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Integrated Relationship between Language, Literature and Society in the Work of Girish Karnad

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Abstract

Language, literature and society evolve parallel to each other and often at a similar pace. Integration of the three is taken up as a challenge by penmen of all ages. Language is the tool a writer with the objective of exploring, observing and presenting the narratives about sociological issues in delectable form depends upon. Authors and scholars have always strived to capture audiences across the world with enchanting subjects and prodigious treatments. Some of them drew inspiration from ancient scriptures and folklore and presented their narratives in the contemporary forms and styles, while others composed their works adopting the idiom and styles of the fable-mongers of the ancient times. Since literary works of all genres are directed towards people who form audiences, and, society at large. The sociological orientation of literature is unique in its own ways for each writer, as all of them have their own anomalous combinations and permutations of linguistics, themes and expression. Works of Girish Karnad, one of the most celebrated contemporary playwrights abound in existential themes drawn from ancient scriptures and folklore, especially myths and mythology. The dramatist has been immensely successful in crafting them, putting them in the framework of contemporary issues so as to appeal even to new-age theatre-goers with modern outlook. This study is centered around Karnad's knack for building literary bridges across time and space to establish links between people, through the use of shared symbolism and idiom, with those existing eons apart and not even remotely connected. This is evident in the key works of Karnad, viz, *Yayati*, *Hayavadana*, *Naga-Mandala*, *Tuglaq*, *Broken Images*, etc. The existential concerns of protagonists and key characters of these plays, though varied in hues, seem to be drawn from the same spring, and hence possess universal appeal.

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Introduction

Language and literature is meaningless without social contexts. Language and literature is ‘for society and by society’ as much as it is the other way around. In day-to-day life, many people consider language and literature as same, which is not so at all in reality. If we probe deeper into the meanings, the dissimilarity in the very nature and purpose of language and literature surface up. First and foremost, language is the basic building block of literature, which means that language is primary and literature, secondary. Language, according to the most widely acceptable definition, is a system that constitutes simple elements of symbolic phonetics and scripts with meanings attributed to them. It forms the basis of communication, especially verbal, gradually evolving into more complex and meaningful structures with higher intellectual and aesthetic values, categorised as literature.

‘Language,’ is derived from '*Lingua*,' Latin for 'tongue', while ‘literature’ has its roots in '*Littera*,' Latin for ‘letters’ or ‘handwriting.’ Both are outcomes of evolution of human society while being instrumental in its development at the same time. Literature, a fabric woven out of the filaments of language that takes on the hues and texture of time and place it is produced in. Moreover, this quality of language and literature is not static, but remains in motion like waves and wind through temporal and beyond. Girish Karnad is one of the very few playwrights who used more than one languages for his creative expression. He initially wrote in his native Kannada, and later rendered into English. Writing in Kannada, he explored and commented on the contemporary society by relating today’s scenario with folk, mythical and historical contexts, considering the socio-cultural sensibilities of the native Kannada speakers always been clear about the choice of language. Although he studied at Oxford University on the prestigious Rhodes Scholarship, he penned most of his plays, including *Yayati*, *Tuglaq*, *Hayavadan*, *Nagamandal*, *Bali: The Sacrifice* etc. in his native Kannada, Starting from his first play, the critically acclaimed *Yayati*, based on the story of a mythological king, Karnad was able to establish his knack for producing socially compliant

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narratives on concurrent themes deriving from thematic parallels from history and mythology that remained a distinctive feature of his work over the following decades.

Even the *prima facie* overview of Karnad's entire work reveals an interesting fact that the playwright chose his native Kannad as the language of literary expression, but his works attracted wider attention after they were reproduced in English. This he started at the behest of his contemporaries in theatre, especially renowned theatre personality Alyque Padamsee, who was keen on producing his *Tuglaq* on stage. Karnad believes that translating the plays with fidelity involves adapting the culture of the original language into another. This seems to be the obvious reasons why Karnad decided to translate his plays into English himself.

