



## WOMAN AND MORALITY: A STUDY OF KARNAD'S FEMALE CHARACTERS

Dr. MONIKA YADAV

[monikayadav2186@gmail.com](mailto:monikayadav2186@gmail.com)



MONIKA YADAV

### ABSTRACT

The majority of GirishKarnad's plays employ the narrative of myth, history, and folklore to evoke an ancient or pre-modern world that resonates in contemporary contexts because of his uncanny ability to remark the past in the image of the present. The majority of his plays employ the narrative of myth, history, and folklore to evoke an ancient or pre-modern world that resonates in contemporary contexts because of his uncanny ability to remark the past in the image of the present. He presented such a world of women always suppressed by men. While realist drama emphasis and often romanticizes the maternal role, folk narratives stress the feminine but not necessarily the maternal. The ideology of urban folk drama thus manifests itself most conspicuously in the treatment of femininity, sexuality, desire, and power. Although the challenge to patriarchy is not absolute, women in folk drama find the means of exercising an ambivalent freedom within its constraints.

In the context of Indian English writing, Girish Karnad is considered as a modern writer as his plays are rich and vibrant in traditional Indian sensibility, characterization and themes yet they have modern perspective. With drama as his chosen literary form and Kannada as his principle language of original composition, Karnad certainly exemplifies the transformative practices of his generation, but he has also carved out a distinctive niche for himself with respect to subject matter, dramatic style, and authorial identity. The majority of his plays employ the narrative of myth, history, and folklore to evoke an ancient or pre-modern world that resonates in contemporary contexts because of his uncanny ability to remark the past in the image of the present. Karnad marks a departure in a major new direction and the invention of a new form appropriate to his content- twelfth century folktale interlineated with Thomas Mann's retelling of it in *Hayavadana*, in *Naga-Mandala* this pattern repeats itself in a different order, creating a cycle of myth-folklore-history and a second cycle of myth- history-

myth- contemporary life-folklore in *Bali-The Sacrifice*, *Broken Images*. He presented such a world of women always suppressed by men. While realist drama emphasis and often romanticizes the maternal role, folk narratives stress the feminine but not necessarily the maternal. In some plays women want those men whom they cannot have legitimately and each one accomplishes her desire through another way and somewhere Karnad seems to justify their act. The ideology of urban folk drama thus manifests itself most conspicuously in the treatment of femininity, sexuality, desire, and power. Although the challenge to patriarchy is not absolute, women in folk drama find the means of exercising an ambivalent freedom within its constraints. The present paper aims to comparative study of the female character in conjugal life in the plays *NagaMandala* and *Bali-The Sacrifice*.

The play *Naga-Mandala* (Play with a Cobra) was originally written in Kannada and later on, translated into English by the author himself. The play weaves two Kannada folk - tales together

that were passed on to Karnad by the scholar and poet A.K. Ramanujan, who had made the collection of several folktales and their variants as they are found in different parts of India. The play deals with the socialistic issues related to women and children. The play is beautifully crafted in Indian traditional ethos and cultural mores, possessing the modernistic attitude towards life. The play is a timeless and universal play based on local mythology of storytelling art. It magically captures the meaning of creativity presenting a complex and provocatively ambiguous world where fictional characters intermingle. The second play *Bali: The Sacrifice* is the translation of Girish Karnad's Kannada play, *Hittina Huja*. The play has a specific pre-modern source- the thirteen-century Kannada epic, *Yashodharacharite*, which can in turn be traced back to two eleventh and ninth-century Sanskrit epics. Karnad puts in front of audience the conflict between violence and non-violence through the myth of 'the cock of dough'. In the Introduction of collected plays volume one, Aparna Bhargava Dharwadher comments "Karnad transforms the story of the dough figurine that comes alive at the time moment of sacrifice into a mature philosophical exploration of love, jealousy, desire, betrayal, and violence between men and women who are bound by the ties of blood and marriage, or encounter each other in the perfect freedom of anonymity" (Karnad xxxiii). The novelty and strength of the play lies in the unconventionality of its four characters, and the seriousness with which it yokes intimate personal acts to structures of religion beliefs.

