BRIDGING TRADITION AND MODERNITY: CREATIVE RESEARCH THROUGH KARNAD'S STORYTELLING

Thangallapally Sreedhar 1, Dr. K.Ravi Sankar 2

1 Research Scholar, Bharatiya Engineering, Science & Technology Innovation University, Anantapur, AP, India

2 Research Supervisor, Lecturer in English, S.V.G.M.G.D.C. Kalyanadurg, Anantapur Dt., AP, India

Abstract

Garish Karnad's theatrical legacy occupies a vital space in the landscape of Indian literature, operating at the complex crossroads of tradition and modernity. His plays draw extensively from classical myths, folklore, and historical events, which he then reinterprets through a contemporary lens to address pressing societal issues, including questions of identity, gender roles, authoritarianism, and existential conflict. This article posits Karnad's dramaturgy as a sophisticated form of creative research—one that not only revitalizes inherited narratives but also interrogates the evolving Indian consciousness in the postcolonial era. Focusing on key texts like *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala*, and *Tughlaq*, the article explores how Karnad bridges temporal, cultural, and ideological divides by reshaping traditional stories to serve as modern allegories. His technique is not merely adaptation; it is a dynamic process of cultural synthesis, critical reflection, and narrative reinvention. By doing so, Karnad reaffirms the theatre as a transformative space for intellectual engagement, sociopolitical critique, and intercultural dialogue.

Keywords

Girish Karnad, storytelling, tradition and modernity, Indian drama, postcolonial literature, creative research, mythology, hybridity, identity, historical allegory

Introduction: The Storyteller as Scholar

In an era where cultures are increasingly defined by their ability to reconcile the old and the new, the role of the storyteller has never been more vital. In India, a land of profound cultural continuities and discontinuities, the theatrical tradition has often served as a canvas upon which this reconciliation is imagined. Among those who have masterfully navigated this complex space is Girish Karnad (1938–2019)—a playwright, actor, and cultural intellectual whose body of work is emblematic of a unique aesthetic that is both deeply rooted in classical Indian narrative traditions and sharply attuned to contemporary concerns.

Karnad's theatrical corpus does more than entertain; it functions as creative research—a term that, in this context, refers to the process of investigating cultural memory, social constructs, and philosophical paradigms through the medium of artistic expression. His method of research involves not the empirical accumulation of data, but a dialectical engagement with inherited texts, transformed through the prism of modernity. Karnad

does not merely resuscitate old stories; he breathes into them new life, re-inscribing them with relevance in a changing world.

Myth and Modernity: The Subversive Structure of *Hayavadana*

First performed in 1971, *Hayavadana* is widely regarded as one of Karnad's most intellectually ambitious plays. Drawing inspiration from the *Kathasaritsagara* and Thomas Mann's retelling of the tale in *The Transposed Heads*, the play revolves around the philosophical question of identity—both individual and collective. Central to the narrative is a seemingly absurd event: the exchange of heads between two men, Devadatta and Kapila, which plunges the characters into a metaphysical conundrum about the locus of selfhood—is it the head that defines a person, or the body?

Beneath the comic façade lies a profound engagement with modern existentialism and the postcolonial search for coherence in fractured identities. The subplot involving Hayavadana—a man with a horse's head yearning for completeness—serves as a powerful allegory for cultural hybridity and the condition of alienation. Karnad's use of traditional performance styles like Yakshagana and his incorporation of Brechtian techniques disrupt narrative realism, forcing the audience to reflect rather than merely consume.

In *Hayavadana*, tradition is not a repository of eternal truths but a living archive to be questioned, parodied, and remade. Karnad's dramaturgy here becomes an act of research—an experimental reconfiguration of myth to interrogate modern dilemmas.

Voices from the Margins: Gendered Subversion in *Nagamandala*

Nagamandala (1988), based on a Kannada folktale collected by A.K. Ramanujan, explores the intersections of folklore, gender, and suppressed desire. The play centers around Rani, a young bride trapped in a loveless marriage, who finds emotional and physical fulfillment in a shape-shifting cobra that impersonates her husband. At the heart of the play is a bold interrogation of female sexuality, agency, and storytelling as survival.

