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## Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* : A tale of Myth and Morality

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### Abstract

Girish Karnad was the prominent figure of the post-Independence theatre movement in India. This movement was called 'Theatre of Roots' which focused on establishing unique national Identity, merging modern sensibilities with traditional folk forms, myths and history. This paper talks about emulsification of myth and mythology to expose modern complexities with the help of modern techniques of drama, metaphors from everyday conflicts in morality and traditional forms. This paper will analysis and depicts how all these have been represented by Girish Karnad in his play *Hayavadana* to talk about the problems of modern man.

Keywords:

Myth, Mythology, Morality, Folklores, Traditions, Theatre of Roots

### 1. Introduction:

Girish Karnad was the influential playwright and an extremely gifted performing arts practitioner of theatre practices in modern India called 'Theatre of Roots'. He has authored his plays mostly in the Kannada language that earned him global fame as the greatest modern playwright. He has contributed to art, culture, theatre and drama, which has had a rich contribution in the literary arena of the Indians. His greatest contribution to the Indian English Drama is, however, his effort to recapture the culturally and mythologically fertile heritage of the Indian past. In his plays, he attempts to revive the local culture and tradition by making a visit to the roots. India is a multi-cultural country with its unique culture and history of colonisation. It is also characterised by powerful representation of indigenous traditions, culture and ethos, which were unfortunately drowned and overwhelmed by the imported culture of Europe in the pre-independence period. Attempting to recover the treasure of culture and tradition, Girish Karnad uses his drama and presentation of tales by stealing tales of Indian Mythologies. On the one hand, Karnad is very conservative in his works, but on the other hand, they are not retellings of the ancient tales. He employs these stories to comment and criticise the modern Indian society, talking about such issues as caste, gender inequality, and the struggle between tradition and modernity. To illustrate, Karnad explores the ideological merits and flaws of idealism and tyranny through the prism of a historical figure, Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq, in *Tughlaq*. The play was written in the 14<sup>th</sup> century; however, it is culturally and politically very relevant as it is disillusioned with political idealism in post-independence India.

## 2. Exploration of Myth:

Myth in Indian literature is a deeply embedded and multi-layered phenomenon, a potent instrument of investigation of complicated themes and problems of society. Girish Karnad, in works such as *Hayavadana* has not used the myth as a backdrop but as an important element that adds taste to the narrative.

Myths create a rhyme by which the characters explore their identities and relationships, as well as their deeply embedded cultural values of the Indian society. Myth and reality in the plays of Karnad give a unique opportunity to investigate the existential questions and also to examine the moral dilemmas facing people. The combination of myth and modern problems helps the viewer connect with the characters on a personal level, and it makes the old legends heard in a new environment of the modern world. Karnad says in the introduction to *Three Plays* : “The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means to question these values, of making them literally stand on their head”. (Ramachandran, 1999)

The trademarks of his storytelling are the way Karnad reinterprets classic myths to bring new life into the old stories and discuss the topical social and moral issues. To take an example, he refers to the myth of the headless horse in *Hayavadana*, as he uses the horse head as a symbol of the search for identity and completeness. Reconstructing these myths, Karnad asks the audience to rethink the preexisting beliefs and values, especially their connection to the issues of contemporary gender, identity, and self-actualisation. His methodology makes it possible to have a discourse between the past and the present, showing that myths can change and stay up-to-date. This flexibility of myth is used to emphasise the flexibility of cultural stories based on evolving socio-cultural conventions.

It is the remaking of the sixth tale of *Vetālapañcaviṃśati* in Sanskrit, the *Brihat katha Sarita Sagar* of *Somadeva* and Thomas Mann’s *The Transposed Heads*. It is the archetype of the play he uses, *Hayavadana* by Karnad. As he writes, this character is called *Hayavadana* in the play, which means the one with the head of a horse. The exterior panel that acts as a mural within which the tale of the two companions is framed is facilitated by the story of this horse-headed man, who would desire to lose the head of the horse and turn into a man. *Hayavadana* also expects to get the same Goddess Kali blessing, which is that he is made whole. Logic takes command. The head is that person: *Hayavadana* becomes a complete horse. The major premise of the story is not accepted, but the overall logic remains the same.

*Hayavadana* by Karnad does explore the nature of human desires and relationships almost to the point that it brings up the clash between social expectations and personal desires. The metaphor of transposition of heads in the play is used to explain the inseparable conflict between various elements of the human identity, the intellect and the body, the desires of the heart and the limitations of the social norms.

The mythology-based symbolism and themes in *Hayavadana* are numerous and full, and provide deep insights into human life and good and evil. As an example, the very existence of the character of *Hayavadana* himself, who holds a horse head and a human body, is a symbol of the struggle between the material and the metaphysical, which makes a person wonder what the real identity is. As well, love, desire and fulfilment are tightly intertwined in the story as an indication of the intricacies of human relationships. The skilful

incorporation of symbols based on Indian mythology helps Karnad to get the audience to connect with these eternal themes at a personal level and introspect and understand their lives in a better way. In conclusion, the play can be seen as a screen of questioning the vagaries of human existence, the persistence of the myth to elucidate the moral truths.

