Visions of Resistance

Postcoloniality is more about engaging one’s social and cultural past in a contemporary context, thereby providing a new insight into the epistemic quest for ethnic identities. Both Girish Karnad and Wole Soyinka employ theatre to this effect, though in different ways. Rooted in their respective postcolonial situations, they create a hybrid theatre language to address the contemporary socio-political situations in their countries. Both Nigeria and India have experienced the extended periods of imperial hegemony, which left a lasting imprint on these nations’ culture. While attempting to subvert the influence of colonisation, their respective cultural tradition that are rich in their pre-contact form aid both Soyinka and Karnad, who make ample use of this abundance as vehicles for driving home the political messages of their literary works. In this process, the hidden potential and subtleties of inferences available within the myths and rituals are exploited to accentuate the issues of the present.

Devices, ranging from onstage properties like costumes and masks, which give direct allusions to the cultural repertoire they bank their plays on, to abstract assertions of cultural purity, like rhythm and music of folk art forms, are employed to maximum effect in the plays by both Soyinka and Karnad. At the same time, their plays also bring out the different manners in which the same tools are employed in postcolonial hybrid cultures. For example, while the European theatrical tradition uses masks to hide the real nature of their characters, the indigenous art forms use them to bring out the inner self of characters. Unlike in European theatre, the characters in postcolonial theatre transcend their real selves to assume traits connoted by the masks. This attributive nature of masks is effectively used by Soyinka while dealing with Egungunian myths and Karnad when his characters stage play within
play as in *The Fire and The Rain*. Both Soyinka and Karnad endorse the indigenous cultural notion that masks are not just stage properties with aesthetic justifications, but are keys to shift from one character to another inside the structure of the play itself. Again, both these playwrights improvise on the use of myths to adapt it to contemporary theatre aesthetics and use them as medium for socio-political criticism, thus attributing a new role to these stage props.

The first hand experience that Soyinka and Karnad have of the colonial theatre help them to draw elements and techniques from both the indigenous and European theatre to generate syncretism and hybridity required to reflect the composite cultural realities of contemporary times effectively. Since the colonists made use of different strategies to command control over the different parts of the globe, so does the experience of postcoloniality differ from region to region and from person to person in accordance with the intensity of the colonial experience that each one undergoes. Through their reinterpretation of age-old myths, Soyinka and Karnad not only bring out the richness and vitality of their respective indigenous cultural tradition but also use them as powerful tools in subverting colonial idioms and power positioning attributed to individuals within social hierarchy. Thematically, both these playwrights exhibit common postcolonial traits as they place stress on the need of personal sacrifices for the general good of the community, which is again a subversion of the prominence attributed to individual over the community during the colonial phase.

Unlike the Western world view where individual acts as the pivot, African society pitches community as its focal point and individual is just part of the collective. In both his ritual-based plays, *Death and the King’s Horseman* and *The Strong Breed*, Soyinka brings out the need for personal sacrifices for the cosmic cycle to move along smoothly. And it is the younger generation, be it Eman or the Western-
educated Olunde, who ultimately shows that extraordinary courage is required to overcome all odds and successfully complete their duty towards the society. Myths and rituals form the base of many plays of Karnad too. Pooru and Arvasu also belong to the younger generation, who make personal sacrifices for the general good. They are daring enough to lay down their individual interests for the cause of the community. Arvasu, just like Olunde, also depicts the spirit and energy that the postcolonial nations need to overcome the burden of centuries of psychological and political oppression. Thus Soyinka and Karnad return to the roots of their traditional wisdom and reinterpret the myths and rituals and add a shade of contemporaneeity to them. By doing so, both Soyinka and Karnad assert their faith in humanity. While both of them borrow characters from their respective histories and legends, the characters they invent better stand testimony to their innate sense of profound concern for man as a social being.

