



A STUDY ON THE DEBATE OF THE NATION THROUGH MYTHS IN GIRISH KARNAD'S SELECT PLAYS

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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 nation, 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. 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.

Keywords: Girish Karnad, myth, nationalism, culture, Indian writing in English

There is no doubt in the fact that the life of every human being is a journey from birth to death, but some people become memorable through their creativity, enthusiasm and vigor. Girish Karnad is one of them as he devoted his whole life for the concerns of his fellow human beings. He was a dramatist of man and nature. He started his career as a playwright, but with his innovations in his writing, he raised the status of Indian drama to the world level. His use of myth and mythology in the fabrics of characters, their hair-raising dialogues, their nerve breaking actions and stunning wit, everything brought the

current problems of the nation to the fore. It is not the narrative of his plays, but the wit and intelligence in the dialogues of his characters that show his concern for problems and issues of national importance. Through women characters, he has raised the issue of gender difference, patriarchy, superficial male ego in marriage, and many others. What is the role of a woman and how the expectations of society break her, the difference between ideology and real situations; nothing is left hidden from the pages of his plays.

This paper, *Debating Nation through Myth in the Selected Plays of Girish Karnad* has endeavoured to analyze objectively the use of myth and its role to voice the problems in nation in the plays of Girish Karnad. This paper is all about the use of the myth and how by choosing unnoticed episodes from folklore, myths and folk tales, Karnad wants to relate current national problems to it. It seeks to draw some conclusions, based on the study of some of his plays. However, it is clear that any analysis is just not the result of certain phases of a playwright's career or study of some of his tracts as it is not based on chronological terms. There are not water tight compartments, having no inter-relationship with his one or another play, but the paper is a study of continuities and similarities as one moves from Karnad's one play to another. His plays act as a criticism to contemporary Indian society's vices, disadvantages and limits. The playwright's humanitarian stance and devotion to human values is evident, as he portrays the inconveniences and vices both of a person and community. In his plays, the Eastern and Western classical folk conventions are seamlessly synthesized, which he uses for the production of a rich and vivid conventional drama, with an instant and resonant contemporary expression. In other 132 words, he uses the Indian mythology as the root for the production of his dramatic art. His works are constantly embedded in the psyche of the Indians, and he reinterprets contemporary life and time by using western dramatic techniques. He has used the traditions to challenge its suitability and relevance in the present context.

His plays are a chain of existential themes and present a quest for belonging and importance, in the search for completeness and friendship, the loneliness of man and his alienation in a world that is unknown and sometimes incomprehensible. Apart from this, Karnad's plays also throw light on other contemporary issues such as human passions' different manifestation such as evil, treachery, sacrifice, lust, sex, anger, hatred, love, conflict between non-violence and violence, caste system problem, patriarchy, and man-woman relationship etc. He draws the narratives from Indian myths, and skillfully uses it as metaphors for current circumstances. The paper explores a mythical viewpoint in Karnad's plays. To make this study coherent, it has been fragmented and then systematized in tracts in the form of chapters and each chapter reveals a new aspect of his plays. His plays lay an unprecedented emphasis on common man who contrasts with the mythical characters. Being the dramatist of the community, he is sensitive to the fears, faults, and sufferings of the common people. As far as his political sympathies are concerned, the radical element in Karnad gave way to the philosophy of non-violence and truth as well summed up in his play, *Bali: The Sacrifice*. He dreamt for a welfare state, where all would be entitled for the maintenance of law. In his concern for the happy co-existence of people from all classes, castes, and religions of the Indian society, he brought the character of Tughlaq to the fore.

