

Voices of Alternatives amidst Urban Chaos: Vibrant Portraits in Two Plays by Girish Karnad

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Theatrical performance is unique by virtue of being a powerful medium of live audio-visual expression, with the voices of different characters communicating their attitudes, aspirations and assumptions to the audience. This paper shall deal with the last two plays by Girish Karnad, *Wedding Album* (2009) and *Boiled Beans on Toast* (2014), focusing on the world of the women servants in urban households, which reveal interesting facets of their way of life. These characters have ample scope of articulating themselves, sometimes manipulating and subverting positions in the strategies involving power on the domestic front. Karnad's modernity lies in his aplomb in investigating into the behavioural patterns which emerge from mundane situations in modern Indian households where the women servants' interactions with their employers and colleagues leave one baffled by their strangeness.

The chief setting for *Wedding Album* is the Nandkarni household in Dharwad, Karnad's hometown for long. *Boiled Beans on Toast*, involving the servants of the Padabidri household, is set mainly in Bengaluru, where Karnad now lives. These two plays engage our attention towards the indispensable women servants required for those who can afford to employ them for decentralising the onus of performing domestic chores in nuclear families. Both plays have sub-plots involving these women. In *Wedding Album* it is Radhabai the cook, in *Boiled Beans* it is Muttu, the maid, and

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Vimala, cook and chief-servant on whom Karnad focuses, to give us an idea of what goes on in their circles. On the one hand, these women are essential, on the other, they are treated with distrust and suspicion, their employers unconcerned or irritated about their way of life, problems and insecurity.

When *Wedding Album* opens, a film tape is actually being seen by Rohit, a story and screenplay writer for television, and Pratibha, a tele-serial maker. Rohit has two closely knit stories for a tele-serial: one involving the wedding of his sister, Vidula, who is preparing to marry a man she has never actually met, and another, about their cook's daughter who becomes the mistress of a rich man whose death brings misery and madness to her. Contrary to Rohit's expectations, Pratibha says that Vidula's story is of less importance compared to the reality of Yamuna, Radhabai's daughter, which can be built upon with more tense nail-biting episodes to make a commercially successful television serial. In the course of the play, however, Karnad shows how, in a patriarchy-determined society, the predicaments of Vidula and Yamuna cannot be seen apart since both are forced to adjust to the expectations of society and fit into customary norms which are ruthlessly and uncompromisingly demanding. In dispensing with Vidula's episode, Pratibha points out to Rohit that they actually have an audience which is "predominantly young. College going. Or young professionals. Westernized. At least potentially." (8) She explains that they may believe it, but they will not accept this story. The very idea of a graduate girl from an educated middle-class family considering marrying a man whom she has never met is ludicrous. What Pratibha fails to see is Vidula's cool calculation to marry an NRI living in the USA, obviously presuming Vidula to be the simple girl from the backwoods. Had she known about the surreptitious visits paid by Vidula to the cyber-cafe for indulging in the luxury of cyber-sex, her reaction and attitude would certainly be a treat for the audience. So, the scene ends with Pratibha shifting her focus and asking to see the episode concerning Radhabai, looking forward to scene five in *Wedding Album*.

One important dimension of the play features the typical conflict between Mother, the mistress of the home, and Radhabai, the long-time cook—the age-old forum of exhibition of power-politics in the women's world in Indian households. This paper will focus on the important aspect which reveals that Radhabai has been overreacting in her interactions with the mistress, railing and arguing with her for the past six months, ever since the experience of seeing and losing sight of her mentally deranged daughter, Yamuna. There are three different narratives regarding Radhabai's reaction after

seeing her lost, now mad daughter, from the terrace of the Nandkarni house.

