Anusandhanvallari
Vol 2026, No.1
November 2026
ISSN 2229-3388

Masks of Power: Karnad's Theatre and the Politics of Identity

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Abstract: Girish Karnad's theatre play is little different from other plays he showcases his individuality by masking his play through history, myth and folklore. He always tries to mask up his broken characters through metaphor. In *Hayavadana* the character *Hayavadana* is a hybrid human who is not confident, he is totally masked up and fragile. In the play *Nagamandala* Karnad use folklore as a mediator to mask the female desire, still he explains the quietness of the victim. Karnad has his way of showing how power works in this society by shifting specification. He has a prism of authority, fidelity of refraction. His play always encourages female perspective from their mind rather than a man's point of view of thinking from a woman's mind.

Keywords: Mask, Victim, Myth, Folklore, Fragile, Politics, Theatre, Power, Dramatizing Fragmentation, Hybridity, and Transformation

Introduction:

Girish Karnad has a unique way of voicing out the society issue through myth, history and folklore in modern theatre culture, he has a perspective of interrogating the society by breaking their power and identity. His dramaturgy is precises in complexities of contemporary engagement by masking the metaphor. Karnad hide's and seeks, protects and destroys. In his play he uses mask as a theatrical prop but he symbolizes and frame work structure with the power of authority, fidelity and self-view.

Karnad has a habit of showing politics through his characters in theatre with powerful content and role play by oscillating between the aspiring problems in the society. In his play Tughlaq, he portrays a visionary leadership which has a view of exposing instability through reformist. In *Hayavadana*, the main character symbolises the mask of hybridity longing for wholeness, he longs the human identity. Same happens in *Nagamandala* but here the main female character masks her feelings and couldn't express herself, how could she express when she herself doesn't know what she wants. Karnad tries to speak the characters mind which might see covered for others but still truth.

In this journal it talks about Karndad's postcolonial debate on governance, his unique approach on feminist point of view in a piece of their mind. By unmasking the metaphor and structural point of view. This paper exposes Karnad's contradictions inherit in authority over identity in the play opens about how people play with power by masking their intention, where no one would know their intention is it pure or vile.

Masks of Power: Karnad's Theatre and the Politics of Identity:

Karnad's stagecraft the mask works as literal stage element in theatre using it as a metaphorical aspect that questions the identity. The person who wears mask are always one who hides their feelings are identity behind it. It might be innocence or happiness or vile thought or anything which the society would normally won't accept or the person might not be feeling to speak their mind thinking how others would react. In Karnad's theatre he uses Yakshagana and folklore as his way of direction. He tries to differentiate his work by transforming the writer's perspective. Mostly his works or rework by highlighting the identity by stabilizing the characters importance where the character doesn't speak his mind or when it's shown to stand up for the protagonist. In politics mask becomes an authority to showcase their power through hiding their intentions or goodwill, even

when the person is vile and they cannot showcase it publicly so mask is very important to conceal their intentions. (Karnad, *Hayavadana*, Mee)

It stands as an aspiration of real and reel life to dramatize the fragile balance by wearing the mask. Karnad writes his plays by postcolonial border disclosing the power performed by contesting the ultimately unmasking the antagonist. In the play *Tughlaq* the writer dramatizes how Muhammad Bin Tughlaq rules his reformist by masking the illusion. The Sulthan's vision he shifts the internal system and opportunism by presenting a bold gesture in leadership yet it collapses under his rule. His mask of authority showcases both illusive and defensive, it protects Tughlaq from swift of covering the deep fractures within the government. Karnad has a way of precariousness of leading and relying on spectacle way of narrating the structural form. In this play he talks about political allegory, exposing how powered people rule by masking their charisma, by risking their own identity and their vile thoughts. (Dharwadker)

In *Hayavadana* the mask of hybridity is fragmented identity. *Hayavadana* opens to the new world of instability by portraying the protagonist by a hybrid like horse head. Later in the play the body swap happens between Devdatta and Kapila. About the hybridity the mask standardizes the wholeness by showing the incompleteness as the condition exists in human world. In the play *Hayavadana* gets complete at the end by transforming into pure white celestial horse, still *Hayavadana* wanted to be a human but he becomes a celestial being. The writer always puts a debate on cyborgs and fragmented selves; it's beyond human expectation. The play shows the desire and fidelity are to themselves by masking the roles posing the cultural expectation being stable. In the work of Karnad, he mentions desire and fidelity for the characters by masking their roles, he presses the cultural variation rather than stabilizing and opening up the truth. To critics Karnads work it's to mention the coherence in finding identity, dramatizing hybridity, foregrounding the broken nature of our human society and subjectivity. (Karnad)

