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## The Quest for Identity in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*

**Dr. Jamuna A.S**  
Assistant Professor-III  
Amity University, Tashkent.

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### **Abstract:**

Jnanpith award winner Girish Karnad was a legendary actor also known for his plays in Kannada and English. He was born in Matheran, Maharashtra, (19 May 1938 – 10 June 2019) and went to become a well-known actor, author, playwright and film director. He was a doyen of Kannada cinema and stage. Karnad wrote the critically acclaimed *Yayati* way back in 1961 while he was at Oxford. Karnad continued to produce outstanding work as a playwright, including *Hayavadana* (1971), which is widely recognized as amongst the most important plays of post-independence India. He added plays like *Tuglaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Tale-danda*, *Yayati*, etc. to his repertoire and gained prominence. Girish Karnad was decorated with the Padma Shri, India's top civilian honour in the year 1974. His play *Hayavadana* was inspired from "The Transposed Heads" by Thomas Mann which is a masterpiece. Karnad often took inspiration from Indian mythology. Myths and legends have an alluring significance especially in the Indian context. Indian literature in general relies heavily on mythology from ancient times. Karnad's play *Hayavadana* on which this study is based upon is both mythical and folkloristic. This paper highlights the influence of Hindu mythology in the play and as an ode to the thespian. It also focuses on the use of Hindu mythological elements like Gods and Goddesses, animals etc. It further verifies the mythological authenticity by comparing the Hindu mythology and Karnad's use of it.

**Keywords:** Indian Mythology, plays, *Hayavadana*, quest, Goddess.

Girish Karnad, recipient of the prestigious Gyanpith award was a revolutionary playwright. From *Yayati* to *The Fire and the Rain* his journey mirrors the evolution of Indian theatre over the decades. Karnad was an outstanding playwright and a master practitioner of his craft. He was a well known playwright, actor, critic and a fine ambassador of Indian art and culture. He was a force to reckon with in Indian Cinema and on the stage. In Karnad's own words,

‘I have been fairly lucky in having a multi-pronged career. You know, I have been an actor, a publisher, a film-maker, but in none of these I felt quite as much at home as in playwriting.’

Five of his plays namely, *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala*, *Tale-Danda* and *The Fire and the Rain* have been translated into English; Karnad translating the first two, himself. His plays reverberate and celebrate our rich Indian culture. Karnad successfully and beautifully intertwined his plays with inspirations from mythology, folklore and legends of yore. He never tired in showcasing his Hindu lineage and vibrant folk tales from the South, especially Karnataka. Karnad successfully exposed nuances of human consciousness, the power of desire and lust within the social and cultural boundaries prevalent.

Indian society is a morass of patriarchy from centuries. The arrogant male stranglehold has ensured no emancipation for women to enjoy or exercise any kind of freedom or liberty to further their cause. Any such attempts were swiftly crushed by the egotistical male. The subjugation continued with some scattered resistance but by and large maintained the status quo. This eventually had a deep-rooted impact on the psyche of women in general, who grew up accepting the glass ceilings imposed upon them from generation to generation. Karnad, through his plays and writings made a conscious attempt to ignite the minds of women to challenge these hypocritical, narrow and motivated cultural practices which were designed with the sole reason to protect the misogynistic male and stamp his authority.

Karnad, undertook to expose these regressive practices often by basing his plays and writings on popular characters and plots from mythology, legends and common folklore. His plays became popular because he successfully blended the past with realities of today and in the bargain giving out a strong message against ill treatment of women. He gave an opportunity to women to break the shackles and emerge as strong willed, ready to fight for their rights and regain their footprints in this modern and contemporary world.

The women characters in Karnad’s plays took the initiative to combat several contemporary issues and problems being faced by them. They challenged the plight and subjugation within the fabric of family, society, culture and the institution of marriage etc. He also ensured that his women characters represented different classes in the society, be it of a royal lineage, religious background, backward castes, belonging to tribes or with high intellect.

