

Quest for Identity in Girish Karnad's *Naga-mandala*

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Abstract

Using myths and folktales, Karnad tells the story of a naive woman and the issues she faces in a patriarchal setup. Her journey begins from being a meek and obedient wife to being an assertive and strong woman. The story of the play is about her quest to realise her self-worth and understand her identity. The playwright reflects on how patriarchal forces try to control women and restrict their freedom. The present paper, thus, explores how Karnad uses myths and folktales to trace her quest for identity.

Keywords: Quest, Identity, Folktale, Postcolonial, Consciousness, Patriarchy.

Introduction

Girish Karnad's play Nagamandala deals with a woman's quest for identity. It is based on a Kannada folktale related to Karnad by the eminent author A.K. Ramanujan. Karnad claims it to be essentially a love story. The play depicts various parallel mythical plots and addresses several important contemporary concerns. It emphasises a modern woman's craving for love and recognition. For this play, Karnad won the Karnataka Sahitya Academy award for the most creative work of 1989. It delivers a scathing critique of the patriarchal discourse and subverts many masculine constructs such as 'Pativrata'. Karnad once stated that "The energy for the folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values".

The title of the play 'Nagamandala' is an allusive one. It is a combination of two words: 'Naga' means a snake or cobra, and the other word is 'Mandala', which means pictorial drawing or dancing. The overall meaning is playing with Cobra. Naga-Mandala is based on two folk tales of Kannada. It is inspired by popular myths and oral stories centring on the king cobra. It discusses the man-woman relationship, the position and identity of a woman and the impact of sociocultural modes on the feminine psyche. The question of chastity being imposed on married women while their husbands have extra-marital affairs, the throbbing of a secret

love that Naga demonstrates by his killing himself on the passionate and warm body of Rani and quest for identity are also some of the complex issues discussed in the play. In the backdrop of myth and folktale, which includes flames, snake, the performance of unique ordeals, the cremation of the dead snake, and the background chorus, Naga-Mandala comes alive with various symbols, hidden meanings and wise lessons.

Girish Karnad, like any other modern dramatist, makes extensive use of myths in his works to criticise sociocultural evils which have deeply eroded women's personal lives. He explores the social injustices perpetrated on naive and ignorant Indian women. Innocent women who were subjected to the violence of their authoritarian husbands were made to bear their husbands because they were afraid of social stigma. Therefore many modern dramatists wanted to abolish these wrong practices that afflicted Indian society. Karnad's Naga-Mandala deals with deep psychological problems faced by contemporary Indian women in the post-independent society by exposing the exploitation of women in Indian society.

Like many traditional wives, Rani considers her husband to be the centre of her whole world. Appana, her husband, locks and mistreats her. He restricts her behaviour and freedom. Her feelings and desires were totally neglected by him. She is forbidden to question him. Whenever she tries to ask, his only reply was "Look, I don't like idle chatter. Don't question me. Do as you are told. I'll be back tomorrow for lunch". She was obedient despite all this and yet she was ignored and cheated upon by him. She is deeply in love with her tyrant husband, and makes efforts to please him but all her efforts go in vain. Appana does not pay attention to the suffering of his wife who fears loneliness and alienation.

Appanna is portrayed as an aggressive and inconsiderate husband. He is totally indifferent towards his wife. Rani is presented as a submissive woman and is always kept isolated from society. Appanna enjoys his own life but makes her life a complete hell. Rani lives as a servant in their house and follows all the commands of her husband. Appanna neglects his duty as a husband and keeps his wife emotionally starved. He doesn't consider his infidelity as something wrong and even doesn't feel it is important to apologise to her. Nevertheless, when Rani finds someone who loves her and fulfils her needs, she is subjected to public humiliation. She was questioned by the public who didn't come to her when she was lonely and neglected. She is asked to go through a dangerous test to prove her chastity and loyalty. No one helps her except the generous snake.

