

## Chapter VII - CONCLUSION

*Let actions alone be the manifestation of the authentic being in defence of its authentic vision.*

*– Wole Soyinka.*

*Theatre often gropes towards the past, looking for meaning, with the tools of the present ... But to have impact on the heart of society, drama must attempt honesty- not merely by using a mythical Indian history, but by engaging actively with possibilities in the present.*

*– Girish Karnad*

## Chapter-VII

### CONCLUSION

Myths are infinite in their interpretations. Joseph Campbell says there could be no final system for the interpretation of myths and quotes the line from the *Odyssey* to capture the enigmatic nature of myth. Myth is like the god Proteus, "the ancient one of the sea, whose speech is sooth". The god "will make assay, and take all manner of shapes of things that creep upon the earth, of water likewise, and of fierce fire burning" (*The Hero* 381). Even the most steadfast questioner could not disclose the whole content of the god's wisdom. Myth is defined as sacred history and yet concerned with men, regional and yet beyond the temporal, stable and yet protean and improbable and yet essential for mankind.

Through the ages the influence of myth has been strongly felt in both religion and literature. The twentieth-century writers have evinced an unprecedented interest in myth in order to heighten the people's consciousness of their spiritual impoverishment. The treasure trove of myths supplied the renowned writers like T.S.Eliot, James Joyce, D.H.Lawrence and Sri Aurobindo with timeless themes. Myth also became a technique of perceiving reality.

Wole Soyinka and Girish Karnad are two dramatists of world renown whose works testify to the happy fusion between myth and literature. By transporting and replanting myths of the past to suit the present scenario, the dramatists aim at the birth of new consciousness resulting in man's ultimate reconciliation with his physical and cosmic environment. The stories they dramatise are contemporaneous and yet unmistakably archetypal in their power. In the transposition of myth into contemporary idiom it is the present reality which constitutes the horizon of inquiry. Soyinka and Karnad fuse the horizons of the past and the present to offer a critique of contemporary society.

Striking similarities are found in the plays of Soyinka and Karnad who have benefited from their twin heritage. The African and the Indian worldview exhibits an animist, holistic way of perception and representation founded in myth and ritual. Their education in England proved beneficial by supplying Christian and Greek myths to Soyinka and by opening up the world of new dramatic techniques to Karnad.

To the question why Soyinka became the first African to win the Nobel Prize, Henry Louis Gates answers: "I think he did precisely because of his mastery of a tragic idiom that is, at once African and European, Shakespearean and Yoruba and Greek, of the tribe and of the metropolis, indelibly black yet ultimately accessible to any sensitive reader" (qtd. in Kumar 15). Though Soyinka's literary output is staggering in its versatility, Soyinka is at his best in his plays. Karnad, a multi-dimensional personality

excels as a playwright. Another striking similarity lies in their choice of themes of great appeal.

Quests for regeneration, for identity and for knowledge constitute the major themes of Soyinka and Karnad. Using the myth of Ogun, the pathfinder, Soyinka insists on the need for sacrifice for regeneration. The protagonist of Soyinka has the attributes of the god Ogun who symbolises dissolution and re-aggregation. The heroes become instrumental in effecting the salvation of the community either by their sacrificial death or by becoming the symbols of rejuvenation. The deaths of Olunde to atone for the tragic failure of Elesin and the sacrifice of Eman identify them with the Ogun myth. Soyinka also superimposes the Ogunian myth with the Greek myth of Dionysus thus turning Euripides' *Bacchae*, a tragedy into a life-affirming communion rite in *The Bacchae of Euripides*. The gruesome tale of a mother tearing her son to death as part of the revenge of Dionysus is skillfully adapted by Soyinka into a ritual of regeneration by turning the blood of Pentheus into the wine of Dionysus.

