

Tradition vs. Modernity in Girish Karnad's Drama

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Abstract: *The article investigates how traditional heritage conflicts with present-day values which exist in Girish Karnad's theatrical works, who serves as a key figure of India's "Theatre of Roots" movement. The study establishes that Karnad uses myth and history and folklore to develop his artwork because he wants to express present-day human problems and post-colonial tensions instead of showing historical traditions. The article compares three foundational plays, which are Tughlaq and Hayavadana and Naga-Mandala, to demonstrate how theatrical productions progress from common social understanding toward individual modernistic behavior. Theatrical works by Karnad examine power relationships while displaying Indian social development through their depiction of intricate human connections. The fusion of ancient and modern elements in Karnad's works creates a distinct viewpoint regarding how Indian culture combines traditional elements with contemporary practices. His work investigates identity themes along with gender dynamics and political power, which helps him create stories that connect with diverse audiences. Theatrical works of Karnad function as strong social criticism about how Indian society transforms while people experience ongoing personal difficulties.*

The analysis depends on Karnad's method which he describes as modernizing the myth because he transforms traditional elements like transposed heads and the supernatural cobra through Brechtian alienation and Camusian existentialism. The study investigates how Karnad's protagonists grapple with the self-disintegration and political idealism collapse which occurs when ancient social structures cease to provide protection in their environment. The article studies how Karnad combines Yakshagana folk traditions with Western theatrical methods to create a "Third Space" which enables him to challenge established patriarchal customs. The study demonstrates how Karnad achieved his permanent impact on world literature through his work because he showed that tradition and modernity exist as ongoing creative processes which shape Indian cultural identity in modern times...

Keywords: Girish Karnad, Tradition vs. Modernity, Post-colonial Theatre, Myth-making, Existentialism, Hayavadana

I. THE NAVYA MOVEMENT AND THE REIMAGINED PAST – INTRODUCTION

The Navya (New) movement in Kannada literature brought Girish Karnad his first success as a playwright when he began his career during the 1960s. This period brought about a complete intellectual transformation because writers wanted to establish their own identity by rejecting the traditional sentimental writing style which existed since the beginning of the Navodaya movement and the existing literary traditions [6]. While his contemporaries in the Navya movement preferred Western modernism and considered Indian traditional arts to be backward, Karnad developed his own unique artistic direction which depended on historical treasures [15]. The section presents Karnad's main creative contribution through his development of contemporary theater, which he achieved by using traditional Indian theater elements. He understood that Indian audiences would best comprehend modern-day worries through the archetypal characters found in mythological and historical and folkloric traditions.

Karnad developed his artistic method to address the identity crisis which emerged in India after its independence. He declared that his education in Western literature created a conflict between the "Great Tradition" of Sanskrit theater and the "Little Tradition" of traditional Indian folk shows. His theatrical work serves as a platform through which different cultures interact with each other [7]. He approaches tradition as a dynamic linguistic system which people can use to

create solutions for modern-day political and psychological challenges instead of treating it as an unchanging religious relic. Karnad considers modernity to be a critical framework through which people analyze historical events because it enables them to question past practices which traditions explain through the simple answer of "Because."

The theoretical basis of Karnad's "interrogative past" is established through this chapter. Karnad uses the historical figure Muhammad bin Tughlaq and the mythological world of the Mahabharata to create an "intervening" force that disrupts past reality. He uses historical distance together with mythological elements to generate a Brechtian alienation effect which enables audiences to watch their current political disillusionment and personal identity disintegration through a secure symbolic distance [8]. This introductory chapter establishes a foundation for analyzing how Karnad's plays serve as a "Third Space" where ancient gods and modern humans share the same stage to demonstrate how people continuously battle between their personal will and the social systems that control them.

