

Girish Karnad's Boiled Beans On Toast: Human Relationships Re-Examined

Meghana. K

Research Scholar

KSOU

Mysore

India

Abstract

“*Boiled Beans on Toast*”, the latest play written by Girish Karnad explores modern day society. The changing trends in people’s belief and values are elegantly presented. Characters belong to different age and sex and they belong to various economic and social strata of the society. He brings characters of varied backgrounds together artfully. Their actions and reactions are realistic in nature and mesmerizing to watch. This paper attempts to explore the various aspects of the play focusing on human relationships trying to analyse if the changing trend in relationships is a frightening matter or a fact to be welcomed as a natural procedure in the evolution of human society.

Key Words: *Boiled Beans on Toast*, Changing trend, Human relationship, Evolution, Society.

Girish Karnad’s plays attempt to mirror the framework of Indian society hoping to present an insight into the audience’s lives. He considers it edifying to share the numerous quandaries faced by people with his readers through his characters. Girish Karnad utilises his observations to reveal human sensibility and the despair of the modern world where his characters try to forge a unique identity and find meaning in the meaninglessness of the current society. By blending humor with irony he reveals the realities of the modern society and tries to bring awareness among his audience about various evils in the society. The complexity of life is his main interest while his plays are a perfect amalgamation of facts and feelings. Although the issues he raises appear regional, they draw our attention to the universal conundrums faced by people.

Girish Karnad's "*Boiled Beans on Toast*" reflects the changing trends in the human relationships in the modern Indian society. Using "the founding myth of the city of Bangalore"¹ as a backdrop, he contemplates about the lives of the people in the "Silicon Valley of India"² and accurately illustrates life in Bangalore's "explosive growth in the last two decades"², realistically depicting the enormous city containing a potpourri of individuals with zest, dreams, aspirations, yearnings and determination. It acts like an echo of the real world, a portrayal of the social make-up and politics of the society. Karnad explores the ever-changing relationships in families belonging to the various strata of the society and renders numerous circumstances and challenges they face in their life. While the idealistic family, familial concord, solace and peace are threatened, unhappiness, jealousy, anger, discontent, deception, disappointment, restlessness and dissatisfaction dominate the lives of the characters, weakening relationships and influencing their behavior towards each other. This play is an elaborate social commentary and acts as a constructive aid in understanding the various facets of the society.

"*Boiled Beans on Toast*" is a Two Act play which revolves around the main character, Anjana Padabidri's life. In the First Act we are introduced to the characters who give a clear indication of their nature while interacting with each other. We are introduced to Anjana, who works at Karunashraya, a hospice for cancer patients, Dolly Iyer who works as an English elocution teacher and claims to help ambitious people like Prabhakar to advance their career. We meet Anusuya, Anjana's mother-in-law who becomes addicted to betting on horses and Kunaal, Anjana's rebellious son who prefers playing Guitar instead of Veena as a revolt against his father. We meet Vimala, the senior Maid in Anjana's house, who has won the heart of her mistress through her industriousness and the junior maid, Muttu who is assiduous and soft spoken. Muttu is forced by her brother to celebrate her daughter's coming of age in his village Karimangala and Vimala is arrested by the police for stealing gold jewellery in another house where she works. Prabhakar convinces his wife to go back to their village after meeting Dolly who promises him an overseas job at Wipro. We are introduced to minor characters like Muttu's mother, brother and Sundara Rajan.

In the Second Act we see the various challenges that the characters meet and the way they handle them. Prabhakar becomes nervous when he reaches the office of Wipro as instructed by Dolly to find that his interviewer is overseas. He informs Dolly about the situation and she promises to call him back. He creates a commotion in the office when Dolly does not contact

him soon and leaves the office in frustration. He realises that he has been cheated and confronts Dolly, cornering her when she is alone. He accuses her of misguiding him but he intends to achieve the dream. Later Dolly is seen convincing an ambitious dancer, Asha, to quit her present job promising her a scholarship in England. Muttu, her mother and husband are insulted by her brother (Shankara) who blames them first for neglecting him and next for showing off their modernity and instigating his children to detest his village. The argument ends with Muttu's husband saving her mother from Sankara's assault. Kunaal witnesses the questioning of Vimala in the police station and is impressed by Vimala's presence of mind and her talent of fabricating lies on spot. He is convinced that she is the thief, but that fact does not bother him, instead he admires her for her talent and invites her back to work in his house. Anjana is upset about the axing down of the tree which stood in front of her house to accommodate a new underpass. Muttu reveals the deception of Vimala about how the latter has been lending various objects to a neighbour without Anjana's consent. This results in Vimala's dismissal. Furious Vimala visits Muttu's house to inform her that Shankara has been living in Bangalore and admitted to a hospital. She takes revenge on Muttu by concealing the name of the hospital in which Shankara was admitted thus making Muttu's mother's life guilt ridden. Anusuya pledges all her jewellery to arrange money for her betting without informing her son and daughter – in –law. She tells Kunaal that Anjana lost her singing ability after marrying her son. Anjana clarifies to Kunaal that her voice left her after attempting suicide. Kunaal realises for the first time how close he has already been to death but still survived and realises that the world would have continued to exist even if he had died. It inspires him to write a song in dedication to Bangalore.

