

Unravelling Sublime Patriarchy in the Select Literary Fiction

Mrs. Ranisha R
Assistant Professor of English
Department of Basic Science & Humanities
College of Forestry
Keladi Shivappa Nayaka University of Agricultural & Horticultural Sciences,
Shivamogga
Email id: ranishar@uahs.edu.in
Mob.no: 9886638022

Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala*, M.K. Indira's *Phaniyamma* and Sara Aboobacker's *Breaking Ties* are works that exemplify the authors' literary brilliance and the conviction to address the central concerns of the society. The narratives, categorically fictional novels, portray the darker side of patriarchy through plots that reflect the early 19th and 20th century society. The novels portray the voiceless, Gramsci's 'the subaltern'. Antonio Gramsci coined the term 'subaltern' to refer to the class of people subordinated culturally and economically. His 'subaltern' referred to slaves, peasants, religious groups and women. Marcus E Green in his work quoted Gramsci's concept of subalternity as a mechanism that functions at the junctures of the variations of race, class, gender, culture, religion, nationalism, and colonialism functioning within an ensemble of socio-political and economic relations" (Green 2011: 399-400).

The protagonists' of the aforesaid works are representatives of 'subaltern' classes who are voiceless through the narratives. Rani in *Nagamandala*, Phaniyamma in *Phaniyamma* and Jamila and Nadira of *Breaking Ties* epitomize the female passivity as the norm of woman's existence. Kate Millet's *Theory of Sexual Politics* (1969) discusses the ideological, biological, sociological and class factors that normalizes female passivity, submissiveness and subjectivity. The essay examines the obtainment of male power through consent over force as a result of ideological conditioning. The socialization process encourages the adoption of temperaments among the two sexes that are conducive to the upkeep of patriarchal hierarchy. Temperament involves molding the personality (sexes) in correspondence to the value system set by the dominant groups that facilitates a hierarchical structure,



positioning themselves in comfortable position over the 'other'. And hence men (male sex anatomically) adopt aggression, wisdom and control as their inherent traits. It is further strengthened by the social roles decreeing superior and inferior status accordingly. Sex roles for female relegate them to domestic servility and males to intellectual assertiveness. While women role-play is indicative of their biological body and experiences, men's role-play is located in the realm of intellectual growth and achievement. Women's role play may be equated with animal-like status as her intellectual capability is less talked about. She is merely associated with her role of child-birth and attendance to infants/elderly as nurturers and care-givers/care-takers.

Socialisation process involving temperament, role and status is psychological, sociological and political imperative that normalizes female suppression and male dominance. Superior physical musculature, a biological origin, is exploited towards the assertion of male superiority and female inferiority. However, Kate Millet' exploration of the sexual politics calls out the political imperative in the appropriation of 'position' of sexes in society that is beyond biological factors. The socialization process, consequentially, lends legitimacy and normalizes the uneven status/exploitation of one sex by the other.

Years of suppression in the pretext of natural superiority of men found itself a subject in the fiction and narratives written by the social visionaries. Girish Karnad's Nagamandala, a tale drawn from folklores, speaks of women's victimization in a phallogocentric society. Nagamandala, a two-act play written by Karnad was published in 1988. The play intelligently weaves together folk tale, social morals and the contemporary issues of the then society. The play, in two-acts, sets the tone of the play in the very first act. The flames are personified as female characters. The plot of the second act is presented by flame personified as female narrator. The introducing Act One acquaints the readers to a man (unnamed) who is cursed to die if unable to remain awake one night in that particular month. He overhears the conversation of a flame who mentions a woman desperate to tell a story that needs an audience to pass it on to the posterity. In his desperation to remain alive, he chose to listen to the story with a promise to pass it on to the generation. The beginning act brings the readers to certain social concerns. The man, in the play, is reflective of all the contemporary writers whose lack of skills to write interesting theatrical plays denote the doomsday of good playwrights among males. Further, the choice of female



character as the narrator of an interesting anecdote may be intentional. Creative act of writing and staging plays, an intellectual activity, was considered a male domain. A woman's artistry at story narration is deployed through female narration of the play; and hence challenging phallogocentric assumption of woman's incapacity in creative and imaginative rendition.

