

# RE-INVENTING TRADITION: A STUDY OF GIRISH KARNADS PLAYS

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## ABSTRACT

Postmodernist erasure of boundaries has made humanities across cultures a seamless corpus of knowledge interface Euro-centricism, hitherto locking the abilities to engage with the other has been relocated in the epiphany moment of facing the other oriental epistemic discourse too reflected the same a priori delimitation of knowledge, for instance, Radhakrishnan Commission 1948 proposing a distinction between fact/nature event/society and values/spirit as subject matter of natural science, social science and humanities respectively. The time now has come to foreground, as Bakhtin would have it, the necessity of comparative dialogic to establish cross-cultural dialogic to eliminate homogenization of discourses and to deconstruct epistemic dominance of occidental knowledge. Similarly the Orientalist paradigm should change into more specifically, South-South dialogue of humanities and reconfiguration of the Asian problematic of singularities in humanities. The need for a shift a rethinking, to create what Derrida calls Transformed Humanities, New Humanities is absolutely imperative to reach a comprehensive understanding of mankind in general.

**Key Words:** Humanities, Culture, Tradition, mythology, Folk elements

The theme “humanities across cultures” immediately stokes an idea to select GirishKarnad’s plays which are a gamut of diverse personalities portrayed with various back-grounds and cultures, hence signifying different aspects of humanity. The aim of this paper “re-inventing tradition” sprouts from multiple elements used in most of his plays; the essence in all these elements is “tradition”. Karnad tried to reinvigorate traditional characters, hence the title “re-inventing tradition” aptly applicable in the context of his plays. From his very first play, Yahati (1961), which was written neither in English nor in his mother tongue Konkani, this theme is vivid. The play, which chronicled the adventures of mythical characters from the Mahabharata, one of the ancient traditions and cultures, was an instant success and was immediately translated and staged in several other Indian languages. 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 fuelling ideas on traditional culture and therefore inherent humanity through them.

If mythology has the power of depicting various cultures representing humanities and bringing tradition to the foreground, then Karnad has used such mythological and folk elements to their fullest. In his plays, there are frequent references to Vedic literature, to songs, to dance forms, and to musical instruments and also to people connected with these activities. Most of the requirements of the early dramatic forms thus appeared in the form of ballads or mere story telling passed on through generations, served as traditional wealth.

Many contemporary Indian dramatists attempted to cross cultural boundaries across time, going “back to the past” in a metamorphic sense to retrieve ancient traditions by creating them in their dramatic productions and the last few decades have undergone translations from the regional languages in English. The epics and classics when translated in English becomes an important part in Indian English literature. Translated texts when taught to the students, increased their creativity and English translations popularized the Indian tradition among the scholars. The translations have forged a link between the east and west, north and south and they contributed to the growing richness of contemporary creative consciousness and hence enriched humanity. At the same time various strands of Indian culture are juxtaposed and the context of some is drawn from Indian mythological episodes, folktales, historical events, and contemporary social situations which are abundant in Karnad’s plays like Hayavadana and NagaMandala.

Girish Karnad is a major dramatist who has significantly gone back to the roots of Indian myth, tradition and culture and has re-created 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 these 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, taking inspiration from mythology and folklore.

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. Karnad’s first play Yahati is a story taken from the Mahabharata. The mythical story is a tale of responsibilities, sacrifice and self-realization. The play The Fire and the Rain is also taken from (the Forest canto of) Mahabharata. It is based on the myth of Yavakiri and includes also the conflict between Indra, Vishwarupa and Vritra. Karnad’s plays, Bali – The Sacrifice and Flowers: A Dramatic Monologue is mythical tales taken from a Kannada and a Sanskrit epic respectively. All folklore is religious, often based on animism because the primitive imagination extends its vision from the natural, in which it is steeped and with which it is saturated, therefore exhibiting primitive humanity.

Karnad’s Hayavadana and Nagamandala source their origin from the folklore tradition of India. Hayavadana is based on Thomas Mann’s translation of the Sanskrit “Vetal Panchavimashati”, which forms part of Kshemendra’s Brihat Katha Manjaria and Somadeva’s Kathasaritsagara. Karnad’s Nagamandala is inspired by the snake myths prevalent in South India. It is a dramatization of two folktales of Karnataka. In fact, Naga Cult is widely practiced in many parts of India. So in a sense, Karnad has reinvented traditions in these two plays.

