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Contributor: Partha Pratim Bandyopadhyay, Department of English

Hayavadana: a summary

Act I

The play opens on a near-empty stage with one character and a group of musicians. The character is Bhagavata, the leader of the singers and the storyteller who acts as narrator and chorus through the play(the Sutradhara of traditional Indian drama). He is a holy man and leads the team of actors who are about to perform a play. As a ritual invocation to the performance, a mask of Lord Ganesha is brought centrestage and worshipped.

Bhagavata begins his song praying for success to the Lord of successes. The god is an emblem of incompleteness with his broken tusk, bloated belly and elephant's head put on a human body, yet he is lord of success and perfection. This is an enigma beyond human understanding and Bhagavata leaves it to return to his story, but the paradox of elusive completeness within apparent incompleteness begins to operate from here. Bhagavata begins narrating the story of two young men from the city of Dharmapura, ruled by king Dharmasheela – Devadatta and Kapila. Devadatta is a fair Brahmin excelling in scholarship and poetry – a man of letters whose body and appearance match his poetic temperament. Kapila is his polar opposite – a robust ironsmith and farmer, and a wrestler and warrior of great physique, deft in all bodily skills and acts. While Devadatta is romantic, Kapila is engaged with the material – together they embody all the human virtues, and are fast friends. Bhagavata's introduction of them is however interrupted by terrified shrieks offstage, followed by an actor running in fear and finding shelter in Bhagavata. After some breathless moments the actor is soothed enough to tell his story – he had been late in coming, and having drunk a lot of water was sitting down on the roadside to urinate when he heard a voice warning him against committing the act in a public place. Upon searching the speaker, he found a speaking horse and ran in terror. Bhagavata laughs at him, and seeing him in a state unable to perform, sends him back to check and alleviate his fear. But the actor runs in again and announces that the speaking horse is approaching the stage. Alarmed that this may interrupt the play's performance, Bhagavata orders curtains to shield the creature from the audience, so that the speaking horse is exposed on stage with a mounting dramatic tension – we first hear his sobs, then see the horse's head, and finally a man's body with a horse's head sitting dejected, backstage. Bhagavata's cynic realism makes him think the head a mask. He and the actor try to pull it out and, failing, realize it to be a real head. Surprised, Bhagavata attributes this miracle to some curse working on the man for some sin he committed, and this infuriates the horse-man into speech. With anger and anguish, he declares his innocence, gives out his name Hayavadana, and moved to tearful memory by the assuaging words of Bhagavata goes to relate his misfortune. His mother was a princess who had made a strange choice of husband – when all the princes of the world failed to win her heart, she fell in love with the white stallion of the Arabian prince and got married to it against all advice. The stallion was really a gandharva – a heavenly creature who was cursed into this state by the god Kubera. Fifteen years after their marriage he was freed of the curse and returned to his original shape. Now he wanted to take his wife with him to heaven, but the princess insisted on his becoming a horse again. In anger the gandharva now cursed her and she became a horse herself and ran away, leaving Hayavadana their child to fend for himself. Since then Hayavadana has been leading a sad mongrel existence rigged by incompleteness – he has tried to be a human participating in society and a life of ideas, but found no place there just as he cannot lead a

purely animalistic life while possessing a human intellect. The incompatibility of head and body is the root of his crisis, which he has tried in vain to get rid of by visiting all the gods and holy shrines of all religions. Bhagavata suggests visiting the goddess Kali of mount Chitrakoot, who is famed to grant all prayers. Hayavadana is eager to go and jumps up in hope, and sets out in company of the actor whom his master has tagged on to him as guide.

