



FEMININE SENSIBILITY IN GIRISH KARNAD'S PLAYS

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ABSTRACT

Women are mercilessly denied an opportunity for open expression of their true feelings in the tradition bound Indian society. In Girish Karnad's plays, women figures constantly revolt against the traditional position of women in Indian society and they try to find their own way on their own choice. His plays mock the unjust values of the patriarchal society which does not care for the feelings of a woman and considers her a subhuman who exists only to serve him with absolute loyalty. Call it *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala* or *The Fire and Rain* --- these elements are all there to serve the purpose of the dramatist. Exploitation and oppression of women have become a recognized culture of male chauvinism. So, his plays represent the junction point at which women are characterized as enlightened and emancipated with the power of resistance who struggle to overcome the male dominance. Girish Karnad wants to aware his audiences through how in the name of marriage women are exploited and subjected to all kinds of repressive treatment engineered basically by a patriarchal society. Karnad has undertaken a journey through his plays to take up the challenge to look at the contentious issues of women. His mastery lies in the treatment of politics of difference that underlies the paradigms of gender and caste.

Keywords : Feminism, Gender, Patriarchy, Tradition, Society

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INTRODUCTION

The 'feminism' is a cultural construction of marginality in relation to patriarchal society. Its origin is the fact that in all societies which divide the sexes into different cultural, economic or political spheres, women are always designated in the subordinated position as objects where men are treated as subjects which is always argumentative in nature. In broad sense feminism examines the social relation with reference to gender and patriarchy. It is a critical theory aimed at examining gender in society in relation to understand the position of women. Feminism is a women's movement which struggle for equal

rights involving in a fair competition with men community. However this movement has to face challenge different issues like stereotype sex role, politics of patriarchal language etc. The critics like Hole and Levine points out that "the socially unequal position of women throughout history is not the result of biology, but is due to the value which society has placed at any given time on the biological differences between the two sexes" (Bhagwat, p.30). According to Jasbir Jain, "feminism is more than a voice of protest or questioning. It is moral self-reflection, a conquering of inner fears and a realisation of self-worth. It does not abandon values or

relationships, but goes on to create new ones" (source-internet).

Through the play *The Fire and the Rain*, Karnad again explores different feminist issues which include the social role of womanhood, sex role, identity, liberation and reflection of socially imposed values on women in a diverse manner. In Karnad's plays, "the drama of women lies in the conflict between her fundamental aspiration as a human subject and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the subordinate and the inessential" (Bhagwat, P.67). The play *The Fire and the Rain* was originally written in Kannada with the title "Agni Mattu Male" and published in English in 1998. Karnad, through the character of Vishakha, openly challenges the typical images of a woman constructed by the society where a woman is expected to remain 'silent' as an object of subjugation. Infact Karnad finds nothing wrong in extramarital affairs of married women in an interview with Tutun Mukherjee, when he says, "I used to know a married woman once who positively blossomed after she had an extra marital affair" (Mukherjee P.43). Actually, Karnad wants to realize the readers that every human being has desires but not only men, women too has desires which should be viewed equally in the society and every human being has the right to fulfill his/her desire without granting treacherous masculine regime.

In this play, the two women figures Vishakha and Nittilai representing their emotions, passions and power by locating themselves in the world of gendered oppression which gradually turns them from bewildered and supplicating into strong and rational women. In spite of her highest social position as an upper caste Brahmin girl, Vishakha falls easy prey to the male oppressors who seamlessly explored her body as experimenters even worst than Nittilai though belonging to a hunter's family of low caste which shows women are equally subjected to violent displacement and inevitable victims beyond hierarchical status as patriarchal system denies the backgrounds of woman's social status. Vishakha openly protest against being treated as an object of exchange between men as she had to meet the

demand of sexual desire of both her husband and her former lover Yavakri. Nittilai also has to face challenge to create space for herself within her own community although being lower caste. It doesn't matter whether a woman belongs to upper or lower caste but there is little chance for women to escape the ravages of the gender bias. According to Mala Renganathan, "Karnad does not neglect the women characters totally. He project their sufferings and dilemmas and also makes them raise fundamental questions concerning the use of knowledge and goal of human life" (Renganathan, P. 268). Karnad makes a very intelligent use of Nittilai's character who dares to challenge the oppression inflicted upon her by the violent male subjects. Although she is a tribal girl, but surprisingly she seems to appear more intensely conscious of social ostracism and the lack of proper knowledge by the high-caste Brahmins. As a reformer Karnad wants to reform his society for which he has uncovered the hypocrisy and hollowness of the Brahmins who always held the highest position in society. Nittilai openly raises question to Yavakri who claims to earn absolute knowledge from Lord Indra, asks, "My point is since Lord Indra appeared to Yavakri and Indra is their god of Rains, why didn't Yavakri ask for a couple of good showers?" (Karnad, p.10). At this point Nittilai's status rises successfully above the male characters that defining her social responsibility above the personal which shatters the futility of patriarchy's pride of their universal knowledge.

