

***Yearning for Identity through Magical realism: Female Protagonists of Girish Karnad***

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The Asian Conference on Literature & Librarianship 2014  
Official Conference Proceedings 2014

0104

**Abstract**

In the history of human civilization, societies are predominantly either patriarchal or matriarchal. In the present day, most of the societies are patriarchal with a very few exceptions which have been discovered by modern day anthropological studies. It is obvious that the patriarchal societies are built on structures which are gender biased and are made and developed to favor men. Literatures that are produced in these societies can rarely be anything other than being patriarchal in their nature. In the introduction to *Magical Realism*, Zamora and Faris, note that magical realism is a mode suited to exploring and transgressing boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical or generic. Further, they continued that the boundaries such as mind, and body, spirit and matter, life and death, real and imaginary, self and other, male and female are to be erased, transgressed, blurred, brought together, or otherwise fundamentally refashioned in magical realist text. This is the premise on which the present study explores the ways in which Girish Karnad employs magical realism as an effective tool to establish the identities of his female protagonists in his plays such as *Nagamandala (1990)* and *Hayavadana (1975)*. In these plays, female protagonists resort to magical realistic yearnings for their identities as they are deprived of their rightful living in the realistic world.

Keywords: Magical realism, identities, postcolonial, gender biased, feministic

## Introduction:

The foundations of societies or civilizations are rooted in their religious or belief systems. Even today most of our societies still base on, rely on and nourish on the similar religious and cultural practices of traditional, patriarchal societies. The two female protagonists of the present study belong to a Hindu traditional society, therefore, it is necessary to focus our attention on how male and female roles are perceived, defined and limited in the given patriarchal society. This is represented by the religious scriptures or tenets of that society. According to *Manusmriti*-an ancient book of religious tenets written in Sanskrit- a classical Indian language, the objectives of a man are four which are called as *Purushardhas- Dharma* (righteousness), *Artha* (wealth), *Kama* (satisfying physical desires) and *Moksha* (salvation). Whereas the duties of woman are six which are called as *Shad-dharmas- Karyeshu daasi*- should work like a servant; *Karaneshu Mantri*- should advice like a minister; *Rupyasha Lakshmi*-should be beautiful (like the Goddess Lakshmi); *Shayanasha Rambha*- Should please man in bed like *Rambha*- a queen of *Apsaras (fairies)* or *devaloka (heaven)*; *Bhojyeshu Maata*- should feed like a mother; and *Kshamaya Dharitri* – should have patience like Mother Earth-an epitome of patience. This shows the gender biased conceptualization of man and woman in the society. The terminology used for their roles indicate the disparity as men had to accomplish objectives, whereas women are assigned with duties. As Simone de Beauvoir says, “one is not born a woman, one becomes one” (as cited in Moi, 1990, p. 65), however, I feel not becomes one but is made into one. Butler (1990) argues that no one is born with a gender, gender is always acquired (p. 142)

In such a context, the female protagonists of Girish Karnad yearn for and establish their identity through magical realism. It is a kind of magical activism. A tool effectively employed to question, oppose, contrast and break the patriarchal structures and conceptions regarding women.

The present study analyses the two plays in the perspective of postfeminism. The feminist discourse has seen several waves of movement. The first wave feminism demanded the equality of the sexes and women’s suffrage, claiming that women are not inferior to men or they are different from men; hence they should “therefore, be allowed to do the same jobs and have the same rights as men” (Atwood, 2007, p. 137).

The second wave feminism on the other hand, focused on the superiority of women against men, asserting that women are “more deserving than men, but because of the lamb-like nature of their superiority they also need more protection” (Atwood, 2007, p. 137). The second wave of feminism started losing its ground in the postcolonial world as it was positioned from the white western middle class heterosexual women. Brooks (1997) says that “the collapse of consensus from within feminism formed around issues of theorizing concepts such as ‘oppression,’ ‘patriarchy,’ ‘sexuality, identity and difference’ as used by white middle-class feminists were increasingly challenged (p. 5).

In the progression of feminist movement, the third wave of feminism resists the perceived overgeneralized, oversimplified ideologies and a white heterosexual middle class focus of second wave feminism. It imposes a judgmental attitude towards both previous waves of feminism and patriarchy. Gender is a performative notion and is socially constructed. It expands to marginalized populations’ experiences. Third wave feminism is also called as postmodern feminism and postfeminism.

