

The Strive for completeness: An integral aspect in Karnad's *Hayavadana*

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Girish Karnad, a versatile genius, was considered as one of the keystones of Indian English Drama. For four decades Karnad composed plays, often using history and mythology to address contemporary issues. The plays that he wrote in Kannada, have been translated into English and some Indian languages. Highly influenced by the renaissance in Western literature, Karnad often choose a subject that looked entirely unfamiliar to manifestation of native domain. Even though Karnad wrote only few plays, he has earned an esteemed place in Indian writing in English. His third play *Hayavadana*, first published in 1971, uses the conventions of folk theatre. The play contemplates on the search for identity in the complex human relationships; of human identity in a world of entangled relationships. The central plot focuses on the story of two friends who are in love with the same woman; who aspires for the incarnation of perfection. The narrative also tells the story of a man with a horse's head who seeks to become a complete man. This play highlights how all the characters become victims in the hands of fate and how they are destined to become incomplete no matter how hard they thrive to become complete. The play also foregrounds the recurrence of beings that are hybrids, with minds and bodies that are not ordinarily compatible. Karnad uses these characters as an assertion that incompleteness is an integral aspect of the human condition, and that although it is human nature to strive toward completeness, the search for the same is inevitably unattainable.

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Girish Karnad, in his writings, draws historical and mythological sources to tackle contemporary themes and existentialist crisis of modern man through characters engaged in psychological and philosophical strife. In his play *Hayavadana* (1971), Karnad uses these techniques to intensify the mystery of the modern individuals living in a chaotic state in the unruly modern world satirizing the individuals' yearning after a 'perfect' life contrary of all that is evil or odd. *Hayavadana* was inspired by the work of Thomas Mann titled *The Transposed Heads* (1940). In the introduction of the play *Hayavadana*, a Kannada writer and critic, Kirtinath Kurtkoti writes:

Mann uses it to ridicule the mechanical conception of life, which differentiates between body and soul. He ridicules the philosophy, which holds the head superior to the body. The human body, Mann argues, is a fit instrument for the fulfillment of human destiny. Even the transposition of heads will not liberate the protagonists from the psychological limits imposed by nature (Kurtkoti 5).

Thomas Mann used mock-heroic tone to disclose the story and based his source on *Kathasaritsagara*, a famous eleventh century collection of Indian legends, fairy tales and folk tales as retold in Sanskrit by a Shaiva named Somadeva. Karnad, on the other hand, in his play, focuses on the characters strive for completeness, twisting relations, humanity and the dark nature of men to tell the story. Girish Karnad is known to adeptly handle the use of conventions and motifs of folk tales and folk theatre: Story within the story, Masks, Curtains, Dolls (that speaks) and the use of the Female Chorus.

The narrative forms a Chinese box structure that is told in the form of a narrative inside a narrative (and so on), giving views from different perspectives. The play has two stories within the main story: the first one is that of the Bhagavata, the second of Hayavadana and the main plot shuttles between the two. The Bhagavata becomes the essence diffusing the two stories, functioning as a unifying force. The Bhagavata performs the role of the narrator, he is different from the typical Bhagavata in Indian drama that appears only at the beginning and end of the play and is very passive throughout. Besides the Bhagavata, Karnad also invoke the use of a Greek chorus, or simply chorus in the context of Ancient Greek tragedy who comment with a collective voice on the dramatic action. Aristotle stated in his *Poetics*:

“The chorus too should be regarded as one of the actors; it should be an integral part of the whole, and share in the action, not in the manner of Euripides but of Sophocles” (Butcher 69).

Like the Greek chorus, the Bhagavata along with the Female Chorus initiates, concludes and comments upon the play. Songs are sung and criticisms are made.

By beginning the play with an actual religious ritual (the puja), Karnad establishes that there will be different “layers” to the play, as opposed to a single, fictional plot line. The play opens with Ganesh Puja with the offering of worship accompanied by singing to the God Ganesha. The Bhagavata is something of a chorus that introduces and comments upon the main theme within the play namely “hybridity.” The play explores hybridity as a basic concept stating that a man himself can be a blend of different persons or having different versions of himself. Lord Ganesha is the first of many beings with an incompatible head and body to appear in the play. Ganesha, whose “Self,” is itself incomplete and a distorted combination of two opposing selves, is worshipped as the “the destroyer of incompleteness” (Karnad 1). This signifies that the deity who crowns his devotees and worshippers with the gift of a perfect and successful life is himself imperfect or incomplete. The use of elephant headed God is remarkable because Lord Ganesha

with human body and animal head (that of an elephant) suitably expresses the central theme of incompleteness of being:

Whichever way you look at him he seems the embodiment of imperfection, of incompleteness (Karnad 1).

