

“He Was Seeking God so he Could Ask for Universal Knowledge”: Knowledge as a Super Narrative in Karnad’s *Hayavadana*, Naga- Mandala and *the Fire and the Rain*

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Abstract: Girish Karnad, the veteran Indian playwright talks of Knowledge in multifaceted understanding of the term. While knowledge stands for wisdom, it suggests spiritual knowledge, the knowledge of the Universe, knowledge of the Self. It is interpreted as human’s power over the Universe, over Nature and at the same time Nature’s power over man or Unconscious’ power over the Conscious mind. The power in Karnad’s plays is placed in diverse points and every character whether the man or the woman or even snakes or dolls are given a will, a power that can topple other structures of power. The Unconscious rules over the conscious, the animal world becomes more intuitive than humans, the divine world intervenes into the human world and so on. The different worlds contest with each other to form a world that is subtle and curious at once.

Keywords: Animism, Mysticism, Nature, Power, Spirituality, Unconscious.



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Knowledge flows and contains at once. The self gets its realization through knowledge of the self and the world. However the real nature of knowledge remains a great riddle for the human mind. Human aspiration with the sense of pride of understanding the world, God, spirituality and the processes of life hanker after knowledge in its infinite manifestations. The key to the world, its processes and what lies beyond this world or any other make man a seeker and a sojourner through the pages of life. Knowledge comes in its numerous manifestations and is understood through different ways that have several ramifications. The search for knowledge has remained a key aspiration with humans through time immemorial. The search for God or the search for the Holy Grail, the search for Truth, Life or Life beyond has ever been man’s exercise. The unending search through human existence, through animism, spirituality or mysticism, all pervade the eternal continuum of human thought and concern.

However, knowledge has been taken as the megalomaniac man’s pride to conceive “the world in a grain of sand” (Blake). Man’s attempts at attaining the core of wisdom have often gone awry and his rigorous tortures faced and meted to others proved futile. This notion has come up from the threats that nature poses in the face of man’s prowess. As man vaunts in his powers and extracts

the essence of life by wringing the strains of life, Nature at times erases every mark that man makes in its amoral destructive forces.

Karnad in his plays toys with this understanding of Knowledge and man's seeking the same in different ways. Karnad openly claims in the voice of Yavakri in *The Fire and the Rain*, that "Knowledge is time. It is space" (13). But even acknowledges, "I know now what can't be achieved. That itself is wisdom, isn't it?" (14), in the voice of the same seeker of Universal Knowledge. What remains most satirical is Karnad's use of "isn't it," Yavakri's seeking the sanction from , his beloved; a man who had attained the Universal Knowledge from God Indra himself, looking out to a woman he had left behind in search of Truth, seems risible and sarcastic.

Knowledge had often been seen as the domain of men. Though the names of Gargi and Maitreyee during the Early Vedic civilization, women were kept out of the domain of knowledge from later Vedic Age. Vedas were solely given to the men for gaining and dissipating knowledge. Men had acquired knowledge and ousted women from its premises. While commenting thus we have to understand that here the Knowledge talked of is the knowledge gained from the Vedas and the Upanishads that which had been written in Sanskrit. The sanskritized knowledge filtered to pure men, the Brahmins, had been considered to become defiled with the presence of women into the knowledge arena.

This knowledge which is kept pure and intact in the hands of men is the knowledge that is contained in the books. However knowledge is not solely limited to the purview of books. There is a knowledge which is mystical and is plumbed through intuition or cognition. The Knowledge contained in Mother Nature or the primordial and primeval everywhere is knowledge which men fail to grasp. Though Knowledge is contained by men in the receptacle of their mind, the flow of knowledge in life is felt and continued by women.

Yavakri in spite of his Knowledge of the Universe could not prognosticate his death or prevent it. Though he used Vishakha and toyed with her love and sensuality only to invoke the ire of Raibhya, his uncle and Vishakha's father in law, he failed to predict the magnanimity of the old man's strength of knowledge. Raibhya's attacking Yavakri with the aid of Brahma Rakshasha whom he had brought to existence with the sole aim of killing Yavakri; was done with the dual aim of distracting Parvasu, his son in the last phase of his fire sacrifice and avenging Vishakha for her relationship with Yavakri.

