

RESEARCH ARTICLE



GIRISH KARNAD AS A MYTH-INTOXICATED MODERN PLAYWRIGHT

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ABSTRACT

My attempt in this paper is to study Karnad's plays from the point of view of Themes and Techniques. While doing so, the focus will mainly be on Man-Woman relationship with the institution of marriage in the post-colonial society. Karnad is India's best living playwright whose journey from *Yayati* to *Boiled Beans on Toast* holds a mirror to the very evolution of a truly 'Indian Theatre' which can be true to its traditions and at the same time responsive to contemporary concerns.

Keywords: Brahminicide, byword, contemporaneity, continuance, existentialist, funny, futility, incensed, invulnerable, mythology, narrative, revenge, ruses, spawned and unnerving.

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INTRODUCTION

Girish Karnad is one of the most influential playwrights of our time and his plays have become a byword for imagination, innovation and craftsmanship. He has been honoured with the Padma Bhushan and was conferred the prestigious Jnanapith Award. He also received the Sahitya Akademi Award. Girish Karnad wanted to be a poet, but he was destined to be a playwright. Basically Karnad belong to the Kannada theatre. Since 1980s, there has been considerable work done in the field of drama. And especially with the emergence of dramatist like Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sarkar and a few more on the scene, dramas written in English in India have started attracting international importance. This article contains views on the thematic and technical

aspects in the plays of Girish Karnad. A brief account of the plays of Karnad is given below, basing on this concept.

1. *Yayati*:

It is the first play of Karnad, published in 1961. It interprets as ancient myth from the 'Mahabharatha' in modern context. It is an existentialist play on the theme of responsibility. The story centres round the character of Yayati, "a king who is in the prime of his life is cursed to old age and he goes around asking people, "Will you take my old age? Will you take my old age?." No one accepts, except his own son, Puru. Ultimately, "the son becomes old and the father becomes young". Yayati enjoyed happiness from varied sources, but he is always discontented and is always madly running in pursuit of new pleasures and new

enjoyments. He mistakes momentary worldly pleasures for eternal happiness and ponders over all the time how to get them.

Karnad interprets the ancient theme in modern context. Like Yayati, the common man of today is grouped in the darkness of material and sensual pleasures. He finds himself in a world in which old spiritual values have been entirely swept away and the new spiritual values are yet to be discovered. Karnad's interpretation of the old myth on the exchange of ages between father and son puzzled and angered conventional critics, but the enlightened readers and critics appreciated it for its modernity. It was originally written in Kannada and now it has been translated into English.

2. Tughlaq:

It is the second play of Girish Karnad and published in 1972. It was also originally written in his mother tongue, Kannada and later on it was translated into English by himself only. In fact, this play is sufficient to earn for Girish Karnad an assured place among the Indo-Anglian dramatists. It is the play about the life and political career of Sultan Muhammad-Bin-Tughlaq of the 14th century India. Karnad deviates from history when it is essential to create artistic and a dramatic effect. Karnad's main aim is to highlight the contradictions in Sultan's complex personality, who is both visionary and man of action, devout and irreligious, generous and unkind, human and barbarian. Tughlaq's close associates-Barni, the scholarly historian, and Najib, the practical politician, represent two aspects of Tughlaq's personality. Aziz and Azam are two opportunists who take the best possible advantage of Tughlaq's ideal politics and befool him. **Tughlaq** has contemporaneity. It reflects as no other play, perhaps does the political mood of disillusionment which followed the Nehru era of idealism in the country. This play is noticeable for consummate and flawless technique, precision and compactness, irony and paradox and symbolism and modernity. The Tughlaq's character has been delineated with psychological depth and intensity. It has been translated into many languages.

3. Hayavadana:

Hayavadana is the third successful and brilliant drama of Girish Karnad written in 1975. It is a memorable treatment of the theme of search for

completeness. The main plot of the play is a judicious blend of a folktale from Somadeva's *Kathasaritgata* and Thomas Mann's long short story *The Transposed Head*. The subplot of the play 'Hayavadana', the Horse-Headman, is Karnad's own invention. It serves both as prologue and epilogue of the play. Devadatta, a scholarly young man and Kapila, a sturdy man are intimate friends. Kapila acts as an intermediary and helps Devadatta in marrying Padmini. After marriage, Padmini is drawn to Kapila, which becomes explicit during their trip to the Ujjain fair. Unable to bear this, Devadatta cuts off his head. Kapila shocked, also dies in the same manner. Goddess Kali grants Padmini's prayer to get back the two men. In her excitement, Padmini transposes the two heads. So she now has a man with Devadatta's head and Kapila's body and another man with Kapila's head and Devadatta's body. Padmini chooses to live with the man who is carrying Devadatta's head. After a short time she goes to the other man with Kapila's head. The two men fight and kill each other. Padmini commits 'Sati', leaving her son to be taken care of by Devadatta's father in the city of Dharmapura. The sub-plot has great comic and ironical significance. The horseman's search for completeness ends comically. He becomes a complete horse.

