

Magic Realism in *Flowers*: Karnad's Post-Modern World of Folkloric Fantasy

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Abstract

"Magic realism" is a recent literary technique that contains a latent amalgamation of fantastic or mythical elements into an otherwise realistically narrated fiction. The theme and subject of such a literary work are often imaginary, somewhat outlandish and fantastic and always reflect into a dream-like reverie. It further marks the miscellaneous use of myths, legends and fairy tales, and an expressionistic description of an arcane situation leading to the element of surprise or abrupt shock. In literary discourses, the term is primarily associated with the post-modern novel of the Americas. Girish Karnad's dramatic monologue, *Flowers*, however, bears all the elements of this literary phenomenon. This short play could also be labeled as a dramatized novel and is a simple tale of a priest caught in an agonized conflict between his devotion to God and his love for a courtesan. However, Karnad's creative genius turns this conflict into a scintillating portrayal of the sexual urge of a priest interspersed with his feelings of religious devotion and familial duties through the technique of magic realism and, in the process, questions god's authority in the post-modern world. The play is an attempt by Karnad for the first time in his playwriting career "to focus on male than a female desire." It presents an interesting picture of the bizarre human world full of magic and its realistic social impressions. The present article attempts to shed some light on this aspect of Karnad through the thematic exploration of the flowers.

Keywords: Magic Realism, Post-Modern Drama, Girish Karnad, Flowers, Myths, Legends, Folklore, Indian English Drama.

Introduction

Girish Karnad's play *Flowers* draws its theme from a deep-rooted Indian consciousness of the folks who always live in the world of fantasy and carnal desire. It is a dramatic monologue based on the legend of Veeranna of the Chitradurga region of Karnataka. The play can also be labeled as a dramatized or folkloric novel. It is a simple tale of a priest entangled in the web of his devotion to God and of his familial obligations towards his wife along with his burning passion for a courtesan. This devotee of the god later starts questioning the authority and superiority of the divine, when found himself in an intricate worldly situation affected by magic realism. The play is an attempt by Karnad for the first time in his playwriting career "to focus on male rather than a female desire" (Dharwadkar, 2005: xxxi). It presents an interesting picture of the bizarre human world full of folkloric fantasy. The present paper attempts to shed some light on this aspect of Karnad though the thematic exploration of his *flowers*.

"Magic realism" is a recent literary technique that comprises of a latent amalgamation of fantastic or mythical elements into an otherwise realistically narrated fiction. The theme and subject of such a literary work are often imaginary, somewhat outlandish, and fantastic and always reflect dream-like reverie. It further marks the miscellaneous use of myths, legends and fairy tales, and an expressionistic description of an arcane situation leading to the

element of surprise or abrupt shock. In literary discourses, the term is primarily associated with the post-modern novel of the Americas. However, Girish Karnad's dramatic monologue bears all the elements of this literary phenomenon in its theme. This short play is a simple tale of a priest caught in an agonized conflict between his devotion to God and his love for a courtesan. However, Karnad's creative genius turns this conflict into a scintillating portrayal of the sexual urge of the priest interspersed with his feelings of religious devotion and familial duties through the technique of magic realism and, in the process, questions god's authority in the post-modern world.

Exposition

The *Flowers* presents a solitary character on the stage. He is a priest. In the play, he presents his monologue through which the entire story of his predicament unfolds. He is about to cast off his life to question the authority of God for something which the almighty had forced upon him. He narrates the tale of his dilemma between religious devotion for God and the erotic love of a courtesan all through his short monologue on the stage. The man lives along with his not too exciting wife, two children, and his parents in a small village. He is the priest of the Shiva Temple, where the local Chieftain is a regular devotee. The priest himself is a fanatical devotee of the Lord. So far in his life, there are only two objects of 'love' – the not so erotic love for his 'plain' wife and the devotional love for the god's inordinately carved 'linga.' Occasionally, he makes love to the unattractive body of his wife at night. But every single day, he worships the Lord by decorating Shivalinga in the temple with meticulous care and with an eye for beauty. It becomes his daily ritual to decorate the linga with beautiful flowers and eye-catching garlands. Right from his childhood, he is in the company of the Lord's 'linga' with this flowering ritual. The religious object thus becomes a part of his self so much so that his wife often associates the linga as his step wife. For the priest, however, it is an unattractive structure just like the body of his wife and unlike any beautiful female in his neighborhood. He voices these feelings in the play when he says:

The linga is not ornately carved like some in the neighborhood. It is essentially a plain phallic stump with a smooth crown and a rough-hewn vulva for the base (Karnad, 2005: 244).

