
Conflict Between Will and Destiny in the Plays of Girish Karnad

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Tragedy itself originates because people cannot change their destiny. Although there are number of possibilities, through divination, propitiation, that a man can appease his fate, there is a limit to this, and it is because of this limitation, the fact that one has already picked one's fate at the beginning and cannot avert it that you find tragedy¹. (52)

Critics differ on the concept of predetermined destiny, some state that an individual's life is predetermined and others state that the fate is not predetermined, and if it is, then there is no scope for a person to exercise his free will. The plays of Karnad very closely deal with the human predicament. Freud in his study of the human psyche has stressed on the tremendous effect that repression has on the individual. The social and cultural norms always stand in opposition to the natural desires of the individual. Erich Fromm calls the society, 'the creative agent'², which is responsible for conditioning, molding and creating the individual characters into pre-set moulds and types. These societal norms force an individual to repress his emotions and work accordingly. The individuals who deviate from such norms suffer the consequences. Almost all the characters in the plays of Karnad are the victims of such tragedy as Aravasu, Padmini, Paravasu, Tipu Sultan, etc. Miller, in his

Tragedy and the Common Man has said "the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing: his sense of personal dignity."³

Karnad shows the conflict between individual will and the tragic destiny. His drama also questions the validity and efficaciousness of a tradition. His fictional characters – articulate individuals as well as types – are involved in a quest for fulfillment and wholeness that leads sometimes to qualified happiness and other times to death.⁴

This idea prevails in all of his plays. His protagonists have certain aspirations in their minds that they strive hard to achieve but what they meet at the end is contrary to their expectation. His major characters like Yavakri, Padmini and Basavanna keep on struggling to achieve the desired end though they not succeed. So, Karnad's plots become the portrait of dilemma, duality and tension. The tension is between two polarities and he seems to struggle in between.

Karnad has an art that creates tragedy from desire where in *The Fire and the Rain* Yavakri, Bharadvaja's son, becomes angry that his father is not accorded the same respect as Raibhya. He desires to become more powerful than him. In order to gain 'Universal knowledge' he goes to the jungle. The girl he loved was married to Parvasu, Raibhya's son. Yavakri is constantly defeated by Raibhya and in the end gets murdered by him only.

Yavakri later confesses that all he had done, having sex with Vishakha, calling Arvasu at the same time was to take revenge on Raibhya. It is indeed tragic to see that he gave ten years to obtain something that was not meant for a man like him. He went to seek 'Universal knowledge' still he could not eradicate the feeling of jealousy. After such long penance, he still nurtured the feeling of jealousy and cunningness in his heart. He himself is not sure whether he had attained the 'Universal Knowledge'. He dies tragically in the end, killed by a Brahma Rakshasa that too sent by Raibhya. Yavakri wanted to defeat Raibhya but he is over and again defeated by him. This indeed is his tragedy.

All the characters in this play are sufferers, Parvasu although the chief priest in the fire-sacrifice, is a murderer of his own father, his wife is not loyal to him, he ditches his own brother. He is the one who pollutes the fire sacrifice. He has no shame :

PARAVASU. You didn't need to. He deserved to die. He killed Yavakri to disturb me in the last stages of the sacrifice. Not to punish Yavakri, but to be even with me. I had to attend to him before he went any farther.⁵ (142)

This strained relationship of father and son, is similar to that of *Camwood on Leaves* by Soyinka. Raibhya, father of Parvasu and Arvasu, is also not satisfied with his life. He was not called to be the chief priest and instead of him it was his son Parvasu who was called. His daughter-in-law Vishakha is also against him. His tragedy lies in the fact that he is murdered by his own son left without the death rites just because fire sacrifice was of much more importance than him. Yavakri was also jealous of Raibhya. Vishakha tells Parvasu:

VISHAKHA: Something died inside your father the day the king invited you to be the Chief Priest. He's been drying up like a dead tree since then. No sap runs in him.⁶ (142)

Vishakha, one of the two female characters in the play, is also a sufferer, her husband Parvasu left her to be in the sacrifice. Her former lover Yavakri left her to attain Knowledge, and when he returned to her it was just to take revenge. She is tormented by desire to be loved.

