

INDIAN SOCIETY, CULTURE AND GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION IN GIRISH KARNAD'S 'NAGA MANDALA'

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ABSTRACT:

The present paper deals with the analysis of Indian society and exploitation of women in the name of culture with special reference to Girish Karnad's play, 'Nag-Mandala.' In most parts of Indian villages, there is a ritualistic practice at Nagapamchami of pouring milk on ant-hills. Cobra is worshipped by girls in order to get good husband and generally barren women in order to bear children. Deeply rooted in Indian culture, Karnad treats history, myths and folk tales as the assets to literature. Reacting to the drastic events taking place around him and using deliberately created diction that is very much Indian in its tone though his play 'Nag-Mandala', Karnad has tried to shed light on the exploitation of women and the unequal position of women as compared to a man in our society.

Keywords: *Discrimination, exploitation, patriarchy, subordination, suppression*

Girish Karnad, the well-known dramatist in India and abroad has the power to change any mythical episode into vibrant and rich dramatic expressions. As a leading Indian dramatist, he is conscious of Indian traditions for the enrichment of contemporary Indian drama. His plays have a universal appeal, though the themes are drawn from Indian myth, legend and history to project a new vision. Karnad has consciously attempted to Indianize the form of drama by interpreting the conventions of Indian Classical drama with some of the folk-theatrical practices and by blending them in a singular style of his own. His individual talent is evident in many of his plays including 'Naga Mandala'.

Girish Karnad himself has told that his play, 'Naga Mandala' is based on two Kannada folk-tales that he heard from A.K. Ramanujan. Published in 1988, the play is inspired from the popular myth and oral stories centered around the King Cobra,

Naga. However, the play raises issues that hold true as much of our times as of bygone years. It discusses the issues about man-woman relationship, position and identity of a woman, about psychology and the impact of social and cultural modes on the feminine psyche. It is a powerful portrait of the agony faced by women in their development into adult roles and social adjustment in a society, where the individual is given little space for independence as a human being. In this paper, the researcher would like to explore the gender-based discrimination in Indian society in relation with the play 'Naga Mandala'. Dr. R. D. Kamble rightly mentions,

"In 'Naga- Mandala', Karnad has projected the vulgar display of control instead of love over woman through the verbal main text and sub-text effectively." (144)

The prologue begins with the man addressing the audience where the Story, in the form of a beautiful young woman, narrates a folk-tale to a playwright who is cursed with death for having bored his audience. His salvation from the curse lies in wakeful listening to the story of Rani. Rani, the protagonist of the play is a symbol of any woman who is unprepared to face loveless life of her own once she leaves the protective threshold of her parent's home. The reality and harshness of the world beyond shocks and confuses her. At the outset, Rani is introduced as a young bride entering a new life with her husband, Appanna. Like any other Indian girl, she too enters this new life with many expectations of a life full of love, desires and dreams. However, reality knocks her down puzzled. Appanna locks her up in the house all alone only to return in the day for his bath and lunch. Rani is only a housekeeper and cook for him. He has banned her from any social contact and interactions. He ensures her complete alienation for which he first brings home a watchdog and then a mongoose. He wishes that nobody should have a word with Rani.

This is a kind of solitary confinement of Rani by her husband in the house. This confinement of Rani symbolizes the chastity belt of the Indian society, the reduction of women's talents to housework and the exclusion of women from any kind of enlightenment and enjoyment. Rani is expected to arrange for his bath and serve him food. The two are psychologically and physically mismatched. Rani expects the company of her husband but her husband Appanna regularly visits a harlot. Rani feels lonely and miserable. When Rani expresses her fear and loneliness, Appanna warns her saying,

"Look, I don't like idle chatter. Don't question me. Do as you are told and you won't be punished" (29)

Rani and Appanna are strangers to each other as Appanna treats her with contempt, aggression and mistrust. He locks her in the room and scolds the old lady Kurudavva and her son Kappanna when they attempt to become friendly with Rani. Appanna is a cruel, dominating, selfish and insensitive man. Rani tries to fill the emptiness of her life with the love of her parents. She becomes the victim of sever alienation and starts hallucinating. Her inner desire of love, companionship and comfort find an expression through various dreams. In her state of mental and emotional anguish, the line between illusion and reality is blurred. Isolated and confined to live a detached life and emotionally deprived, she takes refuge in her dreams about her parents. As a dutiful wife, she obeys the dictates of her tyrant husband without a word, but her true feelings find an expression in her dreams wherein she imagines herself locked up by a "demon" in a castle. The demon is obviously her husband Appanna who locks her up in the house. When Rani dreams of her parents for the first time, she imagines an Eagle taking her to her parents. The bird Eagle symbolizes strength and courage. It also represents fight and freedom, which expresses Rani's yearning for release from her confinement. Due to lack of love from her husband, she takes refuge in the dreams of a prince who will rescue her from her distress. She becomes a day-dreamer.

