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Major Experiments in the Theatre of Girish Karnad: A Case Study

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Abstract

Drama, of all forms of literature, is the closest to life. It can be called an imitation of the multiple colours of life on stage by using multiple dramatic techniques. It creates an imaginary landscape on stage by imitating the real aspects of human life. It not only presents the realistic approach of life on stage, but also enacts what life can be. Imitation is the key concept of theatre, but at the end of a play, it reveals that life has more colours than we normally see. But the harsh reality of theatre is that it gets less attention of academic critics in comparison to other genres of literature. Academicians think that it is a performing art so they talk less about theatre while theatre artists pay more attention of the dramatic performance part and not bother about the academic part of the text. This neglect can be rectified if academic attention is seriously given to the study of the major experiments that have been done in theatre as a performing art.

Keywords: Sanskrit theatre, Folk theatre, Parsi theatre, Epic theatre, Proscenium theatre

Girish Karnad is one among those playwrights who has experimented with the root of Indian theatre. He has used the dramatic devices of theatres like “Sanskrit theatre”, “Folk theatre”, “Parsi theatre”, “Epic theatre”, “Proscenium theatre”, etc. In the field of Indian theatre Renaissance came with the works of Karnad. He experimented a lot with dramatic techniques in his plays. On the basis of his use of dramatic techniques, his plays move effortlessly between tradition and modernity. He can be categorised as traditionalist in the sense of Eliot. He follows tradition but adds something more through modernity which never breaks the roots of theatre. Each of his play has different dramatic techniques and leaves a lot of scope for the directors to think and experiment. His plays got mature not only by his writing, but also by the directions of different famous directors. His position as an experimental

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playwright is as Badal Sirkar in Bengali, Habib Tanvir in Chhattisgarhi, Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi; and Mohan Rakesh and Dharamveer Bharati in Hindi. In the early part of his life he was famous as a Kannada playwright, but with the passage of time he attained the status of a national figure in the realm of Indian theatre.

Karnad started writing plays at that time when the standard of Indian theatre was poor. He wrote plays in these difficult circumstances and started a new era in the realm of Indian theatre. He has experimented a lot and used Sanskrit theatre, folk theatre, Parsi theatre, and introduced Western dramatic techniques independently as well as by mixing it with traditional Indian theatre (for example Epic theatre with Indian folk theatre), etc. About the formative influence on his theatre, Karnad writes:

In fact, when I look to what inspires me or what excites me one automatically goes either, which is of course fashionable these days but one does, to the folk theatre, or to Shakespeare or Ibsen or something like that. And it is by and large true. Certainly in the last thousand years, I would say certainly after the Sanskrit period or Sanskrit drama was over, there is little that really excite one, as an Ibsen would excite one or a Shakespeare would excite one. (86 - 87)

Thus because of these experiments he has rightly been called as “the man of Renaissance” in the realm of Indian drama.

In the matter of experiments Karnad shows the direct influence of folk theatre. He has written two famous plays *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala*. Karnad accepts the direct influence of *Yakshagana* (a form of folk theatre popular in Karnataka) on his plays. *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala* are the outcome of Karnad’s experiments with *Yakshagana*. As a playwright, the first formative influence that has been acknowledged by him is that of the *Yakshagana* performance in his village. This influence during his childhood took deep roots in his mind and he adopts many of dramatic techniques of *Yakshagana* in his plays. About the impact of *Yakshagana* on his mind Karnad says:

I always went to the *Yakshagana* with the servant because my parents would rather be dead than be seen watching *Yakshagana* in those days. It was just considered to low brow and one had to sit with the servants. The Natak Company plays were on proscenium and they were lit by gas lamps, while the *Yakshaganas* were lit by lanterns and very often by torch lights because Sirsi didn’t have any kind of electricity then. (87)

Thus, the first lesson of theatre was from this folk theatre performed in his village. Karnad uses the techniques of *Yakshagana* in many of his plays but mixes it with another form. Karnad has used folk theatre by mixing it with the dramatic techniques of Bertolt Brecht and few other western dramatic techniques. It adopts the dramatic concepts like- selection of theme from oral narratives or from myths, multiple narratives in a single performance,

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structure of the play like Chinese box structure, invocation of god/goddess, poetic verses and heightened prose, character narrator or *Sutradhara*, chorus, role of comic character like *Nata* and *Hanumanayaka*, role of Dolls, role of Chorus, Half-Curtain technique, mask, mime, art of characterisation, happy ending, scope on multiple endings, etc. from folk theatre. Karnad has mixed the dramatic techniques of folk theatre with Western theatre. Karnad's chosen form was an eclectic synthesis of the Greek playwrights, Bertolt Brecht, Jean Anouilh, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Eugene O' Neill. .

