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GIRISH KARNAD: FEMINISM AND THE PLIGHT OF SUBALTERNS

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ABSTRACT



Indian English Writing witnesses host of prolific writers who made efforts to emancipate and ameliorate the conditions of subalterns, particularly women. Several aspects of feminism can be seen in these plays with women as subalterns. Today subalterns acquired a new meaning. The subalterns have become the focus of various English plays written by Indian writers and Girish Karnad evolved as a major writer who emulsified various aspects of Subaltern Literature. This article magnifies contemporary society as displayed in the novels of Girish Karnad with special reference to *Yayati*, *Tuglaq*, *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandal: A Play with a Cobra* which deals with gender bias of women's subjection in an orthodox, male dominated Indian society.

Key Words: Subaltern, Contemporary Literature, Feminism, Infidelity, Existentialism.

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(i)

This is a perceptual fallacy that contemporary Indian literature in English continues to be at the jellyfish stage. The plethora of available literature belies this statement. Not only English writing, particularly in drama has overcome its pangs of birth, it is well past its gestation stage and has attained an indefinable maturity and ripeness in terms of quality and content. This genre of Indian English writers began occupying a literary space in the middle of twentieth century and hence is of a comparatively recent origin.

In European tradition, poetry and drama were accepted as the earliest forms of literary expression dating back to the antiquity of Greek tradition. Both Plato and Aristotle talked about this poetry in their magnum opus, *Republic* and *Poetics* respectively. In England, there was an avalanche of mystery and miracle plays unleashed from the age of Chaucer and Langland. These plays served not only as sources of entertainment but also as forms of communication, inspiring serious critical reviews. In India, writings in English had to face a serious challenge from the regional theatre which did not allow the English plays written by Indians to gain momentum. But once the Indian drama in English took roots, it not only survived but also gained enough currency and appeal. A retrospective peep reveals that since 1950s, innumerable write-ups on indigenous literature in English received rave reviews. A host of writers of great fame sprang up such as Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, followed by Girish Karnad, Vijay

Tendulkar, Mahesh Dattani, Nissim Ezekiel and Arif Currimbhoy. These people received delayed recognition but later on a renewed surge of interest developed around them. Enough probing was conducted not only to unravel their innovative experimental urges in respect of plot, storyline and the theme but also as regards the techniques employed.

The interesting thing about Indian English writing and translation is the interest shown by writers in history and mythology and their efforts to emancipate and ameliorate the conditions of subalterns, particularly women. The important thing about Indian English writing and translation of the scriptures and ancient literature is that issues concerning gender justice and feminism were taken by male writers. Several aspects of feminism found way in their plays with women as subalterns.

Dealing with subalterns, it may be noted that the concept has acquired a new meaning today and no longer denotes a perennial subordinate position of people such as the Blacks in Africa and the Jews in Hitler's Germany. Literature has come to the rescue of the subalterns by its sympathetic portrayal of their plight. Subaltern literature gained momentum and writers scrupulously tried to create social consciousness about these exploited people. The subalterns have become the fulcrum and focus of thematic patterns of English plays written by Indian writers and among them, Girish Karnad takes the palm over other such writers.

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Girish Raghunath Karnad was a man of parts - a playwright, poet, actor, director and translator, all rolled into one to become a renaissance man. His mother tongue was Konkani but he wrote in his adopted language Kannada because of his prolonged stay in Sirsi village of Karnataka. He wrote in Kannada and later translated his plays into English. The earliest influence on him was that of Nataka Company and Yakshagana plays but greater influence came from naturalistic drama of Henry Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw. The impact of Kannada drama was equally profound which included romantic plays, tragedies, comedies and plays in blank verse. He lived in an age in which two streams of thought surfaced viz., country's rich cultural past and adoption of modern techniques. It was a period that witnessed a clash between country's cultural past and adoption of Western modes of thought. It marked the continuity of tradition and modernity. In the words of Aparna Dharwadker, Karnad "employs traditional Indian narrative materials and modes of performance successfully to create a radically modern urban theatre" (Karnad 1995: 355). Apropos of this has been said by R.K. Dhawan 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." (Dhawan:14)

This shows the impact of contemporary literary milieu on Karnad who otherwise cherished a deep yearning for mythological plays of ancient times. He thus belongs to a formative generation of Indian playwrights who "collectively reshaped Indian theatre as a major national institution in the later twentieth century." (Dharwadker 2005: vii) Thus Karnad effectively demonstrated how Indian English drama could revitalize itself by employing native, soil-related subjects. It was necessary to de-colonize Indian English drama of the artificial influence of colonial past. He knew that only a purposeful return to the roots of rich Indian ancient drama both in Sanskrit and Prakrit could increase its artistic haemoglobin count so that it ceased to be the sick man of Indian English literature. (Naik: 43-44). In this way Karnad attempted to Indianize Indian English drama and in the process evolved his own original style. To quote P. Hari Padma Rani "Girish Karnad has attempted to Indianize the form by using some of the conventions of Indian classical drama and some of those of the folk theatre and by blending them in a singular style of his own .(15)

