

WOMEN CHARACTERS IN THE SELECT PLAYS OF GIRISH KARNAD AND VIJAY TENDULKAR

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Abstract

Girish Karnad and Vijay Tendulkar are prominent Indian playwrights. They have been instrumental in the development of their regional theatre (Kannada and Marathi, respectively). Their plays were originally written in their vernacular languages and were later translated into English. Women characters play an important role in their plays. Karnad leans towards mythology to build his unconventional women characters who are bold and open about their feelings and psyche. Whereas, Tendulkar looks at the contemporary society to build women characters who are objectified and are victims of the patriarchal society. Both the writers have made a conscious attempt to reflect upon the feminist ideology of freeing women from the bondages of the patriarchal society. Their women characters are from different backgrounds and ages, and play different roles, struggling to find their own identity. Their characters are deep and intense. This research paper will compare and contrast the women characters from the selected works of GirishKarnad and Vijay Tendulkar.

Key Words: *Indian plays in translation, Women studies, characterization*

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Plays are written and performed from time immemorial. The purpose was didactic as most of the plots revolved around the stories from the Puranas and epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana. Plays were written in a way that they could reach out to everyone, from the king to the peasant. The plots were interesting, the dialogues engaging and the lessons though simple, had profound significance. Indian theatre has evolved over the period of time as a result of foreign invasion, British rule and also independence. Different literary movements and different kinds of works from all over the world were introduced in Indian which had their influence on Indian drama. Different times brought different changes to the theatre: thematically, linguistically, structurally, and so on. In the process of evolution the past and the present are interwoven strongly. Though there seems a great difference in the ancient theatre and theatre of today, it cannot be said that they have nothing in common. Among other things, the basic purpose remains the same, that is, to reach out to the masses in order to convey an important message.

Girish Karnad is one of the many writers in India who are inspired by the past. He is a Kanada playwright, author, actor and film director. He grew up watching regional folk dramas and had many friends and colleagues in the literary field. He learnt about the Puranas, acting, plays and theatre from these experiences which became deeply rooted in him and have a great influence on his thoughts and ideas. He went to Oxford University as a Rhode scholar but decided to come back to India and write in his mother tongue, that is, Kanada. His background with the Indian roots and association with the foreign writers intersected in his plays. He was brought up in an unorthodox environment which helps him to have an open mind about gender and sexuality. Thus he consciously writes about the condition of women and their right to choose over accepting what is given. He has contributed immensely not only to the Kanada theatre but also to the Indian theatre. He has won many awards for his works, some of the major ones for literature being: Padma Bhushan (1992) and Jnanpith Award for contribution to literature and theatre (1999). Some of his important plays are: *Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1972), *Nagamandala* (1988). For this article, the focus will be on the women characters from *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala*.

Vijay Tendulkar was a Marathi playwright, screenwriter, literary essayist, political journalist and a social commentator. He had a literary environment at home, helping him to blossom as a young writer. He faced some hard times himself and his time living in chawls of Mumbai gave him a firsthand experience with the lives of the lower middle class urban society. He took inspiration from real-life situations and incidents for his plays. His treatment of his characters was very realistic. Violence, in various forms: domestic, sexual, political, etc., was a dominant theme in his plays. He played a key role in the avant-garde Marathi theatre and has won many awards for the same. Some of the prominent ones for literature are Padma Bhushan (1984) and Lifetime contribution award from Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship (1998). Some of his important plays are: *Shantata! Court Chalu Aahe* (1967), *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1972), *Sakharam Binder* (1972), *Kamala* (1984). For this paper, the focus will be on the women characters of *Sakharam Binder* and *Kamala*.

Girish Karnad, in the introduction to the collection of his plays "Three Plays", states that 'the myth had nailed me to my past' (3). He explains how his history with Indian mythology had a great influence on him and how he wished to connect his traditional past to his modern present. His first play *Yayati* was inspired by the story of King Yayati from the Indian Epic *Mahabharatha*. His *Tughlaq* was based on the story of Muhammed Tughlaq, a fourteenth century sultan of Delhi. *Hayavadana* was inspired by *Kathasaritasagara*, a collection of tales and Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads*. *Nagamandala* was inspired by two oral tales narrated to him by A. K. Ramanujan. All of these plays have their sources in the past but their characters are built with a modern approach. *Hayavadana* deals with the idea of identity crisis, acceptance one's true self and desires and making choices. The play revolves around three characters, Padmini, her husband Devdatta and his friend Kapila. Padmini is light at heart and jovial. She grew up with nature and is outspoken and, in a way, selfish. She secretly desires her husband's friend Kapila but never says a word. Devdatta, her husband, understands and wants to get out of the way and commits suicide. Kapila, when finds this out, kills himself as well. When she sees what has happened, she is sacred but Kali maa helps her. But in the darkness and confusion she exchanges their heads. It was unintentional, but she takes advantage of it. She goes with the man with Devdatta's head and Kapila's body. After many years when the bodies change according to their masters, she accepts her desires and leaves her husband for Kapila.

