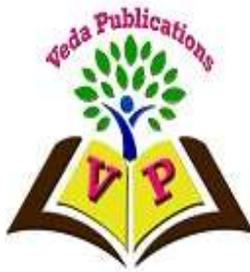




## EVALUATION OF TRADITION AND CULTURE IN THE PLAYS OF WOLE SOYINKA AND GIRISH KARNAD

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### ABSTRACT

Wole Soyinka is the first African writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986. He is a poet, Novelist, autobiographer, script writer and critic. He is considered by many as Nigeria's finest dramatist. The award of the Nobel prize for literature to Wole Soyinka, brought an international recognition for African literature.

Soyinka, who occupies an important Place in African Literature, is not very political like his other colleagues. Even though he is committed to political values, he does not want to keep aside his artistic values because he knows that as an artist he can change the destiny of his people and the society. Soyinka's main literary output is in the field of drama. He is an imaginative thinker. He sees the literary artist as a redeemer that is why he gives a call to all the artists that they have a mission to do. He believes that the writer possesses an inner light so it is his duty to guide his society towards a beautiful future.

Wole Soyinka without any doubt is the pride of the Nigerian Nations. He has always been a headache to the successive Governments. He is widely regarded as a leader. So he is a prophet with honor not only in his village but also villages and cities miles away from his own village. He remains active campaigner for human rights and a strong opponent of all kinds of dictatorship.

In this paper a comparison between wole Soyinka and Girish Karnad plays is broughtout. Both of them by making use of Tradition and culture in their respective countries have written plays to bring out tremendous change in their countries.

**Keywords:** *Indian Drama, Nigeria, Tradition, Culture, Women, Polygamy,*

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## INTRODUCTION

Wole Soyinka is the first African writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986. He is a poet, Novelist, autobiographer, script writer and critic. He is considered by many as Nigeria's finest dramatist.

Girish Karnad is considered as one of the three great writers of Indian drama, The other two writers are Vijay Tendulkar and Badal Sircar. Tendulkar and sircar dealt with the problems of middle class in India. Girish Karnad used Indian myths and legends, to bring out the absurdity of life and man's struggle to achieve perfection through his writings. His characters in his writings generally bring out the elements of revolution. His women characters are considered enlightened and powerful women of modern times. His plays question the age old practices of Indian society.

Girish Karnad is today one of the most well known figures in the contemporary India. He is said to be one of the leading playwright and who practices the performing art vigorously. His plays brought great name and fame for himself.

Girish Karnad is a Pioneer in the field of new drama and all his plays are actable. He has been a writer who has got tremendous concern for humanity; this is seen in all his works.

He has a deep concern for man, especially the weak and oppressed. He believes that the world is not created for man to conquer and abuse it, rather he believes that all the living and non-living things should live in harmony. Karnad focuses his attention on the downtrodden and less privileged people of the society. He has this at the back of his mind that is why all his writings speak for the women and people at the ground level.

Girish Karnad has great command over English language as he has been Rhodes Scholar at oxford. He uses apt and exact words for any situation. He writes dialogues in lucid and precise language. He has been recognized and awarded from time to time for his plays. He also wrote scripts for the films besides being a film maker. He also took great joy in acting; some of his roles can be fondly remembered.

Wole Soyinka's theatrical career began roughly much before that of Girish Karnad. When he

was at the University of Leeds, his two plays have proved Soyinka's reputation as a great playwright. They were, '*The swamp Dwellers*' and '*The Lion and the jewel*' written around 1957, and first performed respectively in 1958 and 1959. On the other side, the plays of Girish Karnad constitute two natural and distinct qualities sequences, the first beginning with *yayati* in 1961. In terms of form and content the plays reveal equally distinct and recurrent patterns of thematic engagement with ancient myth, pre-modern and modern history, the timeless but recognizably traditional world of folk tales and carefully chosen aspects of contemporary life. Thus my choice of plays written by Wole Soyinka are the plays which bring out the culture and tradition of Nigeria namely *The lion and the jewel* and the play written by Girish Karnad namely *Nagamandala*.

## WOLE SOYINKA AND HIS LIFE

Akinwade Olu Wole Soyinka popularly known as Wole Soyinka was born on 13<sup>th</sup> July 1934 in Ijebu Isara. His father belonged to Ijebu and his mother belonged to Egloa. Both of them were subdivisions of Yoruba Ethnic group. Although they belong to Yoruba Ethnic group, traditionally people from these two groups were not allowed to inter marry.

