

The Women of ‘Wedding Album’: Reading Vidula, Amma, and Hema

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Abstract:

Indian culture can be many things at the same time. But, if one were to take a snapshot of it, it would look a lot like Girish Karnad’s ‘Wedding Album’. The play is written in modern India where a family is shown first from the top-most layer, and then from within. Karnad talks about various complexities of culture by keeping the institution of marriage central to the play. Here, we meet an Indian middle-class family in the process of getting Vidula, their youngest daughter married. What starts as a regular glimpse in any average family soon shows us various hidden desires, resentments, and conflicts that are present in the minds of Vidula, Hema, and Amma - the women of ‘Wedding Album’. The paper aims to trace the dual identities of these women, their desires, and their characters throughout the play to understand their reflections of women living in modern-day India.

Keywords: Feminism, Women’s Study, Indian Drama, Indian women’s Identity, Modern-day Indian Woman, Cultural Study.

Introduction

When a writer tries to capture the culture of modern-day India, there are some aspects, like the arranged marriage system, which invariably fall under close scrutiny. Girish Karnad’s ‘Wedding Album’ is a play that not only talks about it but gives the reader and viewer a glimpse into the mindset of people who have been through the same process and have come out on the other side.

If put simply, Karnad’s ‘Wedding Album’ is a play that takes us into the world of a middle-class family, with characters that are in the process of getting Vidula, their youngest daughter,

married to a guy named Ashwin, who is currently living abroad. What unfolds is a story that takes a turn and reveals various layers to what seems like a regular family.

What sets this play apart is how, even though the setting is regular, Karnad manages to loop in the feelings of the younger generation and in contrast of the older generation towards everything - from marriage to technology to caste and much more.

Karnad places this play at the intersection of old cultural values and new, all the while tracing some elements of human nature that become transparent as the play progresses. The beauty of simple words placed in stark contrast to complex characters, 'Wedding Album' explores the changing Indian household and the bleeding of some cultural values of the past into new ones emerging in this current generation.

The play, as compared to other plays written by Karnad, is a new way of storytelling for the playwright himself. Usually, most of Karnad's plays are set in or have deep-rooted references to mythology or/and folklore. 'Wedding Album', however, is set in the current time, with all the chaos and beauty of modern life. The play holds a true mirror to the society we live in and the values which various people have embodied, just like the ones we meet in the play. From afar, it looks like a picture of a happy and regular family but as you get closer, you get a glimpse of everything that lies just beneath the surface.

Karnad's play makes the reader wonder and question how cultural values transition from one generation to another and how, during the course of life, some deep-rooted feelings can come up in different forms, often when we least expect them to interfere with our lives.

The themes, setting, characters, and message of the play all hint towards a deeper look at the transition of culture and values by ensuring due criticism wherever needed.

Class and Behaviour in 'Wedding Album'

With the opening of Karnad's 'Wedding Album', the clash between two generations is prominently visible. One can even argue that this clash is indeed between the Western and Indian traditions. Without using myth or history, Karnad presents to us a world where characters belong to a middle-class family and are of different generations.

The class and age of the people we meet in 'The Wedding Album' play a significant role in shaping the story that Karnad is trying to tell us. It is crucial to note that for the first time ever, Karnad has written a play that takes place in a contemporary setup. All his other works use history

or mythology to give a base and depth to his story. With the 'Wedding Album', Karnad looks deep and hard into the psyche of an average middle-class family.

Essentially, the play is about Vidula's wedding to Ashwin. We meet the Nadkarni family and slowly, the characters start to appear. In a modern setting, these characters use cell phones, have access to a cybercafe and thus to the internet, and have maids at their house. These are some clear markers of the class to which the family belongs. There are conversations that cover finance and struggles with it, highlighting that the central family of 'Wedding Album' is middle-class.

"The Nadkarnis are not only representatives of a middle-class Hindu family but the theme applies to any caste, creed, and religion in India and this makes the play relevant in any context, and perfectly contemporary. To think rather differently it is a blend of Indian culture and techno-savvy modern culture. The scattered personalities reveal the discontentment of human selves in the world of globalization." (Avachar 1)

These characters are a true reflection of people who belong to an Indian middle-class household. In fact, once Karnad goes deeper into their psyche, one can see a deep reflection of culture and societal values deeply rooted in people of different generations. The play becomes a site of the transition between the two ideologies and how they bleed into one another.

