



The Grammar of Desire: Linguistic Construction of Feminine Identity in Karnad's Plays

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Abstract

This paper aims at exploring the construction of feminine identity in the works of Girish Karnad his plays, namely, *Bali: The Sacrifice*, *Hayavadana*, *Taledanda*, *The Fire and the Rain*, *Tuglaq* and *Naga-Mandala* from the perspective of "grammar of desire". Beyond the feminist approaches that have been defined mostly by representation and agency, the study examines the ways language, discourse, structure of narration and performative speech acts construct women's subjectivities within socio-cultural and patriarchal discourses. The paper draws on theories of linguistic subjectivity, gender performativity and post-colonial feminism to examine how desire is articulated, regulated, silenced and transformed through speech, silence, myth and symbol.

The chosen plays demonstrate that the feminine is not preformed but is a process and a struggle, a construct that is created in and through language and culture. Through storytelling and mythic reinvention in *Naga-Mandala*, Padmini's desires question the normative in gender and embodiment in *Hayavadana*, while the sacrificial in *Bali* is exposed as a discipline of female agency and the intersection of language, caste and gender in social life in *Taledanda*. In these dramatic narratives, Karnad takes up mythological and historical themes and highlights the conflict between individual appetites and social expectations.

This study contends that Karnad's dramaturgy opens up alternate discursive spaces for women's negotiation of their identities beyond patriarchal prescriptions. The paper examines the interplay of language, desires and subject formation in Karnad's plays, showing how they disrupt essentialist

notions of femininity and expose the performative nature of the gendered subject. The study is one of the valuable additions to the ongoing debates on gender and language in Indian literature with emphasis on the centrality of linguistic practices in the production of feminine subjectivity in postcolonial cultural context.

Keywords: Girish Karnad, feminine identity, grammar of desire, linguistic subjectivity, gender and language, Indian mythology, postcolonial feminism, performative identity.

1. The Patriarchy of Dissent: *Bali: The Sacrifice, Taledanda and Caste.*

Language has increasingly become a focus for discussion of "feminine identity" as it does not simply convey gendered identity, but as a space where gendered subjectivities are produced, negotiated and contested. This idea of a linguistic construction of feminine identity focuses on the role of the socio-cultural discourses that surround women's desires, silences, speech patterns, and acts of resistance. Patriarchy can limit women's agency in the Indian context, as it can control the language in which women express their experiences. The *Bali: The Sacrifice* by Girish Karnad offers an important context in which to consider this dynamic. The play's character also portrays women who live in a complicated zone between submission and dissent, and the possibility of what could be called the patriarchy of dissent: resisting on the inside of patriarchy systems, in effect. In dialogue, symbol and myth-making, Karnad reveals how desire, duty and social expectations are in conflict, showing how feminine identity is constructed, constrained and re-imagined in the discourse of the patriarchy.

Karnad's work, *Death by Beheading (Taledanda)* is a play discussing the social revolution of the twelfth century in the Veerashaiva community in Karnataka that took place around the philosopher-poet Basavanna, and provides one of the most extended studies of the relationship between caste and gender and linguistic permission. The tragedy of the

play is the tragic repercussions of Basavanna trying to establish an egalitarian society by inter-caste marrying the daughter of Sheelavantha and the son of Haralayya, a project which eventually does not work, with disastrous violence.

The women of Taledanda live at the periphery of a linguistic revolution which they are not entirely capable of sharing even in the supposedly reformist community of the Veerashaivas. *Vacanas* (lyric poems) of female saints such as Akkamahadevi are mentioned as the predecessors of the female spiritual independence but still the social order of the village is limiting the real speech of women. The women of the lower castes, the royal women and the mother of Basavanna are all dealt with in different ways but with quite similar forms of enforced silence, which are not prohibited expressly but rather by the thickness of convention, expectation and the fear of punishment.

What is important to note is that silence here is simply not the lack of speech but a violent repression of an alternative linguistic order which is Karnad. The *vachanas* themselves, recited by women in spiritual ecstasy, without having to pass through the monopoly of the Brahminical tradition, of Sanskrit, are exactly such an alternative order. By enacting the divide between the liberatory thrust of this linguistic culture and its successful incarceration by the patriarchal social structure, Karnad is prescribing a failure of partial reform.

