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Women's Sexuality and Sensibility in Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana*

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Abstract:

Girish Karnad was an eminent Indian playwright, actor, film director and public intellectual who, in one of his plays *Hayavadana*, Karnad exhibits female sexuality and sensibility through the character of Padmini. She challenges traditional gender roles and societal expectations by refusing to be confined to the role of a submissive wife. Padmini's desire for a complete and fulfilling relationship leads her to explore her desires and assert her agency. Her pursuit of love and fulfilment illustrates her struggle for liberation from the constraints placed upon her by society, highlighting the importance of self-discovery and autonomy for women. The Indian society and its culture are dominated by the patriarchal system, rarely offering any chance to females to make use of their liberty for the achievement of their cupidity and advancement of identity which they declare as their possession. Karnad uses *Hayavadana* as an objective correlative to depict human sentiments and man-woman relationships. Whether Karnad's play shows relevance to the present issues, yet it is deeply rooted in the past cultures. He reflects a society of obscure passions, of dark and debarred sentimental spirit immanent in women's desirability which is reflected through the play. He also examined how societal norms and individual desires intersect, impacting the characters' expressions of sensuality and their sense of self. Karnad also tries to represent that how the natural urge of his female protagonist, Padmini is becoming massive over the societal customs and beliefs rejecting patriarchy. He also tries to ridicule the biased ethics of the male-dominant society through the play, which shows no concern for the emotions of a woman and acknowledges her as a subhuman who survives entirely to serve him with utter fidelity.

Keywords: Female sensibility, Gender biasness, Sexuality, Patriarchy, Identity crisis.

Introduction

Female sensibility has appeared as a censorious quest with broader relevance than the feminist movements. The scrutiny of a classical backdrop of gender norms and several gender

concepts and theories was an effort to initiate the separation of women into numerous times and these attempts enforced to refine them.

Gender, as distinctive from sex, has no relation with biology. Dissimilar to sex, which is biologically determined, gender is a social and cultural set-up. No wonder that men and women are anthropologically unlike from each other, but the sexual dissimilarities do not suggest inequity and supremacy of one over other. Peter Barry remarks in his book *Beginning Theory* that,

This distinction is what Simone de Beauvoir invokes in the famous first sentence in part two of *The Second Sex* (1949) when she writes 'One is not born a woman; one becomes a woman.' The project of Beauvoir's book is one which Sexual Politics sees itself as continuing. (130)

In the patriarchal social system of India, 'masculinity' is related to dominance, where 'femininity' is associated with lowliness, and masculinity suggests power, action, self-contention, supremacy and self-denial. Sex is the creation of God. The sexual distinctness is vital for procreation, but gender is not God's creation. It is the patriarchal construct that offers the male instinct for superiority. A patriarchal social order strongly contends male dominance over females and is built not upon mutuality but on suppression. Despite the fact that women have taken part in a crucial part in the construction of the society and have been active means. Yet, the Indian patriarchal society has often endeavoured to lower them to the 'edge'. Gender is deeply implanted in a stratified division of labour, that is, men are for production, and women are for reproduction. Harriet Bradley provides us with the correct interpretation from her text *Fractured Identities*, which reflects on the bond between humans:

Gender refers to the varied and complex arrangements between men and women, encompassing the organization of reproduction, the sexual divisions of labour and cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity. (Bradley, 205)

Girish Karnad's works are widely acknowledged for their complex narrative, mingling folklore and current issues. He usually analyses ethnic, historical and mythological contexts, and his play *Hayavadana* reveals his distinctive story-telling technique. He wrote *Hayavadana* initially in Kannada and later on translated in English. The play is composed upon a tale from Somadev's collection of tales called *Kathasaritsagar*. However, it has been drawn primarily from Thomas Mann's rewriting of a similar tale as *The Transposed Heads*. Karnad's dramas probe through intricate characters and metaphysical concepts, creating captivating experiences

for his spectators. The tale of *Hayavadana* begins with an introduction in which a narrator offers the spectator chief issues and casts of the play. Devadatta and Padmini get united in wedlock with Kapila's support. Devadatta is in love with Padmini to the bosom of his heart. However, Padmini has crush on Kapila. Being a Brahmin, Devadatta concentrates on reading Vedas, writing texts and poetries, and as the son of a blacksmith, Kapila is dusky, dark and has a strong body; he loves swimming and wrestling. As time advances, Padmini gets sick and tired of Devadatta's wisdom and uninteresting work. Besides, Devadatta develops a protruding stomach, which Padmini dislikes. She desires for variation and relish in her married life. She feels attraction for Kapila. As she admires Kapila in such lines,

