CHAPTER 3

From Myth, Folklore and History to Modernity:

Subjectivity as a Locus of Conflicts

in Girish Karnad
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3.1 Girish Karnad: Life and Work

Girish Karnad, the great Indian playwright, poet, actor, director, critic and translator, was born on 19 May 1938. He is the latest of seven recipients of Jnanapitha Award for Kannada, the highest literary honour conferred in India. Karnad has written a number of plays in Kannada which have also been translated into several major Indian languages and English by the playwright or by others. He has often used history and myth to tackle contemporary issues. His plays have been directed by eminent directors like Ebrahim Alkazi, B.V. Karanth, Alyque Padamsee, Prasanna, Arvind Gaur and Satyadev Dubey. He is also regarded as an eminent figure in Indian cinema, where he has worked as an actor, director and screenwriter, earning numerous awards. He has been honoured with Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan by the Government of India.

Karnad was born in Matheran, Maharashtra, into a Konkani-speaking family. His initial schooling was in Marathi. He watched and
enjoyed *Yakshagana* and the *Natak Mandali* performances in his village. He graduated from Karnataka College, Dharwad with Mathematics and Statistics in 1958. He experienced the power and influence of Western drama for the first time when he moved to Bombay for his postgraduate studies. At the end of his studies in Bombay, he received the Rhodes scholarship to go abroad for further studies. He thus went to England and studied at Oxford, where he received a Master of Arts degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics. Karnad has also been a Visiting Professor and Fulbright scholar in residence at the University of Chicago.

His first play *Yayati* (1961) was written when he was preparing to move to England. It explores inner turmoil and indecision through the mythical characters of *Mahabharata*. The play became an instant success and was immediately translated and staged in several other Indian languages. His most popular play, however, came three years later. By the time *Tughlaq*, a complex depiction of the politics of the times, was performed at the National School of Drama, Karnad had established himself as one of the most promising playwrights in the country. He quit his position at the Oxford University Press, having decided to take up writing as a full time vocation.

Karnad has since then composed many outstanding plays in both Kannada and English. His other famous plays are *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala*, *Bali: The Sacrifice*, *Agni Mattu Male* (*The Fire and the Rain*), *Odakalu Bimba* (*Broken Images*), *Anjumallige* (*Flowers*), *Tippuvina*
Kanasugalu (The Dreams of Tipu Sultan), Taledanda and The Wedding Album. In many of his plays Karnad uses history and myth to explore the question of subjectivity formed in the matrices of power and gender. He attempts to create a new consciousness of the absurdity of human life with all its passions and conflicts.

He has also been very active in cinema, working as an actor, director and screenwriter and has won many national and Filmfare awards along the way. His famous films as a director are Utsav, Godhuli and Pukar. He has also won accolades as an actor for his work in many Hindi movies like Nishant, Manthan and the recent Iqbal.

He served as the Director of the Film and Television Institute of India during 1974-1975, as the President of Karnataka Nataka Academy during 1976-1978, as the Indian Co-chairman for the Joint Media Committee of the Indo-US Sub-Commission on Education and Culture during 1984-1993, and as the Chairman of the Sangeet Natak Akademi during 1988-1993.

Girish Karnad addresses the problematic of Indian subjectivity by employing the devices of myth, folklore, legend and history. He uses these devices not to merely visit the past but also to rethink the present and to anticipate the future. The protagonists of his plays, Hayavadana and Nagamandala are faced with contemporary existential concerns. His Tughlaq and Tipu Sultan, similarly, are not just men from history but our contemporary figures. Their predicament is the predicament of our
times, rooted in the political and cultural situation in which we find ourselves. In *Wedding Album* Karnad diverges from his usual devices of myth and history and explores cultural stereotypes in the wake of modernity.

### 3.2 History and/as Contemporary Subjectivity I: *Tughlaq*

In *Tughlaq*, Karnad depicts the predicament of Mohammad-bin-Tughlaq, the fourteenth century monarch of Delhi. The idealism of Tughlaq and the subsequent political disillusionment of the period are often compared to those of the era of Nehru. Karnad himself suggests this parallel in an interview quoted in his Introduction to *Tughlaq*, “And I felt in the early sixties India had also come very far in the same direction – the twenty-year period seemed to me very much a striking parallel” (*Three Plays* 143-144). In the introduction to *Three Plays* he remarks:

> In a sense, the play reflected the slow disillusionment my generation felt with the new politics of independent India: the gradual erosion of the ethical norms that had guided the movement for independence, and the coming to terms with cynicism and realpolitik. (7)

Jawaharlal Nehru indeed shared with Tughlaq an over-ambitious dream to build a glorious India. Tughlaq forsook his rest and sleep to fulfill his dream but his idealism and vision were probably ahead of his times and his subjects could not fit into his scheme of things, resulting in
widespread social, economic and political upheaval and chaos. Tughlaq paradoxically resorted to violence and cruelty for the implementation of his idealistic plans meant for public welfare. Aparna Dharwadker considers this later phase in Tughlaq’s career as bearing a resemblance with the rule of Indira Gandhi in contrast to the earlier phase that resembled the Nehru era:

The analogies with Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru thus foreground the more or less well-intentioned idealism of Tughlaq-Barani in the play’s first half and suppress the cruelty, repressiveness and cunning of Tughlaq-Aziz in the second. The analogies with Indira Gandhi (and her political successors) reverse the emphasis and bring the two halves of the play together. . . she is closest to Karnad’s protagonist in her propensity for choosing evil out of a compulsion to act for the nation in the self-destructiveness of her authoritarianism. (Historical Fictions 52-53)

The play demands a reading at two levels – one historical and the other psychological/personal. However, it can be argued that the play is not only about reading recent Indian history in the light of the period of Tughlaq but also about the nature of subjectivity. It is to be noted that we are led repeatedly into the consciousness of Tughlaq and the mind of Tughlaq has an overpowering presence in the play. The two approaches intersect and lead to arguably the most fruitful reading if we make an
attempt to understand subjectivity in the specific context of its formative historical situation.

The political decisions and innovative ideas of Tughlaq are way ahead of his times. His Amirs and subjects fail to follow him and become apprehensive about his motives. He pleads with them to cooperate:

I have hopes of building a new future for India and I need your support for that. If you don’t understand me, ask me to explain myself and I’ll do it. If you don’t understand my explanations, bear with me in patience until I can show you the results. But please don’t let me down, I beg you. (40)

Tughlaq tries to bring about religious equality but fanatics like Imam-ud-din oppose him. The decision to move the capital to Daulatabad is a step in the same direction but the impracticability of the decision puts off the people and they vehemently oppose the Sultan. Faced with opposition from his own subjects, Tughlaq declares, “I was too soft, I can see that now. They’ll only understand the whip” (40).

He becomes ruthless and cruel after this experience and orders everyone to move to Daulatabad. He gets all opponents to his project killed mercilessly. But he is soon hounded by a profound sense of guilt, and turns to God:

God! God in Heaven, please help me. Please don’t let go of my hand. My skin drips with blood and I don’t know how much of
it is mine and how much of others. I started in your path,

Lord, why am I wandering naked in the desert now? (67)

His words reveal his utter disillusionment and spiritual agony. He started on the path of benevolence but his being tragically ahead of his times made him a tyrant against his will. Similarly, his vision of starting copper currency also ends in a fiasco. His over-idealism brings about his downfall and his own people call him a madman and tyrant. The play thus depicts Tughlaq as a divided subject who has acted cruelly but is not happy with that act. The incident points to the Lacanian fracture in subjectivity: between the subject who acts and the one who sees the subject acting, that is between the agent and the witness. The play, in this way, brings the dialectical nature of subjectivity into focus.

