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Culture and Language in the Plays of Girish Karnad and Habib Tanvir: An Overview

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Abstract:

Indian culture is combination of regional languages. It consists of the local colors of the area, the rituals and Folktale myths etc. There are so many languages in India which are the means of creativity and communication in their scenario. The culture is a defining identity of a society as well as of a person. It is through language and literature that we transmit and express our culture and its value. Culture consists of the customs, beliefs, practices, rituals, languages values and world views that define social groups such as which are based on nationality, ethnicity, religion or common interests of the people. Authors like Girish Karnad, Habib Tanvir, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar, Utpal Dutta and R. N. Tagore who write in their native language has tried to preserve the native culture. Later their works have been translated into English and other languages whether by the author himself or by the others. Even then there is always a twist of the local culture in such works after being translated in other language. Girish Karand has written his plays basically on the folk theatre of India. According to Brecht “the folk play is normally a crude and humble play. It is a mixture of earthy humors and sentimentality with homespun morality”.

Keywords: Culture, Naga Cult, Yajana, Local Dialect, Rituals of Chhattisgarh (local words), Oppressed Culture.

This paper seeks to explore the cultural perspectives of the plays of Karnad and Habib Tanvir. Both the writers have tried to preserve the culture of India by writing their plays in Kannada and in Hindi, but their works have been translated into English either by the author or by the other one. They have used enough local language in their works. The use of local

language and native culture is abundant in the works of these two 20th century Indian writers. Often the plays of these two very important writers deal with the basic issues of humanity. All the plays of these two authors have the glimpse of local color and language with cultural activities of the people. A cultural meaning seems special and assumes special position in his plays and it depends upon the prevailing power relation and knowledge. The cultural practices are articulated through the creative works. These traits can be easily found in the works of Girish Karnad. As a true writer reproducing cultural meaning, participates and contributes to the cultural practices. His plays are the mirror of cultural heritage. We find a reflection of cultural activities in each of his literary work whether it is poetry, play or drama. As a tribute towards his immense contribution to the revival of Folk Theatre, the famous critic on Girish Karnad, Tutun Mukharji comments that, "Karnad has made available the rich sources of both the great and the little tradition, the classical and the folk elements of Indian literature." [T. Mukarji 1990: 134]. In relation to the dramatic art of Karnad the critic P. Dhanevel writes, "In each of his plays, beneath a legendry/mythical or historical story we notice, subtle and constant juxtaposition of the past and present which have been a common feature of Karnad's dramatic arts." [Dhanevel, 2000: 106].

Girish Karnad is the most renowned playwright in the contemporary Indian Theatre who has won international fame. He has been a very successful practitioner of performing arts. He has contributed a lot to Indian English drama by producing such monumental works in play genres, which deal with the culture of India past. He has written many plays in Kannada which is his mother tongue and later he translated them into English himself. Due to his significant contribution to the Indian drama and folk theatre of India Karnad has been called 'John Dryden of India'. As John Dryden holds the important position in the literary restoration period of English literature. He has also been called as 'the Pioneer Indian renaissance' for the contribution which he made to the Indian folk drama. The device of folk tale helps the author in transcending the three dramatic unities of time, place and action. By giving the cultural importance to the folk tales the author has given a freelance description to mystical wonder, magic, supernatural elements in the play *Hayavadana*, which is supposed to be his masterpiece.

Karnad's plays are like the plays of Jean Paul Sartre, Beckett and Adorno, that depicts the existential panorama of life. As Sartre has said in the regard of existentialism, "Aesthetic existentialism, of which I am a representative, declares with greater consistency that if God does

not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which can be identified by any conception of itthat being is man." *Hayavadana* is a play about the completeness and seeking existential problem. Some of his plays, such as *Hayavadana*, *Naga-Mandala* and *Yayati* deal with the existential problem and philosophy that an individual faces in his life. Though the plays are set in the remote past of India but the theme and ideology is contemporary.

