



Retelling and Reinterpretation of Myth and Folklore in Karnad's *Yayati* and *Hayavadana*

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Abstract

Girish Karnad is one of India's leading playwrights who reshaped the Indian theatre as a national institution in the last quarter of the twentieth century. He was born on May 19, 1938 in Matheran in Maharashtra. He is known to be a great poet, playwright, actor, translator, critic, ambassador of culture, television actor and artist, and the director of films and plays. He is a writer of national and international fame. He has written eleven plays, two monologues, nine feature films, three documentaries, three tele serials, one radio play and several articles and lectures to his credit. He is the winner of several articles and lectures to his credit. He is the winner of several national and international awards and honours including the Padma Bhusan, Sahitya Akademi, and India's highest literary award- the Bhartiya Jnanpith. Majority of his plays are based on myth, history and folklore. With their nativistic roots, the plays focus on tradition and modernity with a flood of light on contemporary life and reality. His significant plays include- '*Yayati*', '*Hayavadana*', '*Nagamandala*', '*The Fire and the Rain*', '*Tughlaq*', '*Tale Danda*' and '*The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*' etc. In his plays, Karnad deals with the treatment of myth, history and folklore in the contemporary context. His plays deal with the retelling and reinterpretation of ancient myth and folklore in the modern context. This research article is based on the retelling of myth and folklore in two of Karnad's major plays- '*Yayati*' and '*Hayavadana*'.

Keywords: Myth, Folklore, Retelling, Reinterpretation, Karnad, Contemporary

Introduction: Girish Karnad is one of the greatest Kannada playwrights of national and international fame. He exploits myth, history and folklore and brings out the play's relevance to the contemporary times. In Karnad plays, classical and folk elements seem to happily merge with each other. His plays are remarkable for their thematic treatment, plot construction and characterization. Karnad rarely confronts reality face to face in his major plays. Rather, he prefers to create its illusion through myth, history and folklore. The relevance of his plays is, therefore out of question- they are so obliquely, and so markedly, contemporaneous. The playwright seems to rely solely on the use of myth, history and folklore for his themes and dramatic techniques. To Karnad, playwriting is a "maturing process" ripening not only physically but emotionally also, as if it were "a rite of passage". (Wadikar vi)

We have short, intermittent, passing glimpses of the classical and the folk theatres in the modernity of Karnad plays. The playwright succeeds in establishing a connectivity between the past and the present, by looking at the present as an extension of, and not an escape from, the past, by discovering the relevance of the past to the present times. As a new playwright, Contemporaneity is the greatest source of Karnad's strength. In his realistic presentation of theme, plot and characterization, Karnad stands apart from the rest of the dramatists in India. Thus, the new drama, according to Karnad, is characterized by truth and objectivity. This research article is to analyze and examine the reinterpretation and retelling of myth and folklore in Karnad's famous plays- '*Yayati*' and '*Hayavadana*'.

Karnad's play *Yayati* deals with the theme of responsibility and self realization. In *Yayati*, Karnad reinterprets an ancient Indian myth from the modernist and post-modernist point of view. The play focuses on man's "existential angst" along with his struggle for existence. *Yayati* is an autobiographical play as it reflects the playwrights anxieties, his resentment with all those who seemed to demand, in sheer love of him, the sacrifice of his future.

His play *Hayavadana* is an existential play dealing with the theme of incompleteness and imperfection. It represents man's tragically futile aspiration for perfection through the dramatic version of a folktale. It is a Brechtian kind of play employing native folk theatre strategies to present the mysterious aspects of love and sex with a lot of doubtfulness and suspense.

Girish Karnad delves deeply into his traditional Indian myths to spell out modern man's predicament, anguish, and dilemma. Karnad's plays are a critique of myth, history and folklore and tradition: they are marked by contemporaneity and modernity. Using myths and folklore, Karnad throws light on the reality of life with all its elemental passions and conflicts and man's eternal struggle to achieve perfection. Karnad's plays may be said to have bridged the gulf between the traditional and the modern Indian theatre. His plays display their author's social concern and commitment. Karnad's plays dwell upon the presentation of the problems pertaining to social inequality, anguish and disillusionment in modern life, and the place of the individual in society instead of providing an escapist way reflected in their amusing scenes and situations, they dwell upon the presentation of the problems pertaining to social inequality, anguish and disillusionment in modern life, and the problem of the individual in society.

