

Presenting Woman and Nature: An Ecofeminist Reading of Select Plays of Karnad

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A new literary theory-ecofeminism which relates the ecological degradation and oppression of women in the hands of men and men-constructed-society emerged in 1960. The ecofeminist critics like Rosemary Radford Ruether, Judith Plant, Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies et.al have equated the women to the nature since they both share the same fate which is of degradation and oppression. So, to posit a text from this literary theoretical perspective the natural interest and loss of female interest should be there. Girish Karnad's plays- *Hayavadana*, *Naga-Mandala* and *The Fire and the Rain* can be read from this perspective. My thesis will be about the study and interpretation of these three plays of Karnad in the light of ecofeminist theoretical approach. Ecofeminism castigates the value-hierarchical dualistic thinking, evident in Western philosophy such as nature-nurture, desire-reason, body-head, self-other. This Western philosophy asserts the supremacy of intellectual human over the 'natural nature'. The men have used nature to dominate women and the women have been seen by the man's eye as a production of the society. Ecofeminist critic Elizabeth Carlassare stated:

Much of ecofeminist discourse directs action seeks to resist and subvert political institutions, economic structures, and daily activities that are against the interest on the life on earth. (*Essentialism in Ecofeminist Discourse*)

More recently because of the inclusion of sexism, racism, the interest of animals the movement is better understood as working against the interconnected oppressions of gender, race, class and nature. The female characters, in above mentioned three plays of Karnad suffered profoundly by the men. The heroine of *Hayavadana*, Padmini is the prey of social customs whereas Rani, the queen of *Naga-Mandala* spends a life of imprisonment and of lovelessness resulting unfulfilled sexual hunger. *The Fire and the Rain*, too depicts the same-the oppression of Vishakha and Nittilai in a complex way. In the plays women characters are seen as the production of male hierarchical society. Karnad has employed the folk element and myth in his plays. This very employment of these two as dramatic background is loaded with environmental aspects. Nature thus is an indispensable character in these plays of Karnad.

The setting of *The Fire and the Rain* is entirely nature. The play commences like this:

It has not rained adequately for nearly ten years. Drought grips the land. A seven-year long sacrifice (yajna) is being held to propitiate Indra, the god of rains. (*The Fire and the Rain*)

The environmental issue in the play is preponderant. A strong influence of nature is evident in the play. Karnad's recourse to the age of myth also is loaded with ecofeminist

issue. Along with the ecology the feminine points are also notable. Vishakhais oppressed by Yavakri and Paravasu, the former being the lover and the latter the husband. She has herself uttered that she is a mere doll in the hands of these two. They have used her when they wanted to and thrown her at their own will valuing nothing the woman-interest. Raibhya, the father-in-law is also enraged about Vishakha. In the play there is also an oppressed woman who shares the fate of Vishakha and she is Nittilai. Even Nittilai's degradation and oppression is of two-fold. First she is controlled by the patriarchal society. But unlike Vishakha she belongs to the marginalised group. She loves Arvasu who is the brother of Parvasu. They both, denying the social custom and rule wanted to marry. But, the hierarchal male-constructed-society resists them to be united with each other. The death of Vishakha and Nittilai testifies male domination. The play shows how nature has been used for the cause of men. Both of Yavakari and Raibhya's power lies in water. But they both disregard nature. The moment the kamandalu became waterless Yavakari became powerless. This abuse of nature has been stopped by a woman, Vishakha in the play. The woman is empowered to make the man powerless and to protect nature. Another noteworthy point is that blessed rains come only through the sacrifice of Nittilai, the tribal girl, the 'woman':

*(Wind blows.
Lightening.Thunder. People shout
'Rain! It's running!' . . . It pours.
People dance with joy. They roll in
the mud. Arvasu sits clutching
Nittilai's body.). (The Fire and the
Rain)*

Thus the woman is made active by the playwright. This empowerment of women is an ecofeminist issue.

Naga-Mandala is about the relation between Rani, the woman and a cobra, the animal.

An explicit kinship between the environment and the woman is established in the play. The fact the cobra being the protagonist of the play induces the ecological touch. Rani works all the day for her husband and is imprisoned in the cottage. But her husband does not love her and she is sexually depressed. She could not forget the joy of living with her parents. But soon after the marriage her dreams were shattered. She reached her womanhood only to be the prey of man. This is how the gender distinction issue of the feminists like Elaine Showalter comes into play. Appanna just commands her at his own will. He only comes to take the lunch and only this time she spends with her husband. He comes, commands, eats and goes:

Appanna: Look, I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand?

