MODERNIST STRAINS IN THE MAJOR PLAYS OF

GIRISH KARNAD

An Abstract

Submitted to the C.C.S. University, Meerut

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English

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ABSTRACT

Girish Karnad is a renowned Indo – Anglican playwright of Post – Independence era. Besides, being a prolific playwright, his multidimensional role has rendered his versatile genius into other creative fields - as an eminent actor, Television artist, producer, script-writer and director. The fame of Karnad may be examined on the basis that he has rendered his services as the Chairman of Sangeet Natak Academi, as the Director of the Nehru Centre as well as the Director of the Film and Television Institute of India. Countless awards including Padma Bhushan and Bharatiya Jnanpith are in his prize chart. Karnad has widely been accepted as a thought – provoking playwright. He continues to write not only to satiate his own self, which may be described as ‘Swanta – Sukhaya’, but his artistic creation is meant to arouse the conscience of the ‘demos’ i.e. the common masses in terms of their social, political, economical, cultural and spiritual conditionings. Karnad as a revolutionary playwright always makes an effort to challenge the age – old stereotypical assumptions and the deep rooted false beliefs that serve as nothing except sheer blockages on the growth and prosperity of mankind at large. He is fascinated by life and its vicissitudes. He examines life as being governed by various socio – economics factors.

Karnad, experimenting with the indigenous cultural treasury of history, myths and folklore along with the western performance techniques that have given a new direction to Indian drama, always upholds the solutions towards the upliftment of underdogs and weaker and inferior sections of the society who are subjected to every kind of humiliations and torments inflicted upon them by the society itself. He delves deep into
the problems of life and examines the reasons behind the tragedy of a modern individual that drowns him in utter alienation, hatred, violence, corruption, self – agony and other psychological and sociological factors that inspire his plays.

His plays are larger than life in their sublimity and magnitude. They sing the saga of our rich antiquarian cultural ethos and contain multi – dimensional thematic strands, yet their treatment is entirely relevant to the present social scenario. In this way Karnad stands apart from other the post – independence playwrights in the way of treating history and myths to capture the present tumults and dilemmas.

In the Chapter – I (Introduction) efforts have been made to produce a sufficient summary regarding the status of dramas, particularly Indian English Drama, discussing its origin, development and changes up to the period of Karnad; which left a remarkable imprint on his transformation into a playwright. The chapter also discusses the association of Indian plays with the mythological accounts, the glimpses of which are found in the plays of Girish Karnad. The chapter also talks about some of the leading Indian veteran playwrights. It cross examines the Pre-Independence as well as Post-Independence era playwrights. When we talk about any playwright it becomes mandatory to keep in mind the situations, the conditions and the atmosphere that charge his enthusiasm and help to shape up his artistic creativity, leaving a permanent mark on his psyche. In this sense the chapter travels through various literary stations of Karnad’s life throwing light on him in general and his plays in particular.

Chapter – II (Pre-Modern History) deals with the historicity preserved in the antiquarian data of our country which offers a sumptuous feast for history lovers. Karnad’s three plays viz; Tughlaq, The Dreams of Tipu Sultan and Tale – Danda have been elaborately
discussed in this chapter. Despite being junked and dusted in their contents they echo the contemporary political situation and raise issues taken from our day-to-day lives. The images of Tughlaq, Tipu and Basavanna represent the genuine picture of a modern individual with lofty ideals and ambitions. These plays offer the psychological examination on the failure of the protagonist cherished desires. They also interpret how the destiny of few is led by the whims of such fallen heroes which severely affect the entire world crushing and ruining the dreams of others; thus furthering the process onwards. These plays are a tribute to all those unknown and unacknowledged reformers who always fight for righteousness but are rejected and misunderstood. Karnad very daringly has taken history as a strong rational weapon to do justice to the less popular and perhaps also wrongly-described historical faces to forward his stand on the persistent conflict of ideologies v/s existing ground realities. These plays deal with some burning issues that are dragging the world to ultimate destruction caused by existential alienation.

As a problem playwright like Bernard Shaw and Galsworthy, Karnad strives hard to untie the individuals from the shackles of superstitiously internalized socio-cultural constraints. In Chapter –III (Folk–Lore and Modernity) in folk plays i.e. Hayavadana and Naga-Mandala (Play with a Cobra), the blind beliefs on fate and past lives recur. Karnad attempts to share the holistic views of society in context of liberty and moral rights associated with his women characters. They pass through social inhibitions, moral turpitude, taboos and all sorts of ordeals set by the patriarchal and gender-biased society; at the same time they emerge as unbroken, unshaken and unmoved, enthused with self-confidence, fighting the unjust norms till they attain self-identification. Both the plays pose a philosophical threat in the form of ‘Search for completeness’ and ‘Search for self.’
The characters seek relief in their psychological make-believe world ignoring the sordid realities of life.

