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Countering Mythical Tropes: A Decolonial

Approach to Girish Karnad's Selected Plays

Abstract: *India is a country globally acknowledged for its ancient Mythology and history, which are deeply intertwined with its culture. Myths are timeless tales that lack historical evidence and are passed down through generations. This paper examines Girish Karnad's Hayavadana (1971) and Yayati (1961), prioritising the Indian myths and folktales as tools of resistance against the Western theatrical dominance in postcolonial India. It draws on decolonial theoretical insights from Walter de Mignolo. Karnad uses the ancient sources such as the Mahabharata, the Vetala Panchavimshati, and Kathasaritsagara ("Ocean of the Streams of Stories"), to reinterpret them with a touch of social and political commentary, showcasing dilemmas, identity crises, and meaninglessness. Karnad's Hayavadana echoes Thomas Mann's novella The Transposed Heads (1940), exploring incompleteness and hybridity through folk theatre elements that are rooted in the "Yakshagana" theatrical performance. Similarly, Yayati deals with King Yayati's moral transgression and curse that trades his old age with his son, Puru's youth, which explores moral and existential dilemmas.*

This paper investigates Bharat Muni's Natyashastra over Aristotle's Poetics, through Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's postcolonial idea, and it revives the "Yakshagana" theatre to dismantle the colonial intellectual hegemony to preserve the cultural legacy. This analysis sheds light on how such reinterpretation transforms myths into living forms of resistance by addressing intersectional oppression or power hierarchies in ritualistic performances.

Keywords: Myth, folktale, decoloniality, folk theatre, Yakshagana.

Countering Mythical Tropes: A Decolonial Approach to Girish Karnad's Selected Plays

Nittyta Singha

Introduction

India's cultural identity is profoundly shaped by its myths, folktales, and historical narratives. It reflects a diversity that is elevated in its 22 scheduled languages and over 121 languages, as per the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. Hence, the enriched myths and folktales are an integral part of this nation that makes this country great. Myths are timeless tales which doesn't rely on history and historical evidence but pass through generations. This linguistic mosaic nurtures a rich oral tradition, encompassing epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, Vedic texts, *Puranas*, and *Upanishads*, alongside regional folktales such as Bengali's "Thakumar Jhuli," Hindi's "Vikram-Betaal," Malayalam's "Onam myths," Mizo's 'Chhungkhual Tales,' Punjabi's "Heer Ranjha," Sanskrit's "Panchatantra," and Tamil's "Sangam literature." These narratives unify the nation under the umbrella of "India" or "Bharat," a name mythically linked to King Bharat, son of Dushyanta and Shakuntala, descendant of King Yayati from the *Mahabharata*.

This paper employs a decolonial methodology to examine Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* and *Yayati*, prioritising the myths and folktales in a qualitative textual analysis. Karnad is different from his contemporaries in that he drew upon Hindu myths and infused them with a unique touch of human emotions and feelings, also using them as satires on society and politics, which makes his plays more relevant. He reinterprets the myths in the modern era that revolves around dilemmas, identity, and existential crises. It draws insights from the decolonial methodology and the concepts of scholars like Walter de Mignolo, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Frantz Fanon, Ramón Grosfoguel, and Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni. This paper investigates Bharat Muni's *Natyashastra* over Aristotle's *Poetics*, which explores the Indian theatre over Western theatre, helping to dismantle the colonial intellectual hegemony in the arts, literature, curriculum, institutions, and theatre to reclaim the ancient roots to preserve the cultural legacy.

Hayavadana revolves around the transposed heads motif; the incompleteness or hybridity and mind-body conflict, and reflects the folktale from the *Vetala Panchabinsati*. Karnad utilises folk theatre elements, such as dolls, masks, the Sutradhar, invocation to Lord Ganesha, and so on. On the other hand, *Yayati* takes its origin in the *Mahabharata*, where King Yayati, the forefather of the Kuru dynasty, and the great-grandfather of King Bharat. It deals with the moral transgression of King Yayati, who was cursed by Sage Shukracharya, the father-in-law of Yayati, that made him old at his prime age.

