Reimagining Selfhood: Identity and Modernity in the Postcolonial Context of Girish Karnad's Hayavadana

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Abstract— *Girish Karnad, an Indian Jnanpith awardee playwright, played a pivotal role in the evolution of modern Indian playwriting in Kannada. This paper delves into the intricacies of identity and modernity in Girish Karnad's Hayavadana while examining it from a postcolonial lens. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the fragmentation of selfhood, challenging traditional notions of identity in the face of modernity. The play subtly uses myths and tradition to highlight the impact of colonialism on identity formation, particularly in postcolonial societies like India. Through a postcolonial framework, the paper examines how Hayavadana reflects the ongoing search for a cohesive identity in a world shaped by both colonial past and modern pressures. This research further looks into the ways through which Karnad ponders over the meaning of existence and identity in his play, while questioning the parameters of modernity.*

Keywords— *Identity, modernity, Girish Karnad, post-colonialism, myth*

I. INTRODUCTION

Girish Karnad's Hayavadana (1971) was a spectacular play based on a tale from the *Vetalapanchavimshika* and inspired by Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads*. Molded in the world of Indian mythology and folklore, the play draws from the tales of the *Kathasaritsagara* and explores the conflict between the mind and the body through a unique portrayal that blends traditional storytelling with modern theatrical techniques. At the heart of the play is the story of Devadatta, Kapila, and Padmini whose intertwined fates result in a chaotic love triangle all the while exposing the reality of ending human desires and the greed for more. The play simultaneously discusses the disjunctive life of Hayavadana- a man with the head of a horse. The quest for completeness and an acceptable identity is thoroughly explored through the metanarrative utilized by Karnad in *Hayavadana*. This paper aims to establish a connection between the pursuit of an acceptable identity and the world of post-colonialism.

II. POST-COLONIAL THEORY

Postcolonial theory delves into the literature produced in countries that were once colonies, usually dealing with themes such as national crisis, a struggle for independence, and a quest for identity. Postcolonial theory became part of the critical toolbox in the 1970s, and many practitioners credit Edward Said's book *Orientalism* as being the founding work. *(University of Washington)*

Literature of the colonial states aims to express their identity and realities of the colonized world. One of the important terms of postcolonial literature is "hybridity" which refers to the intermingling of the colonized country's culture with that of the colonizers. Hybridity, as per Homi K Bhabha, is the refusal against acceptance of a monolithic identity.

III. DISCUSSION

The play opens with an invocation of Lord Ganesha to seek his blessings for a successful performance. In the first few minutes of the performance, Bhagvata sings verses in praise of the lord-*O single-tusked destroyer of incompleteness, we pay homage to you and start our play.*

Karnad clearly establishes the idea that the play deals with the notion of incompleteness as a major theme. In the world of post-colonialism, especially with the looming threat of war and violence, an invocation to God serves as a method of bringing hope. However, in the same prayer, Karnad acknowledges the incompleteness in the lord as well and it is not unique to humans but a trait present even in God. The search for wholeness isn't comprehensible by mortals and beyond the understanding of humans.

The play begins with Bhagvata and Nata talking about Hayavadana who is a hybrid of human and horse. Even though his characteristics are of a theriomorph, he has full awareness of contemporary rational thoughts which is displayed in the first act. When Nata, the actor, approaches Bhagvata about a strange creature that he had witnessed, he confesses that this beastly figure instructed him to keep the roadsides clean. Karnad expresses that such concerns are often dismissed by humans, however, Hayavadana cannot ignore them. Even though he is deemed socially unacceptable, his concern for society surpasses the care that humans, who consider themselves superior, have for the world they live in. From a postcolonial perspective, this incident shows that due to the terror of colonialism, humans have lost their connection with nature, which has also shifted their priorities in this modern world. The colonialists' exploitation of nature has, in turn, influenced the natives, resulting in a similar disregard for the environment.

Hayavadana also acts as the representative of hybridity, as defined in the post-colonial context. Hybridity in this sense is all about the intermingling of the colonial culture with the culture of the colonized. Hayavadana embodies this hybridity. He is associated with the Indian culture, as a mythical hybrid horse-headed man, but he attempts to adopt the modern post-colonial ideas to become a truly hybrid creature who is accustomed to the current workings of the world. This reflects the struggles of the postcolonial societies to negotiate their traditional identities with the expectations of the colonizers.

In postcolonial Indian society, the influence of colonialism has boosted the role of fate and destiny. With the poundage of colonial legacy casting a shadow over their lives, people have increasingly abandoned forward-thinking and have left their futures to chance. As Bhagvata says to Hayavadana,

Hayavadana, what's written on our foreheads cannot be altered.

