



Tradition and Modernity in Indian Drama: A Critical Study of Girish Karnad's Plays

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Introduction

Indian drama has always reflected the dynamic socio-cultural fabric of the subcontinent. With a rich heritage rooted in classical Sanskrit theatre and folk traditions, Indian drama underwent a significant transformation in the post-independence era. Among the playwrights who reshaped modern Indian theatre, Girish Karnad stands out as a prominent voice who bridged the gap between tradition and modernity.

Karnad's dramaturgy embodies a postcolonial consciousness, fusing mythology and history with modern concerns such as individual identity, gender politics, and the crisis of meaning in contemporary society. As Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri states, "Karnad's plays represent a conscious effort to re-view tradition, not with nostalgia but as a mode of interrogating the present" (Chaudhuri 12). This paper critically examines how Karnad employs traditional forms and motifs to comment on modern dilemmas, thereby creating a unique postcolonial dramatic idiom.

Keywords

Indian drama, tradition, modernity, Girish Karnad, postcolonial, mythology, hybridity, cultural conflict, identity

The Fusion of Classical and Contemporary Forms in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*

Girish Karnad's contribution to Indian drama lies in his masterful synthesis of indigenous storytelling traditions with the complex themes and structural experimentation characteristic of modern theatre. Among his seminal works, *Hayavadana* (1971) stands out as a groundbreaking play that illustrates this fusion of classical and contemporary forms. Drawing from Indian mythology, folklore, and classical sources such as the *Kathasaritsagara*, Karnad reimagines ancient narratives through a distinctly modern lens. In doing so, he offers a compelling exploration of identity, alienation, and the existential anxieties of the postcolonial individual.

The thematic foundation of *Hayavadana* revolves around the fragmentation of identity—a motif that aligns deeply with the concerns of modernist drama. At the heart of the narrative lies the story of Devadatta and Kapila, two friends who undergo a bizarre head-body transplantation, resulting in a metaphysical and psychological dilemma. This conflict challenges not only traditional conceptions

of selfhood but also raises philosophical questions about what constitutes the core of human identity: the intellect or the physical being. The tension between the two symbolizes the larger existential crisis faced by individuals in a rapidly transforming world, particularly in societies navigating the delicate balance between traditional values and modern aspirations.

Karnad's use of the anthropomorphic character Hayavadana—part man, part horse—further amplifies this theme of incompleteness and fragmentation. Hayavadana's quest for completeness, his desire to become fully human, is ironically resolved when he becomes a complete horse instead, thereby emphasizing the futility of such quests in a world where identity is inherently unstable. The absurdity and surrealism embedded in this transformation underscore the influence of modernist dramaturgy, particularly its inclination toward depicting the human condition as fragmented, absurd, and uncertain.

Critics such as N. D. R. Chandra have aptly noted that Karnad does not invoke myth to venerate the past but rather to interrogate the disquieting realities of the present. As Chandra points out, "Karnad employs myths not to glorify the past but to explore the alienation and anxiety of the present-day individual" (Chandra 52). This deliberate reworking of mythic content serves a dual purpose. On one hand, it keeps the cultural memory alive through performance; on the other, it problematizes the same memory by situating it within the context of contemporary socio-psychological dilemmas. This approach aligns with postcolonial theatrical strategies that seek to reclaim and repurpose indigenous forms while also addressing modern issues of identity, hybridity, and displacement.

Equally significant is Karnad's use of traditional performance techniques such as **Yakshagana**, the Kannada folk-theatre form that blends dance, music, and stylized storytelling. By incorporating such elements into *Hayavadana*, Karnad pays homage to regional performance traditions while simultaneously subverting their conventions. The masks, the chorus, and the non-linear narrative all contribute to a meta-theatrical framework where the audience is constantly reminded of the artificiality of theatre—a characteristic feature of Brechtian theatre and modernist performance. This self-reflexive structure, wherein the narrator (Bhagavata) interacts with both the characters and the audience, breaks the fourth wall and creates a participatory theatrical experience.

Aparna Dharwadker articulates this interplay between tradition and innovation when she observes that "Karnad's formal innovations in *Hayavadana* exemplify a critical dialogue with both indigenous forms and Western dramaturgy" (Dharwadker 178). Dharwadker's observation underscores the hybrid aesthetic of Karnad's dramaturgy. Rather than adopting Western models of drama uncritically, Karnad engages with them critically and interweaves them with native forms to produce a uniquely Indian theatrical expression that is both rooted and cosmopolitan.

