



# Demeaning of Human Values in the Race of Modernity in Girish Karnad's Boiled Beans on Toast

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**Abstract:** Girish Karnad's play *Boiled Beans on Toast* portrays the deteriorating conditions of the society. Through his play Karnad vividly portrays different characters belonging from different strata of the society who aim towards achieving modernity and worshipping materialism. Karnad also shows that it is the human values, human relationships which acts as a source for peaceful existence. Over ambitiousness and materialism not only degrades the person's self, but even the one attached to him as well. Alienation and isolation exist where the materialism, modernity and ambition persist. Human values and human needs are that inescapable and unavoidable part of life which drives a man towards his goal. *Boiled Beans on Toast* offers its readers to interpret human life, values and the needs of its characters on the parameters of modernity, luxury, illegality and hypocrisy. Each and every character with which the reader comes across in the play is a part of a race, a race between tradition and modernity, a race between the haves and the haves not, a race between the right and the wrong.

**Keywords:** Modernity, Alienation, Relationship, Urbanization, Traditions.

The play *Boiled Beans on Toast* by Karnad was published in the year 2014. Karnad through his play might have attempted to present a new discourse of the metropolitan society, but he is not the first writer to give vent to modernity or modern values and beliefs. Apart from the playwrights like Mahesh Dattani, Karnad the theme of urbanization, modernity, changing values has been brought to light through the genre of novel as well. Through the writing of numerous post- Independence novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Jhabvala, Amit Chaudhuri, Amitav Ghosh, and Rohinton Mistry. An attempt has also been made by these writers to study the urbanization and the dilemma of the modern man who has become a man-machine who prioritizes wealth above values, success above humanity, freedom above culture and wealth above family ties and familial relationship thereby creating a wider gap between tradition and modernity.

The only essentiality with which the readers come across in the work of Karnad as a writer is that of the use of myths in his work. Incorporation of myths has been an essential element in the works of Karnad because myths not only provide the readers with a knowledge of the past but at the same time, they also provide the readers the interrelationship those myths tend to hold with the title adopted by the writer and their relevance in the present as well. A renowned USA based Indian critic, Moutushi Chakravartee in his attempt to draw a parallel between Karnad and Shakespeare for their agility in making extensive use of “derivative material” (Pramanik 170) in his play states, “Indeed, all his plays derive from preexisting material, yet, like Shakespeare, he transforms the raw material into a unique drama of human emotions and feelings.” (Pramanik 170)

If one looks forth at the relevance of the title adopted by Karnad for his play one finds that the title directly hints towards the movement from tradition to modernity. Karnad uses the “founding myth of the city of Bangalore” (Meghna 344) as a backdrop in order to interrelate the significance between his title and the existing myth. The word “beans” as used in the title hints towards the myth of how the city Bangalore or Bengaluru which is popularly called as the “Silicon Valley of India” (Meghna 344) currently. During the 11th century when the King Veera Ballala went out for hunting he lost his way in the forest after wandering in the forest for a long time he comes across a hut where an old woman in order to save his life offers him boiled beans called as “benda kaalu” in Karnataka and as a token of thanks he names the place as “Bendakaaluru” or “the place of boiled beans”. With the change in time the place was renamed as

Bangalore during colonialism and in the current scenario it is called as Bengaluru. When one reads the complete title of the play that is “Boiled Beans on Toast” one finds that “toast” is another concept which has been inculcated with time. One can also say that the word toast is “strictly western import into Indian cuisine” (Antony 342). Karnad’s idea of representing the changing values has also been supported by Devina Dutt who rightly admits,

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 centers. Instead, it presents the stories of a cross-section of those who live in Bangalore, and whose expectations, survival techniques and disappointments are all colored by it (Antony 342).

