

Naga-Mandala: An Ordeal of Chastity

¹Rupa Arjunker Pariyani & ²Dr. Darshna Bhatt

¹Ph.D Scholar of Gujarat University, Ahmedabad, Gujarat (India)

²Professor and Head, Department of English, Gujarat University, Ahmedabad, Gujarat (India)

Girish Karnad, a recipient of the Jnanpith Award, is a living legend in the arena of Contemporary Indian English Drama and is considered as one of the most significant Indian dramatists. He has enriched the Indian literary scene by his contribution to art, culture, theatre and drama. Starting his writing career with *Yayati*, Karnad has moved on to give many more thought provoking and symbolist plays that are richly immersed in myth and local culture. A highly learned and intellectual person, Karnad's plays are his mouthpiece to many of the contemporary issues plaguing man and society. Karnad's plays, primarily written in Kannada and then translated into other languages, including English, have brought him national and international recognition.

Naga-Mandala (1988), is a play taking its inspiration from the popular myth and oral stories centring on the King Cobra, "Naga" but raising issues that hold true as much of our times as of bygone years. It discusses 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.

Naga-Mandala is basically the story of Rani who is right from the very beginning of the play, a victim of male chauvinism. It is the story of a woman who undergoes mental torture, loss, agony, and suffering at the hands of her husband. The main plot of the story is a depiction of the fears and suspicion of Rani. She bears all the tyrannies, yet she does not give up her values of life. She is born in a family steeped in orthodoxy where everything about woman-her manners, her ideas, even the very soul- is determined by masculine standards. So, when Rani comes of age her 'fond father' finds a suitable husband for her in Appanna, whose parents are already dead but he has money to spend and spare. Without taking much trouble of making formal inquiries and necessary investigation about the character of the man with whom his daughter has to pass her life, Rani is married off to him.

Rani enters her wedded life like most girls with a lot of expectation but is shocked by Appanna's neglect. Rani's experience on the very first night with her husband is very depressing. There are no soft words, no ardent caresses, and no loving embraces. Instead she is locked up inside the house, her husband goes to his concubine to pass his night. He comes only for lunch and bath and goes back leaving Rani alone locked up again for the night. Hardly a word passes between them, and if he speaks at all, he speaks only in imperatives "not a syllable more than required". Rani feels lonely and miserable. She is not even allowed to have emotional company necessary for the growth and development

of one's own personality. Appanna does not let her talk to anyone, not even to his own mother's childhood friend, Kurudvva, not because he doubts Rani's character but because he does not want her to be more enlightened and to know more, because he wants to keep her busy in the household work as a slave suppressing all her talents and mental growth. Not only this, he treats her in the most inhuman manner, he insults her, abuses her and beats her for none of her fault. He exercises absolute supremacy over her while he arrogates to himself the power of spending the night with another woman.

Mentally Rani is still a child, craving for parental affection. So she moans 'Oh Mother! Father!' in her sleep. She expresses her fear of loneliness and Appanna discounts her feelings without any compassion. This mental torture forces her to fly mentally into the lap of her parents. Marriage is a milestone in a person's life and since it presents a hostile environment, her mind indulges in dreams in order to calm her troubled self. She, like a hurt child, dreams of a fairyland which can be reached only after crossing seven seas and seven isles. And in a magic garden her parents wait for her and receive her with love. This act of combating the present circumstance by withdrawing into an earlier pleasant state is known in psychology as Regression. Rani daydreams that she is taken by an eagle to her parents who caress her affectionately. An Eagle, which is a bird of prey, symbolizes strength and courage. A bird also represents flight and freedom, which expresses Rani's yearning for release from her confinement. She sobs when she comes into the real world. She is deprived of the affection of the fellow-human beings and the knowledge of the outer world. It was very difficult for Rani to live and adjust in a new environment wherein she was all alone. She used to miss her parents. When a woman gets affection and love from her husband she would not miss her parents.

She is practically imprisoned in a solitary confinement. Her personality therefore remains underdeveloped. She is thus made the weaker sex. She being locked in symbolizes the chastity belt of the medieval ages and the empty house that she is locked in stands for her apathetic in-laws according to Karnad. Rani, who is neglected by her cruel husband Appanna, gets consoled through the dream sequence in the place where her desire for love gets timely solace.

Kurudavva, who personifies Kali, learns about Rani's suffering and gives her some roots with pseudo-magical powers to win over Appanna of which she is very much sure that it would work. Acting on Kurudavva's advice, Rani mixes

the paste of the root in the curry to be served to her husband. But she is terrified to see the curry turning red. And instead of giving it to her husband she immediately goes out and pours it into the ant-hill just opposite to her house where lives a King Cobra. Naga, the King Cobra, consumes the aphrodisiac paste and immediately falls in love with Rani. Naga begins to call on Rani in the shape of her husband in the nights and makes love to her.

In the Indian society people believe that Naga can assume any shape of his or her desire. In *Naga-Mandala*, Naga assumes the shape of Rani's husband and in his disguise deceives her. The actual husband Appanna comes only at midday, takes lunch and at evenings goes to his concubine's house. This disguised Naga comes to her at night. He commiserates with her over her pathetic condition and showers on her parental affection that she badly needs. All her pent-up sorrow bursts out. She feels relieved, happy and secure in his company. But she cannot comprehend the situation since Appanna cannot be so affectionate and compassionate. Yet, she willingly suspends her disbelief and enjoys Naga's love and care. Rani is portrayed in the line of Sita and Savitri legends where a woman is made only to accept, yield and suffer and not to question and react.

