



# LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

## Stagecraft of Girish Karnad: An Analysis of Style and Technique in *Tughlag*, *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala*

**Ms. E. Sumathi**

Assistant Professor, Department of English, RVS College Technical Campus,  
Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.

### Abstract

Girish Ragunath Karnad is a renowned actor, film producer and playwright. As an actor - director, art critic and film star, he is a man of many achievements. As a playwright Karnad has received widespread national and international recognition. The present paper brings out the style and technique in the plays of Karnad with reference to his three plays *Tughlag*, *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala* where he has sought for an appropriate approach in style and form of the theatre which is closer to the traditions of India.

### Keywords

Girish Karnad; *Tughlag*; *Hayavadana*; *Nagamandala*; Bhagawatha; Politics; Irony; Symbolism; Folk Tales; Shape shifting.



Of Girish Karnad's nine plays, six are based on myths/legends, two on history, and one on contemporary experience. Regarding the "story" of his plays, he follows the dictum of Bharatha that Nataka (drama), the highest form among the ten sub-genres of art is always built around a story borrowed from well-known epics or myths. The induction scene, stylized dialogue, songs and dances are the features of Indian classical drama. The use of Bhagawatha as part - narrator of the play and the use of masks are the features of Indian Folk-theatre, especially of Yakshagana, the folk-dance-drama of coastal Karnataka. Karnad is a gifted craftsman. According to him, a play realizes its full potential only through presentation on stage. He does not believe the drama as a form of literature which can also be enacted on stage. He feels Drama really comes into being only on stage; and only then the creation of the play gets completed. In fact, it can even be said that a play which cannot be presented on stage is no play at all. This is the reason why not only he gives complete freedom to the directors of his plays but also revises his plays in the light of their stage presentation.

### ***Tughlag***

Karnad has created a new and true drama in his play, *Tughlag*. *Tughlag* is not an ordinary chronicle play but a very imaginative reconstruction of some of the most significant events in the life of King Tughlag. The theme of the play is from Indian history but it is not historical but highly political.

In the play, politics is deftly linked with religion. Reverened Sheik Imam, aligning himself with politics. He accepts the plea of the sultan to serve as his envoy and dissuade Ain-ul-mulk of Avadh from the folly of turning against the sultan. The sultan has managed to kill Imam in such a way that nobody would suspect him. Prayer, which is deeply connected to religion, is used for political murder in the play. Besides religion, history is cleverly linked with politics in the play. Barani, a historian, is asked to give a practical remedy for the uprising of the Deccan and the declaration of independence by Habar Ehasanshah. The

historian wonders why the sultan, who has faith in love, peace and God, has now grown pessimistic about the future. Karnad links history with politics by making the historian align himself with the political activity of the sultan.

*Tughlag* is notable for its poetic value. *Tughlag* appears as a part when he speaks of his interest in the Greeks. He says:

MUHAMMAD. Don't I know it? I still remember the days when I read the Greeks. Sukrat who took poison so he could give the world the drink of Gods, Aflatoon, who condemned poets and wrote incomparably beautiful himself and I can still feel the thrill with which I found a new world, a world I had not found in the Arabs or even in the Quran. (iii 79-85)

The poetry has made the play precise not only for the actor to work with but also for the audience to react to. Karnad's sentences often perform two or three functions at once. It sheds light on the character, speaks of the character and furthers the plot, it also conveys the meaning to the audience. The following lines illustrate the point:

MUHAMMAD. No one can go far on his knees. I have a long way to go. I can't afford to crawl -I have to gallop.

IMMANU-UD-DIN. And you will do it without the Koran to guide you? Beware, Sultan, you are trying to become another God. It's sin worse than patricide. (iii 63-67)

From *Tughlag* one can understand that Karnad has successfully Indianized English in order to create an Indian atmosphere. In *Tughlag* he freely uses Arabic and Indian words for creating the atmosphere of fourteenth century India in Tughlag's reign: for example. 'Sultan', 'jiziya', 'Dhobi', and the Muezzin's call for prayer has been twice given in Arabic. Thus it can be seen that Karnad has successfully paraphrased typical Indian expression into chaste English.

