



## Fractured Reflections and Stolen Words: A Humanistic Exploration of “Broken Images”

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**Abstract:** *Broken Images* by Girish Karnad is a one-act monologue exploring the moral and emotional complexities of literary identity, sibling rivalry, and ethical compromise. The play centers on Manjula Nayak, a Kannada short-story writer who gains sudden fame after publishing an English novel that captivates international audiences. Initially celebrated as a shift from regional to global literature, her success is gradually revealed—through an uncanny on-screen “image” that interrogates her—to be founded on deceit: the novel was actually written by her deceased, wheelchair-bound sister Malini, a gifted English writer. The play delves into themes of jealousy, the quest for recognition, linguistic politics, and the erosion of human values. Manjula’s inner conflicts unfold as she admits her resentment toward Malini’s beauty, intelligence, and the affection she commanded from both their parents and Manjula’s husband, Pramod. In appropriating Malini’s work, Manjula gains prestige but loses moral legitimacy, with the image ultimately exposing her as a fraud. Through fragmented truth and self-revelation, *Broken Images* becomes a metaphor for fractured ethics, broken relationships, and the disintegration of authenticity in the face of ambition. Karnad’s title reflects both the literal television imagery and the metaphorical collapse of integrity, underscoring how personal desires can override familial bonds and artistic honesty.

**Keywords** – Monologue, Humanist Values, Karnataka, Literary Deception, Dramatic Tension, Inner Turmoil, Social Commentary, Sibling Rivalry.

Broken Images is a play which takes up a debate that has grown after independence. It explores the dilemma of Indian writers who choose to write in English. It is a story of conflict and the desire for fame and name. But here the case is little different, because, the only character of the play Manjula Nayak is a story writer in Kannada, who tries to cash in on a dead sibling’s talent. The play throws light on the various qualities of human nature that reveal humanistic concerns present in the play.

The play starts off with T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste land*

. . . for your know only. A heap of broken images, where sun beasts, And the dead tree gives no shelter. T.S. Eliot *The Waste land*

The discordant image refers to generation gap, spiritual disintegration, communication lapse and political instability in a transfigured existence. And in this modern world, where the general moral code of values has been lost, we have limited ourselves to broken electronic images.

The play opens in the interior of a television studio. Manjula Nayak, the only character of the play, walks into the studio. She is in her mid thirties. It is evident through her speech and gestures that she is at home in broadcasting studios. Manjula is a lesser-known short story writer till she wins the best woman writer of the year award. The



fabulous amount of advance she receives from the British publishers brings her instant fame and also induces her to resign the job of a lecturer at Jayanagar.

The anchor at the television studio introduces the literary genius and special guest whose first novel has stunned the world. He also announces that a Kannada telefilm will be broadcast very soon after her speech that is based on the very novel written by her. Manjula's image appears on the screen and smiles and bows to the audience in front of her. The speech starts with 'Namaskara' and Manjula introduces herself as Manjula Nayak. She herself brings two questions before the public as to why she chose English to write that stunning novel, while all her life she wrote in Kannada. Second, how she could so vividly recreate the inner life of a person confined to bed all her life and how a healthy, outdoor woman can be so empathetic to the emotional world of a disabled person. She herself gives the explanation for both the questions. Answering her first question she says that she has been a creative writer in Kannada but while writing this novel it suddenly burst out in English. The success both in terms of money and fame the single English novel has brought her, the entire oeuvre of her Kannada writing could never hope to match. In her speech she also tries to justify that she has written for foreign readers; she explains that the British publishers preferred to publish the novel because it was not written with western readers in view and it was so Indian in its character, feeling and expression. She also accepts that English as the medium of creative writing has enabled her to capture a larger readership across the world and the awards have proved it, she claims.

She further states that her novel has rendered her a meaningful response. She says that an "Arthapoorana" response is good because "Artha" means money too. She generously acknowledges the support of her husband Pramod Rao and owes a lot to her younger sister Malini, the only character in the novel *The River has No Memories* drawn from life. She explains that the other characters in her novel are entirely fictitious.

As she finishes her speech of 15 Minutes, she prepares to leave the room when she encounters her image on the screen that is not her reflection. Whatever Manjula has stated before the audience was entirely wrong and a white lie, because the work was neither her nor were the characters in the novel are invented. The image continues as before on the screen, showing her calmly. Startled Manjula stops and looks around, taps her mike and touches the earpiece to check if the sound is coming from there but there is no response.

The image asks Manjula various questions related to her life, about the novel and her family. The truth is that Manjula is entrapped in a whirlpool of questions from where she has no escape. The alternative left for her is to wear her heart inside out. Gradually and painfully, various truths of Manjula's past are revealed. The image continues to hold the pose of the detached reflective witness. Between spurts of resentful refusal, the truth about Manjula's relationship with her husband and sister is laid bare.