The impact of Parsi theatre can also be seen on Karnad. In the writing of *Tughlaq*, he has used the dramatic technique of Parsi theatre. Parsi theatre mixes both the dramatic techniques of Western and Indian theatre. In the matter of selection of theme it introduces secularism on stage. Due to the secularism alienation comes on stage and character as well as audience feels alienated during the show. The playwrights show the existentialism on stage in order to present secularism. The division of scenes into Deep Scene and Shallow Scene is the land mark of Parsi Theatre. Deep Scene contains the serious action and major characters while shallow scene presents the minor characters and comic episodes. He explains the richness of Parsi theatre as:

The stagecraft of the Parsi model demanded a mechanical succession of the alternating *shallow* and *deep* scenes. The shallow scenes were played in the foreground of the stage with a painted curtain- normally depicting a street- as a backdrop. These scenes were reserved for the 'lower class' characters with prominence given to comedy. They served as *link* scenes in the development of the plot, but the main purpose was to keep the audience engaged while the deep scenes, which showed interior of palaces, royals parks, and other such visually opulent sets, were being changed or decorated. The important characters rarely appeared in the street scenes, and in the deep scenes the lower classes strictly kept their place. (307-08)

The division of stage through curtain is another dramatic techniques used by Karnad from Parsi theatre. It introduces front curtain, middle curtain, and deep curtain on stage. Parsi directors most of the time used painted curtain in order to minimise the use of props on stage. It presents the other dramatic techniques like flash-back techniques, melodramatic scene, and symbolism on stage. Karnad has experimented with the dramatic techniques of Parsi theatre and written *Tughlaq*. He writes:

I wrote *Tughlaq*, I found it increasingly difficult to maintain the accepted balance between these two regions . . . I found the shallow scenes bulging with an energy hard to control. The regions ultimately developed their own logic. The deep scene became emptier as the play progressed, and in the last scene, the 'comic lead' did the unconventional –he appeared in the deep scene, on a

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par with the protagonist himself. This violation of traditionally sacred spatial hierarchy, I decided –since there was little I could do about it –was the result of the anarchy which climaxed Tughlaq’s times and seemed poised to engulf my own. (308)

Karnad has written two plays *The Fire and the Rain* and *Flowers* based on the dramatic techniques of Sanskrit theatre. His selection of Sanskrit theatre is not in an exact way of other playwrights. He has presented experimental Sanskrit theatre to his audience. Both the plays select the themes and techniques of Sanskrit theatre. Karnad has used myth for plot and mixes imaginary plot with the main plot. Structure of the play *The Fire and the Rain* has similarity with a form of Sanskrit theatre known as *Samavakra* while the other play *Flowers* is based on *Bhana* tradition of Sanskrit theatre. The structure of the play *The Fire and the Rain* is structured like Prologue – main Plot –Epilogue. Karnad has adopted *Yajna* as main theme for the play. He has presented sin and expiation as the theme of the play. He has presented *Yajna* at both levels thematic as well as technical level. The structure of *Yajna* and theatre has similarity in the matter of performance (performance-disruption by the demons, building of a protective enclosure-discussion –second performance inside the enclosure). Karnad has also presented the concepts like *Yajna* and entertainment and *Yajna* and danger concepts in the play. The other dramatic techniques he has experimented are like- beginning of the play, art of characterisation, selection of language according to the position of character in Brahminical concepts of society, stage and stage settings, costume and make-up, use of props, concepts of *rasas* and *bhavas*, etc. *Flowers* is another play based on the dramatic techniques of Sanskrit theatre. Karnad has experimented with the techniques of *Bhana* in the play. It is a play in which single character (character like rogue) comes on stage and narrates his own story. The narration of story becomes very interesting because he narrates and performs some body movement of his own self and also of other characters. So Karnad has experimented with the dramatic techniques of Sanskrit theatre and presented a new type of theatre to his audience.

