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Subversion of traditional image of women in Karnad's plays

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Abstract

It is very heartening to learn that some of the male writers create women characters from female perspective. Girish Karnad in his plays subverts the conventional image of women and highlights female sexuality. His women characters strike the readers as strong individuals. This paper analyses his plays to mark the struggle of the women against the established cultural and social forces.

Keywords: Traditional image, women, cultural, social forces

Introduction

Whenever female sexuality is discussed it is presumed that women are essentially passive and responsive to male sexual activity and that they do not possess their own sexual desires. Thanks to feminism and feminists who uncovered the reality that women too are no exception to biological desires but unfortunately it is all suppressed under the dominating patriarchal norms. Girish Karnad's plays and his women characters re-iterate this view point as his plays along with other messages celebrate female sexuality. Creation of expressive women characters from the pen of a male writer is certainly a heartening support to the women writers who, through their writings are engaged in proving the individuality of women.

Girish Karnad's women characters do not seem to wait for 'A Room of Their Own' or for 'A Literature of their Own' to express their surging thought and feelings. They strike the readers or the audience as strong individuals with a mind of their own. They, drawn from traditional sources appear different from the present day modern educated so called empowered women who seek support within the system, and lead conflict ridden lives. They are very decisive, firm and not seem to suffer from any kind inhibitions when it comes to rebelling against the oppressive patriarchy. There do not seem to be any need for external influencing agencies to accomplish the desired tasks. It all comes from within instinctively. they just follow their impulses. Karnad succeeds in transforming archetypes into individuals. The readers or the audience watch the women characters unfolding themselves and before the final metamorphosis is over one can almost demarcate the various stages that characters pass through. According to Elaine Showalter, a woman in her inevitable struggle against the conventional man goes through three major phases.

"First there is a prolonged phase of imitation of the prevailing mode of the dominant tradition and internalization of its standards of art and its view on social roles. Second, there is a phase of protest against these standards and values, and advocacy of minority right and values including a demand for autonomy. finally, there is a phase of self-discovery, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity. An appropriate terminology for women writers is to call these stages Feminine, Feminist and Female".

If one observes carefully women characters in Girish Karnad's plays Nagamandala, Hayavadana and Fire and Rain also go through these three major phases in the process of their struggle against the cultural and social forces that have relegated them to passivity.

Rani in the play Nagamandala is a docile, innocent young girl who is totally ignorant about man-women relationship. Appanna the dominating husband brings the new wife to his house and locks her up in the house and treats her like a housemaid. Rani is the very image of an ideal Indian woman demure, unquestioning and uncomplaining.

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She is inescapably trapped in a meaningless marriage and her husband Appana is her world. She shudders to think of her fate in case of Appanna's something happens to my husband?' In the beginning of the play Rani is portrayed as an extremely naive woman who doesn't even comprehend the meaning of sex Kurudawwa asks her "Has your husband touched you? Your mother? Or an aunt?". She looks Blank.

It is only the entry of the fragile and shy and abhors sex but it is naga who explains to her the meaning of conjugal relationship. Rani blindly enters into sexual relationship with Naga thinking that it is her husband Appanna. But again this blindness seems to be ambiguous. Through the play one feels or rather doubts that Rani must be pretending. There are enough instances in the play to prove this fact. Anyway, Rani grows from enslavement to empowerment. She is strong enough to bear the accusation from her husband who blamed her of infidelity. She is commanded by both Naga and her husband not to ask questions. Rani, inspired by all this repression, makes an attempt to free herself. She listens to Kurudawwa's suggestion and decides to try the medicinal herb on her husband. She gets scared and throws the red colored medicinal liquid into an anthill. However, knowingly or unknowingly she defies the norms of the traditional image of a wife and gets involved in an extra-marital relationship. She grows and is completely transformed. She is shaky and nervous until she decides to take a vow by touching the snake. Once the decision is taken and the swearing of the king cobra is over Rani is quite clear about her identity.

Towards the end, she emerges from a very weak, frail archetypal Indian woman to an extremely bold person who knows the ways of the world. She tells her husband, "I was a stupid, ignorant girl when you brought me here. But now I am a woman, a wife and I am to be a mother. I am not a parrot or a cat or a sparrow". The journey is complete. Rani without waiting for the society to give her justice or to retrieve her from her oppressive state finds her own solution to the problem and is quite contented about it and has no regrets.

