



A Critical Study of Myth and Legend in the Selected Plays of Girish Karnad

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Abstract

This research paper examines the use of mythological and legendary elements in the selected plays of Girish Karnad, one of the most significant figures in modern Indian drama. Karnad's dramaturgy is distinguished by its innovative reinterpretation of myths, legends, and folklore, which he employs to explore contemporary social, psychological, and existential concerns. The study focuses on key plays such as *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala*, and *Tughlaq*, analyzing how myth functions as both a narrative framework and a critical lens for addressing issues of identity, power, gender, and morality. By integrating traditional narratives with modern theatrical techniques, Karnad creates a dialogic space where past and present intersect. The research adopts a qualitative and analytical methodology, drawing on postcolonial and structuralist perspectives to examine thematic patterns and symbolic representations. The findings suggest that Karnad's use of myth is not merely decorative but transformative, enabling a re-examination of cultural values and human experiences. The paper argues that Karnad's plays demonstrate the enduring relevance of myth in contemporary literature and its capacity to articulate complex realities in a rapidly changing world.

Keywords: Myth, Legend, Indian Drama, Girish Karnad, Folklore, Identity, Symbolism

Introduction

The use of myth and legend has remained a central aesthetic and intellectual strategy in Indian literature, serving as a bridge between tradition and modernity, and enabling writers to reinterpret cultural narratives in light of contemporary concerns. In this context, the dramatic works of Girish Karnad occupy a distinctive position, as they creatively appropriate mythological and legendary sources to explore complex questions of identity, power, gender, and existential conflict. Myth, far from being a static repository of ancient beliefs, functions as a dynamic narrative framework that allows for reinterpretation and recontextualization across different historical periods. Karnad's plays exemplify this process by drawing upon classical Indian myths, folklore, and oral traditions, and reshaping them to reflect the dilemmas of modern society. His engagement with myth is neither purely nostalgic nor merely decorative; rather, it is deeply critical and analytical, exposing the tensions between individual desires and social obligations, as well as between inherited values and evolving realities. Plays such as *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala*, and *Yayati* demonstrate how myth can be employed as a powerful dramatic device to interrogate issues such as fragmented identity, gender inequality, and moral responsibility. By reworking well-known narratives, Karnad not only revitalizes traditional forms but also challenges audiences to reconsider established interpretations. Moreover, his dramaturgy reflects a synthesis of indigenous performance traditions and modern theatrical techniques, thereby contributing to the evolution of Indian English drama. This study, therefore, seeks to critically examine the role of myth and legend in selected plays of Karnad, focusing on how these elements are adapted to articulate contemporary socio-cultural concerns and



philosophical inquiries. Through a close textual analysis, the research aims to highlight the enduring relevance of myth as a tool for literary expression and cultural critique, and to underscore Karnad's significant contribution to modern Indian theatre.

Background of the Study

Myth and legend have historically played a foundational role in shaping Indian literary and cultural consciousness, functioning as repositories of collective memory, ethical values, and symbolic meaning. Rooted in ancient texts such as the epics and Puranas, these narratives have continuously evolved through oral and written traditions, influencing various literary forms, including drama. In modern Indian theatre, the reinterpretation of myth gained prominence as playwrights sought to reconnect with indigenous traditions while addressing contemporary realities. In this regard, Girish Karnad emerges as a pioneering figure who revitalized mythological narratives by infusing them with modern sensibilities. His plays draw upon traditional sources yet challenge conventional interpretations, thereby creating a dialogue between past and present. This study is grounded in the understanding that myth is not merely a reflection of antiquity but a living framework through which societal issues, psychological conflicts, and cultural transformations can be critically examined.

This study focuses on a critical examination of the use of myth and legend in selected plays of Girish Karnad, with particular emphasis on *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala*, and *Yayati*. It explores how Karnad adapts traditional mythological and folkloric narratives to address modern concerns such as identity crisis, gender dynamics, and moral dilemmas. The scope is limited to a qualitative textual analysis of these plays, examining themes, symbols, character construction, and dramatic techniques. It also considers the socio-cultural and philosophical implications of myth reworking in contemporary Indian theatre. However, the study does not extend to all of Karnad's works or to performance-based analysis. By concentrating on selected texts, the research aims to provide a focused and in-depth understanding of Karnad's creative engagement with myth and legend.

