

## QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN GIRISH KARNAD'S *HAYAVADANA*

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### **Abstract:**

In "Introduction to *Hayavadana*", Kirtinath Kurtkoti has accurately remarked that the play deals with the problem of human identity in a world of complicated relationships causing "a confusion of identities which reveals the ambiguous nature of human personality" (69-70). The play is essentially concerned with the identity crises of Padmini in the main plot and of *Hayavadana* in the sub-plot. It is worthwhile to search the causes, complications and climaxes of identity crisis in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* for a better understanding of the play as well as of the playwright.

**Key Words:** *Quest, human identity, ambiguous, identity crisis.*

The theme of *Hayavadana* is borrowed from *Kathasaritsagara* an ancient collection of stories in Sanskrit by using Thomas Mann's retold story, "The Transposed Heads". Mythology is nothing but a universal language to express the general truths of life. *Hayavadana* as a mythological play, centered around the Indians who have grouped up. Myths deal with higher truths of life and therefore, are not anchored in reality and do not follow the laws of probability. In other words, myths deal with and present ideologies or philosophies disguised in stories that violate the unities of time, place and action; and the laws of Nature. They deal with supernatural characters or events to present the higher truths, which cannot be articulated in terms of realism or naturalism. To put it in a different manner, myths are disguised ideologies or philosophies. From this point of view *Hayavadana* may be described as an ideological play. The central ideas presented in the play are the body-mind dichotomy and man's search for completeness and man-woman relationship happen to be the philosophical concerns in the play. Within the story of search for completeness, that of *Hayavadana* also is joint.

While the Indian solution in *Vetalpanchavimsati* up-holds idealism, the German solution in "The Transposed Heads" champion materialism. Aware of the extreme nature of these options, Karnad seems to hint at the middle course of humanism in *Hayavadana*. For, he resides on the complex psycho-social dimensions of the problem of identity crisis. It is interesting to note, however, that he maintains the moral problem in the main plot and the philosophical problem in the sub-plot. He combines these two roles in the larger psycho-social plane of the real world for illuminating the essentially unclear nature of human personality. It is this intriguing and complex psycho-social dynamics of human identity crisis—a woman in love with two men (342), the plight of abandoned children (14-15) and the hierarchical social structure with all its repressive conventions (42-43) that lends charm to Karnad's play.

So long as Padmini remains "the daughter of the leading merchant in Dharmapura" (19), she has no problem whatsoever, not to speak of identity crisis. When she is fervently loved by Devadatta, the handsome and wise son of Vidyasagara of the same town, she gets into trouble with Kapila, the best friend of Devadatta. It is not without substance, then, that her marriage with Devadatta is made possible by the active intrusion of Kapila. The enviable friendship of Devadatta and Kapila flourishes as before and, in fact, leads to the sharp crisis of identity in Padmini. For, there develops an undeclared and unconscious

attraction between Padmini and Kapila. Therefore, Devadatta is mentally isolated from his wife and friend, through he loves both of them.

A day arrives when all the three go to the famous Ujjain fair. The beginning of the journey itself is problematical due to Devadatta's lack of serious interest in the fair. He likes to have the day for himself and his wife alone at home but Kapila is all set for the journey. The conflict in the mind of Padmini and her undoubted attachment to Kapila are revealed at this stage. To please her husband, she at first says that the journey could be put off. On seeing the mental agony of Kapila, however, she changes her mind suddenly. Finally they proceed on their catastrophic journey. In the words of Jassbir Jain, "the fragmentation was portrayed through the multiple love-relationships, all of which ended in a similar sense of incompleteness" (29-30). As the play progresses, as Kapila says, every single character is tormented by the "mad dance of incompleteness" (57). Pranav Joshipura also stated that "Karnad presents a comprehensive picture of the human beings in search of perfection and completeness" (199).

On their way to Ujjain, they stop for a while in a forest to rest. Here again, Padmini's conflict is portrayed vividly. Now she no longer cares for her husband's hurt feelings and visits the Rudra temple along with Kapila. Of course, the social frontage is maintained by Kapila who gets permission from Devadatta before leaving. Sure of their mutual attraction, Devadatta remembers his vows to Lord Rudra and Goddess Kali, and goes to the deserted Kali temple to cut off his head. Disturbed by the absence of his friend, Kapila searches for him following the footprints. He too cut-off his head for the sake of friendship. Padmini is disgusted with both of them. The inherent ambiguity in love, marriage, and friendship is brought out greatly in these circumstances. However, the identity crisis of Padmini is complicated further.

Conscious of the social disgrace on her, Padmini too reaches the Kali temple and gets ready to serve her head. At this decisive point, Kali, who is sleeping, wakes up due to the noise made by Padmini. Initially, the Goddess is irritated but slowly comes forward to save Padmini from her critical situation. Granting Padmini's prayer for bringing back the dead men to life, the Goddess goes back to sleep. However, Padmini transposes the heads in her disturbed state of mind. As a result, the identity of Devadatta and Kapila becomes problematic. In fact, Padmini's own identity is broken.

