

Negotiating Tradition and Modernity: A Critical Study of Select Plays of Girish Karnad

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Abstract:

Girish Karnad occupies a singular position in modern Indian drama as a playwright who transformed inherited myth, folklore, and history into a vocabulary for interrogating the contemporary condition. This paper undertakes a critical study of three of his major plays—Hayavadana, Naga-Mandala, and Tughlaq—to examine how Karnad negotiates the tension between tradition and modernity in postcolonial India. Rather than treating tradition and modernity as opposed categories, the paper argues that Karnad's dramaturgy stages their mutual entanglement, using pre-modern narrative forms to articulate distinctly modern anxieties concerning identity, gender, and secular nationhood. Drawing on Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker's scholarship on Karnad's historical and mythic method, and situating the plays within the broader revival of Indian folk theatre after independence, the study demonstrates that Karnad's use of masks, curtains, the Bhagavata figure, and Brechtian alienation devices allows him to hold tradition and modernity in productive, unresolved dialogue. The paper concludes that Karnad's theatre neither romanticises the past nor uncritically endorses modernity, but instead uses the friction between them to expose the fractures within Indian postcolonial selfhood.

Keywords: Girish Karnad, tradition and modernity, Indian folk theatre, postcolonial drama, myth and history, Hayavadana, Naga-Mandala, Tughlaq

Introduction

Modern Indian drama in English translation occupies an unusual location within the larger field of postcolonial literature. Unlike the novel, which largely absorbed English as its primary medium, Indian theatre after independence developed overwhelmingly in the regional languages, and it is through translation that playwrights such as Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sarkar, and Mohan Rakesh entered the national and international literary conversation (Dharwadker, 1995). Girish Karnad, writing in Kannada and later translating his own work into English, is widely regarded as one of the most significant figures in this tradition. Over a career spanning more than four decades, Karnad turned repeatedly to myth, folklore, and history as source material, and in doing so developed a theatre that is neither a nostalgic retreat into the past nor a wholesale embrace of Western dramatic realism, but a sustained negotiation between the two.

This paper examines that negotiation through a critical reading of three of Karnad's best-known plays: Hayavadana (1971), Naga-Mandala (1988), and Tughlaq (1964). Each play draws on a different register of the past—Hayavadana on Sanskrit and Kathasaritsagara narrative material, Naga-Mandala on Kannada oral folktale, and Tughlaq on medieval Islamic history—yet each is animated by unmistakably modern preoccupations: the instability of identity, the position of women within patriarchal structures, and the crisis of secular nationhood in postcolonial India. The central argument of this paper is that Karnad does not treat tradition and modernity as a binary in which one must triumph over the other. Instead, his plays repeatedly

demonstrate that inherited narrative forms already contain the resources for a modern critique, and that modern anxieties can be most powerfully staged when refracted through pre-modern convention.

The paper proceeds in four stages. It first situates Karnad within the broader context of the post-independence revival of Indian folk theatre. It then offers close readings of Hayavadana, Naga-Mandala, and Tughlaq, attending in each case to how the play's engagement with a traditional source is inseparable from its modern argument. The paper then turns to Karnad's dramaturgic method more broadly, considering his adaptation of folk convention alongside the influence of Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre. It concludes by arguing that the enduring significance of Karnad's drama lies precisely in its refusal to resolve the tension between tradition and modernity, a refusal that allows his plays to remain a living resource for thinking about contemporary Indian identity.

This paper is organised as a work of literary and dramaturgic criticism rather than as an empirical study, and its method is accordingly one of close textual reading supported by secondary scholarship on Karnad's plays and on the wider tradition of Indian folk theatre from which they draw. Because Karnad's plays exist in multiple published English versions and have generated a substantial body of critical commentary since the 1970s, the analysis draws primarily on Karnad's own English translations of his work, on Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker's editorial introductions and critical essays, and on the wider body of journal scholarship that has examined the plays' engagement with myth, folklore, gender, and postcolonial historiography. This approach allows the paper to treat tradition and modernity not as abstract categories imposed from outside the plays, but as categories that emerge from a close attention to how the plays themselves stage the encounter between inherited narrative and contemporary concern.

