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A Study of Major Themes in the Plays of Girish Karnad

Kadam S. N.

Head, Department of English
ACS College, Gangakhed

English drama has made an impact through a circuitous route, with the drama of regional tongues being translated either by the playwright or by others into English. Indian English drama has registered a remarkable growth and maturity through English translation of Hindi, Marathi, Bengali and Kannad plays in 1970s and after. Girish Karnad is a distinguished dramatist of the contemporary stage. He has shown the Indian stage as to what depths the mythical, historical and folk themes and strategies could be taken in order to recreate a contemporary consciousness. Karnad draws the Indian audience to contemplate on a very near, very urgent and very contemporary situation. Indian

Writers like Dharmavir Bharti and Mohan Rakesh in Hindi, Badal Sircar in Bengali, Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi and Girish Karnad in Kannada brought to Indian dramatic literature, once again after centuries, the status of creative work. It is a well known fact that Karnad is a reputed film actor, director and script writer yet he finds himself comfortable in a playwright's suit. Karnad has transcreated six plays into English and has written three plays originally in English. It is the first play of Karnad, published in 1961. It interprets as ancient myth from the 'Mahabharata' in modern context. It is an existentialist play on the theme of responsibility. 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 gives it contemporary appeal. Karnad's *Yayati* tells the age-old story of the king who in his longing for eternal youth does not hesitate to usurp the youth and vitality of his son. In the *Mahabharata*, Yayati understands the nature of desire itself and realizes that fulfillment neither diminishes nor eliminates desire. In the drama, Karnad makes Yayati confront the horrifying consequences of not being able to relinquish desire; and through other characters, highlights the issues of caste/class and gender coiled within a web of desire. *Yayati* plays upon the theme of responsibility. This theme directly seems to link up with the philosophy of existentialism. Every character in the play, and more prominently Puru, evades responsibility. After venturing into the mythical world, Karnad moves ahead into the world of tradition to take up themes and fictionalize characters from history. *Tughlaq* (1964, rendered into English in 1972) is his second play and was written in the company natak style, which was a style in continuation with the Parsi stagecraft.

Tughlaq is the first major post-independence play to engage with the sultanate period (twelfth century to early sixteenth century), which brought the "golden age" of classical Hinduism to a decisive end, and introduced Islam as a dominant political and cultural force on the subcontinent. *Tughlaq* is a philosopher and a visionary who has far-sighted hopes and who finally dwindles to become a demagogue and a tyrant. This play eludes any one era and seems to ooze contemporary resonances for all ages. Apart

from being a play about politics and its impact on society, it also is a remarkable study of the protagonist's psyche, and brings out the elements of anguish and anxiety, which is taken to be the hallmark of modern day identity. Tughlaq is one character with opposed personalities merged into one, who is at one and the same time shrewd and credulous, visionary and diplomat, liberal and conservative. This bundle of paradoxes finally proves to be a complete failure. Needless to say *Tughlaq*, with its variety and its flexibility has masterly catered to the tastes of audience of all times—from the sixties to the present day, the play does not tire out its contemporary resonances and always remains open to new criticisms and interpretations, which change with age.

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. In *Hayavadana*, Karnad deals with the problem of human identity in a world of tangled relationships, with the theme of incompleteness and man's desire for perfection.

Naga-Mandala was published in 1990. Originally it was written in Kannada and later the dramatist trans-created it into English. *Naga-Mandala* is a feminist play which not only exposes male chauvinism, the oppression of women, the great injustice done to them by men and the patriarchal culture, but also stealthily deflates the concept of chastity. The purport of the folk tale is seemingly to uphold the institution of marriage—it turns the unhappy married life of Rani into a happy one; however, at the same time, owing to its inherent quality of subversion, the same folktale deconstructs

the idea that fulfillment of love and desires is found within the sacred precincts of married life. Is fulfillment achievable within marriage or outside it, is the question concealed within the very framework of *Hayavadana* as well as *Naga-Mandala*.

