

Themes And Techniques In The Select Plays Of Girish Karnad

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Abstract

Girish Karnad is an Indian dramatist who writes in Kannada and then translates his plays in to English: he has earned international recognition as a playwright and translator. He has also carved a niche for himself as a script writer, actor, and director in the world of Indian cinema. His knowledge of human nature made him a great playwright. His plays recall the ancient theory and tradition of Indian theatre. There is a unique amalgam of the elements of tradition and contemporary in the plays of Karnad. It seems that themes taken from folklores, myths and Indian history turned into a vehicle to express contemporary issues like feminism, marginalization of castes and minority religions, violence, increasing fundamentalism, denigrating Indian politics and existentialism.

Keywords: theme, technique, folk theatre, style.

Girish Karnad, who translated his own two plays Tughlaq and Hayavadna into English, is a front rank dramatist in contemporary Indian literature. he represents the best tradition of Kannada drama which found its finest expression in the plays of T.P.Kailasan, Huyilgol, Garuda, Samasa and Adya. The various genres of drama also marvelously grew and developed in kannada literature: garuda's Paduka Pattabhisheka and C.V. Venkata Ramia's Mandodari are based on legend; Samas's Suguna Gambira and Masti's Talikot are historical plays; Huyilgol's Shiksha na Sambhrama, Kailasan's Home rule and Adya's Harjanwara are realistic social plays; and Karanth's Garbha Gudi and Mugali's Namadhari are statirical plays Romantic plays, comedies, tragedies both Greek and Shakespearean, Poetic plays and blank verse plays too were successfully written.

Girish Karnad was highly influenced by these trends in Kannada literature and he took legend, history and myth for the plots of his three plays – Yayati, Tuglaq and Hayavadana respectively.

Girish Karnad is a gifted craftsman. His plays Tughlaq and Hayavadana are noticeable for consummate excellence of dramatic technique. There has been an unbridgeable hiatus between theatre and plays in Indian English drama. Due to this lacuna only closet plays which were entirely incapable of stage performance were written. Girish Karnad, who belongs to the rich tradition of Kannada theatre, creates a close rapport between stagecraft and playwriting in the English transcriptions of his two plays Tughlaq and Hayavadana which have been successfully staged.

As a dramatic craftsman Karnad evolved a dramatic technique which is so flexible that it changes according to the requirements of his plots. The plot of Tughlaq is based on history and it has all the essentials of a good historical play, Hayavadana is based on folk tale and, hence, all the ingredients of a folk story are deftly employed in it. Kirtinath Kurtkoti observes:

Karnad uses the conventions and motifs of folk theatre – masks, curtains, dolls, the story within a story – to create a bizarre world. It is a world of incomplete individuals, indifferent gods, dolls that speak and children who cannot, a world indifferent to the desires and frustrations, joys and sorrows of human beings. What is real is only the tremendous, irrational energy of the horse and the writer who move round the stage symbolising the powerful but monotonous rhythm of life. (VI-VII)

Karnad's plays have "the tone and expression of great drama." (VIII) The plots in his plays are precise. The devices of parallelism and contrast, suspense and surprise help in the logical development of plot. His plots and characters are correlated and promote the unity of effect or impression. Let us discuss in detail the outstanding aspects of Karnad's dramatic technique and craftsmanship.

Plot is very essential for drama. It is that framework of incidents, however simple or complex, upon which the drama is constructed. The events and incidents are organised into an artistic whole with a view to creating unity of impression or effect. Commenting on the characteristics of a good plot. Henry Arthur Jones says:

Story and incident and situation in theatrical work are, unless related to character, comparatively childish and unintellectual. They should indeed be only another phase of the development of character... A mere story, a mere succession of incidents, if these do not embody and display character and human nature, only give you something in raw melodrama pretty much equivalent to the adventures of our old friend, Mr Richard Turpin. (Hudson, 186)

In Karnad's plays both incident and situation are correlated with characters. In Tughlaq events and incidents which originate from the paradoxical actions of the protagonist Tughlaq and his opponents, have been organised into an artistic whole. The devices of parallelism and contrast have been vividly employed in both Tughlaq and hayavadana. The plot of Tughlaq

is based on opposites and paradoxes. Intrigues, coherently brought under the discipline of art, form its main basis. U.S. Anantha Murthy says:

Both Tughlaq and his enemies initially appear to be idealists; yet in the pursuit of the ideal, they perpetrate its opposites; the ideal and real, the divine aspiration and the deft intrigue. (IX)

The dramatist introduces tension and conflict, which are essential for plot, in the very beginning and all events and actions of characters intensify conflict until it reaches climax and resolves into denouement.

