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Misplacing Heads, Textual Formation, and Reformation: Somadeva's *Kathā Sarit Sāgara*, Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads*, and Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*

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A text[1] exists in language through its relationship with other texts. Such an existence can be seen parallel to the existence of a constantly evolving Being[2] which exists in relation to the world and to other Beings, while remaining distinct and identifiable throughout. A text evolves in a manner similar to the manner in which a Being evolves—"...at the interface of individuation and socialisation…by the action of opposite pulls which are the additive or contributory, and the consolidating or regulatory" (Chaudhuri 151). A text, like a Being, is a continuous work-in-progress which keeps on producing and reproducing itself by a simultaneously interactive and dissociative process, remaining distinctly identifiable at the same time.

This paper attempts to study "the selfsameness in manifold otherness"[3] of three texts—*Kathā Sarit Sāgara* by Somadeva, *The Transposed Heads* by Thomas Mann, and *Hayavadana* by Girish Karnad—which follow the same arc and yet say three very different things. The purpose of this paper is to trace and examine the singularity which remains identical within the changing multiplicity of intertextuality.[4] The analysis employs the theoretical framework of the German existential phenomenologist Martin Heidegger, drawing primarily from his 1927 treatise *Being and Time*.

The tale this paper concerns itself with in the *Kathā Sarit Sāgara* begins when King Vikramaditya brings the daemon Vetala back

[1]Derived from the Latin word *texere* which means "to weave."
[2]In this paper, the word 'Being' (written in uppercase) refers to the noun, and the word 'being' (written in lowercase) refers to the verb.
[3]Martin Heidegger uses this definition for his concept of *Selbstein* or "everyday being-one's-self" (Heidegger 114).
[4]The word "intertextuality" is derived from the Latin word *intertexto*, which means to intermingle while weaving. Julia Kristeva writes, "Any text is constructed of a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (Kristeva).

from the *simsapa* tree[5] and seats him on his shoulder. Vetala says to the king, “King, you are wise and brave, therefore I love you, so I will tell you an amusing tale, and mark well my question” (Somadeva 204). What unravels over the course of the next five pages is a didactic tale that is intended to ground the virtues of fixture and certainty into its readers (or hearers, as the *Kathā Sarit Sāgara* is a compendium of tales originally borrowed from the ancient Indian oral tradition).

In this tale, Dhavala falls in love with Madanasundari as soon as he sees her. He becomes agitated, goes home and remains uneasy until his mother asks him the cause of his uneasiness, which he shares with her immediately. Dhavala’s father partakes in the conversation by asking his son to not worry about something “so easily attained.” As both the families are equal in wealth and occupation, Madanasundari’s father agrees to the marriage and the ceremony takes place the very next day. Madanasundari also falls in love with Dhavala as soon as they are married. A while after the wedding, Madanasundari’s brother arrives at Dhavala’s home with an invitation to participate in a festival devoted to the goddess Durga. Soon the trio, that is, Dhavala, Madanasundari, and her brother set out for the festival. On the way, they arrive at a great Durga temple. Dhavala is moved by the urge to pay his respects to the goddess so he proceeds inside the temple. He reflects on how people worship the goddess Durga by sacrificing living creatures and concludes for certain that the greatest sacrifice he could present to her would be his own self. After this reflection, Dhavala cuts his head with a sword that lay in the temple. Dhavala’s brother-in-law grows impatient while waiting for him, so he enters the temple, witnesses Dhavala’s decapitated head, and decides, without further ado, that he too must take the same route. Then Madanasundari enters the temple, having grown impatient while waiting outside for the two. On viewing the scene of horror, she is convinced that she too must die, so she cries out to the goddess, makes a noose around her neck, and is about to hang herself from a tree, when suddenly, the goddess appears. Impressed by the devotion of the three, the goddess grants Madanasundari that her brother and her husband will be brought back to life if she joins their heads to their bodies. Madanasundari rushes towards the corpses in order to bring them back to life, but she exchanges their heads in a hurry. As a result, Dhavala and his brother-in-law come back to life in different bodies and do not even notice the change. Only Madanasundari notices her error later.