II. THE IDEALIST IN THE RUINS – TUGHLAQ

The historical play Tughlaq which Karnad created in 1964 became his most famous work because it shows how Muhammad bin Tughlaq the 14th-century Sultan of Delhi represented the struggle between traditional values and contemporary ways [5]. Tughlaq whom people describe as a "mad genius" shows modernist creative abilities through his development as a character who exists in a historical context between two different time periods. The play functions as a strong critique against political idealism because it shows how disillusionment affected society during the 1960s after India gained independence and the "Nehruvian dream" failed to materialize. Karnad shows how Tughlaq leads his society through his idealistic beliefs which create problems during times of social change [1]. The audience experiences Karnad's challenge to view political ideals through their political limitations and the realities which exist in governmental authority through Tughlaq's tragic story.

The Secular Visionary vs. The Religious State

Tughlaq's modernity. His secularism and rationalism create his modernity. The Hindus and Muslims who follow his unified India vision will help him build a state which establishes universal justice. He abolishes the Jizya tax and tries to implement a copper currency system which exists ahead of its time by one hundred years. His contemporary reforms create violent conflicts with the fundamental beliefs that support his empire [14]. The Ulema (religious scholars) and the court nobility view his secularism as an affront to Islamic tradition. Karnad highlights that Tughlaq's tragedy is not a lack of intelligence but a lack of empathy for the slow, rhythmic pace of tradition. His modernity exists as an "unplanned" force which destroys all mutual trust between people. The absence of trust between people enables dissent to grow which results in rebellions that cause his empire to collapse. Tughlaq's modernization efforts create disastrous results which demonstrate that governments need to maintain a balance between advancing their systems and honoring their traditional practices.

The Fragmentation of the Ideal

Despite his rational experiments with modern goals, Tughlaq continues to pursue his objectives through increasingly dictatorial methods. The dark aspects of modernity emerge when authoritarianism arises because the population does not accept "enlightened" knowledge [5]. Tughlaq shows his intellectual detachment through the play's chess game symbol. He treats his subjects as chess pawns, but he fails to understand that people actually live according to traditional feelings and nonlogical attachments. The play shows Tughlaq as an existential wreck who prays in a language he no longer believes in while he stands among the destroyed remains of his own idealistic design. His demise results from two main factors: his unsuccessful efforts to modernize and his failure to connect with his people. The play presents a warning against the risks of unrestrained authority which leads to the loss of human connection.

History as a Mirror

Karnad uses the "tradition" of the historical chronicle to reflect the "modernity" of current political despair [2]. The play's setting—the shifting of the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad—serves as a metaphor for a nation in a state of permanent transition. The physical journey of the people across the scorched landscape of India mirrors their internal migration which moves them from a position of faith to complete disbelief. Through Tughlaq, Karnad presents modernity as a delicate structure which transforms into madness when it loses contact with essential human patterns [8]. The play Tughlaq demonstrates how Karnad uses tradition and modernity to show that societies face danger when they

attempt to achieve progress. He uses historical events and modern themes to inspire his audience to think about how power struggles and political disillusionment repeat themselves throughout time. Karnad's play demonstrates how people should not pursue progress blindly because they must first learn about the traditional knowledge that exists from earlier times. The film requires its audience to examine what happens when people choose to leave behind their cultural heritage so they can pursue contemporary ways of living. The film shows viewers that they need to create an approach which combines traditional values with modern methods to build secure systems for future success.

III. THE FRAGMENTED SELF – HAYAVADANA

The political conflicts between different eras serve as the main subject of Tughlaq while Hayavadana 1971 uses its story to display how personal identity breaks apart [3]. Karnad presents his interpretation of the transposed heads myth which connects to both the "Great Tradition" and "Western Tradition" through Thomas Mann and the Kathasaritsagara [9]. Karnad examines human desires through the characters of Hayavadana, Padmini, and Kapila who search for complete unity in a time of constant societal transformation. The play shows how people face negative results when they give up their authentic self to achieve social acceptance.

