Chapter One

Introduction:

Modernity, Tradition, and Thought in the Plays of Girish Karnad

"I am trying to create a tradition of my own."

- Girish Karnad in an Interview to Chaman Ahuja (The Tribune 21 March 1999)

Girish Karnad (1938 - ), reckoned as one of India’s foremost modern playwrights, is a multifaceted personality with a fine sense of humanism. Known primarily for his work in theatre -- fourteen plays till date --, he is much more than a playwright. A poet, actor, film, television, and theatre director, translator and critic, Karnad wears all these hats with equal competence. He is one of the most awarded and appreciated creative writers that independent India has produced. He is a playwright with a unique voice. His uniqueness lies in his preferential and conscious option to move away from trodden paths, preferring to go to the Indic roots of theatre so as to retrace the lost paths and comment on the contemporaneous present. If one looks deeper into the nitty-gritty of his plays, one finds how his plays foreground the state of the human mind, seized by a kind of restiveness in the midst of conflicts which mark the shaking of values which were considered eternal, possessing absolute meaning, truth, and wisdom, a restiveness that hovers around problematizing, dismantling and deconstructing.

Karnad’s contribution to the evolution of Indian theatre through the interface of modernity and tradition is enormous and significant. This interface revolves around
Karnad’s choice and predilection for revisiting and contemporizing Indian myths and history which facilitates an ambience for ‘complex seeing’, to use a book title phrase of Bertolt Brecht, one of the finest theatre practitioners of the 20th century, of contemporary issues, reflecting multi-perspectival dimensions and plurisignifying connotations. The modern thought he ingrains in his plays reflects his deep insights into the human psyche vis-à-vis contemporary Indian subjectivity. The newness of Karnad’s art-emotion lies in his capacity for ‘complex seeing’ of the existential angst of the contemporary Indian problematic, in his genius to familiarize the audience / readers with certain new critical idioms such as ‘intertextuality’, ‘hybridity’, ‘dialogicity’, ‘Otherness’, and ‘subalternity’, and in his showcasing the literary word and the world as ‘temporal categories and agencies’ for promoting liberal humanism. Karnad himself admits in one of his ‘Introduction’ to *Three Plays: Nāga-Mandala, Hayavadana, and Tughlaq*, how Brecht’s influence has gone “some way in making me realize what could be done with the design of traditional theatre” (14). Karnad’s play, *Tughlaq* may be referred here as an instantiation. As Shyam Babu remarks, the idea of “multiple consciousnesses” in Karnad’s *Tughlaq* can be read in the light of Brechtian ‘complex seeing’ “since the play proposes to signify not only a medieval sultan Muhammad bin-Tughlaq in a linear narrative but at the same time the disillusioned government of India envisaged after its political independence and the prevailing political anarchy, in the subversive dramatic technique very graphically” (1). The multilayers of meaning he connotes in and through artistic dramatic endeavours vis-à-vis contemporary themes and issues inspire readers and critics to see him as a cultural aesthete, a “culture-smith”, as Vanashree Tripathi compliments, “with uncanny ability to awaken the intelligentsia in the contemporary world from cultural amnesia” (8). The interface of tradition with modern thought he displays in his dramaturgy provides not only ample space for
negotiation of meanings for contemporary times but also showcases his affinities with the rasa-aesthetics of the ‘theatre of roots’.

In the light of these observations, this researcher, inclined to apply certain theoretical framework, found Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea of ‘dialogism’, Bertolt Brecht’s notion of ‘complex seeing’, Homi K. Bhabha’s approach to ‘negotiation of meanings’, and Gayatri C. Spivak’s focus on the subalternization of the feminine suitable to posit, substantiate, and defend Karnad’s cultural hybridization of thought vis-à-vis the interface of tradition with modern thought in his plays. She is of the view that the Brechtian kind of ‘complex seeing’ Karnad presents in his plays is a mine of modern thought hovering around multiperspectival dimensions facilitating and calling for dialogic readings of his plays, in the Bakhtinian sense of ‘internal social dialogism of novelistic discourse’, ushering in the possibility of ‘negotiation of meanings’ in the ways Homi K. Bhabha suggest, with a thrust towards foregrounding Spivakian kind of subalternization of the subjectivity of the marginalized people, especially ‘the self-authenticating’ subjectivity of women, in the Indian contemporary context.

To elaborate, Karnad’s approach to modernity of tradition and thought may be understood better when readers view his playwriting as a hybrid cultural reflection of his decolonizing mind. His modes of decolonizing the contemporary Indian drama, liberating it from the impact of colonial models, and yet rooting it in the Indic tradition of storytelling, project modernity, as T.P. Ashok, Kannada writer and critic, argues, in a theatre review, with reference to a seminar organised on ‘Karnad’s Plays’, in *The Hindu*, as “a multi-layered process” that transcends the periodicity of time. Subscribing to such a view, Vijaya Mehta, a well-known theatre director, adds in the same review that Karnad’s mind is “a modern mind reflecting on contemporary issues, but with a
thorough sense of ancient culture”. Speaking on the same wavelength, Sa. Shettar, another noted Kannada artist, states in the same review, with reference to the plays of Karnad, that “all history is contemporary,” and insists that “it is time we stopped looking at plays as historical, or as folk. Instead, we need to widen the ambit of our understanding of the modern”. The modern ways with which Karnad projects his women characters may be taken up here for a brief comment by way of reiterating how his decolonizing mind works in his plays. Women characters, presented in different plays, converge, as K.S.Vimala, an activist familiar with Karnad’s plays, comments and argues in the same review, to connote that “the woman in Karnad is a primordial being”, standing outside the framework of “the judgmental”, breaking stereotypes, and yet “fraught with intense moral dilemmas” which simultaneously expose how “men are trapped in the patriarchy that they play so well all along” as if “sexual authority were their male prerogative”. In Karnad’s artistic view, “women”, as Ashadevi, another critic sums up in the same review, “are models of self-authentication, and rarely seek validation from men” (Theatre Review: “Text to Stage” 1-2).

In view of understanding how Karnad responds to ideological questions related to literary modernism, it is relevant to refer to the idea of modernism in Kannada literature vis-à-vis the Navya tradition. The idea of literary modernism in Kannada literature is better understood in the light of the contribution of writers like Gopalakrishna Adiga, U.R. Ananthamurthy, P. Lankesh, Poornachandra Tejaswi, B.C. Ramachandra Sharma, Devanoora Mahadeva, and Alanahalli Srikrishna. These writers and critics tried to explore in their works and critical considerations the nature, culture, and effects of modernism creeping into the literary fabric of Kannada literature. Often referred to as Navya writers, their works are sites for divergent and crisscrossing
approaches to modernism accelerated towards deciphering the contemporary Indian society at cross roads and its pros and cons. They viewed modernism, more or less, as a tool to foreground socialist and humanist goals. Critiquing certain social blemishes such as Casteism and male-gendered hegemonic hierarchies, these writers became dissenters and used modernism as a weapon to fight for higher causes of equality and humanity.

It is also important, at this juncture, to know that modernism as it emerged in Kannada literature, inspired writers like Karnad, U.R. Ananthamurthy and others to look at nation and the notion of individual and collective identity from the point of view syncretism which, as H.S. Komalesha remarks, “believes in the possibility of psychic regeneration through cultural catastrophe” (2). This ushered in writing from the margins, as in the case of Govindaiah and DevanooraMahadeva, so as to empower the downtrodden, posing ‘an implicit challenge to the existing hierarchy’. Thus, socialistic values became part of syncretic modernism, and the boundaries of modernism expanded with Otherized ‘positionalities’ ushering in zones of hybridity with enough space for liminality facilitating a transition from the position of binaries. To relate it with the critical idioms of Bhabha, ‘inclusivity’, ‘hybridity’, and ‘Other point of view’ became prominent values. In parenthesis, a browsing of Chapter Two of the Dissertation of M. Giriraj, titled “Women’s Writing: Creating a Space for Themselves” (2011), prompts this researcher to note that there is a comment and argument in the thesis, worth pondering over, that

The 'Navya' or the modernist movement, of the late sixties in Kannada too was highly patriarchal... Male writers moulded language, imagery and presentation to suit their expression and marginalized the social questions raised by various
writers, including women. ... Modernism politically celebrated liberal democracy.... but stood for 'high culture' as proposed by Eliot, Pound, and Leavis. ... Modernism also highlighted the individualistic experience of the middle-class male and the aspirations and ideologies of the Indian educated middle class. (37-38)

Giriraj also notes how the situation changed after the 1980s, how “various literary movements like the Bandaya (the Rebel), Dalita (the Oppressed), YuvaKavita, JanwadiKavita began to emerge”, ... how the oppressed groups like women and Muslims started writing, and how questions of patriarchies and gender discrimination began to be prominently raised in women's poetry and started deviating from the mainstream after Navya and NayiKavitha” (39).

Karnad’s approach to modernism has to be located against this backdrop. As one of the playwrights who heralded syncretic modernism in Indian theatre, Karnad’s mythification of the contemporary Indian subjectivity, as discussed in other chapters of the present study, represents a synthesis of cultures hyphenated with Indic ethno-symbolism that defines his dramturgy. 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 synergic complexity revealed in the course of his negotiation with ideological spaces. The synergic blending his decolonizing mind is fine with is routed, as noted above, through ‘complex seeing’ which this researcher is fascinated with and which she has endeavoured to decode in the light of the critical idioms noted above.

Karnad’s contribution to literary aesthetics and sensibilities lies in his approach to and affinities with modernity of thought which resonates with the contemporary existential angst. Modernism, for Karnad, is 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. There is little dispute regarding how Karnad, as Krishna Singh comments, integrates “thematic contents, use of Indian myths, legends, history, folk tales and contemporary issues, characters rooted in cultural soil of India, Indianised English and use of folk theatre conventions” as instruments “to advance the process of decolonizing the stage” (2). To artists like Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulker, Habib Tanvir, and Mudrarakshasa and directors like B.V. Karanth, Ratan Thiyam, 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. 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 his 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.

In the light of these observations, the thesis statement of this study may be put forth as follows: This study is an exploration into ‘the ingredients of Karnad’s interfacing of the modernity of thought with the modernity of tradition in the course of his aestheticization of the contemporary Indian problematic’. While positing that Karnad’s return to ‘the theatre of the roots’ vis-à-vis his reuse of myth and history shapes his dynamic complex viewing of the contemporary Indian subjectivity, the study applies ‘a broad framework of theoretical intertextualities’, as noted above, and dwells at length to discern how the playwright transforms his complex viewing into aesthetic experiences in terms of worldviews which embrace ‘the Other point of view’. In the process, the study also indicates the impact of varied influences upon Karnad’s literary sensibilities which shape his complex viewing of the Indian problematic and make him a cultural connoisseur of contemporary India.

