



## Portrayal of Historical Characters in the Works of Girish Karnad

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ABSTRACT

Girish Karnad is a contemporary writer, playwright, actor and movie director in Kannada language. He is the latest of seven recipients of Jnanpith Award for Kannada, the highest literary honour conferred in India. For four decades Karnad has been composing plays, often using history and mythology to tackle contemporary issues. He is also active in the world of Indian cinema working as an actor, director, and screenwriter, earning numerous awards along the way. In 1992 the Indian government awarded Karnad another of its highest honours, the Padma Bhushan, and Padma Shri in recognition of his contributions to the arts. He was the recipient of the Jnanpith Award, India's highest literary prize, in 1999 for his contributions to literature and theatre. He continued to work in film, directing such movies as Kanooru Heggadithi and acting in Iqbal and Life Goes On among others. Karnad's other well-known films in Kannada and also worked in Hindi, directing the critically acclaimed Utsav, an adaptation of Sh draka's 4th century Sanskrit play Mrichchakatika. With the play Nagamandala, Karnad framed an unhappy contemporary marriage in imagery drawn from Kannada folk tales. The present paper presents a critical appraisal on Karnad's passion for literature, knowledge in Historical characters and the execution of these in a lucid and a vivid style in his pen-portrayals as a dramatist in varied perspectives.

### KEYWORDS

#### DETAILED PAPER

Girish Karnad is most famous as a playwright. His plays, written in Kannada, have been widely translated into English and all major Indian languages. Karnad's plays are written neither in English, in which he dreamt of earning international literary fame, nor in his mother tongue Konkani. Instead they are composed in his adopted language Kannada. When Karnad started writing plays, Kannada Literature was highly influenced by the renaissance in Western literature. Writers would choose a subject which looked entirely alien to manifestation of native soil. In a situation like that Karnad found a new approach like drawing historical and mythological sources to tackle contemporary themes. Karnad is a noted communicator and a person of wide accomplishments and interests. Based on his serious explorations of folklore, mythology and history, the subject of his plays reflect the problems and challenges of contemporary life, and endeavour to forge a link between the past and the present. The creative intellectual that he is, he obviously views the subjects of his plays from his own perspective, develops them in the crucible of his own imagination and personal experiences, and employs them as a medium to communicate his own-independent and original-feelings, thoughts and interpretations. He has also forayed into the jungle of cinema, working alternately as an actor, director, and screenwriter, and earning numerous awards along the way. At the age of sixty, however, Karnad is vowing to give up cinema for the stage

Karnad is internationally known as a playwright, but is also a highly talented film-maker, a versatile actor, an able cultural administrator, a noted communicator and a person of wide accomplishments and interests. Based on his serious explorations of folklore, mythology and history, the subject of his plays reflect the problems and challenges of contemporary life, and endeavour to forge a link between the past and the present. The creative intellectual that he is, he obviously views the subjects of his plays from his own perspective, develops them in the crucible of his own imagination and personal experiences, and employs them as a medium to communicate his own-independent and original-feelings, thoughts and interpretations. Karnad dreamt of earning international literary fame, but he thought that he would do so by writing in English. His first play, "Yayati" ridicules the ironies of life through characters in Mahabharata and became an instant success, immediately translated and staged in several other Indian lan-

guages. For four decades, Karnad has continued to compose top-notch plays, often using history and mythology to tackle contemporary themes. He has also forayed into the jungle of cinema, working alternately as an actor, director, and screenwriter, and earning numerous awards along the way. At the age of sixty, however, Karnad is vowing to give up cinema for the stage

Girish Karnad's play Hayavadana has various cultural implications, which are relevant even today. A Man's search for his own self among a web of complex relationships, Girish Karnad's Hayavadana was influenced by Thomas Mann. The Transposed Heads, which in turn is borrowed from one of the Sanskrit Kathasaritasagara stories. Culture defines society and Karnad's plays are a reflection of the culture in our society. Focusing on our folk culture, he takes inspiration from mythology and folklore. With Hayavadana, Karnad has taken us back to the myths and legends of the Hindu religion

