

Karnad's Refuge in Myths, Folklores and History

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A vigorous vitality that combs the past for apt myths, legends and folklores to analyse the present has been the hallmark of Girish Karnad, the pre-eminent Indian playwright in Kannada and English languages. Girish Karnad is regarded as one of the three great writers of the contemporary Indian drama, the other two being Vijay Tendulkar and Badal Sircar. While Badal Sircar and Vijay Tendulkar deal with the problems of the middle class, Karnad takes refuge in Indian myths, legends, folklores, and makes them a vehicle of new vision.

Karnad's creative genius lies in taking up fragments of historical and legendary experience to fuse them into a forceful statement. His childhood exposure to street plays in Karnataka villages and his familiarity with western drama staged in Mumbai influenced him in retelling the legends of India to suit the modern context. Before analyzing how Girish Karnad in his plays reinterprets and myths to convey the contemporary reality, it is important to look at the formative influences that groomed the dramatist in him.

Girish Karnad was born on 19th May, 1938 in Matheran, a town near Mumbai. His childhood was spent growing up in a small village in Karnataka. There he had the first hand experience of watching plays which made a lasting impression on him. Karnad was educated at the Karnataka University, Dharwar. When Karnad was about 25 years of age, he received the Rhodes Scholarship for his higher studies at Oxford, United Kingdom. He had a brilliant academic record at school and at the university. Later, he concentrated on writing and film-making. Though Karnad is a multi-faceted personality, it is essentially as a playwright that he is at his best. He confesses it. He has been fairly lucky in having a multi-pronged career. He has also been an actor, a publisher and a film-maker. But in none of these fields has he felt quite as much at home as in playwriting.

Karnad has won all India recognition for his plays and received a number of awards and honours. Karnad has held the position as Chairman, Sangeet Natak Academy, National Academy of Performing Arts, New Delhi (1988-93). He is at present the Chairman of Nehru Centre, London.

During his formative years Karnad went through diverse influences. He was exposed to a socio-political scenario where there was a direct clash between Western and native tradition. It was India of the 50's and 60's that surfaced two streams of thought in all walks of life: adoption of new modernist techniques, a legacy of the colonial rule and adherence to the rich cultural past of the country. Karnad's position was akin to that of John Dryden, the 17th century dramatist who, while writing his plays, had to choose between the classical tradition and the native tradition. :

Karnad was fascinated by the traditional plays, nonetheless the

Western playwrights that he had read during his college days opened up for him ‘a new world of magical possibilities’(Dhawan 15).When Karnad suddenly flashed on the Kannada stage in the early sixties, he had no established theatrical tradition to begin with. Indian English drama up to the 1960’s had had an apologetic existence. The rich heritage of Indian classical drama and the vibrant folk tradition seldom attracted the Indian English dramatists of the earlier phase, whose models were Shakespeare, Ibsen and Shaw. The Indian English dramatists also failed miserably in drawing judiciously from the rich reservoir of myth and complex historical heritage.

Karnad was aware of the problems and challenges that Indian playwrights had to face after independence. Karnad says in his ‘Introduction’ to Three Plays: They 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...(1).

In the same book Karnad asks:

To my generation, a hundred crowded years of urban theatre seemed to have left almost nothing to hang on to, to take off from. And where was one to begin again? Perhaps by looking at our audience again by trying to understand what experience the audience expected to receive from the theatre?(11).

Influence of the theatre was immense on the making of Karnad as a playwright. He lived in a small town called Sirsi, when he was very young. He often visited the Natak companies which were the offshoots of the Parsi theatre. Another major influence was Yagshagana. Initially Karnad wanted to be a poet. But he was destined to be a playwright. He worked with the Madras players as an actor and director in plays like Evam Indrajit, Uncle Vanya, The Caretaker, The Crucible, A View from the Bridge, etc. Karnad has acted in the lead roles in Oedipus Rex and Jokumaraswamy, directed in Kannada by B.V. Karanth in the open air festival in 1972.

As Karnad is a multi-faceted personality, he has stamped his mark in the field of films too. He has acted in several Hindi, Kannada and Tamil feature films, television films and serials like Malgudi Days, He has also anchored the television programme, Turning point.

