

Overlapping Identities in Girish Karnad's Plays *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Yayati* and *Naga-Mandala*: A Study

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Abstract: The search for identity has always been an important concern for the writers of the Indian subcontinent in the postcolonial period. In his plays Karnad has studied the overlapping of identities in the postcolonial Indian context and how it is affecting the people of modern India. In my paper I intend to focus on how Girish Karnad presents the problems prevailing in modern Indian society and how that is modifying the space occupied by the individual in society and leading to the overlapping of identities in this present situation. My paper also focuses on how this overlapping of identities is affecting the life of the individual in the postcolonial context.

Keywords: confused, deformed and transposed identities; women empowerment; spiritual identity; the social space.

The search for identity has always been an important concern for the writers of the Indian subcontinent in the postcolonial period. The tendency to salvage the pre-colonial Indian tradition and the influence of the western culture for two centuries under the British rule actually have given rise to a transposed culture that is neither Indian nor Western. As a result of that the modern Indian people of India are finding it difficult to locate themselves in the social space with this transposed culture which directly affects their identity and personality. Therefore, the search for identity, its transformation, and incomprehensiveness give rise to the overlapping of the identities which leaves the individual in a state of disillusionment and confusion in this modern phase. This identity crisis has always been an important concern for the writers of the modern India who try to portray this peculiar state of human existence through their literary works. This gains a new dimension through the writings of the Indian writers who are writing in English, the colonial language of India, while portraying the modern Indian culture and society along with its dilemma and indecision to locate the true nature of the space occupied by an individual in society along with the influence of the colonial past and the rich cultural tradition of India that truly carve the identity of the individual. The tendency to identify the Indian culture and society and to locate the individual in that space is an urge to reconstruct the identity of modern man in postcolonial India. This has been there in the novels and stories of R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, Vikram Seth, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Khushwant Singh, Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, in the poems of A.K. Ramanujan, Nissim Ezekiel, in the plays of Mahesh

Dattani, Girish Karnad and in the works of other literary stalwarts of modern India who portray this search for identity to establish the space for existence of an individual in this postcolonial age. Girish Karnad has emerged as an important playwright and a prominent theatrical personality in the field of modern Indian literature who takes the problems prevailing in modern India and sets them against the background of Indian myth, history, culture and tradition which used to exist in ancient India before colonization. In the plays of Karnad we get a beautiful picture of the blending of modern and ancient India. Through the ancient myth and history of India Karnad is presenting the true picture of modern India. In this paper I intend to focus on how Girish Karnad, in his four plays—*Tughlaq*, *Yayati*, *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala*, is presenting the problems prevailing in modern Indian society and how that is modifying the space occupied by the individual in society and how that is leading to the overlapping of identities in this present situation. My paper also focuses on how this overlapping of identities is affecting the life of the individual in the postcolonial context. Karnad's plays present a true picture of modern India along with its people.

Girish Karnad has always referred to the problems of modern India and the people with their character and individuality. *Tughlaq* is an example in instance. Tughlaq, the historical figure is reestablished by Karnad in the post independence Indian context. Tughlaq's sharp mind, his shrewdness and his farsightedness fail to convince the people of his kingdom and establish himself as an efficient ruler. The play *Tughlaq* deals with the theme of search for identity, alienation and loneliness. Tughlaq, an idealist, shrewd politician, impartial in his rules, practical in understanding the situation and modern in thinking, fails to establish his identity as any one of these and turns out to be 'Mad' Tughlaq. The different sides of his personality overlap with each other thus rendering him a confused identity. This refers to the frustrations and disillusionment of modern man in the postcolonial period due to the loss of identity. In the play the people's disillusionment with Tughlaq refers to the disillusionment of the people of India in the post independence period. To be particular it refers to the Nehruvian era. While talking about *Tughlaq* Aparna Dharwadker observes:

Tughlaq is resonant as a historical parallel because it incorporates the problems of historical discontinuity and mediation yet creates a convincing synchrony between premodern and contemporary India. Its social and political applications have also evolved over the past three decades as post-independence Indian politics have taken unpredictable directions. (Dharwadker, 47)

