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Reforming Beliefs

**CONTEMPORARY APPROXIMATION OF INDIAN MYTH  
AND FOLKLORE IN KARNAD'S PLAYS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Girish Karnad's plays reflect upon contemporary Indian cultural and social life through the use of folk-tales, myths and historical legends. He weaves together timeless truths about human life and emotions contained in ancient Indian stories with the changing social moves and morals of modern life. Karnad exploits myth, but the function of myth is to transcend its own factual core by magnifying it, elaborating upon it, refining it and then enriching itself at each telling and retelling.

**Keywords:** Contemporary, folk tales, myth, historical, factual

Karnad's plays are particularly concerned with psychological problems, dilemmas and conflicts experienced by modern Indian men and women in their different social situations. In his first play *Yayati* (1961) Karnad has given the traditional tale a new meaning and significance highly relevant in the context of life today. It is a page from the history of the unknown past but problem discussed in the play is most modern one.

In the play, King Yayati is the representative of modern common man who in spite of receiving much happiness in life remains restless and discontented. This situation is revealed through Yayati's dialogue:

*Solitude? What are you talking about? I don't want solitude. I can't bear it. I want people around me. Queens, ministers, armies, enemies, the populace. I love them all. Solitude? The very thought is repulsive. I have to know myself, Sharmishtha, I have to be young. I must have my youth.*

In the play mythical Yayati ran after sensual pleasures but modern Yayati runs after all kinds of

materialistic pleasures - cars, bungalows, fat bank accounts, beautiful clothes, dance, music etc.

Caste difference is another issue of the play which is still relevant today. The first episode between Devyani and Sharmishtha brings the cause of war that is – issue of class / caste. The incident became the cause of their feud and generated bitterness and gall between them.

Women are still suppressed by men. To show this, a very significant portion of the play is devoted to the study of the decisions of the patriarchal social set-up that expects women to surrender to the will of the male decision makers without protest. This fact is further illustrated through another relationship that forms the sub-plot of the play, the Swarnalata episode. The character of Swarnalata, the maid, is Karnad's creation.

Swarnalata's narrative once again emphasizes the patriarchal norms of the society that expects a woman to prove her innocence. She is never taken on her own worth. The male dominance is apparent in the story of Swarnalata.

In the play the other women characters – Devyani, Sharmishtha and Chitrlekha, become pawns in the games that male characters play and are relegated to the background.

The character of Chitrlekha is Karnad's creation. She is not a modern woman but she is endowed with energy which she tries to use for a place in a male-dominated world.

***Chitrlekha:*** *I did not push him to the edge of the pyre, sir. You did. You hold forth on my wifely duties. What about your duty to your son? Did you think twice before hoisting your troubles on a pliant son?*

Chitrlekha seems to be in search of a man who would define her and provide her some recognition in society ruled by males. Finding herself in such a sad plight, she says to Yayati:

***Chitrlekha:*** *What else is there for me to do? You have your youth. Prince Pooru has his old age. Where do I fit in?"*

She seems to be 'New woman' not in the sense that she challenges the patriarchy but in the sense that she challenged the social obligation and moral laws. She remains a rebellious figure within

the male dominated world.

The Puranic story of Yayati is revived and given a new lease of life by Karnad to bring home many issues that relate to India's contemporary politics.

*Tughlaq*, Karnad's second play and now widely recognized as a classic, first appeared in print in 1964. The play has the historicity of fact and textuality of history in its postmodern and neo-historicist discourses evolving macro-historical schemes like the power-affection, social relations, political reasons and conservative thoughts in its structure. The play is essentially modern, may be more modern, despite being called a historical play.

In its canvas and treatment, *Tughlaq* is both huge and contemporary. It is a tale of the crumbling to ashes of the dreams and aspirations of an over-ambitious, yet considerably virtuous king contemporary in the sense that one can see flashes of *Tughlaq*, attitude-callous yet well-meaning in contemporary political structures too. Karnad says in an interview:

"What struck me absolutely about *Tughlaq*'s history was that it was contemporary. The fact that here was the most idealistic, the most intelligent king ever to come on the throne of Delhi... and one of the greatest failures also. And within a span of twenty years this tremendously capable man had gone to pieces. This seemed to be both due to his idealism as well as the shortcomings within him, such as his impatience, his cruelty, his feeling that he had the only correct answer. And I fell in the early sixties India had also come very far in the same direction – the twenty year period seemed to me very much a striking parallel."

Karnad realises the rotten condition of *Tughlaq*'s time to be synonymous with Nehru's vision of modern India in his attempt to Europeanise her socially and politically during his "*era of idealism in the country*". In the textuality of history he encompasses the imaginative reconstruction of Nehruvian Socialism in the five myths of his legacy – a promoter of dynasty, betrayer of his master (Gandhi), an opponent to Vallabhbhai (a better choice for Prime Minister than Gandhi's selection of Nehru) and an autocrat and imposer of contralised 'Stalinist' model of economic development in India.

