



Stimulating Human Exceptionalism: Hybrid Identities in Karnad's Yayati and The Fire and the Rain

Ms. Bhuvaneswari S.¹ & Dr. V. Anuradha²

¹Research Scholar and Assistant Professor, Department of English, Dr. M.G.R. Educational and Research Institute University, Maduravoyal, Chennai-600095, Tamilnadu, India.

²Professor, Department of English & Dean Admissions (Bihar, West Bengal, & Assam), Dr. M.G.R. Educational and Research Institute University, Maduravoyal, Chennai-600095, Tamilnadu, India.

Abstract

“We need myths that will identify the individual not with his local group but with the planet.”
“Joseph Campbell

Girish Karnad's mythic plays frequently shape the boundaries between human and non-human, demanding traditional notions of human exceptionalism. This article explores how Yayati and The Fire and the Rain show hybrid identities and relational trap, showing the limitations of human-centered ethics and cognition. Using an eco-critical lens, the study examines how Karnad employs ancient mythological motifs to reflect contemporary ecological concerns, highlighting humanity's moral responsibility toward nature (Girennavar, P.R.2025). Exploring literary analysis grounded in post humanist and environmental perspectives, this study evaluates that Karnad's plays explore ethical responsibility to broader ecological and social surroundings. Dialogues and narrative sequences are analyzed to expose the interplay of desire, power, and non-human influence in developing human decision-making. Using an eco critical lens, the study examines how Karnad employs ancient mythological motifs to reflect contemporary ecological concerns, highlighting humanity's moral responsibility toward nature

Keywords: Accountability, Exceptionalism, Mythic Hybrids, Post Humanism, Ecological Ethics

Introduction

“Every human society possesses a mythology which is inherited, transmitted and diversified by literature.” -Northrop Frye

Girish Karnad's plays Yayati and The Fire and the Rain confront the notion of human exceptionalism that is the belief that humans are different, superior, and excuse from the natural laws leading other beings by showing the caustic, unsystematic nature of pure human desire, ambition, and ego. Instead of presenting humans as rational, superior beings, Karnad builds 'Hybrid identities' where his characters are trapped between human intelligence and



primal instincts, and often, the civilized and the in human. When rewriting myths to highlight this weakness, Karnad says that true humanity lies in acknowledging these ‘animal’ aspects and accepting responsibility, despite a conceited pursuit of immortality or celestial power.

Human exceptionalism is the faith that humans are naturally superior to other life forms and acquire independent moral agency has dominated philosophical, literary, and cultural conversation. Contemporary literary theory, predominantly post humanism, challenges this view through the activity of non-human entities and relational interdependence between humans, animals, and the surroundings (Braidotti, 2013; Wolfe, 2010). Girish Karnad’s mythic dramas present fertile ground for such exploration. In *Yayati*, human desire and the exploitation of others with familial and symbolic non-human systems demonstrate the weakness of anthropocentric ethics. The play, *the Fire and the Rain* explores human reliance on ritual, nature, and non-human forces to arbitrate knowledge, fate, and morality. When examining these texts, this study examines that Karnad decidability of human exceptionalism, highlighting a relational understanding of agency and moral responsibility.

Literature Review

Karnad’s plays widely through the lenses of myth (Richman, 1991), postcolonial identity (Nandy, 1992), and archetypes (Thapar, 2000). However, studies addressing human and non-human relationship and post humanist beliefs remain limited. According to the constructivist theory of education, learners should be recognised as unique individuals and allowed to collaborate with others while learning through observation, discussions, and collaborative endeavours (Mascolo & Fischer, 2005). Wolfe (2010) likewise critiques anthropocentrism, exemplifies the ethical inevitability of acknowledging non-human organization. Braidotti (2013) argues that post humanist literature exemplifies the interdependence of humans and other entities, exposing notions of hierarchical human dominance.

Literary analyses frequently highlight how Karnad critiques anthropocentric thinking. In Indian literary criticism, Reddy (2015) comments that Karnad’s plays foreground hybrid identity and relational tensions, yet often focuses on mental and mythic representation rather than post humanist readings. This article leads this scholarship through applying Karnad’s within current debates on human exceptionalism, ecological morals, and mythic hybridity, which connect traditional literary study with post humanist theoretical frameworks. *Yayati* is a mythical play which was written in Kannada language and then translated in English by the writer himself. S. Ramaswamy adds: ...by using imagination and creativity, he transformed myths and legends into a folk narrative style (Ramaswamy 2017).

