

Exploring the Identity Crisis and Incompleteness in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*

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Abstract: Girish Karnad is one of the eminent postmodern English playwrights. His major plays, *Tughlaq*, *Nagamandala*, and *Hayavadana*, reflect contemporary Indian society, focusing on our folk culture. In the play, *Hayavadana* Girish Karnad maps mythology, folklore, and existential dilemmas to grapple with the themes of incompleteness and identity crisis in human lives. The play shows the conflict between the body and the soul. Girish Karnad presents the theme of incompleteness at the three levels: Divine, Human, and Animal. He also used folk theatre conventions like masks, dolls, and the role of a narrator to deal with modern existential issues. The papers also explore how the character in the play suffers from incompleteness and identity crisis.

Key Words: Identity crisis, incompleteness, existentialism, folk theatre, Commonwealth literature, mythology, cultural hybridity.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Girish Karnad is one of the eminent dramatists of Modern Indian theatre and can merge tradition with contemporary art. His contributions to Kannada literature are Vijay Tendulkar to Marathi literature and Badal Sarkar to Bengali literature. Karnad has penned twelve plays, each of his places inimitable with its way of techniques and experiments. Works are initially written in Kannada and translated into English as an integral part of Commonwealth Literature, with Lingua Franca, blending the cultures of East and West in his play, Karnad uses ancient myths to create a contemporary consciousness and existential crisis of modern men.

Girish Karnad's Play *Hayavadana* was published in 1971. Karnad successfully experimented with the theme of folk theatre in his play. In his 'Introduction' to *Hayavadana*, Kirtinath Kurkoti writes: "The plot of *Hayavadana* comes from Kathasaritsagara, an ancient collection of stories in Sanskrit. But Karnad has borrowed it through Thomas Mann's retelling of the story in *The Transposed Heads*...."(1) The play draws effectively upon conventions and motifs of folk tales and folk theatre. Masks, curtains, dolls, and stories inside are carefully used to create a weird world. It's a world of half people, indifferent deities, chatty dolls, mute children, a world that knows nothing of the mortals who feel lust and anger and pleasure and pain.

Themes of incompleteness and identity crisis are explored through existentialist thought intermixed with folklore and mythology. The characters wrestle with fragmentation of identity and a longing for wholeness. This paper aims to analyse how Karnad portrays the inner conflict of the body and the mind, self-wants, and societal needs with the help of characters such as Devadatta, Kapila, Padmini, and *Hayavadana*. The paper will examine the narrative techniques and the symbolic devices with the help of Karnad, who highlights human incompleteness in *Hayavadana*. This paper attempts to realise the truth of human nature in *Hayavadana* with the help of theme, analysis, and exploration.

2. Mythology, Folklore, and the Theme of Incompleteness

A mask of Ganesha is carried onto the stage at the beginning of the play and put on a chair. Bhagavata sings verses in praise of Ganesha along with the musicians after worship.

"O Elephant-headed Herambha whose flag is victor 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 pay homage to you and start our play." (73)

The opening of Hayavadana includes an offering to Lord Ganesha, the deity of imperfect and incomplete. Bhagavata, the narrator, describes Ganesha as "an elephant's head on a human body, a broken tusk and a cracked belly." Heavy with metaphor, the performance captures the play's central theme of incompleteness grounded in three planes of life: the celestial, the mortal, and the bestial.

Hayavadana, an eponymous character in the narrative, depicts the purest form of incompleteness at the nucleus. Born between the battle of his physical and spiritual selves: the body of a man, the head of a horse. His mother was a princess who fell for a celestial being — a horse cursed into that form — adding another level of mythic drama to the tale. Hayavadana's desire for wholeness — first as a male and later as a total horse — is a metaphor for the human craving for self-identity and purpose in a universe that does not care. The ridiculousness of his final transformation into all-but-an-equine being foreshadows the pointlessness of these quests for existential wholeness.

Bhagavata further narrates that two friends were highly close: Devadatta, the wise man, and Kapila, the powerful man. Devadatta gets married to Padmini, while Kapila gets infatuated with Padmini. The two friends murder themselves. In a hilarious scene, Padmini transposes their heads, giving Devdutta Kapila's body and Kapila Devdutta's. Hence, the result is a confusion of identities. Karnad has the power to change any situation in the aesthetic experience. M.K. Naik comments on the technique of the play: "Karnad does not succeed fully in investing the basic conflict in the play with the required intensity, but his technical experiment with an indigenous dramatic form here is a triumph which has opened up fresh lines of fruitful exploration for the Indian English playwright." (2)

3. The Love Triangle: A Microcosm of Human Incompleteness

Hayavadana is centered on the love triangle of Devadatta, Kapila, and Padmini. Devadatta, the Brahmin intellectual; Kapila, the man of iron — the heart and the medicine — the ugly duality of mind and body. But the ideal, and the ultimate union of opposites, the world cannot exist, Pembroke states when Padmini is torn between the intelligence of Devadatta and the body of Kapila.