Initially Vishakha becomes the victim of the power struggle among the male characters of upper class hypocrisy to which she gradually appears more intensely conscious to control their destinies. Now time permits her to take revenge on Yavakri for his vile plan which she came to know that Yavakri, in his obsession of desire for revenge, molests her to avenge the misbehaviour done to his father by her husband's family. Vishakha realizes that she has been used by Yavakri as instrument of vengeance and the universal knowledge that he attained could not help him to possess noble principles. So, it's time now to take decisive step to save her family from

the demon Yavakri when she pours out the consecrated water from Yavakri's Kamandalu. Vishakha empties the water : "Vishakha starts pouring the water out. He looks at her and for a moment cannot comprehend what she is doing. He suddenly screams"(Karnad,p.24). Yavakri has to become the scapegoat of her treachery which exemplifies her intellectual presence of mind. She doesn't pardon Yavakri even when he cries out: "I love you,Vishakha. I have not looked at another woman in my whole life. But that you happened to marry Parvasu is not my fault!" (Karnad,p.24). Thus Yavakri is killed by Brahma Rakshasa as she now realizes her full potential to free herself from the oppressed enslaved sexuality.

In the play *Hayavadana*, Padmini- the sole female representative of the play wants to fulfil her desires and emotions at any cost . Padmini is not like a traditional woman who silently follow the codes of societies and her fascination for two men at the same time is unacceptable for a traditional Indianised society. Karnad has projected the character of Padmini in such a way that she can challenge the society's assumption of female inferiority. In this context, Abhishek Kosta observes, "Girish Karnad has explored the awakening of female consciousness often dramatized in literature" (Kosta, P-71). Devadatta and Kapila, two best friends and the male actors of the play holds the position of two extreme polarities when Padmini interfares between the two. Padmini, Devadatta's wife feels fascinated by Kapila's muscled body which can attract any women. Similarly Devadutta poses a scholarly personality for his poetry and wisdom who acquires an honourable position as a learned Brahmin for which Padmini married him. But Padmini wants to get the best of both the men- the fabulous brain of Devadatta with Kapila's manly body as both of them lacks in each quality such as Devadatta poses a weak body while Kapila a dull brain. Suman Bala points out that, "Padmini's predicament is the predicament of a modern, emancipated woman in our society who is born between two polarities, a woman who loves her husband as well as someone else for two different aspects of their personalities" (Bala,

P.197). Even the song performed by the female chorus commemorates Padmini's plight:

Female Chorus (sings) : 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?A head for each breast. A pupil for each eye. A side for each arm. I have neither regret nor shame. The blood pours into the earth and a song branches out in the sky (Karnad,p.178).

She possess the attitude of modern woman like spontaneous behaviour filled with confidence in front of her husband without any hesitation while interacting with her husband's friend Kapila .In the very first meeting Padmini and Kapila gets engaged in an interaction in such a manner that foregrounds the first love and sensual attraction between her and Kapila. Actually, Karnad not only attempts to handle the subalternity issue by focusing the lives of women in his plays but also energized the women class to raise their strong voice which shifted their portion from 'margin' to 'centre'. Padmini is accustomed to the age old dictates of tradition and society which underscore her predicament as an object of social subjugation when she cries out : "I've touched everyone's feet in this house some time or the other, but no one's ever touched mine?" (Karnad, p.125) which sensitized her belonging to a traditional background family. She realizes that a woman could be easily manipulated into becoming an object of male desire. Here, Padmini turns out to be the antidote of traditional Indian womanhood through her self-sufficiency, boldness and courage, who even not dare to expose her dark secrets. Here, we can see how Padmini is quick to assert her sovereign essence by compelling Kapila to bow down his head over her feet to a contemptuous subjugation despite being the representative of male hegemony : "Kapila : Madam, please. I have some important work. I will touch your feet"(Karnad,p.125). Karnad has exposed the norms of society imposed on women for which they fall under a treacherous masculine regime.

The hypocritical stances of society allows a man to marry more than one woman but the same society never allows a woman to marry more than one man.

