

# QUEST FOR IDENTITY OF WOMEN IN THE PLAYS OF GIRISH KARNAD

Moumita Biswas

Research Scholar

Under the supervision of Dr. Supriya  
Ranchi University

This article is a humble attempt to search the identity of women in the patriarchal society prevailing in India. The condition of women in India has undergone several alterations since past millennia. During the Vedic time, women enjoyed a higher status and were extolled to the heights of Heaven by epitomising her as Goddess. Gradually with the passage of time women lost their status and dignity. She is regarded as an *abla*, a weak and helpless lady who depends upon man for her existence and sustenance.

Indian Literature viewed women as role bound possession whose sacrifices preserved the sanctity and the well being of the family. Literature has always been ambivalent in its representation of women. Writers observed that women had become a heated argument and they started portraying them in their works. They drew inspirations from the real life incidents, which talked about liberating the images. This article traces the paradigm shift where women emerge despite all obstacles to hold her identity in personal and professional life. This paper aims at portraying, the women is no more an accessory to man rather she is a companion, a life partner who is equal to men in all aspects.

Keywords- Women, obstacle, patriarchal, alteration, existence

Women's education, employment, and family roles and the interrelations between them have attracted increasing attention in last few years. Feminist have dispelled long held notions about "women's place" and the accepted myths about their nature and function. Over the last few decades there has been a tremendous change in laws, attitudes, and norms affecting women's status, roles, and development in society in India. As a result of which women have ventured beyond the traditional role of wife and mother, and have sought employment career outside the home, and have actively participated in economic and social development of the nation. There is a restructuring and reorientation of women's role in contemporary society. However, not much empirical knowledge is available about these changes and the impact they have on women's behaviour, values or attitudes and identities. Rapid social changes in women's career and family roles are accompanied by a significant transition in their attitude towards career and family. Research in the last decade highlighted the complex relationships between women's objective roles and her subjective attitudes regarding these roles which affect her overall life satisfaction and sense of identity in society.

In the present era in the post-colonial literature woman has become the centre of discussion, not only in India but also in western countries. Amartya Sen in his "more than 100 million women are missing" mentions two main reasons for gender inequality, first thing is the cultural bias and discrimination while providing nutritious food and general medical treatment. Cultural biases always keep the male domination at the top. Silvia wallaby in her "theorizing patriarchy" depicts patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate oppress and exploit women.

Girish Karnad's plays are very significant from feministic point of view. As a living legend in the contemporary Indian English drama he is considered one of the most significant Indian dramatists. He critically evaluates all his women characters. Much scope is given for their self-expression. They go

beyond the social norms—to fulfill their desires. They are the embodiment of strength, straightforwardness and protestor against social structure which suppresses woman's position.

Spivak accentuates that the ideological construction of gender keeps the male in dominate and female in shadow. Therefore, the role of women should be redefined. It should be done in two ways, first to be within the family and then in public where there is patriarchy of men.

The gender-bias in society and the oppression of women by the patriarchal order form an important part of Karnad's plays. In his plays Karnad pictures the condition of a typical Indian female is ruled by patriarchal order bounded by tradition but those spirits remains unbounded. As a man of humanism Karnad sincerely tries to give the voice to this silenced majority through his plays. Devayani, Sharmishta, Chitralkha in *Yayati*, Kapila and Padmini in *Hayavadana*, Rani in *Naga-mandala*. Tribals: Nitillai and Vishakha in *The Fire and the Rain*, Mahout in *Bali, the Sacrifice* and Rahabai in *Wedding Album*, represent the Karnad's effort to give them the voice to speak.

In masculine society, where woman is identified as 'other' or 'second' sex, despite her high position in the society. Karnad doesn't stick to idealization of son's self-sacrifice rather raises voice against this. Devayani, the queen has to suffer humiliation and finally becomes insane. Swarnalata is tortured by her husband's doubts of infidelity insults and is finally deserted; Sharmishta is an easy prey of Yayati's sexual gratification. Though Chitralkha also faces similar conditions, she emerges as a new woman who boldly challenges the decision of Pooru. She does not allow Pooru to enter into her bedroom-which accepts the course of his father for his moral miss demeanor and becomes old. "I will not let my husband step back into my bedroom unless he returns a young man"

The present paper discusses various philosophical and theoretical aspects of women who struggle audaciously against patriarchy, male dominance and gender discourses. Karnad as an embodiment of rich culture of this land. This is how women characters of his plays become subject of discussion in various ways.

