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Dr. Shylaja S
Principal, Government First
Grade College Peenya,
Bengaluru, Karnataka, India

Rewriting myths/ Recreating women an analysis of Karnad's women characters

Dr. Shylaja S

Abstract

Girish Karnad is one of those playwrights who re-narrates myths and folk tales and attends to focus on women characters. He makes an attempt to subvert the women characters but evades the significant transformation. Therefore, one is left with the question why recreate myths when it becomes a replica of the past. In this paper, I have focussed on Girish Karnad's plays.

Keywords: Patriarchy, past, transformation

Introduction

The prolonged speech of the Sutradhara meanders through the river of life without actually getting into the bottom of it. Karnad's glimpse of life is restricted to the vantage point of the bank of the river. The Sutradhara merely wants to see his reflection which according to him can assist him in unravelling the mysteries hidden beneath the flowing water. He goes on to talk about an individual's existential responsibility of making the right choice.

The playwright through Sutradhara talks about the transformations affected by an individual's perception of old legends from the present view point, but at the same time Sutradhara very cleverly evades or transports the action to the shoulders of the characters in the play. For him, it's the invincible fate which decides the outcome where as all of us are confronted with a crisscross of cross roads. Now, the all important question is, in what way has the playwright through his refracted vision brought transformation in the depiction of the mythical women characters and how effective it is in the present context.

Karnad not only re-narrates the myths and folk tales but also creates new characters like Chitralekha and Swarnalatha in the play Yayathi. He also makes an attempt to present the women characters in the new light. But one wonders at the conclusion of the plays where the women characters much to the surprise of the readers either take a decision to end their lives or they left with no hope.

The portrayal of the women characters begin with assertion but end in submission to either fate or male dominance. Then, just like the Sutradhara's words are woman and her sexuality and her inner strength have been comprehended only at the peripheral level devoid of cohesion. Or has the playwright made use of women characters in order to make the ultimate message about humanity in general a bit more attractive? I am reminded of a dialogue in Vijay Tendulkar's play Silence The court is in session where one of the characters called Sukhatme says while in the process of making Benare the woman character as the Victim for the trial session.

"There is not much difference between one trial and the other. But when there is a woman in the dock, the case does have a different complexion."

Well whatever may be the reason Karnad does make an attempt to subvert the traditional image of women.

Basically his plays deal with the conflicts of making the right choice.

Traditionally, women are expected to unquestioningly accept the choice made for her by the patriarchal society. But Karnad inverts this image of a traditional passive receptor and individual thinking to the women of folk tales and classical myths. He attempts to foreground the relegated voices which are never at the centre of the myths.

Even though the play Yayathi is about the king Yayathi it is the women characters and their voices which strike the readers. Actually, the play is not so much about Yayathi or Purau as

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Shylaja S
Principal, Government First
Grade College Peenya
Bengaluru, Karnataka, India

much as it is about Devayani Sharmishte and the newly created characters Chitrlekha and Swarnalatha. The characters Devayani and Sharmishte very boldly discuss and debate over their sexual attraction towards Yayathi. In fact they come alive right out of the myth as real women with individualistic selves. Initially all these women characters seem to be making a bold attempt to deflect the male norms.

Devayani fumes with anger and jealousy, Sharmishte expresses her frustration over her meaningless position in the palace of Yayathi. Mere expression doesn't satiate her and she acquiesces her sexual desire for Yayathi by forcing him into a physical relationship. Devayani defies all the customs of a queen and quits the palace to meet her father. The most powerful character of the play is Chitrlekha who questions her father-in-law about her husband's youth and makes a very unconventional demand which shocks Yayathi. But one who celebrates the present and doesn't attach much significance to the future mentioned by Yayathi, and one who vehemently negates the act of masking oneself with reason and logic camouflaging all the natural instincts, is made to take her life which remains unconvincing. All the women characters in the play are left in the lurch as Sharmishte sarcastically throws a comment on Yayathi's ambition

"Here is the foundation of your bright future one has turned into a ghost, the other has gone mad and yet another is a fallen woman."

