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CONFLICT BETWEEN EROTIC LOVE AND RELIGIOUS DEVOTION IN GIRISH KARNAD'S
FLOWERS

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ABSTRACT

Flowers is a presentation of the conflict between erotic love and religious devotion. Its philosophy is drawn from the very premise of Hindu asceticism. The whole monologue is a confessional narrative—unforced, spontaneous and voluntary to find relief from the burden. The title of the play, *Flowers*, is marked by dual identity. The flowers are at one and the same time the archetypal symbol of eroticism and pious offerings made to gods and goddesses. The protagonist of the play is a nameless, introspective priest, who confesses his sin of adultery and finally punishes himself by committing suicide. The priest in *Flowers* separated the two opposed worlds—the sacred and the profane and carried on with his daily life with much ease. But the moment he mixed these two worlds up, troubles began to ensue. Human beings live divided and imperfect and it is extremely difficult to bear the burden of perfection. In imperfection lies bliss; perfection demands rigours which the human beings do not wish to indulge in. The issue of imperfection and division of human beings runs in most of the plays by the playwright. Religion offers rigours and human existence, freedom. Because of the blandness of religion, which appears to be mundane in contrast with the ever-changing variations of human life, human civilization has raced far ahead from religion, which has come to occupy a less important and marginalized position in contemporary India, especially among the educated middle-class.

Keywords: Conflict, division and duality, rigours of religion, freedom

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For the first time in *Flowers*, Girish Karnad introduces an introspective confessional male voice of the priest, which has no precursor in the playwright's drama. The plot of *Flowers* is borrowed from a folk-tale from the Chitradurga region in Karnataka. Aparna Dharwadker in the Introduction to the play elaborates upon the source from where the story has been taken: the legend of Veeranna on which the play is based, became widely known when the Kannada writer T.R. Subbanna (to whom Karnad bears acknowledgement in the note on the play) included it in his novel *Hamsageethe* (Swan Song), which was published in 1952. (Introduction, xxxi)

Flowers is a presentation of the conflict between erotic love and religious devotion. Its philosophy is drawn from the very premise of Hindu asceticism. "Hindu myths have always juxtaposed eroticism and asceticism especially in the worship of Shiva, who embodies within himself both creation and destruction." (Jain 346) The very *shivalinga* is a phallic symbol and is emblematic of eroticism; it is a symbol of the communion of the male and female principles, (for the base of the *shivalinga* is symbolic of Shiva's spouse, Parvati). Despite being represented in erotic terms, Shiva is considered to be the greatest ascetic. The Hindu myths of creation are based primarily on the sexual act and the body. Sex and eroticism seem to be the *marga* or the way towards the achievement of the ultimate goal—*Nirvana* or *Moksha* or salvation. It is only when one takes the highly sensuous erotic route, without getting stuck in it, but crossing the barrier, that she/ he achieves *Moksha* or salvation. The same philosophy also seems to be at work in the Hindu Vedic concept of the four *Purusharthas*—*Dharma* (ritual), *Artha* (economic power), *Kama* (love and sex) and *Moksha* (final redemption); it is only when one has traversed all these paths and has overcome all hurdles that the ultimate reality is revealed.

In *Flowers*, Karnad's priest seems to go through a similar ordeal. The whole monologue is a confessional narrative—unforced, spontaneous and voluntary to find relief from the burden. The protagonist of the play is a nameless, introspective priest, who confesses his sin and finally punishes himself by committing suicide. The priest is a devotee who has confined himself to the temple and its vicinity and who is fully acquainted with the life around there. The priest has created a "private universe for which [he] has never for a moment wanted to step out." (Karnad, *Fl.*, 243) He tells the readers that—" in the isolation of this place, I spend most of my time with the *linga*—talking to it, singing to it, even discussing recent political developments, and most of all, decorating it with flowers." (243-244) The priest has lived with the *linga*; the *linga* is his everything and he often loses track of hours while decorating it with flowers, so much so that his wife grumbles that the *linga* is her "step-wife." (244) The priest has earned recognition for his art of decorating the *linga* with flowers. Every morning he takes a dip into the holy temple tank and in a wet dhoti sits down in the sanctum surrounded by baskets of flowers to decorate the *linga*. The Chieftain of the region, comes every evening after the sunset, to visit the temple to see the decoration of the *linga* with flowers by the priest and accept a flower as God's *Prasad*.