The Women of 'Wedding Album'

Girish Karnad, even though his other plays, has always had female characters who are in search of their identity. With 'Wedding Album', we meet some characters who are in this quest themselves.

Vidula, The Bride-to-be

Vidula, the younger daughter of the Nadkarni family, is all set to marry Ashwin Panje, a boy who is based in the US. The story goes that Vidula and Ashwin have never seen each other, but have exchanged portraits through the internet. In fact, to make this marriage seem less absurd, Vidula is shooting an introductory video to share with Ashwin in an attempt to get him to know her better.

At first, Vidula seems like any average middle-class girl, who is expected to get married at a certain age. However, we see Vidula's conflict when her family encourages her to talk and

highlight some things about herself while hiding the other parts. She is among the characters who question the entire institute of marriage and the authenticity that lies in such unions.

With the opening scene, we can see how Vidula treats the idea of appealing as one individual while feeling completely the opposite of it:

VIDULA: I am Vidula, Vidula Nadkarni. I am twenty- two. Twenty- two and a half, actually. I have done my BA in Geography. Passed my exams last year. I am not doing anything at the moment. Worked for a travel agency for six months.

(Stops. Looks at Rohit)

I got bored. If I come to the US, will I need to work? I am really not very good at it.

ROHIT (offscreen): Why don't you smile a bit? Look cheerful....

ROHIT (offscreen): But don't go out of your way to make yourself unattractive. (Karnad 5, 6)

This contrast is like a window into Vidula's mind whereas her brother, Rohit, just wants to make sure her match works out with the promising boy, Ashwin. In fact, Rohit, who works in television, tries to share Vidula's story with Pratibha Khan, a producer for the same television series. In a conversation with Rohit, Pratibha admits that even though she likes Vidula, people who belong to the 21st century would not accept that an educated Hindu girl and an eligible man living in the US have agreed to get married without a meeting, without seeing each other in person ever. This reflects the conflict that we see in Vidula's personality as well. In fact, it is the very conflict that drives her actions throughout the play.

“His woman is contemporary, “new” woman in search of identity in the society which secures freedom to female sex on a par with a male counterpart. The present play also throws new light on the psyche and behavior of these new women. The mother, Hema, Vidula, Pratibha, and even Radhabai are new women in the true sense of the term. Their lives are full of anxieties and resentments while facing the mental, psychological and emotional hardships of life.” (Avachar)

Vidula lives a life of duality. The play tells us that Vidula frequently visits a cybercafe. When asked, she says that she visits the cybercafe to listen to bhajans. However, as the story unfolds, it is revealed that Vidula was indeed trying to find her own sexuality.

This struggle of coming to terms with her sexuality is well captured in the ironic scene where the two men come to the Cybercafe under the pretext of caring about Indian cultures and values. Karnad uses this as an ironic point to show how these old values cross the path of Vidula, who was just trying to take charge of her own sexual identity.

Vidula's story is similar to a lot of adult women in India who live double lives - the one that society expects of them and another one where they discover who they really are.

Amma, the Mother

The modern Indian household of the Nadkarnis is held together by Amma - Hema, Rohit, and Vidula's mother. The play takes a plunge into her psyche by talking about how she plays her role as an Indian mother planning a wedding.

Amma's character is made to be the epitome of warmth, showing the mother in the light of just that - a mother. The readers meet her as a woman with a plan - she has to figure out shopping, plan for the arrival of her soon-to-be son-in-law, all the while dealing with her kids. She is seen planning way ahead and using Vidula's wedding as a chance to get back to or settle the score with her extended family.

This desire to use the event of Vidula's marriage as a way to get back at people who have wronged her is a reflection of how women in the Indian household hold little to no freedom to truly disagree with other members of the family, not if the peace is disturbed. However, just like Amma tried, they try to do it under the pretext of internal matters like weddings.

When Vidula's birth certificate arrives, however, things take a stir. Where there should be her father's name, Vidula quickly finds that the name is that of her uncle, Ramdas. When Amma finds this out, she is livid. Here is how it unfolds:

MOTHER: Don't you see? This wasn't a mistake. That's not possible. This was deliberate,... The rascal! (Karnad 48)

What is revealed here is how Ramdas, Vidula's uncle, used this situation where he was sent to register Vidula's birth, as a way to settle the scores with his brother. Although there is no relationship between Amma and Ramdas, this move done purely to spite his brother takes into account how it would make Amma or Vidula feel.