The first is reported by Rohit who informs Pratibha that he had it from Radhabai that Yamuna went to Bangalore looking for a job, in order to overcome their poverty in the village, and had eventually become the concubine of a rich trader. Radhabai met her daughter secretly, because she was afraid of losing her job as a cook with a family in Malleswaram, in Bangalore. After a couple of years, the trader died and Yamuna was thrown out by his family. Radhabai could not trace her. Then one day, as Radhabai was on the terrace, she heard kids shouting in the street. She looked down to see Yamuna standing there calling out to her mother, her sari in tatters, her hair loose and dirty. She was out of her senses. The children were throwing stones at her. Radhabai said that she called out to her but the sound of the traffic drowned her voice. So, she ran down the stairs to the street. But Yamuna had disappeared.

The second narrative appears in Scene five, where Pratibha and Rohit are engaged in discussing the details of converting this report into an engrossing episode for a tele-serial. After much discussion, about the most engrossing way of presentation, Rohit and Pratibha decide it this way:

ROHIT: We start with the sky overcast. Ominous clouds. It begins to rain. Radhabai runs on to the terrace to collect the clothes. She is piling the clothes on her shoulders, that's when she hears the racket. Goes to the parapet. And looks down. Sees the daughter, recognizes her and runs down. It's pouring by the time she reaches the gate.

PRATIBHA: Very nice. The clothes keep falling off her shoulders as she races down. Superb.

ROHIT: So when she reaches her daughter, it is lashing with rain. All that struggle to take the daughter in—the daughter screaming and pushing her away—all that happens while the rain turns into a thunderstorm.

(Pratibha claps approvingly.)

Ultimately the daughter pushes her and runs away. Literally melts away in the rain.

PRATIBHA: A super shot to end the episode with. Her melting away.

ROHIT: Actually, we should probably end on Radhabai collapsing in the

mud. Calling out and weeping. But the rain blinds her, chokes her calls.

PRATIBHA: Possibly. . . . You know, your great advantage is that you know the lower middle class inside out.

ROHIT: I told you. She worked for us.

However, Rohit's confidence about "knowing" the lower middle class "inside out" is critiqued by Karnad in the ultimate soliloquy of the play uttered by Radhabai in Scene Nine, where we hear the voice of the subaltern, recollecting memories of what had actually happened on that fateful day:

RADHABAI: I leaned across the parapet to see what was going on. There she was—this mad woman—stark raving mad. Shouting foul abuses at the kids who were throwing stones at her.

(Pause)

It took me a few minutes to recognize her. Yamuna! She was shouting and screaming: 'Where's Amma? Which is Amma's house?'

I was paralyzed. Why is she here? What if my mistress sees her? What'll happen to me? I ran and hid in a corner of the terrace. I buried my head in my knees and curled up, so she wouldn't recognize me. I don't know how long I was hiding there. The noise faded. The street became silent again. I crawled back to my kitchen. Safe. (92-93)

After a pause she embarks upon a detailed description of cooking double beans which she was going to prepare that day. The stage had begun to darken slowly as she begins her soliloquy and is immersed in complete darkness as her voice fades away. This fading voice is that of the subaltern, in the third narrative, which brings to the audience the reality of the subaltern's predicament. The complacency of the dominant voice which presumes that it has exhibited the benevolence of "allowing" ample scope / space to the subaltern is turned upon its head by the actual voice of the subaltern, in the soliloquy, which is heavy with socio-cultural obligations centering on something as simple, and yet complex, as existence. It is Radhabai's existential crisis which makes this so-called subaltern create a plausible story for her own security at the expense of the reality of the insecurity and distress of her own child. Such survival strategies seem to be the only option for domestic servants in urban households where getting a job is difficult and losing one is equally easy.

