

## **‘A Peep into The “Urban”’: An Analysis of theme of Modernity in Karnad’s ‘Boiled Beans on Toast’**

**Neethu P Antony**

Research Scholar

Centre for Research in English

Dept of English

Baselius College, Kottayam

### **Abstract**

Girish Karnad’s play *Boiled Beans on Toast* (originally ‘*Bendakalooru*’) which is published in 2014 can be considered as an apt contemporary play- because, it deals with the issues of globalization. The protagonist of the play is the city of Bangalore. The play reveals the shattered life of people who struggles to survive in the midst of an urban culture. For Karnad, behind its scintillating image, it is a city of hopelessness and disappointment. He proves that it is a city which lacks an identity and involved in a constant search for its psyche. Major themes Karnad used in this play to make out his point are - modernity, human complexities and environmental problems. But among them the most important one is the theme of Modernity. Overlaid with a myth, Karnad attempted to present the facts of an urban city.

**Keywords:** Indian Theatre, Urban culture, Karnad. Modernity, Globalisation

### **Introduction**

With the development of human society, a new ‘urban culture’ emerged. The process of urbanization is an inevitable part of contemporary society. In India , the process of urbanization starts after independence as an effect of its hugging of a mixed economic system which paved way to the rise of many private sectors. The urbanisation in India led to the emergence of four major metro cities-- Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata and Bangalore. Bangalore, the hi-tech city of India often considered as “*a city in search of a soul,*” is transforming each and every day into a most modern one. Its culture now sadly turned into truly an indifferent one. Contemporary trends in Indian English Literature gives more importance to the urban themes and urban cultural aspects as India is a developing nation and is changing into a modernised one. Many popular Indian English writers and regional writers are now working with realistic themes which are socially and culturally significant. The problem of urbanisation finds powerful expression in novels of the post- Independence novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Jhabwala , Amit Chaudhuri,

Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry appeared to be acutely touched and moved by the dilemma of modern man in the industrialised and urbanised modern society. In poetry, poets like Prabhakar Rao, A K Ramanujan, Nissim Ezekiel etc reflected the life and identities of urbanised, Western educated Indians. Indian theatre and plays dealt with ideas of social evils like corruption, illiteracy, and urbanization which are also the momentous problems being faced by Indian society. Playwrights like Asif Currimbhoy, Pratap Sharma, Gurcharan Das, Mahesh Dattani, Girish Karnad etc. depicted post- colonial and post- Independence ideas through their works .

Girish Karnad, one of the finest playwrights, filmmakers, and actors of our time, writes in Kannada and has translated his plays into English. Presenting a critical sense of history, myth, and time, his plays make a confluence between the past and the present. He mostly concentrated on myth -oriented themes and its reworking in modern context, but his later plays like ‘Wedding Album’ and ‘Boiled Beans on Toast’ along with myths, dealt with more ‘socially oriented’ and ‘current’ themes conveying the problems of urban culture its cause and effect and changing life style . His journey from “Yayati” to “Boiled Beans on Toast” holds a mirror to the very evolution of a truly ‘Indian theatre’.

### Theme of Modernity

The play ‘Boiled Beans on Toast’ which is written in two Acts is completely a Bangalore based one, which specifically conveys each and every heart beats of the Bangalore city. Girish Karnad is a playwright who previously worked with myth oriented subjects and its transcreation into a modern context. For example- In his most notable play ‘Yayati’, the myth of King Yayati from Mahabharata is presented. But Karnad also included some other ideas of Brecht’s “epic theatre” and also included many new characters here. Karnad’s recent plays like ‘Wedding Album’ and ‘Boiled Beans on Toast’ are more concentrated on socially relevant issues. They actually portrayed many of the contemporary issues with less attention to myths.

Here in the play ‘Boiled Beans on Toast’ Karnad critically views different issues in a cosmopolitan city (here it is Bangalore). He skillfully traced out and also mentioned about the different problems caused by the urban culture. One of the major themes he indirectly and sometimes directly conveyed through this play is about the influence of “modernity” and also about its after effects. The process of urbanisation and the effects of modernity upon the original culture is one of the serious issues that can dangerously lead to the transformation of the original culture and its traditional values into a fashionable one. So one of the major aim intended by Karnad is to convey about the advent of modernity in Bangalore.

