

NAGA-MANDALA: PLAY WITH COBRA

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The story of tradition of drama and dramatic arts and performances in India is glorious and eye-piercing one. The origins of Indian dramatic literature can be traced back to the period of the *Rigveda*. There are many hymns in the *Rigveda* which are imbued with the dramatic elements and dialogue. In Bharata's *Natyashastra* there is an alluring explanation regarding the origin of drama. Girish Karnad, the Jnanapeetha laureate and reputed Indian English dramatist alludes to it in the following words:

It was a time when the moral fibre of the society had weakened, irrational passions held sway and people had surrendered themselves to their baser instincts. Knowledge of the *vedas* (which presumably could have saved the situation) being restricted to the upper section of the society, a medium was required that entertained and could restore the health of the society by reaching out to all the people, regardless of their position in the social hierarchy. On being implored by Indra and the other gods to provide such an instrument, Brahma, the Father of the Universe, took the text from the *Rigveda*, the art of performance from the *Yajurveda*, the song from the *Samaveda* and *rasa* (aesthetic experience) from the *Atharvaveda* and created a fifth veda called *Natyaveda*. ... 'the drama is a re-enactment of the state of three Worlds'. Drama serves varied functions -providing for instruction, entertainment, happiness, peace and moral upliftment. It teaches one one's duty and relieves one's sorrow. There is no maxim, no learning, no art or craft that is not found in drama. For it is the joys and sorrows of human nature expressed through gestures and technique.¹

Thus, the venerated sage Bharata had laid down the rules, regulations and guidelines for the writers of the dramas to come after him. The immortal literary luminaries like Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, Bharavi, Harshavardhana, Magha, Shudraka and a host of dramatists enriched the form. There was free-handed patronage of the rulers to these playwrights. Although the dramas and their performances were crude in the earlier period, improvements were slowly introduced and made it a glowing form in the subsequent centuries. Though dramas, they are imbued with a wealth of poetry.

At the same time Indian regional literatures and writers thereof were highly influenced by Sanskrit literature and drew much inspiration from these great masters and the tradition. They not only entertained the populace but they also enriched their local literatures.

With the colonization of our country, English education system that was introduced, the Indians welcomed the study of English language and literature. They made sincere efforts to master the language and digest the great playwrights of England like William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson etc. Surprising it is to note that Indian playwrights came more under the influence of the western writers and held them as their models rather than our own past masters in spite of their glorious contribution, achievement and glowing past. This led to a kind of delinking from the past and stunted growth of Indian English drama. Observing the phenomenon Adya Rangacharya, the leading luminary in the world of Kannada dramatics writes, "...My plea to lovers of modern Indian drama is first to study classical Indian drama and make a reassessment of it."²

One more area of darkness, as far as Indian English dramatists are concerned, is that they have not employed the rich fund of our mythology which has been the crisscross of many regional dramas such as *yakshagana*, *doddata*, *sannata*, *bayalata* etc. This method, employed by many Greek dramatists in the past and T.S.Eliot in the last century has been, the important reason for success. Of course, some dramatists like Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, T.P. Kailasam, Uma Parameswaran have used our mythological stories and themes quite effectively. In our own times some famous playwrights like Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Dina Gandhi, Badal Sirkar have used our folk elements and mythological stories in their works. Among these writers Girish Karnad occupies an altogether a unique pedestal. He uses history, folklore and myths in his plays in one or the other form.

As a writer Girish Karnad was highly influenced by the traditional theatre, folklore and mythology. He has made use of myths, historical elements and folkloristic elements in his plays invariably and thereby he has enriched the form. He was a reputed actor, a matchless director and film artist. In most of his plays as in the films he portrays the human predicament which consists of pains and pleasures, individuals' struggles with the problems of social and psychological adjustments which lead either to the growth or fall of a character. His plays *Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1971), *Naga-Mandala* (1988), *Tale-Danda* (1990), *Agni Mattu Male* (1995) etc. He writes his plays first in Kannada and then translates them into English. While exhibiting his innovative techniques he displays the above enumerated elements in almost all of his plays. An attempt has been made in this paper to discuss his use of serpent symbolism.