In the case of the play's characters, hybridity is associated with a state of incompleteness, but the Bhagavata argues here that divine beings do not have that same deficiency; their perfection is incomprehensible to mortals "with his crooked face and distorted body, is the Lord and Master of Success and Perfection?" (Karnad 1). Although Ganesha appears to be made of fragments of different beings, he is nevertheless associated with completion. Lord Ganesha represents the three different stages namely the divine, the prosperous human and the animal. As Krishna Gandhi writes:

The theme of the play is an old one... man's earning for completeness, for perfection. It is this yearning which makes people restless in their ordinary existence, and makes them reach out for extra-ordinary things... But the idea of perfection itself is ambiguous (Joshi 200).

The Bhagavata proceeds to tell the story of the two youths: Devadatta and Kapila, who are very dissimilar from each other from the start. Devadatta, the only son of the Reverend Brahmin, Vidya Sagar, represents the intellect, "the greatest poets of the world with his poetry and wit... the apple of every eye in Dharmapura"; (Karnad 2) he is "a poet" "a pundit" who "knows the Vedas backwards" (Karnad 19). On the other hand, Kapila, the only son of an iron-smith, is dark and plain in physical appearance but "in dancing, in strength and in physical skills, he has no equals" (Karnad 2). Both are presented as binary opposites in the text differing from each other in every aspect: socially, psychologically, culturally, economically, and educationally. What makes them binary opposites is the notion that they cannot coexist. Despite the conflict, yet, they are complementary to each-other and they remember the legendary brotherhood of "Lava and Kusha, Rama and Lakshmana, Krishna and Balarama" (Karnad 2). If one of the paired opposites were removed the other's precise meaning would be altered (Barry 42). According to the Bhagavata, "the world wonders at their friendship... one mind, one heart" (Karnad 2). Meanwhile, an Actor comes to the narrator, terrified by horse speaking like a man by the name of Hayavadana: "Haya" means horse and "vadana" means face.

While Kapila talk about wrestling, Devadatta is engaged in the thought of a girl named Padmini, who lives in Pavana Veethi- the street of merchants. She is so fascinating that Devadatta finds her to be his "guru in the poetry of love", that she is beyond his 'wildest dreams" and swears that if he ever get her as his wife, he would sacrifice his "two arms to the Goddess Kali... sacrifice [his] head to lord Rudra..." (Karnad 14). In the course of the play Kapila eventually succeeded in getting Padmini, the daughter of leading merchant in Dharmapura, married to Devedatta.

After Devadatta's marriage with Padmini a new development takes place in the relationship of Devadatta and Kapila. Devadatta gradually becomes aware of the growing mutual fondness between Kapila and Padmini. Kapila evinces romantic sensibility when he relates Padmini, in an aside, as "Yakshini, Shakuntala, Urvashi, Indumati—all rolled into one" (Karnad 16). He compares Padmini to a particular flower called 'Fortunate Lady' providing the reader with glimpses of his imaginative poetic nature:

Because it has all the marks of marriage a woman puts on. The yellow on the petals-then that red round patch at the bottom of the petals-like on your foreheads-then-here-that thin saffron line-like in the parting of your hair-Then-uhm...Oh yes-here near the stem a row of black dots-like a necklace of black heads (Karnad 27).

Devadatta-Padmini-Kapila became the admiring citizens of Dharmapura like Rama-sita-Lakshmana (Karnad 20). Focusing on the complexity of human relationship, Kamad skillfully reflect on the search for identity through his characters. P. Dhanavel comments,

Search for identity becomes subtle and constant juxtaposition of the past and present which has been a common feature of Kamad's dramatic art (Dhanavel 106).

With the passage of time, Padmini's little concern for Kapila enrages Devadatta but when she teases him for his friendship with Kapila, Devadatta exaggerates his friendship in overstated terms:

Kapila isn't merely a friend-he's like my brother. One has to collect merit in seven lives to get a friend like him (Karnad 21).

