

Caste, Patriarchy, and Resistance: Mapping Feminine Identity in Girish Karnad's *Tale-Danda*

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Abstract

Girish Karnad's *Tale-Danda* (1993) stands as a profound historical drama that immerses the audience in the socio-religious ferment of 12th-century Karnataka. The play centres on the radical Sharana or Lingayat (Virashaiva) movement spearheaded by the poet-saint Basavanna. Through its narrative, Karnad delivers a trenchant critique of the deeply entrenched caste system, rooted in *varnashrama dharma*, and its inseparable entanglement with patriarchal structures that relentlessly marginalise women across social strata. At the same time, the drama illuminates pathways of resistance grounded in the egalitarian principles of the Lingayat tradition, which championed spiritual equality irrespective of birth, the sanctity of labour through the concept of *kayaka*, the repudiation of ritual pollution and purity taboos, and a direct, personal devotion to Shiva manifested via the *Ishtalinga* (Karnad 12-15).

This research paper meticulously maps the multifaceted construction, contestation, and eventual redefinition of feminine identity within the overlapping and mutually reinforcing oppressions of caste and patriarchy. High-caste women, exemplified by figures such as Queen Rambhavati, are frequently depicted in stereotypical terms—as docile and submissive beings confined to the narrow domestic and courtly spheres, their existence largely circumscribed by relational identities as wives, mothers, or queens, with scant opportunity for independent agency or self-definition. By contrast, the Sharana ethos advances a progressive vision of gender equality. It elevates the dignity of all forms of labour, dismantles rigid notions of ritual impurity associated with lower-caste occupations, and affirms a spiritual parity that fundamentally challenges both the hierarchical divisions of caste and the patriarchal dominion over women's bodies, sexualities, marital choices, and public participation. The pivotal inter-caste marriage between the Brahmin girl Kalavati and the cobbler's son Sheelavanta emerges as the dramatic fulcrum of the play. This union exposes the violent mechanisms through which caste rigidity upholds patriarchal authority, enforcing social ostracism, familial rupture, and brutal retaliation, while simultaneously opening avenues for resistance, human dignity, and the assertion of individual and collective worth (Karnad 9).

Karnad, through a rich tapestry of female characters drawn from diverse social backgrounds, portrays the profound trauma wrought by male-dominated ideological conflicts. Yet he also foregrounds moments of remarkable resilience, subtle subversion, and burgeoning self-awareness as these women negotiate, challenge, or quietly defy the restrictive norms that bind them. Functioning as a revisionist historical narrative, *Tale-Danda* masterfully bridges the medieval social upheavals of the Lingayat movement with the pressing realities of contemporary India—marked by persistent caste-based atrocities, communal polarisation, honour-related violence, and entrenched gender inequalities. Ultimately, the play delivers a compelling message: authentic and transformative resistance to the intertwined forces of caste and

patriarchy demands a fundamental reimagining of feminine identity. This identity must transcend subordinate or purely relational roles to become autonomous, empowered, and indispensable to the creation of a truly casteless and egalitarian society (Karnad).

Keywords: Girish Karnad, *Tale-Danda*, caste system, patriarchy, feminine identity, Sharana movement, gender resistance, inter-caste marriage, Basavanna, Brahmanical patriarchy, social reform, intersectionality, kayaka, Anubhava Mantapa.

Introduction

Girish Karnad (1938–2019) occupies a towering position in the landscape of modern Indian theatre as a playwright, actor, director, and screenwriter whose contributions have redefined the contours of postcolonial drama. Born in Matheran, Maharashtra, and educated at Oxford University, Karnad emerged as a central figure in the “new wave” of Indian theatre during the 1960s. His dramatic oeuvre is characterized by a brilliant synthesis of indigenous folk and classical performance traditions—most notably Yakshagana—with Western dramatic techniques and contemporary thematic preoccupations. Plays such as *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Naga-Mandala*, and *The Fire and the Rain* exemplify his method of drawing upon Indian myths, legends, and historical episodes to probe complex issues of identity formation, structures of power, gender dynamics, existential dilemmas, and the legacies of colonialism (Karnad). *Tale-Danda*, literally translated as “Death by Beheading,” was written in 1990 and published in 1993. The drama unfolds in 12th-century Kalyana (present-day Basavakalyan) amid the vibrant Lingayat movement initiated by Basavanna. Karnad presents Basavanna’s visionary campaign to forge an egalitarian social order through the establishment of the *Anubhava Mantapa*, an inclusive assembly that transcended conventional barriers. This initiative directly confronted the ossified caste system, promoted the dignity inherent in all labour (*kayaka*), advocated broad social reforms, and prioritised personal devotion to Shiva over elaborate Brahminical rituals. The narrative’s explosive central conflict revolves around an inter-caste marriage, which provokes fierce orthodox backlash, intricate political maneuvering, widespread communal riots, and the eventual catastrophic collapse of the progressive movement. Through this historical lens, Karnad offers incisive commentary on the enduring scourges of caste discrimination, communal violence, and systemic gender injustice that continue to afflict modern Indian society (Karnad 3-5).