Karnad’s portrayal of the interface between tradition and modernity has a terrific relevance to modern and postmodern times. The existential angst of the modern
and postmodern generation in the Indian context is so complex that they cannot be resolved by conventional standards and ethics, or by univocal, or binary propositions. As a playwright committed to the theatre of roots, Karnad has his own sense of the past that radiates upon the contemporaneous present that is inclined to resist colonization of the mind and victimization of the people, especially women and people socially marginalized. As a conscious humanist-artist, he shapes his dramaturgy towards foregrounding subaltern identities, especially female subjectivity, and celebrating the Other point of views that stand in contrast to stances which represent patriarchy and hegemonic voices. His poetic sense of empathy propels him to feel one with victims whose own subaltern subjectivity is projected as an agency of liberation. In this empathizing projection, part of his quest for discovering a dramatic tradition of his own, Karnad identifies himself as part of the agency principle, which predominantly revolves around his foregrounding the feminine subaltern subjectivity that confronts instances of hegemonic patriarchy and other exploitative forces, and around his sympathetic portrayal of the heroism of reformist leaders of Indian history, leaders like Tughlaq, Tipu Sultan, and Basavanna, in spite of their failed attempts to reform the society of their times, vis-à-vis contemporizing their relevance to the present times.

His detractors may brand him as one who does not ‘confront reality’, as one whose characters are broadly constructed as “representations of their class or ideology”. But, to his admirers like U.R. Ananthamurthy, one of the contemporaries of Karnad, known for his own ‘critical insiderism’, and Mahesh Dattani, another playwright with fine contemporary insights, Karnad’s greatness lies in his “historic vision” that has “a contemporary voice”, as Dattani would say, and in the fact that Karnad acts like “a poet of drama”, as U.R. Ananthamurthy, would complement (quoted by S. Kalidas in India
As 'a poet of drama', Karnad foregrounds and celebrates a worldview that embraces a critiquing compassionate understanding of life in the midst of contemporary angst and that inspires him to artistically empathize with victims of the contemporary Indian problematics such as patriarchy, religious and caste orthodoxies, and systemic ogres of hegemony, exploitation, oppression, marginalization, and exclusion. In all these endeavours, his cultural interventionism routed through metaphoric parabolism is more prominent than his realistic portrayals.

His perception of modernity tempered by and with tradition is better understood when one views it through the rapid cultural changes happening due to globalization, media and information technologies which have their impact upon his approach towards problematizing Indian subjectivity. The Indian subjectivity he presents revolves around his critiquing of conventional hegemonic worldviews, blind and superstitious beliefs, traditions and practices and around projecting the Other point of views through subalternization which may be construed as postcolonial ways of measuring realities and foregrounding alternative aesthetics. The fine balance he maintains between language and reality wrought through a number of intertextualities, intellect and emotion, dialogic arrangement and intricacies of human relationships vis-à-vis inner conflict among various characters, mythification and multilayers of subtle but suggestive meanings hovering around resolution and dissolution of conflicts, all placed well within his dramaturgy, is appealing to the contemporary audience and readers. It is within this fine balance, wherein ‘temporalization’ of the literary word and the world is a constant feature, that he weaves the modernity of tradition and thought vis-à-vis writing the postcolonial present of contemporary India.
Whether Karnad is a writer committed to one particular strand of modernism, or mere postcolonial theoretical framework is a moot point. The researcher, in the light of her readings of the writings of authors like Raymond Williams and a few select Indian Renaissance thinkers, is, more or less, aware of the historiography of modernism, its various strands and trends both in the Western and the Indian literary evolution, and the difficulties involved in defining modernism and modernity. In the course of briefly detailing the polemics and heterogeneous insights associated with modernism, modernity, and postcolonial enlightenment, the researcher, in this study, also looks into the prospect and plausibility of viewing Karnad as ‘a postcolonial modernist playwright’. This has been done, as mentioned earlier, in the light of the hermeneutical framework available in critical theories and notions propounded by thinkers and critics like Bakhtin, Brecht, Bhabha and Spivak. Cross-references, just to the extent relevant and necessary, to other modernist thinkers like Jean Paul Sartre, T.S. Eliot, Emmanuel Levinas, Edward Said, Julia Kristeva, and Stephen Greenblatt are also made. There is no intention of overloading the study with theoretical framework. Cross-references are inevitable because of interconnectedness of ideas, notions, theories, and critical discourses. The researcher wishes to make clear here that her reading on these thinkers and critics are limited to what extent Karnad was influenced, or to the extent how their theoretical frameworks can be applied vis-à-vis critical considerations of his plays. This researcher is of the view that Karnad’s worldview cannot be restricted to the limits of postcolonialism, or postcoloniality, or to the influence of any one particular thinker or critic alone. It is the confluence of varied influences that shapes his dramaturgy, his perception of contemporary realities and his worldview.

To elaborate further, this exploration revolves around the researcher’s stance that Karnad’s dramaturgy uses the literary word as “a temporal agency” (303), to use the
phrase of Pheng Cheah, impacting the world with an existential angst through manifold intertextualities intertwined in his plays with Indic touches. The Indic touches he ingrains in his dramaturgy are mediated through ‘the art of improvisation’ vis-à-vis his preference for the reuse of mythology, epics, folklore, and history. This preference for improvisation is not an act of distortion of tradition, ‘distorting Indian culture’, as his critics would aver. It is Karnad’s way of retrieving the past in the course of viewing the contemporary Indian problematic. It is his way of defining the nation as a notion within the parametres of hermeneutical interstiality hybridity ushers in, and the Dionysian dynamics of thought mythic tradition accommodates. It is more focused on subverting the original myth, epic, or folklore, and re-visiting history, a subversion that gives him space for cross-fertilization of thought and for foregrounding diachronic-synchronic worldviews which are multivocal and plurisignifying vis-à-vis the existential angst and ground realities. The existential angst Karnad coils traverses through certain modernist ethos which transcend the boundaries of religion, faith, race, ethnicity and conventional beliefs and practices. Such traversing is appealing to all, especially the modern and postmodern generation of readers / the audience. This explains, besides the reasons for the popularity of his plays in and outside India, why Karnad is seen as ‘a Renaissance man’ and ‘cultural connoisseur’.

As this study concentrates on the interface of tradition with modern thought and as the literary and cultural influences upon Karnad come from both the Western and Indian experiences of modernism, it is relevant to start with the concept of ‘Modernism’ in general, and the evolution of ‘Modernism in Indian Drama’ in particular. In this regard, the researcher assumes that literary modernism was a movement that foregrounded modernity as a hybrid cultural matrix wherein the mythopoeic approach to tradition and complex seeing of the contemporary problematic
were interfaced in such a way that dialogic reasoning and negotiation of meanings became prime values in the course of artistic quest for solutions to human problems. The term, ‘modernism’ as such, is a problematic and difficult one to define. Even as a movement, it does not convey a singular or consolidated sense or meaning. In his book, *Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (Radical Thinkers), published posthumously in 1989, Raymond Williams (1921–1988), who was for many years Professor of Drama at the University of Cambridge, addresses the issues intertwined with ‘the problem of modernism’. He rejects stereotypes and simplifications and is preoccupied with “the ambivalent relationship between revolutionary socialist politics and the artistic avant-garde” (23). Assessing modernism’s strengths and grey areas from a Marxist point of view, he ‘shifts the framework of discussion from merely formal analysis of artistic techniques to one which grounds these cultural expressions in particular social formations’. His musings, like those of Antonio Gramsci, help enlarge our understanding of the political complexities of culture, and avoids postmodernist’s trap of new conformism.

If the beginning of the 20th century were to be taken as a convenient starting point, then one can say that modernism, as a movement, as a Wikipedia website states, spanned “the first half of the twentieth century in the Western epistemology and aesthetics”. “Make it new”, that was “the word” from Ezra Pound, one of the pioneers of the 20th century modernism, to his colleagues, implying the possibility and plausibility of producing many experimental and avant-garde styles within the ambit of modernism. Artistically speaking, the urge was towards modernist aesthetics with “the goal of accomplishing something which had never been done before”. This urge meant that the move was aimed at going beyond the Greek, the Roman, and the Elizabethan or the Jacobean notions of drama. More or less rejecting 19th century traditions and pre-
modernist principles and values which emphasized a sense of order and stability, modernist aesthetics ventured to pronounce “the sense of skepticism and confused identity” (Web. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modernism) against the backdrop of the awareness that collective social values were not that meaningful anymore.

As a literary movement, modernism, as Christopher Keep points out, projected “a radical shift in aesthetic and cultural sensibilities evident in the art and literature of the post-World War One period” (1). The movement, associated with the works of authors like T.S.Eliot, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, Franz Kafka, Proust, and Knut Hamsun, moved away from “the aesthetic burden of the realist novel”, critiqued the nineteenth century bourgeois social order and its worldview, and argued that the ordered, stable and inherently meaningful worldview of the nineteenth century could not, as T.S. Eliot averred, accord with “the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (quoted in Keep 1). John Barth, in his comprehensive and significant essay, “The Literature of Replenishment” (1984), states that “its artistic strategy was the self-conscious overturning of the conventions of bourgeois realism by such tactics and devices of the substitution of ‘a mythical’ for a ‘realistic’ method and the manipulation of conscious parallels between contemporaneity and antiquity” (199). In fact, he borrows and reuses certain terms and phrases already used by Graff, another academician and critic, who has written on modernism and whose source goes back to what T.S.Eliot had already written on James Joyce’s Ulysses. Commenting further, Barth notes the following aspects as significant parts of the variety of literary devices used by modernists, and they are:

the radical disruption of linear flow of narrative; the frustration of conventional expectations concerning unity and coherence of plot and character and the cause
and effect development thereof; the deployment of ironic and ambiguous juxtapositions to call into question the moral and philosophical meaning of literary action; the adoption of a tone of epistemological self-mockery aimed at naive pretensions of bourgeois rationality; the opposition of inward consciousness to rational, public, objective discourse; and an inclination to subjective distortion to point up the evanescence of the social world of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie. (199)

A variety of enlightening depictions of modernist tendencies articulated by writers like James Joyce (Ulysses - 1922), T.S. Eliot (The Wasteland - 1922), Virginia Woolf (To the Light House - 1927), William Faulkner (As I Lay Dying – 1930), Bertolt Brecht (The Seven Deadly Sins – 1933), Djuna Barnes (Nightwood- 1936), Jean Rhys (Good Morning, Midnight- 1939), Arthur Miller (Death of a Salesman – 1949), Ralph Ellison (Invisible Man - 1952), Samuel Beckett (Waiting for Godot- 1953) may be mentioned here. These writers took upon themselves the task of ‘revolutionizing literature’ in an era of technological advances, rise of mass culture, and women’s quest for asserting their identity. Modernists, aware of Freudian psychology, and above all, two devastating world wars, called for radical changes in writing and reading works of art. Monoglossic narratives, straightforward language, and linear construction of plots gave way to fragmentary narratives, multiple points of view, stream of consciousness, dense allusions, and ambiguity, inviting readers to be active in making sense out of them. A Bakhtinian kind of dialogicity became a cultural and aesthetic force. It was a way of seeing the world anew, a ‘complex seeing’, through the prisms of ‘dialogized heteroglassia’, to use the phrases of M.M. Bakhtin. In his best-known and significant essay, “Tradition and Individual Talent” (1919), Eliot was articulate about the continuity of tradition evident in the creativity of the present that could vivify and
modify tradition. His notion of ‘the historical sense’ impacting and impacted by the contemporaneous present was a significant contribution to modernist thought. With drama-as-a-medium, Brecht, as a modern playwright and theoretician, promoted his modernist concerns, marked by experimentations on refining the ‘epic form’ of the drama.

