


# **Critical Insights** **on** **Girish Karnard's Plays**



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NOTION PRESS

**NOTION PRESS**

India. Singapore. Malaysia.

Published by Notion Press 2020

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ISBN 9781649835352

**Title-** *Critical Insightson Girish Karnard's Plays*

**Editors-** Dr Ram Avadh Prajapati & Dr Satish Kumar Prajapati

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## **Fractured Identity, Technological Determinism and Speculative Bilingualism: An Analytic Note on Girish Karnad's *Broken Images***

Ms. Noble A. Paliath

“... for you only know

A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,

And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no

relief...”(T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*)

Indian Literature in general and Indian English Literature in particular always has been a bottle gourd and melting pot for many an intersection, convergence and diversity. The liveliness of Indian English writing lies in the frequent discovery of a dynamic and amazing new talent of global recognition. Indian Drama offers a different aesthetic approach from much of western theatre. In this century, in the field of Indian Drama in English, Girish Raghunath Karnad holds a secure place. Girish Karnad is hailed as a modernist. He is one of the most versatile and vigorous literary personality of contemporary India. He is the recipient of umpteen prestigious awards and recognitions including the ‘Jnanpith award’, ‘Padma Bhushan’ and ‘Padmashree’. His plays though counted on fingertips, nearly eleven plays over a span of four decades, have proved milestones in the history of Indian theatre. He has drawn his themes largely

from mythology, history, folklore and legends combining Western dramatic modes and native tradition. He is a man of many achievements as an actor, director, art critic, film star and playwright.

The writing of play is Karnad's dearest profession of all his other activities. He has penned a plethora of plays and two monologues. He writes his plays in Kannada and English. He has translated many of his plays from Kannada to English. What earns distinction for Karnad among his contemporary dramatists is that he himself has translated his plays from Kannada to English and vice versa. This two way act of translation establishes his equal felicity in two languages. While translating these plays, he is aware that British or American English is neither welcome to the Indian readers nor adequate to express Indian experience. Those plays are *Tughlaq* (1971), *Hayavadana* (1975), *Nagamandala* (1988) *Tale Danda* (1993), *The Fire and the Rain* (1998), *Bali: The Sacrifice* (2004) and *Yayati* (2008). He has translated *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (2004), *The Flowers* (2004) and *Broken Images* (2005) from English to Kannada. The current paper is a modest attempt to evaluate and assess one of the great plays, *Broken Images*, inked by one of the leading playwrights in the realm of Indian Writing in English, Girish Karnad.

Girish Karnad borrows the title of his play, *Broken Images*, from T. S. Eliot's path breaking work, *The Wasteland*

(1992). *Broken Images* is a one-woman play by Karnad. It documents the various episodes in the life of an Indian author who begins to experiment her literary verve by scripting narratives in Kannada only to later realize and construe that she receives international fame and acclaim when her first novel got published in English. The play deals with a Kannada woman writer who unexpectedly produces an international best seller in English. It can be looked at from multiple levels- the focus on values, both personal and academic and the issue of bilingualism in the present world. The play foregrounds multiple levels and layers of sut matters interwoven into its content organization and thematic structure. The play, indeed, discusses a wide array of issues and concerns ranging from---bilingualism, identity, alter-ego, conscience, guilt, responsibility, escapism, love, betrayal, interpretation---to alienation and detachment caused as a result of the interference (“scary,” “obsolescence”) of the mediated technologies, making this work of art an ever-appealing, endearing and amusing read.

The story of *Broken Images* begins with Manjula Nayak, an Indian author getting introduced to the viewers by the announcer. The opening scene of the play is set in the interior of a television studio. The central character of the play is Manjula Nayak. “Manjula Nayak walks in. She is in her mid-thirties/forties, and has a confident stride. She is wearing a lapel mike. It is immediately evident that she is at home in broadcasting studios.” Manjula Nayak is a renowned Kannada short-story

writer. "Until a year ago, she was lecturer in English in Bangalore." With her debut novel in English, *The River has No Memories*, she stunned the literary world and the outcome was the novel turning out to be an international bestseller. The television studio intends to broadcast a Kannada telefilm based on her recently published novel. Manjula Nayak has graciously agreed to answer the queries of the viewers.

