

Masks – Merging the Reality with Magic World - in Select Girish Karnad's Plays

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ABSTRACT

*The mask has been an impersonation of the theatre; its chronological function can be traced to its traditional development as a variety of conventions for the projection of action. The mask functions as a more lasting element, since its form is corporeal. Mask is a covering for the face, usually of a human or animal shape. Masks were designed to fulfil a variety of functions in different societies. Bharata mentions masks as pratishirsha in his *Natyasastra*, and that different masks are to be used for gods and men, according to their habitation, birth, and age.*

The masks represent the spirit by whom the dancer seeks to be possessed; whereas, in the western theatre there has been a contrast between the face and the mask - the real inner person and the exterior that one presents or wishes to present to the world outside. Besides, a mask can create a fantasy and bizarre world. Role-playing and disguise are alternatives to mask. These functions of the masks are further explored in detail in select plays of Girish Karnad's plays in this paper.

Keywords: masks, role playing, disguise, fantasy, Girish Karnad's plays

Theatrical performances are a visual literature of a transient, transitory kind. It is the most impressive one because it can be seen as a reality; it expends itself by its very revelation. The mask has been an impersonation of the theatre; its chronological function can be traced to its traditional development as a variety of conventions for the projection of action. The tradition of the mask as theatrical—or physical—convention dates long back and is diverse; it stretches the entire history of the Classical theatre. As a theatrical principle, the mask has developed in a different way in the major Classical periods, even though in all periods, its primary function has been to convey an objective image of character or action to both the actor and the audience.

The ensuing development of the mask as a dramatic convention was a logical consequence of its function as a theatrical convention. As a theatrical convention, the mask continued to be the primary means for projecting character action, though in a much more intricate and delicate manner. Through the dramatists' exploitation of dramatic elements, in particular the element of thought, the playwright was able to suggest character as a mask of actions. The

dramatic mask anticipated character action from both an objective and a subjective viewpoint. The dramatic mask's subjective expression of character action required greater creative cooperation from the actor.

The mask's development as a performance convention was the outcome of several concurrent factors. The most important factor influencing the mask as a performance convention was the materialization of the performer as the primary ingenious element in the theatrical process and an enveloping desire among theatre artists to explore different ways in which the mask could be used to project action. The various experiments with the mask as a performance convention were prompted by the need to discover as how it could project the action of the performer.

The mask functions as a more lasting element, since its form is corporeal. Mask is a covering for the face, usually of a human or animal shape. Masks were designed to fulfil a variety of functions in different societies. In the primitive society, man realised that he was subjected to two forces of nature namely, benevolent and malevolent force, as a result of which he felt insecure and vulnerable. The former, he thought

was the acts of Gods and the latter, the acts of evil and demon spirits. He started creating myths and desperately tried to materialize these supernatural powers so that, through appropriate rituals, which are but enactments of myths, the gods could be pleased and the evil spirits appeased. From his myth making faculty were born many idols, images and icons. And mask was a special kind of icon.

The face which gives the body its identity is also its quintessence. If the face is masked it becomes another face. The body becomes another body as it feels that a new 'being' flows in from the mask. This 'being' seizes upon the body and transforms it so that there is no inconsistency between the new face and the new body. Thus, the masks act as an instrument of metamorphosis, especially when the mind is impressionable. The mask psychologically elevates the wearer to influence the supernatural powers to which he appeals and at the same time permits them to transform him. Mask not only protects him but transforms, disguises, and enhances his face. When the primitive man put on the mask, he was amazed at its magical powers. Therefore, he regarded masks as 'the antennae of supernatural powers' and as useful ritual objects.

The custom of wearing masks began with animal heads being worn for the successful completion of animal hunt. In some villages, to ward off evil spirits in a highly infected village, devil dancers wearing masks offered sacrifice and conjured the demons of the disease into their own bodies. It has been suggested that masks play a greater part in Africa and Oceanic countries than in Asia and in the North and West of America than in the South and the East. In Europe, masks belong to the folklore and are connected with seasonal performances.

