

SELF OR “THE OTHER”: THE FEMALE NARRATIVES IN GIRISH KARNAD’S NAGAMANDALA AND BALI: THE SACRIFICE

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DOI
[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i2.2024.2121](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i2.2024.2121)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

The paper resolves to study the female characters of Rani and the Queen in the plays of Girish Karnad’s *Nagamandala* and *Bali: The Sacrifice* respectively. Regional theatre received a new impetus after independence from the British rule. Karnad’s plays due to their English translations have been well received by the reading public and also been performed at national and international platforms. The paper, seeks to establish, the predicament of domestic women as reflected in the text of plays mentioned. The plays will be analyzed in the intersection of Judith Butler’s concept of “performativity” as enumerated in her book *Gender Trouble* and Michel Foucault’s precept of the “self” as enumerated in the chapter “Technologies of the Self”. The paper will start drawing its argument from the idea of Judith Butler wherein she states that one’s gender is constructed through one’s own repetitive performance of it. The narrative of the main female characters in the said plays will provide the ground to find out a way to deal with the trouble that lies with “the other”.

Keywords: Gender, Performativity, Self, The Other, Body, Power, Subjection

1. INTRODUCTION

Girish Karnad had been the most renowned personality in the field of playwriting and the performing arts. His plays, though written primarily in Kannada, are translated into English and other languages. The great playwright had himself translated his plays into English. His international fame rests on his plays like *Yayati* (Karnad,1961), *Tuglaq* (Karnad,1964), *Hayavadana* (Karnad,1971), *Anju Mallige* (Karnad,1977), *Hittina Hunja* (Karnad,1980), *Nagamandala* (Karnad,1988), *Tale-Danda* (Karnad,1990) and *Agni Mattu Male* (Karnad,1995) and *Wedding Album* (Karnad, 2009). Most of his plays have been translated into English. His plays are well marked by plot construction, characterization, song, spectacle, symbolism, use of myths and folktales, reinterpretation of history, depiction of social and psychological situations. His plays are also well marked for their technicalities and enriched with the foreign influence. As said by R.K. Dhawan, “Girish Karnad is the foremost playwright of contemporary Indian stage. He has given the Indian theatre a richness that could probably be equated only with his talents as an actor- director.” (Dodiya,2009) The beauty of his plays lies in the traditional stories woven around a modern theme that seeks to transform our value system through a better understanding of the requirements of the changing times. The eternal passions of love, hatred and conflict along-with man’s ever going struggle to achieve perfection form the crux of his plays.

Nagamandala is based on folk- tale. The play has a story teller who has to wake up whole night in order to avoid death and he tells the story of a girl named Rani. The young girl, Rani, is brought by Appanna to his house after their

marriage. He keeps his wife always locked and does not allow her to talk to anyone. Kurudevva, the blind-old woman in the play comes to Rani's rescue by giving her a magical root to be given to Appanna in his food. Nothing happens with the first root as it was small in size which only makes Appanna, unconscious. The next root is so big that it turns the entire curry red, which frightens Rani and forces her to throw that curry into the anthill just outside the house rather than making her husband suffer. Kurudevva had received those magical roots from a saint who bestowed his blessings on the blind girl when she served food to the saint. Rani dismissed the idea of getting her husband back from the clutches of a prostitute with the help of this magical root. Even the whereabouts of her husband, Appanna, had been informed to her by Kurudevva. Kurudevva informs Rani that her husband is in the clutches of the prostitute. Rani finds herself isolated from rest of the world and keeps on talking to herself all alone as she is made to spend nights alone in a house locked from outside. Her husband comes to take bath and eat food only during the day and leaves her locked the next day.

The conflict in the play arises when the Cobra after having consumed the curry mixed with the magical root comes into the locked house and falls in love with Rani (the potentiality of the root predicted by Kurudevva). The Cobra takes the shape of Appanna and tries to be amorous to Rani and no doubt, within days, Rani falls in love with this cobra that looks like her husband, Appanna. Rani is pregnant and she is dragged to the village panchayat by her husband, Appanna, as he claims that he has never touched his wife. The village Panchayat also wants Rani to prove her purity by touching the red-hot iron rod or putting her hand in the anthill which has a Cobra inside and coming out clean without being bit by the snake if she claims that she is indeed pure.

The play, *Bali: The Sacrifice*, comprises of four characters namely the Queen, the King, the Queen-Mother and the Mahout. The Queen is a Jain and she marries the Hindu Kshatriya King. The King converts into Jain as he loves his wife but he is unable to come to terms with this conversion. Queen is continuously derided for her non-violence towards living beings as she marries into a Kshatriya family wherein killing of animals for sacrifice as well as violence is least thought about as a harm to one's existence. The Queen is also chased for not bearing a child. The Queen loses her baby. There is an undefined attraction in the Mahout's voice who sings in the deserted temple and pulls the Queen towards the temple in the dead of the night. The Queen is aware of herself being in the arms of the ugly Mahout. The King chases the Queen and reaches the temple. He fails to find a reason for the Queen's betrayal of him. A sacrifice is suggested by the Queen-Mother to the King in order to evade the sin of infidelity committed by the Queen. At first, the Queen agrees to follow King's wish to perform the sacrifice but she decides to end up her life by piercing the sword inside herself. The Queen's inability to bear a male heir and her infidelity are the points of conflict in the play.