Karnad is also influenced by the dramatic techniques of Proscenium theatre. His plays like *The Dream of Tipu Sultan*, *Tale-Danda*, *A Heap of Broken Images*, *Bali: The Sacrifice*, etc. based on the dramatic techniques of proscenium theatre. Karnad has used the dramatic techniques of Proscenium theatre only in those plays in which he felt the need to present illusionary reality on stage. But at another level he also use the dramatic techniques of proscenium in his other plays based on other forms of theatre because he knows it’s very well that his plays will be performed in proscenium theatre. Karnad has mixed the dramatic techniques of Proscenium theatre with the technique of film in his well-known play *The Heap of Broken Images*. About the influence of Western theatre, Karnad says:

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The tradition that we borrowed from the West was not the tradition of Shakespeare, was not the tradition of Ibsen, so much as the tradition of Shaw. Even when Ibsen is imitated it is Shaw who comes from it and surprisingly what comes through Shaw to us, many of the notions that come through Shaw to us are entirely wrong. (91)

Thus Karnad rejects Shaw because he had provided the wrong tradition of Ibsen to us. He says that the Western influence on Indian theatre came as the influence of Shaw. He says if it had come as the direct influence of Shakespeare and Ibsen then the situation of an India theatre might have been different. But at one level the Ibsenian theatre focuses on the realistic projection of urban middle class and their drawing room and living room conflict. Karnad felt was not suitable for India theatre. He says:

All naturalistic plays in the West take place in the drawing room and this was a great tradition handed down by Ibsen; the living room of the house is the central point for the individual. This is the house which he has got, from which the individual faces the world outside as well as inside, in this living room. So from *A Doll's House*, through all these playwrights that I mentioned until Ibsen actually gives up naturalistic theatre, everything happens in the living room. This is because the living room has a very important place in the West, not only in theatre, but in society itself it is where the person belongs. But in India living room is really a place where you keep the external world out. The only function of a living room in India is to meet guests and to give them tea. It is not a place where the family meets and discusses, I mean the traditional family. (91-92)

He says that to present the conflict of urban middle class as theme for a play in India is very difficult. He says that in the Indian context the drawing room theatre is not possible because in India people always separate their individual life from their social life. The hierarchy of family is set in Indian context. On the other hand, in the West the drawing room is a place where people talk about their personal as well as social problems. So he denies the possibility of this kind of theatre in India. Karnad's rejection of this kind of theatre is a short coming in his theatre. He has never shown the conflict of modern urban middle class as theme in his plays. On the contrary, Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Dattani and other playwrights have excellently used the conflicts of urban middle class as themes in their plays. These playwrights have got their popularity on the basis of their themes selected from urban middle class society, clash of hierarchy in family, class struggle, giving voice to the marginalised, etc. They were able to depict contemporary modern India life. Karnad realised his short coming very late and wrote a play *Wedding Album* based on the life of modern urban middle class society which deals with the living room setting. But Karnad's experiment failed on

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stage. He was unable to do this in his theatre. The reason may be, perhaps, that Karnad had not used the techniques of naturalistic theatre in an open minded way. The second reason may be that he was interested in depicting mythical, legendary and historical reality in a contemporary context. In this context he was for more successful than these other playwrights but in the other he failed.

Karnad has also shown the formative influence of Bertold Brecht on his dramatic writing. Alienation effect, music, verses with irregular rhythm, heightened prose and metered poetry, loosely connected episodes, complex nature of character, songs, and various interpretation are the main characteristics of epic theatre. About the impact of Brecht on Karnad, R. N. Rai quotes “Brecht influence received mainly through his writing and without the benefit of his theatrical productions went somehow in making us realise what could be done with the design with the traditional theatre.” (29) Karnad’s folk plays like *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala* deal with the well-known effects like “alienation effect” propounded by Brecht. Alienation effect is a term which explains that there should be no curtain between the action on the stage and audience. It advocates the performance of the play in general light and the changing of the scenes and sets without dropping the curtain. In the matter of dramatic techniques of the performance both Brechtian theatre and Indian folk theatre have a lot of similarities. As epic theatre, folk theatre also avoids the use of illusionary reality on stage. It has *sutradhara* to play the role of bridge between audience and performance. In the middle of the performance he directly communicates with the audience and actors on the stage. Both present loosely connected episodic themes on the stage. Music, illusionary lights never interrupts the dialogue and action of the play. Karnad has used folk theatre by mixing it with the dramatic techniques of Brecht. Karnad has very strong view point about folk theatre:

The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold the traditional values, it has also the means of questioning these values, of making them literary stands on their head. The various conventions- the chorus, the masks, the seemingly unrelated comic episodes, the mixing of human and nonhuman worlds-permit the simultaneous presentation of alternative point of views, of alternative attitudes to the central problem. To use a phrase from Bertolt Brecht, these conventions then allow for ‘complex seeing’. (39)

Karnad’s folk plays are a good mix of many forms of theatre. He mixes the theatres techniques of traditional Indian folk theatre, epic theatre and proscenium theatre into one shape.

Karnad has shown a deep respect for Greek plays and playwrights. He himself acknowledged the impact on his writing. In his adaptation of classical Sanskrit theatre he mixes the dramatic techniques with Greek dramatic techniques. About the impact of Greeks

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and Shakespeare, Tutun Mukherjee commented in an interview (asking his response), “The structure [of *The Fire and the Rain*] is classically simple: Prologue and Epilogue framing the three Acts. The Greeks and Shakespeare come immediately to mind.”(46) Karnad’s response was, “. . . I wrote the play my attention was drawn to Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*. There were uncanny parallels. The basic myths come with their own meaning, of course. In that too the similarities were remarkable. I delved deeper into Aeschylus’ classic play and consider the joy of re-learning that text the reward for writing *The Fire and the Rain*.”(46-47) So the direct influence of Greek is noticeable on the work of Karnad. Another influence can be seen in the matter of the use of mask in his plays like *Hayavadana*, *The Fire and the Rain*. In the same interview with Tutun Mukherjee, he accepts the Greek impact on his use of mask in the play. He says:

As I contemplated the use of masks for the play, I become conscious of the implications of the ‘mask’. The mask represents the spirit by whom the actor seeks to be possessed. Ancient Indian and Greek theatre had used mask to represent the face “writ large”, as it were. Modern Western theatre uses masks to contrast the face, the persona hiding the real person. In the *Yakshagana* performances that I had seen in my childhood, the show would begin with the worship of Ganesha, who would be represented on stage as an elephant-head mask . . . To me, the basic equation in the tale of the head with a different body offered the perfect justification for the use of the masks. (38)

Karnad does not blindly follow the path of Greek and Western playwrights. He has used them according to the needs of play. He experimented and uses mask to explore the personality. His use of mask fulfils half of the art of characterisation. In *Hayavadana*, mask is used for Lord Ganesh, Kapila, Devadatta and Hayavadana, all characters mask represent their personalities as often found in Greek plays. In *The Fire and the Rain* mask is used powerfully by wearing the mask a character starts to behave according to the nature of mask. Karnad has adopted the concept of mask form various forms of theatre. He has used mask in *Hayavadana* by following the concept of folk theatre. In *The Fire and the Rain* he has followed the concept of Sanskrit theatre and Greek theatre. His use of mask in his plays is against the concept of the use of mask in Western theatre. In Western theatre masks is used to hide the personality while in Indian theatre and Greek theatre mask is used to reveal the personality of character. Besides all these, Karnad has also shown the deep respect for Greek plays and playwrights in various other things.

In the end it can be said that Karnad has started a new era in the realm of Indian Theatre. He experiments ranges from *Natyashastra* till contemporary form of theatre. His greatness line in his experiments because he has not copied any single form of theatre but presented a good mix of many forms of theatre. His plays like *Hayavadana* and *Naga-*

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Mandala are often categorised as folk play but at certain level they follow the dramatic techniques of epic theatre. His plays like *The Fire and the Rain* and *Flowers* are based on the dramatic techniques of Sanskrit theatre but at certain level they deal with the dramatic techniques of Proscenium Theatre. His play *Broken Images* follows the techniques of film in theatre. Karnad is, perhaps, the first theatre personality who has introduced the techniques of film in theatre. Thus, the richness of the theatre of Karnad lies in his experiments with the dramatic techniques of theatre.

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