Within the dramatic universe of *Tale-Danda*, the concept of caste signifies the rigid, birth-determined *varna* hierarchy that the Lingayat movement sought to dismantle by rejecting all forms of discrimination based on origin. Patriarchy, meanwhile, denotes the pervasive male-dominated social order that exercised comprehensive control over women’s roles, mobility, marital decisions, and bodily autonomy. Feminine identity, as explored in the play, encompasses the multifaceted ways in which women strive to articulate and assert themselves beyond these oppressive constraints, aspiring toward autonomy and spiritual fulfillment. Resistance manifests through Basavanna’s revolutionary doctrines and the collective defiance of the Sharanas, although this resistance is ultimately overshadowed by violence and tragedy, highlighting the precarious nature of social reform. This paper delves deeply into Karnad’s portrayal of women as active agents who negotiate the oppressive confluence of caste and patriarchal forces while carving out spaces for the assertion of their feminine identities and agency within the radical Lingayat framework. It is essential to know the historical background of the drama for analyzing its themes properly. The Lingayat movement was indeed a deviation from traditional Hindu religion that advocated for equality

and devotion. Being the Prime Minister of King Bijjala II, Basavanna had enough influence to question traditional authorities. Yet the radical character of the movement could not avoid confrontation, which resulted in the depicted events. The author does not just depict historical events; he reflects on modern India as well.

Historical and Social Context

One of the most significant socio-religious reform movements was that of Lingayats (Virashaivas), which was initiated by Basavanna, the poet and saint (1131-1196). As the prime minister of Bijjala II, Basavanna established the *Anubhava Mantapa*, a pioneering platform where devotees belonging to all different castes and societies could engage in free spiritual dialogue. The movement posed a strong resistance to the caste system, the rituals of the Brahmins, worship in temples, and social inequalities. The basic tenets of the movement included the belief in *Kayaka* (the belief that work is worship) along with the wearing of personal *Ishtalinga* and writing *vachana* in vernacular Kannada. The poetic works of Basavanna greatly empowered marginalised people such as lower castes, craftspeople, and women, thus creating a threat to traditional Hindu society (Donawad and Abidi).

About the larger picture of medieval Indian society, women, especially those of the higher caste, had to endure the rigid constraints of patriarchy and caste discrimination. They were bound by domestic obligations, deprived of personal ownership, involved in harmful customs like child marriage, and usually forbidden from remarriage or even from marrying outside their own caste. In the context of higher caste social norms, purity and respectability, along with subservience to their male protectors, were extremely valued. The emergence of Lingayatism marked a more forward-looking trend in allowing women both equal spiritual status and an active role within devotion.

It is precisely at this point that oppression as an intersectional phenomenon manifests itself. On the one hand, caste prescribed endogamy for retaining purity, whereas patriarchal domination made sure that people obeyed through controlling women's sexual and physical movements. In his play, Karnad highlights these issues through the relations between particular characters.

Intersection of Caste and Patriarchy

The caste system, along with patriarchy, acts together to create complex instances of oppression towards women in *Tale-Danda*. Strict adherence to endogamy and purity customs is combined with the domination of men over women's bodies and lives. This can be illustrated perfectly through the story of Kalavati, the daughter of Brahmin Sharana Madhuvarasa, marrying Sheelavanta, the son of the cobbler Haralayya. This marriage was approved by Basavanna, who saw it as an embodiment of the idea that one's devotion to Shiva is beyond their caste; however, this act provokes a fierce response. This can be exemplified by Lalitamba's famous outburst:

"Till the other day our daughter ran around barefoot. She was told it was unclean to touch any leather except deer-skin. How can she start skinning dead buffalo tomorrow?" (Karnad 9).

This powerful conversation expresses the deep fear that surrounds ritual defilement, loss of one's caste, and possible disintegration of the existing social hierarchy. These acts are not viewed simply as personal decisions but as something far more destructive – an assault on the very power system, necessitating forceful measures. (Karnad 10-12).

These issues can further be understood through their presence in the play. The body of women is used as a site for the struggle between tradition, change, and power. Karnad uses this opportunity to emphasise

that social inflexibility comes with a price to pay in terms of its impact on human lives.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in this analysis encompasses several lenses that help analyse the issues of feminine identity brought out in the play. As per feminist theories, one of the most important contributions in this regard is made by Simone de Beauvoir in her famous book *The Second Sex*, where she writes, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 267). This statement stresses the socially constructed nature of gender, wherein women are considered the "Other," and men are seen as the unambiguous norm against which everything else is measured in patriarchal societies. Feminists in India, such as Uma Chakravarti, have contributed to this idea through their analysis of what is known as "Brahmanical patriarchy," an approach that views women within a caste system where their sexuality, marriage, and mobility have been severely restricted for the sake of purity of bloodlines. (Chakravarti).

