



# Mythological Memory and History in Hayavadana by Girish Karnad

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## Abstract:

This study is to critically analyze Karnad's use of myth and history in his plays. Stated differently, the study examines how Karnad uses history to demonstrate its relevance to current situations and how he incorporates some of the lesser-known scenes from myths, legends, and folktales into his plays. However, it would be helpful to briefly review the history and accomplishments of Indian English drama before moving on to this analysis of his plays. Hayavadana, a play in two acts, is Karnad's third play which was originally written in Kannada in 1970 and later on translated into English by Karnad himself in 1971. The play was an immediate success on the stage and bagged Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya Award for the best play of the year 1972. It also won the Sangeet Natak Award for the best Indian playwright of the year. Initially occurred in Enact in 1971, Hayavadana was published by Oxford University Press in 1975 and since then it has been performed in different translations and adaptations around the world with immense success. This play is a successful experiment in the use of folk motifs. It has been appreciated by many scholars, as Karnad's most important and representative work. P. Dhanavel thinks that "Hayavadana is to Indian drama what James Joyce's Ulysses is to the Western novel", (2000 122) and places it at a pre-eminent position in the canon of Indian drama. S. Gopalie believes that Hayavadana draws to the forefront Karnad, the poet and states that "for sheer poetry of the theatre there is nothing that can challenge comparison with Hayavadana."

**Key words:** Memory Studies, Myth, Identity crisis, Human Relationship, Desire, Lust, Hybridity.

## Introduction

Girish Karnad is a well-known modern playwright in the field of Indian English drama. In the past, the majority of Indian English plays were written with reading in mind and were not intended for theatrical productions. However, Karnad's plays are both terrific theater and superb reading. In his plays, he skillfully presents current challenges by drawing on myths, folklore, and history. He is certain that they have a fundamental connection to the origins of current problems.

Karnad is known as a playwright. His plays, written in Kannada, have been translated into English (mostly translated by himself) and some Indian languages. Kannada is his language of choice. When Karnad started writing plays, Kannada literature was highly influenced by the renaissance in Western literature. Writers would choose a subject that looked entirely alien to manifestation of native soil. C. Rajagopalachari's version of the Mahabharata published in 1951, left a deep impact on him[16] and soon, sometime in the mid-1950s, one day he experienced a rush of dialogues by characters from the Mahabharata in Kannada.

Hayavadana (1971) was based on a theme drawn from *The Transposed Heads*, a 1940 novella by Thomas Mann, which is originally found in the 11th-century Sanskrit text *Kathasaritsagara*. Herein he employed the folk theatre form of Yakshagana. A German version of the play was directed by Vijaya Mehta as part of the repertoire of the Deutsches National Theatre, Weimar.

He makes an effort to understand myth and history in the present, concentrating on "the display of India's intricate cultural fabric." Karnad enjoys learning about lesser-known and obscure tales, attempting to decipher their meaning and connect them to the selected narrative. He is a skilled craftsman whose writing exhibits a delicate fusion of brilliance and perceptive vision, a rich imagination, and a nuanced sense of humor and wit.

## The Transposed Head

Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads* (1955), which in turn draws inspiration from Somdeva's *Brihatkathasaritasagara*, an old Sanskrit collection of stories from the eleventh century, serves as the primary plot point for Hayavadana (1971). "Inter-generic, a folktale transformed into a novella into a play," is how Hayavadana came to be. (Mee 149). The dramatist explains how the Hayavadana plot started to take shape in his own imagination.

Man challenges the reasoning that maintains the head is superior to the body, even if the Sanskrit story presents a moral conundrum. Karnad expands on Mann's idea to examine identity in a world where relationships are unclear. The play attempts to demystify conventional values and ideas and offers a variety of viewpoints that encourage discussion on the fundamentally acknowledged principles of existence. Bringing the animate and inanimate together on a single plane and combining the three levels of experience-divine, human, and animal-improve this.

With a few minor adjustments to the names of the locations and the characters, the original story essentially tells the same tale of the transposed heads. It tells of Prince Dhavala, his wife Madansundari, and her brother Svetpata, and how their heads were switched. However, Karnad has largely embraced Thomas Mann's retelling of the story in *Transposed Heads*. Mann establishes a deep friendship with the young people while deftly avoiding the incestuous portion of the original tale. He also modifies characters and place names in several ways.

