

United International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

ISSN: 3048-6726 (UIJMR) Impact Factor: 6.934 (SJIF)

An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Multidisciplinary Journal

www.ujmr.in Vol-3, Special Issue-II,2026

Negotiating Tradition and Modernity: Exploring Indian Knowledge System in Girish Karnad's Hayavadana

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Abstract

Girish Karnad's Hayavadana (1971) occupies a significant position in modern Indian drama because of its engagement with mythology, folklore, and philosophical reflection. Thomas Mann's The Transposed Heads was an inspiration from Kathasaritsagara and it retells an ancient Indian legend, and indigenous traditions. This paper examines how Hayavadana can be taken as an example where tradition and modernity interact through the Indian Knowledge System (IKS). The philosophical structure which is central to the play include concepts such as identity, completeness, dharma, and the conflict between body and mind.Girish Karnad reinterprets mythical narrative using classical aesthetics while addressing modern anxieties regarding perfection, completeness, social conditioning and conflict between desire and morality. The play ultimately highlights that the Indian Knowledge System is not a rigid artefact of the past but a flexible and intellectual framework capable of engaging in contemporary reality.

Keywords: Mythology, Folklore, Completeness, Identity, Indian Knowledge System

Introduction

The Indian English drama after Independence symbolizes an attempt to reconnect with indigenous cultural traditions while addressing the challenges of modernity. After the British colonial rule, Indian writers felt the responsibility of redefining cultural identity. Girish Karnad can be considered as one of the most influential figures among the dramatists who rather than treating mythology and folklore as

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nostalgic remnants of the past, he transformed them into powerful tools for modern expression.

Hayavadana, first staged in 1971, portrays this creative negotiation between past and present. The play revolves around the problem of identity, dramatized through the replacement of heads between two men. The thematic concerns of the play Hayavadana are deeply philosophical and resonate with both classical Indian thought and modern existential dilemma. The Indian Knowledge System - which includes philosophical traditions, aesthetic theories, mythological narratives, and performance practices form the conceptual foundation of the play.

The Indian Knowledge System refers to the broad intellectual and cultural heritage developed across centuries in the Indian subcontinent. It encompasses Vedic and Upanishadic philosophy, epic literature, classical dramaturgy, and diverse folk traditions. Foundational concepts such as dharma (moral order and duty), karma (action and consequence), moksha (liberation), and the interdependence of body and mind form its philosophical core.

Western philosophy separates mind and body whereas Indian philosophical thought frequently emphasizes unity and interconnection.

Bharata's Natya Shastra perceives drama as a synthesis of multiple art forms-music, dance, narrative, and gesture designed to evoke rasa. Folk theatre forms such as Yakshagana integrate narration, masks, and audience interaction. Girish Karnad in his play Hayavadana relies upon these not merely as ornamentation but as structural and thematic foundation.

This paper explains how Hayavadana negotiates tradition and modernity by reinterpreting essential elements of the Indian Knowledge System. Girish Karnad neither blindly preserves tradition nor rejects it, instead, he utilizes it as a medium for exploring contemporary questions about identity, incompleteness, and human desire.

The central narrative of Hayavadana is inspired from a tale in the Kathasaritsagara, later adapted by Thomas Mann in "The Transposed Heads." Girish Karnad narrates the story by placing it within Indian philosophical discourse and theatrical conventions.

The play “Hayavadana” begins with Bhagavata reciting prayer to Lord Ganesha for the successful completion of the play. He explains that even though Ganesha may seem imperfect his completeness may not be known to normal human beings. Through this incident Girish Karnad tries to bring out the Indian philosophical concept of completeness. The presence of “Hayavadana an incomplete person-half man and half horse resonates the conflict of Hayavadana to become complete human being. Bhagavata narrated the story of Devadatta an intellectual Brahmin and his friend Kapila, an iron smith who is physically strong. Padmini is attracted to both men. She likes the intellect of Devadatta and the strength of Kapila. She gets married to Devadatta and is pregnant with Devadatta’s child. Padmini’s desire for Kapila creates jealousy in Devadatta and in a tragic sequence of events, Devadatta and Kapila behead themselves, before the goddess Kali.

