

Study of Patriarchal Code in Karnad's Nagamandala

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Girish Karnad is one of the foremost playwrights in India who writes in Kannada and yet has moved away from the regionalist tradition to make fresh raids on the inarticulate. In his play 'Naga Mandala', Karnad weaves two Kannada folk tales together, the first one comments on the paradoxical nature of oral tales, and the other is the story of Rani whose predicament reflects the human need to live by fictions and half-truths. He borrows the theme from two Kannada folk tales that he has heard from A.K. Ramanujan, his friend and guru. The play 'Naga-Mandala' deals with gender inequalities. It mocks at and questions the unjust values of our patriarchal society. The postcolonial matrix embedded in the play opens up yet another space for the working out of the theme of patriarchal oppression. Myths, legends and folk forms function as a kind of cultural anaesthesia and they have been used for introducing and eliminating cultural pathogens such as caste and gender distinctions and religious fanaticism. Girish Karnad makes use of myths and folk forms in his plays to exorcise socio-cultural evils. He says, "The energy of folk-theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values, of making them literally stand on their head." In his play, 'Naga Mandala', he exposes male chauvinism, the oppression of women, the great injustice done to them by men and patriarchal moral code. He even goes further and deflates the concept of chastity. He seems to suggest that matriarchy, the lost paradise of mankind, will come again. The play is about Rani, representing a typical Hindu wife. Appanna, a wealthy young man of village, marries her and brings her to his house when she attains womanhood.

After taking his bath and lunch, he locks her in and goes to his concubine. He does not care for her feelings and considers her a sub-human slave who is to serve him with utmost loyalty. He treats her with the contempt of a typical male chauvinist. She feels very lonely, frightened and miserable. When she expresses her fear and loneliness, he ruthlessly disregards and dominates her feelings. He says to her, "Look, I don't like idle chatter. Don't question me. Do as you are told and you won't be punished." [Page - 7] She is literally imprisoned in the house and it is almost a solitary confinement for her husband Appanna orders, "She won't talk to anyone. And no one need talk to her." [Page - 14] She is deprived of the affection of her fellow human beings and the knowledge of the outer world. So, her personality remains underdeveloped. She is just a child mentally. She daydreams that she is taken by an eagle to her parents who caress her affectionately. She moans in her sleep for her parents. When she gets up, she weeps over her miserable life. According to Karnad, her being locked in the empty house symbolizes the apathy of her in-laws. This also reminds us of the chastity belt of medieval ages. In her article "Why do women oppress women?" Srilatha Batliwala says, "Since the beginning of civilization, every society has lived by certain values and beliefs which are cleverly transformed into immutable truths. In reality, these ideologies are specifically created and disseminated to justify the inequality and injustices of prevailing social structure, and thus protect the rights and privileges of the powerful." Chastity is such a value invented by patriarchal culture and accepted by women. It is one of the most powerful yet invisible cultural fetters that has enslaved women for ages since the dawn of patriarchy. There has been enough literature, both oral and written, glorifying this enslaving value and deifying the women characters who observed it faithfully. 'The Ramayana' in which Sita undergoes the fire ordeal to prove her chastity to Rama has been a cultural guide to Indians for more than two thousand years. The concept of chastity goes with, and gets its indispensable support for, another morbid concept that sex is mean and sinful. Every mother along with father and other elders enslaves her daughters to patriarchy by teaching them verbally and non-

verbally that chastity is more important than life and that its loss which brings an unbearable social stigma is worse than death. Many women sacrifice their lives to protect their chastity and many other women silently and quietly tolerate all the oppression and violence of their sadistic husbands. If any bold woman violates these values, she is not only hated and condemned but also culturally excommunicated. Moreover, these values have weakened natural spontaneous love among human being which is feared to lead to 'immoral' sex. In spite of destructive nature of these values, neither men nor women can tolerate attack on these values. It is clear that the concept of chastity is gender-biased and that women care more for chastity than men. Chastity is a patriarchal concept that has been used to oppress and weaken women for ages. The raped women and the women deceived by their lovers commit suicide while the men culprits go unpunished. Appanna's violent reaction to his wife's 'infidelity' does not make him consider a moment his own infidelity towards her. The other villagers also ignore this lapse on his part but they emphasise the institution of marriage and the procreative function of the couple. The importance of the family and progeny are established over and above personal self-seeking.