Nagamandala deals with dominance of patriarchy in the society, question of dignity, status of women and making choices. The play revolves around Rani, a newly married girl, her husband Appanna and the cobra-man Naga. Rani is a young, fragile, innocent, naïve girl. She creates her own fantasy world when left alone in order to kill her loneliness. She was treated like a queen back home, thus her name. But in her new house, she is neglected

by her husband Appanna. When Kurudavva recommends her to crush and mix the magic root in her husband's food, she agrees because she is desperate. But after she sees the color of the food changing to blood red, she gets scared and considers it a sin to trick her husband. When Naga comes into her life, she feels alive again. She feels the difference between her husband who comes home for lunch and the husband who comes at night, but she is too naïve to question them. She is asked not to question, but just to follow what is asked of her, which she does. She wants to know the truth but is too scared of the answer:

Rani: (Blankly.) Yes, I shall. Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you. Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you. No, I won't ask questions. I shall do what you tell me. Scowls in the day. Embraces at night. The Face in the morning unrealted to the touch at night. But day or night, one motto does not change: Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you.

(He is silent)

I was a stupid, ignorant girl when you brought me here. But now I am a woman, a wife, and I am going to be a mother. I am not a parrot. Not a cat or a sparrow. Why don't you take it on trust that I have a mind and explain this charade to me? Why do you play these games? Why do you change like a chameleon from day to night? Even if I understood a little, a tiny bit- I could bear it. But now- sometimes I feel my head is going to burst!

(Naga opens his mouth to say something.)

Rani: I know. Don't ask questions. Do as I say (*Nagamandala* 51).

When she realizes the truth, she plays along which shows how helpless she was even though she finally understood the reality. She does not tell the truth she discovers to anyone, either because she thinks no one would believe her, or because she did not want to lose what she had. Her story depicts how in her world, women are either isolated to their houses without any freedom what so ever, or are treated like goddesses. When she succeeds in the snake ordeal, she is suddenly treated like the divine incarnation. Appanna is that told his wife is no ordinary woman and that she should live the rest of his life at her feet. It truly is an irony, a country in which all the powerful deities are in the form of women, in such a country, women are treated such.

Kurudavva's story is a sub-plot to the play. She is an old, blind woman. She is Appanna's mother's friend and means good for Rani. She tries to help the best she could. Though she is blind, she can see better than others. Unfortunately, she loses her son and

also loses her sanity. Story is personified as a woman. She has freed herself from a woman who kept her silenced all these days. She is a sarcastic remark on the society, if a story is imprisoned she is bound to set herself free someday, and so is a woman.

Both the plays in focus are unique yet have one similar element, their lead women characters seem to be passive and powerless at the beginning of the play. They follow the rules set by the patriarchal society, as their duty. Padmini falls in love with her husband's friend and she cannot do anything about it except to bury her feelings deep within. Rani, who dreams of beginning a beautiful life with her husband, is caged in the house alone, and her husband comes home only once for lunch. Her husband gives her a cold treatment and she is not allowed to ask any questions to him about anything or talk to anyone. Even Naga, who impersonates as her husband asks her not to ask any questions. But they are finally the ones whose choices shape the conclusions of their plays. It was Padmini, one of the most controversial women characters of Karnad, who chooses to leave her husband for the pursuit of another man. Karnad through her choice depicts how a woman, like any man, can choose someone who makes her happy, even if it is someone outside the wedlock. He does not intend to comment on it as 'right' or 'wrong', merely presents the humanness with its shade. The ending of *Nagamandala* has two contradictory conclusions, justified with a constant reminder that the entire story is but merely a "story". Either way, it is Rani who gets to choose whether to get Naga killed or to let him enter her tresses to live with her forever, uniting them. But what is more important is the incident with the village elders. Everyone knew that Appanna visits another woman but the question of chastity arises only for Rani. She is asked to prove her innocence by taking an oath while holding a 'red-hot iron' or 'plunge the hand in boiling oil' (*Nagamandala* 55). Meanwhile, Appanna stands there accusing her of infidelity.

Vijay Tendulkar, on the other hand, was a radical writer. He kept his plays close to reality. His play *Shantala! Court Chaluaahe* was inspired by the Swiss playwright Friedrich Durrenmatt's novel, *Die Panne (A Dangerous Game)*. *Gashiram Kotwal* reflected the rise of a local political party of the time. *Kamala* was based on a true incident, wherein, a journalist bought a woman from the rural flesh market and presented her in front of the press conference. His life in a Mumbai chawl showed him the harsh realities of the middle-class urban families which were reflected through the violent and dominant male characters of his plays such as *Sakharam Binder*.

The women in both the plays come from different backgrounds. Kamala is a village girl who was on sale in a village flesh market. And maybe this is not the first time she is sold. The life she is forced into is "normal" for her. She assumes Kamalabai and Sarita were also bought just like herself:

Sarita: I said, how much did he buy you for?