Now, before looking into Karnad's version of the story and its implication in the present context, it is essential to know the story, in Create PDF files without this message by purchasing novaPDF printer (<http://www.novapdf.com>) 154 brief, as narrated by Mann in *The Transposed Heads* – Shridaman is a Brahmin by birth whereas Nanda is a cowherd and blacksmith. Both of them are intimate friends. When they travel together, Shridaman comes across a beautiful girl whose name is Sita. As it happens in love at first sight, Shridaman falls in love with Sita and expresses his desire to marry her. At first Nanda laughs at Shridaman's idea of marrying her. All the same, he consents to act as a mediator.

Finally, Sita accepts the proposal and marries Shridaman. After some days, while on their journey through the forest on a cart to the house of Sita's parents, they miss the way and fail to reach their destination. There is a temple of Kali nearby so they decide to spend the night over there. Shridaman goes into the temple and under some stress and tension chops off his head with a sword nearby and offers it to the Goddess Kali. After a long waiting, Nanda also goes to the same temple in search of his friend. He is greatly shocked to see the dead body of Shridaman. Being terrified of the accusation of killing his friend for the sake of Sita, Nanda also beheads himself.

Thereafter, getting tired of waiting for both, Shridaman and Nanda, Sita also reaches the temple and finds that their dead bodies are lying before the Goddess. She also decides to end her life but the goddess appears before her and prevents her from killing herself. She requests the goddess to bring both the deads

back to life. Her request is granted with blessing of Kali. Sita, in her ecstatic state, transposes the heads wrongly, giving Shridaman's head Nanda's body and vice versa. Now, the question arises who is the rightful husband of Sita? The answer given by King Vikrama in the Vetala story is that as the head governs the body so it is superior to the body.

## Conclusion

The development of a significant plot, Hayavadana skillfully demonstrates the framework of epic theater. Karnad concentrates only on key concerns and does not follow a typical pattern. For instance, a scenario that could be seen as significant-the marriage of Devadatta and Padmini-is only briefly described. Because they are more important in the grand scheme of things and shed insight on identity and the man-woman relationship, other instances are covered in detail. The Bhagavata connects the numerous stories and lends the story a cohesive texture. As a result, the play, like other epic plays, has a long lifespan.

Karnad removes the myths' and folktales' spatiotemporal bearings and makes them appropriate and pertinent for his dramatic goal. When set in a modern setting and addressing modern issues, his mythological characters become archetypes-demonstrations of universal human traits. Thus, it is possible to see how myths are reimagined for modern audiences in Karnad's plays, with the story acting as a parallel and a contrast that spans entire eras rather than just individual characters. As a result, Karnad meticulously removes any mythological elements that are inimical to his goals and modifies some details. Even though the protagonists in Karnad's legendary and historical plays are strong and noble, they typically end tragically.

Thus, myth serves as the foundation for Karnad's. So, Karnad uses myth as a base on which he establishes a framework of ideas. He is not limited by the scope of the known story, rather he extends it. What he aims at is not fidelity to detail, his objective is to present to the audience the premises he derives from the myth. In Hayavadana, Karnad builds on the myth to create an entirely new dimension, so convincingly portrayed as to make the audience wonder how they could have ever been satisfied with the 'message' in the age-old myth.

In Karnad the characters though ably delineated, emerge as symbolic and representative. They cannot be assigned to any specific time or place; they are universal and eternal. Herein lies the significance of Karnad's use of myth. Despite the rich heritage of myths and legends at the disposal of Indian playwrights, few dramatists have made meaningful use of the tradition.

Even though Karnad's dramaturgy is too complex and multifaceted to be evaluated from a single perspective, the existentialist label is nevertheless the most appropriate. The European play heritage serves as an influence for his dramatic obsession. He has been greatly influenced by the writings of Beckett, Brecht, Camus, and Sartre, which have shaped his theater to deal with human situation in contrast to the conventional theater of character. Character development is not as important in such theater; instead, the focus is on man and his fate. Character ceases to be an individual and instead becomes a representation of humanity as a whole.

At the performance level Hayavadana represents a land mark and a model which reveals the dramatic potential of our native traditions of folk arts and goes a long way in the creation of an essentially Indian aesthetic. In Karnad we find a perfect integration of the two forms, folk and classical which are complementary to each other. A reading of Karnad's plays thus establishes the fact that India does possess a dramatic tradition which despite its diversity has an essentially unified code.

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