The husband and wife turn towards each other, with a greater sense of relationship. The girl bride now becomes the "mother-to-be" and as such receives a new social recognition. This stage of Rani's social integration brings her a new sense of respect and her own worth. This is another significant aspect of the Indian social and cultural life in its treatment of women. In Sudhir Kakar's words, "An Indian woman knows that motherhood confers upon her a purpose and identity that nothing else in her culture can," As a mother, Rani is seen, in the last part of the story, to be in command of the household, with some authority and decision making power. Appanna even agrees to her rather strange demand that their son should perform an annual "pinda-daan" in the memory of the dead snake. The men who seek sexual satisfaction only and deny the importance of love and trust of woman in family and personal relationship are mocked in the exposure of the fragile hold they have over woman's mind, heart and even body. The need to provide

great space to the woman is accepted by the village elders, who respect the procreative role of woman, compel the man to accept and respect his wife and change his egoistic and violent behaviour. It is an extremely ironic moment in the play when Appanna is left holding in public another man's child and asked to respect his wife as a 'goddess'. Thus, the story of Rani as told by the woman narrator transforms the tale of the Prince which is tragic in its endings, to a mockery of the misogyny and self-centredness of the male world as well as exaggerated male claims and ambitions to control female sexuality and virtue. This brings out a clear challenge to the patriarchal moral code prevalent in our society.

The public and private selves become connected through the acceptance of socially responsible role. But that cannot completely dispel the hidden, suppressed desire for greater love and personal fulfilment. The double ending of the play "Naga-Mandala" presents this duality through the structural device. In End One of the story about Rani and Appanna, the Naga enters Rani's bedroom again and dies for the sake of Rani and her family. Though Rani grieves for her lover, the Naga's sacrifice paves the way for Rani's happy married life. In End Two of the play, the snake does not die. He is allowed by Rani to live in her tresses, her "dark, long and cool tresses, like snake princess." [Page - 57]. The lover is always present, he lives with her, within the family. The danger to male authority as a husband and patriarch lives on constantly at close quarters, but meeting within the woman's imagination. The dutiful and loyal wife may observe the social, moral code entirely. Yet within her live the memories of the perfect lover who had given her first emotional and erotic experience. These desires may haunt her or lie dormant within. What matters most to Rani during the period of her relationship with the snake-lover is the awakening of desire and introducing her to love rather than to sex. Rani has gone through these new desires, the day dreaming and fantasizing about love and she understands their power over other social and moral duties. Mandala is a tantric concept indicating inner concentration, a source of energy. Naga- Mandala is a magico-religious ritual involving Naga, the snake-god of Hindus who grants the

wishes of his devotees, especially the wish for fertility. In the play, Naga grants Rani all her wishes which she does not express openly. She grows mentally and becomes a confident lady. She is cured of her frigidity. She gets a devoted husband. Her husband's concubine becomes a life-long servant maid for her. In due course she gives birth to a beautiful child. Besides these, Naga makes Appanna's heart fertile with love and affection for his wife. At a higher level of symbolism, Naga represents a cultural leader who is instrumental in bringing about a socio-cultural reform.

The creation of female protagonists in radical manners is the most significant feature of Girish Karnad's plays. 'Naga-Mandala' is no exception to it. In this play, Girish Karnad has created the character of Rani, the female protagonist, in an uncommon and unconventional way. This character is the product of the post colonial, post modern world who desires to achieve what she lacks, revolts against the patriarchy and male-dominance, strives for survival and destroys traditional concepts anticipating transformation in the outlook of the male-dominated society.

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