

Body, Myth, and Metaphor: Symbolic Constructions of Womanhood in Karnad's Plays

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Abstract:

Girish Karnad's plays repeatedly stage womanhood not through direct social commentary but through the mediating vocabulary of myth, folklore, and bodily symbol. Drawing on Naga-Mandala, Hayavadana, Yayati, and The Fire and the Rain, this paper examines how Karnad translates inherited Indian narrative material — serpent lore, transposed-head folktales, Puranic legend, and Vedic ritual — into a symbolic language for exploring female desire, chastity, fragmentation, and agency. The paper argues that Karnad's women are constructed at the intersection of the body as a site of surveillance (chastity ordeals, arranged marriage, ritual purity) and myth as a resource for imaginative escape or subversion (the serpent-lover, the divided self, the silenced wife). Employing frameworks drawn from Simone de Beauvoir's account of woman as Other, Mary Douglas's anthropology of bodily pollution and boundary, and Sherry Ortner's nature/culture paradigm, alongside existing Karnad scholarship, the paper traces a recurring pattern: female bodies are the terrain on which patriarchal order inscribes its anxieties, while myth simultaneously offers Karnad's heroines symbolic routes toward self-articulation that realist drama forecloses. The paper concludes that Karnad's mythic method is neither escapist nor merely decorative but constitutes a deliberate strategy of indirection through which contemporary gender critique is smuggled into traditional form.

Keywords: Girish Karnad; myth and folklore; body politics; symbolic feminism; Indian drama; Naga-Mandala; Hayavadana.

Introduction

Girish Karnad (1938–2019) occupies a distinctive position in modern Indian theatre as a playwright who consistently returned to myth, folktale, and legend not as nostalgic ornament but as a working method for confronting contemporary social predicaments, most persistently the predicament of women within patriarchal structures of marriage, chastity, and inheritance. From his first play, Yayati (Karnad, 1961/2008), through Hayavadana (Karnad, 1975) and Naga-Mandala (Karnad, 1990) to The Fire and the Rain (Karnad, 1998), Karnad drew on the Mahabharata, Kannada folk narrative, Kathasaritsagara-derived transposed-head tales, and Vedic-Puranic ritual respectively, refracting each inherited story through a modern dramaturgical sensibility shaped by his engagement with Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre and with the resources of Indian folk performance forms (Dharwadker, 1995). This borrowing has often been read primarily as a formal or nationalist project — an attempt to build an “authentically Indian” modern theatre — but a closer look at the women who populate these plays suggests that myth functions in Karnad's work

as something more specific: a symbolic vocabulary through which the female body, and the desires, transgressions, and silences inscribed upon it, can be represented without the constraints of realist social drama.

This paper argues that Karnad constructs womanhood across his major plays through a recurring triad of body, myth, and metaphor. The female body in these plays is rarely simply itself; it is a site of surveillance and testing (the chastity ordeal in *Naga-Mandala*), a site of division and substitution (the mismatched head and body in *Hayavadana*), a site of aging, appetite, and renunciation (the transferred youth of *Yayati*), and a site of ritual purification and exclusion (Vishakha's predicament in *The Fire and the Rain*). Myth supplies both the narrative occasion for these bodily crises and, paradoxically, a set of imaginative resources — shape-shifting lovers, magical transformation, divine intervention — through which Karnad's heroines gain a degree of agency or interiority that a purely realist idiom would deny them. Metaphor is the connective tissue: the serpent, the horse, the fire, the doll, the transposed head, each operate as a condensed image in which bodily experience and cultural anxiety about gender meet.

The analysis proceeds in four movements. It begins by outlining a theoretical framework combining Simone de Beauvoir's (1949/2011) account of woman constituted as Other, Mary Douglas's (1966) anthropology of bodily boundaries and pollution, and Sherry Ortner's (1974) formulation of the symbolic association between women and nature. It then examines three plays in turn — *Naga-Mandala*, *Hayavadana*, and *Yayati* — before a briefer treatment of *The Fire and the Rain*, tracing in each the specific bodily and mythic operations through which female characters are constructed. A discussion section draws the strands together to argue that Karnad's mythic method constitutes a deliberate strategy of indirection: a way of making contemporary feminist critique legible through forms sanctioned by tradition. The paper closes by considering the limits of this strategy and the extent to which Karnad's women, for all the imaginative latitude myth affords them, remain bound by the structures they seem momentarily to escape.

