

The Plays of Girish Karnad: A Feminist Study

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Abstract: The paper endeavours to analyse the plays of Girish Karnad from a feminist perspective. Theme/motif, characterization, image and psychology of the women have been targeted with the purpose to evaluate Karnad's vision, attitude, concern and treatment of the feminine issue.

Keywords: subalternity, dialectical relationship, cultural polarity.

Karnad's deep-rooted humanism allowed him to give voice to the silenced majority through his plays. Karnad was well acquainted with feminist ideologies and the havoc wrought by patriarchal ideologies in Indian society. The plays of Karnad abound with subalterns especially women and lower caste people subjected since ancient time by patriarchy or upper hierarchy of the society. Karnad has not only exposed their subalternity but also fused energy in their lives so that they can speak; shifted their position from "margin" to "centre". *Yayati*, *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Naga-Mandala*, *Tale-Danda*, *The Fire and the Rain*, *Flowers*, *Broken Images* and *Wedding Album* etc. amply exemplify the above notion. Devayani, Sharmishtha and Chitrlekha in *Yayati*, Kapil and Padmini in *Hayavadana*, Rani and Kurudavva in *Naga-Mandala*, lower caste people in *Tale-Danda*, tribals, Nitilai and Vishakha in *The Fire and the Rain*, Radhabai and Yamuna in *Wedding Album* display subalternity of the class they represent. Karnad as a cultural administrator goes beyond this and attempts to provide them their due space and defy the traditional hierarchies prevalent in Indian society. The paper endeavours to analyse the plays of Girish Karnad from a feminist perspective. Theme/motif, characterization, image and psychology of the women have been targeted with the purpose to evaluate Karnad's vision, attitude, concern and treatment of the feminine issue. His deep-rooted humanism and concern for the upliftment of Indian women have produced two sets of characters—one the traditional representing the gendered subalternity; another progressive which mark the evolution of womenfolk. Devayani, Sharmishtha and Chitrlekha in *Yayati*, Padmini in *Hayavadana*, Rani and Kurudavva in *Naga-Mandala*, Vishakha and Nitilai in *The Fire and the Rain*, Chandravati in *Flowers*, Manjula Nayak and Malini in *The Broken Images*, Vidula Nadkarni, Pratibha Khan and Hema, Radhabai, Mira, Vatsala and Yamuna in *Wedding Album* define the feminine world of Karnad which embodies several aspects possessing modern relevance. *Yayati*, the first play of Karnad which is based on the myth of Yayati in the Mahabharata is highly relevant as far as the socio-psychological study of

women is concerned. Devayani, Sharmishtha, Swarnlata and Chitralekha are generic; represent the subalternity of woman in masculinist society where she is identified as “other”, “non-man”, or “second sex” despite her high position in the society. Karnad doesn't adhere to traditional glorification of the son's 'self-sacrifice' rather raises question against this. Devayani, the Queen has to endure every sort of humiliation and becomes insane; Swarnlata is tortured by her husband's unfounded doubts of infidelity, insults and finally deserted; Sharmishtha is an easy prey of Yayati's filthy sexual gratification. Though Chitralekha also faces similar conditions, she emerges as a new woman who boldly challenges the decision of Pooru and false rhetoric of Yayati. She doesn't allow Pooru to enter into her bedroom—who accepts the curse of his father for his moral transgression and becomes old: “I will not let my husband step back into my bedroom unless he returns a young man” (61) and frankly elaborates the reason of her marriage to Pooru: “I married him for his youth. For his potential to plant the seed of the Bharatas in my womb. He has lost that potency now. He doesn't possess any of the qualities for which I married him. But you do” (65-66). Yayati abuses her for these piercing words, “whore” (66). She defies everything i.e. kingdom and high reputation of Bharat dynasty and wants “room” for herself. She smiles defiantly and swallows the poison and dies. She prefers to die rather than yield before old conventions and assigned roles set for woman. Her death endorses new woman's quest for emancipation. Sharmishtha precisely explains the condition of women, “A woman dead (Chitralekha), another gone mad (Devayani), and a third in danger of her life (Sharmishtha)” (68). Jealousy and racial conflict also weakens their lot. The play reinforces the centrality of women. Aparna Bhargva Dharwadker rightly comments: “the most remarkable feature of *Yayati*...is its quartet of sentient, articulate, embittered women, all of whom are subject in varying degrees to the whims of men, but succeed in subverting the male world through an assertion of their rights and privileges” (Introduction: *Collected Plays, vol. One*, xvii).

