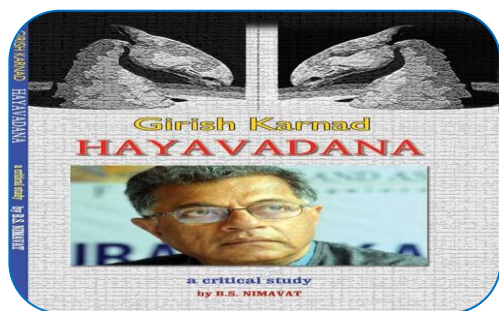




USE OF FOLK TALES IN GIRISH KARNAD'S HAYAVADANA



Dr. Deepak Nilkanthrao Morande

Assistant Professor,

Govindrao Warjekar Arts & Commerce College ,
Nagbhid Dist. Chandrapur (MS).

ABSTRACT:

Girish Karnad (1938–2019) stands as one of the most influential dramatists of modern Indian theatre, known for his unique ability to merge tradition and modernity. His play Hayavadana (1971) is a masterful exploration of identity, incompleteness, and human desire, constructed through the innovative use of folk tales and myths. By drawing from Indian oral traditions, particularly tales from Somadeva's Kathasaritsagara and Thomas Mann's adaptation of an Indian legend, Karnad reinvents folklore to address contemporary philosophical and psychological concerns. This paper explores how folk tales function in Hayavadana, not only as narrative devices but also as frameworks that interrogate cultural identity, colonial influence, and existential anxieties of modern man. Through analysis of structure, characterization, performance devices, and thematic concerns, the paper demonstrates that folk elements in Hayavadana bridge the gap between indigenous storytelling traditions and modern dramatic expression.

KEYWORDS: Folk tales, Girish Karnad, Hayavadana, Indian drama, mythology, incompleteness, identity, folk theatre.

INTRODUCTION

The role of folklore in Indian literature has always been profound. India's rich oral traditions—epics, myths, legends, and folk tales—have historically shaped the nation's cultural and literary imagination. In modern theatre, dramatists like Girish Karnad revived these traditions, using them to articulate concerns of the postcolonial and modern world.

Karnad's *Hayavadana* is particularly notable for its dependence on folk tales. At first glance, the play seems to retell an age-old story, but Karnad reinterprets it to raise philosophical questions about human wholeness, identity, and selfhood. The structure of the play, its use of masks, songs, the Bhagavata narrator, and non-realistic performance devices, all emerge from folk theatre traditions. This paper attempts to explore the use of folk tales in Hayavadana with special reference to narrative source, dramatic technique, symbolic value, and thematic depth.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

- To identify the folk sources and traditional motifs used in Hayavadana.
- To analyse how Karnad adapts these tales to serve modern dramatic purposes.
- To examine the role of folk elements in shaping the themes of identity, incompleteness, and desire.
- To highlight the relevance of folk traditions in contemporary theatre through Karnad's work.

Folk Sources of Hayavadana can be enumerated as below:**1. Somadeva's "Kathasaritsagara"**

The primary tale in *Hayavadana*—the exchange of heads between Devadatta and Kapila—is taken from Kathasaritsagara, an 11th-century Sanskrit collection of stories. The folk motif of misplaced identity through body-head exchange is central to the play's narrative.

2. Thomas Mann's "The Transposed Heads"

Karnad acknowledged Mann's novella as an inspiration. Mann himself had adapted the tale from Indian sources, showing how folklore transcends cultural boundaries. Karnad, however, re-indianizes the tale, rooting it back into indigenous performance modes and philosophical concerns.

3. The Horse-Man (Hayavadana) Motif

The subplot of *Hayavadana*, the man with a horse's head, comes from Indian folklore where animal-headed figures are common, often symbolizing incompleteness or divine punishment. Karnad turns this folk motif into a metaphor for fragmented identity in a postcolonial world.

4. Yakshagana and Other Folk Performance Traditions

Structurally, the play imitates the style of folk theatre. Bhagavata as narrator corresponds to the Sutradhara in Sanskrit plays and the singer-narrator in Yakshagana. Songs, masks, and stylized dialogues resemble folk performance rather than realistic theatre.

Folk Tale as Narrative Framework:

Karnad uses the folk tale of transposed heads not merely as a plot device but as a narrative skeleton. The story of Devadatta, Kapila, and Padmini reflects eternal human conflicts—mind versus body, intellect versus strength, culture versus nature. While the tale is simple in structure, its philosophical implications are profound. Karnad transforms the folk tale into a modern allegory of existential dilemmas.

Hayavadana: Subplot and Symbolism:

The subplot of *Hayavadana*, the horse-headed man, is not directly part of the main triangle, yet it resonates deeply with the theme of incompleteness. Derived from folk imagination, Hayavadana embodies the condition of being "neither man nor animal," echoing the human quest for wholeness. His eventual transformation into a complete horse—rather than man—ironically underscores the impossibility of perfect fulfillment.

Role of Bhagavata and Chorus:

The figure of the Bhagavata draws from folk theatre traditions where a narrator mediates between audience and performance. This device not only roots the play in indigenous culture but also allows fluid movement between story, performance, and commentary. The chorus of children in the subplot further enhances the communal flavor of storytelling.

