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Thematic and Stylistic Thrust in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*

Dr. Satya Paul

Associate Professor of English
Government National P.G. College, Sirsa
Haryana (India)

Girish Karnad is a well known name in the arena of contemporary Indian drama in English. He is recipient of the 1998 Jnanpith Award, the highest literary honour conferred in India. He is a proud possessor of many talents. He has read history with keen interest and acquired deep knowledge of Indian culture from diverse sources. However, since childhood his interest in 'stage' activities has increased and this interest has brought him to fame in India and abroad. Writing a play is his first love: "I have been fairly lucky in having a multi-pronged career. You know. I've been an actor, a publisher, a filmmaker. But in none of these I felt quite as much at home as in playwriting" (interview Dharwadkar, 362) he reveals in an interview. His work has won him numerous prestigious awards – apart from the Jnanpith Award, he has won the Padmashri (1974), and the Padmbhushan (1992) award. Apart from the contribution to the world of theatre, he has represented our country in foreign lands as an emissary of Indian art and culture. His experimentation with the indigenous cultural treasure—history, mythology and folklore have brought his achievements to the forefront, and today he is recognised as one of the authors whose works have earned international fame and are translated not only in English but also in many other Indian and international languages.

In 1971 Karnad wrote *Hayavadana*, a play which was based on a theme drawn from *The Transposed Heads*, a 1940 novella by Thomas Mann. Indeed Mann also borrowed the story from 11th century Sanskrit writer Somadeva's text *Kathasaritsagar* (The Ocean of Stories). The original story is said to pose a moral problem, and Mann treats it to show the mechanical conception of life which differentiates body and soul while Karnad's play puts forward a different problem - the identification of a human being in this world of intricate relationships. The play opens with the offering to the god Ganesha – a figure with elephant head and the body of a man. The figure itself suggests the central theme of incompleteness of being. Bhagavata (the Sutradhar or the commentator) says:

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. How indeed can one fathom the mystery that this very Vakratunda-Mahakaya, with his crooked face and distorted body, is the Lord and Master of success and perfection? (H 1)

The main plot of the play resembles a folk tale. Here Padmini the wife of Devadatta loves his intellect but is headlong in love with the muscular body of his friend Kapila, while the sub-plot deals with the problem of Hayavadana, a minor character with head of a horse and the body of a man. Just as Padmini of the main plot is in search of a perfect combination of body and intellect, Hayavadana of the sub-plot wishes to become a complete man.

The mythical character Hayavadana is an offspring of a Gandharva and a Princess. The Princess fell in love with a white stallion and was married to him. She lived with him for fifteen years. But one fine morning, the horse husband turned into a celestial being and revealed that he was a Gandharva cursed by the God Kubera to be born as a horse for some act of misbehaviour. After fifteen years of human love, he had become his original self again.

Released from the curse he invited the Princess to accompany him to his heavenly abode but she told him that she wanted him to become a horse again. He cursed her to be a horse herself. So she was turned into a mare and galloped away without thinking in the least of Hayavadana, the product of her love with stallion. Now Hayavadana has head of a horse and body of a man and is in search of identity and completeness of his physical body.

Karnad in *Hayavadana* re-envisioned the myths of yore by associating them with contemporary consciousness to understand reality. In a way, the mythical story and characters give identity to human beings by associating them with the incidents and characters found in myths. The characters in the main plot have been put in similar situations as the mythical characters in the sub-plot. The role Hayavadana plays in the sub-plot is the role Padmini plays in the main plot. The story of Padmini becomes the story of Hayavadana by the time the play ends. *Hayavadana* proposes a comparison in the main plot and the sub-plot. The main theme of the play appears to revolve round the question of identity and completeness. Whereas it is a question of blessing and curse for the divine characters associated in the myth of Hayavadana, for Padmini and her two men it is a conflict between natural and irresistible instinct and venerated social norm.

