

## Fragmentation of Identity in Girish Karnad's "Broken Images"

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### ABSTRACT

Girish Karnad's one act, one performer play "Broken Images" (2005), can be looked at from multiple levels. At the beginning, it appears to take on the long-standing debate on the politics of language in the Indian literary culture with the protagonist Manjula Nayak, a short-story writer in Kannada suddenly producing an international bestseller in English. However Karnad, very skilfully, manoeuvres the play and turns it into a psychological thriller by centring on the formation of one's identity and how our earliest experiences stick with us for years and continue to influence us well into our adulthood. In this paper, I wish to focus on the protagonist of Karnad's play Manjula Nayak and her dissociation with her 'self'. The dissociative aspect is a coping mechanism which allows her to shut out the painful and traumatic experiences of her childhood. Manjula writes a novel in English with her sister as the central character. This act revives memories long suppressed. The lie she has been living shatters as she is forced to face her image/ conscience and acknowledge her brokenness.

### KEYWORDS

Identity; Fragmentation; Brokenness; Dissociation; Self.

'*Odakalu Bimba*' (Kannada) or "Broken Images" (English) or Bikhre Bimb (Hindi) all refer to the one act, one performer play written by Girish Karnad in 2005. The play also marked Girish Karnad's return to direction after 30 years. Originally written in Kannada, it was translated by Karnad in English with the title '*A Heap of Broken Images*'. The title of the play is inspired by T. S Eliot's famous lines from "The Wasteland":

What are the roots that clutch, what  
branches grow  
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,  
You cannot say, or guess, for you know  
only  
A heap of broken images, where the  
sun beats,

And the dead tree gives no shelter, the  
cricket no relief,  
And the dry stone no sound of water.  
Only  
There is shadow under this red rock,  
(Come in under the shadow of this red  
rock),  
And I will show you something  
different from either  
Your shadow at morning striding  
behind you  
Or your shadow at evening rising to  
meet you;  
I will show you fear in a handful of  
dust.

This iconic poem by Eliot, "...is a deeply moving embodiment of grief, despair and the longing of rebirth ...

Through the title of his play, Karnad seems to be pointing towards a similar socio-psychological breakdown in human communication and relationships in the face of overpowering ambition and greed” (Mukherjee). The play can be read with multiple degrees of complexities and perspectives. At the beginning, it appears to take on the long-standing debate on the politics of language in the Indian literary culture with the protagonist, Manjula Nayak, humorously critiquing writers and intellectuals who have been breathing fire at her since she produced a novel in English. The conflict arises from her deviance from writing in Kannada as well as the success her novel written in a “foreign” tongue receives.

The play, however, as the title suggests deals with the issue of broken identity, the formation of one’s identity and how our earliest experiences stick with us for years and continue to influence us well into our adulthood. In a very subtle manner, Karnad speaks about what we now refer to as Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), a complex psychological condition that is likely caused by many factors, including severe trauma during early childhood. The dissociative aspect is a kind of coping mechanism, a psychological response to interpersonal and environmental stresses, where the person literally shuts off or dissociates themselves from a situation or experience that is traumatic or painful to assimilate with their conscious self.

In this paper, I will focus on the protagonist of Karnad’s play, Manjula Nayak, and her dissociation with her ‘self’. The paper will read Manjula’s selfhood and its fragmentary manifestations as a suppressed moral dilemma arising from certain life conditions. The fragmentary nature of Manjula’s identity extends not only over her relationships with the people around her but also with languages. The plot revolves around Manjula, a short-story

writer in Kannada who unexpectedly produces an international bestseller in English. This success gives her financial stability and allows her to leave her job as a lecturer of English in Bangalore. In the first half of the play, we are full of admiration for Manjula when she confidently walks in and unflinchingly responds to the accusations of betrayal hurled at her after the publication and success of her novel ‘*The River Has No Memories*’. She upsets people in positions of power when she points out that those who call her a traitor for writing in English, pronounce such judgements in the same language as if, “Speaking in English ... gives you the authority to make oracular pronouncements on Indian literatures and languages.” The irony in their demeanor is evident. She points out that the problem is not related to her ‘creativity’ but with the ‘money’ she has received for the novel. Manjula is unabashed about her success and prosperity and turns the table on her critics by quoting a Kannada proverb, “A response is good. But a meaningful response is better... Arthapoorna ... Artha – which also means money! And of course, fame, publicity, glamour... power.” It is interesting to note that the success Manjula receives from writing in English would probably have been difficult to imagine with a translated work. Translation, being an everyday tool for multilingual individuals living around multiple languages, is a tool that Manjula has not made use of in her previous writing. However, the one she is writing about is her sister, whose preference for English Manjula is contemptuous of and yet the story came to her in English. The act of translation is as much a marker of identity as is speaking. When Manjula writes the experiences of her sister, she not only has to (as an individual living and speaking Kannada) translate her thought into English, she also has to translate her sister’s identity and with it her own.

