

Human Relationships and Existential Dilemmas in the Plays of Girish Karnad

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Introduction - Girish Karnad, a luminary in Indian English drama, occupies a unique place in the canon of modern Indian literature. His plays, deeply rooted in Indian mythology, history, and folklore, transcend temporal boundaries to explore universal themes and human dilemmas. Through his profound engagement with human relationships and existential crises, Karnad crafts narratives that resonate across cultures and eras.

The works of Karnad tend to explore all the intricacies of human relationships between people, within families, and through all systems in the society to show the delicate, and even conflictual nature of bonding between people. At the heart of his plays lies a probing inquiry into the human condition: the chase for identity, the conflict between personal wishes and expectations of society, and anxieties over existence, the reason why we are.

Karnad's plays such as *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana* or *Naga-Mandala* shows his ability of integration of complex narratives where human relationships is used as the fulcrum for greater exploration of philosophy. Using the lives of his characters Karnad depicts the enduring conflict between fate and free will, duty and passion, tradition and modernity. These themes which are written with elements of existentialism make viewers face their reality in life and question the meaning of life and relationships in a constantly evolving world.

This paper aims at discussing the nuanced portrayal of human relationships and existential dilemmas explored in the work of Girish Karnad, dramatic oeuvre, showcasing his ability to combine the personal and the universal, the mythical and the contemporary, in his exploration of what it means to be human.

Human Relationships in *Tughlaq*: Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* (1964) is a masterful exploration of Sultan Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq's relationships—with his subjects, his courtiers, and even himself.

The play portrays the Sultan as an enigmatic ruler, torn between his visionary ideals and his flawed execution. This duality affects his relationships, leading to betrayal, mistrust, and isolation.

- **Relationship with His Subjects:** Tughlaq's desire to unite Hindus and Muslims under his reign stems from an idealistic vision of justice and equality. However, this relationship deteriorates as his policies create chaos and disillusionment among his people. His decision to shift the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad exemplifies this.

"I want Delhi to represent the true spirit of India, her capacity to absorb every idea and make it her own."¹

While the statement reflects his lofty ambitions, it also highlights his inability to anticipate the practical and emotional toll of his policies on his subjects.

- **Relationship with His Courtiers:** Tughlaq's court is rife with conspiracies, reflecting his inability to trust those around him. Aziz and Aazam, the scheming duo, embody the erosion of loyalty in his kingdom. Tughlaq's reliance on the deceitful Aziz shows his existential isolation:

"Even my closest advisors do not understand me. They see only what they want to see."²

This underscores his alienation, as his vision isolates him from his court and exposes the fragility of power.

- **Relationship with Himself:** The most compelling relationship in *Tughlaq* is the Sultan's internal conflict. His idealism clashes with his pragmatism, leading to a profound existential crisis. Tughlaq's soliloquies often reveal his anguish over his perceived failure:

"My dreams have mocked me; my kingdom has betrayed me. I am a man lost in the labyrinth of my own making."³

This statement encapsulates his existential dilemma, where his lofty ideals become the source of his downfall.

Existential Dilemmas in *Tughlaq*: Tughlaq's existential struggles stem from his pursuit of perfection in an imperfect world. He grapples with the futility of his efforts and the burden of his isolation.

1. **Conflict Between Ideals and Reality:** Tughlaq's utopian vision for a harmonious India is marred by his inability to foresee human limitations. His dream of justice turns into tyranny, illustrating the existential dilemma of a leader burdened by his vision.

"Justice! Justice! But how can I mete out justice when

I stand accused in the eyes of my people?"⁴

Isolation and Alienation

Tughlaq's isolation is both self-imposed and circumstantial. His intellectual superiority distances him from those around him, while his failures alienate him further.

"God, why have you abandoned me? Or is it I who have abandoned myself?"⁵

This prayer-like monologue reveals his existential despair and his struggle to reconcile his ideals with his reality.

3. **Search for Meaning:** Tughlaq's existential crisis reaches its peak when he questions the purpose of his reign. His failure to connect with his subjects and fulfill his vision leads to a sense of futility.

"Is this the fate of all rulers? To be alone, misunderstood, and defeated by time?"⁶

In *Tughlaq*, Karnad masterfully intertwines the political and the personal to create a poignant exploration of human relationships and existential dilemmas. The Sultan's failed ideals, fractured relationships, and deep isolation offer a timeless commentary on the human condition.