Modernism in Indian drama is better understood in the light of an overview of the historiography of Indian poetics of drama and the evolution of Indian drama. Adequate documentation is already available on the heritage and legacy of Indian drama from the Vedic period till date. In a compact essay on “The Evolution of Modern Indian Theatre” (2012), H.S.Shivaprakash sums up,

Indian theatre has an unbroken history of over two thousand years. Almost contemporaneous with Aristotle's ‘Poetics’, ancient India produced an encyclopedic manual on theatre called, *Natyashastra*, ascribed to Bharata, which became the basis of Indian performance-genres for centuries to come. This means that there was already a rich tradition of performance-practice long before such a work appeared. The aesthetic theory of rasa, briefly but cogently expounded in the *Natyashastra*, influenced Indian aesthetic theory and practice for more than a millennium. (1)

Supposed to have originated from God-Brahma himself, and christened as ‘the fifth Veda’, drama emerged as a way of combining essences taken from the four Vedas -- dance from the *Rig Veda*, song from the *Sama Veda*, mimicry from *Yajur Veda* and passion from *Athar Veda* --- with the objective serving as a means of ‘exploring and communicating the truth of things’. Bharata’s *Natyashastra* is a comprehensive treatise that deals with all aspects of the concept of drama, providing a general framework of
dramatic aesthetics. In Bharata’s theory, drama is viewed as ‘mimicry of the actions and conduct of the people’. It avers that ‘only drama uses the eight basic emotions of love, joy, anger, sadness, pride, fear, aversion, and wonder’, all related to human behaviour.

Shivaprakash further adds:

The first millennium was also characterized by the great harvest of Sanskrit drama by pre-eminent playwrights like Bhasa, Kalidasa, Shudraka, Vishakadatta, Bhavabhuti and Harsha. This body of works compares in its range and power with the dramatic output of other rich theatre traditions of the world such as ancient Greek Theatre and Elizabethan Theatre. The glory of the ancient Sanskrit drama ended with the first millennium. The medieval period witnessed the emergence of regional language literatures which did not produce dramatic works comparable to ancient classics. However, folk and ritualistic theatres flourished throughout this period. Some innovations happened in religious drama, thanks to socio-religious reform Bhakti Movements, which engulfed the subcontinent during the medieval era. (1)

With the arrival of the British in India, Indian drama came under the Western impact, awakening, as K.R.Srinivasalyengar comments, “the dormant, critical impulse in the country to bring Indians face to face with new forms of life and literature, and to open the way for a fruitful cross-fertilization of ideas and forms of expression” (4). Early traces of modernism can be noticed in the ways how Tagore, Aurobindo, and BharathiSarabhi tackled the influences coming from Marxism, Psychoanalysis, Symbolism, and Surrealism in order to safeguard the Indic touches of poetic excellence, thematic variety, technical competence and symbolic and moral significance. Tagore
wrote more than forty plays representing social comedies, allegorical plays, and symbolic plays, spread over more than half a century. His plays encompass all the known categories of five act plays based on the Elizabethan models, one act plays, poignant tragedies and rollicking comedies. Charades, Farces, Satires, Dramatic Dialogue in verse, Lyrical Dramas, Symbolical plays, and plays predominating in metaphysical and contemporary problems form part of his writings. Tagore’s legacies vis-à-vis modernist symbolism and poetic lyricism are rather well-known. As Shivaprakash comments, Tagore ‘enriched the genre of drama as much as he enriched poetry and fiction’. He created his own drama and theatre with no precedents in the East or the West’ despite borrowing elements from both.

Sri Aurobindo’s eleven plays mirror various aspects of drama. They contain enough evidence to show that they remain, first and foremost, stage plays, performative texts. A fine blend of story, incident and situation, connoting an inexhaustible human significance, is the hallmark of his plays. As K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes, Aurobindo’s plays deal with the need for the spiritual evolution of man. His play, The Viziers of Bassora, may be cited here as an instance wherein the playwright reveals a bright future for mankind in terms of the ultimate victory of the forces of good over the forces of evil. Emergence of a new society is possible when man realizes that he has ‘the strength in his nature, wisdom in his mind, and love in his heart’ to achieve higher possibilities towards glorious manhood. T.P. Kailasam’s contribution to the modernity of Indian English and Kannada drama with a blend of characters and stories derived from mythological tradition may also be remembered here for its liveliness and realism. The way he blended puranic themes, tragic helplessness of the hero caught in fate or destiny for instance, with contemporary issues through derivations from ancient literature vis-à-vis evolution of human character was the hallmark of his dramatic
genius. Another playwright known for presenting new realism was Harindranath Chattopadhyaya. His plays revolved around sociological, historical and devotional aspects. His sociological plays were manifestos of new realism, symbolical, didactic and propagandistic while his hagiological plays were plays of conflict between the good and the evil and the assertion of God’s grace. By virtue of the Gandhian influence upon her, Bharati Sarabhi, as a playwright, focused on issues related to untouchability and took up the cause of women in her plays in English. In her play, *The Well of the People* (1943), she revisits traditional Indian womanhood in the light of Gandhian social doctrine. The realistic touches she gives to the portrayal of the modernity of Indian women and their private worlds in the light of her grasp of the Vadantic notion of spirituality can be noticed in her play, *Two Women* (1952). A parallel development with social criticism and realism as major thrust and focus may also be captured in the writings of other playwrights of the time. A.S. Panchapekesha Ayyar, A.C. Krishnaswami, V.V. Srinivasayengar and S. Fyzee Rahamin may be mentioned here. Telugu playwright, Vireshalingam Pantulu, Kannada writer, Adya Rangachary (Sriranga), and the Leftist-intelligentsia supported IPTA (Indian Political Theatre Association) experiments across India may also be mentioned here in this context.

Against this backdrop and with the launch of Kendriya Natak Sangeet Akadmi in 1953, and the National School of Drama set up by Sangeet Natak Akadami in 1959, Indian drama got a new footing in terms of modernist approaches, thematic freshness and explorations and technical innovations. In this context, it is important to note that, as Anjala Maharshi and Jasmine Jaywant have observed, ‘some of the most significant dramaturgy in the post-independent Indian theatre has come from Maharashtra and Bengal’ from where rich literary and theatrical productions emerged ‘acknowledging
and absorbing the essential lessons of not only the Indian tradition but also of even wider pan-Asian theatrical traditions reflecting a continuing quest for new subject matter’. As Kathryn Hansen writes, ‘intellectual interest in folk theatre started in the late fifties and early sixties in India’. Its vitality was widely acknowledged by writers like Nissim Ezekiel already in 1962. As Hansen comments, “The rediscovery of folk theatre had in fact heightened the sense of a rural-urban cultural dichotomy among the educated elite. Urban theatre was perceived more and more as imitative of the West and non-Indian, while the term rural was acquiring the prestigious connotation of indigenous” (80). Playwrights and directors had begun to incorporate folk conventions and ideas into their productions in the early seventies. Heightened awareness of rural forms was feeding back into the creative process, providing new resources for self-expression. The Round Table on ‘the Contemporary Relevance of Traditional Theatre’, organized by the SangeetNatak Akademi in 1971 raised complex questions with regard to the modern values of the folklore tradition and the role of the urban author vis-a-vis an unfamiliar regional genre and the reaction of the urban audience.

A word about the contribution of Asif Currimbhoy may be relevant here. With thirty plays to his credit, written within a span of fifteen years, the literary career of Asif Currimbhoy may be viewed as ‘the first authentic voice in the Indian theatre of post-Independent India’. Substantial in context and content and innovative in theatrical devices, his plays, such as The Tourist Mecca (1959), The Clock (1959), The Doldrummers (1960), The Restaurant (1960), The Dumb Dancer (1961), An Experiment with Truth (1969), The Great Indian Bustard (1970), The Refugee (1971), The Miracle Seed (1973), and The Dissident MLA (1974), used monologues, choruses, chants songs, slide projections, sound effects, mime and anything that catalysed the dramatic purposes. He was a deeply compassionate playwright who gave his characters
room to reveal themselves. But he was ignored in India until the news of the reputation he enjoyed in the United States reached the country. A few other playwrights like Janaki (*The Siege of Chitor*), Lakhan Deb (*Murder at the Prayer Meeting*), who introduced ‘the expressionist method’ in characterization, Gurucharan Das, Manohar Malgonkar, V.K.Gokak, V.V.Srinivasalyengar, T.M.LoboPrabhu, V.Subba Rao and Nissim Ezekiel who were all conscious of commenting on contemporary social problems and issues such as child marriage, untouchability, sex, power and wealth may also be remembered here.

With the emergence of leading playwrights like BadalSircar, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, and Mohan Rakesh, Indian drama was strengthened and enriched by their recourse and commitment to the reuse of legends, folklores, myths, and history which yielded splendid results. Badal Sircar’s movement toward a ‘Third Theatre’ (Third Gaze) reflected a theatre of rural-urban synthesis. In tune with the continuity of tradition, poetry, music, and dance were brought in as part of Indian theatrical productions. Modernity of thought became the major focus of ‘the Theatre of Roots Movement’. As Erin B. Mee notes, in the post-independent India, a number of playwrights “felt the need to develop a theatre that did not follow British models, but was in some way Indian” (1). K.N. Panikkar, Habib Tanvir, Vijay Tendulkar, and Girish Karnad promoted the ‘Theatre of Roots Movement’ and began to study Kathakali, Yakshagana, Chhau, and other traditional Indian performance forms ‘to see what could be used in the creation of a modern Indian drama’. A perusal of Karnad’s essay, “In Search of a New Theater” (1989), informs that the attempt through this Movement was “to discover whether there was a structure of expectations-and conventions-about entertainment underlying these forms from which one could learn” (101). Adapting and incorporating some of the stories, music, dance steps, rhythms, and
ideas from such forms as Kathakali, Theyyam, Patayani, and Kuttiyattam into his plays and productions, Panikkar emphasized how Indian folktale ‘contains the archetypal elementary expression of man, which is related to the soil of the land’. His experience of directing Sanskrit plays helped him develop a theory enunciating how Indian theatre is not conflict-oriented, but transformation-oriented. As Erin B. Mee adds, to Panikkar, “theatre meant storytelling” (36) that had a mythopoeic dimension.

Dismissing the notion that street theatre was not an art, Badal Sircar, Safdar Hashmi, and Tripurari Sharma promoted ‘street theatre’ in India focusing on how this form of performance could be an agent of ‘change against status quo’. Readers may remember how Safdar Hashmi was beaten to death in 1989 by forces opposed to the conscientizing modes of street theatre. Sharma’s street plays and writings concentrate on ‘giving voice to those who are not often heard, and political issues which are not being discussed’. Focusing on the Indian contemporary scenario vis-à-vis a range of issues such as communalism, the effect on US dollar on Indian economy, bureaucracy and corruption, condition so of the working class population, double oppression of women by class and gender, and the social stigmas attached to leprosy, her writings opened up scope for dialogues and exchange of other points of view rather than providing answers or solutions to problems. Dharmaveer Bharti’s play, Andha-Yug, (Blind Age), a five-act tragic poetic play, set in the last day of the Great Mahabharat war, and written in the aftermath of the II World war and the partition of India atrocities, is an allegorical presentation of the destruction of not just of human lives but also ethical values, caused by the violence that followed partition. It is a metaphoric meditation on the politics of violence and aggressive selfhood and on how war dehumanized both individual and society. Mohan Rakesh was a pioneer in modernist drama in Hindi. His first play, Ashadh Ka Ek Din, was the first modern play in Hindi. He
broke ties with the mainstream Hindi drama, deviated from idealistic or didactic input devoid of connection with contemporary reality and brought beautiful experimentation in dramaturgy. His plays dealt with ‘the disintegration and total collapse of all values of a middle-class family and the man-woman conflict arising from the contradictions of nature and family circumstances’. Sircar, Tendulkar, and Rakesh made conscious departures from pseudo modernism and traditional symbolism and focused on “the drama of ‘non-communication’ – “modern man’s failure to understand each other which is real tragedy of human life” (Sircar 26).

