

# A Critical Study of Girish Karnad's Wedding Album: Modernity, Memory, and Middle-Class Identity

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**Abstract**—Girish Karnad's *Wedding Album* portrays the Indian middle class caught between tradition and modernity through the lens of a family preparing for a wedding. Using multimedia elements and episodic scenes, the play exposes how technology, social expectations, and curated identities shape personal relationships. Karnad highlights emotional distances, gender norms, and diasporic anxieties hidden behind the façade of celebration. The play ultimately critiques the conflict between authentic emotion and the pressures of maintaining a perfect family image.

## Introduction

*Girish Karnad's Wedding Album* stands as a significant contribution to contemporary Indian drama, offering a sharp, insightful portrayal of the Indian middle class as it navigates the shifting landscape of modernity. Set against the backdrop of a traditional Hindu wedding, the play uses the structure of a "photo album" to explore how personal memories, family relationships, and social expectations are shaped by both tradition and the rapid technological changes of the late twentieth century. Rather than focusing solely on the wedding itself, Karnad turns his attention to the emotional and psychological undercurrents that surface in a household preparing for a major life event. Through fragmented scenes resembling snapshots, he highlights how individuals perform carefully curated identities for society while concealing private anxieties beneath a seemingly perfect family image. Karnad's use of multimedia elements such as video, photographs, and digital communication reflects the ways in which technology mediates relationships and reshapes perceptions of intimacy, identity, and morality. The play interrogates the ambivalence of a generation caught between the comfort of tradition and the allure of global modernity. Characters grapple with issues such as arranged marriage, diaspora experiences, gender expectations, and the commodification of personal moments. *Wedding Album* thereby becomes more than a family drama; it evolves into a commentary on how middle-class Indians negotiate cultural continuity in a world increasingly dominated by digital representation.

Through humor, irony, and subtle emotional depth, Karnad constructs a narrative that mirrors the contradictions and complexities of Indian society in transition.

**Index Terms**—Girish Karnad, *Wedding Album*, Indian drama, modernity, middle class, digital culture, identity, family dynamics, tradition, globalization.

## I. THE WEDDING AS A SOCIAL PERFORMANCE

Weddings in Indian culture are not merely private ceremonies but public spectacles that enact social identity, economic capacity, and cultural belonging. Karnad recognizes this and uses the wedding not as the climax of the narrative but as an organizing force around which the characters negotiate their roles. Each family member becomes an actor performing specific expectations dictated by tradition, community standards, and modern aspirations.

The mother embodies the anxiety of preserving family honour. Her attention to rituals, arrangements, and appearances expresses the generational responsibility to maintain continuity with cultural traditions. Yet, even as she upholds these customs, she navigates a shifting world where her children's desires and aspirations appear increasingly removed from those rituals' original meanings.

The father's quiet disconnection, often overshadowed by the mother's emotional intensity, reveals another dimension of middle-class masculinity: the provider who remains emotionally distant but bears the weight of financial responsibility. His silence mirrors the unspoken pressures under which many middle-class men operate balancing workplace expectations, social reputation, and familial obligations without openly acknowledging emotional strain.

The bride, Vidula, becomes the central “subject” of this performance. As a woman at the threshold of marriage, she must present herself as desirable, educated, modern yet traditional a carefully curated blend that satisfies societal ideals. Her life becomes a staged display, like the pages of a wedding album where each picture must convey perfection. Yet, beneath her poised demeanour is an internal struggle intensified by the digitized mode of communication with her fiancé.

Karnad’s theatrical framing compels audiences to consider how weddings produce idealized public narratives. Families display their best moments, suppress conflict, and choreograph harmony. As in an album, unpleasant memories are omitted. Karnad thus critiques not the wedding ritual itself but the cultural obsession with maintaining a flawless image, even at the cost of suppressing authentic emotions.

## II. MIDDLE-CLASS IDENTITY AND THE BURDEN OF RESPECTABILITY

The Indian middle class occupies a unique cultural space aspiring toward modernity while deeply bound by tradition. Respectability becomes its defining feature. Karnad captures this dynamic through the family’s constant concern about appearances, both literal and symbolic.

Middle-class respectability manifests in various forms throughout the play:

- Economic display without extravagance,
- Adherence to ritual without blind orthodoxy,
- Education as a marker of value, and
- Marriage as a social achievement.

The family’s concern with maintaining decorum is evident in the way they prepare for the wedding, manage household interactions, and present themselves to their extended network. Even moments of conflict are moderated by the caution of “what will people think?” This fear of judgment, deeply embedded in middle-class psychology, shapes personal choices and interpersonal dynamics.

