

## **The Art and Technique in Girish Karnad's Plays**

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Our inquiry into Girish Karnad's art and technique has been to see how and what lines he accomplishes the realization of his thematic concerns, particularly in his three plays: *Yayati*, *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala*. In the use of myth and folklore, his concerns are basically related to man's existential turmoil while living in a society with traditional conventions. Out of this resultant tension between what may otherwise be called archetypal and mythical experience, he evolves a symbolic form that shapes his living response to life and its values. At the same time while working out a myth or a folktale against the contemporary reality, he gives a new meaning to the past from the vantage point of present.

Karnad's thematic ambiguities, in fact catapults him into the crucible of art. He is found exploring life at its barest self, using mythical and folklorist structures. If the myth or legend enacts and affirm established social values, they also give the author a stick to question them. Doing so involves contemplation of experience with aesthetic distance. Aesthetic distance is a factor without which no art worth itself can be produced. Now the question arises – what is aesthetic distance?

Aesthetic distance is withdrawal of mind from its scattered externality to interiorizing it and focusing on the object of concern step by step. The process which initiates the withdrawal involves dispassion as the crucial pre-requisite for the inquiry into truth. Inquiry becomes redundant if mind is not fully turned away from the external, from the personal predilections and bias, what German philosopher Immanuel Kant says is "disinterested contemplation" or contemplation if an object separated from one's personal interests. The point is that this disinterested or dispassionate contemplation of an experience discriminates what is transient, and beckons to a dimension beyond what is transient. And the mind gets used to looking deeper into the truth of experience – that is beyond the visual auditory sensory material impressions. That is how realization of truth is achieved in the creative process with aesthetic distance.



By the very fact that Karnad has adopted myths and folklore as the medium to articulate and arrive at a set of values, he could not otherwise have defined, implied that he has acquired a form and mode – in simple words, objectivity – to explore his experience.

The form he looked for was a suitable genre which could be his vehicle for communication yet communication in art involves realization of subject matter, not simply expression. Besides realization cannot be purely a mental event. The external medium through which the artist expresses himself enters into the creative process, and a work of art is not only intuited, it is also revealed in the medium used by him – in myth and legend.

It is also true that Karnad starts with a preliminary excitement about the subject which urges him choose its form or technique. But the technique or form is not a passive medium. In other words, form is not like an empty container which is being filled with the content. On the contrary it is dynamic as it modifies the content and is also modified by the content. It is this formative capacity inherent in the form or technique. So we can describe the creative process thus:

The subject matter which the author chooses arouses in him a passionate excitement, he strives to give it an artistic form. That his response to his subject matter, in other words, experience will only be aesthetic if he is able to switch himself off from all practical and personal interests while contemplating. In the process he will find his excitement and truth of his experience revealed in his material. The revelation is a gradual process. There is a fusion of content and form. Content is revealed through the form, and form is modified through the pressure of content. We may say that aesthetic apprehension is apprehension of form which is realized through disinterestedness.

Here it may also be stressed that form or technique or art is not mere arrangement in space or time but as the system of relations in which the parts of the material are unified. The unification or fusion that is achieved by the artist's formative imagination is not merely emotional but also intellectual. We find that artistic activity finds logical conformity in what is sensuous as it arranges parts to form a whole in accordance with the artist's purpose, it cannot be entirely intuitive.

The formative imagination reveals great crisis of life. Here the artist at times has to distort reality, as Karnad has done, out of regard for formal consideration. We may note



that artistic creation is not a method but an event. The truth of which we have come to know as we have reviewed it. Thus, art is born out of the logic of content and the magic of form which may rightly be called technique.