Vijay Tendulkar evolved a new dramatic form wherein he used prose dialogue, verse, songs and dances selected from popular folk forms of Maharashtra. In his Marathi play, Sari Ga Sari, he utilized the Tamāshā form and its characteristic language patterns. Satire on the social decadence of his times was his favorite theme. His critiquing focus was on love, sex, marriage and moral values prevalent in Indian society. Karnad’s play, Hayavadana, based on the tale of transposed heads from the Kathdsaritsagara, is a symbolic drama employing several conventions of Yakshagana, such as the half-curtain which is carried onstage to introduce new characters, and the Bhagavata or narrator, who introduces the story and comments on the action throughout the play. Hindi and Urdu playwrights began writing original dramas which tried to blend Nautanki elements with contemporary situations and themes. Mudrarakshas’ play, ĀlāAfsar and Tanvir's play, ĀgrāBāzār may be cited here as examples. IndujaAswathi’s essay, “Retrospective of Modern Indian Theatre” (1989), briefing about ‘the Nehru ShatabdiNatyasamaroha’ (Nehru Centenary Theatre Festival) held in New Delhi from 3rd to 17th September, 1989, a unique festival organized by the SangeetNatak Akademi (The National Academy of Music, Dance and Drama), is a good read on the great range, variety, and vitality of plays available in terms of modernist thrusts in Indian
theatre in different Indian languages. The blend of both the Indic and the Western impact could be seen in a number of plays.

Among the other modern playwrights, Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan may be remembered here. Though Indian English drama has been hamstrung by varied counts, Mahesh Dattani writing in English, focused on the thorny sides of modern urban families. Freedom from the tyranny of traditions and customs and from gender biases was brought in as his major concern. His play, *Tara*, is a critique of the modern Indian society which claims to be liberal and advanced into thought and action but practises male chauvinism. In the process, he comments on the stark reality of women playing second fiddle to man. He was greatly impacted by Karnad’s worldviews. Manjula Padmanabhan’s dramatic genius lies in her efforts ‘to recreate theatre as an open-ended process than a finished product’. She explores varied aspects of the present-day urban life, problematizes prevailing perceptions and attitudes, and tries to negotiate meanings relevant to contemporary times.

The modern Indian theatre goes on evolving with its quest for new subject matter. The success of modern Indian theatre is subject to its proximity to stage performance and live audience. Its veracity and cultural identity is related to three important principles, namely tradition, continuity, and change. When these three principles permeate and impact the Indian theatre movement, then the language of drama is filled with a sense of rootedness revealing a true Indian sensibility and eclectic openness towards creativity and innovative techniques. A meaningful and enjoyable blend of themes, strategies and stories taken from Indic tradition of thought with the creativity of the present has enriched the content and the mode of presentation in terms of contemporary significance and relevance. With tradition as clothing embellished with signs and symbols, modernity of themes in modern Indian theatre embodies the
inner thoughts of protagonists whose dialogues reveal their state of mind vis-à-vis the contemporary Indian problematic. The audience participation in discerning the connotations of what the protagonists represent is an important dimension of modern Indian drama. This overview done above helps the researcher focus the rationale for the present study vis-à-vis Karnad’s dramaturgy and his thematic focusses.

To come back to Karnad, Karnad’s dramaturgy is a fine instance wherein the categories of playwright, director, and actor often overlap. He was one of the leading lights in the resurgence of Indian theatre in the 1960s in its search to find its roots and define its identity. The thematic content of his plays, as noted here below, comes from Indian myths, legends, tales, historical figures, and from social and cultural traditions. *Yayati*, his first play, is based on a story from the *Mahabharata*. His second play, *Tughlaq*, is a re-reading of the profile of the Moghul King of the 14th century. *Hayavadna* is an adaptation of Thomas Mann’s Transposed Heads which itself was based on an Indian folktale of 12th century. *Nāga-Mandala* comes from two Kannada folktales interwoven as co-texts. Karnad’s thoughts on modern Indian theatre have been articulated in his articles, interviews, and in his ‘Introductions’ to some of his own plays. That he is a leading contemporary Indian playwright known for his innovative, creative and bold experimentations in dramatic form wherein his major focus has been towards revitalizing the Indian theatre to depict present reality can be discerned from his plays which are characterized by subdued emotionality, unique idioms, and unsentimental worldviews blending rationality and compassionate aesthetics. The stature he commands among his contemporaries has same wavelengths as those of Dharamvir Bharti, Vijay Tendulkar and a few others.

His plays re-present the known and the familiar but in a novel way with his bold experiments in technique. His delving deep into the past, the world of myths and
folklore is his imaginative way of connoting the modern contemporary. It is his way of validating individual experiences and universalizing them. From this point of view, watching or reading a Karnad play is a different and unique experience. He gives the audience a feeling that he is their contemporary. The way he redefines the “spatio-temporal boundaries of modernism” (136), to use the phrase of Aparna B. Dharwadker, within the matrix of ‘cultural interflows’ between indigenous traditions and Western influences exemplifies many of the larger literary, political, and cultural relations and ruptures that are seminal to any discussion of Indian modernism. Originally written in Kannada, one of the Indian languages, and some of which have been translated into English by the playwright himself, Karnad’s plays experiment with bold innovations and contribute to the artistic legacy of Indian theatre vis-à-vis the taxonomy, theory, and practice of modernity and modernism in India. His plays reflect the Indian usage of modernism, modernism as a specific aesthetic experience and expression in which the fusion between the indigenization of Western influences and the paradoxical relation to indigenous traditions can be felt and understood. They use myth, history, and folk legend to comprehend and reflect upon contemporary situations. His approach to decolonizing modernism is cross-referential rather than unipolar, cross-cultural rather than monocultural, and concentric and complementary rather than condescending and hegemonic.

As writer, translator, script-writer, actor, director, and critic, Karnad has received nation-wide and international critical acclaim for his creativity and his ability to delve into the inner psyche of the individual and to universalize the individual experience through the medium of drama. The numerous awards he has won, including the Jnanapith Award, the honours he has been bestowed with, such as Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan, and the significant positions he has held, such as Director of Film and
Television Institute of India (1974-75), Co-chairman for the Joint Media Committee of the Indo-US Sub-Commission on Education and Culture (1984-93), and as Chairman of the SangeetNatak Akademi (1988-93), speak high of his multifaceted calibre, ingenuity and artistic skill. Well versed both in Kannada and English, and rooted in Indian mythology and history, Karnad, as a modern playwright, conveys a complex awareness of the existential angst of the modern man. His creative writing from *Yayati* (1961) to the last published play, *Boiled Beans on Toast* (2014) holds a mirror not only to a contemporary view of India but also to the evolution of Indian theatre during the last five decades.


In many of his plays, Karnad uses history and myth to ‘address the problematic of Indian subjectivity vis-à-vis power and gender’ with a fine sense of deep-rooted humanism. As Alpna Saini notes, the subjectivity foregrounded is a ‘locus of conflicts’.
A new awareness of the absurdity of human life with all its passions and conflicts is portrayed through complex viewing and critiquing and through a number of dramatic techniques. The devices and techniques used make readers and the audience see how the past is brought live as a motif or metaphor to understand the present and anticipate the future. The protagonists of his plays, in both *Hayavadana* and *Nāga-Mandala* for instance, emblematize contemporary existential concerns. The ‘subalternization’ they represent gives voice to the silenced victims of patriarchy and condescending hierarchies of society. These are victims mostly subalterns, especially women and people from the lower strata of India’s Caste system. As Krishna Singh comments, ‘Devayani, Sharmishtha and Chitrablekha in *Yayati*, Kapil and Padmini in *Hayavadana*, Rani and Kurudavva in *Nāga-Mandala*, low caste people in *Tale-Danda*, tribals, 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*’ emblematize and represent subalternity. The predicament faced by some of his protagonists, in *Tughlaq* and *Tipu Sultan* for instance, is ‘the predicament of our times, rooted in the political and cultural situation in which we find ourselves’. The play, *Wedding Album* may be viewed as an endeavour to critique cultural stereotypes in the wake of modernity.

One of the contemporary issues he takes up for dramaturgic mediation is the question of gender justice wherein he problematizes man-woman relationship in the Indian context. In *Hayavadana* and *Nāga-Mandala*, Karnad presents the modern spirit of the Indian feminine psyche by interrogating traditional values and foregrounding the modernity of thought through the characterization of Padmini and Rani who become the loci of female subjectivity. His portrayal of the female subjectivity is not one modern conquest against tradition. Instead, it serves as an interstitial site for celebration
the quest for complete womanhood in the midst of both tradition and modernity prevailing side-by-side in India. His critical insiderism becomes an artistic tool to contrapuntally showcase the paradigm-shifts required to erase hegemonic practices embedded in patriarchy and to poetically romanticize the possibility and plausibility of subalternization vis-à-vis female subjectivity in terms of equality and fellowship.

Karnad’s dialectic engagement with history is extended through his tacit musings on contemporary power politics, leadership issues and governance. The allegorical presentation of Tughlaq in his play *Tughlaq* may be cited here as one instance. Creating an atmosphere of Tughlaq’s days, an atmosphere of mutual distrust, frustrated idealism, communal intolerance, religious bigotry, treachery and sedition, rampant corruption and Tughlaq’s unmitigated blood thirstiness and his final disillusionment, the problematic leadership of Tughlaq, as presented by Karnad, can be viewed as a reflection on the socio-politico situations of India of the 1960s, reflecting the political mood of disillusionment across the nation after the death of Nehru. The parallelism between the reign of Tughlaq and the contemporary history of India vis-à-vis Nehruvian era may not have been consciously intended but readers can discern how the play reflects the chaos, disillusionment and corruption that followed the Nehru era, and this is one of the most important reasons for the popularity of the play. When critics started commenting on the parallelism, Karnad responded:

I did not consciously write about the Nehru era. I am always flattered when people tell me that it was about the Nehru era and equally applies to development of politics since then. But I think, well, that is a compliment that any playwright would be thrilled to get but it was not intended to be a contemporary play about contemporary situation. (2)
The play has a terrific relevance today from the point of view whether idealism or ideological planning is compatible with demeaning politics prevalent across India and whether political leaders with their double faces are capable of resolving issues like riots in the name of religion or communalism that has its bonds with religion.

_**Tale-Danda**_ is another play that may be cited here for its modernity of thought and its contemporary social relevance. By going back to the twelfth century of Indian history, Karnad centres the play on the Veerasaiva Movement of religious reform and protest, pioneered by Basavanna, the poet-saint of the time. Readers who are aware of the fact that the Movement flourished for some time in Kalyan, now in Karnataka, under the patronage of king Bijala, can understand how Karnad shows why the Movement, despite its devotional, mystical, and poetic thrusts, failed in its effort to abolish the Caste system in India. Noble thoughts seldom see the light of the day in India in terms of full realization because of barriers created by people with vested interests. The playwright keeps in mind the ‘Mandal and the Mandir’ issues which exhibited the Caste-savvy parochial mentality of Indian politicians in the late 1980s and hints at how the Caste system, continuing to prevail in India, acts like a hydra-headed evil and how it is the prime cause for disunity among the people of India, if not for the gradual disintegration of Hinduism, as it was so when Basvanna pioneered the reformist Movement.

