

Tradition and Modernity in Contemporary Indian Drama: An Analytical Study of the Selected Plays of Girish Karnad

Amol Nandewar

Research Scholar, Institute of Excellence in Higher Education, Barkatullah University, Bhopal

Dr. Seeme Mehmood

Associate Professor, Dept. of English, Institute of Excellence in Higher Education, Barkatullah University, Bhopal

Abstract

India is a country with unity in diversity. It is rich in culture, traditions and customs. The present study critically examines the interplay between tradition and modernity in the contemporary Indian dramas of Girish Karnad, one of the most influential dramatists in post-independence Indian theatre. Karnad skillfully combines myths, folklore, history, and indigenous theatrical traditions with contemporary socio-political and psychological concerns. Through selected plays such as Tughlaq, Hayavadana, Nagamandala, and Taledanda, the study explores how traditional narratives are reinterpreted to reflect modern dilemmas related to identity, gender, power, alienation, and cultural transformation. Karnad's dramatic technique reveals a synthesis of classical Indian aesthetics and modern existential thought, thereby bridging the gap between past and present. The research adopts an analytical and interpretative approach to evaluate how Karnad reconstructs traditional themes in the context of contemporary Indian society. The study concludes that Karnad's plays successfully represent the conflict as well as coexistence between tradition and modernity, making his drama a significant contribution to contemporary Indian English theatre and cultural discourse.

Keywords: *Girish Karnad, Contemporary Indian Drama, Tradition and Modernity, Myth and Folklore, Cultural Identity, Indian English Theatre, Postcolonial Literature*

1. Introduction

The contemporary Indian drama has emerged as a powerful literary medium reflecting the complexities of Indian society through the interaction of cultural traditions and modern consciousness. Indian playwrights after independence attempted to reconstruct indigenous theatrical forms while simultaneously engaging with issues such as identity crisis, political instability, gender discrimination, social transformation, and existential anxiety. Within this dramatic landscape, Girish Karnad occupies a distinguished position for his remarkable synthesis of mythology, folklore, history, and modern philosophical concerns. His plays challenge the rigid boundaries between past and present by employing traditional narratives to interpret contemporary realities (Awasthi 45). Karnad's dramatic vision demonstrates how ancient cultural symbols continue to influence modern Indian society despite rapid social and technological transformation. His theatre reflects the tension between inherited traditions and emerging modern values, thereby making his works highly relevant in postcolonial literary discourse. The playwright's ability to modernize myths and historical episodes provides a new interpretative framework for understanding changing social structures and human relationships in India. Recent critical studies

further observe that Karnad's dramaturgy revitalizes Indian theatre by integrating folk traditions with modern theatrical experimentation (Lekhan 6).

The concept of tradition and modernity remains central to contemporary Indian literature because Indian society itself experiences continuous negotiation between cultural continuity and modernization. Tradition represents inherited customs, religious beliefs, myths, rituals, and social institutions, whereas modernity signifies rationality, individuality, scientific outlook, and changing socio-political ideologies. Karnad's plays reveal that these two forces are not mutually exclusive but interconnected dimensions shaping human experience. In plays such as *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala*, he reinterprets mythological and folkloric narratives to examine issues of fragmented identity, marital dissatisfaction, women's autonomy, and psychological conflict within modern society. His dramatic technique combines indigenous theatrical devices like masks, songs, folk narratives, and symbolic characterization with modern existential and psychological concerns. Scholars have emphasized that Karnad's theatrical method reflects the "Theatre of Roots" movement, which attempted to recover Indian cultural identity while remaining intellectually modern (Parashari 1667). Another recent analysis notes that Karnad's dramatic narratives transform traditional stories into critical reflections on caste, gender, and political structures in contemporary India (Rani 3). Among Karnad's major plays, *Tughlaq* occupies a significant place in illustrating the conflict between idealism and political reality in modern governance. Although based on the historical Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq, the play symbolically reflects the disillusionment associated with post-independence Indian politics and failed utopian visions. Similarly, *Taledanda* addresses caste discrimination and socio-religious reform through the historical context of the twelfth-century Lingayat movement while simultaneously commenting on contemporary communal tensions and social fragmentation. Karnad's reinterpretation of historical and mythical material demonstrates how the past becomes a mirror for understanding present socio-political realities. His dramatic structure often incorporates Brechtian alienation, symbolic imagery, and existential philosophy to create intellectual engagement among audiences. Critics argue that Karnad successfully bridges Indian cultural memory with modern ideological concerns, thereby creating a dramatic discourse that transcends temporal limitations (Subhashini 985). Contemporary scholarship further highlights that Karnad's theatre remains influential because it presents Indian tradition not as static heritage but as a dynamic and evolving cultural force (Dubey and Singh 52).