Another factor that connects both Soyinka and Karnad is that they expound the native faith in a cyclical pattern of temporal reality, which is in contrast with the linear pattern imposed by the colonial legacy. Plays of Soyinka and Karnad are marked with characters, who always return to their roots after being exposed to Western system of education that is often projected as superior to native wisdom. Olunde and Daodu in Kongi’s Harvest are brought closer to their own culture by their exposure to Western culture and education, as it happens with Tipu Sultan, who takes leverage of his exposure to Western education to counter the British imperial motives. Similarity in problematising the postcoloniality with reference to their political past notwithstanding, Soyinka and Karnad show differences in tone and timbre of expressions, as their respective postcolonial experiences are quite different. Hence Soyinka, who is overtly political in his dealings with the postcolonial condition, time
and again emphasises the need for the harmonious development of the community, for the African world-view gives prime importance to the community. Karnad, on his part, raises the postcolonial issues of caste and gender that cripples the Indian society and leaves subtle pointers drawn from national history to addressing this issue. Through his plays he gives voice to the marginalised and those who exist in the fringes of the society – thereby dismantling the authority wielded upon by the patriarchal society. In Karnad’s plays, the characters representing the patriarchal society attains the political shades of the colonial master just as the power mongers in Soyinka are the reflections of the colonial period, while the protagonists, who stand up to them, symbolise the emerging postcolonial identity.

These playwrights also borrow characters from history and treat them with insights obtained over passage of time, thus bringing out shades of meanings to their actions that were most often wrongly interpreted by colonial historians. The authenticity of history has always been a topic of debate in postcolonial discourse, especially since history has been used by the imperial powers as a major instrument to control the subject people. History is used as a counter discourse strategy by both Soyinka and Karnad. Both of them evoke the collective memory of the people about their history and try to caution the people not to commit the same mistakes over and again. Thus they both deidealise the past and bring out the past of their nations with all the historical deformities. In A Dance of the Forests, Soyinka brings out the horrifying reality of slave trade and corruption that haunted the kingdom of Mata Kharibu and throws light on the continuation of the same mistakes in the present day through the life of Demoke and Madame Tortoise. The character of the General acts as the symbol of indomitable will ready to speak against injustice in the face of all dangers. By making the people face the unpleasant past Soyinka depicts a clear
picture of the past. Similarly Karnad in his *Tale-Danda*, depicts a precolonial Indian society afflicted with the caste consciousness through the life and dreams of Basavanna who yearned and stood for a secular society. Through their works both Soyinka and Karnad exhort the people to consciously overcome the postcolonial amnesia and move forward. Another recurring motif in works of Soyinka and Karnad is the native historian, who is shown as attempting to challenge the colonial recording of local history. These characters are overt manifestations of postcolonial urge to revisit one’s own past with a new perspective.

Another device that Soyinka and Karnad employ to highlight the chinks in their national histories is by depicting the power struggles that existed in the past, which indirectly helped the colonial domination. *Kongi’s Harvest* presents the clash between traditional power structures represented by Oba Danlola and the despot Kongi craving for absolute power. Soyinka advocates that the present postcolonial scenario demands an amalgam of the tradition and modern qualities. He brings out the destructive qualities of the phenomenon of Kongism and demands the eradication of the phenomenon. Similarly, in *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* Karnad presents a native version of the life and dreams of Tipu Sultan, a picture quite contrary to the colonial representation of the great patriot. Along with that he also presents the picture of the native Indian rulers quarreling among themselves, which served as a booster for the British encroachers and their strategy to rule India by the ‘divide-and-rule’ policy.

Finally, both Soyinka and Karnad identify rightly and employ effectively language as a potential counter discursive tool for the postcolonial framework of their plays. Language has been a major tool employed by the colonisers to thrust their authority upon the colonised and all native languages were deliberately sidelined by them to establish English as the stamp of authority. By using English as their medium
to convey their postcolonial realities, both Soyinka and Karnad use the same strategy used by the colonisers to counter the oppression imposed upon them. They deliberately induce the style and diction of their native tongues into the English language and adapt the coloniser’s language to suit their purpose.

