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The Plays of Girish Karnad: Critical Perspectives

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Abstract

The postcolonial Indian theatre saw many meaningful encounters with our tradition. The drive to return and re-discover our tradition was inspired by a search for roots and identity. This was part of the whole process of decolonization of our life-style, values, social institutions, creative forms and cultural modes. Girish Karnad, a famous Indian playwright, probed into the Indian past to re-interpret it and make it relevant for the present times. There is a unique amalgam of the elements of tradition and contemporary in the plays of Karnad. It seems that themes taken from folklores, myths and Indian history turned into a vehicle to express contemporary issues like feminism, marginalization of castes and minority religions, violence, increasing fundamentalism, denigrating Indian politics and existentialism.

Keywords: Theatre, Dramatist, Technique, History, Myth.

Girish Karnad is one such Indian playwright who has rejected the imitative pursuits of the West and has stuck to the native tradition for the themes and techniques of his plays. The reason why Karnad chooses myths or legends is not very difficult to discover. Myths, legends and folklores form the bedrock of any culture or civilization from which come out its basic values, modes and customs. These cover, as Carl C. Jung points out, in the form of motifs and symbols, certain recurring patterns of collective human behaviour and certain archetypal human experiences. Our Indian theatre had a strong tradition in mythological and historical plays. Karnad is deeply aware of the fact and firmly believes in the potential of the Indian theatrical tradition.

The characters in the mythical plays of Girish Karnard are not abstract symbols of some idea but are fully developed characters in their own right. Each play is a presentation of multiple ideologies and ideas; Concerns on caste and gender recur in all myth-based plays; existentialism and related philosophical discourse also find mention while burning issues of violence and non-violence in present times too, seem to fit in. The plays written by Karnad which base themselves on myths are three in number, namely, *Yayati*, *The Fire and the Rain* and *Bali: The Sacrifice*. This paper discusses these contemporary issues knitted in his mythical plays. The origin of the myth and

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the creative outbursts by the author, the themes of existentialism, social stratification, gender issues and other minor issues have been dealt here.

Girish Karnad probed into the Indian past to re-interpret it and make it relevant for the present times. There is a unique amalgam of the elements of tradition and contemporary in the plays of Karnad. It seems that themes taken from folklores, myths and Indian history turned into a vehicle to express contemporary issues like feminism, marginalization of castes and minority religions, violence, increasing fundamentalism, denigrating Indian politics and existentialism. He writes his plays in Kannada and then translates them into English. He is credited for having established the Kannada theatre at a global level. While preserving the local flavour in his plays, the appeal of latter seems to be trans-regional and trans-national. However with the publication of his three English plays, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (2004) and the two monologues, *Flowers* and *Broken Images* (2005) it appears that the playwright has shifted his medium of expression from Kannada to English. In the postcolonial scenario, when an increasing number of literary artists are turning towards the rich heritage of native tradition to re-define their Indian identity, Karnad touches upon contemporary issues like domestic violence, feminism, existentialism, marginalization of castes and psychoanalysis.

The first play written by Karnad was *Yayati* (1961) which has not been rendered into English by the playwright. The play was a spontaneous outcome of the pressures bearing on the young Karnad's mind which made him realize that he was not a poet he had conceived himself to be, but a dramatist at heart and had failed to realize so. Karnad has borrowed the myth of Yayati from the "Adiparva" of the *Mahabharata*; he however has induced certain changes in the play. Karnad takes liberty with the myth and weaves complex dimensions into the plot borrowed from the *Mahabharata*. To the mythical story of Yayati he adds new characters and alters the story-line so as to deepen its connotative richness and give it a contemporary appeal.

Tughlaq not only indicates the experience of colonialism but also suggests the growth of neo-colonialism in postcolonial India. The Indian governance is overtaken by corrupt, educated government bureaucrats and officials whose powers are unchecked by the higher authorities and who execute their own idiosyncrasies. In an essay, "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness", Franz Fanon calls attention to the fact that the newly-independent nation can find itself administered by an indigenous middle-class that uses its privileged education and position cheerfully to replicate the colonial administration of the nation for its own financial profit. This class is "neo-colonial" in that it continues to exploit the people in a way not dissimilar to the colonialists. It is a situation when in Fanon's words, "the national bourgeoisie steps into the shoes of the former European settlement." Aziz here takes up the neo-colonialist position; he rises to the level of an officer in the civil services by his deceit and treachery and then exploits people and accepts bribe from them. He takes complete hold of the political policies of the Empire and finally emerges victorious. It depicts the hold of bureaucracy over the government policies of the nation.

In *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, Karnad celebrates Tipu as a figure of anti-colonial resistance in keeping with the occasion for which it was written. The play thus calls for a resurgence of the feeling of patriotism and nationalism by reminding the uprooted Indian of the sacrifice made by a great warrior for safeguarding one's country. He honours the achievements of a pre-colonial ruler in the postcolonial present. The play projects the life of a great warrior and visionary who foresaw the looming devastation brought upon India by the British Raj, and who in the early years of the English military expansion fought with all his strength and vigour to resist their advances. He was in fact the only Indian prince who threw a challenge to the British empire and proved to them that India was not a land of uncivilized barbarians (as they were seen by the British) which could be captured and toyed with at ease.

