An Abstract of the Study

“Modernity of Tradition and Thought in the Plays of Girish Karnad: A Study”

The present study is a critical inquiry into Girish Karnad’s configuration of modernity vis-à-vis tradition and thought. Keeping various strands of literary modernism, Western and Indian, in perspective, relevant to the topic of the study, and using some of the modernist postcolonial critical idioms, such as ‘temporalization’, ‘intertextuality’, ‘hybridity’, ‘dialogicity’, ‘Otherness’ and ‘subalternity’, the study has made a serious and modest attempt to delve deep, with reference to select plays of Karnad, into the matrices and meanings connoted through his dramaturgy. In the process, it essays to unearth to what extent Girish Karnad succeeds in aestheticizing the contemporary Indian problematic by interfacing modernity with tradition and thought by his conscious option to return to Indic roots of storytelling and by his comfort level at mediating his plays through diverse influences which have made deep impact upon his dramaturgic vision of life that reflects human experience and human character at varied levels in time and history. Instead of repeating known paths of textual analyses focusing more on story line, the researcher opted for a more rigorous critical idiomatic approach with focus more on the contemporaneous cultural and aesthetic consciousness of Karnad as reflected in the select plays.

Karnad’s Brechtian kind of ‘complex seeing’ and ‘historicizing’, animated by ‘spatio-temporal boundaries of modernism’, routed through his mythopoeic – ‘ethno-symbolic’ -- strategies and techniques, and highlighted by a diachronic-synchronic
framework he is familiar and fine with, conveys certain ‘cultural interflows’ foregrounding his affinities with certain eclectic modernist ethos which reflect his concerns for Other-centred point of view against received history, tradition-bound, religion-bound, caste and class-bound hegemonic values which oppress and exploit people, especially women and marginalized sections in the socio-politico-economic and cultural context of India. Data collected, scrutinized and studied in depth to the best of the researcher’s capacity inspires her to summate and conclude that Karnad’s plays are pebbles in the pond of India’s eclectic modernist ethos marked for their ethno-symbolism that facilitates a mythopoeic continuity of narrative system that upholds, or contests traditional values in the course of addressing the contemporary Indian problematic.

Thematic analyses done in the light of certain critical idioms, noted above, defend the stature of Karnad as ‘a cultural connoisseur’ who challenges his audience/readers through his plays, both as texts and performances, which tend to problematize the contemporary Indian subjectivity. Themes such as excessive human desire that includes lust, greed, and self-aggrandizing power politics, problems such as existential alienation, patriarchal exploitation and oppression, misgovernance, manipulative politics, leadership crisis, corruption, caste and class discriminations, communalism, fundamentalist-cultural chauvinism, religious hypocrisy, poverty and marginalization are part of Karnad’s artistic distillation. Issues such as female sexuality, sexual freedom, quest for gender justice, subalternity, and individual and national identity are part of his preferred choices for third space negotiation, or encounters.

By dividing the study into five chapters, with Chapter One dwelling on ‘modernity, tradition, and thought’, Chapter Two examining ‘the diverse influences upon Karnad’s dramaturgy and his vision’, Chapter Three expanding ‘the critical
idioms-induced textual analyses of the select texts’, Chapter Four covering towards viewing ‘Karnad as a Cultural aesthete’, and Chapter Five ‘summatng the previous Chapters, stating and commenting on the research-finds, and concluding the research study’. That Karnad is an eclectic modernist whose imaginative genius blends tradition and thought in the light of his hybridized vision of modernity has been amply posited in the study. His own Prefaces and Introductions to his plays not only reveal his diachronic-synchronic mind enlightened diverse influences but also hint at the possibility that he could be ‘his own best critic’. The stance that he, as a modernist in the post-independence era of India, is a ‘unique iconic voice’ on the count of cultural aesthetics of India, and his artistic dramaturgic talent weaves together ethno-symbolism and certain modernist ethos, appealing to the modern and postmodern generations in and outside India, is one of the mainstays / arguments substantiated and reiterated in between the lines of the dissertation.

The researcher has made a modest attempt to connect and interpolate the polyphonic dimensions of Karnad’s worldviews vis-à-vis interpersonal human relationships, re-reading history, issues arising out of patriarchy, casteism, and certain other social concerns bordering on Indian subjectivity. The research findings, revolving around four major cultural categories, namely ‘modernist ethos’, ‘ethno-symbolism’, ‘postcolonial eye’ and ‘subalternization’, emphasize the fact that Karnad’s dramaturgic imagining and his poetic worldviews dialogically (inclusive of diachronic-synchronic, context-sensitive, and polyphonic approaches and portrayals) foreground a compassionate worldview reflecting his affinities with certain modernist ethos hyphenated by Indic art-emotion that has comparable resonance with that of A.K.Ramanujan.