



Girish Karnad and the Folk Tradition: A Study of Ritual, Device, and Narrative in *Hayavadana*

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Abstract:

This paper explores the brilliant way Girish Karnad weaves traditional Indian folk theatre into modern drama within his play *Hayavadana*. Karnad uses the rich traditions of Yakshagana to explore very modern human struggles, including the pain of feeling incomplete, the search for identity, and the impossible chase for perfection. The study examines how classic folk elements, including the Bhagavata (narrator), traditional masks, talking dolls, and stylised mime, work together to help the audience effortlessly accept the play's unusual premise of swapped heads. Ultimately, by comparing the play to its foundational sources stretching from the ancient Kathasaritsagar to Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads* this analysis highlights Karnad's success in bringing an authentic Indian identity to the contemporary stage.

Keywords: Girish Karnad, *Hayavadana*, Yakshagana, Folk Tradition, Indian Drama, Bhagavata, Myth, Identity.

Introduction

Girish Karnad's plays draw their core theatrical energy from Yakshagana, proving that his work goes far deeper than a simple retelling of old myths and legends. Whether he is pulling from folk tales passed down through generations, ancient scriptures, or classical literature, these traditional roots form the absolute backbone of his writing. When it comes to choosing his subject matter, Karnad stays deeply connected to tradition. However, his real brilliance lies in how he uses Yakshagana stage devices—like bringing in the Sutradhara or Bhagavata as a narrator—to shape and comment on the plot. By seamlessly weaving in traditional elements like masks, half-curtains, mime, and live music, he firmly establishes his identity as a truly authentic folk-traditional playwright.

In one of his essays, Karnad famously notes:

"We keep acrobating between the traditional and the modern, perhaps we could not hit upon a form which balances both." (Karnad 34).

This observation perfectly describes the struggle of many Indian playwrights. Some experiment so heavily with avant-garde styles that they lose their cultural roots, in contrast others stay so rigidly tied to traditional formulas that they leave no room for modern creativity. Karnad, however, masterfully finds the perfect middle ground between the two worlds.

We see this unique balance across his major works, including *Yayati*, *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala*, *Bali*, and *The Fire and the Rain*. For example, in *Yayati*, Karnad reimagines the classic Mahabharata story where a father and son exchange youth for old age. *Nagamandala* weaves together two Kannada folk tales that Karnad first heard from Professor A.K. Ramanujan while in America, and *Bali* finds its inspiration in ancient Jain

literature. His play *The Fire and the Rain* (originally written in Kannada as *Agni Mattu Male*) also returns to the *Mahabharata*, combining traditional scriptural roots with a brilliant, modern psychological analysis of its characters.

The theatrical conventions of *Yakshagana* are highly prominent in *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala*. Although *Yayati* utilises a *Sutradhara*, it lacks the extensive integration of these folk elements found in the other two plays. Karnad enriches his plays by weaving in traditional *Yakshagana* conventions, creating a theatrical style that is entirely his own. This paper argues that *Hayavadana* achieves a successful synthesis of folk tradition and modern dramaturgy, using indigenous performance idioms to explore contemporary anxieties of identity and completeness. Karnad enriches his plays by weaving in traditional *Yakshagana* conventions, creating a theatrical style that is entirely his own. So, before we proceed, let us have a look at some of the characteristics of the performance in the tradition of *Yakshagana*:

In a literal sense, the word '*Yakshagana*' simply means the song of a *Yaksha* (a demigod). While '*Yakshagana*' clearly dates back to before the 16th century, the oldest available play text actually dates to the mid-16th century. The term *prasanga* is used to describe the scripts performed in *Yakshagana*, which are predominantly derived from the two great epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The collection of *prasangas* comprises just over one hundred distinct works, within which a diverse array of heroes, deities, demigods, demons, and celestial entities are portrayed. The incidents may have the locale of heaven, hell, dual, battle, *swayamvar* and so on. The text is in Kannada while the invocation is in Sanskrit, giving it a touch of classical Indian theatre. The *Natyashastra* categorizes various *rasas*,

