

A PEEP INTO THE “URBAN”: AN ANALYSIS OF THE THEME OF MODERNITY IN KARNAD’S *BOILED BEANS ON TOAST*

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ABSTRACT

Girish Karnad’s play *Boiled Beans on Toast* (originally ‘*Bendakalooru*’), published in 2014, can be considered an apt contemporary play, because, it deals with the issues of globalization. The protagonist of the play is the city of Bangalore. The play reveals the shattered lives of people who struggle to survive in the midst of urban culture. For Karnad, behind its scintillating image, Bangalore is a city of hopelessness and disappointment. He proves that it is a city that lacks an identity and is involved in a constant search for its psyche. The major themes Karnad used to make his point in this play are modernity, human complexities and environmental problems. But among them, the most important one is the theme of modernity. Overlaid with a myth, Karnad attempted to present the facts of an urban city.

Keywords: Indian Theatre; Urban culture; Karnad; Modernity; Globalization

INTRODUCTION

With the development of human society, a new ‘urban culture’ has emerged. The process of urbanization is an inevitable part of modern society. In India, the process of urbanization started after independence as an effect of its hugging of a mixed economic system, which paved the way for the rise of many private sectors. Urbanization in India has led to the emergence of four major metropolises— Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, and Bangalore. Bangalore, the hi-tech

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city of India, often considered as '*a city in search of a soul*,' is transforming each and every day into a most modern one. Its culture has now sadly turned into a truly indifferent one. Contemporary trends in Indian English literature give more importance to urban themes and urban cultural aspects, as India is a developing nation and is changing into a modernized one. Many popular Indian English writers and regional writers are now working with realistic themes that are socially and culturally significant. The problem of urbanization finds powerful expression in novels by post-independence novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Jhabwala, Amit Chaudhuri, Amitav Ghosh, and Rohinton Mistry, who appear to be acutely touched and moved by the dilemma of modern man in an industrialized and urbanized society. In their poetry, poets like Prabhakar Rao, A K Ramanujan, and Nissim Ezekiel reflected the lives and identities of urbanized, Western-educated Indians. Indian theatre and plays deal with ideas of social evils like corruption, illiteracy, and urbanization, which are also the momentous problems being faced by Indian society. Playwrights like Asif Currimbhoy, Pratap Sharma, Gurcharan Das, Mahesh Dattani, Girish Karnad, etc., depicted post-colonial and post-independence ideas through their works.

Girish Karnad, one of the finest playwrights, filmmakers, and actors of our time, writes in Kannada and has translated his plays into English. His plays make a critical sense of history, myth, and time; they create a confluence between the past and present. He primarily focused on myth-oriented themes and their modern reworking, but his later plays, like *Wedding Album* and *Boiled Beans on Toast*, along with myths, dealt with more 'socially oriented' and 'current' themes, conveying the problems of urban culture, its causes and effects, and changing lifestyles. His journey from *Yayati* to *Boiled Beans on Toast* holds a mirror to the very evolution of a truly 'Indian theatre'. Girish Karnad's play *Boiled Beans on Toast* (originally '*Bendakalooru*'), published in 2014. It is written in two Acts. The major themes Karnad used to make his point in this play are modernity, human

complexities and environmental problems. But among them, the most important one is the theme of modernity.

The Theme of Modernity

The play is completely a Bangalore-based one, which specifically conveys each and every heartbeat of Bangalore city. In this play, Karnad critically views different issues in a cosmopolitan city (here it is Bangalore). One of the major themes he indirectly and sometimes directly conveyed through this play is about the influence of "modernity" and also about its after-effects. The process of urbanization and the effects of modernity upon the original culture is one of the serious issues that can lead to the dangerous transformation of the original culture and its traditional values into a fashionable one.

The play's title itself is purposefully chosen by Karnad; it indicates a shift from tradition to modernity in a clear-cut way. In the title *Boiled Beans on Toast*, the idea of "beans" is a reference related to the founding myth of the city of Bengaluru or Bangalore, which is today admired as the "Silicon Valley of India". It was in the 11th century, king Veera Ballala went out hunting, lost his way in the jungle, and after wandering through the night, arrived exhausted at a lonely hut, where an old woman saved his life by giving him a handful of boiled beans ("benda kaalu" in Kannada, the native tongue). In gratitude, the king named the place "Bendakaaluru", the place of "boiled beans", which over time got corrupted into 'Bengaluru' and was in turn anglicized by the colonial rulers into 'Bangalore'. But the "toast" is a strictly western import into Indian cuisine. It is a modern term. Here we can recognize, how Karnad conveys the idea of the transformation of the original culture and traditional values of the place into a modernized one. According to Devina Dutt:

"This is a masterfully structured play that makes the city of Bangalore and its explosive growth in the last two decades its subject... It avoids the prevalent

clichés of its image as an IT city or a city of numerous call centres. Instead, it presents the stories of a cross section of those who live in Bangalore, and whose expectations, survival techniques and disappointments are all coloured by it" (*The Hindu*) To an extent, the idea of modernity is good, as it helps in advancements and provides a much smoother way of life for people. The city of Bangalore has beautifully combined its technological and industrial accomplishments. This blend with modern culture has made Bangalore one of the most happening cities in India. But there is also a negative identity to modernity that is hidden behind its mask. Through this play, Karnad, directly and indirectly, points out the real effects of modernity and also tears its mask. On the one hand, the city is acquiring the status of IT capital; on the other hand, the original culture is being shattered. Maybe the recent renaming of the city from "Bangalore" to "Bengaluru" is an attempt to give importance to its past and its roots, which the hi-tech culture of today seems to have forgotten. Therefore, through the title itself, Karnad tries to present the advent of modern culture over traditional values.

The chief protagonist of the play *Boiled Beans on Toast* is the city of Bangalore, a throbbing organism spawned by globalization. The play looks at the reality of the present with unblinking eyes. In Act One, Scene One itself, Karnad presented a picture of a confused, puzzled, and frustrated picture of Bangalore city life. "As the lights focuses on the stage, the entire cast is seen on the stage as in a phantasmagoric tableau, every character is in an immobile state, frozen in the middle of some action or activity. When the lights are fully on, the actors spring into action, talking, moving about, fighting, shouting, bumping into each other, the background noise of traffic and music adding to the effect of a busy thorough fare in Bangalore. Then the lights and the music fade out together" (Karnad 5).

Here, the initial idea of the phantasmagoric and confused state and even the character's immobile, frozen state conveys an idea about the lifelessness state of urban culture. The picture of busy life situations is a typical portrayal of modern life. Scene two in Act One presented the intervention of "mobile phones", which became a vital part of the modern working middle class. Karnad made use of the idea of mobile phones as a symbol of modern identity. He specifically conveyed the distancing of people from the traditional culture, indirectly, through the discussion between Muttu and Sankara about Muttu's daughter Kalpana's coming of age celebration. A complete rejection of traditional culture by Muttu for the sake of convenience can be regarded as a real thought process of modern middle-class people. For them, the "sake of convenience" is the more important one. It makes the outer lifestyle simple, but the inner values more complex.

SHANKARA (annoyed): There are things you can't talk about on the phone. You said you want to have all the rituals done here in Bengaluru. Why? What do we have in this city? All our relations live in Karimangala or Solagiri. They can't come this far for the ceremony.

MUTTU: Husband said Karimangala would mean expense. The Remotest relatives'll turn up. In Bengaluru, we have a smaller affair. More compact.

'MOTHER: What's the point of spending unnecessarily?

SHANKARA: That's what happens when people move to the city. The family back home, relatives, connections—they all become dispensable, don't they? They can be put aside. Ignored. Forgotten (BBT 8-9).

Karnad deliberately included many symbols to refer to the overpowering of modern culture over the original culture. The symbol of "ironing", which appears as a casual idea in the play, is Karnad's brilliant expression of the

modern people's desire for polished lifeways and appearances. The lifestyle change is represented through the transition from boiled beans (a representation of tradition) to biscuits, sandwiches, and junk foods that are believed to be part of the sophisticated hi-fi lifestyle.

Another notable character in the play is Prabhakar, who is a village guy with a vigorous attraction and a thirst for city life. He is a person who likes to watch the huge traffic and traffic blocks. He abandoned his taste for poetry and arts because of his immense attraction to city life. He postponed his artistic ideas to find a safe job. Karnad conveyed the idea of the acceptance of modern culture by the rural people as a means of their "survival". Prabhakar accepts and prefers the "coffee day" culture. Karnad describes his transformation from one who just has a coffee to one who likes to have sandwiches, biscuits, cappuccino, latte, and espresso. His desire to work at 'Wipro' stems from the allure of Bangalore's hi-fi culture. His deliberate pronunciation of "Bengaluru" to "Bangalore" reveals his disdain for traditional culture and embrace of modern culture. Sumitra, Prabhakar's wife, is a simple housewife who loves to have a happy life in the city. She is a character who wants to have a nuclear family without the interference of her parents. Karnad here presents the idea of modern family relationships and certain complexities within them. But Prabhakar is a person who cares about himself only. He wishes to have a better career rather than protect his wife and children.

