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“Thematic Concern and Technical Features in Karnad’s Tale-Danda.”

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Girish Karnad is the most renowned media personality in contemporary India. He is India’s leading playwright and an adept practitioner of the performing arts. *Tale-Danda* which means death by beheading has been acclaimed widely for its brilliant analysis of the ills that plague Indian society today. The present research paper offers thematic concerns and technical features of Karnad and gives varied and analytical interpretations of his play *Tale-Danda*. Karnad has attempted various themes concerning past history post and present values and religious beliefs and myth of India. Karnad has taken up a job to re-interpret and if necessary and possible to re-structure the traditional values of social and political systems concerning caste. He is also concerned with the subtle meaning of Religion. Karnad Speaks in his Interview:

“I wrote Tale-Danda when the ‘Mandir’ and the ‘Mandal’ movements were beginning to show again how relevant the questions posed by these thinkers were for our age. It is not necessarily an attack on caste. It is a question of ‘Why’, why is it that some of our problems seem perennial.”(Ravi Dayal:1993:138)

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These thinkers were those who condemned idolatry and temple worship. Indeed they reflected anything ‘static’ in favor of the principle of movement and progress in human enterprise. They believed in the equality of sexes and celebrated hard dedicated work. They opposed the caste system, not just in theory but in practice. This last act brought down upon them the wrath of the orthodox. The movement ended in terror and bloodshed. It is through the sharanas that the author advocates his philosophy. Basavanna the great sharana saint poet is the mouthpiece to announce the author’s views. The author’s view is expressed through the king Bijjala who is very close in thinking and nobility to the duke’s in Shakespeare’s plays. He also shares his views with kakkayya a sharana and an untouchable saint aged about seventy. Y. Somalata’s observation of Tale- Danda is remarkable:

“In this play Karnad discovers the vital relationship between contemporary society and

Literature adept in choosing the dialectical opposites such as tradition and modernity;

conservative and reformist; spiritual and physical; ideal and pragmatic; constancy and flux for unfolding a logical sequence in poetic terms...centrifugal and centripetal forces of change and resistance are directed against caste order in Hindu society.” (Somalata: 2004:138)

The major theme of Karnad’s *Tale- Danda* is that of deconstruction of caste and religion to arrive at its real proper meaning and to restructure the same for the benefit of the society and the country. In scene after scene Karnad gives new doses and fresh outlooks to the set beliefs and rooted religions faiths. The traditional caste system claims that a king is supposed to be a Rajput or a Kshatriya. The author gives a stunning dialogue taking place between Bijjala the king and Rambhavati, the queen.

“Bijjala: What is my caste? Tell me.

Rambhavati: We are kshatriyas.

Bijjala: Your family- the Hosalas you may be Kshatriyas. But I am a Kalachurya, a barber by caste. His majesty king Bijjala is a barber by caste. For ten generations my forefathers ravaged the land as robber barons. For another five they ruled as the trusted feudatories of the emperor

himself. They married into every royal family in sight. All this so they could have the caste of Kshatriyas branded on their foreheads”.(Karnad:1993)

Karnad achieves two aims here. He shows that the king of kalyan is not a kshatriya but a barber. Further he shows him full of insight and noble thoughts, perhaps to show that deep insight, noble character and ideal administration are not the inborn characteristics of one community only. Once again Karnad breaks away with the rooted traditional beliefs regarding having a son and regarding birth, caste and creed.

“Bijjala: A son in the final goal of human existence it may be that he drinks your blood and chews your bones to mash, but he is the one who’ll keep your soul fed till eternity.

Basavanna:For a sharana, physical parentage is of no consequence. A person is born truly only when the guru initiates him into a life of knowledge.

Bijjala: That’s what you believe. As a child you tore up your sacred thread and ran away from home. Birth, caste and creed mean nothing to you.” (Karnad:1993)

Karnad disagrees with the established tradition of considering a caste or creed on the strength of Physical Parentage. Instead knowledge is the right canon to judge a human being. Through Manchanna Kramita a Brahmin who was an advisor to the king Karnad shows his dissent with the ritual slaughter of animals before the vedic gods. When fire sacrifices or any other sacrifices are offered to God for religious purposes, it is improper, inhuman, unworthy and beastlike; we cannot justify slaughtering of animals for own purposes. In Act II scene V Madhuvarsa, a sharana who is a Brahmin by birth, shows his willingness to sacrifice his daughter’s life to forward the cause of their great movement.

