

## **Expression in Repression: Examining the Intricacies of Female Sexuality in Girish Karnad's *Wedding Album***

**Shikha Dabas**

Research Scholar, CSJMU University, Kanpur, India

### **ABSTRACT**

The article critically examines the depiction of societal issues, particularly about women, in the plays of Girish Karnad, with a focused analysis of *Wedding Album*. It explores the notable shift in Karnad's writing style post-1997, highlighting his engagement with contemporary themes such as identity, gender dynamics, globalization, and the dichotomy of tradition versus modernity. The paper scrutinizes Karnad's portrayal of characters like Vidula and Hema, arguing that these figures act as a conduit for critiquing patriarchal structures and illuminating women's complexities in navigating cultural norms. Furthermore, the research delves into Karnad's subtle yet profound exploration of female sexuality, using characters like Vidula to challenge and question established societal conventions. Through *Wedding Album*, Karnad provides an insightful examination into the intricate facets of women's lives, encompassing their existential quandaries and the often-unvoiced struggles within the Indian milieu. This essay underscores Karnad's significant contributions to feminist discourse and highlights his skill in depicting the multifaceted experiences of women in a society undergoing rapid transformation.

### **KEYWORDS**

Patriarchy; Gender dynamics; Identity crisis; Female sexuality.

### **Introduction**

Girish Karnad, an eminent figure in Indian English Drama, is acclaimed for his dramaturgical representation of societal malaises. Karnad's oeuvre utilizes folk narratives and mythologies as mediums to articulate various facets of feminism. His plays predominantly delve into the ethical quandaries' female protagonists face, thereby voicing the silent agonies and disenfranchisement of numerous married women in the Indian context. Karnad's dramaturgy addresses the existential crises women encounter and portrays their relentless pursuit of meaning in life (Karnad, *Collected Plays*).

Throughout his illustrious career, Karnad consistently employed his plays as conduits for examining and critiquing the

social, cultural, and political fabric of Indian society. Post-1997, Karnad's writing manifested a discernible transition, incorporating contemporary characters and themes, broadening his exploration of social issues and resonating more profoundly with modern audiences (Karnad, *Interviews with Playwrights*).

*Wedding Album*, published in 2009, exemplifies this evolution in Karnad's work, addressing contemporary issues such as identity, gender dynamics, globalization, and the juxtaposition of tradition and modernity. The play, set within the microcosm of a Saraswat Brahmin family—the Nadkarnis—centres around the youngest daughter, Vidula Nadkarni, and her 'technologically arranged' marriage to Ashwin Panje, a US

expatriate (Karnad, *Wedding Album*). Vidula's engagement with Ashwin, facilitated solely through digital communication, epitomizes the intersection of traditional matrimonial customs with modern technological means.

Rohit Nadkarni, Vidula's brother, serves as the intermediary between Vidula and Ashwin, crafting an introductory video for Vidula that underscores the patriarchal expectations entrenched in the matrimonial process. Rohit's insistence on Vidula appearing 'cheerful' and palatable for the camera symbolizes the patriarchal inclination to mould women's identities to fit societal expectations (Karnad, *Wedding Album* 45).

Hema, introduced as Vidula's elder sister, embodies the existential struggles of Indian women. Despite her relocation to Australia following marriage to an NRI and living in a Western milieu, Hema is confined to domestic roles, her potential and aspirations unfulfilled. Karnad poignantly captures Hema's plight: "Hema did nothing with her intelligence and good looks. Has been content to be a housewife" (Karnad, *Wedding Album* 90). This portrayal reflects the limitations imposed upon women, irrespective of geographical and cultural contexts.