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The surprise is that despite his long stay abroad for five years and his acquired proficiency in English, he wrote in Kannada which shows that his soul remained indigenous. He wrote a number of plays such as *Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1971), *Naga-Mandala: A Play with a Cobra* (1990), *Tale-Danda* (1993), *The Fire and The Rain* (1998) and *Wedding Album* (2008). In addition there were a number of other plays such as *Bali: The Sacrifice* (1980) and two monologues -*Flowers* and *Broken Images* (2005). Karnad thus was in the look out for subjects rooted in Indian folklore and used surrealistic conventions to delve deep into the psyche of Indian men and women of today, thereby consciously displaying his concern for the people. He admitted that while writing his plays, he held up a mirror in his hand in which the contemporary society would

reflect itself. He stated in the Introduction to Three Plays: "The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values, of making them literally stand on their head. The various conventions - the chorus, the masks, the seemingly unrelated comic episodes, the mixing of human and non-human worlds-permit the simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view, of alternative attitudes to the central problem." (Karnad. 1999:14).

His first play *Yayati* chronicled mythical characters of the great Indian epic *Mahabharata*. It showed the distinct impact of Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre. (Dhanavel:68). This is corroborated by Veena Noble Das who also maintained that Karnad was influenced by a variety of authors such as Brecht, Anouilh, Camus, Sartre and to considerable extent, Pinter (71). Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Head* inspired him to write *Hayavadana* which deals with the existential theme of ambiguity of human conditions and fractured personalities of people.

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His first play *Yayati* was based on the myth of a king cursed by old age syndrome on account of which he lost his youthful vigour and became an old, senile and decrepit man, who was mournfully praying to his people to oblige him by exchanging his old age with their youthfulness. None came to his rescue except his own son who in the best tradition of Bhisma in *Mahabharata*, exchanged his youth with his father's old age and made a great sacrifice. The tragic scene of the king imploring his people to exchange his age with theirs is meticulously crafted to showcase the poignance of the helpless ruler and this is reminiscent of Oedipus or King Lear.

Yayati shows how a mighty emperor, by the twist of fate becomes a subaltern, decrepit old man and the failure of his people to oblige him shows the erosion of moral values among the masses which in turn is compensated by the sacrifice of his son. The idea was to highlight the weaknesses of modern day value system and the effects of generation gap on living individuals. The play is influenced by existential dramatic tradition of England and depicts the problem of responsibilities and expectations with an Indian family. Its a good play having a compact plot, a minimum number of characters, short and succinct dialogues to keep alive the dramatic sequences.

The play reflects the mental condition and stressful situation of Girish Karnad himself who was undergoing intense emotional crisis while going to England for further studies. He wrote this play while going abroad. He combines in this mythological subject, the existential philosophy of life and juxtaposes the past with the present. The play is based on the existential philosophy that a man is what he chooses to be and not what he does not wish to be. The important thing to note is that the play does not glorify the obedience of Pooru to his father and this is contrary to the original myth. On the other hand, Karnad raises a practical question for what would be the reaction of Pooru's wife Chitrlekha who becomes an unconscious subaltern because of the eclipse of youthfulness of her husband. For that matter both the king and his son became subalterns at one time or other when the curse of untimely old age struck them. But the worst sufferer was Chitrlekha who suffered for no reason. She protested against male chauvinism of a selfish patriarch. *Yayati* shows how a modern man overwhelmed by carnal desires and abuse of parental authority forgets the imperishable values of life. Here Karnad reinterprets an ancient myth of Puranic past to make a statement in the form and structure borrowed from Western playwrights.

His second play *Tughlaq* shows the contradiction in the life of a man who was certainly the most brilliant ruler ever to ascend the throne of Delhi and eventually to end up as one of the most egregious failure. After a reign, distinguished for policies that seem far-sighted even today, he messed up everything to earn the sobriquet of being mad. Finally he ended his rule in unmerited bloodshed and chaos. The play reflected the slow disillusionment of the people of independent India to the gradual erosion of ethical norms that guided the movement for independence. Karnad's concern for the oppressed and the weak led him to the espousal of women's cause and his plays are saturated with a spirit of gender justice and feminism.