In *Nagamandala* the mask is about the folklore in female desire. This play happens to be an oral folklore it talks about silencing women's desire or feelings, where they are not allowed to talk their mind. It was told that giving too much of space to an women will give them head weight or they will forget their space. Same happens with the main character Rani, she gets married in young age, her parents think that's what is good for her. She gets an abusive husband and a life which she doesn't like. Slowly the magical world starts to unveil. The serpent takes the mask of love by taking her husband's form, which makes her hard to recognize. Rani becomes the victim but when she gets pregnant her husband plays the victim card claiming that he never touched her. Which leaves Rani at shock she claims that the child belongs to Appana. This play is a folklore mediocre the narrator of this play is a lamp. This mask empowers Rani's longing and her desired in the patriarchal structure. She finds the courage to talk her mind, but when she speaks the society thinks, she was a descent of goddess. In this play the critiques mainly focusing on conservative system and reinforcing in system. They play the critiques in politics of fidelity by showcasing how women should speak or behave by wearing a mask for this society to please the male chauvinistic society by not hurting their pride. In this play the political view of fidelity shows how women shut their thoughts under tradition by masking it and re-imaging the space of possibility. (Karnad)

According to Karnad's theatre he uses structural principles to mask the characters thoughts output, mask emerging to not indicate the system to the principal structure that shapes the narration and the outline. He has a way of lining the power, fidelity, identity by using myth, folklore and history. His work always tends to focus on fusion of tradition and modernity, the mask always exaggerates the nature of power, the fear of identity reveals in this fragile social class. Karnad always finds a way to unveil the truth by exposing the power-play, fidelity, abusive leadership and breaking the illusion. In the postcolonial era he was the one to perform power by inseparably unmasking everything eventually without hurting the victim's pride, instead he stands up for them and make them understand their self-respect is more important than anything. (Dharwadker)

In Girish Karnad's theatre, the mask functions not merely as a physical object used in performance but also as a metaphor for the complex relationship between identity, power, desire, and social expectations. A mask can conceal a person's emotions, intentions, fears, and vulnerabilities while presenting an acceptable identity to the outside world. People often hide their true feelings because they fear social rejection, criticism, or the consequences of expressing thoughts that challenge established norms. A mask may represent innocence, happiness, authority, loyalty, or even hostility concealed beneath a respectable appearance. Thus, the act of masking becomes a means through which individuals negotiate their identities within the boundaries imposed by society.

Karnad's dramatic art draws significantly upon Indian mythology, folklore, history, and indigenous theatrical traditions, particularly Yakshagana. By incorporating these traditional elements into modern drama, he creates a theatrical space in which questions of identity and power can be explored through symbolic representation, dramatic conflict, and the reinterpretation of inherited narratives. His characters frequently occupy unstable positions between their public identities and private desires. They perform roles that are shaped by cultural expectations, political circumstances, familial obligations, and personal ambitions. These performances reveal that identity is not always a fixed or transparent expression of the self; it can also be constructed, concealed, and manipulated according to the demands of a particular situation. (Mee)

The concept of the mask is especially significant when examined through the political and social dimensions of Karnad's plays. In political life, authority often depends upon the image that a leader creates before the public. A ruler may present himself as a visionary reformer while concealing insecurity, ambition, or the contradictions within his administration. Similarly, individuals living within patriarchal societies may suppress their desires and emotions to maintain social acceptance. The mask therefore becomes a means of understanding how power operates not only through direct control but also through appearances, expectations, and the regulation of identity. (Dharwadker)

Karnad's *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, and *Nagamandala* provide distinct perspectives on these concerns. In *Tughlaq*, the performance of political authority exposes the distance between a ruler's public vision and the consequences of his decisions. In *Hayavadana*, the instability of bodily identity challenges conventional ideas of completeness and selfhood. In *Nagamandala*, folklore becomes a space in which female desire and identity emerge within a patriarchal structure that attempts to regulate women's behavior. Although the plays differ in their narrative sources and dramatic concerns, they share an interest in the conflict between appearance and reality, public identity and private experience, and established social roles and individual aspirations. (Karnad)

