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Karnad's Two Monologues: An Analysis of *Flowers* and *Broken Images*

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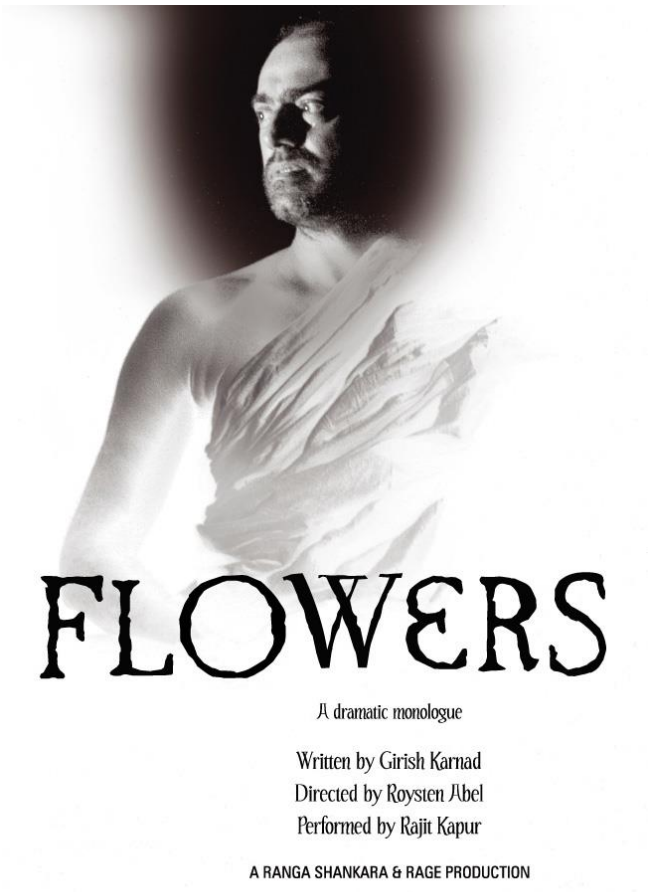


Courtesy: http://www.ragetheatre.co.in/production/flowers/

Karnad Explores the Genre of Monologue

After presenting an array of characters on stage and dealing with a variety of themes, Karnad explores the genre of monologue which is more challenging as, when staged, only a single character has to hold the attention of the audience for a defined period of time. Given that

just one actor participates in the narrative, monologues can be placed in the category of a 'monodrama'. In both the monologues, *Flowers* and *Broken Images* (2004) the character lays bare his or her soul through a series of events coupled with flowing speech.

Flowers

In *Flowers*, Karnad deals with the philosophy of religion and tries to answer questions pertaining to God, justice and mercy. The old questions are cast in contemporary modes as the protagonist discovers flaws in ancient wisdom and raises new debates regarding faith. He also explores the conflicts of love and lust, idealization and profanity, power and morality. Issues like women's position in society, gender roles, social and family structures, religious and princely hierarchies are also discussed.

The plot revolves around a married priest who dutifully worships the *linga*, but stumbles when he falls madly in love with a courtesan. The monologue 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*). Subbanna's protagonist is a temple priest who falls in love with a courtesan. Unable to control his desire, he visits her every evening with the prayer offerings. This continues till the village chieftain discovers a strand of hair in the *prasada*.

The priest, Veeranna, lies that the hair belongs to the god and accepts the chieftain's challenge to prove his claim. After a day's meditation, Veeranna is surprised to find the *shivalinga* with long hair. The *linga* starts bleeding when he breaks a strand to check whether the hair is real. Filled with guilt, Veeranna beheads himself as an act of retribution. Like Veeranna, the priest in the play finds himself in a dilemma when the god forgives his immoral act. After the whole village witnesses "waves and waves of jet black hair" (258) sprouting out of the *linga*, he is made the state saint, "to be prized, protected and shown off to visiting envoys" (259). Unable to understand the way his god governs right and wrong, he commits suicide.

