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Indian Ethos and Dramatic Craftsmanship – A Fusion in Karnad's Plays

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ABSTRACT

Girish Karnad is the most popular media personality in contemporary India. In his plays Karnad uses the various dramatic conventions and motifs of folk art, like masks, curtains, sutradhara, the seemingly unrelated comic episodes to uphold the rich cultural heritage of India. The themes of his plays do have contemporary significance but the main focus is on the presentation of complex cultural fabric of India.

KEYWORDS: conventions, heritage, contemporary, fabric

Karnad's dramatic technique is conspicuous for its excellent plots, characters, setting, style and language contribute to create the unity of effect in the plays. Karnad deftly portrays the multifaceted dimensions of Indian socio-economic, philosophical and religious heritage in his dramatic plots.

Yayati is Karnad's first play in which he has tried to reinterpret in modern perspective an ancient lore- a myth though partially, from the Mahabharata. U.R. Ananthamurthy remarks, **"It is a self-consciously existentialist drama on the theme of responsibility**In 'Yayati', Karnad has tried to explore a symbolic form out of tension between the archetypal and mythical experience and a lively response to life and its values. He has given a new meaning to the past from the vantage ground of the present.

The play is planned in four compact Acts. It also maintains the unity of time and action. Karnad's 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 Puru.

Karnad's second play **Tughlaq** is an outstanding chronicle-play based on the historical facts focusing upon the integrated themes of philosophy, social theory and politics. Karnad's protagonist in the play is a faithful portrait and profile of Sultan Muhammad-bin-Tuglaq (1325-51), a one dimensional man with multi-dimensional thought and behaviour, a great scholar and the most idealist ruler of medieval India. In the play Karnad has exploited almost all the techniques in making it a grand success on stage.

Tughlaq is rightly considered a piece of theatre "par excellence". Karnad experiments with a variety of theatrical techniques to create visual and auditory images, thereby producing the desired dramatic effect on the stage. By employing a variety of theatrical devices – spectacle, quick shift of scenes, blackout – he tries to control the movement of the play and its impact on the audience. Spectacle refers to all the visual aspects of production, scenery, lighting, costume, make-up and the business and the movement of the actors.

Symbolism is another technique that Karnad employs to make his play powerful on the stage. One finds five major symbols in the play. They are prayer, sleep, the game of chess, the python and the rose.

Karnard's third play 'Hayavadana' was published in 1970, exactly six years after 'Tughlaq'The central plot in Hayavadana is based on a tale found in the Kathasaritsagara, (The Ocean of Story), a collection of stories in Sanskrit dating from the eleventh century, and on its further development in Thomas Mann's German novel 'The Transposed Heads'. Thus Hayavadana's origins are intergeneric, a folktale transformed into a novella, into a play, and intercultural-the story has travelled from India to Germany and back again.

The sub-plot of Hayavadana, the horse-man is Karnad's own invention. It deepens the significance of the main theme of incompleteness by treating it on a different plane. It provides the framework of the play both as a prologue and as an epilogue.

In the play, various conventional elements of stagecraft are used which are integral to the action of the play and the actors' stage business. Half-curtains and painted curtains carried by stage hands are used to convey some facts. For instance, when Padmini performs Sati, the curtain has a blazing fire painted on it and as it is lifted, the flames seem to leap up. The front curtain is totally absent and there is no elaborate stage set up.In 'Hayavadana', this theatre idiom transcends regional or linguistic barriers without losing its rootedness.

Girish Karnad's next play Naga-Mandala was published in 1990, it was orginally written in Kannada and later translated into English. **According to Karnad "It is based on two oral tales from Karnataka which I first heard from A.K. Ramanujam**.

In the play, Karnad has used various dramatic devices to provide a new meaning to the known. Regarding the use of these techniques from the folk theatre, **Girish Karnad says : "the various conventions – the chorus, the music, the seemingly unrelated comic interludes, the mixing of human and non-human worlds-permit a simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view, of alternative analysis of the central problem."**

In 'Naga-Mandala', Karnad has used two Kannada folk tales together. The first one comments on the paradoxical nature of oral tales in general, and within this is the story of Rani whose predicament poignantly reflects the human need, to live by fictions and half truths. He is quite comprehensive in his suggestion that **"search for absolute truth in every part of life, may prove to be fatal and the living may come tumbling down."**

Besides 'The Story' as a main part of the whole, Karnad has very skilfully used the sub-plot, the device of roots, freezes and songs to elaborate and intensify the significance of the theme and give it a universal appeal. Karnad continues to have the atmosphere and tempo of folk literature throughout with the help of the demon girl who bewitched Kappanna.

