

Naga-Mandala: A Feminine Play

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Abstract

Girish Karnad, a Kannad playwright is considered a founder of a new technique of drawing historical and mythological sources to deal with contemporary themes. Karnad by employing the non-naturalistic techniques of the traditional Indian theatre, achieves distinctive effect since his plays do not remain mere dramatization of folk-tales, but the plays with multi-leveled deeper meanings. In *Naga-Mandala* he derives the essence from the folk-tales utilizing the techniques of the traditional Indian theatre and marks the departure from the emotional world of traditional values and from the male-dominated world. He skillfully utilizes traditional facets of folk-tales such as the supernatural involvement, the magic, the play within a play, the other worldliness and generates the world of feminine strength to manage balanced societal frame.

Karnad very skillfully represents the concept of chastity in *Naga-Mandala*. The distortion of the concept of chastity is viewed in a somewhat tricky manner. Hence, in this feminist play, Karnad's chief concern is to liberate the oppressed, harshly beaten, locked in the houses (which is not home), Rani into an independent woman, not at the mercy of the husband enslaved by a harlot or a concubine. He achieves this purpose by introducing Naga, the lover. Consequently, the concubine turned into her maid-servant also becomes jealous of Rani and even the elders fall at her feet and calls her the Goddess. Thus, Karnad emancipates Rani, the woman.

Key word: *naga-mandala*, girish karnad

Introduction

Girish Karnad, a Kannad playwright is considered a founder of a new technique of drawing historical and mythological sources to deal with contemporary themes. Karnad by employing the non-naturalistic techniques of the traditional Indian theatre, achieves distinctive effect since his plays do not remain mere dramatization of folk-tales, but the plays with multi-leveled deeper meanings. He has translated his own plays into English. In *Hayavadana* as well as *Naga-Mandala* (1990) ^[4] Girish Karnad makes use of ancient myths and legends, old stories and traditions and interprets this ancient human situation pertaining to the contemporary experience. He illustrates the traditional beliefs to disclose the conflict viewing its universal as well as contemporary significance. In *Hayavadana* Karnad borrows the ancient story from *Kathasaritsagar* – after reading its interpretation in Thomas Mann's novella *Transposed Heads* (1940). Though, he has the theme of the incompleteness of body and soul, head and physique and the vain attempts of Padmini to seek perfection and completeness in Vidyasagar and Kapila. She wants the head of Vidyasagar and the body of Kapila. He ultimately asserts that she has the best of both men after the exchange of heads. The symbolic end depicts the deaths of both men after a duel and Padmini becomes a Sati. Hence, the playwright employs the myth of Ganesh, the grotesque figure of elephantine God, to appraise the perfection and success. In *Tughlaq* Karnad uses the story from history to project Jawaharlal Nehru's idealism and indecision in the historical figure of Tughlaq.

In *Naga-Mandala* he derives the essence from the folk-tales utilizing the techniques of the traditional Indian theatre and marks the departure from the emotional world of traditional values and from the male-dominated world. Here, Karnad employs the concept of patriarchy wherein woman is seen as

'other' in the society. He skillfully utilizes traditional facets of folk-tales such as the supernatural involvement, the magic, the play within a play, the other worldliness and generates the world of feminine strength to manage balanced societal frame. S.R. Jalote considers Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* a fine example of Brecht's epic theatre. He is of the view that the mixing of folklore and magic keeps reminding the spectators that they are only watching a play. Instead of being "emotionally" involved they use their intellectual faculty to judge the events. (Dodiya 263-74)

Kurudavva is related to Appanna as the best friend of Appanna's mother. She cannot tolerate the merciless ill-treatment of the bride- Rani by her husband. Rani's husband named Appanna locks her up every day and every-night and approaches her only for lunch. He neither 'talks' nor 'touches' her. Even after marriage she remains a virgin. The helpless Rani is confined to four walls. Appanna seems to establish his dominance over her forever: "Keep my lunch ready. I shall eat and go.....Do as you are told, you understand? (6-7) Though, Kurudavva is a blind woman, she feels concerned for Rani's miserable plight: she wonders that Appanna has "got himself a bride – and he still goes after that harlot?" (8)

