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THE ROLE OF MASK IN GIRISH KARNAD'S PLAYS

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Abstract:

The mask becomes a vigorous part of contemporary culture. Being a dramatic type, it is used to hide the identity of the person. Many dramatists use this technique in their plays. Girish Karnad employs it to project the personalities of different characters. The mask in his plays shows that how the actor adopts the role playing and disguise, the mask creates the fantasy and bizzare world in his plays.

KEY WORDS:

Renaissance, Psychotherapy, Paraphernalia, Archetype, Yakshagana, Bizzare, Folk art.

INTRODUCTION

The presentation of the mask is a universal cultural phenomenon. It has been utilized from pre-historical eras, through the Antique, Early Modern and Renaissance periods and is equally prevalent in both Western and Eastern cultures. It becomes a vigorous part of contemporary culture. A mask is a fundamental element of the theater and staged performance in much of the world. Many of these performances stem from traditional stories and beliefs. They may often serve more as entertainment than as education or enlightenment. Human beings always try to hide themselves in front of others. Sometimes we use our own face to hide ourselves too! For this purpose we always use masks.

Mask: Meaning

A mask is an object normally worn on the face, typically for protection disguise, performance or entertainment. Encyclopedia Britannica defines it as,

*"Mask is a form of covering for the face employed as a protective screen or disguise: the term also refers to a facial portrait in three dimensions."*¹

The ancient Latin word for mask is "persona" which literally indicates "false face", an aspect of the personality shown to or perceived by others. Every person is said to have at least two selves - one without any guise and the other, an 'alternate self' - one which may or may not be a pretension.

Functions of Masks:

The use of mask develops skills - physical, vocal, communicative and collaborative. The use of masks for religious purpose is a very ancient human practice across the world. Although the religious use of masks has waned, masks are used sometimes in drama therapy or psychotherapy. Masks play a key part within world theatre traditions, particularly non-western theatre forms. They also continue to be a vital force within contemporary theatre, and their usage takes a variety of forms. This essential characteristic of hiding and revealing personalities or moods is common to all masks. Some masks are used on festive

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THE ROLE OF MASK IN GIRISH KARNAD'S PLAYS

occasions or to portray characters in a dramatic performance and in re-enactments of mythological events. Some of the Masks are also used for warfare and as protective devices in certain sports, as well as frequently being employed as architectural ornament. The principal use of mask is 1) as part of the paraphernalia in primitive ritual and 2) as a convention in theatrical representation.

The Role of Masks in Drama and life:

Mask, also spelled masque, derives from early rites and ceremonies, often religious, often based in folk tradition. A masque usually involved a group of visitors arriving, sometimes bearing presents, to hold a ceremonial dance with their hosts. Now these guests traditionally wore masks. This was to hide their identity – and in Court circles, these visitors could well belong to the highest ranks.

The mask as a device for theatre first emerged in Western civilization from the religious practices of ancient Greece. In Greek drama, it is linked to festivals of Dionysus (Known as Bacchus by the Romans), the god of fertility, the harvest, theatre and wine. A masked performer would depict Dionysus and over time other characters became represented by masks. Women did not perform on stage in those days, and female characters were represented by male actors wearing masks. The tradition of using the masks continued into the Middle Age of Europe. Mystery plays told Biblical stories and masks were used to portray the devil, demons, or the seven deadly sins.

Several plays of William Shakespeare incorporate masks as Much Ado about Nothing, A Midsummer Night's Dream etc. the mask is used as a theatrical link between the planes of existence. The epic Sanskrit stories of India, the Mahabharata and Ramayana are the traditional subjects for performance through much of South East Asia, with characters commonly depicted through masks. Masks are one of the most fundamental phenomena of human life.

The Use of Masks in Girish Karnad's Plays :

Karnad employs the masks which is a typical feature of 'Yakshagana' to project the personalities of different characters. His speciality is focused by using the mask in the play. Using of mask in the play functions in the same way as the use of Bhagavata, as a device that is standard to Asian traditional theatre and used by 20th century Western artist. Karnad's fusion of Indian and western theatrical conventions reflects here. Western theatre has developed a contrast between the face and the mask-the real inner person and the exterior on present, or wish to present, to the world outside. But in traditional Indian theatre, Mask is the only the face 'Writ large'; since a character represents not a complex psychological entity but an ethical archetype, the mask merely presents in enlarged detail, its essential moral nature. In Indian theatre mask creates fantasy.

