
Reclaiming the Self: Feminist Voices and Resistance in Karnad's Plays

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Abstract:

This study explores feminist resistance, agency, and self-realization in the select plays of Girish Karnad, including *Yayati*, *Naga-Mandala*, *Hayavadana*, and *Bali: The Sacrifice*. Karnad's female characters—Devayani, Sharmistha, Chitrlekha, Rani, Padmini, the Queen Mother, and the Queen—embody assertiveness, autonomy, and defiance against patriarchal norms, social restrictions, and traditional ethics. Through their struggles, he highlights women's quest for personal desires, identity, and empowerment, often challenging male dominance, caste, class, and ritualistic constraints. His portrayal interweaves myth, folklore, and historical narratives to present multidimensional female characters whose resilience, intelligence, and moral strength articulate potent feminist voices. While their resistance underscores agency and self-realization, it also reflects the socio-cultural barriers and tragic consequences women face in asserting autonomy. Karnad's plays offer a critical commentary on gender politics, the complexities of female identity, and the ongoing struggle for equality, transforming marginalized voices from the periphery to the centre of social and moral discourse.

Key Words: Agency, Identity, Resistance, Self-Realization, Feminist Voices.**Introduction**

The representation of women's voices in literary works, including prose, poetry, and drama, has been depicted for centuries, reflecting drastic changes in social ideals, cultural norms, religious tenets, and feminist movements. In literature, women's voices refers to their ability and potential to make choices in their personal lives, exert influence over their circumstances, and assert independence within the spheres of family and society. Playwrights like Girish Karnad explore this concept in nuanced ways, from subtle actions and reactions to their surroundings and their longing for resistance, to direct challenges to male dominance and gender politics, questioning patriarchy.

In the plays of Girish Karnad, the recurring theme of women's quest for agency, autonomy, and choices illustrates how women raise their voices to break free from male

hypocrisy, social restrictions, and traditional ethics, resisting the gender biases that commodify women at different levels. The playwright emphasizes women's struggle for agency and autonomy in their pursuit of personal desires, despite the constraints of a male-dominated social order that has persisted in Indian society for centuries. The depiction of women's voices highlights female empowerment and the journey toward self-respect and individuality.

Girish Karnad represents his female protagonists as challengers to established social norms, highlighting their feminist resistance while delving deeply into mythic and symbolic themes in his plays. The complex nature of his female characters plays a vital role in shaping feminist resistance, as they resist gender-based exploitation through their intellect, powerful desires, and socio-moral integrity. As Priyaranjan Das observes, "They are not only sensible and sensitive but also intelligent and bold. Vulnerability is their strength; subtle interpretation is their armor; sharp tongue is their sword; more so they are guided by spontaneity even in the most oppressed state of theirs." (Das 45) Many of these female characters assume dominant roles, challenging the tragic and compromised outcomes they face in their pursuit of fulfillment and perfection. As Priyaranjan Das remarks, "Their deprivation, subjugation, loneliness and silence push them to such an extent that they could rise and resist even at the cost of inviting their ruin." (Das 46) Feminist resistance to gender-based social order reinforces the feminist nature of these women, making them aware of their subjugation. In Karnad's plays, his female characters are often confident, assertive, dominant, and firm in their opinions and commitments.

Female Agency and Resistance

In *Yayati*, female characters like Devyani, Sharmistha, and Chitralekha embody feminist resistance as they confront existential issues, complex relationships, and the oppressive strategies of the social order. Devyani's resistance is visible through her intense reaction to King Yayati, as she seeks to punish him for her victimization. Sharmistha's resistance is seen in her struggle against racial conflicts and her efforts to assert her own position, while Chitralekha questions male dominance and hypocrisy. In the context of Chitralekha's reactions, Mudasir Ahmad Shah observes, "Chitralekha's protest in the play for this exchange of youth is an attack on male chauvinism and patriarchy." (Shah 173) Each of these women strives to establish her identity within adverse circumstances. Karnad portrays their resistance as a direct challenge to a system that demands sacrifices from women and seeks to suppress their existence.

In *Naga-Mandala*, Karnad portrays Rani as a character who resists the oppressive nature of her husband and the institution of marriage itself. Rani's resistance lies in her quest to reshape her familial structure and challenge the patriarchal system that confines her within the traditional feminine role. As Gupta & Ansari observe, "Karnad's depiction of Rani's psychological journey highlights the universal human longing for freedom, fulfillment, and self-discovery. It serves as a potent reminder of the importance of being one's true self and of fending off pressure to fit in with society. Through the portrayal of Rani's psychological growth and her quest for self-realization, *Naga-Mandala* invites the audience to reflect on

their own journeys of identity and personal liberation.” (Gupta & Ansari 12) Her transformation into a goddess at the end of the play marks the peak of her resistance, symbolizing her gaining power and dominance both within her family and in society.