What happened to the tall claims of transformation and the matter of choice made by the Sutradhara. By shifting the responsibility to one's destiny or fate is the author also slipping away from justifying the challenging, daring queries and doubts expressed by the women characters? or the question raised at the end also doesn't come to the rescue of the playwright. The readers are also left with the unanswered haunting question "what is the meaning of all this? Oh! God what is the meaning of all this?" Is Chitrlekha introduced only to enlighten Puru or Yayathi? Did Devayani and Sharmishte voice their innermost feelings only to drown them all under their predestined fate? This unfilled gap between their speech and their action speaks volumes about the Sutradhara remaining forever on the periphery and not taking a dip deep into the crevices of the mind of a woman.

Similarly Padmini in the play Hayavadana a recreation of a story from Kathasarithsagara, emerges as an independent individual actively responding to her impulses and not caring for the society and its strictures. She desires a fine combination of intelligence and physical strength in a man. Her uninhibited nature is reflected in the female chorus.

"Why should love stick to the sap of a single body? Ahead for each breast. A pupil for each eye. Aside for each arm. I have neither shame nor regret".

Further Padmini creates what she wants by transposing the heads of Devadatta and Kapila. But at the end she hesitates to take a decision to live with both of them and becomes the cause of their death and not only that she also ends her life. Is death the only solution to the women who exercise their right to choice? Why do the progressive steps of women characters end in retrogression? Why are the voices muffled even before they are heard? Andrea Nye in her article "The voice of the serpent : French feminism and philosophy of language".

"Is there a feminine language that confounds the semantics and syntax historically implicated in the denigration of women? Can the serpent whispering to Eve, in the sweet sinuous words of desire, succeed in communicating a meaning outside Yahu's orders? Can the serpent's speaking ever challenge the power of Yahu? Must the voice of the serpent always become the rejected obscenity trod under foot?"

Therefore, women trying to speak beyond the meta-language dominated by men hardly get any active listeners. This is proved again in the play Rain And Fire where Vishaka's protests, her indulgence with Yavakri her lover, speaks of her strong mind, but at the end of the play she simply retires into her hut of silence where she is left with loneliness. Nittile the bold assertive tribal girl meets her tragic end by the axe of patriarchy.

Queen Amirtha mathi is forced to kill the Dough cock to purify her sinful deed that is her illegal union with Ashtavanka, in the play Bali The sacrifice. Queen Amrithamathi's dialogues in the play resound with a woman's innermost desires and her non-acquiescence to certain established norms. She says

"A king can wage wars, give justice, rule the kingdom, but a queen has to birth to a son. Her whole existence is meant for progeny. I was constantly being watched by the citizens of this kingdom. What else could I do?" and she further justifies her union with the mahout and she never thinks it is a sin. She says

"That moment.... that moment is enough for me... That isn't sin, it is a blessing.... blessing from somewhere...if I agree to sacrifice the Dough cock it is like buying that moment alive.... I'd rather not commit that sin"

She is made to pay a price for all her candid talk. She is tortured by her husband. Even though, she removes her hand from the handle of the killing sword, the sharp edged patriarchal sword forces her to lose her wit.

Again in the play Nagamadala Rani is forced into conformity as she is made to continue to live with her legally wedded husband but with the eternal memory of the snake disguised as Nagappa. Rani's relationship with the snake finally gains social sanction only when she conforms to her legal marriage. Her willingness or her desires are all suppressed or drowned under the dominating societal norms. Does Rani's character only serve as an agent force in order to demonstrate the extent of patriarchy? From time immemorial woman's story has been used as a magnetic tool to attract the attention but has never been told as an attempt to draw curtains on the perpetuating gender politics.

Conclusion

Then, one is forced to ask the pertinent questions, is rewriting myths and recreating women an act of just repeating the past without any significant transformation in the status of women? I would like to conclude by quoting Helene Cixous.

"The future must no longer be determined by the past. I do not deny that the effects the past are still with us. But I do not deny that the effects of the past are still with us. But I refuse to strengthen them by repeating them, to confer upon them an irremovability the equivalent of destiny, to confuse the biological and the cultural. Anticipation is imperative."

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