Myth, Memory, and Modernity in Girish Karnad's Dramatic Art

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ABSTRACT

Girish Karnad's dramatic oeuvre represents a significant intervention in modern Indian theatre through its creative engagement with ancient Indian mythology as a living cultural force. Rather than presenting myths as static narratives rooted in the past, Karnad reinterprets them as dynamic expressions of collective memory that continue to shape contemporary human consciousness. This paper examines how myth functions as a repository of memory in Karnad's select plays Nagmandala, Yayâti, and Hayavadana and how these mythic structures are reconfigured to address modern concerns such as identity, desire, gender relations, moral responsibility, and existential anxiety. Drawing upon folk traditions, PurâGic sources, and classical narrative frameworks, Karnad fuses indigenous storytelling techniques with modern dramatic sensibilities to create a theatre that is simultaneously traditional and contemporary. The study further argues that Karnad's use of myth enables a meaningful dialogue between tradition and modernity, allowing ancient narratives to interrogate present-day social and psychological realities. In Nagmandala, folk mythology becomes a medium for articulating suppressed female desire and resistance to patriarchal authority; in Yayâti, the Mahâbhârata myth is reshaped to reflect modern existential dilemmas and ethical conflicts; while in Hayavadana, myth and symbolism expose the fragmentation and instability of modern identity. By activating cultural memory through myth, Karnad transforms inherited narratives into powerful instruments of modern critique. The paper concludes that G.Karnad's dramatic art demonstrates the enduring relevance of ancient Indian mythology in understanding modern life, thereby establishing myth as a vital aesthetic and

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philosophical resource in contemporary Indian drama.

KEY WORDS

Myth, Memory, Modernity, Girish Karnad, Indian Drama, Tradition.

INTRODUCTION

Myth has always occupied a central position in Indian cultural and literary traditions, functioning not merely as a sacred narrative but as a repository of collective memory, ethical values, and philosophical inquiry. In the Indian context, myths from the epics and folk traditions continue to shape social consciousness and individual identity. Modern Indian writers and dramatists have frequently drawn upon these ancient narratives to reinterpret them in light of contemporary realities. Myth, therefore, becomes a powerful artistic medium through which the past converses with the present, enabling literature to explore enduring human concerns within changing historical and social frameworks.

Girish Karnad emerges as one of the most significant figures in modern Indian drama for his innovative use of ancient Indian mythology to articulate modern sensibilities. Writing in English while remaining deeply rooted in indigenous traditions, Karnad reclaims myth as a living and evolving narrative form. His plays demonstrate a conscious effort to revive folk theatre forms, oral storytelling techniques, and classical mythic structures, while simultaneously engaging with modern philosophical and psychological issues. Karnad does not treat myth as an object of reverence alone; instead, he subjects it to critical scrutiny, thereby transforming it into a vehicle for questioning established social norms and moral assumptions.

The relationship between myth and memory is central to Karnad's dramatic vision. Myths operate as collective memories that preserve archetypal experiences such as desire, guilt, fear, ambition, and moral conflict. By invoking these shared memories, Karnad lends universality and depth to his characters and situations. At the same time, his reinterpretation of myth reflects modern anxieties ali, including nation, identity crisis, gender oppression, and existential uncertainty. This fusion of ancient narrative memory with modern consciousness allows Karnad to bridge the temporal divide between tradition and modernity, making his drama both culturally resonant and intellectually provocative.

This paper seeks to examine how myth, memory, and modernity intersect in Girish Karnad's select plays NâgamaGala, Yayâti, and Hayavadana. Each of these plays draws upon distinct mythological sources, ranging from folk tales and epic narratives to classical story cycles, yet all of them reveal Karnad's consistent concern with reimagining myth in a modern context. Through a close reading of these plays, the study aims to highlight how Karnad revitalises ancient Indian mythology to address contemporary human dilemmas, thereby establishing myth as a vital and dynamic force in modern Indian dramatic literature.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the role of ancient Indian mythology in Girish Karnad's dramatic art.
2. To analyze how myth operates as cultural and collective memory in Karnad's plays.
3. To study the interaction between myth and modern consciousness in Nagmandala, Yayati, and Hayavadana.
4. To highlight Karnad's contribution to modern Indian drama through mythological reinterpretation.

