Ars Artium: **An International Peer Reviewed-cum-Refereed Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences**
ISSN (Online) : 2395-2423 • ISSN (Print) : 2319-7889
Vol. 3, January 2015
Pp. 45-50

The Subalterns Are the Most Fluid and Refreshing: Women Characters in the Plays of Girish Karnad

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Abstract

Women characters in the plays of Girish Karnad are not mere society's obsession for beauty, the 'Shyama Nayikas' rarely to be found in the real world, but they are the true characters grounded in Indian milieu throughout ages. They are not only sensible and sensitive but also intelligent and bold. The vulnerability is their strength; subtle interpretation is their armor; sharp tongue is their sword; more so they are guided by spontaneity even in the most oppressed state of theirs. The queen Devyani to liberated Padmini to modern Vidula, they depict the trends of societal change, rather they are the instruments of change by following their raw impulse like fury, passion and desire even in a limited way in the space allotted to them by the man's world. The double subalterns like Swarnalata, Sharmistha, Kurudavva are the most amazing. They are the ones who understand the reality and the meaning of life far more than other characters. When the characteristic traits of leading men characters are almost static with their patriarchal attitude and notion, it is the women who take the lead to reverse this notion by raising pertinent questions and acting differently. Men are always the towering figures and dominant characters in most of the plays but women are seen as having different and versatile roles which allows them to be the centre of the conflict or plot.

Keywords: Subaltern, Post colonialism, Feminism, Women characters.

The subtle complexities of female sexuality have often been attempted in literature. Their vulnerability and unpredictability, sensuality and sensitivity, creative power and destructive prowess have been deliberated by both the best and worst of minds, in both the best and worst of ages, irrespective of secular and religious narratives. Be it myth, folklore, history or contemporaneity, the female characters arouse immense interest among the readers/audience, thinkers/writers alike as a counterfoil to male characters. Male sexuality is often interpreted with the pretext of female sexuality. Thus diverse aspects and dimensions of female sexuality are incorporated keeping an eye with the society's view (man's view) of a given point of time as the human sexuality of both the sexes is evolving.

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The myth, folklore and history are predominantly the story of man. Women are devoted to a limited set of roles as defined to them by man. Man is stronger, noble, ruler; women are weak, corrupt and ruled. Within this binary, the foundations of the main characters are established. We can always expect the male characters to be strong along with few of his other personality traits, but characters of women who are often seen to come out freely from their expected position and become unpredictable. This unpredictability makes them interesting and we often find them at the centre of the story. Her story is so weaved in the deeds and conflicts of man that readers/ audience sway their heads constantly with every fortune and misfortune of the protagonists but their beating hearts are always worried about the plight and journey of her/s. At other times, her silent suffering in desperation and the feeble attempt to renegotiate in her very own world, where she finds herself to be alien. In other words, being neglected, it is the different aspects of her sexuality occupies the primary position and makes the world go around, while men are the least forward looking characters. In the man's dominant world, women are having different and versatile roles, which allow them to be at the centre of the conflict or plot, where men despite their strength, ruggedness, higher position become mere puppets, subservient to women and her causes.

Inner strength/vulnerability of Indian womanhood can be traced back from its traditions, customs, culture and civilization. According to traditional believes and Hindu mythology, she (woman) is the Energy (*Prakriti*) and the Power (*Shakti*), thus termed as uncultured power which is dangerous and needs to be controlled by spirit represented by *Purusha*. On the other hand, the popular stories in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata with the characters like Sita, Savitri, Damayanti have brought a different notion about Indian woman on their *pativrata dharma* (chaste and devoted wives). On this background, virtue, virginity and chastity become the buzz word for the Indian psyche to narrate any woman with veneration. The heritage/baggage from devi to devadasi, prostration to prostitution, is a long story of adoration and subjugation that makes them intriguing, the characters fit for exploration and further analyses.

Girish Karnad in an era of feminism and post colonialism cannot be free from the spiral and impending influence of his time, but a worthwhile producer of a literary genre to raise some of the pertinent questions on the over arching power of patriarchy and the damage that it causes to Indian woman and the society. 'His plays abound with subalterns especially women and lower caste people subjected since ancient time by patriarchy or upper hierarchy of the society. Karnad has not only exposed their subalternity but also fused energy in their lives so that they can speak; shifted their position from "margin" to "centre" (Singh 121). Their deprivation, subjugation, loneliness and silence push them to such an extent that they could rise and resist even at the cost of inviting their ruin. With this act of valour, it is they who bring the unfathomable meaning to life. They resist and perish, but enough to churn the mighty patriarchy and at times makes them to crumble under their feet. The history is full of gendered subalterns so also in the myth and contemporaneity as it is the by product of culture but the treatment of women characters in the plays of Karnad are like those of

heard before, but not felt so in any point of time. They are sharp, intelligent with empowered voice and embittered action. They could comprehend the life and its consequence in a far better way than their male counter parts. When they are pushed into a corner by the mighty patriarchy, their actions are the ones that determined the fate of the race.