Something in the subject is obviously outside the control of will. This also implies that there is no essential, eternal subjectivity and that the contemporary subjectivity is not really distinct from the ancient and the medieval in any absolute sense. Although Tughlaq is a historical character, yet he is a symbol of the recent Indian leadership. Indeed the most important issue is how subjectivity and history criss-cross. Subjectivity can only be understood by grounding it in history. The relation between subjective consciousness and history is complex and dialectical. We have to consider the historical circumstances in which Tughlaq's thinking is embedded. His subjective consciousness and the circumstances of history are inextricably interconnected. Perhaps it is
the problematic relation between the two that what he thinks and where
he finds himself do not match. And probably this is the genesis of his
tragedy. The issue that the play brings up is that subjectivity is as much
a matter of consciousness as the historicity of consciousness or the
historical over-determination of consciousness.

Critics have noted that characters like Aziz, Barani, Najib and
Sheikh Imam-ud-din are just various facets of Tughlaq’s persona. U. R.
Ananthamurthy in his Introduction to *Tughlaq (Three Plays)* emphasises
this, “All the other characters are dramatised aspects of his complex
personality” (144). Urmil Talwar in her article *The Protean Self: Karnad’s
Tughlaq* says that Tughlaq derives a sense of a multiple and constructed
self from various “discursive locations” of religion, history, law politics
and morality, “In *Tughlaq* Sheikh Imam-ud-din, Najib and Barani are the
personae of Tughlaq, with the Sheikh symbolizing religion, Najib politics
and Barani both history and spirituality” (218). Nevertheless, to be fair to
Karnad’s characterization, each of the characters has an independent
existence and is not merely an aspect of Tughlaq.

Sheikh Imam-ud-din is an orthodox theologian and fanatic who
tries to undermine Tughlaq’s vision of secularism and communal
harmony. Tughlaq invites him to address a meeting and offer some
observations on his administration, but forbids his subjects to attend the
meeting. The meeting, thus, becomes only a trap to capture Imam-ud-
din. The sheikh resembles the Sultan and taking advantage of this fact,
he is sent as a peace emissary to Ain-ul-Mulk who, in turn, kills the sheikh, mistaking him to be the Sultan himself. Sheikh, thus, appears to be the fanatic self of Tughlaq and he is killed so that Tughlaq can be a good, secular politician. We see shades of Kautilya in Tughlaq’s political cunning. Without explicitly acknowledging it, Karnad has brought a politician and political philosopher of the golden period of ancient India into his exploration of the history of medieval India. Kautilya and Tughlaq merge, creating a kind of fictional subjectivity which is nevertheless grounded in history.

Aziz is another character whose story runs parallel to that of Tughlaq. He is the one who has a realistic grasp of the political situation of the times. He understands the motives and flaws of Tughlaq’s plans and subverts each of the Sultan’s well-intentioned moves for his own selfish ends. He is as ahead of his times as Tughlaq is, but he is far more cunning and far-sighted than the Sultan. He takes the guise of a Brahmin to subvert Tughlaq’s secularism, becomes a civil servant to loot people on their way to Daulatabad, mints counterfeit coins when Tughlaq announces the new currency and masquerades as the Khalifa who is supposed to restore the freedom of prayer in the kingdom. Tughlaq, who treats other people as pawns and manipulates them to his own advantage, himself becomes a pawn in the game arranged by Aziz.

Similarly, Najib and Barani are in constant conflict, depicting the internal turmoil that Tughlaq is going through. Najib’s is the voice of the
shrewd politician in Tughlaq who may flout values like morality and truth, if the safety and welfare of the monarch or his subjects are at stake. Barani, on the other hand, is the upholder of values such as peace, love and religion. Tughlaq becomes ruthless after Najib is killed and is hovering on the verge of madness when Barani leaves his court. Dharwadker comments, “Tughlaq’s madness and tyranny – the only qualities his subjects attribute to him – are thus forms of powerlessness posing as power” (52).

Tughlaq, who wanted to change the course of history, is himself changed by the course of events. From a very sensible logician full of the energy and passion for reform, he goes on to become a mad tyrant who is frustrated by the turn of the events and brings out his frustrations on his subjects. Tughlaq is possessed by a vision and driven by a desire to improve, he has much cunning to put his ideas into practice: he spells out to a guard an epiphany that he had experienced when he was young:

Nineteen. Nice age! An age when you think you can clasp the whole world in your palm like a rare diamond. I was twenty-one when I came to Daulatabad first, and built this fort. I supervised the placing of every brick in it and I said to myself, one day I shall build my own history like this, brick by brick.

One night I was standing on the ramparts of the old fort here. There was a torch near me flapping its wild wings and
scattering golden feathers on everything in sight. There was a half-built gate nearby trying to contain the sky within its cleft. Suddenly something happened – as though someone had cast a spell. The torch, the gate, the fort and the sky – all melted and merged and flowed in my blood-stream with the darkness of the night. The moment shed its symbols, its questions and answers, and stood naked and calm where the stars throbbed in my veins. I was the earth, was the grass, was the smoke, was the sky. Suddenly a sentry called from far: “Attention! Attention!” And to that challenge the half-burnt torch and the half-built gate fell apart.

No, young man, I don’t envy you your youth. All that you have to face and suffer is still ahead of you. Look at me. I have searched for that moment since then and here I am still searching for it. But in the last four years, I have seen only the woods clinging to the earth, heard only the howl of the wild wolves and the answering bay of street dogs. (194)

But his enthusiasm and vision are shattered when things do not quite fall into place and he is forced to admit that his subjects are not yet ready for the leap that he wants them to make. Yet he refuses to admit defeat, and brings extreme cruelty into his mission, whipping, lashing and killing the subjects who lag behind. But this too does not take his mission very far. He has to admit defeat and retrace his steps back to
return to where he had started. But his defeat does not come alone; it brings with it utter disillusionment and a kind of madness which causes him to suffer alone and renounce all company, “All I need now is myself and my madness - madness to prance in a field eaten bare by the scarecrow violence” (219-220).

Rajesh Kumar Sharma has called Tughlaq a Nietzschean enigma in his paper *Karnad’s Tughlaq: a Nietzschean Enigma*, comparing him to Nietzsche, who too was way ahead of his times, “Girish Karnad’s Tughlaq has Nietzsche’s venom and brilliance, and like Nietzsche he is tortured by a blocked spiritual vision” (1). Like Nietzsche, Tughlaq too was not the one to submit to any limits and he too goes mad when the world fails to follow his vision. He also has some qualities of Nietzsche’s Overman who wishes to overcome the limitations of the human being and to be free from ideas received through generations. He might have recreated himself without being blocked by any metaphysics as Nietzsche suggests, “a few ideas . . . rendered inextinguishable, ever-present, unforgettable, ‘fixed’, with the aim of hypnotising the entire nervous and intellectual system” (61). Nietzsche prophesied a new subject who would carry the burden of his/her freedom. The Nietzschean Overman is about reinventing human beings and the world. But Tughlaq, being a king, underestimates the need of self-reinvention. He would rather reinvent the world and search for creating a different world in Daulatabad.
Despite his multiplicity of ideas, he is impatient with those who do not share his vision. Tughlaq is not really “the higher type of man” that Nietzsche contemplated, yet he too is generally misunderstood, as Nietzsche had prophesied about himself in the preface of *Ecce Homo*, “Listen to me! For I am thus and thus. Do not above all confound me with what I am not!” (1). Tughlaq suffers a similar fate.