The struggle of Padmini- the female protagonist in *Hayavadana* and Rani- the female protagonist in *Nagamandala* can be seen in the perspective of postfeminist discourse.

Postfeminism “expresses the intersection of a feminism with postmodernism, poststructuralism, and as such represents a dynamic movement capable of challenging modernist, patriarchal and imperialist frameworks”(Brooks, 1997, p. 4). Both characters confront the situation in their own way. Padmini through her actions ridicules the existing social norms of class and caste structures. She also breaks the patriarchal system of imposing and limiting female free will.

## I

In the play ‘*Hayavadana*’ (1994) Padmini is unhappy about her obligatory marriage with Devadatta who is a Brahmin by caste, a learned man, a man of intellect. At the same time she had one more male character in her life Kapila who is juxtaposed to Devadatta. Kapila is an ironsmith by caste, a man of physical strength and emotional vigour.

Two youths who dwell in this city are our heroes. One is Devadatta. Comely in appearance, fair in colour, unrivalled in intelligence, Devadatta is the only son of the Revered Brahmin, Vidyasagara. Having felled the mightiest pundits of the kingdom in debates on logic and love, having blinded the greatest poets of the world with his poetry and wit,...

The other youth is Kapila. He is the only son of the ironsmith, Lohita, who is to the King’s armoury as an axle to the chariot wheel. He is dark and plain to look at, yet in deeds which require drive and daring, in dancing, in strength and in physical skills, he has no equal (1. 73-4).

Devadatta is comely in appearance and fair and intellectually he is unrivalled, whereas Kapila on the other hand is dark, and physically strong and skilful. These features and characteristics attributed to them are caste and profession determined. As being a daughter of a powerful and wealthy merchant, she had to marry Devadatta who is at the top of the caste structure. Usually a woman is married off to a man who is socially at a higher position in terms of caste and class.

The society (realistic life) which is mired in the class and caste structure patronized by patriarchy, can never allow her to act in any way other than what it is prescribed to her by patriarchal society. Magical realism is employed as a tool to transcend beyond the existing parameters. Magical realism can be an appropriate device to liberate herself from the patriarchal dominance and voice her own existence. Zamora and Faris (1995) put forward that “mind and body, spirit and matter, life and death, real and imaginary, self and other, male and female these are boundaries to be erased, transgressed, blurred, brought together, or otherwise fundamentally refashioned in magical realist texts”(p. 6).

Padmini’s transposition of heads of Devadatta and Kapila is her answer to the patriarchal marriage system. After the marriage, Devadatta, Padmini and Kapila go on a pilgrimage to Ujjain. During their journey, Devadatta becomes jealous of Kapila, as Padmini praises Kapila’s physical strength and emotional vigor. He is deeply hurt and decides to kill himself. He goes to a nearby Kali temple and cuts off his head in the presence of goddess Kali. After some time, as Devadatta has not returned, Kapila goes in search of him and finds him dead in Kali temple. Deeply distressed with the death of his friend and out of guilt he too kills himself. Having waited for a long time, Padmini goes in search of them, to her shock, she finds both of them dead in the temple. In a frank conversation, she says to goddess Kali that she should have spared either of them so that she could have a reason to live. As both of them are dead, there is no point of her living. Saying so, she too wants to kill herself. Impressed with the frankness and honesty of Padmini, goddess Kali says that they would come back to

life once she joins their heads to their bodies. then. Thanking the goddess Kali, Padmini joins the heads but transposes their heads.

(Eagerly, Padmini puts the heads-that is, the masks-back. But in her excitement, she mixes them up so that Devadatta's mask goes to Kapila's and vice versa. Then, presses the sword on their necks, does *namaskara* to the goddess, walks downstage and stands with her back to the goddess, her eyes shut tight.)

Padmini: I' m ready, Mother.

Kali: (In a resigned tone.) My dear daughter, there should be a limit even to honesty. Anyway-So be it! (1. 103)

Both Devadatta and Kapila come back to life. Henceforth,

Devadatta is represented by: Devadatta's head +Kapila's body

Kaplila is represented by: Kapila's head + Devadatta's body.