emphasising those of a heightened or passionate nature. These serve as the structural backbone of the drama, effectively channeling the emotional engagement of the spectators. Traditionally, the Yakshagana season begins in late November and continues through the month of May. Karnad in “Author's Introduction” to *Three Plays* writes, “*Once the harvest was over, I went with the servants to sit up nights watching the more traditional Yakshagana performances. The stage, a platform with a back curtain, was erected in the open air and lit up by torches.*” So we can have the picture of the performing space, which is sixteen feet square, with a pole fixed at each of the four corners. On top of the poles is tied a colourful canopy decorated with a bunting of feathers, leaves, and coloured paper. The audience sits on three sides of the performing space. The play begins after nine in the evening and continues all night until dawn.

The invocation to Lord Ganesha marks the beginning of the traditional act of ‘Yakshagana’. Throughout the performance, the worship of Lord Ganesha remains a constant. Offerings of incense, flowers, and garlands are placed before a mask or statue of the deity, signifying his presence as the drama unfolds. The invocation is done in Sanskrit and not in isolation. There is a stage director or Sutradhara called Bhagavata who is the commentator in the play as well as the music director. The Bhagavata initiates the prasanga by performing the opening episode, accentuating his vocal narrative with the rhythmic precision of cymbals. This melodic foundation is supported by an ensemble of percussionists playing the mridanga, maddale, and chande. Together, these percussive layers are anchored by the harmonium, which provides a sustained, tonal drone that serves as the sonic grounding for the performance. There are a lot of improvisations by the Bhagavata and the actors who are traditionally males.

After the invocation, there starts the introduction of characters who come on the stage dancing with vigour, whom the Bhagavata questions and their answers are sufficient introduction. There is also a clown called Hanumanyaka who quizzes the characters. The characters appear on the stage from behind a handheld curtain with a dance called oddolaga. Then slowly the main action of the play is unfolded.

Analysis of Hayavadana

Hayavadana (1971) represents a watershed moment in contemporary Indian drama, demonstrating Girish Karnad's ability to use indigenous performance structures to address universal existential anxieties. While the immediate plot is drawn from Thomas Mann's German novella *The Transposed Heads*, its narrative genealogy extends to the ancient Sanskrit riddle-tale of the Vetalapanchavimshati included in Somadeva's *Kathasaritsagar*. By modifying these source materials, Karnad shifts the focus from a traditional moral puzzle to a modern psychological exploration of identity and fragmentation.

In the original Vetalapanchavimshati, the young washerman Dhavala cuts off his head at a temple of Durga out of intense devotion, and his brother-in-law follows suit out of grief and fear. When the bride, Madana Sundari, accidentally transposes their heads during a frantic resurrection, King Vikramaditya resolves the dilemma through classical jurisprudence. Since the head is the superior limb ruling the body, the man with the husband's head remains the husband. Because the characters act out of pure devotion and familial duty, they experience no internal guilt or psychological friction despite the underlying incestuous complications.

Thomas Mann's Western adaptation, *The Transposed Heads*, psychologicalises this narrative by replacing divine piety with moral transgression, sexual jealousy, and subconscious guilt. In Mann's version, Shridaman sacrifices himself out of jealousy regarding his friend Nanda's attraction to his wife, Sita. At the same time, Nanda commits suicide out of fear of being accused of his friend's murder.

Karnad's dramaturgy absorbs Mann's psychological friction but rejects its definitive moral conclusions. Instead, he uses the transposition of heads to explore the permanent state of human incompleteness. To highlight the universal, archetypal nature of this crisis, Karnad systematically renames the characters to function as psychological "types" rather than distinct historical individuals. When asked about this strategic variation by Meenakshi Rayakar in an interview, Karnad elaborates:

"...I wanted them to be generic terms because the characters are types. In Sanskrit any person whom you do not know is addressed as 'Devadatta' and Kapila means dark and therefore earthly and Padmini is the name of a certain category of women in Vatsyayan's Kamasutra." (Raykar 45)

Through these deliberate linguistic choices, Devadatta becomes the embodiment of the fragile, elite intellect; Kapila signifies raw, instinctive physical perfection; and Padmini represents the idealised aesthetic woman.

