

**IDENTITY: A POST COLONIAL PERSPECTIVE IN GIRISH KARNAD'S  
*HAYAVADANA***

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**Abstract**

Girish Karnad exemplifies himself as a postcolonial writer through the form and structure of his plays. In his theatre European dramatic forms are superimposed with native Indian and Kannada theatrical forms. Karnad's postcoloniality is a result of his innovative application of traditional dramatic forms. He effectively domesticates the dominant theatre tradition and moulds it to give a distinct Indian experience. The identity of his theatre is defined in terms of its cultural difference from both modern European theatre and ancient Indian theatre. Karnad's theatre is a visual presentation of the resistance to colonialist discourse of theatre. It is a theatre in search of completeness of Indian experience. He has gradually evolved a postcolonial Indian theatre, indianising each of the western dramatic elements embedded in it. Karnad's play, *Hayavadana*, is in fact his understanding of the Indian theatre where each character seeks a completeness of experience

The term *post colonial* refers to the complex phase that politically engages the erstwhile colonies after the cessation of European colonization. Post colonialism designates the terrain of discourse that consists of reactions to, and analysis of, the cultural legacy of colonialism. It foregrounds the cultural transformation effected by European colonisation and the struggles endured by the once colonised subjects to reclaim their cultural identity prior to colonisation. It elucidates the dilemmas of the cultural conflict between the two worlds: the colonising and the colonised. It also points to the socio- cultural formation of the new nation states.

The origins of post colonialism can be traced back to the natives' historical resistance to colonial oppression and imperial control. The success of the natives to resist and overthrow the colonial rule empowers them to offer a radical challenge to the political and conceptual structures of the systems on which such domination has been based. It serves to challenge the hegemonic structures of the colonisers that inscribed themselves as the "ideal" and "civilized"

and denigrated the natives as wild, barbarous, and uncivilized. The postcolonial subjects have recognized the strategy of “Cultural Othering” used by the colonizers to domesticate, subordinate and control the colonies. In Edward Said’s phrase, Cultural Othering is an orientalist discourse or practice in which the Orient is constructed as the “Cultural Other” of Europe. The colonised began to re-inscribe hegemonic structures of the Empire that silenced them for ages. Hence, post colonialism involves an engagement with, and a contestation of the coloniser’s discourses, power structures and social hierarchies. It works through the process of “writing back” to the Empire, “re-writing” and “re-reading” its canonical texts to explore the disparate treatment meted out to the pre-colonial people. It consists of the practice of “de-scribing” the empire in which the canons of imperial discourses are re-written to retrieve the cultural identity lost in the colonial oppression. The writing back or the de-scribing can be done in many ways. One of the means is to decolonise the landscape: to imaginatively reconstruct a landscape where the residue of colonisation are conspicuously absent. Dramatist like Wole Soyinka and Girish Karnad construct locales emptied of colonial markers with a view to reconstructing their cultural identity. They landscape their resistance to dominate power structures in life and also dominate literary forms in writings. This is a way to expunge both the consciousness and imagination of the ensnaring images of colonisation. Rather, it is a spade work to cultivate a postcolonial identity.

Identity, as a discourse, has been variedly defined. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines it as “the characteristic feelings or beliefs that distinguish people from others: a sense of national, cultural, personal group identity” (Fowler & Fowler 435). Much of the debate about identity in recent decades has been about personal identity, specifically about personal identity over time; however, identity in general and the identity of things or of other kinds have also attracted attention. Identity is a complex human phenomenon and it depends upon a variety of social factors. It is not the same as being identical: two things may look similar or have similar characteristics but that does not necessarily indicate that both share same identity. It is possible for two objects to be identical in all respects, and at the same time to differ in specific details. In spite of two things being identical, it is possible to discern a feature or a set of features in one of them which the other does not possess.

Stuart Hall opines that identity is not as transparent and unproblematic as is generally thought to be. He argues that identity should not be conceived as an essence, in contrast, identity should be perceived as a matter of “positioning” the situation to which a person is positioned at a particular moment of his/her identity at that point of time (120). No single category to which a person belongs to a particular moment can be said to be his /her identity without determining heterogeneity of his/her affiliations. It would be to limit the plurality of associations made by him/her in life and to fix a person into static category. Hall opines that “instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact ... we should think of identity as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (110). Amartya Sen acknowledges plurality of human identities, and assesses the importance of making choice in deriving identities of a person. Sen writes, “Given our inescapably plural identities we have to decide on the relative importance of our different associations and affiliations in any particular context” (xiii). Responsibilities of choice and reasoning are important to identify a person. The problem of identifying a person should be distinguished from the problem of individualising persons. To individualise is to pick out one from many, while to identify somebody is to recognise the person as the same. So, identification is a great responsibility which must be guided by reasoning. Mere selection of a person and classifying the

person to be a member of a group would not suffice. There must be a logic behind the selection and classification which helps in recognising the person.