Raibhya's sense of revenge was for his sense of injured merit, whereby his son Parvasu was chosen as the Chief Priest or the fire sermon, while he considered a superior to his son in Knowledge had not been considered the right person for the seven- year long sacrifice for his age. Aged though, he claims that he would be feeding the souls of his sons and would die after his sons. His hatred for Vishakha arises from, as Vishakha recognises, the "curdled lust" (Karnad *Fire* 33) of an aged man whose sadism is what remains of his life. Parvasu in turn kills his father to make all even when he comes to realize Raibhya's intentions. All the three men, Raibhya, Parvasu and Yavakri fail to control their passion or vengeance or their Knowledge of the Universe or beyond, that could even compel the Gods to surrender to their will or rites.

Even for their austerities or their penance they failed to control their passions or their ire or even keep them away from their real deaths or their surrendering to the sins which had been forced to commit as their fears had propelled them into or as fortune had destined for them. Knowledge in spite of its magnanimous stature that scared the common people had failed to stop the big men from stooping to pettiness.

The plays of Karnad primarily centre around the themes of exchange of selves and transformation of subjectivity. The world of love and languish gets transformed to become complicated as the subjects in the play clash. The two protagonists in the play *Hayavadana* exchange heads and change roles to prove that they are none other than one and the same self divided into two

different existences. Karnad has deep insight into the human selves and different personalities in his characters conflate to form one being. On the other hand widely different traits within the same character creates rift in the personality of a single individual is a common motif in Karnad's perception. Karnad in his tales of love and hatred, envy and jealousy, creates characters who are unaware of the processes within themselves. The two characters not only exchange heads but even exchange knowledge begotten in them.

In *Naga-Mandala* the Naga reeling in love for Rani, the young adolescent bride takes over the form and countenance of her husband and wins over her love only to engage in a deep engagement of love and perfect reciprocation. There are hardly big and small, prominent or insignificant characters in Karnad. Instead Karnad's characters are steeped in emotions, deep seated and unaware of the self. Love is all, however love is no surrender, instead a terrible urge to possess. The husband to Rani, Appanna though never ever takes heed of his wife and is engaged in a relationship with the concubine of the village, as she is referred to by Kurudavva, becomes steeped in a sense of battered ego as his wife becomes pregnant.

However when the entire village stands stunned by the cobra hanging round her neck in the resemblance of a garland, and the entire world of creatures bless her, in spite of the fact that he had never touched his wife, he does not dare speak against her (Rani), not wait to find out the truth behind the natural birth of the child and the even more uncanny motherhood. Instead he kneels down before the wrath of nature that he believes had made possible the unnatural to take revenge upon his undue torture on his wife. The village eldersmen gather around Rani and claim her as the goddess as soon as the Naga sprawls its head above Rani's head. Patriarchy though takes the upper hand in judging the chastity of a woman, surrenders before a lame serpent considering it the most powerful, just and true. This incident actually changes the course of the play and brings about the real climax.

Hayavadana has two stories clubbed into one or the different rift in consciousness by the piling together of two different identities, the diverse notions of selves into one framework. The man with the horse's head which begins the narrative is complemented by the transportation of the heads of the two friends Devadutta and Kapila. Devadutta is the scholar with a strong mind, whereas Kapila is the able-bodied youth whose metallic body and virulence entices and charms Devadatta's wife Padmini. The two men bound in their love and friendship get separated in their jealousy and love for the lone woman Padmini. Padmini grows through the narrative and from a wife to a lover, she gains acquisition of her self and the self becomes too powerful to be captured within the barriers of the body and instead wafts into the elements. The three characters, Devadatta, Kapila and Padmini form a group but the unification remains incomplete until the end when the three characters ascend the funeral pyre and the two bodies of both the men are claimed as the bodies of her husband by Padmini.

In *Hayavadana* Devadatta and Kapila are friends, of the same age and both have an affinity for Padmini realized or unrealized. In *Naga-mandala* Rani gets wedded to Appanna while she finds her love in the character of the Naga who came before her in exactly the same face as her husband. In the frame narrative of *Hayavadana* the man has a horse's head. While the head that nods is that of the horse, the head that speaks is that of the human. The merging of the animal instincts and the human sensibilities make for a complete persona in Girish Karnad's plays.