But in keeping with the postcolonial contexts of their native countries, these playwrights differ in the way they manipulate the coloniser’s tongue. Soyinka makes use of techniques like mimicry, code-switching, code-mixing and the use of Pidgin English along with extensive use of proverbs, poetry and music from the native Yoruba culture to highlight the postcoloniality of his plays. On the other hand, Karnad draws extensively from the language structure and patterns of classical Sanskrit play and linguistic pattern of Kannada, his natural language, to create this effect. Karnad too uses proverbs and songs, which are loosely translated from the original language, and woven intelligently into the English narrative pattern of the play. The imagery and diction used in these verses effectively give characteristically Indian tone to the play, which augments the choice of theme and tenor chosen by the playwright. Both Soyinka and Karnad also bring in elements of native speech rhythms into the English language and successfully make use of the alien tongue to reflect the native sensibility – native symbols and images which invoke the collective memory of an abundant and rich native tradition. However, Soyinka experiments more with language as he stretches English to its limits and explores the potential of appropriation, whereas Karnad more or less adheres to the classical spirit of adapting a foreign language to express the postcolonial quest for indigenous identity. It is evident from the fact that Karnad wrote primarily in his natural tongue of Kannada and then translated the plays to English so as to reach out to a wider audience. Even when he writes in English, he makes sure that this element of Indianisation holds good. In that manner, both
Soyinka and Karnad encounter colonial legacy by their use of mixed and hybridised language to capture the essence of their fragmented history and richness of own culture.

Both these playwrights are faced with the task of balancing the postcolonial role of highlighting their own cultural richness and correcting the colonial misrepresentation of their respective histories. For this end, both Soyinka and Karnad delve on the theatrical devices from their traditions – as leaving the plays open-ended, leaving space for multiple interpretations of reality. This is also a counteract to the definitive nature of colonial culture that compartmentalises knowledge as extremes of known and unknown and could also be seen as an effort to take their art closer to native culture of abstraction. In tune with the postcolonial trait of decentralising the narrative, both Soyinka and Karnad draw energy from the oral and traditional culture to shift focus from the individual to the community. At the same time, they succeed in addressing social and political challenges posed by their respective nations. While Soyinka highlights the bane of contemporary African political reality, which is ridden with diverse political ambitions and resultant instability in administration, Karnad repeatedly highlights the weak spots in contemporary Indian society – like the unrest caused by the differentiation made over caste and creed as well as restriction of personal freedom on the basis of gender discrimination.

At the same time, it should be noted that Soyinka and Karnad differ in their treatment and approach towards postcoloniality. Soyinka’s reaction to the colonial intervention to the native history and culture has been virulent as argued in this thesis and as reflected in his plays. His characters capture the vibrancy of the political resistance put up against the colonial attempts to alter the cultural mindscape of the native. In contrast to this, Karnad’s characters respond to the cultural revisionism in a
relatively less passionate and often in a more ambiguous manner. Though differential in degree and manner, these two playwrights nevertheless respond sensitively to the contemporary socio-political realities of their nations through their plays. The different techniques used by them owe to the insights they acquired from the cultural exposure to their respective environments as well as to their direct experience of the West.

This study aimed to analyse the impacts of colonialism on different nations, with specific reference to works by Wole Soyinka and Girish Karnad and their continuing engagement with postcolonial projects to counter the legacy of colonialism. As Soyinka and Karnad highlight through their works, issues of political suppression and corruption of values do not end with the colonial era. Writers and artistes in the postcolonial period find their mooring points by returning to roots and re-interpreting their past with a new insight. The assimilation of the indigenous culture happens in many levels. It can be seen that postcoloniality evokes similar reactions, even while retaining individual characteristics. While Soyinka puts up an intensely political stand against the White domination, Karnad attempts to assimilate the lessons of colonialism to his contemporary realities subtly. The undercurrent of both attempts, however, remains to highlight the resurgence of pride in national consciousness. They reiterate the need to place the community ahead of the individual. This subversion of the colonial tenets bonds these two playwrights and leaves scope for furthering the enquiry into the issues raised by them in their plays.