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Decolonizing the Stage: An Evaluation of Karnad's Contribution

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Girish Karnad, a cultural administrator and renaissance figure contributed immensely to decolonize Indian English Drama. Thematic contents, use of Indian myths, legends, history, folk tales and contemporary issues, characters rooted in cultural soil of India, Indianised English and use of folk theatre conventions definitely proved instrumental to advance the process of decolonizing the stage. The present paper endeavors to analyze the evaluation of Karnad's contribution to decolonize the stage via use of folk theatre (Yakshagana) and Natak Company conventions. Though Indian Classical and Modern theatre conventions are also practiced by Karnad, the emphasis is on revitalizing native themes and conventions.

Girish Karnad, a cultural administrator and renaissance figure contributed immensely to decolonize Indian English Drama. Thematic contents, use of Indian myths, legends, history, folk tales and contemporary issues, characters rooted in cultural soil of India, Indianised English and use of folk theatre conventions definitely proved instrumental to advance the process of decolonizing the stage. The present paper endeavors to analyze the evaluation of Karnad's contribution to decolonize the stage via use of folk theatre (Yakshagana) and Natak Company conventions. Though Indian Classical and Modern theatre conventions are also practiced by Karnad, the emphasis is on revitalizing native themes and conventions.

The end of colonialism provided an opportunity to classical or folk traditions to resume their due place in national culture and drama. The great cultural upsurge of the post independence period has resulted in cultural decolonization, and traditional art has asserted their vitality and relevance. Criticism of realism in Western theatre, and the emergence of various theatre forms such as expressionism, theatre of absurd, and Brecht's epic theatre reflect the superiority of anti-realist, anti-Aristotelean aesthetic of Indian theatre over Western theatre. While the modern and post modern theatres and their techniques have been outmoded and there is stress on the traditional theatrical forms which possess revitalizing energy and high aesthetic quality. Theatre personalities like Eugenio Barba, Jerzy Grotowsky, Richard Schechner, and Peter Brooke and their emphasis on traditional theatre forms alarms Indian playwrights to continue their new enterprise. Suresh Awasthi observes: "theatre of roots has finally made its presence felt. It has compelling power, it thrills audience, and it is receiving institutional recognition. It is deeply rooted in regional theatre culture, but cuts across linguistic barriers, and has an all-India character in design" (48). Cultural renaissance after independence led Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar, Habib Tanvir, and Mudrarakshasa and directors like B.V. Karanth, Ratan Thiyam, and K.N. Panikkar to reject Western influences and created the space for indigenous culture and traditions of performing art.

In Karnad's plays, the choice of indigenous subjects—myths, legends, history and folklore; characters rooted in Indian cultural soil, Yakshagana and Natak Company conventions fused with Indian Classical theatre techniques, Indianised English to suit the context and milieu definitely proved detrimental to colonial stereo-typed models, theories of drama and cultural hegemony. He not only reacted against colonialism but also constructed an ideal for writing; it is

a brilliant instance to further the cause of intellectual and cultural independence and accomplish the process of “decanonization and decolonization” (Avadhesh K Singh. *Interventions*. 13). Karnad sets out to write plays with a definite purpose—to revitalize Indian history and culture and free them from Eurocentric domination and de-colonize Indian English Drama. Postcolonial dialectics, subalternization of Indian English Drama and nativism are the most important characteristics of Karnad’s plays. Selecting native subjects for dramatic art is not a new thing; the predecessors of Karnad have also experimented with it. But Karnad’s superiority rests in his use of Indian myths, legends and history developing contemporaneity; co-relating past with the present, subjects of the past and medieval transcend time and age, enjoy validity not only in the past but in present continuous. Karnad finds a voice and a distinct identity for Indian English Drama by reclaiming the past of the country. Plays of Karnad are the lens through which he tries to view the emerging cultural consciousness and germination of indigenous sensibility; condemns Western literary imagination politically motivated then part of the relationship between culture and empire. Karnad diffused the “cultural bomb”—the biggest weapon of the West targeted to annihilate the people’s beliefs in their indigenous names, unity, capacities and heritage; it makes native people see their past as a waste land of non-achievement. More importantly, it makes them want to identify themselves with other peoples’ language and culture. Karnad also resisted colonizer’s strategy for mental enslavement by (a) Destruction or undervaluing of a people’s culture, art etc. (b) The conscious elevation of the language of the colonizer. He adopts ideological resistance to save or restore the sense and the fact of community against colonial system. His quest for cultural independence, de-construction of the European “construction” of the East/Orient as the Dark Other is well illustrated in his plays.

