

# Crisis of Human Identity : A Case Study of Girish Karnad's Play Hayavadana

## Abstract

Girish Karnad mostly employs mythical and folk themes as the skeleton for his plays, and makes an innovative experiment with them. His play Hayavadana (Horse – face ) is an unusual play in the theatrical history of modern India. Hayavadana stands out as an incomparable play showing the crisis of human identity. The play's main plot and subplot reveal the same thought. In the beginning of the play, as Sutradhara narrates, Devadatta and Kapila are the closest of friends- 'One mind, one heart'. Devadatta is a man of intellect, Kapila is a man of body. Their relation gets complicated when Devadatta marries Padmini. Kapila falls in love with Padmini and she starts drifting towards him. The friends kill themselves and in a scene of dramatic implications Padmini transposes their heads, giving Davadatta Kapila's body and to Kapila Devadatta's. It results in a confusion of identity.

The subplot horse man deepens the significance of the main theme of the play by treating it on a different plane. Hayavadana embodies the theme in his physical appearance of equine head and anthropic body. In fact, the crisis of human identity is displayed at the core of the main plot and the subplot. Consequently it acts as a link between the two leading the play a compact unity. Thus, the thrust of the paper is to explore the identity crisis in a unique context stringing two threads of stories together.

**Keyword:** Myth, Folk, Identity.

### Introduction

Girish Raghunath Karnad, a well known contemporary playwright and man of many talents, exhibits his skill of presenting an unique theme of identity crisis through his unusual play Hayavadana (Horse – face) in the theatrical history of modern India. The theme is suggested in the play in phrases such as 'search for completeness' and 'this mad dance of incompleteness'. A modern source of the plot of Hayavadana is Thomas Mann's story, The Transposed Heads. Hayavadana stands out as an incomparable play of incompleteness and identity crisis. The play's main plot and subplot reveal the same thought."The two threads of action woven together in Hayavadana together present a theme, which may be summed up as the totality of being to be achieved through the integration of the self and the wholeness of personality" (Chakraborty 131-132). As in the words of Kurtkoti: "Karnad's play poses a different problem, that of human identity in a world of tangled relation" (Karnad V-VI).

In the beginning of the play, as Sutradhara narrates, Devadatta and Kapila are the closest of friends- 'One mind, one heart'. Devadatta is a man of intellect, Kapila is a man of body. Their relation gets complicated when Devadatta marries Padmini. Kapila falls in love with Padmini and she starts drifting towards him. The friends kill themselves and in a scene of dramatic implications Padmini transposes their heads, giving Davadatta Kapila's body and to Kapila Devadatta's. Resulting in a confusion of identities which reveals the ambiguous nature of human mind and personality. "The irony of the transposed heads on the bodies of two friends, who stand at opposite poles of personality viz., the intellectual versus the activist is employed here to raise the problem of identity" (Naik 275). Padmini lacks the psychological and philosophical ability in her quest for a complete man.

The subplot horse man deepens the significance of the main theme of incompleteness by treating it on a different plane. Hayavadana embodies the theme in his physical appearance of equine head and anthropic body. The horseman's search for completeness ends comically with his becoming a complete horse. In fact, the question of identity crisis is at the core of the main plot and the subplot. Consequently it acts as a link between the two leading the play a compact unity. An attempt is made to have a look at the play and analyze how Karnad employs the theme of identity crisis in the play. The play presents several instances of fractured

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personality suffering from want of integration. The two threads of action woven together in Hayavadana unitedly present a theme than can be comprised together as the totality of being to be achieved through the integration of the self and the wholeness of personality. After the transposition Devadatta and Kapila became fragmented creatures. Padmini also is torn between the two. Devadatta's son loses the child's natural privilege to laugh and to wonder at things. The problem that is before us in the play is that of human identity in a world of tangled relationships.

The subplot, Hayavadana story, is an instance of deep identity crisis. "The sub-plot of Hayavadana, the horse-man, deepens the significance of the man theme of incompleteness by treating it on a different plane" (Vaja 120). Hayavadana, the man with the horse's head somehow wants to regain his identity and asks Bhagavata: "All my life I've been trying to get rid of this head. I thought – you with all your goodness and punya if at least managed to pull it off..."(Karnad 7). Hayavadana is the son of princess of Karnataka. She was a beautiful girl who was permitted to choose her husband. She did not like any of the princes who thronged to get her. She fainted when she saw the handsome prince of Araby sitting on his great white Stallion. When her father decided to marry her off to the prince she said that she would marry the horse: "So ultimately she was married off to the white stallion. She lived with him for fifteen years. One morning she wakes up and no horse ! In its place stood a beautiful celestial Being, a gandharva" (Karnad 8).

The gandharva was cursed by the God Kuvera to be born a horse for some act of misbehavior. After fifteen years of love he had acquired his original self. He wanted his wife to accompany him to his heavenly abode. But she would not. She said she would go only if he became a horse again. So he cursed her to become a horse herself. Hayavadana's mother became a horse and ran away happily. His father went back to his heavenly Abode. Only Hayavadana was left behind. Hayavadana has a human body and an equine head but he is not like God Ganesha. Though he is born of a Gandharva father, he is not one because he does not have divine powers like his father to change his own shape or that of others. He is neither a man nor a horse, though he has features of both. Thus, Hayavadana is incomplete and without identity but he is unable to accept his fate. Within his range of experience, he desires to look like other human beings in order that he may belong to their society. Hence his search is for completeness – a complete human being.