VISHAKHA: I shouldn't ask. I should be silent. And you, in any case, will be silent. My silence again followed by yours. Silences endlessly repeated. Perhaps they too will describe a whole universe. But I am sick of silence.⁷ (141)

Her father-in-law calls her by all sorts of humiliating words, "bitch", "whore", he even beats her, when he comes to know about Yavakri. Even Yavakri uses her, he meets her after coming back, she trusts him but is shattered when she comes to know the truth about Yavakri. Her condition resembles that of Rani of *Naga-Mandala*. But later in the play Vishakha puts Yavakri in a difficult situation and causes his death. Nittilai and Arvasu are the only two innocent persons in the play. They have no jealousy for anyone, they have committed only one mistake that of loving each other. Nittilai is a hunter woman, and Arvasu a Brahmin, that is the only cause of their tragedy. They are not liked by

anyone just because of this reason. Arvasu likes acting but this profession was not meant for higher classes and he obeys his brother and quits acting. His brother Parvasu leaves his father's final rites. Arvasu is shattered by this whole experience, as he trusted his brother very much. Within the main plot of Parvasu and Arvasu is the story of Indra and Vritra. It is decided that for the entertainment of everyone a play will be enacted. Arvasu is given the role of Vritra, and the whole story of the main plot is re-enacted. Nittilai, is killed in the end and Arvasu despite having the choice cannot bring her back to life:

ARVASU: No, it won't. Lord, I have been an ignorant fool all my life. My stupidity contributed to that tragedy – fuelled it on. But after all that I have been through, I'm wiser. I can now stop the tragedy from repeating itself. I can provide the missing sense to our lives – ⁸(60).

If he had taken the decision to bring Nittilai back to life all tragedy would have repeated itself. Nittilai is also the victim of tragedy. She is killed in the end. Yavakri, Parvasu, Andhaka, Raibhya all die. Only Arvasu remains, and he also is left alone. Brahma Rakshasa is the one who seems to be victorious.

Naga-Mandala, another play of Karnad from the very outset shows the human struggle with his fate. In the opening of the play, we see the narrator struggling to save his life, for which he will have to fulfill certain condition. As he himself says:

MAN: a mendicant told me: 'you must keep awake at least one whole night this month. If you can do that, you'll live. If not, you will die on the last night of the month.'⁹(1)

Karnad has also depicted the helplessness of the flames who are at the mercy of their lords and can only come when their masters switch the lamp off. Each character is at the mercy of their fate. Even the story had to come out draped in the song as the old woman was unable to pass it on, and her coming out created tension in the poor women's house. Rani, the name means Queen, but Rani of this story is tortured and tormented by her husband, she is kept like a slave. As the story states:

STORY: but she was an only daughter, so her parents called her Rani " Queen. Queen of the whole wide world."¹⁰(6)

Her name in the beginning does not match with the life she has to live. Gradually, circumstances though not easy, make her the Queen. She gets the status of goddess, her husband becomes her slave and she is spared the pain and suffering. As Suman Bala says:

Rani is never free to express herself, to be herself. She is either daughter, wife, lover or mother. She is always playing a role imposed upon her, except in her dreams in the lonely nights that engulf her. She is a woman used, abused. She can either live as a whore or a Devi. There is no element of person for her.¹¹ (11)

Appanna, Rani's husband, is shown to be cruel and cold man. Appanna's individual wish, creates tension for him, as in his absence Naga comes in his house and takes Appanna's form and starts visiting Rani every night. All goes well, but again destiny factor comes into play and Rani becomes pregnant. This further complicates the plot. Naga knows that Rani's pregnancy will bring problem to her and so insists her to keep it a secret.

