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MYTH AND MYTHOLOGY IN GIRISH KARNAD CONTEMPORARY PLAYS

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ABSTRACT

Girish Raghunath Karnad is a contemporary writer, playwright, screenwriter, actor and movie director in Kannada language. His rise as a playwright in 1960s marked the coming of age of Modern Indian playwriting in Kannada. He is a recipient of the 1998, Jnanpith Award the highest literary honor conferred in India. For four decades Karnad has been composing plays, often using history and mythology to tackle contemporary issues. He has translated his plays into English, and has received acclaim. His plays have been translated into some Indian languages. He is also active in the world of Indian cinema working as an actor, director, and screenwriter, both in Hindi and Kannada flicks, earning awards along the way. He was conferred Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan by the Government of India and also won four Film fare Awards where three are Film fare Award for Best Director - Kannada and one Film fare Best Screenplay Award. He in one of his interview to press speaks that he is a play writer first and an actor by luck. His Plays are Yayati, Tuglaq, Hayavdhana, and Naga Mandal. Naga Mandala was written by Karnad but mixture of two Kannada stories among which one was told by Prof.A.K.Ramanujam.

Key words: Myth, Mythology, Indian Scenario

INTRODUCTION

Modern' Indian theatre is fashioned by western as well as indigenous theatrical traditions. This theatre as we know it is also urban, having evolved from its early avatars in 19th century Bombay and Kolkata, to the multifaceted, national and postcolonial construct that it is today. Current ideas of the 'modern' and 'modernity' become more complex and throw up remarkably challenging questions when looked at through the prism of Indian theatre and theatre criticism. It is difficult to define 'modern' Indian theatre as a discipline with specific inbuilt notions of modernity that renders it significantly different from its earlier phases. Despite the overwhelming influences of Western modernity, modern Indian theatre (in English and in other Indian languages), has freely – if somewhat self-consciously – drawn on myth, history, legend and folklore. Indigenous traditions of music, dance and spectacle have informed performances and concepts derived from classical treatises such as the Rasa theory, have been easily assimilated into this modern theatre, making drama one of the most important genres through which a specific "Indian modernity" may be studied. Until very recently, there was not much debate on the complexities and ambiguities of this modern Indian theatre, even as Indian modernity panned out through the mid-1850s to the present, across the marker of 1947.

The very notion of modernity in the context of Indian theatre / performance is problematic. Indian theatre historiography tends to focus on 'national', chronological theatre histories to establish the 'ancientness'; 'unity' or continuity, while others focus on specific languages or regions. A distinctive development in post-1947 theatre criticism bears an unequivocally 'decolonizing' tint that indicts imports of western traditions of representation in urban

proscenium theatre as harmful colonial legacies that must be offset by reclamation of indigenous and pre-colonial traditions of performance. Within these parameters, definitions of theatrical modernity remain nebulous: they indicate practices and influences that must remain under erasure, because of their links to colonialism. The plays of Habib Tanvir, Mohan Rakesh, Chandrasekhar Kambar, K. N. Panikkar, Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Ratan Thiyam, Kanhaiyalal, Arun Sarmah, Badal Sircar, Safdar Hashmi, Mahashweta Devi, Usha Ganguly, Mahesh Dattani, Poile Sengupta, Mahesh Elkunchwar, Dina Mehta and Manjula Padmanabhan to name a few, are as varied as they are similar – partaking of a multiplicity of materials, ideologies, histories, forms and sensibilities and rendering them intelligible to audiences at home and across the world.

- Theatre historiography and theory
- Theorizing the modern in the context of theatre in India
- Modernity, postcolonial and Indian theatre
- The Natyashastra, Rasa theory and modernity
- Natya, Nritya, Abhinaya: theatre and other performance arts
- The Regional focus and modern theatre
- Feminist, post feminist, and queer theatres in India
- Myth, memory, folklore, history and the modern theatre
- Western realism and contemporary Indian theatre
- Activism and modern theatre
- Nationalism, modernity and theatre

Modern Indian theatre had virtually been relegated to a plant of stunted growth till a decade after the nation threw off its colonial yoke. It is a sad truth that the modern Indian stagecraft was largely a mediocre affair despite the towering presence of such a rich theatrical tradition and stalwarts like Tagore and Aurobindo. This hapless condition of the Indian dramatic enterprise turned the tide with the explosion of group of talented, young, vibrant playwrights on the Indian stage. This welcome whiff of change was ushered in by the likes of Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar and Mohan Rakesh.