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. In fact, 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 their own 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 are 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 misbehavior 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 Paravasu 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.

As we move backward in antiquity in myth and folk based plays we come across a different set of women- domineering, articulating their sexual desire and indulging in extra-marital relationship without any compunction. In Karnad’s *Hayavadana* it is the women who act as the deciding force be it the princess’ stubborn decision to marry the horse that results into the birth of Hayavadana or Padmini’s decision to have both Devadatta’s head and Kapila’s body that takes her to extra - marital relationship with Kapila and for some time she enjoys completeness. When the illicit relationship is discovered it is not she who is accused of by Devadatta. He accuses Kapila and they end their life fighting. She does not intervene. She lives by her own whims and fancies. Even their death is decided by her:

PADMINI : They burned, lived, fought, embraced and died. I stood silent. If I’d said, ‘yes, I’ll live with you both’, perhaps they would have been alive yet. But I couldn’t say it. I couldn’t say, ‘yes’. No,Kapila, no, Devadatta. I know it in my blood you couldn’t have lived together. You would’ve had to share not only me but your bodies as well. Because you knew death you died in each other’s arms. You could only have lived ripping each other to pieces. I had to drive you to death. You forgave each other, but again, left me out. (*Hayavadana* 176).

Not only this she decides the fate of her child in a way that suggests that her child is the son of both Kapila and Devadutta:

PADMINI (without looking at him) : Yes, please. My son is sleeping in the hut. Take him under your care. Give him to the hunters who live in this forest and tell them it’s Kapila son. They loved Kapila and will bring the child up. Let the child grow up in the forest with the rivers and the trees. When he’s five take him to the Revered Brahmin Vidyasagara of Dharmaputra. Tell him it’s Devadatta’s on. (*Hayavadana* 176).

Thus giving charge of her son to Bhagavata she decides to become sati on the combined pyre of Devadatta and Kapila. One wonders of the two friends are not the victim of the female protagonist. Does she have the license of playing fatal games with her husband who loves her honestly or with her husband's friend who devotedly serves them as Hanuman served Sita and Ram? Who is responsible for the tragic end? Is this the healthy way to create female identity? Does the play endorse sati system as chosen by the widows themselves?

However one thing that comes out explicitly is that the quest for perfection / completeness is illusive and untenable. This view is supported by the subplot of Hayavadana (a Karnad's creation) in which Hayavadana struggles to becoming a complete man. He undergoes its ordeal, meets several wise men and finally goes to the goddess Kali where Devadatta and Kapila had offered their heads and gets the blessing to become horse instead of man because of linguistic lapse. But Hayavadana's voice remains human till he is purged of it by the grace of Padmini's boy at the place of Bhagavata. He makes the boy laugh and sing who has never laughed in his age of five years.

The play presents the case of subversion of patriarchy both in practice as well as theory. The main subject of discourse is whether a man should be identified with his head or body as the accidental mistake in transposition of head causes the problem of identity and the solution offered in the two versions of the story is that the head would be the master. Karnad subverts this idea as it is in fact, a patriarchal design in which a male's decision is imposed on a woman and she is supposed to be happy with that.

One of the other well-known plays of kannada is *Nagamandala* (1988) different phases of men and women are explored in the play, even the great injustice is done to women my men in patriarchal society women's great agony and anguish is shown in the play.

Though the great injustice is done to her but stealthily deflates the concept of chastity .through the story 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. Cultured biases in male dominating patriarchal society. Women are treated as foolish and ignorant, their intellectuality is not all recognized, they have lack of freedom to express themselves in the world Identity is still a question mark in case of women. In the present play Rani is representative of all women of that period who undergoes social formation in patriarchal society. she respects values in society superficially her appearance is orthodox but she stands as woman of daring confident and self-trust, gets ready for any examination to prove herself as pure and succeeds in that indiscrimination of gender only the truth is endeavoring. Karnad succeeds in proving this through Rani's character religions.

In case of *Tale danda* as a religious play gives more concentration for castes' .Reformation, at the same time women's position is expressed through the character of Rambhavathi, women's suppression vulnerable condition is of no difference in case of women of high status and bellow. Rambhavathi is also a subject of suppression as Jagadevas' mother and wife of middle class.

