

Themes in the plays of Girish Karnad

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Abstract

Girish Karnad is one of the most significant post-independence dramatists of India. He began his career as a dramatist in 1960 and the journey is still continuing. But it must be remembered that Girish Karnad became a dramatist by chance. He actually dreamt to be a poet but circumstances made him a dramatist. Girish Karnad's plays thus are a mirror to the formation of contemporary Indian subjectivity against the backdrop of several ages, mythic, medieval to modern. He has a wider range in comparison to Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani. Girish Karnad's play marks a radical departure from his earlier play, *Yayati* which is concerned with Indian mythology; now he delves deep into the medieval history of India.

Keywords: Dramatist, nationalist, global, medieval history, independence, mythology

1. Introduction

Girish Karnad is one of the most significant post-independence dramatists of India. He began his career as a dramatist in 1960 and the journey is still continuing. But it must be remembered that Girish Karnad became a dramatist by chance. He actually dreamt to be a poet but circumstances made him a dramatist. But this poetic impulse was never absent from his psyche and his plays, though in prose, have almost poetic resonance. He felt surprise about what was in store for him. His ambition was to be a poet, but his qualifications and talents are those required of a dramatist.

His first play was *Yayati* (1960). He began writing during his passage to England. He wrote all his plays, including *Yayati* in Kannada, the regional language of his adoption. It must be remembered that Konkani is his mother tongue and English is the language in which he had had his higher education. While he was preparing for his trip to England and amidst all the intense emotional turmoil he began writing a play

Girish Karnad's play marks a radical departure from his earlier play, *Yayati* which is concerned with Indian mythology; now he delves deep into the medieval history of India. This suggests that besides being inspired by ancient Indian myths and folklore he was also deeply and abidingly interested in Indian history. Originally written in Kannada in while Karnad was studying at Oxford and translated into English by the author himself, *Tughlaq* is one of the most critically acclaimed plays ever staged in India. Here Karnad takes up the last five years of the reign of Muhammad-Bin Tughlaq under his ken.

The character of one of the most fascinating kings to occupy the throne in Delhi, namely, Mohammed-bin-Tughlaq has been depicted here with great intensity and verve. He ruled over Delhi for 26 years, which is remembered as a period of unparalleled cruelty and agonising existence for his subjects. Karnad's play is labeled a historical play because the chief protagonist is drawn from history. The events that form part of the

narrative are also historical in essence. The play shows how an emperor like Tughlaq can make and unmake history by his whimsical ways.

Tughlaq, a thirteen scene play (Karnad did not divide any of his plays into Acts), was an immediate success on the stage. It was first produced in Kannada in 1965 and was also performed at about the same time in Hindi by the National School of Drama. These productions were followed by its production in Bengali and Marathi. In 1970 there was an English production of the play in English. This English version was a major success. It was presented in London by the National School of Drama for the festival of India in 1982. This production was directed by E. Alkazi. It is Karnad's first successful experiment and after Tughlaq he has used his skill miraculously in translating history on the dramatic pages of *Tele-Danda* and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*. The play *The Dreams of Sultan* differs from other two historical plays as it was first written in English and then was translated into Kannada. Tughlaq, was first written in Kannada and Girish Karnad was persuaded to translate it into English by Alyque Padamses.

Girish Karnad's third play *Hayavadana* (1971) remarks Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker "marked another major change of direction, not only in his playwriting but in post-independence theatre as a whole, because it was the first work to translate into notable practice the debate over the usefulness of indigenous performance genres in the development of a new, quintessentially 'Indian' theatre." *Hayavadana* was originally written in Kannada and was written during the period of his Homi Bhabha Fellowship in 1971-72.

The play's credentials were impeccable and its timing fortuitous. In 1972 the play won both the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, and the Kamaladevi Award of the Bhartiya Natya Singh in the category of the best Indian play.

From the chronological point Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* that made its stage debut in 1988, is one of

those plays that has come a long way. There was a gap of seventeen years between the earlier play *Hayavadana* and the present play. Woven around two Kannad folk tales, the play is widely performed across the globe and has been acknowledged as a modern Indian classic and is a particular favourite of theatre groups. It was written by Karnad during his Fullbright fellowship at the University of Chicago.

Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* is based on two oral tales he heard from A. K. Ramanujan. Girish Karnada in his "Introduction" to *Three Plays* said.

These tales are narrated by women- normally the older women in the family-while children are being fed in the evenings in the kitchen or being put to bed. The other adults present on these occasions are also women. Therefore these tales, though directed at the children, often serve as a parallel system of communication among the women in the family.

Like all women in Girish Karnad's plays who are the manifestations of life force, Rani, the captive heroine of *Naga-mandala*, is an extremely innocent and naïve woman. She marries Appanna, a cruel and dominating husband, who brings her home only to lock her in the house. There is no genuine relationship between the couple. He treats her like a slave. His wife pines for love and affection and he visits his concubine regularly, denying his wife's marital right. On the whole, Appanna's absolute superiority over his wife, his minimal communication with her, her separation from all male and female companionship and his gender-biased inhuman treatment with his wife are some examples of patriarchal culture's tyranny against women, to which Appanna is a representative. Indeed all his treatment and behaviour presents false morality.