Karnad’s *Tale-Danda* is a tragedy shows Basavanna’s principle of movement and progress in human enterprise ending in terror and bloodshed. Through conflict and confrontation which go side by side in the drama, Karnad deconstructs the meaning of caste and religion and shows a

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new community of sharanas who condemn idolatry and temple worship reject anything that is static, believe in equality of sexes and hard work and oppose the caste-system. Pranav Joshipura has also expressed the similar view: “...instead of deliberating on how to abolish the Varna system, Karnad presents it in a startling manner without any solution...to treat an age-old problem without suggesting any solution raises serious doubts about the capacity of a writer.” (Joshipur:2000:69)

The story of this play *Tale-Danda* which literally means beheading is borrowed by Karnad from an important historical movement that took place in the city of Kalyan in 1168 A.D. The movement was started by a group of poet, philosophers, mystics and social revolutionaries which wanted to revolutionize the society as well as change the age old practices of the evils of caste system. It resulted as an age of creativity courageous questioning and social commitment which was unmatched in the history of Karnad. They used the language of common man instead of Sanskrit and talked to people about God in the language which they could understand. They wanted to bring about a complete change and believed in the principle of movement and progress in human enterprise and opposed any kind of static situation. Even in that age they believed in the equality of sexes as well as committed hard work. Because of their commitment to oppose caste system they were humiliated and the anger and displeasure of the orthodox community came down heavily on them. Finally the movement ended in terror and bloodshed.

The language of the play is quiet relevant to the situation. According to Karnad:

“In Karnataka as elsewhere in India, a man has only to open his mouth and his speech will give away his caste, his geographical origins, even his economic status. In the original kannada version of Tale-Danda the language of the play engages with the implications of this fact for a situation in which a group of people are trying to fight caste and social inequality.” (Ravi Dayal:1993:138)

This view can be justified by taking few lines from the text:

“Malliboma : Don't be silly. I shouldn't have even stepped into this Brahmin Street. And you want me to come into your house? No. Thank you.

Damodara: Indrani, the Rigveda tells us that the four varnas flowed out of the primordial Man: The Brahmin from the head, the shudra from the feet.”(Karnad:1993)

These two quotations show us clearly the deep rooted feelings of caste that were imbedded in the psyche of the people which affected the society as large. Marx also comments on the evil effects of the division of labor and social deformity. It proved incontrovertibly the disastrous effects of machinery and division of labor, the concentration of capital and land in a few hand so ever production and crises.

Karnad's *Tale-Danda* exposes the ugly deformity of the Hindu society by depicting the twelfth century communal struggle in the city of Kalyan in North Kanara when Bijjala was the king. In his court there were great scholars and poets. Basavanna the king's officer and the great philosopher united those brilliant people and fought for equality. They shed their castes and became sharanas or devotees of Lord Shiva. They talked about God in the language of common people. They considered their body the very abode of God and denounced idolatry. They condemned all the inhuman traditions and believed in social and gender equality. Finally their noble movement ended in a disaster when the marriage of a Brahmin girl to a Panchama boy led to the fateful war between sharanas and orthodox people. Bijjala a shudra a barber by caste becomes the king of Kalyan. He himself says how he has become a kshatriya:

“For ten generations my forefathers ravaged the land as robber barons. For another five they rules as the trusted feudatories of the Emperor himself. They married into every royal family in sight. Bribed generations of Brahmins with millions of cows. All this so they could have the caste of kshatriya branded on their foreheads.”(Karnad: 1993)

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Bijjala also marries a royal princess, Rambhavati and has a son, Sovideva; he loves Sovideva but detests his un princely behavior. So he does not favor him while he makes the sons of his other wives local lords. Sovideva resents this greatly. Bijjala knows that the people of higher castes do not respect him properly. He admits:

“In all my sixty two years, the only people who have looked me in an eye without a reference to my lowly birth lurking deep in their eyes are the sharanas, Basavanna and his men.” (Karnad: 1993)

Bijjala feels grateful to Basavanna and his men. But his son Sovideva is not happy with it. He dislikes Basavanna and his philosophy. He knows that Basavanna spends large amounts of money on his hospitality to his guests. So he suspects that Basavanna has stolen money from the royal treasury. He therefore decides to prove this by opening the treasury. Thus he wants to win his father’s favor by making Basavanna unpopular.

Jagadeva’s a sharanas comes to know Sovideva’s plan to open the royal treasury. At once he gathered thousands of sharanas and encircles it. Thus he prevents Sovideva from tampering with it. Meanwhile Basavanna comes and immediately sends Jagadeva to attend to his ailing father. He takes Sovideva into custody, find the treasury intact after verification and then release him. People consider it miraculous that the treasure is intact. Bijjala scolds Sovideva severely for his misdeed. So Somideva feels deeply frustrated, humiliated and hurt. He decides to avenge this on his father and Basavanna. Damodar Bhatt, Queen’s priest and Manchanna Karamita, the Brahmin adviser to the king are very unhappy about Basavanna’s mission and Bijjala’s support to it. So they join hands with Sovideva in the plot against Bijjala and Basavanna.

