

Identity Crisis in Hayavadana

Categories: **Crisis Identity**

Essay, Pages 12 (2835 words)

Views 1751

Abstract

Girish Karnad's use of folk forms is neither casual nor incidental. In his Hayavadana, he has made innovative experiment to offer a new direction to modern theatre. The dramatist has proved that the traditional forms need not be treated as precious artifacts, but can be adapted to treat modern themes suitable for the urban audience. This paper is an attempt to portray how Karnad used the ancient story to explore the theme of human identity in a world of tangled relationships and a struggle for perfection.

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Girish Karnad, in Hayavadana, which won the Natya Sangh Best Play Award in 1971, gives expression to Indian imagination in its richest colours and profound meanings. As a significant mark of achievement Karnad makes bold innovations, fruitful experiments and new directions in the history of Indian drama. In Hayavadana, Karnad combines the western techniques with Indian folk psyche, socio-cultural and political reality. The entire play is cast in the form of traditional Indian folk drama, which took several features of ancient Sanskrit drama.

Karnad in Hayavadana strikes a significant note by exploring the dramatic potential of the ancient Indian myths, legends and folk traditions.

Girish Karnad's Hayavadana is based on Thomas Mann's story entitled 'Transposed Heads', which in turn is based on one of the versions of the story in vetal panchavimshati. (The plays of Girish Karnad: The Development of Girish Karnad as

a dramatist) But Karnad draws heavily on Thomas Mann's story. In Hayavadana, Karnad wants to suggest to us that for us king Vikram's solution does not solve the problem.

In fact the real problem begins when it appears to be solved. That could be the reason why he dropped the version of vetal panchavimshati, which had the 'incest' themes. At the same time he makes significant departures from Thomas Mann's story too.

The sub-plot of Hayavadana is entirely different from Karnad's invention. In the play the stories of the sub-plot throughout supports the main plot. Hayavadana is an enigmatic play. Kirtinath Kurkkoti says, 'Karnad's play poses a different problem, that of human identity in a world of tangled relationships' (Contemporary Indian Drama 53). Another critic U. R. Anantha Murthy in his A Note of Karnad's Hayavadana, comments about theme like incompleteness in a comic mode.' A few paragraphs later he says, 'The play tries to create an illusion in us that the head determines the being of man' (56).

At the same time Shubhangi says that 'completeness is a humanly impossible ideal as suggested first in the story of Hayavadana and later in the transposition of head. Finally he achieves its aesthetic goal' (The development of Girish Karnad as a Dramatist: Hayavadana). Anantha Murthy points out that Devadatta is the least 'individuated' character. But this is explicable in terms of the thematic design of the play. (A Note on Karnad's Hayavadana. Karnad Girish, three plays Nagamandala Hayavadana, Tughlaq 93) Veena Noble Dass observes. 'His agony is the agony of the artist who is deeply aware of the sterility and horror that is life' (Three Plays of Girish Karnad, 64). In Hayavadana, as in Shankuntalam and Mrichhakatikam the description of Padmini's affinity with nature resonates with erotic emotion.

Hayavadana in exploring the realm of love, Erotic man – woman, Male bonding, Parent- child, offers us insight into the desires, hopes, fulfilment and frustration it breeds. Karnad's Bhagavata is the mediator. He fulfils many roles in the play from being the key to the play and a detached observer to the confidante of the heroine. The speeches of Bhagavata are resonant with image making that at the outset build upon the stage of Hayavadana invokes a representational mode of projecting female body as a sexualized object. Padmini's presentation is through her changing circumstances from the figure of a heavenly beauty to a figure. In drawing Padmini, the playwright takes an irretrievably compromised position of a man bound to patriarchal concept of womanhood and in the process the play regains the ingredients of a court drama.

Karnad's Padmini is not allowed to attain the greatness of Kalidasa's Shakuntala who embodies the ideals of not only a woman's respect for self esteem but who also in her endurance posits the great illustration of the maternity principle. Hayavadana is resonant with multilayered social messages and also tempts us to see it as a volatile autonomous being. Most critics have tried to come to terms with the problem of 'incompleteness' that the conflicting situation and also the personalities in the play depict. Padmini's free floating volitional and volatile consciousness demands a perfect man for her. Hayavadana nonetheless makes us encounter in Padmini a 'Spirited' 'embodied' mind and more significantly illumines the notions of female subjectivity as embodied in her. Padmini is a transgressive erotic agency and a woman who desires to create a space beyond the pre-fabricated identity.

In Act II of Hayavadana, the questions raised 'To whom Padmini belongs' could have been solved. Padmini's arrival drives in men the knowledge of the agony of love. The mixed up heads create multiple problems since Padmini as a lawfully wedded wife must go to Devadatta because as a mother the paternity of her child is dependent on whom she chooses as a husband. The days of bliss and happiness with Kapila have to reach a state of denouement. Padmini would like to accomplish the union that allows an undifferentiated unified body and mind. One may assume that Hayavadana's aesthetic – visionary wants to break the notion of the character Padmini as a sexualized object. In the body Karnad's Padmini seeks the corporeal ground of her intelligence in her perennial quest for fulfilment.