When Padmini accidentally switches the heads of the two friends, she momentarily achieves the ultimate romantic fantasy: a man possessing both a brilliant mind and a physically beautiful body. However, Karnad's dramatic vision rejects the possibility of such absolute harmony. Unlike the static resolutions of his source materials, Karnad

introduces a dynamic process of physical reversion. Over time, Devadatta's analytical head gradually tames and softens Kapila's vigorous body, while Kapila's head, exiled in the forest, slowly rebuilds a muscular frame through physical labour. By forcing the bodies to slide back into their natural states, Karnad suggests that identity is an inescapable biological reality. The inevitable fatal duel between the friends and Padmini's subsequent act of Sati emphasise that human desire cannot be reconciled within rigid societal frameworks.

The structural complexity of Hayavadana is further enhanced by its original subplot, the narrative of the horse-headed man, Hayavadana, which does not exist in either the Kathasaritsagar or Mann's novella. Born to a human princess and a cursed Gandharva who took the form of a stallion, Hayavadana wanders the stage seeking physical completeness. When he begs Goddess Kali to make him complete, his request is granted with a literal irony: he is transformed into a complete horse rather than a complete man, yet he is left with a human voice.

This subplot serves as an essential thematic mirror to the main narrative. Hayavadana's encounter with an indifferent, sarcastic manifestation of the divine aligns with the play's opening invocation of Lord Ganesha, a deity who himself possesses a transplanted elephant head. Karnad uses these figures to subvert the classical Sanskrit theatre tradition of cosmic harmony, replacing it with a modern, absurd universe where the gods mock humanity's desire for unity.

Furthermore, the stylistic execution of this subplot alters the structural rhythm of the performance. While the first half of the play moves forward without narrative interruption, the second half is continually disrupted by talking dolls, songs, and direct commentary

from the Bhagavata. As Karnad notes, this structural fragmentation is a deliberate aesthetic choice designed to evoke the impression of a "reflection in a broken mirror," capturing the disintegrated lives of the protagonists. Hayavadana is only liberated from his human voice when he meets Padmini's isolated five-year-old child; the boy's laughter causes the horse to lose its human speech and regain its natural neigh. True completeness, Karnad implies, is achieved only by shedding the heavy burden of human consciousness entirely.

Through the parallel development of the main plot and subplot, Hayavadana transcends simple adaptation. Karnad effectively weaponises the non-realistic conventions of the Yakshagana stage—including masks, half-curtains, talking dolls, and narrative asides—to turn an ancient folktale into an avant-garde exploration of the post-colonial human condition.

The Modern Indian Folk Traditional Play

Let us now look at the elements of the play that mark it as a characteristic modern Indian folk traditional play. At the beginning of the play, a Ganesha mask adorned with a garland is displayed on the stage. The Bhagavata chants Sanskrit shlokas in honour of Lord Ganesha, with his musicians playing along. This setup clearly reflects the Yakshagana style. The most notable aspect is the presence of the Bhagavata, who provides commentary on the performance. The Bhagavata's reference to Lord Ganesha as a symbol of incompleteness and imperfection, even though he grants perfection and success, offers an early clue to the play's central theme of imperfection and incompleteness. This aligns with the Yakshagana practice, where the Bhagavata casually foreshadows the story. Both the primary and secondary narratives feature the motif of the exchanged head, a theme that

finds its most profound expression in the iconography of Lord Ganesha, whose own form integrates an elephant's head. Hence, Ganesha's introduction seems to serve as a preface to the play's forthcoming content. As per Suresh Awasthi, the former chairman of Sangeet Natak Akademi, the invocation of Lord Ganesha in _Hayavadana_ marks the beginning of the Indianisation of modern theatre. The presence of musicians on stage with the Bhagavata is another hallmark of Yakshagana. Karnad opens the play with a Nandi, a benedictory song, and ends it with a Bharatvakya, a concluding prayer, a convention followed not only in Yakshagana but also in classical Sanskrit drama.

