



Karnad's *Hayavadana*: A Feminist Performative (Re)telling through Repetition

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Abstract

This essay appraises the work of contemporary Indian feminist theatre director, Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry, who in her productions (like *Nagamandala*, *Bitter Fruit*, *Naked Voices*, *The Dark Borders*) has helmed several imaginative modes of recasting myths and narratives about women; challenging the heteronormative patriarchal ways of seeing and dismantling the hold of this *ought-ness* within the Indian societal fabric of tradition and modernity. The essay delineates the radical potential of a feminist reading of a call for *écriture féminine* being transposed and realised in Chowdhry's theatre work, wherein, the cynosure is not only on the re-telling of myths, but also an embodiment of aesthetics of transformation and fluidity through experimentation with her native traditional folk form and presence of naqqals (traditional artists of female impersonators). The essay focuses on her contemporary production *Hayavadana* to explore her feminist reimaginings.

Keywords: *Hayavadana*, *Ecriture Feminine*, Aesthetics, Performance, Feminism, Indian Mythology

When you're participating in an emotion, you cannot really use distance to forge creativity. But within the savagery of the times, I try to find some affirmations, some humanity and some hope.

—Chowdhry 'In Search of Contexts'ⁱ

Introduction

Based in Chandigarh since 1984, Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry and her group The Company practices a theatrical style that breaks the

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rules of realism and presents traditional mythological and folk tales in idiosyncratic ways, wherein the emphasis is on exploring the immense potentiality of stage through sound, movement, music and images. Though in her productions, the unspoken preoccupations are given form through actions which create a surreal world by physicalising subconscious drives of characters, nevertheless her theatre is rooted within a social, political, geographical and an architectural context. Her innovative craft, feminist directorial process, collaborative methodology, innovative use of space on stage, engagement with materials, and agential embodied performative acts makes her theatre an apt exemplar of her feminist subjectivity.

In Indian theatre historiography, especially in terms of ephemeral performative idioms, there is a gaping void, a lacunae as well as an absence of documentation of the innovations, interventions and legacies created by contemporary feminist women theatre directors like Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry. It is crucial to address this anomaly and also deconstruct this absence with a critical eye within the socio-historical framework of the history of feminist theatre in India. It is in the 1970s that feminist theatre emerged as a cultural incident in the Indian theatre scape. This was due to the influence of the women's movement of the 1960s and the political impetus from the non-commercial agitprop street theatre movement in the country at the time. However, the transformative potentiality of their work on the proscenium stage is largely under represented and sparsely mentioned by post-colonial Indian theatre histories. In consideration of the above, this article delineates and chronicles the methodology, process, creation of performance text, handling of material and scenography employed by Chowdhry with special reference to her recent production *Hayavadana* (2023) (Horse-headed Man).

Hayavadana, a modern classic written (1970s) by late Indian male playwright Girish Karnad combines myth, folktale, music, humour and tragedy as an integral part of its narrative structure. In a bold (re)telling of this story, Chowdhry explores theatre and performance as a constructive site for a feminist director seeking out to re-create and re-interpret old myths. Simone de Beauvoir pointed that the worldview wherein postlapsarian women were fundamentally flawed, a view grounded in the narrative of Adam and

Eve, is not isolated to western ideological traditions alone. Women across cultures have historically as well as mythologically been represented as doomed to immorality and thereby their sexuality as emblematic of preconceived, static conviction of what it *ought* to represent as well as embody. Making use of the narrative nature of myths, their capacity to delve into the realm of anecdotes through the medium of storytelling, Chowdhry experiments with the same and implements several imaginative modes of recasting myths and thereby makes her narratives more about women; challenging the heteronormative patriarchal ways of seeing and dismantling the hold of this *ought-ness* within the Indian societal fabric of tradition and modernity. A K Ramanujan in his essay “Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three thoughts on Translation,” foregrounds his engagement with a very old debate: can we take one version of a narrative, even if it is the earliest written one, to represent the original text of a tale that was well known across the Indic subcontinent, told in myriad ways and understood variously in different idioms? Ramanujan specifically prefers the expression ‘tellings’ to the popularly used terms such as ‘versions’ and ‘variants’ because the latter terms can and do imply the existence of an invariant original text. In line with this argument, this essay looks at Chowdhry’s delineation as a *retelling* wherein the power accorded to a written originary text is dismantled in favour of reckoning the journey of a myth as varied with shifting contexts; which cannot be mapped onto any paradigm of linearity. It appears associational, polytextual, contextual and overladen with multiplicity of meanings.

