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## **Myth as Social, Political, and Psychological Discourse (1980s–1990s)**

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### **Abstract**

The period from the 1980s to the 1990s marks a decisive phase in the evolution of Indian English drama, wherein myth emerges as a potent discursive framework for interrogating social structures, political ideologies, and psychological conflicts. During these decades, playwrights increasingly employed myth not merely as narrative material but as a dynamic interpretive mode that mediated between tradition and contemporary realities. By revisiting mythological and historical narratives, dramatists transformed them into symbolic structures that critiqued caste hierarchies, gender oppression, political disillusionment, and existential anxieties. Myth thus functioned simultaneously as social commentary, political allegory, and psychological exploration. This paper examines how myth operates as a multifaceted discourse in Indian English drama during the 1980s–1990s, focusing particularly on playwrights such as Girish Karnad and the broader theatrical movement that reinterpreted mythic narratives in response to socio-political upheavals and changing cultural identities. The study argues that myth in this period was not static or reverential but revisionist and interrogative, enabling dramatists to challenge inherited norms and reveal the complexities of modern Indian consciousness.

**Keywords:** Myth, Indian English Drama, Political Allegory, Psychological Realism, Girish Karnad, Postmodern Theatre, Cultural Identity

### **Introduction**

The late twentieth century witnessed a paradigm shift in Indian English drama, particularly during the decades of the 1980s and 1990s. This period was marked by heightened political unrest, social transformations, and rapid cultural transitions influenced by globalization, liberalization, and identity politics. Playwrights responded to these changes by revisiting traditional mythological narratives and transforming them into discursive tools that could address contemporary social, political, and psychological realities.

Myth, in this context, transcended its conventional function as sacred narrative and became an analytical framework through which dramatists explored the contradictions of modern life. Rather than treating myth as a repository of timeless moral truths, playwrights reinterpreted mythic figures and events to expose the tensions between tradition and modernity, authority and dissent, and individual desire and social obligation. Myth thus became a site of critical engagement, reflecting the anxieties of a society grappling with the complexities of postcolonial nationhood and cultural pluralism.



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This paper explores the role of myth as a multidimensional discourse in Indian English drama during the 1980s–1990s. It analyzes how myth was deployed to critique social hierarchies, interrogate political authority, and examine psychological dilemmas. Through a detailed examination of key dramatic works and theoretical perspectives, the study demonstrates that myth served as an interpretive lens through which playwrights articulated the evolving consciousness of modern India.

## **Historical and Cultural Context of the 1980s–1990s**

The socio-political landscape of India during the 1980s and 1990s was characterized by ideological fragmentation, economic transitions, and rising identity-based movements. The decline of Nehruvian socialism, the emergence of regional politics, communal tensions, and the onset of economic liberalization in 1991 created a climate of uncertainty and transformation. These changes profoundly influenced literary and theatrical production, prompting dramatists to seek new modes of representation that could capture the complexities of contemporary life.

In this milieu, myth re-emerged as a crucial interpretive framework. Unlike earlier decades, where myth was primarily used to assert cultural continuity, the mythic discourse of the 1980s–1990s became more critical and interrogative. Playwrights used myth to question established social norms, challenge political ideologies, and explore the psychological alienation of individuals in a rapidly changing society.

The revival of myth during this period also coincided with the rise of postmodern aesthetics in Indian theatre. Postmodernism encouraged the fragmentation of grand narratives and the reinterpretation of traditional texts from multiple perspectives. Myth, with its layered symbolism and archetypal structures, proved particularly suitable for such reinterpretation, allowing dramatists to juxtapose ancient narratives with contemporary concerns.

## **Conceptualizing Myth as Discourse**

Myth in modern drama functions not simply as narrative but as discourse—a system of meaning through which social realities are constructed and interpreted. As discourse, myth operates on symbolic, ideological, and psychological levels, enabling dramatists to address complex issues indirectly yet powerfully. It provides a language of archetypes and metaphors that can communicate universal human conflicts while remaining rooted in specific cultural contexts.