Muhammad Bin Tughlaq, who ruled from Delhi in the fourteenth century, was a man of many dimensions. A well-read scholar of the arts, theology, and philosophy, a brilliant calligrapher, a mystic, as well as a poet, it is the 'madness' that earned him the epithet 'Mad Muhammad', that Karnad explores in the play. Using history and myth in equal measure, Karnad delves into the psyche of Muhammad to understand and interpret the rationale behind his whimsical actions. Operating at both symbolic and metaphoric levels, the action of the play is closely paralleled with 'contemporary' political and social events. The new Prologue by Karnad recounts the personal history behind the genesis of the play as well as its afterlife-the many productions and general reception.

Imagination creates culture out of nature and it also produces literary language. Symbols are often used to support a literary theme in a subtle manner. Symbol is something that represents something else either by association or by resemblance. The purpose of symbol is to communicate meaning. Girish Karnad is the foremost playwright of modern India. Tughlaq, his second play, is a historical play replete with symbolism. Girish Karnad in Tughlaq deals with the life of the medieval Indian ruler, Muhammad Bin Tughlaq. The author skilfully pictures the life and reign of Tughlaq through his intensive use of symbols. Girish Karnad in "Introduction to Three plays" remarks "Muhammad the mad," the Sultan ended his career in

blood sheds and political chaos. In a sense, the play reflected the slow disillusionment my generation felt with the new politics of independent India, the gradual erosion of the ethical norms that had guided the movement for independence and the coming to terms with cynicism and real politics. In the play, the symbols have a myriad of origin as well as forms. He used symbols to represent universal thoughts and emotions. His use of various symbols in the play such as Chess, Aziz and Aazam, Prayer, Python, Daulatabad, Rose and birds like Vulture add greater emotional and associative significance. The play Tughlaq is itself symbolic. It is not only historical but can be seen as a symbol of the contemporary political situation in India. Tughlaq reflects the chaos, disillusionment and prevailing corruption in independent India. The Indian government's policies are echoed by those of Tughlaq. It is a play of the sixties, and reflects as no other play perhaps does the political mood of disillusionment which followed the Nehru era of idealism in the country.

Girish Karnad uses relevant symbols in an effective way to enrich the literary beauty. It helps to understand the theme in a realistic way. Yayati was a Puranic king and the son of King Nahusha and his wife Viraja. He was one of the ancestors of Pandavas. He had five brothers: Yati, Samyati, Aiyati, Viyati and Kriti. He had two wives, Devayani and Sharmishtha. Devayani was the daughter of Shukracharya, the priest of the demons. Sharmishtha was the daughter of the Demon King Vrishparva. Sharmishtha was a friend and servant of Devayani. After hearing of his relationship with second wife Sharmishtha from Devayani, her father, sage Shukracharya, cursed Yayati to old age in the prime of life, but later allowed him to exchange it with his son, Puru. His story finds mention in the Mahabharata-Adi Parva and also Bhagavata Purana. Devayani was the daughter of Sage Shukracharya, the guru of all Asuras, she had been cursed by sage Kacha that she would not marry another Brahmana. Sage Shukra was living in his palace. At that time the Asura king was Vrushaparva, whose daughter Sharmishtha was close friend of Devayani.

