

# The Creative Launcher

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## Salient features of *Hayavadan* by Girish Karnad

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### Abstract

Originally, Girish Karnad is a Kannada playwright. He has translated his plays into English to reach a larger audience. He along with other playwrights like Vijay Tendulkar and Mohan Rakesh revived the trend of theatre. They are trying to uphold the rich cultural heritage of India by using myths, legends, histories, and traditional stories in their plays. Girish Karnad has made an effort to fight the legacy of colonism by upholding traditional values and cultural ethos. The themes of his plays have contemporary significance but the focus is on the presentation of complex cultural fabric of Indian society. Karnad loves to discover less known and obscure myths and tries to understand their significance and relate them to the chosen story. Thus he succeeds in providing romantic charm to his plays and that is also without killing the authenticity of the original tales. Karnad, known for his visionary outlook, has sensed new life and effectiveness in his plays by incorporating native and western dramatic techniques enthusiastically and technically. He has great insight into human nature. His knowledge of human nature has made him an expert observer of the society. He is well aware of the paradoxes in human nature and has thorough comprehension of life's little ironies. He has been a humanistic writer. His humanistic attitude is reflected in his plays and ways of presentation. Girish Karnad has consummate command over English and he has successfully and artistically nativized it for expressing Indian ethos and sensibility. His diction is apt. His words are suggestive and reveal characters, situations, economy, precision, clarity, and lucidity through his style.

**Keywords-** Myth, Colonialism, Intellectualism, Archetype

Girish Karnad's *Hayavadan* (1971) is a representative play in various ways. It has various aspects which make this play one of the unique plays in India and showing Indian ethos. Karnad is a ground-breaking and eminent contemporary playwright of India. He has given a fresh and original facet to Indian English drama both thematically and technically. Karnad is basically a playwright writing in the Kannada language. He has enormously contributed to the maturity of Indian English drama through his plays originally written in Kannada. He wrote his plays in Kannada and later on himself translated them into English. He is

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worldwide recognized as a playwright, an exceedingly artistic filmmaker, an adaptable actor, an able cultural raconteur. He has earned his fame as a person of wide accomplishments, wellbeing, the man of multifarious personality who has respired a new life into the spirit of Indian English drama. In his plays, Karnad has created modern awareness while interpreting primeval folklore and legends. He has enriched Indian English drama with his unique literary creative and pragmatic genius. His plays intend to develop an emblematic form out of a tension between the prototype and mythic experience. Contemporary social significance of Karnad's plays presents itself through his effective receptivity in his attempt to give a new meaning and elucidation to past. Karnad found rich prospective in the past cultural, mythical and historical stories.

*Hayavadan* is one of the best known plays written under the impact of myths and past stories. As we know human, non-human and super-human characters appear in mythical stories. The presence of these super-natural agencies endows myth with magical, supernatural and unbelievable characters. Myths are considered to be pre-historical, and, therefore, they fit in no definite author, country and age. They are supposed to have social or collective authorship. The most outstanding attribute of myths are their having normative traits.

## **Myths and Moral Problems in *Hayavadan*-**

There are elemental human obsessions in our society and province which are exposed through this play. There is problem of recognition. Myths and moralities are part of human life. Each and every society has a certain concept of such behaviour and feelings. Psychological principles and dramatic presentation scrutinizes ancient myths in the radiance of existing realities so that they are made meaningful and appropriate. In *Hayavadana*, Karnad re-presents an antique Indian myth from the *veralapanchavimsati* to point to man's eternal quest for completeness, or self-realization. With its highly stylized action and mimicry, especially the scene at the temple of *Kali* and the sword fight between Devadatta and Kapila in the second act, Karnad invests the play with a significance, which brings out the worthlessness of the "incomplete" human being.

## **Padmini: An Archetypal Figure**

In this play, the central and main character figure is a woman whose name is Padmini. She has selfishness and sensuality which find expression in her unappeasable yearning for both brain and brawn. These things are symbolized by Devadatta and Kapila correspondingly. Married to Devadatta, Padmini craves for the muscle and body of Kapila. In the myth, and in the play as well, the craving is not clear, it runs as an undercurrent in Padmini's sub-conscious. She desires deeply for both the body and the intellect, though sub-consciously. It is difficult to prophesy whether or not she would have behaved differently had there been a proper equation of physical strength and intellectualism in either Devadatta or Kapila. The happenings in the Kali temple, where she transposes the heads of Devadatta and Kapila, reveal her sub-conscious desire. Padmini's act, though unintentional, is indicative of the incomplete human beings silent cry for wholeness.