This paper examines the mask as a critical metaphor for understanding the politics of identity in Karnad's theatre. It argues that masking operates at several interconnected levels as a theatrical device, a performance of political authority, a representation of fragmented identity, and a means of negotiating gendered expectations. Through an analysis of the selected plays, the paper explores how Karnad uses myth, history, folklore, and indigenous theatrical conventions to question the apparent stability of identity and expose the tensions underlying social and political power. (Dharwadker)

The Mask as a Theatrical Device and a Metaphor for Identity:

The mask occupies an important position in theatrical traditions across cultures. As a physical object, it transforms the performer's appearance and enables the representation of characters, emotions, supernatural beings, and symbolic figures. In traditional Indian performance forms, masks and other styled theatrical conventions can help create a world in which ordinary reality intersects with myth, ritual, imagination, and collective memory. Within such a theatrical framework, the mask does more than hide the performer's face it can create an alternative identity and establish a relationship between the individual performer, the character, and the audience.

Karnad's engagement with indigenous theatre allows him to explore the possibilities of theatrical representation beyond the conventions of psychological realism. His use of folklore, symbolic characters, narrators, and styled performance techniques draws attention to the constructed nature of theatrical identity. The audience is encouraged to recognize that what appears on stage is simultaneously a representation and an interpretation of reality. This theatrical self-awareness becomes particularly relevant when characters themselves perform identities that differ from their inner experiences. (Mee)

The metaphorical mask can be understood as the difference between what an individual feels and what that individual chooses to reveal. A character may perform happiness while experiencing dissatisfaction, demonstrate loyalty while harbouring resentment, or express moral certainty while struggling with conflicting desires. Such contradictions are not limited to fictional characters they also reflect the ways in which individuals adapt their behavior to the expectations of families, communities, institutions, and political systems.

In Karnad's plays, identity frequently emerges through these contradictions. Characters are shaped by the roles assigned to them, yet they do not always conform entirely to those roles. Their actions reveal the tension between personal desire and social obligation, individual freedom and collective expectation, and internal experience and public performance. The mask thus becomes a useful critical concept for examining how identity is constructed through relationships with others.

The mask also raises questions about the relationship between concealment and revelation. Although it hides certain aspects of the individual, it may simultaneously reveal the pressures that make concealment necessary. A character who suppresses a desire may expose the social structure that prohibits its expression. A ruler who depends upon an image of authority may reveal the insecurity underlying that authority. Similarly, a woman who is forced to perform an acceptable version of femininity may expose the cultural expectations that restrict her freedom.

Karnad's theatre therefore invites an interpretation of the mask as both a protective mechanism and a potential instrument of control. It may provide individuals with a means of survival within restrictive social environments, but it may also prevent them from expressing their identities freely. This dual function becomes particularly visible in *Tughlaq*, where political authority depends upon public appearances, and in *Nagamandala*, where female identity is judged through patriarchal definitions of virtue and respectability.

The relationship between masks and identity is also connected to Karnad's use of folklore and myth. Traditional narratives often contain transformations, disguises, supernatural interventions, and exchanges of identity. By reworking these narrative elements, Karnad creates situations in which the apparent unity of the individual becomes uncertain. His characters are compelled to confront the instability of the identities they inhabit, while the audience is encouraged to question the cultural assumptions through which identity is defined. (Ramanujan)

The mask, in this sense, becomes more than a decorative or performative object. It represents the continuous negotiation between the self and society. Through this metaphor, Karnad examines how individuals are shaped by power, how they respond to social restrictions, and how the revelation of concealed identities can challenge established systems of authority.

Hybridity, Fragmented Identity, and the Mask of Completeness in *Hayavadana*:

In *Hayavadana*, Karnad shifts the discussion of masking from political authority to the philosophical and psychological dimensions of identity. The play questions the assumption that the individual possesses a stable and unified self that can be clearly defined through the body, intellect, emotions, or social position. Through mythological and folkloric elements, Karnad creates a dramatic world in which identity becomes fragmented, uncertain, and subject to transformation. (Karnad)

The character of *Hayavadana*, who possesses a human body and a horse's head, introduces the problem of incompleteness from the beginning of the play. His condition places him between conventional categories of human and animal identity. He does not fully belong to either category, and his desire to become complete reflects the pressure to conform to an established understanding of what a person should be.