Karnad, through the confusion of the identities reveals the ambiguous nature of human personality. Hayavadana, in many ways re-minds us of Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream. When Hayavadana begins, a mask of Ganesha is brought on the stage and the Bhagavata sings about the Lord who is the Master of success and perfection. Naik, M. K. observes Padmini's failure of the attempts and comments: 'Padmini's plight suggests woman's vain attempt to unite man as intellect and as flesh in order to further her creative purpose. But these two aspects of the masculine personality are basically at war with each other and hence the attempt ends disastrously in destruction for woman and man. Integration cannot be achieved by trying to reconcile but by accepting cheerfully the fundamental disharmony in human life'. (Dimensions of India English Literature, 85)

Sharma and Anantha Murthy also say that Karnad fails to identify as a modern Indian dramatist because he confused the audience for a few seconds in Act II. Vinod. V. B. remarks about the second wave of seeking in Padmini, when Padmini sends Devadatta for a fair and goes to the forest in order to meet Kapila. Kapila does not want her arrival first. There arise so many 'why'? Questions in a series. Karnad

comments that people are satisfied with questions and they do not bother much about seeking answer for their questions.

Karnad tries to find out the answer for many unknown questions, despite the physical identity crisis and the sense of alienation. Hayavadana seems to be superior to all the major and minor characters in the play. Horse head appears to symbolize plain common sense and with the blessings of Kali he is converted into a full horse. By a strange coincidence, he meets Padmini's son at the end of the play. It is during his amusing meeting with the little boy that Hayavadana loses his voice and starts neighing. The completeness of a horse is attained and irony is revealed through the play successfully.

The play invites our attention to the thought-provoking question – what determines one's identity? Is it facial beauty and intelligence, or strength and physical prowess? Devadutta and Kapila are these two attributes personified respectively. Nevertheless, the two are envisaged only as complementary entities -Lava and Kusha, Rama and Lakshmana, Krishna and Balarama-and are not treated as a unified entity.

Ever since times immemorial, the head has gained predominance over the body. The Bhagavata, the omniscient narrator, himself declares that the head defines the identity of a man. Ironically, we find that the Bhagavata himself reverses the same when he addresses Hayavadana in the first part of the play as 'poor man', even though Hayavadana possesses the head of a horse. If the voice of the Bhagavata declares that the head is supreme, the tale of Hayavadana seems to echo that the body is superlative. The prince controlling the horse indicates the head, and the horse may signify the body. Contrary to these two, the main plot shuttles between the priority over the head and the body.

Earlier, if Ganesha was the husband of Siddhi and Riddhi, Padmini is the lover of intelligence and strength. Nevertheless, in her case it fails to constitute a harmonious whole; she is caught between association with two personalities, and this leads to a split in her identity. The mental imbalance is clearly explicit in the provocative imagery that portrays her as a woman bathing in the blood of the two men. The female protagonist is a schizophrenic individual caught between two worlds. This becomes implicit in the doorframe of her house which has on it the engraving of a two-headed bird. A bird instantly signifies a female. Having two heads its, its individuality can never remain in integrity as one head will always strive to assert superiority over the other. Kapila strikes the chord when he claims: "A proper two-headed bird. But it is so tiny you can't see it at all unless you are willing to tear your eyes staring at it." (87)

This phenomenon is purely psychological. Padmini is legally wedded to Devadutta out of her desire for fair looks and intellect; and attracted to Kapila for his physical elegance and manual efficiency. P. Dhanavel claims that the flourishing friendship between Kapila and Padmini leads to the acute crisis of identity in Padmini herself affirms that the song: 'Is this one that / Or that one this?' points to her autobiography. When Padmini visualizes Kapila arriving during their trip to forest she loses her sense of propriety and herself divides. The Bhagavata simultaneously chants: 'And the head is bidding good-bye to the heart.'(95) She relegates Devadutta to the background and gets preoccupied with Kapila: 'And what an ethereal shape.'

Subsequently, when she comprehends that Devadutta and Kapila have committed suicide, she loses her sense of proportion. For her existence, her identity is deeply entangled with any of the two. Ironically, she either loses both or acquires association with the two leading to an onset of neurosis. She retorts to the Goddess Kali: "If you'd saved either of them, I would have been spared all this terror, this agony."(102)

Her consistent existence depends on the presence of either of them. Eventually, she finds herself in intense euphoria when she combines the head of Devadutta and the body of Kapila. This union signifies and symbolizes her temporal stability. Padmini wants to procure something beyond an earthly concept which she calls the perfect combination: 'My celestial-bodied Gandharva.(111)' In contrast, the princess of Karnataka seems more down to earth', literally and metaphorically, in that she ventures on securing an earthly being and rejecting a celestial being. Her temporal constancy enables her to behave like a normal human being. However, even in that state of condition, there are traces of her earlier self in consoling Kapila.