The play is a perfect display of aspirations followed by the idealistic pursuits leading to disillusionment and frustration in life. The misinterpretation of values and morality due to complicated circumstances and false notions of success are abundant. The play has a contrasting but colligated group of multitude trying to utilise the opportunities arising with rapid urbanization while coping with the subsequent stress. Mr. Padabidri's ambitiousness keeps him away from his house most of the time causing Anjana Padabidri intense loneliness. The struggling period in his youth has extended to his adult life leading to falling-out with his son, Kunaal. Anjana's loneliness leads to her friendship with a Bengali neighbour who decamps claiming that he does not

“... wish to be trapped into a relationship with a married woman”(78)

Anjana attempts to commit suicide by consuming sleeping pills after feeding them first to her young son unsuccessfully and the ordeal steals her singing. The friend's departure does not hurt her as much as his parting words which suggests that he felt trapped by her instead of liberated. Many years later, she joins the crew of Karunashraya, a cancer hospice, to fend away the desolation and regains her singing there when a dying patient requests for a song. She says,

“I suddenly found myself singing...” (78)

She loves her son Kunaal and believes in giving him freedom to choose the way he wishes to live, but feels caught between her husband and son since Mr. Padabidri uses her as his correspondent to tackle Kunaal about various issues. She is clearly tired of the continuous bickering of the two and wishes some peace of mind when she is at home.

The play probes into the flamboyant life of youngsters which is lacking social and moral beliefs. The young generation which is represented through the character of Kunaal reveals their quest for exemption from the traditions and values enforced on them by the older generation. They have a misrepresented concept of personal space and the line between right and wrong is completely blurred. Kunaal is in his late teens, he is a budding musician who is a part of a band which performs in pubs and restaurants in the evenings. He is a typical rebellious teenager who is convinced that parental monetary support for all his expensive trivialities is his prerogative, but expects his father to not impose any parental authority over him. He is unaffected by the deviations of people around him and views significant matters indifferently. When Anjana questions him about the objectionable sexual orientation of a band member, he shrugs it off by saying,

“... Perhaps he is a transsexual. What am I supposed to do about it? He drums like a god.”(20)

He witnesses the questioning of Vimala by the end of which he is convinced that she is a thief with ready wit for constructing lies. He praises her talent,

“... every word she uttered to the police and to me was a lie. A bright, white, brazen lie. And she knew that I knew and the police knew that she was fibbing. And what courage! What invention! She was leading us on, she was creating a story from

one minute to another. I tell you. she's my heroine. I've never seen such – such – what the word – creativity is! How could we've missed her brilliance! ... She's simply wonderful. I wish she was my girlfriend. I think – I've fallen in love with her..."

(44)

He does not consider it necessary to convey this information to his mother, instead, goes in search of Vimala's house when she does not return to work and invites her back to work. He discloses his observation about his grandmother's activities to his mother when the moneylender, Raykar calls her to settle accounts. Grandmother

"... dint mind using our car when she went on her social rounds. But never, when she went to the races. She didn't want to disturb your schedule, she said, and always hired a cab from the taxi company. So I probed a bit. It was quite a routine for her to stop at Raykar's on the way to the races. So I went to Raykar. Grandma's been borrowing money from him. Regularly." (75)

Anusuya is an old woman who gets addicted to betting on horses. She, like Kunaal feels that spending her son's money is her privilege. Anusuya does not bear any responsibility towards her family, instead seems flippant and detached. She talks with Kunaal about his interest in music. Instead of trying to patch up the relationship between Mr. Padabidri and Kunaal, she accuses her son of being responsible for Anjana's loss of singing. Anjana clarifies about her friendship with a Bengali singer and his abrupt departure and her failed attempt to suicide. The only fact which impresses him is that he could have been dead. This brings on a realization to him that the world would not have been affected by his absence in any way. He feels inspired to write a song about Bangalore and starts singing,

"Big bang Bangalore is a big black hole"(80)

The play urges readers and spectators to think and keep an open mind towards the realities of life. The play explicates several layers of the modern life in a metropolitan city using relationships as its nucleus. A general strife for happiness and contentment is present in the characters; while few people exhibit injudicious use of power ignoring ethics, few others become willing victims of the system. The play strikingly portrays the unquenchable hunger for material and social success which steers people away from their familial happiness. The

play is satiric and the author appears keen to exhibit the imperfection of the society and subsequently urges his readers to reform it. We can observe numerous circumstances which records that everything is not satisfactory in the society and a major change is required. The complicated life that the characters live in the play is a truthful mirror to the society which the readers and audience belong to. Burning social issues like growing population, unemployment, and struggle for survival due to economic and other problems all find a place in the play. The law and order in the city fails to punish the culprits involved in minor cases like thievery. They indirectly warn people to look out for themselves because the police force is unable to protect them. The carelessness and helplessness of the police is visible to us. This also reminds the readers of the various forms of corruption which can be found in all organisations.

Almost all the characters in the play are disillusioned. They are after unrealistic goals and therefore their life becomes a constant search for contentment. The play unfolds an entreaty to people to modify themselves for the betterment of the society by relinquishing self-serving and shallow concerns. Karnad does not purport to steer his readers towards delusory feeling of excellence, but attempts to arouse them from quiescence by appealing them to think about social, political, economic and cultural challenges. He has succeeded in depicting his characters at the crucial times of their lives, their inner crises that permeated their pretense by giving us an insight into their desires, aspirations and frustrations. He has meticulously presented his observation through innuendo, suggestion and insinuation instead of straightforward revelation. His purpose seems to be to elicit appraisal from his readers rather than imposing his beliefs or ideas.

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