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Performativity of the Head and the Body as a Sign System in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*[1]

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Abstract:

Drama has been one of the oldest forms of expression with a philosophical underpinning and didactic intent, both in the East and the West, where the participation of the human body in *poesis* is a necessity. A performance, thus, is dependent not only on the script but also on the appearance of the body, participating in its construction, to elicit a response from the spectator. Subsequently, the mind-body debate finds a temporary resolution in the space theatre offers, where the body of a performer provides the medium through which dramatic performance reaches the audience. The primary text, Girish Karnad's play titled *Hayavadana,* aids in exemplifying the crisis over whether the head or the body serves as the identity marker of an individual. The secondary text, Erika Fischer-Lichte's essay "The Actor's Appearance as a Sign", substantiates the same by purporting the significance of the appearance of a performer in setting the expectations of the viewers prior to any speech utterance.

Keywords: drama, theatre, performativity, mind, body.

Upon locating the classical literature of the West and the East to ancient Greece and ancient India respectively, the two modes–lyric and dramatic–emerge as the most canonised in literary historiography. Within the two modes, the epic genre from the narrative mode and the genres of tragedy and comedy from the dramatic mode constituted the dominant structure of feeling.

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Following the theme 'Reinventing Disciplinarity through Indian Philosophical Ethos', this paper traces the residual of the ancient Indian text *Bṛhatkathā* written by Guṇāḍhya in Paiśācī language found in the primary text, *Hayavadana*, written by Girish Karnad in Kannada. Karnad has translated the play into English himself and acknowledged in the introduction that for the translation, he greatly relied on Thomas Mann's retelling of *Transposed Heads*, translated from German by H. T. Lowe-Porter.

While the paper mainly explores the intermedial transition of the *Rohstoff* (raw material in German)–that is, the matter drawn from *Bṛhatkathā* and *Transposed Heads*–into *Stoff* (material in German) for the plot of the play *Hayavadana*, the intertextuality of the same necessitates acknowledgement. The secondary text of the paper "The Actor's Appearance as a Sign" written by Erika Fischer-Lichte appears in her book *The Semiotics of Theater*, translated by Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones, from German. By contextualising her analysis of the use of a mask in a dramatic performance, the pivotal role of a mask in an actor's appearance in constructing a sign for the identity of a character like Hayavadana can be understood. Subsequently, the *telos* of this paper – understanding the performativity of the head and body as a sign system in *Hayavadana* – revolves around the use of mask in concretising the human imagination of an anthropomorphic being and simultaneously, shifts the head versus body argument from a debate to a relation between the two, which is required in the signification of a character's identity to the spectator, as constructed through the medium of an actor's body.

Etymologically, the word 'Hayavadana' has Sanskrit origins and literally translates to "Horse-Face" in English and thus, the title of Girish Karnad's play *Hayavadana* prerequisites the question, in the reader as well as the spectator, that if the titular character is horse-faced, what would constitute the other half of their body – an animal or a human? Subsequently, the age-old debate between the head, where the mind resides, and the body, viewed as the symbol of corporeality, enters the narrative which the plot of the play, eventually, reveals. Hence, "the

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tension between essentialism", which contextually refers to the precedence given to the head over the body, and "anti-essentialism", contextually referring to the precedence given to the body over the head, forms the basis of the argument of this paper with respect to understanding the relational existence between the head and the body as a sign system that cannot be understood in isolation, as stated by Syed A. Sayeed in "Notes on Comparative Literature":

> It is the tension between essentialism and anti-essentialism, not as two theoretical trends but as the necessary, opposing tendencies inherent in human thought, on the one hand the convergence that prompts conceptuality, metaphysics, indeed philosophy itself, and on the other, the dispersal that represents the self-reflexivity of metaphor and the ineradicable absoluteness of the individual as ontological category. (31)