Human aspirations unlike his needs are limitless when one tends to aspire beyond his need, or let’s say beyond his reach, then he or she is expected to pay for the same. The price can range from being monetary; being dispersal of his or her values, or it can also be human relationships as well. In the play one finds people from different strata, different background running after the fulfillment of their needs. It is the fulfillment of human needs which is prioritized over the human values which is needed for the attainment and maintaining of humanism in the society. Karnad has very well presented the different aspects of the lives of people and the impact it has on their lives. Karnad has also shown that the human values or let’s say the human relationship which acts as the source of survival and hence play an important role in the completion of human being have been substituted by numerous shimmering offshoots of city life like horse racing, band music, social visits, money making etc. When one deals with the people who reside in these metropolitan cities and the kind of lives lived by one find that their lives revolve around how hollowness, materialism, hypocrisy. They need to carry a garb in order to enwrap everything; pretension is exactly what describes them. They pretend to be happy they pretend to be together; they pretend to be enjoying, they pretend to be helpful to others at one point of time one might consider them, they act to be real but in reality, it is a mere hypocrisy.

The play revolves around the life of the protagonist Anjana. It is her family members, her friends and her maids who act as the center of attraction, and it is the interrelation of the lives and the events of all these

characters which tend to comprise as the essential element for the play. Loneliness and emptiness are what defines each and every character. The motive which every character carries is in one or the other way to overcome his loneliness or to pretend that he or she is complete and satisfied. The gross reality being that all these characters whether it is Anjana who devotes herself to social service in order to overcome her loneliness since her husband being nothing more than a money-making machine prioritizes money over his family that is his wife and his son as well. Human relationships which at one point of time were believed to be the root of the Indian family have started losing their significance once the people have adapted to modernity. Karnad doesn't criticize modernity, but modernity or the modern life is more about being lifeless or the modern life offers no seclusion. It is filled with chaos and confusion; it is artificial which makes human being act as superficially. The second character which the readers encounter is Anjana's friend Dolly, Dolly is another such character who is a victim of loneliness but never resists pretending. In fact, she pretends to be a renowned socializer possessing numerous contacts, but even her pretension doesn't remain for a longer time when she is slapped by her husband for her preventive attitude. The third character with which the reader comes across that is Anjana's mother-in-law that is Anusuya. Anusuya has become addicted to betting money in horse race and when she fails to get cash, she is even ready to receive money by keeping her jewelry. The next character which the readers encounter is Anjana's clever maid that is Vimla. Apart from being clever, Vimla is also very witty and excels in the art of befooling others. She is caught of stealing jewelry from her mistress house but when she is caught by the police, she very cleverly cooks stories in order to befool even the police administration. Apart from Vimla another maid with which the readers come across is Muttu. Apart from Muttu's professional life as a servant the readers also get a glimpse of insight of her personal life as well. Muttu is forced by her brother to celebrate her daughter's birthday at their village in Karimangala. Anjana's son Kunal is a band musician, but he too opts for guitar instead of veena as a revolt against his parents. The conversation which takes place between Prabhakar and Dolly sheds light upon the kind of relation which exists between Kunal and his parents,

PRABHAKAR. And her son? He is a guitar player?

DOLLY (not interested). I gather he's very good at veena. But he plays the guitar. As a rebellion.

PRABHAKAR. Rebellion? Against whom?

DOLLY. His parents. (Karnad 26-27)

Dolly Iyer is a friend to Anjana she is an English elocution teacher and acts as a guiding spirit for ambitious people like Prabhakar. The play offers the readers with a group of social climbers who aspires to achieve their ambition and hence they can use each other as a tool. Aspiration is something which succeeds human values and ideologies. Every person is only concerned with the achievement of his aims, desires etc. Mr. Padabidri is an overtly ambitious person who too unlike other businessman believes that earning money and getting successful in life is everything even more than family and family values. He has been shown as ambitious and a struggler since his youth and even after his marriage to Anjana one finds that their relationship is defined by

Anjana's intense loneliness and Vimal's sheer hatred and revolting nature towards him. His coldness or let's say lack of time or the insignificance which the family holds for him becomes responsible for creating discrepancies in his family and is responsible for familial discord. Anjana's loneliness due to lack of husband's love and attention enforces her to cross her threshold and hence, establish an extra marital relationship with her Bengali neighbor, but that too turns out to be a failure because he does not "... wish to be trapped into a relationship with a married woman" (Karnad 78). It was not his parting, instead his words which acted like a spear to her because she could not bear to listen that the Bengali singer felt entrapped with her in a relationship. She even attempts of communicating suicide. She narrates the incident to her son,

ANJANA: ...I ground some sleeping pills in milk and fed them to you. I swallowed the rest. I then prayed to the gods, clasped you to me, and went to sleep, never to wake up again.

(Pause.)

I don't know how long we were sleeping like that... But I suddenly opened my eyes and sat up. Bright and wide-eyed. I was alive and so were you. Death had cheated us both. (Karnad 78)

In order to overcome her alienation, the only solution which she found out was joining the cancer hospice where she was able to regain her voice which she had already lost. It was on the request of the dying patient, as she says, "I suddenly found myself singing..." (Karnad 78).

Apart from that, the readers also witness that the change in values which one witnesses is not only psychological. That is psychologically people are alienated from one another, people are giving preference to money, they have founded new ways of spending their time, like betting on a racecourse, societal get-together etc.

The next and a very important character with which the reader comes across is Prabhakar. Prabhakar is portrayed as a village guy who is vigorously attracted to the modern culture and modern life of Bangalore. During the first meeting which takes place between Dolly and Prabhakar, where Anjana too takes part. Prabhakar is portrayed as a countryside guy whose ideas represent purity of the countryside. In a conversation between the three that is Prabhakar, Dolly and Anjana:

PRABHAKAR: The road outside your house is like a scene from a war movie.

ANJANA: They're building an underpass there, so they are chopping down the trees.

DOLLY: The problem is our City Corporation is run by people born and brought up in the countryside. There've no time for greenery and the environment. They simply love cement concrete, and plastic and glass-fronted buildings. That means modernity to them” (Karnad 14)

The following conversation very clearly depicts the differences in values which one witnesses and the wide gap between a modern materialistic culture and the traditionalism. For the modern man it is the modern culture with its modern aspects, values, ideas and beliefs which tend to play an important role in their life. While, on the other hand, a person belonging to the countryside who has always been residing close to nature he not only finds it difficult to adapt the modern culture and values, but uncompromisingly he adopts to modernity. Thereby becoming a victim to the affluent modernity which, instead of offering them peace and seclusion, offers them a life of chaos and confusion. Mr. Prabhakar, too, in his desire to climb the social ladder with as quickly as he can, he not only becomes a mere pawn and loses his identity as well he is forced to give up his existing relationships, his familial ties, his peace, even his career at the cost of becoming a social climber and a slave to the modernity and modern values. In fact, it is Prabhakar's attraction towards the modern culture his desire to work in the IT Sector when he offered a job at Wipro, he

could not resist the temptation he feels towards the IT sector. Where on one hand, he is a countryside guy who was earning sufficient to suffice himself and his family, but it is his undue desire for modern culture that he becomes fond of the Coffee culture because this coffee culture has more stored in it than the simple coffee, which Prabhakar preferred. The modern-day coffee culture provides him with a range of eating options like “sandwiches, biscuits, Cappuccino, latte and espresso” (Antony 345) which are a mere nuisance of the modern culture.

Apart from Mr. Prabhakar, another such character or let’s say a set of characters who are found to be moving to the verge of modernity are Muttu’s family when they plan to celebrate their daughter’s coming of age. The conversation which takes place between the three that is Shankara, Muttu, her mother and Muttu’s husband, very clearly demarcates the significance of upcoming modern values in their lives.

