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Girish Karnad's Nag-Mandala: A Study of Chastity

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Abstract

Girish Karnad is a versatile playwright and knows the demands of the Indian theatre quite intimately. His play puts forward the idea of chastity through the use of folk lores, myths and historical legends. He presents truths about human life and emotions contained in ancient Indian stories with the alternations of social morals and modern norms. He also depicts the concern of psychological problems, dilemmas and conflicts experienced by modern Indian men and women in their different situations. *Naga – Mandala* (1988) is a powerful portrait of the sufferings faced by both men and women in their development into adult roles and social adjustment in a society where the individual is given little space for self-development, awareness and independence as being.

Keywords: Chastity, Social morals, modern norms, Socio – cultural evils,

Introduction

Girish Karnad is a versatile playwright and knows the demand of the Indian theatre the quite immensely. He has written a number of plays dealing with various aspects of contemporary Indian society and Indian culture. He has extensively used material from Indian mythology, folklore and ancient Indian theatrical examples. He is an immensely popular playwright, an actor and a successful administrator. In recognition of his services to drama and film he was offered the post of Director, Film and Television Institute of India at Pune. This new position placed Karnad in the midst of budding actors, actresses cinematographers, directors and camera men. He developed an interest in the film media and accepted quite a few roles in Hindi films. His plays include Tughlaq, Hayavadana, Yayati, Naga Mandala, Tale - Danda and The Fire and the Rain. His plays effectively weave the contemporary context in their structure.

Karnad wrote this play during his full-bright programme in America and the play was first staged at the University Theatre at Chicago. It is the story of an extraordinarily beautiful young girl called Rani. Her parents find a suitable husband for her. The young man called Appanna is very rich but he has lost his parents, behaves in a curious way. He brings his wife to his village and leaves her locked inside the house and goes away sometime only to return the next day. Rani tells her husband that she feels lonely and frightened during the night but Appanna pays no attention and asks her to behave as an obedient wife. She lives in that house aimlessly and hopelessly until one day, an old friend of her mother's Kurudawa visits her along with her son Kappanna. The old woman has lost her eye sight and knows the world through her son's eyes. Her son tells her the story of Appanna's loneliness and suffering. Rani's story arouses the old woman's compassion and she offers to Rani an herbal root, given to her by a mendicant as an antidote to the indifference and neglect of her husband. Kurudavva tells Rani to feed her husband the root. Rani prepares the required taste and feeds to her husband but the medicine does not produce the desired result. She makes a larger quantity of the paste and mixes it with the curry that she wants to serve to her husband but the paste explodes and frightened Rani pours it into the ant hill. The cobra king emerges from the ant hill and follows Rani as a slave. The king cobra disguises as her husband and visits her every night. Rani believes that her husband is taking interest in her and in home unusually. To her great dismay, Rani gets pregnant without ever realizing that it was the cobra king disguised as her husband. Her husband wants to punish her for her adultery or else requires her to prove her innocence publicly. He wants her to insert her hand in the ant hill. Though she is initially frightened, Naga the cobra king promises her safety. The whole village is assembled and Rani inserts her

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hand in the ant hill and swiftly pulls out the cobra king. She declares an oath that she has never known any other male except her husband and the cobra king. Her innocence is proved and they live happily. Her husband believes that she is gifted with divine powers and that she is no less than a Goddess. She has the power to tame the cobra.

As Karnad informs in his Introduction, the source material of the *Naga-Mandala* comes from a folk tale that he heard from A.K. Ramanujan. *Naga-Mandala* is the story of a young girl, Rani, newly married to Appanna, and their gradual understanding of the role, function and responsibilities of the institution of marriage. This story is presented in the play by a woman narrator that the stranger, a writer himself, enters in to their conversation, and listens to a 'New' tale that has just escaped from an old woman's head.

