



GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN GIRISH KARNAD'S NAGAMANDALA

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ABSTRACT

The play Nagamandala subtitled A Play with a Cobra is based upon a folk belief and a myth. Outwardly, the play appears simple but in it, Karnad has successfully coordinated the elements of myth, magic, folk belief, and romance. The play criticizes gender-biased values and morals of this patriarchal society where women have been oppressed for centuries together. On the day of trial, Rani has been asked to prove her chastity by giving an ordeal while Appanna, her husband, goes unquestioned, even unnoticed. Appanna enjoys extra-marital relationship quite openly with the concubine and tries to punish Rani severely for the same when she is even unconscious and ignorant of the sin of adultery. Thus, the play exposes the double standards of this so called cultured society that strongly demands the faithfulness of a woman to her husband but not the faithfulness of a man to his wife. In Indian society, fidelity is expected only from a woman and man is left scot-free to commit more crimes. That is why the village elders ask Rani alone to prove her fidelity.

INTRODUCTION

In Indian society, marriage is considered to be the holiest of holy institutions. It is believed that fidelity of a woman to her husband is the way to her salvation. Chastity is looked upon, as supreme virtue which she is expected to protect at the cost of her life. Under such circumstances, she is denied love, enjoyment, and education at her age. Actually, her position in the family is like a mattress, a non-entity. Rani is the true symbol of woman's piety and endurance. She was married in her teens and Karnad is deadly opposed of the convention of such an early incompatible marriage. However, she grows physically mature and because, her husband's indifference towards her she behaves like a frightened child in her new house. In the company of Naga, she is happy. He offers her love, enjoyment, and knowledge of the world.

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Girish Karnad who was born in Matheran in the vicinity of Mumbai on May 19, 1938 is said to be one of the most celebrated and successful playwrights in the contemporary India. Besides being an internationally acclaimed playwright, he is a highly talented actor, successful director and film-maker and a man of varied interests. Karnad graduated from the Karnataka University, Dharwad, in 1958. After graduation, he moved to Mumbai for his postgraduate studies. While in Mumbai, he got an opportunity of watching many English, Marathi, and Hindi plays.

In 1970 -72 Karnad obtained the Homi Bhabha Fellowship for his creative work in folk theatre. After leaving his job at Oxford University Press, he got himself busy with drama and films. He served as director of Film and Television Institute of India, Pune during 1974-75. He was awarded Padmashree in 1974 and Padmabhushan in 1992 by the Government of India.

He worked as the Chairman of Karnataka Natak Academy during 1976-78. He was a visiting professor at the University of Chicago in 1987-88. And from 1988-1993, he was the Chairman of the Sangeet Natak Akademi (National Academy for Performing Arts), New Delhi. In 1994, he was honoured with the Doctor of Letters by Karnataka University, Dharwad for his valuable contribution to art, culture and literature. He was the President of the Seventieth Marathi Sahitya Sammelan in 1997 at Ahmednagar.

Karnad's first play *Yayati* brought him the Mysore State Award in 1962, Government of Mysore Rajyotsva Award in 1970 and Sangeet Natak Akademy Award in 1971. His second play, *Tughlaq* also received Sangeet Natak Akademy Award. His play *Hayavadana* obtained Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya Award of the Bharatiya Natya Sangh for the Best Indian Play of the year 1972. *Naga-Mandala* received Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award for the best play in 1989. His another play *Tale-Danda* won him Karnataka Natak Akademy Award for the best play of the year 1990-91, and Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award in 1994.

Apart from his achievements as a successful playwright, he has revealed his multi-faceted creativity through his close association with the world of television and film industry. He has shown his talent as a screen-play writer of several successful Kannada films like *Samskara*, *Vansh-Vriksha*, *Kaadu*, *Ondanandu Kaaladalli* and *Cheluv* and also as a famous writer of T.V. serials, and dialogues. He has featured in many Hindi and Kannada movies and received critical appreciation. He has played the role of *sutradhara* for several stories in the popular audio-book series for kids "Karadi Tales." He has also been the voice of APJ Abdul Kalam, the former President of India in the audio-book of Kalam's autobiography *The Wings of Fire*. Such a long and colourful journey of Girish Karnad as a playwright,

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director, actor and filmmaker culminated in winning the most prestigious Jnanpith Award in 1999. He has thus enriched the Indian cultural scene by his valuable contribution to art, literature, theatre and the film world.

It is observed that in Karnad's writing, there is a perfect synthesis of Eastern and Western dramaturgy, classical and folk conventions with which he creates a rich and vibrant drama rooted in tradition but with a resonant contemporary voice. Although his theatre is manifest in three independent forms or traditions that is, (a) the Sanskrit, (b) the Folk, and (c) the Modern, it has a distinctive unity behind its rich diversity. So, his plays can be studied pre-eminently as modern with an awareness of the classical and folk elements interspersed in them.