Hayavadana is a story of two friends; one is Devdutt, who is an intellectual and an intelligent man, and the other is Kapil, whose body is representative of physical strength and beauty in contrast to intelligence. The plot introduces them as best friends, but a rivalry ensues between the two as they both fall in love with the same woman, Padmini. While Devdutt and Padmini get married, all three of them live together until an unfortunate event leads to swapping of their heads on each other’s bodies, putting Padmini in the spot—who is her husband now, the head that belongs to Devdutt or his body that fathered her child? Chowdhry admits that, “the play’s combination of modernity and contemporaneity with tradition, symbolism and myths of the past dovetailing into a cohesive text is challenging for any

director.”ⁱⁱⁱ In the play, a horse-headed man, who narrates his own fantastical story of how he came to be suspended between the animal and the human world seeks a sort of completeness and a sense of identity. Here, in *Hayavadana* (the Horse-headed man), Karnad reshapes an ancient Indian myth (popularly known as *Vikram-Vetala*) to point to the man’s eternal quest for completeness, or self-realisation. Karnad’s 1971 play, inspired by *The Transposed Heads*, Thomas Mann’s reworking of a Sanskrit tale, from the *Kathasaritsagara*, was treated as a fable. This quest is delineated through a juxtaposition of knowledge (head) and physical strength (body) and the narrative is laid out through two men seeking perfection by vying for each other’s attributes and strong suit. This twinning of two men—one exuding physical strength and the other intellect is an often-used trope in Indian mythology. Karnad’s narrator calls them exemplars of mythic figures like Luv-Kush (Twin sons of Indian Hindu God, Ram as mentioned in *Ramayana*) and Krishna-Balram (Balarama, in Hindu mythology, the elder half-brother of Krishna, with whom he shared many adventures)ⁱⁱⁱ. Chowdhry carries the myth forward “making the play an existentialist myth and a metaphor for the mind over matter discourse inherent in the narrative content of the play.”^{iv} However, the kingpin of her imaginative storytelling on the stage is the tension between the two personalities of her female protagonist Padmini. Chowdhry splits her character and it is two women artists who enact as the two Padminis, representing the ultimate dilemma who thereby take centre stage, both physically and metaphorically. The women director of this play challenges the heteronormative gaze of the spectator by making the women as the subject of her production and not mere objects supplementing the male dominant narratorial dramaturgy and serving as commodified entities to be looked upon.



Fig.1. *Hayavadana* (2023). Photo Credit: Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry

The agency given to women here is what makes Chowdhry a feminist director. The scuffle between the superiority of head over body or vice-a-versa, is not that of a man. Padmini is attracted to Kapil's body, she voices her desires and by splitting her character; Chowdhry is able to provide visibility to Padmini's desires as well as her dreams and wrench them out of the realm of societal invisibility, especially for women in India. A woman's sexual desires and the expression of the same is often relegated to the marginal position of their inner lives, a taboo subject not allowed entry into the mainstream civil society, conversations or representations. Nevertheless, the split of the character of Padmini as a feminist methodological stratagem employed by Chowdhry opens up possibilities for subversions, inversions, contestations as well as rebuttals. The split is not a mere simplistic mind-body dialectic. The two voices are also representative of the conscious and the unconscious of Padmini, which are often an integration of the personal, social and psychical dimension in the form of an insight. If imagined within the conventional psychoanalytical trope, it would have been easy to develop these two as an ontological unit with complimentary roles, falling within the framework of what a Freudian analysis would call a 'projective identification.'

However, Chowdhry's Padminis' are often seen completing each other's dialogues, their voices overlapping each other's at times and echoing at others. They are not always representative of two oppositional dyads of a thought, of feminine desire, of an unattainable idea, a contested identity. There is no hierarchy in the two selves, or a projection of either a vulnerability or a guilt onto the other. The two do not duel for a man's attention rather it is the woman who is unable to decide between two men, and to a certain extent questioning the necessity of making a singular choice. Sexuality of a woman is not relegated into the realm of the unconscious rather a complex nexus of representation is woven, leading the two women actors to explore the complexities of identity, self and agency.

'The love of repetition is in truth the only happy love,' wrote Søren Kierkegaard, describing his attempt to relive a love affair that was always-already lost (1). In this playful account, in the guise of Constantin Constantias, Kierkegaard proposes that life itself is a repetition. His pseudonymous character attempts to re-enact the exact material conditions of a past love affair—including going to the same theatre in order to see the same performance, sitting in the same seat, etc.—but discovers that the only possible repetition is the repetition of impossibility. Chowdhry too has emphasised in her interviews that she believes in creating a new interpretation each time because she truly believes that there is no such thing as a retrospective in theatre. For example, she worked thrice with the same text in her most celebrated production, that is, Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* (Play with a Cobra) to come out with three different *tellings* and performance texts in 1989, 2005 and 2014 respectively. It is an adaptation of a Kannada folk tale in Punjabi, which exemplifies her directorial mediations. Here, she again presents the theme of female sexual desire and transgression by use of subversive humour, female impersonation, and recitation to present this half-fantastical tale. It is this impossibility of mere repetition that I seek to highlight further on. It is interesting to see how Chowdhry employs *repetition* as well as reenactment as an innovative performative tool. She constantly challenges the viewer to grapple with the status of theatricality in the re-enactment and the ways in which its relationships to reference are performed. 'I am always analysing, dissecting, investigating, reworking, reassembling the work I have already done' (Chowdhry