In the play *The Fire and the Rain* Karnad also plays upon the theme of man and his duality, his mask, his face and its resemblances. The masks overpower often and the characters do not remain themselves, but often get transformed to become the *other* lurking within the self. In the *Notes to The Fire and the Rain*, Karnad writes:

Thus the phrase, *Agni Mattu Malé*, in addition to counterpointing two physical elements normally seen as antagonistic, also sets up several other oppositions: between an Indo-Aryan (Sanskrit) and

a Dravidian (Kannada) language, between the pan-Indic and the regional points of view, between the classical 'marga' and the less exalted 'desi' traditions, between the elevated and the mundane, and even perhaps between ...the sacred and the secular (*Notes The Fire and the Rain* 63).

Karnad's mythical approach is his using the myth as a psychological pattern which repeats itself. The human mind, as it reciprocates with nature, the inherent feeling of deep oneness between human mind and the primordial nature gets revealed in Karnad's plays. Karnad's plays are an attempt at postcolonial retaliation and expression of the self. As Anita Myles observes in *Contemporary Indian English Drama: An Overview*:

Girish Karnad extracts the material for his plot from history and mythology mostly but interprets the past in the context of contemporary relevance (Myles, 70)

Karnad's myths derived from the *Mahabharata* (*Yayati* and *The Fire and the Rain*), or *Kathasaritasagara* (*Hayavadana*) or evolving from folklores as in *Naga-Mandala* are highly functional in projecting themes of contemporary concerns. As given in K. Satchidanandan's *Myth in Contemporary Indian Literature*, "Indian myths in the hands of Girish Karnad prove to be vital, meaningful and inspirational" (Satchidanandan 189). He explores myths for a better understanding of the present situation.

The myths project the issues which Karnad brings in to hoist his plots that deal with identity crisis, change of subjects, assertion of female desire in the face of patriarchy, patriarchy's senile attempts to capture the wild moves of the women as powerful as nature and so on. These myths are Karnad's weapons in creating layers and transcending the inhibitions of space and time. The characters evolving from the myths are flesh and blood characters of this day. Karnad deftly carves the myths and frames the characters so as to create a perfect ambience for the projection of the plots.

As Hemandra Nath Das Gupta in *The Indian Theatre*, mentions, from the very beginning of drama, Indian drama had a unique "spirit and structure" (50) of the plays of Bhasa, Kalidasa, etc, we would be sure of the "independent" (50) origin of the Indian theatre. Karnad upholds this spirit and powerfully takes his plots to their fruition. Karnad alters the characters and gives them the dialogue which is spoken by the modern man.

Subjectivities clash and identities contest with each other as the characters churn themselves and often stand inward out. As pointed out in Nandi Bhatia's *Modern Indian Theatre*,

Karnad psychologises myth and produces characters with motivations hidden and apparent, transferred and accepted, self-divisions here are not played out within the heroic mode but within existentialist constraints of love. (Bhatia, 46-47).

The gross basic instincts innate in men get portrayed in the dolls bought from the fair for Padmini's son. The dolls comment on the hands as they hold them, soft or rough, they feel the presence of souls around them, speak to themselves, can read out the dreams which the characters tend to forget as they open their lids, can foresee the characters' lives and dreams and indulge in their instincts. The dolls, half humans, half dolls the dolls speak the inner minds of the characters. They are the primeval, the instincts which get preserved through ages. They can even be said to be live interpretation of the minds of the characters of the play *Hayavadana*. The dolls resemble human figures and man and woman as the two dolls are they reveal their gendered identity. They react to what the characters say, get agitated and even curse the characters as they plan to throw him out or buy new dolls—

They start arguing, then fighting. They roll on the ground, on top of each other, biting, scratching, hitting each other. They shout, scream and giggle. As they fight, the giggles become louder and more frantic. Their clothes get torn (Karnad *Hayavadana* 51).

As they read the dreams in the eyes of Padmini, her longing for the dark man with a broad back, they perceive Padmini's senses so intricately that her senses permeate through their beings and they fall upon one another, jostle and wriggle for a cause unknown and thus tear apart their clothes. All in tatters, gasping they prognosticate the spent lovers after coition. They actually foresee and foretell the consummation of Padmini and Kapila in the forest, amidst the density of nature and the distance from human presence. In this dense darkness nature prevails and so does the natural instinct in man. The characters get out of the made up concerns posed by the society symbolized in the clothes which become redundant as Padmini and Kapila reach their completion in their union after prolonged grief and unrest.

