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Karnadian Dynamics of Intersectionality and Social Subversion in *Naga-Mandala*

Dr. Sangeeta Jain,
Associate Professor,
Department of English,
DAV PG College, Varanasi

Abstract

The Indian social and cultural fabric is woven with the predefined prescriptive socio-cultural norms for men and women, young and old and of late slowly paving the untrodden path for the newly defined gendered segmentations. Girish Karnad has subverted this lopsided socio-cultural phenomenon of his dramatic world through the dramaturgy of fusing myths, folklores, and histories into the narratives of his plays. *Naga-Mandala* is one such play which showcases the trials and tribulations of a young bride Rani in patrilocal Indian culture. Karnad infuses the Naga myth into the narrative of Rani and subverts the constructed and created notion of a whore and harlot into divinity projecting the poverty-stricken, sexually marginalised, socially ostracized bride as a Goddess, possible into the fictional area of dexterous dramatic creativity. The present paper will not only unfold the direst ramifications of patriarchal and patrilocal culture for a newly wedded girl but provides a seemingly suitable supernatural solution also.

Keywords: feminist, patriarchal, patrilocal gender-bias, feminism.

Gender issues form the pivotal point of dramatic oeuvre of Girish Karnad. The plays like *Naga-Mandala*, *Hayavadana*, *Bali - The Sacrifice* reflect very deeply Karnad's conscious portrayal of socio-cultural status and condition of Indian women circumscribed by the patriarchal and patrilocal system, though her spirit does not conform. The penetrating depiction of the problems of women in a prejudiced, biased patriarchal society makes Karnad a feminist writer. Karnad resembles Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw who upheld women's issues in their plays. The issue of the gender-bias in society and the oppression of women by the patriarchal

RESEARCH ARTICLE

order and their mythically driven or folktale solutions form the canonical dramatic norm of Karnad.

Unlike so many male writers of his generation, Karnad has given his female characters voice, wish, will and desire because he wanted to show the world how women are exploited in the name of social, cultural, religious norms and nomenclatures. Karnad advertently wanted to develop the plot in that direction to showcase the speaking, thinking, desirous women characters, not subservient, passive, self-sacrificing women. He even foregrounds sexual gratification seeking women characters in *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala*, both based on Indian folk tales. These plays give “primacy to women in the psychosexual relations of marriage, and create a space for the expression, even the fulfillment, of amoral female desire within the constraints of patriarchy.” (Collected Plays: 2008: xxviii)

Karnad was a true humanitarian who believed and understood male and female genders in their basic sentiments, desires, and whims. He never deifies women thereby crushing her all desires under the socio-cultural normative garb. His experiences have taught him that both the genders have equal emotional and physical desires. In *Naga-Mandala* Rani’s husband Appanna cohabits with harlot for sexual fulfillment but what about his wife Rani who is a newly wedded wife and dreams of meeting a prince. Indian Social structure is built in such a way that it doesn’t permit a wife ‘extramarital relation’. But Karnad has subverted this in the play and portrayed Rani having a relationship with Naga though unintentionally. He favours and allows his women characters having extramarital relation if unsatisfied in conjugal relationship. In a conversation with Tutun Mukherjee, he relates “I used to know a married woman once who positively blossomed after she had an extra-marital affair. If womanhood finds fulfillment in love that happens to be outside marriage, why should that be considered wrong? Radha’s love for Krishna was such” (Mukherjee: 2006:43).

Girish Karnad has humanized the extra-marital relationship through his dramatic art. His parents’ love-relationship nurtured his literary sensibility and he showed his creativity by giving it a human touch: “I was an adolescent when I learnt that both my parents were married before they married each other. In fact, my mother was a widow when she was a nineteen, but instead of being confined to her home, she showed an extra-ordinary courage and became a nurse. And that is how she met my father. My father had an ailing wife, who required nursing. They must have lived together before they finally got married. They made me realize that my mother was human and had human desires” (Mukherjee:2006:43) He very efficiently uses the

RESEARCH ARTICLE

term ‘human desire’ for sexual desire as it is just like any other desire of hunger,thirst,security,fear,love,passion,anger etc.

Girish Karnad has subverted socially constructed norms for woman and made her a human being with all natural flaws, just like a man with all natural flaws, lives in society and society accepts his flaws. This social subversion of roles is remarkably presented in *Naga-Mandala*. It is a dramatic play which fuses together story within story so there are many folktales centering women’s issues conjoined together infusing circles within circles as the title contains the word ‘mandala’ which means circle according to Hinduism and Buddhism. Traditionally a Mandala is a geometric design that represents the cosmos with deities existing in various heavenly worlds. Here the title is coined as Nagamandala which is referred to as Nagaradhane in south Kannada. It is a multiday festival in honour of the snake god. Therefore, Nagamandala symbolically represents the multifarious multidimensional social , cultural, religious loops which confine Indian women psychologically , mentally, physically but worship them scripturally as Goddess.

Naga-Mandala conjoins two folk tales - one is the story of feminine flames and a personified story who gather in a dilapidated temple to narrate the saga of the home where they existed. This folktale symbolically represents female psychology of narrating their personal and familial experiences to their female friends. Their gossip is overheard by a cursed dramatist who will die if he doesn’t keep awake the whole night. The personified story narrates itself which is about a young girl Rani, her husband Appanna and her snake lover referred to as Naga. This is an ordinary story of a girl Rani married to her husband who has extramarital affair. What is extraordinary is Karnad’s eventual climax which justifies a woman’s relationship beyond marriage system.