Karnad's next play, *Tughlaq* (1964), remains among the best known of his works, which portrays the 14th-century Sultan Muammadb in Tughlaq in a very different light. *Tale Danda*, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* were his other critically acclaimed works based on history. Amongst his other works based on mythical tales, *Hayavadana*, *Naga Mandala* and *Flowers* stand out best. Whether his works are derivations among the most lauded of his works with no forthright connection with the ancient are *A Heap of Broken Images*, *Wedding Albums* and *Boiled Beans on Toast*.

Utilising critically selective idiom for compelling storytelling, Karnad also forayed into filmmaking with *Samskara* in 1970, an adaptation of an anti-caste novel by the same name authored by U. R. Ananthamurthy. He wrote the screenplay and played the lead role in the film, followed by *VamshaVriksha* the very next year, co-directed by top theatre personality B.V. Karanth.

Sociological issues in compelling narratives

Literature is often said to mirror society, but it works better when the characters and the situations they are placed in are larger than life. Karnad's plays truly portray realities of Indian society, but mere dramatization of contemporary situation characters are placed in is not enough to attract and hold the attention of the theatre goers. Perhaps, this made Karnad keen on picking plots from ancient narratives and presenting them to create parallels with the present Indian society. Mythological or historical characters attract attention and affinity as they are generally larger than life. Through most of his plays, Karnad also cuts an image of a social reformer. He draws attention towards the social problems, caste-class divide, gender

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discrimination, patriarchal family system, situation of women, and also the belief systems that form the basis of superstition.

Recognised as the most important plays of post-independence India, Karnad's works are centred around existential struggle of man, quest for completeness, man-woman relationships, struggle for social acceptance, fidelity and betrayal, and gender issues, etc. The uniqueness in Karnad's work lies in the fact that his works are striking illustrations of the conflict between an individual and society, but he was also able to create a balance between the two as a playwright. Aside of giving equal importance to individuality and society, presenting socially sensitive issues through almost forced, but highly acceptable narratives became the hallmark of Karnad's work.

Most of his plays *Yayati* and *The Fire and the Rain are Naga-Mandala* are drawn from myths, *Hayavadana* from 11th century Indian folktale. *Tughlaq* is based on fifteenth century King Muhammd-bin-Tughlaq. *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* is about a fearless, great moral and a patriot King of Mysore *Tale-Dandais* a Bhakti movement in southern part of Karnataka in twelfth century. This way, all of his plays are concerned with some social issues. The technique and flow of language he has used connects the modern audiences with the plot and characters. His aim is to realise the audience that it is time to accept the flaws we may have, because only then can we change them.

The protagonist of *Yayati* is an embodiment of unrestrained aspirations, implausible yearnings and forsaking laws of nature for selfish motives. He travels a zigzag path through exceedingly challenging existential situations and finally cuts a rather sorry figure of disillusionment. Still, he undoubtedly leaves a powerful spiritual message for orthodox followers of the materialistic and mundane. This finds expression in the form of the following expression in which the lead character Yayati regrets his greed through the following statement in the play:

YAYATI. Please help me, Puru. Take back your youth. Let me turn my decrepitude into a beginning.

Tughlaq is a historical play with a social theme. It successfully leads to the answers of question raised by historians – what prompted a kind hearted king to go against his own ideas? *Tughlaq* transcends the past to delineate problems of the present. This way, Karnad

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become instrumental in highlighting the ‘novelty of the past, and hint of history in the contemporaneous.’ He was blessed with intellect, power, and a kind heart, and more of desirable attributes, but he couldn’t attain harmony amongst his ideals and what society expected of him. His desires are just to climb up:

TUGHLAQ: How can I spread my branches in the stars while the roots have yet to find their hold in the earth?” (10)

An attempt is made to explore the quest for modernity in two monologues. *A Heap of Broken Images* breaks away from the total fixation with mythology. This psychological monologue deals with the modern theme of technology, existence, gender issues, delusion and reality in one’s private life. The same situation is followed in *Flower* too. It shows the journey towards asceticism, prayers and surrender after realizing the self. The return of the priest after wandering away from the path of devotion marks the return of awakening from ignorance.