One can perceive existential and absurd strains in Karnad's plays. In his plays, the characters in his plays are themselves responsible for shaping their existence and carving out their destinies. *Yayati*, his first play, strikes a note of angst and responsibility. King Yayati succeeds in transferring his old age as well as his sins to his younger son Pooru to fulfil his ambition. However, he experiences shattering disillusionment and loss of faith which lead him towards alienation. It is this sense of responsibility that renders him restless and makes him feel dejected. Girish Karnad says:

"I was excited by the story of Yayati. This exchange of ages between the father and the son which seemed to me terribly modern. At the same time, I was reading a lot of Sartre and the existentialists. This consistent harping of responsibility which the existentialist indulges in, suddenly seemed to link up with the story of Yayati." (Wadikar 195).

In Karnad plays, we find a perfect blending of eastern and western dramaturgy, classical and folk theatre conventions. Karnad creates a rich and vibrant drama rooted deeply in tradition but with a resonant contemporary voice. His theatre is manifested in three independent forms or traditions- the Sanskrit, the Folk and the Modern. It has a distinctive unity behind its rich diversity. It is outstandingly remarkable for its rich variety and complexity. His plays can be studied pre eminently as modern with an awareness of the classical and folk elements interspersed in them.

As a great individualist, Karnad presents the problem of an individual versus society. He stands for individual freedom. He is known to be the pioneer of new drama having pinned his faith in the related values. Karnad's plays put forth several questions without providing any answers to them. Karnad presents modern man predicament, his challenges, his difficulties and ramifications in his plays. In his plays, the life around is projected as it is objectively and dispassionately. Moreover, the dramatist makes no effort to moralize or philosophize it. This research article aims at analyzing the retelling and reinterpretation of myth and folklore in Karnad's plays *Yayati* and *Hayavadana*.

Myth is a certain type of story in which some of the chief characters are gods or other beings larger in power than humanity. Very seldom it is located in history: its action takes place in a world above or prior to ordinary time. Like the folktale, it has an abstract story pattern. "The characters can do what they like, which means what the storyteller likes: there is no need to be plausible or logical in motivation. The things that happen in myth are things that happen only in stories; they are in a self contained literary world." (Frye 164)

To *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, the term myth is a traditional or legendary story, usually concerned with deities or demi-gods and the creation of the world and its inhabitants. *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* defines myth as a kind of story handed down from olden times, especially concepts or beliefs about the early history of a race, explanations of natural events, such as the seasons.

Myth is not a blatant tale of some fictitious character belonging to fictitious past. However, it can be memory of the past, told in fictitious way. The term 'myth' has originated from greek term *mythos*. It has passed through various stages of explanation and interpretation. To Bronislaw Malinowski, "myth is a narrative resurrection of primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, assertions, even practical requirements." (Malinowski 78-79)

In classical Greek, "Mythos" signified any story or plot, whether true or false. A myth is a story in mythology – a system of hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do which had an etiological purpose and to establish the rationale for social customs and observances and the sanctions for the rules by which men conduct their lives.

Distinguishing between myth and folktale, M. H. Abrams puts, "If the protagonist is a man rather than a supernatural being, the story is usually not called myth but legend: if the story concerns supernatural beings, but is not part of a systematic mythology, it is usually classified as a folktale." Myth, being a traditional story of unknown origin handed down from earliest times, has close resemblance to legend. "Although the words frequently are used interchangeably, a myth properly deals with gods and a legend with men. Myths and legends are types of folklore."

Myth is considered to be a very important phenomenon in world literature. It is a historical fact that drama in its early stages of development depended upon myths. The myths provided the 'fables'- a complex of action and character-which assumed the shape of drama. Writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Girish Karnad and Badal Sircar are among those Indian English dramatists who have made a frequent use of Indian as well as foreign myths in their writing, particularly in plays. *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* are the primary sources of myths upon which these playwrights draw time and again.