His disloyalty to Rani and his locking Rani up prove that there is the male dominance projected in the play. Later on, Appanna's demand of Rani's trial to prove her chastity also indicates the male dominance in the society. Karnad portrays the male-dominated society in the play, but his real purpose is to free the female from the male dominance. Rani too, while conversing with Naga-Appanna, asserts her importance as a woman and affection to motherhood. When Naga in the form of Appanna neither shows any fervor nor happiness on issue of her pregnancy, bewildered Rani questions him about his indifference. In fact, Rani innocently assumes that Naga and Appanna are one and the same:

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 mother. I am not a parrot. Not a cat or a sparrow. Why don't you take it on trust that I have a mind and explain this charade to me? Why do you play these games? Why do you change like a chameleon from day to night? Even if I understood a little, a tiny bit- I could bear it. But now-sometimes I feel my head is going to burst!
(32)

Karnad very skillfully represents the concept of chastity. The distortion of the concept of chastity is viewed in a somewhat tricky manner. The chastity of Rani's womanhood seems violated unknowingly, but after going through the snake-ordeal successfully her purity is affirmed publicly. The disloyalty of Appanna to Rani seems the deliberate disloyalty. On the other hand, Rani's surrender to Naga is caused by Naga's disguise as Appanna. Naga's relationship with Rani is puzzling and dichotomic. While Rani is sleeping in her bedroom, Naga in disguise caresses her and tells her that she should be fresh and bright every night he visits. Yet, she does not realize the mystery of Naga's disguise. She allows him spend the night with her in bed. At dawn, he withdraws to the bathroom, turns into the cobra and slips out. In contrast with Naga-Appanna's amorous behavior at night, Appanna steps in after unlocking the door in the morning, takes his lunch callously and goes away. She has lost her chastity to Naga unknowingly. Though, polarity in the behaviours of Naga-Appanna and Appanna baffles her. She does not understand that it has all happened on account of the magic effect of the paste of the root in the curry thrown into the ant-hill. Due to the effect of love-roots, the Naga falls in love with Rani and assumes the form of Appanna to make Rani feel that she has started her married life: Kurudavva asks her "...have you started your married life?" Rani replies blushing: "yes, Kurudavva". Hence, Karnad distorts the age-old concepts of chastity without much offence, i.e. the loss of chastity yet not the lost chastity.

When Rani sees Naga-Appanna enthralled by her beauty, she seems baffled. As she compares this loving, nocturnal behavior with Appanna's "scowling face in the mornings." (30). Rani has been dreaming of her night with Naga-Appanna when Appanna steps in. She asks Appanna, who doubts about the nocturnal intruder: "But when did you go away?" Seeing the wry face, she freezes. A little later, she wonders: "I must have been dreaming again....." (21). She cannot compromise between the dreamy experience of Naga's love-making at night and the callousness of her husband. Hence, she takes the nocturnal affair as a dream. With Naga, she starts thinking that she is not dreaming. She bites her finger to make sure that she is not dreaming. Naga assures her, "I am not a figment of your imagination either. I am here. I am sitting in front of you. Touch me" (22). Hence, it is not a dream, but the play viewing the supernatural forces. Naga plays as a lover in this play within the play.

Rani has enough reasons to think that Naga is not Appanna:

- She sees blood on Naga's cheeks and shoulders. She opens the mirror-box of the healing ointment and sees the cobra in place of Naga. When Appanna returns from the harlot, Rani is confounded to find no blood on his cheeks and shoulders.

- After a tough fight with the mongoose, Naga-Appanna could not visit Rani for fifteen days. When he started his visits afresh, she found Naga-Appanna's body was covered with wounds. Once again, she tried to heal his wounds, partly healed, with her love and care. Although on her husband's body, there were no scars.

