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ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Representation of Gender and Caste in Chandrashekara Kambar's *Singarevva and The Palace*

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13684076>

Article History: Submitted-25/07/2024, Revised-15/08/2024, Accepted-23/08/2024, Published-31/08/2024.

Abstract:

This study focuses on the novel *Singarevva and The Palace* (2002) written by Chandrashekara Kambar, a translation from Lakshmi Chandrashekar which was initially published in the Kannada Language as *Singarevva Mattu Aramane* (1982). The novel addresses the question of what it is to be the gender because of Masculinity, Sexuality, Fertility, and Power in association with the caste. The textual analysis method is used to investigate and show how the author has complexed the questions through his portrayals in the novel, which is the prime argument of this paper.

Keywords: Gender, Caste, Masculinity, Fertility, Power.

Overview of the novel

The tale's protagonist is Singari, born as a daughter into one of the three wives of Nandagavi village's avaricious and dishonest chief, Pandari Gowda. He entices Nagi, Mariya's mother, to work as a domestic helper, and then he takes the little property she possesses. Mariya is holding out for her retribution. In a field, Mariya spots Gowda and Nagi in a precarious situation. He kills Nagi, allowing Gowda to flee, but Mariya is apprehended and given a jail sentence. Gowda convinces Singari to wed the corpse of his sister Shantavva's son in an attempt to amass a fortune. Singaravva expresses shock. Later on, Gowda convinces Singaravva to

marry Saragam Desai of Shivapura, whom he first encounters at a folk theatre play. Singari's childhood playmate Sheeningi goes with her as well. In exchange for Singari giving up her golden waistband, Desai's elderly mother wishes to have a grandson. However, Desai disappoints Singari by turning out to be a failure on the first night. When Singaravva finds out about Huchchayya, who is reputed to perform a pooja that leads to conception, Singaravva makes the necessary arrangements. But Huchchayya dies unexpectedly and Singari takes the help of Mariya, who has been released from jail, to dispose of the body. Mariya asks her favor in return. But she rejects it. Intending to exact revenge on Singari, Mariya turns into a devoted servant of Desai, but in the end, he regrets his actions and chooses to stand by her. Mariya kills Singari's father when he tries to ruin her life. Desai's friends try to get him intoxicated and steal his belongings by luring him out. After saving Desai, Mariya brings him home and hands Singari all the property documents. After learning of her son's transgressions, Singari's mother-in-law passes away and gives Singari her golden waistband. To conceive, Singari offers herself to Mariya. When she does, Desai kills himself, writes her a letter, and accuses her of adultery. Mariya accepts the guilt and goes to prison. Singaravva is waiting for her baby to be born.

The Question of Gender

The concept of gender is relatively new in the history of modern humans. In the humanities and social sciences today, gender is understood differently than it was in antiquity. Gender had been historically linked to grammar, and it wasn't until the 1950s and 1960s that it began to be understood as a cultural construct that could be changed. As per the World Health Organization, gender is determined by socially constructed notions about the roles, behaviors, and behaviors associated with a specific sex. Gender studies use the term "gender" to describe the social and cultural constructs of masculinity and femininity that are put forth. Gender in this context specifically avoids discussing biological differences in favor of highlighting cultural differences. This came from a variety of sources, including American feminists like Judith Butler, French psychoanalysts like Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, and the theories of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and sociologists from the 1950s. After Butler, gender roles were seen as a practice, sometimes called "performative."

The question of gender in the novel *Singarevva and the Palace* is apparent. The novel deals with the question of gender given Masculinity, Fertility, and Power. Kambar represents the complexities of these factors between the newlywed couples Singari and Sargam Desai. Singari is married to Sargam Desai and expects decent companionship from her husband's end

but to her disappointment, her husband appears disinterested he likes her but fails to fulfill her sexuality having a peculiar disease that whenever he sees women's thighs gets faints and unconscious. When Desai suspects the pregnancy of Singari. As she furiously states and questions his manhood: "We have been married so long, have you ever shown me the love due to a wife? You went to gape at the thighs of whores and fell unconscious there!" (Kambar 197).

Thus, in this case, Kambar exhibits through the character Sargam Desai having a weak masculine sensibility which stands for gender question and deprives of making his wife fertile. It is unveiled in the conversation between Sheeningi and Nagamma in the matter of Singarevva's fertility when Nagamma asks about her pregnancy. As in the words of Sheeningi:

"A hollow, worm-eaten stalk of a son you have given her. Can she bear a child a day with that man?" (Kambar 59).

