

# Quest for Perfection Amid Imperfection in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*

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## Abstract

Girish Karnad's third play *Hayavadana* for which he received the Kamladevi Award of the Bharatiya Natya Sangh in 1972, unveils human beings' latent desire for perfection, the internal conflicts, and the futile struggle to attain it. Rightly said, that desires are insatiable and endless. In the process of fulfilling our desires, we deprive ourselves of all those pleasures which we have. We consciously or unconsciously make our lives miserable when we do not make peace with what we possess. Through the play, *Hayavadana*, Karnad has attempted to give a very meaningful message to the readers that there is nothing like perfection. Leave human beings, even gods are not flawless. They too, are imperfect and incomplete. In his play, *Hayavadana*, the writer has illustrated incompleteness at the three levels—divine, human, and animals. He intentionally opened the play with the pooja of Lord Ganesha who himself is an epitome of incompleteness and imperfection. In a way, Karnad has highlighted the meaningless false beliefs of Hindus, who pray to an imperfect god to accomplish perfection in themselves or in others. The play gives a beautiful message that to live a fulfilled life, it is essential to accept fate and be content with what we have. In the futile chase of perfection and desires we stop appreciating what we have right in front of our eyes.

**Keywords:** desire, perfection, conflicts, relationship, struggles, fate, pleasures, imperfection, incompleteness

Girish Raghunath Karnad, a well-known Indian playwright, director, actor, was born in Matheran, Karnataka in 1938. He was the recipient of various prestigious awards like the Padma Shri (1974), the Kalidas Samman (1998) the Padma Bhushan (1992), the Jnanpith award (1999), for his remarkable contributions to Literature and theatre. Instead of writing his plays in English or in his mother tongue, Konkani, Karnad originally wrote his dramas in Kannada. Most of his plays have been translated into English (mostly by himself) and other languages. The immediate popularity received by the plays established him as one of the most prolific playwrights in India. Thanks to this literary genre, which made his plays approachable to us-non native speakers of Kannada and these are read and enjoyed by scholars and critics.

Girish Karnad's third play *Hayavadana* for which he received the Kamladevi Award of the Bharatiya Natya Sangh in 1972, unveils human beings' latent desire for perfection, the internal conflicts, and the futile struggle to attain it. Through the character of Padmini, Karnad has brought to light the struggles of human beings towards perfection. These struggles to seek perfection and the failure to accept the imperfection in ourselves or at times in others become the cause of sufferings and misfortune. *Hayavadana* is a story of a beautiful woman, Padmini, who wanted the best of the two men-Devadatta and Kapila, in one (her husband). In a nutshell, she longed for the beautiful face and the mind of Devdatta and the strong and muscular body of Kapila. This unusual and illogical desire of Padmini gradually became so intense that on getting the opportunity to fulfill it, she did not falter to exchange the head of Devdatta with the body of Kapila.

Karnad's *Hayavadana* draws its inspiration from Thomas Mann's novella *The Transposed Heads* which in turn is influenced by an ancient collection of Sanskrit stories, Somdeva's *BrihatKatha Sarit Sagar* and Vetala *Panchavimshati*. Karnad's *Hayavadana* starts from where Vetala's story ends. Vetala puts up a question to Vikram, who should be the rightful husband of the woman who transposed the heads of her husband and her brother. Vikram answered in favor of the man, who possessed the head of the husband. Through this play, Girish Karnad

like Vetala has seemed to ask a question to his readers that what a woman should do if it really happens in her own life.

