

**MARITAL DISCORD AND ITS ASSONANCE IN GIRISH
KARNAD'S PLAY WEDDING ALBUM**

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Abstract

Girih Karnad wrote in his very first play Yayati that "every story that matters has something to do with nuptials" (p.54). He, therefore, singles out the subject of marriage from his play Yayati to present us with his most recent play Wedding Album (2009). The play gives a real account of the modern myth of a pending marriage in the middle-class, Karnataka based Saraswat family—the Nadkarnis. Marriage being the universal social knot is presented in its forms of dissonance and disturbance as in the play the Father decipheres the concept of marriage as -- "Marriage is a gamble. No escaping the fact – marriage is a gamble" (Scene Nine p. 89). The play brings out the stark contrast between times gone by and the present by reflecting upon the social customs of marriage that have changed considerably. The playwright bears in mind the situation of. The waning influence of parents and relatives is also evident in the patterns of meeting, dating and courting of the suitable the modern world where "people use Internet Café to find life partners" and where people "live in a modern world. A divorce is okay. It's no shame" matches throughout the play. The pronounced changes and tendency of modern marriage is palpably shown in the decision making process. The play consequently presents rigidly conceived roles of a husband and a wife where the characters are seen as survivors for they have failed to meet their partner's psychological needs. The intimate relationship fails to allow the spouses to come together to receive and devote themselves to each other. The partial and incomplete negotiations in various phases of their married lives further lead to marital failure. Karnad questions the capacity of the characters to deal with difficulties and ultimately presents the risk of marital discord that is increased with passing time.

Keywords: Marriage, Love, Marital Failure, Divorce, Relationship

MARITAL DISCORD AND ITS ASSONANCE IN GIRISH KARNAD'S PLAY *WEDDING ALBUM*

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Girish Karnad is a contemporary playwright, screen writer, actor, and movie director. His career is a testament to his great appetite for life, work and new directions. As a modern playwright he dives deep into the vacation of great Indian tradition by assimilating the past to the present through his art of representation in his plays. Karnad wrote in his very first play *Yayati* that "every story that matters has something to do with nuptials" (p.54). He, therefore, singles out the subject of marriage from his play *Yayati* to present us with his latest play *Wedding Album* (2009). The play gives a real account of the modern myth of a pending marriage in the middle-class, Karnataka based Saraswat family—the Nadkarnis. Marriage being the universal social knot is presented in the play in its forms of dissonance and disturbance as in the play the Father deciphers the concept as -- "Marriage is a gamble. No escaping the fact – marriage is a gamble" (Scene Nine p. 89).

The ideal marriage is that of life-long indissoluble marriage in India. However, marital breakdown is peculiar to contemporary age as we witness gradual lessening of the influence of the codes and philosophies laid out by ancient myths. The use of ancient myths by Karnad in writing his plays cannot go unnoticed, for critics have often condemned him for depending too much on ancient history to derive his subject material. The relevance of the myths, however, in the present times can be seen in his major works. It is this very quality that has made him think to write a play about the world that is very different from the sanitized versions we are exposed to but the world that subsists. The indulgent perspective of human existence that provides him the theme of his play *Wedding Album* distinctly reverses the charge laid against him that of his preoccupation with history and folk myth that makes him evade contemporary Indian reality.

Karnad wrote the play *Wedding Album* to articulate and re-introduce the theme of marital discord. The title of the play is suggestive of the marital relation that changes one's life. *Wedding Album* recapitulates the events that affect the lives of the characters down the memory lane. The play talks about the passage of time where intervention of the reader to become a thinker is desirable with an affirmative understanding of human relationships. The playwright presents society that has hitherto remained passive, perplexed and rather a helpless witness to the recent evolution of marriages and their breakdown. The belief of the family to exist as a cohesive unit centering on the marriage of two individuals predominantly was an advent of the workplace as the centre of production. It is this separation of home and work that had provided them with the idea of stereotyped behaviour of a man and a woman in a society. The modern society, however, has been exposed to a workplace where women are also seen to engage themselves outside home at the workplace. The play presents this conflicting idea of working women through the apprehensions held by Vidula as she says at the onset of the play:

VIDULA. I am Vidula. Vidula Nadkarni. I am twenty-two. Twenty-two and a half, actually. I have done my BA in Geography. Passed my exams last year. I am not doing anything at the moment. Worked for a travel agency for six months. I got bored. If I come to the US, will I need to work? I am really not very good at it. (Scene One p.5)

