

### Ritualistic Practices in the Plays of Girish Karnad

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**Abstract:**

*Religion has been a guiding and controlling force for all human beings for all the times. Indian theatres are associated with religion. The dramatist, Girish Karnad has interlinked his dramas with religion and ritualistic practices. Presenting it, Girish Karnad became successful to present folk drama before the reader and audience.*

**Key Words:** primordial, ritualistic practices. Natyasastra, Yajna

India is a nation richly imbued with religious sentiment and belief. In Indian society, individual identity of the person is intertwined with religion undertaking numerous rituals and superstitions. Religion has been a guiding and controlling force for all human beings for all the times. It not only constructs a structure of code of ethics but also punishment awarding institution. This religion has certain influence not only on human life but literature also. Most of the influence can be shown on the drama. There is the everlasting relation between drama and religion. Theatre has often been associated with rituals in the Indian tradition. Indian theatrical activity began with primordial magical, religious or social rites, ritualistic dances, festivals etc. even today many tribes in different part of the country perform rituals to birth, death, puberty, marriage, food gathering, hunting battles and propitiation of their gods, goddesses and primordial forces, in which the dramatic or theatrical elements are prominent.

The foremost dramatist Girish Karnad has interlinked his dramas with this issue. Recently he was conferred with Tata Literature Live! Lifetime Achievement Award 2017 for his outstanding contribution in the field of theatre. He has fearlessly expressed his views on different occasions at different platforms. He presented some folk elements in some dramas which appear as a folk drama. The folk drama is purely based on the ritualistic practices. The vital characteristic of folk drama is to build the moral value among the audience, making them aware about ritualistic practices. Rituals here appear as-a backdrop for the action. His play, *Yayati* deals with a mythic tale and hence, Hindu rituals appear now and then. *Yayati's* marriage with *Devayani* was a result of his unconscious act of holding her by her right hand: "Sir, I am a maiden. And you have held me by my right hand." (Ya.13) This refers to the Indian ritual of holding the bride's right hand during wedding; an act signaling the acceptance of the girls as a wife. The ritual reiterates in another scene where *Sharmishtha* is held by right hand by *Yayati*: "Sir, you are holding my right hand. And I am a princess." (Ya.21) The same practice fails when *Yayati* tried to prevent *Chitrlekha* from consuming poison. *Chitrlekha's* act of performing *arati* at *Pooru*, to welcome the transformed *Pooru* into her heart refers to the Hindu ritual of *arati* done with the lamps. The stage directions give the details, "Chitrlekha takes the lamp to his face and moves it in a circle in front of it, performing an *arati*." (Ya.57) *Devayani's* act of tearing the marriage thread and removing jewellery as she decides to end the marriage with *Yayati* conveys the ritual practice allied with the end of a marriage: ". . . she tears the marriage thread from around her neck and flings it on the floor . . . *Devayani* snatches out other pieces of jewellery she is wearing and throws them out." (Ya.31) In Hindu tradition, women are not allowed to wear the marriage thread and ornaments after the death of their husbands.

