

A CYBERFLANEUR'S LIFE IN GIRISH KARNAD'S *WEDDING ALBUM*: A CULTURAL STUDY

S. Rajarajeswari,

Assistant Professor of English, St. Xavier's College,
Palayamkottai, - 627002, Tirunelveli District,
Tamilnadu.

Email: rajarajeswaris16@gmail.com

Abstract

Girish Karnad is a famous actor, playwright, and a creative figure too. He is a multi-faceted personality who also discusses socio, political and cultural problems of India in his plays. His plays, *Tughlaq*, *Tale Danda*, and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* deal with historical themes. Vidula is an educated modern girl of 22 years. She is about to get married to Ashwin whom she has known only through e-mails and video-conferencing. Scene one opens with Vidula, a self-conscious girl, speaking in front of a camera. She makes her attempt to introduce herself, her background and interests. Vidula compares her marriage with Ashwin to that of the master-slave arrangement. But it is her own imagination. Here Karnad hints at the reality of the patriarchal ownership of a woman and the exploitation involved in an Indian arranged marriage through Vidula. She says that her old master is about to die and, "His family is bound to throw me out. So I had to find a new master. Through Ashwin and Chandrakant, Hema's husband, Karnad expresses their preference for Indian girls to marry. They prefer a girl from their own caste, class, religion, and culture to make the post-marital adjustment easy. Further, they are brought up with the image of a wife as a dutiful person whose primary jobs are household chores and looking after children and husband. Ashwin does not select a western girl as his wife. In *Wedding Album*, Karnad underlines many hidden issues in a very subtle manner. Hema receives and entertains love letters from a neighboring boy, Vivan, who is two years younger to her own son, Ketan. Vidula visits a cyber cafe to seek virtual sexual pleasure by listening to, however not obeying, the voice of the internet lover.

Keywords: creative figure, cultural problems, marriage, household,.etc

Girish Karnad is a famous actor, playwright, and a creative figure too. He is a multi-faceted personality who also discusses socio, political and cultural problems of India in his plays. His plays, *Tughlaq*, *Tale Danda*, and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* deal with historical themes. His plays, *Yayati*, *Hayavadana*, *Naga Mandala*, *the Fire*, and *the Rain* and *Bali: the Sacrifice* had

mythological themes. He depicts the contemporary lives of the people in *two monologues: Broken Images, and Flowers, Wedding Album and Boiled Beans on Toast.*

M. H. Abrams says:

The cultural studies designate a cross-disciplinary enterprise for analyzing the conditions that affect the production, reception, and cultural significance of all types of institutions, practices, and products, among this literature is accounted as merely one of many forms of cultural "signifying practices"(72).

In *Wedding Album* there is a direct clash between Western and Indian Tradition. This paper attempts to study the culture of a cyberflaneur named Vidula in the play *Wedding Album*.

In *Wedding Album*, Girish Karnad explores the traditional Indian Wedding in a globalized, technologically advanced India. The play deals with a normal urban middle- class family: Hema lives abroad with her professional husband Chandrakant. Her brother Rohit is a software designer. Hema's younger sister Vidula is happy because she is going to marry Ashwin, a suitable boy from the USA. Other characters include Father, Mother, Rohit's ladylove Isabel, his wife Tapasya, his boss Prathibha and the loyal cook Radhabai. The family is educated, liberal, and modern. Karnad explores a traditional Indian wedding with a view to exposing the strained relations who come to the occasion of a wedding even from the distant place. It is a happy occasion of the wedding of Vidula and Ashwin. But many other issues are also touched upon here. As the play has a contemporary theme, Karnad shows his characters using cell phones, video-shooting, internet and other modern means of communication. Even the protagonist Vidula, is portrayed as a Cyberflaneur, the one who idly surfs the Internet.

Vidula is an educated modern girl of 22 years. She is about to get married to Ashwin whom she has known only through e-mails and video-conferencing. Scene one opens with Vidula, a self-conscious girl, speaking in front of a camera. She makes her attempt to introduce herself, her background and interests. Her brother Rohit is making a video film on her, to be mailed to her fiancée Ashwin from America. Rohit is offscreen, directing her to show her best to be attractive. He asks her to appear bright and cheerful. Vidula objects to this suggestion and says, "I just want him to know what I am like" (WA6); and she tells Ashwin, "I am not glamorous, as you can see. I am not exceptional in any way. I don't want you to be disappointed later" (WA6). Here a strain of hypocrisy is found in the character of Vidula. She appears to be ignorant but glamorous at times which is later revealed in the café episode.

Through Vidula's speech, in front of the camera, the readers get to know about her and the family. She is a twenty-two-year-old Geography graduate willing to go to the USA after her marriage. Her father Nadkarni is a retired government doctor. She has an elder sister Hema who is married and lives in Australia. Rohit, her elder brother, writes a script for TV production of

teleplays. She discloses a family secret also about a mentally retarded brother who had died in childhood. Her humor is exposed when she adds that she is not retarded but possesses high CQ which means Cooking Quotient.

The marriage of Vidula and Ashwin appears as an arranged marriage in India. She agrees to that marriage. But her internet-café conversation with her unknown friend reveals her inner life. There she behaves like some other girl. She thinks herself as the Yamuna, the daughter of Radhabai, the cook. Radhabai has the dilemma to choose between the daughter and a job. Radhabai's daughter the Yamuna was a kept woman. She used to send money to her, with which Radhabai is able to survive. She comes to the city and works as a cook in a household. But she does not tell anyone about her daughter because she might lose her job if the employer came to know that her daughter is a concubine. Then her daughter's old master dies and his people turn her out. Due to this she becomes mad and starts running on the streets in search of her mother. But her mother refuses to recognize her when she finally finds her house. Radhabai feels guilty and repentant and this causes her to shout at people into fits of temper.