Resuming his narrative, Bhagavata sings a symbolic prologue to the plot in conjunction with a female chorus: the two friends are divided by a mysterious woman who begins to work her feminine desire on them, and the men submit to the mad throes of her passions. The triangle of love leads to widening breaches within their human selves, self-sacrifice, and a macabre dance of life and death that raises the characters to superhuman, grotesque heights. As the human plot unfolds, we see Devadatta and Kapila meeting. Devadatta is distraught, unmindful of the conversation, and Kapila infers that he is thinking of some new girl he has fallen in love with. After some light banter, Devadatta begins a poetic description of feminine beauty which Kapila mockingly parodies, but soon understands the gravity of this new love. Devadatta expresses his desperation at having this girl as his muse, and promises to sacrifice his head and arms to Kali and Rudra to get her. Learning that the house of this girl has a two-headed bird as the door-emblem, Kapila goes out in search, finds the door and knocks. As Padmini opens the door, Kapila is stunned by her beauty and loses words. Their conversation grows comic as she is playful, conscious of the powers of her beauty, and he does not know what to say. He finally surrenders and begs to talk to even a servant of the house, and then refers to Devadatta whom Padmini has heard of. At this Padmini blushes and runs in, Kapila follows her, beginning to feel his own desire for her mounting within him. At this point, we return from action to narration as Bhagavata relates that Devadatta and Padmini are hereafter married, she is pregnant and Devadatta is extremely careful, even finicky about it. When action resumes the three are about to set out on a cart journey to a fair at Ujjain– Kapila is to arrive with the cart and they would start. As the couple speak of Kapila, it becomes evident that Devadatta has begun to dislike her intimacy with his friend, seeking private marital bliss instead. He feels jealous inwardly but is ashamed to admit it, and Padmini's coquettish nature shows forth when she teases her husband with a loose tongue saying shocking things, and calling him 'still a baby'. As they await Kapila and converse on him, it is found that complexities are growing between husband and wife over Kapila's presence. She is attracted by his masculinity that Devadatta lacks, and vainly tries to hide the carnal longing behind the lawful, religiously sanctioned allegiance that marriage entails. Devadatta senses his friend's lust for Padmini and tries to warn her away. In an attempt to placate his jealousy, she offers to cancel the trip to Ujjain and proposes to go by themselves sometime later. Devadatta is elated and tells Kapila that they have called off the journey because Padmini is sick. Kapila had been excited about it all and is now crestfallen, and admits his despair at this turn while warning himself of a moral slippage rising within him. However, he accepts it calmly and is about to go when Padmini suddenly rushes in and demands to go, completely reversing and ignoring her earlier proposal of cancelling the trip. She pleads to Devadatta that she now insists on going out of sympathy for Kapila's boyish disappointment, but Devadatta sees beneath into her repressed desires and bears the humiliation in silence. The journey starts along a densely wooded road to Ujjain, which is the shortest route as Kapila says. Padmini is talkative during the journey, happily prattling on, plainly admiring Kapila's skill at cart-driving and laughing at Devadatta's ineptitude. They stop to rest at a wooded spot where her eyes are drawn by the tree of the Fortunate Lady's flower. She is curious and Kapila climbs the tree to fetch the flower – as he strips and climbs she is mesmerized by his muscular, powerful body into a sexual trance. Devadatta, standing by her, notices her illicit desire in the depth of her eyes; it naturally burns him but he resolves to strangle his agony like a strong man. Kapila returns with the flower and in answer to her query, explains the flower's name by