However, finally Prabhakar turned into a victim of the evilness of modern culture, which is represented through the character of Dolly. By including a character like Prabhakar, Karnad aims to present the straightforwardness of rustic culture that is corrupted by modernity. The characters of Prabhakar and Dolly are real representatives of two types of culture. Prabhakar represents the purity of the

countryside, unknowingly falling into the black hole of modernity's evilness. He is very much attracted to the posh lifestyle and culture and even mesmerized by the "western music". Dolly represents the complete falseness, evilness, and ugly face of the modern culture of Bangalore. She is the one who modernized her name from Rajalakshmi Iyer to Mrs. Dolly. She is a real advocate of the corrupt business mind of city life. She's also aware of the evilness of Bangalore culture, which is revealed by Karnad through her dialogue, "Bangalore isn't a safe place for a woman on her own with a child" (BBT 23). She's the one who has dreams about Singapore.

DOLLY: My husband was posted here in Bangalore when he was in service and fondly remembered the Cantonment bungalows. The pillars, the porticos, and the monkey top windows.

PRABHAKAR: Comfortable! Lucky you, Madam! You should see our flat. It's the size of a handkerchief (BBT 28).Prabhakar's final realization of the essence of human life in Bangalore is a very insightful one. He realized that Bangalore is a city of hope, ambition, etc. and an Indian version of the American Dream. Prabhakar's final monologue represents Karnad's view of Bangalore city.

PRABHAKAR: --- this mess, this chaos. I keep asking myself: what keeps things working at all in this city? What drives these crowds? Hope, ambition. Whatever. It's our version of the American Dream, which would've horrified my parents, but has brought me to Bangalore— *(Suddenly the concrete mixer erupts into action outside, with a deafening roar. They can't hear each other)* (BBT 51).

As a resident of Bangalore, Karnad becomes aware of modern culture's influence on older people. Karnad presented this idea through the experience of Anasuya Padabidri. She is more concentrated on the modern lifestyle and culture. She's very much interested in shopping, horse races, gambling, borrowing, etc. Her modern style corrupted her very much. It's not only physically, but also mentally

influenced her. In the case of Anasuya, a distancing from the traditional original culture is happening. In Act One, Scene Four, Karnad presents the picture of a modern high-class society that gives importance to the maids and servants because, society ladies don't know how to cook, so they depend on servants. Anjana Padabidri, one of the central characters of the play has always depended on Vimala and Muttu. Shankara, who appeared to be a lover of traditional culture, reveals his hidden inner thoughts in this Scene Four. Karnad critically analyzes Shankara's view of the original culture here.

SHANKARA: Oh, is she now? So you've at long last remembered that, have you? And what have you done for these granddaughters, eh? They're rotting in this village. Do you ever think of them in Bengaluru? (BBT 46).

Anjana's son, Kunaal, is another important character Karnad presents here; he is another advocate of modernity. He is a good player of "Veena", which is a traditional one. But he is the one who deliberately avoids it and plays "guitar", a musical instrument of modern culture. He only considered Veena's strains just for its market value. But in the final part of the play, Kunaal rejects Bangalore's modern culture by naming it a "black hole". Karnad here presented a string of hope through Kunaal's rejection of metropolitan modernity.

CONCLUSION

The play, *Boiled Beans on Toast*, can be considered an important one in the realms of "cultural studies". This article, "A Peep into The "Urban": An Analysis of the Theme of Modernity in Karnad's *Boiled Beans on Toast*," makes a critical attempt to analyze the theme of modernity in this play written by Girish Karnad. Karnad succeeded in presenting a critical appraisal of the urban culture in Bangalore and attempted to present an evaluation of the problems happening in urban society. As a resident of Bangalore, fed up with the effects of modernity, frustrations and confusions in human relationships, and several environmental

problems—Karnad is rejecting modern culture, and his violent criticism and staunch opposition towards it found a voice through this particular play. He also clearly portrayed the shift from the “original culture” or the “traditional culture” to the modern culture. According to the director, Lillete Dubey;

Boiled Beans on Toast is a deceptively simple play, that in a non-linear narrative, lays bare the aspirations and hopes of a large mass of Indians today, but also subtly explores several modern themes such as urban migration, environmental concerns, consumerism etc, all laced with a great deal of warmth and humour. As a director, I find it challenging to bring out the subtle nuances of Karnad's work, and feel excited and privileged to premiere a play that will remain a mirror of our times for years to come” (*The Hindu*)

Along with the portrayal of the influence of modern culture, Karnad also critically describes the various ideas of human complexities that are caused by the influence of modern culture. The play constantly reminds us of the dangerous effects of urbanization and modern culture on our daily lives. Karnad presents life as it is lived by the people of Bangalore. He has made use of different characters belonging to multifarious sections of society to present human experiences of city life. Quite interestingly, almost all the characters suffer from loneliness. In Scene Three of Act One, Karnad points to some social complexities of modern life by mentioning how the old parents are rejected and ignored by the children, who are busy with their fast-paced lives, disposing them to ‘Karunashrayas’. The “city of Bangalore” stands just as a symbol in front of us. Through studying the urbanity in Bangalore, Karnad aims to point towards similar attitudes in several other metropolitan cities in India.

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