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Inner and Outer Reflections of Woman's Body and Soul in the Plays of Girish Karnad

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The present paper offers a critique of selected plays of Girish Karnad over the issues of representation of women. Human culture and civilization, since the ancient times to the nineteenth century, was male dominated and women have been considered inferior to men in almost each and every aspect of life. They have been treated as second sex both biologically and culturally and are often represented by male authors as an epitome of beauty. With the change in time women started fighting against their traditional roles. Many women authors like Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Anita Desai etc. described the whole world of women with stunning frankness. But Indian male authors generally failed to delineate their female characters in a strong manner. Girish Karnad is the only playwright who has given the unique representation to women in his plays. He treated subjects of adultery and lust in a very playful and frisky manner thereby treating women sympathetically as compared to his contemporaries. But in an effort to liberate woman's body he actually remains indifferent to the women centered art themes which actually set women free from the shackles of male dominated society. The present paper reflects such issues of women in the plays of Karnad which actually accounts for politics of representation.

Literature grows out of life, reacts upon life, and is fed by life. Conventionally, it is a mirror to society. Whether it is 'art for art's sake' or 'art for life's sake', pleasure and utility blend like a chemical compound. Women writers and women readers have always had to work against the grain. The world literature recites the elegy of woman identity and individuality. It is the tragedy of 'sex-toy' in the literary canons of male dominant world. Aristotle declared that the female is 'femle' by virtue of a certain lack of qualities; and St. Thomas Aquinas believed that woman is an 'imperfect man'. John Donne in his 'Air and Angels' alludes that form is masculine and matter feminine: the superior, godlike male intellect impresses its form upon the malleable, inert female matter. In pre-Mendelian days, men regarded their sperms as the active seeds which give form to the waiting ovum, which lacks identity till it receive the male's impress.

Let no one be borne,
But if one must
Let no one be a girl.

These lines of Vidyapati (early 15th century A.D.) truly exemplify the eternal suffering of the female gender. It may be Eliot's Maggie or Walker's Celie, Tolstoy's Anna Karenina or Casey's Juno, every female character epitomizes Darwin's 'struggle for existence'.

Identity refers to what a person has in him or herself. It lies in self-assertion and expression to one's individuality. The question of identity presupposes an awareness of one's

own existence as a person having positive self-image and the ability to think. Rene Descartes says, 'I think therefore I am.' The concept of identity is crucial as it provides a locus for freedom and fulfils a precondition of empowerment. Generally, empowerment of woman means the self realization of woman and her active participation in decision making, in her social and personal life. Dr. Kelkar in his book *Feminism in Search of an Identity* writes that at the level of theory, "it is possible to think that woman can realize herself and can play a significant role in making personal

and social life meaningful, but at the level of practice it is difficult because at this level empowerment is not only related to her abilities and capacities but also to the customs, traditions and religious practices that either provide or restrict the space for her to bloom."

Feminism challenges patriarchy and gender differences in life, art and culture. It has a definite political stance. According to Toril Moi, feminist criticism is a special kind of political discourse, a theoretical and critical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism, not simply a concern for gender in literature. At a glance, a lot of Indian women seem to be better than their Asian counterparts. India boasts of an Ex- Prime Minister, President, and more women in important positions than any other country in the world. However, a closer look at the majority of Indian women quickly proves this to be a fallacy as the social pattern has hardly changed for the lower classes. Manu, the father of the Hindu caste system, who lived in 2000 B.C. said,

From the cradle to the grave a woman is dependent on a male: in childhood on her father, in youth on her husband, in old age on her son.

