

## A WOMANIST STUDY OF GIRISH KARNAD'S SELECTED PLAYS

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### Abstract

Modern Indian theatre in English and translation witnessed a significant transformation in the latter half of the twentieth century, and Girish Karnad stands at its forefront. His dramaturgy engages myth, folklore, and history not merely as aesthetic devices but as critical frameworks to interrogate contemporary social realities. Although Karnad does not explicitly position himself as a feminist playwright, his works reveal deep sensitivity toward women's marginalization and their quest for identity within patriarchal structures.

### Introduction

Womanism, a term coined by Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, describes a framework attentive to women's lived realities, particularly in contexts shaped by intersecting oppressions (Walker xi). While Walker's formulation arises from African American experience, its emphasis on cultural rootedness and survival makes it adaptable to Indian contexts where gender intersects with caste, tradition, and morality. A womanist study of Karnad therefore uncovers how his plays dramatize female desire, confinement, resistance, and transformation.

Womanism differs from mainstream Western feminism in its insistence on community, cultural memory, and the coexistence of critique and tradition. Karnad's dramaturgy is particularly suited to such analysis because his plays do not reject tradition outright; instead, they interrogate it from within.

In Karnad's theatre, women are rarely simplistic victims. They are complex figures navigating structures that constrain them. Through

symbolic devices, folk performance techniques, and layered narrative frames, Karnad constructs what may be termed a womanist dramaturgy—one that acknowledges women's agency while exposing systemic limitations.

In *Hayavadana*, Karnad adapts a tale from the *Kathasaritsagara* to explore identity and incompleteness. At the center of the play stands Padmini, whose desires destabilize male friendship and patriarchal stability.

Padmini openly admires Kapila's physicality:

"What a body! Such powerful shoulders! If only Devadatta had a body like that!" (Karnad, *Hayavadana* 23).

Her expression of desire is radical within a cultural framework that idealizes female chastity and passivity. Padmini refuses to confine herself to the role of the dutiful wife. Yet her agency exists within limits. After the heads of Devadatta and Kapila are transposed, she articulates the impossibility of fulfillment:

"I wanted Devadatta's head and Kapila's body. I got it. Now what?" (48).

This line reveals the tragic irony of desire within patriarchal binaries. Womanist reading highlights how Padmini's longing for completeness exposes male-centered notions of identity. The men debate philosophical questions of selfhood, but it is Padmini whose emotional and bodily existence becomes the battleground.

Ultimately, Padmini chooses self-immolation:

"I cannot live in this confusion. Let me die as a faithful wife" (62).

Her death demonstrates the cultural script available to women who transgress norms. Yet Karnad does not portray her as immoral; instead, he reveals the rigidity of social structures that

cannot accommodate female complexity.

Naga-Mandala presents one of Karnad's most overtly woman-centered narratives. Rani, a young bride, is trapped in a loveless marriage. Appanna visits her only at night and confines her during the day. She laments:

"He comes like a stranger in the night and leaves before dawn.

Am I a wife or a prisoner?" (Karnad, *Three Plays* 233).

This statement captures the condition of marital isolation. Rani's transformation begins when a cobra (Naga) assumes her husband's form and offers her affection and intimacy. Through this supernatural device, Karnad critiques marital patriarchy and legitimizes female desire.

During the public trial by ordeal, Rani asserts:

"I have known no man other than my husband. This cobra is witness to my truth" (262).

The ambiguity of her "truth" challenges patriarchal definitions of chastity. Unlike Padmini, Rani survives and gains social acceptance. A womanist reading interprets this survival not as submission but as strategic negotiation. Rani reclaims narrative authority, and the storytelling frame—voices of flames narrating the tale—foregrounds feminine oral tradition as a site of resistance.

Tughlaq is often read as a political allegory, yet its gender dynamics are equally revealing. Women are largely absent from political discourse, symbolizing historical marginalization. The chaos unleashed by Tughlaq's ambition creates suffering that remains unvoiced by women within the text.

The Old Man's lament, "Prayer, justice, reason — all are dead" (Tughlaq 38), reflects the collapse of moral order. A womanist reading observes that the absence of female voices becomes a powerful comment on patriarchal historiography. Karnad subtly critiques how grand political narratives erase domestic and

feminine perspectives.

Karnad's dramaturgy does not provide overt revolutionary solutions. Instead, it presents layered narratives where women negotiate survival within cultural frameworks. His use of myth creates critical distance, enabling audiences to confront uncomfortable realities without didacticism. In *Hayavadana*, female desire disrupts philosophical idealism.

In *Naga-Mandala*, storytelling becomes a space of empowerment.

In *Tughlaq*, absence itself becomes commentary. Womanist analysis reveals that Karnad's women embody resilience rather than simplistic rebellion. They expose the cracks within patriarchy while remaining rooted in cultural memory.

A womanist study of Girish Karnad's selected plays demonstrates that his dramaturgy consistently foregrounds women's experiences within layered systems of power. Whether through Padmini's fragmented longing, Rani's transformative assertion, or the silences embedded in *Tughlaq*, Karnad interrogates patriarchal structures embedded in myth and history.

His theatre does not romanticize resistance; rather, it presents nuanced portrayals of negotiation, endurance, and constrained agency. By situating women at the center of existential and moral dilemmas, Karnad contributes significantly to gender discourse in modern Indian drama.

Through a womanist lens, Karnad emerges not merely as a mythic dramatist but as a profound interpreter of women's lived realities within Indian cultural contexts.

## References

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