

Girish Karnad: A Man and Artist—Evolution of His Dramatic Genius

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Girish Raghunath Karnad is a playwright, poet, actor, director, critic, translator and cultural administrator all rolled into one. He has been rightly called the “renaissance man” (Kalidas & Merchant.”Renaissance Man”); whose celebrity is based on decades of prolific and consistent output on native soil. He belongs to a generation that has produced Dharamveer Bharati, Mohan Rakesh and Vijay Tendulkar who have created a national theatre for modern India which is the legacy of his generation. Karnad is the most famous as a playwright. His plays written in Kannad have been widely translated into English and all major Indian languages. Karnad’s plays are written neither in English, except few, in which he dreamed of earning international literary fame, nor in his mother tongue Konkani. Instead they are composed in his adopted language Kannad thereafter translated by himself into English—a language of adulthood. When Karnad started writing plays, Kannad literature was highly influenced by the renaissance in Western literature. Writers would choose a subject which looked entirely alien to manifestation of native soil. Conflicting ideologies, political freedom of India, modernity versus indigenous traditions supplied the specific backdrop to write plays. During his formative years, Karnad went through diverse influences that went long way into shaping his dramatic taste and genius. The earliest influence was that of the *Natak Company* that was in vogue in Sirsi. The *Yakshagana* plays which he used to see with the servants also appealed to him by their buffoonery and horseplay. But the greater influence came from the naturalistic drama of Henrik Ibsen and through him of G.B. Shaw. Karnad was also influenced by Shakespeare considerably. But the influence of Kannada drama was quite profound and deep on him. Karnad represents the best traditions of the Kannada drama which was quite rich with romantic plays, tragedies, comedies, poetic and blank verse plays. Karnad took keen interest in all these kinds of Kannada plays. He was exposed to a literary scene where there was a direct clash between Western and native tradition. It was India of the Fifties and Sixties that surfaced two streams of thought in all walks of life—adoption of new modernistic techniques, a legacy of the colonial rule and adherence to the rich cultural past of the country. Karnad has acknowledged this fact:

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”). R.K. Dhawan examines the impact of contemporary socio-cultural and literaray milieu: “Karnad was fascinated by the traditional plays; nonetheless the Western playwrights that he read during his college days opened up for him a new world of magical possibilities” (14). M.K. Nayak observes, “the most significant plays of the last two decades have come from two playwrights, who interestingly enough, represent a generation each: Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani” (*Littcrit.* 43). Karnad’s plays had effectively demonstrated how Indian English drama could

revitalize itself by employing indigenous subjects, characters, language and Folk and Natak Company conventions and de-colonize Indian English Drama. M. K. Naik has justly 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 haemoglobin count, and make it cease to be the 'sick man' of Indian English Literature. (*Ibid.* 43-44)

Karnad has emerged as a living legend in the contemporary Indian English drama. His output which ranges from *Yayati* to *Wedding Album* marks the evolution of Indian theatre since four decades. "He represents", Saryug Yadav considers, "synthesis of cultures and his formal experiments have certainly been far more successful than those of some of his contemporaries" (9). His technical experiments with an indigenous dramatic form "opened up fresh lines of fruitful exploration for the Indian English playwright" (Naik. *A History of Indian English Literature.* 263). P. Hari Padma Rani also gives credit to Karnad to Indianize the form of drama in English: "Girish Karnad has attempted to Indianize the form by using some of the conventions of Indian Classical drama and some of those of the folk theatre and by blending them in a singular style of his own" (15).

Karnad was born on 19 May 1938 in Matheran, a town near Bombay. He hails from a Saraswat Konkani family of Manglore. His childhood was spent growing up in a small village Sirsi in Karnataka where he had first-hand experience of the indigenous folk theatre. The influence of the theatre was immense on the making of Karnad as a playwright. He happened to see with his father the performances of the touring Natak Companies. These Natak Companies were the off-shoots of the Parsi theatre. Karnad wrote:

In my childhood, in a small town in Karnataka, I was exposed to two theatre forms that seemed to represent irreconcilably different worlds. Father took the entire family to see plays staged by troupes of professional actors called *natal companies* which toured the countryside throughout the year. The plays were staged in semipermanent structures on proscenium stages, with wings and drop curtains, and illuminated by petromax lamps.

Once the harvest was over, I went with the servants to sit up nights watching the more traditional *Yakshagana* performances. The stage, a platform with a black curtain, was erected in the open air and lit by torches.