The people of newly independent India were trying to establish their individual identity as well as the identity of India as a newly formed nation. But the gradual disappointment with the newly elected government, consecutive wars with Pakistan and China and the failure of the political leaders to establish India as it was expected ultimately led to the disillusionment of modern Indian people. Nehru was also disappointed with the fact that things did not come up to his expectations. While talking about *Tughlaq* in her 'Introduction' to

Collected Plays, Vol. 1 Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker says:

In a move that is characteristic of the historical parallel as a genre (and acknowledged by Karnad), *Tughlaq* also invokes significant elements in modern Indian political and cultural experience by presenting an ostensibly self-sufficient historical narrative that viewers and readers can apply to their own situation. For the audience of the 1960s, Karnad's play certainly expressed the disenchantment and cynicism that attended the end of the Nehru era in Indian politics. (Karnad, *Collected Plays*, Vol. 1, XX)

In the play *Tughlaq* Karnad exploits several sides of human nature. The character Tughlaq is presented as a cross-section of so many identities that it becomes very difficult for the reader to separate them and identify each of them for establishing the true self of Tughlaq. On the whole we get an overlapping of several identities in Tughlaq. This overlapping of identities is responsible for the downfall of Tughlaq as well. The presence of so many entities in a single individual puts forth a confused identity of Tughlaq which his people can not accept. In Nehru the independent India saw a learned person, an intelligent ruler, and an emotional self. But, at the same time Nehru's overconfidence on himself, his frequently changing decisions, his wrong policy with China and the shadow of the partition loomed large as a threat against his acceptability to his people. Tughlaq's decision to shift his capital from Delhi to Daulatabad reminds us of the grave decision of the partition of India. The long journey from Delhi to Daulatabad claimed innumerable lives and caused tremendous sufferings among his people. This reminds us of the partition of India and the long journey undertaken by the people of both the sides and which was associated with communal riots and massive loss of lives.

Karnad has presented *Tughlaq* as a dark comedy where we see the satirical presentation of a failed leader with lots of talent which also contains the tragedy of a ruler who deserves more than what he achieves. Lots of talent and ability gets wasted that we see in case of Tughlaq. He is cruel for people thinks he has killed his own father and brother. The people do not like his impartiality between the Hindus and the Muslims. He is idealist, visionary, a learned person and a shrewd ruler. He knows the darkness of superstition, corruption, poverty and injustice prevailing among his people. In fact Tughlaq is more advanced than his age. But the tragedy lies in the fact that his people fail to rely on him. His lofty ideals and utopian visions to build a perfect nation are frustrated and he meets his end within twenty years. Now, it is important to understand the basic reason behind his downfall. The problem is that Tughlaq fails to establish his identity as a perfect ruler, as an impartial judge, as a true son, as a true friend and above all as a true human being. People fails to identify all these sides of his personality, they jumble up everything and form an idea of confused identity regarding Tughlaq. This confusion arises due to the overlapping of these identities of Tughlaq's multifaceted character which is due to Tughlaq's fickle mindedness and his inability to persist with any particular identity for a longer time. His mind is always changing and his decisions are always fluctuating. Moreover, he wants to introduce so many changes within a small span of time which his people are unable to

understand and accept. He introduces regular prayers for Muslims and lifts the *jiziya* tax from the Hindus. He also introduces impartial justice for both Hindus and the Muslims. But his identity as a Muslim stops him from attaining that impartial status before both the communities. Neither the Hindus nor the Muslims are satisfied with Tughlaq's decisions. They are always suspicious and doubtful about him. His identity as a Muslim overlaps with the other sides of his character thus, making his situation more miserable. After shifting to Daulatabad, which inflicted lots of sufferings on his people, Tughlaq ultimately stands disillusioned. He tries to compare his past identity as a youth and the present identity as a failed ruler. This becomes prominent from his words while he is talking to a Young Man in the fort of Daulatabad:

I don't envy your youth. All that you have to face and suffer is still ahead of you. Look at me. I have searched for that moment since then and here I am still searching for it. But in the last four years, I have seen only the howl of wild wolves and the answering bay of street dogs. Another twenty years and you'll be as old as me. I might be lying under those woods there by then. Do you think you'll remember me then? (Karnad, *Collected Plays*, Vol. 1, 64)