Karnad's use of myths is not new, but the newness lies in its modification for questioning the age old customs and traditions and their present relevance in this age of computer and science. His plays are the expression of unsaid and unheard feelings, felt in the dark shades of life. The dramatist assumed a new responsibility and as a responsible playwright, he discussed the problems which are prevalent in different classes of the Indian society and need utmost attention instead of political issues, which the leaders propagate now and then. The present paper is divided into chapters to make a comprehensive study of Karnad's use of myth and mythology, and as a mechanism to analyse the national 133 issues and problems which are rampant in the present scenario too. The paper begins with Indian English drama's achievement and traditions brief survey which helps the researcher to find out the place of the

selected dramatist, Girish Karnad, in the proper literary context and accurate socio-cultural premises. The theoretical framework is also developed step by step in each chapter. The concept of myth is elaborated with significant examples and the critical comments are also briefly reviewed in order to conceptualize these terms with their features, techniques and thematic concerns. A brief introduction of the life and works of Karnad is also a part of chapters which helps researcher to study various influences on his dramatic art.

The last part of this study is the researcher's perspective which clearly states that the aims and objectives of the present study are to make an objective view of all the social, national and ecological concerns inherent in the plays of Girish Karnad. The paper is a journey from Karnad's use of mythological sources to his own views on the problems of the nation, India in its contemporary cultural, social and political milieu. It is a summary of all the ideas and conclusions drawn from the study. As a playwright, Karnad is an existentialist, so the themes based on existential plight of man permeate through all his plays, particularly his first three plays. In the first play *Yayati*, Karnad uses the myth of *Yayati* to focus on the existential situation of man, *Yayati* becomes an icon not only of perennial human quest for fulfilment but also man's invincible desire to relish sexuality and his insatiable thirst for sensual pleasures. The plight of *Yayati* is suggestive of the condition of modern man running after material and the carnal pleasures.

Thus the episode of *Yayati* highlights the theme of responsibility in the modern context. Karnad also brings out the similarity between the ancient King, *Yayati* who is always after sensual pleasure and the modern man who is also after the material pleasure. Like *Yayati*, it is difficult for modern man to resist the temptation of material pleasure. All the heinous crimes like rape, domestic violence, women teasing, sexual harassment and the like are the result of man's lust for sensual pleasures. The journey of Karnad begins with *Yayati*. The play mixes the mythological ideas with contemporary issues, thereby bringing new interpretations to the ancient myth. Here Karnad conveys the need for self-discipline to the reader, the recognition of right, wrong, and the value of sacrifice to himself as important to the materialistic world of the present day. He sheds some light on gender equality in traditional Patriarchal Indian society and the suppression and denigration of women. *Yayati* may also be interpreted as a reflection of the need and desire for worldliness and ambition of the human beings. Man has flaws, and in human traits, some are good, others are bad. Karnad expresses the need for liberty, accountability, right judgments and admitting errors in one's character. The Existentialists' influence on Karnad's thinking dominates his characters.

The existential current of thought and his power are demonstrated by the man, his isolation, his passion in the face of unrest and his attempts to resolve them by right decisions and responsible actions. Karnad portrays a dysfunctional family of unfulfilled quenches, desires, passions, and their grievances. The characters are in a bubble, an insignificant life, and each wants to deal with it differently. In order to engage his audience with difficult life problems, Karnad weaves mythic magic on stage. It is true that he is turning the narrative to his needs, but the overall outcome is powerful, deep, and multidimensional. Girish Karnad's *Bali: The Sacrifice* explores the hollowness of superstition and animal sacrifice, that dominates the human psyche, not only during the precolonial periods but today also. Meanwhile, Karnad discusses the question of stereotypical gender roles given to men and women by the patriarchy. Women surrender themselves and are lesser creatures in the eyes of the patriarchy. Their sole job is to live and work indoors, not in the public domain. They are perceived to be the other of man. The *Mahout* is a particular personality in the play and serves as a counterpart to the other characters. Oddly enough, he is not altogether a stereotypical man. This man sets his own laws and is not thinking about what others say. But despite his lack of resources, the man is obviously proud of his place in the monarchy.