His women characters have strong ethos, are high on aspirations and have a positive attitude to achieve their goals and desires in the given cultural mix.

*Hayavadana* delves into various socially relevant and critical issues like man-woman relationships, virtue-sin, duty- desire, caste system, gender inequality, monogamy, Sati etc. Karnad was constant in his effort and instrumental in demystifying various regressive religious practices and challenge beliefs through his vast array of work, both as a playwright and as an actor through the subjects and choice of roles he enacted on screen.

*Hayavadana* showcases the drama element from ancient Indian Mythology and folk tales. The play consists of two plots; the primary plot is inspired from Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads* which in turn is based on *Katha Sarit Sagara*, an ancient collection of short stories. Devadatta and Kapila are best friends; Devadatta is a great scholar and poet, while Kapila is strong of physique but not educated. Devadatta who is in love with Padmini, marries her. As fate would have it, Kapila too falls for the charms and guile of Padmini. None of the three are happy with the situation and complexities of their relationships and Devadatta and Kapila kill themselves to end the misery. Goddess Kali, pleased with the prayers and penance of Padmini brings them back to life. But Padmini, delirious with joy and excitement ends up transposing their heads. This transposition, does give temporary joy and happiness to all the three but it is short lived as slowly but surely Devadatta and Kapila begin to revert to their original selves. This further exacerbates the situation and causes intense agony to all the characters. The two friends ultimately kill each other with swords to liberate themselves from the cesspool of murky relationships.

The sub-plot though familiar with several Indian myths and legends is Karnad's own creation. A beautiful princess from Karnataka falls in love with a white stallion. She gets married to the horse and live together for fifteen years. The horse miraculously turns into a Gandharva (Celestial Being) but the princess refuses to accept him in his new avatara, in his rage he curses the princess and transforms her into a horse. The princess who has now turned into a horse merrily gallops away ignoring her horse faced or Hayavadana but human born child. The two plots merge when Hayavadana meets the son of Padmini and Devadatta. Here Karnad, juxtaposes the modern with the ancient in a beautiful manner. Both Hayavadana who is horse

faced and the child who has not had a normal childhood due because of the prevailing situation with his parents, are in search of completeness.

The play begins with Bhagavata singing praises to Lord Ganesha and his glory:

O Elephant- headed Herambha,  
Whose flag is victory  
and who shines like a thousand suns,  
O husband of Riddhi and Siddhi,  
seated on a mouse and decorated with a snake,  
O single- tusked destroyer of incompleteness  
we play homage to you and start our play(Karnad,73)

Karnad has beautifully introduced the image of Lord Ganesha (Elephant headed God) which mirrors with Hayavadana's physical form (horse headed). Lord Ganesha is a divine blend of the Human and animal form and is revered as an obstacle remover, epitome of intellect and wisdom. Hindus honor him at the start of all religious ceremonies and rites. But Hayavadana is haunted by his blended form of a human and horse, feels alienated by the society. He is shunned and rejected by both humans and the animals. The depiction of Lord Ganesha is very apt to the central theme of the play which is Transposed Heads. At another level the friendship of Devadatta and Kapila is based on mythic characters from the sacred texts of Mahabharata and Ramayana.

Devadatta, besotted by Padmini is ready to even sacrifice his head to Lord Rudra and both his arms to Goddess Kali just so that his wish of marry her is granted.

Devdatta is not in favor of going toUjjain but he is not vocal about and silently sulks, all the while showing that Padmini's health is of utmost importance. When Padmini notices his strange behavior, she remarks,

“What's happened to you today ?At other times you are so full of your books,you even forget to wash your hands after a meal .But today you have been going on and on all morning.”(Karnad90).