While Soyinka's principal concern is with the relationship between the individual and the community, Karnad uses myths to delve into the inner recesses of the individual characters. Though *Yayati*, *The Fire and the Rain* and *Bali: The Sacrifice* are mythical enactment of the universal theme of redemption through sacrifice, they also become poignant studies of individuals forced to make painful choices. Hinduism acknowledges the coexistence of good and evil, and forces of creation and destruction. Karnad's characters atone for sins, sometimes even for other's sins like

Arvasu and Nitilai, in order to attain redemption. Soyinka is against the sacrifice of unwilling victims for the society's welfare and insists on the need for a true redeemer willing to sacrifice himself for others, as essential for initiating the new cycle of history. Karnad permits multiple perspectives to the theme of sacrifice in *Bali: The Sacrifice* based on a Jain myth. Issues like religion, spirituality, faith, aesthetic and functional attitudes are raised inviting different interpretations. Through the tales of *Death and the King's Horseman* and *Yayati* the dramatists reveal the tragic repercussions that follow the reversal of roles-the sons forced to sacrifice to atone for their fathers who fail in their duty. *The Bacchae of Euripides* and *The Fire and the Rain*, the re-enactments of Greek and Hindu myths show fratricide and atonement for sin as the recurrent motifs which never fail in their appeal.

Myths are utilized to highlight the possibility of regeneration both at the communal and personal level. The dramatists achieve this goal through the soul searching pilgrimage of the characters towards reaching the acme of either perfection or completion. Ogunian metaphysics, symbols of Christianity, Vegetation and Fertility cults are brought into service by Soyinka in his effort to chart out the journey of man through initiation and dedication of self to greater values. In *The Road* the search for completion takes the form of the quest for the ultimate knowledge- the knowledge of death. Undertones of Christianity merge with the Yoruba rituals like the "agemo" to narrate the frightening end of Professor who remains mysterious till the end. The complex but meaningful merger of the mythic

elements with the life of the character yields infinite interpretations. Self-discovery as the perennial instinct in man is powerfully portrayed by Karnad in his monologue *Flowers*. Using an ancient Kannada myth, Karnad highlights how “closeness of eroticism and devotion has always existed in Hindu culture” (*Hindu* 5). When the Professor chooses violent death to decipher the meaning of “Word”, Karnad’s Priest commits suicide as he is unwilling to live on terms dictated by God. Soyinka relives the horrors of war in *Madmen and Specialists*. The play narrates the terrible aftermath of the evil war, one that is macabre and frightening. The atrocities committed in the name of war and inhumanity of the leaders are presented with telling illustrations. Bero’s search for complete knowledge of evil is unravelled graphically. Fermi Osofisan is of the view that the goal of Soyinka is not catharsis but rather psychic wounding (51). Soyinka’s aim is to provoke a collective guilt that would lead to cleansing and atonement. In the play, the purification is achieved through the Yoruba earth-mothers, the *aje*. So myth and mythic motifs become the stay against the confusion and horror of war for Soyinka.

Indigenous theatre techniques and folk tales have been the inspiration behind one of the path-breaking plays of Karnad-*Hayavadana*. In this play Karnad’s technical wizardry comes out in the form of a credible usage of masks, the character of Bhagawata and the clever device of externalizing Padmini’s psyche through dolls. The play deserves the rich accolades for its thematic richness too. The quest for completion is portrayed through the divided beings who seek completion by

transposition of heads. The answer given by Vikramaditya, the mythical King does not work in the modern context. For Karnad's heroine Padmini is a woman who seeks to unify the opposite principles- the Apollonian and the Dionysian, that is she needs a man with no dichotomy between the perfect head and perfect body. Karnad uses the myth of transposed heads to present the existential angst of men and women.

