

Eclecticism in the Plays of Girish Karnad

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Abstract

In the contemporary Indian English drama, Girish Karnad is a great icon who has given a new dimension in playwriting. He has explored new dramatic techniques by combining native and western techniques. He has not followed any particular tradition and style. Karnad plays are based on the themes taken from myths, folktales and history. He has endeavored to relate the past with the present to make a convincing blend of fact and fiction. He selected best things from the available sources and made it new. As an eclectic playwright Karnad has chosen best things from available resources. He does not imitate blindly the techniques and styles of his predecessors. He has added and modified his plots according to the requirement of situation.

Keywords: Exploration; Eclecticism; Myth; Dimension; Convincing; Fact and fiction

Girish Karnad (b. 1938), a shining star in the galaxy of leading Indian English playwrights, is the real architect of vast mansion of Indian English drama. As an eminent actor, filmmaker and playwright, Karnad has given a new dimension to Indian drama in Kannada and English both thematically and technically. He is basically a Kannada playwright, who has immensely contributed to the development of Indian drama through his plays originally written in Kannada. He wrote his plays in Kannada and later on himself translated them into English. He has revived the trends of modern drama.

Karnad was born on 19 May, 1943 at Matheran in Bombay. He spent his childhood

in Sirsi, a small village in Karnataka. At that time there were two theatre forms going on in Sirsi. One was Natak Company performance and the other Yakshagana. Natak Company performance was the offshoot of the Parsi theatre. Karnad's parents considered Yakshagana performance inferior to their taste, yet Karnad used to go to see such performances with his family servants. Karnad was deeply influenced by the technical aspects of these two types of performances. Karnad went through diverse influences during his formative years. He had three distinct dramatic traditions—classical Sanskrit, regional or folk theatre and Western theatre to learn and experiment various new theatrical techniques. Karnad is a great contributor to the development of Indian drama. He has taken Indian drama to a new height by employing new trends of modern theatre. Karnad's approach to drama is modern and eclectic in terms of plot construction and exploration of technical aspects of drama. He has taken plots of his plays from Indian myths, legends and history. However, he has made it almost new and unique by interpreting them in modern perspectives.

Eclecticism is one of most important techniques on which the mansion of Karnad's plays is structured. The term 'eclectic' is derived from the Greek word 'eklektikos', which means deriving things from a variety of resources. Eclecticism is a conceptual approach that does not hold rigidly to a single paradigm or set of assumptions, rather depends on multiple theories, styles, or ideas to arrive at a final conclusion or explanation. It applies different theories in a particular case. In essence it means that eclecticism is a mix of things which can be style, theories or

ideas. Eclectic writers chose their literary material from different sources and redefine it. Eclectics are sometimes criticized for lack of consistency in their thinking and approach. It is, however, common in many fields of study. Eclecticism was first recorded to have been practiced by a group of ancient Greek and Roman philosophers who attached themselves to no real system, but selected material from existing philosophical beliefs those doctrines that seemed most reasonable to them. Out of this collected material they constructed their new system of philosophy. Eclecticism has never been a singular term with one meaning; it is decidedly multifarious, it takes meaning from different sources. Well known eclectics in Greek philosophy were the Stoics, Panaetius and Posidonius, and the New Academics Carneades and Philo of Larissa. Among the Romans, Cicero was thoroughly eclectic, as he united the Peripatetic, Stoic, and New Academic doctrines. Varro and Seneca were also eclectics.

Max Reinhardt (1873-1943), a German Philosopher and critic, popularized the concept as a 'theatre form' in the late nineteenth century. The eclectic approach plays an important role in critical discussions and evaluations, but it is somehow distant from the actual forms of the artifacts to which it is applied, and its meaning is thus rather indistinct. Eclecticism is very much part of the modern theatre, wherein playwrights produce plays based on their individual interpretations rather than any specific set of conventions. In his brief preface to *Eminent Victorians*, Lytton Strachey offers some persistent advice to the eclectics:

It is not by the direct method of scrupulous narration that the explorer of the past can hope to depict that singular epoch. If he is wise, he will adopt a subtler strategy. He will attack the subject in unexpected places; he will fall upon the flank, or the rear; he will shoot a sudden revealing light into

obscure recesses, hitherto undivided. He will row over that great ocean of material, and lower down into it, here and there, a little bucket, which will bring up to the light of day some characteristic specimen, from those far depths, to be examined with a careful curiosity. (Strachey: 2006).