Human Relationships in Hayavadana: Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* (1971) is a rich tapestry of human relationships interwoven with myth, folklore, and existential questions. The play revolves around love, identity, and the complex interplay of the mind and body. Karnad uses his characters to explore how desires and societal norms shape human bonds.

- **Relationships in a Love Triangle:** The love triangle between Devadatta, Kapila, and Padmini underscores the complexities of human emotions. Devadatta represents intellect, Kapila symbolizes physical strength, and Padmini desires a union of both qualities. Her inability to reconcile her love for both men leads to tragic consequences.

"Padmini's eyes lingered on Kapila's body even while her heart reached out to Devadatta's mind."⁷

This reflects the tension in her relationships, shaped by conflicting desires for intellect and physicality.

- **Parent-Child Relationships:** Padmini's relationship with her son is also telling. After the deaths of Devadatta and Kapila, she tries to create a meaningful life for her child. However, the shadow of the past relationships continues to haunt her, reflecting how personal failures impact future bonds.

"She looked at her son as if trying to see a future beyond the ruins of her own."⁸

Friendship Turned Rivalry: The bond between Devadatta and Kapila, once a symbol of loyalty and friendship, deteriorates under the weight of romantic jealousy. Their relationships reflect the fragility of human connections in the face of competing desires.

"Kapila's laughter now had an edge—something strained, like a stretched bowstring."⁹

Existential Dilemmas in Hayavadana: The play's central themes are deeply existential, focusing on questions of identity, completeness, and the search for meaning. Karnad

weaves the existential dilemmas of his characters into the broader narrative of self-discovery and transformation.

1. **Identity and the Mind-Body Dualism:** The head-swapping incident involving Devadatta and Kapila raises profound questions about identity. Who is the true Devadatta or Kapila? Is identity tied to the mind or the body?

"Can a man's body live without his mind? Or is it the other way around?"¹⁰

This existential dilemma is central to the narrative, emphasizing the fragmented nature of human identity.

2. **The Incompleteness of Human Existence:** The character of Hayavadana, the horse-headed man, symbolizes the existential quest for completeness. His longing to become fully human is ironically resolved when he transforms into a complete horse, questioning the very notion of perfection. "What is completeness? A man who is part horse, or a horse that was once a man?"¹¹

Hayavadana's journey reflects the futility of striving for an ideal in a world defined by imperfection.

3. **The Absurdity of Human Existence:** The existential absurdity in *Hayavadana* is heightened by its subversion of conventional logic. The goddess Kali's indifference, the head-swapping incident, and Hayavadana's transformation create a surreal world where the characters grapple with meaning in a chaotic reality.

"The goddess laughs, the world spins, and we are left to find meaning where there is none."¹²

In *Hayavadana*, Girish Karnad masterfully explores the intersections of human relationships and existential dilemmas. The fragmented identities, unfulfilled desires, and search for meaning among the characters create a profound commentary on the human condition. The play's use of myth and folklore amplifies its universality, making it a timeless exploration of what it means to be human.

Human Relationships in Naga-Mandala: In *Naga-Mandala*, Girish Karnad uses the metaphor of folklore to explore the intricacies of human relationships, particularly within marriage, and the interplay of love, fidelity, and societal expectations.

1. **Marriage and Estrangement:** The relationship between Rani and her husband, Appanna, exemplifies alienation within marriage. Appanna's neglect and infidelity create an emotional void in Rani's life, highlighting the fragility of marital bonds when based on control rather than love.

"You will stay here. I will come once a day to see if the doors are bolted. Nothing else concerns you."¹³

This line captures Appanna's dominance and indifference, underscoring the lack of emotional connection in their marriage.

2. **Fantasy and Fulfillment:** The serpent, Naga, who takes the form of Appanna, provides Rani with the love and attention she craves. This relationship blurs the lines between reality and fantasy, questioning the authenticity of love and the boundaries of human connection.

"You are not my husband. But you are the man who makes

me feel alive."¹⁴

This highlights Rani's search for emotional fulfillment, which transcends the conventional boundaries of marital fidelity.

3. Gender Roles and Power Dynamics: Rani's journey from a submissive wife to a figure of power in the village reflects a shift in gender dynamics. Her acceptance of Naga's love and her subsequent transformation challenge traditional notions of female obedience.

"I did nothing. The gods chose me to reveal their power."¹⁵

Rani's statement reveals her newfound agency, derived from the interplay of love, truth, and divine intervention.

