

## **Girish Karnad - A Myth User and Myth Maker for Inculcation of Existential Philosophy on post-fifties Stage**

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**Abstract :** The renowned Kannada playwright Girish Karnad who expertises his hand as an Indian actor, film director and writer acclaimed international appraisal retaining preoccupation with literary outcomes in the soil of motherland. As an efficient dramatist he exhibits his craftsmanship in performing the task of handling myth, legends, history and folklore as a user and a maker for the post-fifties stage against the backdrop of today's most serious crisis, that is, existential agony of mankind. His well-known plays such as *Hayavadana*, *Yayati* and *The Fire and the Rain* dramatized upon the retelling of the myth of *Kathasaritsagara* and *Mahabharata* are presented on the stage keeping in mind the stirring philosophical notion of Existentialism. The dramatist has delved deeper into the mine of ancient Indian myths and folklore to uphold modern man's quest for establishing his identity in the present socio-religious or socio-political context. Despite having opulent means of entertainment in life contemporary people suffer from dissatisfactions resulting from alienation of which Yayati, Devadatta, Kapila, Padmini and Yavakari are perfect embodiment. By using the rich heritage of Purana Karnad attempts to present on stage the absurdity of human life with all its passions and conflicts and one's earnest endeavour to achieve wholeness in the midst of the fragmented scenario of the post-fifties era. By dint of his visionary zeal, feelings and comprehensive nature the playwright has found an accomplishment to make a bridge between the past and present.

**Objectives:** The concerned objective of this article delineates the relevance of Indian myths in contemporary society and the importance of Girish Karnad as a linker of past and present in respect of three plays *Yayati* (1961), *Hayavadana* (1971) and *The Fire and the Rain* (1995)

**Introduction :** From time immemorial myth enriches the sphere of world literature. The term 'myth' originating from Greek 'mythos' means the word coming from mouth. J. A. Cuddon views 'myth' in the following words: "In general a myth is a story which is not true and which involves (as a rule) supernatural beings- or any rate supra human beings. Myth is always concerned with creation. Myth explains how something came to exist..." (525-26) Karnad's talent excels in his attempt to exploit myth and folktales in writing plays inheriting the legacy of the traditional past of his native country. His focus on contemporary men's agony and frustration begotten from existential issues gets vivid reflection in his notable works through the medium of his myth making and myth using potentiality (mythopoeia). Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker relevantly speaks, "The majority of his plays employ the narratives of myth, history and folklore to evoke an ancient or postmodern world that resonates in contemporary contexts because of his uncanny ability to remake the past in the image of present". (Karnad, Collected Plays, Introductory note by Aparna Bhargava, 2005, ix)

The term 'existentialism' was derived from French L'existentialisme. In mid 20th century, the Existential Movement reached its summit by the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel. Existentialism explores the issues of individual existence propagating this doctrine that each person is free to do and choose what he/she likes. It also relates the question of human absurdity. It is a

term applied in both Philosophy and Literature. The chief exponents of Existentialism are Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Kafka, Simon de Beauvoir. In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre mentioned, "My ultimate and initial project- is, as we shall see, always outline of a solution to the problem of being"(Sartre,29). Both Camus and Kafka presumed that the existence of human beings must be viewed in respect to the absurdity of human conditions, his destiny and harsh reality. Actually, "The Existential humanistic paradigm pays particular attention to the essential factors of human existence, such as the facts (and often concerns) of death, freedom, choice, responsibility, finitude, and meaning" (Yalom, 1980). Hence, the issue of identity, incompleteness and feeling of alienation, death, responsibility directly linked with the notion of Existentialism are powerfully projected through Karnad's pen in his famous plays after his intensive penetration into this philosophical precept.

