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Fragmented Selves and Structural Illusion: Myth and Metatheatre in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*

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ABSTRACT

Girish Karnad's play *Hayavadana* (1971) is a profound exploration of identity, desire, and the mind-body dichotomy. While critically acclaimed for its use of Indian myth and folklore, a deeper analysis reveals that the play's narrative structure is not merely a vehicle for its themes but is, in itself, a central argument. This research article reinterprets *Hayavadana* by examining how its complex structure built on the intricate interplay of myth and metatheatre narrates a futile quest for "wholeness." The play's two parallel plots, the myth of the transposed heads from the Kathasaritsagara and the subplot of the horse-headed Hayavadana, are not simply interconnected; they are symbolic reflections of an incomplete existence. Furthermore, the metatheatrical elements, such as the Bhagavata (narrator), the use of masks, and the play-within-a-play device, serve to constantly break the dramatic illusion, forcing the audience to confront the artificiality of constructed identities. By analyzing how these structural components work together, this article argues that the narrative's very form mirrors the central characters' and, by extension, humanity's, struggle to reconcile fragmented parts into a unified whole. The play's ultimate

failure to achieve a stable, complete identity culminating in the tragic and absurd outcomes of both plots is a deliberate structural choice that underscores the play's pessimistic, yet philosophically rich, conclusion.

Introduction: Deconstructing the Quest for Perfection

Girish Karnad's Hayavadana stands as a seminal work in modern Indian theatre, celebrated for its unique blend of ancient myth with contemporary philosophical concerns. The play's core revolves around the timeless human desire for completeness, a quest for a perfect and unified self. The narrative is driven by two seemingly disparate stories: a love triangle involving the intelligent Devadatta, the physically strong Kapila, and the passionate Padmini; and a parallel subplot of a horse-headed man, Hayavadana, who longs to become a complete human. While many analyses of the play focus on its thematic exploration of the mind-body problem and the nature of desire, this article proposes a new reading by focusing on the play's narrative architecture.

Hayavadana is not a linear narrative. It is a mosaic of fragmented stories, layered with ritual and commentary. The structure is a deliberate choice, mirroring the fractured identities of its characters. This research will argue that the play's innovative narrative structure, through its strategic use of myth and metatheatre, becomes the primary vehicle for its philosophical critique. The structure itself enacts the failure of the quest for wholeness, demonstrating that a stable, unified identity, be it a complete human, a harmonized self, or a perfect love, is ultimately an illusion. The play's "narrative failure" is, paradoxically, its greatest success.

This article will proceed by first analyzing the symbolic function of the two central myths and how their juxtaposition frames the play's core conflict. It will then explore the pervasive metatheatrical devices and how they serve to deconstruct the very notion of a stable self. Finally, it will synthesize these observations to demonstrate how the narrative structure as a whole becomes a compelling and tragic commentary on the human condition. The Mythic Framework: Juxtaposing Incompleteness, Karnad masterfully weaves two distinct myths into the fabric of his play, each serving a unique structural and thematic purpose.

The Myth of the Transposed Heads:

The main plot is an adaptation of a story from the eleventh-century Sanskrit text, Kathasritsagara, a tale also famously retold by Thomas Mann in The Transposed Heads. In Karnad's version, the

characters are Devadatta (the intellectual), Kapila (the physical), and Padmini (the woman caught between them). After a tragic misunderstanding, both men behead themselves in a temple. Padmini, granted a boon by the goddess Kali, attempts to revive them but mistakenly transposes their heads. The resulting creatures, one with Devadatta's head on Kapila's body, and the other with Kapila's head on Devadatta's body, forcea dramatic and philosophical crisis.

This myth is the structural core of the play. It is a direct and visceral exploration of the mind-body dichotomy. The head, symbolizing intellect and identity, is pitted against the body, representing physical desire and action. The central question becomes: which part of the self-defines identity? The initial solution, that "the head is the greater," as dictated by the scriptures, is subverted by the play's tragic conclusion. The new Devadatta, with his intellectual head on a strong body, soon finds his body reverting to a softer, more sedentary state, while the new Kapila's body grows hard and muscular again. The myth's narrative structure demonstrates that the parts of the self cannot be simply swapped or fused; they are inextricably linked, and any artificial combination is doomed to fail. The narrative ends in a double suicide, an ultimate tragic proof of the impossibility of achieving a synthesized, complete self.

The Subplot of *Hayavadana*:

The parallel subplot, entirely Karnad's invention, introduces the character of Hayavadana, a man with a horse's head. His quest to become a complete human run alongside the main plot, acting as a grotesque and humorous mirror to the human drama. Hayavadana's incompleteness is physical and literal, a stark contrast to the metaphorical incompleteness of the main characters.