In *Yayati*, the pursuit of eternal pleasure results in ethical collapse, suggesting that human exceptionalism leads to social and familial disintegration (Patteti and Yadagiri, 2023). Karnad’s use of myth serves as more than a storytelling tool which interrogates humanity’s



responsibility toward nature. The gods' silence in the play emphasizes that ecological balance is a human obligation, not a divine intervention. Arvasu's final act, dancing to bring rain, underscores the theme that selflessness and ethical clarity are necessary for ecological restoration (Girenavar, P.R.2025). According to the constructivist theory of education, learners should be recognised as unique individuals and allowed to collaborate with others while learning through observation, discussions, and collaborative endeavours (Mascolo & Fischer, 2005).

Desire, Hybridity, and Ethical Limits in Yayati

In Yayati, the eponymous king connects his old age with his son Puru's youth. This act explores human attempts to exceed physical and moral limits which are an expression of exceptionalist desire. However, Karnad's stories confuse the human claim to independence through symbolic hybridity. The 'exchange of vitality' is not merely human action; it shows the body, lineage, and cosmic integrity. When Yayati says, "I will take your youth, Puru, for without it, I cannot fulfil my desires". Puru replies, "Father, can my body and courage bear what you wish? Will this not untie the natural order?" (Karnad, G., 1974). Here, Puru's opposition foregrounds the interconnectedness of human and non-human systems of youth, energy, and life-force are not human possessions to be appropriated.

The hybrid emotionality highlights limit to anthropocentric ethics. In Yayati, the titular king tries to excuse himself from the natural laws of aging and humanity by forcing his son, Puru, to swap his youth for Yayati's collapse. This act extracts the idea of a noble human, representing Yayati as a 'pleasure-monger' determined by a 'never-ending cycle' of desire. Vishakha's character represents ecological and emotional longing, while Arvasu, the selfless protagonist, symbolizes the restoration of ethical and environmental harmony (Girenavar, P.R. 2025).

Karnad finds the case of Yayati his own case in a different context. He says, "I think looking back at that point, perhaps it seemed to me very significant that this was what was happening to me, my parents demanding that I should be in a particular way, even when my future seemed to be opening in another. So you see, it was the play, where the myth in some ways gave exact expression to what I was trying to say but the form is entirely borrowed from the West" (Anuradha, 2022). Bermúdez's personified cognition framework complements for this reading that Yayati's ethical breakdown stems not only from desire but from incorporeal self-perception, which ignores the personified consequences of action (Bermúdez, 1998). This reading stabilizes human exceptionalism by showing that ethical consciousness must know the non-human dimensions of action.

Karnad argues that age equals wisdom. Instead, he expresses that Yayati's rejection to accept his human confines (old age) leads to a loss of ethical standing, showing the line between a



king and an irrational creature. The suicide of Chitrlekha (Puru's wife) leads Yayati to realize that he cannot flee the consequences of his actions or the 'law of nature.' His last decision to reject his youth and accept his age is a return to a 'mortal' identity, devastating the illusion of his exceptionalism.

Ritual, Nature, and Non-Human Mediation in the Fire and the Rain

Consciousness, Responsibility, Panov V.I. writes, "Ecological consciousness can be understood as a reflection of the psyche of a variety of man's relationship with nature, which mediate its behaviour in the 'natural world', and express the axiological position of the subject of consciousness concerning the natural world" (Panov, 2013). In *The Fire and the Rain*, Yavakri and other characters expect control over knowledge, power, and destiny through ritualistic engagement with natural and supernatural forces. The human characters' agency is mediated by non-human substances like fire, water, inherited spirits, and the natural surroundings. Yavakri says, "If the gods withdraw their blessing, what can my knowledge avail? I am bound by forces beyond my brain". Rituparna (priestess) replies, "Knowledge is never yours alone; it flows during ritual, nature, and the world's ordering." (Karnad, G.1995). Here, Karnad undermines hybrid relationality as human action is devoted from the non-human natural environment. The play accounts human exceptionalism through determining that activity is delivered across biological and ritual systems. Ethical and epistemological authority is not especially human but develops relationally. Both plays foreground human and non-human interdependence but through different processes which reflect Karnad's mythic hybrids which undermine the illusion of human individuality. Human exceptionalism is influenced both philosophically, which limits to control and knowledge and morally, which explores interconnected responsibility.