### **3. Ethical problems in *Hayavadana*:**

The opposition between desire and duty is one of the major ethical issues that Girish Karnad raises in his play, *Hayavadana*. Padmini is a character who is torn between social expectations and her own carnal urges, and is a reenactment of the classic struggle of the person against societal expectations and pursuing her own aspirations. This polarity displays the conflict between myth and reality as Padmini is struggling with the romanticised notion of women in the Indian society and the truths of her own needs. The conflict may be regarded as a miniature of bigger societal concerns, in which people are usually compelled to fit into the old-fashioned roles, at the expense of personal satisfaction and fulfilment. It is therefore Karnad with his prowess that he ventures into the encapsulation of the way in which this conflict of inner desires and external obligations may result in the ambiguity of morality and personal conflict.

Padmini, as a multifaceted and multi-dimensional character, breaks with the conventional concept of the feminine identity and agency. Although her actions might be extreme or even dubious, they are the response to the internal conflicts and dilemmas of living with social expectations and personal desires.

The subplot of *Hayavadana* helps to support the theme of the quest for completeness and the indefinable nature of perfection further. The fact that *Hayavadana* has been made to be a full-fledged horse, who has the voice of a human being, emphasises the contradictions and restrictions that human life has. Although physically changed, *Hayavadana* is still incomplete somehow, which implies that full fulfilment might not be possible.

The second important theme in *Hayavadana* concerns the concept of identity and change, which brings about some ethical issues of selfhood and authenticity. The main plot of the play is a set of unusual character metamorphosis inside, especially the friendship of Kapila and Devadatta, the changing of heads to represent a more profound existential crisis. This change results in a complicated ethical situation, with the characters having to cope with their new identities as well as the ensuing results of such identities. The investigation of this identity crisis, as indicated by Karnad, shows the unease that goes along with change and indicates that, although one can attain a new form, the psychological effects may be much harder to resolve. According to the play, identity is not only a question of physicality, but it is entangled with thoughts, emotions, associations, and so it makes it hard to define who one truly is.

The questions of love and relationships, especially in terms of their moral nature, are also explored by Karnad, especially in the way the main characters interact. The play questions the theme of love, loyalty, and betrayal, especially in the relationships among Padmini, Devadatta, and Kapila. The changing relationships and emotional undertones make the characters question their moral compass and the consequences of their actions against each other. As an example, Padmini influences their lives to the extent that both men find themselves in a dilemma because of her choices, questioning the traditional meaning of faithfulness and love.

Such complexity portrays that love is not a simple feeling but is full of ethical implications that are bound to cause dilemmas that are not simple to resolve. The depiction of these relationships by Karnad makes the audience look at their perceptions of love, loyalty and the ethical obligations that come with strong emotional relationships. Bhagavata in the story reveals the tragic end of Kapila, Padmini and Devadatta's story in the very beginning of the text saying "Two friends there were- one mind, one heart. They saw a girl and forgot themselves. But they could not understand the song she sang." (Karnad, 1994)

#### **4. Cultural elements used and their significance-**

##### **4.1 Classical Indian Theatre Forms:**

The play is also infused with the *Yakshagana*, a traditional theatre in Karnataka, which is very lively in terms of dance, music, and delivery of conversations. The form of the play, where a Bhagavata (narrator) introduces characters and remarks on the action, resembles the role of the *Sutradhara* in the classical Indian drama, as well as the Bhagavata in the *Yakshagana*. This relates the play to the Indian traditional performance arts.

##### **4.2 Chorus and Songs:**

The fact that a chorus and songs are used in the play is similar to the classical Indian theatre, whereby music and verse are essential in telling the story. The *Hayavadana* songs serve to further the plot and bring a glimpse into the inner world of the characters, just like in the traditional Indian plays. "The various conventions- the chorus, the masks, the seemingly unrelated comic episodes, the mixing of human and nonhuman world permits the simultaneous presentation of alternative world point view, of alternative attitude to central problem" (Ramachandran, 1999)

**4.3 Folktales and Folk Characters:** The play is based on the simplicity and straightforwardness of the Indian folktales. Such characters as a Bhagavata, narrator, and the child actor who communicates with the audience resemble the narration styles of the Indian folk theatre. The role of *Hayavadana*, who is half-human and half-animal, is an indication of the fantasy present in folk stories.

##### **4.4 Religious and Ritualistic Aspects:**

The play starts with a prayer to Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, which is customary to worship at the onset of new ventures in Hindu culture. This appeal brings not only a religious touch but also a connection of the play to Indian practices and traditions. The deity Kali also has a central influence on the story, as her involvement in the story makes the head-swapping event happen. Other rituals are presented or mentioned in the course of the play, such as the offering to gods and idol worship. These ceremonies indicate the ingrained religious beliefs in the Indian culture.