[5]A rosewood tree found in India and southeast Asia, mentioned in ancient Buddhist discourses.

Vetala poses his question to King Vikramaditya: Who is Madansundari's husband and who is her brother after the exchange of heads has taken place? Vikramaditya 'solves' this problem by stating with obviousness that the one with the husband's head is the husband and the one with the brother's head is the brother. The purported obviousness of Vikramaditya's solution never lets the question of incest arise. In addition, this tale treats the question of identity as a non-problematic: its underlying ethos dictates that identity is derived from the seat of reason, which is the head, and the body is seen largely as an appendage to the head. However, it cannot possibly be that the severing of the "source of identity" from its immediate surroundings (i.e. the body), even if it is for a short while, causes no disruption in the respective continuities of those Beings which have been disjointed so.

According to Martin Heidegger, a *Dasein*[6] is a Being that exists in time and space. Humans belong to this category of Beings: they are capable of reflection and they are also aware that they exist. Such an awareness of being is informed by a spatial and a temporal component. The Being exists 'here' (which is the familiar space) and not 'elsewhere' (any unfamiliar space). The Being also exists simultaneously in the present, as it was in its past, and as it will be in its future. If any of these components were to be disturbed, the Being would transform into a different one. It seems that the lack of a conflict of identities, in the tale told by Vetala to King Vikramaditya, is an over-simplification which intends to cover up a significant philosophical problem by presupposing the problem to be non-existent. Heidegger would have us believe that such a presupposition, through curbing one's instinct to question, is almost always in service of an established tradition (which could be philosophical, socio-cultural, et al). It could be argued that the privileging of the head over the body is a ploy through which *Brahminical* social superiority[7] is culturally reproduced to the effect of justifying the socio-political status quo in the minds of the reader (or hearer). Heidegger writes that the dissolution of calcified tradition is imperative to understanding the primordial question of being.

Thomas Mann's borrowing of Vetala's tale in his novel takes a more existentialist turn: it does away with the themes of certainty and

[6]The German word *Dasein*, which means "being-there," is the vernacular word for "existence" (Heidegger 8).

[7]Brahmins, the priestly caste, are believed to have originated from the head of the creator Brahma. As such, Brahmins have enjoyed the benefits of a very high position in Indian social hierarchy, often leaving members of other castes to suffer inequality and discrimination.

fixity, thereby trading the simplistic, definitive, and 'amusing' character of the tale for a modernist rendition. Mann's characters—Sita, her husband Shridaman, and Shridaman's friend Nanda—are far removed from the idealistic dispositions of the characters in the 'original' tale. They are given to musing, doubt, and questioning of themselves and their own choices.

Shridaman and Nanda first encounter Sita while she is bathing in a river. Both are equally enchanted by the sight of her naked body and continue in their voyeurism. While Nanda assumes a playful tone, acknowledging their act to be what it is, Shridaman cannot quite bring himself to accept the nature of his gaze. To rationalise his voyeurism, Shridaman goes down the route of philosophy and lectures Nanda about how the goddess Durga resides in the womanly form, as a consequence of which it is not Sita's earthly beauty but the All-Mother's divine might which has him ensnared. Shridaman's denial of his sexual interest in Sita entails his awareness of such an interest, thus betraying his inauthenticity.[8] Another aspect of Shridaman's personality which this denial brings into view is that of his desire to always hold on to a moral high-ground, especially when he is dealing with Nanda. Descended from Brahmins and elder to Nanda in age, Shridaman assumes by default a cultural and intellectual superiority to his Vaishya-born associate, which he must exhibit from time to time. The only correct way for the two to interact would be for Shridaman to influence Nanda, and not the other way around. It is almost as if it would be 'unbecoming' of Shridaman to feel or do as Nanda does in any matter. This does not mean that the two cannot be friends; however, it does mean that they have to remain two—a unification of their types of thought is simply not feasible because it would involve 'becoming' and 'unbecoming.' On some level, this contradiction posits personal identity as a cultural fiction which requires conscious self-fashioning and a subsequent performance—Shridaman, the Brahmin's son is forced to deny a sexual instinct and paint it as a philosophical one. Thus Shridaman becomes the auteur of the text, which is his personal identity, by selectively circling out those traits in him that do not fit the 'idea' of what he should be.