Tradition could be tyrannical preventing the progress of men. Soyinka presents the problem of people's blind adherence to an age old belief, the faith in the Serpent of the Swamp, which stunts growth. Igwezu grows from despair to hope, from ignorance to knowledge after teaching a lesson to the Kadiye, the Chief Priest of the Serpent. Using the Christian and Waste Land mythical symbol of a redeemer, Soyinka saves the play from becoming a tragedy by bringing in the symbolic figure of the blind beggar who combines in him the best in Islam and the best in humanity. The serpent in *Naga-mandala* serves as the redeemer-cum-saviour of Rani. Karnad uses folk tale and the ritual to depict the story of Rani who grows from innocence to experience. By letting the tiny cobra slither into the long tresses of her hair, Karnad challenges the patriarchal society's concept of chastity. Naga-cult prevalent in southern states of India is used by Karnad to give a happier life to Rani through the discovery and acceptance of her own sexuality as crucial to her independence and emotional well-being.

As part of the recovery of the authentic cultural existence, Soyinka and Karnad go back to their roots. Apart from popularizing the indigenous theatre techniques and themes, the writers throw light on the rich history of

their respective past. To Soyinka history is the past and also in the present and in the making. The continuous process of history is recorded through rituals and myths. Retrieval of the past is essential not only as a part of racial self-retrieval, but more urgently for the purpose of learning from past mistakes. Hatred of oppression in any form makes Soyinka portray the evils of the past with a rare honesty. In *A Dance of the Forests* instead of romanticizing Nigeria's past history, Soyinka presents a world ridden with corruption, lust and evil. The characters like Demoke and Rola have to atone for the mistakes of a very distant past in the presence of the forest spirits, and gods. The play becomes a perfect blend of complex elements like the historical, the metaphysical, the symbolic and the mundane evolving into a uniquely Soyinkean statement.

The artistic foray into the past for sources opens new frontiers of meanings to Karnad. *Tuglaq* recreates an important period during the Sultanate era in India. Though Karnad has only intended to look at history through the lens of contemporaneity, the play becomes a political critique of the post-independence decades. Karnad mythicizes the history of Tuglaq and the character that evolves is so rich and varied that he becomes a paradox. That is why the reign of Tuglaq earns the name of a spectacular failure. Sparkling intelligence, idealism, foresight are mixed with insanity, brutality and naivety in Tuglaq whose rule has parallels in post-independent India. Soyinka too warns against history repeating itself in his political play *Kongi's Harvest*. Unlike Karnad, Soyinka uses mythic motifs like the celebration of the Vegetation Spirit, Christian elements like

the Last Supper, meditation on the mountain to cast Kongi as a travesty of a ruler. Kongi is a megalomaniac like Tuglaq and thinks that he must be obeyed at all cost. The eroding political values of contemporary Nigeria are presented with dexterity and pungent satire.

Positive retrieval of the past is done by Karnad to present Tipu Sultan as a true patriot cum warrior. Karnad presents the colonial history from the standpoint of independent India in *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*. Mixing dreams with reality, Karnad depicts the character with nostalgia that Tipu truly evolves into "The Tiger of Mysore". Tipu's portrayal displays the grandeur, the nobility and the vulnerability of a great military leader who tried to overcome the onslaught of the British invasion. Karnad's sensitivity lies in adding the human dimension to Tipu's personality so as to project Tipu as a role model worthy of emulation. The plays of Soyinka and Karnad based on history reveal their faith in learning lessons from history. History is used to chastise the present and to caution against complacency. While Soyinka achieves it standing well within the mythic mode, Karnad lets history to supersede myth.

Myths and folk-tales are used for a very special purpose by Soyinka and Karnad to empower women. Characters like Iyaloja, the *aje*, Segi and Agave emerge as women who crusade for the cosmic balance, countering evil with good. Though Soyinka has received adverse criticism regarding his female characterization, the plays showcase powerful women capable of changing the society for the better. Soyinka's comment on the character of Segi in *Kongi's Harvest* brings out his views on women:

Both Simi and Segi were modelled on a certain kind of woman who is very prevalent in Nigeria. A very strong kind of woman with very strong influences on men and events. That kind of woman held a certain kind of fascination for me. They are a very independent type of woman and at the same time very feminine (110).

