

SINESTESIEONLINE

SUPPLEMENTO DELLA RIVISTA «SINESTESIE»

ISSN 2280-6849

a. XII, n. 40, 2023

RUBRICA «IL PARLAGGIO»

Embracing the Uncharted: Unveiling the Resurgence of Historical Forms in Contemporary Indian Theatre through Girish Karnad's Tughlaq and Nagamandala

QUEEN SARKAR BANERJEE

ABSTRACT

The realm of theatre and performing arts has undergone a captivating evolution, leaving an indelible mark on the creative landscape. This research embarks on an intriguing exploration of contemporary Indian theatre, delving into the resurgence of historical forms that defy traditional boundaries and breathe new life into the stage. Through an examination of seminal works such as Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* and *Nagamandala*, this study seeks to unravel the intricate threads connecting past and present, shedding light on how historical ages continue to shape and inspire contemporary theatrical expression. Drawing on constructivist narratology and rhetorical analysis, this study aims to explore how Karnad crafts narratives that blend historical contexts with contemporary themes, examining the underlying motivations and artistic choices behind the use of specific historical forms. The research delves into the transformative power of theatrical forms that transcend their historical context, pushing the boundaries of convention and propelling the performing arts into uncharted territories. By adopting an interdisciplinary lens, this study uncovers the interplay between tradition and innovation as contemporary Indian theatre

weaves together a rich tapestry of historical influences with fresh and daring artistic visions. Furthermore, this research paper contributes to the ongoing dialogue surrounding the revitalization of traditional theatrical practices and their relevance in a contemporary context. Through a meticulous analysis of Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* and *Nagamandala*, this study examines how these plays bridge the gap between historical forms and contemporary variations. By shedding light on the artistic choices made by Karnad, the study unravels the potential for theatre to serve as a transformative force, pushing boundaries and inspiring audiences to question, engage, and reimagine the world around them.

KEYWORDS: Indian theatre, performing arts, historical forms, resurgence

AUTORE

*Queen Sarkar Banerjee is Assistant Professor-II (English) at the School of Social, Financial & Human Sciences
of the Kalinga Institute of Technology (KIIT), Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India.*

queensarkar.08@gmail.com

Introduction

As the dimmed lights set the stage aglow, the curtains rise, revealing a captivating world that transcends time and space. Theatre, a majestic realm where stories come alive, has wielded its enchanting power to captivate audiences since time immemorial. It serves as a medium of boundless artistic expression, etching indelible memories in the hearts of those who experience its allure. Throughout history, the realm of performing arts has undergone a magnificent metamorphosis, continuously defying conventions and embracing novel forms of creativity. Amidst this ever-evolving landscape, contemporary Indian theatre emerges as a resplendent force, breathing life into ancient traditions while interweaving the tapestry of the past and the present in awe-inspiring ways. Within the embrace of this theatrical symphony, the heritage of historical forms becomes a gateway to a kaleidoscope of emotions, ideologies, and artistic visions. Indian theatre, with its profound respect for tradition, fearlessly ventures into uncharted territories, infusing vibrant hues of modernity into age-old narratives. The theatrical landscape of India is a captivating mosaic adorned with a myriad of diverse forms, each weaving its own unique tapestry of artistic expression. From the grandeur of ancient Sanskrit dramas to the vibrant hues of colorful folk performances, from the soul-stirring melodies of musical extravaganzas to the avant-garde experiments pushing the boundaries of the art form, Indian theatre showcases an extraordinary range of creativity. From the grand proscenium stages of metropolitan theatres to the intimate village gatherings, Indian theatre finds expression in a multitude of spaces. It transcends geographical boundaries, capturing the hearts and minds of audiences across the nation and beyond. It is a celebration of the human spirit, a mirror that reflects society's joys, struggles, and aspirations.

And at the forefront of this artistic revolution stands the luminary playwright Girish Karnad, whose works shine as exemplary embodiments of this transformative spirit. Drawing inspiration from the annals of history, Karnad weaves intricate tales that pulsate with life, resonating deeply with contemporary themes and sensibilities. In his masterful creations, Karnad skillfully fuses the ancient and the present, summoning the spirits of bygone eras to dance in harmony with the aspirations and dilemmas of today. Through his compelling narratives, he invites audiences to embark on an immersive journey, where the boundaries of time blur, and the past reverberates with relevance. Karnad's theatrical oeuvre is a testament to the richness of Indian culture, shedding light on forgotten legends and untold stories, while offering profound insights into the human condition. The vibrant tapestry of contemporary Indian theatre, with Karnad's brilliance at its

heart, resonates as a testament to the enduring power of the performing arts. It is a testament to the human yearning for self-expression, reflection, and connection, transcending geographical and temporal boundaries. As the curtains descend on each performance, the audience is left in awe, transformed by the magic of theatre, forever enchanted by the symphony of history and innovation that echoes through the halls. This research paper embarks on a theatrical journey through Karnad's seminal works, *Tughlaq* and *Nagamandala*. These two phenomenal works serve as our guides as we navigate the uncharted territory where historical forms resurge with fervor, enthralling audiences and sparking conversations that transcend time. By delving into the intricacies of these plays, we seek to unravel the rich tapestry of historical influences that shape contemporary Indian theatre, examining the motivations and artistic choices behind the use of specific historical forms.

