



# Representation of the Quest for Identity and Completeness in Girish Karnad's Hayavadana

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## Abstract

Girish Karnad, one of the greatest Indian postmodern English playwrights, explores in his 'Hayavadana' a Man's search for his own self among a web of complex relationships. He exemplifies incompleteness in three levels-human, animal and celestial of creation in the world. The play shows the conflict between the body and the soul. The main plot of the play involves a love- triangle between two men –Devedatta and Kapila, the best and closest friends and a woman Padmini who desires both men for their specific qualities. The sub-plot is about Hayavadana, a man with horse's head seeking completion in life in the form of a human being. His important plays including Hayavadana, Nagamandala, Tughlaq are the reflection of the culture in our society. Focusing on our folk-culture, Karnad takes inspiration from mythology and folklore. And with Hayavadana, he has taken us back to the myths and legends of the Hindu religion .The present paper explores how every character in the play suffers from the identity crisis and the incompleteness and how among these characters only Hayavadana and the child of Devadatta and Padmini will succeed to get back their identity and completeness.

**Keywords:** Alienation, conflict, heterogeneous, identity crisis, incompleteness, mythology.

## Introduction

Girish Karnad's Hayavadana is a bold and successful experiment on folk theme. Its plot comes from Kathasaritsagar, an ancient collection of stories in Sanskrit. But Karnad's play is mainly based on Thomas Mann's retelling of the story 'The Transposed Heads'. Mann imports a mock-heroic dimension to the Sanskrit tale which is narrated by a ghost to an adventurous king. Kirtinath Kurtkoti writes about the tale: The original poses a moral problem while Mann uses it to ridicule the mechanical conception of life which differentiates between body and soul. He ridicules the philosophy which holds the head superior to the body. Mann argues, the human body is a fit instrument for the fulfilment of human destiny. Even the transposition of heads will not liberate the protagonists from the psychological limits imposed by nature. Karnad's play poses a different problem – that of human identity in a world of complicated relationships. In this play Karnad successfully uses the conventions and motifs of folktales and folk theatre. Masks, curtains, dolls and story within a story have been craftly employed to create a weird world. It is a world of incomplete individuals, indifferent gods, dolls that speak and children who cannot, a world indifferent to the desire and frustrations, joys and sorrows of human beings. What is real is only the tremendous, irrational energy of the horse and its rider who move round the stage symbolising the powerful but monotonous rhythm of life.

## Identity and its crisis

Identity is a very complicated term in postmodern era. It is heterogeneous in form and a relative, dynamic and ongoing process that differs at every stage of one's life. It is the image of who one is. So we begin to search our identity as early as we born till we return to the grave. In fact, without identity we are nothing but a question mark. Similarly, identity crisis within human beings is a natural phenomenon and the most controversial issue in all ages and communities. So the issue of identity is not a clear and fixed concept, as it is imagined, that led to the crisis and became a phenomenon. As Kobena Mercer argues "Identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty." (Google Scholar) Again Erik Erikson, the coiner of the term 'identity crisis', introduced the ideas of adolescent identity crises as well as midlife crises, believing that personalities developed by resolving crises in life. According to the Oxford Dictionary, "identity crisis is a period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person's sense of identity becomes insecure, typically due to a change in their expected aims or roles in society."

Hayavadana is a successful and excellent play by Girish Karnad, an Indian postmodern English dramatist. Karnad (1938-2019) was an actor, film director, bilingual writer and Rhodes scholar. His rising as a playwright in the 1960s, marked the coming of age of modern and postmodern Indian playwriting in Kannda, just as Badal Sarkar did in Bengali, Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi and Mohan Rakesh in Hindi. Karnad wrote a large number of plays dealing with various aspects of contemporary Indian society and Indian culture, Indian mythology, folklore and the ancient theatrical examples. His important plays include Yayatri (1961), Tughlaq (1964), Hayavadana (1971), Nagamandala (1988), Tale-Danga (1990) and Fire and The Rain (1995). Karnad's plays effectively weave the contemporary context in their structure. He also took great problems of caste, heredity, religion and gender, and knits them into the texture of his plays. He uses Brechtian techniques and the technique of Meta-theatre in his plays to show the contemporary reality. K. Narshima Murthy rightly says, "Hayavadana is a Brechtian kind of play employing native folk theatre strategies to present through a folktale, man's tragically futile aspiration for perfection". The theme of Hayavadana Karnad has borrowed from Kathasaritsagara originally but the present story is from Thomas Mann's 'The Transposed Heads' which in turn is based on one of the versions of the story in Vetala Panchvimshati. He himself has added the sub-plot on Hayavadana.

