

PRESENTATION OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS BY EXPERIMENTING MYTHICAL ELEMENTS IN GIRISH KARNAD'S NAGA-MANDALA

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Abstract

Girish Karnad's Naga-Mandala is an attack on the patriarchal social system. It depicts women's condition in society. The character of Rani represents those women who are treated as objects by their husbands. Karnad has used mythical elements—a cobra with supernatural power, magical roots, and ordeals to prove one's sin or virtue. This research paper studies how Karnad presents the social problems like women's exploitation and superstitions by applying such mythical elements. Karnad gives the picture of men-class who does not consider a woman's feelings, but the superstitions in them make her a Goddess.

Keywords: Patriarchal System, Superstitions, Indian Mythology, and Experimenting Myths

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Introduction:

Naga-Mandala was originally written in Kannada in 1988 by Girish Karnad. It was later translated into English in 1990. The main female character, Rani, is not treated as a wife by her husband. He locks her in the house. An old woman Kurudavva gives her roots for the help that it will create love in her husband for her. But, the plot of the story is twisted so that a cobra falls in love with Rani. Cobra takes the form of Appanna (who is called Naga in the play) and loves her. When Rani's husband realizes this, he considers it as her extra-marital affair. He makes her face an ordeal. Despite the logical things, Rani is regarded as a Goddess as she succeeds in the ordeal of a cobra.

Cobra with Supernatural Power

In Indian mythology, snakes are shown with supernatural powers. Some people believe in God Naga. They also believe that a cobra/snake with its divine power can take the shape of a man (woman, in the case of the female snake).

In *Naga-Mandala*, a cobra lives on an ant hill in front of the house of the couple (Rani and Appanna). It is lured by the root, when Rani pours the curry, which is mixed with a paste of the root, on the ant-hill. It feels love for Rani and follows her into the house. It takes the form of Rani's husband. For dramatic convenience, the name 'Naga' stands for cobra when it is in the form of Appanna. It is hard for Rani to conform to two personalities— one, Appanna who comes only at noon; two, Naga (in the form of Appanna) who comes only at night. Rani even questions why her husband is behaving differently at different times. But as in the patriarchal system woman's mouth

is easily closed, Naga discards her questions by simply saying that she shouldn't ask such questions. Here, Rani, as a typical Indian woman, has to accept what her husband expects. The result of this is that Rani becomes pregnant from Naga. When her pregnancy is exposed, the real Appanna does not accept this. He beats her as he knows he never touched his wife. He calls the villagers to expose her sinful act of having an extra-marital affair (in his view). Rani is greatly confused with this reaction of Appanna as she knows no sin in being pregnant. In this condition, Naga comes ahead to help. He insists on Rani that she should take the ordeal of cobra when villagers ask to choose one. By this, he wants to save Rani from the harms she may get from other ordeals.

Reflection in Mirror

There is another one myth in the relation of such cobra (with divine Power) that one can see the real image of the cobra when one finds its reflection in the mirror. After the fight with the dog, the cobra gets injured. The injuries appear on the shoulder and face even after the cobra changes into the form of Appanna. Rani has to apply ointment on the injuries. She goes to take the ointment from her mirror box. Naga (cobra) tries to take her away before she can see his reflection in the mirror. However, Rani sees the real image of Naga in the mirror and screams in fear. She sees the cobra sitting on the same place where, as she thinks, her husband is sitting. However, she is not allowed to ask more questions; she remains quiet.

Mentioning the name of Cobra

There is a belief in some Indian people that if they mention the name 'cobra', especially, at the time of night, the cobra comes to their houses.

In Naga Mandala, Rani and Naga discuss the matter of cobra. Rani does not mention the name cobra', but mimes a hood of a cobra with her fingers, But Naga utters the word 'cobra'. Rani alarms him to be silent, saying: "Shh! Don't mention it. They say that if you mention it by name at night, it comes into the house" (Naga, Mandala-23). As Naga mentions the name again, she

questions why he is tempting fate (cobra's arrival in their house) by calling the name of that 'unmentionable thing'. The dramatic irony is that the cobra is already present in the form of Appanna before her.