Tughlaq, first published in 1964, and staged in 1965 in Kannada transports us to the turbulent reign of Muhammad bin Tughlaq, the 14th-century Sultan of Delhi. Karnad's portrayal of this historical figure becomes a vessel through which he examines the timeless themes of power, idealism, and the complexities of governance. Tughlaq's reign, marked by his visionary yet flawed decisions, becomes a mirror reflecting the inherent paradoxes of human nature and the consequences of unchecked authority. To quote a conversation between Barani, Najibabad and Muhammad Tughlaq from Scene Six:

BARANI: Oh God! Aren't even the dead free from your politics?

NAJIB: Your Majesty, if this incident is to be kept a secret, I'm afraid we'll have to hang everyone who was here even the Hindu guards. They remained loyal to Your Majesty but they have seen it all and are bound to talk. It does mean more corpses.

But then that'll only make the show more impressive.

MUHAMMAD: Najib, I want Delhi vacated immediately.

Every living soul in Delhi will leave for Daulatabad within a fortnight. I was too soft, I can see that now. They'll only understand the whip. Everyone must leave. Not a light should be seen in the windows of Delhi. Not a wisp of smoke should rise from its chimneys. Nothing but an empty graveyard of Delhi will satisfy me now.

BARANI: May Heaven protect us!

MUHAMMAD: Call on Heaven while you can, Barani-you may not get another chance. What hopes I had built up when I came to the throne! I had wanted every act in my kingdom to become a prayer, every prayer to become a further step in knowledge, every step to lead us nearer to God. But our prayers too are ridden with disease, and must be exiled. There will be no more praying in the kingdom, Najib.

Anyone caught praying will be severely punished. Henceforth let the moment of prayer walk my streets in silence and leave without a trace. (Karnad, 1985, p.45)

Karnad's masterful use of language and artistic decisions in *Tughlaq* infuse vitality into historical events, beckoning audiences to confront the profound ramifications of power struggles and political intrigues that reverberate with modern-day socio-political scenarios. By skillfully weaving together the past and the present, he encourages viewers to ponder the timeless nature of human ambition and its consequences, making the play a compelling exploration of the complexities of leadership and governance across ages. Through his unique narrative approach, Karnad fosters a rich tapestry of thought-provoking ideas, leaving an indelible impact on the minds of those who witness this gripping theatrical experience.

In stark contrast, *Nagamandala*, first performed in 1988, delves into the mystical realm of folklore and myth. Inspired by a Kannada folk tale of the same name, the play weaves together ancient narratives and contemporary concerns, blurring the boundaries between reality and illusion. At its core, *Nagamandala* explores themes of tradition, love, desire, and the stifling societal norms that confine individuals. Karnad's skillful incorporation of historical forms within this enchanting tale invites audiences to confront their own relationship with tradition, superstition, and the transformative power of storytelling. The play serves as a reminder that the echoes of the past continue to shape and inspire the present, offering a rich tapestry of cultural heritage that resonates with contemporary audiences.

Karnad skillfully employs historical elements in both his plays, *Tughlaq* and *Nagamandala*, as a means to bridge the gap between the past and the present. His profound understanding of the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation enables him to create theatrical experiences that transcend time, captivating audiences with their insightful and universal themes. By meticulously analyzing these plays, we can delve into Karnad's artistic choices, unraveling the potential for theatre to act as a transformative force that challenges conventions and encourages audiences to question, engage, and reimagine the world around them. This paper is divided into three distinct sections. The first section explores the concept of narratology, delving into its significance within the context of the plays. It further elucidates the two major schools of narratology, providing a comprehensive understanding of their theoretical foundations. Moving on to the second section, the focus shifts to constructivist narratology and its relevance to the works of Karnad. By examining the contributions of influential theorists in this field, we can gain valuable insights into the underlying principles that shape the narratives of *Tughlaq* and *Nagamandala*. This section examines how Karnad utilizes constructivist

narratology to create a rich and immersive theatrical experience that challenges traditional storytelling techniques. In the third section, a rhetorical analysis is undertaken to delve deeper into the plays' persuasive and artistic aspects. This analysis explores the strategic use of language, symbolism, and characterization employed by Karnad to evoke emotional responses and provoke intellectual contemplation in the audience. By critically examining the rhetorical devices employed, we gain a comprehensive understanding of the plays' impact on the viewers, highlighting their ability to stimulate critical thinking and foster a fresh perspective on societal norms and conventions.

Section 1

Narratology, the art of unraveling intricate narratives, transcends academia to become a transformative key that unlocks the hidden chambers of human experience. It delves into the depths of our collective consciousness, revealing the threads that interweave our thoughts, emotions, and perspectives. Narratology challenges the boundaries of reality, blurring the lines between truth and fiction. It invites us to become architects and voyagers, constructing and traversing landscapes of imagination, empathy, and meaning. In this realm, words cease to be mere ink on paper; they become vessels of profound revelation, offering glimpses into the complex interconnectedness of our shared human existence.