Hayavadana, however, refuses to accept his fate and alter the lines of destiny. He turns to religion like any other post-colonial human would've done in times of adversity, and visits every other religious place such as Banaras, Dargah of Khwaja Yusuf, and the Grotto of Virgin Mary, but to his dismay, nothing changed. This mirrors the experiences of the people who retained their faith in God and went to every possible length in religion to escape the world of suffering and identity quest.

Humans are social creatures who rely on and thrive in the presence of others. *(Wasi, Intergenerational Solidarity: A Key to Social Cohesion and Sustainable Development)* Hayavadana reveals to the audience that he attempted to take an interest in the social life of the nation to become a "social being." Regardless of his efforts, he couldn't become a complete man. In the post-colonial world, humans mark themselves as superior because they have a better-developed social life wherein they can debate over concepts such as civics, politics, patriotism, nationalism, socialist or capitalist patterns of society, etc. However, despite trying to mold into this predetermined criterion of being a human, Hayavadan feels incomplete. Moreover, the actor points out that Hayavadana was singing the national anthem, national song, and many other patriotic songs to portray himself as a true patriot, one of the major qualities that humans associate themselves with. However, the part of the national anthem that he sings later is a less-heard part of the actual song.

The lurking question of whether the mind is the controller of the body or vice-versa remains unanswered in the play and is left to the readers to interpret. While Devadatta is shown as the representative of intellect, Kapila is portrayed as an example of physical strength. The playwright clearly distinguishes the two characters at the beginning of the play as a backdrop of the disarray that is about to unfold. Their identities are thoroughly articulated, however, gradually the reader realizes that the swapping of their heads results in the question: who is Kapila and who is Devadatta? The question of identity extends beyond Devadatta, and Kapila, reaching even Padmini's son. The child's paternity remains an unsolved question in the play, further solidifying the identity conflict.

The identity crisis experienced by Kapila and Devadatta after their heads are exchanged mirrors the existential crisis of the colonized societies where people were unsure of their national and social identities as well as their moral alignments. Devadatta getting the best of the situation and misusing the knowledge of the scriptures is a sign of social satire, as used by Girish Karnad to reflect that the society has deteriorated to the point where religion is being used to justify unnecessary clashes and to deepen divides in the community. Kapila mentions it in the text:

Don't tell me about your Sacred Texts. You can always twist them to suit your needs.

In the post-colonial world, camouflaged identities have become prevalent. People often present themselves as

someone they are not, adopting facades or masks. In *Hayavadana*, the use of masks is crucial in performance and conveying deeper meanings. The masks used by the actors are exchanged when Kapila and Devadatta switch heads, creating a sense of confusion and uncertainty. This uncertainty and sense of fear were also observed during the postcolonial era when people, with their newfound independence, had no clarity about what the future holds for them. Even the dolls are representative of Padmini's conscience and narrate her dreams to the audience. The dolls are, later, replaced by newer ones, which Padmini gives to her son before she commits Sati. They become the symbolic replacement for the absent parents of the child. However, they do not act as a positive guiding light, instead make him depressed, anti-social, and withdrawn. As soon as the dolls fall, the child laughs.

The depiction of Devadatta and Kapila beheading themselves as a sacrifice in the Kali temple is both violent and grotesque. This act aligns with the brutal reality of colonial times where violence emerged from ulterior motives and was driven by jealousy, hatred, misunderstandings, and the lack of appropriate guidance. People were led by moral and ethical clashes and the chaos of the colonial era can be reimagined through the scene where Kali herself points out that Kapila didn't sacrifice himself, but rather committed this act to save himself from getting accused.

And what lies! Says he is dying for friendship. He must've known perfectly well that he would be accused of killing Devadatta for you.

In the climax of the play, Hayavadana is shown as a complete horse, left with the trouble of a human voice. He tells Bhagvata about the incident where he visited the Kali temple and the Goddess granted his wish to be complete, but misinterpreted his request, turning him into a horse rather than a human. In the end, *Hayavadana* critiques the ignorance of writers towards the social context, suggesting that this has led readers towards escapism. Once the little boy sits on his back and laughs, Hayavadana's voice turns to a proper neigh, making him a complete horse, revealing that he has finally learned to accept himself.

IV. CONCLUSION

Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* intertwines myth and modernity to examine the nature of identity in a postcolonial context. Through the intricate characters, the play addresses the quest for self-identity amidst the legacies of colonialism. Hayavadana, as a hybrid creature caught between human and animal forms, symbolizes the hybrid identities that arise from the clash of colonial and local cultures. His journey reflects the societal struggle to negotiate traditional values with the demands of a modern world. Karnad's use of masks and ritualistic elements enlightens the theme of identity crisis, revealing how people in postcolonial societies often wrestle with multiple, conflicting identities. Ultimately, *Hayavadana* critiques the superficial and often escapist responses to identity crises in modern times. The transformation of Hayavadana into a complete horse, symbolized by his final acceptance of his nature, serves as a commentary on the need for self-acceptance.

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