From the social life of hunting and evil spirits, masks entered into the theatre. *Prosoopan* in Greece meaning face, *mein*, look, and appearance were inseparable parts of the theatrical production, right from the classical period to the modern. Ancient Greek drama began as a ritualistic dance in honour of the Greek God Dionysius. Thespis presumed to have lived in the mid sixth century, employed elaborate stage techniques like masks and costumes. The masks were used to represent gods and mythical heroes; they also represent emotions like joy, anger, love and so on, allowing the audience to follow the play. Since, the Greek theatre was large and it was not

possible for all spectators to watch the expressions, simple amplifiers built into the masks helped to transmit the author's voice over a great distance.

Chinese plays used masks to portray different types of characters. While 'red' represented a loyal person; 'white' represented a cruel person. A type of Japanese play, *Noh* used many types of masks to represent different emotions. In Europe, when drama moved to the church, masks were used only as a convention. Men represented female characters; hence, in early Elizabethan plays masks were used in a symbolic way, as in Italian *Commedia dell' arte* to portray the female characters.

With the progress of civilization, the age of positivism came, in which the world of perception appeared as absolute as any religious system. Increasing rational approach eroded the religious belief resulting in realism which invaded theatre and masks became a casualty. Thus, masks remained confined to the tribal and non-industrial cultures. As drama is realistic, one may agree with the *Literary Encyclopaedia* that it is a mistake to assume that masks will have no place in the future; if drama returns to the original unrealistic conventions, masks may become a necessity. In recent literature it is found that man has once again come to realise the importance of masks. As Jiwan Pani quotes in his *World of Other Faces: Indian Masks*: "The aversion to intellectual conceits and strong desires to go to the roots being concerned with the elemental, have brought back masks into highly civilised and sophisticated surroundings. They are as they were before uncanny, not through magic and sorcery but being the symbols of the unknown and the mysterious, the forbidden and the veiled". (1986, 4)

The mask tradition in India can be traced to the Mesolithic period. The ancient cave paintings of the period depict magician-priests wearing animal masks and head gears while performing ritualistic dances. In the Indus Valley excavations, there were hollow masks indicative of bigger ritualistic masks.

Bharata mentions masks as *pratishirsha* in his *Natyasastra*, and that different masks are to be used for gods and men, according to their habitation, birth, and age. He also mentions the crowns, and that the masks of demons, lunatics, ghosts, etc. should have long hair. However, in classical Indian theatre, the stress being more on facial expression, masks were seldom used. Moreover, in classical and traditional Indian

theatre, women enacted female roles unlike in the Greek theatre. Bharata had devised a very rich system of acting, ignoring masks. He had also given detailed instructions about how to do facial make-up with different colours, taking into consideration the nature of the character to be portrayed.

The traditional theatre, through many forms of ritualistic and stylised schemes, aims at creating an atmosphere which becomes easy for the actor to come close to the point of identification with the assumed mythical character. Presenting reality through a distinctive stylisation has been the basic approach of traditional Indian art. As a part of stylisation in dramatic presentation, the Indian theatre actor's face is decorated by using elaborate make-up in different colours and designs and has also used masks. In almost all types of masks used in traditional theatre, the head gear forms an integral part of the mask and there is an amazing range and variety of head gear in both design and material. The mask makers use a variety of materials such as clay, wood, bark, cork, pith, hide, tapestry, bamboo, papier mache, etc. The masks are also of different sizes – from the small masks of *Seraikela Chhau* to the huge ones of *Sahi Jatra* of Orissa and *Krishnattam* of Kerala. Most of the masks are in one piece, but some have moving parts. Some are carved, others painted; while some are both carved and painted. The most intriguing and ornate masks are used by actors participating in the professional theatre of Orissa, *Sahi Jatra*. The *Ankia Nat* of Assam and the *Dashavatar* of Goa also use masks. But in these theatrical forms, only a few characters appear on the stage masked. Only gods with one or two heads, demons and animals wear masks, but not the main characters of the play, the only exceptions being the Chau dances and the Mystery plays enacted in the Buddhist Lama monasteries in the Himalaya regions. Masks representing gods, human beings, animals and demons have been treated with a variety of interpretations. For example, in *Ram Lila*, which is a dramatization of the epic, *Ramayana*, a bird mask for Jatayau, a monkey mask for Hanuman, demon masks for Ravanna and Surpanaga are worn by the actors. In many traditional and folk theatre forms, an actor wearing the mask of Lord Ganesha appears in the beginning of the play and there is an invocation to the Lord.

