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Dramatic Skill of Girish Karnad

Shankar Biswas

Abstract:

Girish Kianarnad's one of great Indian playwright. He has composed a lot of drama in kanadian language. But his popularity comes by his transltion of his ownplays into Englis. To write plays he go for his sublegal back to the mythical background of India – from Ramayana, Mahabharata, Purana and so on. Karnad was influenced by Kannada theatre and playwrights but at the same time, he was influenced by the Western theatre. He had read the classical Greek plays, Shakepeare's plays and modern plays including the Absurd Drama. This paper goes to highlight Karnard as a dramatist and his dramatic craft. It will show how the playwright unfolds a new way drawing the past Indian myth in a new mould.

Keywords: Myth, Modern Theatre, Karnad's skill.

Introduction:

Girish Raghunath Karnad is a playwright, poet, actor, director, critic, translator and cultural administrator all rolled into one. He has been rightly called the "Renaissance man" (Kalidas & Merchant."Renaissance Man") Karnad is the most famous as a playwright. His plays which are written in Kannada have been widely translated into English and all major Indian languages. Karnad's plays are not written in English, except few, nor in his mother tongue Konkani. Instead they are composed in his adopted language Kannad thereafter translated by himself into English - a language of adulthood. When Karnad started writing plays, Kannad literature was highly influenced by the Renaissance in Western literature. To write the author would choose a subject which looked entirely alien to manifestation of native soil. Conflicting ideologies, political freedom of India, modernity versus indigenou traditions supplied the specific backdrop to his writing. During his formative years, Karnad went through diverse influences that went long way into shaping his dramatic taste and genius. The earliest influence was that of the *Natak Company* that was in vogue in Sirsi.

But the greater influence came from the naturalistic drama of Henrik Ibsen and through him of G.B. Shaw. Karnad was also influenced by Shakespeare considerably. But the influence of Kannada drama was quite profound and deep on him. Karnad presents the best traditions of the Kannada drama which was quite rich with romantic plays, tragedies, comedies, poetic and blank verse plays. Karnad took keen interest in all these kinds of Kannada plays. He was exposed to a literary scene where there was a direct clash between Western and native tradition. It was India of 1950s to 1960s that surfaced two streams of thought in all artistic work - adoption of new modernistic techniques, a legacy of the colonial rule and adherence to the rich cultural past of the country.

If Indian English drama wishes to go ahead, it must go back first, that is, only a purposeful return to its own roots in the rich tradition of ancient Indian drama, both in Sanskrit and folk drama in Prakrit. Karnad has emerged as a living legend in the contemporary Indian English drama. His output which ranges from *Yayati* to *Wedding Album* marks the evolution of Indian theatre since four decades. “He represents”, Saryug Yadav considers, “synthesis of cultures and his formal experiments have certainly been far more successful than those of some of his contemporaries” His technical experiments with an indigenous dramatic form “opened up fresh lines of fruitful exploration for the Indian English playwright” (Naik. *A History of Indian English Literature*. 263). P. Hari Padma Rani also gives credit to Karnad to Indianize the form of drama in English: “ Girish Karnad has attempted to Indianize the form by using some of the conventions of Indian Classical drama and some of those of the folk theatre and by blending them in a singular style of his own.”

Karnad’s first play *Yayati* was the result of intense emotional crisis he felt while going to England for further studies. To escape from his stressful situation, he began writing a play based on the myth of Yayati from *Mahabharata*. The play that reflects his mental condition at that time is a self-conscious existentialist drama on the theme of responsibility. He combines native subject with existential philosophy and juxtaposes past and present together. The play reveals the existentialist view that each man is what he chooses to be. The play doesn’t glorify son’s obedience to his father who exchanges his curse to his son Pooru is contrary to the original myth. Karnad raises practical question what would be the reaction of Pooru’s wife? Chitralkha’s protest attacks male-chauvinism and subverts patriarchy. Karnad being a problem playwright deals with soci-political and cultural concerns of the contemporary life. *Yayati* - unheroic hero stands for modern man inhabited by worldly desires, sensual pleasure, and irresponsible exercise of power and utter forgetfulness of the imperishable values of life. In *Yayati* Karnad reinterprets an ancient myth from the Puranic past to make a statement in the form and structure he borrowed from the Western playwrights. The play was a great success on the stage.

Karnad’s second play *Tughlaq* is a historical play on the life of fourteenth century Sultan of India—Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq. Karnad has always found it difficult to find a suitable subject for writing plays. He read the history of Kannada literature by Kirtinath Kurtkoti and learnt from him that Indian history has not been handled by any Indian writer the way it has been done by Shakespeare or Brecht. Karnad was very much impressed by this statement; he went through a book of Indian history. And when he came to Tughlaq, he exclaimed, “Oh! Marvellous. That is what I wanted.” That was a subject in tune with the times. In those days, existentialism was quite in vogue. Everything about Tughlaq seemed to fit into what Karnad had surmised from Kurtkoti. He felt that in Tughlaq he had hit upon a fantastic character. He realized that he had absorbed this character and it was growing in front of him.

