
DECONSTRUCTING FAMILY AND PATRIARCHY IN
GIRISH KARNAD'S *NAGAMANDALA* AND *FLOWERS*



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ABSTRACT

Karnad is an unconventional dramatist, who deconstructs the conventional patriarchal value system to bring to light the underlying “violent hierarchy” in such systems and the resultant predicament of human life. He works to dismantle the “logocentrism” of Indian society and brings his readers face to face with the opposite reality, which too has its own validity. Therefore, through *Nagamandala* and *Flowers*, he seems to posit that the significance of each value has to be seen in relation to other values in the social set up, and that no human being, male or female, can be judged on the basis of an over-arching ultimate value.

KEYWORDS : *Deconstructing Family and Patriarchy , Nagamandala and Flowers , violent hierarchy.*

INTRODUCTION :

Girish Karnad is somewhat of an iconoclast who refuses to stay contented with the unquestioned conventional wisdom and value system. Rather he goes beyond conventionality to explore the underlying irreconcilability and opposition within such value system and to show how an individual is crushed under such overarching and dominant system. He works to dismantle the concept of “essential reality” or “logocentrism” of Indian value system, which is based on patriarchy and rejects the dominance of patriarchy over matriarchy or one point of view over the other. Karnad, in his dramas, functions as an eye-opener and brings his readers face to face with an opposite reality which too has its own validity in relation to the situation in which the characters of his plays find themselves. He refutes the politics of exclusion by including contrasting, even opposite, views of life. Karnad posits to re-evaluate the conventional value system by bringing out the inherent “violent hierarchy” (Derrida 41) in such a system of belief. In this way Karnad endeavours to expose the contradictions and oppositions embedded in such a system of belief built on conventional values on the basis of which a certain person is eulogized while the ‘other’ is condemned, and thereby shows how unstable and complex the foundations of such a system are.

Karnad presents the view that each value has several irreconcilable and contradictory aspects which put an individual in an absurd situation that often seems to have no immediate resolution.

Therefore, he seems to posit that the significance of each value has to be seen in relation to other values in the social set up, and that no human being can be judged on the basis of an over-arching ultimate value. In fact Karnad deconstructs the conventional concepts of family and patriarchy and unravels what has been lying hidden and subjugated or rather what has been intentionally kept outside the view of society

In fact deconstruction is a way of critically analyzing texts and unraveling multiple layers of meaning within the text. Deconstruction opposes the view of one absolute meaning of text and stresses the constant transference and postponement of meaning. Jacques Derrida remarks that "from the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs. We think only in signs" (Derrida 27). Like Ferdinand de Saussure, Derrida considers language to be a system of signs where meaning is determined on the basis of difference with other signs. Rorty remarks that "words have meaning only because of contrast-effects with other words... no word can acquire meaning in the way in which philosophers from Aristotle to Bertrand Russell have hoped it might—by being the unmediated expression of something non-linguistic" (Rorty 8). Deconstruction aims to bring to surface as well as to overturn the binary oppositions like signifier/signified, speech/writing, matriarchy/patriarchy, to make explicit "arbitrary violence intrinsic to all texts" (Derrida 41). Derrida, stressing the necessity of overturning such binary oppositions, remarks:

To do justice to this necessity is to recognize that in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with a peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (Axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment. To overlook this phase of overturning is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition. (Derrida 41)

Like a deconstructionist, Karnad attempts to bring to light and dismantle the binaries of male versus female, convention versus modernity, matriarchy versus patriarchy, etc. and portrays their eternal play in his dramas.

