



Desire and Disarray: Exploring Opposing Binaries in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala*

Gautham M A¹, Smrithi², Amal Krishnan A³, S Shilpa Nair⁴

^{1, 2, 3, 4} Department of English, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Amritapuri, India

Email: ¹ gauthamlal.official@gmail.com, ² smrithichandralal@gmail.com,
³ amalkrishnan2403@gmail.com, ⁴ shilpanairs@am.amrita.edu

Abstract

This research paper examines the binary opposition of order and disorder in Girish Karnad's renowned plays, "Hayavadana" and "Nagamandala." Through a comparative analysis of these works, we explore how Karnad employs the dichotomy of order and disorder to challenge societal norms, question conventional definitions of identity, and highlight the complexity of human existence. By deconstructing the traditional boundaries between order and disorder, Karnad exposes the contradictions and ambiguities of these concepts, exploring their subjectivity. The paper explores the ways in which Karnad's plays depict the tension between order and disorder as representative of broader societal struggles and personal conflicts. It examines how the characters and narrative structures in "Hayavadana" and "Nagamandala" navigate and transcend the boundaries of order and disorder, and how these dichotomies are utilized to explore themes such as gender, identity, societal expectations, and the human condition. Furthermore, the paper discusses how Karnad's subversion of the binary opposition of order and disorder challenges traditional hierarchies, disrupts established power structures, and prompts a reevaluation of prevailing social constructs. By unraveling the complexities of these opposing forces, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of Karnad's dramatic vision and his exploration of the multifaceted nature of human existence.

Keywords: Binary opposition, Order and Disorder, Human Desire, Chaos, Absurdism.

Girish Karnad is an actor, director, and one of the most expansive playwrights of Indian theatre and a pioneer of Indian absurdist literature. He has made his mark on the big screen as an actor and director of multiple films, but it is in his plays that we see the true brilliance of the man. His plays tend to take the audience on a journey with the characters, into their lives and their psyches. His characters are bare and human; they are tormented by their circumstances and desires, and we see them navigate their problems in the most organic and relatable way possible. Karnad never shied away from experimenting with new forms or techniques, but he made sure his form could convey the most true-to-life interpretation of the human condition in the Indian society, and that is something he never sacrificed on; that is a promise he made to his audience that anyone could be sure to walk into a theatre showing any of Karnad's plays and witness the various colors of human condition painted in near perfect hues.

Karnad captures in many of his plays, the complexities and intricacies of familial institutions such as marriage and other multilayered relations within the familial space. His themes often edged on topics that are not necessarily considered conventional; his women, as a result, differed vastly from the women of other contemporary works and at a time when women were considered second-class citizens, the women Karnad wrote dared to be bold and open about their emotions and needs. His women were deep and intense, and varied in background and age, they were traditional and modern at the same time. Conventionality weighed them down, but their hunt for individuality and freedom always prevailed, they refused to settle into norms and fought for themselves. Identity is a crisis they all faced, from being locked away in their rooms to being locked in by tradition, but Girish Karnad wrote his women with such vigor that they swam hard against the current in search of their identity and acceptance. Karnad used his art to dissect in front of an audience the society of his time and to make them witness the nuances of a growing and evolving society. He willed the art of writing "absurd" to perfectly suit his voice and talk about whatever issues he wanted to bring attention to, without his art being purely activist.

Karnad's touch of absurdism in his plays is accompanied by a blend of tradition and mythology with modern elements, and he was able to render in perfection the order and disorder that coexisted in Indian society. Karnad presents a binary opposition of order and disorder, which proves to be the best tool to analyze the nature of society and the behaviour of the people living in it. As its nature is inherently comparative or contradictory, Binary Opposition theory helps us understand human behaviour easily.

In *Hayavadana*, the binary opposition of order and disorder acts as the driving force of the plot. The Apollonian and Dionysian binaries act in the play to create the tragic elements that push the story forward: the Apollonian, embodied by Devadutta, who is calm and calculated and expresses himself in moderation; and the Dionysian, embodied by Kapila, who is irrational and eccentric and rarely holds back from expressing himself freely. Nietzsche's claim that true tragedy could only be produced by the tension between these binaries comes true in this play, and the absurdity of the play is highlighted when Padmini finds normalcy in having her husband's weak and timid body swapped with Kapila's strong and capable one. This opposition is also what plants the seed of suspicion inside Devadutta, though his love and trust in both his wife and bestfriend made him blind to his suspicion, his subconscious actions confirm the existence of some sort of tension when all three are present together.

Similarly, in *Nagamandala*, there are opposing binaries in the characters of Appanna and Naga. Though essentially the same person on the outside and portrayed by the same actor, one is an actual human being while the other is a Cobra's imitation of that person, and while Appanna is a chauvinist who treats his wife, Rani, inhumanly with no care for her, Naga is seen by Rani as a part of Appanna that desires and worships her. The tension that exists in the gap between these characters gives rise to a lot of conflict in the play, mainly due to Rani's misconception that these two are the same person and her not questioning the difference in their apparent personalities or the possibility of them running into each other. This gives rise to the opposing binaries of order and disorder in the play which is not resolved until the climax.

