

6

**Subjugation and Emancipation : Women Characters in
the Select Works of Girish Karnad**

Santosh Mahaldar

Abstract: *A feminist perspective explores and analyzes among its other themes, the theme of gender inequality. It talks about the discourses of patriarchy and sexism that have kept women oppressed and marginalized economically, politically, socially and psychologically. Lois Tyson asserts: "Feminist criticism examines how literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social and psychological oppression of women." (Tyson, 2019, p. 79) Disparity against women based on gender distinction has been the core preoccupation of feminism. The role of women in our society has been confined within the boundaries of daughter, wife, and mother, which are suggestive of the restrictions that almost all women face in their homes. This paper draws on gender discourses to discuss the theme of subjugation of women in some select plays of Girish Karnad. The paper discusses four plays of Karnad to explore the issue ; **Naga-Mandala, The Fire and the Rain , Hayavadana and Yajati** . Discussion on women's subjugation requires a proper theoretical and philosophical perspective. The essay refers to some deliberations and convictions of feminist critics like John Stuart Mill, Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, and Michel Foucault. Girish Karnad was well aware that the sexist oppression of women is a feature of patriarchal dominance. We know the adage, "power sets the agenda for patriarchy." The research aims to pinpoint how Karnad seeks for means of atonement in the select plays.*

Keywords: *Feminism, Subjugation, Gender Discourses, Sexist Oppression, Male Power and Hegemony, Emancipation and Freedom*

“The patriarchal construction of the difference between masculinity and femininity is the political difference between freedom and subjection” (Pateman, 1988, p. 207)

“A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. Women’s magazines will tell you that a marriage should be an equal partnership. That’s nonsense. Rubbish. No partnership can be equal. It will always be unequal, but take care that its’ unequal in favour of your husband. If the scales tilt in your favour, god help you, both of you.” (The Dark Holds No Terror, 2004, p.135)

Girish Karnad’s contribution to Indian drama will remain unforgettable. Not only in India but also in the world forum of theater, he is a name will never become an oblivion. In all his plays he seems very immaculate, and perspicacious in portraying the dominant and inimical issues of contemporary Indian society. He has directed and acted in several feature films, documentaries and television serials in Kannada, Hindi and English. He stands as a galaxy in the periphery of Indian Theatre. In the 1960s his emergence as a playwright set the beginning of an advent of modern Indian plays in Kannada, contemporaneously what Badal Sircar did in Bengali theatre, Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi, and Mohan Rakesh in Hindi. Among the well-known plays to Girish Karnad’s credit are *Yajati* (1961), "Maa Nishaadha"(1964) , *Tuglaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1971), *Anjumallige* (1977), *Hittina Hunja* aka *Bali* (The Sacrifice) (1980) *Naga-Mandala* (1988), *Fire and the Rain* (1998), "Taledanda" (1990).

As already mentioned, among Indian modern playwrights such as Mahesh Dattani and Vijay Tendulkar, Karnad is a bright name. Through his writings, he shows his utmost dexterity in portraying the position of women in Indian society. We know about Western playwrights Bertolt Brecht and Jean Anouilh who used folk stories of other cultures as a source for their own plays. Karnad also employs folk tales in some of his dramas.

A feminine perspective explores and analyzes the theme of gender inequality. It talks about the discourse of patriarchy and sexism that has kept women oppressed and marginalized in all sections of the societal level, economically, politically, socially, mentally and psychologically. Lois Tyson asserts: “Feminist criticism examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social and psychological oppression of women.” (Tyson, 2019, p. 79) Women's confinement within stereotypical roles defines a kind of life where there is torture and violence, both psychological

and physical. Women have faced such violence and disparities since ancient times. They have been objectified, treated as objects of enjoyment. Our society is not individualistic, and especially in the case of a woman her claim to individuality remains out of the question. The emphasis is more on duty than on individuality, and the resultant effect is the repression of individuality. A woman can either be a slave or a goddess but never an equal.

We know the dictates of Manusmriti laid grotesque rules against the true and free lives of women in our society for a long time. Manu said that women have to be dependent first on their father, second on their husband and towards the end on their son “father protects her in childhood, husband protects her in youth, and sons protect (her) in old age. A woman cannot be left unprotected.” (MS9.3) [1].