Vidula reveals the story of the Yamuna and several other facts about herself to the unknown friend at the Internet Café. But they are only the illusions of Vidula's imagination. The internet-conversation depicts the multiple performances on the part of Vidula.

Vidula used to be calm and collective but her aggressive nature is revealed in the internet café. She is caught red-handed in net café while watching pornography. In order to defend herself she accuses the youths, "You have come here to rape me"(WA70). She angrily shouts at her assailants, "What gives you the right to come in here? I'll do what I like here. Who the hell are you to question me?" (WA70). She is relieved when the internet café attendant tells her that the two young men have come only for their hafta. Vidula fights for her rights and becomes a bold and aggressive woman when the attack is on her individuality.

Vidula compares her marriage with Ashwin to that of the master-slave arrangement. But it is her own imagination. Here Karnad hints at the reality of the patriarchal ownership of a woman and the exploitation involved in an Indian arranged marriage through Vidula. She says that her old master is about to die and, "His family is bound to throw me out. So I had to find a new master. A younger man. He lives in the US. He has paid a good price to my family" (WA64). All decisions related to Vidula are taken by her father at first and later the role of the master is passed on to her husband who would decide about her life. Vidula remarks, "He can do whatever with me."(WA65) In the life of her sister, Hema too her husband takes all the decisions:

Because they are all transferable jobs and the white wife refuses to go trailing after her husband. We Indian women, on the other hand, are obedient Sati Savitri,

ever willing to follow in our husband's footsteps. Look at me . . . Our men may get all the top jobs. But I am in no better position than Ma. (WA17)

The words of the police in the café episode are also ignored by Vidula. In fact, Karnad does not even begin to judge the matter as moral or immoral. It is difficult to pinpoint what we should call moral or immoral as it depends upon the situation, state of mind or the discourses of the time. The playwright neither condemns nor justifies it.

Ashwin's enticing talk about preservation and propagation of Hinduism and Indian culture to appear to be a professional tactic to the greatness of his culture. On the contrary, he also tells Vidula how he himself has seen, experienced and enjoyed every aspect of American culture:

I have drunk life in the US to the lees. Girlfriends, affairs, mistresses, one-night stands and on the public stage, glamour, success, social connections. I have been through them all. And I have come to the conclusion that that whole culture is empty of values now, bereft of any living meaning. It is shallow, you see what I mean, glittering and shallow . . . Unlike the US, India has an ancient civilization. A culture which is full of wisdom and insight. India should have the capacity to lead the world. (WA80-81)

Ashwin tries to impress upon Vidula that he is looking for a life partner from a place like Dharwad because it means that the girl would be full of “innocence” and “purity” (WA81). It is a case of patriarchy using the discourses of religion and culture to exploit and suppress people by stereotyping genders, persons and places. Ashwin tells Vidula:

Someone like you carries within youth essence of Hindu spirituality. Woman as Mother, Wife, Daughter. Womanhood as the most sacred ideal... I want you to see this not merely as a marriage but as a mission. I would like you to be my partner in carrying the best of our spiritual tradition to the west and save the West” (WA81-82).

The irony is that the partner he finds in Vidula is a girl far from his idealistic expectations –a girl who indulges in sexual fantasies and perversions in secret in the midst of the vigilant youth who attempt to perpetuate fake religious fervor. He expects Vidula to be a submissive housewife who should perform her duties within the circle of the household without expecting any gratitude or without thinking of her own life, career or economic independence. Ashwin tactfully compares woman as Devi. Such discourses stereotype a woman which create impracticable ideals for her to follow. Vidula, however, listens to all this hypocrisy in silence and does not object to it. One cannot believe that she is the same Vidula who attacked the moral guardians in the café episode so vehemently.

Through Ashwin and Chandrakant, Hema's husband, Karnad expresses their preference for Indian girls to marry. They prefer a girl from their own caste, class, religion, and culture to make the post-marital adjustment easy. Further, they are brought up with the image of a wife as a dutiful person whose primary jobs are household chores and looking after children and husband. Ashwin does not select a western girl as his wife. To Vidula he says: "I am boiling inside like a volcano. I want you to share my agonizing search of myself...It may even require an emotional giving up. If you agree to...you will have to share my inner turmoil...I believe you will find it enriching (WA79-80). Like an Indian patriarch, he expects his wife to be a sacred ideal of womanhood: "Woman as Mother, Wife, Daughter. Womanhood as the most sacred ideal" (WA81). He states that the Americans are now in a soul searching mission. He prefers to preserve Indian culture by marrying an Indian Girl who will favor him for wisdom, insight, and guidance.

It's no shame. Vidula promises them "I will never divorce Ashwin" (WA86). Vidula represents the middle class and westernized Indian girls.

In *Wedding Album*, Karnad underlines many hidden issues in a very subtle manner. Hema receives and entertains love letters from a neighboring boy, Vivan, who is two years younger to her own son, Ketan. Vidula visits a cyber cafe to seek virtual sexual pleasure by listening to, however not obeying, the voice of the internet lover. Rohit, her brother, in the absence of Tapasya, his wife, invites Isabel for dinner, appears to have a secret meeting with her. All the three characters - Vidula, Hema and Rohit do not violate the social norms in practical terms, but Karnad highlights, in their case, not the physical chastity, but the mental one. Ashwin's conversation with Vidula proves that chastity is a patriarchal tool.

Culture defines society. Every individual has to be aware of it and must follow the rules and regulations of society. Through the character of Vidula, the playwright effectively portrays the erosion of traditional culture at first and the change in her at the time of her marriage. No doubt, Girish Karnad, a living legend occupies a prominent place in Indian writing in English.

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