

CULTURE IN THE PLAYS OF GIRISH KARNAD

Dr. R. Chanana

A true writer, as a reproducer of meaning participates and contributes to the cultural practices. Cultural meaning seems special and assumes a special position that depends upon prevailing power, relation and knowledge. Cultural practices are articulated through the creative works. These turns make one's literary career and shape one's identity as a playwright. Literature is the mirror of cultural heritage. We find reflection of culture on each literary work either it is poetry, novel or drama. There have been many great personalities in Indian English literature who have shown their interest in cultural practices. Karnad has always questioned the view of Indian culture performing art and continuity of culture. Conflicting philosophies, historical situations, and cultural attitudes have shaped the different forms of Karnad's plays. For Karnad folk theatre is the continuity of tradition. He has specific ideas in his mind. He is able to combine the subjective interests with the general literary and cultural interests. Karnad's *Hayavadana* is play of cultural symbol. In this play, Karnad draws heavily upon the rich resources of the native folk theatre. In this play the folk forms and elements of supernatural play a significant role. The dramatist employs the conventions of folk tales and motifs of folk theatre as masks, curtains, mine, songs, the commentator, narrator, dolls, horse-man, the story within a story. He creates a magical world.

Girish Karnad is fascinated towards the rich Indian folk and mythic lore culture. Karnad's *Naga Mandala* the best treatment of culture, comes in the second trend (The imitation of the narrative techniques and structure of Sanskrit dramaturgy). It's treatment is to the lore of folks. In *Naga Mandala* we find the effect of Naga cult of Kerala. Naga cult of Kerala is a kind of worship. It is variously practiced in many parts of Kerala. It retains the impact of Hindu mythology. Karnad's cultural practice is continued in the play 'The fire and the Rain'. It is a dense, intellectually ambitious autumnal play. It is structured around ideas and excess of strangled relationships, which unfolds with a rare economy and intensity of emotions. Thus Karnad decorates Indian culture nicely in these plays. He wants to make aware our generation of Indian culture. It is right today we have come afar but our culture still catches our attention. He never tries to impose anything on the readers or audience; he always makes realize the importance of our culture.

ROLE OF CULTURE

Karnad has invented life style, values, social institutions, creative forms and cultural modes.

Karnad is among those Indian playwrights who have rejected the imitation of the west. They have ventured something new and indigenous. Karnad has tried to maintain an appropriate approach style and form of theatre. He has worked on consciousness of people and cultural traditions. He wants to make the audience entertaining and aesthetically satisfying. He thought over the fact as how the folk themes can become meaningful and relevant in the modern context. Karnad observes, "It was when I was focusing on the questions of the folk forms and the use of masks and their relationship to theatre music that my play "*Hayavadana*" suddenly began to take shape in my mind"¹

Karnad's *Hayavadana* is a play of cultural symbol. In this play Karnad draws heavily upon the rich resources of the native folk theatre. In this play the folk forms and elements of supernatural play a significant role. The dramatist employs the conventions of folk tales and motifs of folk theatre as masks, curtains, mine, songs, the commentator, narrator, dolls, horse-man, the story within a story. He creates a magical world. The plot of the play is borrowed from Thomas Mann's story *The Transposed Heads*. Through the folk tale Karnad deals with the problem of human identity in a world of confused relationship, with the theme of incompleteness and man's desire for perfection.

The play begins with the bringing of the mask of Lord Ganesha, the deity of traditional theatre on the stage. His worship is like a typical Yakshagan play. The Bhagvata narrates the story with a formalistic expression in the manner of a folk tale "This is the city of Dharmapura ruled by king Dharmasheela whose fame and empire....."²

In the story Devadatta and Kapila are intimate friends. Devadatta is an intelligent son of a learned Brahmin Vidyasagara. He is an intelligent poet and is adorned by everyone in Dharmapura. Kapila is the son of ironsmith Lohita. He has handsome body. Devadatta is in love with a beautiful girl Padmini. They get married with the help of his friend Kapila. They seem like Ram Laxman and Sita.

Slowly-slowly Padmini becomes attracted towards the sound personality of Kapila. Devadatta realizes it very soon and decides to sacrifice himself on the feet of Mata Kali. During his journey to Ujjain he goes to the temple and cuts off his head. Kapila follows the footsteps and reaches there. Because of deep love for his friend he also cuts off his head. Padmini becomes helpless to see this tragic incident. She calls goddess Kali. Goddess Kali appears for a little moment and tells a way to make both of them alive. She (Padmini) follows the suggestion but by mistake she misplaces Davadatta's head on Kapil's body and Kapila's head on Devadatta's body.