The monologue is meditative as well as expansive. Unable to come terms with his new-found sainthood, the priest wants to die. Well-versed in astrology, he predicts his own impending death:

> In a few moments from now, Scorpio will start creeping into the water from the south-eastern corner of the temple tank. There is a hollow there in the third step under the water, large enough to hold an unhusked coconut. And I know that on this day of the year at this precise moment – and I can tell the precise moment because Scorpio is stretched out in the eastern sky in all his magnificent glory with the lowest point of his curving tail just about to take off from the horizon – at this precise moment his reflection will enter the water at the exact point under which the hollow lies. (243)

Look Beyond His Own Life, Into Infinity

So immense is his knowledge that he can look beyond his own life, into infinity: "And looking up at the constellation from this top step of the tank, even with my back to the temple, I could tell you what star is perched on the brass tip of its pinnacle. For I know every nook and cranny in these grounds. I know where every star will be as the skies revolve through the year" (243). The action of the play takes place in his mind and descends before the audience through memories, predictions, associative thinking, dilemmas, anxieties, regrets and fear psychosis. His recapitulation embodies the universal experience of sin and retribution. Whereas an ordinary man would have reveled in the sainthood, the priest thinks of it as a burden. The values of loyalty, commitment and morality do not lose their validity even though he searches all realms of knowledge and he prepares for the final penance:

> Scorpio has crawled out of the recess in the third step under water. His reflection is floating towards me. The hollow is empty. As a boy I used to shove my head into the hollow to test how long I could hold my breath. I shall do so again now, but not to test my lungs. I shall seek in the narrow confines of that hollow the answers that God has denied me. (260)

In Hinduism, the *linga* is a symbol of Lord Shiva and is believed to represent the male generative power. There have been debates on the origin of the *linga*. According to one of the myths, when 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). In *Flowers* the priest treats the *linga* as an independent living entity, "talking to it, singing to it, even discussing recent political developments, and most of all decorating it with flowers" (243-44). The chieftain admires the priest's skill of inventing new ways of adorning the *linga* every day, and he is well-known in the village for his devotion to the job. He explains the rituals that are performed on a daily basis:

> 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, chenduhoovu, sampigai* and *kanakambara.* (244)

Significance of Flowers

Flowers form an important part of Hindu worship. Daily, fresh and specific flowers are offered to a Hindu deity as it is seen as an act to acquire the deity's blessings and to ward off negative energies. For the priest this is more than a job. The experience is euphoric and rather surreal. The giant lingam, the heavy fragrance of the flowers and the incense conjure a picture of romance that is completed with the entry of the courtesan, Ranganayaki. Courtesans have a long history in Indian culture. They were independent women who entertained kings and aristocrats and in return they enjoyed royal patronage. Though educated and skilled in various arts, such as singing and dancing, courtesans were looked down upon and were considered outcasts.Lata Singh writes 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).

After falling in love with Ranganayaki at first sight, the priest on her request decides to show his skills on her bare body which becomes a daily practice just like the *pooja* rituals. For the priest it was an all-new experience as he found her body offering "a whole new world of patterns" (250), something which the *linga* lacked. He 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? (250)

Through this statement Karnad compares the male and female forms. The deity represents the male form which the priest found "bland" as compared to Ranga's well-kept body with which he plays lustfully.

