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**CRITICAL STUDY OF INNOVATIONS AND EXPERIMENTS IN THE  
PLAYS OF GIRISH KARNAD**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Acting in its rudimentary forms as scolding, persuading, mocking or irritating somebody must have begun with the very birth of human beings on earth but theatre in its mature form is certainly an offshoot of an organized effort of some temperamentally sensitive social activists. It is now psychologically and linguistically proved fact that imitation is an inherent instinct present in all human beings. Objective of the present paper is to explore the experimentation and innovation in the plays of Girish Karnad for the survival of Indian theatrical traditions.*

**Keywords:** Tradition, Acting, Theatre, Folk elements, Imitation

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## I. INTRODUCTION

**1.1** Drama is a genre, an audiovisual medium for the expression of human sentiments. It is a mimetic representation of life. It is a blending of poetry, dancing and music. Drama is “literature that walks and talks before our eyes.”[1] In novel and epic, the writer narrates the story and reports the action in detail. But in the drama, the dramatist imitates the activities by action and speech. It calls for co-operation of dramatic art, direction, stage setting, music, action etc. Compton-Rickett defined it ‘as an articulate story presented in action.’[2] In the long term, drama is and remains a powerful influence on changing social attitudes, or the gradual development of the collective consciousness. An eminent Indian critic, M.K. Naik has rightly observed in *Perspective on Indian Drama in English* [3]:

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 that 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 alive audience.

**1.2** Indian literature in English has flourished in the post-independence era which provided the favorable climate for literati who experimented successfully with various genres like poetry, prose, fiction, drama etc. Indian drama in English a “sad Cinderella of Indian Literature” is, no doubt, toddling but is competing with its tortoise speed-slow but steady-drawing the world’s attention by leaps and bounds. Drama is an exercise of presenting very few hours. It is ‘an articulate story presented in action. It calls for various things-imaginings, aestheticism, dialogue, music, characterization, plot and a depth of knowledge about the social structure, psyches of men and manners of society. This is why drama is a “composite art, in which the author the actor and the stage manager-all combine to produce the total effect.”[4]

## 2. DRAMA IN ANCIENT INDIA

**2.1** Theatre is certainly an offshoot of an organized effort of some sensitive social activists. It is an illusion, a fleeting shadow, a vision and a dream-like experience. Theatre is a close parallel between life and theatre and quite often life is theatre-like and vice-versa. Theatre is as old as human being themselves. Primitive people, constantly at war with powerful elements of nature,

evolved this art as a form of worship. The root of theatre in India goes back to ancient times. It is, however, now an established fact that theatre, in India, came into existence in at least a thousand years before the Christian era. The rich amount of Indian drama unveils the verity that Indian theatre has a deep rooted relation with Indian epics and Indian mythologies. The history of Indian theatre goes back to more than 5000 years. *Natya Shastra (The Textbook of Drama)* written by Bharat Muni, is the oldest surviving text in the world on the foundation of drama. This classic Indian text in Sanskrit is written between 200 AD and 400 BC following the words of Lord Brahma. Bharata is often known as the father of Indian theatrical arts. *Natya Shastra*, sometimes referred to as the *Panchama* (Fifth) or *Natya Veda*, was created by taking pathya (words) from the *Rig Veda*, geet (music and chant) from the *Sama Veda*, abhinaya (gesture) from the *Yajur Veda*, and rasa (taste or aesthetic experience) from the *Atharva Veda*. *Natya Shastra* lists nine rasas (love, courage, joy, hatred, fury, compassion, terror, surprise, and spiritual peace) that are the basis of all human emotional states of mind.[5]

**2.2** The most renowned and talented dramatists of the ancient India are Ashwaghosh, Bhasa, Shudraka, Kalidas, Harsha, Bhavabhuti, Visha-khadatta, Bhattanarayana, Murari and Rajeshkhora, who enriched Indian theatre with their plays like *Madhya-Mavyaayoda*, *Urubhangam*, *Karnabharan*, *Mrichkatikam*, *Abhigyana Shakuntalam*, *Malankagnimitram*, *Uttar Ramacharitam*, *Mudrarak*, *Shasa*, *Bhagavadajjukam*, *Mattavilasa* etc. Sanskrit drama has received a great deal of attention at the hands of European Scholars since the *Abhijnanasakuntala* was translated into English by Sir William Jones in 1789.

