

Myth and Modernity in Girish Karnad's Dramatization

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Abstract: This paper examines how GirishKarnad integrates mythic narratives with modern thematic concerns across his major plays. Instead of reverting to uncritical retellings of traditional lore, Karnad reinterprets myths to highlight contemporary tensions involving identity, cultural conflict, political idealism, and gender relations. Focusing on Hayavadana, Tughlaq, and Nagamandala, this study argues that Karnad revives myth not as residual tradition but as a dynamic resource that interrogates modernity. By blending indigenous narrative forms with modern theatrical strategies, Karnad crafts a dramaturgy that challenges static cultural meanings and invites critical reflection on the conditions of postcolonial existence. This paper uses close reading and comparative analysis to explore how myth becomes a mode of resistance and renewal in Karnad's theatre.

Keywords: GirishKarnad, Myth, Modernity, Indian Drama, Identity, Postcolonial Theatre.

Introduction - GirishKarnad occupies a pivotal place in the evolution of modern Indian theatre, widely recognized for his reimagining of myth and history in dramatic form. His plays are often rooted in South Asian narrative traditions yet are unmistakably responsive to the contingencies of contemporary life. Myth, in Karnad's hands, serves neither as nostalgic retrieval nor as static folklore. Rather, myth is an active cultural force that interacts with modernity's questions of selfhood, power, and social transformation. Modernity is often associated with questioning inherited norms, the fragmentation of established worldviews, and the rise of individual subjectivity. Myths, by contrast, are typically anchored in collective consciousness, offering archetypal patterns and shared cultural memory. The juxtaposition of these two forces—myth and modernity—reveals deep tensions and possibilities in Karnad's playwrighting. His dramatization of myth reveals a persistent effort to negotiate between cultural rootedness and critical self-awareness.

This paper explores how myth and modernity intersect in Karnad's dramatization through detailed analysis of three plays: Hayavadana (1971), Tughlaq (1964), and Nagamandala (1988). These texts illustrate the range and depth of Karnad's engagement with mythic material, showcasing how ancient narratives can be revisited to address contemporary dilemmas.

Review Of Literature

Scholarly engagement with GirishKarnad's plays highlights his contribution to postcolonial and modern Indian drama. Critics such as AparnaBhargavaDharwadker and David Richards have emphasized Karnad's blending of folk forms

and modern narrative techniques. Dharwadker notes that Karnad relocates mythic motifs in new contexts to create "an indigenous modernism" that contests both colonial literary canons and uncritical cultural traditionalism. Other critics, including M. K. Naik, have drawn attention to Karnad's thematic concerns with identity and cultural contradiction.

Work on Hayavadana often focuses on the play's interrogation of identity and incompleteness. Tughlaq has been read as a political allegory reflecting the challenges of postcolonial governance, while studies of Nagamandala tend to emphasize gender and ritual. However, there is scope for a comprehensive analysis that foregrounds myth as a dramaturgical strategy across Karnad's oeuvre, particularly in relation to modernity's pressures and contradictions.

This study builds upon existing literature by synthesizing individual interpretations and offering an integrative perspective on how myth functions within Karnad's dramatic structures to articulate modern concerns.

Research Objectives: The study seeks to:

1. Analyse how GirishKarnad employs myth in dramatization.
2. Investigate the relationship between myth and modernity in his selected plays.
3. Examine how mythic frameworks help articulate crises of identity, power, and cultural negotiation.
4. Explore how Karnad's theatre reconciles traditional performance forms with modern narrative concerns.
5. Evaluate the significance of Karnad's dramaturgy for contemporary Indian theatre.

Methodology: This research uses a qualitative textual analysis methodology, focusing on close reading and interpretive analysis of primary texts (Hayavadana, Tughlaq, and Nagamandala). Secondary sources include scholarly books, peer-reviewed articles, and literary criticism on mythology, modernity, and Indian theatre. The analysis aims to foreground thematic, structural, and performative elements without replicating existing critical language.

Myth As Narrative Resource And Dramaturgical Strategy: Mythic narratives have traditionally served as vehicles for conveying a community's foundational beliefs and symbolic truths. In Hayavadana, Tughlaq, and Nagamandala, certain elements of myth are incorporated not to preserve a sacred past but to unsettle familiar meanings and provoke audience reflection. Myth in Karnad's plays is always in dialogue with the present, revealing how ancient stories resonate with and complicate modern issues.

Myth can provide archetypal characters, symbolic situations, and narrative patterns that help dramatize conflicts that exceed individual experience, enabling the playwright to address collective anxieties and cultural tensions. Karnad's use of myth does not entail a retreat into tradition; rather, it offers a means of critical engagement, where ancient narratives are reworked to interrogate modern life.

Hayavadana : Fragmented Identity And Mythic Logic: Hayavadana draws upon a story from the Kathasaritsagara, yet its dramaturgy is far from classical or conservative. The play introduces us to Devadatta and Kapila, whose bodies and heads become mixed in a bizarre accident. This fantastical premise foregrounds the central question: What makes a person whole? Is identity defined by physical form, social role, or internal consciousness?

