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## GIRISH KARNAD: A MULTIFACETED PERSONALITY

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### ABSTRACT

**T**he present paper explores various traits of Karnad's personality which make him a multifaceted writer in contemporary India. His writing urges the reader to ponder over the human life with a new perspective.

Girish Karnad is one of the most celebrated and multifaceted writers in contemporary India. Besides being an internationally acclaimed playwright, he is a highly talented actor, successful director and filmmaker and a man of varied interests. He has directed feature films, documentaries and television serials in Kannada, Hindi and English. An actor-director, art-critic and film star, Karnad is a man of many achievements. He has represented our country in foreign lands as an emissary of Indian art and culture.



Karnad's dramatic career was greatly influenced by Shakespeare, Bernard Shaw, Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, Brecht, Jean Paul Sartre, Eugene O'Neill, Harold Pinter, Samuel Beckett and many others.

Some of the selected plays of Karnad are *Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1971), *Hittina Hunja (Bali - the Sacrifice)* (1980), *Naga-Mandala* (1988), *Tale-Danda* (1990), *The Fire and the Rain* (1995) and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (1997). These plays have also been translated into many other Indian and foreign languages. And his Kannada play *Yayati* has been recently translated into English by Karnad himself, published by Oxford University Press in 2008. He minutely examines the challenges of contemporary life and tries to establish relationship between the past & present. Karnad's greatness as a playwright has been recognized in the literary circle all over the world. He has bagged many awards and rewards for his multifarious creative abilities.

**KEYWORDS:** Karnad, multifaceted personality, writer, actor-director, filmmaker.

### INTRODUCTION :-

Girish Karnad is one of the most celebrated and multifaceted writers in the contemporary India. Besides being an internationally acclaimed playwright, he is a highly talented actor, successful director and filmmaker and a man of varied interests. While focusing multifaceted aspects of Karnad's personality, Jaydipsinh Dodiya aptly remarks, "He has directed feature films, documentaries and television serials in Kannada, Hindi and English. An actor-director, art-critic and film star, Karnad is a man of many achievements. He has represented our country in foreign lands as an emissary of Indian art and culture." (2000 40)

The present paper explores various traits of Karnad's personality which make him a multifaceted writer in contemporary India. His writing urges the reader to ponder over the human life with a new perspective. The study also makes an attempt to record various influences and inspirations that make him a multifaceted writer.

Karnad was greatly influenced by his parents. His father was very much interested in reading and watching the dramatic performances. His mother was fond of Balgandharva. And both of them loved watching plays in the theatre. Right from his childhood, Karnad listened to fairy tales and stories from the Puranas. During his childhood, he liked watching a *Company Natak* and *Yakshagana* at Sirsi. In fact, the seeds of his ardent admiration for playwriting were sown during his childhood. Childhood experiences play a dominant role in shaping the inner personality of a writer. In other words, it can be said that his association with the *natak companies* at an early age left an indelible impact on his mental horizon.

Karnad's dramatic career was greatly influenced by Shakespeare, Bernard Shaw, Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, Brecht, Jean Paul Sartre, Eugene O'Neill, Harold Pinter, Samuel Beckett and many others.

Some of the selected plays of Karnad are *Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1971), *Hittina Hunja* (Bali - the Sacrifice) (1980), *Naga-Mandala* (1988), *Tale-Danda* (1990), *The Fire & the Rain* (1995) and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (1997). These plays have also been translated into many other Indian and foreign languages. And his Kannada play *Yayati* has been recently translated into English by Karnad himself, published by Oxford University Press in 2008. He minutely examines the challenges of contemporary life and tries to establish relationship between the past and present.

Karnad's greatness as a playwright has been recognized in the literary circle all over the world. He has bagged many awards and rewards for his multifarious creative abilities. To mention only a few of them; Karnad's first play *Yayati* brought him the Mysore State Award in 1962, Government of Mysore Rajyotsva Award in 1970 and Sangeet Natak Akademy Award in 1971. His second play, *Tughlaq* also received Sangeet Natak Akademy Award. He became much-talked-about playwright soon after the publication and successful staging of *Tughlaq*. His play *Hayavadana* obtained Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya Award of the Bharatiya Natya Sangh for the Best Indian Play of the year 1972. His play, *Naga-Mandala* received Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award for the best play in 1989. Another play *Tale-Danda* won him Karnataka Natak Akademy Award for the best play of the year 1990-91 and Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award in 1994.

Apart from his achievements as a successful playwright, he has revealed his multi-faceted creativity through his close association with the world of television and film industry. He has shown his talent as a screenplay writer of several successful Kannada films like *Samskara*, *Vansh-Vriksha*, *Kaadu*, *Ondanandu Kaaladalli* and *Cheluvu* and also as a famous writer of T.V. serials and dialogues. He has featured in many Hindi and Kannada movies and received critical appreciation. He has played the role of *sutradhar* (narrator) for several stories in the popular audio book series for kids "Karadi Tales." He has also been the voice of APJ Abdul Kalam, the former President of India in the audio book of Kalam's autobiography *The Wings of Fire*.