As a modernist writer, Karnad interlocks individuals in intense psychological and philosophical conflicts within contemporary matrix and ambience via theatre. The presentation of the mental state of the main character, more than the presentation of the character manifesting itself in action, is of prime concern to Karnad. The female subjectivity he foregrounds in the plays, _Hayavadana_ and _Nāga-Mandala_, for instance, is his poetic way of connecting with the cultural and the psychic representations vis-à-
vis female subjectivity which are crucial to the making of modern nations. As Maitrayee Chaudhuri observes, “Central in the making of the national imaginary has been the figure of the woman. Women are often projected as cultural emblems of the Indian nation and society. Changes in her attire and demeanour are therefore hastily condemned as threats to culture and tradition” (280). In these two plays, Karnad’s perception of a gendered Indian modernity vs tradition propels him to explore and capture the essence of both the Indian nation and the Indian woman. The female subjectivity he warps into these two plays demands a critical enquiry to understand how the male-gendered overarching and hegemonic idiom has been accepted as an unproblematic given. The playwright is critically aware of the fact that India is often seen as ‘a land of contrasts where tradition and modernity coexist—where Indian women are often showcased as emblematic of this coexistence’. Against this backdrop, heforegrounds the subjectivity of the feminine from the vantage point of gender, offering a feminist critique of the public-private divide which falls within the theoretical hub of the modernization framework. His focus on the centrality of gender in the two plays gives readers a glimpse of the then emerging nation-state’s political, developmental and cultural polemics and discourses relevant even today. His complex viewing enables him to view India as a culturally diverse land wherein contemporary India is portrayed as ‘a nation-state in conflict with its own people’.

The world of Gods, the temple priest and the courtesan come to the fore with a number of paradoxes in the play, Flowers. ‘Can’t God be a woman?’ It may be a sacrilege in religious terms if one were to ask such a question. But, that is the predicament of a Brahmin priest, the protagonist in Karnad’s Flowers. Karnad, using a local folktale emanating from Chitradurga in Karnataka, makes a dramatic plot of his own around the Brahmin priest, whose love for God, Shiva, his wife and his mistress, a
wealthy and beautiful courtesan, is equally shared, wherein he subtly critiques the comfort zones people create in the name of paradoxes to cope with certain ‘accepted’ conventions which may mean patriarchy.

Karnad is a contemporary writer who inspires and facilitates the reader to cultivate the art of thinking laterally. Diverse literary and aesthetic influences enrich the dramaturgy of Karnad propelling him to use his artistic skills to convey a Brechtian-kind of intellectual, rather than emotional, response to the complexities of modern life. The spirit of renaissance in Western literature, C. Rajagopalachari’s version of The Mahabahrata, the rich cultural past of Indic tradition vis-à-vis myths, legends, history and folktales, Indian traditional dramatic techniques and devices such as masks, dolls, curtains, chorus, commentators, narrator, story within-a-story, and supernatural elements used in Sanskrit plays, Company Nataks, the Parsi theatre, Yakshagana, Bayalala, and the Indian folk-theatre, and Karnad’s readings of Sartre’s Existentialism impact the playwright’s craftsmanship enabling him to juxtapose the present with the past so as to comment on contemporaneous issues and times with a fine sense of modern sensibilities. In the process, Karnad’s dramaturgy expands, as Tutun Mukherjee points out, the frontiers of imagination to comment on contemporary realities within the realms of poetic creativity that reflects a perfect harmony with the human intellect.

In Karnad’s dramatic manoeuvring, the past is never a deadwood. He valorises it as it provides immense scope for contextualizing the contemporary times and commenting on the current human condition that prompts him to foreground and celebrate the human and the humane in the light of a relook at the Indic notions such as dharma, artha, karma and moksha. The philosophical moorings and subtleties he ingrains in his plays not only portray the existential angst of the contemporary times but also connote the need for a calm and poetic acceptance of anguish and grief in life. His
quest for solutions hover around problematizing essentialist notions and inspiring readers and the audience to see, like a seer, the complexities and vicissitudes of modern life. His quest lies in and consists of complex viewing, hybrid in thought, multidimensional in focus, and plural in meaning. The metaphor of text (writing) and reading (hermeneutics/interpretability) vis-à-vis Karnad’s plays can be elucidated within a framework of a ‘poetics of culture’, to use the phrase of Stephen Greenblatt, as his plays provide not only scope for exchanges and negotiations with a number of intertextualities and discourses but also a pivotal bridging that opens up ‘a systematic axis of comparison and connectivity among disciplines’ (102), to bring in a phrase of Doris Bachmann–Medick, the author of the essay, “Culture as Text: Reading and Interpreting Cultures”.

To put it in other words, integrating a Bhabhan kind of postcolonial hybridization of thought, Karnad ushers in a liminal or interstitial space within his dramaturgy wherein he problematizes conventional, essentialist and homogenous perceptions on cultural beliefs, attitudes and practices and provides enough scope for negotiating lateral thinking, complex viewing, and alternative paths to the discovery of truth. Impacted by the East-West modes of representing socio-politico realities and intricacies of human relationships and yet free from Eurocentric, or exotic, or ghetto-nationalist paradigms of influences, his configuration of modernism and complex viewing vis-à-vis the existential angst of the contemporary times entails a Bakhtinian kind of dialogic discourse that can be viewed through the prism of an Edward Saidian down-to-earth inwardness that conveys a fine sense of ‘critical insiderism’, to use the phrase of U.R.Ananthamurthy. Such a dialogic discourse consists of diacritical, diachronic, and synchronic approaches ushering in cosmopolitan or eclectic modernism.
Propelled by readings in the light of the theoretical and hermeneutical spaces provided by the abovementioned thinkers and critics, the research-scholar of the present study proceeds further to elicit and explore the possibilities of multi-perspectival and multi-dimensional worldviews in Karnad’s plays which could be juxtaposed as figural forms of counter-points which in turn contrapuntally problematize received notions and conventional modes of representation which tend to limit interpretability to fixity of meaning. In the process, she attempts not only to discern the depths and ramifications of the configuration of his complex viewing of contemporary issues but also to explore and elucidate the dialogic and dialectic dimensions of Karnad’s language and art emotions through an analytical reading of his themes and techniques embedded within a framework of intertextualities.

**Review of Literature**

A broad summary of the review of literature available till date and done here below unveils the paths and approaches already trodden vis-à-vis Karnad’s plays. This review of literature is organized around the evolution of Indian modern drama, the evolution of Karnad as a modern dramatist, and the significant themes Karnad has dealt with in his plays, facilitating the researcher to justify the new directions she has taken for further explorations. Besides books published by reputed publishing Houses and articles published in standard Journals, online resources such as UGC-sponsored ‘Inflibnet’ Logins, Stable URL-JSTOR Achieves, and Google Advanced Search were valuable help in reading and assessing the review of literature. A good number of these secondary sources besides the primary ones have been cited in different chapters of the thesis. A few seminars attended by this research-scholar with or without paper presentations, related to ‘Postcolonial Studies’, ‘Myth, History, Tradition and Modernity in Indian English Drama’, ‘Modernity and Indian Theatre’, and reading
about other national level seminars organized in different parts of India including the one, The Nehru Shatabdi Natya Samaroha (Nehru Centenary Theatre Festival) held in New Delhi from 3-17 September, 1989, organized by the Sangeet Natak Akademi (The National Academy of Music, Dance and Drama) were also useful resources in the course of formulating the objectives and research questions for the this study.

Ritual theatre portrayed a very wide range of castes and communities while folk theatre was secular in spirit.

What happened in post-Independent India has been captured by several writers and critics writing from India and abroad. Kathryn Hansen’s essay, “Indian Folk Traditions and the Modern Theatre” (1983), Erin B. Mee’s article, “Contemporary Indian Theatre: Three Voices” (1997), Julia Leslie’s Essay, “Nailed to the Past: Girish Karnad’s Plays” (1997), and Darren C. Zook’s essay, “The Farce Mosaic: The Changing Masks of Political Theatre in Contemporary India” (2001) have been cited in varied parts of the present study for their insightful readings and comments. A reading of K. Satchidanandan’s books and articles was very useful in this regard. He notes that “Indian drama had a realistic phase when it dealt with domestic tensions after the fashion of Ibsen and Strindberg, or with social tensions and conflicts in Shavian or Chekhovian modes” (44). Ibsen was a major influence in 1950s. Theatre of the Absurd had its impact. The Navodaya trend in Kannada, for instance, influenced writers like Sriranga, G. B. Joshiand Girish Karnad prompting them to look for new experiments and innovative techniques. Lakshmi Subramanyam’s book, Muffled Voices: Women in Modern Indian Theatre (2002), presents women characters against the backdrop of male-gendered hegemonic pressures. The book, The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre (2004), edited by Ananda Lal, which has 750 entries (plays) covering all 28 States with 270 excellent photographs as illustrations, is a good read on recent theatre productions, debates, and scholarship. Erin B. Mee’s earlier edition, Drama Contemporary: India (2001) and his later book, Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage (2008), offer considerable insights into the aesthetics of some of the successful contemporary Indian dramatists. The texts chosen represent the range of dramatic styles and issues of concern in India today. Mee’s choice of plays,
representing varied regional languages, is also ‘less than catholic’. Wary of ‘light entertainment for the urban elite’, Mee has a predilection for works that relate closely to Indian social movements, including the theatre of roots, women's theatre, street performances, and dalitsahitya, or literature of the oppressed. His selection of Karnad’s *The Fire and the Rain* and K.N. Panikkar’s *Aramba Chekk* may be viewed as instances of contemporary dramatists’ predilection for ‘the return to the theatre of the roots genre’. The book, *Contemporary Indian Drama: Astride Two Tradition* (2005), edited by Bandana Chakrabarty and Urmil Talwar, brings in a large variety of issues related to Indian dramaturgy, interpretative processes and new directorial interventions. The book contains quite a few textual analyses with thematic thrusts as well as dramatic experimentation, commenting on the use of history, myth and folk forms. The works of the dramatists like Sadhu Binning, Uma Parmeswaran, Nissim Ezekiel, Dina Mehta, Gurcharan Das, Cyrus Mistry, Manjula Padamabhan, Mahesh Dattani, Badal Sircar, Mahasweta Devi, Vijay Tendulkar are highlighted. The book helped the researcher have a comparative perspective of some of the contemporary Indian English Dramatists and appreciate the uniqueness of Karnad in comparison with the other writers. On similar lines, AnitaMyles’ book, *Contemporary Indian English Drama* (2010) enlightens readers on the fact that the modern Indian Drama in English is not a dying tradition. She substantiates her stance vis-à-vis playwrights like Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani who are evaluated in detail validating their efforts towards the continuation of the Indian dramatic tradition.