Theoretical Framework: Body, Myth, and Metaphor

Any account of “the body” in Karnad's theatre must begin by acknowledging that the body on stage is never a neutral biological given; it is, in Simone de Beauvoir's (1949/2011) formulation, produced through a history of representation in which woman is cast as Other to a normative masculine subject, her body freighted with meanings — of nature, of danger, of property — that are not of her own making. De Beauvoir's insight that womanhood is a social becoming rather than a biological essence underlies the reading offered here: the women of Karnad's plays are not pre-given essences illustrated by myth but are actively constructed, scene by scene, through the mythic and ritual apparatus the plays deploy around their bodies.

A second, closely related framework is furnished by Mary Douglas's (1966) anthropological study of purity and danger, which argues that a society's anxieties about disorder are frequently displaced onto the body, and especially onto female bodily boundaries — virginity, chastity, ritual purity — which come to stand metonymically for the integrity of the social order itself. Douglas's account illuminates why, in *Naga-Mandala*, an entire community's sense of moral order can hinge on a single ordeal performed on Rani's body: the snake ordeal is not merely a plot device but a ritual re-inscription of the boundary between purity and pollution that Douglas identifies as central to how patriarchal societies manage the female body. Sherry Ortner's (1974) essay proposing that women are symbolically positioned as closer to “nature” while men are aligned with “culture” offers a third lens, one especially productive for reading Karnad's recurrent

pairing of women with animal or elemental forces — the cobra in Naga-Mandala, the horse in Hayavadana's frame story, the fire of the eponymous later play. Ortner's framework helps explain why Karnad's dramaturgy so often stages female desire through non-human intermediaries: the culturally sanctioned channel for women's erotic and imaginative life in these plays runs through nature-coded myth rather than through direct social assertion.

Alongside these general theoretical resources, existing Karnad scholarship provides more localized frameworks. Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker's (1995) influential reading of Karnad's historical and mythic method emphasizes how Karnad uses inherited narrative to stage a critique of authority that is at once historically specific to postcolonial India and legible as universal parable; this dual address, Dharwadker suggests, is part of what allows Karnad's plays to function simultaneously as folk entertainment and as social critique. Tutun Mukherjee's (2006) edited collection situates Karnad's mythic borrowings within debates about performance and cultural memory; Rangan's (2006) contribution to that volume specifically examines how Naga-Mandala both draws on and subverts the conventions of the oral romance from which it is adapted. Jaydipsinh Dodiya's (1999) edited volume of critical perspectives, including Rajendran's (1999) essay on Karnad's uses of myth and legend, and Vanashree Tripathi's (2004) study of poetics and culture in three of Karnad's plays, together establish that myth in Karnad's theatre is widely read as doing interpretive work rather than functioning as mere decorative allusion. This paper builds on that consensus but narrows the focus specifically to the body: to how myth operates, again and again, as the medium through which Karnad's female bodies are surveilled, fragmented, aged, or ritually purified, and through which those same bodies occasionally slip the leash of the social order that produced them.

The Body Under Surveillance: Naga-Mandala and the Chastity Ordeal

Naga-Mandala dramatizes its heroine Rani's predicament almost entirely through the vocabulary of the body: she is married as a young woman to the indifferent Appanna, confined to the house, and denied even the ordinary intimacy of a shared bed. Karnad frames the play with a self-reflexive prologue in which a Story, personified as a woman, escapes the mouth of a man condemned to stay awake and takes the form of a flame that seeks refuge among a group of women listening to folktales — a device that immediately establishes storytelling itself as a gendered, embodied practice, one that Karnad explicitly attributes to the oral tradition of women narrating tales to children and to each other in domestic space (Karnad, 1990). The play proper then stages Rani's isolation as a bodily condition: loneliness represented not through soliloquy but through her wordless confinement within Appanna's house, her only companions a talking dog and mongoose, her only recourse the love-potion a neighbour urges her to slip into her husband's food. The pivotal transformation of the plot — the cobra who assumes Appanna's form each night to become Rani's secret lover — relocates female desire from the register of moral transgression into the register of myth, where it can be represented without indicting Rani directly. Naga, the serpent-lover, gives Rani what her actual husband withholds: attention, tenderness, and intimacy. Yet the price of this mythic solution is precisely a further inscription upon her body: when Rani becomes pregnant, the village elders subject her to a public ordeal, requiring her to prove her chastity by placing her hand into a snake's burrow and swearing an oath. This scene enacts with unusual clarity Douglas's (1966) argument that a community's anxiety about moral disorder is resolved through a ritual test performed directly upon the body of the suspected transgressor; Rani's body becomes, in effect, the surface on which the village writes its verdict on the limits of licit desire. That she survives the ordeal — because her lover is, unbeknown to

the villagers, the very cobra whose burrow she must touch — allows Karnad to grant his heroine vindication without granting the social order any admission of its own cruelty: the ordeal is passed, not exposed as unjust.