showing its parts that pertain to the marks of a married (fortunate) woman. Kapila informs that there are temples of Kali and Rudra nearby, and this reminds Devadatta of his forgotten sacrificial promise. Out of a vengeful but suppressed ire, he insists that Padmini and Kapila go to the temple of Rudra while he stays back to guard the cart. After some hesitation they set out, and Devadatta starts alone towards the Kali temple along the wooded risky path. Once before the goddess he begs pardon for the forgotten promise, and finding a sword cuts off his own head in fulfillment of his vow. Padmini and Kapila, on returning to the cart do not find him. Kapila notes his footsteps towards the Kali temple and rushes to bring him back in alarm – Padmini resents being left alone, she had wanted Kapila's company in Devadatta's absence. Kapila reaches the temple and finds the horrible incident; he immediately understands his friend's silent agony that motivated this suicide, and is deeply repentant. He laments saying that he was ready to do anything for his friend, even die himself. Then, in desperate sorrow and longing to meet him in the next world, he picks up the sword and cuts his own head in the same manner. Padmini, after a sojourn during which she feels ignored by the men, starts out towards the temple in the dark. She is feared by the darkness and calls of wild animals, and upon entering the dark temple stumbles over the corpses. Curiously, her first reactions upon the discovery are concerned with her own present and future rather than lamentation for husband and beloved, which point at the essentially self-centered hedonism she embodies. Finding no way out of the shame and helplessness, she too picks up the sword. As she is about to jump on it, the goddess speaks up. Padmini is dumbstruck while the sleeping goddess wakes with deafening drumbeats and appears in her terrifying shape. She begins to speak to Padmini in a direct, no-nonsense tone that is weary of human hypocrisy, subterfuge and mincing words. She orders the whining Padmini to put the heads back in place and press the sword on their necks, and the men would come alive. When Padmini asks her why she did not stop the men from doing what they did if she has foreknowledge of everything, she is initially surprised at the selfish turn of Padmini's thoughts, and then replies that she was disgusted at the lying men – one offers her with much false rhetoric his head which he promised to Rudra, and the other dies for the ostensible sake of friendship when he was really afraid of being caught as a murderer. Following the Mother's order, Padmini places the heads but in darkness, frantic hurry and confusion, swaps heads and bodies – Deavadatta's head is set on Kapila's body and vice versa. The goddess warily notes the subconscious feminine motive behind the confusion, but lets it happen as it is. Gradually the men recover, and Padmini confesses she has 'mixed them up'. The resulting jumbles and paradoxes begin to intoxicate and transport them to a mad ecstasy of creation, expressed in their collective laughter and dance celebrating the dissolution of all known rational premises of thought. Slowly the problems of social and familial identity arising out of this mix-up dawn on them. A row begins about whose wife Padmini is now, according to the now opposing laws of society and nature. Physical features, faculties and intellectual capacities have been reversed between the men, but memories are retained. The row leads to the debate over supremacy for the body or the head, and both men offer arguments to prove that the body (for Kapila's head and Devadatta's body) and the head (for Devadatta's head and Kapila's body) constitute the real person with rightful claim over the woman. As Padmini makes her preference clear for the poet's head supported by the wrestler's body (her image of male completeness), some bad blood rises, but subsides soon before the great dimensions of the existential question – what is superior and makes for human identity, head or body, intellect or sense? Act I leaves us at the crest of this dramatic climax.

Act II

Bhagavata resumes discussing the unprecedented crisis from where he left it at the end of Act I. He refers to a mythological instance – King Vikramaditya was presented with the same problem by the

demon Vetala, and he in answer had pointed to the cryptic message hidden in man's fate and running incomprehensibly in his veins, which only a sage with preternatural knowledge can decipher. In accordance to this, the three go to a rishi who pronounces the verdict that the head is the man – so he with Devadatta's head (and Kapila's body) is Devadatta, and Padmini's rightful husband as such. Padmini and Devadatta are jubilant, they celebrate the sanction by embracing and showering each other with amatory praise. As Kapila's manly body has joined Devadatta's intellect, it is a seeming completeness for them, and a fulfillment of her erotic craving. While they go out contented and self-absorbed, Kapila (with Devadatta's body) stands dejected. Bhagavata tries to console him but he disappears into the forest, never to return to the city or his family. A stretch of time passes offstage before we see Devadatta and Padmini settled as a happy couple. He has been to the Ujjain fair and brought back a couple of pretty dolls for their coming child. They prattle over their happy parenthood, and then he reports that at the fair he has entered a wrestling challenge and won effortlessly, just as he had defeated the champion in a sword fight at the gymnasium. Padmini, while admiring her man, warns at this show of physical prowess from the scholar-poet, but Devadatta says these impulses are automatic, not waiting for thought, and begins speaking enthusiastically about swimming. This is the first sign that the body is beginning to act independently of the head's dictates. Then when Padmini expresses surprise and dislike at his applying sandal oil on his body (a habit Devadatta had since childhood), we understand that head and body are going their different ways, and a rift and dichotomy beyond repair is ensuing. As the body gradually metamorphoses, led by the head, a third, objective viewpoint is introduced through the speaking dolls from Ujjain. The dolls are soft and sensitive, complacent and proud, even a little conceited, and speak in a cynical tone emphasizing the grossness of the humans and the futility of their elated state. The dolls start with discussing what princely care their delicacy expected, and then throw disgust at Devadatta's peasant like hands, Padmini's swelling belly, and the newborn baby who for them is a nasty lump of flesh. They can read thoughts and look into the dreams of humans, which invests them with the power of a supernatural chorus beyond the scope of Bhagavata. Six months pass, in which the dolls pass from shiny newness to neglect and decay, as the baby grows and the dolls go out of favor.