In this translation, somewhere, the audience is misled. The image we get of Manjula Nayak is clean, unbroken, with no sharp edges to be found anywhere. As her speech progresses, the audience continues to build an image of Manjula as a caring, responsible, empathetic sister and an understanding and appreciative wife. We are told that Malini, her sister, "...was physically challenged. Suffered from...meningomyelocoele – the upper part of her body was perfectly normal; below the waist, the nervous system was damaged. Completely dysfunctional...she spent her entire life confined to a wheelchair." Here Manjula becomes emotional, reminiscing how Malini came to stay with them in their house in Jayanagar after their parents died and how much she learnt from caring for her. This persona of herself that Manjula is presenting to the world, broadcasting on television, is clearly what she believes herself to be.

When one considers how a person translates, it is easy to picture someone transcribing from one language to another painstakingly. However, it must also be taken into account that languages do not exist in isolation. With them comes cultural phenomenon, social aspects, a whole world that can exist in the language and in which, simultaneously, the language thrives. To translate from one language to another is to give the content a new life. The same can be said of identity, especially in consideration of identity that is changing with language. Let us look into Manjula's own thoughts on the matter. When the 'Image' asks her whether or not "Malini was at home with Kannada", Manjula confesses that her sister rarely used the language and that "She (Malini) breathed, laughed, dreamt in English. Her friends spoke only English. Having her in my house for six years helped improve my English". To this the 'Image' says "So Kannada was the one area that became yours?".

How languages became divided

amongst the two sisters is easy to trace given that they grew up in separate households in different areas, but how languages were claimed as identity is an entirely different matter. Where Malini speaks English because of preference, Manjula prefers Kannada because it is not her sister's preference. Manjula tells the 'Image' that "(she) could not have written about (her) sister in Kannada." But considering the content of her novel, Manjula is not writing *about* her sister, she is writing *as* her, as a woman stuck in bed and watching the world pass by. She is not writing as a second person but is actively taking control of the voice of the narrative. It is not that she could not have written *about* her sister in Kannada, it is that she could not have written *as* her sister in Kannada.

Which brings us to the effect of the act of translating an identity has on a person. Manjula, by virtue of this act of translating herself into her sister to write her story, comes face to face with her own dysfunctional, broken self in the form of the 'Image'. The 'Image' speaks to her from outside, conducting the function of an impartial conscience that is usually internal but in Manjula's case is so divorced from her 'self', so deeply repressed that it manifests as an external entity. From the anecdotes about her upbringing that she hesitantly brings up, it becomes clear to the audience that Manjula has deep emotional and psychological scars. She has subconsciously been repressing her negative emotions, whether it is pain or anger or yearning to be recognized, to the point that her brain creates a virtual self to ease the burden. It brings with it bitter truths and unvoiced emotions: issues of abandonment and parental neglect ("They left me with grandparents in Dharwad...no substitute for parents. When vacations approached I could barely wait to get to Bangalore"); favoritism ("Soon after her birth, the moment the gravity of her

situation was realized, my parents moved to Bangalore...Took a house in the Koramangala Extension. She became the apple of their eye. When she was old enough to go to school, a teacher came to teach her English and Mathematics..." And "Father...left most of his money in her name – for her care. She was always the focus"); sibling rivalry, envy, insecurity, mediocrity, inferiority and self-deception ("She was attractive – more attractive than me. Intelligent – more intelligent than me. And vivacious, which I never was") come tumbling out as she hesitatingly answers to the questions posed to her by her image self.

Issues of abandonment, envy, and self-deception are evident through the protagonist's reactions to the questions posed to her...Girish Karnad brutally exposes the pathetic mess a person's psyche can be reduced to over years of suppressed bitterness and lying to oneself... (medium.com)

The persona of herself that she presented on national television with such confidence not minutes prior shatters and breaks to reveal her true self as it is, fragmented and torn. The realization that she cannot run away anymore forces her

to slowly look up. She finds herself split in two and this time the virtual is the real self. The image makes her accept that even if she had received the same love and attention like her sister Malini, she wouldn't have been as bright as her. It makes her acknowledge her hypocrisy for not buying a house in the Koramangala and for making Kannada her choice of language because Malini "...breathed, laughed and dreamt in English" and her lies about their marital relationship that keep her from acknowledging Pramod's departure immediately after Malini's death. The image forces her to acknowledge her brokenness that she has been running away from, not knowing how to relate to it or what to do with it. She lashes out at the image on the screen before slumping into a strange calmness. ("The Image smiles. Suddenly Manjula becomes calm.")

Karnad has very skilfully used technology on stage to reveal the undisclosed facts that Manjula is herself unaware of. It also points out at "the diminishing distinction between the real and the virtual" and makes us question as to "what would happen when, instead of our interaction with other images, we are forced to confront our own."

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