

# THE VOICE OF OTHER: SUBALTERN STUDY OF GIRISH KARNAD'S PLAYS

Shankar Biswas

Affiliation – M.Phil at Himalayan University  
West Bengal, India

**Abstract:** In this paper I want to show how the subaltern people are treated in the play of Girish Karnad. He has drawn the subject matter of his play from Indian myths, but his creative genius presents them in such a way that gives us the full sketch of the Indian society which is divided in caste, race, class, and many other things. His novel shows the position of the lower class people, women characters, and some untouchable people of the society. The paper shows how the upper class people dominate the lower class people. And also how the women characters are making as 'other' in a patriarchy social structure. But some of the women are trying to rise above their position by raising their voice against the patriarchal society.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Patriarchy, Subalternism, Post-modernism

## Introduction:

The term 'subaltern' means a group of people who are socially, politically and geographically deprived of the hegemonic power circle of the colony and of the colonial country. The word 'subaltern' is derived from Antonio Gramsci's writing on cultural hegemony, which refers to the group that are excluded from a society's main stream for political representation and therefore denied the means by which people have a voice in their society.(1) To the post-colonial theorist, the word 'subaltern' stands for the people who are at the margins of an established society – a subaltern is a person rendered without agency due to his or her social status. Nonetheless, the literary critic Gayatri Spivak spoke against a too-broad application of the term in 1992:

... 'Subaltern' is not just a classy word for "oppressed", for [the] other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie,... In post – colonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern – a space of difference. Now, who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not subaltern.... Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated – against minority on the university campus; they don't need the word 'subaltern'.... They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are. They're within the hegemonic discourse, wanting piece of the pie, and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern.(2)

In the essay "Can the subaltern Speak?" Spivak unfolds her argument that subaltern cannot speak by pointing the example of widow self-immolation in India. The traditional practice of sati continued to flourish in the colonial India as it was seconded by the patriarchal culture which in fact made it extremely difficult for the subaltern women to oppose the practice. (3)

Karnad is a humanitarian writer. And so we find him to give voice to the silence majority through in his plays. The plays of Karnad present a number of subalterns especially women and lower caste people subjected since ancient time by patriarchy or brahminical class in the society. Karnad has not only presented their subaltern position in the society but also injected energy in their lives so that they can speak for their rights in the society. His writings like *Yayati*, *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Naga Mandala*, *The Fire and the Rain* etc are abundantly exemplified with subaltern issues. The paper is my endeavor to analyze Karnad's handling of the subaltern issue and remedial measures suggested in his plays.

*Yayati*, the first play of Karnad which is based on the mythological background of Yayati in the *Mahabharata* is highly relevant to the socio-psychological study of women. All the subaltern women of Karnad's plays like- Devayani, Sharmistha, Swarnlata and Chitrlekha have been identified as "other", "non-man", as voiceless object in the society. Devayani, the Queen is to endure every kind of humiliation and becomes insane; Swarnlata is tortured by her husband's unfounded doubts of infidelity, accused with insulting tone and finally deserted. Sharmistha is an easy prey of Yayati's sexual need. Though Chitrlekha also faces similar situation, she emerges as a new woman who boldly challenges the decision of Pooru and Yayati. She doesn't allow Pooru to enter into her room:

"I will not let my husband step back into my bedroom

Unless he returns a young man."(Page: Yayati-34)

She represents everything i.e. kingdom and high reputation of Bharat dynasty and wants "room" for herself. She prefers to die rather than yield before traditional conventions. Her death fortells new woman's quest for emancipation.

His play *Bali; The Sacrifice* was first brought out into Karnada in 1980 by the name of *Hittina Hunja*. The Rani casource of the play is an ancient Karnada epic, *Yashodhara Charite*, which itself draws on several other sources. The plot of this play comprise of five

characters - the queen, the King, the Queen – Mother and the Mahout. In this play it is very clear that social standing (caste or class or race) hardly seems to affect the condition of the woman. But we noticed that woman has become bold, assertive and bluntly selfish. The female here voiced through the character of the Queen. Here she openly breaks the patriarchal ideology that woman should be devoted to her husband. We find that she desires for sexual gratification for its own sake and not to produce children. Here the Queen seems to testify that womanhood finds fulfillment in love that happens to be outside marriage why should that be considered wrong? Radha's love for Krishna was such.

Moreover the Mahout, a low – caste, elephant Keeper of the King is always haunted by his inferior birth and ugly looks hence feels alienated in the world. His reaction is a natural outcome of his long subjugation and humiliation: People mock at Mahouts. Call us "low – bor. But where would all your princes and kings be without us, I want to know what would happen to their elephant? No elephants no army. No pomp and splendor. No processions. No Kings! Ha!" (Page-217, Bali: the Sacrifice)

*The Fire and the Rain*, a story taken from the *Mahabharata* (forest canto), the myth of Yavakri. There Parvasu is the eldest son of the great sage Raibhya. For seven long years he has performed the mahayagya to appease the gods and get rains for the draught ridden land. In this play we clearly see how the patriarchal ideology dominates all the classes of the society. So we find that, though Vishakha loves Yavakri, yet she is married to Parvasu. Parvasu for the zeal of power leaves his wife. Vishakha requests him a lot yet he remains unmoved. In the absence of her husband Raiva, her father-in-law tortures her in many ways. But out of these tortures we find a sense of protesting voice against the patriarchy social system.

