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Reimagining Women: A Socio-Cultural Reading of the Selected Plays of Girish Karnad

Sonu Kumar Mishra,^{a*}

Dr. Ram Avadh Prajapati^{b**}

^aResearch Scholar, Department of English, Bareilly College, Bareilly, Affiliated to M.J.P. Rohilkhand University, Bareilly, U.P., India.

^b Ph.D. Supervisor & Assistant Professor, Department of English, Bareilly College, Bareilly, Affiliated to M.J.P. Rohilkhand University, Bareilly, U.P., India.

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to investigate Girish Karnad's role in reconfiguring traditional narratives as vehicles of exploring the socio-cultural status of women in Indian societies. Through a text-based analysis of selected plays, *Yayati*, *Hayavadana*, *Naga-Mandala*, *Tughlaq*, and *The Fire and the Rain*, this article illustrates how Karnad uses myths, folklore, and historical events to fashion creative narratives discussing the concepts of womanhood, morality, and patriarchal norms. The women in Karnad's narratives emerge as strategic actors navigating a thin balance between personal freedom and societal conformity as per the moral and cultural standards of their communities. His dramaturgy repurposes inherited myths as live tête-à-tête on ideological changes over time, revealing the two forces; tradition and modernization, desire and duty, and personal conviction and societal affirmation. Hence, as his laser-focuses on lived experiences and stories of women, his dramaturgy becomes a vessel for moral thinking and cultural revitalization, ensuring that the redefined traditions open up vistas for gender justice and a humanistic universe.

Introduction

Girish Karnad (1938–2019) is one of the major exponents and regarded as a great contributor to modern Indian theatre. He has been lauded for his ability to articulate myths, folklores and historical narratives in terms that are relevant to the challenges posed by contemporary socio-cultural concerns. C.L. Khatri aptly remarks about Karnad's use of Indian myths in his plays, "He (Karnad) makes good use of Indian mythology in his plays and finds parables for contemporary

situations. He picks up stories and characters from Indian mythology and history, and through them he dramatizes the contemporary realities" (5). Women are protagonists throughout his works, multidimensional subjects existing in the realm of desire, obligation, identity and agency within patriarchal structures; not just supporting characters. Karnad recasts tradition to reveal its weaknesses and possibilities by emphasising female roles as agents of change, conflict, and cultural negotiation. This article critically examines

>Corresponding author

**E-mail: avadhraj2291@gmail.com (Dr. Ram Avadh Prajapati).

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<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3805-2733>



the social and cultural situation of women in his plays to exhibit how Karnad defies established gender norms as well as myths and history that define such roles.

Myth and Patriarchy

One incident from *Mahabharata* is retold in Karnad's first play (*Yayati*, 1961) to expose the suffering of women in male craving and dynastic insecurities. The story becomes a commentary on male entitlement, as it has been re-told by Karnad, with Devayani and Sharmishtha more vocal about the trauma they have endured than in the classical version. "A King, by definition, has every choice," says Sharmishtha bitterly. "It is the slave who is deprived of it" exposes the play's hierarchical and gendered power structure (*Yayati*, 25). Women have been bargained for and handed from one man to another which sums up their predicament as victims of male control. Chitrlekha too challenges patriarchal expectation when she asks, "And now you want me to meekly yield to your demands?" (*Yayati*, 62). Sharmishtha's devastating judgment near the end of the play represents this spirit, "So here is the foundation of your glorious future, Your Majesty. A woman dead, another gone mad, and a third in danger of her life" (*Yayati*, 68). Karnad exposes the psychological toll that patriarchy takes on women and questions idealised ideas of mythological womanhood. Sharmishtha provides a far more compelling explanation of agency. She challenges caste and class hierarchies and boldly declares that she would not let her birth decide her destiny in response to Yayati's moralising views. Through these female characters, Karnad critiques a social structure that mandates women's sacrifice

while also normalising masculine folly. He reveals the agony of women trapped by male standards for chastity, loyalty and obedience. The play is an essential act of feminist intervention in contemporary Indian theatre because it mounts myth to tease out the psychological manifestations of gendered sadness. Taken as a whole these examples show that Karnad uses myth to direct attention to the social and emotional brutality of patriarchy.

Fragmented Female Subjectivity

Identity, wholeness and societal expectations are theming that Karnad deals with in *Hayavadana* (1971), a play modeled on Padmini as a woman who refuses to be confined to the domestic roles society assigns. The contradictions endowed by patriarchal constructions of gender are evident in Padmini's vacillation between Devadatta's intelligence and Kapila's body. Her divided attraction to Devadatta's intellect and Kapila's body becomes explicit in her exultant cry, "Fabulous body – fabulous brain – fabulous Devadatta" (*Collected Plays*, Vol. 1 153). Karnad's portrayal makes Padmini's emotional and physical dilemma evident. The story's focus on physical integrity and gendered coexistence reveals how female sex imposes ruptures within patriarchal dichotomies. Padmini's desires fracture the masculine homosocial order, making her the disruptive centre of the plot. Karnad employs Brechtian distancing techniques and local genres of the theatre to compose Padmini, not as a deviant woman, but in fact rather as a figure revealing the internal contradictions into which narratives about femininity get enmeshed. Taruna Anand puts,

