



**THE NATURE OF MYTH AND SOCIETY IN THE SELECT PLAYS OF GIRISH KARNAD**

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**Abstract**

This paper focuses on Girish Karnad's use of myth in his plays to express the bad conditions that women suffer from in the patriarchal society. It examines the role of Karnad in modernizing the mythological tales of India to express the modern situation of women. The paper clarifies the postcolonial feminist approach, which is adopted by Karnad in his plays. *Nagamandala* is selected to show the use of myth. Contemporary Indian drama is experimental and innovative in terms of thematic and technical qualities. It is not progeny of any specific tradition but it has laid the foundation of a different tradition in the history of world drama representing myth, religion with context to contemporary socio-political issues.

**Keywords:** Myth, Postcolonial, Feminism, Girish Karnad, Patriarchal society, Indian drama, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*

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Karnad's *Yayati* retells the age-old story of the king who in his longing for eternal youth does not hesitate to usurp the youth and vitality of his son. Karnad invests new meaning and significance for contemporary life and reality by exploring the king's motivations. In the *Mahabharata*, *Yayati* understands the nature of desire itself and realizes that fulfillment neither diminishes nor eliminates desire. In the drama, Karnad makes *Yayati* confront the horrifying consequences of not being able to relinquish desire; and through the other characters he highlights the issue of class, caste and gender coiled within a web of desire. The originality of Karnad lies in the inspiration behind the choice of *Yayati*. In *Yayati*, *Yayati* realises the horror of his own life only after a symbolic experience with *Chitrlekha*, and takes up his spiritual obligation. *Chitrlekha* is the very development of Karnad's thinking. Through the character of *Yayati*, Karnad discovers that desire for power and strength do not break down even after a thousand years and the desire for its fulfillment is the prime concern in every age. Karnad's *Tughlaq* mythicizes history; In *Hayavadana*, the playwright derives idea from *Vetala Panchavimasti*, the play *Nagamandala* explores the Naga tradition of Hindus, the

dramatic monologue *Flowers* represents the mythical episodes of a Sanskrit epic. Also his play *Tale-Danda* is inspired from the life of Basavanna; the play *Bali: The Sacrifice* is a mythical tale taken from a Kannada epic, while in *The Fire and the Rain*, he dramatizes the contemporary caste-based politics and deals with the theme of human imperfection and responsibility in India. Thus, Karnad very vividly and splendidly presents the mythical themes and it is one of the most prominent concerns of his plays.

In the play *The Fire and the Rain*, the myth is taken from the Mahabharata. There are innumerable tales in the Mahabharata and the myth of Yavakri is one of them. It is found in *Vanaparva*. In the narrative of Parvasu, Arvasu and Yavakri, Karnad found the plot of *The Fire and the Rain*. The play also dramatizes one more archetype and that is the archetype of fratricidal strife between Indra and his brothers Vishwarupa and Vritra. In the myth, Indra kills Vritra to become supreme in power. The mythical tale is taken from ‘*Rig-Veda*’. Karnad in this play has exploited the myth of Yavakri. With the help of this myth he brings into light the age long antagonism between father and son. Karnad investigates myth since myth has spiritual health, since they associate past, present and future time concerning human relationship. They test at something which is not prey to time. This is the second 40 play in which Karnad exploits myth, other being the first play *Yayati*. Karnad initially composed it in Kannada, entitled as *Agni Mattu Male* which was first staged by Guthrie Theatre of Minneapolis, Minnesota (USA) in 1994. Karnad says in his play, *The Fire and the Rain*, Agni is the Sanskrit word for fire. And being a Sanskrit word, it carries, even when used in Kannada, connotations of holiness, of ritual status, of ceremony, which the Kannada word for fire (*benki*) does not possess. Agni is what burns in sacrificed altars, acts as a witness at weddings and is lit at cremations. It is also the name of the god of fire (Karnad 5).

