

# GLIMPSES IN LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

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## **Glimpses in Language and Literature**

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## A COMPLEX EAST- WEST CULTURE CONFLICT IN GIRISH KARNAD'S "DRIVEN SNOW"

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Jnanpeeth awardee playwright, media personality and social activist, Girish Karnad has a knack of translating his plays from Kannada to English and sometimes vice versa. He has also bagged national awards in acting and film direction also. Quite surprisingly he does not bring his plays in print chronologically as he writes them. He brought his play *Yayati* written in 1961(Kannada) in English print in 2009. In accordance with his practice of performing his plays before they are published, *Anju Mallige* written in Kannada in 1977, has been performed both in Kannada, Malayalam and in Hindi still remains unpublished though he translated it in English in 2001. Its Kannada title is derived from a Kannada proverb and is translated by the playwright as scared jasmine. In the play too, the protagonist of the play – Yamini explains it: If a jasmine plant refuses to bloom, do you know what they do? They uproot it. Clean its roots of any soil- bare them. Then put the plant in the sun. To dry. To shrivel. They threaten it with death. Then they replant it and it bursts into flowers. They scare it with death—into blossoming (DS 8).

Like all his plays, the present play by Girish Karnad superficially appear simple, however it is pregnant with multiple currents. The present unpublished play, *Driven Snow* is set in late 1970s. It was the first play with realistic and non- Indian setting after writing plays like *Yayati*, *Tughlaq*,

*Hayavadana* and *Nag-Mandala* -all of them based on myth history, and folk tales. Set in a flat in a university city in England, the present play has remained least performed and least discussed in India because, 'its emotional interplay and complexities of characters scared people away from it', says Smitha Ambu who translated the play in Malayalam as *Kalabhedam* and also performed in it. Outside the usual framework of themes of history, folklore and myth, the play shocked the traditional audience in India by narrating a story of complex relationship between a brother and sister, the psychological complexities of the characters and non-linear skills of the presentation. However, it has attracted the young group of artists like Ambu Smitha for performance because of the complexity and depth of the characters and the many underlying turmoil of the human mind and relationships and definitely not the sensitive subject like incest. Karnad's close associate K M Chaitanya finds *Anju Malige* as his most favorite play and believes that the plays is based on Girish Karnad's personal experience. Superficially, the play is, as K P Deepak writes in his blog, about non-residential Indians especially those who went to England in the sixties and seventies in search of greener pastures, both material and intellectual. The play delves into the problematique of 'rootlessness' and 'identity' on the one hand and the forbidden passions raging in the unconscious, on the other. (10)

In fact it is a universal play about the mediocre Indians living in England, (for that matter, anywhere in the West) reluctant to return India, fall prey to the ills of isolation and want of space for communication resulting the raging the unexpressed and pressurized passions leading to madness and suicide in madness. The noted critic and translator Maya Pandit finds the play as the postcolonial consciousness of Girish Karnad(318).

The setting of the play is in England. The galaxy of characters forms mostly south Indian characters and tow ones. They are Satish Rao, his sister, Yamini

Rao, their family friend, Gautam Bhatia, Hareen and Ann and David Kirkwood. As obvious, except David and Ann, other characters are outsiders in England. The play enacts a racial conflict, Diasporic experience, isolation leading to madness and incest leading to possession. These multiple layers of the play make the play thematically rich.

Satish and Yamini are brother and sister living in England (the playwright seems to have not specified the city in England, perhaps to make the setting acceptable/applicable to any place in the western world). In fact, both are passing their time in England and avoiding their return to India. They are mediocre and well aware of their limitations, fed with the routine and dissatisfied with their own performances. Satish too is not performing up to the mark and is fed up with it. On the other hand their family friend, Gautam is doing his M Phil in Economics and searching an excuse not to return India and pressing Yamini for marriage so that he could stay in England. He believes India is rotten, a snarl of bureaucracy and corruption. (DS 5)

The most conspicuous character by his absence is Hareen, addressed in the play as Harry. He is trying to court an English girl for marriage to settle in England, faces opposition from her parents. He is trying and is successful in internalizing the British culture by imitating the English pronunciation so much so that not only Indians but also the British fail to identify him. Though Hareen has become a laughing stock for other characters in the play, he succeeds in marrying a white girl at the end of the play along with a job with attractive salary. He is the prototype of the Indians who ape and imbibe the British culture to settle there.

The first British character that appears on the stage is Ann, a girlfriend of Satish. Like others, she is also aware of the fact and is attached to Satish for love. In the course of the play, one comes to know that she has been orphan

and heartbroken in love, even suffered a nervous breakdown, attempted suicide also.

