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MYTH, HISTORY, AND SOCIAL REALITY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF SOCIAL STRUCTURES IN THE SELECTED PLAYS OF GIRISH KARNAD

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ABSTRACT
Girish Karnad occupies a significant position in modern Indian drama through his innovative reinterpretation of mythology, folklore, and history as instruments of social and political criticism. His plays move beyond the simple retelling of inherited narratives to interrogate the social structures that shape human relationships, individual identity, political authority, and cultural values. This article examines the representation of social reality in four selected plays: Nagamandala, Tughlaq, Hayavadana, and The Fire and the Rain. Using qualitative textual analysis and a comparative approach, the study investigates how Karnad transforms traditional narratives into critical reflections on contemporary social concerns. The analysis focuses on patriarchal authority and female agency in Nagamandala, political idealism and the contradictions of governance in Tughlaq, the instability of identity and the relationship between bodily and intellectual selfhood in Hayavadana, and ritual authority, social hierarchy, and human desire in The Fire and the Rain. The article draws on perspectives from feminist criticism, historical interpretation, and cultural studies to examine the relationship between inherited traditions and social power. It argues that Karnad's dramatic method reveals how apparently stable social institutions are sustained by cultural narratives, ideological assumptions, and unequal power relations. By bringing mythological and historical materials into dialogue with social experience, Karnad creates a dramatic space in which tradition becomes available for questioning and reinterpretation. The study contributes to an understanding of modern Indian drama as a form of social criticism that negotiates the complex relationship between cultural inheritance and social transformation.

Keywords: *Girish Karnad, social criticism, myth, history, Indian drama, patriarchy, political power, cultural identity, social hierarchy, folklore.*

1. INTRODUCTION
Modern Indian drama has developed through a sustained engagement with the social, political, and cultural complexities of Indian life. Among its major playwrights, Girish Karnad occupies a distinctive position because of his ability to transform mythological narratives, historical episodes, and folk traditions into dramatic explorations of contemporary social problems. Rather than treating the past as a closed repository of cultural memories, Karnad uses it as a means of examining the contradictions of the present. His theatre questions established assumptions about authority, morality, identity, gender, and social responsibility.

Karnad's dramatic achievement lies partly in his refusal to separate tradition from modernity. His plays draw upon familiar cultural narratives while exposing the social tensions embedded within them. Myth and history consequently become more than literary subjects: they function as interpretative frameworks through which social institutions and dominant ideologies can be examined. This approach allows audiences to reconsider the apparent legitimacy of customs, political systems, and moral conventions that govern individual and collective life.

The four plays selected for this study demonstrate different dimensions of Karnad's social criticism. *Nagamandala* explores marriage, female desire, and the unequal distribution of authority within patriarchal society. *Tughlaq* examines the contradictions between political idealism and practical governance through its representation of Muhammad bin Tughlaq. *Hayavadana* interrogates identity,

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bodily completeness, and the expectations through which society defines the individual. *The Fire and the Rain*, drawing upon the narrative resources of the *Mahabharata*, investigates ritual authority, social hierarchy, revenge, desire, and the ethical contradictions of religious institutions.

Although these plays differ in narrative setting and dramatic technique, they share a fundamental concern with the relationship between individual experience and larger structures of power. Their characters struggle within systems of authority that claim legitimacy through marriage, religion, political leadership, cultural tradition, or accepted ideas of human identity. Karnad's dramatic worlds reveal that these systems are neither entirely stable nor free from contradiction.

The present study therefore examines how Karnad employs myth, history, and folklore to expose social inequalities and question dominant cultural assumptions. It argues that his plays do not simply condemn tradition or celebrate modernity. Instead, they investigate the tensions within inherited systems of belief and demonstrate how those tensions shape social reality.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Scholarship on Girish Karnad has frequently examined his use of mythology, folklore, history, theatrical experimentation, and cultural identity. Existing critical discussions establish that his dramatic method involves the reinterpretation of inherited narratives rather than their straightforward reproduction. This body of scholarship provides a foundation for investigating the relationship between Karnad's dramaturgy and social criticism.

Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker's *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India since 1947* offers an important framework for understanding modern Indian theatre within its historical and cultural circumstances. Her study situates dramatic practice within changing social institutions, political developments, and theatrical traditions. Such a perspective helps explain how Karnad's plays connect inherited narrative forms with modern concerns.

A. K. Ramanujan's *Folktales from India: A Selection of Oral Tales from Twenty-Two Languages* provides a valuable background for understanding the cultural significance of oral narrative traditions. The relationship between folklore and literary transformation is particularly relevant to *Nagamandala*, in which storytelling, supernatural elements, and community beliefs become central to the dramatic representation of marriage and gender relations.