Moreover, the structure of *Hayavadana* itself mirrors the thematic fragmentation it seeks to explore. The narrative is framed as a play-within-a-play, which not only destabilizes the notion of linear storytelling but also underscores the multiplicity of meanings inherent in human experiences. This structural complexity invites the audience to interpret the play from various perspectives—psychological, philosophical, cultural, and political. It also reflects the postmodernist tendency to question absolute truths and embrace pluralism, ambiguity, and reflexivity.

In the larger context of Indian drama, *Hayavadana* represents a significant departure from the didacticism and moral rigidity that characterized earlier Indian theatrical traditions. Instead, it offers a space for introspection, ambiguity, and open-endedness. The characters are not mere archetypes but complex individuals grappling with internal and external conflicts. Their dilemmas are not resolved through divine intervention or moral epiphanies but remain suspended, inviting the audience to engage in deeper contemplation.

Thus, *Hayavadana* becomes more than just a play; it is a cultural dialogue that negotiates between the weight of tradition and the challenges of modernity. Karnad's dramatization of incomplete identities, his appropriation of folk elements, and his engagement with mythological content—all orchestrated through a modernist lens—reveal his deep commitment to evolving a dramatic form that is both authentically Indian and globally resonant.

In conclusion, the fusion of classical and contemporary forms in *Hayavadana* illustrates Girish Karnad's pioneering vision as a playwright. His ability to reinterpret traditional narratives through the lens of modern theatrical practices not only revitalized Indian drama but also established a new paradigm for contemporary Indian theatre. Through *Hayavadana*, Karnad affirms that the past and the present are not dichotomous but dialogic—that the traditional and the modern must engage with each other to reflect the complexities of Indian identity in a postcolonial world.

Deconstructing Power and Patriarchy in Traditional Narratives: A Study of *Nagamandala*

Girish Karnad's dramaturgy is marked by a deep engagement with the socio-cultural structures that shape and often subjugate human experience. One of the most striking aspects of his dramatic oeuvre is the way he deconstructs traditional narratives to critique entrenched systems of power, especially patriarchy. In *Nagamandala* (1988), Karnad reconfigures oral folktales to foreground the silenced voices of women, challenging both feudal hierarchies and gendered power relations. While the play retains the charm and rhythm of folk storytelling, it also serves as a subversive text that critiques the patriarchal ideologies underlying these traditional forms.

Nagamandala centers on Rani, a young woman married off to Appanna, a man who restricts her to the confines of his home and denies her emotional and physical companionship. Her plight is emblematic of countless women in traditional Indian society whose lives are governed by male authority and societal expectation. Karnad's portrayal of Rani's initial passivity and isolation becomes a powerful commentary on the silencing of women within the patriarchal household. Her husband, Appanna, represents the typical feudal male, aloof, domineering, and emotionally unavailable. The domestic space, instead of being a haven, becomes a prison, echoing the condition of many women whose lives are circumscribed by gendered norms.

However, Karnad does not merely depict Rani as a victim. Through the intervention of magical realism—embodied in her relationship with the Naga (serpent)—Rani begins a journey of self-discovery and transformation. The Naga, who assumes the form of her husband at night and treats her with love and respect, symbolizes an alternative masculinity—one that nurtures rather than dominates. This magical intrusion into the realistic world opens up the possibility of agency for Rani. It allows her to articulate her desires and to break free, albeit metaphorically, from the oppressive structures around her. As Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly observes, Karnad “uses traditional forms to interrogate the ideological assumptions that sustain gender oppression” (Mukherjee 89). By rewriting a folk tale from a female perspective, Karnad subverts the very narrative tools that historically marginalized women.

Rani's transformation is more than a personal or physical change; it is emblematic of a larger socio-cultural shift. By the end of the play, she moves from being an object of male control to a figure of reverence and power—symbolically elevated by the village community and, ironically, even accepted by Appanna. This reversal of power dynamics critiques the rigidity of patriarchal structures while also offering a vision of female empowerment. Importantly, this empowerment comes not through rebellion or confrontation, but through a reimagining of tradition itself. Karnad, thus, demonstrates that tradition need not be discarded but can be reinterpreted to serve emancipatory ends.

The structure of *Nagamandala* is crucial to its thematic depth. Karnad employs a frame narrative where a male playwright is cursed to die if he fails to keep his audience awake. This meta-theatrical device underscores Karnad's self-awareness as a dramatist working within—and against—traditional forms. It also foregrounds the act of storytelling as a site of both oppression and liberation. The inclusion of the Story and the Flames as speaking characters disrupts the boundaries between performer and audience, fiction and reality. This performative layering suggests that stories are not neutral carriers of culture but are imbued with ideological power. As such, the act of retelling a story becomes an act of resistance.