Karnad uses a few dramatic techniques which add much to his artistry. Irony is one such technique which he employs to make his play highly theatrical.

It is not merely contextual but also verbal. The manner in which prayer is sought to be used as an instrument of murder against the very man who has made prayers compulsory in the state, and the role played by Aziz are examples of the irony of situation.

Symbolism is another technique that Karnad employs to make his play powerful on the stage. Four major symbols are there in the play. They are prayer, sleep, the game of chess and the rose. Prayer has been used as leitmotiv in the play. At the micro level, prayer symbolizes the religious idealism of Tughlag. At the macro level, it connects man's unconscious need for divine protection and guidance in an hour of anguish. In the beginning, prayer is made compulsory but later it is banned for a few years and again it is revived. It is reduced to mockery when sultan's life is threatened at the time of prayer.

Sleep is another symbol in the play. On one level it represents the need for rest in man's life. At the macro level it becomes the symbol of peace which eludes man often. It is the barrier between a day and another day. It is sleep that rests and refreshes both body and mind. It is called the great restorer.

The game of chess and the rose garden are two important recurring images which are part of the inner structure of the play. Both are metaphors of alienation and are related to Tughlag's alienation. Chess symbolizes Tughlag's game - approach to life wherein he regards other people as pawn to be changed for his own advantage. In his political game he is checked by Aziz. The game of chess is an ordinary game which is popular in India. It also symbolizes a political game in which the most intelligent and clever politician is check mated by an ordinary washerman.

The rose is a symbol of the aesthetic and poetic susceptibilities of Tughlag. The rose garden which becomes a rubbish dump is a perfect objective correlative of Tughlag's idealistic aspirations meeting with defeat, frustration and disillusionment. It becomes an image of the absurd the gulf between man's expectations of orderliness and the chaos which confront him in the universe.

The images of chess and rose also reinforce the theme of alienation.

### ***Hayavadana***

Karnad deftly uses the convention and motifs of folk tales and folk theatre-masks, curtains, dolls, the story within a story-to create a bizarre world of incomplete individuals, indifferent Gods that speak and children who cannot. The theme of the play is complex. Karnad good- humouredly examines the very concepts of the rational and the physical. The multiplicity of characters and their individual psychic circles playing into each other build up a complex pattern of human relationships.

As in a folk play there is no formal division of acts into scenes. Karnad traces situations back to the story of King Vikrama and demon Vetala. Padmini is gradually disillusioned and undergoes extreme mental agony as she watches the transformation of her husband's body and loss of physical prowess day by day. Her intense love for her 'perfect' husband diminishes as he goes soft again. Towards the end, their bodies transform again and adjust themselves to the heads so perfectly that the men are physically exactly as they were at the beginning and the problem remains unresolved.

Karnad, through the borrowed stories examines the concept of rational and the physical and weaves a pattern of relationships. Karnad provides a deep insight into the meaning and significance of the play and argues that the perfect union of the spirit and flesh in human life is not possible. The device of folk tale helps Karnad in transcending the limitations of time and place. The story of the horse-man or Hayavadana in the sub plot helps to frame the tale of the two friends.

*Hayavadana* is full of mystical wonder and is shrouded in a realm of magic and supernatural, which is a frequent feature in a folk play. Goddess Kali, a supernatural element in the play, is portrayed as a terrifying figure, her mouth wide open with the tongue out but has human attributes too. She is angry when she is disturbed in sleep and wakes up wondering why Devadatta should

sacrifice his head to Rudra and his arms to her.

The Goddess fully comprehends the motives behind the actions of the characters and is fully aware that the two friends were lying to their last breaths. By employing this technique, Karnad reveals the fact that there are no smooth and practical solutions to human problems.

Dolls play a vital role in the play which reveals a special insight, shows very effectively to the audience the thoughts and mental process of Padmini as she visualizes the gradual change of Devadatta's body into its original form and dreams of Kapila's strong body. The strategy of dolls helps in developing the plot further. Padmini asks her husband to go to Ujjain and get new dolls, as the old ones have been worn out and Padmini gets an opportunity to meet Kapila.

