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**Myths and Legends in the Plays of Girish Karnad**

**G. A. Ghanshyam, Ph.D.**

# Myths and Legends in the Plays of Girish Karnad

G. A. Ghanshyam, Ph.D.

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## Indian Drama and Myths

Indian drama written in English by Indian playwrights makes extensive use of tradition, myths, legends and folklore. Girish Karnad's plays vividly exemplify this trend. Girish Karnad is a major dramatist who has significantly gone back to the roots of Indian myth, tradition and culture and has re-created for us the rich and vibrant picture of Indian society, culture and its people. In all his plays he genuinely portrays the Indian way of life with all its positive and negative aspects, its tradition and their relative contemporary importance and relation.

Culture defines society. The cultural ethos of every society is unique in its form and essence representing the character of its people, their experiences and beliefs. Myths, legends and folklore are in fact the embodiments of these cultural ethos that represent the underlying values and principles of life, the shared experience of the race, the rules and the codes of society. Girish Karnad has time and again returned to eternal roots of his cultural tradition, taking inspiration from mythology and folklore.

## Myths, Folk Lore and Legends in Karnad's Plays

Karnad takes his inspiration from the rich tradition of India's past and weaves it through the web of his imagination into tales of his own. Karnad's first play *Yayati* is a story taken from the *Mahabharata*. The mythical story is a tale of responsibilities, sacrifice and self-realization. The play *The Fire and the Rain* is also taken from (the Forest canto of) *Mahabharata*. It is based on the myth of Yavakiri and includes also the conflict between Indra, Vishwarupa and Vritra.

Karnad's plays, *Bali – The Sacrifice* and *Flowers: A Dramatic Monologue* are mythical tales taken from a Kannada and a Sanskrit epic respectively.

Rangan's characterization of folk imagination and folk play and their interplay with magic is easily applicable to Karnad's plays:

Folk imagination is at once mythopoeic and magical. In the folk mind, one subsumes the other. Folk belief, besides being naïve, has a touch of poetry about it which works towards a psychic adjustment. All folklore is religious, often based on animism because the primitive imagination extends its vision from the natural, in which it is steeped and with which it is saturated, to the supernatural, which to the folk mind is only an extension of the former. (Rangan 199)

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Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala* source their origin from the folklore tradition of India. *Hayavadana* is based on Thomas Mann's translation of the Sanskrit 'Vetal Panchavimashati', which forms part of Kshemendra's *Brihat Katha Manjari* and Somadeva's *Kathasaritsagara*. Karnad's *Nagamandala* is inspired by the snake myths prevalent in South India. It is a dramatization of two folktales of Karnataka. In fact, Naga Cult is widely practiced in many parts of India.

### **Historical Plays of Girish Karnad**

Girish Karnad has also written plays that owe their source to Indian history. Weaving his tales around legendary figures drawn from various periods of Indian national history, Karnad has given a contemporary interpretation. According to Nietzsche, "History is necessary to the living man in three different ways: in relation to his action and struggle, his conservatism and reverence, his suffering and his desire for deliverance" (Nietzsche n.p). In other words, the past helps as to comprehend the present. Karnad's *Tughlaq* was inspired by the historical character of Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq, the fourteenth century sultan of Delhi.

In *Tale-Danda*, Karnad takes his inspiration from a historical movement that took place in Kalyan in Karnataka in 1168 A.D. Basavananna, the great Sharana poet-saint and his movement to eradicate caste differences, forms the main theme of the play.

### **Religion, Ritual and Superstition**

India is a nation richly imbued with religious sentiment and belief. According to M. Rajeshwar, "Most Indians are at least in theory religious in outlook" (Rajeshwar 24). In Indian society one's faith is often more than just a personal inclination, for, it defines an individual's identity. Every aspect of life in India is associated with religion. Intertwined with religion are numerous rituals and superstitions. Forming a part of the cultural identity of India, religion shapes and constructs the distinct identity of the individual.

In *Hayavadana*, the presence of goddess Kali reveals the religious sentiment prevalent in Indian society, culture and psychology. Devadutta prays to the goddess to win the hand of Padmini in marriage. Later he beheads himself as an offering to the goddess. Divine intervention unfolds the central theme of the play, 'incompleteness' and quest for completion. The theme also reveals the Upanishadic principle that visualizes the human body as a symbol of the organic relationship of the parts to the whole.

Religion and ritual not only forms a part of the narrative of Karnad's plays but is also integral to the dramatic representation of the plays, a take-off of the folk theatrical tradition of the country. *Hayavadana* begins with an invocation of Lord Ganesha, the remover of all obstacles, who is to be worshipped first among the gods.

