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Girish Karnad's contribution to Indian Theatre in Indian English Literature

Abstract

Being the post modernist playwright, Girish Karnad has the power of using the folk theatre in his plays in a very flaunting way. He has borrowed the ideas of culminating the rich Indian culture in his plays. Each of his plays has a unique kind of props which symbolises the main genre of the play. He has rejected the idea of imitation of western world which was in fashion for English writings and chooses to form a fresh way of writing, using our great folk arts. Some of them were prevailing that time and some of them were on the edge of extinction. His plays are usually found very close to common people with a very realistic approach towards the issues of human being. The paper is an attempt to unfold the innumerable contributions by Karnad to the Indian English Theatre with the help of our rich Indian folk cultures, prevalent since the birth of human civilization. The article shall also cross-examine the types of techniques and methods used to articulate the play on stage, blending the various myths of Sanskrit Literature.

Key words: Myth, Girish Karnad, *Yayati*, *Tuglaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Naga Mandala*, *Tale-Danda*, Indian Theatre, Indian English Drama, Realistic Approach, Existentialism,

Yakshagana, Brechtian technique, Caste system, Social Structure, Identity Crisis, *Natya-Shastra*, Sanskrit Vedas.

“The Theatre shouldn’t lie.”—Emile Zola

Literature is attached to human life with every possible aspect. It can be said that ‘life is literature’ and ‘literature is life’. Literature has three basic tenants, poetry, fiction and drama. Among all the forms, drama is closest to human because it presented the life ‘on stage’. It is the mirror of real life and mostly influenced by it. Unlike poetry and fiction, drama demands both hearing as well as watching channels of human being. It is multidimensional in nature. It needs gadgets like, story, stage, and artist to act or perform in front of people. It’s the most effective medium of communication as it brings down every kind of human being on same platform. Initially starts, for religious purpose, drama deep-rooted itself from, since the civilization begins. Therefore, drama has its root deep in the history of all over the world.

‘Theatre’ and ‘Play’ are usually used as synonyms of drama. But there are some differences among them, too. ‘Drama’ is the performance on stage according to the text. This text is known as the ‘Play’. And ‘theatre’ is the hall or area or more specifically the surroundings of the stage. A play, however, is not intended for a reading audience. The playwright knows that his or her work will only be properly received by the audience in a theatre after it has been interpreted by directors, actors, and designers. These are the *professional readers* -- the theatre artists who will transform the play text or written words into the theatrical event which will be seen and heard in a theatre by an audience.¹

Drama is half literary and half sociological, as it combines both the learned people as well as the society. It gives us, a platform to show social reality. It represents the prevailing culture and dominating believes of society, in the form of narration and arts. Somewhere it can be said that it is the mirror of society with which the audience sees the reality with an

imaginary scene. It can be used to bring revolution into the society. It interlinked the past and present of human beings. Drama has the very ancient background both in England as well as in India.

The roots of Indian drama are very deep and found in Sanskrit language where *Natya-Sastra* seems to give its magnificent presence. It is also believed that *Natya-Sastra* has connection with sacred Vedas. In India, culture of folk-theatre has been practicing from ancient times. In ancient time tribal people collect to perform some rituals and for that they used to do some acting of different kinds of people and animals.

All literature in Sanskrit is classified into Drishya (that can be seen) and the Sravya (that can be heard). While poetry in all forms can be said to fall under the latter, drama falls under the former. Drama in Sanskrit literature is covered under the broad umbrella of 'rupaka' which means depiction of life in its various aspects represented in 'forms' by actors who assumes various roles. In our ancient classical literature, drama has been regarded as 'the fifth Vedas' and it is pertinently termed as the 'Drishya Kaavya' (visual poetry).² Talking about English drama in Indian literature, it is very clear that English has been introduced in India after the British invasion. Being a foreign language, it took some time to grasp our tongue. Initially, plays were written in their native languages, translated into English. But after some time, writers have started writing in English directly. Krishna Mohan Banerjee wrote the first play in English, namely "*The Prosecuted*" which was published in 1831. English drama exposed maximum in pre independence period. Michael Madhusudan Datta born in 1824 was the first dramatist in Modern Indian English History. He mainly wrote in English language translated his three Bengali plays into English, *Ratnavali* (1858), *Sarmistha* (1859) based on Mahabharata, *Is This Called Civilization* (1871).

There is not much change in the post-Independence drama in India. The only changes are at the government level. In this period the Indian drama in English is flourished in the

period of 'New Dramatists'. Some dramatists represent themselves with their scholarship. Major playwrights among them are G.V. Desani, Assif Currimbhoy, Pratap Sharma, Gurucharan Das, Lakan Deb, Nissim Ezekiel, Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar and Mohan Rakesh.

Girish Karnad basically belongs to Kannada theatre group because of his nativity of that area. Initially he wrote his dramas in Kannada language. Kannada theatre has a rich, glorious and ancient heritage of performatory forms particularly in the south-west of Karnataka. Popular folk form include Yakshagana Bayalata, Sannata, Talamanddale, Puppetry, etc.³ He has not just written plays but also accelerate the development of Indian Drama. Along with playwright, he is also a great actor, screen playwright, filmmaker, and director.