But Appanna comes to know about it and tells the village elders. This action of Appanna creates tension in his life as he cannot prove Rani guilty. He himself says:

APPANNA: What am I to do? Is the whole world against me? Have I sinned so much that even Nature should laugh at me? I know I haven't slept with my wife. Let the world say what it likes. Let any miracle declare her a goddess but I know! What sense am I to make of my life if that's worth nothing?¹² (41)

On the other hand, Naga's desires for Rani are wrong yet he takes the human form and visits her every night, despite the fact that Rani is a married woman. His wish turns to jealousy when he sees Appanna and Rani sleeping together, though even Naga is not to blame as he by mistake drinks the love potion which was meant for Appanna and falls in love with Rani.

Blind Kurudavva is also not spared of her tragic destiny as her mobility, her son Kappanna disappears and no one knows where. She tells Rani:

KURUDAVVA: If only I had my eyes! I would have seen her. I would have seen her.... But what can one do with these pebbles?¹³ (38)

Tale-danda, is again a tragic play, where the tragedy is collective and personal. Here the “wish” stand not in individual but gathers in a group of people. Basavanna is a man of great wisdom, he believes in a casteless society and aspires to form one, in his effort he is not alone but is followed by thousands of people from all strata of society, together they call their congregation “sharanas”. But his vision to form a casteless society is thwarted in the end and is met with a great bloodshed. The beginning of the play is itself tragic where we see a father yearning for his son in his illness. The play is full of treachery. The King, Bijjala, is not liked by his own son Sovideva. King gives his full support to the sharanas which brings him in conflict with the Brahmins of his own court and leads to his downfall. The whole tragedy begins when the sharanas decide to marry a Brahmin girl to an untouchable boy. Even the sharanas are divided in their opinion. There are many who don’t like the King and are against Basavanna for this:

MADHUVARASA: The world is awe-struck at the wedding of Sheela and Kalavati. We sharanas have at last shown our mettle, our indomitable spirit. And after all that, you want to lay the credit at the King’s feet? I can’t believe it!¹⁴ (74)

The King on the other hand is betrayed by everyone. In the end, his only hope is Basavanna, as he says “Basavanna is here, Rambha. I shall be King again and you the Queen”²⁶ (86). King is murdered by sharanas by treachery and thereafter Basavanna also dies. Sharanas loose their existence. The families who took the initiative of inter-caste marriage are ruined. The city of Kalyan is left to nothing. Even Damodara Bhatta the Chief Priest is murdered in the end. Sovideva is a foolish ruler who knew nothing “ just wanted the throne of his father and after getting that was not able to deal with. This play is a political, personal and collective tragedy as well. There is the downfall of a King and along with him his Kingdom. Death of Basavanna is the death of a dream, a vision, that would have changed the whole notion of society if it had come true. The play ends violently with the dramatist’s note stating

The strain of bafflement with God’s purpose continues in *Hayavadana* also. *Hayavandana*, is a tragedy in itself as all the characters seem to be struggling for the fulfillment of individual will. Devdatta, is a Brahmin’s only son living in Dharampura, no one can defeat him in his poetic ability, he is a

sensitive man with sensitive body and has a friend, Kapila who is always ready to sacrifice everything for him. They were known for their friendship, but their suffering starts, when they fall in love with the same girl, Padmini. The tragic destiny comes from their desire, Devdatta desires Padmini and so does Kapila, Padmini longs for Devdatta's mind and Kapila's body. Active head but passive body becomes the cause of the suffering for Devadatta. In *Hayavadana*, Padmini is fully satisfied after the change of heads as she now has the combination, she desired, as her husband. But this ideal situation does not last long. Kapila's body succumbs to the sedentary life imposed on it by Devadatta, and Padmini again is left with what she earlier had. Karnad seems to suggest that such wholeness, although immensely desirable, is seldom possible for human beings and it could be thought of only as fantasy. In the sub-plot, the story of the birth and parentage of Hayavadana is presented with all the elements of fantasy. The Princess marrying a white stallion and living with it for fifteen long years and becoming a horse herself at the end is pure imagination. The dolls are made to converse and through them, Karnad describes the sub-conscious images and dreams of Padmini that cannot be represented visually. Devadatta's transfiguration is also communicated through dolls in *Hayavadana*.