By the time I was in my early teens, the *natak companies* had ceased to function and *Yakshagana* had begun to seem quaint, even silly, to me. Soon we moved to a big city. This city had a college and electricity, but no professional theatre. ("Author's Introduction" *Three Plays.*1)

As a young man studying at Karnataka University, Dharwar, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Mathematics and Statistics in 1958, Karnad dreamed of earning international literary fame, but he thought that he would do so by writing in English. Upon graduation, he went to England and studied at Oxford where he earned a Rhodes scholarship and went on to receive a Master of Arts Degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics. During his stay at Magdalen College, Oxford, Karnad felt immensely interested in art and culture. On his return to India in 1963, he joined Oxford University Press, Madras. This offered him an opportunity to get exposed to various kinds of writings in India and elsewhere. Such influences made an indelible mark on the creative genius of Karnad. In 1974, he received an important assignment and was appointed Director of the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune. In 1987, he went to the

U.S.A. as Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence at the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago. From 1988 to 1993, he worked as Chairman of the Sangeet Natak Akademi (National Academy for Performing Arts), New Delhi. In 1994, he was awarded Doctor of Letters degree by the Karnataka University, Dharwad. The awards conferred to Karnad testify his recognition as a contributor to art, literature and cinema. Karnad's awards include the Mysore State Award for *Yayati* (1962), the Government of Mysore Rajyotsava Award (1970), Presidents Gold Medal for the Best Indian film for *Samskara* (1970), the Homi Bhabha Fellowship for creative work in folk theatre (1970-72), the Sangeet Natak Academy (National Academy of the Performing Arts) Award for playwriting (1972), the Kamaladevi Award of the Bharatiya Natya Sangh for the Best Indian play of the year for *Hayavadana* (1972), the National Award for Excellence in Direction for *Vamsha Vriksha* (shared with B.V. Karanth - 1972), the Mysore State Award for the Best Kannada film and the Best Direction for *Vamsha Vriksha* (1972), the Presidents Silver Medal for the Second Best Indian film for *Kaadu* (1974), the Padma Shri Award (1974), the National Award for the Best Kannada film for *Ondanondu Kaaladalli* (1978), the National Award for the Best Script for *Bhumika* (shared with Shyam Benegal and Satyadev Dubey - 1978), the Film Fare Award for the Best Script for *Godhuli* (shared with B.V. Karanth - 1978), the Best Bengal Film Journalists Association Award for the Best Actor in *Swami* (1978), the Karnataka Nataka Academy Award (1984), the Nandikar, Calcutta, Award for Playwriting (1989), the Golden Lotus for the Best Non-Feature Film for *Kanaka Purandara* (1989), the National Award for the Best Non-Feature Film on Social Issues for *The Lamp in the Niche* (1990), "Writer of the Year" Award from Granthaloka Journal of the Book Trade for *Taledanda* (1990), Karnataka State Award for the Best Supporting Actor in *Santa Shishunala Shareef* (1991), the Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award for the Most Creative Work for *Nagamandala* (1992), the B.H. Sridhar Award for *Tale-Danda* (1992), the Padma Bhushan Award (1992), the Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award for Best Play for *Tale-Danda* (1992), the Booksellers and Publishers Association of South India Award (1992), the National Award for the Best Film on Environmental Conservation for *Cheluvi* (1993), a Special Honour Award from the Karnataka Sahitya Academy (1994), the Sahitya Academy Award for *Tale-Danda* (1994), and the Gubbi Veeranna Award (1996-97), and the Jnanpith Award (1999). He also served as Director of the Film and Television Institute of India (1974-75), President of the Karnataka Nataka Academy (1976-78), Indian Co-Chairman for the Joint Media Committee of the Indo-U.S. sub-Commission on Education and Culture (1984-93). In recognition of his meritorious contribution to art, culture and theatre, the President of India awarded him Padamshri in 1974 and Padambhushan in 1992. Karnad won the prestigious Gnanpith Award in 1999. He is a gifted genius and a man of excellent intellectual abilities. He strikes a balance between intellect and emotion in his plays.

When Karnad was preparing to go to England, amidst the intense emotional turmoil, he found himself writing play. It was just a chance that Karnad became a dramatist. He himself tells us: "I wanted to be a poet, the greatest ambition in my life. At the age of 22, I realized I would not be a poet, but be only a playwright" (27). He finds it difficult to describe the trauma created by decision to go abroad for further studies. Karad was surprised to see that instead of becoming a poet he had become a playwright. He himself recounts some reasons behind it:

Going abroad was a much rare occurrence in those days; besides, I came from a large, close-knit family and was the first member of the family ever to go abroad. My parents were worried lest I decide to settle down outside India, and even for me, though there was no need for an immediate decision, the terrible choice was implicit in the very act of going

away....While still preparing for the trip, amidst the intense emotional turmoil, I found myself writing a play. This took me by surprise, for I had fancied myself a poet, had written poetry through my teens, and had trained myself to write in English, in preparation for the conquest of the West. But here I was writing a play and in Kannad, too, the language spoken by a few million people in South India, the language of my childhood. A greter surprise was the theme of the play, for it was taken from ancient Indian mythology from which I had believed myself alienated. (“Author’s Introduction” *Three Plays*.2-3)