He has received wide recognition for his outstanding contribution to the world of movies. He won the President's Gold Medal for script, dialogue writing and lead role in *Samskara* (Kannada). It also brought him the Best Indian Film Award in 1970. He received The National Award for excellence in direction, script writing and acting in *Vansh-Vriksha* (Kannada) which was shared with B.V. Karanth in 1972. His movie *Kaadu* (Kannada) bagged the President's Silver Medal for the second best Indian film in 1974. It represented at the International Film Festival, New Delhi in 1975. His Hindi film *Godhuli* received the Film Fare Award for the best script and direction in 1978. His performances as Director of Kannada films *Kaadu* (1973) and *Ondanandu Kaaladalli* (1978) and Hindi film *Utsava* (1984) have been greatly appreciated. His leading roles in Hindi art films like *Mahatma* (1976) and *Swami* (1978) are also highly appreciated. Even he played the main roles in *Oedipus Rex* and *Jokumaraswamy* directed by B.V. Karanth for the Open Air Festival in Bangalore in 1972. Apart from the films mentioned above, he performed roles in many Hindi feature films, television films and serials of Mrinal Sen, Satyajit Ray, Shyam Benegal and many others. He was a member at the jury of the International Film Festival, New Delhi and also at the Festival of India in Britain and London. He represented India at the Montreal Film Festival.

Such a long and colourful journey of Girish Karnad as a playwright, director, actor and filmmaker

culminated in winning the most prestigious Jnanpith Award in 1999. He has thus enriched the Indian cultural scene by his valuable contribution to art, literature, theatre and the film world. While interviewed by Aparna Dharwadkar, he plainly admitted that of all these fields mentioned above he takes great interest only in playwriting. He states: "I have been fairly lucky in having a multi-pronged career. You know I have been an actor, a publisher, and a film-maker. But in none of these I felt quite as much at home as in playwriting." (1995 362) He has imparted real dramatic spirit to the technique of Indian English drama. His dramatic art is a combination of the rich indigenous folk tradition and the new techniques of western theatre. He is a pioneer in new drama and all his plays are worthy to be staged.

Karnad is aware of the difficulties, hindrances, and obstacles involved in the production of a play. That is why he offers a free hand to artists, directors and the persons concerned with the theatre. It is interesting to note that he has never directed any of his plays. Moreover, he is of the view that once playwriting is over it is as good as finished for him. So he gives full liberty to the director to edit his play without damaging the central parts of the play. It is his firm conviction that each performance is a re-creation and it is the right of every performer to interpret and present it in his own way. If such free-hand is not offered to the performer, then the characters are likely to become the mouthpiece of the playwright. In this regard, while talking to Bhargavi Rao, Karnad explicitly remarks: "...I carry a lot of goodwill with theatre groups and actors. I read out my plays and make a few suitable changes from the feedback I receive. But once I complete the writing, I don't go back. I leave it to the Director's creativity. I don't interfere." (2007 1-2) This is the reason why the spectators get different presentations of Karnad's plays when they are directed by Alyque Padmsee, Ebrahim Alkazi, Satydeo Dubey, Vijaya Mehta, B.V. Karanth and many others.

While writing a play, he has his audiences in mind. He visualizes them in the theatre-hall. He listens to their reactions. The audience in the theatre is a very important factor in any performance. There must be something significant in the performance to satisfy everyone present in the theatre. The success of the performance is based on the reaction and appreciation of the spectators. He rewrites his plays again and again until they become perfect. He reads the script in the company of his friends and then edits, cuts, changes the dialogues and episodes or adds new characters, episodes and so on. He worked for nearly thirty seven years on his play, *The Fire and the Rain* (1995).

When we read Karnad's plays carefully or watch them being presented on stage, one basic question comes up in our mind. Instead of writing plays with original plots based on contemporary reality, why has he resorted to myths, legends and historical plots for his plays? We have already noted that childhood experiences, early impressions play a major role in forming the inner personality of a writer. This seems to be true in his case. He has been brought up in the environment of the folk theatre tradition and in a cultural atmosphere of the *Mahabharat*, the *Ramayana* and the *Puranas*.

By using myths, history and folk-tales, Karnad makes an attempt to show how they are relevant to the modern times in presenting a modern man's dilemma. Myths and history are the endless sources of inspiration and motivation for the creative writers. Therefore "Karnad has found myths a powerful vehicle to carry the complex ideas of the modern times. The use of myths enables him to link the continuity of emotions from the beginning of the civilization to the present age." (Verma and Swarnakar 51) Every creative writer has a natural association with his cultural myths and legends. They make an appeal to his imaginative faculty. They get a logical form and sequence, the moment he tries to unfold them.