Use of Masks, Songs, and Non-Realism:

Masks and stylized gestures are hallmarks of folk performances. In *Hayavadana*, masks (especially in the horse-man subplot) heighten symbolic meaning, detaching the play from Western realism. Songs

interspersed in the narrative function like folk ballads, carrying both entertainment and philosophical reflection.

Themes Reinforced Through Folk Devices:

1. **Identity Crisis:** The head-body exchange raises the question: is identity located in the mind or the body? The folk tale becomes a vehicle for modern existential concerns.
2. **Incompleteness:** Both Devadatta-Kapila and Hayavadana embody human incompleteness, a theme rooted in folk motifs of transformation and hybridity.
3. **Colonial and Postcolonial Resonance:** By choosing folklore instead of Western dramatic models, Karnad asserts cultural selfhood in postcolonial India.
4. **Universality of Folk Wisdom:** Though based in Indian tales, the play resonates with universal questions of human existence, proving the timeless relevance of folklore.

Like all his stories Karnad takes a leap from the original story and develops it further. When the play opens, Devdatta and Kapila are close bosom friends as if two bodies with one mind and heart. This episode in the play is based on a tale from *Vetal Panchvimshika*. Later, another character Hayavadana is introduced who possesses a man's body but a horse's head. The story unfolds the quest for completeness.

The main plot runs into complications when Devdatta marries Padmini. Kapila and Padmini are drifted towards each other. Kapila and Devdatta sever their heads before Mother Kali. Backed by divine blessing, Padmini - in mood of confusion - transfixes Devadatta's head on Kapila's body and Kapila's head on Devdatta's body. The result is confusion of identities.

Devdatta stops writing poetry and Kapila is haunted by memories in Devdatta's body. For time being Padmini is happy that she gets the best of Kapila and Devdatta. When Devdatta undertakes a journey to Ujjain, Padmini undertakes a hazardous journey to the forests to see Kapila finding her in a state of oblivion. Coming back from Ujjain, Devdatta rushes to the forests the moment he knows that the Padmini and Kapila are there together. There Kapila suggests a compromise that they "all three live together – like Pandavas and Draupadi (60-61). Devdatta refuses for compromise. Swords are drawn and Devdatta and Kapila kill each other. Padmini orders to arrange a large funeral pyre with the thought of performing sati herself. At this juncture a scream is heard and Hayavadana emerges not as a complete man but as a full-fledged horse. Hayavadana, too, had gone to Goddesses to implore Her to help correct his mixed identity. Before Hayavadana could state his complete wish, the Goddesses granted the blessings in haste and disappeared. So there is Hayavadana in form of a complete horse. The small child left behind weaves the main plot with the sub-plot. At the age of five the child lives in the world of make believe, playing with dolls all the time and not interacting with the external world. The child is even deprived of human laughter. The child becomes complete when he laughs in response to Hayavadana's laughter. Sprouted human emotions, entangled relationships, transfixing of human selves are paraded wonderfully to make us believe that all these are true.

The play is chiefly concerned with the identity crises: of Padmini in the main plot and of Hayavadana in the sub-plot. Karnad seems to hint at the middle course of humanism in the play. If the tragic identity crisis of Padmini is presented in the main plot, the comic identity crisis of Hayavadana is unfolded in the sub-plot. Karnad found in the story of Hayavadana the solution to his own identity crisis in his artistic career. After writing "Yayati" and "Tughlaq", he felt as if he had exhausted his sources for playwriting. When he came across Mann's story he had a plan to make a film. But he was advised by a friend to write a play. Thereafter Hayavadana started evolving in his mind in form of folk drama providing him the scope to employ double plot device like Shakespeare had done in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. It was as if Karnad, in writing this play has attempted to quell his own artistic identity crisis.

The use of folk tales in Hayavadana can be seen on three interconnected levels:

1. Structural Level

Folk tales provide the scaffolding of the play. Without them, the plot loses its coherence. Both the main story and subplot originate in folklore.

2. Aesthetic Level

Folk traditions enrich the aesthetic texture of the play through music, stylization, humor, and audience interaction. The folk theatre model ensures the play is performative rather than just literary.

3. Philosophical Level

Folklore is reinterpreted to raise modern issues. Karnad does not reproduce the tales mechanically but adapts them to interrogate identity, wholeness, and existential angst.

Thus, the folk tale functions as a bridge: between past and present, tradition and modernity, myth and reality.

CONCLUSION

Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* demonstrates how folk tales, far from being obsolete relics, can serve as dynamic vehicles of modern expression. By reworking stories from Kathasaritsagara and indigenous motifs, Karnad creates a play that is at once traditional and contemporary, local and universal. The use of folk elements enables him to dramatize complex philosophical questions in a language accessible to the audience.

In a postcolonial context, where questions of identity and cultural authenticity dominate, Karnad's reliance on folklore becomes an act of cultural reclamation. *Hayavadana* proves that folk tales are not merely entertaining narratives but powerful instruments of social, psychological, and existential inquiry.

REFERENCES

1. Karnad, Girish. *Three Plays: Naga-Mandala, Hayavadana, Tughlaq* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.
2. Dharwadker, Aparna. *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India since 1947*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005.
3. Naik, M.K. *Perspectives on Indian Drama in English*, New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1977.
4. Ramanujan, A.K. *Folktales from India*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1991.
5. Mann, Thomas. *The Transposed Heads: A Legend of India*, London: Secker and Warburg, 1941.
6. Somadeva. *Kathasaritsagara*, Trans. C.H. Tawney. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1969.