CHAPTER FOUR

SUMMATION

... if the objective meaning of a work of art were known, there would be no point in its existence. It exists merely to suggest many ways in which an undefined truth may be approached. (Guthrie 124)

Though Karnad is a multi-faceted personality, he is essentially as a playwright that he is at his best. In four decades he has written no more than ten plays, but each work has proved a milestone in the history of Indian theatre. Though he wandered long in the realm of the electronic media, he regards playwriting as his home and keeps coming back to it. Quintessentially he is a playwright of great reputation, in India and abroad.

A writer could not be assessed in terms of his number of creative works. Ibsen and Satyajit Ray could never produce more than one play, one film, in a year. In playwriting one just can not sit down and dash away a script. Good ideas do not visit a writer every day. For good creative writing, observation, reading, thinking, researching and planning are necessary. Karnad has all these. Karnad a genius who won the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, when he had written just a couple of plays and who, having given ample proof of his
abundant talent through masterpiece after masterpiece got at 61 the most prestigious literary honour available in India, viz. the Jnanpith Award. Of course, his plays can still be counted on finger tips, but by winning the prestigious award he has done honour to the award. He averred to Chaman Ahuja in an interview, "It is easy to be a genius at twenty, but it's quite another thing to be a talent at fifty." (*The Hindu* 27 Feb 2000 xii)

Today Karnad is considered one of the most significant Indian dramatists. This multi-faceted genius has enriched the Indian literary scene by his contribution to art, culture, theatre, publication field, film industry and drama. It is most befitting that Karnad has been conferred with most of the prestigious awards in India. Karnad who is based in Bangalore, keeps shuttling between Bangalore, Bombay and Delhi as the three metropolitan cities abundantly offer him opportunities for creative writing, acting in films and directing serials for National Television.

Karnad is not impulsive by temperament. He does not resort to writing at the flash of an idea. He follows the golden mean of thought and action when he launches on a new play Karnad explains, in the 'Preface' to *The Fire and The Rain*, how he wrote the play:

... for the moment I read the tale, I knew it had to be turned into a play. For the next thirty-seven years. I
struggled with it, trying to fit all the ramifications of the
myth within some sort of a manageable shape. (ix)

Karnad keeps the classical qualities of balance and restraint in his writings. He is an artist with a touch of alchemy, who could turn all that he touched in literature and films into gold. Karnad remains the most important dramatist of the contemporary Indian English theatre. He has also given the Kannada Theatre a richness by writing his plays originally in Kannada. One could witness the talents of an actor-director in Karnad's plays. By manipulating the mythical themes, folk tales and history, Karnad recreates a contemporary consciousness in his plays. His thorough knowledge of the Western theatre, and his theatrical sensibility have sharpened his knowledge of the stage. His contribution to the Indian theatre community and the world theatre community is remarkable and he gives a meaning to the present day existence by mixing the past and the present. Karnad examined all the aspects of the folk and classical tradition from his state and elsewhere. The actual difficulty is in synthesizing them in order to create a new form. In Karnad's plays, one could watch the intelligent synthesis of all these traditions. In fact Karnad's contribution for the evolution of a new form of "Indian" drama is significant.

India is a rich mine of myths and legends. There is an increasing reliance on the repertoire of myths and legends by contemporary Indian playwrights. A
legend is a fictitious story handed down by tradition. It involves both the supernatural and the real people. Myth is archetypal and so a product of the past. It is an anonymous story rooted in the primitive beliefs. It is primordial, ritualistic and often related to agricultural civilization. Myths attempt to interpret creation, divinity and religion. They represent the collective unconscious of a society. Myths have been used in oral and narrative tradition of India. Gifted playwrights discover source materials from myths and legends and employ them creatively. Karnad uses myth in Agni Mattu Male (The Fire and The Rain) and legends and folk tale in Hayavadana and Naga-Mandala. He uses myth and legend "to tell a particular story effectively." They serve as surrogate for Karnad's plays.