Nothing displays various cultures more than our own Indian History. Karnad has also written plays that owe their source to Indian history. Weaving his tales around legendary figures drawn from various periods of Indian national history, Karnad has given them a contemporary interpretation. According to Nietzsche, “History is necessary to the living man in three different ways: in relation to his action and struggle, his conservatism and reverence, his suffering and his desire for deliverance”. In other words, the past helps as to comprehend the present. Karnad’s Tughlaq was inspired by the historical character of Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq, the fourteenth century sultan of Delhi. In Tale-Danda, Karnad takes his inspiration

from a historical movement that took place in Kalyan in Karnataka in 1168 A.D. Basavananna, the great Sharana poet-saint and his movement to eradicate caste differences, forms the main theme of the play. Such plays help the present generation to understand India's rich history and at the same time, infuse a sense of earlier culture and tradition.

A closer at both the plays: Nagamandala and Hayavadana, further confirms the fact that how traditional folk elements play a significant role in Karnad's plays. Nagamandala of Girish Karnad presents the deplorable state of women in Indian Society. The play is written in two acts with a prologue. The playwright says in the prologue that man is a bundle of weakness, he is either not aware of them or he cannot get rid of them. The man fails to realize the significance of this prediction. He takes it literally and breaks into a laughter because he thinks that keeping awake one night is not a task, failing to realize that keeping awake will rather be a herculean task for a man who dozes off the month, which can be the last night of his life also, he awakes up to the fact that he has to do something to avert his death. He comes to dilapidated temple with an unidentifiable statue to pass his last night. But this temple is a favourite haunt of the flames that come from different houses so exchange notes on the present conditions of the society. The first flames come from the house of a miserly fellow who retires to bed early to save spending on lamp oil. The second tells in which the old mother has died neglected and third flame tells about the story of Rani whose predicament reflects the human need to live by fiction and half-truths. The drama is enacted in a temple at night, in the presence of three naked flames, in front of a man cursed to die within a few hours. The new flame has a different story to tell. The old mistress has seen young women dressed in a Sari coming out of the room in, which her husband is sleeping. However this story also comes to the temple and desires that it should be heard by somebody who can pass it on to others. Flames cannot do it because they are non-living objects. Thus the prologue describes the aberrations of man and woman to give the message that men in general are slaves of passion and are asleep to the hard realities of life.

According to Karnad the sources material of Nagamandala is from a folktale, which he heard from A. K. Ramanujan. The folktale is about a prince whose extreme mistrust of women prevented him for loving any woman, and whose encounter with a woman's desire for love has Ramanujan writes about these tales as many as forty variants. The central theme of all these tales is, Ramanujan remarks: "the narcissism" of the self-involved hero, "who undergoes a test put to him by the wife, in order to survive. The psychological inadequacy that the young man is caught in prevents his self-transcendence, causing acute lack of understanding and communication between him and a woman.

The existential problems found throughout Karnad's play are more comprehensive. Nagamandala is not only about the male difficulty to trust and love women. It seem to be about the socialization process of both men and women, particularly in the Indian marriage which is more often than not, the first experience of sex and love for most people. Act I presents the story of a young girl named Rani, who is the only child of her parents. She is also called Rani because she is the queen of long tresses. When her hair was tied up in a knot, it was as though a black cobra lay curled on the nape of her neck. Her father finds a match for her and gets her married to a young man who is rich and his parents are dead. Rani's husband Appanna, proud and jealous, ill-treats her, coming home only during lunch and staying away with a concubine at night. Kurudavva a best friend of Appanna's mother is blind but her regard for her deceased friend outweighs her disability. She tells her son Kappanna. "He keeps his wife locked up like a caged bird". Kurudavva is moved with pity. She asks Rani not