This hyphenated lifestyle of the servants who form a strong force in all metropolitan cities in India has been investigated further in Karnad's recent play, *Boiled Beans on Toast*. Radhabai and her distraught daughter were important precursors to Vimala Thimmegowda, carrying a Saraswat Brahmin surname, essential to qualify as cook in the Padabidri home, and Muttu, a Mudaliyar by caste, who works in Anjali Padabidri's household as servant. These two characters are used by Karnad to serve as bearers of the title of the play, which serves as the signifier of the lifestyle of the inhabitants of India's silicon valley: a sumptuous helping of 'benda kaalu' (boiled beans) on 'toast'—of indigenous culture on western imported way of life imbibed by the urban rich and imitated and 'abused' by their servants. Those who subscribe to the affluent lifestyle in Bangalore live in posh bungalows manned by a team of servants who have their own hierarchical power-politics, depending on the indulgence of the mistress of the house and the consequent authority engendered by the incumbent. This essential back-up workforce of the city is a cultural melting-pot of the traditional values and practices of the backwoods which it brings with it to the city and the westernized cultural phenomenon which it encounters there. This large section of Bengaluru comprises people from various parts of the backwoods around the growing city, flowing in with hopes and dreams of financial stability and a better way of life, and thereby thronging the slums, the abode of the subaltern. They are not one homogenous entity. They have their own hierarchies and power struggles, which are in a continuous state of flux, being heavily dependent on a fragile framework of temporary employment threatened by loss and uncertainty. This is close to Ania Loomba's observation: "whoever our subalterns are, they are positioned simultaneously within several different discourses of power and of resistance." (Loomba 199)

In this play, Anjana's disapproval of visitors to her servants is compensated by the provision of mobile phones for making necessary personal communications. In spite of this, Muttu's mother and her brother, Shankara, come for an urgent discussion with her regarding the coming-of-age ceremony of Muttu's daughter, Kalpana. Vimala, wielding greater power among the servants, interrupts their conference since the ironing Muttu was doing has remained incomplete, pointing out that this is precisely the reason behind Anjana's forbidding such meetings in her house.

Shankara, unable to take the reprimand from another servant, retorts insolently—the obvious verbal battle between Shankara and Vimala cannot be contained by Muttu, who is aware of Vimala's dominance in the house (a dominance which will be usurped

by Muttu in the course of the play). As Shankara leaves with his mother, Vimala makes her loud voice heard, “Is that your brother? I should ask him to learn a little civility. This isn’t your backwoods, you know. This is Bengaluru. We can do with less rudeness here.” (9) She leaves after satisfactorily making her point as Muttu continues with her unfinished ironing. The inherent tension among the servants is obvious.

In Scene Six Anjana, seated in her living room, is speaking to her husband on her mobile phone. She is upset: she didn’t know that Vimala works in another house—Saroja Kunigal’s; she has been accused of stealing a gold necklace belonging to the old lady in the Kunigal house; and has been taken to the Tilaknagar Police Station; Vimala and Saroja had been quarrelling on the telephone when the police rang up Anjana. Her complete faith in Vimala, who has been working for her over eight years, propels her towards going out of her way to protect Vimala. She explains herself by telling her husband that she had been to the police station, and had temporarily returned home, only to go back with a lawyer to do something for “an innocent woman.” That she has been taken in by Vimala in many ways will slowly arrive as the play progresses.

Scene Eight is set at the police station. As soon as the Inspector addresses the accused as Vimala Thimmegowda (a Saraswat Brahmin surname), Saroja pounces on it and proclaims that her actual name is Vimala Mary Amaldas, and that she is a Christian, which has been confirmed by her personal investigations into Vimala’s background, made two days back when Saroja had gone to Kamraj Road to meet Vimala’s parents, Christians from Velankanni, who have moved to Bangalore. Vimala denies this allegation of using a pseudo-surname. Saroja claims that she’s been working in their house for the past six months, which surprises Kunaal, Anjana’s son, because his mother knew nothing of this employment.

Saroja continues with her allegation that Vimala had stolen her mother’s thick gold chain which the old lady took off before Vimala bathed her every morning, fleeing with it. Saroja pursued her till the Padabidri house where she was found talking to “her boyfriend,” the auto-driver. Vimala’s vehement retort is, again, typical of all domestic help throughout India: “You ladies who’re educated, you can only think of dirty things the moment you see a single woman.” (39) The argument worsens as contradictory information is revealed: Vimala claims to live in Uttarahalli (a slum), and not Kadreguppe (the address she had given Anjana, eight years ago); she claims that she lived with her parents there when her father was alive, implying that he is now dead, whereas Saroja

claims to have met her parents two days back. Vimala's contradictory statements worsen Anjana's understanding of her personal details which seem to be enshrouded by mystery and intentional misinformation.

