



Nagmandala: A Tale of Journey From Feminity to Matriarchy

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Abstract

Modern Indian dramatists have experimented with the bold stories and styles resulting in innovations and fruitful experiments which go into the history of Indian drama as the most significant mark of achievement. Indian drama makes immense use of tradition, myths, legends and folklore to represent the socio-cultural issues. Girish Karnad's plays vividly characterize this trend. The current research paper deals with Girish Karnad's Play, Nagamandala, a dramatic representation of Indian myths accompanied by the dramatic tools to tell a tale of a newly married couple Appanna and Rani and their marital life.

Key words: mythology, legends, culture, feminist, matriarchy

The play *Nagamandala* is a deceptively simply made complex story with the elements of myth, magic, folk, belief and romance. The audience is taken into a make-believe world. This article makes an attempt to study the tale of a journey of Rani from feminity to matriarchy. The play depicts the image of a woman in the society. Karnad's plays reflect the culture in our society. Focusing on our folk culture, he takes inspiration from mythology and folklore. Rangan's characterization of folk imagination and folk play and their interplay with magic is easily applicable to Karnad's plays:

"Folk imagination is at once mythopoeic and magical. In the folk mind, one subsumes the other. Folk belief, besides being naïve, has a touch of poetry about it which works towards a psychic adjustment. All folklore is religious, often based on animism because the primitive imagination extends its vision from the natural, in which it is steeped and with which it is saturated, to the supernatural, which to the folk mind is only an extension of the former" (199). Karnad has very successfully employed the folk drama form in *Nagamandala* to present the

perennial problem of identity and search for totality. He reveals the impact of Brecht's theatrical teachings on him especially with regard to his use of indigenous dramatic forms. Girish Karnad comments, "I read the basic Western canon – the Greek plays, Shakespeare, Shaw, O' Neill, Anouilh, Brecht, Beckett, Sartre, Camus. Brecht's technique influenced me a great deal in the earlier years" (207). An old story gives the dramatist the opportunity to elaborate his thesis to focus on a hitherto unnoticed aspect. The dramatist is able to expose outdated notions and, in the process, create a contemporary consciousness. Karnad recognizes such a principle and uses familiar tales in all his plays. In this article we would try focus on the idea of feminine and matriarchy and how the story of Rani, Appanna and the Naga relate to the journey of the character's transition from feminity to the matriarchy.

Nagamandala 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, a flame that has come to tell a story. The play begins with a Prologue in which one is taken to the inner chamber of a ruined temple. The temple is very old and the idol in it is broken and therefore cannot be identified. It is night and a man is sitting in the temple, yawning involuntarily. He turns to the audience and confides: I may be dead within the next few hours. I asked the mendicant what I had done to deserve this fate.

The man is sad because a mendicant has told him, "You must keep awake at least one whole night this month. If you can do that, you'll live, if not, you'll die on the last night of the month." (22)

The man has been dozing off every night, and tonight is the last night of the month. His guilt is that he has written plays and thereby caused so many people to fall asleep twisted miserable chairs. (22-23). Hence, there is 'the Curse of Death' (23) on him. He swears that if he survives this night, he will adjure all story-telling, all playacting (23). Suddenly he is shocked to see naked lamp flames entering the temple, talking to each other in female voice. All the flames have come from different households in the village, who, after lights have been put out for the night, escape their houses, to collect gossip and have some entertainment. Each flame is a female, a storyteller, sharing with the others her observations and new experiences. Then a new flame enters and is enthusiastically greeted by the other flames. This new flame tells the others:

"My mistress, the old woman, knows a story and a song. But all these years she has kept them to herself...This afternoon ...The moment her mouth opened the story and the song jumped out. (24-25)

The story took the form of a young woman and the song became a sari: this young woman wrapped herself in the sari and stepped out. The identification of the flames with young, sprightly, and vocal women and stories that they tell each other is a brilliant device used by the playwright for creating a particularly female context and content in the mall-oriented folk tale.

The flame begins her story of Rani and Appanna. The Act One begins with the Story addressing the audience: '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 ...' (27). Rani is beautiful beyond words. She is the queen of the long tresses. When her hair is tied up in a knot, it is as though a black King Cobra lies curled on the nape of her neck. Her father marries her to Appanna who soon comes and takes her to his village. Entering into her wedded life like most girls with a lot of expectation is shocked by Appanna's disregard. Marriage is a milestone in a person's life and since it presents a hostile environment; her mind indulges in dreams in order to calm her troubled self. Rani's problem in Appanna's house could be the problem of any bride in a patriarchal family. The couple find it difficult to know that how they can relate to each other. Rani misses her parents, feels homesick 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 concubine, which reflects his awareness of the biological aspect of sex. Rani is mentally a child craving for parental affection.