Simultaneously, the considerable impact of the appearance of a character, as constructed by an actor, upon the audience also comes into play due to the practical difficulty of an actor in depicting a character with the body of an animal in comparison to a character with the face of an animal. In the case of the former, the actor would be required to wear a body suit which would hinder their movements on the stage during the performance. Contrarily, in the latter, the actor can simply wear a mask which would not disrupt the performance; instead it would enhance the effect desired by the anthropomorphic appearance. The mask accentuates the physical difference between the head and the body and makes the half-animal, half-human appearance visually evident for the audience, thus emphasising the intermediality of the dramatic mode. Without the mask, a spectator would not be able to identify the characters in the play, thereby, forfeiting the performativity of the head and body as a sign system. The mask aids in distinguishing the head from the body and thus, the body also comes to play a central role in signifying the identity of a character to the audience, besides the head, and reiterates the relationality between the head and the body.

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Further, the meaning of the title is reiterated due to its explicit reference to the titular character Hayavadana, born out of the union of a human and a horse (a cursed Gandharva), who enters the play in Act I while Bhagavata, the narrator (also the connecting link between the world of the play and that of the audience) had already been introducing the characters of Devadatta and Kapila to the audience. In fact, the play opens with an offering of prayers to Lord Ganesha, the elephant-headed Hindu God of vanquishing obstacles, for the smooth and uninterrupted running of the performance, written in the didascaly as follows:

> At the beginning of the performance, a mask of Ganesha is brought on stage and kept on the chair. Pooja is done. The Bhagavata sings verses in praise of Ganesha, accompanied by his musicians.
> Then the mask is taken away. (Karnad 1)

The act of using only a mask to identify the deity serves as a foreshadowing for the appearance of the titular character besides compelling the audience and the reader to be reminded of the myth behind Lord Ganesha's elephant-headed appearance which has contributed to the conflict over the identity marker of an individual being either the head or the body, in the ancient Indian philosophical structure of feeling. The story of Lord Ganesha acquiring the head of an elephant is so deeply intertwined into the Hindu cultural ethos that even a mask becomes a sign for the deity in the absence of the idol, which, again, aids in the execution of the ceremony performed at the beginning of the play, because of the limited time frame.

In fact, the animal-head, human-body appearance of the divine is reflected in the appearance of the titular character who appears on the stage, even before the audience could meet Devadatta and Kapila, after having already terrified one of the actors with his strange appearance – a being with the body of a man and the head of a horse, besides having the ability to speak like a human. It can be said that the *Adbhutta* (marvel) *rasa*, as theorised by Bharata

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in his *Rasa* (essence, aesthetic flavour) theory in his treatise on dramaturgy, *Natyashastra*, which results in the *styathibhava* (the psychological state) – *Vismaya* (astonishment) being evoked in the audience at the strange sight of a half-human, half-animal character speaking in their tongue. However, another *rasa* invoked is of fear – *Bhayanaka*. Bhagavata, while he was introducing Kapila and Devadatta to the audience, had been interrupted by a scream coming from backstage. When he demanded the screamer to reveal themselves, the actor Nata, frantically breathing, reached the stage and grabbed Bhagavata, out of fear, depicting the s*tyathibhava – Bhaya* (terror):

> [The scream is heard again. The Bhagavata cannot ignore it any more.]
>
> Who could that be creating a disturbance at the very outset of our performance? (looks) Oh! It's Nata, our Actor. And he is running. What could have happened, I wonder?
>
> [The Actor comes running in, trembling with fear. He rushes on to the stage, runs round the stage once, then sees the Bhagavata and grabs him.]
>
> ACTOR. Sir, Bhagavata Sir-
>
> BHAGAVATA [trying to free himself].
>
> Tut! Tut! What's this? What's this?
>
> ACTOR. Sir... oh my God!-God!-
>
> BHAGAVATA. Let me go! I tell you, let go of me!
>
> [Freeing himself.] Now what's this? What...
>
> ACTOR. I-I-I-Oh God! [Grabs him again.]
>
> BHAGAVATA. Let me go! (Karnad 1)

However, assuming that the audience is aware of the myth and worship that is associated with Lord Ganesha, Hayavadana's appearance can also be expected to evoke compassion, instead

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of fear, in the spectators, unlike the actor, Nata. The ordeals Hayavadana, described by him as the play progresses, has to go through in order to achieve a complete form – that of an animal, not a human – invokes the *styathibhava – Soka* (sorrow) associated with *Karuna* (pity) *rasa*.

