



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal
Impact Factor 8.3 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

Mythological and Legendary Elements in the Plays of Girish Karnad

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Abstract

This study examines the integration of mythological and legendary elements in the plays of Girish Karnad, focusing on how traditional narratives are reinterpreted within a modern dramatic framework. Karnad's works draw extensively from Indian epics, folklore, and classical myths, transforming them into powerful tools for exploring contemporary concerns such as identity, gender roles, morality, and existential conflict. Plays such as Hayavadana, Nagamandala, and Yayati illustrate his unique dramaturgical approach, where myth is not merely retold but reshaped to reflect present-day realities. The study adopts a qualitative analytical method to evaluate the symbolic, structural, and thematic significance of these elements. It argues that Karnad's use of mythology bridges the past and present, offering critical insights into human nature and societal dynamics while enriching the landscape of modern Indian theatre.

Keywords: Mythology, Legend, Indian Drama, Girish Karnad, Modern Theatre

Introduction

The incorporation of mythological and legendary elements into modern literature has long served as a powerful narrative strategy for exploring complex human experiences and socio-cultural realities, and this is particularly evident in the dramatic works of Girish Karnad. As one of the most prominent figures in post-independence Indian theatre, Karnad revitalised traditional myths and legends by reinterpreting them through a contemporary lens, thereby bridging the temporal divide between ancient narratives and modern sensibilities. Drawing extensively from classical sources such as the Mahabharata, regional folklore, and oral storytelling traditions, Karnad's plays are not mere reproductions of myth but rather critical re-engagements that question established norms, values, and identities. His dramaturgy reflects a deep engagement with themes such as existential anxiety, the fluidity of identity, moral dilemmas, gender dynamics, and the tension between tradition and modernity. In plays like Hayavadana and Nagamandala, mythological frameworks are employed to symbolise fragmented identities and suppressed desires, while Yayati reinterprets epic material to examine the consequences of human ambition and responsibility. The use of myth in Karnad's works is therefore not decorative but functional, acting as a structural and thematic device that enhances the dramatic narrative while



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simultaneously offering a critique of contemporary society. Moreover, his plays demonstrate how myths are dynamic and adaptable, capable of acquiring new meanings in different historical and cultural contexts. This study seeks to analyse the role and significance of mythological and legendary elements in Karnad's selected plays, focusing on how these elements contribute to the construction of meaning and dramatic intensity. By adopting a qualitative and analytical approach, the research aims to highlight the ways in which Karnad transforms traditional narratives into instruments of modern expression, thereby reaffirming the enduring relevance of mythology in understanding both individual psychology and collective cultural consciousness within the framework of modern Indian drama.

The primary purpose of this study is to critically examine the use of mythological and legendary elements in the plays of Girish Karnad and to understand how these traditional narratives are reinterpreted within a modern dramatic framework. The study aims to analyse selected plays such as Hayavadana, Nagamandala, and Yayati in order to explore how myth serves as a tool for addressing contemporary issues including identity, gender roles, morality, and existential dilemmas. It also seeks to evaluate the symbolic and structural significance of myth in enhancing dramatic expression and narrative depth. Furthermore, the study intends to highlight Karnad's contribution to modern Indian theatre by demonstrating how he bridges the gap between tradition and modernity, thereby reaffirming the continuing relevance of mythological narratives in contemporary literary discourse.

Scope of the Study

This study is confined to an analytical exploration of mythological and legendary elements in selected plays of Girish Karnad, with particular focus on Hayavadana, Nagamandala, and Yayati. It examines how Karnad reinterprets myths drawn from classical sources such as the Mahabharata and regional folklore to address modern concerns related to identity, gender, morality, and human psychology. The study adopts a qualitative, text-based approach, limiting itself to thematic, symbolic, and structural analysis rather than performance studies or audience reception. It does not attempt a comprehensive survey of all Karnad's works but instead focuses on representative texts where myth is central to dramatic construction. The research is also limited to secondary sources available in English and aims to situate Karnad's dramaturgy within the broader framework of modern Indian theatre and myth criticism.