Soyinka has avoided the pitfalls of abstraction and essentialism by creating real women like Iyaloja and Agave who move from the periphery to the centre of events and they also do it from the context of Yoruba belief in the Ogunian principles like creation and destruction. Iya Agba and Iya Mate are the earth mothers who prefer creation to destruction but in order to counter the evil done by Bero they conduct the ritual of purification by fire.

Girish Karnad excels himself in his women characters. More than the men, it is the women characters who appeal to the audience and readers. The Indian situation forces a woman to a life of subjugation and subordination. Karnad presents female characters with a mind of their own. Life of women like Padmini, Nitilai and Chitralkha do not end happily. But they fade away only after making their points of view known. Karnad also subverts myth to mock at the unjust moral codes framed by patriarchy. Women characters like Nitilai evoke admiration whose life hints at the possibility of a world order where love will reign supreme. Rani and Padmini are the women in love with two men. Through them Karnad makes the audience to think about the double standards of socially imposed

strictures and the cultural "mind set" which perpetuates sexual inequality so as to make the people think about whom they serve.

The differences between the dramatists too are many and valid which serve to bring out the distinctness of their respective culture and their individual calibre. Soyinka is mythopoeic in his vision and creates his own stories in which the heroes re-enact the mythic roles especially that of Ogun. In *A Dance of the Forests* Ogun himself becomes a character. But Karnad recreates the myths in his plays and adds new dimensions through other characters like Chitrlekha and Nitilai. Soyinka's plays derive their sources from other cultures like Greek and European, whereas Karnad's plays are confined to Indian myths. Yet the differences only add to the individual achievement of the two writers.

Social relevance of the plays of Soyinka and Karnad rests on contemporaneity which is the hallmark of the writers. Through the pantheon of gods, and through the language of dance, words and music, Soyinka and Karnad become consummate interpreters of the collective consciousness. They are also splendid examples of creative writers meeting the challenges of their times. Soyinka has been in prison and Karnad has been in the forefront raising his voice against communalism resulting in threats of retaliation. They have emerged as conscientious writers whose works interpret the soul and political will of their countries which they consider sacred and sacrosanct.

The comments of Nadine Gordimer, the 1991 Nobel Prize winner, are the right tribute to Soyinka. Gordimer holds the view that by the

masterful appropriation and recreation of Yoruba mythology, through the landscapes and powerscapes of contemporary Nigeria, emerges Soyinka's work that penetrates and exposes the tortured psyche of colonial and post-colonial society with intense and profound artistic power. "And here he has claimed for African literature" Gordimer argues, "a dimension almost lost to other literatures: where are the gods... present in other fiction?" (38). Karnad is no less a dramatist with an incurable need to glimpse into the past, like a wayfarer groping in a huge cavern filled with ruins of an old and unfamiliar mode of life, who succeeds to listen to the call of the past to give it the ears of the present (Rajeswaran 17).

Because of the inherent complexity of the thematological analysis, the techniques as handled by the artists could not be fully explored in the limited space of the present study. Also some of the later plays Soyinka like *Opera Wonyosi*, *A Play of Giants*, *From Zia*, *With Love* etc and Karnad's monologue *Broken Images* have been left out. Much scope is there for research in the two dramatists' drama as theatre. The indigenous and western techniques along with the rich language become a fertile topic that needs further exploration. Myth itself is a rich store house of timeless themes which could be selected and studied as it would encourage a bringing together of different cultures and religions.

The comparative study of the plays of Wole Soyinka and Girish Karnad establishes their mythopoeic vision as the common underlying grid by which they explore and interpret the complexities of human life. Their national identities too emerge as integral part of their universal vision. The

message emerges with clarity and emphasis that enlarged consciousness alone will lead to a better community, a transformed society. The richness of the myths chosen by Soyinka and Karnad has an appeal that goes beyond their continents which also serves to validate this comparative study.