As in Yakshagana, the Bhagavata starts the play. He merely narrates it to present it to the viewers. In a departure from the conventional Hanumanyaka, the actor portraying Devadatta enters the stage to initiate the performance. He not only cuts off the Bhagavata during his narration but also tells him about the man with a horse's head. The actor appears very anxious and scared. Then we find the Bhagavata reassuring him in the customary Yakshagana style:

ACTOR: Please, please, I am sorry.....But-but....

BHAGVATA [more calmly]: Now, now, calm down! There's nothing to be afraid of here. I am here. The musicians are here. And there is our large-hearted audience. It may be that they fall asleep during a play sometimes. But they are very alert when someone is in trouble. Now, tell us, what's the matter

ACTOR: I'm shivering ! On the way.....you see.....I had drunk a lot of water this morning.....my stomach was full.....so to relieve myself.....

BHAGVATA: Watch what you are saying! Remember you are on stage.

ACTOR: I didn't do anything ! I only wanted to.....so I sat by the side of the road ---
and was about to pull up

ACTOR: my dhoti when.....

BHAGVATA: Yes?

ACTOR: A voice -- a deep, thick voice.....it said: 'Hey, you there -- don't you know,
you are not supposed to commit nuisance on the main road?'

BHAGVATA: Who was there?

ACTOR: A horse !

BHAGVATA: What?

ACTOR: A horse ! and it was talking. (Karnad 3)

Thus, we notice that, similar to Yakshagana, there are casual conversations on stage at the start. The reveal of the horse-headed Hayavadana is carefully staged. As two stagehands slowly lower a brightly colored curtain, the character is unveiled to the audience in his complete, iconographic form. Karnad gives Hayavadana several modern allusions to political and social matters, just as Yakshagana comic figures are allowed to make such references, but not the heroic characters who appear later. Curtains are used once more for the entrances and exits of Kali, and right after the Bhagavata declares an intermission for the spectators to reflect on the answer to the transposed head puzzle, as well as to depict Padmini's self-immolation or sati.

There are also some departures from Yakshagana conventions, such as the employment of masks and dolls. Although mask-work is relatively uncommon in Yakshagana, the inclusion of a mask here represents a strategic departure from convention; it serves as a practical solution to visually articulate the central motif of the head exchange. Likewise,

the Bhagavata's role is assumed by the dolls for a while to illustrate Padmini's leaning toward Kapila and the slow transformation occurring in Devadatta's body. A mask is similarly employed to define the zoomorphic features of the horse-headed Hayavadana.

According to Karnad, the dolls fulfil yet another purpose, too:

"I had a definite purpose for using them. In the first half, the Devadatta-Kapila-Padmini story goes on without interruptions. Even the Bhagvata sings or comments only where there's no character on the stage. No song interrupts the flow of the story. In the second half the story is continually interrupted by the dolls, the songs and the Bhagvata interferes in the action, talks to the characters, comments on their mental state. This is merely done to bring out the disintegrated state of the three people's lives. In the first half every thing is neat and clear, but in the second I wanted to create the impression of a reflection in a broken mirror - all fragmented, repetitious, out of focus, all bits and pieces."

Additional elements also contribute to making this play traditional, such as the use of names of old Indian cities and cultural centres. Sanskrit terms and names have been employed liberally. Ironical allusions in the form of similes and metaphors for Devadatta and Kapila are drawn from the scriptures. There are romantic exaggerations in the style of Sanskrit poetry:

".....Devadatta and Kapila who are each other's temperamental opposites are intimate friends and they remind the people of Dharmapura of 'Lava and Kusha', 'Rama and Lakshmana', 'Krishna and Balrama'. Padmini is likened to Yakshi, Shakuntala, Urvashi and Indumati. To the admiring citizens of Dharmapura, Devadatta, Padmini and Kapila are Rama, Sita and Lakshman."