In *Yayati* Chitralekha, the wife of Pooru, makes a very radical point that she has married not Puru but with the youth in him and discovers that identity in Yayati and offers herself to that identity:

I married him for his youth. For his potential to plant the seed of the Bharats 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." ( Karnad: Yayati 65-66)

The king screams in anger but she continues: " You have taken over your son's youth. It follows that you should accept everything that comes attached to it." (Karnad: Yayati 66)

She further humiliates Yayati: "Oh, come, sir. These are trivial considerations...." (Karnad: Yayati 65-66)



Chitralkha is the strongest of all the characters- male or female- in Yayati. She is educated, beautiful and well versed in several arts and warfare. When she is deprived of her legitimate right of her youthful husband, she enters into a dialogue with her father-in-law, who was trying to pursue her to accept the changed reality of Pooru for a decade or so. This dialogue clearly reveals what authority a woman holds:

Yayati (horrified): Hold your tongue! You dare indulge in levity about your husband's death?

Chitralkha (flaring up): 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 foisting your troubles on a plaint son?

Yayati (shouts): Chitra! Take care ....

Chitralkha: Sir! This is my chamber. Only my husband has the right to come in here without my permission, or to shout out my name when he pleases. I am not aware I have allowed anyone else that freedom.

Yayati: I apologize. I ... (Karnad: Yayati 62)

In fact, all characters conduct themselves as per their gunas or sanskaras. Sharmistha, the second wife of Yayati is docile and purely conformist while Devayani, the first wife of Yayati takes revenge against her husband and leaves him forever. She behaves in the vein of her father Shukarcharya, the guru of demons. It is true that they all act in a patriarchal setup and if any age can be assigned to this story, it will date back to a period in B.C. It establishes the fact that women had been enjoying greater freedom and space in ancient India than what they had under Islamic rules.

Chitralkha finds nothing wrong in it to subvert the patriarchal thought. When denied she commits suicide and her suicide brings Pooru back to his sense. He returns his youth to Pooru, "Take back your youth, Pooru. Rule well. Let me go and face my destiny in the wilds." (Karnad: Yayati, 69)

This brief perusal of the fiction of women in Girish Karnad's plays shows that he maps the development of women in India from prehistoric period to the modern / postmodern age passing through different phases and covering women from Brahmin, Kshatriya, Shudra and Tribal. His women are of mixed bag. Some are conformist and stereotypical, some are independent, some are rebel in their own ways while some are ambivalent and they try to create space for themselves within the patriarchal set up. It is concluded with the sum of suggestions by Amartya Sen in his "more than hundred million women are missing" to improve the status of women in male dominated society. He says only through gainful employment outside the home could be increased her status. Her suggestions are welcomed in family affairs. By becoming a part of bread-winner role, she could have equality to male gender; slowly society would turn towards woman with high respect and equality. May all cultural biases favorable to male dominancy could vanish.

## REFERENCES

Bala, Suman, "This mad dance of incompleteness: Search for Completeness in Hayavadana" in J. Dodiya's(ed.) *The Plays of Girish Karnad* ( New Delhi : Prestige, 2009)

Bhagwat, Vidyut, *Feminist Social Thought* (Rawat Publications, New Delhi, 2004)

Karnad, Girish, *The Fire and the Rain* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1998).

Karnad, Girish. *Collected Plays Vol. I & II*. New Delhi: OUP, 2010. Print.

---. *Yayati*. New Delhi: OUP, 2008. Print.

---. *The Fire and the Rain*. New Delhi, OUP, 1998. Print.

---. *Wedding Album*. New Delhi: OUP, 2009. Print.

Karnad, Girish, Karnad, Girish, *The Fire and the Rain* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press,1998).

Kosta, Abhishek, *The Plays of Girish Karnad* (Atlantic Publishers,New Delhi,2012)

Mukherjee, Tutun, (ed), *Girish Karnad's plays, Performance and Critical Perspectives* (New Delhi, Pencraft, 20

Renganathan, Mala, "Re-Reading the Fire and the Rain" in Tutun Mukherjee's (ed) *Girish Karnad's plays : Performance and Critical Perspective* (New Delhi, Pencraft,2008).

