

Mind-Body Dichotomies in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*

Arif Ansari

Research Scholar, Department of English, Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University, West Bengal, India

Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received: 10 Jul 2025; Received in revised form: 03 Aug 2025; Accepted: 08 Aug 2025; Available online: 11 Aug 2025</p> <p>©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords— Education, intelligence, fitness, health, mind, body.</p>	<p>This article will deal with the clash between the mind symbolizing intelligence and the body symbolizing physical fitness as depicted in Girish Karnad's <i>Hayavadana</i> (1971). As Karnad himself uses the words 'mind' and 'body' for intelligence and physical fitness in the play, so the researcher will do the same throughout the discussion. The main two characters in the play, Devadatta and Kapila, are the embodiments of intelligence and physical fitness respectively, and central to the clash is the character of Padmini, the wife of Devadatta who wants to possess both, the mind of Devadatta and the body of Kapila. In our real world, it is very tough to possess both qualities. But, Padmini is pleased to have the intelligence of Devadatta with the physical fitness of Kapila. However, she doesn't realize that a scholar like Devadatta will not be able to maintain a tough body by simply reading. Central to the dichotomy of mind-body, this paper aims to comment on education, intelligence, physical skills and health in the context of the characters in the play. The researcher seeks to explore the relationships between intelligence and physical fitness, intelligence and education, and the impact of health on intelligence through the characters of Devadatta, Kapila and Padmini. Education, intelligence and physical health have an interesting relationship. This play of Karnad is a great commentary on those issues with a simple but realistic story. Literature helps us understand the complex world and <i>Hayavadana</i> is no exception. The clash between mind and body is inevitable and eventually leads to self-torture. It is very tough to harmonize them, sometimes it may lead to destruction as we see happening in the play. Finally, this paper seeks to address the ideas of education, intelligence and physical fitness and how they clash and harmonize with each other as presented by Karnad in his play.</p>

I. INTRODUCTION

Karnad's plays are unique in the way that they focus on the contemporary severe issues through mythical and historical characters. *Hayavadana* (1971) is no exception to that list. Karnad was inspired by the head-switched story in the eleventh-century Sanskrit collection *Kathasaritasagara* and Thomas Mann's philosophical novella *The*

Transposed Heads (1940). And, the play is a great commentary on the ideas of education, intelligence, physical fitness and their relationships. Karnad took the help of symbolism and beautifully illustrated his ideas. The two protagonists of the play Devadatta and Kapila are the symbols of intelligence and physical fitness respectively. And, the abstract relationship between intelligence and physical fitness

is depicted through their behavioural traits and intentions.

According to Cambridge Dictionary, “education is the process of teaching or learning, especially in a school or college, or the knowledge that you get from this.” In *Hayavadana*, Devadatta is the embodiment of education because he is shown as a highly knowledgeable person in the play. He has full knowledge of the Vedas and other Hindu scriptures. He reads and writes poetry, and recites drama to his wife Padmini. Again, intelligence, in the mouth of the Cambridge Dictionary, is “the ability to learn, understand, and make judgments or have opinions that are based on reason.” In the play, Devadatta is described as a person who is “unrivalled in intelligence” (Karnad 106). Here, his education plays an important role in influencing his intelligence. However, the touches of intelligence can be seen in the dialogues of the other major characters in the play. Again, Kapila is the embodiment of physical fitness in the play. He is immensely powerful and can do any task that requires physical skills. In this regard, he is quite contrary to Devadatta who is not physically fit enough. However, we see the differences between Devadatta and Kapila through the eyes of Padmini and we see her act accordingly.