Rani, the heroine of the play *Nagamandala*, as her name itself justifies she is like a queen and beautiful princess. Asserting her personality, Karnad describes her as “Queen of the whole wide world. Queen of the long tresses” (Karnad,p.253). A reverse case happens in her husband’s house as she is treated like a mere servant for which she is thrashed in tears, and meanwhile he has an extra affair with a concubine. He locks her in the house where she lives a life without any future and identity. Rani is rejected by her husband Appanna and the rights of a wife are given to that concubine. At the beginning Rani emerges as the very image of an ideal Indian woman demure and unquestioning just as the epitome of ‘second sex’ where Rani is imprisoned in her own husband’s house. Women in India are taken for granted as men have failed to realize that she too has feelings and emotions. She is exploited simply because she is a woman and no one cares to ask for her consent. . In the empty house of her husband, Rani is locked up “like a caged bird”(Karnad,p.257) symbolizes the chain of restrictions placed round women, which denies even her legitimate rights and hinders her natural growth.

Now Rani realizes the importance of recovery of identity that awaits another reversal as though it seems Karnad is giving a twist to these age – old conventions by portraying Rani’s firm decision to get release from the tyranny of these circumstances. Here Karnad seems to legalize the sexual intercourse between human and sub-human world that provides peace and joy. Actually Karnad poses the problem of the identity of women that provide him a space to tackle the women issues. Now Rani has started her journey from complete innocence to fulfillment of experience to assert her identity. It is at the behest of Kurudavva, an old woman neighbour offers Rani magic root that is a potent love potion. With the help of that magic root, she finds Naga, a form of

mythical snake provides the role of a passionate lover to give the pleasure of sex to Rani.

Karnad locates the complicated dilemma of Rani’s situation which ultimately helps her to break out of the moral codes inflicted by society. She also wants a male companion in her life with whom she craves for happiness. Her inner urge remains repressed and at any cost she has to fulfilled her sexual inclinations. With the entry of Naga, Rani gets confidence in her body. She finds heavenly marital bliss in Naga’s company that becomes an idyllic world for her. By which Karnad gives a twist to the conventions. Naga assumes the form of Appanna and starts visiting her during the night which helps her to forget the demonic world of her rude husband. Her ability to recognize her own selfhood leads her position to acquire a subject status beyond the status of male. She seems to be a free woman who shows the courage to overcome the paradigm of gender bias. The snake –lover Naga who fulfils the desire of his beloved Rani to attain motherhood ultimately has to sacrifice his life for the sake of his love. Whatever the intense care and love she does not get from her husband in reality, Rani gets it from Naga. In the arms of her lover Naga who comes in disguise of her husband, she starts to feel secure and comfortable thus breaking her isolation when she says to Naga: “Let it. I don’t feel afraid any more, with you beside me”(Karnad,p.273).

Rani wants to experience the marital bliss in the company of her lover Naga. Even she compels Appanna who represents patriarchal egoism in his deeds to accept the reality of his wife in front of society when she becomes pregnant. Though Appanna questions her chastity when she is put on trial, she proves her innocence by virtue of the snake ordeal in front of the elder villagers without subjugating her position. And consequently Rani established her identity when the whole village acclaims her ‘a goddess incarnate’(p.293) and her husband is forced to accept her before public as the Elder announces, “Appanna, your wife is not an ordinary woman She is a goddess incarnate. Don’t grieve that you judged her wrongly and treated her badly. That is how goddesses reveal themselves to the world.

You were the chosen instrument for the revelation of her divinity” (Karnad,p.293). Karnad thus making a challenging task by balancing the power to remove patriarchal dominance and the identity is restored when he declares, “Rani lived happily ever after with her husband, child and servant” (Karnad,p.293) and Rani recovers her identity as a wife. According to Jose George, “When the male accepts the flower of femininity, he voluntarily surrenders his power. The (folk) function of the female is to make a man aware of the power of femininity through sensuality / sexuality” (George,p.214).

Conclusion

In all the three plays, Karnad has deliberately employed the women characters to raise their powerful voice against injustices and oppression which signifies a positive impact on our society. By exploring the lives of women caged by patriarchal domination, Karnad has taken the responsibility of subordinated women to free their lives from the bondages of male chauvinism. Actually through these women Karnad has explored the symptoms of modern sensibility which has enabled them to fight against the conventional norms of patriarchal society. It is observed that here Vishakha strives to create space for herself in the crossroads of tradition. Nittilai free herself from a forced marriage shackles despite the conventions of patriarchal regime. Even Rani reaffirms her position from total abjection to unqualified power. And Padmini also openly confesses her own desire for Kapila’s muscled body inspite of being a married woman to get a perfect man who must possess the combination of sexual and intellectual power.

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