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## Gender Narratives and Cultural Perspectives in Girish Karnad's *Yayati*, *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala*

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Girish Karnad's dramatic themes focus on the basic issues that concern the existential problem of an individual in the postcolonial modern Indian society. Gender and culture are two important social constructs that keep on modifying the existential space of an individual. These various class identities often identify the individual as a marginal 'other'. This concept of the 'other' superficially seems to lie within the class constructs that are governed largely by the concepts of gender and culture. By deconstructing the class constructs we can identify and understand how gender and culture subjugate the individual and make him/her the 'other' thus creating subclasses within a class and locating the margin within the centre. Girish Karnad's three plays *Yayati*, *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala* focus on the gender narratives and their presentations through cultural perspectives that try to locate the individual within the constructs of class narratives as a marginalized other.

In his three plays *Yayati*, *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala* Karnad has made a subtle blending of the gender and culture to portray the identity of the individual. This can be analyzed and understood by critiquing the 'Other' discourse of which the individual becomes an indispensable part. In my paper I focus on the representation of gender and culture in relation to the existence of the individual in these three plays of Girish Karnad. My paper also highlights the individual's existence that is modified by the gender and culture constructs that can be better understood by deconstructing the class narratives and critiquing the 'Other' discourse of which the individual becomes an indispensable part.

In *Yayati* and *Hayavadana* class orientation is an important factor that acts along with the gender and culture discourses to subjugate the individual to the level of marginality. Class appears to be a combination of gender and culture constructs that turn out to be the instruments of subjugation that society puts in use to control and modify the existential space of the concerned individual. Gender is a social construct that puts certain norms for man and woman to follow as per their sexes. Gender constructs are associated with the culture and often try to control the female and victimize them in favour of the male. Gender is generally regarded as a cultural construct and is largely influenced by the patriarchal prejudices. Culture, on the other hand, refers to knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, religion, and various other concepts and ideas that are acquired by a group of people through generations by experiences of an individual or a class. Class contains the traits of culture that establishes it, while gender is another product of culture that pervades every class thus re-defining the existential space of the individual. These stereotypical constructs of gender and culture often deform and distort the existential space thus aligning the individual with the margin and making it the 'other'.

The play *Yayati* talks about the struggle of two women, Sharmishtha and Devayani, who fight to achieve their rights by defying the norms of gender discourse and the cultural tradition thus challenging the dictates of patriarchy and the bloodshot eyes of society. In *Hayavadana* Padmini craves for a perfect life partner. For achieving her goal she goes to the extent of transposing the heads of her husband and his friend, though she falls short of achieving her desired goal. The conflict of nature and culture can be observed in these two plays. Sharmishtha and Padmini fight against the artificial constructs of gender and culture to establish their natural desires and rights. Here comes the question of feminine discourse and its conflict with the patriarchal constructs of gender and culture. In other words their conflict lies with their own class. These two female characters oscillate between the centre and the margin. This interaction between the margin and the centre often renders the individuals an 'other' identity. Class plays an important role in highlighting the individual's conflict with the stereotypical concepts of gender and cultural constructs and locating the individual's actual space of existence within society.

The conflict of *Yayati* starts with the revenge taken by Sharmishtha, an Asura(Demon) princess, against her friend Devayani, a Brahmin and the Queen of King Yayati. Class difference and the cultural orientation lie at the centre of this conflict. Sharmishtha seduces King Yayati and compels him to indulge in physical relationship with her. This act on the part of Yayati is surely a violation of the marital norms and an act of treachery and discrimination against his Queen Devayani. The source of the conflict lies in the class and gender discriminations. Being a representative of the male narrative Yayati betrays his wife Queen Devayani. Gender constructs in the modified Indian cultural scenario depict the superiority of the male over the female and render the former with the illegal and unholy authority to have multiple sexual partners and debar the female from her fundamental marital rights. Patriarchal gender constructs project the woman as a suffering soul who sacrifices her life for the male thus becoming an object of exploitation. Sharmishtha exploits these gender constructs to challenge the class discrimination that she faced for being a low class Rakshasha princess. But, in doing so she indirectly makes Devayani a victim of the patriarchal constructs of gender and culture that Sharmishtha intends to subvert.

