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INFEASIBLE DESIRES OF WOMEN IN GIRISH KARNAD'S SELECTED PLAYS

Feminism is used to describe political, cultural or economic movement aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women. French philosopher Charles Fourier is credited with having originated the word in 1837. Since then, this term has been extensively used to boost the socio cultural movement that aims at the freedom of women from male domination in the patriarchal society. It highlights various hidden and oppressive aspects of man-woman relationship. Indian cultural traditions are male dominated, hardly giving any scope to women to exercise their fulfillment of desires and development of identity which they claim as of their own. There are two areas of study as far as woman writing is concerned- one is how women writers describe the male-dominated society in their literary works, and what kind of revelation they make about their own role and the second is to study the way of their expression. In other words, one is to study their content and the other is to their style and form in their works. Writers like Mary Wollstoncraft in *A Vindication of Rights of Women* (1792), authors like J.S Mill in *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and Friedrich Engels in *The Origin of the Family* (1884) wrote of the need to rethink the of women and social oppression against them.

In the early twentieth century, Olive Schreiner, Virginia Woolf and later Simone De Beauvoir have written on the gender questions from the perspective of and oriented towards issues like education, marriage, economics, sexuality and morals. Parmod K. Nayar in his book *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory* writes about Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) that she has analysed the gender biases and oppressive structures in pedagogic practices to mediate upon the women's question that gender oppression and patriarchal university institutions prevent the female researcher from discovering or

interpreting as a woman. They deny access to woman's text, and suggest that the male's version of the woman is the true one. Language is itself gendered, so that when the woman takes to writings she is forced to use the masculine tongue. The male novelists have already decided on form and structure of literary language- a language that privileges order, diction, linearity and pattern. This is not suitable for the woman novelist, who requires a 'freer' language. Woolf detects a sense of bitterness in women novelists such as George Eliot, Charlotte Bronte and Jane Austen for the reason that they are unhappy with the language they are forced to use. Economic independence and a separate space are crucial to the woman. Further Woolf analyses the different "culture" of males. It is the male sex which has fought wars and killed people. Women see things differently. Being "outside" enables the woman to look at the institutions of power, all of which are based on the male's need to pander to his ego. Without denigrating women, even leaders like Mussolini and Napoleon could not have survived as "heroes". If the nineteenth century feminist fought against the patriarchal state, the contemporary feminists fight against the fascist one. Women must enter positions of power. Yet they must retain their feminine value system. This value system derives from what Woolf calls, "the four great teachers of educated men- poverty, chastity, derision and freedom from unreal loyalties" (qtd. in Nayar 86). Parmod K. Nayar also writes about Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) that she seeks to understand the position of women into a "Second Sex". Women, for her, become mythicised, the subject of male dreams and idealization. Cultures all over the world and through history have therefore projected certain qualities into the woman, depending on the masculine need of the moment. Beauvoir writes: "the categories in which men think of the world are established from their point of view, as absolute.... A mystery for man, woman is considered to be mysterious in essence" (qtd. in Nayar 87). Thus the women become associated with life, fragility, purity, beauty, goodness, "nature" on certain occasions. On other occasions, she is evil, seductress, corrupter, death. Simone De Beauvoir writes: "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (qtd. in Nayar 85). Virginia Woolf distinguishes woman from man in values. Woolf says:

It is probable however, that both in life and art the values of a woman are not the values of a man. Thus, when a woman comes to write a work, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values – to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important.(qtd. in Desai 19)

In her work *A Literature of Their Own*, Elaine Showalter divides women's writing in to three phases. The first one is the 'feminine' phase beginning from 1840 to 1880. These writers imitated the contemporary male writers and tried to write like male writers for fear of the male dominated society that discourages a woman to become a writer. The second phase 1880-1920, which comes under 'feminist' phase, characterizes woman as a writer of protest against male chauvinistic canons and male values. The third Period which is spanned from 1920's onwards is called 'female' phase in which the women writers stopped both imitation and protest against unequal depiction of woman in male writing. Female writing is a kind of self- discovery of woman as herself and about her own experience of her own feelings, inhibitions and undercurrents as a female observer.

Karnad's plays reflect such social situations and social practices taking place in our country. Liberation of women from the variety of bondages and rigid patriarchal control are the essential feminine concerns of Karnad plays. Multiple perspectives have been expressed through women characters in the play *Yayati* (1961), *Hayavadana* (1971), *Naga-Mandala* (1990), *Fire and the Rain* (1998), *Bali the Sacrifice* (1980) and in *The Wedding Album* (2008). Karnad's plays portray the harsh and realistic situation faced by women in India. Being a conscious and sensitive dramatist, Girish Karnad envisages profound changes in traditional, socio- psycho-cultural status of a woman and tries to establish the identity of women in his plays.