At times, the relationship between the two men becomes strenuous for Padmini to comprehend: Two friends there were—one mind, one heart. They saw a girl and forgot themselves. But they could not understand the song she sang (Karnad 11). When Padmini is pregnant, Devedatta finds it difficult to show his unwillingness for journey to the big Ujjain fair. As they all set out in a cart driven by Kapila, on the way Padmini is strongly fascinated by Kapila's skill in driving a cart his strong muscles and his ability. Padmini's attraction towards Kapila could not remain hidden from Devedatta when Padmini expresses her desire to go to the temple of Rudra, but Devedatta refuses to accompany her and asks Kapila to escort her. Devadatta anticipates her inclination towards his friend Kapila but he feels powerless to avert the situation. He says "Good-bye Kapila, Good-bye padmini, may the Lord Rudra bless you. You are two pieces of my heart. Live happily together. I shall find happiness in that thought" (Karnad 28). As they set out for the temple of Rudra, Devadatta too goes to the temple of Kali to fulfill his promise, where he finds a sword and cuts off his head to offer it to Goddess Kali, which he previously promised to do so to Lord Rudra. Kapila goes in search of his friend but finds his truncated body. So, Kapila also cuts off his head in repentance. He kills himself partly because of his affection for his friend and partly because of

his fear of the society that will accuse him as the cause of his death. After seeing both the bodies, Padmini also proposes to follow them but Kali forbids her to do so, and asks her, “Put these heads back properly. Attach them to their bodies and then press that sword on their necks. They will come up alive, is that enough?” (Karnad 32). However, Padmini keeps the heads on the two bodies, but in her excitement she puts Devadatta's head on Kapila's body and vice-versa. Then she presses the sword on their necks exactly according to the instruction of the Goddess. As they come alive, Kapila's body weighs a ton on Devadatta's head and Devadatta's head feels heavy on Kapila's body. The friends laugh merrily seeing their bodies as if they have donned themselves in a new pair of clothes. Padmini, at her wits' end said that she almost died of fright. This act reveals the ambiguous nature of human personality: Kapila with Devadatta's body! Devadatta with Kapila's body! Four men in a single lifetime. (Karnad 54). The two friends make claims and counter claims to the hand of Padmini. Kapila clearly indicate what Padmini wanted “Devadatta's clever head and Kapila's strong body...” (Karnad 38). Finally Devadatta takes her away as he has now become a possessor of both the things which Padmini had wanted - a perfect man as her husband.

The second act of Hayavadana is largely Karnad's creation that is based to a greater extent on the story of by Thomas Mann, but the conclusions offered are interpreted differently. The second act shows that the solution Vikrama gave to the problem is insufficient in the present situation. Padmini's act of going with Devedatta's head is based on the same solution. After the exchange of the heads, Padmini felt that she has the best of both men. Hence, the play tries to create an illusion that the head determines the being of man which according to the Shastras is the head is the sign of a man (Karnad 37).

But if the head controls the body it rationally follows that it will transform the body. Padmini remains with Devedatta, She is happy for some time, since Davadatta can perform the physical feats of Kapila and can also excel the best of scholars. But as time passes, she is forced to watch the transformation taking place and thus loses Kapila slowly. Also, Devadatta's head with Kapila's body combine slowly reverts to the nature of Devadatta. And so does the other combines of Kapila's head with Devadatta's body. But there is a difference. Devadatta stops writing poetry while Kapila is haunted by the memories in Devadatta's body. Padmini, after the exchange of heads, feels that she has the capacity for complete experience. Her situation is beautifully summed up by the images of the river and the scarecrows in the choric songs (Karnad 59). Padmini grows weary of her husband, sends Devadatta to the Ujjain fair to fetch new dolls for the child and in the meanwhile she walks into the embrace of Kapila. She takes the child with her and claims it to be the child of both Devadatta and Kapila. Padmini's visit disturbs Kapila. He had buried all those faceless memories but Padmini has dug them all up for him. He finds himself in a tough situation and asks Padmini: “Why should one tolerate this mad dance of incompleteness?”(Karnad 57)

Ultimately, she finds herself with the same problem she had faced in the first act. She misses Kapila's impulsiveness and his physicality consequently. Devadatta loses Padmini to Kapila once more. The emphasis of the play is on Padmini, the woman who is faced with this impossible situation. Padmini's predicament is the predicament of a contemporary, unconstrained woman in our society who is born between two polarities; a woman who loves her husband but is fascinated by someone else: for two different aspects of their personalities. The three characters somehow form a kind of love triangle which in the words of Sternberg,

‘in the short-term, it refers to “the decision that one loves a certain other”, and in the long-term, it refers to “one’s commitment to maintain that love” (Sternberg 313).