The social changes presented in the play have directly or indirectly coincided with the breakdown of patriarchal system which invested overwhelming power and authority in the hands of the male head of the family. However, Hema's views reflect upon dissatisfaction of Indian women with their lives. The ideological control of the family, especially over women as individual even in the present day world remains in the bondages as women are to follow norms and standards of being a housewife:

HEMA. ...the white wife refuses to go trailing after the husband. We Indian women, on the other hand, are obedient Sati Savitris,

ever willing to follow in our husbands' footsteps. Look at me—
Melbourne, Johannesburg, Singapore, and now Sydney. Our men
may get all the top jobs. But I am in no better position than Ma.
(Scene Two p. 17)

The changed structure of society has further affected the needs to experience approval, affection and tender physical closeness of women in their marital relations. Failing to accept the rejection from the spouse women in the play wish to be the subjects who are worthy of the acknowledgement by an outsider. The characters like that of Vivan and man referred to as Voice in Scene Six are introduced to gratify Hema's and Vidula's feelings of being wanted, trusted and appreciated for their own sake. The women characters look out for companionship in the play as Karnad marks the relative absence of the approval, acceptance and physical closeness which leads to deprivation and insecurity in marital relationship. The deprivation is subtly hidden in varied relations shown in the play, for the characters involved are preoccupied with themselves and their jobs. The characters choose to withdraw and remain distant from their marital relations by choosing to be indifferent to the needs of their partner.

Karnad tries to present his readers with variables that bring a couple together. The play for that reason is an attempt to list out the social factors that influence the choice of the life partner. The social criteria are shown to depend much on the religious affiliation, social class, race and ethnic background. In the play physical beauty, intellectual prowess, social aptness and many other characteristics ascertain the factors that bring a couple together. The play brings out the stark contrast between times gone by and the present by reflecting upon the social customs that have changed considerably. The waning influence of parents and relatives is evident in the patterns of meeting, dating and courting of the suitable matches throughout the play.

The choice of future partner is primary concern of the participant only if the parents withdraw the restrictions imposed on the individual. Rohit's father has come to understand that within the gap of a few decades young people

develop an outlook that is markedly different from those of preceding one or two generations. Mira's endeavors to convince Rohit for marriage is, therefore, answered by the Father with his terse statement—'Don't worry about us. I'll look after my old age and you look after yours.' (Scene Three p.34)

The play further reflects upon the Hindu practice of bringing together people of similar social background into marriage. The most explicit and defined limits on an individual to decide as to whom he may or may not marry also depend on the proposed match to belong to the same religion or community. Hema's question to her brother Rohit presents how the powerful prohibition continues to operate in the matter of selection norms of society as she interrogates—'Why should you take up with a Christian girl? Aren't there nice girls in our community?' (Scene Three p. 42)

The play reflects upon the view that parental images often influence marital choice. The presence of strongly positive affectionate ties further influence one to understand the bonds that knit together the couple. However, as the play progresses we find that Rohit's and Tapasya's marriage within the broad similarity of social class and race fails because of Rohit's strong urge to assert independence. He chooses to defy parental direction which persists long after his rejection to the "bribe" that was offered to him to fulfill his dreams in 'an age of opportunities'. The immediate defeat of their marriage is a result of corrosive influences of the hurried marriage that had put them in the higher bracket of vulnerability.

The play unravels marriage and its meaning in accordance with a Swiss proverb which describe it as a covered dish. The blatant blindness of the choice and the ambiguity of the outcome of the marriage are defined in the play through Vidula's and Ashwin's marriage. Karnad shows the trend of society with considerable clarity how the place of residence, social class, race, age, intelligence, and religious affiliations delineate preferences and eligibility.

ASHWIN. ...I have come here because I believe that it is in places like Dharwad that belief in innocence, the very idea of purity, still survives. Someone like you carries within you the essence of

Hindu spirituality. Woman as Mother, Wife, Daughter.
Womanhood as the most Sacred Ideal. (Scene Eight p. 81)

The playwright focuses on the elements that bring a particular man and woman together in marital relations through several complex pair of characters like Vidula Nadkarni and Ashwin Panje, Rohit and Tapasya, Pratibha and Irfan, Hema and Chandrakant, Mother and Father. The different relations demonstrate intensely different choices made by people having different opinions, personality and temperament. The very choice of dialogues given to Vidula who is to get married to a man she has never seen before questions the credibility of the concept of marriage as she says – 'Look, I don't know if this wedding will actually take place...' (Scene Two p. 14). The concept of modern marriage is consequently shown to have changed with time as it is now a mere institution regulated by a legal contract:

ROHIT. He has already said he doesn't want all that. No rituals, no wasteful **tamasha**, nothing. If he and Vidula like each other, they'll go to the Registrar and sign. If they don't, they'll shake hands and part. He proceeds to Malaysia. Catches up with his badminton team. (Scene Two p.25)

The fact that attention is paid to the concept of personality is defined by Vidula's character that is simple and sophisticated. Vidula and Ashwin's marriage presents the common situation of two moderately deprived persons who come together to derive complimentary satisfaction through their union. Vidula scoring less at the 'CQ – Cooking Quotient' finds out that Ashwin is also passing through the 'spiritual crisis'. The presence of the partner affects two of them when they come together in bond of marriage as they contradict and criticize each other trying to defeat one another. The situations that arise later in their lives make them realize that they are partially insufficient. Though, the partial insufficiency of the partner is experienced by other characters too in varied spheres viz. sexually, intellectually, or socially. It is as a result of this insufficiency that a second person is preferred to meet the missing requirements, creating a triangular situation. Such a situation is presented

evidently through two triangular relations in particular --Mother, Father and Ramdas Nadkarni and that of Hema, Chandrakant, and Vivan.

The need for a home, independence, and children are universal ones. But the personal needs which the character appears to seek for in marriage are love, affection, confidence sympathy, understanding, dependence, encouragement, intimate appreciation and emotional security. The need for security and affection that have been unanswered by the partner have affected the Mother so much so that she realizes having 'achieved nothing' in her life (Scene Nine p. 90). After forty years of marriage the Father and Mother come to understand that their marriage has survived on a number of factors that were perilously maintained. The transferable government job has not only disturbed the family but has also down the line made the two realize that they have failed to acknowledge each others' sacrifices. The significance of 'forty years' of a marriage relation is contrasted by the playwright as Mother refers to it as 'forty years of slogging' (p.77) while Pratibha at the age of 'forty' realizes that she has made a right choice by marrying 'a man ten years her senior. A Muslim...Because he offered her affection and security' (p. 61).

The play presents the pattern of expectations which are seldom fulfilled. There are marriages which are shown in the play with a domination-submission relationship. The recurrent criticism towards such marital relations is portrayed through the times of frustration and anger that leads to infliction of physical violence when all control is lost.

ROHIT. ...Don't you know, Appa had a bad temper. And he was not averse to using his hand on Ma. Apparently Ramdas Uncle couldn't stand that. He never let Appa hit Ma when he was around. (Scene Four p. 55)

The hostility followed by many years of bickering and quarrelling makes the two partners realize that even after many years of apparent harmony their relation has failed to endure the test of time. The marital relationship of the characters as a result is not observed to have been based on understanding;

rather it is shown to depend on the authority and power.

VIDULA. But it gives you a sense of power, doesn't it? To have a girl waiting for you – her parents kneeling before you—begging and pleading... It really must make you feel grand. (Scene Three p. 42)

The pronounced changes and tendency of modern marriage is evidently seen in decision making process. It is the mutual interaction in day to day events in the play that present the rigidly conceived roles of a husband and a wife. The marked withdrawal in Rohit and Isabel Pinto's relation shows how the best laid plan also fail. The contemporary difficulties stem for Rohit when he is to understand the obvious limits to adjust in the new relation he has with Tapasya. Marital disharmony and unhappiness is the result that indicates and marks the adversely affected marriage. Hema's personality has also been so adversely affected in the course of marriage by her husband that the time has come when help is to be sought. Their relation was constantly affected by factors that were present prior to marriage, during the period of the engagement and remained constant even after marriage.

HEMA. (without raising her voice): Big! My poor husband. He said he would be quite content with a small fire altar ad seven steps round it. That's all. And he was taken at his word. Literally. If he had made a fuss, wouldn't you have given him the whole caboodle?(Scene Two p.15)

Marriage brings about a close and intimate psychological relationship. But characters in the play are seen as survivors for they have failed to meet their partner's psychological needs. The intimate relationship fails to allow the spouses to come together to receive and devote themselves to each other. The partial and incomplete negotiations in the various phases of marriage further lead to marital failure in the play. Karnad questions the capacity of the partners to deal with difficulties and ultimately presents the risk of failure that is increased with passing time.