Since the Bronze Age the male dominated patriarchal society has put the woman at a great disadvantage in respect of their social, religious, economic and religious rights. It has been observed that some laws in the 'Smriti' or Hindu laws codes were erected from time to time and over the ages, salutary to the welfare of women. But the ruling hegemony of the day, nonetheless, never implemented them. This has resulted in the Brahminical religious order in a social system dominated by patriarchy and promoted practices of hypergamy, polygamy, child marriage, oppression of child widow and widow sati, concubinage, harlotry and the laws which regarded women as polluted during the period when they reach their adulthood. The earliest revolutionary and reformative creeds, Buddhism and Jainism attempted social and religious reforms from positions outside the religious and social order. They, however, displayed unequal suspicion and disapproval of the issues pertaining to the rights of women. The great Buddha saw in woman a personification of evil and was unwilling in conceding to women equal rights even in the matter of spiritual quest. It was only at the persuasion of his foster mother Prajapati Goutami that he consented for the admission of women into monistic life. All through the epic and Sanskrit literature descriptions of women are in abundance. But every time women is described in terms of their beauty of her physical figure "pinasronipayodhara". They talk of women only by the way of describing her hair, her waist, her navel and her breasts. Even poet like Kalidasa could not escape from this. In *Mahabharata* at one place Draupadi is described as "Trigambhirsaddunta Rakta Pancasu Pandasu" that is she was deep at three places, raised at six ones, and red at five. This description is made in a very low taste to add insult to the injury.

Most playwrights in the history of Indian theatre, failed to delineate their female characters in a strong manner. But Girish Karnad is the only playwright among his contemporaries who has given a unique representation to women in his plays. He has treated adultery as a normal subject and has treated adulterous women sympathetically. Yet he repeatedly turns the situation and manipulates the language so brilliantly thereby creating ambiguity and a space of freedom for himself as well as for the readers and spectators. The portrayal of woman by Karnad invokes a representational mode of projecting female body as a sexualized object. He has glamourized the roles of the archetypal women. He has placed his women characters in a closed circle of dominant patriarchy and ideology which is unequivocally chauvinistic. On the surface level, he treats his female characters as being just in having sexual desires but actually he is indifferent to the women centered art themes which seeks to restore the dignity and equality of women. Luce Irigaray's exhortation of women to do what comes to mind, do what you like, without reason, without valid motive, without justification rarely coincides with the representations of Karnad's heroines. For him, woman is just the symbol of erotic desires, trapped in the universal stereotypes. He has depicted the image of woman as loose and provocative. He has repeatedly condemned woman for her fickleness, and her concerns with appearances. He fails to represent the concept of 'new woman' as is represented by Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sehgal, Henrik Ibsen or Arnold Wesker. He represents women as being locked behind the fences of patriarchal boundaries which results in their oppression, suppression and in turn to their internalization of male dominated codes and conventions. In a pseudo attempt to provide a high pedestal to women he actually degrades their whole existence. In his dramatic world, only male characters seem to have monopoly over the important matters and women seem to be associated with passivity. Her only desire is the longing for a superior male body. Even the act of telling stories by Karnad is structured upon phallo-centric myths. His ideology is complicit with patriarchy. He only depicts women in Lacanian and Freudian sense. He elevates his women by infusing in them sexual desires which the ancient women were not allowed to display openly and which they themselves regarded as a matter of evil and shame. Padmini in *Hayavadana*, Rani in *Naga-Mandala* and Vishakha in *The Fire and The Rain* are shown as having erotic desires and Karnad justifies them as being natural to human instinct. But the outcome of those desires is again represented in a traditional way which in no way gives true representation to women. Padmini, who desires for the intelligent mind and strong body of a person, performs sati, Rani, who sleeps with Naga unintentionally, bears the burden of her lover and Vishakha, who makes the relation with her old lover outside the marriage is left alienated. Thus they are made to suffer loneliness, lovelessness, rootlessness, boredom and humiliation.

