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Padmini And Her Feministic Voice In Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*

¹Dr. Jitendra Kumar Mishra

¹Assistant Professor

¹Department of English,

¹Lalit Narain Tirth Mahavidyalaya,

Muzaffarpur, Bihar, India

Abstract: Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* is a landmark play in Indian drama that challenges traditional notions of identity, marriage, and gender roles. This paper explores the theme of revolt against societal expectations of marriage through the character of Padmini, who embodies a feministic voice in the play. Unlike conventional portrayals of passive and sacrificial wives in Indian literature, Padmini asserts her desires and refuses to be confined by rigid marital norms. Her fascination with both Devadatta's intellect and Kapila's physicality symbolizes the inherent conflict between societal expectations and individual aspirations. Karnad critiques the institution of marriage as an inadequate construct that often fails to accommodate human complexity. Through a close comparison with the protagonists Nora and Tara, and also through her contrast with Shakuntala and Seeta, the study highlights how Padmini's character resonates with broader feminist discourses. The recurring motif of incompleteness in *Hayavadana* further underscores the limitations of traditional social structures. By analysing Karnad's use of mythology, folklore, and modern sensibilities, this paper establishes *Hayavadana* as a significant feminist text that redefines the agency of women in literature.

Index Terms - Mythology, Marriage, Identity, Gender Roles, Folk Traditions.

Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* is one of the most significant works in contemporary Indian theatre. It had first appeared in the year 1971. It is a seminal Indian play that blends mythology, folklore, and modern existential themes to explore questions of identity, completeness, and human desires. The play is based on the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, an ancient Sanskrit collection of stories compiled by Somadeva in the 11th century, and also draws inspiration from Thomas Mann's novella *The Transposed Heads* (Die vertauschten Köpfe, 1940). Mann's novella itself is a reimagining of the *Vetalpanchavimshati* (Twenty-Five Tales of Baital), a classical Indian literary collection. Karnad, in his adaptation, Indianizes the tale by embedding it within the framework of traditional folk theatre, particularly the Yakshagana performance style of Karnataka.

Set in a mythical past, *Hayavadana* tells the story of Devadatta, an intellectual, and Kapila, a physically strong man, who are both in love with Padmini. A supernatural twist occurs when their heads get exchanged, leading to an existential dilemma about identity and the primacy of body versus mind. Through this, Karnad raises profound philosophical and psychological questions about selfhood and gender roles. The subplot of *Hayavadana*, a man with a horse's head, adds another dimension to the exploration of incompleteness. The play is a landmark in Indian drama for its use of indigenous theatrical traditions and its questioning of rigid societal norms, making it a rich text for literary and cultural analysis.

With its roots firmly planted in Indian folk traditions, mythology, and theatre, the play challenges the foundational constructs of identity, love, marriage, and the nature of the human soul. Karnad's masterful blend of these elements allows the play to transcend the bounds of a typical romantic drama, becoming a profound social commentary on the structures that bind individuals—particularly women—within societal expectations. The plot centres on a love triangle involving Padmini, her husband Devadatta, and his close friend Kapila.

The conflict arises when Padmini's emotional and physical attraction to Kapila leads her to question her conventional marriage with Devadatta. She is ultimately forced to confront not only her identity but also the very institution of marriage itself.

In a society that often defines women's roles within the confines of marriage, Padmini's actions and choices in the play are revolutionary. Karnad places her at the centre of the drama as the figure whose revolt against the patriarchal confines of marriage challenges the very structure that shapes her identity. Marriage, which traditionally symbolizes security, social respectability, and the natural order of society, becomes a site of contestation for Padmini. Her refusal to abide by the conventional rules of marital fidelity and her willingness to explore personal fulfilment outside this institution reflect a feminist critique of how marriage is structured and how women are expected to fit into its roles.

