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BEING HUMAN: AN OSCILLATION BETWEEN LOVE  
AND LUST IN KARNAD'S *FLOWERS*



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ABSTRACT

**G**irish Karnad is an accomplished dramatist, who has presented a disturbing yet human clash between sensuality and spirituality in his play *Flowers*. Often man finds himself split into two selves—one 'split self' wants to revel in the delights of sensuality breaking all taboos, the other 'split self' feels awed under the social conventions and feels an inner desire to devote his life in the service of God. It is this clash—this oscillation between love and lust—that has been painted by Karnad in his play *Flowers*.

**KEYWORDS** : *human clash , human picture , sensuality*

*and spirituality , tradition and modernity.*

INTRODUCTION :

Girish Karnad is an accomplished Indian dramatist, who presents a disturbing yet human picture of clash between body and mind, love and lust, sensuality and spirituality, tradition and modernity, etc. in his dramas. Man often comes into conflict with his warring desires and passions and finds himself lost in the maze of such conflicting desires. On the one hand he attempts to be an 'ideal' citizen following the established norms of society and earning respect and recognition in return but on the other hand feels a strong urge to go beyond such norms and fulfill his 'individually felt desires'. On the one hand he strives to be a 'good husband' or 'father' or 'son' but at the same time he is driven by his dark passions which overcome his efforts to be a 'good', 'model' or 'normal' citizen. It is this often repressed zone or theatre of clash between dark passions and devotion to duty which is sought to be dramatized by Karnad in his play *Flowers*. This clash is the sign and result of being human and not robots. Commenting on this conflict inherent in Indian view of life, Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty remarks, "Traditional Hindu philosophy is a constant interplay of Apollonian and Dionysian currents where conflict is considered to be essential to fulfillment" (13).

Hindu view of life has advocated transcendence of mind over body, spirituality over sensuality, and conjugal love over mere sensual lust. It is this view of life which has been so deeply and commonly rooted in Indian psyche. Those deviating from this view of life are not seen in good light and are often criticized for their impious life marred by excessive sensuality. Observance of and adherence to such

norms of an ideal and pious life becomes an absolute necessity if the person is a priest. A priest, in India or elsewhere, is expected to lead an austere life dedicated to the devotion of God and uplift of his soul, showing people the way to achieve salvation and completely shunning materialistic and sensual pleasures.

The plot of *Flowers* is based on a folktale from the Chitradurga region in Karnataka, which was used by the Kannada writer T. R. Subbanna in his 1952 novel *Hamasageethe (Swan Song)*. Here we have a married priest who has always led a life of propriety and decency, following a strict regimen of devoting all his energies in the service of God. He spends all his time worshipping the *linga* while keeping himself distanced from worldly attractions. The priest says:

This temple, this tank, these rough grey boulders towering over them, the flowering shrubs and trees, the birds that come and go through the seasons—they are my world. I am priest here. I have lived all my life here and discouraged all friendly attentions from the outside world. I spend most of my time with the *Linga*—talking to it, singing to it, even discussing recent political developments and decorating it with flowers. (*Flowers* 243)

The priest decorates the *linga* with beautiful flowers, weaving new patterns of flowers. In Hinduism *linga* is a symbol of Lord Shiva and represents the male generative power. George M. Williams, referring to one of the myths regarding the origin of *linga*, remarks that when Lord Shiva tore off his *linga* it “extended deeper into the cosmic waters than Vishnu could dive and higher into the cosmos than Brahma could soar” (Williams 200).

Everyone, even the chieftain of the village admires the dedication and devotion with which the priest adorns the *linga* with flowers every day. He follows his daily routine of worshipping the *linga* without the slightest breach. He says:

I have a dip in the tank and, and in the wet dhoti, sit down in the sanctum surrounded by baskets of flowers. Everything else then recedes into hazy, scarcely-felt distance and for an hour there is only the *linga* and me. And the conversation conducted through flowers – malligai, sevanti, chendu hoovu, sampigai and kanakambara. (*Flowers* 244)

However, the things change drastically when the priest falls in love with Ranganayaki, a courtesan and starts adorning her bare body everyday with the same flowers he uses to adorn the *linga*. About the position of and general attitude towards courtesans, Lata Singh remarks that “a courtesan has accumulated over time moralistic, value loaded connotations; in the popular mindset it was equated to a whore, forcing these women performers into silence” (1677).