The film opened in August 2002 at Loews State Theatre in Broadway, Manhattan and was a big success. Conclusion There is no doubt in the fact that the life of every human being is a journey from birth to death, but some people become memorable through their creativity, enthusiasm and vigor. Girish Karnad is one of them as he devoted his whole life for the concerns of his fellow human beings. He was a dramatist of man and nature. He started his career as a playwright, but with his innovations in his writing, he raised the status of Indian drama to the world level. His use of myth and mythology in the fabrics of characters, their hair-raising dialogues, their nerve breaking actions and stunning wit, everything brought the current problems of the nation to the fore. It is not the narrative of his plays, but the wit and intelligence in the dialogues of his characters that show his concern for problems and issues of national importance.

Through women characters, he has raised the issue of gender difference, patriarchy, superficial male ego in marriage, and many others. What is the role of a woman and how the expectations of society break her, the difference between ideology and real situations; nothing is left hidden from the pages of his plays. This paper, *Debating Nation through Myth in the Selected Plays of Girish Karnad* has endeavored to analyze objectively the use of myth and its role to voice the problems in nation in the plays of Girish Karnad. It seeks to draw some conclusions, based on the study of some of his plays. However, it is clear that any analysis is just not the result of certain phases of a playwright's career or study of some of his tracts as it is not based on chronological terms. There are not water tight compartments, having no inter-relationship with his one or another play, but the paper is a study of continuities and similarities as one moves from Karnad's one play to another. His plays act as a criticism

to contemporary Indian society's vices, disadvantages and limits. The playwright's humanitarian stance and devotion to human values is evident, as he portrays the inconveniences and vices both of a person and community. In his plays, the Eastern and Western classical folk conventions are seamlessly synthesized, which he uses for the production of a rich and vivid conventional drama, with an instant and resonant contemporary expression.

In other words, he uses the Indian mythology as the root for the production of his dramatic art. His works are constantly embedded in the psyche of the Indians, and he reinterprets contemporary life and time by using western dramatic techniques. He has used the traditions to challenge its suitability and relevance in the present context. His plays are a chain of existential themes and present a quest for belonging and importance, in the search for completeness and friendship, the loneliness of man and his alienation in a world that is unknown and sometimes incomprehensible. Apart from this, Karnad's plays also throw light on other contemporary issues such as human passions' different manifestation such as evil, treachery, sacrifice, lust, sex, anger, hatred, love, conflict between non-violence and violence, caste system problem, patriarchy, and man-woman relationship etc. He draws the narratives from Indian myths, and skillfully uses it as metaphors for current circumstances.

His plays lay an unprecedented emphasis on common man who contrasts with the mythical characters. Being the dramatist of the community, he is sensitive to the fears, faults, and sufferings of the common people. As far as his political sympathies are concerned, the radical element in Karnad gave way to the philosophy of non-violence and truth as well summed up in his play, *Bali: The Sacrifice*. He dreamt for a welfare state, where all would be entitled for the maintenance of law. In his concern for the happy co-existence of people from all classes, castes, and religions of the Indian society, he brought the character of Tughlaq to the fore. Karnad's use of myths is not new, but the newness lies in its modification for questioning the age old customs and traditions and their present relevance in this age of computer and science. His plays are the expression of unsaid and unheard feelings, felt in the dark shades of life. The dramatist assumed a new responsibility and as a responsible playwright, he discussed the problems, which are prevalent in different classes of the Indian society and need utmost attention instead of political issues, which the leaders propagates now and then.

The paper is a journey from Karnad's use of mythological sources to his own views on the problems of the nation, India in its contemporary cultural, social and political milieu. It is a summary of all the ideas and conclusions drawn from the study. As a playwright, Karnad is an existentialist, so the themes based on existential plight of man permeate through all his plays, particularly his first three plays. In the first play *Yayati*, Karnad uses the myth of Yayati to focus on the existential situation of man, Yayati becomes an icon not only of perennial human quest for fulfilment but also man's invincible desire to relish sexuality and his insatiable thirst for sensual pleasures. The plight of Yayati is suggestive of the condition of modern man running after material and the carnal pleasures. Thus, the episode of Yayati highlights the theme of responsibility in the modern context. Karnad also brings out the similarity between the ancient King, Yayati who is always after sensual pleasure and the modern man who is also after the material pleasure. Like Yayati, it is difficult for modern man to resist the temptation of material pleasure. All the heinous crimes like rape, domestic violence, women teasing, sexual harassment and the like are the result of man's lust for sensual pleasures.