Therefore, he trades his old age with his son, Puru's (Pooru) youth, which highlights the moral and existential dilemmas.

Literature Review

Girish Karnad's plays, *Hayavadana* and *Yayati*, are beautifully crafted from ancient Hindu mythical sources like the *Mahabharata*, *Vetala Panchabhinshati*, and *Kathasarit Sagara*. However, this paper synthesises the existing literature in this area of study by drawing insights from the published articles, critical books and news articles of the experts. For example, most of the works on *Hayavadana* highlight its exploration of incompleteness and the mind-body dichotomy, in short, the identity crisis. Deboshree Bhattacharjee (2022) applies Roman Ingarden's Nebentext to analyse stage directions, which is significant for the engagement of the audience, subverting folk forms for meta-theatricality and non-realism. Dr. R. Bakyoraj allegorically interprets the transposed heads motifs, incorporating Hindu myths with Western influences like Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads* (1940), which revolves around an identity crisis due to the colonial influence on culture. Dr. T. Mahendran (2023) frames it as a "cultural renaissance" (1), as a resistance to Western dominance in postcolonial India. Rohit Yadav and Kavya Dixit (2019) emphasise the reflections of folk tales and Hindu values and moralities in Indian culture, with supernatural motifs which echo modern psychological complexities. P. Lakshmilavanya *et al.* (2020) view it as a moral discovery with the amalgamation of tradition and modernity's bleak future. Dr. Amara Khan investigates a 2008 performance, where the use of masks symbolises the Yakshagana folk theatrical performance that reveals the national identity and the importance of folk theatre to the modern audience.

Then the works on *Yayati* focus on patriarchal myths, identity crisis and existential themes from the *Mahabharata*. Sarita Kumari (2024) explores Karnad's reinterpretation of folklore and mythology, depicting King Yayati's curse and Puru's sacrifice as critiques of responsibility and human incompleteness, moral and psychological dilemmas, by preserving ancient art with modern plight. Dr. Kunwar Sahab Singh (2023) examines patriarchal mythical intersections, reinterpreting the epic to reveal absurdity, selfishness, feminism, and women's predicaments like Devayani's and Sharmistha's conflicts. Anuradha, in her article, analyses mythical reworking, adding characters like Chitrlekha for social-religious-philosophical depth, emphasising desire, alienation, and self-sacrifice in modern contexts.

To examine these existing research works collectively emphasises Karnad's hybridisation of myths and folk tales through the reinterpretation. Therefore, a gap is still there in this area of research, and the findings of this research paper are to apply the decolonial theoretical framework to dismantle the colonial influence in postcolonial Indian theatre to reclaim its roots of ancient folk theatre. Hence,

this analysis sheds light on how such reinterpretation transforms myths into living forms of resistance by addressing intersectional oppression or power hierarchies in ritualistic performances.

Research Questions

The paper seeks to answer the following questions, including:

1. How does Karnad utilise myths and folktales as tools of resistance against Western theatrical dominance?
2. In what ways does it investigate Bharat Muni's *Natyashastra* over Aristotle's *Poetics* to reclaim its ancient roots in theatrical performance?
3. How are folk theatre elements used in *Hayavadana* and *Yayati* through the performance of the Yakshagana to counter colonial or Eurocentric epistemology?

Objectives

The paper aims to address the following objectives:

1. To examine the myths and folk tales as tools of resistance against Western theatrical dominance.
2. To investigate the *Natyashastra* over *Poetics* to reclaim its ancient roots.
3. To analyse the use of folk theatrical elements through the performance of the Yakshagana to counter colonial or Eurocentric epistemology.