Myth and Cultural Memory in Karnad's Drama

For Girish Karnad, myth functions not as a fixed or inviolable narrative belonging solely to the past, but as a dynamic cultural memory that evolves with time and social change. Myths carry within them the accumulated experiences, beliefs, and moral dilemmas of a civilisation, making them deeply relevant across historical periods. Karnad recognises that myths survive not because of their sacred authority alone, but because they continue

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2030

to speak to fundamental human concerns. By reworking ancient and folk narratives, he transforms myth into a living dramatic form capable of addressing modern anxieties and ethical questions.

Myth as cultural memory preserves archetypal human experiences such as desire, fear, ambition, guilt, and aspiration emotions that transcend temporal and social boundaries. Karnad draws upon these shared psychological patterns to lend universality to his characters. Whether it is Yayâti's obsessive desire for youth, Rani's longing for emotional fulfilment, or the divided selves in Hayavadana, these figures resonate with modern audiences precisely because they embody timeless human conflicts stored in collective memory. Myth, therefore, enables Karnad to explore the continuity of human experience while revealing its changing social expressions.

G. Karnad's use of myth also allows him to interrogate the social structures embedded within cultural memory. While myths often reflect dominant ideologies such as patriarchy, authority, and moral hierarchy, Karnad revisits them with a critical modern perspective. In doing so, he exposes the tensions between inherited values and contemporary ethical sensibilities. By situating ancient narratives within modern contexts, Karnad encourages audiences to question traditional power relations and social norms rather than accept them unquestioningly. Myth thus becomes a space for critique as well as continuity.

Another significant aspect of Karnad's engagement with cultural memory is his reliance on folk traditions and oral storytelling. Folk myths, transmitted through performance and memory rather than written texts, retain a fluid and participatory character. Karnad incorporates elements of folk theatre, such as narrators, masks, and symbolic action, to emphasise the communal nature of myth-making. This performative dimension reinforces the idea that myth is not an isolated text but a shared cultural experience shaped by collective memory and audience interaction.

Ultimately, G. Karnad's dramatic art demonstrates that myth and cultural memory are essential tools for understanding both the past and the present. By reactivating ancient myths in a modern dramatic framework, he bridges the gap between tradition and modernity. His plays invite audiences to reconnect with their cultural heritage while simultaneously engaging in critical reflection on contemporary life. In Karnad's theatre, myth becomes not a relic of bygone times but a living, evolving force that illuminates the complexities of modern human existence.

Nagmandala: Folk Myth, Memory, and Female Consciousness

Nagmandala is rooted in a folk tale from Karnataka, reflecting Girish Karnad's deep engagement with oral tradition and collective memory. By drawing upon folklore rather than classical myth alone, Karnad foregrounds the voices and experiences preserved through generations of storytelling, particularly those of women. The play opens with a narrative framework that emphasises the act of remembering and retelling, suggesting that folk myths survive through communal memory rather than written authority. This reliance on oral tradition allows Karnad to present myth as fluid and adaptable, capable of addressing contemporary concerns while remaining anchored in cultural heritage.

The blending of myth and reality in Nagmandala enables Karnad to explore themes of female desire, repression, and identity within a patriarchal social order. Rani's marriage to Appanna is marked by emotional neglect and physical confinement, reflecting the oppressive structures governing women's lives. The mythical serpent-lover, who assumes Appanna's form at night, represents the fulfilment of Rani's suppressed emotional and sexual needs. This supernatural element does not merely serve as fantasy; rather, it reveals psychological truths about desire and loneliness that are often silenced in conventional social discourse.

G. Karnad's reinterpretation of the folk myth challenges traditional patriarchal norms embedded within cultural memory. While classical myths often reinforce male authority and female submission, Nagmandala subverts these assumptions bycentringg female experience and agency. Rani's transformation from a submissive, fearful wife to a self-aware and confident woman signifies the reclaiming of identity through myth. The ordeal

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2031

by fire, traditionally a test of female purity, is reimagined as a moment of empowerment rather than punishment, thereby questioning the moral codes imposed upon women by patriarchal society.

Ultimately, the folk myth in Nagmandala functions as a cultural memory that both exposes and critiques the limitations placed on women. By retelling the myth in a modern dramatic form, Karnad foregrounds female consciousness and self-realisation, suggesting that myths can be reclaimed as tools of resistance rather than instruments of oppression. The play demonstrates how cultural memory, when reinterpreted through a modern sensibility, can illuminate hidden histories of female suffering while also envisioning possibilities of autonomy and transformation. In this way, Nagmandala becomes a powerful exploration of gender, memory, and myth in contemporary Indian drama.