By embedding this critique in the fabric of a mythological and folk-based narrative, Karnad presents a tragic yet darkly comedic exploration of the absurdities inherent in societal conventions. The play is deeply grounded in the Indian context and it touches on universal themes of identity, love, and the limitations imposed by tradition. It is a relevant and thought-provoking work even in contemporary discussions of feminism, marriage, and personal agency.

Girish Karnad was born in 1938 in Matheran, Maharashtra, and became one of India's most respected playwrights, actors, and directors. His body of work spans over five decades and includes plays, films, and television scripts. As an intellectual and creative force, Karnad drew on his vast understanding of Indian culture, mythology, and history to craft plays that not only entertained but also provoked critical thought about societal structures, political realities, and human relationships. His works often challenge traditional norms, questioning both historical legacies and the contemporary social fabric.

His plays, including *Tughlaq*, *Yayati*, *Nagamandala*, and *Hayavadana*, intertwine classical themes with contemporary issues, creating narratives that reflect the dilemmas of human existence. Karnad often used mythology and folklore to critique social structures, making his plays relevant across generations. His feminist undertones, particularly in *Hayavadana*, resonate with modern discourses on gender and identity, positioning him as a pivotal figure in post-independence Indian literature.

Karnad was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University and came back to India to work with the Kannada theatre, transforming it into a platform for social critique. His works are noted for their intellectual depth and their commentary on the complex socio-political landscape of post-independence India. Themes of identity, modernity, and the questioning of traditional values appear consistently throughout his composition.

Karnad's contribution to Indian theatre is inextricably linked to his engagement with folk traditions and mythology. His plays incorporate characters and themes from ancient Indian stories, yet he presents them in ways that challenge traditional interpretations, infusing them with modern sensibilities and moral ambiguities. *Hayavadana* stands as a prime example of this technique, drawing on the ancient folk myth of Hayavadana, a man cursed with the head of a horse, and weaving it into a modern narrative that critiques issues of identity, body, and societal roles.

As a writer, Karnad was known for his interest in social issues, particularly concerning gender roles, caste discrimination, and the institution of marriage. His critique of societal norms was not limited to abstract commentary. He used his characters and plots as vehicles to explore how entrenched cultural practices impacted individuals, especially marginalized groups like women. In *Hayavadana*, Karnad tackles the sacred institution of marriage, portraying it as a limiting and restrictive force, especially for women. In this way, Karnad's feminist inclinations are embedded in his works, and Padmini's character in *Hayavadana* is one of the most compelling representations of his feminist voice. It was a great loss to Indian literature losing him in the year 2019.

Padmini's role in *Hayavadana* can be interpreted as a manifestation of feminist rebellion against the patriarchal structure of marriage. Her revolt is not overt or violent but rather a deeply personal challenge to the limitations imposed upon her by the institution of marriage. Padmini is married to Devadatta, a scholar and a man of intellect, but her emotional and physical desires lead her to Kapila, her husband's close friend who represents a more physically robust and spontaneous existence. This emotional dissonance between the

two men—Devadatta and Kapila—forces Padmini into an existential crisis, as she attempts to reconcile her love for one and her attraction to the other. In Act I, Padmini's fascination with Kapila's physical prowess is evident when she remarks:

*"Look at those shoulders... like a lion's!
And those arms! Have you ever seen arms like those?"*

(Act I, Line 78)

This admiration for Kapila's strength contrasts with her earlier appreciation of Devadatta's intellect, indicating her struggle between emotional, intellectual, and physical fulfilment. Padmini's predicament highlights the limitations imposed on women within marriage, where they are expected to suppress their multifaceted desires in favour of societal expectations.

The primary issue at stake in Padmini's conflict is the role of marriage in defining women's identities. In traditional Indian society, marriage is often portrayed as the ultimate institution for women, one that provides them with social security, respectability, and a clear role within the family and community. However, Padmini challenges this structure by refusing to be confined by the traditional gender roles that marriage dictates. Her desire for Kapila is not merely a passing infatuation but a yearning for a more holistic sense of self-actualization—one that includes both emotional and physical fulfilment, aspects often ignored in conventional marriages. Her agency is most apparent in Act II, when she boldly declares:

"Why should I be satisfied with half when I can have both?"

