

# The Fragmented Goddess: Female Identity and Embodied Resistance in Girish Karnad's Hayavadana

Sri Panchadarla Appala Konda

*Ph.D. Research Scholar in English*

*Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University, Etcherla, Srikakulam Andhra Pradesh, India-532001*

**Abstract**—Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* (1971) employs Indian myth and folk theatre to interrogate the Cartesian mind-body binary through the figure of Padmini. This article argues that Padmini's pursuit of "completeness" constitutes an embodied form of resistance against the patriarchal regulation of female desire. Drawing on Indian feminist thought and performance theory, the study examines how Karnad's dramaturgy — masks, dolls, the Bhagavata — creates a critical distance that enables transgressive female agency to be staged. Padmini's choices, including her final act of sati, are reinterpreted not as moral failure but as a radical refusal to inhabit a culturally mandated fragmented self. The paper concludes that Karnad transforms the pativrata discourse from within, positioning female identity as performative, desiring, and ultimately uncontainable by traditional mythic structures.

**Index Terms**—Girish Karnad; *Hayavadana*; Padmini; Female Identity; Resistance; Body Politics; Indian Feminism; Folk Theatre; Myth

## I. INTRODUCTION

Postcolonial Indian English drama frequently returns to myth to confront contemporary crises of identity. Girish Karnad, writing in Kannada and translating himself into English, occupies a unique position in this tradition. His *Hayavadana*, sourced from Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads* and the 11th-century Sanskrit *Kathasaritsagara*, dramatizes a love triangle that is also a philosophical problem: what constitutes a human being — the head or the body? While substantial scholarship addresses the play's existential themes, the gendered implications of this question remain under-theorized.

This article centers Padmini, the woman at the heart of the triangle, to argue that Karnad uses the mind-body split to expose how patriarchy fragments female

identity. Padmini's resistance is not articulated through Western liberal feminist rhetoric of "rights" but through desire, choice, and bodily autonomy — categories deeply suspect within *stridharma*. By locating her agency within folk performance conventions, Karnad ensures that resistance operates through, rather than against, Indian cultural idioms.

## II. MYTH, FOLK FORM, AND GENDERED SPACE

Karnad's theatre belongs to the "Theatre of Roots" movement that sought decolonized aesthetics. *Hayavadana* employs Yakshagana conventions: a Bhagavata-narrator, masks, songs, and dolls. These devices are not mere ornamentation. As Aparna Dharwadker notes, the folk frame creates "alienation effects" that prevent easy identification and force audiences to confront ideology. For Padmini, this formal distance is crucial. Her transgressive desire for both Devadatta's intellect and Kapila's body would be censored in realist drama. Folk theatre's non-realism sanctions it as "play" while smuggling in serious critique.

The play opens with the Bhagavata, a male authority who controls narrative. Yet his authority is repeatedly punctured — he forgets lines, is corrected by actors. This instability mirrors the larger instability of patriarchal logic that the play exposes. Within this destabilized space, Padmini emerges.

## III. PADMINI: DESIRE AS EPISTEMOLOGY

Padmini is introduced as Devadatta's wife, but she is never a passive pativrata. Her first appearance establishes her as desiring subject: she finds Kapila's body "beautiful" and says so. In a culture where

female gaze is denied, this is radical. Her subsequent manipulation of the two men to behead themselves appears cruel, but the text complicates blame.

When she transposes the heads, she deliberately gives Devadatta Kapila's body and vice versa. Her logic is wholeness: "I want a man who is perfect." The ensuing confusion — which is the "real" husband? — deconstructs patriarchal definitions of marriage based on name, lineage, or ritual. The society's answer, that the head determines identity, is shown to be inadequate because Devadatta with Kapila's body gradually reverts to his "original" weak physique. The body remembers. Thus, Karnad rejects mind-body dualism and affirms embodied identity.

Padmini's refusal to accept either fragmented man is key. She does not settle. When both men kill each other in a duel, she commits sati. Critics have read this as punishment. However, within the play's logic, it is Padmini's final choice. She will not live as half a person, nor will she be distributed between two incomplete men. Her sati is not submission to stridharma but rejection of a world that offers women only fragmented existence. As Usha Bande argues, "It is her final 'no' to patriarchy".

#### IV. THE DOLLS AND THE FEMALE BODY

The two talking dolls that Padmini takes to the forest are critical. They function as a chorus that voices what Padmini cannot say publicly. They comment on her sexual dreams, her pregnancy, and her dissatisfaction. The dolls, being inanimate, can speak female desire with impunity. Through them, Karnad externalizes Padmini's interiority and shows that female desire exists even when silenced.

Moreover, the dolls physically deteriorate as Padmini's conflict intensifies, suggesting a link between psychic repression and bodily decay. The female body in Hayavadana is not docile; it speaks, dreams, and finally refuses to be a site of compromise.

#### V. RESISTANCE WITHIN TRADITION

Padmini's resistance is characteristically Indian. She does not abandon marriage, leave home, or deliver feminist speeches. Instead, she works within given structures — marriage, sati, motherhood — and hollows them from inside. She bears Devadatta's child, fulfilling the wifely duty, but the child is raised

in the forest by Kapila's people, outside patrilineal control. Her legacy is thus not absorbed by either husband's lineage.

The Bhagavata's final attempt to restore order by declaring Padmini a goddess is ironic. The patriarchy can only comprehend female power by deifying it, thereby removing it from the human realm. Padmini becomes myth, but the play has already shown that myth is a human construction. Thus, Karnad leaves us with a question: if a woman must become a goddess to be whole, what does that say about the culture?

#### VI. CONCLUSION

Hayavadana reveals that female identity in India cannot be understood through Western binaries of oppression/liberation. Padmini's resistance is oblique, embodied, and mediated by myth. Karnad does not offer solutions; he exposes the inadequacy of questions that ask women to choose between mind and body, duty and desire.

By making Padmini the epistemological center — the one who knows what she wants — Karnad subverts the Kathasaritsagara original where the woman is a prize for male debate. In Karnad's version, the woman stages the debate and refuses its terms. Her fragmented end is not defeat but indictment. In this sense, Hayavadana creates a distinctly Indian feminist dramaturgy where myth becomes both the cage and the key.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] U. Bande, "Desire, Body and Identity: A Feminist Reading of *Hayavadana*," *Indian Literature*, vol. 46, no. 5, pp. 178–186, 2002.
- [2] A. Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India since 1947*. Iowa City, IA, USA: University of Iowa Press, 2005.
- [3] G. Karnad, *Hayavadana*. New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 1975.
- [4] A. Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- [5] G. C. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, C. Nelson, Ed. Urbana, IL, USA: University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.

- [6] S. Tharu and K. Lalita, *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*, vol. 1. New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- [7] V. Tripathi, *Three Plays of Girish Karnad*. New Delhi, India: Prestige Books, 2004.