

Hayavadana

By

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Character Sketches of *Hayavadana*

(1) The Bhagavata

In Hindu tradition, a *Bhagavata* means a true devotee or worshipper of God. In *Hayavadana*, the Bhagavata acts as the narrator and guide of the play. He introduces the story and explains the events that happen between the three main characters—Devadatta, Kapila, and Padmini. At first, he appears to control the story, but as the play goes on, it becomes clear that even he cannot predict or control how things unfold.

His narration is interrupted when Hayavadana, the strange man with a horse's head, enters the scene. The Bhagavata is surprised by this sudden turn and tries to help Hayavadana find a way to remove his horse's head before returning to the main story. In the second act, the Bhagavata becomes more involved with the characters directly. He speaks to them as if he were part of their world—he is shocked to see Kapila living in the forest, and he reacts with surprise when Devadatta arrives to confront Padmini.

When Padmini decides to commit *sati* (self-immolation), the Bhagavata tries to stop her, showing his human concern. Through his character, Karnad shows that even the narrator, who seems all-knowing, is powerless before destiny. The Bhagavata's experiences reflect the play's deeper message—that life is full of surprises and cannot be controlled by anyone, not even the storyteller himself.

(2) Devadatta

Devadatta is one of the central characters in *Hayavadana* and one of the two male heroes of the main story. His name means “gift of God.” The Bhagavata describes him as fair-skinned (the actor playing him wears a white mask) and exceptionally intelligent. He is the son of a learned Brahmin and is highly respected for his talent as a poet and scholar.

At the beginning of the play, Devadatta and Kapila share a strong bond of friendship. However, this friendship begins to weaken when Devadatta falls deeply in love with Padmini. After marrying her, he becomes jealous of the closeness between Padmini and Kapila. His growing insecurity and possessiveness lead him to a tragic act—he cuts off his own head in despair.

Through a strange twist of fate, his head is mistakenly placed on Kapila's body, giving him Kapila's strength while keeping his own mind. At first, Devadatta feels happy and fulfilled, believing he now has both intellect and physical power. But soon, his new body begins to lose Kapila's strength and returns to its original, weak state. This change fills him with anxiety, as he begins to fear that Padmini no longer admires him as before.

In the end, Devadatta realizes that he will never achieve complete satisfaction or harmony between mind and body. Accepting this painful truth, he and Kapila choose to end their lives together. Their mutual death becomes an act of forgiveness, freeing them from jealousy and restoring the friendship that once united them.

(3) Kapila

Kapila is one of the two main heroes in *Hayavadana*. His name means “reddish brown,” which suits his dark complexion and his background as the son of a blacksmith. In contrast to Devadatta, who represents intellect and sensitivity, Kapila symbolizes physical strength, energy, and courage. He wears a black mask on stage, and the Bhagavata praises him as a man unmatched in strength, skill, and boldness.

Kapila shares a deep and loyal friendship with Devadatta. Out of friendship, he helps Devadatta by finding out Padmini's name and background. However, when Kapila meets Padmini, he instantly realizes that Devadatta's gentle nature may not suit her strong personality. He senses that Padmini would be better matched with someone strong and passionate—“a man of steel” like himself. Even after Padmini marries Devadatta, she continues to admire Kapila's physical power and vitality, which secretly stirs feelings of love within him. Yet, despite his attraction to Padmini, Kapila remains loyal to his friend. When Devadatta kills himself out of jealousy, Kapila's sense of friendship and honour compels him to do the same.

After the goddess Kali mistakenly switches their heads, Kapila—now with Devadatta’s head—argues that Padmini rightfully belongs to him, as he now possesses her husband’s mind. However, when his claim fails, he leaves society behind and retreats to the forest. There, he rebuilds his physical strength but cannot escape the emotional conflict caused by the mixed identity of body and mind. In the end, he agrees with Devadatta that their lives have become meaningless. Together, they decide to end their suffering through mutual death, forgiving each other and bringing their tragic story to a close.

(4) Padmini

Padmini is the central female character in *Hayavadana* and the main cause of conflict between Devadatta and Kapila. She initially marries Devadatta because she is attracted to his brilliant intellect and poetic nature. However, after marriage, she soon discovers that Devadatta is overly emotional and sensitive, unable to handle her playful teasing and sharp remarks. Kapila, who understood her strong and spirited personality from their first meeting, had already sensed that Devadatta might not be the right match for her.

Although Padmini loves Devadatta’s intelligence, she is also drawn to Kapila’s physical strength and vitality. Even during her pregnancy, her heart secretly longs for Kapila’s masculine charm. This divided desire—her attraction to Devadatta’s mind and Kapila’s body—creates the tragic tension that leads to both men’s deaths. Devadatta, consumed by jealousy, kills himself, and Kapila, out of loyalty, follows him in death.

When Padmini accidentally exchanges their heads, she briefly feels that she has achieved her dream union—the intellect of Devadatta combined with the strength of Kapila. However, as time passes, their bodies slowly return to their original forms, and her desire becomes restless again. She realizes that complete satisfaction in love and life is impossible. At the end of the play, when both men kill each other once more, Padmini is left heartbroken and alone. Grieving deeply, she entrusts her young son to the Bhagavata’s care and chooses to end her life by performing *sati*, burning herself on the funeral pyre. Through Padmini’s character, Girish Karnad explores the conflict between mind and body, showing how human emotions and desires can never fully be in harmony with rational thought.