In *Theatre in India*, Karnad says that mask was not used in Sanskrit theatre since it had a small audience of two hundred or three hundred. But in Indian traditional theatre, he says, the masks

represent the spirit by whom the dancer seeks to be possessed; whereas, in the western theatre there has been a contrast between the face and the mask - the real inner person and the exterior that one presents or wishes to present to the world outside. Besides, a mask can create a fantasy and bizarre world. Role-playing and disguise are alternatives to mask.

In *Hayavadana*, the characters wear appropriate masks. Devadatta is the son of a revered Brahmin, Kapila, the son of an ironsmith is a wrestler and fights bravely with his sword; the former being pale-hued wears a pale mask and the latter wears a dark one. After the transposition, the two of them exchange their masks. Their initial happiness results in regaining their normal selves. Devadatta happily adjusts himself. But, Kapila is haunted by the memories of Devadatta's body. Later, he succeeds in shaping his body and the success comes not as Padmini thinks, "The head always wins, doesn't it?" (II, 55), but by the synthesis of the body and the mind.

The decision to use masks had made Karnad think deeply on the theme. The theme of *Hayavadana* is the problem of alienation. The elephant-headed god symbolizes alienation, since his body and head are incompatible. Hayavadana, the eponymous character like Ganesha also symbolizes alienation. The idea of using the mask of Lord Ganesha is significant as it not only enriches the theme, but it also, presents a perfect blend of the three worlds of experience – the divine, the human, and the animal. Ganesha is often represented by a young boy wearing the elephant mask, who is then worshipped as an incarnation of God himself. Ganesha's mask doesn't say anything about his nature. It is a mask, pure and simple. The elephant head questions the basic assumption of the story: that the head represents the thinking part of the person, the intellect.

Karnad gives his reason as to why he chose Hayavadana, the horse-headed man, who uses the mask of a horse: "It seemed unfair however to challenge the thesis of the riddle by using God. God, after all, is beyond human logic, indeed beyond human comprehension itself. The dialectic head to grow out of grosser ground, and I sensed a third being hovering in the spaces between the divine, and the human, a horse-headed man". (1994, 14)

He is the son of a princess who had fallen in love with a horse – a *gandharva* turned into a horse. This horse after fifteen years of human

love transforms into his real self, *gandharva*. The princess refuses to accompany him, so is transformed into a horse. This story is narrated by Hayavadana. Hayavadana's presence in the play is first seen as that of an intruder to the story. And later, the Bhagavata mistakes that he has been wearing a mask: First, you go around scaring people with this stupid mask. . . . Take it off – I say, take off that stupid mask! [. . . *The tug of war continues for a while. Slowly, the truth dawns on the Bhagavata*] Nata, this isn't a mask! It's his real head! (I, 6)

This incident underscores Karnad's theme, “. . . the mask is 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” (1994, 13). Hayavadana implores Kali to make him complete. As, Bhagavata says, in accordance with the Rishi's words the head represents the thinking of man and hence, Hayavadana turns into a horse with a man's voice. The masks in the play function in the same way as the Bhagavata, as a device that is standard to Asian traditional theatre and used by 20th-century western artists. For instance, western theatre audiences are familiar with Bertolt Brecht's style being heavily influenced by Chinese performance. In his play, *The Good Woman of Setzuan* (1947), there are characters who take on the voice and persona of another character by putting on that character's mask. Karnad uses this technique of mask-swapping to signify the switching of Kapila and Devadatta's heads. In a way, then, Karnad refers to the traditional Asian performance as he acknowledges the work of western playwrights who themselves had borrowed from Asian performance. *Yayati*, which deals with the exchange of ages between father and son and back to the father, has encouraged directors to use masks to represent Yayati, the father and Puru, the son.

Role-playing is a kind of mask in *Tughlaq*. Tughlaq's appearances and his private moments are like that of an actor. In a scene, the Step-Mother sees the Sultan as an actor:

STEP-MOTHER. Then what do you do all night?