Sarita [Recovering]: Me? Look here, Kamala [Changes her mind, and sits down beside her.] For seven hundred.

Kamala: My god! Seven hundred?

Sarita: Why? Was it too little?

Kamala [Pause]: It was an expensive bargain, memsahib. If you pay seven hundred, and there are no children...

[Sarita assumes a sad expression.]

Then he has to pay for clothes, and for food. He must be very unhappy. Really (*Kamala* 34).

The only life Kamala knows about is where men buy women and pay for their requirements, and it is the job of the women to satisfy them, work for them and bare children for them, in return.

Sarita, on the other hand, grew up in a good Maharashtrian home. She was an independent strong girl, until she was married to Jaisingh. Now, she does everything the way her husband would want it, right from how to maintaining his phone calls for him, to which kind of parties to attend. She lives her life believing it is normal for a wife to do everything in accordance to the choices of her husband. But it is only after meeting Kamala and talking to her that she realises that, she is not very different from her. If Kamala was a slave, so was she. The only difference being, Sarita is legally tied to Jaisingh. She suddenly feels a sense of disillusionment. When she tries to keep her wishes in front of her husband she is silenced, rather crudely. Jaisingh tells her, 'It's I who takes decisions in this house, and no one else. Do you understand?' (*Kamala* 42). Kakasaheb tries to console Sarita by telling her, Jaisingh is a man and he is just proud of his achievements, to which Sarita asks:

Sarita: And therefore he's entitled to keep a slave. [Tormented.] But why? If a man becomes great, why doesn't he stay a great man? Why does he become a master?

Kakasaheb: Sarita, the questions you are asking have only one answer. Because he's like that. That's why he's a man. And that's why there's manhood in the world. I too was just like this. Don't go by what I seem to be today. I gave your aunt a lot of trouble. As if it was my right. I didn't care what she felt at all. I just marched ahead looking in front of me. I was confident she would follow, even if she was limping. And she did follow, the poor thing.

Sarita: So, Sarita, go behind your master like that. It's your duty to do it- is that what you're saying?

Kakasaheb: It may be unpleasant, but it's true. If the world is to go on, marriage must go on. And it will only go on like this (*Kamala* 47).

This short conversation depicts how it is not new for women to sacrifice everything for their husbands. Sarita's aunt too had to "limp" behind Kakasaheb without questioning because otherwise the system of marriage will not work, according to Kakasaheb. And Sarita decides that this must change. She still does not know how. But she knows she will have to "pay" for it, and she is ready to pay for her own freedom. Her transformation seems sudden but it is actually like the bamboo shoot which slowly builds up only to suddenly shoot up one day.

In Sakharam Binder, Laxmi and Champa are both in need of a shelter. Both of them were ill-treated by their husbands. Laxmi was thrown out of the house because she could not give her husband any children. Laxmi is a woman abandoned by her husband. She accepts her fate as an object to the male dominance. She is docile and innocent. She feels free with insects and birds rather than humans. She was illtreated by her husband and left because she couldnot give him any children. Even Sakharam exploits her but she tolerates everything. Though docile is able to bring changes in Shakharam, he drinks less and starts regular prayer in her influence. At one point, when she cannot take it any longer, she decides to go to her nephew but is kicked out of there as well. With no option left, she returns to Sakharam's house. But when she returns he does not want her anymore, she stays on and her presence in the house effects Sakharam negatively. She is religious and believes she survives only because of her faith in god. This faith does not leave her even when her words make Sakharam kill Champa. She plans to dispose the body when even a person like Sakharam is in loss of words and action.

Champa, on the other hand, was tortured by her drunkard husband to satisfy his sexual desires in inhuman ways. Once Champa's husband comes to Sakharam's house in search of her and would not leave. She starts beating her husband and Sakharam who is new to such a situation asks her whether she has no heart for beating up her own husband so cruelly, for which she replies:

Champa: No, I don't have a heart. He chewed it up raw long ago. [Pulls herself free.] He brought me from my mother even before I'd become a woman. He married me when I didn't even know what marriage meant. He'd torture me at night. He branded me, and stuck needles into me and made me do awful, filthy things. I ran away. He brought me back and stuffed chilli powder into that god-awful place, where it hurts most. That bloody pimp! What's left of my heart now? He tore lumps out of it, he did. He drank my blood (*Sakharam Binder*167).

Champa became a woman 'socially' before becoming a woman 'biologically', she is made into what she becomes, she is physically tortured by her drunkard husband and finally she decides to take charge of her life, drinks to numb her feelings, has nothing to lose so fears nothing, is killed at the end because of what is she forced to become by the men in her life.

Though they all have different kinds of past, but the kind of lives they lead is not very different. They are all, in a way, slaves to the men they are tied to. GirishKarnad's women character though live subjugated lives, at the end, gain enough courage to take their own decisions. Vijay Tendulkar's plays being so close to this era and culture, drawing such a chilling scenario, is a cause to worry because it shows how even today women have to face such kinds of struggles.

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