

Revisiting Patriarchy: Women Empowerment in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*

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Abstract: This paper examines feminist concerns and the status of women in society through Girish Karnad's play *Hayavadana*. Originally written in Kannada and later translated into multiple languages, the play offers a fresh perspective on female identity and agency. The focus is on the protagonist Padmini, portrayed not as the conventional submissive or self-sacrificing woman, but as bold, assertive, and unapologetically desirous of fulfilling her dreams. Karnad presents her quest for the "complete man"—a fusion of physical strength and intellectual depth—as both empowering and transgressive. In doing so, the play highlights Padmini's courage to defy traditional gender roles and underscores the complexities of women's agency in a patriarchal framework.

Keywords: Submissive, empowering, transgressive, feminist.

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REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Girish Karnad, a renowned Indian playwright, actor, film director has been one of the leading figures in modern Indian theatre who has contributed significantly to its development in post –independence India. His works, often written in Kannada, have been translated into multiple languages and are well –known for their exploration of mythology, history, and contemporary issues. Karnad's debut play, *Yayati* (1961), is a retelling of a story from the Mahabharata, exploring themes of responsibility and ambition. His later plays like *Tuglaq* (1964), a historical drama, *Hayavadana* (1971) a modern classic based on *kathasaritasagara* tale and obviously *Nagamandala* (1988) a magic realist exploration of love, fidelity and gender dynamics in rural India shares the dramatic genius of Girish Karnad.

Many Indian English writers like Badal Sircar ,Vijay Tendulkar ,Mohan Rakesh ,Mahesh Dattani and Girish Karnad have voiced for women empowerment in and through their plays .For instance Badal Sircar in his *Evam Indrajit* ,Vijay Tendulkar in *Silence !The Court is in the Session* ,Mohan Rakesh in his *One Day in Ashadha* and *The Great Swans of the Waves* and Girish Karnad in *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala* ,*The Fire and the Rain* and *Bali :The Sacrifice* have empowered women as their leading heroines .The objective of the present paper is to see whether Karnad's woman Padmini ,the protagonist of *Hayavadana* ,is an

empowered woman who aspires for a man blended with superior body and mind [1].

What do we mean by women empowerment? The term women empowerment in simple words means a woman who is empowered and treated equally with man in any society .The Wikipedia defines women empowerment as, "women empowerment is the process in which women elaborate and recreate what it is that they can be, do, and accomplish in a circumstance that they previously were denied". The Cambridge dictionary defines empowerment as the "process of gaining freedom and power to do what you want or to control what happens to you". It means that empowered women make their own decisions to live the life of their own in the society and treated as equal in the society.

The plot of *Hayavadana* has been inspired by a tale from *kathasaritasagar*, an ancient collection of Indian folktales. Additionally, Karnad was heavily influenced from Thomas Mann's novella *The Transposed Heads* which itself was based on the *kathasaritasagar* story. Karnad blends these sources with elements of traditional Indian theatre , mythology and his own creative interpretations to explore themes of identity ,incompleteness ,and human desire .Karnad did a great job in undertaking such a sensitive and psycho -feminine issue in his play *Hayavadana*, supporting the main plot with a parallel running subplot of a horse's story whose name is Hayavadana symbolising the horse's head and

human body. Hayavadana's search for completeness and Padmini's search for completeness are the parallel stories running into this play [2].

Karnad himself being an erudite writer takes this opportunity to teach a lesson to humankind that this issue of desire for completeness which lies in the subconscious of everyone is an illusionary concept. Karnad through the story of Padmini gives a deep insight to humankind as a whole that there is nothing called completeness or perfection in this world. Both the terms are relative as someone can be more perfect or less perfect in certain situations or vice-versa. Then what is the predicament of completeness that the heroine Padmini is searching for, in his husband Devadatta, who is complete in himself but at the same time incomplete from Padmini's point of view. The play symbolising this quest for completeness also glorifies Padmini's character as an empowered woman. Although many critics accuse Padmini for her urge for physical pleasure but some hold a sympathetic view towards her journey. The play begins with a prayer to lord Ganesha, an emblem of incompleteness but ironically enough, completes the wishes of his devotees. The play opens with the prayers as:
O single tasked destroyer of incompleteness,
We pay homage to you and start our play. (Girish Karnad *Hayavadana* 1)

