



Amorous Desires of a Devoted Priest in *Flowers*

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Abstract:

Flowers (2005) is a magnum opus of 21st century by legendary playwright Girish Karnad (1938-2019). He is a prolific playwright who has credited with numerous awards like Padma Shri (1974), Padma Bhushan (1992), Sahitya Akademy Award (1994) and the Jnanpith Award (1999) for his contribution to Indian literature in English. Though, his mother tongue is Konkani but he chose to write in Kannada and English. In *Flowers*, Karnad deals with the conflict between amorous love and devotional love of an unnamed priest. The monologue continues to hold the attention of the readers through its aesthetic intensity. However, *Flowers* is not merely an amorous play that displays man-woman relationships in the background of Indian sensibility; it brings forth the spiritual intensity, a complete devotion towards God. Duality of the title can be sensed by the pious offerings of flowers to decorate the linga and the same flowers are used to decorate the naked body of the courtesan. Karnad precisely highlights the sacred and the profane world goes hand in hand with ease. In *Flowers*, Karnad returns to the archetypal world of dramaturgy and focuses on introspective male confessional voice rather than female. He takes the inspiration to write the play from the legend of Veeranna, archaka of the Hidambeshwara temple, who belongs to the Chitradurga region. The monologue became widely known in 1952 when T.R. Subbanna, a kannada writer included it in his swan song novel *Hamsageethe*.

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In *Flowers* Girish Karnad has minutely dissected the inner soul of a devoted priest who being a married man falls in love with a courtesan. Karnad has presented us with a glimpse of the sensuous passion of a simple-minded human being. In the traditional Indian society human beings are still governed by the hidden erotic desires in his heart. Like other Karnad plays, viz. *Yayati*, *Bali-The Sacrifice*, *Nagamandala*, *The Fire and the Rain* and *Broken Images*, *Flowers* too features unlawful affairs. As far as the protagonist priest is concerned, he gets sandwiched between his spiritual and amorous desires. He gets entrapped between his duty and desire. Thus, Karnad uses his creative genius to instil a sense of social consciousness about devotion and reformation among the masses of the contemporary society. Aesthetic sense is another crowning element in the play. The priest decorates the linga and the courtesan's naked and tight body purely on aesthetic reason. In the play, Karnad tries to set a balance between the amorous and the devotional desires of a priest.

The priest introspects from within and blames himself for the sin which he commits by decorating the courtesan's naked body with the pious flowers taken from the linga in the temple. He feels humiliated to think of his dishonest act in his lawful firm devotion towards linga that his wife called his step-wife. He says:

"I spend most of my time with the linga—talking to it, singing to it, even discussing recent political developments, and most of all, decorating it with flowers."² He also feels ashamed of his unlawful love with the Courtesan when "she was bending, holding the *pallu* of her sari spread out in front of her. The upper half of her bosom was uncovered and as I dropped the shells in her sari, I saw the mole. On her left breast, just near the cleavage."³

Karnad skilfully presented the theme of identity crisis when the priest's devotional love sinks into the erotic love which he presented in his other plays like *Hayavadana* where Devadutta and Kapila seems to sink into each other and in *Naga-Mandala* where Apanna seems to sink into the Naga and in *Broken Images* where Manjula seems to sink into the image of Malini on the plasma screen. Karnad also presented a glimpse of middle class man who lives in a joint family and suppresses his hidden amorous desires for the sake of his family. He beautifully portrays the husband-wife relationship in a patriarchal family where the priest lives with his two children and aged parents.

A marvellous contrast has been presented by Girish Karnad in terms of two different feminine characters—the priest's wife and the courtesan. The two are pole apart in terms of social reputation, liberty, thoughts, responsibilities, homely atmosphere and living standard. The priest's wife is always ready to offer her services for the family and never pay attention on her looks. The priest observes her tiredness at one occasion and says: "She lay there like a wet rag, mouth half open, all excitement for life drained out of her, exhaustion oozing out from every limb. I couldn't remember how long it had been since I had seen her sleeping. She looked so much in need of rest that I didn't have the heart to wake her up, so I came back to continue my vigil on this step."⁴ On the other hand the priest says about the courtesan's body as: "I had to use all my ingenuity in devising a filigree that could stay snug against the curvature of her hips.... Her breasts were firm and tight."⁵ The priest further says: "I had never seen a woman completely naked... my wife covered herself with a sari even when she bathed. On the days I wanted her, I would give her a look she had come to recognize and late at night when everyone was fast asleep, she would crawl up to my room for a furtive scuffle in bed which demanded the minimum of uncovering."⁶ Contrary to it this desire is openly expressed by the courtesan without any hesitation but the priest's wife would prefer to die than to be seen naked even by herself.

The creative carpenter, Girish Karnad, says that writing a play is like building a house and it is an individual activity of a playwright. Every playwright has his own method to write a play. Even if the theme is same different playwrights treat it differently. So he precisely chose the theme of transformation of spiritual desires of a devoted priest into amorous desires. In the end, priest's heart filled with guilty of his act. With a humiliating heart he communicates with God as:

"I am guilty of gross dereliction, of sacrilege. Guilty of cruelty to the two women I loved. Why then should God cast His vote on my behalf? Because I loved Him? Has God the right to mock justice in favour of love for Him? Or does He has a different logic? If He does, it's not fair that He should expect me to abide by it, not demanding to know what that logic is. Such Grace is condescension evn it comes from God. Why am I worthy of this burden He hass placed on my shoulders? I refuse to bear it. God must understand I simply cannot live on His terms."⁷

At the end of the play the priest commits suicide by saying: “ As a boy, I used to shove my head into the hollow to test how long I could hold my breath. I shall do so again now, but not to test my lungs. I shall seek in the narrow confines of that hollow the answers that God has denied me.”⁸

Work Cited:

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3. Ibid. 245.
4. Ibid. 253
5. Ibid. 249
6. Ibid.248-249
7. Ibid.260
8. Ibid. 260