Structurally, the subplot is crucial for two reasons. First, it externalizes the central theme of incompleteness. Hayavadana’s longing for a unified form makes the abstract mind-body problem of the main plot tangible and absurd. His journey, which culminates in him becoming a complete horse rather than a full human, is a darkly comedic counterpoint to the tragic failure of the main characters. Second, his narrative acts as a frame. It begins and ends the play, bookending the human story with a ritualistic prayer to Ganesha and a final, unexpected transformation. The Ganesha myth, which frames the play, is also a story of a transposed head (an elephant's head on a human body), but with a slight difference from the main characters. Ganesha's incompleteness is worshipped as a source of divine power and wisdom. This provides a crucial contrast, suggesting that while humans strive for impossible perfection, the gods are whole in their very imperfection.

The Metatheatrical Structure:

Unmasking the Illusion. Karnad's use of metatheatre is not a mere stylistic flourish; it is a fundamental structural component that deconstructs the narrative as it unfolds. Metatheatre is a play's self-conscious awareness of its nature as a theatrical performance. In Hayavadana, this is achieved through several devices:

The Bhagavata:

The Bhagavata acts as a narrator, commentator, and participant in the play. He frequently breaks the fourth wall, addressing the audience directly, introducing characters, and even offering his own philosophical interpretations. This constant intervention prevents the audience from becoming fully immersed in the dramatic illusion. By reminding the viewers that they are watching a constructed performance, the Bhagavata forces them to question the "reality" of the identities presented on stage. This structural choice encourages a critical distance, prompting the audience to reflect on their own quests for a unified self, which may be as constructed and illusory as the characters' identities.

Masks and Dolls:

The use of masks for Devadatta and Kapila is another metatheatrical device. The masks are not meant to hide the actors' identities but to draw attention to them as archetypes rather than individuals. This is made explicit when Hayavadana, with his real horse-head, first appears, and the Bhagavata mistakes it for a mask. This confusion highlights the theme of constructed identity. Are the characters' personalities inherent, or are they a role they are playing? This question is further complicated by the talking dolls, which narrate Padmini's dreams and desires. The dolls, as puppets, emphasize the characters' lack of agency and their manipulation by forces that, be it desire, myth, or fate, are beyond their control.

The Play-within-a-Play:

The entire structure of Hayavadana can be seen as a play-within-a-play, framed by the invocation to Ganesha and the concluding song. This nested structure serves to distance the audience from the events, inviting a Brechtian-style critique rather than a purely emotional response. The ritualistic beginning and end, which belong to the world of folk theatre (Yakshagana), ground the mythical story in a specific cultural tradition while simultaneously highlighting its timeless, universal relevance.

The Narrative's Final Argument: The Tragedy of Incompleteness. The play's narrative structure, from its mythic foundations to its metatheatrical deconstructions, is a powerful argument against the

possibility of perfect unity. The tragic conclusion is a necessary and logical outcome of this structural design.

The story of the transposed heads, which a more conventional narrative might have resolved in favor of either the head or the body, ends in a stalemate that leads to death. The body, once reunited with its original head, dies in a duel. The narrative rejects the possibility of a "correct" combination, suggesting that the self, once fragmented, cannot be pieced back together.

Similarly, Hayavadana's journey ends in an equally incomplete, yet absurdly "complete" state. He becomes a full horse, but one that can only neigh with a human voice. He is stuck in a new form of limbo, neither completely animal nor human. This grotesque transformation reinforces the play's central thesis: the quest for wholeness is an absurd, often tragic, endeavor. The narrative's inability to resolve its central conflicts is not a flaw; it is the core of its message.

Conclusion:

A Narrative of Fragmentation. Hayavadana's genius lies in its structural integrity. Karnad's play is not just a retelling of old myths; it is a meta-commentary on the nature of storytelling and identity itself. The narrative's constant self-referential gestures, its juxtaposition of mythical and human quests, and its refusal to provide a satisfying resolution all contribute to a profound critique of the human condition.

The quest for a unified self, a perfect partner, or a complete life is, according to Karnad, a fool's errand. The true nature of being is fragmented, a constant negotiation between the mind and the body, a mixture of the divine, the human, and the animal. The play's narrative structure, in its fragmented, cyclical, and self-aware form, embodies this philosophical position. By forcing the audience to grapple with the constructed nature of its characters and plot, Hayavadana achieves a rare feat: its form becomes its argument. The play's narrative structure is a quest for wholeness that knowingly, and powerfully, fails, leaving the audience to ponder the enduring, beautiful, and tragic reality of their own incompleteness.

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