



TRANSPOSITION OF HEADS IN INDIAN MYTHOLOGY: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to study the popular theme of 'Transposition of Heads' in Indian mythology and the contrasting interpretations it evokes. The battle for supremacy between the mind and the body is a centuries old affair in Indian literary tradition. From the Puranas to the folk tales of India, this has been a recurrent theme.

Introduction:

The Classic Literature is rooted in the retelling of folklore orally. A proper understanding of oral literature would help us enjoy, appreciate and appraise the classic literature and art. A vast number of Indian Languages have yet remained only spoken, with the result that literary compositions in these languages are not considered 'Literature'. They are a feast for the folklorists, anthropologists and linguists, but to a literacy critic, they generally mean nothing. They elevate written composition and texts alone to the status of literature.

In this paper an attempt has been made to probe the theme of "The heads that got switched" in Indian folklore. Girish Karnad is one of the three great writers of the contemporary Indian drama, the other two being Vijay Tendulkar and Badal Sircar. While Badal sircar and Tendulkar deal with the problems of the middleclass, Karnad takes refuge in the India folk tradition and makes them a vehicle of a new vision by taking sources for his plays from folk or oral tradition. For example, the plot of his play Hayavadana is taken from *Kathasaritha Sagara*, an ancient collection of stories in Sanskrit. It was compiled by Somadeva in 1070 C.E.

King Vikramaditya and the Riddles:

One of the stories of *Kathasaritha Sagara* is that of king Vikramaditya who is asked to fetch a corpse (Vedalam in Tamil) hanging upside down in a tree by a Rishi named Gnanaseelan. Gnanaseelan has been in Tapas (meditation) for a long time, hoping to bring the goddess Durga and the corpse under his control. As the goddess was pleased by his Tapas, she appeared before him. The rishi asked her to grant him the boons: longevity, kingship and vedalam (Corpse) besides her blessings. His also wished that all the kings in the world should be his subjects and that he should rule the entire world sitting on the throne of King Vikramaditya.

The goddess agreed to grant him the boons on condition that he has to conduct a Yajna (a holy sacrifice) with the heads of thousand kings killed on her altar.

The Rishi killed nine hundred and ninety nine kings and cut off their heads according to the words of Durga. He was looking for the last one and thought of King Vikramaditya as his victim. So, he met him and conned him to believe that as he was conducting a Yajna. If Vikramaditya was with him for a day, he would attain the benefits of it, the sage lied. The king agreed to be with him, on a new moon day. The particular day came; the king went to the forest all alone. There, he was told by the Rishi to fetch a corpse (Vedalam) which had been hanging upside down in the tree. Following the words of the Rishi, Vikramaditya went towards the tree with the intention of fetching

the corpse and climbed the tree and released the corpse from the tree and carried it on his back and walked towards where the Rishi was. The corpse began to speak and enquired him and his intention and learned that he was the king Vikramaditya. Further, it said that if he uttered a word, it would go back to the tree. So the king kept silent. The Vedalam told him a series of conundrum stories and demanded answers for them to test his wits. So, Vikramaditya agreed to answer the conundrums. We have taken one of the conundrums of 25 tales told to Vikramaditya by the Vedalam. That is "The Heads that got Switched" for this study.

The state, Somavathigai, was ruled by the king Kethu. There was a famous Kali Temple in which festival was conducted every year. Dhavalan, of Bhamasthalam, was a devotee of Kali. He fell in love with Madanasundari, who had come to the festival and beseeched the goddess Kali that if she became his wife, he would oblate his head to her.

Soon after, the festival got over. He disclosed his love for the girl to his parents. They approached her parents and a wedding was duly solemnised. They led a happy life but their happiness did not last for long. One day Madanasundari's brother paid a visit and sojourned there as a guest for some days, and invited his sister and Dhavalan to his village.

On their way to the Somavathigai village, Dhavalan happened to see the Kali temple which reminded him of the offering of his head to the goddess. So, he set off to the temple with his wife and brother-in-law being asked to stay behind. He enters into the temple and cut his head off with a sword and offered his head to the goddess.

As time went by, Dhavalan's brother-in-law worried about his return. So, he went looking for him and was shocked to see the beheaded body of Dhavalan. Out of grief and finding it difficult to convey the death of Dhavalan to his sister, he too beheaded himself with the same sword.

As both Dhavalan and her brother, did not return for a long time, Madana Sundari got worried and set out in search of both. At the Kali temple, she was shocked to see the trunks of both and decided to cut her head off with the sword rather than live without her husband. When she was about to cut her head off, an oracle intervened and stopped her from killing herself. Pleased by the piety of all, Durga appeared before her and blessed her with the boon to bring her husband and her brother back to life by placing the heads on the respective bodies.

In excitement, Madanasundari puts her husband's head on her brother's body and vice versa. Both of them got back to life and prostrated before the goddess in gratitude.