Ancient sources, modern audiences

Although most of the Girish Karnad’s plays are rooted in the ancient past, he has managed to adapt the content and style to appeal modern theatre goer.

Karnad is a dramatist with a difference as he has written exclusively for the stage. While writing, Karnad keeps his audience in mind, and remains conscious about the conversational element in the dialogues. Each spectator in the theatre is a witness vital to any performance. For the playwright and the artists carrying his work to the plays, the audience is God.

The Dreams of Tipu Sultan is the saga of shattering of dreams of the most powerful King in India’s south. Karnad presents him as one of the most politically wise and visionary ruler in modern history. He was presented not only a great warrior, but also a great social reformer and a dreamer. Karnad brings Tipu’s secret dream into public to show how great a thinker and a patriot he was.

The play *Tale-Danda* is set in twelfth century India. The play brings out the intricate complexities of a social order in vogue during that period. Karnad’s *Hayavadana* explores the modern theme of identity and nature of reality in reference of relationships. *Naga-Mandala* is a folk tale and explores the predicament of a modern individual illusions and love with a snake lover serves as panacea to fulfil one’s loneliness, who is locked in psychological and

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philosophical conflicts like 'Rani' of this play. *The Fire and the Rain* is a dramatic representation of the quintessential conflict between good and evil. The play also looks at the contentious issues of women in India.

Bali: The Sacrifice is a one-act play and is very modern in its feel, though the storyline is picked from a narrative on conflicts with the value systems of Hinduism and Jainism, in context to sacrificial blood-letting. It talks about love, jealousy, betrayal, desire, violence and several other contemporary issues based on our daily lives. The contemporary dilemma between the urging of the two halves of human soul is what the play dramatizes. There is a conflict between a Jain queen and her husband, a Hindu king. One day the Queen enchanted by the beautiful voice of a low cast ugly, Mahauat, the Elephant-keeper, mates with him. When King and the Queen-mother learned about this, a ritual-sacrifice was decided as punishment. Since she was a Jain, the punishment was in the form of a mock-beheading of a dough-cock. As she lifted the sword for the purpose, she heard the cock crow. This shocking development moved her so much that she impales herself with the same sword. The sacrifice of the dough cock ended into the sacrifice of the Queen herself, and she dies. The play points out that whether she belongs to the high caste or lower rungs of the society, Indian woman is almost always ill-treated by the society, and even looked down for being a woman.

Existentialism Across time and Space

Existentialism puts emphasis on and freedom of choice and taking responsibility for consequences of one's actions. Abstinance from all abstract thinking and an insistence on the idea that one's thought process should be connected with our experiences is its central idea. As a philosophy, it offers a ray of hope, ecstasy and exultation amidst the grim realities of life.

Karnad's plays have a marked thrust on consciousness of the self and the experiences lived through, as there is an effort to reaffirm the faith in the potential of the self to deal with experience. Challenges of selfhood, search of identity, isolation and frustration are also dealt with. Existentialist significance is major element of the themes.

Observation reveals that the characters in *Yayati*, *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Naga-Mandala*, *The Fire and The Rain* and *Tale-Danda* are victimised by their personal as well as social problems, which create hurdles in their lives and they remain incomplete in some or

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other ways. They pine for completeness but it becomes a difficult dream in their lives which make them miserable, tortured, and exploited, isolated and captivated.

Thus, in the moment of self-expression and an attempt of exploring his insecurities, Karnad has given this traditional tale a new meaning and significance highly relevant in the context of life today.

