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A FEMINIST CRITICAL STUDY OF GIRISH KARNAD'S "NAGA-MANDALA"

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ABSTRACT

Naga-Mandala which portrays the theme of betrayal at conjugal level. Naga a supernatural being fell in love with Rani and with the power of his magic impersonated himself into Appanna's form. He found it easy to betray Rani by such disguise. This makes us feel that patriarchal culture suppress the authority. Rani is the typical image of an ideal Indian woman-demure unquestioning and uncomplaining. Girish Karnad appears as a dramatist of social realities in this play.



Girish Karnad is the foremost playwright of the contemporary stage. He has given the Indian Theatre a richness that could probably be equated with his talents as actor cum director. He has represented India in foreign lands as an ambassador of art and culture. His plays are staged in theatre all over the world. He has bagged prestigious awards as playwright, director and actor.

In his play *Naga-Mandala* (1988), Karnad offers an insight into the private lives of women. The protagonist is Rani. Right from the beginning the flames that appear in the 'Prologue' of the play represent the metaphorical terms the different lives of the women the village. The flames gather a midnight to tell tales about the private lives of couple and rejoice in their findings. The play opens with a man, in a 'morose stance' sitting in their sanctum of a ruined temple. He is gloomy because a mendicant has told him, "you must keep awake at least one whole night this month. If you can do that you will live. If not you will die on the last night of the month." Karnad for creating a particularly female context, and exposition situation in the 'man-oriented' folk tales which are going to be the basis of the play. He brings within the play the strong association between oral narrative tradition and women's sub-culture existing within the patriarchal

societies. Karnad's play *Naga-Mandala* is one of his very popular plays based on two oral tales from Karnataka which he first heard from Professor A.K.Ramanujan. He wrote it in Kannada during his stay at the University of Chicago as Visiting Professor. Later he translated it into English and staged it at the University Theatre at Chicago. *Naga-Mandala* is the story of a cobra making love to Rani in the guise of her husband Appanna who ill-treats her by locking her in the house and going after a harlot. Later on, when Rani becomes pregnant through her Cobra-lover, Naga helps her vindicate her honour, gain the status of a goddess and live with her husband, child and Appanna's concubine as her maid servant. The play employs the frame of folktales by combining with the well-known myth of the snake worship in several parts of India. The play is replete with myth, magic, supernatural and fantasy. The play with its folk frame work of a Female story narrator makes it a typical play highlighting the gender perspective. Karnad transforms the Indian folk tales and mythic tradition by endowing them with a modern facade by adapting the Brechtian theatrical technique. Like other plays, *Naga-Mandala* too exemplifies his ideal of 'total theatre' that combines drama, dance and myth.

All the women characters in Karnad's play have immortalized their places in literary world and the students of literature, particularly of drama and theatre would not certainly forget them. Naga-mandala is a folktale transformed into the metaphor of the married women. It is a Chinese box story with two folk tales transformed into one fabric where myth superstition, fact and fantasy, instinct and reason, the particular and the general blend to produce a drama of universal evocations. The predicament of Rani as opposed to the name is deplorable than that of a maid. The name 'Rani' ridicules at the Indian ideal of womanhood as the Rani or Lakshmi of the household. As Virginia Woolf asserts in *A Room one's Own*, imaginatively, she's (women is) of the highest importance, practically insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover, is all but absent from history.

The woman is portrayed as dependent in all three phases of her life as a daughter (Rani's dependence on her parents) as a wife and as a mother. In Indian society, the woman is said to be complete only after marriage. However, paradoxically she neither belongs to this world or that her parental home or her husband's abode. For the woman, the home is said to be an expression of her freedom; it is her domain. However, Rani is imprisoned in her own house by her spouse in a routine manner that baffles others with the door locked from outside. She does not shut the door behind her like Nora does in *A Dolls House*, but God opens a door for her in the form of a King Cobra. The King cobra gets seduced by the love potion by Kurudavva to Rani to lure, pathetically, her own husband who turns blind eye to her. The snake assumes the form of a loving Appanna in contrast to the atrocious husband at day. The climax is reached when Rani becomes pregnant and Appanna questions her chastity. Her innocence is proved by virtue of the snake ordeal that the village elders put before her, and she is eventually proclaimed as a goddess incarnate.