The concept of eclecticism has gained wide popularity in the modern literature. With the advent of multiculturalism, it is impossible to be comfortable within even a single literary tradition. It is not merely concerned with borrowing of things, but it is a best medium of combination of best things from available resources. As in modern literature, writers do not see the social happenings passively. They encounter it actively and try to reinterpret these changes in modern perspectives. Karnad has faithfully exploited the concept of eclecticism in his plays. Karnad has followed the concept of eclecticism both in themes and techniques. He has borrowed the plots of his plays from Indian myths, legends, folk-tales and historical events, and reinterpreted the same in contemporary scenario. He has used native and western dramatic traditions in his plays. Karnad's concept towards eclecticism is quite modern. He does not toe with the traditional concept of the term. Although he has borrowed his plots from different sources, these plots seem to be new. Karnad has chosen this literary form to communicate his contemporary concerns. He uses the techniques of classical and folk theatres to expose the values of past. The contemporary Indian theatre is excellently successful in depicting the political upheaval, social changes, sense of insecurity, frustration and depression. Modern Indian theatre, when it started its pilgrimage was provided with rich local and regional tradition. But it was a herculean task to accommodate it with the western realistic tradition and modern thinking. Thus there started experimentation in theatre. Karnad has experimented with the

fusion of the traditional and modern dramatic forms and content. The classical tradition of theatre in India was far away from the common strata of society. The purpose of using traditional forms is to achieve a rare insight into the contemporary reality.

Karnad is the precursor of the technique of eclecticism in Indian English literature. Karnad has faithfully exploited the concept of eclecticism in his plays and interpreted them in modern perspectives. His concept towards eclecticism is quite modern. He does not toe with the traditional concept of the term. He has taken the term as means of selection of literary material and dramatic techniques. He has reinterpreted the plots of his plays according to the demands of contemporary situation. His plays are the vehicles of his ideas towards the contemporary issues. He has touched upon various issues in his plays such as love, hatred, jealousy, perfection, lust, desertion of responsibility, multiplicity of motifs, casteism, inter-caste marriage, relevance of traditional theatrical techniques. Karnad's plays *Yayati*, *Bali: The Sacrifice* and *The Fire and The Rain* are based on myths, *Tughalq*, *The Dreams of Tippu Sultan* and *Tale-Danda* on historical events. The other two plays *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala* are based on folktales.

In his plays, Karnad has used the Indian and western dramatic techniques. He has invariably looked towards the Sanskrit and folk theaters to adopt dramatic techniques. He has also adopted western dramatic techniques to bring modernity in his plays. Thus by adopting the dramatic techniques of classical Sanskrit, folk or regional and western theatres, Karnad stands to be an eclectic modern playwright in true sense.

Karnad's plays the proof of his superb dramatic technique. His experiments with folk and classical techniques are highly fruitful to create an effective and successful stage production. He has beautifully blended the techniques of Indian theatre such as the use of

Sutradhara, Announcer or Song, the supernatural elements, play within the play, masks, mime, songs, half-curtains, dolls, etc. with modern techniques such as sound, light, flash-forward, flashback, rigging, conscience corridor, sound-scraping, role-on-the-wall, physical theatre, split focus, cross-cutting and tableaux.

Karnad's first play *Yayati* is based on myth. He has taken the plot of this play an ancient tale of the *Mahabharata* and reinterpreted in modern perspective. In the original story of *Mahabharata* king Yayati was tenth in the line of Brahma's family. Devayani, the daughter of sage Shukracharya and Sharmishtha, the daughter of Asura king Vrishparva had a quarrel. Sharmishtha pushed Devayani into a dry well. King Yayati saw Devayani into the well and took her out of it. Devayani fell in love with Yayati. They got married with the permission of Shukracharya and Saharmishtha is punished to serve Devayani as her maid servant. Sharmishtha also falls in love with Yayati and there develops a clandestine relationship between the two. When Devayani comes to know about this illegitimate relationship, she complains about the matter to her father. Sage Shukracharya curses Yayati with old age. Yayati, who is desirous of sensuous pleasure, pleads Shukracharya for relive from the curse. Yayati manages to exchange his old age with the youth of his youngest son Pooru. Yayati enjoys his youth and vitality for a thousand years. When Yayati realizes his selfishness and he returns the youth of his son Pooru and himself goes to forest. In Karnad's play, the king Yayati realizes his only after the tragic end of Chitrlekha, who commits suicide failing to fulfill her marital bliss. Karnad has beautifully exploited the theme of responsibility. How the desertion of responsibilities creates problems and complexity in life. All the characters in the plays suffer for not discharging their responsibilities properly.

