



Girish Karnad: Myth, History, and the Representation of Contemporary Indian Culture

Dr.T.Mahendran

Associate Professor of English,
A.V.V.M. Sri Pushpam College, Poondi
mahendranavvm@gmail.com
6382369180

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Abstract: Girish Karnad stands as one of the most influential figures in modern Indian drama, whose plays blend myth, history, folklore, and fantasy to interrogate contemporary social realities. This paper examines how Karnad employs traditional narratives to critique social injustice, patriarchal dominance, caste discrimination, religious orthodoxy, political corruption, and existential dilemmas of modern man. By reinterpreting myths and historical events through modern dramaturgical techniques—often influenced by Western theatre traditions such as Brechtian Epic Theatre—Karnad transforms the past into a powerful lens for understanding the present. The study argues that Karnad’s drama functions as a cultural chronicle of India, offering ethical insights and urging social introspection rather than prescribing simplistic solutions.

Key words: Girish Karnad, Myth, History, Indian Drama, Tradition, Society, Feminism, Caste, Religion, Existentialism

Introduction

Modern Indian drama reflects a dual tendency: a return to indigenous traditions for themes and techniques, and the assimilation of modern theatrical forms. Girish Karnad exemplifies this synthesis by fusing Indian myths, legends, and historical narratives with contemporary concerns and Western dramaturgy. His plays transcend temporal boundaries, using the past to illuminate persistent social, political, and cultural problems of modern India.

Karnad's dramatic corpus demonstrates a sustained engagement with human values and ethical dilemmas. He exposes the darker aspects of tradition—hypocrisy, exploitation, violence, and manipulation—while simultaneously acknowledging the cultural richness of India's mythic heritage. His work underscores the belief that history and mythology are not static relics but living forces that shape present consciousness.

Myth and History as Tools of Contemporary Critique

Karnad's use of myth and history is not nostalgic but interrogative. Drawing from texts such as the *Mahabharata*, Jain epics, folklore, and medieval Indian history, he reworks archetypal narratives to question dominant social norms. Plays like *Yayati*, *Hayavadana*, *Naga-Mandala*, *Tughlaq*, *Tale-Danda*, *Fire and the Rain*, and *Bali* demonstrate how historical and mythical frameworks can be deployed to analyze power, gender, faith, and morality.

By juxtaposing archetypal experiences with modern realities, Karnad creates symbolic structures that resonate with contemporary audiences. His drama challenges Nehruvian idealism and the overly optimistic portrayal of post-independence India, revealing instead the unresolved tensions beneath the surface of national progress.

Gender, Marriage, and Patriarchal Structures

One of the most significant concerns in Karnad's plays is the position of women within patriarchal society. Characters such as Rani (*Naga-Mandala*), Padmini (*Hayavadana*), Devyani and Sharmishtha (*Yayati*) embody the emotional, sexual, and social suppression imposed upon women through rigid institutions like marriage.

Naga-Mandala boldly addresses female desire and autonomy, destabilizing traditional notions of chastity and purity. Rani's extramarital relationship, facilitated through the mythical Naga, subverts male-centric definitions of virtue. Karnad indirectly legitimizes her defiance by exposing the hypocrisy embedded in societal norms that demand female fidelity while ignoring male transgressions.

Similarly, *Hayavadana* critiques the obsession with perfection—intellectual versus physical—and exposes how women become victims within male-dominated marital frameworks. These plays collectively foreground the struggle of women for selfhood and sexual fulfillment, challenging centuries-old gender hierarchies.

Caste, Religion, and Social Violence

Karnad's historical plays such as *Tale-Danda* and *Fire and the Rain* present a searing critique of caste discrimination and religious orthodoxy. Drawing from pre-modern Indian history, *Tale-Danda* exposes the brutality sanctioned in the name of religion and caste purity. The play highlights how religious texts and rituals are misinterpreted to justify oppression, particularly of lower-caste communities.

The inhuman practices sanctioned by caste ideology—denial of education, untouchability, and violent punishment—are starkly depicted. Karnad echoes the views of reformers like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who condemned caste as a system designed to preserve Brahminical dominance at the cost of social progress.

In *Fire and the Rain*, the character of Nittilai exposes the hypocrisy of upper-caste men who exploit tribal women while denying them dignity or social acceptance. Through such narratives, Karnad critiques both inter- and intra-religious conflicts, advocating compassion and ethical responsibility over blind adherence to tradition.

Power, Politics, and Existential Anxiety

Political ambition and misuse of religion form the core of plays like *Tughlaq*. Muhammad bin Tughlaq's idealism degenerates into tyranny, mirroring contemporary political corruption. Karnad presents power as inherently unstable, often leading to moral decay and societal chaos. Existential themes permeate Karnad's drama. His characters navigate alienation, communication breakdown, and identity crises in an absurd and unpredictable world. Influenced by Brechtian Epic Theatre, Karnad moves away from Aristotelian catharsis, encouraging rational reflection rather than emotional release. Plays such as *Yayati* and *Hayavadana* exemplify this shift, foregrounding cause-and-effect relationships and moral consequences.

Sacrifice, Ethics, and Humanism

In *Yayati* and *Bali*, Karnad explores the ethics of sacrifice. *Yayati* critiques human greed and the irrational desire to defy natural cycles, portraying the exploitation of the younger generation by the older. The play becomes a metaphor for modern materialism and ambition.

Bali dramatizes religious conflict through the domestic tension between tradition and reform. By proposing symbolic sacrifice instead of animal killing, Karnad suggests compromise and ethical evolution as solutions to entrenched belief systems.

Across his plays, Karnad rejects violence and advocates humanism. He emphasizes humility, compassion, and moral accountability as pathways to individual and social redemption.

Karnad as a Cultural Chronicler

Karnad's plays collectively function as chronicles of Indian culture. By reviving forgotten rituals, regional traditions, and historical episodes, he educates audiences across geographical and cultural boundaries. His portrayal of practices such as the Naga cult or historical figures like Tughlaq bridges regional divides and fosters national cultural awareness.

Like African writers who employ myth to critique postcolonial realities, Karnad uses indigenous narratives to address universal human dilemmas. His characters transcend time and place, embodying enduring conflicts of desire, power, faith, and identity.

Conclusion

Girish Karnad emerges as a chronicler of contemporary Indian culture who masterfully intertwines myth, history, and modernity. His plays do not offer quick solutions but provoke critical awareness, urging audiences to question inherited traditions and social injustices. By holding a mirror to society through the lens of the past, Karnad demonstrates that unresolved historical mistakes continue to shape the present.

The study affirms that Karnad's dramaturgy possesses universality, relevance, and ethical depth. His works address perennial human problems—alienation, oppression, ambition, and moral responsibility—making them timeless in appeal. This research thus contributes to the critical understanding of Karnad's oeuvre, reinforcing his stature as one of the most significant voices in modern Indian drama.

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