

Girish Karnad: Shaping Of an Artist

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Girish Karnad was born on 19th May, 1938 in Matheran, a town near Bombay. His childhood was spent growing up in a small village in Karnataka where he had first-hand experience of the indigenous folk theatre. His encounter with the Natak companies at the early stage of his life made a lasting impression on the mind of Girish Karnad. He says:

It may have something to do with the fact that in the small town of Sirsi, where I grew up, strolling groups of players, called Natak Mandails or Natak Companies, would come, set up a stage, present a few plays over a couple of months and move on. My parents were addicted to these plays. That was in late 1940s. By the early 1950s, films had more or less finished off this kind of theatre though some Mandails still survive in North Karnataka in a degenerate state. But in those days they were good or least I was young and thought so. I loved going to see them and the magic have stayed with me.¹

During his formative years, Karnad went through diverse influences. He was exposed to literary scene where there was a direct clash between Western and native tradition. It was India of the fifties and the sixties that surfaced two streams of thought in all walks of life-adoption of new modernistic 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 seventeenth century British dramatist who, while writing his plays, had to choose between the classical tradition and native tradition. In the first, norms had been set rigorously by Aristotle, the second was a more liberal, native approach that was practised by Shakespeare. Dryden evaluated the merits and demerits of both the tradition in his famous critical treatise "*Essay on Dramatic Poesy*". Karnad was fascinated by the traditional plays, nonetheless the Western playwrights that he read during his college days opened up for him "a new world of magical possibilities".

After graduating from Karnataka University Dharwad in 1958, Karnad moved to Bombay for further studies. In the meantime, he received the prestigious Rhodes scholarship and went to England to do his Master's degree. During his stay at Magdalen College, Oxford, Karnad felt immensely interested in art and culture. On his return to India in 1963, he joined Oxford University Press, Madras. This offered him an opportunity to get exposed to various kinds of writing in India and elsewhere. Such influences made an indelible mark on the creative genius of Girish Karnad. However, it would be worthwhile to mention here that during his teens, Karnad fancied himself a poet. He had written poetry and had trained himself to write in English. The greatest ambition of his life was to be a

poet. But by the time he was in college, he wanted to write in English, become a novelist and be internationally famous and he also realised that the art of a poet or a novelist was easier than that of dramatist. As he says :

The subject that interest most writers is, of course, themselves and it is easy subject to talk about. But you it is always easier if you are a poet or a novelist because you are used to talking as a writer directly to the audience. The problem in being a playwright is that everything that you writer is for someone else to say.²

Karnad's plays all in Kannada have received countrywide critical acclaim thanks to the translations he has major plays into English. The comfortable adaptation of his plays into a Westerns language medium is a reflection at one level of his command of the two languages. More than that, however, it is Karnad's ability to universalize, the individual and social predicament through the medium of drama that gives his work wide appeal and easy enter into other languages. Karnad's works have been staged by eminent directors as E. Alkazi, Satyadev Dubey, B.V. Karnath, Alyque Padamsee, Vijay Mehta, Shyamanand Jalan and Amal Allana. They have also been performed for audiences abroad. Girish Karnad has also made a substantial contribution to India cinema, having scripted for and directed a number of films in Hindi and Kannada, besides acting in many films. Karnad has written many plays in Kannada, of which he has translated five into English. Although rooted in Indian mythology and history, his plays at the same time convey a strong and unmistakable Western philosophical sensibility. The existentialist crises of modern man is conveyed through strong individuals who are locked in intense psychological and philosophical conflicts. According to Dr. Satpal Singh:

Girish Karnad is the leading playwright of the contemporary Indian stage in this regard. He has given the Indian theatre a richness that could probably be equated only with his talents as an actor-director. His contribution goes beyond theatre : he has directed feature films, documentaries and television serials in Kannads, Hindi and English and has played leading roles as an actor in Hindi and kannada art films, commercial movies and television serials. He has represented India in foreign lands as an emissary of art and culture.³