The miserable days roll by in this manner, Appanna treating her as a non-human thing, without any feeling, following his instructions without uttering a single word of complain. He locks her in the room, and scolds the old woman Kurudavva and her son Kappanna when they attempt to become friendly with Rani. One day it so happens that Kappanna (the dark one) enters the street carrying his mother Kurudavva (the blind one) on his shoulders. Kurudavva is the intimate friend of Appanna's mother and comes to visit the new daughter-in-law. She talks to Rani and feels her through the window. She learns that Appanna still visits his concubine though he has a beautiful wife. The elderly woman bursts out: "I'll tell you. I was born blind. No one would marry me ... One day a mendicant came to our house.... He was pleased with me and gave me three pieces of a root. 'Any man who eats one of these will marry you', he said" (33). Therefore, Kurudavva used the middle-sized root and got her loving husband. She gives Rani a piece of aphrodisiac root and instructs her to grind

the root and mix it in Appanna's food. Rani for the first time has someone to speak to her sympathetically and she is granted a miraculous thing to solve her problem. So, she feels very happy. When Appanna comes, Kurudavva expresses her wish to talk to Rani. He says: "She won't talk to anyone. And no one needs talk to her"(34). He brings a watchdog to prevent people from talking to his wife. It is clear that Appanna does not want Rani to come into contact with other people. She starves for affection and love.

Rani grinds the aphrodisiac root into a paste and pours it into the curry. The curry boils over, red as blood but terrified pours the entire curry into the anthill where lives King Cobra. She like any typical wife does not want harm her husband in any. But Appanna as a typical husband punishes her severely even for a small thing like her going out.

The charm of the root has worked now. The King Cobra consumes the paste and due to effect of the aphrodisiac root falls in love with Rani. It follows Rani and when it is very dark, the Cobra enters Rani's house through the drain in the bathroom. As the Cobra can assume any form it likes, it takes the shape of Appanna. He visits Rani at night and takes pity on her for her miserable condition. He is so affectionate, compassionate and full of love that Rani cannot comprehend the situation. Yet she readily suspends her incredulity and starts enjoying the concern and affection of Naga in the guise of Appanna .

Act II continues with the same scene. Naga's meeting Rani every night continues but leaves her confused as to why Appanna was so nice at night and is rough and rude hissing like a stupid snake during the day. Rani tells Appanna (King Cobra): You talk so nicely at night. But during the day I only have to open my mouth and you hiss like a ... stupid snake (42). On one night, Rani sees wounds on Naga's cheek and so brings the mirror box for ointment. Naga had received these wounds in a fight the previous night with the dog, which Appanna had brought to keep a watch on Rani and to keep everyone away from her. To her surprise she sees an image of a cobra in the mirror and screams with

fright. At once, she shuts the box and pushes it away. Then she gently touches his wounds and finds his blood cold and advises him not to meander in cold weather and ruin his health. Rani fails to understand the reality because of her innocence, immaturity and inexperience.

Rani is totally ignorant of sex also. She feels that sex is mean and sinful. After the love - making, she goes to a corner and starts weeping feeling that she has committed some sin. The Naga explains to her that sex is natural and enjoyable but not sinful but he fails to convince her. She expresses her discontent when he leaves, he repeats his order that she should not ask why his behaviour at night is different from that during the day. She accepts it like a dumb animal.

Kappanna and his mother Kurudavva come in the morning. Kappanna is delighted to see Appanna(Naga) thinking that the magic root has worked. She speaks to Rani. They fail to understand how Appanna has gone out while the lock is still there. Kappanna sees a cobra coming out of the house. Kurudavva instructs Rani to block the drain to prevent the entry of reptiles. Appanna comes and he finds the dog dead. Rani is also surprised to see that there was no wound on his face she has healed at night. After lunch, Appanna goes out and brings a mongoose to keep a watch on Rani. The mongoose gives a tough fight to the Cobra before dying. Naga does not visit Rani for fifteen days due to his injuries. When he comes back after fifteen days, his body is totally covered with deep wounds. Rani is surprised to see that Appanna has no such wounds at night but she has no courage to ask any question.