Hayavadana wanted to change into a complete man. He possessed a horse's head but a man's body and voice, but his luck, unfortunately is bad enough to change him into a complete horse for the Goddess of Mount Chitrakoot does not wait to listen to his full prayer for becoming a full man. Contrary to his longing the changes in the end to a full fledged horse like his own mother. The conversion testifies to the supremacy of head over body. The main problem posed by Karnad through Hayavadana is not simply how the later could become a complete man or horse. It is more of a why : Why was he born like this? Who is responsible for his present condition? When Hayavadana says only I – the child of their marriages was

left behind, there is a sort of intense repulsion about his parents. His celestial father had left for heaven and his earthly mother, turned into a mare by her husband's curse on her demand to stay on the earth, joined the equine family happily. Now the child Hayavadana is left alone on the earth to search for its' equine face. Since he does not belong to the human or the animal world proper, he asks Bhagavata: "But where is my society? Where? You must help me to become a complete man, Bhagavata Sir, But how? What can I do?"(Karnad 9) But Bhagavata is unable to answer him satisfactorily. As these questions are not easy to answer because Hayavadana is neither a complete horse nor a complete man if he would have been a man. He would have accepted it as his fate or destiny, and what is written on the foreheads can not be altered. Contrary to this he would have a horse, no power of reasoning and a sense of belonging and recognition for himself.

Hayavadana tries to get rid off his horse-head. He visited every corner of the earth and all men who could have helped him. He had to cover his face every where despite having a blameless life. Hayavadana's problem does not seem to be solved. After Bhagavata's suggestion he goes to Goddess Kali and threatens to chop off his head and once again the goddess's ambiguous boon creates another problem while solving one. In response to Hayavadana's prayer, 'make me complete' the goddess makes him a complete horse, not a complete man and in addition to this, Hayavadana still retains his human voice. Now his trouble is how to remove it. This time he does not have to go to any god or goddess. His liberation is complete only when he laughs to amuse Padmini's child. He loses his human voice and gets his proper neigh that is, he becomes a complete horse and thus a complete being. Hayavadana himself, in turn, brings about a welcome transformation in this boy who is predictably abnormal, for he has forgotten how to laugh. It is Hayavadana's laughter which has earlier restored to boy to normalcy. Thus Hayavadana's efforts suggest that the totality of being can be achieved through the integration of the self and the wholeness of personality.

Generally it is said that animals, including chimpanzees, do not take pleasure in looking at their own image in the mirror. As a result, they do not have desires for wholeness as human beings do. Both Hayavadana and his mother are disturbed by the desire for recognition so long as they have traces of human beings, especially language. Once they are turned into a complete horse, the desire for recognition or problem of identity does not operate in them. Then, it is possible to conjecture that both gods and animals do not suffer from the problem of recognition or identity of their own image in the mirror consequently, they do not have to seek an imaginary wholeness which may bring them harmony and happiness. But the ill-starred human beings, being what they are, are driven to search for the unattainable ideal. In several cases, this impossible search ends in inevitable destruction which is performed by the protagonists of the main plot Devadatta, Kapila and Padmini.

Devadatta is a slender and delicate person while Kapila is powerfully built person. Kapila is not interested in poetry and literature where as Devadatta is very much interested. Devadatta is a pundit and a poet

and having a desire for outshining Kalidasa and his Shakuntalam. Devadatta, who is often caught in the tangle of desire, he has fallen in love more than fifteen girls in two years. He falls in love with Padmini too and he swears that if ever he got her as his wife, he would sacrifice his own arms to the goddess Kali and head to Rudra. Thus, he develops the fatal desire for possessing her by marriage. That is to say when Devadatta tries to associate his identity with Padmini through marriage for another identity of becoming a great poet allegedly for excelling Kalidasa, but this proved to be destructive in the end. Devadatta, himself, is unable to fulfill his desire because of his weak character. His desire, then, is fulfilled by Kapila, his close friend. After the marriage Devadatta is again, unable to maintain the acquired status and position. When Devadatta is frustrated due to non-recognition of his desire by Padmini, he proceeds to execute his vow. He forgets his wife, his friend and most importantly his desire for surpassing Kalidasa. As the opportunity comes up in the forest Devadatta goes to the Kali temple and commits suicide, uttering the following words

Bhavani, Bhavani, Kali, Durga, Mahamaya, Mother of all Nature – I had forgotten my promise to you. Forgive me, Mother. You fulfilled the deepest craving of my life-you gave me Padmini-and I forgot my word. Forgive me, for I'm here now to carry out my promise (Karnad 28).