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 theatre.

As opposed to the first play, Karnad wrote this one in the convention of the Natak Company. For form of the play, Karnad was no more interested in John Anouilh. He divided the play into scenes in the indigenous fashions of the natakas - *shallow* and *deep scenes*. The shallow scenes were played in the foreground of the stage with a painted curtain - normally depicting a street - as a backdrop. These scenes were reserved for 'lower class' characters with prominence given to comedy. They served as link scenes in the development of the plot, but the main purpose was to keep the audience engaged while the deep scenes, which showed interiors of palaces, royal parks, and other such visually opulent sets, were being changed or decorated. The important characters rarely appeared in the street scenes, and in the deep scenes the lower classes strictly kept their place.

Naga-mandala builds on the folkloric tradition implicitly and has intimate connections with the ways mythic systems of belief coexist with ontological realities. The play problematises what Panikkar has called through the Chakyar figure in his play *The Lone Tusker* the *lokadharmi* and *natyadharmi* functions of any story. The Chakyars are a community in Kerala who perform the *koothu* and *koodiattam* in the temples of Kerala, both styles of drama being intensely performance-oriented and only minimally text-based. The *lokadharmi* play deals with worldly affairs (of the *loka* or the world) and calls for 'bare representation' hence validating realism or *vraisemblance* over versification or 'embellishments'. The *natyadharmi* play (to do with *natya* or dramatic art) revels in verbal and linguistic pyrotechnics, allowing the Chakyar to forge an intellectual bond with the more learned among his audience, one that would match his piquant and allusive social commentary, and give him credit for his wide learning and technical artistry through subtle ways of encouragement. It goes without saying that folklore has always been both *lokadharmi* and *natyadharmi*: informal, extempore, performance - oriented and at the same time, richly allusive, a 'mosaic of quotations' that forms the palimpsest of myth. Karnad deploys this twin-facetedness of the folkloric tradition but critiques it by capturing the prefatorial first plot of the male storyteller in a moment of dramatic crisis.

Though the play is a richly textured dramatic transmutation of two folk tales of Karnataka, Karnad delves deep to explore contemporary socio-cultural and philosophical concerns giving them modern validity. Rani is placed in a world where orthodox social conventions, cultural taboos and coercive forces work; patriarchy is established which proves greatest blow to the existence of Rani. Apart from overt patriarchy, she is socialized to internalize the male superiority - an invisible conspiracy to derogate and marginalize her position in the society. She adopts new ways to transcend age-old subjection of woman. Rani is surrounded by evil social forces where she finds herself helpless; tortured by alienation and despair but she never surrenders and continues her struggle for identity - as a woman, as a wife and as a mother. Karnad's solution appears, at the first observation odd, unconvincing and unconventional violating traditional mode of treatment. Message is clear: despite alienation, despair and antithetical conditions a woman must continue her struggle for her existence and transcend "nothingness" in life and manipulate co-existence as a means for self-existence. Patriarchy, socio-cultural practices, parents of Rani, Appanna, Village Elders, Naga, Dog, and Mongoose etc are the tools to perpetuate exploitation of Rani.

Staving off sleep and sure death (an equation that takes on a special piquancy within the theatre), the figure of the male writer of this first plot must pass the last night of the month without sleeping in order to survive a mendicant's curse. By directly addressing the audience, the male playwright engages them in his crisis, and as soliloquy flows freely along with dialogue, his conversation with the audience simulates and recreates the domestic space of telling and hearing within the very public theatrical space. When the female-voiced Flames enter into the action, a new kind of dramatic situation occurs on stage and the male writer is transformed from protagonist to interloper and internal audience. This *newmise-en-scène* provides a peculiarly female counterpoint to the mediated border zone between audience and protagonist created by the 'lone' playwright whose dilemma now temporarily recedes, as a choral, communal and distinctly women-centric ethos takes over the stage. By endowing the Flames with a female presence, Karnad brings to life those subcultural impulses of women's tales that often work in robust opposition to male mechanisms of folkloric communication. The professional Chakyar of Panikkar's play is, after all, a tremendously masculine figure, and his looming power is encapsulated by the analogy with the big lumbering elephant, the tusker that has 'strayed from his herd' and with whom the Chakyar is dramatically and existentially aligned. The Chakyar's lone mythology, like the accursed condition of the male writer in *Naga-mandala's* prefatorial plot, strikingly contrasts with the Flames, 'those nonprofessional tellers of tales' for whom 'the whole tale is the tale of her acquiring her story, making a person of her, making a silent woman a speaking person.

