

### Myths as an Icon: A Study of Girish Karnad Plays

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##### Abstract

One of the greatest tasks before writers is to find an adequate mode to communicate the incommunicable. Myth has had a very significant place in human psychology and in society from its beginning as a primitive religious narrative to its recent adaptation as an aid in the exploration of an unconscious mind. Myth represents the events, conditions, and deeds of Gods or superhuman being that are outside ordinary human life and yet basic to it.

Myths are usually regarded as fairy tales or beautifully narrated flights of imagination invented by primitive people for their amusement or consolation in the face of baffling natural phenomena. But they also point, as Carl Jung has suggested, to the collective unconscious of mankind. Indeed, myths continue to exercise a profound influence on our lives even as they are shaped by the way we live. It is a story about superhuman beings of an earlier age taken by preliterate society to be a true account, usually of how natural phenomena, social customs, etc., came into existence.

It is originated from the Greek word 'Mythos'. Myth always passes through various stages of explanation and interpretation. According to Branislaw Malinowski myth is

*“A narrative resurrection of primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, assertions, even practical requirements”.*<sup>1</sup>

The main characters in the myths are usually Gods, supernatural heroes and humans. As sacred stories, myths are often endorsed by rulers and priests and closely linked to religion or spirituality. In the

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society in which it is told, a myth is usually regarded as a true account of the remote past. Myth can be considered under two categories- 'true' myth which is known as sacred narrative and defined by its function only and 'literary' myth which include the stories of the ancient Greek and Roman Gods and heroes. Myths have resemblance with folktale, legends. Myths, legends, and folktales are different types of traditional story. Unlike Mythos, folktales can be set in any time and any place, and they are not considered true or sacred by the societies that tell them. Like mythos, legends are stories that are traditionally considered true, but are set in a more recent time, when the world was much as it is today. Legends generally feature humans as their main characters, whereas myths generally focus on superhuman characters. Broadly speaking there are four types of myths: Culture myths, Ritual myths, Gods and gandharvas myths like Shiva, Rama and others; Heroes like Bhishma, Eklavya and other warriors; personalities like Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi etc. have been archetypes, symbols of certain virtues. Their followers make them all myths.

India is a mine of myths and legends. There are an increasing reliance

on the repertoire of myths and legends by contemporary Indian playwrights. Ramayana and Mahabharata have become permanent source of myth. Kalidasa and Bhasa's plays were based on the eighteen-day Kurukshetra battle from the Mahabharata in Andha Yug. Chandalika by Rabindranath Tagore is based on a popular Buddhist legend. Several modern Indian writers have turned to myth for their work. They have mined its vast resources to bring forth a variety of interpretations of contemporary situations, giving a new direction to the use of myth. Indeed, the use of myth in literature has been an interpretative strategy to make texts embody both the past and the present. Shashi Tharoor, for example, has used mythology from the Mahabharata in *The Great Indian Novel* to forge new insights by blending the mythical and the contemporary to form a sort of modern mythology. He moves easily from Bhishma to Gandhi and then to the present world, comparing, contrasting and mixing various periods and ages and devising a new understanding of the Indian past and present in this way. Dharmavir Bharati, in *Andha Yug*, also uses episodes from the *Mahabharata* to present a world of grief, futility, savagery and death resulting from a great and terrible war. The use of

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myth is fairly unavoidable in Indian English Poetry. It permeates the cultural poetry of India. The very idea of how one sees themselves in the world has mythic implications. For example, women might identify with the predicament of the spurned Radha or disrobed Draupadi or the committed Sati in articulating their condition of the world. The reality is that in a setting as diverse and eclectic as India the use of mythology and religious iconography in poetry helps to bring some level of common ground to bring about shared experiences and what the article below would title "Collective Aspirations."

The Playwrights like Homer, Virgil, Milton, Sri. Aurobindo, T.P. Kailasam, Girish Karnad etc. have been greatly handled the myth in their plays. Among them Girish Karnad is India's leading playwright and adept practitioner of the performing arts. His plays are primarily written in Kannada and then are translated into other languages. The following plays are to his credit - Yayati(1961), Tughlaq(1964), Hayavadana(1971), Anglimalinge(1977), Hittana Hunja(1980), Nagamandala(1988), Tale-Danda(1990), Agni Mattu Male(1995), Bali- The Sacrifice(2002), The Wedding Album, Broken Images and

Flower and two monologues(2004).Girish Karnad along with other playwrights Vijay Tendulkar and Rakesh Mohan revived the vogue of theatre. They are trying to uphold the rich cultural heritage of India by using myths and traditional stories in their plays. Karnad has made an effort to fight the legacy of colonialism by upholding Indian values and its cultural ethos. The themes do have contemporary significance but main focus is on the presentation of complex cultural fabric of India. Karnad loves to discover less known and obscure myths, tries to understand their significance and relate them to the chosen story. Through plays, myths can represent properly so his initial desire was to become a playwright.