On receiving the Jnanpith Award, he explains in an interview "I cannot invent plots; therefore, I use myths. I cannot invent stories and hence go to history."¹ The play *Nagamandala* subtitled *A Play with a Cobra* is based upon a folk belief and a myth. Outwardly, the play appears simple but in it, Karnad has successfully coordinated the elements of myth, magic, folk belief, and romance. The play starts with a prologue which effectively sets the tone and mood of the play.

The play opens in a surrealistic setting: The inner sanctum of a ruined temple. The idol is broken. So, the presiding deity of the temple cannot be identified. It is night. Moonlight seeps in through the cracks in the roof and the walls. A man, suspended between life and death, is sitting in this temple. He is cursed for making his audience fall asleep twisted in miserable chairs, who came trusting him. "All that abused mass of sleep has turned against him and become the cause of Death." (247) That is the last night of his life if he fails to keep himself awake throughout the night.

Meanwhile Flames and story arrive in the temple to share some gossip. Man requests the story to tell him a tale accepting her condition that "he will tell it again to someone else." (252).

It is a story of Rani whose husband enjoys extra-marital sex openly and unashamedly and locks Rani in his absence. He is reluctant to spend time with her. An old woman, Kurudavva, Appanna's mother's friend, is greatly moved by Rani's plight. She gives her a magic root to fascinate her husband. On the advice of Krudava, Rani mixes the root in the food and cooks it. The solution appears like blood. Thinking that it may be poisonous and can cause a serious harm to her husband, Rani throws it. Incidentally, it falls upon an anthill within which lived the Naga, the King Cobra. Getting affected by the love potion, he falls in love with Rani. He starts visiting Rani every night, assuming the form of Appanna, her husband. In the

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beginning, Rani is somewhat shocked due to her husband's rudeness during the day and amorousness in the night. However, in course of time, she learns to accept it and enjoy it. The conjugal love results ultimately in her pregnancy. When Rani informs Naga that she is pregnant, he gets anxious for her and tells her to follow his directions without fail. Rani's husband Appanna discovers her pregnancy. He is sure that she has committed adultery as he has never slept with her. The village elders ask Rani to prove her chastity by giving an ordeal. As per the suggestions of Naga, Rani offers to go through a "snake ordeal". She thrusts her hand into the anthill, pulls out the venomous King Cobra. She swears that she has never touched anybody except her husband and the Cobra. Naga spreads his hood over her head, sways it for a while, hangs himself around her neck like a garland and goes away. The whole village acclaims her 'a goddess incarnate' and her husband is forced to accept her as such. Appanna falls at her feet and begs for her forgiveness. Now, he is her devoted husband and his concubine becomes her servant-maid. However, Rani's acceptance by her husband has tragic consequences for Naga. He cannot visit Rani anymore. As he cannot live without her, he entangles himself in her hair and commits suicide. Rani now gets conscious of the mystery. She honours Naga's supreme sacrifice by making his son light his funeral pyre in accordance with Indian custom and tradition. Thus, the story illustrates Coleridge's off-quoted critical term "willing suspension of disbelief".

The title of the play is highly symbolic. Naga stands for the character of the King Cobra. A "mandala" consists of a triangle and a square, i. e. a triangle within a square. The zeitgeist of the play is the *mandala*. The three points of the triangle are Rani, Appanna and Naga. It illustrates the eternal triangle of an adulterous situation presenting the wife, the husband and the lover. The four sides of the square provide the dramatic frame-work and stand for the Flames (the observer), the tale, the Man (the writer) and the audience (the respondees). The role of a story here is similar to that of *sutradhara* or the chorus in the Greek play. Her appearance on the stage throughout the play adds to the feministic aura of the play.²

According to Girish Karnad, "Appanna and Naga represent the two unconnected roles of a husband as a stranger during the day and as lover at night."³ Rajinder Paul rightly points out: "It is a play where a cobra plays the lover and proves to be better behaved than his human counterpart who is as insensitive as a husband as we read about in bad tales."⁴

The society projected in the play is divided on the basis of gender. The play criticizes gender-biased values and morals of this patriarchal society where women have been oppressed for centuries together. On the day of trial, Rani has been asked to prove her chastity by giving an ordeal while Appanna goes unquestioned, even unnoticed. Appanna enjoys extra-marital relationship quite openly with the concubine and tries to punish Rani severely for the same when she is even unconscious and ignorant of the sin of adultery. Thus, the play exposes the

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double standards of this so called cultured society that strongly demands the faithfulness of a woman to her husband but not the faithfulness of a man to his wife. In Indian society, fidelity is expected only from a woman and man is left scot-free to commit more crimes. That is why the village elders ask Rani alone to prove her fidelity.