The Second Act introduces the readers to a male-driven society that turns a blind eye to the regressive patriarchal ways of life. The play centers on the lives of Appanna and Rani, a newly-wed couple. However, an aggressive and obstinate Appanna continues his illegitimate affair with a concubine and doesn't enter a nuptial life with young, naive Rani. He made visits every day for lunch and returned after locking Rani in home. Appanna's hostile behavior kept the neighborhood aloof away from any possible societal interaction with his household. Kurudavva, a close acquaintance of Appanna's mother, visits Rani knowing her plight. A blind woman carried on shoulders by her son Kappanna attempts to resolve the issue by providing Rani with two magical roots. The roots, a drug that would help her win the love of her husband. The small root doesn't make a difference. Adding the big root turns the curry flamboyant. Worried about the noticeable difference in curry, Rani pours it away on the ant-hill. Naga residing in the ant-hill falls in love with Rani and thus starts the midnight tryst with Rani in the guise of Appanna. Rani is surprised with the changes in Appanna and attempts at knowing the completely contrasting behavior of Appanna during the lunch hour and night. However, she is discouraged from probing into the differences. Days pass and Rani becomes pregnant about which she informs Appanna (Naga) who responds indifferently while real Appanna is infuriated. He holds her guilty of adultery which Rani didn't understand. He beats her and decides a trial before the elders to find the truth of her pregnancy. Appanna (Naga) in the night, tells Rani that it's inevitable for Rani to avoid the trial and prove her innocence. Further, he insists Rani that she choose the snake ordeal to prove her chastity and insists on speaking the truth. And warns her that she might be bitten by the snake if she spoke otherwise. Rani comes out unscathed after the ordeal and the elders command Appanna to serve her the rest of his life. Appanna treats her like a Goddess thereafter and they are blessed with a son in due course of time. The play is given different endings based on the reactions of the unnamed man and other flames. One of the endings is the serpent sacrifices itself and is cremated by Rani's son on her insistence. The unhappy ending was replaced by an ending wherein Rani



allows the living serpent in to stay in her tresses and claims that her hair is symbolic of marital bliss.

The play undoubtedly kept the readers engaged in its staging. As a matter of fact, the chapter's focus here is to draw attention to the misogynist shades of a patriarchal society. Though a story drawn on folklore with essentially supernatural elements, one can't ignore the suppression of female voices that largely is treated normal in a male-dominated society. A woman is treated less than a human being and is treated another piece of furniture brought home. A newly wed Rani is locked inside the home and denied any form of interactions with her maternal home, even neighborhood. Surprisingly, the parents too don't attempt to rescue the child from the shackles of an unhappy wedded life. A reminder of temporary state of a young girl in her own home. She is treated a commodity traded in the marriage and the buyer is granted absolute autonomy on her existence thereafter. The domestic abuse and the inhuman treatment received by Rani don't find a mention among the elderly and her acquaintances. Nevertheless, she is compelled into a trial for a mere allegation by her husband, by the elderly and the learned men of the same society. The double standards of sexual morality of the society is explicit in the scene wherein a woman is subjected to trial on a mere accusation of the husband; while the husband's infamous visits to the concubine remains unaddressed by the society. While a man expects fidelity of the woman, man's polygamous affair is naturalized and treated normal. He is unquestioned. Rani's subjection to snake ordeal is a reiteration of Sita's fire ordeal from the epic *The Ramayana*. The portrayal of ideal 'feminine' virtues in the holy epics through idealization of Sita and Sati, is a manifestation of patriarchy in its absolute subtleties. The abhorrence for woman as a consequence of intimacy outside marriage is treated with naturalness. A woman's respectability is locked in her 'body' and a man's respectability is never at stake. Being born a man itself yields him respect disregard of his conduct, appearance and behavior.

