

Rewriting Womanhood through Intertextuality: A Feminist Reading of Girish Karnad's Major Plays

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Abstract:

This research undertakes an extensive intertextual feminist analysis of Girish Karnad's major plays—*Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Naga-Mandala*, and *Tale-Danda*—to examine how womanhood is constructed, deconstructed, and reimagined across myth, history, folklore, and socio-religious realism. Drawing upon Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality and feminist frameworks developed by Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the study explores how Karnad's female characters negotiate patriarchy, silence, sexuality, desire, agency, and resistance within rigid socio-cultural systems. The paper argues that Karnad does not merely reproduce inherited narratives but strategically rewrites intertextual sources—classical myths, oral folktales, historical chronicles, and reformist histories—to expose and critique gender hierarchies embedded in Indian society. Through close textual and comparative analysis, the study highlights recurring feminist motifs such as female voice versus silence, body politics, chastity, transgression, and the destabilization of normative gender roles. By foregrounding women as central agents of meaning rather than peripheral figures, the research makes a significant contribution to Indian English drama studies and feminist literary criticism.

Keywords: Intertextuality, Feminist Criticism, Girish Karnad, Indian English Drama, Representation of Women.

1. Introduction

Indian English drama has long served as a powerful medium for interrogating social, political, and cultural realities. From its colonial origins to its post-independence evolution, drama in English has functioned as a site where history, myth, ideology, and identity converge. Among contemporary Indian playwrights, Girish Karnad occupies a distinctive and influential position due to his innovative dramaturgy, which fuses indigenous narrative traditions with modern theatrical techniques.

While Karnad's plays have been widely studied for their political allegory, philosophical depth, and historical consciousness, their feminist potential remains insufficiently explored. Much of the existing scholarship privileges themes of power, nationalism, and existential crisis, often relegating women to secondary or symbolic roles. This paper challenges such critical tendencies by foregrounding womanhood as a central thematic and structural concern in Karnad's dramatic oeuvre.

The present study argues that Karnad's engagement with intertextuality enables a sustained feminist re-visioning of womanhood. By rewriting myths, legends, folklore, and historical narratives, Karnad interrogates patriarchal ideologies that have traditionally defined women in terms of silence, chastity, obedience, and marginality. His female characters emerge not merely as narrative functions but as agents who articulate desire, resistance, and selfhood.

2. Intertextuality and Feminist Theory: A Conceptual Framework

Julia Kristeva's concept of intertextuality revolutionized literary criticism by rejecting the notion of textual originality and emphasizing the dialogic nature of all texts. According to Kristeva, every text exists as an

intersection of multiple discourses, absorbing and transforming earlier narratives (Kristeva 66). Karnad's dramaturgy exemplifies this principle through its sustained engagement with mythological, historical, and folkloric sources.

From a feminist perspective, intertextuality becomes a powerful tool for rewriting gendered narratives. Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that woman is socially constructed rather than biologically destined provides a critical lens for examining how Karnad's female characters are shaped by patriarchal institutions (Beauvoir 283). Elaine Showalter's gynocriticism further emphasizes the importance of recovering women's voices and experiences within male-dominated literary traditions (Showalter 22).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern adds another critical dimension by highlighting how women, particularly within colonial and postcolonial contexts, are doubly marginalized. Spivak's question—"Can the subaltern speak?"—resonates deeply with Karnad's dramatic worlds, where women struggle to articulate their identities within oppressive structures (Spivak 287).

Together, these theoretical frameworks enable a nuanced feminist intertextual reading of Karnad's plays.

3. Womanhood and Political Power in *Tughlaq*

Tughlaq (1964), Karnad's first major play, is often read as a historical tragedy centered on political idealism and moral disintegration. However, a feminist intertextual reading reveals the systematic marginalization of women within political historiography. Female characters remain largely confined to domestic spaces, excluded from formal governance and public discourse.

The Sultan's stepmother represents a form of indirect female agency, exercising influence through counsel rather than authority. Her marginal presence underscores Beauvoir's notion of woman as the "Other," whose power is mediated through male structures (Beauvoir 16). Karnad's portrayal critiques the masculinist nature of political power by exposing how women's voices are silenced in historical narratives. Yet, this silence is not merely passive. The strategic withdrawal of women from overt politics suggests a moral distance from the violence and hypocrisy of male governance. Karnad thus destabilizes traditional historical narratives by foregrounding women's ethical insight even in their marginalization.