The lives of women have been manipulated by patriarchy in all ages and cultures undoubtedly in various ways by prescribing values, norms, gender roles and ethics to keep the male dominance at the top:

Women's issues are central to every society, primarily because they go on to define all human relationships and social constructs. In India for a variety of political and cultural reasons, women's position has been centre-staged in various ways, ways which are not necessarily pro feminist, instead very often they tend to influence socialization process and reinforce subordination or compliance to the norms defined by patriarchy (Jain 119).

. The most important feature of his plays is the creation of female protagonists in a radical manner. Although performing their appropriate social roles in the family and society, Karnad's women characters also think about their personal desires and achieve them in their own way. In a conversation with Tutun Mukherjee, Karnad asserts "I used to know a married woman once who positively blossomed after she had an extra-marital affair. If womanhood finds fulfillment in love that happens to be outside marriage, why should that is considered wrong?" (Mukherji 43).

R.K. Dhawan said that “Karnad was fascinated by the traditional plays: nonetheless the Western playwrights that he read during his college days opened up for him a new world of magical possibilities” (14).

In his remarkable plays, *Yayati* (1961), *Hayavadana* (1971), *Bali: The Sacrifice* (1980), *Naga-Mandala* (1990), *Fire and the Rain* (1998), *The Wedding Album* (2008), Girish Karnad shows the signs of women’s struggle to achieve their self identity. Karnad’s women characters are modern in the sense that they are capable of taking their own decisions. The modern woman in his plays is very conscious about her desires and her equal rights in the family as well as in society. In this way, Karnad’s women characters keep the qualities of modern woman who has courage to rebel and raise her voice against the patriarchal subjugation. They are able to present their case very effectively though remaining with the social conventions and with the circumstances of their lives. Though Karnad’s women characters do not achieve complete fulfillment but they strive to attain their own self and identity. Though their desires can not be fulfilled in the Indian male dominated society but they try to meet their demands by becoming assertive and articulate against the conventions, customs, taboos of their society.

In *Yayati*, the female characters like Devayani, Sharmistha, Chitrlekha and Swarnalata are struggling a lot for their existence. They are lost in the crisis of their own. Girish Karnad’s first play *Yayati* is a story about Sarmishtha who marries Yayati but this marriage infuriates Devayani who asks her father to bestow a curse of old age and decrepitude up on Yayati with a sharing clause that if someone shares it he would regain his youth. His four elder sons refuse to accept it, but the fifth one ‘Puru’ yields to his entreaties and accept the curse whereas in the play, Yayati is already married to Devayani and later Sharmishtha as his wife. It is pathetic that king Yayati and his son Puru realize their evil deeds only at the cost of life of Chitrlekha. The dramatist portrays the selfless nature and the helpless plight of the Indian women who willingly sacrifice their lives; make the members of their family to realize their nobility. The issue of gender is highlighted especially in the way Yayati treats women in the play. C.N. Ramachandran feels that in Karnad’s plays choice and consequences of choice were dissociated and the one who suffered the most due to the choices of others was always a woman. In most plays of Karnad, “the worst sufferers are women . . . who are caught up in a whirlpool of Hindu patriarchy, and are sucked down helplessly” (Ramachandran 28).

In Karnad's second play *Hayavadana* Padmini is the most debated character. She marries Devadatta but later on fell in love with Kapila, which creates a compelling unbearable situation for both the friends who consequently commits suicide out of remorse. In a highly comic situation of theatrical climax, Padmini transposes their heads giving Devadatta, Kapila's body and vice versa, thereby creating an identity crisis for the duo. The situation becomes tense again when the two come to a duel and kill themselves again which leaves Padmini with no choice except to immolate herself with her husband's dead body in a sati ceremony. Padmini has always been in quest for sexual and physical satisfaction of her desires and motives. She also tries to revolt against the prevailing socio-cultural forces. This act of self immolation by sitting on a funeral pyre of her dead husband shows her own choice to end her life in her own way.

Karnad's play *Naga-Mandala* is originally written in Kannada and published in 1990. The main plot of the play *Naga-Mandala* is the story of Rani. She is introduced as a young bride on the urge of a new life with her husband Appanna. She starts her new life with him and has multiple expectations, desires and dreams. But Appanna treats her as if she were a mere servant. The play is a tale of male chauvinism that debilitates and degrades females and rests on the exploitation and incarceration of women. Girish Karnad presents the problem of chastity that is primarily related with women and they must care more for chastity than men in Indian society. Traditionally, the concept of chastity is a patriarchal concept that has been used to weaken women and to control them in male dominated society. *Ramayana* is the great epic of Hindu mythology. The female character Sita has to face fire ordeal to prove her chastity in the presence of all elders and her husband. It is a kind of example which shows that from very ancient times women are exploited on the name of chastity. In the same way, Girish Karnad presents 'snake ordeal' for Rani to prove her chastity in *Naga-Mandala*. The concept 'ordeal' is related with only women from ancient age to modern age. Also such incidents show the reality that women in Indian society have secondary place and they have to suffer on the name of purity in marital life. Commenting on this, Prem Sagar says that we shall be "worse than blind Kurudavva if we fail to give women their due place in the society and worse than Cobra if we fail to appreciate their potential. Rani's and Naga's ultimate act of reconciling with the situation is edifying. It is no wisdom to remain stuck to the past, when future beckons us," (Foreword 15). The Cobra liberates her from "a life of sterility and slavery. But the village elders, a