To fulfil the quest of attaining a complete form, Bhagavata advises Hayavadana to visit the Kali temple, where the transposition of the heads of Devadatta and Kapila had happened due to Padmini's mistake and thus, an anticipation is aroused in the audience about the outcome of Hayavadana's visit. Similarly, in Act II, the child of Padmini and Devadatta, having been bereft of any laugh or smile or joyful expressions since their death, bursts into laughter, the *styathibhava* associated with *Hasya rasa*, at the sight of Hayavadana using human language, who had, by then, acquired the complete form of a horse, not human as might be expected, yet had not lost his human voice. The performativity of the horse face of Hayavadana depends upon his human body in order to appeal to the senses of the viewers and elicit an aesthetic response from them. Later, as he acquires the whole body of a horse, the ability to use human language acts as the remnant of his past identity, due to which Bhagavata recognises him at the end of the play.

For the head and the body to function together as a sign system, an actor's appearance, dependent upon the use of a mask in *Hayavadana*, also adds meaning to the identity marker of the character in setting the expectations of viewers. Whilst Bhagavata attributes a philosophical reasoning behind the appearance of Lord Ganesha – the incomprehensibility of the completeness of the divine by humans, hence an incomplete form – in terms of practicality, the staging of a drama requires human bodies performing in a space selected with the intent of theatrical use. Inevitably, this necessitates the use of a mask in an actor's appearance in order to depict such a character:

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> The meaning that can be attached to the sign 'mask' that is—being an imitation or distortion—thus always related to the human face can be described in terms of a binary opposition: The mask either signifies a human being or a nonhuman being (God or a spirit, animal, ancestor). In both cases its function is to transform the wearer into someone he is not. (Lichte 74)

Therefore, the moment the actor portraying the character of Hayavadana, wearing a mask, comes into view, not only Bhagavata but the audience is also equally surprised by his half-horse, half-man appearance. They can connect his identity to his peculiar appearance, distinct from that of the actor's appearance outside of the theatrical space, even though Hayavadana reveals his name only a few dialogues later. Erika Fischer-Lichte states the same in the beginning of her essay "The Actor's Appearance as a Sign" from *The Semiotics of Theatre*:

> The moment an actor appears on the stage, the audience has already received information which allows it to identify the character being portrayed as a specific character…. The moment the actor appears on stage, we form a specific opinion about the character he is portraying and have certain expectations as to how that character will behave and what he will do. We have, so to speak, ascribed a temporary identity to character X by having identified him as someone on the basis of the specific appearance with which actor A represents X on the stage. The audience thus takes the actor's external appearance as a sign which can be allocated the meaning of character X's specific identity. Here, the actor's appearance quite obviously functions as a system that generates meaning, wherein the process of constituting meaning takes the form of a process of identification. (64)

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

Besides Hayavadana, the other two main characters are Devadatta and Kapila–the bosom friends of the city Dharmapura. The actors portraying them are also required to wear masks in order to convey their countenance – Devadatta who is "comely in appearance, fair in colour," and Kapila who is "the only son of the iron-smith Lohita, who is to the King's armoury as an axle to the chariot-wheel. He is dark and plain to look at, yet in deeds which require drive and daring, in dancing, in strength and in physical skills, he has no equal," (Karnad 2) as described by Bhagavata to the audience before they come onto the stage. It is the use of masks which facilitates the beheading: "The head—that is, the mask—rolls off and blood flows," (Karnad 2) as well as transposition of their heads which happens later in the play. Since such an exchange of heads is practically not feasible, in fact unfathomable, an exchange of masks of the characters enables an easy manifestation of the transposed heads. The enabler, Padmini in the context of *Hayavadana*, does not have to pretend to exchange their heads, she is to only remove the mask of one and put it on the other. Even the actors, while showcasing that their characters are sacrificing themselves, can choose to take off their masks to demonstrate the act of beheading.