Within narratology, two major schools explore the concept of narrative unreliability: the rhetorical school of narratology and the cognitive or constructivist school of narratology. The rhetorical school, represented by scholars like Wayne C. Booth, Seymour Chatman, William Riggan, Rimmon-Kenan, and James Phelan, approaches narrative as a communicative tool shaped by authors. Drawing from the classical tradition of rhetoric, this school focuses on the use of language and other persuasive strategies to engage, influence, and persuade audiences. It asserts that narrative texts are not neutral conveyors of information but rather products of deliberate rhetorical choices made by authors. Meanwhile, cognitive or constructivist narratology, primarily advocated by Tamar Yacobi and Ansgar Nunning, explores how narratives are constructed and received by readers. This school emphasizes the active role of readers in interpreting and assigning meaning to texts. It recognizes that readers fill gaps in the narrative, actively participating in the process of meaning-making. This perspective aligns with the theatrical experience, where audiences engage with performances to construct coherent narratives. The rhetorical school of narratology identifies the specific strategies authors employ to construct narratives. These include the use of figurative language, selection of details, and deployment of narrative voice and point of view. Metaphor, irony, and other rhetorical devices, along with the arrangement and organization of narrative elements, shape the reader's understanding of the story and characters.

This school draws inspiration from the ancient Greek rhetorical tradition, which viewed narrative as a persuasive form of communication. Authors strategically employ language, structure, and other rhetorical devices to influence readers' attitudes, beliefs, and values.

A fundamental principle of the rhetorical school is that narratives are not neutral or objective accounts of events; they are intentionally constructed by authors to achieve specific goals. These goals can be overtly political or ideological, or they may subtly shape readers' perspectives. By studying narratology through the rhetorical lens, we gain insight into the power dynamics between authors and readers, the role of language in persuasion, and the impact of narrative choices on audience reception. Wayne C. Booth writes in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, "The author is present in every speech given by any character who has had conferred upon him, in whatever manner, the badge of reliability." (Booth, p.18)

On the contrary, Constructivist narratology presents a theoretical framework that examines narratives by placing emphasis on the active role of readers or interpreters in constructing meaning. It highlights the notion that the interpretation of a narrative is a subjective process, shaped by the reader's individual background, knowledge, and cultural context. By adopting this perspective, the traditional belief that meaning is inherent in the text itself is challenged. One influential scholar closely associated with constructivist narratology is David Herman. He posits that narratives are not fixed structures with predetermined meanings, but rather dynamic and interactive systems that rely on the active engagement of readers. In his book *Story Telling and the Sciences of the Mind*, Herman writes:

I define narrative as a mode of representation that is situated in--must be interpreted in light of a specific discourse context or occasion for telling, and that cues interpreters to draw inferences about a structured time-course of particularized events (in contrast with general patterns or trends) (Herman, 2007, p.314)

According to Herman, readers bring their own interpretive frameworks and prior knowledge to the reading process, which significantly influences how they derive understanding from the narrative.

Marie-Laure Ryan is recognized as a significant scholar in the field of constructivist narratology. Her contributions revolve around the exploration of the idea of the "narrative as virtual reality," emphasizing the immersive nature of narrative engagement. Ryan argues that readers mentally construct a virtual world within the narrative, integrating their own experiences and emotions into this process. This perspective highlights the crucial role of subjective reader response in shaping the interpretation of a narrative. In a similar vein, Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory also makes valuable contributions to constructivist narratology.

Iser proposes that readers actively participate in the process of filling in gaps and making inferences in the text, thereby creating meaning through their interaction with the narrative. In his book *the Act of Reading- A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Iser writes:

It is generally recognized that literary texts take on their reality by being read, and this in turn means that texts must already contain certain conditions of actualization that will allow their meaning to be assembled in the responsive mind of the recipient. The concept of the implied reader is therefore a textual structure anticipating the presence of a recipient without necessarily defining him: this concept prestructures the role to be assumed by each recipient, and this holds true even when texts deliberately appear to ignore their possible recipient or actively exclude him. Thus the concept of the implied reader designates a network of response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text. (Iser, 1997, p.25)

Seymour Chatman's contributions to the field of narrative communication and reception are highly relevant to constructivist narratology. In his insightful work, Chatman places a significant emphasis on the dialogic nature of narrative interpretation, asserting that readers and texts engage in an ongoing exchange. He argues that readers actively negotiate meaning by interpreting the narrative through the lens of their own perspectives, fostering a continuous dialogue with the text. By highlighting the active and interactive nature of narrative comprehension, Chatman's ideas shed light on the dynamic process of narrative understanding. In his seminal book titled *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* published in 1978 he writes:

Whether the narrative is experienced through a performance or through a text, the members of the audience must respond with an interpretation: they cannot avoid participating in the transaction. They must fill in gaps with essential or likely events, traits and objects which for various reasons have gone unmentioned. (Chatman, 1978, p. 28)

In this regard, Chatman introduces two crucial concepts: "story" and "discourse." "Story" refers to the chronological sequence of events that transpire within the fictional realm, while "discourse" encompasses the specific representation of those events in the text. Chatman posits that readers play an active role in constructing the story by drawing inferences from the discourse, underscoring the reader's agency and participation in the storytelling process. By doing so, Chatman's work underscores the significance of reader engagement and their interpretive agency in narrative comprehension.

