

## **Feminism in Girish Karnad's Plays**

**K. Dasaradhi**

**Head of the Dept. of English & Placement Officer,**

**V.K.R, V.N.B & A.G.K College of Engineering,**

**Gudivada, A.P**

**India**

### **Introduction**

For many hundreds of years, women have strived for gaining equality with men. They have been held back and their opportunities taken away from them because of the fact that they were women. Feminism is the belief in social, political, and economic equality of the sexes. And it is the feminist movement that has been trying to give these rights to women who have been deprived of their equality and privileges that men have never given them. I believe that women have every right to be equal with men and feminism is what is slowly accomplishing this. Feminism is beneficial to men, women, and their families because it is allowing mothers, daughters, and sisters to have an equal opportunity in life to achieve all they can without any discrimination based on their sex. It is a human right to be equal to others around you and it does not matter if you are male or female. They should both receive the same opportunities and privileges given in life and feminism helps women accomplish this task of equality.

Feminism is allowing women to expand their careers and businesses that they never were able to have before. Women now have power in government and they hold high and powerful jobs. They have gained their independence from a male dominated society and are rising to become less dependent on their husbands for financial support. Many women are now even managing their own families, without the help or support of a man. Men are also being helped because their wives are now able to help with financial needs; they are not depended on for the only source of income for their family anymore. Feminism is allowing women to have better high paying jobs that are allowing them to have greater incomes.

**KEY WORDS: Feminism, Play, Society, Patriarchy, family. modern, exploit, relationship**

## Abstract

A woman has become the centre of discussion in the post- colonial literature and social strata of India as well as Western Countries. The lives of women have been manipulated by the patriarchy in all ages and cultures, undoubtedly in different ways by prescribing values, norms, gender roles and ethics to keep the male dominance at the top. Silvia Walby in her ‘Theorising Patriarch’ depicts patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women.

Today, Girish Karnad is considered as one of the most significant Indian dramatists. He as a dramatist of post-modern era fascinates us with the marvellous world of his plays, critically evaluated the mind and behaviour of his female protagonists in a collective perspective, impact of the patriarchy, women’s endeavour to fulfil their desires final crises and their extinction from their world. We encounter with him a playwright as a thinker, artist, actor, poet, and a producer who as a true culture-smith intends to awaken the contemporary Indian intelligentsia from cultural amnesia.

Girish Karnad has emerged as a living legend in the contemporary Indian English drama. His output, which ranges from *Yayati* to *Wedding Album*, marks the evolution of Indian theatre since four decades. Karnad transmutes and transforms his source material to such an extent, being an actor and theatre man himself, that the modern, contemporary, individual talent incorporates the tradition into a trans-creation that is rich and strange. Karnad admirably succeeded in his attempt to show the Indian playwrights as well as the world Theatre Community at large how our past and present can coalesce to give present-day existence meaning and to theatre activity a direction.

The present paper discusses various philosophical and theoretical aspects of women who struggle audaciously against patriarchy, male dominance and gender discourse. Karnad, being a glorious son of land, inherits a rich legacy of the tradition and culture, and this is how the artistic creation in his plays finds an expression and a respectable place in the society.

Karnad’s plays are particularly concerned with psychological problems, dilemmas and conflicts experienced by modern Indian men and women in their different social situations. In his first play *Yayati* (1961) Karnad has given the traditional tale a new meaning and significance highly relevant in the context of life today. It is a page from the history of the unknown past but problem discussed in the play is most modern one. In the play, King *Yayati* is the representative of modern common man who in spite of receiving much happiness in life remains restless and discontented. This situation is revealed through *Yayati*'s dialogue:

Solitude? What are you talking about? I don't want solitude. I can't bear it. I want people around me. Queens, ministers, armies, enemies, the populace. I love them all. Solitude? The very thought is repulsive. I have to know myself, Sharmishtha, I have to be young. I must have my youth. In the play mythical Yayati ran after sensual pleasures but modern Yayati runs after all kinds of materialistic pleasures - cars, bungalows, fat bank accounts, beautiful clothes, dance, music etc. Caste difference is another issue of the play which is still relevant today. The first episode between Devyani and Sharmishtha brings the cause of war that is – issue of class / caste.

Women are still suppressed by men. To show this, a very significant portion of the play is devoted to the study of the decisions of the patriarchal social set-up that expects women to surrender to the will of the male decision makers without protest. This fact is further illustrated through another relationship that forms the sub-plot of the play, the Swarnalata episode. The character of Swarnalata, the maid, is Karnad's creation. Swarnalata's narrative once again emphasizes the patriarchal norms of the society that expects a woman to prove her innocence. She is never taken on her own worth. The male dominance is apparent in the story of Swarnalata. In the play the other women characters – Devyani, Sharmishtha and Chitrlekha, become pawns in the games that male characters play and are relegated to the background.

