

THE THEME OF INCOMPLETENESS IN KARNAD'S 'HAYAVADANA'

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ABSTRACT: My attempt in this paper is to study Girish Karnad's play 'Hayavadana' from the point of view of themes of incompleteness and search for identity in the midst of tangled relationships, causing a confusion of identities which reveals the ambiguous nature of human personality. Karnad has the power to transform any situation in the aesthetic experience. Girish Karnad presented the theme of incompleteness at three levels- divine level, animal level and human level. I have tried my best to deal with the theme of incompleteness in this paper. There can be a lot of interpretations of the theme of incompleteness.

Key Words: incompleteness, identities, ambiguous, imperfection, disillusioned, alienation, absurdity.

Girish Raghunath Karnad (born 19 May 1938) is an Indian actor, film director, Kannada playwright who predominantly works in South Indian Cinema. He has done to Kannada literature what Vijay Tendulkar to Marathi, Badal Sarkar to Bengali and Mohan Rakesh to Hindi literature. Girish Karnad has written a large number of plays dealing with various aspects of modern Indian society and Indian culture. He has used ancient Indian myths and folklore in most of his plays. His plays include 'Nagamandala', 'Tughlaq', 'Hayavadana', 'Yayati' etc. In his plays, he deals with the contemporary socio-political and cultural issues through the dramatization of myths, legends and folklores. Karnad also takes problems of caste, heredity, religion and gender and weaves them in the texture of his plays. In his play 'Hayavadana', Karnad deals with unconventional themes.

Girish Karnad's play Hayavadana was published in 1971. In this play, Karnad has presented the theme of incompleteness and search for identity in the midst of tangled relationships, causing a confusion of identities which reveals the ambiguous nature of human personality. In his 'Introduction' to Hayavadana, Kirtinath Kurkoti writes: "The plot of Hayavadana comes from *Kathasaritsagara*, an ancient collection of stories in Sanskrit. But Karnad has borrowed it through Thomas Mann's retelling of the story in *The Transposed Heads*...."¹. In this play, there are two intimate friends, Devadatta, the man of intellect and Kapila, the man of physique. Devadatta marries Padmini, but Kapila falls in love with Padmini. Consequently, the two friends kill themselves. In a hilarious scene, Padmini transposes their heads, giving Devdutta Kapila's body and Kapila Devdutta's. Hence the result is a confusion of identities. Karnad has the power to transform any situation in the aesthetic experience. M.K. Naik comments on the technique of the play: "Karnad does not succeed fully in investing the basic conflict in the play with the required intensity, but his technical experiment with an indigenous dramatic form here, is a triumph which has opened up fresh lines of fruitful exploration for the Indian English playwright"².

At the beginning of the play, a mask of Ganesha is brought on the stage and kept on a chair. Worship is done and Bhagavata sings verses in praise of Ganesha, accompanied by the musicians:

"O Elephant-headed Herambha
whose flag is victor
and who shines like a thousand suns,
O husband of Riddhi and Siddhi,
seated on a mouse and decorated with a snake,
O single-tusked destroyer of incompleteness,
we pay homage to you and start our play."(73)

So, from the very beginning of the play we find the use of the word 'incompleteness'. Ganesha is considered the destroyer of obstacles and the Lord of Perfection and success. Bhagavata gives a description of Ganesha as:

"An elephant's head on a human body, a broken tusk and a cracked belly—whichever way you look at him he seems the embodiment of imperfection, of incompleteness."(73)

Here Bhagavata finds Ganesha the embodiment of incompleteness because he has elephant head and human body. The theme of incompleteness is presented at three levels: divine level, human level and animal level.

