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The Self in the Role of Another: The Quest for Identity in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala*

C. Samuel*

Abstract

The relative roles of colonisers and colonised are explored in postcolonial literature, along with resistance and disagreement against hegemonic empires. It can also talk about how colonialism shaped cultural prejudices, as well as how language has given rise to inferior identities. Topics including racial identity, gender, place, migration, obstruction, and enslavement are common in postcolonial discourse. 'Hayavadana' and 'Naga-Mandala' by Girish Karnad are famous and outstanding literary works that portray identity crises and imperfection. All along their lives, humans chase for the ideal of completeness. However, they fail to remember that completeness is an unreachable goal. This article delves into the intense identity and imperfection crises. It also shows how much more powerful the mind is than the body. Karnad paints an authentic image of his characters as they struggle within to maintain an identity and achieve the unattainable ideal of completeness. The theme of "incompleteness and identity crisis" immediately prompts the selection of Girish Karnad's plays, which depict the incompleteness of diverse personalities in distinct circumstances and cultures, thereby illustrating various elements of identity crisis. This article attempts to analyse the ideology of the identity crisis, which is an entity of postcolonialism, citing Girish Karnad's, 'Hayavadana' and 'Naga-Mandala'.

Keywords: Incompleteness, Identity Crisis, Culture, Myth

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*C. Samuel, Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. John's College, Affliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Palayamkottai - 627002, Tamil Nadu, India.

Girish Karnad, one of the great Indian playwrights, has given us a fresh and exciting view of Indian society and culture by delving deeply into India's myths, traditions, and myths. Every one of his works of art provides an authentic depiction of Indian culture, including its ups and downs, traditions, and how they relate to and impact modern life. When it comes to culture and society, one defines the other. As Eswar Rao, in his article "Re-inventing Tradition: A Study of Girish Karnad's Plays," observes:

> Culture defines society. The cultural ethos of every society is unique in its form and essence representing the character of its people, their experiences and beliefs. Myths, legends and folklore are in fact the embodiments of these cultural ethos that represent the underlying values and principles of life, the shared experience of the race, the rules and the codes of society. (2)

Over the years, Girish Karnad has drawn ideas from the timeless traditions of his culture, particularly mythology and folklore. He has constructed unique stories by drawing on the rich heritage of India's history and then spinning them using his own creative process. The *Mahabharata* is the source material for his debut play, *Yayati*. Duties, selflessness, and the quest for enlightenment are all themes that run throughout the legendary narrative. Every folktale has a theological underpinning, and many of them use natural elements like animals and reptiles as their foundation. This is due to the fact that our most basic human traits such as our innate curiosity, openness, and faith are on display in the folktales we hear and read today. The Indian folk heritage is considered the cradle of Karnad's plays Hayavadana and *Naga-Mandala*.

Karnad is widely acknowledged as a prominent figure in Indian media and one of the country's most esteemed dramatists. He was a master storyteller who, by drawing on Indian mythology, history, and folktales, was able to immerse his audiences in authentic Indian settings. He sought to resolve the contradictions, psychological issues, ambiguities, and conflicts that contemporary men and women face in their various circumstances as an early practitioner of theatre. He has made use of theatrical tactics that leave a more lasting and immediate impact. His goal in employing theatrical elements in nearly all of his plays is to heighten the impact and range of perspectives of a well-known subject. According to Kirtinath Kurkoti:

> Karnad uses the conventions and motifs of folk-tales and folk-theatre-masks, curtains, dolls and the story-within-a story to create a bizarre world, it is a world of incomplete individuals, indifferent gods, dolls that speak and children who cannot - world which appears to be indifferent to the desires and frustration, joys and sorrows of human beings… But his work has the tone and expression of great drama. He has the genius and the power to transform any situation into an aesthetic experience. (vii)

Written in Kannada and translated into English, Girish Karnad's third drama, *Hayavadana*, is an audacious and fruitful exploration of folk themes. The drama is

both magnificent and full of metaphorical meaning. The Kathasaritsagar is an old Sanskrit collection of tales that provides the basis for the primary narrative, which is a love triangle between Devadatta, Kapila, and Padmini. Whether the man with Devadatta's head or body is considered Padmini's true spouse is a moral dilemma in the original narrative, which is told by the ghost of Vaital to the brave Indian king Vikram as part of the Vaitalpanchvishati. As a result, the explanation is that the man who has Devadatta's head is actually her spouse, as the head is the most valuable component of a man.