Karnad’s plays include *Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964), *.Hayavadana* (1971), *Anjumallige*, Kannada version published by Manohara Grantha Mala, Dharwad, 1977. The English translation by the playwright as “Driven Snow” is as yet unpublished. *Hittina Hunja*. 1980, published as *Bali: The Sacrifice* [along with *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*] New Delhi: OUP, 2003. *Nagamandala: A Play with a Cobra*. (1990), *Tale-Danda* (1993). *The Fire and the Rain* (1998). “The Dreams of Tipu Sultan,” *Theatre India*. No.1 May 2000: 47-85. *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan and Bali: The Sacrifice*. New Delhi: OUP, 2004. *Two Monologues: Flowers and Broken Images*. OUP, 2005. *Wedding Album*. OUP, Nov, 2008. Karnad’s first play *Yayati* was the result of intense emotional crisis he felt while going to England for further studies. To escape from his stressful situation, he began writing a play based on the myth of Yayati from *Mahabharata*. The play that reflects his mental condition at that time is a self-conscious existentialist drama on the theme of responsibility. He combines native subject with existential philosophy and juxtaposes past and present together. The play reveals the existentialist view that each man is what he chooses to be or makes himself. The play doesn’t glorify son’s obedience to his father who exchanges his curse to his son Pooru is contrary to the original myth. Karnad raises practical question what would be the reaction of Pooru’s wife? Chitralkha’s protest attacks male-chauvinism and subverts patriarchy. Karnad being a problem playwright deals with soci-political and cultural concerns of the contemporary life. *Yayati*—unheroic hero stands for modern man inhabited by worldly desires, sensual pleasure, and irresponsible exercise of power and utter forgetfulness of the imperishable values of life. In *Yayati* Karnad reinterprets an ancient myth from the Puranic past to make a statement in the form and structure he borrowed from the Western playwrights. The play was a great success on the stage. Karnad’s second play *Tughlaq* is a historical play on the life of fourteenth century Sultan of India—Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq. Karnad has always found it difficult to find a suitable subject for writing plays. He read the history of Kannada literature by Kirtinath Kurtkoti and learnt from him that Indian history has not been handled by any Indian writer the way it has been done by Shakespeare or Brecht. Karnad was very much impressed by this statement; he went through a book of Indian history. And when he came to *Tughlaq*, he exclaimed, “Oh! Marvellous. That is what I wanted.” That was a subject in tune with the times. In those days, existentialism was quite in vogue. Everything about *Tughlaq* seemed to fit into what Karnad had surmised from Kurtkoti. He felt that in *Tughlaq* he had hit upon a fantastic character. He realized that he had absorbed this character and it was growing in front of him,

certainly the most brilliant individual ever to ascend the throne of Delhi and also one of the biggest failures. After a reign distinguished for policies that today seem far-sighted to the point of genius, but which in their day earned him the title ‘Muhammad the Mad,’ the sultan ended his career in bloodshed and political chaos. In a sense, the play reflected the slow disillusionment my generation felt with the new politics of independent India: the gradual erosion of the ethical norms that had guided the movement for independence and

the coming to terms with cynicism and realpolitik. (“Author’s Introduction” *Three Plays*. 7)

R.K. Dhawan explores several resemblances between Karnad’s *Tughlaq* and Shakespeare’s *Richard II*:

Like King Richard, Muhammad-bin-Tughlq is temperamental and whimsical. Events in both the plays centre around the eccentricities of their protagonists. Again like Shakespeare, Karnad presents the historical events and complexities of the time with perfect objectivity of a true historian, throwing upon them the beautiful colouring of art. He exhibits without concealment the weakness of the king’s character but spares no pain to evoke our whole-hearted pity for him in his fall. (16)

The political chaos which Karnad depicts in *Tughlaq* reminded many readers of the Nehru era in Indian history. Karnad finds this similiarity accidental. U.R. Anatha Muthy considers the play

more than a political allegory. it has an irreducible, puzzling quality which comes from the ambiguities of Tughlaq’s character...all other characters are dramatized aspects of his complex personality...But it would be unjust to say that the play is about an ‘interesting’ character, for the play relates the character of Tughlaq to philosophical questions on the nature of man and the destiny of a whole kingdom which a dreamer like him controls. (“Introduction” *Tughlaq*. viii-ix)

Tughlaq had a tremendous success with the reading public and it achieved greater popularity on the stage as actors have liked to do the role of the emperor. As opposed the first play, Karnad wrote this one in the convention of the Natak Company. For form of the play, Karnad was no more interested in John Anouilh. He divided the play into scenes in the indigenous fashions of the natakas—*shallow* and *deep scenes*. The shallow scenes were played in the foreground of the stge with a painted curtain—normally depicting a street—as a backdrop. These scenes were reserved for ‘lower class’ characters with prominence given to comedy. They served as link scenes in the development of the plot, but the main purpose was to keep the audience engaged while the deep scenes, which showed interiors of palaces, royal parks, and other such visually opulent sets, were being changed or decorated. The important characters rarely appeared in the street scenes, and in the deep scenes the lower classes strictly kept their place.