Savita Goel has rightly judged the contribution of Karnad to drama:

Girish Karna is among those Indian Playwrights who have rejected the imitative pursuit of the West and have ventured into indigenous territory for their themes and techniques. Karnad has sought for an appropriate approach, style and form of the theatre which is closer to the consciousness of people, consistent with our cultural traditions, entertaining and yet aesthetically satisfying. He thought over the fact as to how the paraphernalia of folk theatre can become meaningful outside its context and become relevant in the modern context. (204).

The potent underlying features, techniques, character delineation and choice of language directly targeted against colonial neurosis and centrality of the West, definitely pave the way for literary and cultural independence. The observation of P. Obula Reddy is highly significant in this regard:

The Indian dramatists like Karnad, Tanvir, Panikkar, and Karanth in their works return to the tradition....It is something to be lived and grappled with, adapted and even transformed, in order to create new forms of drama which relate to Indian people...their return to the past is an immediate response to the immediate historical reality of ‘westernization’ in India. There is also an attempt to ‘decolonize the mind’ in the sense that Ngugi wa Thiong’o might advocate; by decolonizing definitions of culture, aesthetics and representational forms and techniques; by combing rather than separating the various languages, idioms, forms and techniques, narratives and histories that make up popular and regional cultures of India. This process of decolonization involves the practice of interculturalism at the most essential level....They produce plays in the spirit of decolonization. They draw from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and from the dramas of Kalidas and Bhasa. But they do not uphold the Hindu hegemony by this. (34-35)

The stature and role of Karnad as a de-colonizer of Indian English Drama must be acknowledged and appreciated without any altercation. Karnad freely develops his plots, characters, themes, chooses a performing technique specific to the play; even he adopts modern theatre technique of the West to make the performance effective rather than make a blind imitation of the West, and fuses indigenous cultural sensibility. For instance, *Broken Images* and *Wedding Album* require modern theatre conventions to perform them well, he unhesitatingly, goes for modern theatre equipped with high technology, revolving theatre and high acoustic quality. But it is a medium only that he picks up for specific purposes, never forgets what he has to do. He has brought cultural facets of Indian society to the theatre and filled them with new energy and vitality. Vanashree Tripathi has discovered the growth of creativity of Karnad in Postcolonial milieu:

In Girish Karnad, we discover the creative urgencies of a highly complex postcolonial intellectual temper endeavouring to come to terms with its cultural legacy, muddled up in several versions and misinterpretations. Karnad's formidable erudition dedicated to the construction of an Indian theatre in the contemporary times springs from a desire to reflect the collective aspirations of innumerable generations, and give our relationship to art and culture an overall orientation. (7-8)

Karnad's major accomplishment lies in his "artistic revival of the ceremonial content of drama as ritual; he gives theatrical performance the dignity of a religious rite to counter its reputation as mere mimetic entertainment" (Tripathi 14). His narrative matrix seemingly takes to Brecht's epic realism to project the conflicting cultural mores, yet exercises rigid economy of form and content recalling elegance of classical theatre. Most importantly, Karnad's imagination is "thoroughly and originally Indian in every one of its blood cells" (Dhanavel 96), for he has declared courageously: "my three years in England had convinced me Western theatre had nothing to offer us" (Qtd. in Dhanavel 96). Rupalee Burke comments on the motive of Karnad's playwrighting: "Karnad's motive behind his playwrighting is to catch the pulse of the socio-cultural-historical-political facets of India and Indian life....Karnad has, from the beginning, been pre-occupied with history and myth, albeit with a purpose" (106-107). K. Chandrashekhar has rightly observed: "The likes of Girish Karnad enable us to pretend that there is such a thing as a truly "Indian" theatre which can be true to its traditions and at the same time responsive to contemporary concerns" (xv).