The play has its normal course till another British character David Kirkwood appears on the stage. Maya Pandit terms him a right wing, racist, and a chauvinistic Englishman who hates Indians because they have caused unemployment in his native England.(320) He comes to the flat of Satish as Ann had asked him for lift, thinking that the flat belongs to Ann. He is quite impressed by the furniture he finds in the living room and openly expresses his bitterness. He is angry with the white girl Ann for having friendship with an Indian. His hatred for the Indians comes from his insistence for the racial purity. He refers to Ann in the bitterest way:

DAVID: Saw her outside the station. Offered lift. I thought it was her place. I mean... Fucking hell. Bloody whore! Well it is obvious, isn't it? She has taken up with a Packy, hasn't she? What bitches like her need is a good kick up at ass (DS 28).

David doesn't hide his dislike for the Indians, when Yamini offers him food. "I don't like Packie tea. Actually I don't like Packies". His British race doesn't allow him anybody to call him by his first name. He reminds Yamini to call him with respect, when Yamini introduces herself to him.

YAMINI: Let me start again. I am Yamini. Yamini Rao. And you are David.

DAVID: Kirkwood. Good. What college are you in David?

YAMINI: Mister Kirkwood, thank you. (DS 26)

In the same scene, one finds that Yamini tries to appease David's ego, another way of imitating the British culture by being subservient. She says to David:

YAMINI: Now will you please stay for lunch? Please, I'll wear gloves if you prefer. I'll wash the plates and spoons in front of you. The food I will serve will be untouched by Indian hands. What do you say? (DS 28)

David doesn't shed his British attitude and asks for whiskey when beer or sherry is preferred by the Indians. David's remark to the painting by Yamini reveals his superiority complex and belittling the colonized and also Yamini's agreement to it. He describes it, 'like a pile of shit', whereupon she replies, "Actually, you seem to see more in it than I did. I don't know what it is" (DS29).

When Yamini wonders at David's being a lorry driver as these menial jobs have been given to Indians available at cheap rates, David's reaction exposes his sense of insecurity on the growing population of Indians in England at the cost of loss of employment for the natives.

YAMINI: OH! There are still some white lorry drivers left, are they? I thought they were all gone.

DAVID: That'll happen if we don't watch out. You lot breed like rabbits. And every black man is ling with a white woman (DS 29)

The cultural contrast occurs when Yamini is kissed by David on invitation and says that she has never been kissed before, David wonders, Never been... kissed? Yamini replies, "No never... It's not the kind of thing nicely brought up Indians girls do. David says, "You don't mean... you're a virgin?"

Here again, Yamini's way of apologizing David for her remark on him shows her affected but subservient tendency, when she says, "I am sorry, my most contrite apologies. I withdraw the remark unconditionally" (DS 32).

After a violent move responded to Yamini's challenging offer, there is a fusion of Indian Banglore curry and British lorry. They go or outing and do what she has never done before. Here begins an analysis of Yamini's character—what she had been in her in her childhood, how her youth passed



by bereft of youthful adventures she loved most. She admits that she has not had sex before she met David. An unsatisfied woman within her wakes up, she mounts him and sits on him, kisses him.

DAVID: You're just a kid... a teenage kid. You haven't grown up.

YAMINI: What do you mean grown up? When I was child, I was grown up. Sane. sober. Sagacious. My childhood really began yesterday you have opened me up....

Don't preen. You know why I hadn't been deflowered yet? Because all my friends till now have been gentlemen. But you—you are a lower class oak. English filth—so I let you do it.

DAVID: Fuck you, bitch

YAMINI: Then what are you waiting for, dog? Quick- my brother will soon be here.

The thesis statement is made by Yamini after they make love. The thesis speaks against the nationalism based on race and color which is beyond the reach of men like David. Yamini says:

YAMINI: You're damn right. Keep the whites separate from the blacks. Then keep the upper classes separate from the lower classes, the upper castes from the lower. Even within a class, caste, and community, keep each family separate. Then whatever needs to happen will happen within the bosom of family. Purity demands progressive violation. The logical conclusion of racial purity is incest what an insight! (DS 31)

At other moment, she says, "Keep Britain white! White as the driven snow! (DS 31)

Here is the fine opposition to the nationalism and multi-culturalism. Girish Karnad talks about the issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the 1970s and also warns of incest out of mad persuasions of racial purity. Today it appears more

relevant in the context of love jihad and attacks on the Indians (particularly, Sikhs, and Muslims) and the Negros in the white world.

Yamini's encounter (both physical and cultural) with David brings her to the reality of the world in England. The world of violence, adventures, joy, and openness is quite contrary to the world of Satish, Harry and Gautam which is sophisticated, artificial, and mediocre far away from reality. She enters in the world of bicycle chains, clasp knives, batons, black jacks.

On the one hand, men like Gautam, Satish and Harry are trying to avoid their return and are anxious to merge with the white world; on the other hand, men like David are striving hard to keep their world bereft of any cultural mixing. This strife on one hand is between violent and sober, on the other hand, it is between fascism and multi-culturalism.

To conclude, one finds that fascism practiced by David, mediocrity of the Indian characters and their strife to imbibe the western culture to settle there to avoid return to India, suffocation leading to madness and most conspicuously the trait of incest are the undercurrents in the play, however, the incest dominates it.

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