Karnad's turning to traditional sources is not merely imitative and reviving. He does not simply retell old myths and legends. His interest is in revisioning them to suit his artistic purposes. Karnad does not faithfully follow the original sources. He makes changes in the myths and legends. In Yayathi, Karnad invented Chandralekha, a new character and she plays the pivotal role in the play. In the Mahabharata, Yavakrida is presented as molesting Vishaka, Paravasu's wife. But in his The Fire and the Rain, based on the Mahabharata, Karnad makes changes and presents Yavakrida and Vishaka as old lovers meeting after a long gap of ten years. When Yavakrida was away, Vishaka was married off to Paravasu. The old lovers meet in the
outskirts of the hermitage when Parvasu is away for the Yajna. The meeting is earthy and realistic. Karnad is highly innovative when he deals with the traditional themes. In Hayavadana, Karnad introduces the sub-plot and it is Karnad's imaginative addition to the main plot of Devadatta - Kapila - Padmini episode. Naga-Mandala, the traditional folk tale attains a new dimension by the introduction of Kurudavva - Kappanna episode.

The process of Karnad's artistic creation needs special attention. It is an interesting subject of study. The process has the quality of a mystery. He ruminates over myths and legends and in the transmutation process, there is deep thinking on Karnad's sight. As a result, Karnad conceives and achieves an innovative and suitable structure for his plays. Thus his plays attain excellence in artistry and craftsmanship. He describes the process of his dramatic creativity in his preface to The Fire and the Rain. The story of Yavakri appealed to him and it took nearly thirty seven years for him to write the play. In the case of Naga-Mandala also, he took several years to write the play. The idea of the play Hayavadana struck him when he read Thomas Mann's "Die Vertauschten Kopfe." But the idea crystallized in Karnad's head in the middle of an argument with B.V.Karanth, a popular theatre personality and Karnad ruminated over the story for a number of years.
When Karnad exploits myths and legends and resort them to contemporary subjects, he creates a favorable audience response. This audience response is an innovative idea in Karnad. In an interview with Rajinder Paul, Karnad explains the secret of this audience response and reception:

Most myths have a strong emotional significance for our audience. I like to play on that too. Part of the effect does come from the fact that the audience already has a set of response to the particular situation I'm dealing with. 

(Enact 1971 3)

The traditional subjects in an innovative method, when presented properly interpret the present in the light of the racial memory. Thus the past is linked with present and continuity is established. Thus the myths and legends serve as metaphor for contemporary situation in Karnad's plays.

Karnad longed to be a poet, but later, when he was in Bombay, he saw "Miss Julie" directed by Alkazi, and impressed by "the psychological cannibalism of the play," Karnad wanted to be a playwright. (Three Plays 2) As a Rhoder Scholar Karnad wanted to live for ever in the land of Eliot and Auden. But his parents wanted him to return to India and settle down. He started writing Yayati to ease the tension, while travelling by ship to England. Anouilh's Antigone and Euridyce introduced him to the art of investing myths
with contemporary relevance. His association with the Madras Players also yielded insights into the craft of theatrical production. When he writes, he can visualize what the scenes could be like on the stage.

Karnad learnt that the Western theatre did not have much to offer him. He found that the absurdists were repeating themselves. He was not very much interested in the drawing-room plays interpreting people within the narrow psychological limits. Western theatre is based on individuals, whereas Indian is relational oriented.

Legend, myth and folklore are the sources to which playwright Karnad has often turned to as sources for his creative expression. Almost each time he has returned with a play that not only probes but reinterprets and extends that which already exists. It is the churning of a modern mind of the post-Freudian generation. Karnad’s journey to history and legend brought forth Tughlaq and Tale-Danda, his encounter with a folklore let to Hayavadana and Naga-Mandala and his thirty seven years of long contemplation with myth resulted in The Fire and the Rain.

