

Girish Karnad plays were Classical and Modern, traditional Controversy and Complexity

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Abstract

Girish Karnad. Born 9 May 1938 –died on 10 June 2019, was an Indian playwright, actor, a Jnanpith awardee, predominantly worked in Kannada, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Marathi films. His rise as a playwright in the 1960s marked the coming of age of modern Indian playwriting in Kannada, just as Badal Sarkar did in Bengali, Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi, and Mohan Rakesh in Hindi. He was a recipient of the 1998 Jnanpith Award, the highest literary honour conferred in India.

For four decades Karnad composed plays, often using history and mythology to tackle contemporary issues. He translated his plays into English and received acclaim. His plays have been translated into some Indian languages stands as one of the most influential figures in modern Indian drama, whose plays blend myth, history, folklore, and fantasy to interrogate contemporary social realities. This paper examines how Karnad employs traditional narratives to critique social injustice, patriarchal dominance, caste discrimination, religious orthodoxy, political corruption, and existential dilemmas of modern man, classical and modern traditional controversy and complexity and historicity. He was active in the world of Indian cinema working as an actor, director and screenwriter, in Hindi and Kannada cinema, and has earned awards.

Keywords: Tradition, controversy, complexity, caste and creed discrimination, religious orthodoxy society, social injustice, folklore and mythological, fantasy, social realities.

Girish Karnad was conferred Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan by the Government of India and won four Filmfare Awards, of which three are Filmfare Award for Best Director – Kannada and the fourth a Filmfare Best Screenplay Award. He was a presenter for a weekly

science magazine programme called "Turning Point" that aired on Doordarshan in 1991. Girish Karnad was born in a Konkani-speaking Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmin family of Matheran, in present-day Maharashtra, in 1938. His mother Krishnabai (née Mankikar) was a young widow with a son who belonged to a poor family. Since it was necessary for her to earn a living, she began working as a nurse and cook generally housekeeper for the bedridden wife of a certain Raghunath Karnad, a doctor in the Bombay Medical Services.

Some five years later, and while the first wife was still alive, Krishnabai and Raghunath Karnad were married in a private ceremony. The marriage was controversial not because of bigamy, but because of the prevailing social prejudice against widow remarriage. Therefore, the wedding was held privately, and under the dispensation of the Arya Samaj, a reform organization that condones widow remarriage. Girish was the third of the four children born thereafter.

Karnad's initial schooling was in Marathi. Later, after his father was transferred to Sirsi in the Kannada-speaking regions of Bombay Presidency, Karnad was exposed to travelling theatre groups and *nataka mandalis*, which were experiencing a period of efflorescence during the iconic Balgandharva era. As a youngster, he was an ardent admirer of Yakshagana and the theater in his village. His family moved to Dharwad in Karnataka when he was fourteen, where he grew up with his two sisters and a niece.

After completing his schooling at the Basel Mission Boys School, Dharwad, he earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in mathematics and statistics from Karnataka Arts College, Dharwad (Karnataka University), in 1958. After graduation, he went to England and studied philosophy, Politics and Economics at Magdalen in Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar (1960–63), earning his Master of Arts degree in philosophy, political science and economics. Karnad was elected the President of the Oxford Union in 1962–63

Karnad is known as a playwright. His plays, written in Kannada, have been translated into English (mostly translated by himself) and some Indian languages. Kannada is his language of choice. When Karnad started writing plays, Kannada literature was highly influenced by the renaissance in Western literature. Writers would choose a subject that looked entirely alien to manifestation of native soil. C. Rajagopalachari's version the *Mahabharata* published

in 1951, left a deep impact on him and soon, sometime in the mid-1950s, one day he experienced a rush of dialogues by characters from the Mahabharata in Kannada.

"I could actually hear the dialogues being spoken into my ears ... I was just the scribe," said Karnad in a later interview. *Yayati* was published in 1961, when he was 23 years old. It is based on the story of King Yayati, one of the ancestors of the Pandavas, who was cursed into premature old age by his preceptor, Shukracharya, who was incensed at Yayati's infidelity.

Yayati, in turn, asks his sons to sacrifice their youth for him, and one of them agrees. It ridicules the ironies of life through characters in *Mahabharata*. The play in Hindi was adapted by Satyadev Dubey and Amrish Puri was lead actor for the play. It became an instant success, immediately translated and staged in several other Indian languages.

Karnad found a new approach of drawing historical and mythological sources to tackle contemporary themes and existentialist crisis of modern man through characters locked in psychological and philosophical conflicts. His next was *Tughlaq* (1964), about a rashly idealist 14th-century Sultan of Delhi, Muhammad bin Tughluq, and allegory on the Nehruvian era which started with ambitious idealism and ended up in disillusionment. This established Karnad, now 26 years old, as a promising playwright in the country. It was staged by the National School of Drama Repertory under the direction of Ebrahim Alkazi, with the actor Manohar Singh, playing the visionary king who later becomes disillusioned and turns bitter, amidst the historic Purana Qila in Delhi. It was staged in London by the National School of Drama for the Festival of India in 1982.