In conclusion, Karnad's *Wedding Album* is a seminal work that not only exemplifies his thematic shift to more contemporary issues but also continues his critical examination of the complexities faced by women in a rapidly evolving society. She says,

A white wife refuses to go trailing after her husband. We Indian women, on the other hand, are obedient Sati Savitris, ever willing to follow in our husband's footsteps. Look at me - Melbourne, Johannesburg, Singapore, and now Sydney. Our men may get all the top jobs. But I am in no better position than Ma. (17)

The portrayal of Hema in Girish Karnad's *Wedding Album* underscores her surrender to a male-dominated society, epitomizing the entrenched notion of women as dedicated wives, nurturing mothers, and restricted to domestic confines. This characterization highlights female subordination under patriarchal structures, a recurring motif in Karnad's work (Karnad, *Wedding Album*).

Karnad's play also critically examines the allure of Western countries as destinations for ambitious Indian youth seeking career advancement. While these opportunities facilitate professional growth for men, their wives, like Hema, are often relegated to supportive roles, echoing the stagnancy of their societal positions despite geographical relocation (Karnad, *Wedding Album*).

This intersection of gender and economic factors in the subjugation of women is further explored in the context of socialist-feminist theory. Karen V. Hansen and Ilene Philipson argue that women's oppression is rooted not only in patriarchal systems but also in capitalist structures. They posit that gender inequalities are intricately linked with class-based systems in male-dominated societies (Hansen and Philipson, *Women, Class, and the Feminist Imagination*).

Hansen and Philipson's perspective provides a theoretical framework for understanding the dynamics in *Wedding Album*, where the subjugation of women like Hema is seen as a product of both patriarchal and capitalist influences. This dual lens of analysis deepens the understanding of the play's critique of the societal roles and expectations imposed on women. In sharing his 'Materialist views of Gender', Prof. Pramod K. Nayar, a critic and the author of *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory* writes,

Materialist feminists argue that domestic labor contributes to the household economy, but is rarely seen as 'productive'. In other words,

the work done by men in fields and factories is treated as productive labour, while the work done by women inside houses is rendered 'invisible'. (Nayar 132).

In *Wedding Album*, Girish Karnad explores the theme of women's sacrifices within the household, often dismissed as their 'natural duty' rather than recognized as a significant contribution to the household economy. Karnad highlights the persistent issue of the sexual division of labour (SDL) in both ancient and modern societies, where domestic tasks are predominantly assigned to women, and economic provision is seen as the domain of men. When domestic roles are professionalized, men undertaking these tasks perceive the same work women do as trivial. This SDL, as Karnad suggests, is a social construct born from patriarchal norms, limiting women's potential and confining them to domestic spaces despite their capabilities as earners (Karnad, *Wedding Album*).

Additionally, Karnad introduces other female characters in the play, such as Tapasya and Isabel, to illustrate the patriarchal dynamics in the Indian context further. Though minor and never appearing on stage, these characters are pivotal in exposing male chauvinism. Isabel Pinto, portrayed as Rohit's submissive Christian girlfriend, and Tapasya, presented as a potential matrimonial match for Rohit, both exemplify the emotional exploitation by male characters. Tapasya is depicted as an educated and sensitive woman, yet the expectations of subservience constrain her. It is starkly highlighted in Karnad's description of Tapasya as "a First Class in MA in Sociology. She is a modern girl-educated and sensitive" (38). Yet, her parents overlook entirely her opinions on marriage.

Through the characters of Tapasya and Isabel, Karnad sheds light on the societal prioritization of men's choices

over women's autonomy. The parents of Tapasya, Mr. and Mrs. Sisurs, exemplify this dynamic by their eagerness to arrange her marriage to Rohit, disregarding her desires and educational achievements. The play critiques this cultural tendency to overlook women's agency in favour of fulfilling societal expectations of marriage and subservience.