Karnad's fictional Mohammad evokes not one but several political figures of the colonial and post-colonial India as *"basically concerned with the tragedy of limits of human power in predominantly psychological context."*

Karnad has intensified the aura of distrust, deception, violence etc. by introducing two devilish imposters in the sub-plot. Aziz and Aazam represent the other side of evil and viciousness that reside in the Sultan. They are born-machiavellian cheats. Aziz is an intelligent, shrewd, imaginative and opportunist. He uses different masks throughout the play. He kills his bosom friend, Aazam. It is interesting to know his thoughts on politics. He explains:

*"Politics! It's a beautiful world-wealth, success, position power and yet it's full of brainless people."*

The character of Aziz stands for the corrupted public servants in the post-independence period in India. One can readily recognise the existence of Aazam and Aziz - like characters in all organisations.

By embodying Mohammad in radical impulses Karnad makes him "at once the Gandhi experimenting with truth, the Nehru aiming at cultural modernity and the Indira choosing self – destructive authoritarianism for her concept of national well-being in the style of her leadership to modernise zeal."

Thus, by evoking Gandhi, Nehru, and their political heirs in contemporary time, Karnad lends to his protagonist of history, contemporary relevance.

The dramatic world of Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* is 'bizarre' and 'topsy – turvy' but is not unreal as it presents the reality of man's everyday dreams. In fact, the whole play can be considered a manifest dream with a latent content.

Karnad's *Hayavadana* explores the complex psycho – social dimension of the problem of human identity crisis, as different from the moral aspect of the Indian story and the philosophical purport of Mann's story in both tangled and untangled relationships.

The play reveals the essential ambiguity of human personality which is apparently shaped

or shattered by the human environment. Fundamentally incomplete and imperfect, the human beings search and strive for attaining the unattainable ideal of completeness and perfection.

Girish Karnad successfully pictures Padmini's, Hayavadan's and Padmini's child's thirst for completeness, for perfection. Probably what Karnad tries to reveal through Padmini is the predicament of a modern, free and bold woman who is torn between polarities, a woman who loves her husband as well as someone else for two different aspects of their personalities. Karnad has described her situation through the symbols in the Female chorus.

*Why should love stick to the  
sap of a single body ? When the  
stem is drunk with the thick  
yearning of the many petalled , many  
flowered lantana, why should it be tied  
down to the relation of a single flower?*

Padmini, after the exchange of heads, had felt that she had the best of both men

*"fabulous body – fabulous brain – fabulous Devadatta."*

She is fascinated by both Davadatta and Kapila and this creates the problem. The incompleteness of human desire is symbolized by Padmini. The two men cannot accept each other when it comes to sharing a woman and kills each other. Padmini performs Sati with two bodies placed on pyre.

Karnad's next play *Nagamandala* (1988) is a powerful portrait of the agony and anguish faced by both men and women in their development into adult roles and social adjustment in a society where the individual is given little space for self – development, awareness and independence as a being.

In his play *Nagamandala* he not only exposes male chauvinism, the oppression of women, the great injustice done to them by men and patriarchal culture but also stealthily deflates the concept of chastity through the story of Rani.

The solitary confinement of Rani by Appanna in the house symbolizes the chastity belt of

the Middle Ages, the reduction of women's talents to house work and the exclusion of women from enlightenment and enjoyment.

Karnad brings within the play the strong association between oral narrative tradition and women's sub - culture, existing within the patriarchal societies. Karnad says that women tell stories when putting children to bed or while doing their household chores. In the presence of other women and children, women, give expression to their own point of view and experiences which are not perhaps permitted or recognised by patriarchal, classical stories. Their stories represent, *Karnad says a "distinctly woman's understanding of the reality around her, a lived counterpoint to the patriarchal structures of classical text and institutions."* The men of patriarchal culture suppress the intellect of women and they try and to prove that women are foolish and ignorant.

Women's close - knit relationships with the other members of family and their lack of freedom to explore the world on their own is one of the reasons why identity for them is usually a matter of relationships.

The scene of Rani's trial reminds us of Sita's trial in the Ramayana and it shows its affinities with traditional Indian values. The traditional test in the village court has been to take oath while holding a red- hot iron in the hand. But Rani insists

*"I must swear by the King Cobra".*

Naga cult is a major type of worship, is still vigorously practised in many parts of Kerala which retain the impact of Hindu mythology. Blind faith and superstition - driven belief in Naga myths and tales promote ritualistic worship of Naga. The practices are very much alive in the socio - cultural life of the people of Hindu faith in Kerala.

After the judgment Rani becomes the head of the family. Appanna accepts her superiority and says to her.

*"You are no common person. You are a goddess."*

However the matriarchal Rani, unlike the past patriarchal Appanna, never orders him. Thus by

showing a trace of matriarchy at the end, the play anticipates that matriarchy is to follow patriarchy if our society is to change for better.