The snake mainly represents rebirth, death and mortality, due to its casting of its own skin and being symbolically "reborn". The play is about the rebirth of a submissive and sincere woman who transforms into a strong and assertive woman with the help of a cobra/snake who made her realise her true identity. Shape-shifting or changing forms are prevalent in Indian myths and folktales. Karnad himself believed that a snake could take the form of a human. Snake here takes the shape of Appanna and fulfils the marital expectations of Rani. But, the snake ordeal taken by Rani to prove her chastity is reminiscent of the mythological story of Ramayan, where Sita undergoes a fire ordeal to prove her chastity. However, Karnad has dealt with this issue in a modern context. He has given Rani a happy ending. He depicts her in a strong light. He questions the different standards of society to judge adultery by a woman and a

man. He has normalised the issue of infidelity by a woman whose husband doesn't fulfil her needs. Naga's selfless love and affection made her realise her true worth as a result of which she was able to understand and acknowledge herself as a strong independent being who deserves authority in her own life.

Myths and folk tales in a patriarchal society primarily represent the male unconscious fears and wishes and are patriarchal constructs. The women's experiences and desires are considered unimportant in these stories. They do not probe much light on women's fears, anxieties, and psychological problems. It is a remarkable achievement of Karnad that he adapts this male-oriented folktale in such a way that it becomes a representation of the experience of man and woman in the psychologically transitional phase. In the end, Karnad's Rani becomes quite vocal and asserts, "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. I am not a parrot. Not a cat or a sparrow." She is seen to be in command of the household with some authority and decision-making power. Appanna even agrees to her rather strange demand that their son performs an annual "pinda-daan" in memory of the dead snake.

In postcolonial fiction in the twentieth century, myth is used as a framing device that contains and interrogates historical events, thereby functioning as a form of alternative history. Karnad, by using this myth, questions patriarchy and patriarchal notions of fidelity where a man's extramarital affairs are taken casually, and a woman has to go through a tough life-harming test to prove her chastity. Myth and folktale may be the starting points for Nagamandala, but the end products are neither one nor the other. Karnad locates Rani's existential dilemma in her self-knowledge. It led to Naga's death, but his sacrifice made her understand her identity. The solutions provided by the myths and folktales that were Karnad's story material did not satisfy Karnad's modern sensibility, and he understood that they would not make his audience happy. The modern mind must grapple with reality not by myth-making but by trying to re-vision and re-interpret life by exploring various possibilities and complexities that one may encounter in one's journey through life.

Girish Karnad in his play treats Rani as a representative of Indian feminineness. The unique challenge of Naga-Mandala lies in the exposure of its limitations as a work of art. In this sense, the play is attuned to its contradictions about women's experiences of desire and the modes of self-expression available to them within existing discourses. The play hints that these contradictions lie at the heart of myths as a whole. Karnad's way of reckoning with anxiety generates the classic postmodern theatrical device of multiple endings. It appeals to the postmodern sensibility of the late twentieth century, of which Naga-Mandala is a good example. Though the end of Naga-Mandala is not within the orthodoxy of Indian epic texts, the play must be studied and interpreted by taking into account the cultural context of the Indian woman of today who seeks to fulfil her needs and aspirations.

Conclusion

Thus, it has been observed that Girish Karnad uses myths in his play Nagamandala to explore contemporary issues. However, myths, which usually represent male desires and

wishes, are used only partially by Karnad. He has subverted them to expose the exploitation of women in Indian society and raise feminist concerns. Therefore, the play serves as a critique of the vices, drawbacks and limitations of contemporary Indian society. His play portrays certain existential themes like identity, love, isolation, chastity, authority, powerplay, etc. The complex psychological and emotional world of Rani in Nagamandala reveals the problem of women in the patriarchal setup. The play skilfully charts out the journey of a naive female who evolves as a strong and assertive creature. She realises her worth and stands up for herself.

Moreover, Karnad has supplemented the folktale with his modernist sensibilities in order to talk about a woman's identity, her wishes and her authority. He has expressed that: "Theatre can simultaneously be entertainment, political commentary and artistic statement and can be composed in traditional, realistic and post-modern forms". Karnad takes up fragments of folktales and links the past and the present, the archetypal and the real. As Dhanavel says, the borrowed myths are "reinterpreted to fit pre-existing cultural emphasis".

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