‘In Search of Contexts’). In *Hayavadana* multiple figures and references to the co-existence of the head and the body incongruities in various Indian mythological narratives are reproduced and re-enacted in the play. Megan Carrigy in her book *The Reenactment in Contemporary Screen Culture: Performance, Mediation, Repetition* talks of how reenactment is a form of historical representation wherein the emphasis is on how it is a highly mobile, multimodal and a dispersed representational form with a capacity for adaptation as well as transformation.

Hayavadana opens with the traditional *Ganesh Vandana*, as Ganesh, also called Ganapati—the elephant-headed Hindu god of beginnings, is traditionally worshipped before any major endeavour and is the patron of intellectuals. This is particularly and specifically pertinent here, because the elephant-headed deity, he of the transposed head is invoked to bless this performance. This motif of repositioning of the head, beheading is re-enacted several times in the performance and is a repetition of references from Indian stories of the past, nevertheless it is their contemporaneity, their (re)imagining, their embodiment and their broad conceptualisation that make them an affective medium of feminist imaginings. One of the most spectacular sequences is the long monologue by the goddess *Kali* after the two men offer their head to her. In popular iconography, *Kali* is represented as black-blue in colour, her eyes red with intoxication and rage. Often, she is depicted adorning a garland of severed human heads. The play presents the actor (re)enacting the role of this goddess, standing on top of the bonnet of a truck—radiating as a mischievous, radical and a feminine force with dark humour as her narrative strength. *Kali* is said to refrain from giving that which is expected. Here, she becomes a spectator to her own trick of exchanging the heads. G. N Devy in his article *Politics of Translating Myths and the Indian Tradition* (2022) talks about how “the purpose of translation of a myth or a mythic figure has always been to subvert, to challenge, to shock, to modify,” and Chowdhry dexterously employs this very grammar to present her *Kali*.

Hayavadana is symbolic of the feeling of incompleteness, a constant search for identity. Giving a physical form to an idea is difficult for the director and the actors. It is the scenography of the

play that contributes to the transformations and fluidity essential for the same on stage. As the play begins and the curtain parts, the spectators see a huge truck occupying the centre of the stage—which constantly rotates and is the platform for unfolding of many performance frames.



Fig. 2. *Hayavadana* (2023). Photo Credit: Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry

We see musicians precariously perched on top of the truck (See Fig. 2) who perform live, there are three male actors dressed as grooms sitting on the bonnet of this truck and the audience can see actors of the play sitting on trunks used as luggage inside the truck—preparing for the performance and their acts respectively. The labour of performance and the telling of the story takes place in front of the audience, enabling an involved spectator immersion into the play. One sees that the meaning of what the text is saying is extended through objects, through visual material, through body language, through simple everyday things. The search for identity in a world of tangled relationships is further explored by the director as she brings in both—animate and inanimate objects together as the *mis-en-scene* here, making the play an interesting mix of the fictional, the real and the illusionary. A certain kind of visual exuberance becomes a kind of a counter-text. Sequences like the beheading, the wedding

procession wherein the actors break into a rap song while they tap on the stage with their arms and fists all the while satirically deriding religious superstitions, a horse that speaks, and a chorus of dolls that comment upon the unfolding events, are amongst the many innovative and unusual devices that the play showcases. The accentuation of sensory, intuitional, experiential, improvisational elements in the performance destabilises the hierarchy of the text and word-oriented theatre. Chowdhry is constantly reconstitutes, reassembles, and fuses scenes together in her spectacular scenography and action. In her conversation with another Indian Feminist theatre director, Anuradha Kapur she speaks of how “acting is about intuition and meeting the stranger in a room rather than the familiar.”^v Allowing multiple forms of collaborations in rehearsals and on stage, she enables creative encounters as well as dialogues, it leads to individual notions being challenged and forces collaborators to (re)think, interject and break out of their limitations. Chowdhry, who is also a product of Ebrahim Alkazi’s pedagogy which highlights realist acting, dialogues, blocking et al., makes constant attempts to break free from this realist mode in her productions. “The logic of realism suffocates the actor and does not allow them to push the edge.”^{vi} She makes use of surplus of materials on stage to extend the meaning of the narrative as well as bring in the everyday with its sensory tactility. With a sharp focus on the interplay of visuality, with her work full of images and verbal enunciations, Chowdhry not only questions the established matrix of theatre practice, but also leaving a stamp of her gender on her work. This was possible by bringing in the materials of performance within the discourse. It can also be seen in line with what Andy Lavender (2016) calls three important kernels of theatre and performance: mediation, performing and spectating. With a discerning and a percipient eye for detail and an assemblage of objects onstage, Chowdhry was focusing on the mediality of the event, the format in which it is structured for the performance and the effect on the audience, generating a new set of possibilities of spectatorship, increasingly drawing on participatory models of engagement, and privileging sensory experience. One of the most powerful elements in the play is the entourage of musicians on stage working in unison with trained urban actors. We see Punjab’s *Naqqals* (traditionally travelling bards and also female impersonators) who have had a long tradition of performance art.