The play *Hayavadana* has two plots and in each plot the characters struggle to attain perfection. *Hayavadana* is a Sanskrit word which means a 'horse headed man'. The play is named after the character of Hayavadana, a protagonist of the sub-plot who too is in the search of completeness. His name itself suggests his predicament. He was neither a complete horse nor a complete man. This incompleteness dragged him to various holy places and ultimately, he attained partial perfection at Kali's temple. As Goddess Kali was collapsing with sleep, she did not wait for Hayavadana to complete his wish and in a haste and drowsiness turned him into a complete horse. Hayavadana made peace with this transformation but as desires are endless and insatiable, he regretted the voice of a human being. "I fell at her feet and said, 'Mother, make me complete'. She said 'So be it' and disappeared- even before I could say 'Make me a complete man'! I became a horse (Karnad 1975: 68). Human beings' selfish attitude probably was the reason for Goddess Kali's indifferent and indolent nature. Many of us pray to God when we are hurt and vulnerable. When our life goes smoothly and is in complete control, we ignore God, whereas, on the other hand, when life throws a curveball, we instantly turn to God for assistance. This could be the cause of Goddess Kali being peevish and indifferent to the predicament and wishes of Hayavadana, Devdatta, Kapila and Padmini. She said rather peevishly, I thought- 'Why don't you people go somewhere else if you want to chop off your stupid heads? Why do you have to come to me?' (Karnad 1975: 68). In the main plot too, we get the same search for completeness and perfection. A brief summary of the main plot is as follows. Devdatta, a handsome, fair, and intelligent Brahmin was the only son of Reverend Brahmin Vidhyasagar. Kapila, a dark, plain looking but strong man was the only son of the ironsmith, Lohita. At physical level they were men at extreme polarities yet they were very close friends.

Two friends there were  
---one mind , one heart-- (Karnad 1975: 11)

Devdatta fell in love with Padmini and wanted Kapila to act as his messenger. His love for Padmini was so intense that he vowed to sacrifice his two arms to Goddess Kali and head to Lord Rudra, if he succeeds in getting her as his wife. Here, Kapila also after seeing beautiful Padmini felt an attraction towards her and confessed to himself that she is not made for the man like Devdatta "what she needs is a man of steel" (Karnad 1975: 19). But for the sake of friendship and being a loyal friend to Devdatta, he subdued his feelings and became the means of arranging the marriage of Devdatta and Padmini.

Padmini, a modern woman who believed in articulating her desires and chasing her dreams soon realized that she had got married to a man who instead of hovering around her and praising her beauty, paid more attention to the scriptures, and poetry. This indifferent attitude of Devdatta diverted her attention to Kapila, her real admirer. Karnad portrayed her as an emancipated woman who expressed and not suppressed her feelings. Being in marriage, yet keeping an incestuous relationship with Kapila suggests a kind of rebellious nature of Padmini against patriarchal system. She can be considered rebellious as she did not submit herself to the conventional social norms and values and articulated her aspiration through her action. Being completely regardless of Devdatta's happiness and sentiments by now, she planned a trip to the Ujjain fair so that she could spend some time with Kapila. From here, the readers come to know that Padmini had become sick and tired of Devdatta as he was so intensely engrossed in his scriptures, poetry, that he overlooked her sensual pleasures which she began to look for in Kapila.

Since Padmini was pregnant at that time, Devdatta was against going to the Ujjain fair. As she was eager to spend time with Kapila, she did not pay any consideration to Devdatta's worry and disappointment and compelled him to undertake the journey to the fair. In the mid-way, Devdatta, Kapila, and Padmini took a halt near a temple. Devdatta, who had by now realized the nature of the relationship developing between his wife and Kapila, decided to sacrifice himself before Goddess Kali. Devdatta sacrificed himself not to fulfill the vow which he had made before the marriage but he did so because he could not bear Padmini's infidelity and Kapila's betrayal. He was mindful and also fearful of the society and its codes which do not approve of a woman who has an extra marital

relationship. Perhaps, the customs of the society which were ignored by Padmini, could not be disregarded by Devdatta forced him to sacrifice himself before Goddess Kali.

When Devdatta after many hours did not return, Kapila set out in search of him. On reaching the Kali's temple, he was frightened to see Devdatta's dead body lying on the floor. Seeing this, he also decided to cut off his head so that he would not be accused of killing his friend, Devdatta, for his wife, Padmini. Like Devadatta, Kapila also had a fear of society and its rules which compelled him too, to sacrifice himself and escape the charge of infidelity. It is clear from the sacrifices made by Devdatta and Kapila that both of them were well acquainted with the patriarchal rules of the society and its violation. On the other hand, for Padmini, her desires and their fulfillment were above the norms of the society.