Naga continues visiting Rani regularly curing her of frigidity with delicacy, endurance, and fondness. Rani, too, starts enjoying the pleasures of love. Rani becomes pregnant and thinks that she has conceived for her husband. Neither the naga nor Appanna is happy with the news. Naga, he is not happy because Rani's pregnancy can reveal his identity. He advises her to keep it secret from him as long as possible. Rani is too much confused at this type of behaviour of her husband. When Appanna

(the actual husband) comes to know about Rani's pregnancy, he is furious. He curses and kicks her.

Appanna is not ready to accept Rani's virtuousness. He drags her out and tries to throw a huge stone at her to smash her illegitimate child to be born. Now, the Cobra comes out and hisses loudly. Appanna throws the stone at the snake, which escapes into the ant-hill. He then goes out to request the Village Elders to sit in judgment and punish her. That night Naga comes and Rani asks him with flood of tears in her eyes: Naga says, "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 is not even a rope in this house for me to use (53). He advises her to take snake ordeal. He assures that everything will be all right and her husband will become her slave. She will get all she has ever wanted.

The village elders sit in judgment and Rani swears that she has not touched anyone except her husband and the Cobra, nor has she allowed any male to touch her. If I lie, let the Cobra bite me (58). The Cobra does not bite her, but slides up her shoulder and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head. The crowd is stunned, while the Elders declare her a Devi, a divine being (59). This shows that how the society can make a goddess of a woman but does not allow her to live like a human being.

Rani gives birth to a beautiful son, but Appanna is aware that he is not the father of the child. He is not convinced of Rani's chastity. The Cobra unable to bear separation ties a stress on Rani's hair round its neck and strangles itself to death hiding in her hair. The dead Cobra falls to the ground when Appanna combs her hair. Rani, who now understands all about the Cobra, wishes him to be cremated by their son and rite to be performed to commemorate the Cobra's death. Appanna agrees to the wishes of Rani as he regards her the goddess incarnate. "Rani: (Almost to herself) A Cobra. It has to be ritually cremated. Can you grant me a favor? Certainly. When we cremate this snake, the fire should be lit by our son. As you say." (63)

Thus, in Nagamandala, the human and non-human worlds enter into one another's lives to expose the playwright's vision of reality. A number of Indian habits and beliefs are reflected in Karnad's plays. Karnad has deployed all devices used with the folk-tale and mythic patterns, like the imputations of superhuman qualities to humans and non-humans, the use of magic elements, extraordinary ordeals. The flames, the Naga taking Appanna's form, the magic roots, the imputation of divinity to a woman - all confirm to the needs of folk-tale and myth. The play appropriately seems a re-mythification of the Ahalya myth. In Valmiki's Ramayana, Ahalya commits adultery knowingly but the folk mind equates Ahalya with the chaste women and therefore cannot allow her to sin deliberately. So, Indra is shown to have perpetrated a fraud on her by impersonating her husband Rishi Gautam. In NagaMandala too, Rani is innocent. It is Naga in the form of her husband Appanna who makes love to her. She thinks that she bears her husband's child and does not suspect Naga's identity until the very end.

By enduring Naga with the feelings of genuine love and making him in the process the sorrowing lover whose cruel mistress is Rani, Karnad de-mythicalizes the husband-wife marital love and re-mythicalizes the beauty-beast myth. Realizing that he can no longer assume Appanna's form and as a snake could not have a human mistress, he decided to end his life so that his lover might live in happiness. Naga stands for the sub-human world while Appanna, for the human world. The pleasant world provides peace, security and happiness which Rani finds in Naga's company. The demonic world brings loneliness, separation, humiliation, pain and the threat of more pain which she gets in the company of her Husband. Naga's dark animal world provides peace and joy whereas Appanna's bright human world brings pain and humiliation to her This presents the inversion of the romance tradition. Romance also presents a polarization of the two worlds that permits a transit from one to the other. By the end of the play Rani has traveled a long route from innocence to experience. She has acquired the role of rule maker and has learned to blend her feminine behavior, attributes and traits with those

of a woman of a woman ruled family. When she finds the dead Naga in her hair, she has acquired enough cunning to successfully persuade her husband to allow her son to perform the last rites for Naga, as a father is entitled to receive from his son. The scope of Nagamandala extends beyond feminism into patriarchy.

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