



A Literary study of Girish Karnad's Plays in the light of Sanskrit literature

Dr. Bhairavi Dixit

1100/B, "SANGEET" OPP. MDN Telephone Exchange Quarters, Muni-Dery, Aambawadi- Bhavnagar

ABSTRACT

Drama is a popular literary form from ancient time. The modern Indian English Dramas many a times seem to be influenced by ancient literary creation. Though the playwrights of India write in their own mother tongue or in English, but the literary works can be very well evaluated in the light of Sanskrit language and literature. In this research paper, researcher probes into Girish Karnad's selected plays as contemporary Indian English Literature with the help of ancient Sanskrit literature. The use of myth preserves the base of Adikavyas like Ramayana and Mahabharata where as the references of Natyashastra in the modern Indian English plays serve as literary gift to the new generation to regenerate the ideas of Shashtra. Such is the best way of preservation of old Sanskrit literature in regenerating it by a new vista.

KEYWORDS: Mythological Sources, Folktales, Reshape, Preservation, Sanskrit Literature

Sanskrit is the oldest and the most efficient language of the world and so its literature. India has the longest and the richest tradition in drama. The origin of Indian drama can be traced back to the Vedic Period. During the age of the Vedic Aryans, drama was performed in a simple way. Different episodes from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the Bhagavad-Gita were enacted out in front of people.

Girish Karnad is a playwright, poet, actor, director, critic, translator and cultural administrator all rolled into one. Karnad has acknowledged,

"My generation was the first to come of age after India became independent of British rule. It therefore had to face a situation in which tensions implicit until then had come out in the open and demanded to be resolved without apologia or self-justification: tensions between the cultural past of the country and its colonial past, between the attractions of Western modes of thought and our own traditions, and finally between the various visions of the future that opened up once the common cause of political freedom was achieved. This is the historical context that gave rise to my plays and those of my contemporaries ("Author's Introduction" Three Plays.1).

Under such context, Karnad found, "a new approach like drawing historical and mythological sources to tackle contemporary themes" (Wikipedia "Girish Karnad")

M. K. Naik has commented that Karnad knew it well that,

"If Indian English drama wishes to go ahead, it must go back first, that is, only a purposeful return to its own roots in the rich tradition of ancient Indian drama, both in Sanskrit and folk drama in Prakrits, can help it shed its lean and pale look, and increase its artistic hemoglobin count, and make it cease to be the 'sick man' of Indian English Literature" (Naik.43-44).

Karnad has emerged as a living legend in the contemporary Indian English drama. The Treatise on Theatre is the most complete work of dramaturgy in the ancient world. It addresses acting, dance, music, dramatic construction, architecture, costuming, make-up, props, the organization of companies, the audience, competitions, and offers a mythological account of the origin of theatre. Drama is regarded as the highest achievement of Sanskrit literature. Bharata's Natyashastra in Sanskrit is the most pioneering work on Indian dance & drama. It displays consciousness of all major aspects of drama, namely stage-setting, music, plot construction, characterization, dialogue and acting. According to legend when the world passed from golden age to silver age, people started getting addicted to sensual pleasure and jealous, anger, and desire. Then Gods, demons, yaksha's, Rakshas, Nagas populated the whole world. At that moment, Lord Indra requested God Brahma:

"Please give us something which would not only teach us but be pleasing both to eyes and ears." (Adya Rangacharya: 1)

God Brahma gave the pious idea of Natya Veda after meditation. He combined the essence of Natya Veda out of the four Vedas, dance from

the Rig Veda, song from the Sama Veda, mimicry from Yajur Veda and passion from Atharva Veda. Vishwa karma was the celestial architect who builds a stage in Indian heaven and Bharta was the actual manager. The same evidentiary note is found in Girish Karnad's The Fire and The Rain "Brahma, the Lord of all creation extracted the requisite element from the four Vedas" (Prologue 2). He pulled out the text from Rig Veda, songs from Sama Veda, the art of acting from the Yajur Veda and Rasa (aesthetic experience) from the Atharva Veda and combined them into a fifth Veda "Natya Veda" and thus gave birth to the art of drama. He handed it over to his son, Lord Indra, the God of the skies. (The Fire and the Rain.2).

It is also notable that though Karnad being a modern Indian English playwright, has tried to preserve the oldest treatise on theatre focusing on the codes of caste by favoring Arvasu in his play The fire and The Rain through the mouth of an actor-manager, regenerating the ancient incident related to the performance of Bharatmuni's Natyashastra,

"The sons of Bharata were the first actors in the history of theatre. They were Brahmins, but lost their caste because of their profession. A curse plunged them into disrepute and disgrace. If one values one's high birth, one should not touch this profession. And I have killed my father, a noble Brahmin. I already stand tarnished. I may now become an actor" (F.R.3).