Existential Dilemmas in Naga-Mandala: The play is imbued with existential themes, exploring questions of identity, truth, and the nature of reality.

1. Identity and Duality: The duality of Appanna and Naga raises questions about identity. Is Naga a representation of Rani's desires, or does he embody a mystical reality? This ambiguity reflects the fragmented nature of human identity and perception.

"Who is the real Appanna? The one who comes by day or the one who loves me at night?"¹⁶

Freedom and Confinement

Rani's life reflects the existential tension between freedom and confinement. Initially trapped in a loveless marriage, her relationship with Naga represents an escape, though it remains tied to the societal framework of her role as a wife. "The walls of this house suffocate me, but outside lies a world I cannot claim as my own."¹⁷

The Search for Truth

The trial of Rani by elders of village is a symbolic existential quest for truth. The fact that she manages to hold the snake without being harmed is taken as a divine approval, however this also affects the fact of relativity of truth in a world governed by perception and power.

Truth is what you see and what you believe. But what if the gods see differently?"¹⁸

Girish Karnad in his Naga-Mandala uses the role of myth and reality to explore human relationships and existential dilemmas. The play steers through the complexity of love, fidelity, and identity, offering a profound critique of societal norms and individual desires. Through Rani's transformation, Karnad highlights the fluid nature of truth and the resilience of the human spirit in confronting existential challenges.

Conclusion: Naga-Mandala is a remarkable work by Girish Karnad that perfectly incorporates folklore into the modern patterns of human relations and the problem of human existence. By reflecting on Rani's journey of suppression to empowerment Karnad raises universal questions regarding love, identity and seeking truth. The uniqueness of structure of play and the thematic richness make the play be a part of the line of greatest modern Indian drama that should be compared with other important contemporary works.

Comparison with Other Contemporary Dramas:

1. Vijay Tendulkar's Sakham Binder: Whereas Naga-Mandala explores the concepts of marriage by means of myth and fantasy, Vijay Tendulkar, in Sakham Binder (1972), has followed a realistic approach by emphasizing the gender structure and patriarchy within a contemporary setting. Both the plays comment on patriarchal system, but in a more subtle and symbolist manner by Karnad and brutally realistic by Tendulkar.

In Sakham Binder, the series of relationships of main character with women point to the values of transactional dominance and eventual fall, contrasts to transcendence of Rani in Naga-Mandala. The invincibility of women in oppressive situations, however, comes out in both plays.

2. Badal Sircar's Evam Indrajit: The Evam Indrajit (1965) written by Badal Sircar has existential themes, like Naga-Mandala, but it is set in a modern city environment. The characters of Sircar are dealing with the tediousness of the life and uselessness of the wishes of the society, which runs parallel to the quest of Rani to find meaning and satisfaction in her marriage.

While Evam Indrajit questions existential absurdity through alienation in a mechanized society, Naga-Mandala uses mythic motifs to address individual and communal identities.

Mahesh Elkunchwar's Garbo: Garbo by Mahesh Elkunchwar (1970) dwells on complicated feelings and affiliations of people and in particular struggle between desire and social constraints. Like Naga-Mandala, it was about love and fidelity; however, it has a nihilist sense to it. On the contrary, Karnad employs the redemptive solution by propounding the symbolical triumph of Rani and her spiritual change.

Relationships fall apart under existential desolation in Garbo, but in case of Naga-Mandala, love albeit, flawed and even unrealistic, enables the discovery of oneself and self-empowerment.

3. Karnad's Tughlaq: Karnad himself has written Tughlaq (1964), which similarly concerns people with existentially, yet addresses other theme, like political ambition and disillusionment of an ideal ruler. Naga-Mandala, on the contrary, focuses on personal and domestic world, featuring a microcosm view of existential angst.

These two plays disclose the characteristic of a human to struggle against contradictions: the idealism and practicality of Tughlaq, and the fantasy versus reality of Rani.

Closing Thought: Girish Karnad manages to establish a harmonious balance in Naga-Mandala between the myth and modernity providing a timeless reflection on the human relations and the issues of existence. The folkloric aspect of the play also offers a peculiar perspective, as most of the plays at the time were more realistic or used urban contexts. Combining the dreams of a fiction with the actual personal story, Karnad reminds us of the timeless nature of the ancient stories and their ability to help strug-

gling humans in the modern times and hence Naga-Mandala has played a pivotal role in the history of modern Indian drama.

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