The notion of women's empowerment is a strong discourse in almost every field of humanities. Woman empowerment is the process of empowering women in all strata of life – art, education, social identity and finding an expression for equal opportunity. Feminist theorists believe that our cultural structures are ideological where women are thought to be subordinates, to be the ‘other’. They are determined to unpack the ‘ideologies of dominance’.

John Stuart Mill in his essay *The Subjection of Women* (1869) advocates for women's equal rights and freedom. Mill goes against the conventional social system where women are placed in lower status and presents his convictions for women's rights and emancipation in all strata of life. Mill holds that despite having potential manpower within them, women are unable to fully contribute to the advancement of society because they are confined to their homes and subject to numerous strict restrictions. Due to this discrimination and inequality, women suffer from cultural patriarchy where they are treated as objects. Mill writes:

The legal subordination of sex to- is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and it ought to be replaced by a system of perfect equality, admitting no power and privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other. (Mill, 2006, p. 3)

Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* (1949) talks about the treatment of women during her times. She put forward the question; “what is women? (Beauvoir, 1953, p. 8) A woman's destiny depends on man's hand. Men are considered as subjects and women are like “other”. In a family tree men are clearly marked as privileged while women are the additional, the underprivileged. A man can recognize himself on his own but a woman has to

depend on her father, husband or son in the matter of her identity. Beauvoir refers to Greek writer Pythagoras's observation on women to bring out centuries of prejudiced conviction: "There is a good principle which created order, light, and man, and an evil principle which created chaos, darkness, and woman." (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 8) Kate Millet in her path-breaking work *The Sexual Politics* (1969) asserts that women are the victims of society's repressive ideology, which favors male choices. Michael Foucault has pointed out that power is established through unequal dynamic circumstances. From this vantage point, power connections are internal to processes like economic ordering, networks of knowledge relations, legal reforms, and political reforms. Higher institutions, like state and politics are not the only ones that play suppressive roles there are institutions like family that follow the patriarchal model.

We will now proceed to analyze the theme of women's subjection and emancipation in the select works of Girish Karnad. We will look into the situations of Karnad's women's characters and their literary representation.

Karnad's play *Naga-Mandala* (1988) begins with the man (the failed playwright). The man is cursed to die if he fails to spend a sleepless night. The play *Naga-Mandala*, or play with a cobra is based on two oral anecdotes from Karnataka. Karnad heard one a few years ago from professor A.K. Ramanujan, while he was staying, at the University of Chicago, and he wrote *Naga-Mandala*. The play recounts the story of a girl named, Rani. Her husband, Appanna treats her atrociously keeps her locked in her house. Karnad here explores the theme of women's incarceration and women's emancipation. The play revolves around three main characters, Rani, Appanna and the Cobra. In the starting scene of the play, we see that Rani gets married to Appanna (who represents any man). Rani's parents consider Appanna as a suitable bride for her because Appanna is rich and wealthy. Since she is a single daughter, her parents called her Rani, Queen of the whole world, Queen of the long tresses. One day her husband Appanna comes and takes her with him to his village. The worst days of Rani start after her marriage. Now Rani is "Beyond the seas and the seven isles." Appanna, Rani's husband, starts torturing her physically and mentally. He locks her and goes to spend time with another woman. He departs after lunch and returns the next day. Rani wants to share her pains and sorrows but she has no one to talk to. She is miserable and frightened to pass the days and nights alone. At her own house, Rani used to sleep between her mother and father. But here Appanna does not even care for her and rebukes her all the time. He says " I don't like idle

chatter. Do as you are told, you understand?" Thus Rani starts living her life like a "caged bird". Kurudavva, a blind woman, through her son finds out about Appanna's ill-treatment of Rani and that he visits the house of his concubine. She makes a connection with Rain and after hearing Rani's painful tale, Kurudavva feels pity for Rani and gives her a magical root to be mixed with curry to make her husband fall in love with her. But instead of feeding her husband, she pours it into a nearby ant-hill where a Naga eats the curry. Naga falls in love with Rani and visits Rani every night in disguise of the real Appanna. They make love and eventually, Rani becomes pregnant. When Rani shares the fact with the real Appanna and he gets shocked calls her a traitor, a harlot, prostitute, " Aren't you ashamed to admit it, you harlot? I locked you in, and yet you managed to find a lover! Tell me who it is, who did you go to with your sari off?" (Nagamandala,33). Thus Appanna in turn blames Rani for adultery and insults her. At the verdict of village elders Rani must undergo a chastity test. As suggested by Naga Rani offers to take a snake ordeal. She has to put her hand in a snake pit. If assumed pure, the snake would not bite her. The Naga does not bite her, instead, it raises its hood over its head and gently coils around her neck like a garland. This incident is a miracle. The village elders hail Rani as a Goddess, " she is not a woman. She is a divine Being, a Goddess-" (Nagamandala, 39). Now, Appanna repents, is made to accept Rani's domination, and mends his ways of life. They start living a happy conjugal life. But Naga cannot forget his love for Rani. He decides to visit her. The ending of the play is multi-layered that provides a space for the lover within Rani's household as Rani considers Naga as the symbol of her marital bliss and tells him to live in her hair. The brutal treatment of Rani by Appanna before to the miracle is malicious. She is confined by Appanna like a caged bird. She lacks control over her own life and the ability to communicate her problems. During a discussion of the play, Nagamandala Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker says :