Kanard uses this device as means of exploring 'a modern outcome of a traditional situation'. **Naga-Mandala** has several other examples of shape shifting, besides the Naga assuming the form of Appanna. The flames take on human shapes, the story becomes a young woman and the song a sari.

Naga-Mandala, therefore, is a unique example of experiments in the use of dramatic devices. The devices become an integral part of the whole and give the play an epic dimension. In the play, Karnad tries to fuse artistically dialectical relationship between tradition and modernity. Karnad's indigenous stamp of 'modern theatre' deserves due credit and appreciation.

Taledanda (1993) is the second play of Karnad which exploits history, for its theme. The story of 'Taledanda', which literally means beheading, is borrowed by Karnad from an important historical movement that took place in the city of Kalyan in 1168 A.D. Kalyan in the 12th century was a cauldron of tensions and conflicts.The play is structured in three acts. The first act revolves around Basavanna, the accusations that he faces, and the effect of these accusations. The second act examines the repercussions erupting out of the marital proposal of Madhuvarasa's

daughter with Haralayya's son. The third act moves towards the climax when Sovideva siezes power from his father Bijjala and imprisons him. Bijjala is killed by Jagadeva in an act of peevish rebellion.

There is a problem of making an interesting character out of a saint in 'Tale-Danda'. The technique of splitting the character of Basavanna has become a matter of debate. Basavanna appears to be weak in the play. As occasion demands, he should become angry, he should condemn. But he doesn't do so. He doesn't appear idealized. But he is quite a pragmatic character. He is fully aware that his ideals have triggered off that marriage and that there would be dire consequences as well.

"Basavanna : The orthodox will see this mingling of castes as a blow at the very roots of vanasharma dharma."
The people involved in this marriage do not know this. He knows that the movement he gave rise to, will go out of his hand, and victimize himself.

"Basavanna : We are not ready for the kind of revolution this wedding is. We haven't work long enough or hard enough!"
This bifurcation into two characters, or splitting of one character through an internal conflict, is the basis for the success of Taledanda. Here the conflict is between religion and society.

The female characters, the queen Rambhavati and Amba along with Savitri are voiceless, passive and suffering women. Even the Sharana women are not as free thinking as they claim to be.

Social deformity is illustrated in its various aspects in Karnad's 'Tale-Danda'. The ugly face of the caste system in India is exposed in 'Tale-Danda'. Basavanna is betrayed by his own followers in his ideal struggle to eradicate the caste system gradually. Consequently, not only does Basavanna's movement fail but also his followers emerge as a new caste, after a few hundred years. Thus Karnad exposes the evil effects of social deformity at cultural, social and psychological levels.

Published in 1998, **The fire and the Rain** is Karnad's transcreation in English of the Kannada version of his play entitled 'Agni Mattu Male'. The play is based on the myth of Yavakri taken from chapters 135-138 of the 'Vana Parva' (Forest Canto) of the 'Mahabharata'. Karnad has adopted, worked and contemplated upon the myth for thirty seven years.

The play begins with a Prologue, is divided into three Acts, and ends with an Epilogue. As the title of the play **The Fire and the Rain** suggests, the play focuses both on the negative and positive human emotions – jealousy, betrayal, deceit, as well as selfless love. Thus the Fire is the fire of revenge, lust, anger, envy, treachery, violence and death. The rain, on the other hand, symbolises self-sacrifice, compassion, divine grace, forgiveness, revival and regeneration.

Karnad's uniqueness lies in the revival of the ritualistic and symbolic aspects of drama. Involved in role-playing, rituals in all cultures have purpose : to ward off and purge the community from all evils. Dressing, signing and dancing – all are aspects of rituals.

The Epilogue approaches the final moments of revelations and coincides with catastrophe. In motifs of 'Play within the play', the analogue between Indra-Vritra and Paravasa-Arvasu, is made to appear. The 'Play within play' is a mask play and shows the mixing of human and non-human. Arvasu as Vritra – the snake, the manager as Indra, his brother as Vishwarupa. Girish Karnad's views about mask are different from those of western dramatists. The western dramatists interpret mask as two facet's of a man's personality – the imposition of another personality on the real one. But Karnad tells us that Indian concept of mask is different.

The play is a dynamic combination of various art forms – music, dance, party etc. It displays complicated human relationships symbolically. It depicts the jealousy of man against man, father against son, brother against brother, wife against husband, high caste against low caste human beings. Thus, we can say that it is a very important and influential play in the modern age.

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