Folklore Tradition of India in Girish Karnad’s Nagmandala

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ABSTRACT

Myths are universal, occurring in almost all cultures. They deal with basic questions about the nature of the world and human experience and can illuminate many aspects of a culture. Culture defines society. The cultural ethos of every society is unique in its form and essence representing the character of its people, their experiences and beliefs. Myths, legends and folklore are in fact the embodiments of these cultural ethos that represent the underlying values and principles of life, the shared experience of the race, the rules and the codes of society. This paper explores the style acquired by Girish Karnard in presenting these folklords through plays and characterization.

Keywords: Folklore; Nagmandala

Introduction

Girish Karnad makes extensive use of tradition, myths, legends and folklore. Girish Karnad's plays vividly exemplify this trend. Girish Karnad is a major dramatist who has significantly gone back to the roots of Indian myth, tradition and culture and has re-created for us the rich and vibrant picture of Indian society, culture and its people. In all his plays he genuinely portrays the Indian way of life with all its positive and negative aspects, its tradition and their relative contemporary importance and relation (Lalitkas, 2016).

“The real function of literature in human affairs is to continue myths’ ancient and basic endeavour to create a meaningful place for man in a world oblivious to his presence”, says Vincent B. Leitch. Karnad’s taking to myth and legend in his plays was more an act of im-pulse rather than intention (Nair, 2006). He had rightly chosen to use myths and legend for his plays. He feels they are very much relevant today, and hence, seeks to adapt myths and folk forms in his plays. Thus he effects a synthe-sis between the ancient and the modem to serve his purpose of using the past to illum-inate the present.

Karnad uses myths, legend and folk tales in his plays Yayati, Tughlaq, Hayavadana and Nagamandala. Girish Karnad's Hayavadana and Nagamandala source their origin from the folklore tradition of India. Hayavadana is based on Thomas Mann's translation of the Sanskrit 'Vetal Panchavimashati', which forms part of Kshemendra's Brihat Katha Manjari and Somadeva's Kathasaritsagara. Karnad's Nagamandala is inspired by the snake myths prevalent in South India. It is a dramatization of two folktales of Karnataka. In fact, Naga Cult is widely practiced in many parts of India.

In Nagamandala, Karnad forges a synthesis between the ancient and the modern to serve his purpose of using the past to illuminate the present. He uses a traditional folk-tale to throw light on the present, thereby fusing the past and present. Karnad takes his inspiration from the rich tradition of India's past and weaves it through the web of his imagination into tales of his own.

Sacrifices also form a part of such religious practice as seen in the obliteration of the self physically in Hayavadana, the snake ordeal that Rani undergoes in Nagamandala.
The whole trial of Rani with the king cobra spreading its hood over her can be seen as having symbolic significance. The period of the Rani-Appanna as Naga-relationship is the period of learning, of assessing, for both. In the early marriages that were so common in India some five or six decades ago, physical maturity preceded emotional and psychological maturity and this caused pain and suffering in most cases. This is symbolized in the trial. Rani, true to the ‘Pativrata’ archetype, is willing to face death to prove her fidelity, and her ‘pativrata’ brings about a change of heart in Appanna. Day writes in The Many Meanings of Myth:

Aquatic or terrestrial, snakes in myth display an extra ordinary range, such as fertility in the case of the Indian snake groves, joining tree and serpent as fertility symbols are often famed for aiding current women to conceive, and secondly, for the healing purpose as the entwined snakes of the caduceus are still the world’s best-known symbol of the healing arts.

There are also myths about the weddings of nagas and humans, and “countless serpentine interventions in human affairs transverse almost all the known themes about snakes and are often buffingly ambiguous” (Day 428).

Karnad in his plays tries to evolve a symbolic form out of the tension between the mythic experience and a living response to life and its values. Contemporariness in Karnad’s plays manifests itself through his operative sensibility in his attempt to give new meaning to the past from the vantage point of the present.

The story of Appanna also has certain interesting touches. It is believed that some witch or fairy enchanted him away from his lawful wife. Once again, the act of the unfaithful husband is explained away through the use of some mysterious fairy. The identity of the woman who entices Appanna away is unknown and it remains a mystery. Are these anecdotal explanations intended to justify that we as human beings are simply pawns in the hands of the divine, or that these events are inevitably caused by Karma?

As per the traditional scales of social roles and culture, the individual holds a subordinate position to society, community or family. In Nagamandala Rani and Appanna confirm to their social roles and obligation as husband and wife even though both are aware of the truth of their relation.

Girish Karnad uses a magical folklore to reveal the complexity of human life. In particular, he uses the folklore in the Indian context to reveal the social and individual relations.

Man-Woman intimate relationships, the question of chastity being imposed on married women while their husbands have a merry-go-round with other women outside their wedlock, married women’s earnest desire for the love of their husbands is explained away through the use of some mysterious fairy. The identity of the woman who entices Appanna away is unknown and it remains a mystery. Are these anecdotal explanations intended to justify that we as human beings are simply pawns in the hands of the divine, or that these events are inevitably caused by Karma?

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are what we believe in and where we live in.’ Girish Karnad makes use of myths, mythologies and folklore as his source for his plays, not for the glorification of the chosen myths but to relate the myths to the present and to the past beliefs found in these myths. Karnad provides us with a glimpse of the past as well as its relevance to an understanding of the contemporary world.

Although in our Indian context myths are related to religion, Karnad is only interested in the mythical side of it. He finds a Jungain quality in these myths. Moreover the elements of myth and history are common to most audiences in our country. Most myths have a strong emotional significance and the audiences have set responses to-wards them and Karnad likes to play on that.

Karnad says that use of myths and folk techniques allow for “Complex seeing”, although the myths have traditional and religious sanction, they have the means of ques-toning these values. Added to this Karnad believes that the various folk conventions like the chorus, the music, the mixing of human and non-human worlds permit a simultaneous presentation of alternate points of view. Thus, the myth acquires new dimensions in the creative hands of Karnad, and the play unfolds rich strands of meaning.

References