The female protagonist Rani, despite being the newly wedded bride of Appanna, lives the servile life of a domestic maid. She serves her husband timely food, clothes, cleans the house , gets insulted if raises an inquiry. She represents the colonised, marginalized, subaltern nonentity. Appanna comes home at noon to have lunch and goes away to his beloved, leaving Rani crying at night. The expected climax would have been Rani accepting her fate or fighting with her husband. Rani takes help of an elderly woman who gives her magic root to mix into food and to give that food to her husband. Innocent Ranimixes the root into food but when the colour of the food changes , she throws into anthill wherein the hidden Naga eats that root mixed food and falls in love with Rani. He turns into Appanna and comes to Rani at Night. Innocent Rani thinks that Naga in reality is Appanna and experiences conjugal bliss. The

RESEARCH ARTICLE

romantic story of Rani and Naga becomes a nightmare for Rani when she becomes pregnant. Appanna takes Rani to Panchayat and declares her the characterless culprit having slept with her lover and conceiving. The village Panchayat calls Rani for acceptance of guilty or to face the ordeal to prove her chastity. The innocent Rani has to prove her chastity whereas Appanna in the broad daylight goes to his mistress but nobody in the village dares to challenge him for chastity question. The concept of chastity traditionally is set for woman, she has to prove, no man has to prove his chastity. Sita had to face the fire ordeal to prove her chastity. Since centuries all women have to protect their bodies Candida in the eponymous play of G.B. Shaw rebukes her husband, compares her chastity with a mere shawl:

Ah, James, how little, you understand me, to talk of your confidence
in my goodness and purity! I would give them both to poor Eugene as
willingly as I would give my shawl to a poor beggar dying of cold,
if there were nothing else to restrain me.(Jain:2006:112)

The dramatic world of Karnad not only presents the exploitation of women as second sex representing the women caught in social shackles but it gives a mythical solution to it. In *Naga-Mandala* Rani faces the snake ordeal bravely and Naga proves her innocence and finally she is declared a goddess amidst public. Her husband accepts her divinity and leaves the concubine and stays with her. The whole village rebukes Appanna that he should value his wife as she is Goddess in human form:

ELDER I :Appanna, your wife is not an ordinary woman. She is a goddess incarnate. Don't grieve that you judged her wrongly and treated her badly. That is how goddesses reveal themselves to the world. You were the chosen instrument for the revelation of her divinity. (Collected Plays: 2008:293)

The biggest question here is that when Appanna knows he has not lived a single night with his wife how can she be pregnant. Is it blind faith of a poor Indian village in divinity or something else working here?

There are many questions emerging in the mind of an intelligent reader such as how can a man accept a pregnant wife without having slept a night with her. Why has Karnad given this socially unaccepted conclusion which doesn't suit the patriarchal mindset of a male socialised in male hegemonic power relationship? The hardest part to accept is the double conclusion where the dead Naga is ceremonially paid tribute by Rani and Naga's son and the other ending

RESEARCH ARTICLE

has Rani hiding the Naga into her hairlock. The transformation of innocent wife Rani into a bold mother facing the ordeal for the sake of legitimacy of her unborn child is also an idea to ponder.

This is where Karnadian dynamics of subverting the social order of gendered biases can be explored while searching the answer to all the interrogative ‘whys’ mentioned above. The biggest tool for subverting the stereotyped gendered paradigms in the play is the mythical narrative and its open-endedness. Karnad as a dramatist adapts the Indian story of an innocent girl married into a family where her existence has little value. The whole day she is involved in household chores rebuked by husband and other family members. At night she is also a physical machine used by husband without her wish, This is what generally the common family scene is where women live life of mute machines. Rani longs for the love of her dream prince but she gets guilt despite serving everything. Karnad subverts this situation through the myth of Naga. In India especially in southern part the Naga worship is ritualistic part of culture to obtain the blessings for the well being of family. Snake is part of Hindu mythology and associated with Lord Shiva, Lord Vishnu, Lord Krishna. Karnad has utilised Naga myth to grant Rani everything a woman desires. Myths are the oral narratives which emerged in the process of civilization and cultural development of human society. Karnad reutilized the Naga myth to subvert the narrative of an exploited village girl thereby subverting the socio-cultural norms of patriarchal society.

Karnad in fact, has carved a new Indian woman and a new Indian man through his dramatic art. The difference of sex and gender is very clearly elaborated in many fields of knowledge. Sex is a biological category; the gender is a social construct. This means a biologically male person can be feminine in attributes and a biologically female person can have masculine attributes.

Masculine and feminine qualities are more of social construct than biologically embedded characteristics. Masculinity is equated with activity, strength, logic, power etc. whereas femininity is usually equated with passive qualities like emotion, softness, care, imagination etc. There is a long list of binary qualities traditionally associated with both the genders. One more difference between femininity and masculinity is that femininity is articulated from the position of the marginalized whereas masculinity is a normative domain which sets all social cultural codes according to its own perspective and prerogative. Its hegemonic control evaluates the gendered roles in society - who has to do what, who can do what and where. A man can laugh loudly but it is supposed to be indecent for a woman, a man

RESEARCH ARTICLE

can have relation outside marriage, but it is deemed to be characterless for a woman and innumerable others functioning in society to control women.. Not only *Naga-Mandala* but almost all Karnadian plays which recreate the mythological narratives, has subverted the established social norms and order for the emancipation of female especially.

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