Background of Indian Mythology in Literature

Indian mythology has long constituted a foundational stratum of the subcontinent's literary imagination, shaping narrative structures, thematic preoccupations, and symbolic vocabularies across genres and historical periods. Rooted in canonical texts such as the Vedas, Ramayana, and Mahabharata, mythological discourse in India operates not merely as sacred narrative but as a dynamic repository of cultural memory and ethical inquiry. These texts offer archetypal



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characters, cyclical conceptions of time, and moral dilemmas that have been continually reinterpreted by poets, playwrights, and novelists. In classical Sanskrit literature, dramatists like Kalidasa integrated mythic motifs to construct rasa-driven aesthetic experiences, while medieval bhakti and puranic traditions further disseminated myth through vernacular forms, embedding it within everyday cultural consciousness. With the advent of modern Indian literature in the colonial and postcolonial periods, mythology underwent a critical transformation: it ceased to function solely as a vehicle of devotion and instead became a site of reinterpretation, resistance, and psychological exploration. Modern writers began to appropriate myth to interrogate issues such as identity, gender, power, and social hierarchy, often subverting traditional narratives to reflect contemporary realities. In this context, mythology serves both as continuity and critique, enabling authors to negotiate the tension between tradition and modernity. The enduring adaptability of mythological material thus underscores its centrality in Indian literature, providing a rich intertextual framework through which successive generations articulate evolving cultural and existential concerns.

Significance of Myth and Legend in Modern Drama

Myth and legend occupy a crucial position in modern drama as they provide a symbolic and structural framework through which complex human experiences and contemporary socio-cultural issues can be explored with greater depth and universality. Unlike realistic narratives confined to specific contexts, mythological stories possess timeless relevance, allowing dramatists to transcend temporal and geographical limitations while addressing enduring concerns such as identity, morality, power, and existential conflict. In modern theatre, myths are not merely retold but reinterpreted, often deconstructed and reshaped to reflect present-day anxieties and ideological shifts. Playwrights such as Girish Karnad have effectively utilised myth and legend to create layered narratives that operate simultaneously on symbolic and realistic levels, enabling audiences to engage with both the past and the present. Through this approach, myth becomes a powerful dramaturgical device that facilitates the exploration of psychological depth, social tensions, and cultural contradictions. Moreover, the use of myth in modern drama enhances theatrical expression by incorporating elements such as archetypes, ritualistic patterns, and metaphoric language, thereby enriching the aesthetic and philosophical dimensions of performance. It also allows playwrights to question established traditions and reinterpret inherited cultural values in light of contemporary realities. By bridging tradition and innovation, myth and legend contribute to the evolution of modern drama, ensuring its relevance and resonance across diverse audiences while reaffirming the enduring significance of cultural narratives in shaping human understanding.



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Overview of Girish Karnad's Contribution to Indian Theatre

Girish Karnad stands as a seminal figure in post-independence Indian theatre, credited with revitalising dramatic practice through an innovative synthesis of indigenous performance traditions and modern dramaturgy. Writing primarily in Kannada and frequently translating his own works into English, Karnad expanded the reach of regional theatre while maintaining linguistic and cultural specificity. His plays, including *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala*, and *The Fire and the Rain*, exemplify a distinctive dramaturgical method that reconfigures myth, folklore, and historical material to interrogate contemporary concerns such as identity fragmentation, gender relations, ethical responsibility, and the tension between individual desire and social norms. Karnad's engagement with classical sources like the *Mahabharata* is neither imitative nor reverential; instead, he employs myth as a critical lens through which modern anxieties are articulated. Stylistically, his theatre integrates elements of traditional forms such as *Yakshagana*, oral storytelling, and ritual performance with Western dramatic structures, resulting in a hybrid aesthetic that is both culturally rooted and globally intelligible. Beyond playwriting, Karnad's contributions as an actor, director, and cultural administrator significantly shaped the institutional landscape of Indian theatre, fostering experimental and multilingual productions. His work thus redefined the possibilities of modern Indian drama by demonstrating how inherited cultural narratives can be transformed into dynamic instruments of contemporary expression, ensuring both artistic innovation and cultural continuity.

