



## Feminism in Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala*

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### Abstract

The research paper presents the feminist approach in Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* (1988) in the framework of postcolonial gender analysis. *Naga-Mandala* (1988) addresses the continued uneven power relations between female and male gender. Karnad's female character, Rani, in *Naga-Mandala*, is actually pitiable, downgraded and most importantly an object of patriarchal social, political dominance and authority. The paper postulates Rani as a site of theoretical transformations, engaging the issues of sexuality and power position in relation to the feminism patriarchal Indian state. Later Rani situates a performative self in the text through an interrogatory narrative speech that succeeds in participating in the critique of patriarchal subjectivity and hegemonic feminist positioning while inserting a resistant feminist ideologies into gender discourse to re-envision the role of Indian women in India's development. *Naga-Mandala* presents substantial constituents of feminism. The drama represents the patriarchal ethical enigma which burdens women with fidelity to their husbands but not the loyalty of men to their wives.

Keywords: Oppression, Feminism, Gender issues, Male-dominance, Patriarchy

The main purpose of the research paper is to show how in *Naga-Mandala*(1988), the female protagonist, Rani who in the start of the play is dominated, revolts against the limitation of social customs and eventually upsurges from her important position to a goddess. This study is to establish how Girish Raghunath Karnad (1938-2019) presents the conventional images of women that have always been imposed on them by patriarchy.

Girish Karnad is the foremost playwright of the contemporary stage. He has given the Indian theatre richness that could probably be equated with his talents as actor cum director. He has represented India in foreign lands as an ambassador of art and culture. His plays are staged in theatre all over the world. He is well known writer, playwright, director and actor. In his play *Naga-Mandala* (1988), Karnad offers an insight into the private lives of women. The protagonist is Rani, Right from the beginning the flames that

appear in the prologue of the play represents the metaphorical terms the different lives of the women of the village. The flames gather at mid-night to tell tales about the private lives of couple and rejoice in their findings.

In his drama, Karnad cleverly depicts the state of a representative Indian woman, controlled by the patriarchal order constrained by convention, but whose temperament is uninhibited. Karnad is considered a celebrated Indian film director, actor and a playwright. He performed not only in plays but also in several outstanding films.

*Naga-Mandala* (1988) was primarily composed in Kannada and published in 1990. The drama is an intermingling of mythology and two Kannada folk-tale that Karnad had heard from his intellectual and writer companion, A.K.Ramanujan, Aparna B. Dharwadker enlightens about *Naga-Mandala* (1988) by saying as follows:

The first story about the lamp flames that gather in a village temple to exchange gossip about the households they inhabit, is part of the outer play and gives imaginative expression to the idea of communicative life. The second story, about the woman who was visited by a King Cobra in the form of her husband, is personified in the play as a beautiful, smart and young woman in a sari.

Feminism in India is an award-winning digital intersectional feminist media organisation to learn, educate and develop a feminist sensibility among the youth. It is required to unravel the F-word and demystify the negativity surrounding it. It amplifies the voices of women and marginalised communities using tools of art, media, culture, technology and community. Feminism is carefully presented in most of the plays of Girish Karnad. Karnad very effectively expressed the condition of a typical Indian Female ruled by the patriarchal order bonded by tradition, whose spirit remains unbounded. This issue of the gender bias in society and the oppression of woman by the patriarchal order happen to form an important part of Karnad's plays. Karnad also depicted women entrusted with feminism fighting the unjust norms at the patriarchal order. Actually women's encounter with patriarchy lends the women to death or disaster. In this research paper I would like to study the treatment of female characters in plays of Karnad based on myths.