Nanda is more generous in acknowledging that not all that composes him is entirely his own. He understands that he has "learned himself" from Shridaman, and believes himself in that sense to be de-

[8]In Heideggerian thought, "authenticity" means "ownedness" or "being one's own," implying the idea of owning up to and owning what one is and does; "inauthenticity" implies a refusal to do so (Varga and Guignon).

rivative and not quite as pure as Shridaman. Nanda realises that he is an *a priori* 'Being-in-the-world'[9] where his way of existence is relative to the way of existence of his surrounding world. He is an incidental pastiche: who he is remains informed by where and when he is. If these factors were to differ Nanda would be completely different too. This is established by his saying:

> …you are so necessary to me, my elder brother; what I have not you have, and you are my friend, so that it is almost as though I had it myself. For as your fellow, I have a part in you, and so I am a little bit Shridaman; but without you I were only Nanda, and that is not enough. (Mann 41)

"Mineness belongs to any existent *Dasein*, and belongs to it as the condition which makes authenticity and inauthenticity possible" (Heidegger 78). As "ownedness" is implicit in "authenticity," it becomes implicit in "mineness" too. This means that "mineness" can only be constituted post-reflectively, through "ownedness." Where there is a post-reflective refusal to own up to what one is, "inauthenticity" is established through a fictive or superficial "mineness" which covers up the true "mineness." The reason that Nanda can openly admit to the derivative nature of his identity is because he does not suffer from a sense of superiority. This enables him to exercise his freedom and choose who he is to be by drawing upon the varied influences available to him. Because Nanda does not follow a default code of conduct which is "received wisdom" from an "original source," he is an authentic existential individual. His "mineness" is his own as he understands how derivative it is and how much it is a consequence of his choices.

The same, however, cannot be said of Shridaman, who believes himself to be the possessor of an original 'self' derived directly from the idea of that 'self' only, and from no other source. Nanda is, of course, quite correct in his assessment of himself—he is "a little bit Shridaman" and Shridaman is a little bit of him (although Shridaman would never admit to it). Shridaman's puritanism is *Brahminical* in the sense that it refuses to engage with the possibility of a source of identity 'lower' than its assumption for what the sources of his identity should ideally be. This refusal to engage is a post-reflective choice, which does not leave Shridaman without turmoil. While Shridaman may convince Nanda otherwise, the truth remains that the nature of his

[9]According to Heidegger, "being-in-the-world" is an inherent characteristic of the *Dasein*. The *Dasein* dwells in the world, not just spatially, but also by belonging in the world (Wheeler).

gaze towards Sita has a sexual undertow, and he certainly cannot convince himself of the same lie which makes him inauthentic.

When Shridaman takes a detour into the Kali temple from the trio's journey, his motive for this deviation is not purely devotional. It expresses Shridaman's wish for a short respite from the awkwardness of the situation on the cart—Sita's obvious interest in the contours of Nanda's body, Nanda's noticing of this interest, and Shridaman's pretension of not noticing any of this. At the Kali temple, however, Shridaman is overawed by the grotesque imagery and the fearsome idol of the goddess. He concludes that he must present a sacrifice to the goddess no less than his own head, following which he beheads himself with a sword. When Nanda arrives in search of Shridaman, he is shocked at the sight of his friend's head lying separate from his body. Remembering his earlier oath to Shridaman, in which Nanda swore he could not live without his friend, he beheads himself too. Sita's arrival on site, her decision to take her own life, and the appearance of the goddess completes the sequence of events marked by the "original tale" but it is at this point that Mann's version makes a serious departure. He employs a *deus ex machina* not just to bring the dead characters back to life but to also make the real motives of the characters open to the reader. In Mann's rendition of the tale, the goddess has decided to appear not because she is impressed with the devotion of the characters but because she is too well-aware of their hypocrisy and wishes to make it known that she cannot be deceived. "An 'appearance' does the announcing—that which in its showing-itself indicates something that does not show itself." (Heidegger 53) It is through the goddess' appearance in the tale that the reader comes to know of the truth of the characters' motives. Mann's characters are far removed from the idealistic archetypes of the 'original' tale (Dhavala, in Vetala's tale, is paralysed to inaction on account of his desire for Madanasundari); they are flawed human beings who are capable of feeling and being moved to action by baser emotions[10] such as desire and rage. Shridaman beheads himself because death provides him with the perfect escape from the fact that he would never be enough for Sita. Nanda follows Shridaman in death because he knows that he would be accused of murdering Shridaman in order to take over Sita. Sita decides to hang herself because she knows that society would shun her for setting two great friends against each other, ultimately being held solely responsible for the whole fiasco.

