

Girish Karnad – Hayavadana – Summary & Analysis

Girish Karnad is a well-known personality famous for his acting skills and direction abilities. Most people are not aware of the spell bounding plays written by Karnad in Kannada language. He started his career with a one act play titled “Maa Nishaadha” and became famous for his works like Tuglaq, Hayavadana, Taledanda, Yayati, etc. The play Hayavadana was published in the year 1972 and is inspired by the work of Thomas Mann titled “The Transposed Heads”.

The source for this work by Thomas Mann is “Kathasaritsagara”, which is an old Sanskrit collection of stories. Mann used mock-heroic tone to tell the story, whereas Karnad focuses on the incompleteness, twisting relations, humanity and the dark nature of humans to tell the story. However, there is not much seriousness that one could observe in the play and everything goes as if it is normal. Hayavadana is written in two acts with the involvement of Bhagavata who is the commentator to the actions done in the play.

ACT ONE

The play Hayavadana starts with prayer to Lord Ganesha and Bhagavata sings the verses for the success of the play. In the verses, the narrator talks of the incompleteness of God and declares that man is not wise enough to comprehend what is complete and what is incomplete! He says that people should accept God no matter the shape one visualizes Him. Bhagavata introduce the place and setting, which are announced as the city of Dharmapura ruled by the King Dharmasheela. The two lead characters are introduced – Devadatta and Kapila. Devadatta, son of Brahmin Vidyasagara, is considered a great scholar with wonderful poetic abilities. Kapila, son of Ironsmith Lohita, is considered a daring personality with unbelievable physical skills.

A scream is heard off the stage and Bhagavata pauses and carries on with the description of the two. He says that Devadatta and Kapila are inseparable friends and live like brothers. They are compared to Rama and Lakshmana, Lava and Kusha, Krishna and Balarama. Another scream comes from the same direction and the narrator wonders what is causing the disturbance. He sees an actor who is anxious and comes to the narrator. Words stutter from his mouth as he tries to explain something he has witnessed. After Bhagavata calms him down, the actor explains the strange thing he saw. He explains that he saw a horse that spoke when he was about to urinate on the road. The actor says that the horse with a thick voice tells him not to commit such thing in public.

Bhagavata asks the actor to leave the matter and prepare for the play. However, the actor says that he is too nervous to hold a sword and cannot act. Therefore, the narrator asks the actor to back and find the talking horse [as an attempt to clear the confusion of the actor]. As Bhagavata tries to motion the play, the actor comes back shouting that it or he is coming. Confused Bhagavata and worried about the discretion of the audience, he asks the curtain to be lowered and decides to inspect the matter before allowing the audience to witness it. Bhagavata discovers a strange being with the head of a horse and the body of a man. At first, he believes that the horse head is a mask and tries to remove to no use. After a few futile attempts, Bhagavata realizes that the horse head is indeed real and the being is half-man, half-horse.

Bhagavata enquires about the plight and asks whether it was because of the curse of a sage or because of discretion of pilgrimage or due to insulting a righteous wife. The horse headed man interferes and says that it is not due to any of the reasons and feels sad for the accusations. Bhagavata tries to console and asks the name. He introduces himself as Hayavadana. The narrator asks about the head and Hayavadana says that he is born with the head. He was silent when they try to pull it [thinking of it as a mask] because he felt that the actors and the narrator with so much accumulated righteousness and virtues would be able to liberate him of the horse head.

The Story of Hayavadana [ACT ONE]

Hayavadana is very disturbed about his birth and goes on to narrate the details of his parents. The Princess of Karnataka was a very lovely girl who was allowed to choose a husband of her own choice. Many came to see her from far regions of the world like Africa, Persia and China. However, she did not like any of them. Then one day Prince of Araby came to see her riding on his white stallion. She faints the moment she looks at the scene. King and the Queen decide that he is the right man for the Princess and make all the arrangements.

