Chapter Four

Karnad as a Cultural Aesthete:

His Contribution to Literary and Cultural Aesthetics

Karnad is an internationally known Indian playwright, and his accomplishments are of varied hues. The fact that he is an acclaimed playwright, highly talented filmmaker, versatile actor, and effective communicator been briefly stated and acknowledged in the first Chapter of the present study. The research findings of the present study help this researcher to argue in this Chapter that Karnad is also a fine modernist myth-maker and cultural connoisseur capable of ethno-symbolic complex seeing that does a fine tuning with an eclectic hybridization of thought conducive to problematize the contemporary Indian subjectivity and to look for multiple meanings in the quest for solutions to the existential angst of contemporary problems. Karnad’s modernity of thought emanates from his perception of and affinities with ethno-symbolism that marks his sense of tradition wherein he sees myth as continuity towards exploring meanings for life. It also has its referentiality to and relationality with his vision of modernism that reflects a hybridized, dialogical, and inclusive aestheticization of ground realities, an aestheticization that has a lot of cultural implications. It also facilitates Karnad to widen his ‘postcolonial eye’, an eye that is critical, interruptive, contesting, enunciating, illumining, and inclusive. And above all, it has its affinities with certain Indic aesthetics that hinge on the beauty of truth that celebrates ‘understanding culture’ as posited elsewhere in the present study. In a nutshell, Karnad’s contribution to literary aesthetics and sensibilities lies in his hybridized
Otherization that contests received notions, ideas, ideologies, and values, and foregrounds and celebrates subaltern subjectivity that mediates through his ethno-symbolic complex seeing that reflects modernist ethos in tune with the rasa-aesthetics of a compassionate worldview.

To be more specific and concrete, this Chapter is an attempt, by way of research findings, to substantiate the modernist dimension of Karnad’s dramaturgic vision of life by assessing his literary contributions reflected in his dramatic mythopoeic (ethno-symbolist) portrayals, his decentering and decolonizing approach, his subalternization of female subjectivity and the subjectivity of the people on the edge of margins, and in his celebration of polyphony of voices as alternative voices and shared values standing in contrast to received notions and values. In other words, this Chapter takes readers towards discerning and appreciating the research-findings of the study which revolve around the cultural and ideational dimensions of Karnad’s plays. These dimensions are inclined towards reaching beyond and transcending established boundaries of traditional thought and leaning towards affirming the perception that Karnad’s cultural aestheticism consists of de-essentializing Indian individual and national identities by refreshingly historicizing the Indian subjectivity/problematics through animated historical readings and positioning it/them with lived or existential experiences, a technique Karnad uses throughout his plays, supplemented extensively by his option to return to the roots. The research findings revolve around four major cultural categories, namely ‘modernist ethos’, ‘ethno-symbolism’, ‘postcolonial eye’ and ‘subalternization’. This Chapter highlights these cultural categories in such a way that they serve as agencies of substantiating the arguments of the thesis vis-à-vis the title of the study and strengthening the quality-content of the research concerns taken up in the study.
To move further, in the course of discussing the dialectics of cultures, Homi K. Bhabha, in one of his chapters titled, “Dissemination: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation”, in his book, Nation and Narration (1990) asks: “How does one write the nation’s modernity as the event of the everyday and the advent of the epochal?” (171). While trying to discover how Karnad, as a playwright, responds to such a question, the immediate thought that came to the mind of this researcher was to briefly look again at how Karnad viewed and assimilated the myriad strands of modernism. In this connection, this researcher wishes to go back Komalesha’s reading of literary modernism in Kannada Literature which was briefly mentioned in Chapter One. Touching again on and expanding the idea of modernism in Kannada literature helps appreciate the status of Karnad as a modernist cultural aesthete which is the prime focus of this Chapter. Keeping in mind ‘the antithetical axis’ upon which the cartography of modernism stands, namely, “a quotidian reality at the micro-level and as an agent of transition at a macro-level”, Komalesha observes that Bhabha attempts to elucidate the double signification of modernism in the light of its dichotomous Janus face and appears to come to a close conclusion that all acts of transition, whether social, political, or cultural, demand a reconfiguration of certain existing structures and patterns, thus “posing an imperative for societies to accept the cosmic dynamic principle as a ruling monarch”. This psychodynamics of transition poses a challenge to the negotiation of the principle of ‘Centre’, and in today’s contemporary context, to locate the Centre is to engage one’s intellect in the “already collapsing structure of signifiers” (1-2, 4).

