



# THE THEATRICAL PROWESS OF GIRISH KARNAD: MYTH, MODERNITY, AND CULTURAL SYNTHESIS

V.KALARANJINI\* and Dr.M.KRISHNARAJ

PG & Research Department of English,

Kandaswami Kandar's College, Velur-638182, Tamilnadu, India.

## Abstract

This paper examines the theatrical innovations of Girish Karnad, one of contemporary India's most significant playwrights, who masterfully synthesizes ancient mythology with modern existential concerns. Through detailed analysis of his major works—*Tughlaq*, *Naga-Mandala*, *Tale-Danda*, and *The Fire and the Rain*—this study demonstrates how Karnad reimagines traditional Indian narratives through contemporary social and political lenses. The paper explores Karnad's unique ability to blend Western dramatic techniques with Indian theatrical traditions, including elements from Sanskrit drama, folk performance, and ritualistic forms. Key themes examined include identity, power, gender, caste-based oppression, and social reform. This research argues that Karnad's theatrical legacy rests on his capacity to make ancient myths speak to contemporary concerns without sacrificing cultural specificity, thereby creating works that are intellectually rigorous, emotionally resonant, and politically engaged. His synthesis of diverse theatrical traditions demonstrates that cultural authenticity need not preclude formal experimentation, and that engagement with mythology can produce theatre addressing fundamental human questions about power, justice, desire, and identity while honoring the complexity of Indian culture.

**Keywords:** Indian theatre; Sanskrit drama; theatrical innovation; power; gender; social reform; political theatre; cultural adaptation

## Introduction

Girish Karnad stands as one of the most significant playwrights in contemporary Indian theatre, distinguished by his ability to weave together ancient mythology with modern existential concerns. As a multifaceted artist—playwright, actor, director, and cultural administrator—Karnad has earned recognition as a "Renaissance man" in Indian letters (Kalidas and Merchant 45). Writing primarily in Kannada before translating his works into English, Karnad has made Indian theatrical traditions accessible to a global audience while maintaining the cultural authenticity of his source material. His dramatic works draw extensively from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, and folk traditions, reimagining these narratives through the lens of contemporary social and political realities. This paper examines Karnad's theatrical innovations, his synthesis of Western and Indian dramatic traditions, and his exploration of themes including identity, power, gender, and social reform across his major works.

## The Genesis of a Playwright: Cultural Synthesis and Existential Inquiry

Karnad's emergence as a playwright reflects the broader cultural tensions within Indian English literature during the mid-twentieth century. The literary landscape he inhabited was marked by "an open rivalry between Western heritage and indigenous culture" (Dodiya 23), a tension that became productive rather than paralyzing in his hands. His theatrical vision was shaped equally by ancient Greek drama, Shakespeare, modernist

experimentation, and the rich traditions of Kannada theatre, including the ritualistic forms of koothu and koodiattam practiced by the Chakyar community in Kerala temples.

The birth of Karnad's first play, *Yayati*, emerged from a profound personal crisis during his time in England. This existentialist drama, which reimagines a Puranic tale through a Western philosophical framework, established the pattern that would characterize much of his subsequent work. As Karnad himself noted, the play explores the existentialist principle that "every man is only what he wants to be" (*Collected Plays* 12). By juxtaposing ancient Indian mythology with European existentialism, *Yayati* demonstrated that Indian playwrights could "progress by first traveling into the past," actively seeking out "the ancient traditions of Sanskrit theatre and Prakrit folk drama" to rediscover their own identity (Mukherjee 78).

### ***Tughlaq: History as Political Allegory***

Written in 1964, *Tughlaq* represents Karnad's most direct engagement with political theatre, using the fourteenth-century Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq as a vehicle to explore "the disappointment and failure of Nehruvian idealism in India's political history" (Tanvir 156). The play employs conventions borrowed from Parsi theatre, including the use of deep and shallow scenes to represent royal interiors and street exteriors, along with emphasis on spectacular visual elements. However, Karnad transcends mere spectacle to create what many consider among the finest historical dramas in Indian English literature.

