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The Portrayal of Family Values in Girish Karnad's Selected Plays

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ABSTRACT

Girish Karnad is ranked among the greatest playwright in Indian English literature. His plays are rich and vibrant in traditional Indian sensibility, characterization and themes yet they have modern perspective and universal effect. He has also made a distinctive position for himself with respect to style and method. This paper aims to study different aspects of family relationship with reference to his selected plays, 'Hayavadana', 'Nag-Mandala', 'Bali' and 'Wedding Album'. He has presented family as the center in these plays. In these plays, he observes how system in families is changing in the process of modernization. In this paper, the researcher has mainly focused about the major trends of change and their impact on the family values and relationships.

Key Words: Theme, Characterization, drama, family values, Indian English literature



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Introduction:

In India, families are still patriarchal and patrilineal in structure. Marriage as an institution also seems to be under the influence of patriarchy. Marriage is still a socio-religious institution in India and it is a matter which takes place between two families. It is still arranged by parents, elders and members of the kinship group and it plays an important role in conjugal relationship. In their book *The Family in the New Millennium: Strengthening the family*, A. Scott Loveless and Thomas Holmansay writes:

The kinship system still has a strong hold on marriage and other family practices that perpetuate patriarchy, rather than a democratic ideology. Some examples of these practices are child marriages, dowry demands, sati, celebration of the birth of a boy child, female feticide and infanticide, father as natural guardian, and so on. Individuals or families who deviate from the ethnic norms of their community often face ostracism. (Loveless, 265)

In his presented plays, Karnad also describes the various aspects of traditional society. He talks about major trends of change and their impact. In a traditional family, elders have supreme authority. They play a decisive role in every matter of the family for instance marriage, religious ceremony, and celebration. Raghuvir Sinha comments: "The hierarchical authority was centralized in the eldest male of the Hindu family who also had the decisive authority in matters of family as well as inter-family relations (101). In the matter of marriage, youngsters are not allowed to put their opinion or objection especially girls. Even today, children are socialized quite early into the notions of inequality. Boys are considered economic support; on the other hand, daughters are prepared for her adult roles. Karnad has focused on all these issues in his plays.

The Portrayal of Family Values in Girish Karnad's Selected Plays:

In the plays like *Hayavadana*, *Naga-Mandala* and *Wedding Album* marriages take place under patriarchal pressure and groom selected by the elders are not the suitable match for the bride. It also affects conjugal relationship. Karnad presents how couples are unable to give equal importance and respect to their spouses. He also points out the mind-set of people which seems to be influenced by patriarchal system. In this regard, Amrit Srinivasan observes, The constellation of sexual, conjugal, caste, class and age-related behaviors and attitudes of selfishness and sacrifice, chastity and commerce, obedience and authority, all integral to modern Hindu marriage (viii).

Arrange marriage is still a norm in cultures and it plays an important role in conjugal relationship. In



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these selected plays of Karnad, only elders have decision-making powers, girl's desires are treated as secondary and girls also prefer to be silent because it is considered against ethos to put her opinion against elders. For example, in the play *Hayavadana*, at the time of marriage, Padmini is more attracted towards Kapila's body than Devadatta but she doesn't raise her voice against the family members. Rani in *Naga-Mandala*, is also not mature enough to get married but her parents arrange her marriage without her consent. In *Wedding Album* too, Karnad shows that everybody in Vidula's family is giving more attention to Ashwin and nobody cares about Vidula's opinion. Even Vidula herself doesn't seem serious about her marriage. Through his plays, Karnad ridicules the ideology of a majority of Indians who select a groom for their daughter not by judging his virtues and character but their criteria of measurement revolve around his family name and the ancestral property left for him and don't give importance to their daughter's desire.

In his plays, Karnad describes how matches have been made under patriarchal pressure ends in disaster. As in an interview with Tutun Mukherjee, Karnad says, "Man and women relationship can be explored rationally and artistically. It is not as though we need to commodify our cultural heritage" (Mukherjee, 34). Karnad also describes that separation and remarriage are still considered as a symbol of embarrassment and disgrace and there is a pressure from the family to reconcile and compromise even though they are not compatible. In the letter to his granddaughter, the legendary figure Amitabh Bachchan seems to advise her that,

Don't get married for any other reason other than you want to get married. People will talk. They shall say some terrible things. But that doesn't mean you have to listen to everyone. Never ever worry about – 'Log Kya Kahenge'. At the end of the day, you are the only one who will face the consequences of your actions, so don't let other people make your decisions for you. (Bachchan, YouTube).

