

Hayavadana

By

Girish Karnad

Glossary of Key Terms

Tragicomedy:	A play that mixes both serious (tragic) and funny (comic) events. It makes the audience both laugh and feel sad.
Climax:	The most exciting or important moment in a story or play, where the main conflict reaches its highest point.
Antagonist:	The main force or problem that opposes the hero or creates conflict in the story. It may be a person, a group, or even an idea (like human weakness in <i>Hayavadana</i>).
Theatre of Roots Movement:	An Indian theatre movement that began after independence. Playwrights used Indian traditions (mythology, rituals, dance, music) to create modern plays instead of only following Western styles.
Mythology:	A collection of traditional stories, usually about gods, heroes, and supernatural events, which explain culture and beliefs.
Psychological Conflict:	A struggle inside a character's mind, usually between feelings, desires, and duties.

Short life sketch of Girish Karnad

Girish Karnad was born in a Brahmin family. From childhood, he liked travelling theatre groups. He studied Mathematics and Statistics at Karnatak Arts College and completed his graduation in 1958. After this, he went to England as a Rhodes Scholar and studied Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Oxford University. During this time, he wrote his first play called *Yayati*. Later, he worked for Oxford University Press for seven years. After that, he started writing full time for theatre and films. For about forty years, he continued writing plays. In his plays, he often used stories from history and mythology to talk about modern-day issues.

For his great work in theatre, he received many awards. In 1974, he got the **Padma Shri**, one of the highest civilian awards in India. In 1992, he received another big award, the **Padma Bhushan**, for his contribution to arts. In 1999, he was given the **Jnanpith Award**, which is India's greatest literary award.

Historical background

In 1947, when Karnad was a child, India became free from British rule. During the British time, most theatre in India was about performing plays by Shakespeare. After independence, Indian playwrights and directors wanted to remove this colonial influence. They tried to build a new Indian theatre by using elements from religion, classical dance and music, martial arts, and Sanskrit traditions. This effort was called the “**theatre of roots**” movement. Karnad's plays were also part of this movement. However, he also borrowed some ideas from Western theatre, such as using **choruses** and **masks** from Greek drama. The “theatre of roots” movement became very popular in the 1960s and 1970s, which was the same time when Karnad started writing plays.

Inspiration and Other Works

Hayavadana is inspired by a 1940 novella written by Thomas Mann called *The Transposed Heads*. The story of Devadatta, Kapila, and Padmini comes from this novella. But Karnad gives more importance to the inner, psychological struggles of the three characters than Mann did. Thomas Mann himself got the idea for *The Transposed Heads* from an old Sanskrit text of the 11th century called the *Kathasaritsagara*.

Some of Karnad’s other early plays also deal with deep philosophical and psychological themes. For example, in *Yayati*, Karnad retells an ancient Hindu myth about duty and responsibility, where a father and son exchange their ages. Another play, *Tughlaq*, is based on the life of Sultan Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq, a 14th-century ruler of India. This play shows the loneliness of a king and the struggles of leadership.

In both *Yayati* and *Tughlaq*, Karnad studies the psychology of his characters—whether they are from myths or from history—to show important truths about human life.

Key Facts

Full Title:	<i>Hayavadana</i>
Year Written:	1971
Place Written:	Madras (today called Chennai), India
Year Published:	1972
Literary Period:	Part of the “Theatre of Roots” movement in Indian drama
Genre:	A play, written as a tragicomedy (a mix of serious and comic elements)
Setting:	The story takes place in the city of Dharmapura, in a mythical past
Climax:	Devadatta and Kapila cannot adjust after their heads and bodies are exchanged, so they finally kill each other
Antagonist (Main Conflict):	Human weakness and incompleteness; the struggle between the mind and the body

Translation and Performance of Play

Although Girish Karnad’s first language was Konkani, he wrote *Hayavadana* and most of his other plays in Kannada, which he treated as his second or adopted language. Later, Karnad himself translated *Hayavadana* into English. *Hayavadana* was originally performed by The Madras Players, Karnad’s local theatre company.

Act-Wise Summary of *Hayavadana*

By

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Act 1

The play begins with a mask of Lord Ganesha. Ganesha is a Hindu god who has the head of an elephant and the body of a boy. The mask is placed on a chair in front of the audience, and a small worship ritual (puja) is performed.

