

Discourse of Subalterns in the 'Sub Altern World' with Special Reference to the
Plays of Girish Karnad

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Abstract

This paper shall explore the interpretation of Subalterns among the Sub Altern world of Girish Karnad's characters. The paper argues that the condition of women in this male society is very poor regarding the fact that the male society itself is facing Subaltern issues. Girish Karnad has portrait his all female characters very daring, courageous fearless, but still they have always been treated as the second class citizens. The inequitable treatment of women will be interpreted in terms of (against) 'societal pressure' verses individual freedom', 'marriage institutions' verses 'one's life' and 'patriarchal society' verses 'self desire'. Furthermore, the article highlights the contradictory situation of women in his plays like *Yayati*, *Hayavadana* and *Nagamanadala*. Devayani, Sharmishtha, Chitrlekha and Swarnlata, all the female characters of *Yayati*, were not better than of Padmini of *Hayavadana* and Rani of *Nagamanadala*. All the women characters of these plays had faces difficulties because of being the weaker one. The paper symbolizes the condition of subalterns (women), in the actual condition created by the 'Sub Altern'(men). The objective is to show how the females actually survive and resist against the injustice and made their life better in the end. 'Feministic approach' has been taken while analyzing the paper along with the factors of subalternism regarding the 'Sub Altern Theory'. It's a kind of blend of two different approaches, to find out the most affected area of our society, resulting the weaker section as the most suppressed segment of the human world. Girish Karnad has wisely used this plight of females in his plays showing the real situation from the real world. The article deals with many such kind of mischief, prevalent in our society.

Key words: Myth, Girish Karnad, *Yayati*, *Hayavadana*, *Naga Mandala*, Marriage institution, Patriarchal society, Sub Altern, Feminism, Cultural effect, Social Structure, Self Conflict, Social pressure, domestic violence (Rani), double standard of society, Social Strata

The terms *subaltern* and *Subaltern Studies* entered postcolonial studies through the works of the Subaltern Studies Group, a collection of historians of the Indian Subcontinent who explored the political-actor role of the men and women who constitute the mass population, rather than the political roles of the social and economic

elites, in the history of the Indian Subcontinent¹.

The postcolonial studies lead to the rise of subaltern issue which also connects the issue of women. This issue of women overlaps the concept of subaltern's issues in Indian Subcontinents. The issue of women came on surface in the past few centuries, catching

the attention of public. From the past few decades it has become a hot topic of discussion especially in post-colonial period. Although, these issues were always there on grass root level but never seek attentions. It is in the post colonial time when writers start discussing these topics on big platforms. The women are always 'the subalterns' in the world of men. Our society always restrains the role of women in the name of morals, norms, traditions, ethics etc just to keep the male dominance over them. Women are not allowed to act freely rather they have to live in the prominence of patriarchal power, where their roles are pre-decided².

Our contemporary writers credited a lot in highlighting the injustice of women and spark a movement of improving the condition of women, with one of the strongest weapon i.e. through writings! Among such writers in our Indian English Literature, there comes the name of Girish Karnad, the most significant playwright of our age, for such issues in post modern world.

Belonging to the post modern world, Girish Karnad has the quality of recycling the past experiences, blending with our rich heritage with an extra topping of mythical elements. With such a specific ingredients, he can make any kind of dish and can serve us with a spoon of dramaturgy and left us to decide the flavour and taste. Now it's on us (the audience) whether to take it as sour, salty or sweet. But being the master of his creations he is well expert to mould the mind set of his audiences without knowing that we (the audience) are just like puppet doing or understanding what we are laid down to.

At present, Karnad is the most popular personality both in broadcasting and literary world having the command of acting as well as writing. His plays are enriched with the theme of folk arts with a rich use of masks, lights, sutradhara on the stage. Above all these, the soul of the play is to demonstrate a live scene of contemporary issues mainly based on the human dilemmas and women condition. His female characters have both voice and power still they suffer more. Actually the voice is given to wake us, the audience, to get sensitized about such issues which are relevant in our life.

Almost every play of Karnad consists of a kind of myth and culture of our heritage. In *Yayati*, he borrowed the plot of King Yayati taken from the first chapter 'Adi-Parva' of *Mahabharat*³. This is the only play which consists of the maximum number of female characters Devayani, Sharmishtha, Chitrlekha and Swarnlata. The miseries of all the four women show their state of life in the male oriented system of world. Although the concept of subaltern is mostly exclusive for the population which are socially, politically and geographically outside of the colonial homeland⁴ but in this discourse I am trying to bring out the concept of subalternism especially for women who is always there from the very starting of human civilization and this is clearly visible in Karnad's play.