Hayavadana 's physical appearance can be interpreted as a mask that makes his difference visible. Unlike a conventional mask that conceals the face, his horse's head reveals the instability of his identity. His body becomes a site upon which the boundaries between human and animal, natural and supernatural, and complete and incomplete are challenged. His condition raises questions about whether identity depends upon physical appearance or whether it can be understood through a more complex relationship between the body and the self.

The problem of identity becomes more complicated through the exchange of heads between Devadatta and Kapila. The transformation creates a conflict between bodily identity and mental identity, challenging the assumption that the self can be located in a single, unchanging physical form. Devadatta's head on Kapila's body and Kapila's head on Devadatta's body create competing claims about who each man has become. Padmini's response further complicates the question because her attraction to the two men is connected to their different physical and intellectual qualities.

The exchanged heads function as a theatrical device through which Karnad exposes the inadequacy of fixed definitions of identity. The characters attempt to establish certainty through the familiar categories of body, intellect, social relationship, and personal history. Yet these categories no longer provide an uncomplicated answer. The individual becomes a combination of conflicting attributes, and the desire to identify a single, authentic self remains unresolved.

The mask of completeness is particularly significant in this context. Devadatta and Kapila represent different qualities that Padmini finds attractive, while their transformed bodies challenge the social and philosophical assumptions through which identity is understood. Their experiences suggest that the ideal of a complete individual may itself be a cultural construction. The attempt to reconcile incompatible aspects of the self does not necessarily lead to harmony; it may instead reveal the contradictions that make identity unstable.

Padmini's character adds another dimension to this problem. Her desires do not conform neatly to conventional expectations of feminine loyalty and marital fulfilment. She experiences an attraction that cannot be reduced to a single set of physical or intellectual qualities. Her choices expose the tension between personal desire and the social roles through which women are expected to define themselves.

The play's engagement with Yakshagana and other folk-theatrical conventions strengthens its exploration of unstable identity. Masks, symbolic performance, music, the presence of the Bhagavata, and the interaction between narration and dramatic action remind the audience that identity is being constructed and represented on stage. The theatrical form does not merely communicate the problem of identity it also makes the audience conscious of the processes through which characters and performers assume different roles. (Mee)

Hayavadana 's final transformation into a horse, while retaining the ability to speak, offers an especially revealing conclusion. His desire to become a complete human being does not produce the expected result. Instead, his transformation takes him further away from conventional human identity. The ending complicates the assumption that completeness necessarily means conformity to a predetermined ideal.

The play can therefore be read as a critique of the desire to establish identity through fixed categories. The mask of completeness represents the expectation that individuals should possess a coherent and socially recognizable identity. Karnad challenges this expectation by presenting characters whose identities are shaped by contradictory physical, psychological, and emotional experiences.

Through *Hayavadana*, the politics of identity emerges as a struggle between individual complexity and the social desire for stable classifications. The play suggests that the self cannot always be reduced to a single feature or role. By dramatizing fragmentation, hybridity, and transformation, Karnad exposes the limitations of cultural expectations that demand a unified and complete identity.

The Mask of Desire and Patriarchal Authority in *Nagamandala*:

In *Nagamandala*, the metaphor of the mask acquires a gendered dimension. Karnad draws upon folklore and oral storytelling to examine how women's identities and desires are shaped by patriarchal expectations. The play presents a social environment in which a woman's worth is closely associated with her conduct as a wife, her sexual fidelity, and her conformity to established ideas of femininity. Within this structure, women may be compelled to conceal their emotions and desires in order to preserve social acceptance. (Karnad)

Rani's experiences illustrate the consequences of such expectations. Married at a young age, she enters a relationship in which her emotional needs are neglected and her freedom is restricted. Appanna's treatment of her reveals a marital arrangement that grants the husband considerable authority while denying the wife an equivalent degree of personal autonomy. Rani's isolation makes her position particularly vulnerable because her identity is defined primarily through her relationship with her husband.

The mask in this play is not initially a physical object worn by Rani. It is the socially acceptable identity she is expected to inhabit. She is required to perform the role of a dutiful wife even when the marriage fails to provide companionship, affection, or emotional security. Her silence becomes a form of adaptation to a social order that offers limited space for the expression of female dissatisfaction.

The arrival of the serpent, who assumes Appanna's appearance, complicates the relationship between identity and appearance. Because the serpent takes the form of Rani's husband, she encounters a figure whose outward identity is familiar but whose behavior differs from that of Appanna during the day. The disguise creates a distinction between appearance and experiences the same visible identity becomes associated with two contrasting forms of behavior.