Like Jean Anouilh, Girish Karnad makes use of myths and folk forms in his plays to expel socio-cultural evils. He says:

The energy of folk thane comes from the fact that although it seems in upheld traditional values, it also the means of questioning these values, of making theme literary stand on their head. [The plays of Girish Karnad, 251]

In *Naga-Mandala* Girish Karnad arises a question on the concept of 'Chastity'¹ which is such a value invented by patriarchal culture and accepted by women. It is one of the most powerful cultures that have enslaved women for ages since the dawn of patriarchy. The Ramayana in which Sita undergoes the fire to prove her chastity to Rama. Every mother along with father enslaves her daughters to patriarchy by teaching them verbally and non-verbally which brings an unbearable social stigma.

The 'flame' begins her story of Rani and Appanna. The young girl misses her parents, feels home-sick and lonely while Appanna comes home only in the day, asks for food, stays for some time and then goes away. Every night he visits the concubine, which reflects his awareness of the bio-logical aspect of sex. The next day before Appanna leaves, she expresses about her loneliness in the night, at that time Appanna replied that, "What is there to be scared of? Just keep to yourself. No one will bother you." Again Rani tries to woo his mind, then Appanna says:

*Appanna look, I don't like idle chatter
Don's question me. Do as you are
Told. I'll be back tomorrow for lunch"
[Naga-Mandala, 7]*

This initial stage is painful for Rani, who is still very attached to her parents. The pain and loneliness of Rani are emphasized by the narrator, drawing attention to her emotional state; Appanna treats her as if she were a non-human being, without any feeling and a robot cook following his oral instructions. As Appanna treats her with contempt, aggression and mistrust he locks her in the room.

One day Kurudavva and her son Kappanna come to her. She talks to Rani and she learns that Appanna still visits his concubine though he has a beautiful wife. So she gives Rani a piece of aphrodisiac root and instructs her to grind root and mix it in Appanna food thus, problem will be solved. When Appanna comes, Kurudovva and Kappanna express her wish to talk to Rani. He says:

*Appanna: She won't take to anyone. And
No one need talk to her"
[Naga-Mandala, 14]*

It is clear that Appanna does not want Rani to come into contact with other people and to know more. While he enjoys extra-marital sex, he does not allow her to enjoy even the affection of others. He mercilessly keeps her starved to affection and love which are indispensable for the growth of human mind. This solitary confinement of Rani by Appanna in the house symbolizes the chastity felt of the middle Ages. Rani mixes the paste of the aphrodisiac root in the curry. As the curry turns red and she throws it on the anthill in front of house. A king cobra, called Naga, consumes the aphrodisiac post and falls in love with Rani. He assumes the form of Appanna and visits Rani at night. He takes pity on Rani for her pathetic condition and showers parental affection on her. All her pent up sorrow bursts out.

Rani cannot comprehend the situation since Appanna cannot be so affectionate and compassionate. Yet she willingly suspends her disbelief and enjoys the concern and affection of Naga who is in the guise of Appanna. She feels happy and secure in his company. She becomes bold enough to talk to him and falls asleep in his embrace. Naga is happy about his success. He lays her gently down on the bed. He becomes a cobra and leaves her.

Appanna comes in the morning next day. He unlocks the door and steps in, Rani comes out running and laughing, obviously thinking that hardships have ended as Appanna changed for better. But she learns that she is wrong.

*Rani: But when did you go away?
I am..... [freezes when she sees
The expression of distaste on his face]
[Naga-Mandala, 21]*

Thus, she becomes frigid again. As usual, after lunch, Appanna leaves. It gets dark. Naga comes out of the anthill and fights with dog. He kills dog to stop the disturbance to Rani's sleep: but he gets injured in that fight. Then he enters the house through the draught and assumes the form of Appanna. He sees Rani, smiles and sits on her bed. She is not sure whether she is dreaming. The gentleness and warmth of Naga (Appanna to her) is incomprehensible to her. Then Naga assures her that what she sees is real, not a figment of her imagination.