The two men cannot accept each other when it comes to sharing a woman and all the three destroy themselves in the process. Devadatta confesses to Kapila that even after having his physical form has not attained completeness, “I wanted your power but not your wilderness. You lived in hate- I in fear” (Karnad 60). Even Kapila, after possessing Devadatta’s body had not owned his “wisdom” (Karnad 60). They suffer from the unified functioning of the incorporated body. Both became disintegrated, deteriorated bodies. The two must die because they cannot all live together in harmony. Devadatta makes it clear that there are “no grounds for friendship now” and “no question of mercy” and that they must “fight like lions and kill like cobras” (Karnad 61). It has been widely assumed that the brain rules the body, and that it defines one’s personality and who one is. Human desire for completeness represented by Padmini ends in utter disappointment as the transposition of heads gradually proves that it is the mind that rules. She is of the opinion that both men have won but she ‘the better half of two bodies- I neither win nor lose’ (Karnad 57). In the process, Devadatta and Kapila died fighting with each other while Padmini decides to perform Sati. Before sacrificing herself, Padmini makes it clear that she cannot hope to get perfection even in her next life. As she prays to “kali, mother of all nature”, she says:

You must have your joke even now other women can die praying that they should get the same husband in all the lives to come. You have not left me even that little consolation (Karnad 63).

The deaths serve the absurdity of the situation. What Karnad wants to convey is that the world is swarming of incomplete individuals, indifferent to the desires and frustrations, joys and sorrows of human beings. The incompleteness of human desire is symbolized by Padmini: the fundamental nature of the human body that is torn between heaven and earth, itself being impressionable. The constant search for fulfillment of desires, of completeness results in a tragic end.

The sub plot of *Hayavadana*, the horse-headed man, deepens the significance of the main theme of incompleteness by looking at it from different perspective. Hayavadana’s father, a celestial being, asked his mother to accompany him in heavenly abode, she refuses to go with him as she

wanted him in the form of horse. Consequently Hayavadana's father cursed her to be a horse, she was pregnant at that time, and therefore she gives birth to a unique child who is having horse's head and man's body. Thus, the child has divine elements (his father a Gandharva) and a human element (his mother a human being) and also having an animal element (as his mother converts into a mare). Though Padmini suffers from the split-mind personality, she sacrifices herself in the pyre 'sati'. Therefore, the call of the mind is not ignored. It is true that mind gradually subdues. But this is not a symptom of a complete personality. Padmini's aspiration for phenomenal body, phenomenal brain is unlike the aspiration of Hayavadana's mother, who rejected handsome suitors from every land and was enchanted by the White Stallion ridden by the Prince of Arabia. Horse is an age long symbol of masculinity and sex, of passion, (Greysmith 1) so the choice of the bestial aspect is the choice of the Celestial one. Hayavadana's own statement deserves mention:

No one could dissuade her. So ultimately she was married off to the white stallion. She lived with him for fifteen years. One morning she wakes up-and no horse! In its place stood a beautiful Celestial Being, a Gandharva (Karnad 8).

Apparently this celestial being was cursed by the God Kubera to be born a horse for some act of misbehavior. After fifteen years of human love he had become his original self again (Karnad 1.8), his identity restored. Hayavadana's mother refuses to go to heavenly abode with her Gandharva husband. Since, she fails to recognize the divine aspect of relationship hence her life turns in to a tragedy; and she carried the tragedy/the curse not only by herself but by the next generation also, that is Hayavadana as he carries the cause of incompleteness. When Hayavadana was left by his mother in an incomplete state, he was neither in the form of a man nor that of an animal. Since his birth, Hayavadana has always been facing an identity crisis: still in search of completeness of his physical body and his society. His personal life has naturally been blameless. He has taken: "Interest in the social life of the Nation-Civics, Politics, Patriotism, Nationalism, Indianization, and the Socialist Pattern of Society" (Karnad 9). He has tried everything. But still he is forced to ask the Bhagavata "where's my society? Where? You must help me to become a complete man" (Karnad 9). Hayavadana asked the Bhagavata what he could do to get rid of his horse's head and become a complete human being enjoying the social status of the same. In search of his completeness, he has been to several places of pilgrimage and consulted numberless fakirs and saints. But all this has been a meaningless pursuit. When the Bhagavata and Actor ask him whether he has visited Banaras and Rameshwar, Hayavadana reveals:

Banaras, Rameshwar, Gokam, Haridwar, Gaya, Kedamath- not only those but the Dargah of Khwaja Yusuf Baba, the Grotto of Our Virgin Mary-I've tried them all. Magician, mendicants, maharishis, fakirs, saints and sadhus, sadhus with short hair, sadhus with beards- sadhus in saffron, sadhus in altogether-hanging singing, rotating, gyrating on the spikes, in the air, under water, under the ground. I have covered them all (Karnad 9-10).

After losing hopes from every corner, Hayavadana is at last advised by the Bhagavata to try the Kali of Mount Chitrakoot, as she is ever awake to the call of her devotees. Therefore, the Bhagavata sent his Actor to accompany Hayavadana to there and blessed them by saying: “May you become successful in search for completeness” (Kamad 11). Towards the end of the play Hayavadana appears again on the stage, when he is asked about his experience at the temple of Kali, Hayavadana says to the Bhagavata:

Ah! That’s long story I went there, picked up a sword which was lying around- very unsafe, I tell you- put it on my neck and said: ‘Mother of all Nature, if you don’t help me I’ll chop off my head!...The Goddess appeared. Very prompt. But looked rather put out. 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? 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 (Kamad 68).

Thus, in search of completeness Hayavadana becomes “a complete horse” instead of a complete man. However, he is still not a complete being yet as he still retains the human voice which to him is “the cursed human voice” (Karnad 68). Now he is worried to get rid of his partial human qualities. After five years, Padmini's son is like Kapila. He is as sullen as he. But he starts laughing for the first time in his life when Hayavadana who is now a complete horse except his human voice talks and laughs like a human being. His liberation is complete only when the five-year old son of Padmini asks him to laugh and soon the laughter turns into a neigh. As in the words of Rukhaya,

The child biologically belongs to Devadutta's head and Devadutta's body; however, it exhibits qualities of Kapila in its violence and unintelligible activities. . . . Moreover, the child prefers the horse to human; bodily instinct reigns over human intelligence yet again. Therefore Karnad's primary motive in writing the play was to ponder upon the significance of the body in one's identity and hence reverses the dichotomy head/body in his title. This is the significance of the title that powerfully echoes the theme of the drama. Hayavadana's dream of becoming a complete man remains unfulfilled. The supremacy of the head over body is also found in the case of Hayavadana. Kali grants the wish of Hayavadana to become complete and he becomes a complete horse. The horse gives him a ride while the boy sings a nursery rhyme. He now loses his human voice and starts neighing. Thus they free each other from their incompleteness.

Along with the other characters in the play, the horse headed man is also in search of his identity and to get rid of its physical incompleteness either by changing into a human being completely or to be a horse. Commenting on Hayavadana’s quest, Kirtinath Kurtkoti in his Introduction to the play, aptly remarks:

The horseman's search for completeness ends comically, with his becoming a complete horse. The animal body triumphs over what is considered the best in man, the Uttamanga, the human head! (Kurtkoti 6).

Hayavadana illustrates this crisis very effectively. Animals enjoy the totality of being and hence Hayavadana's mother is happy at the prospect of being a horse. Hayavadana too enjoys the privilege in the end. Padmini attempts to get the best of both the mind and the body by the transformation of the heads. But Padmini tries to achieve the impossible as integration cannot be achieved by trying to reconcile the irreconcilable, but by accepting cheerfully the fundamental disharmony in human life (Naik 140).

Perfection according to D.G. Gillham, is an ideal, a fiction, a state beyond the grasp of imperfect man. The ideal is clearly an important part of our thinking- if it were not it would not reappear so frequently and persistently in our records- but is not deliberately achieved... limited programmed which is bound to fail anyway and leave us frustrated.

The search for completeness or perfection thus leads the characters to their tragic and poignant death. The play explores the theme of incompleteness at three levels: the divine, the man and the animal. If Lord Ganesha represents the imperfection at the divine level, Padmini, Devadatta and Kapila represent the human level while Hayavadana reflects the animal level. Hence, incompleteness is inevitable or unavoidable and human relationships are bound to be effected by it. Karnad very tactically represents the impossible strive for completeness as a theme in the play.

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