Traditionally the Naqqals have a vast repertoire of traditional songs and ballads and a formidable capacity to improvise on, and lampoon, whatever situation they are put in. Initially, when Chowdhry first encountered the Naqqals on her arrival in Chandigarh (1984), she tried to cull from their rich traditions and intricate patterns of lost skills to find modes of dramatic expression that could add to her understanding of regional impulses. Her collaborators of three decades, in this production perform to the late BV Karanth's music, rearranged by his protégé Amod Bhatt, who recasts the musical patterns and placements. She comments, 'The musical instruments which were used in the songs were of a certain temperament, but we have used instruments like the saxophone, guitar, trumpets and xylophone' (Chowdhry Personal Interview). The musicians are not a static presence but are active participants in moving the plot forward and provide a vital pitch as well as tone to the construction of the scene.

Post partition, Punjab has been an important part of the discourse around recollective public memory of trauma through performances, recording testimonies, literature (especially the genre of short story). Chowdhry too has devised performances which are retellings of several short stories by prolific Indian writer Saadat Hasan Manto (1912–1955) who wrote people's stories of Partition trauma and violence through short stories and aphoristic sketches. 1984, the year Chowdhry moved to Chandigarh is an important year in the history of continuation of this trauma and violence suffered by the city. During Operation Blue Star which was aimed to kill a Sikh militant, Jarnail Bhindranwale on the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi's command, many Sikh civilian devotees inside the Golden temple were also killed in this attack. Indira Gandhi's Sikh bodyguard retaliated by assassinating the Prime Minister on October 31, 1984. Thereafter, nationalist Hindu mobs countered with attacks on a grandiose scale, burning, stabbing, and gorily murdering thousands of Sikhs in and around the city of Delhi. Chowdhry's move to the city in Punjab and her dealings with the traumatic crisis of emotional development at the moment can be seen in her attempts to bring in the regional specificities of the state into the mainstream imagination through her theatricality. However, she does not fall into any fixed

and boxed overwhelming provinciality, her works are cosmopolitan in their approach and presentation.

In Indian theatre historiography, it is important to address the omissions and the absence of documentation of the theatre created by women theatre directors like Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry. My writing above is an attempt to highlight her work, together with her methodology for an international readership. However, my critique of her work is in her inability to completely break free from the pedagogical lineage and genealogy of male pedagogues like Alkazi and Karanth. The questions I grapple with are, that when women directors and pedagogues try and carve out a space, a niche in the spheres with a long legacy of patriarchal dominance, then to what extent is it possible for them to step out of or challenge this hegemonic genealogy? What should the matrix of academic criticism of these works be pointing towards and should they be highlighting the limitation thereof?

Chowdhry has never worked outside the actor-audience division of the proscenium space, perhaps an institutional limitation she cultivated as a student of the National School of Drama. Her play discussed in the essay, *Hayavadana* is a perfect example of her craft, feminist directorial process, collaborative authorship, innovative use of space on stage, engagement with materials, and agential embodied performative acts. However, the performance text does not make the audience uncomfortable towards the end of the play. Extremely pertinent questions of intersectionality, power relations like caste hierarchies are not explored in the very possible frames of desire and identity present in the text. Could one of the Padmini be presented as a lower caste woman? Or perhaps with a different religious identity? Could the talking dolls represent dissenting voices of the disenfranchised Indians being denied citizenship? Or that of the migrant labourer forced to live in deplorable conditions in the cities? —to further layer the performance with a much more inclusive, social, political, and intersectional feminist way of seeing.

Endnotes

- i. In an Interview with Vikram Phukan, 2020
- ii. Personal Interview (2023)
- iii. Sometimes Balarama is considered one of the 10 avatars (incarnations) of the god Vishnu, particularly among those members of Vaishnava sects who elevate Krishna to the rank of a principal god.
- iv. Directors Note (2023)
- v. Feb 2017, Ambedkar University, “Devising Theatre: A Conversation”.
- vi. Ibid.

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