

'MYTHS', 'LEGENDS' AND 'FOLKLORE' IN GIRISH KARNAD'S NAGA-MANDALA

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Abstract

People often consider the words 'myth' and 'legend' synonyms. In literature these words are used interchangeably. In fact, there is a minute unapparent demarcation line in the inherent meaning of these words. It is said that myths are stories based on traditions which are transmitted through generations. They are about gods, demi-gods or supernatural humans, and explicate natural and historical events. In fact, myths are more than stories. They interpret and exemplify ancient culture and correlate it with contemporary culture. They abridge generation gap. Myths answer timeless questions and serve as a compass to each generation. Jnanpith, Padma Shree and Padma Bhushan laureate Girish Karnad is a significant name in the Indian literary scenario. He established himself as a talented and authoritative dramatist after the publication of Yayati (1961) and Tughlaq (1964). Most of his plays are peculiarized and characterized by myths and folktales. This paper is an attempt to analyze the amalgamation of myths, legends and folklore in Naga- Mandala of Girish Karnad.

Key Words- Myths, Legends, Folklore, Tradition, Amalgamation

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Introduction

Indian English authors, particularly dramatists, were looking for new ways to express themselves. Folk stories, mythology, and incidents from epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata all helped them out brilliantly. Professional companies in Karnataka and Maharashtra began staging legendary plays in the late 1800s. A myth is a narrative, a storey, or a saga of superhuman will, fortitude, and power that has been passed down down the generations by word of mouth and written down by poets who have changed the topic as it suited their needs. Karnad frequently bases his plays on tales from Indian mythology. Myths and stories have a long history throughout the world. Basically, myth deals with gods, goddesses, demigods and supernatural beings. On the contrary, legends consist of a story featuring human beings. Legends are a mixture of fact and fiction and provide some moral lesson. Major Sanskrit epics of ancient India, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are considered to be the basic sources of Indian mythological heritage. Similarly, Kathasaritsagar (ocean of the stories of stream) is a popular and monumental collection of legends, which deal with the material aspect of life. In spite of this theoretical difference, myth and legends go side by side in literature. They are interdependent and support each other. Their interlacing is inseparable.

Indra Nath Chouduri affirms that

"... myths are one of the segment which serve to determine the Indianness in our literature"

Jung points out:

"myths and legends embody themselves in the form of motifs and symbols, certain recurring patterns of collective human behavior and certain archetypal human

experiences. Myths express certain archetypal social relationships. These relationships could be of father and son, husband and wife, or of brothers. Secondly myths have the power to affect us even without our being aware of it."

Encyclopedia Britannica Volume VII states:

"myth fulfills in primitive culture an indispensable function, it expresses, enhances and codifies belief: it safeguards and enforces morality, it vouches for the efficiency of rituals and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization, it is not an idle tale but a hard-worked active force, it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but pragmatic character of primitive faith and moral wisdom."

Folklore is said to be the expressive body of culture shared by a particular society. It is an oral history preserved by the people of a large society. Folklore is a broad term. It includes ancient myths, legends, fairytales, folk-art and folk-dance, riddles etc. Folklore has no author as such. It just emerges from cultural traditions and is carried forward by incessant and perpetual telling and retelling. In other words, folklore is a description of culture which has been passed down verbally from generation to generation. Myths and legends are vital constituents of folklore.

Padam Shree and Padma Bhushan laureate and Jnanpith awardee Girish Karnad is a prominent playwright, actor, director and translator of post-independence India. The paper discusses the amalgamation of 'myths', 'legends' and 'folklore' in Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala*.

Naga- Mandala

The story of Naga-Mandala is based on Kannad folklore which Karnad heard from poet and academician A. K. Ramanujan. This type of stories is told by women while they fed children in kitchen. The play Naga- Mandala has four narrative levels. The frame story contains three other stories. Each of them is entangled with the previous one. The frame story tells us that there was an author whose plays were so boring and monotonous that audience often went to sleep. For this 'crime' author is condemned to death, unless he manages to remain awake for one entire night before the end of one month. Tonight is the last chance for him. The second and the third narratives contain mythical elements. The second narration is a