Padmini approaches her husband with a proposal to take the child out by the lake, and when he complains of the cold, the conversation turns to how his bodily habits are changing. The scholar's head is molding the wrestler's body to its own tune, to the wife's dislike and against her grain of robust living. This is also signified by the perception of the dolls that the hard palms have changed to girlish softness and the tight belly has loosened – they follow the metamorphosis to a coarse, grotesque level that sends a shudder through the audience. They enter Padmini's subconscious and watch her dreams that are beginning to show up the rift between her head (dedicated to her marital accord with Devadatta) and her body (reverting from the effeminate Devadatta and desiring Kapila). The lullaby she sings describes a dream – an image of a princely rider in white, riding a white stallion. The red jasmines on his chest, his pebbly eyeballs and cold body signify his riding into a world of the dead – the land he rides towards is a nowhere. Padmini's internal schism is driving her to a private tumult unlike the men whose heads have been transposed. The dolls catch her dreaming of Kapila, but on waking she tries to repress her dark thoughts. However the cycles of change are too great for her to contain – she is exasperated all the more as she is inwardly threatened by disintegration. The contradictory voices of conscience (head) and carnal desire (body) are symbolized by the two dolls as they attempt to reveal and repress Padmini's dream of Kapila climbing and diving; they then fight and scream and giggle, and the seriocomic fight represents the struggle of moral and immoral forces in her mind. Padmini proposes to get new dolls for the baby, and this brings out a string of curses from the old tattered dolls, which reflects their hatred not only of their own rejection but of Padmini's ploy to get Devadatta out of her way for some time. As he sets out for

Ujjain, Padmini speaks to her child of the witching fair of the forest. The beautiful description of the natural backdrop, the interplay of light and shadow, sun and moon on the trees and river, is a setting for the flowering of the deepest, darkest fantasies of the mind, away from human society. Symbolically, the forest with its vibrant, free life-force stands for the male creative principle of nature, while the tree of the Fortunate Lady standing outside the forest is the feminine waiting to receive the seeds of life. Her decision to go to the forest fair is thus a volitional move in the carnal direction.