Nowadays, feminism rules mostly in books and on social media and vanishes into oblivion when it comes to real life. Despite belonging to a much older generation Amitabh Bachchan has proved that he is open-minded and his advice is not only for his granddaughter but for every girl who faces difficulties in her life. In the play *Hayavadana*, Padmini and Devadatta are physically and intellectually compatible. Padmini voices the innate differences between them: —

Padmini : Sorry... the trouble is. I grew up saying these awful things and it's become a habit now. But you are so fragile! I don't know how you are to go through life wrapped in silk like



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this! You are still a baby.....! (130).

Devadatta is no match either for Padmini's sharp tongue or her clear thinking. He himself admits that he is not a perfect match for her: "I know this girl is beyond my wildest dreams. But still-I can't help wanting her-I can't help it" (126). Devadatta's friend Kapila also realizes that Padmini wants a man of steel, he couldn't do anything. Ultimately, the two families fix the marriage of the two. A marriage, in the traditional Hindu milieu, is not something that takes place between two persons but it brings two families together. As Bhagwata says, "In Devadatt's house they have the Goddess of learning for a maid. What could then possibly stand in the way of bringing the two families together? (126). Bhagwata's remark also suggests that Padmini doesn't get her deserving place in her husband's house but the two families decide and their marriage takes place which results in utter failure.

In *Naga-Mandala*, Appanna is also not a perfect match for Rani as their neighbor Kappanna says, "Appanna should have been born a wild beast or a reptile. By some mistake, he got human birth. He can't stand other people" (255). The statement of Kappanna clarifies that he is not a good human being. Like Padmini, in the play *Naga Mandala*, the marriage of Rani is also fixed by her parents in haste and Appanna is not a good match for Rani. Her Husband Appanna goes out every night just uttering, "well then, I'll be back tomorrow at noon. Keep my lunch ready. I shall eat and go" (254). He regularly visits concubine and leaves her everyday locked in the house alone. One can see that there is no bond, love and care in their relationship and it renders the marriage meaningless. As a result, Rani is reduced to the status of a housemaid who must cook for husband and feed him every afternoon.

Ashwin in *Wedding Album* also pays less attention towards Vidula as Rohit, her brother mentions, "Don't be obtuse. He has not exactly been over-communicative. Barely half a dozen short emails in all these weeks. Hardly any calls." (Wedding Album, 86). Like other female characters, she is neglected by her husband. Vidula's fiancé Ashwin represents the Indians who live in the USA. On the other side, Vidula is a careless girl who doesn't take seriously her official matters e.g. she forgets her important matter of applying the birth certificate. Her dignity is related to her activities in an internet cafe. Her relationship with a stranger proves her a decisive person and very bold but when she moves outside of that space, she opted a conventional solution in her life which is to get married to the boy who stays in abroad. Even though she changes her life style, she gives up eating fish. She decides to do everything that every perfect Indian woman is supposed to be and that's the complexity Karnad is hitting out at that people cannot give up by saying that this is twentieth century and things have changed. Somewhere certain compromises are being



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made and these are need to be kind of open up and one looks again and renegotiate in this sense with these form for example, Vidula decides to stay committed despite frightening in communication and arrogant side of Ashwin towards her.

The reality that one is still govern even after all these years by certain demands in society which is why women are still leading extremely traditional lives. Likewise, Hema, her elder sister being married to an NRI and a resident of Australia, is opposed to Rohit's entanglement with a Christian girl. She angrily says, "It doesn't seem to bother any of you that he's going out with a Christian girl" (Wedding Album, 43). Her brother answers calmly, "Is this what going to Australia does to people? You are in the twenty first century, you know" (Ibid). Hema is also a talented and educated woman who lives in abroad but she does not view marriage as an elevating experience. Vidula's comment that Indians are in top positions in abroad and in response Hema's comment expresses the reality as she says,

Do you know why because they are all transferable jobs and the white wife refuses to go trailing after her husband. We Indian women on the other side are obedient Sati Savitris, ever willing to follow in our husband's footsteps. Look at me-Melbourne, Johannesburg, Singapore and now Sydney. (17)

From the generation of the mother to the present where women like Hema and at the end of the play Vidula also going to follow the same track follow the husband whenever he goes. There is a great sense of unhappiness in the mother particularly because she had thought that these things would happen in her time and now all this education and everything may help her daughters to do something with their lives. The unhappiness is visible but at the same time one can see that both Hema and Vidula, in a sense, are still continuing to play out these stereotypes that are there for women.