Hayavadana is the product of search for identity, the problem of alienation – the difference between the mind and the body. In the play we've majority of important characters who have confused identity and are devoid of completion in one or the other form. From the main plot of the play we've protagonists like Devedatta, Kapila and Padmini, all of them are hunting for their completeness and true identities. Specially after the transposition of heads wrongly, the problem worsens. From the sub-plot we've Hayavadana, another important character, who symbolises incompleteness, seeks for complete identity as he possesses the head of horse and body of man. We have also a son born from Padmini of Devedatta's head and Kapila's body is the symbol of ultimate confusion of identity and he doesn't know to whom he belongs. The play Hayavadana opens with an invocation and worship to Lord Ganesha who himself is the embodiment of imperfection and incompleteness, suffers from alienation. His head and body are incompatible as he has the body of a human being and the head of an elephant. As Bhagavata rightly says,

"May Vighneshwara, the destroyer of obstacles, who removes all hurdles and crowns all endeavours with success, bless our performance now..... An elephant's head on a human body, a broken tusk and a cracked belly – which ever way you look at him he seems the embodiment of imperfection, of incompleteness. How indeed can one fathom the mystery that this very Vakratunda -Mahakaya with his crooked face and distorted body, is the Lord and Master of Success and Perfection?" (Act1, p.73)

Karnad here has artistically blended the two. If Lord Ganesha is husband to Riddhi (fame) and Siddhi (knowledge), Padmini is wife to Devedatta and lover to Kapila. Thus the true identity crisis is reflected within the relationships of Devedatta, Padmini and Kapila respectively.

The main plot of Hayavadana is set in the city of Dharampura where in dwell two youths Devedatta and Kapila, who are inseparable friend. Though both of them belong to the two polarities at socio-cultural and metaphysical levels, however, are described as "one mind, one heart" like Lava and Kusha, Rama and Lakshmana, Krishna and Balarama. Devedatta, the son of Brahmin, is the man of intellect and unrivalled in intelligence whereas Kapila, the

son of an ironsmith, possesses very good physical skills. This paradox brings complexities in them. On the other hand Padmini, the female protagonist, yearns for a perfect husband with brain and physical strength. She marries Devedatta but likes and loves Kapila. Padmini here acts as a two-headed bird. This kind of individuality can never remain in integrity as one head will always strive to assert superiority over the others. Thus the attraction of Padmini leads to flourish her friendship with Kapila and consequently to the acute crisis of identity. In this regard Jassbir Jain writes, “the fragmentation was portrayed through the multiple love-relationships, all of which ended in a similar sense of incompleteness.”

One day Devedatta, Padmini and Kapila all together set a plan for a short visit to Ujjain. On the way of their journey when Padmini notices a tree, Kapila instantly climbs it to bring her the flowers and her fascination for Kapila climbing the tree can be seen in her activities which are filled with sexual connotation. Padmini says: “(watching him, to herself) How climbs like an ape. Before I could even say ‘yes’ he had taken off his shirt, pulled his dhuti up and swung up the branch. And what an ethereal shape! Such a broad back –like an ocean with muscles rippling across it-and then that small, feminine waist which looks so helpless”.(Act1,p.96) She looks at him as celestial being, totally engrossed in his manly shape, his movements almost a dance to her. On the other hand on watching the mutual passion between Padmini and Kapila, Devedatta feels himself isolated like an “otherman” and faces an existentialist crisis, loss of identity and incompleteness as a husband and a friend.

During their journey when Kapila and Padmini go to the Rudra temple, Devedatta goes to the Kali temple. The latter begs to the goddess Kali forgiveness for not fulfilling his promise made to her earlier. He promised to god Rudra to offer him his head and to goddess Kali to offer her his body on account of fulfilling his wish. Devedatta then cuts off his head with a sword. On searching Kapila notices Devedatta lying dead in the Kali temple and then he laments: “You’ve cut off your head! You’ve cut off your head! Oh my dear friend, my brother, what have you done? Were you abhorrence? And in your anger you forgot that I was ready to die for you? If you had asked me to jump into fire, I would have done it. If you asked me to leave the country, I would have done it. If you had asked me to go and drown in a river, I would have accepted. Did you despise me so much that you couldn’t even ask me that? I did wrong. But you know I don’t have the intelligence to know what else I should have done. I couldn’t think- and so you’ve pushed away? No Devedatta, I can’t live without you. I can’t breathe without you. Devedatta, my brother, my father, my friend.....” (Act1, p.100) Kapila holds himself guilty and feels responsible for the death of Devedatta and consequently he cuts off his head and sacrifices it for his friend.