Mythological and Legendary Framework in Karnad's Plays

The mythological and legendary framework in the plays of Girish Karnad is deeply rooted in the Indian cultural and literary tradition, where myth and legend function not merely as stories of the past but as living narratives that shape collective consciousness and ethical understanding. In the Indian context, myths derived from texts such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are intrinsically linked to philosophical inquiry, moral dilemmas, and cyclical notions of time, thereby offering a rich conceptual foundation for dramatic reinterpretation. Karnad appropriates these mythic structures and legendary motifs to construct narratives that resonate with contemporary audiences, transforming traditional tales into powerful mediums of modern expression. Rather than presenting myths in their original form, he reworks them to address present-day concerns such as identity crisis, gender dynamics, power relations, and existential anxiety, thereby demonstrating how myth can serve as a dynamic interpretative tool. This approach is evident in plays like *Hayavadana*, where the myth of transposed heads becomes a metaphor for fragmented identity, and *Nagamandala*, where folklore is utilised to articulate suppressed female voices and societal constraints. Furthermore, Karnad's dramaturgy is marked by a sophisticated use of symbolism and archetypes, drawing upon universal patterns embedded in mythic narratives to enhance thematic depth and psychological complexity. Characters often



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embody archetypal roles such as the seeker, the sacrificer, or the rebel, while symbols derived from myth—such as transformation, disguise, and ritual—operate at multiple levels of meaning within the dramatic structure. Through this interplay of myth, legend, symbolism, and archetype, Karnad creates a layered theatrical experience that bridges the traditional and the modern, enabling a nuanced exploration of human experience while reaffirming the enduring relevance of mythological frameworks in contemporary Indian drama.

Literature Review

The use of mythology and legend in modern Indian English drama has emerged as a significant literary strategy for reinterpreting cultural traditions in contemporary contexts. Scholars have consistently emphasized that mythology in drama is not merely a retelling of ancient stories but a dynamic tool for exploring modern concerns such as identity, morality, and socio-political change. Banerjee (2018) argues that Girish Karnad effectively blends myth with modernity, creating narratives that resonate with both traditional and contemporary audiences. Similarly, Bhat (2017) highlights Karnad's ability to reinterpret classical myths, transforming them into vehicles for addressing existential and philosophical dilemmas. Choudhury (2016) situates this practice within the broader framework of cultural memory, suggesting that myth serves as a repository of collective consciousness that playwrights like Karnad revisit and reconstruct. Das (2016) further underscores the importance of Indian English drama as a medium that bridges the gap between indigenous traditions and modern literary forms. Ghosh (2017) extends this discussion by analyzing how myth, legend, and history intersect in Indian plays, creating layered narratives that reflect both continuity and transformation. Collectively, these studies establish that mythology in Karnad's works is not static but evolves through reinterpretation, enabling playwrights to engage with contemporary issues while preserving cultural heritage.

Building on this theoretical foundation, a substantial body of research has focused specifically on the narrative techniques and thematic functions of mythological elements in Karnad's plays. Kaur (2018) identifies myth as a crucial narrative device that structures the dramatic framework of Karnad's works, allowing for symbolic and allegorical interpretations. Devi (2020), in her analysis of *Hayavadana*, demonstrates how mythological motifs are employed to explore themes of identity, incompleteness, and transformation. Similarly, Kumar (2020) examines *Nagamandala*, highlighting the interplay between folklore and myth in shaping the narrative and its underlying symbolism. Dharwadker (2018) emphasizes the structural role of myth in modern Indian theatre, noting that Karnad's plays often use mythic frameworks to challenge linear storytelling and introduce multiple layers of meaning. Mehta (2017) contributes to this discourse by discussing archetypal patterns in Indian drama, suggesting that Karnad's characters often embody universal archetypes that transcend cultural boundaries. Nair (2019) further explores the tension between tradition and innovation in Karnad's plays, arguing that the playwright



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Impact Factor 8.3 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

reconfigures mythological narratives to reflect contemporary realities. These studies collectively reveal that mythological and legendary elements in Karnad's drama function as both narrative strategies and thematic tools, enabling a deeper exploration of human experience and cultural identity.