Later in the play, Kunaal speaks a monologue on the mobile to Nandita, his friend, describing the trip to Uttarahalli with Vimala and the police, "An absolute nightmare from which there was no way of waking up." (41) Vimala's sister-in-law, who finally emerges from their house, represents the insolent woman of her class who refuses to cooperate with the strangers enquiring about Vimala. The sole refrain she utters is "ask the man of the house when he comes." (43) The constable explains to the innocent Kunaal that "Bangalore is bursting with women like her. Where they live, how they live, how they move around—it's all a mystery. Impossible to pin them down. Like scorpions, you know. They only have to see a slab of stone and they'll crawl under it and set up house." (44) Kunaal contacts Nandita again, his animated conversation with her serving as reflectors of his gatherings from what he has witnessed:

I was flabbergasted, Nandita. Absolutely stunned. She's been with us for nearly eight years—and we've been saying oh such a nice woman, so reliable. And you know, every sentence she uttered to the police and to me was a lie. A bright, white, brazen lie. And she knew that I knew and the police knew that she was fibbing. And what courage! What invention! She was leading us on, she was creating a story from one minute to another. I tell you. She's my heroine. I've never seen such—such—what's the word—creativity! How could we've missed her brilliance! (44)

He switches off the phone. Act One ends with his soliloquy in which his admiration and wonder at Vimala's brilliant modus of chalking out a survival-strategy in this alien, hostile and competitive scenario (a common tactic adopted by all domestic help in urbanised India) is expressed: "She's simply wonderful. I wish she was my girlfriend. I think—I've fallen in love with her. What a woman! A true heroine!" (44)

Act Two begins with Shankara accusing his mother of abandoning him in Karimangala, and leaving for Bangalore with the young Muttu, when she was widowed. She reminds him that his family had thrown the widow and daughter (liabilities) out of the house and had kept the heir, the son, with them. Muttu's mother had a hard time sewing linen in the machine for the Marwaris for eight to ten hours a day, damaging

her knees in the process. Accusations are thrown at each other by mother and son:

SHANKARA: And what have you done for these granddaughters, eh? They're rotting in this village. Do you ever think of them in Bengaluru? . . . I was the older child and yet you didn't take me to Bengaluru. You didn't even bother about me later. . . .

MOTHER: How can you blame me? What choice did I have? You were a male child. . . . We lived like beggars, like roofless orphans in that monster city. . . . Would your grandparents have let us into the house? I was the inauspicious woman who'd killed their son. But didn't your daughters come to Bangalore? . . . Didn't they enjoy the city?

SHANKARA: And came back hating this dump and our life here. You showed off nicely, I grant you that. (46-47)

The tantrums clarify the rift between the migrant city-dwelling wage earner and the family left behind in the ancestral domain which tends to miss out the fact that the migrant had to risk uncertainties prior to finding some sort of equilibrium. This quest for a better way of life than that offered by the backwoods is explored by Karnad through the attitudes of different characters who represent various socio-cultural strata—Anasuya, Anjana, Vimala, Muttu, Prabhakar, Shankara and others.

In Scene Four a call arrives on Anjana's mobile which Muttu carries to her. Vimala is on the other side. Anjana requests her to come back to work. Muttu is an alert eavesdropper during their conversation. She informs Anjana that Shalini, the hired cook, will be absent for the next two or three days. Muttu pounces upon Anjana's inconvenience to advance her position in the household. She claims that she can cook, if Anjana would allow a Mudaliar (lower caste). The modern, city-dwelling Anjana has no caste-related inhibitions. So, it is settled that Muttu shall cook. Then, Muttu cunningly strikes at the absent Vimala by dropping a series of informations about Vimala's lending the tenants of their neighbour, Professor Menon, two LPG cylinders, their old mixer and microwave oven, for the last four months (ever since the tenants arrived) to Anjana's surprised wrath. Karnad definitely unfolds aspects of the world of urban domestic-help in this play. On the one hand, he shows their murky domestic front. On the other, he reveals their lying, slyness and opportunistic practices.