The play *Naga Mandala* also is about the ceremony of Naga cult which is a festival of Kerala in which they perform dance and invoke the Naga. Naga cult is a type of worship which is still in trend in many parts of Kerala as well as Karnataka which retain the Hindu Mythology of worshipping the Naga. There are many types of Naga cult performances. Naga is a semiotic cultural in myths and sacred texts of Hindu Mythology. The Pulluva community, a Hindu sect of Kerala, is believed to have descended from a Dravidian clan whose totem is Naga. The ritual is done solely by the Pulluva sect only to escape from the 'Sarap Kopam' that is the anger of serpent. They come to the temple and worship the nag and perform a dance which resembles the serpent movement. During the performance and worship one Pulluva women enters the temple and she do trance like dance of which is like the dance of Naga after sometime the women gets in trance and she is ready to predict the oracle or the quarries of the people. The ritual is called the 'Kalpana Parayal' which means 'the telling of future'. After the foretelling the women fall unconscious and that marks the end of the ritual worship of Naga. In the play the author has tried to establish a cult and belief in the Pulluva family which is a sect of society of Kerala. *Naga-Mandala* is a folk narrative if it is seen through the perspective of cultural belief and cult of Kerala of Pulluva community whose totem is Naga. The playwright has used the folk narrative for his most of the play as he has used it in the play very successfully. Folk narratives are the cultural constructs that are intended to shape the individual in accordance with the codes of the moral of tradition. The play *Naga-Mandala* is also dealt in existential problem of Rani who faces a deep alienation in the house of Apanna lonely. Rani in the play of *Naga-Mandala* is alienated from the strata of life. The play points to the fact about the problems which an individual faces in the modern Indian society. They try to find solace in the rest of their life by compromising with the situation as Rani in *Naga-Mandala*, Padmini in *Hayavadana* and Chitrekha in the play *Yayati*, Karnad has also commented about this dilemma of life in one of his interviews," 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 apology or self-justification: tension 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 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.[Karnad,1994:20]

Regarding the technique of Folk form and the use of mask and other techniques which he has used in his plays the playwright ,Karnad observes,’’ it was when I was focusing on the question of Folk Form and Theatre that my play *Hayavadana* began to take shape in my mind,’’ . The author has used the both above mentioned techniques along with the narrative technique of Bertolt Brecht, the Epic Theatre Technique he means the narration of the story in Homeric Epic style, but the pastness of event is presented in present way. Karnad has used the narrative technique of epic theatre in his play *Hayavadana* which he has taken from Bertolt Brecht.

The play *Hayavadana* is the symbol of culture. Karnad employs the conventions of folk tales and motifs of Folk Theatre, as masks, curtain, songs, the commentator, narrator, dolls, horse-man, and the story within story. For Karnad the Folk Theatre is continuity of tradition and culture. He has described the use of mask, supernatural elements, worship of God Ganesh and marriage ceremony in the play *Hayavadana* . The play is about the culture of Dharampuar where Devadatta lives with his renowned Brahmin father. The play deals with fair, Dolls the act of sacrificing the vowed thing on the completion of the wish. That is also a ritual about which there is description in the sacred texts of Hindu mythology.

In the play *The Fire And the Rain* the ritual of Yajana is described by the author which is an ancient Indian Myth of Vedic age. The play *Tale- Danda* is about a movement which wanted to bring the equality to the Nation. The play is set in southern Indian state Kalyan where the king is Bijjala who was by birth is a barber. He was a follower of young philosopher, Basvanna who was leading a movement of castless society. In the play author has tried to retain our cultural value of ancient India. In the play *Tale-Danda* the writer has described the way how the heir apparent, was coroneted without the dynastic declaration of the king Bijalla. No sooner he got the power of kingship than he began to reverse the system of the living people that is the hierarchy, which was being ruled by his father. The young king destroyed the whole sect of

Sharanas which was rising as a castless society. The play *Bali: the Sacrifice* is also about the culture of Jain religion. The setting of the play is south India where a queen is made to sacrifice a dough cock for the infidelity she has committed. After analyzing the ideas of plays, it can be said that the plays of Karnad are about the culture as well as the other contemporary theme. He has used Kannada language to write the play but the play turned out to be so successful that it was translated into English by the author.

Habib Tanvir, who is one of the foremost playwrights, after the Independence of India. He has written many plays. He is a vernacular, Hindi dramatist of Indian stage. He has served as a great contributor to the Indian drama especially in the foundation of New Theatre. He has got his training in RADA in England. He traveled throughout the European continents to see the performance of the plays of other countries. He has got the experience of various national techniques of staging plays. He lived near about eight months in Berlin where he got the chance to see the performance of the plays of Bertolt Brecht in Berliner Ensemble Theatre. He learnt a lot there in the company of Brecht such as alienation effect, caption, which is an Art of dramatic performance of the play, use of placards that is to write the main event of the each scene of the play in bold letter on a paper or anything which can be visible to the audience. He used the song, in imitation of Brecht: which works as a chorus to provide commentary on the theme and ideas of play. It also brings the rational view and judgment of the audience regarding plays incidents and the ideology.

