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## NAGA MANDALA: JOURNEY OF A WOMAN FROM ENSLAVEMENT TO EMPOWERMENT

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### ABSTRACT

Girish Karnad is the most renowned media personality in the contemporary India, leading playwright and a very skilful practioner of performing art. He have deep interest in the traditional Indian life and ethos of Indian culture. He projects various facets of traditional Indian. He very dexterously pictures the condition of a typical Indian female ruled by the patriarchal order bound by tradition, but whose spirit remains unbound. Karnad's women characters are the products of the post-colonial, postmodern world that desire to gain what they need. In *Naga-Mandala*, Rani, is an ideal Indian woman modest, unquestioning and uncomplaining, is locked in empty house, symbolizes the chain of restrictions placed round women, and it denies even her legal rights and hampers her natural growth even today. The patriarchal moral code demands chastity and loyalty of a woman to her husband, but not the faithfulness of a man to his wife. Chastity is such a value invented by patriarchal culture and it is one of the most powerful yet invisible culture fetters that enslaved women for ages. In India mythology we have examples of women characters, namely Sita, Tara, savitri, and so no. Through his plays, Karnad portrays that Indian women do not even have freedom to tal with other men and express their emotions.

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### INTRODUCTION

Girish Karnad is the most renowned media personality in the contemporary India, leading playwright and a very skilful practioner of performing art. When Karnad joined the stage after the nation's independence in 1947, the Indian theatre was suffering from acute identity crises being torn between its ancient cultural past and its more recent colonial legacy, which gave birth to hybrid dramatic forms. Several theatre personalities at that time articulated the aspirations of a newly independent nation through their attempts to decolonize the aesthetics of modern Indian theatre by retracing its roots in the repository of India's

classical and folk traditions. Karnad has himself acknowledged this fact:

My generation was the first to come of age after India became independent of British rule. It therefore had to face a situation in which tensions implicit until then had come out in the open and demanded to be resolved without apologia or self-justification: tension between the cultural past of the country and its colonial past, between the attractions of Western modes of thought and our own traditions and finally between the various visions of future

that opened up once the common cause of political freedom was achieved. (Karnad 21) He employs shape shifting in his plays to give them a touch of folk tales. As all his plays round history, myth, folk tales and fantasies, shape shifting becomes a necessary device for him to show it as non-realistic to explain a modernistic tendency to a realistic situation. As A. K. Ramanujan writes:

Karnad experimenting as usual with his mythical elements in the folk tales tradition tries to find a modern reaction to an ancient situation. He tries to cut below the surface to reveal the burning cure of mental or spiritual reality. (A.K.Ramanujan). The main concern of the play writer here becomes centred on human (and non human) beings in combination interacting into one another. (Prasad 179)

Girish Karnad seems to have deep interest in the traditional Indian life and ethos of Indian culture. He projects various facets of traditional Indian. These plays project different virtues and morals of traditional Indian life and present how tradition of Indian culture plays very significant role to demonstrate moral path to human beings in the modern context.

Karnad very dexterously pictures the condition of a typical Indian female ruled by the patriarchal order bound by tradition, but whose spirit remains unbound. As a humanist he has profound concern for the 'oppressed'. Karnad's women characters are the products of the post-colonial, postmodern world that desire to gain what they need. Karnad women fight the unjust norms of the patriarchal order. They revolt against the patriarchy and male dominance.

In *Naga Mandala*, Karnad presents two folk tales together. The first tale talks about the paradoxical nature of oral tales as they have an existence of their own independent teller and yet live only when they move on from one story teller to another. The play is the story of Rani, who intently wanted to fill the void in her life. "Her predicament poignantly reflects the human need to live by fictions and half truths . . . Karnad breathes into his

stories a new consciousness, which is entirely contemporary" (Prasad 178).

The play is richly textured dramatic transmutation of two folk tales of the Karnataka region. The postcolonial matrix embedded in the play opens to another theme of patriarchal oppression. The thought of ritualistic chastity and purity hidden behind the facet of metaphysical Indian tradition that has laid importance only for men and pushed a women's place somewhere beneath the vertical line of social hierarchy.

In *Naga-Mandala*, Rani, is an ideal Indian woman modest, unquestioning and uncomplaining, is locked in empty house, symbolizes the chain of restrictions placed round women, and it denies even her legal rights and hampers her natural growth even today. She is one among the passive victims of a male dominant society as her husband. Appanna is a very dominating and cruel husband. He goes out every night just uttering, "well then, I'll be back tomorrow at noon. Keep my lunch ready. I shall eat and go"(Karnad 27). Through Rani, Karnad portrays a very common problem faced by women in India. A newly wedded Indian bride is left in the house, with not even the freedom and courage to express her fear of loneliness. Rani's words show her hesitation and fear. She tries to say "Listen- (fumbling for words) Listen- I feel- frightened-alone at night (Karnad 28). He retorts, "What is there to be of scared? Just keep to yourself. No one will bother you! (28). Rani has no choice of her own. Her husband pays no attention to her. Appanna is involved in an extra-martail relation and has lost interest in his wife. He goes out, shuts the door, and locks it from outside and goes away. "She runs to the door, pushes it, finds it locked, peers out of the barred window. He is gone" (27). Rani has remained locked all alone in her house throughout the nights. Her husband Appanna who comes the next morning warns her "Do as you are told, you understand" (28). She is allowed only to cook lunch for him. She is just became a housemaid and there is no freedom for her. She became trapped. Her husband expects from her to serve him as a robot with absolute obedience. Appanna fails in his duty as a husband, and he does not even satisfy the needs of his newly wedded wife Rani. He mercilessly keeps her starved of affection

