

Girish Karnad: A Catalyst Performer

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Abstract: *Girish Karnad, a multi-faceted genius, acquired an early interest in drama and dramatized contemporary socio-political and cultural issues in his plays through the use of myth, legend and folk-lore. While dealing with history and culture he has tried to relate them with contemporary situations. He meticulously uses the substance to reshape our society. Though studied at foreign universities, his deep sense of Indian thought strike over the reader but basically never engrossed in any typical format and in that sense he is versatile genius. After having an experience the readers have impression of a catalyst performer. This paper attempts to unfurl the way he behaves as a catalyst playwright referring to his various plays. In Chemistry, catalyst is a substance that increases the rate of a chemical reaction without being consumed in the process. To literature point of view, it is someone or something that encourages progress and change. Unlike poetry and fiction, Indian drama has been unable to grow and bear rich fruit but Karnad being a playwright feels comfortable and at his best.*

Keywords: *catalyst, excavates, renaissance, delve, myth, legend, folk-lore*

1. INTRODUCTION

Girish Karnad is one of the towering figures in the world of Indian theatre. The present paper is an attempt to reinforce the paramount role of the dramatist as a catalyst performer. In Chemistry, catalyst is a substance that increases the rate of a chemical reaction without being consumed in the process. To literature point of view, it is someone or something that encourages progress or change. It is an inciting incident that sets the successive conflict into motion. T. S. Eliot, an influential critic, speaks about the concept in his *Tradition and the Individual Talent* published in 1919. He compares the mind of a poet to a catalyst. For him, poet's mind is a jar or receptacle in which numberless feelings and emotions are stored. Karnad is the real performer behind the theatre though not actively participates as a character in each and every play. Basically Indian drama in English has not registered very notable gains during the post-independence period. If Indian English Literature is the Cinderella of literature in English, Indian drama in English is the Cinderella of Indian English Literature. Unlike poetry and fiction, Indian drama has been unable to grow and bear rich fruit but, Karnad being a playwright, feels comfortable and at his best. He confesses: "I have been fairly lucky in having a multi-pronged career. You know, I have been an actor, a publisher, a film maker. But in none of these fields have I felt quite as much at home as in playwriting."

Karnad's construction of a new idea of drama that excavates from the immensely rich, unexplored holdings of Indian myths and history, re-reads their communicative practices and cultural contexts and invites a new mode of reception. The breadth of perspectives is informed with anthropological developments and humanistic struggles in our culture. Historical or mythic narrative in Karnad is a liberal source of meaning. It ranges beyond the sharp east-west dichotomy or the constructed opposition between Western 'realism' and Indian 'idealism', between European renaissance mode of objective representation and the Indian mode of spiritual and symbolic perception. Extending 21st century, the composite art of Indian drama as Karnad visualizes would serve significant functions providing for instruction, entertainment, enlightenment, happiness, peace and moral elevation. Unlike, Badal Sircar and Vijay Tendulkar who delve into the problems of the middle class man, Karnad goes back to myths and legends and has made them a vehicle of a new vision. This shows indianness and contains the element of post colonial attitude. By

using these myths, he tried to show the absurdity of life with all its elemental passions and conflicts and man's eternal struggle to achieve perfection. Karnad is an existential playwright. He concerns himself with the problems of existence, the quest for equality, search for identity and the problems of isolation and frustration. Existentialism asserts humanism or the dignity of man. This philosophy is exemplified in all his plays.

He dramatizes contemporary socio - political and cultural issues in his plays through the use of myth, legend and folk-lore. Problems like caste, heredity, religion and gender are discussed in his plays. He performs as a catalyst that takes help of myth, legend and folk-lore like a jar and keeps heterogeneous elements rendering the effect to the audience. He meticulously uses these devices to project the situations in our society. The play *Tughlaq* dramatizes the political disillusionment of the post - Nehruvian regime. Gender is an important issue in *Hayavadana*. *Yayati* is about king's passion for immortality and the picture of a power hungry politician. *Naga-Mandala* deals with the ironic predicament of a woman who becomes a victim of her husband's indifference. The play questions the very institution of marriage and the sense of isolation and loneliness resulting from post- marriage pressures. *The Fire and the Rain* takes up complex issues situations like revenge, futility of knowledge, jealousy and ego. *Wedding Album* reinvents with introducing a new visual tool – that of technology and its new found issues in traditional situations. *Tale-Danda*, an excellent tragedy, deals with the failure of Basavanna's effort to reform society, sunk in the mire of caste divisions, discrimination between the sexes and exploitation of the marginalized sections. *Bali: The Sacrifice* explores the existential dilemmas of passion and violence posed by an ancient Jain myth.