Rani's husband Appanna is not only rude but also oppressive, domineering and male-centred. As a newly married bride, she is kept totally unaware of sex. She is deprived of the endearment of her husband. Her marriage is meaningless and

mirthless. She is practically imprisoned through this marriage. Rani, being a naive and innocent girl, is totally unaware of the ways of the world and realities of life and relationships. Instinctively, she craves for Appanna's love, her prince who in reality is beastlike person. She is in fact, the representative of an Indian bride with dreams of a successful married life.

Appanna is indifferent to his lovely wife. He comes for lunch everyday mechanically, orders mechanically and treats her as a machine. He gives Rani separation, loneliness, humiliation, pain and mental strain. Here we come to know that Appanna is a typical domineering husband who treats his wife inhumanly. He is a male chauvinist who is free from bondage and does whatever he likes. He betrays his wife but does not want to be questioned by her. Kurudavva, the kind and blind friend of Appanna's mother feels sorry for Rani's plight and gives her two pieces of aphrodisiac root and asks her to add it in Appanna's food. Being unsuccessful with a small piece of the magical root, Rani mixes the second largest root into her curry. As she saw the curry turning 'blood-red', she thinks it is dangerous to feed Appanna with the mixture. So, she pours the liquid in the ant- hill where the King Cobra laps it up and falls in love with Rani. This is the turning point of her life. The King Cobra transforms himself into human being and takes the form of Appanna, Rani's husband. He enters the house of Rani through the drain in the bathroom and visits Rani at night. Now she feels relieved and happy and enjoys Naga's love and care. She is very happy and secure in his company.

The real Appanna continues his role of visiting during day for lunch and the Naga in Appanna's appearance performing the role of a real husband, visits her at night and shares her bed. However, the development of the character of Rani after getting love from Naga Appanna is amazing. It is from enslavement to empowerment. Even Naga explains to her the meaning of sex and convinces her that it is a universal phenomenon. Now she starts enjoying the erotic pleasure and every night she anxiously waits for Naga to arrive and she finds her absolute in him. Moreover, her pregnancy proves that Naga is not an illusion but a reality. Naga brings all the happiness and glory to Rani and her married life. When Appanna notices the pregnancy of Rani, he torments her by accusing

her for infidelity. His words will prove his anger. He scolds her by saying, "Aren't you ashamed to admit it, you harlot? I locked you in and you managed to find a lover! Who did you go with your sari off?" (33)

Appanna complains about the fidelity of Rani to the villagers and they suggest the traditional fire-test. However, Rani insists to swear by the King Cobra. The Cobra doesn't bite Rani, instead it slides up her shoulders and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head and she is proved chaste. Hereafter, her life is transformed as Appanna too falls at her feet like the villagers and Rani gets everything that was promised by Naga. Thus, through the play Karnad expresses the female point of view about her needs, problems and experiences of exploitation in the male-dominated society.

To conclude, 'Naga-Mandala' questions and exposes gender-based discrimination and morals of patriarchy which have oppressed women for ages. This is observed at the village court, where Rani is put to the fire-test of chastity. Appanna enjoys extra-marital sex openly and unashamedly and the whole village knows it. Thus, the play uncovers the injustice of the moral code which demands faithfulness of a woman to her husband, but not the loyalty of a man to his wife. Appanna and Naga seem to represent two faces of a man, one seen at day as Appanna and the other at night as Naga. This two-facedness symbolizes the exploitation of women by men for generations, while Rani symbolizes the women's eternal endurance of his subjugation.

Rani is the very image of an ideal Indian woman-mute, unquestioning and uncomplaining. The right to ask 'why' is taken away from her. Even later, when Naga orders her not to ask him questions, she obeys till she gets pregnant. As Rani is the symbol of any woman who is exploited, her husband Appanna is also a type representing the stereotypical image of a chauvinistic male who is dominating and cruel. Naga on the other hand is a

representation of the matured, caring and loving male, truly a myth in the rigid and traditional bound patriarchal society. A woman has no identity of her own. She is considered incomplete without a man. She craves for completeness in her relations, in love but usually finds none. This inequality is clearly visible in the relationship of Rani and Appanna. Rani has no say in any matter; she cannot even question the behavior of the husband. As a result of years of conditioning that a girl goes through right from birth, Rani also accepts her suppression submissively.

Thus, Konrad's 'Naga-Mandala' presents a hypocrite and biased social and cultural trait of the Indian society and its effect on the female psyche. The play mocks at and questions the unjust values of our patriarchal society which discriminate women. Karnad has highlighted this inequality and imbalance in the man-woman relationship. Doing this, Karnad has juxtaposed questions of morality and adultery and the diverse responses and reactions that a man and a woman face in this regard from society. The society is partial towards men and unduly harsh and cruel to the women. As a victim of gender discrimination, a woman has to undergo trial for an offence she is not guilty of, while the men go scot-free even after committing a heap of crimes openly. Appanna can beat his wife, lock her up and accuse her of adultery while his own character and adulterous relations are not to be put up for question by society. However, Karnad presents a rebellious and open-minded outlook on the issue of gender discrimination and exploitation of women in the Indian society under the name of culture.

References

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