

Beauty in Karnad's Play *Flowers*

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**Abstract**

The play that I have selected to explain the various aspects of beauty in the works of Girish Karnad is *Flowers*. The priest is the protagonist of the play and being a reserved man, he has lived all his life in isolation from the mechanical world. As John Keats mentions in his most celebrated *Ode on the Grecian Urn*,

Beauty is truth, Truth Beauty  
That is all ye know on Earth  
And all ye need to know.

As we turn the pages of the work, our senses are enlightened by the many glimpses of beauty. Beauty is celebrated at various levels in this particular play of Karnad. But the play also shows certain foibles of human beings.

**Keywords:** Girish Karnad, *Flowers*, sensuousness, male gaze, menstrual seclusion, patriarchal norms, dereliction, sacrilege, whims and fancies.

### **Beauty of Nature**

The only sights familiar to the simple priest are the temple, the tank, the rough grey boulders, the flowering shrubs and trees and such, of his village. Most of his time is spent with the (symbol of Shiva) *linga*- talking to it and decorating it with flowers. The names of the various flowers that he uses to decorate the *linga* as well as the courtesan, Ranganayaki are mentioned. We also come across the description of the constellation in the sky, Scorpio. This constellation makes its appearance before the readers, both before and after the play. The priest is a humble man who has no particular ambition in his life.

### **Beauty of the Senses**

A sexual undertone is vividly portrayed in the work. Sensuousness underlies the entire story. He describes the *linga* as a plain phallic stump with a smooth crown and a rough-hewn vulva for the base. These terms are related to male sexual powers and female sexuality and passivity. The priest is so engrossed with decorating the *linga* that his wife is seen grumbling

“The *linga* is my step-wife.” (Collected Plays.vol.2, p. 244)

The priest is well known for his floral efforts. He is in love with the courtesan, Ranganayaki. It is the Shivarathri celebrations that render the chance for the priest and for her to meet for the first time.

The priest's attraction for the courtesan is purely sexual. His weakness is all for her body and he cannot control the fire raging in his loins. The courtesan is pictured as the very epitome of sensuousness.

The male gaze aspect introduced by Laura Mulvey is highlighted in this work. The courtesan and the priest's wife are viewed from a man's sexual viewpoint.

The days he spent waiting for her are called the two feverish days. Terms like menstrual seclusion, the pallu of her sari, upper half of her bosom being uncovered, the mole on her left breast, just near the cleavage add to the sensuous atmosphere. The physical beauty of Ranganayaki is emphasised and even contrasted with the exhausted and dull look of his wife. Beauty and grace are exhibited by Ranganayaki when she pushes her lush hair from her forehead to the nape of her neck. The kohl in her intoxicating eyes and the sandal paste and turmeric on her cheeks give a life-like form to her person. The flame of oil lamp lighting a sparkle on her lips and his floral decoration is also a source of beauty. The playwright rushes the readers up the ladder of sensuousness when he gives the description of her breasts which are firm and tight. He decorates her naked body with flowers. Decorating the contours of her body make him more innovative and thereby pave the way to explore fresher designs with the flowers. The seductive nature of Ranganayaki is unfolded before the readers. Moreover, the priest's act of undressing her is explained which appears to be the very height of sensuousness. It is ironical that the priest voluptuously consumes her body, but not the food in her house. Even the young Chieftain of that region has a keen eye for beauty. He nods his head in appreciation at the innovative pattern in which the priest has laid flowers on the *linga*.

### **Duty is Beauty**

The wife is aware of the priest's illicit relation. But the patriarchal norms dictated by the society seal her mouth.

My wife was awake. She never ate before me. As soon as she heard me splashing in the tank, she would start heating up the food. (Collected Plays, Vol. 2, p.251)

The priest is proud to declare his wife's devotion and dedication for him, but the realisation that he too has an obligation towards her selfless love does not dawn upon him till he finds himself in a tight situation. The priest is not bothered about the spreading of this news of his illicit relation with the courtesan. For him, it is an honour to be taken up by such a beautiful and wealthy courtesan. He waits for the people around to envy him for his fortune and virility. His wife knows of his secret life with Ranganayaki, but she never questions her husband.

She never exhibits any sign of anger or retort. The only thing she expects from him is acceptance of her, which he refuses. Instead of satisfying her sexual desire which she displays openly before him for the first time, he turns his back towards her to seek refuge in his lover's arms. Very conveniently, the priest overlooks his wife's feelings. But in his time of need, the wife takes over the authority of the priest in order to save him from the Chieftain's questions through which the priest is challenged to prove his innocence. The hair growing from the *linga* makes everyone wonder struck. The Chieftain at once falls to the feet of the priest and begs forgiveness.

### **The Priest's Faults**

Gross dereliction and sacrilege are his grave flaws. The priest is dedicated to God but he takes his wife for granted. He is not ashamed to cheat her. His guilt makes him attempt the heinous act of suicide. He decides to drown himself in the temple tank. The act of cruelty that he does to the two women makes him punish himself.

### **Beauty of Assumed Isolation**

The priest is introduced to the readers as a man leading a secluded life. The only women he has supposedly seen in his entire life are his mother and wife. He has no regrets regarding his seemingly reserved life.

### **Beauty of Wealth**

The Chieftain and the courtesan, Ranganayaki are the epitomes of wealth. The richness of the two people makes the poor priest susceptible to their whims and fancies. The Chieftain loves to witness the floral decoration that is done by the priest. For this purpose, there rings a bell just an hour before the Chieftain's arrival. The priest has to struggle to make

the arrangements. Similarly, the courtesan too misuses her sexuality and financial strength to make the priest do everything her heart desired.

### **Beauty of Devotion and Faith**

The priest is devoted to God which is symbolised by his love for the *linga*. The priest's wife is extremely devoted to him. She treats her husband as God. Ranganayaki shows that she is devoted to the priest and vice versa. But, this kind of devotion gets tarnished during certain moments. What is more essential is the beauty of sincerity and commitment towards one's job and also towards one's relations. The beauty of truth and honesty in relations triumphs over physical beauty and sexual love. This point has been exemplified by this short abstract.

### **Beauty of God's Grace**

It is solely the grace of God that saves the priest's honour from being eroded before the huge public who were taken aback by the presence of a long hair from the *linga*. The readers are well aware of the fact that the hair belongs to the courtesan, Ranganayaki and the priest is close to being caught for adultery when he claims that the hair belongs to the *linga*. The public wait eagerly to judge the priest, but they are shocked to witness long tresses of black hair flowing from the *linga*. Even the priest is stunned at the miraculous spectacle. God has made a mockery of justice for the sake of love for his ardent devotee.

### **Beauty of Death**

The priest seeks solace in the arms of death when he feels betrayed by his God, who protects the former by elevating him to the status of the one chosen by God. He leaves behind his family and the object of his lust to drown himself in the pond near the temple.

### **Conclusion**

An array of beauty in its various forms is found throughout the work. Girish Karnad's vision of beauty is vividly portrayed in his celebrated story *Flowers*. There is some ugliness also here. The ugliness you can see in this play are the adultery of the priest, and the act of suicide; the other two points of evil here are the power of wealth over a man's mind, and a man's insensitivity to his wife's feelings.

So, it is not wholly a play of beauty alone. Human beings are neither fully good nor fully evil. Karnad is well aware of this universal phenomenon. His characters do portray all of the foibles of humans.

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