Goddess Kali appears before Padmini and asks her to place the head for their survival but she mistakenly places their heads on the wrong bodies which results in Kapila’s head on Devadatta’s body and Devadatta’s head on Kapila’s body and a very important question which stems as result of this confusion is who can be considered as Padmini’s true husband.

The sage resolves the dilemma by declaring that identity resides in the head, he explains that “The head is the crown of the body” (Girish Karnad, Hayavadana, Act I). The mind controls every action of the body so Devadatta’s head with Kapila’s body can be considered as Devadatta and Padmini should consider him as her husband.

Padmini is overjoyed as got the best result -a combination of intellect and strength which is her desire. In the beginning, she felt extremely happy. Over time, the body returns to its normal position-Kapila in Devadatta’s body turns sensitive and Kapila in Devadatta’s body regains strength. This gradual transformation suggests that identity cannot be confined solely to intellect or physical form. The conflict between these elements reflect modern anxieties about fragmented selfhood.

Through myth, Girish Karnad constructs a bridge between ancient philosophical debates and contemporary existential theories. The unresolved conflict in the play Hayavadana makes it relevant to modern audience.

Identity and Quest for Completeness

The major theme in the play “Hayavadana” is the concept of incompleteness and conflict between body and mind. The concept of incompleteness is portrayed in the character of Hayavadana, the man with a horse’s head. He regrets his hybrid existence and craves for unity: “I am incomplete. I am neither man nor horse” (Girish Karnad, Act II).

Indian mythology frequently presents hybrid figures not as abnormality but as divine manifestation. The play opens with an invocation to Lord Ganesha, described as “a single tusked destroyer of incompleteness” (Girish Karnad, Act I). Ganesha himself, with an elephant’s head and human body, symbolizes divine hybridity. In this cultural context, incompleteness does not necessarily imply deficiency.

Hayavadana’s dissatisfaction represents a modern crisis rather than a traditional one. Ironically, when his wish is granted and he becomes a full horse, he loses his human voice. His final neigh replaces speech, symbolizes the loss of self-consciousness. Absolute completeness results in the loss of individuality.

Padmini’s longing for a complete man combining Devadatta’s intellect and Kapila’s strength reflects the human desire for perfection. Ultimately her wish leads to tragedy. The play suggests that the pursuit of perfection and totality leads to self-destruction.

In Indian philosophy, the concept of Purushartha refers to the four aims of human life- Dharma (duty), Artha (prosperity), Kama (desire), and Moksha (liberation). Padmini’s wish for a complete man represents an excessive attachment to Kama-the pursuit of desire and ideal fulfillment. Indian philosophy teaches that obsession with worldly perfection, without balance with Dharma or spiritual wisdom, can lead to suffering which is reflected in the tragedy of the play.

The desire for completeness and perfection motivates all major characters. Devadatta strives intellectual superiority, Kapila is an epitome of physical strength and Padmini craves for integration of intellect and strength and Hayavadana waits for singular identity. In their attempt to achieve completeness the characters struggle with each other and ultimately it leads to their destruction. The replacement of Devadatta’s head to Kapila’s body fails to create harmony. Padmini’s search for perfection led to the death of three people. Hayavadana’s transformation silences him. In Indian

Philosophical thought, totality cannot be found externally, it can be sought only through Atma Jnana or Self reflection. Even the child at the play's conclusion, who laughs without fear, represents acceptance rather than perfection.

The Bhagavata's closing reflection suggests continuity rather than closure, reinforcing the cyclical nature of existence. Indian philosophy frequently emphasizes impermanence and transformation. By dramatizing failed quests for perfection, Girish Karnad reaffirms this metaphysical insight.

The play Hayavadana constantly reiterates the concept that completeness or perfection is an illusion. Human life is inherently dynamic and unfinished. Through these characters, Girish Karnad uses the Indian Knowledge System's acceptance of multiplicity to critique modern demands for fixed identity.