Yayati, Karnad's first play, was written in 1961 and won the Mysore State Award in 1962. In *Yayati*, Karnad takes liberty with the original myth and invents some new relationship to make it acceptable to modern sensibilities. In the puranic story, Yayati marries Devayani, daughter of the sage Shukracharya, and also takes Sharmistha, a low born girl as his wife under certain niceties of drama. Devayani, furious and seething with jealousy, brings a curse on Yayati, of course with a saving clause that if he desired, anybody else could also bear that curse for Yayati. Drenched in sensual pleasures, Yayati promptly asks his son to exchange his youth with him. Pure willingly offers with youth as filial devotion and Yayati shuns carnality only after indulging in it for a thousand years. In Karnad's play, Yayati has already married Devayani and marries to Sharmistha during the action of the play. Karnad invents two characters - Puru's wife Chitrlekha and confidant Swarnalata. In Karnad's play, the whole action takes place in one night. Pure is shown coming home after his marriage and the bed is being prepared for the

newly, weddly couple. The same bed is used for Yayati to solemnize Sharmistha. The curse falls and Puru losses his youth and suddenly grows old Chitralkheha (Puru's wife) who wants to bear a child is disillusioned. She decided to offer herself to Yayati then she commits suicide. This shakes Yayati and acts an eye opener. In a moment of genuine remorse, he takes back the curse from his son.

Karnad's interpretation of the familiar old myth on the exchange of ages between father and son seems to have baffled and even angered many of the conventional critics. But to others, who are trying to root their contemporary concerns in old myths, Karnad's unheroic hero Puru is a challenging experience. Karnad places the individual person at the centre of his picture of the world and shows that each man is what he chooses to be or makes himself. In his psychological exploration, the playwright shows an impressive insight and introduces concepts which greatly extend the area of moral self-knowledge and self-awareness.

Tughlaq, Girish Karnad's second play, written in 1964, is perhaps his best known play. *Tughlaq* was directed by A. Alkazi and presented in London by the National School of Drama for festival of India in 1982. The play shows the transformation of the character of the medievel ruler Muhammad Bin Tughlaq, misunderstood and maligned, suffers an increasing sense of alienation and is forced to abandon his earlier idealism and end up as a tyrant. In fact, his *Tughlaq* has been compared by critics to Camus's *Caligula*, for both the plays present a tyrant using his power absolutely, indulging in wanton and senseless cruelty. In both the plays, the king appears as a "carnivorous animal" paying an unexpected penalty at the end. Yet neither play aspires to be historical drama and liberties are taken with historical fact in both of them. Karnad adds a sub-plot with purely imaginary characters and ignores historical truth in showing a close bond between Tughlaq and his step-mother. Both the plays have been invested by critics with urgent topical significance and have been generally described as political allegories. But to do this, assets M.K. Naik in his book *Studies in Indian English Literature*, will be to divert attention from both the works. Although Karnad himself admits that what struck him about Tughlaq's history was that it was contemporary it has to be affirmed that *Tughlaq* is basically concerned with the tragedy of the limits of human power in a predominantly psychological context. In *Tughlaq*, the focus is on the psychological implication of the theme of human power in respect for a self-righteous idealist (the most dangerous combination possible) armed with absolute power over his subjects. In this play, Karnad like Shaw, emerges as a playwright who is historically awake. The political chaos which Karnad depicts in *Tughlaq* reminded many readers of the Nehru era in Indian history. Karnad finds his similarity accidental. He says:

I did not consciously write about the Nehru era. I am always flattered when people tell us that it was about the Nehru era and equally applies to development of politics since then. But, I think, well, what is compliment that any playwright would be thrilled to get, but it was not intended to be a contemporary play about contemporary situation.⁴

Admittedly, Karnad's play *Tughlaq* is an excellent work of art, with an intricate plot, subtle irony, copious satire, delicate symbolism. But over the years scholars have been over-emphasizing its value as a political satire. No

doubt, a work of art is open to more than one interpretation. However, the glorification of the play as a political satire and nothing more seems to be rather under-estimation of the work and thereby doing injustice to another. The play, inter alia, offers an excellent psychological study of the character Muhammad Tughlaq - his motives, his vision, his efforts to assert himself as the ruler of people, as also how he takes his own failure.

