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RESEARCH ARTICLE

KARNAD : THE ACHIEVER OF THEATRICAL COMMUNICATION.

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Abstract

Indian English literature is the Cinderella of literature in English. Indian drama in English is the Cinderella of Indian English literature. A recent bibliography of Indian writing in English¹ lists as many as separate titles under poetry, under fiction and a partly under drama. The bibliography of Indian drama in English appended to *Perspectives on Indian Drama in English*. Actually of these three forms, poetry and drama began their careers around the same time, with Henry Derozio's Poems (1827) and Krishna Mohan Banerji's, *The Persecuted* (1831) respectively, while the first Indian English novel - Bankim Chandra Chatterji's *Raj Mohan's Wife* appeared only in 1864. Since then, the 'pocket theatre' has clearly left the theatre far behind in the development of Indian writing in English. Fiction has already produced masterpieces like *Untouchable*, *The Serpent and The Rope* and *The Guide*. Indian drama in English was unable to grow similarly and bear rich fruit.

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Introduction:-

Several factors are responsible for the arrested growth of drama. At the outset, there is the fundamental problem of the indissoluble relationship between drama and the theatre - a relationship, which constitutes at once a single advantage and a limitation for drama vis-a-vis other literary forms. Drama is a composite art in which the written word of the playwright attains complete artistic realization only when it becomes the spoken word of the actor on the stage and through the medium reacts on the mind of the audience. A play, in order to communicate fully and become a living dramatic experience, thus needs a real theatre and a live audience. Of all writers, it is truest to say of the dramatist: 'He must communicate or he will die'. It is precisely the lack of these essentials that has hamstrung Indian drama in English all along. A glance at the development of drama in India during and after the British rule in India is instructive. The first theatre in Bombay, the Bombay Amateur Theatre, was built in 1776 on a spot 'where a tank of impure water existed before'² (and the curse of that 'impure water' has perhaps plagued the English theatre in India ever since). The plays presented here were 'in the main the comedies of the later Georgian playwrights'³. This theatre, soon crippled by financial difficulties was finally sold by public auction in 1835. The Bombay Gazette (12 September, 1835) protesting against the sale considered the day "not distant when the genius of Hindustan would again raise its head in renovated youth invigorated by the mighty auxiliaries of European literature and science"⁴. "If then", the editor asked, "An Indian Shakespeare should arise, shall there be no stage to call forth the creations of his fancy? Shall his genius sleep and its first fruits be lost to his country?"⁵ (A hundred and forty years later this complaint is still valid today, as far as drama in English is concerned) When the Grant Road Theatre

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opened a decade later, in 1846, Mrs. Deacle, in her inaugural address, indicated the kind of entertainment she proposed to offer: 'Old wines made mellow and improved by age/New fruits but late from the London stage'⁶.

Girish Karnad (b.1938) is one of the foremost playwrights in India who writes in Kannada and yet has moved away from the regionalist tradition to make fresh raids on the inarticulate. His first play *Yayati* (1961) re-interprets an ancient Hindu myth on the theme of responsibility and emerges almost like a self-consciously existentialist dream. Regarding this play, Karnad frankly confessed in an interview that he wanted to tell people "I had read Sartre, Camus and others"⁷. Karnad's second play *Tughlaq* (1964) explores the Paradox of the idealistic Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq whose reign is considered to be one of the spectacular regimes of history. In connection with this play, Karnad has revealed in course of the same interview "he read a work of **Kannada** criticism which proved that many historical plays written earlier were costume plays and that no one attempted to relate a historical episode to modern sensibility like Shaw. This inspired me to write such a play in Kannada"⁸. His third play *Hayavadana* (1970) presents the theme of human beings aspiring for the unattainable in the Brechtian pattern. And in his fourth play *Naga-Mandala*, Karnad weaves two Kannada folk tales together, the first one comments on the paradoxical nature of oral tales, and the other is the story of Rani whose predicament reflects the human need to live by fictions and half-truths. In all his plays - be their theme mythical, historical or legendary -Karnad's approach is modern. He uses the conventions and motifs of folk art. Like masks and curtains to project a world of intensities, uncertainties and unpredictable denouements, he rightly believes that the energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values. The various conventions - the chorus, the music, the apparently unrelated comic interludes, the mixing of the human and the non-human worlds - permit a simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view. Like Bertolt Brecht, Karnad strives to break the "illusion" of the theatre by which the spectators become so engrossed in a play that they forget, for the time being, what they are. Therefore like Brecht, Karnad leaves the stage apparatus visible, presents synoptic announcements, and has narrators directly talking to the audience. All this compels the audience to respond intellectually to the action of the play and question it, instead of responding emotionally and merely accepting it. Karnad's interpretation of the familiar old myth on exchange of ages between father and son seem to have baffled and even angered many of the conventional critics. But to others, who are trying to root their contemporary concerns in old mix, Karnad's unheroic hero Puru is the challenging experience.