The realisation of the split reaches its saturation point when Devadutta and Kapila meet each other in complete honesty at the end of the play. Padmini comprehends that both cannot co-exist within her at the same time. She says in pg.130 that she knew it in her blood that they both could not have lived together, because they had to share not only her body but share theirs' as well.

KAPILA : Devadutta, couldn't we all live together like the Pandavas and Draupadi.

DEVADUTTA : What do you think?

KAPILA : No it cannot be done.(129)

Subsequently, we find the Bhagavata presenting the crack in Padmini's self in emblematic terms:

After sharing with Indra
 His wine
 His food
 His jokes
 I returned to the earth
 and saw from far-
 a crack had appeared
 in the earth's face-
 exactly like Indra's smile.(129)

The only solution to this is the exorcising of the ghosts of Kapila and Devadutta, and in turn suicide for Padmini. The playwright achieves this in a remarkable metaphor. As the two slay each other, Padmini jumps into the funeral pyre in the ritual of Sati. As their fight is stylized like a dance, Padmini's reaction is also in the form of a dance synchronizing with the former. In expressionistic terms, this dance is exemplary to Padmini's identity crisis.

At another level, Kapila and Devadutta get into a state of identity crisis when their heads get transposed. The Bhagavata in his omnipotent authority allows the head to gain precedence and christens them Devadutta and Kapila corresponding to their heads. Devadutta also refers to the shastras and says that the head is the sign of a man. Nevertheless, one cannot fail to perceive the influence of the bodies on the two. Like never before, the dull-witted Kapila becomes logical and convincing in his arguments:

This is the hand that accepted her at the wedding. This is the body she's lived with all these months. And the she's carrying is the seed of this body. (106)

And in Devadutta we observe a kind of violence in language and action.

DEVADUTTA (pushing Kapila aside): Get away, you pig. (107)

Devadutta professes to have defeated a champion wrestler and sword-fighter just because his body had inspired' him. He avows that his body 'doesn't wait for thoughts-it just acts!' (113) At any rate, this is only a passing phenomenon of stability, and ultimately the body adapts itself to the head. Padmini summarizes the gist of the play when she tells Kapila:

The head always wins, doesn't it? (55)

Metaphorically applied this idea can always pertain to any system also, be it social, political or economic. The head of a system always dominates over the system for its

smooth functioning. This is always the case and if the system rarely renders itself stronger, then the head is overthrown.

Therefore as long as they co-exist the head is always superior. A stable relationship is not something consistent and always remains a utopian paradigm in our imagination.

As for the identity of the child, it remains shrouded in mystery. It probably corresponds to a representative of the next generation in that it remains indifferent to the system or reacts violently to the same. The child biologically belongs to Devadutta's head and Devadutta's body; however, it exhibits qualities of Kapila in its violence and unintelligible activities. The mole of Kapila remains, on his shoulder as his identity. The body reigns supreme here.

To cap it all, Padmini prefers Kapila over Devadutta; the body over the head at every instance. She utters the name of Kapila before Devadutta always (101,104). And the child favours the horse over human; bodily instinct over human intelligence yet again. This becomes Karnad's primary motive in writing the play, to ponder upon the significance of the body in one's identity and hence reverses the dichotomy head/body in his title Hayavadana where haya stands for horse/body and vadana for man/head. N.P.

Ashley affirms that the focus on the body governs the characterization of the two male characters. Since they have inanimate, static faces (masks), body language becomes the signature of their individuality. The main reason for the title Hayavadana is that Hayavadana is more complete than the other main characters Devadutta, Kapila and Padmini. And more significantly, he is complete, because towards the end, he is the only person who is satisfied! Being complete/incomplete is only a matter of one's own perception; else, how can the animal-headed Ganesha be regarded supreme and the animal headed Hayavadana be called incomplete.

Besides, the man/body dichotomy also relates to the dialectic pair man/woman. According to the Semitic religions of the world, woman is said to be constructed from the ribs of man. Karnad seems to question this theory also. Besides, by presenting a white Devadutta, and a black Kapila, Karnad also appears to address hidden agendas and issues of racism. Critics like Erin B. Mee stress: 'Hayavadana exemplifies the divided self of the postcolonial subject, he is also an example of the failure to deal successfully with that situation: he survives by negating one side of himself.' Does the body really depend on the head? By relying on bodily instincts, isn't it better to transcend back to primitivism than live in this calculating and

manipulative era by aid of the brain? Which holds a better identity for this? These are points to ponder upon.
