

Myth and Reality: A Critical Analysis of the Play *Hayavadana*

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Abstract:

Girish Karnad emerges as a distinguished figure in Indian literary and theatrical circles, celebrated for his diverse roles as a playwright, poet, director, actor, critic, and translator. To fully appreciate his work, it is crucial to understand the role of myth within his narratives. Myths are stories rich in symbolism, shared across various cultures, often blending natural and supernatural elements. They feature characters and events that evoke awe and wonder, serving as a bridge between the tangible and the mystical. In Karnad's play *Hayavadana*, the intricate relationship between myth and realism is vividly depicted through a narrative deeply rooted in classical Sanskrit storytelling traditions. The theme of 'incompleteness' is central from the beginning. The character Ganesha, revered as the remover of obstacles and associated with perfection and success, is referenced through the *Bhagavata Purana*. The play also explores societal themes such as caste and social hierarchy, exemplified by Padmini's choice of a husband—Devadatta, a Brahmin symbolizing wisdom and societal approval, versus Kapila, the son of a laborer, representing strength and vitality. The story unfolds during a journey marked by jealousy and desire, culminating in a mythic act where Devadatta and Kapila, in a moment of impulsive rage, sever each other's heads at a Kali temple. This act leads to a surreal transformation, with their heads exchanged, symbolizing humanity's relentless pursuit of perfection and highlighting the complex relationship between appearance and reality. Karnad's plays often utilize archetypal myths as narrative tools, seamlessly blending traditional storytelling techniques with contemporary sensibilities, thereby enriching the theatrical experience for modern audiences.

Keywords: contemporary, classical, myth, reality, play.

Girish Karnad stands out as a prominent figure in Indian literature and drama, renowned for his multifaceted contributions as a playwright, poet, director, actor, critic, and translator. Born on 19 May 1938 in Matheran, Maharashtra, Karnad has received numerous accolades, including the prestigious Jnanpith Award, the highest literary honor in India.

It is surprising and interesting indeed that a modern playwright like Girish Karnad, alienated from his ground and his own language for quite a considerable time, should fall upon ancient resources of myth and legend, in writing his plays. Karnad states, that he wanted to be a poet, and spent all his teenage years preparing himself to be an English poet like Auden and Eliot. It seemed to him there was nothing to do in India and therefore he wanted to be in England, and hence trained himself to be an English

writer. But, when it really came to expressing his tension it came off in Kannada “as if a character were dictating and I was just a steno”. (Jain; Gowri)

His recognition extends to national honors such as the Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan, awarded by the Indian government. Most of his theatrical works are originally composed in Kannada and later translated into English and various other Indian languages, reflecting his mastery in storytelling and cultural adaptation. Karnad’s plays are celebrated for their ability to reinterpret Indian history and mythology, blending traditional folktales with contemporary themes. His storytelling is characterized by wit and a conscious effort to present these stories in innovative forms, often addressing social issues and advocating for societal reforms. His works challenge regressive customs and traditions, offering fresh perspectives through dramatization that aims to inspire change among both audiences and readers.

Understanding the concept of myth is essential to appreciating Karnad’s work. Myths are narratives imbued with symbolic significance, prevalent across civilizations. They often incorporate both natural and supernatural elements, with characters and events that evoke a sense of wonder and enchantment. Many folktales and mythological stories have been transmitted orally across generations, resulting in variations and adaptations over time. Consequently, the origins and authorship of these stories are often uncertain. Myths tend to reflect societal norms and moral codes, frequently rooted in the deep-seated caste system, social stratification, religious beliefs, superstitions, gender roles, and patriarchal structures. These stories, drawn from texts like Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavad-Gita, and the Vedas, form an integral part of Indian cultural identity. They impart moral lessons about dharma—what is right and wrong—and continue to influence contemporary life and values, shaping perceptions and guiding behavior. According to Moutushi Chakravarthi, in an interview with Karnad in the year 1991, he mentioned:

... use of myth and legend in his plays was largely driven by spontaneous inspiration rather than deliberate planning. This approach likely stemmed from his early exposure to various traditional theatrical forms, which profoundly influenced his artistic development. Throughout his career, he engaged with three primary types of theatre: the traditional company Natak, Yakshagana, and Western theatre. These diverse influences shaped his writing style, whether through the impact of traditional theatrical practices or his own admission of limited ability to craft entirely new narratives. This blend of cultural influences and personal limitations contributed to the unique character of his dramatic works. (Karnad; Gowri)

