

FEMINISM IN GIRISH KARNAD'S PLAYS

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Abstract

Feminism is beneficial to men, women, and their families because it is allowing mothers, daughters, and sisters to have an equal opportunity in life to achieve all they can without any discrimination based on their sex. It is a human right to be equal to others around you and it does not matter if you are male or female. They should both receive the same opportunities and privileges given in life and feminism helps women accomplish this task of equality. Feminism is allowing women to expand their careers and businesses that they never were able to have before. Women now have power in government and they hold high and powerful jobs. They have gained their independence from a male dominated society and are rising to become less dependent on their husbands for financial support. Many women are now even managing their own families, without the help or support of a man. Men are also being helped because their wives are now able to help with financial needs; they are not depended on for the only source of income for their family anymore.

Key Words: Feminism, Play, Society, Patriarchy, family. modern, exploit, relationship

Introduction

Gender issues seem to be suffused in most of the plays of Girish Karnad. In his plays, Karnad very dexterously pictures the condition of a typical Indian female, ruled by the patriarchal order bounded by tradition, but whose spirit remains unbounded. Although the playwright is not an out and out feminist like Henrik Ibsen, the playwright of *The Doll's House*, but the problems of a female in a prejudiced, biased patriarchal society are referred to in most plays by the playwright. The issue of the gender-bias in society and the oppression of women by the patriarchal order happen to form an important part of Karnad's plays. At the same time, Karnad depicts women enthused with feminism, fighting the unjust norms of the patriarchal order. Also more often than not such a direct encounter with patriarchy leads the women to death or disaster. The present paper undertakes to study the treatment of female in two plays of Karnad based on myths, namely *Yayati* (1961) and *Bali: The Sacrifice* (1980; rendered into English in 2004).

Karnad has borrowed the myth of *Yayati* from the "Adiparva" of the *Mahabharata*. *Yayati* re-tells the age-old story of the king who in his longing for eternal youth does not hesitate to usurp the youth and vitality of his son. Karnad takes liberty with the myth and weaves complex dimensions into the plot borrowed from the *Mahabharata*. To the mythical story of *Yayati* he adds new characters and alters the story-line so as to deepen its connotative richness which gives it contemporary appeal.

In Karnad's *Yayati*, king *Yayati* is married to *Devyani*, an "Aryan" princess and during the course of the play, develops an illicit relationship with *Sharmishtha*, an "Anarya", and openly expresses his desire to marry her. *Puru*, here figures as the son of another of the king's spouse, who again like *Sharmishtha*, comes from the "Anarya" or the "rakshasa" clan. The two novel characters introduced by Karnad in the plot are, *Puru's* wife *Chitrlekha* and the maid confidant, *Swarnalata*. Karnad invests new meaning and significance for contemporary life and reality by exploring the king's motivations. In the *Mahabharata*, *Yayati* understands the nature of desire itself and realizes that fulfillment neither diminishes nor eliminates desire. In the drama, Karnad makes *Yayati* confront the horrifying consequences of not being able to relinquish desire.

Bali: The Sacrifice was first brought out into Kannada in 1980 by the name of *Hittina Hunja*, but

was not translated in English at that time. The source of the play is an ancient Kannada epic, Yashodhara Charite, which itself draws on several other sources. The play is one that has multiple ideological issues. Though based on an ancient Kannada epic, the story, characters and incidents are often overshadowed by overt ideological concerns as relevant today as they were many centuries ago. The play is a treatise on the viability of violence and non-violence in the present scenario.

The plot of Bali: The Sacrifice comprises of four characters, the Queen, the King, the Queen-Mother and the Mahout. The Queen is a Jain and she marries a Hindu King. Out of love for his spouse, the King converts into Jainism but is unable to come to terms with the new faith. Jainism dictates non-violence and Hinduism believes in the practice of sacrifice or bali, which means violence. The Queen-Mother is a devout Hindu who believes in sacrifices. The King vacillates from one end to the other, from Hinduism to Jainism, from the Queen-Mother to his wife but is unable to come to terms with any faith. In the climactic event of the play, the Queen enchanted by the beautiful voice of a low caste ugly, Mahout, the Elephant-Keeper, mates with him.