It is quite clear that education and intelligence are positively correlated. There are multiple factors that should be taken into consideration while talking about their relationship. In a research article entitled “How Much Does Education Improve Intelligence? A Meta-Analysis” published by Sage involving 600,000 participants, the researchers argued that “longer educational duration is associated with increased intelligence test scores” (Ritchie and Tucker-Drob 1366) and that “individuals with a propensity toward higher intelligence tend to complete more years of education” (Ritchie and Tucker-Drob 1366). So, this investigation supports the hypothesis that education has a positive effect on intelligence. Again, Ian J Deary and Wendy Johnson in their article entitled “Intelligence and education: causal perceptions drive analytic processes and therefore conclusions” talked about the correlation between education and intelligence. The finding of the study supports the observation that “education influences the development of intelligence” (Deary

and Johnson 1363). Spending more time in school helps one develop his/her intelligence. The researchers observed that “perhaps more intelligent people gain access to more and higher-level education. Perhaps exposure to more education causes higher intelligence test scores” (Deary and Johnson 1363). So, the researchers concluded that education strongly affects intelligence and vice-versa. Komarudin in his article “The Relationship between Intelligence and Learning Motivation on Children with Special Need in Inclusive Elementary School” talked about the correlation between intelligence and motivation to learn in children with special needs. He concluded that “subjects who had a high level of intelligence, then the learning motivation tends to be higher” and the “subjects who had low intelligence level, it also tends to be low learning motivation” (Komarudin 104). Apart from these, there are other studies which assert that “higher level of education leads to greater level of intelligence” (Wikipedia, 2022). However, this may not be true for every situation because of the involvement of multiple factors in these processes such as genes, environment, ideology etc.

Physical fitness and intelligence are intimately connected and various studies throughout the world have proven that. In an article entitled “Association of Physical Fitness with Intelligence and Academic Achievement in Adolescents,” the researchers pointed out that there exists a positive association between physical fitness and intelligence. They asserted that “cardiorespiratory fitness was positively associated with intelligence and academic achievement” (Gil-Espinoza et al. 1). The researchers argued that if adolescents spend time doing physical activities to improve the components of fitness, then this will simultaneously affect their intelligence and academic achievements. In another article entitled “Association between physical fitness, body mass index and intelligent quotient I individuals with intellectual disabilities” the researchers mentioned that “IQ is significantly related to the variables representing muscle strength, in the lower and upper body” (Cabeza-Ruiz et al. 993). They observed a significant association between IQ and muscle strength. They reported on the basis of the cognitive tests that those who were regular in their physical activities did better in the test than those who were

irregular and of low intensity. A study published under the title "Association of physical activity and health status with intelligence quotient of high school students in Jeddah" investigated the relationships between physical activity and intelligence. They tested and surveyed the secondary school students of Jeddah and observed that "students who shared physical education classes and exercised at and outside school showed a positive correlation with high IQ scores" (El-Kholy and Elsayed 2039). The Wikipedia article on "Impact of health on intelligence" states that intelligence can be affected by health in various ways. Intrauterine growth retardation, breastfeeding, micronutrient and vitamin deficiencies, protein and energy malnutrition, industrial chemicals, alcohol and drugs, Stress, tropical infectious diseases etc. affect our health which eventually affects our intelligence. The website article of the Degree Council entitled "Link between Physical Fitness and Intelligence" states that our level of fitness will affect our overall ability to learn. It considers obesity one of the reasons behind our mental decline. The article concludes with the statement that regular physical activity can make people smarter and healthier.

The characters of Devadatta and Kapila are symbolic and represent the modern discourse of education and fitness. And, Padmini is like us, the readers/audiences who procrastinate in choosing between the two. Just like modern middle-class people, she is entangled between the two. *Hayavadana* is unique in the way that it deals with the discourse of modern conflict. Padmini chooses Devadatta but cannot remain unaffected by the grief of not getting Kapila. When finally she desires to have both by breaking the ideological border, she becomes a transgressor and has to suffer the consequences.

II. DEVADATTA AND HIS SYMBOLISM

In *Hayavadana* Karnad's characters are individuals and at the same time symbols of some modern ideas. The character of Devadatta can be argued to be the symbol of education. In the play, he is "the only son of the Revered Brahmin, Vidyasagara" (Karnad 106) and a highly educated person. He is described as "comely in appearance,

fair in colour, unrivalled in intelligence" (Karnad 106). Devadatta becomes "the apple of every eye in Dharmapura" (Karnad 106) because of his knowledge and education. The wideness of his knowledge is such that he can defeat the mightiest pundits of his kingdom in the debates on logic and love. He has a wide knowledge of literature and knows poetry very well. Even in the battle of poetry and wit, Devadatta blinds the greatest poets of the world.

