# The Role of Myth in Girish Karnad's play *Hayavadana*

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## Abstract

Myth is narrative or tale which gives symbolic meaning to all the supernatural agencies which appear in myth and create a world of tangled relationships. Girish Karnad in his plays had vividly represented this trend. Although his plays are mythical in nature, Karnad's approach is very lively and modern. In the play, *Hayavadana,* he skillfully makes use of themes from Indian mythology, folklore in order to create a world of characters which are transcendent. Karnad had artistically converted all those myths into the present framework to throw light on the social dilemmas. Hayavadana is cast in the form of traditional Indian folk drama. In my paper, I am going to show how Karnad uses Hindu mythology in his play and in inculcating myths; he presents the rich cultural heritage of Hindu mythology.

**Keywords**: Indian mythology, myths, Padmini, the sub conscious, desire, folklore

Most people think of myths as fairy tales or wonderfully recounted flights of imagination created by primitive humans to provide fun or solace in the face of perplexing natural facts. They are deeply rooted in the psyche of the whole society and have a profound influence on the lives of the people. The influence of myth on the traditions and day to day activities can be seen through literature, arts, philosophy, religion, etc. Myths always have played an important role in the creation of art and literature. Myths have always had a tremendous amount of influence in India. Due to the fact that we are the world's oldest surviving civilization, Indian ethos is nourished by an abundance of sources, such as Indian folklore and mythology, which are endless in number. Ancient Indian myths have been documented in the four Vedas, the Puranas, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Upanishads, as well as their social and aesthetic appeal that has endured through the ages and continue to be potent even in modern times. Numerous contemporary

Indian authors have resorted to myth and attempted to bring out a range of interpretations of present conditions, therefore providing a new path for the utilization of myth in contemporary literature in the country. As a writer working in modern Indian theatre, Girish Karnad has perhaps exploited myth in one of the most rich and complicated manner possible. This paper attempts a study of the representation of myth in Girish Karnad's play, *Hayavadana* and how he has used myth in a modern context to point the man's eternal quest for completeness. It also deals with the conflict between various contradictory constituents of subjectivity that is faced by a contemporary Indian.

In Karnad's hands, history and myths are not only instruments for visiting the past, but they are also tools for contemplating the possibilities that the future seem to contain. He only uses myths in the portions that are beneficial to him, and he adds to them with his own imagination to fill in the blanks. As a result, his plays have been accused of upsetting some of the community's pre-existing opinions on a number of occasions. Karnad argues that the vitality of folk theatre derives from the fact that, although it seems to defend traditional values, it simultaneously has the ability to call such beliefs into question. Mythology in Indian literature has always been integral to the understanding of any texts. Either the ancient writers or the contemporary writers, themes from Indian mythology fascinates everyone. The art of story-telling is ingrained in our tradition and culture which is beautifully depicted by Girish Karnad in almost all his works. We also find that it is not only the authors who extensively use mythology in their works but it is also the readers who are mesmerized time and again by myths and several mythical legends. There are infinite ways to define myth because of the multiplicity of subjects within it. Myths are related to religion but Karnad explores those areas in myths which are not religious.

*Hayavadana* is a two-act play written in Kannada, and this is his third play to be written in that language. The whole production is performed in the style of traditional Indian folk theatre, and *Hayavadana* is based on a story found in Kathasaritsagara, an old collection of tales in Sanskrit that dates back to the 11th century. However, in order to further expand the tale, Karnad sought the assistance of Thomas Mann's recounting of the incident in *The Transposed Heads*, which was

published in 1992. The episodes of Hayavadana, the man with a horse's head who he wishes to get rid of in order to achieve "completeness," are drawn from both sources, with the addition of the episode of Hayavadana. While making use of the ancient myth from Kathasaritsagara, Karnad makes certain changes in the original myth. For example, he has changed the names deliberately for he wanted the names to be generic terms applying to all human beings. In Sanskrit, any person whose name is unknown is referred as Devadatta. Kapila means the 'dark one' whereas Padmini is one of the six categories into which Vatsyayana classified all women. Thus, these names of the characters are representatives and therefore their story could be a story of any person.

