

Study of Girish Karnad: The Modernist in Indian Theatre

Rupali Gosavi

Research Scholar, Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut, U.P

Abstract

Indian theatre is one of the most ancient forms of Indo-European and Asian theatre and it features a detailed textual, sculptural, and dramatic effects.[1] Like in the areas of music and dance, the Indian theatre is also defined by the dramatic performance defined by the concept of Natya, which is a Sanskrit word for drama but encompasses dramatic narrative, virtuosic dance, and music.[2][1] Indian theatre exerted influence beyond its borders, reaching ancient China and other countries in the Far East. The earliest form of classical theatre of India was the Sanskrit theatre which came into existence after the development of Greek and Roman theatres in the west.[3] One theory describes this development as an offshoot of Alexander the Great's Indian conquest.[4] The invading army staged Greek-style plays and Indians picked up the performance art. While some scholars argue that traditional Indian theatre predated it, there is a recognition that classical Greek theatre has helped transformed it.[4]

Keywords: Theatre, Drama.

1. INTRODUCTION

Girish Raghunath Karnad (born 19 May 1938) is an Indian actor, film director, Kannada writer,^[1] playwright and a Rhodes Scholar, who predominantly works in South Indian cinema and Bollywood. His rise as a playwright in the 1960s, marked the coming of age of modern Indian playwriting in Kannada, just as Badal Sarkar did in Bengali, Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi, and Mohan Rakesh in Hindi.^[2] He is a recipient of the 1998 Jnanpith Award, the highest literary honour conferred in India.^[3]

For four decades Karnad has composed plays, often using history and mythology to tackle contemporary issues. He has translated his plays into English and has received acclaim.^[4] His plays have been translated into some Indian languages and directed by directors like Ebrahim Alkazi, B. V. Karanth, Alyque Padamsee, Prasanna, Arvind Gaur, Satyadev Dubey, Vijaya Mehta, Shyamanand Jalan, Amal Allana and Zafer Mohiuddin.^[4] He is active in the world of Indian cinema working as an actor, director and screenwriter, in Hindi and Kannada cinema, and has earned awards. He was conferred Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan by the Government of India and won four Filmfare Awards, of which three are Filmfare Award for Best Director – Kannada and the fourth a Filmfare Best Screenplay Award.

Girish Raghunath Karnad was born in Matheran, in present-day Maharashtra, in 1938. His mother Krishnabai née Mankikar was a young widow with a son, and while training to be a nurse, met Dr. Raghunath Karnad who was a doctor in the Bombay Medical Service. For five years they could not get married because of the prevailing prejudice against widow remarriage. Finally their marriage was sanctified under the dispensation of the Arya Samaj. Girish was the third of the four children born thereafter.^[5]

Girish Karnad's initial schooling was in Marathi. In Sirsi, Karnataka, he was exposed to travelling theatre groups, Natak Mandalis, as his parents were deeply interested in their plays.^[6] As a youngster, Karnad was an ardent admirer of Yakshagana and the theater in his village.^[7] His family moved to Dharwad in Karnataka when he was 14 years old, where he grew up with his two sisters and niece.^[8]

He earned his Bachelor of Science degree in mathematics and statistics from Karnatak Arts College, Dharwad (Karnataka University), in 1958. Upon graduation Karnad went to England and studied

Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Magdalen in Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar (1960–63), earning his Master of Arts degree in philosophy, political science and economics.^[4] Karnad was elected President of the Oxford Union in 1963.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Karnad is known as a playwright. His plays, written in Kannada, have been translated into English and some Indian languages. Kannada is his language of choice.

When Karnad started writing plays, Kannada literature was highly influenced by the renaissance in Western literature. Writers would choose a subject that looked entirely alien to manifestation of native soil. C. Rajagopalachari's version of the Mahabharata published in 1951, left a deep impact on him^[11] and soon, sometime in the mid-1950s, one day he experienced a rush of dialogues by characters from the Mahabharata in Kannada. "I could actually hear the dialogues being spoken into my ears ... I was just the scribe," said Karnad in a later interview. *Yayati* was published in 1961, when he was 23 years old. It is based on the story of King Yayati, one of the ancestors of the Pandavas, who was cursed into premature old age by his preceptor, Shukracharya, who was incensed at Yayati's infidelity. Yayati in turn asks his sons to sacrifice their youth for him, and one of them agrees. It ridicules the ironies of life through characters in Mahabharata. It became an instant success, immediately translated and staged in several other Indian languages.^[10]

Karnad found a new approach of drawing historical and mythological sources to tackle contemporary themes and existentialist crisis of modern man through characters locked in psychological and philosophical conflicts. His next was *Tughlaq* (1964), about a rashly idealist 14th-century Sultan of Delhi, Muhammad bin Tughluq, and allegory on the Nehruvian era which started with ambitious idealism and ended up in disillusionment.^[11] This established Karnad, now 26 years old, as a promising playwright in the country. It was staged by the National School of Drama Repertory under the direction of Ebrahim Alkazi, with the actor Manohar Singh, playing the visionary king who later becomes disillusioned and turns bitter, amidst the historic Purana Qila in Delhi. It was staged in London by the National School of Drama for the Festival of India in 1982.^{[4][10]}

Hayavadana (1971) was based on a theme drawn from *The Transposed Heads*, a 1940 novella by Thomas Mann, which is originally found in the 11th-century Sanskrit text *Kathasaritsagara*. Herein he employed the folk theatre form of *Yakshagana*. A German version of the play was directed by Vijaya Mehta as part of the repertoire of the Deutsches National Theatre, Weimar.