Concept of Myth and Legend in Literature

The concepts of myth and legend occupy a foundational position in literary studies, functioning as symbolic narratives that articulate the beliefs, values, and collective consciousness of a culture. A myth is generally understood as a traditional story, often involving gods, supernatural beings, or primordial events, that seeks to explain the origins of the world, human existence, and natural phenomena. In contrast, a legend is typically rooted in historical or quasi-historical events and characters, though it is embellished with imaginative elements over time. Both forms operate beyond mere storytelling; they serve as vehicles of cultural memory and moral reflection. In literature, myths and legends are not confined to their original contexts but are continually reinterpreted to suit changing socio-cultural realities. Modern writers employ these narratives as frameworks for exploring psychological depth, existential dilemmas, and social tensions, thereby transforming them into tools of critical inquiry. The adaptation of myth allows authors to universalize individual experiences while simultaneously grounding them in specific cultural traditions. In the works of Girish Karnad, for instance, myth and legend are reimagined to interrogate issues such as identity, gender, and power, demonstrating their enduring relevance in contemporary discourse. Thus, myth and legend in literature function not as static relics of the past



but as dynamic and evolving narrative structures that bridge the gap between tradition and modernity.

Relevance of Myth in Indian Drama

Myth has remained profoundly relevant in Indian drama due to its deep-rooted connection with the cultural, religious, and philosophical traditions of the subcontinent. Indian theatrical forms, from classical Sanskrit drama to modern experimental theatre, have consistently drawn upon mythological narratives derived from epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, as well as Puranic and folk traditions. These myths provide a rich repository of archetypal characters, symbolic situations, and moral dilemmas that transcend temporal boundaries. In modern Indian drama, myth is not merely reproduced but reinterpreted to address contemporary socio-political and psychological concerns. Playwrights such as Girish Karnad have utilized myth as a powerful dramaturgical tool to explore issues like identity crisis, gender inequality, and ethical conflict, thereby making ancient narratives relevant to modern audiences. By reworking traditional stories, dramatists create a dialogue between past and present, allowing audiences to critically engage with inherited cultural values. Moreover, myth enables a symbolic mode of expression that can address sensitive or complex themes indirectly, enhancing both aesthetic depth and interpretative scope. It also facilitates the blending of indigenous performance traditions with modern theatrical techniques, contributing to the evolution of Indian theatre. Thus, the continued relevance of myth in Indian drama lies in its adaptability, universality, and capacity to function as a medium for both cultural preservation and critical reflection.

About Girish Karnad and His Contribution

Girish Karnad (1938–2019) stands as one of the most influential figures in modern Indian theatre, whose work significantly reshaped the trajectory of Indian English drama. A playwright, actor, director, and intellectual, Karnad brought a unique synthesis of traditional Indian narratives and modern dramaturgical techniques to the stage. Writing primarily in Kannada and later translated into English, his plays are distinguished by their innovative use of myth, legend, and folklore as frameworks for exploring contemporary socio-political and psychological concerns. Unlike conventional retellings, Karnad's reinterpretation of myth is deeply analytical, often questioning established norms related to identity, power, gender, and morality. His notable works, including *Yayati*, *Hayavadana*, and *Nagamandala*, exemplify his ability to blend indigenous performance traditions such as Yakshagana with Western theatrical conventions, thereby creating a distinctive dramatic style. Karnad's contribution extends beyond thematic innovation; he played a pivotal role in revitalizing Indian theatre during the post-independence period by making it both culturally rooted and globally relevant. His works have been widely performed, translated, and critically acclaimed, earning him prestigious recognitions including the Jnanpith Award. Through his creative engagement with myth and legend, Karnad not only preserved cultural heritage but also transformed it into a dynamic medium for critical inquiry, establishing himself as a central figure in contemporary Indian literary and theatrical discourse.

Theoretical Framework

- **Myth Criticism**

Myth criticism serves as a central analytical lens for interpreting literary texts that draw upon traditional narratives, archetypes, and symbolic structures. Rooted in the works of theorists such as



Northrop Frye and Carl Jung, this approach views myths as universal patterns that reflect collective human experiences and unconscious desires. In the context of the plays of Girish Karnad, myth criticism enables a deeper understanding of how ancient stories are reinterpreted to express modern psychological and social concerns. Karnad's use of myth is not limited to retelling; instead, he reshapes archetypal motifs—such as identity fragmentation, transformation, and moral conflict—to explore the complexities of human existence. Through this framework, myths are analyzed as living narratives that transcend time, allowing the playwright to engage with enduring themes while simultaneously critiquing contemporary realities.