Padmini in *Hayavadana* is unlike of Rani of *Naga-Mandala*. She belongs to a family of leading merchant of Pavana Veethi of Dharampura. Though, in the play she enjoys commanding position, she is close to the spirit of Cleopatra of Shakespeare, succumbs to Dionysian tendency and indulges into cuckoldry. She camouflages love of Devadatta, his poetry gets new charm and vitality. She is so fascinating that Devadatta finds her “beyond my wildest dreams” (14) and swears “if I ever get her as my wife, I will sacrifice my two arms to the goddess Kali; I'll sacrifice my head to Lord Rudra...” (14). Even Kapila finds “Yakshini, Shakuntala, Urvashi, Indumati—all rolled into one” (16) and warns Devadatta, “She is not for the likes of you. What she needs is a man of steel” (19). While talking to Padmini Kapila rightly says: “I know what you want, Padmini. Devadatta's clever head and Kapil's strong body” (38). The fact is soon discovered—her temptation to Kapila's muscular body; she is real Padmini of Vatasayana.

Devadatta senses her leaning towards Kapila but he feels helpless. Devadatta and Kapila represent Apollonian and Dionysian tendencies respectively hence Padmini's hunger for Kapila is very outcome of her own nature. But in the temple of Kali, after Devadatta and Kapila's sacrifice, she is so much embarrassed to see the melodramatic scene and frightened to sense the sarcasm of people, anticipating people would blame her for both deaths. She instantly decides to kill herself. Transposition, no doubt, was a very frightening experience to her, yet she felt she had the best of both the man: "My Devadatta comes like a bridegroom with the ornament of a new body.... It's my duty to go with Devadatta. But, remember I'm going with your [Kapil's] body" (41), "fabulous body—fabulous brain" (43) and "male smell" (43) express her nymphomaniac ecstasy and lust for sexual gratification. Even Doll I and Doll II comment on her psychic reactions—dreams, phantasies and reveries in which Kapila figures "climbing a tree!", "dived into a river" (50) symbolically let loose Padmini's suppressed sexual desire and hunger for Kapila. Soon she is disillusioned and finds herself, like Devadatta, Kapila and Hayavadana a victim of "mad dance of incompleteness" (57). Even after marriage, she can't resist herself and goes to the forest with her son and enjoys extramarital sexual relation with Kapila cuckolding her husband for four or five days. In a duel Devadatta and Kapila exchange forgiveness and kill each other. Subsequently, Padmini finds herself nowhere. She suffers from alienation and perplexing situation erupts. Padmini's practice of *sati*, comments Bhagavatta, "it would not be an exaggeration to say that no *pativrata* went the way Padmini did" (63).

Karnad's *Naga Mandala* is a sociological study of Indian women ; richly textured dramatic transmutation of two folk tales of Karnataka. It not only exposes the ugliness of a society where woman is considered "second sex", "other", "subject", "non-man"----women are taught in the process of being socialized, to internalize the reigning patriarchal ideology—e.g. male superiority; and so conditioned to derogate their own sex and to cooperate in their own subordination. Patriarchal dominance has prevented women from realizing their productive and creative possibility. The play also suggests remedial measures and slaps the orthodox society by an act of reconciliation between Rani and Naga.