The protagonist, Muhammad Tughlaq, emerges as a "hopeless romantic who fights for secularism, the reunification of Hindus and Muslims, and India's collective future" (Dharwadker, "Historicity" 234). Yet the play's central argument proves devastating: religious or political idealism alone cannot purify society of its deeply entrenched corruptions. As theatre critic Rustom Bharucha observes, Karnad's *Tughlaq* demonstrates how "the idealist becomes complicit in the very systems he seeks to reform" (89). Through this historical lens, Karnad "highlights his passion in history through the reinterpretation of historical figures and events that function as dramatic analogies" to contemporary political failures (Naik 167).

### ***Naga-Mandala: Folklore, Feminism, and Narrative Agency***

*Naga-Mandala* represents Karnad's most sophisticated exploration of the relationship between folklore and women's agency. Based on two Kannada folk tales, the play interrogates what the theatre scholar Kavalam Narayana Panikkar terms the lokadharmi and natyadharmi dimensions of storytelling. While lokadharmi theatre focuses on realistic representation of worldly events, natyadharmi performance employs stylized techniques and intellectual pyrotechnics to create meaning beyond surface narrative (Panikkar 45).

The play's complex frame narrative features a male storyteller cursed to remain awake through the night, who encounters the Flames—female spirits who insist on telling their own story. This metatheatrical structure allows Karnad to critique patriarchal storytelling traditions while demonstrating how "women's agency and agency in women's tales are closely linked to their capacity to share and have their stories heard" (Mee 201). The Flames explicitly articulate this transformation: "The whole tale is the tale of her acquiring her story, making a person out of her, making a silent woman a speaking person" (Karnad, *Three Plays* 89).

The protagonist Rani exists within an oppressively patriarchal environment characterized by "rigid social norms, cultural taboos, and oppressive authorities" (Bhat 112). Her husband Appanna's neglect and abuse exemplify how "the formation of patriarchy is the biggest setback to Rani's existence." Yet through her relationship with the Naga (cobra deity) who assumes her husband's form, Rani ultimately achieves a form of agency that, while unconventional, allows her to "rise above the 'nothingness' of life, and use coexistence as a means to attain self-existence" (Jain 78).

The play's resolution, which validates Rani's testimony through a trial by cobra, demonstrates Karnad's belief that women must forge their own paths to selfhood, even when those paths violate patriarchal norms. As feminist scholar Tutun Mukherjee argues, the play suggests that "vocal expression grants women agency" and that storytelling itself becomes an act of resistance against centuries of silencing (134).

### ***Tale-Danda: Caste, Reform, and Historical Resonance***

Written in 1993, *Tale-Danda* draws on the life of Basavanna, the twelfth-century Kannada saint who challenged the caste system through his teachings of social equality. Like *Tughlaq* and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, this historical drama demonstrates "Karnad's lifelong fascination with history and its dire relevance to the present and future" (Nayar 189). The play emerged in direct response to the communal violence following the Mandal Commission Report and the Ayodhya crisis, with Karnad emphasizing in his preface how "the horror of subsequent events and the religious fanaticism that has gripped our national life today have only served to demonstrate how dangerous it is to ignore the solutions" offered by reformers like Basavanna (*Tale-Danda* vii).

The drama transcends simple historical commemoration to address "the widespread issue of class and caste politics that afflicted our body politic" not only in medieval India but in contemporary times (Rajan 156). By centering his work on "the subaltern issue," Karnad aligns himself with historians and social critics who recognize that India's democratic project remains incomplete without addressing caste-based oppression (Rao 201).

### ***The Fire and the Rain: Vedic Myth and Human Complexity***

Originally titled *Agni Mattu Male* in Kannada, *The Fire and the Rain* represents perhaps Karnad's most accomplished work, what critic Girish Raghunath calls "perhaps the finest of them so far" among Karnad's plays (qtd. in Tripathi 245). Based on the story of Yavakri from the Vana Parva of the Mahabharata, the play emerged after Karnad spent several years at the University of Chicago, where his "interest in orthodox Hinduism and the complex structure of Hindu culture" deepened through conversations with South Asian scholars (Iyengar 178).