Both of them start claiming to be the husband of Padmini. Each one gives their argument. Kapila argues that it is this body that she slept and lived with her, likewise, Devadatta argues that a man is identified by his head. Eventually, they go to a hermit to settle the matter. The hermit citing the scriptures socially accepted traditional understanding that head is superior to body, and he pronounces a judgment the one who has the head of Devadatta would be the husband of Padmini. Obviously, Padmini is quite happy with the judgment because she gets the best from the both. Devadatta's intellect and Kapila' Physical strength and skill. 'Fabulous body – Fabulous brain – Fabulous Devadatta.'(1. 113)

It is an expression and an attempt to create a trans human (the human with Devadatta's head+ Kapila's body) in condemnation of the stereotypical live puppets (humans like previous Devadatta and Kapila) being produced by and controlled by the existing society. It is her answer to the patriarchal subjugation. It was not an accidental but a deliberate act.

The mixing up of heads is not accidental as she tries to make it appear but it is a deliberate act of her. She does not want to let a chance slip out of her hands. Right from the beginning, she expresses her wish, covertly and overtly, not to limit her relationships from her husband's point of view but to have the relationships from her perspective. She does not like to be tied up to the marriage determined relationships. When Padmini sees the two men lying dead on the floor, she asked kali, 'If you'd saved either of them, I would have been spared all this terror, this agony. Why did you wait so long?' (1. 103). Goddess Kali appreciates her truthfulness as she speaks true to her heart without making any distinction between both of them. For her, Devadatta is no more important than the other. Her attachment to both the men is equally strong, although the form of attachment is different. She makes this very clear to Kali, whereas the other two lie to their last breath. Kali's remarks after she mixes up the heads clearly indicate that the mix up is intentional but not accidental. Kali remarks, 'my daughter, there should be a limit even to honesty. Anyway – so be it!'(1. 103) In this way, Padmini achieves what she wants – the best from both. Padmini is clever, bold and manipulative to get things done as per her wish. It's magical activism.

Wishing against the existing choices is her way of responding. She is not even bothered to express these wishes without any inhibition, where a society's biased way of treating man's and women's sexual affairs in a different way. Man 'somehow' has social acceptance whereas a woman does not exercise the same level of acceptance. Though man's immoral and unethical acts are condemned, it's a mere masquerade.

Feminist theory's aim of 'destabilizing' cultural and social representations of women and revealing the ideology embedded in realism is fulfilled through the language of magical realism. As Faris (2002) states:

The irreducible elements in the hybrid mode of magical realism estrange the basis of authority of realism making way of new forms of discourse that reflect alternative ways of being to emerge. It is this destabilizing of realism, which has a longstanding power of representation in the west that has made magical realism an enabling discourse for the postcolonial world (p. 113).

In realistic text and context, it is highly impossible for a female protagonist like Padmini to yearn for, sustain and establish her identity. Magical realism is an effective tool which makes her a bold, courageous, honest, unperturbed, uninhibited personality.

## II

Rani in *Nagamandala* (1994) is a naïve, docile house wife. She is a victim of male suppression. Since the beginning of their marriage life, Appanna constantly visits concubine while keeping his wife locked at home. He comes home once a day for lunch and goes out soon after.

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 hands, locks her in and goes away. Rani watches him blankly through the window*)

STORY: And so the days rolled by (1. 7)

This is the plight of Rani's life after marriage. She has neither any voice, nor freedom, nor dignity of life and she is left helpless. She is altogether deprived of her rightful life as a woman and as a wife. She longs for the love and care she had from her parents, expects to have the dignity of wife in the family. She can never have them from her realistic life. Only the Magical realistic life can get her what she wants.

Most of the fantasy episodes of Rani in *Nagamandala* can be considered as instances of magical realism. Only in the initial stages when she resorts to speak to herself (to get off her boredom and loneliness) it can be seen as her own fantasizing. But as the plot deepens, the characters in her fantasy tend to appear as realistic ones. So, ultimately, we may not be able to distinguish between the reality and the fantasy. Her fantasy gradually acquires a status of reality.

In the initial stages, when Naga (in guise of Appanna-her husband) visits her in the nights of Appanna, she was not certain whether it was a fantasy or reality. She mentions her apprehension with Naga.

All these days I was never sure I didn't just dream up these nightly visits of yours. You don't know how I have suffered. When I saw your scowling face in the mornings, I would be certain everything was a fantasy and almost want to cry....Suppose night queen bush does not blossom? Suppose it's all a dream (2.50).