The scene shifts to the forest now, and we see Kapila in his original physical state living a brooding solitary life there. Padmini enters the scene carrying her child and the two meet. She says she has brought out the child to accustom it to open nature, but has lost her way. All her way she has 'stuck to the wrong road' – the statement reveals her acknowledgement of her moral deviation. She says the son is Kapila's, meaning that Deavadatta's body has fathered it, but Kapila vehemently refuses saying he is Kapila now in body and mind. Yet, memories of being Devadatta in body well up in him, and he wishes a close look at the child. Sensing his dilemma Padmini asks softly how he carries on, and Kapila melts into sympathy and asks her in. Padmini tries to soften him further by showing the mole on the child that marks its resemblance to its father, but also curiously notes that the soft body of Devadatta has changed into the tough muscular mode of Kapila. He says he fought that softness away because it rendered him unfit for forest life – there was a war between body and head, and the head again won here as it fashioned the body to its needs. At peace with himself now, having resolved the dichotomy, Kapila asks her why she has left Devadatta. She is answerless – after the seeming completeness of Devadatta's head with Kapila's body, she has seen how human completeness wanes with time, and is now faced with the compromised completeness of Kapila whose head, in hardening the body for practical need has dulled itself. Bhagavata, as chorus, intervenes to speak for the speechless Padmini, explaining the slow eroding effect of time over her. The slow, gradual nature of physical transformation has kept her memory painfully alive, which may not have been so if the change were magical and instantaneous. But the change has been very human, stirring consciousness slowly and weakening the willpower of the observer. Kapila in an agonized voice tells her he had achieved a sort of completeness by shaping Devadatta's body along principles dictated by Kapila's head, becoming the old Kapila again, which is now being threatened by memories raked up by Padmini's arrival – memories forgotten by his conscious self but flowing nevertheless in his veins. He pleads her to go back, but is himself wavering in conviction. Padmini, knowing that Kapila's old desire for her is returning, and that his raucous maleness would instinctively seek her femininity to complete itself, stays on the plea that her son is tired and needs sleep. She in her turn also remains incomplete until joined with a man, and prompts his sensual memories to that end by silently watching him and offering herself to his gaze. Kapila's rising memories shove him to the brink of incompleteness again – he tries to fight it but resigns to the widening breach. His body, by its own, recognizes Padmini's touch and sparks the memories of having been Devadatta, while his head being Kapila's fails to find them. Padmini offers a sensual union to erase the breach; comparing herself to a river, she argues that the head must know the sensations the body has undergone – that is her solution to the war of sense and intellect, to be reached through a plunge in the river. The songs of Bhagavata and the female chorus at this point extend the comparison of Padmini with a free-flowing river and Kapila with a dried up scarecrow on the bank. The river is the emblem of desire, playing in whirls and eddies of its own accord and rushing forth in laughing carelessness. As the sweep of desire takes up the two, Devadatta enters in search of his wife and son, holding a sword and two new dolls. He is out to take revenge and Bhagavata informs him that Padmini has been with Kapila for four or five days. Before he can assault, Kapila comes out saying he was waiting for Devadatta to come. On meeting the fire of revenge gives way to a calm, and a weary look back at how the bodies behaved. Kapila says that

Devadatta's body gave him new sensations and ideas at first, and Devadatta says he had tried to curb Kapila's wildness - both recounting how the bodies revolted and then slowly submitted to the heads. They seem to have undergone a catharsis, after which living and dying are not so different. Kapila proposes they live together, but knows it to be a false solution. They take up swords knowing that they should both die hereafter, and the fight begins in the tune of a ritual dance where the dancers are locked in a superhuman consciousness of the cyclical and impersonal nature of life and death. They kill each other as Padmini watches in silence – she knew in her blood they could not live sharing her and the bizarre changes of their own bodies. She is the cause of their death – the root of all confusion but also the human urge for completeness working through her. She orders her son to be given to the hunting tribes of the forest as Kapila's son, and to return him to Devadatta's father when he grows to be five. She resolves to burn herself with her men. The playful vivacity in her nature has now been replaced with a grave awareness that fate has unfolded its mystery in her actions. She now knows she has always been the embodiment of the generative principle, drawing men to fulfill nature's purpose, and endeavoring to aspire to a completeness only allowed to gods. With this realization she goes to her self-immolation, because the generative principle in her is spent. In death she becomes one with the flower of the Fortunate Lady, emptying her mortal existence into the immortal life of nature.

