

The Ordeal-Survival-Affirmation of Womanhood in Rani Padmini

Sajeesh K

Department of Language and Literature

Cooperative Arts and Science College

Madayi, Pazhayangadi, Kannur District, Kerala

Abstract

The female characters of Girish Karnad have always been reflective. They give us insight about how they triumphantly overcome the trials and ordeals and thereby establishing their own space in a patriarchal society. A woman is not given any opportunity to prove her capability. When she is brought up as obedient and submissive she becomes incapable to face any ordeals in life. This article primarily focuses on two of Karnad's characters; Rani and Padmini and the way they are treated by the dominant male characters. In a sense they are victimised because of their gender status. Therefore a feminist approach is required to examine the major characters and themes of the plays *Nagamandala* and *Hayavadana*. This approach tells us how female characters are represented in a literary world that is dominated by patriarchy. Their experiences become more complex in Indian context and the differences in their lives need to be addressed.

Key words: Patriarchy, feminism, sex and gender, feminist literary criticism, ecriture feminine.

Introduction

The treatment and representation of female characters in our literature has been the subject of considerable debate for many years. They are either sidelined or put in a secondary position. Female voices and identity are submerged under the patriarchal domination of literary world. Therefore their presence and existence are backgrounded and are not addressed properly. Heroism and heroic activities are attributed only to male characters.

Popular culture and the conventional family system of India precisely inculcate the idea that a woman does not deserve freedom. In all stages of her life, be it infancy, youth or even in grown up stage, she is submissive;

“Pitah Rakshathi Koumare

Pati Rakshati Youvane

Puthro Rakshati Vardakye”

Na Sthree Swathanthram arhati “echoes in every Indian society. The boundaries are drawn, specially designed rules and etiquettes are formed, she is asked to behave in a particular manner, dress what family elders instruct and so on. She lives within this system that does not have a voice to be raised. Her likes and dislikes, passions, sexuality are decided by the dominant male group.

When it comes to literary world, the situation is not different. She is a shadow figure. It seems there is certain criteria which womankind should follow. A woman is expected to manifest obedience, chastity, docility, innocence and submissiveness. Unconditional obedience becomes a symbol of female identity through which her innate impulses can easily be submerged. Education, right to have a choice in matters of marriage and sexuality and control over body have long been denied.

All these inequalities, injustices, misrepresentations and mistreatments have often been discussed, yet an ample space is not evolved for the rightful expression of feminine features. Therefore it is clear that discussions are in full swing but none of them suggest solutions of any kind. Many writers and scholars undertake the issues and foreground them. Feminine reading and feminine writing emerge out of this context.

There is a need for re-reading and re-writing the history and literature. This need is not a new one. Even in the past many writers, both male and female, undertook the task that including Mary Woll-stonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Simon de Beauvoir. Their work examines how and in what way women are represented and dealt by the patriarchal literary world. Women and their status are created or more precisely they are a social construct. Simon de Beauvoir rightly observes as, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman”. Patriarchy makes us believe that the subordination of women and their passiveness are ‘natural’. Why a woman cannot act, because she is woman. These passive subordinate statuses exist throughout the centuries in the minds of the readers. This mentality did not change up to a point. Their biological features like puberty, menstruation, pregnancy, delivery and motherhood are labelled as their physical defect; as they are unfit to act.

Feminist literary criticism emerges out of this necessity to question all these prejudices, disorientations and mentalities. In the 1980s their focus of attention was changed by drawing upon the findings and approaches of other kinds of criticism such as Marxism, Structuralism and linguistics. As suppressed female experiences were not recorded in history and literature it begins to record them by exploring the nature of the female world and outlook. They undertook the need for constructing a new canon of women’s writing.

Where was she? None of the literary movements give us a satisfying us. Therefore instead of focussing on critical concepts like theme, motif and characterisation a theoretical approach was developed. French feminism is more overtly theoretical in nature. Their concern is more on language, representation and psychology. The prominent figures among them include Julia Kristeva, Helen Cixous and Luce Irigaray. Cixous finds the language is masculine, therefore she has posited the existence of an *écriture féminine*, associated with the feminine, and facilitating the free play of meanings. Differences in feminist movement was visible and this differences need to be addressed. They lie in race, culture, language, geography and so on.