Hayavadana (1971) was based on a theme drawn from *The Transposed Heads*, a 1940 novella by Thomas Mann, which is originally found in the 11th-century Sanskrit text *Kathasaritsagara*. Herein he employed the folk theatre form of Yakshagana. A German version of the play was directed by Vijaya Mehta as part of the repertoire of the Deutsches National Theatre, Weimar.

Naga-Mandala (Play with Cobra, 1988) was based on a folk tale related to him by A. K. Ramanujam, brought him the Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award for the Most Creative Work of 1989. It was directed by J. Garland Wright, as part of the celebrations of the 30th anniversary of Guthrie Theatre, Minneapolis. The theatre subsequently commissioned him to write the play, *Agni Mattu Male* (The Fire and the Rain). Though before it

came *Taledanda* (Death by Beheading, 1990) which used the backdrop, the rise of Veerashaivism, a radical protest and reform movement in 12th century Karnataka to bring out current issues.

Karnad's dramatic corpus demonstrates a sustained engagement with human values and ethical dilemmas. He exposes the darker aspects of tradition—hypocrisy, exploitation, violence, and manipulation—while simultaneously acknowledging the cultural richness of India's mythic heritage. His work underscores the belief that history and mythology are not static relics but living forces that shape present consciousness. Myth and History as Tools of Contemporary Critique Karnad's use of myth and history is not nostalgic but interrogative. Drawing from texts such as the Mahabharata, Jain epics, folklore, and medieval Indian history, he reworks archetypal narratives to question dominant social norms. Plays like *Yayati*, *Hayavadana*, *Naga-Mandala*, *Tughlaq*, *Tale-Danda*, *Fire and the Rain*, and *Bali* demonstrate how historical and mythical frameworks can be deployed to analyse power, gender, faith, and morality. By juxtaposing archetypal experiences with modern realities, Karnad creates symbolic structures that resonate with contemporary audiences.

His drama challenges Nehruvian idealism and the overly optimistic portrayal of post-independence India, revealing instead the unresolved tensions beneath the surface of national progress. Gender, Marriage, and Patriarchal Structures One of the most significant concerns in Karnad's plays is the position of women within patriarchal society. Characters such as Rani (*Naga-Mandala*), Padmini (*Hayavadana*), Devyani and Sharmishtha (*Yayati*) embody the emotional, sexual, and social suppression imposed upon women through rigid institutions like marriage. *Naga-Mandala* boldly addresses female desire and autonomy, destabilizing traditional notions of chastity and purity. Rani's extramarital relationship, facilitated through the mythical Naga, subverts male-centric definitions of virtue.

At the Tata Literary Festival held in Mumbai in 2012, Karnad was invited to speak about "his life in theater" in an hour-long session. During his speech, he lashed out at V. S. Naipaul for his "antipathy towards Indian Muslims". Naipaul had earlier been conferred the Lifetime achievement award by the festival's organisers. Karnad also criticized the organizers for

having honoured Naipaul. The audience, which had gathered to hear Karnad speak, had mixed reactions to the speech. Some, like organizer Anil Dharker, tried ineffectually to steer the speech toward less controversial waters. Others were amused by the episode, and some commented on the research and logic that had gone into the speech unfortunately overshadowed by its 'scandalous' nature.

Just a few weeks after this, Karnad again created controversy by claiming that Rabindranath Tagore, who wrote India's national anthem, was a great poet but a second-rate playwright.

In November 2015, during celebrations marking the anniversary of 18th-century Muslim ruler Tipu Sultan's birth, Karnad stated that Bangalore International Airport should have been named after Tipu Sultan instead of Kempe Gowda. This created a furore among many people. Karnad apologised the following day.

Karnad indirectly legitimizes her defiance by exposing the hypocrisy embedded in societal norms that demand female fidelity while ignoring male transgressions. Similarly, Hayavadana critiques the obsession with perfection—intellectual versus physical—and exposes how women become victims within male-dominated marital frameworks. These plays collectively foreground the struggle of women for selfhood and sexual fulfilment, challenging centuries-old gender hierarchies. Caste, Religion, and Social Violence Karnad's historical plays such as Tale-Danda and Fire and the Rain present a searing critique of caste discrimination and religious orthodoxy. Drawing from pre-modern Indian history, Tale Danda exposes the brutality sanctioned in the name of religion and caste purity. The play highlights how religious texts and rituals are misinterpreted to justify oppression, particularly of lower-caste communities.