The opening of the play introduces the two best friends Devadatta and Kapila as one mind, one heart and the narrator of the story Bhagavata describes their friendship as, "This is the city of Dharmapura, ruled by king Dharmasheela whose fame and empire have already reached the ends of the eight directions. Two youth who dwell in this city are our heroes (Karnad 1). Their friendship flourished uninterrupted till Devadatta married Padmini with the help of his friend Kapila who became a messenger of their love messages, till the culmination of their marriage. Padmini became the better half of Devadatta and settled in his house. Nor did Devadatta forget his debt to Kapila and the old friendship flourished as before as said, "Devadatta – Padmini – Kapila. To the admiring citizens of Dharmapura, Rama – Sita – Lakshman (Karnad, *Hayavadana* 19). Three of them lived happily as Ram Lakshman and Sita. Devadatta, unrivalled in intelligence and Kapila in physical skills and both are "one mind, one heart" (Karnad, *Hayavadana* 2). The heroine of the play who is unrivalled in beauty, charms both the friends equally as both of them comments, "her beauty is the magic lake. Her arms the lotus creepers. Her breasts are golden urns and her waist..." (Karnad, *Hayavadana* 13). The theme of the play is introduced at the very outset of the play by the female chorus: "Female Chorus: Why should love stick to the sap of a single body? When the stem is drunk with the thick yearning of the many metalled, many flowered lantanda, why should it be tied down to the relation of a single flower?" (Karnad, *Hayavadana* 11) [3].

The chorus expresses the ideology of Padmini that love has no bounds and it cannot be limited to any one man. She has no regrets or shame in revealing this view as she is presented as a bold and frank woman. She is having an upper hand over both Kapila and Devadatta as Kapila admits: "Kapila: I give up, Devadatta. I surrender to your judgement. I had not thought anyone could be more beautiful than the wench Ragini who acts Rambha in our village troupe. But this one! you are right – she is Yakshini, Shakuntala, Urvashi, Indumati – all rolled into one" (Karnad, *Hayavadana* 16). Padmini is not a sexually priggish lady. Her fascination for Kapila gets expressed in different ways which makes Devadatta jealous of Kapila. To add fuel to fire she humors Devadatta as a very fragile one: "I don't know how you are going to go through life wrapped in silk like this! You are still a baby." She assumes the role of a mother figure to Devadatta.

An empowered woman adopts the role reversal technique same as Padmini does with Kapila when she plays the manly role saying "I like making fun of Kapila – he is such an innocent. Looks a proper devil, but the way he blushes and giggles and turns red, he might have been a bride (Karnad, *Hayavadana* 21) and for herself she remarks "no one taught this bride to blush" (Karnad, *Hayavadana* 21) shows her dominating nature and behaviour as opposed to the traditional female role. Padmini is akin to the modern women free from the taboos associated with the feminine roles in society. She is a strong woman as instead of being pregnant she undertakes the journey by cart with Kapila. She likes adventures and not timidity. Padmini draws Kapila to an object position and loves to play with his innocence. Kapila under the magic spell of Padmini does exactly what pleases her. Kapila's muscular body fascinates Padmini and she boldly accepts this as: "Padmini: How he climbs – like an ape. Before I could even say Yes, he had taken off his shirt, pulled his dhoti up and swung up the branch. And what an ethereal shape! such a broad back – like an ocean with muscles rippling across it – and then that small, feminine waist – which looks so helpless" (Karnad, *Hayavadana* 25) [4].

Padmini is also sexually attracted towards Kapila as any other woman out of natural instincts of a woman and adds "no woman could resist him" (Karnad, *Hayavadana* 26). Devadatta's helplessness in front of the rebellious Padmini leads to the catastrophe where he sacrificed himself in the temple of Kali and Kapila follows his steps and shoves off his head too. At this juncture only does Padmini realise that her love has ruined them and they died for her: "What shall I say happened? And who'll believe me? They'll say the two fought and died for this whore" (Karnad, *Hayavadana* 31). Devdatta & Kapila sacrifice their heads before Goddess Kali. Padmini is shocked on seeing the site of dead body of Devadatta and Kapila and thus is about to sacrifice herself. Kali appears and grant life to both



men but out of excitement the head to the bodies gets transposed due to darkness in the temple.

Padmini's wishful fantasy comes to reality when with the blessings of goddess Kali, she creates an ideal man for herself by exchanging their heads. Devadatta with Kapila's body brings her fascination come to reality and completes her search for complete man. "Padmini. It's almost my autobiography now, Kapila! Devadatta, Kapila with Devadatta's body! Devadatta with Kapila's body! four men in one life time" (Karnad, *Hayavadana* 56). Kapila angrily expresses this as: "I know what you want, Padmini. Devadatta's clever head and Kapila's strong body" (Karnad, *Hayavadana* 38). Kapila disappointed resigns to the forest and Devadatta and Padmini succumbs to the joys of the married life. A rare combination as Padmini asserts: "fabulous body – fabulous brain –fabulous Devadatta" (Karnad, *Hayavadana* 58). Padmini fulfils her yearning through creating her ideal man with brain waves. Her longing ones quenched for a short span pseudo satisfaction then head wins over body and Devadatta's original physis comes into light through gradual transformation.

