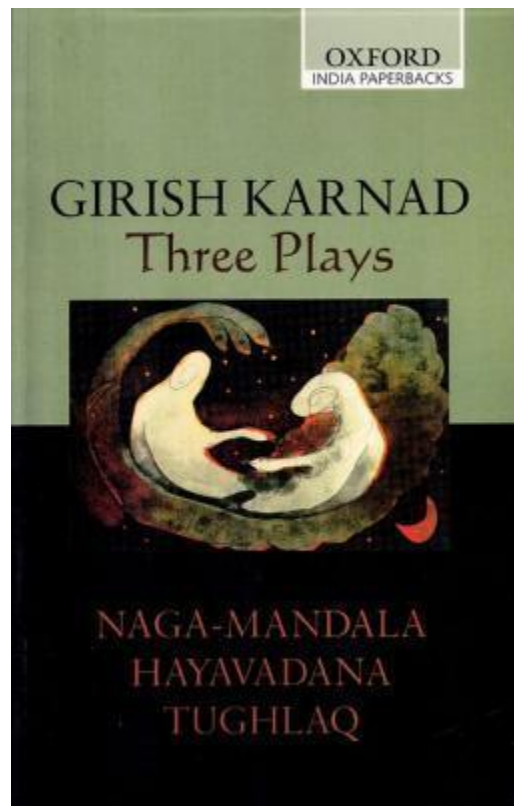


The Treatment of Myths, Folklore and History in the Plays of Girish Karnad

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Abstract

Karnad takes refuge in Indian myths, legends, and folklore, and makes them a vehicle of new Vision. Karnad's creative genius lies in taking up fragments of historical and legendary experience to fuse them into a forceful statement. His childhood exposure to street plays in Karnataka villages and his familiarity with western plays staged in Mumbai influenced him in retelling the legends of India to suit the modern context.

Western playwrights that he had read during his college days opened up for him ‘a new world of magical possibilities’ (Dhawan 15). When suddenly flashed on the Kannada stage in the early sixties, he had no established theatrical tradition to begin with. Indian English drama up to the 1960’s had an apologetic existence. The rich heritage of Indian classical drama and the vibrant folk tradition seldom attracted the Indian English dramatists of the earlier phase, whose models were Shakespeare, Ibsen and Shaw.

The Indian English dramatists also failed miserably in drawing judiciously from the rich reservoir of myth and complex historical heritage.

Karnad was aware of the problems and challenges that Indian playwrights had to face after independence. Karnad says in his ‘Introduction’ to *Three Plays*, “They had to face, a situation in which tensions implicit until then had come out in the open and demanded to be resolved without apologia or self-justification; tensions between the cultural past of the thought and our own traditions and finally between the various visions of the future that opened up once the common cause of political freedom was achieved. This is the historical context that gave rise to my plays.”

Key Words: Girish Karnad, Contemporary Consciousness, Primitive imagination, Inexhaustible Lore, Pragmatic Character.

Introduction

Girish Karnad is one of the brightest shining stars of Indian English Literature. Born in May 19, 1938, in Matheran, Maharashtra, he earned international praise as a playwright, poet, actor, director, critic, and translator. With his best loved play, *Tudhlaq*, Karnad had established himself as one of the most prominent playwrights in the country.

Based on his serious explorations of folklore, mythology and history, the subject of his plays reflects the problems and challenges of contemporary life, and endeavours to forge a link between the past and the present. As a creative intellectual Karnad obviously views the subjects

of his plays from his own perspective, develops them in the crucible of his own imagination and personal experience, and employs them as a medium to communicate his own independent and original feelings, thoughts and interpretations.

Though known for his controversial themes, his plays are widely read and enjoyed because of his wonderful dramatic techniques, vivid image and symbols and his outstanding ability to portray some of the harshest and bitter-most realities of life with forthright simplicity.

Treatment of Myths, Folklore and History

Though Karnad's interests are multifarious, he has given the Kannada Stage a richness that could probably be equated only with his talents as an actor-director. He has shown the Indian stage to what depth the mythical themes and folklore could be taken in order to recreate a contemporary consciousness. The greatest problem, however, was how to utilize these traditional forms in order to revitalize his works in the urban context. It is at this point that the famous playwright Bertolt Brecht came to his help. Brechtian influence on Karnad made him sharply aware of the theatrical imaginativeness and inherent power of the Indian theatre.

Folk Imagination

Folk imagination is at once mythopoetic and magical. In the folk mind, one subsumes the other. Folk belief, besides being native, has a touch of poetry about it which works towards a psychic adjustment. Karnad is of the opinion that all folklore is religious, often based on animism because the primitive imagination extends its vision from the natural in which it is steeped and with which it is saturated to the supernatural, which to the folk mind is only an extension of the former.

Deliberate Return to Rich Tradition

By a deliberate return to the rich tradition and the parallel art forms to popularize folk theatre, Karnad lights up the rich treasure house that the Indian dramatists can make use of. He

has illustrated how the inexhaustible lore of myths, parables and legends offer immense scope for the Indian drama. Karnad links the past and the present, and the archetype and the real.

Issues of the present world find their parallels in the myths and fables of the past which lend new meanings and insights through analogy, thus reinforcing the theme. By transcending the limits of time and space, myths provide flashes of insight into life and its mystery.

Use of Archetypal Myths

Karnad revives the ancient tradition by the powerful use of archetypal myths that are with meaning for the contemporary world. Myths that are part of the collective consciousness of the people are invoked in Karnad's plays to show how modern man's predicament is foreshadowed in the archetypal myths.

T. S. Eliot recognized 'the power of myth to manipulate... a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity (qtd. in Frye 162) and declared that the use of myth was a step towards making the modern world possible in art.

Conclusion

Many modern writers have employed myths and legends to convey their sense and view life. In a way this practice itself is like myth and is a recurrent pattern. In ancient India and Greece myths served as the sources material for drama. Re-telling or the re-enactment of old myths in modern terms underlines the universality of the experience that is embodied in stories.

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The Treatment of Myths, Folklore and History in the Plays of Girish Karnad

417

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