Though Karnad’s interests are multifarious, he has given the Kannada stage a richness that could probably be equated only with his talents as an actor-director. He has shown the Indian stage to what depth the mythical themes and folklores could be taken in order to recreate a contemporary consciousness. The greatest problem however, was how to utilize these traditional forms in order to revitalize his works in the urban context. It is at this point that the famous playwright Bertolt Brecht came to his help. Brechtian influence on Karnad made him sharply aware of the theatrically, imaginativeness and inherent power of the Indian theatre. Admitting Brecht’s influence on his dramatic works Karnad remarks thus:

Brecht's influence, received mainly through his writings and without the benefit of his theatrical productiveness, went some way in making us realize what could be done with the design of traditional theatre. (TP 14)

Karnad's advantages were many. His expert knowledge of contemporary European theatre, his exposure to the Western dramatic literature and more importantly his dramatic sensibility, all these certainly sharpened his thorough knowledge of the stage. He has shown to the Indian theatre community and to the world theatre community how our past and present can cohere to give to our present day existence meaning and to theatre activity, a direction. Karnad has achieved a thorough synthesis of all the three traditions – classical, folk and contemporary Western, which when used discriminatingly and intelligently lead to the discovery of a new form and as a result a new style of production leading to a rich Indianness in his plays.

Karnad is not a prolific writer. He is very much against writing in haste. Usually the idea of a play incubates in his mind for a long time and it is only when total action of the play is clearly before his mind's eye that he starts writing it. He is not impulsive by temperament and does not resort to writing at the flash of an idea. He follows a golden mean of thought and action when he launched a new play. Karnad himself acknowledges this in his "Preface" to *The Fire and the Rain*:

"The myth of Yavakri" (or Yavakrita) occurs in Chapters 135-38 of the "VanaParva" (Forest Canto) of *The Mahabharata*. It is narrated by the ascetic Lomasha to the Pandavas as they wander across the land during their exile.... I first came across the story of Yavakri and Parvasu, while still in college, in C.Rajagopalachari's abridgement of *The Mahabharata*....for the moment I read the tale, I knew it had to be turned into a play. For the next thirty-seven years, I struggled with it, trying to fit all the ramifications of the myth within some sort of a manageable shape (ix).

Karnad as a playwright is preoccupied with the retelling of Indian myths, legends, folklores and history. Of his eleven plays, seven are based on myths and legends and three on history, and only one on contemporary experience. Regarding the story of his plays it is well known that Karnad is happy when he works with a famous myth or legend. The reason why Karnad chooses myths and legends is not very difficult to fathom. As Jung points out,

Myths and legends embody themselves in the form of motifs and symbols, certain recurring patterns of collective human behavior and certain archetypal human experiences. Myths express certain archetypal social relationships. These relationships could be of father and son, husband and wife, or of brothers. Secondly myths have the power to affect us even without our being aware of it (qtd. in Mukherjee 57).

Myths may be false, fictitious and far removed from reality and history. Northrop Frye in his "Myth, Fiction and Displacement" says, Myth 'is a drive towards a verbal circumference of human experience'. Myth and Magic are closely allied; both are psychic phenomena. (165).

Myth is eternally present in the psyche and it is called the language of the present tense. Purana in Sanskrit means 'through old, ever new' (pure api navam), or 'old becomes new' (pure navam bhavati it) – magic is the manipulation of psychic action. Folk imagination is at once mythopoetic and magical. In the folk mind, one subsumes the other. Folk belief, besides being native, has a touch of poetry about it which works towards a psychic adjustment. He is of the opinion that all folklore is religious, often based on animism because the primitive imagination extends its vision from the natural in which it is steeped and with which it is saturated, to the supernatural, which to the folk mind is only an extension of the former. Whether myth or romance or folk belief, the play's dramatic tension lies in its juxtaposition of the tradition and its subversion at every point which makes the audience sit up and watch the breath-taking action unfold upon the stage.

By a deliberate return to the rich tradition and the parallel art forms popularize by folk theatre, Karnad lights up the rich treasure house that the Indian dramatists can make use of. He has illustrated how the inexhaustible lore of myths, parables and legends offer immense scope for the Indian dramatists. Karnad links the past and the present, the archetype and the real. Issues of the present world find their parallels in the myths and gables of the past which lend new meanings and insights through analogy, thus reinforcing the theme. By transcending the limits of time and space, myths provide flashed of insight into life and its mystery. As it is stated in VII volume of Encyclopedia Britannica:

Myth fulfills in primitive culture an indispensable function, it expresses, enhances and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality, it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization, it is not an idle tale but a hard-worked active force, it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic character of primitive faith and moral wisdom (58).