A scream of horror is heard of the stage by Bhagavata. An actor comes running in, trembling with fear. He tells Bhagavata that he has seen a man with horse head. It's Hayavadana, a man with the head of a horse. Haya means horse and Vadana means face. He is the son of the princess of Karnataka. She was a very beautiful girl who fell in love with a white stallion and married off to that white stallion. Hayavadana tells about his mother that:

"She lived with for fifteen years. One morning she wakes up—and no horse! In its place stood a beautiful Celestial Being, a *gandharva*. Apparently this Celestial Being had been cursed by the God Kuvera to be born a horse for some act of misbehaviour. After fifteen years of human love he had become his original self again."(80)

Released from his curse, he asked the Princess to accompany Him to his Heavenly Abode. But she refused. And she wanted him a horse again. So, he cursed her to become a horse herself. She became a mare and run away happily without bothering about her son. Hayavadana felt incomplete with this horse head and wanted to get rid of it. So, he went to almost all the temples of India, but in vain. Now Bhagavata suggested him to go the temple of Kali.

In the city of Dharmapura live two closest friends Devdutta and Kapila. Devdutta is the only son of revered Brahmin, Vidyasagara. He is comely in appearance, fair in colour and unrivalled in intelligence. The other one is Kapila. He is the son of iron smith, Lohita. He is dark and plain to look at and he has no equal in strength and physical skill. Bhagavata describes their friendship as:

“The world wonders at their friendship. The world sees these two young men wandering down the streets of Dharmapura, hand in hand, and remembers Lava and Kusha, Rama and Lakshmana, Krishna and Balarama.”(74)

Bhagavata calls them “one mind, one heart”. Devdutta falls in love with Padmini. Padmini is the beautiful daughter of the leading merchant in Dharmapura. Devadatta falls in love fifteen times and he fails to get married to any one of the girls. His sixteenth love also seems to be a fiasco. He feels utterly hopeless: “I swear, Kapila, with you as my witness I swear, if I ever get her as my wife, I’ll sacrifice my two arms to the goddess Kali, I’ll sacrifice my head to Lord Rudra.”(85) On the behalf of Devdutta, Kapila goes to Padmini’s house and persuades her parents for the marriage of Devdutta and Padmini. Kapila’s description of her beauty:

“She is Yakshini, Shakantala, Urvashi, Indumati—all rolled in one.”(87)

Devdutta and Padmini get married. Kapila frequently goes to Devdutta’s house. Padmini is attracted towards Kapila. She needs a man of steel. One day the threesome planned a trip to Ujjain. But Devdutta is not interested because he has sensed her attraction towards Kapila. They set out for the trip and Kapila is driving the cart. Watching Kapila climbing a tree, Padmini says:

“How he climbs—like an ape. Before I could even say “yes”, he had taken off his shirt, pulled his Dhotti up and swung up the branch. And what an ethereal shape! Such a broad back—like an ocean with muscles rippling across it—and then that small, feminine waist which looks so helpless.”(96)

Praising his physique, Padmini even says: “No women could resist him.”(96) On their way to Ujjain, they stop for some time. Padmini and Kapila go out to the temple of Rudra and Devdutta walks to the temple of Kali. He offers his head to the Goddess. When Kapila and Padmini return to the cart, Devdutta was not there. Kapila goes to the Kali temple and finds Devdutta dead. Now Kapila also cuts off his head, thinking people will say he has murdered Devdutta for Padmini. It is darker when Padmini reach the temple and she stumbles over the bodies. Finding both of them dead, Padmini lifts the sword to sacrifice her too. But goddess Kali appears and interrupts her. Padmini falls at Her feet and begs for their life. Goddess Kali grants her request. Eagerly, Padmini puts the heads back. But in her excitement she mixes them up so that Devdutta’s head goes to Kapila’s body and vice versa. After their exchange of bodies, primarily they are excited and happy. But problem ensues when Kapila’s head claims Padmini as his wife. He argues that:

“This is the hand that accepted her at the wedding. This is the body she’s lived with all these months. And the child she’s carrying is the seed of this body.”(106)