[10]In ancient Indian tradition, 'desire' is a base emotion from which a high-born Brahmin would distance himself. Mann's characterisation breaks the traditionally-established hierarchy of emotions, thereby humanising his characters.

On being brought back to life in different bodies, Shridaman and Nanda notice the difference, unlike the characters in Vetala's tale who remain oblivious to the change. The difference is that of the spatial component of their, that is, Shridaman's and Nanda's being. "As a world is a characteristic of *Dasein*'s being, every *Dasein* 'proximally' has its world, thus the 'world' becomes something 'subjective'…'world' can be understood in an ontical[11] sense as that 'wherein' a factical *Dasein* can be said to 'live'" (Heidegger 92–93). A body is not a mere appendage, it is not happenstance. A body is the space occupied by the *Dasein* in the world—if the body were to differ, the *Dasein* too would be different. The *Dasein* cannot exist irrespective of its body because the *Dasein* does not merely have its body, it is its body. This is evident when Nanda is able to train his new, weakly body into the shape that his old body used to be. It is also evident in how Shridaman's new, muscular body turns into the shape of his old body due to a lack of the training required to maintain it. Because Nanda's mind is used to a regimen of regular physical exercise and also because Shridaman's mind is not used to any such regimen, the two friends soon find that their new bodies have turned into the likeness of their old bodies. While Sita's *deliberate error*[12] in swapping the heads while attaching them to their bodies may have satisfied her then, she is ultimately brought back to square one. For Shridaman and Nanda, the complication (which used to be the problem of desire) becomes an even greater crisis of identity and being. The question remains—who is Sita's husband? The answer is not as simple as Somadeva makes it out to be in the *Kathā Sarit Sāgara*. While Nanda's body may have Shridaman's head, it was Shridaman's body that accepted Sita's hand in marriage and also impregnated her. The correct answer is that none of the two is Sita's husband, because Shridaman has ceased to be Shridaman (on account of losing his own body i.e. the spatial component of his Being) and Nanda never really became Shridaman (despite having gained Shridaman's body) because Nanda cannot step out of his own Being temporally.

Girish Karnad drew inspiration from Mann's novella and fashioned Vetala's tale into a two-act play *Hayavadana*. The Kannada word "hayavadana" translates into "one with a horse's head." While the theme of Mann's text is the nature of Being, Karnad deals with the complete idea of being complete. The play begins with a prayer recited

[11]'Ontical' inquiry is concerned with entities and facts about them, as opposed to 'ontological' inquiry which is concerned with the meaning of Being. The 'ontological' is more primordial than the 'ontical.' (Heidegger 31)

[12]An instance in the text in which a character is moved to act, on account of desire.

by the narrator Bhagavata[13] to Ganesha, the god of beginnings and a patron to the arts:

> An elephant's head on a human body, a broken tusk and a cracked belly – whichever way you look at him he seems the embodiment of imperfection, of incompleteness… Could it be that this Image of Purity and Holiness, this Mangalamoorty, intends to signify by his very appearance that the completeness of God is something no poor mortal can comprehend? (Karnad 1)