The Princess recovers and announces that she is in love with the white stallion. She insists on marrying the horse and unable to dissuade her feelings, the wedding is done. She and the horse live together for fifteen years and the horse transforms into a celestial being. The celestial being or Gandharva is cursed by Kubera for misbehaving and he regains his actual state after leading the life where he could get human love.

After transforming into his former self, he offers the princess to come to the Heavens and live with him. However, she refuses and this act angers the celestial being. He curses her to become a horse and she feels very happy about the curse. Gandharva leaves the palace and goes to Heaven, Princess becomes a horse and roams freely; whereas, the fate of the child born to them becomes questionable.

Hayavadana asks Bhagavata to suggest a solution. He names a number of temples and Hayavadana says that he has already tried them all. Finally, he asks Hayavadana to visit the Kali Temple of Chitrakoot. Hayavadana feels very happy and says that he will start immediately. However, the narrator asks the actor to go with Hayavadana so that he won't lose the way. As the two exit the stage setting out for the Kali Temple, Bhagavata comes back to the story of the two friends – Devadatta and Kapila.

Friendship and Love – ACT ONE

The narrator speaks of the like mindedness of the two friends who are about to meet a girl. Then, female chorus is heard representing the girl. The chorus sing in bewilderment about the state of love, where it is expected to happen with a single soul and compares it to a flower. The chorus desires a head for each breast without any shame or fear.

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

Devadatta is shown sitting in a chair when Kapila approaches him questioning his absence at the gym. Devadatta seems preoccupied while Kapila brags about his wrestling match against a great wrestler of Gandhara. Kapila is delighted to say that the wrestler praised the technique of him and said that he would have a great future. He observes that Devadatta is thinking of something else and questions him about the details.

Devadatta reveals that he saw a girl and could not stop thinking of her ever since. Kapila is familiar with this sort of situations as Devadatta does this quite often. However, he feels by listening to the words of Devadatta that he is serious this time. He offers to help and knowing some details about the place of her living, Kapila leaves Devadatta to his thoughts. But, Devadatta feels really tensed as he thinks that Kapila is not suitable for this type of job. He prays to God Rudra and offers him his head if everything goes right. He prays to Goddess Kali and offers her his arms if everything goes right.

Kapila enters the street mentioned by Devadatta and finds the house after a few trials. He knocks the door and sees the girl described so beautifully by his friend. He speaks aside and claims that she is more beautiful than the eternal dancers of the Heaven and the celestial incarnates who came to become humans. However, he does not lose track of his errand and announces that Devadatta wishes to take her hand in marriage. Padmini blushes and calls for her mother; later, it is announced through Bhagavata that Devadatta and Padmini are married.

The Three Hearts – ACT ONE

Padmini is pregnant and the couple seem to prepare for a journey. Devadatta does not like the idea of the journey as it could upset the pregnancy. Further, he says that tagging along Kapila will disturb his idea of being alone with Padmini. He emphasizes the fact that whenever Kapila is around Padmini reacts over enthusiastically and concentrates on him more. Padmini supports her reactions by saying that she likes to make fun of innocent Kapila. Aside, Devadatta says that Kapila blushes in front of Padmini like never before and Padmini shows great affection without caring about her status. Aloud, he says to Padmini that Kapila is not used to woman and she understands the suspicion in his words.

They debate and finally decide to cancel the trip. Devadatta asks Padmini to go into a room and says that he would tell Kapila that she is ill. Padmini agrees and pretends to go into the room; however, she goes and stands in a corner as Kapila arrives. Kapila brings a hired cart and apologizes for being late. As he goes on speaking about the cart and the problems he had to face for hiring one – Devadatta says that Padmini is sick and they have to cancel the trip to Ujjain. Kapila becomes silent, but recovers to say that he will send off the cart.

Aside, Kapila feels very disheartened about the cancellation of the trip. He feels that the whole week would be in emptiness and he has nothing to do.