Likewise, for the audience, it is convenient to understand the transposition of heads if it happens through the exchange of masks since they are unaware of the identity of the actors and their faces off stage. For them, the mask is the chief identity marker of the character, distinct from the actor. They do not come to associate the characters to the appearance of the actors, but to the appearance the actors' construct to portray a particular character. The characters come to be identified through the masks, a pivotal part of the appearance, irrespective of which actor wears them. With Devadatta's head (mask) on Kapila's body and vice versa, the audience can easily distinguish between the two, despite the seemingly perplexing exchange of their heads and thus, bodies. Without the facility of masks, the actors would have to mimic each other's portrayal of their respective characters in order to convince

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

the audience of the transposition: "For, since the mask functions as a sign which allows the character to be identified quickly and conclusively, switching this sign in itself indicates a change in roles as well" (Lichte 76).

Further, after Devadatta's and Kapila's heads have been exchanged, the gradual reversal of the physiognomy of their bodies–Devadatta losing the muscles and the athletic abilities that came along with Kapila's body, while Kapila transforming Devadatta's frail and lanky body into the body Kapila had been born with–can be portrayed, yet again, through the use of masks. The actor playing the character of Devdatta can take back his mask from the actor playing Kapila, in lieu of the transformed bodies of their characters, leading to a transposition of identities, though their heads remain transposed:

> Whenever a mask is employed, it functions as a sign of transformation: the masked person is no longer identified as the person he is, but rather as the person signified by the mask, although without being equated with the latter; the consciousness of the difference between the subject of the bearer of the mask and the person signified by the mask is maintained. (Lichte 75)

There is an irony in the disappointment of Padmini, in comparison to her overjoyed reaction when Devadatta had acquired Kapila's body, on realising that Devadatta was losing the manliness of Kapila's body, as stated by the puppets in the play:

> Doll I: His palm! They were so rough when he first brought us here. Like a labourer's. But now they are soft-sickly soft-like a young's girl.
>
> .....
>
> Doll II: His stomach. It was so tight.. and muscular. Now..
>
> Doll I: I know. It's loose... (Karnad, Act II)

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This irony proves that appearance has a significant contribution to the construction of the identity of a character by an actor through the medium of his body. Devadatta, before the transposition, had been the most sought-after groom-to-be in Dharmapura due to his overpowering wisdom and knowledge, represented by the head. Kapila, on the other hand, was known for his Herculean strength, represented by the body. Simply put, Devadatta was the brain while Kapila was the brawn.

Although Padmini had married him, Devadatta felt insecure because of the difference in the physical statures of him and Kapila, besides knowing about Kapila's feelings for Padmini. Hence, when the transposition happened, he was ecstatic since now he could satisfy Padmini with the new body (Kapila's) he had gained and simultaneously, bask in his scholarly status. Before acquiring Kapila's body, Devadatta felt that he had been lacking in his *dharma* in the role of a husband towards Padmini, a societal expectation. Hence being able to fulfil his conjugal *dharma*, even through the use of another body and thus, an altered appearance, reaffirmed his faith in his identity which his own body had failed to accomplish, enabling him to readily give up on it despite Kapila proclaiming that the child in Padmini's womb had come from the seed of his (Devadatta's) body. The desire of Devadatta to have the body of Kapila in order to satisfy his wife exemplifies what Erika Fischer-Lichte means in the following lines:

> The individual may very well mean something different to different people, but these meanings are constituted from the context of the relevant culture in which certain patterns of language, action, and behaviour are interpreted in a generally accepted manner. In other words, the individual initially acquires an identity from the fact that he belongs to a particular collective body and incorporates the institutions of this community into his own behaviour. (65)

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

For Kapila, though, it was the complete opposite because, despite thinking that by possessing Devadatta's head he would be considered Padmini's husband, he was not only denied that but also had to give up on his body. The chief identity marker of Kapila was his body, unlike Devadatta, whose was his head. Without his body, even if he had his head, he would not be believed to be Kapila in Dharmapura, which is why he chose to live as a religious recluse in the forest. The association of Kapila's identity with his body, instead of his head, reiterates the significance of understanding the head and body together as a sign system.