Sovideva Demodar and Manchanna hatch a plot against the king. They first get the loyal servants of Bijjala killed and then imprison him in his own palace. Basavanna knows this and requests sharanas to stand by the king. But most of them refuse to save him from Sovideva. So he himself followed by a few sharanas visits Bijjala who is greatly perturbed. He advised him to cling to

Lord Shiva who alone can save him from any danger. As he leaves for Kappadi, Bijjala frenzily sobs laughs. Jagadeva and other sharanas entered into the palace through a secret passage. But they do not find the Prince and feel greatly frustrated.

Jagadeva leads them to the inner shrine of Shiva where the old king hides. Bijjala firmly embraces the Linga to protect himself. Then Jagadeva lies that Basavanna has sent them to him. Believing this Bijjala comes out of the shrine in spite of the request of the other sharanas not to kill him Jagadeva stabs him to death when they all leave on this request, and he commits suicide. The screams of the victims and the eulogies of Sovideva by Brahmins are heard simultaneously. Karnad says:

“You can perceive deep irony, because, after all the martyrdom of the sharanas, when they re-emerged after three centuries of underground survival as linguists, they were totally caste-ridden.”(Shukla:1999:39)

He feels that *Tale-Danda* is relevant even today as religious fundamentalism is strong enough to destroy the Babari Masjid and claim the lives of thousands of people. He adds that when people all around us are slaughtered in the name of a temple, he hears echoes from those times long past. That is why the words of Basavanna points to mandir masjid violence: Violence is wrong, whatever the provocation. To resort to it because someone else started it first is even worse. And to do so in the name of a structure of brick and mortar is a monument to stupidity. Hence Karnad rightly remarks:

“It seems 800 years have solved no problems. We are back exactly where we started. Social deformities thus illustrated in its various aspects in Karnad’s Tale-Danda. The ugly face of the caste system in India is exposed in Tale-Danda. Consequently, not only does Basavanna’s movement fail but also his followers emerge as a new caste after a few hundred years.”(Ibid:40)

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Thus Karnad exposes the evil effects of social deformity at cultural, social and psychological levels. The representation of high caste women in Girish Karnad’s *Tale-Danda* is expectedly Stereotypical. They are docile, shouted at told to mind their own business, or worse still rejected and packed off to their parent’s. There is hardly a hint of equality in the husband – wife relationship. She might be the queen of the kingdom, but her real standing is no better than any other servant of the palace, as far as the king is concerned. Elains Showalter’s words appropriately fit Rambhavati’s situation:

“We have seen our foremothers as mindless down-trodden souls, accepting century after century the fetters of their lot with passivity, unheeding or incapable of perceiving their exclusion from society.” (Showalter:1977:11)

The other woman in the palace is Sovideva’s wife. It is important to note that this absent, voiceless woman acquires value in the changed context. The words spoken by Sovideva on this occasion are revealing for their irony and male egocentricities. Woman is valued for her functional utility only not for her intrinsic worth as a human being.

The most crucial events in the play which triggers catastrophic consequences, involving the death of the king and the beheading of Mahuvarasa and Haralayya is the wedding between a high-caste Brahmin’s daughter and a cobbler’s son. The marriage has become possible because both the families have embraced sharanas religion. A typical characteristic of patriarchy is that men are in control and it is they who wield power. Women remain voiceless. Lalitmba points to the practical problems, besetting the alliance of a Brahmin girl with a cobbler boy. But her objections and fears are not satisfactorily resolved. They are unceremoniously bruised aside by her husband, Madhuvarasa. Lalitamba’s objections to the marriage sound justified:

“Till the other day our daughter ran around barefoot. She was told it was unclean to touch any leather except deer-skin. How can she start skinning dead buffaloes tomorrow? Or tan leather?”(Karnad:1993)

A description of the religion, given on the blurb of the play is noteworthy. A new religion, raised in revolt against the narrow-minded, ritual ridden Brahminism preaches equality of human beings. Caste does not add value or attach stigma to people. In the eyes of Lord Shiva, whom sharanas worship all are equal. Women remained a marginalized and suppressed groups without voice, without power and may be even without consciousness of their peripheral position in society. With the observation of Showalter says:

“Woman’s relationships to themselves and society have been essentially static, as fixed as to render women of the past mute and dumb, unable to write, speak or even see the truth.”

(Showalter:1977:14)

Karnad discloses that he has written *Tale-Danda* when the Mandir and the Mandal movements were beginning to show again how relevant the questions posed by these thinkers. The horror of subsequent events and the religious fanatics that have gripped our national life today have only proved how dangerous it is to ignore the solution they offered. The ugly face of the caste system in India is exposed in *Tale-Danda*. Basavanna is betrayed by his own followers in his ideal struggle to eradicate the caste system gradually. Karnad exposes the evil effects of social deformity at cultural, social and psychological levels. Karnad’s *Tale-Danda*, a tragedy shows Basavanna’s principle of movement and progress in human enterprise, ending in terror and bloodshed. The representation of high caste women in Karnad’s play *Tale-Danda* is expectedly stereotypical: they are docile shouted at told to mind their own business or worse still rejected and packed off to their parents.

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