At another level of modernity of thought and modernist ethos, to artists like Girish Karnad, BadalSircar, Vijay Tendulkar, Habib Tanvir, and Mudrarakshasa and directors like B.V. Karanth, RatanThiyam, and K.N. Panikkar, the end of colonialism
was an opportunity for cultural decolonization, and cultural decolonization paved the way for the assertion of the vitality and relevance of traditional art. They were able to see the compelling power of the theatre of the roots, its rootedness in regional theatre culture, its capacity to transcend regional linguistic barriers, and to reflect, as Suresh Avasthi states, ‘an all-India character in design’ (48). Such cultural renaissance inspired and motivated them to limit Western influences and create the space for indigenous culture and traditions of performing art. Karnad ventured to use modernism as a tool for varied purposes such as to initiate a decolonizing process by way of liberating himself from the limitations of Western dramatic modes of expression, to return to the roots so as to have enough space to muse on contemporary issues haunting India through the mediation of the dynamics of myth, and to discern the complexities of life through intertextual dialogicity mythopoeia was able to facilitate in terms of syncretic modernism.

As one of the playwrights who heralded syncretic modernism in Indian theatre, Karnad’s mythification of the contemporary Indian subjectivity, as discussed in other preceding chapters of the present study, represents a synthesis of cultures hyphenated with Indic ethno-symbolism that defines his dramaturgy. His adherence to Indic ethno-symbolism shapes his dramatic voice a distinct one. His conscious adherence to ethno-symbolism, manifest in his reuse of Indian myths and history by which he co-relates the past with the present, provides him the matrix to comment on the absurdities of life with its elemental passions and conflicts and to convey how human beings struggle to achieve perfection in the contemporary times. His adherence is not a blind imitation of the traditional ways of storytelling, or conventional dramatic techniques derived from the legacies of Indian literary heritage such as the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* and other Sanskrit dramas. It is open enough to adaptation from both the Indic tradition and
the modern theatre technique of the West. Without being under the impact of any kind of literary hegemony either from the Indic or the Western tradition, Karnad freely adapts and develops his plots, characters, themes, and chooses a performing technique specific to a particular play. His cultural aestheticism reflects a fusion of both the traditions in his attempt to comment on the zeitgeist as he sees it, and his seeing has a diachronic-synchronic complexity. By virtue of his creative intellectual and modernist cultural dispositions, he views the subjects of his plays from a complex intertextual perspective, develops them blending his own imagination and personal experiences, and employs them as a medium to communicate his own-independent romanticized poetic thoughts through mythopoeic interpretations. His serious dramatic explorations of folklore, mythology and history reflect the problems and challenges of contemporary life and endeavour to forge a meaningful link between the past and the present. Vis-à-vis historicizing, his contribution to literary aesthetics and sensibilities lies in his approach to and affinities with modernity of thought which does a lot of critical reasoning with the contemporary existential angst. The germination of his indigenous aesthetics and sensibility is not a blind reaction against the colonial legacies of drama. Instead, it liberates him from mental enslavement and from the mindset that tends to devalue indigenous culture and makes him a practitioner of intercultural hybridity and aestheticism. Such hybridity is aesthetically satisfying to him. In no way, it compromises his stance against colonial, or neocolonial ways of thinking.

The first and foremost impression one gets vis-à-vis Karnad’s cultural aestheticism after reading his plays, or witnessing the stage presentations of his plays is about his commitment to discovering a tradition of his own through return to the roots which highlights, as indicated in the beginning of this Chapter, his contribution to ethno-symbolism that facilitates the integration of hybridity with Indic touches. This
may also be counted as one of the findings of this research pursuit. Karnad’s status as an ethno-symbolist shines through his incorporation of Indian myths, folklores and history into the matrices of dramaturgy signals a reclamation of the nation’s cultural past. The presence of the cultural past in the experience of the modern nation emphasizes the historicity of the nation. Karnad subscribes to the idea that a nation is built on and strengthened by the myths and memories of the past. Myth as continuity, as argued in Chapter Two, strengthens the concepts of nationalism, modernism, and cultural identity. In this context, Anthony D. Smith’s observation on ‘historical ethno-symbolism’ may be relevant. He notes:

For ethno-symbolists, what gives nationalism its power are the myths, memories, traditions, and symbols of ethnic heritages and the ways in which a popular living past has been, and can be, rediscovered and reinterpreted by modern nationalist intelligentsias. It is from these elements of myth, memory, symbol, and tradition that modern national identities are reconstituted in each generation as the nation becomes more inclusive and as its members cope with new challenges. (9)

In his plays, Karnad adapts an ethno-symbolic approach to foreground the relevance and meaning of the cultural past in the experience of the new nation after the departure of the colonial masters. He distils and adapts from the legacies of myths, symbols, traditions and memories and uses his imagination to blend history and fiction to intervene in the historical present of the nation contributing to the imagining of a unified nation in the midst of the contemporary angst. As Aparna Dharwadker comments, Karnad’s process of hybridization of thought serves to evoke an ancient and pre-colonial past in the form of myths referring to certain fictional narratives about
divine and heroic human agents belonging to the formative stages of Indian culture and link the same to the contemporaneous present by juxtaposing and contrasting imagining. Karnad’s approach to ethno-symbolism takes into account the age-old awareness that myths, legends and folklore are embodiments of a nation’s cultural ethos conveying timeless values and principles of life and shared experiences of the people. Almost all his plays are illustrations wherein Karnad spreads varied ethno-symbolic frames by way of intertextualities in order to go back to the roots of Indian myths, tradition and culture and re-create a vivid image of Indian society showcasing its cultural legacies with a postcolonial and critiquing eye touching on, dealing with, and commenting on the Indian way of life with all its positives and negatives.