and love, which are indispensable for the growth and the nourishment of human mind. This solitary confinement of Rani indirectly results in the inhibition of women's talent for housework and in the negation of women's right for enlightenment and enjoyment. Rani is the very image of an ideal Indian woman- modest, unquestioning and uncomplaining. The empty house, Rani is locked in, symbolizes the chain of restrictions placed round women, which denies even her legitimate rights and hinders her natural growth even today. She is one among the passive victims of a male dominant society while her husband Appanna is a very dominating and cruel husband who exercises absolute supremacy over his innocent and naive spouse.

The patriarchal moral code demands chastity and loyalty of a woman to her husband, but not the faithfulness of a man to his wife. Chastity is such a value invented by patriarchal culture and it is one of the most powerful yet invisible culture fetters that enslaved women for ages. Nothing seems to be more important in life than to be chaste. Loosing of one's chastity brings unbearable social stigma and this is worse than death. Traditionally a "good woman" is always synonymous with good wife must be chaste, faithful like Sita. "For both men and women have been traditionally personified by Sita who is portrayed in the Ramayana, as the quintessence of wifely devotion. As one is already made aware of the myth of Ramayana, Sita is subjected to the whims of her husband who abandons her only because of the commoner's derogatory remarks" (Prasad177). The Ramayana in which Sita undergoes the fire ordeal to prove her chastity to Ram has been a culture guide to Indians for more than two thousand years. In scripts and myth, woman is always depicted either as a goddess or a sub-human creator, never as a human being.

Every parent or elders enslaves her daughter to patriarchy by teaching her that chastity is more important than life and loss of chastity brings an unbearable social stigma that is worse than death. Many women lose their lives to protect their chastity or bear in silence all the oppression and violence of their husband. If any woman violates these values, she is boycotted by the society. Rani in

*Naga-Mandala* sleeps with Naga in the guise of Appanna. Rani was brought to the Village Council by her indulgent husband as a whore to whom punishment had to be meted out for her adultery. She is only accepted back as a goddess by the villagers. "there are hosannas and cheers from the crowd. Elders I exclaims, "A miracle! A miracle! A miracle!" elder II declares her a "Divine Being" and Elder III calls her "a Goddess". Appanna falls at her feet and says, "Forgive me. I am a sinner. I was blind..." (Karnad 262). Indian society fails to accept woman as a human being with natural desires. She cannot win people's hearts with love but only by performing miracles and being a goddess.

Rani accepts her subjugation submissively and her desire for love, comfort and companionship are repressed and suppressed and she is isolated and detached from any social interactions by the dictates of her tyrant husband. She dreams of herself being locked up by a 'demon' in a castle, while the prince comes in the guise of the cobra and leads her to cross the line demarcated for her by her husband and society. In her dream-like state, a result of her long moments of isolation and yearning, Rani is blissfully intoxicated with the love of Naga who comes in the guise of her husband Appanna. The suspicious husband finds out about her pregnancy and beats her up accusing her of adultery. Appanna's violent reaction to Rani's infidelity does not make him consider for a moment his own infidelity towards her. He finally makes her suffer the humiliation of being questioned by the village panchayat. In the trial before the village elders, she speaks the truth: "Yes, my husband and this king Cobra. Except for these two, I have not touched any one of the male sex" (*Naga-Mandala* 292). The trail of Rani is similar to Sita's trail in the Ramayana. Rani finds herself in a similar situation like Sita who has to give agni pariksha to prove her chastity. Her husband who accuses her infidelity torments Rani. Karnad here exposes the patriarchal moral code, which emphasis loyalty of a woman for her husband but does not question the infirmity of a man. In the play, Appanna neglects his newly wedded wife and commits adultery no question is raised. But Rani is put to test in the presence of the panchyat. The Oath she has to take before the

panchayat is either holding a red hot iron or plunging the hand in boiling oil. But as instructed by Naga, Rani chooses the snake ordeal, most dreadful option, in order to prove her loyalty. She put her hand into the anthill, pulls the cobra out, take her oath by the cobra and speak the truth. The villagers judge her to be innocent and hail her as a Goddess. Rani's transformation from an immature and naïve girl to the ideal 'mother' becomes connected through the acceptance of socially approved roles. After the test of her fidelity, a brute husband who has an illicit relationship with a concubine becomes her slave and server with a sense of metaphysical mystique. Rajinder Kumar Dhawan stated that "This vulgar display of power instead of love and treating woman as a disposable object accrues to him owing to the past colonialist ethos and mystique of tradition" (152). The terms loyalty and chastity are restricted exclusively to women in India to pin them down under male domination.

In India mythology we have examples of women characters, namely Sita, Tara, savitri, and so on. Through his plays, Karnad portrays that Indian women do not even have freedom to talk with other men and express their emotions. Whether it is Sita or Shakuntala, chastity tests are only for women. Rani has to prove her chastity by undergoing 'snake ordeal' and Padmini through 'Sati'. Society can never accept or come to terms with a woman strong enough to be assertive and independent; even if it does accept a woman as the leader, it does so with grudge and after much ado. A woman can either be a slave or a Goddess but never an equal.

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