Devadatta asks Kapila to sit to have a chat and Padmini comes in to their surprise. She asks them why they are not doing preparations. Kapila asks about the illness and she says that the minor headache disappeared after taking medicine. She goes to Devadatta and pleads him to proceed with the trip. She says that Kapila has done so much over the week with the preparations that it would be unfair to cancel the journey. Devadatta could not say anything and accepts her wishes.

Padmini praises the driving skills of Kapila and reminds how awful Devadatta manages a cart. As they move, she looks at a tree and is attracted towards the flowers. Kapila explains that it is a Fortunate Lady's Flower and goes to bring one to her. As he climbs the tree, Padmini is attracted by the strongly built body of Kapila. Devadatta feels jealous as he observes the looks of Padmini towards Kapila. He does not blame her as he knows that the body of Kapila is irresistible. Meanwhile, Kapila brings a heap of flowers for Padmini. He explains that the flowers contain all the colours a married bride would have; hence the flowers are called Fortunate lady's Flowers. They speak of other matters and Kapila mentions of the Rudra Temple and Kali Temple in the vicinity. Devadatta suddenly remembers his oath to the two deities. Kapila asks them to visit Rudra Temple, but Devadatta insists that he would stay put. After a few forward and backward debates Kapila and Padmini decide to visit Rudra Temple without Devadatta.

Fulfilment of the Promise – ACT ONE

As they leave, Devadatta wishes them [Kapila and Padmini] to be happy and walks towards the Temple of Kali. He begs forgiveness in front of the Kali idol for forgetting his promise after getting married to his love – Padmini. He finds a sword in the Temple and cuts off his head as an offering to Goddess Kali.

Pandemonium after a decision – ACT ONE

Padmini and Kapila return only to find an empty cart. After waiting for some time, Kapila could not stop worrying about his friend and goes in search of him leaving Padmini in the cart. She cannot believe that Kapila is more worried about Devadatta than her. Kapila moves near the Temple of Kali and is shocked to see his decapitated friend.

Kapila says that if Devadatta wanted he would have jumped into fire or drown in a river. His actions towards Padmini are nothing but actions of an unintelligent man. He feels that if Devadatta would have guided him, he would have come out of that dark situation. He speaks greatly of Devadatta and claims that he is his friend, brother, guru and everything. He picks up the same sword and cuts off his head.

It is almost dark and Padmini is complaining about the men who have not returned to her. She imagines that Devadatta would be grumpy with Kapila for his actions. She decides to go in search for them and reaches the Kali Temple. She finds the two dead bodies and feels terrified. However, she does not express grief over their deaths but expresses concern about her situation when she returns home. Padmini feels that this act will show her as a whore for whom the two men fought and died. Therefore, she decides to kill herself when Goddess Kali appears to stop her.

Goddess Kali is yawning and asks Padmini to express her desire. Padmini shows the dead bodies and Kali tells her to reattach the heads to the bodies and press the sword on their necks. She tells that the act would make them alive.

As Padmini tries to praise the Goddess, She stops her. Kali says that she needs to sleep and orders Padmini to do it quickly. Padmini being curious asks a question to Goddess Kali. She asks the Goddess why she did not stop Devadatta and Kapila while they were killing themselves. The Goddess gives two reasons – her sleep and the lying nature of the two men.

Goddess Kali reminds that Devadatta promised to offer her his limbs and the head to Rudra. But, he offers his head here as the Rudra Temple is visited by Padmini and Kapila. She admits that Devadatta is noble in his actions and did not hesitate to fulfil his promise despite confused about the offering.

Goddess Kali then speaks of Kapila who does not even mentions her while giving his life. She says that Kapila might have known well that the death of Devadatta would be put on his head. She says that if it weren't for fear Kapila would have taken Padmini without any shame. Then, she speaks to Padmini and says that she was the only one to speak the truth however selfish it might be. Goddess Kali orders Padmini to reattach their heads and she does that. With great drums and lights Kali disappears leaving Padmini to her fate.

As Padmini opens her eyes she realizes her mistake. She switches the heads of Devadatta and Kapila, attaches them to the bodies of Kapila and Devadatta. Padmini feels mortified, but the two men laugh out about their situation. They feel that they are now blood relations and thank Padmini. However, their joyous predicament subdues and they start arguing over Padmini.

