

## **Subversion of Social Hierarchy in Girish Karnad's Tale-Danda**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Girish Karnad was one of the eminent writers and a connoisseur in Indian writing in English. Apart from art-direction, stage and T.V. performances, criticism, he was known as a playwright who had played a pivotal role in reviving the Indian plays and stage performances. He through his plays pioneered the post-colonial Indian writing in English. In this research paper, the author attempts to analyse how the play, Tale-Danda, subverts the hierarchy at social level. The play revolves around a social reformatory movement which aims to uproot the 'Varnashramdharma' which has been imposed on people's lives and which is the primary reason of their social exploitation, especially those who are placed at the lowest strata of the society. While raising voice against the social discrimination the play tries to subvert certain social essentialisms which thereby subverts the social hierarchy.

**Keywords:** *social hierarchy, subversion, caste, sharanas.*

### **Introduction**

Girish Karnad's Tale-Danda traces the subversion of hierarchy at social level. Originally scripted in Kannad and translated later by the playwright himself, highlights the social, political and religious upheaval of a city in North Karnataka called Kalyan during twelfth century A.D. which was then under the rule of King Bijjala.

### **Subversion of Caste-System**

Girish Karnad in the present play contravenes the Indian Caste-system which has its root in the Vedic belief that of birth of human-beings from different limbs of Brahma. Caste-system is the outcome of the four Varnas namely Brahmin, Kshtariya, Vaishya and Shudra. This Caste-system had been a source of atrocity for people like 'Karna' and 'Eklavya' who were denied social recognition and respect just because they belonged to the lower strata of the society. Caste system has been the most vulnerable aspect of Indian culture. Tale-Danda is a sincere attempt to eradicate this demon of Caste-system which has been deteriorating the Indian culture since ages. The play highlights a movement initiated by a saint-poet, 'Basavanna', in the city of Kalyan. The followers of this movement called themselves 'Sharanas', the followers of Lord Shiva, and they advocated the values like equality, fraternity, peace, and the prime objective of this movement was to uproot the Caste-system from the society. Basavanna and his followers through this movement wanted to establish a society free of caste and class where everyone will be equal. No one will be above or beneath anyone and where every individual be it a man or a woman will be equal in socio-religious and spiritual field in addition to all other rights that of status and opportunity. Basavanna had a vision of such a society where there will be freedom of thought, expression, occupation, dignity of labour, a society which will construct a common platform for every individual to

"sit together, eat together, argue about God together, indifferent to Caste, birth or situation."  
(Tale-Danda\*, p. 10)

The movement was open for everyone ranging from the highest strata to the lowest strata of the society. There was a great uproar about the movement, its leader and moreover its ideals. The movement was gradually pinching to the orthodox Hindus. A wave of change in social acceptance and order had been initiated which was intolerable to those who had always exploited the downtrodden. Many upper caste persons had too inculcated its ideals and started implementing it in their lives. Most of the people who followed the ideals of this movement and who called themselves 'Sharanas' were young minds as they willingly wanted to change the time and situation. Old people either compromised with the transition or resisted the change adhering to the age-old customs, rituals, beliefs and culture. So, Karnad by presenting such a society which awaits a major social change by uprooting or discarding the Caste-system subverts the age-old foundation on which is laid the construction of a so-called civilized society.

The play opens on a familial situation of Jagadeva, a Sharan. Jagadeva, in the absence of Basavanna, for the past ten days has not gone to his house where his ailing father is desperate to see and meet him. Ultimately, after the return of Basavanna to Kalyan, Jagadeva heads to his house. But by the time he reaches his house

his father is about to die pining for his only son to be with him. Even in such a situation, Jagadeva argues with his mother to let Mallibomma, an untouchable and Sharan, enter the house of a Brahmin.

Mallibomma understands that being an untouchable he is prohibited in the house of Brahmins and therefore is reluctant to accompany Jagadeva but Jagadeva being a true and staunch follower of the ideals of the 'Sharanas' wants his mother to permit Mallibomma to enter his house. Jagadeva's mother compromises with her brahmanical ideals by allowing and asking Mallibomma to enter the house so that her dying husband may see and meet his son and his soul rests in peace.