Published criticism of Karnad's plays has also examined the relationship between myth and social experience. Bashini's discussion of *Nagamandala* considers the retelling of myth and folklore, while Padma Priya and Poongothai explore the use of myth, ritual, and theatrical technique in *Nagamandala*, *Hayavadana*, and *The Fire and the Rain*. These studies demonstrate the importance of traditional narrative resources in Karnad's dramatic representation of cultural and psychological conflicts.

More recent discussions continue to examine the relationship between tradition, modernity, gender, and cultural identity in Karnad's theatre. Yadagiri's study of tradition and modernity and Shukla, Srivastava, and Ray's comparative analysis of *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala* illustrate the continuing critical interest in the interaction between cultural inheritance and contemporary social concerns.

Nevertheless, a comparative study of the four plays selected here can bring together several related dimensions of social criticism: patriarchal authority, political ideology, individual identity, and ritual hierarchy. The value of this approach lies not in claiming that these themes have never been studied, but in examining how they operate across distinct dramatic settings and how Karnad's use of myth, folklore, and history connects them.

Accordingly, the present article develops a comparative reading of the four plays, emphasizing the relationship between narrative form, social institutions, and unequal power relations. A final journal submission should expand this review through a systematic search of recent peer-reviewed research and a precise comparison with the most relevant existing studies.

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3. RESEARCH GAP

Existing scholarship provides substantial discussion of Karnad's engagement with myth, folklore, gender, identity, and political authority. However, the relationship among these themes can be examined further through a comparative framework that places historical drama alongside plays derived from mythological and folk narratives.

The present study addresses this analytical problem by examining how different narrative traditions represent social structures and their contradictions. Rather than treating each play as an isolated thematic study, it investigates the recurring relationship between authority, cultural legitimacy, and individual agency across all four texts.

The research gap should be understood as a focused analytical opportunity rather than an assertion that no previous scholar has investigated these issues. Before submission, the author should verify the precise originality of this approach through a systematic review of existing literature.

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The principal objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the use of myth, folklore, and history as instruments of social criticism in Karnad's selected plays.
2. To investigate the representation of patriarchy, gender inequality, and female agency in *Nagamandala*.
3. To analyze the relationship between political idealism, ideological authority, and governance in *Tughlaq*.
4. To explore the construction of personal identity and the relationship between body, mind, and social expectations in *Hayavadana*.
5. To examine ritual authority, social hierarchy, and ethical conflict in *The Fire and the Rain*.
6. To identify the connections between cultural narratives and the structures of power that shape individual and collective experience.

5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study is guided by the following questions:

1. How does Karnad employ myth, folklore, and history to represent social realities?
2. In what ways do the four plays question established structures of authority and social hierarchy?
3. How are gender, political power, identity, and ritual represented as sites of conflict?
4. How does Karnad transform inherited narratives into critical reflections on modern social concerns?
5. What similarities and differences emerge in the playwright's treatment of social criticism across the four plays?

6. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The article adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework combining feminist criticism, political and ideological analysis, and cultural studies. These perspectives are used selectively to illuminate different dimensions of the plays rather than to impose a single explanatory model upon all four texts.

6.1. Feminist Criticism

Feminist criticism provides a framework for analysing the relationship between gender, power, and social institutions. It examines how patriarchal systems regulate women's choices, define acceptable behavior, and distribute social authority unequally. This perspective is particularly relevant to *Nagamandala*, in which marriage and sexual morality become mechanisms through which female identity is judged and controlled.

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6.2. Political and Ideological Criticism

Political criticism investigates how authority is established, justified, and challenged. In *Tughlaq*, the relationship between political ideals and governing practices reveals the contradictions of leadership. The play enables an examination of the gap between the language of reform and the social consequences of political decisions.

6.3. Cultural and Social Criticism

Cultural studies provides a framework for investigating how traditions, rituals, and inherited narratives influence social behavior. It is useful for examining the relationship between bodily identity and cultural expectations in *Hayavadana*, as well as the authority of ritual and social hierarchy in *The Fire and the Rain*.

Together, these approaches enable the study to examine social criticism as a process through which literary texts reveal the assumptions and power relations underlying established institutions.

7. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employs a qualitative, interpretative, and comparative research methodology based primarily on close reading of the four selected plays. It identifies significant dramatic situations, character relationships, symbolic elements, and narrative structures that illuminate the representation of social power.