Karnad's second play *Tughlaq* is a historical play. The play dramatizes five years of Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq's reign from 1327 to 1332 when he shifted his capital from Delhi to Daulatabad. This was the most shifting and challenging period of Muhammad-Bin-Tughlaq's life. Tughlaq is a man of complex personality. He has multiple motives in his schemes and style of governance. He is at once an idealist and crafty politician, a humanist and a tyrant, a man who is always looking for the fulfillment of ideals. Tughlaq has generally been regarded as a contemporary play. Being a historical play, it deals with the true incidents of past as its theme. Tughlaq introduces various reforms and changes – Hindu-Muslim unity, transfer of capital from Delhi to Daulatabad, token currency, rationalization of taxes and many others. In *Tughlaq* Karnad has drawn a parallel between the historical realities of fourteen century Delhi Sultanate and twentieth century India. It was deliberately written in the convention of the company of Natak. All the scenes are divided and alternated between deep scenes and shallow scenes. The shallow scenes are usually played in the foreground of the stage with a painted curtain—depicting a street—as a backdrop. These scenes are 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 are clearly divided into those which came into shallow scenes and those which came into deep scene.

Karnad has taken the plot of *Hayavadana* from Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads* (1955). The story of Devadatta and Kapila originally occurs in

ancient Sanskrit story *Vetalapanchavimishika*. By blending native and western dramatic traditions, Karnad has brought out a new mode of modern drama on moral values of life and the complexity of human relations. The issue of quest for completeness is the significant point in the play. The Sanskrit tale poses a moral problem; Mann uses it to question the logic that holds the head superior to body. According to Mann human body is the fit instrument for the fulfillment of human destiny. He argues that human body is as important as mind. Whereas Karnad is of the view that natural completeness is true and permanent and satisfactory. Karnad uses the theme to explore the problem of identity in tangled relationships. The play aims at demystification of traditional values and concepts and presents multiple viewpoints that promote a dialogue on the basic accepted tenets of life. Karnad has used folk theatre elements to emphasize the central theme of the play, i.e., the problem of identity and completeness. Karnad uses the conventions of folk theatre such as masks, curtains, mime songs, the commentator-narrator, dolls, horse-man, the story-within-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. He employs poetry, music, a sense of gaiety and celebration linked with theatrical event in the play. In Yakshagana performances mask is used 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. The 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.

Karnad's play *Naga-Mandala* (1988) is based on two different Kannada folk-tales. In the play, Karnad has explored the Indian theatrical techniques with the help the theme of the play. The play thus reflects the technical elements of theatrical art and also for the Indian tradition of storytelling, even though he innovates and experiments by sharing twentieth century views. Karnad emphasizes that we need not look for Brechtian technique of epic theatre in order to produce Verfremdung or alienation effect. Brecht questions the value of Enfulang (Empathy or identification) and argues that by abandoning Enfulang we can see the things in reality. Karnad is of the view that in Indian theatrical tradition there already exist numerous dramatic techniques which produce the effect of Verfremdung or alienation. Karnad uses "non-naturalistic techniques" of traditional Indian theatre to derive alienation effect in his play *Naga-Mandala*.

Tale-Danda (1990) is the brilliant reflection of Karnad's visions on contemporary social issues of casteism, fanaticism and inter-caste marriage which are against the social laws of equality and justice to all. Casteism and fanaticism are two social deformities which the playwright has dealt with in the play. He wrote the play in 1989 when the 'Mandir' and 'Mandal' movements were beginning to show how relevant the

questions posed in the 12th century are relevant today. The original story of the play is based on the historical incident which took place in 1168 A.D. in the city of Kalyan. In *Tale-Danda* Karnad has raised social issues such as casteism and hypergamous marriage which stand in encounter with Hindu religion and against social justice. The play questions the relevance of two thousand years old traditional values of caste-system. The essential aspect of this system is its hierarchy, restrictions on inter-caste marriages and on eating or living together to the extent of not touching each other. Karnad has raised a very challenging contemporary issue through this play. The spirit and message of the theme is quite modern and relevant in the present day situation.

Karnad's play *The Fire and the Rain* (1998) was originally written in Kannada in the name of *Agni Mattu Male*. Later on the play was translated into English by the playwright himself. The plot of the play is taken from the "Vana Parva" (Forest Canto) of the *Mahabharata*. It is a tale told by the ascetic Lomasha to the Pandavas when they were in exile. *The Fire and the Rain* is a symbolic and allegorical play which presents the conflict between good and evil. Though the plot of the play is taken from an ancient Indian story, Karnad's approach is modern. Karnad has raised basic questions of human relationships against the backdrop of patriarchal society. The play symbolizes fires of jealousy and rain of humanity, kindness and love. It is a play of conflicting notions of good and evil, moral and immoral, broadmindedness and conservatism. The whole story of the play revolves around two saint family of Bharadwaj and Raibha. These two saint family hold knowledge as the supreme goal of life. But their dharma becomes a game of adharm for achieving the post of Chief Priest of the fire-sacrifice.