He himself confessed:

*"I have been fairly lucky in having multi-pronged career. You know, I have been an actor, a publisher, a film maker, but in none of these field have I felt quiet as much at home as playwright"*<sup>2</sup>

Karnad draws on the Indian Mythology for his themes. When Karnad was asked about the reason handling of myth, he answers that he wants to tell a particular story effectively. He makes

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changes in previous myths and legends. His main aim is to subterfuge to discuss socio-cultural evils. As Ranendran writes:

*“Karnad employs myths and legends so that he could interpret the present in the light of racial memory”<sup>3</sup>*

Karnad has handled myth successfully in *The Fire and Rain*, **Naga-mandala** and **Hayavadana** and **Yayati**. He dives deep into the archives of ancient scripture and brings out a scoop full of relevant anecdote and myths. He tries to find a path in the labyrinthine ways of life with the help of these stories. Karnad picks up the myth but uses only the relevant part of it in his plays. Myths and mask provide a rich texture to his plays and at the same time enhance the knowledge of the viewers about our ancient scriptures.

In **Yayati** Karnad presents the age-old story of the mythological king who, as a result of a sage’s curse grows old before time and in his longing for eternal youth, borrows the vitality of his own son. Karnad borrowed the myth from the Mahabharata, the story of **Yayati** runs thus in the epic manner. In **Hayavadana** Karnad employs the story of Devdatta and Kapila- which is based on a tale from the

Vetalapancha Vimishika, but he draws Thomas Mann’s story of **The Transposed Heads**. The Vetal Panachavimshati and Somdeva’s Brihatkatharitsagara basically relate the same tale of the transposition of heads. In **Hayavadana**, Karnad shows that there is a man having horse head, Devadatta and Kapila after transposing their heads, lost their identities. The play starts with invocation of Lord Ganesha, who is a symbol of incompleteness and theme of the play is a ‘search of completeness’ and ‘this mad dance of incompleteness.’ The main plot is related to the story of Devdatta-Padmini-Kapila which can be identified as Rama-Sita-Lakshman. The sub-plot of Hayavadana is the horse-man deepens the significance of the main theme of incompleteness by treating it on a different plane.

In **Naga-mandala**, Karnad weaves together two folk tales from Karnataka which he heard from A.K. Ramanujan. The central one focusing the snake love motif, while the flame story explores the notion of stories of a life independent of their narrators, derived from oral tradition. The theme is completely mythical. Pranav Joshipura comments on it as:

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*“Karnad in **Naga-mandala** has made use of folktales and the ‘mixing of human and non-human worlds as a distancing device which brings in the element of alienation in the play”<sup>4</sup>*

Girish Karnad’s **The Fire and the Rain** being a symbolic and psychological interpretation of myth of Mahabharata, revivifies the myth again into modern context. Main story rotates around the character-Bharadwaja and Sage Raibhya and indigenous myth of Yavakri. It relates to the Myth of Mahabharata for displaying Indian Ethos and modern apathy towards relationship. Main purpose of using myth is for social change and amelioration of the low-caste people. The myth of Indra, the myth of Yavakri, Play within play have been so well knit in the play that they do not appear as three stories but seem to be one single unit.

Karnad’s handling of myths throws light on the mystery of the process of his artistic creation. He ruminates on it, that’s why his plays attain artistry and craftsmanship. He reads the story of Yavakri and Parvasu in C. Rajgopalachari’s **Abridgment of the Mahabharata** and resulted in the play

**‘The Fire and the Rain’ (Agni Mattu Male)**. He studies Mann’s **Die Vertauschten Kopfe (Transposed Heads)**. The idea of writing Hayavadana occurred in his mind in the middle of an argument with B.V. Karanth, a theatre director. Karnad does not blindly follow the mythological story; he deviates from it and manipulates it according to the need of the story. The myth says that Parvasu-Raibhya’s eldest son and the chief priest of the Fire sacrifice unintentionally killed his father, taking him to be a wild animal, but in the parvasu kills his father intentionally. He believed that his father was responsible for the poor condition of his wife. The dramatist also insinuates that Raibhya had sent his son for the ritual of Fire sacrifice for several years intentionally.

Myths serve as surrogate for Karnad’s plays. His plays **Yayati** is based on the Yayati myth in the Mahabharata. Owing to the curse of sage Sukracharya, Yayati got premature old age. He exchanges his old age with the prime youth of his son, Puru to realize the sensual pleasure. The myth of Yayati is taken from chapter 135-138 of the ‘Vana Parva’ which is employed in **Agni Mattu Male**. The story of Kathasaritasagara

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includes in Hayavadana. Each story of Vetala (Goblin) poses a riddle at the end for king Vikrama to solve. The Vetala story runs as follows: Dhavala is young washerman; he marries Madana Sundari, accompanied by Sundari's brother, the couple set out to attend a festival. Meanwhile, Dhavala cuts off his head at the temple of Durga. The brother in law also kills himself. When Sundari is about to kill herself, the Goddess asks her to replace the heads of the trunks. She transposes wrong head on wrong body in excitement. The question stands before her, who is her husband? This is the test for king Vikrama to solve. Thomas Mann possessed same story but here character are two friends. Karnad used same myth in **Hayavadana**, mingling the story of Devdatta-Padmini-Kapila.