Karnad places the individuals at the center of his picture of the world and shows that each man is what he chooses to be or marks himself. In his psychological exploration, the playwright shows an impressive insight and introduces concepts, which greatly extend the area of moral self-knowledge and self-awareness. This goes to prove that Karnad has indeed read wisely Sartre, Camus and others. Girish Karnad has given this traditional tale a new meaning and significance highly relevant in the context of life today. The symbolic theme of Yayati's attachment to life and its pleasures as also his final renunciation is retained. Karnad's originality lies in working out the motivations behind Yayati's ultimate choice. In *The Mahabharata*, Yayati recognizes the nature of desire itself and realizes that fulfillment does not diminish or finish desire. In Karnad's play, however, Yayati recognizes the horror of his own life and assumes his moral responsibility after a series of symbolic encounters. V.S. Khandekar, the eminent Marathi novelist, also used the Yayati myth in his novel. *Yayati* published in 1959, received several awards such as the State Government Award (1964). In his novel, Khandekar made Yayati a representative of modern common man who inspite of receiving much happiness in life, remains restless and discontented. The mythical Yayati ran after sensual pleasures, but Khandekar's Yayati runs after all kinds of materialistic pleasures - cars, bungalows, fat bank accounts, beautiful clothes, dance, and music. Though the tale is taken from the 'puranas', Khandekar's Yayati is a modern man. The existentialists like Sartre and Camus put a great stress on choice and responsibility. In an interview, Karnad says: "I was excited by the story of *Yayati*, this exchange of ages between the father and the son, which seemed to me terribly powerful and terribly modern. At the same time, I was reading a lot of Sartre and the Existentialists. This consistent harping on responsibility which the existentialists indulge in suddenly seemed to link up with the story of *Yayati*."⁹"Forgive me, Mother. You fulfilled the deepest craving of my life-you gave me Padmini - and I forgot my word Here Mother Kali.... My Head. Take it"¹⁰. This play, *Yayati*, emerged out of his sublimated protest against his being suffocated by the responsibilities thrust on him by his parents. *Tughlaq* received acclamation and Karnad was recognized as a promising playwright. The play was translated into other Indian languages. It presents Muhammad-Bin-Tughlaq, the eponymous and enigmatic character, who keeps on changing his roles.¹¹ He thinks that he alone can rule his kingdom ideally. So he gets his father and brother assassinated in a contrived accident and inherits the kingdom. He is a great scholar and visionary. He is caught in

the game of power. He plays the role of Rescuer in order to feel powerful. Though his favorite role is the Rescuer, he shifts to the other roles of the Drama Triangle, Persecutor and Victim. He effects several reforms which, he thinks, will benefit his people. He announces equality of justice on the second anniversary of his coronation. Aziz takes advantage of it and, in the guise of a Brahmin named Vishnu Prasad, files a suit against the government after buying a confiscated land from a Brahmin with a back date. He is offered five hundred silver dinars and also a post in the Civil Service as compensation for the loss of his land. Tughlaq feels overwhelmed about his success in implementing his ideal. He addresses his people and says: *My beloved people, you have heard the judgment of Kazi and seen for yourselves how justice works in my kingdom - without any consideration of might or weakness, religion or creed. May this moment burn bright and light up our path towards greater justice, equality, progress and peace - not just peace but a more purposeful life. And to achieve this end I am taking a new step in which I hope I shall have your support and cooperation. Later this year the capital of my empire will be moved from Delhi to Daulatabad*¹². He is thus blind to how some people like Aziz exploit his reforms, which therefore fail to reach the intended people. And people are not happy at all about his rule. A Hindu, for example, does not commend his removal of jiziya tax and condemns him for hypocrisy: We didn't want an exemption! Look, when a Sultan licks me in the teeth and says, 'Pay up, Hindu does', 'I' m happy. I know I'm safe. But the moment a man comes along and says, 'I' know you are a Hindu, but you are also a human being' well, that makes me nervous. Aparna Dharwadker aptly points out, "Tughlaq's madness and tyranny the only qualities his subjects attribute to him - are thus forms of powerlessness posing as power."¹³ And M.K. Naik compares Karnad's *Tughlaq* with Camus's *Caligula* and finds the fiasco of power in both of them. *Tughlaq* can also be compared with Tendulkar's plays, especially with *Ghasiram Kotwal* where power game is very intense. Muhammad plays the Rescuer while Ghasiram becomes the persecutor to exercise power. Steiner says, while explaining how and why people play these roles, "Having been in powerless position, we make ourselves feel better by taking, and assuming power over others as Rescuers or persecutors"¹⁴. The problem of alienation is brilliantly delineated by Norman O. Brown, a psychoanalyst, in his *Life against Death*¹⁵. He states that Apollo and Dionysus stand for self-alienation and self-unification, respectively. Once man enjoyed Dionysian ego, but he lost it in the process of civilization in his great endeavour to prove to himself that he is superior to all the other beings in Nature. And his mind started working independent of his body. This led to the emergence of Apollonian ego, where the sensations of his body do not reach his mind. This makes his personality and his life incomplete. Then he strives to overcome this and feels frustrated at his failure. *Hayavadana* illustrates this crisis of mankind very effectively.

Conclusion:-

Karnad exploits Yakshagana, the folk theatre of Karnataka, very cleverly to bring out this theme. The reason was Kapadia's "concept": he employed children not only as supernumerary citizens, but also in important parts like that of Azam. According to him, "Children [sic] today are burdened so much that donkeys should be throwing a party" (Director's Note in the brochure of the production). We echo the sentiment, surely, but *Tughlaq* hardly seems less of a burden on young shoulders - the prepubescent boy playing Azam had to voice such lines as "Now ail you have to do to become a saint is rape". Carelessness in other ways "so spoilt the overall effect. For example, three people looked after costumes, but forgot that Aziz disguised as Brahman should wear the sacred thread.

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