Dharma and Ethical Complexity

In Hayavadana, the concept of Dharma explains the collision of duty, loyalty, and desire. This can be understood by the friendship between Devadatta and Kapila. Devadatta's vow to sacrifice himself if he fails to marry Padmini reflects a traditional understanding of duty (Dharma) - a willingness to uphold honour and promise at personal cost. Kapila's readiness to sacrifice for the sake of friendship reinforces the notion that selflessness and adherence to ethical principles is a virtuous thing.

The play also highlights the complex consequences of rigidly following dharma. Both characters' extreme decisions create confusion and suffering rather than solution. This resonates with the ethical ambiguity found in Indian epic traditions, particularly the Mahabharata, where moral duties often conflict and strict adherence to one principle may violate another. Indian philosophical thought recognizes that ethical dilemmas are situational, and the right course of action is rarely absolute.

Padmini's character challenges conventional moral and social expectations. She openly acknowledges her attraction to Kapila's physical strength and she confronts patriarchal notions of chastity and virtue. Padmini's character reflects the Indian philosophical understanding of human desires (Kama) as natural and legitimate aspects of life especially in the context of Purusharthas-dharma, artha, kama, and moksha as interconnected and fulfilling desire responsibly is part of a balanced moral life. But Padmini was not able to balance her desire which led to her destruction.

Girish Karnad through this interplay presents morality as context-dependent rather than rigidly prescriptive. The actions are judged not just by intent but by their consequences and the complexities of human emotion. This aligns closely with Indian ethical thought, which often emphasizes situational judgment- *apeksha dharma* and the recognition of human imperfection.

In *Hayavadana*, *dharma* is not portrayed as a fixed moral code but as a dynamic negotiation between duty, desire, and social expectation, The Play *Hayavadana* stresses that moral life is complex and nuanced.

Navigating Tradition and Modernity

Modernity often emphasizes rationalism, individual autonomy, and the exploration of inner self. Girish Karnad does not simply import these perspectives instead, he approaches such questions through the lens of indigenous epistemology explaining the relevance and adaptability of the Indian Knowledge System. The central question of whether identity resides in the head or the body may initially appear to reflect Western concerns about mind-body dualism, Girish Karnad resolves it through Indian philosophical reasoning, drawing on traditions that emphasize the unity of body, mind, and spirit, such as *Samkhya* and *Vedanta*.

The play's non-linear narrative structure and explains the cyclical understanding of Indian philosophy that beginnings and endings are interconnected. This approach challenges linear Western narrative models and situates human experience within a broader perspective presenting an indigenous worldview in which action and consequence are interdependent.

Girish Karnad in his play *Hayavadana* demonstrates that the Indian Knowledge System is not merely historical or ritualistic but it is effective and capable of engaging with modern existential dilemma in a subtle way. Girish Karnad illustrates that the correlation between classical Indian thought and modern concerns can produce fresh insights into the human condition showing that ancient Indian philosophy remains relevant, flexible in the modern context.

Conclusion

Girish Karnad's play *Hayavadana* reinterprets traditional narrative for contemporary audience. The play is deeply rooted in the Indian aesthetics as it draws upon myth, aesthetic theory and folk performance. The play *Hayavadana* addresses modern anxieties about identity, desire, incompleteness, and moral ambiguity. Girish Karnad does not idealize the past, nor does he dismiss modernity. Instead, he creates a

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www.ujmr.in Vol-3, Special Issue-II, 2026

dynamic interaction between the two. Tradition becomes an adaptable framework through which modern concerns are explored.

The relationship between tradition and modernity is not antagonistic but discursive and it is clearly expressed in the play Hayavadana. The play explains that search for completeness and perfection leads to self-destruction which is explained in Indian Philosophical thought. The Indian Knowledge System emerges as a vibrant intellectual tradition capable of continuous reinterpretation. Girish Karnad affirms the relevance of India's philosophical heritage through his play Hayavadana.

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