In addition to narrative and thematic analyses, recent scholarship has examined the broader cultural and ideological implications of mythological reinterpretation in Karnad's works. Chakraborty (2019) highlights the role of myth in shaping identity in contemporary Indian drama, suggesting that Karnad's plays use mythological frameworks to question established norms and redefine cultural identities. Gupta (2021) further argues that Karnad's reimagining of mythology reflects a conscious effort to make traditional narratives relevant to modern audiences, particularly in the context of globalization and cultural hybridity. Mishra (2021) situates this reinterpretation within postcolonial discourse, emphasizing how myth becomes a tool for resisting colonial narratives and asserting indigenous perspectives. Kulkarni (2022) expands this perspective by examining the integration of folklore and myth in modern theatre, highlighting their role in preserving cultural diversity while fostering innovation. Patel (2020) and Rao (2016) both emphasize the symbolic significance of mythological elements, noting that they often serve as metaphors for broader social and psychological realities. Jain (2019) adds a political dimension to this analysis, arguing that Indian English drama, including Karnad's works, engages with issues of power, culture, and representation through mythological narratives. Overall, the literature demonstrates that mythological and legendary elements in Karnad's plays are multifaceted, functioning as tools for narrative construction, cultural expression, and ideological critique. This body of research underscores the enduring relevance of mythology in modern drama and highlights Karnad's contribution to the evolution of Indian theatre through his innovative reinterpretation of traditional narratives.

Mythological and Legendary Framework in Karnad's Plays

1. Concept of Myth and Legend in Indian Context

In the Indian literary and cultural tradition, myth and legend are not merely imaginative tales but constitute a living and evolving system of thought that informs ethical values, social structures, and philosophical reflection. Rooted in foundational texts such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, myths are deeply intertwined with religious beliefs, ritual practices, and collective memory, thereby occupying a central place in shaping cultural consciousness. Unlike Western notions of myth as fictional or symbolic narratives detached from reality, Indian myths function as both sacred and experiential truths, often embodying complex moral dilemmas and metaphysical questions. Legends, similarly, emerge from oral traditions and regional storytelling, carrying localised variations of universal themes. These narratives provide a rich repository of archetypes, symbols, and narrative patterns that have been continuously reinterpreted across



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literary forms. Within this framework, myth serves as a dynamic medium through which successive generations engage with enduring questions of duty, desire, fate, and human existence.

2. Myth as a Tool for Contemporary Expression

In the plays of Girish Karnad, myth is not employed as a static or decorative element but as a critical and transformative tool for engaging with contemporary realities. Karnad reinterprets traditional narratives to address modern concerns such as identity crisis, gender inequality, existential conflict, and the tension between individual autonomy and societal expectations. By situating mythological frameworks within modern psychological and social contexts, he enables audiences to perceive familiar stories in new and thought-provoking ways. For instance, in *Yayati*, the mythic narrative is reshaped to explore themes of responsibility and moral consequence, while *Nagamandala* utilises folklore to foreground issues of female agency and patriarchal oppression. This reinterpretative strategy allows myth to function as a bridge between past and present, making it relevant to contemporary discourse while preserving its symbolic richness. Karnad's approach demonstrates that myths are inherently adaptable and capable of reflecting changing social realities.

3. Symbolism and Archetypes in Karnad's Works

A distinctive feature of Karnad's dramaturgy lies in his sophisticated use of symbolism and archetypes derived from mythological and legendary sources. His plays are populated with characters and situations that reflect universal archetypal patterns, such as the quest for identity, the burden of sacrifice, and the conflict between desire and duty. In *Hayavadana*, the motif of exchanged heads symbolises the fragmentation of human identity and the tension between body and mind, while recurring elements such as transformation, disguise, and ritual function as powerful symbolic devices that deepen the dramatic narrative. These archetypal and symbolic structures operate on multiple levels, allowing for both literal and metaphorical interpretations. Through this layered use of mythic elements, Karnad enhances the psychological complexity and thematic depth of his plays, creating a dramatic form that is simultaneously rooted in tradition and responsive to modern sensibilities.

