
SOCIALIST REALISM IN THE DRAMATIC WORKS OF GIRISH KARNAD: A CRITICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the presence, articulation, and thematic significance of Socialist Realism in the dramatic works of Girish Karnad (1938–2019), one of the most distinguished playwrights of postcolonial Indian literature writing in English and Kannada. Synthesising the theoretical principles of Socialist Realism — as formulated by Maxim Gorky and institutionalised by the First Soviet Writers' Congress (1934) — with the specific socio-historical context of post-Independence India, this paper argues that Karnad's dramatic output consistently engages with questions of class exploitation, caste oppression, feudal authority, and the agency of marginalised communities. Through close readings of *Tughlaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1972), *Naga-Mandala* (1988), and *The Fire and the Rain* (1995), this study analyses how Karnad deploys mythological and historical frameworks to foreground material conditions and ideological contradictions. The paper demonstrates that Karnad's technique — particularly his use of folk theatrical conventions, non-linear narrative, and symbolic imagery — converges with the Socialist Realist mandate to expose social inequities while preserving aesthetic complexity. The study concludes that Karnad occupies a unique position in world drama: a writer whose engagement with oppression and agency is filtered through an indigenous theatrical sensibility, making his work a significant contribution to the global tradition of politically committed literature.

Keywords: Girish Karnad, Socialist Realism, Indian Drama, Postcolonial Literature, Caste and Class, Folk Theatre, Mythological Revisionism, *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Naga-Mandala*

1. INTRODUCTION

Girish Karnad stands as one of the foremost architects of modern Indian drama.

Born in Matheran in 1938, Karnad wrote primarily in Kannada and translated his own work into English, thereby securing a dual readership. His dramatic corpus — spanning over five decades — engages with history, mythology, folklore, and contemporary social realities in ways that defy simple generic classification. He is at once a mythmaker, a historian, a political thinker, and a craftsman of theatrical form. It is within this complex artistic identity that the concerns of Socialist Realism find their most productive expression.

Socialist Realism, as a literary and artistic doctrine, emerged in the Soviet Union during the 1930s. Defined broadly as a method of truthful, historically concrete depiction of reality in its revolutionary development, it demanded that writers represent society not merely as it is but as it is becoming — with special emphasis on the struggles of the working class and oppressed communities. While the doctrine was subsequently subjected to political institutionalisation and rigidity, its theoretical core — the commitment to representing material conditions, social contradictions, and collective agency — has remained a productive critical lens for analysing politically engaged literature globally.

The application of Socialist Realism to Indian literature requires careful calibration.

India's social contradictions are not reducible to the European capitalist model of class antagonism. The intersections of caste, gender, religion, colonial history, and regional identity produce a far more complex social terrain. Karnad's dramatic work is particularly sensitive to this complexity. He does not write simple agitprop or straightforward ideological allegory. Instead, he inhabits the fertile terrain of myth and history, using their symbolic resources to illuminate the material and psychological dimensions of social oppression.

This paper undertakes a systematic reading of four major plays — *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Naga-Mandala*, and *The Fire and the Rain* — through the lens of Socialist

Realism. The argument is not that Karnad is a doctrinaire Socialist Realist but that his dramatic imagination repeatedly gravitates toward the concerns that define the tradition: the exposure of exploitative social structures, the representation of subaltern agency, the critique of ruling-class ideology, and the aesthetic challenge of rendering these concerns with formal rigour and popular accessibility. In this sense, Karnad's theatre constitutes a distinctly Indian variant of the Socialist Realist impulse in world literature.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIALIST REALISM AND ITS CONTEXTS

2.1 Origins and Principles of Socialist Realism

The term 'Socialist Realism' was first formally articulated at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934. Andrei Zhdanov, speaking on behalf of the Soviet Communist Party, defined the new literary method as demanding 'truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development,' insisting further that artistic truth and historical concreteness must be combined with the task of 'ideologically remoulding and educating the working people in the spirit of socialism.' Maxim Gorky, often regarded as the founding figure of the movement, elaborated these principles through his own fiction and essays, emphasising the representation of the common people's collective life, aspirations, and struggles.

