

THEATRICAL BACKGROUND IN GIRISH

KARNAD'S PLAYS

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ABSTRACT

An attempt to form a connection between the bygone moments and present lifetime is often discovered in the dramas of Girish Karnad. With a subjective view, he often sees the topic of his dramas and developing them, casting them in the crucible of his imaginative self and experienced vision. He goes to that generation which came out at the threshold of post-colonial India. It was that generation which was trapped by the perils of the cultural past of the country equally well as the colonial past. In a typically reactionary post colonial situation, to write in the terminology of the colonial ruler- 'English' in newly Independent India was seen as politically incorrect. And there lies the question of mimicry, adopting and adapting the speech, language of the colonizers to create an Indian drama. India that time was on her way towards the discovery of her 'self', her identity. Dramatic performances are mostly respected as a slice of, an extension of the subjective experiences of mortal millions. The innate difficulty of the spectators to come to terms with 'English' as the language of the performance had been a perennial problem zone. Girish Karnad has been one of the vanguards who aided the audiences by using Indian English, mythical references in theatres that is at once internalized and voiced without any traces of premeditation. He returned the gaze, as a vehicle of resistance and gave Indian dramas, a form, and an identity that is truly Indian.

Keywords: *drama, generation, Indian, myth, performance, play, spectators, theatre.*

I. GIRISH KARNAD: BACKGROUND

Girish Raghunath Karnad was born at Matheran¹ in Maharashtra,² near Mumbai, on 19 May 1938 into a Brahmin family.³ Karnad did his elementary schooling at Sirsi, Karnataka. His family moved to Dharwad, Karnataka, when he was 14 years old and he graduated from Karnatak Arts College, Dharwad (Karnataka University).⁴ Upon graduation Karnad went to England for higher studies. He was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford from 1960 to 1963 and a Bhabha Fellow from 1970 to 1972.⁵

He is a film director, performer, dramatist, and screenwriter in the Kannada language. He has acted not only on stage, but also in a number of first-rate films. Karnad initially desired to be a poet, but circumstances made him a dramatist.

He says as follows:

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 only a playwright... When I was about twenty I got a scholarship to go abroad. I was the first member of the family to go abroad and although the present generation won't understand it and I am sure many of you who have been

through it will not understand how difficult it was to come from a traditional family and to go abroad because although everyone was thrilled that I was going to England, it involved lots of decisions.⁶

Karnad also talks of coming to writing plays as follows:

I was very tense and I found ultimately and suddenly on the eve of my leaving for England, that I had started writing and writing a play rather than a poem and it surprised me for three reasons. One thing that it was a play, because I just said I wanted to be a poet. The second thing that surprised me was that I wrote in Kannada because I spent all my teenage years preparing to be an English poet. I wanted to go abroad and be in England, the country where *Auden* and *Eliot* lived and shine there etc. and it seemed to me there was nothing to do in India and, therefore, I trained myself to be an English writer. But when it really came to expressing one's tensions it came off in Kannada and I suddenly realized that I wasted some years of my life practising writing. The third thing that surprised me was that it was a play about a myth, *Yayati*, from the *Mahabharata*.⁷

II. GIRISH KARNAD'S THEATRICAL BACKGROUND

Karnad grew up in the small town of Sirsi, which lacked basic facilities such as electricity at the time. The only source of entertainment was tales about local myths and legends. This traditional upbringing provided him with the chance to have personal familiarity with the folk theatre in Karnataka. In the following comment, Karnad discusses the influences on him and the reason why he considers his past so influential on his future as a playwright:

I think one reason is because I grew up in Sirsi. At that time, there was no electricity. I stayed in Sirsi from 1941 to 1952. That means the day used to get over by 8 o'clock in the evening. There was no television, and I grew up by lantern light. The whole atmosphere was of stories. There was one lady who would cook for us. She used to stay with us and tell stories at dusk. In school, we used to tell each other stories. One of the reasons I can write about mythical characters so easily is because they were a part of my growing up.⁸

The folk tales told by the elderly people at home, and presented on the stage by the natak companies, the offshoots of the Parsi theatre, left an everlasting mark on his mind which formed the basis of his vision as a playwright: 'the rich wealth of folklore, told and retold amidst the frightening darkness of the surrounding jungles transported the little boy to a world where the snake spoke like a man and the Gods changed form'.⁹ The natak companies were travelling theatre groups also called Natak Mandalis.¹⁰

Karnad in 'Author's Introduction' to *Three Plays: Naga-Mandala, Hayavadana, Tughlaq* says that these companies were troupes of professional actors which toured the countryside throughout the year.¹¹ The plays were staged in semi-permanent structures on proscenium stages, with wings and drop curtains, and were illuminated by petromax lamps.¹² Many of these natak (drama) companies were successful in Maharashtra in the nineteen thirties. By the forties, most of natak companies had been put out of business by the growing Bollywood film industry.¹³

There were two kinds of theatre that were going on in Sirsi. One was the elite but dying shape of the Parsi theatre (natak company plays) and the other was *Yakshagana*, which was in those days considered a very low form of art.¹⁴ These two theatres occupied two social spaces. Karnad tells of his own experience as follows:

I went with my parents to see the company natak plays, there were chairs and you sat in chairs. We were invited by the owner. Father, always got a pass because he was a doctor and we sat in the front row and watched these

plays. I always went to the Yakshagana with the servants because my parents would rather be dead, than be seeing watching Yakshagana in those days. It was just considered too low-brow and one had to sit with the servants. The natak company plays were lit by gas lamps, while the Yakshagana were lit by lanterns and very often by torch lights... I survived in this kind of theatrical atmosphere until I came to Bombay.¹⁵

After seeing *Yakshagana* performances in Sirsi, the dramatist also gained familiarity with urban western theatre when he went to Bombay for his postgraduate studies.¹⁶ This is important because it was the psychology of western drama which seems to have so interested him and which he saw as so different from Indian theatre of any kind. One evening, when he was viewing Strindberg's *Miss Julie* directed by *Ebrahim Alkazi*¹⁷, the sleeping dramatist suddenly woke up in him:¹⁸ When I walked out of the theatre that evening, I felt as though I had been put through an emotionally or even a physically painful rite of passage. I had read some western playwrights in college but nothing had prepared me for the power and violence, I experienced that day.... What impressed me as much as the psychological cannibalism of the play was the way lights faded in and out on stage.... The realization that there were instruments called dimmers that could gently fade the lights in or out opened up a whole new world of magical possibility.¹⁹

It was in the year 1961 that the man who initially wanted to be a poet became a dramatist with his first play, *Yayati*, written when he was only 23 years old.²⁰

Surya Nath Pandey in *Writing in a Post-Colonial Space* says that:

Yayati is Karnad's first endeavour at 'reworking' a myth.²¹ *Yayati* is based on the *Adiparva*, the first book of the epic, the *Mahabharata*. In this epic, *Yayati* is a king, who in the prime of his life is cursed to old age and goes around asking people if they will take his old age. No one accepts – but his own son, *Puru*. The son becomes old and the father becomes young. In the *Mahabharata*, *Yayati* recognizes the nature of desire itself and realizes that fulfilment of desire does not diminish.²²

In Karnad's play, *Yayati* recognizes the dreadfulness of his eternally young life and assumes his moral obligation after a series of symbolic encounters. This is a play about the responsibility of an individual. Karnad's account of the old myth on the exchange of ages between father and son confused and infuriated Indian conservative critics, because to them it is a son's duty to help and obey his father no matter what the demand may be. It was acceptable to them that a son offered his youth to his father and took all his curses on him. But liberal readers and critics appreciated Karnad's play for its contemporaneity and challenging of the old rules of conservative Indian society. To these liberal readers and critics 'Karnad's unheroic hero was a great experience'.²³

To date Karnad has fourteen plays to his credit. He takes mythical and legendary tales from his culture and explores them in a contemporary context. This deconstructing of myth becomes an act of self-searching for the dramatist. In his hands, folk tales assume contemporary importance. He combines the past and the present into a union that bespeaks of both tradition and modernity in his playwriting.

