

Retrieval of Indian Culture and Tradition in Girish Karnad's Plays

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Girish Karnad is the most renowned media personality in the contemporary India, leading playwright and a very skillful practitioner of the performing arts. His plays are primarily written in Kannada and then translated into other languages. The English translations of his plays are his own. They have brought him international recognition as the pre-eminent contemporary playwright. He has enriched the Indian literary scene by his contribution to art, culture, theatre and drama. But the most significant contribution which he has made to Indian English Drama is his attempt to retrieve the cultural and mythological rich tradition of the Indian past. Therefore, the argument of this paper would be to highlight Karnad's contribution in this direction. In his plays we find that he returns to the roots and tries to revive the local culture and tradition. India is a post-colonial nation having its own distinct culture and colonial histories. It is also multicultural in character in that it has a strong presence of indigenous traditions, culture and ethos which are unfortunately submerged and subjugated by the imported culture of Europe. Girish Karnad is one such dramatist who makes an attempt to retrieve the treasure of culture and tradition.

Cultural and social colonization of the native culture by the dominant foreign influence has not only resulted in unprecedented change in social and cultural ethos of India but it has also been accompanied by an alteration of the economic scenario of our nation. And the worst affected are the traditional arts and crafts. It is because of this that writers like Girish Karnad make an attempt in their writings to bring about a 'cultural renaissance' on the Indian literary scene. He has been rightly called the "Renaissance man", (Kalidas and Merchant) whose celebrity is based on decades of prolific and consistent output on native soil. He belongs to a generation that has produced Dharamveer Bharati, Mohan Rakesh and Vijay Tendulkar who have created a national theatre for modern India which is a legacy of his generation. Hence their "return to and discovery of tradition was inspired by a search for roots and a quest for identity. This was part of the whole process of decolonization of our life-style, values, social institutions, creative forms and cultural modes." (Goel, 1999:204) In other words, like Bertolt Brecht, Karnad makes the audience to respond intellectually rather than emotionally to the action of the play. With his artistic skill, he combines myth and reality, past and present and portrays the complexities of the modern life. Karnad literature is highly influenced by the renaissance in Western literature. During his formative years, Karnad went through diverse influences that went long way into shaping his dramatic taste and genius. One of the influences on him was that he was exposed to a literary scene where there was a direct clash between Western and native traditions. As Savita Goel puts it:

During 1960s, dramatists pondered over a significant question, i.e., how to draw upon the various strands in the traditional theatre-some of which had lost contact with urban civilization during the colonial era and many of which seemed deeply rooted in religious sensibility-so as to revitalize and enrich their own work. (Goel 1999:204)

It is important to understand that during the Fifties and Sixties in India there were two streams of thought in all walks of life like the adoption of new modernist techniques and

adherence to the rich cultural past of the country. And Karnad has himself acknowledged this fact:

My generation was the first to come of age after India became independent of British rule. It therefore had to face a situation in which tensions implicit until then had come out in the open and demanded to be resolved without apology or self-justification: tension between the cultural past of the country and its colonial past, between the attractions of Western modes of thought and our own traditions and finally the various visions of the future that opened up once the common cause of political freedom was achieved. This is the historical context that gave rise to my plays and those of my contemporaries. (Karnad 1994:20)

Karnad has exploited Indian mythology with a definite purpose in his mind. Indian mythology is based on a written textual tradition that has survived through time and foreign influences and attempts at subversion. However, the folk tales and traditions that reflect the social and cultural ethos of the nation are ingrained in an oral tradition that requires immediate attention and preservation to save them from extinction. Much of these folk traditions and culture have survived into the contemporary era through the effective medium of folk theatre. But strong influence of the dominant colonial culture and later the modern modes of entertainment from the West, be it cinema or the modern theatre, pushed these mostly regional forms of literature to the periphery. Girish Karnad is one such contemporary dramatist who has contributed immensely to the genre. Belonging to the postcolonial group of writers, his plays are rich in Indian sensibility and tradition, drawing inspiration heavily from the classical Indian dramatic tradition, myths, legends and folktales. He has always taken his inspiration from the Indian mythology, history and folklore. In his plays he has endeavored to keep the Indian spirit and ethos intact through the use of a wide range of techniques and devices adopted from the folk theatre. Exploring his immense contribution to the revival of folk theatre, Tutun Mukherjee comments that Karnad has “made available the rich resources of both the Great and the Little tradition, the classical and the folk elements of Indian literature”.(Mukherjee 1990:134) In his various plays Karnad has tried to portray not only the contemporary society and its dilemma but has also extensively employed the various conventional folk tales and techniques and devices of the folk theatre: masks, dolls, curtains, chorus, commentators-narrator, story-within-a-story, supernatural elements, etc. In fact, Karnad’s contribution to the revival of the art of folk theatre by bringing it out of regional context into the mainstream of national theatre is immense and noteworthy. He has used native theatre modes like Yakshaganga, the Parsee Natak models and other folk theatre forms. Based on a rich dramatic heritage tracing its lineage to the days of Natyashastra, Karnad has truly given a new life to the art of theatre as is evident from an analysis of some of his famous plays. R K Dhawan estimates Girish Karnad’s position and contribution to theatre and drama as under:

Girish Karnad is the foremost playwright of the contemporary Indian stage. He has given the Indian theatre a richness that could probably be equated only with his talents as an actor-director. His contribution goes beyond theatre. He has directed feature films, documentaries and television serials in Kannada, Hindi and English and has played leading roles as an actor in Hindi and Kannada art films, commercial movies and television serials. He has represented India in foreign lands as an emissary of art and culture. (Dhawan: 1999:13)

The Karnad drama focuses on the complexity of human relationship and contains an indirect critique of modern Indian society. In each of his play, beneath a legendary/mythical or

historical story, we notice “subtle and constant juxtaposition of the past and present” which has been “a common feature of Karnad’s dramatic art.” (Dhanavel, 2000:106) Karnad began his literary career as a dramatist with the publication of his play *Yayati* (1961). Drawing his source from the mythological character of Yayati in Mahabharata, Karnad depicts the contemporary dilemma of everyman caught between the contradictory pulls of pleasure and responsibility, materialism and renunciation. Apart from the puronic mythology upon which the play is based, Karnad has employed the character of Sutradhara modeled on the narrator-commentator of folk theatre. The Sutradhara informs the audience about the mythological origin of the play as well as the theme of the play which emphasizes the importance of owing up to one’s responsibility in life. Karnad has given this traditional tale a new meaning and significance highly relevant in the context of life today. The symbolic theme of *Yayati*’s attachment to life and its pleasures, as also his final renunciation, is retained. Karnad’s originality lies in working out the motivations behind *Yayati*’s ultimate choice. Karnad’s reading of Jean Paul Sartre and other existentialists helped him immensely to give a shape and meaning to his play. In an interview he once said:

I was excited by the story of *Yayati*, this exchange of ages between the father and the son, which seemed to me terribly modern. At the same time, I was reading a lot of Sartre and Existentialism. This consistent harping on responsibilities which the existentialists indulge in suddenly seemed to link up with the story of *Yayati*. (Paul, 54)

The above quote clearly shows that Karnad was much impressed with the predictive behavior of *Yayati*. For presenting *Yayati*’s alienated self and stressful situation he has reworked myth with the Existential philosophy of Beckett, Sartre and Camus. He further says in an interview:

It is true that Existentialism was the persuasive philosophy of the time. 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 to their actions, except *Sharvistha* and *Chitrlekha* (Mukherjee 1990:31).

To sum up, the myth of *Yayati* has been dramatized by Karnad in his play *Yayati* with the specific purpose of glorifying the Existential philosophy of the performance of the duty and acceptance of responsibilities. *Hayavadana* significantly projects the myth of *Ganesha*, who, himself being an “embodiment of imperfection, of incompleteness”.

In his second play *Tughlaq* (1964), Karnad uses a legendary figure from Indian history, a visionary and an idealist. Considered as a piece of theatre par excellence, Karnad’s *Tughlaq* employs several folk theatrical devices borrowed from Parsi theatre like the use of Deep Scenes and Shallow Scenes to depict the interior of palaces and the exterior of a street; emphasis on spectacle-like striking costumes make-up, scenery etc. Through the historical character of *Tughlaq*, Karnad tries to represent the disillusionment and failure of Nehruvian idealism in Indian political history. The play provides an interpretation of human character in its width and depth and delves out the quest for cultural values. Its principal claim lies on the fact that it one of the most successful attempts made in India to produce a genuine history play in English. Karnad made a successful attempt at introducing politics and religion in *Tughlaq*. *Muhammad Tughlaq*, the protagonist of the play, is an idealist aiming at Hindu-

Muslim unity, at secularism and also at building a new future for India. The greatest truth that Karnad has brought out through his *Tughlaq* is that religious saints cannot wash away filth from society. History is an aspect of Karnad's histrionics. In dramatization of history he makes it a living subject relevant to his contemporary time. Karnad's interest in history is projected in the recontextualising of events and persons which provide analogies for contemporary time. History is presented in theory and political ideologies with performative energy and carnivalesque to correct the present. With the imagination and marvelous discovery of the 14th century Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq's dysfunctional politics he minutely projects his observation of post-independence Nehruvian policy and disillusionment of his generation in socio-political realities in *Tughlaq*.