Karnad has borrowed the myth of Yayati from the 'Adiparva' of the Mahabharata. Yayati retells the age old story of the king who in his longing for external youth does not hesitate to motivate the youth vitality of his son. Karnad takes liberty with the myth and weaves complex things into the plot borrowed from the Mahabharata. To the mythical study of Yayati Karnad adds new characters and changes the story-line so as to deepen its connotative richness which presents it contemporary appeal. In Karnad's Yayati, King Yayati is married to Devyani, an "Aryan" princess and during the course of the play, during the course of the play, develops an illicit relationship, an 'Anarya' and frankly expresses his desire to Puru, here figures as the son of another of the King's spouse, who again like Sharmishtha, comes from the 'Anarya or the 'rakshasa' clan. The two novel characters introduced by Karnad in the plot are Puru's wife Chitralekha and the maid confidant, Swarnalata. Karnad invests new meaning and significance for

contemporary life and reality by exploring the king's motivations. In the Mahabharata, Yayati understands the nature of desire itself and realises that fulfilment neither diminishes nor eliminates desire. In the drama, Karnad makes Yayati confront the horrifying consequences of not being able to relinquish desire.

*Naga-Mandala* is a folktale transformed into the metaphor of the married woman. It is a Chinese's box story with two folktales transformed into one fabric where myth and superstition fact and fantasy, instinct and reason, the particular and the general blend to produce a drama with universal evocations. The predicament of Rani as opposed to the name is deplorable than that of a maid. The name 'Rani' ridicules at the Indian ideal of womanhood as the Rani or Lakshmi of the household.

The woman is portrayed as dependent in all three phases of her life-as a daughter (Rani's dependence on her parents), as a wife (Rani's reliance on Appanna) and, as a mother (Kurudavva's handicap without Kappanna). In Indian society, the woman is said to be complete only after marriage. However, paradoxically she neither belongs to this world or that: her parental home or her husband's abode. For the woman, the home is said to be an expression of her freedom: it is her domain. However, Rani is imprisoned in her own house by her spouse in a routine manner that baffles others with the door locked from the outside. She does not shut the door behind her Nora does in "A Doll's House", but God opens a door in the form of a King Cobra. The king cobra gets seduced by the love potion provided by Kurudavva to Rani to lure, pathetically, her own husband who turns a blind eye to her. The snake assumes the form of a loving Appanna is contrast to the atrocious husband at day. The climax is reached when Rani becomes pregnant and Appanna questions her chastity. Her innocence is proved by virtue of the snake ordeal that the village elders put before her, and she is eventually proclaimed a goddess incarnate.

Appanna is a Metaphor of Male Chauvinism presented in the drama *Naga-Mandala*.

Appanna literally means "any man" and points to the metaphor of man in general, his chauvinistic stance and towering dominance to the extent of suppressing a woman's individuality. Rani endeavours to discover her individuality by seeking refuge in dreams, fairy tales and fantasies to escape the sordid reality of her existence. At an age where the typical fantasy would be a Sultan or prince coming on horseback, Rani's flight of the imagination transports her to aversion to the institution of marriage. Critics show her body as site of "confinement, violence, regulation and communication of the victimized gender-self". And they also point out how she later uses the same body to rebel, to subvert and to negotiate her space in society. Appanna poses her as an adulterous woman whereas he himself has an illicit relationship with a concubine. He and his hypocritical society questions Rani's chastity and side-steps the validity of Appanna's principles. This is just a miniscule cross-section of the patriarchal society that we live in. In Indian myth, a miracle has been mandatory to establish the purity of a woman, while a man's mere word is taken for the truth; whether it is Sita, Shankutala or Rani in this instance. Karnad very effectively explained the Nature of the Folk Stories.

