



DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES: A STUDY OF GIRISH KARNAD'S SELECT PLAYS

Dr.T.Mahendran,
Assistant Professor of English AVVM Sri Pushpam College (Affiliated to Bharathidasan
University, Thiruchirappalli) Poondi, Thanjavur district, Tamilnadu, India-613503
mahendranavvm@gmail.com

APA Citation:

Mahendran T., (2023). Diverse Perspectives: A Study of Girish Karnad's Select Plays, *Journal of Indian Languages and Indian literature in English*, 1(2), 07-13; 2023

Submission Date: 12/01/2023

Acceptance Date: 11/03/2023

Abstract

Karnad is regarded as one of the three great writers of the contemporary Indian drama, the other two being Vijay Tendulkar and Badal Sircar. His significant plays include *Yayati*, *Tughlaq*, *Naga-Mandala*, *Tale Danda* and *Hayavadana*. Girish Karnad shows how myths, folklore and history could be reinterpreted to reveal the inevitable relation of the bygone past to the present. The select plays of Karnad clearly indicate that the problems such as patriarchy, gendered discrimination, religious bias, issue of caste, political manipulations seem to be nearly perpetual. Violation of dharma, egotism, lack of fear and faith in God are the main reasons for the tragic life of man. There are different dimensions in the art of Karnad's playwriting. A humanist with touches of existentialist philosophy, he has for social realism. Karnad makes an expert use of native and Western stage techniques in provided abundant scope all his plays. These plays are analyzed in the light of mythology, folklore and history. Karnad has succeeded to a large extent in interpreting the present modern mind while the context of the plays is set in the hoary past.

Keywords: Karnad, contemporary, myths, folklore, history, discrimination, religious bias, issue of caste, political manipulation

As the master of English language, he attracts the attention of his audience easily with his poetic prose. Karnad's plays abound in myriad Indian themes and vernacular words. Karnad's plays are loaded with meaning and thus provide abundant scope for multilayered interpretations. Karnad's plays have great performability on the stage and they are closer to the Greek dramas with their tragic propensity. The protagonists are cast into such circumstances that their own flaws and follies rise up only to destroy them finally. Though there is linear advancement in the plays having a beginning, a middle and an end, they are multi-dimensional in their appearance. Importance is given to human values and human dignity. Owing to the variety and uniqueness of his plays, Karnad has created a furore in the critical circles. With the

tremendous success of his plays in India and abroad, he occupies a prominent place in the galaxy of Indian writers in English. His genius can be seen in creating simple characters with noble thoughts, who have uttered noble truths of life.

But he has depicted the characters of upper echelons of society, kings and gods in poor light. The paper is a modest attempt approaching the plays with varied points of view. Owing to its varied entertaining and enlightening features, drama has become an essential part of human life. Sanskrit drama and the regional dramas had touched the zenith. Hence, it was not difficult for the contemporary playwrights to project Indian themes into English language. Bhakti Movement of the twelfth-century CE influenced innumerable playwrights in the regional languages of India. Indian theatre, exploiting the Western techniques, has its wide popularity among the theatre lovers. Contemporary Indian English drama has been elevated to the point of worldwide recognition by the great playwrights like Girish Karnad, Badal Sarkar, Mohan Rakesh and Vijay Tendulkar.

Karnad has emerged as the unassailable icon of contemporary Indian English drama through his masterpieces. His plays are staged and directed by the well-known stage directors like B. V. Karanth, Alaque Padamasee, Ebrahim Alkazi, Satyadev Dubey, Om Shivpuri and Shyamanand Jhale. Karnad explores Indian psyche through his plays and they reflect contemporary Indian society in totality. The study of Karnad's plays shows that he has intended to bring some novel changes in society. Karnad gives new meaning and significance to the contemporary life and social reality by exploring King Yayati's selfish attachment to life and its pleasures. The story of Yayati is one of the most intriguing and fascinating episodes of the Mahabharata. Karnad has connected "the past and the present by exploiting the Grammar of literary archetypes" (Frye 135). Yayati is examined in the light of existentialism, which glorifies the philosophy of individual's performance of duty and acceptance of responsibilities. Karnad highlights the element of crisis that Pooru's sacrifice brings and the dilemma in the minds of Yayati, Pooru and Chitrlekha. It is a "self-consciously existentialist drama on the theme of responsibility" (Ananthamurti vii). The perennial clash between the expectations of parents and the aspirations of their children is brought into prominence. King Yayati stands for the modern man, who is influenced by power-politics and sensual pleasures unmindful of the ethical values. Yayati recognizes the horror of his own life and takes up moral responsibility at the end of the play. Social issues related to patriarchy, subordination of women and gender inequalities are given importance. The play clearly warns that unbridled pleasures unmindful of ethics will bring sorrow, suffering and death. Those who crave for worldly pleasures cannot live peacefully due to their vaulting ambitions. As Raymond Williams says, "Every aspect of personal life is radically affected by the quality of the general life" (584). Fratricide is the central theme of *The Fire and the Rain*.