Adorning the naked body with garlands becomes akin to lovemaking as both take pleasure in the act. Through Ranganayki the priest satisfies his sexual needs, something he is not able to do when at home with his wife: "On the days I wanted her, I would give her a look she had come to recognize and late at night when everyone was fast asleep, she would crawl up to my room for a furtive scuffle in bed which demanded minimum of uncovering" (248). The priest's wife is aware of the affair, but she does not complain even once and quietly continues to serve him:

> She never ate before me. As soon as she heard me splashing in the tank, she would start heating up the food. While I ate, she stood rigid by the door, lanky and impassive, concerned but still. She never once asked me about Ranganayaki. . . . 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. (251)

Portraits of Stereotypes

By portraying stereotypes, Karnad once again comments on the position of women in the Indian society. On the one hand is the priest's wife who endures everything silently, and on the other is Ranganayaki who is merely an object of pleasure for men. Unlike the queen in *Bali* (1980) or Padmini in *Hayavadana* (1971), his wife suppresses her desires and performs the duties that are expected of her. Through the love triangle of the priest, his wife and the courtesan, Karnad comments on the patriarchal perspectives on marriage and love liaisons. The priest's wife is voiceless, constant and supportive. That she can leave her husband does not occur to her, as according to Hindu custom a wife leaves her husband's house only when he dies. Marriage is an eternal commitment. The courtesan, however, is not under any such bondage. Her presence, unlike the wife's, is not valued. She is allowed, by the dramatist, to disappear. The only moment of intimacy between the priest and his wife is seen when they wait for the chieftain in the temple. After a long wait he performs the *pooja* and gives a flower to his wife:

> The formality was over. I put a flower in my wife's outstretched hand. As she straightened to tuck it in the knot of her hair, she looked directly into my eyes. And held the look. My wife and I were there, just the two of us, alone, as we could never be at home. At a time and in a place where nobody could possibly surprise us. And for once, her infinite self-control had slipped and she was baring her desire as brazenly as though she had let her *pallu* drop from her bosom to expose her blouse and let it hang unretrieved. . . . I could feel my insides reaching out to her and was taken aback that I had forgotten that I could want her. The *linga* sat there looking at us and I snarled silently at it, 'Isn't it funny? I am going to defile your sanctum and it has to be with my lawful wife, for Ranganayaki would never be allowed to step in here. (253-54)

Marginalisation

Karnad comments on the marginalisation of courtesans. Considered to be morally degraded, they are not even allowed to enter a religious shrine. The priest makes it clear that had he the authority he would have made love to Ranganayaki inside the temple. He prefers to be in

her company and like the everyday *pooja* he performs, he sees his visits as a ritual. Ranganayki offers a sharp contrast to the priest's wife whose body has been damaged by child bearing and domestic labour. This is the reason he chooses to be with Ranga instead. His relationship with Ranganayaki comes to an end when the chieftain discovers her hair in a flower. Life comes full circle when he returns with the same flowers to its rightful place, the *linga*. Here he flouts the rule of offering fresh flowers to the deity and ends up using "the leavings, polluted discards" (256). Asked to prove that "God had long hair" (256) the priest goes into isolation for twelve days and prays as an act of penance. The priest's twelve-day penance reaps rewards in the form of a *linga* with long hair. Hair is a central metaphor in the play. Ranga's hair defiles the *prasada,* the priest offers his wife a flower for her hair when they sit together in the inner sanctum and the *linga* sprouts rich, lustrous hair that bleeds when plucked. The same hair earns rewards and distinctions for the priest. However, he is unable to understand why god was so benign especially when he had committed a sin. He sees god's mercy as a burden, a miracle which was beyond his understanding:

> . . . 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. (260)

Distancing from Beliefs

With the above ironic statement the priest distances himself from his religious beliefs and practices and condemns the rule of rising over bodily desires. Like other men who came in Ranganayaki's life, the priest too leaves her and fails to give her an identity and place in society. She is remembered merely as a courtesan when she leaves the village. Her final image is reflective of her helpless state:

> The tranquility of the night was shattered by the canon. . . . Frantic, I started pulling out the flowers from her hair and piling them on my shoulder cloth. She sat up, groggy and dazed, yelping in pain as I snatched at the flowers. . . . As I turned back to push the main door shut, I saw Ranganayaki, naked and on all fours, staring out stupefied, shivering. (255-56)