The life of women characters in particular is not that of the utter helplessness as Karnad rather presents them as responsive isolated characters. The glimpses of Mother's and Radhabai's emotional distress present the anxieties, fears and terrors of their emotional survival. A gradual alienation for sometime ultimately leads to not only a level of emotional independence but also contributes and guards them against their own anxieties. Detachment and independent existence, however, is dreaded by the characters either consciously or unconsciously. The range of female characters in the play expresses the threat of their survival in their state of acute distress caused by their failed marital relationships.

The overprotective parents in the play insist on making the decisions of marriage for their children. It is a belief in the source of love that they can foresee the limitations of the marriage. The absence of emotional dependence also presents certain characters in resentment as the commonest accusation made against the spouse is that they are unreliable leading to variations in the mood of characters. It is gradually realized that one partner becomes an object of mixed feelings striving for the support, hating the limitations and restrictions. Marital stability then is immediately marked by the interference of people who bring the couple together. The frequent visit to parents home often become occasions of bitter resentments as Hema feels neglected. Each character is divided within himself or herself, torn apart by the restless compulsion of society to create a new life and to meet the new needs of the family.

HEMA. I'll tell you something. During our wedding, I caught my father-in-law looking at me and boy, was I glad I was leaving for Australia with Chandrakant! My mother-in-law must have learnt to live with that look. (Scene Four p.51)

The parents are shown to have a vital part to play in the *Wedding Album*. It is the Mother who understands the difficulties of marriage and tries to do all she can to retrieve her daughters' loss. The separation from her daughters is described as an intolerable event that destroys all her desires. It is precisely presented by the playwright through Radhabai's story which reinforces the

point where parents try to reclaim their children. Parents, therefore, are presented as a source of reassurance and support system as they reduce their children's fear of being alone. It is their growing anxiety about the coming future of their children that requires urgent reassurance regarding their married lives.

MOTHER. He thinks we are so desperate for him? Just tell him the proposal is off.

VIDULA. No, we can't. We'll become the laughing stock of the town. We agreed to all this. Now to break off for no reason! I can't face it.

FATHER. No reason? I met your mother only a couple of times before we got married. But at least we had met. (Scene Two p. 26)

The elder daughter Hema is seen to resolve her life by taking refuge with her parents for some time. However, in the absence of the family members she stays at home waiting anxiously, sometimes despairingly for Vivan's letters. Experiencing these feeling she retaliates in overtly hostile manner. In the last scene of the play the last 'blank' letter symbolizes the mutual withdrawal setup that provides a rationalized solution to her married life. It is the feeling of being lead down by the partner that has been reflected in the conversation of siblings in the last scene of the play which further replicates Hema's bitter disappointment with her marriage.

ROHIT. What she is trying to tell you is if at any moment you wish to divorce Ashwin and come back, don't hesitate to do so.

HEMA. Leave him and come back if you feel like it. You are timid. We don't want you to suffer in silence for fear of what people here will say. Or what we will feel. We are with you on anything you decide. (Pause)

ROHIT. We live in a modern world. A divorce is okay. It's no shame. (Scene Nine p. 86)

The play *Wedding Album* presents relations in marital disorder leading to marital breakdown. The play presents recognizable tensions of the relation

which have to be evaluated recognizing the challenges that might be faced with psychological and social means. The play helps the reader elicit information about the stability of the marriage and the mechanisms that might alleviate anxiety and mood disturbance through the comprehensive evaluation done through reading of the play. Karnad bears in mind the situation of the modern world where 'people use Internet Café to find life partners' and where people 'live in a modern world. A divorce is okay. It's no shame'. The allocation of priorities for modern day individuals has made them confront arising out of their ever-widening professional involvement affecting their family needs. The playwright, therefore, emphasizes on the need of spouses to be more conversant which would also be useful in marital reconciliation.

Jack Dominian says in his book *Marital Breakdown* – 'Marital disharmony is a responsibility that cannot be dealt with either through the rigours or the permissiveness of the law, because human happiness cannot be legislated for. Help for those who cannot find it for themselves has to come through the appropriate organizations and through men and women who are willing to help their neighbor in his plight.' (p. 162) Karnad chooses to become that man who willingly presents the marital discord in his writing which further helps readers to interpret their lives with caution. His play rather provides with ideology that becomes imperative command to his readers through Mother – 'Don't do the same thing with your life' (p. 90). His writing initiates and contributes to the society by providing an understanding of the meaning of marriage through representation of various social problems confronted in the present day world.

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