Research Methodology

This study seeks to analyse Karnad's *Hayavadana* and *Yayati* through the qualitative textual examination. The paper draws its insights from decolonial methodology to uncover the colonial influence in Indian modern theatre, especially Indian English drama. Decoloniality not only uproots the colonial roots or dismantles Eurocentric influences but also goes back to its roots to preserve indigenous heritage. Both plays are rooted in the Hindu myths and folktales. Therefore, these plays are thematically and structurally different from the other modern plays. On the other hand, his contemporaries like Badal Sircar, Habib Tanvir, Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Duttani, Mohan Rakesh and others, whose plays are influenced by leftist ideology and Western theatre. Although in their plays, there is a touch of Indianness, and the real stories of the people that generally connect more with the masses. Therefore, the masses were intensely involved with these plays, and it spread to a larger number of people, because these playwrights were talking about the plight of modern life and the modern crises. Not only that, they were also associated with the IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association) movement, which was started in 1942 for the masses to spread a social consciousness about the problems of the people. Hence, they used theatre as a medium of expression of the plight of people, like the 1943 Bengal famine. Bijan Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* (1944) is a prime example.

However, Girish Karnad is completely sidelined from all this staff. It doesn't mean he was unaware of all these. But he was more passionate about the reinterpretation of myths from the ancient epics. He himself said in an interview, "I have always been drawn to the folk forms because they allow me to speak in a language that is both ancient and contemporary, bypassing the colonial baggage of English theatre" (Bhattacharjee 183). Here, Karnad's use of the Yakshagana folk form counters the Eurocentric epistemology. To decolonise this, Fanon advocates that the colonised reclaim their roots through violence, which he describes as a "cleansing force" that liberates the colonised people from inferiority complexes and restores humanity, thereby rejecting Eurocentric knowledge systems that deem the colonised irrational or primitive (Fanon 92). To advocate Fanon's arguments, Mignolo adds that "epistemic delinking" tries to make a detachment from the colonial knowledge system by resisting colonial intellectual hegemony by dehegemonising it to protect its indigenous roots (Mignolo 122).

Discussion

Indian dramas in English don't get the audience, which the regional dramas do, due to the cultural gap. The audience doesn't feel connected to English drama. In 1775, the first modern theatre was set up in Calcutta for the British, not for the Indians. However, it places more emphasis on the adaptation of the English dramas, and this is the way Western theatre takes its roots in the Indian Sub-continent. Even today, Indian dramas in English don't get that much popularity compared to the regional dramas like Bengali, Tamil, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, etc. In a National Seminar, a Marathi dramatist and harsh critic of Indian English drama, Jnaneshwar Nadkarni, said,

Butcher them (the Indo-Anglian playwrights), castrate them and force them to write in their native Hindi or Urdu or whatever Indian languages their fathers and mothers used to speak. (Naik 175)

Karnad as an Iconoclast

Girish Karnad is a renowned Indian playwright and a veteran actor. He originally wrote in Kannada his plays, including *Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1971), *Nagamandala* (1990), *Tale Danda* (1990) and *Boiled Beans on Toast* (2014). All his plays are part of the Indian curriculum and the syllabi of reputed institutions. In an interview, he himself accepted that he sees himself as an essential playwright and also said, "But my very first play, *Yayati*, shows a kind of confidence, a feel for the medium, which surprises me. If I could do that at twenty-two, I must have a gift for it. It's like a sprinter who just knows he can run" (Karnad ou.edu). In his childhood, he travelled with theatrical groups. He also says, "My parents were addicted to these plays. That was in the late '40s... I loved going to see them, and the magic has stayed with me" (ou.edu).

Plots of *Hayavadana* and *Yayati*

The play, *Hayavadana*, begins with the rise of the curtain and the narration of the Sutradhar, Bhagavata and the invocation of Lord Ganesha, the destroyer of incompleteness and obstacles. Lord Ganesha, Vignaharta, is a God with a human body and elephant head that signifies His incompleteness:

The Bhagavata enters, chanting a traditional verse, inviting the audience into the world of the gods and demons. (Karnad 3)

This sets the tone of the play; it will revolve around incompleteness and hybridity. It has two plots, one main plot and another sub-plot. The main plot is about the horse-headed incomplete man named Hayavadana, who is in search of being a complete man: “I am neither man nor horse, but a grotesque blend—where do I belong?” His mother was a princess of Karnataka, and his father was a Celestial being or gandharbha in the form of a white stallion horse because he was cursed by the god Kuvera. Therefore, he became a half-horse and half-man, which makes him come a long way to search for completeness.

