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Incompleteness in Completeness: Negotiating Fragmentation and Identity in Karnad's *Hayavadana*

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Abstract:

Post-independence Indian theatre reveals profound tensions between colonial inheritance and indigenous cultural memory, a conflict powerfully dramatised in Girish Karmad's Hayavadana. The study offers a postcolonial reading of the play to explore the paradox of "incompleteness within completeness" as a central metaphor for fractured identity. Through myth, folktale, and the motif of transposed heads, the play interrogates hybridity, cultural ambivalence, and the instability of selfhood. Drawing on postcolonial theory, the article argues that Hayavadana articulates the psychological and cultural condition of the postcolonial subject through a syncretic theatrical form.

Keywords: *Postcolonial theatre, Hybridity, Identity, Incompleteness, Myth, folk tradition, Girish Karnad*

Introduction:

The Indian theatre had been influenced by British colonisation. The western educated modern Indian theatre began in cities like "Bombay, Calcutta and Madras" (Karnad 1:304) in the "second half of the nineteenth century" (Karnad 1: 304). These modern practitioners embraced what Karnad describes as a "cultural amnesia." (Karnad 1: 305) where they attempted to stage English plays in translations and that too in Indian stages. Thus, they were following the British culture, tastes and legacy only to cater to the interest of the ruling and upper classes. As Karnad mentions:

Inevitably the theatre it created imitated the British theatre of the times, as presented by visiting troupes from England. Several new concepts were introduced, two of which altered the nature of Indian theatre. One was the separation of the audience from the stage by the proscenium, underscoring the fact that what was being presented was a spectacle, free of any ritualistic associations and which therefore expected no direct participation by the audience in it; and the other was the idea of pure entertainment, whose success would be measured entirely in terms of financial returns (1:304)

Thus Shakespeare, the Elizabethans, the Classics, and so on were performed by various theatres which were not able to survive in the post-independent era. The native people of the post-independent India wanted something related to their Indian experience catering to the socio-political changes.

Girish Karnad was among the first generation playwrights in the post-independent India who were able to understand the anxieties and aspirations of the living common people in the newly formed country. The country's political independence also brings with it underlying tensions that call for a meaningful response like as Karnad suggests, the tension between "... the cultural past of the country and its colonial past, between the attractions of Western modes of thought and our own tradition, and finally between the various visions of the future that opened up once the common cause of political freedom was achieved." (Karnad 1: 301) That means the structure and thematic style of drama was fast changing in the post-independent India where the country wanted the end of colonial rule but was also in a conflict between the past experience and English theatre legacy.

Karnad's early experiments in theatre were heavily influenced by his exposure to Western plays and theatrical practices. As Karnad was a Rhodes Scholar from Oxford, he drew a lot of experience from Western playwrights such as Anouilh, Sartre, O'Neil, and the Greeks, whose impact is visible in his early works. While the themes of these plays were rooted in Indian sources, their form and style reflected Western influence. However, after initially embracing Western models, Karnad came to recognise their limitations in expressing the Indian psyche. Western realism, which emphasises the individual as a distinct entity, proved inadequate in an Indian context, where identity is often defined relationally through family, class, and caste. As Karnad explains, Indians are defined by their "Indianness" (Karnad 1:315).

Over time, Karnad understood that Western theatre can little support his own creative vision. Similarly, the once-dominant Parsi theatre and the conflicting Indian realist styles of the era fell short of capturing the nuances and complexities of contemporary life. So Karnad turned himself to traditional Indian forms and mythology which was quite a familiar place for him. Karnad's goal was not simply to revive these classical forms, but to adapt them for practical use in post-independence theatre. He discovered that traditional dramatic structures and idioms could serve as potent instruments for engaging with modern themes.

Karnad's use of folktales in his plays offered a window into history while highlighting its relevance for understanding the present. Karnad's engagement with the past can be understood in two ways. On one hand, he views it as a natural inclination of senior writers to write about the world of their childhood, as it lies close to their consciousness. On the other hand, Karnad deliberately incorporates the past as a creative device. In his plays, it not only serves contemporary purposes but also carries layers of meaning worth exploring. By using the past as a structural tool, he reconstructs history and establishes a distinctive identity for his theatre, setting it apart from conventional forms.