The Aesthetics of Hybridity

Theatre of Roots considers Hayavadana to be its most significant theatre performance because the play follows traditional Indian performance conventions through its use of Bhagavata Nandi and mask elements while simultaneously breaking those conventions [7]. The horse-headed man (Hayavadana) serves as a tangible representation of the transitional space which exists between traditional beliefs that combine divine and animal elements and contemporary understanding of human and intellectual capacities. The chapter shows how Karnad uses folk elements as "alienation effects" which stop audiences from becoming permanently devoted to the story and instead push them to experience the characters' existential struggles [12]. Karnad through these elements expects his audience to investigate how myths create boundaries which separate reality from tradition and modernity from divine and human aspects. He develops an original method which enables viewers to explore complex philosophical ideas while maintaining respect for India's diverse cultural traditions.

The Search for the Whole Man

The plot centers on the triangular relationship between Devadatta as the intellectual Kapila as the physical man and Padmini as the woman who seeks to fulfill her desires. Padmini starts to believe that she has found her "perfect man" after the two men accidentally switch their heads because she thinks he possesses Devadatta's intelligence together with Kapila's physical appearance. Karnad uses this myth to demonstrate a modernist truth which states that a person's identity will never remain unchanged [11]. The body starts to influence the mind while the mind starts to disregard the body. The pursuit of "completeness" leads to a tragic outcome which results in two people taking their own lives. The play depicts how human identity becomes complicated when people attempt to disconnect their mental state from their physical existence [9]. Karnad employs Indian mythology to enhance the story through his use of Indian mythology which brings to life universal themes about love and desire as well as the pursuit of complete identity.

Subverting the Divine

The traditional myth describes a goddess who intervenes to bring back order. The character of Goddess Kali in Hayavadana displays three states of sleepiness and three states of boredom and three states of detachment. The entire work represents a modernist artistic disruption [12]. The play's divine characters lose their standard power which forces the human actors to carry their entire identity burden. He proposes that modern society creates an illusion about the existence of complete human beings. Our existence as human beings creates our identity because we all express our personal traits as "Hayavadanas" who must accept our partial identities. The character Hayavadana shows that fixed identities do not exist because his character develops through human interactions. The characters experience internal conflicts that reveal their struggle to handle multiple competing desires and emotional states.

IV. SUBVERTING THE FOLK – NAGA-MANDALA

In Naga-Mandala (1988), Karnad moves from the "Great Tradition" of history and Sanskrit myth to the "Little Tradition" of oral folklore [4]. Karnad develops a traditional narrative through the combination of two Kannada folk

tales which include a talking lamp and a woman who falls in love with a cobra. This chapter shows that Karnad uses folklore's supernatural elements to examine modern women's hidden desires and their ability to act independently which leads him to break traditional norms that he employs.

The Domestic Prison

The play introduces Rani, a young bride trapped in a traditional marriage to Appanna, who treats her with utter neglect and locks her in their house while he spends his time with a mistress. In a traditional folk setting, Rani would be the "suffering Sita," defined by her patience and chastity [12]. However, Karnad introduces a modernist psychological depth to her isolation. Her loneliness is not just a social condition but an existential void. The play changes its focus from domestic abuse to a detailed study of feminine desire and creative thought when she receives a magic root that makes a King Cobra (Naga) fall in love with her by taking on her husband's appearance during the night.

The Duality of the Naga

The Naga, who visits Rani at night in the guise of Appanna, represents the "Ideal Husband" that tradition promises but modernity often fails to provide. Rani understands the man who visits her at night differs from the man who locks her up during daytime hours yet she chooses to inhabit this liminal space of the supernatural [13]. Karnad uses this duality to protest the traditional split between the "public" husband and the "private" lover. The Naga becomes a manifestation of Rani's own repressed sexuality. Rani transforms from being a passive object of tradition to becoming an active subject of her own narrative through her decision to embrace the "snake-husband."