Karnad is a giant in post-independent Indian theatre for his multilayered contribution in Indian art and literature. He synthesizes the rich native tradition and western dramatic traditions. In this way he is the major post-independence playwright of India who derives narrative for his plays from folktale and employs traditional anti-realistic theatrical conventions including music, dance and open air performance. While western forms and structures have been used by him, the ethnicity has been retained and the content is always native. Karnad changes the flow of the contemporary Indian theatre by assimilating the technique of all western theatre giants like Bertolt Brecht epic theatre has been Indianized by him. Karnad expresses his own self-perceptions, abilities and accomplishments in his plays. Karnad's perception is variegated and shedding rainbow sheds, and these sheds while true to their soil are equally relevant at global platform. The Yakshagana, Natak Company performances and oral traditions of theatre in India fascinated him much. It is not an extreme to say that Karnad is of that generation of Indian writers who encountered the rich tradition of myth, poetry, history, legend and folklore, personally during their childhood and felt them in his blood in this formation of adult authorial selves. The lively culture of oral tradition, which is no more available to the Western playwrights, has been available to the playwright. During his time or olden days story telling was in air. Karnad's playwriting and tradition of theatre has been carefully balanced. Tradition for him seems to be a promise to express his creativity. Along with the oral tradition, Karnad assimilates the Western classical tradition of drama and modern forms and trends to exploit his resources. Indian gods and goddess have been ridiculed and bestowed with human passion and emotions. They are gods and goddess as well as one with the mentality of common human being. Lord Ganesha has been

ridiculed for his incompleteness in the invocation of completion of show in the play *Hayavadana*, Kali falls drowsy while Padmini prays to her in the same play. As in the play *The Fire and the Rain* Lord Indra is given human emotions. Apart from this Karnad has followed the tradition and religion cult of Hinduism. In the beginning of the play Karnad worships Lord Ganesha for the successful completion of the show. With the help of living texture of myth, history and legend, Karnad constitutes a bond between the past and the present, between author and audience and in this way shares his interests and excitement with the audience at large. Every playwright borrows his plot from the store of the past. Karnad, too, has borrowed his plots from the rich heritage of Indian myth, legend and history. In Western theatre the impulse of exploitation of myth and historical events has been seen from the ancient times. William Shakespeare, Marlow, Ibsen Shaw, O'Neill, Miller, Anouilh have exploited myth and history to some extent. Thus Karnad's use of history and myth in contemporary theatre might appear adventurous at the national level, but it is in accordance with the rich tradition.

Karnad's originality as a dramatist lies in his skillful use of myth, history, and folktale to make his play lively and thought provoking. Karnad has emerged as the most significant playwright of post-independence Indian literature. Karnad's humanism, derived mainly from his profound concern for the oppressed and the downtrodden his compulsive return to and reinterpretation of the mythical past and oral tradition and his determined demystification of the dominant beliefs and practices. He has employed traditional Indian narrative materials and modes of performance successfully to create a radically modern urban theatre. He has felt challenged by the tension that exists nowadays between these two realities in India, the traditional and the modern, and has thrived in developing a credible style of social realism.

Karnad shows a great interest in the theatre as representation as well as in the incorporation of stories which come from popular folktales. His interest in storytelling contributes to the success of his plays in Indian society, as he proudly admits. He looks for subjects in traditional Indian folklore. He is attentive to the innovations brought about by the European playwrights of the first half of the twentieth century, and uses magical-surrealistic conventions to delve into the situation of the Indian men and women of today, consciously giving expression to the concerns of people. In the case of *Naga-Mandala* different levels of knowledge are superimposed and different theatrical techniques are used, which permit us to discover, or at least surmise, the possibility of transcending the conflict to achieve wholeness.

Karnad's dramatic world is wide and multilayered. His contribution to Indian English drama is very significant in terms of his dramatic experiment. Karnad is highly innovative in the field of Indian English drama. He has not blindly imitated the existing trends of drama, but also created new techniques to serve his purpose. His technique

is superb and flawless. Plots of his plays are well-knit, the devices of contrast, suspense and surprise help in the logical development of the plot. His plays does not fall any group of traditional form of drama. They have their own identity in contemporary drama. His characters are vivid and lively. Both the plot and character are correlated and helpful to the effect of dramatic expression. His language is according to the situation of drama.

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