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## Girish Karnad's Hayavadana: A Contemporary Relevance of Myth

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### **Abstract:**

Girish Karnad's Hayavadana (1971) is an experiment on a theme from folk-tale. Karnad has taken the plot of the play from Kathasaritsagara, an ancient collection of stories in Sanskrit. However, it is chiefly based on Thomas Mann's retelling of the story of 'The Transposed Heads'. Hayavadana by Karnad poses the problem of human identity in a world of tangled relationships. Karnad has successfully made use of conventions and motifs taken from folk-tales and folk-theatre.

**Key Words:** Myth, folk theme, transposition, problem of identity & completeness

### **Introduction**

Girish Karnad's third play Hayavadana (1971) is a wonderful experiment on the folk theme. The main plot of the play is based on Kathasaritsagara, an ancient collection of stories in Sanskrit. It is only for the subject that Girish Karnad goes to this ancient collection of stories. He provides a new interpretation to it. However, he borrowed the plot from the retelling of the story of Thomas Mann's 'The Transposed Heads'. Thomas Mann had written this story in order to ridicule the mechanical concept of life which differentiates body from soul.

While discussing the contemporary relevance of myth with reference to this particular play Hayavadana, one must understand the term myth. Myth is a reference to a legendary or imaginative story. It could be in the form of a fable or a fairy tale, and may have allegorical allusions. In the classical Greek, "mythos" signified any kind of story or plot, either invented or true, though it is a kind of a story in a mythology in the modern context in the form of a system of stories of ancient origin which once upon a time were believed to be true by a particular group of civilization and came down to us by word of mouth through oral transition in the man. The term also deals with stories that may have supernatural characters deliberately invented by their authors. During the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Plato used such invented myths in order to speculate beyond a certain point wherein it could be more comprehensible. Myth is best conceived not as a collection of fixed and final stories, but as "a work", as an ongoing process that is expressed in oral and written narratives and includes the diverse ways in which these narratives are received

and appropriated. A number of modern writers have also asserted that an integrative mythology, whether inherited or invented, is very much essential for literature. A number of writers before Karnad used mythology for the creation of their literary works. James Joyce in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, T.S.Eliot's "The Waste-Land" Eugene O'Neill's "Mourning Become Electra", and many others use a deliberately woven modern materials on the pattern of ancient mythology. The present story of the play *Hayavadana* is also based on myth.

The play begins with the prayer by Bhagavata. Bhagavata was considered to be a priest and a soothsayer in ancient Indian folk tradition. The Bhagavata in this play is praying to lord Ganesha and describing him as a destroyer of incompleteness. This was a common practice before the mythical narrative was unfolded. The conversation between Bhagavata and the actor as well as between Bhagavata and Hayavadana provides a fertile background for a discussion on the problem of identity as well as the contemporary relevance of myth in the play. The Actor, in shivers comes to Bhagavata, and informs him that he had seen a speaking horse. Bhagavata himself is also surprised to hear this and doubts the statement.

He refuses to believe what he has heard. There appears on the stage a speaking horse even as the Actor is in the process of trying to convince the Bhagavata that he had seen a speaking horse. This sudden arrival of the speaking horse surprises Bhagavata who, at first, cannot believe his own eyes, and begins to think that someone wearing the mask of a horse has made an appearance to frighten people. However, the Bhagavata is soon convinced that it was not a trick but a reality. Bhagavata wants to know from that horse headed man named Hayavadana as to

"Who brought you to this? Was it a curse of some rishi? Or was it some holy place of pilgrimage, a punyasthan, which you desecrated? Or could it be that you insulted a pativrata, a dedicated to the service, of her husband? Or did you...?"

The question of Bhagavata ends up annoying Hayavadana more because he has never harmed anyone. Responding to the request from the Bhagavata, Hayavadana explains the reason for his incompleteness. He describes why he has to bear with the horse head and human body. He considers his mother responsible for his quaint situation.

"My mother was the princess of Karnataka. She was beautiful girl. When she came of age, her father decided that she should choose her own husband so princes of every kingdom in the world were invited- and they all came. From China, from Persia, from Africa. But she didn't like any of them. The last one was to come was the prince of Araby. My mother looked at that handsome prince sitting on his great white stallion- and fainted....

Her father at once decided that this was the man. My mother woke up and do you know what she? ....She would marry that horse!...So ultimately she was married off to the white stallion."

Hayavadana's mother passes fifteen years of her married life with that white stallion, who suddenly turns into a "Gandharva" one morning. Gandharva was actually facing the curse of the God Kubera for his misbehavior. Now Gandharva asked Hayavadana's mother to accompany him to his holy domicile. The lady turned down his proposal, and went to the extent asking the Gandharva to become a horse again. So, Gandharva, an enraged curses her to be one herself, whereupon she turned into a mare and ran away happily, leaving behind their one child, Hayavadana with him to their fates. Bhagavata advises him to go to the temple of goddess Kali on the mount of Chitrakoot. This is the point in the dramatic narrative that Hayavadana begins his search for completeness. It is in this context that the character of Hayavadana can be studied as one in search of perfection. To begin with, he appears to be more intellectual and important a character from the point of view of the play but, as the play progresses we find him craving for real identity in this world of imperfection. He somehow fails to realize that he is also an incomplete character like the other beings of the world. Hayavadana comes under the influence of "maya" and ends up inviting problems for himself. At the end of the story, he achieves perfection by becoming a complete horse losing his human face.