Karnad incorporates the past, in the form of myths and folktales, in his plays as a device. Staging the cultural past of the nation is in view of historicizing the political present. The critical or subversive glimpse of the past is a means to understand the contemporary present. From this perspective, myths and folktales have a flexible structure of meanings that are worth exploring. He makes them a structural device to reconstruct the past and to establish the difference of his theatre from the conventional ones. Mythic characters embodied with powerful qualities define Indian psyche in the contemporary context through their ethno-symbolic presence re-presented in varied ways to reflect and comment on the contemporary Indian subjectivity. Folktales constitute another set of fictional narratives alluding to the world of humans. In other words, the ubiquity of the past in the theatre of a new nation becomes an impacting agency in the hybridization of thought for which Karnad has a conscious predilection. This explains his mythopoeic approach to contemporizing the Indian problematic. Karnad’s contemporizing and complex seeing views how Indian ground realities, such as gender, caste, class, religion, more than the weight of the Western colonial legacies,
mean more agonies in terms of local / neocolonial oppression and underdevelopment of India.

Karnad’s reclamation of the past makes him identify himself with the culture and language of the people whose subjectivity becomes his thematic focus. Through this reclamation, he adopts an ideological resistance against colonial paradigms of drama so as to restore a renewed Indic cultural identity. This way, his quest for cultural independence which deconstructs and reconstructs the Eurocentric notions of dramaturgy is highly articulated with importance given to the process of Otherization that ushers in hybridization of thought, and this hybridization of thought has deeper affinities with Indic ways of storytelling than with the Western modes of representation. It has more to do with his complex seeing than with imitative pursuits of either the Indic, or the Western tradition. His cultural rootedness and connectedness with the world of Indian myths and stories unveils an ecologist-like synthesis of his complex viewing that propels him to try to reconcile the mundane and the spiritual beyond the realms of religion and religious or traditional orthodoxies. It is important and relevant to keep in mind that the atheism of Karnad is not a barrier to his Indic cultural aestheticism. The synthesis he brings in vis-à-vis alternative aesthetics may revolve around interrogating, and problematizing in terms of subversive aesthetics, and concealing or connoting in terms of answers, but it is a plausible and therapeutic experience, posited against dominant discourses, and it promotes ‘an understanding-culture’ rather than ‘an abstraction-culture’ as stated earlier. Here lies his Indic sense of humanism. Ramaswamy and M.K.Naik are of the view that the technique of bringing together myth and legend to folk narrative style is an arena in which Karnad succeeds significantly, an arena where ‘many others have not’. Ramaswamy adds that Karnad
“creates a bridge between the elite and the folk which has proved to be his strength” (278).

Quoting Dhanavel, Tuta Easwar Rao points out that Karnad’s mythic mode of representation “forms internal part of cultural consciousness of the land with multiple meanings” and such mythic representations suggest that Karnad “believes in the Jungian collective racial consciousness”, and this justifies his recourse to the past for source materials. His recourse is to the fragments and not to the entirety of myths and fables. He uses the fragments artistically to the extent that they suit and serve his imaginative and dramaturgic purpose, namely to convey “hushed truths vis-à-vis modern man’s anguish and dilemmas” (84). His contribution to postcolonial Indian theatre, retrieval of tradition, contemporaneous critical realism, feminine psyche, and subaltern aesthetics has been stupendous. His understanding of contemporary human predicaments -- human dilemmas, existential angsts, and consequences of the conflicts between tradition and modernity, his critique of the colonization of the mind done by neo-colonial local elite forces controlling the destiny of innocent and ordinary people, and his hybridization of thought that promotes Otherness as a critical idiom, metaphor, and agency of foregrounding and celebrating subalternity, all these make him a fine cultural aesthete, an Indian Renaissance man with modernist ethos. The safe distance he maintains in his figural realism from personal ideological preferences shapes his poetic view of life with fine touches of objectivity, secular in nature, authentic in perception, and appealing to thinking minds. His creative cross-cultural aestheticism lies in problematizing than offering solutions to contemporary issues. A balanced measure of subversion guided by a profound sense of neutrality shapes his complex viewing of contemporary human predicaments. The fusion he ensures between the specificity of culture and context and the connotation of meaning that transcends time and context is
figural. His dramaturgy blends well the spatiality of culture, history, context, text and semiotics and the a-temporality of semantics problematizing one single-window type of viewing and implying certain multidimensional synchronization of thought. While commenting on the evolution of the creativity of Karnad, Vanashree Tripathi observes:

In Girish Karnad, we discover the creative urgencies of a highly complex postcolonial intellectual temper endeavouring to come to terms with its cultural legacy, muddled up in several versions and misinterpretations. Karnad’s formidable erudition dedicated to the construction of an Indian theatre in the contemporary times springs from a desire to reflect the collective aspirations of innumerable generations, and give our relationship to art and culture an overall orientation. (7-8)

Karnad’s idea of India as a nation of hybridity in terms of language, culture, religion, caste, ethnicity, thought-paradigms, and values gets well integrated through connotations within the structurality of his dramaturgy. This integration is an artistic epiphany with myriad portrayals, characterization, dialogicity, intertextuality, and polyphonic voices. In all these artistic ventures, Karnad’s perception of modernist ethos which transcend particularities of religion, propagandist ideology, and one particular school of thought embraces a worldview that celebrates a fine sense of hybrid cultural aestheticism that has a preferential option for the cause of subalterns on humanitarian grounds and compassionate worldviews. As Krishna Singh elucidates, Karnad’s deep-rooted humanism allows him to give voice to the silenced majority through his plays. The plays of Karnad abound with subalterns especially women and lower caste people subjected since ancient time to patriarchy or upper hierarchy of Indian society. Karnad has not only comments on their subalternity but also poetically empowers them so that they can speak, shift their position from “margin to the mainstream”. Most of his plays
amply foreground and celebrate the idea of subalternity. Devayani, Sharmishtha and Chitralekha in *Yayati*, Kapila and Padmini in *Hayavadana*, Rani and Kurudavva in *Naga-Mandala*, subaltern community affiliated characters in *Tale-Danda*, tribals like Nitilai and Vishakha in *The Fire and the Rain*, Mahout in *Bali: The Sacrifice*, Chandrawati in *Flowers*, Malini in *Broken Images* and Rahabai in *Wedding Album* “display subalternity of the class they represent” (2). Karnad as a cultural connoisseur makes honest attempts to provide them their due space so that they could defy traditional hegemonic hierarchies prevalent in Indian society. These reflections give a synergic idea of how Karnad’s hybrid cultural aestheticism interpolated in his plays captures, as Rupakee Burke notes, “the pulse of the socio-cultural-historical-political facets of India and Indian life” (105) with a refined sense of modernist ethos acting as a pendulum between modernism and postmodernism.

Karnad’s predilections for ethno-symbolism, hybridization of thought, and dialogic reasoning that embraces multilayers of meaning-making may be substantiated with reference to some of his plays:

The play, *Yayati*, deals with the existential angst of the modern/postmodern man. As a historicized and contemporized text, the play is an attempt to transmit a new meaning to the traditional tale associated with the text vis-à-vis attachment to life and the need for renunciation of untenable desires in life. The modern sensibilities Karnad brings in through fresh meaning making and multilayers of meaning focus on inevitable and indispensable moral responsibilities associated with human actions. Yayati’s encounters with reality point to the culpability with human actions are intertwined. Puru’s predicament is the predicament of the modern/postmodern man, and Puru’s wife stands for the genuine aspirations a young bride is eligible to have. Though the play is indigenous in its language and techniques, it has traces of a Sartrean play hovering
around one of the existential absurdities and concerns of life. Sartrean kind of existentialism gives more importance to personal choice, freedom, commitment to one’s aspirations, alienation, the absurd, nothingness, and so on. Yayati is portrayed as an existentialist who wants to live his life on his own terms. His personal and egoistic urges overwhelm his concern for and responsibility towards others. His hedonistic pursuits in life make him say: “Women, music, dance, celebrations, and my subjects. I love life” (24). Yayati seems to be an archetype typifying the insatiable human desire.

In Nāga-Mandala, Karnad critiques the hegemonic worldviews perpetuated in the name of patriarchy. The double-standards of moral codes – one for men like Appanna, and another Rani – are untenable within a framework of normal human reasoning articulated by Karnad in and through the feminine psyche of Rani. In the play, the ingredients of new morality vis-à-vis modernist ethos are portrayed through the eyes of Rani. In terms of artistic and ideational poetic affinities, Karnad’s own subjectivity gets merged with that of Rani. As the Shutradhar of the play, the Man, insists on “keeping awakened though out the night” (22), the audience are also moved by the innocence of Rani to form their reasoning over what happens in the play because of patriarchy-induces cruelties. Her innocence is more eloquent than Appanna’s shouting, branding her as a ‘whore’ (33). It sensitizes the audience on why or under which logic she should keep mum and be a faithful wife when man go scot-free vis-à-vis conjugal loyalty. The world of animals, snake for instance, brought into the texture of the play, prompts readers to see the tenability and relationality of comparability of relationships between the animal kingdom and the world of human beings. Karnad’s mode of historicizing and complex seeing seems to challenge the idea of ‘man’ as the crown of creation, as averred in The Bible if it were to mean subservience of women to men. For, that would be a sign of patriarchy suffocating and silencing womanhood, all
the more so in the context of emerging paradigms of new knowledge on women empowerment which vouchsafe women to ‘speak’ and ask many ‘freedoms’ suppressed at the cost of their fair name and sexuality.