### **3. THE PURPOSE OF INDIAN THEATRE**

**3.1** According to the Indian view of life, the purpose of drama and theatre is to create a feeling of pleasure or bliss (Rasa) by delineating different situations, mental status and feelings of human beings. The Indian view of life does not accept that a human being is a puppet in his hands of inscrutable, enigmatic, mysterious, blind supernatural forces, condemned to struggle, but destined to face a pre-determined tragedy. That is why in Sanskrit plays, instead of the usual exposition of any gradually intensifying real or imaginary personal predicament or sense of sin, we have a portrayal of the joys and sufferings, success and failure. On the other hand, the purpose of western drama is to reveal the struggles of life in their various forms. The western impact gave life to the drying sap of Indian drama leading to the emergence of great writers like

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Tagore, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya and Sri Aurobindo. Tagore contributed a lot to lyrical simplicity in poetry. Aurobindo, developed the tradition of Elizabethan poetic drama and Chattopadhyaya introduced the Marxist theme for social and economical uplift of poor, deprived class. The western drama and theatre entered India as elements of the culture of the conquerors, which, in a well-planned manner, deliberately tried to prove that the Indian culture was inferior, trivial and undeveloped.

**3.2** Theatre in India initiated as a narrative form such as singing, dancing and reciting. The emphasis was always given to literature, Indian music, mimic, and painting. Its root deeply allied with Vedic ritualism. Richmond's observation is relevant here: [6]

Theatre in India, as we see it, speaks with many tongues, has a multitude of patterns, probes a host of issues, mimics no one and, at times, apes the West, pleases the few as well as the many, and serves the rich and the poor alike, man and god. In India it is possible to find those who believe that "theatre is cinema", and that the living theatre of the stage in the village square or in the temple is dead. However, we find Indian theatre very much alive.

Thus the history of Indian theatre portrays the saga of a journey from epic theatre to the theatres of the modern era. Indian theatre, pregnant with its rich past has therefore amalgamated the richness of literature, mime, dance, music, painting, architecture and sculpture to carve a niche for itself in the arena of entertainment.

#### **4. GIRISH KARNAD AND INDIAN THEATRE**

Today, Girish Karnad is considered one of the most significant Indian dramatists. We encounter in him a playwright as a thinker, artist, actor, poet, and a producer who as a true culture-smith intends to awaken the contemporary Indian intelligentsia from cultural amnesia. He has enriched the Indian literary scene by his contribution to art, culture, theatre and drama. Girish Karnad is one of the most popular playwrights in Kannada and English. The innovative aspect of his plays, blending folk themes and folk modes of performing arts with themes and issues of universal significance, gives them a distinct character that appeals to the reader. He has successfully depicted the Indian life, myth, culture, social set-up in all his dramas like *Yayati* (1961), *Nagmandala* (1989), *The Fire and the Rain* (1994), *Tughlaq* (1964), *The Wedding Album* (2009), *Bali: the Sacrifice* (2004), etc.

#### **5. GIRISH KARNAD & MODERN INDIAN PLAYWRIGHTS**

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**5.1.** Girish Karnad in the capacity of writer, director and actor substantially contributed to enrich the tradition of Indian English theatre. His well known plays are *Yayati*, *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Nagmandala*. He borrowed his plots from history, mythology and old legends but with intricate symbolism, he tried to establish their relevance in contemporary socio-political conditions. To relocate, reinterpret, redefine and re-establish truth and tradition, he explores folk theatre and takes the plots and themes from Indian myth, history, legend etc. He deftly employs all the conventions and motifs of folk tales and folk theatre-masks, dolls, curtains and the story within the story. His return to folk theatre takes him away from realistic pattern of drama, probably western drama: [7]

European realism has become such a universal idiom that it is hard to imagine any other kind of relation...Now, even the west has given up realism. In fact, they are moving towards us. In America for example, no one does Tennessee Williams' kind of plays anymore...Realism *per se* is more or less dead. His *Three Tall Women* is so different from the work of the person who had written, *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* In England, too Osborne and his angry man who dominated the kitchen-sink plays are long forgotten. When I was young the domineering figure was Shaw, not so today. And who are their playwrights now? Dario Fo who has won the Nobel Prize comes from the clowning tradition of commedia dell-arte not from the realistic tradition. Indeed the cultural imperialism of the west need not bother us now. In fact more and more, the playwrights are moving away from the written plays towards theatre.