Discussion : Taking cue from Camus and Kafka Karnad shows his dexterity to present the meaninglessness and absurdity of life by exploiting myths and folktales in his notable drama *Hayavadana*. Regarding the origin of the story told in this play, Karnad himself added, "The central episode in the play- the story of Devadatta and Kapila- is based on a tale of *Kathasaritsagara*, but I have drawn heavily from on Thomas Mann's reworking of the tale in *The Transposed Heads...*" (Karnad, *Collected Plays*, V, I 2005,103). The play containing one main plot and one subplot hinges upon the theme of identity crisis in the world of tangled relationship and incompleteness. In the main plot, Padmini's desire for having perfectness through the union of Kapila's 'Fabulous Body' and Devadatta's 'Fabulous Mind' gives birth to a series of problems. This difficult relationship establishes the notion that none can be perfect and complete in this socio-cultural ethos. At length Padmini realises how absurd her conception is and consequently each of the three figures has to suffer from alienation. Finally all of them have to opt to die to get rid of the complexity of their lives. Again, the subplot concentrates on a horse-headed man who longs for being complete and perfect becomes a victim of identity problems. At the beginning of the play, the image of Lord Ganesha implying the focal point of the drama on incompleteness is clearly propounded. So, the entire play abounded with a mythic story in existential vein exposing modern man's dilemma vigorously.

Karnad takes refuge in myth to critically portray the contemporaneity while writing his first play *Yayati*. In this play, the dramatist probing into the myth of Mahabharata depicts the story of existential dilemma under the deep impact of Sartre and Camus. Taking its root in the *Adi Parva of Mahavarata*, *Yayati*, the king of Kuru dynasty, has been located by Karnad in modern context to celebrate the issue of responsibility and dichotomy between desire and fulfilment, problems of identity which are closely associated to the philosophy of existentialism. Intending to achieve lifelong youth to the detriment of his son Pooru's youthful vitality to enjoy erotic pleasure proves to be horrific and futile for the king *Yayati* whose consciousness awakes after the death of *Chitrlekha* who is Karnad's own invention to meet his dramatic end. *Yayati*'s proneness to evade the onus of responsibility giving exact value to relationships evokes the escapist nature of the modern father to a larger extent and it is evident in his own words: "Yes, it is my entire fault. I never took the initiative to understand you" (*Yayati* Act-ii). Dr. Jyoti Gupta and Dr. Sushama rightly comment: "*Karnad's Yayati* reveals the afflicted consciousness of a broken man like *Yayati* who tries to find a meaning in existence. Out of sorrow and humiliation *Yayati* is unable to understand the meaning of life till he is rid of old age. But contrary to his expectation *Chitrlekha's* suicide leads him to expiate his desire. He projects the image of an existential character and shows that no man has the courage to choose whole-heartedly either right or wrong. He is himself an amalgamation of self-evasion and vanity, self- condemnation and humility. Thus, there is an eternal quest for meaning and value, freedom and truth that can sustain us in this chaotic and apparently meaningless world." (Dr. Jyoti Gupta and Dr. Sushama Sharma 36).

Karnad's efficiency as a dramatist lies in his mythopoeic method while telling the story of *The Fire and the Rain* from an existential point of view. Apart from using the original primitive myth stated in Chapters 135-38 of the *Vana Parva (Forest Canto) of Mahabharata*, Karnad reshapes and alters it in the play wherever required for a vivid delineation of the pertinent question of existentialism. The dramatist deviates from implementation of the exact myth about Yavakari and the myth of Indra-Vritra. He also moulded the character of Visakha, Paravasu's wife to expose the psychological plight confronted by a woman in male-centric society. Her fight for obtaining liberty from the grasp of cruel male chauvinists is a fine example of existential crisis. In Yavakri myth the dramatist retained the tussle between knowledge and wisdom to make it relevant in the present day. Characters like Arvasu, Paravasu, Yavakari are caught in the trap of illusory relations of brotherhood and friendship. Visakha also finds herself lonely in the patriarchal system. So, the entire play is poised in an existential situation.

Conclusion :Karnad's uniqueness as a successful modern Indian playwright is sought in his accomplishment of playing with the traditions of ancient myths, legends or folklore which he remakes when needed to serve the dramatic purpose appropriately. Needless to say, his contemplation upon contemporary burning existential predicament has been aptly dramatized in his chief works. His mythopoeic potential is quite commensurate with his engrossment in portraying the exigencies of modern people, thereby placing the significant past heritage in context of present scenario.

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