Magical Roots

In Indian mythology, magical roots are used to tempt one to fulfill one's purpose. In *Naga-Mandala*, Rani's husband does not love her. Kurudavva gives Rani the root (herb) and says to mix it in Appanna's meal. It will make him tempted with love for Rani. To ensure Rani, Kurudavva tells Rani her own story of how she got the roots from a mendicant for the same purpose. Once, she mixed the paste of the root in the meal and gave it to a young boy (her relative guest). He fell in love and married, too, to her. Kurudavva believes that the root will be useful for Rani, in the same manner. She says:

Here. Take this smaller piece (of root). That should do for a pretty Jasmine like you. Take it! Grind it into a nice paste and feed it to your husband and watch the results. Once he smells you he won't go sniffing after that bitch (concubine). He will make you a wife instantly. (*Naga-Mandala*, 13)

Rani gives that root in milk to Appanna. Appanna faints, but goes as if nothing happened to him. For the second time, Kurudavva gives Rani a larger piece of root. Rani makes a paste of the root and mixes it in curry. But the curry becomes so red that she fears it may be dangerous to Appanna's life. She is a typical Indian woman who cares for her husband's life, whereas the husband does not care if his wife lives or dies and how she suffers due to his disregarding her. Rani dismisses her plan of giving that root in-curry to her husband. She says to herself: "Suppose something happens to my husband? What will my fate be? That little piece made him ill. Who knows...? No, no. Forgive me, God. This is evil. I was about to commit a crime. Father, mother, how could I, your daughter, agree to such a heinous act?" (*Naga-Mandala*, 17).

Rani pours the curry on the ant hill. But it creates another trouble. The cobra inside is affected by that curry in which the root is mixed. The cobra falls in love with Rani. To make love with her it changes itself into the Appanna's form.

Ordeals

In Indian mythology, there are ordeals which are believed as tests for proving ones crime or Innocence. It is supposed that if one passes the ordeal successfully without getting any harm, it means the person is innocent. And, if the person is harmed in the ordeal, it is considered the person is lying; and will be punished.

In *Naga-Mandala*, when Appanna realizes that Rani is pregnant. He considers it an immoral act as he knows he has never touched Rani. He calls the villagers to punish her. The elders give Rani three options of ordeal— to plunge her hand in boiling oil, to hold a red-hot iron rod, and to hold a cobra in her hand. While facing the ordeal the person has to swear that he/she is innocent.

Rani fears the snake ordeal and prefers the other two. But looking at Kurudavva's condition, she realizes her own. Death seems better than life to her, as her husband is calling her bad names accusing her of the sinful act of having an extra-marital affair. So, she does not fear the death. She accepts the snake ordeal and plunges her hand into the ant-hole. She swears holding the cobra in her hand: "Since coming to this village, I have held by this hand, only two.....My husband... And this Cobra... Except for these two, I have not touched any one of the male sex. Not have I allowed any other male to touch me. If I lie, let the Cobra bite me" (*Naga-Mandala-39*).

In a sense, Rani is true, for she does not know about cobra's supernatural power and its secret love with her. She simply thinks that she has no incestuous relationship outside of marriage. Cobra does not do any harm to Rani. It spreads its hood over Rani's head. This makes elder people, who put Rani on trial, think it was an unordinary incident. One of them says:

"Appanna, your wife is not an ordinary woman. She is a goddess incarnate. Don't grieve that you judged her badly. That is how goddesses reveal themselves to the world"(*Naga-Mandala*, 40). Here, the elder affirms that Rani is Goddess incarnate; but, on the other hand, he does not regret that they (including Appanna) treated her badly. Conveniently, the elder village judge escapes the men from their wrongdoings with women.

Conclusion

In the present time, scientific-minded people do not believe in the myths like that of cobra and roots as shown in the play, *Naga-Mandala*. The matter of ordeals is acceptable part that people are so superstitious and foolish to make a mal-treated woman even the Goddess. However, Karnad successfully makes use of mythical elements in his play to present social problems. The story of Rani, a woman exploited under patriarchal circumstance, is beautifully interwoven with mythical elements.

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