Devadatta with Kapila's body claims that head is superior to body; hence, he claims Padmini. Kapila with Devadatta's body claims that Padmini used to live with the body of Devadatta; hence, he claims Padmini.

Padmini feels that she should be with Devadatta who has the body of Kapila. But, Kapila with the body of Devadatta does not accept her choice and the argument goes. Bhagavata, the narrator, comes as every character freezes and questions the audience about the solution.

Hayavadana Analysis – ACT ONE

The parallel between expectations and realities is wonderfully drawn by Girish Karnad through the first act. One can observe the play being disturbed many times, introduction of bizarre elements, untimely decisions, etc. that create confusion and curiosity at the same time. In addition, we find three different characters – righteous, sinners and the in-between.

Hayavadana is a completely righteous character who cannot escape his fate. Padmini is shameless and honestly admits to want more than one man in her life. Her ideas are not rare in this era, but in a time setting where traditions are everything – Padmini is not a righteous woman. Devadatta and Kapila are neither good nor bad and are drawn to react based on the situations. They can turn on each other or laugh about it without any concern. They are hypocrites who try to justify their means through a proper end. However, they have some respectable elements like friendship, love, morals, etc. that make them worthy people in the society.

Girish Karnad cleverly uses Goddess Kali to judge the three individuals – Devadatta, Kapila and Padmini. Kali emphasizes that Devadatta is noble but forgets his promise; Kapila hides his true feelings even before killing himself and Padmini is warned for being too honest [during the reattachment of heads]. It shows that Padmini might have known what she was doing despite the fact that there is no further discussion about it anywhere in the play.

ACT TWO

As the curtain is removed, the narrator poses the same question again to the audience about the solution to the problem. He refers to King Vikrama who faced a similar problem while answering the questions of Bethala. King Vikrama answers that the head is superior to body; hence the person with the head will be identified as the real individual. Bhagavata reveals that the three have gone to meet a sage [Rishi] to get a solution for the problem. In the background, the verdict of the Rishi will be announced after the narration. The sage clearly states that the person with the head of Devadatta shall be called as the husband of Padmini.

Devadatta and Padmini are so happy with the decision that they embrace and speak soft words to each other. Padmini calls Devadatta thus:

“My celestial-bodied Gandharva... My sun-faced Indra...”

“What a wide chest. What other canopy do I need?”

“My Devadatta comes like a bridegroom with jewellery of a new body...”

They bid goodbye to Kapila and move along. Before separating, Padmini goes to Kapila in order to reconcile him. She tells Kapila not to worry as it is his body that is with the head of Devadatta. Kapila does not say anything and the couple move forward.

The two dolls – ACT TWO

Bhagavata explains that Kapila goes into the forest and the couple move to their city to enjoy their married life. The scene shifts and Devadatta enters a room carrying dolls. Padmini loves them and she goes on to ask about the fair that he went without her. Devadatta says that he got involved in a wrestling match and pinned down a great wrestler of other city with his wonderful body. He says that no one suspected him as they felt that his wrestling moves were learnt from Kapila. They go out and the dolls are alone in the room as they start to talk to each other.

The dolls do not like the way Devadatta holds them with tight grip. They call him a brute, beast and a peasant who cannot handle dolls or any delicate objects. Suddenly, Bhagavata appears tossing the dolls with excitement. He runs near Bhagavata and says that Padmini gave birth to a beautiful boy child. There is a long pause after which the stage is clear and only the dolls are in conversation. They complain about the child who is always crying and appears like a lump of flesh. Through the conversation it is known that it has been six months since the birth of the child and the dolls are deserted.

Padmini asks Devadatta to take her and the child to the lake. However, Devadatta reminds that he is a Brahmin who needs to perform his duties. His initial interest in sports and swimming are not with him anymore. Devadatta moves the doll to take a book and the doll tells the other one that his hand felt very soft. The dolls agree that Devadatta changed over time and his stomach also loosened.