As Bhagavata begins to narrate the tale he is interrupted by a loud scream across the stage. It turns out to be Nata, the actor. The cause of Nata's discomfort is that he has witnessed a man who has the head of a horse. Naturally, Nata is met with Bhagavata and the audience's disbelief until Hayavadana, the man with a horse's head, appears on stage. Bhagavata, sceptical at first, believes the head to be a mask and the whole affair to be some sort of a prank. However, he is shocked to discover that Nata is right. It turns out that Hayavadana was born this way; there is no previous sin or curse responsible for the way he is. The theme of the play is set around identity when Bhagavata exclaims, "…what can anyone do about a head one's born with?" (Karnad 7)

In an attempt to solve Hayavadana's problem, Bhagavata sets him and Nata on a pilgrimage to the Kali temple in Chitrakoot and continues with his narration of the tale. This Kali temple is the same temple where the characters of the tale behead themselves and are brought back to life with different heads. The arc of the tale is the same as that of Thomas Mann's. Two friends—Devadatta, the scholar and Kapila, the sportsman—fall in love with Padmini. Padmini marries Devadatta but she feels an intense, unprecedented sexual attraction towards Kapila. This becomes a cause of jealousy for Devadatta, who beheads himself in the Kali temple, following which the familiar course of events takes place. The first act of the play ends when the argument erupts between the new Devadatta (the one with Devadutta's head and Kapila's body) and the new Kapila (the one with Kapila's head and Devadutta's body) over who is the rightful husband of Padmini. Bhagavata addresses the audience as he closes:

> What? What indeed is the solution to this problem, which holds the entire future of these three unfortunate beings in a balance?

[13]The Sanskrit word 'bhagavata' is the title given to devotees of Vishnu, a Hindu deity.

> Must their fate remain a mystery? And if so shall we not be insulting our audience by tying a question-mark round its neck and bidding it good-bye? We have to face the problem. But it's a deep one and the answer must be sought with the greatest caution. Haste would be disastrous. So there's a break of ten minutes now. Please have some tea, ponder over this situation and come back with your own solutions. We shall then continue with our enquiry. [*The stage-hands hold a white curtain in front of the frozen threesome, while the Bhagavata and the others relax and sip tea.*] (Karnad 39)

The idea of completeness implies two things—there is an incompleteness which is indicated through the appearance[14] of a lack and this incompleteness can be turned into completeness if there is a desire to do so. It is important to note that the lack precedes the desire, and the desire becomes a consequence of this lack.[15] The appearance of a lack indicates an incompleteness which causes desire but the disappearance of desire does not lead to completeness. Completeness can only be achieved through the disappearance of lack which would indicate the end of incompleteness.

During the intermission of Karnad's play the audience (or the reader) has the option to arrive at their own solution to the problem thereby to complete the play and leave the theatre (or stop reading further) if they are satisfied with their own conclusion. However, seldom does an audience (or a reader) surrender to the instinct of claiming "auteurial"[16] authority upon a text, favouring a more traditional reverential approach towards the author's authority. Therefore, the second act begins and the audience (or the reader) waits for Karnad's version of events to unfold upon the stage (or on paper). This waiting on the audience's part is an 'appearance' and the thing it implies is a 'desire' for the completion of the play. The desire, in turn, is another 'appearance' which implies a 'lack' of a conclusion, and the lack implies an 'incompleteness.'

The white curtain is removed as the second act begins, and Bhagavata forays directly into addressing the problem. Referring directly to the ancient tale in the *Kathā Sarit Sāgara*, Bhagavata consid-

[14]The word "appearance" is used in the Heideggerian sense—"that which in its showing itself indicates that which does not show itself."
[15]In the psychoanalytic philosophy of Jacques Lacan, "lack" is always related to "desire."
[16]In film theory, an auteur is a film director who influences his/her films in such a way that he/she could be considered to be the author of the film.

ers whether King Vikramaditya's answer to Vetala's question would appeal to the audience, deciding that it would do so, continues to narrate the tale. In the tale, Devadatta, Kapila, and Padmini appeal to a *rishi*[17] for a solution to their stalemate, and the *rishi* reaffirms that the head is indeed the seat of identity. However, this solution does not entail the end of 'desire' in the play. While Padmini is with the new Devadutta, she continues to hanker after the new Kapila; therefore she does not feel complete. Devadutta and Kapila cannot be complete because it is not feasible for them to be temporally and spatially uniform after their heads have been exchanged (as that would mean for both of them to occupy their two bodies at the same time). The realisation of the stalemate that their lack is "unfillable" leads the three to decide to die: Devadutta and Kapila fight each other unto death, following which Padmini performs *sati*[18] so that the three may become one in death.