Karnad’s depiction is not satirical in a simplistic sense; it is empathetic yet incisive. He exposes the contradictions of a class that is both liberated and constrained by education, employment, and global exposure, yet constrained by the weight of custom and social surveillance. Respectability becomes both a source of pride and a subtle

imprisonment. By illustrating these tensions, Karnad comments on the broader cultural transformation occurring in India, where the desire for upward mobility competes with the preservation of cultural stability. Wedding Album thus becomes a sociological portrait of a class navigating the promises and anxieties of modern life.

## III. TECHNOLOGY AND THE MEDIATION OF RELATIONSHIPS

Technology occupies a central thematic role in Wedding Album. Unlike many plays that use technology merely as background, Karnad integrates it into the emotional and narrative machinery of the drama. Video cameras, emails, digital photos, and long-distance communication become symbolic of the fragmented, mediated nature of modern relationships. The fiancé, Rohit, living in the United States, interacts with Vidula primarily through digital communication. Their relationship, therefore, lacks the depth and immediacy of physical presence. Karnad uses this motif to highlight how modern relationships often rely on mediated forms of intimacy where curated images replace genuine emotional interaction. Vidula’s uncertainty stems partially from this distance; she is asked to marry someone who appears familiar through technology but is emotionally inaccessible.

The use of a video camera within the play symbolizes surveillance, memory-making, and performance. Characters alter their behaviour when the camera is on, showcasing how modern individuals constantly negotiate between authentic selves and socially acceptable personas. The camera dictates posture, emotions, and interactions, much like social media does in contemporary society.

Karnad thus anticipates a world where the boundary between public and private dissolves through digital mediation. The wedding album once a physical object becomes a metaphor for how individuals consciously construct their identities through selective representation. Technology not only records memories but shapes them, influencing how families remember themselves and how they wish to be remembered.

## IV. GENDER EXPECTATIONS AND EMOTIONAL LABOR

Gender is a foundational axis of the play. Karnad intricately examines how traditional gender

expectations persist even in modern, educated households. The mother embodies the emotional labour required to hold the family together. She absorbs stress, manages conflicts, and ensures that rituals are followed, all while concealing her own vulnerabilities. Her emotional investment reflects the deep-rooted belief that a woman must maintain familial harmony.

Vidula's character represents the modern Indian woman negotiating conflicting expectations. She must be educated, independent, career-oriented, and yet submissive enough to fit comfortably within the patriarchal structure of marriage. Her doubts about the wedding, though subtle, reflect the emotional burden placed upon young women to conform to an idealized version of femininity poised, accommodating, and dutiful.

Karnad also critiques the commodification of women in matrimonial contexts. The bride becomes a "product" displayed through photographs, videos, and descriptions. Even the process of arranging a match particularly a transnational one reveals how women are evaluated, categorized, and judged. Vidula's internal conflict stems not only from personal hesitations but from the broader societal pressure to fulfil a predetermined role.

Men, too, carry gender burdens. Rohit's role as an NRI groom carries expectations of economic success and cultural superiority. The father's quiet authority reflects a gendered norm of emotional restraint. The brother's detachment from household responsibilities exemplifies another critique: the uneven distribution of emotional labour within families. Through these character dynamics, Karnad exposes the persistent patriarchal structures that shape women's lives even within families that consider themselves modern. The play thus becomes a commentary on the hidden costs of gender conformity.

#### V. DIASPORIC ASPIRATIONS AND CULTURAL ANXIETY

One of the most compelling aspects of the play is its exploration of diasporic relationships. Rohit's presence in the United States symbolizes global mobility and the aspirational dreams of many middle-class Indians. An NRI groom is often perceived as a symbol of prestige, economic opportunity, and expanded social networks.

However, Karnad complicates this idealization by highlighting the emotional and cultural distance embedded in such relationships. Vidula must prepare to leave her family, traditions, and familiar environment for a life she barely understands. The digital communication between her and Rohit reveals not intimacy but emotional vacuum. Their conversations lack depth, suggesting that the match is based more on social expectation than personal connection.

Diaspora in *Wedding Album* is not presented as a romantic escape but as a terrain of uncertainty. The groom's absence during the crucial stages of wedding preparation underscores the physical and psychological gap between him and the family. His distance symbolizes the larger displacement experienced by many who migrate caught between nostalgia for their homeland and the demands of a foreign environment.

Karnad's portrayal is neither nostalgic nor critical but reflective. He captures the hope and anxiety of families negotiating global aspirations yearning for upward mobility while fearing cultural loss. The wedding becomes a transition point not only for Vidula but for the entire family as they confront the implications of globalization on personal, cultural, and familial continuity.

