

Feminist Concerns in Girish Karnad's *Wedding Album*

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Abstract – Male subjugation, confined identity, and unpaid labour have been the hallmarks of female identity. The term “feminine” – that is defined as “other” than “masculine” – connotes qualities quite opposite to “masculine.” They are not only binary opposite terms, but the first one also bears all sorts of negative aura. However, Feminists, for the last one century, have been raising their voice against the practice. While Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* (1970) registers that sexual politics governed by male chauvinistic views has placed man as a sovereign subject in the society and woman as subjugated to man, Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (1990) holds that “gender” is just an approval and continuation of the traditionally imposed images. The entire feminist discourse revolves around two axioms i.e. “gender” difference is the basis of structural inequality between male and female, and “gender” inequality is not a biological reality but a cultural construct. It aims to understand the social and psychic mechanism that constructs and perpetuates gender inequality and tries to subvert it to the possible limits.

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Though Feminism in India, in many senses, does not stand quite parallel to that of the Western idea, yet its critique of the system grossly rooted in male chauvinism manifests its multifaced resistance to the practice of woman subjugation in our society. One such example can be cited in the works of Girish Karnad, who, like other feminists, neither depicts females' plight ideally nor blindly romanticizes their heightened position. Instead, his deliberation of women condition in Indian society is logical and realistic. His play *Wedding Album* presents a pending marriage in an urban middleclass, Karnataka-based Saraswat family – the Nandkarnis. While oscillating between the real and techno-savvy world, the play also weights the pros and cons of wedding culture in Indian society and reassesses the space given to women in contemporary global era. It shows that while expanding job opportunities abroad for Indian males gives a very optimistic picture of contemporary India, the condition of women is still questionable, and their age-old suffering still persists, though in different forms. The present paper aims at revealing the perpetual suffering of women, their home confined identity and their persevering struggle to challenge the preconceived notion about them as the “other”.

The play depicts the conflict between the modern “self” of women and their traditional image which is still ready to accept the traditionally defined roles. However, it positively registers that even in their acceptance of traditional image, their resistance against subjugation is apparently noticeable. It also underlines the contribution of the modern technology

in the upliftment of women. Moreover, the question of class conflict in middle class social milieu which intensifies women's suffering is not out of the ambit of the paper.

By delving deep into the mechanism of human relationships of two generations of a Saraswat family, Girish Karnad. In *Wedding Album*, has put considerable effort in the evaluation of the traditional image of women which lacks, in some aspects, sign of development. Traditionally allotted space to women is confined within four walls and her socially defined aim of life is to satisfy her husband's demands even at the cost of her own desires. It is inherent in them that even modern educated women are unable to get rid of it. life of Vidula's mother is governed before marriage by her father, and by her husband subsequently. Memory of her past life explains her regulated “self”: “Our lives are over. My father wouldn't even let me finish college..... I never had any time for you children. Just rush, rush. And I achieved nothing in my life” (WA 90). However, her realization itself is a resistance against subjugation. She suggests her daughter to create a new image beyond male hegemony: “You are capable of anything if you will only make up your mind Don't throw away your talent. God gave me such lovely children. But I could give them no guidance. We did nothing for you. Don't do the same thing with your life” WA 90). Like her sister, Hema also does not succeed to subvert the traditionally defined image of woman as a housewife, mother, and home confined slave: “Hema did nothing with her intelligence and

good looks. Has been content to be a housewife" (WA 90). Despite being a product of globalized world, she holds on to her mother's image. Her behavior explains what Judith Butler calls "gender" as a performance or role played by an individual, and it is social because of its validation and acceptance by society. Her realization signifies perpetuation of the traditional image of women: "I am in no better position than ma" (WA 17). But in spite of the fact that both the women readily yield to their subjugation, a spark of revolt is easily visible in them. Like Vidula's mother, Hema's confession also shows her dissatisfaction with her present identity.

Some critics hold that that patriarchy is not only the sole player in women's oppression, but is joined also by capitalism (Hansen & Philipos 19). Materialist Feminists argue that domestic labour contributes to the household economy, but is rarely seen as "productive" i.e. the work done by men in fields and factories is treated as productive labour, while the work done by women inside houses is rendered "invisible" (Nair 93-94). The play can be read from this aspect as well, it depicts foreign countries as lands of promising future where Indian youths aspire to work, and have acquired top positions in various Multinational companies, international Banks, and corporations. But the sad fact is that, while we boast for the males' success, we hardly recognize women's contribution in it. they sacrifice a lot to facilitate their husbands in reaching top positions. Hema confesses: "And do you know why? Because they are all transferable jobs and a white wife refuse to go trailing after her husband. We Indian women, on the other hand, are obedient Sati Savitris, ever willing to follow in our husband's footsteps. Look at me – Melbourne, Johannesburg, Singapore, and now Sydney. Our men may get all the top jobs. But I am in no better position than Ma" (WA 17). Her realization in this regard registers her anguish over discrimination against women in the economic spheres.

Class consciousness, which form the basis of Socialist Feminism, is also apparent in the play in the plight of Radhabai and her daughter. Radhabai who has lost her husband is always scolded by Vidula's mother for trivial reasons; and when, being influenced by TV serials, Radhabai retaliates, infuriated Vidula's mother asks her to leave the job to live a life of object poverty. It is not only she who suffers, but her daughter also suffers even more bitter fate, and gets mad on being abandoned by her husband. Though the play presents the plight of a woman as a worker who ultimately gets nothing but humiliation to bear, resulting in the commoditization of women labour; yet Radhabai's dissent with her mistress and her daughter's attempt to marry a rich trader suggest their resistance against their subjugation.

