



Padmini in Hayavadana: Desire, Choice and Fragmented Identity

P Appala Konda¹, Dr. K. Surya Chandra Rao²

¹Ph.D Research Scholar in English, Dr.B.R. Ambedkar University Etcherla, Srikakulam

²Professor, MA, M Phil, Ph.D Principal Govt Women's College (Autonomous), Srikakulam-532001

Abstract-- Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* (1971) uses the folk motif of transposed heads to explore the crisis of female identity in a patriarchal society. This paper focuses on Padmini, the central female character, to argue that her journey embodies the conflict between Desire, Choice, and Fragmented Identity. Torn between Devadatta, the intellect, and Kapila, the body, Padmini is forced to exercise agency in a world that defines women through male relationships. The surgical exchange of heads literalizes the fragmentation women experience under patriarchy, where body and mind, desire and duty, are constantly split. Through Padmini, Karnad questions whether a woman can ever achieve a "whole" identity or if she is doomed to remain a site of contestation between male ideals. Drawing on feminist theory and Indian folk tradition, this paper contends that Padmini's final act is not defeat but a radical assertion of choice, making her one of the most complex female figures in modern Indian drama.

Keywords-- Girish Karnad, *Hayavadana*, Padmini, Female Identity, Feminist Drama, Indian Theatre, Desire, Fragmentation, Agency, Patriarchy, Yakshagana

I. INTRODUCTION

Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* is based on Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads*, which itself derives from the Sanskrit *Kathasaritsagara*. While the play appears to be a mythological fantasy, it is a profound psychological study of identity. At the center of this crisis stands Padmini. She is not a passive object but the axis around which the tragedy revolves. This paper examines Padmini through three lenses: Desire - what she wants; Choice - how she exercises agency; and Fragmented Identity - the consequence of living in a patriarchal structure.

II. DESIRE: THE SPLIT BETWEEN MIND AND BODY

Padmini's desire is presented as dual from the beginning. She marries Devadatta for his "beautiful head" and "learning", Sir. She says: "His voice... like the sound of a temple bell". This is desire for intellect, status, and poetry.

However, after marriage she is drawn to Kapila, the "body". She admits: "Kapila's shoulders... like a mountain". This is desire for physical strength and protection.

Karnad thus shows that female desire in patriarchy is not allowed to be "whole". Society forces women to separate intellect from body, and Padmini internalizes this split.

III. CHOICE: AGENCY IN A MAN'S WORLD

The head-transplant is the turning point. When Padmini discovers the mistake, she makes an active choice. She rejects Devadatta's head on Kapila's body and chooses Kapila's head on Devadatta's body.

This is a radical act, Sir. She is saying: "I want the body of Kapila and the status of Devadatta". For the first time, she is not chosen - she chooses.

Feminist critic Elaine Showalter calls this "the moment of female self-naming". Padmini refuses to be a prize. She becomes the subject. But society punishes this choice.

IV. FRAGMENTED IDENTITY: THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF WHOLENESS

After the exchange, neither man is "complete" and Padmini's life becomes impossible. Devadatta-Kapila is intellect without courage. Kapila-Devadatta is strength without learning.

Padmini is now blamed for the disaster. The Bhagavata and society ask: "Why did you choose?"

Her final act of sati is debated. Is it defeat or control? This paper argues it is control. By choosing death, she refuses to live in a world that will always see her as "Devadatta's wife" or "Kapila's lover". She chooses to end the fragmentation on her own terms. Thus, Padmini moves from fragmented identity to a tragic but complete self-definition.

V. CONCLUSION

Padmini in *Hayavadana* is not a victim. She is a woman who dares to desire, dares to choose, and pays the price for it. Karnad uses the folk device of head-swap to expose a modern truth: patriarchy fragments women by forcing them to choose between mind and body, desire and duty. Padmini's story is the story of every woman who tries to be whole in a world that demands she be half. Her tragedy is therefore her resistance.



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