Girish Karnad was undoubtedly the most prominent of the new crop of promising dramatists and is today one of the foremost dramatists on the contemporary world stage. The fabulous history of the miraculous development and bold innovation of the modern Indian stage are inseparably linked with the glorious dramatic career of Girish Karnad.

Unlike his illustrious contemporaries like Sircar and Tendulkar who sought to delve into the quagmire of issues of middle-class lives, Karnad was content to revert to the rich depository of his land's mythology and history; the subjects of his plays reflect the confounding problems and trying challenges that contemporary life entails and endeavor to forge a valid link between the past and the present. In other words, as a creative individual, Karnad obviously perceives the subjects of his plays from his own unique perspective, develops them in the crucible of his own imagination and personal experiences and artfully employs them as a medium to communicate his own singularly independent and original feelings, thoughts and interpretations.

Karnad was born in Matheran in 1938 and had his education at Karnataka University, Dharwad and at Oxford where he was a prestigious Rhodes Scholar. He reminisces: "I've been an actor, a publisher, a filmmaker. But in none of these, I felt quite as much at home as in playwriting."

Karnad spent his impressionable childhood in Sirsi, where he had his memorable firsthand experience of indigenous folk theatre. He was adequately exposed to two forms of theatre: plays staged by troupes of professional actors called Natak companies and the more traditional costume drama of Yakshagana performances acted out in the open air. In the course of his studies, karnad came across the plays of the western dramatists like Brecht, Anouilh, Sartre and Beckett. This acquaintance with western thought and theatre has exerted an indelible influence on his dramatic art per se. the resulting voice is the subtle fusion of the grandeur of Sanskrit drama, the profundity of the Greek theatre and the sophistication of the western mode of dramaturgy. In this regard, Karnad's theatre had been hailed as: a theatre of in between's."

In Karnad's theatre, drama depends less on plot and more on the total theatrical experience. Towards this end, he borrows heavily from the western theatre and blends them deftly with the indigenous folk arts. For instance in Hayavadana, the Brechtian principles of alienation are wonderfully suffused with a number of folk motifs. He believes that the visual aspect of the theatrical performance is much more significant than any other aspect and draws on the conventions of folktales to create a world of his own. In fact, Karnad owes a lot to the ritualistic theatre of Indian folk art, where the aspects meta-theatre is found to abound in.

Karnad has more than a dozen major plays to his credit. Many of them have been translated into English and staged with aplomb throughout the world. The impressive list includes Yayati (1961), Tughlaq (1964), Hittina Hunja (1970), Hayavadana (1971) and Nagamandala (1988). Other notable contributions include Anjumallige (1985), tale Danda (1990), Agni Muttu male (1995), Tippuvina Kanasugalu (2000) and Bali, the sacrifice (2002).

Reworking of potent myths or historical events has always been the favorite mode of Karnad. His dramatic oeuvre amounts to a reworking of either mythical plots or folk legends or history, which are already quite familiar to his audience. However, this inability to invent an original plot has led to the stringent criticism that Karnad, as a playwright, lacks originality. Karnad himself is aware of this drawback and he remonstrates: "first of all I don't choose a plot because it has any relevance to anything, I choose it rather because it hits me and I get excited over what seems to me a marvelous story. I ask myself why it is exciting to me. The process of writing a play is an attempt at capturing that excitement again, understanding it and in some way communicating it.

The peculiar reason for the fascination that Karnad entertains for myths is that Indian myths offer solid basis of a common background which permeates the collective consciousness of the entire nation. Unlike any other nation, the Indian people are deeply conscious of their rich culture and cherish their past. As this mythology is an inseparable conscious of their rich culture and cherish their past. As this mythology is an inseparable part of the entire nation's heritage, the deft employment of these myths become a facile artistic solution to overcome the stumbling block of the heterogeneity of the Indian audience.

It was while engaged in the creation of his first play, Yayati that Karnad discovered the latent potential of myths to represent current dilemmas and stupefying worries as he found himself at ease inscribing his own dissatisfaction with the society into the pliable readymade framework of the mythical pattern. He had won the prestigious Rhodes scholarship to study in England. But his family and his friends wanting him to stay with them thus demanding the total sacrifice of his future prospects seemed to invertebrate the self-centered nature of the mythical king, Yayati who had exchanged his old age for his son's (PURU'S) youth. In this play, Karnad poses the existential problems of identity and responsibility. A critic notes: "while Karnad made free use of the Mahabharata legend with all its elemental passions and conflicts, he made it the vehicle of a new vision-the conflict between idealism and altruism of youth and fear of death haunting the old.

