

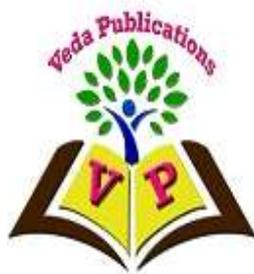


BEING HUMAN AND BEYOND HUMAN: TRANSHUMANISM IN GIRISH KARNAD'S *HAYAVADANA*

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ABSTRACT



Girish Karnad is regarded as one of the luminiferous stars in the universe of Indian theatre. His plays are renowned for its innovative tone and aesthetic appeal. *Hayavadana*, his third play, spins around the theme of identity and quest for perfection. Two plots appear intertwined in *Hayavadana*- one is the triangle relationship of Padmini, Kapila and Devadatta and the other is a sub plot which deals with the story of Hayavadana. The story of Padmini's inexhaustible desire for a perfect husband aptly fits into a play which deals with the theme of human completeness. Transhumanism is a method and process which focuses on the elevation of human capabilities with the help of technology. Transhumans refers to humans whose qualities are more than ordinary humans but haven't reached the extraordinary level of posthumans and thus they depict a middle stage between humans and post-humans. The research paper juggles with the trope of human and tries to unveil the transhumanist tendencies and looks into the possibilities of reading *Hayavadana* as a transhumanistic text.

Keywords: *Capabilities, Completeness, Enhancement, Humans, Perfection, Transhumanism.*

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Theatre in India has a rich tradition. Contemporary theatre in India is also blessed with playwrights of outstanding talent. Girish Karnad occupies a significant position in the galaxy of Indian playwrights. His plays display an amalgamation of indigenous and western techniques. Karnad's plays are painted with iridescent colours of imagination and are innovative in tone and techniques. *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala*, *Tughlaq*, *Fire and Rain* etc are his most popular plays.

Hayavadana (1975) is the third play written by Girish Karnad. The play is based on *Kathasarithsagra* and Thomas Mann's *Transposed Heads*. It blends myths, legends and folk techniques to create a potion tinged with humour, sarcasm and social criticism. According to M.K.Naik, "*Hayavadana* presents the typical existential anguish, but does not stop at the existential despair. Going beyond it, the play suggests a strategy for the achievement of integration in a world inevitably cursed with absurdity and irrationality" [3]. Human life is essentially not perfect. Each individual experiences flaws of one kind or another. They are not the ultimate beings or the centre of all activities as the anthropocentric discourses suggest. Superiority of human beings and their supposed existence akin to the sun in the solar system is basically a myth.

Hayavadana puts forward this notion of incompleteness and also suggests the ensuing journey of human beings for perfection. The play begins with an invocation to lord Ganesha. Lord Ganesha has an elephant head with a human body but is neither considered as an animal nor as a human but as God. The invocation ends by the lines: "O single-tusked destroyer of incompleteness, / we pay homage to you and start our play" [2]. Bhagavatha, who takes up the Tiresian role of a narrator, brings up the paradox of how Lord Ganesha, who has "an elephant head on a human body, a broken tusk and a cracked belly" and is worshipped as a symbol of perfection, appears as an "embodiment of imperfection, of incompleteness" [2]. Such a symbol of Ganesha can be taken as a suggestion that the concept of perfection is inherently flawed. Even though many critics observe that Karnad in *Hayavadana* conveys the futility of human's quest for completeness, the theme of

human enhancement or quest for improvement looms large in the play, thus illuminating its associations with transhumanism.

The play revolves around the entangled relationship between Devadatta, Padmini and Kapila. There is a sub plot which deals with the story of Hayavadana. Hayavadana is born as a result of the communion of a princess with a celestial being who was in the form of a horse. As a consequence of the communion, Hayavadana was born with a horse head and a human body. Hayavadana's urge to become complete and his metamorphosis into a complete horse is connected with the main plot of the play.

The main plot revolves around three characters- Padmini, Kapila and Devadatta. Devadatta and Kapila in the outset of the play are bosom friends. While Devadatta is renowned for his exemplary scholarship and Kapila is bestowed with a robust body. Both of them thus stands as an epitome of two qualities and hence reminds of the binary relation between body and mind. The plot takes a major twist with the entry of Padmini. Devadatta gets enchanted by Padmini's beauty and falls for her. Their wedding takes place. Padmini admires the sharp intellect of Devadatta but feels dejected as he lacked good physique. Humans who have a perfect amalgamation of both a robust body and a sharp intellect are considered as rare. One who has intellect may lack a good physique and vice versa. Such flaws are mostly considered as inherent. But Padmini was ambitious. She couldn't compromise her desires. She was enchanted by the robust body of Kapila, which Devadatta shockingly discovers. Padmini's desire for a perfect husband can be read in the light of transhumanism.