On the other hand, the sub-plot revolves around the three characters Devdatta, Kapila and Padmani. Devdatta is a Brahmin whose profession is practising the Hindu rituals, and Kapila is his friend and a physically strong blacksmith. Then comes Padmani, who is married to Devdatta, but she is also attracted to Kapila’s muscular physique, which leads to a conflict between Devdatta and Kapila. At last, on the way to their Ujjayan trip, Devdatta sacrifices his head to Goddess Kali of Mount Chitrakoot, as he promised, and after seeing that, Kapila also does the same. Aftermath, knowing this, Padmini also wanted to do the same, but before she does, Goddess Kali awakes from her sleep and tells her to fix their heads without wasting any time. However, due to darkness, she unintentionally swats their heads so that Devdatta’s head is on Kapila’s body and Kapila’s head on Devdatta’s body. Then here, the question comes that “The heads are transposed, but the bodies remain the same—yet which is the true husband” (Karnad 18)? In *Vetala Panchabinsati*, Vetala, the demon, also asked the same question to King Vikramaditya of Ujjayan. He answered that the head is superior to the body; therefore, the head of Devdatta with Kapila’s body is the husband of Padmini. Then, as the play goes forward, Devdatta, with Kapila’s body, started loosening the muscles, and on the side, Kapila, with Devdatta’s body, gained the muscles like he had. At the end of the play, they both kill each other in a sword fight, and Padmani performed the sati by giving her son to Bhagavata. Furthermore, we have seen that Hayavadana comes on the stage singing the national anthem, “Jana Gana Mana.” He comes from the Kali temple of Mount Chitrakoot, and then he meets with the son of Padmini, whom she gave to Bhagavata before she did the ritual of Sati, who doesn’t talk, but after hearing the voice of Hayavadana, he starts laughing because he is hearing a horse laughing. At last, when Hayavadana was singing suddenly became a complete horse. Though he wanted to become a complete man, at least he is now

complete. The Sutradhar mediates: “In this play, the gods laugh, and we, the audience, are part of their jest” (Karnad 10).

The play, *Yayati*, begins with a backstory: Devayani, daughter of the Sage Shukracharya (preceptor of Asuras), and Sharmishtha, daughter of the Asura King Vrishaparva, were once friends. During a bathing outing, a storm mixes their clothes. Sharmishtha accidentally wears Devayani’s clothes, leading to a heated quarrel where Devayani insults Sharmishtha’s “inferior” Asura bloodline. Sharmishtha became angry and pushed Devayani into a well and left. King Yayati rescued Devayani when he was passing through by holding her right hand, a gesture which led to a marriage custom in ancient times. The Asura King Vrishaparva, a friend of Shukracharya, to appease him, made Sharmishtha, his daughter, Devayani’s maidservant. Yayati married Devayani, but later developed an attraction towards Sharmishtha, which compelled Sage Shukracharya to curse him.

However, there was only one solution to it, and that was if a young person, in his own will, wants to transfer his age with King Yayati, only then will he get back his youth. In desperation, Yayati begs his sons to exchange their youth for his curse. His youngest son, Puru (Pooru), in his own will, agrees to trade his youth for his father’s old age, sacrificing his prime to honour his father. On his wedding night to Princess Chitrlekha of Anga, the transfer occurs, leaving Puru aged and impotent. Chitrlekha, horrified by her husband’s fate and the king’s selfishness, confronts Yayati, questioning the morality of his actions. In despair over her ruined marriage, she commits suicide by poison. This tragedy shatters Yayati, who realises the destructiveness of his unchecked desires. Yayati requests Puru to take back his youth, and he accepts his curse. He exiles himself with Sharmistha to the forest, renouncing his throne to Puru.