Karnad's narrative structure embraces episodic scenes and embraces the logic of folk performance traditions, such as Yakshagana. The inclusion of a chorus and a Bhagavata figure disrupts strict realist aesthetics, enabling a mythic viewpoint that destabilizes linear narrative expectations. This hybrid form resonates with modernist concerns about fractured identity and the limitations of rational categorization.

The character of Hayavadana himself—who prays for completeness—becomes a metaphor for human longing in a fragmented modern condition. His quest for wholeness reflects the contemporary anxiety of self-definition beyond conventional social roles. Karnad's representation of identity thus moves beyond simplistic mythic moralism to engage with existential questions central to modern subjectivity.

Tughlaq: Idealism, Irony, And Political Myth: While Tughlaq is ostensibly a historical play, its deployment of mythic resonance lies in the way it constructs the Sultan as an archetype of political idealism gone awry. Muhammad bin Tughlaq's visionary reforms—relocating the capital, introducing economic innovation—echo the modern political

aspiration for rational governance over inherited feudal and sectarian structures.

Karnad uses irony and juxtaposition to dramatize the gulf between idealism and realpolitik, framing Tughlaq's actions as structural embellishments to a larger myth of modern leadership. The Sultan's idealism, derived from intellectual conviction, ultimately collapses under the weight of practical consequence, betrayal, and human resistance. This narrative trajectory resonates with modern political skepticism, where grand schemes often falter due to the complexity of social conditions.

In this play, myth functions implicitly: the Sultan becomes a symbolic figure representing the contradictions of modern statecraft. The audience is invited to consider how noble intentions can be subverted by psychological complexity and structural inertia, echoing broader anxieties about modern political authority.

Nagamandala : Ritual, Desire, And Cultural Narration: In Nagamandala, Karnad blends folk ritual and mythic narrative to explore gender, desire, and cultural performance. The play revolves around a woman married to a reptilian spirit in disguise—a fantastical premise that provokes questions about fidelity, desire, and enforced social norms.

The use of jalapaata (snake ritual) and collective songs situates the play within a performative frame that challenges Western realist conventions. The ritual space becomes a site of negotiation between social expectations and individual longing. Myth and ritual here do not function as conservative reinforcements of tradition; rather, they offer a symbolic language through which female subjectivity and emotional truth are articulated.

The serpent figure embodies creative force and hidden desire, destabilizing patriarchal assumptions about purity and marital roles. By foregrounding ritual and collective performance, Karnad enables characters and spectators alike to inhabit a mythic perspective that reveals the limitations of modern rationalism when addressing human complexity.

Myth And Modern Identity: Thematic Convergences: Across these three plays, myth functions as a narrative resource that allows Karnad to dramatize crises of identity, cultural negotiation, and moral complexity. Mythic structures enable characters to embody archetypal tensions while remaining grounded in socially relevant situations.

In Hayavadana, the question of wholeness becomes a metaphor for modern subjectivity. In Tughlaq, the mythic dimension lies in the tension between visionary schemes and social resistance. In Nagamandala, ritual and myth create expressive space for emotionally coded experiences that modern rational discourse often suppresses.

These thematic convergences reveal that Karnad's use of myth is not a nostalgic revival of lost spiritual coherence but a dynamic tool for critical inquiry. Myth becomes a way of questioning, reframing, and intensifying modern anxieties

rather than merely reproducing traditional stories.

Karnad's Modern Theatrical Form: Karnad's dramaturgy does not simply transplant mythic material into modern settings; it reconfigures theatrical form itself. His plays blend episodic structure, symbolic dialogue, and non-linear narrative with folk performance elements that challenge Western realist frameworks. This formal hybridity allows Karnad to expand dramatic possibility and invite audiences into alternative modes of meaning-making.

The chorus, ritualistic interludes, and meta-theatrical devices in his plays serve as reminders of myth's performative origin and its capacity to evoke communal experience. By integrating these elements, Karnad resists the reduction of drama to psychological realism, opening up space for mythic imagination to interact with contemporary consciousness.

Discussion: Tradition, Modernity, And Creative Tension: Karnad's theatre exemplifies a creative tension between tradition and modernity rather than a conflict. Mythic narratives are not presented as static authority but as living structures that inform, challenge, and reshape modern sensibilities. Tradition is not merely preserved; it is reinterpreted, allowing marginalized voices, hidden emotions, and cultural contradictions to emerge.

Modernity, with its emphasis on rationality and social change, often dismisses myth as archaic superstition. Karnad's plays show that myth can serve as an interpretive lens for modern dilemmas, illuminating experiences that rational discourse alone cannot fully capture. In doing so, Karnad's dramaturgy fosters a space where cultural

memory and contemporary inquiry co-exist without reducing one to the other.

Conclusion: GirishKarnad's dramatization of myth and modernity demonstrates an enduring creative resource for Indian theatre. His plays reveal that myth, when creatively repurposed, can address the fragmentations, anxieties, and ethical dilemmas that define modern life. In Hayavadana, myth exposes the instability of identity; in Tughlaq, it reveals the limits of idealism; in Nagamandala, it articulates emotional and cultural complexities often obscured by rational discourse.

Karnad's work suggests that modernity and myth need not be adversarial. Instead, when myth is treated as a dynamic cultural resource, it can enrich modern dramatic expression and deepen audiences' engagement with contemporary concerns.

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