There is essentially a conflict of order and disorder in *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala* that runs deep, and wide out of the consciousness of the characters into the collective consciousness of Indian society. Though both plays deal with infidelity, they also poke a stick into the stubbornness of the system. In both plays, the women are stuck, by choice or not, in unions that do not satisfy them, and the stubbornness of the system kept them locked in it for the foreseeable future. But human nature could not be contained in a cage, and it eventually broke free. In *Hayavadana*, Padmini ultimately leaves her husband for Kapila, whom she was subconsciously attracted to, and in *Nagamandala*, Rani craves the night visits of Naga, disguised as her husband. Rani went as far as to suspend all logic and reasoning of her own and believe in the explanations Naga gave her for the difference in personalities of her own husband. Thus, chaos was introduced into the system invited in by innate human desires, which eventually disrupted the system and challenged its rigidity.

Karnad's societal critique in *Nagamandala* and *Hayavadana* employs the motifs of myth, folklore, and fantasy to critique the rigid norms and expectations that govern human relationships, especially those of gender and identity. In a society that runs on an established order, Karnad's characters fall prey to their primitive carnal desires, and as if a rock is thrown into a well-oiled system of gears, the system breaks down, the characters find their lives turned upside-down, and it all descends into absurdity and disorder this explains the overarching theme of order and disorder in the society, which sets the tone for a social critique. The absurdism and chaos in the play come from the characters' reactions to these rigid norms, or the established order of the society. Additionally, in *Hayavadana*, the question of completeness is raised by the characters, along with that of society's fixation on external appearances. Padmini is torn between her innate desires and her marital commitment; she chooses until the end to keep the system satisfied, and this leads to her feeling incomplete all her life. Until the moment she decides to give in to her desires and choose Kapila, that decision disrupts the order of the system and eventually leads to the deaths of all three of them.

Kapila and Devadutta, on the other hand, have been battling with their identities since the swap happened. Kapila never felt at home in the new body, which he battered and tortured until it looked like his old body, but still he could not feel at home; he felt incomplete at all times, as if a part of him had been lost. On the other end of the spectrum, Devadutta could never fit into the new strong and capable body; he did not treat it the way it was supposed to be treated and neglected it, and as a result, slowly but surely, his body ended up looking like his old one, frail and weak. For Kapila and Devadutta, their identity was their true conflict. This conflict explores the binary of body and mind and one's imposition over the other.

Nagamandala presents Rani as a person who is a slave to the system. Rani could not get out of the marriage, nor could she get what she wanted out of it. Her marriage with Appanna felt like a room with no windows, and Rani was suffocating in it until Naga entered her life. Rani felt momentarily freed from the patriarchal prison that marriage had put her in. Though only for the night, Rani could experience the love and affection she craved; but by morning, she was back in the prison of a loveless marriage and even abuse. In her eyes, the husband who worships her body at night beats and bruises it in the morning. Call it hope or desperation, but

either of those restricted her from questioning it all. And like in *Hayavadana*, the system breaks down when Rani becomes pregnant and Appanna swears that he had never lent her as much as an affectionate gaze.

Karnad shows us struggle that feels real and suffocating not only to the characters but also to the audience, the opposing binaries help us understand the complexity of the situation as well as see the absurdity of it all. These plays are extended social critiques as much as they are about the internal conflicts of its characters, the story comes to life when this internal conflict bleeds out of the characters and starts affecting the social elements around them. In both the plays, fingers cannot be pointed at the characters for feeling or even expressing their innate desires, it is the rigid structures of the society that gave no concern for their desires or needs and put them in marriages with men they did not chose or like and the same structures that, when these women felt or expressed their pent up desires, entombed them in profanity.

Desire is one of the strongest human emotions, its manifestations range from simple and harmless, prompting us to enjoy the scent of a flower on the sidewalk, to raging and fierce, making people throw away all sense of right or wrong to satisfy one's desire. Karnad explores this fierce side of desire through the characters in these plays. The story pits coexisting binary opposites against each other to show how they would organically respond to conflict. It also shows the role society and a general sense of morality play in this conflict whether it be in instigating the conflict or in diluting it. The study of binaries continues to prove to be an effective study of human nature and relations as well as the social and moral code of conduct.

References

- [1] Karnad, Girish Raghunath. *Hayavadana*. India, Oxford University Press, 1975.
- [2] "Nāga-Mandala: Play with a Cobra." *Three Plays*, by Girish Raghunath Karnad, Oxford Univ. Press, 2006, pp. 247–300.
- [3] Anand, Dr. Taruna. "EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN IN GIRISH KARNAD'S HAYAVADANA." *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities*, vol. 5, no. 2, Feb. 2017, pp. 33–40, doi:10.24113/ijellh.
- [4] Yaqub, Huma. "Subverting and Redefining Femininity through Indigenous Tropes: Karnad's Nagamandala and Hayavadana." *Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal.*, vol. 7, no. 6, Dec. 2016, pp. 67–75.
- [5] Bhise, D.M. "Devastation Caused by Aberrant Desires in Girish Karnad's Hayavadana." *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, vol. 8, no. 2, 30 Apr. 2017, pp. 521–527.