Dharwadker divides the playwrights and directors after the independence of India into two broad categories. One group comprised playwright-directors such as *Habib Tanvir*, *Chandrashekhara Kambara*, *Kavalam Narayana Panikkar*, and *Ratan Thiyam*, whose theatre was devoted either mainly or absolutely to the practice of folk and traditional forms and explored the resources of tradition.²⁴ Playwrights like Karnad and Tendulkar and directors like *B.V. Karanth* and *Vijaya Mehta* are included in the second group as they do not limit themselves to folk materials but practice a range of theatrical modes.²⁵

Karnad sets out to write plays with a definite purpose; to revive Indian history and culture and free them from Eurocentric domination and to de-colonise Indian English language drama. Postcolonial interactions, subaltern issues in Indian English drama and the problems of the Indian people are the most important concerns in Karnad's plays. *Krishna Singh* writes in his article 'Decolonizing the Stage: An Evaluation of Karnad's Contribution' that:

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.²⁶

Similarly, *Savita Goel* has judged Karnad's involvement with drama as follows:

Girish Karnad 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.²⁷

Obula P. Reddy's opinion is also significant in this regard. He writes that:

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, 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.²⁸

Karnad freely develops his plots, characters, themes, and chooses a performing technique that is particular to each play. He frequently adopts modern theatre techniques from the West such as high technology, revolving stages, and high acoustic quality to make the performance effective, but does not blindly imitate; rather he fuses indigenous cultural sensibility with imported learning. For instance, *Broken Images* (2006) and *Wedding Album* (2006) require modern theatre conventions to perform them well.

Kambara observes that: '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'.²⁹

Therefore, the plays of Karnad are easily adaptable to the Western audience and they appeal to both Indian and Western audience.

Parasuram Ramamoorthi says that one word that aptly describes Karnad's plays is *betweenness*. According to Ramamoorthi:

[*Betweenness* is] a kind of state that accommodates the 'Yakshagana and Theatre of the Absurd', allows the influence of *Kalidasa* and *Shakespeare*, theatre as an art form and the commercial theatre, theatre as Word and Performance, theatre which is regional (writing in Kannada and performing in Karnataka) as well as national

(one playwright who is often performed in Delhi and translated into Hindi and Punjabi), theatre which is simultaneously part of the Indian English theatre scenario... and a celebrated event of the Kannada theatre.³⁰

III. CONCLUSION

Among the major dramatists' that India ever created and saw, Girish Karnad fits the bill who gifted a distinct silhouette to the enormous volume of creative article that India already is preoccupied with. A playwright for five decades and yet maintaining his ground, Girish Karnad continues to redefine and reinstate the contours of Modern Indian Theatre with his Kannada plays, which he himself translates. Under him Indian theatre went about in building the nation without ever realising it with new idioms, new language. His plays are timeless and cuts across the plains of truth in terms of the issues, the search of identity, and an alarming pendulum of the time and has a beauty of its own- the mythical allegories, the presentation, rooted in Indianness that summons inexorable rather than contrived conclusions thus at once platforming Keats- "*Beauty is truth, truth beauty, that is all ye know and all ye need to know....A thing of beauty is joy forever.*" Perhaps, Karnad himself feels the same as he clarifies- "*If I write a play I want it to be read 200 years from now. Whether I am read I can't judge, I won't be there. So I put everything I have: study concentration, imitation, stealing ideas, everything.*" Karnad's dramaturgy is like a good film, not the one meant to be suffered with a heckling crowd, but the one meant for you alone far from the sway of the crowd, beside a warm fireplace on a chilly wintry night when the faraway smell of the night kinder a breath of nostalgia of being an individual, and most importantly an Indian.

IV. WORK CITED

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