4. *Hayavadana*: Desire, Body Politics, and Fragmented Femininity

Hayavadana (1971), based on a tale from the *Kathasaritsagara*, offers one of Karnad's most complex feminist explorations. The character of Padmini disrupts conventional representations of feminine chastity and submission. Her desire for both Kapila's physical strength and Devadatta's intellectual refinement challenges patriarchal binaries that separate mind and body.

Through intertextual rewriting, Karnad transforms a mythic narrative into a feminist critique of idealized womanhood. Padmini's fragmented desire reflects Showalter's argument that female identity resists singular definition (Showalter 34). Her tragedy lies not in moral failure but in the impossibility of reconciling desire within rigid patriarchal norms.

The play foregrounds female sexuality as a legitimate human impulse, thereby dismantling cultural taboos surrounding women's desire. Padmini's death ultimately exposes the destructive consequences of denying female agency.

5. *Naga-Mandala*: Folklore, Female Voice, and the Politics of Desire

Naga-Mandala occupies a pivotal position in Girish Karnad's dramatic canon because it marks his most explicit engagement with female subjectivity and patriarchal oppression through an intertextual feminist lens. Drawing upon oral folktales from Karnataka, Karnad reconstructs a narrative space in which women—traditionally silenced within both literary and social discourses—acquire voice, agency, and erotic legitimacy. The play exemplifies Julia Kristeva's idea of intertextuality as a dialogic process in which older narratives are not merely retold but ideologically transformed.

At the centre of *Naga-Mandala* is Rani, a young bride subjected to emotional neglect and marital confinement by her husband, Appanna. Appanna embodies institutional patriarchy: he maintains a public

life of sexual freedom while confining his wife within the domestic sphere under the guise of honour and chastity. Rani's condition reflects Simone de Beauvoir's argument that marriage often functions as a mechanism through which women are reduced to immanence while men retain transcendence. Her silence, obedience, and invisibility represent the socially sanctioned ideal of womanhood within a patriarchal framework.

However, Karnad disrupts this normative structure through the intertextual intrusion of folklore and myth. The magical root given to Rani and the subsequent emergence of the Naga (cobra) as her nocturnal lover introduce a symbolic space where female desire is neither criminalized nor suppressed. The Naga is not merely a supernatural figure; he is an alternative masculine presence that listens, reciprocates, and affirms Rani's emotional and sexual needs. Through this symbolic union, Karnad redefines desire as a legitimate and human dimension of womanhood rather than a moral transgression.

The transformation of Rani from a submissive wife into a woman who articulates her experience publicly during the trial scene is one of the most radical feminist moments in Indian English drama. When Rani survives the ordeal of holding the cobra, she is elevated to divine status, paradoxically gaining social power through mythic validation. This irony exposes the contradiction within patriarchal systems that deny women agency in everyday life but sanctify them through symbolic rituals. Karnad thus critiques the selective moral logic of society, where women's suffering is normalized but their autonomy remains unacceptable.

From a feminist intertextual perspective, *Naga-Mandala* reclaims oral storytelling as a female epistemological space. The play's frame narrative—where stories themselves speak—foregrounds narrative as a means of resistance. Elaine Showalter's gynocritical emphasis on women's narratives finds resonance here, as Karnad positions storytelling as a mode through which women rewrite their identities. Rani's voice emerges not through direct rebellion but through symbolic negotiation, highlighting the complexity of female resistance in patriarchal cultures.

Ultimately, *Naga-Mandala* reimagines womanhood as fluid, desiring, and assertive. Karnad's intertextual strategy dismantles rigid moral binaries and establishes folklore as a feminist archive capable of challenging dominant ideologies.

6. *Tale-Danda*: Gender, Religion, and the Limits of Social Reform

Tale-Danda represents Karnad's most politically charged exploration of social reform, caste violence, and religious orthodoxy, yet its feminist implications are equally profound. Set against the backdrop of the twelfth-century Veerashaiva movement led by Basavanna, the play interrogates the paradoxes of reformist ideologies that promise equality while perpetuating patriarchal control. Through intertextual engagement with historical chronicles and vachana literature, Karnad exposes the gendered exclusions embedded within ostensibly progressive movements.

Women in *Tale-Danda* occupy a deeply conflicted position. While the Veerashaiva philosophy advocates spiritual equality and rejects caste hierarchy, it fails to dismantle patriarchal norms governing female sexuality, marriage, and obedience. Karnad's female characters are caught between spiritual liberation and social surveillance, illustrating Gayatri Spivak's contention that subaltern women often remain unheard even within emancipatory discourses.