Hayavadana (1970) is the third and the most representative of his plays. It deals with archetypal theme, underlying mythical patterns, identifiable character-types, folk theatre conventions i.e. use of mask, curtains, dolls, story within story, use of images of Kali, Ganesh, Rudra etc, allegorical significance of the play are the characteristic features of the play. It was originally written in Kannada and it was persuaded by Rajinder Paul to translate the play into English and first published this translation in his journal *Enact*. It was Mrs. Laxmi Krrishnamurthy and Mrs. Yamuna Prabhu who jointly produced it for the madras Players at the Museum Theatre, Madras on 7th December 1972. The plot of *Hayavadana* is derived from Somdeva’s *Brihadkatha Saritsagar*, an ancient collection of stories in Sanskrit. The central episode in the play—the story of Devadatta and Kapil—is based on a tale from *Vetala Panchavimshika*, but Karnad has borrowed it through Thomas Mann’s novel *Transposed Heads*, a mock-heroic transcription of the original Sanskrit tales. Whereas the sub-plot—horse-man’s search for completeness, is Karnad’s original invention. *Hayavadana* is a play on the “mad dance of incompleteness? (57) and search of identity in a world of tangled relationships. Devadatta, the intellectual, and Kapila, the man of body, are intimate friends who represents two extreme opposites—one Appolonian; another Dionysian tendency. Devadatta marries Padmini. Padmini

and Kapila fall in love with each other. The two friends kill themselves. In a highly comic scene which is of great dramatic significance Padmini transposes their heads, giving Devadatta Kapila's body and vice-versa. It results in a confusion of identities which reveals the ambiguous nature of human personality. The situation gets complicated. They fight a duel and kill themselves again. Padmini performs *sati*. Karnad delves deep into the traditional myths to spell out modern man's anguish and dilemmas that are created in his mind. S.Ramaswami has rightly commented:

Karnad transmutes and transforms his source material to such an extent, being an actor and theatre man himself, that the modern, contemporary, individual talent incorporates the tradition into a transcreation that is rich and strange. The Rhodes scholar and practical man of theatre and cinema blend into a recreation of the myth and legend of India with a novel blend of traditional material and contemporary narrative technique which is quite challenging in bringing folk and elite theatres together. (21-22)

Karnad's play in a characteristic way begins where the 'Vetal' story ends. How would the woman take it if it really happened and would it ultimately solve the problem for her? are the fascinating questions the artist in him faces. Karnad doesn't satisfy with Pooru's acceptance of his father's old-age and *Yayati* uses this only as a starting point. If young Pooru had a wife how would she feel about Pooru's extraordinary decision, becomes the nucleus of his exploration of the problem raised by the mythical story. In *Hayavadana* what Karnad wants to suggest is that for us King Vikram's solution does not solve the problem. In fact, the real problem begins when it appears to be solved. That could be reason why he dropped the version of *Vetala Panchavimshika* which had the "incest" theme at its core. He also makes significant departures from Mann's story. Shubhangi S, Raykar analyses thus: "In all his plays Karnad takes this kind of leap from the original story and develops it further. This further development is the play of artist's imagination and it challenges the glib solution offered in the original stories" (48).

Naga-Mandala: Play with a Cobra (1990) is a play based on two oral tales of Karnataka narrated by older women of the family while feeding children in the kitchen or being put to bed. The other adults present on these occasions are also women. Therefore these tales, though directed at the children, often serve as a parallel system of communication among the women in the family. These tales Karnad heard from Professor A.K. Ramanujan thereafter he transmuted them into dramatic form. First is the traditional tale of a cobra turning into man at night and visiting a married woman; and the second is based on the popular belief that a night long vigil in a temple can ward off death. Karnad himself commented on the role and significance of these tales:

They also express a distinctly woman's understanding of the reality around her, a lived counterpart to the patriarchal structures of the classical texts and institutions. The position of Rani in the story of *Naga-Mandala*, for instance, can be seen as a metaphor for the situation of a young girl in the bosom of a joint family where she sees her husband only in two unconnected roles—as a stranger during the day and as a lover at night. Inevitably, the pattern of relationships she is forced to weave from these disjointed encounters must be something of a fiction. The empty house Rani is locked in could be the family she is married into. ("Author's Introduction" 17)

The play presents a tale of male chauvinism to give the message that it debilitates and degrades both sexes. In modern ambience, men and women have to work in tandem to maintain this pace of progress. Women have shown that they have drive to and enterprise as much as men have. Though to our misfortune we find that there are innumerable cases of exploitation of