Aziz is the one who subverts each of Tughlaq’s moves, while calling himself a follower of Tughlaq, “Since your majesty came to the throne, I have been your most devout servant . . . I insist I am your majesty’s true disciple” (216). Here we find another intersection between the subjective consciousness and history, where the nature of subjectivity can be explored in terms of the subject’s cunning to use history as a resource.

Tughlaq, like Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky’s Raslkonikov, is a dreamer who is not satisfied with the world and would create a different world for himself. All three are thinking of “uttering the new word”, the possibility of creating a new world thereby (*Crime and Punishment* 20). Nietzsche chose to go mad, Raslkonikov tries to retrace and confess, while Tughlaq does not even reach there but falls into vile manipulations and stoops from being a normal man to a subhuman manipulator of the worst order.

### 3.3 History and/as Contemporary Subjectivity II:

**Dreams of Tipu Sultan**

The protagonist of Girish Karnad’s another historical play *Dreams of Tipu Sultan* is caught in an ethical dilemma. Tipu Sultan, one of the most
politically perceptive Indian Kings during the British rule, keeps on wavering between nationalistic sentiments for India and everything Indian and his respect for the British way of life, British people’s undying love for their nation and their great passion for trade. Tipu knows that the English are thriving in India owing to their clever political machinations and their stronghold on trade: “Think of the John company - how they came to this country, poor, cringing, and what they have become in a mere fifty years. They threaten us today. It’s all because of their passion for trade” (26).

He wishes the Indians to wake up to this fact and instead of leaving the Indian resources open to exploitation by the British, be their own masters and earn profits by trading Indian goods:

This land is ours and it's rich, overflowing with goods the world hungers for, and we let foreigners come in and rob us of our wealth! Today the Indian princes are all comatose, wrapped in their opium dreams. But some day they'll wake up and throw out the Europeans. . . . It's them or us. (36)

That is why Tipu sends delegations to China, France, Istanbul and so on to develop trade relations with these countries. He imports technology from these countries and exports rare Indians products to them, thus strengthening the economy of his own kingdom and building a trading empire. Though Tipu is full of nationalistic and patriotic feelings, he can still not help wondering at European enthusiasm and energy: “That's
what makes Europe so wonderful - it's full of new ideas - inventions - all kinds of machines - bursting with energy. Why don’t we think like them?” (36).

Tipu is relentless in his criticism of his fellow native rulers who support the British and even facilitate their rule over India. He lashes at the Nizam and the Marathas when they join hands with the British against him, “We are blocked by our own people” (40).

Tipu fears that his own trusted officers might stab him in the back when the moment comes. He envies the British nationalism, their love for England and their steadfastness. In a dream, while talking to his father, he discloses his deepest fears and his admiration for the British in a long speech:

But, Father, often, suddenly, I see myself in them - I see these white skins swarming all over the land and I wonder what makes them so relentless? Desperate? . . . They don't give up. Nor would I. Sometimes I feel more confident of them than my own people. . . . They believe in the destiny of their race. Why can't we? . . . But the English fight for something called England. What is it? It's just a dream for which they are willing to kill and die. Children of England! (51-52)

He feels a kinship with the British in their undying love for their nation and their never-say-die attitude. But at the same time he feels revolted by their amoral politics when they demand his sons as hostages.
He does not want his sons to be influenced by the violence ingrained in
their language: “The danger is: they’ll teach my children their language,
English. The language in which it is possible to think of children
as hostages” (43).

Tipu’s predicament is also the predicament of a
contemporary/postcolonial Indian subject, who is indecisive about
whether to admire the developed countries of the world for their
progressive ideas, wealth, work culture and propriety or to look down
upon them for their lack of what we call Indian values of trust, sympathy
and love. Should we achieve our ends relentlessly without caring for
means, or stand for the eternal human emotions of love, bonding and
fraternity? Tipu seems to be very clear about what to receive from the
west and what to reject.

Karnad’s historical subjects, as his Tughlaq and Tipu Sultan
exemplify, appear to be our contemporaries with concerns that are very
much our concerns. He explores subjectivity in them as a process of
dialectical exchange between individual consciousness and the historical
situation. Tughlaq in his moral transgressions, violence and interiority
stands in contrast to Tipu who appears to be saner, more in control, yet
as complex. Tughlaq’s blabbering and aporia, which make him appear
mad/eccentric, can also be compared to Tipu’s symbolic dreams which
forebode and affect his future decisions. While Tughlaq keeps on
waverin
and remorse, Tipu is unsure about whether to imitate British patriotism or hate their brutal imperialism. But where Tughlaq ends up losing his sanity, Tipu chooses to die fighting for his ideals.

3.4 Myth and Subjectivity: *Hayavadana*

Myths are usually regarded as fairy tales or beautifully narrated flights of imagination invented by primitive people for their amusement or consolation in the face of baffling natural phenomena. But they also point, as Carl Jung has suggested, to the collective unconscious of mankind (Segal107). Indeed, myths continue to exercise a profound influence on our lives even as they are shaped by the way we live.

It can be said that theories need myths as much as myths need theories, for if theories illuminate myths, myths confirm or interrogate theories. Several disciplines have tried to analyse myths by applying various tools, trying to find what myth is, what it stands for, how it works and what its purpose is. The pioneering English anthropologist E. B. Tylor is of the view that myth is at odds with science. According to him, myths cannot be called untrue or outdated, but they ascribe a personal cause, as understood by the myth-maker, to natural events and processes. Since the personal causes are neither predictable nor testable, there is uncertainty surrounding the significance of myths (85).

According to the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowsky, the primitive people use myth to reconcile themselves to the aspects of the
world that cannot be controlled, such as natural calamities, ageing and
death (137). For Mircea Eliade, however, myth is not only an explanation
but also the ritual recreation of a story that it tells. The real purpose of
myth is thus experiential: encountering divinity (82). Sigmund Freud
considers the purpose of myth to be conciliatory, as Robert A. Segal
remarks:

Myth thus constitutes a compromise between the side of
oneself that wants the desires satisfied outright and the side
that does not even want to know they exist. For Freud, myth
functions through its meaning: myth vents oedipal desires
by presenting a story in which, symbolically, they are
enacted. (94)

According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, the founder of structural
anthropology, myth could be seen as the primitive people’s attempt at
balancing the binary opposites and making them less contradictory, or
reconciling them with each other. A myth may resolve a contradiction by
providing a mediating middle term or an analogous, but more easily
resolved, contradiction. Thus, myth is, according to Strauss, a common
horizon of understanding shared by a community of people. It is the
ordering of the chaotic experience of existence, the rationalization of all
that is incomprehensible to human mind and a way of coping with the
larger questions of life and even defining the identity of a race (10).
As such, myths can be said to exercise a profound influence on our traditions and day-to-day activities by way of religion, philosophy, arts and literature. Myths have always been particularly significant in arts and literature. In India they have always wielded extraordinary power. Since ours is the oldest surviving civilization in the world, Indian ethos is richly fed from countless sources, and Indian mythology and folklore are among those sources. Myths are preserved in the four Vedas, the Upanishads, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana and the Puranas and their aesthetic and social appeal has survived through centuries and remains powerful even in contemporary times.