In *Hayavadana*, Karnad uses a fine technical device - a Brechtian type of narrator-figure-Bhagvata. Bhagvata is basically intended to draw the audience into the play. He is able to step out of the play, talk to the audience, and explain the action with his thought-provoking comments.

Karnad widens the scope of his role, he is not only the commentator, narrator but also one of the main characters which is clear in Act II. When Bhagvata and Kapila converse before Padmini arrives at Kapila's hut and also when the Bhagvata talks to Padmini before she performs sati. He has introduced this device because of his childhood folk theatrical experience in 'Yakshagana',

Karnad employs the ingenious folk device of masks which is a typical feature of 'Yakshagana', to project the personalities of different characters. In the beginning of the play, Devadatta appears on the stage wearing a pale coloured mask and Kapila a dark mask. To signify the transposed heads, their masks are transposed. Hayanadana appears wearing the mask of a man and in the end the mask of a horse.

### ***Nagamandala***

Karnad's play reflect upon contemporary Indian cultural and social life through the use of folk tales. His play *Nagamandala* is a powerful portrait the

agony and anguish faced by both men and women in their development into adult roles and social adjustment in a society where the individual is given little place for self-development, awareness and independence as a being. The title of the play comes not from any human character, but from a snake - Naga. The story of the Cobra suggests that the play not merely dramatizes the folk tales in modern interpretation. In Hindu mythology, Naga represents several images as snakes, handsome men, or half-man and half-snake. The folk tale element of *Nagamandala*, the magical power which the Cobra possesses, convention like chorus, masks, and comic episodes makes the play quite theatrical. In the play if the cobra is regarded as possessing magical powers, the play is a folk drama. If the Naga alludes to Rani's paramour, the play arouses the audiences' critical faculties, sets their mind and poses many problems. It leaves the audience to reflect on the social law which differentiates a woman from a man which demands a wife's faithfulness even to a faithless husband.

One comes across various conventional elements of stage craft in the play which are integral to the action of the play and the actor's stage role. Half curtains and painted curtains carried by stage hands are used to convey some facts. When Padmini performs sati, the curtain has a blazing fire painted on it and as it is lifted the flames seem to leap up. The front curtain is totally absent and there is no elaborate stage set-up.

The action of the play is mimed, for example, when the three characters processed to Ujjain, a cart does not appear on the stage. Rather, Kapila, followed by Padmini and Devadatta, enter, miming a cart ride. Kapila is driving the cart. His plays are replete with instances of miming. For all these techniques, Karnad owes a great deal to the folk theatre.

In *Hayavadana*, this theatre idiom transcends regional or linguistic barriers without losing its rootedness. It becomes obvious that the main thrust of Karnad's search was not to revive tradition but to understand and assimilate

it for creative use, namely to express the contemporary human situation and varied manifestations.

Thus, through the use of folk theatre strategies the contours of fresh, innovative and flexible dramatic form emerged, enabling Karnad to portray different points in time and space to bring in many levels of reality.

The notable features of this drama are the use of a chorus and music. In *Nagamandala* all the songs are sung by the flames. The flames are the metaphors of the women of the village who have gathered during the night to tell tales and sing songs. The story of the flames comments on the nature of oral tales in general they have their own existence, they are independent and are passed on from the possessor of the tale to the listener.

*Nagamandala* throws light on the paradoxical and self-contradictory nature of dramatic experience. On a stage limited in time and space, drama is expected to represent human experiences unlimited in time and space consequently all that one sees on stage is only a make believe, and yet, as long as the play lasts, both those on the stage and in the audience take it to be true. Thus drama is suspended between truth and make believe, and it is this aspect that *Nagamandala* dramatises so effectively.

Similarly, *Nagamandala* again in the comic-ironic mode, dramatises the agony and helplessness of a women in the Hindu society in which she can see her husband only at night. In fact, the picture of Rani, shut up in an old and huge house for most part of the day and night alone reveals the male dominated Hindu society. Thus the play is mythical, ritualistic, and traditional and the playwright brings traditional values. Karnad relates classical and folk tales to modern contexts.