PADMINI: [watching him, to herself]. How he climbs- like an ape, Before I could even say 'yes', he had taken off his shirt, pulled his *dhoti* up and swung up the branch. And what an ethereal shape! Such a broad back- like an ocean with muscles rippling across it- and then that small, feminine waist which looks so helpless. (*Hayavadana*, 25)

Padmini's beauty, too captivates Kapila. He, too has a crush on her. They both feel comfort in each other's presence. Padmini desires for an extra-marital affair with Kapila, who is dusky and robust. Padmini has no sense of guilt and shame because she realizes that she is a rebellion against patriarchal norms. Nevertheless, Kapila has a sense of guilt against Devadatta. He is scared because he does not have an intention to hurt Devadatta and to lose their friendship. Therefore, he seeks to seduce Padmini without Devadatta's knowledge. Instead, Padmini does not have any sense of fear regarding her husband. She flirts openly with Kapila in the presence of Devadatta. Devadatta become possessive concerning Padmini's interest in Kapila which is evident in the argument between him and her wife Padmini; when, she asks about Kapila to him, he says,

DEVADATTA: ... and drool over Kapila all day.

PADMINI: [taken aback]. What do you mean?

DEVADATTA: What else should I say? The other day I wanted to read out a play of Bhasa's to you and sure enough Kapila drops in.

PADMINI: Oh! That's biting you still, is it? ... But why are you blaming me? He was your friend even before you married me, wasn't he? He used to drop in every day even then...

DEVADATTA: But shouldn't he realize I'm married now? He just can't go on as before...

PADMINI: Don't blame him. It's my fault. He learnt a bit about poetry from you and I thought he might enjoy Bhasa. So, I asked him to come...He didn't want to...but I insisted. (*Hayavadana*, 20)

While Devadatta and Kapila were depicted as brothers in the play, Padmini's desires for Kapila becomes an incestuous relationship, as this type of love is forbidden in society according to the laws of patriarchal society. Padmini's desires and her flirting with Kapila seem as taboo. Each woman has an impulse to seek for a chance to shatter the patriarchal customs, like Padmini intentionally breaks the societal rules by seducing Kapila. Devadatta is now in an awkward situation. He hesitates to take up the issue with Padmini or else with Kapila. He, too do not wish to hurt Padmini's emotions.

The story acts per their interwoven fates as they counter threats and alterations, comprising a pivotal storyline element involving a switched horse's head. Padmini, one of the chief characters in the play, is a leading character. She is the spouse of Devadatta, one of the two best friends. Padmini turns into a piece of fascination and love for Devadatta and Kapila, creating a triangular bond at the core of the drama. Her character offers a portrayal of beauty, lust, and the clash between sexual and rational appeal. Throughout the play, Padmini's presence prompts the emotional pressure and provides the subject of the search for completeness, a woman's search for identity and gaining recognition for the significance of attaining a woman's corporal needs in society. As Charlotte Bronte rightly said, "*I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will; which I now exert to leave you*" (257-258, *Jane Eyre*). Padmini, trapped in the web of societal norms and traditions, woven by the patriarchal society to trap the women to drive her to foster the obligations of her man. Therefore, in this play, Padmini is not ready to tolerate all the tyranny of patriarchy and retain her impulses above her responsibilities as a spouse and a mother.

Gender consciousness is a significant aspect of the play and depicted through the transformation of characters. The play revolves around the central theme of a 'head transplant' where two characters, Devadatta and Kapila, switch heads. This physical transformation blurred the lines of gender identity, highlighting the idea that one's identity is not solely defined by their physical characteristics. Karnad questions societal gender roles and expectations throughout the play. The characters like Padmini and Kapila challenge traditional gender roles,

with Padmini initially appearing as a strong, independent woman and Kapila as a man struggling with his identity. This switch explores the complexities of gender and the limitations imposed by societal norms. The play also delves into desire and attraction, regardless of gender. The character's romantic and sexual feelings are not constrained by traditional gender roles, emphasizing that love and desire are universal human experiences that transcend gender boundaries. Because of transposed heads, here arises a question of identity when Kapila angrily says, "*Whose wife is she?*" (*Hayavadana*, 36). The characters in the play, grapple with a sense of incompleteness, both in terms of their physical and gender identities. Like in the play Padmini yells in an argument with Kapila for her incompleteness, "*Whose incompleteness? Yours?*" (*Hayavadana*, 57). This underscores the idea that true completeness and fulfilment may not be found solely through conforming to societal norms. Karnad explores the idea of a woman's sexuality as a multifaceted and complex aspect of human identity. The central idea concerning women's sexuality that he reflects through the drama is the notion. According to Karnad, women's desires, choices, and experiences are not one-dimensional but rather a rich tapestry of emotions and conflicts. The chorus comments that, "*A head for each breast. A pupil for each eye. A side for each arm. I have neither regret nor shame. The blood pours into the earth and a song branches out in the sky*" (*Hayavadana*, 64). Karnad reflects the feminine desires and emotions through the chorus, which Padmini herself cannot convey in her own words. Karnad challenges traditional and reductive views of women's sexuality by emphasizing various ideas in his play *Hayavadana*.