Most of the plays of Tanvir are written in local Hindi language, but there is always a twist of culture in the play. He has used pure native language for the dialogues of the characters in his plays. This technique gave liveliness to his play. The language of the play is local Chhattisgarhi dialect. But the English audience, who were watching the play *Charandas Chor* in Edenbara show London, were able to grasp the theme and ideas of the play. The brilliant depiction of the theme and acting of the actors helped him to get Award of Fringe Festival for the play *Charandas Chor*. All the plays of Tanvir are written in the local language Chhattishgarh where most of his plays are. For example the play *Charanda Chor*, which is in local Chhattisgarhi language, reflects the native cultures of rural villages where the play is set.

The play *CharandasChor* reflects the cultural aspects of the people of Chhattisgarh. The author has used the native song and the Nacha of Madhya Pradesh in this play. The play abounds

in the use of folk songs. As the group of singers of folk song which comes to the house of money lender. The condition and circumstances of the poor villagers is portrayed in the play. Not only the poor but the rich men's culture is also portrayed in the play very effectively as the priest of temple, the money lender the minister, the queen etc. The hierarchy of the reign of the queen, how the people live and what are their trades and rituals, are very lively described by the author in the play *Charandas Chor*. The procession which was organized by the queen to bring the hero to the palace and proposal of marriage is depicted in a grand style in the play.

The next play in consideration is *Agra Bazar* which is supposed to be the masterpiece of Tanvir. In this play the playwright has tried to show, the condition of the poor people of Agra and the problem they were facing in search of their livelihood. Urdu language is used in this play in abundance. There are many Urdu Gazals in this play of Nazir who was a very eminent poet of that era. The culture and religion is also depicted in the play by the procession of two religious groups, the swimming competition of the people of Agra. One another play which deals with the culture and language of the Indian tribe is *Gaon Ka Naon Sasural Mor Naon Damad*. The play depicts the Devar -Devarin culture of the tribal people, their marriage ceremony, The Gauri - Gaura act of marriage. In the play the author has described how an old man who marries a young girl, is be fooled by the lover of the girl in the guise of religious act of Devar- Devarin. The play is written in the native Devar dialect of the tribe people. It represents the cultural activities of the Devar people. Another important play dealing with the culture of tribal people is *The Living Tale of Hirma*. This play is written in the local tribal and Hindi language. It is about the tribe people and the conflict of government to include their empire in the Government state. First they resist but they are forced to surrender as the government seizes their land. They tried to preserve their land and culture but it proved to be fruitless. The play describes the social and cultural activities of tribal people.

On the basis of observation of the plays of Tanvir it would be appropriate to say that the plays of Habib Tanvir are set in the local area and they deal with the culture of the Indian people. Most of his plays are written in Hindi and the local language where the plays are set. It has been clearly found in the plays of Tanvir one can easily find the cultures of Indian people. He uses enough local languages in his plays, by this he wanted to make understand, the illiterate villagers and rural people his ideology of society and his view of theatre. His theatre is the theatre of working class. The theory of working class he has adopted from the Bertolt Brecht. According to

Brecht, “Any Theatre which goes ahead of its time instead behind it working class theatre: going ahead does not mean, excluding the audience from it; but to show the audience which is of author's interest.” India has several languages to be spoken. All the languages have their own impact on their regional literature whether it is folk song or folk rituals done in whole locality. In the context of cultural description the playwright has said in one of his interview with Anjum Katyal that, “I have simplified the division of culture into two. The culture of the oppressor and the culture of oppressed.” He spent his life writing about the culture of oppressed class. He was against the evils of capitalist system and supported a more people oriented culture of the oppressed class. He was always with the people of oppressed class writing about their cultural beliefs and the rituals they performed. It was the reason that founded the naya Theatre with the help of illiterate people of Chhattisgarh. He wanted to bring the social downtrodden class to the stage for this aim he wrote about the preservation of their sect as he has tried to show in the play *The Living Tale of Hirma*. I will conclude my paper with statement of book review, “Karnad’s plays ... have greatly contributed to the enrichment of contemporary theatre... [They] have great perform ability; [Karnad], in a way, is directors playwright.” No doubt he has contributed a lot to the Indian drama by writing such monumental works in play genre which deal with the past Indian culture. He has revived the culture by writing the plays about the great Indian culture.

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