These theories further offer more insights into the text. As per Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, it is essential to retrieve those voices from history and literature that have been deliberately silenced for centuries in these texts. Particularly, the Dalit theory highlights the issues of social injustice and violence associated with the caste system. For the analysis of the play, these theories help understand how Sharana women act as subalterns while contesting Brahminical hegemony by subscribing to egalitarian Lingayat ideology. (Spivak 66-111).

According to Kimberle Crenshaw, the theory of intersectionality is useful in explaining the experiences of discrimination created by the interaction of multiple axes of oppression, such as those of caste, gender, and class. Upper-caste women in *Tale-Danda* live under the strict supervision of society that demands high behavioral standards from them because of their families' honor. On the other hand, lower-caste women have to deal with the double disadvantage of discrimination based on caste and gender. (Crenshaw 139-67).

These theoretical perspectives collectively enrich the literary analysis, allowing for a nuanced examination of how Karnad portrays feminine identity as a site of both oppression and potential emancipation.

Representation of Caste in *Tale-Danda*

The Brahminical varna system is depicted by Karnad as a stringent and brutal framework that defines not only one's social standing, profession but also marriage alliances and participation in rituals. It is an institution of untouchability and segregation of the lower castes wherein any form of opposition is viewed as pollution that poses a danger to the universal dharma. The Brahminical orthodoxy portrayed within the play takes offense at the Lingayat movement initiated by Basavanna, especially in terms of the inter-caste marriages which are considered a serious threat to the age-old hierarchy. The movement promotes egalitarian values among the castes, even those who are categorized as untouchable by the *Anubhava Mantapa* and through the principle of individual faith. The conflict between these two ideologies results in violence and murder which is best portrayed in acts of decapitation of the parents of the inter-caste marriage (Haralayya and Madhuvarasa) and the killings of many other Sharanas, the assassination of King Bijjala and the destruction of Kalyana. All these incidents reflect the title of the play which literally translates to "story-stick" or *Tale-Danda*. (Karnad 45-50; Donawad and Abidi).

Female Characters and Feminine Identity

Women in *Tale-Danda* have been used by Karnad as essential instruments for viewing the issue of femi-

nine identity through the prism of caste and patriarchal norms. Rambhavati is presented as an example of the stereotype of conformity of the high castes. Being limited to her royal duties in the closed space of her domesticity, she conforms to traditional views and lacks the capacity to act as queen and wife.

Lalitamba, being Kalavati's mother, serves as the embodiment of tradition's resistance moderated by a sense of personal sorrow. As shown by her reaction to the impending marriage between her daughter and Kalyani (Karnad 9), there is an indication of both the practice of purity and emotional pain that Lalitamba is going through.

She becomes the character that embodies modest assertiveness. Kalavati marries Sheelavanta in order to transcend the rigid caste structure in quest for her own spiritual commitment. Her deeds represent the beginnings of an assertion of independence as she becomes symbolic of the change possible within Sharana thought.

The wife of Basavanna, Gangambika, provides an example of subtle agency and supportive association with the movement. In her silent approval of the movement and its ideology, she shows that women had found ways of exerting their own power and influencing the society while being active at home. Altogether, all these depictions show the women's body as a site of struggle between traditionalism and modernity. (Karnad 20-25).

Acts of Resistance and Subversion

Women from *Tale-Danda* indulge in many different ways of resisting oppression, which include their active involvement in the *Anubhava Mantapa* and more indirect subversive actions that happen in the course of everyday life. While some challenge patriarchal dominance, others form cross-caste associations and remain unfazed despite physical abuse. According to Karnad, all of these acts are commendable, but are ultimately unable to completely overthrow the deeply ingrained patriarchal order. It is through such struggle that feminine identity takes shape. (Karnad 35-40).

Contemporary Relevance

The issues highlighted in *Tale-Danda* continue to be relevant in today's India, with cases of casteist violence, honor killings resulting from marriages between individuals belonging to different castes, and instances of gender inequality still being common occurrences. The play by Karnad acts as both a warning as well as an inspiration that emphasizes the need for further reforms in society, particularly those pertaining to the rights of women and justice for all.

Conclusion

Through its rich character portrayals, historical grounding, and theoretical depth, *Tale-Danda* offers a profound mapping of feminine identity as a contested yet resilient space. Direct statements from the text, such as Lalitamba's protest (Karnad 9), underscore the personal stakes involved in challenging caste and patriarchy. Karnad ultimately calls for a reimagining of society in which women's full humanity is recognised as essential to genuine equality and social transformation.

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