In the play *Bali –The Sacrifice*, there is a main female protagonist, the Queen. She also named as Amritamati, belongs to Jain religion and firmly believes in the principles like love, pity, kindness and compassion of Jainism. On the other hand in *Naga-Mandala*, there is Rani. The opening lines of the story introduce a girl but her name as writer says "doesn't matter": "A young girl. Her name ... it doesn't matter. But she was an only daughter, so her parents called her Rani. Queen. Queen of the whole wide world..." (Karnad 253).

Both of the characters have hailed as 'Queen' as Rani is a Hindi word also means 'Queen'

but their identities are totally opposite. Amritamati (*Bali-The Sacrifice*) is a strong and authoritative woman as she confronts her would be husband in her first meeting: "Ohho! So you're the prince who's come to be my husband. But you are so- small. Don't husbands have moustaches?" (Karnad 205). On the contrary Rani is pure embodiment of feminine simplicity, innocence, and powerlessness. Karnad describes Rani as a "Queen of the whole wide world" which is ironical. Her situation is antipodal to her name as her "fond father found her a suitable husband" (253). Rani continued to live with her parents until she reached womanhood. Now her husband came and took her with him to his village. Traditionally in Indian culture the family members fix the marriage of female child. The girl is not consulted but is told to marry a boy whom her family has chosen for her. The same thing happens in the case of Rani and she has to accept it without any complains. Her condition is very pitiable as writer mentioned in the text: "He pays no attention to her, goes out, shuts the door, locks it from the outside and goes away....She does not know what is happening stands perplexed. She cannot even weep" (254). However Amritamati (*Bali-The Sacrifice*) has done inter-religion marriage with King who belongs to Hindu religion. She is very asserting as well as impulsive for instance when King tries to make fun of her family she revert him: "I don't want to marry you" (206). More than any other female characters of Karnad, she is self-possessed. As she defines herself when mahout asks "Are you ugly?" .She replied "No, I don't think so. People usually describe me in flattering terms" (194).

In *Naga-Mandala*, marriage for Rani means the loss of the secure world of children and parental love, she has to reimagine that world in her fantasies merely to keep herself from psychic collapse. As the ill-tempered, tyrannical, two-dimensional husband, Appanna rapidly reduces her daily life to a featureless existence without companionship: "Look, I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand?" (254). Rani's husband Appanna 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 Col.1 254). He regularly visits to concubines. The absence of this

bond renders the marriage meaningless and Rani is reduced to the status of a housemaid who must cook for husband and feed him every afternoon. The prince of her dreams, who was to bring her to his house turns into a demon. Rani, an ideal Indian woman modest, unquestioning and uncomplaining, is locked in empty house. On the contrary, Queen Amaritamati controls and dominates her husband. She has managed to convert her husband to her faith Jainism abdicating Hinduism in which he was. Also, she gradually controls his state affairs: "We'll face it together. But not here. At home" (227). She makes king forbid all kinds of bloodshed in the state. She does not allow her Mother-in-law to celebrate her joy at the Queen's pregnancy. She has fully captivated the King's affairs and has full control over the family: Queen: we are Jains. Our son will be a Jain. He will have to uphold the principle...." (213).

Rani behaves like a traditional Indian woman who fears to do any act against her husband. It is very Indian tradition prevents her to offer such kind of roots to her husband and she wants to remain faithful to her husband in conjugal life. As she says "Suppose something happens to my husband? What will my fate be? That little piece made him ill...No. No. Forgive me God. This is evil. I was about to commit a crime. Father, Mother, how could! Your daughter agrees to such a heinous act. No, I must get rid of this before he notices anything" (Karnad Col.I 266). On the contrary Queen Amritamati's act appears sheer betrayal, as she has no obvious reason to betray her husband. It appears more impulsive than her dissatisfaction in family. Perhaps she is tired of the King's obeying nature. She wants somebody robust to rule her. When Mahout asks about her thought about him, she says "you are not tall and fair with an aquiline nose and ruby lips-I live surrounded by such men and I am sick and tired of them" (193).