His father was a Head master so Soyinka studied in his father's school. After his primary education, he travelled to Ibadan for secondary education. After finishing schooling and working for eighteen months in the government medical store in Lagos, he joined the university college of Ibadan in 1952. During his study at the university college he came in contact with many students who had lot of interest in literary activities there. After his graduation he worked as a play reader for royal court theatre.

Wole Soyinka was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1986 acknowledging his stature as a great writer and his lifelong commitment for the cause of justice. There is no doubt that Soyinka is pride of the Nigerian Nation. Soon after receiving the noble prize he was made knight commander, an honor given to a man who did exceptional service to the nation.

Wole Soyinka is considered as one of the 'big men' of the African world of letters, others include fellow Nigerian Chinua Achebe, Leopold



senghor, and Kenyan activist writer Ngugi wa Thingo. After receiving Nobel Prize his reputation grew even bigger. Like the other big men of post colonial Nationalisms-Nehru, Nasser, Nkrumah-Wole Soyinka is bold, brilliant and exceptionally gifted.

Soyinka the man cannot be separated from Soyinka the writer because all his writings are the expression of ideas, views, beliefs and convictions. All these come out through his writing because he felt for the people. He has shown a great courage and devilry attitude towards the existing Nigerian dictators inspite of a threat to his life.

Soyinka occupies an important Position among the Nigerian writers. Unlike the other two writers namely Achebe, Clark who have excelled in one particular literary genres-Achebe in fiction and clork in drama respectively, Soyinka tried and excelled in all most all kinds of genres and he proved his genius and talent so powerfully.

Wole-Soyinka is considered deeply un-African in his style, although all his poems, novels and dramas have the background in Nigeria. Soyinka's clash with authority can be under stood from his school days because he had to fight with the authoritative figures at home and at school. Soyinka is an accomplished rebel not just because of his dramatic writings but because he belonged to Nigerian press. He had powerful friends in the press that is why he could escape from military strong man General Mahammad Buhari in November 1994. Soyinka fondly remembers that trip as "plunging into the forest of demons on a sputtering two wheeler." He knows when to run because he is living in a country where arguments are often settled with bullets and bombs.

One of the most striking aspects of Soyinka's carrer is his ability to show creativity through his writings. He is remembered and earned respect as a producer, director and actor as well as dramatist, staging many of his plays and others, in Nigerian and other parts of the world.

#### **GIRISH KARNAD'S LIFE AND EARLY INFLUENCES**

Girish karnad was born on 19 may 1938 in matheran, a town near Bombay. He belongs to semi-Marathi and semi Kannada Saraswathi community of Dharwar. He grew up in a small village in Karnataka. He had a firsthand experience of folk theatre and

Natak companies which visited his village. As a result these made a lasting impression on his mind.

Karnad developed interest in native drama because of his parent's interest which shaped him as a dramatist. He wanted to become a poet but he realized that he could not become a poet but only a playwright. His father took the entire family to see plays staged by different groups. Sometimes he used to go with the servants to sit up the whole nights to watch traditional performances.

After obtaining first class in B.A from Karnataka University, Dharwar, he went to Bombay for his post graduate studies. At the end of his studies there he received a scholarship to go abroad for further studies. He faced lot of difficulties in deciding to go abroad. Yet he could make a decision to go and pursue his studies. The trip proved to be fruitful and fortunate for karnad in his future adventures as a playwright.

Karnad was fascinated by the traditional plays, especially he read some of the western plays during his college days opened up for him a new world of magical possibilities. Karnad went to England for his post graduations. While he was in Magdalene College, oxford, he felt immensely interested in art and culture. When he returned to India he joined oxford university press madras. This helped him to get exposed to various writings in India and elsewhere. These influences made a lasting impression on the creative genius of Girish karnad.

In the initial stages of writing, karnad was greatly influenced by existentialist-philosophers like Jean-Paul, Sartre and Albert Camus. These people gave much importance to stress and responsibility. So, Karnad was so much influenced by them as a result his first play 'Yayati' was the impact of these writes.

Girish karnad is today one of the most talented and prominent Media Personalities in modern India. He wrote his plays primarily in Kannada and later they were translated to English. These plays brought him name and fame at the international forums as a playwright.

Girish karnad is considered as one of the three great writers of India the only two are Vijay Tendulekar and Badal Sircar. Vijay Tendulkar and Badal sircar dealt with the problems of middle class



where as Karnad deals with myth culture and tradition and makes them a vehicle of a new vision. By using these, he shows life and his external struggle for perfection. His characters are revolutionary especially all his woman characters are empowered and enlightened ones.

