

Chastity in a Patriarchal Society: A Comparative Study of Women Characters in Girish Karnad's Selected Plays

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Abstract

This research note tries to make the readers ponder over the status of a married woman and how chastity alone can decide a woman's life, by considering two plays of an eminent playwright, Girish Karnad, namely: *Bali: A Sacrifice* (1988) and *Nagamandala: Play with a Cobra* (1988). Perhaps, the playwright wants his readers to contemplate and ask themselves as to why the virtue of being a chaste and a faithful partner is confined to women and not to men. Through his plays, he depicts two polar women and their contrasting ends, merely to showcase the patriarchal society in a novel manner. The conventional chaste woman is metamorphosed into a goddess while the New Woman is criticized, though both being victims of societal norms.

Keywords: Chastity; Metamorphosed; New Woman; Patriarchy; Victim.

Introduction

Girish Karnad through his plays, namely, *Bali: The Sacrifice* (1988) and *Nagamandala: Play with a Cobra* (1988) makes his readers ruminates about how fidelity is a mark of virtue for women alone. The attribute of chastity for a woman has remained a continuous issue since primordial times and the same has been brought out ingeniously by the playwright, as without much effort, when these two plays are read in succession, the polarity of women and their stature of transmutation makes us think for a while about the place of a woman, even in the current time. The witty playwright has named both the women in the two plays as Queen and Rani to tell us that it is only namesake, but in reality, none has the choice or the will to shape their lives, rather their lives were either dictated by the

society or by their male counterpart. Another commonality between them is that both have remained victims of the patriarchal society, that is, living a woman's life in a world dictated by man. As a matter of fact, a woman either becomes an angel, if she concedes to her man, or is considered to be a demon, if she goes against the norms of the patriarchal world.

Bali: A Sacrifice "deals with the concept of woman emancipating herself in questioning the patriarchal rules. The woman here raises her voice on the irrational traditional patriarchal acts in the name of religion" (Pavani 39). Queen Amritamati indulged in a physical relationship with a Mahout, in a ruined temple, during the middle of the night. She walked away from the palace in a state of trance as she told the Mahout when asked, "I wanted the company of your voice" (Karnad 194). Here, the Queen herself was seen as an object of sexual gratification by the Mahout, bereft of any emotion. But her act of adultery is considered a sin and was magnified further because the Queen Mother loathed her as she made her son take up the Jain faith, instead of giving up her faith post marriage. The King loved the Queen and always treated her severely gentle, perhaps she wanted someone who could dominate and take her under his control. The copulation was not an act of sexual gratification, in fact, she had no reason to betray her husband. The Queen refused to make an offering to the Goddess, upon her news of pregnancy, which enraged the Queen Mother, more than anything else. Even in this instance, we find them expecting only a male child as an heir, thus showing their favor for a male child over a female birth. After the entire act of her adultery, the Queen wanted to get back to her King as she told him, "I want to come back to you. I feel fuller. Richer. Warmer. But not ashamed" (Karnad 235). Therefore, her unchaste act was neither out of her love for the Mahout nor was it a betrayal to the King, however, the idea of New Women, who tries to lead a life in their own terms and fashion is often criticized and, in some cases, they meet their doom. The Queen, unwilling to offer a 'cock made of dough' to the Goddess and her vow to remain a Jain, that is to refrain from any act of violence, she sacrificed herself towards the end. "Stepping out of marital bonds or claiming their rights, whichever the case, the result is always a disaster, the death of the female initiators" (Pavani 43). The play tries to portray that an unchaste woman meets her own end, either upon understanding the love of her King, or maybe as a repentance for her guilt. Though she assures the King that, "I'll never betray you" (Karnad 235), she killed herself. Probably, the playwright wanted to tell us that an unchaste woman cannot get back to her husband, even after realization, especially, in a world filled with patriarchal norms under the veil of religion.