These are the concrete proofs of the deception. Yet, Rani was so much enamoured of Naga's love, she scarcely cared to solve the riddle. On the contrary, she co-operated in the exotic love-making surrounded by the dancing, singing flames. As a result, she becomes pregnant. She was happy enough to prove that she was not fantasizing about Naga-Appanna's love. Though, Naga, the deceiver, was not happy enough to receive the news and wanted it to remain secret. She did not understand the chameleon like aspect of the lover who satiated the carnal desires, but failed to owe the fruits. This was the greatest deception, which disillusioned other.

Though Rani's husband did not sleep with her, Rani was pregnant. This was enough to enrage him. The stage direction says: "In a flash, Naga becomes Appanna, pushes her to the floor and kicks her." (33) Next moment, Appanna demands explanation from Rani, the harlot: "Tell me who it is, who did you go to with your sari off?" (33) Hence, the inevitable trial ensues: the village elders sit in judgement. To prove her chastity they ask her to take an oath by holding a red-hot iron in her hand or by putting her hand in the snake burrow and taking a vow that she has not committed adultery. However, Rani insists: "I must swear by the King Cobra". She swears the half-truth which appears truth:

Since coming to this village, I have held by this hand, only two.....My husband and... and this Cobra...yes, my husband and this king cobra. Except for these two, I have not touched any one of the male sex. Nor have I allowed any other male to touch me. If I lie, let the Cobra bite me. (39)

The trial makes the readers and the crowd to prostrate before her. She comes out safe and sound from the severe trial termed a 'snake-ordeal'. The elders tell Appanna that she is a Goddess and the couple is escorted home in the *palanquin*. Thus, Rani proves to be a chaste woman enjoying glory and the wedded bliss. Karnad delineates the emancipation as well as empowerment of the woman in a best possible manner. Jayne M. Blanchard's analysis in Saint Paul Pioneer press seems appropriate in this context: The triumphant treatment of women in Naga-Mandala is enough to make you forget all this guilt and sin nonsense....." (Span 44).

In order to leave the play open-ended, the playwright chooses to project three ends of Rani's paramour and Rani herself:

- The primary end is traditional. Rani lived happily with her husband and her child. Appanna's concubine becomes Rani's menial servant. Although the flames do not accept this end. (59-60)
- Appanna is aware of Rani's disloyalty and loss of chastity because he has not slept with her. Rani realizes that her husband and Naga are different person because "No two men make love alike" (41). Both of them make compromise. Though, Naga approaches Rani's bed-room, assumes a petty size and hangs in the noose of Rani's tresses. Appanna traces the dead cobra, combing her hair and awe-struck, he falls to her feet: "you are a Goddess".

As Rani takes the Cobra merely as a totem, she gets the cobra ritually cremated and orders her son to “perform the rituals to commemorate its death.”(44) The scene of Rani’s pressing the dead cobra to her cheeks with eyes filled with tears. The flames reject the tragic end.

- The third alternative shows that the live cobra falls from Rani’s hair as Appanna combs her hair. When Appanna runs out to find out a stick to kill the cobra, Rani hides the snake in her tresses and asks it to “live in there happily forever.” She terms her hair as the symbol of her wedded bliss (46).

S.R. Jalote very aptly states the playwright’s thematic treatment of this play wherein the reader can discover the aspect of social realism: “In *Naga-Mandala* Karnad has rejected the value of emotional identification and catharsis. The play leaves the audience in possession of their critical faculties, so that they may learn something conducive to social realism.” (Dodiya 265)

Hence, in this feminist play, Karnad’s chief concern is to liberate the oppressed, harshly beaten, locked in the houses (which is not home), Rani into an independent woman, not at the mercy of the husband enslaved by a harlot or a concubine. He achieves this purpose by introducing Naga, the lover. Consequently, the concubine turned into her maid-servant also becomes jealous of Rani and even the elders fall at her feet and calls her the Goddess. Thus, Karnad emancipates Rani, the woman.

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