One day, as Devayani and Sharmishtha along with the hoard of servants were amusing themselves in a park, King Yayati happened to pass by. Devayani had been secretly in love with Yayati, as he had once rescued her from a dry well. Devayani and Sharmishtha introduced themselves to him, and Devayani confessed to being in love with him and asked him to marry her. According to the story, Yayati enjoyed the sensual pleasures for a "thousand years" and later realized the futility and said, "Know this for certain ... not all the food, wealth and women of the world can appease the lust of a single man of uncontrolled senses. Craving for sense-pleasures is not removed but aggravated by indulgence even as ghee poured into fire increases it....One who aspires for peace and happiness should instantly renounce craving and seek that which neither grows old, nor ceases even when the body ages." Yayati then gave back the youth to his son Puru, receiving his old age in return. He renounced the world, and retired into a forest and according to the story, attained the lord through his spiritual practices. Gender issues seem to be suffused in most of the plays of Girish Karnad. In his plays, Karnad very dexterously pictures the condition of a typical Indian female, ruled by the patriarchal order bounded by tradition, but whose spirit remains unbounded. Karnad has borrowed the myth of Yayati from the "Adiparva" of the Mahabharata. Yayati re-tells the age-old story of the king who in his longing for eternal youth does not hesitate to usurp the youth and vitality of his son. Karnad takes liberty with the myth and weaves complex dimensions into the plot borrowed from the Mahabharata. To the mythical story of Yayati he adds new characters and alters the story-line so as to deepen its connotative richness which gives it contemporary appeal. The two novel characters introduced by Karnad in the plot are, Puru's wife Chitrlekha and the maid confidant, Swarnalata. Karnad invests new meaning and significance for contemporary life and reality by exploring the king's motivations. In the Mahabharata, Yayati understands the nature of desire itself and realizes that fulfilment neither diminishes nor eliminates desire. In

the drama, Karnad makes Yayati confront the horrifying consequences of not being able to relinquish desire.

Hayavadana is one of Karnad's most remarkable works. The plot of Hayavadana comes from Kathasaritsagara, an ancient compilation of stories in Sanskrit. The central event in the play-the story of Devadatta and Kapila- is based on a tale from the Vet-alapanchavimshika, but he has borrowed it through Thomas Mann's retelling of the story in The Transported Heads. The Sanskrit tale, told by a ghost to an adventurous king, gains a further mock-heroic dimension in Mann's version. The original story poses a moral problem whereas Mann uses it to ridicule the mechanical notion of life which differentiates between body and soul. He ridicules the philosophy which holds the head superior to the body. The human body, Mann argues, is a device for the completion of human destiny. Even the transposition of heads did not liberate the protagonists from the psychological limits imposed by nature. Karnad's play poses a different problem, that of human identity in a world of tangled relationships. When the play opens, Devadatta and Kapila are the closer of friends-'one mind, one heart', as the Bhagavata describes them. Devadatta is a man of intellect, Kapila, a 'man of the body'. Their relations get complicated when Devadatta marries Padmini. The first level, which forms the 'exterior' plot, is that of Hayavadana's story. Hayavadana, a man with a horse's head, is trying to seek 'completeness' by fully emerging as a man. He is the offspring of a Celestial Being and a Princess, who seem to loathe his appearance. Hayavadana thereby becomes symbolic of a fragmented identity, which is very relevant today. Karnad explores existentialism by intensifying the motif of incompleteness by a broken tusk and a cracked belly - whichever way you look at him he is the embodiment of imperfection, of in-completion.

On the second level, which is the primary plot, is that of two friends, Kapila and Devadatta, who dreams despondently of Padmini. Karnad also depicts the caste restrictions that one has and how one is confined to the so-called 'caste occupations'. Devadatta is a learned Brahmin, writing poetry and is physically unfit, whereas Kapila, a Kshatriya, is a wrestler and is physically stronger. Although Kapila is attracted to Padmini when he meets her, he nonetheless arranges the marriage between Devadatta and Padmini. The plot eventually thickens to when Padmini starts to 'fall' for Kapila merely for the physical strength that she finds lacking in her husband, Devadatta. The existentialist crisis occurs when Devadatta and Kapila's heads are transposed to each other's body. This causes the identity conflict to become more immense for both, as Kapila retreats to the forest unable to confront the problem logically. The importance that one places body over the mind is explicitly expressed by Devadatta, who now has Kapila's body, "I'd always thought one had to use one's brain while wrestling or fencing or swimming. But this body does not wait for thoughts, it acts." We see that Padmini emphasizes the physicality of the body first, which is echoed by many of those today. Eventually, she finds herself in intense euphoria when she combines the head of Devadatta and the body of Kapila thereby according herself a high degree of sexual freedom.