Girish Karnad, in his own narrative style with an embellishment of supernatural elements, creates a defiant woman who finds the uninhibited love, by transgressing the patriarchal boundaries of imposed chastity and fidelity. Rani's blissful marital life as the plot concludes, despite an illicit connection, naturalizes a woman's need for physical intimacy and rightfulness to live the life she chooses to live. Appanna is reduced to a helpless man who is compelled into living a life restraining the aggressive masculinity within. Contrary to the societal norms that holds a physical



intimacy outside the institution of marriage as a sin and religious faiths that advocate singular devotion in a woman for her husband, Rani's decision to have her son perform funeral rites for the dead snake (one of the endings of the play) or allowing the living serpent to live ever in her beautiful tresses is symbolic of her fidelity to a man apart from her husband. A naïve girl like Rani grows to be the harbinger for all those women who strive to seek happiness by transcending the dictates of the patriarchal society. Disregard of the differing concluding acts of the play, it may be noted that the phallogocentric culture unleashes unrestrained aggressive masculine impulses victimizing women in a patriarchal society. Karnad skillfully uses inanimate objects and serpent to advocate a way of life that is not phallogocentric. Rani's beautiful life despite her liaison outside marriage is a purposeful intervention in the story to evidence the naturalness of woman's sexual needs and right to a respectful and blissful life.

M.K. Indira wrote her magnum opus *Phaniyamma* in Kannada which was later translated into English. It is claimed to be a reconstruction of the real life experience of a child widow, Ancheyatte, an elderly acquaintance of the author herself. *Phaniyamma*, despite being the reflection of a real story, is a narrative that may be referred to as a documentary of exploitation of subaltern women in an Indian traditional society. The social and religious set up were essentially patriarchal wherein the 'feminine' was suppressed beyond human level. The central character in the novel is Phaniyamma. Even as astrologer predicts, "lifelong bliss and the birth of eight sons" (Phaniyamma, pg. 28) a long beautiful nuptial life, Phaniyamma is widowed at the age of nine as her 12 year old husband Nanjunda dies of snake-bite. Bound to the custom, the village elder and the elder of the house, who stand in for the patriarchal power systems, collude helplessly to make the kid a widow, dressed in a white sari, after cleaning her kumkum and shattering her bracelets.

"Since the girl is a child, remove the signs of marriage on the eleventh day and have her wear a white sari. Don't touch her hair. She shouldn't show her face to anyone until she menstruates. Nor can she perform any 'madi' task. The fourth day after she menstruates, her hair must be shaved off and she must be made to take up 'madi' for the rest of her life. If these instructions aren't followed to the letter the entire household will be excommunicated" (ibid, pg.46)

The nine-year-old Phaniyamma sobbed when her lovely bangles were broken, not



realising her terrible fate thereafter. When she starts her period at the age of fourteen, they have her head shaved, transform her into a "madi" (cleansed) lady, and is joined into the community of elderly widows at home. She experiences a sort of conclusion to her life. All the joys of life are shunned for her. However, she continues to live a strict austere life of a widow assisting other women in childbirths, marriages and other ceremonies. She survived on meagre meals. Yet, living in a joint family, she experiences all the walks of life in its passivity. Her repugnance for physical intimacy and child birth brings the readers in confrontation with a new woman who believes in an existence beyond man-woman communion. Phaniyamma is less heard but her inner feelings interrogates the patriarchal set up that is highly hypocritical and vindictively immoral. In her silence, she defies the worldly belief of inevitability of man-woman's co-existence. Phaniyamma, a high-caste widow assists Sinki, a low-caste woman and a woman from Christian community in the child-birth. She turns a blind eye to the physical liaison between Putta Jois and Subbi, an illicit affair outside the institution of marriage. Subbi was abandoned by her husband alleging barrenness, at her incapacity to mother a child. She stands by Dakshayni who rebels against the imposed widowhood after her husband's death. Phaniyamma's respectability in the society was avowing to her observance of widowhood without defiance. Hence, her silent disobedience of irrational religious beliefs and practices, exploitative caste system and regressive sexual hegemony doesn't stir a commotion and her decisions were accepted rather unwillingly. Even as the narrative at the outset appears to be the glorification of a woman who comply with the societal norms, the novel imperceptibly surfaces a woman who interrogates the patriarchal set up that strangulates a woman alone in the name of custom and tradition. Phaniyamma wonders at the 'impurity' of menstruating blood. A child born in the menstrual blood is divine. But, a woman must observe 'madi' only the first three days of menstruation. The spaces allotted for woman during the madi evokes disgust in Phaniyamma. Putta Jois and Subbi make love in one such space. It stirs the thoughts of hypocrisy practiced among men in Phaniyamma. A man's belief in caste and impurity of menstruating women in broad daylight looked obsolete during the darker hours when they have their secret midnight trysts with other women and women of lower caste. Her eyes constantly questioned the vicissitudes of community and its hollow practices. The double standards of sexual morality, as represented in *Nagamandala*, is drawn into question in *Phaniyamma* too.