Karnad and the Post-Independence Revival of Folk Theatre

Girish Karnad emerged as a playwright during the 1960s, a period in which Indian theatre was engaged in a self-conscious search for indigenous dramatic forms that could stand apart from both classical Sanskrit drama and colonial-era proscenium realism. Dharwadker (1995) situates this generation of playwrights within a broader postcolonial project of using "the narratives of myth, history and folklore to evoke an ancient or pre-modern world that resonate[s] in contemporary contexts" (as cited in Malik, n.d.). Karnad, trained at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar yet rooted in the folk performance traditions of Karnataka, was distinctively positioned to draw on both worlds. His earliest play, *Yayati* (1961), already announces the pattern that would define his subsequent work: a well-known mythic narrative reworked to expose a thoroughly modern anxiety, in that case, a father's demand that his son sacrifice his youth in the father's place.

This turn to myth and folklore was not an isolated aesthetic choice but part of a wider theatrical movement associated with directors and playwrights such as Habib Tanvir, B. V. Karanth, and K. N. Panikkar, who similarly sought to revitalise Indian theatre by drawing on folk performance idioms—the use of masks, live music, direct address to the audience, and non-illusionistic staging. Karnad's own theatrical practice, both as playwright and as a figure associated with the National School of Drama and Karnataka's Rangayana movement, was shaped by this milieu. What distinguishes Karnad within this movement, however, is the philosophical seriousness with which he treats the friction between the traditional source and its modern retelling: his plays are less interested in folk form as decorative device than in folk form as a structure of thought capable of holding contradictions that realist drama cannot easily accommodate.

It is important to stress that this turn toward folk and mythic material was not simply a matter of aesthetic preference; it carried an implicit cultural argument about what an authentically Indian modern theatre might look like. In the decades immediately following independence, Indian playwrights working in English or in translation faced the question of how to build a national theatrical idiom that was neither a derivative imitation of the European proscenium stage nor a static replication of classical Sanskrit dramaturgy, which had by the twentieth century largely ceased to be a living performance tradition. Karnad's generation found an answer in

the still-vital folk performance traditions of the regions—Yakshagana in coastal Karnataka, Tamasha in Maharashtra, Nautanki in North India—forms that had never been fully absorbed into either colonial or classical frameworks and that consequently offered a genuinely alternative resource for a modern national theatre.

Karnad's own account of his relationship to this material, as recorded in his prefatory notes to his plays, emphasises that his engagement with folk form was not nostalgic but experimental: he treated the conventions of folk theatre as a set of formal tools to be tested against modern dramatic problems, much as a modern novelist might test the resources of an inherited genre. This experimental orientation distinguishes Karnad from playwrights who used folk material primarily for its regional colour or its capacity to lend a play an air of authenticity. For Karnad, the folk form was valuable precisely because its non-realist conventions—its comfort with the supernatural, its tolerance of direct address and metatheatrical commentary, its refusal of a single unified perspective—gave him access to dramatic effects that a realist idiom could not easily produce, and that were, paradoxically, well suited to representing the fractured, multiple, and unresolved character of modern experience.

Hayavadana: Myth, the Divided Self, and the Modern Predicament

Hayavadana is Karnad's most widely studied play and remains the clearest instance of his method of using a pre-modern narrative to stage a modern problem. The play's central story, of two friends, Devadatta and Kapila, whose heads are accidentally transposed onto each other's bodies, is drawn from the Kathasaritsagara and mediated through Thomas Mann's German retelling, *The Transposed Heads* (Karnad, 1994). The narrative device of confused identity, ancient in origin, becomes in Karnad's hands a vehicle for exploring a specifically modern anxiety about the relationship between mind and body, intellect and desire, and the impossibility of achieving a wholly integrated selfhood.