In his dramatic world women are treated as objects of lust for the ardent men to whom even the family relation with that woman does not matter. Padmini, the sister-in-law of Kapila is the object of lust for Kapila, Rani for Naga and Vishakha for her father-in-law Raibhya and her old lover Yavakri. Women are taught to repress their desires and trained to practice self-effacement. She has articulated male constructed definition. She is not expected to go outside and perform but efficiently lurk around the threshold supporting male endeavor. Those who try to cross the threshold and acquire voice are scared of the wide, dark, animalistic devouring world outside. So the large number of them remains passive, servile, silent, bearing and rearing children and gratifying the sexual needs of their husbands. Padmini in *Hayavadana* makes an attempt to cross the threshold and wages a war against the patriarchal order of command and contentment. By her pungent honesty she is able to achieve the impossible dream of a perfect

man, though for a brief period. She walks out of her house with her son to the forest to seek Kapila, her dream rider. But she falls prey to patriarchal society. She succumbs like Vishakha but does not allow herself to be abused and thrown away for the design of man. Like Nittilai risks her life to make Arvasu a complete man, Padmini risks herself to make Kapila a complete man but she does not deny the truth of her being, of her heart of her feeling. She has to affirm her life in the fire as Nittilai affirms her life in the rain.

Women in the male's domain are ill treated and tortured by their husbands and in laws for various reasons. Ambedkar has pointed out that, "Women under the laws of Manu allow the husband the right to beat his wife." (431) Rani is beaten up by her husband Appanna and Vishakha is beaten up by her father-in-law Raibhya because they both tried to step outside their respective households to meet other men. Though Karnad's women are full of desires and dreams but they cannot lead a life of their choice. They are submissive, faithful, and self effacing, honoring their husbands even in the most unpleasant circumstances. They are stereotypical, docile, shouted at, told to mind their own business, rejected and packed off to their parents.

Extra Marital affairs are a taboo for women even in this age of enlightenment but it is not a taboo for men. Though men commit the worst kind of sexual crimes, people blame only the women. Padmini is considered bad and amoral when after her marriage with Devadatta she desires for Kapila, whereas Devadatta has many affairs before his marriage but he is not blamed. Similarly Appanna also has a concubine but Rani's involvement with Naga makes her to face the snake ordeal by her husband and the village elders. Vishakha is beaten up for her intimate meeting with Yavakri but Raibhya who has a lust for his daughter in law, is not said anything even by Vishakha's husband, Paravasu. No man in patriarchal society could tolerate his wife's relationship with another man. Nittilai understand this fact and proves to be an Indian woman as she feels that under no circumstances she should spoil the reputation of her husband. But her husband does not understand the truth and out of suspicion kills her. Rani in Naga-Mandala is made to live with Appanna happily in the end. She very well knows the fact that the child born to her is of Naga. But she accepts her fate and plunges into marital joys with her husband who humiliated and beaten her up before. This is very much in the tune with the ethos of patriarchal society which cannot accept a woman being in love with two men at one and the same time.

In others plays of Karnad like *Tale-Danda* and *Yayati*, which are also women centered, representation of women is made with the facet of gender politics. In *Yayati*, Chitralkha's dreadful situation can be seen when she has to bear all the consequences of her husband's Puru's exchange of youth with his father. Unable to live with the old man, she commits suicide instead of fighting to restore her rights. In *Tale-Danda* queen Rambhavati, might be represented as the queen of her kingdom but the reality is that she is no better than any other servant of the palace. The deep rooted patriarchal attitude makes her husband feel superior and behave in a rude manner she has to wail, cry and shed tears. Rambhavati seems to be devoid of a self or a will of her own.

Karnad plays consist of two worlds, internal and external. The internal world is that of the husband and wife and the external world consists of friends, father, mother, relatives and even concubines. The wife is isolated and kept aloof from the external world. The husbands try to

exert monopoly over their wives and if they fail to do so, they get emotionally charged and destructive.

Centuries later this is the bitter truth that most uneducated and economically dependent women have to live with it even today. They represent Ibsen's Nora in 'The Doll's House' whose awakening is suppressed. Unlike her, they never slam the door. Modern pieces of Indian art are expected to play their role in the betterment of women. But, the scene is opposite in the present works. They epitomize the politics of representation.

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