The meta-theatrical frame also critiques the very institution of theatre as male-dominated and exclusionary. The playwright, whose failure to engage the audience leads to his curse, becomes a metaphor for the failure of traditional, patriarchal narratives to resonate with contemporary audiences—particularly women. By allowing the female voice (Rani's) and the feminine figure of Story to dominate the narrative, Karnad reclaims theatre as a space where silenced voices can be heard and where new meanings can be created. The gender politics of *Nagamandala* are thus intricately woven into its structure, not just its content.

Moreover, *Nagamandala* challenges the binary between truth and falsehood, morality and immorality—categories often used by patriarchal societies to control women. Rani's ordeal, including the trial by ordeal involving the cobra, reveals the absurdity of societal expectations of female purity. The fact that Rani is declared chaste despite her unconventional relationship with the Naga illustrates how truth in folklore and oral traditions can be fluid and open to interpretation. Karnad uses this ambiguity to question moral absolutism and to expose how such frameworks have historically been used to subjugate women.

Through his complex and layered narrative, Karnad reveals how myth and folklore, often perceived as static or regressive, can be dynamic instruments of critique. He does not discard traditional forms but reclaims them, transforming them into vehicles of progressive thought. In doing so, he aligns with a broader tradition of postcolonial Indian drama that seeks to reconcile the past with the present—not by reproducing it uncritically, but by interrogating and reshaping it.

In conclusion, *Nagamandala* is a powerful example of how Girish Karnad deconstructs traditional narratives to expose and challenge patriarchal ideologies. By blending myth, folklore, and meta-theatre, he not only critiques gender oppression but also proposes alternative ways of imagining female subjectivity and agency. The play stands as a testament to Karnad's unique ability to balance tradition and modernity—affirming that the past can be a site of both critique and renewal.

Identity, History, and Postcolonial Angst: A Study of *Tughlaq*

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* (1964) is a landmark in modern Indian drama for its profound engagement with the themes of identity, historical consciousness, and postcolonial disillusionment. Set in the 14th century during the reign of Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq, the play does not merely reconstruct the past but refracts it through the lens of contemporary anxieties. Karnad transforms a historical narrative into an allegorical critique of India's post-independence political failures, revealing the tragic gap between visionary idealism and the harsh realities of governance. In this respect, *Tughlaq* becomes a quintessential example of how Indian drama, especially in Karnad's hands, negotiates the interplay of tradition and modernity.

At the heart of *Tughlaq* lies the eponymous ruler—a paradoxical figure of brilliance and brutality. His attempts at radical reform, including the relocation of the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad and the introduction of token currency, are historically documented as both visionary and disastrous.

Karnad uses these historical facts not to glorify the past but to explore the nature of political authority and its psychological and ethical limits. Tughlaq's descent into tyranny, suspicion, and isolation reflects the emotional and intellectual turmoil of a leader who cannot reconcile his ideals with the flawed world he seeks to govern.

This tragic paradox finds strong resonance in the postcolonial Indian context, especially in the aftermath of independence. Karnad wrote *Tughlaq* during a time when the initial euphoria of freedom had begun to wane and the harsh realities of nation-building emerged. The parallels with Jawaharlal Nehru's era are particularly striking. Nehru's vision of a secular, democratic, and industrialized India—rooted in rationalism and idealism—was increasingly undermined by political unrest, communal tensions, and bureaucratic inefficiency. As Aparna Dharwadker asserts, “Tughlaq's descent mirrors the postcolonial crisis of governance where visionary leadership collapses under the weight of impractical utopias and ideological absolutism” (Dharwadker 110). Thus, the play becomes a scathing commentary on the failure of intellectual leadership and the betrayal of national ideals.

The theme of identity in *Tughlaq* is not restricted to the political realm; it also extends to personal and existential dimensions. The Sultan's crisis is as much about the nation as it is about the self. He is portrayed as a ruler who aspires to be both philosopher and king, but ends up alienated from both his people and his own conscience. His identity, torn between spiritual idealism and pragmatic ruthlessness, reflects the schizophrenia of postcolonial leadership—caught between the utopian promise of independence and the grim compromises required to sustain power. This fragmentation of the self mirrors the postcolonial condition, where the collective identity of the nation is in flux, and where historical consciousness is haunted by the legacy of colonialism.

Moreover, the play's structure itself reinforces its thematic concerns. The episodic format, rapid shifts in time and place, and a broad spectrum of characters—from nobles and soldiers to fakirs and commoners—create a sense of historical motion and political fluidity. This dramatic mobility suggests not just the instability of Tughlaq's rule but the broader uncertainty of a nation in transition. The stage becomes a political arena where ideologies clash, and the past is continually interrogated. As N. D. R. Chandra notes, “By setting a modern moral crisis within a historical frame, Karnad reclaims history as a tool for political commentary” (Chandra 55). The use of history, then, is not ornamental but functional—serving as a mirror to contemporary dilemmas.