The present study examines the representation of tradition and modernity in the selected plays of Girish Karnad with special emphasis on thematic construction, characterization, symbolism, and dramatic techniques. The research investigates how Karnad reconstructs myths, folklore, and historical narratives to address modern concerns related to identity, gender relations, political instability, morality, and cultural transformation. The study also evaluates Karnad's contribution to contemporary Indian English drama by examining his role in redefining theatrical aesthetics through the integration of indigenous performance traditions and modern dramatic innovations. By critically analyzing selected plays such as *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala*, and *Taledanda*, the paper attempts to understand the continuing relevance of Karnad's dramaturgy in contemporary literary and cultural studies. Recent academic discussions suggest that Karnad's plays continue to inspire modern theatre practitioners because of their multidimensional engagement with Indian social realities and universal human dilemmas (Kumar 4). Furthermore, scholars recognize Karnad as one of the most significant dramatists who transformed Indian theatre into a space where tradition and modernity coexist in creative tension (Sudarshan 112).

2. Background of Study

Indian drama has undergone remarkable transformation from classical Sanskrit theatre to contemporary experimental drama, reflecting the socio-cultural evolution of Indian society. Traditional Indian theatre was deeply rooted in mythology, epics, folklore, religion, and ritualistic performances, which served not only as entertainment but also as mediums of moral and philosophical instruction. However, after independence, Indian dramatists began to address contemporary socio-political realities, identity crises, urbanization, gender inequality, and cultural fragmentation through innovative dramatic forms. His plays reflect the continuity of Indian cultural heritage while simultaneously questioning rigid social structures and modern existential anxieties. Critics observe that Karnad's dramaturgy created a new direction in post-independence Indian English theatre by employing myths and history as metaphors for contemporary concerns (Dharwadkar 112). Recent scholarship also recognizes Karnad's theatre as a major contribution to the "Theatre of Roots" movement, which sought to reconnect modern Indian theatre with native cultural traditions while maintaining global relevance (Khatri 58).

The background of Karnad's dramatic vision is closely associated with the cultural and intellectual climate of postcolonial India, where writers attempted to redefine national identity amidst rapid modernization and Western influence. Karnad was influenced by classical Indian texts, folk traditions, Yakshagana performances, oral narratives, and Western dramaturgy, particularly existential and absurdist theatre. This synthesis enabled him to construct plays that address universal human dilemmas while remaining deeply rooted in Indian cultural consciousness. His dramatic narratives reveal how traditional values often collide with modern aspirations, thereby creating psychological and social tensions within individuals and communities. Scholars argue that Karnad's reinterpretation of myths and historical episodes allows contemporary audiences to critically examine present realities through the lens of the past (Naik 214). Contemporary literary critics further state that Karnad transformed Indian drama into an intellectual and performative space where history, folklore, and modernity interact in a meaningful dialogue (Rao 6).

Another significant aspect of the background of this study lies in the growing academic interest in analyzing the relationship between tradition and modernity in contemporary Indian literature. Modern Indian dramatists frequently reinterpret cultural traditions not merely to preserve the past but to interrogate social realities and evolving human relationships. Karnad's theatre particularly demonstrates how myths and historical narratives can be decontextualized to address issues of democracy, secularism, gender justice, and identity politics in modern India (Kulkarni 87). His dramatic structures combine folk performance techniques, symbolic characterization, masks, music, and nonlinear narration with modern psychological and philosophical insights. This innovative dramatic approach contributed significantly to the modernization of Indian theatre without disconnecting it from its indigenous roots. Researchers highlight that Karnad's plays continue to remain relevant because they depict the perpetual conflict between social conventions and individual freedom in rapidly changing societies. The recent studies suggest that Karnad's dramaturgy reflects a broader cultural discourse in which tradition becomes a living and evolving force rather than a static inheritance (Mishra 94).

3. Rationale of Study

The analytical study of tradition and modernity in the selected plays of Girish Karnad is important because contemporary Indian society continues to experience intense cultural transition influenced

by globalization, technological advancement, urbanization, and changing socio-political values. In such a context, Karnad's drama provides a meaningful literary framework to understand how traditional myths, folklore, historical narratives, and indigenous theatrical practices interact with modern consciousness and contemporary social realities. His plays reinterpret classical themes not merely for cultural preservation but to critically examine issues such as identity crisis, political instability, gender oppression, caste hierarchy, and existential anxiety in modern India. Through works like *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, and *Nagamandala*, Karnad demonstrates that tradition is not static but dynamic and capable of addressing modern dilemmas. His dramatic technique combines folk performance, symbolism, mythology, and modern theatrical experimentation, thereby creating a unique postcolonial dramatic discourse. Contemporary researchers observe that Karnad's dramaturgy successfully transforms historical and mythological material into instruments for questioning present social and political structures (Lekhan 4). Recent studies further emphasize that Karnad's plays represent a continuous dialogue between cultural inheritance and modern rationality, making his works highly relevant in contemporary literary criticism and theatre studies.