Tughlaq is in search of his lost identity. He is desperately in search of the lost space of safe and secure existence that he has lost due to the loss of his identity which has occurred due to the overlapping of several aspects of his personality and has created a confusion which is similar to the chaos and confusion that prevailed during his time in history. The same thing we see in case of modern man of postcolonial India. The desperate attempt to locate himself in the postcolonial context and to establish his own identity fails to succeed because the people of modern India are suffering from doubts and confusion regarding their own identities which are influenced by the traditional past and the long western rule. Tughlaq's search for his real identity and his disillusionment are reflected in *Hayavadana* as well. The anxiety, chaos, confusion and the ultimate conflict regarding the determination of the true identity and the location of the self finally turns up in *Hayavadana* to reconstruct the space occupied by the individual in society. In this play also we witness the mixing up of different identities which gives rise to the question regarding the supremacy of the body or the head, regarding the search for completeness and above all a question regarding the nature of human existence is raised in the modern context. Like *Tughlaq* in *Hayavadana* also see the overlapping of identities. But the difference is that while in the former we see the overlapping of the different aspects of the character of an individual in case of *Hayavadana* the overlapping of identities of different individuals is seen. This also significantly symbolizes the transposed nature of the postcolonial Indian culture that is facing a challenge to establish its own identity in the modern context. While talking about the play in the 'Introduction' to *Hayavadana* Kirtinath Kurtkoti says:

Karnad's play poses a different problem, that of human identity in a world of tangled relationships. When the play opens, Devadatta and Kapila are the closest of friends—'one mind, one heart', as the

Bhagavata describes them. Devadatta a man of intellect, Kapila a 'man of body'. Their relations get complicated when Devadatta marries Padmini and she too starts drifting towards him. The friends kill themselves and in a scene, hilariously comic but at the same time full of profound dramatic implications, Padmini transposes their heads, giving Devadatta Kapila's body and Kapila Devadatta's. The result is a confusion of identities which reveals the ambiguous nature of human personality. (Karnad, *Hayavadana*, V-VI)

The transposed identities of Devadatta and Kapila truly signify the transposed nature of the modern Indian culture which is a mixture of the Indian tradition and the modern western influence. The confusion that is created in the play by this overlapping of identities of two men with each other actually draws a parallel with the identity crisis that we have witnessed in Tughlaq himself and with the people's opinion regarding Tughlaq. In both the cases we see that this overlapping and the resulting confusion lead to the utter disillusionment, frustration and downfall. Both *Tughlaq* and *Hayavadana* lead to a tragic end. Death seems to be the only solution in *Hayavadana* which indicates to the need for a new beginning. It is pathetic to see that Karnad does not prescribe any remedy for the modern man who is facing this identity crisis and is failing to locate himself in the postcolonial context. This is similar to Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads*, the text that influenced Karnad a lot while writing this play. Death becomes the ultimate solution in Mann's text as well. Death and annihilation cannot be that solution the problems that are faced by the modern Indian culture due to its distorted colonial past. While talking about it in her 'Introduction' to *Collected Plays*, Vol. 1 Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker says:

Thomas Mann's philosophical elaboration of this story in *The Transposed Heads* (1940) is a fully developed parable about conjugality, proscribed desire, and an 'accidental' disruption of identity that can be resolved only by death. (Karnad, *Collected Plays*, Vol. 1, XXV)

Although we do not get any direct solution regarding the solution for the identity crisis faced by modern man in the postcolonial Indian society we get a suggestion regarding the spiritual upliftment of the whole matter. In both the plays we see that man is facing problem with the earthly identities. Only spiritual journey and enlightenment can bestow modern man with his true identity which can lead him from utter disillusionment to the path of salvation. Therefore, the spiritual identity is the only identity that can provide man a real space for him to exist without conceding any threat from society or any other entity and can remain pure and complacent. Therefore, to attain this spiritual salvation man needs to get detached from the earthly matters which can cause the overlapping of several identities that are thrust upon him by society. This detachment is achieved through death in *Hayavadana*. On the other hand in *Tughlaq* we see that Tughlaq is in a state of disillusionment and is detached from reality and he cannot identify the space in which he exists. That space is nothing but seems to be a void. The darkness and the void

signify the nullification of the other identities that made a confused picture of him. Karnad aptly states the situation in the end of the play:

As the Muezzin's call fades away, Muhammad suddenly opens his eyes. He looks around, dazed and frightened, as though he can't comprehend where he is. (Karnad, *Collected Plays*, Vol. 1, 99)