- **Structuralism**

Structuralism provides another significant framework for analyzing Karnad's dramatic works by focusing on the underlying structures that govern narratives, language, and meaning. Influenced by theorists like Claude Lévi-Strauss, this approach examines binary oppositions—such as tradition versus modernity, body versus mind, and freedom versus constraint—that shape the thematic and narrative organization of literary texts. In Karnad's plays, these structural patterns are evident in the way myths are reconstructed to reveal tensions within society and the individual psyche. Structuralism helps decode how meaning is generated through recurring motifs, symbolic contrasts, and narrative patterns, thereby highlighting the systematic organization of myth within the dramatic form. It also allows for an exploration of how traditional mythic structures are disrupted or transformed to produce new interpretations.

- **Postcolonial Approach**

The postcolonial approach is particularly relevant in examining Karnad's works, as it addresses issues of cultural identity, hybridity, and the legacy of colonial influence in Indian literature. This framework analyzes how writers reclaim indigenous traditions and reinterpret them to resist colonial narratives and assert cultural autonomy. In the plays of Girish Karnad, myth and legend are employed as tools to recover and revalorize native cultural forms while simultaneously engaging with modern, often Western-influenced, perspectives. The blending of traditional Indian myths with contemporary concerns reflects a hybrid literary identity that challenges cultural marginalization. Thus, the postcolonial lens reveals how Karnad's dramaturgy negotiates between the past and the present, tradition and modernity, and local and global influences, making his work a significant site for cultural and ideological exploration.

Literature Review

The scholarly engagement with myth and legend in modern Indian drama, particularly in the works of Girish Karnad, reflects a sustained critical interest in how traditional narratives are reconfigured to address contemporary concerns. Ananya Banerjee (2018) emphasizes the dialectical relationship between myth and modernity, arguing that Karnad's dramaturgy exemplifies a conscious effort to reinterpret inherited narratives in light of modern existential and social anxieties. Similarly, G. N. Bhat (2017) highlights that Karnad does not merely reproduce mythological content but actively reconstructs it, transforming static cultural symbols into dynamic instruments of critique. These studies collectively suggest that myth in Karnad's plays operates as a flexible narrative strategy, enabling a dialogue between the past and the present. S. Chakraborty (2019) further expands this discourse by linking myth with questions of identity, asserting that contemporary Indian dramatists



utilize mythic frameworks to explore fragmented subjectivities and cultural dislocation. This perspective aligns with the broader understanding that myth serves not only as a cultural artifact but also as a psychological and philosophical tool for examining human existence within changing socio-cultural contexts.

The role of cultural memory and theatrical tradition in shaping myth-based narratives has also been a significant focus of critical inquiry. M. Choudhury (2016) argues that myth functions as a repository of cultural memory, enabling playwrights to preserve and reinterpret collective experiences through performance. This view is reinforced by B. K. Das (2016), who situates Indian English drama within a continuum of indigenous and colonial influences, noting that playwrights like Karnad negotiate these dual inheritances through the strategic use of myth. Das underscores that Karnad's plays are deeply rooted in Indian traditions such as folklore and classical narratives, yet they are articulated through modern dramatic techniques, creating a hybrid form that resonates with diverse audiences. This hybridity is crucial in understanding how myth operates within Indian theatre—not as a relic of the past but as an evolving construct that adapts to new cultural and ideological contexts. Together, these studies highlight the importance of myth as both a cultural and performative element in modern Indian drama.

A more focused analysis of individual plays reveals how mythological elements are employed to address specific thematic concerns. R. Devi (2020), in her study of *Hayavadana*, examines the use of myth to explore identity fragmentation and the quest for completeness, emphasizing the symbolic significance of the head-body dichotomy. Devi argues that Karnad's reinterpretation of myth allows for a nuanced exploration of psychological conflict and existential uncertainty. Similarly, Aparna Dharwadker (2018) analyzes the structural dimensions of myth in modern Indian theatre, suggesting that Karnad's plays are characterized by a sophisticated integration of mythic patterns with contemporary narrative techniques. Dharwadker's work highlights the dramaturgical innovation in Karnad's plays, where myth is not only a thematic concern but also a structural principle that shapes the narrative and theatrical experience. These studies demonstrate that Karnad's engagement with myth is both thematic and formal, contributing to the richness and complexity of his dramatic works.