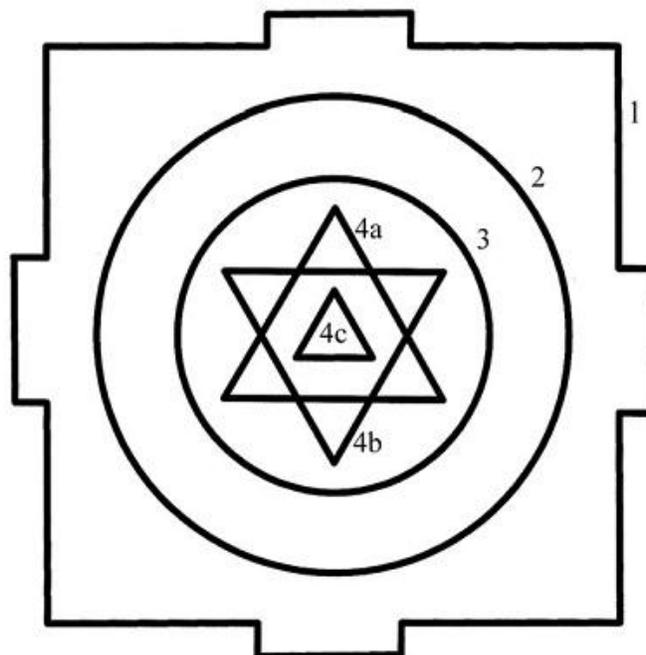
gossiping among the personified giggling flames. They gather in the same ruined temple where author is lamenting his predicament. The flames gather there at night after getting rid of their work and share each other's story. When the author sees them, he hides himself behind a column and hears their stories carefully. The third narration level is a tale told by one of the flames who arrives late due to some reason. Her unique tale is about a woman who knew an interesting story but refused to share it with other people. One day, when the woman was sleeping and snoring, the story ironically escapes and transforms into a beautiful young lady, and the song, which accompanied it, turns into her beautiful sari. The fourth narrative level is the story of Rani, the protagonist of the play. Rani born out of the story escaped from old hag's mouth. As the main story begins, the complex turns out in the structure of the story. The author-narrator of the first level, who has been listening to the second and the third narrative levels, established a dialogue with the story teller of the third level and he suggests a name for the masculine character of the central story. The name is Appana means 'any man'. Furthermore, they reach an agreement by which the author promises to re-tell the story, thus keeping it alive. Veena Noble Dass states: "This play is based on folk tale and it is interesting to observe that the serpent forms as important ingredient in most narratives all over the world"

The plot of the central story, the story of Rani, can be summarized as follows: young Rani, recently married to Appana, is locked inside the house by her husband who treats her as a servant. He regularly goes to a courtesan and return in the night only. An old blind woman Kurudavva, who is always carried around by her son Kappana, tries to help Rani by giving her a magical root. She instructs Rani to cook and serve it to Appana with food. With the magical effect of the root, he will fall in love with Rani, she explains. Rani cooks the root and makes a potion (curry), but did not serve it to Appana. She pours it on the ant-hill, which is the dwelling place of king cobra. As a result of it, the king cobra falls in love with Rani. He enters the house through the drain in the bathroom at night and takes on the appearance of Appana. Thus the cobra meets Rani everynight. It results in the pregnancy of Rani. When Appana comes to know that Rani is pregnant, he informs the elders of the village about the infidelity of his wife, as he never had sexual relations with her. Rani proves her innocence by undertaking the 'snake ordeal'. Surprisingly, instead of biting her, the cobra slides up her

shoulder and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head. The people present there are awe struck. They all accept Rani as 'goddess' and Appana too accepts her as his wife.

The characters of the main story, mentioned above, develop on the fourth narrative level. They seem to be in the two groups having three interrelated characters in each. One group is of Rani- Appana- Naga and the second is of Rani- Kurudavva- Kappana. Thus, each group forms a triangle, and both the triangles are intermingled. According to the science of Indian Symbolism, the intersection of two triangles, one pointing upwards and another pointing downwards, indicate the union and oneness of 'Shiva' and 'Shakti'. In Indian mythology too, the intermingled triangles symbolize the union of male and female. A third triangle also can be visualized inside the other two, to represent the three endings that the play offers.

