

Karnad's *Hayavadana*: Reflections through a Dialectical Frame

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Abstract

Karnad's *Hayavadana* narrates the quest for wholeness in a dialectical set-up of creation. The pursuit of absolute happiness amid chaos and incomplete order of the world becomes a significant theme of the narrative structure. Through its exquisite symbolism, the play captures the dynamics of the contrary, opposing yet integral aspects of our being - body and intellect, which transform to create and evolve spiritually. The play unfolds the saga of dialectical interplay, which unfolds and expands to re-create ever-new patterns of thought.

Keywords: Girish Karnad, *Hayavadana*, Dialectics

The search for oneness in a universe which is broken into binary patterns of existence has been the shared saga of several ages. *Hayavadana*, a play by Girish Karnad, portrays the dialectical order of creation through its narrative structure. Karnad is a playwright cherished for his portrayal of Indian history, mythology, folklore and philosophy in his writings. His art of transforming ancient folktales, myths and episodes from history into exquisite plays of contemporary relevance truly marks him as an icon of Indian theatre. In his play, *Hayavadana*, he retells the ancient tale from *Katha Sarit Sagar*, upon which Thomas Mann based his story *Transposed Heads*.

The play is a unique retelling in which Karnad employs a dialectical frame to reveal

several paradoxical facets through characters and situations. The protagonists in the story incessantly search for perfection, completeness, bliss and fulfilment, though much in vain. Juxtaposed against their inept-fates, stands Hayavadana, a minor yet interestingly the titular character, who succeeds in creating a crucial balance between the dialectical forces.

Dialectics apparently is inherent in everyone's life in some way or the other. As in the play, attaining a balance between the binaries has been a question which has perplexed minds since ages. No wonder, the narrative of *Hayavadana* owes its origin to a tale narrated in the *Katha Sarit Sagar* and retold again by Thomas Mann in his magnum opus *Transposed Heads*.

To briefly discuss the history of dialectics, it appears as a part of the historic discourse since the earliest of times. Several thinkers contributed towards development of the dialectical perception. The ancient philosophers particularly in Greece, used the term in the context of contradictions embedded in a discourse. The Paradoxes used by the fifth century, Greek philosopher, Zeno of Elea brought to light the contradictions embedded in phenomenon such as 'motion'. The term has also been mentioned by Aristotle, in his discourse on the 'Topics'. Plato used the term for describing a critical dialogue with one's soul in the form of questions and answers.

Hegel developed dialectics, in a significant way, to build a general theory in which human spiritual development is seen as emerging from the struggle between opposites. Marx applied Hegel's method, to his own theory of socio-economics development. Bertold Brecht brought the philosophy of dialectics into theatrical performances.

To put it simply, dialectics involves analyzing a situation from two opposing angles. It is interesting that the contrary perspectives of any given instance can be seen as emerging from a single source. Dialectics projects itself as an integral part of existence. The happenings in the material world can be perceived as originating from the dialectical clash of the opposites. It thus follows that any idea, process, force or thought can be considered as the

thesis. For every such thesis, there is an antithesis. These two - the thesis and the antithesis, clash and reconcile to give rise to the synthesis.

Dialectics serves as a tool for analysing how things, forces or processes work which can be evaluated on the basis of three fundamental ideas: Firstly, everything in this creation - any object, process or force, is inherently composed of two opposing elements. Secondly, during the course of their existence, these opposing elements sometimes overcome or interpenetrate each other. Their mutual interplay and interaction bring about a gradual change with respect to time, which constitutes as a crucial aspect of this process. Thirdly, change is a natural outcome of this process which emanates in different patterns.

