

## **RANI'S PREDICAMENT IN KARNAD'S *NAGA-MANDALA***

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Girish Karnad, a Rhodes Scholar, writes plays in Kannada and then transliterates them into English. He has been composing plays for more than four decades now. His role in the revival of Modern Indian playwrighting has been substantial. He is also active in the world of Indian cinema working as an actor, director, and screenwriter, in Hindi and Kannada films, earning awards along the way. He was born into a Konkani speaking, Saraswat Brahmin family, in Maharashtra. Yet he neither writes in Konkani, his mother tongue, nor does he write in English, the language he dreamed of earning literary fame as a poet. He writes in his adopted language Kannada.

Karnad draws his themes from historical and mythological sources. He also incorporates folk tales and gives them a modern touch. 'Yakshagana', the traditional folk theatre of Karnataka, has been a vital influence on him. His childhood exposure to street plays in Karnataka villages and his familiarity with western dramas staged in Bombay, have induced him to retell the secular legends of India to suit the modern context. Influence of Bertolt Brecht and Epic theatre are obvious in his plays.

Epic theatre, which flourished in 1920's is in direct contrast to 'Aristotelian' theatre. The spectator does not connect with the characters instead, he/she has to stand back and observe the characters. Karnad employs folk tales in an attempt to instill an alienation effect. His characters go through psychological and philosophical conflicts.

After a careful perusal of Karnad's plays, it becomes clear that he deals with gender issues also, though not as an out and out feminist like Henrik Ibsen. Karnad deals with patriarchal issues and oppression of women's issues, but he is doing this within the social norms of Indian society. Issues of the present world find their parallels in the myths and fables of the past, giving new meanings and insights reinforcing the theme.

In his first play *Yayati*, Karnad weaves a story around the mythical story of the *Mahabharata*. Patriarchal norms of the society, expect women to surrender to the will of the male decision-makers without protest. This aspect is dealt deftly by Karnad. The concept of chastity and innocence are also explored here as well as, in Karnad's play '*Naga-Mandala*'.

The playwright artistically mingles myth and folktale, in *Naga-Mandal* to bring out the predicament of Indian women, through the protagonist of the play, Rani. By using only parts of the myth and merging them with his imagination Karnad brings a touch of modernity and contemporality to his plays. The tale of Rani and Naga may be myth but Rani's predicament is universal. Rani represents the traditional Indian women, who has to live up to the image of Sita.

Karnad first heard this folk tale from the poet and academic A.K. Ramanujan, several years ago. It is based on two oral tales from Karnataka. Karnad wrote the play, when he was in Chicago as a visiting professor at University of Chicago. These tales are normally told by older women while children are being fed or being put to bed. These serve as a parallel system of communication among the women in the family. Karnad gives this piece of information in his 'Introduction' to 'Three Plays'.

Characters like Story, Man, Flames come in the prologue and fade into the background in Act I. Further they return to centre-stage in the Epilogue. It is the protagonist, Rani, with whom the audiences' sympathies would lie. She becomes the epitome of loneliness and suffers at the hands of a dominant, ununderstanding and callous husband. Rani makes up fictional stories to keep

herself occupied and fill her loneliness. Rani's predicament poignantly unravels the human tendency to live by illusions, fictions and half-truth.

As in another play by Karnad, *Hayavadana*, in *Naga-Mandala* too, it is found to present triangular relationships. While in *Hayavadana* two different forms merge into one by transposition of heads – Devadatta and Kapila, in *Naga-Mandala*, two different experiences are brought about by the same form – Appanna and Naga.

At the surface, it is a simple story of a young girl, Rani, 'the Queen of the long tresses', who is married to cruel and indifferent Appanna. The name 'Rani' ridicules at the Indian ideal of womanhood as the Rani or Lakshmi of the household. Appanna locks her in the house and goes to visit his mistress. Kurudavva, the blind old woman, sympathises with Rani and gives her a love-portion which is supposed to help Rani lure back her husband. Ironically, this portion is savored by Naga, the Cobra and it is Naga who is lured into loving the beautiful Rani. Nagas have been believed to be Shape-Shifters. Naga, here takes the form of Appanna and visits Rani every night. Thus unknowingly Rani loves Naga in the form of Appanna. After several months all hell breaks loose, when Appanna finds Rani is pregnant and an ordeal is arranged by the village elders, where Rani has to prove her innocence and her chastity. Rani takes the snake ordeal and proves her purity. She is turned into a demigoddess. So this on the surface of it, is a simple story. Yet, at a deeper level it brings about many complex questions on moral social norms and the patriarchal values.