Hayavadana (first written in 1971; rendered into English in 1975), which is the third play written by the playwright, delves into the rich heritage of the Indian folk theatre to address contemporary issues and pose philosophical riddles about the nature of identity and human being's quest for completeness. This experimental play is an "urban folk" drama in that it joins the conventions of *Yakshagana* performance (a dance-drama form belonging to the coastal areas of Karnataka) — stock characters, music, dance, masks, talking dolls etc. with a core narrative which apart from the philosophical implications, addresses contemporary concerns.

Naga Mandala (1990) is a socio-psychological study of Indian woman; richly textured dramatic transmutation of two folk tales of Karnataka. It deals with gender-bias and the subjection of woman in patriarchal Indian Orthodox society. The female protagonist- Rani and Kurudavva, other female character, are generic creations that stand for Indian women. In *Fire and the Rain* (1998), which is a far more successful play, Karnad draws upon a story from the *Mahabharata.* But in the best traditions of modernism, he gives a contemporary meaning to an old legend which stresses the dangers of knowledge without wisdom and power without, integrity. The 'fire' in the title of the play is the fire of lust, anger, vengeance, envy, treachery, violence and death. The 'rain' symbolizes self-sacrifice, compassion, divine grace, forgiveness, revival and life. The myth of Yavakri has been dramatized with new dimensions, and presentation is amply successful to create ancient atmosphere and link past with present. *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (1997) was first written as a radio play for BBC to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of India's independence in 1996. Later it was entirely re-written for the stage. The plot obviously deals with some aspect of Indo-British relation. It primarily explores the secret inner world of a man whose public life was a continual war against British colonialism. It follows the model of the history play established in *Tughlaq* and *Tale-Danda. Wedding Album* (2008) is the latest play of Karnad. It's a delightfully poignant tale of love and longing in a shining India. It explores the traditional Indian wedding in a globalized, technologically advanced India. It took more than thirty years to transform the memory of Karnad's sister's marriage which was marked by celebration and anxiety into a full-length play. The marriage of Vidula Nadkarni belonging to urban middle class Saraswat family of Dharwad represents the indigenous socio-cultural practices, though she belongs to a different world-cyber world of modern youth to whom "marriage is a gamble" (89).

Karnad borrows heavily from traditional theatrical techniques. In *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala*, he makes use of a number of traditional techniques. Multi-level communication by way of animals, supernatural beings, talking dolls, songs and prose recitations, *bhagvata* and masks, *swagata*, music, rhythmic movements, *rangpati*, *prasanga*, *nandi* and *bharatvakya* etc. are made use of in these plays. There appears to be a sprinkling of folk-theatre and classical techniques in *Yayati* with use of Sutradhar and Nati; *The Fire and the Rain* with the induction of *bharatvakya*, Prologue and Epilogue; *Bali* with inductions of songs sung by characters and singer; *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* with use of *kaskshavibhaga*. However these techniques seem to be used to create an effect of alienation or defamiliarization. It appears as if the playwright wished to make the audience think about the themes and characters portrayed and not identify with them.

Though Karnad is an Indian and makes use of folk-theatre devices, his intents appear to be at variance with those of the traditional theatre. The classical and traditional Indian theatre never drew a line between the realistic and the spiritual world. For them the cosmos comprised of both worlds and so their presentation of supernatural beings, talking animals completely fitted in their system of things. The question of alienation, thus never arose in the traditional theatre.

On the other hand Bertolt Brecht thought of these techniques as part of Eastern Stylization. He incorporated these techniques borrowed from Chinese theatre, to create the effect of alienation in his plays. The techniques were deployed in order to prevent identification of the spectators with the characters and force the audience to think about the situation and jolt into action.

Karnad expresses his indebtedness to Brecht for reminding him of the techniques present in his very own Indian theatre. He too, like Brecht and unlike the traditional theatre, uses varied techniques for creation of alienation. It appears that Karnad's chief interest in traditional techniques is prompted by his aim for creating alienation effect. For this he sometimes even adopts Brechtian modes and blends them with traditional theatrical techniques. In *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, Karnad makes strong use of alienation effect through historicism. The two historians who are present at the beginning of the play appear to be Brechtian devices to create alienation. On account of their being real human beings present at a certain period of history who had actually done a research on the life of Tipu, the two historians of the play seem to resemble the *sutradhar* of the Indian traditional theatre very less. In *Tughlaq*, the Sultan's theatrical speeches create an effect of alienation. The narration in *Bali*, *Flowers* and even in *The Fire and the Rain* moves backwards and forwards and almost creates a movie-like effect. Flashbacks, an alienating modern device is again made use of in *Bali*. In *Flowers*, the flashback forms a part not of enactment but of narration. There is use of cinematographic Brechtian device in *Naga-Mandala* in scenes where Appanna becomes Naga in a flash.

In *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, the non-division of acts into scenes does not so much appear to be the extension of the folk tradition followed by Karnad in *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala*, *The Fire and the Rain* and *Yayati*, but as means to maintain the rapidity

of movement between dreams and reality, without any breaks. The language-issue, the debate in the country on the privileging of the elite language of the time, English over regional languages is a subject of much discussion in Karnad's monologue, *Broken Images*. In the latter play the debate is between English and regional languages and in *Tale-Danda*, it is between Sanskrit and the language of the masses. In both cases there is a conflict between the language of the elite and the regional languages. It seems that the playwright, not satisfied with what he has already achieved, moves on with his creative explorations into new aspects of life and philosophy, art and technology.

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