#### **GIRISH KARNAD'S NAGA MANDALA**

*Naga Mandala* should be read placing it in the South Indian neo-colonial cultural environments. First, the treatment of Naga lore is in the dramatic space. Second, the treatment of Naga lore is as the extension of Naga performance culture of Kerala folk lore. In folk discourse words are used as signs of culture. In that sense Naga the protagonist of *Naga Mandala* is presented as a cultural sign. Naga represents the animal world that is capable to feel human emotions. Commonly Naga is only a snake but he is appeared as a figure in the performative space, the king cobra. Naga in the play is a supernatural being who has special power to transform. This mysterious quality of Naga makes the play entirely beautiful. In *Naga Mandala*, belief and reason are well combined. It confines the playwright. In *Naga Mandala* we find the effect of Naga cult of Kerala. Naga cult of Kerala is a kind of worship. It is variously practiced in many parts of Kerala. It retains the impact of Hindu mythology. The hood of the Naga is a cultural icon from the myth. There are more than a dozen temples in Kerala dedicated to Naga and Naga-cult. Blind faith and superstitions are driven by the belief in Naga myth. Naga myths/Tales promote worship of Naga. Such practices are much alive in the social cultural life of the Hindu people in Kerala. There are many types of Naga cult performances. A Hindu religious sub sect of Kerala, The Pulluva Community is believed to have descended from Dravidian clan whose totem is Naga. There is a folk belief that if serpent's anger brings calamity, disasters and diseases, it can be pleased by the Pulluva alone in Kerala Naga trance is a cultural performance that is related to the nature and character of Naga. The planning of this performance is such as at first a colourful picture of a Naga is made or drowns in the courtyard of the temple. Here the worship takes place. After that the divine song and chanting begin in praise of Naga with the help of musical instrument. Then the worship is done by the

priest to the Naga to make man free from sin. The Pulluva women enter there and begin to the Naga trance dance. Finally these trance women are ready to tell about the future of the devotees. After the foretelling, women fall unconsciously and that marks the end of the worship.

In *Naga Mandala* there is a strong undercurrent of mythical belief. The process of transformation of Naga into a human being is derived from such a belief. A live physical experience of Naga cult performance enables the acceptance of the transformation that is dramatized in the play. The theme of the play reminds us of the Kerala Naga cult. This experience makes acceptable all the possibility of Naga becoming performer and the performer becoming a Naga in the aesthetic manner. In other words, the physical experience of Naga cult trance dance accepts the theatrical concept of transformation as the possible result of reality *Naga Mandala* is connected with the cultural consciousness. It can easily become the extension of folk culture, when it is read in the context of culture belief. Without cultural context it is only a folk text about superstitious and sensational story of snake meeting with the woman. Cultural context determines the true meaning of *Naga Mandala*. *Naga Mandala* is a folk cultural play. It is a folk morality play in its deep structure. There is a community of beliefs in the play. In this play, Naga, a symbol of supernatural powers, fulfills the desires of a devotee Rani, the symbol of womanhood desires. She needs love and sensual pleasure from her husband Appanna. But, she is denied in their marital life. Her actions based on folk beliefs fulfill her desires.

The moral in this play is that when a devotee is in need, God of belief appears to solve the problems. Folk narratives are cultural construction. They shape the individual according to the code of the moral tradition. This play has multi streams as symbolic, mythical and feministic. The folk vision of male sexuality is well conveyed in *Naga Mandala*. Karnad's art of dramatization has many layers of philosophical dimension. *Naga Mandala* may be seen as a morality play in the sense of religious mysticism combined with the scene of nature. The transformation of a male and purification of a female from the sin are the central themes dealt within this



play. In this play, Karnad presents a theory of transformation and abandoning. It is the continuity of a narrative of belief system of a culture that is based on moral. Karnad has full command over the audience of the world. He has achieved a special position among the Indian dramatists. His feministic approach is highly remarkable especially in the play *Naga Mandala*. This play held an immediate appeal because of reading it as Rani's story. This story is of a restricted or confined lady. The whole story revolves around the lady character among the middle class women. The main story of the play is co-related with male story teller and his artistic anxieties.