Compared with Ram and Lakshman, Love and Kush, Krishan and Balaram, Devadatta and Kapila are bosom friends – two bodies and one soul. The bewitching beauty—“Yakshini, Shakuntala, Urvashi, Indumati”—all rolled into one” (H 16) is Padmini whose beauty enamours the best intellect of the town, Devadatta. Kapila is son of an ironsmith, a muscular body personified. The two friends are opposite to each other – one is ‘intellect’ the other is ‘body’ and their friendship appears to be based on the fact that they compliment each other. When Devadatta falls in love with Padmini, he asks Kapila to convince her to marry him and he does it successfully. Devadatta’s nimble mind easily falls in love but his passive body lacks in initiative to propose and realise the desired object of love while Kapila cannot perceive the feelings of love spontaneously but his agile body responds with immediate initiative. The beautiful body and agile mind of Padmini quickly responds to search for the object of her desire, which is the strong body, so that it can give her a sense of completeness. And after the marriage the combination of Devadatta, Padmini and Kapila is seen like ‘Ram-Sita-Lakshman’. Soon ‘Ram’ finds the comparison corrupted to the extreme when Lakshman succumbs to Sita’s beauty and Sita too forgets her vow of being faithful to Ram as a wife. Now Devadatta compares Kapila, who once has been his other half and now is object of hate, with a dog: “He only has to see her and he begins to wag his tail. Sits up on the hind legs as though he were afraid to let her words fall on the ground” (H 22). Padmini is devoted to Devadatta as a wife but as a woman of strong instincts, she gets irresistibly attracted towards Kapila. An aside in the play speaks of her attraction for Kapila: “what an ethereal shape! Such a broad back—like an ocean with muscles rippling across it. He is like a celestial being reborn as a hunter . . . How his body sways, his limbs curve—it is a dance almost” (H 25). Her attraction for Kapila and the hesitation that forbids her moves underlines not only the conflict between the body and the mind but also between one’s instinctual desires and social restrictions. Her unease and fear is clearly visible in her question to herself: “How long can one go on like this? How long? How long? If Devadatta notices. . .” (H 26).

To win the battle of his instinct, Devadatta, under the impression and intensity of impulse, promises to lose his head to goddess Kali if he succeeds in winning Padmini as a wife. However, after his marriage with Padmini he never recalls the promises made. The unease emanated from his imagination of social life after Padmini deserts him makes him cut off his

head in the presence of Kali. Otherwise, the interior self of Devadatta has accepted that a beautiful woman like Padmini cannot resist the manly muscles of Kapila:

DEVADATTA (*aside*). And why should I blame her? It's his strong body—his manly muscles. . . . No woman could resist him—and what does it matter that she's married? (*H 26*).

So is the case of Kapila who beheads himself when he finds that his friend has cut off his head because of him. He fears that people will blame 'Lakshman' for the death of 'Ram'. Goddess Kali also knows this and she plainly expresses her dissatisfaction over the sacrifices made.

However, the voice of instincts is constantly audible to Padmini and she is helpless in ignoring the call of her natural feelings yet when she finds both Devadatta and Kapila dead in the temple of goddess Kali, the horror of existence at once thunders loud in her ears. She finds herself in a tough situation:

PADMINI. Home? And what shall I say when I get there? What shall I say happened? And who'll believe me? They'll all say the two fought and died for this whore. They're bound to say it. Then what'll happen to me? No, Mother Kali, no,—it's too horrible to think of. (*H 31*)

The goddess blesses her and asks her to 'replace' the respective heads on the torsos if she wanted them to be alive again. Padmini transposes the heads in the darkness. Now the question arises who is her husband – the figure with body of Kapila and head of Devadatta or the body of Devadatta and head of Kapila? It appears quite natural that Padmini wants to go with the former while both Kapila and Devadatta assert their respective claim over her. To solve the puzzle tradition, rituals, religious prescriptions and sacred texts are quoted which come handy to justify their respective natural and instinctual responses. Finally, a sage decides that the head is the 'Uttamanga' and hence the figure with the head of Devadatta is her husband. Each of the three has his/her own complaint, satisfaction or logic at last as Devadatta accepts and Kapila reconciles with the reality:

KAPILA. I know what you want, Padmini. Devadatta's clever head and Kapila's strong body. . .

