

## MYTH RITUALS AND TECHNIQUES IN THE PLAYS OF GIRISH KARNAD

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### Abstract

*Girish Karnad's plays flourish with the elements of myth. In this paper the researcher tried to present the handling of myth, ritual and techniques in the plays of Naga-Mandala, Hayavadana & The fire and the Rain of Girish Karnad. The main concern is to find out how far the mythical, Ritualistic elements & the techniques have been exploited by the dramatist to portray the sociocultural problems and the response of the society. In all his plays- be mythical, historical or legendary - Karnad's approach is modern. In his play, Hayavadana, he reinforces the central problem of human existence in a world of tangled relationships. In Hayavadana, he skillfully uses the principles and theme of Indian mythology, folk tales and folk theatre-masks, curtains, dolls, the story-within-a-story—to create a bizarre world of incomplete individuals, indifferent gods, dolls that speak and children who cannot - world which appears to be indifferent to the desires and frustrations, joys and sorrows of human beings. In the play Fire and the Rain the author showcases on the passionately opposing elements; the rains of human love and sacrifices. It abounds in its hard-woven texture the riches of psychology, the hate and the jealousy of man against man, father against son, wife against husband and so on. It is concluded that although the ending of the plays is not within the orthodoxy of Indian epic texts and Hindu philosophy, it can be seen in the cultural context of Indian woman of today who seeks to fulfill her needs and aspirations. This Paper has made an attempt to study how successfully Karnad has used myth, folk tales and various other techniques to represent his theme in his plays.*

### Introduction

In Indian literary history, myth and folklore have always kept prominent positions. The two epics Ramayana and Mahabharata as well as the Purana have been an unending resource for literature as well as plays. But after the advent of British rule, the themes of Indian Drama changed due to increased knowledge of the option of use of themes other than myth, and drama moved its concentration towards social and political themes. Myths, legends and folk forms function as a kind of cultural anesthesia and they have been used for introducing and eliminating cultural pathogens such as caste and gender distinctions and religious fanaticism. Girish Karnad makes use of myths and folk forms in his plays to exorcise socio-cultural evils. He even goes further and deflates the concept of chastity. He seems to suggest that matriarchy, the lost paradise of mankind, will come again. In all his plays- be mythical, historical or legendary - Karnad's approach is modern. In his play, Hayavadana, he reinforces the central problem of human existence in a world of tangled relationships.

### Myth & Rituals in Nagamandala

The play is about Rani, representing a classic Hindu wife. Appanna, a rich young man of village, marries her and brings her to his house when she reaches womanhood. After taking his bath and dine, he locks her in and goes to his concubine. He does not care for her feelings and considers her a subhuman slave who is to serve him with utmost loyalty. He treats her with the contempt of a typical male chauvinist. She feels very lonely, frightened and miserable. When she expresses her fear and loneliness, he ruthlessly disregards and dominates her feelings. She is literally imprisoned in the house and it is almost a solitary confinement for her husband Appanna orders, "She won't talk to anyone. And no one needs talk to her." She is deprived of the affection of her as her fellow human beings and the knowledge of the outer world. So, her

personality remains underdeveloped. She is just a child mentally. She daydreams that she is taken by an eagle to her parents who caress her affectionately. She moans in her sleep for her parents.

Besides Rani, Appanna has a mistress whom he visits every night and comes to Rani only at noon. His treatment with Rani is monstrous and animalistic. He keeps her locked up inside the house so that she cannot express her grievance to anyone. Her sexual desires are neglected. She is frequently beaten. Her emotions are crushed mercilessly. And socially, she is not allowed to communicate with anyone outside the house. Rani's dreams and desires are shattered. She turns voiceless and choiceless. She does not find emotional, social or sexual satisfaction from the institution of marriage. Appanna's inhuman treatment is witnessed on the first day of their marriage when instead of being with Rani, Appanna goes to meet his mistress and locks Rani up in the house. He says, "...I'll be back tomorrow at noon. Keep my lunch ready. I shall eat and go". He doesn't even tell her the reason. Neither has he told her where he is going. Because of the patriarchy conditioned mind, she even does not gather courage to question his night visit. Her upbringing in patriarchal setup has made her timid, shy and submissive. She has lost her capacity to question. As a result, she fails to gather courage and confidence to question the exploitative and oppressive system.