The Karnad's play *Hayavadana* unravels the dialectical fabric of existence through its narrative structure. The significance of the theme can be understood from the fact that the play was titled, 'Divided Together' during its performance at the Berlin Festival of Drama and Music in 1985. The dialectical concern is suitably brought to focus right at the beginning of the play which opens with an invocation to Lord Ganesha as the "Single-tusked destroyer of incompleteness". The invocation is paradoxical as Lord Ganesh characterized by the 'single-tusk' connotes a sense of being incomplete yet is the destroyer incompleteness. He is also addressed as "an elephant's head on a human body, a broken tusk and a cracked belly" (1). Even though his head, tusk and belly seem to convey the opposite, yet Lord Ganesha is a symbol of perfection. In extension, Karnad declares: "... the completeness of God is something no poor mortal can comprehend". Thus, the co-existence of completeness and incompleteness offers a dialectical inspiration which seems to be ingrained in firmly in the structure of the play.

The plot of the play likewise presents conflicting associations confronting the protagonists. The two friends, Devadatta and Kapila, remain are bonded with each other like the opposite poles of a magnet. They allegorically depict the contradictory nature of the

human body and intellect which is evident from their differences in appearance, education, social status and likewise.

Devadatta is the son of Vidhyasagar, whose name means, the ocean of knowledge and Kapila of Lohita, a blacksmith. Despite the differences, both begin to love the same woman, Padmini. This brings them to a pivotal point in the story. Until now, the friends who remained bonded as a whole despite inherent differences begin to move on separate trajectories while in pursuit of the common destination. The dialectical nature of their association transforms to take the shades of friendship and enmity. They are now on a journey interspersed with moments opposition and oneness similar to the fate of human predicament.

Their opposing paths merge and intersect momentarily at certain points, for instance, at a point when Devadatta becomes aware of Padmini's feelings for Kapila, he continues to cherish Kapila as a friend yet dislikes him as a rival in love. The story suitably portrays the concerns of the contradictory nature of the human sensual body and intellect. Devadatta being endowed with discriminatory intelligence possesses the uncanny ability to carry on arguments or debates over philosophical or intellectual matters. However, when he has to propose Padmini, he asks Kapila to propose her on his behalf. Kapila, an embodiment of human body, is neither well-read nor well-bred like Devdutta, but he seems confident and does not hesitate in going ahead with the proposal as observed in the following lines:

My dear Devadatta, your cloud-messenger, your bee, your pigeon is sifting right in front of you and you don't even know it? You wait here. I'll go, find out her house, her name.

The plot of reminiscent of similar tales in pursuit of lady-love such as the Knight's Tale in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales in which the knights Palamon and Arcite who are best of friends who turn rivals as they start on a pursuit of their lady-love, Emily.

As the story unfolds, Devadatta manages to marry Padmini but their union is far from a sense fulfillment or bliss. Devdutta's superior intellect begets Padmini but in spite of being his wife she is strongly attracted to Kapila. Her platonic alliance is clearly incomplete without Kapila. After having been married and having a son she still craves Kapila's attention when they go on a trip to Ujjain. Dramatically, after reaching Ujjain Devdutta recollects that he had taken a vow to sacrifice his head and an arm if he got married to Padmini.

To honor his word, he sacrifices his head before goddess Kali. Kapila who is seemingly separate yet inherently bonded with Devdutt follows his friend and sacrifices his head. The quest for absolving duality into the nothingness of being seems fulfilled after the demise of both intellect and the body. However, Padmini, the embodiment of desire is not satiated still. Padmini seeming considers sacrificing her head but is stopped by Kali and offered the boon to join the heads of both Devdutt and Kapila. The intellect and body are thus both to be reborn and sustain the chain of life. Padmini follows the instruction by the goddess and proceeds to join the heads. However, paradoxically, in a state of confusion, she mixed up their heads and places the wrong heads as she places them interchangeably.

The unison between Devadatta's head and Kapila's body apparently results in a perfect man which amalgamates the head which represents the intellect and the body which signifies the sense. However, instead of building a portrait of perfection she actually instigates what can be seen as a 'war' between the head and the bodies of the two men. Devadatta who was supposedly perfect after the transposition of heads as - he possessed unparalleled intellect and a strong and muscular body, is still not free from the paradox. His head begins act as a subordinate his body which in turn begins to lose its vigor and vitality. While he is trapped in a war within himself his beloved Padmini once again slips away from him and joins Kapila, who in turn is not free from his own dilemma.