Several modern Indian writers have turned to myth for their work. They have mined its vast resources to bring forth a variety of interpretations of contemporary situations, giving a new direction to the use of myth. Indeed, the use of myth in literature has been an interpretative strategy to make texts embody both the past and the present.

Shashi Tharoor, for example, has used mythology from the Mahabharata in The Great Indian Novel to forge new insights by blending the mythical and the contemporary to form a sort of modern mythology. He moves easily from Bhishma to Gandhi and then to the present world, comparing, contrasting and mixing various periods and ages and devising a new understanding of the Indian past and present in this way. Dharmavir Bharati, in Andha Yug, also uses episodes from the
Mahabharata to present a world of grief, futility, savagery and death resulting from a great and terrible war.

Among the contemporary Indian dramatists, Girish Karnad has used myth in arguably the richest and the most complex ways. He explores the resources of myth, folklore, legend and history to construct his dramatic universe. Hayavadana, The Fire and the Rain and Yayati are rooted in Indian myth. Bali is based on both myth and folklore. Nagamandala draws on folklore, while Tughlaq and Dreams of Tipu Sultan are inspired by history and legend. Karnad uses myth and history from the vantage point of the present and to view the present in a better light.

Myth and history in the hands of Karnad are not just instruments to visit the past, but are used also to contemplate the possibilities which the future seems to hold. He taps myth and folklore, the hidden sources of shared meaning in the community for which his plays are meant to disturb some of the prevailing perceptions of this community. According to Karnad, “The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning those values, of making them literally stand on their heads” (Introduction to Three Plays 14).

Hayavadana is based on a tale found in Kathasaritasagara, a collection of stories in Sanskrit dating from the eleventh century. But Karnad also draws upon the further development of the story in Thomas
Mann’s German novella *The Transposed Heads*. He borrows from both the sources but alters them here and there, adding the episode of Hayavadana, the man who has a horse’s head but of which he wants to rid himself in order to attain “completeness” as a man. Hayavadana’s search for completeness ends ironically with his becoming a complete horse. Hayavadana also points to the duality of human/animal, the struggle of the human being to discipline his animalism, with the latter ironically triumphing in the end.

The conflict between body and mind is also the theme of *Hayavadana*. When the play opens, Devdatta and Kapila are great friends - “one mind, one heart” as Bhagavata describes them (82). Devdatta is a man of intellect; Kapila is physically better built and is also more attractive. Their relations come under strain when Devdatta marries Padmini. Kapila is attracted to Padmini and she too starts drifting towards him. The climax approaches when the three start for the Ujjain fair through a forest and stop midway to take rest. Devdatta is consumed with jealousy and suspicion:

> What a fool I’ve been. All these days I only saw that pleading in his eyes stretching out its arms begging for a favour. But never looked in her eyes . . . Only now - I see the depths now - I see these flames leaping up from those depths . . . Let your guts burn out - let your lungs turn to ash but don’t turn away now. (96)
He goes to the temple of Kali and slices off his head with a sword. After waiting for some time, Kapila goes in search of Devdatta and, finding his friend dead and fearing that he might be accused of killing Devdatta for the sake of Padmini’s hand, he too beheads himself. Padmini then reaches the temple in search of Devdatta and Kapila. Terrified at the sight of the two beheaded bodies, she appeals to the goddess Kali for help. The goddess appears, but Karnad does not represent her as the fierce-looking goddess of mythology but as a sleepy, bored and impatient goddess. Bored, she cuts short the story of Padmini, “Skip it! Do as I told you. And quickly, I’m collapsing with sleep”. And she adds, “Actually if it hadn’t been that I was so sleepy, I would have thrown them out by the scruff of their necks” (102-103).

She grants to the entreating Padmini the two men’s lives after faulting the men for their foolish lies and false sacrifices. And she asks Padmini to rejoin the heads with the bodies. Unable in the darkness to identify the heads correctly, Padmini accidentally transposes the heads, giving to Devdatta’s body Kapila’s head and to Kapila’s body Devdatta’s head. The question now arises, “Who of the two is her husband?” The three find the answer in the words of a sage who proclaims that since the head is the supreme organ of the body, the man bearing Devdatta’s head should be her husband.

Initially, Devdatta or the head of Devdatta on Kapila’s body behaves differently from the way he did before. But gradually he changes
to his former self. So does Kapila. But there is a difference: Devdatta stops writing poetry, while Kapila is troubled by the memories that lie deposited in Devdatta’s body. Padmini, who had felt after the exchange of heads that she had the best of both men, is slowly disillusioned. The story comes to an end with her self-immolation that follows the death of both the friends who kill each other in a duel.

The head-body conflict, as it has been put to superb use by Karnad, throws light on the conflict between the self and the other by means of the rejoined bodies of Kapila and Devdatta. If the old head symbolises the self, the new body symbolises the other. The self is opposed to the other, but it has to assimilate the other by bringing about a transformation in the other so that it becomes one with the self. As a result, over a period of time, the body of Kapila attached to the head of Devdatta transforms into the likeness of Devdatta’s old body and vice versa. But despite this transformation Padmini remains unsatisfied. Her effort to find completeness in her mate fails. She is the one who really suffers in this war between head and body, intellect and emotion. Her unhappiness suggests that it is impossible to reconcile the dualities perfectly, that one has to live with these dualities, and that the ideal state of harmony is practically unattainable.

The play also explores the obscure and unreliable nature of self. In the liberal humanist tradition, the self has long been treated as something essentially and self-evidently given. But Karnad’s play
contests the notion of an essential self and its givenness. The play shows how the self may be (re)created and modified, since it is not a definite, coherent and fixed construction but a malleable structure open to moulding and remoulding. Individual identity is not an entirely free consciousness or a stable universal essence but a situated construction.

The old self dissolves and a new self gradually replaces it after the transposition of heads. Kali’s temple is significant as the place where the process begins. When the three characters reach the temple in the midst of a dark and dense forest, they have left their previous selves behind. Kali is the female embodiment of primordial time. She is also the goddess of obscurity and her passivity in the play challenges the popular myth, as the sanctity of her conventional representations is exposed to ironic and critical observation erasing the difference between the modern and the mythical consciousness. Kali may also be seen as signifying Mother India, with Kapila, Padmini and Devdatta deriving their identities from her. However, the identities so derived are inescapably caught in dualities. Indeed, a postcolonial reading of Hayavadana cannot fail to notice here a central conflict between pre-colonial and colonised strands of subjectivity.

Hayavadana, the horse-man, embodies the duality at the heart of contemporary Indian subjectivity. Here lies the special significance of the opening scene: the horse-man theme anticipates the entire range of
dualities which the play subsequently explores, but it also embodies the constituent duality of the human being, that is the duality between the animal and the human.