In sum, *Wedding Album* serves as a critical reflection of the entrenched patriarchal norms in Indian society, where women's sacrifices are undervalued, and their autonomy is often suppressed. Karnad's portrayal of these dynamics through the experiences of Vidula, Hema, Tapasya, and Isabel underscores women's multifaceted challenges in navigating these societal constraints. The creation of Tapasya's disdained existence in the play echoes the feminist voice by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, which she delivered as a TED Talk in 2012 and published as an essay titled, *We Should All Be Feminists*. She says,

We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls, you can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful, but not too successful. Otherwise, you would threaten the man. Because I am female, I am expected to aspire to marriage. I am expected to make my life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important. (Adichie 2012).

The character of Tapasya, alongside others, epitomizes the plight of women constrained by societal expectations, mirroring a sentiment echoed by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie regarding the suppression of women's aspirations. This theme is further exemplified through the portrayal of the mother of Hema and Vidula. Introduced in the play's second scene, she embodies the repressed desires resulting from the rigid patriarchal structures of Indian society. Her dreams,

curtailed by an early marriage and denied educational opportunities, reflect a broader narrative of female subjugation.

Karnad utilizes the mother's character as a critical lens to scrutinize the superficiality embedded within the Indian marriage institution. She is depicted as a submissive wife, dominated by both her father and husband, encapsulating the societal norms that govern women's lives. The play poignantly reveals her internal struggle through her reflections on a life unfulfilled, yet she endeavours to instil a sense of independence in her daughters. This dichotomy is captured when she expresses regret for not achieving personal aspirations while simultaneously advocating for her daughters' self-reliance.

This portrayal in *Wedding Album* resonates with Adichie's observations on women's systemic barriers, illustrating how societal constructs often dictate and limit women's life choices. Karnad's dramatization of these themes offers a critical commentary on the enduring impact of patriarchal norms on the aspirations and autonomy of women in Indian society. She says,

Our lives are over. My father wouldn't even let me finish college..... I never had any time for you children. Just rush, rush. And I achieved nothing in my life. But I was hoping at least you girls would do something.... Don't throw away your talents in just bearing children. God gave me such lovely children. But I could give them no guidance. We did nothing for you. Don't do the same thing with your life." (90).

Through *Wedding Album*, Karnad meticulously depicts the age-old practices of women's struggle and their resistance against the male hegemony. The play sketches out the victimization of women and the psychological and emotional trauma they experience in the modern technology-driven world. The repressed desires and regulated choices of Hema and

Vidula were shown to be no different from their own mother. The goal that was set for these women from two different generations was to marry an eligible and successful bachelor.

### **Dual Identities led by Karnad's women**

Girish Karnad's *Wedding Album*, the scenes progressively reveal the concealed emotions and desires of the female characters, who pursue physical and emotional fulfilment. The play presents an authentic depiction of the intricacies of femininity through the characters of Hema, Vidula, and their mother. These women, represented in Vidula's symbolic 'wedding album,' are shown in sharp contrast to the stereotypical compliant image of Indian women. They navigate lives of dual identities, exploring their true selves and seeking affection beyond their marital partners.

A pivotal revelation in the play is the subdued sexual desires of the mother, which come to light with the entry of Ramdas Nandkarni, her brother-in-law. The longstanding, concealed relationship between Ramdas and the mother gains prominence when the need arises for Vidula's essential documents for her Visa application. The discovery that Ramdas is listed as Vidula's biological father on her birth certificate stirs profound reactions. Initially, the mother displays anger and disillusionment over Ramdas' egregious error. However, her reluctance to replace Ramdas' name on the certificate with that of her husband is revealing. She rationalizes, "All these days, we didn't know what was in the corporation files. So, why can't we continue with Ramdas' name on the certificate?" (Karnad, 54). This response encapsulates her years of submission and devotion to a despondent married life, during which she found solace in her brother-in-law, who protected her from her husband's oppression.

This narrative arc in *Wedding Album* exposes the complexities of the

mother's character and her search for comfort outside her marriage, highlighting the multifaceted nature of female experiences in a patriarchal society. The conversation among her children further underscores the impact of these revelations, revealing the nuances of family dynamics and the consequences of societal constraints on individual lives. It follows as

VIDULA: Did you hear that? Ma! Saying leave it as it is? Can you believe it?

