
Girish Karnad : A Tribute

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ABSTRACT

Girish Karnad is a writer, dramatist, director and actor par excellence. 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 the legacy of his generation. Jnanpitha Awardee, Karnad is the author of many well known plays in Kannada and English. He has represented Indian art and culture in foreign lands.

Girish Karnad was a conscious writer, who had keenly observed cultural and political upheavals in India and brings in a new equation in his plays. In this paper, I propose to analyze the selected plays of Indian playwright Girish Karnad who has experimented with the fusion of the traditional and the modern dramatic forms and content. Karnad is most famous as a playwright and his plays have become a byword for imagination, innovation and craftsmanship. In the subsequent years, Karnad continued to post script narratives, interpreting for us histories and myths, forging an idiom of writing that was tethered to both the past and present. Karnad's practice of drawing source from myths and tales lends the play an immediacy of appeal.

This paper thus studies Karnad's selected plays from the point of view of themes and techniques. While doing so, the focus will mainly be on the history and myth in his dramatic works-Karnad's journey from his first drama 'Yayati' holds a mirror to the very evolution of a truly 'Indian theatre.'

A drama is basically a piece of writing in which a story is told to the audience through performance by the actors in a theatre. According to W.H. Hudson, "the drama is designed for representation by actors who impersonate the characters of its story and among whom the narrative and the dialogue are distributed." Plot, characters, dialogues, an atmosphere and a certain view of life are the chief elements of drama. A drama contains the dramatist's criticism of life and is the product of his imagination working upon his experience and observation. It is meant for delight as well as instruction of mankind. In order to communicate to the audience directly, a playwright has to rely on dialogue and action for the delineation of his characters and unravelling of the plot. Thus, a playwright's work ends only with his play's performance on the stage.

India has the longest and the richest tradition in drama. The origin of Indian drama can be traced back to the Vedic Period. As a manifestation of our national sensibility, Indian drama came into existence as a means of exploring and communicating the truth of things and was popularly known as the 'fifth veda'. Indian drama got a new footing when Kendriya Natak Sangeet Academy was started in Jan 1953; National School of Drama set up Sangeet Natak Academy in 1959, was another development. The year 1972 was a landmark year for the Indian theatre. Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad have contributed to the modernization of the face of Indian theatre. These playwrights have made bold innovations and fruitful experiments in terms of both thematic concerns and technical virtuosity. They used legends, myths, folklores, history with splendid results. They represented Indian drama at national level, for they dramatized universal aspects of human life in India.

But Girish Karnad was a writer, dramatist, director and actor par excellence. Jnanpitha Awardee Karnad is the author of many well known plays in Kannada and English. After Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1828-73), he is the only truly bilingual playwright in modern and contemporary Indian theatre, the translator of all of his own work from Kannada into English and vice versa. Thus, Indian English drama has achieved a remarkable growth through English translation of the regional drama. Karnad's achievements as a playwright has received widespread national and international recognition. He has been rightly called the "renaissance man".

Born in Matheran, on 19th May, 1938, Girish Karnad comes of a Saraswat Konkani family of Mangalore. After graduating from Karnataka College, Dharwad in 1958, he moved to Mumbai for his post graduate studies. Meanwhile, he received the prestigious Rhodes scholarship and went to England for further studies. He was at Oxford from 1960 to 1963 where he developed his interest in literature, culture, play-writing and performing arts. In 1963, he joined Oxford University Press, Chennai, which gave him an opportunity to get exposed to various kinds of writing. Again, he was awarded Bhabha Fellowship to study abroad from 1970 to 1972. He was appointed Director of Film and Television. Institute of India, Pune in 1974. He worked as Chairman of the Sangeet Natak Academy from 1988 to 1993. He was awarded Doctors of Letters by Karnataka University, Dharwad in 1994 for his significant contribution to art, culture and literature. His creative and performing abilities have enriched the Indian theatre. He has been honoured with the Padma Bhushan and was conferred the Prestigious Jnanpith Award. He also received the Sahitya Akademi Award. Karnad wanted to be a poet, but he was destined to be a playwright. He himself says: "I had never fancied myself a dramatist. Infact, I had tried my hand at writing poetry..." Arguably, Karnad was the first contemporary Indian playwright whose works have been staged and discussed abroad with keen interest. This paper proposes to analyze the selected plays of Indian playwright Girish Karnad who has experimented with the fusion of the traditional and the modern dramatic forms and content.