By making Rani almost a pure embodiment of feminine simplicity, innocence, and powerlessness, Karnad pares his drama of gender relations down to an elemental level. Marriage for Rani means the loss of the secure world of childhood and parental love, and she has to reimagine the world in her fantasies merely to keep herself from psychic collapse. (Karnad, Collected plays, Vol. 1 xxx).

After her experience with the snake, people begin to revere her as a goddess. This too points out at the society's evil that cannot see the real plight of women but

has to place her on a pedestal and be worshipped in order to be accepted. In *Naga-Mandala*, Karnad depicts the twofold oppression of women in society.

Karnad's another play *The Fire and the Rain* which is based on C. Rajagopalachari's prose retelling of the *Mahabharata*, especially on the myth of Yavakari in 'Vana Parba' is also a prominent play that speaks of women's emancipation. Besides the theme of feminine, spiritual crisis, belief and disbelief Karnad presents women's issues in contemporary society. Through the characters such as Raibhya, Parvasu, Yavakari, Nitilai and Vishaka Karnad brings forth the subjection of women in the society. The theme of women's oppression can be studied in two ways, one through the sufferings of Vishaka, the wife of Parvasu and former lover of Yavakari and the other through Nitilai the tribal girl and the lover of Aravasu.

In the play, we see how Yavakari and Parvasu have used Vishakha to their own satisfaction. To them, she seems to be an object of sensual enjoyment only. In Vishakha's words, "my husband and you! He left no pore in my body alone. And you think a woman is a pair of half-formed breasts." (*Fire and the Rain*, 40) Yavakari had left Vishakha alone to gain universal knowledge for ten long years. Vishakha felt alone, helpless and dejected. When Yavakari returned from long perseverance with magical power he meets Vishakha. From the conversation between Yavakari and Vishakha, we can grasp, and perceive the sufferings of the lonely Vishakha. Vishakha had to marry Parvasu, though she had no interest in him. Her opinion did not matter. In their conjugal life, Parvasu gave her a luxurious life of love and happiness but it lasted only one year. Parvasu had to leave for fire sacrifice and did not come back for seven long years. He had used her body like an experimenter or like an explorer. Vishakha says: "He used my body, and his own body, like an experimenter, an explorer. Shame died in me. And I yelled. Alone, I have become dry like a tender." (FR,39)

Throughout the play, we see how Vishakha becomes the victim of patriarchal domination, the harsh treatment of Parvasu and Yavakari and also Raibhya. Just as Yavakari uses Vishakha as a bait to draw the attention of Parvasu, the character of Raibhya is another patriarchal representation. Raibhya, the father-in-law of Vishakha treats her in a ghastly and vicious way. His behaviours and gesture towards Vishakha and women, in particular, is ill-mannered and disdainful. He compares Vishakha as a filthy object, buffalo and shit. He uses abusive language to slur and to incriminate Vishakha. When Vishakha returns from the nearby forest Raibhya anticipates about the nexus between Yavakari

and Vishakha as he has an evil eye on Vishakaha. He starts beating her. He shouts: "You whore. You roving whore...!" (FR, 43)