Karnad uses the disappearance of Ranga to restore normalcy. With her powers she metamorphoses into the *linga* and saves the priest from disgrace. His promotion is a tongue-in cheek comment on how saints are made. He, however, is overwhelmed by her intelligence and his wife's power of love and commits suicide. The suicide is unexpected and rattles the reader. He sees the title of sainthood as a punishment rather than an honour, for it would keep reminding him of his transgression. He is aware that it would be impossible for him to take the same path as he did before meeting Ranganayaki. Ranganayaki's entry severs the priest's ties with his god and his free will comes into play. Divine intervention only makes matters worse for him. Unable to bear the burden of his dwindling faith and the betrayal of his wife's trust, he chooses to end his life in the very hollow in which he played as a child.

Portrayed from Male Perspective

Women in the monologue are portrayed from a male perspective. The two women are radically different from each other. The priest's wife is a submissive, nameless woman who performs the roles designated to her. She is engaged in housework all the time. She even seems to treat conjugal relations with her husband as a chore. The priest observes: "I had never seen a woman completely naked. At home, we all bathed in the open, in the corner formed by the neem and the banyan trees in our backyard, so my wife covered herself with a sari even when she bathed" (248). He even goes further to say: "The problem, however is more basic. My wife would have died of shame than be seen naked, even by herself" (249). Ranganayaki, on the other hand, is comfortable with nudity. In her company he sheds all inhibitions and worships her like a goddess. In spite of his close association, the priest refused to eat in Ranganayaki's house. He was a Brahmin and would consume only the food cooked and served by his wife. Karnad

highlights the hypocritical attitude: “I would return home quite late, ravenous. Ranganayaki had given up teasing me about consuming her body but not the food in her house” (251)

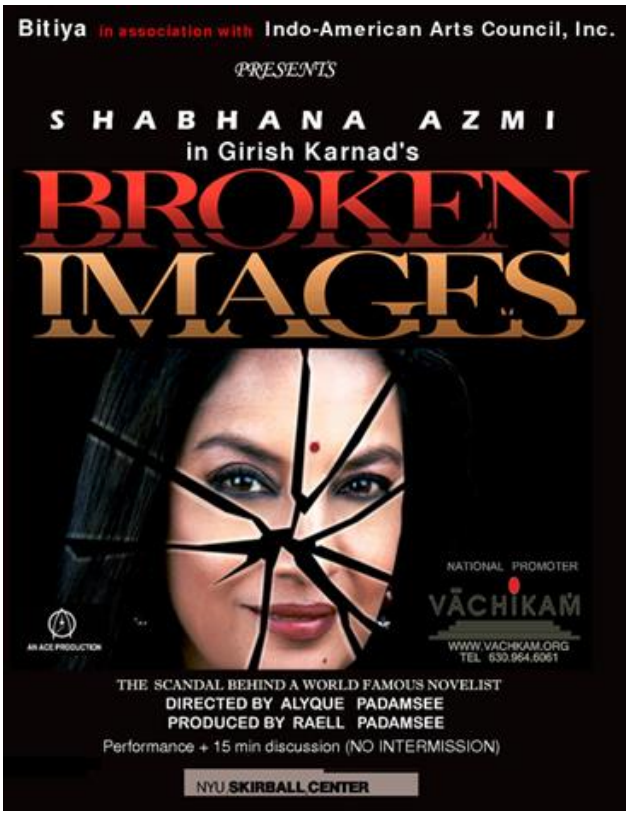
A certain evolution takes place in the personality of the wife in the course of the play. She not only takes the initiative in love-making when she is alone with her husband in the inner sanctum, but she also exercises her rights. When the priest is mobbed by believers after the miracle takes place, she rescues him: “No one, not even the Chieftain, questioned her authority. I fell into deep sleep and woke up refreshed. It was almost midnight, my usual hour for the evening meal. She served me food and supervised the proceedings, as usual, leaning on the door” (259). In two simple sentences, she declares her victory: “She is gone. She and her woman left town the very next day” (259),

Ironic Variation of Whore-Madonna Syndrome

Aparna Bhargava Dharwadkar opines that the play offers an “ironic variation” of the ‘whore-madonna syndrome’ for “the priest’s voice has an endearing innocence and honesty rather than an alienating arrogance” (xxxiii). According to the whore-madonna complex a man would refrain from having sexual relations with his wife for he sees her as a caring and saintly figure. To fulfill his sexual needs he would turn to a woman who has fallen in the eyes of society; an impure, tainted woman. According to Sigmund Freud, a man who has a cold, dysfunctional relationship with his mother develops this condition. The priest sees his wife as a mother-figure and would consider the act of lovemaking incestuous. Indeed the priest reveals the existential angst that he goes through after his illicit affair. He not only loves the *linga* which he had known and worshipped since childhood, but also his wife and the courtesan.

Girish Karnad uses myth to deconstruct manmade institutions like priesthood and kinship as power centres. Once again the hollowness is exposed like in *Naga Mandala* (1988), *The Fire and the Rain* (1994) and *Talé-Daṇḍa* (1990). Through *Flowers* he shows that sin and retribution are defined by priests to their own advantage. The monologue also shows how man’s sudden awareness of his own vulnerability brings despair.

Broken Images



Broken Images, which Karnad also directed, deals with the dominance of the English language in the field of Indian writing. It provides a caustic comment on the response a writer gets from the media for using the coloniser's language. It was Shashi Deshpande's comments that inspired Karnad to write the play. She pointed out that "Indian writers in English who are published in India get a step-motherly treatment compared to those published on foreign shores" (John). Works of great worth published in Indian languages languished until translated into English. The deliberate marginalisation of vernacular literature during the colonial period impacted Indian literary heritage. Thus the monologue explores the ethics of originality which has been a major debate in the literary world since the Romantic period. The protagonist's novel, *The River Has No Memories*, is looked upon as a betrayal in certain quarters:

> Actually let me confess. If I had foreseen how many people I would upset by writing in English – I really would not have committed that folly. Intellectuals

> whom I respected, writers who were gurus to me, friends who I thought would pat me on my back and share my delight – they are all suddenly breathing fire. How dare I write in English and betray Kannada! (263)

Technology and Language Debate

With just a single character Karnad juxtaposes twenty first century technology with the language debate that has been raging for years. Karnad makes Manjula Nayak his mouthpiece and defends Indo-Anglian Literature for using English to reach out to a wider audience. Her debut novel in English has taken the literary world by storm. She has been invited by a broadcasting studio to share her success story. She walks onto the stage wearing a lapel mike, surrounded by television sets:

> Ah! I see. New Technology. Isn't it scary? The rate of obsolescence? (*Listens*.) Of course I have. In London. And in Toronto. But when you think of Indian television studios, you always imagine them cluttered. Lots of men and women scurrying about, shouting orders. Elephantine lights. Headphones. Cameras. You know what I mean. But here . . . I mean, it's all so spartan. . . . All right. . . . No camera. I just look ahead and speak to an invisible audience in front of me . . . Direct. Fine… (261-62).

New Panopticon

The very setting is reminiscent of Michael Foucault's interpretation of a 'Panopticon'; a building where each and every movement of an individual is watched. Similarly, the media has become the new Panopticon; the 'all seeing' eye to which Manjula falls prey. She reveals her repressed desires and fears to her own image on the giant screen. What was supposed to be just an interview turns out to be a dissection of a character who steals her physically challenged sister's novel and identity and presents it to the world as her own. She weaves a brilliant story, full of lies and deceit, about how she was affected by her sister's failing health:

> Truly the book is about her. I have dedicated it to her memory. She died last year just a few months before the book came out. I have tried to relive what I learnt about her emotional life as I nursed her – tended to her – watched helplessly as she floated into death. I miss her. I miss my beautiful, gentle sister. (265-66)