MUHAMMAD. I pray to the Almighty to save me from sleep. (ii, 10)

She laughs at his performance and that is a positive sign of his acting personality, “I don't know what to do with you. I can't ask a simple

question without your giving a royal performance” (ii, 10-11). His various other performances include: his acting in the presence of Sheikh Imam-ud-din as a true ruler interested in establishing a 'new world'; kneeling in front of the Amirs and pleading with them to accept his plans, etc.

In the comic plot, Aziz disguises himself in various roles like that of a Brahmin, a victim, and most significantly like that of the Khalif. Here, Aziz is Muhammad's shadow. Like the Sultan assuming different roles, Aziz also disguises himself in different roles such as the Brahmin and the Khalif of Baghdad. He tells the Sultan, “I insist that I'm Your Majesty's true disciple” (xiii, 80).

There are three basic dialects in Muhammad's life: the visionary, the idealist and the realist. Dr. K. S. Ramamurthi comments on this 'divided self' of Tughlaq: “He is at once an idealist and a crafty politician, a humanist and a tyrant, a man who has murdered sleep and yet not a Macbeth haunted by supernatural solicitations, a man who thinks and broods much and yet not a Hamlet incapable of action or guilty of delay”.

To visualize the divided self in terms of English is a popular English theatrical device. John Osborne does this in *Luther*. The man (Martin) behind this is a person in conflict with himself and his parents. His rebellion is a mask that provides him an opportunity to the familial conflict and he fights it out in another ground.

In Karnad's *Tughlaq*, he is at war with himself. He is basically a visionary, a poet and not a ruler. Barani, the historian is able to view this characteristic trait of the Sultan: “But you are a learned man, your Majesty, you are known to the world over for your knowledge of philosophy and poetry. History is not made only in statecraft; its lasting results are produced in the ranks of learned men. That's where you belong, Your Majesty, in the company of learned men. Not in the market of corpses”. (viii, 55). In this play, Karnad has shown how the mask can be used to perform the twin functions of disguise and role-playing.

In *Naga-Mandala*, the mask becomes a necessity for Rani to escape from reality. She is the only daughter for her parents and, moreover, after her marriage, she is locked in the house by her husband, Appanna. Hence, she dreams of being saved by good spirits at times of difficulty. Her soliloquy, her imagination and her dream of a

fantasy world act as her mask. In the words of Roger W. Oliver, “a mask can be a fiction that comes to be believed in by the individual as his true reality” (qtd. in D.R. Subramanian, 99).

The ‘Flames’ assume human characteristics and gossip in the temple after they are extinguished in their houses. Their changing form indicates that night has set in, the world of reality has evanesced, and the world of illusion and fantasy has initiated. In the ‘New Flames’ story of the old woman who knew a ‘Story’ and a ‘Song’, the ‘Story’ becomes a young woman and the ‘Song’ a Sari. Wearing the sari the story walks out of the old woman’s house. The idea is that stories cannot be stingily confined to oneself as the old woman was but should be shared. As ‘Flame 1’ puts it, “So if you try to gag one story, another happens” (Prologue, 4). And later, the woman with the Story tells the story of Rani and Appanna.

One of the most important things that masks do is to transform the identity of the wearer, and changing the identity is not the same as transforming it. The change of identity and transformation can be explained by using the term “larva”. English speakers recognize the term “larva” as referring to the immature stage in the developmental cycle of an animal, usually an insect. A caterpillar, for instance, is the larval stage of a butterfly or moth. In Latin “larva” originally meant either a mask, or a spirit, or a ghost. Thus, the caterpillar is a “mask” that a butterfly wears until it is transformed into a moth. The caterpillar does not simply change; it becomes something else, a totally different entity.

The Flames only change, whereas in Hayavadana and Naga-Mandala the characters undergo transformation and this is due to the mask that each one wears. In Hayavadana, as explained earlier, the characters undergo transformation due to the exchange of heads, thanks to the confused state of Padmini. In the initial stages they are happy about the exchanges:

[They stare at each other. They burst into laughter. She doesn't know how to react. Watches them. Then starts laughing].

DEVADATTA. Mixed-up heads!

KAPILA. Heads mixed-up!

.....
.....

DEVADATTA. How fantastic! All these years we were only friends. . .