Karnad's dramatic technique is superb and flawless. His plays have the tone and expression of great drama. The plots in his plays are well-knit, the devices of parallelism and contrast, suspense and surprise help in the logical development of plot. His characters are vivid. Both the plot and character are correlated and promote the unity of effect or impression. His English is simple, vocabulary from different stocks, imagery, symbols, irony and metaphors heighten the dramatic effects. Karnad's language is situation modified and vehicle to express typical Indian ethos. Karnad is a progressive dramatist—a pioneer in neo-drama and all his plays are actable. Earlier it was a mere literary exercise; the new dramatic movement has given a new lease of life to Kannada theatre. Kirtinath Kurtkoti has rightly commented: "With this new theatre growing around them, [non-professionals] new playwrights like Girish Karnad have been able to bring to drama a first hand knowledge of the practical demands of the stage and a better understanding of dramatic style and technique" ("Introduction" v). The influence of theatre was immense on the making of Karnad as a playwright. He himself has narrated the experience of his making:

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 *natak companies* which toured the countryside throughout the year. The plays were staged in semipermanent structures on proscenium stages, with wings and drop curtains, and were 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 back curtain, was erected in the open air and lit by torches. (“Author’s Introduction” 1)

Soon both the theatre forms ceased to function and Karnad was exposed to Strindberg’s dimmers in Mumbai. Western theatre techniques and playwrights with realistic theatre (G.B. Shaw was the presiding diety) an improvement over Parsi theatre was established both as an art and an instrument of social change. The proscenium continued, only now the grand spectacles gave way to the *interior set* with the invisible fourth wall. And that three-walled living room succinctly defined the basic limitations of this school of writing. The influence of Kannada drama was quite profound and Karnad represents the best traditions of Kannada drama which are immensely rich. Vanashree Tripathi has rightly observed the process of forging a theatre of our own in Karnad:

Karnad has discovered and reinvented diverse patterns of drama from Indian and the world literature and his drawing on the myths, folktales and histories have rejuvenated, expanded and energized the poetics of contemporary drama....Both tradition-seeking and intercultural in innovative acumen, his eclectic adaptation of the Western mode makes it relevant to the Indian experience...the desire to repossess an Indian form of theatre is more than apparent. (9-11)

Karnad’s plays from *Yayati* to *Wedding Album* are the testimony of above features thematic as well as theatre techniques. His experiments with folk and Classical techniques are highly fruitful to create an effective and successful stage production: The use of Sutradhara, Announcer or Song, the supernatural elements, play within the play, masks, mime, songs, half-curtains,, dolls, etc blend with modern devices such as sound , light, flashforward, flashback, rigging, conscience corridor, sound-scaping, role-on-the-wall, physical theatre, split focus, cross-cutting, tableaux, and teichoscopy (viewing from the wall).

Tughlaq was moulded on Natak Company—off-shoots of Parsi Theatre, conventions in which all the scenes were divided and alternated between deep scenes and shallow scenes. The shallow scenes were usually played in the foreground of the stage with a painted curtain—depicting a street—as a backdrop. These scenes were reserved for ‘lower class’ characters and kept for 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 major characters rarely appeared in the street scenes, and in the deep scenes the lower classes strictly kept their place. Characters of the play were clearly divided into those which came into shallow scenes and those which came into deep scene. The first half of the play was written on the above conventions, but with the development of the form on its own and in the end Aziz, one of the characters meant to be comical, ended up in the palace, which seemed to be right, given the political chaos that one was writing about. For a history play, Natak Company conventions, Karnad found suitable while the Hindus have no tradition of history. The plot of the play develops into thirteen scenes—deep as well shallow. Karnad have chosen the historical figure—Muhammed Tughlaq as a protagonist that constitutes main plot:

The most brilliant individual ever to ascend the throne of Delhi and also one of the biggest failures...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” 7)

Tughlaq is one of the best plays of Karnad due to his art and technique. It is a judicious mixture of fact and fiction. The plot of the play is based on history and most of the characters and events are close to the history but there are certain additions i.e. Aziz and Aazam are invented by the playwright suited for shallow scenes and comical portrayal. Thus Karnad has added a comic sub-plot to the play. The story of Aziz and Aazam parodies the story of Tughlaq. The play is wanting, according to Tilak, “in catharsis in the true Aristotlean sense. Then denouement is weak and in the end Tughlaq has not been murdered but is seen sleeping confused and bewildered on his throne” (12). Announcer has been used as a choric figure who beats his drum and makes important announcement. Use of contraries, symbols (Chess Game, Prayer, and Python), metaphors, idioms and phrases and words from Arabic, Urdu, Hindi and Kannada, interesting story, complex plot, make the play highly innovative in technique.

