

History, Myths and Literature in the Plays of Girish Karnad: A Critical Exploration

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Girish Karnad is a modern Indian English dramatist who is renowned with his stunning skills of integrating native myths with history in such a way that appeals to modern sensibility. His play serves as a good example of how classical themes could be re-contextualised and adjusted to the realities of the contemporary theatre, thus making the cultural discourse of the present enriched. The modern man is forced to wander through a maze of economic, political, and ideological problems in the dominant materialistic environment. This is the situation in the oeuvre of Karnad, which indicates that even with external growth, there are still those who are deprived of spiritual illumination. His dramatics thus ask the question of what follows the progress and inner satisfaction, placing the existential crisis of the person at the centre of the story. Thematically, the plays of Karnad are in a spherical arrangement around the complex interaction of the past, history, myth and legend. Having condensed these stories within the aggregate memory of India, he reforms them in a way that they are relevant to the predicaments of the contemporary humankind. This approach will enable him to ask questions of how far historical and mythological paradigms can shed some light on the modern social and ethical dilemmas. The current essay critically evaluates how Karnad employs history, myth and literature in his stock of drama. It is also prefigurative of the similarities between his practice and the statements by T.S. Eliot, who said that the past should be re-done by the present just to a degree that the present is also informed by the past. In this sense, the essay places Karnad in a wider intertextual culture of negotiating the time. Such works as "Tughlaq," in which historical events are used to unveil the ups and downs of power and government; or the mythically charged works "Hayavadana" and "Nagamandala," measuring human desire, identity and social mores through folklore, are illustrative of such a technique. Combining the ancient narration forms with the modern political awareness, Karnad manages to craft a type of the theatre, which feels both Indian and instantly relevant to the viewers. In the end, this paper has shown how the dramaturgy of Karnad is a cultural reflection and how it helps us question our identity and the social frameworks by deliberately blurring the boundaries between history, myth, and literature. His plays thus do not just add to the canon of aesthetics, but also the socio-cultural mirror of contemporary India.

Keywords: Girish Karnad, Indian Drama in English, Cultural heritage, Search for identity, Myths and history, Past and present, Literature and theatre, Power and politics, Women empowerment.

The speaker in the speech under examination argues that Hindus were molested and mistreated by the Sultan who, at the same time, attempted to project the image of an egalitarian state. His claims, however, do not go down as well with the audience as, in the times of religious zealotry and accepted sectarian animosity, his liberal words can appear insensitive to Muslims and even subversive to Hindus, leading to the question of his real intentions.

Hayavadana, an Indian dramaturgy masterpiece by Girish Karnad, is a translation of a Sanskrit story selected in the Kathasavitsagar. This story was later translated by Thomas Mann as *The*

Transposed Heads, where he assumes that the human body is the most suitable medium to enforce a predestination that is accurate. Karnad takes this motif to explore a different predicament the search of identity in an elaborate maze of relationships. Since its inception, the play struggles with the absurdity and contradiction of human life that portrays every character as a disjointed personality that struggles to attain success and completeness. This is a reiteration of Aristotle saying that plot is the soul of tragedy, and a well-structured sequence of events that help in character development and emphasizes the coherence of the themes.

It will be wise to outline the philosophical foundations of existentialism as such before embarking on the existentialist aspects of the work of Karnad. The western doctrine prefigures the individual as a key actor of self determination. Its foundations are archaic, but Kierkegaard revived the idea and then extended it by other philosophers like Jaspers and Heidegger. Existential thought finds its expression in literary works (both Dostoevsky and Kafka) and in the middle of the twentieth century, Sartre, Beauvoir, Malraux, and Camus emerged as the most articulate representatives of this movement. *Hayavadana* injects these existential streams into its narrative text, and assumes that human identity is self-made, not determined by God, society or biology, and that renouncing choice makes one despise.

Another Karnad composition, *Nagamandala* play, is a combination of folkloric themes and modern sociopolitical issues. It is a story of a young woman Rani, who is married to the lazy Appanna and has her locked up in her household world. To draw the attention of her husband, she uses a magical root donated by her confidante Kurudavva to lure the love of her husband, and ironically, the root attracts a serpent disguised as Appanna, making Rani think she is in a state of conjugal love but on the contrary, she is still under the foot of a cobra. The reality comes out and Rani is forced to display her innocence to her people with eventual success when the serpents coils are harmless in her hand leading to her worshipping as a deity.

This story challenges the divide between the solid convention and personal

desire and highlights the loneliness of women in the patriarchal regime and the blurry line between the facts and fantasy. It is a description of how women despite being trapped in strict social conventions are resilient and resourceful. It uses both lyrical and symbolic narrative in a way that is combined with references to myths and the supernatural to create a tableau, which swings between everyday reality and dreamlike allegory, thus triggering audience reflection on ills that plague our society filling the aesthetic delight of the narrative.

