

THE INDIVIDUAL'S JOURNEY TOWARDS SELF- REALIZATION IN GIRISH KARNAD'S 'HAYAVADANA'

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Abstract

The relationship between drama and its social and cultural milieu has always been intimate. The facts of an era find their way into plays and its dreams and illusions radiate from drama, which is considered as one of the most significant artistic mediums that mirror the debates and anxieties of contemporary society. Girish Karnad is one of the most famous Indian playwrights of post-Independence era. His work Hayavadana's plot deals with the multifaceted nature of the human identity and portrays the characters' journey towards self-realization. In the play, the quest for completion is achieved by some characters, like Hayavadana and Padmini's child, who experience conflict in the beginning, but emerge as complete holistic beings at the end. The play has multiple layers of meanings which it explores through its themes and plot structure, especially the notion of identity as fixed and stable.

Drama, being essentially a social art, is perhaps the most important form of literature that leads to a comprehensive understanding of both the society as well as the individual. The relationship between drama and its social and cultural milieu has always been intimate. Since the facts of a period find their way into plays and its dreams and illusions radiate from them, drama is considered as one of the most significant artistic mediums that mirrors the debates and anxieties of contemporary society. H.S. Shiva Prakash observes that, "Theatre, the most composite of all art forms, draws strength from multifarious interactions among varied cultural expressions" (Prakash 195). Drama in India has a long history and even in languages which have no noteworthy dramatic texts, the available narrative literature reveals theatrical properties. Drama not only reflects contemporaneity and phases of life but also embraces different echelons of society.

During the pre-independence period in India, several theatrical organizations like the Indian National Theatre, Ebrahim Alkazi's theatre unit, the Bhartiya Natya Sangh etc. came in to existence and promoted theatre. Post independence, the Indian government encouraged visual and performing arts. The National School of Drama, Sangeet Natak Academy and several institutions, beginning especially with the National Drama Festival in 1954, gave momentum to the theatre movement in India. Indian literature in English flourished more in the post-Independence era which provided a favourable environment for the literati who experimented successfully with various genres like drama, poetry, prose and fiction. Some famous Indian playwrights of the post-Independence period are Mahesh Dattani, Manjula Padmanabham, Girish Karnad, Asif Curimbhoy,

Gurucharan Das and others. Bijay Kumar Das in his book *Postmodern Indian English Literature* states that “three playwrights who have given a new direction to Indian English drama in the postmodern period are Girish Karnad, Nissim Ezekiel and Mahesh Dattani” (Das 116).

Contemporary writers have focused on the complex nature of human identity. The characters in Girish Karnad’s *Hayavadana* (1971) try constantly to integrate their multiple identities. Karnad often focuses on the multitudinous nature of human identity as having many facades, each of which is distinct and exclusive. This trait of human nature is represented symbolically in his plays by presenting characters that embody contradictions and paradoxes within them, or through characters who contrast with each other so much that they can be seen as different aspects of the same personality. Thus, many of Karnad’s plots deal with the multifaceted nature of human identity and portray the characters’ journey towards self-realization.

When Girish Karnad appeared on the Kannada theatre scene in 1961, the theatre world was in a search of a new theatre language. Girish Karnad realises the impact of modernism on his works but also adheres to the rich literary past of our country and therefore says, “My generation was the first to come of age after India became independent of British rule. It therefore had to face a situation in which tensions implicit until then had come out in the open and demanded to be resolved without apologia or self-justification ...” (Author’s Introduction: Three Plays.1) Postmodern literature shows a crisis of identity of human being (ethnic, sexual, social and cultural) and its struggle for legitimization in a hypocritical society. This dilemma is evident in Karnad’s plays and those of his contemporaries like Vijay Tendulkar and Badal Sircar. The younger generation of potential viewers was nurtured on the new literary taste, whereas an unresolved conflict between the old and the new, the native and the foreign, the traditional and the radical was implicit.

Karnad is today ranked as one of the front-line playwrights in contemporary Indian theatre and for five decades Karnad has been composing plays, often using history and mythology to tackle contemporary issues. He has written fourteen plays, out of which he has translated five into English. Although Karnad is influenced by western philosophical sensibility, his plays at the same time are strongly rooted in Indian mythology and history. Myths and legends have not only defined our culture but have always provided immense scope for the Indian dramatists. As Shastri states “Myth, at all events, is a raw material, which can be the stuff of literature” (Shastri 229-230). The existential crisis of modern man is conveyed through strong individuals who are locked in intense psychological and philosophical conflicts. Karnad’s use of mythology is one of its strongest traits which validates individual experience and universalises it.

