

Exploration of Female Protagonists in GIRISH KARNAD'S Selected Plays.

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Girish Karnad is one of his interviews says:

In our homes, women folk speak a lot when they serve food. They have freedom to speak only in the kitchen and in the bedroom. The reason probably is they give food and sex. It is only there that a man sits and receives while the woman gives.

Karnad's female protagonists give an impression, if seen objectively, as if they are different facets of one character called 'woman' placed in the essential socio-political and economical perspective. They pass through a journey, having realised the oddities of life but remain unshaken, unbroken, and unmoved and ultimately reach to the goal, fixed by the creator of Karnad's stature. On their way they are seen being tossed by the social inhibitions, moral turpitude, taboos, yet the journey continues till they reach to the state of self-identification. It seems as if Karnad-step by step, allows his female protagonists come out of the man made 'impregnable castle' to enjoy the fresh air of self-reverence. Karnad is conscious in letting out his female protagonists to enjoy a new identity.

This paper covers Karnad's four major plays viz: Yayati, Hayavadana, Nagamandala and The fire and the Rain and the study of the mind of the playwright how he develops and moulds the female sensibility towards the current wave of self-identification emerging gradually among women.

Karnad's female protagonists belong to the different strata of society, but they are common as far as female sensibility and aspirations are concerned. Chitrlekha is a princess, married to Puru, the heir prince, Padmini belongs to a rich merchant family and is married to a Brahmin belonging to upper middle class, Rani happens to be a common village girl and Vishakha is wife of a great priest. Karnad, consciously tries to cover the predicament of woman in general with the expected socioeconomical issues pertaining to their lives. One quite interesting thing to note here is that all the four female characters are young married women and are put to test to prove their mettle against the dictates of man's ego. A young girl, having enjoyed all sorts of freedom finds herself in the most odd situation where she finds her world of dream being questioned and her identity erased.

The emotional set back they face, give them a new force and like Phoenix they once again emerge from their ashes and prove their potential and add a new meaning to their lives. In Nagmandala Karnad uses the right metaphor 'lock' to intensify the psychological as well as social helplessness, a woman is several times forced to face. They attempt to come out of man made boundaries.

One very common feature with the four protagonists is their aspiration to attain motherhood. what they call 'completeness' and thus the crux of the problem-man, woman relationship, sex and the problems related to that, creep to the general attitude towards life.

It is a characteristic feature of Karnad as playwright to explore the Indian folk tales as mythology and to give them a new context and meaning. In YAYATI my focus of attention is on how Chitrlekha reacts in the last part of the play and emerges as the voice shattering into pieces the human

ego and its self -asserted dominance. Yayati, the king, as he is old now, feels if he gets some more years added to his life, he would be able to fulfil his dream as a king. He asks his son Puru to sacrifice his twenty five years and Puru unhesitatingly does so. Puru never thought of the plight of his young wife Chitrlekha nor did the king think if his act was socially as well as morally justified. When Chitrlekha faces her husband, now feeble, emaciated old looking man, she is shocked and the woman in her breaks the social barriers. She categorically challenges the very authority of the king. She doesn't yield to the arguments of Yayati but retorts:

Cowards and Liars will always argue, With your arguments, you have woven a net around me.
(76)²

To make the man's ego more miserable, Chitrlekha puts a proposal before Yayati. She would like him to take the place of Puru in her life so that she can bear a child of the family.

When I accepted Puru as my husband I did not know him. I had chosen his youth,..... The qualities that I chose in him are not present in him any longer but..... but still possess all those qualities. (75)³

In Chitrlekha, I believe, Karnad has initiated the very concept of a conscious woman who struggles to make her space and voice heard.

Karnad goes a step further in Hayavadana while creating a multidimensional character in Padmini. She is beautiful, clever, pragmatic and above all innovative. Yayati's Chitrlekha questions the very authenticity of men's dictates, whereas Padmini tempers with Nature to fulfil her dream. She makes an attempt to bridge the gap between illusion and reality. Padmini gets married with a delicate looking scholar Brahmin, Devdatta but her deep-rooted urge for 'absolute' always disturbs her in the presence of Kapila. "What an ethereal shape? Such a broad back-like an ocean with muscles rippling across it and that small feminine waist which looks so helpless." (25)

Padmini starts dreaming of a 'complete' man. She gets a chance when Devdatta and Kapila offer their heads before the goddess Kali. At this juncture she liberates her 'woman' from the social restraints and becomes the maker of her fate. She exchanges the heads and thus gets Devdatta with Kapila's Body. She overrules the predicament. at least for a time being. Nature does not allow her to enjoy the self created illusion but for a while she is successful in deluding even Nature. Padmini meets her fate at the end of the play as she is put in the most crucial, perplexing situation but the way she handles the female sensibility and asserts her identification, is indeed a new dimension of Karnad's female protagonist.

The human predicament and the need to live by fictions and half truths, is the complex theme of Karnad's next play Nagmandala where the female protagonist Rani exhibits the dilemma in the life of an Indian woman. Despite physical and mental tortures given to her by her husband, she is not ready to break away from moral compunction. The only expectation she cherishes is the loving husband at night. She gets that acceptance from Appanna- the cobra and feels elated. All her grudges are forgotten and she is quite complacent as she realises her motherhood. Till her trial she has the conviction that her husband is the instrument in giving her the feel of completeness. It is interesting to note here that without disturbing the very base of socio-moral structure of faith prevailing in our

society, Karnad provides three probable ends to this play. The first is the expected one, the second is the wishful thinking but the third is to bring woman's identity into focus. Rani accepts the half truth on realising that it was none else but the Cobra who made her attain motherhood. At the end of the play, therefore, she saves cobra from Appanna, her husband.

She lets her hair down to the floor and says "Quick now. Get it. Are you safely in there ? Good. Now stay there... Let me get used to you. This hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss, live in there happily, for ever. (45, 46)

Both Padmini and Rani undergo the same experience, the first aspires to have perfection through two human beings, Devdatta and Kapila, and Rani feels satisfied through Appanna, her husband and Appanna the Cobra. The human instinct is almost the same in both the female protagonists. Regarding Rani's predicament S.R. Jalota's observation appears more relevant in the present context. He writes :

It leads the audience to reflect on the efficacy of the social laws which discriminate a woman from a man and which demand a wife's faithfulness even to her callous husband.

In the projection of Rani's character Karnad makes an attempt to bring a state of self-introspection for man in general with the eternal truth as the holy Bible says, "Judge not the thy be not judged."

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. Seema Suneel, "Girish Karnad's Yayati Reconsidered". New Directions in Indian Drama ed. Sudhakar Pandey and Freya Barua (Prestige Books : New Delhi : 1994) 135.
3. Ibid.
4. Jalota, S.R. "Girish Karnad's Nagmandala: Epic Theatre Revisited", The Indian journal of English Studies (Vol. xxxiv-1995-96, IAES, New Delhi), 62.