In Indian context the differences are in many layers. Along with patriarchy, elitism and linguistic differences casteism is much more prevalent. Discrimination on the basis of caste is a phenomenon that prevents the emancipation of women. In every social problem, women are the direct victims; poverty, malnutrition, polygamy, childhood marriage, low level life span. The problems are more complex and one can easily say that Indian women face multiple discrimination and injustice. One may wonder how discrimination and torturing of women are possible in India where women are treated as goddess according to one's belief. She is a god who symbolises creation and power, who, in all phases of her life, stands for others by giving love, caring, protection, sharing and service to everyone. Such a goddess is abused violently. Their cries, pains or all harsh and pathetic experiences are also not recorded. In all historical and literary stage she was an absent figure.

Under all types of administration, she is not safe, a shadow figure who is not foregrounded. Many freedom fighters and writers undertook the task of bringing women to the mainstream. In academic and political circles debates held. Girish Karnad is one among the writers who takes over the responsibility of bringing the issues to light.

The challenge of Rani to overcome compelling ordeals

Girish Karnad as a writer treats woman not as a shadow or a secondary figure. He puts his woman characters in the centre. Though patriarchal domination is powerful, he makes us aware of its consequences. How a woman lives in such a society, how her manners and behaviour are formed by mankind is brought to light. This work primarily focuses on two of his powerful characters; Rani and Padmini, who undergo through many trials and ordeals. We know even a goddess figure like Sita was not exempted from ordeal. A woman has to prove her chastity in order to prove that she is not sinned. On the other hand men are always safe who never face any testimony. His glory and heroism lie in how far he violates the norms. Men can be sinned but women can never be and they have to undergo trials even if she is innocent.

Consider Rani's life under a marriage system by examining her relation with her own husband, whom her parents found for her. The play *Nagamandala* is experimental in many ways. Girish Karnad here makes use the features of epic theatrical effects of Bertolt Brecht. The elements of folklore tradition, Yakshagana, a story within a story can also be seen in the

play. Karnad further makes an experiment by introducing the technique of multiple endings. The major characters like Rani, Appanna, Kurudawa, Kappanna and Village Elders act when the narrator narrates the story and who is also present on the corner of a stage. The story of Rani is narrated by a character called Story who comes with another character called A Song. Audience is two levels; the first is a group of Flames who listen the story along with a character, who is a playwright and the second group consists of us.

Girish Karnad makes us know that how powerful is story telling. In ancient oral tradition we had a system of telling stories where, when a story is narrating, all members of a family assembled. Such is the power of story. And a story gets its existence when it is retold. In this way a story is passing from one generation to another with adequate changes. In a particular course of time this process came to an end. *Nagamandala* says how an elderly woman suffocates a story by not retelling it. Therefore this story, it is the story of Rani, comes out from the woman and begins to narrate it for the flames and the nameless playwright.

Rani is presented as the protagonist of the play. She is called Rani by her own parents. She was brought up as a pampering child. As in every Indian family Rani is also obedient, submissive and chaste. Now as a young bride she is taken to her newly married husband's house. He is Appanna. In Kannada language Appanna means any man. He is called so because such men are everywhere who is powerful and dominant figure. He is not questioned by anyone and he is to be obeyed by others, that is, unconditional obedience that he expects from others. Then one can guess how about the life of our Rani under the surveillance of Appanna. She is neglected by him and she cannot enjoy a life which a wife expects from her husband. Appanna is more interested in keeping an affair with a village concubine. Therefore it is clear that he marries not for him but for the sake of the society.

In a society where religious beliefs are deeply rooted superstitions may likely to arise. Kurudawa explains the power of magical roots to Rani. When it is fed to Appanna he is her slave, Kurudawa makes her believe so. By mistaken and out of fear she feeds not Appanna, and the power of the magical roots works out in a Naga, a king cobra, which is residing in an ant-hill near their home. The story gets a new dimension here. According to mythological belief, a cobra can assume any shape it likes. Cobra assumes the shape of Appanna and visits her every night. Two Appannas, one at night and one at day time come to the life of Rani. All shouting and abuses at day time are equally balanced by loving and caring at night.

In Indian family system a woman should not question her man even if she has doubts. So is Rani. Appanna shouts and beats during the day time and Naga in the form of Appanna gives her what she wishes. Every man or every husband has two faces; that is revealing here. Men usually abuse their wives but become soft in night as they need physical pleasure from their wives. Rani is unable to question the duality in her husband. She remains changeless.

Things become more complex when Rani is impregnated. Appanna accuses her of infidelity. As a result she is publicly abused. In the presence of the Village Elders and a large crowd she

is asked to prove her chastity. Snake ordeal as suggested by Naga shows how far womankind mercilessly testifies at a trial. Fire ordeal and snake ordeal, the worst form of trials, it seems, are designed only for womankind. In mythology or in history no man ever faces trial of any kind. Holding a red hot iron is another method of trial. In all means justice is denied to them. Consequently women have to carry a sinned life and it is followed by ostracism.