Speaking on identity, Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) points out that “the assertion of identity is by no means a mere ceremonial matter in the contemporary world” identity is a vital as well as a hotly disputed topic in literary and cultural studies (42). Time involves change and identity over time happens to be a controversial notion. Identity is not inherent or immanent in any object. Rather, identities are derived. It depends upon a variety of social factors. Identity or identities of a person is derived from the affiliations and associations which a person has. In this context the following statement of Amartya Sen becomes significant enough: “When we shift our attention from the notion of being identical to oneself to that of sharing an identity with others of a particular group (which is the form the idea of social identity very often takes), the complexity increases further” (xii). Depending upon social circumstance a person assumes different identities at different junctures of time.

Girish Karnad exemplifies himself as a postcolonial writer through the form and structure of his plays. In his theatre European dramatic forms are superimposed with native Indian and Kannada theatrical forms. Karnad’s postcoloniality is a result of his innovative application of traditional dramatic forms. He effectively domesticates the dominant theatre tradition and moulds it to give a distinct Indian experience. The identity of his theatre is defined in terms of its cultural difference from both modern European theatre and ancient Indian theatre. Karnad’s plays are textual paradigms of postcolonial Indian theatre. His theatre functions as an analogue for the performative potential of postcolonial theatrical experience all over the world.

Karnad’s theatre is a visual presentation of the resistance to colonialist discourse of theatre. It is a theatre in search of completeness of Indian experience. He has gradually evolved a postcolonial Indian theatre, indianising each of the western dramatic elements embedded in it. Karnad’s play, *Hayavadana*, is in fact his understanding of the Indian theatre where each character seeks a completeness of experience. It has been gradually ridding himself of the western influence he has incorporated in his early plays. Karnad has revived and improvised Indian folk tradition to produce alienation effect in his plays. He has reconstructed the past on the stage and reinvented its meaning in the context of the present. He has contemporised mythologies and mythologised human concerns in his plays. Karnad has developed a new performance aesthetics that resonates with the postcolonial identity of Indian nation.

Problematising the issues of personal identity, Karnad starts the play, *Hayavadana*, by drawing the attention of the audience to the clear dissimilarity in the figure of the elephant-headed god. If indeed the head rules the body, then why is Ganesha not like an elephant in nature?

Bhagavata: An elephant’s head on a human body, a broken rusk and a cracked belly- whichever way you look at him he seems the embodiment of imperfection, of incompleteness. How indeed can one fathom the mystery that this very Vakratunda- Mahakaya, with his crooked face and distorted body, is the Lord and Master of Success and Perfection? Could it be that this Image of Purity and Holiness, this Mangalamoorty, intends to signify by his very appearance that the completeness of God is something no poor mortal can comprehend? (CP 1 106- 107)

Hayavadana, who has a man’s body and a horse head and who all his life, has been trying to get rid of his head. Because of his incompleteness, he has no clear identity. He is in the search of identity as he is neither horse nor man. His frustration surmounts because of his own identity.

Hayavadana cries with anguish in lack of proper identity which questions his roots and makes him rootless and meaningless. He is tired of his identity that one can assess in his feelings: “What temple did I desecrate? What woman did I insult? What...” (CP 1 112)

He further says:

What else? What rishi? What sage? What? Whom have I wronged? What have I done to anyone? Let anyone come forward and say that I’ve caused him or her any harm. I haven’t – I know I haven’t. Yet... (CP 1 112)

He again questions Bhagavata helplessly: “But where’s my society?” (CP 1 114). But after a lot of struggle in the search for his identity, Hayavadana succeeds to be a complete horse with the help of Kali. The precious touch of Padmini’s son completes his search and he becomes happy. As a result, he becomes a complete horse or the complete animal.

*Hayavadana* begins not with the story of Padmini but with the incident of the horse’s head and a human bodied man which gives the play its name. Here the horse is a symbol of conflict that is produced by the identity that is not a natural part of the being but put on from outside and at the end of the play the creature loses even the human voice and becomes a horse altogether leading to a resolution of the conflict. Both the story of Hayavadana and that of the lovers explore the same theme of an adopted identity growing into the actual identity.

In case of Kapila and Devadatta in the play their conflicts of identity cannot be so simply resolved and at the end their death is the only feasible solution to the situation. Like a master of ceremonies, Padmini plays a crucial role in determining the lives of Devadatta and Kapila. Both are enamored with her and both yearn to be each other. Kapila wishes to be Devadatta so that he can express his love to Padmini while Devadatta wishes to be Kapila so that he can charm his wife and win her love.