Naga-Mandala is 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 of 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 judgement do not find fault with him. Nobody believes the innocence of Rani. She sleeps with Naga without knowing it. She does not discover the identity of Naga who assumes Appanna's form by using his magical power. Her failure to discover the truth is the suppression of her reason and intuition by the injunction of Appanna and Naga not to ask any question. If she had discovered the real identity of Naga, she would not have allowed him to enter bedroom. As a typical woman, she is frigid and despises sex. What she craves for is affection which Naga gives her in plenty by functioning as a surrogate parent for a while. By using his erotic art, Naga cures her of frigidity. Because of this later Appanna and Rani are able to enjoy material life happily.

Chastity is a patriarchal concept that has been used to oppress and weaken women for ages. Here also in the case of Rani her chastity is clearly gender based. There are reasons which led to whole trouble that crop between Rani and Appanna. In the first place, he regards her as his property and adopts a possessive attitude towards her. Secondly, the lack of communication between them makes him a stranger to her. What to talk of sexual gratification, she is even not allowed to have emotional company necessary for the growth and development of one's own personality. Appanna does not let her talk to anyone, not even to his own mother's childhood friend, Kurudavva. "She won't talk to anyone. And no need to talk to her". (14).

The maltreatment of Appanna leads Rani to day dreams and immaturity. She is mentally a child craving for parental affection. She feels frightened alone at night in the house and desires to have her parents with her on her bed at night. Not only the reviewers reflect Rani's anguish and mental condition but also reveal her desire for a world where all differences based on sex inequality came to an end as defined by Millet: The arrangement of human life on agreeable and rational principles from where the enter notion of power over others should be banished. Her Appanna is marked by chauvinism. He commands his newly wife and treats her with contempt reserved for woman in a new patriarchal

society. Appanna treats her as if she were not a human being. He does not clear care for her feelings and emotions and treats her like robot who only works for him. As a male chauvinist, he has utter contempt for his wife. He feels frightened and miserable when she expresses her fear and loneliness. He mercilessly disregards her feelings. This mental torture forces her to fly mentally into the lap of her parents.

The concept of purity of characters has been associated with woman since ancient days, almost from the beginning of human civilization. A lady especially in India fails to command that social prestige which she ought to have if she is once stigmatized. What Rani does and what she suffers is not due to some weakness in her character. Like Oedipus, who murders his father and marries his mother unknowingly, Rani also commits the gravest sin of adultery in the ignorance of the real identity of cobra. But the society, based on the patriarchal norm never pardons a woman who has lost her virginity. Kurudavva, an intimate friend of Appanna's mother, comes to Rani.

Since she is blind and old, she is brought by Appanna, her son. She talks to Rani and feels her through the window. 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 the root and mix it in Appanna's food. As the curry turns red and looks sinister, she throw it on the ant-hill in front of the house. A King Cobra, called Naga, consumes the aphrodisiac paste 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. Appanna comes in the morning next day. He unlocks the door and steps in Rani comes out running and laughing, obviously thinking that her hardships have ended as Appanna has changed for better. She learns that she is wrong.

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: '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 parrot.' She later shows the same courage which shocks Appanna. After judgement, Rani becomes the head of the family. Appanna accepts her superiority and says to her, "You are no common person. You are a goddess." However the matriarchal Rani, unlike the patriarchal Appanna, never orders him; she request him if she needs a favour from him. Naga- Mandala questions and exposes the gender based value and morals of patriarchy which have oppressed for ages. This is effectively done by juxtaposing Appanna and Rani at the village court. Rani commits adultery without knowing it since Naga always visits her in the guise of Appanna where as Appanna openly and ashamedly commits adultery with his concubine. Yet the village court tries the case of Rani only.

To conclude I can say, Naga-Mandala is a feminist play. The play questions the patriarchal moral code which demands the faithfulness of woman to her husband but not the faithfulness of a man to his wife. This accepted not only by men but also by women. Female virginity is thus nothing but to keep a woman as a slave under man's control. The dramatist does not express his opinion about the rights of women or emancipation of women. But he merely presents the tragic consequences of the subordination of a married women to her heartless man. The play shows how the woman is excessively controlled by her husband. Girish karnad appears as a dramatist of social realities in this play. He is definitely on the side of Rani who wins our sympathy too.

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