(Act II, Line 132).

In traditional Indian society, marriage has been viewed as a sacred institution, one that binds individuals not just through love, but through social, economic, and religious obligations. Women, in particular, are often expected to embody ideals of purity, chastity, and devotion within the confines of this institution. However, Padmini challenges these constraints by refusing to conform to the image of the dutiful wife. Her emotional and physical attraction to Kapila, a man of contrasting personality and physicality to her husband, suggests a rebellion against the limitations of marital love. Karnad portrays this internal struggle not just as a romantic conflict but as a confrontation with the societal expectations surrounding women and marriage.

Marriage, in *Hayavadana*, is portrayed as a social construct that limits personal agency and expression. Padmini, by seeking fulfilment outside the boundaries of her marital relationship with Devadatta, challenges the notion that marriage should define her. The conflict between the characters can be seen as symbolic of the broader societal pressure placed on individuals to conform to predefined roles. In this sense, the play critiques the very fabric of marital expectations, presenting them as restrictive rather than liberating.

The character of Devadatta serves as a representation of the intellectual, idealized partner in marriage—calm, composed, and rational. Yet, his inability to fully satisfy Padmini's emotional and physical needs exposes the flaw in the notion of a perfect marriage. In contrast, Kapila represents the vitality and spontaneity that Padmini craves, and yet his external appearance, coupled with his crude behaviour, also highlights the limitations of desire when not anchored in intellectual and emotional connection.

The play's tragic resolution—where Padmini attempts to resolve her conflict through the surreal act of body-swapping—underscores the absurdity of trying to conform to rigid gendered roles in marriage. In the end, Padmini is left to reconcile the body-swap as an impossible solution, symbolizing the futility of adhering to societal expectations. By doing so, Karnad points to the inherent flaws of traditional marriage as a system that both defines and confines the identities of individuals within it.

Padmini's role as the central agent of revolt against marriage in the play is emblematic of a feminist critique that was ahead of its time, especially in the context of Indian theatre. In a society where the institution of marriage often dictates women's identities and their roles within the family and community, Padmini's search for personal fulfilment outside these structures is revolutionary. Her journey represents a challenge to the idea that women must sacrifice their desires, needs, and individuality in the name of duty or societal expectations.

Through Padmini, Karnad critiques the notion of a “perfect marriage.” Her relationship with Devadatta, while intellectually fulfilling, lacks the physical connection she craves with Kapila. Devadatta, despite being a man of wisdom and intellect, is unable to provide Padmini with the physical connection she desires, while Kapila, in contrast, represents raw vitality and sensuality. However, Kapila, though physically appealing to Padmini, is far from the ideal partner in terms of intellectual compatibility. This duality in Padmini’s affections suggests that no single individual—whether intellectual or physical—can fulfil all of one’s needs. In this way, Karnad critiques not just the institution of marriage but the very idea of a single person being the sole source of emotional and physical satisfaction.

To better understand Padmini’s role as a feminist figure in *Hayavadana*, it is useful to compare and contrast her with other prominent female characters in Indian literature who challenge societal norms, particularly in the context of marriage. One such comparison can be made with *Shakuntala*, the central character in Kalidasa’s ancient Sanskrit drama *Abhijnanasakuntalam*. Shakuntala, like Padmini, is a woman whose identity is intertwined with her relationship to a man. In Shakuntala’s case, her identity is defined by her marriage to King Dushyanta. However, unlike Padmini, Shakuntala’s identity is largely passive, defined by the male character’s actions and decisions. Shakuntala’s love and devotion to *Dushyanta*, despite his initial rejection, showcase a more traditional, idealized view of womanhood, where the woman’s role is to wait and endure. In contrast, Padmini actively seeks personal fulfilment outside of marriage, positioning her as a much more assertive and self-aware character in the feminist discourse.

