



The Use of Myth in Indian English Drama during the Post- Independence Era (1947–1970s)

Maheshwar Raut

Research Scholar, Department of English, Malwanchal University, Indore

Dr. Dhananjay Patil

Supervisor, Department of English, Malwanchal University, Indore

Abstract

The decades following Indian independence witnessed a significant transformation in Indian English drama, marked by a renewed engagement with myth as a powerful dramaturgical and ideological tool. Playwrights of the post-1947 period drew upon mythological narratives from epics, Puranic lore, and regional traditions to negotiate questions of identity, nationhood, morality, and socio-political transition. Rather than merely reproducing traditional myths, dramatists reinterpreted them in modern contexts, turning myth into a dynamic medium for critique and reconstruction of contemporary realities. This paper examines the use of myth in Indian English drama from 1947 to the 1970s, focusing on its thematic, structural, and symbolic functions. Through an analysis of major playwrights such as Girish Karnad, Asif Currimbhoy, and others, the study demonstrates how myth served as a bridge between tradition and modernity, enabling dramatists to articulate the complexities of a newly independent nation. The paper argues that myth in post-independence Indian English drama was not escapist but rather deeply political and existential, reflecting tensions between past and present, individual and society, and faith and rationality.

Keywords: Myth, Indian English Drama, Post-Independence Literature, Girish Karnad, Cultural Identity, Modern Indian Theatre

Introduction

The attainment of independence in 1947 marked a watershed moment in the cultural and literary history of India. Alongside political freedom emerged an intense quest for cultural self-definition and national identity. Indian English drama, which had previously been overshadowed by colonial theatrical models and regional language theatre, began to evolve as a significant literary genre. During the post-independence decades, particularly from 1947 to the 1970s, dramatists increasingly turned to indigenous sources, especially myth, to construct narratives that were rooted in Indian tradition while simultaneously addressing modern concerns.

Myth, in the Indian context, is not merely a body of ancient stories but a living cultural framework that continues to inform ethical values, social structures, and philosophical thought. The epics such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, along with numerous Puranic and folk myths, provided a rich reservoir of symbols and archetypes. Post-independence dramatists utilized these mythic narratives not as static relics but as flexible structures capable of reinterpretation in light of contemporary socio-political realities. The use of myth thus became a strategy for negotiating the anxieties of a society transitioning from colonial rule to modern nationhood.

This paper explores how Indian English dramatists between 1947 and the 1970s employed myth to articulate the dilemmas of modern India. It investigates the thematic motivations behind mythic adaptation, the dramaturgical techniques used to reinterpret myths, and the socio-political implications of such reinterpretations. By situating myth within the broader cultural and historical milieu of post-independence India, the study highlights its enduring relevance in shaping the contours of modern Indian theatre.

Historical Context: Post-Independence Cultural Reconstruction

The immediate decades after independence were characterized by rapid social transformation, political experimentation, and cultural introspection. India was grappling with issues such as partition trauma, democratic institution-building, industrial modernization, and the challenge of forging unity in diversity. In this context, literature and drama became crucial mediums for exploring national consciousness.

Indian English drama, though relatively less prolific than fiction and poetry in earlier decades, began to find a distinctive voice in the post-independence period. Playwrights sought to move away from imitative Western dramaturgy and instead explore indigenous narrative traditions. Myth emerged as a particularly effective device because it offered both familiarity and flexibility. It allowed dramatists to anchor their works in cultural continuity while also enabling them to reinterpret established narratives to reflect contemporary concerns.

Furthermore, the resurgence of myth in drama was closely linked to the broader modernist movement in Indian literature. Modernist writers aimed to reconcile the fragmented modern experience with traditional philosophical and cultural frameworks. Myth, with its universal archetypes and symbolic richness, provided a means to explore existential dilemmas such as alienation, moral conflict, and identity crisis—issues that were central to the post-independence psyche.

Conceptualizing Myth: Theoretical Perspectives

Myth in literature functions not merely as narrative material but as a symbolic system that encodes collective cultural memory. In the Indian context, myth operates simultaneously at religious, philosophical, and socio-cultural levels. It embodies archetypal conflicts—dharma versus adharma, duty versus desire, fate versus free will—which continue to resonate in modern contexts.