In this essay, I shall try to capture the fluidity of female characters in the plays of Girish Karnad. They are synonymous to poetic grandeur not because of their inherent beauty, the Shyama Nayikas, but because of their spontaneity and rebellion. Their inept understanding to life is amply proved by their actions. And their comprehension to various facets of life is what refreshing to the audience and readers alike. Their tragedy does not bring the audience to their feet rather their actions enlighten them exposing the vices that exist in the man and the patriarchy. They are the archetypes; their fall is not because of individual error or folly like King Lear or Macbeth but a rage against a system, though that bring their perish. They may not be deliberate construct by the dramatist as they are taken from myth, folklore or history except the two plays but definitely retouched to present his view point to the issues related to present society. On this backdrop, I wanted to discuss the women characters of Karnad.

There are at least three set of women characters, even more in the plays of Karnad. The first set of characters did not act on the stage, but their stories not only binds the plot of the plays, but also make a stirring impact on the audience; namely- the mother of Pooru, the mother of Hayavadana and the daughter of Radhabai. The second sets of characters are the double subalterns, very crucial chains of the plot but among the women they hold the lower strata. Swarnalata, Kurudava and Radhabai belong to this list. The third, of course, heroines of the play – Devyani, Sharmishtha, Chitralekha, Vishakha, Nittlai, Rani, Padmini, Manjula, Vidula. The fourth may be the lamps and dolls but I am not going to interpret them in this paper. All these characters are known for their inner strength, spontaneity and rugged impulse that make them lively, bold, rebellious and forward looking. Their constant urge to invent their position in the society has made this species better evolutionary creatures than their other counterparts.

The seemingly improbable character is the mother of Hayavadana (body of a man with the head of a horse). The princess of Karnataka finds no prince worthy of her but a stallion. She marries him and lives for fifteen years. The hilarious story finds a divine turn and the horse turns to be a celestial being, ready to return to his heavenly abode along with his human love. She refuses to give him company rather urges him to return to his original form. Infuriated, he curses her to become a horse, and she becomes so and runs away happily. This bizarre story has four interesting turns. First, a teen ager infatuates with an unworthy being; second, she cares him to such an extent with her love that he almost becomes godly; third, after regaining his position, he dumps her; fourth, the woman does not surprise at all and faces the predicament happily. In every phase of the story, there is a progression in her spiritual life. On the contrary, there is a regression in the character of her husband. He returns to his divine form but fails to understand the divine meaning of life. His curse to the princess amply

proves that aspect of his life but for a spiritual lady like the princess the curse is like enlightenment, free from the worry of losing someone, free from the fear of breach of discipline and free from the pain of immortality. She is free, fresh, rejuvenating and one of nature's own child. The mother of Pooru is another woman who can be interpreted like any other women characters in *Yayati*. She is a loving mother to Pooru and rakshyasi woman to Yayati. She was beautiful – ethereal, not to mention, 'A Bharata prince would not have married a woman not beautiful' (36). She came to Yayati like a winning trophy in one of his military campaigns. The other part of her life is least cared by Yayati, but has a deep impact on Pooru, about the deathly silence which surrounds that face. Even if we pursue the antagonistic view point of Yayati about her, we find she is a subaltern character even if she is the senior queen of Bharata dynasty; she is an untouchable due to her race. Her vengeance is unique in nature that she could pollute the bloodline of Bharatas. Her rebellion brings to the end of her life, but she is found courageous enough to proclaim so. Ironically of course the same bloodline bails his father out during his disillusionment of prioritizing the preference. Another character of such category is Yamuna, the daughter of Radhabai. She is maintained by a rich trader as his concubine. She is a telling character, her being thrown out from the trader's house to her madness and screams, is the story unparallel- her suffering and her tragedy. The other women characters of Karnad show their resilience and rebellion, whenever they are pushed to an extreme by the patriarchy. They are very blunt in their words and action. Karnad has portrayed Yamuna providing no such voice, but presented her predicament in a very outrageous way when Vidula acts as Kuchla the Jezebel. She takes the story of Yamuna while submitting herself 'to the disembodied randy voice of Swamy Anang Nath the Bodyless, in a darkened Cyber Café' (Foreward xi).

Swarnalata, Kurudavva and Radhabai are brought from the pragmatic school of Karnad's women characters. Among them Swarnalata comprehends the life more than anyone else. Her lie to her husband to release him from the torments of doubts, suspicion and obsession at the cost of making her life a living hell is a story of extraordinary courage. She exposes the hollowness of her husband who was suffering from Rama Syndrome – love and doubt for the wife at the same breath. Her support and advice to Devyani on every matter related to life of what it is and how one should lead including the statement on Yayati to her; 'His Majesty is … he is like a child. He will forget that woman once he finds another toy' (31). To Swarnalata she is a solace, a harbinger of hope (bringer of poison) to end the pain and assure peace. Kurudavva, on the other hand, is a blind lady, but a light of hope to reverse the fortune of those miserable and unfortunate. Her magic root is the centre of the plot, like that of Shakuni's three dices to achieve direction at wish. She fails but brings a new lease of life for Rani. The Naga comes to Rani's rescue because of Kurudavva's miracle roots. The insanity of Kurudavva at the end of the story is a poetic injustice and an anticlimax. Is it because defying the law of nature? Whatever, her act is miraculous but she is not, she is the product of the earth, of magic and of nothingness. Radhabai is a domestic help in a modern Indian city. Her poverty and insecurity has a dimming effect in the glowing lights of the city. She tries her best to depersonalize her professional life but