The primary sources are the texts of *Nagamandala*, *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, and *The Fire and the Rain*. Secondary sources include scholarly books and peer-reviewed articles on Karnad, modern Indian drama, mythology, folklore, feminist criticism, and political theatre.

The analysis proceeds through three stages. First, each play is examined individually to identify its principal social concerns and dramatic strategies. Second, the findings are compared to establish recurring patterns and significant differences. Third, the selected theoretical perspectives are applied to interpret the relationship between cultural narratives and social structures.

The study is textual rather than empirical. It does not claim to measure audience responses or represent the views of all Indian communities. Its conclusions are therefore based on literary interpretation and should be understood within the scope of the selected texts.

8. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

8.1. Myth, Marriage, and Patriarchal Authority in *Nagamandala*

Nagamandala provides a particularly significant example of Karnad's use of folklore to examine social structures. The play centres on Rani, a young woman whose experience of marriage exposes the unequal distribution of power within a patriarchal household. Her relationship with Appanna is marked by emotional neglect and by the husband's authority to define the terms of marital life.

The institution of marriage in the play is not represented merely as a private relationship between two individuals. It is embedded within a social structure that gives the husband considerable authority while limiting the wife's freedom. Rani's isolation demonstrates how domestic arrangements can become instruments of social control. Her identity is shaped by expectations concerning obedience, fidelity, and feminine respectability.

Karnad complicates this structure through the intervention of the serpent, who assumes Appanna's form and establishes an intimate relationship with Rani. The supernatural element creates a conflict between biological identity, social recognition, and moral judgement. Rani's experience cannot be easily accommodated within the community's established categories of acceptable female behavior.

The play's use of folklore is important because it allows Karnad to question the authority of social conventions without presenting the action as a realistic domestic drama alone. The fantastic narrative exposes the instability of the moral assumptions through which the community judges Rani. Her eventual

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trial becomes a public test of sexual respectability, but it also reveals the unequal standards by which women and men are evaluated.

Rani's ordeal illustrates the contradiction between the idealisation of feminine virtue and the limited agency granted to women in patriarchal society. Her social recognition depends upon a public performance of purity rather than upon a fair investigation of the circumstances of her life. The community's acceptance of her therefore raises questions about the relationship between truth, reputation, and social authority.

At the same time, the play should not be interpreted as offering a simple or complete liberation from patriarchy. Rani gains recognition, but that recognition is mediated through the supernatural and through the very social institutions that have constrained her. Karnad thus presents female agency as a complex negotiation with established authority rather than as an uncomplicated escape from it.

From a feminist perspective, *Nagamandala* demonstrates how folklore can expose the contradictions of patriarchal morality. The play transforms a traditional narrative into a critical examination of marriage, gender inequality, and the social production of feminine respectability.

8.2. Political Idealism and the Crisis of Authority in *Tughlaq*

In *Tughlaq*, Karnad turns to history to examine the complexities of political power. The central figure, Muhammad bin Tughlaq, is represented through the tension between intellectual ambition and political failure. His plans for reform and administrative transformation are associated with an aspiration to create a more rational political order. However, the consequences of his decisions reveal the distance between political intention and social experience.

The historical setting allows Karnad to explore the relationship between the ruler and the governed. Political authority is presented not simply as the possession of a powerful individual but as a structure sustained by institutions, public trust, and the consequences of policy. When the ruler's decisions produce suffering and uncertainty, the legitimacy of his authority becomes increasingly unstable.

The movement of the capital and the introduction of token currency are among the historical policies associated with Tughlaq's reign that the play uses to dramatise the difficulties of political reform. Within the dramatic narrative, these decisions reveal the consequences of policies that are not adequately reconciled with social realities. The ruler's intellectual confidence cannot by itself guarantee the success of administrative change.

Karnad's representation of Tughlaq also complicates the distinction between idealism and tyranny. The ruler cannot be understood merely as an enlightened reformer whose intentions are misunderstood, nor can his political vision be reduced to simple irrationality. Instead, the play explores how ambition, mistrust, coercion, and the desire to control historical change can undermine the very ideals that initially justify political action.

The political crisis in the play is therefore also a crisis of social relationships. The ruler becomes increasingly separated from the people whose lives his policies affect. The gap between official intentions and public experience exposes the limitations of authority that fails to accommodate the complexity of the society it seeks to transform.

Although the play draws upon a fourteenth-century historical figure, its dramatic concerns extend beyond the period represented. The conflict between political promises and practical consequences remains relevant to the study of governance, ideology, and public accountability. This relevance does not mean that the play is a direct representation of any single modern political regime. Rather, its historical framework creates a space for examining recurring contradictions in the exercise of power.