Devadatta, who is the sole son of a Brahmin and is attractive, brilliant, and an innate poet, marries Padmini. However, Padmini finds Kapila's figure attractive, and Kapila finds her attractiveness irresistible. Kapila is the sole offspring of an ironsmith; he is dark-skinned and unattractive, yet physically unmatched. The central theme of Hayavadana is the quest for one's own identity amidst a complex web of relationships, and the characters represent this quest while also drawing attention to the subtle irony in human activity. As a chorus, Bhagavata begins by remarking on Lord Ganesha's peculiar paradoxes. He embodies an elephant's head, and he represents how absurd human life is. Bhagavata describes Devadatta as "comely in appearance, fair in colour, unrivalled in intelligence" (Hayavadana, 2), and furthermore describes Kapila as "he is dark and plain to look at, yet in deeds that require drive and daring in dancing in strength and physical skills, he has no equal" (2). Because of all the problems, Devadatta and Kapila end up sacrificing their heads to Kali, the goddess of death.

But the goddess asked Padmini to restore life to the dead by placing their heads on their bodies correctly; however, Padmini confused Devadatta with Kapila and placed Kapila's head on Devadatta's body. Padmini's confusion stems from her desire to own both in one structure. According to Karnad, "Eagerly, Padmini attaches the severed heads to the bodies of the men." But in her excitement, she mixes them up so that Devadatta's head goes to Kapila's body, and vice versa. She then presses the sword against their necks, performs a namaskara to the goddess, descends the stage, and stands facing the goddess with her eyes tightly closed (Hayavadana, 34). Unfortunately, the outcomes were far from what Padmini had hoped for—a combination of Devadatta's head and Kapila's body. Among the friends, a question arises about who will be Padmini's husband in the future. Meanwhile, Padmini expresses her desire to choose her own husband. In the play, Bhagavata, after referring to the sacred texts, gives the verdict. As written in the text:

> So, our three unfortunate friends went to a great rishi in search of a solution to their problem. And the rishi—remembering perhaps what King Vikrama had said—gave the verdict. (In a loud, sonorous voice)
>
> As the heavenly Kalpa Vriksha 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. (40)

The needs of nature altered their physical characteristics, and once close friends turned into their fiercest adversaries. The play's identity crisis shows how complex human personalities can be. Finally, they end their lives by killing each other in a duel, while Padmini ends hers by performing sati. All through their lives, people work so hard to achieve flawlessness, yet they fail to see that completeness itself is impossible to attain. As Surekha Hooda rightly points out, "A certain amount of scepticism, even bordering on cynicism, runs through the tragic, pathetic, comic, and ludicrous characters and situations. Consequently, Karnad has come to rely heavily on irony at the conceptional and technical level, achieving incredible dramatic scores" (JETIR 832). Padmini, motivated purely by self-interest, does the act of interchanging the heads to end up with an identity crisis. The trembling voice of Padmini, placed between the dead bodies of Devadatta and Kapila, reveals the true identity of the friends. As Padmini says:

> They burned, lived, fought, embraced and died. I stood silent. If I'd said, 'Yes, I'll live with you both', perhaps they would have been alive yet. But I couldn't say it. I couldn't say, 'Yes.' No, Kapila, no, Devadatta. I know it in my blood you couldn't have lived together. You would've had to share not only me but your bodies as well. Because you knew death you died in each other's arms. You could only have lived ripping each other to pieces. I had to drive you to death. You forgave each other, but again, left me out. (*Hayavadana*, 62)