To marry Padmini, Devdatta pledges to sacrifice his head to Lord Rudra, this commitment of Devdatta is indeed a signal to the tragic fate, as there was no point marrying her, as he would not be able to stay with her for long.

DEVDATTA: If I ever get her as my wife, I'll sacrifice my two arms to the goddess Kali, I'll sacrifice my head to Lord Rudra.¹⁵ (14)

The real discord between them arises when Kapila still comes to their house, the friendship that was cherished by them becomes sour. Their trip to Ujjain is again a signal to their tragic fate. Devdatta is against this trip but Padmini and Kapila strongly desire to go as they would get time to spend together. During their trip she openly express her fondness for Kapila, and mocks Devdatta, by narrating the incidence where she and Devdatta went in a cart. It is tragic fate of Devdatta that his love and friendship both the things close to his heart are no longer there for him. Obviously, Devdatta is left with no choice but to bid good-bye to his wife and friend.

Devdatta in the hope of getting relief beheads himself before the goddess

but as tragic fate would do, he is brought back to life with Kapila's body. Same is the fate of Kapila who from the beginning knew that Padmini is meant for him. He despite trying hard could not stop himself from liking Padmini:

KAPILA. So it is off. What am I to do for the rest of the day? ...why this emptiness... Kapila, Kapila get a tight hold on yourself. You are slipping, boy, control yourself. Don't lose that hold. Go now... Go, Go! (Aloud) well then – I'll start.¹⁶ (23)

He is confused, as he cannot leave his friend and neither can he leave Padmini. When Devdatta goes alone to the temple of Kali, he follows him and offers his head too. Even Kapila cannot get what he wanted.

Padmini, the root cause of all the tension, when she sees both men beheaded offers herself too, suddenly she is given a boon to bring both men to life. But her's is also a tragic fate, in the hurry she joins the wrong body with the wrong head and this boon turns into a curse for Devdatta and Kapila both. For Padmini this is the combination she has longed for since her marriage, but once they become alive, both Devdatta and Kapila, start fighting as to whose wife Padmini is, head or body. Even the goddess's miracle fails, such is the tragic fate of all the three that they still are haunted with the same problem, whether Devdatta or Kapila. Their life seems to be a vicious circle from which there is no escape. Both Kapila and Devdatta claim Padmini's hand.

Padmini goes with Devdatta's head and is happy as she gets what she wanted. Karnad has time and again brought our attention to the fact that God has his own plans for everyone, that human beings are helpless in front of their fate. Padmini's joys end when Devdatta starts losing Kapila's physique and gets back to his original form.

Padmini again longs for Kapila, she considers herself a loser in the game where Kapila and Devadatta remain the gainers. In fact, all the three are losers. Even the child seems to be a victim of tragedy as he is left to a stranger and his parents die leaving him alone, not even once they think about him. Their life ends in a situation where it had ended before, again a duel is fought between the two and both die. Padmini commits sati:

PADMINI: Other women can die praying that they should get the same husband in all the lives to come. You haven't left me even that little consolation.¹⁷ (63)

Even Hayavadana is a tragic horse – he has a horse's body and a man's voice. His mother too left him. B. Vinod in a lively note says:

That completeness is a humanly impossible ideal is suggested first in the story of *Hayavadana* and later in the transposition of heads. By showing the absurdity of the ideal of completeness the play finally achieves its aesthetic goal. It implicitly asserts the value and significance of human imperfection which makes any upward movement impossible.¹⁸ (221)

Dreams of Tipu Sultan, is a great tragedy, not only of the ruler but with him of a state and a vision. Tipu Sultan was a strong and brave ruler, he was unbeatable in intelligence and commitment. Britishers tried all means but were unable to defeat him. He was the only ruler who didn't allow any British convoy in his state. The play begins and ends with a memory. As Aparna Dharwadker says:

Tipu's life is framed throughout by his death. For Kirmani a participant - observer in Tipu's tragedy, the matter of history consists not of facts (which concerns the English) but with the memories of a fabled ruler that are fading all too quickly.¹⁹ (xxvi)

The play begins with the death of a ruler, death which is brought by treachery, he had a dream, to flourish, in business like the British and to some extent he had achieved it also. But the English got scared of his growth and got him murdered. His trust is broken. His last dream is a fantasy of victory in the midst of defeat and death. Not only Tipu but his family had to suffer. His wife dies and his sons are sent as hostages. As He knew that his own people were negotiating against him. The play also exposes how smart English were in dealing with Indians – their sole motive was to earn money. The play ends with a tragic note “the descendants of Tipu Sultan were left to rot in the slums of Calcutta”²⁰ (239). The descendants of such a powerful ruler who increased the trade of country rotting in the slums is a real pity. This is a tragedy indeed – a tragedy that seems to live on.

Bali also deals with the tragic fate of King, Queen and Queen Mother –

sometimes marriage in different groups can result in chaos in the family. *Bali* is a portrayal of ardent believers. Queen detests animal sacrifice whereas Queen Mother cannot think of anything without doing animal sacrifice, be it for celebrating or doing penance. The element of tragedy hits when Queen goes to the Mahout and the King sees her with the Mahout. Queen Mother comes to know about her and wants her and the King to make a sacrifice. The play rotates around this single theme of sacrifice. Mahout has his own tragedy – he is born ugly, and so is ashamed of his looks. As Vinod comments the plays of Karnad are:

a powerful portrait of 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 space for self-development, awareness and independence as a being.²¹ (249)

Karnad has used existentialism in his plays. Existentialism is an attitude and outlook that emphasises human existence. 'Existence precedes essence' – this is the maxim of existentialism. Existentialism deals with the problems that the individual has to face in life, with the ways how he faces them, with his feelings and emotions and above all, with his outlook on life and experience. It recognises freedom and responsibility of the individual man. Radhakrishnan realises deeply the present-day condition of man. According to him the present period is a period of uncertainty. Man has lost his happiness and peace. The life has become artificial and mechanical. Radhakrishnan writes, "we live in a period of agonising strain, of grave anxiety, of manifold disillusionment. The world is in a condition of trance"²²(5).

Thus, the plays of Karnad time and again show a mortal will, engaged in an unequal struggle with destiny, whether that destiny be represented by the forces within or outside the mind. The conflict reaches its tragic outcome when the individual perishes. The tragic issue, the defeat of the individual, leads to the realisation that human presumption to determine one's destiny is necessarily ruinous. Tragedy, then, deals with the most fundamental of issues that exists at all – man's relationship to the gods. The underlying question of all these dramas concerns the laws and standards by which the gods let man live. It is the paradox of tragedy that it will never yield any definite answers.

The only result is one's awareness of the unreliability and deceptiveness of human reason, the realisation that the true shape of things cannot always be judged by their surface appearance, the experience that man's view and insight can be clouded over by demonic forces, the experience of the nothingness of man. Ultimately, perhaps, all the instances that we find in tragedy of powerlessness, of undeniable human limitations, derive from the tragic perception of human existence itself, which seems, at least in part, to be terrifyingly vulnerable, precarious, and problematic. And it is precisely because of these human limitations that suffering also becomes basic to the tragic vision. Tragedy typically presents situations that emphasise vulnerability, situations in which both physical and spiritual security and comforts are undermined, and in which the characters are pressed to the utmost limits – overwhelming odds, impossible choices, demonic forces within or without. Against the tragic protagonist are the powers that be, whether human or divine, governed by fate or chance, fortune or accident, necessity or circumstance, or any combination of these. The more elevated, the more apparently secure and privileged the character's initial situation, the greater is our sense of the fall, of the radical change of fortune undergone, and the greater our sense of his or her suffering. Tragedy testifies to suffering as an enduring, often inexplicable force in human life.

End Notes

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