Several publications have appeared in the form of books and articles on Karnad’s recourse to the theatre of the roots, revisiting mythic tradition, and re-reading history, his preoccupations with existential concerns, the relevance of his plays to contemporary critical consciousness, and his projection of female

tradition and Modern: The Roots Movement and Theatre’s Negotiation with Modernity in India” (2014) presents a contrapuntal reading deploying ‘the process of decolonization and Indianization’ as significant values within ‘the return to the roots movement’ in the course of reading the plays of Karnad which may be read as instantiation of ‘alternate modernity’ to the Western capitalist and imperialist modes of modernity.

Quite a few essays have been written on the Brechtian influence upon Karnad. T.Marx’s essay, “Brechtian Impact on Girish Karnad” (2006), Deepak Dhillon’s article on “Influence of Brechtian Technique on Girish Karnad: A Study of Nāga-Mandala” (2013), and Deepa Kumawat’s and Iris Ramnani’s paper on “Impact of Brechtian theory on Girish Karnad: An Analysis of Hayavadana and Yayati” (2013) may be mentioned here. Chapter Two has an elaborate reading on the influence of Brecht upon Karnad. One other online reading, namely Amara Khan’s paper on “Cultural Analysis of Indian Women in a Patriarchal Society: Trajectory of a Woman’s Emancipation in Girish Karnad’s Nāga-Mandala” (2014), presented in a seminar on ‘Women on the Edge’ organised at Queen’s University, Belfast, on the occasion of the International Women’s Day Conference, on 7th and 8th March, 2014, projects the feminized subjectivity of the female from the point of the view of the Other in the light of the theoretical framework derived from Edward Said’ notion of ‘Other’, and Gayatri Spivak’s critique of subalternization. Another recent study, “Violence to women in the Plays of Tendulkar and Karnad” (2014) argues that most of the women characters in their plays suffer due to male-chauvinism. A comparative perspective shows how Tendulkar’s Leela Benarein Silence! The Court is in Session, for instance, is victimized by her own father in order to ensure his own professional advancement. The study also points out the social insults to which some of Karnad’s
female characters like Rani, Nittilai and Vishaka, Chitralekha, and Radhabai are subjected. Karnad’s dexterous handling of the condition of the typical Indian female is discussed at length. Krishna Singh’s essay, “Postcolonial Subalternization in the Plays of Girish Karnad” (2011) is a fine reading of subaltern women characters in the plays of Karnad from the Gramscian point of view of subalternity. Priya Srivastava’s chapter, “Social Alienation in Karnad’s Tughlaq” (2006) in the book, Perspectives and Challenges of Indian English Drama (2006), edited by Neeru Tandon, and Bedre R.T’s and Meera M. Giram’s online article titled, “Girish Karad’s Tughlaq: A Study in Existentialism and the Absurd” (2007) http://www.yabaluri.org/triveni/cdweb/girishkarnadstughlaqjul2007.htm) are readings which show how Tughlaq lived in an entopic world in which communication was impossible and illusion was preferred to reality. It shows how Tughlaq’s suffering emanates from ‘an unbridgeable gap between his aspirations and the utter failure he meets from the impossibility of communication, from the realization of futility’. Asha Lata Raman’s “Existentialism in Girish Karnad’s Plays: Tughlaq, Hayavadana and Nāga-Mandala” (2011) substantiates how the theory of existentialism can be applied to interpret the plays of Karnad and how existentialism makes Karnad’s characters ‘experience some kind of mental or spiritual breakdown in which they begin to question the meaning of reality and existence’. Amita Potsangbam’s essay, “Contemporary Relevance in Girish Karnad’s Yayati” (2012) brings out how the contemporaneity of the play is finely depicted in Chitralekha-Yayati dialogue, manifest in Chitralekha’s effort to take a place in a male-dominated world and in her ways of challenging certain social obligations and moral laws. Amrita Sengar’s essay, “Indian Ethos and Dramatic Craftsmanship: A Fusion in Karnad’s Plays” (2013) and Godugunuri Prasad’s essay, “Girish Karnad as a Myth-Intoxicated Modern
Playwright” (2014) are critical readings based on themes and techniques in the plays of Karnad. In her book, *Drama in Indian Writing in English Tradition and Modernity* (2013), N.Velmani has four chapters focusing on Karnad’s plays. Tracing Brechtian Influence on Girish Karnad, she has done a comparative reading of Brecht’s *The Life of Galileo* and Karnad’s *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*. On the whole, her focus is ‘to present a study of the engagement between tradition and modernity in terms of form, function and meaning of the modern plays of Indian Epic Theatre’ in the light of the impact of Brecht’s Epic Theatre on the works of leading Indian playwrights, namely, Girish Karnad, Mahesh Dattani, Badal Sarcar and others.

Studies have also been done on specific plays of Karnad and published as articles or chapters. Rita Kotheari’s essay on “Post-scripting Narratives: A Study of Girish Karnad” and N.K.Ghosh’s chapter on “Girish Karnad’s Tughlaq: History in the Future Tense” in the book, *Writing in a Post-Colonial Space* (1999), edited by Surya Nath Pandey, demonstrate how ‘the present provides an admirable vantage point from which history can be reviewed and reinterpreted literally and figuratively’ and how ‘the present itself is understood better when it is situated in the context of history’. That postcolonial discourse has a number of contesting perspectives is a major argument in the book. Abha Shukla Kaushik’s essay, “Subaltern Historiography: Girish Karnad’s Dreams of Tipu Sultan” (2010), posits vis-à-vis the play taken up for discussion, that ‘the play of power in the colonized societies was very complex. The relationship between the colonizer and the colonized was never completely on the basis of oppressor – victim opposition but required at times the involvement of colonized at different levels’. Shivaji Shankar Kamble’s “Social Reality in Girish Karnad's The Fire and the Rain” (2011) examines how Girish Karnad's mythical play presents social reality from a nativist point of view. Social reality is one of the important insignias of
Indian literature and civilization. We find its seed in native, non-Vedic traditions of Buddha, Jain, Veershaiva, Varkari, and Mahanubhava cult. The author states that ‘it is nothing but a self-realization or inner voice of human beings’. Rohit Phutela essay, “Kuntaka’s Vakrokti Siddhanta and Girish Karnad’s The Fire and the Rain: Resuscitating the Classical Indian Literary Criticism” (2013) is a perceptive reading that emphasizes how the dialectics of the Western Theory and the Indian aesthetic principles pertaining to the drama and poetry intersect in the play, The Fire and the Rain. The author of the paper substantiates how Girish Karnad has employed various linguistic devices in the play in order to carve a greater impact in the presentation of some emotions as well as magnify the aesthetic quotient, which are typical to theatrical performances.

Tanuka Chatterjee’s “(Re) negotiating Culture: Cultural Reconnaissance in Girish Karnad’s Hayavadana” (2014) provides a perspective on Indian Culture as a category which is deeply imbricated in the living cultures of contemporary Indian society. Arguing that in Hayavadana, ‘cultural identities, densely ambiguous, are revealed, masked, fabricated or stolen, the author of the paper states that the play is a damning indictment of the moribund Indian culture mired in the thralldom of spiritual bankruptcy and gender prejudices’. Sumita Roy’s paper on “Negotiating Ideological Spaces: Reading Girish Karnad’s Bali: The Sacrifice” (2010) is an important contribution to new thought. The two parameters used for reading are indicated by the words ‘negotiation’ and ‘ideology’. A perspective from the point of view of the audience is also part of parameters employed in the discourse. Bharathi Chinnasami’s essay, “Karnad’s Hayavadana” (2010) is a reading focused on the themes of incompleteness and human search for identity. E. Sumathi’s paper on “Stage-craft of Girish Karnad: An Analysis of Style and Technique in Tughlaq, Hayavadana and
"Nāga-Mandala" (2013) elucidates how Karnad experiments with a variety of theatrical techniques to create visual and auditory images, thereby producing the desired dramatic effect on the stage. These three plays are also sites where sub-plots serve as intertextualities connecting intergeneric storylines. K.M.Chandar’s essay, “Mythifying a Folktale: Girish Karnad’s Nāga-Mandala” (1999) and Dolors Collellmir’s paper on “Mythical Structure in Karnad’s Nāga-Mandala” (2004) analyze how Karnad’s technique of using different narrative levels, superimposing sub-plots within the main plot in the play, is a pointer to the exemplification of his vision of theatre as a unifying and total experience. Inam Ul Haq’s essay on “Mythic Interpretations using Sociological Perspectives in South Asian Literature: An Analysis of Girish Karnad's Nāga-Mandala” (2013) argues that the mythical pattern and structure of the play serve ‘to relocate the boundaries of perception outside of the finite knowledge of civilization to include the world of Hindu Myth’. It also examines how myth criticism and feminist criticism are applied ‘to set the base for the historic development of myth, its diverse interpretations and to study the text in the exploration of contemporary social concerns’.

Saurabh Mishra’s essay, “Magnum Opus of Man-Woman Relationships in the Background of Indian Sensibility in Girish Karnad’s – Hayavadana, Nāga-Mandala, Tughlaq, Yayati, The Fire and the Rain and Tale-Danda” (2013) is a detailed elucidation of the complex structures Karnad brings in his meticulous treatment of women characters vis-à-vis gender relationships. N. Indhira Priya Dharshini’s essay, “Postmodernism in Girish Karnad’s Nāga-Mandala” (2014) comments on how the textuality of the play ‘shows the rare quality of highly suggestive images and concepts transcending realism so as to produce a thought-provoking impression on the spectators. By developing an Indian myth, the play creates a mysterious and powerful
experience though the dual representation of the Cobra and Appanna. They are inseparably connected in the tale, leading to a multi-dimensional situation; Rani’s transformation from the moment of oath-taking heightens the suggestive quality of the play. Some of these articles are revised extracts from dissertations or theses done by the authors. In her essay (2014), “Subversion and Closure: Reading Micro-Texts in Girish Karnad’s Hayavadana and Nāga-Mandala”, Sudha Shastri explores the roles played by the riddle and the oath as micro-genres deployed by Girish Karnad in his plays Hayavadana and Nāga-Mandala. These two plays, though separated by seventeen years publication-wise, are companion texts wherein Karnad ‘furthers subversive politics’ through intertextualities wrought in as co-texts, politics that ‘contradicts the innate generic logic’ in the plays. The riddle in the plays revolves around Karnad’s exploration into the issues of identification and delineation. The strategic positions of the riddle and oath in the plays confront and then subvert the prior expectations of the reader.

The fact that a number of Dissertations at MPhil level and theses at PhD level have been done on Karnad from different parts of India cutting across disciplines and departments, even by research-scholars at Engineering Colleges across India, shows how significant Karnad has been to students and scholars in contemporary India vis-à-vis the Indian subjectivity he has foregrounded in his plays, which is quite appealing to the present-day generation of readers and audience. Among the unpublished theses and dissertations available online, a few significant ones, going beyond the trodden paths and focusing on the contemporaneous relevance of Karnad’s plays, done in the recent years, may be cited here. Alpna Saini’s thesis, “The Construction of Contemporary Indian Subjectivity in the Selected Plays of Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani” (2010), K. Arjunsinh Parmar’s thesis, “The Plays of Girish Karnad:

In the light of the data gathered, the research states here below certain trends of thought which have emerged as major focuses in reading and assessing the plays of Karnad. They are:

1. Theme-based Readings such as ‘Self and Quest for Identity’, ‘God and Supernatural’, ‘Reality and Fantasy’, and ‘Use of Symbolism’, and social issues such as casteism, patriarchy, vain knowledge of priestly class with their possessiveness, jealousy, malice, mistrust, competition, treachery, revenge, power-conflict, adultery and meaningless sacrifices and rituals;

1. Reuse of Myth and History and Blending of the Contemporary Problematic’;

2. Projection of Female Subjectivity foregrounding alternative aesthetics;

3. Ideological Spaces as Dramatic Presentation, and a few more.

4. Quite a few comparative readings, comparing Karnad’s plays with those of Vijay Tendulkar for instance, have also been done.