The subplot is just as significant in *Hayavadana* as the main narrative. This is a folktale that was told in the days of old. The fact that it is used as the title of the play means that its significance may be understood. The subplot of Hayavadana the horseman, which treats the major issue of incompleteness on a separate arena, enriches the relevance of the primary concept by offering a distinct perspective on it. A horse-headed guy named Hayavadana was abandoned by his parents, who are Gandharva, who was born as a horse due to Kuber's curse, and a beautiful princess from Karnataka. His parents left Hayavadana alone. He travels to numerous holy places, experiments with magic and mantras, and seeks the blessings of holy men, gods, and goddesses to achieve his goal of completeness and the removal of the horsehead. In the play's first act, *Hayavadana*, in search of his completeness, asks Bhagavata:

> What a forehead! If it was a forehead like yours, I would have accepted anything. But this! … I have tried to accept my fate. My personal life has naturally been blameless. So, I took interest in the social life of the Nation —Civics, Politics, Patriotism, Nationalism, Indianization, the Socialist Pattern of Society … I have tried everything. But where's my society? Where? You must help me to become a complete man, Bhagavata sir. (*Hayavadana*, 9)

However, in the end, he ends up becoming a complete horse. The head, which represents the finest in man, is defeated by the animal character. Hayavadana is a

symbol of the ambitions that everyone has for things that are impossible to achieve. In a nutshell, Hayavadana is a search for the fundamental and innate longing that everyone has at their core for completion or perfection. This is an effort to bring home the argument that the quest for completeness on the part of man is pointless and that he ought to be happy and content with what he already possesses rather than wasting time in a frenzied quest for completeness.

Karnad depicts the awful conditions that women are subjected to in Indian society in *Naga-Mandala*. The prologue marks the beginning of *Naga-Mandala*, which is a play within a play. The characters in this prologue are the narrator, Flames, and the story in the form of a woman. The story in the form of a woman makes up the plotline of the play. The "Prologue" takes place in the innermost chamber of a temple that has been completely destroyed. The author of the play intends to convey in the prologue that man is a collection of several shortcomings and that he is either oblivious to these shortcomings or unable to free himself of them. Karnad's plays concentrate primarily on the psychological challenges, ambiguities, and conflicts that contemporary Indian men and women face in their various social contexts. *Naga-Mandala* vividly portrays the agony and distress experienced by both men and women as they transition into adulthood and integrate into society, a society that grants limited opportunities for personal growth, understanding, and individual autonomy.

There is a severe breakdown in relationships and comprehension between a young guy and a lady because he is unable to move past his emotional inadequacies and communicate with her. Most of its versions end tragically, and it poses a danger to both the family and society as a whole. The inner struggle that Karnad's plays make apparent is one that, maybe, every young man must surmount while he goes through adolescence. *Naga-Mandala* explores how men and women adapt to the conventional societal roles assigned to them.

The narrative of *Naga-Mandala* centres on the marriage of a young woman named Rani to a man named Appanna and how the couple comes to terms along the duties and obligations that arise with being married. As the play's protagonist, Rani represents a young girl trapped in the middle of a dysfunctional family who witnesses her spouse's dual identity as a mysterious stranger by day and an ardent lover at night. The interplay between the human and non-human realms in *Naga-Mandala* exposes the author's interpretation of events. Kurudavva, who is Appanna's mother's best friend, offers Rani a piece of root so she may offer it to her spouse in an effort to win him over.

Rani is given an additional piece by Kurudavva, which she then crushes into a paste because the previous one failed. Boiling the root puree in curry causes it to turn a bright red stream. The mere sight of the meal horrifies Rani, so she throws it into the anthill. The resident king cobra consumes it. Naga, a king cobra, eats the erotic paste and develops romantic feelings for Rani. At night, he visits Rani while posing as Appanna. Because of her unfortunate situation, he feels sorry for Rani and

gives her paternal love. She finally lets off all her unexpressed sadness. Rani finds herself in a state of complete confusion, unsure whether her husband is the one who enters the house in the morning or the one she sees in the night. A crisis of finding the true identity of her husband surrounds her as she speaks:

> … No, I won't ask questions. I shall do what you tell me. Scowls in the day. Embraces at night. The snarls in the morning unrelated to the caress at night. But day or night, one motto does not change: Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you … I was a stupid, ignorant girl when you brought me here. But now I am a woman, a wife, and I am going to be a mother. I am not a parrot … why don't you take it on trust that I have a mind and explain his charade to me? Why do you play these games? Why do you change like a chameleon from day to night? (47-48)