While Devayani achieves her right to become the queen through dharma, Sharmishtha also claims her right in the same way though belonging to the lower class. Thus, she replaces Devayani, challenges the superiority of Devayani's class and subverts patriarchy. If Yayati can indulge in several physical affairs as a man then Sharmishtha also stands justified in her act of seducing another married man. To acquire her social right Sharmishtha challenges the norms of patriarchy and gender narratives and indulges in forbidden love relationship. She reacts from the margin and moves towards the center by becoming the Queen of King Yayati. On the other hand, in spite of being a member of the privileged class and the Queen of King Yayati Devayani becomes a victim of the patriarchal gender constructs and her existential space becomes a marginal space within the centre. But, we cannot consider Sharmishtha as the person responsible for Devayani's misfortune. It is the network of power, as described by Michel Foucault, which propels Sharmishtha towards achieving her right as a woman in the male dominated society. Sharmishtha carves out her own space as a woman by discarding the norms of chastity and morality that are imposed on a woman by the constructs of Indian culture. Class and

culture implicate the existential condition of the woman in favour of the male discourse. The Indian culture that is largely dictated by and meant for the male is used as an instrument by Sharmishtha to displace the phallic centre. In that sense Sharmishtha has achieved her right as a woman and has succeeded in obliterating the class differences. This act of Sharmishtha is against the Indian Hindu tradition. But if we consider the point of individual right then Sharmishtha's act stands justified, and King Yayati seems to be doing no wrong in rendering her with her womanly right. While talking about the issue Dr. Falguni P. Desai observes,

Devyani thought Yayati had violated his Dharma, when he married Sharmishtha. She was right in her own way. But if a man is bogged by a woman for Dharma's sake to pour in the seed he must do so, as a king & a Kshatriya Yayati followed his Dharma in doing so....Sharmishtha asks from Yayati her ritu right, ritu embrace, so that her ritu may not be in vain and in such circumstances Yayati rightly follows his dharma and grants her an offspring by practicing world's highest holy law of their union. (Desai, 51-52)

Class is made up of various stereotypical concepts and praxes that are largely associated with and highly influenced by the concepts of gender and culture. In *Yayati* the conflict between Sharmishtha and Devayani is governed by their class orientations that are influenced by the gender and culture concepts. By deconstructing the class we can understand the interplay of gender and culture that transfers the concerned individual from centre to the margin. Apart from having their feminine identities Sharmishtha and Devayani also have their respective class and cultural orientations. But, while Sharmishtha moves from the margin to the centre Devayani becomes the marginalized within the centre. While Devayani becomes the suffering female figure, Sharmishtha emerges as a bold woman who defies the norms of patriarchal society by indulging in physical relationship with King Yayati, Devayani's husband, and that too before marriage to establish her rights. Sharmishtha is not an escapist. While fighting for her right she is ready to accept any consequence occurring due to her action. While talking to Meenakshi Raykar about his play *Yayati* in an interview Karnad says,

Every character in the play tries to seek escape from the consequences of its actions. Even Puru does that. Yayati, Devayani and Puru all of them try to avoid facing the consequences. Sharmishtha is the only character who accepts the consequences of her action. (Raykar, 340)

In *Hayavadana*, on the other hand, the interplay of class and gender is observed on a different level. The complex triangular love relationship among Devadatta, Padmini and Kapila is governed by the class and the gender narratives. The transposition of the heads of Devadatta and Kapila dissolves the borderlines of class and culture differences between the two and as a result of that the individual continues to remain in a no man's land. The centre and the margin overlap with the overlapping of the culture and class identities. As a result of that the existential space of the individual always remains in a flux thus making it difficult to interpret and locate the actual position of the individual in society. Padmini's act of transposing the heads of Kapila and Devadatta clearly expresses her physical desire for a perfect male partner. But, the gender constructs of the patriarchal society prevents her from fulfilling her desire. Since she belongs to a higher class and because of being married to a Brahmin Padmini cannot commit adultery by indulging in physical relationship with Kapila, a Sudra. Padmini's culture is determined by her class

which is different from that of Kapila. Padmini and her husband Devadatta share the same cultural background. But, unlike Sharmishtha Padmini fails to transcend the boundaries of class, culture and gender to achieve her goals. Karnad hints at a bold issue of extramarital affair, which we observe in *Naga-Mandala* as well, where the female tries to transcend the patriarchal gender construct of an ideal wife to attain her sexual fulfilment. Padmini's act of transposing the heads of the two males is a clear attempt on her part to defy and subvert the dictates of gender and culture narratives and satisfy her own desires and unfulfilled intentions. While talking on this matter P. D. Nimsarkar writes,

Padmini does not publicly admit her love for Kapila because she is aware of the socio-cultural restrictions which prohibit a married woman from developing extramarital relationship which would otherwise have been taken as a breach of social condition and violation of marriage institution. Moreover, Kapila is a Sudra, a lower caste person and inter-caste marriage would not have been approved and accepted...Her idea of a perfect man is already at the centre of her game plan and by shutting the eyes she transposes the heads, Devadatta's on Kapila and vice versa deliberately, with the advantage of the goddess' blessing. (Nimsarkar, 104)