ROHIT: Yes, I can. (Lowering his voice) Don't you know, Appa had a bad temper. And he was not averse to using his hand on Ma. Apparently Ramdas Uncle couldn't stand that. He never let Appa hit Ma when he was around.

HEMA: I know. Once Ramdas Uncle got so wild, he was about to beat up Appa. (55)

Ramdas' secret feelings towards Mrs. Nandkarni led him to hate his brother, who used to beat his wife ruthlessly. The love affair between Ramdas and the mother had not been made explicit by Karnad. He rather gives certain hints through several instances that indicate the existing intimacy between them. Given the instance of the birth certificate and Ramdas' amorous feelings toward his sister-in-law makes the audience becomes suspicious about Vidula's real father.

The repressed sexuality of Hema is reflected when Vivan enters the story. He is a 13-year-old boy who used to visit the Nandkarni family to borrow books from them. In *Wedding Album*, Vivan is presented as a gerontophile who seems to have an erotic feeling towards Hema, a mother of a boy 'older than this Vivan'. The books that Vivan prefers to read are sensual in nature. His preferred books are *Madam Bovary* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. His adolescent sexuality is revealed more when he hands over a 'personal letter' to

Hema that reads 'Darling, you don't know how much I desire to crush you in my arms...'

In the fourth scene of Girish Karnad's *Wedding Album*, the playwright intricately portrays Vivan's character and his burgeoning obsession with Hema. Karnad captures the complexities of Vivan's character through his impulsive and provocative dialogue. Vivan, confronted by Hema's threat to reveal his behaviour to his mother, unabashedly declares his love for her, saying, "Go ahead; I will also tell her I love you. The moment I saw you the other day, I fell desperately in love. I want to die with my hand inside your blouse..." (*Wedding Album* 45). This line conveys Vivan's reckless abandonment and his deep infatuation with Hema. Hema's reaction to Vivan's advances combines pretence and genuine shock. Karnad describes her response as she slaps Vivan lightly, followed by a recoil, "scared by her violence" (*Wedding Album* 45). This action reflects her internal conflict and discomfort with Vivan's advances. Despite her apparent admonishment, Vivan remains undeterred, expressing his intense feelings for her. He retorts, "Hit me. The touch of your hand fills me with ecstasy. I am crazy about you" (*Wedding Album* 45).

Karnad delves into the intricate emotional and psychological dynamics between Hema and Vivan through this scene. He showcases how Vivan's unbridled passion clashes with Hema's mixed response, encapsulating the complexities of human emotions and desires. This moment in "Wedding Album" is pivotal in exploring the themes of love, obsession, and the boundaries of social propriety within the narrative. A Czech writer, Milan Kundera, in his work, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, writes,

The male glance has often been described. It is commonly said to rest coldly on a woman, measuring, weighing, evaluating, selecting her

— in other words, turning her into an object... What is less commonly known is that a woman is not completely defenseless against that glance. If it turns her into an object, then she looks back at the man with the eyes of an object. It is though a hammer had suddenly grown eyes and stare up at the worker pounding a nail with it. When the worker sees the evil eye of the hammer, he loses his self-assurance and slams it on his thumb. The worker may be the hammer's master, but the hammer still prevails. A tool knows exactly how it is meant to be handled, while the user of the tool can only have an approximate idea. (85)

The statement by the writer suggests Hema's reciprocatory feeling towards Vivan's raunchy behavior. She was relishing the attention from a 13-year-old child that she failed to get from her own husband. She glances through Vivan's letters and 'a blush spreads on her cheeks'. Hema's yearning for affection is also indicative of her discontented married life, where she vacillated between her roles and responsibilities as a mother and a housewife. In the *Wedding Album*, desire plays a significant role in bringing out the different layers of Hema's behavior, which is not expected from an Indian married woman. Through Hema, Karnad comments on women's resentments that can develop over the years by fulfilling the duties and expectations of others.