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## **Reconstructing Fractured Self into a Composite Whole**

In other words, the re-enactment of the ancient myth in *Hayavadana* aims at the transformation of the fractured self into a composite whole. It has to be underlined that the transposition of heads, fails to solve Padmini's problem of identity, which is at bottom a universal human problem of *Who am I? What am I?* Padmini's requirements are not stated clearly even after the transposition of heads. The tension between moral right and wrong pervades on her whole being. The problems of daily life can be seen in the thinking and sensibility of Padmini. Immediately after finding out what she had done hastily and unintentionally, although she actually desires for Kapila's body, she is in utter confusion: "What have I done? What have I done? What should I do? Mother-mother!"

The myth in the words of the Bhagavata offers the explanation to Padmini's dilemma. Therefore, the man with Devadatta's head is indeed Devadatta and he is the lawful husband of Padmini's. Thus, the tale of the *Vetalapanchavimsati* acts as a allegory for Karnad's narration of the psychological quandary of the modern man bound by social and moral norms and inhibitions. Different kinds of problems are undertaken by the character which seems very real.

### **Preference for the Non-religious Dimension-**

Although, in Indian context, most myths are related to religion, Karnad is interested in the non-religious dimension of myths. Most myths have a strong emotional significance and the audiences have set responses towards them. Karnad re-interprets these myths from a non-religious dimension and exploits their inherent potential to arouse and sustain human emotions.

### **Complex-seeing as the Goal**

Although the myths have conventional and religious endorsement yet they have the means of questioning these values and morals. Karnad has strong belief that the multifarious folk conventions like the chorus, the music, the mixing of human and non-human worlds permit a simultaneous presentation of alternate points of view. Thus, an ancient myth acquires new magnitude in the innovative hands of Karnad, and the play throws up diverse meanings. *Hayavadana* presents the typical and existential anguish, trauma and sufferings, but does not stop at the existential despondency.

### **Absurdism in Hayavadan**

In Girish Karnad's landmark play *Hayavadana* (1971), Devadatta, a jealous husband, and his guilty friend, Kapila, behead themselves at goddess Kali's temple. Before Padmini, Devadatta's distraught wife, can follow suit, the goddess offers to renovate the men's lives, but leaves the task of rejoining the severed heads and bodies to Padmini. In her confusion, Padmini swaps the heads on the bodies of the husband and friend. The trio's resulting struggle with desire, individuality and existence is placed within a narrative about the quest for a sense of achievement, led by the horse-headed man Hayavadana.

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It draws and successfully implements its love triangle from Thomas Mann's 1940 novella *The Transposed Heads*, which has its source in a story from Somadeva's twelfth-century Sanskrit collection Kathasaritasagara. In Somadeva's story, the wife ends up with the man with the husband's head, as the head is the chief of the body's parts. Mann's novella extends the logic: the wife of an intellectual fleetingly attains an ideal mate when she errantly places his head on his brawny friend's body at Kali's temple – but she finds herself saddled with the original husband as his new body adapts in submission to his head, even as it leaves the subtle stamp of its old memories on his mind. "It's a cleverly considered play, and the [part of the] girl is so well written," said Kripalani, citing Padmini's predicament in the light of the Hindu concept of choosing the same husband for seven lifetimes. Preetika Chawla, who essays the role of Padmini, found that the pull of desire that her "extremely petulant", quick-witted character faced between her brainy husband and the brawny friend was "a dilemma any woman, anywhere in the world could be in". The play touches on matters of monogamy and desire; "Why should love stick to the sap of a single body?" asks the female chorus. Lahiri said that while the play's conflict is sparked by Padmini's "transfer of affection" between two men who love her, the directors are hooked on the play's engagement with identity as the characters grapple with the mind body split".

The new production retains the original and powerful structure, with various tweaks. In the original script, Karnad drew on – and parodied – elements of folk theatre form yakshagana, such as "the chorus, the masks, the seemingly unrelated comic episodes, the mixing of human and nonhuman worlds [to] permit the simultaneous presentation of alternate points of view". While The Industrial Theatre Co's production does not draw on yakshagana, Lahiri said that live music will lend a feel of folk performance. Kripalani's biggest tweak to the 2001 production is in doing away with the masks traditionally used to depict the transposition of the men's heads. "In the text, the head dictates what the body does," Kripalani said, referring to the underlying logic in Somadeva's story and *The Transposed Heads*.

For Kripalani, the excitement about the new rendition was about its all-new "very intelligent and young" cast, and the music of Suhas Joshi on flute and Rahul Sharma on tabla, which will "lightly underscore" the drama. "I think the older version of the text attempted to find closure," said Kripalani. "I don't think our lives or theatre or anything is about closure," he added.

## Conclusion

With the writing and performance of *Hayavadana*, Girish Karnad opened a new vista in Indian writing in English, specially, in the field of drama. He made the play very appealing to the sensibility of the audience and perfect for the connoisseurs of dramatic techniques. The play has been praised worldwide for its correctness of style and openness of themes.

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