Padmini's attraction towards Kapila is unveiled on their destination towards Ujjain, which serves as a plot twist. Karnad uses this sensual imagery to express her obsession with Kapila's corporeality while hinting at a tension beneath it. Devadatta's existential crisis deepens when he finds out about Padmini's divided loyalties. Later, their sacrifice at the temple of Kali and the casual switching of heads only further muddles their identities. The bafflement — "Whose wife, she is?" — highlights the absurdity of such strict categorisations of identity and fulfillment.

4. The Psychological and Philosophical Dimensions

Karnad's characters engage in existential and psychological battles that crystallise the ambiguity of human experience. The head-body switch confounds all three protagonists' identities. (Devadatta himself was impatient with her; Padmini, having been duly impressed by the synthesis of Devadatta's head and Kapila's body, was only initially satisfied; she soon realised the transience of anything complete, even Devadatta's future asceticism.) Devadatta's diseased body wilts for want of exercise, so Kapila in the sick and diseased Devadatta's body builds it up by asceticism. That reversal destroys Padmini's sense of fulfillment and resurrects her incompleteness.

Kapila's retreat to the forest and the eventual decline of Devadatta drive home the futility of their efforts to bring harmony to their fractured self. Padmini's decision to die alongside her husband and friend — a blood-soaked theatricality — is the most profound form of embrace of human fallibility. Her acknowledgment that there will be no perfection, not even in the afterlife, encapsulates the existential despair that seeps like bloodstains in and out of the play.

5. Existentialist Concern in Hayavadana

Hayavadana deals with the existential crisis of modern men and women, challenging their own identity and self-fulfillment. The characters' frustrations are mirrored in the split human mind and the inherent contradictions of being. Although she possesses the "perfect" combination of Devadatta's intellect and Kapila's strength, Padmini's dissatisfaction refers to the impossibility of completeness. The lament of the old Hayavadana about his human voice, even though he was a complete horse, brings out the paradox of identity further.

As a narrative of several relations leading to fragmentation and, ultimately, mutilation, Jassbir Jain rightly remarks that the play portrays attempts at shaping connections, which inevitably lead to fragments that are never concrete. This timeless pursuit of identity and completeness resonates poignantly with audiences today and provides Hayavadana with a deep context for modern existential angst.

6. Hayavadana in the Context of Commonwealth Literature

Girish Karnad's Hayavadana is the surreality laid-on folk play, drawing on the templates of folk theatre — masks, the use of dolls, cycles of storytelling folds upon folds one within the other — applying folk conventions to carve out a surreal fluidity delightfully, the elasticity never losing sight of the subject theme — of identity, of incompleteness, of dilemmas of the human beings.

The hands of the characters speak, the masks of the past, and the outbursts themselves signify and enact the fragmented identities of the characters, manifesting their internal struggles. The speaking dolls are extensions of Padmini's subconscious, communicating her repressed desires and maternal urges. Their eventual silence reflects the narrative tragedy of humanness and strengthens the message of incompleteness. Its episodic structure, borrowing from techniques and forms of traditional Indian storytelling such as those articulated in the Kathasaritsagara, also adds depth to its themes by mixing the real with the fantastic. Hayavadana's subplot of a man who wants to be complete comes to a comical climax when he becomes a perfect horse. However, he is regretful because of his human voice, making him realise that he can never become complete. The meta-theatrical aspect is increased by introducing Bhagavata as a narrator who further connects the audience with the story and provides reflections and insights into the progression of events. The invocation to Lord Ganesha at the beginning of the play sets up the motif of imperfection, as Ganesha himself is a symbol of both success and incompleteness, representing the human condition. As he effortlessly weaves folk theatre elements with contemporary narrative elements, Karnad's play becomes one of the ages that play with the line between reality and illusion, a universal reflection on man's struggles and the unique dilemma of existence itself.

7. Conclusion

In Hayavadana, Girish Karnad combined the essentials of cultural pluralism and post-colonial literature in the theme of his play, and Indian myths were fused with Western philosophical concepts in one narrative style. This blending serves as a mirror to Commonwealth literature and shows its tendency to approach universal themes. This theme of identity crisis in the play corresponds with post-colonial interest since its characters cannot define their identity, representing a larger quest for the cultural identity of post-independence India. Karnad's duality as a writer, writing in Kannada and translating his works into English, has bridged the cultural gap between the East and the West, ultimately opening the world of Indian drama to the rest of the world. An adaptation of a Sanskrit play, as well as a cross between the Western gay, lesbian, and Indian male tradition, Hayavadana, speaks not only of themes of identity, existentialism, and relationships but also engages with universal as well as post-colonial concerns, placing it in the same realm as several other commonwealth texts which deal with similar themes.

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