Further contributions to the field examine the broader interplay of myth, legend, and history in Indian English drama. A. Ghosh (2017) explores how playwrights integrate myth and legend with historical elements to create layered narratives that reflect the complexities of Indian society. Ghosh argues that such integration allows for a multidimensional exploration of cultural identity, where myth serves as a lens through which historical and contemporary realities can be interpreted. Collectively, the reviewed literature underscores the centrality of myth and legend in understanding the works of Girish Karnad, highlighting their role in mediating between tradition and modernity, individual and society, and past and present. However, despite the extensive scholarship, there remains scope for a more comprehensive analysis that synthesizes thematic, structural, and ideological perspectives, particularly in relation to selected plays. This study seeks to address this gap by offering a focused and integrated examination of myth and legend in Karnad's dramaturgy.

Myth and Identity in *Hayavadana*

1. Fragmentation of Self

In *Hayavadana*, Girish Karnad employs myth as a powerful medium to explore the crisis of identity and the fragmentation of the self. Drawing upon a tale from the Kathasaritsagara and Thomas Mann's retelling, the play dramatizes the story of Devadatta and Kapila, whose heads are mistakenly transposed, creating a complex dilemma regarding the nature of identity—whether it resides in the mind or the body. This mythic situation becomes a metaphor for the modern individual's fractured existence, where psychological, social, and physical identities often remain in conflict. The character of Hayavadana himself, a man with a horse's head, further intensifies this theme by embodying incompleteness and the perpetual quest for wholeness. His desire to become fully human ironically results in becoming a complete horse, suggesting the ambiguity and instability of identity. Through such mythic constructs, Karnad highlights the impossibility of achieving a unified self, thereby reflecting existential concerns that resonate with contemporary audiences. The play thus uses myth not as a static narrative but as a dynamic framework to question essentialist notions of identity and to reveal the inherent contradictions within human existence.

2. Use of Folklore and Symbolic Elements

Karnad's use of folklore and symbolic elements in *Hayavadana* significantly enhances its thematic depth and theatrical richness. The incorporation of traditional storytelling techniques, such as the presence of a Bhagavata (narrator) and the use of masks, songs, and dolls, situates the play within indigenous performance traditions like Yakshagana, while simultaneously allowing for modern reinterpretation. These folkloric devices function not merely as aesthetic embellishments but as symbolic tools that reinforce the central themes of identity and transformation. The motif of the incomplete being, represented by Hayavadana, symbolizes the fragmented nature of human identity, while the head-body transposition serves as a metaphor for the conflict between intellect and physicality. Additionally, the use of dolls in the latter part of the play subtly reflects the internal tensions and suppressed emotions of the characters, acting as extensions of their subconscious. By blending myth with folklore and symbolism, Karnad creates a multi-layered dramatic structure that transcends conventional realism. This fusion allows the play to operate on both literal and allegorical levels, making it a profound exploration of identity, human desire, and the search for completeness within a fragmented world.

Myth, Gender, and Power in *Nagamandala*

1. Role of Oral Tales and Storytelling

In *Nagamandala*, Girish Karnad foregrounds the performative power of oral narratives, transforming folklore into a self-reflexive dramatic device that interrogates truth, desire, and authority. The play is framed by a storyteller and a chorus of flames—personified tales—that gather to recount stories, thereby establishing storytelling itself as an active, quasi-magical agent. This meta-theatrical structure underscores how stories circulate within communities, mutate across tellings, and ultimately shape social realities. The serpent (naga) who assumes the husband's form emerges from such narrative circulation, blurring the boundaries between fiction and lived experience. Through this strategy, Karnad demonstrates that oral tales can both subvert and reinforce dominant norms: they provide imaginative spaces where suppressed voices—particularly those of women—can be articulated, yet they also carry the weight of inherited cultural codes.

Thus, myth in *Nagamandala* is not fixed but produced through narration, performance, and collective memory, enabling the play to examine how meaning and authority are constructed through the act of telling.