Then, the Vedalam stopped the story and told that king Vikramaditya must answer the riddle or would lose his life. It asked him, "Who of them would be her husband?" Vikramaditya solved the riddle that the man with Dhavalan's head was her husband because the head was supreme of all the limbs and one's identity depended on the head. The Vedalam accepted the verity of the reply and escaped to the tree.

The Story of Mariamman:

Renuka is another name for Mariamman, a Hindu goddess worshipped predominantly in the Indian states of Tamilnadu, Andhra, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Telangana. According to legend, King Renuka performed a ritual to maintain peace and good health. He was blessed with a daughter, Renuka, who originated from the fire of his Yajna (a holy ritual). When she was eight, Agasthiya, the guru of King Renuka, advised him to have his daughter married to Jamadagni, when she reached maturity.

Jamadagni was the son of Ruchikamuni and Satyavati. The both got married and lived in the Ramshrung mountains. Renuka helped the Jamadagni Rishi in all of his tasks of performing various rituals and Puja. She was famous for her devotion and chastity. It was said that she was able to create a pot to hold water made only of sand, one fresh pot every day.

She would fill her pot and use a snake, which was nearby, turning it into a convolution for placing the pot on her head. They had five sons Vasu, Viswa Vasu, Brihudyanu, Brutwakanwa and Rambhadra was the youngest and beloved who was called Parashurama. One day, Renuka went to the river to carry water for the ritual. On her way to the river, she happened to see Gandharvas. For a moment, she lost her concentration and devotion to her husband as she was physically attracted to one of the Gandharvas. She lost her power of collecting water in unbaked pot too which she had collected with the help of her chastity. So, she returned to the ashram without water. On seeing her returning empty handed, Rishi Jamadagni understood what had happened to her at the river with his divine power and became furious and ordered her sons to cut her head off. One by one, four of them refused flatly. In anger, the Rishi turned four of his sons into stones. Finally, Parasurama was ordered to behead his mother for her infidelity.

Parasurama immediately obeyed his father. When Parasurama raised his axe to kill his mother, she fled and took refuge in the house of a low-caste poor woman. He chased his mother and beheaded her. But he accidentally chopped off the head of the low-caste woman too who tried to prevent his matricide. The Rishi was pleased by the deeds of Parasurama and offered him a boon. As a sincere son, he obeyed the order of his father and executed his mother. To prove his love for his mother, he wanted the boon of bringing back his dead mother and his brothers to life. The Sage also agreed and gave him the boon that he asked for and asked him to sprinkle water on the corpses. In a hurry to bring back his mother to life, Parasuraman accidentally placed the head of low-caste woman on his mother's body and vice-versa and sprinkled the water on the stones of his brothers. Then, all of his four brothers and his mother Renuka and low-caste-woman Yellama came back to life. The Rishi Jamadagni accepted the woman with the head on the low-caste woman's body as his wife. The original head of Renuka was, from then, worshipped. Thus, the goddess is called as Renuka Yellamma or Mariamma. It stands for Mari, goddess of rain and also referred as Mari (meaning change in tamil) Amman (Amman who got her head switched) in Tamilnadu. In Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu. Symbolically, the head of Renuka Parameswari is being worshipped by attaching it to a pot in.

In 'Hayavadana', Karnad ridicules the belief which holds the head superior to the body. When the play opens, Devadatta and Kapila are presented as close friends – one mind, one heart'.

Devadatta is a man of learning and intellect, while Kapila is a man of the body. Devadatta has all the qualities expected of a Brahmin youth, falls in love with a beautiful girl, Padmini. Kapila, a devoted friend of Devadatta, is the son of an ironsmith. Devadatta happens to see the paragon of beauty, Padmini, in the market and is fascinated by her. Like Dhavalan in the Vikramaditya story, Devadatta too gets so impatient to get her that he swears to sacrifice his arms and head to goddess Kali and Lord Rudhra respectively. He expresses his pledge to Kapila boldly.

"I swear, Kapila with you as my witness,
I swear, if I get her as my wife

I'll sacrifice my two arms to the
Goddess Kali, I'll sacrifice my head
To Lord Rudra,"

He feels that there is no use of his hands and head if he is unable to get her. So, he asks Kapila to convey his feelings (proposal for marriage) to Padmini, whom he had seen on Pawana Veethi (Street). Kapila mediates and arranges their marriage.

Thus, Devadatta is indebted to Kapila and the three live like, "Rama-Sita-Lakshmana" and the old friendship goes on flourishing as before. However, their relationship becomes tangled as Kapila is attracted by Padmini and Padmini is captivated by Kapila's muscular body. Padmini says to herself that "No woman could resist him [Kapila]. Devadatta also notices that Kapila never blushes. Thus, jealousy grows between the two friends owing to Padmini's arrival in the life of Devadatta.

