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The Pursuit of Completeness in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*

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Abstract:

Evolution, whether zoological or spiritual, is the basic requisite for making our existence more and more meaningful. The yearning for attaining perfection with a Sense of Completeness has always provided the needed impetus for this process. However, there are immense delusions regarding the notion of becoming a 'Complete Man.' Girish Karnad's play *Hayavadana* offers a distinct perspective regarding this. Search for identity, characteristics of true love, and the idea of a perfect man are only some of the issues addressed in the drama. The main plot of the play is based on the story "The Transposed Heads," which originated as a Folk Tale in ancient India and was later elaborated by Thomas Mann in his novella of the same name. Devadatta and Kapila, the two closest friends, both fall in love with Padmini.

However, Padmini is torn between the two, as Devadatta possesses a brilliant mind but is physically unattractive, while Kapila is physically strong but not as intelligent as Devadatta. The complexity in the play heightens when accidentally the heads of the two friends get transposed and they are given back life by the divine intervention of Goddess Kali. The current study focuses on one of the central themes of the efforts of the protagonists to attain perfection or completeness. The play teaches us that true completeness can only be achieved by overcoming our feelings of imperfection, embracing our unique qualities, and attempting to attain a bigger purpose in life by rising above our mundane realities. Then only we can truly attain 'Better Worldliness.'

Keywords*:* Hayavadana, Girish Karnad, Completeness, Transposed, Better Worldliness.

Hayavadana (1971), a play written by Girish Karnad, is considered exceptional in the history of Indian theatre for its unique blend of folk theatre elements and bold themes. The play effectively depicts the imperfections of humans and their pursuit of attaining completeness, which is improbable to attain without rising above illicit desires and mundane existence. The central theme of the play is the age-old "quest for completion", which is depicted in the Main Plot through the three major characters of the play, Devdatta, Kapila, and Padmini, and in the most innovative Sub-Plot through the character Hayavadana, a unique creature, who has a body of a man and head of a horse. The play depicts numerous cases of fragmented identities that are suffering from a lack of integration. The two intertwined actions collectively provide a subject that can be summed up as the attainment of total existence through the unification of the self and the wholeness of personality.

The story of the main plot revolves around two friends Devdatta, a man of intellect, and Kapila, a man of physical strength. Devdatta marries a beautiful and sharp girl Padmini, who is also secretly loved by his friend Kapila. The problem occurs when Padmini gets deeply attracted to Kapila, even though she loves Devdatta. The reason for this dual attraction

was that she admired both persons for different reasons, Devdatta for his intellect and Kapila for his physique. As Padmini had always aspired to find the blend of these two qualities in her husband (her notion of a complete man), she found herself torn between the two men, who seemed to love her equally. Gauging the situation, and feeling shattered, Devdatta attempted to remove himself from the scene and commits suicide in a forlorn Temple of Goddess Kali. When Kapila realized what had taken place, he too killed himself out of deep guilt. Padmini, being left all alone and considering herself responsible for the two deaths, was also trying to kill herself, but her act was intervened by the sudden appearance of Goddess Kali, who granted her an opportunity of bringing the two men back to life by placing their dislocated heads on their bodies. However, as fate would have it, in her distraught state of mind Padmini transposed the two heads by placing Devdatta's head on Kapila's body and vice versa. As the two men gained consciousness, the big question of identity arises, 'who should now be considered Padmini's husband' the man with Devdatta's head or the man with Devdatta's body? To figure out this situation, the three unfortunate people go to a Rishi who provides them with the following solution:

> "As the heavenly Kalpa Yrikasha 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." (*Hayavadana*, 40)

Padmini's happiness knew no bounds as she had gained for her such husband, who was an embodiment of perfection, a brilliant mind with a wonderful body.

However, Devadatta and Kapila shattered into fragments as a result of this major transposition. Initially feeling elated at his sudden gain of physical strength as well as admiration from his wife, Devdatta soon gets wearied by the efforts to maintain his physique. He also felt hounded by an identity conflict. For some time, he embraces the new-found strength but deep down aspires to continue the family tradition of Brahmins, which involves

numerous studies, writing, and reading each day. His head soon began to govern his body, which to the dismay of Padmini, slowly regained the shape of the body that Devdatta originally possessed. Knowing what had happened, Padmini, who has now become a mother, in her curiosity to check whether Kapila has also transformed back to his original personality, visits him in the forest, where due to acute dejection at having lost all good things that he ever had, Kapila was dwelling away from the society. As expected, she discovered that governed by his head, Kapila too had worked upon his body and regained his previous personality. Following his wife, Devdatta too reached the forest and all three realized that they will never gain solace due to being caught in the never-ending chase of perfection. As earlier, the three protagonists again embrace death and put an end to their incomplete saga. Before dying, Padmini handed over her child to Bhagavat, the narrator, and requested him to give the child to Kapila's friends in the forest to train him in physical prowess and when he turns five, to give the child to Devdatta's family in the city, where he would gain intellectual acumen. This was again her attempt at gaining completeness and perfection through her child.