Critics have long noted the multiple, alternative endings Karnad supplies for the play, each of which stages a different fate for the serpent-lover, from his death at Appanna's hand to his voluntary retreat into the safety of Rani's unbound hair. The proliferation of endings is itself significant for a reading centred on the body: it suggests that no single resolution can fully contain the contradiction Karnad has staged between Rani's socially sanctioned identity as chaste wife and the embodied reality of her extramarital desire, so that the play, rather than resolving this contradiction, multiplies the mythic devices available for managing it. As Rangan's (2006) analysis observes, Karnad's version of the oral tale simultaneously reproduces and destabilizes the folk romance convention in which a woman's fidelity to her supernatural lover is ultimately rewarded, precisely because the play never allows the audience to forget the coercion — arranged marriage, ritual ordeal, threatened violence — that surrounds that reward. Naga-Mandala thus exemplifies the pattern this paper traces throughout Karnad's work: the female body is simultaneously the object of surveillance by a patriarchal order anxious about chastity and lineage, and the site through which myth offers a partial, provisional imaginative escape from that same order.

Fragmented Bodies, Divided Desire: Hayavadana

If Naga-Mandala stages the female body as an object of ordeal, Hayavadana stages it as an object of division and recombination, using the folkloric device of the transposed head — drawn by Karnad from the Kathasaritsagara tradition — to interrogate what constitutes the self to which a wife is imagined to belong (Karnad, 1975). Padmini is caught between Devadatta, a man of refined intellect and weak body, and Kapila, a man of powerful body and blunter mind; her desire, the play suggests, cannot be satisfied by either man alone, since she is drawn to the mind of one and the body of the other. When both men behead themselves in a fit of guilt and grief, Padmini, instructed by the goddess Kali, attempts to restore them to life by reattaching their heads to their bodies — but in her haste she switches the heads, producing a Devadatta with Kapila's body and a Kapila with Devadatta's head.

The ensuing dispute over which resulting man is “really” Devadatta, her husband, stages with unusual explicitness a question that Karnad's other plays leave more implicit: is a woman married to a man's mind, his body, or some social contract that exceeds both? Padmini initially chooses to live with the man who has Devadatta's head and Kapila's body, on the logic that the head, as seat of intellect and social identity, should govern; but her subsequent attraction back toward the bodily strength now inhabited by Devadatta's head dramatizes the impossibility of the choice she has been forced to make. Karnad compounds this with the play's frame story of Hayavadana, a man with a horse's head who longs to become fully human, and whose eventual transformation into a complete horse — rather than a complete man — offers an ironic commentary on Padmini's own predicament: wholeness, the play suggests, may be available to myth's hybrid creatures only by relinquishing the human altogether, a resolution unavailable to Padmini herself. Ortnor's (1974) nature/culture framework is useful here: Padmini's oscillation between the two recombined men has often been read as an allegory of the mind/body split inherited from Sanskrit aesthetic theory, but it can equally be read as a dramatization of how a woman's desire is pathologized precisely when it cannot be contained within the culture-coded categories — intellect, social contract, lineage — that a patriarchal marriage system uses to fix her identity. Padmini's body, unlike Devadatta's or Kapila's, is never itself split

or recombined; it remains singular even as the men around her are literally cut apart and reassembled, and this asymmetry — her body as the fixed point against which male identity is interrogated — has led Dharwadker (1995) and other critics to note that Karnad's mythic experiments, for all their formal daring, tend to leave the female body as the stable ground on which male crises of identity are staged. Padmini's eventual death by self-immolation on the funeral pyre of both husbands closes the play on a note that readings following Tripathi (2004) interpret as Karnad's refusal to grant his heroine any resolution that does not require the extinction of the very body that has been the site of the entire dispute. Hayavadana thus extends the pattern of Naga-Mandala: myth supplies the occasion for representing a woman's desire and interiority with unusual complexity, even as the underlying structure of the plot ensures that her body remains the terrain, and ultimately the casualty, of that representation.