#### VI. FAMILY DYNAMICS AND UNSPOKEN TENSIONS

While weddings often evoke celebration, Karnad is more interested in the emotional undercurrents beneath this surface. The family in *Wedding Album* is not dysfunctional, yet it is deeply fragmented by unspoken grievances, emotional distances, and private fears. The mother's anxiety reveals her fear of losing control as her children grow distant. The father's silence hints at unexpressed fatigue and emotional withdrawal. The siblings navigate their own lives with minimal emotional engagement. Collectively, they appear functional, but individually they grapple with emotional dissonance.

Karnad excels in exposing these subtleties through short scenes, pauses, and conversations that appear trivial but carry deeper significance. A comment about the wedding budget, an argument over photographs, or an awkward video-call transforms into a moment of emotional revelation. These fragments function like

snapshots brief, seemingly superficial moments that reveal underlying truths when examined closely.

The play illustrates how families often communicate through implication rather than articulation. Affection is expressed indirectly, conflicts are softened, and emotional transparency is avoided. This is not due to lack of love but due to a cultural tendency to prioritize harmony over confrontation.

#### VII. MEMORY, PHOTOGRAPHY, AND SELECTIVE REPRESENTATION

Memory plays a significant symbolic role in the play. The wedding album the object after which the play is named serves as a metaphor for how families construct their histories. An album contains only selected moments; it omits conflict, tension, and disappointment. In this sense, Karnad suggests that families curate not only their visual memories but also their emotional narratives. The act of taking photographs becomes an act of shaping the future memory of the family. Every pose is planned. Every smile is rehearsed. Every angle avoids imperfection. In doing so, the family engages in an unconscious performance of identity capturing what they wish to remember rather than what they actually feel.

This becomes especially significant in a digital age where images circulate beyond physical albums. The play anticipates a world where photographs and videos are shared, archived, and displayed as proof of happiness or success. Karnad critiques this shift by revealing how digital images intensify the pressure to present a flawless life.

#### VIII. EMOTIONAL FRAGMENTATION AND THE SEARCH FOR AUTHENTICITY

At its core, *Wedding Album* is a play about emotional truth its absence, suppression, and occasional emergence. Each character, despite outward functionality, experiences loneliness, confusion, and longing. Vidula's uncertainty about marriage, the mother's fear of irrelevance, the father's silent distress, and the brother's emotional disengagement all point to a deeper crisis of authentic connection. Karnad does not present these crises as melodramatic but as quietly pervasive emotional realities of modern life. The play suggests that the more individuals rely on external validation, the more internally fragmented

they become. The wedding is not just an event of union but also a moment that exposes cracks in family relationships.

In this sense, *Wedding Album* becomes a search for authenticity within the performative structures of society. It encourages audiences to reflect on whether emotional truth can survive in a world dominated by curated images, global aspirations, and social expectations.

#### IX. CULTURAL CONTINUITY AND THE UNCERTAINTY OF TRANSITION

The play also interrogates how cultural practices persist in a rapidly changing world. Rituals, gestures, and traditional customs remain central to the wedding preparation, yet their meanings are often reduced to habit rather than belief. Younger family members participate but without deep emotional investment. Older members enforce tradition but with growing awareness of its diminishing authority. Karnad captures this transitional moment with sensitivity. He does not romanticize tradition nor dismiss modernity; instead, he highlights the complexity of cultural continuity. The family remains culturally anchored but emotionally adrift, symbolizing a nation negotiating the balance between global modernity and cultural roots.

#### X. THE PLAY'S STRUCTURE AS COMMENTARY

The episodic structure of *Wedding Album* enhances its thematic richness. Each scene is like a photograph brief, composed, and revealing only part of the story. The lack of linear progression reflects the fragmented nature of memory, relationships, and modern life. Karnad's structural innovation thus mirrors the thematic concerns of the play, making form and content inseparable.

#### XI. CONCLUSION

Girish Karnad's *Wedding Album* presents a nuanced exploration of Indian middle-class life at a moment when tradition and modernity intersect in complex ways. The play's episodic structure, reminiscent of a digital album, underscores how individuals selectively record and present their lives for public consumption.

Karnad uses this form to expose the gap between appearance and reality, revealing the emotional fragility hidden behind a seemingly harmonious family preparing for a wedding. Central to the drama is the tension created by changing social values, the influence of global culture, and the expanding role of technology. Characters struggle to reconcile their private desires with societal expectations, demonstrating how the pressure to maintain respectability can obscure deeper emotional truths. The play also foregrounds gendered experiences, emphasizing how women must negotiate the conflicting demands of tradition and independence. In capturing these tensions, *Wedding Album* becomes more than a reflection of one family's journey; it serves as a broader commentary on the evolving identity of urban India. Karnad's ability to blend humor, irony, and emotional insight ensures that the play remains relevant to contemporary audiences. It encourages readers to rethink how families construct, preserve, and sometimes distort their own stories.

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