Another play in this series was *Hayavadana* which elevated women on a pedestal higher than that of the man. Its theme was borrowed from *Kathasaritasagar*, a collection of Sanskrit stories. It has a complicated, bizarre plot consisting of two close friends Devdatta and Kapila. It is based on a tale from *Vetala*

Panchavimshika but Karnad borrowed it from Thomas Mann's *Transposed Head*. It is a play on the mad dance of incompleteness and a search for identity in a world of tangled relationships. Devdatta was an intellectual and Kapila a man of body who represent two extreme opposites - one Apollonian; another Dionysian tendency. (Krishna :6) Devdatta married Padmini but she fell in love with Kapila which created a compellingly unbearable situation for both the friends who consequently committed suicide out of remorse. In a highly comic situation of theatrical climax, Padmini transposes their heads giving Devdatta, Kapila's body and vice-versa, thereby creating an identity crisis. The situation becomes tense again when the two come to a duel and killed themselves again which leaves Padmini with no choice except to immolate herself with her husband's dead body in a sati ceremony. This act of self-immolation by sitting on the funeral pyre of her dead husband, shows the agony and pitiable plight of women in India. Karnad's treatment of this episode shows the tyranny of religious and social conventions relating exclusively to women which consider marriage as the supreme boon of a women who achieves salvation through her services to her male protector - the husband. Thus according to Indian tradition, "Chastity is superior and preferable to life," (Manchi :37) for the woman. Maybe it is for this reason that the evil custom of sati was enjoined on the women so that even after the death of her husband she remained chaste and did not go to any other man. The fact that the man after his wife's death was not expected to immolate himself and could get another spouse shows the extent of gender injustice in India. The subaltern status was prescribed only for women. Thus in *Hayavadana*, with a use of folk form, Karnad assimilated into it a tradition of Indian classical drama to convey his perception of contemporary reality. In this way his play is suffused with modern day human sensibility veering round a search for completeness and identity both. It exhibits the existential anguish and predicament even of a liberated women in contemporary Indian society. In *Hayavadana*, the women is shown to have the liberty to carry on her affair with another man which results in the suicide of her husband as also her paramour and yet she is not fully liberated. After the transposition of dead heads on the torso of Devdatta and Kapila, a deadly duel takes place between the two which results in the killing of both. Yet she was not spared the ordeal of sati which signified her sub-human status.

The central theme in the play is the incompleteness of human beings and the dead are revived by the act of transposition of heads. It is interesting to remember that at the beginning of each performance, a mask of Ganesha is brought on the stage, kept on the chair and puja is performed which also displays the agony of incompleteness. Lord Ganesha with human body and elephant head corroborates the central theme of incompleteness of human beings. By a strange irony, Lord Ganesha, who appears to be an embodiment of imperfection is worshipped as the destroyer of incompleteness. Commenting on this paradox, Bhagavata rightly states "An elephant body, a broken tusk and a cracked belly - whichever way you look at it he seems to be an embodiment of imperfection, of incompleteness" (quoted in Ray: 202). Even Karnad questions the riddle of intellectualism associated with the incompleteness of Lord Ganesh. He says "..... the elephant head also questioned the basic assumption behind the original riddle: that the head represents the thinking part of the person, the intellect" (Dodyia:33)

Naga-Mandala: Play with a Cobra (1990) is a story based on two oral folk tales of Karnataka narrated by elder women of the family either at the time of feeding the children or when they are being put to bed. These tales serve as a parallel system of communication among women. Karnad heard these stories from Professor A.K. Ramanujan and gave them dramatic form. The first relates to a Cobra turning into man at night and visiting a married women after assuming her husband's form. The second is based on the popular belief that a night long vigil in the temple can ward off death. The tales rest on woman's understanding of reality around her. *Naga-Mandala* is the story of Rani who is married to Appanna who maltreats his wife and satisfies his lust elsewhere with a mistress. Rani is locked up in an attic at night when her husband is visiting his concubine. Kurudavva, a friend of Rani's deceased mother-in-law arranges a forest root believed to be an aphrodisiac but far from arousing love and lust in Appanna, it only makes him crueller instead. A bigger dose was prepared but Rani, out of fear did not serve it to her husband and instead poured it into an ant hill where a Naga tasted it and fell in love with Rani. He visited her every night in the form of Appanna while her husband frolicked with his concubine. After sometime, the Naga's truth is revealed to Rani but by then she was already

very thick with him and waited for him anxiously every night and was pinning anguishedly in his absence. Rani becomes pregnant and her husband heaps charges of infidelity and adultery on her but she saves her skin by undergoing the fiery ordeal of putting her hand into the snake pit. The Cobra, already being her surrogate husband, refuses to bite her and curls up around her arms thereby according her the position of a goddess. After several intriguing episodes, the play ends with Rani giving birth to a bright son and the Cobra taking permanent shelter in her long tresses.

The play is a tale of male chauvinism that debilitates and degrades females and rests on the exploitation and incarceration of women. 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." (Prem Sagar "Preface").

Here Karnad not merely takes a dig at male dominance and reveals the exploitation of women and the great injustice to which they are put by patriarchal culture and the domineering class of men but it also overtly deflates the concept of chastity that undergrinds the male mythic imagination across religion and language.