But the priest worships the linga devotedly and finds sensual comforts in its floral decoration that he rarely gets from his ugly wife. The flowers, therefore, become a symbol of his sexual passion. Just like Padmini of *Hayavadana* and Rani of *Naga-Mandala*, the previous plays of Karnad, the protagonist in *Flowers*, too, is devoid of pleasant sexual fulfillment. Through his act of the decoration of linga every day, he provides some relief to these carnal desires. He so tries to invent newer and newer ways to place the garlands over the slippery surface of the linga and pleases his sensitivity as well as the worldly senses of beauty. He gets appreciation all over for this devotion and his ability to adorn the god from the entire village community. He is also revered by the Chieftain, who visits the temple every evening for his evening prayers. The priest thus turns into a legendary florist priest in the village. All goes well until his religious and familial life is disturbed by the appearance of a wealthy and sensuous courtesan, named Chandravati, as a devotee in his temple. A storm brews immediately in the otherwise ritualistic and monotonous life of the priest when he glances furtively at her ravishing, half-bare bosom, which bears a sensuous mole when she offers her prayers to the Lord. At that instance, he feels excited and longs for her. He expresses these feelings in the following words of the monologue:

I wanted her. I had never lusted for a woman before and so felt emasculated by this sudden weakness. Yet I could not control the fire raging in my loins. (245).

Thus, pent up feelings of unsatiated carnal desires of the priest take hold of his religious mind from then onwards. He visits Chandravati's house every evening after the Chieftain's prayer. The courtesan, too, is highly appreciative of the dexterity the priest exhibits while bedecking the linga. She incites the priest to the same mastery in decorating her own body with flowers every night before fulfilling his sexual urge. Soon, the priest's love for the courtesan takes over his love for the Shivalinga. For the first time in his life, a living body replaces an inanimate

religious object as a source of the priest's comfort. However, he carries on his routine rituals with equal passion forged in the temple.

This is a strange situation where the priest protagonist is nearby of the inanimate god with full of devotion along with bubbling carnal desire for the erotic human object. In this connection, Janhavi Acharekar quotes Karnad's words to explain the intricate psyche of the priest. In her review of the *Flowers*, she writes:

"Closeness of eroticism and devotion has always existed in Hindu culture," says Karnad, when asked about his unusual theme. He draws on examples such as the eroticism in the relationship between Krishna and Radha (Acharekar 2007).

Similar is the case with the priest in *Flowers*. However, Chandravati now becomes an object of the priest's first love in the manner of mythical Krishna's love for Radha. Every evening, after the floral decoration of the linga and after the Chieftain's prayer, he heads for the sensuous domain of the courtesan. He decorates her body with the same flower garlands of the linga, even risking his religious and social standing. All the time, the priest is aware of the sins and the blasphemy committed by him for the love of a socially discarded person. He also feels guilty over his infidelity. He expresses this guilt openly when he laments:

But I was distressed at the pain I was causing my wife. I loved her. I knew I had made her a target of vicious gossip. I sensed her anger, her humiliation, and felt ashamed of myself. (Karnad, 2005: 251).

Even then, the priest cannot resist the temptation to see Chandravati. He continues with the daily ritual of decorating first the stone image of God and then beautifying the living body of the courtesan with the same flowers. His devotion to the god now gets a different meaning. Gradually, he disapproves of the very structure of the linga he so loved and worshipped earnestly all through his life. He says: "Why didn't the Lord offer a form which inflamed invention as Chandra did?" (250).

This is quite unusual to a priest who, until then, had devotedly served his god, had offered prayers with strictest possible austerities and had passionately decorated His linga with the garlands of

beautiful flowers. However, now:

The garlands were the same, inevitably, but God was not to be a preliminary model for what I would do with her body. Each day I coaxed the flowers to say something special to God and then something entirely different to Chandra (251).

Very soon, his new and unworldly routine gets a jolt when one day, the Chieftain doesn't arrive for his pooja on time. After a long wait for this human lord, the priest decorates the linga, performs the pooja, goes as usual to Chandravati very late at midnight, and undergoes the decoration of her sensuous body with those flowers. Unfortunately, at that time, he gets the warning of the Chieftain's visit to the temple, and so has to rush back to the temple with the flowers. He had already performed the pooja with those flowers earlier. They were now polluted for the linga worship. To place them on the linga again is the desecration of the religious sanctity. But he has no choice at the moment for fear of the Chieftain's wrath. Therefore, he completes the ritual with those flowers.

However, after the pooja, accidentally, the Chieftain discovers his sin in the form of long hair in one of the flowers. No doubt, it belonged to the courtesan, as suspected. Every single soul in the village is, by now, aware of the priest's illicit affair. In a religious rage, the Chieftain immediately demands an explanation. The priest, in confusion and without any intention of accepting the guilt, utters the words:

"If we believe that God has long hair," I said, "He will have long hair." (257).