Karnad's distinct contribution to this effort was to use myth, history, folklore and contemporary urban life as four fold narrative resources to which he could return throughout his career. However, Karnad positioned himself firmly in the present even when he was immersed in past narratives. Over nearly 60 years, these versatile narrative sources enabled Karnad to create one of the most dense and sustained bodies of dramatic writing among his post – independence peers. In an essay titled "Theatre in India" which first appeared in the journal *Daedalus* (1989), Karnad offered an elegant commentary on the challenges confronting his generation in Indian theatre and the impulses and the questions that led to the writing of major plays such as *Tughlaq* and *Hayavadana*. Karnad has written 10 plays of which he has translated five into English. Although rooted in Indian mythology and history, his plays at the same time convey a strong and unmistakable western philosophical sensibility. In order to attain deeper insight to study and analyze Karnad's plays, it would not be incongruous to discuss how he has employed myths, legends and history in his plays -

1. *Tughlaq* - It is the second play of Girish Karnad and published in 1972; on the life of Sultan Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq of the 14th Century India. Karnad saw Tughlaq as a complex personality who was at once a dreamer and man of action, benevolent and cruel. From a sensitive and intelligent ruler who sets out to do the best for his people, Tughlaq misunderstood, suffers an increasing sense of alienation, and is forced to abandon his earlier idealism and end up as a tyrant. Karnad deviates from history when it is essential to

create artistic and a dramatic effect. It had seemed to Karnad that India of the 1960s provided a striking parallel to the 14th century of Muhammad – bin-Tughlaq. Tughlaq 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 flawless technique, precision and compactness, irony and paradox and symbolism and modernity. Tughlaq's character has been delineated with psychological depth and intensity.

2. *Tale – Dada (1993)*- It is seen as Karnad's first play that deals explicitly with the influence of the larger social and intellectual milieu on individual action. Here, once again history has been used to explain contemporary events. He writes of Basavanna, a social reformer of repute of the twelfth century Karnataka who had founded the Lingayat faith. As chief minister of the kingdom of king Byhalia, Basavanna tried to do away with the caste system, inequality of the sexes rejection of idol – worship etc. Consequently, king Bijjala is dethroned by his son while Basavanna dies a mysterious death.

3. *Naga – Mandala* – is based upon folk belief and myth and its complexity consists in a concurrently coordinating the elements of myth, magic, folk belief and romance. The play is based upon two oral tales normally narrated by older women in the family. The title of the play is after a snake – Naga Rani, the heroine of the play who is humiliated and derided as 'harlot' before the village elders, but 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. Myth and folk tale thus merge and come together and weave a rich tapestry of meaning that explores the modern predicament.

4. *Hayavadana* – marked another major change of direction, not only in his play writing but in post – independence theatre as a whole. In 1972, *Hayavadana* won both the annual Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, and the Kamladevi Award of the Bharatiya Natak Sangh, for the best Indian play Karnad has taken the plunge into the depths of Indian literature: epics, myths and legends to look for the subject matter for his plays. His play is richly symbolic and spectacular. The main plot, the story of a love triangle between Devdatta, Kapila and Padmini is drawn from *the Kathasaritsagar*, an ancient collection of stories in Sanskrit. The sub- plot of *Hayavadana*, the horse –man deepens the significance of the main theme of incompleteness by treating it on a different sketch. The play represents the aspirations of human beings for the unattainable. 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. As a playwright, Girish Karnad has left an indelible impact on the history of contemporary Indian dramaturgy. His two plays – *Tughlaq* and *Hayavadana* have helped to redefine the form and structure of drama.

Therefore, Girish Karnad was a conscious writer, who had keenly observed cultural and political upheavals in India and brings in a new equation in his plays. Though he borrowed all his material from old myths, those myths are related to the actions and situations of the present. As a sensible creative artist, he is pained to see the problems and issues which afflict human being as well as society. It is Karnad's ability to universalize the individual and social predicament through the medium of drama that has given his works wide appeal. His use of myths and legends as metaphors for contemporary situations has induced the researcher to make a study of his plays. His creative genius lies in taking up fragments of historical – legendary experience and fusing them into a forceful statement. By using these myths he tried to reveal the absurdity of life with all its elemental passions and conflicts and men's eternal struggle to achieve perfection. Karnad delves deep into the traditional myths to spell modern man's anguish and dilemmas that are created in his mind. In his

dramas, myth 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. The technique of fringing together myths, legends and folk narratives is his forte. He takes up mythical and legendary tales from his own culture and unfolds them in the light of modern sensibility. Karnad upholds the rich cultural heritage of India and endeavours to fight against the legacy of colonialism by advocating Indian values and cultural ethos of India. Indian imagination and sensibility can be easily seen throughout his plays.

Thus, to conclude we can say that Girish Karnad was an icon who transformed modern Indian theatre. He belonged to the first post – independent generation of artists and created one of the most dense and sustained bodies of dramatic writing, Indian theatre has ever witnessed. But today, we will miss the brilliance of the iconic playwright, actor, director and his immense contribution to arts and culture. He died 81, in June 2019 after prolonged illness at his Bengaluru residence. He was a progressive voice that championed the freedom of expression. His death is an irreparable loss to the world of Indian theatre. He was a writer dramatist director and actor par excellence.

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