How gender is a social construct is being reflected in the play. As Simon de Beauvoir observes a woman is made by the social norms and she is given the status of a woman, thereby she is categorised as 'Other'. Womanisation is a process in which womanhood is constructed and is made natural.

Certain strange things may influence the gullible people and they may have superstitious dimension. The victimised Rani later treated as a goddess because of a miracle. This divine status is given to her by the Village Elders and the gullible crowd. They seek blessings from the divine Rani, who earlier came to witness the damnation of her. Thus from a sinned life Rani is saved.

The survival of Padmini

Padmini is unconventional on the other hand. Karnad presents her as a bold character who could demand what she wants what Rani lacks. When ordeals were imposed upon Rani, the ignorance of the crowd and superstitious beliefs help her to survive. Padmini doesn't face any ordeals. Her survival and self assertion rather show how powerful Padmini is. Her sexuality is decided by herself.

Though the play *Hayavadana* is written in 1971, it is based on Thomas Mann's 1940 novella *The Transposed Heads*. Therefore *Hayavadana* further explores a situation; is head more superior to body? Padmini goes deep into it and finds happiness in both head and body. While she enjoys life with the intelligent Devadatta, she has an eye on the masculinity of Kapila. How satisfies herself constitutes the rest of the part.

The play centres around three characters; Padmini, Devadatta and Kapila. The thematic level of the conflict between the head and the body is largely depends upon their complex relationship. While the head controls the movements of the bodily actions, certain impulses and instincts need to be satisfied irrespective of the control of the head. Padmini obeys her head for marrying Devadatta, but soon develops a physical desire for Kapila.

The tension between the two male characters over Padmini exists in the beginning. It becomes complicated when Devadatta and Kapila switch bodies. Who has control over Padmini creates a dispute. Is the man with the head of Devadatta and the body of Kapila, or the man with the head of Kapila and the body of Devadatta? While the two involve in the dispute over Padmini, her desire goes for the man who has the head of Devadatta and the body of Kapila. Her two desires are satisfied in this way. Though this desire is widely

discussed in the feminist circles, Padmini deserves all our respect because there is a quest for perfection in her.

The restrictions imposed upon Rani is largely because of her helplessness, whereas Padmini is unconventional. She is very beautiful. Devadatta is much attracted to her at the very first sight. But their relationship after the marriage gets loose. Her desire cannot be blamed on the ground that it is fulfilled in the temple of Kali. What she wishes is granted. But when Devadatta begins to lose his physical strength, the one that once Kapila owned, she goes to the latter in the jungle. This impulse can also be justified thematically as the quest for perfection.

The two once again fight over Padmini and die without any concerns. But Padmini is the one who needs to face life. Unable to fulfil the quest for perfection she asks Bhagavata, the narrator, to take care of the child. Here too she equally balances the claim of the child by giving it first to the hunters of the forest, who are related to Kapila and then to the father of Devadatta. She then declares to undergo Sati, as it is a social demand.

Padmini is the only character who is left incomplete in the play. The quest for perfection is fulfilled by the characters except Padmini. Both Devadatta and Kapila forgive each other before they die and they share no concern over Padmini, who, on the other hand, attains salvation by performing Sati.

Conclusion

The two characters are the symbol of survival. Rani survives herself by performing the snake ordeal and Padmini by following her own logic and impulses. Satisfying herself is more important to Padmini and she boldly faces the consequences. Ordeals and trials are part of our life, but the point is that how far we are prepared ourselves to face them. Many unwritten laws are also framed along with all these and the women are the direct victims of all these because she is made unprepared. Her existence largely rests on how she is able to survive them and this survival stage is the hardest phase in the life. While majority fell off in the process, only a few survived.

Affirmation or assertion of womanhood passes through many stages. She is victimised. Both Rani and Padmini display the courage to assert their selfhood by surviving and challenging the obstacles. Patriarchy makes a woman obedient and submissive, thereby making her inefficient and incapable to meet the challenges of the life. One should meet many unseen challenges, but the conventional man made systems like family, society and marriage make the womankind incompetent by not creating opportunities to meet those challenges. Rani exemplifies this situation and Padmini faces it without thinking the consequences.

Bibliography

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. New York: Manchester University Press, 2002

Karnad, Girish. *Hayavadana*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988

Karnad Girish. *Naga-Mandala-Play with a Cobra*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001

Internet Reference

<https://www.licharts.com/lit/hayavadana/characters/padmini>

<https://www.thebetterindia.com/69782/feminism-through/the/ages/in/india>