

THE ROLE OF TRANSLATION IN REPRESENTING INDIAN CULTURE: A STUDY OF GIRISH KARNAD'S PLAYS

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Abstract:

Language is a fundamental pillar of human civilization, enabling the transmission of knowledge, culture, and social norms across generations (Baker, 2018). The global proliferation of an estimated 7,000 distinct languages (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2023) has made translation an essential bridge for intercultural dialogue. The word 'translation' consist of two Latin words. They are 'trans' means 'across' and '-lation' means 'to take'. Thus, translation is "to carry across" which involves the complex transfer of both semantic meaning and cultural context (Bassnett, 2014). India, as a nation, is defined by its multicultural, multilingual and multi-religious traditions, making translation a practice of profound historical significance within its context.

This research paper examines the role of literary translation in mediating Indian culture for a global audience through an analysis of Girish Karnad's plays: *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala* and *The Fire and the Rain*. Girish Karnad originally wrote his plays in Kannada, in which he delves deeply into Indian mythology, folklore, tradition and history. He later translated many of these works into English himself. This study investigates how culturally specific Indian elements such as myths, rituals and social structures are presented through the translation of his Kannada plays into English for an international readership. He does not merely transpose text but actively reconstructs Indian heritage, making it accessible while preserving its intrinsic complexity. Ultimately, this research highlights how translation serves as a vital tool for decolonizing cultural narratives and asserting a place for Indian thought on the world stage.

Therefore, this paper will study selected plays of Girish Karnad to understand how literature, through translation from a regional language to English, reflects Indian culture, tradition, myths, legends, heritage, and social values.

Key Words: Translation, Indian culture, English Language, Indian English Drama, Representation.

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Introduction:

Translation has created a bridge among people worldwide. The ancient Greek word for translation was 'metaphrasis' which means 'a speaking across'. In simpler terms, it refers to the act of transferring or expressing content from one language or medium to another. Various theorists have defined translation differently; for instance, Eugene Nida views it as a 'science', Theodore Savory describes it as an 'art', and Eric Jacobson sees it as a 'craft'. There are several categories of translation, primarily classified by language, such as:

1. Intra-lingual – Translation occurring within a single language.
2. Inter-lingual - Translation taking place between two or more languages.

These two categories can further be divided into:

1. Literary Translation - A type of translation that aligns closely with the original text word for word.
2. Sense Translation - A form of translation that emphasizes the essential meaning rather than the specific words.

There have been continuous debates on literal translation and sense translation but literal translation is generally preferred in the scientific and technical

fields and sense translation is seen more often in the literary field. Girish Karnad (1938-2019) stands as one of India's most celebrated playwrights whose works have gained international recognition largely through translations done by himself. He was a multilingual writer, fluent in Kannada, English and Marathi. He was also the Rhodes Scholar and student of Oxford. Girish Karnad occupied a unique position at the intersection of Indian cultural traditions and Western theatrical forms. His plays draw extensively from Indian mythology, folklore and historical tales, reworking them to address contemporary concerns while remaining deeply rooted in specific cultural contexts. This paper argues that translation in Girish Karnad's drama functions not merely as a linguistic exercise but as a complex cultural process that mediates between traditional Indian worldviews and modern theatrical sensibilities between local traditional performance and global audiences.

The selected plays for this study Hayavadana (1971), Nagamandala (1988) and The Fire and the Rain (1998) represents Girish Karnad's diverse engagement with different source materials and translation challenges. These works span three decades of his career and illustrate his evolving approach to represent Indian culture through translation. As Karnad himself noted, translating his plays involved not just finding linguistic equivalents but conveying entire cultural cosmologies that give meaning to the words. In his words, "Translating from Kannada to English, in his experience, actually involves translating the cosmology of Kannada culture". This research paper builds on this insight to explore how Girish Karnad's translations navigate the delicate balance between cultural fidelity and creative adaptation, between authenticity and accessibility.

Theoretical Framework for the Study:

The theoretical foundation of this paper draws from contemporary translation studies and cultural theory,

particularly the concept of the "translational turn" in cultural studies. According to cultural theorist 'Doris Bachmann-Medick', translation has evolved beyond its traditional linguistic dimensions to become a fundamental category of cultural analysis that can address the complexities of cross-cultural encounters in an increasingly globalized world. She argues that "translation conceived of as cultural practice does not describe a certain kind of cultural expertise; rather it is part of everyday life". This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding Karnad's plays which treat translation as an active process of cultural negotiation rather than a mere technical exercise.

1. Hayavadana:

Hayavadana (1971) represents a complex engagement with Indian mythological sources, primarily the Kathasaritsagara which was an 11th century Sanskrit compilation of legends and folktales and Thomas Mann's modern retelling in The Transposed Heads. Karnad's play explores themes of incompleteness, identity, female desires and the mind-body dichotomy through the story of three characters and two friends Devadatta and Kapila. They undergo a bizarre transformation after swapping heads. The play incorporates elements of traditional Yakshagana theatre which represent folk form of Karnataka and blending them with contemporary theatrical techniques to create a hybrid performance style that challenges conventional categories.

The translation of Hayavadana into English involved not just linguistic conversion but the cultural mediation of these diverse sources and performance traditions. Karnad had to navigate between the Sanskrit mythological framework, the Western literary adaptation by Mann and the folk traditions of Yakshagana to create a coherent theatrical experience. This required a translational strategy that could honour the play's cultural

specificity while making it accessible to audiences unfamiliar with these traditions. The figure of Hayavadana, a man with a horse's head seeks completeness. It may be a metaphor for translation itself which always involves hybridity and the negotiation of different cultural elements.