The relationship of the priest with the God is like one between the lover and his beloved. Here the devotional service rendered by the priest to the *linga* parallels the love and devotion of a woman for her beloved. Although, the play is centred around the male principle, but in the act of devotion and surrender, the role of the priest is transformed into that of a female's. Transformation of body forms a very important aspect of Girish Karnad's plays—in *Hayavadana*, the horse-headed man is transformed into a complete horse, in *Naga-Mandala*, the Naga has magical propensities to transform into a man; here not the body but the soul of the priest undergoes transformation from being a male to a female. The dedication to the Supreme force, as his female consort reminds one of the philosophy of Sufism and the Bhakti saints, where the devotee views himself/ herself as the God's consort.

The two other spatial units which exist outside the temple are the priest's home and the courtesan's house. The priest's home is a place where his wife and two children live along with his aged parents, a place which needs economic support, denies him of privacy, and where love-making with his wife has fallen into a routine, cast in a typical patriarchal family. As the typical male, who dictates the rule of sex to his wife, the priest says:

On the days I wanted her, I would give her a look she had come to recognize and late at night when everyone was fast asleep, she would crawl up to my room for a furtive scuffle in bed which demanded the minimum of uncovering. (248-249)

The priest's sexual life, as most sexual lives in Indian marriages constrained by the society and members of the family are, becomes only a furtive and secret expression of desire expressed and hidden in the darkness of the night. Contrasted with this is the courtesan's house where desire is openly expressed without any inhibition

and where the body is naked. The priest's wife, on the other hand "would have died of shame than be seen naked, even by herself." (248)

The first meeting of the courtesan Ranganayaki with the priest takes place in the temple itself during the "Shivaratri" celebrations. *Shivaratri* is believed to be the wedding day of Lord Shiva with Goddess Parvati which signifies at a wider level, the communion of the male and female principles. In the case of the priest, this meeting on *Shivaratri* signifies the communion of the priest with the courtesan. At their very first meeting, while giving a cracked coconut to Rangnayaki, the priest notices a mole on her left breast of her bosom just near the cleavage, and he felt a "fire raging in the loins." (245) It is interesting to see how this sensual fire raging in the loins later in the play transforms into a fire raging in the soul—the fire of eroticism gets transmuted into the fire of asceticism—the ultimate love and devotion for the omnipotent God.

From that day onwards, the priest fell for her and his presence in the temple became less for the love of his duty than to notice the beauty of Ranganayaki— "her smile with dark sensuousness." (246)

Daily encounters with Rangnayaki at the temple increased the priest's sexual urge and when the courtesan did not come to the temple for a few days, he took the *prasada*, begged the *linga*'s forgiveness and headed straight to the courtesan's house. He reached the house of the courtesan and was led to her by an old lady who was her accomplice. The house of the courtesan is described by the playwright as "cavernous" which seem to connote the deep, dark tunnels of sensuality in which the priest is about to surrender himself. When he first met her in her house, "she was sitting in a corner of the backyard, on a mat spread out on the floor" (247), which marked her days of "menstrual seclusion" (247). Her seclusion reminds one of the isolation and seclusion of the *linga* in the inner sanctum of the temple. Being a courtesan and not permitted to the inner sanctum of the temple, Rangnayaki, expresses her desire to know how the priest decorates flowers on the *linga* and asks him to come again when she was free of her menstrual course. As promised, the day after next when the chieftain goes back after the performance of *pooja* in the evening, the priest takes the used flowers with him to Ranganayaki's house. There she sits naked before him and he creatively decorates her body with flowers.

The contrast with the previous kind of ritual is to be found in enactment in the courtesan Ranganayaki's home. In Ranganayaki's house, the paraphernalia necessary for the observance of *pooja* and decoration of flowers on the *shivalinga*, is absent—there is no dip in the tank, no silver *thalis*, no jaw-sticks, no camphor and no helper.