Apart from this, Karnad uses myth in his other plays to portray exploitation and predicament of a woman in the patriarchal society. Yayati draws our attention to the problem of the unequal power relationship especially in the joint family. The problem of patriarchy becomes conspicuous at the introduction of a new character, Chitralkha as Pooru's wife. She rebels against restrictions forced upon her. The complex psychological and emotional world of Sharmishtha, Devayani and 135 Chitralkha in Yayati, Padmini in Hayavadana the Queen Amritamati in Bali: The Sacrifice Rani in Naga Mandala, Vishakha and Nittilai in The Fire and the Rain reveal the helplessness which the women face in a patriarchal set up. Though they belong to the ancient times, they are the representatives of the present generation of Indian women. Being suppressed and deprived of freedom, they challenge the patriarchal code of conduct. They are modern in the sense that they are capable of taking their own decisions. The modern woman is very aware about her desires, responsibilities, duties and rights in family as well as in society. In this way, Karnad's women characters bear the qualities of modern woman who is courageous enough to rebel and raise her voice against the patriarchal subjugation. His women need to be more courageous. Rani must raise her voice to the atrocities of Appanna, Vishakha must have the insight to see through the trap of Yavakri, Chitralkha should have given some time to herself to come into the terms with Pooru's decision, and Padmini should have decided well exactly which man she wanted for her. The study comprises a discussion on the importance of myth, its uses, significance in the formation of a healthy society and nation and how it adds values to life. Characters in Karnad are not only walking and talking people. These are various situations that a human being passes through in the course of his life. The way these characters behave in the play, the challenges they face and the way they deal with these challenges, their fears, agonies, pain and joy all these are lesson to the masses. Karnad's characters are fit and fine. They are mythical but are not free from the lack of human passions. The consuming fire of desires grips them as it does with any common man.

They are whole and integrated this moment, the fragmented and disintegrated the next moment. His characters are so overwhelmed by temptations that their desires are unending. Desire to get this or that obscures their good tendencies. They are very much aware about their duties to the society and the self. But they have limited vision of life in the beginning. They have to pass through the hard tests of life and ultimately, they come out victorious. Their victory is, no doubt, a matter of happiness, they even celebrate their fall and defeat. Tughlaq is found asleep after a long time, Yayati realizes his duties towards his family, nation and its people. 136 Karnad presents man in many shades but in all shades, he champions the cause of national upliftment. This research is a comprehensive analysis of man-woman relationships in Karnad's plays. In Bali: The sacrifice, the Jain myth is explored to show man-woman relationship in various aspects.

The relationship between the King and the Queen becomes very tense in the end. Through the character of the Queen Amritamati, Karnad has portrayed a dauntless woman who unhesitatingly confesses her extra-marital relation and categorically admits that whatever happened was very beautiful and charming. He shows the King as the protector of patriarchy who comes down to the point of humiliating his wife in the temple. Karnad has really taken a bold step in the depiction of the Queen's character who to safeguard her honour gives up her principle of non-violence by killing herself. A folktale of Rani is also used to highlight man-woman relationship in Naga Mandala. Appanna, Naga and Kappanna who are attracted by the feminine beauty symbolize various aspects of male-sexuality. Appanna stands for the male authority. On the other hand, Appanna's other 'self' Naga is a perfect lover. He loves her intensely and introduces her to the world of erotic pleasure. It is Naga who awakens her womanhood and makes her bold and confident.

At the supernatural level, if Naga is considered a God of fertility then we can say that after getting pleased, Naga gives all happiness to Rani by using his magical powers. In reality Naga and Appanna should be viewed as the same person's two faces. That is why Karnad points out that a husband takes

advantage of double expectations in western culture by behaving differently during the day and the night. The playwright thus reveals the absurdity of conventional society by the use of a folktale. Rani in Nagamandala is no better than a door mat. The play shows how men dominate and women suffer meekly without any protest in the patriarchal society. In some of his plays, Karnad depicts the callous and hypocritical nature of patriarchy. For instance, Padmini's quest in Hayavadana ends in death, Rani's search settles in compromise, Amritamati also ends her life and in *The Fire and the Rain*, Nittilai is brutally killed by her reckless husband and Vishakha is exploited and left alone. The playwright thus exposed the Indian patriarchal society's double standards under which a man is regarded as a significant individual irrespective of his shortcomings, while a woman is judged by her chastity and is mispunished by the society.