So, the threesome goes to a great Rishi in search of a solution to their problem. And the Rishi, remembering Vikrama and Vetala’s story gives the solution:

“As the heavenly Kalpa Vriksha is supreme among trees, so is the head among human limbs. Therefore the man with Devdutta’s head is indeed Devdutta and he is the rightful husband of Padmini.”(110)

Kapila broken hearted goes to the forest. Padmini is a lotus on the earth. She needs a man with the steel body. But Devdutta is a comely Brahmin. He could not satisfy her physical needs. So, she wants Devdutta’s clever head and Kapila’s strong body. Now, when Devdutta has Kapila’s body, Padmini gets complete satisfaction. But her satisfaction and completeness is temporary. In the Introduction to Hayavadana, Kirtinath Kurtkoti said:

“Initially Devdutta—actually the head of Devdutta on Kapila’s body—behaves differently from what he was before. But ever so gradually he changes to his former self. So does Kapila. But there is a difference. Devdutta stops writing poetry while Kapila is haunted by the memories in Devdutta’s body. Padmini who, after the exchange of heads, had felt that she had the best of both the men, gets slowly disillusioned. Of the three, only she had the capacity for complete experience.”(70)

Padmini again starts craving for Kapila’s body. The dolls conversation makes it clear that she has Kapila in her dream. Padmini sends Devdutta to the Ujjain fair to bring dolls for the boy. And she herself goes out in the forest where Kapila lives. Padmini wants to join with Kapila, he refused. But Kapila’s body still have those memories and feels incomplete.

Kapila : What does it matter now whether you stay or go?

You’ve done the damage. I had buried all those faceless memories in my skin. Now you have dug them up with your claws.

Padmini : Why should one bury anything?

Kapila : Why should not one? Why should one tolerate this mad dance of incompleteness?

Padmini : Whose incompleteness? Yours?

Kapila : yes, mine. One beats the body into shape, but one can’t beat away the memories in it. Isn’t that surprising?(126)

When Devdutta comes from the fair back, he finds Kapila and Padmini living happily together. He cannot tolerate this scene, but controls his anger. Both Devdutta and Kapila love Padmini and want to have her, yet each recoils from the obvious solution: namely they should both live with Padmini.

Devadatta : Tell me one thing. Do you really love Padmini?

Kapila : Yes.

Devadatta : So do I.

Kapila : I know. (Silence) Devadatta, couldn't we all three live together - like the Pandavas and Draupadi?

Devadatta : What do you think? (Silence. Padmini looks at them but doesn't say anything.)

Kapila : (laughs). No, it can't be done.

Devadatta : That's why I brought this. (129)

The end of the play is very interesting; both the friends take the swords and kill each other in a dual. Padmini, commits sati in their joint funeral pyre, handing her son over to Bhagavata. She said to him:

“Yes, please. My son is sleeping in the hut. Take him under your care. Give him to the hunters who live in this forest and tell them it's Kapila's son. They loved Kapila and will bring the child up. Let the child grow up in the forest with the rivers and trees. When he's five take him to the Revered Brahmin Vidyasagara of Dharmapura. Tell him it's Devdutta's son.”(131)

The question remains unanswered who is Padmini's real husband and for whom she does sati.

The problem is not solved but disposed of through the death of the threesome. What the play underlines is that one way completeness is possible but not a perfect combination or polarity of the opposites.

This is how the central refrain of the play is expressed by the female chorus:

“Why should love stick to the sap of a single body? When the stem is drunk with the thick yearning of the many-petalled, many-flowered lantana, why should it be tied down to the relation of a single flower?

A head for each breast. A pupil for each eye. A side for each arm.”(132)

But Padmini and Devadatta's choice of death affects the child's growth adversely. “Children of his age should be outtalking a dictionary, but this one doesn't speak a word. Doesn't laugh, doesn't cry, doesn't even smile. The same long face all twenty-four hours. There's obviously something wrong with him...” (134) as the actor puts it.