The **Bhagavata** (the narrator) asks Lord Ganesha, who is known as the “**remover of obstacles,**” to bless the play and make it successful. He explains that Ganesha may look imperfect because he has the head of an elephant and the body of a boy. But, he adds, Ganesha is actually complete in a way that ordinary humans cannot fully understand.

The **Bhagavata** begins to tell the story of the play. First, he describes the setting—the kingdom of **Dharmapura**. Then he introduces the two main characters, **Devadatta** and **Kapila**. Devadatta is fair, handsome, and the son of a Brahmin. He is a very intelligent poet and defeats even the best poets and scholars in arguments about logic and love. Kapila, in contrast, is the son of a blacksmith. He is dark-skinned and not very handsome. But he is strong, brave, and full of energy. He is good at physical activities like dancing and showing feats of strength. The Bhagavata explains that people admire the deep friendship between the two men. He sings that they are like two friends who share “**one mind and one heart.**”

At that moment, an **actor** suddenly runs onto the stage, screaming in fear. The **Bhagavata** tries to calm him down, saying that there is nothing scary on the stage—only the musicians and the audience are present. The actor then explains what frightened him. He says that while hurrying to his performance, he needed to go to the bathroom. With no proper place nearby, he sat by the roadside. Suddenly, a voice told him not to do that. He looked around but saw no one. When he tried again, the same voice stopped him once more. Finally, when he looked up, he saw that the voice was coming from a **talking horse** standing in front of him.

The **Bhagavata** does not believe the actor's story. He tells the actor to go and get ready with costume and makeup for the performance. But the actor shows his trembling hands and says he is too scared to act or even fight with a sword. Seeing this, the Bhagavata has no choice. He sends the actor back to check again if there really was a talking horse. The actor goes unwillingly, still afraid.

The **Bhagavata** tries once more to continue his story. But suddenly, the actor runs back onto the stage, shouting that the strange creature is coming. The Bhagavata says that if the actor is so afraid, then they should hide the creature from the audience. So, two stage hands hold up a curtain. At that moment, the creature—**Hayavadana**—enters and stands behind the curtain. The audience can hear him crying. The Bhagavata asks the stage hands to lower the curtain. But whenever the curtain is lowered enough to show his head, Hayavadana quickly hides behind it. Finally, the curtain is dropped completely, and the audience sees Hayavadana's full form: he is half-horse and half-man.

The **Bhagavata** still does not believe what he is seeing. He scolds **Hayavadana**, saying that he must be trying to frighten people by wearing a mask. The Bhagavata tells him to remove the mask. When Hayavadana does not answer, the Bhagavata asks the actor to help him pull it off. They both try, but they cannot remove it. Finally, the Bhagavata admits that the horse's head is not a mask at all—it is Hayavadana's real head.

The **Bhagavata** asks **Hayavadana** who he is and why he has come there. Hayavadana replies that all his life he has been trying to remove his horse's head, and he hoped the Bhagavata could help him. He then tells his story. His mother was a princess. When she grew up, she had to choose her own husband. Many princes came to marry her, but she did not like any of them. One day, the prince of Araby came riding a big white horse. When she saw him, she fainted. Her father thought this meant she liked him, so he decided she would marry him. But when the princess woke up, she declared that she wanted to marry the horse itself, not the prince.

Hayavadana continues his story. He says that nobody could change his mother's mind, so she married the horse. For fifteen years, they lived happily together. Then, one morning, the horse changed into a **Celestial Being** (a divine figure). He explained that he had once been cursed by another god to live as a horse, but the curse said that after

fifteen years of human love, he would get back his divine form. The Celestial Being asked the princess to come with him to his **Heavenly Home**. But the princess refused unless he became a horse again. Angry, the Celestial Being cursed her and turned her into a horse. She ran away joyfully in that form, leaving **Hayavadana**, their son, behind as the child of this strange marriage.

Hayavadana asks the **Bhagavata** how he can get rid of his horse's head. The Bhagavata replies that destiny cannot be changed—"what is written on our foreheads cannot be altered." Hayavadana explains that he once tried to become a complete man by joining in the "social life of the Nation." But he could not find a place where he truly belonged. He wonders how he can ever be a complete man if he does not have a complete society around him.