to worry and sends Kappanna to bring the roots, which produce the magical quality of love in the heart of the man that eats them. Kappanna gives the roots to Rani with the instruction. "Grind it into a nice paste and feed it to your husband and watch the results. Once he smells you he won't go sniffing after that bitch. He will make you a wife instantly". According to Kappanna's instruction she pours the paste into the curry. She pours this curry into the ant-hill. As she turned out of the ant-hill a cobra lifts its hood, hissing out of the ant-hill. Thus the cobra comes to love Rani. The second Act presents the love story of Rani and the cobra. Appanna has brought a dog to keep the blind Kurudavva away from his wife. The dog is tied to the door. The cobra assumes the shape of Appanna to make love with Rani. He comes every night when Appanna is away. Rani gets confused on observing the nature of Appanna. Appanna becomes angry when he comes to know of the pregnancy of Rani. When Rani is in the position of proving her loyalty and chastity to the villager, she takes the cobra in her hand. The cobra does not bite her, but slides up her shoulder and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head. The crowd gets stunned while the elders declare her as a God, a divine being. Appanna asks her forgiveness and takes her fondly into his arms. Rani gives birth to a beautiful son, but Appanna knows the fact that he is not the father of the son. The cobra, could not bear the separation, ties a tress of Rani's hair around his neck and strangles itself to death hiding in her hair. The dead cobra falls to the ground when Appanna combs her hair, Rani who now understands all about the cobra. Appanna accepts the wishes of Rani as he takes her as an incarnation of the Goddess. The playwright's vision of the human and non-human worlds and role of tradition is revealed in this play.

Karnad's way of storytelling is quite different from other dramatists keeping the soul of his subject matters intact. His play Hayavadana begins with stage directions. When the curtain rises, the whole stage is empty except one chair and one table in the back portion of the stage. Bhagawata and the musicians sit on the table and a mask of Ganesha is placed on the chair. The prayer to Ganesha, sung by Bhagawata and the musicians make a proper beginning in Hindu tradition. Bhagawata starts telling about the introduction of the situation, place, characters and action. He introduces Devadatta, Kapila and the city of Dharampure, ruled by King Dharameshela. Devadatta is fair in colour. He has proved his talent in debate on logic and love. He is the only son of the ironsmith Lohita who is to the king's armoury as and to a charlock's wheel. His complexion is dark and plain to look. Next the chorus is introduced. Bhagawata, actors, dolls and also the incompleteness of human beings is also introduced in this act. They all act as chorus. After that, all the actors appear on the stage. First on the stage he has heard a horse speaking man's language. Hayavadana is the most important character to the audience. He introduced such a character in his play. Then we hear the story of the incompleteness of man from the horse's mouth. In Act II, Girish Karnad introduces the two dolls to comment upon the changes that have appeared in the character of Devadatta and Padmini, after the interchange of heads between Devadatta and Kapila. Both were in love with Padmini; Padmini also loves both of them. She loves Devadatta for his handsome face and is attracted towards Kapila for the sake of his physical appearance. Kapila and Padmini go to the temple of Goddess Kali, because to find an opportunity to offer his head to the Goddess not in devotion, but in disgust at the love. Moving between Kapila and Padmini, Kapila's search of Devadatta and finding his head cut off from the body, he cuts off his own head. Unknowingly, she joined the head of Devadatta on Kapila's body and Kapila's head on Devadatta. Padmini desired a fusion of the two people for her husband with this new combination. But it is the head that ruled over the body naturally. After sometime this body loses its vigour. The changes that come over the body is to be highlighted in all next scenes of the play. To cap it all, the central character in this play chooses the body over the head at

every instance and bodily instinct over human intelligence yet again. This becomes Karnad's primary motive in writing the play, to ponder upon the significance of the body in one's identity and hence reverses the dichotomy head/body in his title Hayavadana where haya stands for horse/body and vadana for man/head. It has been established in various studies that the focus on the body governs the characterization of characters. The main reason for the title Hayavadana is that Hayavadana is more complete than the other main characters. Being complete or incomplete is only a matter of one's own perception; else, how can the animal-headed Ganesha be regarded supreme in our tradition and culture?

Besides, the man/body dichotomy also relates to the dialectic pair man and woman. According to the Semitic religions of the world, woman is said to be constructed from the ribs of man. Karnad seems to question this theory also. Karnad also appears to address hidden agendas and issues of racism. Hence the playwright's aim of presenting the traditional elements sans superstition and hence cruelty which in one line can be termed as "Re inventing Tradition" is exemplified in this play.

History is witness to this fact that no play in the history of any literature or for that matter, in the history of civilisation attains greatness which fails to instruct the current and future generations alike. It's obvious for contemporary scholars, critics, and literature lovers to praise their generation's writers effusively. But if a work of literature's worth is retained across several generations then only the actual excellence of that work's is confirmed. By any standard of literary judgement and assessing parameters, Karnad's plays will be held with high repute.

The aim of any form of literature and arts is to guide all by pleasing and Karnad's plays do the same by combining reinvented traditional culture with modern world perspective with a moral purpose.

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