##### **4.5 Cultural Attitudes and Social Norms:**

The form of the traditional Indian society and its norms of marriage and relations are reflected in the play. The level of relations Padmini had with Devadatta and Kapila, and the wish to merge the two men, shows the limitations and demands on the women in a patriarchal society. Caste and Social Hierarchies: Friendship between Devadatta, a Brahmin, and Kapila, a Kshatriya, indirectly mentions the caste relations in Indian society. Although the play does not explicitly address the issue of caste, the culture has a certain effect on the characters and their behaviours.

#### **4.6 Language and Dialogue:**

The language variety of India is evidenced by the fact that Sanskrit verses were used along with the vernacular languages and dialects. Philosophic thoughts and proverbs are frequent in the conversations, and these are typical of conventional Indian speech. Indian literature, Indian philosophy and religious books are sprinkled throughout the play. These allusions appeal to the Indian cultural awareness and enhance the story.

#### **4.7 Ganesha as a Symbol:**

The image of Ganesha, the elephant god, with his fragmented yet mighty shape, serves as a representation of the theme of incompleteness, which permeates all the play. This is connected to a greater cultural principle of the power of the divine against physical flaws. The Horse Head: The horse head in *Hayavadana* is used to depict the clash of human interests and the truth of life. The metaphor is based on Indian mythological symbolism, in which animals tend to symbolise deeper facts about human nature.

#### **4.7 Conventional Indian Values and Philosophies:**

The play also alludes to the idea of *karma* (action and its consequences) and *dharma* (duty/righteousness), which are paramount in the Hindu philosophy. These cultural beliefs are also reflected in the actions of the characters and the consequences of their actions. The Search for Completeness: The quest to wholeness, which is represented by the longing of the characters for physical and spiritual wholeness, echoes the Indian philosophical ideas about the human condition and the need to reach *moksha* (liberation).

#### **5. Effects of *Hayavadana* in modern society:**

The *Hayavadana* by Girish Karnad is an exceptional response to the contemporary problems in the setting of a myth; it manages to connect old stories with the current problems of society. The play explores the nature of identity and the struggles people have to face with their identity in a world full of confusing relationships. Using the mythological motifs, Karnad points out the eternal conflicts of the contemporary man, including the necessity to find a sense of belonging and the need to find oneself in a world of pressures. Not only does this combination of the past and the present enable the viewers to contemplate eternal themes, but it also makes them think critically about the issues they face today, including gender identity, heritage, and what human desire is.

In addition, *Hayavadana* has had a profound impact on the Indian theatre and literature as it has brought a way to connect the traditional storytelling with the modern theatre practice. The original theme of folk tales and mythological motifs utilised by Karnad has revitalised the Indian stage, where the playwrights are tempted to go deeper into the narratives of their culture and to bring out the theme of issues pertinent today. It is this melding of styles that has given rise to a new wave of artists who have tried out form and content, resulting in a rich tapestry of performances that have appealed to audiences in this day and age. One of the reasons why the play was such a success is the fact that it was able to relate with the audience at numerous levels, not only providing entertainment but also serious philosophical questions of life, morality, and the human condition.

In the modern world, *Hayavadana* teaches the crucial lessons about morality and human behaviour and challenges people to face their moral problems and their role in society. Karnad uses the characters in their

struggles to bring out the importance of self-awareness and introspection, and the audience should also introspect and address their actions and the consequences they have on people around them. The play raises the issues of fidelity, love, and the essence of sacrifices, and it makes people think about the ways these phenomena can be revealed in modern relationships. The pondering over such moral questions, *Hayavadana* can be seen as a potent way of reminding people of the value of integrity and compassion in the world of modernity and understanding better what is right and wrong in an ever-changing society.

## 6. Conclusion:

*Hayavadana* is a plentiful weft of cultural features based on Indian mythology, theatre, folklore, and philosophy. Not only do these elements ensure that the play has its cultural context, but they are also used to examine common themes through a very Indian prism. This is a very powerful piece of work because it uses the symbols of culture, rituals, and traditional forms of narrative that fill the disjunction between the old and the new. By redefining folk elements, playwrights such as Girish Karnad are not only able to preserve the traditional cultural expression, but also provide a new understanding of the eternal human problems. Karnad has been successful and has given a new approach to the ancient and contemporary elements in his plays, which have motivated a new generation of playwrights and theatre actors in India. His work has led to the rediscovery of interest in Indian folklore, mythology, and history in modern theatre. A lot of modern Indian playwrights like Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan have followed the path of Karnad and addressed the social issues in terms of Indian cultural traditions, thus as a continuation of the rebirth of Indian cultural themes in contemporary theatre.

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