Kapila, not to be outdone is equally pretentious; he chooses to die for the fear of punishment and not for his friendship. Padmini, comparatively is braver and upright than her two consorts but is hypocritical too. She desires the body of Kapila though being wedded to the cerebral Devadutta. She is not satisfied with either Devadutta or Kapila as their own selves but desires a mix of both. To quench her lust, she cheats and persuades her husband to visit the fair in Ujjain so that they can buy dolls for their son.

Goddess Kali is worshipped as a symbol of motherly love and also associated with violence in the Hindu Pantheon. On entering the temple of Rudra along with Padmini and Kapila, Devadatta excuses himself to be alone in the temple. In a sudden burst of rage and emotion, he prostrates in front of Goddess Kali chanting prayers and suddenly dismembers his own head as a sacrifice.

Kapila, on seeing his friend Devadatta dead becomes emotional and remorseful, he too cuts off his head with the same sword and dies. Padmini, loses her composure on seeing both Devadutta and Kapila dead and lets out an agonizing scream.

Padmini decides to kill herself with the very same sword but it is stopped by the Goddess who asks her to put it down. Padmini pleads with the Goddess to bring Devadatta and Kapila back to life. The Goddess Kali advises her to attach the heads to their bodies and then press the same sword on their necks. This brings both Devadutta and Kapila back to life. There are various references in Hindu mythology of Human sacrifice to please Goddess Kali.

The character of Devadatta dominates Padmini and Kapila because of his superior mind and intellect. But Padmini has all the strings in her hands; she is the main protagonist and dominates both Kapila and Devadutta with her charm and magnetism. She keeps them entrapped in her lust and bodily charms and both are totally under her trance which makes it difficult for them to escape her clutches.

W.J Wilkins traces the Hindu mythology as,

“There can be no doubt that human sacrifices were formerly offered to Kali, though now they are forbidden both by British law and the Hindus scriptures; the prohibition in Hindu books, however, is in a more recent class of books than those in which they ordained. In the Kalika

Purana, from which the following extracts are made, nothing could practice, gleaned than the instruction regarding this cruel practice. Siva is address in his sons the Bhairavas, imitating them in these terrible mysteries.”

Thus, in the play *Hayavadana*, Karnad widely uses Hindu mythology, in terms of plot, characters, Hindu Gods and Goddesses, mythological beliefs customs, etc., Hayavadana amalgamates the troika of experiences, namely: the divine, the human, and the animal.

Karnad dares to challenge all the superstitious and regressive beliefs and practices prevalent in India by this play. He forces the audience to think and introspect about the use of caste and religion and their negative impact. The narrative is laced with skepticism, drama and cynicism. The play is filled with characters and situations which are mostly tragic and sometimes comical.

Karnad has highlighted deep rooted patriarchy prevalent in India from ancient times, beautifully through this play. The plight of women hasnot changed much when he draws parallels with examples from mythology. Padmini is torn between her legally wedded husband Devadutta who is a man of great intellect and with an artistic bend and Kapila, who has an iron physique and is tough and muscular. She desires Kapila to quench her bodily thirsts. She is not able to accept the shortcomings of Devadutta and wants the best of both worlds. In the process, all of them suffer including her son. The play also subtly conveys that we have to respect that nobody is perfect in this world. We have to accept and acknowledge the shortcomings of each other to live in peace and harmony. The earlier we accept this the better will be our life and relationships.

Padmini is the centrifugal force which captivates Devadutta and Kapila, the entire play revolves around her. Both Devadutta and Kapila are enamored by her beauty and bodily charms. She is torn between the two and is reined in by the moral social code which restricts a married woman from seeking pleasures outside her marriage. Though it is perfectly acceptable for a male to have an extra marital relationship or visit a prostitute. But even after Devadutta’s head is transposed on Kapila’s body, Padmini’s happiness is short lived. Her quest to have a man who is both intellectual but with a body of steel ultimately lead to her downfall. This leads her to commit Sati and find peace and relief in death because she could not find perfection in her life.

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