

**A Mythical and Theatrical Perspective:  
Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*  
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**Abstract**

Girish Karnad is one of the most renowned, leading playwrights of contemporary India. He has been very successful practitioner of performing arts. He has contributed a lot to Indian English drama by producing such monumental works in play genres, which deal with the culture of India past. His plays show the vivid example of Indian myth-a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or special phenomenon, and typically involving super natural elements as it represents the social value, the principles of life, shared experience of race, the norms and codes of society. He takes the myth not entirely but only in parts and weaves it through the web of his dramatic imagination into tale of his own. He has also written the historical plays dealing with ancient Indian king, Mughal king. He takes an aspect of their life and gives a contemporary interpretation. The dominant presence of the ancient and medieval past in Karnad's play is the result of both personal and cultural compilations. He has recreated the rich and dynamic picture of Indian society, culture and its people. He often talks of Indian folklore cultural, about the life of people, their experience and their beliefs in divine being and humanity.

**Keywords:** Mythical, Theatrical Perspective, Folklore, Alienation Effect, Complex Seeing

Indian drama written in English by Indian playwrights makes intensive use of tradition, myths, legends and folklore. Most of the playwrights in India have either written in such a traditional manner that it lost relevance to their urban existence or they have written in such an urbanized manner that it lost its relevance to the traditional part of their personality. In this regard Karnad comments "we keep acerbating between the traditional and the modern, perhaps we could not hit upon a form which could balance both."(TP) But in the case of matter is different. He writes in such a way that he neither losses the traditionalistic approach of native culture nor the urbanity of urban and western theatre. He feels that they are very much relevant today, and hence, seeks to adopt myths and western theatrical devices of in his plays. Thus, with his plays he creates a bridge between the ancient and the modern to serve his purpose of using the past to illuminate the present.

Myth and folklore, the basis for *Hayavadna*, *Bali* and *Naga Mandala*, evoke the personal experience of author's life. They are congruous with resources of both realism and an essential theatrical anti-realism technique (music, mime, magic), and foreground the lives of women of

working class. Majority of his plays employ the narratives of myth, history and folklore to invoke an ancient or pre-modern world that resonates in contemporary context because of his prodigious ability to remake the past in the image of present. Thus, he roots the contemporary concern in old myth to present in effective way. He does not take myths in their entirety, but he takes them only in parts that are useful to him and the rest he supplements with his imagination. In this regard Karnad himself says in his introduction to three plays that, “The myth had enabled me to articulate to myself a set of values that I had been unable to arrive at rationally.”(TP) In this way, he attempts to balance both in his plays.

The play *Hayavadana* has its origin from the folklore tradition of India. It abounds in the frequent use of myth like the Talking Dolls, Lantana tree, Midnight Bride and the four famous religious places and so on where people use to go to achieve salvation. Its theme is derived from Somdeva’s *Kathasritsagar*, a collection of stories in Sanskrit literature. It is a famous collection of Indian legends, fairy tales and folktales written in 11th century. But he has primarily used in the play Mann’s version of the story which advocates the theme of mind vs. flesh and head versus body. The transposition is the creation of Mann in the original story of Sanskrit the dilemma remains unsolved with whom she would go whereas Mann has given the solution of the problem in his play. Karnad has applied the central theme, the story of Devadatta, Kapila and Padmini and their changing of heads from the novel *The Transposed Heads* Written by Thomas Mann to project the theme of fundamental ambiguity of human life. Karnad has dealt the issue with the existentialist perspective signifying toward the search of identity and completeness. In this regard the observation of K. Rajendran is to be taken in consideration as he writes, “Mann’s version of the tale treats the spirit versus the flesh theme. Karnad handles the tale to relate the problems of identity. After the transposition of heads, Devadutta and Kapila lose their identities.”

The theme of the play symbolizes the *Upanisadic* principle that visualizes the human body as a symbol of the organic relationship of the parts to the whole. Beyond its philosophical reflection on identity and its self-reflexive structure, *Hayavadana* also resonates in present dramatic and cultural contexts because it gives primacy to women in the psychosexual relations of marriage, and provides a space for the expression, even the fulfillment of amorous female desire within the constraints of patriarchy. In this respect, the genre of urban folk theatre to which *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala* belong, offer a radical contrast to the representation of women in the urban realist drama. *Hayavadana* begins with an invocation of Lord Ganesha, the mythical character, the younger son of lord Shiva, the remover of all obstacles, is to be worshiped first among the Gods. The mythical figure of lord Ganesha represents a perfect blend of three different worlds of experience- The divine, the human and the animal which in turn becomes the central sub plot too i.e. the story of three person going to a temple, since it foreshadows the character of *Hayavadana*. With *Hayavadana* Karnad has taken us back to the myths and legends of the Hindu religion. He makes the play an interesting study of man’s quest for a complete and wholesome experience of life. For this he joins the *Transposed*