Hayavadana (1971) is Karnad's third play which is based on the story *The Transposed Heads* by Thomas Mann. Originally sourced from *Vetal Panchavimshati* and Somdeva's *Brihakatha Saritsagara*, Karnad's *Hayavadana* deals with the complexity of human relationships and man's yearning for perfection. Karnad's remarks about the play:

...it was when I was focusing on the question of folk forms and the use of masks and their relationship to theatre music that may play *Hayavadana* suddenly began to take shape in my head. (Karnad 1989:346)

Structured on a typical *Yakshagana* play, Karnad's *Hayavadana* begins with a traditional worship of Lord Ganesha, the presiding deity of traditional theatre. Use of Ganesha worship symbolically also introduces the main theme of the play that is 'incompleteness' and the quest for 'completeness' or 'perfection'. The manner in which Bhagavata narrates the story is a style adopted from a folktale, "this is the city of Dharampura ruled by King Dharamsheela..."(Karnad 1988: 1). The other devices sourced from folk theatre used in the play are the extensive use of masks and dolls for portraying effectively the different characters, human and non-human both as well as the different thought processes of these characters; chorus, mime, painted curtains, props, supernatural element, etc. The play revolves around the myth of Ganesha which operates at several levels. The mythical figure of Lord Ganesha representing a perfect blend of three different worlds of experience-the divine, the human and the animal-become central within the frame of sub-plot. The play aims at demystification of traditional values and concepts and presents multiple view points that promote a dialogue on the basic accepted tenets of life. This is enhanced by the merging of three levels of experience – the divine, human and animal and the bringing together of the animate and the inanimate on a common plane.

Karnad's *Nagamandala* (1990) is a mythological play based on a folk tale and the snake myth. The play through using the element of folk lore questions the patriarchal codes of society and deals with modern concepts of repression and psychology. He admits:

The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values, of making them literally stand on their head.(Karnad 1994: 20)

Nagamandala "is based on two oral tales from Karnataka which I first heard several years ago from Professor A K Ramanajun." (Karnad 1997) The sub-title 'play with a cobra' given by Karnad himself is indicative of its theme and the significance of the role of Cobra in it. In *Nagamandala*, Karnad weaves two Kannada folk tales together. It depicts the pitiable condition of Rani, who can't be said to be representing most of the young girls, who, just after their marriage, fall victim to the ill-treatment and atrocities of their husbands.

Taledande is another Kannada play written in 1990 by Girish Karnad. It is about the rise of the radical protest and reform movement, Veerashaivism, in 12th century Karnataka. He was awarded Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award (1993) and the Sahitya Akademi Award in Kannada language for the play in 1994. It is a dramatic representation of the undesirable complications caused by the Hindu myth of origin of Varnas. By projecting Bijjala, a Shudra, a barber by caste, as the king of Kalyan, Karnad challenges the myth of Varnas. It is written in the backdrop of mandir-mandal conflict, the drama draws parallel between the Socio-Religious Political and Economic condition of existing times and southern India in 12th century A.D. during Bhakti Movement. Eight hundred years ago in the city of Kalyan a man called Basavanna assembled a congregation of poets, mystics, social revolutionaries and philosophers, unmatched for their creativity and social commitment in the history of Karnataka, even perhaps of India itself. According to Kavita Nagpal (Hindustan Times) Karnad wrote the play when the mandir and masjid movements were beginning to show how relevant the questions posed in the 12th century are today. The anger of society, unwilling to abandon the safety net of the caste system, turns to frenzy when a Brahmin sharana girl is married to a chamar sharana boy. They are lynched and kalyan is rift with war cries.

The play *The Fire and the Rain* is a play based on the myth of Yavakri taken from “Vana Parva” (First Canto) of the *Mahabharata*. The myth whose origin can be traced back to *Rig Veda* provides the play its structure along with ritual which forms an important part of the narrative structure. The play begins with a prologue and ends with an Epilogue, and is divided in three acts. In its structure the play resembles Samavakarna, a type of drama as mentioned in Bharatmuni’s *Natyashastra*. Through the use of a myth Karnad gives a modern perspective to the story. He uses the brother betrayal issue of the myth and adds to it the ritual of the fire sacrifice to represent the web of luster and gender politics in our society. Karnad’s *The Fire and the Rain* transports the audience to the mythical world of the *Mahabharata*, but without dissociating them from day-to-day realities. *The Mahabharata* myth of Yavakri has been beautifully presented alongwith the Rigvedic myth of the slaying of the demon Vritra by Indra in this play. With certain digressions the playwright has made the play all the more interesting, impressive and relevant to the contemporary audience and theatre. Here, Karnad makes use of myth for the purpose of social change and amelioration of the low-caste people. Girish Karnad not only sources his themes and narratives from folk tales and mythologies but also employs the various devices and techniques from India’s rich tradition of folk theatre. In fact:

....fascinated as he is with the rich Indian folk and mystic lore, draws from it the material for his drama. His *Tughlaq* mythicizes history; Hayavadana derives its idea from “Vetala Panchauimsat”; Yayati and *The Fire and the Rain* present retelling of episodes from the *Mahabharata*; *Tale-Dande* is inspired by the life of Busavesvara, the Virasaiva social reformer. (Rangan 2006: 199-200)

Karnad’s use of techniques and devices used from Sanskrit play, Company Natak, Parsi theatre, Yakshagana, Bayalala, have helped him to bridge the gap between the actor and the audience as is typical of traditional performances. This perhaps is one of the reasons of the wide global acceptance and application of Karnad’s plays. These devices help him to transform the written word into action and breathe life into the text. “Theatre leads to the rejection of the usual limitations of man and man’s power and infinitely extends the frontiers of what is called poetry”. (Artand 1958:13) And in Karnad’s plays, “these two worlds of reality and imagination meet in perfect harmony creating poetry”. (Mukherjee 1990:134)

Karnad has contributed immensely to foreground the indigenous culture and tradition through the use of folk tales, myths and legends and the form of folk theatre. He has proved helpful in re-affirming and establishing the national identity firmly on the contemporary ground of foreign cultural influences and invasion. Extensive use of folk techniques and crafts have generated newer interests in indigenous arts and crafts, their life, tradition and culture thereby contributing to their economic development and progress. Use of traditional devices and artifacts by contemporary drama has helped generate a new scope for livelihood for the various artisans and folk artists.

In his dramatic manoeuvre he instrumentalises India's myths, folklores and history to propagate India's cultural heritage, philosophical beliefs, religious thinking, political understanding, social values and customs among the people of the West. His creative imagination is originally Indian. His evolution as a dramatist is based on the rich and varied Indian traditions and with the use of rich and varied Indian traditions and with the use of rich plethora of Indian myths, folk elements and historical facts. As an actor, director and scriptwriter, Karnad is very much artistic to weave Indian tradition, culture and social settings in his plays. In dramatization of mythical, folklorish and historical elements he projects man women relationship and India's cultural plurality with modern sensibilities. Karnad takes myth as a faith builder for individual's spiritual evolution. He uses folklore to connect the magic and reality and history for a symbolic sociopolitical struggle in contemporary reality. He takes history as a positive concept to analyse life and society. The past is not always dead for Karnad. In his fascination for the fossilized facts and fiction of the past he has made a treasure-trove in his dramatic pursuits.

Karnad uses myths in his plays to express meaning for the contemporary life. He believes that the significance of myth never dies. In an age of postmodernism and globalization, he observes people's craze for materialism and their crude imitation of Western civilization. So as a conscious dramatist, he valorizes myths, parables, legends and folktales in his plays. He rewrites them in his plays as they provide immense scope for living. While he uses mythical episodes in his plays he significantly aims at using them for social, religious and philosophical purposes. He presents certain episodes of myths from the *Mahabharata* and contextualizes them in contemporary human situations. It is observed that his plays on myths are rooted in the ancient Indian dramatic tradition of *dharma*, *artha*, *karma* and *moksha*. In the mythical imagination of his plays he revives the ancient dramatic tradition in the celebration of the human and humane. Presenting myths in human condition he links the present with the eternal and the contemporary with the archetypal. D. Maya rightly remarks:

Karnad links the past with the present, the archetype with the real. Issues of the present world find their parallels in the myths and fables of the past which lend new meanings and insights through analogy, reinforcing the theme. By transcending the limits of time and space, myths provide flashes of insight into life and its mystery. They form an integral part of the cultural consciousness of the land, with their associative layers of meaning, their timelessness and relevance to contemporary issues. (Maya 2001:68).

Karnad deals with mythical episodes in his plays and interprets them in contemporary reality. Linking the ancient and the modern dramatic traditions in his plays he links the natural and supernatural phenomena in human conditions. He takes refuge in Indian myths and makes them a vehicle for new vision. In the use of myths he presents the absurdity of life with all its elemental passions, conflicts and individual's eternal struggle to achieve

perfection. While dealing with ancient myths he aims at plunging us into the sentiment of devotion because our suffering in this world is that we have forsaken our faith in gods. In terms of form and content his plays focus on new discourses on Indian myths. Investing bits of myth, Karnad introduces us with India's ancient tradition and culture which provides us hope and consolation.

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