Karnad is using *Nagamandala* to reveal the patriarchal chauvinism, systemic oppression of women, and injustices caused by a male dominated culture. He presents a new matriarchy as a healing fantasy. The play traces the path of victimization of Rani by Appanna to the position of a matriarch, and the need to recalibrate the society towards a more egalitarian society. The relational map described by Sudhir Kakar, daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, mother, also explains how the relational roles a woman plays are many and how these interdependencies justify her social agency.

The crown of a successful playwright in India has been the capacity of Girish Karnad to create easily accessible plays that are full of philosophical resonance. Based on the scholarly histories, mythological tales, and folklores, he brings the stories to the stage where he makes them alive, as instruments of understanding the human feelings, the social dilemmas, and the problems of identity. His body of work (Tughlaq, *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala*) shows how the ancient themes

were brilliantly blended with the modernist sentiment, and thus, it became an essential part of the Indian theatre culture. The scholarly activities, including his visits to the University of Chicago, where he taught as a special lecturer, and his administrative experience at the Film and Television Institute of India, the Sangeet Natak Akademi, etc. serve to confirm his versatility as an intellectual and his devotion to theatrical experimentation.

The conflict between duty and desire faces in the play *Yayati* by Karnad who reinterprets a legend of Mahabharata. The titular ruler is a king who is plagued with a curse of rapid aging, and hands it over to his heirs, trying to restore youth and vitality. This plot structure is a critique of human tendency of individual satisfaction at the cost of societal obligations, thus repeating existentialist concerns of authenticity and moral responsibility. The discussion is quite simple, but its symbolic echo, the most striking one being the depiction of the curse as a symbol of unbridled selfishness, allows scholars to explore how mythic archetypes relate to modern moral issues.

The remarginalization of *Yayati* also reflects the propensity of Karnad to give mythic forms a current significance. The play is not obtrusive but still maintains deep symbolic depths by maintaining an un-owned and straightforward linguistic register. The combination of mythic and psychological levels makes it an eternal work, which urges people of any status to question the eternal problem of the necessity to balance personal desire and demands of responsibility.

Tughlaq by Karnad is a depiction of the rule of Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq, a 14th-century Sultan of Delhi whose idealistic ambitions turned out to become a disaster to his people. His high ambitions were to attain an egalitarian, culturally unified polity but such misjudgement like the transfer of the capital to Daulatabad, and the introduction of copper coins, led to devastation and general unrest. The play highlights that there is a thin wall dividing idealistic visions and real life, with the tragedy positioning Tughlaq as an idler trapped outside reality. The play is written in a very reserved and yet powerful way and contrasts the ideals of heroism with the poisonous essence of ambition, which can be inevitably compared to the existentialist ideas of authenticity, freedom and humanity.

In his academic studies about Indian history, Karnad came across the personality of Tughlaq and had observed an existential hero in him. M. K. The description of Tughlaq as an existential tragedy given by Naik is correct as it reflects a man who lives surrounded by contradictions of good intentions being against barbaric results, a man immersed in his own myth and a man who would face the truth of his mortal nature in the end. The play is a quintessential example of the confrontation between the unworkable utopian aspirations and the empirical rule and is a rich ground on which literary theorists can examine the dialectic interaction between idealism and historical necessity.

The first acts in *Tughlaq* feature an old interlocutor discussing with a young ruler the nature of politics whose restlessness was being instigated by the rising wave of changes. This

complex play shows the lack of connection between the proclaimed egalitarianism by Tughlaq and the feeling of grievance of the people, and it reveals the gap between political discourse and the actual existence. The final quotation of the play, which is, the line, where the author refers to the need to create a secular and harmoniously integrated society, denies the easy belief in the power of charisma but makes modern readers question the boundaries of sovereign vision in the intricate society structure.

Now, now don't at me when you say that. We didn't want an exemption! Look, when a Sultan kicks me in the teeth and says, 'Pay up, you Hindu dog', I'm happy. I know I am safe. But the moment a man comes along and says, 'I know you are a Hindu, but you are also a human being.' Well, that makes me nervous (Karnad: 197: 2).

This discussion brings out the perceived injustices under the Sultan on Hindus, and the declarations of egalitarianism by the Sultan on the polity. The people, though, are also ambivalent with his declarations, not believing in a really objective position in a time where sectarian hatred and hostility between the Hindu and Muslim world is widespread.

Hayavadana is an ultimate masterpiece to the Indian contemporary dramaturgy, which is the brainchild of Girish Karnad. The play is based on the Sanskrit version of the story which is present in *Kathasavitsagar* and further re-processed by Thomas Mann in his novel the translated heads. He believes that the corporeal ego is the best medium through which one can realize his or her fate, but Karnad uses the

same theme to challenge the, search of identity in the midst of complicated interpersonal relationships. His dramaturgy aims to enlighten the clash between absurdity and contradiction, therefore, predetermining the pursuit of self-actualisation with excessive relentlessness.