*Heads of Mann* with *Hayavadana* a story which is entirely his own invention to represent the whole crisis of existentialism problem which is search of one's own identity in this world. In her Essay, 'A Re-Writing of Girish Karnad's Plays with Reference to Myth and Folklore.' Veena Noble Das says, "Hayavadan is based on Indian myth. The play tells a story embellished with the truth of life and incongruities of our existence capsulated in fantasy. It is simultaneously a story, a social satire and the psychological study of a woman."

Karnad has used in most of his plays the folk theatre of India. Karnad has very successfully employed the folk drama in *Hayavadana* to present the perennial problems of identity and search of completeness. He chooses to write about a known story because an old story gives the dramatist the opportunity to elaborate unnoticed aspect. At this point of representation, to some extent the author has applied the objective correlative theory of T. S. Eliot. That is to find best object to express emotions and ideas. It has found its best expression in this play. In the post-colonial society, the identity crisis has become a major issue. Folk imagination is at once mythopoeia and magical. In the folk mind one subsumes the other. All folk lore is religious, often based on animism because the primitive imagination extends its vision from the natural, in which it is steeped and with which it is saturated, to the supernatural" (Rangan) He chooses events / episodes from Indian mythology to question their values and relevance in the present context. His mythical characters are archetypes, manifestation of general human characteristics placed in contemporary context and deal with contemporary situations. There is no easy solution provided in his plays. To quote Karnad again, "The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values, of making them literally stand on their head."

The present paper is all about the mythical perspective of the author in the play *Hayavadana*. The play has two plots the main plot dealing with the life and problems of three persons Devadutta - a formal mode of addressing a stranger, Padmini- One of the six types of women, whose name Karnad has derived from the *Kamsutra* of Vatsyayan and Kapila meaning -the dark one. The sub plot of the play is concerned with the story of Hayavadana (character) one with men's body and horse head and human voice that is in search of completeness. This story of Hayavadana (character) is of Karnad's own invention telling about the marriage of Karnataka princess who chooses to marry with a horse, a Ghandharva, was cursed by the god Kubera the God of wealth to spent some fourteen year with human then only he will be freed from his curse of disobedience in Hindu mythology. In the coming time after living with fourteen year with the princess of Karnataka the horse one day turns out to be a beautiful Ghandarva (the Celestial being). He then asks the princess to go with him to the heavenly abode, but she refused to go as she said that she would only accompany him if he becomes the horse again. Then hearing this, he cursed his wife to be a mule. Thus, Hayavadana (character) was born. In this way without doing anything wrong the protagonist has to face such great problem of hoarse head with human voice.

The main plot of the play is, narrated by Bhagavat, who is the narrator of the play, like the narrator Arkadi in the play *Caucasian Chalk Circle* of Brecht, the story of Devadutta, Padmini and Kapila. The two of them Devdutta and Kapila were close friends. They were such friend that they fell incomplete without the other. The Bhagavat compares their friendship with the pair of mythical character Lova and Kush Krishan and Balaram. Devadutta was a learned person known for his learning of Vedas and Purans he was the star of every one's eyes. Kapila, the son of a blacksmith, was not less loved by the people of Dhhrampura the place where they lived. He was famous for his muscular body and wrestling. He was a person of lower-class society. He was not fair enough as Devadutta but they were the mind and heart of friendship. One day Devadutta sees Padmini. He falls in love with her. He was so deeply in love with her that he promises to offer his head to lord Rudra and hands to the Goddess Kali if he gets Padmini as his wedded wife. He, Devadutta is finally married with Padmini with the help of his friend Kaipala. They live their life happily for some time. Gradually Padmini feels attracted towards Kapila due to his robust body. They set out to see the fair of Ujjain on the way they stop to take rest where by chance they find a temple of Kali the most powerful goddess in Hindu mythology and Rudra- God of destruction in the Hindu mythology and supposed to be the most powerful of all Gods. On seeing the temple Devadutta remembers the promises which he has made to get Padmini. And he decides to offer his head. To do so he requests two to go to the temple of Rudra so that he may fulfill his desire of beheading himself accordingly to the promise. Then he beheads himself as offering to the goddess Kali. On seeing that his dearest friend is dead Kapila also cuts his head. Finally Padmini for fear of the society is also ready to cut her head then the goddess Kali appears and asks her to set their head to their bodies and touch with the sword then they will be alive again Padmini does so but in haste she mixes the head to the one another body. With the intervention of supernatural power Kali, the central theme of the play unfolds. In *Hayavadana*, the presence of Goddess Kali reveals the religious sentiment prevalent in Indian society, and culture. Religion and ritual not only form a part of the narrative to the play but also are integral to the dramatic representation of the play. In words of Alexander Pope the use of supernatural machinery. Then the dilemma comes with whom Padmini will go as wife. The problem is solved by Rishi that head is supreme in the human body so the body with Devadutta's head is the husband of Padmini.