2. Myth, Narrating, and the Feminine Counter-Narrative.

Storytelling as Subversive Act: Karnad offers numerous insights into the challenges present in today's world and provides a lot of insights into the issues that currently exist in the world. Probably one of the most characteristic tricks Karnad uses is the embedded storytelling, when Karnad uses embedded stories as told by the women characters in the bigger dramatic structure as a form of subversive self-expression. It is in the form of a narrative that *Naga-Mandala* consists; the old woman who is conversant with the tale of Rani has been given it by the very flames to which she feeds, beings of heard utterance. It is a most self-conscious dramatization of the ways in which the marginalized knowledges, or those knowledges that are those of women, survive and move in the non-official ways.

The ultimate narration of Rani at the end of the play is among the most shocking in the Indian drama. She is both telling and lying, confessing and hiding when she narrates to the gathered society the tale of her affair with the snake as a means of demonstrating her faithfulness (a tale which she knows will be interpreted as an expression of divine chastity instead of being accepted as the reality of erotic desire). She tells the truth in every detail, but a false interpretation. That is the state of feminine counter-narrative in a world where the sexual experience of women cannot be directly expressed: the truth needs to be told in a voice that will make it acceptable to the audience.

The political consequences of this strategy are overwhelming. The story of Rani does not free her; it rewrites her in the same order of wifely virtuousness that she was supposed to represent. However, it does so in her own key, with the means of her own experience, and it saves her life, and gives her a kind of social strength (as the 'virtuous wife' to whom a god has spoken) which she lacked before. It is not feminist victory, but survival under extremely

limited circumstances, and Karnad has no false pretenses.

3. The Mythology of Female Desire: *Hayavadana*.

Adapted by Karnad as *The Transposed Heads* (adapted by Thomas Mann himself as an adaptation of an ancient Sanskrit story, in turn), *Hayavadana* is perhaps his longest and most sustained work on the subject of female desire and its connection to word and self. The dilemma faced by Padmini who is in love with both the Devadatta and Kapila by their mind and body respectively is not just an erotic problem; but a dilemma of feminine articulation in a symbolic order that cannot allow women to have composite, conflicting desires.

The well-known conclusion of the play, where the reversed heads slowly return to the bodies, making the principle that mind (identified with the intellectual sophistication of Devadatta), and body (identified with the physical energy of Kapila), are two distinct aspects of personhood, unstable, has been interpreted in a variety of theoretical ways. Under the understanding of feminine language, the most notable is that the desire of Padmini is constantly brought to play in performance, movement, and song instead of being stated outright.

The passion of Padmini is too big to be expressed in words. She is unable to say I love both men, in different streams, in different things about my being, because it is not a recognizable statement in her social world. Rather, she practices this desire with gesture, with the ambiguity of her physical interest in both men, with the non-verbal actions of longing which are offered to her by the traditional theatrical idiom of Yakshagana.

It is the last linguistic act that Padmini makes when she makes her son a doll, a doll that she models in a way that it has both a mind and a body. She cannot articulate her situation because it is impossible to do so in words and

so, she forms a tangible item that represents it. It is a type of feminine speech that does not involve verbal communication at all, and yet it speaks to the audience with unparalleled accuracy, at least in the context of the play. The doll is a memorial and a manifesto; the dogma of the political demand that the social order cannot digest.

4. Transgressive Speech: Longing, Power, and Violation of Taboo.

4.1 *The Voice of the Forbidden: Eroticism and Social Order.*

The women characters created by Karnad, without exception, are characterized by what they cannot say. The most banished of feminine voices in his plays is the erotic voice, the literal expression of female desire. When the women violate this ban, the result is always disastrous, not due to the illegitimacy of the desire, but due to the fact that the social order is unable to accommodate it.

Vishakha, a character of the Mahabharata episode The Fire and the Rain (adapted after the Bhagavata Purana version of the story Yavakri and Parvasu) is placed in a linguistically vulnerable situation. Wedded to Parvasu, absent, absorbed in his spiritual ambition, and ultimately able to commit murder, she has no legal means of working out her yearning, her fear or her moral reason. She is encoding female speech as perilous, disrupting, and ultimately deadly when she utters her desire and her doubt in a dramatic structure that has already coded female speech.

It is not only the verbotenness of the society that destroys the love of Arvasu towards her, and the potential of a world where equals can bring forth desire, but also the theatrical form itself, which Karnad inherits as the Sanskrit tradition. Meditating on this heritage, the play adheres to the lines of the narration of the history of the women who speak desire: it is always the history of the punishment of that speech. Karnad does not just repeat this punishment, he makes it tragedy, a breakdown

of the social order but not the direct effect of the crime.