**5.2.** Karnad's play *Yayati* reinterprets an ancient myth from the *Mahabharata* in modern concept. The plot of the play *Hayavadana* is adopted from *Katha Saritsagar*, an ancient collection of stories in Sanskrit. I find that *Tughlaq* is Karnad's best historical play where he mingles facts with fiction. Karnad projects the curious contradictions in the complex personality of Sultan Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq. In the play *Tale Dande*, he discovers the vital relationship between contemporary society and literature. His use of myth as a structure and metaphor in his play gives "new meaning to the past from the vantage point of view of present". In the play *Nagmandala*, the conflict is between patriarchal and matriarchal views of society. It is about the life of Rani, a typical Indian woman in male dominated society. The play *Naga Mandala* is based on folk-tales of Kannada. It was first staged at the University of Chicago. Karnad says:[8]

The energy for the 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 seemingly unrelated comic interludes, the mixing of human and non human worlds permits a simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view.

**5.3.** In the backdrop of a folktale, which includes flames, snake, avatars, performance of impressive ordeals, cremation of the dead snake, and the background chorus, *Nagamandala* comes alive with numerous symbols, hidden meanings, and explicit and implicit lessons, even as the play bewitches the captive audience, scene by scene. The play started with a curse of dead or non-responsive audience, but we complete reading the play certainly as active and live audience! At the end of it all, we still wonder whether it is the magic, characters, events, conversations, or simply the ambience that takes us far from our mundane life even for a few hours. A master piece, indeed, from a reluctant Master.

## **6. DRAMATIC ART OF GIRISH KARNAD**

**6.1** Girish Karnad's dramatic art lacks stability still his success lies in technical experiment with an indigenous dramatic form. Girish Karnad is only exception who innovated and experimented the theatre in a different way. When he started his career, as dramatist he had no established theatrical tradition to begin with. He, as an impressive actor, intelligent director and powerful playwright, has initiated a conscious movement and experimented extensively in all the spheres of the art of drama-in language, setting, plot and mode of presentation (technique). Although he burrows the plot of his plays from different episodes of myth, history and folklore, no character in his dramatic sphere is a superhuman being. We find that rationality is the hallmark of Karnad's theatre. In this regard, Rajni Rajgopal's remark is quite relevant:[9]

Here spaces and characters make and unmake, form and erase their destinies, while gods and demons are deceptively human and engage in endless play with time.

**6.2** On the other hand, the Sanskrit theatre had been an 'elitist phenomenon' even in its glorious days and had restricted itself to a group of wealthy and educated courtiers without having any appeal for general public. The Sanskrit dramatic works depicts different mental states, emotions and ideas, desires and aspiration, strengths and weakness, basic oral and social problems as well as individual predicaments. Plays like *Madhyam Vyayoga*, *Urubhanga*, *Swapnavadatta*, *Pratima*, *Abhijnan Shankunthala*, *Vikramorvarshiya*, *Mrichchhakatika*, *Mudrarakshasa*, *Uttaramacharita*,

*Ratnavali* present a many-layered fascinating picture of the social, political, economic and cultural life. They have a distinct place in the world dramatic literature for their keen insight, delicate aesthetic sense, structural skill, variety, dramatic and theatrical quality of the language and excellence of their poetry. To conclude, the Sanskrit dramatic literature, unlike Karnad's plays *Yayati, Hayavadna, Tughlaq, The Fire and the Rain, Tale-danda*, is based on a very profound philosophical outlook, a comprehensive world-view and a highly developed aesthetics. But Girish Karnad was and is aware of the problems and challenges of general people of India. Therefore, it seems to me that his approach is to feel and share the pulse of common people and common life.

## **7. REGIONAL –CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS IN GIRISH KARNAD'S PLAYS**

**7.1.** Girish Karnad rejuvenated, expanded and refashioned the Indian theatre. He is at the position of being compared to Peter Brooks, Jerzy Grotowsky, Eugenio Barba, Phillip Zarrili, in the west, Suzuki Tadashi in Japan, and W.Soyinka in Nigeria. Further, he can be compared to Shakespeare, T.S.Eliot in borrowing and utilizing the sources from Greek legends, chronicles, Plutarch and Roman history. Karnad incorporates the western classical tradition of drama and Indian tradition of myth, poetry, history, legend, folklore. Now a new interest in regional cultural expressions and folklore has developed in India, leading to the rediscovery and re-evaluation of indigenous forms of literature and the performing arts. Nowhere is this more apparent than in theatre. The traditional theatres such as Yakshagna, Tamasha, Ras Lila, Nautanki, Bhavai, Jatra, and Khyal have gone through a remarkable revival since Independence.