In *Hayavadana*, Karnad’s reuse of myths portrays modern man’s anguish and dilemma. By his effective use of the myths, legends, and stories, he interprets the age-old human situation with reference to contemporary experience. The play is a fine illustration of how Karnad grapples with the theme of incompleteness through Padmini’s strong quest for unattainable perfection. The central theme of incompleteness is foreshadowed in the Bhagawatha’s worship. Karnad is seized of the theme of incompleteness and depicts the protagonist, Padmini’s yearning, for completeness and perfection. As K. Narasimhamurthy comments, “*Hayavadana* is a Brechtian kind of play employing native folk theatre strategies to present through a folk tale man’s tragically futile aspiration for perfection” (81). As K.Mankaiarkarasi notes, there is a covert suggestion that women are manifestations of ‘divine energy’ or ‘life force’, and it is they who hold the centre stage. Combining some of the Western techniques with the Indian folk psyche which can accommodate even the device of making inanimate objects animate, Karnad contemporarizes the socio-cultural reality of India. Patriarchal discourses, bordering on parental irresponsibility and conflicts arising out of imposition of chastity on the female only, get deconstructed with Karnad’s artistic positionality almost and ambivalently identical with that of Padmini, the central character in the play, critically negotiating on the lines of Bhabha’s notion of Other-centred third space negotiating encounters hovering around two concepts, namely the rational and the physical and touching on respective individual human psychic circles. Altogether, the play, as Pranav Joshipura comments, is a complex text that “builds on a
complex pattern of human relationships”, indicating “human sympathies against a gradually intensifying clash of personalities” (199).

Repeating another mythical theme in *Bali: The Sacrifice* based on the thirteenth century Kannada epic, *Yashodharacharite*by poet Janna, Karnad weaves the storyline around the King Yashodhara, his Queen Amrutamati, and her adulterous relationship with the king’s Mahout. On the advice of his mother vis-à-vis the ‘sin of adultery’ committed by the Queen, the King initiates the process of expiation performing a symbolic sacrifice of a cock made of flour to please the gods. But the cock comes to life and crows at a time when it is supposed to die. Though the myth was meant to be a caution against the dangers of lust and violence, Karnad makes a shift from the central issue of extreme human desires to conflicts and tensions associated with beliefs and customs. From the point of Karnad, the concept of chastity is a minor issue compared to the main theme of the play, the conflict between beliefs -- Jainism and Hinduism, and the related debate casting ‘an ironic light on the violence endemic in postcolonial India’.

Cultural aestheticism of Karnad has a recourse to history too as illustrated in *Tughlaq, The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, and *Tale-Danda*. Karnad’s play, *Tughlaq*, as Aparna Dharwadker argues, charts the complex textual and cultural ramifications of postcolonial historical fictions. Its narrative represents Indian history as a historical parallel capable of navigating at multiple levels the memory and experience of postcolonial Indian audiences. The dramatist’s historical knowledge shows how the action of Tughlaq sequentially invokes the most powerful modern Indian models of political action, those associated with leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Indira Gandhi. In *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, on the count of another layer of meaning, Tipu’s predicament is the predicament of contemporary Indian subjectivity.
vis-à-vis India’s development paradigms namely whether the Indian citizenry should be saturated with the models of development and progress as they happen in the West, or to stagnate with proclaiming that Indian is the repository of great eternal verities of life, or to blend both and see a multicultural India that would be a role model on certain Indic counts. Karnad seems to imply that Tipu was a great role model in terms of what to get from the West and what to reject, and how to imbibe the Indic. As argued elsewhere in the study, Tale-Dandais a multiperspectival re-reading the history of Basavanna, the social reformer of the 12th century. Drawing our attention to the complexities of the present, the play sensitizes and conscientizes the audience / readers illuminating them on the horrendous consequences of the endemic afflictions endured in India under the impact of religious and caste and class-conscious politics infecting the cultural and spiritual fabric of India’s polity and governance. Commenting on Karnad’s cultural aestheticism in the play, Y. Somalata states:

In this play, Karnad discovers the vital relationship between contemporary society and literature...adept in choosing the dialectical opposites such as tradition and modernity; conservative and reformist; spiritual and physical; ideal and pragmatic; constancy and flux for unfolding a logical sequence in poetic terms...centrifugal and centripetal forces of change and resistance are directed against caste order in Hindu society. (137-138)