In *Naga-Mandala* Rani—the female protagonist, and Kurudavva—the other female character, both are generic, represent the extreme physical torture and mental trauma, struggle for their identity as a woman, as a wife, and as a mother. Four Flames, Story, and the Man also reflect the sufferings and exploitations of women. Rani is treated in a slavish manner, imprisoned like a caged bird, neither is she allowed to talk to outsider nor outsider is allowed to do the same. Despite her chastity and fidelity, she is forced to face the Naga Ordeal. Appanna (Rani's husband), Naga (Cobra), Dog, Mongoose, Three Village Elders and the orthodox society have been used as the forces of subjection. Karnad has treated 'eternal—triangle' unlike of G.B.Shaw. Shaw in *Candida* gave a

different twist to 'eternal—triangle' where Candida is a New Woman and finale brings the impression that conjugal love must be fostered and glorified whereas Karnad exposes the hollowness of male- chauvinism. Rani's acceptance of Naga as her own is a curt reply to the question of extra-marital relation in which only males are allowed to go freely, even after getting married, to concubine (as Appanna does) whereas the yardstick of morality is imposed upon women. J.D.Soni judiciously comments that Karnad in the play tries to “fuse artistically dialectical relationship between tradition and modernity” (76). Prologue introduces Four Flames, which are animated, symbolic representations employed to report the sufferings of women. The tragic sufferings of women are extended to other female character—e.g. Kurudavva, who is an example of wisdom and philanthropy. Nobody in the society has eyes to see Rani's laceration at the hands of her philandering husband, but blind Kurudavva alone can see the truth. She extends motherly love and care to Appanna as well as to Rani. She is also the victim of orthodox society where the role of a woman is subservient and marginalized. Except her son Kappanna, there is none to look after her. Even the Village Elders treat her cruelly and unsympathetically while she has lost her only son. *Naga- Mandala*, Karnad commented, express: “A distinctly woman's understanding of the reality around her, a lived counter point to the patriarchal structure of classical texts and institutions” (Introduction to *Three Plays: Naga Mandala, Hayavadana, Tughlaq*. 17). Krishnamayi attempted to redefine the insurgent female psyche in an androgenic milieu and concluded: “Gender equality still remains a myth...the discussion of the relationship between man and woman have been prescribed by man not by woman. Man who is ruled by the mastery-motive has imposed limits on her. She accepts it because of biosocial reasons.” (64-65).

Vishakha and Nittilai belong to two different socio-cultural backgrounds in *The Fire and the Rain*. Vishakha is the wife of Paravasu, a Brahmin, and daughter-in-law of Raibhya, a learned ascetic whereas Nittilai hails from a tribal community. Despite cultural polarities, both experience similar socio-psychological taboos and restrictions and feel bounded. For Nittilai, subjection is more intense—apart from patriarchy her inferior position in social hierarchy deteriorates her standing in the society. Though the play is based on C. Rajgopalachari's prose retelling of the *Mahabharata* especially the myth of Yavakri in Vana Parva, Karnad constructs a story of passion, loss, and sacrifice in the contexts of Vedic rituals, spiritual discipline, social and ethical differences between human agents, and interrelated forms of performance still close to their moments of origin, yet the treatment of feminine world, images of women, their subjection and changing status is not less remarkable. Vishakha, an archetypal character and Nittilai, Karnad's invention symbolize the subalternity of women that has been highlighted by the playwright exposing the ugliness in our society restricting their place and creativity in human society. Vishakha loves Yavakri but his decision to get knowledge directly from gods initiates him into ten years' penance leaves