However, even the son of Padmini faces an identity crisis, as he develops into an alienated creature, for he has spent his childhood in the jungle, which tremendously influenced his development. He refuses to socialize with anyone and remains intensely bonded only to his dolls, vehemently fending off any attempt by anyone to even touch them. This alludes to his immersion in a fantasy realm from which he has no desire to leave. The innate ability of Padmini's son to laugh and wonder at things seemed to have been lost. As Shibani Basu Dubey rightly opines:

> Karnad good-humouredly yet critically manipulates the very concepts of the rational and the physical. The multiplicity of characters and their psychic circles playing into each other build up a complex pattern of human relationships. And by projecting these

human sympathies against a gradually intensifying clash of personalities, Karnad presents a comprehensive picture of human beings in search of human perfection and completeness. (Dubey, 2016)

The play's sub plot dealing with the story of Hayavadana is also an illustration of a severe identity issue. Hayavadana's plight of having a horse's head and a man's body has the root in the strange love story of his parents, where his father, a Gandharva with a divine origin, cursed and then transformed his human mother into a horse. Despite having a Celestial father, he is not the supreme child because he lacks the divine abilities that his father possessed to transform his own or other people's shapes. Sadly, even after gaining some characteristics of both parents, he is neither a man nor a horse. As a result, Hayavadana lacks identity and is incomplete. He desires to appear like other individuals so that he can integrate into their culture. He had a voice and body of a man but possessed a horse's head, therefore, he strongly aspired to develop into a complete man. His yearning can be felt when he pleads before Bhagavata to help him get rid of his Horse's head: He asks Bhagavata: "All my life I've been trying to get rid of this head. I thought- you with all your goodness and *punya*, if at least you managed to pull it off ... ". (*Hayavadana*,7) Bhagavata then directs him to the Kali's Temple. However, despite his wishes submitted to Goddess Kali to turn him into a full man, he eventually transforms into a full-grown horse like his mother and moreover, still possessed the human voice. Thus, even now he struggled with imperfection.

Totally devastated, Hayavadana travels to every part of the planet and contacts every man he knows who he believes might be able to assist him. Even though he had led a blameless life, he still had to keep his face hidden from everyone. He wanted to get rid of this human voice with a full horse appearance since it was making him feel suffocated. But to his amazement, towards the end of the play when Hayavadana meets Padmini's son and laughs in order to encourage the gloomy child to feel happy, he is liberated from his predicament. All

of a sudden, he loses his human voice, learns how to neigh properly, and eventually becomes a full-entity horse. Moreover, by openly laughing at being amused at a Horse with a human voice, Padmini's son also gains normalcy and becomes playful and happy, as expected from a normal five-year-old child. Thus, both Hayavadana and the child attain completeness when without any self-centred and illicit desire, they enable each other for social integration and become companions.

In this play by Karnad, humans are viewed as vile creatures who are constantly engrossed in pursuing false ideals which causes distress and misery. The pursuit to attain completeness and perfection is not considered wrong, but if this chase is underlined with illegitimate desires, even God will not be willing to help. This is shown very clearly in the play as neither Padmini nor Hayavadana could attain completeness even after divine intervention. Moreover, integration can only be attained by accepting the inherent weaknesses and striving to overcome them through hard, persistent work and legitimate methods. It is further suggested that the completeness of human personality can be achieved only when we will try to strike a balance and harmony in our material and spiritual needs.

The characters in the play strive to be completely perfect in terms of their physical and intellectual attributes. However, the play while exploring the theme of completeness informs the audience that completeness lies not in the physical or intellectual aspect, but is only concerned with the spiritual aspects. The audience realizes that only by transcending the material and egoistic existence can one achieve true completeness. This play encourages the audience to examine their own lives and consider what limits them and what they can do to transcend those limitations. Through the characters, the play reminds us that true greatness lies in our ability to transcend our physical and intellectual limitations and connect with something deeper and more meaningful.

The play challenges the notion that happiness can be discovered in physical attractiveness and satirizes the importance placed on it. Devadatta and Kapila both seek Padmini but she finally rejects both of them because they are both lacking in some way. Hence, the play makes an argument that a deeper connection that transcends physical attraction is where true fulfilment originates. It also explores the concept of acceptance in the play, especially in relation to accepting oneself and one's limits. Although Hayavadana, the man with a horse's head, longs to become fully human, he ultimately understands that he can be happy only by accepting his lot and making the best use of his inherent qualities. Thus, it is evident that embracing one's individuality and that of others is a critical first step on the path to happiness and fulfilment. The drama also makes the point that unbridled and illicit desire can result in misery and even disaster. In response to the obsessive passion of Padmini for attaining a complete man with qualities of both head and heart, a tragic love triangle develops which makes an important remark that it is essential to restrain one's desires while bringing the effects of one's actions into consideration. Above all, the play highlights the importance of the development of ethical sensibility and spiritual consciousness above the development of the head and heart for these are the essential quotients needed for the evolution of Homo Sapiens to Homo Spiritualis for establishing ‘Better Worldliness.’

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