In *Hayavadana*, Padmini’s resistance is strong, rebellious, and firm against the rigid social judgments she faces. She attempts to balance her desires amidst crisis, all while facing social criticism and personal guilt. Her aspiration to balance both intellectual and physical fulfillment reinforces her resistance, as she challenges conventional ideas about morality, marriage, and female sexuality. Padmini appears with feminist qualities, fulfilling aspects of modern women who live for their identity and aspirations. As Mudasir Ahmad Shah observes, “The predicament of Padmini, the female protagonist, can easily be compared with the predicament of a ‘Modern’ woman.” (Shah 175) Her disobedience to social norms and her refusal to be constrained by them reflect her desire to live on her own terms. Through Padmini’s character, Karnad critiques social judgment and its consequences for women who pursue their personal desires.

In *Bali: The Sacrifice*, the Queen’s resistance is shown through her refusal to conform to family rituals, such as animal sacrifice, and her open-mindedness in her relationship with Mahout, crossing barriers of caste, class, and religion. In this regard, S. Pavani observes, the Queen is “a very self-possessive woman character created by the dramatist. She controls and dominates her husband. She has managed to convert her husband into Jainism. Also, she controls his state affairs. It is evident that Karnad presents his woman to participate in political discussions. Certain qualities of her prove to be a New Woman. She makes him in all kinds of bloodshed in the state. Even she does not allow her mother-in-law to celebrate her joy at the Queen’s pregnancy. Thus, she tries to have control over the family.” (Pavani 41) In asserting autonomy in her relationships, the Queen embodies feminist resistance against the restrictions imposed by marriage, tradition, and rituals. However, her resistance is often limited by the overwhelming power of religion, tradition, and the socio-moral expectations imposed on women.

Feminist Assertion and Self-Realization

Ultimately, Karnad’s female characters, such as Devyani, Sharmistha, Chitralkha, Rani, Padmini, and the Queen, appear as a rebel against the established notions, and reflect feminist resistance through their actions and reactions against gender discrimination and social frameworks that view them as secondary. As Priyaranjan Das opines, “Karnad has presented the women characters with least emotional precision so that they could come out from their traditional allotted space either to rebel against the injustice or to follow their desire as their own.” (Das 50) Despite the harsh treatment they endure, these women seek autonomy, personal choices, and individuality. Their assertiveness and aggressiveness, manifested in their behavior and mindset, demonstrate their resistance. However, Karnad’s plays emphasize that such resistance often comes at a significant cost.

Karnad analyzes feminist resistance, highlighting the barriers and opportunities women face when asserting agency in a patriarchal society. Even when their female

characters rebel and resist, their actions frequently result in tragic consequences, social punishment, and judgment. In the context of Girish Karnad's female characters, Dr. C.L. Khatri rightly observes, "Girish Karnad maps the development of women in India from prehistoric period to the modern or postmodern age passing through different phases. His women are submissive and subversive. Some of his women rebel in their own ways while some are ambivalent. These women try to create space for themselves within the patriarchal set up." (Khatri 1) While feminist resistance is essential, it is often constrained by the very systems it seeks to dismantle. Karnad illustrates the challenges women face in defying oppressive norms, ultimately questioning whether true freedom is attainable in a society that continues to uphold patriarchal ideals and traditional gender roles.

Feminist Voices in Karnad's Plays

Girish Karnad intertwines his plays with mythology, folklore, and historical events, engaging deeply with feminist perspectives on women's issues. Karnad portrays multifaceted female characters, exploring their poignant feminist voices in diverse ways. In this regard, Gupta and Ansari observe, "His female characters are multifaceted and exhibit a wide array of emotions, desires, and conflicts. Through their experiences, Karnad delves into themes such as identity, power dynamics, social constraints, and the quest for self-realization." (Gupta & Ansari 8) His works consistently reflect an understanding of the complexities of women's lives, their yearning for agency, autonomy, and choice, while giving voice to their resistance and resilience against gender dynamics and deformities. As Gupta and Ansari observe, "Through his nuanced portrayal, Karnad transcends shallow stereotypes and archetypes, presenting women as multidimensional beings with their own agency, dreams, and conflicts." (Gupta & Ansari 9) Karnad's feminist voices in women are rational, powerful, and assertive, emerging as controlling forces that seek to reshape female identities within their respective spheres. His female protagonists are diverse in their moods and flexible in their thoughts, representing mental strength and dominant positions. In the context of *Tale-Danda*, Gupta and Ansari rightly observe, "Karnad's depiction of the female characters in *Tale-Danda* highlights the strength, resistance, and resilience of women, challenging preconceived notions and underscoring their importance in shaping social narratives. It offers a powerful commentary on gender dynamics, the struggle for equality, and the multifaceted nature of female identity in the face of oppressive systems." (Gupta & Ansari 13) The female characters in Karnad's plays exhibit remarkable power to resist challenges in their daily lives. Their actions and reactions are striking as they confront personal issues, conflicts, desires, and socio-moral dilemmas, creating a rupture between the traditional power structure and gender politics. In the context of *Naga-Mandala*, Seema Jaysi and Dr. Kurrey rightly observe, "The play covers the theme of woman's destiny, her chastity and her position in the society and home, and merges it with an unexpected ending latent on double crossing, double standard and revivify of old customs." (Jaysi & Kurrey 120) His plays offer profound insights into social barriers, exploring how these obstacles shape female thoughts and psyches. Karnad highlights how socio-cultural myths, assumptions, and ideals limit women's thought processes and actions, suppressing their feminist voices and their assertion of personal rights. Through his female characters' struggles, Karnad presents a compelling exploration of feminist voices, underscoring the need to cultivate feminist sensibilities in

women's personalities and promoting social awareness and moral awakening for women's holistic development.