Karnad also uses myth, folktale and history to focus on man-woman relationship in his plays like *Yayati*, *The Fire and the Rain*, *Tale-Danda*, *Bali: The Sacrifice*, *Nagamandala*, and *Hayavadana*. Of all women characters in Karnad, Padmini is the most dynamic character. It is she, who challenges the patriarchy and tries to achieve her dream of perfect man though it does not last long. In *Hayavadana*, the folktale of Devadatta – Padmini and Kapila is exploited to depict the modern man's quest for identity and the search for completeness. It is a story of a woman who is in love with two men. In the Indian context it is taken for granted that a woman will keep all love and loyalty for her husband and preserve herself from any kind of outside attraction. However, in the play this conventional concept of a woman is turned upside down. The woman in the original tale is instructed that one particular combination of head and body is her husband and she looks no further – the story ends there. In order to emphasize the central theme of the problem of identity and search for completeness, the playwright has introduced the subplot of *Hayavadana*. It is again *Hayavadana* who desperately struggles to know his society. Another important theme, the dramatist emphasizes in the text is the problem of incompleteness.

The quest for completeness is the age-old theme being explored by several writers in literature. Padmini's attempts to achieve perfect man itself reveals that man is an imperfect being and it is absolutely futile to attain perfection in this imperfect world. Our attempts to achieve completeness usually end tragically or comically. Obviously Karnad neither accepts the Indian idealistic solution, nor the German materialistic solution. He seems to be in favour of humanistic solution. Karnad appears to believe that it is good for the human beings to accept life as it comes and make the most of it. So he suggests a practical approach to life. Karnad exposes the contradiction between man's thought and action by satirizing the sacred rites and rituals in *Bali: The Sacrifice*. Using the Jain myth of cock of dough, he discusses the two vital issues- violence and non-violence. This issue is raised when the Queen commits adultery and the King is unable to punish her and her mate in adultery due to his philosophy of non-violence. But the thoughts of violence, to take revenge come to his mind. In this way, he deviates from the Jain philosophy in which intended violence is as offensive as the actual violence. The King's duties are sacrificed. He has little independence; his obligations to the State and his family control his life fully.

The Mahout is totally open, by comparison. He respects the Queen and cannot be taken liable for anything. He doesn't have friends or relatives. The dirt and contempt of the world and the trendy self of the Mahout show that he was sacrificed to hardship. At the end of the match, the Queen offers herself. She had been sacrificed several years before. The culture which condemned her as barren was sacrificed to her. For her involvement with the Mahout, she was verbally murdered by the King's mother. Karnad also questions all kinds of superstitious and supernatural beliefs and practices. This is also best conveyed in *Hayavadana*'s visit to different religious places to achieve perfection. The Queen Mother is always seen pleasing her gods and goddesses in *Bali: The Sacrifice*. The priests perform fire sacrifice for getting rains and misuse the rites and rituals for their selfish ends in *The Fire and the Rain*. In fact, Karnad's

humanistic approach aims at eradicating such blind beliefs and practices which obstruct the progress of general human welfare. The problem of the caste system is also raised in his plays. The petty quarrel between Devayani and Sharmishtha in *Yayati* becomes the root cause of their enmity and generates bitterness between them. This trivial incident of quarrel takes a form of perpetual war of race, caste and class.

In *The Fire and the Rain*, the people from low castes are prohibited to enter the place of the Fire Sacrifice. Priests are instructed not to talk to the shudras. In those days, knowledge of Vedas and of other sacred books was meant only for those who belonged to the upper caste community. Even a strong protest is shown against the intercaste love marriage between Arvasu and Nittilai. In short, this play also brings out the harsh social reality exposing a deep gulf between the lower and the upper caste people. Karnad's way of perceiving the past and present is a unique one. He revises and changes myth to suit his dramatic productions and makes myth, an endless source of inspiration for the creative. The use of myth and history gives him ample scope to explore the universal issues like existentialism, problem of identity, patriarchy, man woman relationship, problem of caste system and many more. With the help of 139 History and Myth he compares the ancient and modern social structures. The status of women in the patriarchal social system is also one of the major thematic concerns of Karnad in most of his plays. Karnad chooses a ruler, Tughlaq, from the pages of history who had inherited a vast empire. Tughlaq failed to predict modern times and this is the cause of his downfall. Tughlaq worked selflessly for his country. He demands support and understanding from his ministers, but each time they revolt against him. He too battles and resists, but achieves his end and sees the rubble of his life surrounding him. This is his otherness that triggers the collapse of his empire. The originality of Tughlaq goes way beyond his opponents' comprehension, and this is why they regard him as the other.

