DEPICTION OF MORAL, ETHICAL AND EXISTENTIAL CRISIS IN THE PLAYS OF GIRISH KARNAD

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ABSTRACT

The paper talks about the depiction and presentation of different types of crisis in the plays of the famous playwright, Girish Karnad, Karnad uses different elements like masks, costumes, historical themes, folklores, etc., to portray the social, ethical, political and existential crisis. He uses plots, characters, places and values from past and molds them in a way appropriate for discussing present day's social and moral conflicts. He writes about past but discusses and critics present. The paper provides ample examples of the legendary skills of Karnad of depicting deep characters with the help of small details like culture and time apt costumes, character magnifying masks and particular vocabularies. It also provides citations and descriptions of how Karnad has infused his plays with different types of conflicts and their solutions.

INTRODUCTION

Girish Karnad is one of the most popular names in Indian Drama literature. Karnad writes in Kannad mostly but is well-versed in Marathi, Hindi and English. Like most of Indian Drama, Karnad's plays are based on Indian mythology and folklores. However, he does not simply elaborate and adapt these stories; he manages to question their political correctness. He takes

up themes from folklores and mythology and weaves them into stories that force the audience or reader to really investigate Indian culture and tradition.

For example, he took the animal sacrifice ritual as the plot for **Bali – The sacrifice, 2009**, casting a doubt on the justification of animal sacrifices as given by Rigveda. In an interview about Bali, he said:

> *I was both anxious and eager about going to Bali. It explores the concept that underlying violent impulses are always there, even though our well-intentioned efforts frequently cover them up. In addition, it suggests that people's thoughts, intentions, and deeds are all connected. It discusses the Jain belief that planning an act of violence makes it no less objectionable than the act itself. The piece explores religious tensions.*
> *(Mukherjee 2006: 49)*

For another play, he chose 13th century *Yashodhara Charite,* which consists of insights into the relationship between religion and society. In this play, he focused on Hinduism and Islam tensions in India, the philosophy, culture and ideology that are at the core of the value conflicts and ethical problems. Karnad tries to depict the exclusivism and positivism of the values and ideologies that form the essential human links.

Karnad draws inspiration from folktales as well and reinterprets them to fit the needs of his story. Folklores are based on cultural and environment themes and help to keep traditional belief and practices and culture alive through oral transfer. Moreover, they present an overview of religion, race, culture and many other aspects of human life from an academic point of view.

In words of Dharwadker (2006: xxix):

> *In contrast to their urban counterparts, women in folk theatre find the means to exercise ambiguous independence within the confines of patriarchy. Therefore the ideology of urban folk drama is most obviously shown in its depiction of femininity, sexual desire, and power.*

Girish Karnad reimagines the folktales and serves them in a new and better way to make them more relevant and effective for today's life and society by using Brecht's technique to universalize themes adapted from Indian myths, folklores, culture and heritage. His themes are always multi-layered covering philosophical, social, cultural, metaphysical, all at once. For example, in *Hayavadana,* the character Padmini faces issues that are not very relatable

for modern women. However, the play manages to portray the struggles of women in modern days as well as before, it also raises issues of unequal social and gender norms.

In the words of the author, Girish Karnad, himself,

> *The intensity of folk theatre stems from the fact that, while it looks to defend traditional ideals, it also has the capacity of challenging these beliefs, of making them literally stand on its head.* (Karnad 2007: 14).

By using unconventional devices like chorus, masks and comedic sequences, Karnad beautifully presents different possible approaches with which a play can be viewed and its central plot maybe understood.

For example, in a play about a priest, Veeranna, Karnad furnishes a story filled with chauvinism, reflection, confession, naivety, love and lust. The priest, Veeranna, is presented as a very positive and innocent character even though he's cheating on his wife with a sensual mistress, a prostitute, on whom he showers all of the temple's gifts after the evening prayer. Through the thought process and actions of the priest, Karnad elaborates a dilemma between logical and intuitive; empirical and transcendental; purity and lust; divine and practical; righteousness and erotica.

Karnad's plays, based on folktales, are not merely accounts of daily, monotonous life of uneducated, rural folks; they educate the audience on Indian culture and heritage. In addition to this, Karnad has drawn inspiration for his plays from Indian history. Historical events have found a place in his imaginative mind, giving him a spectrum of psychoanalysis, political practice and revolutionary ideas to experiment with. He uses his modern, progressive thoughts and mindset and sets them in a plot in past, highlighting the social, political, ethical and sometimes, moral crisis.