At its theoretical core, Socialist Realism rests upon several interconnected principles. First, it insists on the primacy of social and material conditions in shaping human consciousness and action. Character psychology, in this framework, is not independent of class position and social formation. Second, it demands that art illuminate the contradictions within existing social formations and the possibilities of their transformation. Third, it privileges

collective protagonists and community agency over individualist heroics. Fourth, it values formal accessibility — the work must be comprehensible to the people whose struggles it represents. These principles, developed in the European context, require translation and adaptation when applied to the Indian literary field.

2.2 Extending Socialist Realism to Postcolonial India

The Indian Peoples' Theatre Association (IPTA), founded in 1943, represents the most significant institutional attempt to develop a Socialist Realist aesthetic in the Indian context. Influenced by both Marxist theory and the anti-colonial nationalist movement, IPTA writers and performers sought to integrate folk theatrical forms — Jatra, Tamasha, Nautanki — with the demands of politically committed art. This integration of the folk and the political became a defining characteristic of Indian committed drama and provides an important context for understanding Karnad's work.

Scholars such as Sudha Shastri and G.S. Amur have noted that postcolonial Indian

drama faces the dual challenge of engaging with indigenous social realities while also negotiating with European theatrical traditions and critical frameworks. Karnad's achievement lies precisely in his ability to navigate this dual inheritance. He draws on Sanskrit dramaturgy, the conventions of Yakshagana (the folk theatre tradition of Karnataka), and mythological narratives, while simultaneously engaging with the analytical concerns — class, power, exploitation, agency — that define the Socialist Realist tradition.

2.3 Myth, History, and Social Critique

A distinctive feature of Karnad's Socialist Realist engagement is his deployment of mythological and historical material as a vehicle for social critique. This technique has precedents in world literature. Bertolt Brecht's use of historical settings, Federico Garcia Lorca's engagement with folk mythology, and the broader tradition of what Raymond Williams called 'drama from Ibsen to Brecht' all demonstrate that the critical representation of social reality need not be restricted to naturalistic or contemporaneous settings. Myth and history, in Karnad's hands, become defamiliarising devices — they estrange the audience from the familiar and invite a fresh analytical engagement with questions of power, justice, and social organisation.

3. HISTORY AS IDEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE: TUGHLAQ (1964)

3.1 The Historical Context and Karnad's Intervention

Tughlaq, Karnad's second play (written in Kannada as Tughlaqand translated into English by the author), is set in the fourteenth-century Delhi Sultanate of Muhammad bin Tughlaq — a ruler notorious for his brilliant but catastrophically implemented policies, including the relocation of the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad and the introduction of

token currency. The play was written during the Nehru era, and its political resonances with post-Independence Indian governance were immediately recognised by contemporary audiences and critics.

The Socialist Realist dimension of Tughlaq lies in its systematic exposure of the gap between ruling-class rhetoric and material reality. Muhammad bin Tughlaq presents himself as an enlightened, egalitarian ruler committed to justice and reform. Yet the play methodically reveals how his idealism is inseparable from an authoritarian will to power that destroys the very people it claims to serve. The ordinary subjects of the Sultanate — farmers, merchants, soldiers — bear the catastrophic consequences of his grand designs, while the Sultan remains insulated within his ideological certainty.

3.2 Class and Power in the Play

The play's secondary characters constitute a social panorama that functions as a counterpoint to the Sultan's perspective. Aziz, the cunning opportunist who impersonates a Brahmin to exploit the Sultan's reform of land grants, represents the agency of the lower orders within a corrupt social system. His survival strategies — deception, mimicry, social climbing — are not presented as mere villainy but as rational responses to a social order that offers no legitimate pathways to the dispossessed. His character introduces a note of dark comedy that is thoroughly Socialist Realist in its exposure of how social inequality corrupts all human relations.

The mass displacement caused by the forced transfer of the capital to Daulatabad is rendered through reported narrative and stage imagery rather than direct representation, yet its social weight is palpable throughout the play. The suffering of ordinary people — the loss of homes, livelihoods, and lives — is positioned as the ultimate measure against which the Sultan's idealism must be judged. This insistence on the material consequences of political power for subaltern communities is a defining characteristic of Karnad's Socialist Realist method.