In the course of her talk with the image Manjula accepts that her sister Malini, on whom the novel was written, was more attractive and intelligent than she is. She was so generous that she never asks for anything, as she is disabled. But their parents realised the gravity of her situation and she became the apple of their eye. She was given a good education at home only. Manjula tries to explain that Malini was good at everything because she received so much love and attention from their parents. She was hungry of life and that is why she read a lot. Manjula observes :

I have often wondered whether I would have been as bright if I'd received all that love and attention. (p. 269)

Manjula lived with their grand parents in Dharwad. They are affectionate to her but not as her parents used to be, while Malini lives with their parents at Koramangala and receives



everything she wished. After the completion of her education Manjula finds a job in Bangalore. Then she meets Pramod Rao, a computer engineer, and gets married and settles there in Jayanagar. She tries her hand at creative writing but could write only in Kannada. As the questions from the image continue, more truths are revealed. She is not good at English. She herself accepts that her own English is improved a lot on account of as Malini staying for six years in her house. She says about Malini :

She breathed, laughed, dreamt in English. Her friends spoke only English. Having her in my house for six years helped improve my English. (p. 217)

Manjula's explanations continue to peel away the layers of artificiality, deception and falsehood and reveal her discontentment, her suppressed yearnings for attention. When the topic of the novel *The River Has No Memories* is discussed, the novel is said to be based on her crippled sister Malini, who suffers from meningocele and whose whole life is confined to the wheel chair. She is always the focus of attention. Her father leaves most of his assets in Malini's name. After her parents' demise Malini moves in with them. Manjula affirms that her sister has beautifully adjusted with them and died a few months before, the book came out.

However, later the truth unfolds itself. Manjula has not penned even a word of the novel, and has literally stolen Malini's identity, creativity and language. It is evident in her agitated dialogue with the image :

All right! I didn't write the novel she did. She wrote it. Every word of it. After her death, I found the type script in her drawer.  
I read it. [Pause]

I was decimated. (p. 282)

Image : It was brilliant. A masterpiece. The work of a genius. You know that as a writer you could never dream of such heights. The passion. The clarity. The insights. The total control. A work of genius. (p. 283)

Apparently, it is her revenge for years of agony. Malini has first caught her parents' attention and later Pramod's. Manjula is often portrayed as the venomous cousin in the novel, perhaps that is how Pramod and Malini regarded her. Manjula felt humiliated and could not tolerate that image of herself. She expresses her bitter hatred for Malini :

She despised me. Perhaps they both did. Perhaps she had turned him against me.

At that moment I knew—that I hated the cripple. I had always hated her. I was only waiting for her to die. (p. 285)

When a simple error, mistaking the author's signature M. Nayak is committed by the literary agent, Manjula grabs what she herself could never hope to achieve. By publishing the novel in her own name Manjula just not only succeeds in stealing Malini's creativity but also her identity. She regards it as a final victory over her dead sister who pinned her down in 'coruscating prose' but the image makes her realise that Malini has won at last, by proving her a fraud.

Image : Wait a bit. Perhaps... she did win in the end ? Manjula : How do you mean ?

Image : If she meant to prove you that you were a fraud, she certainly succeeded. (p. 286)

Finally the image on the screen becomes real in comparison with the deceptive human being, on the other side; it ends dramatically. Manjula goes behind the screen to unplug the connections and wipe out the image. Suddenly the image speaks in the



voice of Malini. The image intones that she is Malini Nayak the English novelist. Her work of genius is stolen by Manjula Nayak the Kannada short story writer, as her own. Every screen in the television studio begins to show different images of Manjula. The image start speaking loudly :

Of course, I shall continue with the name of Manjula Nayak. As Manjula Nayak, I have been invited as visiting Professor to seven prestigious American Universities. I use the nomenclature for my passport, my bank accounts, property and financial investments. However, I am in truth Malini, my genius of a sister who loved my husband and knew Kannada and wrote in English. (p. 287)

Therefore, the writer Manjula Nayak stands as a metaphor for all those writers who were limited to their native language (Kannada) not out of responsibility, but due to lack of choice. Now let us analyse the humanistic values that we find in the play.

We have already noted that the only character of this play Manjula Nayak is a lesser-known short story writer till she wins accolades for her maiden English novel. In the very beginning we find Manjula giving a speech before a silent audience in the television studio. The content of her speech introduces that Manjula is one of those writers who choose to write in English. It also proves that she is right on her part, as she is accused of having betrayed her own language Kannada. The Kannada writer betrays herself at that very moment she makes association with an English novel by reading it. This is why the word 'decimated' has been used in the play as the Kannada writer reads the novel.

However, when the image interrogates Manjula, she is entrapped in a whirlpool of questions. The truth unfolds itself that Manjula has not penned even a single word of the novel. What does it mean? I think this is one of the worst things to steal someone else's identity, creativity and language. Girish Karnad has given a very suitable title to the play because the broken images seem to be pointing towards the degradation of human values and the breaking down of meaningful relationships between people. Here in the case of Manjula Karnad shows sociological breakdown in human relationships in the wake of overpowering ambition and selfish interest.