Not only is he educated, but he influences others through his education. Even his best friend Kapila agrees to the fact that he has been civilized by his friend. Kapila considers himself no better than an ox before his friendship with Devadatta. He tastes the unique flavour of delicious literature and poetry through the hands of his friend Devadatta. He considers Devadatta far more superior to him as Devadatta is educated in literature and poetry. Kapila acknowledges:

KAPILA: ...And I'll say it again. If it wasn't for you I would have been no better than the ox in our yard. You showed me that there were such things as poetry and literature. You taught me... (Karnad 118)

Kapila is always in praise of the immense education of Devadatta and the knowledge he has. Devadatta knows the *Vedas* by heart. He can write the greatest poetry on earth. He holds the confidence even to "outshine Kalidasa" (Karnad 120). He reads Kalidasa and frequently mentions him in his conversations. He even compares his lady love Padmini to Shakuntala. The plays of Bhasa are his source of enjoyment. He likes to read out the plays of Bhasa to his beloved. We come to realize the versatility of his knowledge in Act II where we see that he is looking for *Dharma Sindhu*. Devadatta is a brilliant scholar and loves doing intellectual exercises. There is no doubt that he is highly educated and has gained excellent knowledge of Sanskrit literature and religious scriptures. For this very reason, Bhagavata says as if the Goddess of Learning works as a maid in the house of Devadatta. To quote:

BHAGAVATA: ...Padmini is the daughter of the leading merchant in

Dharmapura. In her house, the very floor is swept by the Goddess of Wealth. In Devadatta's house, they've the Goddess of Learning for a maid. (Karnad 126)

Devadatta's Brahmin orientation and education makes him "unrivalled in intelligence" (Karnad 106). It is mainly because of his education and intelligence that Padmini agrees to marry him. He is the brightest among all in Dharmapura. He even tries to play with God with the help of his intelligence. He has sworn that if he gets Padmini as his wife, he will sacrifice his arms to goddess Kali, and his head to Lord Rudra. Apparently, it seems to be real, but there is a problem with the oath. How can one sacrifice his head if one has already sacrificed his arms? Without the help of the arms, it is not possible to sacrifice the head. Devadatta has to pay with his life for his false oath to Kali and Rudra.

DEVADATTA: ...I swear, Kapila, with you as my witness I swear, if I ever get her as my wife, I'll sacrifice my two arms to the goddess Kali, I'll sacrifice my head to Lord Rudra... (Karnad 120)

Devadatta is educated and knowledgeable because of his regular practice of reading and writing. However, he rarely does physical activities. According to Padmini, "he has the tenderest feet on earth" (Karnad 137). When Padmini and Kapila are unable to find Devadatta in the cart on their way to Ujjain, Padmini remarks that "Devadatta's too weak to have gone far" (Karnad 139). The fact is that Devadatta doesn't like doing physical activities like playing and swimming. He says, when their heads change with one another, that he is okay with the muscular body of Kapila for a few days with all its energy, but he cannot go on like that forever. If he does so, he will have to sacrifice his family tradition of reading and writing on a regular basis which he refuses to do. He is a Brahmin with full respect for his family traditions. Hence, he allows the muscular body of Kapila to transform into his own.

DEVADATTA: It was fun the first few days because it was new. All that muscle and strength. But how long can one go on like that? I have a

family tradition to maintain- the daily reading, writing and studies... (Karnad 157-158)

III. KAPILA AND HIS SYMBOLISM

Kapila is the best friend of Devadatta and can be argued to be the symbol of physical fitness in the play. He is the only son of an ironsmith and the backbone of the King's armoury. He has no equal in deeds that require physical strength. He is immensely fit and can do any physical activity for hours. The two best friends are very opposite to each other. All physical activities are fun for Kapila. In Act I we see in gymnasium Kapila was having fun with his friend Nanda. The wrestler from Gandhara compliments Kapila that he will go far. But these activities are very boring to Devadatta and he doesn't even want to talk about them.