The difference between content and achieved content is technique. Content is simply a lump of experience till technique handles it, shapes it, and explores it. Mark Schorer has rightly asserted that “technique is the only means he (artist) has of discovering, evolving, developing his subject, of conveying its meaning, and finally, of evaluating it”(71). The writer who has right technique, who has the capacity to scrutinize his subject-matter thoroughly will produce works with thickness and resonance, Schorer further explains that technique is not a device for heightening the dramatic interest, it is rather “a means towards positive definition of the theme, of exploring and defining values in an era of experience”(72) which is not already given but is given for the first time. Here Karnad has rightly affirmed that myth in a play does not simply hold traditional values, but also gives an opportunity to question them. Technique then objectifies the material of art. The objectification in Karnad’s case has been done through myth and legend, and T. S. Eliot would call it “objective correlative”. It can also be viewed as expressionism. Expressionism impels the writer to reject materialism and realism. Its stance is radical, otherwise, as it altogether rejects any pre-occupation with outside reality, as it is understood that in art the process of realization does not proceed from outside to inside but from inside to outwards. The inner reality must be helped to realize itself through means of the spirit. Yayati’s Padmini’s and Rani’s intense desire for fulfillment in life and their wriggling against social, moral and physical constraints are their attempts to realize their spirit. Expressionist play is in fact a human being’s quest for spiritual regeneration. In other words expressionist play projects personal vision which is usually troubled embodying violent extremes of moods and feelings. Often the play implies that what is depicted represents the experience of an individual standing alone and afraid in a society which is disintegrating into chaos.

When Karnad uses myth and folklore to project and explore his experience his characters in all the three plays become weak, and are not complicated by their unpredictability of motive and interplay of texture of meaning. They are not multilayered as we find characters in the novels of skilled craftsmen like Jane Austen and Henry James.



We may take up any character from *Yayati*, *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala* with an exception of Sharmistha she is a bit complex character. They are not given psychological shades, hence lack depth. Therefore, expressionist play always runs the risk of degenerating into mere rhetoric, and avoiding the risk is arduous task. Karnad could not escape from this pitfall in every situation. His plays more or less run like parables which focus on a moral dilemma, yet he uses a narrative form telling a story by the illustrative scenes, choruses, commentators, songs, dances, projected titles, that is Indian traditional folktale form which also includes the use of masks, puppets and sutradhar. Sutradhar is a commentator as well as actor participating in the action of the play. By making a play just a play removing every illusion of reality, and emphasizing to the audience that they are only watching a play not a real drama of life, he is offering a critique of conventional values of the modern urban society.

Karnad started his career with *Yayati* (1961) having written the play at the age of twenty two. It has been quite an achievement for a young man like Karnad at an early age. It is mythical play fashioned to project existential turmoil not only against the social norms but against the moral fabric of an individual being. Developing experience of the creative process shapes the thematic trajectory.

The play is about king Yayati of Mahabharata who exchanged his decrepitude with the youth of his youngest son Pooru to break off the curse of pre-mature old age. Karnad's choice of mythological subject led him to forge an eclectic synthesis of Sophocles, Jean Anouilh, Jean Paul Sartre, Eugene O'Neill. The play turns out to be a dialectic play which reshapes the mythical material, redistributes its thematic emphasis and invents new characters to exploit the dramatic potential of the story.

Yayati has already achieved greatness as king when he is cursed with pre-mature old age for cohabiting with Sarmistha, the Raksha princess who is the rival of his wife Devayani, daughter of sage Sukracharya. In *Mahabharata* Yayati's motives are not questioned when he demands youth from his sons but rather filial relations are upheld as his youngest son Pooru offers his youth for his obedience while accepting father's authority.