The author also remarks of the identity of tales in general, about their reality of being and their continuance only on being passed on. The objectivity leads us to perceive the story as concept with its own existence and identity; and to emphasize its individuality it is personified in the form of a woman. V. Rangan says "A



story is born and grows; it has life. Each story has an independent existence and a distinctive character. All story tellers are ancient mariners cursed keep the story alive". The story seems to echo that in order to live, a story has to be "told" and "re-told" i.e. the story has no role without the listener or perceiver. And cannot help thinking that whether the author or stressing the reader's role in constructing meaning or phenomenology. The reader-response theory questions the endurance of the author's viewpoint that has no existence without the reader's perception. Being "told" and "re-told" is nothing but "interpretation", "re-interpretation". Therefore, any literary piece is only an object without the reader breathing meaning into it. So for the story to survive, it must be ultimately 'passed on'. Otherwise, the flames were attributed with 'not having' the qualities of passed on'. However this is what they were precisely doing at the outset. Therefore, 'passing on' has wider ramifications here, than merely physically transmitting.

The Symbolism of the Man and the Story is very powerful in the drama *Naga-Mandala*. Again the playwright is a man, and the story is personified as a woman. So does Man create Woman? However the playwright echoes that the story has an autonomous existence and lives by virtue of interpretation and re-interpretation. Likewise, a woman has her own existence and lives by virtue meaningful procreation. Thus, the gist of the framework of the story runs parallel to the theme of the main story. As Rani's role gets inverted at the end of the story and Appanna turns into a mere "instrument to prove her divinity", likewise roles get reversed as the playwright "listens" to the story.

Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* is a feminist Play. It question patriarchal moral code which demands the faithfulness of a woman to her husband but not the faithfulness of a husband to his wife. It can be described as a problem play. It presents the problem of a married woman, the position and status of a woman in her relation to her husband and home. The dramatist does not express his opinion about rights of women or the emancipation of women. But he merely presents the tragic consequences of the subordination of a married woman to her heartless husband. The play shows how the woman is excessively controlled by her husband. Girish Karnad appears as a dramatist of social realities in this play. He is definitely on the side of Rani who wins our sympathy too.

In *Naga-Mandala* the dramatist delivers a message to the society, namely that it should awaken a sense of individual responsibility among women. Without being allowed to develop her own individuality, a woman would be really unhappy. If Rani had lived with Appanna forever under the conditions in which we find her husband at the beginning of the play, her life would have been a vale of tears. In Indian society a woman is expected to render unquestionable obedience to her husband as Rani does in this play. She has no right not only to defy her husband but also to question him.

The typical discriminating treatment to Appanna and Rani is carefully presented in the play. Appanna openly and unashamedly commits adultery, but nobody objects to it. Even the Village Elders who sit in judgement of Rani's adultery do not find any fault with him. Nobody believes the innocence of Rani. She sleeps with Naga without knowing its identity. She does not discover the identity of Naga who assumes Appanna's form by using its magical power. Her failure to discover the truth is the suppression of her reason and intuition by the injunction of Appanna and Naga she would not have allowed him to enter

her bedroom. As a typical woman, she is frigid and despises sex. What she craves for its affection which Naga gives her in plenty by functioning as a surrogate parent for a while. By using his erotic art Naga cures her frigidity. Because of this, later Appanna and Rani could enjoy material life happily.

Chastity is a very powerful weapon to subjugate women in the play and society. It is a patriarchal concept that has been used to oppress and weaken women for ages. Here also in the case of Rani her chastity is clearly gender based. There are two reasons which lead to the whole trouble that crop between Rani and Appanna. In the first place, he regards her as his property and adopts a possessive attitude towards her. And lack of communication between them makes him a stranger to her. The idea of characters has been associated with women since ancient days, from the beginning of human civilization. A woman in India fails to command that social prestige which she ought to have if she is once stigmatized. What Rani does and what she suffers is not due to some weakness in her character. Actually Rani commits the severe sin of adultery in the ignorance of the real identity of Cobra. But the society, based on the patriarchal norm never pardons a woman who has lost her virginity. In this way, the play *Naga-Mandala* reflects upon the contemporary Indian cultural and social life with the use of myths and folktales. It is not a feminist play because it is pathetic story of Rani and she is no doubt a victim. She considers Naga as the symbol of her wedded bliss and asks him to live in her hair for ever.

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