male institution, doom her to inactive and fruitless life of a goddess” (Nampoothiri 217). In this feminist play, Girish Karnad has created a world where the female protagonist is struggling to establish her identity and space of honour, and also posing the challenge to the norms and values made by the male dominated society.

Bali: The Sacrifice was first brought out into Kannada in 1980 by the name of *Hittina Hunja*, but was not translated in English at that time. The source of the play is an ancient Kannada epic, *Yashodhara Charite*, which itself draws on several other sources. The play is one that has multiple ideological issues. Though based on an ancient Kannada epic, the story, characters and incidents are often overshadowed by overt ideological concerns as relevant today as they were many centuries ago. The play is a treatise on the viability of violence and non-violence in the present scenario. The plot of *Bali: The Sacrifice* comprises of four characters, the Queen, the King, the Queen-Mother and the Mahout. The Queen is a Jain and she marries a Hindu King. Out of love for his spouse, the King converts into Jainism but is unable to come to terms with the new faith. Jainism dictates non-violence and Hinduism believes in the practice of sacrifice or *Bali*, which means violence. The Queen-Mother is a devout Hindu who believes in sacrifices. The King vacillates from one end to the other, from Hinduism to Jainism, from the Queen-Mother to his wife but is unable to come to terms with any faith. In the climactic event of the play, the Queen enchanted by the beautiful voice of a low caste ugly, Mahout, the Elephant-Keeper, mates with him. Soon after the incident comes to the knowledge of the King and the Queen-Mother. Being a Jain, the King cannot indulge into violence by killing the Mahout and avenging the wrong of desecrating the sanctity of marital bond. The question which haunts the King and the Queen-Mother is how to placate the gods and goddesses for this act of sin. Finally the Queen-Mother tells the King that to placate for the sin committed, a sacrifice has to be made. The Queen does not want to indulge in this mock sacrifice but is forced to by the King. Since no real blood can be shed, a dough-cock is decided to be sacrificed, which suddenly comes alive. The sacrifice of the dough cock turns into the sacrifice of the Queen herself and she dies. Karnad’s female seems to have marked an apogee in *Bali*. For the first time the emboldened female desires seem to cut through the patriarchal order unabashed and unashamed. In *Bali*, femininity has become bold, assertive and blatantly selfish. The female here, voiced through the character of the Queen, has laid bare the inner recesses of her heart,

and more importantly of her body, her need for flesh, her desire for sexual gratification for its own sake and not as conscious attempts to produce children, have come to fore.

In his next play *The Fire and the Rain* (1998), Vishakha is the major female character who strives to achieve her right in male dominated society. When she asked her husband why he did not come to meet her, there was no response from her husband. Vishakha, instead of thinking as a traditional wife, blames her husband that he used her body only for sexual gratification for one year. Vishakha breaks the rich Indian tradition of pious woman and goes to Yavakri. *The Fire and the Rain* it is between Vishakha and Yavakri and Parvasu and between Nittilai, her husband and Arvasu. Vishakha lives in the world of imagination that after marriage, she would have her children, learned husband and a happy family with a respectable place in society. After a year of romantic exuberance, mechanically generated, Parvasu leaves her alone, alienated till his death and family ruins. Karnad's "Women are full of dreams and desires but they cannot live happily because they are denied from their right to live with the men of their choice" (Dhanvel, 118).

Karnad's new play *The Wedding Album* (2008), is directed by Lillete Dubey. The play is about an urban middle class family. There are three kids in the family, of which one is settled in the US, another is about to get married to US based groom and the son is software engineer. Behind this respectable happy family is a hidden double life. Anger, frustration, jealousy, suspicion and hidden desires of women all come out as the plot unfolds. The play which is structured into nine scenes 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. Amrit Srinivasan has observed:

The constellation of sexual, conjugal, caste, class, and age-related behaviours and attitudes of selfishness and sacrifice, chastity and commerce, obedience and authority, all integral to modern Hindu marriage, forms *Wedding Album's* central narrative thread...works as modern myth, whose condensed logic straddles both the real and the tech-simulated world of today, to help us confront our own mixed-up, amoral, craven, unhappy selves... *Wedding Album* encourages us to examine the growing fundamentalism of the Hindu middle class

family, which is largely 'missing' from social science scholarship on India today. (Karnad, WA, Foreword ix)

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