Karnad's interest is not in recreating old myths and legends but in revisioning them to suit his artistic purpose. Chitrlekha who plays a pivotal role in **Yayati** is Karnad's invention. In **Hayavadana**, he changes the names of characters- Shridaman into Devdatta, Nanda is changed into Kapila, Sita into Padmini. Padmini has given a special type of feminine beauty in Vatsayana's **Kamasutra**. By changing names Karnad

achieved universalisational effect. In **Hayavadana** he uses myths for interpreting contemporary realities. The slaying of the demon, Vritra, by Indra is one of the archetypal myths of India which appeared for the first time in the **Rigveda** and much later with variations in the Mahabharata. It is the Mahabharata version of the myth that Karnad uses in the play.

Traditional or mythical sources structure his plays. As in **Naga-Mandala**, the whole play is a complete mandala in graphic form. It represents some narrative levels of the play, starting from the outside:-

- The outer square represents the base of the ruined temple.
- First circle for flames story
- Crossed triangle represents the story of Kurudavva, Rani, Appana, Cobra etc.

**Agni Mattu Male** is a three act play with a prologue and an epilogue. The Prologue presents the seven year long Yajna (fire sacrifice) observed by Parvasu for rains. Epilogue shows Indra grants Arvasu the boon of rain. **Hayavadana** is a two act play. It introduces with the invocation of God Ganesha (Nandi). The

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supplement of myth presents here through myth poetic mode, Karnad produces a 'complex seeing' and 'alienation effect' he says-

*"The myth had enabled me to articulate to myself as a set of value that I had been unable to arrive at rationally"*<sup>5</sup>

The Yavakri myth in Mahabharata highlights that mere learning is insufficient. Here, in Agni Mattu Male, he highlights the problems of married women Vishaka and Nittilai represent modern married women craving for freedom. The story of Rani in **Nagmandala** represents a woman sees her husband in two unconnected roles-as a stranger during day and as a lover at night. Her craving for sexual pleasure leads her towards ordeal. In **Hayavadana**, Karnad examines the disillusionment of a sensitive modern woman who wants to integrate intellectuality and physicality in her as man. After transportation, she got perfect husband as

*"Padmini: fabulous lady----- brain, fabulous Devdatta"*<sup>6</sup>

Karnad handles the story to refer to women's concerns. He taps myth

and folklore, the hidden sources of shared meaning in the community for which his plays are meant to disturb some of the prevailing perceptions of this community.

For discussion of feminism, Karnad handles myths. Myths and folklores also capture the effects of life in a woman. **Hayavadana** employs Mann's legends as a starting point. Bhagvata concludes opening act with referring the solution of the Vetala on the matter of transposition of heads:

*"Bhagvata: What? What indeed the solution to this problem, which hold the entire future of these three unfortunate beings (Devdatta, Padmini, Kapila) in a balance? Must their fate remain a mystery? .....We have to face the problem. But it's a deep one and the answer must be sought with greatest caution haste would be disastrous"*<sup>7</sup>

The dilemma of Padmini is both internal psyches. The 'either nerd' or 'hunk' choice is very difficult to make and the alter egos of Apollonian and Dionysian are hard to live within the long run. The woman of substance is sometimes a stooge in the hands of fate and in reality has to learn to make compromised if she wants things to remain as she chooses them to be and as

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she wants them to remain. Apollo or Dionysius, Padmini needs her ideal man. Is her legitimate need wrong?

Karnad's artistry imbibes in analysing human identity in a world of tangled relationship. Rani in **Naga-mandala** has sex with Naga in the shape of her husband. Is she chaste and innocent? Padmini's plight with two men suggests, can a woman have preference? Vishaka has sex with her old lover in Agni Mattu Male. Is she an adulteress? Nittilai in the play abandons her husband chooses to live with her lover. Can a woman exercise such a prerogative? This feminist concern treated directly and openly may invite rebuff from traditionally bound Indian audience. Why do modern theatre directors choose myth and legend-based plays for productions? The reason is that such plays have elements of modernity and relevance for audience. **Hayavadana** shows the problem of division between body and mind. He interprets the present in the light of racial memory. Thus, he links the past with the present and establishes continuity. Broadly speaking, the myth of **Yayati** has been dramatised by Karnad in his play Yayati with the specific purpose of glorifying the existentialist philosophy of the performance of duty and

acceptance of responsibilities. **Hayavadana** significantly projects the myth of Ganesha, who himself being an 'embodiment of imperfection of incompleteness' is worshipped as 'the destroyer of incompleteness.' **Naga-mandala** depicts the story of pitiable condition of young girls who become the victim to the ill-treatment and atrocities of their husbands.

In such a way Karnad has gained excellent achievement in handling myth. Karnad has the special genius that can transform any situation into an aesthetic experience. He carefully handled the myth to produce a 'complex seeing' and 'alienation effect.' He projects not only Indian myths but also western-tradition. He is a 'Renaissance Man' having multi-facet personality. To quote R.K. Dhawan:

*"He is a genius as a writer, a man of excellent disposition and one in whom all the four elements to use a Renaissance analogy, are so well-mixed that nature may stand up and say 'Here's Man.'"*<sup>8</sup>

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