Karnad presents the evil consequences of inflated ego, jealousy, revenge and murder within the learned families of Raibhya and Bharadwaja. There is an emphasis on the danger of 'assumed knowledge,' which is not learnt at the feet of a teacher. The Brahminic culture is criticized for its deviation from ethical values and its attachment to the outdated traditions. The play advocates the virtuous quality of compassionate love for those who are dispossessed. The futility of Yavakri's artificial knowledge due to his evil nature, Parvasu's failure as a responsible husband and Vishakha's ruined life are elaborately discussed. Karnad highlights the nobility and humanity of Arvasu and Nittilai, who emerge as victors at the very end of the play. The play is a dramatic representation of the conflict between Good and Evil. Karnad projects the mystery of Evil, which does not allow man to progress further.

Karnad successfully exposes male chauvinism and exploitation of women. Both *Yayati* and *The Fire and the Rain* are highly relevant so far as contemporary society is concerned. Karnad shows his ability in universalizing the individual predicament through the medium of drama. The selection of themes from India's mythical past and applying them to the contemporary situations prove to be the mark of Karnad's versatile genius. The play, *Hayavadana*, provides us with a glimpse of multiple issues such as triangle love, identity crisis, existentialism and sexuality which combined with folk element, mock the age-old customs. The sexuality of women and their oppression have been put forth in a very

unassuming way. The futile quest for perfection and its utility as the main theme of the play is analysed. The play explores man's search for his own self among a web of complex relationships and his struggle for identity within the framework of the head and body dichotomy.

The combination of humour and pathos with appropriate symbolism describe the psychic state of Padmini, a true victim of unattainable desire. The theme of the play and the names of the characters are all symbolic. According to K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, Karnad is "modern and he deploys the conventions and motifs of folk art and curtains to project a world of intensities, uncertainties and unpredictable denouement" (736). Karnad makes use of various innovative experiments to offer a new direction to modern theatre. The theme of identity crisis offers an adequate scope for his imagination. Karnad also portrays the predicament of Padmini, a modern and bold woman. She is torn between two polarities, a woman who loves her husband as well as his friend for two different aspects of their personalities. After the exchange of heads, Padmini experiences the best of both men but slowly she comprehends reality. There is no spirituality in her love except a mere passion for physical pleasure. Commenting on Padmini's desire for Kapila, Satish Kumar points out, "Padmini lives for herself; for the satiation of her sensuality" (30). Her effort to find completeness in her lover has become a futile struggle. Finally, she learns the ultimate truth that it is impossible to find perfection since the world is full of incomplete individuals. In the same way, the Goddess makes Hayavadana, horse-headed man, a complete horse instead of a complete man.

Naga-Mandala unravels Karnad's mastery in combining an oral tale with domestic reality within the gender hierarchy. The influence of patriarchal culture, the absurdities of life, the individual's perception of reality and the struggle for authentic existence are the main issues of the play. Presenting the ancient Indian tradition of storytelling, Karnad has successfully pictured the problems of married women in Indian society. The play deals with gender inequalities where men enjoy more freedom and privilege and women undergo oppression and suppression. Karnad finds fault with the men, who commit worst crimes but try to chastise their women. In this context, it is apt to quote Simone de Beauvoir, a French philosopher, who comments that

"man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being . . . she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the absolute—she is the other" (16).

The existential dilemma becomes cumulative experience in the play. The play is about the experience of a woman as a wife in the tradition of Indian arranged marriage system. Due to the influence of the deep-rooted socio-cultural hegemony, Appanna treats Rani with mistrust, contempt, aggression and finally as a prostitute. Appanna, with a sense of male pride, regularly visits his concubine and commits adultery with her. But patriarchy does not find fault with him. Karnad pities the ignorance of Indian women, who are the silent victims of oppression and ill-treatment. When Appanna locks his wife in the house, she cannot fight for her freedom. The play shows that woman is totally suppressed and marginalized and her position is restricted to domestic sphere.