Karnad very skillfully portrays mother-son relationship. In *Bali-The Sacrifice*, Queen mother's relationship with her son is a disturbing one. She became very sad to know that her daughter in law is from Jain community. Even it is a shock to her that her son has left his religion and has adopted Jainism. Mother Queen has kept different kinds of animals to sacrifice and she has sacrificed some of them to the goddess praying for a grandchild. When the King confesses to Mother Queen about his wife's illicit relationship with the Mahout, Mother Queen becomes very angry and wants to punish her. So, Mother asks her son: "Has she fallen so low? The whore. And you. How can you stand here like? I should cut her piece...feed her wolves and vultures. Do it son now!" (221) In this way, mother suggests her son to kill his wife. Her words suggest



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her level of hatred towards Queen. She is a conventional woman who believes in the ethics of patriarchal society where a woman is expected to remain faithful to her husband. For her, it is very abhorrent to know that Queen of the palace has kept an extra-marital relationship with a low caste and ordinary person like Mahout. So, she becomes furious

Throw her bones to the dogs. She has betrayed you. You are not bound by your vows now. All this nonsense about non-violence. I had to go. Kill the harlot and her lover. If you won't do it, I'll do it. Let me fetch my sacrificial knife from the temple (Bali, 223)

Even she forgets that killing daughter-in-law is not the solution of the problem. She could not bear that her daughter-in-law has an illicit relationship with Mahout. Mother Queen asks furiously to her son, "What kind of a man are you? You have lost your manhood. You, you impotent. You love her. But such love is meant for harlots. She drowned our family in sin" (224). She uses very ruthless words like harlots, whore etc. for her daughter-in-law. Mother surpasses the limitations of motherly behavior and she challenges her son to take revenge.

On the other hand, the Nadkarni mother in *Wedding Album* is a typical embodiment of selfless attitude but her struggle to find and preserve her identity also presents her as a modern woman who is not only concerned about her children's growth but about her own growth too. She once might have expected to be emancipated but she could not, because of her responsibilities. She always tries to warn Vidula- "Just rush, rush. And I achieved nothing in my life. . . You are capable of anything if you will only make up your mind. . . Don't throw away your talents in just bearing children" (Wedding Album, 23). She really wants that her daughter should become successful and independent in her life. In the same way, Kurudavva in *Naga-Mandala*, the neighbor of Rani, helped her every time she needs. She is the one who finds out that Rani is locked inside: "He keeps his wife locked up like a caged bird? I must talk to her! (257). Kurudavva did not know her personally but she is more worried about her than Appanna: "I haven't slept a wink since you told me you saw Appanna in his concubine's courtyard. He has got himself a bride- and he still goes after that harlot" (255). She gives Rani a magical root to feed her husband so that Appanna would fall in love with her. Within Indian families, there are firm rules about privacy, intended to preserve family honour but Karnad presents how these rules are sometimes misused. In some traditional families, matters are not shared with individuals outside the family especially women are restricted to have contact with their friends and family.



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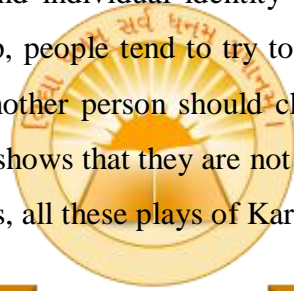
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The birth of a daughter is not an occasion of happiness in the family. The daughters are not given equal rights in the matters of education, career and marriage. They are often married even without their consent. Karnad very skillfully depicts the condition of females ruled by the patriarchal order bound by an institution of marriage. He is not a feminist, but like a humanist with his deep concern for the subjugated, he portrays women who are fighting against the unjust norms of the patriarchal order and reveal their real self, that is fearless. Padmini in *Hayavadana*, Rani in *Naga-Mandala*, Queen in *Bali: The Sacrifice* and Vidula in *Wedding Album* are presented in traditional Indian social life but they have some kinds of qualities which are possessed by modern Indian women like a quest for completeness, eager to achieve equal rights in the family.

Conclusion:

Through his female characters, Karnad presents an image of a modern woman who is a traditional woman yet aware of her desires, right and individual identity in social life. In his book titled as *In the family*, especially in conjugal relationship, people tend to try to change other people because they believe that their ways are right and for them another person should change himself or herself as they want and when people want to change their spouse shows that they are not accepting them as they are which basically lack of acceptance means a rejection. Thus, all these plays of Karnad are the best examples for Indian family values.



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