Drawing Parallels in Myths and Modernity

Drawing metaphors from myths and legends to highlight existential situations, modern man goes through is a unique quality Karnad displays through much of his work. Karnad has repeatedly demonstrated through his plays and their characters, that modern man is going through the same existential crisis as his predecessors has in the past. His attempts to overcome the insurmountable problems in the present turn futile in much the same ways as the past.

Girish Karnad addresses the challenges of Indian subjectivity by employing the devices of myth, folklore, legend and history. He uses these devices not to merely visit the past but also to look at the present from another perspective, mostly existential, and also to visualise the possible future. The protagonists of his plays, *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala* are faced with contemporary existential concerns. His *Tughlaq* and *Tipu Sultan*, similarly, are not just men from history but our contemporary figures. Their predicament is the predicament of our times, rooted in the political and cultural situation in which we find ourselves. In *Wedding Album* Karnad diverges from his usual devices of myth and history and explores cultural stereotypes in the wake of modernity.

Based on his serious explorations of folklore, mythology and history, the themes of his plays illustrate the challenges and conflicts of contemporary life and attempt to forge a link between the past and the present. Being a creative intellectual with an existentialist approach, he views the characters of his plays and their joys and woes not from his own perspective alone, but nurtures them in the light of individual experiences from a multitude of perspectives, and employs them as a medium to communicate thoughts and interpretations that are timeless.

D. Maya rightly remarks: Karnad links the past with the present, the archetype with the real. Issues of the present world find their parallels in the myths and fables of the past

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which lend new meanings and insights through analogy, reinforcing the theme. By transcending the limits of time and space, myths provide flashes of insight into life and its mystery. They form an integral part of the cultural consciousness of the land, with their associative layers of meaning, their timelessness and relevance to contemporary issues. (Maya 2001:68).

Interpersonal conflicts triggered by an array of reasons and uncountable socio-political upheavals are all part of our society, modern age full of complexities, complications, and ideas that are revolutionary and baffling. The age in which we live is loaded with stress causing issues that are dark and ugly. Provision for materialistic satisfaction overshadows the concern for spiritual intent or quest for self-actualisation. Man seems to have gone insane with overwhelming greed for wealth, lust and fame. He finds himself adrift in choppy seas of incompleteness with no glimpse of shore, or a star to guide, with the dilemma to baffle— “To be or not to be”.

Girish Karnad sources his themes and narratives from folktales and mythologies and employs the various devices and techniques from India’s rich tradition of folk theatre. In fact: ...fascinated as he is with the rich Indian folk and mystic lore, draws from it the material for his drama. His *Tughlaq* mythicizes history; *Hayavadana* derives its idea from *Vetala Panchauimsat*; *Yayati* and *The Fire and the Rain* present retelling of episodes from the *Mahabharata*; *Tale-Dandais* inspired by the life of Busavesvara, the Virasaiva social reformer. (Rangan 2006: 199-200)

Conclusion

Different cultures and regions, different languages came into existence. After the invention of phonetic language, the art of writing using symbols for corresponding sounds, of vowels and consonants, evolved and people started expressing themselves in writing. Whatever they wrote was preserved and thus in this way literature came into existence. Thus, we see that literature is the product of language and so it depends on language. If a language is dead, automatically, its literature is also dead. It has been rightly said that if you want to kill and destroy a community, first kill its language, the community will automatically be killed and vanished.

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It is also observed that the language used in literature is different from the one used in day to day life by ordinary people. Literary language makes the communication from larger than life characters easier. Literary language contains symbols, metaphor, hyperbole, etc., but in this modern age, the situation is changed. It is now considered to be a good writer's quality to use the language of the ordinary people in his literary works, in order to keep communication in its simplest form. Since the literature is the expression of human thoughts, its content is limitless because the thoughts and desire of human beings to communicate with one another is inexhaustible. This makes the gamut of literature's subject matter as extensive as human experience itself.

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