Examining the interplay of myth and realism in Karnad’s play Hayavadana reveals a complex narrative rooted in classical Sanskrit storytelling, specifically inspired by Thomas Mann’s rendition of the Sanskrit narrative *Vetal Panchavimshati*, a segment derived from Kshemendra’s Brihat Katha Manjari and Somadeva’s *Kathasaritsagara*, offers a profound insight into classical Indian storytelling

traditions. This translation encapsulates the rich cultural and literary heritage embedded within these ancient texts, providing a bridge for contemporary readers to access the intricate tales and moral lessons conveyed through centuries of oral and written transmission. The *Vetal Panchavimshati*, part of a larger corpus of stories, exemplifies the narrative artistry and philosophical depth characteristic of Indian literature, highlighting themes of morality, wit, and the human condition. Mann's translation not only preserves the essence of the original Sanskrit works but also adapts their narrative style to resonate with modern audiences, ensuring the timeless relevance of these stories. This work underscores the importance of cross-cultural literary exchange and the enduring power of storytelling as a means of moral and philosophical exploration, making it a significant contribution to the appreciation of Indian literary heritage in a global context.

Most of the playwrights in India have either written in such a traditional manner it lost relevance to their urban existence or they have written in such an urbanised manner, that it lost relevance to the traditional part of their personality. In this context Karnad comments "We keep acrobating between the traditional and the modern, perhaps we could not hit upon a form which balance both". (Karnad, *Acrobating between the traditional and modern*; Gowri)

The play explores themes of identity, completeness, and human desire through the allegory of heads and bodies. The protagonist, Padmini, epitomizes a woman driven by self-interest and conflicting desires. She is portrayed as a beautiful, self-centered individual whose inability to reconcile her sexual and emotional needs leads to tragedy. Her marriage to Devadatta, a wise but physically weak man, and her attraction to Kapila, a strong but less intellectually inclined man, symbolize her quest for both mental and physical fulfillment.

At the outset of the performance, a Ganesha mask is presented and placed on a chair on stage. Rituals are performed, and the Bhagavata recites hymns extolling Ganesha, while musicians provide musical accompaniment, creating a reverent atmosphere:

O Elephant-headed Herambha
whose flag is victor
and who shines like a thousand suns,
O husband of Riddhi and Siddhi,
seated on a mouse and decorated with a snake,
O single-tusked destroyer of incompleteness,
we pay homage to you and start our play. (Karnad, *Hayavadana* 1)

From the outset of the play, the term 'incompleteness' is prominently featured. Ganesha, revered as the remover of obstacles and the deity associated with perfection and achievement, is described through Bhagavata as follows:

An elephant's head on a human body, a broken tusk and a cracked belly—whichever way you look at him he seems the embodiment of imperfection, of incompleteness. (Karnad, Hayavadana 1)

In the narrative, Bhagavata perceives Ganesha as a symbol of incompleteness, primarily due to his unique form that combines an elephant's head with a human body. This theme of incompleteness manifests across three distinct levels: divine, human, and animal. During a dramatic moment, Bhagavata is struck by a scream of terror from the stage, prompting an actor to rush in, visibly shaken. The actor reports witnessing a creature with a horse's head—Hayavadana, a man whose face is that of a horse. The name Hayavadana derives from the Sanskrit words for horse (Haya) and face (Vadana). He is described as the offspring of a princess from Karnataka, a woman renowned for her beauty who fell in love with a white stallion and married it. Hayavadana shares details about his mother, adding depth to his story and emphasizing the recurring motif of incomplete or hybrid forms in the narrative.

She lived with for fifteen years. One morning she wakes up—and no horse! In its place stood a beautiful Celestial Being, a gandharva. Apparently, this Celestial Being had been cursed by the God Kuvera to be born a horse for some act of misbehaviour. After fifteen years of human love he had become his original self again. (Karnad, Hayavadana 8)

Having been freed from his curse, he requested the Princess to join him in his journey to the celestial realm. However, she declined his invitation and instead expressed a desire to have him return to his horse form. In response, he cast a spell upon her, transforming her into a mare who then happily fled, unconcerned about her child. Meanwhile, Hayavadana, feeling incomplete due to his horse head, sought to remove it. His quest led him to visit nearly every temple across India, but his efforts proved unsuccessful. Ultimately, a devotee advised him to seek out the temple of Kali, hoping that divine intervention might offer a solution.