Thus, half desire of Padmini of fabulous body and fabulous brain fulfils but only for a short span of time. With the passage of time the head wins over the body and both Devadutta and Kapila turns to their real self as they were earlier in their life. Meanwhile Padmini gives birth of a beautiful son. The happiness of sensuous pleasure does not last long. Once again Padmini dreams about Kapila. She goes to the forest to meet Kapila where he has been living since the incident of transposition. This time both fight to gain Padmini as their wife and finally they kill each other and Padmini becomes sati by burning with their bodies. Thus, her desire of completeness never comes true. She says that he should be kept five years to the forest as the son of Kapila and after that he should be sent to the reverend Brahmin Vidyasagar as the son of Devadutta. She wishes to gain her son the complete

mixture of brain and body what she could not get in her life. In the end of the play Hayavadana (character) goes to the same temple of Kali where his desire to be complete comes true. He becomes complete horse, but human voice does not change. But when he comes with the child in the end of the play, his voice eventually changes in the voice of horse. Thus, he becomes a complete horse.

Karnad has adopted the narrative technique of Brecht in his play there is a narrator, Bhagavat like Arkadi in the play *Caucasian Chalk Circle* of Brecht. The whole story is put in the mouth of the Bhagavat who timely provides commentary on the scene of the play which is the chief characteristic of alienation effect of Brecht. He reveals the impact of Brecht's theatrical techniques on his plays especially with regard to his use of indigenous dramatic forms. He says, "I read the basic western canon- the Greek plays, Shakespeare, Shaw, O'Neil, Anouilh, Brecht Sartre, and Camus. Brecht's technique influenced me a great deal in the earlier years." In the play the dramatist has applied the Alienation Effect, which is a key feature of Epic Theatre invented by Bertolt Brecht, German playwright of 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is a dramatic device used by the playwrights to break the emotional attachment of the audience with the events and happening on the stage so that they may critically observe the play rather than passively accept the solution provided by the author. It is used to raise the critical ability of the audience as well as the actor not to emotionally involve the characters they are playing. That is why they are made constantly aware of the fact this only play for the pure entertainment. He has used technique in the play *Hayavadana*. He has used both the telling and showing technique of drama in his play. In Plato's words it is *Mimesis* and *Diegesis*. In the regard of using alienation effect, he says that the separation of the audience from the stage by the proscenium, underscoring the fact that what was being presented was a spectacle free of any ritualistic associations and which therefore expected no direct participation by the audience in it; and the other was the of pure entertainment."

There is enough influence of German Philosophy and the theatrical devices too in the play *Hayavadna*. K. Narasimhamurthy writes: "*Hayavadana* is a Brechtian kind of play employing native folk theatre strategies to present through a folk tale man's tragically futile aspiration for perfection.<sup>8</sup> Regarding the usage of western influence Karnad in his introduction to three plays says, "oddly enough the play owed its form not the innumerable mythological plays I had been brought up on, and which had partly kept these myths alive for me, but to western playwrights whom until then I have read only in print: Anouilh (his *Antigone* particularly) and also Sartre, O'Neill, and the Greeks." He has used the existentialist philosophy of Sartre in the play. He has used the mask technique of O'Neil in the play. The first and foremost influential play which influenced him most was the *Miss Julie*- a realist and naturalistic tragedy of August Strindberg. There is plenty of influence of western playwrights and their techniques in his plays. Nobody can deny the fact; even the playwright has acknowledged this fact in the introduction of Three Plays. I will conclude my paper with statement of book review, "Karnad's plays ... have greatly contributed to the enrichment of contemporary theatre... [They] have great perform ability; [Karnad], in a way, is directors' playwright." No doubt he has contributed a lot to the Indian drama by writing such monumental works in play genre which deal with the past Indian culture. He has revived the culture by writing the plays about the great

Indian culture. He has used the various conventions-the chorus, the masks, the seemingly unrelated comic episodes, and the mixture of human and nonhuman worlds, which gave to the simultaneous presentation of alternative point of view, of alternative attitudes to the central problem. To use the phrase Bertolt Brecht, these conventions then allow for ‘Complex seeing.’

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