“Padmini is a modern woman, freed from the socio-cultural inhibition, who executes her desire of perfection, a perfect man in her personal life by overthrowing the patriarchal propriety and male dominance” (Anand, 38). As Shubhangi Raykar observes, “Padmini’s predicament is the predicament of a modern, emancipated woman in our society who is torn between two polarities” (Raykar, 177). Additionally, Padmini’s tragic fate represents the enormous price extracted from women when they cross normative lines. The Dolls, in their animated form, are individual members of the society as well as the part of the social conscience who interpret Padmini’s psyche and according to Erin B. Mee they (Dolls) narrate her (Padmini’s), “dreams about Kapila as she sleeps, reveal the illicit desire she feels but cannot, as a married women in Indian society articulate” (Mee, 151). Karnad does not moralize her decisions; on the contrary, he uses her as a figure to examine more broadly how certain societal customs make autonomy in women something perilous and unacceptable. As Aparana Dharwadker says, the play “...gives primacy to women in the psychosexual relations of marriage, and creates a space for the expression of, even the fulfillment of amoral female desire within the constraints of patriarchy” (*Collected Plays*, Vol 1, xxviii).

Mythic Subversion and Female Desire

In *Naga-Mandala* (1988), one of Karnad’s most blatantly feminist works, a young woman named Rani is caught in a loveless marriage with Appanna. His words reveal the patriarchal reasoning that rules his home and set the harsh routine of Rani’s wedded life. “Well, then, I’ll be

back tomorrow at noon. Keep my lunch ready” he said. “Make sure my lunch is ready. I shall eat and go” diminishes the marriage bond to one of utility, command, and service, leaving no room for love, companionship, or acknowledgement. This dominance is made physically apparent by the stage direction that follows: he “goes out, shuts the door, locks it from the outside and goes away” (*Collected Plays*, Vol 1, 254). Rani is not only neglected but is actually imprisoned within marriage. When she ever tries to speak, Appanna cuts her off, “Look, I don’t like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand?” (*Collected Plays*, Vol 1, 254). The manner in which Appanna treats Rani; “locked up like a caged bird”, is a metaphor for women’s spatial restriction into patriarchal marriage (*Collected Plays*, Vol 1, 257). Karnad exposes the violence underlying the normative household when Appanna bluntly commands to stay inside the hermitage reducing Rani to a possession rather than a partner. However, she is not left in a state of passivity by the play. She protests, “I am not a parrot,” as she steadily gains verbal and emotional power. “Not a cat or a sparrow,” she said, claiming to be independent (*Collected Plays*, Vol 1, 284). The transformation of Rani, from a shy woman to an empowered woman, is an instance in which subjectivity of female self could be gotten back against the male hegemony. The charm of the naga and the lover provoke desire and traditional paradigms of righteousness, desire, and male authority suddenly appear outdated in the light of this magical tale. Her relationship with the Naga undermines that position because, despite her continued ignorance

of his identity, her encounter with the serpent-lover symbolises emotional contentment and permits a reimagining of marital intimacy. By the end of the play, her trial becomes a moment of female empowerment. By carrying the serpent and going into the flames to complete the ordeal and declare her innocence, she demonstrates her moral supremacy over patriarchal tyranny. The serpent ordeal, wherein she states, “Yes, my husband and this King Cobra. Except for these two, I have not touched any one of the male sex. Nor have I allowed any other male to touch me. If I lie, let the Cobra bite me”, is the apotheosis of her newfound selfhood, old language of chastity as performance art of strength rather than submission (*Collected Plays*, Vol 1, 292). Critics have read this as Karnad rewriting female purity narratives into agency narratives. The play also critiques the way society constructs truth, virtue and the concept of self; Rani’s survival depends on her ability to take control of how culture defines their stories. Thus, *Naga-Mandala* reconfigures folktale traditions to foreground women’s resilience and the complexities of female desire.

Political Histories and Marginal Women

Even though *Tughlaq* (1964) is not about women, the treatment of female characters in it sheds light on gendered marginality sanctioned by historical discourses. Women are generally shuttled aside, which means that feminine presence is written to disappear in political history unless the march of women becomes useful as a symbol. The Step-Mother serves repeatedly as an ethical counterpoint to the Sultan’s ambition, asking things like “Muhammad, how long are you going to torment

yourself this like?” (*Collected Plays*, Vol. 1, 77). In a world where masculine statecraft predominates, her presence brings compassion, self-control, and emotional intelligence. For example, the Sultan’s emotional deterioration is suggested by the brief references to the mother figure. Following the command to kill his Step-Mother, Tughlaq spiritually disintegrates and cries “God, God in Heaven, please help me. Please don’t let go of my hand. My skin drips with blood and I don’t know how much of it is mine and how much of others... Why am I become a pig rolling in this gory mud?” (*Collected Plays*, Vol 1, 79-80). Karnad here suggests that the women in the play are structurally sidelined, but their very marginalization reveals the moral vacuum created by patriarchal history. Karnad makes Tughlaq lament, invoking maternal wisdom as a counterpoint to his political ambition. Even though women do not occupy central dramatic action, their absence is itself a socio-cultural commentary. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar remarks that Karnad’s historical imagination is acutely aware of those silences that mark women’s exclusion from public life. Karnad subtly criticises the patriarchal historiography that favours male rulers and public activities while making women invisible by depicting a world in which female voices are rarely heard.