Constructivist narratology acknowledges the importance of the storyworld, also referred to as the fictional universe or narrative realm. It encompasses the imaginative realm consisting of events, characters, settings, and regulations within

a story. The storyworld is crafted through the dynamic interplay between the reader's imagination and the textual cues provided by the author. In the storyworld, readers actively engage with and explore the author's created fictional reality. They actively generate mental imagery, make inferences, and fill in gaps in the narrative. The storyworld is not fixed or predetermined but instead shaped by the reader's interaction with the text. Each reader may construct a slightly varied storyworld based on their unique interpretations and perspectives.

Section II

In the context of Girish Karnad's play *Tughlaq*, constructivist narratology proves highly significant as it facilitates an examination of the seamless integration of historical contexts and contemporary themes by the playwright. Rather than presenting a conventional historical account of Tughlaq Sultan, Karnad utilizes the historical backdrop as a vehicle for examining timeless themes and contemporary issues. Instead of presenting the Sultan as a one-dimensional historical figure, Karnad intricately crafts a multi-dimensional character that embodies both historical facts and fictional elements. By doing so, he challenges the audience's preconceived notions about Tughlaq and encourages them to explore the underlying motivations and complexities of the character. The audience is prompted to consider the various perspectives through which they can interpret Tughlaq's actions and decisions. They may view him as a visionary leader driven by idealism and a desire for administrative reforms, or as a tyrant whose impulsive decisions led to chaos and suffering. By incorporating multiple narrative perspectives, Karnad invites the audience to actively engage with the play and critically examine their own understanding of historical figures and events.

One of the notable artistic choices made by Girish Karnad in his play *Tughlaq* is the integration of historical forms. Karnad takes inspiration from traditional Indian performance styles, specifically 'Yakshagana' and 'Nautanki', to infuse the narrative with a profound cultural heritage and create a distinctive theatrical experience. This creative decision not only pays homage to the vibrant artistic traditions of India but also allows for the exploration of contemporary themes within a historical context.

Yakshagana is an age-old folk theatre form that originated in the southern Indian state of Karnataka. It encompasses various elements such as music, dance, elaborate costumes, and stylized gestures to portray mythological and historical narratives. In Yakshagana performances, actors adorn colorful costumes, intricate headgear, and vibrant face paint. The dialogues are delivered in a rhythmic manner, either sung or spoken, accompanied by traditional musical instruments like the mridangam, chande, and chakratala. By incorporating Yakshagana elements into *Tughlaq*, Karnad introduces the essence of folk traditions, adding layers of depth and

cultural resonance to the narrative. Karnad infuses the play with striking theatricality, employing stylized movements, rhythmic dialogues, and symbolic gestures to bring the historical events to life on stage. This integration of Yakshagana's dramatic techniques lends an inherent dynamism to the play, captivating the audience and enhancing their engagement with the narrative. Furthermore, Yakshagana's narrative structure, which often weaves together multiple subplots and characters, influenced Karnad's approach to storytelling in *Tughlaq*. The play features a tapestry of interconnected stories and portrays a wide array of characters with diverse motivations and conflicts. This rich tapestry echoes the multi-layered narratives commonly found in Yakshagana performances, demonstrating Karnad's artistic debt to the tradition. Moreover, Yakshagana's emphasis on social commentary and its exploration of human nature resonated with Karnad's thematic concerns in *Tughlaq*. To quote a conversation between Aziz, Aazam and a common man from Scene 7 of *Tughlaq*:

MAN: Isn't it terrible, Your Excellency? But there it is. That's what men have come to. The relatives of the dead have to pay us a fine before taking the bodies. Well, if the orders had been obeyed I would have built a house by now. But no, they won't pay-even for the dead! They come at night and steal them. Not just the poor. Even the rich folk--the most respectable people of Delhi! I could tell you a name or two and you wouldn't believe it. It is terrible. People won't stop at anything once they get into the habit of thieving, that's certain.

AZIZ looks at Aazam and laughs. Aazam *grimaces*.

AZIZ: So this is your family. All eight here?

MAN: Yes, Sir.

AZIZ: Get on with you there. There's a tent kept for you.

Yes! Whatever happens to the others, people like you mustn't die. The Sultan will need a lot more like you soon. (Karnad, 1985, p.49)

The play delves into the complexities of power, governance, and the human condition, mirroring the introspective nature of Yakshagana performances. Karnad, like Yakshagana artists, employs his work as a vehicle for critical examination of society and its inherent contradictions.

Similarly, Nautanki is a popular theatrical form prevalent in North India, particularly in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. It is characterized by its lively and entertaining nature, combining music, dance, and dramatic storytelling. Nautanki performances involve a troupe of actors who assume various roles, donning vibrant costumes, engaging in energetic dance sequences, and performing melodious songs. The narratives often revolve around folk tales, historical events, and social issues.

Through the inclusion of Nautanki elements in *Tughlaq*, Karnad infuses the play with the exuberance and vibrancy inherent in this traditional art form, enriching the audience's engagement with the narrative.