Girish Karnad, well-versed both in modern western drama and ancient drama, has made use of both Western and Indian Dramatic techniques in this play.

4. Naga-Mandala:

Naga-Mandala was published in 1990. Originally it was written in Kannada and later the dramatist trans-created it into English. It is significant to note that the title of the play takes not after any human character, but after a snake-Naga Rani, the heroine of the play who is humiliated and derided as 'harlot' before the village elders, undertakes the 'Snake Ordeal', like Sita who undergoes the 'Fire Ordeal' and like Sita, she comes out unscathed. She is elevated to divinity and is hailed by all as a goddess. Her husband Appanna realizes his mistakes and accepts her with all humility and feelings of sincere remorse and repentance. It is a folk play and companion piece and sequel of *Hayavadana* rather than a work of striking originality. **Naga-Mandala**, a simple but

sucegical tale, celebrates sensuality from a woman's point of view. The noble features of this drama are the use of chorus and music. In the play, all the songs are sung by the flames. The flames are the metaphors of the women of the village who have gathered at the time of the night to tell tales and sing songs.

5. Tale-Danda:

It is a play written in Kannada and published in English in 1990 by the dramatist himself. It talks about the radical protest and reform movement, Veersivism, in 12th century in Karnataka. It is a dramatic depiction of the undesirable difficulties caused by the Hindu myth of origin of varnas. By presenting Bijjala, a Shudra, and a barber by caste, as the king of Kalyan, Karnad challenges the myth of varnas. It is written in the backdrop Mandir-Mandal conflict, the drama draws similarities between the Socio-Religious, Political and Economic conditions of the existing times and Southern India in the 12th century A.D.

6. The Fire and the Rain:

It is the Sixth successful drama of Girish Karnad, published in 1998. It is a trans-creation of the Kannada play of Girish Karnad's '*Agni Mattu Male*'. The reader can find a sustain growth in Karnad's dramatic creation. It is based on mythology, for which the dramatist has relied heavily on an episode of 'Vanaparva' from the 'Mahabharata'. It is narrated by the ascetic Lomasha to the Pandavas as they wander across the land during their exile. In the plot of the play, Bhardwaj and Raibhya were two sages. They were good friends. Raibhya, a learned man, lived with his sons. Sage Bharadwaj concentrated on his ascetic practices. Yavakri, the son of Bharadwaj, felt that his father did not get the respect and recognition he deserved. So he cherished a grievance against the world. He went to the forest and performed 'Tapasya', in order to obtain the knowledge of the Vedas from the gods. Indra appeared to him and tried to convince him that knowledge could not obtain through shortcuts. "Knowledge has to be obtained by studying at the feet of a guru". But Yavakri was adamant and Indra granted his wish. Bharadwaj cautioned him, but he did what he wanted. He molested Raibhya's daughter-in-law in a lonely place.

Raibhya was incensed at Yavakri's misdeed. He invoked the Kritiya' spirit of, from one hair, he created a fair woman who resembled his daughter-in-law, and from the other a demon. He sent the two to kill Yavakri. The spirit in the semblance of the daughter-in-law approached Yavakri seductively and stole the urn which contained the water that made him invulnerable to danger. The demon chased him with a trident and killed him. On hearing of his son's death, Bharadwaj cursed Raibhya that he would die at the hand of his elder son. Shocked at his own folly, Bharadwaj immolated himself.

Raibhya's two sons, Parvasu and Arvasu, were conducting the holy fire of sacrifice to the king. One night Parvasu was returning home, he mistook the black deerskin which his father was wearing for a wild animal and unintentionally killed him. He realized his mistake and cremated his father. Then he returned to the sacrificial enclosure. He said to his brother Arvasu, "Since you are not capable of performing the sacrifice alone, go and perform the penitential rites prescribed for Brahminicide. "I'll carry on the sacrifice". (p.35)

Arvasu obeyed his brother's advice. When he returned to the sacrifice, Parvasu said to the King, "this man is a Brahmin killer. He should not be allowed to enter the sacrificial enclosures." (p.44) Arvasu was thrown out. He returned to the forest and prayed to the Sun God.