KAPILA. Now we are blood relations!
Body relations! [*Laughing*] What a gift!
(1, 34 – 35)

But, later on they realize the difficulty of deciding on who the real husband is. They resort to the words of the great *Rishi* who says, the head is superior among human limbs. Therefore, the man with Devadatta’s head is the rightful husband of Padmini. Padmini tries to cheer up Kapila before she parts telling him, “It’s my duty to go with Devadatta. But remember I’m going with your body” (II, 41). Though in the initial stages, Devadatta enjoys “the muscle and strength days”, later he feels he cannot continue as he has “the family tradition to maintain the daily reading, writing and studies” (II, 46). As Devadatta changes, Kapila also changes but his transformation is not the same as Devadatta’s. He exclaims, “When this body came to me, it was like a corpse hanging by my head. It was Brahmin’s body after all – not made for the woods . . . I had no use for it. The moment it came to me a war started between us” (II, 55). Anyway, Kapila trains the body and so it runs, swims and eats as he likes. He is now ‘the rough and violent Kapila’. Devadatta meets Kapila in the forest and he says they have both learnt what each of them lacked earlier:

DEVADATTA. Did my body bother you too much?

KAPILA. It was not made for this life. It resisted. It also had its revenge.

.....
.....

KAPILA. . . . There were times when I hated it for what it gave me.

DEVADATTA. I wanted your power but not your wilderness. You lived in hate – I in fear (II, 60)

In Naga-Mandala, the Naga assumes the shape of Appanna and transforms Rani from an innocent, frightened, dreamy girl to a mature woman. The magical roots given by the blind woman, Kuruduva help in transforming the Naga into Appanna. With the ingression of the snake into her life, her transformation begins. The Naga comes at night to meet Rani when her husband locks her in. Rani is naïve, innocent and rigid and is instructed by the Naga not to ask questions about anything that happens. Rani is blind to the reality but her blindness seems, as quoted by Savita Goel, “. . . ambiguous. She is unable to comprehend how the distant and brutal

husband who visits her at midday transforms into a sensuous lover at night" (1986, 113). Rani says, "You talk so nicely at night. But during the day I only have to open my mouth and you hiss like a . . . stupid snake" (II, 22). She abides by the rules imposed by the patriarchal society and only when she is pregnant does the real problem dawn upon her. Her husband accuses her of being disloyal as he is very sure that she has found a lover, "Aren't you ashamed to admit it, you harlot? I locked you in and yet you managed to find a lover!" (II, 33) Rani is surprised as she could not comprehend as to what had happened. And, finally she had to accept the words of Naga, and she undertakes the snake ordeal to prove herself; she confesses, swearing by the King Cobra that she has not touched any one of the male sex, except her husband and this snake.

In the process, she is claimed to be a divine incarnate. Though Appanna is not convinced of her fidelity, he says, "Have I sinned so much that nature should laugh at me" (II, 41). He undergoes great mental agony and this transforms him into a devoted husband. Rani is thus, transformed into an extremely bold person and gains an awareness of the ways of the world. She now occupies the highest position in the family, yet when she wants something, she asks for a favour from her husband. One example stated in the play is asking for permission to cremate the Naga. Appanna's harlot does penance for her ill deeds by performing menial jobs in Rani's house.

Transformation is related to the supernatural. The crossing of boundaries is perilous, and a magical event. It might end in death or destruction or unhappiness. Anybody who transgresses must pay the price. Naga dies once his transfiguration is revealed. He commits suicide and dies like a true lover strangling himself by the tresses of Rani's hair. Thus, he becomes a lover's martyr, and asserts the sublime, purity, and dignity of his love. Naga's death leads to the revelation or enlightening of Rani to an otherwise unnoticed reality and it is this, that makes her decide that her son should cremate the Naga and every year the rituals should be performed.

In *Hayavadana* also, Kapila, Devadatta and Padmini after reaping the unsuccessful fruit of transformation end in death. The two friends fight and die, while Padmini dies an unhappy death as she exclaims: "I had to drive you to death. You forgave each other, but again – left me out" (II, 62)

These "transformation" masks show the double nature of mythical beings – both animal and "something-other-than-animal". The mask represents an animal spirit that stands in a special relationship to the mask owner or his family. Recognition of this link between the human world and the spirit/animal world establishes intimate connection between all forms of life.