It can be said that the head and body conflict has been used by Karnad to explore the central dilemma faced by a contemporary Indian between various contradictory constituents of subjectivity such as the spiritual and the materialist, the mental and the bodily, the rural and the urban, the pre-colonial and the colonised, the traditional and the modern. Thus, *Hayavadana* lays bare various layers of duality present at the centre of contemporary Indian subjectivity. Karnad thus tries to explore in this play the problematic identity of the contemporary Indian subject. Through the use of various devices, he seems to be even consciously aiming to bring home the complexity of the problem. As he states in the Introduction to *Three Plays*:

> The chorus, the masks, the seemingly unrelated comic episodes, the mixing of human and non-human worlds permit the simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view, of alternative attitudes to the central problem. (14)

The play succeeds in dramatizing the situation successfully though it does not point to any clear answers. It confronts the dualities and contradictions, without suggesting the possibility of any easy reconciliation.
3.5 Myth, Folklore and Subjectivity: Nagamandala

Girish Karnad extensively resorts to the myth and folklore in his play Nagamandala also. For him, myth is not just a device to look back into the past, but it is also an instrument to analyse the present and contemplate about the future. His subjects are not just men and women from an ancient race but people like us who can be analysed to reveal contemporary tendencies. We often see in them a streak of contemporary Indian subjectivity, contemporary notions and contemporary discourses.

As in Hayavadana and Bali, the subjects of Nagamandala too are faced with the dilemmas of our times. In fact, many similarities can be traced in the structure of Hayavadana and Nagamandala. Both the plays are centred on the conflict in the mind of a female subject who is so entangled in the patriarchal discourses of chastity and duty that she is unable to make a choice between the husband and the ideal lover.

Secondly, as in Hayavadana, there is a juxtaposition, a taking over by the ideal lover of the role of the husband. In Nagamandala, it is done through the shape-shifting of a cobra, Naga, into Appanna, Rani’s husband; in Hayavadana, this juxtaposition is brought about by transposing the heads of Kapila and Devdatta.

Kurudavva of Nagamandala has been compared to Kali in Hayavadana by A. Jaganmohana Chari in his paper “Karnad’s Hayavadana and Nagamandala: a Study in Postcolonial Dialectics” (235). She becomes the instrument of juxtaposition, like Kali in
Hayavadana. She gives a root to Rani to help her lure her husband back. Rani, however, throws the root on an anthill, causing the cobra to fall in love with her. But Kurudavva is not an uninterested spectator like Kali who appears bored and angry at being woken up; on the contrary, she takes keen interest in the marital life of her friend’s son Appanna.

The shift from Hayavadana happens towards the end of the play which suggests that Padmini cannot keep both Kapila and Devdatta (denoting body and mind respectively), but must be content with one and remain incomplete and unsatisfied for ever, because it is a general human condition. Karnad is here probably confronted with the challenge of looking at the human world without illusions. On the other hand, in Nagamandala, Rani gets to keep both the devoted husband and the besotted Naga in the coils of her hair. In fact, Karnad has proposed two endings to the play. The first ending suggests the death of Naga, while the second ending suggests Naga’s relegation into Rani’s consciousness. According to Veena Noble Dass, this implies that Rani is condemned to oscillate forever between fantasy and reality (125). But whether or not this indecisiveness is a punishment is not definitely answered by the text.

Nagamandala is a story within a story narrated by Story (a character) to a playwright condemned to die if he is unable to stay awake the whole night in return for the abused mass of sleep that he induced in his audience:
I asked the mendicant what I had done to deserve this fate. And he said: ‘You have written plays. You have staged them. You have caused so many good people, who came trusting you, to fall asleep twisted in miserable chairs, that all that abused mass of sleep has turned against you and become the Curse of Death.’ (22-23)

Karnad’s own subjectivity merges into the subjectivity of the character he has created. The playwright himself is a character and the distance between the writer and the character appears to vanish. Karnad good-humouredly appeases the audience of the play and seems to be also mocking the critics.

The Sutradhar of the play, the Man, is trying to keep awake in a dilapidated temple, when he hears female voices approaching. To his surprise, he witnesses a group of naked flames walking towards the temple, talking animatedly. Each flame has a story to tell, weaving a pattern of stories within stories. One of the flames tells the incident of the Story and the Song who pop out of the mouth of an old woman who has kept them confined, not narrating them further. This story has taken the form of a young woman and the song that of a sari.

The playwright hints that the story is born to be kept alive by repeated narration. It cannot be bottled up, but would escape at the earliest opportunity. It must grow both vertically and horizontally. The
incident emphasises the ineluctable uninterruptedness of the story-telling process: a story demands to be told over and over again.

Story too reaches there and the flames offer to listen to her, but Story is despondent because the flames cannot pass her on. The Man then comes forward and offers to repeat Story in the form of his new play. Story accepts the offer and starts narrating the story of Rani, who is married to Appanna (any man). Appanna treats Rani cruelly, locking her up in his house and visiting the house only to have his bath and lunch. The lock signifies the whole patriarchal discourse of chastity which is used to confine women.

Appanna visits his concubine without any moral or social reservations and is never required to explain anything or prove his fidelity or purity through a snake/fire ordeal. Karnad hints at the double standards of patriarchal institutions where men are not accountable for their social/moral conduct while a woman always is. A woman is expected to be faithful even to a husband who treats his wife cruelly and is unfaithful to her. Appanna’s behavior shocks Rani and her dreams of a blissful married life are shattered. She begins to dream of a rescuer who would free her from the clutches of her demon husband. She longs to go back to her parents.

When Kurudavva comes to know of Rani’s predicament, she gives her an aphrodisiac root to lure Appanna back. Rani mixes the root with his food but seeing its blood-red color is horrified and throws the gravy
on the ant-hill in which Naga, the cobra, lives. The cobra is smitten with love for Rani and starts visiting her in the guise of her husband. The relationship between the animal (snake) and the human suggests a certain continuum and a relation between the two. Firstly, it suggests that man is equally vicious like a snake. Secondly, if we discard the human lens, a relation of equality and independence can be perceived between the animal and the human. In other words, we are called upon to have the ability to look at the human being freed from the limitation of our conception of what a human being entails and to get rid of the limited ideas in which we are apt to confine it. One has to identify, thus, with the otherness of the other. At the level of ideology, the animal-human continuity also undercuts the humanist idea of man as the crown of all creation.

Rani is surprised to find Appanna paying a visit at night, as he usually comes for lunch and leaves after that. She asks him if he wants anything:

   RANI. But when did you come? Shall I serve the food?
   NAGA. (*Laughs.*) Food? At midnight?
   RANI. Then something else. Perhaps. . . (39)

The patriarchal arrangement requires the woman to be subservient and Rani does not expect her husband to come to her without any demand. She is quite surprised to find him in a mood for idle talk and caresses. But Naga wins her over with patience and compassion. Rani begins to
enjoy his company and affection, and waits for him every night. One afternoon she tries to talk to Appanna, who snubs her again, making Rani suspicious that the incident of the previous night exists only in her fantasy. She keeps on oscillating between the twin poles of credulity and knowledge. The question is whether it is just Rani who oscillates between truth and fiction or whether it is a general human predicament.

Human beings are influenced and controlled by discourses, according to Michel Foucault, and are led to believe what discourses want them to believe. Each era produces certain discourses through which the subject may be objectified according to the ruling values, beliefs and interests of its society. What we call the truth is a product of discourses over a period of time. Foucault questions the very possibility of apprehending any reality outside or beyond discourses.