Another interesting comparison can be made with *Seeta*, the heroine of the *Ramayana*, whose life is defined by her marriage to Lord Rama. Seeta’s story is one of trial and endurance, where her virtue is constantly questioned by others, and her value is measured by her fidelity to Rama. Though she undergoes numerous trials, *Seeta* remains largely a passive figure, subjected to the whims of the male characters around her. Padmini, on the other hand, actively challenges these roles and the expectations of female virtue in marriage. Her physical and emotional rebellion in *Hayavadana* represents a departure from the passive role of *Seeta*, symbolizing the complex journey of a woman’s quest for autonomy. Unlike many female characters in traditional Indian literature, Padmini does not merely endure her circumstances but actively confronts them, questioning the very foundation of her identity and desires.

Padmini’s eventual decision to swap bodies with Devadatta and Kapila—leading to an absurd and tragic resolution—is a radical attempt to overcome the limitations of identity imposed by marriage. Through the body-swap, Karnad illustrates the complexity of human identity, suggesting that it is not merely the body or mind that defines a person, but a deeper, more fluid interplay between the two. Padmini’s ultimate inability to find resolution through this act reflects the impossibility of reconciling her desires with the expectations of marriage. The absurdity of the body-swap itself is a critique of the societal constructs that try to define individuals in rigid, dichotomous roles, particularly in terms of gender and marital fidelity.

Padmini’s character finds parallels in other literary works that explore themes of female agency and rebellion against societal constraints. For instance, Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* presents Nora Helmer, who, like Padmini, challenges marital norms by seeking personal fulfilment beyond the confines of her prescribed role as a wife and mother. Nora says,

“I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I was Papa’s doll-child. And the children have been my dolls in turn. That is what our marriage has been, Torvald.”

(A Doll’s House, Act – III)

Similarly, in Mahesh Dattani’s *Tara*, the protagonist Tara grapples with gender-based discrimination, much like Padmini’s struggle against societal expectations of marriage. Both characters reject the notion of silent suffering instead of seeking agency over their lives. Tara says,

“I plan to take up a course in science. I am going to be independent, Chandan. I don’t want to be someone’s wife who just serves tea.”

(Tara, Act – II)

Another parallel can be drawn with Mohan Rakesh's *Ashad Ka Ek Din* (One Day in the Rainy Season), which also interrogates the nature of identity and the limitations placed upon individuals in relationships. In Rakesh's play, the protagonist, Kapil, is torn between his duties as a writer and his desires for personal freedom. Like Padmini in *Hayavadana*, Kapil grapples with the expectations placed upon him by both his social role and his internal desires. The central difference lies in the nature of their conflicts—where Padmini's identity is shaped and defined by her relationships with Devadatta and Kapila, Kapil's struggle is more focused on his role as a creator in a society that demands conformity. Both plays, however, explore the alienation that comes from the limitations imposed by societal and familial expectations.

In terms of dramatic structure, *Hayavadana*'s blend of folk theatre and modern elements creates a unique narrative that evokes both mythological traditions and contemporary sensibilities. Its dramatic form, which incorporates elements of absurdist theatre, surrealism, and dark humour, sets it apart from more traditional works. The body-swap element, which serves as a catalyst for Padmini's personal revolt, brings a philosophical depth to the discussion of identity and self-actualization. This surreal twist highlights the play's existential theme—how far can a person go in seeking personal fulfilment without losing their sense of self? Similarly, the character of Hayavadana, who longs for the human form but is cursed to live as a horse-headed man, represents the absurdity of trying to resolve an existential dilemma through external change. This connects deeply to the theme of identity, particularly for women like Padmini, who are often expected to conform to prescribed roles without questioning their underlying assumptions.