Manjula is not the real author, but she tackles questions with ease. Being a Kannada writer she hits back at the people who criticized her for writing in English: "My British publishers said to me: 'We like your book because it's so Indian. We receive any number of manuscripts from India but they were all written with the western reader in view. Your novel has the genuine Indian feel!'" (264). She further explains that there is nothing wrong in writing in English for making money and considers it a "good enough reason" (264). At the same time she points out that writing in Kannada is not so profitable. This way Karnad defends those writers who write in English including himself. Though he has written most of his plays in Kannada, as a writer he is aware of the fact that he scaled greater heights through his translations. He translated most of his plays into English and at the same time preserved the Indian flavor. Raja Rao, one of the founding fathers of the Indian novel, also defends writing in English as long as it is suits the Indian conditions:

> English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up – like Sanskrit or Persian was before – but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We can only write as Indians. . . . Our method of expression. . . will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it. (*Kanthapura* 5)

Today, English has come a long way from being just a weapon used by the white man to subjugate the colonised. The presence of English on the cultural stage has been beneficial as in a way it has helped to preserve the linguistic diversity of the national fabric. Ramanujam Meghanathan observes: "English knowingly or unknowingly has played an instrumental role in

maintaining the diversity of India's language scene because the existence of English has meant that it is not necessary to select any one Indian language as a national language" (83). However, African writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o, condemns the use of English and sees it as committing "Languicide". In *Decolonising the Mind* he bid farewell to English and started writing in his native Gikuyu language, thus "resurrecting the African soul from centuries of slavery and colonialism that left it spiritually empty, economically disenfranchised and politically marginalised" (Warah). Like Ngugi, many writers see English as a danger to their native tongue and believe in holding on to their roots through their mode of expression.

Complex Relations between Sisters

Malini's novel, which "burst out in English" (264), received worldwide attention after her death. Compared to the lukewarm response to her elder sister's Kannada writings, her novel met with instant success. Manjula's vendetta presents a microcosmic view of the tension and the rivalry that existed between the two sisters. It exposes a complex relationship ruled by jealously and bitterness. Manjula's repressions are rooted in her low self-esteem. Her envy of her sister goes back to their childhood. It was compounded in adult life when Malini came to live with her and monopolised her husband's attention all day.

While Manjula wishes to "live in the heart of Kannada culture" (270), her younger sister "breathed, laughed, dreamt in English" (271). Malini is portrayed as the younger, attractive woman who suffers from *meningomyelocele*. Her ailment confines her to a wheelchair, but even then she "radiated life" (269). The attention she received from her parents makes Manjula feel inferior. She says, "I have often wondered whether I would have been as bright if I'd received all that love and attention" (269). What disturbs Manjula even more is the closeness between her husband, Pramod, and Malini. Pramod, who is "caring, but useless" (282), is a software developer and spent most of his time at home. Though physical intimacy was out of the question, Manjula was curious to know what the two did all day and would often return from work at unexpected timings only to find them engaged in some animated discussions "like a married couple" (280). At times she felt like "someone external to the soul of this house – along with the cook, the maid and the nurse" (281). Pramod saw the nurse as the only person close to Malini

after him. He would ask Manjula if they could bring back the nurse and would also go out with her close friend, Lucy, to expensive restaurants. Rather than his wife, he considered the nurse and Lucy suitable companions to ventilate his pain and anger. Manjula reveals that their relationship fell apart after he found out that she was publishing the novel and claiming its authorship.

