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EXPLORING AND REVISIONING THE SUBALTERN ISSUES IN GIRISH KARNAD'S
YAYATI AND TALE-DANDA

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ABSTRACT

Girish Karnad has emerged as the most significant playwright of the post-Independence Indian literature. His plays were first written in Kannada and then translated into other languages, including English, have brought him national and international recognition in several ways. He received several honors like Padma Shri, Padma Bhushan and Jnapith. He also received Sahitya Akademi Award for creativity. He is known for the use of myth, history and folktales to dramatize the contemporary issues in the post-colonial Indian society. Subaltern studies is basically concerned with historical and socio-cultural aspects of society, including the entire people, which is subordinated in terms of caste, class, gender and ethnicity. It is more psychological than physical when it works in terms of caste, class, and gender. The subordination and subjugation, the resignation and silence, alienation and loneliness, the lack and deprivation, the neglect and resilience notice the lives of marginalized people. Karnad expresses his concerns for the voiceless people in his plays like *Yayati*, *Tale-Danda*, *The Fire and the Rain* etc. Subaltern issues refer to the various issues like, gender, race, caste and ethnicity etc. which are found in the society. The present research paper would highlight and revision the subaltern issues in the selected plays, *Yayati* and *Tale-Danda*.

Keywords: Subaltern, Subjugation, Caste, Gender, Patriarchy.

Introduction

The term "Subaltern" was first used by Antonio Gramsci to express the subordination condition in terms of caste, class, culture and ethnicity. Subaltern is formed from the two Latin words 'sub' and 'alter', which means 'under' and 'other'. So subaltern refers to the downtrodden people, based on caste, class, gender and ethnicity. Subaltern are those, who are downtrodden, suppressed, marginalized and voiceless. No one pays attention on them. They are invisible from the main stream of the society. They have no history. Even they cannot speak about their rights. In her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes, "The subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow". (Spivak, p.287) Spivak uses the term for the working class, subjugated women, rural peasantry and lower class people, who endure silently under the hegemonic domination of elite class. Morton Stephen mention the words of Spivak,

I like the word Subaltern for one reason. It is situational. Subaltern began as a description of a certain rank in the military. The word was under censorship by Gramsci: he called Marxism 'monism', and was obliged to call the proletariat 'subaltern'. That word, used under duress, has been transformed into the description of everything that doesn't fall under strict class analysis. I like that, because it has no theoretical rigor. (Morton, p.46)

In Indian society, women are always subjugated in the hegemony of patriarchy. Since the ancient period, women have no scope to gain their identity and achieve their goals. The patriarchy has controlled the women's lives on the basis of conventions, traditional gender roles, and norms to maintain the male supremacy. Women's desires and longings have been a subject of profound discourse in culture, tradition and literature. Gender refers to the conditions of man-women relationship. Gender rectitude is a position in which men and women perform as equals. They have equal access to resources. And they have also equal opportunity to exercise control over issues affecting their destinies. Power-relations is to achieve the power to negotiate on equal terms with man in order to influence equally the establishment of acceptable norms of decision-making in all sphere of life. As Jasbir Jain and Sudha Rai writes,

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. (Jasbir Jain and Sudha, p. 119)

Girish Karnad is the pioneer playwright, who enrich the Indian English drama. He creates an authentic landscape of human experience by vibrantly integrating history, myths, legends, and folklore in his plays. He animatedly portrays the distant past and contextualizes it to present the contemporary issues. He undermines the elitist philosophy by deconstructing the legends in all his meta-narratives and voices the concerns of the suppressed particularly women and lower cast people. Subalterns suffered since the ancient period by the patriarchy or hegemonic domination of the society. They have no history, no identity. Karnad has deep rooted humanism, which forces him to write about subalterns. He exposes his concerns about the women and the marginalized people of the Indian society. O.P. Budholia remarks,

Karnad decolonizes the narrative pattern in his plays. He uses indigenous resources for the structural design of his plays and he picks up Indian myths, metaphors and symbols and uses them in such way as to interpret the contemporary and moral issues authoritatively. (Budholia, p. 12)

Karnad has directed his attention to the helpless, the trapped, the inarticulate, the handicapped, the oppressed, the downtrodden, the neglected, the exploited, and he abused in the ladder of existence and the argued dramatically for a better world, though he is aware of the perennially of the human problems. He has the deep concerns to subalterns. Hence he portrays his characters with the historical and social importance.