**7.2.** Considered decadent and largely forgotten during colonial days, these regional theatres have recently received attention and ascertain amount of governmental support from the national and state Sangeet Natak Akademis. Their status has been enhanced by an intellectual reappraisal which views them as the surviving fragments of the ancient Sanskrit dramatic tradition, on the basis of common features such as preliminary rituals, stylized acting and gestures, stock characters like the stage director (sudradhar) and clown (vidushaka), and abundant song and dance. Through annual festivals held in the capital, folk theatre groups from all over India have performed for urban audiences, and Western scholars have also been attracted to study the

traditions. As a result, greater familiarity with folk theatre forms had developed in the cities, and the urban attitude has shifted from scorn to curiosity and respect. The rediscovery of folk theatre had in fact heightened the sense of a rural-urban cultural dichotomy among the educated elite. Some dramatists began to reject Western influence and urge a return to village culture and traditions. The Urdu playwright Habib Tanvir rightly concluded: [10]

It is in its villages that the dramatic tradition of India in all its pristine glory and vitality remains preserved even to this day. It is these rural drama groups that require real encouragement.. .it is not until the city youth is fully exposed to the influence of folk traditions in theatre that a truly Indian theatre, modern and universal in appeal and indigenous in form, can really be evolved.

## **8. INDIAN FOLK CONVENTIONS AND GIRISH KARNAD**

**8.1.** By the early seventies, playwrights and directors had begun to incorporate folk conventions and ideas into their productions. Heightened awareness of rural forms was feeding back into the creative process, providing new resources for self-expression. Girish Karnad harmonizes the western tradition of drama with the social-political change, sense of insecurity, frustration, isolation, depression, and search of perfection in Indian sensibility. Karnad shares his problem:[11]

...tensions between the cultural past of the country and its colonial past, between the attractions of Western modes of 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.

**8.2.** Girish Karnad handled the themes in his own style to mock the society to revive the political situations and to transform the people to be aware of the political unrest. I find logical presentation and development in his plays that inspires and excites the reader to know more about his characters may be from myth or history. In Karnad's plays the influence of western writers like Camus, Brecht, Beckett, Osborne, R.Bolt, Pinter, Sartre etc.can easily be perceived. He is influenced more by Henrick Ibsen, an outstanding figure of his age in dramatic art and whose works became the model for many dramatists since the late nineteenth century. He adopts the technique and the structure of western playwriting. He writes:[12]

When I wrote *Yayati*, I was influenced by European playwrights like Camus, Sartre and others. I wrote *Tughlaq* after my return from England. No one had thought of putting *Yayati* on stage. I thought my second play also would meet the same fate.....My *Yayati* imitated the form of

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modern western drama. Now I thought that I should see the form of our commercial drama. Most of the critics try to discover the influence of Brecht in my play, which is not there at all. *Tughlaq* has the spaciousness of our commercial drama.

**8.3.** Girish Karnad has given the Indian theatre a richness that could probably be equated only with his talents as an actor-director. His contribution goes beyond theatre. He has represented India in foreign lands as an emissary of art and culture. Karnad in all his plays moved away from tradition. Karnad used many techniques like folk tales, folk theatre, masks, curtains, dolls, the story within the story etc. for the success of his plays. Iyenger writes that his approach is 'modern' and he deploys the conventions and motifs of folk art like masks and curtains to project a world of intensities, uncertainties and unpredictable denouements. His style is simple and the dialogues are suited well for the Indian sensibilities and ethos. About his style and technique Kirtinath Kurkoti writes: [13]

An intellectual playwright, whose work has the tone and expression of a great drama, he has the genius and the power to transform any situation into an aesthetic experience the quality of which to use Joyce's vocabulary would be 'static' rather than 'kinetic'.

**8.4** Girish Karnad is undoubtedly the most renowned media personality in the contemporary India. He is one of the most popular playwrights today in Kannada and English. He is India's leading playwright and an adept practitioner of performing arts. The innovative aspect of his plays, blending folk themes and folk modes of performing arts with themes and issues of universal significance, gives them a distinct character that turns the reader into Karnad's world-world of tradition and modernity. He is a multi-faceted personality. He says, "I have been fairly lucky in having a multi-pronged career. You know, I have been an actor, a publisher, a filmmaker. But in one of these fields have I felt quite as much at home as in playwriting. Further he also realizes that for writers, in India, it is not possible to live on the royalties alone that they get on their writings. He admits, "One can't earn a comfortable living even from a successful play. Take *Tughlaq*. As you know, it's been enormously successful- critically as well as in performance. Playwrights in the West have been able to retire on such success- or at least, to devote themselves to that activity entirely. Rangan's characterization of folk imagination and folk play and their interplay with magic is easily applicable to Karnad's plays:[14]

Folk imagination is at once mythopoeia and magical. In the folk mind, one subsumes the other. Folk belief, besides being naïve, has a touch of poetry about it which works towards a psychic adjustment. 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.