When Padmini appeared in the temple and realized what had actually happened, her words were really shocking to the readers that how could she, being an Indian wife, ask for this wish from goddess Kali "If you'd saved either of them, I would have been spared all this terror, this agony" (Karnad 1975: 32). Padmini was open and vocal to articulate her desires, which pleased Goddess Kali. She appreciated her openness and asked her to put her heads back to their bodies. Padmini, in her excitement or in desire of getting a perfect man, put the heads wrongly, which was speculated by the Goddess Kali. "My dear daughter, there should be a limit even to honesty" (Karnad 1975: 33). But again because of her drowsiness and indifference she did not stop Padmini from exchanging the heads. Padmini was cognizant of the fact that "her illicit, extramarital relationship with Kapila will not be acceptable to the society as it threatens the 'order' in this patriarchal society" (Raykar 1999: 178) therefore, she cunningly employed a method to attain completeness and perfection in her husband without transgressing the rules of the society. In this connection, Jaganamohana Chari writes:

Padmini is "repressed by the power of patriarchal values of the ruling class ideology. But she appears to be relatively freer and more capable of distancing herself from the hegemonic contexts. She may rest content in her consent to the hegemonic contexts, yet she adopts the more indirect mode of facing up reality" (Chari 1999: 234).

It was practically not possible for her to love and live with two men at the same time because of her liking for different attributes of their personalities. Her shrewd mind made it possible but unfortunately, not for long. The wrong transposition of heads obviously made her happy but naturally arose the problem-who is the rightful husband of Padmini? Mohit Ray explains the act of Padmini i.e., transposition of the heads, in the light of Freudian psychology.

The mistake in the transposition of the heads of Devadatta and Kapila can be explained in terms of Freudian slip activated by id. In other words, the subconscious desire for Kapila's body makes Padmini put, albeit unconsciously, the head of Devadatta on Kapila's body. Furthermore, the "mistake" also absolves her of the responsibility of transgressing the codified morality of her society (Ray 2003: 210).

Completely ignoring the ritualistic codes of the society, she did what an ordinary Indian wife could never dare do. In her madness to get a perfect husband, she could not suppress and resist her natural instinct which eventually after a few months of the exchange of heads resulted in turmoil and chaos not only in her own life but also in her son, Devdatta, and Kapila's lives too. Naik observes that it is, "ironical that Padmini brings no prosperity to the two friends with whom her lot is cast" (Naik 2008: 139). Through her character, Karnad conveys the idea that we human beings at times because of our queer desires make our lives complicated and unhappy. In India, the husband-wife relationship is considered as a pious relationship based on trust. The breach of trust on either party may cripple the life long relationship. The partners accept each other's strengths and weaknesses wholeheartedly and this acceptance makes their marital life bliss or else a curse. Padmini could not accept the fact that nobody is perfect in the world and her craving for sensual pleasure and a perfect husband resulted in a tragic and poignant death of all the three at the end of the play.



Padmini's predicament is the predicament of a modern, emancipated woman in our society who is torn between the two polarities: a woman who loves her husband as well as someone else for different personalities. A civilized Apollonian society and its moral code will not accept such a woman. The two men will not accept each other when it comes to sharing a woman and the three will destroy themselves in the process.

(Raykar 1999: 177)

After coming back to life, Devdatta and Kapila started quarrelling for Padmini. Their desperation to get Padmini is distinct in the play when Devdatta rejects his own body after the switch as he knew that Padmini liked a strong physique and not a fragile body. Kapila, too, claimed her by arguing that Padmini belonged to him as she was carrying the seed of his presently possessed body in her womb.

To seek the solution of the problem, all the three went to a rishi who gave the solution that the man possessing Devdatta's head is the rightful husband of Padmini. "As the heavenly Kalpa Vriksha is supreme among trees, so is the head among human limbs. Therefore, the man with Devdatta's head is indeed Devadatta and he is the rightful husband of Padmini" (Karnad 1975: 40). This decision of the rishi made Padmini very happy as she got the perfection which she wanted from each of them-Devdatta's fair, handsome face and Kapila's strong body. Padmini's selfish attitude compelled Kapila to remain in the forest with Devdatta's delicate body. Padmini's happiness, satisfaction and her yearning for perfection was ephemeral. As the head rules over the body, soon, with time Devdatta's head began to rule over Kapila's body, the body which initially indulged itself in all the physical activities and kept Padmini happy, transformed and to the utter dismay of Padmini gradually reverted into its former shape. In short, Padmini ultimately received what she was running away from.