The play’s title itself is purposefully chosen by Karnad, it indicates about a shift from tradition to modernity in a clear cut way. In the title ‘Boiled Beans on Toast’, the idea of

“beans” is actually a reference relates to the founding myth of the city of Bengaluru or Bangalore, which today admired as the “silicon valley of India”. It was in the 11<sup>th</sup> century , king Veera Ballala went out hunting , lost his way in the jungle, and after wandering through the night, arrived exhausted at a lonely hut, where an old woman saved his life by giving him a handful of boiled beans (“benda kaalu” in Kannada, the native tongue). In gratitude, the king named the place “Bendakaaluru”, the place of “boiled beans”, which in the course of time got corrupted into ‘Bengaluru’ and was in turn anglicised by the colonial rulers into ‘Bangalore’. But the “toast” is a strictly western import into Indian cuisine. It is really a modern term. Here we can clearly recognise, how Karnad conveys the idea of the transformation of the original culture and traditional values of the place into a modernised one. According to Devina Dutt:

“This is a masterfully structured play that makes the city of Bangalore and its explosive growth in the last two decades its subject. . . . It avoids the prevalent clichés of its image as an IT city or a city of numerous call centres. Instead, it presents the stories of a cross section of those who live in Bangalore, and whose expectations, survival techniques and disappointments are all coloured by it”.

To an extent the idea of modernity is good, as it helps in the advancements and provided a much smoother way of life for the people. The city of Bangalore has beautifully combined its technological and industrial accomplishments. In fact, this blend with the modern culture has made Bangalore one of the most happening cities in India. But there is also a negative identity of modernity which is hidden behind its mask. Through this play Karnad directly and indirectly points out the real effects of modernity and also tears its mask. . Here, the city is acquiring the status of the IT Capital on one side, on the other, there is a shattering of the original culture is happening. May be the recent renaming of the city from “Bangalore” to “Bengaluru” is an attempt to give importance to its past and its roots which the hi-tech culture of today seems to have forgotten.

Therefore, through the title itself Karnad tries to present the advent of modern culture over the traditional values. The chief protagonist of the play ‘Boiled Beans on Toast’ is the city of Bangalore, a throbbing organism spawned by globalisation. The play looks at the reality of the present with unblinking eyes.

In Act One, Scene One itself Karnad presented a picture of confused, puzzled and frustrated picture of Bangalore city life.

“As the lights focuses on the stage, the entire cast is seen on the stage as in a phantasmagoric tableau, every character is in an immobile state, frozen in the middle of some action or activity. When the lights are fully on, the

actors spring into action, talking, moving about, fighting, shouting, bumping into each other, the background noise of traffic and music adding to the effect of a busy thorough fare in Bangalore. Then the lights and the music fade out together”. (Karnad pg.5)

Here, the initial idea of the phantasmagoric and confused state and even the character’s immobile, frozen state conveys an idea about the lifelessness state of the urban culture. The picture of busy life situations is actually a typical portrayal of an urban culture.

Scene two in Act One presented the idea about “mobile phones”, which became a vital part of urban culture and also Karnad mentioned about the working middle class. Here Karnad made use of the idea of mobile phones as a symbol of modern urban identity. Karnad specifically conveyed the distancing of people from the traditional culture, in an indirect way through the discussion between Muttu and Sankara about Muttu’s daughter Kalpana’s coming of age celebration. Here we can see a complete rejection of traditional culture by Muttu in order for the sake of convenience, which can be regarded as a key idea of modern middle class culture. For them the “sake of convenience” is the more important one. It makes the outer lifestyle simple ,but inner values more complex.

SHANKARA (annoyed): There are things you can’t talk about on the phone. You said you want to have all the rituals done here in Bengaluru. Why? What do we have in this city? All our relations live in Karimangala or Solagiri. They can’t come this far for the ceremony.

MUTTU: Husband said Karimangala would mean expense. The remotest relatives’ll turn up. In Bengaluru, we have a smaller affair. More compact.

MOTHER: What’s the point of spending unnecessarily?

SHANKARA: That’s what happens when people move to the city. The family back home, relatives, connections—they all become dispensable, don’t they? They can be put aside. Ignored. Forgotten.

Karnad deliberately included many symbols in order to refer to the overpowering of modern culture over the original culture. The symbol of “ironing”, which appears to a casual idea in the play is actually Karnad’s brilliant putforwarding of the reflection about polished life ways and appearance that the urban people yearns for. The change in lifestyle is represented through the transition from the boiled beans (representation of tradition) to biscuits and sandwiches, the junk food which is believed to be the part of the sophisticated culture. Hi-fi life style and formal attitudes now become the ideal face of modern life culture.

Another notable character in the play is Prabhakar, who is a village guy with a vigorous attraction and a thirst for the city life. Finally, this character turned into a victim of the evilness of the modern culture which is clearly represented through the character of Dolly. By including a character like Prabhakar, Karnad aims to present the straightforwardness of the rustic culture and also attacks and deeply criticises the evilness of modernity. The rushness of the city life is represented through the words of Prabhakar. Here through Dolly’s words Karnad presented the country people’s love and attraction for the modern way of lifestyle and culture.

PRABHAKAR: The road outside your house is like a scene from a war movie.