Karnad's groundbreaking second play, Tughlaq is a historical one loosely based on the life of sultan Muhammed-bin-Tughlaq of fourteen century India who is ignominiously dubbed the mad king. Here Karnad poses a philosophical question as to how a self righteous idealist with absolute power over his subjects a can be detrimental to the destiny of the whole nation. The overall treatment of plot and character in the play resembles Camus' treatment of ancient roman legend in his Caligula.

Karnad's next venture, Hittina Hunja reworks an age old Kannada myth. The play deals with a Jain king who comes to realize the shocking adultery which his wife committed in her mind. The solution to this tricky problem is the sacrifice of a cock to the gods to atone for the guilt. However, as a true Jain, the king cannot put it to practice. So, he makes a cock out of dough and just as he begins the sacrifice, it amazingly begins to crow. The fascinating play seems to suggest that all kinds of violence are equally offensive and therefore condemnable.

Hayavadana and Nagamandala are often considered twin plays as they share numerous features in common. Both interpret ancient stories from a refreshingly new contemporary angle. In

Hayavadana, Karnad dramatizes an archetypal riddle of identity posed by the story of the transposed heads in the Sanskrit work, Vetala Panchavimsati which forms a part of Kshemendra's Brihatkathamanjari and Somadevas Kathasaritsagara. In this play, Karnad operates within a complex frame work of myths and legends, affecting a perfect synthesis of eastern and western modes of dramaturgy. Karnad invests the myth with new meanings, making it the vehicle of highly contentious contemporary issues like the problem of being, the search for identity (especially feminine), the search for completeness and the existential agonies of man. At another level, the play presents the conflict between the apollonian and Dionysian aspects of human nature.

In Hayavadana, Karnad suffuses Brechtian techniques of alienation with a number of folk motifs. In this play, alienation is both the theme and the techniques of alienation with a number of folk motifs. In this play, alienation is both the theme and the technique. Karnad presents us with a number of alienated characters like Hayavadana, goddess kali, Padmini, Devadatta and Kapila. He also uses a number of alienation devices like songs, masks, the chorus, dolls and etcetera. Of these, the stage manager, the use of masks to figuratively represent characters, the devices of entry curtains and etcetera are directly borrowed from the Kannada folk theatre, Yakshagana Bayalata. The use of myth as the basic source of the play also serves a purpose: it alienates the audience.

Nagamandala deals with a woman's quest for an ideal husband. It is a play based on a Kannada folk tale related to Karnad by the noted litterateur A.K. Ranmanujan. Karnad claims it to be essentially a love story. "The work displays a number of parallel mythical plots and like Hayavadana it addresses several momentous contemporary concerns. Karnad handles the sources in Nagamandala to emphasize a modern woman's craving for love and recognition. This play gave him the Karnataka Sahithya academy award for the most creative work of 1989. This play delivers a scathing critique of the patriarchal discourse and deflates many a masculine construct such as Pativratya.

Agni Muttu male treats the intriguing problem of amorality in contemporary life. It is an evocative re enactment of a powerful fratricide myth from the Mahabharata of India's destruction of his own brother out of pure petty jealously. Arvasi's cry," why brother? Why?" echoes through the play, expressing the confused anger and soul breaking agony of betrayal. The ending of the fire and the rain however seems to echo the waste land with reference to the interpretation of "Da"

The plays driven snow and Bali: the sacrifice are intense and riveting and reveal many dimensions. These plays foreground the complex issue of social conflict, subliminal pressure and violence which provoke not so much physical as emotional and psychological repercussions. About Bali, the sacrifice, Lynn Gardner comments: the experience is greater than the sum of its parts and it is as enjoyable as it is thought provoking."

The play Tale-Danda deals with the rise of Verashivism, a radical protest and reform movement in twentieth century. This play deals explicitly with the influence of the larger social and intellectual milieu on individual action. A heap of broken images is the latest play of Girish Karnad. This play has won critical accolades for its brilliant use of technology as well as dramatic denouement.

Thus Girish Karnad virtually redefines contemporary experience by using the intricate grammar of literary archetypes, achieving meaning through myths, legends and folklore. His plays are notable for their outstanding dramatic style and techniques. He concerns himself with the problems of existence, search for identity and the problems of isolation and frustration. For Karnad, drama is not merely literary existence, but a direct offspring of the living stage.

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