Padmini is gradually disillusioned and undergoes extreme mental agony. She watches the transformation of her husband's body and loss of Kapila's physicality day by day, inch by inch. Towards

the end their bodies transform again and adjust themselves to the heads so perfectly that the men are physically exact as they were at the beginning. Through this folk strategy, Karnad examines the concept of rational and physical relationship. Karnad provides a profound insight into the meaning and significance of the play. The device of folk Tale helps the playwright in transcending the limitations of time and place. Having the cultural importance of folk tales Karnad gives full scope to mystical wonder, magic and supernatural in 'Hayavadna'. In this play Karnad gives practical solutions to human problems.

Along with Indian culture of folk theatre Karnad uses Brechtian type of narrator figure in the role of the Bhagavata. He is able to step out of the play. He gives the proper explanation of the action. Karnad owes a great deal to folk theatre. He employs the ingenious folk device of masks which is the typical feature of 'Yakshagana'. In the beginning of the play, Devadatta appears on the stage wearing a pale-coloured mask and Kapils, a dark mask. Later on to signify the transposed heads, Their masks are transposed. Lord Ganesha wears an elephant headed mask and Kali, a terrible mask, Hayavadana appears wearing the mask of a man in the beginning and in the end the mask of horse. In the play various conventional and cultural elements are used.

In *Naga Mandala* the nature of its experimentation is with narrative and dramatic style Karnad is well conscious about the most ideal stream for the post-colonial Indian dramaturgy in which the local myths and folk tales are treated as the dramatic performances. They are implied with their sentimental attachment to the real culture of their generation. Such indigenous dramaturgy is deep rooted in the culture of India. In fact this phase should be understood to be the thread of the performance traditions of the post-colonial India.

Naga Mandala should be read placing it in the South Indian neo-colonial cultural environments. First, the treatment of Naga lore is in the dramatic space. Second, the treatment of Naga lore is as the extension of Naga performance culture of Kerala folk lore. In folk discourse words are used as signs of culture. In that sense Naga the protagonist of *Naga Mandala* is presented as a cultural sign. Naga represents the animal world that is capable to feel human emotions. Commonly Naga is only a snake but he is appeared as a figure in the performative space, the king cobra. Naga in the play is a supernatural being who has special power to transform. This mysterious quality of Naga makes the play entirely beautiful. In *Naga Mandala* belief and reason are well combined. It confines the playwright.

In *Naga Mandala* we find the effect of Naga cult of Kerala. Naga cult of Kerala is a kind of worship. It is variously practiced in many parts of Kerala. It retains the impact of Hindu mythology. The hood of the Naga is a cultural icon from the myth. There are more than a dozen temples in Kerala dedicated to Naga

and Naga-cult. Blind faith and superstitions are driven by the belief in Naga myth. Naga myths/Tales promote worship of Naga. Such practices are much alive in the social cultural life of the Hindu people in Kerala. There are many types of Naga cult performances. A Hindu religious sub sect of Kerala, The Pulluva Community is believed to have descended from Dravidian clan whose totem is Naga. There is a folk belief that if serpent's anger brings calamity, disasters and diseases, it can be pleased by the Pulluva alone in Kerala Naga trance is a cultural performance that is related to the nature and character of Naga. The planning of this performance is such as at first a colourful picture of a Naga is made or drowns in the courtyard of the temple. Here the worship takes place. After that the divine song and chanting begin in praise of Naga with the help of musical instrument. Then the worship is done by the priest to the Naga to make man free from sin. The Pulluva women enter there and begin to the Naga trance dance. Finally these trance women are ready to tell about the future of the devotees. After the foretelling, women fall unconsciously and that marks the end of the worship.

In *Naga Mandala* there is a strong undercurrent of mythical belief. The process of transformation of Naga into a human being is derived from such a belief. A live physical experience of Naga cult performance enables the acceptance of the transformation that is dramatized in the play. The theme of the play reminds us of the Kerala Naga cult. This experience makes acceptable all the possibility of Naga becoming performer and the performer becoming a Naga in the aesthetic manner. In other words, the physical experience of Naga cult trance dance accepts the theatrical concept of transformation as the possible result of reality *Naga Mandala* is connected with the cultural consciousness. It can easily become the extension of folk culture, when it is read in the context of culture belief. Without cultural context it is only a folk text about superstitious and sensational story of snake meeting with the woman. Cultural context determines the true meaning of *Naga Mandala*.

Naga Mandala is a folk cultural play. It is a folk morality play in its deep structure. There is a community of beliefs in the play. In this play, Naga, a symbol of supernatural powers, fulfills the desires of a devotee Rani, the symbol of womanhood desires. She needs love and sensual pleasure from her husband Appanna. But, she is denied in their marital life. Her actions based on folk beliefs fulfill her desires. The moral in this play is that when a devotee is in need, God of belief appears to solve the problems. Folk narratives are cultural construction. They shape the individual according to the code of the moral tradition. This play has multi streams as symbolic, mythical and feministic. The folk vision of male sexuality is well conveyed in *Naga Mandala*. Karnad's art of dramatization has many layers of philosophical dimension. *Naga Mandala* may be seen as a morality play in the sense of religious mysticism

combined with the scene of nature. The transformation of a male and purification of a female from the sin are the central theme dealt within this play. In this play, Karnad presents a theory of transformation and abandoning. It is the continuity of a narrative of belief system of a culture that is based on moral.