Appanna can't be that kind and loving; therefore, Rani doesn't understand. While Naga, disguised as Appanna, shows her care and love, she voluntarily ceases her disbelief. Being in his presence makes her feel safe and comfortable, and she even has the courage to believe he is her husband, Appanna. The text illustrates this misidentification when Rani exclaims, "Goodness! Goats have to be sacrificed and buffalos slaughtered to get a word out of you in the mornings. But at night—how you talk! Snakes and lizards may do what they like, but human beings should have some sense of shame" (40). Evil has been effectively staged by Karnad in *Naga-Mandala*. Day by day their affection towards each other grows, and after killing the guard dog, the evil avatar Naga makes love to Rani, which eventually leads to the pregnancy. Appanna was so enraged by the dog's death that he brought a mongoose the following day. The mongoose lasted for only a day and died of a snake bite. After discovering a bit of snake skin and blood under its claws, Rani faints. As written in the play:

> Rani fainted when she saw the dead mongoose. That night he did not visit her. There was no sign of him the next fifteen days. Rani spent her nights crying, wailing, pining for him. When he started visiting again, his body was covered with wounds which had only partly healed. She applied her ointment to the wounds, tended him. But she never questioned him about them. It was enough that he had returned. Needless to say, when her husband came during the day, there were no scars on him. (45)

Towards the end of the play, failing to identify that Appanna and Naga are different characters, Rani discloses the matter to Appanna that she is pregnant. Upon hearing Rani's pregnancy news, Appanna becomes enraged, beating her and dragging her into the street. Almost planning to kill her, he picks up a huge stone to throw at her. At that time, the cobra moves forward, hissing loudly. On seeing the cobra, Appanna throws that stone at the cobra, which instantly runs away. Appanna rushes to the village elders for justice in this regard. The village elders give a verdict that Rani should take the snake ordeal. She must remove the cobra from the anthill and prove her innocence. The guilt-ridden Rani survives the ordeal and is

worshipped as a goddess in the end. Karnad has brilliantly shed light on Rani's dilemma of identifying her true husband. After all, in the end she lives with her beloved Naga by hiding it inside her tresses and also with Appanna.

In *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala*, Karnad combines western methods with the thoughts, sociocultural realities, and political realities of the Indian people. The dramatic styles of both plays are based on those of traditional Indian culture. The system for reanimating dead objects is described in *Hayavadana*, and in *Naga-Mandala*, Ichchadhari Naga is portrayed as the night husband of Rani. As Sulekha Varma and Akash Behera rightly observe:

> Karnad has utilized the folk-art of Yakshagana to analyze the advanced and modern difficulty of human beings … Notwithstanding, the fanciful models are quickly attracting good consideration loaded with fascination. For instance, Centaur is of half man and half horse, Minotaur is of half man and half bull, as well as Sphinx is of a large portion of lion's body and a lady's head. Such a grand combination coordinates to put a reminder of the three witches in Shakespeare's Macbeth. Similarly, Hayavadana in Karnad's *Hayavadana* is a great artistic and supreme instance of literary pattern. (3166)

In *Hayavadana*, the protagonist Padmini longs for a male who possesses both a strong mind and a sturdy physique, but she is ultimately let down by her pursuits, ending up in an identity crisis. Eventually, she comes to the realisation that a man's true character is defined by his mind. Similarly, in *Naga-Mandala*, Rani confuses two identities with one.

Girish Karnad's plays *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala* reflect the complexities of selfhood in a culturally rich but often contradictory society. In *Hayavadana*, the protagonist Hayavadana grapples with the notion of completeness and identity, as he is torn between his human form and the head of a horse, symbolizing the struggle to reconcile the physical and emotional aspects of the self. Similarly, *Naga-Mandala* explores identity through the dualities of love and desire, as Rani navigates her societal role and personal longing, ultimately transforming through her experiences with the mystical and the real. Both plays illustrate how identity is fluid, shaped by cultural narratives and personal journeys, highlighting the interplay between tradition and individual agency.

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