Kapila curses Padmini for his ruined life and friendship but Padmini still pitying Kapila offers her love to him. The transformation scene between Padmini, Devadatta, and Kapila emerges as a pivotal moment that encapsulates the central concerns of identity, desire, and incompleteness. Padmini's assertion, "Yes, you won, Kapila. Devadatta won too. But I—the better half of two bodies—I neither win nor lose" (Karnad, *Hayavadana* 57), becomes more than a personal reflection; it illustrates the fundamental paradox of her existence. Devadatta, who embodies intellect and refinement, may claim victory by retaining his head, the seat of reason. Kapila, whose body signifies physical strength and vitality, may likewise consider himself a winner. Yet Padmini refuses the logic of their triumph. As the woman who stands between the two, she becomes the embodiment of contradiction, one who participates in their victories yet remains excluded from fulfillment. Her words stress that while men measure themselves in terms of achievement or loss, a woman in her position is trapped in a state of suspension, unable to share wholly in either claim [5].

Kapila's reaction underscores this tension. His anger and curse against Padmini reflect the bitterness of a man whose life and friendship have been irreparably destroyed. For him, Padmini is not merely a figure of desire but the disruptive force who has unsettled the sacred bond between himself and Devadatta. His outburst conveys the anguish of betrayal, as he interprets Padmini's choices as the cause of his downfall. In his curse, one can hear the echo of wounded masculinity and fractured loyalty. The theme of male friendship, often idealized as enduring and unshakable, is here destabilized by the presence of female agency. Kapila's bitterness is thus not directed

at fate alone but at Padmini as the catalyst who, in his perception, turned harmony into destruction.

Yet Padmini's response resists the image of a manipulative seductress. Instead of retaliating, she expresses pity toward Kapila. Her pity, however, is complex: it is not simply sympathy for his suffering but also recognition of the shared predicament in which both are ensnared. By offering her love to Kapila, she extends an ambivalent gesture that is at once consoling and tragic. It is consoling because it affirms her emotional connection to him despite his curses, yet tragic because it arises in a context where such love cannot yield resolution. Rather than presenting herself as victorious, she aligns herself with loss and incompleteness.

This scene becomes crucial for understanding the thematic fabric of *Hayavadana*. Padmini's divided position dramatizes the impossibility of reconciling intellect and passion, the mind and the body. Her role as the "better half of two bodies" illustrates not wholeness but fragmentation. Both Kapila and Devadatta may claim partial triumph, but she embodies the futility of those claims. The woman's position becomes the site where contradictions converge without resolution. Ultimately, Karnad uses this moment to interrogate the human longing for completeness. Padmini, Kapila, and Devadatta all strive for integration, yet each remains marked by absence and failure. The scene affirms that desire, far from yielding harmony, often leads to disjunction and ruin. Through Padmini's words and actions, Karnad reveals the tragedy of human relationships, where pity and love coexist with loss, and where no character truly achieves victory.

"Kapila :Yes mine .One can beat the body into shape ,but one can't beat away the memories in it .Isn't that surprising ?That the body should have its own ghosts – its own memories ?memories of touch –memories of a body swaying in these arms of a warm skin against this palm –memories which one cannot recognise ,cannot understand ,cannot even name because this head wasn't there when they happened"(Karnad, *Hayavadana* 58)

Kapila admits that while a person can discipline or train the body, it is impossible to erase the memories it carries. What strikes him as strange is that the body itself seems to hold on to experiences independent of the mind. He reflects that the body preserves its own "ghosts," impressions that remain even when the intellect cannot account for them. These are memories not of thoughts, but of physical contact—of embraces, of the sensation of warmth against the skin, of movement shared with another. Such memories are deeply imprinted in the flesh, beyond conscious control. Kapila observes that these bodily memories are puzzling because they do not belong to the head or the rational mind. They are fragments that linger in muscle,



nerve, and skin, even when the conscious self cannot interpret or name them. It is as though the body lived through moments that the mind was absent for, and those moments return later as haunting reminders. His words reveal a conflict between physical memory and mental awareness: the body refuses to forget intimacy, while the head struggles to make sense of something it never witnessed.