For his play, *Hayavadana*, Karnad won the Kamaladevi Award of the Bharatiya Natya Sangh in 1972, the theme of which drawn from *The Transposed head*, a story by Thomas Mann in it, Karnad used the folk art of Yakshagana to examine the modern problem of the body/intellect divide. The character Padmini's search for the complete man who must have the best attributes of mind and body frustrated in spite of her best efforts, and she realises that it is the intellect that is supreme and always determines what a man is and will become. According to Dr. Satpal Singh:

The theme of this play thus is a complex one and Karnad good humouredly yet critically evaluates the very concepts of the rational and the physical. The multiplicity of the characters and their individual psychic circles playing into each other build up a complex pattern of human relationships. And by projecting these interlocked human sympathies against a gradually intensifying clash of personalities, Karnad presents a comprehensive picture of the human living. Indeed, Karnad's work has the tone and expression of great drama he has the genius to transform any situation into an aesthetic experience, with his tongue in the cheek humour and irony.⁵

In 1988 and 1990 Karnad wrote *Naga-Mandala* and *Tale-Danda* respectively, both of which received critical acclaim. Both of them were translated into English. *Tale-Danda* brought Karnad the "Writer of the year" award, instituted by Granthaloka, in 1990, followed by Karnataka Nataka Academy Award for the best play of 199-91. He also received Kannada Sahitya Academy Award in 1993 and the Sahitya Akademi (National Academy of the Letters) Award in 1994 both the *Tale-Danda*. The play *Tale-Danda*, deals with the rise of Veerashaivism, a radical protest and reform struggle between the forces of reaction and protest. It is seen as Karnad's first play that deals explicitly with the influence of the large social and intellectual milieu on individual action. According to Dr. Satpal Singh:

His play *Tale-Danda*, is acutely reflective of the contemporary political and social events - the aftermath of the Mandal Commission Report and of the demolition of Babri Masjid, over Rama Janma Bhoomi.⁶

Naga-Mandala (Play with Cobra) was based on a folk tale related by Prof. A.K. Ramanujan to Karnad. The play mocks at and questions the unjust values of our patriarchal society. In the play, Karnad has also cut below the surface to reveal the burning core of mental or spiritual reality. The main concern of the playwright here becomes centred on human (and non-human) being in combination, interacting, entering into one another's lives, becoming part of one another. What Karnad seems to be primarily interested in is a real contact, a real meeting of the selves, depending on mutual knowledge. The abandonment of realism in this play takes us to a world that appears to be weird and even metaphysical. According to Dr. Satpal Singh:

The primarily psychological treatment of character seems to embody a philosophy of life which emphasizes that events have meaning only in relation to the characters. And yet there is patterning of human affairs by an agency which remains inscrutable. Karnad here presents a world where things happen inexplicably and the schemes and intentions of people do not seem to control the action. Indeed, Girish Karnad's art can be described as a vision of reality.⁷

In 1989, he received Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award for the Most Creative Work of Naga Mandela. It was directed by J. Garland Wright, as part of the celebration of the 30th anniversary of Guthrie Theatre Minneapolis.

Agni Mattu Male's English transcreation *The Fire and The Rain*, was first staged in Minneapolis, USA in 1994 and was published in 1998. In this play, Karnad turns once again to myth to present a moving tale of love, jealousy and conciness. The action of the play is centered around a seven years long fire sacrifice conducted to propitiate the rain god, Indra, to end a devastating spell of drought. In this background is woven a complex story of hurt egos, awe-inspiring spiritual powers that are harnessed only to serve jealous ends and all encompassing love which raises a man above the plane of a mere mortal. *The Fire and The Rain* is certainly Karnad's challenge to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Moreover, a film had been made on this play, named as Agni Varsha in 2002, which is directed by Arjun Sajjani.

The Dreams of Tipu Sultan (1997) can be described as the long awaited history play in which, after dealing with precolonial Indian history in two earlier works, Karnad confronts British colonialism in its curcial early stage of military expansion paradoxically at the invitation of the British and for a celebration of India independence. The playwright notes that his 'obsession' with Tipu was something else he inherited from A.K. Ramanujan's dairy in which Tipu had recorded his dream. In many important respects *Tipu Sultan* follows the model of the history play established in *Tughlaq* and *Tale-Danda*. It draws upon a range of historical sources to present convincing portraits of the principal characters, but crates an imaginative plot and resonant dialogue to contain their experience. It deals with a controversial protagonist who can be characterized in radically opposite ways, depending on the observed viewpoint - as a heroic figure of anticolonial resistance (comparable to the Rani of Jhansi) in one perspective, and a treacherous but fallible (and even foolish) adversary in another. The image in the play of a polity in crisis, both because of internal dissensions and the presence of a powerful alien adversary, carrier the same potential for application to contemporary problems that made the history of *Tughlaq* and *Tale Danda* politically relevant in present day India. As in *Tughlaq*, the presence of a court historian, Hussain Ali Kirmani, among the play's characters enables Karnad to reflect on the process of history writing and the many conducts of history- oral and written, unefficial and official, objective and subjective, dominant and subalteral. The play also juxtaposes larger than life figures such as Tipu, Haidar Ali, Nana Phadnavis, Lord Carnwallis and Arthur and Richard Wellesley against a large cost of less prominent historical individuals (Kirmani, Tipu's principal queen and sons, numerous courtiers and military officials) as well as ordinary citizens and soldiers. The results, as a dramatic fiction through its polyphony of voices.

Hittina Hunja, the first version of the play published in Kannada in 1980, was performed in both Kanada and Hindi, but not translated into English at that time. In 2002, Karnad reworked the play completely in English named *Bali : The Sacrifice*. Like *Hayavadana*, *Bali* has a specific pre-modern source - the thirteenth century Kannada epic, Yashodhara charite which can in turn be traced back to two eleventh and ninth century Sanskrit epics. Through the same process of 'realistic' fictional elaboration that marks his approach to myth and folklore from Yayati onward. Karnad transforms the story of the dough figurine that comes alive at that the moment of sacrifice into a mature philosophical exploration of love, jealousy, desire, betroyal and violence between men and women who are bound by the ties of blood and marriage, or encounter each other in the perfect freedom of anonymity. In comparison with Karnad's earlier work, the novelty and strength of *Bali* lies in the unconventionality of its four characters, and the seriousness with which it yokes intimate personal acts to structures of religious belief and practice. The promise of motherhood within licit boundaries of marriage is the motivating force in *Bali*. The true originality of *Bali* is that it assimilates the sexual issues to a historically nuanced meditation on the nature and psychology of violence. In the preface, Karnad described violence as 'the central topic of debate in the history of Indian civilization' - a debate in which Hinduism has been ranged against Jainism and Buddhism (Two Plays, 69). Karnad also chooses to address not the public and political carnage of war and conquest (which led, for instance, to emperor Askoka's conversion to Buddhism), but the legitimization of violence in ritual practices that individuals (such as the queen mother) regard as private acts of faith and worship. The central 'problem' in the play is thus not the queen's adultery but the deep spiritual rift between her Jainism - which aligns itself with compassion, mercy and non-violence and the traditional Kshatriya ethos of her husband family. The king has embraced Jainism in principle, but his instinctive propensity for violence is evident in every scene, whether it is set in the past or the present. When he compels the queen to join him in the symbolic sacrifice so that his desire for atonement may be satisfied, her imagination breathes life into the sacrificial object and leads to her own death. As Karnad notes, the Jain position that 'intended violence condemns one as surely as actual violence' gives the argument a 'complex ethical twist' and creates a solipsistic world without the possibility of real absolution. More broadly, the Jain-Hindu debate of the premodern period casts an ironic light on the endemic violence of the postcolonial present in India- a problem addressed directly in both *tughlaq* and *Tale-Danda*.

The two short monologues in English that conclude this collection- *Broken Images* and *Flowers* (2004)- from a radical code to Karnad's fourty year career as a playwright because they initiate new subjects and forms. *Broken Images* takes up a debate that has grown steadily edgier since independence - the politics of language in Indian Literary Culture, specifically in relation to the respective claim of the modern Indian Languages and English, which must also be recognized now as an Indian, though not as indigenous, language. As a successful author of short and long fiction in Kannada and a teacher of English in a Bangalore College, Manjula Nayak, the play's only character, has led a rather typical literary life. When she unexpectedly publishes a stunning first novel in English that transforms her into the Literary Phenomenon of the Decade, the breakthrough arouses admiration, but also dismay and resentment that she has 'betrayed' Kannada for the sake of fame, fortune and a vastly expanded audience. So far, these are the standard terms of the debate over language, and except for the missing Booker Prize, Manjula's

story is a transparent send-up of Arundhati Roy's runaway success with *The God of Small Things*. Manjula's conversation with her own television image (her doppelganger) soon reveals, however, that she is an imposter who has passed off her dead sister Malini's novel as her own. The switch to England, hailed as an inspired act of self-fashioning on the author's part, turns out in reality to be an act of dishonesty, desperation and cowardice, the implication being that the material lure of English as a medium can only lead the Indian language author to prostitute herself. Significantly, the value of the novel itself is not in dispute titled *The River Has No Memories*, it is a superbly accomplished autobiographical fiction about a lifelong invalid who 'breathed, laughed, dreamt in English'. What the play impugns is the opportunism of the Kannada author who tries to cash in on a dead sibling's talent.

