



Postcolonial Discourse and the Reinterpretation of History in Girish Karnad's Plays

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Abstract

This paper explores how Girish Karnad, one of India's foremost playwrights, engages with postcolonial discourse through the reinterpretation of historical and mythological narratives. It examines how Karnad deconstructs linear, colonial historiography and gives voice to subaltern identities, challenging hegemonic structures. Focusing primarily on the plays *Tughlaq*, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, and *Hayavadana*, this paper highlights how Karnad uses history not just as a backdrop but as a site for ideological contestation and cultural recovery.

Keywords: Postcolonial, mythological, colonial historiography, subaltern, hegemonic.

Introduction

Girish Karnad's dramatic oeuvre occupies a pivotal place in modern Indian theatre, bridging the divide between classical themes and contemporary concerns. A defining characteristic of Karnad's work is his use of historical and mythological sources as a means of engaging with postcolonial anxieties. His plays are neither simple retellings nor nationalist glorifications; instead, they are critical interventions that challenge colonial narratives, question identity formations, and critique power structures.

This paper investigates the ways in which Karnad reinterprets historical figures and events, particularly through the lens of postcolonial theory. By examining the interplay of tradition and modernity in his narratives, we can uncover how Karnad not only reflects the complexities of Indian society but also addresses universal themes of conflict and resolution. Ultimately, this exploration highlights the enduring relevance of his work in fostering a critical dialogue about the legacies of colonialism and the ongoing struggles for self-definition and autonomy in a rapidly changing world. It predicates that Karnad's plays function as discursive tools that interrogate official history, recover silenced voices, and foreground cultural hybridity.

Postcolonial Theory and Historical Rewriting

Postcolonial theory interrogates the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism. It is concerned with the deconstruction of Eurocentric historical narratives and the reclamation of indigenous voices. Thinkers like Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have emphasised the need to challenge the 'master narratives' of colonial history.

In the Indian context, colonial historiography often portrayed India as a land of timeless stagnation, awaiting British enlightenment. Postcolonial literature, therefore, attempts to subvert this portrayal by revisiting history from indigenous perspectives. Karnad's plays are instrumental in this project; they revisit pre-colonial and colonial events with a view to exposing the complexities erased by colonial simplifications.

Tughlaq: The Paradox of Idealism and Despotism

Karnad's *Tughlaq* (1964) is a seminal work that portrays the 14th-century Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq as a deeply conflicted ruler. Set during a turbulent period of Indian history, the play critiques both the ruler's utopian vision and the chaotic consequences of his policies.

On the surface, *Tughlaq* may appear to be a historical tragedy. However, Karnad uses the historical setting to comment on post-Independence India's disillusionment with Nehruvian idealism. The play critiques the dangers of ideological absolutism and the disjunction between political rhetoric and social reality.

By giving a nuanced portrayal of Tughlaq—neither demonising him as a tyrant nor glorifying him as a visionary—Karnad subverts colonial historiography, which often depicted Muslim rulers as despotic and irrational. Karnad humanises Tughlaq, exposing the tragic irony of a ruler who dreams of justice but engenders chaos.

The Dreams of Tipu Sultan: Revisiting a Colonial Antagonist

In *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (1997), Karnad undertakes a significant revisionist project. Tipu Sultan, a historical figure often vilified in British colonial narratives, is reimagined

through the lens of his personal writings and dreams. The play draws heavily on the *Khwabnama*, a record of Tipu's dreams, presenting him as a complex, introspective leader.

Karnad contrasts British records of Tipu as a fanatical despot with a more intimate portrayal that emphasises his progressive visions for Mysore, his resistance to colonial domination, and his cultural openness. By including the voice of a British Orientalist, Colonel Kirkpatrick, Karnad introduces a dialogic structure that allows the audience to perceive conflicting historical narratives.

This reimagining challenges colonial representations and aligns with the postcolonial objective of revisiting suppressed histories. Tipu becomes a symbol of resistance, not through militant nationalism, but through his dreams, which offer a humanistic counterpoint to the imperial gaze.

Hayavadana: Myth and Identity in a Fragmented World

While *Hayavadana* (1971) is not a historical play in the conventional sense, it contributes to postcolonial discourse by using mythology and folklore to question identity and cultural wholeness. Based on a story from the Sanskrit text *Kathasaritsagara*, *Hayavadana* explores themes of incompleteness, hybridity, and the search for identity.

The play dramatises the tale of two men and a woman caught in a love triangle, complicated by a magical body-head exchange. The subplot of *Hayavadana*, the man with a horse's head who desires completeness, serves as an allegory for postcolonial identity—torn between past and present, east and west.

Karnad uses the fragmented identities in the play to critique the colonial imposition of rigid categories of self and other. The mythological frame allows him to engage with complex philosophical questions about selfhood, authenticity, and cultural assimilation. *Hayavadana*, thus, serves as a metaphor for postcolonial India's search for a coherent national and cultural identity.

Subaltern Voices and Cultural Reclamation

Karnad's plays are notable for their inclusion of voices marginalised in mainstream historical accounts. Whether it is the court jester in *Tughlaq*, the narrator in *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, or the talking dolls in *Naga-Mandala*, these characters often represent subaltern perspectives that question dominant ideologies.

In portraying history from multiple angles, Karnad not only challenges the authority of singular narratives but also reclaims cultural spaces that colonialism sought to erase. His characters often navigate a space between history and myth, reality and imagination—a liminal zone that enables critical reflection and cultural recovery.

Conclusion

Girish Karnad's engagement with history is marked by a postcolonial sensibility that seeks to deconstruct colonial historiography and foreground indigenous perspectives. Through plays like *Tughlaq*, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, and *Hayavadana*, Karnad reinterprets historical and mythological narratives to question identity, power, and memory. His works remind us that history is not a fixed narrative but a contested terrain shaped by ideology, perspective, and voice. In a country still grappling with the legacies of colonialism, Karnad's plays offer a powerful medium for reimagining the past and envisioning a more inclusive and complex cultural identity.

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