Another layer of postcolonial angst in *Tughlaq* emerges from the play's engagement with the theme of betrayal. Tughlaq is betrayed by those he trusts—his step-mother, his trusted courtier Barani, and the very people he wishes to uplift. However, he too becomes a betrayer—of his own ideals, his subjects, and ultimately, himself. This duality reflects the reciprocal nature of trust and deception in politics, especially within a postcolonial framework where the legitimacy of leadership is often contested. The cycle of idealism and disillusionment becomes an allegory for the nation's journey—from hope to despair, from unity to fragmentation.

The religious undertones of the play further complicate its exploration of identity. Tughlaq aspires to create a syncretic state where Hindu and Muslim can coexist in harmony. Yet, his very efforts to enforce this vision lead to alienation and revolt. His secularism, while noble in theory, is enforced with authoritarian zeal, resulting in the opposite of what it intends. This paradox highlights the challenge of forging a composite national identity in a culturally diverse society. The play thus becomes an inquiry into the contradictions of secularism—a foundational value of modern India, yet one persistently under strain.

In *Tughlaq*, Karnad also subtly questions the role of the intellectual in society. Characters like Barani and Aziz (a trickster posing as a saint) represent two poles of intellectual and moral engagement. While Barani is torn by loyalty and integrity, Aziz manipulates religious and political structures for personal gain. These characters symbolize the dilemmas of postcolonial intellectuals—whether to serve the state, critique it, or exploit it. Through them, Karnad critiques the complicity and impotence of the educated elite in the face of political decay.

Ultimately, *Tughlaq* transcends its historical setting to become a meditation on power, identity, and the human condition. It illustrates how history can be repurposed to question the present, and how drama can serve as both cultural archive and ideological critique. The play's tragic arc—of hope corrupted, of wisdom turned into tyranny—captures the essence of postcolonial angst. In doing so, Karnad affirms the value of theatre as a space where the past and the present can be brought into dialogue, where tradition and modernity collide and coalesce.

In conclusion, Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* exemplifies how Indian drama can employ historical narratives to examine contemporary crises. Through its exploration of identity, power, and disillusionment, the play critiques the failures of postcolonial leadership and probes the psychological costs of idealism. In reclaiming history not as a celebration of the past but as a site of critical engagement, Karnad aligns himself with a modern dramatic tradition that seeks to articulate the complexities of a nation struggling to define itself. *Tughlaq*, thus, is not just a historical tragedy; it is a modern epic of fractured dreams and enduring questions.

Language and Cultural Hybridity

Karnad's bilingualism and his ability to write in both Kannada and English contribute to his unique position in Indian drama. He chooses the language based on audience and thematic relevance, reflecting India's linguistic plurality and postcolonial hybridity.

Meenakshi Mukherjee aptly remarks, "Karnad's work illustrates the creative tension between the native and the colonial, as language becomes a site of cultural negotiation and resistance" (Mukherjee 75). His plays, while rooted in Indian contexts, are accessible globally, showcasing the dialogic nature of Indian English drama.

Moreover, the hybridity in his characters—who often straddle two or more cultural value systems—mirrors the postcolonial condition of negotiation and duality. This linguistic and cultural in-betweenness is not a limitation but a source of creative energy in Karnad's dramaturgy.

Theatrical Experimentation and Legacy

Karnad's contribution to Indian drama is not only thematic but also formal. His plays defy linearity, engage with non-realistic devices, and explore psychological depth. In *The Fire and the Rain* (1995), Karnad blends Vedic mythology with a psychological study of ambition, jealousy, and spiritual doubt.

As Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri writes, "Karnad's drama fuses metaphysical concerns with theatrical spectacle, creating a powerful commentary on human fallibility" (Chaudhuri 40). The performance of the fire sacrifice becomes both a literal and symbolic act, exposing the inner contradictions of the characters.

Karnad's influence extends beyond his own writing. His engagement with mythology, history, and gender has inspired a generation of Indian playwrights like Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan to explore social themes through innovative forms.

Conclusion

Girish Karnad's oeuvre represents a compelling interplay between the old and the new, the mythical and the real, the traditional and the modern. His works not only revive India's cultural past but also subject it to critical scrutiny, making his drama an essential part of postcolonial literary discourse. By using tradition as both a resource and a challenge, Karnad crafts a dramatic language that is deeply Indian yet universally resonant.

As Dharwadker affirms, "Karnad's theatre is a site of cultural synthesis, where ancient myths converse with modern anxieties, and tradition is reborn through critical introspection" (Dharwadker 205). His legacy continues to shape the contours of Indian drama in the 21st century.

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