But Karnad restructures this myth as a drama of discontent, futility and death. Here Yayati is self-centered, pleasure loving king who invites the curse because he cannot overcome his desire for Sharmistha, although Devayani has washed him of the destructive consequences of his choice. Even Sharmistha has been apprehensive of the approaching calamity. After offering his youth in exchange for old age, Pooru is philosophical but self-hating ‘outsider’ who feels unsettled by the questionable legitimacy of his birth, and is oppressed by the weight of dynastic tradition. He accepts the curse because he thinks the sacrifice of his youth would counteract his feelings of unworthiness, and enable him to fulfill his destiny as a Bharata prince. Pooru has just returned home after a long absence with a new bride Chitrlekha. She accepts the curse but commits suicide in revulsion against her miserable future. Too late, Yayati atones for his action by returning Pooru’s youth and going into the forest. Sharmistha, however, points out to him inescapable foundation of his future “a corpse, a lunatic, a fallen woman” (Karnad62). Pooru ends the play in a state of bewilderment, having failed to comprehend the point of what he has suffered.

An important character in the play is Chitrlekha who adds complex dimension to Yayati’s not immoral but moral desire. First she rejects the king’s authority over her and sees no reason why her life should be “immolated at the altar of some empty bubble in the future” (Karnad66). But before killing herself she also reminds Yayati that incestuous adultery between them would be the logical implication of his assumption of Pooru’s youth. Sharmistha is most complex character in the play that seeks Yayati’s attention and knows she is doomed by his pursuit. She questions him for his quest for eternal youth – quest for ‘Sanjeevani’ – that will always be for a surrogate victim. She even dissuades Pooru from assuming the curse because “sacrificing oneself needlessly is a form of perversity. Pride in being self denying all the time can become a fatal habit” (Karnad 50). But the characters in the play still lack psychological depth. The impact could have been tremendous with thick and resonant characters.

*Hayavadana* is a folklore taken from *Kathasaritasagar* about the heads that got switched. The real power of the play lies in its representation of femininity, desire, and identity independent of its sources. The play moves through its structural stages with existential burden rooted in its thematic trajectory. But the experience it offers is probed

through a technique which tries to define its meaning and evaluates it. The technique Karnad has chosen is folktheatre technique with the paraphernalia of magic dolls, masks, mimes, half-curtains along with co-mingling of goddesses and animals; he also introduces the narrator in the figure of Sutradhar. The folklore he has chosen is what T.S. Eliot calls “objective correlative” which lends him aesthetic distance in the exploration of his subject-matter through a unique drama of human emotions and feelings. Through the struggle of Padmini, Kapila, Devaddatta and along with the story of Hayavadana’s mother, the play presents a world of monstrous passions of dark and forbidden emotional energy inherent in woman’s sexuality. The central theme of the play we have maintained is not as usually declared theme of identity crisis but woman’s sexuality. The play we have shown sets out to persuade us of the magnificence of such unmoral passions. But we are told to take the gigantic instinctual drives of extraordinary creatures at their own face valuation. Padmini, Devaddatta and Kapila are set apart, as special creatures, from the mundane world about them by their heightened capacity of feeling. They identify themselves with the uncompromising primordial force. But this has been absurd, and Karnad discovers their absurdities and evaluates them by his technique to persuade us that they are mistaken in their estimate of themselves. All of them in the end are destroyed by this mundane world about them.

To lay bare us the full character of this passion Karnad gives his material a broad scope in time and finds a means of narration and a point of view in the figure of Bhagwata who conducts the proceedings in the play and encompasses the material. The whole world of action of *Hayavadana* is presented against the background of cloddish world of conventions about it. The action surges forward and backward to violate the social conventions.

The main story of the play starts with the socially convenient marriage between Padmini and Devaddatta without any inkling of passionate love of Padmini for Devaddatta. Her overwhelming passion for strong Kapila is affirmed at the Ujjain firstly and it is confirmed time and again. Padmini then loses control over her and her sense of right and wrong collapses as her whole being vibrates at the sight of Kapila. Karnad here develops his theme dispassionately towards the positive definition, and thematic projection is built up with connotative richness of the images like cart, lady-fortune flower. Kapila’s strong