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 “Il 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 (Karnad 55)

Modernity and modern values are preferred over the traditional values is very clearly visible through the dialogues of Muttu and her husband when she plans for her daughter’s coming of age ceremony in the city of Bengaluru instead of their native town Karimangal or Solagiri. Karnad has, through their dialogues, also clearly depicted that how, with the change of time for people, their rituals and cultures are losing their significance with time and these cultures and values for which the Indian society has been recognized have become a thing of the past. It is only technology and modern gadgets like cell phones which becoming

prevalent day by day because people are not only losing interest in their culture, but, at the same time, they are losing interest in the people as well. For them, the following their traditional values are not only becoming tiresome but monotonous too to some extent.

When Muttu insists upon keeping the celebrations for her daughter's coming of age in the city instead of their native town, which not only shows her neglecting the significance of the cultural values, but her inviting of her brother Shankara on phone annoys him even more because as per the traditional beliefs the invitations meant a personal or face to face attraction instead of using these modern gadgets. It's Muttu's lack of sincerity towards her culture and cultural beliefs which produces the negative results and insists Shankara for such kind of behavior as one witnesses in the following lines "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" (Antony 343). The following lines very clearly depict that in place of relations, family get-together, face - to - face invitations, rituals, all these things have lost their relevance with time.

The modern culture even doesn't spare the present generation to which Kunal belongs. Under the garb of modernity, not only are people ready to break the laws of morality, but at the same time they are ready to cross as well as crush the paradigms which the tradition and culture offers them to keep them within the threshold. Anjana's son Kunal does not only widen his differences between his over-ambitious father who never devoted time to his family by opting for guitar instead of sitar. The guitar here, too, is a modern instrument which is symbolic of traditional Indian music. Instead, he opts for guitar for which acts as his revolt against the traditional value admired by his father. Kunal is an unruly son who believes that his parental support is his legacy, but he resists any kind of interference in his life by his parents. He is least concerned with people's perception regarding him, and hence fails to distinguish between the important matter and the less important matter. On being questioned by his mother about the nasty sexual bearings of a band member, he completely neglects any such incident by saying, "... perhaps he is a transsexual. What am I supposed to do about it? He drums like a god" (Karnad 20).



Another very significant aspect of Kunal's persona with which the readers come across, since it is Kunal who is representative of the modern generation when he encounters Vimla at the police station despite knowing the fact that Vimla is lying and very cleverly trying to deceive the police men by cooking up stories one finds that it is Vimla's wit and cleverness which impresses Kunal to such an extent as he rightly admits,

Every word she uttered to the police and to me was a lie. A bright, white, brazen lie. And she knew that I knew, and the police knew that she was fibbing. And what courage! What invention! She was leading us on; she was creating a story from one minute to another. I tell you she's, my heroine. I have never seen such what the creativity is! How could we have missed her brilliance!... she's simply wonderful! I wish she was my girlfriend; I think I have fallen in love with her (Karnad 44).

The above-mentioned extract very clearly demarcates at not one or two but numerous revealing aspects of the society, the administration as well as the present generation. Vimla who is a thief who has committed a crime but here though her crime has been brought to light but neither the administration nor the master is able to take any strong action against her despite the fact that she is a culprit. Instead, Kunal appreciates her wittiness and hence is ready to worship her and even to some extent, he admonishes her wittiness to such an extent that he is even ready to make her his beloved, Kunal very well knows that she is wrong.

Karnad through the character of Kunal once again brings to light the change in human values which has taken place with time. It is not honesty, sincerity, loyalty, or the hard work which is appreciated or which the person would like to adopt, instead it is the negative aspects like wittiness, dishonesty which have become the benchmark for the current generation to follow and worship. Even the police administration fails to criticize the wrong doers despite the fact that they are well aware of that, but they fail to take any action because society is full of such wrong doers and their prisons are already filled with them. These kinds of people flourish at every nook and corner of the city, just like creepers.

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