Appanna and Naganna, are actually the two aspects of man's nature: the one, seen during the day who performs the role of a dictator, and the other, at night who plays the lover's role. These two contradictory faces symbolize the exploitation and double standards of man. Rani is the evidence of woman's endless suffering in the male-dominated society.

However, the forces of love prevail over those of tyranny. That is why Rani is helped by the King Cobra. She not only is rid of the trap but is also honoured and worshipped by the society around. So B. T. Seetha is quite justified in pointing out: "If *Nagamandala* symbolizes a woman's predicament in a traditional ... family set-up, there is also an underlying metaphor of love that rises from the realms of an abyss to reach the heights of a sanctified relationship of acceptance and reverence."⁵ The critic adds: "Rani and Appanna are presented as characters who 'live happily ever after', though not without a sense of restlessness in Appanna's inability to comprehend Rani's motherhood and her status as a goddess and Rani's anguish to know whether it was her husband who came to her as the lover, because 'No two men make love alike.' The desire and instinct to be happy buries the past, only to make it possible to move ahead in time."⁶

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Towards the end of the play, Rani is portrayed as a goddess. But she never dreams of such a divine image. Throughout the play, she appears human. That is why the very realization that she is going to be a mother, gives her joy. There is a definite shift in her character. The play depicts her journey from an innocent, helpless, vulnerable, ignorant girl into a confident, courageous, clever, determined and self-assertive lady. It is evident when she says, "I was a stupid, ignorant girl when you brought me here. But now I am a woman, a wife, and I am

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going to be a mother.” (283-84) After undertaking the snake ordeal, she receives what she has been longing for, i. e. her husband’s love and affection. However, her union with her true husband results in a cessation of her love relationship with Naga, who can neither renounce his passion for her nor kill her. So, he commits suicide. Now, Rani is clever enough to realize the fact and to manage the situation accordingly. She skilfully gives Naga his right by receiving her husband’s consent to perform the funeral rites by his own son. V. Rangan justifiably points out, “By the end of the play, Rani has travelled a long route from innocence to experience. When she finds the dead Naga in her hair, she has acquired enough cunning to successfully persuade her husband to allow her son to perform the last rites for Naga, as a father is entitled to receive from his son.”⁷

The snake ordeal, Rani undergoes through, proves her purity which is actually an illusion. The fact is: Appanna never has shared bed with Rani. Naturally, he is not the father of the child, Rani has given birth to. Yet, he accepts both Rani and the child and hails Rani as goddess at the instance of the village-folk. He thinks that he is a sinner who has set the goddess on torture. So, he says: “Have I sinned so much that even Nature should laugh at me?” (294)

The play, thus, explores the issue of truth and illusion. Rani, Naga, and Appanna are well aware of the facts. Still, all of them treat illusion as reality. Actually, each of them sees and perceives truth from his/her own perspective. In the snake ordeal, Rani speaks the truth that she has been touched only by the two-- one her husband and the other the King Cobra. Naga gives her protection by raising his hood over her head. Appanna’s stand is that he has not touched his wife. So, the snake ordeal surprises him. The villagers, however, think that Rani is not a human being but a goddess. Appanna prefers illusion to reality for he believes that Nature has turned back upon him. Rani’s innocence ends with the snake ordeal since she realizes another truth regarding the father of her child.

V. Rangan appropriately states: “Does *Nagamandala* ... mean the ‘coils of the cobra’ that entangles Rani or is it Naga himself caught in the coils of love for Rani? Sex seems to be the road to salvation in the Karnad canon and holds an important place in all his plays....It is the supreme path that teaches the lessons of life to Rani, Naga and Appanna.”⁸

The folk-tale used in the play, has several dimensions. Rani is innocent; she is ignorant of the adultery she commits. She does not suspect Naga’s identity till the end of the play. Practically, the Naga is her husband’s alter ego.

The ‘Man’ plays the role similar to that of the chorus in a Greek play. He is the sutradhara who introduces the main characters, supervises and passes comments on them, and correlates

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the events. Similarly, at the beginning of the play, there is just a suggestion of an invocation. The play is set in “The inner sanctum of a ruined temple. The idol is broken, so the presiding deity of the temple cannot be identified.” (247) According to B. T. Seetha “A ruined temple is symbolic of the fractured self in Nagamandala.”⁹ The King Cobra loses his identity in the love affair. He gets entangled in the throes of love. Towards the play’s end, his relationship with Rani is “a pleasing pain” for him. He cannot bear to see her in the company of her husband. So, he decides to bite her. But he fails to do it since he himself states: “No, I can’t. My love has stitched up my lips. Pulled out my fangs. Torn out of my sac of poison... Yes King Cobra is now no better than a grass snake.” (296). This is how Karnad humanizes the King Cobra, as Milton does the Satan in the *Paradise Lost*. The pride and poison of the King Cobra have been subdued by Rani’s love and affection. However, he proves superior to both Appanna and Rani by sacrificing his life for Rani’s marital bliss.

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