As a humanitarian, Karnad brings her to the centre stage. Rani, as a New Woman, tries to discover her true self. Karnad depicts the manwoman relationship in their conjugal life. He has succeeded in introducing the supernatural element in the form of a snake-lover, which is a unique dramatic rendering of Karnad. As a champion of women, Karnad questions the gender-biased justice, which favours man. In this context, Jaganmohan Chari aptly comments that men are favoured because "the concept of ritualistic purity of the metaphysical tradition has structured the hierarchical vertical line-up of gods at the top, men below and women still underneath" (124). *Bali: The Sacrifice* shows how Karnad transforms the story of the 'Dough Cock' into a mature philosophical exploration of love, jealousy,

desire, betrayal and violence. He takes the theme of sex outside marriage to present conflicting religious and cultural ethos of India.

There is novelty in the unconventionality of its major characters. Subaltern issues and the feminist study also make the play more valid in the contemporary context. The Mahout and the Queen are the real lovers of freedom of the individual. The Mahout represents subalternity due to his low caste. The Mother and the Queen underline two sets of women—one traditional and bound to her age-old rituals and the other rational and sensitive in her outlook. Karnad goes deep into the heart of the Mahout and describes how he is always haunted by his inferior birth and ugly looks. He feels alienated from the rest of society due to his low social status. His reaction is a natural outcome of his long suffering due to his subjugation and humiliation. Dream element is convincingly utilized to suit the theme of the play. Symbolism is the heart of the play that has illustrated indirectly the Queen's chance experience of sex with the Mahout. Finally, she yields before the power of patriarchy and bravely embraces her death in order to protect her view of non-violence.

The play is decorated with poetic beauty and thought-provoking negotiations. Karnad succeeds in dramatizing the struggle between ideological conflicts and power-politics. Tughlaq presents how Karnad is fascinated by the complex personality of Muhammad. The character of Tughlaq is portrayed in an unbiased manner to analyze contemporary Indian politics in the light of lessons from history. Karnad builds up the play on opposites—the ideal and the real, the divine aspiration and the deft intrigue. The change of Tughlaq's role from an idealist to a cruel tyrant reminds the nature of Camus's Caligula. Tughlaq is not only an idealist but also a dreamer like Tipu. The play deals with the futile efforts and failures of Tughlaq, who aims at creating a heaven on the earth and bringing unity among the Hindus and the Muslims. Karnad works out the protagonist's progressive alienation with existential overtones. Karnad successfully makes an attempt in mixing religion and politics with fiction to present contemporary religio-socio-political reality.

The play clearly indicates that idealism and politics do not go hand in hand. Tughlaq's idealism is shown as misused by his officers like Aziz and Aazam. He crosses the limits of human power and goes to ambivalent heights that are beyond the comprehension of his people. His people do not understand his broad-minded ideals. Hence, he is forced to abandon his earlier idealism and end up as a tyrant. As a result of his failures, he suffers from isolation, frustration and a sense of existential alienation. He fears that his identity as a ruler is at stake. It is an irony that the most intelligent Sultan is called 'mad Tughlaq.' History is contextualized in order to emphasize political manipulations, which have arisen during the Nehruvian era. It is an excellent work of art with an intricate plot, subtle irony, pungent satire and delicate symbolism.

The play has become milestone in Karnad's dramatic career, which brings him name and fame along with great success on the stage. Tale-Danda is a symbolic representation of human tragedy, a serious literary imitation of the age-old Varnaashrama Dharma ("duties followed by different Castes") and the evils of caste system. The play presents the sufferings of lower caste people due to oppression. The perspectives of the oppressed and down-trodden have been firmly inscribed. "The contemporary implications of the theme are hidden in the deeper structure of the play" (Rao 20). The play mirrors the aftermath of the recent 'Man- dal' and 'Mandir' agitation. Karnad exposes the deformity of caste system and the ills of laws pertaining to marriage. Karnad highlights afresh the neglected area of history, which is the offshoot of the existing sociocultural and religious forces.

The play examines man's identity and his bewildered existence in the social hierarchy of the Hindu society. It is a rich work of art with a serious concern regarding caste hierarchy and provides various interpretations at different levels. Karnad emphasizes the failure of the idealistic movement of Basavanna and his sharana followers, whose reformistic efforts to eradicate the evils of caste have ended

in violence and bloodshed. In this context, Rupalee Burke Comments: (Karnad's) his plays have always aimed at providing message in the contemporary context. In *Tughlaq* and *Tale-Danda*, Karnad employs history to comment on the pathetic and corroded state of Indian modern day politics, and through which he engages in an intellectual debate of our time (105-107).