Hayavadana returns to the stage at the end of the play. At the Kali temple in Chitrakoot, he too had found the sacrificial sword and was ready to sever his horse-head when the goddess appeared. He cried to the goddess and begged her to make him complete. At once, Hayavadana turns into a complete horse. While he had anticipated that he would become a complete man, it could be argued that in Hayavadana's case, the goddess' appearance leads to the implication that the gap between expected reality and experiential reality too is "unfillable." For those who did surrender to Karnad's authority of the play, the text might be complete. For those who did not, it is unlikely that on turning into a complete horse, Hayavadana never desired to become a complete man again. Even if Hayavadana were to turn into a complete man, he would not be spatially and temporally 'complete' unless he were to be both a horse and a man at the same time (which is not feasible) and his being so were to mark an end of 'lack.'

Another way to mark the end of 'lack' would be to destroy the Being that lacks. In Vetala's tale, the problem of 'lack' is non-existent through presupposition. Thomas Mann ends his novella after the scene of the trio's suicide—an act which marks the end of the Being which is incomplete along with its lacks and desires. Girish Karnad lets Hayavadana live even if it is the life of a horse. In doing so, Karnad leaves his audience desiring to know how Hayavadana fared after his transformation, and whether he never desired to become a man after

[17]A Hindu sage or saint.
[18]A Hindu practice whereby a widow immolates herself on the funeral pyre of her husband; now abolished by law.

becoming a horse. The implicit 'lack' in *Hayavadana* persists because the audience is left desiring, perhaps, right alongside the incompleteness of Hayavadana.

The question of what composes a complete Being can only be answered if one understands how being can be complete. According to Heidegger, a *Dasein* exists in the present or the "now," but it does so by way of a "connectedness"[19] to its past (that which has happened to the *Dasein*) and its future (that which will or might happen to the *Dasein*), as a series of experiences undergone over a sequence of "nows." Therefore, it is not just the *Dasein* in the final "now" but the multiplicity of *Dasein* over the sequence of many "nows" collected together which form the "being-a-whole" or the complete Being. "Being-a-whole" is also a "being-unto-death": the *Dasein* stretches along between birth and death, changing in every "now," yet somehow able to maintain its own singularity or "selfsameness," until it ceases to be. This is where "being-a-whole" becomes problematic for a text: the text does not move linearly in time to meet its own death.

A text's possibilities for its future "nows" are seldom exhausted: as long as a text is continued to be read, interpreted, and remembered, it continues to influence and interact with Beings and other texts. Because a text does not die, it never becomes complete. Since there is no ultimate "whole" for the text to arrive at, in every single present "now," the text is the summation of all its sequential "nows" —a tentative whole. Therefore, there is no question of *Hayavadana*'s completion in this moment. Similarly, in the case of Vetala's tale in the Somadeva's *Kathā Sarit Sāgara* and Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads*, there is no possibility for a completion yet. Instead of being looked at as three different tentative wholes, the paper proposes that these texts should be considered as three components of an enlarged, more consolidated, diachronic tentative whole—woven together by a "connectedness"—yet able to mark their own "selfsameness" distinctly among each other.

[19]According to Heidegger, "connectedness" is what binds the *Dasein* to its different temporal instants, and those different temporal instants to each other, thereby making the temporality of the *Dasein* possible. The link created by this "connectedness" is not linear, but simultaneous in time. This means that the *Dasein* is not linked chronologically in its past, present, and future, but in all three at the same time.

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