Another rationale for the present study lies in the growing academic importance of examining Indian English drama as a medium of cultural negotiation and social reflection. Karnad's plays reveal how individuals and societies struggle between inherited traditions and modern aspirations for individuality, freedom, equality, and self-expression. His reinterpretation of myths and historical episodes allows contemporary audiences to critically revisit social realities through the lens of the past. Moreover, Karnad's theatre contributes significantly to the "Theatre of Roots" movement, which aimed to revive indigenous performance traditions while maintaining relevance within modern theatrical discourse. This study therefore becomes essential in understanding how Karnad reconstructed Indian theatrical aesthetics without disconnecting them from contemporary concerns. His plays remain academically significant because they address universal human conflicts while remaining deeply rooted in Indian cultural consciousness. Recent literary analyses indicate that Karnad's dramatic vision reflects the complexities of modern Indian society where identity, culture, and morality constantly evolve under the pressure of modernization and globalization (Roy 4345). The contemporary scholars highlight that Karnad's theatrical innovations continue to influence modern Indian theatre by creating a creative synthesis of myth, history, and modern social critique.

4. Objectives of Study

- To examine the representation of tradition and modernity in the selected plays of Girish Karnad
- To analyze the use of myths, folklore, and historical narratives in reflecting contemporary social realities in Karnad's drama
- To study the portrayal of identity crisis, gender issues, and socio-political conflicts in the selected plays of Girish Karnad
- To evaluate the dramatic techniques and theatrical innovations employed by Karnad in blending indigenous traditions with modern dramaturgy
- To assess the contribution of Girish Karnad to contemporary Indian English drama and postcolonial literary discourse

5. Review of Literature

Several scholars have critically examined the dramatic contribution of Girish Karnad in the context of tradition, mythology, and modernity in contemporary Indian theatre. Researchers observe that

Karnad's plays successfully reinterpret myths, folklore, and historical narratives to address contemporary socio-political and psychological issues. Studies on Tughlaq emphasize the portrayal of political idealism, disillusionment, and the crisis of leadership in post-independence India, while analyses of Hayavadana and Nagamandala focus on fragmented identity, gender consciousness, and existential conflict. Scholars further argue that Karnad's dramatic techniques reflect a synthesis of indigenous theatrical traditions and modern dramaturgical experimentation, thereby contributing significantly to the "Theatre of Roots" movement in Indian drama. Contemporary literary critics also highlight that Karnad transformed traditional narratives into instruments of social critique by examining caste oppression, patriarchal dominance, and cultural alienation through symbolic and philosophical frameworks. Recent studies reveal that Karnad's theatre remains globally relevant because it combines universal human dilemmas with Indian cultural consciousness and postcolonial realities (Rani 4). Moreover, modern researchers recognize Karnad's contribution in redefining Indian English drama through innovative use of mythology, symbolism, folk elements, and historical reconstruction to reflect changing social values and modern human anxieties (Subhashini 985).

6. Discussion

The selected plays of Girish Karnad reveal a profound interaction between tradition and modernity, where myths, folklore, and historical narratives are reinterpreted to examine contemporary social, political, and psychological realities. In Tughlaq, Karnad portrays the tragic conflict between idealism and political pragmatism through the historical figure of Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq. Although the play is set in the medieval period, it symbolically reflects the political disillusionment and moral instability experienced in post-independence India. The protagonist's intellectual brilliance and visionary ideals gradually collapse under the pressures of ambition, betrayal, and authoritarian governance, thereby representing the crisis of modern leadership. Karnad's use of historical allegory transforms the past into a critique of present political systems and human greed. Scholars argue that the play demonstrates how modern political failures emerge when rationality becomes disconnected from ethical responsibility (Dharwadker 168). Contemporary literary criticism further observes that Tughlaq reflects the conflict between utopian aspirations and harsh socio-political realities in modern democratic societies (Rani 5).

Hayavadana and Nagamandala illustrate Karnad's innovative use of mythology and folklore to explore modern concerns related to identity, individuality, marriage, and gender consciousness. In Hayavadana, the interchange of heads between Devadatta and Kapila symbolizes the fragmented nature of human identity and the conflict between intellect and physical desire. The play questions the modern search for completeness and perfection while employing traditional folk theatre techniques, masks, music, and symbolic characterization. Likewise, Nagamandala critically examines patriarchal oppression and female desire through a folk narrative structure. The character of Rani represents the suppressed condition of women within traditional social institutions, while the magical serpent becomes a symbol of emotional fulfillment and liberation. Karnad's reinterpretation of folklore enables him to challenge rigid gender norms and expose the contradictions between traditional morality and modern individuality. Critics highlight that Karnad modernizes indigenous narratives to create a feminist and psychological discourse relevant to contemporary society (Parashari 1668). Recent studies further note that these plays reflect the coexistence of fantasy and realism in understanding modern human relationships and emotional alienation (Roy 4346).