The journey of Karnad begins with *Yayati*. The play mixes the mythological ideas with contemporary issues, thereby bringing new interpretations to the ancient myth.

Here Karnad conveys the need for self-discipline to the reader, the recognition of right, wrong, and the value of sacrifice to himself as important to the materialistic world of the present day. He sheds some light on gender equality in traditional Patriarchal Indian society and the suppression and denigration of women. Yayati may also be interpreted as a reflection of the need and desire for worldliness and ambition of the human beings. Man has flaws, and in human traits, some are good, others are bad. Karnad expresses the need for liberty, accountability, right judgments and admitting errors in one's character. The Existentialists' influence on Karnad's thinking dominates his characters.

Karnad portrays a dysfunctional family of unfulfilled quenches, desires, passions, and their grievances. The characters are in a bubble, an insignificant life, and each wants to deal with it differently. In order to engage his audience with difficult life problems, Karnad weaves mythic magic on stage. It is true that he is turning the narrative to his needs, but the overall outcome is powerful, deep, and multidimensional. Girish Karnad's *Bali: The Sacrifice* explores the hollowness of superstition and animal sacrifice, that dominates the human psyche, not only during the precolonial periods but today also. Meanwhile, Karnad discusses the question of stereotypical gender roles given to men and women by the patriarchy. Women surrender themselves and are lesser creatures in the eyes of the patriarchy. Their sole job is to live and work indoors, not in the public domain. They are perceived to be the other of man. The Mahout is a particular personality in the play and serves as a counterpart to the other characters. Oddly enough, he is not altogether a stereotypical man. This man sets his own laws and is not thinking about what others say. But despite his lack of resources, the man is obviously proud of his place in the monarchy. Apart from this, Karnad uses myth in his other plays to portray exploitation and predicament of a woman in the patriarchal society. *Yayati* draws our attention to the problem of the unequal power relationship especially in the joint family. The problem of patriarchy becomes conspicuous at the introduction of a new character, Chitrlekha as Pooru's wife.

She rebels against restrictions forced upon her. The complex psychological and emotional world of Sharmishtha, Devayani and Chitrlekha in *Yayati*, Padmini in *Hayavadana*, the Queen Amritamati in *Bali: The Sacrifice*, Rani in *Naga Mandala*, Vishakha and Nittilai in *The Fire and the Rain* reveal the helplessness which the women face in a patriarchal set up. Though they belong to the ancient times, they are the representatives of the present generation of Indian women. Being suppressed and deprived of freedom, they challenge the patriarchal code of conduct. They are modern in the sense that they are capable of taking their own decisions. The modern woman is very aware about her desires, responsibilities, duties and rights in family as well as in society. In this way, Karnad's women characters bear the qualities of modern woman who is courageous enough to rebel and raise her voice against the patriarchal subjugation. His women need to be more courageous. Rani must raise her voice to the atrocities of Appanna, Vishakha must have the insight to see through the trap of Yavakri, Chitrlekha should have given some time to herself to come into the terms with Pooru's decision, and Padmini should have decided well exactly which man she wanted for her.

The study comprises a discussion on the importance of myth, its uses, significance in the formation of a healthy society and nation and how it adds values to life. Characters in Karnad are not only walking and talking people. These are various situations that a human being passes through in the course of his life. The way these characters behave in the play, the challenges they face and the way they deal with these challenges, their fears, agonies, pain and joy all these are lessons to the masses.

Karnad's characters are fit and fine. They are mythical but are not free from the lack of human passions. The consuming fire of desires grips them as it does with any common

man. They are whole, integrated this moment, the fragmented, and disintegrated the next moment. His characters are so overwhelmed by temptations that their desires are unending. Desire to get this or that obscures their good tendencies. They are very much aware about their duties to the society and the self. But they have limited vision of life in the beginning. They have to pass through the hard tests of life and ultimately, they come out victorious. Their victory is, no doubt, a matter of happiness, they even celebrate their fall and defeat. Tughlaq is found asleep after a long time, Yayati realizes his duties towards his family, nation and its people.