This paper is an attempt to analyze the situations of Rani as in *Nagamandala* and the Queen in *Bali: The Sacrifice* in the light of the concept of 'Performativity' as enumerated in *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler and intersecting this discussion with Michel Foucault's essay on "Technologies of the Self" in the book *The Essential Foucault*. The paper seeks to establish the much talked about debate on gender as an irresolvable issue and the role of the concepts of "the other" (Rabinow & Rose, 2003,126) and the "self" (Rabinow & Rose,2003,146-69) reminding one of the 'Care of the self' (Rabinow & Rose,2003,155) as an essential ethic of life. The talk on gender will not render it ineffective but an understanding of the concepts of the self and the other are essential to bring changes in an issue that no outside agency can resolve. The words that follow form the basis of entire discussion in this paper are the concepts of "the other" and 'self' as enumerated by Michel Foucault.

A cursory glance at some research papers is essential before the discussion of the issue of gender. Asa Carlson's paper "*Butler's Unduly Worry about Foucault: The Paradoxically Constituted and Constructed Body*" (2008) discusses Judith Butler's discontentment about Michel Foucault's discussion of body as incoherent and tries to sought out the debate whether culture plays any role in the construction of a body or are these both separate entities. (74-90) S. Paneerselvam's research paper, "*A Critique of Foucault's Power and Knowledge*" (2000), in his attempt to evaluate the precepts of power and knowledge as enumerated by Michel Foucault has tried to say that Foucault failed to give the solution to local modalities and that Foucault never worked upon the modalities of local struggles (13-28). The research paper by Li He, "*The Construction of Gender: Judith Butler and Gender Performativity*" (2017) focuses on the idea that gender is constructed by society and is not innate in a human being. The research paper by Dr. Sandeep Kumar Sharma, "*Epitome: International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*" (2018) discusses the precepts of power and knowledge by Michel Foucault with respect to the production of knowledge through "cultural and social institutions" Shikha Sharma in her paper "*Michel Foucault and Judith Butler: The Entwined Twins of Power Politics*" (2020) discusses gender with respect to discourses like psychoanalysis, postmodernism and post-structuralism. She studies the social status of women with

respect to these theories. The paper “*Girish Karnad’s Plays: Mythology Versus Reality*” (2022) written by talks about the stereotyped roles of men and women and adds that women are bound to be confined to home and men are meant for the outer world and nothing is going to alter this situation. (197-203)

Judith Butler’s writes, “... performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, ...” (Butler, 2016, xv). An act of being oneself is repeated in day- to - day life and it becomes a ritual or a norm and becomes an inseparable part of oneself. Butler also says, “...that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body...” (Butler, 2016, xv) Our performance of our gender is in a continuity and defines the body that we owe and are understood by everything that lies outside to our existence.

Gender is something, Judith Butler continues, created by its own performance. It does not exist before or after our acts. Performativity, according to Judith Butler, is situated outside. (Butler, 2016, xv) It is the repeated act that stays as a part of our existence and comes to define us. The effects of this repetition and our acceptance of it as a permanent part of our identity leaves a scare scope for our meaningful existence. Performativity does not lie as the internal essence of gender but is actually a series of acts that reflects through one’s gender. Performativity is something that leads to the construction of gender through a repetitive reminder of norms. Something one acts repetitively, then, becomes an “internal” feature of oneself. Butler questions the existence and role of ‘psyche’ (Butler, 2016, xvi) as its place seems to be occupied by the “interiorization” (Butler, 2016, xvi) of repetitive acts by a body. Butler relates this question to the “... interiorization that a psyche performs.” (Butler, 2016, xvi) Whatever a body performs remains inside the surface of its psyche in the forms of norms. She raises the query of female being “constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body...” (Butler, 2016, xxxi) Butler also holds the contention in her book, *Bodies that Matter* that there is no ‘I’ or “we” preceding the process of gendering and so to say this ‘I’ or “we” exists only within the meshes of gender relations. (Butler, 2017, xvi) She also holds the contention that this performativity exists prior to “... one’s arrival on the scene” (Butler, 2016, xvi) Even to get the recognition of one’s gender in a social construct displaces the biological construction.