Kapila before the dual urged Devadatta to accept this proposal “Devadatta ,couldn’t we all three live together –like the Pandavas and Draupadi” (Karnad, *Hayavadana* 60) Padmini was an strong woman making choices but couldn’t allow herself to go against this and accept both of them as her husbands’ just like the Draupadi of Mahabharata .She liked Kapila and could not restrict to appreciate his manliness but this in no way meant that she had no sexual modesty. She always chose Devadatta over Kapila. It was Kapila who looked at her with lustful eyes. She was always firm with her decisions that she was Devadatta’s wife and had a soft corner for his friend Kapila. She played with the innocence of Kapila but was never imagined to sexually involve with him. She didn’t compromise till last as she says: “They burned, lived, fought, embraced and died. I stood silent. If I’d said, yes, I ll live with you both, perhaps they would have been alive yet. But I couldn’t say it” (Karnad, *Hayavadana* 62). She instead of living with two men embraced death and this shows the power of an Indian women. No weak women could behave the way Padmini did. For Padmini empowerment is no choice but a way of life.

Karnad says that through this incident brings the inner psyche of women to limelight. The two men who have been friends for years together are unable to accept women in common. The cowards die fighting a dual but courageous Padmini performs Sati as she is the embodiment of love and life. Even before performing sati in the last minute of life she makes it clear to the society. Thus, the play has been proving to be an authentic document of women empowerment. He has empowered Padmini to take decisions of her own and to lead her own life.

Although, Padmini’s momentary satisfaction came when she miraculously achieved the unification of these two attributes, that is strong body along with strong mind, rolled into one, Devadatta. Her happiness knew no bound till one incident shattered her all hopes. In no time she realizes the impossibility of attaining her wishful desire and consoles herself with the limitations of human body. The consequences of her bold desires lead to the death of her husband and their common friend Kapila after which the courageous Padmini also became Sati. Padmini’s last avatar is the most dreaded one when she makes up her mind to perform Sati and lived forever in the stories as an empowered woman of society. As Bhagavata asserts:

“Bhagavata :Thus Padmini became a Sati .India is known for its pativratas –wives who dedicated their whole existence to the service of their husbands –but it would not be an exaggeration to say that no pativratas went in the way Padmini did .And yet no one knows the spot where she went Sati .If you ask the hunting tribes who dwell in these forests ,they only point to a full blossomed tree of the fortunate lady .They say that even now on full moon and on new moon nights a song rises from the roots of the tree and fills the whole forest like a fragrance” (Karnad, *Hayavadana* 63)

Neither the death of a lover nor the subsequent status of Padmini is presented as tragic. The deaths serve only to emphasize the logic behind the absurdity of situation. The sub plot of *Hayavadana* the horse man, deepens the significance of the main theme of incompleteness by treating it on a different plane. The horse man’s search for completeness ends comically, with his becoming a complete horse. The animal body triumphs over what is considered the best in man, the human head. Bhagvata concludes:

“Bhagvata: But tell me –you went to the goddess to become a complete man, didn’t you? What happened.

Hayavadana: I have become a complete horse –but not a complete being. This human voice –this cursed human voice –it’s still there. How can I call myself complete? If I only could. What should I do, Bhagvata sir? How can I get rid of this human voice? (Karnad *Hayavadana* 68)

Bhagavata: What’s there in a song, Hayavadana? The real beauty lies in the child’s laughter –in the innocent joy of that laughter. No tragedy can touch it” (Karnad, *Hayavadana* 70).

In the closing act of *Hayavadana*, Bhagavata confronts Hayavadana with the irony of his wish. Bhagavata reminds him that he had once gone to the goddess in search of wholeness, to be freed from his half-human, half-horse state. Yet the outcome had not been what he expected. Instead of being transformed into a complete man, he had become a full horse—still lacking the sense of completeness he longed for. The reason, as he laments, lies in the remnant of his humanity: his voice. The body is that of a horse, but the human voice persists, leaving him fractured and restless. He asks, almost desperately, what he can do to rid himself of this voice and finally become a unified being [6,7].

Bhagavata, with calm wisdom, shifts the perspective. He tells Hayavadana not to obsess over the human voice or the imperfections it carries. According to him, the essence of joy and beauty is not in song or voice alone, but in something deeper, simpler, and purer—the laughter of a child. A child’s laughter, Bhagavata suggests, has a power untouched by sorrow or tragedy. It represents innocence, renewal, and the natural rhythm of life, reminding both Hayavadana and the audience that wholeness does not always lie in physical perfection but in inner freedom and joy.



The play ends on a note of reconciliation with divine mystery. The narrator declares that the mercy of Lord Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, surpasses human understanding. The god grants every creature a fulfilment suited to its need: a grandson to the yearning elder, laughter to a child, and even the full form of a horse to Hayavadana. Through this ending, Karnad underlines the unpredictable yet compassionate nature of divine grace, suggesting that completeness is given in unexpected forms, often beyond human definition.

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