The *Dreams of Tipu Sultan* is engaged with some aspects of Indo-British relation and the conflict between the colonial oppression and the oppressed. The play "attempts a mind shift by destabilizing the mind set" (Krishnaswamy, 85). Tipu wonders at the Indians who are forever in internecine strife. They go to the extent of backstabbing each other for power and position. Karnad reminds the Indian rulers of the dangers of inviting imperial powers and their meddling in India's political sovereignty. The play is an example of mutually destructive politics of Indian subcontinent. But the British endeavour for something larger than life. They do not betray their own race as they have believed deeply in the destiny of their race. They identify with a dream called 'England.' *Tughlaq* and *Tipu* are not just men from history but they resemble our contemporary leaders. While *Tughlaq* finds it difficult to choose between ethics and progress, *Tipu* is unsure about appreciating or condemning the British way of life.

The play also presents the secret inner world of a great king, *Tipu Sultan* whose public life is a continual war against the British. Like *Tughlaq*, *Tipu* is also a great visionary and a dreamer with progressive ideals. As the 'Tiger of Mysore,' he proves his valour and strength till his last breath. Karnad also focuses on man's postcolonial situation and existential crisis through the portrayal of his protagonists, who are locked in intense psychological, political and philosophical conflicts. In this context, Dharwadkar comments, "Karnad interlineates 'textualized' history with legend, lore, and memory because all these modes of transmission are germane to the story of *Tipu*" (xxiv). In *Ma Nishada* (1964), Karnad, drawing forth a small event from Bhavabhuti's *Uttara Rama Charita* projects an ordinary washerman as the hero. Owing to the comments of the washerman, Lord Rama sends away Sita to the forest. The play dwells on the washerman's anguish, guilt, exile and alienation. The washerman is blamed for the separation of Sita from her husband and for her tragic life in the forest. Though the play is not given importance in critical discussions and theatrical circles, Karnad himself considers it noteworthy because it illustrates his preoccupation with subordination of women and the lower caste people. Another interesting possibility in the play is its move to make the character go in search of its author as in the Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921).

Though the washerman belongs to lower strata in community life, he proves himself genuinely human. *Flowers: A Dramatic Monologue* (2004) deliberately reveals patriarchal attitude of men towards women. It is an example for Karnad's imaginative power in shaping the argument between love and duty. The way he spiritualizes the aesthetics of flowers is wonderful. There is a single narrator in the monologue as in Robert Browning's *Andrea Del Sarto* (1855). It is not a story though it tells a story. It is not a play though there is enactment. It is not a poem despite the lyrical beauty, which evokes an emotive response in order to understand its mystery. It is important to study its form, symbols, myth and religion. There is a struggle between physical desire and tradition, eroticism and religious discipline and between patriarchal attitude and its limitations. The conflict between religious devotion and erotic love is well brought out. The mingling of spiritual attitude and carnal desires is the central theme of the monologue.

Karnad's choice of a priest as his narrative voice, the temple as a place for his trial and the worship of the Shiva Lingam—represent the primordial male principle. Love-making is a semi-public act and a replica of the worship of Shiva lingam with flowers. Though the priest's worship of Shiva lingam creates

an esoteric ambience, he himself does not live up to it. The priest abuses Chandrawati, a courtesan, sexually and makes her an easy prey to quench his desire. His eyes feast on her physical beauty.

Finally, the priest realizes that the worship of Shiva Lingam is preferable to the worship of physical beauty. A charitable twist is given to the dramatic monologue. Karnad's one act play, *Broken Images: A Dramatic Monologues* (2004) is inspired by T. S. Eliot's poem, *The Waste Land* (1922), an embodiment of grief, despair and longing for rebirth. Karnad's 'Broken Images presents a complex debate on the role of technology and language. The play points out how ethics are broken for the sake of name and fame. Manjula Nayak, the protagonist, who writes stories in Kannada, is short of desired success. For the sake of "fame, publicity, glamour . . . power" (BI 265), she prefers to write in English. She indulges in plagiarism and secretly publishes a novel out of Malini's manuscript and achieves national and international fame. Karnad is of the opinion that there is a break down in the socio-psychological relationship of people due to over-ambition, jealousy and greed. The play provides umpteen instances regarding the deceiving nature of Manjula Nayak.

The plot of the play uses modern electronic media to counter point the usual myth-making. Exploration of ideological and psychological dimensions is well suited to the contemporary social mores. The conflict between writing in one's own language and in a foreign language is structured through Manjula Nayak's confrontation with her own image as the "objective correlative." *Wedding Album* (2008) is a recent play of Karnad, exploring cultural stereotypes in the wake of modernity. It is a comic family drama, which describes a traditional wedding ceremony with a view of revealing the inner secrets, fears, jealousies and infatuation among the youth. The theme of the play deals with an urban middle-class Saraswat Brahmin family of Nadkarnis, who are educated, liberal and modern in outlook. Karnad aims at presenting the traditional Indian wedding ceremony in a globalized and technologically advanced world. On the surface, the celebration is a familiar picture and a joyful event. But inside the recesses of their hearts, there are long suppressed suspicions, jealousies, frustrations and aggressions.