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Tughlaq thus demonstrates how historical drama can function as social criticism. By reconstructing the past through dramatic conflict, Karnad investigates the instability of political authority and the social costs of reform when it becomes detached from human realities.

8.3. Identity, Embodiment, and Social Expectations in *Hayavadana*

In *Hayavadana*, Karnad examines the problem of identity through a narrative that combines myth, folklore, and theatrical fantasy. The play's central exchange of heads between Devadatta and Kapila creates a dramatic situation in which bodily identity and intellectual identity no longer correspond in familiar ways.

The resulting conflict raises fundamental questions about the relationship between the body, the mind, and the social recognition of the individual. If identity is understood through the mind, one character may be recognised as the same person despite inhabiting a different body. If identity is understood through physical form, an entirely different conclusion becomes possible. Karnad uses this contradiction to reveal the instability of the categories through which people define themselves and others.

The problem of identity also has social implications. Individuals are not recognised exclusively through their inner consciousness; they are evaluated through physical appearance, relationships, gender roles, and established cultural expectations. The play's fantastic premise exposes the difficulty of reconciling these different forms of identification.

Padmini's position complicates the debate further. Her relationship with Devadatta and Kapila is shaped by attraction, intellectual affinity, physical desire, and competing ideals of masculinity. The play thereby questions the assumption that human relationships can be explained through a single stable principle. Desire and attachment resist the neat distinctions that social conventions seek to impose.

The narrative also challenges the ideal of completeness. The figure of Hayavadana, whose body combines human and equine characteristics, provides a parallel exploration of the desire to achieve a fully integrated identity. His search for completeness contrasts with the human characters' difficulties in defining what completeness actually means.

Karnad's use of masks, physical performance, and folk-theatrical devices reinforces the instability of identity. These theatrical techniques remind the audience that identity is represented, interpreted, and socially recognised rather than simply given as an unquestionable fact.

From the perspective of cultural criticism, *Hayavadana* examines how the desire for stable categories can conflict with the complexity of human experience. The play does not offer a straightforward solution to the problem of identity. Instead, it reveals the limitations of social and philosophical systems that attempt to define the individual through a single criterion.

The social criticism of *Hayavadana* therefore emerges through its treatment of embodiment, desire, and cultural expectations. Its mythic structure becomes a means of questioning the assumptions through which identity and human relationships are organised.

8.4. Ritual, Social Hierarchy, and Ethical Conflict in *The Fire and the Rain*

The Fire and the Rain draws upon the narrative resources of the *Mahabharata* to investigate the relationship between ritual authority, social hierarchy, personal desire, and ethical responsibility. The play's world is shaped by religious practices and inherited social arrangements that claim legitimacy through tradition. Yet the characters' actions expose tensions between the public authority of ritual and the private motivations of those who participate in it.

The sacrificial ritual provides a central framework for examining the relationship between religious authority and social power. Ritual is presented as a practice with collective significance, but its performance is also connected to questions of status, recognition, ambition, and control. The play invites

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consideration of whether religious institutions necessarily produce ethical conduct or whether they can reproduce the same rivalries and inequalities found elsewhere in society.

The conflict between public duty and personal motivation is particularly important. Characters who participate in ritual and religious life are not free from jealousy, revenge, grief, or the desire for recognition. Karnad therefore complicates any assumption that ritual status automatically guarantees moral authority.

The play also examines social hierarchy through the unequal distribution of recognition and opportunity. The treatment of Arvasu and the representation of Paravasu's authority allow the drama to explore the relationship between institutional position and individual worth. Questions of exclusion and social legitimacy become inseparable from the characters' personal conflicts.

The play's treatment of ritual and social order should not be reduced to a rejection of religion as such. Its critical force lies in distinguishing ethical responsibility from the mere performance of socially authorised practices. Ritual becomes problematic when institutional prestige or personal ambition takes precedence over compassion and justice.

Mythological narrative enables Karnad to dramatise these contradictions without limiting them to a particular historical moment. The inherited epic framework provides cultural familiarity, while the playwright's reinterpretation exposes the human conflicts that exist within the narrative.

In this respect, *The Fire and the Rain* extends the article's central argument. Just as marriage and gender expectations structure the world of *Nagamandala*, and political ideology structures the world of *Tughlaq*, ritual and religious authority help organize the social world of *The Fire and the Rain*. In each case, the institution claims legitimacy, yet the actions of individuals reveal the contradictions embedded within it.

8.5. Comparative Perspective: Myth, History, and Social Reality

A comparison of the four plays reveals that Karnad's use of myth, history, and folklore is closely connected to his critique of social structures. These narrative forms provide different ways of examining the relationship between established authority and individual experience.

