

Original Research Article

Speaking The Self; Narrating the Desire: The Women Characters in Karnad's *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala*

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Abstract: Girish Karnad one of the greatest playwrights of all times used his plays as a receptacle that held the myths and mindset of India at once. The ennui of modern man and especially the women as it comes up in his plays balance the age-old tradition and the writing back to it. The protagonist women in the plays as *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala* unlike the women tortured or exploited in a male-dominated society express their will. The will-to-power makes the realization of their desires possible. The two women, Padmini and Rani in these plays show a curious graph, where each woman possesses two men and while they are possessed by the one, as the society would have it, they possess the other as their heart would desire.

Keywords: Desire, Myth, Nature, Primordial, Psychological projection, Self.

The women characters in the plays of the veteran playwright Girish Karnad become even more voluminous as Karnad had realized desire in his mother, where she as a widow would live with a man. Unlike in Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* or *Sakharam Binder*, where desire in women meet their terrible fall in the hands of patriarchy, the women in Karnad gain power over the men. In Karnad's play though patriarchy plays its role and has a voice which raises itself off and on, patriarchy is overruled by the strength of will and the genuine craving of the human heart that will pursue its instincts beyond life and the bans and restrictions of the world. As Karnad reminiscences:

The very thought that our mother might have lived in sin with a married man never mind that it was our father was painful in the extreme (Karnad *This Life* 8).

Karnad's compassion and respect generated towards women gets narrated in the female characters whom he unearths from the myths and day to day existence. He creates characters like Puru's wife in *Yayati* to evince the angst of a young woman facing decrepitude in her newly wedded husband. Devayani, Sharmistha, Chitralkha (*Yayati*), Rani, Kurudavva in *Naga-Mandala*, Padmini in *Hayavadana* and Nittilai and Vishakha in *The Fire and the Rain* have a powerful voice which projects their selves. The plays come together in their mythical exploration and powerful psychological adventures. Satyadev Dubey, believes Karnad to be:

...the only playwright in the history of Indian theatre to have treated adultery as normal and treated adulterous women sympathetically (qtd. Karnad 1995: 358).

In *Hayavadana* Padmini acts as a powerful force, a life spirit, who searches the ideal and reaches out for completion, this completion bridges the gap between life and Nature, and the individual existence and the primordial. The human consciousness becomes one with the stirring, the higher Consciousness. Rani's husband Appanna does not exist nor does he play his role in Rani's life. Instead the Naga comes in Appanna's resemblance and performs the role of a husband. The husband does not shower his benevolence on Rani and the role is played by the Naga. However when Appanna realizes his blunder and comes to take his place, the Naga is neither heard nor seen. Here Naga's presence too comes as a dream

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fulfilment or projection of the Consciousness whereby Rani direly needs a lover. As Carl Jung in his book, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, unravels the “process of psychic projection” (169):

Everything that exists, acts, for otherwise it would not be actual. It is only actual thanks to its inherent energy. Being is a field of force. The primitive *mana* conception, as we can see, is of the nature of a crude theory of energy (Jung 169).

In a similar manner in *Hayavadana* too, the craving in the heart of Padmini for a husband who would possess both a superior intellect and a powerful body makes the exchange of heads possible. The will power of Padmini makes her capable of recreating her husband of her choice, complete and perfect by the transposition of Devadatta’s head on Kapila’s body. The female desire becomes so powerful that her desire gets materialized with the bliss of the Super power. In *Hayavadana* the story begins with the narration of a horse that speaks in a human voice. The horse’s narration brings about the story of Padmini and Padmini’s story takes her to an abandoned temple. In a similar manner in *Hayavadana* too, the craving in the heart of Padmini for a husband who would be both physically strong and intellectually powerful becomes conspicuous.

Here in this play the feminine principle overpowers the male principle. She is stronger in her strength of will and pursuit than the male. Padmini, though existing in a patriarchal society, exerts her will. She is wedded to Devadatta but has her affinity for her husband’s friend Kapila. This goes on but her desire wouldn’t have found their expression but for the aid of the Goddess Kali. Here the presence of the Goddess Kali in the abandoned temple in Chitrakoot Parvat, that which reminds of the Mahabharata is a reference to the ancient heritage which in a way takes us beyond the limitations of patriarchy.