Girish Karnad’s play *Hayavadana* (1971) explores the contemporary debate about human identity by reworking the 11th century ancient fable *Kathasaritsagara* (1070AD) which was further developed by Thomas Mann (1875-1955) in his novel *The Transposed Heads* (1940). Karnad’s play reveals a strong influence of both the texts in its plot structure and in the rendering of events. Through the ancient myth of a young woman named Padmini, who is married to a handsome and intellectual Brahmin Devadatta, and yet is in love with his friend Kapila who is unrivalled in strength and physical skills, Karnad presents the identity crisis of the heroine. Padmini’s identity is fragmented as she is torn between the desire for the two men who contrast each other in their physical and mental attributes, and she seeks to escape from this conflict. Pranav Joshipura comments, “Padmini is the predicament of a modern, free and bold woman who is torn between polarities” (Joshipura 203).

The play opens with the invocation of Lord Ganesha, “The destroyer of obstacles, Lord and master of success and perfection “who removes all hurdles and crowns all endeavours with success. Lord Ganesha himself has a human body, the head of an elephant and a broken tusk therefore embodying imperfections and incompleteness. The prayer to Lord Ganesha anticipates and complicates the play’s thematic exploration of incompleteness and the human search for wholeness. M. Sarat Babu has said, “Physical deformity reflects not only gender and social deformities but also political deformity. It is the head that carries the cultural attributes and thus it is the head that determines the lifestyle of the individual” (Babu 83).

The complex question of identity is explored in the play at different levels. The main plot of the play involves Padmini, Kapil and Devadutta and explores the theme of the search for completeness. Devadutta and Kapila became fragmented creatures while Padmini, attracted by Devadutta’s acumen and knowledge on one hand and Kapila’s physical vigour and charm on the other, feels divided between the two. The sub-plot of the story involving the character Hayavadana (Haya means Horse and Vadana means head) explores the nature of identity in a different manner. Since he has been endowed with the ability to speak as humans do, he expresses his intense desire to become a complete being. Another significant narrative thread in the play involves Padmini’s child, who being the offspring of parents who themselves struggle to define their identity, again reflects the same crisis. The child had been given to Bhagvata by his mother and is hopelessly incomplete for he has become a silent recluse and has lost his ability to behave as a normal child.

Karnad employs the motif of disintegration and fragmentation through different characters in this play. This fragmentation is a typical postmodernist trait, for postmodernism rejects a single or absolute reality, but instead promotes plurality of meanings and the coexistence of a wide variety of small narratives. Human identity in postmodernist works is a problematic concept, for it is shaped by multiple aspects of the human persona and can never be taken to be absolute or complete. In Karnad’s play, different characters reveal a desire for self-realization as they are strongly attracted by traits in other individuals which are complementary to their own self.

The identity of Padmini, similarly, reveals a strong attraction for those aspects of the male stereotype, which are lacking in her husband Devadutta. He is learned but frail-bodied. Intellectual Devadutta is the antithesis of his friend Kapila, who is strong and virile and an embodiment of the typical attributes of the male which charm women. Padmini observes Kapila and thinks, “what an ethereal shape! Such a broad back like an ocean with muscles rippling across it”, and then thinks for Devadutta, “and then that small, feminine waist which looks so helpless”. She is fascinated by Kapila’s agility and prowess. Her thoughts run “He is like a celestial being reborn as a hunter....How his body sways, his limbs curves - it’s a dance almost” (26). Padmini’s strong yearning to be united with both the men propels the plot of the play. Devadutta, dejected and hurt by Padmini’s evident attraction towards Kapila, commits suicide. Shocked and dumbfounded, Kapila is afraid of being accused of having committed his friend’s murder and has no resort but to commit suicide too.