Kambar portrays dynamic masculinity through his characters which is associated with Power, concerning servitude and respect of people in the village where none of them were in reverence to Sargam Desai when compared to Pandari Gowda. According to the Sheeningi words,

Whatever else Gowda of Nandagavi might have been, the servants quaked with fear at the sight of him. The female servants didn't dare to look at his face so where was the question of speaking to him? That kind of bearing, that authority, Desai did not possess. He gave the impression of a man who had lost the confidence of ever winning anything. He was always in a state of depression (Kambar 55).

In contrast, he also represents the character Marya a holeya serving in Pandari Gowda's house whose representation is so fierce and courageous and a symbol of a strong masculine vigour. His representation can be viewed in Sheeningi's words:

Mareppa used to work for us from the time he was small and we'd constantly call out, Marya! Marya! He was one of the holeyas. I don't know why but Gowda couldn't stand the sight of him. He was after all our age, maybe a year or two older. He had no friends. How could he? He wasn't much of a talker, he didn't laugh, and above all, wasn't good-looking. You could say he was quite ugly. A face dark as the soil, busy eyebrows, a small nose that looked

skyward and crooked, uneven teeth behind thick lips. The chin is too small. Only the eyes were arresting bright sparkling blue. If you thought you could gaze at them, the wonderful fellow carried a naked sword in each. But he wasn't a fraud. His face revealed all there was in his mind. That's why you felt respect for him. I told you he was our age, but he was muscular, like a Pehlwan. He spoke very little. If he did it was only to say Yes! In a voice that sounded like steel. He had dismissed us altogether as though we were not equal to him. I was the one who served him the food every day, but he didn't once look at me with any kind of emotion. (Kambar 29,32).

Although, Marya was considered a lower caste holeya, Kambar through the character Singari and her wish for bearing children and sexual gratification and to avoid the identity as a barren woman unites with Marya irrespective of caste and only considers him as 'masculine'. As in the words of Sheeningi:

Now, when he stood before her, her cheeks would flush, and her body grow taut. "My Marya! She would say, rolling her eyes and enjoying the pleasing warmth of his body, her eyes speaking you know how my Marya looks? Stunning, male, with a body of steel. And a soul so pure, you cannot imagine. When he's by my side, no evil spirits or ghosts from the palace dare come near me. (Kambar 192).

In addition, Kambar discusses a similar theme in his *Jokumaraswami* which reflects the same narrative as the current one does.

The Question of Caste

What is Caste?

In its etymological view, the word caste stems from the Spanish and Portuguese *Casta* which means race, lineage, or breed. Uma Chakraborty in her groundbreaking work, *Gendering caste* observes the caste by looking at the Brahminical scriptures that describe the two terms according to their systems of division that they are 'Varna' and 'Jati'. And she explicates that varna stands for color in the literal sense in Sanskrit, subsequently, it is divided into four categories namely Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra, in addition to another category which is considered fifth varna and termed as untouchables or outcastes who live outside in the Hindu society. According to her, Jati denotes that members must marry within themselves.

People from the Jati are the people of descent group, conventionally assigned to a particular occupation. Further, she states each 'Jati' has its cultural obligations and traditions with own its good habits, rituals, dress codes, and even art forms and may thus appear to merely function along an axis of difference, evidence of the enormous variations in Hindu society (Chakraborty 9).

Thus, this article shifts to Kambar's representation of caste and how he debunked the classification of caste by unifying two opposite castes as discussed below. Although Kambar is considered a folklorist and modernist writer his stories address the caste politics and the subsequent oppressions that happened to the underprivileged categories especially to say Dalits. This theme is recurring in all the works of Chandrashekar Kambar. Such works as *Jokumaraswami*, *Singarevva*, and *The Palace*, *Karimayi*, *Shiva's Drum* are prominent texts that speak of the oppression and violence faced by the lower castes in the subjects of agriculture, land, love, sexuality, fertility, gender, power concerning the feudal regime in the twentieth century.

In this case, the novel *Singarevva* and *The Palace* also represents the caste issues in the novel. The lower caste holeya Marya who has worked as a servant since his childhood in the feudal lord Pandari Gowda's mansion experiences dehumanizing treatment from the lord. The caste holeya as discussed in the article "An improvement in the status of Holeya and Madiga community in present scenario: Special reference to Ramanagara District" by Lokesh and Mylarappa, the holeya is an Indian scheduled caste that primarily resides in the states of Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Madhya Pradesh. Historically, they were landlords who founded numerous ancient kingdoms in the Deccan region of ancient India. Since they belonged to the warrior classes of vanquished kingdoms during India's medieval era, they were viewed as outcasts and were typically employed as agricultural laborers. Farmland is referred to by the term *Hola*, from which the term holeya is derived. Holeyas inhabited Canara, the Coorg province, and Mysore in British India. They belonged to one of the lowest social classes and were considered partial slaves, liable to be sold by the estate's owner.

