
Exploring Dissatisfaction and the Quest for Perfection in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*

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ABSTRACT

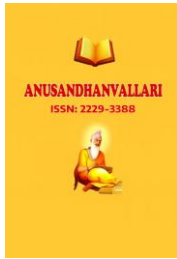
This study presents the constant feeling of dissatisfaction and the quest for perfection in humans with the help of Girish Karnad's novel *Hayavadana*. Humans are not satisfied with what they have been doing to achieve their goals and desires. In other words, humans become the most dissatisfied beings in the world because their desires grow exponentially. As seen by the difficulties faced by the protagonists in this story, this unquenchable desire for more frequently results in a cycle of unmet expectations. Karnad beautifully illustrates how this constant desire may distort identity and create internal conflict, ultimately calling into question the fundamental basis of what it means to be entire. The phrase "I want exactly what I want" corrupted the human mind for a prolonged span of time, which made them forget the gratitude of life. In *Hayavadana*, Girish Karnad's view of a particular character shares the idea of how humans are filled with discontent with what they have in the present. This paper examines the causes of discontent and the need for perfection and offers strategies for overcoming this feeling.

KEYWORDS

Identity, Dissatisfaction, Imperfection, Transformed heads

Introduction

Girish Karnad was an eminent Indian actor, film director, and distinguished writer in the Kannada language. He was awarded the prestigious 1998 Jnanpith Award—the highest literary honor in India. Over the course of four decades, Karnad authored numerous plays, often using historical and mythological themes to explore and critique contemporary social and political issues. His works were also translated into English, earning him significant recognition and critical acclaim. Apart from history and mythology, Girish Karnad's plays focus on social and political issues and often criticize unfair systems. Through his compelling narratives, Karnad challenged audiences to reflect on their own identities and societal values, making his contributions invaluable to Indian theatre. His ability to weave complex characters and intricate plots allowed him to resonate with a diverse audience, ensuring that his legacy would endure for generations to come. Karnad's influence extended beyond the stage; he was also an accomplished filmmaker and writer, further enriching the cultural landscape of India. His works continue to inspire new generations of playwrights and artists, fostering a deeper understanding of the human experience across various contexts. He explores personal identity, especially the challenges of



balancing old traditions with modern life. His works also look at human emotions, relationships, and moral choices.

Karnad's *Hayavadana* (1971), a Kannada drama with the literal meaning 'Horse-face,' is a deeply layered piece that combines imagination, humour, and emotional reflection. The play's plot is based on Thomas Mann's novella *Transposed Heads*, which was inspired by the *Kathasaritsagara*, an eleventh-century Sanskrit work. Through its exploration of identity, desire, and the nature of human connections, *Hayavadana* dives into the complexities of selfhood and the quest for wholeness. The play's distinct characterisation and symbolic usage of the horsehead theme highlight the protagonists' hardships, eventually compelling audiences to confront their own conceptions of love and fulfilment. The interplay of these topics prompts viewers to consider the contrast between physical and emotional identity. As the characters navigate their interwoven destiny, the spectator is challenged to consider the essence of what it is to be entire in a world where desires frequently conflict with reality. This investigation of identity and desire not only adds depth to the story, but it also has a personal resonance, encouraging spectators to reflect on their own experiences and decisions. As a result, the story transcends its fictitious confines, serving as a mirror to reflect the intricacies of human relationships and the pursuit of happiness.

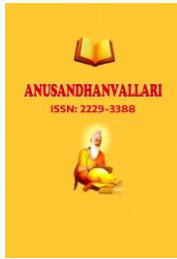
The Symbolism of Incompleteness: Lord Ganesha as Divine Framework

In the play *Hayavadana*, Girish Karnad has discussed how humans are dissatisfied about their appearance and with what they have the play began with the introduction of Lord Ganesha as "Oh, elephant-headed Herambha," symbolizing the incompleteness of God's appearance. Ganesha is a Hindu god uniquely characterised by his youthful human body and the head of an elephant. Even though Lord Ganesha is the remover of obstacles he can't remove his own obstacles. On the other hand, for Lord Ganesha, it is not an imperfection in his eyes. But the specific characters in *Hayavadana* are not portrayed with the same level of tolerance and acceptance for imperfection. This contrast highlights the theme of identity and the struggle for self-acceptance within the play. While Ganesha embodies a harmonious balance between his divine nature and physical form, the characters in *Hayavadana* grapple with the societal expectations and personal insecurities that arise from their own perceived flaws. These struggles ultimately lead them to confront the complexities of their identities and the lengths they will go to achieve a sense of completeness. In doing so, the play invites the audience to reflect on the nature of perfection and the acceptance of one's true self, even amidst societal pressures.