In the realm of theatrical storytelling, masks have long held a profound significance. They possess a transformative power, allowing performers to transcend their own identities and embody a myriad of characters and archetypes. In Girish Karnad's magnum opus, *Tughlaq*, the utilization of masks serves as a powerful symbol, bridging the gap between historical narratives and contemporary audiences, while highlighting the enduring relevance of performing arts in preserving and revitalizing traditional forms. Each mask adorns a distinct countenance, bearing the imprints of history and culture. With the donning of these ethereal visages, the actors undergo a metamorphosis, assuming identities that embody the spirit of a bygone era. Through the mask, they transcend their own individuality, embodying historical figures and archetypes that transcend time. The significance of masks in *Tughlaq* extends beyond mere visual aesthetics. They become a metaphorical conduit, enabling a profound exploration of the human condition, the complexities of power, and the mask-like facades we all wear in our own lives. In the realm of governance, leaders often don masks to project authority or to hide their vulnerabilities. Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq himself, the central character of the play, dons the mask of a visionary ruler, driven by lofty ideals and dreams of reform. However, behind this veneer lies a flawed and fragile soul, struggling to reconcile his idealism with the harsh realities of power.

The relevance of performing arts, particularly in the context of historical narratives, lies in their ability to breathe life into forgotten stories and evoke a sense of cultural memory. In *Tughlaq*, the masks serve as a visual bridge between the historical past and the contemporary present. They enable the audience to connect with characters from a bygone era, experiencing their triumphs and tribulations, and contemplating the resonance of their struggles in our own lives. Furthermore, the masks in *Tughlaq* invite us to reflect on the enduring relevance of traditional performing arts. They represent a nod to the ancient theatrical traditions of India, where masks were employed to convey profound truths and to transcend the limitations of individual identity. Karnad, a maestro of both contemporary and traditional forms, intertwines these realms, acknowledging the power of the past to inform the present. In a world increasingly dominated by technology and virtual experiences, the significance of live performances becomes even more pronounced. The tangible presence of actors, their physicality, and the immediacy of the theatrical experience create a unique connection between the performers and the audience. The masks, with their enigmatic allure, draw the audience into a shared

space, where history, culture, and contemporary relevance coalesce. The magic of masks lies not only in their visual impact but also in the interplay between the seen and the unseen. Behind each mask, emotions flicker and gestures convey layers of meaning. The mask becomes a mirror, reflecting the complexities of the human psyche and inviting us to contemplate the masks we wear in our own lives - the roles we play, the identities we adopt, and the truths we conceal. As the final act unfolds, the masks are gently removed, revealing the faces of the actors beneath. The performance draws to a close, but the lingering impact remains. The power of the mask transcends the confines of the stage, echoing in the hearts and minds of the audience. It prompts introspection, provoking us to question the masks we wear and the narratives we perpetuate. It invites us to contemplate the relevance of performing arts, the enduring significance of history, and the interplay between the traditional and the contemporary.

Constructivist narratology, as an approach to understanding narrative structure, posits that the meaning of a story is not fixed but emerges through the active construction and interpretation of the audience. It emphasizes the fluidity of storytelling, the interplay of multiple perspectives, and the way in which narratives shape our understanding of reality. In *Nagamandala*, Karnad masterfully embraces this approach, inviting us into a world where stories intertwine, where reality and fantasy merge, and where the boundaries between characters and audiences blur. The play introduces us to Rani, a neglected and unhappy housewife trapped within the confines of a loveless marriage. As she embarks on a journey of self-discovery and liberation, we are immersed in a web of stories within stories, each layer unraveling the intricate nuances of desire, repression, and the power of storytelling itself. Karnad skillfully navigates between different narrative perspectives, shifting seamlessly from the mundane realities of Rani's life to the mystical realm inhabited by a shape-shifting cobra. Through the interplay of these narratives, Karnad challenges our preconceived notions of truth and reality. He presents us with a narrative puzzle, inviting us to actively construct meaning as we navigate the shifting sands of the story. The cobra, representing desire and transformation, becomes both a literal and metaphorical embodiment of Rani's hidden desires and her quest for liberation. As we witness Rani's journey unfold, we are confronted with the multifaceted nature of storytelling itself, where truth and fiction blend, and where the power of narrative can reshape our perception of the world.

Moreover, the Constructivist narratology approach in *Nagamandala* extends beyond the mere structure of the play. It permeates the very essence of the theatrical experience, blurring the boundaries between the stage and the audience. Karnad's masterful use of storytelling devices, such as the inclusion of folk songs and music, also the way he personified flames and story, draws the audience into the narrative, encouraging active engagement and interpretation. We become co-creators of

meaning, constructing our own understanding of the story as it unfolds before us. To quote a conversation between Story and the Man in the Prologue:

STORY: You can't just listen to the story and leave it at that. You must tell it again to someone else.

MAN: That I certainly shall, if I live. But first I must be alive to That reminds me. I have a condition, too.

STORY: Yes?

MAN: I must not doze off during the tale. If I do, I die. All your telling will be wasted.