4.2 *Akkamahadevi and the Tradition of Mystic Speech.*

His work with the Veerashaiva tradition of Taledanda puts Karnad into dialogue with one of the most remarkable traditions of feminine transgressive speech in India: the vacanas of the female saints, most especially Akkamahadevi (12 th century CE). The vacanas of Akkamahadevi, which she sang, in protest of her marriage to the king, and in ecstatic devotion to her lord Chennamallikarjuna, is one type of speech that explicitly rejects the norms of speech in a patriarchal context. She gives her desire its name, her rejection its name, the connection of her flesh with the divine its language in a language of heart-breaking directness.

Karnad does not make Akkamahadevi a character in Taledanda, but her presence lingers over the play like a precedent a demonstration of what feminine speech can do when properly aligned with the power of spirituality and free of social restrictions. The women who are represented in the play are gauged in relation to this missing norm: they can never bring themselves to such total disengagement with social norms as the vacanas of Akkamahadevi, and the failure to do so is an index of the social restraints under which they are placed.

The difference between the mystic speech of Akkamahadevi and the confined speech of the women of Taledanda sheds light on a key paradox of Karnad handling of feminine speech, namely, that the most radical feminine speech in Indian literary history was made possible by virtue of its identification with devotional practice, by the fact that it was justified by the fact that it was in claim to divine power and thus it was not under the normal range of patriarchal authority. Women who talk without this divine permission are subject to the entire social punishment.

5. The Language of the Body: Performance, Gesture and Corporeal Speech.

5.1 Theatrical Idiom of the Body in Theatrical Karnad.

The body per se in Karnad plays has a definite linguistic power due to the use of traditional theatrical forms, especially the masked performance tradition of coastal Karnataka. In Yakshagana, just like in the Sanskrit Natya tradition it owes some of its origin to, body is a system of signs: mudras (hand gestures), footwork, eye movement, and facial expression are a precisely coded vocabulary that supports, and even replaces verbal speech in some cases.

In the case of women characters of this theatrical idiom, the expressive power that the body has is both emancipating and inhibiting. On the one hand, it offers a medium of communication that circumvents the social mechanisms that govern verbal speech a woman who cannot say what she wants can do it by a gesture that will be read accurately by the audience when the other characters on stage will not. However, conversely, the body is also the place where the most personal types of social control are practiced: modest standards, marriage rituals, caste prohibitions of contact, all of them are printed on the female body and restrict its freedom of expression.

The reincarnation of the body of Rani during the sorties of the Snake, or, to put it differently, her physical awakening, her new status towards her own body, is one of the most important narrative events in *Naga-Mandala* which cannot be told, but only acted. The audience realizes there has been a prior event in the body of Rani prior to her utterance of it, since the theatrical idiom offers us the vocabulary of physical transformation prior to the verbal recognition.

The sixth chapter is titled Ritual Performance and the Claim of Sacred Authority by the Female Body.

Some of the plays by Karnad are based on ritual performances where the bodies of women become the tool of communicating with deities. The background of *Naga-Mandala* and the fire ritual in *The Fire and the Rain* establish a situation where the normal social prohibitions of the female body are put on hold by the assertion of the sacred authority.

In this case, possession as a speech mode is especially important. The authorized speech of the possessed woman is never fully hers she is the mouthpiece of a greater authority and this deprivation of agency is ironically what allows her to move into a kind of oratory which the woman as a social creature could not have approached. The community not only tolerates but also encourages speech on the part of a possessed woman which it would repress had she spoken in her own person. This is a very ambivalent feminine power: this power relies on the silence of the voice of a particular woman even though it allows her body to present itself.

The plays of Karnad are very conscious of this ambivalence. The ritual possession does not get valorized by him as feminist empowerment but rather critically as a social technology that both empowers and limits feminine speech that allows space to say what cannot be otherwise said and provides that what can be said is not subjected to social scrutiny.

6. Women and the Language of power Queens, Advisors, and the Political voice.

6.1 Tughlaq and the Female Interlocutor who is Not There.

The first big play to be written by Karnad but it remains to date one of the most politically advanced plays by him is *Tughlaq* whose notable feature is the near total absence of women characters in the political world of the work. The historical Muhammad bin Tughlaq, whose multifaceted, far-sighted and ultimately disastrous rule the material of the play is furnished by, worked in an atmosphere of court culture wherein the excluded speech of women on politics is structurally disenfranchised.

Karnad re-creates this exclusion--but by doing so creates it visible as an exclusion, as a constitutive absence and not a natural state.