Hayavadana is developed on Yakshagana and other folk- forms. The conventions of the folk tales and motifs of folk theatre are dexterously fused together: masks, curtains, mime songs, the commentator-narrator, dolls, horse-man, the story-within-a-story, world of human and the non-human create a grotesque world. It is a world of incomplete individuals, indifferent gods, dolls that speak and children who cannot, a world indifferent to the desires and frustrations, joys and sorrows of human beings. Karnad employs poetry, music, a sense of gaiety and celebration linked with theatrical event in the play. The plot is based on Thomas Mann’s *Transposed Heads* which is rooted in Somdeva’s *Brihadkathasaritasagar* and *Vetal Panchavimshati*. Through these borrowings, Karnad has developed the themes of existential dilemma and theme of incompleteness. The play is structured into two Acts; main plot deals with Devadatta, Kapil and Padamini while the sub-plot deals with Hayavadana. Both the plots advance the concern of the play—the mad dance of incompleteness and search for completeness. Karnad introduces mask of Lord Ganesha, the presiding deity of traditional theatre on the stage and pooja is done in his praise like a typical Yakshagana play. Soon Bhagavatta introduces theme of the play through Ganesha possessing the head of an elephant and human body signifying incompleteness; thereafter Bhagavatta narrates the story with a formalistic expression in the manner of a folk tale. Savita Goel finds consummate excellence in this technique: “There is a superb technical achievement in the way in which Karnad uses Brechtian type of narrator figure in the role of Bhagavatta. He is primarily intended to draw the audience into the play. He is able to step out of the play, talk to the audience, explaining the action with his insightful comments” (211). Use of mask is a popular feature of Yakshagana to highlight personalities of dramatis personae. In the beginning of the play, Devadatta enters on the stage putting on a pale-coloured mask and Kapila a dark mask. After transposition, their masks also change to signify change of heads. Lord Ganesh is presented with an elephant-headed mask and Kali, a terrible mask, Hayavadana appears with the mask of a man in the beginning later with the mask of a horse. Use of curtains—half- curtains, painted curtains, carried by two stage hands –sort of curtain used in Yakshagana or Kathakali, are used to carry specific meaning. The curtain marks the entry of Hayavadana and the scene of Padmini performing Sati is marked by a curtain that has a blazing fire painted on it and as it is lifted, the flames seem to leap up, Kali is also represented by the picture of Kali on the curtain. There is no front curtain nor any elaborate stage set up. Use of Dolls is another feature of the popular theatre; they are used to satisfy the emotional appetite of the audience and comment on the psyche of Padmini. While Devadatta, Kapila and Padmini are going to Ujjain by a bullock cart, the action is mimed. Here is no cart on the stage rather Kapila

is followed by Padmini and Devadatta, enter miming a cart ride. Kapila is driving the cart. Image of Kali in the play creates the world of mystery and wonder with frightening image animated: “Behind the curtain one sees the uplifted blod-red palms of the goddess. The curtain is lowered and taken away and one sees a terrifying figure, her arms stretched out, her mouth wide open with the tongue lolling out. The drum stops and as she drops her arms and shuts her mouth, it becomes clear she has been yawning” (31-32). These theatrical techniques suit to deal with the thematic concerns and entertain the audience.