The orthodox Muslims are annoyed by Tughlaq's idealism, humanism and departure from the practice of the religious tenets in administrative matters. The old man who represents the orthodox segment of Muslim society introduces the note of dramatic conflict with his word: "God, what's the country coming to". (1) The young man supports Tughlaq and says that the country is in perfectly safe hands. It is evident that this is a conflict between the old and new, between orthodox religion and modernity which are embodied in Tughlaq and his orthodox opponents. As the plot advances, the conflict develops.

The Sultan who is a curious mixture of the ideal and the obnoxious has as an intriguing nature. He sends his major opponent Sheik Imam-ud-Din as a royal envoy to rebellious Ain-ul-Mulk. The Sheik is treacherously killed. This malicious and barbarous misdeed perpetrated by Tughlaq intensifies the conflict with the rebellion of Amirs, Sheikhs and Sayyids who hatch a conspiracy under the leadership of Shihab-ud-Din to murder Tughlaq at prayer time. Ratan Singh who masterminds this conspiracy inform the Sultan about it. He takes all precautions arrests Amirs etc. and inhumanly kills Shihab-ud-Din. Rebellions becomes quite common and consequently. Tughlaq becomes revengeful, disappointed and frustrated. The capital is shifted from Delhi to Daultabad resulting in death and disaster to countless of people. The sultan's step mother gets Najib, who is considered Tughlaq's evil genius, killed. He sentences her to death. The conflict reaches the climax. Tughlaq's viciousness increases but with every crime and murder he becomes more disillusioned and frustrated. The play ends when Tughlaq's teetering on the brink of madness and he cannot offer prayer to which he attaches great importance. The denouement lacks in tragic intensity and depth. Therefore M.K. Naik says:

However, Tughlaq fails to emerge as a tragedy, chiefly because the dramatist seems to deny himself the artist's privilege to present an integrated vision of characters full of conflicting tendencies.

(Naik, 262)

Prayer has been used as leit-motive in Tughlaq. Tughlaq killed his father at prayer time. The Muslim Amirs, Sheikhs etc. conspire to murder Tughlaq at prayer time. In the beginning Tughlaq is very particularly about prayer. Everyone has to pray five times a day because that is the law. Where he is at height of frustration he bans prayer in his kingdom and when it is reintroduced after an interval of five years on the arrival of Ghiyasaud-Din Abbasid he

sleeps soundly. Both Tuglaq and his opponents uses prayer as a political strategy. U.S. Ananthamurthy rightly says:

That prayer, which is most dear to Tuglaq, is vitiated by him as well as his enemies, is symbolic of the fact that his life is corrupted at its very source. The whole episode is ironic. (9)

The sub-plot related with Aziz and Aazm parallel to the main plot. It is employed for the purpose of burlesque: in other words, it is introduced in the way of ridicule. Such burlesque parallelism is a singular feature of the plot of Tuglaq. Aziz who assumes various disguises from start to finish is a wily time server who is not punished for his misdeeds but is rewarded by the sultan. The under plot is characterized by suspense and surprise.

The story of Hayavadana is taken from Kathasaritsagara and Thomas Mann's version of it in the Transposed Heads. Karnad deals with the problem of human identity and human relationship. In the very beginning the Ganesh Pooja stands for curious contraction in life. Lord Ganesha who shines like a thousand suns and sits on a mouse decorated with snake, is the husband of Riddhi and Siddhi and is the 'single tusked destroyer of incompleteness.' How can a single-tusked-elephant-headed God be the destroyer of incompleteness? The note of burlesque, topsyturvydom, of incompleteness and the search of identity is introduced in the opening scene. The following invocation of Lord Ganesha implies the transposition of head which is the main theme of this play. Invoking Ganesha Bhagvata says:

An elephant's head on a human body, a broken tusk and a cracked-belly-whichever way you look at him he seems the embodiment of imperfection, of incompleteness. How indeed can one fathom this mystery that this is very Vakradanta, Mahakaya, with his crooked face and distorted body is the Lord and Master of success and perfection? Could it be the Image of purity and Holiness, this mangalamoorti. intends to signify by his very experience that the completeness of God is something no poor mortal can comprehend. (1)

Devadatta, 'comely in appearance, fair in colour, unrivalled in intelligence', is a renowned intellectual and poet. Kapila, dark and plain to look at, is par excellence in deeds' which require drive and daring, in dance, in strength and in physical skills.' The two young persons, so diametrically opposed both in appearance and qualities, are intimate friends who remind the people of Dharampur of Lava and Kusha, Rama and Lakshman, Krishna and Balarama.' (2)

Devadatta is married to Padmini, the daughter of leading merchant in Dharampur. The friendship between Devadatta and Kapila goes on flourishing. To the admiring citizens of Dharampura, Devadatta, Padmini and Kapila are like Rama, Sita and Lakshman. Can these persons representing contraries and contradictions live harmoniously and maintain their relationship as Rama, Sita and Lakshman did? Can the contraries be reconciled? The myth

of Rama, Sita and Lakshman is both suggestive and ironical. It implies that in want of proper understanding and in the presence of worldly passion such relationship cannot be maintained with sanctity. Hayavadana is conscious for the meticulous and impeccable handling of myth and legend.

Girish Karnad maintains both suspense and surprise to the last. Padmini, who is with child, has a sensual nature and is fascinated by Kapila's sturdy physique. She contrasts Kapila and Devadatta:

And what an ethereal shape, such a broad back like an ocean with muscles rippling across it and then that small, feminine waist which looks so helpless. (25)

They fall in love. Devadatta is sick at heart. Kapila and Padmini go to the temple of Kali. In utter anguish he cuts off his head. Kapila and Padmini return to the cart and they are in a fix when they do not find Devadatta there. Leaving her all alone Kapila runs towards the Kali temple. Padmini, who cares only for herself, does not appreciate Kapila's going there. She says: He's gone, Really, he seems more worried about Devadatta than me. (29)

Kapila too beheads himself. In the cover of darkness Padmini too goes to the temple and is terrified at the ghastly scene. She is selfish. She loves her own self, rather than Devadatta or Kapila. she condemns Kapila, who looked at her with dog's eyes, for selfishness and unkindness. She is perturbed to think. "They'll all say they too fought and died for this where.(31)

She worships Goddess Kali who grants her the boon that by adjusting their heads on their trunks and by pressing them with the sword she can revive them to life. In darkness she transposes their heads. The story reaches its climax. Commenting on the transposed heads M.K.Naik says:

The irony of the transposed heads on the bodies of two friends, who stand at opposite poles of personality, viz, the intellectual versus the activist is employed here to raise the problem of identity. (263)

The transposition of heads results in a confusion of identities which reveals the ambiguous nature of human personality.

In the beginning Devadatta (the head of Devadatta on Kapila's body) behaves quite differently from what he was before. But gradually he changes to his former self. Kapila also under goes a change. Devadatta does not write poetry and Kapila is haunted by memories in Devadatta's body. Padmini who has enjoyed the best of both the men, by and by gets disillusioned. She is tired of Devadatta and takes shelter in Kapila's cottage. They again fight a duel and kill themselves. Padmini ascends their funeral pyre and performs sati.

Hayavadana is not a tragedy. The deaths of Devadatta and Kapila and the sati of Padmini reveal the logic of the absurdity of situation. Naik says:

Karnad does not succeed fully in investing the basic conflict in the play with the required intensity, but his technical experiment with an indigenous dramatic form here is triumph which has opened up fresh lines of fruitful exploration for the Indian English playwright.(263)

The sub-plot of Hayavadana, the horse man, highlights the significance of the main theme of incompleteness by treating it on a different plane. Hayavadana is unhappy over his horse head and wants complete identification as a horse. His search for completeness ends comically, with his becoming a complete horse. Bhagavata concludes the play with an invocation to Lord Ganesh, who too has a transposed head:

Unfathomable indeed is the mercy of the Elephant-headed Ganesa. He fulfills the desires of all – grandson to a grandfather, a smile to a child, a neigh to a horse. How indeed can one describe his glory in our poor, disabled words? (71)

The sub plot burlesques the main plot and deepens the irony implied in the main plot.