With these cathartic deaths, the play comes to its narrative and emotive end, but the ideological issue of completeness remains unresolved – the three die incomplete in each and all, suffering strangely from the bizarre experiment. As Bhagavata performs the closing rites, the audience is whipped into attention by a scream, when the customary national anthem should have begun. The screaming actor rushes in to report that he has heard and seen a horse singing traditional Indian patriotic songs followed by the national anthem, and has rushed in to convey this frightening event. As Bhagavata begins to remember Hayavadana, the first actor enters with Padmini's son, cajoling him to speak or smile. The boy is dumb, and only reacts violently when his dolls are touched. Bhagavata identifies him by the mole on the shoulder. They are busy with the boy when the second actor attempts to say he has seen not a horse-headed man but a complete horse, but his words are stopped by the entry of Hayavadana singing. He has a horse's body now, as well as the head, and he greets all with perfect courtesy. As they laugh in unison, a miracle happens – the dumb boy bursts into laughter seeing a horse laugh. Bhagavata asks him how he became a full horse. Hayavadana's reply ironically repeats the emotionally charged suicides of the men. He went to goddess Kali and picked up the sword, and offered to chop his head off if she did not grant his prayer. The goddess was dismayed that everybody came to her to cut off their heads, and was in a mood of disgusted hurry. Hayavadana made his prayer for completeness, but before he could utter the word 'man', the prayer was granted and he became a horse. On reflection however, he prefers the horse's life to a man's, and this works as the final sarcastic comment on the human enterprise for perfection. Yet he has one drawback – he has not been able to shed off the human voice which is so useless, spent in futile discourses all through life. He furthers the sarcasm when he says he sings patriotic songs with the aim to ruin his hated human voice because he has seen people suffering that fate. The boy then moves him from despair to happiness, and he asks the boy to sing in exchange of a ride on his back. The boy, not knowing the national anthem, sings his mother's lullaby – this time himself standing for the dead rider. Hayavadana is saddened by the tragic import of the song and tells Bhagavata so, but Bhagavata glosses over the song and highlights the pure joy of the child's laughter. Hayavadana is cynical of the gloss – he identifies such sentimentalism as a national disease keeping us in a fool's paradise, shut out from reality. But his criticism is muted as it happens in the social life of the nation, and he turns to the boy's demand for laughter. It is now that the final miracle happens – as he laughs, the sound grows nearer the sound of the horse's neighing than a human laugh – and Hayavadana receives the final bliss of the loss of the

human voice. He is as happy at this as his mother had been, perhaps more because he has suffered the tragic solitude of the halfway-between. His rise to completeness is paradoxically a fall from the human to the subhuman, an indication that animals live a fuller life being free from vain human intellection, a more cohesive union of head and body. This transformation also returns us to the opening image of Lord Ganesha, who as a god is complete with only an animal's head over a human body – a hint of harmony of sense and thought above his visibly uncouth appearance. The play ends in a prayer to the Lord where all join.

Important themes/issues in the play

a) **The duality of body and head**: This duality is recurrently presented in the play through the figures of Lord Ganesha, Hayavadana, Devadatta and Kapila. It is seen as the chief obstacle to completeness. Attempts to overcome it are baffled (in the men) or turned to ironic degradation (in Hayavadana).

b) **Creative impulse aimed at perfection**: The human impulse to create, and evolve creation towards perfection is a continuous force combining male and female sexuality, but working chiefly through Padmini and the goddess Kali. Padmini takes it to its utmost human reach, while the goddess senses the narrow, selfish, self-defeating motives of the impulse and fulfills them in ironic jeopardy.

c) **Critique of modern India**: The timeless theme of completeness/incompleteness is seen as an existential crisis of post-independence India with its colonial backdrop. The critique works largely through Hayavadana's efforts of becoming a complete human.

d) **Play within the play**: The inner narrative/drama of the three human figures is framed by an outer narrative/drama of Hayavadana, the actors and stage hands, and Bhagavata. The inner and the outer (framing) narratives run along separate timelines, and obliquely comment upon each other. The framing narrative keeps the audience at a critical distance and encourages free thought on the ideas presented.

e) **Fulfillment as frustration**: Human desires/prayers are fulfilled in ways leading to metaphysical confusion and ironic reversals. The metaphysical agent of this is goddess Kali, whose sleepy sarcasm points at the seeds of human failure.

f) **Psychoanalytic approach**: An investigation into the function of the creative energies and the minds experiencing interior and exterior change is continuous through the play – conducted by the chorus and Bhagavata and later through the speaking dolls.

g) **Nature**: The human creative impulse is defined as emanating from nature – Padmini and Kapila are nature's children, and the child is returned to the forest, nature provides the background and imagery of sexual union – thus the individual mingles in the universal.

h) **Time**: There is a complex movement of time in the characters' consciousness. They experience the flow, measured by change, as well as follow a cyclical movement returning to moments frozen in memory. Also, the swing between the ancient India of Padmini-Devadatta-Kapila and the modern India of Hayavadana happens, and prompts the audience to understand one time by another.