



Yearning for Existence: Female Identity and Patriarchal Negotiation in the Mythical Plays of Girish Karnad

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Abstract:

Girish Karnad's plays are foundational to modern Indian theatre, distinguished by their innovative reinterpretation of myth, history, and folklore. Central to his oeuvre is the nuanced exploration of female identity and the negotiation of autonomy within patriarchal frameworks. This paper examines four of Karnad's seminal works—Yayati, Hayavadana, Naga-Mandala, and The Fire and the Rain—to analyze how he constructs female subjectivity through mythic narratives, simultaneously critiquing the societal structures that confine women. Drawing on feminist and psychoanalytic perspectives, the study argues that Karnad's female characters transcend passivity, appearing as multidimensional figures grappling with desire, morality, and sociocultural pressures. While many ultimately yield to patriarchal constraints, their acts of resistance and psychological depth reveal a persistent yearning for an existence beyond prescribed roles. Through his revision of myths, Karnad exposes deep-rooted gender inequalities, dramatizing the conflict between individual longing and societal obligations. His female protagonists inhabit both internal and external worlds, navigating the fraught terrain between emotional fulfillment and compulsory obedience. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that Karnad's plays are not mere retellings but incisive commentaries on gender politics and the quest for female agency.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Feminist Criticism, Female Identity, Mythical Reinterpretation, Gender Politics, Autonomy, Indian Drama.

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Introduction: Myth, Modernity, and the Question of Female Identity

Girish Karnad is a leading post-independence Indian dramatist. Writing mainly in Kannada, his works have been translated into English. Karnad redefines the link between myth and modernity, reshaping myths to address present anxieties of identity, morality, power, and gender. Erin B. Mee notes Karnad's dramaturgy creates a dialogue between past and present, making old stories relevant through modern awareness (Mee 34). This is clear in his portrayal of women. Indian society has long relied on patriarchal codes. These regulate women's sexuality, movement, and speech. Myths and epics often celebrate female chastity, sacrifice, and obedience. Such narratives reinforce a moral order in which men hold unquestioned power. In this context, Karnad's plays disrupt the normal pattern. His women question, desire, transgress, and suffer. They are not symbols but complex, emotionally rich characters. Characters like Chitrlekha, Padmini, Rani, and Vishakha show the clash between personal longing and social expectation. Building on this disruption of normative narratives, this paper proposes that Karnad's female characters articulate a persistent and complex yearning for autonomous existence that challenges established patriarchal structures. While they strive to assert themselves, social and cultural systems repeatedly deny them full autonomy. Many ultimately remain circumscribed by patriarchal authority; however, their struggles underscore both the fragility of male-dominated rule and the possibility of alternative modes of identity.

This study situates itself within the broader scholarly discourse on Karnad's dramaturgy and feminist criticism in Indian theatre. Previous critics, such as Erin B. Mee (2008) and Tutun Mukherjee (2006), have highlighted Karnad's engagement with myth and modernity, while Suman Bala (1999) and Sarat Babu (1999) have explored gender, desire, and power in his plays. Yet, a comprehensive synthesis of feminist and psychoanalytic approaches to Karnad's representation of

female subjectivity remains needed. This paper aims to address this gap by drawing on feminist theory from Mary Wollstonecraft and Hélène Cixous, in conjunction with psychoanalytic insights from Jacques Lacan, to offer a nuanced reading of the crisis and negotiation of female identity. The analysis focuses on four plays: *Yayati* (1961), *Hayavadana* (1971), *Naga-Mandala* (1990), and *The Fire and the Rain* (1995), employing close textual analysis and engagement with existing scholarship to advance an original argument about Karnad's mythic reimagining of women's agency.

Theoretical Framework: Feminism, Desire, and Patriarchal Structures

Feminist thought claims that women's oppression lies in systemic power, not just in single injustices. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft argues that society makes women weak by denying them education and freedom (Wollstonecraft 86). This argument fits Karnad's plays. There, women are limited by social codes, not by their own limits. Hélène Cixous writes that patriarchal systems create hierarchies. In these, masculinity ranks above femininity. This shapes language, culture, and identity ("Sorties" 579). Karnad's plays make this hierarchy clear. Male figures like Yayati, Devadatta, Appanna, and Parvasu control women's bodies and lives. Yet, the women in these stories do not always give in quietly. They express desire and fight injustice.