Girish Karnad uses Bhagavata as chorus. Like chorus in ancient Greek drama he reports all the important events and developments which are essential for the development of plot. Other devices and conventions of folk tales and folk theatre like masks, curtains, dolls, the story within a story etc. are employed in Hayavadana.

The plots of Tughlaq and Hayavadana are thus precise, well knit and are remarkable for architectonic quality. Various events and actions of characters contribute to the unity of effect.

Karnad's characters are vividly delineated. He observes economy, precision and concentration in portraying his characters, which are needed for the development of plot. Karnad follows the rule that every character should be so presented as to appear absolutely adequate to all the demands which the plot makes upon it. Tolman says "that only those characteristics of the hero" – or indeed of any important personage – "should be made prominent which really influence the course of action; and that these characteristics should be unmistakable." (188-89) Karnad's characters reveal themselves through their own actions and words. Dialogue reveals character. The utterances of a given person in his conversation with others and the remarks made about him by other persons in the play are important devices for character delineation in Tughlaq and Hayavadana. Karnad also employs the devices of contrast, irony and parallelism for character portrayal.

Characterisation and plot are correlated in the plays of Karnad and only those points of character are emphasized, which develop the plot; Tughlaq has been portrayed with great psychological truth and depth. The dramatist deftly projects the paradoxes in the complex personality of Tughlaq who is at once a dreamer and man of action, benevolent and cruel, devout and godless. Tughlaq is the only unifying factor in Tughlaq. All important events and actions which make the plot of Tughlaq issue from his character. Tughlaq himself reveals his idealism, scholarship, secularism in his various speeches. When his idealism and administrative reforms are frustrated a psychological change comes over him. In order to realize his plans and administrative reforms he resorts to murder and bloodshed, gets frustrated and disillusioned. How clearly his disillusionment is expressed in the following words:

I am teetering on the brink of madness, Barani, but the madness of God still eludes me, (shouting). And why should I deserve that madness? I have condemned my mother to death and I'm not even sure she was guilty of the crime. (58)

Tughlaq's hasty, idealistic but sometimes thoughtless actions precipitate his downfall.

Other characters too throw light on Tughlaq's willfulness and callousness. Ratansingh says:

I have never seen an honest scoundrel like your Sultan. He murders a man calmly and then actually enjoys the feeling of guilt. (28)

Barani also says:

Oh God! Aren't even the dead free from your politics (44)

Barani, the scholarly – historian and Najib, the shrewd politician, represent the two opposite selves of the sultan. Aziz who is shrewd, wise, intelligent, pragmatic and utilitarian, is a notorious cheat who represents all those who take unlawful advantage of Tughlaq's idealism.

Characters in Hayavadana highlight the implicit irony in human existence and embody the search of identity in a world of tangled relationships which forms the basic theme of the plot. Bhagavata who acts as chorus first of all comments on the curious contradictions in Lord Ganesha, the elephant – headed god, who symbolizes the absurdity of human existence. Bhagavata describes Devadatta as “comely in appearance, fair in colour, unrivalled in intelligence”. (2)

He embodies the quintessence of intellectual life. Kapila, the only son of the ironsmith Lohita, is Devadatta's opposite. “Kapila is dark and plain to look at, yet in deeds, which require drive and daring in dancing, in strength and in physical skills, he has no equal.” (2) Yet these two persons, diametrically opposed to each other, are intimate friends and remind the people of Dharmapura of “Lava and Kusha, Rama and Lakshman, Krishana and Balarama.” (2) These two young men complement each other. Devadatta falls in love with Padmini who, according to Kapil, “is Lakshmi, Shakuntala, Urvashi, Indumati – all rolled into one.” (18) He marries her. Padmini ridicules Kapila and Devadatta, tells her that he “has a heart of gold.” (22)

Devadatta, Padmini and Kapila go to the temple of Rudra. Padmini is with child. Kapila drives the cart smoothly on the uneven road. His sturdy physique fascinates Padmini who in the beginning laughed at him. She embodies sensuality and selfishness. Kapila goes to bring for her the Fortunate Lady's flower. She begins to dislike her husband, Devadatta and comparing them both she says to herself:

How he climbs like an ape. Before I could even say 'yes', he had taken off his shirt, pulled his dhoti up and swung up the branch. And what an ethereal shape such a broad back like an ocean with muscles rippling across it – and then that small feminine waist which looks so helpless. (25)

Kapila's masculinity hypnotises Padmini whose sensuality has remained unsatiated. She thinks Kapila as the superb specimen of humanity. Devadatta is now jealous of Kapila. She comes as a kill joy in their life. Padmini exists only for herself. When Kapila goes to search Devadatta, she says:

He's gone! Really, he seems more worried about Devadatta than me. (29)

The two friends kill themselves in the temple of Kali. Padmini invokes the Goddess, who appears and tells her:

You spoke the truth because you're selfish – that's all. (33)

The Goddess empowers her to bring Devadatta and Kapila to life by putting their heads on their trunks but in confusion and excitement she transposes their heads. The transposition of heads creates an absurd situation. But it is a blessing in disguise for selfish Padmini, who will now enjoy Devadatta's intellect with the sturdy and masculine body of Kapila. She joyously says:

My Devadatta comes like bridegroom with the ornament of a new body. (33)

Kapila disappears into the forest and Devadatta and Padmini return to Dharampura and plunge into the joys of married life.

A change comes over Devadatta and his body suffers a transformation. Kapila also undergoes a transformation. Padmini meets Kapila in the forest and is again attracted by his masculinity. She lives for herself; for the satiation of her sensuality. Devadatta and Kapila kill each other and Padmini performs sati. One who lives for oneself can never understand the sanctity of human relationship.

Settings in Tughlaq and Hayavadana are in keeping with the plots. Tughlaq has been set in fourteenth century India and the dramatist has vividly created the atmosphere of court intrigues, seditions, murder and bloodshed. In the opening scenes which take place in 1327 the atmosphere of conflict between the idealism and progressive attitude of the Sultan and the religious bigotry of orthodox Muslims has been recreated. The announcer in Tughlaq also helps in creating the atmosphere of reality. Citizens who have been suffering and starving highlight poverty and destitution in Tughlaq's reign.

In Hayavadana the setting corresponds with the absurdity in human existence the plot deals with. Absurdity being in the opening scene with the worship of Lord Ganesh who is presented as the symbol of absurdity. The appearance of Hayavadana who has a man's body and horse's head, also creates absurdity. The transposition of heads results in a confusion of identities. Suggestive symbols are also used to create a bizarre atmosphere. Karnad deftly creates the atmosphere of folk tale by using masks, curtains, dolls, the story within story etc.

Girish Karnad, who has been a Rhodes scholar at Oxford, has great command over English, which he gracefully uses in his two plays. He chooses apt and appropriate words which are suggestive and reveal both character and situation. He writes dialogue in lucid, pointed and precise language which is

conspicuous for flexibility: It changes with the nuances of his characters, How vividly the conflict between old and new, between Tughlaq's idealism and the orthodox Muslims is revealed.

Old Man: God, what's this country coming to?

Young Man: What are you worried about, grandfather? The country's in perfectly safe hands safer than any you've seen before. (1)

In the opening scenes Tughlaq's language is highly poetic and imaginative as it communicates his idealism:

Let's laugh and cry together and then let's pray. Let's pray till our bodies melt and flow and our blood turns into air. History is ours to play with – ours now. Let's be the light and cover up the boundaries of nations come: I am waiting to embrace you all. (10)

In later scenes when Tughlaq is disillusioned and frustrated, his language expresses his disturbed psyche:

God, God, in Heaven, please help me. Please don't let go of my hand. My skin drips with blood and I don't know how much of it is mine and how much of others. I started in your path O Lord, why am I wandering in this desert naked now? I started in search of you. Why am I become a pig rolling in this gory mud. Raise me, clean me. Cover me with Your Infinite Mercy. I can only clutch at hem of your cloak with my bloody fingers and plead. I can only beg – have pity on me. I have no one but you now. Only you. You... You... You ... (62)

Karnad's characters use language which suits their status and temperament. The cheat, Aziz, uses matter of fact language, devoid of Tughlaq's imaginative expressions:

My dear fellow, that's where our future is, politics. It's a beautiful world, wealth, success, position, power and yet it's full of brainless people with not an idea in their head. When I think of all the tricks I used in our village to pinch a few torn clothes from people – if one uses half that intelligence here, one can get robes of power. And not have to pinch them either – get them. It's fantastic world. (50)

Karnad's language is symbolical and he adroitly uses chess, prayer and python as symbols in Tughlaq. The chess suggests duality in Tughlaq's nature. As skilled chess player he uses his political opponents as pawns on the chess-board of politics. Prayer is the leit – motif of the play and the python suggests Tughlaq's barbarity and humanity.

In Hayavadana language and style create an impression of absurdity. The prayer song in praise of Lord Ganesh and Bhagavata's long choric comment, written in clear and straight forward language, convey the feeling of irony, contradiction and absurdity which form an essential part in human life. Karnad makes a stylistic experience in Hayavadana. In order to highlight the curious contradictions and absurdities underlying human serious for the non-serious. Devadatta and Kapila who are each other's temperamental opposites are very intimate friends and they remind the people of Dharmapura of 'Lava and Kusha, Rama and Lakshmana, Krishna and Balarama'. Padmini is likened

to Yakshini, Shakuntala, Urvashi and Indumati. To the admiring citizens of Dharamapura Devadatta, Padmini and Kapila are Rama, Sita and Lakshman, After the transposition of heads the myth of Rama, Sita and Lakshman reversed when Kapila says:

Devadatta, couldn't we all three live together like the Pandavas and Draupadi. (60)

This is a stylistic innovation in Hayavadana.

Political and imaginative language is employed to intensify the absurdity. Commenting on the similarity between a fortunate lady and the Fortunate Lady's flower, kapila says:

Because it has all the marks of marriage a woman puts on. The yellow on the petals – then that round patch at the bottom of the petals – like on your foreheads – then here – that this saffron line – like in the parting of your – hair, Then – um – here – near the stem a ray of black dots – like a necklace of black beads. (26-27)

Padmini's words are expressive of her selfishness.

Hayavadana, the horse man, uses simple and clear language which is both suggestive and revealing:

My personal life has naturally been blameless so I took interest in the social life of the Nation – civics, politics, nationalism, Indianization, the socialist pattern of society... I have tried everything. (9)

He suggests the type of people who play a prominent role in national life.

Karnad's style is simple, straightforward and idiomatic. Idioms and Phrases abound both in Tughlaq and Hayavadana; for example, "light up our path", "Went Wild", "hold your tongue", "the end of my tether", "to breathe life into", "play the game", "torn into pieces", "backbone of rebels", "an incompetent food", "get rid of", "an honest scoundrel", "crush into dust", "get to doze out spittle", "mug's game" etc. (Tughlaq) and "hand in hand" "look up", "to have the cheek", "turn up", "mumble under breath", "powder to dust", "drool over", "a heart of gold", "feel like bits of wood", "guts burn out", "lungs turn to ash", "to look at with dog's eyes", "made dance of incompleteness" etc. (Hayavadana).

Karnad has successfully Indianized English in Tughlaq and Hayavadana in order to create Indian atmosphere. In Tughlaq he freely uses Arabic and Indian words for creating the atmosphere of fourteenth century India in Tughlaq's reign; for example, "sultan", "Jiziya", "Kazi-i-Mumalik", "dhobi", "dar-ul-Islam", "Durbar-i- Khas" and the Muezzin's call for prayer has been twice given in Arabic. In Hayavadana Sanskrit and Hindi words and names have been freely used, as "Nata", "riddhi and siddi" "Vighneshawara", "Vakratunda – Mahakaya", "punya", "ganharva", "fakirs", "sadhus", "kalpa Vriksha", "alpanas", "arti", "makarandas" and "jacarands" etc. Karnad has successfully paraphrased some typical Indian expressions into chaste English:

In her house, the very floor is swept by the Goddess of Wealth. In Devadatta's house, they've the Goddess of learning for a maid. (19)

Plot, characters, setting, style and language – all contribute to create the unity of effect or impression in Tughlaq and Hayavadana. They also reveal the dramatist's view of life or vision of life which is the search of identity in the midst of worldly complexities.

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