Agency, Karnad suggests in *Naga-mandala*, as indeed agency in women's tales in general, is intimately connected with their being able to tell their own stories, and of those stories being heard. The idea that stories *need* to be told if they are to have life recalls Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, published the same year as Karnad's play. It was Rushdie's first novel

after *The Satanic Verses* and a writer's response to the fatwa in the only way he knew how: by writing. In tune with the central dilemma of that immensely popular short novel where an allegorical apocalypse of silence looms large over creative expression, Karnad's play also underscores the reiterative power of stories—a story exists to be told; by extension, the teller exists to tell. And for women, whose stories for centuries have either been erased, or submerged, or appropriated by patriarchal structures, speech *is* power. The old woman tries to 'choke' and 'imprison' her creativity but the story and the song escape her clutches, and earn a life of their own. The critique here is not only of the structures that imprison the old lady within a bickering marriage, but also of her tacit imbibing of those repressive structures that inhibit and keep her from expressing her identity.

Tale- Danda (1993) derives its story from the life of a Kannada saint Basavanna who resisted ideologically against the prevailing evils of caste hierarchy. Like *Tughlaq* and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, it is a historical play. History and its urgent relevance to the present continuous have always fascinated Karnad and *Tale- Danda* illustrates this fact. Explosive situations after the official endorsement of Mandal Commission Report and Mandir issue in 1989 motivated Karnad to work on subaltern issue and highlight, “how relevant the questions posed by these thinkers were for our age. The horror of subsequent events and the religious fanaticism that has gripped our national life today have only proved how dangerous it is to ignore the solutions they offered” (Karnad “Preface”). And the historical context, deeply implanted in his mind proved catalytic to his plays. Drawing our attention to the genesis of the present, the play illuminates the endemic affliction of the caste and class politics infecting our body politic in the medieval period of history.

The Fire and the Rain is a far more successful play based on the myth of Yavakri (or Yavakrita) which occurs in Chapters 135-138 of the Vana Parva (Forest Canto) of the *Mahabharata*. It is an English translation of a play in Kannad *Agni Mattu Male* by the playwright himself. It took thirty-seven years time to live with a myth and develop into the present form for a workshop with professional actors at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis. Years spent in the company of South Asian scholars at the University of Chicago stimulated his interest in orthodox Hinduism and the complex organization of the Hindu society. The most spectacular and successful production of the play was by Arjun Sajnani in English (Banglore, 1999), subsequently, Sajnani reworked the play as a commercial Hindi film titled *Agnivarsha* (casting Amitabh Bachchan as Indra). Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker has examined the genesis and evolution of the play: “Karnad reimagines the world of Hindu antiquity and constructs a story of passion, loss, and sacrifice in the contexts of Vedic ritual, spiritual discipline (*tapasya*), social and ethical differences between human agents, and interrelated forms of performance still close to their moments of origin” (“Introduction” Vol. Two. xvii). 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. It is narrated by the ascetic Lomsha to the Pandavas during their exile. But Karnad gives a contemporary meaning to

an old legend, which stresses the dangers of knowledge without wisdom and power without integrity. The myth cautions about the misappropriation of power that human beings receive from the gods after great penance. Yavakri, the son of sage Bhardwaj, acquires knowledge of the Vedas directly from Indra after ten years rigorous penance. Though his father regarding acquisition of divine power warns him, Yavakri uses it to molest the daughter-in-law of sage Raibhya, whom he resents. Raibhya in retaliation creates a demon (*Brahma Rakshasa*) and a spirit in the form of his daughter-in-law, Vishakha, both of whom pursue Yavakri and kill him. Bhardwaj curses Raibhya - that he will die at the hands of his own son - and then kills himself in remorse. Sometime later Parvasu indeed mistakes the deerskin his father Raibhya is wearing for a wild animal, and accidentally kills him. Involved with his younger brother Aravasu in a fire sacrifice, Parvasu initiates another cycle of evil when he falsely accuses the latter of patricide (hence of brahiminicide). Aravasu then begins his own penance to the Sun God, and when granted a boon, asks for Yavakri, Bhardwaj, and Raibhya to be restored to life. Lives that were destroyed due to human lapses are restored through divine intervention. Karnad has forged closer connections between the principal characters and created them into rounded personalities. Yavakri and Vishakha are not strangers but lovers whose relationship both precedes and follows Vishakha's marriage to Parvasu, making her more than merely a passive object of Yavakri's lust. Her marriage itself appears to be an arid contract: after a frenzy of sensual gratification Parvasu has left Vishakha to Raibhya's care, and the relationships between the three are startling in their lovelessness and malevolence. Similarly, Parvasu kills his father out of hatred rather than ignorance. Karnad has also invented a love episode between Aravasu and a tribal girl Nittilai, and develops a contrast between the life of discipline and sacrifice with the life of instinct and emotion—opposition between Brahmin and Sudra, with Aravasu working as a connective link between the two apposite worlds. Karnad's note on "Drama and *Purushartha*" in *The Fire and the Rain* endorses his unequivocal interest in the doctrines of *Purushartha* towards which a work of art should draw mankind. Karnad himself has pointed out the structure of the play resembles that of Aeschyles's *Oresteia* trilogy, the chief motifs in which are the protagonist's home-coming after a prolonged absence; human frailty and temptation and crime; the operation of the supernatural in human life; and Divine grace. With its solid thematic richness *the Fire and Rain* is, "perhaps the finest of Karnad's plays so far."

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