Vishakha helpless, alienated—"sick of silence" (141) and deeply frustrated. Subsequently, she is married to Parvasu who offers up Vishakha's life, first to his sensual appetite and then to his lust for fame. The meeting of Vishakha with her former lover Yavakri infuriates Raibhya who grabs her by her hair and start beating and kicking her. She is condemned as "whore" (127) and "bitch" (138) thereafter left to be handled by her husband. She is an easy prey to Raibhya's anger over his rejection as the Chief Priest by the king. He creates *Brahma Raksha* to kill Yavakri. Vishakha is bold and acknowledges her meeting with Yavakri before her husband candidly. Nittilai, a tribal girl of 14 loves Arvasu, a Brammin of 18. Both work in a troupe. She is exposed to face the world and know how cruel and ruthless it can be. Only Andhak appreciates their love; the elders of Nittilai's tribe are anxious to interrogate Arvasu. Hers is a romantic love, a world of teenage phantasies ignorant from caste and cultural distinctions. On the contrary, Raibhya condemns her as "savage" (126). When Arvasu fails to appear before Council of tribal Elders; they decreed, "Nittilai will marry another boy—of our own tribe" (135). She is handed over to a tribal boy and married against her wishes. She has no say. Her protest touches climax when she runs away from her husband, family and everything for the sake of love. But, as an Indian married woman, she doesn't want to cuckold her husband. She transcends from petty sexual gratification and romantic love and develops pious relationship with Arvasu. Nittilai's brother and husband chase her like hounds. She is frightened of their evil designs. She is offered a ghastly death despite her innocence: "the husband pulls out a knife, grabs Nittilai by her hair and slashes her throat in one swift motion. He then lets her drop.... She lies there, her eyes open, bleeding, dying like a sacrificial animal" (172). The killing of Nittilai endorses still today patriarchy and long established social conventions are strong enough to crush women's liberty or any kind of adventurism. But the quest of the woman for emancipation has started. The Queen Mother and Queen in *Bali: The Sacrifice* represent two conflicting ideologies i.e. one is static, traditional and deeply rooted in age-old social conventions while the second is progressive, sensitive, open-minded and rebellious in spirit. Queen is a Jain who follows the path of non-violence; on the contrary, Queen Mother who is a Hindu frequently indulges into blood sacrifice. Karnad has developed two sets of women folk to demonstrate their socio-psychological evolution. The Queen despite her high position in the society feels alienated and desperate, though she is witty and eloquent in speech and rebellious in spirit falls prey to filthy sexual gratification. She is haunted by libidinous compulsions and alienation, hence, swayed by enchanting song of Mahout and fails to resist her. Like Padmini of *Hayavadana*, she is tempted by the muscular body, though the ugly complexion of Mahout. She freely violates the social norms and spends one night with him "nameless" (88) hiding her real identity to satisfy her erotic urge. She indulges into extra-marital relationship and redefines conjugal relationship. She is bold enough and candidly acknowledges what she has done with Mahout before her husband-King:

QUEEN: I do not regret anything that has happened. I will not disown him or anything he gave me.

King: How can you be so crass? So brazen? You—

QUEEN: Because it just happened. Without my willing it. It just happened. That's all. And what happened was beautiful. I want to come back to you. I feel fuller. Richer. Warmer. But not ashamed. Because I didn't plan it. It happened. And it was beautiful. I am yours. I'll never betray you again. (118-119)

Queen changes King's mind by her strong ideology of non-violence. Any kind of violence vexes her even killing of birds or dough hurts her profoundly. Her involvement with Mahout is an alarming signal to patriarchal society where any man can enjoy coquetry while the yardstick of morality is imposed on woman and if she goes beyond it Ordeals are there to punish her in the name of infidelity. Karnad has responded and attacked such discriminatory social behaviour in his plays especially in *Yayati*, *Hayavadana*, *Naga-Mandala*, *The Fire and the Rain* and *Bali: the Sacrifice* and the *Wedding Album* where the female protagonists pose a challenge to the whole society. Queen has undergone through the bitter experience of miscarriage; again she is pregnant and Queen Mother who blesses her for “a son whose glory blinds the eight directions” (94) endorses patriarchy that has socialized her to internalize male superiority. She perpetuates, though unconsciously, the subjection of woman. Karnad had juxtaposed Queen and Queen Mother vis-à-vis to symbolize two different images of women. One indulging in sacrifice for the well-being of the family and to celebrate auspicious occasions another at extreme end condemns any kind of violence. One conforms traditional conventions, taboos and practices and another ready to show their futility. They have developed a relationship based on hatred. She abuses Queen as “harlot”, “whore” (107) possessing “fickle womb” (115), and instigates King to “cut her to pieces...feed her to wolves and vultures” (107) for cuckoldry. Queen thwarts any kind of sacrifice in honour of her child. Even the morality of substitution is not acceptable to her, she rather sacrifices herself.