Padmini is seen singing a lullaby to the child and Devadatta comes to her. They fall asleep when the dolls notice that Padmini is having a dream. They see a man approaching Padmini in her dreams and identify him not to be her husband. The same is witnessed when she falls asleep for the second time in the middle of the day. The dolls debate and fight over the shameless dream of Padmini. As a result

their clothes get torn and they become very rugged. Padmini notices that the dolls are too shabby for them to be allowed near the child. Therefore, she asks Devadatta to go to the Ujjain fair and bring new dolls. The dolls curse her and Devadatta [not audible to them] for thinking of replacement. As Devadatta picks them and starts to move out, the dolls try to warn about her wife and her intentions towards another man. But, Devadatta cannot hear a thing and starts his journey towards Ujjain.

The Reunion with Kapila – ACT TWO

As Devadatta goes out, Padmini immediately starts towards the fair in the dark forest. Meanwhile, Bhagavata spots Kapila who becomes his former strong self. The narrator asks about his whereabouts to which he says that he lives in the forest. Bhagavata tells about the death of his parents and Padmini bearing a son. Kapila seems angry and walks away from Bhagavata.

Padmini walks across the forest and confronts Kapila. He is paralysed to see her after a long time. He inquires after a long pause about her presence in this part of the forest. She explains that she wanted her child to experience Nature. He asks about the child and she says that the child belongs to Kapila as well [because of Kapila's body]. However, Kapila does not accept that and says that Devadatta is the child's father. He takes the child and Padmini remarks that he has mole on the same spot as in the body of Kapila. He does not care about it. Then he goes on about the difficulties he faced with the body of Devadatta in the forest. He says that he finally wins and has become stronger like the old Kapila.

Padmini without resisting her feelings says that she came to see him. Initially Kapila resists, but they indulge to their desires.

The death of friends – ACT TWO

Devadatta comes to the forest in search of Padmini and confronts Kapila. They feel that they are back to their normal selves. Then, Kapila praises the greatness of Devadatta's body. He says that he was able to look at things with great imagination. Kapila hopes that the three can live together without any problem; but, Padmini expresses nothing. Therefore, Devadatta comes directly to the point and draws a sword. He asks Kapila to bring his sword as well. They understand that the problem to this everlasting solution is the death of them.

Devadatta and Kapila fight and die together.

Padmini is once again left alone and she once again thinks of her predicament. She says that both the individuals finally forgave each other and died without any concerns. But, she was the one who needs to face life. Bhagavata enters and is in shock at the sight of the dead bodies. Padmini asks him to take care of the child resting in the hut. She instructs the narrator to take the child to the hunters in the forest and tell them that it is the child of Kapila. After five years, she asks Bhagavata to take the boy and give him to the father of Devadatta – Brahmin Vidyasagara and tell him that boy is the son of Devadatta. She gives the dolls brought by Devadatta to the narrator. Bhagavata inquires about Padmini, wherein she declares to undergo Sati along with Devadatta and Kapila.

Bhagavata narrates about the dedicated wives of India and the uniqueness of Padmini. He tells to the audience that no one knows the spot of Sati and the hunters only point at the Fortunate Lady Tree. He says that in full moon and new moon a song can be heard near the tree [which is sung by Padmini in the beginning].

“Why should love stick to the sap of a single body?”

As Bhagavata prepares to end the play a loud scream is heard. An actor comes horrified and says to the narrator that there is a horse singing National Anthem and other patriotic songs. As they are speaking, another actor enters with a boy who seems very serious. The boy has two dolls, which are somewhat dirtier. Bhagavata inquires about Hayavadana and gets to know that the actor is chased away by him after they reach the Temple of Kali. The actor says that he resided in a village of hunters where a woman gave the boy to hand him over to the city.

Bhagavata relates the words of the woman and the dolls. He tries to go near the boy, but he gets back with serious look. The narrator assures that he will not touch the dolls and looks at his shoulder. He finds a mole and concludes that the boy is the son of Padmini.