In *Nagamandala* Girish Karnad relates the life story of an Indian woman, Rani, who finds herself weighed down against the traditions of the society which has been skewed towards male sensibility. Whereas a male member of society enjoys all sorts of freedom in his life, a female has to pass through innumerable ordeals to save her existence on earth. Though Appanna is wedded to Rani, he enjoys his extra-marital relationship with his 'concubine' shamelessly neglecting the emotional and physical needs of his wife, Rani. The overarching male oriented traditions will devour the existence of Rani if she too chooses to have a companion outside the marriage bond to fulfill her emotional and physical needs. Rani, who is recently married to Appanna, is locked inside the house daily by her husband and is treated as a servant who has to prepare meal and perform all house hold duties for her husband while he enjoys his extra-marital affair with his 'concubine'. No member of the society raises a question on the infidelity of Appanna towards his wife, Rani and at the same time no one dares to come to the rescue of Rani by giving support to her so that she could gather courage to raise her voice against his immoral and wicked treatment towards her. Appanna visits her wife only to have lunch. He has not even consummated his marriage with Rani. Rani feels suffocated and choked and wishes to be free from this unbearable bond. If she chooses to be free from the clutches of her cruel husband, the society will brand her as an undignified woman. Kurudavva, an old blind woman, advises Rani to give her specially prepared potion to her husband to win the heart of her husband. Kurudavva assures Rani that after consuming the potion Appanna will develop love for her and "won't go sniffing after the bitch. He will make you a wife instantly" (Karnad, *Nagamandala* 262). However Rani, at the last moment, gives up the plan of giving that potion to her husband and instead pours the potion on the ant hill which was a dwelling place of a

cobra. The cobra develops love for Rani and visits her daily at night assuming the appearance of Appanna. Rani gets pregnant and as soon as she informs Appanna about her pregnancy, he casts doubts on her chastity and asks her to pass through the snake ordeal to prove her chastity before the elders of the society. Surprisingly, the cobra instead of biting her slides up her shoulder and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head. Rani is considered to be a goddess and Appanna is left with no choice but to accept her as his wife.

In *Nagamandala* Karnad deconstructs the way society gives a long rope to males to fulfill their sexual desires whereas females are expected not only to suppress their physical needs but also the fundamental right to lead a respectful life. Karnad attempts to dismantle the dominant view that adultery on the part of a male member of society is something normal or acceptable while if a woman goes astray from the path of fidelity to her husband, she will have to be punished by the society. Karnad uses myth in the play to present a contrasting situation to unravel the psyche of a wayward male, who finds his wife involved in physical relations with a Cobra. The snake ordeal, instead of going in favour of Appanna, proves Rani innocent and she is taken to be a deity. Appanna falls into the same snare which he set for his wife Rani. By creating opposite and contrasting scenarios pertaining to sexual behaviour of a male and a female, Karnad neither accepts nor rejects any of the standpoints but simply presents the "arbitrary violence" inherent in each viewpoint, and, therefore, posits that no viewpoint can be taken to be absolutely or essentially perfect or imperfect. The perfectibility or imperfectability of any value or belief system has to be seen in relation to other values or beliefs within the social set up.

In another play entitled *Flowers* Karnad has deconstructed the male created value system that governs the sexual behaviour of man and woman in society. The plot of *Flowers* is based on a folktale from the Chitradurga region in Karnataka, which was used by the Kannada writer T. R. Subbanna in his 1952 novel *Hamasageethe* (Swan Song). Here we have a married priest, who has always led a life of propriety and decency following a strict regimen of devoting all his energies in the service of God. Everyone, even the chieftain of the village admires the dedication and devotion of the priest towards the *linga*. He follows his daily routine of worshipping the *linga* without the slightest breach. However, the things change drastically when the heart of the priest starts throbbing for Ranganayaki, a courtesan and he adorns her bare body everyday with the same flowers he uses to adorn the *linga*. The priest, who always kept himself away from all sensual pleasures, gets overwhelmed with the contours of the body of Ranganayaki. The *linga*, which was the only desirability in his life, does not appeal to him any longer. The priest says:

I pitied it, felt exasperated at its unimaginative contours. Why did its shape have to be so bland and unindented that one had to balance garlands precariously on it and improvise superfluous knots to hide some ungainly strings? Why didn't the Lord offer a form which inflamed invention like Ranga did? (Karnad, *Flowers*50)