Naga makes use of his patriarchal authority and silences any doubts that Rani may begin to have:

. . . Listen, Rani. I shall come home every day twice. At night and of course again at mid-day. . . .When I come and go at night, don’t go out of this room, don’t look out of the window - whatever the reason. And don’t ask me why. (45)

It can be asked whether this command is to be read within the unequal power relationship between man and woman and what would happen if Rani is tempted to disobey it. But she is prepared to silence all her doubts, in return for the love and affection she had been seeking in
the strange new home. She does not ask any questions and waits for Naga every day. It is difficult to say whether Rani guesses that Naga and Appanna are not one but two different persons. M. Sarat Babu is of the view that Appanna and Naga are the two faces of one man symbolizing the exploitation and double standards of man (35). But do both of them not stand for the suffocating discourse of patriarchy, silencing women in one way or another? Appanna’s mistreatment of Rani and his visits to the concubine hints at the ways patriarchy can use the instrument of sex to demean women. It demeans the concubine by using her as a sex object, while it demeans Rani by denying her the relationship that forms the basis of marriage.

Karnad deconstructs the discourse of marriage as an essential and fulfilling union and depicts how marriage is used by patriarchy to confine and exploit women. As in Sakharam Binder, in this play too, patriarchal arrangement in a marriage is shown to mirror the class relations between a capitalist and a worker. Appanna expects Rani to do all the household work, prepare meals for him, yet in return he does not even talk to her, but orders her around, locks her in the house and mistreats her. Yet the institution of patriarchy also has its roots deep in the psyche of women like Rani who cannot bring themselves to protest. Rani submits to the orders of Appanna and does not question him about his whereabouts. On the contrary, she is concerned when Appanna falls ill after drinking the milk containing the aphrodisiac root.
Naga too makes use of the same patriarchal discourse to subjugate Rani into silence, although he claims to be in love with her. He is only concerned about satisfying his desires, and not about what its consequences can be for Rani. He betrays Rani when she becomes pregnant and leaves her to face the consequences alone.

Rani is unable to comprehend her husband’s behavior when Appanna confronts her about her pregnancy, blaming her of infidelity. Even if Rani had been unfaithful, it is only Naga who would know about it, but he does not even care to enlighten her about it. He leaves her to face the ordeal all by herself and does not admit his role in causing all this suffering to her:

NAGA. Rani, the village elders will sit in judgment. You will be summoned. That cannot be avoided.

RANI. Look at the way you talk- as if you were referring to someone else. After all you complained to the elders about me. Now you can go and withdraw the complaint. Say my wife isn’t a whore. (53)

It is difficult to guess exactly when Rani starts differentiating between Naga and Appanna. The play hints at many such occasions which should have consolidated Rani’s belief about Naga not being Appanna, yet it appears that Rani ignores the witness of all these occasions – such as Naga’s wounds, his image in the mirror and his being able to enter a locked house. It appears to be a willing suspension
of disbelief on Rani’s part not to have arrived at the right conclusions. Or if she had guessed it earlier, she yet spontaneously goes on playing the role of an ignorant woman, since it suits her best. The same applies to Appanna who willingly suspends his disbelief of Rani’s chastity and goes on to perform the role of an ideal husband and father near the end of the play.

It is difficult to find out whether he really accepts the myth of the goddess surrounding Rani, or submits before the collective pressure of the village elders and the people:

ELDER I. Appanna, your wife is not an ordinary woman. She is a goddess incarnate. Don’t grieve that you judged her wrongly and treated her badly. That is how goddesses reveal themselves to the world. You were the chosen instrument for revealing her divinity.

ELDER II. Spend the rest of your life in her service. You need merit in ten past lives to be chosen for such holy duty.(59)

And that is what Appanna does, but is he really convinced that Rani is chaste? The man too raises his doubts about the ending, which makes Story alter her story as she makes Appanna speak up his suffering:

What am I to do? Is the whole world against me? Have I sinned so much that even nature should laugh at me? I know I haven’t slept with my wife. Let the world say what it likes.
Let any miracle declare her a goddess. But I know! What sense am I to make of my life if that’s worth nothing? (60)

The faith and the personal testimony of the rational self appear to be in conflict. The use of myth repeatedly undermines the idea of the reliability of the rational self. Also the significance of the conflation between the myth of goddess and the real woman stands out here. Karnad seems to be problematizing the separation between the two, suggesting that the myth of the goddess compels a certain performativity on the part of the real woman which is shaped by the discourses of divinity. On the other hand, while judging a goddess our judgment is influenced by our frameworks of judging the real woman. Through *Nagamandala*, Karnad seems to be pointing out at this confusion between the territories of divinity and humanity.

It is difficult for Rani to decide whether to act as a goddess or as a real woman. Clear demarcations are hardly possible. She must perform multiple roles at the same time. Story raises the issue of Rani’s dilemma when she comes to know that Appanna is not Naga:

No two men make love alike. And that night of the Village Court, when her true husband climbed into bed with her how could she fail to realise it was someone new? Even if she hadn’t known earlier? When did the split take place? Every night this conundrum must have spread its hood out at her. (60)
But Story suggests that these seeming flaws in the ending must be ignored. The playwright hints at the element of credulity on which playacting thrives in the classical drama, and he follows Ibsen in achieving a distancing effect from the audience:

When one says, ‘and they lived happily ever after’, all that is taken for granted. You sweep such headaches under the pillow and then press your head firmly down on them. It is something one has to live with, like a husband who snores, or a wife who is going bald. (60)

In fact, Story offers the man a choice of endings among which he may prefer any, suggesting how far our lives are shaped by narratives, fictions and half-truths. Truth is always contingent and fragmentary, and leaving the ending open suggests the impossibility of reaching a final version of truth, if there is any. One has to construct one’s own truths. So she suggests an ending in which Naga strangulates himself with Rani’s hair and Rani starts exercising her newly gained goddess status and gets Appanna to ritually cremate Naga.

But the play does not end here. The Man goes on to offer another ending at the request of the flames which are of the opinion that the ending given by Story is not proper, “Stop making excuses! . . . The story may be over. But you are here and still alive! . . . Listen, we don’t have much time left. . . . Get on with it, for goodness’ sake, etc.” (64).
So the Man tries and brings out a happy ending in which Rani allows Naga to live in her tresses. The comparison, frequently made, between a woman’s hair and the snakes stands out (as in Greek mythology Medusa’s hair are believed to be snakes). The open ending suggests the flexibility of narratives which go on changing as they change mouths. Truth is a construction of narratives, as in Tendulkar’s play *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Samant reads an incident out of a novel, which becomes the reality for Benare. Similarly, subjectivity is also a narrative and discursive construction. The ritual cremation of Naga does not denote the end but its integration and acceptance into the community. In this way, the two endings can be read as not being radically different from each other.

### 3.6 Between Cultural Stereotypes and Modernity: *Wedding Album*

*Wedding Album* is the most recent play of Girish Karnad. In it he gathers some vignettes from a typical Indian arranged marriage. Karnad explores a traditional Indian wedding with a view to exposing the strained relations which come to the fore on the occasion of a wedding when even the farthest relatives come together to celebrate the wedding. In addition to this, Karnad uses the occasion to explore several contemporary issues related to relationships and society.
Vidula, the female protagonist, is about to get married to Ashwin whom she has known only through e-mails, video-conferencing and photo-sharing. Incidentally, the marriage of Vidula and Ashwin appears as an arranged marriage in the contemporary India which is changing rapidly under the impact of several global forces. One can notice a co-optation of postmodern technologies by a conservative social institution.