Tale-Danda's 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, Veershivism, in 12th century in Karnataka. The play projects a socio-religious movement, called the *lingaya* headed by the poet seer Basavanna during the time of the Kalachurya dynasty, which was supported by the then ruler, Bijjala. However the event of marriage between a Brahmin girl Kalavati and a boy of a low class Sheelavanta, leads to violence and bloodshed in Kalyan and becomes the cause of the downfall and complete obliteration of the movement.

The next play by Karnad based on a less-known myth is *The Fire and the Rain* (1995; rendered into English in 1994). *The Fire and the Rain* takes up complex issues and situations. It is based on 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. Karnad not only makes minor improvisations in the story but also creates a novel character, Nittilai, who finally emerges as the most significant among all. The addition of Nittilai in Karnad's story and the multifarious dimensions associated with her character give the play a unique flavour and lend to it a novel perspective. Her presence in the play makes the two polarities in Indian society (and in ideology as a whole), surface up—the Brahminic culture characterized by discipline, rigour and asceticism and the Tribal characterized by simplicity, humanity and agnosticism. This presentation of strain and conflict in opposing forces, values and

ideologies seems to be Karnad's supreme interest in his plays.

The Dreams of Tipu Sultan (2004) is Karnad's third history play after *Tughlaq* and *Tale-Danda*. The play is based on the great warrior and visionary of the nineteenth century, Tipu Sultan. It was conceived by the playwright as a radio play and was written on being approached by the BBC on the occasion of the fiftieth Independence anniversary of India. Being a native of Karnataka, and brought up amongst the folk ballads and legends of the great emperor Tipu, Karnad didn't have to think twice before writing a play on that subject. Back in 1987, he had located a copy of Tipu's diary of dreams in the University of Chicago's Regenstein Library and "[i]n 1990, he was among the public figures who voiced strong support for Sanjay Khan's teleserial, *The Sword of Tipu Sultan*" (Dharwadkerxxiii.). The play has a three-layer structure which contains the drama of this colonial encounter. The first layer of the play is the conversation between two historians Hussain Ali Kirmani and Colin Mackenzie. The second is the enactment of Tipu's life—his love for his family, his ideals, his statesmanship, his diplomacy, his commercialism and his zeal to make his empire the best. The third is formed of Tipu's dreams—partly narrated and partly enacted—and the interpretations of the three of these by Tipu.

With the publication of the two monologues by Karnad in 2005, there seems to be a marked shift in his dramaturgy. Instead of presenting an amalgam of tradition and contemporaneity in *Broken Images* (2004; rendered into English in 2005) and *Flowers* (2005), it appears that the playwright has separated his distilled and unified vision into two parts; for the first play is based on a contemporary setting and has contemporary resonances but the second one is drawn from the world of folklores

but, unlike his other works drawn from tradition (myths, history and folklore), has less relevance in the present scenario.

The plot of *Flowers* is borrowed from a folk-tale from the Chitradurga region in Karnataka. The play is a presentation of the conflict between erotic love and religious devotion. The whole monologue is a confessional narrative—unforced, spontaneous and voluntary to find relief from the burden. The protagonist of the play is a nameless, introspective priest, who ~~confesses his sin and finally punishes~~ himself by committing suicide. Karnad talks about the oppression of the high caste by the low caste and that of the women by the patriarchal order. This theme is visible in *Yayati*, in *The Fire and the Rain*, in *Naga-Mandala*, *Hayavadana*, *Bali* and *Tale-Danda*. In *Flowers*, too there are veiled and tacit references to the burning issues of gender, caste and class in contemporary India.

In *Broken Images* no myth or folklore or historical legend is used to venture into contemporary problems and issues. It is different from other plays of Karnad with the introduction of technology in the plays. ~~The protagonist of this monologue is~~ Mangula Nayak. She gives voice to 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 validate it. This monologue presents the contrast between 'authenticity and duplicity'.

Girish Karnad is one of the most influential outstanding playwrights of modern age and ~~his plays have become a byword for~~ imagination, innovation and craftsmanship. It may be said that with the emergence of Girish Karnad's plays, there has been a revival in the interest of Indian drama in English.

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