Karnad's theatre is deeply rooted in Indian dramatic tradition conceptualized by Baath's Natyashastra. Karnad himself explains in his "Notes" to The Fire and the Rain the nature of drama:

The first chapter of Bharata's Natyashastra gives us the myth of the origin of drama.... It was a time when the moral fibre of the society had weakened; irrational passions held sway and people had surrendered themselves to their baser instincts. Knowledge of the Vedas was restricted to the upper class of the society. So, a medium was required to restore the health of the society through entertainment invariably to all the people. On being implored by Lord Indra and the other gods to provide such an instrument, Brahma, the Father of the Universe, took the text from the Rigveda, the art of performance from the Yajurveda, the song from the Samaveda and the rasa (aesthetic experience) from the Atharvaveda and created a fifthveda called Natyaveda. But Indra realized that the gods were unable to deal with this new form and passed it on to human preceptor, Bharata. Bharata, with the help of his hundred sons and some nymphs specially created by Brahma for the purpose staged the first play. The play was performed on the occasion of the Banner Festival, held to celebrate Indra's victory in a battle over the demons. The theme

of the play was the victory of the gods over the demons. This did not please the demons that were present. They took umbrage and using supernatural powers, ‘paralysed the speech, movement as well as the memory of the actors;’. After this, Bharata approached God for a theatre building to perform the play uninterrupted (70-71).

Drama serves varied functions – providing instruction, entertainment, enlightenment, happiness, peace and moral upliftment. It teaches one one’s duty and relieves one’s sorrow. There is no maxim, no learning no art or craft that is not found in drama. For it is the joys and sorrows of human nature expressed through gestures and other techniques. Karnad further says in his ‘Notes’ to The Fire and the Rain states: The ‘purusharthas’ are the four ethical goals of human existence. ‘dharma’, ‘artha’, ‘kama’ and ‘moksha’. Dharma relates to the spiritual sphere, ‘artha’ to the realm of political and economic power, and ‘kama’ to that of sexual or aesthetic gratification. What a person understands as his or her ‘purushartha’ could vary according to his or her background, stage of and station in life, sex, etc., as well as the nature of the crisis he or she is facing. The fourth goal ‘moksha’ is release from the cycle of births and deaths and hence final liberation from human bondage. This is the supreme goal, the achievement of which relates the human being to the Absolute. The concept therefore belongs to a realm beyond where the first three are relevant. Thus, the harmony of the first three may be seen as a means of realizing the fourth. Abinavagupta states that drama should direct one’s mind towards the realization of the purusharthas (72).

Karnad revives the ancient tradition by the powerful use of archetypal myths that are resonant with meaning for the contemporary world. Myths that are part of the collective consciousness of the people are invoked in Karnad’s plays to show how modern man’s predicament is foreshadowed in the archetypal myths. T.S.Eliot recognized the power of myth to manipulate’... a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity’ (qtd. in Frye 162) and declared that the use of myth was a step towards making the modern world possible in art.

Karnad turns to tradition and history in order to seek an answer there for the failures of the present. In plays like Yayati, Hayavadana, Naga-Mandula, Tale Danda and The Fire and the Rain, Karnad has skillfully reinterpreted myths, folklore and legends to give a contemporary colouring, Karnad has produced 14 plays till date. They are:

Tughlaq
Hayavadana
AnjuMallige
HittinaHunja
Naga-Mandala
Tale-Danda
The Fire and the Rain
The Dreams of Tipu Sultan
Bali: The Sacrifices
Two Monologues
Flowers
A Heap of Broken Images

Wedding Album

Of all his plays, three plays Tughlaq, Tale Danda and The Dreams of Tipu Sultan are based on history. The other three plays Yayati, The Fire and the Rain and Bali: The Sacrifices are drawn from Indian myths and two plays Hayavadana and Naga-Mandala have folktales as their origin. Only one play Anju Mallige has London as its setting. Unlike his predecessors, Karnad's plays are not mere costume plays or masks, but they are invested with contemporary relevance. Karnad himself said in an interview:

I had never fancied myself a dramatist. In fact, I had tried my hand at writing poetry. When I was at Dharwar which was the cultural capital of Karnataka having produced writers like Bendre, Gokak and so on, I would very often pass by the famous Kannada publishing house Manohara Granthamala and wonder if my work would ever be published by them! During the weeks of preparation for my departure to England – which were as I said quite stressful for various reasons – I found myself writing a play. This was Yayati. Though I had trained myself to write in English, I found myself writing the play in Kannada. (qtd. in Mukerjee 30)

Karnad's first play Yayati (1961) is a retelling of the Hindu myth on the theme of responsibility. The theme of the play is based on the Hindu epic, The Mahabharata, where Puru as an obedient son accepts his father's old age. King Yayati is an ancestor of the Kuru Dynasty. The King is cursed to old age as a consequence of an adulterous affair with his queen Devayani's maid, Sharmistha. Yayati's plea for mitigation to the Gods results in the communication of the curse enabling him to seek another person with whom to exchange his old age. This proves to be his own son Puru. But his wife Chitrleka unable to bear this ends her life by taking poison. At the end of the play Yayati takes back the old age from his son and Puru has witness the death of his wife.

Karnad departs from the myth in respect of the fact that he chooses not to make Puru the product of Yayati's union with Sharmistha, but of an earlier marriage to an Asura princess. This is in order to emphasize rather Puru's personal choice of self-sacrifice than atonement for his father's sin. The play Yayati ends tragically in death and sacrifice.

Karnad in his plays, does not take myths in their entirety. He takes only parts of them that are useful to him and the rest, he supplements with his imagination to make his plots original and imaginative. Thus in Yayati (1961), he has taken the myth partially. In the order plays like Hayavadana (1972), Naga-Mandala (1988) and The Fire and the Rain (1995), Karnad has employed parts of myths. His reworking of myths, historical and literary elements related him to dramatists like T.P. Kailasam and Rangacharya, the renowned pre-independent Indian dramatists.

Karnad's practice of drawing raw materials for plays from myths and folktales primarily lends his plays an immediacy of appeal. It is an important fact that since the audience has a pre-knowledge of the source material, their curiosity is to see how it is worked upon by the dramatist. Such an initial attitude to the play they are going to watch

ensured their notice of the freshness of approach and the artist's deviations from the original story. Karnad in his plays exploits this advantage fully and involves the audience in the reflections of a moral or intellectual problem.

In his latest play, *Flowers* also Karnad returns to the previous themes. The play echoes the sexuality of *Naga-Mandala* and the conflict of *Hayavadana*. Like all his other works, he draws inspiration from Indian history and mythology. Karnad derives his source from a folktale from Chitradurga. He sets the landscape of his childhood as its background.

In this play, a Brahmin priest is torn between his erotic love for God on the one hand and that for the courtesan Chandravati on the other; caught between love for his wife and that for his mistress; between passion and duty.

When asked about his unusual theme, Karnad says, "closeness of eroticism and devotion has always existed in Hindu culture" (qtd. in Acharekar). He draws an example such as the eroticism in the relationship between Lord Krishna and Radha.

A sea change has occurred in the realm of Indian drama with the emergence of Girish Karnad on the scene. Like the Irish playwright Samuel Beckett who wrote his immortal plays, *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* in French and later translated them into English to become the unassailable icon of contemporary British drama, the Konkani Karnad also has authored his monumental plays, *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Naga-Mandala*, *Tale-Danda* and *The Fire and the Rain* in Kannada and then rendered them into English to emerge as the emblem of a vibrant and rich contemporary Indian English drama for the whole world. The English translations of his plays have brought him international recognition as the pre-eminent contemporary playwright.

A playwright is primarily a communicator, his expressive style depends on the interaction he wishes to cultivate with the people around him, with whom he lives and relates to. An artist's sensitivity makes him conscious of a certain kind of tyranny of the past from which he tries to extricate himself by accepting the past as unutterable and true and attempting to modify it in the imaginary world he creates. Myth is thus a palpable presence for the playwright who experiments with it within his genre by relating, reinterpreting, revisioning and re-fashioning it within the structural framework of his art.

Many modern writers have employed myths and legends to convey their sense and view life. In a way, this practice itself, like myth, is a recurrent pattern. In ancient India and Greece, myths served as the source material for drama, and the re-telling or the re-enactment of old myths in modern terms underline the universality of the experience that is embodied in stories.

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