The very first play Karnad wrote is *Yayati* which came into existence during 1961 in Kannada language and later translated into English in 2007. At the time of writing this play Karnad was reading about Jean Paul Sartre and other leading existentialist of that which helps him to structuralize the play in a more modern way. In an interview he once said:

“I was excited by the story of Yayati, this exchange of ages between the father and the son, which seems to me terribly powerful and terribly modern. At the same time, I was reading a lot of Sartre and the Existentialist. This consistent harping on responsibility which the Existentialists indulge in suddenly seemed to linkup with the story of Yayati.⁴

The play begins with the entry of ‘Sutradhara’ who addressed the audience to introduce the background of the play. Sutradhara addresses the audience and define himself as:

“Good evening. I am the Sutradhara, which literally means ‘the holder of the strings’...I have designed and consecrated the stage. I am responsible for the choice of the text. And here I am now, to introduce the performance and to ensure that it takes place without any hindrance.”⁵

Karnad wrote this play on the traditional style of Yakshagana in which a presenter has to come to the stage and elaborates the story. He has beautifully mingled the ancient mythology with Yakshagana style for the audience of modern or young generation to make them understand their responsibility. The Sutradhara has elaborated the play in the beginning and tells the audience about the main theme and purpose of the play. He explains the plot and gives a brief description about the motive of the writer. The myth of *Yayati* is found in the first chapter of *Mahabharata*, which is 'Adi-Parva'. The story of an intoxicated King living in his zone and enjoying his youth in every way and doesn't want to lose his lavish life style which creates severe damage to the ones belonging to him. Karnad has used the Myth of King Yayati, to symbolise the problematic life style of modern man and that man's desires has no ending.

His next play *Tughlaq* (1964) is a genuine history play which portrays an important page from Mughal period of Indian history. It focuses on the paradox of Mohammad Tughlaq, the idealistic Sultan of Delhi. The play contains all the essential ingredients to make it eminentlyactable. It makes use of the best theatrical devices - speech, silence and gesture, irony, humour, pathos, suspense. It is free from melodramatic possibilities and free from excessive emotion or sentiment. Composing the play Karnad had actually replied to Eunice de Souza in one way as she had commented that, "Indian plays in English do not go back to history to establish modern man's relationship to history, to interpret contemporary problems."⁶

His third play *Hayavadana* (1971) was based on Thomas Mann's short story *The Transposed Heads* which is again a copy of a tale found in *Kathasaritasagar*. Karnad wrote the play making use of the Yakshagan, a folk theatre form of Karnataka. *Hayavadana* deals with the problem of man's identity in a world full of complicated relationships. Karnad here treats the problem of identity crisis employing the Brechtian technique. The play begins with

the pooja of Lord Ganesha by Bhagwata (kind of Sutradhara). Later the stage has been shared by Hayavadana and hence the play moves within the play. It creates a kind of interest among Audience to watch characters of one story interacting with the characters of the other. Karnad himself describes the whole scenario as:

“Two stage hands enter, hold up a half curtain, above six feet in height, the way the curtain is held up in Yakshagana and Kathakali. The curtain hides the entry of Hayavadana, who comes and stands behind the curtain.”⁷

Moving towards Karnad’s next work *Nagamanadala* (1990), Karnad has used his plot within the plot strategy (frame narrative technique) of *Hayavadana*, but this time more effectively. Talking about the source material of the play Karnad himself writes in the Introduction to Three Plays:

*‘Naga-Mandala is based on two oral tales I heard from A. Ramanujan. These tales are narrated by women—normally the older women in the family - while children are being fed in the evening 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 system of communication among the women in the family. They also express a woman’s understanding of the reality around her, a lived counterpoint to the patriarchal structures of classical texts and institutions...’*⁸.

Naga-Manadala is the finest work of Karnad which shows the double standards of society. The character Rani, symbolise the every girl of the society who is been treated as slave by her husband. The play was so successful that later a movie has been made on this. The play is basically based on the Kannada folk tales who are very prevalent in remote areas. The play is a blend of mythical as well as folk cultural elements. The play is dreamlike fantasy in itself and is very fictitious.

Tale-Danda is another historical play of Karnad. He has written the play to express the conflict, which everybody was suffering during 'Mandir- Mandal movement'. Everyone was living in an environment of communal hatred. Karnad has very critically commented on this by producing this play with an especial reference of 12th century's 'Anti Caste System Revolt' of South India. Karnad speaks in his interview:

"I wrote *Tale-Danda* when the 'Mandir' and 'Mandal' movements were beginning to show again how relevant the questions posed these thinkers were for our age. It is not necessarily an attack on caste. It is a question of 'Why', why is it that some of our problems seem perennial." The play *Tale-Danda* shows that how much these caste system influences the human behavior and can make humans so much cruel and harsh for the sake of purity. Karnad has beautifully blended these caste systems of India in this play. He has borrowed the theme from our history in which, during 1168 AD, an anti caste movement was brutally suppressed by the orthodoxies in Karnataka region. A Brahmin namely Basavanna assembled a group of intellectuals who opposed the caste system not, just in theory but in practice. This made an outrageous anger among the public and was ended in terror and bloodshed. We can still hear this sort of violence, frequently, though we have entered in post modern world.

Every play of Karnad has contributed to Indian English Drama in a very effective way. His plays have the potential to raise voice against the injustice of this world. Each play categorise a particular section. This is Karnad's style of writing where the audiences are compelled to think about the pain, sorrow and agony of man. It is Karnad who has the guts to re-cycle our past's part with the modern world, showing the transparency between the two era. His use of myth and history shows that nothing has changed yet, except 'the-time'. Human beings of that time had done the same mistakes which we are doing in this post modern era. We are learning nothing from our past and keep doing the same mistakes without acknowledging them.

Girish Karnad is a kind of man who is continuously trying to wake us up from our stupor, but we are still not very ready to accept our faults. His plays has contributed to Indian Drama a lot but his contribution will only be fruitful when 'we' will realise our faults as Society and will start learning some lessons from our past.

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