Padmini's inability to find completeness in either the poet Devadatta's mind married to the labourer Kapila's body, or the reverse combination, has been read by critics as an allegory for the disjunctions of modern subjectivity, in which no single identity can satisfy the competing demands placed upon it. As one study of the play observes, Karnad's transformation of the transposed-heads story exemplifies a mode of "trans-creation" in which "the modern, contemporary, individual talent incorporates the tradition" so that the past and the present might together give theatre activity a new direction ("Tradition and Modernity in Indian English Theatre," n.d.). The play's use of the Bhagavata as narrator-commentator, its incorporation of masks to signal the instability of the transposed identities, and its framing story involving the horse-headed Hayavadana searching for completeness, are all devices drawn from Yakshagana and other folk performance traditions, yet they are deployed to interrogate a thoroughly modern philosophical question: whether the self can ever achieve the wholeness it desires.

Crucially, Karnad does not resolve this tension in favour of either tradition or modernity. The folk framing device does not offer comforting closure; instead, it multiplies the play's ironies, since even Hayavadana's own quest for completeness ends not in transcendence but in a further, comic transformation into a complete horse rather than a complete human being. The play thus uses the resources of traditional narrative form to resist, rather than provide, a settled answer to the modern problem it raises—a strategy that recurs across Karnad's dramatic corpus.

The play's frame narrative, involving the horse-headed Hayavadana who seeks to become fully human, has often been read as a structural mirror of the central Devadatta-Kapila-Padmini plot, and this doubling is itself significant for understanding Karnad's negotiation of tradition and modernity. Hayavadana's affliction, like Padmini's dilemma, cannot be resolved through a simple restoration of an original, unmixed identity; the play consistently frustrates any desire for a return to a prior wholeness, whether human or animal, mental or physical. In this respect, Hayavadana can be read as staging a distinctly modern scepticism about the

availability of any authentic, uncontaminated selfhood, a scepticism that sits in productive tension with the folk and mythic materials through which it is expressed, since such materials often carry an implicit nostalgia for cosmic or narrative order that the play ultimately declines to honour.

At the same time, the play's use of masks deserves particular attention as a device that literalises the theme of composite, unstable identity. The physical transformation of Devadatta and Kapila is represented on stage not through illusionistic special effects but through the deliberately visible convention of exchanged masks, a technique borrowed directly from Yakshagana performance. This choice is doubly significant: it signals Karnad's debt to traditional theatrical vocabulary, and it simultaneously performs a very modern, self-reflexive commentary on the constructedness of identity, since the audience is never permitted to forget that the transposed identity before them is a theatrical artifice rather than a naturalistic transformation. The mask, in other words, becomes the point at which tradition and modernity are most tightly fused: an ancient performance convention pressed into the service of a thoroughly contemporary meditation on the performativity of the self.

Naga-Mandala: Folk Form and the Feminist Critique of Patriarchal Tradition

If Hayavadana stages the divided self, Naga-Mandala stages the divided position of women within a patriarchal social order, again through the medium of folk narrative. Karnad has explained that the play is based on two oral tales he heard from the folklorist A. K. Ramanujan, tales that are, in Karnad's own account, characteristically narrated by women to other women and children within the domestic space (as cited in a study of the play's narrative technique, n.d.). The play's central story, of a neglected young wife, Rani, who is unknowingly visited at night by her husband Appanna in the guise of a cobra, and who is subsequently forced to prove her chastity through a public ordeal, is on its surface a conventional folk narrative of marital fidelity and divine intervention.

Yet critics have persuasively argued that Karnad reworks this material into a pointed critique of the very patriarchal structures the folktale might seem to endorse. Rani's ordeal by the snake-shrine, in which she is compelled to prove her chastity to an entire village, has been read as a site through which the play interrogates "questions of gender subjectivity, sexuality, and power positionality," inserting what one analysis terms "a resistant feminist ideology into gender discourse" even as it retains the outward shape of a devotional folktale ("Tradition and Modernity in Indian English Theatre," n.d.). Dharwadker's introduction to the Collected Plays similarly frames Naga-Mandala as continuing the exploration, begun in Hayavadana, of "the complication and subversion of conjugality," but taking, in her words, "a more elemental approach" to that subversion (as cited in Lomte, n.d.).

The play's formal structure reinforces this critique. Naga-Mandala is framed as a story told by a group of flames to keep a man awake through the night, itself a device drawn from oral storytelling convention, and the story-within-a-story structure allows Karnad to hold the folktale's surface piety and its subversive undertow in simultaneous view. The play's debt to Bertolt Brecht and Jean Anouilh, both of whom reworked classical narratives for modern audiences, has also been noted by critics examining Karnad's technique ("Girish Karnad's Naga-Mandala: A Feministic Approach," n.d.), suggesting that Karnad's use of indigenous folk form is itself inflected by a modern, cross-cultural theatrical sensibility. The result is a play in which tradition supplies the narrative material for a critique that is unmistakably contemporary in its feminist orientation, while modernity supplies the theatrical self-consciousness—the frame narrative, the direct engagement with the audience—that allows that critique to be legible.

It is worth dwelling further on the significance of the play's ordeal scene, in which Rani is made to prove her innocence by picking up a cobra, an act that, according to village custom, only the truly chaste can survive unharmed. On a purely traditional reading, Rani's survival of the ordeal simply confirms the folk belief in divine justice: the innocent are protected by supernatural intervention. Yet Karnad complicates this reading

by ensuring that the audience, unlike the villagers on stage, knows the literal truth of Rani's situation—that her nocturnal visitor was in fact the cobra in human disguise, and that her fidelity, understood in conventional terms, has in fact already been transgressed, without her knowledge or consent. This gap between what the audience knows and what the community on stage believes is the mechanism through which Karnad's critique operates: the very ritual that is supposed to demonstrate the justice of the patriarchal order is shown to rest on an epistemological blind spot, since the community's judgment of Rani's virtue depends entirely on a truth it cannot actually perceive. The folk ordeal, rather than vindicating tradition, becomes the means by which the play exposes the arbitrariness of the standards by which women's bodies and behaviour are publicly judged. This reading is reinforced by the play's ambiguous and much-debated ending, in which the community reinterprets Rani's survival as proof that she is an incarnation of a goddess, elevating her to a status that, while nominally honorific, in fact forecloses any possibility of her being understood simply as a wronged woman seeking a livable domestic arrangement. Critics have noted that this apotheosis can be read as a further, subtler form of patriarchal containment: rather than reckon with the injustice done to Rani, the community resolves its unease by mythologising her, transforming a story of exploitation into a story of divine favour. Karnad's refusal to offer his audience a straightforwardly redemptive ending is characteristic of his broader method: the play uses the shape of a traditional folktale, complete with its expected supernatural resolution, only to redirect that resolution toward an unsettling, modern recognition of how communities manage, rather than confront, the wrongs done to women within them.

Tughlaq: History as Political Allegory and the Crisis of Secular Modernity

Where Hayavadana and Naga-Mandala draw on myth and folktale, Tughlaq turns to history, specifically the fourteenth-century reign of the Delhi Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq, a ruler remembered in both medieval Muslim historiography and colonial-era Orientalist scholarship as visionary yet erratic, idealistic yet ultimately catastrophic in his policies. In her landmark essay "Historical Fictions and Postcolonial Representation: Reading Girish Karnad's Tughlaq," Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker (1995) argues that Karnad's play does not simply dramatise this historical figure but actively interrogates the very process by which history is written, showing that Tughlaq's fictional representation is shaped by "a complex historical narrative mediated by medieval Muslim historians," who disapproved of his religious unorthodoxy, and by "nineteenth-century orientalists," who used the turmoil of his reign to justify British colonial rule (Dharwadker, 1995, p. 43).

Written in 1964, less than two decades after Indian independence, Tughlaq has been widely read as an allegory for the postcolonial Indian state's own crisis of secular nationhood under Jawaharlal Nehru. Dharwadker (1995) contends that the play, by using religious difference as its central problematic, develops "a resonant parallel between premodern and contemporary Indian political and cultural experiences" and thereby "reenacts the country's postindependence crisis of secular nationhood." Tughlaq's idealistic early policies—his declared commitment to religious tolerance and his ambitious, ultimately disastrous decision to shift the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad—invite comparison with Nehru's own idealism, and the ruler's descent into paranoia and violence over the course of the play has been read as a warning about the fragility of secular idealism when it is not grounded in the practical realities of governance.

This use of history as political allegory is a modern gesture as much as a traditional one. Karnad does not present Tughlaq's reign as settled historical fact but foregrounds the instability of historical narrative itself, dramatising the gap between the ruler's private motivations and the public, retrospective judgements passed upon him by chroniclers with their own ideological investments. This self-conscious historiographic scepticism situates Tughlaq within what Dharwadker (1995) terms the postcolonial genre of "historical fictions," texts that refuse the antiorientalist assumption of a clean separation between "true" and "fictive" modes of historical writing. In this sense, Tughlaq exemplifies Karnad's characteristic method: it takes the

seemingly settled material of medieval history and uses it to stage a thoroughly modern anxiety about the reliability of the narratives, whether nationalist or colonial, through which a postcolonial society understands its own past.

The structure of the play reinforces this historiographic argument at the level of dramatic form. Tughlaq unfolds across a sequence of episodes that trace the sultan's transformation from an idealistic reformer, committed to religious pluralism and administrative innovation, into an increasingly isolated and violent autocrat, haunted by the consequences of his own policies. Karnad punctuates this trajectory with scenes of public disputation, in which characters representing rival religious and political factions voice competing interpretations of Tughlaq's actions in real time, so that the audience witnesses not a settled historical verdict but the process by which such verdicts are contested and constructed. This structural choice is itself a modern dramaturgic strategy layered onto historical material: rather than presenting history as a fixed sequence of events to be dramatized, Karnad stages history as an ongoing argument, a technique that anticipates the postcolonial historiographic scepticism that later critics such as Dharwadker (1995) would identify as central to the play's achievement.

The figure of Aziz, a comic petty criminal who repeatedly disguises himself to exploit the chaos of Tughlaq's reign, further complicates the play's treatment of history and modernity. Aziz's cynical opportunism, and his eventual success in rising through the very administrative chaos that destroys Tughlaq's idealism, offers a darkly comic counter-narrative to the sultan's tragic arc, suggesting that grand historical idealism and cynical self-interest are not opposites but are, in fact, mutually enabling within a single political order. This subplot has been read by critics as Karnad's oblique commentary on the gap between the idealistic rhetoric of postcolonial nation-building and the more cynical realities of the political and administrative class that actually inherited power after independence, extending the play's allegorical resonance beyond the figure of Nehru alone to encompass the wider machinery of the postcolonial state. In combining a tragic historical protagonist with a comic contemporary type, Karnad again demonstrates his characteristic refusal to let either tradition, in the form of received historical narrative, or modernity, in the form of a straightforwardly satirical contemporary allegory, stand alone as the play's final meaning.

Dramaturgic Strategy: Folk Convention, Brechtian Distance, and Cultural Synthesis

Across all three plays, Karnad's negotiation of tradition and modernity operates as much at the level of theatrical form as at the level of narrative content. Karnad draws extensively on the conventions of Indian folk theatre—the Bhagavata or sutradhara figure who narrates and comments on the action, the use of masks and curtains to mark shifts between the human and non-human worlds, the interpolation of song and dance, and direct address to the audience. These devices, as critics have noted, allow Karnad to break the illusion of realist theatre in a manner that has frequently been compared to Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre and its technique of *Verfremdungseffekt*, or alienation effect ("The Traditional and the Contemporary," n.d.).