Girish Karnad is a pioneer in the field of new drama and all his plays are actable. Their story is generally borrowed from ancient myths, folk literature, or history. His success lies in discussing modern problems with the help of an ancient myth. It is interesting to read old tales in the light of contemporary concerns.

Most of the play wrights in India have either written in such a traditional manner which lost relevance to their urban existence or they have written in such an urbanized manner, that it lost relevance to the traditional part of their personality. In this context Karnad comments

"We keep acrobating between the traditional and the modern, perhaps we could not hit upon a form which balance both" (Ind.Lit.vol.1). And, thus he attempts to balance. Here are some notable points for the study of Karnadian plays in the light of Sanskrit language and literature. His plays are some or the other ways represents myths, legends, folktales and history. In 'Yayati', he has taken the story of the Yayati from 'Adiparva' of Mahabharata and reshaped it by giving it a modern touch. In the original story Sharmistha marries Yayati but this marriage infuriates Devayani who asks her father to bestow a curse of old age and decrepitude upon Yayati with a shaving clause that if someone shares it he would regain his youth. His four elder sons refuse to accept it but the fifth one 'Puru' yields to his entreaties and accepts the curse. Karnad has moulded the original mythical story of Yayati. In the play, Yayati is already married to Devayani, but during the course of action, accepts Sharmistha as his wife. In the original story Puru is unmarried, but in Karnad's play he is married to Chitrlekha and her reactions to her husband's decision are recorded. Swarnalata, a maid servant, is another addition to the characters. The mythical story of Yayati forms the basic plot of the play but the dramatist adds, "...new characters to

deepen the connotative richness of the play as he gives it a contemporary appeal." The play is a self consciously existentialist drama on the theme of responsibility. His interpretation of the "familiar old myth on the exchange of ages between father and son baffled and angered my conventional critics, but for other, who were trying to root their contemporary concerns in old myth...Puru was a great experience." The play establishes that "...myth is not merely a narrative to be bent to present purposes, but a structure of meaning worth exploring in itself, because it offers opportunities for philosophical reflection without the connotations of realism or the necessity of a contemporary setting."

Hayavadana derives its plot from 'Kathasaritsagara' an ancient collection of stories in Sanskrit 'Vetala Panchavimsati' but Karnad has, to impart it a contemporary relevance, borrowed it from Thomas Mann's novella 'The Transposed Heads': "The original poses a moral problem while Mann uses it to ridicule the mechanical conception of life which differentiates between body and soul."

Karnad makes certain changes in the original myth. For example, he changes the names of the characters. When asked about his intention in changing the names, he says "I wanted them to be generic terms because the characters are types. In Sanskrit any person whose name you do not know is addressed as 'Devadutta' and Kapila means dark and therefore earthly and Padmini is the name of the one class of women in Vatsayana's Kamasutra.

We find the impact of Sanskrit drama, with its "special social setting, a steady well-ordered universe in which everyone-even the gods-has an allotted place, the same impact of the existence of goddess Kali as a divine character is found in his Hayavadana.

As Karnad has pointed out, Naga-Mandala is based on two oral tales from Karnataka and the other source of the play can be found in Ahalya Myth:

"In Valmiki Ramayana, Ahalya commits adultery knowingly but the folk mind equates Ahalya with the chaste women and therefore cannot allow her to sin deliberately. So Indra, is shown to have committed a fraud on her by impersonating her husband Gautama."

In Naag-Mandala, there is a story undercurrent of a mythical sub text of belief. The process of the transformation of Naga into a human being is derived from such a sub text of belief. Once again Karnad returns to the Mahabharata for myth and plot. The myth of Yavakri occurs in the Vana Parva, narrated by the ascetic Lomasha to the Pandavas as an admonitory and advisory lesson. In the original myth, having felt grieved at the insult of his father, Bharadwaj, Yavakri goes to forest, performs 'tapasya' and acquires knowledge through the 'rigors of his ascetic practice' directly from Indra but misuses it and molests Raibhya's daughter-in-law. Raibhya invokes the 'Kritya', creates Rakshasa (demon) and a spirit to kill Yavakri. Bharadwaj knew that his son was to blame for the misdeed but he cursed Raibhya to be killed by his elder son. However, he regrets his mistakes and immolates himself.

In a nut shell, I submit my findings that there is a high possibility of studying contemporary Indian English Literature with the help of ancient Sanskrit literature. The use of myth preserves the base of Adikavyas like Ramayana and Mahabharata where as the references of Natyashastra in the modern Indian English plays serve as literary gift to the new generation to regenerate the ideas of shastras. Such is the best way of preservation of old Sanskrit literature in regenerating it by a new vista.

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