But when she becomes pregnant all her fears and anxiety were dispelled. She says now she has a definite evidence that she is not fantasizing. She confirms this to herself saying, 'Dreams remain in heads. This one has sent roots deep down into my womb' (2.52).

In spite of the strong evidence, she is very skeptical and anxious about the whole thing. She senses that though both of them appear alike (like Appanna) they have a fundamental difference. 'The Face in the morning unrelated to the touch at

night.’(2.52). As a woman, she could make out the face of the day visitor and the touch of the night visitor is not same. For Rani, the Appanna of day is juxtaposed to Appanna of the night (Naga). One represents the realistic world whereas the other represents her magical realistic world. He is like an embodiment of her yearnings.

The play *Nagamandala* has three endings.

After the snake – ordeal, as usual, the Story (the narrator of the story) ends the play.

Ending-1:

So Rani got everything she wished for, a devoted husband, a happy life. She even got a life – long servant to draw water for her house..... In due course, Rani gave birth to a beautiful child. A son. Rani lived happily ever after with her husband, child and servant. (1.59)

Ending-2:

STORY: Yes, the Cobra, One day the Cobra was sitting in its ant – hill and it thought of Rani and said: ‘why should I not go and take a look’?

*(During the above dialogue, the Cobra enters the house, takes on his human form.)* (1.61)

When Naga enters the bed room, Rani is sleeping next to her husband, her head on his shoulder, her long loose tresses hanging down from the edge of the cot. Her child is by her side. There is a quiet smile of contentment on her face. Naga looks at the group and recoils in sudden anguish, covers his face as though he cannot hear to see the scene. After pondering over his fate, he decides to summon his magical powers for the last time to become as thin as her hair and stay in her long tresses.

*(A beam of light on him. The rest is plunged into darkness long dark hair appear to descend and cover him. He covers himself and dances. Finally, Naga ties a tress into a noose and places it around his neck. The stage slowly becomes dark)* (2.62)

In the morning, when Rani gets up, she feels her head very heavy. When she combs through a dead cobra falls to the ground. She performs all funeral rites and the cremation fire is lit by her son. Further she asks his husband to allow her son to perform the rituals to commemorate its death every year.

Ending-3:

In the third instance, once again the story goes back to the scene where Rani is sleeping beside her husband and her long tresses are hanging down from the edge of the cot. Her son is by her. Suddenly, Rani wakes up moaning and complains of heaviness in her head. As she combs her hair a live snake falls out of her hair and lies writhing on the floor. Appanna is shocked to see a snake and runs out to get a stick. In the meantime, Rani watches the snake transfixed.

RANI: *(Softly, to the cobra)* You? What are you doing here? He’ll kill you. Go. Go away. No! Not that way. He’s there. What shall we do? What shall we do? Why did you ever come in here, stupid?  
*(suddenly)* My hair! Of course. Come, quick. Climb into it....

This hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss. Live in here happily forever. (2. 64)

When all the three endings are observed, the Ending-1 is a routine one, and is consistent with the realist story line. However, the rest of the two endings are magical realistic. In the Ending-2, Rani's concerns are addressed. Naga getting into her hair and falling dead in the morning and then the final rites are performed by her son, indicates that she gives her the status of the father of her son, after all Naga is the father of her son. She does not shy away from taking the responsibility. She gives a dignified end to her magical realistic life. Rani goes a step ahead in the third ending, where she keeps the magical realistic ending alive. Moreover, she keeps it in parallel with the realistic ending (Ending-1). It's her magical realistic answer to the life imposed on her by the patriarchal family set up.

Furthermore, "Throughout the history women have reduced to objects for men; 'woman' has been constructed as man's other, denied the right to her own subjectivity and to responsibility for her own actions. Or, in more existentialist terms: patriarchal ideology presents woman as immanence, man as transcendence"(Gamble, 2001, p. 92). In the magical realist perspective, Bowers (2004) opines because of inherent characteristics of subversion and transgression, magical realism becomes a growing tool of expression in the postcolonial world. She also thinks "that has led many postcolonial, feminist and cross cultural writers to embrace it as a means of expressing their ideas" (pp. 66-7). However, the female protagonists of Girish Karnad through their magical activism yearn for and establish their identity and take responsibility of their own actions.

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