*Rani: You talk so nicely at night. But
Curing the day only have to
Open my mouth and you hiss
Like stupid snake? -
[Naga-Mandala, 22]*

She beds sorrowful and says that she can say nothing if he spins riddles like this. Naga knows that his identity will be revealed unless he suppresses her reason and intuition by using patriarchal authority,

*Naga: I am afraid 'that' is how it is going
To be. Like! that' during the day, Like
'that' at night. Don't ask me why?
Rani: I Won't [Naga-Mandala, 23]*

This shows how the men of patriarchal culture suppress the intellect of women and how their Ignorance gives men the freedom of doing whatever they like. Thus, male chauvinists are able to prove that women are foolish and ignorant. This injunction of Naga proves to be so powerful that Rani does not know the real Identity of Naga until Appanna sleeps with her.

Rani moves into Naga's arms as a child *men* he invites her to sleep in his lap she sees wounds on his cheeks and so she brings the minor box for ointment. She sees an image of a cobra instead of her husband in the mirror and screams with fright. She says, by miming, that she has seen a cobra in the mirror. Then she touches his wounds and finds his blood peculiarly cold.

Rani in her happiness forgets everything. She does not realize what Naga is doing to her until he completes love-making At once, she goes to a corner away from him and starts weeping. She feels that sex is mean and sinful. Naga is astonished at her erotic ignorance. He takes her and explains her that sex is natural and enjoyable but; not sinful. He makes a long speech, giving examples to justify love-making. She expresses her unhappiness over his going out. Before leaving, he repeats his injunction that she should not ask why his behavior at night is different from that during the day. She accepts it like a dumb animal. She cannot suspect Naga's identity in the bed because Appanna has never made love to her.

Naga visits Rani every night. He cures her of frigidity with affection, patience and fact. Naga here functions as a male sex sunogale in curing Rani of frigidity. Rani starts enjoying erotic pleasures. After five months one day she says she is happy because she has a concrete evidence that her happiness is not a fantasy.

*Rani: I have definite evidence to prove I
Was not fantasizing.
Naga: What evidence? ;
Rani: lam pregnant. ? [Naga-Mandala, 30]*

Naga is not happy because her pregnancy can reveal his identity; he does not know what to do. He just asks her to keep it secret from him as long as possible. She feels utterly confused and helpless because she can neither hide the pregnancy of five months nor have it aborted. She must have thought that the man is mystery.

The next day, Appanna discovers that Rani is pregnant. Since he has never slept with her he knows that she has committed adultery. This infuriates him and he pushes, kicks, and curses her.

*Appanna: Aren's you ashamed b admit
It you harlot? locked you in
And yet you mangier to find a
Loves! Tell me who did you go to
With your sari off?
Rani: I swear to you I haven't done
Anything wrong. [Naga-Mandala, 33]*

Appanna does not accept her innocence, He cannot understand the shame that she has caused him. He drags her out and tries to throw a huge stone at her to smash her illegitimate child to be born. At the moment, the cobra (Naga) comes out and hisses loudly. Appanna throws the stone at the snake which escapes into the anthill. Rani at once gets in and balls the door behind her. He demands her to open the door and she does not

obey her husband in order to escape his wrath. He goes out to request the village elders to sit in judgment and punish her severely. That night Naga comes and finds her crying. He sits nearby Rani and asks:

*Rani: why are you humiliating me like this?
Why are you stripping me naked in
front?
Of the whole village? Why don't you kill?
Me instead? [Naga-Mandala, 35]*

He says that the trial by the elders cannot be avoided and he advises her to take the snake ordeal. He assures her that everything will be all right,

*Naga: don't worry. Your husband will
Become your slave tomorrow.
You will get all you have ever
Wanted? [Naga-Mandala, 35]*

Then, the village elders sit in judgment the next day. They listen to Appanna and Rani. They ask Rani to prove her chastity, by taking the oath while holding a red-hot iron rod. But she requests them to permit her to take the snake ordeal. They concede to her request. She puts her hand in the anthill and takes the cobra out. While holding it, she says that she has never touched anybody other than her husband and the cobra. The cobra slides up her shoulders and spreads its -hood like an umbrella over her head. It sways its hood gently for a while, moves over her shoulder like a garland and goes into the anthill. Rani stares with confusion while people prostrate before her and praise her.