Such instances, when brushed under the rug, create the tapestry of threads that hold together the entire plot of 'Wedding Album', and at the center of it is Amma, changing with time to make sure it stays that way.

Hema, The Sister

Conflicts of gender are clearly visible in other female characters like Hema, Vidula's older sister, who is married and settled abroad. She has a husband, who is a working professional, and a son. Although she is visiting her family on the occasion of helping her sister's match work out for the best, we see the anxieties of Hema materialize in the form of constant calls and hand-holding of her son and husband. One can argue that through these actions, Hema is performing, or trying to perform, the role of an ideal wife, daughter, mother, and sister.

We reflect on Hema's own identity when Vivan enters the story.

Vivan is a thirteen-year-old boy who comes to the Nadkarni household to borrow books. He is seen to have developed feelings for Hema, who has a son just 2 years younger than Vivan. The books that Vivan reads are sexual and sensual in nature, starting with 'Madam Bovary'. When Hema confronts him about it, he says that he has even read 'Lady Chatterley's Lover'. This unfolds a deep reflection into the psyche of a complex character like Vivan and in contrast, how it makes Hema feel when he tells her that he is indeed in love with her.

"One cannot understand that a boy of thirteen or of fourteen can have sexual desire for a woman of his mother's age. He has written a letter to Hema with these explicit words;"Darling you don't know how I desire to crush you in my arms." In the fourth scene we find Vivan visiting once again Hema and gives her one more letter. When Hema threatens him to tell the matter to his mother, he says, "Go ahead I will also tell her I love you. The moment I saw you the other day, I fell desperately in love. I want to die with my hand inside your." After listening to this Hema slaps him but he tells that he is crazy of her. This type of complex relationship is first time shown by Karnad in the Indian Theatre." (Suresh 2)

This layered character of Vivan brings out the way in which female characters are often viewed in society.

Through Hema, Karnad comments on multiple things. Her character is similar to a lot of girls living in Indian society. She embodies the roles and responsibilities that women are expected to carry, the relationships they are expected to maintain, and the families they are expected to build and sustain. In life, when such events like a wedding in the family occur, the elder daughter plays a vital role in making sure all goes smoothly. With Hema, we see the performativity of the social role she is entrusted. However, there is also conflict.

Her conflict becomes visible in little moments where her calm and collected self gives way to a more honest and open dialogue between her and the rest of the family members, especially her mother. With her Amma, there are some resentments that have been buried deep through the years, and only through inor conflict, they come up and are visible. Desire also plays a major role in bringing out the side of Hema that is not expected out of an Indian woman with a child and a husband. Her character is shown to have mixed feelings about the feelings that Vivan expresses. Through this, Karnad comments on how women have a complex relationship with desire. These instances show that no matter how someone appears on the surface has nothing to do with their inner thoughts, desires, and their everyday reality. This shows how complexities are a major part of every Indian woman's life, including Hema.

“Karnad presents the vanity of young girls in our contemporary middle class urban life. Their worries and anxieties in life, involvement and activities in the city internet cafés are displayed in the play with a realistic touch.” (Keerthana 1)

Through Hema, we see how resentments can build up over the years and how, even when married, there are endless expectations, roles, and realities that a seemingly modern woman lives through.

Conclusion

Girish Karnad has used a lot of realistic experiences to create a play where women find the voice, they need to talk about things that are usually not seen on stage or read about. The play ‘Wedding Album’ is no exception. Through his female characters, he brings to light various realities that go into making a modern identity of an Indian woman. The play works as a splendid reflection of how women lead dual lives in order to explore their desires, are constantly aware of how they are fulfilling various roles and yet they fulfill them and is a clear mirror to the fact that even when society considered these women to be free and independent, they are but in search of their own identity, the one they can feel like their own. Karnad is the writer who not only recognizes this search but also ensures that he writes about it as openly and transparently as possible.

This quest to identify the real identity and self-image that every modern Indian woman carries is what makes Karnad's play so special. His lens is that of an observer, who not only knows the pain and restrictions of this society that women juggle every single day, but is also the person

who is not afraid to challenge those through writing that involves female characters like Vidula, Hema, and Amma.

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