Karnad has full command over the audience of the world. He has achieved a special position among the Indian dramatists. His feministic approach is highly remarkable especially in the play *Naga Mandala*. This play held an immediate appeal because of reading it as Rani's story. This story is of a restricted or confined lady. The whole story revolves around the lady character among the middle class women. The main story of the play is co-related with male story teller and his artistic anxieties. Through this play Karnad presents the tradition of women's story telling. In this play the gender and sexuality is noticeable. Sexual excitement and mellow dreams of a newly married woman are carried in the play. Karnad is well aware that the audiences are not only male; there are women too in large number. Karnad has used the theme to show that a married woman is content when she finds fulfillment in love. Karnad has tried to make us realize that the love that happens to be outside marriage should not be considered wrong. If we have a look on Krishna Kathas, Radha's love for Krishna is considered pious. The reason for feministic interest is that Karnad was extremely inspired by his mother after the death of her husband. She showed courage to face the society in which many hurdles are raised up for a lonely woman. Karnad stresses on human desire. He realizes that every human being has desires.

The concept of chastity in *Naga Mandala* is also appreciable. Chastity is a value intended by culture. It is one of the most powerful cultural aspects. *Ramayana* in which Sita undergoes the fire to prove her chastity to Ram, comes before our eyes when we see Rani. It has been a cultural guide to the Indians. Chastity is most precious and valuable to any woman. Many women lose their lives to protect their chastity. Karnad explores the concept of chastity along with the great injustice done by man. In the play *Naga Mandala* Rani is a cultural icon who faces many hurdles to prove her chastity.

Karnad's cultural practice is continued in the play *The fire and the Rain*. It is a dense, intellectually ambitious autumnal play. It is structured around ideas and excess of strangled relationships, which unfolds with a rare economy and intensity of emotions. Karnad noted that, "The year spent in the company of south Asia scholars at the university of Chicago has stimulated my interest in orthodox Hinduism and the complex organization of Hindu society." 3

In *The Fire and the Rain* Karnad re-imagines the world of Hindu antiquity. He constructs a story of passion, loss and sacrifice in the context of Vedic rituals. It is based on spiritual penances, social and ethical differences between human agents and interrelated forms. Once again in this play Karnad enlarges

and changes a myth for many sides reflection on cultural codes, modes of representation and forms of attachment. In this play, Karnad has followed the old Indian classics as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, as a base to highlight the Indian culture.

Karnad is very much impressed by the story of Yavakri. The story of Yavakri is described in the *Mahabharata*. It is a cautionary tale about the misapplication of powers of human beings, received from the gods after great penance. Yavakri is the son of the sage Bhardwaja. He gets knowledge of the Vedas from Indra after years of Tapsya. He uses his super powers to molest the daughter-in-law of sage Raibhya. Raibhya, for taking revenge, creates a demon and a spirit in the form of his daughter-in-law. Both of them pursue Yavakri and kill him. Bhardwaja places curse on Raibhya that he will die at the hand of his own son. But later he kills himself. Sometimes later the curse becomes true. Parvasu mistakes the deer skin, his father is wearing for a wild animal. He kills his father accidentally. Involved in the fire sacrifice, Parvasu initiates another cycle of evil. He falsely accuses the letter of Patricide to his brother Arvasu. Arvasu begins his penance to the god sun. When he granted the boon, he asks for Yavakri, Bhardwaja and Raibhya to be restored to life. Lives that were destroyed due to human mistakes are restored through divine intervention.

In his elaboration of the myth Karnad creates a closer relationship. He presents his characters as renowned personalities. He adds a special intentionality into their actions. In the Fire and the Rain Yavakri and Vishakha are not strangers but lovers. But by chance Vishakha marries Parvasu. She becomes the object of Yavakri's lust. Her marriage itself appears to be a contrast after the madness of sensual pleasure. Parvasu has abandoned Vishakha to Raibhya's care. The relationship between the three is starting in their lovelessness. The magical act of revenge in the Mahabharata turns into tragic irony in beautiful manner in 'The Fire and the Rain'. In the same way Parvasu kills his father out of deliberate hatred not accidentally and not in ignorance. Although he does not instigate the destruction of the fire sacrifice at the end, he chooses death as an act of expiation. The supernatural character in the play extends the same quality. In *Mahabharata* the Rakshasa is a device for bringing about Yavakri's death. In Karnad's play his return to the spirit world becomes entangled with painful ethical choices in the human world.