From the concept of the mythical origins of drama in the *Natyasastra*, the performative space had an innate connection with the space of a *Yajna* or a sacrifice. The ritualistic aspect of theatre is more in the form of a semiotic space where the ‘theatrical’ and the ‘ritualistic’ share the notion of a performance. In *Tughlaq*, the space of the prayer hall becomes an important space in Scene Five and Six. *Tughlaq* had already made prayer, five times a day, compulsory for all the Muslims in the country. *Tughlaq* opens with prayer and ends with prayer. An instance is presented by *Hayavadana* which employs an all-embracing use of Indian/Hindu rituals. The introductory prayer of Ganesha, or Nandi Puja is only a remnant of a longer religious ceremony: the *purvaranga*, which is described in Bharata’s *Natyasastra*. In the opening scene, act I, of *Hayavadana*, the bhagavata’s worshipping Ganesha, inaugurates the play with his blessings. His recital of the outline of the story, at the outset of the play, and introducing us to Nata: ‘Oh! It’s Nata, our actor and he is running. What could have happened, I wonder?’ (I,74). Padmini’s reference to the touching of others’ feet in respect is an important ritual act followed in India. It is done to pay respect to the elders. Padmini in the introductory scene refers to this practice to Kapila: “. . . I’ve touched everyone’s feet in this house some time or the other, but no one’s ever touched mine? You will?” (CP Vol.I 125) Padmini’s acts of biting her tongue and slapping on the cheeks in remorse shows her ritualistic behaviour. Padmini’s act of *Sati* also signals the ritualistic practice. Her ‘ritualistic worship’ of Devadatta, *sati* and so on are mocked at here. Karnad also refers to the Indian ritualistic worships and sacrifices in *Hayavadana*. Indian ritualistic superstitions are mocked at through *Hayavadana*’s attempts to accomplish completeness:

“Banaras, Rameshwar, Gokarn, Haridwar, Gaya, Kedarnath – not only those but the *Dargah* of Khwaja Yusuf Baba, the Grotto of Our Virgin Mary – I’ve tried them all. Magicians, mendicants, Maharishis, fakirs, saints and sadhus . . . I’ve covered them all.” (CP Vol.I 115)

Devadatta’s pledge to offer his head to Lord Rudra and arms to goddess Kali reminds of ancient Indian rituals of offering sacrifices to Gods for their accomplishment of desires. Indians still continue this practice of offering to God, though not human sacrifices. The reference to *poojas* and *mangalarati* in Kali temple, the presence of Goddess Kali, rishis, pundits, and temples enhances the ritualistic atmosphere of the play. The inner sanctum of a ruined temple of the Goddess Kali witnesses the key events in *Hayavadana*. Religion and ritual shape and construct the distinct identity of individual. “Religion and ritual not only forms a part of the narrative of Karnad’s play but is also integral to the dramatic representation of the plays, a takeoff of the folk theatrical tradition of the country” ( Rao) It is the sanctum of the temple where jealous Devdatta beheads himself; Kapila his friend follows his suit, out of fear of the blame of killing his friend.

Rituals always play a significant role in the design of the folk art. Karnad uses the rituals that linger around Cobra or snake adoration in India-Naga- panchami’ the fourth day and the fifth day of the waning period of the moon. Rani’s trial episode to prove her innocence by holding the king cobra of the ant-hill gives an instance of the age-old Indian ritual. Rani’s success at the trial and her elevation to the level of a goddess signals the divinity that is attached to the worship of the Nagas in Indian culture. Rani’s refusal to refer to Cobra at night resonates a popular Indian belief. Rani says: “Shh! Don’t mention it. They say if you mention it by name at night, it comes into the house.” (CP Vol.I 273) Appanna’s act of searching for an untouchable to bury the dead dog, Rani’s snake ordeal, her other choices like taking ‘the oath while holding a red-hot iron in the hand . . . to plunge the hand in boiling oil’ (CP Vol.I 288) reflect the ritualistic practices of rural India. The ritualistic practice of cremating the father by his son also is shown here. As

“RANI:    When we cremate this snake, the fire should be lit by our son.

Appanna: As you say.

Rani: And every year on this day, our son should perform the rituals to commemorate its death.” (CP Vol.I 298)

In the play, *Bali-the Sacrifice*, Karnad draws attention to the ritualistic sacrifices practiced in India even today. Here the Queen mother represents the older world that pursues with the sacrifices of animals to please her God. Hence, she rears animals for sacrificing: “The animals are graded according to the occasion. Poultry is offered at daily rites. Sheep, goats for the more important rituals. Then buffalo.” (CP Vol.I 212) The reference to greater extent of slaughter of animals as sacrifice at the king’s birth refers to this ritualistic practice: “They say when you were born; every inch of the earth for miles around was soaked in blood.” (CP Vol.I 213) The sacrifice of dough figurines for atonement prevails in the present-day India. The Queen Mother’s and the king’s proposal to sacrifice the dough cock as an atonement for the Queen’s sin is in tune with this.