The **Bhagavata** advises **Hayavadana** to visit different temples and make a vow to a god. Hayavadana replies that he has already tried many things. Then the Bhagavata remembers one more temple that he could visit—the temple of the goddess **Kali**. The Bhagavata explains that earlier thousands of people used to visit Kali's temple. But later, they stopped going because they found out that she gave everything people asked for. Hearing this, Hayavadana decides to try. He leaves for the temple of Kali, and the actor goes with him.

The **Bhagavata** now returns to the main story he had been trying to tell. He gives a short summary of what is going to happen. He says that the two close friends, **Devadatta** and **Kapila**, who were "one mind and one heart," met a woman named **Padmini**. Because of her, they "forgot themselves." In the end, however, neither of them could truly "understand the song she sang." The Bhagavata then describes a powerful image: the woman (Padmini) holding the **severed heads** of the two men, her body covered in their blood, while she dances and sings.

The **female chorus** starts to sing. In their song, they use different comparisons and questions to ask why a person's love should be restricted to only one other person. Then **Devadatta** and **Kapila** come onto the stage. Devadatta is shown as a slim and gentle-looking man, and he wears a light-colored mask. Kapila, on the other hand, is strong and muscular in appearance, and he wears a dark-colored mask.

Kapila asks his friend **Devadatta** why he did not come to the gym the night before. Devadatta seems lost in thought and answers that he was busy working. Kapila then talks excitedly about a wrestling match he won, but soon notices that Devadatta is not really listening. He guesses that Devadatta has fallen in love again. Devadatta insists that this time the girl is very special to him. He begins reciting poetry to describe her beauty and importance. But Kapila interrupts him and completes his lines, showing that Devadatta has said such things many times before. This makes Devadatta angry. He feels that Kapila is not respecting his feelings and even doubts their friendship. Kapila then declares that he is truly loyal to Devadatta. He says he would give his life for him—even by jumping into a well or walking into fire.

Devadatta, believing that his friend truly understands him, tries to explain his love more clearly. He begins expressing his feelings through new poetry. As he listens, **Kapila** realizes that this girl must be very special. Devadatta becomes sad because he feels that she is out of his reach. He promises that if he were ever able to marry her, he would offer his arms and his head to the gods as a sacrifice.

Kapila offers to help find the girl for **Devadatta**. Devadatta tells him that the night before, he had followed her home from the market. He remembers that she lives somewhere in **Pavana Veethi**, but the only detail he recalls about the house is a **two-headed bird** engraved above the door. Kapila immediately sets off to find her house and learn her name. Devadatta thinks to himself how good a friend Kapila is. But then he hesitates, wondering if it was really wise to send Kapila, because he thinks Kapila is “too rough, too indelicate.”

Kapila goes to **Pavana Veethi**, the street where merchants live. He walks past many large houses, looking for the one with the **two-headed bird** above the door. When he finds the right house, he knocks to see who lives there. The girl, **Padmini**, opens the door, and Kapila falls in love with her at first sight. Padmini quickly tests him, asking what he wants. Kapila struggles to explain why he is there. She asks if his eyes are working, and why, if he already knew the house, he was looking at all the doors. She refuses to call the master of the house, or her father or brother. Kapila is left anxious and embarrassed, trying not to reveal the real reason he has come.

Kapila finally asks **Padmini** if she knows **Devadatta**. She asks what Devadatta means to Kapila. Kapila answers that Devadatta is his greatest friend, and then adds, “but the main question now: what’s he going to be to you?” Padmini blushes at this and goes to find her mother. After she leaves, Kapila thinks to himself that Padmini needs a strong and brave man, while Devadatta is too sensitive for someone as quick and clever as her.

The **Bhagavata** says that there was no difficulty in arranging the marriage between **Padmini and Devadatta**. Padmini’s family was very rich, while Devadatta’s family was highly respected for their knowledge and learning. Because of this, the marriage took place quickly. Even after the marriage, the close friendship between **Devadatta, Padmini, and Kapila** remained strong.