Karnad has successfully Indianised English.....In Hayavadana, Sanskrit and Hindi words and names have been fully used, as “Nata”, “Riddhi and Siddhi”, “Vighneshwara”, “Vakratunda-Mahakaya”, “Punya”, “Gandharva”, “Fakir”, “Sadhus”, “Kalpa Vriksha”, “alpanas”, “Arti”, “Makarandas” and “Jacarandas”, etc. Similarly names of the places like Chitrakoot, Gandhar, Banaras, Ujjain, Rameshwaram, and even Dharmapura makes the play even more traditional. J. Vijaya Gauri draws our attention towards the tradition of ancient Sanskrit poetry, of descriptions sporting romantic hyperbole.

BHAGVATA: In her (Padmini's) house, the very floor is swept by the goddess of wealth. In Devadatta's house, they have goddess of learning for their maid. (Karnad 19)

Instances of Indian idioms occur frequently in the play, as shown by M.K. Naik for instance.

DEVADATTA: One has to collect merit in seven lives to get a friend like him.

PADMINI: You are my saffron, my marriage thread. (Karnad 21)

PADMINI: Long before the sun rises, the shadow of twigs draw alpana on the floor.

The star raise arati and go. (Karnad 52)

The stage design is sparse and conveyed through printed curtains that stagehands hold up openly before the audience. Shifts in location are depicted by actors moving about, and mime substitutes for stage props, as in the ill-fated cart journey to the forest taken by Devadatta, Padmini, and Kapila in Act I, and when Kapila presents flowers to Padmini, Devadatta and Kapila don masks of suitable colours, the former's being light-toned and his friend's a dark one. Asides are used often, the characters remain motionless. At the same time, the Bhagavata remarks on the events, and the duel between the two friends is choreographed like a dance, with Padmini's response rendered in the same stylised manner.

A trait typical of the Indian sensibility is the seamless merging on a single level of the human, the supernatural, and the inanimate realms, with 'willing suspension of disbelief' achieved by attributing human flaws and weaknesses to supernatural entities and lifeless objects. Goddess Kali, who revives the deceased friends, is portrayed as a drowsy, uninterested, sarcastic grouch; and the two dolls belonging to Padmini's child envy the infant and observe with ironic delight the increasing softness of Devadatta's post-transposition body and Padmini's guilty dreams of Kapila.

In contrast to Western realist theatre, there is no effort to depict the dramatic action as a fragment of real life; the nature of theatrical illusion is emphasised, much like in Brecht's epic theatre. Hence, at the close of the first act, as stagehands place a curtain in front of the motionless characters, the Bhagavata declares an intermission and drinks tea right on stage with his companions. In the concluding benedictory prayer, every character participates, including the three main ones who have perished during the course of the play.

The play also mirrors established folk drama conventions through its frequent use of comic elements, which serve to counterbalance the more serious aspects of the narrative. These comedic moments sometimes come across as clever, at other times as ironic, and occasionally as farcical. Thus, Hayavadana has been composed in a typical folk-traditional style even though it may carry deeper social and psychological themes. So, from a technical standpoint, the play is folk traditional. Hayavadana draws from a conventional tale and employs the methods of folk theatre. Kirtinath Kurtakoti's remark is worth citing:

"Karnad uses the conventions and motifs of folk theatre - masks, curtains, dolls, story within the story - to create a bizarre world. It is a world of incomplete individuals, indifferent gods, dolls that speak and children who cannot, a world indifferent to the

desires and frustrations, joys and sorrows of human beings. What is real is, only the tremendous, irrational energy of the horse and the writer who move round the stage symbolising the powerful but monotonous rhythm of life." (Kurtakoti V)