Yayati is first play by Karnad. It interprets the mythical story of *Mahabhart*. In the play, the king Yayati meets a beautiful girl, named Devayani. She is daughter of Shukracharya. Yayati first time saw her a well because her friend, Sharmistha pushed her into the well. Sharmistha is the daughter of Vrishaparvva and the princess of 'Asura'. While hunting in the forest, Yayati comes near the well in search for water. His eyes goes into the well and is surprised to see a beautiful girl. The girl, Devayani is calling her help to come cot from the well. He asks her ancestry. She replies that she is daughter of Shukracharya. Yayati holds her right hand and comes her out from the well. Now Devayani says to him to marry because she is maiden. And it is religious belief when a man holds a right hand of a maiden. The man has to be marry the maiden. So Yayati marries Devayani. The marriage has been solemnized with the social taboos and caste infringements. And Sharmishta was punished and she will be maid of Devayani.

Marriage is a must for every young adolescent girl, who is living in the patriarchal society. In Indian culture, a girl has to be left her father's home and has to be settled with her husband's home. This is the case

with Devayani, who leaves her father's home and settle with her husband. Her father cannot refuse the proposal of Devayani's marriage with Yayati. When she got married, she does not have any rights on her father's property. Before marriage, she takes care of her father but after marriage she should be take care of her husband and his family. And she also has to work according to her husband. This is called patriarchy. Thus after marriage, her life is governed his husband. This patriarchy is governed by the society. Devayani suffered this patriarchal system throughout the play. As she says,

If you had deserted me after we first made love, left me on the bed of leaves, no one would have blamed you. Kings are used to women throwing themselves at them. I too would have kept silent from fear and shame. Why then did you marry me? (*Yayati*, 14)

Shukracharya is the father of Devayani, has the Sanjeevani Vidya that is why Yayati marries to her daughter. If her father has no power, he would not get married with Devayani. The King, Yayati wants to hold power lifelong over the state. So Devayani was passed from her father to her husband. This is commodity, which is traded. Shukracharya himself played a role as agent in this deal. As Sharmistha says,

"...And what would you see His Majesty's eyes? Have you tried to find out? Have you ever dared examine those eyes and acknowledge the lust burning there? Except that he is not lusting for you? You poor darling, he lusts for immortality. Your father's art of 'sanjeevani'. (*Yayati*, p.)

Yayati, a very famous play of Karnad, is mainly concerned on an individual's duty. It rests on the human emotions. Class and caste division leads society to clash and introduces it with so many disorders and brutality. Sharmistha drags Devayani with her long hair, grabs her to a well and pushes her into it, after being annoyed of her remarks. Here we see the violent actions of both lady characters. Sharmistha's nature is evil, while Devayani's words are also evil. Sharmistha started intriguing and seducing Yayati to avenge Devayani. After being mentally troubled by Sharmistha's act Devayani sets her father to put Yayati on curse. Pooru embraces old age of his father that is why Chitrlekha killed herself. Her death is the cruelest part in the play. Character of Chitrlekha is Karnad's own imagination and creation. Yayati's mind got changed after the death of Chitrlekha. However, Karnad used to tell that Yayati was the main reason behind Chitrlekha's death. Chitrlekha says,

I did not know Prince Pooru when I married him. I married him for his youth. For his potential to plant the seed of the Bharatas in my womb. He has lost that potency now. He doesn't possess any of the qualities for which I married him. But you do. You have taken over son's youth. It follows that you should accept everything that comes attached to it. (*Yayati*, 65-66)