In the talk, Manjula Nayak explains how she has been criticized for writing in English, instead of her native language, Kannada, why she chose that language and how her family (Pramod Murthy, her husband and Malini, her disabled sister) supported her through its writing. At the end of the presentation, she prepares to leave the studio, but her image on the monitor televising her talk continues to speak. Immediately, her image on the screen is addressing herself on the stage. The viewers are unaware of who the character on the screen is supposed to represent, whether it is Manjula's inner self or her outer one, her conscience or her ego, but regardless, Manjula begins probing her on-stage self about the same issues she had discussed in the presentation, gradually unfolding and unravelling the circumstances that led to the penning down and publication of *The River has No Memories*.

*Broken Images* is a single actor play that discusses the fragmentation of identity and the problem of bilingualism amidst other explored topics. It is seemingly deceptive in nature. At the

very outset, the play is conceived to be a commentary on the writer's conflict between writing in one's mother tongue versus writing in English. At the very onset of the play, everything is not revealed, something is concealed, and something is hidden in the tone and metaphor of a monologue. Gradually, the monologue of the Kannada writer, Manjula Nayak gives way to a revelatory dialogue between her and the TV Screen Image. The supposed, questionable and diplomatic facade of the real self of Manjula Nayak in the first half of the play breaks down as the TV Screen Image of hers appears.

As Michelle Robinson Obama in her 2018 release *Becoming* remarks, "You never quite knew what other folks saw you to be... Are you what you appear to be?" Karnad clearly shows us that we are not all that we think we are. The three-way divide among our cautiously exposed public selves, who we think we are and who we really are, is laid bare. The facade that we construct ourselves may collapse at any time and in the near future we all may get minimized to a hollow, lonely shell and our electronic copies will become more reflective of our inner spirit than our words, thoughts and actions. Manjula: "New Technology. Isn't it scary? The rate of obsolescence?" (*Broken Images* 223) The discussed issue in the play, the disintegration and dissolution of one's identity, invites all possible explorations and interpretations and speculations. Of the two selves, the fact that the TV Screen Image is a more genuine version of Manjula than her own self is a foreshadowing of how technology can



overpower our relations and the world. The technique of conversing with one's own self is presented on the stage by Karnad with the help of technology. Karnad uses the camera eye very effectively in the play. It is a searching, penetrating eye on that can see into the self. Modern gadgets can even invade a person's privacy without his or her knowledge. He uses the electronic device metaphorically to project the inner recesses of Manjula's mind. Manjula's psychological perversion—her jealousy, her hate, and her appropriation of an achievement which is not hers could not have been brought out without the new technology.

MANJULA: Who are you, for God's sake? What gives you the right to interrogate me like this—about my private life? Either you are me in which case you know everything. Or you are an electronic image, externally prying. In which case, you can just... just... switch off.  
(The Image smiles. Suddenly Manjula becomes calm.)  
(*Broken Images* 237)

We are also led to think, whether the Image on screen is Manjula's projection of herself or her sister's ghost. There is also another likely reading to it that Manjula herself may not have written the novel all by her, but might have stolen it from Malini's memoirs. There are glaring instances in the play where Manjula unknowingly mentions that the published work was not

a product of her imagination alone but was the artefact of her sister's invention.

MANJULA: "I wrote the novel in English because it burst out in English... The novel doesn't really do her justice... She breathed, laughed, dreamt in English. Her friends spoke only English. Having her in my house for six years helped improve my English. (*Broken Images* 234)

Manjula's husband, Pramod Murthy, being in the software development field who works from home might have helped Malini in jotting down her personal reflections.

MANJULA: Mind? "Thank God for it. You see, he is in software development. Works from home. She was confined to her chair. Can you imagine what would have happened if they hadn't got on?"