The triumph of the playwright lies in the fact that he is able to make the mythical very real. This is what exactly Karnad has done in his plays. His treatment of the traditional subjects with the innovative touch of an architect always takes him to success. The mystique of the myth reaches out to the
Karnad's plays in Kannada, in English and in other languages have received country wide critical acclaim. Out of the ten plays he has written in Kannada, he has translated five into English. It is Karnad's ability to universalise the individual and social predicament through the medium of drama has given his works wide appeal and easy entry into other languages. They have also been translated and performed for audience abroad. Karnad is in fact one of the most done Indian playwrights abroad.

Although rooted in Indian mythology and history, his plays at the same time convey a strong and unmistakable Western philosophical sensibility. The existentialist crisis of modern man is conveyed through strong individuals who are locked in intense psychological and philosophical conflicts. "Karnad has been accused of escaping into the past," said Lakshmi Chandrashekher, an academic and active figure in Kannada theatre. (117) She continues:

But the use of mythology in most modern literature validates individual experiences and universalizes it. And I think Karnad has been able to do that. (117)

Yayati Karnad's first play examines the moment of crisis that Puru's decision sparks and the dilemma it presents for Yayati, Puru and Puru's young wife. Tughlaq his second play shows the transformation of the character of the medieval ruler Mohammed Bin Tughlaq from a sensitive and intelligent ruler
who sets out to do the best for his people. 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 Hayavadana Karnad used the 
folk art form of Yakshagana to examine the modern problem of the 
body/intellect divide. The play presents the frustrated Padmini in spite of her 
best efforts in search for the complete man who must have the best attributes 
of mind and body. Naga-Mandala and Tale-Danda also received critical 
acclaim. Naga-Mandala was based on a folk tale related by A.K.Ramanujan to 
Karnad. Naga-Mandala's folkloristic frame subverts the classical notions 
about marriage without offending the reader's sensibility. Karnad makes fun 
of gods, priests and husbands in Naga-Mandala. Tale-Danda is Karnad's first 
play that deals explicitly with the influence of the larger social and intellectual 
milieu on individual action. Tale-Danda deals with the rise of Væra-saivisam, a 
radical protest and reform movement in twelfth century Karnataka, and the 
struggle between the forces of reaction and protest. Lakshmi Chandrashekher 
rightly remarks:

I get the impression that from Tale-Danda onwards 
Karnad's plays begin to turn outward in a more obvious 
way. He foregrounds the social context of individual 
conflict, something that is further developed in Agni Mattu
Male (The Fire and the Rain), his most recent play. The modern relevance is unmistakable. (118)

The Fire and the Rain is built upon the little known myth of Yavakri, it takes Karnad's personal quest forward. The Fire and the Rain certainly appears to be more laboured than Hayavadana or Naga-Mandala. It is more in the nature of a sophisticated speculation on the essence of theatre. No doubt it is thought provoking.

Though Karnad's plays are complex art forms, they have their own discipline. They borrow from a dozen art forms, but they owe allegiance to none. Like any other art, his plays are capable of analysis, recreation and judgment of its methods and purpose. His plays are social events. His plays are expression of community. For understanding the play, what is communicated is to be known. To recognize this, action is the language. This language creates the dramatic world of the play. The relation between this world and reality is metaphorical. So the nature of the stage, the setting and the style of acting should help the language in its creation of this metaphorical world. In his essay on "Drama, Theatre and Reality" in Drama & Dramatics, Dawson observes:

.... The language of the play establishes for the audience what are the criteria of possibility and probability;
movement, gesture, properties and scenery are auxiliaries which, ideally speaking, should grow out of the creative language. (8-9)

The principle may perhaps be best illustrated in the plays of Karnad. Karnad is not primarily a social problem dramatist. Dramatically he belongs to a particular world. The art of investing myths with contemporary relevance keeps Karnad above a step of the other Indian dramatist of today.

Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism* rightly points out:

> We begin our study of archetypes, then, with the world of myth, an abstract or purely literary world of fictional and thematic design, unaffected by canons of plausible adaptation of familiar experience. In terms of narrative, myth is the imitation if actions near or at the conceivable limits of desire. The gods enjoy beautiful women, fight one another with prodigious strength, comfort and assist man, or else watch his miseries from the height of their immortal freedom. The fact that myth operates at the top level of human desire does not mean that it necessarily presents its world as attained or attainable by human beings. (136)
Karnad does not invent plots for his plays. When a story excites him, he wants to share the excitement with others. He turns to legends, myths, history and folklore. In his interview with Chaman Ahuja, Karnad explains:

In fact, what attracts me most is the archetypal folk tale:
With no fact already there, I find in it all the scope for flirting with ideas. What is more, in a folklorist framework. I find the great advantage of being able to subvert the traditional, even classical beliefs. Since folk tales make fun of everybody - rulers, priests, even gods - everything is taken in good humour. Of course, I must hasten to add, my basic concern is with the human spirit and not with the folk per se; using folk as a mere aesthetic device with no further exploration of what is to be human does not attract me. (xii)

The present could be presented by making history reflect one's own time. The ancient myths serve as metaphors for contemporaneity. *Tughlaq and The Fire and The Rain* are the best examples to substantiate this point.

Some critics have accused Karnad of writing with Western audience in mind and of using themes and techniques that might shock or startle the Indian viewers. But this is not true as far as *Hayavadana, Naga-Mandala* and *The Fire and The Rain* are concerned. Karnad wants to illustrate man's
universal predicament from the viewpoint of a new twentieth century awareness. As the banal method would not do the purpose, as the established myths are not sufficient, Karnad invested myths and dramatized them with contemporaneity. The plays have became provocative. But a good play should be provocative.

With reference to *Hayavadana*, one could assert that the head is more powerful than the body. But it is true that no one can be a perfect being. For a human being it is better to live with a constant tension rather than by to resolve it through some impossible desire for perfection. Devadatta's head on Kapila's body, therefore, results not in perfection, but in failure in the end. Man persists in his folly of trying to realize perfection. If this is the inevitable destiny of man, one has to live and this is how people go on living. Then it can not be called a folly Karnad enlightens the age old situation in new terms. In an interview with Gowri Ramnarayan Karnad asserts:

True, there are others who deal with social reality as it exists today, but I don't think they go beyond mere description. After all, a photographic impression of reality has no value unless you are able to do something more with it. If someone sees my play I would go like him go home with a sense of greater dimension of things than before. This is
possible if there is a distance from the subject, not if I am right in the middle of it... besides, the viewer's mind builds up so many strands of association with current affairs. Then it becomes a strain to highlight that particular aspect you have focused on. (74)

Karnad's handling of mythical themes in depth, recreates a contemporary consciousness. If Karnad is concentrated with the consequences of shirking responsibilities in *Yayati*, *Tughlaq* is the presentation of the most intelligent and idealistic king, who grows alienated and desperate. It also presents the theme of betrayal and existentialism. *Hayavadana* poses the problem of identity and search for completeness. *Naga-Mandala* deals with the universal problem of male chauvinism, the oppression of women and the concept of marriage and chastity. *Tale-Danda* exhibits the stark reality of the ugly social deformity and *The Fire and the Rain*, puts forward Karnad's quest for truth. Of course there is the experience of human isolation and a search for positive value in life and human relationship as recurring themes in Karnad's plays.

Karnad, often seeks a new form for the presentation of myths, legends, folk tales or history with a dramatic point of view. Karnad tries for the synthesis of the East and the West to create a new form. He uses Indian
theatrical techniques in large to present the Western concepts. Except in *Naga-Mandala*, the East - West blending is very prominent in his plays. He also uses Brechtian techniques and features of Absurd drama to present Indian themes.

Karnad has put an indelible mark in the celluloid field, apart from his contribution to the electronic media. To begin with, he wrote the scripts and dialogues for the film *Samskara* (1960) in Kannada based on the novel of the same name by U.R.Anantha Murthy. He played the lead role in that poem in celluloid. With V.V.Karanth, he has co-directed the film *Vamsha Vriksha* (1971) in which he has acted also.