Karnad's feminist voices resonate deeply throughout his plays, where he vividly depicts the struggles and inner conflicts of women within patriarchal and social frameworks. In *Yayati*, the female characters—Devyani, Sharmistha, and Chitrlekha—embody the feminist voices. Devyani, wife of King Yayati, reacts with fury and bitterness towards her husband's association with Sharmishta, her childhood companion. Her decision to leave the palace for the sake of her self-respect, and to punish her husband for his betrayal, highlights the growing feminist voice within her. Sharmistha, an attendant to Devyani who becomes Yayati's queen, contrasts with her rival. She is portrayed as stronger, more independent, and dominant than Devyani, gaining Yayati's favor while challenging caste, class, and gender hierarchies. Her rise marks a subtle rebellion against these constraints, reinforcing the feminist voice in her character. Similarly, Chitrlekha represents feminist ideals as she grapples with the personal and social impacts of Yayati's decision, which seeks to control her life, asking for personal sacrifices for the clan and palace. These female characters, with their complex and multifaceted natures, showcase Karnad's sensitivity to the emotional and psychological dimensions of gender bias. In this regard, Priyaranjan Das precisely comments, "All these characters are living a life of hell or at least a part of it. But the combative powers of these three characters could teach Yayati a lesson that thousands of battles and hundreds of sensuous women could not." (Das 49)

In *Bali: The Sacrifice*, Karnad critiques gender and power dynamics, exploring the complex relationship between traditional faith, personal desire, and gender bias. He delves into socio-cultural and moral dilemmas, advocating for love, peace, and non-violence through characters like the Queen, whose assertive nature is driven by her desire to uphold humanitarian values. In this regard, Dr. C.L. Khatri observes, "She stands to her values and conviction be individual freedom or nonviolence and to defend the Jain principle of non-violence she as if in a reflex action goes to the extent of violence." (Khatri 6) Her emotional turmoil stems from her complex roles as a queen and a woman, confronting both personal and social dilemmas. Her bold opinions and progressive thinking highlight her strong feminist voice.

In *Naga-Mandala*, Rani takes on a dominant role in her family and society after her ordeal with the snake at the village court. She asserts her dominance and control over her husband, rebuilding her family structure on her terms and challenging traditional images of women. As Seema Jaisi and Dr. Kurrey observes, "The play describes her journey from an innocent helpless, an invaluable, ignorant girl into a confident, courageous, clever, determined and self-assertive woman." (Jaysi & Kurrey 120) At the end of the play, Rani's rise to power underscores her feminist voice, reinforcing her autonomy and authority. Similarly, in *Hayavadana*, Padmini represents a strong feminist voice, challenging the traditional expectations of women being passive and submissive. In the context of Padmini's character, Priyaranjan Das rightly observes, "She is the woman ahead of her time, and the

disjunction at the time, being a woman, to celebrate the desire, the mirth and the laughter; thus her downfall.” (Das 49) Her quest for perfection and autonomy in expressing her innermost thoughts showcases her mental strength and feminist ideals though she falls a subject to the time and situation.

Through these protagonists, Karnad crafts poignant feminist voices of women against the systemic forces who consider women secondary, and assert to suppress their identities, and portrays their resistance and resilience. As Krishna Singh remarks, “His plays abound with subalterns, especially women and lower caste people subjected since ancient time by patriarchy or upper hierarchy of the society. Karnad has not only exposed their subalternity but also fused energy in their lives so that they can speak; shifted their position from “margin” to “centre” (Singh 121). His depictions invite readers to reflect on women’s plight in contemporary society.

Conclusion

Girish Karnad’s plays offer a profound exploration of women’s voices, resistance, and self-realization within a patriarchal society. Characters like Devyani, Sharmistha, Chitralekha, Rani, Padmini, and the Queen assert autonomy, challenge male authority, and confront social hypocrisy, reflecting the evolution of women’s consciousness amid restrictive social, moral, and cultural codes. By intertwining myth, history, and folklore, Karnad portrays women not as passive victims but as active agents of change—whether confronting betrayal in *Yayati*, asserting identity in *Naga-Mandala*, reconciling intellect and desire in *Hayavadana*, or opposing ritualistic violence in *Bali: The Sacrifice*. His nuanced depiction highlights their resilience, the high cost of defiance, and the pursuit of self-definition. Ultimately, Karnad reclaims the marginalized female voice, transforming subjugation into assertion and emphasizing the enduring courage, dignity, and self-realization of women.

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