The absurdity of the body-swap and the unresolved conclusion of *Hayavadana* invite audiences to reflect on the limitations of human agency. Just as the characters in the play are trapped in a cycle of identity crises and unresolved desires, so too are individuals in society often constrained by the very systems they seek to challenge. This existential dilemma—between the personal and the social—forms the heart of the play's critique of marriage and identity.

The absurdity of *Hayavadana* lies not only in its fantastical premise of body-swapping and the mythological references but in the way it exposes the absurdity of social conventions surrounding marriage. Throughout the play, Karnad uses humour and satire to reveal the way marriage, a sacred institution in many cultures, can become a form of social control. In a society where marriage is the ultimate symbol of respectability, Padmini's refusal to adhere to its confines exposes the powerlessness of individuals—particularly women—within this framework.

Marriage, in Karnad's play, is a performative act that masks the deeper emotional and physical needs of individuals. Padmini's attraction to Kapila, a man who is more physically appealing to her than Devadatta, demonstrates that emotional fulfilment and physical attraction are both integral to a woman's identity. In a traditional marriage, these needs are often sidelined, as the focus is placed on maintaining familial honour, social status, and procreation. Padmini's revolt against these restrictive roles is both an act of personal rebellion and a critique of the societal structures that perpetuate them.

However, Padmini's actions are not without consequence. The tragic resolution of the body-swap—where the characters remain in a liminal state of unresolved identities—emphasizes the complexity of this revolt. It suggests that while it is possible to challenge societal expectations, there is no simple or easy resolution to the tensions between individual desires and social constructs. Padmini's fate, ultimately unresolved and tragic, points to the deep struggles women face when attempting to transcend the roles society imposes on them. Her revolt, while courageous, is not without its own limitations.

Karnad's feminist critique is not limited to Padmini's character alone. The play as a whole critiques the rigid gender roles that define the institution of marriage. Devadatta and Kapila, too, are caught in a web of societal expectations that limit their agency. While they are not directly oppressed in the same way as Padmini, they are still bound by the norms of honour, duty, and loyalty that dictate their actions. Devadatta's emotional stoicism, his inability to respond to Padmini's desires, and his devotion to societal ideals of wisdom and intellect all serve to highlight the restrictions placed on men as well. Even though the play's central feminist focus is on Padmini, it also critiques the broader social expectations that shape all individuals, regardless of gender.

Hayavadana is a strikingly complex and layered exploration of identity, gender roles, and the limitations of marriage. Padmini's journey in the play represents a feminist revolt against the societal expectations imposed on women within the institution of marriage. Her refusal to be defined by the roles that marriage assigns her is a courageous and tragic attempt to assert her individuality and autonomy. By challenging the very foundation of marriage as an institution, Padmini reflects the broader struggles that women face when trying to assert their desires in a world that often seeks to constrain them.

Through the surreal and tragic events that unfold in *Hayavadana*, Karnad opens up a dialogue about the limitations of social conventions and the complexity of human identity. The play does not offer easy solutions or resolutions but instead invites the audience to reflect on the absurdities of social expectations and the impossibility of resolving the tensions between individual desires and societal norms. In this sense, *Hayavadana* is a timeless work that continues to resonate with contemporary audiences, especially in the context of ongoing feminist struggles for gender equality and individual freedom.

By juxtaposing Padmini's personal revolt with other similar characters in Indian literature, such as *Shakuntala* and *Seeta*, the play underscores the complexity of female agency in a patriarchal society. Padmini is not merely a passive figure who suffers the consequences of social norms but an active agent who challenges the very fabric of those norms. Her tragic fate is not a defeat but an invitation to question the assumptions that underlie the institution of marriage and the role of women within it. In doing so, Karnad's *Hayavadana* offers a powerful feminist critique that remains relevant to contemporary debates about gender, identity, and societal roles.

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