Phaniyamma's choice of tales speaks her stance on patriarchy. She disagreed with Sita and Sati, and hence narrated Panchatantra tales and tales from Arabian nights to the young children of the household. "Some good for nothings write the Puranas and we useless ones believe them. That is all there is to that." (ibid, pg.119). She couldn't accept the ordeals of women whose sanctity of 'body' was held of prime significance. She found it bizarre that a woman had to testify herself pure each time unlike a man who is not questioned for polygamous affairs. A man's entitlement to polygamous practice in a patriarchal set up is atypical of phallocentric culture that grants absolute power for male. Phaniyamma even transgresses the caste prejudices by assisting women from other community and caste in child birth. Her life of self-effacement transforms the white attire of a widow into the wings of an angel who is more human and practical in her thoughts on caste, religion and absurd societal ways. M.K. Indira lends a rebellious voice for Phaniyamma in her penetrative silence. The second-half of the narrative demonstrates the rise of Phaniyamma as a woman with progressive mind-set, in contrast to the regressive mind-set of male pundits. The protagonist of the narrative testifies to the exploitative side of patriarchy and unbundles the hypocrisies and pretentiousness of the patriarchal set up.

Sara Aboobacker's *Breaking Ties* originally written in Kannada as *Chandragiriya Theeradalli* too addresses the issues of women in Muslim community. The defenceless young daughter of an egocentric and autocratic father, Nadira, is the tragic focal point of the fictional story, which depicts her tragic situation. Nadira is wedded to Rashid and lives a blissful life in Kavalli unlike her mother Fatimma whose memory of her wedding to Mohammad Khan sends chill down her spine even after decades. Mohammad Khan willfully destroys his own daughter's marriage on account of his unrestrained masculine superiority and for personal gain. He does it so as he considers himself insulted, that his son-in-law denied to provide him with financial support when he needed it to arrange dowry for his second daughter Jamila. He avenges himself by slyly obtaining the talaq from Rashid and thereby separating the devoted pair. However, Rashid plans for their child to be abducted in order to compel Nadira to come back to him. Nadira, on the other hand, is devastated by it. She is unable to leave her spouse or disobey her father. In the end, Mahammad Khan,



who has been frightening the women in the home, understands Nadira's suffering and is eager for the split pair to get back together. However, religion is obstructing them this time. In accordance with the tenets of Islam, Nadira's marriage to Rashid is contingent upon her marriage to another man and receiving a talaq from him. Nadira grudgingly agrees, despite her fear, because she wants to return to her husband and child. However, the image of the man she would be spending a night with, so overcomes her with fear and misery that she kills herself by jumping into the pond next to the mosque. What strikes the readers through the narrative is the complacency of the female figures. Their responses to the subjugation is reflective of the grooming they received since their young days.

Simone de Beauvoir is quoted to have said "One is not born but becomes a woman" signaling the socialization of sexes into the gendered identities. Nadira and Fatima can typically be referred to as classic examples of the 'beings' who strictly adhere to the behavioral patterns ascribed to their genders. A young Fatima was beaten into a physical relationship on her wedding night. Since that day, she is a victim of domestic abuse. The institution of marriage in patriarchal society is transactional, wherein the father trades his daughter to a man who becomes the absolute master and owns her enough to do anything and everything with her. Fatima was forced into a nuptial relationship physically both by her father who carries her to husband's room; and by Mohammed Khan who forces himself upon her brutally. The normalization of sexual violence in a marital relationship is evident in the indifferent attitude of Fatima's maternal ties to her victimized life at Khan's home. She is forced to sever connections with her maternal home fearing the wrath of Mohammad Khan. However, Fatima sounds grateful to Khan for reasons sanctioned by the society. Even as Khan's act of rescuing her from drowning had more to do with financial gains, Fatima looks up to him as savior. Further, she is grateful to him for not re-marrying another woman as she was only able to mother daughters and not sons. The phallogocentric culture is evident in the celebration of the birth of sons and not daughters. Alongside, man's polygamous life is treated normal and nothing sinful. Hence, Khan who chooses to live his life with a single woman is treated noble and kind even as he ill-treated and abused her the whole life. The latter part of the narrative introduces the readers to Rashid who stood in stark opposition to the violent Mohammed Khan. He wins the love of Nadira before the conjugal night and