(5) Hayavadana

The name *Hayavadana* itself means “the one with a horse’s face,” which perfectly reflects his strange and symbolic identity. He appears in the play as a man with a horse’s head who interrupts the Bhagavata’s narration to share his unusual story. Hayavadana was born to a princess and a celestial being who had taken the form of a horse. Because of this unnatural union, he was born half-human and half-horse.

Deeply troubled by his incomplete form, Hayavadana longs to become whole and truly human. To end his suffering, he visits the temple of the goddess Kali and prays for a complete human form. However, due to a misunderstanding or the goddess’s divine playfulness, his wish is granted differently—he becomes a complete horse instead of a complete man. Although this transformation gives him physical wholeness, he remains unhappy because he still possesses a human voice.

Later, when a little boy enters and begins to laugh and sing with him, Hayavadana’s human voice slowly changes into a horse’s neigh. At that moment, he finally becomes entirely horse—free from the confusion of being half-man and half-beast. His story symbolically completes the play’s central theme of *wholeness (purnatva)* and identity, showing how completeness is not always achieved through reason or desire but through acceptance of one’s true nature.

(6) The Boy (Padmini’s Son)

Padmini’s son appears as a young boy only at the very end of the play, though earlier, when he is an infant, he is represented on stage by a pair of wooden dolls. The first actor explains that the boy has grown up silently in the forest, never speaking, laughing, or showing emotion. This quietness reflects his inner sense of incompleteness, for he is born into a confusing world — one where he has two fathers. Devadatta is his father by mind, and Kapila by body, leaving the child symbolically divided between the two.

When the boy first appears, he clings tightly to his dolls, showing no sign of joy or sorrow. However, his silence is finally broken when he meets Hayavadana, the man with the horse’s head. Seeing the strange creature makes the boy laugh for the first time, and together they begin to sing and laugh joyfully. In this moment of pure laughter, Hayavadana’s human voice disappears, and he becomes a complete horse at last.

Through the innocent laughter of the boy and the transformation of Hayavadana, the play reaches its symbolic resolution. Both characters find a natural sense of *wholeness* and *completion* that the adult characters had failed to achieve. Their union through laughter suggests that completeness comes not from intellect or desire, but from acceptance, innocence, and the harmony of life itself.

(7) Kali

Kali, the Hindu goddess of death and transformation, plays an important symbolic role in *Hayavadana*. She appears whenever the main characters visit her temple in times of despair or crisis. It is before her that Devadatta cuts off his own head as an offering, and it is she who interrupts Padmini when Padmini attempts to end her life in grief. Later, Kali brings both Devadatta and Kapila back to life, but because Padmini mistakenly places their heads on the wrong bodies, they awaken with their identities switched.

Kali also appears in the story of Hayavadana. When he approaches her temple hoping to become a complete man, she instead turns him into a complete horse. This incident shows her unpredictable and indifferent nature — the goddess is powerful and creative, yet also careless and capable of causing confusion. Through Kali, the play highlights the mysterious balance between creation and destruction, order and chaos. She represents the divine power that shapes human destiny, reminding us that life often moves according to forces beyond human understanding.

(8) Dolls

In the second act of *Hayavadana*, Padmini and Devadatta buy two dolls for their little son. Onstage, these dolls are portrayed by young children, which adds a playful yet meaningful touch to the story. Although they seem like simple toys, the dolls serve as keen observers of the lives of Devadatta and Padmini. They notice and comment that Devadatta's physical strength begins to weaken with time, showing how his body slowly returns to its original, soft state. The dolls also reveal Padmini's inner thoughts and desires. As Padmini sleeps, they describe her dreams to the audience — dreams that show her longing for Kapila and her constant struggle between mind and body. Through their lively and innocent voices, the dolls act as storytellers who uncover the hidden emotions of the characters.

Symbolically, the dolls represent innocence, observation, and truth. They express what human characters cannot openly say and help the audience understand the deep emotional changes taking place in Padmini's life.

(9) Female Chorus

The female chorus appears along with the Bhagavata and helps to narrate the story and explain the emotions of the characters. They often express Padmini's deep feelings about love and her inner conflict between her love for two men — Devadatta and Kapila. Through their songs and voices, the chorus gives the audience insight into Padmini's emotional struggles and the theme of divided love.

(10) Actor I

Actor I is one of the performers in the play-within-a-play. At the beginning, he discovers Hayavadana — a strange creature with the face of a horse and the body of a man — and is frightened by his appearance. By the end of the play, this same actor returns to the stage with a young boy, who is later revealed to be Padmini's son. His role connects the start and end of the play, adding a sense of continuity to the story.

(11) Actor II

Actor II is another performer in the acting troupe. He meets Hayavadana later in the play, after Hayavadana has been turned into a complete horse. His character helps the audience see how much Hayavadana's transformation has changed him, emphasizing the play's theme of searching for completeness.