Post-independence dramatists adopted a revisionist approach to myth. Instead of treating myths as sacred and immutable, they re-examined them critically, often highlighting suppressed voices, ethical ambiguities, and psychological complexities. This approach aligns with modern literary theory, which views myth as a dynamic structure open to reinterpretation. By reworking mythic narratives, playwrights were able to interrogate traditional values and expose their limitations in addressing contemporary realities. Thus, myth in post-independence Indian English drama functioned on multiple levels: as a structural framework, as a symbolic language, and as an ideological tool for social critique. It allowed dramatists to transcend the limitations of realism and engage with deeper philosophical and existential questions.

Myth as a Medium of Cultural Identity

One of the primary reasons for the resurgence of myth in post-independence drama was the need to establish a distinct cultural identity. After centuries of colonial rule, Indian writers sought to reclaim indigenous traditions and reinterpret them for a modern audience. Myth provided a sense of continuity with the past, reinforcing the idea that modern India was rooted in an ancient yet evolving cultural heritage.

By re-engaging with myth, dramatists asserted the autonomy of Indian literary expression. They demonstrated that Indian theatre did not need to rely exclusively on Western models but could draw upon its own rich narrative traditions. This cultural reclamation was not reactionary but creative; myths were reshaped to reflect contemporary social realities such as gender inequality, political corruption, and existential disillusionment. The use of myth also facilitated communication with diverse audiences. Since mythological stories were widely known across linguistic and regional boundaries, their reinterpretation in English drama made the plays accessible while retaining cultural authenticity. Thus, myth became a unifying cultural language capable of addressing the complexities of a pluralistic nation.

Reinterpretation of Myth in the Works of Girish Karnad

Among the most significant dramatists of the post-independence period, Girish Karnad stands out for his innovative use of myth. Although many of his plays were originally written in Kannada and later translated into English, they occupy a central place in Indian English dramatic discourse due to their thematic and conceptual significance.

Yayati (1961): Myth and Existential Dilemma

Karnad's *Yayati* reinterprets a story from the *Mahabharata*, focusing on the king Yayati who exchanges his old age with his son in order to continue enjoying worldly pleasures. In the traditional myth, Yayati's desire is portrayed as a moral failing eventually leading to repentance. Karnad transforms this narrative into a modern existential tragedy, exploring themes of responsibility, generational conflict, and the burden of inherited guilt.

The play reflects the anxieties of post-independence India, where the older generation, shaped by colonial experience, was often perceived as transferring unresolved conflicts to the youth. Yayati's refusal to accept the consequences of his actions becomes symbolic of a society reluctant to confront its moral and historical responsibilities. Through myth, Karnad articulates a universal psychological conflict that resonates with modern audiences.

Tughlaq (1964): Historical Myth and Political Allegory

Although *Tughlaq* is based on historical rather than mythological material, its portrayal of the medieval ruler acquires mythic dimensions. The character of Muhammad bin Tughlaq is depicted as an idealistic visionary whose lofty dreams collapse into tyranny and chaos. The play uses historical narrative as a quasi-mythic allegory to comment on the disillusionment of post-independence political leadership. By blending history with mythic symbolism, Karnad creates a timeless commentary on the paradoxes of power and idealism. The ruler becomes an archetypal figure representing the tragic consequences of excessive ambition and moral ambiguity.

Hayavadana (1971): Identity and Fragmentation

In *Hayavadana*, Karnad draws upon a tale from the *Kathasaritsagara* and integrates it with folk theatre traditions. The story of exchanged heads between two friends becomes a philosophical exploration of identity, completeness, and the conflict between body and mind. The play reflects the fragmentation of modern identity in a rapidly changing society.

Myth here functions as a metaphorical framework through which the playwright examines psychological and existential concerns. The incomplete horse-headed character, Hayavadana, symbolizes the universal human quest for wholeness in an incomplete world. This reinterpretation demonstrates how myth can be adapted to address modern philosophical questions.

Myth and Social Critique in Other Post-Independence Plays

While Girish Karnad remains the most prominent figure, other dramatists of the period also employed mythic motifs to critique social realities.

Asif Currimbhoy and the Mythic Imagination

Asif Currimbhoy's plays often engage with historical and mythic elements to comment on contemporary issues. His dramatic works explore themes such as war, cultural conflict, and moral degeneration. Though not always directly retelling mythological stories, Currimbhoy frequently employs mythic archetypes and symbolic structures that evoke the moral dilemmas of epic narratives. This indirect use of myth allows him to universalize modern conflicts and situate them within a broader civilizational context.