In his second historical play *Tale-Danda* he re-examines the need and the structure of the caste system of India that was once, in the past, hailed as an ideal one. Picking up historical-cum-political background for his plot, he moulds his theme of *Tale-Danda* to serve his present needs. *Karnad says "I wrote Tale-Danda in 1989 when the 'Mandir' and the 'Mandal' movements were beginning to show again how relevant the questions posed by these thinkers were for our age."*

Exploitation and oppression have become a 'natural' norm in our society as it has absorbed and observed individualism and competition. Consequently everybody takes inequality for granted.

Karnad tries to trace the cause behind the failure of Basavanna's movement, ultimately the final betrayal was not by the enemies but by the followers. He feels that *Tale-Danda* is relevant even today as religious fundamentalism is strong enough to destroy the Babri Masjid and claim the lives of thousands of people. He adds:

*"When people all around us are slaughtered in the name of a temple, I hear echoes from those times long past."*

Therefore what happened in the twelfth century is still happening now. So Karnad rightly remarks:

*It seems 800 years have solved no problems. We are back exactly where we started."*

From the Volcano of Mandal Commission to the sporadic violence unleashed by Ranvir Sena in Bihar, and events of atrocities and caste wars across India – in remote regions of Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, our history is redolent with the evils of monstrous and exploitative caste system. All laws ensuring equality of mankind fail to redress its tyranny constantly challenged.

*Tale-Danda's* world of contending ideologies is marked by conspicuous presence of women characters. In the play male has voice, presence and power, whereas the female is silent,



absent and powerless. It shows the condition of middle class women of our society who is taught from the beginning to repress her own desires and trained to practice self-effacement, women has come to articulate a male-constructed definition, which she has internalized. Therefore, when she speaks it is patriarchy that speaks through her. She is not expected to go out and perform, but efficiently lurk around the threshold, supporting the male endeavour.

Queen Rambhavati's condition in the play indicates that women of high status were stereotypical: docile, shouted at, told to mind their own business or even rejected or packed off to their parents. The character of Queen Rambhavati is similar to any contemporary woman. Her position is clear from her words to Sovideva.

*"Do you wish. Just don't upset your father, that's all. He turns his bad temper on me and I can't take it longer."*

King Bijjala's crass treatment of Queen Rambhavati is not due to a malevolent intention but induced by the entrenched patriarchal assumptions.

***Bijjala:*** *Doesn't anything interest you women except marriage and husband and children?*

***Rambhavati:*** *Have you left us anything else?*

Women of all strata in Tale-Danda are made to suffer the trauma resulting from men's actions. Such is the condition of women in traditional Indian society, as the play depicts. Women remained a marginalized and suppressed group, without voice, without power, and may be even without consciousness of their peripheral position in society. Women's slavery leaves men free to pursue their wishes.

Karnad's next play *The Fire and the Rain* is based on a myth within a myth, a short narrative within the Mahabharata. The entire play deals with much violence like bloodshed, betrayals, jealousy, pride false-knowledge and anger. Ascetic Lomasha, in the myth imparts knowledge to the Pandavas and Karnad imparts it to the world by re-writing it. The myth is very relevant to the contemporary society. Misuse of knowledge which is rampant nowadays is leading the world towards destruction. In the play Karnad has adopted the myth of Yavakri to

make it a medium to warn the society. It is clear from Yavakri's dialogue.

*"I want knowledge so I can be vicious, destructive."*

The character of Yavakri describes the pitfalls of asceticism – the difficulty of faith. His cynicism and destiny dramatize the contingent faith of contemporary man in a precarious universe that the playwright so feelingly identifies.

There is another warning in the play, which deals with brother destroying brother in Indra-Vritra legend. In the contemporary world also brother is destroying brother for selfish purposes.

The images of Nittlai and Vishakha in the play represent the primal aspects of contemporary women: the maternal and the sexual. Their lives are organized around issues that favour male domination. Their oppression and tragic end is inscribed by the power struggle among the male characters of the upper caste as well as their domination in the marginalized community and in proportion to their lack of freedom to control their destinies.

The playwright's interest in exploring the varieties of ideological issues that have replenished the Indian civilization through ages is represented in Nittlai. She embodies the ascetic ideals of a predominantly non-brahmanical tradition not implicated in struggle for power in ancient India. She brings us in close contact with a significant and yet obscure cultural stream of the ancient India: the ascetic tradition.

The play very subtly, insinuates at the prevailing practice of exploitation of the lower class by the upper class Brahmins. The father of Nittlai comments:

*".....that Brahmins bed their women but hesitate to wed....."*

These types of atrocities are still committed on the lower class by the upper class. Therefore the need is for a sympathetic understanding of their oppressive past in grappling with our present-day reality, in which also lies real humanity. In a way, the intellectual ability to creatively reflect on and analyze human problems knows no gender or caste, Karnad seems to say.

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