body pulls her irresistibly, and she turns out to be an explosive bomber. Padmini's explosive emotional state of mind links her to Hayavadana's mother's bizarre choice of a horse for her husband. It is woman's sexuality fore and which is fast catching up with the essential fabric of the play in its unfolding. The whole episode of Hayavadana's mother's marriage with the white stallion is a metaphor for women's sexuality which connects with Padmini's do or die struggle for fulfillment. But the contrast between the two also has emerged as Hayavadana's mother had achieved her bliss living with the strong animal, stallion for fifteen years, had a child also by him. And Padmini's bliss after switching the heads in the temple lasts briefly before it collapses and she is driven to the Sati pyre. Padmini could not escape the head controlling the body logic enunciated in the play. But Karnad is unable to persist with the logic in the case of god Ganesha's head controlling the body, as he confesses that divine working is beyond human comprehension.

Here Karnad while working, as he has admitted, on grosser grounds, has not assimilated the divine phenomenon into his creative process, and has been unable to examine the *Kathasaritasagar* logic, or Mann's conclusions in his novella *Transposed Heads*. Besides, Karnad presents his narrative without the psychological depth, with the result his dramatic structure lacks density and layered richness in characterization. His use of dolls as folktheatre device to bring out the inner workings of the protagonist does not in fact dig out her emotional depth and psychological cross-currents; nor have we been taken deep into the emotional turmoil of Devadatta and Kapila. When Padmini is offered the choice of two husbands at the end of the play she recoils. At the bottom of her existence her authentic self could have generated an agonizing conflict between her chance of gratification of her long cherished wish and social fears and uncertainties of living with two men. But Karnad ruffles only the hard emotional glossy crust and does not penetrate deep into the truth of her whirling response to Kapila's body. He no doubt contemplates the experience but goes not deeper. He in fact achieves alienation effect by blocking the emotional impact on the audience. Yet he maintains control over the shaping narrative as he handles several threads, preceding and on-going and knits them together into a momentum as past images and symbols keep recurring, building up the thematic thrust.



The folklore at its best has produced wisdom in the presentation of parable and not esthetically satisfying results, when it lacks psychological truth. It does not matter what conventions, devices you use.

Summing up our last play *Nagamandala* we may remember Mark Shorer's dictum that everything is technique which is not a lump of experience, and no writer escapes technique. It is a different matter whether his technique serves his art's purpose or disserves. Karnad approaches his *Nagamandala* with another folklorist technique. It is a technique rooted in Indian traditional theatre with all the devices of Sutradhar, magic, mime, mixing of human and non-human words, changing the course of events, even at the end of the play at the behest of the audience, underlying in this technique is Bertolt Brechtian technique of "alienation effect". The technique works on the parable, if a newly married woman is neglected for days together in a patriarchal society, she is bound to get a secret lover; and in the distribution of poetic justice, she is rewarded notwithstanding the social violations she has committed. But we may point out that with his technique Karnad is unable to achieve his content – and the folktale runs like an interesting story with a moral, and we pick up a piece of wisdom the way we do from a morality play. Infact the penetrating search of art is missing in spite of whatever technique he has used.

The theme of *Nagamandala* is same as that of *Hayavadana*, that is woman's sexuality but with a variation. Here the protagonist Rani is not freewheeling, candid and bold like Padmini. She is a young timid woman married into a patriarchal family, neglected and humiliated for days together by her husband. She overcomes her ordeal by finding a secret lover and starts enjoying the bliss of her married life outside marriage. No less interesting are her efforts to stay abreast of social conventions despite her violations against them, much as she comes to dominate her astray husband. There are two folktales lumped together, the first one is used as the outer framework of the second main story. The first story about the flames that gather in a village temple to exchange gossips about the household they inhabit gives dramatic expression to the idea of community life. The second story, about the woman who is visited by a king Cobra in the form of her husband, is personified in the play as beautiful woman in a sari, and it tells the inner story of the play to the audience composed of the playwright and the flames. This amalgamation of human,



abstract, and magical elements creates a synthesis that is thematically simpler than the polysemy of the *Hayavandana*.