On the count of the postcolonial eye of Karnad, his modernist cultural aesthetics vis-à-vis Other-centred subalternization that also takes care of poetic plausibility of inclusivity and compassionate worldviews reflecting the Indic tradition of compassion requires a brief comment here. Karnad, as a theatre-related artist, writer, and critic, stands out as a unique connoisseur of and significant contributor to the idea of subalternization. The poet in him shapes him as an artist focusing on ‘poetry as pity’ but
moulding and expanding it further into drama, drama as ‘an art and act of empathizing’ with the cause of subalterns, particularly the cause of exploited and marginalised women’s subjectivity and empowerment and the subaltern identity / subjectivity of marginalised people, especially the least among the least from low caste or tribal communities. Though a reference has already been made to the main characters who have the courage and wisdom to move from the realm of ‘margin’ to the ‘centre’ elsewhere in the dissertation in a different context, the following instances taken at random from Karnad’s plays illustrate the poetic and figural plausibility, if not fully possible in concrete life-situations, of subalterns having the agency-power for effective communication and articulation.

As stated elsewhere in the dissertation, Devayani, Sharmishtha and Chitralekha in *Yayati*, Kapil and Padmini in *Hayavadana*, Rani and Kurudavva in *Nāga-Mandala*, the socially marginalized people (low caste people) in *Tale-Danda*, tribal women like Nittilai and Vishakha in *The Fire and the Rain*, the Mahout, and even the Queen in a way, in *Bali: The Sacrifice*, Chandrawati in *Flowers*, Malini in *Broken Images*, and Rahabai in *Wedding Album* may be seen as subalterns in the Karnadian hybridized sense of the term. Devayani endures humiliation to the extent that she becomes insane at the end due to a self-serving king. Sharmishtha is a victim of the self-gratification of the king. Swarnalata is deserted because of her husband’s unfounded suspicion. But, Chitralekha is Karnad’s overarching of a new woman. She challenges not only Yayati but also her unheroic husband representing the culture of conformism and inaction. All these women are ‘embittered’, as Aparna Dharwadker remarks, in life by virtue of the whimsical fancies of men. Padmini, unlike Rani, is bold enough to defy the conjugal law society has imposed, and to move forward to fulfill her quest for completeness, and she could find it beyond her marriage. Devadatta feels cuckolded but her fatal attraction
towards Kapila never ceases even after marriage to Devadatta. Karnad goes to the extent ambivalently justifying the moves of Padmini in the name of sexual freedom, if that helps realizing a woman to blossom to perfection. Kapila, though a low caste man, is good enough for Padmini to make feel that he would fit into her scheme of achieving completeness she is desperately seeking. Rani and Kurudavva are more generic archetypes vis-à-vis the mental agony they undergo by virtue of born as women in the Indian context of male-gendered patriarchy. In the core of their conscience, they know that they innocent and conjugally loyal. The Naga ordeal in the case of Rani turns out to be a blessing in disguise as the Naga becomes of a contrapuntal metaphor for her ultimate liberation. In all these instances, Karnad sees the arrogating and subjugating tendencies of men who have the final say in terms of gender justice. Hailing from two different socio-cultural backgrounds, both Nittilai and Vishakha contrasting examples of subalternity. Vishakha suffers more as a type being ‘sick of silence’ (141) as she states in the play but Nittilai is a supreme example of courage to perform certain acts of love that take her to the realm of noble souls despite her lowly tribal background.

In Karnad dramaturgy, techniques of canonical counter-discourse and intertextuality have important roles in terms of subaltern Otherization and polyphony in the Bakhtinian sense. When mediated through the critical idioms of Spivak, Karnad goes one step further than Spivak to connote the possibility that subalterns, especially marginalized and battered women can ‘speak’ and assert. The conflict between tradition and modernity, between centre and margin may be pervasive but poetic plausibility does imply a real prospect. The open-ended endings in some of the plays of Karnad give scope such reasoning in terms of dialogicity and hybridity.

Karnad’s ethno-symbolization and cultural aestheticism educate the audience / readers that vis-à-vis the notion of ‘traditional Indian theatre’, both the classical
Sanskrit theatre and the regional folk forms have a fine blending with modernity of thought through mythopoeia. The classical is associated with the more refined and sophisticated tradition that is linked to urban life and folk as less privileged with rural life. Hence, the terms, ‘classical and folk’ compliment and are contrapuntal, and they are Karnad’s modes of cultural transmission and preservation. Karnad defends his stand in exploring the rich sources of Indian folk traditions. His interest is not in the sheer imitation of the form of these indigenous traditions, but in an exploration of the human concerns through traditional techniques. He notes in an interview to Chaman Ahuja:

The basic thing, I discovered, is that the subject of any play has to be the human spirit. Using folk as a mere aesthetic device —with no further exploration of what it is to be human — does not attract me. It is not the question of garnishing the plays with music, colour and dance... Of course, folk forms do have certain intrinsic advantages. The folklorist framework subverts classical notions about our holy cows; through tongue-in-the cheek irony, folk tales make fun of rulers, priests, even gods — without offending even the puritans (The Tribune 21 March 1999).

