
Longing for Self-Identity in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*

Dr. Dhanaji Nagane

Head, Department of English
Sharadchandraji Pawar College, Jejuri

ABSTRACT

The present article dives into Girish Karnad's Hayavadana to map out the significance of the earnest desire of the characters perfection and self-identity against the backdrop of the features of Indian culture, religion, beliefs, etc. The play is a milestone in the history of Indian Writing in English. Karnad exposes the issue of identity and impersonation leading to conflicts between the mind and the body. This aspect brings us close to the conflict that we face in our daily lives. The conflict between the head and the body is well expressed in Devadatta's words, "I'd always thought one had to use one's brain while wrestling or fencing or swimming. But this body does not wait for thoughts, it acts." The play prospered the regional theatres because of its apt, thought-provoking, mythical, topical and social issues.

Keywords: Perfection, Self-Identity, Mythology, Religion, Beliefs

Introduction

The beginning of Indian Drama can be pointed back to the ancient rituals and seasonal festivities of the Vedic Aryans. Later, different events from the epics *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Bhagvadgita* were picked up and enacted out in public places. There are references to drama in Patanjali's *Vyakarna Mahabhashya*, Vatsyayan's *Kamsutra* and Kautilya's *Arthasastra*. Thus, the origin of Sanskrit dramas dates back to 1000 B.C. Contemporary Indian drama, deviating from classical and European models, is experimental and innovative in terms of thematic and technical qualities. It is not progeny of any specific tradition but it has laid the foundation of a different tradition in the history of world drama by representing history, legend, myth, religion and folk-lore with context to contemporary socio-political issues. An increasing theatrical tradition evolved by Girish Karnad and his contemporaries prepared the background for contemporary Indian English theatre.

Girish Karnad born in 1938 is a versatile playwright and knows the demands of the Indian theatre quite immediately. He has written a large number of plays dealing with various aspects of contemporary Indian society and Indian culture. He has extensively used material from Indian mythology, folklore and the ancient Indian theatrical examples. His plays include *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Yayati*, *Nagamandala*, *Tale-Danda* and *The Fire and the Rain*. Karnad's plays effectively weave the contemporary context in their structure. Contemporary socio-political and cultural issues are dramatized through the use of myth, legend and folklore. Karnad also takes important problems of caste, heredity, religion and gender and knits them into the texture of his plays. The political disillusionment of post Nehruvian regime, its ambiguities and paradox are brilliantly dramatized in a play like *Tughlaq*. In his plays like *Hayavadana* and *Yayati*, Karnad deals with unconventional themes.

In *Hayavadana*, Karnad effectively dramatizes the conflict between the body and the soul. The question of physical vitality versus intellectual power is powerfully dramatized in the characters of Devadutta and Kapila. As a member of Brahmin caste Devadutta possesses all the virtues and qualities of an intelligent class. He is preoccupied with reading and knowledge and spends most of the time in his study. As a consequence he

grows physically weak, pale and thin. Kapila to the contrary belong to a lower caste and quite naturally, he is physically strong and sturdy. The contrast between Devadutta and Kapila powerfully illuminates the age old caste narrative stereotyping human beings according to their origins and caste. It is a highly revealing comment on the nature of a caste based society and the notions of intellectual superiority and physical sturdiness that are governed by the caste paradigm. The subject is relevant to the contemporary society.

Karnad sets in motion *Hayavadana* with a prayer to Ganesha "*the destroyer of incompleteness*" as he is called the husband of Riddhi (style) and Siddhi (talent). It is believed that Riddhi cannot exist without Siddhi, and Siddhi counterfeits its identity with the appropriate Riddhi. The harmonizations of these two features shape the ideal of appropriateness that Karnad endeavors to achieve throughout the play through his heroine, Padmini. The play attracts our attention to the thought-provoking questions such as what decides our identity. Whether it is decided by the facial beauty and intelligence or strength and physical powers. Likewise, Devadutta and Kapila are these two attributes personified respectively. But the two are envisaged only as complementary entities such as Lava and Kusha, Rama and Lakshmana, Krishna and Balarama and are not considered as a fused thing.

Since the beginning of human race on the earth, the head has gained predominance over the body. It is observed through the frequent speeches of the Bhagavata, the omniscient narrator, who himself declares that the head defines the identity of a man. But the Bhagavata himself reverses the same when he addresses Hayavadana in the first part of the play as "*poor man*", even though Hayavadana possesses the head of a horse. Although, the voice of the Bhagavata declares that the head is supreme, the tale of Hayavadana seems to echo that the body is superlative. The image of the prince controlling the horse indicates the head, and the horse may signify the body. Contrary to these two, the main plot shuttles between the priority over the head and the body.