In her personal life too, Manjula fails to live up to her responsibilities of a wife, as Pramod continuously pines for her attention; she almost ignores him. When the image claims that Malini 'loves my husband' it is evident that Manjula did not. She fails to give her husband the love and affection that he expects.

When she herself raises the question in her speech as to how an active and aggressive person like her can depict so sensitively the innermost sentiments of a crippled person. She very beautifully explains the reason behind it, but while entrapped in the questions of the image she has no escape. It becomes evident that Manjula does not like her sister, whose whole life was confined to the wheel chair. She herself accepts the truth that Malini has delicate looks, she is brighter than she; she even admits that living with Malini for six years, after the demise of their parents, she has improved her English. In this way more truth and various types of human values present in human nature manifest themselves.

On the one hand, we find Manjula as an embodiment of duplicity, deception and falsehood, exposing her own discontentment but on the other we see her good side, too. Suppose if the novel of Malini had not been published, a large number of readers could have been deprived of a fantastic work of art. A work of art is more valuable than its creator. Infact Malini has written the novel but Manjula did the great task of getting it published. Everyone wants to listen to his/her praise and this simply happens with Manjula too. She was described in the novel as a shallow woman who had taken her sister in for her inheritance. Manjula could not



bear this reflection of her and felt insulted. It is absolutely true that she has grabbed what she herself could never hope to achieve, but reaching this height of fame and popularity, no one would like to reveal the reality and lead a life of obscurity and humiliation. The literary agents mistook the signature M. Nayak for her name. Evidently, whatever she has done she it has been done knowingly.

Hence we can say that Manjula Nayak is an ordinary woman who could not help grabbing what came her way. She knows it well that she would never reach such a height of fame and popularity on her own potentiality. Here we find that she is a jealous person, yearning for attention and keeps on with her game of falsehood and deception. The only good thing done by her is to get the novel published in her own name and in this way a large number of audience could be able to read such a good work of art. She observes :

From beyond the funeral pyre, my sister was challenging me to burn the script. If I succumbed, I would stand condemned in my own eyes for destroying a masterpiece.  
(p. 285)

Next to Manjula comes her sister Malini Nayak who knew Kannada but used it only with cooks and maids. Malini is at home, in English, and wrote her novel *The River Has No Memories* in English. Slowly and painfully Manjula continues to turn over the layers of realities and thus we come to know the actual qualities of Malini. She suffers from meningomyelocle and whose whole life is confined to the wheel chair. Despite this drawback in her, she is intelligent, vivacious and beautiful. As she is physically challenged, their parents pays more attention to Malini and this irks Manjula.

Malini is possessed of such a good character and quality that she has first received her parent's attention and later Pramod's. The sister's rapport with Pramod symbolises their bond with their Motherland. Manjula fails to live up to her responsibilities of a wife as Pramod pines for attention. Malini is with him purely out of love. They share their pain and pleasure. When the image claims that Malini 'loved my husband', it is evident that Manjula did not. More significantly, Malini knew Kannada and therefore knew her roots. The successful married life depends upon the satisfaction of husband and wife, but Pramod was not satisfied with Manjula and this satisfaction he could receive from Malini. Manjula brought her to Jayanagar after her parent's demise, only for her inheritance. Both Malini and Pramod were of the same opinion regarding her and it irritated Manjula.

Next to Malini we have Pramod, husband of Manjula. He has been portrayed in the novel as a person, who is inclined towards his sister-in-law beyond his matrimonial tie. But Manjula herself admits that they could not have a sexual relationship, as Malini is paralysed below her waist. Even then she blames her that she has shared her husband. Pramod and Malini become complementary to each other. He loves her out of sympathy and vice-versa.

He did not like the idea of Manjula, publishing the novel by Malini, in her own name. After the Publication of the novel Pramod gets separated from her. He misses Malini a lot and Manjula could never fill in that gap. In an effort to console himself he asks her permission to let the nurse come back who had nursed Malini. After her death, the real communication between Manjula and her husband almost comes to an end. In the words of Manjula :

We lived entombed in Silence. The last real communication between us-the last moment of privacy was when he'd asked whether we could call the nurse back. I had replied with a flippant why, but we looked at each other for a moment only-the room had suddenly filled with the reek of her incontinence, her phlegm and sweat, her perfumes, medicines and disinfectants. This was weeks after she had died.  
(p. 284)





In the last line of the above extract it is evident that how much he missed her. Even after many weeks of her demise, nothing has been removed from that place. To keep that love Impact, he regards the nurse as a suitable substitute to lessen his agony, but does not care for Manjula, who is blinded by the intoxication of fame and popularity, which was achieved on a dead sibling's talent, of whom she had been jealous throughout her life and after her demise too.

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