Karnad's return to his cultural roots does not imply a total rejection of his early European influences. His plays reflect diverse forms, making his theatre truly syncretic with a blend of Western techniques and indigenous Indian performances. He carefully structures his plays to create an interplay between Western theatrical traditions and the native performanceof Indian culture. The result is a hybrid form of theatre, brought to life through Karnad's innovative vision as P. Ramamoorthi observes, in "Theatre as betweenness":

… one word that aptly describe Girish Karnad and his plays is betweenness, a kind of state that accommodates the 'Yakshagana and Theatre of the Absurd', allows the influence of Kalidasa and Shakespeare, theatre as an art form and the commercial theatre, theatre as Word and Performance, theatre which is regional … as well as national theatre … which is simultaneously part of the Indian English theatre scenario … and a celebrated event of Kannada theatre. (Subramanian 1)

Karnad himself acknowledges his position of "betweenness." In an interview with K. Rajendran, Karnad frankly admits his style as eclectic:

I am eclectic in that fashion and I am multicultural. Whatever I think will help me, I will take ... shamelessly … my attitude has been how can I increase the expressivity of the plays. Which techniques can be used to express better. With the folk forms - the songs, dances, monologues - if they help, that is fine. If puppets help, that is fine. Whatever techniques learnt from Beckett and Ionesco, which would help to express particular sensibility … that is also okay. (Subramanian 82)

This feeling of betweenness in Karnad's plays comes directly from the diverse influences he encountered early in life. He draws extensively on native folk traditions, such as Yakshagana and other regional forms as well as blending his understanding of Western theatre.

Karnad returned to his roots through the lens of folktales with his third play, *Hayavadana*, which won him the Kamaladevi Award from the Bharatiya Natya Sangha in 1972. In this play, Karnad explores a theme deeply rooted in Indian tradition. The central story revolves around two close friends from Dharmapura: Devadatta and Kapila. Devadatta who is a Brahmin symbolises the mind, while Kapila, a blacksmith, symbolises the body and stature. Devadatta falls in love with Padmini, a beautiful and uninhibited woman seeking an ideal and complete man. As a devoted friend, Kapila arranges the marriage between Devadatta and Padmini. In the later stage, a deep friendship develops between Kapila and Padmini, which fills Devadatta with intense jealousy. Devadatta, being unable to bear the situation, goes to a Kali temple and sacrifices himself by cutting off his own head. Out of loyalty to his friend, Kapila also kills himself in the same way. Left alone, Padmini decides to end her life too, but Goddess Kali appears and promises to restore both men to life. In her excitement, Padmini accidentally places the wrong heads on the wrong bodies, switching them. A hermit later settles the question of identity by declaring that the man with Devadatta's head must be Padmini's true husband, because the head governs the body. For a while, Padmini enjoys the ideal combination of Devadatta's intelligence and Kapila's strong physique. However, over time, the bodies slowly return to their original form, leaving Padmini deeply disappointed. Padmini, still longing for Kapila, eventually goes to the forest with her child. The story ends tragically when the two friends decide to fight to death, and Padmini ends her life by committing sati.

The main plot of the play, *Hayavadana*, is taken partly from Thomas Mann's story titled *Transposed Heads*, which in turn is based on the "… story about switched heads in the twelfth-century Sanskrit collection, the *Kathasaritasagara"* (Karnad 1: xxiv). In the original Sanskrit tale from the *Kathasaritasagara,* the story ends when a wise man declares that it is our mind that controls the whole body, hence body with the head of Devadatta should be the husband of Padmini. However, in *Hayavadana,* the real conflict begins only after this apparent solution is offered. Kamad effectively explores the theme of identity through characters who remain in continuous search of their true selves, while at the same time reviving the cultural glory of India's past through embedded tales and traditions. In *Hayavadana,* Kamad weaves together two interconnected plots. The central plot revolves around a love triangle in which both Devadatta and Kapila fall in love with Padmini and Padmini, in turn, develops feelings for both men.

Questions related to hybridity and identity become especially prominent after the transposition of heads in Devadatta and Kapila. This transformation raises crucial questions: Who is truly Padmini's husband? Who is Devadatta? Who is Kapila? Both men assert that they are Devadatta in order to claim their right to Padmini, highlighting the complex and unstable nature of identity in the play. Kapila's crisis is conveyed in his words: "This is the hand that accepted her at wedding. This is the body she's lived with all these months. And the child she's carrying is the seed of this body" (Karnad 1: 146) Kapila's predicament can be seen as a result of his desire for Padmini. But Devadatta reasons that "When one accepts a partner, with the holy fire as one's witness, one accepts a person, not a body. She didn't marry Devadatta's body, she married Devadatta the person." (Karnad 1: 146) Thus, the crisis of incompleteness is further intensified with the hasty transposition of heads by Padmini