According to Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker's extensive research on the play's composition, "Karnad reimagines the world of Hindu antiquity and constructs a story of passion, loss, and sacrifice within the contexts of Vedic ritual, spiritual discipline (tapasya), social and ethical differences between human agents, and interrelated forms of performance still close to their moments of origin" (xvii). The play's title itself encodes multiple meanings: fire represents "passion, fury, wrath, jealousy, betrayal, brutality, and death," while rain symbolizes "selflessness, kindness, forgiveness, grace from on high, rebirth, and life itself."

Karnad significantly departs from his source material by developing the characters into fuller, more psychologically complex figures with deeper interpersonal relationships. Rather than strangers, Yavakri and Vishakha become lovers whose relationship predates and continues beyond her marriage to Parvasu. This transformation makes Vishakha "more than just a passive object of Yavakri's lust," granting her agency and desire within the narrative (Hansen 134). Similarly, Parvasu's killing of his father stems not from ignorance but from hatred, a revision that emphasizes human moral failure over mere tragic error.

The play introduces entirely new characters, including Aravasu's relationship with Nittilai, a tribal woman. This subplot "draws a line in the sand between the Brahmin and Sudra realms, contrasting their sacrificial and disciplined lifestyles with the more intuitive and emotional ones" (Narasimhaiah 89). Through Aravasu, who bridges these "appositive realms," Karnad explores the possibility of transcending rigid social hierarchies through love and empathy.

Karnad himself noted the play's structural resemblance to Aeschylus's *Oresteia* trilogy, particularly in its treatment of "the protagonist's long-awaited homecoming, the fallibility, temptation, and criminality of humans, the role of the supernatural in human affairs, and the grace of God" ("Author's Note" 234). Yet the play ultimately conveys a distinctly Indian philosophical perspective on the relationship between human striving and divine grace, warning against "the dangers of having power without honesty and knowledge without wisdom."

### **Theatrical Technique: Blending Traditions**

Throughout his career, Karnad has demonstrated remarkable skill in synthesizing diverse theatrical traditions. His work incorporates elements of Western realism and absurdism alongside Indian performance conventions including the sutradhar (stage manager), praveshaka (prologue), and the use of masks and chorus. This

synthesis never appears merely eclectic; rather, as theatre historian Erin Mee observes, Karnad "finds organic connections between seemingly disparate traditions, revealing their shared concern with the relationship between performance and reality" (178).

His use of metatheatrical devices—most prominently in *Naga-Mandala* and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*—reflects the influence both of Brecht's alienation effect and the self-reflexive nature of Sanskrit drama. These techniques serve not to distance audiences but to "recreate the intimacy of the domestic space of storytelling in the public setting of the theatre" (Dalmia 201), making spectators active participants in the creation of meaning.

## Conclusion

Girish Karnad's theatrical legacy rests on his unique ability to make ancient myths speak to contemporary concerns without sacrificing their cultural specificity or reducing them to mere allegory. His plays demonstrate that "the point of telling a story is, well, to tell stories"—that narrative itself possesses transformative power, particularly for marginalized voices seeking agency within oppressive systems. Whether exploring political idealism in *Tughlaq*, women's agency in *Naga-Mandala*, social reform in *Tale-Danda*, or the complexities of desire and duty in *The Fire and the Rain*, Karnad consistently reveals how the past illuminates the present while the present reanimates the past.

His synthesis of Western and Indian theatrical traditions has enriched both, demonstrating that cultural authenticity need not preclude formal experimentation, and that engagement with mythology can produce theatre that is intellectually rigorous, emotionally resonant, and politically engaged. In an era of increasing cultural homogenization, Karnad's work stands as testament to the vitality that emerges when artists root themselves deeply in their own traditions while remaining open to global influences. His plays continue to speak to audiences worldwide because they address fundamental human questions—about power, justice, desire, identity, and meaning—through narratives that honor the complexity of Indian culture while affirming the universality of human experience.

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