The two dialectical forces ultimately strike and destroy each other. Duality and freedom

from duality, nothingness and a desire for life, intellect and senses of our body – are binaries which keep switching sides in the endless chain of evolution, change and spiritual expansion.

The narrative focuses on the dialectical dilemma of the protagonists, Devdutt and Kapila. Never-the-less Padmini too portrays dialectical tensions in the plot. Her search for perfection keeps her dangling between the dialectical pull of her desire towards the two men. She achieves fulfillment once, though very briefly, after the heads are transposed, and is absolved finally after she performs 'Sati' with the dead bodies of the two men.

She can herself be even seen as an embodiment of the paradox wherein - her love for both Devadatta on account of his intellect and her attraction towards the charming Kapila, becomes the source of conflict in the plot. Her quest in fact seems endless which doesn't seem to get any better, even after the idyllic transposition of heads which ensures she gets the best of both - Devadatta's head and Kapila's body.

She acts as a catalyst who in fact instigates the tension at several instances in the story. For example, when Devadatta canceled the trip to Ujjain, she could have prevented complications by agreeing to stay back, but she doesn't so. Likewise, she could have checked Kapila after becoming aware of his feelings for her, during the Ujjain trip. Instead of checking Kapila, she encourages him and even ignores Devadatta's jealousy. Finally, she goes to meet Kapila in the forest, in spite of the fact that she had already been granted the completeness she sought.

Another character who shares a predicament similar to Padmini is Hayavadana's mother. Both women seek perfect love and grapple with their questionable fates as mothers. Just as perfection, a fleeting condition, continues to evade Padmini, so seems Hayavadana's mother, a royal princess who rejected several suitors to marry a horse, whom she loved.

Padmini's son faces a dialectical dilemma like Hayavadana which he seems to have inherited from his parents as he is to be raised in a set-up of contradictory environment after up after Padmini's demise - for five years he is supposed to be raised by the hunters in the forest and thereafter by Devadatta's father who would instruct him in the Vedas. He would thus be groomed both by mother Nature and then by the codes of tradition, culture and civilization.

The only character who seems to be closest to the evasive state of complete perfection is Hayavadana, a minor character whose story becomes a part of the sub-plot. To narrate his tale, Hayavadana too is gripped by a dialectical trap since the inception of his existence. By his birth itself, he possesses two contradictory aspects - the human and the animal, which in his case is that of a horse. He derives his dual personality from his mother, a beautiful princess and his father, who was a horse. Thus, the hybridity of his existence is built up of contradictions, which he wants to break free.

Being endowed with a horse's head and a human body, he becomes symbol of clash between - intellect versus the sensual body, like Devdutt and Kapila. Hayavadana wants to resolve this paradox and seeks complete perfection. He achieves what he desires, though in an apparently imperfect manner for after he visits the Kali Temple, the goddess grants him his wish but instead of becoming a complete man he ends up becoming a complete horse.

The fate of Hayavadana further raises questions about the pursuit of perfection by making efforts like Devdutt and Kapila or by becoming the path of grace, like Hayavadana. Hayavadana in the sub-plot is juxtaposed with that of Padmini in the main plot. The similarity of their situation but dissimilarity of their ultimate fates is juxtaposed against each other. The play explores the quest for absolute oneness amid the constraints imposed by the restrictive order of perplexing duality. It contemplates over the quintessential quest for salvation through its characters and situations. While Devdutt, Kapila and Padmini paradoxically grapple with

dialectical structures to achieve perfection, they poignantly fail despite their best efforts. In contrast, Hayavadana, achieves the portrait of perfection they seek, though not quite in the perfect form of a human but ironically in the lesser form of being as a horse. The pursuit of breaking free from duality of being to achieve absolute oneness also seems to display duality of means – to evolve like Hayavadana or to dissolve into nothingness like Kapila, Devdutta and Padmini. The paradox of dialectical nature of existence depicted in the play becomes a significant reality for human existence.

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