IMAGE: He must be proud of you. That flattering portrayal of him in the novel. The moving acknowledgement in your speech today..." (*Broken Images* 236)

Manjula lies to the public about Pramod's love, Malini's misery and even her passion for writing. This delusion in a way leads the spectators to presuppose that they might expect more literary outpourings in the future from her, when in reality she feels that she is incapable of producing any further work of

literary merit. We also become suspicious of Manjula when the Image remarks:

IMAGE: ...how could you so vividly recreate the inner life of a person confined to bed all her life? How can a healthy, outdoor woman be so empathetic to the emotional world of a disabled person? Well, it is sad, but I owe that to my younger sister, Malini... She is the only character in the novel drawn from life. The other characters and the plot are entirely fictional. Invented. (*Broken Images* 228)

*Broken Images* takes up a debate that has grown steadily since 1947- the politics of language in Indian literary culture, specifically in relation to modern Indian languages and English. It is mainly focused on the writers who attempts to write in both languages, vernacular and in English also. In this novel Manjula Nayak is appreciated for her achievement for writing a novel in English. The play introduces Manjula Nayak as a truly (?) bilingual practitioner. She sincerely asks whether writing in 'an other tongue' amounts to betrayal of his/her mother tongue. Manjula: "I fancied myself a Kannada writer in those days. Wanted to breathe the language. Live in the heart of Kannada culture... Now that you are a success in English." (*Broken Images* ) Manjula Nayak reminds us of the dilemmatic situation in which all bilingual writers are victimized, when they adhere to

use two languages, one, their mother tongue and the other, preferably English.

MANJULA: After having written in Kannada all your life, why did you choose—suddenly—to write in English? Do you see yourself as a Kannada writer or an English writer? What audience do you write for? And variations on that theme... If I had foreseen how many people I would upset by writing in English—I really would not have committed that folly... How dare I write in English and betray Kannada! (*Broken Images* 226)

It is with a bit of resentment and utter amazement that Manjula internalizes the cold reception and ripples that her book created and ignited in literary and academic circles. The intellectuals whom she respected, the writers who were considered gurus by her, friends whom she thought would appreciate and share delight in the newly released success, were all breathing fire, only because she chose to write in English thereby betraying her mother tongue to which Manjula retorts, “After all, the family I have written about is Kannada. I am a Kannada writer myself, born to the language and civilization, and proud of it” (*Broken Images*). Manjula Nayak articulates the aporetic situation, the double bindlock in which bilingual writers are all caught up. The discouraging social forces will not set them free. English is a medium of intellectual dishonesty, according to the categorizers. This meddling and nosy interference

from the part of the dispiriting societal powers find expression in many a writer's literary creations.

MANJULA: A pundit for instance has stated that no Indian writer can express herself—or himself—honestly in English. 'For Indian writers, English is a medium of dishonesty.' Of course, one could also ask how many Kannada writers are honest in what they write—in Kannada. But if you did that, you would be immediately condemned as a traitor. You can't win!... Well, that's it. I have committed the cardinal sin of writing in English.  
(*Broken Images* 227)

As Kamala Das says, "I speak three languages, write in/Two, dream in one./Don't write in English, they said, English is/ Not your mother tongue. Why not leave/Me alone, friends, critics, visiting cousins/Every one of you? Why not let me speak in/ Any language I like? ("An Introduction") The supremacy of English over Kannada as a literary medium is a metaphor for Malini's superiority. It is Malini who help Manjula sketch an international best seller. She also provides the adequate raw materials for the novel. Yet, Manjula deceives her by claiming the ownership of the global success. Thus intellectual inferiority and sibling rivalry also surface as intertwining themes in the play.

This also may be the implication for the title *Broken Images*. Her image in one level was well appreciated. But in her

actual life she did steal her sister's work. So she is having a "broken image" throughout the play. In this play Manjula stands as a metaphor for all those writers limited to their native language (Kannada), not out of responsibility, but due to lack of choice. The image in the play stands for many other things. Image may be for Manjula's years of revenge for her sister. It is also suggestive of her stolen identity of her sister. It also refers to the age old conflict between writing in one's own language and a foreign language, through the objective correlative of the writer's confrontation with her own image. Those who write in their mother tongue also do accept royalties and trade their creativity, rather than wield the pen for social service. The identity crisis of the writers who were writing both in vernacular language and also in English are meticulously portrayed in the play.

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