Social order barely resembles to influence the women's dilemma which is very distinct in Karnad's play, *Yayati*. Born into a monarchical kin, being an Aryan princess, Chitrlekha comes from an elite family, the Aryans. Chitrlekha experiences injustices and annihilation in spite of being highest in caste and class through men. But at the same time like Chitrlekha, her maid confident Swarnalata, who is one of the chief characters in the play, comes from low caste. Even she does not get love of her husband and family because the former relied on that she is impure. In this way, women in our Indian society are always treated as low only on ethical ground of being a woman not by social rank and power, no matter whether she is superior or inferior in social order. The despotic patriarchy always mistreated her. If truly say, woman are often assigned for the history creating a diminished group in patriarchal system, whether is an empress or damsel. In this context, Chitrlekha says,

Modesty requires that I claim not to understand the question. But since it has been asked and since it is now the most important question in my life, let me state that I consider myself immediately fortunate in having found such a husband. The last fifteen days have been among the happiest in my life. He is warm, considerate, and loving. I have grown up amidst Kshatriya arrogance. His gentleness is like a waft of cool breeze. (*Yayati*, 64)

Tale-Danda is a historical play, which throws light on the human system of caste. It is based on a historical incident which took place in the 12th century but the issues it raises, are extremely relevant in the contemporary Indian society. In the play, a group of people, the upper caste Brahmins and the ruling class nobility which along with King Bijjala's son. Sovideva plays power politics first deftly and when it fails, ruthlessly to suppress and kill

all oppositions. There is terrible bloodshed at the end of the play in Kalyan so that the whole city is drowned in a sea of blood. Probably the stakes are higher in this play. In view of the defenders of the system, on stake is not just one kingdom but a whole set of the two thousand year old values supporting the caste system. As the caste in India is derived from the birth alone, it is a closed system. The caste cannot be transferred from one class to another class or be gained as a reward for the highest merit or bestowed as an honorary title by even the most powerful monarch. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar remarks about the caste system in India,

Caste system is not merely a division of labourers—which is quite different from division of labour—it is a hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other. (Ambedkar, 67)

The essential features of the caste system such as hierarchy, restrictions on marriage and food, hereditary occupation are challenged and flouted by Basavanna and his followers. This is just not acceptable to the conservative elements of the society and the confrontation can only lead to disaster. Basavanna is King Bijjala's treasurer and he is a poet and social reformer too. Through his path breaking ideal, he has been able to gather round him, a number of people sharanas as they are called, who believe in his ideal of a casteless and classless society. This movement exhorts people to believe in the idea of 'work is worship'. Basavanna has the King's support too as King Bijjala himself is a barber. The difference is that since five generations back, this family has been messengers and through marriages in royal families and grabbing power has got some resemblance of respectability. King Bijjala himself has married into a Kshatriya royal family of Hoyasalas. Bijjala is quite conscious of his caste and says only Sharanas are not bothered about his low caste. As he says,

A man's caste is like the skin of his body. You can peel off the skin but whenever the new skin appears people recognize the skin—the same old skin—same old caste—Kshatriyas, Rajputs, Untouchables, herdmen—this is the special trait of this earth – special trait of the water here.....I am sixty two. In all these years, the only people whose eyes did not have a shadow of my caste are sharanas, Basavanna and his people. (Karnad, 15)

Basavanna has agreed to be the treasurer of the Royal treasure as, according to him, the king is only a keeper of the people's money. But he quits when doubts are raised by Sovideva, the king's son, about his honesty. On Sovideva's opening of the lock of the Royal Treasure, ten thousand sharanas surround the treasury to make sure; no conspiracy is hatched to involve Basavanna. He has already ruled for 15th years but finally it is politics of the troika of Damodar Bhatt, Manchanna Kramita and Prince Sovideva which succeeds in its evil design of dethroning the King and grabbing power. Not only that, they succeed in destroying the momentum of a new reformist movement with progressive ideas which rejected the idol-worship, rituals, class-distinctions, casteism, superstitions, profiteering and other obscurantist ideas. In this context Sarat Babu writes,