In Scene Seven, Vimala comes on the scooter to Muttu's house on a revengeful

spree since she has been ousted from her job in Anjana's house. She asks for Muttu's mother and informs her that Shankara has come to the city to work as an auto driver. He has been surreptitiously concealing his identity. She had met him accidentally at the auto stand when she had gone to meet her friend, the auto driver. She had collected information about Shankara, who lived with other auto drivers in a garage. He had landed up in a hospital, terribly wounded. She says: "Half a dozen young boys in a room together. Can't you imagine the shenanigans? Drinks. Drugs. Street women. Apparently there was a fight the other day. They brought out their bicycle chains and knives. Now he is in the general ward of a hospital wrapped up in bandages. And the hospital won't keep him for long if he doesn't produce some cash. (*Pause.*) And in the whole of Bangalore, only I know who he is." (68) After having produced the desired anxiety in the crippled old woman, she leaves without telling Muttu and her mother in which hospital he is, absolutely satisfied with the cold-blooded revenge she has been able to take so early on the usurper, Muttu. Muttu assures her mother that her husband would definitely look for Shankara, although she is not prepared to believe what Vimala has said.

In the last scene, Muttu, now fully in charge of the housekeeping, speaks to her mother on the mobile phone, asking her not to disturb her when she is at work. She assures her mother that her husband is looking for Shankara. However, after she switches off the mobile, she says, "As though we've nothing else to do. The brute. He'll get in touch if he needs to," (75) revealing that she has been leading her mother on about the search for her brother.

Karnad's plays show how theatre can present various patterns of behaviour in an engrossingly realistic manner, with a variety of voices being heard by the audience. This linguistic aspect may also be investigated in the plays in Kannada, which is lost in those translated in English, raising the question of linguistic appropriation and its concurrent issues. While English serves as the medium of reaching out to a larger audience, it eliminates class distinction, bringing about a linguistic unification which fails to project the reality of the place of language as communication. It would be fitting to quote Karnad's own words here:

All the members of Wedding Album—except the outsiders like the attendant at the video shop and the invisible lover—belong to the same caste [Sarawat Brahmin] and so would speak the same dialect of Konkani. Radhabai is a cook but from a

sub-caste of the same caste. People from lower castes were not allowed to cook in the kitchen.

In Boiled Beans the family members would speak Konkani and others—visitors, friends, servants—would speak Kannada. Since Muttu’s family is immigrant from Tamil Nadu she should speak Tamil to her mother and brother but in the play she speaks to them in Kannada. Same for Vimala. They speak correct Bangalore Kannada. [Italics mine. e-mail dated 8 February 2014]

The uniform use of English by all the characters conceals much of the linguistic politics involved in social behavioural patterns in multicultural India, particularly in the metros, where proximity tantamounts to shoulder-rubbing by all strata of society owing to strategies of survival and sustenance. A metropolitan city symbolizes growth, money, power, fulfilment of dreams—in short, man’s unlimited capacity to rule the earth, to the exclusion of biodiversity and environmental congeniality. In being a part of the race for all that the city represents, each individual carves out unique strategies which will enhance his/her ability to reach a set target. The affluent can fend for themselves in nuclear families. The poor aspirants need to stay together for survival when in trouble and toss each other out of the way when self-centred gains are at stake. Karnad highlights relevant realistic features of the behavioural patterns of domestic help in the last two plays he has written, for the entertainment and edification of his English-speaking urban audience who would definitely corroborate the experiences of the Nandkarnis, Padabidris and Kunigals.

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