Finally, a note on Karnad’s use of motifs, imagery, ritual elements, shape-shifting, bringing in the divine and human figures, aspects, and elements which are part of his ethno-symbolization would be an appropriate conclusion to this chapter as the motifs and the symbols he ingrains with the texture of his plays, coming from a variety of sources and forms and as part of visual language, not only enhance the quality of themes and meanings connoted but also collectively add value to the stature of Karnad as a cultural aesthete, to his rendition of ethno-symbolism. Instead of going in detail to all the plays studied for this dissertation, this researcher opts for considering, in regard
to Karnad’s symbolization, a few symbolically significant plays, with cross-references
to other plays.

The visual language and symbols used in the play, *Tughlaq*, include symbols
like the Game of Chess, Aziz and Aazam, Muhammad the Mad, Prayer, Python,
Daulatabad, and the Rose Garden. The Game of Chess Tughlaq is good at stands for
both the manipulations he is capable of as ruler, and by extension, for politics as the
locus of conflicts which is one of the themes in the play. Gradual erosion of ethical
norms in politics and bureaucracy vis-à-vis governance is symbolized and represented
in the personalities of Aziz and Aazam. Their lack of probity in private and public life
and their intense egoistic pursuits is an anathema sit of the kingdom they are associated
with. They look for every chance to exploit the liberal policies of the ruler known for
impartiality and noble-heartedness. Aziz has no qualms about being dishonest and
corrupt. His indulgence in corruption and criminalization of politics makes him utter
these words to Aazam:

My dear fellow, that’s where our future is politics! It’s a beautiful world of
wealth, success, position, power, and yet it’s full of brainless people, people
with not an idea in their head. (50)

In an ambience of manipulative politics, prayer time marks the mindset of conspiracy
for executing assassinations. Prayer is seen as an instrument of convenient and
manipulative politics, politics of vengeance. Prayer time in the Sultanate becomes
moments of mockery of true devotion and piety. Both banning prayer and reintroducing
it are acts of egoistic convenience and they have little to do with religion or spirituality.
The long and wide passage of the royal fort is seen as if it were a coiled python with
enormous belly prowling hungry for its victims. The dramatist’s imagination extends
this symbol to the crookedness and cunningness of Tughlaq evident in his attempts to
crush dissidence or rebellion. Tughlaq’s enemies roam around like vultures with their sharp eyes to identify their victims. Tughlaq’s madness evident in his revengefulness is also related to the act of prying vultures are capable of. Daulatabad, the new capital city, supposed to be a city symbolizing religious harmony and Hindu-Muslim unity is seen as a city of political catastrophe, at least in terms of the rash decisions Tughlaq makes during his rule.

More ironically and tragically, the rose garden in the royal fort, of which Tughlaq is so fond of by virtue of the inspirations he derived from the poems of Sheik Sadi of Persia, is turned into a clandestine site for storing counterfeit coins minted in the kingdom. When confronted, though gently, by his step-mother, Tughlaq says:

Now I don’t need a rose garden, I built it because I wanted to make for myself an image of Sadi’s poems. I wanted every rose in it to be a poem. I wanted every thorn in it to prick and quicken the senses. But don’t need these airy trappings now; a funeral has no need for a separate symbol. (63-64)

Karnad can be criticized for the directness with which he makes his central characters speak about their mental states, positions, and attitudes. But, when one knows that art can intervene contemporaneously with a prophetic voice historicizing and commenting on the politics of today, it is inevitable and important for the audience and readers to see the tragic irony of the ambience in which they live. The play abounds with a number of juxtaposed symbolic episodes and motifs which help readers compare and contrast antiquity with the predicaments of the present-day visualized in mindless and ruthless acts of corruption, religious and moral hypocrisy, treachery, vengeance, and murder. Humour and irony apart, as U.R. Ananthamurthy puts it, in his Introduction to the play, “the irony is deeply tragic” (145). Symbolization in the play connotes abundantly by implication that a country like India professing democracy and
dharma-savvy politics and administration cannot afford to have leaders who are split-
personalities, double-speaks, and who pawn the people in order to ensure that they
alone matter as if what would happen to the nation were not their business or concern.
By way of verbal symbolism, Karnad also hints that mere fundamentalist approaches to
solving the problems of the masses will only encourage more and more presences of
cultural chauvinism, a euphemism for ghetto nationalism and a dangerous idea, and
aggravate social tensions already aplenty in the country. The alienation Tughlaq had to
endure can remind readers the sense of alienation the people of India endure against the
mind and soul-disturbing onslaught political debauchery perpetuates in the name of
democracy. Karnad’s portrayal of Tughlaq is such that the whole play becomes a motif
cum metaphor for the contemporary Indian problematic, a point of focus of this
dissertation, subtly implying that the social engineering India requires lies in its
multicultural vision and ethos. This is a theme Karnad comes back with greater
criticality in Tale-Danda, much later after writing Tughlaq.