Although it seems that the mask, since it covers the face, gives precedence to the head, the transposition of the heads would not have been a bone of contention between Devadatta and Kapila, if the latter's body had not been physically more attractive to Padmini. At the same time, her marriage to the former would not have happened, if he had not been considered to have been blessed by the Goddess of Wisdom. Earlier, the actor wearing Devadatta's mask was only identified through his head, while the actor playing Kapila's mask was identified through his body. After the transposition of their heads, Devadatta had acquired the ultimate form, his mind and Kapila's body, according to convention, while Kapila was believed to be at the losing end of the event of transposition. Nevertheless, as years passed and Devadatta neglected maintaining his body, as he had done with his mind, he lost Kapila's body and his body returned to its original form. Kapila, on the other hand, built the new body he had, that is, Devadatta's body, from scratch. Therefore, their dissatisfaction with their own heads and bodies brings out the necessity of understanding the relational existence between the head and the body and their performativity as a sign system for a character to be identified.

Additionally, Padmini's act of committing the blunder of exchanging the heads of Kapila and Devdatta can also be interpreted as the projection of her hidden desire to have the best of both worlds – the brain and the brawn. In fact, Goddess Kali also comments upon this: "My dear daughter, there should be a limit even to honesty," (Karnad 33). When Kapila exposes her, she

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

takes offence and the three of them visit a *rishi* who announces that it was the head which decided whose body it was and not the other way around, reinforcing essentialism.

A disappointed Kapila renounces the world while Devadatta and Padmini begin living happily-ever after or, so they think. Soon, Padmini is disillusioned as Devadatta's original frame returns due to his inability to maintain Kapila's body. She finds out Kapila's whereabouts and sees that he has transformed Devadatta's body into a replica of his original body, both of them succumb to their desire for each other, thus bringing out anti-essentialism. Therefore, though identity relies greatly upon appearance, identity also develops throughout the performance of the character by an actor:

> For the external appearance only provides the outline of an identity, sketching the contours of a role that, in concrete form, arouses expectations which have to be met. This concretization is performed by the actor through his actions. The linguistic and paralinguistic, mimic, gestural, and proxemic signs he produces fill the role outlined by the external appearance with concrete, individual life. The character's identity, in other words, only takes shape in the course of a process in which the various sign systems related to the character enter into relationship with one another. Whereas the external appearance in this process represents the identity that can be separated from the actor's individuality and can be transposed to any actor embodying this role, the signs produced by the actor represent the identity of the character who is constituted by every actor in a different way that is tied to his specific individuality. (Lichte 91)

Towards the end of Act II of the play, the three characters – Padmini, Devadatta and Kapila – have met a tragic end and the child of Padmini and Devadatta has met the titular character. This is also when the confluence of the two stories within the play, an embedded narrative, occurs

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

– the story of Devadatta, Kapila and Padmini as narrated by Bhagavata and the story of Hayavadana happening simultaneously. On one hand, there is the transposition of Devadatta, and Kapila and on the other, the transposition of Hayavadana with a complete form of a horse, both granted by the same Goddess, also portrayed through a mask.