women, yet it is more than clear that Rani can not be incarcerated any more. We shall be “worse than blind Kurudavva if we fail to give women their due place in the society and worse than Cobra if we fail to appreciate their potential. Rani’s and Naga’s ultimate act of reconciling with the situation is edifying. It is no wisdom to remain stuck to the past, when future beckons us” (Prem Sagar “Preface”). The play deals with gender-bias and the subjection of woman in patriarchal Indian Orthodox society. The female protagonist—Rani and Kurudavva, other female character, are generic creations stand for Indian woman. Though the play is a richly textured dramatic transmutation of two folk tales of Karnataka, Karnad delves deep to explore contemporary socio-cultural and philosophical concerns giving them modern validity. Rani is placed in a world where orthodox social conventions, cultural taboos and coercive forces work; patriarchy is established which proves greatest blow to the existence of Rani. Apart from overt patriarchy, she is socialized to internalize the male superiority—an invisible conspiracy to derogate and marginalize her position in the society. She adopts new ways to transcend age-old subjection of woman. Rani is surrounded by evil social forces where she finds herself helpless; tortured by alienation and despair but she never surrenders and continues her struggle for identity—as a woman, as a wife and as a mother. Karnad’s solution appears, at the first observation odd, unconvincing and unconventional violating traditional mode of treatment. Message is clear: despite alienation, despair and antithetical conditions a woman must continue her struggle for her existence and transcend “nothingness” in life and manipulate co-existence as a means for self-existence. Patriarchy, socio-cultural practices, parents of Rani, Appanna, Village Elders, Naga, Dog, and Mongoose etc are the tools to perpetuate exploitation of Rani. M.K. Naik has explored the symbolism embedded in the play:

The two folk-tales are deftly blended in presenting the two allied themes of the nature of art and the relationship between art and imagination on the one hand and mundane reality on the other. The tale of the failed playwright seems to suggest that art demands everything from the artist and that he will die if he cannot fulfil his mission. The Rani-Appanna-Cobra tale is evidently an allegory of the nexus between the world of art and the world of reality. Rani, who whiles away her time making up fairy tales, is the artist, and the Cobra, the power of imagination, while Appanna represents the work-a-day world. The fact that the Cobra assumes the form of Appanna suggests that Art is, and also is not, the same as reality. That the Cobra finally finds permanent refuge in the hair of Rani is perhaps indicative of the permanent alliance between Art and Imagination. (46)

Tale- Danda (1993) derives its story from the life of a Kannada saint Basavanna who resisted ideologically against the prevailing evils of caste hierarchy. Like *Tughlaq* and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, it is a historical play. History and its urgent relevance to the present continuous have always fascinated Karnad and *Tale- Danda* illustrates this fact. Explosive situations after the official endorsement of Mandal Commission Report and Mandal issue in 1989 motivated Karnad to work on subaltern issue and highlight, “how relevant the questions posed by these thinkers were for our age. The horror of subsequent events and the religious fanaticism that has gripped our national life today have only proved how dangerous it is to ignore the solutions they offered” (Karnad “Preface”). And the historical context, deeply implanted in his mind proved catalytic to his plays. Drawing our attention to the genesis of the present, the play illuminates the endemic affliction of the caste and class politics infecting our body politic in the medieval period of history. It was the strong sense of history, which has nurtured in Karnad a dominant will for social justice, a sincere compassion for the socially oppressed and subaltern. Karnad doesn’t offer any solution to the problem; but raised the subaltern issue for discussion

and common consensus. Under Basavanna, a social reformer of the 12th century assembled a congregation of poets, mystics and social revolutionaries and philosophers formed the *Lingayat* faith, giving impetus to courageous questioning and social commitment. The abolition of caste, equality of sexes, rejection of idol worship, repudiation of Brahminism, and of Sanskrit in favour of the mother tongues i.e. Kannad; were the main tenets of subaltern revolution. The resentment reaches its climax when Madhuvarsa, a Brahmin gives his daughter Kalavati in a marriage to an untouchable—Sheelvanta. This last act opposing caste hierarchy, not just in theory but in practice also, brought down upon the wrath of orthodox; the movement ended in terror and bloodshed. The playwright wants to suggest whenever such important issues are not considered seriously and solutions offered by these thinkers go unheeded, disastrous results would follow again. Rupalee Burke finds Karnad a playwright with a difference whose motive behind playwriting is to catch the:

Pulse of the socio-cultural-historical-political facets of India and Indian life...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)

Basavanna's vision of egalitarian society and spiritualized politics was the vision of Karnad himself. He raises many questions and few oblique suggestions provide but more are left to the audience to think and get them resolved.

The Fire and the Rain is a far more successful play based on the myth of Yavakri (or Yavakrita) which occurs in Chapters 135-138 of the Vana Parva (Forest Canto) of the *Mahabharata*. It is an English translation of a play in Kannad *Agni Mattu Male* by the playwright himself. It took thirty-seven years time to live with a myth and develop into the present form for a workshop with professional actors at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis. Years spent in the company of South Asian scholars at the University of Chicago stimulated his interest in orthodox Hinduism and the complex organization of the Hindu society. The most spectacular and successful production of the play was by Arjun Sajnani in English (Bangalore, 1999), subsequently, Sajnani reworked the play as a commercial Hindi film titled *Agnivarsha* (casting Amitabh Bachchan as Indra). Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker has examined the genesis and evolution of the play: "Karnad reimagines the world of Hindu antiquity and constructs a story of passion, loss, and sacrifice in the contexts of Vedic ritual, spiritual discipline (*tapasya*), social and ethical differences between human agents, and interrelated forms of performance still close to their moments of origin" ("Introduction" Vol. Two. xvii). The 'fire' in the title of the play is the fire of lust, anger, vengeance, envy, treachery, violence and death. The 'rain' symbolizes self-sacrifice, compassion, Divine Grace, forgiveness, revival and life. It is narrated by the ascetic Lomsha to the Pandavas during their exile. But Karnad gives a contemporary meaning to an old legend, which stresses the dangers of knowledge without wisdom and power without integrity. The myth cautions about the misappropriation of power that human beings receive from the gods after great penance. Yavakri, the son of sage Bhardwaj, acquires knowledge of the Vedas directly from Indra after ten years rigorous penance. Though his father regarding acquisition of divine power warns him, Yavakri uses it to molest the daughter-in-law of sage Raibhya, whom he resents. Raibhya in retaliation creates a demon (*Brahma Rakshasa*) and a spirit in the form of his daughter-in-law, Vishakha, both of whom pursue Yavakri and kill him. Bhardwaj curses Raibhya—that he will die at the hands of his own son—and then kills himself in remorse. Sometime later Parvasu indeed mistakes the deerskin his father Raibhya is wearing for

