ENGH SEM 2: PAPER HCC-T-3

Contributor: Partha Pratim Bandyopadhyay, Department of English

Critical issues in Hayavadana

1. The plot structure: The play has a triple-plot framework, in a one within another pattern, each commenting on the one it subsumes. First there is Karnad’s play, within it Hayavadana’s story, within it Bhagavata’s play performing the story of the three humans:

In this structure, Bhagavata’s and Hayavadana’s stories have different timeframes: Bhagavata’s story is situated in an ancient Indian kingdom, while Hayavadana’s spans from ancient, mythical India to a modern, postcolonial India. Conversely, Bhagavata’s story upholds the timeless human urge to become complete, while Hayavadana’s story becomes a critique of the ideological chaos of postcolonial India.

There is a self-conscious character in Bhagavata’s arranged performance of his play – he and his actors and stage hands openly talk about it as a performance, make funny gestures and comments between each other, and show mocking respect to the audience before whom they are preparing to perform. Hayavadana’s entry before the human story begins is an interruption that deflects attention by design, and playing with the audience’s belief in what it sees. All these create an awareness in the audience that it is a play and not reality – something that is to be thought upon and critically judged. This is intended to create a distance that both provokes thought and analysis and suspends the yardstick of realism, preparing the audience for the magical realism that is to follow. The effect is like the alienation effect Bertolt Brecht used to create for his political theatre.

Hayavadana appears at the beginning and the end of the human story narrated by Bhagavata, framing the play and presenting an oblique commentary on its central theme of completeness/incompleteness. What happens in the human story by the transposition of heads is reflected in Hayavadana’s quasi-human existence: the same urge for completeness drives both stories and in the end, the human failure is parodied by the animal completeness.

Apart from this, the human story is interrupted frequently by Bhagavata’s choric narration and ponder.

1. Chorus: It consists of a team led by Bhagavata – the musicians and female singers in the background and Bhagavata doing the narration, filling up gaps and uttering the inarticulate thoughts of the humans. As leader of the chorus and a holy man, Bhagavata also represents traditional Indian society with its sexual conservatism, exaggerated religious faith and communal value systems against which the machinations of sexual desire are to be measured. In a way Bhagavata therefore represents the audience too, as part of his choric duty. In Act 2, the dolls perform a choric function when they comment upon the physical and psychological changes in Devadatta and Padmini. They (the dolls) extend the range of choric knowledge and add criticism to commentary. At a point the dolls fight, when one goes to reveal Padmini’s lustful dreams and the other is shocked and ashamed of such immorality. Here they have become the subconscious and conscious layers of Padmini’s mind (the Id and the Superego) and achieved a penetration of the chorus into the character. Hayavadana also does some choric service by letting his predicament play the role of a subplot interpreting the human plot.