Flowers, in contrast, returns to the world of folklore, and is the first work in this genre to focus on male rather than female desire, thus registering a small but important shift in Karnad's dramaturgy. The legend of Veeranna on which the play is based belongs to the Chitradurga region, and became widely known when the kannada writer T.R. Subbana (known as TaRaSu) included it in his 1952 novel, *Hamsageethe* (Swan Song). The protagonist of the novel is a singer called Venkatasubbaya and early in the narrative Subbanna briefly inserts him into the tale of Veeranna, *archaka* of the Hidambeshwara temple. The married priest has been passionately in love with a mistress to whom he takes the offerings from the temple after the evening prayers. One day the palegar (chieftain) discovers a hair in the prasada and demands an explanation from Veeranna, who claims to prove the truth of his claim, the priest in turn challenges god to display hair or accept his head in punishment, and enters a meditative trance to the accompaniment of Venkatasubbayya's song. When the chieftain arrives the next day to expose Veeranna's lie, the Shivalinga has indeed sprouted long silken hair and when (urged by singer) he pulls out a tuft to test its authenticity, blood beings to ooze from the crown of the *lingam*. Overwhelmed by a sense of sin at having injured his deity, Vessanna beheads himself in the sanctum.

Karnad has acted, directed and scripted a number of films and documentaries. He scripted Samaskara, the award-winning novel by U.R. Ananthamurthy and played its lead role. The film was initially banned on grounds that its bold anti-caste message would spark tensions, but it went on to win the President's Gold Medal for the Best Indian Film in 1970. He also served as Director of the Film and Television Institution of India (1974-75). He scripted and acted in *Vamsha Vriksha* (Kannada), *Kaddu* (Kannada), *Godhuli* (Hindi), *Ondanondu Kaaladalli* (Kannada), *Utsar* (Hindi) and *Cheluvi* (Kannada). He has made three documentaries a film on Kannada poet D.R. Bendra in 1973, *Kanka-Purandara* (English) in 1988 on two medieval Bhakti poets of Karnataka and *The Lamp in the Niche* (English) in 1989, On Sufism and the Bhakti movement. A number of his films and documentaries won awards and have been shown at film festivals all over the world. Karnad has also acted in several Hindi and Kannada feature films, for well known directors such as Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and Shyam Benegal. He has also contributed substantially to the literature on Indian theatre and cinema. Girish Karnad was awarded Padma Shri in 1974 and the Padma Bhushan in 1992. He was President of the Karnataka Nataka Academy (1976-78) and Chairman of the performing Arts (1988-93). He was also a visiting Professor and Fulbright Scholar-in-Research at the University of Chicago during 1987-88. He was made Doctor of Letters by Karnataka University in 1994 and got

Gubbi Veeranna Award by the Govt. of Karnataka (1996-97). This multifaceted playwright also got Janpith, the country's highest literary recognition for his contributions to modern Indian drama in 1999. Karnad is the seventh Kannadiga and the second playwright to win the award, which is given each year for the best creative writing by an Indian citizen. The award carries a citation, a bronze image of Veerdevi and a cash award of Rs.5 lakhs and was also awarded Kalidas Samman.

Karnad has been a bitter critic in recent years of the rise of religious fundamentalism in India. He publicly condemned the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992; he uses all public platforms to warn of the threat Hinduva poses to secularism, multi-culturalism and the freedom of expression. When religious fundamentalists tried to whip up communal tensions over the controversy about the Idgha Maidan in Hubli, Karnad (who hails from Dharwad) strongly opposed them. More recently, he has publicly opposed the threats made by the Sangh Parivar of stopping the Tipu Bicentennial celebrations. Karnad lives in Bangalore with his wife Dr. Saraswathy Ganapathy and two children, Shalmali Radha and Raghu Amary.

Thus, Karnad remains the most important dramatist of the contemporary Kannada stage. He has given the Kannada Theatre a richness that could probably be equated only with his talents as an actor-director. He has shown the Indian stage as to what depths the mythical themes could be taken to in order to recreate a contemporary consciousness. Karnad's advantages are many - his expert knowledge of contemporary European theatre, his exposure to the Western Dramatic literature and more importantly his theatrical sensibility - all these certainly sharpened by his thorough knowledge of the stage. He has shown to be Indian theatre community and to the world theatre community and to the world theatre community how our past and present can coalesce to give to our present day existence meaning and to theatre activity a direction.

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