Gender is constricted under the regime of power and discourse. Language constructs categories. Cultural practices also stamp these distinctions. Butler states two terms ‘politics’ and ‘representation’ (Butler, 2016, 2) Representation makes possible the knowability of the existence of female gender and also determines to establish the function of a language which can either disclose or misrepresent the assumptions about the category of women. If performativity is a repetition of oppression that interiorizes certain gender norms, then it is possible to ensure liberty from this trap that one finds oneself into.

It is the political system that leads to a discursive formation of women as “subject’ and tends to emancipate it also. (Butler, 2017, 3) Further, the “exclusionary practices” (Butler, 2016, 3) are themselves based on the juridical structures as their foundation. Gender, Butler says, is itself enmeshed in the categories of political and cultural intersections in which it is produced. “Gender” is a cultural construct (Butler, 2016) that rules out the possibility of its fixity. Butler agrees with Simone de Beauvoir’s words that “One is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one.” (Butler, 2016, 11) and adds that one becomes a woman under cultural compulsion. (Butler, 2016, 11)

Body is interpreted by cultural meanings. Body acts as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed. As per Butler, the body itself is a construction. (Butler, 2016, 12) There is a cultural attribution of ‘mind’ to the male and the ‘body’ to that of the female. Women exist only in the physical part of their existence and logic and thinking have never been assigned any role with respect to women. The ‘body’ is the only source of a woman’s identity. It becomes a compulsion to accept such an identity resulting from socio- cultural milieu. The patriarchal structures forms patterns of thinking and feeling in order to have their way of set-up by encouraging such political structures that try to recreate such identities that are found to be most suitable.

Judith Butler’s contention of the body as a social construct and body as passive medium in intersection with Michel Foucault’s concept of body and the soul offers a good insight with respect to the conduct of women to the question of the cultural construct of gender. According to Judith Butler, a soul differs from a body as there is no identification of the soul by gender. A soul can only be viewed by the owner of the body. Michel Foucault’s essay “Technologies of the Self” (Rabinow & Rose, 2003, 146) offers a discussion on “ethics” that are meant to be practices of freedom. By the word ‘ethics’ he meant our very existence and behavior. Foucault included our way of clothing, our appearance, gait and almost everything that defined us as an individual with a certain identity. When we deal with what Foucault calls as ‘self’, is a training of the self by oneself. He categorizes this self into three categories out of which ‘Technologies of Power’ (Rabinow

& Rose,2003,146) will be discussed in this paper. This category of the care of the self, determines the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends of domination which, Foucault, calls as objectivizing of the subject. The concept of the care of the self, according to Foucault, is, "... to effect by their own means or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom perfection, or immortality." (Rabinow & Rose,2003,147) Foucault opined that " We are the inheritors of a social morality that seeks the rules for acceptable behavior in relation with others." (Rabinow & Rose,2003,149) Foucault gave importance to the words "knowledge of the self" (Rabinow & Rose,2003, 149) as something of great importance in understanding oneself in relation to those around us. Self, according to Foucault, stood for the notion of identity. A knowledge of oneself or knowing oneself means to become an object of the quest of concern for self. This was not only a concern for the conduct of oneself but also a transformation in our existence as a being so as to make the best of our life. Foucault's concept of "self" referred to the concern for the inner self that is the soul. Even Butler maintains that "...power acts not only on the body but in the body" (Butler,2017,89). Soul could take care of itself through contemplation. Foucault's concept of care of the self, took into account an awareness of other relationships also (Rabinow & Rose,2003) and what Butler also calls "Reflective self-relation" (Butler,1997,22) It aimed at justice, both ethical and political. This knowledge of an estimate of oneself in relation to others help one acquire the skill to free oneself from immediate politics of power.

Rani in *Nagamandala* and the *Queen in Bali: The Sacrifice* are the female protagonist in these plays. Rani is brought by Appanna as a young bride when the play starts and she is made to understand that her role in Appanna's house and in his life would be decided by Appanna himself. He is very clear about deciding Rani's conduct and makes Kurudevva understand in his own rough way.

APPANNA: "...She won't talk to anyone. And no one need to talk to her." (34)

RANI: "They call me Rani." (31)

KURRUDEVVA: "Didn't want to tell you. There is a woman, a bazar woman... your husband in her clutches." (36)

RANI: "Suppose something happens to my husband? What will my fate be? (39)

It is a typical Indian household that Rani enters into where she is not aware of the ordeal that was in store for her. She wakes up nights all alone in the house and trying to figure out her new life after marriage. She fails to understand why she has been locked in a house and what might be the whereabouts of her husband. She is forbidden by Appanna to question anything and is directed to prepare the food when he comes back home for lunch and leave her locked again till the following day.

RANI: "...Shall I serve the food?" (39)

RANI: "...Spending the whole day by myself is rotting my brain." (42)

The trouble starts when Rani becomes pregnant and Appanna, her actual husband has never touched her.