Furthermore, by considering the setting and structure of the play and taking in account the different narrative levels Indian mythology and symbolism inherent in the stories, the whole play can be encompassed in a complete mandala in graphic form-



Graphic representation of the play Nāga-Mandala

1.- Square. Base of the ruined temple

- 2.- First circle. Ring of the Flames
- 3.- Second circle. Acoustic wave of the song
- 4a.- Upward triangle: Kurudavva-Rani-Appana
- 4b.- Downward triangle: Appana-Rani-Cobra
- 4c.- Inner triangle: The triple endings of the play

S. Govindappa in his research paper has rightly explained that –

“The graphic mandala represents the four different narrative levels of the play. The outer square signifies the base of the ruined temple which symbolizes the reconstruction of the ruined temple in the further progress of the play. The first circle inside the square represents the flames of the second narrative level and the second represents the acoustic wave of the song which is materialized into a beautiful sari wrapped around the young bride who is the personification of the story of the third narrative level. The two intertwined triangles represent the relation between the supreme consciousness and the creative force. The innermost triangle at the center stands for the three endings of the play. The graphic representation of this play Nagamandala, which comprises of the geometrical figures such as a square, the circles and the triangles complement each other and lead to the required balance of the centrifugal and centripetal forces of a mandala.”

The play has three endings. The first ending resembles the endings of fairy tales. Rani, after proving her innocence spectacularly, is considered and worshipped as an incarnation of a goddess. Appana accept her as his wife and forgets about his concubine, who gladly becomes Rani’s maid servant. This type of ending often happens in folktales and fairytales. This ending seems to be very loose, Appana never had sexual relations with Rani, who is expecting a child. Still he accepts Rani as his wife because the villagers have declared her as ‘Mother-Goddess’. One more question arises here. Rani has come to know that the person with whom she had sexual relations was not her husband. In spite of this fact she is not feeling guilty. So, the first ending doesn’t seem to be palatable.

The second ending includes the suspicion of Appana and the state of mind of the cobra. After realizing the fact that Rani loves someone else, he wants to sacrifice himself. He hides in the abundant hair of Rani and dies. Here, the flames do not seem to be happy because of the death of the cobra. Hence the author- narrator of the story decides to change the climax of

the play by making the re-appearance of Rani and Appana. This time, when cobra falls from Rani's hair, he is alive. Frightened Appana thinks to kill the cobra but Rani saved him by letting him hide in hair again. She explains Appana that the cobra has escaped. The play ends with these emotional words of Rani:

"This hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss. Live in there happily forever" (Naga-Mandala)

The third ending of the play may not be accepted by many Indian critics. In Indian culture

"marriage is considered as the supreme boon for a woman as it offers her salvation through her service to her husband"

In fact, Karnad in this play projects the position of Rani as a metaphor for a situation of a young girl in a joint family, where she sees her husband only in two connected roles, as a stranger in the day and as a lover in the night.

In the words of Satya Dev Dubey-

"Girish Karnad is the only playwright in the history of Indian Theatre to have treated adultery as normal and treated adulterous woman sympathetically."

In the Indian mythological and cultural tradition, snake is an image of vital energy of cosmos. It symbolizes fertility and the process of development in human beings. The protagonist of the play, Rani, symbolically shows her emotional relationship with cobra (snake) by letting it to live happily in her abundant hair. This signifies her vital energy as well as her conscious level aroused after her sexual awakening. Thus, the cobra has given her chance to choose and achieve liberation. Moreover, snakes (Nagas) are frequently portrayed as charming man or half- man and half reptile in different mythological and folktales. Karnad has aptly and conveniently used all available beliefs rooted in the psyche of Indian folk. In this context, it is noticeably significant that the title of the play comes from 'Naga' a non- human character. The snake ordeal of Rani reminds us of the fire ordeal of Sita in the Ramayana, Similarly, the magical root given to Rani by Kurudavva also reminds us of Kunti of the Mahabharata, who was given a special boon of conceiving the pregnancy with the help of reciting some special hymns by a well-known saint Durvasa. Kunti shares her boon with Madri. Karnad has reproduced this instance of Kunti and Madri in another form of Kurudavva and Rani.

In this way Girish Karnad has very successfully assimilated different myths, legends, beliefs and supernatural elements in his play *Naga-Mandala*. To wind up, we may briefly conclude that Girish Karnad has uniquely and fruitfully, amalgamated and assimilated the myth, legend and folklore in his play *Naga-Mandala*.

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