a wild animal, and accidentally kills him. Involved with his younger brother Aravasu in a fire sacrifice, Paravasu initiates another cycle of evil when he falsely accuses the latter of patricide (hence of brahiminicide). Aravasu then begins his own penance to the Sun God, and when granted a boon, asks for Yavakri, Bhardwaj, and Raibhya to be restored to life. Lives that were destroyed due to human lapses are restored through divine intervention. Karnad has forged closer connections between the principal characters and created them into rounded personalities. Yavakri and Vishakha are not strangers but lovers whose relationship both precedes and follows Vishakha's marriage to Paravasu, making her more than merely a passive object of Yavakri's lust. Her marriage itself appears to be an arid contract: after a frenzy of sensual gratification Paravasu has left Vishakha to Raibhya's care, and the relationships between the three are startling in their lovelessness and malevolence. Similarly, Paravasu kills his father out of hatred rather than ignorance. Karnad has also invented a love episode between Aravasu and a tribal girl Nittilai, and develops a contrast between the life of discipline and sacrifice with the life of instinct and emotion—opposition between Brahmin and Sudra, with Aravasu working as a connective link between the two appositive worlds. Karnad's note on "Drama and *Purushartha*" in *The Fire and the Rain* endorses his unequivocal interest in the doctrines of *Purushartha* towards which a work of art should draw mankind. Karnad himself has pointed out the structure of the play resembles that of Aeschyles's *Oresteia* trilogy, the chief motifs in which are the protagonist's home-coming after a prolonged absence; human frailty and temptation and crime; the operation of the supernatural in human life; and Divine grace. With its solid thematic richness *the Fire and Rain* is, "perhaps the finest of Karnad's plays so far" (Naik 48).

The Dreams of Tipu Sultan (1997) draws its plot from the history of Tipu Sultan. It follows the model of the history play established in *Tughlaq* and *Tale- Danda*. It was first written as a radio play for BBC to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of India's independence in 1996. The plot obviously deals with some aspect of Indo-British relation. It primarily explores the secret inner world of a man whose public life was a continual war against British colonialism. It was late A.K. Ramanujan who drew his attention to the record of his dreams maintained by Tipu Sultan himself. Karnad, like many other playwrights was fascinated by the valour of Tipu Sultan who continued to inspire folk ballads in Karnataka. Tipu Sultan is viewed as one of the most brave warriors, political visionary and dreamer; one of the most politically perceptive and tragic figures in modern Indian history. The radio play was broadcast by the BBC on 15th August 1997 and was directed by Jatinder Verma of Tara Arts with Saeed Jaffrey playing the role of Tipu Sultan. Karnataka Nataka Rangayana staged the Kannad version in the periphery of Daria Daulat, Tipu's summer palace in Srirangapatna, to commemorate his 200th death anniversary in May 1999. Later it was entirely re-written for the stage. The play blends historical sources to portrait major characters and develops an imaginative plot and resonant dialogue to reflect their experience. Tipu stands for a force fighting against British Colonialism. The image in the play of polity in crisis, both because of internal dissensions and the presence of a powerful alien adversary, "carries the same potential for application to contemporary problems that had made the history of *Tughlaq* and *Tale-Danda* politically relevant in present day India" (Dharwadker, Vol. Two. xxiii). The characters major as well as minor are put together, language and dialogue apt to create the air of Sultanate period of India. Tipu, Haider Ali, Nana Phadnavis, Lord Cornwallis, Arthur and Richard Wellesley against a less prominent historical figures i.e. Kirmani, Tipu's queen and sons, courtiers, ordinary citizens and soldiers. Karnad avoids any partisan parade of heroes and villains, rather creates black sheep in both the camps. Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker rightly comments: "Karnad interlineates 'textualized' history with legend, lore, and memory

because all these modes of transmission are germane to the story of Tipu” (*Ibid*, xxiv). Karnad has also projected Tipu in multiple and contradictory roles—as a beloved ruler, legendary warrior, loving father, and visionary dreamer, but also a Machiavellian schemer who plots with the French against the British, the defeated soldier who enters into humiliating treaties with the enemy, and the gullible commander who is eventually betrayed by his own side. Tipu’s decline destroyed a visionary who had progressive ideas to modernize his empire on the European line.