Hayavadana's Struggle with Identity and Appearance

The play moves towards the other character called Hayavadana, a creature with a horse head and human body, the offspring of a deity in horse form and a woman. The appearances of Hayavadana and Lord Ganesha are similar to each other. The contrast between these two characters lies in their acceptance of their appearance. Lord Ganesha embraces his form, while Hayavadana struggles to embrace it. He asks Bhagavata, "What else? What rishi? What sage? What? Who have I wronged? What have I done to anyone? Let anyone come forward and say that I've done him any wrong. I know I haven't—I know I haven't yet..." His voice quivers with desperation as he seeks validation for his existence, yearning to understand the roots of his torment. Unlike Lord Ganesha, who embodies wisdom and tranquillity despite his unique form, Hayavadana feels trapped in a cycle of self-doubt, questioning his identity and purpose in a world that seems to judge him solely by his appearance.

As he grapples with these feelings, he wonders if true acceptance will ever be within reach. The thought gnaws at him, a relentless reminder that wisdom and tranquillity may seem distant when one is ensnared by the



confines of self-perception and societal expectation. In his quest for comprehension, Hayavadana begins to investigate his relationships with others around him, thinking that true connections will provide a glimpse of the acceptance he seeks. Each interaction reflects his inner conflict, exhibiting both the warmth of fellowship and the harshness of prejudice that frequently lurks beneath the surface. As he navigates these intricate dynamics, Hayavadana realises that true wisdom is often found in embracing vulnerability and admitting his and others' flaws. During his trip, he discovers that acceptance is more than just fitting into predetermined moulds; it is about celebrating the unique tapestry of human experience that connects us all.

The Quest for Transformation and Completeness

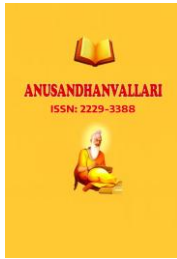
This reveals his hatred towards his appearance. He ends up questioning everything and everyone, desperately seeking validation that he doesn't deserve this, insisting on his own innocence and the injustice of his appearance since he has committed no wrong. This internal struggle consumes him, leading to a profound sense of isolation. He longs for acceptance but fears that his outward flaws overshadow his true self, leaving him trapped in a cycle of self-doubt and despair. As he navigates this tumultuous emotional landscape, he finds himself withdrawing from those who might offer solace, convinced that they too will judge him harshly. Each interaction becomes a reminder of his perceived shortcomings, deepening his belief that true connection remains forever out of reach. However, a glimmer of hope lingers beneath the layers of insecurity, compelling him to pursue moments of vulnerability. Perhaps, he muses, if he could muster the courage to share his struggles, he might discover that others too carry their own burdens, and in that shared experience, find a bridge to genuine understanding and companionship.

This sentence demonstrates that he considered his horse head as a burden to lead his life, so he keeps on looking for a person who is able to free him by removing his horse head throughout his life. Later, Hayavadana goes to Kali's temple, hoping that the only person who can change him as a human is Goddess Kali. When she appeared, he wished, "Mother, make me complete," before he completed the sentence as "Make me a complete man." She replied to him, "So be it," so that he had changed as a horse. Even though Hayavadana changed as a horse instead of a human, which was against his wish, he feels happy because all he wanted was a complete form, neither a horse nor a human. The only disappointment that he had after achieving his horse form was his human voice. Later, a young boy's help fulfilled his wish.

The boy, intrigued by Hayavadana's plight, sought to help him regain his lost identity. Through their unlikely friendship, they embarked on a journey to find a way for Hayavadana to embrace both his human voice and horse form, ultimately discovering that true fulfilment lies not in physical form but in understanding and accepting one's true self. As they travelled together, they encountered various challenges that tested their bond and revealed the deeper connections between identity, voice, and the essence of being. However, the true significance lies in the bonds we establish with others. These connections not only shape our understanding of ourselves but also illuminate the paths we choose to walk. Through shared experiences and mutual support, they realized that embracing their unique identities could lead to a profound sense of belonging and purpose.

Padmini's Dilemma: The Conflict Between Mind and Body

Padmini, the other character, strongly reflected a sense of incompleteness and struggles to embrace the present. She is depicted as an attractive young woman who is considered suitable for marriage. Drawn to Devadatta's brilliant mind, Padmini marries him. However, as time passes, she begins to realise that his intellectual pursuits often overshadow their emotional connections. This leaves her feeling increasingly isolated, caught between her



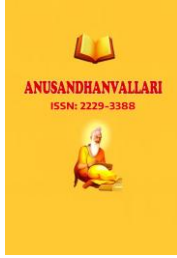
admiration for his brilliance and her yearning for a deeper, more fulfilling relationship. However, she quickly learns the extent of his sensitivity when her playful, yet sharp, comments unintentionally wound him. She expresses her thoughts about Devadatta by saying "You truly lack a sense of humour. I'm unsure of how you'll navigate life with such grace! You are still a baby..."

These lines show how sensitive Devadatta was in every situation. Despite marrying Devadatta for his intellect, Padmini finds that her needs are not fully met. She started looking for her needs in Kapila while she was pregnant with Devadatta's child that made Devadatta to end his life. She was impressed by Kapila's muscular body the same way she was impressed by Devadatta's mind. It almost ends up like a war between mind and body. Padmini's character embodies the internal conflict between passionate love and carnal desire, between virtue and vice. Her yearning for Devadatta's affection while simultaneously desiring Kapila's physical strength exemplifies the inherent duality of human desires and the inherent impossibility of achieving complete fulfillment. Upon witnessing the demise of both men, Padmini experienced no guilt regarding Devadatta's tragic fate, a consequence of her own unconventional actions. Instead, her thoughts were consumed by practical concerns: her immediate course of action, the means of returning home, and the daunting task of explaining the extraordinary events that had transpired.