Psychoanalytic theory also helps us understand desire in Karnad's works. Jacques Lacan says desire comes from a sense of lack. There is a gap between need and demand (Lacan 287). Karnad's female leads feel this lack. They yearn for love, equality, or respect. But society denies these goals. Their suffering is not just personal bad luck. It is rooted in structures that make desire and duty clash.

Karnad's plays become a meeting point for feminist critique and psychological complexity. They show that women's struggle for identity is at once personal and shaped by society.

Female Sacrifice and Silent Resistance in Yayati

Yayati is Karnad's first play. It draws on the Mahabharata, but differs from the original. In the myth, King Yayati swaps his old age with that of his son Puru. He does this so he can keep seeking pleasure. Karnad shifts the focus to the emotional fallout of the decision, especially for the women affected.

Chitrlekha, Puru's wife, stands out in this play. Unlike submissive mythological women, she questions Puru's sacrifice. Her protest is not just emotional, but also rational and philosophical. She refuses to glorify a sacrifice that causes silent suffering. Puru is praised as a dutiful son. Yet, Chitrlekha silently suffers for his choices. As C. N. Ramachandran notes, in Karnad's plays, women are often the worst sufferers (Ramachandran 28).

At first, Chitrlekha seems modern, assertive, and vocal. She will not obey without question. Her resistance, though, gets weaker under social pressure. In the end, her despair shows how hard it is to remain independent under strict moral codes. Karnad presents only partial freedom: women may question, but cannot escape.

Devayani and Sharmishtha add more depth to female portrayals in Yayati. Devayani fights for her pride and justice. But her strength depends on her father's power. Sharmishtha, once royal, is now a servant. She faces both gender and class oppression. Their conflict reveals more than personal rivalry. It exposes social hierarchies that divide women. Feminist critics insist that empowerment must take class and status into account. Karnad explores this with care.

Yayati ultimately shows how male desire can value pleasure above morality. Women are left to endure the emotional pain. Through these female roles, Karnad critiques a culture that celebrates male heroism. He also criticizes the way society normalizes female sacrifice.

Desire and Incompleteness in Hayavadana

If Yayati looks at male decisions, Hayavadana explores identity and female desire. The story comes from the Kathasaritsagara and Thomas Mann's version in *The Transposed Heads*. It centers on a love triangle between Devadatta, Kapila, and Padmini. The two men accidentally swap heads. This sparks a debate: does the head or body define a person?

Within this odd and comic plot, Padmini is deeply complex. She is not just good or bad—she is human. She feels limited by her husband, Devadatta. At the same time, she is attracted to Kapila's physical energy. Her desire is more than sexual. She wants a partner who has both intellect and strength.

Critic Suman Bala sees Padmini's situation as a search for completeness in a broken world (Bala 195). Her longing echoes Lacan's idea of lack. No man fully meets her ideal. Still, society demands wholeness where only fragments exist. When she changes Devadatta and Kapila's heads, she tries to create the perfect mix of mind and body.

But Padmini's power does not last. Society's moral rules take over. Padmini cannot live a life outside the accepted boundaries of marriage. After Devadatta and Kapila die, she performs sati. This act seems both loyal and a surrender to patriarchy. Her death shows the tragic limits of female desire in strict societies.

Yet Padmini is not merely a victim. She articulates her longing honestly. She defies the expectation that women should suppress their desire. In doing so, she destabilises the patriarchal fantasy of the

passive wife. Even in defeat, she exposes the hypocrisy of moral codes. Society condemns female desire while tolerating male transgression.

