

## Indian Culture and Tradition in the Selected Plays of GirishKarnad

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**Abstract:** *Girish Raghunath Karnad is an Indian actor, film director Jnanpithawardee Playwright and a perfect practitioner of the performing Arts. He has written his plays originally in Kannad and then translated into other lending languages. He has transcreated his plays into English. His Plays have Popularised him as the pre- eminent contemporary Playwright. Karnad had a first hand experience of folk- theatre and Natak Companies. He is one of the three great writers of India. The other two are Vijay Tendulkar Writing in Marathi and BadalSirkarwriting in Bengali. In his plays, he tries to revive the local culture and tradition. Indian culture and tradition play a vital role in the plays of Karnad.*

**Key words:** *culture, tradition, folk-lore, myth, history etc.*

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Karnad has exploited Indian mythology with a definite purpose in his mind. Indian mythology is based on a written textual tradition that has survived through time and foreign influences and attempts at subversion. However, the folk tales and tradition that reflect the social and cultural ethos of the nation are ingrained in an oral tradition that requires immediate attention and preservation to save them from extinction. Much of these folk traditions and culture have survived into the contemporary era through the effective medium of folk theatre. Karnad is one such contemporary dramatist who has contributed immensely to the genre. Belonging to the postcolonial group of dramatist, his plays are rich in Indian sensibility and tradition, drawing inspiration heavily from the classical Indian dramatic tradition, myths, legends and folklore. In his plays, he has endeavoured to keep the Indian spirit and ethos intact through the use of a wide range of techniques and devices adopted from the folk theatre. In his various plays Karnad has tried to portray not only the contemporary society and its dilemmas but has also extensively employed the various conventional folk tales and techniques and devices of the folk theatre. He has used native theatre modes like Yakshagana, the Parsee Natak models and other folk theatre forms.

The Karnad drama focuses on the complexity of human relationship and contains an indirect critique of modern Indian society. Karnad began his literary career as a dramatist with the publication of his play *Yayati* (1961). Drawing his source from the mythological character of Yayati in Mahabharata, Karnad depicts the contemporary dilemma of everyman caught between contradictory pulls of pleasure and responsibility, materialism and renunciation. Apart from the puranic mythology upon which the play is based, Karnad has employed the character of Sutradhara modeled on the narrator commentator of folk theatre. The Sutradhara informs the audience about the mythological origin of the play as well as the theme of the play which emphasizes the importance of owing up to one's responsibility in life. In his first play *Yayati*, the king Yayati meets beautiful Devyani, the only daughter of Shukracharya. He had seen her for the first time in dry well. She was drawn to Yayati and immediately asked him to marry her, with a plea that he had lifted a maiden by right hand, because she had gauged that Yayati, the emperor would be a worthy husband for her. Despite the caste infringements and social taboos, the marriage between Yayati and Devyani was solemnised. Sharmishtha, who pushed Devyani had to accompany Devyani after marriage for her indecent deed against Devyani. Karnad has given this traditional tale a new meaning and significance highly relevant in the context of life today. The symbolic theme of Yayati's attachment to life and its pleasures, as also his final renunciation, is retained. Karnad's originality lies in working out the motivations behind Yayati's ultimate choice.

In his second play *Tughlaq* (1964), Karnad uses a legendary figure from Indian history, a visionary and an idealist. Considered as a piece of theatre par-excellence, Karnad's *Tughlaq* employs several folk theatrical devices borrowed from Parsee theatre like the use of Deep Scenes and Shallow Scenes to depict the interior of palaces and the exteriors of a street; emphasis on spectacle, scenery etc. Through the historical character of Tughlaq, Karnad tries to represent the disillusionment and failure of Nehruvian idealism in Indian political history. The play provides an interpretation of human character, its width and depth and delves out the quest for cultural values. Its principal claim lies on the fact that it is one of the most successful attempts made in India to produce a genuine history play in English. Karnad made a successful attempt to introducing politics and religion

in *Tughlaq*. Muhammad Tughlaq, the protagonist of the play, is an idealist aiming at Hindu-Muslim unity, at secularism and also at building a new future for India. The greatest truth that Karnad has brought out through his Tughlaq is that religious saints cannot wash away filth from society. In dramatization of history he makes it a living subject relevant to his contemporary time. With the imagination and marvelous discovery of the 14th century Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq's dysfunctional politics he minutely projects his observation of post-independence Nehruvian policy and disillusionment of his generation in socio-political realities in *Tughlaq*.