Karnad’s myth-making and his Indic tradition of storytelling, as
DolorsCollellmir elucidates in her essay, “Mythical Structure in Girish Karnad’s Nāga-
Mandala”, shows that mythopoeic and mythopoetic narrative levels interspersed with
other stories, evident in the mythic structure of the play, Nāga-Mandala can “lead to
an exemplification of his vision of theatre as a unifying, total experience” (1). To
Karnad’s postcolonial eye and mind deeply conscious of ethno-symbolism and cultural
aesthetics, the whole gamut of myth itself is a metaphor for continuity in terms of
comparison and contrast, juxtapositions, contrapuntal, relational, contesting and
inclusive writing, reading, and hermeneutics. On other counts of symbolization, in the
plays, Nāga-Mandala and Hayavadana, “there are empty court yards, locked houses
and deserted temples and palaces working as symbols… Rani, the central character in
the play, *Nāga-Mandala*, is locked in a house where nobody lives. The temple in *Hayavadana* and the house in *Nāga-Mandala*, both wear a deserted look symbolizing the vacuum in the life of the major character -- Padmini and Rani respectively” (Lakhwinder Singh Gill 3). Commenting on the mythopoeic cultural environment in the play, *Nāga-Mandala*, R.Chanana states:

Naga Mandala should be read placing it in the South Indian neo-colonial cultural environments. First, the treatment of Naga lore is in the dramatic space. Second, the treatment of Naga lore is as the extension of Naga performance culture of Kerala folk lore. In folk discourse words are used as signs of culture. In that sense Naga the protagonist of Naga Mandala is presented as a cultural sign. Naga represents the animal world that is capable to feel human emotions. Commonly Naga is only a snake but he is appeared as a figure in the performative space, the king cobra. Naga in the play is a supernatural being who has special power to transform. This mysterious quality of Naga makes the play entirely beautiful. In Naga Mandala belief and reason are well combined. (893)

Karnad’s *Hayavadana* as “a play of cultural symbol” (Chanana 892), is a fine instantiation of Karnad’s indebtedness to the Indian culture of folk theatre, wherein he uses the Brechtian kind of narration and complex viewing by bringing in the Bhagawatha as the narrative figure who gives timely and relevant interpretation of the action happening in the play, and by ingenuously employing the folk device of transposed dark masks. These conventional and cultural elements are part of Karnad’s ethno-symbolization engineered by his dramaturgy and mediated through the contemporary Indian problematic.

Moulding the play, *The Fire and the Rain*, as a drama of sacrifice and expiation, Karnad explores ruptured and tangled human relationships vis-à-vis gaps between ideal
symbolization and brutal ground realities. The play revolving around the *Yagna*—sacrifice (fire-sacrifice), dramatizes how Paravasu, vitiates and distorts the very goal of the sacrifice, namely to safeguard humanity from the dangers of misusing divine powers acquired through yogic practices and Vedic rituals, from greed, lust, molestation and such other forms self-indulgence and aggrandizements. In the context of Vedic rituals, the playwright constructs an autumnal story of dichotomies noticed in human behaviour leaning towards profaning spiritual penances and arrogating spiritual powers for satisfying lust which results in moral corruption. In terms of symbolization and historicizing, the world of Hindu antiquity comes alive exposing the levels of hypocrisy the Brahminical priestly class can indulge in, the extremes to which men of Vedic knowledge and wisdom acquired by spiritual penances can go in terms of misapplication of divine powers endowed with them, and the orgy of evil and violence they can perpetuate despite the fact they are all men particular to perform rituals. By inventing the parallel story of Aravasu's relationship with Nittilai, the tribal girl, Karnad extends the moral significance of cultural symbolization with reference to personalities capable of exuding positive energies (Eros) against negatives (Thanatos), capable of showcasing the difference between nature and culture, between a life of discipline and sacrifice and that of instinctual emotions and impulses. The tangled relationships in the intertextual storyline in the play also serve as counterpoints against self-centred Brahminical ways and other forms of ego and ruthlessness. Karnad seems also to connote that *shudras*, the lowly characters represented by Nittilai, a tribal woman, are better equipped by natural wisdom to represent the ideals of love, reconciliation, compassion, freshness and hope. The title of the play embracing two juxtaposed terms, ‘fire and rain’, has a cultural connotation that evil inherent in human nature cannot be destroyed unless and until human beings are in control of their life by
self-discipline. The two terms symbolize the irony of tension between nature and culture. They are as the moral compass of the play. The mingling of tears and rain at the end of the play implies the plausibility that, though it is a perennial struggle, it is possible, there is a way out, to tame human emotions and transcend the constrictions caused by self-centred life-styles. The play stands for a moral crusade for discerning and discovering the beauty of eternal verities of life ingrained in the Indic rasa-aesthetics of the quest for ‘Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram’ and the triumph of ideal hope that truth will ultimately prevail.