Women, Ritual, and Oppression

Women are once more the targets of patriarchal and ceremonial violence in *The Fire and the Rain* (1995), which is based on the *Mahabharata*’s story of Aravasu, Yavakri, and Brahminical rivalry. Tribal woman Nittilai is notable for her bravery, kindness, and moral rectitude. Though drawn with

courage and emotional clarity, is likewise trapped within structures of caste and gender. Her love for Arvasu transcends both caste and patriarchal conventions. At the same time, Arvasu's insistence that Nittilai is central to his life, "I can't give up Nittilai. She is my life. I can't live without her – I would rather be an outcaste –" gives their relationship emotional seriousness that exceeds ritual and caste law (*Collected Plays*, Vol. 2, 113). However, she is ruthlessly murdered for prioritising her independence over social standards. Her last cry becomes an indictment of a world ruled by caste, ritual, and masculine power. According to Nand Kumar, "Through dramatization of the mythological episode of Arvasu's love for a tribal girl of hunting community, Karnad very significantly condemns and ridicules the caste system which has been social stigma for ages" (176). The tragedy of Nittilai illustrates how women's bodies become sites for negotiating social, caste, and ritual anxieties. As Aparna Dharwadker notes that the death of Nittilai exposes the hardness of a ritual order that suppresses all forms of feminine agency. Another female character, Vishakha, represents the destructive confluence of patriarchal expectation, betrayal, and desire. Her bitter admission, "I was married off to Parvasu. I didn't want to, but that didn't matter," lays bare the denial of female consent within social and familial arrangements (*Collected Plays*, Vol 2, 122). The brutality of patriarchal indifference is exposed by Vishakha's marriage: Instead of acknowledging her as a complete human being, Parvasu disregards her emotional needs and uses her body as a means of

satisfaction. Her affair with Yavakri is framed not as moral failing but as a symptom of her emotional abandonment. Karnad, through this play has exposed the vulnerability of rigid gender norms. As Mohan Lal Mahto observes, "Vishakha and Nittilai are two prominent female characters in the play who become the victims of patriarchal hegemony" (Mahto, 82).

Karnad's Feminist Dramaturgy

Across these plays, Karnad accomplishes a complex task: he retrieves stories from myth, folklore, and history, only to reinterpret them in ways that expose and critique patriarchal ideologies. In doing so, he participates in what Meenakshi Mukherjee terms, the unpacking of tradition, a process by which cultural narratives are revisited and re-evaluated to reveal their assumptions. The women in Karnad, however, are not so easily typed: they are neither glorified heroines playing a function nor merely victims. But they are not simple victims, nor even necessarily likeable people. They are complicated and contradictory characters whose travails reflect something about the socio-cultural conflict of the old tales and modern times alike. There are themes and patterns running through it that indicate greater depth of character, such as a repeated theme of imprisonment and observation. Both Rani and Devayani are themselves confined and scrutinised, illustrating the larger curtailment of women in general. However, what Karnad gives us is also that of lust and action. Padmini and Rani expose such desires and urges in themselves which are intense, overwhelming and shattering the patriarchal categories that are running counter to

their nature. In his stories, women revolt and display a fighting spirit. Sharmishtha rebels against the caste system, Rani rejects purity standard displays her best self even in fear and rescue, and Nittilai chooses love over tribal utility. At the core of Karnad's dramaturgy is a feminist demonstration with cultural theorist who explains that one needs to re-read the culture archive. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak contends, "the task is not to reject the past but to retrieve it for new uses" (Spivak 203). Karnad embodies this through his dynamic reworking of inherited narratives.

Conclusion

The plays of Girish Karnad critically excavate the socio-cultural profile of women in historical, mythic and folk backgrounds. His dramaturgy undermines patriarchal norms and decentres it, hence forming a more complex female subjectivity based on the concepts of desire and resistance. Rewriting history to address current-day anxieties, Karnad interrogates and reanimates cultural memory with women as central agents in a dialectical clash between tradition and modernity. Through his plays he has revisited the characters of women in classical stories and even as interventions in feminism, in Indian theatre.

Because the women in his plays interest so many readers and audiences of our time, just as they have for those years, one could say that is because those characters are absolutely classic vehicles for us to think about what being a human being is all about the paradoxes, ironies ambiguities, double binds and options there can be in life.

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