Some cultures believe that supernatural power resides in the mask itself. This power is revealed when a human being puts on the mask and it is the spirit of the mask that performs and not the "man-that-was". He has become something beyond the human and through this metamorphosis the audience too is transformed. It is elevated from the routine duties of daily life, and transported into a different plane of reality while contradiction, conflict and ambiguity are resolved in a fundamental unity. In this altered state, shared by both the masked and the audience, some basic truths and values are rediscovered as personal desires are set aside in favour of a common good.

For example, in *Bhagavata Mela*, of *Prahalada Charitram*, the man playing the role of the man-lion, i.e., Narashima, is possessed of the mask that he wears. Before he wears the special mask of Lord Narashima, the actor who plays man lion has to fast and pray. Farley P. Richmond remarks on this: "In *Ras Lila* and *Ram Lila*, the putting on of the head dress or mask is a ceremonial and sacred act which changes the performer from an ordinary person into a living incarnation of the deity" (qtd. in D. R. Subramanian, 103). When the actor playing Lord Narashima takes off his mask, he becomes unconscious and motionless.

In *The Fire and the Rain* the Actor-Manager warns Arvasu of this fact of the mask: "Here. This is the mask of Vritra the demon. Now surrender to the mask. Surrender and pour life into it. But remember, once you bring a mask to life you have to keep a tight control over it, otherwise it'll try to take over. It'll begin to dictate terms to you and you must never let that happen. Prostrate yourself before it. Pray to it. Enter it. Then control it". (III, 52)

In the course of the play-within-play, *The Triumph of Indra*, Arvasu is possessed by the mask of Vritra and chases Indra resulting in chaos and confusion. The Actor-Manager shouts, "It's the mask - it's the mask come alive. Restrain him - or there'll be chaos" (Epilogue, 57). The guards try to control him but finally, it is Nittilai who brings Arvasu out of the burning

pavilion, takes off the mask and throws it away. At this juncture, Arvasu says, "I don't know what came over me, Nittilai" (Epilogue, 58). Arvasu is betrayed by his brother, Parvasu for no fault of his own. Arvasu's cries, "But why, Brother, why? . . . Why? (II, 38) is also echoed in the role that he plays using the mask of Vritra, "Why, Brother? Why, why, why? Brother, why? Why? Indra's laughter – And why are there vultures, sparrows, kites and eagles reeling in such frenzy over the sacrificial sanctum?" (Epilogue, 56) Arvasu, who is acting as Vritra, exclaims in the same manner to his brother, Parvasu. This brings to light the guilt of Parvasu who walks into the blazing enclosures and dies.

Though Karnad has used masks in the earlier plays, in one of his interviews to Dr.P. Ramamurthy and Ms. Parimala Nadgir, he says, "In *Hayavadana*, I've said, masks should be used. Now, perhaps, I feel it should be done without mask. Perhaps, masks are not in Indian convention. Now I have begun to feel it" (qtd. in Rajendran, 94). He continues to say that masks should mean only a Chau mask or Greek mask. The word 'Mugada' is a coinage in Kannada and there is no traditional name for masks. In Kathkali, there is strong make-up and the characters are trained to use their eyes, and their face is often enveloped in a mask like make-up.

Until a few decades ago, the modern theatre, under the strong influence of realism loathed the use of masks in the theatre, reasoning that it was foolish to hide the most expressive part of the human body with an artificial covering. But now, mask is staging a gradual, but determined, comeback to the contemporary stage. Serious thinkers feel that to be aesthetically more satisfying the theatre should be more theatrical and stylised rather than being wholly realistic. Masks are symbolic in form and construction. The mask with its accoutrements of costume, make-up, jewellery and props, helps one to gain an insight into the depth and amazing variety of theatre. Karnad has experimented successfully with masks in his plays.

A Karnadian mask helps the characters to impersonate another being as in Naga's disguise as Appanna, the transformation of ages as in Yayati's exchange of old age for youth with Puru, transformation of heads as in Hayavadana

changing into a horse, and Devadatta's head being transposed to Kapila's. The masks are very helpful in effecting changes in the identity of characters whenever the dramatic action demands it. With the help of masks, Karnad has created a bizarre world with the supernatural characters thereby enhancing and merging the world of magic with that of reality.

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