3.3 Disillusionment and the Critique of Progressive Ideology

Tughlaq's most sophisticated Socialist Realist move is its treatment of the character of Aazam, a young idealist who initially believes in the Sultan's reforming vision. Aazam's gradual disillusionment — as he witnesses the violence and cynicism beneath

the Sultan's enlightened facade — traces the ideological education of a consciousness that must confront the gap between ruling-class rhetoric and social reality. This trajectory resonates with the Socialist Realist concern with the relationship between ideological mystification and material truth, a concern that Karnad handles with considerable psychological complexity.

4. IDENTITY, WHOLENESS, AND THE SOCIAL BODY: HAYAVADANA (1972)

4.1 The Folk Theatrical Frame

Hayavadana, based on a story from the Kathasaritsagara and influenced by Thomas Mann's novella *The Transposed Heads*, represents Karnad's most elaborate engagement with the formal resources of folk theatre. The play employs the conventions of the Yakshagana tradition — a narrator figure, masks, song, and the presence of a divine frame — to investigate questions of identity, completeness, and social belonging. Peter Brook's celebrated production of the play in 1975 brought it to international attention and confirmed Karnad's status as a major figure in world theatre.

From a Socialist Realist perspective, Hayavadana is significant for its interrogation of the ideological construction of social identity. The central narrative — in which the heads of two men, Devadatta (the intellectual) and Kapila (the craftsman), are transposed by the goddess Kali — functions as a mythological allegory of the class division between mental and manual labour. Devadatta represents the educated, upper-caste intellectual class; Kapila represents the artisan community. Their relationship — initially fraternal but ultimately destructive — enacts the contradictions of a social order that simultaneously celebrates and subordinates manual skill.

4.2 Padmini and the Subaltern Feminine

The character of Padmini — Devadatta's wife who is drawn to Kapila's physical vitality — occupies a complex position within the play's Socialist Realist framework. She is, simultaneously, a figure of desire, a subject of male property relations, and an agent of her own choosing. Her inability to achieve wholeness — torn between the intellectual head and the physical body — mirrors the broader social fragmentation produced by class and gender hierarchies. Karnad refuses to resolve this contradiction through romantic idealism; instead, the play ends in tragedy, with both men dead and Padmini following

them onto the funeral pyre.

This tragic resolution, far from being pessimistic in the straightforward sense, performs a characteristic Socialist Realist function: it reveals the social conditions that make genuine human wholeness impossible within the existing order. The impossibility of Padmini's fulfilment is not personal failure but social tragedy, rooted in the division of labour and the patriarchal regulation of female desire. Karnad's refusal of a consoling conclusion is, in this sense, an act of ideological honesty.

5. PATRIARCHY, MYTH, AND FEMALE AGENCY: NAGA-MANDALA (1988)

5.1 The Structure of the Play

Naga-Mandala, which Karnad describes as a 'play with two legends,' employs a distinctive metatheatrical frame: a man under a curse is told two stories during the night, and the inner play dramatises the second of these stories. The central narrative concerns Rani, a young woman married to Appanna, a man who confines her at home while he spends his nights with his mistress. Through a magical nagamandala — a root given to her by an old woman — Rani is visited by a cobra who transforms himself into her husband. When she becomes pregnant, the community, unable to account for the pregnancy within their understanding of Rani's isolation, constructs a myth of divine intervention to account for it.

5.2 The Critique of Patriarchal Social Organisation

Naga-Mandala is Karnad's most sustained engagement with the conditions of women's oppression within rural Indian social organisation. Appanna's treatment of Rani — keeping her locked in the house, denying her food, maintaining a mistress while exercising marital rights — represents the patriarchal regulation of female sexuality within a system of property relations. The play's Socialist Realist dimension lies in its refusal to sentimentalise or aestheticise this oppression; it is rendered with unflinching social specificity.