While on the other hand, in the play, *Naga-Mandala: Play with a Cobra*, “the social and cultural norms always stand in opposition to the natural instinctive urges of the individual, which are then repressed in order to confirm to the pre-decided socially and culturally accepted roles” (Ghanshyam & Chakravarti 29). Rani, a pitiable, conventional and docile woman is a symbol of traditional women in a patriarchal society, who have the duty to perform domestic tasks, but never have the right to demand their male counterparts. Rani, a young woman, who is married and brought by her husband, Appanna, lived the life of a domesticated animal under her unsympathetic and inconsiderate husband. Her emotions were not paid any heed. She was like every other piece of furniture at home, treated without any emotions. They did not have conversations, nor intimacy as Appanna had an illicit relation with another woman, so he barely spoke to Rani, except giving her instructions as “I’ll be back tomorrow at noon. Keep my lunch ready. I shall eat and go” (Karnad 254). So, there was no marital bliss and he kept her under lock throughout, perhaps he had taken her as property than his wife. “Isolated and confined to live a life detached from any social interactions, and emotionally deprived, Rani takes refuge in her dreams about her parents” (Ghanshyam & Chakravarti 30). Despite having gone through so much pain and agony, she thought about what would happen to her husband with the effect of the aphrodisiacal magic root given to her by Kurudavva as she asked herself “suppose something happens to my husband? What will my fate be?” (Karnad 266). However, with the help of the aphrodisiacal magical root, she found love from Naga, the snake, who took the form of Appanna. “Females are projected in the story as great receptors of pleasure that need completeness from male” (Dalal 362). Appanna had brought a dog and a mongoose to safeguard the house, which were symbols of male domination.

Rani, unaware of the fact that it was Naga, who visited her in the nights, with the effect of the magic root, they made love and she conceived, however, throughout she wonders how Appanna was a stranger to her in the day and a lover to her in the night. Only with the news of her pregnancy, she confirmed and turned even happier than she was during the night visits of Naga in the form of Appanna. But Appanna (human) drags her to the village heads, that is, a private affair was made public, and accused her of adultery, so as to prove her innocence, she was called on trial and she chose the snake ordeal and as a consequence was metamorphosed into a goddess. As the snake did not sting her, it rather went round her shoulder as a garland, so one of the village elders remarked, “Appanna, your wife is not an ordinary woman. She is a goddess incarnate... You were the chosen instrument for the revelation of her divinity” (Karnad 293). Therefore,

“a man does not need to explain his reasons for enjoyment of his sensual pleasures but a woman’s instinctual need is unseen, and their desire is considered an infringement of moral codes requiring paranormal justification” (Sujatha & Chandran 180). As she remained faithful to Appanna, who so ever had taken his form, she had been transformed into a goddess and was blessed with everything in her life, “women who live outside the limits decreed by society are either loose women or supernatural beings” (Ghanshyam & Chakravarti 31-32). Consequently, Rani transformed from a marginalized to an assertive one, upon proving her innocence, as she posits that her son would perform the ritual rights for the dead snake. Earlier, she had no say in the play, but towards the end she claimed her power at least over the domestic affairs. Hence, “a woman can either be a slave or a Goddess but never an equal” (Ghanshyam & Chakravarti 34). Towards the end, she yearned for the sensuous love of Naga, thus she made him rest in her long black tresses. So, her fondness for Naga had to be concealed to retain her wedded bliss. “Desires may be fulfilled and remain concealed in her psyche as evidenced by the presence of Naga in her tresses or in her imagination, but in reality, she confirms to the pre-determined role set by society not as a naive and submissive girl but as an experienced and assertive woman aware of her rights and position” (Ghanshyam & Chakravarti 35).

Upon close analysis, the reader of both the plays gets to re-think the status of a woman in the society and her position that has been set by the patriarchal world. To quote Aristotle’s *Politics* “the relation of male to female is by nature a relation of superior to inferior and ruler to ruled” (Borghini par.5). Perhaps, the playwright Girish Karnad wants to show the same is being practiced till date and makes us ponder over the question “What is a Woman?” (Beauvoir, 23). In both the plays, we see that women are treated more like physical property and somehow, over the years, the same has been accepted by them. In fact, the condition, ‘Cult of Domesticity’ has remained intact, despite the rolling years and centuries. Women are always taught to remain chaste, pious, submissive and domesticated, irrespective of their circumstances. She is always defined in relation to a man, but somehow a woman could never achieve a well-defined independent meaning and a stand for herself. As a matter of fact, a woman could never have a life on her own terms, but rather, she is to remain under the dictum of the society, that which has been built to favour man and his domination. She is always considered and treated either as an object, or as a secondary sex, or as a human being, living to satisfy men and her family, but never for herself.