The play underscores societal influences, such as caste and social status, evident in Padmini's choice of husband—Devadatta, a Brahmin, representing wisdom and social approval, versus Kapila, a laborer's son, embodying strength and vitality. The narrative unfolds during a journey where jealousy and desire culminate in a mythic act—Devadatta and Kapila, in a moment of impulsive rage, cut off each other's heads at a temple of Kali, leading to a surreal transformation where their heads are swapped. This act symbolizes the human pursuit of perfection and the complex relationship between appearance and reality. Padmini's subsequent decision to unite the heads and bodies in a way that satisfies her desires reflects her internal conflict and societal pressures. The play ultimately portrays the tragic consequences of human obsession with idealism and superficial perfection, culminating in the death of the characters and Padmini's tragic act of sati, symbolizing societal and personal sacrifice. According to Northrop Frye: "Myth is primarily a certain type of story...The Things that happen in myth are the things that happen only in stories: they are in a self – contained

literacy world” (Frye 163-164). According to Sinha, Karnad's interpretation of the traditional myth concerning the exchange of ages between father and son has perplexed and even provoked many traditional critics. T. N. Madan articulates the core idea of communalism as the belief that a religious community's political interests remain unaffected by internal divisions such as ethnicity, language, or social class. Instead, these interests are often defined in opposition to other similarly identified religious groups. Jacob George highlights the significance of Lord Ganesha, a deity embodying a harmonious integration of divine, human, and animal realms, as a pivotal symbol within the narrative. This figure not only enriches the story but also foreshadows the character of Hayavadana, emphasizing the interconnectedness of different worlds of experience within the plot.

Girish Karnad's play *Hayavadana* delves into profound themes such as personal identity, the intricate relationship between the physical body and the mind, and the inherent struggles of human existence. Central to the narrative is Hayavadana, a character cursed to possess a horse's head, symbolizing feelings of incompleteness both physically and psychologically. His quest for a fully human form underscores a deeper desire for wholeness and acceptance, emphasizing that true completeness extends beyond mere physical appearance. Hayavadana visited many temples, mosque, and church to revive his completeness: “Banaras, Rameshwar, Gokarn, Haridwar – Dargah of Khwaja, Yusuf Baba, the Grotto of our Virgin Mary – I’ve tried them all. Magicians, mendicants -- saints and sadhus – I’ve covered them all” (Karnad, *Hayavadana* 9).

The play further examines the complex interplay between mental and physical aspects of identity through the characters of Devadatta and Kapila. Devadatta embodies intellectual and spiritual pursuits, whereas Kapila represents strength and corporeal groundedness. Their childhood friendship is complicated by a love triangle involving Padmini, a woman of exceptional beauty. Devadatta marries her, yet she falls in love with Kapila, leading to a tragic incident where their heads are accidentally swapped. This event causes profound confusion about their true identities, as Devadatta's thoughts and emotions are now housed in Kapila's robust body, while Kapila's physical strength resides within Devadatta's intellectual frame. This scenario raises fundamental questions about the essence of personal identity—whether it is rooted in the body, the mind, or a combination of both.

Devadatta: Tell me one thing. Do you really love Padmini?

Kapila: Yes.

Devadatta: So do I.

Kapila: I know. (Silence) Devadatta, couldn't we all three live together - like the Pandavas and Draupadi?

Devadatta: What do you think? (Silence. Padmini looks at them but doesn't say anything.)

Kapila: (laughs). No, it can't be done.

Devadatta: That's why I brought this. (Karnad, *Hayavadana* 60)

The narrative suggests that neither physical transformation nor mental change alone can guarantee a sense of completeness. When body and mind are misaligned, it results in emotional turmoil and suffering, as evidenced by subsequent tragic events. The play also explores the tension between fate and free will. Hayavadana's curse appears inescapable, symbolizing the power of destiny