The extreme identity crisis appears in the play when Padmini in her excitement and fear messes up the heads of the two friends. Padmini finds out that Devedatta and Kapila both have committed suicide in Kali temple. She loses her sense of proportion. She too offers herself to the goddess Kali as a sacrifice as she can’t survive without the two, because for her existence, her identity is entangled in any of them. Padmini says : “No! Kapila’s gone, Devedatta’s gone. Let me go with them.”(Act1, p.101) Goddess Kali freezes Padmini from committing to suicide and grants her request and asks her to put the heads on their bodies and press the sword on their necks and they would come back to life.

However, in her disturbed state of mind, Padmini transposes their heads, as the fabulous mind with the fabulous body had always been a choice of Padmini. She puts Devedatta’s head on Kapila’s body and Kapila’s head on Devedatta’s body. Such kind of an entirely chaotic situation for all three of them causes the extreme crisis of identity. Now a tough question of identity rises as “whose wife is she?”(Act1, p.106). Kapila with Devedatta’s body claims Padmini. He argues that it is with the body that Padmini took the vows of marriage before the sacred fire and the child which she is carrying in her womb the seed of that body alone. Even the goddess Kali of Mt. Chitrakoot, the mother of all nature, appears to be indifferent to the characters that causes their identity and completeness more complicated.

To have the solution of their critical identity crisis, three of them go to a wise rishi whose un-equivocal conclusion is reported by Bhagavata: “As the heavenly Kalpa Vriksha is supreme among trees, so is the head among human limbs. Therefore, the man with Devedatta’s head is indeed Devedatta and he is the rightful husband of Padmini”(Act 2,p.110).The judgement gives much happiness to both Padmini and Devedatta.She says: “my celestial-bodied Gandharva.....my sun-faced Indra.....”(Act2,p.111) and is overjoyed to have her "fabulous body-fabulous brain-fabulous Devedatta”(Act2,p.113).Expectedly, Kapila with Devedatta’s frail body is sad and leaves them to live in the deep forest. Padmini’s predicament, as Joshipura describes as “The predicament of modern, free

and bold woman who is torn between polarities, woman who loves her husband as well as someone else for two different aspects of their personalities.”

Now Kapila stands for the identity crisis and incompleteness. He is unhappy with the frail body of Devedatta. But with the passage of time, he gains a robust body through the sound maintenance of physical exercise. On the contrary, Devedatta who got the vigorous body of Kapila, loses the strength and grip due to lack of physical maintenance. Now Padmini feels unhappiness over it. She asks Devedatta where his manly smell is. She again feels incompleteness. She begins to miss Kapila. So on the pretext of getting new dolls, she sends Devedatta away and herself proceeds to the forest to meet Kapila. At first Kapila displeased to see her and asks her “ what do you want? Another head?” Padmini clearly responds that she is an entity caught between two different identities of association. She says: “ Yes, you won Kapila, Devedatta won too. But I, the better half of the two bodies-I neither win nor lose.”(Act2, p.126)

However finally both Devedatta and Kapila realize that they love Padmini deeply but cannot live together like Pandavas and Draupadi mentioned in the great epic The Mahabharata. Hence they fight each other and kill themselves and Padmini enters the funeral blaze as a sati. Before sacrificing her life , Padmini makes it clear that she cannot hope to get perfection even in her next life too. As she says the goddess Kali, “You must have your joke even now. Other woman can die praying that they should get the same husband in all the lives to come. You haven’t left me even the least consolation.”(Act2, p.131)

Karnad very craftly uses two dolls to convey the changes in Devedatta’s physical features and to interpret Padmini’s psychic warfare. When Devedatta touches the dolls, they comment:

Doll1: His palms! They were so rough once, when he first brought us here. Like a labourer’s. But now they are soft- sickly soft- like a young girl’s.

Doll2:His stomach. It was so tight and mascular. Now.....(Act2,p.116)

On the other hand Padmin’s desire for an ideal celestial Gandharva is unveiled through the use of dolls that come to her dreams.

Doll1: A man....

Doll2: But not her husband.

Doll1: No, someone else.

Doll2: Is this the one who came last night?

Doll1: Yes the same. But I cannot see his face then.

Doll2: You can now. Not very nice – rough. Like a Labourer’s. But he’s got nice body-looks soft (Act2, p.118).