This comparison is instructive but should not obscure the distinctiveness of Karnad's synthesis. Whereas Brecht developed the alienation effect largely in opposition to the illusionism of Aristotelian tragedy, Karnad found comparable distancing devices already present within indigenous folk performance, which had never fully subscribed to realist conventions in the first place. As one study observes, Karnad "believes that the energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values," and that the chorus, music, and apparently unrelated comic interludes of folk theatre "permit a simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view" ("The Traditional and the Contemporary," n.d.). Karnad's achievement, in other words, is not to import a Western technique into Indian material, but to recognise and activate a capacity for self-critique that was already latent within the traditional forms he inherited.

This recognition has significant implications for how the plays' negotiation of tradition and modernity should be understood. Tradition, in Karnad's hands, is not a static repository of values to be either preserved or discarded; it is itself a resource of formal and critical possibility, one that can be reactivated to address concerns—the instability of identity, the oppression of women, the fragility of secular governance—that are inescapably contemporary. Modernity, correspondingly, is not simply an external force imposed upon traditional material from outside; it emerges from within the traditional form once that form is read closely enough to expose the questions it was already implicitly asking.

This synthesis also has implications for how audiences are positioned in relation to Karnad's plays. Realist drama, in its classical Western form, typically invites the audience into a stable illusion, asking spectators to suspend disbelief and identify with characters as though observing events unfolding naturally before them. Karnad's folk-derived devices consistently disrupt this identification: the Bhagavata addresses the audience directly, masks draw attention to their own artificiality, and framing narratives remind spectators that they are watching a told story rather than a transparent slice of life. The effect is not to alienate the audience from the play's emotional and ethical concerns, but to prevent that engagement from collapsing into passive, uncritical absorption. Spectators are asked simultaneously to feel the pathos of Padmini's dilemma, Rani's ordeal, or Tughlaq's tragic isolation, and to reflect critically on the social and historical structures that produce those predicaments—an effect achievable only because the traditional theatrical apparatus and the modern critical sensibility are made to operate together rather than in sequence.

Conclusion

The three plays examined in this paper—Hayavadana, Naga-Mandala, and Tughlaq—demonstrate that Girish Karnad's engagement with tradition is never merely retrospective, and his engagement with modernity is never merely a rejection of the past. In Hayavadana, the ancient narrative of transposed heads becomes a vehicle for exploring the modern anxiety of a divided, incomplete selfhood. In Naga-Mandala, an oral folktale of a devoted wife and a serpent lover is reworked into a feminist critique of the very patriarchal structures that folk narrative might, on its surface, appear to endorse. In Tughlaq, the chronicled history of a fourteenth-century sultan becomes an allegory for the postcolonial Indian state's own crisis of secular idealism, while simultaneously interrogating the reliability of historical narrative itself.

What unites these three very different plays is Karnad's consistent refusal to resolve the tension between tradition and modernity into a simple hierarchy. His theatre insists that inherited narrative forms—myth, folktale, and history alike—are not obstacles to modern understanding but are themselves already sites of critical possibility, requiring only the right dramaturgic pressure to yield a modern argument. This is why Karnad's plays continue to be read and staged decades after their composition: they do not offer nostalgia for a lost tradition, nor do they offer an uncomplicated celebration of modernity's arrival, but instead dramatise the ongoing, unfinished negotiation between the two that continues to define postcolonial Indian identity. Future scholarship might extend this study by considering Karnad's later plays, such as *The Fire and the Rain* and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, which continue this negotiation through, respectively, Vedic myth and eighteenth-century colonial history, suggesting that the tension between tradition and modernity remained the defining preoccupation of Karnad's dramatic imagination across his entire career.

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