ANJANA: They’re building an underpass there, so they are chopping down the trees.

DOLLY: The problem is our City Corporation is run by people born and brought up in the countryside. They’ve no time for greenery and environment. They simply love cement concrete, and plastic and glass-fronted buildings. That means modernity to them.

According to Karnad, the characters of Prabhakar and Dolly are real representatives of two types of culture. Prabhakar represents the purity of the countryside, unknowingly falls into the black hole of modernity’s evilness. He is very much attracted towards the posh lifestyle and culture and even mesmerised by the music of “western music”. Dolly represents the complete falseness, evilness and ugly face of the modern culture of Bangalore. She is the one who modernised her name from Rajalakshmi Iyer to Mrs. Dolly. She is a real advocate of modernism and the business world of Bangalore city. She’s also aware about the evilness of Bangalore culture, which is revealed by Karnad through her dialogue “Bangalore isn’t a safe place for a woman on her own with a child”. She’s the one who has dreams about Singapore.

DOLLY: My husband was posted here in Bangalore when he was in

service and fondly remembered the Cantonment bungalows. The pillars, the porticos, and the monkeytop windows.

PRABHAKAR: Comfortable! Lucky you, Madam! You should see our flat.

It's the size of a handkerchief.

Prabhakar is introduced as a person who likes to watch the huge traffic and traffic blocks. He is a person who abandoned his taste for poetry and the arts because of his immense attraction for the city life. He postponed his artistic ideas in order to find a safe job. Here, Karnad conveyed the idea of the acceptance of modern culture by the country people as a means of their "survival". Prabhakar accepts and prefers the "coffee day" culture, here Karnad clearly describes about his transformation from one who, having just a coffee to one who likes to have sandwiches, biscuits, Cappuccino, latte and espresso. His dream to work in 'Wipro' is because of the enchanting effect of the IT hi-fi culture in Bangalore. His deliberate pronouncing of "Bengaluru" to "Bangalore" reveals his dislike for the traditional culture and his embracing of the modern culture.

As a resident of Bangalore, Karnad become aware about the modern culture's attitude towards older people. Karnad presented this idea through the experience of Anasuya, the mother-in-law of Mrs. Anjana Padabidri during a train journey. Even the old Anasuya is more concentrated on the modern lifestyle and culture. She's very much interested in shopping, horse races, gambling, borrowing etc. Her modern style corrupted her very much. It's not only physically, but also mentally influenced her very much. Here, in the case of Anasuya, a distancing from the traditional original culture is happening. Karnad here critically done a good analysis of the changing culture, its reasons and after effects. In Act One, Scene Four, Karnad concentrated more on this particular idea.

In Act One, Scene Four, Karnad presents the picture of modern high class culture who gives much importance to the maids or servants, because society ladies don't know how to cook, so they depends on servants. Here, Anjana has always depended on Vimala and Muttu. Shankara, who appeared to be a lover of traditional culture, reveals his hidden inner thoughts in this Scene Four. Karnad critically analyse Shankara's view of original culture here.

SHANKARA: Oh, is she now? So you've at long last remembered that, have you? And what have you done for these granddaughters, eh? They're rotting in this village. Do you ever think of them in Bengaluru?.

Bangalore is considered as a “monster city” by Muttu’s mother who always try to embrace the original country culture. In Act Two Scene Six, Karnad introduces a symbol of a “cement mixer”, it is closely related with the heartbeats of the modernity in Bangalore. It’s roaring sound will crush the traditional culture’s presence in the city. Prabhakar’s final monologue represents Karnad’s own view of the Bangalore city.

PRABHAKAR: --- this mess, this chaos. I keep asking myself: what keeps things working at all in this city? What drives these crowds? Hope, ambition. Whatever. It’s our version of the American Dream, which would’ve horrified my parents, but has brought me to Bangalore—

(Suddenly the concrete mixer erupts into action outside, with a deafening roar. They can’t hear each other)

Anjana’s son Kunal is another important character Karnad presented here, he is another advocate of modernity. He is a good player of “Veena”, which is a traditional one. But he is the one who deliberately avoids it and plays “guitar”, a musical instrument of modern culture. He only considered Veena’s strains just for it’s market value. But in the final part of the play Kunal rejects the Bangalore’s modern culture by naming it as a “black hole”. Karnad here presented a string of hope through Kunal’s rejection of the metropolitan modernity.