Soon after the incident comes to the knowledge of the King and the Queen-Mother, being a Jain, the King cannot indulge into violence by killing the Mahout and avenging the wrong of desecrating the sanctity of marital bond. The question which haunts the King and the Queen-Mother is how to placate the Gods and Goddesses for this act of sin. Finally the Queen-Mother tells the King that to placate for the sin committed, a sacrifice has to be made. The Queen does not want to indulge in this mock sacrifice but is forced to by the King. Since no real blood can be shed, a dough-cock is decided to be sacrificed, which suddenly comes alive. The sacrifice of the dough cock turns into the sacrifice of the Queen herself and she dies. The question posed is whether intended violence is as offensive as real violence—whether the thought of mock- sacrifice is equivalent to actual sacrifice?

In Hittina-Hunja, the Kannada version of Bali, as in the original myth, the Queen did not actually commit adultery but only intended to, while in Karnad's Bali, she actually does commit adultery.

The Oppression of Women

In Yayati, the issue of gender is highlighted especially in the way Yayati treats women in the play. C.N. Ramachandran feels that in Karnad's plays choice and consequences of choice were dissociated and the one who suffered the most due to the choices of others was always a woman. In most plays of Karnad, "the worst sufferers are women . . . who are caught up in a whirlpool of Hindu patriarchy, and are sucked down helplessly." (Ramachandran 28)

Karnad, in order to present the situation of a newly-wed female (had she been in the original mythical story) adds the character of Chitrlekha which throws more light on the gender-bias of society.

The desires of a woman are always curbed in a patriarchal order; here it makes little difference whether she belongs to a high class/ caste or a low class/ caste. Chitrlekha in Yayati is an Aryan princess, the protagonist in Bali: The Sacrifice is a queen and Vishakha in The Fire and the Rain is a Brahmin; all these women belong to a higher social order but suffer at the hands of the unjust patriarchal order. The character of Chitrlekha as has already been said is Karnad's creation. "Through her Karnad explores the futility of being born a princess who finds reality too much to bear and kills herself". (Raju 84)

Chitrlekha suffers first at the hands of her husband, Puru, who does not think of his wife even

once before acceding to the supreme sacrifice of giving up his youth and vitality to serve his father's idiosyncrasies which serves no purpose but to fill up the void in his own life. Chitrlekha finds it hard to live up to the expectations of a royal Aryan woman or to put it in general terms, of an Indian wife who accepts all the decisions of her husband with a smile and never dares to question his authority. When the maid confidant Swarnlata informs Chitrlekha that Puru has accepted his father's curse of old age, the latter has the courage to say—"Do you know I had greatly wronged the Aryan prince. I thought of him as a coward and cursed my fate for being his wife. But I am indeed very lucky Swarna!" (Karnad, Yayati73)

But as soon as Puru confronts her and she sees her husband transformed from a youth full of vigour into a shriveled old man, all her idealism withers away and she cries out in terror and panic—"Don't come near me...go away from here...Don't touch me!"

Yayati comes to picture and consoles Chitrlekha and asks her to behave in a fashion befitting a royal princess. Here the schism between the behaviour expected of a man and a woman in a traditional Indian society surfaces up. While Yayati flouts the rules of morality with ease, develops an illicit relationship with Sharmishtha and even has the cheek to tell his wife in her face that he would marry another woman, the newly married Chitrlekha is expected to exhibit devotion and morality and remain a dutiful wife.