No woman was ever allowed to voice out her pain, rather under the veil of tolerance, she had to bear the societal subjugation and remain docile, if she has to remain alive or without any further disparaging judgements. Often a woman loses her identity and becomes an extension of her husband, especially in the Indian context, "In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent" (Buhler, 195). As a result, a woman loses her identity and becomes just a living tangible form, devoid of all feelings and emotions. But on the other hand, the celebration of male sexuality is clearly shown in both these plays, as the character of Rani was put on trial, while on the other hand, her husband, Appanna sought pleasure through his illicit relationship, even after his marriage with Rani, but his character remained unquestioned. Similarly, the Queen met her own end, but Mahout was set free in the play.

In the play, *Naga-Mandala*, Rani was only a physical body, lacking any hold over her life, until she had been metamorphosed into a Goddess. Before being elevated in status, she was a human body, where she just accepted the instructions of her husband and never dared to question him, despite the contradicting personalities that were experienced by her during the day and the night. On the other hand, we have the Queen, in the play, *Bali*, who has accidentally indulged in a physical relationship with a mahout who was not given a second chance, especially by her mother-in-law. This shows that every woman born is bound to become one, that is, the idea of gender over sex becomes a topic of significance and discussion, upon reading both the plays. However, the fact "Mental, moral and physical inferiority of" (Woolf, 21) women was challenged by the playwright.

From a traditional view, the chaste Rani rose and got a beautiful family, towards the end, on the other hand, the New Woman, the Queen, who broke away from all the societal and patriarchal norms was doomed. But from a novel view, Rani and the Queen, both are considerably strong and independent women, who were not supported by any, but they stood strong for themselves. Rani boldly took the snake ordeal test to prove her innocence, while on the other hand, Queen could not compromise on her values and beliefs, instead she sacrificed her life. Therefore, the inferiority of women, here, becomes a question. However, the social construct of gender thrusts a woman deeper than the biological concept of sex. One who remains chaste and obedient is described as an angel, while the one who questions and rejects the conventional views is depicted as a demon and is condemned by the society.

Both the plays depict how well the idea of masculine superiority is accepted and is considered to be the norm, while the suffering of the feminine gender goes away in oblivion. Though a woman is victimised by the patriarchal norms, yet it is accepted as the law of human nature. A woman is believed and entrusted with all virtues, but on the contrary, a man can be full of vices, but escapes punishment as the norms are all framed in favour of the masculine gender. Woman is compelled to suffer, but the man is free to seek his pleasure. Man is the owner, while the woman is his property. Women were seen to be treated like baby making machines in both the plays, however, each had to suffer in their own ways. The virtue of chastity is a symbol for women alone, but the pleasure-seeking nature of male is a celebration of masculinity.

Therefore, upon reading and analysing both the plays, the playwright may be hinting to his readers about the plight of woman in a patriarchal society, where chastity alone can determine the status of a woman, that is, she is either risen to the pedestal of a Goddess or else, she is condemned to death, if she goes against the patriarchal norms. Consequently, Karnad has enabled his readers to contemplate over the status and condition of a woman in the society as well as in the family setting with these two plays in hand. As Karnad is known to offer solutions to the modern days' problems through his mystical writings, here as well, by making his readers to ponder over such a question, he may be urging his readers to re-frame the societal standards and promote gender equality.

Conclusion

Considering the lives of two women, the reader must acknowledge the fact that "only women are accused of violating the moral codes of society" (Pavani 43). Queen Amritamati is condemned, though it was her own choice to kill herself, probably the playwright was giving a hint that the patriarchal society does not forgive an unchaste woman, even though there is no love nor betrayal, nor any other ulterior motive and such women tend to lose their power and meet their end easily. Conversely, Rani was risen to the status of a Goddess for withstanding the absence of redamancy in her relation. Hence, "chastity is a very powerful weapon to subjugate women in the play and society. It is a patriarchal concept that has been used to oppress and weaken women for ages. Here also in the case of Rani her chastity is clearly gender based" (Gaikwad 397). Through Rani and Queen Amritamati, Karnad showcased the constructs of a patriarchal society such as chastity and ideal womanhood that women are made to follow, but not men. The unchaste Queen is bound to kill herself to escape

the slander of the patriarchal society, while the chastity of Rani elevates her to the status of a Goddess. though, both were victims of society but men are not bound to any such norms and sufferings. Therefore, chastity alone determines and shapes every woman's life, including her status and death, as they are surmised by the patriarchy of the society and its male constituents.

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