Firstly he brings out different types of problems confronted by a modern Indian woman in the patriarchal society. For instance, Chitrlekha in *Yayati*, Padmini in *Hayavadana*, Rani in *Naga-Mandala*, Vishaka & Nittilai in *The Fire and the Rain* are the protagonists who stand for modern women. "He uses the sources as tools for addressing his audience on vital issues related to women. He questions the moral code for its gender discriminating nature. He emphasizes a modern woman's craving for love & recognition." (Kharat 66) Thus, Karnad shows how a woman's existence is driven into margin in the male-dominated social set-up. Secondly he presents existentialist issues like identity, split personality, ideological separation and dichotomy of the real and the ideal in his plays. For instance, his first play *Yayati* deals with the theme of responsibility. *Hayavadana* depicts the problem of identity and search for completeness in life. *Naga-Mandala* portrays the agony and helplessness of a woman in the Indian family. His historical play, *Tughlaq* focuses on the dream qualities and tyrannical nature



of Tughlaq by giving exposure to his dual personality. *The Fire and the Rain* depicts the contrasting picture of two cultures, two ways of life, the brahminical and the tribal. Thus, Karnad puts forward divergent contemporary issues by using myths, history and legends in his plays.

In his plays, Karnad attempts to attach a new meaning to the past in the light of the present. He is well aware of the fact that a creative artist can make his society to know the complex issues of the time. Whenever the issue of contemporaneity is raised, he invariably gives the example of two plays: *Tughlaq* and *Tendulkar's Ghashiram Kotwal*. He also considers Dharmavir Bharati's *Andha Yug* (1954) as the first remarkable Indian play.

Tendulkar wrote *Ghashiram Kotwal* in 1974 and the Indira Gandhi-Bhindranwala episode occurred in 1983. So the play is well ahead of time and predicted what would happen in Punjab. In this context Karnad writes: "In his *Ghashiram Kotwal*, Tendulkar uses *Dashavatara*, a traditional semi classical form, to investigate a contemporary political problem, the emergence of 'demons' in public. These demons are initially created by political leaders for the purposes of their own power games, but ultimately go out of control and threaten to destroy their own creators. It is a theme recurrent in Indian mythology: the demon made indestructible by the boon of gods and then turning on the gods themselves. (A decade after the play was written in Punjab, Sant Bhindranwale and Mrs. Indira Gandhi seemed to be re-enacting the theme in real life in horrifying detail.)" (1997 15)

Like Bertolt Brecht, he makes the audience to respond intellectually rather than emotionally to the action of the play. One important aspect of his writing is that there are no elaborate stage directions in his plays. This gives full freedom to the actors and directors to exploit their creativity.

Karnad is a highly educated playwright. His education abroad has made him to have an excellent command over the English language. Being a poet, his language has a poetic quality which easily permeates in his writing. As a poet-playwright, he is classed with Shakespeare, T.S. Eliot, Tagore, Dharmaveer Bharati, Nissim Ezekiel, V.V. Shirwadkar and many others. He writes lucid, crisp, precise and simple dialogues. There are not very lengthy and tiresome dialogues in his plays. He has deep insight into the human mind and very skilfully presents internal conflicts of his characters. He reveals a complex and delicate emotional entanglement in man-man and man-woman relationship.

Karnad's plays are short, usually in two acts, except *Tale-Danda*. There is, as he himself accepts, Brechtian influence on writing scene-wise plays like *Tughlaq* and *Tale-Danda*. His plays have only limited number of characters; for example, there are three major characters in *Hayaradana* and *Naga-Mandala*. Though there are many characters in *Tughlaq* and *Tale-Danda*, they revolve round the major characters only. Thus in *Tale-Danda*, he attracts our attention to Basavanna and King Bijjala and most prominently to Sovideva, Jagadeva and Damodar Bhatta. In *The Fire and the Rain*, we remember the chief characters like Yavakri-Vishakha-Paravasu, and Arvasu-Nittilai. And in *Bali: the Sacrifice*, there are four major characters that hold our attention right from beginning to the end.

Our curiosity is first excited exactly in the middle of his plays. For instance, the intensely curious conspiracy against the Sultan is depicted in Scene VI in *Tughlaq*. And in *Hayavadana* changes take place exactly at the end of Act I. In *Naga-Mandala*, Naga, a lover enters Rani's life exactly at the end of Act I. In *Tale-Danda* the complicated inter-caste marriage takes place exactly in the middle of Act I. His plot and structure develop side by side in his mind. His plays hardly exceed ninety pages. *The fire and the Rain* which contains a Prologue, an Epilogue, and three Acts incorporates only seventy four pages.

To sum up, we can say that Girish Karnad is a multifaceted personality and one of the celebrated playwrights of the contemporary Indian stage who has earned national and international fame. He is widely acclaimed for his technical experiments and displaying a wide range of themes and subjects as well. He, along with other modern playwrights like Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar and Rakesh Mohan has renewed the Indian theatre-tradition.

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