The three plays of Karnad which are of concern in this paper all deal with a mythical core which is nonetheless mystical. The mysticism which is prevalent in the text baffle the mind of the audience and readers alike. Nature runs through the plays of Karnad and one can feel the presence of nature as the susurrations of blood in his plays.

The emblem of the two headed birds on the doorway of Padmini in *Hayavadana* gives an insight into Karnad's deep desire or interest in playing with the dual processes of human mind. The human mind is full of limitless ambitions, desires and longings. However these longings and desires remain unfulfilled and create a repressed sense of desire within the psyche. These repressed desires symbolically transform through his imagination. The understanding of life along with the certain elements which are large within our consciousness and certain elements which we do not understand, all come together and create a fudge in our mind.

Karnad creates a world of his own mostly in the three plays *Naga-Mandala*, *Hayavadana* and *The Fire and the Rain*. In these plays a difficult environment; the environment which has a momentum in itself, an element of animism spread throughout these texts come up. Whether from the symbol of the dolls in *Hayavadana* or the symbol of the sacrificial fire where Padmini ascends the funeral pyre of Kapila and Devadatta and becomes a sati or the Sacrifice of Yavakri, where he stands in the circle of fire and offers his limbs to God Indra or even in the transposition of heads of Kapila and Devadatta, everywhere is a reality which goes beyond mundane reality. The conceived world on the other hand is a dream world where the traces of the unconscious become active and act as in the conscious realm.

The division or the margin between the consciousness and unconscious gets blurred and the unconscious takes over the consciousness in the world of Karnad. The world where everything happens on a psychic plane, Rani the adolescent young girl in *Naga-Mandala* starts conceiving of the world as she would have it. She finds an Eagle, a stag with the golden antler, a big whale or even the snake, the Naga coming to her aid to rescue her from the grim reality of life. Life becomes exactly as she had wanted with the love of her husband in the form of Naga who had resembled her husband and with all the security that society can afford to a married woman and the comforts of home and hearth with the concubine acting as her maid .

Similarly in *Hayavadana* Padmini has the chance of transforming the man she had desired with Devadatta's head and Kapila's robust body into one form, whereby she can get whatever her heart desires. After that transposition of the head of Kapila and Devadatta, the person who emerges with Devadatta's head and Kapila's body becomes actually possible. In *The Fire and the Rain* even Yavakri can realize his heart's desires by compelling God into listening to his wishes and fulfilling them. Throughout the play whatever happens at times becomes realisation of the desires or the unconscious of the characters. The characters have their due and their turn and powerful consciousness makes whatever comes to their mind or consciousness get transformed to a reality which is more real than what happens on the reality's plane.

The presence of the dolls who tear each others' clothes out of sheer desire for each other projects them as bearing a mark of the force which surpasses human will or rationality. Desire in Padmini

for Kapila gets its full realisation after the transposition of the heads. These dolls which were actually play things and something that had been naive and innocent for the child were transformed into entities which have an urge of their own that can realize human desire and human intentions. The great notion of feelings and emotions which the playwright projects in his three plays *Hayavadana*, *Naga-Mandala* and *The Fire and the Rain* all have traces of nature in them. These elements of nature build blocks of aspirations not only for the human mind but also for nature. It is not only the unconscious which is at play or that which comes up out of its repression but there are also certain things which nature itself had designed much before humans had had an inkling of it. The characters do not become real characters but become certain agencies which are executed through them. If in *Naga-Mandala*, Rani becomes a powerful emblem of a woman who goes beyond her simple life of a girl newly married to become a woman, to one who could control her life, her family, her husband and even nature itself, she becomes a part of the female agency which are found in Kurudavva, in the demon woman who comes up again and again before Kappanna and also the elements of nature who somehow brew within are all visible in Karnad's plays.

