

**RECASTING TRADITION:
MYTH AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF CULTURAL
IDENTITY IN THE DRAMATURGY OF GIRISH KARNAD**

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21416938>

ABSTRACT

This article explores how Girish Karnad reinterprets myth and legend to examine the construction of civilizational identity in modern Indian drama. Karnad's plays are deeply rooted in classical myths, folklore, and traditional narratives, yet they go beyond simple retelling. Instead, he reshapes these narratives to address contemporary social, cultural, and philosophical concerns. By revisiting mythological themes, Karnad questions established notions of identity, morality, power, and tradition within Indian civilization.

Plays such as Hayavadana, Nagamandala, and The Fire and the Rain demonstrate how mythic and legendary elements can be transformed into powerful dramatic tools for exploring human dilemmas and cultural contradictions. In Hayavadana, the theme of incompleteness highlights the complexity of human identity. Nagamandala uses folklore and storytelling traditions to challenge patriarchal norms and give voice to marginalized female experiences. Similarly, The Fire and the Rain revisits Vedic mythology to examine the tensions between desire, sacrifice, and spiritual ambition.

Through these reinterpretations, Karnad establishes a dialogue between the past and the present. His plays reveal that civilizational identity is not fixed but constantly reconstructed through cultural memory, mythic imagination, and changing social realities. Thus, Karnad's theatre becomes a vital medium for understanding how tradition is reimagined in modern Indian literary discourse.

KEYWORDS: *Myth, Legend, Civilizational Identity, Tradition, Folklore, Modern Indian Drama, Cultural Memory, Girish Karnad.*

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Introduction

Myth and legend have long played an important role in shaping the cultural imagination of societies. In Indian literature and theatre, mythological narratives are not simply stories from the distant past; they continue to influence how people understand tradition, identity, and social values. Modern writers often revisit these myths in order to reinterpret them and connect them with contemporary concerns. Among such writers, Girish Karnad occupies a unique place for his creative and thoughtful use of myth and folklore in modern Indian drama. Karnad's plays demonstrate how ancient narratives can be reworked to address modern questions about identity, morality, power, and social change. Rather than presenting myths in their original form, he reshapes them through imaginative storytelling and modern theatrical techniques. In doing so, he establishes a meaningful dialogue between the past and the present. His dramatic works suggest that cultural identity is not a fixed or unchanging concept; instead, it evolves over time through interpretation, memory, and cultural practice.

Myth and Dramatic Vision in Karnad's Theatre

The use of myth in Karnad's theatre reflects his deep engagement with India's cultural traditions. Myths offer him a powerful narrative structure through which universal human concerns can be explored. By combining mythological material with modern dramatic forms, Karnad creates plays that are both rooted in tradition and relevant to contemporary audiences.

A distinctive feature of Karnad's dramaturgy is his ability to present mythological characters as deeply human figures. Instead of portraying them as distant heroes or divine beings, he depicts them as individuals who struggle with emotional conflicts, moral dilemmas, and social pressures. This approach transforms myth from a static narrative into a living cultural expression that speaks directly to modern society.

Identity and the Search for Wholeness in Hayavadana

In Hayavadana, Karnad explores the complex theme of identity through a mythinspired story. The plot centers on the unusual exchange of heads between two friends, raising philosophical questions about whether human identity is determined by the body or the mind. Through this imaginative situation, the play examines the idea of human incompleteness and the desire for wholeness.

The character of Hayavadana, who has the head of a horse and the body of a man, symbolizes the struggle for self-identity. His longing to become fully human reflects a universal search for completeness and self-understanding. By blending mythic symbolism with psychological insight,

Karnad presents identity as something fluid and constantly evolving rather than rigid or predetermined.

Folklore and Women's Experience in Nagamandala

Nagamandala is another important example of Karnad's innovative use of myth and folklore. The play is inspired by traditional folk tales and storytelling practices. Through this narrative structure, Karnad addresses issues of gender, power, and the position of women in patriarchal society.

The central character, Rani, lives in an unhappy marriage and experiences emotional isolation. Her relationship with a mysterious serpent lover introduces a magical and symbolic dimension to the story. Through Rani's experience, Karnad highlights the silence and oppression often faced by women in traditional social structures. At the same time, the play celebrates the power of storytelling and oral traditions in preserving cultural memory.

Ritual, Power, and Conflict in The Fire and the Rain

In *The Fire and the Rain*, Karnad draws inspiration from Vedic mythology to explore themes of ritual, ambition, sacrifice, and moral conflict. The play revolves around a long sacrificial ritual intended to bring rain during a severe drought. However, behind the ritual lies a complex network of jealousy, rivalry, and personal suffering.

Through this dramatic narrative, Karnad reveals how religious practices can sometimes become disconnected from their ethical foundations. By revisiting ancient mythological material, he reflects on the tensions between spiritual ideals and human desires. The play ultimately suggests that tradition must be continually examined and reinterpreted in order to remain meaningful.

Myth and Cultural Identity

Across his plays, Karnad shows that myth is not simply a story belonging to the past. Instead, it is a powerful cultural resource that continues to shape contemporary thought and identity. By reinterpreting traditional myths, he creates a dialogue between historical memory and modern social realities.

Karnad's dramatic works illustrate how cultural identity develops through ongoing interaction with tradition. Through imaginative reinterpretation, myths become tools for questioning social structures, exploring human emotions, and reflecting on the changing nature of society.

Conclusion

The plays of Girish Karnad demonstrate how myth can function as a powerful medium for examining cultural identity and social transformation.

In works such as *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala*, and *The Fire and the Rain*, Karnad creatively reshapes traditional narratives to address modern concerns and universal human questions. His theatre reveals that tradition is not static but continuously redefined through artistic interpretation and cultural dialogue. By recasting myth in this way, Karnad's dramaturgy offers valuable insights into the evolving relationship between myth, tradition, and cultural identity.

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