Sacrifice, Silence, and the Aging Body: Yayati

Karnad's first play, *Yayati* (Karnad, 1961/2008), draws on the Mahabharata legend of the king cursed with premature old age, who persuades his son Pooru to exchange youth for age so that Yayati may continue to indulge his appetites. Where *Naga-Mandala* and *Hayavadana* foreground a single central heroine, *Yayati* distributes its exploration of womanhood across several female figures — Devayani, Yayati's proud and possessive wife; Sharmishtha, her attendant and rival, whom Yayati takes as a second consort; and Chitrlekha, Pooru's new bride, who discovers that her husband's body has been aged beyond recognition in his father's service. It is Chitrlekha's response to this discovery — she chooses suicide rather than a marriage to an old man's body inhabiting her young husband's identity — that provides the play's most direct meditation on the relationship between body and self within marriage.

Chitrlekha's refusal has been read by Dodiya (1999) and Rajendran (1999) as Karnad's earliest articulation of a theme he would return to across his career: the disjunction between the body a marriage contract assigns to a woman and the body she is actually asked to live with. Unlike Rani in *Naga-Mandala*, who is granted a mythic surrogate lover, or Padmini in *Hayavadana*, who at least retains the power to choose, however impossibly, between two recombined men, Chitrlekha is offered no such imaginative latitude; the exchange of youth and age in *Yayati* is presented as an accomplished, irreversible fact enacted between father and son with no consultation of the woman whose body and future the exchange redefines. Her suicide can accordingly be read less as an act of despair than as the only form of agency the play's mythic logic leaves available to her — a refusal to inhabit a body-self relation she has not chosen, staged, in the absence of any other avenue, upon her own body.

Devayani and Sharmishtha, meanwhile, are constructed through the mythic vocabulary of rivalry and hierarchy rather than of transformation: Devayani's insistence on her status as a sage's daughter and Sharmishtha's subordinate position as a princess reduced to attendant both dramatize how the female body, even when not subject to literal transformation, remains a site on which questions of status and possession are worked out through the institution of polygynous marriage. Read together with Chitrlekha's fate, the women of *Yayati* suggest that Karnad's mythic method, even at its earliest and least formally experimental, was already oriented toward exposing how myth's grand narratives of appetite, sacrifice, and curse are underwritten by transactions in which women's bodies function as currency between men — a pattern the more celebrated later plays would elaborate with greater formal sophistication but had already established in this first, comparatively neglected work.

Ritual Fire and Female Witness: The Fire and the Rain

The Fire and the Rain (Karnad, 1998), Karnad's reworking of the Yavakri story from the Mahabharata's Vana Parva, extends the paper's argument into the register of Vedic ritual. The play's central female figure, Vishakha, is married to Paravasu, a priest wholly consumed by the seven-year fire sacrifice he is conducting to end a drought, and she is reunited during the play with Yavakri, the ascetic she once loved, who returns from years of austerity seeking both magical power and, the play makes clear, Vishakha herself. Vishakha's body, like Rani's and Chitraklekha's before her, becomes the ground on which male ambition — Paravasu's ritual perfectionism, Yavakri's hunger for the power his asceticism has won him — is contested; her own desire is again mediated through myth, here the myth of ascetic power and the ritual purity the fire sacrifice demands, so that her adultery with Yavakri constitutes not merely a domestic betrayal but a pollution of the sacrificial order itself, in precisely the sense Douglas (1966) identifies as central to how ritual systems police the boundary between the sacred and the impure.

The play's climax, in which Paravasu kills his own father in the darkness of the sacrificial enclosure, mistaking him for a demon, and Yavakri is subsequently killed by a spirit summoned in vengeance, resolves the male rivalry through further ritual violence, while Vishakha is left to articulate her grief and culpability largely through witness rather than through any mythic transformation of her own. Where Rani gains a serpent-lover and Padmini gains, however briefly, two recombined husbands, Vishakha gains no comparable mythic resource; her route to narrative resolution lies chiefly in bearing witness to the catastrophe the men's rivalry has produced, while it is Paravasu's brother Aravasu whose climactic performance of a myth-play brings the rains at last. The relative narrowing of mythic agency available to Vishakha compared with Karnad's earlier heroines suggests that the playwright's mythic method is not a static formula applied uniformly across his career but a resource calibrated differently depending on the specific inherited narrative and ritual context each play draws upon; where the domestic folk romance of Naga-Mandala had room for a shape-shifting lover, the Vedic sacrificial world of The Fire and the Rain offers its women comparatively little beyond the roles of witness, source of pollution, or occasion for ritual violence between men.