It becomes an act of personal expression and exploration. Instead of the stone stump there is a living, breathing and sleeping body, vibrant and active. There is no public centrality; instead, it is a private space. (Jain 349)

Her body, as against the bland and slippery surface of the *lingam* was curvaceous and called forth the artist in the priest. Because of the decoration of Rangnayaki's body, the priest's everyday act of worship began to feel mundane; he felt exasperated at the dull and pallid *linga*'s unimaginative contours and wondered, "Why didn't the Lord offer a form which inflamed invention like Ranga did? (Karnad, *Fl.* 250) The experience also inspired him to choose the flowers carefully because the intended idol is no longer the *linga* but Rangnayaki. The priest's concentration is differently directed towards each of the two objects he chooses to worship. Though the garlands are the same, the motifs are different. It is not a mere duplication, but a new invention: "Each day I coaxed the flowers to say something special to God and then something entirely different to Ranga." (251)

His visits to the prostitute became a routine affair. He would undress her every day, decorate her with flowers, each time forming different artistic patterns and then make love to her. The priest's passion for the prostitute became a well-known affair in the town, but his wife never questioned him on that. But this routine was disturbed on the *tritiya*, third day after the moon. The priest was waiting for the canon to be sounded which signaled the chieftain's setting out for the temple. After waiting for a long time, when it was near midnight, he decided to perform the *pooja* and then sent his wife home. He was more concerned about the passion raging in his heart for the courtesan than anything else in the world. He then collected the flowers and set forth for Ranganayaki's house. Here his wife seemed to stop him from going and her warning seemed more

metaphorical than literal. She says—"Don't go in the dark. Snakes, poisonous insects. Why don't you stay home." (254) The darkness talked about by the priest's wife connotes the dark and sensual road of *kama* or sexual urge which has blinded the priest and at the end of the story, the sex-ridden priest is awakened from this darkness and achieves light. But as it is with morning, with dawn, with white; it is with the road to ultimate salvation. Until and unless one knows the antithesis—the night, the dusk, the black—one cannot appreciate the thesis. So the priest must know and fully plunge himself in darkness in order that he may come to light.

He turns down his wife's advice, and goes to Rangnayaki's house, wakes her from sleep and decorates her with flowers, but he does not make love to her. Just then, he hears the sound of the canon; he is shocked and immediately collects the "used" flowers, which are now "leavings, polluted discards" (256) and rushes back home. The highly ritualistic and righteous priest, who takes a dip in the holy tank before the performance of the *pooja*, who is extremely pious and pure in the execution of his priestly duties, uses the same flowers to decorate the *linga* in order to save himself and commits a deliberate act of sacrilege. As he himself admits—"What further use they had been put to in Rangnayaki's house she didn't need to try too hard to imagine. To place them on the *linga* again was desecration." (256) Thus the priest for the first time merges his two worlds—the religious and the erotic and this merging proves to be disastrous. As Jain puts it:

Upto the point, the journey of the flowers had been unidirectional but now they perform a return journey—from the courtesan's body to the *lingam*, thus obliterating the difference between the pure and the polluted....(350)

In his plays, Karnad endeavours to show that the dogmas of the society may be called to question but is nearly impossible to break the shackles of the tradition-bound society we live in. When Padmini, in *Hayavadana*, ventures forth to achieve the perfect man—a combination of an intelligent Brahmin head and a robust Shudra body—she ends up in a disaster with the death of the duo and her suicide, for she is unable to break the moral codes of the society. In *Bali* too, the Queen has to pay for her adultery in terms of her death. *Tughlaq* is disheartened with the failures of his far-sighted plans which were not acceptable to the society of his times and goes mad. It is only when characters come to the forefront and try and express their desire for some kind of unification in a society divided into multi-layers that they fall into social and moral trouble. Division and duality form a very vital aspect of Karnad's writings—from *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Padmini*, *Rani* and *Manjula* of *Broken Images*—Karnad presents us with a plethora of divided characters searching for a unity, for perfection and completeness.

The title of the play, *Flowers*, is also marked by this dual identity. The flowers are at one and the same time the archetypal symbol of eroticism and pious offerings made to gods and goddesses. Till the time, the priest efficiently maintains the dual identity of the flowers and is free from any kind of trouble. The priest in the *Flowers* separated the two opposed worlds—the sacred and the profane and he carried on with his daily life with much ease. But the moment he mixed these two worlds up, troubles began to ensue.

The priest quickly decorated the temple when he got back from the courtesan's house and when the chieftain came he performed the *pooja* and offered him a flower as *Prasad*. Then he heard the chieftain say—"I didn't know God had long hair."(Karnad, *Fl.* 256) The news of the priest's adultery had spread like forest fire and what the chieftain was hinting at, was very evident. On the repetition of the question by the chieftain, the priest hurriedly gave the only reply which was possible in the given circumstance. He says—"If we believe that God has long hair...he will have long hair." (256) Upon challenged by the chieftain to prove his point, the priest asks for some time till the next new moon.