As Ganesha was the husband of Siddhi and Riddhi, Padmini is projected as the lover of intelligence and strength i.e. Devadutta and Kapila respectively. However, she fails to form a harmonious whole. On the contrary she is entangled between these two personalities, and this leads to a split in her identity and her mental imbalance that is clearly visible in the stimulating scenes that projects her as a woman bathing and dancing in the blood of the two men. Padmini, the female protagonist, is a mentally disturbed individual caught between knowledge and power. This becomes implicit in the doorframe of her house which has on it the engraving of a two-headed bird. A bird instantly signifies a female. Having two heads, its individuality can never remain in integrity as one head will always strive to assert superiority over the other. Kapila strikes the chord when he claims, "*A proper two-headed bird. But it is so tiny you can't see it at all unless you are willing to tear your eyes staring at it.*" (P.16). This aspect is solely psychological. Padmini is legally wedded wife of Devadutta and she loves him for his fair look and intellect; on the other hand she is attracted to Kapila for his physical elegance and power. This attraction of Padmini leads to flourish her friendship with Kapila and consequently to the acute crisis of identity. She herself asserts that the song, "*Is this one that / Or that one this?*" points to her autobiography. When Padmini envisages Kapila during their trip to forest, she loses her sense of propriety and attracts towards Kapila's muscular body. Here the omnipresent narrator, the Bhagavata chants, "*And the head is bidding good-bye to the heart.*" (P.25) because Padmini demotes Devadutta to the background and gets fascinated with Kapila as she inwardly utters, "*And what an ethereal shape.*" (P.25).

Padmini figures out that Devadutta and Kapila have committed suicide and lose her sense of proportion. Her identity is deeply entangled with any of the two and her existence too. Paradoxically, she either loses both or acquires association with the two leading to a commencement of phobia. Her consistent existence depends on the presence of either of them. Eventually, she finds herself in intense euphoria when she combines the head of Devadutta and the body of Kapila. This union signifies and symbolizes her temporal stability. Padmini wants to procure something beyond an earthly concept which she calls the perfect combination, "*My celestial-bodied Gandharva.*"(P.41) In contrast, the princess of Karnataka seems more down to earth', literally and metaphorically, in that she endeavors on securing an earthly being and rejecting a celestial being. Her temporal constancy enables her to behave like a normal human being. However, even in that state of condition, there are traces of her earlier self in consoling Kapila. At a later stage, Karnad utilizes dolls to interpret Padmini's dreams. Even at that unconscious level there is a split-hence Doll I and Doll II. Also, note that the dolls are dressed in such a way that it is difficult to decipher their sex; as conscience has no gender.

DOLL I: Is that little Satan asleep yet?

DOLL II: Think so. God! It's killing me.

DOLL I: Crying all day.

DOLL II: Making a mess every fifteen minutes.

DOLL I: His palms! They were rough when he first brought us here like a laborer's. But now they are soft, sickly soft like a young girl's. (P. 45)

Dolls are generally acquainted with soft hands. If Doll I therefore, calls it "*sickly soft*" it is not from its personal point of view but that of Padmini's. And it speaks so, immediately after Padmini touches Devadutta and shudders realizing the fact that he has transformed into his original form. The split becomes more prominent as the dolls begin quarrelling with each other (this reflecting the conflict in her mind) and Padmini tries to achieve the ideal concept in her imaginative lullaby. First the paragon of her dreams is constructed in the song '*Here comes a rider!*' (P. 47) and subsequently her failure to achieve this in reality is reflected in the latter part.

Padmini wheedles Devadutta into believing that she does not care about Kapila anymore. At any rate, as soon as she closes her eyes, the dolls start speaking of the visitor in her dreams. As Devadutta transforms into his original self once again, the split becomes almost complete in Padmini; and she becomes aggressive. A schizoid individual does things in secrecy and the tattered dolls can be attributed to this. Furthermore, with the dolls is associated a sense of honest propriety or what one would call the morality principle and she has to discard them before she leaves for Kapila.

When Padmini goes to Kapila again, he pleads with her to go away. He hits the hammer on the nail when he retorts, "*What do you want now? Another head?*" (P. 52) Padmini clearly reflects that she is an entity caught between two different identities of association. She says, "*Yes, you won Kapila. Devadutta won too. But I, the better half of the two bodies- I neither win nor lose.*"(P.55)

The realization of the split reaches its saturation point when Devadutta and Kapila meet each other in complete honesty at the end of the play. Padmini comprehends that both cannot co-exist within her at the same time. She knew that they both could not have lived together in her blood, because they had to share not only her body but share theirs' as well.

KAPILA: *Devadutta, couldn't we all live together like the Pandavas and Draupadi.*

DEVADUTTA: *What do you think?*

KAPILA: *No it cannot be done. (P.60)*

Finally, we find the Bhagavata presenting the crack in Padmini's self in emblematic terms, "After sharing with Indra His wine His food His jokes I returned to the earth and saw from far- a crack had appeared in the earth's face- exactly like Indra's smile." (P .61) The only solution to this is the exercising of the ghosts of Kapila and Devadutta, and in turn suicide for Padmini. The playwright achieves this in a remarkable metaphor. As the two slay each other, Padmini jumps into the funeral pyre in the ritual of Sati. As their fight is stylized like a dance, Padmini's reaction is also in the form of a dance synchronizing with the former. In expressionistic terms, this dance is exemplary to Padmini's identity crisis.

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