He is widely known for his acting in *Swami, Manthan, Nishant, Godhuli* and *Tabbaliya Ninade Magane*. He has also directed films like *Kadu* (1973) and *Ondanondu Kaladalli* (1978) in Kannada, *Utsav* (1984) *Bhumika* in Hindi. His roles in *Manthan* and *Swami* are among the best in Hindi art cinema. In his interview with Chaman Ahuja, Karnad quips:

Very often, I feel miserable When I realize that, instead of writing good plays - which I think I can do, and should be doing - I have to act in bad TV serials. In this connection, I should wish to add that although acting in films is quite remunerative, it is soul destroying too. That is why I refuse
to be just an actor; I act just for money for my livelihood. Mercifully, I have been able to save my soul by turning to playwriting when ever I can. Theatre has been my first love and remains a passion still. (xii)

His association with the celluloid world has provided him with ample advantages. He had the opportunity to be a director and script-writer in films and there he had discussions on cut, shoot and edit and these kept him alive in terms of the craft. The new visual media of commercial film and television had reduced art to a commodity endlessly replicable at will, with the needs of consumerism dictating the produce. One should not forget that here is a medium that helps one to communicate so easily and to search vast numbers. Of course it has destroyed a lot of good things, but it has also produced a Satyajit Ray, an Akira Kurosawa. As Karnad is very busy with his celluloid and TV activities one fears that this will obstruct his theatrical activities and India will miss many good plays. But the truth is that drama still rules his heart and writing is his soul.

Karnad is a skillful translator. He writes his plays in Kannada. He writes articles, essays and film scripts in English. When he translates his own plays, he has a great advantage. He has a lot of freedom that another translator will not have. A translator has to be faithful to the text and he does not have the freedom
to make changes if it is somebody else's text. To begin with he was quite reluctant to translate his own plays. He realized that translating from Kannada into English required a great deal of re-writing - a kind of trans-creation. He translated Tughlaq when Alyque Padamsee was to stage it and then Hayavadana for the Madras Players. He feels that translating from one regional language to another is easier than translating to English. The basic problem for the translator lies in his search for appropriate cultural equivalents.

Besides his own plays, Karnad has translated Sircar's Evam Indrajit which was well-received in literary world. He found translating the play very enjoyable and rewarding. As a translator, he kept in mind the utterance value of the dialogue. He also conveyed appropriate rhythm and pace of the original language.

Between 1963 and 1970, Karnad was an active member of an amateur group called "Madras Players". He worked as actor and director in such plays as Evam Indrajit, Six characters in search of an Author, Uncle Vanya, The Caretaker, The Crucible and A View from the Bridge in English during 1964-69. He also acted the lead roles in Oedipus Rex and JoKumaraSwamy, directed in Kannada by B.V.Karanth for the Open-Air Festival in Bangalore in 1972.
Karnad has also published a number of articles, the most significant being "In Search of a New Theatre" in Contemporary Indian Tradition and Theatre in India in Daedalus.

Karnad's plurality and complexity in themes and techniques can never be undermined. His versatility can never be questioned. Karnad remains an artist and his art can be described as a vision of reality. Karnad remains, possibly the most contemporaneous, thought provoking serious dramatist of India. He is functioning in the true role of the playwright. He has the courage to pursue the search for truth relentlessly and he is the most compelling playwright to explode the Indian Theatre Scene. Karnad will remain a dramatist of national and international reputation.

There is plenty of scope for further research. Some of the topics that need in-depth analysis are man-woman relationship in Karnad's plays, Theatrical Representation of History in Tughlaq and Tale-Danda, psycho cultural study of Karnad's plays, the treatment of caste and religion in Karnad's plays to mention a few.

National boundaries are not impediments to the understanding of the unity of all literature. What makes a work of art great is the description of the fundamental human emotions. Karnad is a playwright who values above all the fundamental human emotions. Karnad is considered one of India's
foremost playwrights and an excellent craftsmen who ties up all loose ends. He has not only blended East and the West, in terms of technique, but also has brought the West and East, the unifying factor being his art.