He asked God to restore Yavakri, Bharadwaj and Raibhya back to life and make Parvasu forget his evil act. When Yavakri regained life, the god reprimanded him to pursue knowledge in the right manner.

The Fire and the Rain take up complex issues and situations. It centres round "a seven year long fire sacrifice designed to persuade the gods to send rain, and sweeps through seduction, murder and betrayal a climax which is as unexpected as it is philosophically resonant." Revenge, futility of knowledge, jealousy and ego are interwoven into the texture of the play of this play. Karnad has successfully re-worked the myth of Yavakri to humanize it and present a universally true picture. The picture being one which reveals that love is the only redeeming force of life and that the conflict within man is due to a ceaseless pursuit of his own obsessions. This conflict can only be settled when

man chooses to forego his obsessions and embrace humanism. Thus, the play is relevant to the times and transcends barriers of language and the constraints of a given culture, to blossom into a drama with universal appeal.

7. The Dreams of Tippu Sultan:

It is a political play published in 2004. Karnad wrote this play to celebrate the Fiftieth Anniversary of Indian Independence. Karnad's *The Dreams of Tippu Sultan* (*Tippuvina Kanasugalu*) follows the model of the historical plays established in *Tughlaq* and *Tale-Danda*. It draws upon a range of historical sources to present convincing portraits of the principal characters. It deals with a controversial protagonist who can be characterized in radically opposite ways, depending on the observer's viewpoint—as a heroic figure of anticolonial resistance, comparable to the Rani of Jhansi, in one perspective, and a treacherous but fallible and even foolish, adversary in another. The image in the play of polity is crisis, both because of internal dissensions and the presence of a powerful alien adversary, carries the same potential for application to contemporary problems that had made the history of *Tughlaq* and *Tale-Danda* which are politically relevant in present day India.

The playwright has authentically recreated history in "Tippu Sultan" and the character –Tippu Sultan, Haider Ali, Nana Phadnavir, Lord Cornwallis and Arthur and Richard Wellesley are well drawn. Karnad's imagination has imparted historical reality, both to the exposition of the theme and portrayal of characters. The insertion of Tippu's four dreams, especially in the last one, reveals the psychological workings of the protagonist's mind and also infuses a poetical element in the play. Hence, "Tippu Sultan" is Karnad's most poetic play.

8. Bali: The Sacrifice:

It was published in 2004. It is a tribute to the astuteness and sensitivity of Mahatma Gandhi that Karnad saw clearly the importance of non-violence to the cultural and political survival of India. The practice of offering animal sacrifices to the god is repugnant. This idea is presented through the conflict between the Brahminical order, represented by the queen Mother, and the Jain Principal of non-violence, represented by the queen. The practice of the continuance of offering miniature figurines

made of dangers which were substituted for live animals. It is also obnoxious and must be relinquished. It shows that the actual violence has been replaced by violence in intention.

The queen Mother is traditional and orthodox. She believes in superstitious rites and rituals. She is irrational and thrusts her unreasonable wishes on other members of the family, her daughter-in-law, Amritamani, who represents the voice of sanity and rationality, and her son, the king. The king married Amritamani, a Jain against the wishes of the queen mother who despises her daughter-in-law considering her defiant and rebel against time-honoured family traditions. She often rebukes her son for marrying a Jain. The queen, Amritamani, develops a fatal fascination towards the Mahout for his frankness, pleasing voice and rationality. Her attraction for the Mahout is without love or lust. She is peace-loving and shuns violence. She is shocked at the sight of injured bird knocked down by king which he thinks as a show of his bravery. She detests her mother-in-law's celebration of the news about her pregnancy. She does not reconcile to the idea of offering a sacrifice of animals and birds to god. The queen mother, the king and even the subjects intend to offer sacrifice but she boldly resists the idea and damns it as irrational. She admonishes even her husband. She does not approve of her husband's charge that her miscarriage was the result of her defiance of rituals. The climax is reached when the king tries to strip her naked outside. She defiantly pushes the king and moves towards the Mahout. Finally, she ends her life and becomes the real sacrifice. Hence, *Bali- The Sacrifice* is a voice of reason against irrational rites and rituals.