Women do not have freedom to question. However, they are questioned in case they deviate slightly from the prescribed path of patriarchal system. For Appanna, there is no social, ethical or established taboo. He is free from all limitations and his actions are not subjected to questions. Karnad very ingeniously raises the issue that our conformist society and social laws insist loyalty and dedication from a wife even to a disloyal and heartless husband. Rani is always locked by Appanna in the house. This lock and key is the symbolical representation.

Girish Karnad makes use of myths, rituals 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 part beliefs found in these myths. Human values and behavior seem to follow well set norms. Karnad provides us with the glimpse of the part as past as well as its relevance to an understanding of the contemporary world.

### **Myth and ritual in Hayavadana**

In his play, Hayavadana, he emphasizes on the central problem of human existence in a world of tangled relationships. In Hayavadana, he skillfully uses the morality and theme of Indian mythology, folk tales and folk theatre- masks, curtains, dolls, the story-within-a-story—to create a bizarre world of incomplete individuals, apathetic gods, dolls that speak and children who cannot - world which appears to be indifferent to the desires and disappointments, joys and sorrows of human beings.

The main plot of the play begins with Kapila, who finds his best friend Devadatta despondently dreaming about Padmini. Kapila, who is a wrestler whereas Devadatta is a scholarly Brahmin and poet but is physically weak. Kapila goes to arrange Devadatta's marriage to her and realizes that Padmini is as clever as she is beautiful. Although Kapila is attracted to her, he arranges the match, and Devadatta and Padmini are married. After the wedding, Padmini finds herself getting attracted to the strong-bodied Kapila, and Devadatta is consumed by jealousy. He felt bad on the act of his wife as he decided to offer himself to Kali, but Kapila too is not left behind. The two men behead themselves in the Kali temple. The pregnant Padmini, afraid that she might be blamed for their deaths, then decides to kill herself. However, Kali stops her and offers to bring the men back to life. Padmini rearranges the heads so that Devadatta's head is on Kapila's body and vice versa and asks the goddess to do her magic. The presence of goddess Kali reveals the religious sentiment prevalent in Indian society, culture and psychology.

Karnad shows that the individual's identity depends on the materialism of the mind/body. In trying to identify exclusively with mind and body, both of which are basically physical, the characters end up feeling confused and bothered. The play illustrates that while a mystery in terms of theoretical understanding, completion can be known through direct experience. *Hayavadana* most effectively subverts the accepted notion of the superiority of head over body, brain over brawn, with unreasonable human hopes and aspirations. Human beings have not yet reached those heights where they can dispense with all sorts of symbols and rituals and

devote themselves to purely abstract principles. Rituals give a concrete shape to the abstract spiritual ideals and add colors and zest to life.

### **Myth and Ritual in Fire and the Rain**

The word Agni carries connotations of holiness. Male in Kannada means rain, pure and simple, while Mattu stands for the connective 'and'. Thus, the literal meaning of the phrase 'Agni Mattu Male' is Fire and the Rain. The story is intensely embedded in mythology, ritualistic atmosphere and psychological significances. Karnad's rebuilding of the past release the contemporary consciousness from the restraints of the present. The play "The Fire and the Rain" is thought provoking and morality oriented. The fire is used as a myth. Agni is worshiped as god in Indian Mythology. God of Rain is also given importance "Indra", as all the characters in play are trying to please Indra to get rain for the World. The mythical and symbolic plan of this play is designed in such a way that it links with the original myth of Mahabharata for displaying culture and lack of concern towards the relationship of the humans. The main concept is that knowledge and skills should be obtained by proper education from a guru. Exceptions in this will lead to unnecessary issues and consequences. This concept is explained by the character of Arvasu as god Indra is educating in this regard.

The prologue begins with a ritual of a seven year long sacrifice done by the king to satisfy(propitiate) Indra, The god of rain. Paravasu is appointed as the chief priest of fire sacrifice. The Yajna ceremony is the principal setting for performing the vedic rituals to god Indra. The whole play revolves round the yajna as it is considered to be the holy instrument for meeting Gods with men on earth. This helps mankind by performing it can fulfill one's ambition. Karnad uses Yajna to obtain God Indra's blessings in the form of rain.