Critical Perspective: Hayavadana and the Scholarly Conversation

To fully appreciate the complexity of Girish Karnad's Hayavadana, it must be examined within the intricate socio-political context of post-colonial theater, rather than dismissing it as a mere stylistic engagement with traditional folklore. Critics Brian Crow and Chris Banfield have long pointed out that post-colonial playwrights are almost always caught in a stubborn tug-of-war. On one hand, they feel this deep urge to dig up and reclaim their native roots, but on the other, they are stuck operating within a theatrical world heavily shaped by Western realism. This is the exact tightrope Karnad walks. As Suresh Kumar argues in his analysis of Karnad's staging techniques, pulling from the folk tradition is not some cheap trick to trigger nostalgia or make the stage look exotic. Instead, Karnad is completely dismantling and rebuilding these old performance tools to carry the weight of very modern psychological identity crises. The folklore here is not just a passive backdrop; it is the actual engine pushing the whole play forward.

This brings us straight to the play's opening, which has historically sparked a lot of debate among theatre scholars. Suresh Awasthi famously claimed that bringing a mask of Lord Ganesha onto the stage in Hayavadana marks the definitive "Indianisation of modern theatre".(Awasthi 112). It is easy to see why he would say that the traditional Nandi (benedictory song) feels like a comforting return to cultural roots. Nevertheless, if we just stop there and celebrate, we miss the brilliant, dark irony Karnad is playing with. He

intentionally brings out a deity with a mismatched, transplanted elephant head to introduce a story where human beings literally chop off their own heads and swap them. When you look at Awasthi's point alongside Crow and Banfield's ideas about pushing back against Western forms, you realise Karnad's version of "Indianisation" is not traditional comfort food. He is using a sacred, familiar icon to immediately plunge the audience into an absurd universe where even the divine is fractured.

We see this same friction playing out in the very language of the script. M.K. Naik focuses heavily on how Karnad "Indianises" the English language by splashing local idioms and hyper-romantic poetic flourishes all over the dialogue—like Padmini calling her husband her "saffron" or her "marriage thread". While Naik is certainly right about the distinct flavour of the text, we can push his reading a lot further if we look at it through Kumar's focus on dramatic technique. These highly stylised, beautiful Sanskrit metaphors do a lot more than just sound pretty. They create a deliberate, deeply uncomfortable gap between the lofty, poetic ideals the characters voice and the actual, rotting reality of their mismatched bodies. The language itself ends up acting like a beautiful mask that fails to hide their internal breakdown.

Finally, this clash between traditional storytelling and modern alienation is what defines the play's tragic ending. Kirtinath Kurtkoti takes a pretty bleak view of the climax, arguing that Karnad uses masks, curtains, and talking dolls to construct a bizarre world of incomplete people and indifferent gods where human sorrow is met with absolute cosmic apathy. Kurtkoti definitely hits the nail on the head when it comes to the heavy existential despair of the play, but we should not just accept that the universe wins and humanity loses.

When the horse-headed Hayavadana finally loses his human voice because Padmini's otherwise silent child breaks out into a laugh, it is not just a random display of blind, cyclical life energy. If we read Kurtkoti's take alongside Crow and Banfield's thoughts on post-colonial liberation, that final laugh looks like a radical rejection of Western logic. Wholeness is not something you can find by overthinking your way out of a crisis or by playing by society's rigid rules. It has found by completely abandoning the heavy burden of human consciousness and stepping straight into the raw, non-verbal world of performance. Karnad uses Yakshagana to show that in a broken world, you can not fix a shattered mirror by staring into it, you have to step completely through the glass.

CONCLUSION

When we look at the big picture, Hayavadana shows us exactly why Girish Karnad is such a genius of modern theatre. He did not just throw in Yakshagana elements like masks, curtains, and the Bhagavata to make the play look exotic or traditional. Instead, he used these folk tools to help us look at some really messy, modern human problems, like why we always feel incomplete and why we constantly chase a perfection that does not exist. By taking a simple old riddle and twisting it into a deep psychological story, Karnad proved something huge for Indian drama: you do not have to copy Western styles to make a serious, modern play. By turning back to his own roots, he created a style of theatre that feels completely authentic to India, yet speaks to human beings anywhere in the world.

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