The female desire is sanctioned by the Goddess and nature gives the status of sati to Padmini. Though the men, Devadatta and Kapila despise their lives and surrender their selves, Padmini is never defeated. Padmini awaits completion and fulfilment which she attains even at the cost of her life. In the character of Padmini, the abandoned Goddess on the desolate mountain, along with the ambience where Nature’s presence, is felt in the stirring and their dire urge to accommodate the spirit of Padmini. Padmini’s attempt to express herself is a retaliation that goes beyond the linear performance of the action. The nature and the Goddess are as if one in their desiring for the completion. As Girish Karnad in *Three Plays* observes:

Western theatre has developed a contrast between the face and the mask—the real inner person and the exterior one presents ... to the world outside. But in traditional Indian theatre, the mask is only the face ‘writ large’ (Karnad 1997: 13).

It must be said in this regard that in the nature and ambience of the Chitrakoot parvat and the forest where Kapila had started living in seclusion away from the company of other humans are living in their presence, is an element of power and consciousness lurking in nature. The presence of the throbbing nature imbued with a will power that reciprocates the will of the female principle shows a perfect bonding between the nature, woman and the godhead. Nature has a fragrance that gets mingled with the essence of Padmini.

Patriarchy’s exploitation of women gets registered in Karnad again and again. Whether in the torture of Appanna, or in Vishakha’s comment in *The Fire and the Rain*, everywhere is a rejection of the exploitation of men. As Vishakha remarks about her husband Paravasu—

He used my body, and his own body, like an experimenter, an explorer. As instruments in a search. Search for what? I never know (Karnad 1998).

The women begin as tender women uncertain in the world of men but gradually they become more powerful than the male. The women get over their marginalized state of existence and retaliate through an assertion of their identity and by locating a realm for themselves, where they reign supreme. As Arshia Sattar, the critic, writes in “Girish Karnad and the women who defied norms”:

Unlike so many male writers of his generation, Karnad was so sure to give his female characters not simply a voice, but also a narrative nub... (Sattar)

The marginalized and exploited whether in the form of women or Nature or an abandoned goddess in an abandoned temple, form one whole where the three different units come together and express their disturbances, their marginalization and their self-assertion. In this it is quite visible that the notion of self-assertion and expression of the self in one’s own version refuting the supernarrative becomes quite conspicuous. Here this self expression becomes quite visible and with the aid of the women characters, who transcend the intention of their creator, the playwright Karnad, speak on their own and topple patriarchy’s rigid laws. The characters express themselves in their speech, action and newer interpretation of life.

In Karnad's plays the female characters are virulent and quite powerful in the sanctity of their selves. The characters are so powerful that in *Hayavadana*, *Nagmandala* or even in *The Fire and the Rain*, the female protagonist has two men and she shares a perfect relationship with both in their coming together and dealing with them. The characters in the three plays centre around this powerful female protagonist who weaves her network of charm and creates a mesmerizing world not only for herself but for the characters who surround her life. In *The Fire*, Vishakha has both the men who love her and look to her with virulent passion. Rani in *Naga-Mandala* is the wife and beloved to two different men with the same countenance and Padmini in *Hayavadana* has one husband in two men.

The female characters in Karnad are the central focus of his plays. The female protagonists are strikingly original and dauntless in their moves. Vishakha does not care for her husband or her lover and considers her primary concern as centred in her duties which she never transgresses in spite of the strain that she endures. Rani, a mere adolescent girl grows up to become the wily woman who quite naturally understands the difference between the two males in her life while all the time communicating with both and herself. She not only beguiles the men of the community or her husband but even cheats sin itself being the truthful woman and without an iota of guilt.

Padmini in the similar vein remains a sati though she acquires the best of both the worlds and the best of both the men. She is a wife and mother and a perfect lover who meets the satisfaction of both the souls who love her and satisfies herself in the face of every odd. In her urge for the satisfaction of her soul and gratification of her senses which she claims as her right, she remains a sati. She takes to the funeral pyre of the two dead, confused in their sameness and difference, but she remains resolved in her desires and unperturbed in her understanding of her self. The three bodies step onto the same funeral pyre but it is only Padmini who preserves her essence which wafts through the forest.