Two Monologues: *Flowers* and *Broken Images* also through light on the feminine issues. *Flowers* shows that woman's body is always a target of man's lustful eyes who conspires as a predator to exploit her sexually and make her an easy prey. Even the holy man unnamed Priest in the play feasts his eyes and indulges in sensual pleasures with Chandrawati, a courtesan and develops extra-marital relationship with her. The Priest's wife knows his advances but tolerates everything silently. Later, with the disappearance of Chandrawati, the Priest devotes his full time to Lord Shiva and hops his wife would assist him, as Paravasu does in *The Fire and the Rain* and leaves his wife Vishakha desperate: “I was among the chosen of the Lord and she could not possibly think of herself as a wife now, only as a slave and guardian, all shades of the marital bond expunged in favour of her devotion to me, her good fortune in having me for her husband” (259). The Priest fails to understand the feminine sensibility. A woman is used the way man desires—i.e. sex item, slave, and guardian or bound to carry out whatever role has been assigned to her.

Broken Images highlights the changing role, status and transformation in feminine psyche in the modern world. Manjula Nayak, the only character in the play, teacher of English in Bangalore writes short stories in Kannada. But for the sake of “fame, publicity, glamour... power” (265) prefers writing novel in English. Manjula leads a typical literary life. She endeavours, by hook or crook to earn name, fame and money out of writing. She publishes, unexpectedly, a novel titled *The River Has No Memories*, she fetches wide admiration but resentment too for she has betrayed Kannada for the sake of fame, fortune and a larger audience. However Manjula's conversation with her own television image reveals that she is an imposter who has passed off her dead sister Malini's novel as her own. Opportunism, plagiarism and Manjula's justification for larger audience and money making and acknowledging them not illegitimate pursuits for a writer epitomizes modern Indian writers' dilemma and frustration writing in regional languages. Aparna Bhargava Dharwadkar has rightly observed the position of Manjula Nayak: “The switch to English, hailed as an inspired act of self-fashioning on the author's part, turns out in reality to be an act of dishonesty, desperation, and cowardice, the implication being that the material lure of English as a medium can only lead the Indian-language author to prostitute herself” (*Introduction*: xxvii). Karnad deals with literary politics in the play and immediately relates language to genre. This was hitherto unexplored area for women erstwhile, but Manjula Nayak has refuted it and proved that a woman writer can also succeed either by opportunism or plagiarism. She has realized how to manipulate the things for bestseller and accrue immediate success. She can challenge the authority of male writers. Manjula has learnt and taught us how to “survive” (283) in the changed world order.

The *Wedding Album* which is structured into nine scenes is a gyno-text that deals primarily with women and their two different worlds i.e. traditional and modern cyber world. But both of them merge into each other. Even the traditional elder women are fused with energy, hope and modern sensibility. Younger sorts enjoy liberty in education, love, courtship via 'distance' technology; and marriage. The play marks the highest evolution of feminine psyche. The backdrop of the play is unlike of *Yayati*, *Hayavadana*, *Naga-Mandala*, and *The Fire and the Rain*. It deals with middle class Saraswat Brahmin family—an epitome of multiculturalism and cosmopolitan ideology. The play also examines the growing fundamentalism of the Hindu middle class family weakening. The family comprises Father Nadkarni, a doctor, Mother, an intelligent housewife, progressive in her ideas who sacrificed her talent for the sake of the family, conscious of children's career. Hema, the eldest daughter married and lives in Australia; Vidula, younger daughter has done BA in Geography, Rohit, son who writes stories and script for teleplays, is seeking better future prospects and Radhabai, a cook in Nadkarni's family is antitype of rest of the women. Vidula Nadkarni is exposed to modern education, social culture and science and technology. She is twenty two and half; has done BA in Geography and presently doing

nothing. She is the product of modern cyber world. She regularly visits to Internet Café to find her life partner. O the surprise of Pratibha Khan she, “agrees to consider marrying a man whom she has never met...in this day and age?” (8). Like Westernized Indian youths, she is facilitated by video tapes, SMSs, phone calls and webcam to decide her husband. Aswin Panje, a Sarswat Brahmin is her choice, finally their marriage is materialized. Though she suffers due to miscarriage, yet waits for next chance. Amrit Srinivasan comments about Vidula:

Vidula is not exactly as he [Karnad] pictures her and that like any other modern, mixed up, unhappy, Hindu gal, she leads a secret life. Whether willingly submitting herself as Kulcha the Jezebel to the disembodied randy voice of Swami Ananga Nath the Bodyless, in a darkened Cyber Café, or transmuting her guilt at being found out into hysterical rage, screaming 'sexual harassment' to make her moral tormentors run away—she is resourceful enough to find herself a surrogate swami, a flesh and blood stranger to help her work her way through desire. The subjugation she seeks in her secret, erotic world can after all be served as well through man and marriage and to higher purpose. (*Forward*. xi)

Unlike Vidula, Pratibha Khan is a modern self-made Oriya woman of forty who develops her own business in Bangalore and takes tough decision to marry a Khan. And for being successful producer of television serials, she understands the psychology and emotional appetite of the audience and rejects out rightly the story of Vidula as a possible theme for future episode: “PRATIBHA: Rohit, we have an audience which is predominantly young. College going. Or young professionals. Westernized. At least potentially” (8). She has a practical approach to life. She wonders over Vidula's decision to marry a man without meeting him. Pratibha is an important figure in modern corporate world symbolizing modern Indian woman's emerging role and image. Hema, though born in modern age, educated and married and lives in Australia, is rooted in conservative practices and customs of Sarswat Brahmin family. She disapproves Rohit's advances to Isabel, a Christian girl. She is satisfied as a housewife. As a fair sex, she has bitter experience of how, first, her father-in-law observes her body; secondly, Vivan, a young boy, younger to her son feels crazy for her: “VIVAN: The moment I saw you the other day, I fell desperately in love. I want to die kissing you. I want to die with my hand inside your blouse...” (45). She feels humiliated and slaps on his cheek. These two instances prove a woman is always a prey to male sexual desire irrespective of age or relation. Mother is a fusion of tradition and modernity. She maintains age-old social conventions prevalent in Saraswat Brahmins. The most remarkable feature of her character is that she understands the need of the time and proper human resource development. Despite limitations of middle class family, she has “skill at management” (91). She is talented who sacrificed it for the sake of the family. She has learnt a lot from life. Consequently, she insists on, especially to Vidula, to make sound career and become self-reliant: “MOTHER: ...so many opportunities in today's world. We couldn't even dream of such

world...there are lots of openings in America....Don't throw away your talents in just bearing children" (90). Mother has developed a cosmopolitan vision which refutes any caste or religious distinction: "I don't see any difference between Christian girls and Hindu girls these days" (43). Radhabai, Mira and Vatsala have been characterized to depict first set of woman in Indian society. Mira and Vatsala register their presence in Scene Three. They are generic and typed characters. Radhabai, a widow, is a cook in Nadkarni's family who takes personal care of the family and serves delicious dishes to children and is reminded of her own daughter Yamuna she has shamelessly left, naked and abused on the road. At the end of the Scene Nine she finds her daughter in the street below in a very pitiable condition: "RADHABAI: ...There she was—this mad woman—stark raving mad. Shouting foul abuses at the kids who were throwing stones at her....Yamuna! She was shouting and screaming: 'Where is Amma? Where is Amma's house,'" (92-93). Radhabai is paralyzed to see her and avoids from her eyes apprehending the loss of job; and engages in kitchen menials. The gloomy image of the widow and her mad daughter figure in the last page of the wedding album leaves us to think over their lot seriously. Karnad has great concern for the caste or gendered subalterns in his plays and he has brought them from margin to centre through his plays. The evolution of Karnad's dramatic genius from *Yayati* to *Wedding Album* parallels the evolution of his vision of feminine issues. Myths, legends and folktales which were used in the early plays to discuss feminine issues were dropped and he takes everything from actual life and treats in a realistic manner.

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