To sum up, myth is a kind of story whose characters are gods or other beings larger in power and potential than human beings. They are infact the stories of uncertain origin or authorship. A myth is basically meant to communicate thought about subtle paradoxes of experience. Myth is a traditional or legendary story handed down from older times, especially concepts about the early history of a race or explanations of natural events. Myths, in a way, portray a culture, its abiding values, mores and philosophy and act as means of their transmission across generations.

Folklorism with its specific language represents in literature the ideas and ideologies of the common people of society. It basically represents the philosophy of Bhasa (the common language of the people) instead of the classical language (Sanskrit). Even the writings of Kabir, Mira, Nanak, Tulsi and other poets of Bhakti cult have used Bhasa in their writings. Their writings with the universal signs of literature represent the common man and the common ideas of society. Folk tale as a monolithic entity deals with the monogenesis of the specific community that involves in the dialogic nature of the speech acts.

Girish Karnad retells and reinterprets ancient myth, legend, history and folklore in his plays. Karnad as a dramatist derives the sources for his dramatic art from the myths, legends, folk motifs and from some burning issues of our contemporary society. Girish Karnad derives the resources of the myths, and folkloristic devices from the epics of India. He also works out the ideologies of the Vedic culture and the principles of *Natyasastra* in some of his plays.

Karnad makes an extensive use of myths and folktales to frame plot in his plays. In his plays, he borrows from the great epics like *The Mahabharata*, *The Ramayana* and *Kathasaritasagara*- but he skillfully explores into them the human psychology and the relationship that exists between them. He gives a new dimension to these old stories by turning them into fine plays.

Karnad's first play *Yayati* (1961) is based on the Adi parva of the *Mahabharata*. In his play *Yayati*, Karnad retells and reinterprets the story of the mythological king who in his pursuit for eternal youth trades the vitality of his own son. He has borrowed the myth from the section Adi parva of the great epic the *Mahabharata*. The condensed form of the story of *Yayati* as found in the original in the *Mahabharata*. In his plays, Karnad has given a new meaning and significance highly relevant in the context of life even today.

The symbolic theme of *Yayati*'s attachment to life and its pleasure as also his final renunciation are retained. Karnad's originality lies in working out the motives behind *Yayati*'s ultimate choice. In the great epic, the *Mahabharata*, *Yayati* recognizes the nature of desire and realizes that fulfillment does not diminish or finish desire. However, in the play *Yayati*, "*Yayati* recognizes the dreadfulness and horror of his own life and assumes his moral responsibility after a series of encounter." (Dodiya 104-13)

In his first play *Yayati*, Karnad interprets the ancient myth of the *Mahabharata* in the modern context. He also suggests that modern man suffers because he often seeks his identity in sensual pleasures. He shuns his responsibility towards women. He forgets that life without values and responsibility is quite meaningless.

In *Yayati*, Karnad reinterprets the ancient myth of the *Mahabharata* in the contemporary context. He expresses modern man suffers too as he often seeks his identity in sensual pleasures. He shuns his responsibility towards women. He even forgets that life without values and responsibility is quite meaningless. Karnad reinterprets the ancient myth of *Yayati* in a new light. Karnad, just like existentialists thinkers Sartre and Camus helped in molding a new shape and significance to this play.

His existentialist play *Yayati* explores the complexities of responsibility and expectations within the Indian family. Karnad introduced the character of Chitralekha, Pooru's wife which was absent in the original. Karnad has given a new twist in terms of responsibility. In this play, Karnad explores that modern women have broken the traditional norms set up by the patriarchal society. They are now realizing the responsible behavior of men towards them as natural and just.

Girish Karnad reinterprets ancient Indian folklore, in his play, *Hayavadana* (1970). Karnad has borrowed the plot from a collection of ancient tales in Sanskrit called *Kathasaritasagara*. Later on, he developed it further from Thomas Mann's (1875-1955) translation of the story, *The Transposed Heads* (1940). Karnad states- "The play is based on a story from a collection of tales called the *Kathasaritasagara* and the further development of this story by Thomas Mann in *The Transposed Heads*."