Transhumanism is usually defined as a set of philosophies or as a socio-cultural process that is based on the assumption that human beings can be improved drastically by the application of sophisticated technology. "Transhumanists promote the view that human enhancement technologies should be made widely available..." [1]. Transhumanism is an extension of humanism and looks forward in improving the abilities of humans. "Transhumanism do not speak in one voice, and the movement expresses a variety of impulses (...)" Several themes are common to transhumanist



discourse: the view of evolving human nature, the focus on biotechnological enhancement that will exceed ordinary human physical and cognitive traits, a deep concern for longevity..."[4]. Padmini's quest is also synonymous with such transhuman perspectives. Human body and mind forms the focus of Padmini's thoughts.

The individual transhumanist story is typically described as ambition to live a life supported by enhancements so as to achieve better health and mental capacity, refined emotions, new abilities, and longevity, and perhaps become a posthuman. People differ on whether this endeavor is merely about overcoming everyday limitations, becoming something akin to a Greek god, or totally escaping the human condition. [5]

In a twist of events, Devadatta and Kapila behead themselves. In a scene which is simultaneously supernatural and sarcastic, goddess Kali advises Padmini with the method to bring them back to life. Bringing back somebody from death is impossible even in this technologically advanced era. Even though Karnad brings in an intervention of the divine, it raises our suspicion whether such a redemption is possible in the ordinary world especially for common people; thus labeling the entire situation as supernatural or fictitious. The desire for immortality has always been there in the minds of humans. Humans have an inherent desire to stay away from death, to increase life time, to bring back the deceased ones to earth and to remain immortal. Innovations in the field of science have discovered medicines to eradicate many diseases so as to increase the life-span of human beings. But immortality or life span beyond an age limit still remains as an impossible dream for humans. The futuristic science may vehemently try to produce such humans or preferably transhumans, who have more life span than ordinary humans or are preferably immortal. Transhumans represent a state in between human and posthuman.

Karnad in a creatively crafted scene depicts how Padmini plays her cards to achieve her desired

husband. While placing heads on the bodies, she places Devadatta's head on Kapila's body. Now she got the much desired combination- a man with intellect and strong physique. Padmini was thrilled over her accomplishment. She says: "My celestial-bodied Gandharva...My sun-faced Indra..." [2]. Such methods of producing human beings with desired qualities clearly underscore the process of genetic engineering. Transhumanism implies that human beings need not have to compromise with their present existence. Their physical, mental and intellectual faculties can be modified or improved using science and technology.

As a result a new posthuman phase in the evolution of human species will emerge in which humans will live longer, will possess new physical and cognitive abilities, and will be liberated from suffering and pain due to aging and diseases. In the posthuman age, humans will no longer be controlled by nature; instead, they will be the controllers of nature. Those who welcome the vision of the posthuman phase are known as *transhumanists*. [4]

Karnad depicts that the hybrid bodies which Padmini created were not constant entities. They haven't reached an extraordinary level of perfection or in the realm of posthuman. The bodies as a result again underwent changes and mutations. The desired body of Padmini with Devadatta's head and Kapila's body suffered the change in which Kapila's strong physique got changed into the weak body of Devadatta again. Similarly, the body on which Kapila's head was placed underwent metamorphosis and became the strong robust body of Kapila. So, the drastic changes on the body designed by Padmini got vanished and what remained was the earlier version of Devadatta and Kapila. Such changes on both sides can be a repercussion of their intense training to return back to their previous form. Such kind of exercises which reshapes both the mental and physical faculties of human beings can also be considered as an instrument of transhumanism. This twist in the plot raises many significant questions. Whether such a change was an illusion created by



Padmini? Does this imply the failure of science in putting forward an effective mechanism to improve human beings? After all, rather than catering the selfish motives of certain individuals, can such changes bring in sweeping improvement to essential human conditions? Such a twist in the plot can be interpreted as being suggestive of the limits of human developed science which could never transgress into certain mysterious territories of human life. "Transhumanism might simply be in favor of a set of instrumental methods for achieving ambitious aims, but not provide any real value theory or purpose" [5].

The play can be read as an interrogation into the basic idea of human itself. Hayavadana who is born as a result of the communion between a human princess and a celestial human being or gandharva (in the form of horse) shatters the premises of hetero normative human communities where a human male is assumed as the centre. Moreover, Hayavadana in the end of the play changes into a complete horse. The son of Padmini could establish communion only with Hayavadana. This may indicate that the animal world of Hayavadana is much better than the human world which is full of scrupulous agendas and frailties.