The play deals with gender bias and women's subjection in an orthodox, male dominated Indian society. Rani and Kurudavva are the generic faces of Indian women. Karnad borrows his storyline from the folk tales of Karnataka but imparts them a contemporary socio-culture hue thereby providing them modern validity. Rani is shown as a victim of cultural taboos and coercive forces of society that conspire to deliver a blow to her independent womanhood. Rani is compelled to internalize male superiority and accept her marginalized position in society, but she adopts new ways to transcend and overcome age-old subjection of women. She refuses to surrender and continues to fight for preserving her identity as a woman, as a wife and also a mother. Karnad's solution appears unearthly, unconvincing and unconventional at the first sight since it violates old social norms but he wanted to prove that despite antithetical conditions, a woman must continue her struggle for existence and transcend 'nothingness' in life. The two folk tales are deftly blended to posit a relationship between art and imagination on the one hand and mundane reality of the world on the other. The Rani-Appanna - Cobra tale is an allegory of nexus between art and objectivity of the world. The fact of Cobra acquiring the form of Appanna establishes a nexus between art and imagination, as also between imagination and reality. This is established when the Cobra seeks a permanent refuge in the long tresses of Rani's hair which is indicative of the alliance between art and imagination.

Karnad depicts the character of married women from an unconventional perspective to show that the society is dreadfully puritanical, patriarchal and prejudicial to women. As a consequence "most Indian playwrights just don't know what to do with their female characters" (Karnad 1995:359) This is so much so that another noted writer Satyadev Dubey confirmed that Karnad is "the only playwright in the history of Indian theatre to have treated adultery as normal and treated adulterous women sympathetically." (Karnad 1995:358) Here Karnad dexterously turns the situations and manipulates the language of the dialogues brilliantly to overcome ambiguity and create a space of freedom for himself, the audience and the avid readers. One may recall here the words of Federico Garcia Lorea whom Karnad also admired that the theatre should be "a rostrum where man are free to expose old equivocal standards of conduct, and explain with living examples the eternal norms of the heart and feelings of man" (Garcia 1982 (1960): 59).

In essence, *Naga - Mandala* is an out and out feminist drama etched out of the rubric of folk mythology which rests on the weird theme of woman's fate, her chastity and societal role and combines it with an unexpected ending resting on double crossing and upturning of old mores. In this play, the rise of Rani to the exalted status of a goddess instantiates a special kind of transformation which at one level is the actual fulfilment in social terms of her name and at another level, it represents an explicit subversion of the standards of a conservative society embedded in patriarchy. The play's feminist vision, the irony of Rani's snake trial which met with success mocks at the classic Hindu mythic chastity test. It is reminiscent of Sita's ordeal of fire in *Ramayana* to prove her fidelity and chastity. In Karnad's play the woman undergoes another test, the ordeal

of handling a venomous snake which proves "it is her very infidelity that comes to her aid in proving that she is a faithful wife." (Dharwadker: 444)

It may be added and Karnad also realises the predicament of men as lesser sufferers who bear the burden of masculinity that comes with a system, rigidly predicated on a binarist division of experience. The play shows a split in the male figure who is the sullen husband by day and the passionate lover by night. This indicates how women in general think of their husbands in cloistered system of unequal marriages. (Dharwadker: 445). It also indicates a split in male persona and its inability to cohere in a system where open affection is a social taboo and demonstrativeness is an index of promiscuity. This way the play exhibits the story of Rani's triumph over the unjust patriarchal injunctions to stand on her own convictions. Thus *Naga-Mandal* represents the post modern sensibility of the late twentieth century which shows the transformative power of women's retelling of myths that tear apart archaic notions of women's chastity and fidelity and usher in a new era of gender equality. This is the premise on which the modern theatre rests, predicated as it is on the notion of gender parity. In the words of G.P. Deshpande "a pre-modern theatre was taken to be eternal theatre. It did not seem to be material to this search (for an authentic "Indian" theatre) that modern Indian theatre was being written in different languages and as such different cultures and situational specificities mattered as much to this theatre as to the theatre based on the epics like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*" (Deshpande: x)

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Girish Karnad thus becomes an epitome of unconventional wisdom, champion of feminism and an aggressive proponent of gender justice and parity which explodes the myth of masculine superiority and exclusiveness resting on double standards, devised by a patriarchal society, to lionize men and relegate women to a sub-human secondary status in societal hierarchy. As a modern playwright, Karnad comes before us as a crusader and an iconoclast who is engaged in the act of "deconstructing myths. He takes up mythical and legendary tales from his own culture and unfolds them in the light of modern sensibility. This deconstructing of myth becomes an act of self-searching for the playwright he combines the past and the present into a unity that bespeaks of tradition and modernity in his art of playwriting." (Gill:8).

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