In Karnad's first play *Yayati*, the King was cursed by his father-in-law Shukrachaya for practicing adultery. The King was proud of his youthfulness and must have never imagined that he could also face such situation. His wife Devayani in outrage left her husband Yayati on such account. To

save himself from the curse of being old, he exchanges his age from his son Puru. Puru feels inferior to his father, wanted to do something which will boost up his self-esteem. In order to conquer over his fear he ignored his responsibilities and expectations of his wife Chitrlekha. Yayati's decisions of exchanging his curse with his son resulted in the death of his daughter-in-law Chitrlekha, who committed suicide and this incident opens his eyes and made him realize the meaninglessness of life and its pleasures. Nobody can skip his fate whether he is a King or common man.⁵

Talking about the female characters, Devayani, daughter of Shukracharya and wife of King Yayati, is the most powerful among the other female characters of the play. As a daughter of a Brahmin Scholar, she has the power to speak but as a wife of King Yayati, she has to lower her status to make space for others and has to accept the polygamy culture. Apart from his status and high birth she still has to tolerate the injustice. She is the Queen only for public but as an individual she is being treated as a very common slave with no self respect. Devayani's nurturing was never to endure injustice but rather to speak loudly. So Devayani decided to raise her voice against Yayati. She is not that kind of women to accept her defeat silently. But as a result of her dare, she had to relinquish her queen's position as well as her husband.

Sharmishtha is a queen of Rakhshi tribe, but still she has to live as a slave in royal house, because a Rakshasi can never become a queen in our society. She is more competent as a queen of Yayati than Devayani. Sharmishtha is very bold and clear in her

thoughts and needs. She hates Devayani, because somewhere she feels that she is the reason of her miserable life. She blamed her for all the miseries and suffering she was facing. She loved Yayati and understands him better than Yayati himself. She became the backbone of King Yayati, during his sufferings. She helps Yayati to understand life and its meaning. Her role was very dominating and can convince anyone with her confident gestures. Even King Yayati, finds himself convinced by her arguments. Karnad has made her very sharp, intelligent, and daring in personality. She challenges the queen's capabilities as well as the male chauvinism of the King. She has the confidence that she is much more capable than of Queen Devayani, so she never left a chance to challenge her. Karnad has given Sharmishtha the strongest voice in the play. She dares everyone, the queen Devayani, the king Yayati and the society, because of the injustice done towards her, by them. She was a very bold woman, aware of her rights and the double standard of the society. Other female characters represent only one or two shades in their roles but Sharmishtha had multiple shades and possess different roles for others. A 'brave-woman' for other females, 'eligible-queen' for Devayani, 'loving-mother' for Puru, a 'smart-companion' for Yayati, an 'adviser' for the King and a 'philosopher' for life. She is an ideal woman in the most misfit gesture and in odd situation. The most perfect women in the wrap of most imperfect attire. She is a 'Rakshasi' by her gene but is a 'Queen' by her soul, with the most balanced personality.

Chitrlekha, wife of Puru show a very poignant kind of plight of women, where

husbands takes decision only considering about themselves and not having a single thought about their wives. Just to prove himself strong, courageous like his father, Puru took the decision of exchanging the curse. But the effect of this decision was worst for his wife Chitrlekha. She was a newly wedded wife and has the dream of a romantic loving life with his husband. But now it was all crushed down with the loss of her husband's youth and energy. Accepting his decision, she initially behaves like a strong princess showing strength but lastly loses control over herself and committed suicide. Her death opens the eyes of King Yayati and he realizes his mistake. He regrets his decision but was helpless to stop the consequences of his blunder. Chitrlekha shows courage to speak but it was too late for her. If she shows the courage to raise her voice a little earlier, she must have been saved. But she shows the courage when her ability to endure over power saturated. Her suicide, made Yayati back off his decision of exchanging youth and he undo his curse with his son and accept the reality of old age.

Karnad has interlinked these three royal females Devayani, Sharmishtha and Chitrlekha but Swarnalata's sufferings was totally different and was not related to the royal house. Swarnalata was the maid of the Royal ladies and used to serve them. She belonged to the most common and poor community of society. Her suffering shows the most grass root level prejudices of our society. Swarnalata's husband shows the character of a male chauvinistic who takes the women's virginity as their prestige issue. Swarnalata was not allowed to be educated

so she was educated by a Brahmin secretly. When her husband came to know about this he was unable to accept the fair character of her wife and started doubting about it. He was unable to bear that and became mad and later committed suicide. Swarnalata's was the most silent character although during the play, we find her talking to everyone but the real truth was always kept hidden in her heart. Truth of her character, which she never had been able to explain to her husband. She couldn't get the courage to raise her voice and spent her whole life silently, exactly like the society wanted her to live.