Folk Theatrical Elements in *Hayavadana* and *Yayati*

Hayavadana is drawn from Thomas Mann’s German novella, *The Transposed Heads* and Indian folklore like *Vetala Panchavinsati* and *Kathasarit Sagara* (“Oceans of the Stream of Stories”). The transposed heads motif and incompleteness or hybridity themes are used in the play by Karnad. In an interview with director B.V. Karanth, he talked about the adaptation of his play, *Hayavadana*, into a film. Then he also said,

For the first time, we had used folklore, horses, masks, all those kinds of elements. And it was hailed as ‘*Natyashastra* Re-enters’... everyone was waiting to know how to use traditional forms. (The Wire)

In *Hayavadana*, Karnad uses the Yakshagana, folk theatre elements like dolls, masks, the Sutradhar, an invocation to Lord Ganesha, and a story-within-a-story, which doesn’t contain the Western theatrical elements. The actors use the different colours of masks, i.e., black and white, to indicate the transposition of heads. The black mask for Kapila and the white mask for Devdatta: “The actors don

masks, transforming into the spirits of the forest, their movements guided by the rhythm of the drum” (Karnad 15).

In this world, where the dolls talk and children don’t, that creates a sense of meaninglessness and the theme of absurdity. In the play, the dolls give the information about the dreams of Padmini of Kapila. Though the characters can’t hear them except the audience because the writer takes a creative liberty here to tell his story. The dolls are also used as a continuation of the cultural impact: “The doll dances, its wooden limbs echoing the ancient steps of the village ritual” (Karnad 45).

In this performance, the engagement of the audience is very crucial to create a reason in their minds. But in Aristotelian theatre, the spectator or audience is the last component for the development of a play: “The play-within-a-play begins, with the actors stepping out of their roles to address the audience directly” (Karnad 10). Here, it showcases the importance of the audience in the folk theatre or Indian classical drama. It is not only the characters who perform on the stage, but it is also the audience for whom they perform and making them better and better.

Stage direction is also a crucial part of Indian theatre or folk theatre. Every light, background music, curtains, and so forth play an important role. In this case, Karnad said, “The stage directions in my plays are not mere instructions; they are a way to bring the entire theatre alive, drawing from our traditional performance spaces where the audience is an active participant” (Bhattacharjee 185).

On the other hand, *Yayati*, which is derived from the epic *Mahabharata*, revolves around King Yayati, who is the forefather of the Kuru dynasty. He is the great-grandfather of King Bharat. The Sutradhara frames the narrative: “Sometimes when we are walking along a path, we see two paths in front of us. We can take only one road and feel that we are fulfilling our life’s purpose. However, we are always conscious of the inaudible voice which says: What would have happened if we had walked on the other road... Yet let the untrodden road be untrodden and let its secret remain buried. Let us stick to the morals of the grandmother’s stories that we heard in our childhood. This is the sad story of our life” (Karnad 9).

He was cursed by his father-in-law, Sage Shukracharya, the preceptor of Asuras. Due to moral transgression, he was cursed that he would become old at his prime. But a young person in his own will wants to give his youth to him, then he would become young in return; the young man turns into an old man. When no one agrees with it, his son Pooru trades his youth with his father, and he becomes old. Hence, Pooru is punished with old age for a crime that he didn’t commit. It showcases the moral and existential dilemmas of the characters. Here, Karnad blends the mythical characters with the modern crisis, like meaninglessness or absurdity. Karnad himself says on the production of Indian theatre form and the influence of colonisers in modern Indian theatre:

The point is that ‘modern’ Indian theatre emerged under British influence in three cities... Naturally, their theatre imitated the visiting British theatre groups, and so Indian theatre inherited the proscenium... (ou.edu)

The play sheds light on responsibility and duty over unchecked desires. It also critiques the greed of eternal youth and sensual pleasures as leading to moral and ethical dilemmas. It analyses the self-realisation of the overambitious, the absurdity of human choices or existentialist themes, and the patriarchal exploitation of women.