9. Wedding Album:

Karnad's *Wedding Album* is an Ultra-Modern play stressing India's traditions and conventions. It was published in 2009. Karnad uses his home language Konkani first time in writing this play and later it was translated into English. The main theme of the play is celebration of marriage in the life of urban middle class family especially the Nadakarnis, Saraswat Brahmin family. It brings the clan together to show their solidarity and mutual concern. Besides this, it also shows the blend of anxieties and resentments long buried within the

bosom of the family. The event is 22 years old Vidula, the daughter of Dr. Nadakarni, who is looking forward to her an arranged marriage with Ashwin, an NRI in the USA. The play has an Indian favour mixed with the advancement of technology of modern India. It burns the vital point of the story. The play has Nine (9) scenes presenting traditional and modern cyber world. It encourages us to examine the growing fundamentalism of the Hindu middle class family which is missing from Social Science-Scholarship of modern India today. It is humorous play without setting except living room of Dr. Nadakarni. The dialogues are resourceful and funny.

10. Boiled Beans on Toast:

It is the latest play of Girish Karnad, published in 2014. The chief protagonist of the play is the City of Bangalore, a throbbing organism spawned by globalization. The play holds a mirror to the fractured lives of its floating popularity which occupies a broad social spectrum from the struggler to the street-smart survivor, from the small-town aspirant to the elite. This is a city of wild hopes and dashed dreams, of disappointment and despair, of environmental destruction and rapid development. Bengaluru is said to have acquired its name through a king's gratitude for a dish of boiled beans. Bengaluru on toast- a place that has been cooked rapidly from traditional to modern, from a small town into a large metropolis is the theme of this play. It is the portrait of a city.

Anjana Padabidri, the central character, weeps over the axing down of the magnificent rain tree across the road-a tree because of which she built her house there. Her friend, Dolly, a high-society battered wife with little to occupy her, rues the cement concrete that is replacing tree everywhere. However, what she rues, Prabhakar Telang finds exciting. He has never seen tall, glass-fronted buildings except on television, in the small town in the Western Ghats from where he comes. For him, they spell promise. For Vimala, the family servant on the make, the anonymity that the city offers, provides convenient cover. Girish Karnad's play is a vibrant with moments of lyricism, cruelty, and laughter, as it deals with a host of characters, jostling together, clashing, and getting entangled or preying upon each other, in the city of 'Bangalore'.

Karnad observes these characters with a sense of irony, maintaining a remarkable objective view point devoid of nostalgia. The play is neither loaded with memories of a Golden past, nor does it take a moralistic stand against development. It looks at the reality of the present with unblinking eyes. The only time Karnad allow himself to judge is at the end, when Anjana's musician son, Kunal, describes Bangalore as a 'Big Black Hole'. It is a realistic play in structure and theme. "Boiled Beans on Toast" belongs to a world of multiple misalignments. Structurally, the play works as a prose symphony, the dominant theme being configured through long and short movements.

Monologues:

Girish Karnad also wrote two short Monologues – '*Broken images*' and '*Flowers*'. Karnad deals with new subjects and forms. He deftly encapsulates all features of a play into the monologue form. "*Broken Images*" takes up a debate that has grown steadily edgier since Independence - the politics of languages in Indian literary culture. It also deals with the popularity of novel in English. Drama is now so popular. It distinguishes from other plays of Karnad with the introduction of technology in the plays. The protagonist of the Monologue is Mangula Nayak. She raises the question of Kannada writers suddenly changing the linguistic medium from Kannada to English. The writers in regional languages may condemn it, but Indian English writers justify it. This monologue presents the dichotomy between 'authenticity and duplicity'.

In the next monologue, "*Flowers*", Girish Karnad returns to the world of folklore. It is the first work in this genre to focus on male rather than female desire. In this monologue, Karnad presents the dichotomy between 'love and duty'.

CONCLUSION

Thus, to conclude we can say that with the emergence of Girish Karnad's plays, there has been a revival in the interest of drama in English has not only gained vast popularity in India but also has gained international recognition. Indeed, Karnad's art can be interpreted as a vision of reality. This is the effect of post-colonialism. Karnad's plays provided us a picture of a woman in the post-

colonial society. So Karnad is India's best living Playwright, whose journey from "*Yayati*" to "*Boiled Beans on Toast*" holds a mirror to the very evolution of a truly 'Indian theatre'. In the dramas of Girish Karnad, myth is not merely a ritual or a structural device. It is a means of exploring a modern outcome of a traditional situation. Karnad tries to establish a 'dialectical relationship between tradition and modernity which is a central theme in contemporary Indian society. Karnad does not employ the myths in their entirety. He picks up threads of legends and folk tales that he finds useful. He adds his imagination to construct the plots to these tales. The technique of fringing together myths, legends and folk narratives is his forte.

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