KAPILA: Devadatta, why didn't you come to the gymnasium last evening? I'd asked you to. It was such fun... (Karnad 117)

Apart from his strength, Kapila is extremely physically attractive. Both Padmini and Devadatta believe that "no woman could resist him" (Karnad 134). Kapila has a muscular body and smells manly as Padmini observes. Padmini hyperbolically compares Kapila to a "Celestial Being" with an "ethereal shape" (Karnad 134). From the point of view of Padmini, Kapila has a seductive physical shape and is impossible for any woman to resist him. Just as wisdom and intelligence are the attractions of Devadatta, in the same way the Celestial shape and extreme physical strength of Kapila are Kapila's attractions. Padmini is attracted to both the mind of Devadatta and the body of Kapila.

PADMINI (aside): He is like a Celestial Being reborn as a hunter. How his body sways, his limbs curve- It's a dance almost.

DEVADATTA (aside): And why should I blame her? It's his strong body- his manly muscles. And to think I had never ever noticed them all these years! I was an innocent- an absolute baby.

PADMINI (aside): No woman could resist him. (Karnad 134)

KAPILA: I did. (Karnad 168)

Kapila may have an attractive body, he is “too rough” and “too indelicate” in conversations as Devadatta observes. He is a man of pure heart and a genuine friend of Devadatta, but he doubts Kapila’s ability to convince the woman he loves. Devadatta believes that Kapila lacks mannerisms. Hence, he considers Kapila the wrong man sent for his marriage proposal. Kapila is a master in his smithy, on the farm and in the fields, but not the right messenger for a marriage proposal. Devadatta doubts:

DEVADATTA: Kapila- Kapila... He’s gone. How fortunate I am to have a friend like him. Pure gold. (Pause) But should I have trusted this to him? He means well- and he is wizard in his smithy, in the farm, in his fields. But here? No. he is too rough, too indelicate. He was the wrong man to send. He is bound to ruin the whole thing... (Karnad 122)

Kapila is the kind of person who uses force and violence if necessary. He is the son of an ironsmith. He has grown up to be rough and violent. When Devadatta gets the body of Kapila after Padmini mixes the heads, he pushes Kapila with the body of Devadatta aside using force. Not only does he use physical strength, but also verbally abuses Kapila. Kapila immediately reacts that “this is Kapila’s violence” (Karnad 147). On the other hand, Kapila feels like a corpse after getting Devadatta’s body. Immediately a war starts between the body and the mind. Finally, he becomes the “Kapila with a body which fits his face” (Karnad 169).

KAPILA: When this body came to me, it was like a corpse hanging by my head. It was a Brahmin’s body after all: not made for the woods. I couldn’t lift an axe without my elbows moaning. Couldn’t run a length without my knees howling. I had no use for it. The moment it came to me, a war started between us.

PADMINI: And who won?

IV. PADMINI AND HER SYMBOLISM

The play *Hayavadana* is about incompleteness and imperfection. No character in the play is completely complete; there is always a desire for more which leads to their imperfection. Padmini is the symbol of both intelligence and strength in the play. She is not as educated as Devadatta, but quite intelligent. She is not like Devadatta in spite of being intelligent. She shows the same respect to a physically fit person as she does to an educated person. She has grown up playing in the woods and swimming in the river. Thus, she understands the importance of both. This is the reason that she can neither be happy with an educated man like Devadatta, nor a muscular man like Kapila. She wants both qualities in a man to be her ideal husband.

A complete man should be one who has a perfect body and a sharp mind. The body symbolically represents physical fitness and mind intelligence. And central to the clash of Devadatta and Kapila is Padmini who symbolizes both intelligence and strength. But, even she is not perfect in the sense that she always carries an unfulfilled desire. Devadatta believes that he is worthy of Padmini because he is a pundit as well as a poet. He is ready to do anything for her, even sacrifice his life because he considers her the epitome of perfect beauty. On the contrary, Kapila believes that Padmini needs a man like him of extreme physical strength. She is not at all for the likes of Devadatta. Each one of them considers themselves perfect and thus worthy of Padmini. However, this eventually leads to mimetic rivalry and conflict.