However, it is not only Vivan who showed lecherous behavior in the play; other male characters, including Hema's father-in-law and their servant Nagappa, are also presented as the tool of masculine scopophilia. The conversation mentioned below between Vidula and Hema indicates the sordid reality of the society where female bodies, irrespective of age difference or relation, are considered as an object of gaze by male beastly passions.

VIDULA: True, Nagappa didn't raise his voice. But a lot of his energy went into raising the skirts.

HEMA (started): What?

VIDULA (embarrassed at having let that line slip): Well, he.....used to put his hand up...

HEMA: ..... But you were so little. I never thought-

VIDULA (shrugs): He would touch one in the oddest spots.....

HEMA: And we left you home with him because we thought you were safe with him. (23)

In *Wedding Album*, Karnad insinuates the hypersexual gaze through which men see women in society. The sexual deviance shown by Vivan, Nagappa, and Hema's father-in-law, clearly reflects a society where women are often viewed as passive objects and blank canvases on which men paint their sexual ideals and fantasies. Vivan's compulsive sexual behavior is also an outcome of an androcentric mindset, where men, even at a younger age, feel liberal about expressing their carnal desires, but women are easily censured if they try to step out of their pre-defined boundaries.

The episode of the Internet café in the sixth scene unfolds multiple layers of a gender-biased society where Vidula is condemned for only trying to take the charge of her sexual identity. Her suppressed sexuality forces her to lead a dual life under the masked identity of a culturally-sophisticated woman. She frequently visits an internet café where she enjoys cybersex with a man whom she calls "Swami". She submits herself willingly to the man on internet by impersonating the family cook's daughter Yamuna, who was a kept woman of an aged trader. Here, Vidula equates her life with Yamuna and considers her marriage with Ashwin as nothing more than a master-slave arrangement.

VIDULA: I have been sold off.

VOICE: You have been what, baby?

VIDULA: Sold off. I told you I am a kept woman. Kept by a trader. I am his concubine. Maintained by a man much older than me.....

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.....

He can do whatever with me. (65)

In *Wedding Album*, Girish Karnad critically examines the patriarchal desire to possess women, utilizing the character of Vidula to highlight the physical and psychological abuses inherent in Indian arranged marriages. Karnad portrays women as commodified beings, transferred from the dominion of one male guardian to another. Vidula's life, initially under her father's control, is later subjected to her husband's authority in a foreign country, symbolizing her transition from one form of patriarchal control to another. This dynamic is poignantly captured when Vidula's attempt to explore her sexuality is met with slut-shaming by men claiming to uphold Indian cultural values.

The end of the sixth scene signifies Vidula's farewell to both her 'Swami' and her suppressed sexual desires, which she had previously explored in the anonymity of an internet café. Karnad uses the cybercafe setting as a symbolic space of emancipation, where Vidula momentarily escapes the confines of socially constructed patriarchal norms. The internet café becomes a sanctuary for her sexual liberty, a place devoid of moral judgment.

Karnad's depiction of female sexuality extends beyond "Wedding Album" to his other works like "Yayati" and "Nagamandala." In these plays, he presents multifaceted female characters who challenge societal norms and embrace their sexuality. Through these narratives, Karnad confronts the male-chauvinistic perceptions of women's sexuality, inviting audiences to engage with the complexities of women's sexual experiences. His exploration of this theme promotes a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of female desire and autonomy, significantly contributing to the discourse on gender and sexuality.

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**Ms. Shikha Dabas** currently serves as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at SRM University Delhi NCR, Sonapat. She is also pursuing her Ph.D., focusing on "Gender Mainstreaming" through a comparative analysis of the literary works of Girish Karnad and Mahasweta Devi. In addition to her doctoral research, Ms. Dabas exhibits a wide-ranging scholarly interest, encompassing feminist theory, cultural studies and Indian Writings in English.