One incident of this dehumanizing act can be observed in the words of Sheeningi:

Yet Gowda's hatred for the boy matched what he would have felt for an equal.
We found it amusing that Gowda should be so vengeful with a mere servant
and kick and beat him for no reason at all. As for abusing him, there was no

limit to it. Even the sight of Marya getting beaten by Gowda was worth watching. Gowda would beat him with whatever he could lay his hands on a stick, a whip, a slipper. But Marya would not move. Would not even change his expression. His blue eyes alone would glint, like a sharpened steel knife. He'd simply stand there like a big metal statue, chewing his nails and glaring at Gowda, incensing Gowda further. He would thrash Marya some more and Marya would remain frozen as ever till exhausted, Gowda would leave, abusing Marya's mother as he went (Kambar 30).

In addition, although he was named Marya he was constantly called by Gowda 'sulemaga', (Son of Whore) 'Bolemaga', (Son of Whore) 'Hadargittimaga' (Son of Whore) which are abusive and obscene words in the Kannada language. In a particular instance, Marya went inside the palace to clean, the sight of this act made Gowda furious, and uttered "Don't anyone give this Bolemagi rotti today!"

Kambar also depicts the injustice that happened to Marya in the hands of the cunning, lusty, selfish, greedy Pandari Gowda in the subject of land and his mother. As Sheeningi states:

They said Gowda had taken Marya's mother as his mistress after Marya's father's death. Marya had not approved of this of it seems, and had warned his mother many times. According to others, after Marya's father's death, Gowda had appropriated Marya's land. That may have been the truth because I saw once Marya and Gowda arguing heatedly in the fields and Marya thumping his fist on the ground saying it's mine it's mine (Kambar 33).

Thus, Kambar projects Marya as an oppressed victimized subject in the caste case on the one hand. However, on the other hand, privileges him because of gender in contrast to Sargam Desai and eventually makes Singari fertile. Hence planting his seed in Desai's queen's womb.

The Question of Fertility

Throughout the early 20th century, several modernist authors focused on the metaphor of the modern world's lack of virility and fertility. The declining standard of living and culture in the urban, industrial world is represented by this lack of fertility. T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) perfectly captures this idea of a barren desert where nothing new can be created to bring the world back to life. The two central characters in James Joyce's 1922 novel *Ulysses* are a

man who is incapable of fathering a son and a fatherless son. There is no history without a father, and there is no hope for the future without children. D. H. Lawrence, in his novels, consistently divides life into two categories nature and sexuality, and urban and industrial decay. The difference between the mythical hero Ulysses and his symbolic counterpart Leopold Bloom—a henpecked, browbeaten man with little hope and no prospects—shows how much people's identities suffer from this sense of sterility.

On the regional side, Kambar becomes the exponent to represent the theme of fertility, which is not all alone in this particular text. This specific theme is recurrent in other works of Kambar, one such is *Jokumaraswami*. He complicates the theme of fertility because of gender and caste about marriage love, sexuality, and fertility which is a prime aspect to extending the relationship harmoniously. However, he projects how these aspects lead to conflicts in human relationships when the absence of those. Such a case was Singari. Since childhood yearned to become a mother, acting as a mother whenever she plays with her friends. Even in the cattle shed she used to take care of calves tied in the shed and talk like a mother with them. But what strikes her fate is she is tied to an impotent man Sargam Desai, and her dream to become a mother in other words to be fertile is disrupted by her husband who is suffering from a strange sexual illness. In this case, Singari's desire is fulfilled by the holeya Marya. Thus, she becomes pregnant and fertile, which seems to Sargam Desai as an immodest act, and revolts against her to unbirth the illegitimate fetus in her womb. As Sheeningi mentions:

“When...when, like a bull that chandala butted her stomach with head and shrieked "We'll not allow a bastard child to play in our palace” (Kambar 203).

Thus, Kambar in this way represents the question of gender and caste in terms of masculinity, fertility, and power. Hence this probe realizes that the absence of any natural phenomenon in humans creates complexities in human relationships concerning the invention of gender and caste.

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