

Nagamandal: An Analysis of Patriarchal Notions in Indian Society.

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Abstract: *Nagamandal* is one of the most significant plays by Girish Karnad. It is also one of the most notable milestones in Indian English drama. The play has a dexterous blending of myth, ritual and imaginative writing, making most artistic use of the popular modes of theatre and serious playwriting; thereby making an analysis of the social situation of the times.

Keywords: Indian Society, Patriarchal, Myth, Playwriting.

Introduction: *Nagamandal* is based on two oral tales Karnad has heard from A. Ramanujan. These tales are narrated by Women-normally the older women in the family-while children are being fed in the evenings in the Kitchen or being put to bed. The other adults present on these occasions are also women. These tales often serve as a parallel system of communication among the women in the family. They also express a distinct woman's understanding of the reality around her, a linked counterpoint to the patriarchal structures of classical texts and institutions. This makes the play, close to the reality which is part of the readers and the audiences lived life, As Ramanujan puts it:

Even in a large modern city like Bombay, Madras or Calcutta, even in Western-style nuclear families with their planned 2.2 children, folklore...is only a suburb away, a cousin or a grandmother away.(50)

Karnad's play not merely delineates a facet of Indian social life, but also diagnoses some social evil or the other in a most artistic manner. Here the focus is on the lives of men and women in diverse relationships, bringing out the patriarchal ethos which sets the tone in inter-personal relationships. In such a dispensation, women inevitably are at the receiving end. Not merely do characters like Kurudavva and Rani all shown as suffering, it is through other beings like flames and story too that the warped perspective has been brought out. An in depth

analysis of the play reveals the delineation of the patriarchal social order which undermines the position of women in the community.

Rani's predicament in the play can be taken as a metaphor for the fate of most women in a traditional patriarchal society like India's. A young bride in a joint family interacts with her husband in two absolutely divergent ways. During the day he conducts himself as a total stranger, while at night he functions as ardent lover. The locked house in which Rani is confined during the day may well be taken as indicative of wedlock which has virtually imprisoned her. Even when regarded in its bare essentials, Rani's take could be that of any Indian girl- living in her parent's place and then one fine morning being married off to a stranger and shifting to his place. The locked house can be taken as indicative of her not being allowed to have any contacts with anybody without the consent of her husband.

Rani: I would merely lie here, my eyes shut tight. What is there to see after all ? The same walls. The same roof. As the afternoon passed. My whole being got focused in my ears. The bells of cattle returning home-that means it is late afternoon. The cacophony of birds in a far-away tree it is sunset..”

Karnad has very radically exposed the patriarchal notion about the requirement of chastity in women. Rani, being accused of unfaithfulness by her husband, has to prove her chastity before the village elders. That is another corollary of the hold of patriarchal affecting the position of women adversely, obviously a man is not required to prove his 'chastity' or 'purity'. Rani proves her innocence not by challenging the elders and exposing her husband's indifference and lack of faithfulness to her. He is openly having a regular affair with a concubine. She proves her chastity through subterfuge, though unwittingly. The Naga advises her to take the 'snake-test' rather than the fire test. The same Cobra who had given her this advice (in the outer form of Appanna). Crawls on her hand and shoulders, leaving her unharmed. There is great irony in Rani's remark that she has touched only two males, '*my husband and this king Cobra*'. Karnad through Elder III brings out the absurdity of patriarchal insistence on purity in case of women.

Elder III: The traditional test in our village court has been to take the oath while holding a red-hot iron in the hand. Occasionally, the accused has chosen to plunge the hand in boiling oil.

Chastity is a value invented by patriarchal culture and accepted by woman .it is one of the most powerful yet invisible cultural fetters that have enslaved woman for ages since the dawn of patriarchy .There has been enough literature ,both oral and written ,glorifying this and enslaving value and deifying the women characters who observed it faithfully .Srilatha Batliwala supports the view .“Since the beginning of civilization ,every society has lived by certain values and beliefs which are cleverly transformed into immutable truth.In reality ,these ideologies are specifically created and disseminated to justify the inequalities and injustices of prevailing social structure ,and thus protect the rights and privileges of the powerful .

Nagamandal deals in a very subtle manner with the notion of female space and the irrepressible need for women to speak out. Feminists like Virginia Wolf ‘A room of One’s own’ and Elaine Show alter in her essays talk about women being denied the space to realize themselves. They do not have even an opportunity to express themselves or even a language which can give words to their feelings and aspirations. The play talks about the nature of tales through the narration of tales. The flames convey indirectly the playwright’s comments on the paradoxical nature of oral talks. These tales have an existence of their own which is not dependent on the teller. Nevertheless the talks line only when they are passed on from the narrator of the tale to the listener of the tale. As evident from the play;

Story: You can’t just listen to the strong and leave it at that. You must tell it again someone else.

Man : That I certainly shall ,if I live .but first I must be alive to That reminds me . I have a condition ,too.

One can therefore argue that a tale is in a position similar to that of a daughter who is not expected to say at home permanently. She has to be passed on to her husband. Thus a narrator and a naratee have relationship like that of a girl and her husband. This ironic parallel is in the subtext of the play and obviously comments on the operation of patriarchy.

Karnad has depicted another dimension of patriarchy by feminine personification of flames. The flames are shown gossiping like typical village woman. They talk of their master, mistresses, their homes and hearth, their affection and concern, loves and hatreds. The stories the flames tell do engage our attention because they show how women have few opportunities of self expression. But Karnad, at the same time, seems to be echoing

the patriarchal contention that women think only of trivial, routine issues of life. They cannot come up with any original thought. As evident from Appanna and Naga's repeatedly contention to Rani saying, 'Do as I tell you'. There by bringing forth man's thinking pattern and attitude towards women:

Naga : (Sadly) I realize it cannot remain a secret for long . That is why I
said , as long as possible .Please , do as I tell you .