The main subject of thematic concern in *Hayavadana* is the construction of identity, a theme to which Karnad is as relentless as a whip. Characters are constantly in pursuit of success and perfection, and the plot can be viewed as evidence of the academic knowledge of Aristotle, who looked into the plot as the soul of tragedy. A logical and beautifully arranged flow of events must not only inform the development of character, but also act as a purely decorative frame. The play begins with Ganesh Puja where the god, Lord Ganesh, the symbol of the perfect, has a head of an elephant and a single tusk indicating the thematic paradox of transposition and duplicity. The passing thus creates the theme of being in discrepant reality initially.

Before an analysis of existentialism in Karnad in the work of *Hayavadana*, it is of paramount importance to define the philosophical basis of the existential thought. This is a doctrine of the West origin, which assumes that the individual existence is a primary reality. Ancient in its concept, it was enhanced by Kierkegaard of the contemporary era, and developed further by Jaspers, Heidegger, and the rest. The themes of existentialism become evident in the writings of Dostoevsky, Kafka, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Malraux and Camus. The existentialist content of the chivalry is rich: man is self-made,

denies predestination, and has to face the despotism of external factors. Existentialists believe that freedom is condemnation; human life is dynamic succession of moments which must be preserved in the concrete experience but not in the abstract hypothesis.

Another theatrical work by Karnad is called *Nagamandala*; it is a mix of folk narrative traditions and modern issues. It is centered on the life of a young woman Rani who is married off to a man named Appanna who makes her a prisoner in her own home. She is able to perceive a magic root, which Kurudavva gives to her, in her solitude, which is meant to capture the heart of her husband. Unfortunately, the root beckons a serpent posing as her husband thus creating the illusion of marital bliss with the background of hidden threat. The resultant truth compels Rani to prove her innocence in front of her society, which she achieves by taming the cobra, thus avoiding any danger and gaining divine worship.

The gist of *Nagamandala* is its investigation of tension between tradition and personal desire, which underlines its isolation of women in patriarchal societies and mixes the reality with imagination. The storyline is that women, regardless of a suppressive societal set up, are resilient and agentic. The play highlights how intricate truth is and how love and faith may take inexplicable forms. It challenges male dominance and prefigures the strength of women endurance using a poetic and symbolic diction that combines folk mythic motifs and magical realism. The language is distinctly approachable but highly suggestive and allows passing through the

divides between ordinary reality and unreal worlds without any difficulties.

Here, the discussion of the patriarchal oppression and male chauvinism presented by Karnad is a call to the wider feminist narratives. He promotes a new conceptualisation of matriarchal paradigms as an aspirational paradigm. The story is the account of how Rani is tormented by Appanna, and, at the same time, questions the feminine chastity in the context of a larger sociocultural setting. The transition of naivety to maturity is triggered by the encounter of Rani and Naga until she reaches the level of being the matriarch of the family. Karnad thus assumes that social development requires going back to matriarchal values. Sudhir Kakar notes that in the book, *Naga Mandala*, Karnad identifies the relational identities of Rani in the context of her relationships; as daughter, wife, mother-in-law, mother with the social approval of each of these positions emphasized.

The character development of Rani in *Naga-Mandala* is also another good example of an existentialist saga, since she strives to rescue marriage identity within the dull and emotionless matrimonial environment. Karnad gives a subtle and realistic picture of the victimized wife, the socio-cultural struggle over marital identity. It is in this two-fold chase that both Rani and Appanna face the need to keep personal identities in the environment dominated by patriarchy. Karnad is the critic who misfortune attacks the archetypal Indian husband and reveals the compromise personality that is challenged by the demands of society. Similarly, Rani and Vishakha, who are characters in *The Fire and*

the Rain, are stereotyped as women who see themselves bound by traditions, and therefore their submissiveness is subject to the requests of the patriarch, no matter how they are placed in the moral context. Their situation is an example of what a modern woman is facing with regards to male exigencies.

To conclude, it is possible to note that the dramatizations of Girish Karnad reflect the powerful combination of historical, mythological, and literary themes to express the timeless truths about human life and society. Instead of the escapist nostalgia, he chooses critical approach to the present reformulating ancient stories to explain issues of the modern world. Using characters who are struggling with identity, power, love and obligation, Karnad highlights the fact that human emotion remains constant through time. His ability to combine the old with the new, to seek both localization and universalism, makes his works a subject matter of inquiry on the part of the scholar both about social injustices, redefinition of the doctrine, and the many-sided aspects of human experience.

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