Hayavadana – The complete horse – ACT TWO

Amidst the revelation, Hayavadana enters and greets Bhagavata. Hayavadana and the actors talk in a jovial manner and burst out with laughter. The boy laughs with delight and the dolls fallout from his hands.

Bhagavata explains to Hayavadana that the body does not know of laughter, sorrow and neither has he spoken to anyone else in five years. He tells Hayavadana that it is because of him that everyone can see the smile on the boy's face. Hayavadana is very delighted to know it. Then Hayavadana starts to narrate his journey and how he became a complete horse.

Hayavadana explains that after entering the Temple of Kali, he finds a sword and offers his head to the Goddess. Goddess Kali appeared before him and said:

“Why don't you people go somewhere else if you want to chop off your stupid heads? Why do you come to me?”

Hayavadana says that Kali asked of his wishes for which he said he wanted to be complete. She grants the wish and disappears. However, he says that the Goddess did not completely listen to the wish and made him a complete horse instead of making a complete man. Bhagavata feels sorry, but Hayavadana is happy and claims that being a horse is great. However, Hayavadana feels bad about the presence of human voice, which still makes him incomplete. Bhagavata cannot come up with a solution to this problem. Hayavadana says that he is singing the National Anthem in hope of losing his voice. He says that people who often sing the National Anthem are bound to ruin their voices. Hayavadana starts to sob and boy tries to console him.

The boy says – “Don't cry. You are nice when you laugh.”

Hayavadana stops crying and asks the boy to sing the National Anthem with him. However, the boy does not know what a 'National Anthem' is. Therefore, Hayavadana asks the boy to sing any other song. The boy sings the lullaby that Padmini used to sing to him. Hayavadana feels that the song is a

bit tragic but is happy to see the child smile. He asks the boy to sing another song, but he cannot think of any. So, he sings the same song and Hayavadana tries to laugh and the laughter slowly turns into a neigh.

Hayavadana becomes complete with his human voice gone.

Bhagavata asks the actors to go to Brahmin Vidyasagara about the arrival of his grandson on a grand horse. The narrator thanks Lord Ganesha for fulfilling the desires of Vidyasagara, the boy and Hayavadana. They all pray together for the prosperity of the land and the play comes to a conclusion.

Hayavadana Analysis – ACT TWO

The second act starts with a sage proclaiming that head is superior to the body. Indeed, it is proven in three instances. Devadatta gradually loses the bodily strength of Kapila and becomes a Brahmin again. Kapila gradually loses the weak body of Devadatta and becomes a strong personality again. Hayavadana, who has a horse head, is granted the body of a horse instead of a human head and body.

Padmini is the only character in the play that is left out without a proper justification. Despite the concealment her act of Sati with two men alone shows her nature. She is not the one to have a place in the list of dedicated wives in India. She is the one to be placed in the list of historical whores who ruined lives with absurd desires.

Bhagavata is cleverly used by Girish Karnad to knit the play and his entrance at the right time at the right place helps the scenes to move forward. Goddess Kali shows indifference towards humans indicating that gods are not really interested in the matters of mankind. This is a contradiction to the belief that God watches over every person and comes to rescue in times of need.

Padmini is the only character who is left incomplete in the play. Devadatta and Kapila forgive each other before death and die without even concerned about Padmini. The fruits of righteousness, patience and innocence are reaped by three characters.

Vidyasagara, who was patient enough to allow Devadatta marry Padmini. In the whole play, there is no mention of Vidyasagara or his presence. Therefore, he is gifted with a grandson who is happy and playful.

Hayavadana, who remained righteous till the end without slightest of deviations was blessed with a complete body. Hayavadana finds a new friend in the boy and is very happy to live as a horse.

The boy who is innocent of the sins of Padmini, Devadatta and Kapila is rewarded with a grandfather and a dear friend – Hayavadana.

The three characters are complete in every sense and send a message to everyone that God looks upon those who are only patient, righteous and innocent of sins.