The community's construction of the myth of Rani's divine pregnancy — and her eventual elevation to the status of a goddess — constitutes a devastating critique of ideological mystification. The community's need to preserve the social fiction of Appanna's honour and Rani's chastity produces a mythology that serves the interests of

the existing patriarchal order while appearing to honour Rani. This process of ideological myth-making — by which oppression is transfigured into divine blessing — is a paradigmatic Socialist Realist subject, and Karnad handles it with characteristic ambivalence: Rani is simultaneously liberated and further imprisoned by her mythological elevation.

5.3 The Agency of the Storyteller

The metatheatrical frame of the play — in which the story is told by Flames, the spirits of stories not yet told — adds a reflexive dimension to its political concern. The act of storytelling itself becomes a site of agency for marginalised voices; stories that have not been told, stories that exist outside the official record, carry the experiences of those who have been silenced. This celebration of subaltern narrative as a vehicle of truth is thoroughly consistent with the Socialist Realist valorisation of collective, popular knowledge against the distortions of ruling-class ideology.

6. SACRIFICE, POWER, AND CASTE: THE FIRE AND THE RAIN (1995)

6.1 The Mahabharata Material and Karnad's Adaptation

The Fire and the Rain, based on the Mahabharata story of Yavakri and reworked through Karnad's characteristic lens, is his most direct engagement with the question of caste discrimination and Brahmanical privilege. The play is set against a prolonged drought and the desperate attempt by the priestly community to perform a great sacrifice — a Yajna — to bring rain. Into this context Karnad introduces the figure of Nittilai, a tribal woman, and her relationship with the competing Brahmin scholars whose intellectual arrogance and social privilege are exposed through the unfolding tragedy.

6.2 Caste as a Social Relation of Production

The play's Socialist Realist core lies in its representation of the Brahmin intellectual community as a ruling class whose monopoly on sacred knowledge reproduces its social dominance. The conflict between Raibhya and his son Arvvasu — one pragmatic and politically astute, the other idealistic and committed to pure scholarship — mirrors the contradiction between the instrumental and the utopian dimensions of intellectual practice within a hierarchical social order. This is familiar Socialist Realist territory: the critique of idealist intellectualism that remains insulated from material conditions and

subaltern suffering.

Nittilai, as a tribal woman who exists entirely outside the sacred economy of the Brahmin community, functions as the play's most significant subaltern figure. Her love for Arvvasu and her death at the hands of Yavakri — who assaults her as an act of revenge against Paravasu — reveals the violence that underlies the seemingly refined world of Brahmanical scholarship. Her body becomes the site on which competing male claims of honour and ideology are enacted, a representation that situates the play firmly within feminist-Socialist Realist concerns about the intersections of class, caste, and gender.

6.3 The Rain as Ideological Symbol

The drought and the rain function as overdetermined symbols within the play's Socialist Realist framework. The absence of rain represents not merely meteorological misfortune but the failure of the ruling priestly class to fulfil its social function — a function whose claims to legitimacy rest on ideological rather than material grounds.

When rain finally comes, it is ambiguously associated with Arvvasu's sacrifice of his personal honour, suggesting that social renewal requires the renunciation of privilege rather than its mystification through ritual performance. This resolution is characteristically Karnadesque in its refusal of simple affirmation, positioning the possibility of social renewal within a framework of profound personal and collective loss.

7. FOLK THEATRICAL CONVENTIONS AS SOCIALIST REALIST FORM

A crucial dimension of Karnad's Socialist Realist practice is his deployment of folk theatrical conventions as formal vehicles for social critique. This alignment of popular form and political content resonates deeply with the Socialist Realist concern with accessibility and the relationship between art and its popular audience. Karnad's use of the Bhagavata (narrator-commentator figure), the chorus, the direct address to the audience, and the interpolation of songs and dance numbers in his plays serves multiple functions simultaneously.

First, these conventions break the illusion of theatrical naturalism, creating what Brecht would recognise as an 'alienation effect' — a distancing that encourages the audience to think analytically about the social conditions being represented rather than simply identifying emotionally with individual characters. Second, they locate the drama

within a popular performative tradition that is inclusive rather than exclusive, available to audiences across class and educational divides. Third, they enable Karnad to introduce multiple perspectives and voices into the dramatic frame, resisting the tendency toward monological representation that can afflict both naturalistic and ideologically schematic drama.