STORY: As a self- respecting story, that is the least I can promise. (Karnad, 2005, p.252)

In the captivating tapestry of the theatrical world created by Girish Karnad in *Nagamandala*, a profound exploration of the power of narratives unfolds. Karnad's masterful storytelling challenges us to reflect on the profound influence of stories in shaping our perceptions, desires, and the very fabric of our realities. Through the lens of Constructivist narratology, we are reminded that the narratives we tell and consume possess a remarkable capacity to mold not only our individual identities but also the collective consciousness of society itself. Karnad's play invites us to contemplate the profound ways in which stories weave themselves into the tapestry of our lives. Stories are not mere entertainment; they possess a transformative force that shapes our understanding of the world and ourselves. As we immerse ourselves in the multi-layered narratives of *Nagamandala*, we are prompted to examine the stories that have influenced our lives, both consciously and unconsciously. We begin to recognize that the narratives we have internalized have played a significant role in shaping our beliefs, desires, and aspirations.

Through the Constructivist narratology approach, Karnad reminds us that narratives are not fixed entities but fluid and malleable constructs. They are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed through the interaction between storyteller and audience. The multiple perspectives and intricate narrative structures in *Nagamandala* encourage us to actively engage in the process of constructing meaning. We become co-creators of the narrative, constructing our own interpretations and understanding of the play's profound themes. The transformative power of storytelling is illuminated through the journey of Rani, the protagonist of *Nagamandala*. As Rani navigates her own desires, longings, and societal expectations, we witness the immense potential of narratives to redefine our realities. Rani's encounters with the shape-shifting cobra symbolize the

transformative nature of storytelling, transcending the boundaries of the mundane and awakening her to hidden desires and possibilities. Karnad's play beckons us to contemplate the ways in which narratives can liberate us from the constraints of societal norms and awaken us to our own inner potential. As the play reaches its culmination, the final threads of the narrative are delicately woven together, leaving us with a profound realization. We understand that storytelling, in its complexity and fluidity, possesses an unparalleled ability to evoke deep emotions, challenge societal conventions, and ignite the boundless realms of human imagination. *Nagamandala* stands as a testament to the enduring power of narratives to transcend boundaries and illuminate the human experience. To quote the most iconic conversation between Rani and Naga (disguised as Appanna):

NAGA: Then listen to me carefully. When you face the Elders, tell them you will prove your innocence. Say you will undertake the snake ordeal.

RANI: Snake ordeal? What is that?

NAGA: There is an enormous ant- hill under the banyan tree.

Almost like a mountain. A King Cobra lives in it. Say you will put your hand into the ant- hill.

RANI: (Screams.) What?

NAGA: Yes. And pull out the King Cobra. And take your oath by that cobra.

RANI: Give me poison instead. Kill me right here. At least I'll be spared the humiliation. Won't the cobra bite me the moment I touch it? I'll die like your dog and your mongoose.

NAGA: No, it won't bite. Only, you must tell the truth.

RANI: What truth?

NAGA: The truth. Tell the truth while you are holding the cobra. (Karnad, 2005, p.286)

In this thought-provoking theatrical journey, Karnad implores us to become conscious consumers and creators of narratives. He urges us to critically examine the stories we encounter and actively shape the narratives we share with the world. Through the Constructivist narratology lens, we are reminded of our agency in reshaping our individual and collective realities. We possess the power to challenge dominant narratives, redefine societal norms, and harness the transformative potential of storytelling for the betterment of ourselves and society at large. As we step back from the luminescent stage, our hearts are imprinted with an indelible awareness of the narratives that encircle us. We comprehend their far-reaching influence, extending beyond the confines of the theatre, and penetrating every aspect of our existence. Karnad's masterful craftsmanship in *Nagamandala* awakens

within us a deep appreciation for the intricate tapestry of stories that weave together the fabric of our lives.

Karnad skillfully blends elements of folk theatre and ritualistic performances in *Nagamandala* to create a unique theatrical experience that engages with Indian cultural traditions while addressing contemporary themes. He delves into the profound well of Indian mythology and folklore, enriching *Nagamandala* with timeless tales and legendary sagas. Woven into the fabric of the play are threads from the ancient Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*, intermingled with the tapestry of local folk tales and legends. Through the mesmerizing presence of the serpent, Karnad delves into the mythical associations embedded in Indian culture, where serpents symbolize power, fertility, and transformative journeys. By drawing from this treasure trove of mythology, the play gains an extraordinary depth, connecting it to the broader tapestry of cultural narratives and archetypes.

Furthermore, *Nagamandala* immerses itself in the tapestry of Indian ritualistic practices and deeply held beliefs. The play explores the concept of "nagamandala," a sacred ritual performed by certain communities to conquer marital strife or infertility. This ritual, entailing the creation of a mandala—an ethereal geometric design traced with turmeric or vermilion powder—serves as the central motif, interwoven into the very fabric of the narrative. The inclusion of these rituals and their associated symbols adds a spiritual dimension to the performance, heightening the emotional and psychological odyssey undertaken by the characters. Adding to the symphony of traditional Indian performance styles, *Nagamandala* seamlessly incorporates music and dance. Karnad masterfully infuses the play with traditional Indian melodies, ranging from the celestial strains of classical Carnatic music to the soulful melodies of folk tunes, and the rhythmic cadence of traditional beats. These captivating musical interludes, interwoven with the fabric of the narrative, accentuate the mood, convey the depths of emotion, and underscore pivotal moments in the storytelling. Accompanying the music are mesmerizing dance sequences inspired by classical Indian dance forms such as Bharatanatyam and Kathak, infusing the performance with elegance and visual splendor.