The sub-plot of 'Hayavadana' deepens the significance of the main theme of incompleteness and search for identity by treating it on a different plane. Hayavadana's search for completeness ends comically becoming a complete horse. On the suggestion of Bhagavata Hayavadana went to the temple of Goddess Kali and tried to chop off his head. The Goddess appeared and rather peevishly said 'Why don't you people go somewhere else if you want to chop off your stupid heads? Why do you have to come to me?' Hayavadana fell at her feet and said, “mother, make me complete”. Even before he could say 'make me a complete man!' Goddess said 'so be it' and disappeared. He became a horse. Hayavadana sorrowfully said the Bhagavata:

“I have become a complete horse—but not a complete being! This human voice—this cursed human voice—it's still there! How can I call myself complete? If I only could. What should I do, Bhagavata sir? How can I get rid of this human voice?”(136)

Now Padmini's son is five years old. He is as morose as Kapila. It's the first time the boy laughs and insists Hayavadana to laugh. Hayavadana's laughter finally ends as a proper neigh and becomes a complete being. He gives a ride to the boy. In the Introduction of the play, Kirtinath Kurtkoti said:

“The horse-man's search for completeness ends comically, with his becoming a complete horse. The animal body triumphs over what is considered the best in man, the *Uttamanga*, the human head!”(70)

Manisha Dwivedi is right to say: “The princess of Karnataka finally got the body of a horse since it has a perfect form and grace. Hayavadana achieves completeness when finally he becomes a complete horse and loses the human voice through singing the Indian National Anthem. But this is one-sided completeness. But for human being, who is a combination of flesh and spirit, body and mind, completeness requires a harmonical relationship between body and mind but cartesian division seems to be a perennial irresolvable problem for man.”³

The problem of *Hayavadana*, alienation, absurdity, incompleteness and search for identity are central of the plays of Karnad. Incompleteness is an inescapable and insurmountable reality. In the 'Introduction' of the play, Kirtinath Kurtkoti said: “Karnad uses the conventions and motifs of folk tales and folk theatre—masks, curtains, dolls, the story-within-a-story—to create bizarre world. It is a world of incomplete individuals, indifferent Gods, dolls that speak and children who cannot, a world indifferent to the desires and frustrations, joys and sorrows of human beings. What is real is only the tremendous, irrational energy of the horse and it's rider who move round the stage symbolizing the powerful but monotonous rhythm of life.”(70) Bhagavata, who at the beginning of the play, considered Ganesha, an incomplete being, because He has an Elephant-head and human body. But at the end of the play, he praises Ganesha:

“Unfathomable indeed is the mercy of the Elephant-headed Ganesha. He fulfils the desire of all – a grandson to grandfather, a smile to a child, a neigh to a horse. How indeed can one describe his glory in our poor, disabled words?”(139)

In his plays, Girish Karnad uses the conventional themes and techniques. Commenting on the use of techniques of the classical and folk theatre of India, Krishna Gandhi said:

“The theme of the play is an old one . . . man's yearning for completeness, for perfection. It is this yearning which makes people restless in their ordinary existence, and makes them reach out for extraordinary things. . . . But the ideal of perfection itself is ambiguous. The character of Hayavadana is invented as an example of this ambiguity.”⁴

Thus Girish Karnad presented the theme of incompleteness at three levels- divine level, animal level and human level. Fundamentally human beings are incomplete and imperfect. Devdutta, Kapila and Padmini remained incomplete even after their best efforts to be complete. At the end of the play, they died as incomplete beings. The Princess of Karnataka became a horse, a perfect and graceful being. Hayavadana achieved completeness becoming a complete horse. At the end of the play, Lord Ganesha has been praised as the one who fulfils the desire of all. I have tried my best to deal with the theme of incompleteness. But there can be a lot of interpretations of the theme of incompleteness. The topic is open for further interpretations by worthy scholars.

References:

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