Voice, Chastity, and Subversive Survival in Naga-Mandala

If Yayati foregrounds female suffering within sacrificial ideology and Hayavadana dramatises fragmented desire, Naga-Mandala moves further toward exposing the everyday brutality of patriarchy within the home. The play is based on oral tales narrated to Karnad by A. K. Ramanujan. It weaves folklore with theatrical self-reflexivity. At its centre stands Rani, a young bride. Her name ironically means “queen,” though she is anything but sovereign in her marital home. Rani’s husband, Appanna, treats her as a possession rather than a companion. He locks her inside the house during the day. At night, he spends time with a concubine. The physical confinement of Rani becomes a powerful metaphor for the social incarceration of women within patriarchal marriage. Imelda Whelehan notes that radical feminist thought sees patriarchal gender relations as the root of women’s oppression (Whelehan 28). Appanna embodies this systemic dominance. He assumes unquestioned authority over Rani’s body, movement, and speech. What makes Naga-Mandala remarkable, however, is Karnad’s use of fantasy to destabilise this hierarchy. The cobra (Naga), who assumes Appanna’s form at night and becomes Rani’s affectionate lover, introduces ambiguity into the narrative. Is the Naga a projection of Rani’s desire? A symbolic compensation for emotional deprivation? Or a folkloric device to critique male hypocrisy? The ambiguity allows Karnad to challenge the rigid concept of chastity that Indian society traditionally imposes upon women.

When Rani becomes pregnant, Appanna accuses her of infidelity and subjects her to public humiliation. The village elders demand a trial by ordeal to prove her purity. Ironically, the Naga’s intervention transforms the ordeal into a spectacle that confirms her chastity. Sarat Babu observes

that the play “deflates the concept of chastity” by exposing its socially constructed nature (Babu 238). Rani’s body becomes a site of communal judgment, yet truth itself proves malleable. Unlike Chitrlekha and Padmini, Rani ultimately survives. She gains reverence and authority within the community. However, this empowerment is paradoxical: it is achieved through mythic intervention rather than direct rebellion. Rani does not overthrow patriarchy; she manipulates its symbols. Her transformation from submissive bride to revered figure suggests that survival within oppressive systems may require strategic negotiation rather than overt resistance. Through Rani, Karnad dramatizes the silencing of women. Whenever she attempts to question Appanna or the Naga, she is told, “Do as you are told.” The denial of speech reinforces her subordinate position. Yet by the end of the play, her voice—validated by miraculous proof—reshapes the social order. Karnad thus imagines the possibility of female agency emerging from within myth itself.

Ritual, Body, and Exploitation in The Fire and the Rain

In *The Fire and the Rain*, Karnad returns to myth—drawing from the Mahabharata—to examine power struggles within ritualistic society. While the play primarily revolves around the rivalry between brothers Arvasu and Parvasu, its emotional centre lies in the suffering of women such as Vishakha and Nittilai.

Vishakha is married to Parvasu, a ritual-obsessed Brahmin who abandons her in pursuit of prestige and ascetic discipline. Her loneliness reflects a recurring pattern in Karnad’s plays: the husband’s allegiance lies with ambition or ego rather than with emotional partnership. When Vishakha seeks affection elsewhere, she is condemned as immoral. Karnad exposes the double standard that permits male desire while criminalising female longing.

Raibhya's violence toward Vishakha further intensifies the critique. He exploits her sexually, then publicly shames her. The hypocrisy of male authority becomes starkly visible: the patriarch who commits transgression punishes the woman for it. The body of the woman becomes both the object of desire and the instrument of punishment. In Lacanian terms, Vishakha becomes trapped in the gap between demand and recognition—her desire for love cannot find legitimate expression within the symbolic order (Lacan 287).

Nittilai, a member of a tribal community, introduces the dimensions of caste and class into the gender debate. Her love for Arvasu defies social boundaries, but she is forced into marriage within her community. When she attempts to assert her emotional truth, she is silenced by collective authority. Karnad demonstrates that patriarchal domination intersects with caste hierarchy; women from marginalized communities suffer doubly.

Unlike Rani, Vishakha, and Nittilai do not achieve redemptive transformation. Their suffering underscores the persistence of structural injustice. However, through their portrayal, Karnad compels the audience to confront the cruelty embedded in ritual and tradition. Religion, which should offer moral guidance, becomes an instrument of exclusion and violence.