The priest, who always distanced himself from all attractions, begins to be overwhelmed with the contours of the body of Ranganayaki. The *linga*, which was the only attraction in his life, does not appeal to him anymore. The priest says:

I pitied it, felt exasperated at its unimaginative contours. Why did its shape have to be so bland and unindented that one had to balance garlands precariously on it and improvise superfluous knots to hide some ungainly strings? Why didn't the Lord offer a form which inflamed invention like Ranga did? (*Flowers* 250)

The priest shows equal devotion to *linga* and Ranganayaki but he himself is aware of the conflicting situation and says that “Each day I coaxed the flowers to say something special to God and then something entirely different to Ranga” (*Flowers* 251). The priest, who is expected to transcend mind over body and spirituality over sensuality, falters and places the *linga*, an epitome of spirituality and the body of Ranganayaki, an epitome of sensuality at the same pedestal. However, deep within he feels guilty as well as afraid of the embarrassment that will be caused to him if anyone sees him standing on the doorstep of Ranganayaki's house. He says, “the inauspiciousness of the encounter and the

ridicule I would face if anyone saw me standing on the doorstep of the house" (*Flowers* 246).

He is not forgetful of the pain he is causing to his wife by having an illicit relation with a courtesan:

... 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. ... Communication in the house was reduced to fragments and we stopped even looking at each other. But there was nothing I could do. (*Flowers* 251)

The situation creates in his mind a divide between his love for his wife and the *linga* and his lust for Ranganayaki. He wants to choose the both—his love and devotion to the *linga* and his wife as well as the courtesan, which is not possible. He finds himself in an absurd situation, which offers him no immediate resolution. On the one hand he adorns the body of Ranganayakin with flowers; on the other hand, he very conveniently disallows her to enter the sanctum of the temple. Similarly he visits the house of Ranganayaki but being a Brahmin, eats the food cooked and served by his wife only and never touches the food prepared by the courtesan. The priest says, "I would return home quite late, ravenous. Ranganayaki had given up teasing me about consuming her body but not the food in her house" (*Flowers* 251).

The priest's relationship with Ranganayakin abruptly comes to an end as the village chieftain discovers Ranganayaki's long hair in a flower/prasada. His lust for Ranganayaki so overpowers him that when he is questioned by the chieftain about the presence of the hair in the prasada, he without feeling a bit hesitant answers that it was God's hair and "If we believe that God has long hair, he will have long hair" (*Flowers* 257).

When challenged by the chieftain to prove that it was God's hair, the priest accepts the challenge and prays for full twelve days as penance in isolation. His prayer is granted by God and "waves and waves of jet black hair came out blowing out" (*Flowers* 258). Everyone gets awestruck and takes the priest to be a divine deity. However, this, instead of resolving the conflict in the priest further accentuates it. The priest feels guilty:

... I am guilty of gross dereliction, of sacrilege. ...Why then should God cast His vote on my behalf? ... Has God the right to mock justice in favour of love for Him? Or does he have a different logic? ... Such Grace is condescension even it comes from God. Why am I worthy of this burden He has placed on my shoulders? I refuse to bear it. God must understand I simply cannot live on His terms. (*Flowers* 260)

The priest feels so much overpowered with the feeling of guilt that he commits suicide in the sanctum of the temple itself. Referring to the oscillation in the priest between his love for his wife and *linga* and his lust for Ranganayaki, Jasbir Jain remarks that the essence of *Flowers* lies in the:

"the compressed narrative of transformation, change, questioning and the complexity of the human mind as it fluctuates between desire and power, sacrifice and self-fulfillment in order to hold on to some meaning in life". (357)

Girish Karnad presents a genuine dilemma of being human with fatal consequences. What is tragic is that the priest, the society or even the audience is not able to understand the grey zone of being human, where love is something conscious and deep but dark passion or lust is more powerful as it is from the unconscious, and rises up unpremeditated, unmediated and uninvited. Here faith can put a lid

on the clash and questioning of the religious contract yet it cannot transcend it till we are human. Perhaps what is needed to worship Shiva is the third eye of Shiva Himself which once opened would burn Kamadeva (Cupid) himself, only then perhaps this clash would cease to erupt. Till then there will be flowers and hair on the *linga*.

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