Girish Karnad depicts women's sexuality as a taboo in society; whether he does not explicitly state his views within the play, but he uses the characters and their experiences to shed light on this issue. Karnad, in his play, highlights the deeply entrenched patriarchal norms in society. These norms often dictate women's roles and behaviours, including their sexuality. The women are expected to conform to these norms, and any deviation met with societal disapproval. The play *Hayavadana* also showcases the double standards applied to men and women regarding their sexual behaviour. Men like Kapila and Devadatta face fewer consequences for their actions as compared to Padmini. This reflects a common societal bias where men are often forgiven or excused for their sexual behaviours while women were judged more harshly. Devadatta and Kapila who both love Padmini, have very narrow thinking regarding the women's rights and freedom. The play depicts how society judges and moralizes women's sexuality. Whether a man is a husband or a lover, man will be a man. No matter how much he loves and admires a woman, he is the holder of the patriarchy and will never wish to

lose his power and sense of superiority. Padmini's sexual independence and desires were not met with gossip and condemnation. It reflects a broader societal tendency to scrutinize and stigmatize women who explore their sexuality openly. Karnad's portrayal of characters like Padmini suggests that society often seeks to control and repress women's sexuality to maintain traditional power structures. Women who assert their sexual agency were seen as threatening the status quo. The play illustrates how societal expectations regarding women's sexuality are deeply ingrained and resistant to change. These expectations can lead to internal conflict for women torn between their desires and societal norms. In the play, Padmini's character is represented as a strong and sexually independent woman. The chorus also sings Padmini's desires in such lines, "*Why should love stick to the sap of a single body? When the stem is drunk with the thick yearning of the many petalled lantanas, why should it be tied down to the relation of a single flower?*" (*Hayavadana*, 63-64). Her desires for both Kapila and Devadatta defy conventional norms that expect women to be passive or monogamous in their romantic and sexual relationships. Her agency in expressing her desires challenges traditional gender roles. When Devadatta and Kapila both cut off their heads she knowingly transposed their heads, when goddess Kali tells her to join the heads to their respective bodies,

PADMINI. Yes, Mother...

[Eagerly, Padmini puts the heads – that is, the masks – back. But in her excitement, she mixes them up so that Devadatta's mask goes to Kapila's body and vice versa. Then presses the sword on their necks, does namaskara to the goddess, walks downstage and stands with her back to the goddess, her eyes shut tight.] (*Hayavadana*, 33)

Padmini uses a trick to seek sexual completeness and yearning. She yells in happiness, "*Fabulous body – fabulous brain – fabulous Devadatta*" (*Hayavadana*, 43). It reflects her determination to assert her individuality and challenge societal expectations placed upon her as a woman. The female chorus also sings,

FEMALE CHORUS. The river only feels the

pull of the waterfall.

She giggles and tickles the rushes

on the banks, then turns

a top of dry leaves
in the navel of the whirlpool, weaves
a water-snake in the net of silver strands
in the green depths, frightens the frog
on the rug of moss, sticks and bamboo leaves,
sings, tosses, leaps and
sweeps on in a rush - (*Hayavadana*, 58-59)

The love triangle between Padmini, Kapila and Devadatta creates a conflict which is not solely about gender, but also about desire and love, highlighting the complexity of human emotions and relationships. The society within the play reacts with shock and confusion to Padmini's sexual choices. Her actions challenge the established norms of patriarchy and lead to gossip, judgment and moral scrutiny. It reflects the real-world tendency to stigmatize and condemn those who do not conform to societal expectations regarding sexuality. Padmini's relationship with Kapila, who possesses Devadatta's head, raises questions about the nature of desire, love, and attraction beyond physical appearance. This transformation underscores the idea that love is not only based on physical attributes but is a deeper, more complex connection. The reactions of society to Padmini's sexuality also serve as a commentary on societal hypocrisy. The same society that adheres to rigid norms often engages in secret affairs and hypocrisy, revealing the contradictions in their moral judgements.