Vidula is an educated modern girl; hence, why she agrees to such an arrangement is incomprehensible. Perhaps the occasion offers her an opportunity to be someone she cannot be otherwise, as is apparent from her internet-café conversation with her unknown friend. She steps into the shoes of another girl, as the concubine of an older man who keeps her like a slave. The girl is sold off when the master dies. She reveals this and several other facts about herself to the unknown friend at the other end, but which are only a figment of Vidula’s imagination. But the internet-conversation offers her a veil of anonymity behind which she can be whatever she feels like. This multiple performance on the part of Vidula can be better understood in the light of Judith Butler’s concept of performativity discussed in Chapter 1. Butler suggests that identity is performative. People may become totally different persons when placed in different circumstances or in the company of different persons. By identifying the repetitive processes of inscription of social norms and the resistance offered to those norms, Butler emphasises the discontinuous nature of identity.
Vidula steps into a newly constructed ‘self’ in the internet café, and also when she is with Ashwin, her groom-to-be. We notice a strain of hypocrisy in Vidula when we return to the opening scene of the play. Her brother Rohit is making a video of Vidula to be sent to Ashwin. He asks her to appear bright and cheerful and put her best foot forward. Vidula objects to this suggestion and says, “I just want him to know what I am like”; and she warns Ashwin, “I am not glamorous, as you can see. I am not exceptional in any way. I don’t want you to be disappointed later” (6). It appears that Vidula herself is hardly aware of the possibilities within her. She appears to be ignorant of how glamorous she can be at times, as later demonstrated in the café episode. Everyone considers Vidula to be timid and subservient, but in the internet café when she is attacked by the self-styled guardians of Hindu culture, she reacts in an aggressive manner, using expletives and threatening her assailants, “What gives you the right to come in here. I’ll do what I like here. Who the hell are you to question me?” (70). And later, “Get out of here, you bloody bull-shitters. If you don’t fuck off this minute . . .” (71). Vidula stands up to them for her rights and transforms into a bold, aggressive and aware woman in the face of a fanatically charged patriarchal attack on her individuality.

Vidula’s arranged marriage with Ashwin is in a way similar to the master-slave arrangement of Vidula’s imagination. Karnad obliquely hints at the reality of the patriarchal ownership of a woman and the exploitation involved in an Indian arranged marriage through Vidula, when she says
that her old master, her father, is about to die and that, “His family is bound to throw me out. So I had to find a new master. A younger man. He lives in the US. He has paid a good price to my family” (64).

This reveals her clear understanding on her part of how a woman is treated in a typical patriarchal Indian family before her marriage. All decisions related to her are taken by her father and, later, when she is married the role of the master is passed on to her husband who would decide about her life. Vidula remarks, “He can do whatever with me” (65). Her sister Hema too discusses the patriarchal arrangement in her married life where her husband takes all the decisions:

Because they are all transferable jobs and the white wife refuses to go trailing after her husband. We Indian women, on the other hand, are obedient Sati Savitris, ever willing to follow in our husband’s footsteps. Look at me . . . Our men may get all the top jobs. But I am in no better position than Ma. (17)

Probably, this is the reason Hema has not been able to utilise her talent and education and remains a housewife, constantly worrying about her children and home. She is probably so neglected by her husband and her marital life is so dull that she is excited when Vivan, a boy even younger to her son, shows an interest in her. She is at first shocked at receiving attentions from a boy so young, but later she feels flattered and looks forward to short meetings with him and his erotically
charged letters. But near the end of the play, Vivan dumps her for a younger girl. Karnad, through this episode, hints at the sexual openness prevalent in society where all limitations of age, relation and propriety disappear. Mahesh Dattani feels that Karnad does not take any moral stand regarding any of the sexual issues depicted in the play, but rather paints them with an amoral brush:

We feel privileged in having had an insight into a way of life that goes beyond social decorum and upper class demureness. This play is a winner because we do not find her surreptitiousness in any way immoral. (6)

The moral police in the café episode are also too obviously snubbed by Vidula. In fact, Karnad does not even begin to judge the matter as moral or immoral. It appears that in Karnad’s plays morality is assumed to be relative. It is difficult to pinpoint what we should call moral or immoral as it depends upon the situation, state of mind or the discourses of the time. The amoral stand of Karnad in this play can be compared to his stand in other plays like The Fire and the Rain, Bali and Hayavadana. In these plays too, Karnad does not comment on the propriety or impropriety of adultery. He neither condemns, nor justifies it. But on the other hand, Vijay Tendulkar almost always has an explicit stand on such matters in his plays. For example, in Sakharam Binder, he tries to justify Sakharam’s adulterous relationship with various women
and in *Silence! The Court is in Session*, the final speech of Benare is almost a justification.

Karnad’s stand on morality can be seen in the light of Nietzsche’s views who considers morality as a weapon of the weak to get even with the strong. The weak label the strong as “evil” and, in turn, themselves as “good”, and they uphold their tendencies as virtues but condemn those of their opponents as vices, creating an arbitrary system of morality to protect their interests. Nietzsche does not see any divine basis of morality but, of course, morality forms an important discourse in the ideological processes to suppress certain tendencies supposed to be dangerous to the state and society, according to Althusser. Marx called religion the opium of the masses; similarly, the discourse of morality can function to restrain and control the people. For example, the moral police in the play uses the discourse of Hinduism and its values and morals for certain political aims. The café attendant tells Vidula that those people charge money from him to let him run his business which, according to them, is a danger to their culture. The argument of culture/morality/religious piety is, thus, a convenient tool to be moulded to suit one’s ends.

Ashwin’s proclamations about preservation and propagation of Hinduism and Indian culture too appear to be a professional tactic to win people and impress upon them the imagined greatness of his culture,
while, on the contrary, he also tells Vidula how he himself has seen, experienced and enjoyed every aspect of American culture:

I have drunk life in the US to the lees. Girl friends, affairs, mistresses, one-night stands and on the public stage, glamour, success, social connections. I have been through them all. And I have come to the conclusion that that whole culture is empty of values now, bereft of any living meaning. It is shallow, you see what I mean, glittering and shallow . . . . Unlike the US, India has an ancient civilization. A culture which is full of wisdom and insight. India should have the capacity to lead the world. (80-81)

Ashwin tries to impress upon Vidula that he is looking for a life-partner from a place like Dharwad because it means that the girl would be full of “innocence” and “purity” (81). It is a case of patriarchy using the discourses of religion and culture to exploit and suppress people by stereotyping genders, persons and places. Ashwin tells Vidula, “Someone like you carries within you the essence of Hindu spirituality. Woman as mother, wife, daughter. Womanhood as the most sacred ideal” (81).

He expects Vidula to be a submissive housewife who should perform her duties within the circle of the household without expecting any gratitude or without thinking of her own life, career or economic independence. Ashwin tactically yet spontaneously uses the patriarchal discourse of woman as Devi. Such discourses construct certain subject
positions which stereotype a woman, creating impracticable ideals for her to follow. Vidula, however, listens to all this hypocrisy in silence and does not object to it. It is difficult to believe that she is the same Vidula who reprimanded the moral guardians in the café episode so vehemently.