The problem remains the same even after the exchange of the heads. The gender discourse becomes active with the expression of Padmini's hidden feminine desire for a perfect man when she defies the gender constructs and the patriarchal norms of an ideal woman and an ideal wife and transposes the heads of Devadatta and Kapila. The conflict between Devadatta and Kapila is the conflict between the centre and the margin. Padmini, on the other hand, becomes a marginalized self in spite of belonging to the privileged class and thus gets located in the marginal space that is created within the centre. In *Hayavadana* the interplay of various class and culture paradigms reveal the displacement of the individual from centre to the margin. After the transposition of the heads the person with Kapila's head and Devadatta's body and the person with Devadatta's head and Kapila's body reside in a hybrid space that is formed due to the overlapping of the centre and the margin. Through this play Karnad makes a bold attempt in questioning the authority of the traditional class and culture discourses and the compatibility of the gender constructs of the patriarchal Indian society. The head governs the body and the head is governed by the culture and tradition that are related to the respective classes. The conflict returns as Devadatta with Kapila's body loses his muscular physical beauty and Kapila with Devadatta's body grows his body into a muscular one due to their lifestyles that are governed by their respective classes. Thus, both culture orientations and patriarchal gender constructs stop Padmini from transcending her class barriers and fulfil her desire. This desire remains dormant in *Hayavadana* but clearly develops in Karnad's another important play *Naga-Mandala*.

*Naga-Mandala* is an important play that discusses the important issue of feminine desire for social independence and sexual fulfilment by defying the dictates of patriarchy and subverting the patriarchal constructs of gender and cultural discourses. In *Naga-Mandala* the racial class divisions are not so prominent. But the female is itself presented as an oppressed class and Rani, the central character of the play, becomes a representative of it. The subjugation of a woman by the patriarchy through the instruments of gender and culture constructs has been presented by Karnad in this play along with the bold

feminine desire to subvert those constructs and fulfil her sexual desires thus materializing the feminine dreams that we have seen remaining dormant and unfulfilled in Padmini in *Hayavadana*.

The atmosphere of magic realism is created in *Naga-Mandala* as well where Rani fulfils her sexual desires with the Naga in the absence of her husband Appanna. Here the female desire and the feminine discourse get overlapped with each other in the psychological discourse of a female self thus, creating a hybrid semi-real space. The issues of extramarital affair and illegal sexual relationship have been put forth by Karnad in the modern context through myth and folklore.

The issue of extramarital affair is prohibited in Indian culture. But, in his play *Naga-Mandala* Karnad indirectly justifies Rani's act of adultery by stating it as a metaphor. Rani gets physically engaged with Naga (a Cobra in the guise of Rani's husband Appanna) who makes love with her every night in the absence of her cruel husband Appanna who leaves her everyday locked in the room. The identities of Naga and Appanna have overlapped with each other thus creating a state of confusion among the husband and wife. The semi-dark atmosphere and the confused identities give Rani the opportunity to break away the barriers of patriarchy and exercise her own discretion in fulfilling her feminine desire and subverting the male constructs. Through Rani, Karnad challenges the patriarchal constructs of chastity and ideal womanhood that the women are made to follow only to serve the purpose of the male. While talking on this matter M. Sarat Babu writes,

*Naga-Mandala* is a feminist play. It questions the patriarchal moral code which demands the faithfulness of a woman to her husband but not the faithfulness of a man to his wife. This is accepted not only by men but also by women. Appanna openly and unashamedly commits adultery but nobody objects to it; the Village Elders who sit in judgment do not find fault with him. Nobody believes the innocence of Rani. She sleeps with Naga without knowing it. She does not discover the identity of Naga who assumes Appanna's form by using his magical power. (Babu, 76)

Rani's attaining of sexual and social superiority is reflected through the words of Fatima Sugarwala,

At the end Appanna worships his wife and accepts the child. Now he is at peace, he has resolved his differences, but faces the dichotomy of her real and ideal self. She pats her hair, and tells Naga, "This hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss, live happily for ever." She wants the love and the status of her wedded husband and she also yearns for the warm sensuous love of the Naga. (Sugarwala, 22)

Both Sharmishtha and Rani revolt against Patriarchy. The difference is that while Sharmishtha shares the male partner with another woman (Devayani), Rani keeps two male partners for the fulfilment of her needs.

Thus, through Sharmishtha, Davayani, Padmini and Rani Karnad elaborately presents the gender and culture discourses that are prevalent in the patriarchal Indian society. Each of these characters belongs to a particular class and has a definite cultural background. Sharmishtha and Rani relocate their marginal space of existence within the centre by subverting the oppressive social constructs. On the other hand Padmini and Devayani become the marginalized selves within the centre. Karnad succeeds in portraying the bold woman in Sharmishtha, Rani and Padmini thus, challenging the traditional patriarchal

concepts of gender and culture that consequently puts a question mark on the validity of class discrimination in general. Girish Karnad has identified the reactions against and the deconstructions of various social constructs that are responsible for the conflict between the centre and the margin. This is no more confined within the literary boundaries but has begun to be a major movement in the postcolonial modern Indian society that has raised a bold question against the authenticity of the traditional phallogocentric world.

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