Women, who are few in Tughlaq, such as the mother of Tughlaq, women of court, are characterized by their connection to men whose political ambitions take up the play. There is the language of the inner advisor, of the inner love, of the warning and of the counsel, the very language which women of the *zanana* (the female quarters) possess, who have an access to the political, but have no political voice or expression. The only person who addresses Tughlaq with any real authority is, perhaps, his mother, whose authority is that of the domestic, of the personal, of the female, but not of the political.

The fact that Karnad does not allow women to be included in the political discussion of Tughlaq is a truth of historical nature, but it is also true of the way the postcolonial Indian politics is organized. Written in 1964, following the first ten years of Indian independence, the meditation on the failure of political vision by Tughlaq, cannot be studied independent of the meditation on the exclusion of half the population by the language of political power.

6.2 *The Queen Voice: Rani in Naga-Mandala and Agency in Constraint.*

Whereas Tughlaq is the symbolism of women deleted in political speech almost entirely, *Naga-Mandala* is a more subtle look at agency in constraint. Rani is not a political actor, by any obvious definition but her last act, her testifying publicly about her relationship with the snake is an extraordinarily political act, in the sense that it bargains the conditions of her social life on a social stage and reaches a strategic result through the employment of a very fine-tuned story.

What Rani does with her narration is not the breaking of the patriarchal and patriarchies but a repositioning of her in them. By presenting her sexual encounter as a divine act she achieves the status of a woman of exceptional virtue, by

uttering a truth that gets treated as a sacred myth and not a social transgression she gains the respect of the community instead of the punitive one. It is not a radical political speech, it is a strategizing of the available discursive materials to have the best possible result under radically constrained conditions.

Feminist critics have argued that this is either a win to Rani or an additional patriarchal imprint. Both readings are possible in the play. The one thing that cannot be doubted is that Karnad is concerned with the circumstances in which the feminine speech can be made intelligible and consequential: it needs to move in the existing structures of myths, divinity, and social convention, whereas the content of the feminine speech lies beyond the structure and surpasses it.

7. **Caste, Intersectional Subaltern Voice, and Language.**

There is no way to separate the treatment of feminine language by Karnad with his continuing concern with the issue of caste as a factor determining the right to speak. Gender and caste intersect to create a language permission hierarchy that is more intricate and more vicious than either.

In Taledanda, the marriageable women of the lower classes Haralayya family and his son are doubly silenced: not only by gender expectations on women and speech, but also by the added stigma of caste pollution. Even the Brahmin females of the upper classes have their share of restraint, but they are restrained as the servant of the privilege, that the purity and social stature of a caste in which they must be subservient to reproduction and housewifery be maintained. The woman in the lower caste has to contend not only with gender silence but with further dehumanization, the fact that she is regarded as virtually speechless by the upper caste.

The most effective answer to this intersectional silencing that Karnad gives is the dramatization of the tradition of *vacanas*. The

vacanas, spread among all Veerashaiva and caste-independent and caste-gender based speech restrictions suspended in favor of a common lingual devotion, are exactly an attempt at establishing a spoken common or lingual commons. What is so sad about Taledanda is that this project failed: the vacanas could not, alone, bring down the social institutions that had given rise to the silencing they desired to defeat.

The analysis has an important implication on postcolonial studies and politics of representation. Karnad does not bring consoling words. He does not insinuate that the rediscovery of the muted feminine voices can be a question of listening more attentively or talking more loudly. According to him, the circumstances in which the feminine speech is made legible are in their turn organized by power relations that cannot be changed easily. The vacanas are beautiful, radical; they are inadequate, since the social world where they are uttered do not share their assumptions of the equality of all speakers in humanity.

8. Karnad Dramaturgy of Feminine Language: Formal Analysis.

8.1 *Frame Narrative Framework as Feminist Machine.*

A number of plays by Karnad use frame narratives-stories within stories, theatrical layers in which alternative levels of diegesis are digested, as a technique to structure the play which has certain consequences in the way that feminine speech is represented. The furthest frame (the playwright who is unable to sleep, the flames of an oil lamp) in *Naga-Mandala* is replaced by an inner frame (the flames talking about their situation) which is, in turn, replaced by the story about Rani and the snake. This stratification would mean that the story about Rani is mediated by numerous female voices of narratives before the audience can reach it.

This official decision is politically specific: it requires that women narratives circulate among women, that they be maintained and

passed within the female networks of narrative that are operating beneath the scanners of the official culture. The fires are fringe benefits, who owe their presence in this world to the good grace of those who bring them oil; but they are the bailiffs to tales the official world need not or will not know. Karnad exposes the informality of feminine knowledge and gossip, the whisper, the tale in firelight, as a kind of counter-archival practice.