This incident of permitting an untouchable to enter into the house of a Brahmin subverts the social hierarchy of Caste-system. The ideals advocated by the Sharan movement preaches that

\*Subsequently mentioned as TD.

all human-beings are equal irrespective of birth, caste and profession. So, Mallibomma being a Sharan should not hesitate to enter Jagadeva's house, a brahmin's house, but his hesitation proves that the followers of the movement are not able to practice its ideal in their daily life as still they are conscious and trapped in the clutches of caste and birth and are not able to transcend it.

So, the followers of Basavanna's non-violent movement are themselves oblique about the ideals of the movement they have launched. On one hand they want to uproot the social concept of caste and class and on the other hand at the backdrop of their mind they still are conscious of their social belongingness which prevents them to think that they all are equal in every sense. So, in a way, the Sharanas themselves do not adhere to the doctrines which they propagandize, which ultimately becomes the chief reason for the fall of their revolution.

The major incident which happens to be the cause of the demolition of their movement is the matrimonial alliance between a Brahmin girl, Kalavati, and a cobbler's boy, Sheelavanta. The marriage between the two is arranged by Kalavati's father, Madhuvarasa. He proposes to marry his daughter to Haralayya's son which Haralayya is elated to accept. They approach Basavanna to seek his blessings for the wedding. They wanted to practice the doctrines they preached. Basavanna opined that the marriage between an upper-caste girl with a lower-caste boy was too early to materialize as their revolution was in the initial stage and therefore it might invite the wrath of the traditionalists.

But the other sharanas were too enthusiastic and determined to face any consequence as in near or distant future they have to face it and therefore they are fully prepared for it.

Through this matrimonial alliance the sharanas wanted to subvert the age-old social concept of caste by transcending the periphery imposed on them by the rigid caste-system. But it seems from their attitude that they see it as their personal victory over the rigid and traditional concept which was imposed upon them and not as the victory of humanity in general. The father of Kalavati, Madhuvarasa, and the father of Sheelavanta, Haralayya, are ready to stake the lives of their only child just for the sake of a cause and their personal contentment completely overlooking their children's safety and stand-point.

"MADHUVARASA: Then let me say this: I shall not hesitate to sacrifice my daughter's life to forward the cause of our great movement." (TD, p. 46)

Sheelavanta is honest enough to confess his fondness for Kalavati but is also completely aware about Kalavati's despise for the smell of leather and therefore is reluctant to marry her as he does not want to ruin her life. Sheelavanta is quite determined to practice his vocation and his father supports him in it as he is doubtful that people engaged in other profession may not accept Sheelavanta if he wishes to change his profession.

So, here the hypocrite attitude of the sharanas is exposed as they are unable to transcend the caste-system which was imposed on them but now they are used to it and believe that they belong to it. This crude thinking and mindset of the sharanas is the root cause of their deprivation as they are not united with their mind, heart and birth. So, Basavanna by launching the sharan movement wants to subvert the social hierarchy of caste-system but is not able to rise above the clutches of the same caste-system and therefore the movement ends in blood-shed and violence.

The enraged orthodox group of Hindus supported by Prince Sovideva not only overturn King Bijala's rule but also slaughter Madhuvarasa and Haralayya. The city of Kalyan is gripped in chaos, violence and blood-shed. Sovideva usurps King Bijala's crown as King Bijala too indirectly supported Basavanna's ideology. King Bijala belonged to the lineage of Barber and therefore was in favour of the abolishment of Caste-system but he being a ruler, could not support such a movement directly. Bijala becoming the King of Kalyan and marrying Rambhavati who was a Kshatriya also subverts the social hierarchy of caste. The

consequence of the marriage between Sheelavanta and Kalavati was discerning as it was too early to reform the age-old mindset of the orthodox high-caste Hindus.

### **Subversion of Social Roles of a Woman**

Girish Karnad's plays are always dominated by his women characters. Most of his plays has a female for its central figure. It is seen that Girish Karnad's plays based on folk-tales are dominated by its women characters but this domination is not to be seen in his historical plays. In *Tale-Danda*, Girish Karnad has projected a mixture of bold and strong women with some weak and submissive women characters too. Basavanna's wife, Gangambika, Madhuvarasa's wife, Lalitamba and Jagadeva's mother, Amba are presented as strong and assertive women characters whereas Queen Rambhavati and Jagadeva's wife, Savitri are presented as submissive.