The story then jumps **six months ahead**. **Padmini is pregnant**, and she, **Devadatta**, and **Kapila** are going on a journey to **Ujjain**. Devadatta admits that he feels **worried** about Padmini traveling while she is expecting a child. Padmini playfully **teases** him, saying that he is so careful and protective that it seems as if she were the **first woman ever to be pregnant**. She jokes that if she even **stumbled**, Devadatta would behave as though she had already **lost their baby**. Devadatta, however, becomes **very upset** by this teasing.

While talking, Devadatta shows that he feels jealous of Kapila and of the attention Padmini gives him. He thinks Padmini admires Kapila too much. He was upset when Padmini invited Kapila to their house at a time when Devadatta wanted to read a play to her. Once Kapila came, reading the play became impossible. Padmini asks him directly if he is jealous of Kapila, but Devadatta strongly denies it. Still, Devadatta notices that Kapila looks very happy whenever he sees Padmini. He even describes Kapila as acting like a dog that wags its tail and sits up eagerly. Devadatta wonders to himself how Padmini has not seen this behavior.

Padmini tries to calm Devadatta and says they can cancel the trip and spend the day together. She tells him she will not mind much. When Kapila comes, Devadatta tells him that Padmini is not feeling well. Kapila feels sad because this means he cannot spend time with Padmini. But when Padmini sees Kapila, she changes her mind again. She does not want to disappoint him, so she tells him to prepare the cart for the trip. Devadatta feels hurt by her sudden change of mind.

The three of them leave together in the cart. Padmini praises how well Kapila drives it. She remembers a story from soon after her marriage. At that time, Devadatta tried to drive her to a lake outside the city, but he could not control the oxen. He failed to get past the city gates, so he had to turn back home, feeling angry and embarrassed.

Padmini notices a tree with beautiful flowers called the Fortunate Lady's flower. Kapila quickly runs and climbs the tree to bring her some flowers. As she watches him, Padmini quietly admires Kapila's strong body. Devadatta also sees Padmini looking at Kapila and feels very jealous, but he keeps quiet and just watches her. At the same time, Padmini becomes worried that Devadatta has noticed her feelings for Kapila. She wonders how long she can continue living this way.

Kapila comes back with the Fortunate Lady's flowers. Padmini asks why they are called that. Kapila explains that the flowers look like the signs of a married woman: the mark on her forehead, the line of hair parting, and the dots that look like a necklace. Padmini then tells Devadatta that he should use these details in his poetry. Devadatta tries to change the mood by saying they should continue their journey. But Padmini says she would like to stay the night there, because there are many interesting places nearby, like the temple of Rudra and the temple of Kali.

Kapila and **Padmini** decide to visit the temple of **Rudra**. But **Devadatta**, still upset, says he does not want to go and will stay to watch the cart. Kapila notices the tension and offers to stay instead, but Devadatta insists that Kapila should go with Padmini. Padmini feels frustrated by Devadatta's mood and decides she will go without him. Finally, unable to resolve the argument, **Kapila goes with Padmini** to the temple. **Devadatta** says goodbye to **Padmini** and **Kapila**. Quietly to himself, he hopes that they will be happy together.

Then he remembers the promise he made to the gods to offer his arms and head. He goes to the **temple of Kali**. There, he shouts a short, sad prayer, saying that his head will be offered to the goddess. He then keeps his promise and **cuts off his head** (using the actor's mask), which takes some effort.

Padmini and **Kapila** come back from the temple of Rudra. They start to worry because they cannot find **Devadatta**. Kapila follows Devadatta's footprints to the **temple of Kali**. There, he finds Devadatta's body and feels deep **sorrow** over his friend's death.

Kapila speaks to the dead Devadatta, asking if he forgot that Kapila would have done anything for him. He admits that he knows he made mistakes but says he did not have the intelligence to act differently. Kapila says he cannot live without his friend and decides to join him in death. He then **cuts off his own head**. Later, it becomes **dark**, and Padmini notices that Kapila is also gone. She goes to the temple to look for them and finds the bodies of both men. She screams in **horror**.

In her **despair**, **Padmini** asks why the two men left her alone. She fears that if she goes home, people will think the men died over a "whore." She decides to join them in death and picks up a sword to kill herself. But the goddess **Kali** stops her.

