son.

“Here comes a rider
 From what land does he come?
 On his head a turban
 With a long pearly tail
 Round his neck a garland
 Of virgin-white jasmines.
 In his fist a sword
 With a diamond-studded hilt
 The white clad rider
 Rides a white charger
 Which spreads its tossing mane
 Against the western sky,
 Spreads its mane like breakers
 Against the western sky
 Sleep now my baby
 And see smiling dreams.
 There he comes-here he is!
 From which land does he come?
 But why are the jasmines on his chest
 Red O so red?
 What shine in his open eyes?
 Pebbles O pebbles.
 Why is his young body
 Cold O so cold?
 The white horse gallops
 Across hills, streams and fields.

To what land does he gallop?
Nowhere O nowhere”.

The song clearly marks her attention towards the horse rather than the rider. Such words like ‘charger’, ‘tossing mane’, ‘breakers’, ‘gallops’, etc. clearly points out the vigorous masculinity of the horse rather than rider, obviously a prince who is associated with such timid phrases like ‘jasmynes on his chest’, ‘round his neck a garland of virgin white jasmine’, clearly marks Padmini’s fascination of the virulent male horse rather than the prince and it also clearly invokes the tale of Hayabadana’s mother, the princes of Karnataka. They are really inhabitant of the dreamland which is not actual but may be possible in the possible worlds. At the end we also see Hayabadana ‘becomes complete’ at the association of the boy, the child of Devdutta and Padmini. He becomes a complete horse figure, having a horse’s voice. He was in the non-actual world in his incomplete figure yearning to be complete, yet still loving his mane, now becomes the denizen of the actual world.

Thus throughout the play the confrontation of actual and possible world becomes the one of the real dominating theme of Girish Karnad’s ‘*Hayabadana*’, and the play can be viewed in the above lights which certainly has some streak of absurdist techniques and can be explained in multiple different layers of meaning.

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