*Hayavadana* is concerned with the struggle that exists between mind and body. Even before the three main characters appear on stage, the Bhagavata discloses the existence of a love triangle in the play's opening scene –
" 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)

The whole being of Padmini struggles between determining what is right or what is morally unacceptable for her. It is shown by Padmini's insatiable need for both brains and brawn, which are represented by Devadatta and Kapila, respectively, that she is selfish and sensual. Padmini, who is married to Devadatta, has a strong desire for Kapila's physique. The yearning is not explicitly stated in the myth or in the play, but it is there as an undercurrent in Padmini's sub-conscious mind throughout. She has strong cravings for both the physical and the mind, yet she does so unknowingly. Whether or if Kapila or Devadatta would have acted differently if they were both physically strong and intellectually strong is impossible to predict.  However, in the Kali temple, when Padmini reaches there she finds that Devadatta and Kapila have killed themselves by beheading one another. She begs Goddess Kali for aid after seeing the two decapitated bodies. Karnad depicts the goddess as a tired, bored, and impatient goddess, rather than the mythologically depicted goddess of mythology. As a result, an absurd scenario arises

and poses a dilemma of identification. When Padmini explains the situation to Kali, the bored Goddess Kali cuts short the story-

"Skip it! Do as I told you And quickly

I'm collapsing with sleep."                                 (Karnad, 33)

She also adds___
"Actually if it hadn't been that I was so sleepy, I would have thrown them out by the scruff of their necks."                                ( Karnad, 33)

When Padmini requests to reconnect the heads with the bodies, she gives in to her pleas, condemning the two men of their dumb falsehoods and sacrifices. Padmini commits a mistake. The heads are transposed by Padmini, who is in a disturbed state of mind, and Kapila's head is placed in the body of Devadatta, while the body of Kapila is placed in Devadatta's head. The reversal of the heads exposes her unconscious longing for another man. Despite its accidental nature, Padmini's gesture exemplifies the wordless plea for completeness of the imperfect human person. For better or worse, the re-enactment of the old narrative in *Hayavadana* is aimed at transforming the broken individual into a composite whole. It should be noted that the transposition of heads does not provide a solution to Padmini's issue of identity. Even after the transfer of heads, Padmini's wishes are not conveyed plainly in her mind. The conflict between what is morally right and what is wrong affects her whole life. After realizing what she had done in haste and unwittingly, she is in complete disbelief, despite the fact that she truly craves Kapila's body_____

" What have I done? Mother Kali, only you can save me now__ only you can help me___ What have I done? What have I done? What should I do? Mother, mother…."         (Karnad, 34)

A solution to Padmini's predicament can be found in the myth, according to Bhagavata.

"As the heavenly Kalpa Vriksha is supreme among trees, so is the head among human limbs. Therefore, the man with Devadatta's head is indeed Devadatta and he is the rightful husband of Padmini."

(Karnad, 40)

So, the story of the Vetalpanchavimsati serves as a metaphor for Karnad's depiction of the psychological situation of the contemporary man, who is constrained by societal and moral rules as well as inhibiting influences. In the subplot, Hayavadana's problem also deals with the problem of completeness. His goal was to remove the horse's head, so he sought the advice of Bhagavata and travelled to the Kali temple on Mount Chitrakoot to do it. It is the same temple where the two characters of the main plot, Devadatta and Kapila beheaded themselves. In this case, too, we find that Kali's ambiguous boon makes a new issue while addressing an existing one. In answer to Hayavadana's petition, "make me complete," the goddess Kali transforms him into a complete horse, rather than a full man, and he keeps his human voice as a result of this transformation. When the five-year-old kid of Padmini from the main narrative causes him to laugh once again, the laughing transforms into a genuine neigh, suggesting that Hayavadana has been completely liberated from his imprisonment. Perhaps, Karnad included this subplot of Hayavadana in order to underline the concept of completion throughout the novel. It adds to the relevance of the primary plot's significance. The animal body prevails over the human head, which is regarded as the pinnacle of human achievement.

According to Karnad, a contemporary Indian must choose between materialist and spiritual, the bodily and mental, urban and rural, colonial and pre-colonial, modern and traditional components of subjectivity in order to find a middle ground. Girish Karnad uses myth in *Hayavadana* to show the weakness of man. Here the image of Ganesha not only serves as a God for the success of the plot but also paves the path for further development. It explains that in reality everyone in this world is an incomplete self which allows scope for improvement. It is Karnad's goal in this play to examine the modern Indian subject's identity in a critical light. Using a variety of tactics, such as masks, comics, and the blending of human and non-human realms, he appears to be even actively attempting to convey the intricacy of the issue. The play

confronts the dualities and contradictions but doesnot suggest any possibility of easy reconciliation.

Lastly, we can conclude that the play, *Hayavadana* deals with modern man's quest for completeness through various contradictions and to this theme, the use of an ancient myth that is reshaped by Karnad has given a new dimension to the play. Karnad was of the opinion that numerous folk practices, such as the chorus and the contemplation on human and non-human realms, allow for different points of view. Girish Karnad hailed as the top dramatist when it comes to the use of mythology into his works. He enables the readers to form a new perspective regarding human life. The play, *Hayavadana* is a perfect example in order to show the role myth plays in nullifying certain established norms of society. A symbolic form is successfully created in the play, highlighting the conflict between the archetypal and mythical experiences.

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