So, the portrayal of a woman's independent will of choosing her sexuality over morality by Karnad in the play indicates a threat to the Patriarchal society and cultural norms. He depicts how Padmini's open expression of her sexual desires challenges the patriarchal control that society seeks to maintain over women. Her refusal to conform to traditional roles and expectations disrupt established power dynamics. Padmini's sexual independence and her desire for Devadatta and Kapila defy cultural norms that dictate monogamy and the male dominance in relationships. This defiance, questions the deeply ingrained cultural expectations regarding woman's behaviour. Padmini's character subverts traditional gender roles. She takes the initiative in her relationships, which is unconventional in a patriarchal society. This subversion threatens the patriarchal order that relies on the strict segregation of gender roles.

Kapila's jealousy and insecurity about Padmini's love for Devadatta reveal the fragility of male ego within a patriarchal framework. His discomfort highlights how a women's sexual agency can disrupt male dominance and control. In the words of Eva Figs,

Dominance is ... the keynote in an analysis of the man-woman relationship where the male attributes are one associated with mental thought and positive activity, whilst the woman is regarded as essentially passive; her role is to be the respectable of male sexual drive for the subsequent reproduction of the species. (173)

Devadatta too, feels jealous and insecure about his bosom friend Kapila whether Kapila is his childhood friend, who is reflected through such lines in the play after hearing Padmini's views about Kapila's physique, "*And why should I blame her? It's his strong body – his manly muscles. And to think I had never ever noticed them all these years...I was an innocent – an absolute baby.*" (*Hayavadana*, 26). Padmini also comments on Kapila, "*No woman could resist him*" (*Hayavadana*, 26). Kapila's words also show that Padmini is not a simple girl and cannot be controlled easily in these lines with Devadatta, "*You are a gentle soul. You can't bear a bitter word or an evil thought. But this one is fast as lightning – and as sharp. She is not for the likes of you. What she needs is a man of steel.*" (*Hayavadana*, 19). Kapila also realises that Padmini is not a such type of woman who can bear patriarchal suppressions and cultural norms.

Padmini's actions were met with societal condemnation and gossip. It reflects the societal fear that women's sexual independence can lead to moral decay and the erosion of cultural values, which shows how society attempts to suppress any deviation from the established norms. In this relation, Karnad comments, "*If womanhood finds fulfilment in love that happens to be outside marriage why should that be considered wrong? Radha's love for Krishna was such*" (Karnad 43). The central plot device of the head transplant between Kapila and Devadatta's heads serves as a metaphor for the interchangeability and fluidity of gender roles and identities. It symbolizes the threat that women's sexuality poses to the rigid gender roles upheld by the patriarchal society. Padmini's attraction to Devadatta and Kapila challenges societal norms regarding monogamy and heterosexual relationships. Her struggle to reconcile her desires with societal expectations reflects the complexity of forming a sexual identity in the face of cultural norms. Her experiences illustrate that identity is not only defined by gender or sexual orientation.

Conclusion

In this play, *Hayavadana*, Girish Karnad represents a powerful and rebellious attitude of a woman's character through Padmini. He has depicted Padmini as a mutinous character from the significant play, *Hayavadana*. She encounters the slyness of her husband, Devadatta and she plans to seek attainment in her life. She degrades patriarchy and its conventional norms and ridicules it by proving herself to be a polygamist. Through the unique plot and characters of *Hayavadana*, Karnad tries to raise questions about the fluidity of gender and the limitations of societal expectations. It encourages the audience to reconsider traditional notions of gender and identity, making it an essential work in the context of gender consciousness. Karnad does not explicitly provide a solution to the issue of women's sexuality being a taboo; he raises awareness about the complex interplay of societal norms, double standards, and moral judgements that contribute to the persistence of this taboo. His work encourages reflection on these issues and the need for societal change to foster greater acceptance and understanding of women's sexual agency. Padmini's sexuality challenges societal expectations, explores the complexity of human desire and relationships, and exposes the hypocrisy and insecurities of the patriarchal society within the play. It also focuses on the fear that patriarchal societies have of women's sexual agency, as it has the potential to unravel deeply entrenched power structures and cultural expectations.

Padmini's search for identity and completeness in the play refers of how societal expectations, gender roles, and desires intersect and shape one's sense of self, and it invites the audience to reflect on the challenges and complexities of identity formation within a patriarchal society. In the essence, Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* challenges the stereotypical and often repressive views of women's sexuality which are prevalent in society. He portrays women as individuals with complex desires and choices, acknowledging the diversity and richness of their experiences; Karnad's exploration of women's sexuality invites society to reflect on the importance of respecting and understanding the autonomy and complexities of women's sexual identities.

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