Padmini is another character in the play Hayavadana who not only knows what she wants but is courageous enough to defy the traditional norms in order to get what she wants. Padmini is bright like lightning and sharp witted. She gets married to Devadatta scholar who has fallen in love with her and moreover belongs to her class-the brahmin upper middle class and the marriage is sociably accepted. But Padmini remains dissatisfied as she is attracted towards Kapila a close friend of Devadatta who is an embodiment of physical strength. She desires a fine combination of intelligence and physical strength in a man. Ever though, she conforms to the societal norms and gets into a traditional marriage with Devadatta and calls him her saffron and her mangalasutra her desire for "a perfect man" coaxes her to openly encourage Kapila. Among the three main characters of the play Padmini stands out as an independent individual actively responding to her own impulses and not caring for the society and the people around her. She is quite different from the traditional image of women as she is not a bashful bride nor does she treat her pregnancy as an obstacle to her girlish behaviour. She is quite unmindful of her husband's feelings and continues to entertain Kapila's companionship. Her uninhibited nature or the feminist in her is reflected in the female chorus "why should love stick to the sap of a

single body? A head for each breast. A pupil for each eye. A side for each arm. I have neither regret nor shame".

Further Padmini creates what she wants. She in her excitement transposes the heads of Devadatta and Kapila and creates the man she wants and is not ashamed to walk out with the body of Kapila and the head of her husband. It may be only a temporary solution but Padmini succeeds in getting what she wants. Padmini grows from a sensuous, luscious bride to an assertive individual. Her pursuit for perfection doesn't stop here. When she realizes that Kapila's body is behaving according to Devadatta's mind she once again loses interest in Devadatta and goes in search of Kapila into forest. Padmini is not satisfied in knowing only Kapila's body she wants to know the mind of Kapila also. But Devadatta's arrival on the scene ensures a fight between Kapila and Devadatta. They kill each other. Padmini asserts her will through her death. She doesn't consent to the idea of living with both Kapila and Devadatta. She is quite firm till the end about what she wants a 'perfect man'.

Vishakha is another strong character in the play Fire and Rain who is not prepared to sacrifice her youth and her sexual desires for the sake of traditional values. In the beginning when Vishakha against her will marries Parvasu the cousin of Yavakri whom she was in love with, tries to adapt herself to her wedded life and is quite happy for a year. But Parvasu all of a sudden decides to leave her in order to perform a ritual to appease rain god. Vishakha is left alone with her sexually frustrated old father-in-law. When Yavakri comes back into her life Vishakha doesn't hesitate to violate the social code and renews her long relationship with him. Her individuality or her strength is seen when she questions her husband Parvasu who has come home on hearing about his wife's infidelity.

"Vishakha: I was sure you wouldn't even come if I were on my death bed But my fornication was reason enough wasn't it? K

Unlike her husband Parvasu's silence, Vishakha's candid acceptance of what she has done speaks of her strong mind which possesses the power to go against the established norms in order to achieve what she desires.

All the three women characters Rani, Padmini and Vishakha rebel against the suppression in their own way. The prevailing system doesn't support them, but they are quite courageous to face the consequences. They refuse to remain feminine- in the sense the male dominated society expects them to and they in their own independent ways attempt to liberate themselves and in the process realize their real strength and identities. All the three characters do not depend on their marriages or husbands to give them protection or redeem them from their sufferings. When the opportunities come their way they do not turn a blind eye but make use of them. Padmini, in fact creates an opportunity for herself. They are quite conscious and clear about their actions. There is no second thought, conflict or dilemma in them. They follow their instincts as though it is natural and quite normal. It is the quality in them which makes them stand apart when compared to the modern women. They give an expression to their bodily desires and not only refute their passivity but also disprove the fact that the whole existence of women is meant for the fulfillment of the male accomplishment.

Among the three plays discussed in this paper, "Nagamandala" has drawn inspiration from a folk tale

whereas "Hayavadana" and "Fire and Rain" are based upon classical myths. In all the three plays the conflict is that of making, is expected to accept the choice made for her by the patriarchy. But Karnard inverts this image of traditional women as a passive receptor and imparts individual thinking to the women of folk tales and classical myths. The women in Karnard's plays especially the three women discussed in the paper are strong enough to defend their choices. Thus, Karnard counterpoises the issues concerning women and his women characters emerge as assertive individuals who possess the capacity to make impossibilities possible.

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