treated her with respect and reverence till the unfortunate incident. He even attempts to teach her read and write, showered her with love and gifts, and yearns to take her out for a movie. Women in Muslim community were restrained from pursuing any activities that involved appeasing sensual pleasures. Despite Nadira's curiosity to know what a cinema is, she chooses not to dare watch a movie at the theatre. "I didn't quite mean it. If I come with you now to the film, it will make news and people will pelt stones at our family. Why ask for trouble?" (BT, pg.12) Rashid's mother Aminamma, Jainabi and Nadira's reactions to Rashid's intent to teach her letters sums up the patriarchal set up that didn't believe intellectual activity as a woman's domain. Any activity that required the use of intellect was declared a man's domain and all animal-like activity that involved physical act of nurturing and raising offspring was necessarily female domain. Further, in the narrative, Nadira becomes a victim of male egos. When Mohammed Khan brings her back home without Rashid's knowledge, Rashid too refrains from walking down to bring her back. Mohammed Khan who never looked at women as human beings holds absolute disregard for her daughter's feelings and marital life with Rashid. He sees her second marriage with an old man as a means to prosperity, with no consideration for feelings and consent. Even as Fatima is pained to see her daughter's state of affairs, neither does she act upon nor encourage her daughter to do so. The utmost complacency on the part of female characters catalyzes the tragic fate rather fast. Aminamma takes away small Papu from breastfeeding Nadira without her knowledge. Even as Nadira is heart-broken, she doesn't fight for her conjugal and maternal rights. Rather, she yields to her 'feminine' traits which refrains her from acting upon herself. And the society unquestionably considers the father's right on the child as absolute and irrevocable over the mother's. The priority to the 'phallus' alone is evident in the father's irreversible right over the child. Rashid's unthoughtful act of pronouncing talaq thrice and divorcing Nadira is a matter of serious concern. A woman who is an equal partaker in the nuptial tie is rendered invisible by officiating and accepting a process that doesn't involve her but affects her alone. Sara Aboobacker was an early advocate for abolishing triple talaq for its atypical patriarchal tenet, which threatened the lives of married Muslim women all over. Man's absolute right to declare a marriage null and void without a woman's knowledge is another facet of patriarchy. Religious institutions are just another tools of patriarchy that facilitates male authority over females. Towards the end, in the interesting turn of affairs,



Mohammed Khan is compelled to marry off the obstinate Nadira to Rashid again. Religious dictum comes in way again wherein a divorced woman was expected to marry another man, spend a night with him and then remarry Rashid. Nadira couldn't come in terms with the conditions and ends her life though Rashid, Khan, Aminamma and Fatimma convinces her to do so. Nadira reflects on the helplessness of a woman who had no control over her life nor her body. Her body was a site of contestation and ever at the mercy of man. She defies the patriarchal society in her death as the socialization into gendered identities never allowed her to rebel when she was alive. Undoing a biological identity is rather more easier than the undoing a sociological identity as sociological identity formation starts since the hour of birth and goes on to continually build up in the 'psyche' forever. Nadira and Fatimma's complacency is a consequence of socialization of sexes into sexed temperament, sexed roles and corresponding status.

All the three narratives depict the victimization of 'subaltern' women. The choice of the texts with characters of different societies was to essentially communicate the similarity of suppression of women disregard of caste, religion and status. Nadira, a Muslim woman; Phaniyamma, an upper-caste born and Rani, a loving daughter of affluent parents were equally victims of patriarchal society. Gendered oppression is a common factor among all the strata of society and hence sought transformation. The authors of the narratives voice the need for liberation of women from ascribed 'feminine' temperament, role and status.

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