Padmini prays to Goddess Kali to help her since both, her husband Devadutta, and Kapila, are dead. The Goddess allows her to put the heads of both the men back on their bodies, so that they may live again but Padmini inadvertently transposes their heads in the process. This again reflects Padmini’s strong yearning to

acquire both – the intellect of Devdutta and the physical charm of Kapila. Now Devadutta's body has Kapila's head while Kapila's has Devadutta head, the use of masks as a theatrical device acquires importance at this juncture in the play. The narrator Bhagwat states, "Henceforth, the person wearing the mask of Devadutta will be called Devadutta, similarly with Kapila" (34). To some extent she is successful in integrating the conflicting desires that she has nurtured. But, with the transposing of the heads, the identities of both Devadutta and Kapila become questionable. Here the question of the nature of the self arises – is the self something pre determined which remains constant throughout the life or is it a social construct, moulded and shaped by the society in which it exists? Also, underlying the entire puzzling situation is the question – is human identity a superficial construct – which depends only on a person's physical appearance, or is it a deeper notion which takes into account all the different facets—the physical, emotional, social, psychological and mental attributes of the person. P. Dhanvel argues, "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...reveals the essential ambiguity of human personality which is apparently shaped or shattered by the human environment" (Dhanvel 47).

A similar conflict is experienced by Hayavadana, the horse-headed man who appears on the stage in the beginning of the play and is a part of the ontological world of the narrator

Bhagwata. Hayavadana, with a man's body and a horse's head, wants to get rid of his head and become a complete man. Whereas, Hayavadana's parentage (offspring of the union of a celestial being in an equine form and a princess) symbolically suggests the combination of the three elements of the divine, the human and the animal in his making. His mother was the Princess of Karnataka. She fell in love with the stallion of a prince who had come to marry her. After fifteen years of happy life, the horse became his original self, Gandharva, who was cursed by Kubera, God of wealth to be born as a horse for his misconduct. He asked her to accompany him to his heavenly abode, which she declined. He cursed her to become a mare and he went off, and Hayavadana was left behind. Living in the world of men, he finds himself incomplete with his horse's head and human trunk. He tries unsuccessfully to be a complete being but Hayavadana's problem remains unresolved.

Another minor yet important pair of characters in the play is the dolls, who have been brought by Devadutta to his house to please his wife Padmini. The dolls converse with each other, unheard by the human characters on the stage, and comment on the thoughts and action of Padmini's and Devadutta. The dolls are perceptive and discern the change in Devadatta's personality and physical attributes after the transposition of the heads has taken place.

Doll I: His palms! They were so rough, when he first brought us here, like a labourer's. Now they are soft sickly soft like a young girl.

Doll II: His stomach. It was so tight and muscular. Now...

Doll I: I know it's loose.

The speech of the two dolls also centres on Padmini's psyche revealing her intense attraction towards Kapila, something that their society would never approve of. The dolls voice Padmini's thoughts aloud, thus allowing the reader and the audience to glimpse into her complex psyche. They complement her external actions with

a commentary about her mental world and her thought process and thus enable the reader to comprehend her impulses and hidden desires.

Padmini's story is narrated and dramatized on stage. It is resolved only after the trio's entire story has been told and concluded by the narrator Bhagwata. At this point, the ontological world of the three lovers and that of the narrator and Padmini's seemingly mute child converge when Hayavadana appears on stage again neighing. It deepens the significance of the main idea of search for completeness at a different level. This time Hayavadana is in the form of a complete horse, majestic and graceful, and has lost his ability to speak like a human being. Hayavadana's identity crisis catalyzes the child's natural ability to laugh and wonder at things around. Gauri Shankar Jha points out that Hayavadana is, "a post-colonial offshoot of a matured post-colonial mind highlighting social and psychological problems, interrogating human ideas and ideals" (Jha 75).

The nature of the self and its fluidity thus becomes a trope in the play, which is alluded to by Karnad at different levels. For characters like Hayavadana and Padmini's child, the problem is resolved at the end. Kapila and Devadutta have a duel in the end and stab each other to death. Padmini, guilty of having being a cause of all this trouble performs Sati and dies too. Thus the quest for completion is achieved by some characters in the play that experience conflict in the beginning, but emerge as complete holistic beings at the end. It is told at the end of the play that Hayavadana is happy with his completion as a complete being and runs around, neighing happily. Bhagvata also, in the end, breathes a sigh of relief on Hayavadana's complete version and on Padmini's mute boy singing bits of songs and thanking god for the successful completion of the play.

Karnad's *Hayavadana* thus explores contemporary dilemmas about the nature of identity. It questions the notion of identity as fixed and stable through its characters and plot structure. A. K. Sinha aptly comments, "The multiplicity of the characters and their individual psychic circles playing in to each other build up a complex pattern of human relationships" (Sinha 119). The play has been widely appreciated and discussed in the literary world by the critics and readers alike for the multiple layers of meanings and contemporary issues that it explores.

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