One prominent theorist who has extensively written about metatheatre is Lionel Abel. In his book *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form*, Abel delves into the idea of metatheatre as a form of self-consciousness in drama. He argues that metatheatre disrupts the illusion of realism and prompts the audience to reflect on the nature of theatre and its relationship to reality. Karnad's use of metatheatrical elements in *Nagamandala* aligns with Abel's exploration of self-reflexivity within the theatrical medium. Abel proposed that metatheatre explores the boundaries of theatricality, blurring the lines between fiction and reality, and incorporating self-referential elements. Karnad beautifully embraces this notion through the play's

multi-layered storytelling approach. Mythology, folk tales, and personal narratives intertwine, inviting the audience to contemplate the very act of storytelling and the transformative power it holds. The characters in *Nagamandala* become storytellers, embodying the essence of metatheatre as they share their tales within the framework of the play. This metafictional exploration highlights the performative nature of both the characters and the audience, blurring the distinction between the imagined and the actual.

Right from the opening scene of *Nagamandala*, the characters in the play are aware of their roles as performers and often address the audience directly, blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality. This metatheatrical strategy can be connected to the works of influential theorists such as Bertolt Brecht and his concept of *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect). His alienation effect sought to create a sense of distance between the audience and the characters, challenging emotional identification. In *Nagamandala*, Karnad ingeniously employs direct address and breaks the fourth wall, allowing the characters to address the audience directly. By breaking the illusion of reality, Karnad encourages the audience to adopt a critical perspective, examining the constructed nature of the play and the underlying socio-cultural themes it encompasses. Brecht aimed to disrupt the audience's passive immersion in a play and provoke critical reflection by reminding them that they are witnessing a theatrical performance. Karnad's use of direct address in *Nagamandala*, achieves a similar effect, reminding the audience of the constructed nature of the play and encouraging them to question the boundaries between illusion and reality.

Antonin Artaud, a prominent figure in metatheatre theory, emphasized a theatre that transcends traditional narratives and aims to evoke raw emotions and primal instincts. His ideas align with Girish Karnad's metatheatrical approach in *Nagamandala*, where Karnad employs the theatrical form to delve into profound aspects of human existence, including desires, fears, and transformations. In *Nagamandala*, Karnad's metatheatrical exploration is evident through the use of various theatrical techniques that challenge conventional storytelling and invite the audience to engage with their own emotions and instincts. One such technique is the portrayal of Rani, the central character, and her transformative journey. Rani's encounter with the snake becomes a metaphorical exploration of her desires and fears. Through the metatheatrical lens, Karnad encourages the audience to reflect upon their own deep-seated desires and fears, evoking a visceral and emotional response.

Section III

Girish Karnad's plays *Tughlaq* and *Nagamandala* stand as timeless masterpieces of Indian literature, offering profound insights into human nature, societal

dynamics, and the complexities of power. Through meticulous storytelling and captivating characters, Karnad skillfully employs rhetorical devices to challenge conventional norms, provoke thought, and ignite a deep introspection within the audience. In *Tughlaq*, Karnad presents a searing critique of political power and the consequences of ambitious rulers who succumb to their own hubris. The play revolves around the enigmatic character of Muhammad bin Tughlaq, the 14th-century Sultan of Delhi. Karnad's deft use of rhetorical devices adds layers of depth to the narrative, enhancing the play's impact on the audience. Tughlaq's resonance among Indian audiences can be attributed to its portrayal of the political climate of the 1960s, capturing a unique sense of disillusionment that emerged after the era of idealism under Nehru's leadership. Karnad, acknowledged this aspect of the play in his own words. U.R. Ananthamurthy quotes Karnad from his interview from *Enact* magazine in June 1971:

What struck me absolutely about Tughlaq's history was that it was contemporary. The fact that here was the most idealistic, the most intelligent king ever to come on the throne of Delhi ... and one of the greatest failures also. And within a span of twenty years this tremendously capable man had gone to pieces. This seemed to be both due to his idealism as well as the shortcomings within him, such as his impatience, his cruelty, his feeling that he had the only correct answer. And I felt in the early sixties India had also come very far in the same direction—the twenty-year period seemed to me very much a striking parallel. (Ananthamurthy, 2020)

One such rhetorical device employed in *Tughlaq* is the motif of irony. Through irony, Karnad exposes the stark contrast between Tughlaq's intentions and their unintended consequences. The audience is confronted with the irony of a ruler who desires to bring about societal welfare but ends up causing immense chaos and suffering. This irony serves as a powerful rhetorical tool, forcing the audience to question the inherent flaws within systems of governance and the dangers of unchecked power. Moreover, Karnad effectively utilizes symbolism in *Tughlaq* to evoke powerful imagery and heighten the emotional impact of the play. The character of Tughlaq himself becomes a symbol of the complex nature of leadership and the burden of responsibility that comes with it. His constant struggle to maintain a delicate balance between idealism and pragmatism mirrors the challenges faced by leaders throughout history. The symbol of the wheel, which *Tughlaq* employs as a metaphor for the cyclical nature of power, adds a profound layer of meaning to the play, prompting the audience to reflect on the eternal struggle between ambition and accountability.