Rani is a sensible woman who does not think of breaking the pious relationship of marriage with her husband. She even tries to appease her husband. Kurudavva was an elderly woman and she was old friend of Appanna's parents. She suggests some tricks to Rani to make her husband her lover. Rani tries to offer liquid of root through food to Appanna but she fears if there would be negative

consequences of that root on her husband. Therefore she pours the curry into the anthill to destroy it. But there is a King Cobra tastes that liquid and starts love to Rani. A cobra can assume any form as it likes. Naga which eats that liquid enters the house and took the shape of Appanna. Rani thinks that Appanna started loving her. But in reality, it was Naga in the form of Appanna. Oppositely in *Bali-The Sacrifice*, one midnight, Queen leaves her bedroom chasing a melodious song and finds herself in the arms of an ugly low caste elephant-keeper Mahout, the master of the heavenly voice. The Queen's sexual betrayal is quite unconvincing. Her husband attends her more than any other things in the world. For her happiness, he makes his own mother live separately. For her sake he left his religion and family tradition of sacrificing animals. It is significant that Queen plays very dominant role in the relationship of husband and wife. She always treats her husband as an attendant to follow her commands. In both the cases, the protagonists commit adultery but in the matter of Queen, the act was done willingly but Rani did it unknowingly.

Rani's unconscious relationship with the Naga proves fruitful and brings her motherhood but when her real husband get to know about her pregnancy he drags her in of Panchayat and Elders decides that she has to give chastity test to prove her fidelity towards her husband. She braces herself but she opts snake-ordeal instead of the hot – iron. She bravely faces the snake-ordeal to prove her faithfulness to her husband. The miracle during the snake-ordeal turns her into a master of her house. On the other hand, Queen Amaritamati has a choice. Mother Queen decides to offer a hundred fowl in sacrifice to her goddess in order to avoid disaster invited by the Queen's adulterous deed. The Queen strongly objects and also prevents the King to do the bloodshed. So Mother Queen suggests sacrificing a dough cock instead of a live one to be performed by the King and the Queen. The Queen has objections even to that symbolic violence: "But...but...this sword. This plunging in of the blade. The act....it's violence.." (Karnad 236). After a long argument, Queen agrees to participate in sacrificing act but surprisingly, the cock of dough comes in life.

At last, Queen in desperation stabs herself with knife and offers the sacrifice of her own life.

Rani in *Naga-Mandalais* very simple, innocent and honest woman who cannot understand why her husband doubted on her and she is the victim not the sinner. She even asks her husband "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? I would have killed myself. But there's not even a rope in this house for me to use"(290). But Queen in *Bali-The Sacrifice* is very shrewd woman who wants to hide her betrayal and she does not regret about her deed. AparnaDharwadker comments:

In Bali the queen is childless and although this lack is an inescapable point of reference in her life, it is not (at least for her) a source of obsessive guilt or shame. Aroused by the mahout's song, she seeks him out for an anonymous coupling that violates the boundaries of caste and class, but when challenged, refuses to profess guilt for her action or to atone for it through a propitiatory ritual. More than any other female character in Karnad's drama, she is a transgressive presence, deprived of conventional feminine roles by chance and circumstance, but self-possessed and cerebral enough not to surrender to the pressures of conformity. (Karnad XXXIV)

In this way AparnaDharwadker rightly describes true face of Queen who keeps principles according her view and uses to benefit her. Queen is bold and has dominant nature and she does not be apologetic about her betrayal against her husband. Instead she justifies her betrayal as an accident in her life. When King asked about her betrayal she retorts:

I do not regret anything that has happened. I will not disown him or anything he gave me. ...because it just happened. Without my willing it. It just happened. That's all.... I want to come back to you. I feel fuller. Richer. Warmer. But not ashamed. Because I didn't plan it. It happened. And it was beautiful. (Karnad 234 )

The words of Queen reveal her astute nature. She wants to prove that her betrayal is not betrayal but only an accident. The Queen seems to testify Karnad's statement that "if womanhood finds fulfillment in love that happens to be outside marriage, why that should be considered wrong? Radha's love for Krishna was such" (Mukherjee 43). Instead in the case of Rani, somehow the miracle helps her hide her sin under the cover of family and accords it not only social sanction but also mastership of her family. She is hailed as a Goddess in the village and roles of Appanna and Rani are exchanged. Now Appanna became her servant but in Queen's situation her treachery became reason of her death.

#### References

Karnad Girish, *Collected Plays, Tughlaq, Hayavadana, Bali: The Sacrifice, Naga-Mandala*, Volume-one, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2010. Print.

Mukherjee, Tutun, ed. *GirishKarnad's Plays: Performance and Critical Perspectives*. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2006.