In *The Fire and The Rain*, rituals become a central event. The play centers on the fundamental Indian ritual of the fire sacrifice that completely dominated the mode of thinking from the Vedic period. The fire sacrifices continued to be offered to god by kings and wealthy individuals (*Yajamana*) to attain the benefits like son, cattle, wealth, rains, longevity of life and so on. The prologue of the play itself takes us to the fire sacrifice performed for rains: “It has not rained adequately for nearly ten years. Drought grips the land. A seven-year long fire sacrifice (*yajna*) is being held to propitiate Indra, the god of rains.” (CP Vol.2. 105) The stage directions give details of the sacrificial scene:

“Fire burns at the centre of step-like brick altars. There are several such altars, at all of which priests are offering oblations to the fire, while singing the prescribed hymns in unison. The priests are all dressed in long flowing seamless piece of cloth, and wear sacred threads. The king, who is the host, is similarly dressed but has his head covered.” (CP Vol.2. 105)

Convincing Nittilai’s brother for marriage. Arvasu is ready to offer the flesh to God as per Hindu tradition, ‘Arvasu: ‘I’ll offer chunk of my flesh to your gods as a penance.’ (CP Vol.2. 136) The final scene of the appearance of Lord Indra completes the total effect of the ritualistic atmosphere in the play as rain pours as a result of the sacrifice.

Karnad provides with vivid details regarding the ritualistic worship of Shiva, his idol. The Indian tradition of worshipping the idols: decorating it with flowers, the endless oblations of milk, ghee and oil through the centuries, the offerings of coconuts to the linga are referred to by Karnad. He gives details about the basic ritual requirement: “...jawsticks, and camphor and the placement of wicks in different silver plates for the aarati.” (CP Vol.2. 244) He continues the rituals observed by the priest for his worship: “I have a dip in the tank, and in the wet dhoti, sit down in the sanctum surrounded by basket of flowers...malligai, sevanti, chendu, hoove, sampigai, and kanakambara.” (CP Vol.2. 244) After the pooja is over and the prayers are done, the devotee (here Chieftain), “accepts a single flower as God’s prasada, presses it to his eyes, stick it behind his right ear” (CP Vol.2. 260) In the case of woman devotees the flower is prasada, is used to “tuck it in the knot of her hair” The priest’s act of breaking the coconut as offering is also described: “I crack every one of the coconuts myself and return the halves as prasada, with a petal or two and sandal paste in it.” (CP Vol.2. 245)

The elements of ritualistic acts are evident in *Tale-Danda* also. The death scene of Sambashiva Shastri (Jagadeva’s father) in the beginning of the play conveys the ritualistic acts done at a dead person: “Put it onto the floor, fold its legs, otherwise it won’t fit on the bier... send for the bamboos and rope...Your mother. Attend to her hair. Her head has to be shaved.” (CP Vol.2. 13) The same

rituals are also described in scene four like seeping the floor, the application of cow dung for purifying, and the reference to the disposal of all the things used for the ritual: ‘Not the wood, not the pots, not the left-overs. Burn what you can. Consign the rest to the river. Everything should be disposed of.’ (CP Vol.2. 40) The play also employs the act of performing arati, as used by,

“ Damodara Bhatt does arati before the King. Mother and son stand and fold their hands. The priest steps out of the room, extends the arati towards the two. They spread their palms to receive the warmth of the flame and put a few coins in the plate.” (CP Vol.2. 14)

It is also seen in the queen’s efforts to arrange for an arati to welcome the King Bijjala: “You shouldn’t rush in like this-without arati or saffron-water to cast out the evil eye” (CP Vol.2. 17)

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