The play gives a vivid picture of the self and psyche of the members of the family and uncovers the glory and gravity of secrets in a middle class family life. There is tension between the forces of modernity and tradition, each claiming for a space of its own. The prominence of the forces of falsity and spirituality, pulling them in opposite directions and leaving behind a sense of loss and guilt, are convincingly portrayed. The play also shows the influence of globalization and the evil impact of multimedia on younger generation. Karnad studies the subjectivity of Indian men and women placed in rarely encountered dilemmas. The title of Karnad's autobiography (2011) is taken from a line in D. R. Bendre's famous poem 'Aadaadtha Aayushya' ("life moves on while playing"). A special mention should be made that his experiments with Indian themes from remote past have been more successful on the stage than those of his contemporaries. They are literary excavations and innovations of the Indian collective past—the mythical, the folk, the legendary and the historical. In this context, commenting on Karnad's method of writing plays, Shubhangi S. Raykar says, "Usually the idea of a play incubates in his mind for a long time and it is only when the total action of the play is clearly imprinted in his mind's eye, that he starts writing a play" (46).

His plays are universalistic, allegorical, ritualized as well as individualized. He succeeds amazingly in contemporizing the socio-political conditions of mythological times and make them serve a surrogate for his plays. His essays on "Indian Theatre" is a landmark in the history of modern Indian theatre and drama criticism. With his entry, Indian English drama has acquired a unique identity with the rejuvenation of ancient Indian themes. "Today Girish Karnad is considered one of the most significant

Indian dramatists. He has enriched the Indian literary scene by his contribution to art, culture, theatre and drama” (Dhawan 19). The future of the nation depends on the creative ability of youth, who are the future architects and leaders of our nation. Drama can help prepare broad-minded and responsible global citizens. Dramatic arts in education are an important means of stimulating creativity and inculcating virtuous qualities in the minds of our youth. Dramatic presentations might provide the youth with an outlet for emotions and suppressed thoughts.

The reader or the spectator, having undergone the vital experience of reading or watching a drama, may become another explorer and takes upon himself a new role to play in society. Drama may instruct how to maintain equilibrium in various difficult situations and find out solutions to the problems of every day. Drama renders the possibilities of developing positive, confident self image, self control and discipline, tolerance and empathy in its readers. Drama, with all its entertaining features, is an important device for preparing our youth to live and work in a world that is increasingly team-oriented rather than hierarchical. In the context of unifying people’s perception and bringing harmony, Karnad’s contribution is invaluable.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ananthamurti, U. R. Introduction to to Tughlaq. Madras: Oxford UP, 1972. vii. Print. Beauvoir, Simone de. The Second Sex. Trans. Constance Borde and Sheila MalovancyChevalier. London: Vintage, 1997. 16. Print.
- Burke, Rupalee. “India Then and Now: The Contemporary Relevance of Girish Karnad’s Tale-Danda” Studies in Indian Drama in English. Ed. Prasad, Amarnath and Yadav. Saryug Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 2003. 105-107. Print.
- Chari, A. Jaganmohana. “Karnad’s Hayavadana and Naga-Mandala: A Study in Post Colonial Dialectics” New Directions in Indian Drama. Ed. Sudhaker Pandey Freya Barua. New Delhi: Prestige, 1994. 124. Print.
- Dhawan, R. K. “Girish Karnad: The Man and the Writer,” The Plays of Girish Karnad: Critical Perspectives. Ed. Jaydipsingh Dodiya. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1999. 19, Print.
- Iyengar, Srinivasa K. R. Indian Writing in English. Rpt. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt., 1989. 736. Print.
- Karnad, Girish. “The Theatre In India.” Daedalus, 118 Fall 1989. xxiv, 347. Print. Krishnaswamy, N and John Verghese. et. al. Contemporary Literary Theories: A Students’ Companion. New Delhi: Macmillan, 2001. 85. Print.
- Kumar, Satish. A Survey of Indian English Drama. Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 1993. 30. Print. Kurtkoti, Kirtinath. “Introduction to Hayavadana.” Three Plays: Naga-Mandala, Hayavadana,
- RAJESH, L. "PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF IMMIGRATION AND ASSIMILATION IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF AMIT CHAUDHURI."
- MANIMOZHI, R. "GITHA HARIHARAN'S NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE AND STYLE OF WRITING IN THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT."