

# *Hayavadana*

By

Girish Karnad

## Questions and Answers

**Question No. 1: How does *Hayavadana* reinterpret Indian myths to explore the philosophical duality of mind and body (Sankhya Darshan)?**

### **Introduction:**

Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* is a remarkable modern Indian play that blends myth, folklore, and philosophy to explore the deeper questions of human existence. Drawing inspiration from ancient Indian stories and the philosophical system of **Sankhya Darshan**, Karnad uses traditional material to reflect on modern psychological and spiritual conflicts. The play examines how the **mind (Purusha)** and **body (Prakriti)** function as two essential yet conflicting aspects of human life. Through the story of Devadatta, Kapila, and Padmini, Karnad reinterprets myth to express the timeless struggle between thought and action, intellect and emotion, and the human desire for completeness.

### **Main Answer:**

Girish Karnad's play *Hayavadana* is one of the finest examples of how modern Indian drama reinterprets ancient myths to discuss timeless philosophical ideas. The play is not just a retelling of an old story but a creative reinterpretation that explores the **Sankhya Darshan** concept of the duality between **mind (Purusha)** and **body (Prakriti)**. Through the intertwined stories of Devadatta, Kapila, and Padmini, Karnad presents the eternal conflict between the physical and the intellectual, between emotion and reason, and between desire and duty.

The main story of *Hayavadana* is based on an old tale from the *Kathasaritsagara* and Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads*. It begins with two friends who are opposite in

every way — **Devadatta**, the scholarly and sensitive Brahmin, represents the **mind, intellect, and spiritual aspiration**, while **Kapila**, the strong and passionate blacksmith, represents the **body, energy, and instinct**. Both are united in friendship but become divided when they fall in love with the same woman, **Padmini**.

Padmini is fascinated by both of them — she loves **Devadatta’s intelligence and poetic nature**, but she is also drawn to **Kapila’s physical strength and vitality**. Her divided attraction becomes the centre of the play’s philosophical exploration. When the two men cut off their heads and Padmini, by mistake, places Devadatta’s head on Kapila’s body and Kapila’s head on Devadatta’s body, the myth takes a symbolic turn.

This incident is not just a dramatic event — it becomes a **metaphor for the confusion of mind and body** in human life. The question “Who is the real husband — the one with Devadatta’s head or the one with Kapila’s body?” leads to a deeper inquiry: *Which defines a person — the mind or the body?*

The **rishi’s decision** that “the head rules the body” reflects the traditional Indian belief of Sankhya philosophy, which places the **mind or consciousness (Purusha)** above the **body or matter (Prakriti)**. According to this philosophy, the human being is complete only when both aspects are in harmony. However, in *Hayavadana*, the harmony never lasts. Devadatta, after some time, loses Kapila’s physical vigor, and his body once again becomes weak and soft. Kapila, on the other hand, continues to live with strength but without peace or purpose.

Through this transformation, Karnad questions whether the **mind and body can ever be completely united**. He shows that **intellect without strength is helpless**, and **strength without thought is meaningless**. Padmini’s dilemma between the two men represents the **human search for wholeness** — a desire to unite the physical and the mental aspects of life. Yet, her tragedy also suggests that **such completeness is impossible**. No human being can ever achieve perfect unity between body and mind; life always remains incomplete.

The subplot of **Hayavadana**, the man with a horse’s head who wants to become complete, mirrors this theme of incompleteness. In the end, when he becomes a complete horse instead of a complete man, Karnad humorously but deeply comments on

the human condition — that **the desire for completeness often leads to absurdity or transformation**, not fulfillment.

Through the combination of myth, folk theatre, and philosophical reflection, Karnad reinterprets traditional stories to express a modern concern — the struggle of human identity torn between the physical and the spiritual. His use of **Sankhya Darshan's principles** gives the play a deep philosophical foundation while keeping it emotionally powerful and theatrically rich.

*Hayavadana* is not only a reinterpretation of Indian myths but also a profound exploration of **the duality of mind and body** and **the eternal human quest for completeness**. It shows that man, divided between reason and passion, intellect and instinct, can never become whole — and that this incompleteness is, perhaps, the true nature of human existence.

#### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, *Hayavadana* is a brilliant reimagining of Indian myth that presents the eternal philosophical conflict between **mind and body**, as explained in **Sankhya Darshan**. Karnad uses the myth of transposed heads and the subplot of Hayavadana to show that human beings constantly strive to unite their intellectual and physical selves but always remain incomplete. The play thus becomes both a philosophical and a psychological study of man's inner division and his longing for wholeness. By combining myth, folk tradition, and modern thought, Karnad makes *Hayavadana* a timeless reflection on the nature of human identity and the impossibility of perfect harmony between the mind and the body.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Question No. 2: Discuss the idea of identity and wholeness in *Hayavadana* in the context of the concept of *Purnatva* (completeness) in Indian philosophy.**

**Introduction:**

The idea of *Purnatva*, or completeness, is a central concept in Indian philosophy. It refers to the perfect state in which the physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of existence are in harmony. Indian thinkers believe that all human beings are essentially divine and whole, but their ignorance and desires make them feel incomplete. Girish Karnad, in his play *Hayavadana* (1971), reinterprets this philosophical idea through myth and folk elements. The play deals with the deep psychological and spiritual search for identity and wholeness. Using mythological stories, masks, and music, Karnad explores how modern human beings, like mythic figures, remain divided and incomplete — struggling to find their true selves.

**Main Answer:**

The theme of identity and wholeness lies at the very heart of *Hayavadana*. Karnad presents the idea that every human being desires to become complete, but in reality, everyone remains torn between opposing forces of body and mind, desire and duty, reality and illusion. The play's structure — two interwoven stories — reflects this duality.

The first story is about Hayavadana, a man with the head of a horse and the body of a human. His half-human, half-animal existence becomes a living symbol of incompleteness. He cannot belong to either world and suffers from an identity crisis. His quest for wholeness begins when he prays to Goddess Kali to make him “complete.” Ironically, the goddess grants his wish but turns him into a complete horse instead of a man. This humorous yet meaningful transformation suggests that completeness is possible only through acceptance — not through resistance or denial of one's true nature. Hayavadana attains peace only when he stops desiring to be something else. His journey, therefore, represents spiritual completion through self-realization.

The second and main plot — the story of Devadatta, Kapila, and Padmini — also deals with incompleteness but at a human and psychological level. Devadatta, the scholar and poet, represents intellect, reason, and spirituality. Kapila, the blacksmith and athlete,

stands for physical strength, passion, and energy. Padmini, the beautiful and sensitive woman, is caught between the two extremes — the charm of Devadatta’s mind and the attraction of Kapila’s body. She desires both, and this desire becomes the source of conflict. When the heads of Devadatta and Kapila are accidentally exchanged in the Kali temple, their identities are thrown into confusion.

This head-body exchange is a powerful metaphor for the philosophical problem of duality — mind and body cannot exist separately, yet they cannot completely unite either. Even after the exchange, Devadatta and Kapila are unable to reconcile their two halves, and Padmini continues to feel divided. This shows that human life is always fragmented, that the mind and body rarely achieve perfect balance. Their tragic deaths further emphasize that the pursuit of wholeness through desire or reason alone leads to destruction.

In the background of these human stories, Karnad uses the voice of the Bhagavata, the traditional storyteller, to remind the audience of the Indian philosophical context. The Bhagavata’s constant prayers to Lord Ganesha — the god with the elephant head — provide the symbolic framework of *Purnatva*. Ganesha, though physically incomplete, is spiritually complete. His union of human and animal forms represents the harmony that the human characters fail to achieve. Through this divine contrast, Karnad points out that wholeness is not a physical condition but a state of inner realization.

Moreover, the concept of *Purnatva* in Indian philosophy, especially in the Upanishads, teaches that everything in the universe is already complete. It is only human ignorance (*Avidya*) that creates a sense of incompleteness. The characters in *Hayavadana* reflect this ignorance — each one seeks completion through external means: Hayavadana through a change of body, Devadatta and Kapila through love, and Padmini through union with both. Their failure suggests that true completeness cannot be achieved through external change; it must come from within, through acceptance and spiritual understanding.

Hayavadana’s final transformation into a full horse — while he sings and laughs with the little boy — symbolizes the attainment of this inner harmony. The boy’s laughter represents innocence and renewal. The laughter of both — human and horse — merges into one, suggesting that unity is finally achieved, even if in a symbolic way. The ending prayer to Ganesha once again reaffirms the theme of divine completeness.

**Conclusion:**

Thus, *Hayavadana* becomes a profound philosophical exploration of identity and *Purnatva*. Karnad uses myth, folk tale, and symbolism to express the eternal human struggle between body and mind, passion and intellect, self and society. The play shows that human beings remain incomplete as long as they depend on external perfection. Wholeness or *Purnatva* is achieved only when one accepts oneself and realizes the divine completeness within. Through his poetic vision and philosophical insight, Karnad transforms an ancient Indian idea into a timeless reflection on the modern human condition.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Question No. 3: What aspects of classical Indian aesthetics (Rasa Theory) are evident in *Hayavadana*? How do they enhance the impact of the play?**

**Introduction:**

Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* is deeply rooted in classical Indian dramatic traditions and aesthetics. The play beautifully blends myth, folklore, and philosophy with the principles of **Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra***, particularly the **Rasa Theory**. According to this theory, a successful work of art must evoke certain emotions or *rasas* in the audience, leading them to a state of *rasa-anubhava* — aesthetic pleasure or emotional experience. Karnad uses these classical ideas not merely as decorative elements but as integral parts of his storytelling, enriching the emotional depth and philosophical resonance of the play.

**Main Answer:**

In *Hayavadana*, almost all the major *rasas* find expression through the characters and situations. The play opens with a prayer to Lord Ganesha, which immediately sets the tone of **Śānta Rasa (peace and devotion)**. This devotional atmosphere recalls the traditional beginning of Sanskrit dramas, aligning the play with ancient Indian performance traditions.

The **Śṛṅgāra Rasa (love and beauty)** is central to the story, seen in the passionate triangle between Padmini, Devadatta, and Kapila. Padmini's attraction to both men — Devadatta's intellect and Kapila's physical strength — reveals the complexity of human emotions. Her longing and inner conflict between mind and body create the aesthetic mood of *śṛṅgāra*, not only as romantic love but also as a symbol of desire and incompleteness.

The **Raudra Rasa (anger)** and **Vīra Rasa (heroism)** are evident in Devadatta and Kapila's friendship and rivalry. Devadatta's jealousy and violent reactions, as well as the final fight between the two friends, bring out these powerful emotions. Their duel, stylized as a ritual dance, transforms violent emotion into aesthetic experience, showing how Karnad merges traditional performance style with modern dramatic technique.

The **Karuna Rasa (pathos)** dominates the later part of the play. The tragic fates of Devadatta, Kapila, and Padmini evoke sympathy and sadness. Padmini's act of *sati* (self-

immolation) deepens the emotional impact, transforming her from a flawed woman into a symbolic figure representing eternal human longing for completeness (*purnatva*). The audience experiences compassion rather than judgment — a hallmark of classical aesthetics.

Additionally, **Hāsyā Rasa (humour)** appears through the character of Hayavadana, the man with a horse's head. His comical yet tragic situation evokes laughter mixed with pity, creating a balance between seriousness and lightness. Even the Bhagavata's commentary adds a tone of irony and humour, making the play emotionally rich and varied.

### **Integration of Rasas and Dramatic Impact:**

Karnad's artistic genius lies in how he interweaves multiple *rasas* without losing coherence. The combination of *śṛṅgāra*, *karuṇa*, and *raudra* rasas creates a layered emotional experience that reflects the inner turmoil of human existence — the struggle between the mind and body, reason and desire. The *Bhagavata* acts as a *sutradhara* (narrator) who controls the emotional rhythm of the play, just as in classical Sanskrit drama. This not only preserves the Indian dramatic tradition but also enhances the play's universality. The presence of *Śānta Rasa* at the end, when the Bhagavata prays to Ganesha and the play concludes with laughter and peace, restores balance and completeness. Thus, the play moves from conflict and passion to calm and acceptance — the ultimate goal of Indian aesthetics.

### **Conclusion:**

Through the effective use of *Rasa Theory*, Girish Karnad transforms *Hayavadana* into more than just a modern retelling of a myth. Each *rasa* contributes to the audience's understanding of the play's philosophical themes — identity, incompleteness, and the search for wholeness. The blend of emotions, music, humour, and devotion gives the play its aesthetic power and emotional depth. Hence, *Hayavadana* stands as a remarkable example of how classical Indian aesthetics can enrich modern theatre, making the experience spiritually and emotionally fulfilling.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Question No. 4: How does the play challenge or uphold traditional views of dharma, especially in the context of relationship and personal desire?**

**Introduction:**

Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* is a modern Indian play deeply rooted in myth and philosophy. It retells ancient legends to explore universal human conflicts between **dharma (duty)** and **kama (desire)**. Through the love triangle of Devadatta, Kapila, and Padmini, the play presents the tension between moral obligations and personal emotions. Karnad uses traditional Indian concepts like dharma, friendship, marriage, and sacrifice to question whether individuals can ever achieve moral perfection while still being true to their human feelings.

**Main Answer:**

Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* presents a deep exploration of **dharma** (moral and social duty) and its conflict with **personal desire**. Through the characters of Devadatta, Kapila, and Padmini, the play questions whether human beings can truly follow dharma when emotions and passions come into play. Instead of simply upholding the traditional moral order, the play **challenges the rigidity of dharma** by showing how personal desires often clash with prescribed social duties.

In traditional Indian thought, dharma guides individuals to live in harmony with moral laws and social expectations. A wife must be loyal to her husband, a friend must be faithful, and one's personal desires must be restrained. In *Hayavadana*, however, this order begins to collapse. Devadatta, the learned Brahmin, represents intellect and moral restraint. Yet, his deep passion for Padmini makes him break his vow of friendship and ultimately leads him to commit suicide. His act of self-destruction reflects how **personal desire can overpower one's dharma**, revealing the weakness of the so-called moral man.

Kapila, on the other hand, represents the body and instinct. Though he knows his dharma as a friend forbids him from desiring Padmini, he too cannot resist his attraction toward her. His internal struggle shows that dharma is not easily practiced when one's emotional and physical desires are intense. Both friends thus fail to live according to

dharmā, and their tragedy results from this moral confusion between the duties of the mind and the desires of the body.

Padmini's character further complicates the idea of dharma. As a married woman, her dharma is to remain loyal to her husband, but she is irresistibly drawn to Kapila's physical strength. Her attraction is natural and human, yet it defies social codes. Through her, Karnad presents a woman's voice that refuses to be limited by patriarchal morality. Padmini's longing for both intellect and physical passion suggests that **dharmā and desire cannot always coexist peacefully** in human life.

The confusion reaches its peak when the heads of Devadatta and Kapila are switched. The question of who Padmini's true husband is becomes symbolic of a larger dilemma: does dharma depend on the **mind (head)** or the **body**? When the sage declares that the head rules the body, Karnad subtly mocks society's tendency to favor intellect and reason over emotion and desire. Yet, the later downfall of all three characters shows that neither pure intellect nor pure passion can bring harmony unless they are balanced.

By the end of the play, Padmini's act of *sati* (self-immolation) may appear to restore dharma, but Karnad presents it ironically. Her death does not symbolize purity or moral victory; rather, it exposes the tragic consequences of a society that forces individuals to choose between duty and desire. The chorus's final song — questioning why one cannot love more than one person — reinforces the idea that **rigid dharma cannot accommodate the complexity of human emotions**.

Thus, *Hayavadana* both challenges and redefines dharma. It does not reject moral values entirely but shows that dharma must evolve to include emotional truth and personal fulfillment. Karnad uses myth and symbolism to reveal that the **real dharma lies in self-understanding and inner harmony**, not merely in social conformity.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, *Hayavadana* transforms the idea of dharma from a fixed social rule into a living, personal struggle. The play does not merely condemn the characters for breaking dharma but shows how their desires reveal the **limits of rigid morality**. Through their

tragic fates, Karnad suggests that true dharma lies not in blind obedience to social codes but in finding a **balance between the mind, the body, and the soul**. Thus, *Hayavadana* redefines moral duty in a human and philosophical light, making it both timeless and deeply relevant.

\*\*\*\*\*

Dr. T. S. Brahmbhatt