PADMINI. Shut up, you brute.

DEVADATTA. Suppose she did. There's nothing wrong in it. It's natural for a woman to feel attracted to a fine figure of a man. . . (*H 38*)

Karnad hardly emphasises Padmini's attraction for Devadatta's intelligence. The 'id' supersedes the 'ego'—instinctual drives seek gratification while 'ego' is fulfilled automatically in case of Padmini. Her 'id' dominates irrespective of external reality and cultural values. But the solution suggested by the sage solves her problem and as per the traditional wisdom, she finds a convenient way of social adjustment with her husband now with the body of her cravings.

The significance that gets shifted quite recurrently between instinctual response and social norm in the life of characters in this play lends credibility to the multiplicity of interpretations of the supposedly fixed standard of values. Soon the muscles fade away from the body of Devadatta due to lack of physical exercise and he excuses – "I have the family tradition to maintain—the daily reading, writing and studies" (*H 46*) which underlines his weakness. His supple muscles and weak body attracts Padmini no more and she cannot resist searching for Kapila in the forest on the very first opportunity that comes to her. When

Devadatta finds them together in the jungle a duel takes place between the two men that leaves both of them dead. Now Padmini performs 'sati' by laying down her life at the funeral pyre of Kapila and Devadatta.

Thus in *Hayavadana* Karnad underlines the conflict between the body and the mind and the consequent fracture in harmony of modern man through the myth of Hayavadana. The mythical story has been put against the saga of modern man who is civilised and conforms to the cultural aspirations of the society consciously or unconsciously. Modern man has achieved his present state via a long process of civilization during which the concord between the body and the mind has been lost. Various psychoanalysts have interpreted this loss through diverse theories. The psychoanalytical theories divide human mind into three parts—the id, the ego and the superego. The part first referred to represents instinctual drives that seek gratification irrespective of external reality and cultural values while the part mentioned third ignores the biological impulses as well as external reality and looks for a life of ideals, virtues, values and morals. The ego perceives and responds to external reality and acts as a leader to satisfy the 'id' and the 'superego' within the limits of the external reality. A free flow of the 'id' or the 'superego' creates a split between the mind and the body making them strangers. In such a state, the experiences of the body do not reach the mind and the feelings of the mind do not spread through the body. The ego causing such a self-alienation is called Apollonian ego. In contrast to this, when the ego wants to be natural and when the superego accepts the biological reality the mind and the body work in consonance. Such an ego which allows integrated and unified 'body-mind' is known as Dionysian ego. This concept helps us in understanding the riddle of Hayavadana as well as Padmini in Karnad's play *Hayavadana*.

The complex web of desires for each other in Padmini, Kapila and Devadatta and the lurking fear in their hearts marks the conflict between the 'id' and the 'ego' in their personalities. In a way, Kapila represents the 'id' while Devadatta the 'ego' and Padmini stands for the convoluted conflict between the two driving forces. Devadatta's approval of Padmini's attraction for the muscular body of Kapila: (*aside*) "No woman could resist him" (H 26), and his act of allowing the two to go together when they are on an expedition while he himself goes to the temple of goddess Kali signifies the importance of logic of intellect while Kapila's rejection of his easy separation from Padmini and his consequent escape to forest as a protest embody the dominance of the irresistible 'id' over 'the ego'. In addition, the final search for solution in death through a duel signifies not only dissonance between the body and the mind but impossibility of unification between the two in modern civilised man who cannot reject the existence of the ego. On the other hand, the final transformation of Hayavadana into a complete horse rather than a complete man marks the possibility of unification of body and mind in animals in whom the 'id' and 'the ego' do not clash.