Another significant dimension of Karnad's dramaturgy is visible in Taledanda, where historical events are used to address caste discrimination, communal tensions, and social inequality in modern India. The play is based on the twelfth-century Lingayat reform movement led by Basavanna, yet it strongly resonates with contemporary debates on caste politics and social justice. Karnad demonstrates how attempts to establish equality and reform social structures often encounter violent resistance from orthodox institutions and conservative forces. Through symbolic dialogues and ideological conflict, the playwright critiques both traditional social hierarchies and the failures of modern democratic systems in achieving social harmony. His dramatic narratives consistently reveal that tradition and modernity are not opposing forces but interconnected realities shaping human consciousness and cultural identity. Karnad's blending of folk traditions, mythological symbolism, historical reconstruction, and modern theatrical experimentation significantly contributed to the development of contemporary Indian English drama. Researchers emphasize that Karnad's plays remain relevant because they provide a multidimensional understanding of the tensions between cultural continuity and social transformation in modern India (Subhashini 986). Furthermore, scholars recognize his theatre as a major contribution to postcolonial dramatic discourse where indigenous traditions are reimagined to engage with universal human concerns and contemporary socio-political challenges.

7. Findings of Study

- The study found that the plays of Girish Karnad effectively portray the continuous conflict and coexistence between tradition and modernity in contemporary Indian society through myths, folklore, and historical narratives.
- The analysis revealed that Karnad uses traditional cultural elements not merely for preservation of heritage but as symbolic tools to address modern socio-political, psychological, and existential concerns such as identity crisis, alienation, and moral instability.
- The study identified that plays like Tughlaq, Hayavadana, Nagamandala, and Taledanda critically examine issues related to political disillusionment, gender inequality, caste discrimination, and social transformation within the framework of modern Indian society.
- The findings further indicate that Karnad's dramatic techniques, including symbolism, folk theatre elements, masks, mythology, nonlinear narration, and historical allegory, successfully create a synthesis between indigenous theatrical traditions and modern dramaturgical experimentation.
- The study observed that Karnad's reinterpretation of myths and history contributes significantly to postcolonial Indian English drama by transforming traditional narratives into instruments of contemporary social critique and cultural reflection.
- The research found that Karnad's female characters, particularly in Nagamandala, challenge patriarchal structures and represent the evolving consciousness of women seeking individuality, emotional fulfillment, and freedom in modern society.
- The study concluded that Karnad's theatre reflects the idea that tradition and modernity are interconnected cultural forces rather than opposing concepts, thereby presenting Indian identity as dynamic, evolving, and multidimensional.
- The analysis also established that Girish Karnad played a vital role in modernizing Indian theatre while preserving its indigenous cultural roots, making his dramatic works highly relevant in contemporary literary and theatrical discourse.

8. Conclusion

The present study concludes that the plays of Girish Karnad represent a remarkable synthesis of tradition and modernity in contemporary Indian drama. Karnad successfully reinterprets myths, folklore, history, and indigenous theatrical traditions to examine modern socio-political, psychological, and cultural realities. Through selected plays such as *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala*, and *Taledanda*, he portrays the complexities of identity crisis, political disillusionment, gender oppression, caste discrimination, and moral conflict within changing Indian society. His dramatic narratives reveal that traditional cultural forms continue to remain relevant when decontextualized in the light of contemporary concerns. The study further establishes that Karnad's dramaturgy bridges the gap between India's cultural heritage and modern intellectual discourse by combining symbolic representation, folk performance techniques, and modern theatrical experimentation. His theatre therefore becomes a medium through which the tensions between continuity and change, past and present, and individuality and social structure are critically explored. The research also concludes that Karnad's contribution to contemporary Indian English drama extends beyond literary innovation, as his plays serve as important cultural and philosophical reflections on postcolonial Indian society. By transforming traditional narratives into instruments of social criticism, Karnad challenges rigid social hierarchies, patriarchal norms, and political failures while simultaneously preserving the richness of Indian cultural consciousness. His dramatic vision demonstrates that tradition and modernity are not contradictory forces but interconnected dimensions shaping human existence and national identity. The enduring relevance of Karnad's plays lies in their ability to address universal human dilemmas while remaining deeply rooted in Indian socio-cultural realities. Thus, the study confirms that Girish Karnad occupies a significant place in modern Indian theatre for redefining dramatic aesthetics and creating a meaningful dialogue between indigenous traditions and contemporary modern thought.

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