During the 1980s–1990s, dramatists adopted a revisionist approach to myth, emphasizing its fluidity and adaptability. Mythic characters were no longer portrayed as idealized figures but as flawed individuals struggling with moral dilemmas and existential uncertainties. This humanization of mythological figures allowed playwrights to explore psychological depth and social contradictions more effectively. Furthermore, myth as discourse allowed dramatists to circumvent the limitations of realism. Realistic representation often struggles to capture abstract psychological states or ideological conflicts, whereas mythic symbolism can encapsulate these



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complexities through metaphor and allegory. Thus, myth became a powerful dramaturgical strategy for representing the layered realities of modern Indian society.

## **Myth as Social Discourse**

One of the most significant functions of myth in Indian English drama of the 1980s–1990s was its use as a tool for social critique. Playwrights reinterpreted mythological narratives to expose persistent social inequalities related to caste, gender, and class. By placing mythic figures in contemporary contexts, dramatists revealed the continuity of oppressive structures despite the promise of modernity.

In many plays, mythic narratives are reworked to question patriarchal norms and highlight the agency of marginalized characters. Female characters drawn from myth are reimagined as assertive individuals who challenge traditional expectations. This reinterpretation not only critiques gender discrimination but also reflects the broader feminist movement gaining momentum in India during this period. Myth was used to critique caste hierarchies and social stratification. By revisiting myths associated with social order and dharma, dramatists exposed the ideological justifications for inequality embedded within traditional narratives. Through this process, myth became a site of resistance where inherited values were interrogated and redefined. Myth thus functioned as a mirror reflecting the contradictions of Indian society. It revealed how ancient narratives continued to shape contemporary social attitudes, even as modern ideals of equality and justice challenged them. By transforming myth into social discourse, playwrights encouraged audiences to question the legitimacy of entrenched social norms.

## **Myth as Political Allegory**

The political dimension of mythic discourse in the 1980s–1990s is particularly significant. During these decades, India witnessed political instability, communal conflicts, and the erosion of ideological certainties. Playwrights used myth to critique political authority and expose the moral ambiguities of leadership. In several dramatic works, mythological or historical narratives are employed as allegories for contemporary political situations. For instance, the reinterpretation of mythic kings or revolutionary figures often reflects the disillusionment with modern political leadership. The idealistic ruler who becomes tyrannical or morally compromised symbolizes the failure of political ideals in the face of power struggles.

The use of myth as political allegory allowed dramatists to address sensitive issues indirectly. By framing political critique within mythic narratives, playwrights could circumvent censorship and engage audiences in critical reflection without overtly confronting contemporary authorities. Myth thus became a subtle yet powerful medium for political discourse. Scholars note that myth and history in modern Indian drama serve as metaphors to address anxieties such as alienation, inequality, and moral decay, thereby offering a sustained critique of social injustice and political



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failure. This demonstrates how myth operates not as escapism but as a deliberate strategy for political engagement and ideological interrogation.

## **Myth as Psychological Exploration**

Beyond its social and political dimensions, myth in the drama of the 1980s–1990s also functions as a medium for psychological discourse. Playwrights used mythic archetypes to explore themes of identity crisis, alienation, desire, and inner conflict—issues that became increasingly prominent in the late twentieth century. The psychological reinterpretation of myth involves presenting mythological characters as embodiments of universal human dilemmas. Their struggles with destiny, morality, and selfhood reflect the existential anxieties of modern individuals navigating a fragmented world. Through this process, myth becomes a symbolic representation of the human psyche, revealing the tensions between conscious desires and unconscious fears. The blending of myth with psychological realism also enables dramatists to transcend the limitations of linear narrative. Mythic symbolism allows for the representation of dreams, fantasies, and subconscious impulses, thereby expanding the expressive possibilities of theatre. This integration of myth and psychology aligns with modernist and postmodernist explorations of subjectivity and identity.

## **Girish Karnad and Mythic Discourse in the 1980s–1990s**

Among the playwrights who most effectively utilized myth as social, political, and psychological discourse during this period, Girish Karnad occupies a central position. His later plays, particularly from the late 1980s onwards, demonstrate a sophisticated engagement with myth and history as interpretive frameworks for contemporary realities.

### **Nagamandala (1988): Myth and Gender Psychology**

*Nagamandala* exemplifies the transformation of myth into psychological and feminist discourse. Based on a folk tale, the play explores the life of Rani, a woman trapped in a loveless marriage who finds emotional fulfillment through a mythical serpent lover. The mythic narrative becomes a vehicle for examining female desire, repression, and identity within patriarchal society.