Appanna and Naga represent the two unconnected roles of a husband-'as a stranger during the day and as lover at night' according to Karnad. Rani experiences the dichotomy of the warm loving embrace of her ideal lover and the cold, authoritative and contemptuous behaviour of her real husband Appanna. She realizes the difference between the husband's day and night's visits but fails to unravel the mystery of the contradictory behaviour of the two Appannas due to her craving for love. She says,

You talk so nicely at night. But during the day I only have to open my mouth and you
Hiss like a ...stupid snake.

(Naga-Mandala, p.22)

She is in a dilemma, but accepts the difference between the passionate lover and the dominating husband because she has inherited this tradition. She had some doubts in the initial stages but whenever she asks any question Naga makes use of patriarchal authority to discount her reason and suppress her awareness lest his identity should be discovered. Naga managed to win her confidence by his ingenuity. This injunction of Naga proves to be so powerful that Rani does not know his real identity until she sleeps with her own husband.

Night meetings of Rani and Naga continue to the extent of her becoming pregnant, which is a definite evidence to prove that Naga is not an illusion but a reality, she attains a state of heavenly bliss. She thinks that she has conceived for her husband. But Appanna is shocked to notice Rani's pregnancy in spite of all the restraints he had imposed upon her movements. The shocked husband with Hindu concept of chastity and 'satitwa' is out of himself. He accuses of her of infidelity and she is put to test in the presence of the village elders. The village elders ask her to prove her chastity by

taking the oath while holding a red-hot iron rod. But she requests them to permit her to take the snake ordeal. When she undergoes the snake ordeal, she confesses, swearing by the King Cobra that she has never touched any one of the male sex, except her husband and this snake:

Since coming to this place, I have held by this hand only two...Yes, my husband and
This King Cobra. Except for these two, I have not touched any one of the male sex. Nor
Have I allowed any other male to touch me. If I lie, let the Cobra bite me.

(Naga-Mandala, p.39)

Rani is not an adulteress, she commits the gravest sin of adultery in the ignorance of the identity of the Cobra. She speaks the innocent truth. So, the Cobra does not harm her and she is apotheosized into a divine goddess incarnate. All the people prostrate before her, adore her as a Goddess and seek her blessings. Appanna also falls at her feet and begs for her forgiveness. Now he becomes her devoted husband and his concubine, her life long servant. Later Rani begets a beautiful boy. Thus she gets all her wishes fulfilled as promised by Naga. Thus, the main plot unfolds how an ill-treated wife becomes a worshipful Goddess, a Divine Mother, though she has to undergo the frightful snake ordeal. However Appanna is not convinced of her chastity. He undergoes great mental agony. Among Hindus it is the greatest torment to a man if he knows for certain as does Appanna that his wife is an adulteress. Appanna's case is worse. He has to serve Rani the whole life in spite of his knowledge that she has copulated with somebody else. It is like living hell. Appanna who is not any particular person but a representative of chauvinistic males has to get the nemesis in the end. By all standards of judgement, Appanna is condemned to lie in hell fire all his life, without any hope of redemption. It seems that providence has punished him for torturing his wife and for being infidel to her.

The typical male chauvinism is expressed through Rani's husband and the society. Appanna enjoys extra-marital sex openly and unashamedly whereas Rani sleeps with Naga who assumes the form of Appanna. Yet the older male members of the society ask Rani for a test by holding a red hot iron-rod in her hand while speaking the truth, but they never ask her husband for a test for his bad character and his irresponsible behaviour towards his wife. Thus, the play uncovers the injustice of the patriarchal moral code that demands the faithfulness of a woman towards her husband but not the faithfulness of a man to his wife. Man is allowed to flirt with as many numbers of women as he pleases. Female virginity is thus nothing but to keep a woman as a slave under man's control. Girish Karnad is not only exposing the male Chauvinism through the device of Cobra ordeal, but also the double standard of morality of patriarchal culture and the hollowness of the concept of chastity. The entire scene is reminiscent of last scene in the famous Indian epic, The Ramayana, in which Sita undergoes a similar fire ordeal to prove her purity of conduct in the presence of the elders and the respectable citizens of Ayodhya speaking these words:

Yes Gods, I bow before you. Oh Rishis, I bow to you.
Oh Agni, you at least know
My purity and will take me as your own!

The name of the leading character "Rani" is symbolic. It is a paradox. Rani which means "The Queen", doesn't have right to ask a question. In reality The Queen gives order, here Rani takes order with a constant fear of her husband Appana. The Queen may ask for an ordeal but here "Rani: The Queen" had to pass through an ordeal of chastity. It is a matter of disgrace that "An Ordeal of Chastity" was demanded by a man who himself have committed adultery.

Karnad's Naga-Mandala thus presents a hypocrite and biased social and cultural trait of the Indian society and its effect on the feminine psyche. The play mocks at and questions the unjust values of our patriarchal society.

Highlighting the inequality and imbalance in the man-woman relationship, Karnad juxtaposes questions of morality and adultery, and the diverse reactions and responses that a man and a woman face in this regard from society. A story of a woman's journey from innocence to experience, the play depicts her transformation and rebellion to survive as an individual having equal rights to respect, freedom and love. Karnad's Nag-Mandala proves that chastity is a myth. If chastity is spiritual or psychological, Rani has not lost it though she sleeps with Naga before the judgement. In addition, chastity is a patriarchal concept that has been used to oppress and weaken women for ages. The raped women and the women deceived by their lovers commit suicide while the men culprits go unpunished. It is clear that the concept of chastity is gender biased and that women care more for chastity than men.

References

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