Serpent often gets employed in literature as a multifaceted symbol. In the play *Naga-Mandala* Karnad has employed serpent symbolism quite convincingly and effectively.

Very often the words 'myths' and 'legends' get used synonymously. One gets entwined with the other. According to "Although the words frequently are used interchangeably, a properly deals with Gods and a legend with men. Myths and legends are types of folklore."³ Thus there is always an inseparable connection between myth and folklore. Both of them believe in rituals and practice of rituals. If a myth clarifies the prescribed action and enactment of rites in turn rites dramatize mythical narrative. And in the course of narration as part of enactment of legends symbols manifest. "A complex emotional experience is a symbol. And the power of symbols is to arouse the deep emotional self, and the dynamic self beyond comprehension. Experience of many ages, accumulated, still throbs within a symbol. And we throb in response."⁴ The serpent symbolism, employed by Girish Karnad in his play *Naga-Mandala*, goes to show this. Serpent, as an 'image', first gets referred to in the *Rigveda*, wherein it represents the Trinity.⁵ I write 'image' because "No man can invent symbols. He can invent an emblem made up of images or metaphors or images but not symbols."⁶ Some images in the course of many generations of men become symbols, embedded in the souls ready to start alive when touched up on, carried on in the human consciousness for centuries. Serpents act as the preservers of the life. They themselves symbolize life. The matrix is said to be in the form of a serpent "*Nishatsnum yah sareesrapam*"⁷ the larvae or a reptile that grows in the uterus. The infant in the earlier days of its birth almost looks like a serpent coiled. However, slowly as the infant learns to crawl and raise its head slowly surely it looks like a crawling serpent. Hence the names like Nagesha, Nagamma, Nagamani, Sareemani etc. the image of serpent thus symbolizes life. The also symbolizes the Trinity especially Lord Vishnu the preserver. The serpent is Apovatsa- the scion of water. That is why the serpents do stay near the water usually-lakes and ponds. The water is the water of life. Therefore, life proceeds from water only. "*Garbhamdadhra aapah*"⁸ water gives life. By this, it is quite evident that we the human beings are the sons or scions of water. *Aaponaaraitiproktaaapovainarasonavah*- water is the procreative element and the human beings are the progenitors of water.⁹ (*The The*

Mahabharata) and therefore we the human beings are the progenitors of water. Therefore, both water and serpent are deified. Probably the dazzling serpentine lightening, the python like entwining creepers and the rivers with their 'meandering motion' and all other things of the kind might have motivated our progenitors to recognize the manifestation of the serpent power in them. Therefore, the serpent symbolism has become so inveterate in the human mind and literature all over the world.

"The Nagas may assume various forms. Takshaka appears at one time as a naked mendicant; at another as an old Brahmin, and on a third occasion a little woman, his proper shape is that of a snake. They may adopt yet other forms besides those of men and beasts."¹⁰ To the ancient man the serpent was the bringer of weals woes together. Therefore, Satan and other reptilian characters like the dragon, the hydra etc. are delineated as serpentine. Hence, even in these civilized days the serpent has remained there in the consciousness as well as sub-consciousness of humanity. This shows the living response of the humanity towards the symbol. "When men become unresponsive and half dead, the symbols die."¹¹ This repeated reference and frequent use of serpent as a symbol goes to show that it lives yet.