The character of Chitrlekha is Karnad's creation. She is not a modern woman but she is endowed with energy which she tries to use for a place in a male-dominated world. Chitrlekha: I did not push him to the edge of the pyre, sir. You did. You hold forth on my wifely duties. What about your duty to your son? Did you think twice before hoisting your troubles on a pliant son? Chitrlekha seems to be in search of a man who would define her and provide her some recognition in society ruled by males. Finding herself in such a sad plight, she says to Yayati: Chitrlekha: What else is there for me to do? You have your youth. Prince Pooru has his old age. Where do I fit in?" She seems to be 'New woman' not in the sense that she challenges the patriarchy but in the sense that she challenged the social obligation and moral laws. She remains a rebellious figure within the male dominated world.

The Puranic story of Yayati is revived and given a new lease of life by Karnad to bring home many issues that relate to India's contemporary politics. Tughlaq, Karnad's second play and now widely recognized as a classic, first appeared in print in 1964. The play has the historicity of fact and textuality of history in its postmodern and neo-historicist discourses evolving macro-historical schemes like the power-affection, social relations, political reasons

and conservative thoughts in its structure. The play is essentially modern, may be more modern, despite being called a historical play. In its canvas and treatment, Tughlaq is both huge and contemporary. It is a tale of the crumbling to ashes of the dreams and aspirations of an over-ambitious, yet considerably virtuous king contemporary in the sense that one can see flashes of Tughlaq, attitude-callous yet wellmeaning in contemporary political structures too. Karnad says in an interview: "What struck me absolutely about Tughlaq's history was that it was contemporary. The fact that here was the most idealistic, the most intelligent king ever to come on the throne of Delhi.... and one of the greatest failures also. And within a span of twenty years this tremendously capable man had gone to pieces. This seemed to be both due to his idealism as well as the shortcomings within him, such as his impatience, his cruelty, his feeling that he had the only correct answer. And I felt in the early sixties India had also come very far in the same direction – the twenty year period seemed to me very much a striking parallel."

Karnad realises the rotten condition of Tughlaq's time to be synonymous with Nehru's vision of modern India in his attempt to Europeanise her socially and politically during his "era of idealism in the country". In the textuality of history he encompasses the imaginative reconstruction of Nehruvian Socialism in the five myths of his legacy – a promoter of dynasty, betrayer of his master (Gandhi), an opponent to Vallabhbhai (a better choice for Prime Minister than Gandhi's selection of Nehru) and an autocrat and imposer of centralised 'Stalinist' model of economic development in India. Karnad's fictional Mohammad evokes not one but several political figures of the colonial and post-colonial India as "basically concerned with the tragedy of limits of human power in predominantly psychological context."

Karnad has intensified the aura of distrust, deception, violence etc. by introducing two devilish imposters in the sub-plot. Aziz and Aazam represent the other side of evil and viciousness that reside in the Sultan. They are born-machiavellian cheats. Aziz is an intelligent, shrewd, imaginative and opportunist. He uses different masks throughout the play. He kills his bosom friend, Aazam. It is interesting to know his thoughts on politics. He explains: "Politics! It's a beautiful world-wealth, success, position power and yet it's full of brainless people." The character of Aziz stands for the corrupted public servants in the post-independence period in India. One can readily recognise the existence of Aazam and Aziz - like characters in all organisations. By embodying Mohammad in radical impulses Karnad makes him "at once the Gandhi experimenting with truth, the Nehru aiming at cultural

modernity and the Indira choosing self – destructive authoritarianism for her concept of national well-being in the style of her leadership to modernise zeal.” Thus, by evoking Gandhi, Nehru, and their political heirs in contemporary time, Karnad lends to his protagonist of history, contemporary relevance.

The dramatic world of Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* is 'bizarre' and 'topsy-turvy' but is not unreal as it presents the reality of man's everyday dreams. In fact, the whole play can be considered a manifest dream with a latent content. Karnad's *Hayavadana* explores the complex psycho-social dimension of the problem of human identity crisis, as different from the moral aspect of the Indian story and the philosophical purport of Mann's story in both tangled and untangled relationships. The play reveals the essential ambiguity of human personality which is apparently shaped or shattered by the human environment. Fundamentally incomplete and imperfect, the human beings search and strive for attaining the unattainable ideal of completeness and perfection. Girish Karnad successfully pictures Padmini's, Hayavadan's and Padmini's child's thirst for completeness, for perfection. Probably what Karnad tries to reveal through Padmini is the predicament of a modern, free and bold woman who is torn between polarities, a woman who loves her husband as well as someone else for two different aspects of their personalities. Karnad has described her situation through the symbols in the Female chorus. Why should love stick to the sap of a single body ? When the stem is drunk with the thick yearning of the many petalled , many flowered lantana, why should it be tied down to the relation of a single flower? Padmini, after the exchange of heads, had felt that she had the best of both men "fabulous body – fabulous brain – fabulous Devadatta." She is fascinated by both Davadatta and Kapila and this creates the problem. The incompleteness of human desire is symbolized by Padmini. The two men cannot accept each other when it comes to sharing a woman and kills each other. Padmini performs Sati with two bodies placed on pyre.

