

Exploring the Themes of Identity and Human Existence in Girish Karnad's Hayavadana

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Abstract: *This paper investigates the complex themes of identity and human existence as portrayed in Girish Karnad's Hayavadana. It examines the intricate processes through which individuals construct a sense of self within the broader context of society and the world. The study explores how personal experiences, cultural backgrounds and societal interactions influence the formation of identity, both individually and collectively. It also addresses fundamental philosophical questions concerning the nature of humanity, particularly our relationships with others and our place within the universe. Identity is presented as a multifaceted concept, shaped by an individual's beliefs, values, perceptions and self-awareness. Furthermore the paper emphasizes that human existence is profoundly interconnected with our relationships with family, friends and the wider community. Girish Karnad's play Hayavadana, first performed in 1971, is a two act theatrical work. Through a rich blend of mythology and folklore, Karnad explores the complexities surrounding the human quest for completeness. The narrative not only questions the notion of personal identity but also examines the struggles individual face in their pursuit of wholeness within an ever evolving social and cultural framework*

Keywords: Identity, Completeness, Mythology, Folklore, Human Quest

I. INTRODUCTION

Girish Karnad (19 May 1938- 10 June 2019) was a renowned Indian actor, film director and a celebrated playwright in the Kannada language. His contributions extend across Kannada as well as Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Marathi cinema. Karnad's emergence as a playwright during the 1960s is considered a pivotal moment in the rise of modern Indian theatre alongside other notable figures like Badal Sarkar in Bengali, Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi and Mohan Rakesh in Hindi. Karnad was honored with the prestigious "Jnanpith Award", India's highest literary recognition in 1998. Throughout a career spanning four decades, he produced a wealth of plays, often blending historical narratives and mythology with contemporary themes. Many of his plays were translated into English (mostly by himself) and received widespread acclaim. They have also been adapted into several Indian languages and directed by prominent film makers such as Arvind Gaur, Vijay Tendulkar, Satyadev Dubey and many more. Apart from theatre, Karnad was a significant figure in Indian cinema. His contributions earned him numerous awards including the prestigious "Padma Shri" and "Padma Bhushan" awards. He has also won four filmfare awards.

Karnad's works addresses a variety of themes, skillfully weaving together mythological and historical narratives with modern social and political issues. Some of the recurring subjects in his plays include the complexity of human relationships, the exploration of violence, the questioning of traditional beliefs and the influence of power structures on both individuals and society. Prominent examples of his works that showcase these themes are Hayavadana, Nagamandala, Tughlaq, The Fire and the Rain and Yayati. Literary critics have generally regarded Girish Karnad as an influential and highly versatile playwright, admired for his talent in merging traditional Indian theatrical forms with contemporary storytelling techniques. Several critics have also highlighted his distinctive blend of personal expression and political commentary within his plays.

Main Thrust:

The themes of identity and human existence are central to many of Girish Karnad's works, notably in plays like Hayavadana and Yayati. Hayavadana written in 1971, explores these themes deeply. The title Hayavadana translates to



“horse faced”, hinting at the play’s symbolic exploration of incompleteness and identity. The story draws inspiration from the ancient “Brihatkatha” and Thomas Mann’s retelling of the “Transposed Heads”. Hayavadana intertwines narrative of two close friends, Devadatta and Kapila and their shared love interest Padmini. Alongside their story, the character of Hayavadana is used to examine how individuals experience personal struggles with their own identities. The play brings to light the inner conflict between intellect and physicality emphasizing the continuous human struggle for a complete and unified identity. It also delves into the inherent ambiguity and contradictions within human nature. The plot primarily revolves around two main characters- Devadatta, a man known for his intellectual prowess and Kapila, a man celebrated for his physical strength.

They are friends but their friendship faces a challenge when both fall in love with the same woman- Padmini. The play opens with the appearance of Hayavadana- a half-human and half-horse figure who seeks to become whole human. He undergoes transformation from a horse to a man, but his head remains that of a horse. This change serves as a metaphor for the fragmented nature of human identity. The bond between Devadatta and Kapila is the central of the story. When Padmini enters their lives, their friendship is tested and both begin to confront their sense of identity and desire. Padmini, the main female character is portrayed as a confident capable and self-reliant woman. Though she fall for Devadatta’s intellect, she is equally attracted to Kapila’s strength. Her interaction with both men act as a trigger for deeper exploration of identity, love and human nature.

The climax of the play revolves around tragic elements that unfold through the character Hayavadana. It highlights the intricacies of human connections and the quest for a stable identity. Ultimately, the characters confront the harsh reality of their own incompleteness and the unattainable goal of absolute wholeness. The play follows a non-linear, blending mythological themes with traditional theatrical techniques to explore human contradictions. It delves into the conflict between physical and the intellectual, revealing the inherent uncertainty of existence. The idea of hybridity, where individual traits combine features of different beings or identities is central to the play. Hayavadana’s half human, half horse nature symbolizes this duality. The characters grapple with their fragmented selves, illustrating the broader human struggle with incompleteness. In the end, the play suggests that true wholeness maybe beyond reach. Characters like Devadatta, Kapila and Padmini strive for perfection but ultimately remain incomplete.

II. CONCLUSION

Girish Karnad’s Hayavadana serves as a profound exploration of identity, completeness and dichotomy between mind and body. Through symbolic characters and a compelling narrative structure, the play raises important philosophical and psychological questions about human desires, emotional fulfillment and the complexities of selfhood. The triangular relationship among Devadatta, Kapila and Padmini showcases the tension between intellectual and physical attraction, emphasizing the challenges involved in attaining true wholeness. By blending traditional Indian folklore with modern psychological insight, Karnad critiques rigid societal norms and the human pursuit of perfection. His use of myth and symbolic story telling provides a rich cultural and emotional backdrop that invites audiences to reflect on their own notions of identity and completeness. Hayavadana remains relevant due to its thematic depth, emotional resonance and unique narrative style, securing its place as a landmark work in Indian theatre and continuing to captivate contemporary audiences.

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