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If *Tughlaq* shows the hypocrisy and misuse of religion, then evolution and transformation of religion forms a part of the play *Tale-Danda*. Superstition, an innate characteristic of traditional and orthodox religion, finds a reflection in *Nagamandala* wherein Kurudava gives the aphrodisiac root to Rani, giving a new twist to the tale. The reference to a Yaksha woman enticing Kappanna, the son of Kurudava, also reveals predominance of superstitious belief and belief in the supernatural elements.

Sacrifices also form a part of such religious practice as seen in the obliteration of the self physically in *Hayavadana*, the snake ordeal that Rani undergoes in *Nagamandala*, the seven years Fire Yagna in *The Fire and the Rain*, and the daily ritual of sanctification, adornment and worship of Lord Shiva in *Flowers: A Dramatic Monologue*.

Spiritual thought and wisdom inherent in religion are also incorporated into the themes of the plays. The emphasis given to intellect or the mind over matter, inherent in Indian socio-psychological and cultural context, is evident when in *Hayavadana* Devdutta says, "According to Shastras, the head is the sign of a man..." (Karnad *Hayavadana* I.146). The theory of Karma, Ahimsa, Balidan, Varna, etc. also echoes through the various narratives of Karnad's other plays.

The Hindu spiritual belief in yoga, self restraint, selflessness and sacrifice of self is re-iterated in the plays. The unrestrained, selfish enjoyment of sensual pleasures of Yayati is disapproved of and so is the egoistical attainment of knowledge for power as in the characters of Raibhya, Yavakiri and Parvasu; while the selflessness, compassion and love of Puru, Nittilai and Arvasu are commended in life. Attainment of true knowledge does require sacrifice but here it means a surrender of self: the sacrifice of false ego, sensuous pleasures, ambition and pride. "True sacrifice is that of love especially that which is for the benefit of humanity." (Nair 248)

Socio-Cultural practices like Sati, Varna and the Patriarchal moral codes are portrayed with remarkable clarity and precision by the playwright in plays *Yayati*, *Nagamandala*, *Tale-Danda*, *The Fire and the Rain*, etc. The Bhagavata thus says in *Hayavadana*, "...Padmini became a sati. India is known for its pativratas, wives who dedicated their whole existence to the service of their husbands;" (Karnad, *Hayavadana* II. 177). On the patriarchal social order that subjugates and alienates women, Karnad comments on the role of Appanna and Naga in the play *Nagamandala* that they represent the twin roles of the husband, "as a stranger during the day and as lover at night." (Karnad, Author's Introduction 19)

## **Idealism**

Karnad portrays the idealism aspect of Indian society in several plays. In *Tughlaq*, idealism is shown to be misguided, in *Tale-Danda* it is shattered and destroyed by violence and bloodshed by the traditionalists, in *Bali-The Sacrifice*, it reveals the stark realities of human instincts contrasted with bare ideology which finds an echo in *Flowers-A Dramatic Monologue* wherein the idealism of faith comes in conflict with basic human desires of the senses.

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Ideals form the basis of the various principles and codes conceptualized and formulated by societies around the world. Ideals are sought to be practiced through culture that creates and shapes the typical psyche of any society. Yet idealism is often manipulated for selfish ends as in the case of the Yayati who takes advantage of Puru's devotion and reverence for him as a son to transfer his curse onto him; or the two friends Devdutta and Kapila who sacrifice their lives in front of goddess Kali but hide their real motives, ("The rascals! They were lying to their last breaths," *Hayavadana* I.142) or Tughlaq, who uses prayer to fulfill his own vested interest to gain sovereignty, etc.

### **Subordinating the Individual to Social Interests**

As per the traditional scales of social roles and culture, the individual holds a subordinate position to society, community or family. In *Nagamandala* Rani and Appanna confirm to their social roles and obligation as husband and wife even though both are aware of the truth of their relation.

### **The Relevance of the Past for the Present**

Indian society is traditional and an individual is still governed by societal roles and norms that ensure a continuity and survival of its cultural mores. As Eric Fromm writes, 'We are what we believe in and where we live in.' Girish Karnad makes use of myths, mythologies and folklore as his source for his plays, not for the glorification of the chosen myths but to relate the myths to the present and to the past beliefs found in these myths. Readers and viewers instantly see how even with changed forms human values and behaviors seem to follow well set norms. Karnad provides us with a glimpse of the past as well as its relevance to an understanding of the contemporary world.

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**G. A. Ghanshyam, Ph.D.**  
**Department of English**  
**Government M. L. Shukla College**  
**Seepat**  
**Bilaspur (C.G.) 495555**  
**[dr\\_gag@rediffmail.com](mailto:dr_gag@rediffmail.com)**

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