We find that Karnad poses his women protagonists in such way that appears to challenge patriarchal tradition. It seems that he has revised traditional folk tales and myths as a result we find his heroines enmeshed in the crossroads of tradition. It can be observed through the dialogues between Visakha and Parvasu as:

Visakha : Will you come home once the sacrifice is over? I suppose that would be too human ... But I am sick of silence all right. Then come before you go back. Please, I'll lay myself open to you as a devoted wife.

Parvasu : You want me to kill you? (Page-17, Fire and the Rain)

In this above mentioned conversation, between husband and wife, we find that Visakha reveals her suffering, repression, emotion. And desire, and her lack of power even to communicate all this properly with her husband.

There is another woman named Nittilai who belongs to the lower class community. She is forcefully married to a man who belongs to her own community. She has nothing to say. Nittilai raises voice for her own right and it is her protesting action which has shaken the so called traditional patriarchal social order when she runs away from her husband, for the sake of love. Nittilai's brother and husband chase her like hounds. She is frightened of their evil designs. The Killing of Nittilai endorses still today patriarchy and long established social conventions are strong enough to crush women's liberty or any kind of adventurism.

In *Tale-Danda* all men have voice, presence and power, whereas the female characters are silent, absent and powerless. There is no liberty to female who may voice in the male-constructed society. A large number of women in India remain committed passive, servile and silent, bearing and rearing children and gratifying the sexual needs of their husbands. In this play the woman feels that she is only a namental and she is as a mark of respect and stability in society. The concept of our society regarding woman as daughter, sister, mother and wife are set and woman will have to live only for maintaining such relationships. She has no right to think of herself. Female characters of *Tale –Danda* are docile, shouted at, told to mind their own business or worse still. In case of Rambhavati, we can find that she is a frivolous queen but in reality neither her husband nor her son gives no value to her ideas. Though she does not revolt against her husband nor her son yet she wants a relief from the patriarchal society.

Sovideva's wife is also suffering from lack of love and warm affection of her husband. She is discarded by her husband and is sent to her parents' house. She feels much humiliated. Sovideva wants only to revel in the arms of a prostitute, Indrani. When Sovideva is confused and afraid and is in need of help in the aftermath of the beheading of Madhuvarasa and Haralayya, he is advised to visit his father-in-law for support and bring her queen back. In support Sovideva answers:

"She is our queen after all, frigid bitch though she is." (Page-94)

Thus we find here woman is valued for her functional utility only, not for her intrinsic worth as a human being.

How the woman is treated in a patriarchy society is best found in the play *Naga Mandala*. In this play Rani is a simple, innocent and ignorant girl who is married to Appanna. Her husband is an aged man who does not give time to his newly married wife and left her alone in a room. Rani and Appanna are strangers to each other, as Appanna treats her with contempt, aggression and mistrust. He looks her in the room, and scolds the old lady Kurudavva who attempts to become friendly with Rani. Thus Rani becomes an isolated woman. She, a little helpless diffident girl, gradually becomes a confident and courageous lady. This can be seen when she speaks to Naga:

"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." (Page- 28)

But the discovery of her pregnancy to Appanna brings many cruel oppression on Rani. She is accused of adultery. She is brought before the whole village to prove her chastity by touching the kobra. Rani finds herself alone in this crisis, for the lover as well as the husband fail to provide moral or emotional support. Rani is asked by the man at night, whom she takes to be her husband, to "speak the truth ... what you think is not of any consequence. It must be the truth." The truth for Rani is that she has been faithful to her husband. The conviction comes into the public. The nervous, frightened young girl finds within herself a new courage and confidence and gains social respectability. She emerges triumphant from the public trial, as the snake does not bite her. And finally she gets her dignity.

Thus Girish Karnad has presented the women characters of his plays in such a way which gives us a full-view of the women and their plight. The women are always treating as 'other' in the so called Patriarchal society. They are reduced from humanity to a common animal being who must not have any voice of their own. But some of the women must break the social barrier for their own sake.

#### Works Cited:

- (1) Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* of Antonio Gramsci. Trans. and ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. Chennai: Orient Longman, 2004.
- (2) de Kock, Leon. "Interview With Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa "ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature Archived." *the Wayback Machine*. 23(3) 1992: 29-47. ARIEL
- (3) Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. London: Macmillan, 1988. 271 - 313.

#### Other Books:

- (1) Das, B.K. *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*. (Fifth Edition), New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, Pvt. Ltd. 2007.
- (2) Mukherjee, Tutun, ed. *Girish Karnad's Plays: Performance and Critical Perspectives*. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2006.
- (3) Dharwadker, Aparna Bhargava, ed. *With an Introduction Collected Plays*. Vol. One; *Tughlaq, Hayavadana, Bali: The Sacrifice, Naga-Mandala*. New Delhi: O.U.P., 2005.
- (4) Tripathi, Vanashree. *Three Plays of Girish Karnad: A Study in Poetics and Culture- Hayavadana, Tale-Danda, The Fire and the Rain*. New Delhi: Prestige Book, 2004.
- (5) Nayar, Pramod k. *Literary Theory Today*. New Delhi: Prestige, 2002.
- (6) Pandey, Punam. *The Plays of Girish Karnad: A Study in Existentialism*. New Delhi, Sarup book Publishers Pvt.Ltd.2010.
- (7) Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. (Seventh Edition), Singapore: Thomason Asia. Pvt.