Discussion: Myth as a Strategy of Indirection

Read across these four plays, Karnad's construction of womanhood emerges as neither a simple reproduction of patriarchal myth nor a straightforward feminist subversion of it, but rather a sustained, formally varied exploration of how the female body becomes legible only through the mediating structures — ordeal, transformation, sacrifice, ritual purity — that myth supplies. In each case examined here, a woman's desire, grief, or agency is represented not directly but through a mythic or ritual apparatus external to her: the cobra who stands in for the husband Rani cannot love; the transposed heads that stage the impossible choice Padmini is forced to make; the exchange of youth and age that forecloses any choice at all for Chitraklekha; the sacrificial fire that renders Vishakha's adultery a cosmic rather than merely domestic transgression. This consistency suggests that what Dharwadker (1995) identifies as Karnad's characteristic strategy of using inherited narrative to stage contemporary critique under cover of historical or mythic distance operates with particular force around questions of gender: myth allows Karnad to represent female desire and suffering with a frankness that a more directly realist treatment of arranged marriage, chastity policing, or ritual patriarchy might not have found equally acceptable to the same

audiences, while simultaneously ensuring that the critique remains available to be read, if an audience prefers, as mere retelling of old story.

Yet this same strategy of indirection carries a cost that this paper's analysis has tried not to elide: the mythic devices that grant Karnad's heroines their moments of desire, agency, or vindication rarely dismantle the underlying structures that constrain them. Rani survives her ordeal, but the ordeal itself, and the social order that demanded it, remain intact at the play's end; Padmini's desire is represented with unusual complexity, but the play resolves that complexity only through her death; Chitrlekha is granted no mythic resource at all, only the option of refusal through suicide; Vishakha's grief is witnessed but not redressed by any transformation available to her. In this respect, Karnad's mythic method can be read, following the logic of Ortner (1974) and Douglas (1966), as itself performing the very operation it dramatizes: it relocates female bodies into the register of nature, ritual, and boundary precisely at the moments when those bodies threaten to exceed the categories culture has assigned them, and in doing so it grants those bodies visibility and imaginative richness even as it declines to grant them a way out.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Girish Karnad's recurring turn to myth, folklore, and ritual across *Yayati*, *Hayavadana*, *Naga-Mandala*, and *The Fire and the Rain* constitutes a deliberate and consistent strategy for constructing womanhood at the intersection of body and metaphor. Across these plays, the female body functions as the site on which a patriarchal social order inscribes its anxieties about chastity, lineage, and purity, while myth simultaneously furnishes Karnad's heroines with a symbolic register — the serpent-lover, the transposed head, the exchanged body, the sacrificial fire — through which their desire, grief, and occasional defiance can be staged in ways realist drama of Karnad's period might not have permitted. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's account of woman as Other, Mary Douglas's anthropology of bodily boundary and pollution, and Sherry Ortner's nature/culture framework, alongside the substantial body of existing Karnad criticism, this paper has traced a pattern in which mythic transformation grants Karnad's women visibility without necessarily granting them liberation: Rani survives her ordeal but does not overturn it; Padmini's complex desire ends in her death; Chitrlekha's only agency is refusal through suicide; Vishakha's suffering is witnessed rather than redressed.

Karnad's mythic method should therefore be understood neither as an antiquarian retreat from contemporary gender politics nor as a fully achieved feminist critique, but as a strategy of indirection whose very indirection is its interpretive interest: by routing questions of female desire and bodily autonomy through inherited narrative, Karnad makes those questions available to audiences and readers in a form that can be received as traditional storytelling even as it performs a sustained interrogation of the structures that traditional storytelling often serves to naturalize. Future scholarship might productively extend this analysis to Karnad's later, less frequently studied plays, and to comparative readings alongside other modern Indian dramatists working with similar mythic material, whose contrasting dramaturgical choices would help clarify what is distinctive about Karnad's consistently mediated treatment of the female body.

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