Internal and External Worlds: The Isolation of the Wife

A recurring structural pattern in Karnad's plays is the division between internal and external worlds. The wife inhabits the interior domestic space, while the husband moves freely in the public sphere. In *Naga-Mandala*, Rani is locked indoors; in *Yayati*, Chitrlekha's fate is decided by male negotiations; in *Hayavadana*, Padmini's desire is judged by social law; in *The Fire and the Rain*, Vishakha remains emotionally isolated while men pursue ritual glory.

This spatial separation mirrors psychological isolation. The wife's inner life—her dreams, frustrations, and doubts—remains invisible to society. Karnad grants his female characters interiority through dialogue and monologue, allowing audiences to witness their mental struggle. As Tutun Mukherjee observes, Karnad's dramaturgy foregrounds performance as a space where silenced voices can be heard (Mukherjee 43).

However, interiority does not automatically lead to liberation. Most of Karnad's women are caught between obedience and rebellion. They articulate resistance but cannot entirely dismantle the structures that confine them. This tension reflects the broader social reality in which Indian women navigate tradition and modernity.

Reimagining Myth: Continuity and Critique

One of Karnad's greatest achievements lies in his method of mythic reinterpretation. Rather than rejecting tradition outright, he engages it in dialogue. By altering narrative emphasis—shifting focus from heroic male figures to marginalized women—he exposes the silences of canonical texts.

In *Yayati*, the epic celebrates filial sacrifice; Karnad reveals the emotional cost to women. In *Hayavadana*, folklore entertains philosophical speculation; Karnad transforms it into a meditation on female desire. In *Naga-Mandala*, an oral tale becomes a feminist allegory. In *The Fire and the Rain*, ritual myth becomes a critique of institutionalized patriarchy. Karnad's mythic method does not reject tradition but interrogates it. In *Yayati*, sacrifice is reframed through female suffering. In *Hayavadana*, folklore becomes meditation on incomplete desire. In *Naga-Mandala*, an oral tale transforms into an allegory of domestic oppression. In *The Fire and the Rain*, ritual myth exposes institutional cruelty.

Erin B. Mee argues that Karnad's theatre creates a "contemporary resonance" within ancient material (Mee 52). This resonance is particularly visible in his representation of women. Though situated in mythic time, their struggles mirror modern debates about autonomy, sexuality, and identity. Karnad's women are not passive sufferers but complex figures who negotiate desire, morality, and social expectations. Although many ultimately succumb to patriarchal forces, their resistance and psychological depth reveal a persistent yearning for autonomous existence. Karnad's mythic reinterpretations transform inherited narratives into spaces of feminist interrogation, exposing gender inequalities embedded in tradition and dramatising the tension between personal desire and social obligation.

Conclusion: The Persistent Yearning for Existence

Across *Yayati*, *Hayavadana*, *Naga-Mandala*, and *The Fire and the Rain*, Girish Karnad constructs a dramatic universe in which women are central to the moral and emotional crisis of society. They are not passive symbols but thinking, desiring, conflicted individuals. Their lives are shaped by patriarchal power; they continuously negotiate, question, and sometimes subvert that power. The dramatic oeuvre of Girish Karnad occupies a central place in modern Indian theatre for its creative reworking of myth, history, and folklore within contemporary ideological frameworks. One of the most compelling dimensions of his dramaturgy is his complex portrayal of women negotiating identity within patriarchal structures.

Chitrlekha's protest, Padmini's longing, Rani's survival, and Vishakha's defiance collectively articulate a profound yearning for existence. This yearning is not merely a desire for romantic fulfilment; it is a demand for recognition as autonomous subjects. Even when they fail, their struggles expose the inadequacy of the systems that constrain them.

Karnad does not offer simplistic solutions. His plays end ambiguously—sometimes tragically, sometimes ironically. Yet through myth reimagined, he invites audiences to reconsider inherited norms. By centring female experience within epic narratives, he challenges the cultural hierarchies that silence women.

Ultimately, Karnad's theatre becomes a space where tradition and transformation intersect. His women, though often defeated, leave behind unsettling questions about duty, desire, and dignity. Their yearning for existence continues to resonate, reminding us that the struggle for female autonomy is both historical and ongoing.

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