Padmini and Rani rule the roost and are born to be free. In the world of men the women create a different sub-terrain all their own and more powerful and subtle than the world of men. The patriarchal constructs are masterfully brought in by the dramatist, but the way in which the female protagonists address these notions the male characters are overruled in their own game.

In Karnad's play *Hayavadana* two friends finally depart as their love for their beloved makes them strangers not only to their friends, but to themselves. The characters over and over again change their forms and as they come to terms with their own selves, they come closer to Padmini not as another, but as the key factor that colours their existence. The play revolves around the notion of where does love dwell on the body or in the mind; or is there a greater probe into the soul which lies beyond or into the interstices of the soul.

The women find their space amidst the cryptic world of men and the reprimanding of the aldermen of the society is intact in Karnad's play. The women conform to tradition and that which has been designated as right by the society. However, this had led to a space to the women clan who spin a world of their own amidst disturbances. Karnad's irony over societal processes, whereby a woman is made to conform to the norms of patriarchy and chastity becomes apparent in Karnad. Women like Padmini and Rani get their desires fulfilled through guile, while remaining chaste. They defy the norms of chastity while conforming to the codes of the same. While Padmini ascends to the funeral pyre of her husbands as a sati, Rani is hailed as the goddess when she claims that she had touched no male other than her husband and the Cobra, which statement the Cobra sanctions as the truth.

As men split over their desires and yet fail to satisfy the same, the female get their desires and will be fulfilled even under dire constraints. The characters throughout Karnad's plays as *Hayavadana* and *Nagmandala* everywhere is a terrible crisis to express and find the centre, especially for men. The woman is certainly marginalized, but the woman creates a space of her own where she reigns uncontested and is hailed as the superior even by the very society that had marginalized her. The women in a dire attempt to seek escape from this marginalization give birth to sensibilities that transcend the linear thought of men. As the Bhagavata claims, "the river/ has no fear/ of memories" and the Female Chorus take up the spirit singing:

The river only feels the
pull of the waterfall.
She giggles, and tickles the rushes
on the bank, ...
...
While the scarecrow on the bank
has a face fading
on its mudpot head
and a body torn
with memories (Karnad *Hayavadana* 58-59).

While the male clan reach out to the world in search of fulfilment and acquisition, the women in their search for completion become one with the ambience and waft through their setting, transcending the strict premises of restrictions and inhibitions. In the play *Hayavadana* though the female protagonist Padmini dies, her smell lingers and so too her entity as embodied in nature. The existence of the male however gets negated and wiped out in no time.

The women move in and out of the text creating ripples and new spaces whereby the locked and confined humans find their own spaces and their human dignity. The women are embedded in their setting and each character has a unique participation in nature and his ambience. The setting creates a perfect backdrop to the growth and flourishing of life of the characters. When the man fails to understand the trouble and the terrible constraint of their women clan, the ambience with its tenderness cures and revives the grief-stricken women. The difficult state of existence of the women becomes so greatly absorbed by nature that their duress is converted into strength and instead the life of the women becomes less hazardous than the male who ultimately put their existence at stake for their survival.

Throughout *Naga-Mandala* we have references to the blind woman Kurudavva, the adolescent girl, Rani, the concubine and the Yaksha woman. Unlike in the traditional notion of patriarchy where women fail to voice their desires, the women in *Naga-Mandala* are characterized by their desires. The women not only sense their desires and pronounce them, but they make moves to let their wish be fulfilled in life against every stricture laid down by the patriarchal society. The patriarch as he is Appanna disregards the presence of Rani in his house. He locks her up and spends his days and nights with the so-called concubine. As Kurudavva emerges there with her son Kappanna immediately she realizes that it must have been the doing of Appanna. She gives a magical potion to Rani to cure the disregard in her husband. Rani thinks of her parents but fails to connect with her past. Instead, she connects with the world of nature around her.