Chitrlekha, unwilling to submit to the patriarchal order and with no hope of emancipation from the mesh, commits suicide. She feels her life is a waste and there is no point in going on with it. Her anguish is expressed in the following speech:

Neither will you return Puru's youth nor will you accept me! . . . Of what use am I to your garland of victories? All of you have achieved your objectives. Who needs me now? You have your youth; Pururaj has his self-sacrifice, but what am I to do?

She expresses the plight of women in Indian society who find themselves completely out of place in a world ruled by men. Finally Chitrlekha commits suicide, rather the society forces her to commit suicide like it had forced Padmini in Hayavadanato perform sati, Nittlai in The Fire and the Rain to be murdered and the Queen in Bali: The Sacrifice to sacrifice herself.

The death of Chitrlekha makes Sharmishtha comment at the exploitative patriarchal set-up, which crushes and oppresses women and offers them not even an infinitesimal hope of emancipation. Sharmishtha accuses Yayati of Chitrlekha's death—"This is the foundation of your future life: One woman [Chitrlekha] has become a ghost; the second [Swarnalata] mad; and the third [Sharmishtha] a fallen woman".

A very significant portion of the play is devoted to the study of the decisions of the patriarchal set-up that expects women to surrender to the will of the male decision makers without protest. This fact is further illustrated through another relationship enunciated in the play: the Swarnalata episode. Swarnalata was jilted by her husband who thought that she had a relationship with a Brahmin boy before their marriage.

Swarnalata tried her best to prove her innocence to her husband but failed. Her husband became miserable and Swarnalata who loved her husband very much, could not bear his condition. She decided to give him peace of mind by lying to her that indeed the Brahmin boy had violated her. This freed her husband of the dilemma and he went away never to return. The narrative reiterates the concept of chastity and virginity which holds a place of prominence in the Indian society. A woman whose virginity has been violated is looked down upon, but the men are never called to question. Sita in The Ramayana too had to take an ordeal to prove her innocence and Rani in

Naga-Mandala was also expected to testify herself at the behest of her indulgent husband in front of the whole village. Swarnalata's narrative once again scrutinizes the patriarchal norms of the society that expects a woman to prove her innocence. She is never taken on her own worth.

S. Subash Chandran asserts that in Bali, the non-violent saviour and the blood-thirsty goddess, representing the Apollonian and the Dionysian order respectively seem to have their earthly emissaries in the form of the Queen-Mother and the Mahout, whose mission is to continue waging war in human heart and mind. The Queen-Mother has an uncanny way of realizing the truth while the divine music of the Mahout can mesmerize its listeners. By mating with the Mahout, the Queen feels herself liberated from the bondage of patriarchy imposed by the Apollonian order. She, by communion with the Mahout, lets the Dionysian principle rule supreme which emancipates her from hackneyed patriarchal traditions.

In Naga-Mandala, the Naga liberates Rani from a world of sterility to that of liveliness and fecundity. The Mahout here emerges as the Queen's saviour. Burdened for fifteen years to bear a child for the royal throne, amidst the mock whispers and the giggling of the palace maids, the ridicule of the Queen-Mother and the desperation of her husband, the Queen has completely forgotten the creative aspect of her sexuality.

The traditional Indian woman is burdened with the idea of bearing a child, more especially a son, for her family. The women in the aforementioned plays of Karnad seem to be aware of their oppression and repression in the patriarchal order but also know that they cannot do much about it. A barren woman in an Indian society is looked down upon. Women themselves have a deep-rooted notion to bear an heir for their family. But here emerges a modern woman, unfettered and free who wishes to make love merely for pleasure and for its own sake.

Conclusion

Whenever they attempt to cross their defined limits, like did Chitrlekha in Yayati and the Queen in Bali, they meet with disaster. It matters little which class they come from, the women of all social strata seem to suffer more or less equally. Chitrlekha and the Queen from superior class/ race, and Swarnalata and Sharmishtha from the lower class/ caste/ race, undergo suffering. Stepping out of marital bonds or claiming their rights, whichever the case, the result is always a disaster—the death of the female initiators.

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