All the four female characters of *Yayati* show the sufferings of women in this men world. Although their sufferings were differ but still they had to suffer in their own accordance. All of them had a common connection regarding their sufferings which is 'men'. Devayani suffers because of her husband, Sharmishtha because King Yayati, Chitrlekha because of Puru and Swarnalata because her husband. Girish Karnad has written the play during 1961, after fourteen years of Independence. At the time of *Yayati*, Karnad was only in his earlier twenties, and was so capable of understanding the silent-voice of the sub-alterns of 'men-society'. However, Karnad's greatest contribution in the play is the matter of choice, for *Yayati*. Karnad has made *Yayati* realizes his fault after a series of tragedies. Mahabharata's *Yayati* realizes it without any flaws. In Karnad's play however, "Yayati recognizes the dreadfulness and horror of his own life and assumes his moral responsibility after series of encounter"⁶ especially his encounter with

the royal women, Devayani, Sharmishtha and Chitralkha.⁷

However, the play also indicates towards the upper class of the society of modern age who has indulged themselves in sensuous desires. The play can play the role of eye opening to those modern 'mongering people' and reminds them that the Hindu concept of sexual control.⁸

In the play *Hayavadana*⁹, Karnad portraits Padmini, as the lead female character. Like Karnad's former female characters she is bold, and full of life. She is agile in nature and wanted to live her life fully. She doesn't like to be controlled by others, but unfortunately, our society doesn't allow a woman to live by herself. So she married to Devdutta, a handsome fair looking man. Devdutta was timid and had lack of energy as well, contrasting Padmini's nature. But one thing he has i.e. the social status. No woman can have a social status without a husband. For every woman, to survive in this patriarchal society, marrying a man is a compulsory act. Women have no power to raise their voice against this culture so they silently accept the man chosen for her by their family. Like every women Padmini also tried to convinced herself but her desires were caught between two contrasting men, Devdatta and Kapila. Both of them were best friends but had poles apart kind of personality. Kapila, a bosom friend of Devdatta was totally devoted to his friendship and was always ready to do anything for him. Kapila consisted of all the kind of qualities which Padmini wanted in her husband. Padmini tried her level best to accept what the society has allotted her by suppressing her desires and needs but failed.

She tried to raise her voice but her voice has not the power to pierce the mountain of patriarchy. With her sacrifice as 'Sati' her voice also died.

Karnad somewhere shows the concept of 'new women' through Padmini. Karnad represents a bold, iron willed woman who goes against the tradition to fulfill her desire of having a husband who carries a superior head on a superior body. Padmini's predicament seems to be the predicament of a modern sophisticated woman of 'women's liberation'. However, in the course of time, she too realizes the absurdity of her efforts.

Rani or the queen, the only daughter of her parents, brought up as a princess in her maternal home, is the main lead female character of Karnad's next play *Nagamanadala*¹⁰. Apart from all the happiness from her maternal side, she experienced the worst in her married life. She was kept in home locked, not allowed to talk to anyone, brutally beaten by her husband, treated as a maid and a slave, she has the worst kind of life anyone can have. Till now, Karnad's every female character has courage and confidence but Rani is the only exceptional case. Karnad has given her the most pitiful and helpless character. Appanna, her husband used to treat her very brutally, with every kind of physical as well as emotional torture. She accepted her miseries as her fate, because she has no other option, for her survival. Appanna was her husband, and this mere relation gives him to master over Rani. Society has given him such veto power to rule over his wife. Karnad shows the naked and brutal face of society as well as of marriage, when the elders of the village decree Rani to proof her

innocence on Appanna's wrong allegation of adultery. Till the end she never found the courage to raise her voice against the injustice and hence survived, unlike Chitrlekha and Padmini. Somewhere Karnad indicates that only those women can survive who are not rebellious. Rani represents every single girl of our society. She is the most silent female character of Karnad's play till now. Still only the character of 'Silent-Rani' raises the most outrageous inner voice among audience. Her miseries can easily associate with every individual by sympathy or empathy.

Karnad took birth at the time of British Colonization. He started his career of writing in a phase where the effects of British Colonization were still alive i.e. post Independent period. The writers were struggling in between the British and Indian Ideologies. During such phase, Karnad took the whole contrasting path and walks on the route of our rich historical and cultural background instead of dwelling in the confusion of nativity and colonial thoughts. This route becomes smoother with the use of mythology too. Going through the opposite of wind Karnad has chosen to expose the hollowness of man and of society. He himself has given the voice to the subalterns especially the females. He portrays his

female characters usually very bold and outspoken except Rani of *Nagamanadala*. Although, his characters doesn't show the typical patterns of subalterns' but still Karnad has given them his own kind of subaltern traits. The meaning of subaltern is 'below' a person having higher rank or status. In the play *Yayati*, Puru was subaltern to his father King Yayati in rank, similarly in *Hayavadana*, Kapila was subaltern to Devdatta in social status, and Sappanna (the son of Kurduva) was subaltern to Appanna in social power in the play *Nagamandala*. And here Karnad shows how these subalterns treat 'their subaltern'. Karnad has very smartly chosen one character below the other and shows the condition of the women, who already are under them.

Karnad has given his own kind of voice to the 'Subalterns of the Subaltern-World' and shows that yes, they can speak if we let them speak. It's our responsibility to let them be free and live life according to 'thierself' without imposing them our fakeness. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak discusses whether 'the subaltern can even speak', somewhere Karnad has given her the answer, that Yes! They can, if we let them. The path seems difficult but not very impossible¹¹.

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