This transformation raises questions about the relationship between identity, desire, and recognition. Rani responds to the figure she encounters at night without fully understanding the deception that structures their relationship. The serpent's assumed appearance makes the boundaries between husband, lover, and supernatural figure uncertain. The mask of the husband's identity therefore becomes a narrative device through which Karnad explores the complexity of desire and the limitations of socially established categories.

The play also exposes the unequal standards through which men and women are judged. When Rani becomes pregnant, Appanna denies having a relationship with her and questions her fidelity. The burden of proving sexual purity falls upon Rani, even though the circumstances of her experience are not understood by the community. Her identity becomes subject to public scrutiny, and her personal reality is subordinated to collective assumptions about female virtue.

The serpent ordeal provides a crucial moment in the politics of identity. Rani is required to demonstrate her chastity through a public ritual that allows the community to determine whether she is a virtuous woman. Her acceptance depends not simply on her experience but on the interpretation of that experience by others. The ritual thus reveals how patriarchal society exercises power by defining the conditions under which a woman may be recognized as honorable. (Karnad)

The mask of respectability is especially important here. Rani's social position improves when the community interprets the outcome of the ordeal as evidence of her extraordinary virtue. Yet this recognition does not necessarily dismantle the social system that placed her under suspicion in the first place. Instead, her acceptance is secured through a culturally intelligible explanation that preserves the authority of existing beliefs.

Karnad's use of the frame narrative and personified storytelling elements further complicates the relationship between truth and social judgement. The play begins with a storytelling framework in which stories possess a life of their own, suggesting that narratives can survive, change, and acquire new meanings through repetition. Folklore becomes a space in which experiences excluded from conventional social discourse can be represented through magical and symbolic forms. (Ramanujan)

The serpent can therefore be interpreted as a figure through which suppressed desire becomes narrative visible. However, the play does not offer a simple resolution in which female freedom is fully achieved. Rani gains social recognition, but that recognition remains connected to the cultural values through which her community understands chastity and virtue. Her transformation reveals both the possibilities and the limitations of negotiating power from within an established social structure.

The politics of fidelity in *Nagamandala* thus extends beyond the question of whether Rani is faithful to her husband. It concerns who has the authority to define fidelity, whose experiences are accepted as truth, and whose identity is placed under public judgement. Karnad exposes the contradiction of a social system that demands female virtue while failing to provide women with emotional freedom and equal authority. (Hazarika)

Through folklore, the play makes visible the relationship between gender, identity, and power. Rani's story demonstrates that the mask of the ideal wife can conceal loneliness, desire, and dissatisfaction, while the mask assumed by the serpent destabilizes the distinction between socially accepted identity and private experience. Karnad thereby creates a dramatic space in which patriarchal assumptions can be questioned and the complexities of female identity brought to the foreground.

Conclusion:

Girish Karnad has a way to recognizance the importance of identity based on their authority which never gets fixed by his exceptional narrative skill and displaying it through his direction in the theatre. As for the mask of metaphor, he purposely uses the victim's fragile nature to expose the power of their nature of self-hood. In the play *Tughlaq*, the leader's visionary gets collapsed under his systematic contradiction, exposing the hazardous reformist to his ambition. In *Hayavadana* hybridity show the wholeness, by dramatizing the impossibility of achieving their fullness within their soul, body and mind. To find the human identity to get self-fulfilment by identifying their desire. Same in *Nagamandala*, Karnad uses folklore to confess female desires. Where in this society the women are being silenced simultaneously, they are not let to speak their mind or let them enjoy their happiness. Always a lady has to put her family first before marriage her father and brothers' choices and after marriage her husband and sons' preference comes first. Her choices are never asked, even she never dares to dream or do what she likes to do.

All considered together, Karnad's play illustrates how mask functions as a structural principle. He always does rule over myth, folklore and history. He has a way of unmasking everything using traditionalism and modernity. He was an aspiring director with constraint by converging their performance of power. Karnad always makes sure to stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves. Even it happened in past he made sure to write as a play or direct in theatre he gets the justice served for the victim. (Dharwadker)

This paper shows the Karnad's dramaturgy's vital focus for making sure of political view during the postcolonial writings in our country. His work always reminds us about the misuse of power, prevaricating the patriarchal society he takes stand for women and the weak ones. He is a great critique and transformer. Who uses resistance as a tool to continue his theatre work by resonate as a commentary complexity of identity, fidelity and leadership in contemporary society.

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