The strange story of Hayavadana is directly related to the ancient mythology. Hayavadana forms a mythical base of the play, which abounds in myths and legends. Hayavadana is the son of Gandharva, who in some or the other curse brings him into the human world in the form of a bony horse. He gets married to a human soul, stays on in this world for fifteen years and, once the curse is over, returns to his heavenly abode. What gives the play its appeal is the appearance of a mythical Hayavadana with a human body and the head of a horse.

The strange story of Hayavadana is directly related to the story of Devadatta, Kapila and Padmini. The only difference is that in case of Devadatta and Kapila, it is a human error-made by Padmini which leads to many other problems in the play.

Devadatta and Kapila are the closest of friends. Devadatta is an intellectual and Kapila is a man with a muscular physique. Padmini is an attractive good looking young lady, and she is so charming that both Kapila and Devadatta want to marry her. Devadatta and Kapila fall in love with Padmini. Devadatta marries Padmini who likes him for his intellect, and this marriage drives a wedge in the relationship shared by Devadatta and Kapila. Padmini is dissatisfied with Devadatta after sometime because she now feels that a good physique is better than good intellect. She falls in love with Kapila. This love creates problem for both – Devadatta and Kapila.

Devadatta and Kapila do not care for their old friendship, but become jealous rivals. Each tries to get the other out of his way to marry Padmini. Here is the point wherein a character from Indian history, Padmini, who is known for her beauty, ends up attracting the attention of Alaudin Khilji and performs jauhar when Khilji attacks her husband's kingdom to capture her. This story is one

with a reference. They fight against each other in the temple of Goddess Kali and kill each other in the end.

The Goddess takes pity on Padmini and offers to bring them back to life. She asks Padmini to close her eyes and to respectively put their heads on their bodies. Since Padmini likes the intellect of Devadatta and a strongly built body of Kapila, she ends up transposing the heads, and puts the head of Devadatta on Kapila's body and the head of Kapila on Devadatta's body, and in the process also ends up creating the problem of identity in the play Hayavadana. The transposition of heads leads to transformation in both, with Devadatta becoming bodily strong and Kapila intellectually and leading to the same problem again. Padmini does not know now whom she should consider her husband.

At this juncture the play seems to suggest that the fusion of Apollonian and Dionysian, the two opposite polarities of life at metaphysical and socio-cultural level is neither possible nor practicable. Had this not been so, Padmini would have achieved her dream for ever as Devadatta would have got rid of his rival Kapila and more importantly all the three of them would have been able to live happily thereafter. All the three enjoy perfection for a while but that achieved perfection proves to be transitory and short-lived. With that their momentary satisfaction goes away and ultimately all the three of them go back to their previous condition and face the same quandary yet again.

Karnad appears to be raising here the problem of physical identity opposed to mental identity. The subtle question before the spectators is whether a man is identified on the basis of his mental, or physical superiority. Even Kali, the Goddess, does not solve the problem for Padmini, who prepares for the self-sacrifice with the words:

“Kapila's gone – Devadatta's gone. Let me go with them.”

At this juncture the Goddess interferes, and says,

“Hey ..... Put it down! Put down that sword”

Nevertheless the Goddess leaves it to Padmini to decide whom she should consider her husband. Kali addresses Padmini thus:

“...now do as I tell you put these heads back properly. Attach them to their bodies and then press that sword on their necks. They'll come up alive. Is that enough? ... Do as I told you and quickly...now don't go on taking. Do what I told you and shut your eyes...My dear daughter, there should be a limit even to honesty. Anyway – so be it”

Devadatta's and Kapila's coming back to life creates a greater problem for Padmini. Man's personality, character, outlook and approach to life are governed by his head as is the rest of

body. Hence, Devadatta's head with Kapila's body is more convincing. It has been approved even by the Holy Scriptures:

“According to the shastras, the head is the sign a man....of all the human limbs the top most – in importance – is the head. I have Devadatta's head and it follows that I am Devadatta.”

Karnad tried to solve the acute problem of identity, through physical versus mental superiority. The words of the Bhagavata, who refers the problem of three unfortunate beings to a Rishi. The Bhagavata repeats what the Rishi had said:

“As the heavenly Kalpa Vriksha is supreme among threes, so is the head among human limbs. Therefore the man with Devadatta's head is indeed Devadatta and he is rightful husband of padmini.”

It has been made clear in the course of play that it is the head which has its impact on the body. Devadatta's head leads to the wasting away of Kapila's body, and proves the supremacy of the head over the body.

### **Conclusion**

The play thus deals with mythical reference through the story of Devadatta, Kapila and Padmini and Hayavadana. The way the heads of Devadatta and Kapila are transposed, transforming the bodies in the process goes on to suggest that perfection is not given to man, for it is a trait of the divine. What cannot be attained in real life is achieved in our dreams, in our mythology and Hayavadana is an example of something of this kind happening in the form of a dream sequence, though it turns out to be a nightmare for Padmini.

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