The myth of yavakri" which Karnad uses in the play provides ample scope for the portrayal of the diagonally opposite aspects of human desires. Karnad has taken more liberties with the myth to make it a play encompassing many aspects of the modern life. As Karnad says,

A myth seems complete in itself and yet when examined in detail, contains subconscious signals which lead you onto another myth which in turn will act as a conduit to a third one while illuminating the one you started with (The Fire and The Rain, 69). Thus the myth and ritual, deals with a symbolical fire which burns passion, lust, revenge and betrayal transforms to give a rain of love, compassion and harmony. Karnad uses a minor myth taken from The Mahabharata to extract a difficult concept of meaning and significance.

### **Techniques in the Plays of Girish Karnad Symbolism, Imagery and Irony**

Art should be employed as a supplement to nature for, in co-operation, the two bring about perfection. Wellek also, in his Theory of Literature, says that imagery, symbols and irony are viewed for the most part as ornaments or decorations. They are, therefore, studied as detachable segments of the works in which they appear. They bridge or bind together old divine components 'form' and 'matter', Poetic language is permeated with imagery with the simplest figures and mythological ones. Imagery should not be confused with actual, sensuous, visual image-making. Karnad being influenced by poetics of both the eastern and western tradition has used irony, imagery, and metaphors effectively in appropriate places thus achieving success on the stage. Human beings born in this world are always yearning and desiring to attain fulfilment in their journey on earth. The characters in Karnad's plays highlight the implicit irony in human existence and embody the search of identity in a world of tangled relationships which forms the basic theme of the plots. It is Yayati who is in search of his lost youth and Padmini is desirous of a perfect husband and Yavakri is in futile pursuit of true knowledge to be attained within a short period of time - all his characters are seen in a vain pursuit of their journey of life. Yayati aspires to remain young always. The youth symbolises energy and strength with immortality. Desirous of sensuous pleasures he marries Devayani, the daughter of Sage Sukracharya, who could give him the boon of immortality. In Hayavadana, Devadatta is the symbol of man's intellect, while Kapila symbolises man's physical faculties. Devadatta is literally, 'God given' and Kapila is 'tawny, reddish' and is also the name of the famous sage who was the founder of the Samkhya School of Indian Philosophy. This has ironic significance when applied to the humble ironsmith's son. Padmini, as

the name suggests, is a special type of feminine beauty, but ironically she does not bring prosperity to the two friends with whom her fate is cast. Her name also makes her the eternal female. The symbolic core of *Hayavadana* comprises the philosophic crisis of estrangement between mind and body. In the context of America—the land of diasporic immigrants disembarking off ships and distant civilizations, and natives forcibly diasporized to reservations and social margins—this becomes the predicament of disjuncture at a more social level. The bodily presence of any given individual in America may indeed be tangibly located somewhere in its bountiful topography, but the soul may well be surfing on tidal waves of murky memories breaking the shores of genetic inheritance and the collective unconscious.

Karnad uses the elements of folk theatre to great advantage, and combines the symbolic and the absurd quite effectively within the limits of theatrical credibility. A characteristic feature of the Indian ethos is the effortless bringing together on the same plane of the human, the supernatural and the inanimate worlds, the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’, being secured by endowing supernatural beings and inanimate creatures with human follies and foibles. The dolls are jealous of the baby and watch the growing flabbiness of the post transposition of Devadatta’s and Padmini’s sinful dreams of Kapila with ironic glee. Unlike western realistic theatre, there is no attempt to present the dramatic action as slice of life; the fact of dramatic illusion is stressed as in Brecht’s epic theatre.

In *Naga-Mandala*, “Rani’s predicament poignantly reflects the human need to live by fictions and half-truths. Her search for truth finally goes beyond a point and hence, tumbles down the whole edifice of day-to-day life”, says Surendran in his *Rani’s Predicament in Nagamandala*. This is so because she has to do two roles of safe-guarding the small cobra and her family. Karnad builds his plays around an image/motif. As the play progresses, the image/motif, through its waves of connotations grows into a metaphor. Finally the whole play develops an extension of this metaphor; and the play, in turn, becomes a metaphor for something outside the play.