Initially, Padmini views the accidental head-switching as a fortunate solution that combines Devadatta's intellect with Kapila's strength. Yet, as the men's bodies inexorably return to their original forms, the illusion of this ideal state shatters, leaving Padmini yearning for a life that remains forever out of reach. When both men die at the play's end, it worries her. The loss of their lives not only signifies the end of the potential she saw in their combined capabilities but also serves as a haunting reminder of the fragility of her dreams. Padmini is left grappling with the reality that sometimes, what seems like a perfect solution can lead to an irreversible tragedy, forcing her to confront the depths of her own desires and the harshness of fate. As she reflects on the choices she made, Padmini realizes that pursuing ambition often comes with unforeseen consequences. The echoes of their laughter and shared ambitions linger in her mind, compelling her to reassess her own path and the sacrifices she must weigh against her aspirations. In this moment of introspection, she acknowledges that every decision carries with it the weight of responsibility and the potential for loss. The reality of what they might cost now seems to overshadow the vibrant dreams she once held so dear, prompting her to question if the pursuit of greatness is truly worth the cost of her peace.

The Philosophy of Acceptance and Self-Realization

In the play *Hayavadana*, Hayavadana and Padmini keep on looking for perfection in their lives and forget to embrace what they have in the present. Hayavadana has the head of a horse and the body of a human, setting him apart from others. If he views this uniqueness as something special and embraces it, the struggles that once made his life painful could transform into a blessing. On the other hand, despite being impressed by Devadatta's intellect when she married him, Padmini was not satisfied. She began searching for someone else to fulfil her physical needs. At the end of the play, she feels guilty for her actions and performs Sati. Throughout the play, Padmini's character grapples with the dilemma of choosing between her mind and her body. As Girish Karnad once said, "We are all incomplete. We all need something outside us to complete us." Similarly, Padmini's misery begins when she seeks to fulfil her desires through someone outside her marriage—someone unaware of her wedlock—in pursuit of her own pleasure. This quest for fulfilment ultimately leads her down a path of self-destruction as she realises that external validation cannot replace the essence of her identity. In the end, Padmini's tragic choice to perform Sati serves not only as a reflection of her internal conflict but also as a



profound commentary on the societal constraints imposed on women, highlighting the desperate measures taken in the pursuit of autonomy and self-worth.

This moving performance emphasises the terrible realities that many women face when strict cultural conventions suppress their passions and identities. Padmini's sacrifice becomes a strong symbol of resistance, forcing a rigorous assessment of the values that determine a woman's worth in a world that frequently attempts to minimise them. In this environment, her story rings true, requiring a rethinking of the narratives that influence women's lives and choices. By facing these oppressive standards, Padmini's legacy inspires future generations to develop paths of strength and reclaim their own identities free of societal expectations. This call to action not only encourages women to establish their independence, but it also develops a communal movement for equality and respect. Padmini's story continues to be repeated, serving as a reminder that the fight for dignity and acknowledgement is still ongoing, motivating people to band together in solidarity against injustice. Communities can empower everyone to pursue their goals by embracing her spirit. Finally, Padmini's legacy stands as a beacon of hope, urging us all to challenge existing norms and advocate for a future in which everyone may thrive.

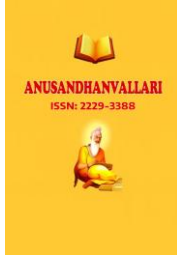
Conclusion:

Every human being in the world should know how to embrace their appearance, and life starts from there. If the appearance bothers a human for a prolonged period, it will destroy the happiness of present life. *Hayavadana* explores the fundamental question: "What makes an individual perfect?". The answer to this may vary from person to person, but one answer remains constant and stands above all: A person who finds self-satisfaction in their current circumstances can experience lasting ecstasy throughout their life. One should understand the fact that nobody is born with perfection or with all their needs. We search, comprehend, modify, and ultimately determine what is essential and what is not. Humans are made this way. We determine our needs by understanding what is important, changing it, and then deciding what is necessary. Life is not about seeking perfection; it is all about being perfect with what we have.

That's why Girish Karnad says, "One cannot be perfect. One must accept what is." This acceptance allows us to embrace our flaws and limitations, fostering a sense of contentment. It encourages us to focus on growth and improvement rather than chasing an unattainable ideal, reminding us that fulfilment comes from appreciating our journey rather than fixating on an elusive destination. Recognizing our imperfections opens us to learning and evolving. This mindset not only enhances our resilience but also deepens our connections with others, as we come to understand that everyone shares their own struggles and imperfections. Ultimately, this shared experience cultivates empathy and compassion, allowing us to support one another in our respective journeys. Embracing our vulnerabilities fosters a community where we can celebrate accomplishments and navigate challenges together, reinforcing the idea that we are never truly alone in our endeavors.

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