Karnad's *Hayavadana* presents a comprehensive picture of human beings in search of completeness and perfection. Karnad treats the theme of incompleteness and imperfection in a very appealing way in this play. It is women who act as the deciding force in the plot as well as the sub plot of *Hayavadana*. *Hayavadana* is a play based on ancient Sanskrit collection of stories and poses the problem of search of identity in a web of tangled relationships. It also endeavours to reveal to the audience the thought processes and inner psyche of the protagonist of the play-Padmini.

In his plays, *Yayati* and *Hayavadana*, Karnad deals with traditional puranic themes. He has given a fresh interpretation to these themes in his plays. Karnad's plays have pioneered a style which unites the elements of traditional Indian theatre, such as 'Yakshagana'. We also see strikingly modern sensibility for contemporary socio-political realities. In *Yayati*, Karnad has borrowed the myth from the *Mahabharata* and other puranas. Karnad retells and reinterprets the age-old story of the mythological king who is in longing of eternal youth. Therefore, he sought to borrow the vitality of his own son.

Girish Karnad, in his plays, gives the traditional tale a new meaning and significance highly relevant in the context of life even today. In the play *Yayati*, the symbolic theme of *Yayati*'s attachment to life and its pleasures as his final renunciation are retained. The originality of Karnad lies in working out the motivations behind *Yayati*'s ultimate choice.

Yayati can be said to be a self consciously existentialist drama based on the theme on responsibility and self realization. The theme of the play *Yayati* is based on the Mahabharata. In the play, Puru is an obedient son who accepts his father's old age as a great sacrifice indeed. Yayati wanted someone else in his kingdom to accept his old age in exchange for money, land and kingdom. No one is prepared for the sacrifice, so Puru accepts it with a sense of respect to his father. At the end of the play, Yayati takes back the old age from his son. Also, Puru has to witness the death of his wife.

Hayavadana is based on *Kathasaritasagara*, an ancient Sanskrit collection of stories. He has borrowed it from Thomas Mann's retelling of "*The Transposed Heads*". In Mann's version, the Sanskrit tale told by a ghost to an adventurous king gains further mock heroic dimensions. Karnad's play *Hayavadana* poses a different problem that is quest of human identity in a world of tangled relationships. The play opens with two close friends- Devadatta and Kapila. They are- One mind, one heart, as the Bhagvata describes them.

Karnad depicts the mythological legend in a very interesting and humourous manner in this play. At the end of the play, Karnad describes the horse man searching for completeness in a very comic vein. Finally, Hayavadana becomes a complete horse. The main plot of the play is equally interesting. The result is confusion of identities which reveals the ambiguous nature of human responsibility. Karnad has the genius and power to transform any situation into an aesthetic experience. In the play, Karnad has rendered the story of completeness and search of identity in a web of tangled relationship. What Karnad wants to convey in this play is the world is full of incomplete individuals and also is indifferent to the desires and frustration, joys and sorrows of human beings.

Conclusion: Girish Karnad delves deeply into his traditional Indian myths to spell out modern man's predicament, anguish, and dilemma. Karnad's plays are a critique of myth, history and folklore and tradition: they are marked by contemporaneity and modernity. Using myths and folklore, Karnad throws light on the reality of life with all its elemental passions and conflicts and man's eternal struggle to achieve perfection. Karnad's plays may be said to have bridged the gulf between the traditional and the modern Indian theatre. His play display their author's social concern and commitment. . In *Yayati* and *Hayavadana*, Karnad deals with the treatment of myth and folklore in the contemporary context. This research article is based on the retelling and reinterpretation of myth and folklore in two of Karnad's major plays- '*Yayati*' and '*Hayavadana*'. Girish Karnad delves deeply into his traditional Indian myths to spell out modern man's predicament, anguish, and dilemma. Karnad's plays are a critique of myth, history and folklore and tradition: they are marked by contemporaneity and modernity. Using myths and folklore, Karnad throws light on the reality of life with all its elemental passions and conflicts and man's eternal struggle to achieve perfection. Karnad's plays may be said to have bridged the gulf between the traditional and the modern Indian theatre.

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