The Subversion of the Chastity Trial

The play reaches its peak moment through the "Snake Ordeal" which serves as a conventional fire test that uses a cobra to determine Rani's purity after her pregnancy. The woman in traditional myth needs to demonstrate her "purity" so that she can satisfy the male ego. Karnad, however, turns this on its head. Rani does not achieve "purity" through her success in the ordeal because the cobra moves to her hair instead of attacking her. She remains "chaste" according to her personal understanding although she has engaged in sexual relations with other people. Through Naga-Mandala, Karnad suggests that tradition can only achieve "magical" status when it provides people with the power to make their own decisions. He "modernizes" the folk tale because he does not provide a standard ending which teaches a moral lesson; instead, he presents various endings which make the audience question what is true and how they should perceive patriarchal authority [8].

V. THE SHAMANIC BRIDGE – KARNAD'S AESTHETICS OF SYNTHESIS

Karnad established his post-colonial theatrical work through his skill of creating visual and auditory connections between classical and modern theatrical performances. The chapter examines his technical synthesis between traditional theatre of roots and Western theatrical writing standards. Karnad used folk elements as fundamental philosophical instruments which he applied to break down the conventional storytelling methods used in modern realistic fiction [8].

The Yakshagana and the Alienation Effect

Karnad frequently employs the conventions of Yakshagana which represents a traditional dance-drama form from Karnataka through its display of colorful costumes and its performance of designated movements and its implementation of a "half-curtain" technique [15]. However, he uses these elements as Brechtian alienation effects (Verfremdungseffekt). Through his performance system demonstration which shows Bhagavata (narrator) interacting with characters and actors performing mask changes in front of the audience Karnad dismantles the traditional "illusion" of performance. This technique forces the audience to remain modern critical observers. The spectator must analyze the social and existential problems presented instead of being taken away by the nostalgic "magic" of the myth.

Masks, Dolls, and the Externalized Psyche

The masks that Devadatta and Kapila use in Hayavadana function as two separate functions. Karnad uses masks which traditionally depict fixed character types to investigate the modernist problem which creates a divided self. The mask serves to demonstrate the public persona which people show to others and the hidden personal identity that exists behind this persona. The talking dolls in Hayavadana which show Padmini's body changes create a way for Karnad to show the inner psychological transformations which his characters experience through their hidden mental processes.

He uses this combination to create psychological depth which traditional folk forms fail to show while keeping the mythic elements which Western realism does not possess [11].

The Spatial Dialectic

The performance space of Karnad functions as a "Third Space" which combines historical geographical elements with contemporary mental processes [1]. The flames in Naga-Mandala who represent human form function as a supernatural chorus which delivers their storytelling through dialogue that contains the contemporary urban people's sarcastic humor. Through his combination of different language styles Karnad demonstrates that the "ancient" exists in the present because it needs a contemporary voice to express its significance. His synthesis-based aesthetic system enables the performance to transform into an active cultural exchange which combines traditional Indian heritage with modern artistic expression.

VI. CONCLUSION – THE SYNTHESIS OF TIMES

Girish Karnad's entire body of dramatic work shows that traditional practices and contemporary practices exist in an ongoing process which creates new ways for both traditions and modern practices to interact with each other. His artistic creations transform the "past" into a contemporary instrument which enables people to find their own identities. Karnad established that modern Indian playwrights needed to explore sacred texts through critical analysis because they needed to study elements from Vedic texts and Puranic scriptures and village folk traditions. The study proves that two temporal periods create tension which drives the development of Karnad's most exceptional artistic compositions. In Tughlaq, he showed how political modernity loses its effectiveness when it loses contact with its historical and emotional foundations. In Hayavadana, he studied modernist tragedy through the ancient myth and folk performance to explain the concept of shattered human identity. In Naga-Mandala, he employed supernatural elements and "Little Tradition" to empower women through modernity who faced limitations from patriarchal folklore traditions. His theater language creation established an Indian theatrical system which connects with global audiences through its recognition that technological advancements and secular values and global cultural exchange do not eliminate the ancestral heritage which continues to affect our lives. Karnad's plays show us that identity exists as a "portable construct" which develops through our family stories and our present-day decisions. Through mapping the hidden elements of this disagreement Karnad encourages his audience to recognize that post-colonial existence has established a "middle space" which requires people to move between their ancestral traditions and contemporary developments.

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