He would not let them impose any danger of being colonised. The assembly of the Court nobles in order to put down Muhammad-bin Tughlaq reveals once again the workings of inter colonialism. In this situation, the interested citizens are not externals, but his own subjects who are suspicious of his decisions. He makes prayer obligatory first and then bans it completely when his nobles attempt to kill him during prayer. He does not allow it in his country. It is ironic that Heaven destroyed both his father and his brother while they were praying. But Karnad depicts Tughlaq's humanity that calls on the reader to be compassionate. Karnad gives some logical rationale to this mysterious entity by going beyond the limits of historical accounts, chronicles and stories about the Sultan. Through his plays, Girish Karnad appeals to men and women to remove all his flaws and to work for the upliftment of the nation. Here he plays the role of a nationalist and the ultimate goal of nationalism is to keep aside his own interest and to work for the well being of people, society and nation. He wants to his audience to not to be selfish but to be selfless. People must be aware of the people who create all the issues regarding religious fundamentalism.

He is a true humanitarian also who thinks not only about the human being but also about the all living beings including all innocent animals. He believes in the theory of *__Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam__*, which means the whole world is a family. At every level he wants peace and harmony among the people. Myth and reality, history and present, all are combined by him to demonstrate the dynamics of modern living. He tries to find a solution to all of the social issues. 140 In order to patch the cracks in civilization and project a utopian future to the average man, he utilizes the magic realistic technique in his plays. The specific description of flames becomes an important after- colonial instrument for the unfounded demolition of colonial history and a means for people to become acquainted with a rich nation's culture. The magic of Karnad becomes a medium in which the wisdom of the uneducated, the rural and women is clarified. He rejects the hegemonic notion that only books and higher education will bring on knowledge.

The issue of ecological concerns is raised in *The Fire and the Rain*. It is the beauty of the relationship of Arvasu and Nittilai that rejuvenates the fields. From an eco feminist standpoint, the state of Vishaka and Nittilai can be looked at where the injustice of women and the arid land can mirror one another. Eco- feminists consider that women are more naturally linked and better able to perceive and communicate with them. They view dominance and natural destruction like their own subjugation. Eco-feminists often claim that seeing women as equal would change the climate. This play can be seen as a post-modernist text grappling with the fracturing of people's personalities. The world's order has been broken. The planet becomes a wilderness from a prolonged drought. Nature, once all powerful, cannot fill its missing ability and peace. The no playwright combines and interacts with Indra and deals with his own characters. Human ideals such as passion, loyalty and honesty are embodied in a soothing sense; the rain fills up the earth with terrestrial aromas. In conclusion, we can say that in Karnad's plays although the characters have been ably delineated, they maintain their contemporaneity all through the course of action. They cannot be assigned to any specific time or place; they are universal and eternal in their appeal.

Karnad's characters are universal. Their problems are not confined to them only, but it pervades the entire community. The modern world of chaos and fragments makes the modern man's life horrible. He is in continuous search, search for his place in this world of boundaries and barriers. It leads him to the world of matters and materials. His plays are a reflection of modern man's predicament. Karnad's philosophy of life, his non-violent approach, his realism, all acts as a guiding lamp to the dark shades of human life. His plays deal with human predicament mainly highlighting the condition of man and nation in the modern world. Thus, all the plays 141 of Karnad have a remarkable contemporary social relevance. It is for this reason that the study like this could be treated as a modest contribution to the body of criticism that has gone into the genre of Indian drama in general and Karnad's drama in particular.

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