A fundamental aspect of human nature, the feeling of incompleteness and the search for fulfilment, forms the core thematic concern of *Hayavadana.* The play highlights the fragmented existence of human beings in a modem world filled with complex and tangled relationships right from its opening scenes. It begins with an invocation to Lord Ganesha, the one-tusked, elephant-headed deity who symbolises perfection and completeness and also indicates the irony of the situation:

An elephant's head on a human body, a broken task and a cracked belly whichever way you look at him he seems the embodiment of imperfection, of incompleteness. How indeed can one fathom the mystery that this very Vakratunda- Mahakaya, with his crooked face and distorted body, is the Lord and Master of Success and Perfection? (Karnad 1: 104)

The seemingly imperfect figure of Lord Ganesha actually portrays the imperfection in every being in the whole realm: the divine, the human, and the animal Thus the play ridicules humanity's obsessive search for perfection, since even a deity is shown as incomplete or imperfect.

Incompleteness is further emphasized through the subplot involving Hayavadana, a narrative largely created by Kamad himself. According to the story a beautiful princess marries a white stallion with whom she falls in love and enjoyed marital relationship for fifteen years. However, the stallion transforms into a Gandharva and urges the princess to leave for heaven with him. On refusal, she was cursed by the celestial being to be a horse, who left happily galloping leaving behind their child, Hayavadana. The two narrative strands intersect when Hayavadana, in his own search for wholeness, meets Padmini's five-year-old son who is also engaged in a similar quest for completeness. The absurd nature of the pursuit of perfection in modem society is highlighted through the other characters as well, since each of them is incomplete in some way. Devadarta, the Brahmin, symbolises intellect, while Kapila, the blacksmith, represents the body and physical strength. Their friendship rests on the fact that each compensates for what the other lacks, making them complementary halves of a whole.

Every characters act towards a search for completeness which results in further fragmentation. Padmini represents the feminine principle in search of wholeness and perfection. As critics note, Padmini's dilemma is that of "a modern, free and bold woman who is torn between polarities, a woman who loves her husband as well as someone else for two different aspects of their personalities" (Dodiya 203). Her longing for a total experience is expressed through her desire to possess both men, each embodying different qualities, which becomes symbolically fulfilled through the transposition of their heads. This sense of incompleteness extends to Padmini's child as well, who grows up caught between two contrasting cultures. Lacking the natural security and guidance that parents normally provide, he becomes withdrawn, insecure, and emotionally distant. Bhagavata observes his condition,"… this poor child- he hadn't laughed, or cried,or talked in all these years." (Karnad 1: 182) The child too suffers from the problem of identity. Hayavadana who wanted to be a complete human being results in transforming to a complete horse. The goddess Kali who grants his entreaty, "… make me complete" (Karnad 1: 183), makes him a complete horse but retains his "human voice" (Karnad 1: 183). Even the boon of the goddess could not complete him. His wish, of being complete is only fulfilled at the end of the play when he meets with Padmini's child, another incomplete being.

Padmini's desire for a complete man with intellect and body further complicates the situation with the transposition of heads. This only toughens thesituation for the character, Kapila who moans, "Why should one tolerate this mad dance of incompleteness? (Karnad 1: 170). Although, the head governs the body yet Kapila's body kindles the memories of Padmini's touch of which his mind is alien to. His body's responses cannot be recognised by his intellect:

That the body should have its own ghosts, its own secrets? Memories of touch - memories of a touch - memories of a body swaying in these arms, of a warm skin against this palm - memories which one cannot

recognize cannot understand, cannot even name because this head wasn't there when they happened. (Kamad 1:171)

Padmini realises this as she says to Kapila:

Your body bathed in a river, swam and danced in it. Shouldn't your head know what river it was, what swim? Your head too must submerge in that river: the flow must rumple your hair, run its tongue in your ears and press your head to its bosom. Until that's done, you'll continue to be incomplete. (Karmad 1: 171)

Among all the characters of the play, it is Padmini who enjoys the chance of complete experience for once. After transposition, she attains what she actually craved for, the perfect man in Devadatta with Kapila's strong body. Padmini's words reveal her happiness: "Fabulous body-fabulous brain-fabulous Devadatta" (Karmad 1: 153). However, she could savor the experience of completeness only briefly, as Devadatta's perfect form gradually fades with time, returning her to the earlier sense of incompleteness. Through the characters, Kamad portrays the fragmented and imperfection of every individual in post-independent India. People in independent India cannot erase the legacy of colonialism, nor can they fully return to their pre-colonial heritage. Instead, they must live within a hybrid cultural space that blends both influences. Their identities, therefore, are hybrid identities, and they must learn to negotiate and balance these conflicting elements as much like Devadatta and Kapila in the play.

The blend of British legacy and traditions is an important theme of the play. Even the title, *Hayavadana,* highlights the idea of hybridity, a condition in which an individual exists between two cultures, the native and the colonial. Just as the postcolonial subject embodies this duality, Hayavadana himself is a hybrid figure, part human and part animal. This fusion of forms leads to a profound identity crisis, leaving him excluded from both worlds. He is rejected by humans and animals alike, which creates in him a deep sense of alienation and a yearning for completeness. Like the divided self of the postcolonial individual, Hayavadana cries out, "But where's my society? Where?" (Karnad 1: 114) His inability to belong anywhere torments him continuously. His state of incompleteness foreshadows the hybridity later experienced by Devadatta and Kapila after their transposition.

Even after the exchange of heads, Devadatta and Kapila are unable to attain completeness and further leads to complexities. Devadatta's mind feels estranged within Kapila's powerful body, and the same is true in reverse. The sense of being suspended between two identities and belonging fully to neither creates deep internal turmoil for both men. In Homi Bhabha's terms, they experience "unhomeliness" (13), a state in which one no longer feels at home within one's own self. Kapila's state is expressed in his words:

When this body came to me, it was like a corpse hanging by my head. It was a Brahmin's body after all, not made for the woods. I couldn't lift an axe without my elbows moaning. Couldn't run a length without my knees howling. I had no use for it. The moment it came to me, a war started between us. (Karnad 1: 168)

Devadatta's condition is similar as possessing Kapila's strong body leads him to take up activities such as wrestling, swimming, and sword fighting where his intellectual nature plays no role. The resulting sense of alienation and psychological displacement mirrors the experience of postcolonial individuals, whose consciousness is divided between two opposing cultures that of the coloniser and the colonised.

The postcolonial concept of "cultural Othering" as explained by Said (54) is also evident in the play, *Hayavadana.* Devadatta who is a Brahmin symbolises coloniser who stands for intellect, "Comely in appearance, fair in colour, unrivalled in intelligence" (Karnad 1: 106) is civilised and cultured. In contrast, Kapila, the blacksmith, dark and plain to look at (Karnad 1: 106) stands for strong body and is wild and untamed. They are introduced by the Bhagavata as bosom friends, "Two friends there were one mind, one heart." (Karnad 1:106) However, the actions of Kapila and Devadatta serve as a total contrast to the mythological characters like Lava and Kusa, Rama and Lakshmana, and Krishna and Balarama. Unlike these

legendary siblings, whose relationships embodyloyalty and equality, the friendship between Devadatta and Kapila is marked by caste and class divisions. Kapila who is always depicted as different becomes the "Other" (Beauvoir xxii) in relation to Devadatta and therefore inferior. His constant intention to obey and fulfill every wishes of Devadatta does not signify a friendlike relationship which rather looks like master and servant where Kapils's submissive nature is revealed through his words:

And have you understood me? No, you haven't. Or you wouldn't get angry like this. Don't you know I would do anything for you? Jump into a well - or walk into fire? Even my parents aren't as close to me as you are. I would leave them this minute if you asked me to. (Karnad 1: 118)

However, Devadatta does not reciprocate Kapila's sense of loyalty and indebtedness. Instead, his attitude towards Kapila reflects the inferior status imposed upon him. Devadatta dismissively remarks, What do you know of poetry and literature? Go back to your smithy that's where you belong" (Karnad 1:119). The stage direction further reinforces this hierarchy by noting that Kapila "sits down on the floor" (Karnad 1:119). Thus, their friendship mirrors a colonial power structure, resembling the hierarchical relationship between the coloniser and the colonised.

Havavadana through its characters, Hayavadana, Kapila, Devadatta, and even Lord Ganesha, invoked in the Bhagavata, function as striking visual symbols of the hybrid nature of existence. Postcolonial Indian theatre itself is inherently hybrid, blending the European theatrical influences and indigenous Indian narrative forms. Thus distinctly portraying the postcolonial identity of the character of contemporary Indian theatre.

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