In contrast to Yakshagana and Natak Company using lantern and petromax, *Broken Images* uses “New technology” (261) i.e. “the interior of a television studio. A big plasma screen...several television sets... red bulbs...lapel mike...Elephantine lights, Headphones, Cameras...the yellow light” (261-262) and the Announcer appears on the big plasma screen, a modern avatar of Sutradhara, and introduces the only character of the play—Manjula Nayak and disappears and thereafter she addresses the audience through television image. Her address is self-exploratory—how she became best seller writer in English and earned wide recognition and money. When the address is over still the image of Manjula is there on the screen and “From now on, throughout the play, Manjul and her image react to each other exactly as though they were both live characters” (267). The image is Manjula’s inner self and Karnad has explored her psycho-biography in an entirely new way on the stage. Finally, “all the screens start speaking loudly, some in Kannada, the others in English. The cacophony is deafening. The revolving stage moves out into the dark. Then one by one, the sets switch off, leaving the studio, dark and empty” (284).

Wedding Album was first produced by the Primetime Theatre Company at the Tata Auditorium, National Centre for the Performing Arts, Mumbai on 10 May, 2008 and it was directed by Lillete Dubey. The play is structured into nine Scenes and “Scene One and Five take place about three years after the rest of the play” (5)—forward backward movement technique is highly effective to develop the plot. The action of the play is confined to Nandkarni’s living room, Software Production Office of Pratibha Khan, Internet Café and Restaurant. Modern technology and gadgets have been used to dramatise the most important issue of the play—marriage, a moment of celebration and anxiety. Detailed description of the stage setting by the playwright is similar to G.B.Shaw’s technique. The story-within-the-story is another characteristic feature. Rohit and Praibha Khan are busy to make a story in video cassette for 21st century young viewers. Scene One starts with “a screen on which we see Vidula in close-up, speaking directly to the camera. She is extremely self-conscious and ill at ease” and introduces herself like Manjula Nayak of *Broken Images*: “I am Vidula. Vidula Nadkarni. I am twenty-two and a half, actually. I have done my BA in Geography. Passed my exams last year. I am not doing anything at the moment. Worked for a travel agency for six months” (5). Vidula’s self introduction is a modern version of Suradhara. Plenty of humour and satire have been used to expose the traditional Indian marriage culture. Camera, screen, SMS, Internet Café, video chatting, laptop, mobile phones, etc have been frequently used to suit the subject and young cyber-generation. The play ends with the darkening of the stage.

The myths and legends used with, “imagination and creativity resulting in stageworthy plays is Girish Karnad. The technique of bringing together myth and legend to folk narrative style is the way in which he succeeds where many others have not. He creates a bridge between the elite and the folk which has proved to be his strength” (Ramaswamy 278). M.K. Naik has rightly judged the contribution of Karnad to drama: “...his technical experiment with an indigenous dramatic form...is a triumph which has opened up fresh lines of fruitful exploration

for the Indian English Playwrights” (275). Khatri & Arora observe that Karnad’s originality as a dramatist lies in his “extraordinary skill of using myth, history, and folktale to make the drama lively, thought provoking and gripping. In the wake of globalization where drama is gasping for breath, it is the dramatic genius of Karnad who has provided it not only oxygen for its life but also energized it by Indianising it for further maturation” (“Preface” v-vi). Asked about the lasting legacy of Karnad, he replied embarrassingly: “I see a legacy of my generation. I am happy to belong to a generation that had a Dharamveer Bharati, a Mohan Rakesh, a Vijay Tendulkar and I. Together we can claim that we did create a national theatre for modern India” (Kalidas and Merchant 2). A.K. Sinha explores identical dramatic techniques in Karand and Brecht. Like Brecht, Karnad strives to

Break the “illusion” of the theatre by which the spectators become so engrossed in a play that they forget, for the time being what they are. Therefore, like Brecht, Karnad leaves the stage apparatus visible, presents synoptic announcements, has narrators directly talking to the audience. All this compels the audience to respond intellectually to the action of the play and to question it instead of responding emotionally and merely accepting it. (55)

Karnad endeavors to explore theatrical vision, form and language which can embody the consciousness of Indian masses and deeply rooted in Indian cultural heritage. The fusion of content and form governed by the strong sense of Indian-ness and pouring Indian imagination is highly entertaining and aesthetically gratifying. The consistency with “our rich cultural heritage” (Jain 82) and indigenous folk conventions make him a de-colonizer of Indian English drama.

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