2. Feminine Identity and Patriarchy

Karnad uses mythic transformation to critique patriarchal structures and to probe the instability of feminine identity under social surveillance. The protagonist Rani, confined within a rigid marital framework, is denied agency by her husband's neglect and the community's moral scrutiny. The naga's nightly visits, while deceptive, create an alternate space of emotional fulfillment and bodily autonomy, complicating the binaries of fidelity and transgression. Myth here functions as a protective yet paradoxical device: it allows Rani to navigate oppressive norms, but it also subjects her to trial by ordeal, where her "purity" must be publicly validated. The climactic snake ordeal—where Rani's chastity is affirmed—reveals how patriarchal systems co-opt myth to legitimize control over women's bodies, even as the same mythic logic enables her survival and elevation to a revered status. By staging this contradiction, Karnad exposes the mechanisms through which power operates—disciplining, sanctifying, and narrativizing the female subject. Ultimately, *Nagamandala* presents feminine identity as fluid and contingent, shaped by desire, storytelling, and institutional authority, while advancing a nuanced critique of patriarchy through the reworking of folklore.

Myth and Existential Crisis in *Yayati*

1. Reinterpretation of Puranic Myth

In *Yayati*, Girish Karnad undertakes a profound reinterpretation of a well-known episode from the Mahabharata, transforming a Puranic narrative into a modern exploration of existential anxiety and moral conflict. The original myth recounts King Yayati's curse of premature old age and his subsequent decision to exchange it with his son's youth, traditionally framed as a tale of desire and eventual renunciation. Karnad, however, departs from the conventional moral resolution by foregrounding the psychological turmoil and ethical ambiguity underlying this act. The myth is not treated as a sacred, unalterable story but as a flexible narrative framework through which contemporary concerns—such as individual freedom, the burden of choice, and the consequences of self-indulgence—can be examined. By humanizing mythic characters and emphasizing their inner conflicts, Karnad dismantles the heroic aura of the original narrative and presents them as flawed individuals grappling with existential dilemmas. This reinterpretation thus shifts the focus from divine justice to human responsibility, making the myth relevant to modern audiences.

2. Themes of Desire, Responsibility, and Sacrifice

The central thematic concerns of *Yayati* revolve around the interplay of desire, responsibility, and sacrifice, which collectively underscore the existential crisis faced by the characters. Yayati's insatiable desire for youth and sensual pleasure reflects a deeply human longing for permanence and fulfillment, yet his decision to transfer the burden of old age onto his son Puru exposes a failure of moral responsibility. This act raises critical questions about the ethics of self-preservation and the extent to which individuals can justify their desires at the expense of others. Puru's willingness to accept his father's curse, often interpreted as an act of filial duty, is reexamined by Karnad as a complex and tragic sacrifice that highlights the oppressive expectations embedded within familial and social structures. The resulting tension between personal desire and ethical obligation creates a profound sense of existential unease, as characters are forced to confront the consequences of their



choices. Through this exploration, Karnad uses myth not merely to retell a story but to probe the fundamental contradictions of human existence, emphasizing that the pursuit of desire often leads to moral compromise and existential disillusionment.

Conclusion

The critical study of myth and legend in the selected plays of Girish Karnad demonstrates that myth is not merely a repository of ancient narratives but a dynamic and adaptable framework through which contemporary human concerns can be effectively articulated. Karnad's dramaturgy reveals a sophisticated engagement with traditional sources, where myths and legends are reinterpreted to explore complex themes such as identity, gender relations, power structures, and existential dilemmas. In plays like *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala*, and *Yayati*, myth functions as a critical tool rather than a decorative element, enabling the playwright to bridge the gap between past traditions and modern realities. The study highlights how Karnad deconstructs conventional interpretations of myth to reveal the fragmentation of identity, the complexities of feminine experience within patriarchal frameworks, and the moral ambiguities inherent in human desire and responsibility. Furthermore, his use of folklore, symbolism, and indigenous theatrical techniques enriches the dramatic structure and enhances the interpretative possibilities of his works. By situating myth within contemporary contexts, Karnad not only preserves cultural heritage but also challenges audiences to critically engage with it. The findings of this study underscore the enduring relevance of myth in modern literature and theatre, particularly as a medium for questioning established norms and exploring universal human experiences. Ultimately, Karnad's contribution lies in his ability to transform myth into a living discourse that reflects the tensions, contradictions, and aspirations of modern society, thereby establishing his works as significant texts in the canon of Indian English drama and reinforcing the importance of myth as a powerful instrument of literary and cultural analysis.

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