These plays lay bare the fickle mindedness of the society, which is more swayed by emotions than by logic. Padmini of Hayavadana and Rani of Nagamandala are the true representatives of Indian wives - exploited yet bold enough to resist the wrongs done to them.

Chapter – IV (A Modern Use of Ancient Myths) talks about the use of myths as glimpses of the past as well as its relevance to an understanding of the contemporary period. India is a land of kaleidoscopic contrasts in terms of habits, manners, foods, languages, customs, attires and physical appearances. It nurtures and preserves the repository of age-old traditions and customs we all are abide by, whether we admire them or not. Indian society is ruled by conventional ideas wherein the idealism and faith come in conflict with basic human desires of the senses. The faith of an individual is governed by societal roles and norms that ensure a continuity and survival of its cultural mores. ‘The Fire and the Rain’ and ‘Bali: The Sacrifice,’ included in this chapter are structured within the framework of human predicaments. Both the plays dramatize the futility of human efforts to combat with destiny and finally inviting a series of misfortunes. As a result the innocents like Nittilai, Vishakha and Arvasu in The Fire and the Rain have to suffer till the end of their lives. The play ends at a positive note when the virtuous get due rewards and truth wins. Both these plays describe the dilemma of Indian women entrapped in their household duties where they are served not better than animals. They are beaten, abused and exploited by their male – counterparts, at the same time they appear as bold, assertive, unembarrassed, resolute and blatantly selfish who refuse to profess guilt and to
atone for it. In this way Karnad takes a daring step in the projection of his women characters. The Queen in Bali: The Sacrifice is a representative of a modern individual who is against the traditional set–up but has to abide by it, only to maintain the family courtesy. The play abhors the bali or sacrifice system and favours the ideology of non–violence. It upholds and stresses on Gandhi’s vision of ‘Live and let live’ when the present world is entrapped in mutual rift and chaos. This family saga picks up issues from our daily life like love, vengeance, suspicion, hatred, trivial disputes rooted amid spouses.

In Chapter – V (Quest for Modernity in Monologues) two monologues – ‘Broken Images’ and ‘Flowers’ have been taken up. In the former Karnad transforms his earlier image from that of a history writer to a technology inspired playwright. The monologue brings out the pitfalls of modern life – style of urban metro cities by citing the illustration from IT hub – ‘Bangalore.’ This psychological tale is a dramatic representation of the technology driven existence which is diminishing the differences between ‘real’ and ‘reel.’ We are living in an artificial world where our self - made electronic images are sweeping our genuine forms. Technology is reducing our private self. The chapter talks about this misuse of scientific inventions and technology in the name of advancement. The monologue also discusses the reducing status of regional language writers as compared to Indo – Anglican writers, who are greeted with huge promotional money and fame all across the world. Broken Images very artistically highlights the contemporary dilemma of Indian regional writers who are overlooked and underestimated at the global front. The monologue also raises the daily life issues taken from a middle class family of Manjula and Pramod, whereas Malini–crippled sister to Manjula unfortunately is blamed for all the misunderstandings. Broken Images invites all round discussions on several
multiple phases of life. Another monologue, ‘Flowers’, describes the journey of a strayed priest to the path of devotion. The play reveals the conflict between duty and desire, between ignorance and awakening. The priest in the play is the representative of modern individuals who move towards unfair ways to satiate their worldly lusts and desires, but at last they have to repent on their deeds. The Monologue imparts the lesson that one has to finally come back to the place from where he has started and if any one dares to challenge this cycle of nature he is sure to be punished by supernatural agencies that always keep vigil on our actions. ‘Flowers’ reveals the theory of ‘Duty is worship.’ The priest at the end succeeds to wash all the stains on his character only after seeking the solace in the company of his childhood friend i.e. Lord ‘Shiva.’ The playwright wants to suggest through this mythical tale that in this modern world of mistrust, anarchy and hatred only the purity of heart (sprung from love and respect) for all can purge our corrupted soul and make our world a beautiful dwelling.

Chapter – VI (Conclusion) at the end of the thesis is the summing up of all the earlier discussions made in the above mentioned chapters.

Girish Karnad thus captures in his plays some fascinating aspects of the ‘Modernity’ associated with contemporary life and the society, particularly in relation to India. The subsequent chapters of this thesis explore the details of this phenomenon.