The two women Rani, supposedly the queen of hearts of her parents, and the concubine on the other end, are foil to each other. While Rani is the queen of hearts of the family and her parents have got her wedded off even before she had come of age, the concubine is considered as a woman who has no social status as she is meant for the satisfaction of desire of the male clan. The concubine simply satisfies the desire of the male but can never expect to have a place in the household or in the society. She remains as a canker of the society. Kurudavva, the lone female character who wants Rani to dwell in grace and sanctity does whatever she can, gives magical roots to Rani which according to her would inflame love and desire in Appanna. However, Rani is too scared to execute this and what emerges is a series of question marks where the potion is thrown away, which in turn gets showered on a cobra and ultimately the Naga in the form of a man, exactly resembling her husband comes to her rescue. In the Naga she derives the ultimate pleasure of togetherness and the joy and satisfaction that she had been deprived of. However still she remains chaste as she had touched no other male other than her husband and the snake as she confesses.

Rani becomes a mother; she gets the name of a chaste woman and almost attains the status of a goddess for her pains. However, the concubine on the other hand loses the control on Appanna that she had had. Still, she does not get wiped off from the scene. Instead, her life is given an ending too just like Rani. She is so scared of her evil doings that she offers to become the maid of Rani and do the house-hold work for her. Though she enters the home domain her role in the household is of carrying out menial job. The two characters, Rani and the concubine become the dark doppelganger, the two faces of the Janus and while one is deprived of her dignity in the initial stage the other flourishes and the vice versa.

Love grows throughout the play, but love shows an anomalous growth as the kind of love which is considered valid and just as per societal norms remains out of question. Naga's love for Rani, Rani's stifled love for her husband, Rani's love for her husband's stature in Naga (though she might have cherished the doubt that he was not her husband, the same entity), Appanna's love for the so-called concubine and Kappanna's responding to the call of the Yaksha woman as wildly guessed by her mother Kurudavva bring in uneven instances of love which come and leave but do not remain to address elements of faith and trust. What remains is what the societal nexus enforces upon Rani and Appanna to stay together with fidelity and dedication.

In this process all the characters get blended into one and the society's role in straitjacketing diverse, multifaceted relationships into one strict stream remains the most potent structure in designating cause to relationships. The overlaps and blurring get merged as the relationships stand in the expert fire of criticism of authority of society. However, the Naga persists and so do the call of Kurudavva for life prevails stronger than the strictures, the norms of the obvious.

Stories emerge through different facets of life and life gets its dimensions marked through the rendering of experiences into solid instances and brave projection of truth. However, though the story emerges and comes into the arena of love and lovelessness, hatred and despising and enter into a zone where feelings fail themselves and can in no way be named; everywhere is a craving to deceive life and gain out of it at once. While life inspires stories, stories flicker through entities and episodes of life making thought possible and dreams real.

Naga-Mandala thrives upon humans' quest for the ultimate, the ideal in love, in conjugal fidelity, in consciousness of the self, in growth, maturity and regeneration. The story enters into a similar domain of perfection where what lurks is purity in diverse forms—purity of heart, soul, emotions, desires, relationships, and in upholding the sanctity of the self. The journey from adolescence to womanhood is also the journey from innocence to desire, from lack of awareness of the structured self to an acquisition of the self.

Rani's story begins with a flame quite unwillingly narrating her story to the story-teller, who would convert the story into a text. The text transforms into different narratives, where the adolescent girl becomes a woman and mother, fulfilled in desire and happiness. However, this should have been quite impossible under her condition, unless Providence would have showered grace upon her and the nether world came to her rescue.

The storyteller in search of a story fights out his existence looking for a story which could be tamed into the structure of a text. The flame delivers a story; however, as stories escape the grip of the creator, they transgress and deceive the scripter. In his turn the scripter fails to get hold of the story and what emerges is a fiasco, creating different endings, revealing different secrets. The different secrets of Rani and her relationship with Naga create the sensation that love makes relationships happen and that in turn gives birth to stories; stories end in different forms as life takes its course. As the mind, so the course of life, and so does a story journey to its end through diverse renderings across worlds. Everywhere is a transgression that baffles as Rani questions, "Do desires really reach out from some world beyond right into our beds?" (*Naga-Mandala* 39).

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