Eco-critical readings argue that *The Fire and the Rain* foregrounds nature as an active force rather than a passive resource. Scholars suggest that drought, fire, and rain function as agents that resist human manipulation, thereby undermining human exceptionalism (Sadhu and Bhatt, 2024). The play *The Fire and the Rain* analyses the Brahminical fascination with rituals of the 'fire' as a form of superior, empty, and 'self-destructive' behaviour that declares to be superior to the inherent world. Raibhya, a learned sage, makes a Kritya a demon from his own hair, hiding the line between human, spirituality, and monster. This indicates that the 'highest' human intelligence can generate the lowest form of ancient, destructive evil. Yavakri, although acquiring divine knowledge, Vidya is defeated by his own pride, which proving that knowledge without self-restraint is futile. Nittilai, a tribal woman, symbolizes as a hybrid identity that rejects the rigid, artificial, and mysterious ways of the Brahmanical privileges. She highlights the faith of humanity, the rain, over the fire of selfishness and the ritualistic determination. Aravasu's final act forfeiting his own happiness to get back his



loved ones is not an exquisite act but a human act of empathy. It expresses that true humanity is found in compassion, not in seeking to become a God.

In one of the interviews with Tutun Mukherjee, Girish Karnad says, “My attempt was to emphasize the calm acceptance of grief and anguish. Puru’s old age is a sudden transformation and not the eventuality of life. It brings no wisdom and no self-realization. It is a senseless punishment for an act he has not committed. I was also intrigued by the idea that if Puru had a wife, how would she react? So, I introduced Chitrlekha. Every character in the play tries to evade the consequences of their actions, except Sharmistha and Chitrlekha” (Anuradha, 2022).

Exceptionalism in *Yayati* and the Fire and the Rain

Scholars widely agree that Girish Karnad reworks Indian myths not to glorify human authority but to interrogate it. Critics note that in *Yayati*, the king’s attempt to transcend aging exposes the illusion of human exceptionalism, revealing desire and mortality as inescapable aspects of human existence (Bhat, 2017). Girish Karnad’s *Yayati* and *The Fire and the Rain* both probe the notion of human exceptionalism, yet they do so through superficial narrative and mythic processes that foreground human and non-human affiliation.

In *Yayati*, the hybridity establishes physically and symbolically through the exchange of youth between father and son, highlighting the limits of human desire and the impossibility of transcending natural and embodied boundaries. The human body, along with generational and cosmic obligations, becomes a site of ethical constraint. *Yayati*’s disembodied claim to control youth underlines the moral and existential significances of treating energetic forces as objects of proprietorship, thereby problematic anthropocentric authority.

Recent criticism emphasizes that Karnad’s plays situate human life within a larger cosmic and moral framework. Humans are portrayed not as supreme agents but as interdependent beings bound by ethical, natural, and metaphysical forces, thereby resisting the ideology of human exceptionalism (The Criterion, 2025). Equally, in *The Fire and the Rain*, hybridity is facilitated through ritual, nature, and cosmic forces. Human activity is not independent but dependent upon collaboration with non-human systems, comprising fire, water, and inherited spirits. Characters like Yavakri identify that their acquaintance and power are inadequate when detached from these larger ecological and ritual frameworks. Karnad, here validates that ethical and epistemic authority occurs relationally, dispersed across human and non-human mediators, rather than inhabiting solely within human cognition.

The two plays, therefore, propose corresponding explorations of hybrid association. While *Yayati* highlights embodied and generational hybridity as a review on desire and human pride. *The Fire and the Rain* connects ecological and ritual hybridity as a framework for moral action and liability. In both plays, Karnad undermines human exceptionalism by



demonstrating that ethics, agency, and moral choice are deviated from the broader systems of bodily, ecological, and cosmic in which humans are embedded. Overall, these narratives show that the sensation of human authority is both philosophically and morally flawed which is highlighting the essential of relational perception for responsible action.

In both plays, Karnad implies that the human is not a fixed, superior kind, but a hybrid condition continuously negotiating with its own basic natures, as desire, lust, anger, and the fear of death. When creating characters who are disintegrated like Puru or Yayati or Nittilai, Karnad contends that humanity only finds its true, sustainable exceptionalism after it stops trying to be better than nature and starts taking accountability for its place within it.

Conclusion

Throughout *Yayati* and *The Fire and the Rain*, Karnad confronts traditional notions of human exceptionalism. His mythic hybrids, whether physical, ritual, or ecological, which expose the relational and delivered nature of activity. These plays support moral accountability not only to other humans but also to non-human forces, which include nature, ritual, and the body itself. Through incorporating post-humanist perspectives, Karnad's drama determines the inseparability of human and non-human domains, which offer a literary model for evaluating agency, morality, and environmental ethics in contemporary discourse.

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