The Bhagavata figure, deployed in Hayavadana and elsewhere, is particularly significant in this context. As a mediating presence who both narrates and comments on the action, the Bhagavata embodies the collective wisdom of the community — the repository of the folk tradition — against which the individual dramas of desire, ambition, and suffering are measured. This collectivist perspective, rooted in popular rather than elite culture, is a formal expression of the Socialist Realist valorisation of collective social experience over individual psychological interiority.

8. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES AND SCHOLARLY DEBATES

The application of Socialist Realist frameworks to Karnad's work has generated significant scholarly discussion. Aparna Dharwadker's *Theatres of Independence* (2005) offers the most comprehensive account of modern Indian drama in English, situating Karnad within a broader field of postcolonial theatrical production. While Dharwadker does not primarily employ a Socialist Realist framework, her analysis of Karnad's negotiation between indigenous performative traditions and Western dramatic conventions provides an important context for the present argument.

S.K. Desai and P.K. Joy, in their readings of *Tughlaq*, emphasise the play's engagement with the crisis of idealism in post-Independence Indian governance — a reading that resonates with the Socialist Realist concern with the relationship between ideological mystification and material reality. M.K. Naik's influential study of Indian writing in English contextualises Karnad within the broader development of Indian literature's engagement with social and political questions, noting his distinctive blend of the mythological and the contemporary.

More recent scholarship by Shanta Gokhale and Tutun Mukherjee has focused on the specifically feminist dimensions of Karnad's work, reading his female characters as figures of subaltern resistance within patriarchal social formations. This feminist

scholarship complements rather than contradicts the Socialist Realist reading proposed here: both frameworks are concerned with the representation of oppression and agency, and their intersection in Karnad's work produces some of his most powerful theatrical effects.

A dissenting perspective is offered by scholars who argue that Karnad's mythological and historical framings ultimately aestheticise social contradictions rather than radicalising them — that the beauty and richness of his theatrical form soften the critical edge of his social engagement. This is a legitimate concern that any serious application of Socialist Realist criteria must address. The response proposed here is that Karnad's aesthetic complexity does not dilute his political critique but rather intensifies it: by refusing simple ideological resolution, he represents social contradictions in their full historical depth and psychological reality.

9. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the dramatic works of Girish Karnad constitute a significant contribution to the global tradition of Socialist Realist literature, understood in its broadest and most productive theoretical sense. Through close readings of *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Naga-Mandala*, and *The Fire and the Rain*, the paper has demonstrated that Karnad's theatre consistently engages with the Socialist Realist concerns of social oppression, ideological mystification, subaltern agency, and the material conditions that shape human consciousness and action.

What distinguishes Karnad's Socialist Realism from its European antecedents is the specific social terrain it maps: the intersections of caste, class, gender, and colonial history in post-Independence India, rendered through the formal resources of an indigenous theatrical tradition that includes folk performance, Sanskrit dramaturgy, and mythological narrative. This indigenisation of the Socialist Realist impulse is not a dilution but an enrichment — it produces a form of politically committed drama that is simultaneously locally rooted and globally resonant.

Karnad's work also complicates the doctrinaire dimensions of Socialist Realism in productive ways. His plays do not offer simple affirmations of revolutionary possibility or uncomplicated celebrations of collective agency. They inhabit the contradictions of their

social moment — the disappointments of post-Independence governance, the persistence of caste and patriarchal structures, the ambiguity of individual agency within determining social formations — with rigorous intellectual honesty. This complexity is not a departure from the Socialist Realist tradition but a deepening of it, recovering the genuine analytical ambition of the tradition from its more schematic political applications.

The study of Karnad through the lens of Socialist Realism thus serves a dual purpose: it illuminates previously underemphasised dimensions of his dramatic work, and it demonstrates the continued relevance and analytical productivity of the Socialist Realist framework for the study of postcolonial literatures. As Indian literature increasingly occupies a central position within the world literary field, the critical tools we bring to its study must be capable of grappling with the specific social conditions and aesthetic traditions from which it emerges. This paper has attempted to show that Socialist Realism, appropriately nuanced and critically applied, is one such tool.

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