Kapila, who is in search of Devadatta, goes to the Kali temple and finds him dead. He comes to the conclusion that he cannot live without his friend. "I can't breathe without you Devadatta my brother, my father, my friend ..." (Karnad 30). Thus, Kapila too commits suicide as a true friend of Devadatta. The fact is that the bondage between Devadatta and Kapila has been established prior to the introduction of Padmini. A complementary relationship can be seen between them also head + body = complete man. Padmini as a weak complement of Devadatta and as a strong complement of Kapila is a late arrival. Padmini is shocked to find both Devadatta and Kapila dead. Staring at the body she lets out a terrified scream: "Oh, Devadatta, what did I do that you left me alone in this state? Was that how much you loved me? And you, Kapila, who looked at me with dog's eyes- you too." (Karnad 31)

She decides to kill herself with the very same sword but is stopped by the goddess who asks her to put it down. Padmini pleads with the goddess to bring Devadatta and Kapila back to life. Kali advises her to put the heads back properly, attach them to their bodies and then press the sword on their necks. She does as she is told and both of them are brought back to life. In her confused state of mind she bungles wrongly and invites for more suffering because the crisis has to be faced by her. The plot takes an interesting turn at this point and the real identity crisis begins here. Padmini in her excitement has mixed up the heads and Devadatta's head goes to Kapila's body and vice versa. The transposition of heads poses various questions related to the identity of each individual. Kapila starts feeling his head heavy and Devadatta feels his head weighing a ton. On the other hand, the transposed Devadatta and Kapila thank her because, as Kapila says, "Now we are blood relations! Body relations!"

(Karnad 36). And he considers the exchange of heads as a gift. While the desire of both Devadatta and Kapila has been one, to be unified. The desire of Padmini, too, is that they should be one head and heart.

The identity crisis reaches its peak when Devadatta asks Kapila whether he loves Padmini. He replies in the affirmative. Finally, Devadatta and Kapila agree that the only solution for both of them is to die. At this juncture they talk about the identity crisis that they are made to experience: "With what confidence we chopped off our heads in that temple ! Now whose head – whose body – suicide and murder – nothing clear" (Karnad 61). They start fighting and both lie dead thus putting an end to the problem at least in their lives. At the same time it poses another question chiefly concerned with the social and psychological problem of a woman living with more than one husband, in addition to the problem of the future of the children. This cultural importance of society carries with it the crisis of identity-incompleteness and mind-body dichotomy together. After this fighting Padmini is made to face the crisis. She says that "If I had said yes I'll live with you both, perhaps they would have been alive yet. But I could not say it. I know it in my blood you could not have lived together" (Karnad 62). Thus, Padmini, torn between the two is also a house divided against itself. The crisis is then carried over to the child. Padmini tells Bhagavata to give her child to the hunters who live in the forest and tell them it is Kapila's son when the child is five years old she would like him to be taken to the Brahmin Vidyasagara of Dharmapura and tell him it is Devadatta's son. The presentation of the child's predicament is interesting.

This son of Devadatta becomes an orphan and is initially accepted by the forest people as Kapila's son but is soon rejected by them as a child of the city. He is alienated creature, dumb and morose. He is hopelessly incomplete, for he has lost the child's natural privilege to laugh and to wonder at things. The alienation of Padmini's child is total. The boy refuses to communicate with any person but is passionately attached to his dolls, resisting fiercely any attempt on the part of any one even to touch them. This suggests his absorption in a world of make believe from which he has no desire to emerge. The sight of a laughing horse, however, suddenly breaks the barrier as his innate child like sense of wonder and delight. It is this laughter that restores him to normalcy, after which he drops the dolls. Thus, the child becomes the full member of the family and the society.

To conclude, Girish Karnad's Hayavadana is a play of desires – a drama as well as a game of the desire for recognition. We find the mind asserting itself fully over the body with a result that the physical features begin to change radically. Each person regains his identity. Devadatta and Kapila who reappear in the temple of Kali in the second act are in no way different from the pair who sacrifice themselves in the first act of the play. The parable thereby asserts that identity is essentially met. Hayavadana searches for human completeness but attains animal completeness, contrary to this longing he changes to a full fledged horse like his own mother in the end. This conversion also testifies to the supremacy of head over body. His mother marries a horse and is cursed to become a

horse. Both of them regress to the stage of animal life where there is no problem of wholeness or of recognition. Lord Ganesha on the other hand remains at the divine level, though incomplete and imperfect. He is paradoxically the destroyer of incompleteness as also the master of perfection. Obviously, he appears to be a true subject without any illusion of wholeness. At the human level, Devadatta, Kapila and Padmini are trapped in the triangle of desire for recognition. Padmini's metonymic desire is played out through the transposition of heads, leading to the tragic end of all the three the child of Padmini refuses to enter on the stage. However, Hayavadana enables him to laugh and speak normally. His entry into it suggests the continuity of the endless chain of desires for recognition. Goddess Kali is unique in the sense that she is divinity but suffers from the agony of desire for recognition because she speaks the human language. In this way we clearly observe that in "the play Hyavadana, Karnad skillfully mirrors the search for the identity through his characters" (Pandey 78). In all, the desire for recognition or the crisis in human identity is useful in understanding the complex motives of Karnad's characters in Hayavadana who move along the signifying chain of desires till they reach the stage of speechlessness and death.

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