The play, *The Fire and the Rain*, as analysed by Karnad, is that ‘Agni’ the Sanskrit word for fire, carries the connotations of holiness and the ritual status of ceremony. ‘Male’ is a Kannada word meaning rain, pure and simple. ‘Mattu’ means and. Thus, the phrase ‘Agni Mattu Male’, in addition to counter pointing two physical elements normally seen as antagonistic, also sets up several oppositions: between Indo-Aryan (Sanskrit) and a Dravidian (Kannada) language, between the national and regional points of view, between the classical ‘marga’ and the less exalted ‘desi’ traditions, between the elevated and the mundane, and even perhaps, the sacred and the secular (1998, 63). The title is significant as it shows the various aspects of themes dealt with in the play. Sacrifices also form a part of such religious practice as seen in the eradication 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*. Karnad’s plays are not only good literature but also good theatre; the plays harmonise at the intellectual, symbolic, allegoric levels and external dramatic action with the proper balancing of theatrical and literary commitments.

### **Masks, Costumes and Characterisation**

In *Naga-Mandala*, the Naga assumes the shape of Appanna and transforms Rani from an innocent, frightened, dreamy girl to a mature woman. The magical roots given by the blind woman, Kuruduva help in transforming the Naga into Appanna. With the ingress of the snake into her life, her transformation begins. The Naga comes at night to meet Rani when her husband locks her in. Rani is naïve, innocent and rigid and is instructed by the Naga not to ask questions about anything that happens. Rani is blind to the reality but her blindness seems, as quoted by Savita Goel, “. . . ambiguous. She is unable to comprehend how the distant and brutal husband who visits her at midday transforms into a sensuous lover at night” (1986, 113). Rani says, “You talk so nicely at night. But during the day I only have to open my mouth and you hiss like a . . . stupid snake” (II, 22). She abides by the rules imposed by the patriarchal society and only when she is pregnant does the real problem dawn upon her. Her husband accuses her of being disloyal as he is very sure that she has found a lover, “Aren’t you ashamed to admit it, you harlot? I locked you in and yet you managed to find a lover!” (II, 33) Rani is surprised as she could not comprehend as to what had happened. And, finally she had to accept the words of Naga, and she

undertakes the snake ordeal to prove herself; she confesses, swearing by the King Cobra that she has not touched any one of the male sex, except her husband and this snake.

Karnad, in *Hayavadana* or in any other play, does not specify the costume of his character, because he leaves it to suit the director or actor and it is this marked respect for the directors or producers that makes his text an excellent theatre. Items of clothing have specific connotations but these can be easily changed, extended or inverted with the change in the wearer and the situation. Costumes act as a loaded signifier. In many ancient settings, many kinds of clothing, head gears, gas styles, or masks were rendered for particular castes, ranks, ethnic groups, and regeneration. Drama had ready material to suit its own purpose. They could then be made to reflect the essential meaning of a persona and its ethos. The same aim was fulfilled by the use of masks in Greek theatre.

Transformation is related to the supernatural. The crossing of boundaries is perilous, and a magical event. It might end in death or destruction or unhappiness. Anybody who transgresses must pay the price. Naga dies once his transfiguration is revealed. He commits suicide and dies like a true lover strangling himself by the tresses of Rani's hair. Thus, he becomes a lover's martyr, and asserts the sublimate, purity, and dignity of his love. Naga's death leads to the revelation or enlightening of Rani to an otherwise unnoticed reality and it is this, that makes her decide that her son should cremate the Naga and every year the rituals should be performed.

Many critics have analysed Karnad's use of characters as symbols and types. Karnad himself says that the characters do not represent the complex psychological entity but an ethical archetype. Raykar is of the opinion that Karnad has made the characters generic, i.e. representative. Padma Malini and Subhash Chandran while analyzing the characters of *Naga-Mandala* have also agreed with Karnad and have explained further that archetypes are deeply buried in the collective unconscious and they express themselves through symbols (July, 1998, 34; July-Dec. 1997, 94).

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