Nitilai, another woman character in the play has suffers a lot due to the vigilance of a male-dominated society. The male society has fixed the duties and boundaries and choices of women. Amongst the multiple social barriers that a woman faces, male surveillance is the most unbearable. We live in a society where a group of people try to control the lives of others through the use of ideology and language. In this society the vulnerable become the victims of repression and marginalization. In the play, *The Fire and The Rain* Karnad depicts women's subjection and subjugation in Indian society. We find Nitilai's submissive and docile nature, her submission to her father, brother and husband. It seems she has been taught to behave in an inclined way in front of dominating in the society. Nitilai loves Aravasu and wants to marry him but social barriers become a pivotal issue. Aravasu is Brahmin and Nitilai is a tribal girl. She has to take permission from her family and community. They do not approve it and Aravasu to fails to turn up for permission due to complications in the plot. They marry Nitilai to a boy from tribal community. She is a helpless and an ignorant girl who has no right to make a decision of her own because she is a woman. Her life meets a terrible, tragic culmination when she flees from her husband's house to assist, nurse, and support Aravasu when he is in danger. Her father, brother and husband chase her like a hunter. Nitilai is afraid of her life and expresses her fear to Aravasu. She pines:

I've run away...from my husband. From my family. From everything... (FR 61)
They're after me...I'll disappear. Go and hide in the jungle... you think I want to be hunted down by my brother and my husband... Aravasu, I am still young. I don't want to die (FR, 69)

Finally, they find her kill her brutally. Nitilai's scream becomes representative of all the collective screams of all the oppressed women of our society.

"Please, brother... husband ... please, don't." (FR,77)

Karnad returns to the theme of women's oppression and emancipation in another play *Hayavadana* (1975). The character of Padmini is vibrant in representing women's choices and preferences. Padmini is not like Karnad's Rani in *Nagamandala* or Vishakha and Nitilai in *Fire and The Rain* but almost a free woman who rejects the domination of Devadutta and Kapila in many cases.

The play revolves around the characters of Devadatta, Kapila and Padmini. Devadatta falls in love with Padmini and marries her. His friend Kapila also falls in love with Padmini and thus begins the problems. Devadatta is an intelligent, and wise poet. He has a very sharp brain. On the other hand, Kapila has a strong physique. Devadatta and Kapila are the best friends, Bhagavata describes them as “one mind, one heart” (Hayavadana, 4) Padmini becomes impressed with the strong body of Kapila and begins to desire him. Although Kapila warns Devadatta, he says: “...she is not for the likes of you. What she needs is a man of steel. But what can one do? You will never listen to me...?” (Hayavadana, 19)

The characters fall into a complex intricate circumstances where they offer their heads to goddess Kali with a sword they find inside her temple and kill themselves. With the blessings of goddess they can be brought back to life if Padmini attaches the head to their bodies and presses the sword against their neck. In confusion Padmini gets their heads mixed up. Kapila's head gets Devdatta's body and Devdatta's head gets Kapila's body. The play then puts forward the question, whom does Padmini belong to? Is Devdatta the body Devdatta who has Kapila's head or is it the head Devdatta who has Kapila's body? Does the woman get married to the body or to the person? Where does the person reside in the body or the head? Padmini decides to go with Devdatta's head who has Kapila's strong body. “I know what you want Padmini. Devatta's clever head and Kapila's strong body...”(Hayavadhana 148) But Padmini is not as settled as we think, the men change, the head rules the bodies. Padmini is the only one left unchanged as the head wins and the bodies adopt to their new masters. But bodies have their own memories too. Who does Padmini love then? Who of the two is Devdatta? Who of the two is Kapila? To resolve the problem both fight and kill each other again. In the relationship and the complication between man and man it is Padmini who is left out. Ironically she decides to become a sati. The play is ironical in its comments :

Thus Padmini became a sati. India is known for its pativratas, wives who dedicated their whole existence to the service of their husband; but it would not be an exaggeration to say that no pativrata went in the way Padmini did. And yet no one knows the spot where she performed sati. (Hayavadana, 63)

Padmini is a kind of “ modern Sita”, an overriding character. She does what she wishes without fearing the male order. She knows her choices. Dharwadker rightly observes :

“The ambivalence of Padmini’s position in the triangular relationship, however, appears in her many challenges to masculinity and male friendship, which create frictions contradicting her apparent power. She dominates both men in shrill, shallow way and resents any sign that their mutual bond might override their interest in her.” (Dharwadker, 2008, p. 338-9)

Padmini seems to have achieved emancipation within the patriarchal framework. She is not a submissive woman. In a sense she represents modern women. In spite of the fact that she is married, she is not afraid to speak her mind out about Kapila, saying that "No woman could resist him." (26 Hayavadana) The play is also a commentary on the social construction of masculinity.