The central crisis surrounding inter-caste marriage becomes a site where gender oppression intensifies. Women bear the burden of social transgression, facing violence and ostracism for acts that challenge patriarchal and caste-based norms. Karnad's portrayal underscores how women's bodies become symbolic

battlegrounds upon which ideological conflicts are fought. This aligns with feminist critiques of reform movements that prioritize abstract ideals over lived female experience.

Intertextually, *Tale-Danda* rewrites history by foregrounding emotional and ethical dimensions often absent from official chronicles. Karnad does not romanticize the reform movement; instead, he reveals its internal contradictions, particularly its failure to address gender injustice. The play demonstrates that religious or social transformation without feminist consciousness merely reproduces new forms of domination.

From a feminist perspective, *Tale-Danda* challenges the assumption that spiritual equality automatically translates into social liberation for women. Karnad's nuanced portrayal highlights the necessity of gender-sensitive reform, positioning women not as symbols of purity or progress but as individuals whose autonomy must be central to any genuine transformation.

7. Comparative Feminist Intertextual Patterns in Karnad's Plays

A comparative reading of *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Naga-Mandala*, and *Tale-Danda* reveals a coherent feminist intertextual pattern underlying Karnad's dramatic vision. Despite differences in setting, genre, and narrative source, these plays consistently interrogate patriarchal constructions of womanhood through strategic textual reworking.

One of the most significant recurring motifs is the tension between **silence and voice**. Women initially appear as silent figures—politically marginal in *Tughlaq*, domestically confined in *Naga-Mandala*, emotionally conflicted in *Hayavadana*, and ideologically constrained in *Tale-Danda*. However, through intertextual disruption, Karnad gradually enables women to articulate their experiences, challenging Spivak's question of whether the subaltern can speak.

Another dominant pattern is **body politics**. Female bodies are sites of control, surveillance, and punishment across Karnad's plays. Whether through the policing of chastity, the moralization of desire, or the ritualization of suffering, women's bodies become instruments through which patriarchal authority is enforced. Karnad's feminist intervention lies in exposing these mechanisms and reclaiming the body as a site of agency.

The **reworking of myth and history** is central to Karnad's feminist strategy. By rewriting canonical narratives, he destabilizes their ideological foundations. Myths that once reinforced gender norms are transformed into tools of critique, while historical narratives are reimagined to foreground marginalized voices.

Collectively, these patterns demonstrate that Karnad's feminism is neither overtly didactic nor simplistically oppositional. Instead, it is dialogic, operating through intertextual negotiation rather than outright rejection of tradition.

8. Contribution to Indian English Drama and Feminist Literary Studies

Karnad's feminist intertextual dramaturgy significantly expands the scope of Indian English drama by challenging androcentric critical paradigms. Traditionally, Indian drama criticism has privileged themes of nationalism, political power, and mythic symbolism, often marginalizing gender as a secondary concern. This study repositions womanhood as a central analytical category, demonstrating that gender is integral—not incidental—to Karnad's thematic concerns.

From a feminist literary perspective, Karnad's work bridges the gap between Western feminist theory and indigenous narrative traditions. His plays demonstrate that feminist critique need not reject myth or folklore but can reclaim and reinterpret them. This approach enriches postcolonial feminist discourse by foregrounding culturally specific modes of resistance.

Furthermore, Karnad's intertextual feminism challenges the binary between tradition and modernity. By engaging with pre-modern narratives to address contemporary gender issues, he disrupts linear models of progress and asserts the relevance of cultural memory in feminist praxis.

9. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Girish Karnad's major plays constitute a sustained feminist project articulated through intertextual dramaturgy. By rewriting myths, folklore, and history, Karnad interrogates patriarchal constructions of womanhood and foregrounds women as active agents of meaning.

Across *Naga-Mandala*, *Tale-Danda*, and his broader dramatic corpus, Karnad exposes the ideological mechanisms that silence women while simultaneously offering narrative spaces for resistance, desire, and self-expression. His feminist vision is neither prescriptive nor utopian; it is critical, dialogic, and deeply rooted in cultural specificity.

Ultimately, Karnad's plays affirm that womanhood is not a static identity imposed by tradition but a dynamic process shaped through negotiation, resistance, and re-vision. This intertextual feminist reading repositions Karnad as a crucial figure in both Indian English drama and feminist literary criticism, whose work continues to challenge and expand the boundaries of representation.

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