


BC-20-21



Critical Insights
on
Girish Karnad's Plays

Edited By

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Critical Insights on Girish Karnard's Plays

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Nutan Mahavidyalaya
Bareilly





NOTION PRESS

Singapore, Malaysia.

Published by Notion Press 2020
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ISBN 978-1-64983-535-2

Title- Critical Insights on Girish Karnard's Plays

Editors- Dr Ram Avadh Prajapati & Dr Satish Kumar Prajapati

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Themes in Girish Karnad's Dramas

Dr. Nirmala Shivram Padnavat

India has rich heritage of literature, culture and history. *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are two main famous epics of India. These epics are in the form of lyrical drama. Performing drama is one of the specific features of Indian culture since ancient era. After ruling the British over India, English received as the status of International language. Indian writings are translated into English which were written in several regional languages of India. Rabindranath Tagore, Arundhati Roy, Kamala Das, Jayant Mahapatra, Girish Karnad etc. are popular writers on Indian English Literature. Girish Karnad is popularly known for his dramas and movies as well as acting. His style of writing drama is different than those of other writings. He combines Indian myth and fiction together with his imagination in his dramas and writings. Current chapter deals with Girish Karnad's special features of writing drama.

Girish Karnad was born on 19th May, 1938 and left the world on 10th June 2019. He was a writer whose major writing is in Kannada. He was a popular Indian actor, film director, playwright and a Rhodes Scholar. He worked mainly in South Indian drama cinema.

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In 1960s, Girish Karnad rises as a dramatist and received a high rank in the modern era as the best Indian Kannada writer. He was honoured with the Jnanpith Award of 1998 which is the highest literary honor conferred in India. His plays are based on the theme of myth, history with several social issues. Later on his plays were directed by directors such as Ebrahim Alkazi, B. V. Karanth, Alyque Padamsee, Prasanna, Arvind Gaur, Satyadev Dubey, Vijaya Mehta, Shyamanand Jalan, Amal Allana, and Zafer Mohiuddin.

As far as the matter concerns of Indian cinema, Karnad was an active personality who worked as an actor, director, and screen writer in both Hindi and Kannada cinemas. He received many awards for his notable work in Bollywood as 'Padma Shri' and 'Padma Bhushan' by the Government of India and won four 'Film fare Awards', of which three are 'Film Fare Award' for 'Best Director' – Kannada and the four times 'Film Fare Best Screenplay Award'.

Girish Karnad is not only popular in Kannada writing but also known as good Indian English Playwright. His famous plays are *Yayati*, *Hayavadana*, *Nagmandala*, *Wedding Album*, *Tughlaq* etc. His writing consists of historical themes and Indian myths. His writing techniques of drama are as given below.

Girish Karnad has used historical themes in his dramas. *Tughlaq* and *Tale-Danda* are two best examples of it. Diwan Sing Bajeli writes on Karnad style as, "As a playwright, Girish

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Karnad has left an indelible impact on the history of contemporary Indian dramaturgy. He was rooted in the cultural tradition of his soil with a deep understanding of Western dramatic aesthetics and craft. His two plays - *Tughlaq* and *Tagore* - have helped redefine the form and structure of drama. The drama *Tughlaq* has thirteen scene drama. This drama is basically focuses on the historical incident of 14th Century, Tughlaq-Indian ruler. It is not only historical play but also a political play. It reflects the contemporary politics of 1960s." (The Hindu, 13, June 2019)

The play *Tale-Danda* is written in 1990. Karnad selected the theme of mandir-mandal conflict. The play draws parallel between the socio-religious political and economical condition which was existed in the 12th century A.D. during Bhakti Movement presents more gruesome aspects of Indian history. In history, during the 12th century A.D., the mandir-mandal conflict was existing in Indian society at large scale where Basavanna who imagined the casteless society. The play *Tale-Danda* is the historical based history on the life of Basavanna.

We found the theme of political power and political activities in Girish Karnad's drama. Further, we can say that in the plays of Karnad, there are demonstration of the politics of power and the constant and human relationship. He has revealed the status of women in...


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loves him too much and cares him. She is his step mother but in patriarchy, the political power lies in the hands of men. Though women feel sad, they do suffer but they do not have rights to open their mouth against man and they don't act unless they are not motivated by men. This we found, with the example of Sultan and his step mother as- the Sultan's stepmother is worried too much about the Sultan on one side and on the other side, she found the criminal mind to kill Sultan's advisor. She is stone to death for this crime as a punishment by Sultan. She is punished by the Sultan and she is stoned to death. The main reason behind the murder of the Sultan's advisor is her lust for power, the power over the Sultan, not her love and care for the Sultan

In India, caste is always been a part of Politics. We found the exploring of caste, in the play *Tale-Danda* by Karnad.

As mentioned above, male dominating society does not allow female to raise their voice in the family, same political power is used in the society, religion and so on. This theme is also found in *Tughlaq*, the Sultan has combined politics with the religion. He had made mandatory that every Muslim should pray *Namaz* for five times daily. He was in belief that the Muslims and Hindus should be treated equally. Even, he had stopped incrimination done by Muslim on the Hindus in the nature of the old *Jiziya* tax.

In Karnad's play *Hayavadana*, we come close with two ... as one couple from

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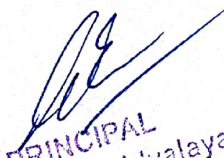


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Brahmin community Devadatta and Padmini while Kapila is a son of Lohita i.e. blacksmith. As a part of lower society/community, he serves Devadatta and Padmini. He accepts that he is inferior to him and commences all the actions which are told to him by Devadatta and Padmini, though he is friend of Devadatta.

Girish Karnad's writing focuses on the theme of political power in India which is the part of the class and caste discrimination so the reflection of the same can be found in his writing. In *Yayati*, Devyani and Sharmishta are friends but Sharmishta belongs the Rakshasa Community so she is treated as the slave to Devyani. Not only the society but also the father of Sharmishta told her to be a slave of Devyani.

In the play *Tale-Danda*, the class-discrepancy and caste-discrepancy is at centre. When 'Mandal Commission' published its report and it brought a lot of agitation among students. In addition to that, after the Babari Mosque issue, the secularism in India was in danger and Karnad wrote *Tale-Danda* on this background. Basavanna, the protagonist of *Tale-Danda* tries to establish a movement and a new sect Lingayatism in which he expects that the people from all the communities should encompass and participate. The movement becomes successful and a marriage in between a Brahmin girl and a cobbler boy takes place. But due to this marriage conformist and orthodox minded ... (King Bijjala's son), Manchanna Kramita


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and Damodara Bhatt oppose the movement. Sovideva gives orders to overwhelm the movement of Sharanas.

In the play, *The Fire and the Rain*, the caste system is also focused on by Karnad. Arvasu is in fond of performing the dramatic activities. But he is not allowed by his brother Parvasu. It is assumed that only the persons belonging to lower caste community should participate in dramatic activities. In the prologue to *The Fire and the Rain*, the actor-manager requests Parvasu to allow Arvasu to perform the play because he is in short of an actor. He tells Parvasu that the sons of the Bharata were the first actors in the history of theatre. They were Brahmin but lost their caste because of their profession. Arvasu, the protagonist of the play, loves a hunter girl Nittilai but the marriage does not take place. Nittilai is forced to marry a boy from her community. When Nittilai runs away with Arvasu, she is killed by Nittilai's brother and husband. *Yagna* is organized for rains but only Brahmins are allowed to enter to the *yagna* place.

In the plays of Girish Karnad and Vijay Tendulkar, sometimes the suppressed people accept the age old tradition but in some of the plays they react and oppose the caste system. In *Yayati*, Sharmistha takes revenge on Devayani by throwing Devayani into the well and later by molesting her husband Yayati. In *Tale-Danda*, the people from Brahmin community as well as from cobbler community join the movement. A Brahmin girl is ready to accept a cobbler boy as her life-partner. In *The*




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...and the Rain, Arvasu is ready to accept a hunter girl as his wife. Nuttal does not worry about the rules and regulations of her community and she runs away with Arvasu leaving her husband behind. In Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal*, Ghashiram takes revenge on the Brahmins of Poona as he is oppressed by them. In *Kanyasulkam*, Arun Athawale takes revenge on the Brahmin community by suppressing his wife Jyoti.

Thus, the powers of politics, political status in the society and caste system in social structure have been selected as the themes by Karnad in his dramas.

Karnad portrayed different types of female characters in his different dramas. In *Tughlaq*, we find that the female characters as the victims of power even though they belong to different socio-economic backgrounds e.g. two of them (Mother and the Lady) are defeated mothers who must have tears over their lost sons. Both remain nameless.

Karnad has shown through his dramatic world how mother and son can have incestuous relationship in *Tughlaq*, wife is allowed to have extra marital affair if her husband is physically weak in *Hayavadana*, and an already married woman has all emotions and permission to offer herself to her previous lover if her husband stays away from her for a long time. The murder of Tughlaq's advisor by his step mother is because of lust of his step mother towards Tughlaq. In *Hayavadana*, Padmini has desire of both her husbands. She wants the


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strong body of Kapila to fulfil her sexual desire though she is married with Devdatta. In *Yayati*, *Yayati* and *Sharmistha* are not punished for their affair. Moreover, they are allowed to get married.