Kali shows her **anger** that the men did not really care about offering their heads to her and only wanted to escape their problems. Kali tells Padmini that she can **bring the men back to life** if Padmini puts their heads back on their bodies. Excited, Padmini tries to do this but **accidentally puts Devadatta's head on Kapila's body and Kapila's head on Devadatta's body**. (In the play, this is done using the masks.)

When **Kali** brings **Devadatta** and **Kapila** back to life, the three of them quickly notice that something is wrong. **Padmini** explains what happened with the heads. At first, they find it **funny**. They sing a playful song and roll on the ground, laughing. But when they try to leave, **conflict** starts. Each man claims that **Padmini is his wife** and should go with him.

Devadatta (the man with Devadatta's head) says that the **head rules the body** and that a person marries the personality, not the body. **Kapila** says that his **hand held hers at the wedding**, that his body is the one Padmini has lived with for months, and that his body gave her **the child**. Therefore, he argues, he is her husband.

The argument between **Devadatta** and **Kapila** grows stronger. When Devadatta pushes Kapila aside to take **Padmini** home, Kapila asks her if Devadatta would ever have acted so **violently**. Padmini starts to go with Devadatta, and Kapila teases her, saying she only wants **his body** and Devadatta's **mind**. The **Bhagavata** interrupts, asking what the solution to this problem could be. The **curtain falls**, marking the end of **Act One**.

End of Act I

Act Two

Act Two begins with the **Bhagavata** again asking what the solution is to the problem of the exchanged heads. He explains that **Padmini**, **Devadatta**, and **Kapila** go to a **rishi** (a wise sage) for help. The **rishi** decides that the **head rules the body**. So, the man with **Devadatta's head** is Padmini's true husband.

Devadatta and Padmini celebrate this decision. Padmini feels very happy about Devadatta's **new body**. She tries to comfort Kapila by reminding him that she is, in a way, still with his body. After this, **Devadatta and Padmini go home**, while **Kapila goes back to the forest** and disappears.

Back at **Padmini and Devadatta's house**, the two live more happily than ever. Devadatta buys **dolls** for their unborn child at a fair, which makes Padmini very happy. He tells her that, on his way to the fair, he saw a **wrestler** and suddenly felt the urge to fight him. Even though Devadatta had never wrestled before, he quickly **pinned the man to the ground**. Padmini is amazed at Devadatta's **great strength**.

The **dolls** (played by children in the drama) speak directly to the audience. They talk about the **beauty of the house** and say that they deserve only the best things. They recall how, at the fair, **mothers and children looked at them with longing and desire**. The dolls also notice how **rough Devadatta's hands** are and remark that he doesn't deserve such fine dolls.

After some time, **Padmini gives birth to a baby**. Devadatta speaks to the **Bhagavata** for the first time, inviting him to the **feast** they are hosting. But the Bhagavata is surprised—he says he never heard about the feast, or even about the birth of their son.

The **dolls** complain that now everyone is giving attention only to the **baby**, and **no one cares about them anymore**. They admit that they should have been more careful when **Padmini became pregnant**, because from then on the baby was going to take their place. The dolls say that **Padmini looked ugly while she was pregnant**, but add that **Devadatta never saw her as ugly**—to him she was still beautiful.

Six months later, Padmini and Devadatta begin to argue about their baby. Padmini wants to take the child to the lake, but Devadatta feels it would be too cold for the baby to swim. Padmini thinks Devadatta is being too protective. When Devadatta touches Padmini, she suddenly shivers and gets goosebumps. A little later, Devadatta picks up one of the dolls, and the doll also shivers. The dolls then explain that Devadatta's body is slowly changing back into its weak and soft condition.

Padmini sings a lullaby to put her baby to sleep. The song is about a rider on a white horse. After singing, she herself falls asleep. While she is sleeping, the dolls begin to describe her dream. They explain that in her dream she sees a man with a rough face but a soft body. The dolls then reveal that this man is not her husband. Through this, it becomes clear that Padmini is dreaming about Kapila.

More time goes by, and Devadatta's body changes back to the way it was before. He becomes soft and weak again, without any muscles. At this point, the actor who first played Devadatta comes back to take up his role with the original mask. Meanwhile, the dolls talk about Padmini's dreams, suggesting that her dreams have now become very sexual. They begin to argue with each other about who should tell the audience these details, and in their fight, they tear each other's clothes and scratch one another. Seeing this, Padmini comments that their son's dolls are worn out and damaged. She then asks Devadatta to go and buy some new dolls for their child.