RANI: "We are going to have a baby" (50)

Rani's performativity is confined within the four walls of a house that belongs to Appanna and she has been kept there locked which best suits Appanna. Her life revolves around serving lunch to her husband. Rani is never allowed to question norms set up by Appanna after their marriage. She is not even allowed to speak or to look outside the window.

The Queen, in Bali: The Sacrifice, marries the King, who no doubt respects her religion but is unable to forgo his way of life which includes sacrificing animals and violence in general. The King is also unable to contain his mother, the Queen Mother in her callous and indifferent attitude to his wife, the Queen. There is a never- ending struggle in the palace where the Queen fails to understand the need of violence towards animals for fulfilling human ends as also her inability to give birth to a male heir or a child at all, lands her up in a conundrum of troubles that includes her physical contact with the Mahout. The Queen fails to share a meaningful marriage with the King as the latter is unable to fill the vacuum inside her due to her miscarriages.

QUEEN: "...My coming here has nothing to do with my husband. He is a marvelous person- affectionate, gentle, trusting." (79)

QUEEN: "No, I came here because I heard you sing. I had to come ..." (82)

QUEEN: "...I was just a woman, any woman. Now he can gloat." (87)

QUEEN: "...For one night, I was nameless." (88)

QUEEN: "...This garden is only for girls..." (89)

QUEEN: "...Then I could make love to you-for
its own sake-..." (95)

QUEEN: "..., tradition can be given up..." (96)

KING: "...She was under such pressure to produce an heir..." (99)

MOTHER: "You became the laughing stock of the world. You had to swallow public
humiliation." (100)

The Queen loves the King but she is unable to understand his hesitation towards controlling the violence towards animals in his palace. The Queen is not interested to perform any sacrifice of an animal in order to bear a child. This sounds as a pressure on her. The Queen is overwhelmed by the mesmerizing song of the Mahout and is unable to contain herself and goes with the flow where she finds herself in the arms of an ugly Mahout in a dilapidated temple. She is not at peace with herself due to the tension created by her failing pregnancies and her life of no violence towards any living being. The Queen's mind is full of violence where she is unable to let go the influence of the very idea of violence from the inner recesses of her mind. The Queen fails to perceive that her role is that of a provider and not a seeker. Her desire to respect freedom of mind and soul for herself as well as for others do not allow her to fall in tune with those around her.

Gender, as enumerated in both the female narratives, becomes an inseparable part of the life of Rani and the Queen. The act of performing an assigned role according to norms that are an inseparable part of one's life determines the impress of one's gender. It is precisely that part of their identity that they find it difficult to part with or to say get rid of. The internalization of such norms can very well be seen in the way that Rani does not question Appanna about the restrictions placed upon her and similarly, the Queen is under constant pressure of the King and her mother-in-law regarding her conduct and Jain faith. The very identity of a woman's body is a result of the repetitions of her expected role in a social construct. Now the question remains that what has been interiorized and remembered in a certain space in one's psyche, why has that self, forgotten itself? If it is repeatedly possible to practice one's oppression as an expression of self (as claimed by Butler), it is all the more possible to practice one's liberty or just as simple as being oneself. Butler does not find any fixity about gender norms and oppression also cannot be imagined to last forever. It is never a trouble to transform a pattern of thinking by keeping progress and dignity in one's mind. Foucault in his essay "Technologies of the Self" (Rabinow & Rose, 2003) impresses upon the fact of the significance of one's being that caters to the larger goals of a care of the self by taking into account one's body, thoughts and soul into consideration. It is the liberty of thought and the existence of a body in consonance with a happy and free soul that Michel Foucault held as the greatest principle of individual freedom. It becomes difficult for politics and representation to stop an individual from acquiring the skill to determine one's freedom and happiness.

Rani decided to speak for herself in the village panchayat when she is dragged in front of wide eyes of the crowd. She refuses to accept the blame of infidelity forced upon her by Appanna. After her ordeal in front of the village, she comes out victorious and it marks the beginning of a new Rani, a confident wife and a loving mother. The Queen in *Bali: The Sacrifice*, does not conform to the animal sacrifice as in the concluding scene of the play, the King demands a sacrifice of a cock made of dough whereas the Queen could actually feel the cock alive and she prefers to pierce the sword inside herself rather than committing the crime of killing an animal as well as she outrageously rejects the spontaneous moments with the ugly Mahout as sin.

Both the plays under discussion have been replete with the idea of self as representative of one's identity that sought a better understanding of oneself in relation to those around oneself. It is a quest of oneself and one's journey of self-knowledge that could lead to one's transformation to a better and a happy individual. If performativity of subjugation can lead to gender as a painful issue, then performativity of a care of the self and an understanding of our relations with respect to others can be looked at to reach at a better analysis and a conduct of oneself. It is the sheer beauty of our being in this world with our idea of happiness and wisdom.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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