The social deformity in the Hindu society took the form of 'caste system'. The Hindu society consists of four recognized class called 'Varnas' and one unrecognized class called 'avarnas'. Their functions are priesthood and education, administration and war, trade and productive work. They are Brahmins (priests, poets, teachers and ministers), Kshatriyas (Kings and warriors), Vaishyas (tradesman), Shudras (Craftsmen) and Panchamas (menial workers). Shudras and Panchamas toil and produce wealth which the people of higher classes enjoy. According to a Hindu myth, the four recognized classes emanated from the mouth, the arms, the things and the feet of Brahma, the God of creation, respectively. Such myths and literature, created and perpetuated by Brahmins, seek to justify the social hierarchy and sanction their superiority. (Sarat Babu, p.45)

The news of the marriage-celebrations between a boy and a girl from sharana families proves to be the last straw as tempers are already running high in certain section of the society. The boy belongs to the erstwhile untouchable community and the girl to a Brahmin family but both families are converted to the new sharana faith. The old system has been challenged and the Brahmin ghettos witness some unrest. Damodar Bhatta convinces Sovideva to rise in revolt against his father because the king has failed to stop the marriage and has instead tried to protect sharanas. As he says,

This marriage arranged by the *sharanas* was no trifling matter. On the one hand stands the Vedic Dharama, which has branched out in strength over the centuries and now shades the whole of Aryavarta. On the other, there is the *sharanas* movement—a pestilence—but of a virulence not seen since the days of the Buddha. These two face each other in implacable hostility. The battle is without quarter. And if Your Majesty had not intervened the *sharanas* would met their fate on the day of that infamous wedding. But Your Majesty staunched the wrath of the people. (Karnad, p. 65)

King Bijjala is dethroned but not killed by Damodar Bhatt, Manchanna Kramita and Prince Soviddeva to save their own skins. It left to Jagdev, a Brahmin turned sharana who enters the palace through a secret passage and kills Bijjala by enticing him to come out of the Shiva temple. The queen had died earlier and the king is half-mad when he is killed. The whole city of Kalyan is bathed in the blood of innocent people because the power – hungry rulers and the obscurantist nobility would not accept change. Their pathological hatred of the lower castes has led them to behave bestially. For the manipulators of the political system, men and women are merely pawns to be sacrificed at will for self-interest and grabbing the power. In this context, Karnad says, “You perceive deep irony, because, after all the martyrdom of the sharanas, when they re-emerged after three centuries of underground survival as ligayats, they were totally caste ridden...It seems 800 years have solved no problems. We are back exactly where we started”. (Karnad, 76)

Karnad is a playwright who has a profound concern for both men and women, especially the oppressed and subalterns. He is a humanist who believes in the past as mirror for reflecting on the present and so has constantly turned to the past myths, histories, and oral tales for his themes. He is humanist who is iconoclastic enough to demystify the dominant beliefs and practices, both secular and spiritual that are more often put to evil use by crooked and the biased. He affirms the physical and earthly life as it is, mainly through the indomitable women char as a humanist has deep insight into the contemporary social and political issues, which are eternally relevant to mankind through he does not openly suggest any pragmatic solutions for them. His humanistic solutions are implicitly embedded in the plays themselves. In the play, *Yayati*, he beautifully present and raise the voice for the women issues, which are depicted. His humanism is tinged with a sense of loss, pain, suffering, incomprehension, and helplessness. The rebellious humanist however succeeds in making his voice heard. When the saint Basavanna and the saintly king Bijjala can be crucified, how can the society be redeemed? Questions kike these are nailed fast to his readers and the audience.

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