In the light of the review of literature, one may ask if there is anything more still left out insinuating that there is a saturation point that has already been reached vis-à-vis studies of Karnad’s plays. This study dispels such an impression on the ground that Karnad’s mythification blending tradition and modernity and connoting multiple
meanings relevant to contemporary citizenry has an enduring value like Indian myths and folktales. She is of the view that as long as the issues he has dealt with are issues bothering current generations in India or elsewhere, Karnad’s plays will be read and enacted.

In the present study, the researcher views the review of literature as the matrix on which she could prepare the grounds for the rationale and justification of the study and for the formulation of the research questions and concerns. The review of literature strengthens the view that Karnad is a contemporary writer who inspires and facilitates the reader to cultivate the art of thinking laterally. It has enlightened the researcher to see how diverse literary and aesthetic influences contribute to the intertextualities ingrained in his plays and enrich his dramaturgy propelling him to use his artistic skills to convey a Brechtian-kind of intellectual, rather than emotional, response to the complexities of modern life and assess to what extent the playwright succeeds in his craftsmanship in juxtaposing the present with the past so as to comment on contemporaneous issues and times with a fine sense of modern sensibilities. In Karnad’s dramatic manoeuvring, the past is never a deadwood. He valorises it as it provides immense scope for contextualizing the contemporary times and commenting on the current human condition that prompts him to foreground and celebrate the human and the humane. His quest for solutions hover around problematizing essentialist notions and inspiring readers and the audience to see, like a seer, the complexities and vicissitudes of modern life. His quest lies in and consists of complex viewing, hybrid in thought, multidimensional in focus, and plural in meaning.

The review of literature has also propelled the researcher to think and move beyond the paths already taken. The ‘poetics of culture’, to use the phrase of Stephen Greenblatt, Karnad provides in his plays with a number dialogic intertextualities has
helped the researcher view his plays as a pivotal bridging that opens up ‘a systematic axis of comparison and connectivity among disciplines’, to borrow the words of Doris Bachmann – Medick, the author of the essay, “Culture as Text: Reading and Interpreting Cultures”. The topic of the present study is the outcome of the researcher’s awareness, courtesy the enormous guidance received from the guide and supervisor of the study, an awareness that Karnad ushers in a liminal or interstitial space within his dramaturgy wherein he problematizes conventional, essentialist and homogenous perceptions on cultural beliefs, attitudes and practices, and provides enough scope for negotiating lateral thinking, complex viewing, and alternative paths to the discovery of truth.

**Justification for the Study**

To Karnad, art is symbolic, functional, dynamic, and capable of pointing to an inward looking into the world captured by the literary word/text meant for performance. His modernity of thought has its concomitant relationship with his ways of inward looking into realities through modern use of tradition, myth, and history. His inward looking into complex contemporary issues through certain aesthetic parameters of art noticed in his re-contextualization of allusions and references from age-old myths and history which, in turn, provides analogues for contemporary times, reinforces his capacity for complex viewing and yet, projecting a subtle synthetic worldview. Though topics like myth and history, and modernity of tradition in the plays of Karnad have been researched and studied for dissertations and theses in the recent past as indicated in the review of literature, Karnad’s mode of complex viewing through dialogic and polyphonic intertextualities and the *rasa*-aesthetics of Indic tradition in the backdrop of intertextual and theoretical taxonomy of modernity and modernism in Indian theatre has not been explored in depth till date, and hence the significance and relevance of the topic of the present study. Karnad’s aestheticizing the contemporary Indian problematic
through a number of intertextualities is quite fascinating and unique. It calls for fresh
explorations so as to see the relevance of Karnad’s plays to contemporary times where
problem-solving focuses more and more on self-authenticating dialogicity, and hence
the justification for the current study.

**Objectives and Research Concerns**

In the light of this justification, questions and concerns such as whether
Karnad’s art of combining modernism and complex viewing can be construed as a way
of foregrounding the contemporaneous present beyond the postcolonial, what his
unique contribution to the postcolonial theatre is in terms of his approach to
problematising the contemporary Indian subjectivity and his affinities with the Other
points of view, whether his deconstruction of myth or history serves any purpose other
than Derrida’s or Barthes’, whether his alternative aesthetic vision of life revolves
around a kind of ‘Nietzschean enigma’, (Rajesh Kumar Sharma, 1), to what extent his
turning to Indian history, myths and fables and his complex viewing reflects his
affinities with dialogicity connoting multilayers of meaning illumined by dhvani-rasa,
and to what extent his cultural aestheticism enriches figural realism in terms of
intertextualities, hybridity and eclectic humanism, have been discussed in the thesis.

Influences upon Karnad have been from varied sources. That Karnad ‘grew up
with a lot of myths’ and ‘was groomed in mythology’ is already a known fact. But,
Karnad’s creativity lies in his capacity “to reconcile tradition and modernity into an
organic synthesis” (Sarangi 72). Critics who have studied Karnad’s plays in the light of
Bakhtinian trope of the ‘carnival’ have pointed out that Karnad’s tendency is more
towards “problematising issues rather than making assertive statements of theme”
(Sudha Shastri and Amith Kumar 145). Influences from other dramatists like Brecht and
Ibsen may also traced in his dramatic structure and connotations of meaning. Indian
sources of influence include Bharata’s *the Natyashastra* vis-à-vis choreography of utterance and action, and the folk theatre of *Yakshagana* and *Bayalataat* the level of performance and stage. As Sridhar Rajeswaran remarks, Karnad is “a cultural hybrid” who “dips into both Indian as well as Western scholarship in the construction of his plays” (129). Chapter Two of the study makes an attempt to substantiate how the positives of a number of literary and aesthetic influences serve as a confluent impactful factor in the dramaturgy and artistic vision of Karnad.

The synthesis of cultures wrought through his formal and technical experiments with an indigenous touch is the hallmark of his unique style. The symbols and the allusions he brings in and integrates in the course of writing the Indian subjectivity reveal his affinities with the Indic imagination and sensibility free from colonial yokes. His aesthetic approach and sensibility marks a conscious deviation from Aristotelian cathartic-centredness, and alternatively moves towards active and critical participation of the audience. It is a Brechtian way of foregrounding the audience or readers into the forefront. The present study has also focused on these dimensions.

The operation of myth and history in his plays not only reflects his capacity to configure themes and techniques but it also propels him to symbolically embody and reinforce a multi-dimensional worldview via his perception and critique of contemporary issues such as leadership crisis and struggle in modern society, caste tensions, religious orthodoxy and its socio-politico ramifications, the question of gender, complicated human relationships revolving around jealousy, revenge, and curse revealing the psychic aberrations of the human mind. Against this knowledge, one objective of the study was to focus on reformulating, strengthen certain select domains of thought and articulate on certain fresh domains with reference to the researcher’s
critical reading of select plays of Karnad. These domains have been posited and elucidated in Chapter Three.

In Karnad’s recourse to myths, the Dionysian principle, namely ‘a word used in myth can have several meanings’, is at work at varied levels and stages of myth-making, complex-viewing and connotation of meanings. It is the cluster of meanings that contributes to the making of the myth. Karnad’s proficiency in handling myths and symbols is evident in his myth-plays such as Nāga–Mandala, Yayati, Hayavadana, and The Fire and the Rain. In his history-plays like Tale-Danda and Tughlaq readers could notice the predominance of historical structure wherein he, as Dixit notes, treats history more as myth than as mere history in order to “give symbolic reshaping to reinforce the contemporary issues” (86). Detailed analyses of select plays of Karnad, done in Chapter Three, illustrate, demonstrate, codify, and reiterate the role of the Dionysian principle and the significance of complex viewing of Karnad and highlight the relevance of his complex worldview to the modern man experiencing and enduring several forms of existential crisis.

In Karnad’s perception, a good play is the repository of human experience and values. It is a tool for juxtaposing, comparing, contrasting, and commenting by indirection or implication. His play, The Dreams of Tipu Sultan, is a good example. Under floodlights, the playwright propels the audience to see and read, as Rajesh Kumar Sharma observes, the meanings behind juxtapositions – “two ideologically and politically divergent historiographies, the native and the colonial” - in the play enabling the audience to see “the inhuman vanity of an objectifying imperial epistemology” (http://kriticulture.blogspot.com/2008_05_01_archive.html). This study goes deeper into the performance-significance of the plays of Karnad so as to explore how the playwright uses the stage in order to meaningfully and purposefully
incorporate figural realism by juxtapositions, imaginative literary realism that transcends the brutality of modern times and the predicament of the modern man. Chapter Three addresses at length and in depth all the objectives and concerns, mentioned above, under four domains of thought briefed elsewhere in this Chapter.

As this researcher is inclined to discern the configuration of multi-perspectival and multi-dimensional worldview ingrained in the plays of Karnad, this study also concentrates on Karnad’s plays as interstitial sites for dialogic and discursive readings of his plays focusing on readers and their interpretative turns. The modern man is looking for not one Centre. Questing for conventional essentialism is not his forte. He/she is looking for multiple alternatives to arrive at truth, to define his/her identity against the backdrop of the existential crisis he/she experiences. This study cautions readers against the pitfalls of depending on mere orthodox essentialist notions or on mere Western post-structuralist modes of deconstructing Karnad’s texts, and informs them of the indispensable need of reading his plays in the light of Indian poetics that foreground complex viewing through intertextualities, a viewing that comments on existential concerns and certain eternal verities of life and tends to celebrate eclecticism, rather than nihilistic relativism, as a way of thinking and living in the midst of modern times full of restiveness. This researcher is of the view that Karnad ushers in an ‘understanding culture’ rather than an ‘abstraction-culture’. Chapter Four dwells at length on this view and substantiates the reasoning behind considering Karnad as a cultural aesthete.

The fifth and concluding Chapter underscores, besides summating the overall focus of the study, the positives of Karnad’s cross-cultural hybridization of thought which stand as a signifier of the valuable complex viewing Karnad is committed to in
his quest for celebrating the *eros* of an organic and eclectic worldview against the *thanatos* (negatives) of modern life.

**Methodology**


To Karnad, like to T.S. Eliot, tradition is a living phenomenon. Like Eliot, Karnad believes in using tradition as a living metaphor wherein he sees tradition as a contemporaneous presence in which the presentness of the past becomes relevant and meaningful. This is why he uses myths as a powerful vehicle to comment on the complexity of the modern times. This study makes ample cross-references to Karnad’s recourse to tradition, myth, and history which he uses as tools to understand the complexity of contemporary issues.