Gangambika is the most assertive and strong female character in the play who is bold, witty, outspoken and extrovert. She is very critical about the way women are treated by the males of the society and particularly by their own husbands.

"GANGAMBIKA: Shame on you, Madhvanna. Women and cattle, they are all the same to you, aren't they? . . . A woman is just a ripe mango on a roadside tree for all of you, isn't she? Just one more challenge to your manhood!" (TD, p. 49-50)

Through Gangambika, Girish Karnad mirrors the situation of women in the society. Gangambika is free to exercise her freedom of expression but only within the four walls of her house. She does not have any say in the Sharanas movement even though the movement very strongly advocates the equality of sexes. But within the threshold of her house she does not allow anyone to dominate and it is quite visible in her remark on the conversation between her husband and King Bijala.

"BIJALA: This cursed wedding shall not take place! Do you understand? This is an order. I am not willing to discuss the matter any further . . . Let me warn you, Basavanna, if you think I have ascended the throne merely to sit back and scratch my arse, you are in for a surprise. After sixteen years, how little you know me! You and those sharanas of yours! Just because the city of Kalyan has fallen into your hands, you think you can twist my arms behind my back and push me around with impunity? I am Bijala! Know that and be on your guard. If you insist on driving me to the limits of patience, I shall stamp you all like a cushionful of bed-bugs! . . .

GANGAMBIKA (to Basavanna): Shall I bring the medicine?

BASAVANNA: Eh?

GANGAMBIKA: The medicine?

BASAVANNA: What medicine?

GANGAMBIKA: For your ears. If His Majesty needs to shout even in this small house, perhaps your ear needs attention . . .

BIJALA: Basavanna, I can take on the whole lot of you sharanas single-handed. But I swear, your women confound me!" (TD, p. 56-57)

So, here she indirectly gives a message to the King that she is master of this house and nobody can illtreat her husband. Gangambika's courageous and domineering attitude is showcased which sets herself apart from the rest of the women characters in the play.

The Sharanas preach of equality among the sexes but it is just a propaganda. The sharnas like Maduvarasa always want their wives to abide by the decision taken by him and should not register any protest against it. The decision of Kalavati's marriage with Sheelavanta is not a mutual decision. Madhuvarasa's wife, Lalita, is not at all happy with the matrimonial alliance but she is not permitted to interfere in the decision taken by her husband. She vents her frustration infront of everyone, when both the parents of the girl and the boy have assembled at Basavanna's place to discuss about the marriage. Infront of everyone she gathers courage to speak what she thinks and infront of everyone too she is threatened to be thrashed by her husband.

So, the sharanas themselves subvert the ideals which they preach that of equality among all and through this incident what Gangambika remarks about the women's place in patriarchal yoke also proves to be correct.

On the other hand Lalitamba asserts her right of equality and right of expression that she is free to follow the age-old culture and tradition that she has been observing since years. She candidly tells to Basavanna that she does not follow the ideology of sharana movement and she will always be a devotee of Goddess Dyamavva.

So, Lalita liberates herself from the clutches and chains of patriarchal yoke which enforced her to change her religion and God. She has been a victim of her husband's frivolous and swinging mood and inclinations since years but now she is helpless but to go against her husband's decision of marrying their only daughter

with a cobbler's son because by doing so he is not only risking his daughter's life but also ruining her life as she can't stand leather's smell. So, it is thereby highlighted that an Indian woman breaks the shackles of patriarchy only when she is left with no choice but still some women tolerate it all their life. Lalita is bold enough to challenge this patriarchy.

Some of the female characters aforementioned challenge and subvert the male patriarchy whereas some other female characters just go on tolerating without protesting against the atrocities inflicted upon them by their husbands.

### Conclusion

So, through Tale-Danda, Girish Karnad has deconstructed the social comprehension of caste, birth, religion and God and has tried to give it a fresh meaning for the overall development of the society in general. Caste system is prevalent in the contemporary society too and thereby through the play it is highlighted that the caste, birth or religion of a person is not at all a proper parameter to judge a person and therefore it should be abolished.

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