So it is clear that Karnad’s new play ‘Boiled Beans on Toast’ can be considered as an important one in the realms of “cultural studies”. . Along with the portrayal about the influence of the modern culture, Karnad also critically describes about the various ideas of human complexities which is caused by the influence of modern culture. The play constantly reminds us of the dangerous effects of urbanization and modern culture on our daily lives. India is a place which is traditionally known for her family bonds and mutual exchange of love. But Karnad presents the effects of urban culture which shatters our family bonds. Karnad presents the life as it is lived by the people of Bangalore. He has made use of different characters belonging to multifarious sections of the society to present human experiences of city life. Quite interestingly, almost all the characters suffer from loneliness. In Scene Three of Act One, Karnad pointing to some social complexities, here, he mentioned about how the old parents are rejected and ignored by the children into certain ‘Karunashrayas’ who are busy with their fast-paced life. Here Karnad critically conveys about the inner complexities of urban life.

Prabhakar is introduced as a character who is a job-seeker from a small village, for him the concrete jungle rolling-over the shrinking greenery hold promise of untold prospects. Here, Karnad describes about the changes that happen in the mind of a person because of the influence of the modern life situations. He transformed from a person of good-nature to an ambitious one.

Karnad presents the character of Sumitra, Prabhakar's wife as a simple housewife who loves to have a happy life in the city, she is a character who wants to have a nuclear family without the interference of parents. Karnad here presents the idea of modern family relationships and certain complexities inside it.

But Prabhakar is a person who cares about him only, he wishes to have a better career rather than protecting his wife and children. Prabhakar's final realisation of the essence of human life in Bangalore is very insightful one. He realised that Bangalore is a city of hope, ambition etc and an Indian version of the American Dream.

So through these above mentioned ideas, Karnad clearly conveyed the theme of modernity through this play. He also critically mentioned directly and indirectly about, how the traditional culture in Bangalore is threatened by modernity or modern culture. Karnad presented a skillful analysis of the present culture here in Bangalore, and quoted about the facts that influences its culture.

## **Conclusion**

Through this article '*A Peep into The "Urban": An Analysis of Theme of Modernity in Karnad's 'Boiled Beans on Toast'*', a critical attempt is done in order to analyse the major theme of modernity in this particular play written by the most acclaimed writer Girish Karnad. The play focused more on the contemporary issues more than the mythical ideas. Karnad deliberately attempted an analysis of the "culture", presented his viewpoints through the voices of his characters He directly and indirectly presented and refer to the aspects of modernity through the actions he presented through this play. Karnad really succeeded in presenting a critical appraisal of the urban culture in Bangalore and attempted to present an evaluation of the problems happening in an urban culture. He also clearly portrayed the shifting from the "original culture" or the "traditional culture" to the modern culture. According to the director Lillete Dubey;

"Boiled Beans on Toast' is a deceptively simple play, that in a non-linear narrative, lays bare the aspirations and hopes of a large mass of Indians today, but also subtly explores several modern themes such as urban migration, environmental concerns, consumerism etc , all laced with a great deal of warmth and humour. As a director, I find it challenging to bring out the subtle nuances of Karnad's work, and feel excited and privileged to premiere a play that will remain a mirror of our times for years to come".

Through this play '*Boiled Beans on Toast'*, Karnad really turned into a writer of our contemporary days, because here, he gave much importance to the present culture and exposed the real facts behind the seemingly beautiful hi-fi life of the high class people and their lifestyle in metropolitan cities. Here, the major protagonist is the "city of Bangalore". By referring to its



founding myth and origin , Karnad here critically studies about the glide from a pure traditional culture to a modern culture which is full of corruption.

Here, the “city of Bangalore” stands just as a symbol in front of us. Through studying the urban culture in Bangalore, Karnad aims to point towards the similar attitudes in several other metropolitan cities in India. As a resident of Bangalore, fed up with the effects of modernity, frustrations and confusions in human relationships and of several environmental problems—Karnad is rejecting the urban culture and his violent criticism and a staunch opposition towards several urban cultural aspects found voice through this particular play.

## Works Cited

1. Karnad, Girish. *Boiled Beans on Toast*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014. Print.
2. The Hindu. "A really serious Playwright." *The Hindu Magazine* 19 May 2013: 1-4. Print.

## References

1. Chakraborty, Kaustav, ed. *Indian Drama in English*. New Delhi: PHI Learning Private Limited, 2011. Print.
2. Dharwadker, Aparna Bhargava. "Performance, Meaning and the Materials of Modern Indian Theatre: Interview with Girish Karnad", 2010. Print.
3. Dhawan, R.K., *Indian Literature today*, New Delhi : Prestige Books, 1994. Print.
4. Dodiya Jaydipsinha. *The Plays of Girish Karnad: Critical Perspectives*, New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991. Print
5. Khatri, C.L. *Indian Drama in English - An Anthology of recent Criticism*. Jaipur: Book Enclave, 2007. Print.
6. Pandey, Manoj K. *The Plays of Girish Karnad and Tradition*. New Delhi: Adhayan Publishers and Distributors, 2007. Print.