Appanna, himself visits a concubine, and walks scot free, while Rani is asked to prove her purity. Rani is shut up and has no company. She feels hurt and humiliated and longs for her parents' company. To compensate for her loneliness she slips into fantasies. She fancies to be a princess who is held captive by a demon and a whale comes to her rescue. With the help of Kurudavva's love portion, which has no effect on Appanna, the first time, Rani finds love in Naga, who is love-struck by the same love portion, which Rani had discarded because it turned blood-red the second time over. Naga is everything

that Appanna is not. Naga is caring and loving. He is able to win Rani's love through his soft words and gentle behavior. He is in direct contrast to the cruel Appanna. Appanna behaves like a wild beast in treating Rani, while Naga, though a beast is able to win over Rani.

Rani is not able to voice her problems with Appanna. He wants her to comply with what she is asked to do, without question. This is the general rule of patriarchal society. The women of the family have to blindly accept the orders from the male members. She has no say whatsoever in the decision making process. So when Naga comes to her at night and eases all her discomfort Rani is not able to accept it. She is not able to believe it and expects all this to be a dream, an illusion. Naga is able to free her of all her inhibitions and allows her to grow into a beautiful mature personality. By the end of the play, a different picture of Rani is unraveled, where she is able to take her own decisions. She allows Naga to live in her tresses without the knowledge of Appanna, which is something of an empowerment, considering the Rani in the earlier part of the play. In the alternate end to the play suggested by the playwright, the snake does not die. The lover is always present; he lives with her, within the family. The danger to male authority as a husband and patriarch lives on constantly at close quarters but mostly within the woman's imagination.

Krishanamayi quotes: "In the dramatic world of Karnad, women, within and without wedlock, are subjected to various forms of deprivation, humiliation, violence and torture in almost every walk of life in one way or the other. The playwright not only exposes the arbitrariness of the system where women are considered as "second sex," "other," "non- persona" but also questions the way women are socialized to internalize the reigning hegemonic ideology and degrade their own position to perpetuate the on-going subordination and subjugation. Man who is ruled by the mastery-motive has imposed her limits on her. She accepts it because of biosocial reasons."

It is also an irony that Appanna who has an affair outside matrimony, calls for the village elders to try the case of Rani on the grounds of infidelity.

Appanna's violent reaction to his wife's infidelity does not make him consider for a moment his infidelity towards her. The other villagers also ignore this lapse on his part but they emphasize the institution of marriage and the procreative function of the couple. The importance of the family and progeny are established. Appanna represents the hypocritical patriarchal society which questions Rani's chastity and ignores the validity of Appanna's illicit relationship. In Indian myth, a miracle has been mandatory to establish the purity of a woman. A man's mere word is taken for the truth. Paradoxically, Rani is able to prove her chastity only by including the cobra (Naga) in her revelation of truth.

"I have held by this hand only two...

my husband and ...

and this Cobra is the second one."

After this revelation the Cobra slides up her shoulder and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head. Rani is deified as a Goddess. Immediately the society divinizes her for her supreme powers and capacity and expresses guilt in putting her through the ordeal. It is through the snake which is worshiped for fertility that Rani conceived and it is this point in her life, that brought a complete change. Snake led to affect lives of many and redefines many relations in the play, especially of Rani and Appana.

Finally, Karnad tries to press upon the mind of the reader to make their own judgments. The two endings of the play and the participation of the audience in the form of the Man, allow the playwright to deepen the symbolic meaning. Symbolism is galore in this play which mingles myth, reality, folk tale and illusion. A blend of all these, make the play complex and sets the ball rolling to question important social norms of society.

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