Angrily, therefore, the Chief orders him to prove that God indeed has long hair. Now the priest is in deep trouble. He is an ardent devotee of Lord Shiva all these days. Nowadays, he has disgraced himself, and so, has been asked to prove his innocence by a human soul. The situation is akin to the famous ordeal from the *Ramayana* of the mythical Seeta to prove her chastity and the snake ordeal of Rani from Karnad's earlier play, *Naga-Mandala*. It also corresponds to the ordeal of Raju, the protagonist of R.K. Narayana's Sahitya Academy award-winning novel, *The Guide*, where being ordained as a miracle man, Raju had to bring the rains on the earth in the drought-prone region. All these leading literary characters were thought to have sinned in the

eyes of the world. The priest, in Karnad's *flowers*, too, has to undergo the ordeal to prove his purity of priesthood. It is practically impossible to find living hair or any other limb in an inanimate object, even if it is the very image of the god. So, there is nothing left for the priest now but to resort to Lord Shiva once again. For the next twelve days, he prays to the Lord in utmost austerity. That way, the sinned priest cleanses his sin in the presence of the linga. After the twelve days of the ordeal, a miracle comes to the fore, and Divine Magic appears in reality. The Chieftain and the thronged crowd find the inanimate linga sprouting hair like a female head. The priest's innocence, therefore, is proved and is declared as a saint by the gathered crowd.

Although the priest is in a state of shock, he suffers from his guilty conscience. He thinks that he has wronged everyone – his god, his wife, and also his lover. Therefore, he is a sinner in the religious as well as in a worldly sense. Hence, god's boon is unacceptable to the pricked conscience of the priest. His monologue towards the end of the play points out to this tortured predicament when he says:

I am guilty of gross dereliction of sacrilege. Guilty of cruelty to the two women I loved. Why then should God cast His vote on my behalf? Because I loved Him? Has God the right to mock justice in favor of a love for Him? Or does He have a different logic? If He does, it's not fair that He should expect me to abide by it, not demanding to know what that logic is. Such grace is condescension even it comes from God. (260).

This is a strange logic. The first time we see a mortal questioning the almighty for a divine act. This is the power of penmanship by Girish Karnad. Out of common folklore, the dramatist has deftly tackled this post-modern query of the existence of the Divine Authority and dramatized the situation to present such a confused state of the human predicament in the post-modern world. An ordinary human being is shown here questioning the very authority, whom he always revered, prayed, and always seek His grace in his day to day problems. The priest, in this instance, is not happy for the divine intervention in his mundane affairs. He was honest in accepting his sin before god. While praying for the ordeal, he had

not expected the god to help him to the extent where he would feel guilty and powerless to announce the sin openly. In his own eyes, he thinks that he did not deserve it. Therefore, in a great state of mental agony and with indignation, he asks God: "Why has God done this to me? I had only asked Him to give me the courage to live in disgrace, for I knew I had tainted myself" (259).

The priest here considers that he is not worthy of the burden of such a divine grace. Therefore, he wanted to live on his terms and not on the terms dictated by the benevolent God. The burden of sainthood, despite being morally and physically a sinner, is too much for him to cope in this world. Hence, finally, he seeks death to question the very authority of God and seek answers for the injustice that he thinks was forced upon him by the almighty.

Conclusion

The play thus ends without providing any answer to the dilemma faced by the priest, an ordinary mortal of flesh, blood, and desires. This is an interrogative age where man questions anyone anything. The world of folklore is also no exception. It brings forward the realistic feelings and etching desires faced by an ordinary individual of the society. Therefore, Karnad's *Flowers* is such a fantastic world where the fantasy turns into a post-modern reality. Initially, the dramatist caricatured the priest at a higher, venerable state of a moral human being due to his sincere devotion to god. In reality, however, the author proves that, albeit being a priest, he is also a very ordinary folk with worldly wants and personal desires, a representative of the twentieth century India where there are more problems and questions than solutions and answers. Deepa Punjani also presents such truth when she says:

The priest's passionate worship of the non-living 'lingam' and the living 'yoni' underlies the oneness of the Shiv-Shakti principle. Still, in this case, it unearths the superficial but deeply entrenched modes of thought (Punjani).

Shanta Gokhale, in her review of the play, raises a similar argument in her comments:

The ultimate question that *Flowers* poses, however, is not about the priest's social-sexual dilemma, but about how he sees god, and himself

about god. . . Why have you blessed me despite my transgressions, he asks, forgetting that man cannot ask God to explain himself. Rational questions shatter faith, which is the very center of the man-god relationship as envisaged by man. Without faith, there's no hope (Gokhale).

Therefore, in *Flowers*, Karnad dramatizes this feeling of the faithlessness of the folkloric priest through the post-modern literary perception of magic realism. Since the antiquity, questioning to god for His dictates was assumed to be a religious taboo and a sin. But in the post-modern era, people are openly discussing and asking questions about the very existence of God and or His dictates. For them, their feelings, desires, and way of life are more tolerable than an ancient belief in god and god's ideals. The modern man exemplified by the priest in this play, loses his faith in divinity and creates his world full of fantasy, beauty, urges, and passions. That way, Karnad succeeds in dramatizing the post-modern belief or rather the nonchalant belief of the existence of God and His omnipresence through this folkloric tale of magic realism.

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