Yayati: Myth, Memory, and Existential Modernity

Girish Karnad's Yayâti is drawn from the well-known episode of the Mahabharata, yet the dramatist significantly reshapes the ancient myth to articulate concerns that resonate strongly with modern existential thought. Instead of presenting the story as a moral allegory rooted in dharma and cosmic order, Karnad shifts the focus to the inner life of the protagonist. The play foregrounds psychological conflict, personal responsibility, and ethical ambiguity, thereby transforming a traditional myth into a vehicle for modern philosophical inquiry. Through this reinterpretation, Karnad demonstrates how myth, preserved in cultural memory, can be reactivated to explore contemporary human dilemmas.

At the centre of the play lies Yayati's refusal to accept old age and his obsessive desire to retain youth and pleasure. This refusal reflects a distinctly modern anxiety the fear of aging, loss of power, and the inevitability of mortality. Karnad presents Yayati's desire not as heroic ambition but as existential denial, revealing the human tendency to escape responsibility by clinging to transient pleasures. The ancient myth thus acquires a modern dimension, echoing contemporary society's obsession with youth, success, and self-gratification at the cost of ethical accountability.

Memory in Yayati functions as a powerful moral force that confronts the individual with the consequences of desire. Unlike traditional mythological narratives where divine order ultimately restores balance, Karnad's play emphasizes human agency and its repercussions. Yayâti's decision to exchange his old age with his son's youth is not portrayed as a justified act of royal privilege but as a morally troubling choice that generates guilt, remorse, and inner emptiness. Cultural memory, embodied in the myth, serves as a reminder that unchecked desire leads not to fulfilment but to spiritual disintegration.

 G. Karnad's portrayal of Yayâti marks a significant departure from theidealisedd heroic figures of classical mythology. His Yayâti is a deeply flawed, self-centred individual, plagued by doubt and moral confusion. This characterisation mirrors the condition of modern man, who often finds himself alienated from traditional values and uncertain of ethical direction. The play presents human relationships between father and son, husband and wife not as sacred bonds governed by dharma, but as fragile connections strained by desire and ego. In doing so, Karnad aligns the ancient myth with the existential concerns of modern literature.

Ultimately, Yayati transforms an ancient myth into a profound exploration of modern existential crisis. By emphasising psychological conflict, moral responsibility, and the burden of choice, Karnad redefines myth as a medium for examining the complexities of human existence in a modern world. The play suggests that cultural memory, preserved through myth, continues to hold relevance precisely because it reveals the recurring patterns of human weakness and longing. In Karnad's hands, the myth of Yayâti becomes not a tale of divine punishment, but a timeless reflection on desire, guilt, and the search for meaning in an uncertain world.

Hayavadana: Myth and the Crisis of Identity

In Hayavadana, Girish Karnad draws upon the ancient narrative tradition of the Kathasaritsagara to explore the deeply modern problem of fragmented identity. While the source myth presents a fantastical tale

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of exchanged heads and bodies, Karnad reinterprets it to reflect the psychological and existential anxieties of modern individuals. The play foregrounds the question of what constitutes true identity whether it lies in the mind, the body, or an integration of both. By using myth as a narrative framework, Karnad transforms an ancient story into a powerful exploration of contemporary human consciousness.

The central myth of Hayavadana revolves around the division between body and mind, a duality that has preoccupied philosophical thought across cultures. Karnad uses the story of Devadatta and Kapila to dramatize this conflict: Devadatta represents intellectual refinement, while Kapila embodies physical strength and vitality. The accidental exchange of their heads disrupts the assumed harmony between mind and body, revealing the instability of identity when reduced to singular attributes. This mythical episode serves as a metaphor for modern psychological conflict, where individuals often struggle to reconcile competing aspects of the self.

Karnad further deepens the theme of identity crisis through the character of Padmini, whose desires expose the inadequacy of rigid social definitions of selfhood. Padmini's attraction to both the intellect of Devadatta and the physicality of Kapila challenges traditional notions of marital fidelity and feminine virtue. Her inner conflict reflects modern anxieties surrounding desire, choice, and fulfillment. Through Padmini, Karnad highlights the limitations of idealized identities and underscores the human longing for completeness in a fragmented world.