However, the case of Padmini is different from that of Devadatta and Kapila. She is in search of unification of the body and the mind, and in this pursuit, she achieves pleasure when the heads are transposed and she gets the head of Devadatta on the body of Kapila as a husband. However, her happiness proves transitory. Indeed she is more inclined to body and hardly understands the power of the head (she does not mention the intellect of Devadatta); she mistakes the juxtaposition of the body and the head for their unification. But her later yearning for Kapila underscores her reawakening and continuation of her search for the ideal – unrestrained play of the body. Like Devadatta and Kapila, she too ends her life by performing 'sati' but she gets distinguished by her attempt at unification of the body and the

brain through her son. Perhaps that is why she assigns the task of physical and mental training in two phases to the Bhagavata:

My son is sleeping in the hut. Take him under your care. Give him to the hunters who live in the forests and tell them it's Kapila's son. They loved Kapila and will bring the child up. Let the child grow up in the forest with the rivers and the trees. When he's five take him to the Revered Brahmin Vidyasagara of Dharampura. Tell him it's Devadatta's son. (*H* 62)

The little boy remains sad like Kapila while in the forest but when he is brought to the town and meets Hayavadana, he laughs in the company of the horse with human voice. The act makes both of them complete—the boy drops the dolls to clap and thus becomes normal and the laughter of Hayavadana turns into a proper neigh. This clarifies as to why Hayavadana's mother chooses for her husband a stallion rather than a man and why goddess Kali makes Hayavadana a complete horse rather than a complete man.

Karnad appears to believe that human activities are governed by man's primal instincts to a large extent. Many of his plays deal with the theme of love and sex – physical relationship of a king and his attendant (*Yayati*), a woman's love for king cobra while her husband is interested in relationship with the other woman (*Nagamandala*) and a woman's revival of desire for her lover when her husband is absent for a long time (*The Fire and the Rain*). The play under study *Hayavadana* is no exception. Here the main plot and the sub-plot seem to encapsulate the irresistible libido at its centre. While in the sub-plot we find that Hayavadana's mother falls in love with a white stallion and nothing can persuade her against marrying him, in the main plot it is Padmini who is overpowered by her sexual impulse for the muscular man Kapila though she is married to Devadatta, the most intelligent man of the town.

Padmini is unconventional in her views regarding sexual liberty and she violates the social principles. Rejecting social codes of married life, her love for Kapila knows no boundary and she questions: "Why should love stick to the sap of a single body? When the stem is drunk with the thick yearning of the many petalled, many-flowered Lantana, why should it be tied down to the relation of a single flower?" (*H* 63-64). Her attraction for the muscular body of the wrestler Kapila is perceptible in her thoughts that cherish him: "what an ethereal shape! Such a broad back. . ." (*H* 25). Her act of transposing the heads—the head of Devadatta with the body of Kapila and *vice versa* makes one wonder if she did it by mistake.

As a result of the transposition, she gets a perfect man with the body of Kapila and the head of Devadatta. Even before the decision of the Rishi comes, she is ready to go with the man having the body of Kapila and the head of Devadatta. She rebukes Kapila (with Devadatta's body) when he claims her. And when the Rishi upholds Padmini's opinion that the figure with Devadatta's head is her husband she is excited with joy. At once she is attracted towards the muscular Devadatta and starts caressing his strong body: "What a wide chest. What other canopy do I need?" (*H* 41) she asks. But when the head governs the body and Devadatta's muscles start fading away due to lack of physical work and incompatibility of mind, she again goes to the forest in search of Kapila. Undoubtedly the playwright depicts the strong hold of sexual desire on human mind but he does not reject emotional love as an essential element of amorous relationship between a man and a woman. That's why he makes Padmini feel pity for Kapila and console him that she is going with his body at least. However, what Karnad intends to espouse here is Sigmund Freud's analysis that all human activities are governed by the sexual instinct in man.