In the beginning of the play we find Hayavadana, a man with the head of a horse who suffers badly from the sense of identity crisis and incompleteness. He is the son of the Princes of Karnataka and a white stallion that later turns into a celestial being. Hayavadana’s parents go to their right places for their identity and completeness. But Hayavadana is left behind with imperfection. His desire to get rid of his horse head and become a complete human being, However, how far is this possible? The most pertinent question is, ‘Is any human being complete?’ Had it been so, Padmini, Kapila or Devdatta would have been content with what they have or what they were and their story would not end in a disaster ? Hayavadana is grossly unaware and ignorant of himself, his value and also does not possess the knowledge of the self. The trouble of being incompleteness makes him to visit to several temples, dargahs and many places, meets many men but all his efforts are in vain. He states, “I took interest in the social life of the Nation- Civics, Politics, Patriotism, Nationalism, Indianization, the Socialist Pattern of Society.....I have tried everything. But where’s my society? Where?”(Act1, p.81) Later, on Bhagavata’s (the narrator and commentator of the play) advice, he goes to Kali temple and the goddess Kali grants his pray to make him complete. But in her hurry to fulfil it, She makes him a horse with human voice instead of a “complete man.” Hayavadana says, “I have become a complete horse - but not a complete being! This human voice – this cursed human voice – it’s still there!

How can I call myself complete? ..... How can I get rid of this human voice?"(Act2, p.136) Thus Hayavadana is left incomplete again and his search for completeness continues.

We must say the cause of Hayavadana's incompleteness is his own parents. He is the product of an unequal marriage between a celestial being and an earthly woman. His mother is a princess of Karnataka who falls in love with a white stallion at the time of her swayambar when a number of princes from different places had come to woo her hand for marriage. But disregarding all she marries the stallion and lives with him happily for fifteen years. One fine morning in his place she finds a handsome celestial being that exhorts her to go with him to heaven. But she blatantly refuses him. The reason being that had she chosen to accept a man than horse he would suffer from the aforesaid problems whose impact would directly or indirectly fall upon her. Her search for completeness ended in a horse. This celestial being, however, feels offended on her refusal and cursed her to become a mare instead and left for his heavenly abode. Surprisingly all, Hayavadana's mother did not feel the angst on being converted into a mare and happily galloped away to join the family of horses. Thus she becomes a complete being. But Hayavadana, their son, is left behind in incompleteness with the human body and the horse's head.

Another important character the son of Padmini, a psychological deformed, introvert, and irritable who doesn't speak and clutches the dolls all the time, also suffers from the problem of identity. Though the child biologically belongs to Devedatta's, but he has a mole of Kapila's body on his shoulder. Like his mother the child favoured body over mind, horse over human. Nothing could make him laugh but Hayavadana did. The latter got the horse head from his father and human body from his mother and becomes the symbol of incompleteness and of identity crisis. Finally the two offspring of two unequal marriages find completeness in each other's incompleteness through love and care shown by each other. "His human voice is gone now. He can only neigh and leaps around with great joy." (Act2, p.138)

Hayavadana's searching for completeness is primarily his ignorance about his real nature of the self. "There is no cause for grief" is mentioned in The Bhagavata Gita. This holy book addresses itself to the human problem of conflict and grief. Hayavadana's problem emanates from the sense of inadequacy that every human being feels. The inability of a person to face a particular situation arises from his/her lack of understanding that every topical problem arises from the basic human problem of the inadequate self. Unless one discovers oneself to be an adequate self, life continues to be a problem. Searching for stable identity and completeness is never ending process. Such kind of crisis happens to Hayavadana who feels that he is incomplete mainly because of the horse-head, and suffers from the problem of alienation.

## Conclusion

However, through the play Hayavadana Karnad explores the identity crisis and the incompleteness that every individual of modern world is experiencing. Almost every characters like Devedatta, Padmini, their son, Kapila, and Hayavadana are depicted in the play as the representatives of modern society. All of them are in search of their real identity and completeness. Here we find two aspects of the problem of identity crisis – moral and psychological. So almost every crises within beings come, get solution and then come again. And this eternal quest for identity and completeness never ends as there is always a lacking of it. As M.K.Naik rightly advises, "Modern man must recover his sense of childlike curiosity, wonder and amusement at the sheer incongruity of life in order to achieve integration."

The presentation of beginning and the ending of the play is excellent as Karnad begins the play through the narrator Bhagavata with an invocation to the lord Ganesha who himself is the embodiment of imperfection and concludes it with a pray:

Grant us, O Lord, good rains, good crop, prosperity in poetry, science, industry and others affairs. Give the rulers of our country success in all endeavours, and along with it, a little bit of sense."(Act2, p.139) As Pranav Joshipura mentioned, "Karnad presents a comprehensive picture of the human beings in search of perfection and completeness."

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