Post colonialism rejects the claim to universalism made on behalf of the western thought and literature. It examines the representation of the non- western cultures with and within the texts. It develops a perspective in which the conditions of marginality, plurality and otherness are seen as the sources of cultural valorization and potential changes. It celebrates hybridity and cultural polyvalency. The Indian writer can never get rid of Indian culture, philosophy, as a result of which that writing has a strong element of Indianness.

2. DISCUSSION

Karnad is truly catalyst while dealing with *Naga-Mandala*. The play is supported by the oral tales from Karnataka. Its plot is conspicuous for rare complexity. It questions the authenticity of traditional values and conventions and in their place presents a new interpretation and vision which harmonizes with changing social reality. 'Naga' which is considered as associated with divinity, a permanent companion of Shiva, the permanent bed for 'Vishnu and Laxmi.' The latter word Mandala is a magic square that has a charming power to control, guide and direct human lives. Here in the play, Naga makes the mandala and plays with human lives. Karnad makes use of myths and folk forms in his plays to exercise socio - cultural evils. In *Naga-Mandala*, he exposes male chauvinism, the oppression of women, the great injustice done to them and stealthily deflates the concept of chastity. There is a significance of shape shifting in the play. *Hayavadana* is based upon one such folktale. The source of the play goes back to Somdevas *Brihadkathasaritsagar* and ancient collection of stories in Sanskrit, but this particular play could also be traced to Thomas Mann's famous story 'The Transposed Head'. Karnad uses the conventions and motifs of folktales and folk theatre like masks, curtains, dolls and story within a story etcetera. He creates a strange world. It is a world of incomplete individuals, indifferent gods and dolls that speak. It is a world different to the desires and frustrations, joys and sorrows of human. The source of the play, *Bali:The Sacrifice*, is an ancient Kannada epic, *Yashodhara Charite*, which itself draws on several other sources. The play is one that has multiple ideological issues. Though based on an ancient Kannada epic, the story, characters and incidents are often overshadowed by overt ideological concerns as relevant today as they were many centuries ago. Here the playwright skillfully handles the issue and keeps in front of the audience for further improvement. *The Fire and The Rain* is based on a popular myth from the *Mahabharat*, the myth of Yavakri. It is narrated by the ascetic Lomasha to the Pandavas as they wander across the land during their exile. The playwright being a catalyst constructs a complex play of tangled relationship, of deceit and treachery, of loss and sacrifice. In *Tale-Danda* he uses the history of medieval India to depict the social ethos in contemporary India. Through the play it is revealed that caste system is a great threat to the unity and integrity of Indian society. *Yayati* is an

existential play on the theme of responsibility and human relationship. It is also a reflection on the condition of modern man, whose mind, disturbed by many worldly and sensuous passions, has turned into a veritable zoo inhabited by wild desires, sensual pleasures, irresponsible exercise of power and utter forgetfulness of the imperishable values of life. The modern man is in no way better than Yayati.

The myth of Yavakri attracted Karnad and he decided to turn it into a play. He adroitly reshapes the myth in order to make it dramatically effective and to interpret it in contemporary contexts. Karnad skillfully revises the *Mahabharata* myth and alters it to suit his dramatic requirements. He adds several characters and situations and deletes some unnecessary incidents and situations. He contemporaries the original myth and reinterprets it in the light of modern ideas and contexts. In *The Fire and The Rain* the basic character of the myth has been changed. What remains unchanged is the basic nature and atmosphere of the myth. One of the fascinating aspects of dealing with myths is their self reflectivity. A myth seems complete in itself and yet when examined in detail, contains subconscious signal which lead you on to another myth which in turn will act as a conduct to a third one while illuminating the one you started with. Myths are fascinating to the playwright. He skillfully uses and innovates them to suit his dramatic purpose. He knows that the folk theatre derives its energy from traditional values; it also has the capacity to question them. As a folk play *Naga-Mandala* has all the paraphernalia required for the genre. The very idea of a Naga or Cobra impersonating the identity of Appanna, Rani's husband, is unbelievable but the playwright portrays the metamorphosed Naga as a real human character. It has been used to render the inner landscape of the mind or the passion, agitation and ecstasies of the heart and soul of characters. The play opens with the bringing of the mask of Lord Ganesha, the presiding deity of traditional theatre on the stage and his worship like a typical Yakshagana play. The Bhagvata, accompanied by musicians, sings verses in praise of Ganesha. At the outset, the theme of the play is introduced as Ganesha processing the head of an elephant and human body symbolizes incompleteness. As the Bhagvata comments:

“ An elephant's head on human body, a broken tusk and a cracked belly – whichever way you look at him he seems an embodiment of imperfection, of incompleteness. How this very Vakratunda-Mahakaya, with his crooked face and distorted body, is the Lord and Master of success and perfection? Could it be that this image of purity and holiness, the Mangalmoorti, intends to signify by his very appearance that the completeness of God is something no poor mortal can comprehend?” (Karnad, 2002: 73)

The Bhagavata narrates the story with a formalistic expression in the manner of a folktale. *Bali: The sacrifice* is a tribute to the astuteness and sensitivity of Mahatma Gandhi that he saw so clearly the importance of non-violence to the cultural and political survival of India. Here is an instance that reveals the bitter reality of our life.

“As the world is divided
into two orbs:
one lit up by the sun
the other hid in the shade.
So also the human soul,
the habitation of gods,
is split into two realms –
one of the spirits the adore
the blood and gore
of the bright, shining blade
slicing smoothly
through the lamb
and the other

ruled by the spirits that bid
you pause
before you use
the knife on a sapling
or clap in the air –
lest you harm a life.” (Karnad, 2009: 73)

Queen in her soliloquy poses a question that the World is divided into two parts. One is the part of the sun that throws light whereas the other part is hid in the darkness. It is also true to human soul which is habitation of gods. This world is split into two realms. The one that adores the blood of the innocent and the other ruled by the spirits those sensitively pause before using the knife on a sapling or clap in the air. Here the playwright seems to be a catalyst performer.

HEMA: Who is this Isabel?

VIDULA: His girlfriend.

HEMA: A Christian?

VIDULA: With that name, what do you think?

HEMA: Weird.

VIDULA: This is a new thing he has started. Catnaps. Whenever
there is a problem, he jumps into bed.

HEMA: Couldn't he find a suitable match within our caste?

(Karnad, 2009: 29-34)

Isabel is Rohit's girlfriend. Hema questions her Christianity. She surprisingly asks whether he couldn't find a suitable match within their caste. It shows that really our mindset is not changed even in the twenty first century. Vivian, a boy of thirteen, appears with much reality of child psychology. His fascination for Hema who is of his mother's age projects a kind of truth hidden in the mind. Vivian has tremendous dreams about her. His letters to her show how he thinks and behaves extraordinarily. Vidula's conservative older sister, the expat Hema, is juxtaposed poignantly with a more practical and at times progressive mother while Rohit himself, the seeming rebel with a Christian girlfriend, chooses arrangement over love for better career prospects. While dealing with all such occasions the playwright is a catalyst performer.

Karnad deftly weaves multiple threads-sub-plots such as 13-year-old Vivian's passionate and pornographic notes to Hema who is old enough to be his mother and Radhabai the domestic's pathos-filled story. Karnad also introduces various contemporary concerns and issues. When the television producer Pratibha, a Hindu married to a muslim says "There's nothing I don't know about harassment" or when Vidula's secret life as an anonymous cybersex kitten at the sleazy neighborhood internet café is exposed and shushed just as quickly can account of her Saraswat status by the Saraswat moral brigade, the playwright opens a Pandora's Box of new age crises. Karnad has borrowed the myth of *Yayati* from the "Adiarva" of the *Mahabharata*. *Yayati* re-tells the age-old story of the king who in his longing for eternal youth does not hesitate to usurp the youth and vitality of his son. He takes liberty with the myth and weaves complex dimensions into the plot borrowed from the *Mahabharata*. He invests new meaning and significance for contemporary life and reality by exploring the king's motivations. Karnad makes *Yayati* confront the horrifying consequences of not being able to relinquish desire.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The present paper throws light on the aspects of Girish Karnad as a catalyst performer. There are innumerable instances stated in the paper show that how the playwright very potentially has woven the threads of myth, legend, folk-lore and history to display the contemporary status of our Indian society especially keeping himself aloof and entangled in one situation. He very honestly creates different situations and pushes the characters to perform their duties. The audience also

leaves the theatre with lots of ideas in their mind. He is the one who encourages progress or change. It is an inciting incident that sets the successive conflict into motion.

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