Kapila falls in love with Padmini and she too starts drifting towards him. The friends kill themselves and in a scene, hilariously comic but at the same time full of dramatic connotation, Padmini transposes their heads, giving Devadatta Kapila's body and Kapila Devadatta's. As a result Padmini gets the desired 'Man'. Kali understood each individuals moral fibre and was indifferent than the usual stereotypical portrayal of god and goddesses. The result is a confusion of identities which reveals the ambiguous nature of human personality. Initially Devadatta- actually the head of Devadatta on Kapila's body- behaves differently from what he was before. But slowly he changes to his former self. So does Kapila, faster than Devadatta. But there is a difference. Devadatta stops reading texts, does not write poetry while Kapila is haunted by the memories in Devadatta's body.

The play is an interesting read, with humour interjected at the appropriate places to lighten the mood as when Kali wakes up from a long sleep. Hayavadana is able to engage the reader throughout the play and is an easy read. By setting an Indian myth or folk tale or even an incident from the Mahabharat or Ramayana in a very contemporary and light manner through traditional Indian Theatre forms, Karnad has made literature easily accessible. He has blended issues such as love, identity and sexuality with folk culture and his imagination. He provides us with a glimpse of the past as well as its relevance in understanding the contemporary world. On the whole, the play is enjoyable to read and pleasantly relatable.

Tughlaq, his best loved play, established Karnad as one of the most promising playwrights in the country. A large number of his Kanada plays have been translated into English. His first play, *Yahati*, was written neither in English nor in his mother tongue Konkani. Instead, it was composed in his adopted language Kannada. The play, which chronicled the adventures of mythical characters from the Mahabharata, was an instant success and was immediately translated and staged in several other Indian languages. His best loved play, however, would come three years later. By the time *Tughlaq*, a compelling allegory on the Nehruvian era, was performed by the National School of Drama, Karnad had established himself as one of the most promising playwrights in the country. For four decades, Karnad has continued to compose top-notch plays, often using history and mythology to tackle contemporary themes.

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*Yayati* is examined as a play, using the Hindu myth that glorifies the philosophy of individual's performance of duty and acceptance of responsibilities, reinterpreting the ancient myth from the Mahabharata to suit the modern context. India's hoary tradition and rich culture serves as the basis for folk tales. Karnad draws from such rich sources, abundantly available in some of our regional and Sanskrit classics, and moulds them into the plays *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala*. He succeeds in making silken purses of sow's ears!

History is contextualised in *Tughlaq* that brings to mind the social and political compulsions during the Nehruvian era. In these plays, Karnad employs the indigenous dramatic form and Indian myths eschewing the western concept of the theatre and European lifestyle. For example, unlike the drawing room which is the centre of the western stage, the kitchen is where all intimate discussions are held and important decisions taken. His very first play *Yayati*, written while studying at Oxford, is taken from a story in the great Hindu epic *The Mahabharata*. It recounts the events that follow a son's attempt to rescue his father from a curse, thus throwing the entire family into a moral dilemma. There is a strong sense of the past in Karnad's work, and he borrows extensively from Indian mythology and history. His play *Tughlaq*, for instance, shows the transformation of the old Mughal emperor *Mohammad bin Tughlaq* from a sensitive ruler into an unjust oppressor.

Karnad is a noted communicator and a person of wide accomplishments and interests. Based on his serious explorations of folklore, mythology and history, the subject of his plays reflect the problems and challenges of contemporary life, and endeavour to forge a link between the past and the present. The creative intellectual that he is, he obviously views the subjects of his plays from his own perspective, develops them in the crucible of his own imagination and personal experiences, and employs them as a medium to communicate his own-independent and original-feelings, thoughts and interpretations. For sure, with the arrival of Karnad, English drama in India acquired a typical Indian identity with the rejuvenation of Indian myths.