Then the priest enters a state of a meditative trance. He shuts himself in the sanctum, sits cross-legged in front of the *linga* and prays. He had no other choice than surrender. For twelve days, he cleansed his existence of everything, every name or person, except the *linga*. The priest is now another man; an ascetic rinsed of the poisonous temptations of worldly pleasures. And then the unexpected happens. On the twelfth day, the onlookers start gathering to see whether the priest will be able to uphold his claim or will face public humiliation. When the chieftain ordered the inner sanctum to be opened, ""waves and waves of jet black hair came billowing out, their tips gently eddying and swirling in the evening breeze." (258) On someone's doubt

that the hair might be glued, one of the Brahmins moved with all his strength, pulled the twisted tuft on the *linga* with all might and his fingers came to be marked with blood. He came out crying and shrieking—"It's bleeding, it's bleeding. I have wounded God." (259) The chieftain fell to the priest's feet for forgiveness and the crowd made him a saint and started seeking his blessings. The priest thus became God's chosen one.

The ending of the monologue is a natural outcome of man's need for anchoring, no matter at what price. Padmini in *Hayavadana*, to put an end to her divided identity performs *sati*, which was a highly acclaimed social practice in ancient India, and Rani in *Nagamandala*, when exalted to the level of goddess by the villagers and provided with her husband's love and all worldly pleasures which provide her stability and anchor, deliberately chose to keep silent about her snake-lover. Similarly, the priest ends his duality by renouncing erotic pleasures and accepting asceticism.

The road to salvation of the priest is also symbolically projected through the symbol of the scorpion. Like the venomous Scorpio, who at the beginning of the play, starts "creeping into the water from the south-eastern corner of the temple-tank," (243) the priest, full of the poison of worldly pleasures, starts his journey towards the ultimate bliss. At the end of the play, his renunciation is complete, like that of the scorpion which "...has crawled out of the recess in the third step under water" and his "reflection is floating towards" (260) the priest, which seems to signify spiritual nourishment and enlightenment.

The priest, after becoming the God's chosen one, suffers from existential angst, which can be better termed as the anguish of being here and now. It is the anguish before the fact of human particularity, why one exists at one particular epoch in one particular way, why not is he/ she born in some other epoch. Same is the case with the priest who is unable to understand the judgment of God.

When he becomes a perfect ascetic and the chosen one of God, he is very unhappy with his sainthood. No longer does he seem to be happy with his "private universe" but in a way resents it. He confesses of his blasphemy in decorating God with the "used" flowers and in his cruelty towards the two women he loved, his wife and Rangnayaki, but he would not accept any condescension from God. Karnad had always eyed the concept of God with objectivity—whether it is the mocking Kali of *Hayavadana*, who has been accorded human traits by the playwright, the absent God of *Naga-Mandala* or the broken idol of *Bali*—**his gods are either objective observers or mere indifferent participants**. That is to say Karnad's treatment of God is like that of a postmodernist's, working very near to the notion that God is dead and effaced from this universe. In *Flowers*, he raises questions on God's concept of justice, which appears to be biased and prejudiced and which seems to be completely opposed to the concept of justice and righteousness observed in human society:

Why then should God cast his vote on my behalf ? Because I loved Him ? Has God the right to mock justice in favour of love for Him? Or does He have a different logic ? If He does, it's not fair that he should abide by it, not demanding to know what that logic is. Such Grace is condescension even when it comes from God. Why am I worthy of this burden He has placed on my shoulders ? I refuse to bear it. God must understand I simply cannot live on his terms. (260)

Here, a very crucial issue is touched upon by the playwright—the human being as against God. Human beings live divided and imperfect and it is extremely difficult to bear the burden of perfection. In imperfection lies bliss; perfection demands rigours which the human beings do not wish to indulge in. The issue of imperfection and division of human beings runs in most of the plays by the playwright. Religion offers rigours and human existence, freedom. Because of the blandness of religion, which appears to be mundane in contrast with the ever-changing variations of human life, human civilization has raced far ahead from religion, which has come to occupy a less important and marginalized position in contemporary India, especially among the educated middle-class.

It is only when the priest gains perfection, the ultimate bliss that he commits suicide—his world, as against the world of Padmini of *Hayavadana*, was better off when he was imperfect. Perfection brought him to the same fate as Padmini's; both of them commit suicide and reiterate the idea that imperfection is an inescapable part of human life.

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