Karnad makes use of symbols to depict instinctual forces in human beings. His concern for the psychological problems of man and his revolutionary outlook towards old values compel him to employ different symbols at different times. In *Hayavadana* the names of the characters are true reflections of their personalities – Devadatta is ‘god-like’ in his knowledge, Kapila meaning iron has iron-like body and Padmini meaning lotus is beautiful like a flower. Her nature can be equalled to a lotus that is rooted in earth but looks towards sky in aspiration. V.B. Vinod rightly finds the incompleteness of human desire symbolised by Padmini: “Rooted to the earth and with the flower turned skyward, she symbolises the fundamental nature (*prakriti*) of the human body: it is torn between the downward (*tamasic*) earth the upward (*sattvic*) heavens, itself being impressionable (*rajsic*)” (Vinod, 221). Thus her name and role in the play is in keeping with her nature.

The mythical character lord Ganesha with his broken tusk and awkward belly is the god of perfection but his own imperfection symbolises the inherent incompleteness and absurdity in human life. Hayavadana too, with his horse-head and body of a man embody modern ‘man whose head is like a horse (symbol of sex) and body (capabilities) like an ordinary human being. He is neither animal nor man – more than an animal and less than a perfect human being.

In Karnad’s *Hayavadana* sexuality has been expressed with the help of various personal symbols. Padmini’s description of the moving bullock-cart driven by Kapila has symbolic overtones. The description of the journey has been equalled to the sex act. The bullock-cart driven by the oxen stands for the phallus, the bull for the male virility and the road for the female sex organ. Padmini tells Kapila, “The cart . . . the oxen seem to know exactly where to go—you drove it so gently” (H 25). In contrast to Kapila’s gentle driving of the cart, she once experienced Devadatta’s poor skill in driving, she tells: “Devadatta took me in the cart . . . so we started—only two of us, me and Devadatta driving against my advice . . . and we didn’t even cross the city gates. The oxen took everything except the road” (H 25). Again the act of bathing in the river also connotes physical enjoyment and relationship. During their conversation in the forest Padmini reminds Kapila of the old relationship between their bodies by using the image of bathing in a river. She says:

Your body bathed in a river, swam and danced in it. Shouldn’t your head know what river it was, what swim? Your head too must submerge in that river—the flow must rumple your hair, run its tongue in your ears and press your head to its bosom. Until that’s done, you will continue to be incomplete. (H 58)

In this way the unfulfilled sexual desire of Padmini finds expression through various powerful symbols. The symbols are objective co-relatives used for the depiction of the conflict between the head and the body, the ‘id’ and ‘the ego’.

Karnad weaves the theme of love and sex with the theme of rebellion through the character of Padmini. Her social behaviour registers her subversion of social order. She rebels against the established norm that a married woman cannot love anyone else than her husband. Married to Devadatta by choice, she drifts towards Kapila because in him she finds a better lover. She is so overpowered by her carnal desires that even in the presence of her husband she reveals her admiration for the broad-shouldered man reminding us of Vijay Tendulkar’s Champa who finds Dawood ‘nice’ ‘very nice’ against her man Sakharam Binder and develops physical relationship with him. Padmini’s hidden but powerful desires for Kapila and her controlled disclosure of them underlines her being a combination of submission and rebellion in one

fold. Indeed through her Karnad tries to reveal the predicament of a woman who is modern and bold but aware of social norms, and who is torn between polarities – devotion for the husband and affection for the lover, aspiration to fulfil cravings of the heart and consciousness of the constraints that are guided by her mind. In depicting rebellion of an Indian woman from a traditional family Karnad certainly gives an impression of the influence of western schools of thought on him. He seems to agree with Herbert Read who quotes Camus in the Foreword to *The Rebel* that:

Revolt is one of the essential dimensions of mankind. It is useless to deny its historical reality. Rather we must seek in it a principle of existence. But the nature of revolt has changed readily in our times. It is no longer the revolt of the slaves against the masters, nor even the revolt of the poor against the rich; it is metaphysical revolt, the revolt of the man against the conditions of life, against creation itself. At the same time it is an aspiration towards clarity and unity of thought—even paradoxically towards order.¹⁷

Karnad appears to agree with Read. The reconsidered myth in *Hayavadana* helps one understand the complexity of human relationships, role of social norms in the working of one's mind and the power of instincts in deciding the course of one's life.