Karnad has employed two dolls in the play to convey Padmini's anguish and her yearning for Kapila. The conversation of the dolls unveils the changes taking place in the body of Devdatta, Padmini's dream of a rough man with a nice body i.e., Kapila. After the transposition of the heads, Padmini was the happiest one among all the three as she accomplished what she desired. But, she was unaware that incompleteness and imperfection are inevitable and it's impossible to change those things that we have no control over. It is important to realize that nothing lasts forever but Padmini's rejection to accept the fact, invited unnecessary frustration, disappointment and sufferings in her as well as Devdatta and Kapila's lives too.

Once again, the selfish Padmini became discontented and began to pine for Kapila when she observed the changes in Devdatta's body. She set out to search for Kapila in the forest carrying her newly born baby. Next morning in search of Padmini, Devdatta also came to the forest where Devdatta and Kapila killed each other leaving behind Padmini and her son. Devdatta and Kapila who never took themselves as incomplete beings were happy in their own lives and were dear to each other but soon with the appearance of Padmini in their lives, nourished disliking for each other which eventually resulted in the killing of each other at the end of the play.

Padmini, rather than living as a widow, decided to perform sati. India is a country which is well known for pativratas-who spend their whole lives in the service of their husbands and do not fear to perform the sati on their funeral pyre but here in the end of the drama, Padmini's act of performing sati was not due to her love for Devdatta or Kapila. Padmini, not being faithful to her husband, Devdatta, decided to perform sati, probably because of two reasons. Firstly, by performing sati, a socio-cultural practice prevailing in India in those times, she wanted to prove her chastity. Secondly, she wanted to give a better future and place to her son in the society.

Through *Hayavadana*, Girish Karnad has also exposed meaningless false beliefs and rituals practiced by Indian society and tried to enlighten orthodox Hindus by highlighting the follies of Goddess Kali which made the lives of the characters of the play deplorable and woeful. Goddess Kali was so indifferent to the predicament of Hayavadana that without letting him complete his wish, she made him a complete horse regretting the voice of a human being. Another instance, of her indifferent and inert attitude gets reflected when she did not prevent Padmini from exchanging the head and body of Devdatta and Kapila. She let Padmini fulfill her desire of a perfect

and complete husband and in a way tangled the relationships and made their lives complicated and tragic. Had Goddess Kali stopped her from doing this misconduct, the lives of all the four including Padmini's son would have been much better. She probably would have accepted Devdatta with his imperfections with the flow of time. Her child would have been raised by his own parents rather than by hunters in the forest.

Padmini's desire to get a complete and perfect husband was not only restrained to Devdatta, she aspired for the perfection and completeness in her own son too. To make him perfect and complete, she before performing sati handed over her son to the hunters and asked them to make him physically strong like Kapila. She asked them to hand over the child to his grandfather, Vidhyasagar, at the age of five who would take care of his intellect. So, we see that the reunification of the head and the mind which Padmini always wanted failed to accomplish either in Devdatta or in Kapila, attempted to attain in her son.

Rightly said, that desires are insatiable and endless. In the process of fulfilling our desires, we deprive ourselves of all those pleasures which we have. We consciously or unconsciously make our lives miserable when we do not make peace with what we possess. Through the play, *Hayavadana*, Karnad has attempted to give a very meaningful message to the readers that there is nothing like perfection. Leave human beings, even gods are not flawless. They too, are imperfect and incomplete. In his play, *Hayavadana*, the writer has illustrated incompleteness at the three levels-divine, human, and animals. He intentionally opened the play with the pooja of Lord Ganesha who himself is an epitome of incompleteness and imperfection. In a way, Karnad has highlighted the meaningless false beliefs of Hindus, who pray to an imperfect god to accomplish perfection in themselves or in others. The play gives a beautiful message that to live a fulfilled life, it is essential to accept fate and be content with what we have. In the futile chase of perfection and desires we stop appreciating what we have right in front of our eyes.

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