Although in the beginning when Bhagavata along with Actor I, had attempted to forcefully remove Hayavadana's head, assuming it was a mask, they were unsuccessful. This is ironic because it was indeed a mask, yet as the actors pretended that they were having great difficulty to remove it, their characters as well as the audience were convinced that Hayavadana had been born with the head of a horse and was not trying to fool anyone or garner fake sympathy. However, Padmini was able to achieve the unimaginable because all she had to do was exchange the masks of Devadatta and Kapila, symbolic of their heads. Hayavadana's second appearance is again marked by the fear of Actor II, but by this time, Bhagavata as well as the audience are able to identify him through the mere mention of a talking "horse" used to describe him. Nevertheless, the revelation that he (Actor II) had heard "a complete, perfect, proper" horse singing the national anthem and not "a horse-headed man" as presumed by Bhagavata as well as the audience, brings back the element of surprise. Therefore, through the character of Hayavadana, Girish Karnad surprises the audience not once, but twice.

Meanwhile, the characters of Devadatta and Kapila reiterate the significance of the head and the body in relation to each other, thus forming a sign system that cannot be understood in isolation. The head requires the body as much as the body requires the head for an embodied consciousness to exist, rendering the *rishi's* judgement of the dominance of the head over the body null and void. The head is where the thinking takes place, but without the body, that thinking cannot become praxis.

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

For a text to be dramatised, an interaction between human bodies and a designated space, called a performance, is necessary thus making the drama an intermedial mode. The human bodies involved – the actors – are required to construct an identity so convincing that the audience partakes in the willing suspension of disbelief. A mask, especially in a play such as *Hayavadana*, contributes towards heightening the persuading effect of an enactment, by becoming a part of the sign system of the head and the body constituting the appearance, as well as providing an aesthetic experience for the audience by aiding the actor in the construction of a character's identity. Simultaneously, the mask dispels Aristotle's standardisation about the appearance of an actor because the audience comes to associate the mask, as a sign, with the character, not the actor, depicted whenever Hayavadana, Devadatta and Kapila entered the stage during the course of the play. Consequently, the mask signifies the character irrespective of the actor's appearance outside the theatrical space.

Yet, a mask alone, symbolic of the head in the context of the play, cannot constitute a sign system because, without the body, it will also cease to function, much like the body without the head. The indispensability of the head and the body is seen through the characters of Devadatta – his body flourished when it was not his own while the body he had acquired ultimately withered, and Kapila – he was forced to give up on his body but he started anew and transformed his newly gained body. The relation between identity and appearance necessitates the establishment of the head and the body as a sign system, without the sovereignty of one over the other.

> The identity of a character, in other words, is always developed as the product of a sign process, and indeed as that meaning that is constituted, on the one hand, with the help of the immutable signs of external appearance that can be reproduced in the same way, and on the other, by the signs which have the capacity for qualitative change, depending on the individuality of the actor who

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

> creates them through his activity. Consequently, a character's identity cannot be fully constituted if the spectator considers only the signs creating his appearance and produced by the actor's activity; rather, the specific relationships in which the two kinds of signs can come together also have to be recognized and interpreted as elements that constitute meaning in relation to the character's identity. (Lichte 92)

Therefore, it can be inferred that it is the audience that creates a sign system between an actor and their appearance on stage through signification of their identity, that is, the association of a character, to the appearance constructed by the actor during a performance. In other words, the audience forms a relationship between the actor and the character by virtue of seeing the character's appearance on the stage as constructed and performed by the actor. Thus, it is the responsibility of an actor in their portrayal of a character, that is, in the process of constructing a character's identity, to aim at fully utilising their appearance, head and body alike, for it becomes a sign as soon as they occupy the theatrical space, in order to ensure an active aesthetic engagement and participation from the audience.

The theatre provides the space for the dramatisation of a text involving human actions and events in the act of performance by human bodies – the actors – in the said space which exists in relation to the presence of a *sahṛdaya* audience, that is, the ideal spectator. Karnad's *Hayavadana*, therefore, not only establishes the relationality between the head and the body through the intermediality that the the dramatic mode offers but also, acts as an emergent in the contemporary structure of feeling where aesthetic reception impacts the meaning-making process during textualisation, which was the intent behind the *telos* of this paper.

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End Notes

1. Presented at the Three-Day International Conference on "Reinventing Disciplinarity through Indian Philosophical Ethos", conducted by the Department of Literatures in English, The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad from 19-21 February, 2025.

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