over individual agency. His relentless pursuit of a human form reflects an attempt to transcend this fate, yet he remains bound by it. Similarly, the choices made by Devadatta, Kapila, and Padmini are influenced by personal desires, but their lives are also shaped by forces beyond their control. The accidental head swap underscores how external forces and uncontrollable circumstances influence personal identity and destiny, illustrating that human lives are a complex interplay of choice and fate. Mythology and folklore significantly inform the narrative, with Hayavadana's cursed condition drawing inspiration from traditional stories from Indian and Western cultures where transformations and curses are prevalent. These mythic elements serve to question whether identity is fixed or malleable, shaped by external influences such as curses or destiny. Hayavadana's unusual appearance, with a horse's head, symbolizes internal conflict and alienation, reflecting his psychological and emotional struggles to understand his true self. The grotesque imagery underscores the tension between self-perception and physical reality, highlighting the universal human conflict between the ideal self and bodily limitations. Another prominent theme is human desire and its tragic consequences. The love triangle illustrates how unfulfilled longing can complicate relationships, leading to dissatisfaction and emotional distress. Padmini's love for both men exemplifies the difficulty of achieving fulfillment, and her unfulfilled desires contribute to feelings of insecurity and, ultimately, tragedy. The narrative demonstrates that unrestrained desire, when unmet, can result in pain, confusion, and destructive outcomes. The tragic events—mistakes, accidents, and loss—are manifestations of characters' inability to reconcile their desires with their realities. This underscores the destructive potential of human longing when it remains unfulfilled or misunderstood.

Through an exploration of identity, fate, mythology, and desire, Hayavadana offers a nuanced reflection on the human condition:

“I have only one sorrow ... I have become a complete horse but not a complete being!
This human voice this cursed human voice – it is still there!” (Karnad, Hayavadana 68)

It prompts contemplation about the nature of selfhood, the factors that define us, and the conflicts that arise from the discord between inner identity and outward appearance.

HAYAVADANA. Laugh again? – Let me try [tries to laugh]. Ha Ha

Ha! No, it's not easy to laugh-just like that ...

BOY [mimes whipping]. Laugh-laugh ... *HAYAVADANA*. All right. All right. I'll try again.

Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! – Huhhuh ... Heahhh ...

[His laughter ends up as a proper neigh]. (Karnad, Hayavadana 70)

The play suggests that the pursuit of wholeness is complex and often fraught with tragedy, as individuals grapple with accepting themselves fully. Karnad's work emphasizes that understanding who we are involves navigating the delicate balance between internal and external realities, and that this journey is often marked by struggle and sacrifice. The characters' experiences reveal that while personal choices are significant, external forces such as destiny and mythic influences play a crucial role in shaping our lives. The mythic motif of a cursed man with a horse's head underscores the fluidity of identity and the influence of external forces beyond individual control. Hayavadana's

physical form symbolizes the disconnection many feel from their true selves, and the play's blending of reality and myth invites reflection on the nature of human identity. The narrative also highlights how desire can lead to suffering when it remains unfulfilled, illustrating the tragic consequences of human longing. The love triangle exemplifies how unfulfilled desires can generate dissatisfaction, insecurity, and ultimately tragedy. Overall, Hayavadana presents a profound inquiry into what it means to be human, emphasizing that the quest for completeness is often complicated by external influences, internal conflicts, and the unpredictable nature of fate. It challenges audiences to consider the complex layers of identity, the power of myth, and the enduring human pursuit of self-understanding, all within a framework that underscores the tragic beauty of human imperfection and aspiration.

In conclusion, Girish Karnad's plays exemplify the use of archetypal myth as a narrative device, blending traditional storytelling with modern sensibilities. Critics often regard his work as a modern reimagining of Indian folktales, emphasizing their relevance and adaptability in addressing current social issues; Mohit Ray insightfully notes that the process of clarifying religious beliefs and customs, which should be seen as a reflection of modern sensibilities, reaches its most profound expression in Hayavadana (Ray 106). Karnad demonstrates remarkable skill in weaving together mythological elements within realistic settings, creating intricate stories that provoke reflection on societal standards, human nature, and cultural identity. The generation was the first to come of age after India's independence from British rule. As a result, we encountered a landscape where long-standing tensions became more visible, demanding resolution without excuses or self-justification: the struggle between India's rich cultural heritage and its colonial past, the appeal of Western philosophies contrasted with indigenous traditions, and the diverse visions of the future that emerged in the wake of political freedom. This historical context deeply influenced the development of my plays and those of my contemporaries, shaping our artistic themes and expressions.

The tension between myth and reality is a central theme in Hayavadana. While traditional myths suggest that Padmini's mistake was accidental, Karnad's dramatization emphasizes her passionate and complex emotional state. Her desire to attain social recognition and fulfill her personal needs creates a conflict between societal ideals and individual realities. The myth of the perfect human being is challenged by Karnad's portrayal of human imperfections, emphasizing that myths often serve as allegories for human desires and societal norms rather than literal truths. This nuanced depiction invites viewers to reflect on the societal constructs that influence individual choices and the often tragic consequences of such conflicts.

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