Similarly, in *Nagamandala*, Karnad employs rhetorical devices to explore themes of desire, repression, and the oppressive societal norms that confine

individuals. The play weaves together elements of folklore, mythology, and contemporary social issues to create a rich tapestry of emotions and ideas. Karnad's use of metaphor in *Nagamandala* plays a pivotal role in shaping the audience's understanding of the characters and their predicaments. The caged bird, a recurring metaphor throughout the play, represents the protagonist Rani's entrapment within the confines of a loveless marriage and the suffocating societal expectations imposed upon her. The metaphorical resonance of the caged bird evokes a sense of empathy and longing, drawing the audience into Rani's world and highlighting the universal human desire for freedom and fulfillment. Furthermore, Karnad employs dramatic irony to heighten the tension and engage the audience in the intricacies of the plot. By revealing information to the audience that is unknown to the characters, he creates a sense of anticipation and dramatic tension. The audience becomes active participants in the unfolding story, eagerly awaiting the collision of secrets and desires, and contemplating the consequences of choices made by the characters.

In *Tughlaq*, Karnad masterfully unravels the tumultuous reign of the enigmatic sultan, Muhammad bin Tughlaq. Through his gripping narrative, he forces us to confront the eternal question of power and its corrupting influence. The sultan's grand vision, driven by idealism and intellect, dissolves into a tragic spiral of betrayal and disillusionment. As we witness Tughlaq's descent into darkness, we are compelled to ponder the limitations of human agency and the treacherous nature of absolute power. And then, *Nagamandala* emerges, captivating us with its ethereal charm and magical realism. The play delves into the intricate tapestry of human desires and the entanglement of tradition and individual freedom. Through the transformative journey of Rani and her enigmatic encounters with the serpent, Karnad challenges societal norms and liberates our imagination. He beckons us to question the oppressive structures that confine us, urging us to seek solace and liberation in the unexplored realms of our own dreams. As the final scenes of these magnificent works unfold, a profound realization dawns upon us. Karnad's exploration of historical forms in contemporary Indian theatre transcends mere nostalgia; it serves as a powerful catalyst for self-reflection and social introspection. The resurgence of these forms in our modern context allows us to confront the perennial struggles of power, identity, and societal norms that continue to plague us. In the amalgamation of the historical and the present, we find ourselves standing at a crossroads of possibilities. Karnad's compelling narratives compel us to acknowledge the interplay between the past and the future, between tradition and evolution. They ignite a fire within us, urging us to chart our own path, unafraid of the uncharted territories that lie ahead.

As a multi-talented individual encompassing the roles of an accomplished actor, director, screenplay-writer, high-profile administrator, and revered public figure, Girish Karnad emerged as a prominent "celebrity" in the realm of Indian theatre. His

exceptional contributions, exemplified by his thought-provoking works like *Tughlaq* and *Nagamandala*, have played a pivotal role in unveiling the resurgence of historical forms within contemporary Indian theatre. With a passion for embracing the uncharted territories of artistic expression, Karnad's profound impact on the theatrical landscape remains unparalleled, leaving an indelible mark on the cultural fabric of the nation. Embracing the uncharted also becomes a call to action, a reminder that our journey as individuals and as a society is not confined to the known and familiar. It is an invitation to explore the depths of our own souls, to confront the shadows of history, and to forge a path that is uniquely ours. In this exploration, we discover the true essence of our existence—a culmination of past, present, and future, intertwining in a grand tapestry of human experience. As we carry the echoes of *Tughlaq* and *Nagamandala* with us, we are inspired to embrace the uncharted, to immerse ourselves in the richness of our heritage, and to navigate the unexplored paths that await us. Within these uncharted territories, we find the raw material of our dreams, the catalyst for personal growth, and the potential to reshape our collective destiny.

References

- Abel, L. (1969). *Metatheatre: A new view of dramatic form*. Hill and Wang.
- Ananthamurthy, U. R. (2020, May 20). *Why Girish Karnad's "Tughlaq" is a classic in Kannada literature*. The Wire. <https://thewire.in/culture/girish-karnad-tughlaq>
- Artaud, A. (2024). *Theatre and its Double*. Bloomsbury Methuen Drama.
- Booth, W. C. (2008). *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Univ. of Chicago Pr.
- Chatman, S. (1978). *Story and discourse: Narrative structure in fiction and film*. Cornell University Press.
- Herman, D. (2007). Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind: Cognitive Narratology, Discursive Psychology, and Narratives in Face-to-Face Interaction. *Narrative*, 15(3), 306–334. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30219260>
- Iser, W. (1997). *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Kabbinahithilu Venkataramana, P., & Kumar, S. (2021). Effectiveness of folk theatre in conveying environmental consciousness: A case study of yakshagana. *Media Asia*, 49(2), 111–129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2021.2005961>
- Karnad, G. (1985). *Tughlaq*. Oxford University Press.
- Karnad, G. (2005). *Collected Plays*. Oxford University Press.
- Nünning, A. (2004). Where Historiographic Metafiction and Narratology Meet: Towards an Applied Cultural Narratology. *Style*, 38(3), 352–374. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/style.38.3.352>
- Ryan, M. L. (2015). *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Yacobi, T. (2001). Package Deals in Fictional Narrative: The Case of the Narrator's (Un)Reliability. *Narrative*, 9(2), 223–229. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20107251>