The next play of Girish Karnad, from the chronological point of view is *Bali: The Sacrifice*. It was first brought out into Kannada in 1980 by the name of *Hittina Hunja*, but was not translated in English at that time. The source of the play is an ancient Kannada epic, *Yashodhara Charite*, which itself draws on several other sources. But Karnad was inspired by Somadeva Suri's *Yashastilaka* written in 950 AD, which centres on the Jain abhorrence of violence in any form—particularly of meaningless and value-less blood sacrifices. *Bali* is the outcome of a brief given to Girish Karnad by Vayu Naidu, the play's commissioning producer. It required Karnad to consider the global impact of India's partition on a millennial civilisation. Karnad, in turn, chose to look at the anatomy of violence and non-violence as expressed by the themes of the Jain epic.

Chronologically *Tale-Danda* is Karnad's next play. In 1988 Girish Karnad returned to India from Chicago and took up the prestigious post of Chairman of the Sangeet Natak Akademi in an atmosphere which was a far cry from the "delicate play of fancy and fantasy in *Naga-Mandala*." The first play after his residence in India Girish Karnada wrote *Tale-Danda*. This play is also an extended tribute to A. K. Ramanujan, as the culmination of the long-standing friendship between the two great Kannada litterateurs. For a proper appreciation of this play we have to refer back to the past as is the case with the play *Tughlaq*. While *Tughlaq* is placed in medieval

India this play goes farther into the past to a time when the majority religion turned against itself. The time of the story is post-1980s when Indian politics had been overshadowed not by secular politics but by communal leaders. The politics based on religious grounds for attaining short-term selfish goals can be called communal politics. India has been tormented from the very idea of communal politics since medieval times. It created havoc in the form of partition. India was partitioned on religious lines because of the wide spread resentment created in the minds of Muslims by the Muslim League. But, the hysteria created by communal politics vanishes in no time. The Muslim League disappeared from the political arena soon; a Party which created a country did not survive longer than a decade. In the 80's a new wave of political statistics came in the forefront. Some political parties preached communal politics. The majority community was also quite annoyed by the minority appeasement policies of the other parties. Sensing the political scenario communal parties started luring the majority community with its Ram Mandir campaign. The result was the demolition of the Babri Masjid followed by countrywide communal riots, killing thousands of innocent. Politics in contemporary India is marked by the 'resurgence' of 'caste and communal politics'. The past two decades have seen a dramatic collapse of the old political formations and parties which had dominated the politics of the Nehruvian era. Even the movements of that period, right up to the mid-1970s, were largely movements on economic issues and questions of corruption, black-marketing, hoarding and food shortages. Through the decade of the 1980s, there was a gradual erosion of the Nehruvian secular-nationalist imagination, and one of the factors responsible for it was the 're-emergence' of caste and religion in public as well as private discourse.

Then next play of Girish Karnad is titled *Agni Mattu Male* in Kannada which was translated as *The Fire and the Rain (Agnvarsha)*. It was originally written in English but soon was translated into English by Karnad himself as it was part of a deal with Garland Wright that he should provide a play for the workshop with professional actors in Guthrie.

Girish Karnad's plays thus are a mirror to the formation of contemporary Indian subjectivity against the backdrop of several ages, mythic, medieval to modern. He has a wider range in comparison to Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani. While Tendulkar explore the socio-political and cultural constituents of subjectivity, Karnad explores the multiple layers of subjectivity in not only the mythical and historical but also the contemporary Indian subjects. His plays can be regarded as representing the contemporary Indian subjectivity across classes, genders and temporalities. He attempts to make modern the historical and mythical subjects, making them appear extremely contemporary and relevant. He deals with almost every strata of society including the royalty, the rural lower class and the urban middle class where Vijay Tendulkar's focus lies in the middle class and Mahesh Dattani's subjects belong to urban middle class. He studies the subjectivity of Indian men and women placed in rarely encountered dilemmas. Be it the Rani of *Naga-*

Mandala, or the three protagonists of *Hayavadana* the subjects of Girish Karnad are entangled in unprecedented turmoil. And through this turmoil, he explores the multiple layers of their existence in the world. Girish Karnad's historical subjects, as his Tughlaq and Tipu Sultan exemplify, appear to be our contemporaries with concerns that are very much our concerns. While Tughlaq finds it difficult to choose between ethics and progress, Tipu is unsure about appreciating or condemning the British way of life. Similarly, Girish Karnad's protagonists in *Naga-Mandala* and *Hayavadana* are faced with contemporary crises revolving around identity and existence. Rani oscillates between self-identification with the two roles assigned to her, that is, the role of an ideal Indian daughter-in-law and that of a goddess; while Padmini finds it difficult to choose between intellect and beauty, wondering why she cannot have the best of both. A comparison can also be made between *Tughlaq*, *Naga-Mandala* on the basis of Karnad's stand on morality: Rani is accepted as a goddess after her adulterous relationship with Naga, while Tughlaq assumes the status of a visionary emperor after his acts of brutal violence.

Apart from being one of the most important Indian playwrights today, Girish Karnad is also a film-maker whose films have received much acclaim. But it has been his work in television, as actor and host of a science programme, which has made him a household name in India. But Girish Karnad's career does not stop even here. His further positions include: Director of the Film and Television Institute of India in Pune (1974-5), President of the Karnataka Nataka Akademi (1976-8), Visiting Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence at the University of Chicago (1987-8), Chairman of the Sangeet Natak Akademi in New Delhi (1988-93), Fellow of the Sangeet Natak Akademi (1994) and now, Director of the Nehru Centre, High Commission of India, in London.

2. References

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