8.2 *The Mask and the Voice: Convention of Performance and Feminine Agency.*

The masking in *Hayavadana*, appropriated by Karnad, is a curious dislocation of face and voice, based on the Yakshagana tradition. The masked actors are limited to expression solely by gesture and movement since the mask is a standardized face with which they have to construct their body language. Such a displacement of expression to the body is especially important to Padmini whose wish is none other than the wish of a compound wholeness- mind and body in one- which the mask tradition practices and deprives.

It is ironical: of a theatrical tradition in which masks are used to signify types, but not individuals, the urge to achieve individual wholeness (to become fully a man, to unite intellectual beauty and physical vitality) of Padmini is represented in a performative idiom which desystematically depersonalises. The mask is a mask of desire, in the very form of individual denial. That tension is not resolved: this is a productive contradiction, which adds depth to the exploration of the issue of feminine agency in the context of cultural constraint in the play.

The half-human figure of *Hayavadana* himself, the horse-man who wants to be fully-human, is an image displaced of his own state, the state of Padmini herself: she is also the partially-human one whose desires in their full extent are not accepted by the social world in which she lives. His search of wholeness is similar to hers, except that he attains an ironic

fulfillment (becoming a complete horse and not a complete human) that darkly remarks on the options that exist to characters who transcend the categories into which they belong.

9. Feminine Language of the Postcolonial Politics of Karnad.

The career of Karnad was matched with the initial decades of the Indian independence; his plays are highly involved into the project of a question of what sort of nation India is and what it ought to be. The feminine linguistic politics of his play cannot be detached by this bigger postcolonial agenda: who speaks, in what tongue, with what authority are not simply individual but a national one.

The reconstruction and dramatization of local folk traditions Yakshagana, Bhuta Kola, the vacanas is a political action in itself in the politics of postcolonial culture. This was the repression or relegation of these traditions by the mixture of colonial scorn and Brahminical normativity of the upper caste; to have set them in the center of a complex intellectual drama was to assert their legitimate status as carriers of true cultural intelligence. And these traditions provided women with performative and expressive forms of power which were denied them by the overwhelming order.

Meanwhile, Karnad is a critical and not a nostalgic postcolonialist. The folk traditions that he uses are not romanticized. He demonstrates their inner contradictions, their achievement with caste order, their restrictions as means of true liberation. The Bhuta Kola tradition can somehow empower the woman body with some sort of divine authority, however, it does not criticize the circumstances in which the woman body is regulated in other ways. The vacanas can establish a linguistic common across caste boundaries, but cannot alone destroy the social arrangements which generate those boundaries.

It is this critical consciousness that makes the drama written by Karnad so intellectual in

nature and so relevant even today. It is not the simple tale of oppression and liberation he provides, it is a multifaceted account of the circumstances in which liberation is and is not, the tragic price of social forms incapable of containing the full gamut of human desire and expression.

10. Conclusion

The Politics of the Unspeakable.

The play of Girish Karnad is one of the most elaborate interactions with feminine language in the Indian drama. His female characters are not victimized by mere silence or heroines in straightforward liberation. They are actors in extremely limited circumstances, using the few but actual resources at their disposal: silence as dignity, storytelling as counter-narrative, the body as expressive medium, ritual performance as sacred authority, myth as strategic cover to maintain their subjectivity and sometimes to change their social circumstances.

It is, after all, the politics of the possible in the impossible which are the politics of feminine language in the plays of Karnad. His women are unable to speak the ways they cannot speak, they can speak anyway, in tones that go beyond where they are supposed to be held, in terms where the rest of the actors are not heard, and in intonation where the audience hears the actors, even when they are not. The distance between what is said and what is heard, what is done and what is perceived is the distance in which the criticism of patriarchal and caste based social orders of Karnad are expressed.

To South Asian literature practitioners, performance scholars, feminist thinkers, and postcolonial scholars, the drama of Karnad presents an unsurpassed collection of representational practices of approaching feminine language politics. There is never emptiness in his silences; they are filled with the tension of everything that cannot be said, and in that tension is the prospective promise of a more just linguistic order--and in that prospective promise is the frustration.

The Speechless woman can be the most politically active character on stage in the dramatic universe created by Karnad. It is not her lack of speech but rather her presence: the presence of all that the social structure has pronounced unspeakable, kept in its impeccable integrity in the indestructible interior of a selfhood that has resisted by remaining unwholly translated into the language the world offers.

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