The true reason for plagiarizing the novel was more than just winning recognition that she could not get as a Kannada writer. She wanted to hide from the world the fact that she loathed Malini and wanted her to die:

> It was venomous. I was camouflaged as the first cousin, and not sister. But it was me all right and the portrayal was rancorous. I was a shallow woman, a pretentious mediocrity, a gushy conniving and devious relative who had taken her in for inheritance. But there were no adjectives. Just facts. The events were from life. They were accurately described. The conversations were recorded verbatim. I couldn't deny them. (284-85)

Instead of becoming a "laughing stock" (285), and being remembered merely "as a footnote in the life of a brilliant author" (285), she decides to turn things in her favour. It is her way of taking revenge and filling a void which was created because of the extra attention and love her sister received. She hopes to wipe away all the bitter memories and bask in the glory of her new identity as a bestselling author. Her image however reminds her of the bitter truth:

> IMAGE. Wait a bit. Perhaps... she did win in the end?
> MANJULA. How do you mean?
> IMAGE. If she meant to prove *to you* that you were a fraud, she certainly succeeded.
> MANJULA. You – you – I'll show you.
> (*She rushes to the screen and looks for the cable connecting it.*) (286)

Unmasking Manjula

The image unmasks Manjula and presents her true self. The act of trying to disconnect the cable is symbolic of hiding her guilt, of silencing the truth. Rather than following each and every gesture and movement of Manjula, it acquires its own identity and confronts her. It finally succeeds in the end:

> IMAGE. I am Malini Nayak, the English novelist. Manjula Nayak, the Kannada short-story writer, was decimated the moment she read my novel. She thus obliterated all differences of ink and blood and language between us and at one full stroke morphed into me . . .
>
> Of course, I shall continue with the name of Manjula Nayak. As Manjula Nayak, I have been invited as Visiting Professor to seven prestigious American Universities. I use that nomenclature for my passport, my bank accounts, property and financial investments. However I am in truth Malini, my genius of a sister who loved my husband and knew Kannada and wrote in English.
>
> (*Suddenly all the screens start speaking loudly, some in Kannada, the others in English. The cacophony is deafening. The revolving stage moves Manjula out into the dark. Then one by one, the sets switch off, leaving the studio, dark and empty*.) (287)

Sibling Rivalries

Sibling rivalries have been discussed in detail in literature. According to Eva Rueschmann:

> The pattern of antagonism and competition between sisters abounds in classical literature and myth . . . some of the more famous examples of sisters in literary and dramatic history include . . . Antigone and Ismene in Sophocles' play; Cordelia and her sisters Goneril and Regan in Shakespeare's *King Lear*; Clarissa and Arabella in Richardson's *Clarissa*, Dorothea and Celia Brooks in Eliot's

Middlemarch; Elinor and Marianne Dashwood in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*; and in modern literature Olga, Masha, and Irina in Chekhov's play *Three Sisters*; Ursula and Gudrun Brangwen in D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*; Helen and Margaret Schlegel in E.M. Forster's *Howard's End*; and the five sisters in Federico Garcia Lorca's play *The House of Bernarda Alba*. (Rueschmann)

The theory of sibling rivalry has also been explored by psychologists such as Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler. Adler talks about the importance of equal treatment of siblings in the family. He believes rivalry between siblings is grounded in each child's need to overcome potential feelings of inferiority. Freud too talks about rivalry between siblings in terms of hatred and jealousy: "The elder child ill-treats the younger, maligns him and robs him of his toys; while the younger is consumed with impotent rage against the elder, envies and fears him . . ." (Sherwin-White 7). While it is clear that Manjula felt inferior to her younger sister, nowhere does Karnad give details of how Malini was treated. The rivalry between the two is merely confined to Manjula's shocking revelations.

Bilingual Writing

According to Karnad, the play's relevance "is self-evident to anyone who knows what is happening in India's literary landscape where vernacular writers feel they do not get the attention that writers in English get, that there is a definite 'class system' operating here" (John). Though Manjula cannot be forgiven for the crime she committed, the reader cannot help but sympathize with her. She represents those writers who believe in using the vernacular language, but fail to make a mark in the literary world. One solution a situation like this offers is to write in the native tongue and then translate the work so that it caters to readers both at home and abroad. This would not only give the work a wide readership, but also the recognition the writer deserves.

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