The fright is due to the shock that Tughlaq gets after realizing the detachment and the void where he is thrown. Here he is in a midway position where he neither wants to get detached from his society nor is he prepared to pursue a spiritual journey to reconstruct his identity and relocate himself in the present situation. By giving the reference of Lord Ganesha in *Hayavadana* Karnad shows the peculiar ways of the creation of God which are impossible for the common people to comprehend and predict. Ganesha is the God of perfection, the destroyer of all obstacles and incompleteness. But, he himself is having the head of an elephant and the body that resembles the human body. Thus, only the body does not signify the perfection of any object or a being. The spiritual perfection is also important to understand the true identity of a person. In the play *Hayavadana* the transposition of heads does not create the overlapping of identities. It is the lack of spiritual knowledge and ignorance that are responsible for the identity crises in the play. The same thing is applicable for modern man as well. Modern man is lacking in spiritual knowledge. Due to this ignorance man fails to identify his true identity among several other identities which overlap to form a confused identity that misleads him to utter destruction.

A similar kind of crisis is seen in the play *Yayati* as well. The play *Yayati* is all about neglected responsibilities and the search for identity. Yayati, the king shuns his responsibilities as a king, as a husband, as a father and as a true human being and indulges in sensual pleasures. He searches his identity in the worldly pleasures. When he is inflicted with the curse of old age by Shukracharya due to his extramarital physical relationship he exchanges his old age with the youth of his son Pooru. This signifies the exchange of the whole identity. This identity that he wants to establish is against the tradition and society. Through the ancient myth of *Mahabharata* Girish Karnad presents the spiritual corruption and moral degradation of modern man. The search here is in a negative sense. Yayati takes the identity of Pooru which overlaps with his own identity. Pooru on the other hand takes the identity of Yayati which overlaps with his own identity. This creates confusion for Chitrlekha the young daughter-in-law of Yayati and the newly married wife of Pooru. Her shock after witnessing the identity crisis, her cries, her remark that Yayati, who is actually her father-in-law, should take her husband's place and her ultimate suicide—all indicate the shock received by the people of modern India after perceiving the corruption prevailing in the postcolonial Indian society. While talking about the confused identities of Yayati and Pooru Dr. Falguni P. Desai observes:

Yayati exchanged his youth with Sarmistha's son Puru; When Sharmistha enjoys life with Yayati, she is tormented with the thought that whether she is enjoying with Puru or Yayati. She is living with Yayati but it is Puru's youth, which gives her the ritu

embrace. Sexual relationship with one's own son is forbidden, as it is great sin according to ethics. (Desai, 52)

The people of modern India actually finds it difficult to identify the true identity of the modern Indian culture that they are following and as a result of that they fail to relate themselves with this newly formed nation. The identity of the modern Indian culture is an overlapping of the pre-colonial Indian culture and the Western culture that it imbibed during the long colonial rule under the Britishers. It presents a confused state of the nature of the modern Indian nation as a whole which is signified by the transposition of the heads in *Hayavadana* that I have discussed above. This makes the people of newly independent India unable to form their true identities which have also got overlapped. This has created a strange situation which is more a punishment than a boon for the people of modern India. This anxiety and frustration due lack of identity and space in modern society is seen in the character of Tughlaq as well. While talking about Yayati's regaining of his youth at the cost of his son Pooru's future in his 'Afterword' to *Yayati* Girish Karnad says:

The son accepts the exchange and the curse, and thus becomes old, older than his father. But the old age brings no knowledge, no self-realization, only the senselessness of a punishment meted out for an act in which he had not participated. The father is left to face the consequences of shirking responsibility for his own actions. (Karnad, *Yayati*, 73)

Therefore, again we see the matter is ending in frustration and disillusionment that has become the spirit of modern India. The present situation is severe. People are neglecting their duties, corruptions are on the rise and personal desires are gaining more importance which are degenerating the human values and are leading to utter spiritual sterility. While *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana* and *Yayati* deal with the identity crisis that is related to the individual self and the modern Indian society in *Naga-Mandala* we see how overlapping of identities leading to some problems that raise the issues of women in the modern context and their position in the postcolonial Indian society. The play is related to the oppression of women in Indian society and a woman's desire to break away from the shackles of patriarchal exploitation to have extramarital affairs (which becomes a necessity and not an evil) to establish her own identity in society. While talking about the play Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker says:

By making Rani almost a pure embodiment of feminine simplicity, innocence, and powerlessness, Karnad pares his drama of gender relations down to an elemental level. Marriage for Rani means the loss of the secure world of childhood and parental love, and she has to reimagine that the world in her fantasies merely to keep herself from psychic collapse. (Karnad, *Collected Plays*, Vol. 1, XXX)

In the play Rani, already married to Appanna, unknowingly establishes physical relationship which Naga (the cobra in the shape of Appanna) and begets a child by him. Rani's husband Appanna has been very cruel to her, keeping her locked the whole day in the house and having the relationship with another woman. The cobra falls in love with Rani due to the effect of the root given by Kurudavva to her and which (in the form of a paste) was eaten up by the cobra without Rani's knowledge. Confusion

occurs when the cobra takes the form of Appanna (Naga) and starts making love to Rani every night during Appanna's absence. Rani fails to identify the cobra. The identity of Naga and that of Appanna have overlapped with each other thus creating a state confusion among the husband and wife.

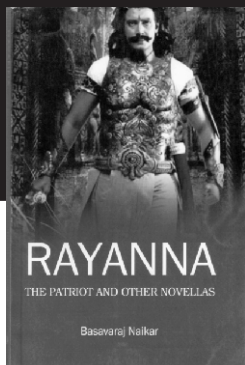
Karnad has used the oral tales from Karnataka to bring out some serious issues of modern India. It is interesting to see that Rani is hardly suspicious about the real identity of Naga. She clearly sees the difference between the character of Naga and her brutal husband Appanna. She never tries to understand the unnatural coming and going of Naga. Even, during the night when the Naga arrives to Rani, drenched with blood after having a fight with the dog, Rani hardly becomes doubtful about his real identity. Rani is intelligent which is evident from the way she faces the "Cobra Ordeal" before the Elders of the village. In spite of that she takes Naga for her husband. This shows that Rani deliberately ignores this fact and makes love with Naga. Through Rani Karnad presents the subconscious mind of a married woman, in the Indian context, who is oppressed by the patriarchal society and finds her freedom, her identity and takes her revenge against her husband and the whole system by indulging in extramarital affair with another man. This we cannot consider as an adultery, as society puts it, but a protest against the social oppressions on women in India and adultery becomes a necessary evil. In Rani also we get the overlapping of two identities, the first one presents the innocent girl in Rani and the second one is the rebel in her who is not afraid to challenge the social constructs like marriage, purity and submission to a torturing husband and is ready to break any code of conduct. Ultimately Appanna becomes her 'slave' and the other ending of the play where Rani hides the cobra in her hairs for life establish Rani as a symbol of empowered woman who has the power to control men and society. She emerges as the new woman with a new identity which emerges from the overlapping of other identities imposed upon her by society.

Thus, we see how Girish Karnad applies Indian history, myth, folklore and tradition to present the identity crisis that is faced by the people of modern India who are trying it hard to overcome the confusion, that prevails regarding their own identities and positions in the postcolonial Indian society, which is nothing but the result of the overlapping of several identities that has occurred due to the rich Indian tradition and the distorting influence of the colonial past. In *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana* and *Yayati* we see the inability of the protagonists to establish their own identities in the materialistic world. Either spiritual revelation or death becomes the only way for gaining that absolute identity and the space for existence. Tughlaq is transported to a different level, at the end of the play, where he finds himself in a void. He achieves the detachment but fails to gain the spiritual identity. On the other hand in *Naga-Mandala* the overlapping of identities brings forth the way out for the liberation of women from the oppressions of the patriarchal Indian society. Thus, we see that Karnad, through these four plays, has very skillfully presented

the overlapping of identities and the identity crisis that prevail as major problems in postcolonial Indian society.

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Rayanna

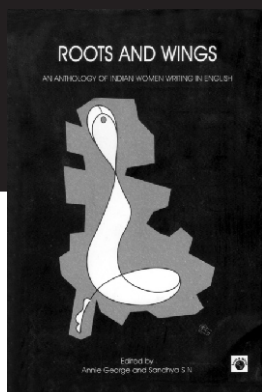
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