One day Kapila plans, with Padmini and Devadatta, a visit to Ujjain fair. As Padmini is pregnant, Devadatta tries to postpone the proposed trip to Ujjain. But it does not succeed on account of Padmini's insistence. On the way, Devadatta decides to sacrifice his head to Kali to fulfil his earlier vow. He takes a decision to kill himself in the Kali Temple while Padmini and Kapila are on their way to Rudhra Temple.

When both Kapila and Padmini returned from Rudra temple they are surprised to see Devadatta missing from near the cart. Kapila, on tracing Devadatta's foot prints towards Kali temple, rushes to see his friend's dead body.

Unable to think of anything, Kapila picks up the swor, that is lying there in the temple. He too cuts off his head before Kali.

Padmini gets worried, when both Devadatta and Kapila do not return. She gathers courage and sets out to look for them. She reaches the Kali temple. She notices utter darkness in the temple. She stumbles over the truncated bodies, stares at them and lets out a scream.

"Oh God! What's this? Both! Both gone!
And didn't even think of me before
They went... Devadatta, what did I do
That you left me alone in this state?
Was that how much you loved me?
And you, Kapila who looked at me
With dog's eye - you too?
How selfish you are - how unkind!
What shall I do now - where shall I go?
How can I go home?... And what shall
Say when I get there? What shall I say Happened? And who'll believe me?
They all say the two fought and died
for this whore."

Padmini thus laments over their death and she too decides to hack-off her head. Just then goddess Kali appears and in her mercy offers to bring back the two friends to life. She orders Padmini to put the heads on the respective bodies. Padmini finds this an opportunity of having the best out of it. She places Devadatta's head on Kapila's body and Kapila's head on Devadatt's body. Since head is superior according to Shashtras, both of them claim to be the husband of Padmini. Kapila claims Padmini as his wife on the ground that the child she is carrying is the seed of his body. He also reminds Padmini about the oath she had taken with the hands of Kapila not with Devadatta's

hand. Devadatta argued that Padmini belongs to him because she had married him not for his body but as a person on the whole.

Therefore, he is the rightful husband to Padmini and not Kapila. At last Devadatta scores more points over Kapila because,

“According to shastras, the head is the sign of a man... of all the limbs the top most in position as well as in importance – is the head. Kapila is the loser in this exchange of heads. Padmini succeeds in having both the intellect and flesh, “Fabulous body – Fabulous brain – fabulous Devadatta.”

Devadatta enjoys the benefits of Kapila’s well trained body for about a year before it loses its vitality. Kapila who feels hurt and cheated remains in the forest to change the Brahmins’ body into an athletic one. Padmini in the end, cheats her husband and walks with her child in her arms into the embrace of Kapila who again succeeds in his efforts to ‘live’ in the forest. Padmini gives birth to a child whom she claims to be belonging to both Devadatta and Kapila. The play ends with Devadatta discovering Padmini and Kapila together. Both Devadatta and Kapila, have a duel and both die in the end.

The Story of Ganesh:

The play ‘Hayavadana’ (The man with horse face) begins with the invocation i.e, Prayer offered to Lord Ganesh (the god of imperfect) for the successful completion of the play. He himself is imperfect who is being worshipped for perfection. He is with elephant head on human body.

One day Goddess Parvathi was preparing for a bath. She asked Nandi to guard the door and not allow any to enter. He faithfully carried out his duty. But when his master, Lord Shiva wanted to enter into the bathing place, being loyal to its master, Nandi let Shiva enter into that place. Parvathi was angry about Nandi’s insincerity. So, she decides to have one for her as loyal as Nandi is to Shiva.

And so, she created Ganesh, taking the turmeric paste (dirt) from her body and breathed life into it and declared it as her son.

Parvathi wished to bathe, and told Ganesh to guard at the door, so that she could bath without any disturbance. When Shiva came home, his entry was derided by a strange boy telling him he could not enter his own house. Ganesh was not able to recognize him. He ended up himself by fighting with the lord, whose infamy cut off the head of Ganesh.

Learning after Ganesh’s demise, Parvathi decided to destroy the entire creation in rage. Brahma, the God of creation, pleaded her to reconsider her drastic destructive plan. Parvathi also agreed and said she would reconsider if two conditions were fulfilled; Ganesh to be brought back to life and he is to be worshipped before all other gods.

Lord Shiva having realized his mistake agreed to Parvathi’s conditions. He sent Brahma to bring the head of the first creation that he comes across that is lying with its head facing north. Brahma returned with the head of an elephant, which Shiva placed on to Ganesh’s body. Breathing new life into him, he declared Ganesh as his own son and gave him the status of being the foremost among the gods.

Conclusion:

The Indian mythology is a body of literature that endears laymen and scholars alike. What has been discussed in this paper is just a leaf out of a book. Stories and myths continue to tease our intellect by giving newer and newer meanings every time we read them. The subject of mind vs body is a never ending tussle, not only in

literature, but also in science. Modern science tries to assign a superior status to the mind treating it as the chief architect of the human personality. Whatever the conclusion of science is, literature, especially Indian mythology will continue to amuse readers at least for a few more centuries.

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