Devadatta finds it hard to cope with the playful banter of Padmini. Devadatta’s painful awareness of Padmini’s love for his friend drives him to take an extreme action. He kills himself. His sacrifice before Kali however fills Kapila with intense anguish and he also beheads himself. Padmini’s elegiac mourning and the decision to end her life rouses Kali from her deep sleep and Kali grants her the lives of her lovers. At Kali’s behest, Padmini puts the heads back. But in her excitement she mixes them up, so Devadatta’s head goes to Kapila’s body and Kapila’s to Devadatta’s body. So, in their Ujjain trip, Kapila and Devadatta lose their real identities and their identities are totally mixed and interchanged.

The mixed up heads create multiple problems since Padmini as a lawfully wedded wife must go to Devadatta and also because as a mother to be, the paternity of her child is dependent on whom she chooses as a husband. In an acrimonious debate that follows both assert their claim on Padmini and Padmini expediently chooses the head of Devadatta and the body of Kapila.

Devadatta is happy with the body of Kapila which Padmini loves silently. But Kapila becomes rootless and feels lost and questions what his real identity is. He realises his false identity for which he has sacrificed too much. He exists but his identity is questionable. He is puzzled too much but tries to compromise with Devadatta’s body. Now, Padmini is also not with him. When his identity changes, he is happy with the hope to have Padmini. But now his changed identity becomes a too heavy burden upon him to bear. So Padmini becomes the cause of the rootlessness of Kapila.

Padmini is now very happy, but she is under a delusion that she has searched the real identity of transformed Devadatta. Head governs the body and hence Devadatta changes. Ruled by the mind, the body of Devadatta begins to attain its former impulses and former shape and he is no longer a strong bodied man. If Devadatta seems to have won in the beginning, his victory is

only illusory and Kapila's efforts always continue. In his search for identity, Kapila is always in the river of turmoil, all his peace and pleasure are devastated but unfortunately he does not find his authentic identity. He feels that Devadatta and Kapila cannot change their identity once more. Padmini's search for the complete man who must have the best attributes of mind and body is frustrated in spite of her best efforts and Padmini realises that it is mind that is always supreme and always determines what a man's identity is and will become. Devadatta comes. Both Kapila and Devadatta fight and kill each other. Padmini performs *sati*. None of them attains completeness. One can assess that the loss of their identities are full of complexity and doubt which becomes instrumental in their doldrums' spirit. They do not wish to live any more in future. They live in their meaningless context world as they are men of no identity. There is no other way in which they could have accepted a resolution of their crisis. Going back to their old bodies could have made the situation more complex. The idea is to present the conflict as a result of putting on a false identity that a reversal would not have brought on as effectively and death is suggested as the end of the problem.

One witnesses a search for identity in the life of Hayavadana's father. Hayavadana (a man with horse head) is the son of the great princess of Karnataka and a Celestial Being. Hayavadana's mother is told to choose her own husband. So the princes of every kingdom in the world were invited from the different countries like China, Persia and Africa. But she threw a look at the handsome prince of Araby sitting on his great white stallion and she fainted. The horse is declared as her husband by her father after a lot of efforts to dissuade her not to marry with horse. But in reality, the horse was not a horse but he turned into the form of horse on account of the curse by Kubera. Therefore, the horse is always in a search for his identity. Hayavadana tells the story in this way:

She lived with him for fifteen years. One morning she wakes up-- and no horse! In its place stood a beautiful Celestial Being, a *gandharva*. Apparently this Celestial Being had been cursed by the god Kubera to be born a horse for some act of misbehaviour. After fifteen years of human love he had become his original self again. (CP 1 114)

Having released from his curse, Hayavadana's father asked his mother to accompany him to his heavenly abode but she did not. She poses him a bet that "she would come only if he became a horse again" (CP 1 114). So he cursed her to be a horse. He does not agree to leave his identity again because he could understand the pangs of losing identity. Now his mother is left to experience a losing identity.

The confusion of the identities reveals the ambiguous nature of the human personality. When *Hayavadana* begins, a mask of Lord Ganesha is brought on the stage and the Bhagavata (the Sutrardhar or commentator) sings verses in praise of Vakratunda- Mahakaya (Ganesha) with the crooked face and imperfect and distorted body who is the Lord and Master of success and perfection. Ganesha, whose function is to avert imperfections, is himself startlingly imperfect, a bizarre mixture with a "crooked face and distorted body" (CP 1 106) and he himself has two identities.

Padmini's son, who survived his mother's fate and has the power to complete himself, the horse and the play, acquires a symbolic role as ancestor of a future generation. Hayavadana, almost complete, struggles to lose his "cursed human voice" (CP 1 183) by singing the national anthem, which he has noticed always seems to spoil people's voice although without success. Ultimately, the interdependence of these two "incompletes" is made obvious when the comic exhibition of Hayavadana provokes the boy's socialisation. The child now is laughing and riding

on the horse's back, and the shared laughter turns the horse's human moan into a whinny, thereby both acquiring complete identity. In brief, Karnad skilfully mirrors the search for the identity through his characters that are constantly in search for their identity.

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