The Mythic Mode as Political Allegory

In several post-independence plays, myth functions as a political allegory. By presenting mythological characters in contemporary situations, dramatists expose the contradictions of modern governance, social hierarchy, and ethical decay. The familiar mythic framework makes the critique more potent, as audiences recognize the contrast between idealized past values and present moral compromises.

Such allegorical use of myth also enables playwrights to bypass censorship and address sensitive political issues indirectly. Myth thus becomes a safe yet powerful vehicle for social commentary.

Myth, Modernity, and Existential Concerns

A striking feature of post-independence Indian English drama is the fusion of myth with modern existential philosophy. Playwrights were influenced by global modernist movements that emphasized individual alienation, absurdity, and moral ambiguity. By reinterpreting mythic narratives through an existential lens, they created plays that were simultaneously traditional and modern.

Myth provided archetypal situations—conflict between duty and desire, fate and free will, illusion and reality—that could be reimagined to reflect the psychological turmoil of modern individuals. Characters drawn from myth were endowed with human vulnerabilities, doubts, and contradictions, making them relatable to contemporary audiences. This existential reinterpretation of myth also challenged rigid moral binaries. Instead of presenting mythic heroes as flawless, dramatists portrayed them as complex individuals grappling with ethical

dilemmas. This humanization of mythological figures reflected the broader shift from collective moral certainties to individual moral questioning in post-independence India.

Dramaturgical Techniques in Mythic Adaptation

The use of myth in post-independence drama was not limited to thematic borrowing; it also involved innovative dramaturgical techniques. Playwrights experimented with non-linear narrative structures, symbolic staging, and integration of folk performance traditions. These techniques enhanced the mythic atmosphere while allowing for modern theatrical expression. For instance, the incorporation of chorus, masks, and ritualistic elements created a sense of timelessness, blurring the boundaries between past and present. Simultaneously, modern dialogue and psychological realism grounded the mythic narrative in contemporary experience. This synthesis of traditional and modern theatrical devices resulted in a unique dramatic idiom characteristic of post-independence Indian English theatre.

Gender Perspectives and Re-Reading of Myth

Another important dimension of mythic reinterpretation during this period was the re-examination of gender roles. Traditional myths often portrayed women within restrictive frameworks of sacrifice and obedience. Post-independence dramatists began to question these portrayals, presenting female characters with greater psychological depth and agency. By revisiting mythological narratives from a modern perspective, playwrights highlighted the silenced voices and suppressed desires of women characters. This feminist re-reading of myth contributed to a broader critique of patriarchal norms in Indian society. Myth thus became a site of ideological contestation, where inherited cultural values were interrogated and redefined.

Myth as a Bridge between Tradition and Modernity

One of the most significant contributions of post-independence Indian English drama is its ability to harmonize tradition with modernity through myth. Rather than rejecting tradition outright or embracing modernity uncritically, dramatists used myth to mediate between the two. Myth provided a framework through which contemporary issues could be examined without severing ties with cultural heritage.

This synthesis is evident in the thematic concerns of the plays, which often juxtapose ancient ethical dilemmas with modern socio-political realities. By doing so, playwrights demonstrated that the moral and philosophical questions embedded in myths remained relevant in the modern world. Myth thus functioned as a timeless lens through which the changing contours of Indian society could be understood.

Conclusion

The period from 1947 to the 1970s represents a formative phase in the evolution of Indian English drama, characterized by an innovative and purposeful engagement with myth. Far from being a nostalgic retreat into the past, the use of myth during this era served as a dynamic strategy for cultural reconstruction, social critique, and philosophical exploration. Playwrights such as Girish Karnad and others reinterpreted mythological narratives to address the anxieties of a newly independent nation grappling with issues of identity, morality, and political disillusionment. Myth in post-independence Indian English drama functioned on multiple

levels: it provided cultural continuity, enabled allegorical critique of contemporary realities, and facilitated the exploration of existential and psychological dilemmas. Through creative adaptation and reinterpretation, dramatists transformed myth into a living, evolving medium capable of reflecting the complexities of modern Indian life. The use of myth during this period underscores the enduring relevance of traditional narratives in shaping modern literary expression. By bridging the gap between past and present, myth allowed post-independence dramatists to construct a distinctly Indian dramatic idiom that was both rooted in cultural heritage and responsive to contemporary concerns. The legacy of this mythic reimagining continues to influence Indian theatre, reaffirming the power of myth as a timeless and transformative force in literature.

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