In the play *Naga -Mandala* :Play with a Cobra Girish Karnad has shown the axiom discussed above convincingly successfully. The play opens with a man who is sitting in a ruined temple. He is told by a mendicant, "You must keep awake at least one whole night this month. If you can do that, you will live. If not, you will die on the last night of the month"¹² Then the flames come one by one. The story is narrated in the old tumble-down - any -moment temple by a new flame which arrives last to join the already arrived flames. The story of the play is a story of

"...an only daughter, so her parents called her Rani. Queen. Queen of the whole wide world. Queen of the long tresses. For when her hair was tied up in a knot, it was as though a black King Cobra lay curled on the nape of her neck, coil upon glistening coil. When it hung loose, the tresses flowed, a torrent of black, along her young limbs, and got entangled in her silver anklets. Her fond father found her a suitable husband. The young man was rich and parents were both dead. Rani continued to live with her parents until she reached womanhood. Soon her husband came and took her with him to his village. (p.6)

It is after Rani's entering her husband's house that her difficulties begin. Her husband Appanna leaves her alone in the home, locked up in it. He never allows her to go out of the four walls. He is found in the company of a concubine who had cast a spell on him. He would make only diurnal visits and order her about to prepare his meal, would bathe, eat and then go away locking her inside the home. There is an old woman called Kurudavva in the village. She is friend of Appanna's mother. Hearing the news that Appanna is married and has brought a young wife she visits Rani's home with the help of her son Kappanna. Kappanna carries her on his back and dismounts her near the door. Then finding it locked she goes to the window, meets Rani and feels her beauty with her fingers by moving her hands on the cheeks, chin and ears of Rani. She is happy at her extraordinary beauty. Then Kurudavva asks Rani as to her wedded life and connubial pleasures. Rani pours down her sorrow in words laved in lament. At this moment, Kurudavva gives Rani two pieces of root-one bigger and one smaller -asking her to grind them into paste and feed Appanna mixing it into the food. After this, when Appanna comes the day, Rani tries the smaller piece first. Rani grinds it into paste and mixes it into the milk and gives it to Appanna to drink. After drinking the milk Appanna feels giddiness. Then slowly recovers and goes away as usually. Kurudavva, after some time, visits Rani to know the effect of the roots on Appanna. When Rani explains everything before Kurudavva, she asks her to use the larger one this time. Accordingly, this time Rani mixes the paste into the curry. The curry at once

turns blood red. Rani being frightened of the dangerous consequences, takes the curry out and pours it into the enormous ant-hill nearby. The King Cobra which was residing in it gets infatuated at Rani. It follows her immediately and watches from distance. Then, the serpent enters through the bath drain during the night and assumes human form (Appanna-Naga) and unites with Rani. And Rani without knowing anything submits. AS a result of these nocturnal visits Rani becomes pregnant. When Appanna comes to this, he is furious. He asks Rani, “Are you not ashamed to admit it, you harlot? I locked you in, and yet you managed to find a lover! Tell me who it is. Who did you go to with your sari off?” (p.33) Saying so he beats her violently. The cobra watches them through the window. Then Appanna drags her into the street saying that he would abort the babe and smash it into dust. Saying so he picks up a big stone to throw on her. Immediately the serpent enters there in between them hissing and separates them. Then Rani runs into the house and puts the latch across the door from behind. In spite of Appanna’s repeated bangs on the door she does not open it. Appanna registers a complaint against her. The village elders who gather ask Rani to prove her innocence. Instead of hot-iron ordeal (*tapta-lohadivya*) and boiling-oil ordeal (*taptatailadivya*) she proposes to undergo serpent ordeal (*Naga divya*). The village elders are nonplussed and ultimately agree to her proposal. Accordingly, she puts her hand into the ant-hill and pulls the Cobra out. Holding the Cobra in her hand she announces loudly that since coming to the village, “I have held by this hand only two ... my husband this 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.” (p.39) Much to the surprise and awe of the assembled audience including the elderly judges the Cobra climbs up her shoulder and spreads its hood over her head. Swaying its hood there for a while it becomes docile and decorates her like garland. Then leaving her the Cobra slides back into the ant-hill. The gathering is awestruck and applauds Rani as goddess incarnate. The village elders advise Appanna to get reconciled with her as she is a godly personality. Appanna falls at her feet and begs for forgiveness. Even the concubine of Appanna, who happens to witness the ordeal scene, seeing Rani’s pious glory feels ashamed of debased life and offers to spend the rest of life as Rani’s maid servant. In due course of time Rani gives to a male child and thereafter lives happily. Then Naga enters into the bed room of Rani one night and sees her sleeping next to her husband, laying her head on his shoulders. Her child is by her side. There is a look of contentment on her face. When he makes this visit, perhaps the last one, He says some words to himself. Here are his words, “Why should I not take a look? I have given her everything. Her husband. Her child. Her home. Even her maid. She must be happy.... Hard to believe now I was so besotted with her.” (p.42). Then, he goes near the tresses of Rani and hides into them. When Rani complains of heaviness in her head Appanna while combing her comes across it and stoops to kill. When he goes into the kitchen to bring a stick Rani lets her hair down to the floor and asks the serpent to enter into it. Here are her words, “Quick now. Get it. Are you safely in there? Good. Now stay there. And lie still. You don’t know how heavy you are. Let me get used to you, will you?... This hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss. Live in there happily forever.” (pp.45-46) The play ends with Rani feeding her baby, which is symbolic again.