fails ironically because of a teleserial. Her decision of an unfortunate time starts haunting him. The melodrama of the life of the poor in the television industry like the poverty of India to the west is best sold but their life raises questions of the sensitivity of the so called intellectual mass. Vidula becomes the mouth piece when Karnad raises questions on the life of Yamuna, the injustices thrown to them by the society.

The heroines of Girish Karnad are from diverse backgrounds but with one common baggage - the subjugation in the hands of patriarchy. Karnad has not changed the narratives but given the weapons of speech to his leading women characters that the narratives seem altogether different. His women characters are not only empowered with shrill tongues but also capable of stings. It is true like any other subaltern characters their sting instead of causing harm to others bring their own ruin. The three major women characters in the plays of *Yayati*, the play of an ancient myth but 'not mythological', are Devyani, Sharmistha and Chitralekha. All these characters are living a life of hell or at least a part of it. But the combative powers of these three characters could teach Yayati a lesson what thousands of battle and hundreds of sensuous women could not. Sharmishtha not only seduces king Yayati but exposes the injustice meted out to her because of her race. The illogical sufferings of her are tersely debated, 'After all, as a slave, what weapon did I have but my body' (29). Devyani's remarks out of fury; 'I am no kshatriya queen to suffer relatives foisted on me. I am leaving…' (31) brings the notion to the forefront that woman for her self-respect can go any further. Chitralekha's rebellion and her ultimate sacrifice for her cause is an inspiring story of anyone who dares to dictate the terms on the questions of rights, duties and justice. The role of woman, the concept of marriage, the worn out line of *pativrata* are beautifully mocked at by Chitralekha:

> I married him for his youth. For his potential to plant seed of the Bharatas in my womb. He has lost the potency now. He doesn't possess any of the qualities for which I married him. But you do. (65-66)

Padmini in *Hayavadana,* is the most debated character of Karnad. Her love for Kapila's masculinity to the exhilaration after the juxtaposition of heads; her loneliness and emptiness to becoming sati make her a complex character. She not only suffers from the Dionysian tendency but she is the product of nature, which is naturally attracted to another product of nature. It is she who infuses the sense of belongingness in Kapila. She is the woman ahead of her time, and the disjunction at the time, being a woman, to celebrate the desire, the mirth and the laughter; thus her downfall. The paternity anxiety and the blessed motherhood is the focal point in the play *Naga Mandala.* She was like a caged bird in all her married life, faced the loneliness and humiliation like never before. Kurudavva's magic roots attracted Naga and in turn bring a new lease of life to her. Her poetry of rebellion bumps in no place but enough to clot the vessel of the man at night:

> I shall do what you tell me. Scowls in the day. Embraces at night. The face in the morning unrelated to the touch at night. But day or night, one motto does not change: do not ask questions. Do as I tell you (51).

Once the paternity anxiety of Appanna is resolved, she becomes a tormentor to her husband with a tag of goddess. Her reward to Naga the trophy of life is a kind of punishment to her pati, not always the parmeswar. Vishakha's tongue, her action and boldness exhibit her strength and comprehension of life as it is. Her two stern dialogues to Yavakri such as 'Indra may be immortal. But … my breasts hang loose now'(121) and ' He left no pore in my body alone. And you – you think a woman is only a pair of half-formed breasts' (123) at the first place sum up her understanding of human sexuality. Her concern and action (the cause) for the death of Yavakri; her bold admission of her fornication to her husband and her sisterly advise to Aravasu not yield to Paravasu are glaring examples of Vishakha a woman of substance and a woman of rebellion. Nittilai a subaltern in true sense is caught in the crossfire of rage, of hate and of treachery. Arvasu's calling of her name while it is raining at the closing of the play is a triumph of her that she could establish only after her death. Vidula in the *Wedding Album*, after so much of drama of uncertainty, her search for private space, the regressive out look towards woman, is seen as a savior not only to the inner turmoil of her husband but to the spiritually starved world at large. The future is unknown but the subaltern is forced to carry the load for a spiritual elevation. For anything goes wrong, she is the one to perish not the race.

Karnad has presented the women characters with least emotional precision so that they could come out from their traditional allotted space either to rebel against the injustice or to follow their desire as their own. They are the ones who understand the reality and the meaning of life far more than other characters. When the characteristic traits of leading men characters are almost static with their patriarchal attitude and notion, it is the women who take the lead to reverse this notion by raising pertinent questions and acting differently. Men are always the towering figures and dominant characters in most of the plays but women are seen as having different and versatile roles which allows them to be the centre of the conflict or plot.

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