In the play, Yayati, Puru is shown wearing the mask of Yayati accepting the old age of his father with a great sense of responsibility, respect and sacrifice. In Naga Mandala the Mask becomes a necessity for Rani to escape from the reality. It is her self talk that becomes a mask to her. Rani dreams about a fantasy world as about loving Appanna, so in her fantasy, the cobra becomes Naga- as stranger during the day and as a lover at night, Roger W Oliver says that a mask can be:

*"A fiction then comes to be believed in by the individual as his true reality"*²

In Hayavadana, Lord Ganesha and Hayavadana has human body and animal's head, so Mask is there. In the introductory part of the play, the presence of Ganesh, a mask of a one-tusked elephant and the protective deity of actors, serves not only to establish links with traditional theatre but also to anticipate the use of masks in the play and to underline the key thematic complex-the search for completeness. Lord Ganesha is considered a mixture of human, animal and divine forms. He is a God who has an elephant's head with a human body. It is a mask, pure and simple. Karnad says,

*"Right at the start of the play, my theory about mask was getting subverted. But the elephant head also questioned the basic assumption behind the original riddle; that the head represents the thinking part of the person, the intellect."*³

Being satwic in Nature, Devadattaa wears a pale-coloured mask whereas Kapila wears dark one, as the son of an ironsmith. R. S. Sharma justifies the use of mask as,

*"Mask is symbolic of shape-shifting: it is a means to revive an age-old function of drama as ritual. Hayavadana ritualizes the search for completeness."*⁴

THE ROLE OF MASK IN GIRISH KARNAD'S PLAYS

Though in the middle, there is some slight change. In the later play, masks are transposed to indicate the transposition of heads. Kali, the Goddess, appears in a terrible mask. Though their heads have interchanged, they remain same. Hayavadana appears with the mask of a man in the beginning later with the mask of a horse. While writing the play, Hayavadana Karnad felt that it would take the shape of a folk drama chiefly because of the change of heads which could be easily managed on the stage with masks. Here a brief reference to the genesis of the play may be quite relevant. Karnad writes in this connection:

*“By the late sixties any seminar you went to in India, the question was what to do with folk theatre and this problem was endlessly debated and people said this was relevant and this was not relevant, what to do with it etc. [...]. all this meant that folk theatre was very much in the air and one day I was telling the story of transposed heads to my friend B.V.Karanth. I said here was a beautiful story, and why a marvelous theatre don't. The moment he said I knew it would make a very good play. So while one confesses that one went consciously to some of the folk theatre, Yakshagana and others, one cannot deny that Brecht as well as Badal Sirkar were haunting one, and that went some way in the shaping of Hayavadana.”*⁵

Mask is also used extensively in modern expressionistic drama, especially by Eugene O'Neill. Karnad, indianizes O'Neillian theme in Hayavadana. In his Three Plays, Karnad says,

“The mask merely presents in enlarged detail its essential moral

*nature.” And so “a character represents not a complex psychological entity but an ethical archetype.”*⁶

Role playing is a kind of Mask in Tughlaq. As a king, the Sultan has to play many roles in his life. Tughlaq stabs Shihab-Ud-Din to his heart's content and orders to behead the Amirs, “stuff their bodies with straw and hang them up in the palace-yard.”⁷ In respect of Shihab-ud-Din's, he plays the role of traitor's traitor and tyrant. When Barani spreads a silken cloth on Shihab-Ud-Din's corpse, the Sultan says villainously, “Don't cover him. I want my people to see his wounds” (54) Muhammad has already killed his father and brother while they were praying. But when his step-mother accepts that she has killed Najib, Tughlaq finds fault with her action. At the same time, he justifies his murders: “I killed them - Yes - but I killed them for an ideal” (77). The role that he plays is that of a visionary, a tyrant, a forgiver, a self-realizing person, and also a devotee. Thus, role playing and disguise are alternatives to mask. He is forgiver also in respect to Ain-ul-mulk. He takes the role of self- realizing, forgiver and devotee. Thus as P. Ramamoorthy says:

*“He (Tughlaq) plays a role now, then changes costumes and plays another 'role'”.*⁸

In The Fire and the Rain, Arvasu wearing the mask of Vritra, loses control over himself. He attacks and chases the Actor-Manager who plays Indra, saying, “You can elude me, Indra. But you can't escape me. Even if you fly like a falcon across ninety-nine rivers, I'll find you. I'll destroy you. I'll raze your befouled sacrifice to the ground”⁹. Hence, the Actor-Manager shouts “It's the mask, it's the mask, come alive. Restrain him-or there'll be chaos”.¹⁰

Mask is thus used in Karnad's plays to depict how the fantasy (Naga- Mandala) and bizarre (Hayavadana) world can be created, to show how the actor adopt role playing and disguise (Tughlaq) can become the various forms of Masks, To quote K.R.S. Iyanger.

*“Karnad's approach is a modern, and he deploys the conventions and motifs of folk art like mask and curtains to project a world of intensities, uncertainties and unpredictable denouements”*¹¹

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