According to Nayak (2011: 139-140),

> *He (Girish Karnad) reverberates them with his ideological genes in post-colonial speculations; by reawakening his dead heroes from their petrified identities. As an impartial and transcendent observer, he examines his characters; political, diplomatic, psychoanalytical, and revolutionary ideas.*

Karnad has written deep historical plays like ***Tughlaq*** (1972), which has received much praise in its review. In this play, Karnad presents the enigmatic character of Mohammad-bin-Tughlaq, medieval Muslim sultan, the worst ruler in history. He extends a creative narrative of the critical moments in the reign of Tughlaq, enveloping macro-historical concepts like, power attachment, social interactions, political motives and conservative views. The political

background of the play depicts the post-independence political disenchantment in India. As Karnad puts it:

> *The drama, in a way, depicts the growing disenchantment my generation had with the new politics of Independent India, with the gradual disintegration of ethical values that had led the campaign for Independence and coming to grips with cynicism and realpolitik. (Karnad 2007: 7)*

Karnad advocates revisionist history, i.e. the study of the past through the lens of present's political and social concerns. Karnad is simple, concise and direct when it comes to language, he is also very precautious and particular when it comes to characters and plots. The story of Tughlaq is a story of deep-rooted social issue of instability of ruler's character and mind. Karnad uses Natak company rituals, which were a huge part of his upbringing, to make the depicted crisis feel more close to home. Karnad colors his plays with conflicted morality as is evident in the end of *Yayati* and the whole of *Tughlaq*. In *Tughlaq*, Karnad has displayed the need of consolation through Tughlaq's character; in *Hayavadana*, he talks about quest for self-knowledge and consciousness through Padmini; and in *Tale-daa,* he showcases conflict between mind and body.

A reviewer made an apt comment saying:

> *"The Fire and the Rain, however, leaves one with a sense of dissatisfaction at the sacrifice of youth and gender that had to be made in the pursuit of the development of power and status."*

Karnad elaborates how youth is sometimes used as puppet for authority. In *Yayati,* he talks about a greedy monarch who wanted to snatch everlasting youth from his son, via a fresh interpretation.

A critic writes,

> *"In the Mahabharata, Yayati knows the nature of want itself and realizes that completion does not decrease or terminate desire."*

However, towards the end of the play, Yayati comes to terms with the misery of his life and accepts his moral duty. Karnad's specialty is using traditional, historic sources and themes and making them suitable for today's audience, as he has done in *Yakshagana, Bhagvata* and many more.

Karnad also talks about the usage of masks in Indian theatre. He says that the usage of mask is not to alienate the inner person from the outer image that is visible to the world, but to magnify the character. Unlike western theatre, Indian theatre uses masks to portray an ethical

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ideal rather than a complex psychological being. For example, in Karnad's *Tale-daa,* the main character of the play, Basavanna, is a social reformer, a moral and spiritual being who advocates finding meaning in one's existence. They play encircles charges against Basavanna and characters' way of dealing with them. It also includes the unconventional union of Madhuvarasa's daughter and Haralayya's son, the son of a cobbler; and the imprisonment of the father, Bijjala, by his son, Sovideva, thus, depicting a wide range of crisis in a single play.

In addition to masks, costumes too are a huge part of Karnad's plays. Since most of his plays are based on history, mythology and folklore, costumes play an important role in differentiating Indians, Westeners and Colonizers. Costumes also set the timeline and tone of the play. For example, in Tipu Sultan and Tughlaq, the characters wore muslim garments from sultanate era to set the ambiance of the play. Whereas the king Bijjala was seen in the costume fit for Hindu Emperor. Costumes also signify the social, political and economic capital as well as the traditions, customs and beliefs of the character. It also highlights the cultural distinction. In *Yayati, Naga-Mandala,* and many more, costumes are often reflective of the ethics of the character. In the climax of *Naga-Mandala*, Appanna questions Rani, "*Who did you go to with your sari off?*" (Play Collection I, p. 284) *She hides her face with her sari and prepares to depart,*" the Mahout remarks as he and the Queen quitely leave the temple in *Bali: The Sacrifice* (Two Plays 82). In *Talé-Daa*, the king mocks Sovideva's effeminacy by forcing him to wear a sari and blouse. The priest is enchanted by Ranganayaki's feminine allure and sensuality, elaborated in the monologist appreciation of her saree and blouse.

Karnad's choice and presentation of plot and descriptions and appreciations of feminity, desire and identity point towards the existential questions.

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