
Social Stratification in the Plays of Girish Karnad

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Abstract:

Girish Karnad seems to condemn the hierarchical system of social stratification in most of his plays. He seems to be of the belief that Indian mind and more specifically the Hindu mind, can grasp the world only in terms of binary divisions—Man-Woman, Father-Son, Aryan-non Aryan, Upper class/caste-Lower class/caste etc. always privileging the first in each pair. His plays provide a sharp expose of such a mind, which has this tendency of classification, which cannot accept both sides of the coin. The present paper examines and explores how Karnad vehemently condemns the caste system in his plays and calls for the establishment of a more humanistic society.

Keywords: Social Stratification, Caste System, Humanity, Binary division

Introduction

In several plays by Karnad, the issues of gender, caste and class, seem to be entwined and suffused in the very framework and plot of the play. Karnad seems to be of the belief that Indian mind and more specifically the Hindu mind, can grasp the world only in terms of binary divisions—Man-Woman, Father-Son, Aryan-non-Aryan, Upper class/caste-Lower class/caste etc. always privileging the first in each pair. His plays provide a sharp expose of such a mind, which has this tendency of classification, which cannot accept both sides of the coin and dwell (to use Keats' phraseology) in "Negative Capability".

Discussion

In the play *Hayavadana*, we find that Padmini, not satisfied with the body of her fair-faced brahmin husband, Devadatta, craves for the rough, dark and sensuous body of his low-caste friend, Kapila; in *Bali*, too, the Queen rejects her husband, the high-born King. She delightfully sleeps with the ugly bandicoot and says that she is completely tired of handsome and polished men whom she sees around her—"If you mean you are not tall and fair with an aquiline nose and ruby lips—I live surrounded by such men and I am sick and tired of them" (*Collected Plays*. 193).

In this candid declaration, she subverts the ideology of identity being

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restricted to shape and form, social standing and acceptability and reminds one of Padmini in *Hayavadana* who falls for the dark uncouth Kapila and finds her fair-faced, civilized husband less attractive. In *The Fire and the Rain*, this duality is stretched further and is expressed through the futility and failure of brahminical rituals to propitiate the Gods and the victory of innocence manifested through a young tribal girl. In a similar vein, *Yayati* too exposes two strands of dualism characterized by two markedly different races—the race of the high-born and the low-born. Devyani is an Aryan, while Sharmishtha an Anarya, a *rakshasi* woman.

Tughlaq in the play *Tughlaq*, wished to bring in secularism in his kingdom, to unite the Hindu and the Muslims on principles of equality, but he miserably failed in his endeavours. Both the communities mistrust his aspirations of a unified society. There are no direct references to caste-system in *Naga-Mandala*. However the division of the Flames into those of different oils—cheap and expensive is a pointer to the deeply-rooted system of stratification in Indian society.

Flowers also exposes, though at a much smaller scale than Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain*, the hypocrisy and unnaturalness of caste system in India where the outcastes, the courtesans are last to be admitted by the high caste man in the precincts of the temple but the first when it comes to drawing pleasure by having sex. Karnad appears to ridicule the accepted hypocrite arrangement where a high-born male can absolve himself of extra-marital affairs with low castes by taking a holy dip in the water. The meaninglessness of rites and rituals and the emphasis on the purity of heart is what Karnad seems to hint at in most of his plays.

Tale-Danda seems to be Karnad's final statement on the exploitative and meaningless caste-system prevailing in India. The play is an indictment of *Varnashram Dharma* and calls for its revision. Here he portrays caste as having not only social but economic implications which makes it even more difficult to escape from its clutches. Aparna Dharwadekar says,

Caste appears in *Tale-Danda* as the basis of Hindu socio-religious organization across class divisions, and the play presents the philosophical dialectic of caste as well as the practical consequences of the opposing positions (*Collected Plays.*, xi).

Karnad also seems to foretell the strengthening of the low caste/ class men in his plays. The Mahout in *Bali* seems to represent the deprived class and castes in the Indian society which have gained voice and authority to oppose those who are up in the social strata and who are no longer helpless and feeble like Bakha, the Shudra protagonist of Mulk Raj Anand's *The Untouchable* (1935). Karnad decentres the entire caste system in Indian society (wherein the low-caste is associated with ignorance and the high class with knowledge) by giving the Mahout a freedom of expression carried to an extreme, where a King acknowledges his power of sensuality. When the King and the Queen wake him up in an attempt to make love in the temple,

the Mahout assumes an authoritative voice, rebukes the couple and asks them to get out.

Throughout his plays we find that Karnad has played on the privileging of the deprived against the bestowed. Shudras are privileged against Brahmins, rural/natural life against urban setting of city life, secular against sacred and demons against gods. The Brahma-Rakshasa, even though a demon, fulfills his duty of killing Yavakri while the gods appear to be unreliable. The same is portrayed in *Hayavadana*, where the father of Hayavadana, a Celestial being appears to be much more selfish, mean and unthankful than the humans and leaves his devoted wife and abandons his son. The Celestial Being can be taken to symbolize the high castes in the Indian society, who by virtue of the elite power endowed on them by religious and social norms, exert their oppressive power and those at the bottom of the social order only suffer silently. Thus in his plays, Karnad seems to subvert the hierarchy based on social stratification.

Nittilai's call for humanity, for compassion, for love transcending caste/class/religious barriers, seems to be a projection of the playwright's urge for a society based not on meaningless rituals but on humane principles. As Nigam says—“Whereas Gods and Brahmins represent treachery and evil, Nittilai though an outcaste, is full of human attributes and beauty (39).” In *Hayavadana* too, at the end of the play the Padmini's child and the Hayavadana who has turned into a complete horse by the end of the play, play along and seem to reiterate Rayka's idea that—“Hayavadana's laughter makes the boy forget his dolls and his regressive tendencies. It makes the child's return to humanity possible (186).”

Conclusion

What Karnad seems to project is that all systems that classify the human beings are futile and so is the caste system, which for long needs massive revision. He seems to reinstate that love and compassion should be the basis of every religion and this is in fact the essence of being human.

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