In *Nagmandala*, Rani is treated very badly by her husband Appanna. As per Indian traditional method of social structure Rani's marriage has taken place when she was a child. After the natural maturity period, Appanna brings her at his home. Though she is married with him, Appanna does not give her the rights of a wife. She is always locked into the home when he goes outside to visit concubine. He comes home just to get bath and dinner. Rani is the victim of bad traditions and customs of Indian society where female are treated inhumanly by male. Karnad on the contrary in the same drama *Nagmandala* Kappanna, the son of Kurudavva is always busy in taking care of his blind mother.

History and myth are the basic themes which are used by Karnad in his drama. The appearance of Lord Ganesh in *Hayavadana*, the theme of Indian myth in his drama, *Yayati*, the *Nagmandala* itself suggests the Indian myth in the title. These are the best examples of Karnad's use of myth in his drama.

The main human psychology is concern with the dream of an individual. Karnad in *Tughlaq* deals with the psychology of Sultan with the attainments to highlight the gap between the dreams and deeds. Just to become a Sultan (as he dreams), even

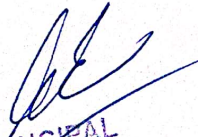

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...think of the relationship of the family, neither of brother
...of father. He killed his father and brother when they were
...Narnaz. His mother felt bad for it but for him the political
...more important than family relations. Even he killed the
...person like Sheikh Imam-ud-din, just for his greed of
...power. His dream and greed of political power made
...so busy in political activities that he could not marry and
...remains bachelor. Finally, he remains alone and lonely.

On the other hand in *Tale-Danda*, Karnad has strongly
...the family concept except the family of Jagadeva and
...the king. The power of politics and the relationship of the
...run side-by-side or the part of revenge between families is
...the major psychological issue used by Karnad in his plays. Same
...*Tuglaq*. Sovideva beats his father and puts him in the prison.
The only difference is that Sultan killed his father while
Sovideva imprisoned his father. The king Bijjala is not satisfied
with his son Sovideva but later he not only imprisoned his father
Bijjala but mother Jagadeva also. The psychology of having the
power of king is the theme used by Karnad in his drama.

Love, sex and contemporary world is also selected by
Karnad as the theme of his drama writing. The birth of
Hayavadana as a man with man head and body of horse, is the
product of his mother's love towards the horse. The horse was a
Gandharvaa, a celestial figure. The sex and love relationship


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between a Gandharva, a celestial figure and a woman resulted the birth of Hayavadana, man headed horse.

Another case is in *Hayavadana* about love, sex and desire is shown by Karnad with the character of Padmini who want intellectual mind of Devdatta, her husband and strong body of Kapila, friend of her husband. She has sexual desire for Kapila too behind her husband Devdatta. At the end of the drama, due her desire of love, sex and lust, she remains alone in this drama.

In the Drama *Yayati*, Karnad borrowed the theme from the Novel *Yayati* written in Marathi by V.S. Khandekar -taken from Indian mythology. The lifetime desire of sex and lust, lost all the humanity, human relationship is the major focus of drama *Yayati*. The King 'Yayati' is very crazy for sex and wants new and more female to fulfil his desire and lust. At the end of drama, he came to know that as we try to fulfil the desire of body, it increases rapidly and as we try to control it, we can get success to come out of the need and desire of body. Controlling *indriyas* is the only solution to come out of the sexual need of body. Thus, being a contemporary Indian English dramatist, Karnad openly spoke about the love, lust, sex and human psychology.

Karnad's drama can be categorized in different types as far as the theme is concern. He talks about the existence and freedom of women. Women are always the part of suffering in the male dominating society. Rani, the character of *Nagamandala* and Padmini, the character of *Hayavadana* are the symbols of

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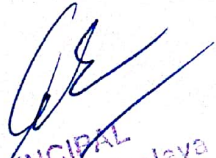


...types of women who fights for their existence. These two
...falls under one group who fights for women's freedom,
...identity and their freedom. The audience find that in
...the fullest expression to the women's innermost
...is given through Padmini. The freedom is given to man to
...as many wives or mistresses as he wants, he likes or he can.
...the contrary, a woman in our society is not allowed to have
...apart from her husband. This controversy creates a question
...approach that males dominating society never think
...the wish will/desire of a woman. In Karnad's dramas we
...the feminist approach with the representation of Padmini's
...character who has desire of sex with multiple husband. Further,
...has selected the theme which establishes that women have
...desire in ancient era and this modern era too, but they
...cannot live like a Draupadi in the current era.

Thus, The use of mythology, the selection of plot and
character for drama from history, love, sex, desire, dream,
importance of political power than family relationship, socio-
economical discrimination existing in Indian society, gender
discrimination, traditional and modern society etc. major issues
are portrayed as the main theme of plays by Karnad in his drama.

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