By making Rani almost a pure embodiment of feminine simplicity, innocence, and powerlessness Karnad reduces his drama of gender relations down to an elemental level. Marriage for Rani means the loss of the secure world of childhood and parental love, and she has to reimagine that world in her fancies merely to keep herself from psychic collapse. Her ill-tempered, tyrannical, two dimensional husbands Apanna reduces her daily life to joyless existence, whereas he enjoys extra-marital sex with a concubine. Except for the secret visits of Kurudavva, the old blind woman of the village, Rani remains without company or community life. Because the marriage is unconsummated, her latent power as wife and mother also remains unrealized. Then she takes a secret lover through the magic which is dramatic device to accomplish the end. Kurudavva is mother in-law figure for Rani, and in the snake lover she sees husband figure as he resembles Apanna. The snake lover magical visits in the form of husband are virtually over determined by the familiar folk logic that beauty and innocence must triumph over the open violation of moral norms. Once the visits have begun, Rani's experience brings out the realistic difference in the context of Indian family between 'day' and 'night' selves, and the liberating effects of sexual fulfillment. Rani accepts the brutish husband of the day who turns into the tender lover at night because those are the conditions of her sexual initiation and emancipation as Naga explains, "the husband decides on the day visits. And the wife decides on the night visits." Rani's whole self responds to her lover's embraces, her soul opens out to the beauty and fragrance of nature. Yet Karnad does not probe boldly her exact responses in love-making experience, nor does trace the effects of her love experience on her soul. She is otherwise drowned topsy turvy in the overwhelming bliss of fulfillment.

The snake ordeal is another magical way or dramatic device to survive the ordeal – with 'truth or half-truths' as Karnad has said. But her perfect life that follows is riddled with irony and compromise. The astray husband has to accept the chastity of a wife who undoubtedly had a secret lover, and a child he knows he has not fathered. Rani comes to realize that her two husbands were not the same person. She realizes, in otherwords, the difference between the husband and the secret lover. That way her new life is not free of remembrance and regret.



Rani's story does not end with the inner play as it happens in *Hayavadana*. The characters in the outer frame narrative question the 'happily ever after' convention because it leaves too many questions unanswered, and playwright in the play creates two alternative endings, one tragic, one happy. In the tragic ending Rani can drop her erstwhile lover altogether and in the happy one, she can keep her lover for secret liaison inspite of the presence of her husband in the house. What is shown in the double ending is that husband is as good as lover whether she keeps him or not. That no male is unique for a woman. This posture rejects the concept of patriarchy who considers woman as property.

The fact that Rani accepts her situation tamely shows that she is a blurred character, not sensitive, unpredictable, nor she is emotionally rich as she lacks depth worthy of a protagonist. Secondly, Karnad's technique of using folklorist frame does not penetrate outer-surface of Rani's condition after her reconciliation with her husband. Here Karana's technique should have probed Rani's bruised and wounded self after she is parted from her lover with whom she has spent five months of heavenly life, her agonized separation, her tensions, her conflicts and hopes could have made a great impact. Karnad, anyhow, does not admit of psychological probing. The technique Karnad has used infact does not invite the decisive ending. In the interest of what Karnad claims of multiple seeing, the impact of the play is diluted and intensity, sacrificed to the concept of "alienation effect".

Another point we may refer to is that the first story of flames and playwright which is attached to the main story has little relevance in the central proceedings of the play. It does not contribute to the thematic development of the play – since it is not connected with the theme of woman's sexuality. That has been our main concern to see whether Karnad has succeeded in creating his experience or his content into an artistic whole irrespective of the sort of technique he has used. At best the outer episode creates ambience for the main folktale. But we must remember technique is not arrangement of events within a plot or arrangement of suspense or arbitrary device for heightening of dramatic interest, on the contrary, technique is a means towards positive definition of the theme.

### **Works Cited**

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