The play juxtaposes reality and fantasy, suggesting that mythic imagination offers a psychological escape from oppressive social conditions. At the same time, it critiques the rigid moral codes that govern women's lives. By blending folklore with psychological realism, Karnad transforms myth into a discourse on gender, subjectivity, and emotional fulfillment.

### **Tale-Danda (1990): Mythic History and Political Disillusionment**

*Tale-Danda* reinterprets a historical religious reform movement to comment on contemporary socio-political conflicts. Set in the twelfth century during the rise of the Lingayat movement, the play addresses issues of caste oppression, social reform, and the violent backlash against



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progressive ideals. The narrative draws parallels between historical events and modern communal tensions, thereby transforming history into mythic political allegory.

The play demonstrates how mythic and historical narratives can be employed to critique contemporary political realities. By situating modern conflicts within a mythic-historical framework, Karnad reveals the cyclical nature of social and political struggles.

## **Mythic Consciousness and Contemporary Identity**

Karnad's dramaturgy illustrates how myth can function as a cultural mirror reflecting the evolving identity of modern India. His plays blur the boundaries between myth, history, and contemporary reality, suggesting that the past continues to shape present consciousness. Critics observe that Karnad combines ancient narrative forms with modern political awareness, thereby creating theatre that is both culturally rooted and socially relevant.

## **Myth, Postmodernism, and Fragmented Identity**

The mythic discourse of the 1980s–1990s is closely linked to postmodern aesthetics characterized by fragmentation, intertextuality, and multiple perspectives. Playwrights increasingly rejected linear storytelling and embraced nonlinear structures that mirrored the complexity of modern experience. Myth, with its cyclical narratives and symbolic multiplicity, became an ideal vehicle for such experimentation.

Postmodern reinterpretation of myth also involved questioning the authority of traditional narratives. Instead of presenting a single moral truth, dramatists offered multiple interpretations, highlighting the ambiguity and relativity of ethical values. This multiplicity reflects the fragmented identity of individuals in a pluralistic society where traditional certainties have been destabilized.

Through this postmodern lens, myth becomes a dialogic space where competing ideologies and perspectives coexist. It allows dramatists to explore the tension between collective cultural memory and individual subjectivity, thereby capturing the psychological complexity of contemporary life.

## **Interplay of Tradition and Modern Consciousness**

The reinterpretation of myth during the 1980s–1990s demonstrates a dynamic interplay between tradition and modern consciousness. Playwrights neither rejected tradition nor accepted it uncritically; instead, they engaged with myth as a living tradition open to reinterpretation. This engagement reflects a broader cultural negotiation between the desire to preserve heritage and the need to adapt to modern realities.

Myth provided a framework through which dramatists could examine the ethical and philosophical dilemmas of contemporary society without losing cultural rootedness. By situating modern conflicts within mythic narratives, they emphasized the continuity of human experience across time while acknowledging the changing social context.



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## Conclusion

The decades of the 1980s and 1990s represent a crucial phase in the evolution of Indian English drama, marked by the emergence of myth as a multidimensional discourse encompassing social, political, and psychological dimensions. Playwrights utilized myth not as a static repository of traditional values but as a dynamic interpretive framework capable of addressing the complexities of modern Indian life.

As social discourse, myth exposed persistent inequalities related to gender, caste, and class, challenging entrenched social norms. As political allegory, it critiqued the failures of leadership and the contradictions of ideological systems. As psychological exploration, it provided a symbolic language for articulating existential anxieties, identity crises, and inner conflicts. Through these multiple functions, myth became a powerful medium for representing the fragmented yet interconnected realities of late twentieth-century India.

The works of Girish Karnad and his contemporaries demonstrate that mythic reinterpretation is not merely a literary technique but a profound cultural strategy. By reworking traditional narratives, dramatists created a theatre that was simultaneously rooted in cultural memory and responsive to contemporary challenges. Myth thus emerged as a living discourse, capable of mediating between past and present, collective history and individual psychology, and tradition and modernity. The use of myth as social, political, and psychological discourse in Indian English drama during the 1980s–1990s reflects the transformative potential of traditional narratives in shaping modern literary expression. It reveals how myth can serve as a critical lens through which societies confront their contradictions, negotiate their identities, and envision new possibilities for the future.

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