

# Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* :A Feminist Reading

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Girish Karnad presents the individual as well as social predicaments, resulting from the dichotomy between instinct and reason, body and mind, male and female psyche in his play like *Nagamandala*. In Karnad's plays, while the female characters search for a completeness within their partners, the men fail to achieve a harmonious existence of their body and mind. Karnad's plays become aesthetic experiences, which release multiple connotations with their rootedness in human emotions and instinct. His drama offers a unique aesthetic approach to myths, folklore and story-telling. The plots provide ample scope for a variety of experiments on the stage. Karnad's detractors, however, think that Karnad is reduced to a bunch of plays, that dwell on multifarious myths and parochial ethnicity. His contemporary writers often complain that Karnad does not confront reality and his characters are not flesh and blood individuals, but broad representations of their class or ideology. But this charge is actively countered by Karnad's legion of admirers. Mahesh Dattani almost refutes these charges on Karnad by proclaiming that Karnad has not only a historic vision but a contemporary voice, which make his plays universal. U.R. Ananthamurthy too asserts the fact that Karnad is the poet of drama. The use of history and mythology to tackle contemporary themes gives him the psychological distance to comment on the contemporary times. Thus *Nagamandala* as well as *The Fire and the Rain* become universal, timeless plays, where myth and reality, fact and fiction get fused in order to unravel the complex, discursive demands of contemporary socio-cultural paradigm.

The denotative quality of his plays is expressed in the use of myths and history in order to manifest the spirit of contemporaneity. The various states of human condition become Karnad's main thematic concern, and performance becomes the creative motivation of his dramatic vision. The plot of *Nagamanda* is drawn from myths and folk tales. Karnad here recreates, adapts and relates these mythic as well as the folkloric tales in order to relate them to the predicament of split personality of modern man. This play also latently manifests Karnad's concern with the issue of gender identity. Karnad's plays are, thus, not mere imitations of life, but are representations of existential predicament and concretizations of philosophical abstractions. He deploys this twin-facetedness of the folkloric tradition in order to communicate the aesthetic experiences, which release multiple connotations with their rootedness in human emotions and instinct.

*Nagamandala* is a folktale transformed into the metaphor of the married woman. It is a Chinese 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. *Nagamandala: Play with a Cobra* is, as Karnad says in his note to the play, based on two oral Kannada tales, he had heard from his mentor-friend and well-known poet A.K. Ramanujan, to whom Karnad also dedicates the play. In fact, a comparative reading will reveal that, as with the plots of much Greek drama, the plot of *Nagamandala* is a reworking into the dramatic medium of the "folk-mythologies", whose stories Ramanujan retells. Two plots make up *Nagamandala*. The framing plot of the male playwright and his curse is a re-telling of the story that Ramanujan calls "A Story and a Song", while the plot that deals with the story of Rani is based on "The Serpent Lover". Karnad also makes use of myths and folk forms in his plays to exorcise socio-cultural evils. He says in his Introduction to the play, "The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning those values, of making them literally stand on their head"(14). Fusing two folktales into one, it becomes a tale of love, yearnings and psychological manifestations. The play is about a couple and how the wife Rani failing to win her husband Appana's affection, eventually falls in love with the metamorphosed Naga. There is an evident use of magic realism in the portrayal of the

character Naga, who serves as the emotional and physical resort for Rani, when her husband is away out of continuous resentment. The character of Naga is borrowed from the concept of King Cobra of Kannada folklore, which can assume human dimensions. Naga has often been interpreted as the manifestation of the repressed urges and the needs of a neglected wife. Rani's predicament is about a life, lived by fiction and half truth. In *Nagamandala* Karnad not only exposes male chauvinism, the oppression on women, the great injustice done to them by patriarchal culture and men, but also overtly deflates the concept of chastity, that undergirds the patriarchal mythic imagination across religion, language and folktales.

*Nagamandala* begins with a Prologue, depicting the predicament of the Man, who is caught between a limbo-like situation of sleep and wakefulness, life and death. As the Man says in the Prologue, the audience, like the wedding guest of "The Ancient Mariner" can not but enter into the make-believe world of fantasy, created by the narrator. A "mandala" consists of a triangle. Similarly the zeitgeist of the play is the mandala. The three points of the triangle are Rani, Appanna and Naga, which illustrates the eternal triangle of an adulterous situation presenting the wife, the husband and the lover. In *Nagamandala*, Naga assumes the form of the husband Appanna during the night and becomes an embodiment of love, passion and concern, unlike Appanna of the daytime who is indifferent, harsh and callous. Appanna, as a typical representative of the patriarchal mindset, is unfaithful to his wife and spends most of his time with his concubine. He comes home only to bathe, eat and impose restrictions on Rani. It is at the behest of Kurudavva and with the hope of changing her husband that Rani is willing to try the love potion. The redness of the extract frightens her and in a moment of confusion she throws the extract upon the anthill. Naga internalises it and immediately falls in love with Rani. Now he takes the form of her husband to approach Rani. Then life starts to grow into a dream for Rani, who undergoes almost a trance-like state, when only instinct works. Even as she suspects Naga, she refuses to wake up to reality. Rani's experience with Naga borders on a dream-like situation. Naga comes in the guise of her husband, but he cannot change what he is. This is brilliantly manifested by the dramatist:

Frogs croaking in pelting rain, tortoises singing soundlessly in the dark, foxes, Crabs,

ants, rattlers, sharks, swallows-even the geese! The female begins to smell like wet earth. And stung by her smell, the king Cobra starts searching for his queen. The tiger bellows for his mate. When the flame-of-forest blossoms into a fountain of red and earth cracks open at the touch of the aerial roots of the banyan, it moves in the hollow of the cottonwood in the flow of the estuary, the dark Netherlands, within everything that sprouts, grows, stretches, creaks and blooms- everywhere, those who come together, cling, fall apart lazily! It is there and there and there, everywhere.(25)

The passage recalls the myth of union of Heaven and Earth and of the first male and female. It is this law of life that Rani is ignorant of. The above mentioned passage is replete with erotic images. Rani enjoys Naga's company so much that she wants the night to last forever. Naga employs the myth of life to educate her about physicality. Naga as the phallic symbol initiates her into sex. Appanna is here symbolic of the reasonable side of man, while the Naga with all its phallic connotations typifies the primitive instinct of a man. Naga has often been interpreted as the manifestation of the repressed urges and the needs of a neglected wife. Rani's predicament is that she can not attain both of the qualities in the single person. Hence failing to accept the harsh realities of life, she chooses to live her life, by fictions and half truths, ignoring the reality. The predicament of Rani is that she can not gain both of the qualities within the single person

Appanna accuses Rani of infidelity when he comes to know about her pregnancy. Naga ultimately solves the problem and helps her to win not only her husband's love, but also the reverence of the entire village. To the play's explicitly feminist vision, the ironies inherent in Rani's success in the snake-trial are vital. As a test of her chastity, the trial defeats the purpose for which it was devised in the first place. The snake ordeal mocks the classic Hindu mythic chastity test, the test of truth. In the *Ramayana*, Sita comes through the ordeal of fire because she is truly chaste and faithful. In Karnad's play, the woman comes successful through the ordeal of handling a venomous snake only because the snake is her lover and eventually her confession that she has not touched any other male bodies than her husband and the Naga, becomes true. Hence "it is her very infidelity that comes to her aid in proving that she is a faithful wife" (Dharwadker, 444). The solution also puts

an end to Naga's love affair with Rani. Now the Naga suffers from the pangs of separation like a human lover. Realizing too well that he could no longer assume Appanna's form and as a snake could not have a human mistress, he decides to end his life so that his lover might live in happiness. Ultimately, in *Nagamandala* Rani realises gradually the distinction between her husband and the snake-lover and gains the knowledge that two men do not love alike :

When her true husband climbed into bed with her, how could she fail to realize  
it was someone new? Even if she hadn't known earlier? When did the split  
take place?(60)

Thus, throughout this play Karnad problematises the concept of 'identity' as well as the notion of the split personality. Besides, Karnad also highlights the irony that lies between the concept of personal chastity and public reputation as it is manifested through Rani's 'snake ordeal', which eventually proves to be a facade to eyewash the public. Within this dichotomy between the lover and the husband, the instinct and the reason, it is the instinct that seems to win. Thus the male characters, in the plays of Karnad, can utter only in a mood of frustration like Robert Browning's character, Andrea Del Sarto that "And thus we half-men struggle . . .". Karnad presents in these plays the individual as well as the universal predicaments highlighting the gulf between instinct and reason. So the beloved's aspiration for an amalgamation of both of the qualities within her partner remains unfulfilled for ever like John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn", where Keats too vainly seeks to unite the warmth of life and the permanence of art.

Within the ambit of this play Karnad highlights the oppressive as well as the claustrophobic notions of the Indian society, where an Indian woman has to justify always her chastity in the public in spite of her husband's open infidelity. Their lives are guided by the decision of the 'other'. Thus, they become objects to the will of the patriarchs of the society. Due this process of 'othering' of the female self, Gayatri Spivak addresses the humiliated female figure as the 'gendered subaltern'. In the essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak writes that women because of the "ideological construction of gender"(271) within patriarchy, are replaced from the socio-cultural sites as 'subjects'. Spivak argues that "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has

no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow”(287). On the female subjugation by the patriarchy she further writes,

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is double effaced. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labour, for both of which there is ‘evidence’. It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant.(287)

So the figure of woman, whether in social atmosphere or in literary discourse, is ultimately erased and Spivak reflects on this issue,

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ . . .(306)

In this essay Spivak compares these ‘gendered subaltern’ to a medium like ‘palimpsest’, written over with the text of ‘other’ desires. Thus woman is formulated as the passive self, devoid of subjectivity. Same thing happens to the life of Rani .

But one point is very significant here as Rani who was gradually losing their identity as well as their subjectivity being turned into an object of patriarchal desire, start to regain their lost identity, when she steps out of her ‘home’. Agency, Karnad suggests in *Nagamandala* like the agency in women's tales in general, is intimately connected with their being able to control their ‘body’ at their own pleasure, and to tell their own stories from their point-of-view. Here through her extra-marital affairs, by regaining the power to control their ‘body’ at her own pleasure, Rani achieves the form of female ‘agency’, that was denied to her within the family. Thus Rani becomes the weaver, as well as the dilator of the plots of seduction. In many ways, *Nagamandala* is a feminist play, and within the rubric of folk-mythology it fuses the oft-used themes of fate, chastity, women's social role and the feminist perspectives of a woman’s desire of ‘jouissance’ within the

matrix of her wedlock, and her aspiration for a sense of completeness within herself as well as within the splitted self of her counterpart.

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