Yajati’s plot, adapted from the Mahabharata’s "Adiparva," centres on King Yayati, who is a king obsessed with youth and material pleasures. He marries Devayani, Shukracharya’s daughter, but molests Sharmishtha due to his untamed lust. This makes Shukracharya curse him that he would lose his youth and become decrepit. He finds the curse extremely agonizing since he is unable to curb his sensual pleasure. When his son Puru, reasons with Shukracharya, the severity of the curse is lessened. If anyone else wills to trade their youth for Yayati’s old age he will once more experience youth. Puru, decides to trade off his youth for his father who readily agrees. The decision causes his wife Chitrlekha to kill herself. Yayati’s sense of reason is awakened and he gives Puru’s youth back realizing that time has passed. Karnad deftly connects the figures, events to the conditions of modern man. In the play we see king Yajati’s ill-treatment to the women namely, Devyani, Sharmistha and Chitrlekha.

The theme of women’s conditions and subjugation is evident in Karnad’s another play *Yajati*. The play is adopted from the Indian mythical anecdote ‘Adiparva’ of Mahabharata. In the institution of marriage, home and family all the women characters in the play have suffered from masculine domination. We will excavate how the king, the ruler Yajati has penetrated his pervasive power of male domination over the female counterparts in the form of wives and daughters- in law in the play. The king first marries Devyani, then he develops an illicit affair with Sharmistha thus openly expresses his desire to marry her.

When Shukracharya Devayani’s father curses Yajati, we see some of the prominent issues of men–women clash. As a consequence of Yajati’s bad situation his son Puru wants to take the curse upon him just to reverse Yajati’s youth as he was before. But Puru’s wife Chitrlekha protests and appears as a

new woman. She is entirely unsatisfied with Puru's decision and rejects all pleas of Yajati. She does not allow Puru to enter her bedroom, she says: "I will not allow my husband step back into my bedroom unless he returns a young man." (Hayavadana, 61)

Feminism explores the various cultural dimensions of women's lives. feminism holds that the discrepancies between men and women are not natural but socially constructed. Karnad through the presentation of the female characters as discussed above has focused on the situations of women in the Indian context. Karnad was aware of the patriarchal power which is about the sexist oppression over others. Through his depiction of women characters he represented women the domination present in Indian society and offered some ways to deal with it. He tried to find out the ways of liberation and agency for women from the clutches of male power and hegemony.

References:

- Arvind M, Nawale, & Nibedita, Mukherjee. (Eds.) (2013). *Indian Theatre in English and Literary Feminism*. New Delhi: Authors Press.
- Beauvoir, S. de. (2011). *The Second Sex* (C. borde & S. M. Chevallier, Trans.). Vintage Classics.
- Butler, Judith. (2002). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.
- Cavallaro, D. (2001). *Critical and Cultural Theory*. Bloomsbury.
- Dharwadkar, Aparna B. (Ed.) (2008). With an Introduction Collected Plays. Vol. One: *Tughlaq, Hayavadana, Bali: The Sacrifice, Nagamandala*. O.U.P.
- Erin, Mee. B. (Ed.) (2005) *Drama in Contemporary India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1998). *History of Sexuality Vol 1*. (Robert Hurley. Trans.). Penguin Books.
- Karnad, G. (1975). *Hayavadana*. Oxford University Press.
- Karnad, G. (1990). *Naga-Mandala: Play with a Cobra*. Oxford University Press.
- Millet, K. (2016). *Sexual Politics*. Columbia University Press.
- Mukherjee, T. (Ed.) (2006). *Girish Karnad's Plays: Performance and Critical Perspectives*. New Delhi: Pencraft International.
- Nair, P.K. (2010). *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*. Pearson.
- Pateman, C. (1988). *The Sexual Contract*. Stanford University Press.
- Sivakumuran, S. (2016). "Female Consciousness in Girish Karnad's Hayavadana." MCASJR, Vol-3, pages:16-21
- Soni, M. (2022, March 29). *Patriarchal Power: A Theoretical Unravelling of Power Imbalances*. Feminismindia. <https://feminismindia.com/2022/03/29/patriarchal-power-a-theoretical-unravelling-of-power-imbbalances/>
- Tyson, L. (2019) *Critical Theory Today*. Routledge.
- http://www.sanskritdocuments.org/all_pdf/manusmriti.pdf the laws of Manu.