*Hayavadana* (1971) is Karnad's third play which is based on the story *The Transposed Heads* by Thomas Mann. Originally sourced from *VetalPanchavimshati* and Somdeva's *BrihatkathaSaritsagara*, Hayavadana literally mean one with horses head. The precursor text is the Transposed Heads by Thomas Mann. Although switching of heads of two people are relatively rare in the myths legends and folk tales of most cultures. Indian myth provides a fairly rich source of these stories. The most Indian examples of this narrative concerns the origin of the elephant headed God Ganesha. Hayavadana has a main plot and a sub plot. It belongs to the category of modern Indian drama. Hayavadana proved that modern Indian drama is attached with tradition of the country. The story comprises of two friends Devdutta and Kapila and Devduttas wife Padmini. There is a love triangle in the play where Kapila falls in love with Padmini. The play opens with the worship of Lord Ganesha by Bhagvata and others.

O Elephant headed Herambha your flag is the symbol of  
Victory and you shine like a thousand suns. O husband of  
Riddhi and Siddhi, you are seated on a mouse and adorned  
With a snake, you are single tusked and destroyer of  
Incompleteness. (Karnad 01)

Karnad's *Hayavadana* deals with the complexity of human relationship and man's yearning for perfection.

Karnad's *Nagamandala* (1990) is a mythological play based on a folk tale and a snake myth. The play is based on two oral tales from Karnataka, which Karnad had heard from Prof.A.K.Ramanujan. The sub-title Play With a Cobra, given by Karnad himself is indicative of its theme and the significance of the role of Cobra in it. In *Nagamandala*, Karnad weaves two Kannad folk tales together. The play is based on the theme of Injustice done to women by men in a patriarchal society. Women's agony and anguish is shown in the play. The main plot of *Nagamandala* is the story of Rani. She is introduced as a young bride on the urge of a new life with her husband Appanna. She starts her new life with her husband and has multiple expectations, desires and dreams. But Appanna treats her as if she were a mere servant. The play is a tale of male chauvinism and incarnation of women. Karnad presents the problem of chastity that is primarily related with woman and they must care more for chastity than men in Indian society. Girish Karnad presents 'snake ordeal' for Rani to prove her chastity in *Nagamandala*. It depicts the pitiable condition of Rani, who can't be said to be representing most of the young girls, who, just after their marriage, fall victim to the ill-treatment and atrocities of their husbands.

*Tale-Danda* is another play written in 1990 by Karnad. It is about the rise of the radical protest and reform movement, Veershaivism, in 12<sup>th</sup> century Karnataka. It is a dramatic presentation of the undesirable complications caused by the Hindu myth of origin of Vernas. By projecting Bijjala, a Shudra.abarbar by caste, as the king of Kalyan challenges the myth of Vernas. It is written on the backdrop of *Mandir-Mandal* conflict.

Karnad deals with mythical episodes in his plays and interprets them in contemporary reality. Linking the ancient and the modern dramatic traditions in his plays he links the natural and supernatural phenomena in human conditions. He takes refuse in Indian myths and makes them a vehicle for new vision. In the use of myths he presents the absurdity of life with all its elemental passions, conflicts and individual's eternal struggle to achieve perfection. While dealing with ancient myths he aims at plunging us into the sentiment of devotion because our suffering in this world is that we have forsaken our faith in gods. In terms of form and content his plays focus on new discourses on Indian myths. Investing bits of myth, Karnad introduces us with India's ancient tradition and culture which provides us hope and consolation. The particular form of drama that Karnad draws upon is Yakshagana of Karnataka. Almost all of his plays are full of Indian tradition and Culture.

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