Yakshagana as a Tool of Resistance

Yakshagana is a traditional folk theatre form performed in Karnataka (and the coastal part of Kerala), which literally means “songs of the demi-gods.” It blends music, dance, dialogue, costumes, makeup and stage direction into a unique performance. It generally narrates stories from the epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* with moral and religious values. There are two components of it, one is “Himmela” and the other is “Mummela.” “Himmela” is about the background music with the singers and musicians, and “Mummela” is the dance-drama trope that is enacted through their dance performances, which prioritises Bharat Muni’s *Natyashastra*, which also talks about the “natyadharmā” and the “rasa-anubhava.” But the Western theatre emphasises the “mimesis” and “catharsis”, propagated by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. Mignolo’s “control of knowledge is a crucial dimension of coloniality” (452) frames how colonial theatre erased indigenous epistemologies, which Karnad restores through *Natyashastra*-inspired performance in his plays. In academia, the decolonial concept emphasises epistemic delinking, as later mentioned by Mignolo, where the colonised intellectual must abandon mimicry of European culture and instead draw from the “psycho-affective equilibrium” of pre-colonial legacies to build a new, authentic national identity (Fanon 208).

On the backwardness of the Indian English drama and the Western influence, a critic and writer named MSS Pandian says:

The theatre in India has been a site of contestation between colonial modernity and indigenous cultural practices, where the latter often remain submerged under the weight of the former. (Pandian 85).

To advocate Pandian’s statement, M.K. Naik also adds, “If Indian English drama wishes to go ahead, it must go back first, that is, only a purposeful return to its own roots in the rich tradition of ancient Indian drama, both in Sanskrit and folk drama in Prakrits, can help it shed its lean and pale look” (Naik 43-44). Hence, this is a way to counter the Western theatre through the performance of folk theatre in postcolonial India.

Conclusion

To conclude, as the title of the paper suggests, this paper counters the mythical tropes by decolonising the Indian modern theatre. Indian modern theatre is inspired by the Eurocentric theatrical performance propagated by Aristotle. Hence, it decentres the Western form of theatre by using myths and folk tales as tools of resistance to reclaim its ancient cultural heritage. It emphasises decolonial methodology to decentre the centre of colonial intellectual hegemony in postcolonial Indian art forms. Therefore, through the study of this research, it defended the questions raised in this paper by reclaiming the indigenous knowledge system, which can only be preserved through practices and performances. We should never forget our roots because this is our identity. If we start distancing ourselves from our roots, then it will become a question of an existence and identity crisis.

In academia, Karnad's plays critique the "coloniality of power" (Grosfoguel 19), where even post-colonial elites reproduce hegemony; Fanon urges a shift toward proletarian and peasant-led revolutions that prioritise praxis over abstract theorising, ensuring intellectuals serve the masses rather than elite interests (Fanon 1961). By decentring the Eurocentric epistemology, this paper has given the answers to all the questions raised. This paper used the decolonial framework to counter the colonial knowledge system by de-hierarchising the hierarchy of power to reclaim the ancient form of folk theatre or indigenous knowledge. It is good to be modern but not erasing the tradition, culture and heritage. Therefore, it is our responsibility to protect and preserve our culture from Western influence.

This paper has filled the theoretical gap through this decolonial methodology with a qualitative research approach. Hence, there is a scope of study for further study, which will be done through the study of the existing literature. This global perspective in decolonial academia challenges Eurocentric hegemony by centring the lived experiences of colonised as the foundation for true liberation (Fanon 309). Modern audiences lack interest in myths, folktales and history. They are more interested in Sci-Fi, dystopian narratives. Therefore, modern theatre, literature, arts and films should come forward with mythical stories in a modern context, through which we can spread our myths and history among the masses and that can help us to preserve it. Furthermore, Ngũgĩ also came up with his theory of decoloniality to de-hierarchise the power hierarchies or intersectional oppression in ritualistic performances using reinterpretation of myths into living forms of resistance (Thiong'o 1987).

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