Other modes of expression such as use of irony, humour, parallelism, juxtapositions, contrasts and comparisons have also been highlighted. As indicated above, Karnad’s thought processes in terms of modernity of tradition have been read
through a few theoretical frameworks drawn from thinkers and critics like Bakhtin, Brecht, Bhabha, and Spivak and from the Indic tradition of *rasa*-aesthetics. To do just a postcolonial reading of Karnad was not pursued because Karnad’s plays cannot be restricted to mere postcolonial framework and this researcher tends to subscribe to the view that the ‘postcolonial’ as such is problematic today. The issues Karnad touches on and the intertextualities and the hybridity of thought he interpolates and juxtaposes transcend the limits of the postcolonial. Karnad foregrounds an eclectic modern worldview, not merely a postcolonial perspective, in his effort to focus on the Indian problematic subjectivity and to connote the Other points of view and alternative aesthetics. The existential concerns he deals with transcend the boundaries or binaries ‘the postcolonial’ is often associated with.

In the light of these highlights, the study has been organized into five Chapters. A synopsis of these Chapters is as follows:

**Chapter One:**

**Introduction: Modernity, Tradition, and Thought in the Plays of Girish Karnad**

This chapter foregrounds the rationale for the present study in the light of a brief overview of the concept called modernism and its relationality to the Brechtian kind of ‘historicizing’ that has a predilection for ‘distancing’ and ‘critical detachment’, and in the light of the dimensions of the modernity of thought embedded in the plays of Karnad. The researcher argues that the playwright’s worldview consists of complex viewing and modernist ethos with an Indic touch interwoven through a number of intertextualities understood better in the backdrop of certain theoretical frameworks. Complex viewing is in tune with one’s preoccupations with the grasp of the existential concerns and is conducive to foregrounding the Other points of view as a counter or an alternative to hegemonic or patriarchal views, customs and practices. The view that
Karnad is a ‘Renaissance man’ with an Indic touch with affinities with the ‘theatre of roots’ ushering alternative aesthetics (the Other points of view) is foregrounded as a major argument of the study. The spirit of Renaissance that is in him inspires him to be ceaseless seeker of egalitarian goals in terms of interpersonal human relationships and eclectic humanism. This perennial quest propels him to interface modernity within a framework of tradition.

Besides stating the thesis statement and accommodating a comprehensive review of literature, the logistics of this chapter give an overview of what comes in other chapters of the present study.

Chapter Two:

Return to the Roots: The Muse of Influences in Karnad’s Dramaturgy

Karnad is unique vis-à-vis his return to the roots of Indian theatre. His historical sense and consciousness and his modernist presentation of the contemporary Indian problematic intertwined in his dramaturgic structures and plots come from a variety of cultural and literary influences enabling him to connote and project an eclectic worldview through subalternization of his characterization. These diverse influences, starting from his early childhood experiences of witnessing to street theatre, passing through the furnace of his concerted interest in drama and related researched readings, and decisively impacting his dramaturgy, his formal textures and stage presentations, form a collective matrix wherein a confluence of cultures and ideas converges together towards dialogicity conducive to the projection and reiteration of the Other points of view.

In this chapter, these influences which contribute to the foregrounding of dialogic imagination are referred and elucidated within a framework of the critical idioms noted earlier in the synopsis. The idioms drawn from readings on Bakhtin
Dialogic Imagination and Discourse), Brecht (Epic Theatre vs Dramatic Theatre), Bhabha (Third Space Encounters and Hybridization of Thought), and Spivak (Subalternization of the Feminine and Vice Versa) are intersected with the Indic rasa-aesthetics impacted by dhvani and vakrokti which overarch Karnad’s plot-structures and dialogues ensuring an ‘understanding-culture’ rather than an ‘abstraction-culture’ that sums up Karnad’s deep-rooted humanism.

Chapter Three:

Writing the Postcolonial Present of Contemporary India: Intertextual Configuration of Thought in the Plays of Karnad

This chapter is an attempt to understand the theme-focused diachronic-synchronic approaches Karnad opts for in writing the postcolonial present of contemporary India. It takes into account how Karnad’s plays reflect a judicious mix of diachronic-synchronic approaches in their mediation through language and reality in foregrounding the contemporary Indian problematic. It posits, elucidates and argues how intertextual configuration of thought interwoven through certain new critical idioms such as temporalization, hybridity, dialogicity, Otherness, and subalternity, pervades his dramaturgy, plot-structures, characterization and dialogues. It is done assuming that Karnad is a playwright who subscribes to the view that literary texts connote meanings relationally through interdependent intertextualities. This assumption derives its strength through instantiations of how Karnad employs co-texts such as history, myths, and folktales, which are part of the cultural heritage of India, in the course of moulding his main texts and how they are used as a cogent means of representing India in the postcolonial present. Detailed analyses of select plays in relation to the Indian problematic/contemporary Indian subjectivity are the focus in this chapter. They foreground four domains of thought in terms of the hermeneutics of complex
viewing and configuration of thought in the light of Karnad’s critical insiderism which consists of subversive aesthetic dimensions which serves as a matrix providing a liminal space for discerning intertextualities and discovering the fragrance of eclectic modernism.

**Four Domains of Thought**

3.1 **Self-Reflexive Mythification of Human Dilemmas: Existential Concerns and the Contemporary Indian Problematic**

Three plays -- *Yayati, Bali: The Sacrifice, and The Fire and the Rain* – have been taken up under this domain for analyses here with cross-references to certain other plays. These three texts serve as kind of trilogy focusing on connecting myths to dialogic rationality and connoting lateral relationality of multilayers of meanings on human behaviour, human dilemmas and their existential angsts. An ironic mode of self-reflexivity becomes a programmatic strategy to historicize the present in the light of India’s cultural past. Critiquing injustices, inequalities and residual hangovers of colonial and neo-colonial hegemony, Karnad aesthetically measures the contemporary Indian problematic through mythification of India’s ethno-symbolism. The counter-discourse Karnad brings in revolves around altering, often allegorically, the native original cultural text such as texts mentioned above, which serve as outer frame for his dramatic presentation of the predicament of contemporary social situations, subverting original hegemonic narratives, re-visiting and revising mythological characters, dismantling and deconstructing power-structures, critiquing injustices associated with traditional hegemonies, and decolonizing the mind of the reader by critical insiderism vis-à-vis injustices involved.
3.2 Quest for Gender Justice: Man-Woman Relationship

The subalternization of the feminine and feminization of the subaltern becomes the prime focus in this domain. The figural forms of romanticizing the female subjectivity against the world of patriarchy portrayed in Hayavadana and Nāga-Mandala have been brought out with cross-references to other plays of the writer where gender issues are interlocked. The feminization of the subaltern is discussed in the light of Spivak’s notion of the subaltern and other related theories and aesthetics. The psychological depth and intensity with which Karnad delineates his female protagonist-characters is commented upon with textual quotes and critical readings.

3.3 Dialogic Engagement with History: The Contemporary Indian Political Problematic

Two plays -- Tughlaq and The Dreams of Tipu Sultan -- taken up for analyses instantiate and substantiate how Karnad views power politics, leadership issues and governance in the contemporaneous context by revisiting history. The ways Karnad re-assesses the two heroes of history, Tughlaq and Tipu Sultan, and connects them with the contemporary power politics and governance by indirection or connotations enable readers to juxtapose, see, and understand how, for instance, Tughlaq’s political decisions and innovative ideas were far ahead of his times, why his commendable leadership and effort to bring about religious equality was opposed by fanatics, and how, much later in the contemporary Indian political problematic, the Nehruvian era of idealism had its own angst and was followed by a mood of disillusionment in the politics of India. A critical reading of the play, The Dreams of Tipu Sultan, gives readers a glimpse of Karnadian way of remembering the heroism of Tipu and connotes its relevance to the contemporary Indian socio-political context.
3.4 Egalitarian Goals: Religion, Caste, and Communalism as Barriers

The analytical reading of *Tale-Danda* done under this domain may prompt readers to see the politics of the Mandalization of the Caste system done in India in the late 1980s. Karnad’s mythification hovering around Basavanna, the revolutionary saint of the 11th century, and his worth-emulating effort to eradicate the ills of Caste system in India, presents his angst against inhuman customs and practices which exploit marginalized people in the name of religion, Caste, and communalism which are viewed as agencies of hegemony and oppression. Critiquing fundamentalist religious consciousness that divides Indian society on the lines of communalism and caste-highbhandedness that discriminates dalits and other subalterns in terms of demeaning social stratification, Karnad shows how oppressive and exploitative the so-called Hindu *varnashrama dharma* is, how inequality is taken for granted almost as part of the established norms of the Hindu / Indian society, passed on from generation to generation, and why revolutionary steps, like the ones initiated by Basavanna, to eradicate, are indispensable even if they cannot achieve an enduring solution. Haralayya, the low caste-cobbler who asks poignant questions on the legacies of subcultures of discrimination perpetuated in the name of caste-based physical parentage and associated mind-sets, seems to be a mouthpiece of the playwright’s anguish in the play. He is a prototype like Nittelai in *The Fire and the Rain*. In Karnad’s dramaturgy, Basavanna, the eleventh century-saint, becomes ‘the archetypal arch’ to condemn the ill effects of religious, communal, and caste violence in the contemporary Indian scenario. The play helps readers see how contemporary India continues to be faulting in her human development agenda despite the heritage and legacies of religious tolerance.
Chapter Four:

Karnad as a Cultural Aesthete: His Contribution to Literary and Cultural Aesthetics

The kind of realism Karnad integrates in his plays with a fine sense of modernist ethos through ‘the grammar of literary archetype’ via history, myths and folklore and a number motifs, symbols, and intertextualities testifies that he is a cultural aesthete with an Indic touch and commitment to connote and foreground alternative aesthetic experiences in tune with the Indic rasa-aesthetics that seeks and sustains ‘understanding culture’ and compassionate worldviews. His representation of contemporary issues finding parallels in the myths and fables of the past providing insights into life and its mystery transcends the limits of time and space. As TutaEaswarp Rao and Dhanavel note, such a 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 hence his recourse to the past for the 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’. It provides him the matrix to comment on the absurdities of life with its elemental passions and conflicts and on how man struggles to achieve perfection in the contemporary times.

Karnad’s cultural 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.

Chapter Five:

Conclusion: Summation, Research-Findings, and Provocations for Future Explorations

The last Chapter, besides summating the major areas focused in this study, has enough space for considering and commenting on the research findings. Art-emotion illumined by intertextuality ushering in polyphony, dialogicity harvesting multiple meanings tempered by/with dhvani-centred connotations which contribute to the Karnadian ways of aestheticizing life within the ambience of the contemporary Indian problematic has been projected as the major finding of the research. Research findings, arrived at, provide reasonable answers to research questions and concerns raised in Chapter One. These findings also point out the limitations of the present study and raise certain other questions -- moot points -- for further explorations by future researchers. In conclusion, the researcher shows her awareness that today’s findings are inspirations for tomorrow’s research. The findings of this study will hopefully contribute to new knowledge and inspire prospective research scholars to continue to read Karnad and his plays afresh.

This research-scholar also tried to have an interview with the playwright. It is yet to happen. It could happen before the final Viva Voce, hopefully prior to the award of the degree. Certain new and unexplored areas/arenas, likely to be focused during the
interview, may help readers to see where Karnad stands today vis-à-vis his plays as both performative and readable texts.

Apart from relevant parenthetical citations within the dissertation noted, the ‘Works Cited’, placed after the Five Chapters, provide also a select but fairly comprehensive additional sources, both primary and secondary, in accordance with the guidelines of MLA handbook. Inadvertent flaws in any with regard to MLA guidelines may be due to the way the research scholar’s minor ambivalences and ambiguities regarding the difference while quoting print and web sources or such other related issues.