In *Nagamandala*, folklore exposes the gendered assumptions governing marriage and sexual morality. In *Tughlaq*, historical reconstruction examines the relationship between political ambition and the consequences of governance. In *Hayavadana*, myth and theatrical fantasy challenge the stability of identity and the expectations associated with the body and human relationships. In *The Fire and the Rain*, epic material provides a framework for investigating ritual authority, social hierarchy, and ethical responsibility.

Despite their differences, the plays share a concern with the gap between public ideals and lived realities. Marriage claims to organize legitimate relationships, political leadership claims to advance collective welfare, cultural ideals promise a coherent identity, and ritual claims to embody social or spiritual order. Yet each institution is shown to contain contradictions that become visible through individual suffering, conflict, or resistance.

Karnad's dramatic technique is central to this process. Rather than relying exclusively on direct commentary, he uses symbolic action, dramatic irony, narrative ambiguity, and theatrical experimentation to make social contradictions visible. The audience is encouraged to reconsider familiar assumptions rather than accept the moral authority of inherited narratives without question.

The four plays also demonstrate that social criticism need not depend upon a realistic contemporary setting. Historical distance and mythological imagination can create a productive critical distance from present-day assumptions. By encountering familiar social problems in unfamiliar narrative forms, audiences may become more conscious of the cultural frameworks that shape their own interpretations.

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Nevertheless, the plays do not present an identical understanding of social change. Rani's negotiation with patriarchal society, Tughlaq's political failures, the unresolved identity questions in *Hayavadana*, and the ethical conflicts in *The Fire and the Rain* produce different dramatic outcomes. These differences are significant because they prevent the study from reducing Karnad's theatre to a single moral lesson.

The comparative reading therefore suggests that Karnad's social criticism operates through the exposure of contradictions rather than through the presentation of simple alternatives. Tradition is neither automatically oppressive nor beyond criticism; history is neither a neutral record nor a complete explanation of the present; and individual agency is neither entirely absent nor unrestricted. The plays reveal how social reality emerges through the continuing negotiation between cultural meanings, institutional authority, and human experience.

9. MAJOR FINDINGS

The comparative analysis produces five principal findings.

First, myth, folklore, and history function as critical resources rather than merely decorative elements. Karnad transforms inherited narratives to illuminate social conflicts and question established assumptions.

Second, social institutions are represented as structures that distribute authority unequally. Marriage, political governance, cultural expectations, and ritual practices shape the choices available to individuals.

Third, the plays reveal a persistent conflict between public ideals and lived experience. The language of morality, reform, identity, and religious duty does not always correspond to the consequences of institutional practices.

Fourth, individual agency emerges as complex and constrained. Characters attempt to negotiate established systems, but their actions are shaped by the social and cultural conditions in which they live.

Fifth, Karnad's theatrical experimentation strengthens his social criticism. Folklore, historical reconstruction, symbolic action, and dramatic ambiguity encourage audiences to question the legitimacy of familiar cultural and political assumptions.

These findings support the argument that Karnad's theatre is a significant site for examining the relationship between inherited narratives and changing social realities.

10. CONCLUSION

Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala*, *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, and *The Fire and the Rain* demonstrate how mythology, folklore, and history can become powerful instruments of social criticism. Through different narrative traditions, the plays investigate the structures of authority that govern gender relations, political life, identity, ritual, and social hierarchy.

Nagamandala reveals the contradictions of patriarchal marriage and the unequal moral expectations imposed upon women. *Tughlaq* exposes the distance between political idealism and the practical consequences of governance. *Hayavadana* challenges stable definitions of identity and completeness, while *The Fire and the Rain* examines the ethical tensions embedded in ritual authority and social hierarchy.

The comparison establishes that Karnad's dramatic method is neither a simple rejection of tradition nor an uncritical celebration of cultural heritage. Instead, he reinterprets inherited narratives to expose the conflicts and inequalities within social institutions. His plays suggest that the authority of tradition depends partly upon the assumptions through which communities interpret and reproduce it.

The significance of Karnad's theatre lies in its capacity to transform culturally familiar stories into occasions for critical reflection. By bringing the past into dialogue with social experience, he demonstrates that drama can question the ideological foundations of established institutions and reveal the tensions between collective expectations and individual freedom.

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Ultimately, the selected plays present social reality as a field of competing values, unequal power relations, and unresolved ethical questions. Their continuing literary significance lies in the invitation they offer readers and audiences to reconsider how authority is constructed, how identities are recognised, and how inherited narratives may be reinterpreted in the pursuit of a more reflective understanding of society.

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