KAPILA: ... She is not the likes of you. What she needs is a man of steel. But what can one do? You’ll never listen to me. And I can’t withdraw now. I’ll have to talk to my family... (Karnad 126)

Padmini marries Devadatta but she can’t resist the temptation of Kapila. Devadatta is the son of a Revered Brahmin Vidyasagara and a knowledgeable person. He knows literature and poetry very well and defeated famous scholars in

debates on logic. This has attracted Padmini towards Devadatta and she eventually marries him. She is happy to become the wife of a famous and loveable person in Dharmapura. On the other hand, she can't resist the powerful Kapila. Padmini is amazed when she sees the bare-bodied Kapila climbing a tree like an ape. She calls Kapila a God with his "ethereal shape" (Karnad 134). She is mesmerized by the manly smell of Kapila. So, Padmini has to stand still in conflict and remain undecided. She cannot go with the education and knowledge of Devadatta and nor leave the strength of Kapila behind. It is like our conflict in the real world where we fail to harmonize these two things. The temptation at the sight of Kapila is seen in the lines below.

PADMINI (watching him, aside):
How he climbs- like an ape. Before I could even say 'yes', he had taken off his shirt, pulled his dhoti up and swung up the branch. And what an ethereal shape! Such a broad back: like an ocean with muscles rippling across it- and then that small, feminine waist which looks so helpless. (Karnad 134)

By the end of Act I, we come to realize how smart Padmini is. There is no doubt that Devadatta is smart and educated, but he has acted foolishly by playing with Gods. He sacrifices his head to Goddess Kali and declares that he has fulfilled the promise once he has made to Goddess Kali and Lord Rudra. However, this is not the original intention. He actually can't tolerate the pain that his wife has come to long for his friend. On the other hand, Kapila declares that he has sacrificed his life for his friend Devadatta. But, the one simple thing they don't realize is that they are trying to lie to a Goddess and hence making a fool of themselves. Padmini, however, doesn't commit the same mistake; she knows very well that she is dealing with the sacred. She doesn't act foolishly by lying to a Goddess. Kali appreciates the truthfulness of Padmini and reveals the true intentions of Devadatta and Kapila. Kali realizes that Padmini is not like Devadatta and Kapila when she says:

PADMINI: How could one possibly hide anything from you, Mother?

KALI: That's true enough. (Karnad 141-142)

Padmini is one person who is near perfect in the play, but can't become so because of her unfulfilled desire to have a perfect husband. She has been happy with Devadatta but can't resist the temptation of having the muscular Kapila. She has sought a complete man, with a body and a mind; with intelligence and physical strength. This only happens when she changes the heads of Devadatta and Kapila with their bodies.

V. CONCLUSION

The play is about mimetic rivalry and the impossibility of becoming a complete human being. The clash between human beings is inevitable. And our rivalry is rooted in our desire to become perfect and complete. Devadatta is in the top position in what he is doing. He has defeated all the pundits in Dharmapura in debates on logic and love. He, in fact, is a master of literature. But still, he desires the fitness and strength of Kapila. In this way, he believes, he will become complete and will lead a happy life with his wife Padmini. On the other hand, Kapila desires to read and write poetry like Devadatta. Kapila thinks education and intelligence will complete him. And, only then he will be worthy of Padmini with his body of steel and wisdom like Devadatta.

Both of them try their best to fulfil their mimetic desires. But, they have failed in their attempts. Their own natural inclinations become hindrances in their goal of becoming others. Devadatta becomes complete Devadatta, but can't remain so. Kapila gets the body of Devadatta but eventually makes it muscular like his original body. So, their desire to become complete by being educated, intelligent and fit remains incomplete. They desire to be complete because they want to be with Padmini, the love attraction of both and the cause of their rivalry. This rivalry finally results in their deaths.

Padmini has no rivals in the play because nobody imitates her desire in the play. Devadatta and Kapila are rivals as Padmini is the object of their desire and hence the cause of their rivalry. It is very tough to make the life of a human being complete.

Padmini's incompleteness lies in the fact that she desires to live with a complete man, with a head and body, meaning intelligence and strength. She has married Devadatta because of his knowledge of literature and poetry and his wisdom, but can't resist the temptation of muscular Kapila. She has granted muscular Devadatta with all his wisdom by Goddess Kali, but Devadatta can't maintain his muscular body just as Padmini can't leave the desire of getting a complete partner. Hence, all and everything remains Incomplete in death.

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