The processes of nature are all in one way or the other feminine in their exploitation by the men. If the dog in *Naga-Mandala* is a representation of the tortures of the male world and the mongoose in a way repeats that, it is the snake who as the prey acts as an agency that represents nature and hence is feminine. It might be said in this regard that how can the Naga who acts as the male and the lover to Rani be regarded as a female agency without a female form? However it can be said that it is because of this common tendency of being exploited and tortured by the male patriarchy that these two elements of nature, the female agency and Rani and the feminine agency in the Naga come together to each others' aid. Both Rani and the Naga come together in their love and reciprocation, their close bonding emerging from the nature of exploitation that had been meted out to them in the hands of men. As Rani ends the play with, "The hair is a symbol of my wedded bliss. Live in there happily, for ever" (Karnad *Naga-Mandala* 46). The male factor had ever considered things on rational parameters where rationality does not hold good in Karnad's plays, especially the three plays that have been taken into concern.

The plays of Girish Karnad have in them a dire urge to fulfil whatever one's heart desires. Everyone is intent on fulfilling his desire even at the cost of one's life. Rani has her desire of her husband's love, Naga has his desire of meeting the Naga woman with long tresses, the Yaksha woman ultimately takes Kappanna out of his mother's grasp and Padmini has her wish fulfilled. In each case life transcends the rational parameters and for men and women in the rational world there are numerous observations through which one can understand how to create an unreal reality where everything is possible only because it is what the heart desires. The woman's heart is given absolute power to create a world of their own where she becomes the all powerful and ultimate.

The men in Karnad's plays are certainly duped and beguiled in the hands of women. They might be sagacious or might have attained ultimate knowledge but they have to kowtow before the women. Whether it is Arvasu who surrenders before Nittilai and gives away his Brahmanism to live a life with a tribal girl Nittilai, it is Yavakri who though attains ultimate knowledge fails to resist the longings of. Vishakha becomes more powerful even without her knowledge and the Innocent Rani becomes more powerful than Appanna, much older to her. Though Appanna is quite sure that he had been duped by nature and cheated by Rani, still he fails to claim and has to accept the reality as it is the society's order to accept Rani as his own. This makes Appanna, a cheated character and at the same time appears foolish in spite of his awareness of the world. Both the men Kapila and Devadatta fail to trammel their emotions and succumb to the failure which they think have come to them because of the presence of Padmini. Padmini becomes all powerful and life moves only as for her whims and desires. She has her due and though in the end everyone takes to death it is her entity which gets spread throughout the forest and she remains a part of the

environment, intact. The men merely end their lives to cease the dual conflict brewing in their bodies and minds.

Vishakha becomes the protagonist who actually makes the entire play move around her. If it is Parvasu who gets married to her and leaves no pore of her unturned, it is Yavakri who in spite of his knowledge fails to go beyond her charms. It is also because of her that the fight between Arvasu and his father begins and this leads to the ultimate doom of Arvasu. While had known what it is to “grow heavy, burst open, drip and rot, to fill the world with one’s innards” (Karnad *The Fire* 16), Yavakri remained engrossed in his adolescent fantasies of Vishaka’s breasts.

Arvasu and Parvasu and even the other male characters fail to conquer the world even with their wisdom. Though Vishakha tells Yavakri, “Indra may be immortal. But... my breasts hang loose now,” (Karnad *The Fire* 14), it is Vishakha’s essence and the reality of her presence which leaves the indelible mark upon Yavakri even after ten years of silence, solitude, abstinence and even for his ultimate wisdom. Though Indra had come before him and Yavakri had been graced with ultimate knowledge, the remembrances and the understanding of those moments or the wisdom given to him had all left a vague trail in his mind. The nebulousness of the presence of Indra, whom it had taken him ten years to appease and the presence of Vishakha whom it was quite easy to deny and leave alone for ten years, stand challenging one another with the obvious victory for Vishakha .

Yavakri’s knowledge itself had eluded him as had his passions which had failed to quit in spite of the rigorous penance. The more had he lived an austere life, the more he failed to satiate his hunger. The knowledge far from resolving the quickness of his senses had left them exactly in place as he had left them ten years before. Paravasu had “used my body, and his own body, like an experimenter, an explorer” (16), as Vishakha accuses before Yavakri. Paravasu had extracted the bodies as his own object of search, if it had been the extent to which one could indulge in their bodies and get driven to a “Mystical” (16) or “Spiritual” (16) experience. Whatever the nature of the search or whatsoever the attainment, both Yavakri and Paravasu end their search in a woman and her self.