His characters navigate alienation, communication breakdown, and identity crises in an absurd and unpredictable world. Influenced by Brechtian Epic Theatre, Karnad moves away from Aristotelian catharsis, encouraging rational reflection rather than emotional release. Plays such as Yayati and Hayavadana exemplify this shift, foregrounding cause-and-effect relationships and moral consequences. Sacrifice, Ethics, and Humanism In Yayati and Bali, Karnad explores the ethics of sacrifice. Yayati critiques human greed and the irrational desire to defy natural cycles, portraying the exploitation of the younger generation by the older. The play becomes a metaphor for modern materialism and ambition. Bali dramatizes religious conflict through the domestic tension between tradition and reform. By proposing symbolic

sacrifice instead of animal killing, Karnad suggests compromise and ethical evolution as solutions to entrenched belief systems. Across his plays, Karnad rejects violence and advocates humanism. He emphasizes humility, compassion, and moral accountability as pathways to individual and social redemption.

Karnad as Cultural Chronicler Karnad's plays collectively function as chronicles of Indian culture. By reviving forgotten rituals, regional traditions, and historical episodes, he educates audiences across geographical and cultural boundaries. His portrayal of practices such as the Naga cult or historical figures like Tughlaq bridges regional divides and fosters national cultural awareness. Like African writers who employ myth to critique postcolonial realities, Karnad uses indigenous narratives to address universal human dilemmas. His characters transcend time and place, embodying enduring conflicts of desire, power, faith, and identity. **Conclusion** Girish Karnad emerges as a chronicler of contemporary Indian culture who masterfully intertwines myth, history, and modernity. His plays do not offer quick solutions but provoke critical awareness, urging audiences to question inherited traditions and social injustices. By holding a mirror to society through the lens of the past, Karnad demonstrates that unresolved historical mistakes continue to shape the present. The study affirms that Karnad's dramaturgy possesses universality, relevance, and ethical depth. His works address perennial human problems—alienation, oppression, ambition, and moral responsibility—making them timeless in appeal. This research thus contributes to the critical understanding of Karnad's controversy and complexity, reinforcing his stature as one of the most significant voices in modern Indian drama.

He was a proponent of multiculturalism and freedom of expression. He was a critic of religious fundamentalism. He had publicly condemned the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992 and later spoke against the attempts to create controversy about the Idgah Maidan in Hubli. He had opposed RSS, BJP and other organizations on several occasions. He opposed Narendra Modi for the Prime Minister's post in the 2014 parliament elections. He was one of the 200 writers who put out an open letter against hate politics and for "diverse and equal India" during the 2019 general elections. With a tube in his nose, he wore a placard saying "Me Too Urban Naxal" at the first death anniversary of slain journalist Gauri Lankesh. Karnad claimed that Tipu Sultan was the greatest king of Karnataka had in 500 years, on a religious controversy about the king. Karnad was a supporter of the Forum for Communal Harmony.

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 recreated 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 this 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,

Indian English drama, an umbrella term, indicates both the Indian plays written in English and the bhasha-plays translated in English. Contemporary Indian English drama turning away from the classical and European formulae is inventive and fact-finding in terms of thematic and technical qualities. In the sphere of contemporary Indian English Drama Girish Karnad is a living icon and one of the most exceptional practitioners of performing arts. His trains of thought do have modern relevance and the prime focal point is on the display and demonstration of multiplex cultural essence of India. He has a go at discovering a path and plan in the labyrinthian routes of Indian life and produces his plays garnering the requisite portions of our ancient scriptures. India's complications and drawbacks in the near future are large-scale but in theory and practice the situation is controllable. The paper aims at finding and analysing praxes and premises implied in the plays of Girish Karnad with an overview of Indian English drama

A woman has become the centre of discussion in the post-colonial literature and social strata of India as well as Western Countries. The lives of women have been manipulated by the patriarchy in all ages and cultures, undoubtedly in different ways by prescribing values, norms, gender roles and ethics to keep the male dominance at the top. Silvia Walby in 'Theorising Patriarch', observes, it is " a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. Today, Girish Karnad is considered as one of the most significant Indian dramatists. He as a dramatist of post-modern era fascinates us with

the marvellous world of his plays, critically evaluated the mind and behaviour of his female protagonists in a collective perspective, impact of the patriarch, women's endeavour to fulfil their desires final crises and their extinction from their world. We encounter with him a playwright as a thinker, artist, actor, poet, and a producer who as a true culture exhibiter

Karnad, therefore, extract the plots from classical to modern plots from mythology and folklore and presents the with his own invention and innovation to the audience with new vision. Yayati is about the theme of responsibility, which teaches a man to be morally obliged for each action. Hayavadana, Fire and Rain, Taledanda, Tughlaq talks about the concept of perfection, Naga mandala also folklore version. Which is quite impossible for human being to achieve as there is an eternal fountain of human desire, various technique such as Yakshagana Bhagavata, masks curtains, symbols sutradhara and dolls are used by him in Hayavadana. And Yayati. Karnad gives reference to Hindu god and goddess, Indian rituals and traditions. Karnad revisit to Indian mythology and folklore fused with western style grasps his modern audiences and at the same time preserve ancient classical art forms.

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