Two inter-related questions of identity harvest up here are Who is Padmini's husband? and Whose wife is Padmini? The moral problem is solved by a learned rishi whose un-equivocal conclusion is reported by the Bhagavta: "As the heavenly Kalpa Vriksha is supreme among trees, so is the head among human limbs" (40). Therefore, the man with Devadatta's head, is indeed, Devadatta and he is the rightful husband of Padmini. The decision gives much happiness to both Padmini and Devadatta. She is overjoyed to have her "Fabulous body-fabulous brain-fabulous Devadatta" (43) and so is her revived husband. Expectedly, Kapila is sad and parts company with them to live in the deep forest. Padmini's predicament, as Joshipura describes as "The predicament of a modern, free and bold woman who is torn between polarities, women who loves her husband as well as someone else for two different aspects of their personalities" (203).

The moral problem of identity crisis is solved but not so is the psychological problem. Further biological transformations take place in both Devadatta and Kapila, as they reach their former self of distinctive head and body. Gradually, Padmini is disillusioned with her transfigure husband. In fact, she speaks to Devadatta about the increasing loss of Kapila's energy in him. He brushes aside the question but she becomes fanatical with the memories of Kapila, which is dramatically well brought out through her song and the Dolls. She uses the Ujjain fair as an excuse to buy new dolls for their son and sends out the unwilling Devadatta. Then, she goes to the forest in search of Kapila and finds him at last. It is necessary to note that she also takes her son along with her. At first, Kapila is distressed by Padmini's arrival but he accepts her to become a complete man himself, as suggested by Padmini. However, their happiness is short-lived, as Devadatta comes after them to put an end to their unsettled trilateral life. Both Devadatta and Kapila realize that they love Padmini deeply but cannot live together "like the Pandavas and Draupadi" (60). Hence, they fight with each other and kill themselves. Padmini stands a mute spectator to this deadly

fight because she also knows in her blood that they could not live together. Unavoidably, she enters the funeral blaze as a sati. The identity crisis of Padmini, of Devadatta as well as of Kapila lead all of them to find freedom in fire.

Karnad projects that Padmini needs “a man of steel.” (19) Devadatta is not the man for her. The two men change to their “original self” but Padmini remains in her primitive procreative self. Karnad examines the psychological and sociological identity of these characters but has no method to cure them. Even as she enters the fire after the fashion of the typical Indian *pativrata*, Padmini is painfully aware of her identity crisis. She prays to her ancestor:

Kali, Mother of all Nature, 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 haven't left me even that little consolation. (63)

So Padmini died as a discontented and deficient woman. The identity crisis of Hayavadana is physically clear as an objective correlative for Padmini's in a strange and hazy form, he has a horse's head on a human body. Quite noticeably, he is similar to Lord Ganesha “who has an elephant's head on a human body, a broken tusk and cracked belly” (1). If Hayavadana is seen as an unwelcome trespasser into the main play, Lord Ganesha is brought to the stage as the supreme God. However, Hayavadana's interference is as meaningful as that of the presence of Ganesha, if not more. For instance, he is mistaken to have put on a mask. “It's his real head” (6). Then, mask is reality in the case of both Hayavadana and Ganesha. In contrast, the human beings exhibit no such correlation between appearance and reality.

Hayavadana's critical condition can be better understood in the light of his ancestry. He is the offspring of a Celestial Being in the form of a horse and the Princess of Karnataka. Not surprisingly then, he is born with an equine head and a human body. Perhaps there is a biological association between male and head on the one hand, and female and body on the other. Such an union seems to be true in the case of Padmini's son who is as depressed and sad as his father but as lively and energetic as his mother. Nevertheless, the sexual symbolism is obvious but it has a mythical base. After fifteen years of having the human love of the Princess, the roan father becomes a celestial being who “had been cursed by the God Kubera to be born a horse for some act of misbehavior” (8). He wants his wife to go with him to Heaven but she urges him to be the same horse. Infuriated, he curses her to be a horse and disappears. The cursed Princess joins the horse family. Only Hayavadana is left alone to search for his completeness. Not belonging to any group of his own is his problem of identity, but he is more than rewarded with his intelligence.

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. The horse head appears to symbolize plain common sense. He asks intelligent questions and points to several break out in the individual and social systems. His actual problem seems to be that he is not sufficiently aware of his superior intelligence. As a result, he is carried away by the misleading figure of a complete man and is finally changed into a complete horse but with human voice by Goddess Kali's blessing of doubtful nature. Therefore, he has to worry his voice and starts yelling.

Could there be any suggestion that the common sense of Hayavadana is increased when he becomes a complete horse? Or could there be the opposite possibility that Hayavadana is poor of his common sense after the change? If the latter is valid, the loss of Hayavadana's common sense is an irremediable loss for the country, for Indian drama, and for Karnad. Nothing like the extraordinary creature of Hayavadana has come out of Karnad either before or after Hayavadana. Of course, there is the Naga in *Nagamandala* but he is more a symbol of sexual energy than of common sense. As Karnad, and everybody, knows very well what is needed for a healthy society is pure horse sense and not the adulterated snake sense. Hayavadana's transformation, then, is sharply ironical.

Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*, thus, explores the complex psycho-social dimension of the problem

of human identity crisis, as different from the moral aspect of the Indian story and the philosophical purport of Mann's story, in both tangled and untangled relationships. The play reveals the essential ambiguity of human personality which is apparently shaped or shattered by the human environment. Fundamentally it is incomplete and imperfect, yet the human beings search and perfection.

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