*(Finishes his meal, gets up).
I'll be back tomorrow, for
lunch.(Appanna washes his
hand, locks her in and goes
away.)(Naga-Mandala)*

Rani, just like a forlorn princess is confined entire day in the cottage. Thus, she is devoid of the nuptial happiness and affection. Appanna, her husband not only, does not love her but also thinks that there is no need to talk to her wife earnestly. She is sexually depressed also. But, in spite of all these she works all the day for her husband and never questions about his whereabouts. Rani becomes the very image of Indian women-unquestioning, uncomplaining and modest. The solitary confinement of Rani implies the absolute absence of woman's legitimate right for enlightenment and enjoyment. The empty house emblematises the patriarchal chains of society. Though, Appanna is not even a dutiful husband, he exercises utmost supremacy and control over his naive wife. This indubitably induces the shackles of male-dominated society. This is how the man subjugates woman. This scenario is

evident in Indian society even at present time. The fate of the woman has not changed so much. Karnad is well aware of this fact. In order to highlight the overall female oppression in the hierarchical society Karnad refuses to name the female protagonist in particular. However, in this depression and the loneliness of woman comes in rescue the king cobra, the nature. The cobra in guise of Appanna spends night with Rani and also at the end of the play frees her from obvious perils. Rani, too validates the relationship from the part of a woman by knitting the cobra with her black long hair in one ending of the play. The other ending shows that Rani with astonishment discovers the cobra in her hair and Rani was eager to kill it and thus she refuses the relation. This kind of unpredictability is closely associated with nature because nature, too is unpredictable. Rani has been made a goddess in the play and this appellation has been given by the society for her attachment with nature, the cobra. The female-goddess is in this way 'produced'. The entire play is set amid nature. The play is set in such a time when there was everything nature; the present day technological advancement was unimaginable. Karnad, owing much to the myths and folklores has posited his play in ancient time. But, as an adept craftsman he is unique in using the folktale and to incorporate some of his artistic inventive touch in the play. At the very inception of the play, the flames have been attributed the female voice. Through the identification of the flames as women Karnad has used his creative prowess in a particularly female context in the man-oriented folktale. This recourse of Karnad in folktale is embedded with ecological issue. Rani, the oppressed woman in the play has been compared often to the elements of nature. In Act I when Kurudavva discovers Rani, she goes on to appellation her in terms of nature. The blind woman feels Rani's face and praises the beauty in terms of flowers. In the solitary confinement, mental depression and

physical hunger of Rani comes in rescue the king cobra which is an element of nature. Thus the play depicts how the woman is suffered by the man and how nature stands beside the anguished oppressed woman.

Hayavadana concerns the complex relationship among Devdatta, Padmini and Kapila. Devdatta signifying intellect being an erudite is married to Padmini who has the physical attraction to the sturdy Kapila. But, the society will not permit her to be with Kapila. Thus the woman interest is lost. Padmini, the female is more enamoured of Kapila, the body than Devdatta, the head. She watches Kapila and thinks:

How he climbs- like an ape. .
. . . And what an ethereal
shape! Such a broad back:
like an ocean with muscles
rippling across it- and then
that small, feminine waist
which looks so helpless.
(*Hayavadana*)

After the death of these two Padmini alters the head of the two unconsciously. It also refers the hidden desire of Padmini bringing the Freudian theory into the fore. So the woman prefers a 'body' to the 'intellect'. The most pivotal scene of the play is set in forest where a temple of Goddess Kali is. This temple in the forest also brings the ecofeministic approach. Thus the environment plays a significant role in the play and has an interconnectedness with the woman. The setting of the play is medieval India where the present technological advancement and development is not found. It refers to the proclamation of V. Shiva. The subplot propelling around the incompleteness of *Hayavadana*, literally meaning horse-faced-human is wrought with ecofeministic issue since it refers the conjugation of the human world and the animal world. The incomplete *Hayavadana* finds completeness not in human-world but in natural world. Triumph of animal world

over human world is an ecofeministic issue. At the inception of the play there is an invocation to Lord Ganesha, the elephant-headed god who himself is an emblem of incompleteness. The ecofeminist critics celebrate incompleteness. Though Karnad owes much to Thomas Mann for this play, but Karnad unlike Thomas Mann has not propagated his own view point about the dichotomy between body and head, evident in the play and rather he has showed which one is a woman's desire between these two.

Lawrence Buell has stated:

Just as feminism was moved by minority and 'third world' feminisms during the 1980s and 1990s toward autocritique of its prior focus on Western white middle-class concerns, so during the past decade some ecofeminists have been among the leaders in a broader initiative to push environmental criticism toward substantive engagement with issue of environmental welfare and equity of more pressing concern to the impoverished and socially marginalized: to landscapes of urbanization, racism, poverty, and toxification; and to the voices of witnesses and victims of environmental injustice. (*The Future of Environmental Criticism*)

All these three plays probably reflect the ecological and feminist issues that the ecofeminist critics proclaim. The very setting of the plays is ecological since they are placed in such a time when the present modern technological advancement was beyond imagination. Thus Karnad's recourse in ancient myths seems to be loaded with ecofeminist interest. The woman oppression in the hands of men is

evident in the plays. Karnad's these three plays may not have been studied and interpreted from this ecofeminist perspective. My thesis will try to unearth this perspective. By doing this, these three plays of Karnad could be seen as a tool to decolonise the women colonised in the society till date.

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