Bali: The Sacrifice discusses conflicting mindsets with religious beliefs, simultaneously exposes the hollowness and futility of age-old rituals. The plot of the play has drawn upon the thirteenth century Kannad epic *Yashodhara Charite* by Janna, which in turn refers back through an eleventh century Sanskrit epic by Vadiraja to the ninth-century Sanskrit epic *Yashastilaka*, by Somdeva Suri. The play is “a tribute to astuteness and sensitivity of Mahatama Gandhi that he saw so clearly the insistence of non-violence to the cultural and political survival of India” (Karnad. *Two Plays*. 69). Anshuman Khanna observes that the play, “Offers a fresh perspective of approach vis-à-vis man’s psychological struggle and manoeuvres. It presents the cultural, moral and religious dialogic in the context of the warfare between the losing grounds of reality and conscious right to social survival—a conflict between the effete essentialist position and the conceptualized work of living” (106).

It explores the existential dilemma of passion and violence posed by an ancient Jain myth. The myth is less concerned with actual violence than with the morality of substitution, which permits violence, a wider and subtler play by masking its true nature. Violence has been the one of the crucial subjects of debate in the history of Indian civilization. Vedic sacrifices, conducted by Brahmin priests, involved the slaughter of animals as offerings to the gods, which the Jains found repugnant. To the Jain, indulging in any kind of violence, however minor or accidental, meant forfeiting one’s moral status as a human being. Later Buddhists too advocated non-violence. The issue found some resolution when the Brahmins renounced blood sacrifice. Miniature figurines, made of dough, were substituted for live animals, a practice that continues to this day. Despite this change, Jains objected this process of substitution that carries the original violent impulse within them which was no less dehumanizing. Karnad came across the myth of the Cock of Dough when he was in his teens and the myth littered with discarded drafts of dramatized versions of it. The myth revealed unexpected meanings with long ponderings over it and *Bali: The Sacrifice* is the result of over two decades evolution. Karnad transforms the story of the dough figurine that comes alive at the moment of sacrifice into a mature philosophical exploration of love, jealousy, desire, betrayal, and violence between men and women who are bound by the ties of blood and marriage, or encounter each other in the perfect freedom of anonymity. Novelty of the play lies in the unconventionality of its major characters, and the seriousness with which it yokes intimate personal acts to structures of religious belief and practice. Subaltern issue and the feminist study also make the play more valid in the present context. Mahout represents subalternity and his anger, frustration and disgust are very much generic; whereas old Queen (King’s mother) and Queen Amritawati underline two sets of women—one traditional, blind adherent to age-old rituals indulging in sacrificial acts for material gains; second a woman of practical vision thwarting any form of violence. She even ridicules the morality of substitution. All the four characters are set of opposites—old Queen and Queen; King and Mahout. Vinod Mishra finds in the play, “a voice of reason against a saga of myths” (104). Subha Mishra has seen Foucault’s Panopticism in *Bali: The Sacrifice* which implies deconstructing the established beliefs.

The two short monologues in English—*Broken Images* (2004) and *Flowers* (2004) mark significant change in subjects and forms. *Broken Images* takes up a debate on the politics of language in Indian literary culture. Particularly in relation to the respective claims of the modern Indian languages and English which must also be recognized now as an Indian, though not an indigenous language. Manjula Nayak, the play's only character, is a writer of short and long fiction in Kannada and teacher of English in a Bangalore college, succumbs to the temptation of larger audience and money making; she involves in plagiarism and exposed thereafter. She herself confesses while talking to her own television image that she is an imposter who has passed off her dead sister Malini's novel as her own. She has tried to cash in on a dead sibling's talent. This Anglophilic attitude, comments Dharwadker, "can only lead the Indian language author to prostitute herself" ("Introduction" Vol. Two. xxvii). It deals with problems of authenticity and bad faith created by globalization, through a confrontation between a writer and her electronic image. When Karnad takes on literary politics in the play he immediately relates language to genre. The central issue in the play doesn't involve drama at all but the radically unequal status of fiction written in two contemporary languages, Kannad and English. Manjula Nayak is an epitome of an Indian woman emerging in a changed world order. How modern women can lag behind their male counterparts even in literary writing or plagiarism? Both Majula and Malini are contrasted—one is an invalid another ready to exploit whatever is commercially significant.