One of the most significant challenges in translating Hayavadana is the representation of folk theatre conventions within the framework of modern drama. Yakshagana employs specific musical patterns, dance movements and audience interaction techniques that do not have direct equivalents in Western theatre. Karnad's translation negotiates this challenge by selectively incorporating elements of Yakshagana while adapting them to the conventions of contemporary drama. For instance, the role of the Bhagavata who is the narrator-singer in Yakshagana is preserved but modified to function within the play's structure who also serve as a cultural bridge between the traditional and the modern.

2. Nagamandala:

The play Nagamandala (1988) draws from folk narratives that Girish Karnad learned from the renowned folklorist A.K. Ramanujan. The play tells the story of Rani, a neglected wife who forms a supernatural connection with a king cobra that takes the form of her husband. The play explores themes of female desire, domestic confinement and patriarchal authority. Karnad's translation of these folktales into contemporary drama involves not just linguistic conversion but the cultural reinterpretation of traditional narrative structures and symbolic systems.

The play presents significant translation challenges related to the representation of folk beliefs and supernatural elements for modern audiences. The central premise that a snake can transform into a human and engage in romantic relationships requires a delicate balancing between maintaining

the folkloric authenticity and ensuring that the story remains credible and meaningful to contemporary viewers. Girish Karnad addresses this challenge by framing the play within a self-consciously theatrical context that acknowledges its folk origins while inviting critical engagement with its themes. This framing device functions as a meta-translational strategy that mediates between the folk worldview and modern sensibilities.

Nagamandala also illustrates the gendered dimensions of cultural translation, particularly in its representation of women's voices and experiences. The play gives voice to female characters who are often silenced in traditional narratives, translating their subjugated perspectives into the centre of the dramatic action. This approach aligns with what 'Bachmann-Medick' identifies as the potential of translation to challenge dominant power structures and create space for marginalized voices.

The play ends with Rani as centre character achieves a measure of agency and recognition for her relationship with the snake. In the original folk context, the myth of ordeal has a mythical significance. It reminds us the ordeal of Sita in the Ramayana. The Indian mythologies are replete with the stories of Ordeal of many characters who have undergone it. In Nagamandala, Rani has to undergo an ordeal in order to prove her chastity.

3. The Fire and the Rain:

The Fire and the Rain (1998), originally titled 'Agni Mattu Male' in Kannada, presents perhaps the most complex challenge for cultural translation among Karnad's plays. The title itself state the difficulties as Girish Karnad noted, 'Agni mattu Male' in English becomes 'Fire and Rain' but 'fire' does not capture the sacredness that *agni* embodies. 'Fire' would only mean fire. At a deeper level, the combination of the words *Agni* and Male connote sacred vs profane. This fundamental

untranslatability of key cultural concepts requires Girish Karnad to develop sophisticated strategies for conveying their full significance.

The play draws its inspiration from the ancient Sanskrit tradition, specifically the myth of Yavakri from the Mahabharata. It also engaged with performance theories from the *Natyashastra*, the foundational text of Indian drama. This dual engagement with mythological content and performative theory creates a multi-layered text that demands different translational approaches for different aspects.

Findings:

Girish Karnad's approach to these challenges exemplifies what 'Bachmann-Medick' describes as the need to move beyond "simplistic metaphors of transmission" in translation. Rather than attempting to find exact equivalents for culturally specific concepts, Karnad employs a strategy of explanation and contextualization that incorporates their meanings into the dramatic structure itself. For instance, the concept of 'rasa' the aesthetic flavour or emotional essence that theatrical performance should evoke is not merely translated but dramatized through the play's action and character relationships. This technique allows Karnad to communicate the concept's significance through theatrical experience rather than lexical definition.

The play's engagement with Vedic rituals and sacrificial ceremonies represents another dimension of cultural translation. These rituals are not merely background elements but central to the play's dramatic structure and thematic development. Girish Karnad achieves this balance by focusing on the human relationships and power dynamics that play out through the rituals by using them as a lens to examine broader questions of desire, jealousy and the quest for knowledge.

Conclusion:

This research paper has demonstrated that translation plays a fundamental role in representing Indian culture in Girish Karnad's plays. It functions not merely as a linguistic process but as a complex form of cultural mediation. Through the analysis of *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala*, and *The Fire and the Rain*, we have seen how Girish Karnad developed sophisticated strategies for translating mythological frameworks, folk traditions, performance theories and philosophical concepts for contemporary audiences. His approach exemplifies what 'Doris Bachmann-Medick' describes as the 'translational turn' in cultural studies, where translation becomes a basic category of analysis for understanding cross-cultural encounters and representations.

The study has identified several key principles underlying Girish Karnad's translational practice. First, he consistently treats translation as a creative opportunity to reinterpret and reinvent traditional materials rather than simply reproduce them. Second, he navigates the tension between cultural specificity and universal accessibility by focusing on the human dimensions of mythological and historical narratives. Third, he employs meta-theatrical techniques to reflect on the translation process itself, acknowledging its limitations while turning them into artistic strengths. These principles collectively represent a significant contribution to both translation studies and Indian theatre which offers a model for how cultural traditions can be kept vital and relevant through thoughtful adaptation.

The implications of this research extend beyond the specific case of Girish Karnad's plays to broader questions about cultural representation in a globalized world. It is very important to present the diverse tradition and culture accurately and accessible to global

audiences. International interest in Indian culture has been consistently growing. Karnad's approach suggests that effective cultural translation requires not just linguistic fluency but deep cultural literacy, artistic creativity and a willingness to engage in the ongoing reinterpretation of tradition.

Thus, Girish Karnad's plays offer a rich resource for understanding the role of translation in cultural representation.

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