

“Exploring Indigenous Traditions in the Plays of Girish Karnad”

*Dr. Pooja Joshi

**Preeti Jhajharia

ABSTRACT

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 character and the codes of a society. 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. Karnad has significantly gone back to the roots of Indian myth, tradition and culture and has re-created the rich and vibrant picture of Indian Society. He has time and again returned to the eternal roots of his cultural tradition, taking inspiration from mythology and folklore.

The present research paper is an attempt to explore two plays by Karnad respectively, *Naga Mandala* and *Hayavadana*, to examine the representation of historical, mythic, legendary and oral elements in Karnad's writings. It is both arresting and interesting to investigate in current scenario how 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. The study aims to identify the traditional Indian art forms used by Girish Karnad in his plays with a view to relate them to contemporary times.

Key words: Indian drama, myths, legends, oral tradition, folklore.

FULL PAPER

Girish Karnad is a major force in the field of Indian theatre in English. He has enriched the Indian literary scene with his contribution to art, culture, theatre and drama. The most significant and seminal aspect is Karnad's attempt to retrieve the cultural and mythological rich tradition of the Indian past. His plays offer a return to the roots and attempt to revive and recreate the local myths, legends and oral tradition of history. India has a distinct culture and rich heritage of its own. Karnad deftly captures the multicultural character of our land and weaves beautiful threads through indigenous traditions, culture, myths, and history to bring out the socio-cultural ethos subjugated by the imported culture of Europe.

Karnad has depicted various facets of human life in his plays. Kirtinath Kurtkoti opines about Karnad as a playwright, “His work has the tone and expression of great drama. He has the genius and the power to transform any situation into an aesthetic experience”. (iv) Karnad's writings are identified well in India and his plays achieved a great success on stage. He aims at reconciling

paradoxes and contraries of life. His first play *Yayati* is based on a myth from the *Mahabharata*. The mythical story is a tale of responsibilities, sacrifices and self-realization and focuses on the theme of responsibility. *Hayavadana* problematizes the search for roots and human relationships. *Naga Mandala* by Karnad is a play where myth takes over reality. The use of history, myths, legends, and folk-tales is the major vehicle for weaving different threads of story in the tales of Karnad. It also draws attention to Karnad's contribution to the formation of nation identity through the revival of these important art forms and the way he connects them with contemporary realities of modern life.

Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala* source their origin from the folklore tradition of India. *Hayavadana* is based on Thomas Mann's translation of the Sanskrit '*Vital Panchavimshati*' and *Naga-Mandala* is inspired by the snake myths prevalent in south India. Both the stories are autonomous and independent of the person who tells them, although they live by being told and shared. *Naga Mandala* by Girish Karnad is a play where myth takes over reality. The play is based on two oral Kannada tales he had heard from his mentor-friend and well-known poet, translator, and philologist A. K. Ramanujan, to whom Karnad also dedicated the play. Through the interesting blend of history and myth, he talks about socio-cultural issues of the India. Rani is a young bride who is neglected by her indifferent and unfaithful husband, Appanna. Appanna spends most of his time with his concubine and comes home only for lunch. Rani is one of those typical wives who want to win her husband's affection at any cost. In an attempt to do so, she decides to drug her husband with a love root, which she mixes in the curry. That curry is spilled on the nearby anthill and Naga, the King Cobra drinks it. Naga, who can take the form of a human being, is enchanted with her and begins to visit her every night in the form of her husband. This changes Rani's life completely as she starts to experience the good things in life though she never knows that the person with her is not her husband but the Naga.

One of these days, she gets pregnant and breaks the news to Appanna. He immediately accuses her for adultery and says that he has not fathered the child. The issue is referred to the village Panchayat. She is then asked to prove her fidelity by putting her hand in the snake burrow and taking a vow that she has not committed adultery. It is a popular belief that if any person lies holding the snake in their hand, he will be instantly killed by the snake God. She does place her hand in the snake burrow and vows that she has never touched any male other than her husband and the Naga in the burrow. She is declared chaste by the village Panchayat. However, her husband is not ready to accept that she is pregnant with his child and decides to find out the truth by spying on the house at night. Appanna is shocked to see the Naga visiting Rani in his form, spending time with her and then leaving the house. Appanna gets furious with the Naga and indulges in a fight with him. Both of them fight vigorously and at one point of time, the Naga takes the form of the snake and escapes into the burrow. The villagers see the snake escaping into the burrow and kill it. Before dying the snake comes to Rani and reveals the truth to her. However, after this incident Appanna realizes his mistake and he accepts Rani along with the child she is carrying.

In the backdrop of a folktale, which includes flames, snake, avatars, performance of impressive ordeals, cremation of the dead snake, and the back ground chorus, *Naga-Mandala* comes alive with numerous symbols, hidden meanings and explicit and implicit moral lessons. The play started with a curse of dead or non-responsive audience, but we complete reading the play certainly as active and live audience.

Thus, the play takes its inspiration from the popular myth and oral stories centering on the king cobra. *Naga-Mandala* explores man-woman relationship, position and identity of a woman and the impact of social and cultural modes on the feminine psyche. In *Naga-Mandala* the woman character Rani is portrayed as dependent in all three phases of her life, as a daughter, as a wife and as a mother. In Indian society, the woman is said to be complete only after her marriage. Girish Karnad uses a magical folk tale to reveal the complexity of human life. He uses the folk tale in the Indian context to reveal the social and individual relations. The question of chastity being imposed on married women while their husbands have a merry-go-round with other women outside their wedlock, the throbbing of secret love that Naga demonstrates by killing himself on the passionate and warm body of Rani and above all, the result of the sexual communion being a male child, the "son" lighting funeral pyre and so many other potent and hidden meanings, make this play a very complex and subtle study.

The story in the main plot of *Hayavadana* is based on a myth taken from Somadeva's *Katha Sarit Sagara* and Thomas Mann's version of the same story of 'Transposed Heads'. Karnad makes the play an interesting study of man's quest for a complete and wholesome experience of life. He combines the transposed heads plot of Mann with *Hayavadana* story which is completely Karnad's own invention. This is how Karnad makes use of a myth. He takes them only in parts and the rest he supplements with his imagination.

In *Hayavadana*, the mother of the title character was the princess of Karnataka. She was a very beautiful girl. Her father decides that his daughter should choose her husband and invited the princes of every kingdom in the world. She did not like any of them. She looked at the handsome prince sitting on his great white stallion and fainted. She woke up, and said she would only marry that horse. Eventually, she was married to the white stallion. She lived with him for fifteen years. One morning a beautiful Gandharva stood in the place of the horse. This Gandharva had been cursed by the god Kubera to be born as a horse for some act of misbehavior. He, released from curse, asked his wife to accompany him to his heavenly abode. She agreed and became a horse herself by the curse of her husband and ran away happily. The child of their marriage was *Hayavadana* who was left behind. *Hayavadana*'s problem is how to get rid of horse's head. On the advice of Bhagavata he goes to Kali temple of Mount Chitrakoot. He threatens to chop off this head. As in the transposed heads plot, Kali's ambiguous boon creates another problem while solving one. In response to *Hayavadana*'s prayer, "make me complete" the goddess makes him complete horse and not a complete man and in addition to this, he retains his human voice. When the five year old son of Padmini of the transposed heads plot makes him to laugh again the laughter turns into a proper neigh indicating the complete liberation of *Hayavadana*. The horse

has at last become normal. The dilemma of the female character is exposed through Padmini and the flash back of *Hayavadana* is purely dramatical. Karnad has the genius and the power to transform any situation into an aesthetic experience. This is the main theme of the play *Hayavadana*.

Although in our Indian context myths are related to religion, Karnad is only interested in the mythical side of it. He finds a Jungian quality in these myths. Moreover, the elements of myth and history are common to most of the audiences in our country. Many myths have a strong emotional significance and the audiences have set responses towards them and Karnad likes to play on that. Thus, the myth acquires new dimensions in the creative hands of Karnad and the play unfolds rich strands of meaning. These two plays are product of Karnad's recreation of his own imagination. Both plays are love stories. In *Naga-Mandala*, the snake changes into a man where as in *Hayavadana*, the horse changes into a man. Both plays show the relationship of man and woman. The theme also reveals the Upanishad principle that visualizes the human body as a symbol of the organic relationship of the parts to the whole. Sacrifices also form a part of such religious practices as seen in the obliteration of the self physically in *Hayavadana*, the snake ordeal that Rani undergoes in *Naga-Mandala*. Spiritual thought and wisdom inherent in religion are also incorporated into the themes of the plays.

Karnad displays a keen sensibility towards indigenous roots and art forms. For instance, Bhagavata 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." Similarly, the role of Appanna and Naga in the play *Naga-Mandala* represent the twin roles in the husband, "as a stranger during the day and as lover at night." In *Naga-Mandala* Kurudeva gives the aphrodisiac root to Rani, giving a new twist to the tale. *Hayavadana* is resonant with multi-layered social messages and also tempts us to see it as a volatile autonomous being. While, *Hayavadana* is situated in the interstices of an invigorating legacy of traditional Indian folk and modern western theatre, *Naga-Mandala* builds on the folkloric tradition implicitly and has intimate connections with the ways mythic systems of belief co-exist with ontological realities.

The energy of folk comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values. It also has the means of questioning those values, of making them literally stand on their head. In *Naga-Mandala*, the story ends with the question who is Rani's husband, Appanna or Naga? In *Hayavadana*, the story ends with who is the real husband, the one with the husband's head or the one with his body? In *Naga-Mandala*, the god is Naga who saves Rani's life during snake ordeal and in *Hayavadana* the goddess is Kali, who bring them back to life. Religion and rituals not only serve a part of narrative of Karnad's play but also are integral to the dramatic representation of the plays as in *Hayavadana* it started with invocation of Lord Ganesha, the presence of Goddess Kali.

Girish Karnad like any other modern dramatist makes extensive uses of myths in his plays to condemn Socio-Cultural evils, which have deeply eroded the personal life of woman. Karnad wanted to expose the social-injustices perpetrated on innocent, ignorant Indian women.

Innocent women who were subjected to the violence of their sadistic husbands were made to tolerate their husbands because they were afraid of social stigma. Therefore many modern dramatists wanted to abolish these wrong concepts, which afflicted the Indian Society. Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* deals with deeply psychological problems faced by modern Indian women in the present society. In this way, both *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala* are in depth studies of human nature with a serious message to deliver through the presentation of our cultural and historic traditions, myths and folk tales in a powerful way. M. K. Naik has rightly observed in this regard, "...his technical experiment with an indigenous dramatic form... is a triumph which has opened up fresh lines of fruitful exploration for the Indian English Playwrights" (275).

*Assistant Professor,

** Student, (M. A. Previous),
Department of English

Kanoria P. G. Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Jaipur

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