Karnad's next play *Nagamandala* (1988) is a powerful portrait of the agony and anguish faced by both men and women in their development into adult roles and social adjustment in a society where the individual is given little space for self-development, awareness and independence as a being. In his play *Nagamandala* he not only exposes male chauvinism, the oppression of women, the great injustice done to them by men and patriarchal culture but also stealthily deflates the concept of chastity through the story of Rani. The solitary confinement of Rani by Appanna in the house symbolizes the chastity belt of the Middle Ages, the reduction of women's talents to house work and the exclusion of

women from enlightenment and enjoyment. Karnad brings within the play the strong association between oral narrative tradition and women's sub- culture, existing within the patriarchal societies. Karnad says that women tell stories when putting children to bed or while doing their household chores. In the presence of other women and children, women, give expression to their own point of view and experiences which are not perhaps permitted or recognised by patriarchal, classical stories.

The men of patriarchal culture suppress the intellect of women and they try and to prove that women are foolish and ignorant. Women's close-knit relationships with the other members of family and their lack of freedom to explore the world on their own is one of the reasons why identity for them is usually a matter of relationships. The scene of Rani's trial reminds us of Sita's trial in the Ramayana and it shows its affinities with traditional Indian values. The traditional test in the village court has been to take oath while holding a red-hot iron in the hand. But Rani insists "I must swear by the King Cobra". Naga cult is a major type of worship, is still vigorously practised in many parts of Kerala which retain the impact of Hindu mythology. Blind faith and superstition- driven belief in Naga myths and tales promote ritualistic worship of Naga. The practices are very much alive in the socio-cultural life of the people of Hindu faith in many states of our country. After the judgment, Rani becomes the head of the family. Appanna accepts her superiority and says to her. "You are no common person. You are a Goddess." However the matriarchal Rani, unlike the past patriarchal Appanna, never orders him. Thus by showing a trace of matriarchy at the end, the play anticipates that matriarchy is to follow patriarchy if our society is to change for better.

In his second historical play 'Tale-Danda' Karnad re-examines the need and the structure of the caste system of India that was once, in the past, hailed as an ideal one. Picking up historical-cum-political background for his plot, he moulds his theme of Tale-Danda to serve his present needs. Karnad says "I wrote Tale-Danda in 1989 when the 'Mandir' and the 'Mandal' movements were beginning to show again how relevant the questions posed by these thinkers were for our age." Exploitation and oppression have become a 'natural' norm in our society as it has absorbed and observed individualism and competition. Consequently everybody takes inequality for granted.

Karnad feels that Tale-Danda is relevant even today as religious fundamentalism is strong enough to destroy the Babri Masjid and claim the lives of thousands of people. He adds: "When people all around us are slaughtered in the name of a temple, I hear echoes from those times long past." Therefore what happened in the twelfth century is still happening

now. So Karnad rightly remarks: It seems 800 years have solved no problems. We are back exactly where we started." From the Volcano of Mandal Commission to the sporadic violence unleashed by Ranvir Sena in Bihar, and events of atrocities and caste wars across India – in remote regions of Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, our history is redolent with the evils of monstrous and exploitative caste system. All laws ensuring equality of mankind fail to redress its tyranny constantly challenged.

Tale-Danda's world of contending ideologies is marked by conspicuous presence of women characters. In the play male has voice, presence and power, whereas the female is silent, absent and powerless. It shows the condition of middle class women of our society who is taught from the beginning to repress her own desires and trained to practice self-effacement, women has come to articulate a male-constructed definition, which she has internalized. Therefore, when she speaks, it is patriarchy that speaks through her. She is not expected to go out and perform, but efficiently lurk around the threshold, supporting the male endeavour. Queen Rambhavati's condition in the play indicates that women of high status were stereotypical: docile, shouted at, told to mind their own business or even rejected or packed-off to their parents.

The character of Queen Rambhavati is similar to any contemporary woman. Her position is clear from her words to Sovideva. "Do you wish. Just don't upset your father, that's all. He turns his bad temper on me and I can't take it longer." King Bijjala's crass treatment of Queen Rambhavati is not due to a malevolent intention but induced by the entrenched patriarchal assumptions. Bijjala: Doesn't anything interest you women except marriage and husband and children? Rambhavati: Have you left us anything else? Women of all strata in Tale-Danda are made to suffer the trauma resulting from men's actions. Such is the condition of women in traditional Indian society, as the play depicts. Women remained a marginalized and suppressed group, without voice, without power, and may be even without consciousness of their peripheral position in society.

## CONCLUSION

Girish Karnad is a versatile dramatist who has not only revived Indian drama in English but enlarged its scope by introducing new techniques and thematic variations unparalleled in the history of the theatrical activities in India. The most important feature of his plays, viewed from several perspectives, is the creation of female protagonists in radical manners. He goes back to ancient Indian culture, myths, mythologies and folklores, studies puranas, takes women as presented in the then prevalent culture but combines them with

contemporary world where women are struggling to establish their identity and space of honour. His women are the products of the postcolonial, post modern world who desire to achieve what they lack, revolt against the patriarchy and male dominance, enslave male ego and demolish culture and tradition anticipating transformation in the outlook of the male dominated society. In their struggles they think, act, maneuver and if they fail to obtain the objects they commit suicide. They are passionate, lustrous and philosophical and take emotional intelligence in their strive for survival and demolition of the traditional concepts.

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