While Devadatta is away to buy new dolls, Padmini takes her son into the forest. As she walks, she imagines a kind of magical fair, inventing stories about the happenings in the forest. Before moving on, she remembers that there is something else she wants to do: greet the tree of the Fortunate Lady, the same tree connected to her earlier attraction toward Kapila.

In another area of the forest, Kapila appears, and the Bhagavata is surprised to find that he has been living there. The Bhagavata tells Kapila that Padmini has given birth to a son, but he notices the anger and tension in Kapila's movements. Kapila dismisses the Bhagavata's remarks, saying that what he is saying sounds like mere poetry, not reality.

Padmini meets Kapila in the forest. Kapila admits that he has worked very hard, almost punishing himself, to make his body strong again. He also reveals that he is disturbed by the memories that came with Devadatta's body—memories of things he never actually lived, such as moments of closeness with Padmini. Seeing her again makes those memories come alive, and it troubles him deeply. Padmini tells him that he should be able to experience those memories for himself, and gently touches his face. Then, the two of them go together into Kapila's hut. Devadatta returns from his trip with new dolls and starts looking for Padmini. On his way, he meets the Bhagavata, who is surprised to see him there. After some hesitation, the Bhagavata tells Devadatta that Padmini has been staying in Kapila's hut for the past four nights.

Devadatta finally finds Padmini and Kapila, and all three face the truth of their tangled situation. Kapila suggests that they all live together, but both men immediately reject the idea. Devadatta and Kapila then understand that the only way to end their troubled and divided lives is by killing each other. They decide to fight to the death. As the Bhagavata sings, their fight takes on a graceful, dance-like form. During the fight, Kapila injures Devadatta, causing him to fall to his knees, but Devadatta then stabs Kapila in return. Both continue to struggle on their knees until they finally die from their wounds.

Once again, Padmini is left alone. She wonders if she should have agreed to live with both Devadatta and Kapila, but she realizes that such a life would never have been possible. Accepting her fate, she decides to perform *sati*—to burn herself on the funeral pyre of the two men. She instructs the Bhagavata to take her son to the hunters living in the forest and, when the boy turns five, to return him to his grandfather in the city. Padmini then performs *sati* as the stagehands raise a curtain painted with flames higher and higher. The women's chorus repeats its opening song, asking why it is impossible to love more than one person at the same time. They call Padmini the Fortunate Lady, and the Bhagavata concludes by saying that the Fortunate Lady's tree now grows on the very spot where Padmini is believed to have died.

Just as the story appears to have ended, the Bhagavata is interrupted once again—this time by another actor who runs in, shouting in alarm that he has seen a horse singing the national anthem. The horse is soon revealed to be Hayavadana.

The first actor then comes back on stage, bringing with him a young boy who is holding a pair of dolls tightly in his hands. The boy does not smile, laugh, or speak at all. He only becomes angry and aggressive when anyone tries to touch his dolls. The Bhagavata recognizes the boy and realizes that he is Padmini's son. At that moment, Hayavadana comes back, but now he has not only a horse's head but also a horse's entire body. He explains that he had asked the goddess Kali to make him complete, but before he could finish his request, she misunderstood and turned him into a complete horse instead of a complete man. He feels unhappy because, although he now has the full body of a horse, he still speaks with a human voice.

The young boy suddenly begins to laugh at Hayavadana, which surprises the Bhagavata and the other actors. Hayavadana says that he had been singing the national anthem because it usually spoils people's voices. However, instead of continuing with that, he and the boy start singing together the lullaby that Padmini once sang — the one about the rider on the white horse.

The Bhagavata comments that the boy's laughter sounds very beautiful, but Hayavadana doubts such emotional praise. As the boy and Hayavadana keep laughing together, Hayavadana's laughter slowly turns into the sound of a horse's neigh. In this way, he finally becomes complete — fully a horse.

The Bhagavata ends the story with a prayer to Lord Ganesha. All the other characters and actors join him in offering thanks to the god for helping them complete the play successfully. In the end, they pray that the rulers of the country may be blessed with success and also with “a little bit of sense.”

End of Act II

Reference/s:

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