The figure of Hayavadana himself a man with a horse's head serves as a powerful symbolic representation of incompleteness and the desire for wholeness. His quest to become fully human ironically results in the loss of his human voice, suggesting the tragic impossibility of achieving perfection. This outcome reinforces Karnad's central argument that the pursuit of an ideal, unified identity is inherently flawed. The myth thus articulates a deeply modern insight: human identity is marked by imperfection, contradiction, and continual transformation.

The play's theatrical techniques further reinforce the instability and fluidity of identity. Karnad employs masks, folk theatre conventions, songs, and a narrator-like Bhagavata to create a performative space where reality and illusion constantly intersect. Masks, in particular, symbolize the multiple roles individuals perform in society, emphasizing the constructed nature of identity. These dramatic devices draw attention to the act of performance itself, suggesting that identity is not fixed but continuously shaped by social expectations and personal choices.

Ultimately, Hayavadana demonstrates how myth functions as cultural memory while simultaneously articulating modern anxieties. The ancient narrative preserves timeless human dilemmas such as the conflict between mind and body and the desire for wholeness yet Karnad's reinterpretation situates these concerns within a modern psychological framework. By blending myth, symbolism, and folk theatre, Karnad reveals the fragility and ambiguity of identity in the modern world. In doing so, Hayavadana becomes a profound meditation on the human condition, showing how ancient myths continue to resonate as mirrors of contemporary existential crisis.

Myth, Memory, and Modernity: A Synthesis

Across Nagmandala, Yayati, and Hayavadana, Girish Karnad consistently employs myth as a vital bridge between the ancient past and the modern present. These plays demonstrate that myth is not an obsolete narrative form but a dynamic cultural resource rooted in collective memory. By drawing upon folk tales, epic traditions, and classical story cycles, Karnad revives myths as frameworks through which modern social, psychological, and existential issues can be examined. The continuity of myth enables him to situate contemporary concerns within a broader historical and cultural context, thereby lending depth and universality to modern experience.

SHODH SAMAGAM

Mythical narratives, preserved in cultural memory, allow Karnad to interrogate pressing modern issues such as gender inequality, moral responsibility, alienation, and the crisis of identity. In Nagmandala, folk myth exposes the repression of female desire within patriarchal structures; in Yayati, epic memory becomes a medium for exploring existential despair and ethical confusion; while in Hayavadana, myth articulates the fragmentation of selfhood in modern life. These diverse thematic explorations reveal Karnad's belief that ancient myths continue to reflect fundamental human dilemmas, even as their meanings shift in response to changing social realities.

Rather than rejecting tradition in favour of modern rationality, Karnad reclaims and reinterprets it. His dramatic art demonstrates that tradition and modernity are not oppositional forces but complementary modes of understanding human existence. By reactivating cultural memory embedded in myth, Karnad transforms inherited narratives into powerful instruments of modern expression. His synthesis of myth, memory, and modernity thus affirms the relevance of Indian mythological traditions in addressing contemporary social and psychological realities, making his drama both culturally rooted and intellectually progressive.

CONCLUSION

Girish Karnad's dramatic oeuvre reveals a profound and sustained engagement with ancient Indian mythology as a living form of cultural memory. Through Nagmandala, Yayati, and Hayavadana, Karnad demonstrates how myths, far from being relics of the past, continue to shape human consciousness and social structures. His plays show that myth preserves timeless human experiences desire, fear, guilt, ambition, and longing which recur across historical periods and remain central to modern life.

By reinterpreting myth through a modern sensibility, Karnad revitalises traditional narratives and subjects them to critical scrutiny. His drama interrogates patriarchal authority, questions moral absolutes, and exposes the instability of identity in the modern world. In doing so, Karnad transforms myth into a medium of reflection rather than reverence, enabling audiences to engage critically with both inherited traditions and contemporary realities. Myth becomes a mirror that reflects not only the past but also the anxieties and contradictions of the present.

Ultimately, Karnad's blending of myth, memory, and modernity establishes him as one of the most significant voices in modern Indian drama. His ability to bridge the ancient and the contemporary allows his plays to resonate across cultural and temporal boundaries. By converting myth into a vehicle of modern consciousness, Karnad affirms the enduring power of Indian mythology while redefining its role in modern literature and theatre. His dramatic art stands as a testament to the continued relevance of cultural memory in understanding the complexities of modern human existence.

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