The priest shows the same devotion to *linga* as well as Ranganayaki but he himself is aware of the irreconcilable situation and says that "Each day I coaxed the flowers to say something special to God and then something entirely different to Ranga" (Karnad, *Flowers* 251). He is not forgetful of the pain he is causing to his wife by having an unlawful relation with a courtesan:

. . . . But I was distressed at the pain I was causing my wife. I loved her. I knew I had made her a target of vicious gossip. . . . Communication in the house was reduced to fragments and we stopped even looking at each other. But there was nothing I could do. (Karnad, *Flowers*251)

The priest's association with Ranganayakin abruptly comes to an end as the village chieftain

discovers Ranganayaki's long hair in a flower/prasada. His desire for Ranganayaki so overpowers him that when he is questioned by the chieftain about the presence of the hair in the prasada, he without feeling a bit hesitant answers that, "If we believe that God has long hair, he will have long hair" (Karnad, *Flowers* 257).

When challenged by the chieftain to prove that it was God's hair, the priest accepts the challenge and prays for full twelve days as penance in isolation. His prayer is granted by God and "waves and waves of jet black hair came out blowing out" (Karnad, *Flowers* 258). Everyone gets awestruck and takes the priest to be a divine deity. The priest feels so much overpowered with the feeling of guilt that he commits suicide in the sanctum of the temple itself.

Here in *Flowers* Karnad deconstructs the way how the life of a priest, a courtesan and a married woman is judged on the basis of conventional values. Conventionally a priest is judged as being godly only if he/she shuns a life of sensuality, and completely surrenders himself in the service of God. A priest is expected to turn a blind eye to all worldly pleasures and live a life of complete abstinence. Karnad weaves a net of incidents in his play and presents a completely opposite picture of a married priest, who, besides being devoted to the service of *linga*, develops affection for a courtesan, who becomes even more appealing to him than the *linga* in due course of time. Here too Karnad neither completely accepts nor rejects any of the portrayal of the life a married priest, rather he presents the "arbitrary violence" underlying in each of them. He goes beyond 'logocentrism' or the conventional value system and seems to put forward the view that a priest is a human being, and as a human being can never be completely spiritual or absolutely sensual, a priest too ought to be seen primarily as a human being

Further Karnad presents a disturbing picture of courtesans, which overturns the binary created by society between a 'normal' woman and an 'abnormal' woman. The priest would feel a desire to devour her beautiful body but would not eat food prepared or served by the courtesan. Karnad deconstructs this attitude of society towards courtesans by presenting her as loveable to the priest as the *linga* itself. A courtesan who is looked down upon by society is raised to the stature of the *linga*, though for a short while to present a "violent hierarchy". Here too Karnad neither eulogizes nor condemns the life of a courtesan, he only attempts to deconstruct the "violent hierarchy" created in the life of a courtesan and a married woman.

In *Flowers* Karnad has also deconstructed the usual concept of sacredness. Worshipping the *linga* in temple is seen as one of the most sacred rituals while having sexual relations even within the bond of marriage is often denounced as a mere sensual pleasure which is often seen as an obstacle in realizing God. However Karnad presents a completely contrary picture when the priest establishes sexual relations with his wife in the sanctum of the temple. He seems to equate the pleasure derived from sexual relations with his own wife to that of derived from devotion and service to God. However by presenting a completely opposite and contrasting picture, Karnad neither accepts the one nor rejects the other, rather he presents the underlying "violent hierarchy" and "arbitrary violence" in each of the view.

Karnad in his plays relates the stories of his characters who find themselves in absurd situations due to the binary oppositions created by society between good and bad, moral and immoral, sensual and spiritual, etc and bring out the underlying "violent hierarchy" or "arbitrary violence" which, instead of resolving the problem further aggravates the situation, and in this way brings to light the instability and complexity of any value system.

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