Flowers (2004) in contrast, returns to the world of folktale, and is the first work in this genre to focus on male rather than female desire, thus registering a small but important shift in Karnad's dramaturgy. The legend of Veeranna on which the play is based belongs to the Chitradurg region, and became widely known when a Kannad writer T.R.Subbanna included it in his novel *Hamsageete* (1952). The married priest has been passionately in love with a mistress to whom he takes the offerings from the temple after the every prayer. One day the *palegar* (chieftain) discovers a hair in the *prasada* and demands an explanation from Veeranna, who claims that the hair belongs to God. Challenged by the chieftain to prove the truth of his claim the priest in turn challenges god to display hair or accept his head in punishment, and enters a meditative trance to the accompaniment of Venkatesh's song. When the chieftain arrives the next day to expose Veeranna's lie, the *shivalinga* has indeed sprouted long silken hair, and when (urged by the singer) he pulls out a tuft to test its authenticity, blood begins to ooze from the crown of the *lingam*. Overwhelmed by a sense of sin at having injured his deity, Veeranna beheads himself in the sanctum. The conflict between religious devotion and erotic love—mingling of spiritual and carnal is central. The miracle of the *shivalinga* confirms the power of the priest's worship and marks him as one of the chosen, but it also ends his life. Sudhir K. Arora has pertly commented:

Thematically, both the monologues are sound and once again, Karnad has introduced his well-known confrontation—between love and duty in *Flowers* and authenticity and duplicity in *Broken Images*. Hence, *Folwers* spiritualises the aesthetics of floweres while *Broken Images* breaks the ethics of pseudo-images regarding the questions related to languages and the originality in literary world. (233)

Both the monologues were originally written in English and later translated into Kannada reversed the common feature of Karnad's writing. *Flowers* is a narrative and *Broken Images* dramatic in technique. Both are the result of complex structural design and thematic innovation which mark a turning point in the long dramatic career of Karnad.

Wedding Album (2008) is the latest play of Karnad directed by Lillette Dubey and performed in Bangalore July 10-11, 2008 thereafter in Delhi, Chandigarh and Ludhiana with grand success. It's a contemporary play with "humorous insight into the country's traditions and culture...explores the traditional Indian wedding in a globalised and technologically advanced India" ("Express News service"). It's a delightfully poignant tale of love and longing in a shining India. According to Karnad:

This play has been, in a sense, 30 to 40 years in the making. When his sister got married, he watched the members of his family gathering together, and observed the resultant interpersonal dynamics and tensions...he found it a combination of "celebration and anxiety", and tucked it away in his mind, to emerge much later. He didn't want to write it as a "story" play, though, and the form that it has taken now is satisfying to him. (citizenmatters.in)

Wedding Album deals with an urban middle-class Saraswat Brahmin family of Nadkarni: a daughter who lives in Australia (Hema) with her professional husband, a son (Rohit) who is a software designer, a younger daughter (Vidula) willing to marry a suitable boy from America she has never met, a doting mother (Mother) and a cook (Radhabai). The family is educated, liberal and modern. Each snapshot shows its members "frozen in an attitude of respectability, yet each figure has a double image with a penumbra of a hidden life... It's a wonderful comic drama that is deeply revelatory about the India that we live in today" (Deopti "Wedding Album"). According to Lillette Dubey, director of the play, "*Wedding Album* is full of sharp, pithy, and observant comments. Just because the play is not heavy, it doesn't mean it doesn't have muscle and content" (Qtd. in Deepa Mohan). The *Wedding Album* which is structured into nine scenes deals primarily with women and their two different worlds i.e. traditional and modern cyber world. But both of them merge into each other. Even the traditional elder women are fused with energy, hope and modern sensibility. Younger sorts enjoy liberty in education, love, courtship via 'distance' technology; and marriage. The play marks the highest evolution of feminine psyche. Amrit Srinivasan has observed:

the constellation of sexual, conjugal, caste, class, and age-related behaviours and attitudes of selfishness and sacrifice, chastity and commerce, obedience and authority, all integral to modern Hindu marriage, forms *Wedding Album's* central narrative thread...works as modern myth, whose condensed logic straddles both the real and the tech-simulated world of today, to help us confront our own mixed-up, amoral, craven, unhappy selves...*Wedding Album* encourages us to examine the growing fundamentalism of the Hindu *middle class* family, which is largely 'missing' from social science scholarship on India today. ("Foreword" ix).

Karnad is an innovative, multifaceted and problem playwright who imbibes several personalities in one. He has contributed a lot to enrich Indian English Drama through playtext, performance, acting, and direction. Moreover, like his contemporary playwrights Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, and Mahesh Dattani he has reshaped Indian English Drama. But unlike his contemporaries, he adapts mythical and historical material with a view to giving it a psychological interpretation. As a modern playwright, Karnad is always engaged in the act of "deconstructing myths. He takes up mythical and legendary tales from his own culture and unfolds them in the light of modern sensibility. This deconstructing myth becomes an act of self-searching for the playwright...he combines the past and the present into a unity that bespeaks of tradition and modernity in his art of playwriting" (Gill 8). Karnad upholds the rich cultural heritage of India and endeavours to fight against the legacy of colonialism by advocating Indian values and

cultural ethos of India. Subjects from the native soil, characters deeply rooted in indigenous culture, English very much Indianised to suit the context and create feel of Indianness, and folk and classical theatre traditions endorse his well- thought design to set free Indian English drama from the colonial yoke. Indian imagination and sensibility can be easily seen throughout his plays.

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