Naga-Mandala (Play with Cobra, 1988) was based on a folk tale related to him by A. K. Ramanujam, brought him the Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award for the Most Creative Work of 1989. It was directed by J. Garland Wright, as part of the celebrations of the 30th anniversary of Guthrie Theatre, Minneapolis. The theatre subsequently commissioned him to write the play, *Agni Mattu Male* (The Fire and the Rain). Though before it came *Taledanda* (Death by Beheading, 1990) which used the backdrop, the rise of Veerashaivism, a radical protest and reform movement in 12th century Karnataka to bring out current issues.^{[4][12]}

Karnad made his acting as well as screenwriting debut in a Kannada movie, *Samskara* (1970), based on a novel by U.R. Ananthamurthy and directed by Pattabhirama Reddy. That movie won the first President's Golden Lotus Award for Kannada cinema.

In television, he played the role of Swami's father in the TV series *Malgudi Days* (1986–1987), based on R. K. Narayan's books. He also hosted the science magazine *Turning Point on Doordarshan*, in the early 1990s.

He made his directorial debut with *Vamsha Vriksha* (1971), based on a Kannada novel by S. L. Bhyrappa. It won him National Film Award for Best Direction along with B. V. Karanth, who co-directed the film. Later, Karnad directed several movies in Kannada and Hindi, including *Godhuli* (1977) and *Utsav* (1984). Karnad has made number of documentaries, like one on the Kannada poet D. R. Bendre (1972), *Kanaka-Purandara* (English, 1988) on two medieval Bhakti poets of Karnataka, Kanaka Dasa and Purandara Dasa, and *The Lamp in the Niche* (English, 1989) on Sufism and the Bhakti movement. Many of his films and documentaries have won several national and international awards.

Some of his famous Kannada movies include *Tabbaliyu Neenade Magane*, *Ondanondu Kaladalli*, *Cheluvi* and *Kaadu* and most recent film *Kanooru Heggaditi* (1999), based on a novel by Kannada writer Kuvempu.

His Hindi movies include *Nishaant* (1975), *Manthan* (1976), *Swami* (1977) and *Pukar* (2000). He has acted in a number of Nagesh Kukunoor films, starting with *Iqbal* (2005), where Karnad's role of the ruthless cricket coach got him critical acclaim. This was followed by *Dor* (2006), *8 x 10 Tasveer* (2009) and *Aashayein* (2010). He played a key role in movies "*Ek Tha Tiger*" (2012) produced by Yash Raj Films.

3. GIRISH KARNAD: THE MODERNIST IN INDIAN THEATRE

Girish Raghunath Karnad is a playwright, poet, actor, director, critic, translator and cultural administrator all rolled into one. He has been rightly called the "renaissance man" (Kalidas & Merchant, "Renaissance Man"); whose celebrity is based on decades of prolific and consistent output on native soil. He belongs to a generation that has produced Dharamveer Bharati, Mohan Rakesh and Vijay Tendulkar who have created a national theatre for modern India which is the legacy of his generation. Karnad is the most famous as a playwright. His plays written in Kannad have been widely translated into English and all major Indian languages. Karnad's plays are written neither in English, except few, in which he dreamed of earning international literary fame, nor in his mother tongue Konkani. Instead they are composed in his adopted language Kannad thereafter translated by himself into English a language of adulthood. Karnad's practice of drawing source from myths and tales lends the play an immediacy of appeal. Another important fact is that since the audiences are familiar with the theme they curiously watch or read the play, to know the perception and focus handled by the dramatist. Born in Matheran, hailing from a Saraswat Konkani family, Girish Karnad (1938) spent his early years in the rural parts of Maharashtra, watching, enjoying and internalizing Yakshagana and the Natak Mandali performances in his village. After graduating from Karnataka College, Dharwad in 1958, he moved to Mumbai for his postgraduate studies. At the end of his studies there, he received the Rhodes scholarship and went to England and completed his Masters in Arts in Philosophy, Politics and Economics from Oxford. He cultivated a keen interest in art and culture and on his return from England he joined Oxford University Press, Madras in 1963. He was appointed as the Director of Film and Television Institute, Pune in 1974. Almost after a decade and a half, in 1987, he was awarded Fulbright Scholar in Residence at the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago. Girish Karnad is one of the most influential playwrights of our time and his plays have become a byword for imagination, innovation and craftsmanship. He has been honoured with the Padma Bhushan and was conferred the prestigious Jnanapith Award. He also received the Sahitya Akademi Award. Girish Karnad wanted to be a poet, but he was destined to be a playwright. Basically Karnad belong to the Kannada theatre. Since 1980s, there has been considerable work done in the field of drama. And especially with the emergence of dramatist like Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sarkar and a few more on the scene, dramas written in English in India have started attracting international importance. This article contains views on the thematic and technical aspects in the plays of Girish Karnad. A brief account of the plays of Karnad is given below, basing on this concept.

4. CONCLUSION

At the Tata Literary Festival held in Mumbai in 2012, Karnad was invited to speak about "his life in theater" in an hour-long session. Instead of talking about the subject, he took the opportunity to lash out at V. S. Naipaul for his "antipathy towards Indian Muslims". V. S. Naipaul had earlier been conferred the Lifetime achievement award by the festival's organisers. Karnad also criticized the organizers for having honored Naipaul.

The audience, which had gathered to hear Karnad speak, had mixed reactions to the speech. Some, like organizer Anil Dharker, tried ineffectually to steer the speech toward less controversial waters. Others were amused by the episode, and some commented on the research and logic that had gone into the speech (unfortunately overshadowed by its 'scandalous' nature).[19]

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