The view is "Apart from the Indian setting, culture, philosophical and religious beliefs, historical incidents, sociological and anthropological survey with the enunciation of contemporary realism, Karnad's plays appear to be monumental creations with rich and vibrant, multi-layered suggestive and ambivalent meanings. Almost every aspect of the plays is examined minutely, drawing support from all the criticism and scholarship available on the subject. It is also notable that Karnad being a modern Indian English Playwright has tried to preserve the oldest treatise on theatre focusing on the codes of literature.

Myth is fundamental, the dramatic representation of our deepest instinctual life..., capable of many configurations, upon which all particular opinions and attitudes depend on the myths take their shapes from the cultural environments in which they grow. It is a dynamic factor everywhere in human society; it transcends time, uniting the past traditional modes of belief with the present current values and reaching towards the future spiritual and cultural aspirations. He also endorses a view and argues that it is "the story of loss and regaining of identity". This loss and regaining of identity is well exemplified by Karnad in *Hayavadana* through the incompleteness of *Hayavadana* who holds the central key of the play. Karnad in his plays presents an amalgam of facts and fantasy by combining and exploring the dramatic potential of the ancient Indian myths, legends and folk traditions.

*Samskara* marked Karnad's entry into filmmaking. He wrote the screenplay and played the lead role in the film, an adaptation of an anti-caste novel of the same name by U.R. Ananthamurthy. The story is set in a street in a small village called *Durvasapura* in the Western Ghats of Karnataka. A majority of the people who live in the street belong to the community of *Madhwas* a Brahmin community. The people who stay here have a traditional mindset and strictly follow the rules defined by their religion. Two of the main characters in the story are *Praneshacharya* and *Naranappa*. *Praneshacharya* is a devout Brahmin who has completed his Vedic education at *Varanasi* and has returned to *Durvasapura* and is considered as the leader of the Brahmin community of his village and the surrounding ones. His main goal is to attain liberation the *moksha* and he is willing to go to any length to achieve it. To remain focused on his goal and as an act of self-sacrifice, he marries an invalid woman and hence remains celibate. However, the Brahmin principles also stipulate that a non-Brahmin cannot cremate the body of a Brahmin.

*Praneshacharya*, being the leader, is responsible for finding the answer to this difficult problem. He reads the holy books, but they do not provide any solution. He then goes to a temple to pray to God and spends a whole day there. Disappointed at not being able to solve the problem, he trudges back home. On his way, he encounters *Chandri*. He is mesmerised by her beauty and when he wakes up in the middle of the night, he finds himself lying on *Chandri's* lap. *Chandri* rushes home, finds that *Naranappa's* body has started to rot, gets it cremated in secrecy, and leaves *Durvasapura*. *Praneshacharya* is left in a piquant situation on whether he has to reveal his immoral act to the people of the village or keep quiet about it. Feeling guilty, he leaves the village but the guilt never leaves him. Finally deciding to own up his act, he returns to the village and the story ends here. It's left to the imagination of the viewer on whether *Praneshacharya* owns up or not

In 1994, he won the *Sahitya Akademi Award* for his social drama, *Taledanda* in 1990, and the *Jnanpith Award* in 1999 for his contribution to modern Indian drama. Karnad does not succeed fully in investing the basic conflict in the play with the required intensity, but his technical experiment with an indigenous dramatic form here is a triumph which has opened up fresh lines of fruitful exploration for the Indian English playwright. He has been the voice of *APJ Abdul Kalam*, former President of India, in the audiobook of *Kalam's* autobiography by *Charkha Audiobooks 'Wings of Fire'*. In a way Karnad has shown to the world theatre community, how our past and present can coalesce to give a direction to theatre activities and how this fusion can add significance and meaning to our present day existence. Karnad's plays have always carried social messages. At a time when most of his peers were switching to the more-lucrative film industry, Karnad steadfastly stuck to writing about social reform for the theatre.

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