On the other hand, it is Ma who seems to have emerged unscathed from the influence of patriarchy. She used to get severe beatings from her husband. But now it is she who takes the decisions. Father grumbles about having lost his commanding position in the family, but he praises Ma for her sacrifice and her skill at management. But this again reinforces the idea that a woman can only win applause in a patriarchal system if she makes sacrifices, reaffirming the woman as Devi.

The wedding is supposed to bring together all the family but it becomes an occasion for bringing past grudges and resentments to the fore. Hema, for example, has always thought that she is less beloved of her parents than Rohit and Vidula. She remembers that in her childhood when her parents got transferred, they did not take her along but left her with the relatives. She also feels that her parents could have spent more on her wedding. She envies the elaborate preparations being made for Vidula’s wedding. Her father and mother feel that it was Hema who was in a hurry to get married, so they could not plan an elaborate wedding. Father even brings out a list of expenses incurred on the wedding, prepared accurately by Ramdas. He speaks lovingly about his brother.
Ramdas who he feels was very bright, but mother tells him that Ramdas hated him despite his affectionate concern for him:

You go on, Ramdas, Ramdas. About your brotherly love. Helping him out. But have you ever wondered what he thought of you? He hated you for it . . . he was an ungrateful . . . jealous . . . (74)

Later it is discovered that Vidula’s birth certificate bears the name of Ramdas as her father. Ma considers it a wilful action by Ramdas as he was jealous of Father. Hema and Vidula feel that Ramdas probably had his eyes on Ma since she was very beautiful. Dattani is of the opinion that Ma’s nonchalance about Ramdas’s name on the certificate is scandalizing (6). However, it appears that some notions of propriety and tradition are ingrained in their family and that is why ma feels that the wrong name on the certificate does not matter much and could be left as it is.

Through Rohit, the play gives us a glimpse of how the lure of money and fame could make a person opportunistic. Rohit loves Isabel, but the Sirur family wants him to marry their daughter Tapasya. They offer him foreign education and even assistance in setting up his own business. Rohit at first refuses but gradually the lustre of wealth tempts him and he gives in, dumping Isabel to suffer. Rohit marries Tapasya and yet has his eyes on Isabel, and so invites her to join him when Tapasya is away. But the promise of prosperity and material well-being
makes him suppress his emotions for Isabel. It is thus the conflict between wealth and prosperity on the one hand and love and emotion on the other which defines Rohit as a subject.

Radhabai, the cook, too makes a similar move, when it comes to choosing between the love of a daughter and a job. Radhabai’s daughter was a kept woman. She used to send money to her, with which Radha is able to come to the city and find a cook’s job in a household. But she does not tell anyone about her daughter because it might cost her the job if the employer came to know that her daughter is a concubine. Incidentally, her daughter’s master dies and his people turn her out. With no shelter or money and heaps of insults from people, she goes mad and starts running on streets in search of her mother. But her mother refuses to recognise her when she finally finds her house. The incident, however, leaves Radha guilty and repentant, causing her to weigh and ponder her decision time and again, throwing her into fits of temper. The play ends with Radhabai contemplating the decisions she made, reliving the crucial moments and justifying to herself what she did and why she could not do otherwise. It appears that she repeats the incident to herself time and again in order to consider and reconsider her options:

You can’t keep a grown up daughter at home, can you? . . . I was paralyzed. Why is she here? What if my mistress sees her? What’ll happen to me? (92-93)
The social discourse of morality commands her to make her choices. Dattani compares her to Firs in Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*, but thinks that Radha is a far more tragic figure than Firs. According to him:

Keeping Radhabai in the periphery for so long shows
Karnad’s preoccupation with the Brahmin’s point of view,
but at the same time his compassion clearly rests on the
other side. Although Karnad is closer home, he doesn’t take
us into the kitchen where his saddest story is set. (6)

Although Radhabai’s story is somewhat marginalised in the play, yet it certainly catches the eye of Pratibha and Rohit when they are planning the next episodes of their TV serial. Pratibha, Rohit’s boss, finds it more realistic and melodramatic than the Vidula episode. They discuss how they can mould the ending a little to make it even more tear-jerking. Pratibha congratulates Rohit for having thought of such a great idea, “Your great advantage is that you know the lower middle class inside out” [59]. The fabrication and maneuvering of real life tales to suit the requirements of a tele-serial suggests how far sensibilities can be shaped by the spectacle-machine of the capitalist media. Human grief, too, becomes a commodity in a kind of emotional cannibalism.

It is noteworthy that in *Wedding Album* Karnad moves from myth, folklore and history to cultural stereotypes and modernity. There is no direct allusion to either myth or history in it, yet the cultural stereotypes it showcases are of an almost mythical stature. Although it appears to be
a comparatively modern play, yet the subjectivity it explores emerges out of ancient mythical and cultural discourses. The play explores the tension between forces of tradition and modernity, both vying with each other for a space in subjectivity, leaving a hole in the subject. It also depicts how the discourses of culture, morality and tradition are associated with a sense of guilt and remorse, as is apparent in the case of Radhabai and Rohit.

Karnad’s plays thus are a mirror to the formation of contemporary Indian subjectivity against the backdrop of several ages. He has a wider range in comparison to Tendulkar and Dattani. While Tendulkar explores the socio-political and cultural constituents of subjectivity, Karnad explores the multiple layers of subjectivity in not only the mythical and historical but also the contemporary Indian subjects. His plays can be regarded as representing the contemporary Indian subjectivity across classes, genders and temporalities. He modernises the historical and mythical subjects, making them appear extremely contemporary. He deals with almost every strata of society including the royalty, the rural lower class and the urban middle class where Tendulkar’s focus lies in the middle class and Dattani’s subjects belong to urban middle class.

He studies the subjectivity of Indian men and women placed in rarely encountered dilemmas. Be it Rani of Nagamandala, the three protagonists of Hayavadana or Vidula, Radha and Rohit of Wedding Album, the subjects of Karnad are entangled in unprecedented turmoil.
And through this turmoil, he explores the multiple layers of their existence in the world.

Karnad’s historical subjects, as his Tughlaq and Tipu Sultan exemplify, appear to be our contemporaries with concerns that are very much our concerns. While Tughlaq finds it difficult to choose between ethics and progress, Tipu is unsure about appreciating or condemning the British way of life. Similarly, Karnad’s protagonists in Nagamandala and Hayavadana are faced with contemporary crises revolving around identity and existence. Rani oscillates between self-identification with the two roles assigned to her, that is, the role of an ideal Indian daughter-in-law and that of a goddess; while Padmini finds it difficult to choose between intellect and beauty, wondering why she cannot have the best of both. A comparison can also be made between Tughlaq, Nagamandala and Wedding Album on the basis of Karnad’s stand on morality. In Wedding Album Karnad seems to be justifying normal bourgeois morality, whereas in the other two plays the transgression of moral norms elevates the transgressors above ordinary human beings: Rani is accepted as a goddess after her adulterous relationship with Naga, while Tughlaq assumes the status of a visionary emperor after his acts of brutal violence. And in Wedding Album Karnad chooses to lay bare the workings of the forces of modernity on traditional institutions, depicting how the forces of materialism, individuality and consumerism on the one hand and culture, spirituality and ethics on the other, rend their subjects
apart, pulling them in opposite directions and leaving behind a sense of loss and guilt.