Here, Karnad turns folklore—a genre often associated with patriarchal mores—into a tool of feminist subversion. The play is meta-theatrical, layered with a narrative frame that features a male storyteller threatened with death unless he keeps his tale alive through the night. This narrative device functions as a commentary on the power of storytelling to defy silence, mortality, and gendered repression.

By embedding the woman's story within a patriarchal frame and then subverting that very structure, Karnad demonstrates how traditional forms can be reclaimed and re-authored to reflect contemporary gender politics. This is not mere artistic embellishment; it is creative theorizing through dramatic language.

History as Mirror: The Political Allegory of *Tughlaq*

Tughlaq (1964), one of Karnad's earliest and most celebrated plays, reconstructs the reign of the 14th-century Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq. Known for his brilliant yet erratic decisions, Tughlaq becomes for Karnad a complex symbol of the idealism and eventual disillusionment of the Nehruvian era.

Set in the medieval past but resonating powerfully with post-independence India's political climate, the play uses historical allegory to explore themes of power, rationality, religious tolerance, and tyranny. Tughlaq is portrayed not as a villain but as a tragic figure whose vision exceeds his grasp—a man whose desire for a unified, secular India collapses under the weight of realpolitik.

The play's significance lies in its capacity to reflect modern anxieties through a historical lens. Karnad does not present history as a fixed archive but as a field for critical inquiry and reinterpretation, making *Tughlaq* a quintessential example of creative research in action.

Intertextuality and Narrative Innovation

Karnad's plays are deeply intertextual, often layering classical texts with folk elements, postcolonial theory, and modernist sensibilities. This polyphonic mode of storytelling allows for multiple entry points into the narrative, enriching the interpretive potential of his work.

For example, in *Hayavadana*, the invocation of Ganesha not only grounds the play in ritual but also destabilizes the notion of divine completeness, setting the stage for a thematic inquiry into incompleteness and identity. In *Nagamandala*, the fusion of oral tale and myth challenges the fixity of gender roles and questions authorship itself. This narrative complexity enables Karnad to function not merely as a playwright but as a cultural historian and theorist, using fiction as a methodology of analysis.

Conclusion: Karnad's Legacy and the Future of Creative Research

Girish Karnad's legacy lies in his ability to transform the theatre into a laboratory of ideas, where inherited narratives are dissected, interrogated, and reborn. His body of work exemplifies how the arts can serve as a site for rigorous inquiry—what we now recognize as creative research. He invites his audiences not only to witness stories but to think with them, question them, and in doing so, engage with the fundamental tensions of our times.

In a world grappling with the resurgence of fundamentalism, cultural amnesia, and identity politics, Karnad's approach to storytelling remains ever-relevant. His plays remind us that tradition is not a burden to be carried but a text to be re-read, re-imagined, and re-lived.

By bridging the traditional with the modern, the sacred with the profane, and the personal with the political, Karnad models a way of being a writer, a scholar, and a citizen—not in opposition to the past, but in creative dialogue with it.

References

1. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
2. Dharwadker, Aparna Bhargava. *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India Since 1947*. University of Iowa Press, 2005.
3. Karnad, Girish. *Collected Plays Volume I & II*. Oxford University Press, 2005.
4. Ramanujan, A.K. *Folktales from India: A Selection of Oral Tales from Twenty-two Languages*. Pantheon, 1991.
5. Lal, Ananda. *The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre*. Oxford University Press, 2004.
6. Mukherjee, Tutun. "Revisiting the Past to Redefine the Present: A Study of Karnad's Plays." *Indian Literature*, Sahitya Akademi, Vol. 47, No. 2, 2003.
7. Dalmia, Vasudha. *Poetics, Plays, and Performances: The Politics of Modern Indian Theatre*. Oxford University Press,