Thus, the play is full of folkloristic and mythological undertones. A myth or folkloristic elements appear as truth or untruth at the same time. In the play the character of Rani passes through this riddle and become unable to solve it for herself. When she declares before Naga that she is pregnant the response of Naga is quite detached one. She speaks to him, “Scowls in the day. Embraces at night. The face in the morning unrelated to the touch at night.... I was a stupid, ignorant girl when you brought me here. But now I am a woman, a wife, and I am going to be a mother.... Why don’t you take on trust that I have a mind and explain this charade to me? Why do play these games? Why do you change like a chameleon from day to night? Even if I understood a little, a tiny bit- I could bear it. But now – sometimes I feel my head is going to burst!” (p.32)

In this way serpent as a symbol of life-life saving and life-giving agent and also a dispenser of justice has been handled quite successfully in this play. The serpents are believed to bestow progeny, wealth and grant everything. This has been shown in the drama through the character of Rani who gets all she wants by dotting on the character of Naga. Even when Appanna tries to kill Rani with the baby in her womb., Naga appears between them and saves their life. The play *Naga -Mandala Play with Cobra*, permeating deep into the understanding of play-goers as well as readers has successfully managed to gain a cozy compartment in the world of drama.

References

1. Girish Karnad, "Notes" *The Fire and the Rain*, (Delhi:Oxford University Press, 1998),pp.70-71.
2. Adya Rangacharya, "Classical Indian Drama and Modern Indian Theatre",quoted by M.K.Naik, *Perspectives on Indian Drama in English* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press,1977)p.189.
3. *New Standard Encyclopedia* vol. IX (Chicago: Standard Educational Corporation,1987), p.649.
4. D.H.Lawrence, quoted by Tajinder Singh, *Selected Literary Criticism*(Academic Paper Backs 1984) p.158.
5. The Hindu Trinity consists of the three deities namely Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara or Shiva each performing the function of Creation, Preservation and destruction respectively.
6. Quoted by Tajinder Singh, Op.Cit., p.158.
7. A line from the *BrahmanagniSookta* of the *Rigveda*
8. A reference to *Garbhaadaanahoma*, a vedic ritual that takes place before the nuptials wherein the pontifical brahmin advises the newly married couple of their care to be taken when the woman conceives a baby.
9. Sham. Ba. Joshi, *Rig Veda Sara: Naga Pratima Vichar* (Mysore: Prasaranga Mysore University ;1971) p.103.
10. Quoted by Sham. Ba. Joshi *Ibid*.p.49. Vogel
11. Quoted by Tajinder Singh, OP. Cit. p.158.
12. Girish Karnad, *Naga-Mandala Play with a Cobra* (New Delhi:Oxford University Press, 1990) p.1. (All subsequent references to the play are to this edition. The numbers in parentheses indicate page numbers)