Padmini's quest for perfection doesn't end with experimentation on Devadatta's and Kapila's bodies. Before embracing death after Devadatta and Kapila passed away, Padmini instructs Bhagavatha on how to bring up her son. She instructs that her son must be handed over to Kapila's people in the forest and after five years to Devadatta's father as his grandchild. First he should be taught by Kapila's people, so that he can gain a stout and strong body. Then, he should be made the disciple of Devadatta's father so that he will be bestowed with a keen intellect. Padmini is here playing with the parentage of her son. She paints an ambiguity regarding her son's father. With the transposition of heads, Devdatta's body was fitted to Kapila's head. This creates a confusion regarding the real father of Padmini's son. It evokes the question of to whom does the child belong to; to Devdatta's face or to his body (which are not united anymore!)? Karnad here questions the ambiguity which envelops the notion of human itself. Is it the head or the body which

identifies a being as human? Or whether it is the union of the two?

Padmini is trying to convert her son from being an average human being; she wants him to be perfect with a sharp intellect and good physique. Padmini's strategizing can be due to suspicion about human being's inherent nature of imperfection. Padmini may have assumed that a transfer of genes from his parents won't grant a successful life to her son. Genes can be tricky. Nobody can be sure about the traits which flow through the genetic creeks over generations. Having a 'desirable' parentage which combines all the qualities therefore doesn't need to grant the child with all those perfect qualities. Also, from her previous experience she understood that circumstances and environment can also affect the faculties. Artificial changes inculcated on the body at a later stage on life may not remain permanent. So, she wanted to train her son from his infancy itself. Such notions about inculcating new faculties bring forth the concept of human enhancement. "Due to genetic engineering, humans are now able not only to design themselves, presumably to get rid of various limitations, but also redesign future generations thereby affecting the evolutionary process itself" [4].

Padmini's interference in the life of Devadatta, Kapila and her son also illuminates the questions of human rights. Padmini in fact doesn't have any right to play with the bodies and heads of both Devadatta and Kapila. Similarly, Padmini draws the map of her son's life also. He is not given the freedom to choose his own teachers. This is again a violation of personal freedom. But Devadatta and Kapila were dead during the time of transposition of heads. In a way, they ceased to be humans then. But they were soon alive and felt the change. This process was akin to organ transplantations which in many circumstances take place without a person's consent, more often when they are alive but are in a state of comma or when there is no hope of improvement. But such transplantations have always been a contested realm which problematises the concept of human rights. Humans are affected by the socio-cultural, economic and scientific factors of a particular time and hence human identity can be said to be in a state of flux. When many proponents



of transhumanism consider it as an improvisation of humanism and therefore being focused on humans, many other critics introduces a new definition of post humanism which defies this notion of human as the center. Robert Pepperell for instance, assumes that transhumanism marks the end of humanism. This postmodern notion about transhumanism is in par with *Hayavadana* as the play especially with the story of Hayavadana shatters the preconceived notions about human as the autonomous sophisticated being who occupies the centre stage of the world.

In a transhumanistic world, the genes, mental and physical attributes and even desires can be installed even before birth. Fortunately, when such a world becomes a reality, it will also provide them with many more opportunities for further enhancements and modifications. Nobody has to be dissatisfied with their flaws, if such services and processes are distributed in an egalitarian manner. Transhumanism envisions a 'flawless', world thus challenging even the premises of human evolution. But even then, there is dark cloud that looms over the head of human beings, the impending warning that an overuse or abuse of science and technology may prove to be bane and will result in catastrophe. New discoveries erase the old ones by projecting its flaws and such a technology when encountered with a slight aberration will lead to disastrous consequences. There are also certain conditions and emotions in human life which science couldn't decipher. Except from theoretical standpoints, a transhumanist world still exists as a mirage, as no such enhanced communities are manufactured till now. Hence, similar to the oddities that persist in the concept of transhumanism, the play also displays oddities regarding the notion of perfection. On one hand the play can be read as an argument in support of transhumanism which underscores the concept that such improvisations are possible but at the same instant it highlights that such attempts can be futile also. Whatever be the undertones the unending desire and quench for completeness forms the major crux of the play. *Hayavadana* can be considered as a play with transhumanistic tendencies which proposes challenges, subverts and at the same time assimilates the concept of human enhancement with the help of technology. Thus *Hayavadana* can be interpreted as

a text which proposes transhumanistic perspectives and possibilities.

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