

The Subversion of Patriarchal Structures in the Plays of Girish Karnad

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Abstract

This paper aims at highlighting the subversion of the patriarchal norms by the women characters in the plays of the famous Indo Anglian playwright, Girish Karnad. Women in Karnad's plays subvert all the patriarchal structures; they flaunt their identity by rebelling against the existing norms of patriarchy. They fight tooth and nail to subvert the rules laid down by the male dominating world.

Keywords: Girish Karnad, Plays, Hierarchical norms-male hegemony-mangalashtra-prejudiced-gender bias-feminine psyche-anti individualistic.

Introduction

As analysed by Valerie Bryson in her renowned work, 'Feminist Political Theory' patriarchy maybe defined as a system in which the father or a man is the head of a family and also the ruler. Women are relegated to traditional roles as that of wife and the ever-sacrificing mother in the old system of family. A perusal of Girish Karnad's plays makes us aware of the problems faced by women in a prejudiced, biased patriarchal society. The issue of gender bias surfaces in his works. As Simone de Beauvoir tells in her renowned work 'The Second Sex',

"One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one"

It is also to be realised that patriarchy works at the caste level too.

Caste System: A Reflection of Patriarchy

In 'Yayati', when Sharmishtha (member of the Rakshasa clan) exhibits the boldness to question Queen Devayani, we should realise that it is not the quarrel between two women but instead, it is the revolt against the discrimination that the high caste Devayani showed towards the lower caste Sharmishtha. The latter questions the dominance of caste- the Bharatha and Arya dynasty's domination over the Rakshasa clans. She subverts the caste system by attacking Queen Devayani verbally and seducing the queen's husband, King Yayati. She hurls abuses at the people of the court, indulges in all sorts of gossip till the palace inmates are totally irritated. She has established her influence and role in the palace. She has succeeded in constructing a space for herself in the palace and this is how she fights the caste system prevailing there.

Denial of the Patriarchal Norms

Another example of subversion in ‘Yayati’ is that of Swarnalata who has also subverted patriarchy by owning up to her doubtful husband that she was seduced by her tuition teacher (tutor). Though it was a lie, she said it to pacify her husband who had lost his peace of mind by imagining that his wife was not chaste. Disappointed by his discomfiture, she decided to free him from this pathetic condition. On hearing the lie from his wife, he turned and slept peacefully after a long time. He left her the very next day. She subverts the norms that expects a woman to always uphold the values of chastity. She did it to liberate her husband from the pangs of endless worries.

Then, we come across Chitrlekha, who is a woman, at the height of feminine psyche. She tries to follow the hierarchical norms set forth by the male hegemony by pretending to be happy at first. When her husband Puru has accepted his father’s old age, she acts as if she has been chosen to be the Blessed One. But her pretensions end abruptly, and she is at once conscious of herself as a woman. She wards off her husband from her chamber and does not shy from showing her reluctance in accepting him in his shrivelled state. When rebuked by her father in law Yayati for not pleasing her husband, she criticises the King for being selfish. She makes him realise the sin he has done by exchanging his old age with his young son. Puru was the agent through whom Chitrlekha dreams of being a mother of the heir of the Bharatha dynasty. But much to her surprise, she was welcomed by the dynasty with very odd things like the broken pendant of the mangalasutra of Queen Devayani and a vial of mushroom poison that was left on the bed by Sharmishtha. Both were ill omen and Chitrlekha questions King Yayati very boldly. She is educated and she uses her knowledge to assert her rights as a human being. How can a young newlywed bride suffer the pangs of separation from her husband? The present age gap also creates separation, both of mind and body. Her entry into the kingdom stands a waste. Yayati learns a lesson from his daughter in laws’ death. She commits suicide by drinking the vial of poison. Her suicide is a means of rebellion against the male domineering society.

Women as Agent of Patriarchy

In the play ‘Bali: The Sacrifice’, the Queen Mother is an agent of patriarchal norms. She stands and fights for it. Her inclination for animal sacrifice to please the Gods makes her a symbol of violence before us. Her dislike for her son’s wife (The Queen) is not the jealousy that an elderly woman feels for a younger one. Rather, it is the revenge that a hierarchical order feels towards a disobedient body. The Queen was unable to conceive even after fifteen years of marriage. She subverts the patriarchy by sleeping with the ugly mahout and her pregnancy after sleeping with the mahout proves her potency and the King’s impotency. She overrides all the limitations drawn forth to limit her existence. Her repression into the palace is broken by her when she leaves the palace to mate with the mahout. By this act, she satisfies her carnal urge as well as she takes revenge on all those gossip mongers of the palace who try to depreciate her on the basis of her inability to give an heir to the Dynasty.

Though she has to repay the wrong she had done by losing her life, she had the

solace of living her short life to her minds fill.

The Fire and the Rain

Vishakha leads a miserable life because she is being neglected by her husband, Paravasu who is the Chief Priest who is to conduct a fire sacrifice to bring in rains. In the meantime, she is repeatedly raped by her father in law. As a vengeance, she takes her way out by indulging in a sexual act with her lover before marriage, Yavakri. But she is shocked and also infuriated with Yavakri when she learns that he had exploited her emotions to take revenge on her father in law, Raibhya for his selfish reason. She brings an end to Yavakri's life and even the lustful Raibhya dies at the hands of his son unknowingly.

Vishakha takes apt revenge to the men in her life. The second woman character in the play is Nittilai and she is butchered by her husband and brother for eloping with her lover. But she lived a few days of her life to her hearts content. Though the main theme of the story is about the fire sacrifice conducted by the Chief Priest for invoking rain in the village, it also has an underlying theme of how patriarchy is subverted by the women characters of Karnad's plays.

Weaker Men Victimised by Patriarchy

Patriarchy proves to be anti-individualistic for many, particularly women and weaker men. In the above plays, we can analyse the goodness exhibited by men like Prince Puru in 'Yayati', The King in 'Bali: The Sacrifice' and Aravasu in 'The Fire and the Rain'. It is the goodness of these men that become their weakness and the cause of their failure and misery, and they become victims to the patriarchal dictum. Prince Puru takes up King Yayati's old age to express his gratitude towards him for having socially accepted him as his son though he was born to a woman of a Rakshasa clan.

But in the process of exhibiting his gratitude, he made the flaw of ignoring and neglecting his duties as a husband. It was this flaw that led to the suicide of his bride, Chitralkha. Similarly, we come across The King of 'Bali: the Sacrifice' who is so devoted to his wife that he converts into her religion. He becomes a Jain for his wife's favour, but he is unable to bring a consensus between his mother and wife. The lack of support at her husband's residence makes her drift away from him and she resolves to infidelity.

Conclusion

Patriarchal structures render power to a few and leave certain others powerless. Even religions are agents to oppress women as can be seen in the case of sati in Hinduism, triple talaq as in the case of Islam, etc. Girish Karnad's works exhibit embittered women, all of whom are subject to the whims and fancies of men in varying degrees but succeed in subverting the male world through an assertion of their own rights and privileges.

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