That a woman is seen as a sex object to be enjoyed by men is shown in the play through Nagappa's behavior. When Vidula's mother boasts that Nagappa has been working in the house of thirty years but never raised voice against her. Vidula ironically

remarks: "True, Nagappa didn't raise his voice. But a lot of his energy went into raising skirts" (WA 23). Karnad also presents the practice of subjecting the female body as a sight for male fantasy in contemporary society. Vivan who is two years younger to Hema's son, Ketan, astonishes her by giving her two personal letters having lines like, "Darling, you don't know how I desire to crush you in my arms...." (WA 19). He becomes crazy when Hema threatens to reveal his nonsense before his mother: "Go ahead. I'll tell her I love you. The moment I saw you the other day, I fell desperately in love. I want to die kissing you. I want to die with my hand inside you blouse" (WA 45). However, it is not only Vivan who humiliates her, but her father-in-law also observes her body. The play presents the sordid social reality that female body is always considered as a prey by male beastly passions, irrespective of age difference or relation. She is treated as a machine having no feelings even to get hurt.

On this chequered background of female subjugation and subversion, Vidula somewhat symbolizes Radical Feminism. The very beginning depicts a conflict between Vidula and brother, Rohit. He, who represents the patriarchal façade of society attempts to orchestrate Vidula on chauvinistic pattern. She is suggested by Rohit to present her "best face," to "smile a bit" and "look cheerful" before her would-be bride-groom, in order to get his consensus" (WA 5). Stuffed with modern sensibility, she retorts: "I am not glamorous as you can see. I am not exceptional in any way. I don't want you to be disappointed later" (WA 6); but she is ultimately convinced by Rohit to do whatever he wants and to succumb to the terms and conditions laid down by Ashwin. Rohit's attempts to regulate Vidula's free "self" can be referred as mechanism of women's subjugation. Yet the more he endeavours to suppress her independent "self," the more her fight against male domination gets intensified. Vidula, being a product of tech-simulated world, is fused with modernity from top to the toe and refutes suggestions given by her family to break off her relationship with Ashwin if it seems to her imposing. She replies in a decisive tone: "Ashwin may not speak much. But he was clear about what he expected from marriage. I agreed with him. I gave him my words" (WA 86). And "I trust him. He is my husband after all" (WA 87). Her statement hardly gives any space to male superiority in the family and signifies her bold stand to her unrestrained self.

What is more, Girish Karnad's dramatic vision does not spare the impact of Cyber technology. The play depicts how technical innovations are providing women with a space to express their hidden desires. Her restrained "feminine self" finds expression through virtual reality. Vidula's visit to the Cyber Café for video chat is an expression of her unspoken desires. The intensity of her controlled self can be noticed when she tells a lie to the Voice on the computer screen: "Sold off. I told I am a kept woman. Kept by a trader. I am his concubine. Maintained by a man much older than me.... He has had a heart attack...."

Could be dead by tomorrow So I had to find a new master. A younger man" (WA 64). And when the Voice tells Vidula, "I'll strip you then I'll rape you." She excitedly reacts, "I can't wait. I can't..... That sounds divine! I am yours..... Go ahead. I am yours. All yours" (WA 65). But as two intruders try to curb her "self" blaming her to watching be Porno films and call her "a disgrace to.....ancient Indian culture (WA 69) and "Hindu Women!" she stringently defends herself saying that "I have paid for the computer.....to be left alone in this room. To work here without being disturbed Who the hell are you to question me" (WA 70).

Whether willingly submitting herself as Kuchla the Jezebel to the disembodied randy voice of Swamy Ananga Nath, the Bodyless, in a darkened Cyber Café, or transmuting her guilt at being found out into hysterical rage, screaming 'sexual harassment' to make her moral tormentors run away—she is resourceful enough to find herself a surrogate swami, a flesh and blood stranger to help her work her way through hopeless desire. The subjugation she seeks in her secret, erotic world can after all be served as well through man and marriage and to higher purpose (xi).

It is true that she enjoys eroticism in the Cyber Café and subjugates to the Bodyless Voice, but she does it for the expression of her unspoken desires. In India to get sexual pleasure, physically or virtally, is considered violation of social morality especially for women. If Vidula dares to defy the social law of virginity, it transmutes her revolt against traditional conventions.

Ashwin Panje who has "drunk life in the US to the less" and has enjoyed "Girl friends, affairs, mistresses, one-night stands" and "on the public stage, glamour, success, social connections" (WA 80) sees the West with "no spiritual moorings left" (WA 80), he comes to India to marry a girl with traditional values because he thinks "... it is in places like Dhawad that beliefs in innocence, the very idea of purity survives" (WA 81). Living in the US, he is fed up with the materialistic progress and feels need of spirituality to survive. He says to Vidula: "Someone like you carries within you the essence of Hindu spirituality. Woman as mother, Wife, Daughter. Womanhoos as the most Sacred Ideal" (WA 81). He considers marriage as a mission of reviving spirituality and expects of his wife to be his partner in the mission. Ashwin considers Vidula his better half and feels incomplete without her. He requests her to make up his spiritual hollowness. He does not impose his desires on her but leaves it up to her to decide. Therefore, for the first time, her values meet with justice and she is treated fairly on equal terms. Honoured as an individual, Vidula decides to marry Ashwin. Her decision to live with Ashwin sounds logical because he treats her as an individual and gives enough space to grow her "self" instead of subjugating it (218).

Thus, Girish Karnad's *Wedding Album* meticulously sketches out women's struggle in contemporary Indian society against their subjugation and their triumph over the age-old practices. It registers their varied resistance that most of the time goes covert but strongly indicates that in spite of they are determined to change the scenario to create a bigger space for themselves.

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