*Eider- I: A miracle! Amiracle!
Elder- II: She is not a woman. She is
a divine being! [Naga-Mandala, 39]*

While Appanna stands uncomprehending. The people take Rani and Appanna in a Palanquin in their house. The couple is taken in procession to their house. Appanna also balls at her feet and says:

*Appanna: Forgive me, I am a sinner.
I was blind [Naga-Mandala, 40]*

On the Day of Judgment, she comes to know that Naga in the guise of Appanna has been with her all these nights. She expresses her gratitude to Naga for all the help by making her son cremate the dead cobra who commits suicide. Appanna also concedes to her request that their son should not only light the funeral prayer of Naga but also perform the annual rituals every year.

Naga-Mandala is to be conceded as a feminist play, it questions the patriarchal moral code which demands the faithfulness of a woman to her husband; but not the faithfulness of a man to his wife. This is accepted not only by men but also by women, Appanna openly and unashamedly commits adultery but nobody objects to it; the village elders who sit in judgment don't find any fault with him, nobody believes in the innocence of Rani. She sleeps with liaga without knowing it. She does not discover the identity of Naga who assumes Appanna's form by using his magical power. As a typical woman, she is frigid and despises sex. What she craves for his affection which Naga gives her in plenty by

functioning as a surrogate parent for a while. By using his erotic art, naga cures her frigidity. Because of this later Appanna and Rani are able to enjoy marital life.

Rani is a simple, innocent and ignorant girl, she has grown physically; but not matured mentally. She behaves as a frightened child in the presence of Appanna. She grows as she receives the affection of Naga. She, a little helpless different girl, gradually becomes a confident and courageous lady. This can be seen when she speaks to Naga;

*Rani: I was a stupid, ignorant girl when
You brought me here. But now I am
A woman, a wife and I am going
To be a mother I am not a panot
[Naga-Mandala, 32]
After judgment, Rani becomes the head
of the family,*

Appanna accepts her superiority and says to her:

*Appanna: You are no common person
You are a goddess. [Naga-Mandala, 42]*

However, the matriarchal Rani, unlike the past patriarchal Appanna, never orders him, she requests him. Thus, by showing a trace of matriarchy at the end, the play looks forward that matriarchy is to follow patriarchy if our society is to change for better,

Karnad's *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala* prove that chastity is a myth, if chastity is spiritual or psychological; Rani has not lost it though she sleeps with Naga before the judgment day. In "Hayavadana" Padmini enjoys marital life with Devadatta who gets Kapil's body after the transposition of heads. In addition, chastity is patriarchal concept that has been used to oppress and weaken women for ages.

The concept of Chastity is gender biased and that women care more for chastity than men. In Ben Jonson's *Volpone* there is an incident similar to that in "Naga Mandala" carvion has a very beautiful wife called Celia. He locks her in when he goes out. When he sends her to sleep with "Volpone" in order to inherit his property, Celia refuses to do so. This shows that the concept of chastity proves to be more powerful than the strongest lock.

In *Naga – Mandala*, Mandala is a tantric concept indicating inner concentration, a source of energy. Naga-Mandala is a magic-religious ritual involving Naga, the snake god of Hindus who grants the wishes of his devotees, especially the wish for fertility. In *Naga-Mandala*, Naga grants Rani all her wishes which she does not express openly. She grows mentally and becomes a confident lady. She is cured frigidity. She gets a devoted husband. And she begets a good son. In addition, Naga Makes Appanna's hearty fertile with love and affection for his wife.

Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* the story takes happy turn, both, Rani and Appanna adjusting the family and community in a socially useful manner. But this is achieved after upsetting the male egoism and exaggerated sense of power over women. The male assumption of keeping full control over the body, sexuality and virtue of women through the institution of family and values like chastity are mocked in the play. The play mocks at and questions the unjust values of our patriarchal society. Thus, Karnad's play "Naga-Mandala" reflects the Indian social milieu and the role of individual character or group of characters of play for individual or social development.

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