A careful study of *Hayavadana* reveals that there exists a beautiful concord between the form and content in Karnad's works. As far as plot is concerned, the play has been built with utmost care. The play follows the simple pattern of the main plot and the sub-plot for its development. The main plot deals with real human characters and situations while the sub-plot has its basis in mythology. However, interference of myth in the main plot cannot be denied. The two plots move parallel. In the sub-plot Hayavadana is an offspring of a beautiful Princess and a stallion, the two who finally are turned into horses and gallop away without thinking in the least of the fate of their little one. So is the case of Padmini's child in the main plot—he is left in lurch at an early stage of life as his father dies in the duel and his mother becomes a 'sati' in pursuit of satisfaction. Just like Hayavadana, who feels lonely and out of place, the child is also found to be autistic. He hardly takes any interest in human beings until he meets Hayavadana who becomes a complete horse when the innocent child smiles at him, and in return the laughter of the horse-headed man brings normalcy to the child and he throws away the lifeless dolls signifying his farewell to autistic tendencies. Moreover, in both the cases the present generation suffers because of the faults of their last generation – the child because of Padmini and Hayavadana due to his mother's weaknesses. Another point is that Karnad depicts all the characters in such a way that they cannot achieve all of their aims. If it becomes possible for Devadatta to marry Padmini, to prolong happiness is not possible for him. Padmini gets the perfect combination in man with Devadatta's head and Kapila's body but soon her joy proves to be momentary. So is the case of Hayavadana who wants to become a complete man but is finally turned into a complete horse thereby indicating that it is the fate of human beings that they cannot achieve what they aspire for. The perfection we are in search of is out of range of not only human beings but of animals (Hayavadana) and even divines powers (Lord Ganesha). Further, the horse-headed man's search for completeness ends with his becoming a complete horse, and not a complete man, and thus the animal body triumphs over what is considered, the best in man, the 'Uttamanga', the human head which is the case with Padmini too whose 'physical attractions', and not intellectual powers, first govern and then finish her life. Thus, the two plots that run parallel and support each other in reinforcing the theme of completeness in the play make it an artistic whole.

In the process of forging a theatre out of our cultural roots, Karnad attempts to redefine diverse patterns of drama from Indian and world literature. His drawing on history, mythology and folktales invigorates and expands the canvas of contemporary Indian drama. Unlike many other contemporary Indian dramatists, he does not hesitate in amalgamating the trends of Western theatre with our own. Though his plays are related to Indian experiences, yet they reveal the primeval nature of human consciousness found among human beings all over the globe. While redefining history and myth, Karnad has defied all narrow perspectives and has not written plays on the theme of nationalism or freedom struggle or surface level conflicts of men and women. His plays question several aspects of Indian ethos in the philosophical and metaphysical terms and deal with deeper aspects of human existence. However, his veneration for his native tradition of drama does not emanate from any ideological or national agenda but from his “comprehensive learning and exposure to the arts and aesthetics of the past and the West that have made him aware of the pan-Asian and in some respects, pan-Western features of Indian culture.” (Tripathi, 32)

Considered from the angle of dramatic effectiveness, Karnad’s theatre achieves outstanding milestones. His dramatic works, including *Hayavadana*, amalgamate the world of reality and fantasy in such a way that a metaphor of life is presented on the stage. In his dramatic world dream becomes reality and invisible becomes visible. Below the surface of the words lies the subtext of the actors’ roles which is easily possible for Karnad the actor-cum-playwright. One can enjoy his works in spite of being ignorant to his stylistic opulence. Another remarkable feature of Karnad’s artistry is that his plays have been able to strike a balance accommodating both efficacy and entertainment in good measure. And it is precisely due to the fact that he does not intend to burden his plays with any overt or covert ideology. In short, Karnad’s work is an integrated enterprise that concerns itself with communicational, representational, fictional, linguistic and structural principles of drama and theatre.

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