Karnad presents man in many shades but in all shades, he champions the cause of national uplift- ment. This research is a comprehensive analysis of man-woman relationships in Karnad's plays. In *Bali*: The sacrifice, the Jain myth is explored to show man-woman relationship in various aspects. The relationship between the King and the Queen becomes very tense in the end. Through the character of the Queen Am- ritamati, Karnad has portrayed a dauntless woman who unhesitatingly confesses her extra-marital relation and categorically admits that whatever happened was very beautiful and charming. He shows the King as

the protector of patriarchy who comes down to the point of humiliating his wife in the temple. Karnad has really taken a bold step in the depiction of the Queen's character who to safeguard her honour gives up her principle of non-violence by killing herself. A folktale of Rani is also used to highlight man-woman relation- ship in *Naga Mandala*. Appanna, Naga and Kappanna who are attracted by the feminine beauty symbolize various aspects of male-sexuality. Appanna stands for the male authority. On the other hand, Appanna's other self Naga is a perfect lover. He loves her intensely and introduces her to the world of erotic pleasure. It is Naga who awakens her womanhood and makes her bold and confident. At the supernatural level, if Naga is considered a God of fertility then we can say that after getting pleased, Naga gives all happiness to Rani by using his magical powers. In reality Naga and Appanna should be viewed as the same person's two faces. That is why Karnad points out that a husband takes advantage of double expectations in western culture by behaving differently during the day and the night. The playwright thus reveals the absurdity of conventional society by the use of a folktale. Rani in *Nagamandala* is no better than a door mat. The play shows how men dominate and women suffer meekly without any protest in the patriarchal society.

He tries to find a solution to all of the social issues. In order to patch the cracks in civilization and project a utopian future to the average man, he utilizes the magic realistic technique in his plays. The specific description of flames becomes an important after- colonial instrument for the unfounded demolition of colonial history and a means for people to become acquainted with a rich nation's culture. The magic of Karnad becomes a medium in which the wisdom of the uneducated, the rural and women is clarified. He rejects the hegemonic notion that only books and higher education will bring on knowledge. The issue of ecological concerns is raised in *The Fire and the Rain*. It is the beauty of the relationship of Arvasu and Nittilai that rejuvenates the fields. From an eco feminist standpoint, the state of Vishaka and Nittilai can be looked at where the injustice of women and the arid land can mirror one another. Eco- feminists consider that women are more naturally linked and better able to perceive and communicate with them. They view dominance and natural destruction like their own subjugation.

Eco-feminists often claim that seeing women as equal would change the climate. This play can be seen as a post-modernist text grappling with the fracturing of people's personalities. The world's order has been broken. The planet becomes a wilderness from a prolonged drought. Nature, once all powerful, cannot fill its missing ability and peace.

The no playwright combines and interacts with Indra and deals with his own characters. Human ideals such as passion, loyalty and honesty are embodied in a soothing sense; the rain fills up the earth with terrestrial aromas. In conclusion, we can say that in Karnad's plays although the characters have been ably delineated, they maintain their contemporaneity all through the course of action. They cannot be assigned to any specific time or place; they are universal and eternal in their appeal.

Karnad's characters are universal. Their problems are not confined to them only, but it pervades the entire community. The modern world of chaos and fragments makes the modern man's life horrible. He is in continuous search, search for his place in this world of boundaries and barriers. It leads him to the world of matters and materials. His plays are a reflection of modern man's predicament. Karnad's philosophy of life, his non-violent approach, his realism, all acts as a guiding lamp to the dark shades of human life. His plays deal with human predicament mainly highlighting the condition of man and nation in the modern world. Thus, all the plays of Karnad have a remarkable contemporary social relevance. It is for this reason that the study like this could be treated as a modest contribution to the body of criticism that has gone into the genre of Indian drama in general and Karnad's drama in particular.

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