Through this play Karnad presents the tradition of women's story telling. In this play the gender and sexuality is noticeable. Sexual excitement and mellow dreams of a newly married woman are carried in the play. Karnad is well aware that the audiences are not only male; there are women too in large number. Karnad has used the theme to show that a married woman is content when she finds fulfillment in love. Karnad has tried to make us realize that the love that happens to be outside marriage should not be considered wrong. If we have a look on Krishna Kathas, Radha's love for Krishna is considered pious. The reason for feministic interest is that Karnad was extremely inspired by his mother after the death of her husband. She showed courage to face the society in which many hurdles are raised up for a lonely woman. Karnad stresses on human desire. He realizes that every human being has desires. The concept of chastity in *Naga Mandala* is also appreciable. Chastity is a value intended by culture. It is one of the most powerful cultural aspects. Ramayana in which Sita undergoes the fire to prove her chastity to Ram, comes before our eyes when we see Rani. It has been a cultural guide to the Indians. Chastity is most precious and valuable to any woman. Many women lose their lives to protect their chastity. Karnad explores the concept of chastity along with the great injustice done by man. In the play *Naga Mandala* Rani is a cultural icon who faces many hurdles to prove her chastity.

#### **WOLE SOYINKA'S PLAY THE LION AND THE JEWEL**

Traditional Bride Price: When Lakunle, The school teacher is teaching a class, the times table,

Sidi walks past carrying a pail of water on her head. He is described as wearing a threadbare and rumpled clean English suit that is a little too small for him. He wears a tie that disappears beneath his waistcoat. His trousers are ridiculously oversized, and his shoes are Blanco-white. He comes out and retorts, saying that he told her not to carry loads on her head or her neck may be shortened. He also tells her not to expose so much of her cleavage with the cloth she wore around her breasts. She says that it was too inconvenient for her to do so. Sidi scolds him, saying that the village thinks him stupid, but Lakunle says that he isn't that easily cowed by taunts. Lakunle also insults her, saying that her brain is smaller than his. He claims that his books say so. Lakunle deeply admires Western culture and seeks to emulate, often to comically inadequate effect. He is portrayed by Soyinka as clumsy in both actions and words. He is in love with Sidi, but he has not married her because she demands that he should pay the traditional bride price, something he refuses to do: There are many inconsistencies in Lakunle which also may irritate Sidi. Although he claims to detest Baroka's habits and powers, in fact he secretly envies them. In one speech he wishes if he had the Bale's privilege of marrying many wives. Now, polygamy is a familiar tradition in older, backward society whereas monogamy is a modern phenomenon. Lakunle is contradicting himself here by trying whole-heartedly to uphold modernity but ironically he cannot obviate his native identity and demands. Even he seems to forget his principles at the end of the play when he eagerly embraces the thought that since Sidi is no longer a virgin now, he cannot be asked to pay a bride price for her

#### **POLYGAMOUS SOCIETY**

A Prominent Feature of Traditional Life In the play, Soyinka portrays the African polygamous society. The marrying of multiple wives is legal in Nigeria and it is a prominent feature of traditional life. Lofts and wives are the criteria of wealth of a person. It is accepted that the old man marrying the young girls. Polygamy is the function of the family as an economic unit of production. Especially for those in agrarian production, a large family provides the labour necessary for the maintenance and growth of the business. The tradition allows widow inheritance,



in which a man marries the widow of a deceased brother. This practice ensures that the woman and her children remain under the economic and social care of the family. Sometimes the successor of dead Bale or chief of the area marries the last and favourite wife of the dead Bale, as his first wife. According to the custom, the first wife of the Bale becomes the senior and receives all honors in the family.

According to the tradition, a Bale can have as many as wives as he can, but he has to follow some conditions like treating all equally, distributing resources equally to all wives and children, avoid discrimination among wives and children. Baroka, the Bale of the village, has many wives. His harem is already full with his number of wives from Sadiku to latest favourite wife, Ailatu. The desire for more girls has not left him even at the age of sixty two. The play is a Nigerian bedroom farce, for its convention of polygamy. After seeing Sidi's beautiful pictures in a glossy magazine, he desires to have her on that night and he expresses his wish to his first wife Sadiku to woo that young girl for him. It is the custom of the village that the first wife has to persuade and makes the girls to marry her husband; it is a part of her duty to ensure his happiness. By this act, the society emphasizes that the wives have to obey and do furnish all sorts of his desire. It is settled in the minds of the women in the society.

### CONCLUSION

Wole Soyinka and Girish Karnad have worked for their society and brought many changes in their respective countries. They have brought tremendous changes to their culture in the society where they lived. That is why they were respected and remembered throughout the world. Hence both Wole Soyinka and Girish Karnad were given prominence in the literary world.

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