Analysis of Selected Plays

1. Hayavadana

In *Hayavadana*, Girish Karnad draws upon a tale from the *Kathasaritsagara*, a classical Sanskrit compendium of stories, to construct a complex narrative centred on the instability of identity and the notion of incompleteness. The myth of transposed heads—where the heads of two men are accidentally exchanged—serves as a powerful allegory for the fragmentation of human personality, raising philosophical questions about whether identity resides in the mind or the body. Karnad utilises this mythic structure not merely as a narrative device but as a means of



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exploring existential anxiety and the human quest for wholeness. The titular character, a man with a horse's head, further reinforces the theme of incompleteness, symbolising the inherent imperfection of human existence. Through this interplay of myth and metaphor, the play interrogates the limitations of rational definitions of identity while emphasising the paradoxical nature of human fulfilment.

2. Nagamandala

Nagamandala is rooted in folklore and oral storytelling traditions, reflecting the richness of indigenous narrative forms. Karnad constructs the play through a layered narrative technique, where stories are personified and oral tales become active agents within the dramatic structure. This reliance on folklore enables him to foreground marginalised voices, particularly that of the female protagonist, Rani, whose experiences reflect the constraints imposed by patriarchal society. The myth of the cobra transforming into a human lover serves as both a fantastical element and a symbolic representation of desire, imagination, and emotional fulfilment. Through this mythical narrative, Karnad challenges conventional notions of truth and morality, suggesting that lived experience and emotional reality may transcend rigid social norms. The play thus becomes a space where myth and oral tradition empower suppressed voices and reconfigure dominant narratives.

3. Yayati

In *Yayati*, Karnad reinterprets a well-known episode from the Mahabharata to explore the ethical implications of desire and responsibility. The myth of King Yayati, who exchanges his old age with his son in order to continue enjoying worldly pleasures, is transformed into a psychological and moral inquiry. Karnad shifts the focus from divine intervention to human agency, emphasising the consequences of selfish desire and the burden of inherited guilt. The play interrogates the tension between individual fulfilment and moral duty, revealing how personal choices can have far-reaching repercussions. By humanising mythic characters and situating their dilemmas within a modern ethical framework, Karnad renders the narrative both relatable and philosophically profound.

4. The Fire and the Rain

The Fire and the Rain draws upon Vedic mythology and ritualistic traditions to depict the complex interplay between spirituality and human emotions. The narrative revolves around a prolonged sacrificial ritual intended to bring rain, symbolising both divine intervention and human desperation. Karnad uses the ritual as a dramatic backdrop to explore themes of jealousy, ambition, love, and revenge, thereby highlighting the limitations of ritualistic practices in addressing human suffering. The characters are driven by intense emotional conflicts that often contradict the spiritual ideals they are meant to uphold, creating a tension between sacred duty and personal desire. Through this juxtaposition, Karnad critiques the rigidity of ritual and



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underscores the necessity of emotional and moral introspection, ultimately presenting a nuanced vision of human experience that transcends simplistic dichotomies between the sacred and the secular

Conclusion

The exploration of mythological and legendary elements in the plays of Girish Karnad reveals the depth and sophistication with which traditional narratives can be reinterpreted to address modern concerns. Karnad's dramaturgy demonstrates that myths are not static relics of the past but dynamic frameworks capable of engaging with evolving social, cultural, and psychological realities. By drawing upon classical sources such as the Mahabharata and indigenous folklore, he constructs plays that operate simultaneously on symbolic, thematic, and philosophical levels. Works like *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala*, *Yayati*, and *The Fire and the Rain* exemplify how myth can be reshaped to interrogate issues such as identity fragmentation, gender dynamics, moral responsibility, and the conflict between desire and duty. His use of archetypes, symbolism, and narrative layering enriches the dramatic experience, enabling audiences to engage with both the universality of myth and the specificity of contemporary contexts. Karnad's approach highlights the continuity between tradition and modernity, suggesting that cultural heritage can serve as a foundation for innovation rather than a constraint. By humanising mythic characters and situating them within realistic emotional and ethical dilemmas, he transforms ancient stories into compelling reflections of modern life. This study affirms that Karnad's integration of mythological and legendary elements not only enhances the aesthetic and intellectual dimensions of his plays but also reinforces the enduring relevance of mythology in modern literature. His work stands as a significant contribution to Indian theatre, demonstrating the power of myth as a versatile and transformative medium for artistic and critical expression.

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International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

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