Rani : (Blankly) Yes ,I shall .Don't ask questions Do as I tell you .Don't
ask questions . Do as I tell you.No ,I won't ask questions . I shall
do what you tell me .Scowls in the day .Embraces at night . The
face in the morning unrelated to the touch at night but day or
night one motto does not change : Donot ask questions . Do as I
tell you .

Even though the Naga has been presented as a male who is not chauvinist in his thinking, there is a level at which the Naga is not different at all. Like Appanna, the Naga also asks Rani not to ask questions. Appanna goes to his courtesan, leaving his wife locked. He orders his wife what to cook and expects her not to raise any uncomfortable questions. The Naga also functions in a mystifying manner. He would not like Rani to ask why the Naga's shadow is that of a Cobra's ; why does he have scratches on his body? Why does he disappear for days together? Why does he seem so indifferent in the morning but so loving at night. The Naga, in a typically patriarchal manner, would not be questioned by the wife in any way:

Naga: (Seriously) I am afraid that is how it is going to be. Like that during the day.Like this at
night. Don't ask me why.

In another respect too, *Nagamandala* far from exposing patriarchy, reinforces that, Kurudavvas' faithful and obedient sen, Kappanna "*melts away*" all of a sudden. His mother believes that a snake of 'Yaksha' woman has tempted. Kappanna. Rani feels concerned at the plight of the old woman and asks story why the poor mother has to suffer like that.

RANI: Why should she suffer like this ? Would sight have helped? Do desires really reach out from
some world beyond right into our beds?

Hereby Karnad has assigned woman a stereotyped role in keeping with patriarchal and anti-feminist thinking. A woman has been scrutinized/criticized as a *temptress from beyond* and as in the words of Kurudava herself, - perhaps a snake women?

Furthermore, Rani and Kurudavva being women try themselves share anti-feminist thoughts try blaming an assumed female figure for Kappanna's unprecedented going away.

The play highlights another fact of man-woman relationship in orthodox, conservative Indian society. A woman's chastity, fidelity are highly prized though no such concept exists in relation to women. Appanna keeps his newly wed wife, Rani, locked as he goes out to spend the night with his concubine because he could not like her to come in contact with any other person without his consent, when she still becomes pregnant, he immediately jumps to the conclusion that she has had an affair with some other man. The village elders, despite their overall sympathetic attitude, would like her to undergo the usual tests to prove that she has been pure and faithful. Thus, Karnad exposes the hypocrisy of the male-dominated values of Indian society because nobody seems to mind the fact that Appanna himself has been most brazenly unfaithful to his newly wedded wife. Even at the end after Rani's purity has been vindicated, the concubine stays in Appanna's house, though as a maid.

Appanna's violent reaction to his wife's 'infidelity' does not make him consider for a moment his own infidelity towards her. The other villager also ignores 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 over and above personal self-seeking. The husband and wife turned towards each other, with a greater sense of relationship. The girl-bride now becomes the "mother-to-be" and as such receives a social recognition.

This stage of Rani's social integration brings her a new sense of respect as her own worth. This is another significant aspect of the Indian social and cultural life in its treatment of women. In Sudhir Kakkar's words, "an Indian woman knows that motherhood confers upon her a purpose and identity that nothing else in her culture can." (57)

As a mother ,Rani is seen , in the last part of the story , to be in command of the household ,with some authority and decision making power .Appanna even agrees to her rather strange demand that their son should perform an annual “pinda-daan” in the memory of the dead snake .

The playwright has shown woman as dependent shelter, seeking part of the society. They are weaker vessels’ which cannot be on their own. They have to have a male protector. The presentation here tallies with the advice rendered in the Indian scriptures that a woman should be under the protection of her father, husband and son. The sub-plot concerning Kurudavva shows clearly one facet of it. She is wholly dependent on her son, Kappanna, even though her being blind gives some cover of legitimacy to it. When Kappanna disappears, perhaps lured by some snake or Yaksha temptress, as the mother suspects, she is rendered absolutely helpless. Kappanna leaving his mother to live a life of his own with a woman of his choice is understandable from a psychological perspective. But the mothers helpless plight moves Rani and she asks the story why a woman has to suffer like this. This dimension of woman’s portrayal adds a note of poignancy to the subordinate role played far as man-woman relationship and patriarchy is concerned. Love, marriage and any other bond or value governing the relationship is conditioned by this, socio cultural context. Karnad has dealt with patriarchy in a complex manner. At junctures he takes a feminist stance, while at other places he seems to be reinforcing the patriarchal mindset, exposing various social evils, moreover he makes his characters. Carry sociological, cultural and psychological significance.

Karnad ,then , recreates the Indian society in his plays to uncover the layers of false beliefs and practices one after another rigorously and relentlessly .Some critics like A.R. Shukla use the term deconstruction to describe Karnad’s dramatic enterprise . However ,demystification seems to be a much better alternative ; asit does not imply the abyss of endless signification that Derrida has attributed to deconstruction.

One can certainly credit Karnad with the writing of plays which spring from grass root reality. He deals with basic themes and questions which have a direct bearing on the life of the people. As V.K Gokak summarizes that he captures the essence of life. He is committed to a vision of art for life’s sake. His plays not merely delineate a facet of Indian social life but also diagnose some social evil or the other in most artistic manner.

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