**8.5.** Contemporary Indian drama, deviating from classical and European models, is experimental and innovative in terms of thematic and technical qualities. It is not an offspring of any specific tradition and it has laid the foundation of a distinctive tradition in the history of world drama by reinvestigating history, legend, myth, religion and folk love with context to contemporary socio-political issues. A cumulative theatrical tradition evolved by Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sirkar, Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad, prepared the background of contemporary Indian English theatre.

## **9. SURVIVAL OF FOLK ELEMENTS AND INDAIN THEATRE**

**9.1** Folk culture is the culture of community specially belonging to rural areas-shared rituals and festivals shared economic social customs, myths, fables and history. Folk-art is a symbol of social life. It reflects the inner beauty, the design and the values that lie deep in the rural areas. India is a country of villages where the traditions are still prevalent. Indian theatre is a very important example of the multilingual, multi-cultural Indian literature. With the achievement of India's independence a strong interest in the recovery or reinterpretation of her traditional culture i.e. language, national history, folklore, archeological monuments, anthropological findings, arts and crafts, music, dance, drama and the kindred subjects, has become a symbol of modern Indian identity alongside the national emblem. Today we experience great difference in climate, our planting and harvesting seasons vary, and we speak different dialects which vary from region to region. Yet in spite of these differences and divergences, communities far removed from each other have been found to possess remarkably similar folklore and culture. India has been the rich resources of folk culture, such as folk tales, songs, theatres, dances, rituals and folk beliefs.

**9.2** The folk elements are still kept alive by rural people and surviving in cultural expressions in villages and cities. The use of folk elements is a part of our indigenous knowledge representing common people's sense of mystery and wonder. In India, post-independence drama is marked by a pluralistic experimentation with various dominant trends in different parts of the country. Every artist, dramatist or director has a unique style to reflect the Indian social, political scenario.

In the 1960-70 period playwrights like Girish Karnad and Chandra Shekhar Kambar from Karnataka, Badal Sircar and Mohit Chattopadhyaya from Bengal, Manoranjan Das and Bijay Mishra from Orissa, V.Tendulkar and Mahesh Elkunchwar from Maharashtra and Madhu Rye from Gujarat writers, producers like Habib Tanvir from Chhatisgarh and Kanhaiyalal Madhya Pradesh, Ratan Thiyam from Manipur, Utpal Dutt from Bengal, Shyamanand Jalan and Satyadev Dubey in the Hindi theatre, K.N.Panikkar from Kerala, Jabbar Patel and Sreeram Lagoo from Maharashtra and Pravin Joshi from Gujarat among many others are the real makers of the contemporary Indian theatre.

### **CONCLUSION**

Theatrical traditions in India dates back to the days about which even the historians' conclusions are more or less guesswork. The earlier tendency to believe that the theatre is imported to India from the West is totally baseless though it is true that until recently, the theatre people in India knew well about both the classical and modern western playwrights and theoreticians including Aristotle, Shakespeare, Ibsen and G.B.Shaw etc. but had little knowledge about Bharata, Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti and Vishakhadatta etc. It is, however, now an established fact that Indian theatre has its own origin since times immemorial.

Girish Karnad, the youngest among these, has excelled in his experimentations and has succeeded in innovating the post sixties Indian theatre. He is one of the initiators of this movement and has profusely contributed to it. His greatness lies in the fact that he did not ignore any of Indian traditions and assimilated different elements from all of them. He worked as a prominent pioneering figure in the emergence of a significant theatre in India, called Experimental Theatre. Although he borrows the plots of his plays from different episodes of myth, history and folklore, no character in his dramatic world is a superhuman being if he does not wish one to be so and if at all, he wishes, he does so for certain significant dramatic purpose and not only because it is believed to be so. We also find that rationality is the hallmark of Karnad's theatre. Finally, it can be stated that it was Girish Karnad who explored the Indian theatrical traditions through his plays and helped in its survival too.

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