In an important move, Karnad invents the parallel story of Arvasu's relationship with tribal girl Nittilai. He develops Arvasu as the antithesis to Raibhya, Parvasu and Yavakri. As an actor and as Nittilai's lover Arvasu counterpoints the Brahmanism. It enables Karnad to contrast the life of discipline and sacrifice with the life of instinct and emotion very systematically. This division between nature and

culture, mind and body appears in his earlier plays like *Hayavadana* and *Bali: The Sacrifice* but in *The Fire and the Rain* this duality is expressed for the first time as the clear opposition between brahmin and sutras. Arvasu is used as the connective line between the two worlds. In spite of having saint like qualities Yavakri, Railbhya, and Parvasu have a will to get supreme power. Parvasu's false denunciation of Arvasu is of course an act of deliberate evil. On contrary Arvasu sacrifices himself to love and community. He is ready to renounce his born status, for the sake of Nittilai. Thus, the play associates Brahmanism with mind games, ego, and ruthlessness and shudras culture with love and compassion, freshness and hope. As Karnad himself points out that among the Brahmanism Vishakha is chastised but not punished, whereas among the hunters Nittilai pays with her life for choosing Arvasu over her husband. Ironically Arvasu loses Nittilai because of his inability to abandon orthodoxy.

The identity of Arvasu as an actor further complicates the treatment of Brahmanism. Because in terms of both origin and practice of theatrical performances compliment the Vedic rituals. In the note of the play Karnad argues that "Theatre as theorized and practiced in antiquity is not a secular counter point to a Yagnya but a parallel performance that can ever offer a welcome diversion from the regours of rituals."4

In *The Fire and The Rain* Karnad explores a tangled relationship between representation and reality of the fictional characters. Parvasu corrupts the fire sacrifice by his act of murder and betrayal. With the help of such various incidences, the distinction between fact and fiction has been erased. Arvasu assumed the demonic role in the play and temporarily it becomes his real self. It leads to the desecration of the Yagnya site and the death of Parvasu. A little after, Nittilai loses her life because she cannot oppose her human impulse to rush to Arvasu's help. The crisis ends within the community. It is nothing but Arvasu's real life decision to sacrifice his own happiness. All these interlinked elements make *The Fire and the Rain*, Karnad's most ambitious metatheatrical play in which performance is not just a framing device but a thematic preoccupation and an intrinsic part of main action.

In the broad sense *The Fire and the Rain* is a drama of sacrifice and expiation. The fire sacrifice is an appeasing ritual intended to end the community and sufferings. But it is corrupted in many ways by Parvasu. His death is a form of personal reconciliation. But the communal crises are resolved through other painful submission. Parvasu also offer Vishakha's life, first to his sensual – pleasure, appetite and then to his lust for fame. While Vishakha unwillingly sacrifices Yavakri her love for him. Nittilai dies for the sake of Arvasu and Arvasu surrenders Nittilai for the common good. The play's unusual capacity to move readers or audience is certainly bound up with this succession of victims and a sense of loss. A

maxim that proves true in this play – “Kama, Krodh, Mada, Lobha - All these things are way of hell.”

With a cultural intention, Karnad wants to convey that evil is something that is ever present and cannot be destroyed, though it may be kept under control. The end of the play *The Fire and the Rain* mingle tears and rain. In this play, myth and ritual cohere to unfold the deeper meaning of life. The irony of life itself is woven into the moral part of the play. It has been proved in this play that love is the only principle that can help to transcend the limitations of the self. It enables one to regain an integrated perception of life. The essential principle of ‘Satyam’, ‘Shivam’, ‘Sundaram’ change into practical reality of life in the play. Truth comes before us as eternal beauty.

Thus, Karnad decorates Indian culture nicely in these plays. He wants to bring in a kind of awareness for our generation to understand Indian culture. Though we have travelled far, our culture still catches our attention and this is something that Karnad firmly establishes in our mind. He never tries to impose anything on the readers or audience, but he always makes us realize the importance of our culture.

REFERENCES

1. Girish Karnad “Theatre in India” Daedalus, Fall 1989 P. 346
2. Karnad’s Hayavadana – P. 1
3. Aparna Bhargava Dharwadkar : Collect plays Vol. 2 Page. 16
4. In the Note of the Play – *The Fire and the Rain*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Prof. Ranjana Chanana is working as Head of the Department of English in Govt. Auto Maharaja College, Chhatarpur (M.P.). She has been teaching U.G. & P.G. classes since 1982. She has been guiding research scholars since 1990. Currently, seven research scholars are doing Ph.D. under her guidance. Three doctoral degrees have been awarded so far under her guideship. She has published nine papers within 3 years.