### **Shape-Shifting**

In Karnad's plays shape-shifting often has disastrous consequences. It might end in death, destruction or unhappiness, like Naga in *Nagamandala* who must die once his shape shifting is found out. In *Hayavadana*, Padmini seeks a



boon from the Goddess in order to transpose the heads. In *Nagamandala* the shape-shifting occurs only after Naga has been affected by the old woman's magic potion. In each of these cases, there is an unforeseen, unfortunate, even tragic outcome of the shape-shifting.

Shape-shifting is instrumental to some illumination in Karnad's characters. In *Hayavadana*, the question is of completeness. What is a complete human being? Also, is the head more powerful than the body? The answer in the end is, yes, the head is more powerful than the body - if you have the head of a horse, you'll end up as a horse. Instead of a constant tension between a man and horse, it's better to be just a horse. But also that there's no perfect being possible. For a human being, that is, it is better to live with a constant and opposing tension rather than try to resolve it through some impossible hankering after perfection. Kapila's head on Devadatta's body, therefore results not in perfection, but in failure in the end.

In *Tughlag* the major example of shape shifting is the attempt to change the capital to Daulatabad. What's being tried is to turn Daulatabad into Delhi. The attempt fails because there's a fundamental difference between illusion and transformation. In the former, one thing pretends to be another; in the latter, one thing becomes another. *Tughlag* is a play full of dissimulations, illusions and lies. In fact, the whole play is about lies and hypocrisies. This is the dominant theme, illustrating the moral decline of politics, so apt in the contemporary times. The play abounds in metaphors from theatre. Tughlag, himself is a great role player; in Aziz he finds his double. Aziz kills Ghias-ud-din and pretends to be him. Daulatabad cannot succeed in being Delhi because it is blessed not by a holy man but by a murderer masquerading as a holy man. In *Tughlag*, shape-shifting does not really take place; instead there is merely 'acting', dissimulation, pretence and betrayal.

*Nagamandala* has several examples of shape-shifting. The main one, of course, is the cobra assuming the form of Appanna to make love to Rani. But

earlier the flames take on human shapes to gossip at the temple after they have been 'put out' in the houses. In the new flames story about an old woman, who knew a story and a song, the story becomes a young woman and the song, a sari. Wearing the sari, the story walks out of the old woman's house. The point is that stories must not be stingily confined to oneself as the old woman did, but shared.

The play is about narrativity, or the truth of fictions. The union of Rani and Naga is fruitful, though the latter is not a man because in reality Appanna is harsh, unkind, cruel but in fantasy Naga is more fulfilling, satisfying and energizing. The re-creation is literal - Rani and Naga have a child but not Rani and Appanna. Rani stands for the creative mind, a mind which is innocent, open to imagination and to love. Appanna is the anti-creative principle. He keeps Rani locked up inside the house and consorts with a prostitute. But Rani finds a genuine lover in Naga. Later, Appanna is forced to submit to Rani when she is transformed by the power of the imagination into her full potential. The creative principle triumphs over social propriety. Thus shape-shifting is a central metaphor in Karnad's plays. It is both a structural and a thematic device.

Thus, in Girish Karnad's plays language and style create an impression of absurdity. His straight forward language conveys the meaning of irony, contradiction and absurdity. He is an accomplished stylist. His plays also reveal the dramatist's view of life which is the search of identity in the midst of worldly complicities.

**References:**

- Bhatta, Krishna. *Indian English Drama: A Critical Study*. New Delhi: Sterling, 1987. Print.
- Dodiya, Jayadipsingh. *The Plays of Girish Karnad: A Critical Perspective*. New Delhi: Prestige, 1999. Print.

**MLA (7th Edition) Citation:**

Sumathi, E. "Girish Karnad's Stagecraft: An Analysis of Style and Technique in *Tughlag, Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala*." *Literary Quest* 1.7 (2014): 93-103. Web. DoA.

**DoA – Date of Access**

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.