

The Place of Women in Indian Society: A Study of Girish Karnad's Naga-Mandala

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Abstract

Naga-Mandala is a two-act play written by well-known Indian playwright and actor Girish Karnad in 1987 and published in 1988. Nag-Mandala means 'a play with cobra'. This play is based on two oral folktales prevalent in Karnataka and other several parts of the country which Karnad heard from Professor A.K. Ramanujan. The sub-title 'Play with Cobra', given by Karnad himself, is an indication of its theme and the importance of the role of Cobra in it. In Nag-Mandala Karnad weaves a Kannada folk-tale that comments on the paradoxical nature of oral tales in general and has an existence of their own. These stories are independent of the teller and are passed on from one storyteller to another. In this play, there is the story of Rani, who makes up tales to fill the void in her life. Rani's predicament poignantly reflects the human need to live by fiction and half-truths. The play highlights man's attitude toward women in a patriarchal society and the conceptions like mistrust, infidelity and lack of communication between husband and wife which result in the disturbance in family life and the institution of marriage. The play, in the end, reaffirms the significance of motherhood as the cementing factor in the family and the society.

Keywords

Folktales, Motherhood, Mistrust, Predicament, Prevalent, Adultery, Indianness.

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The story of the play has been taken from a Kannada folklore that Karnad heard from the poet A.K. Ramanujan. The story of the play hangs around Rani, the protagonist and her husband's indifferent attitude towards her and her incognizant affair with King Cobra. The play begins with a 'Prologue' presented by Man, Flames and Story, the characters that prominently figure in the story of Naga-Mandala. The story of the Naga-Mandala is narrated by a special character 'Story'. The narrator-Story is born of a woman's mind who is wretched up with the behavior of her husband due to her complete negligence by her husband. The mind of Rani, the protagonist of the play, is strongly agitated due to her suspicion regarding her husband's affair with some other woman. The story of Rani and Appanna is a story of a mismatched man and woman in a typical Indian society. Rani faces the same problem which that Indian women generally face in their life in a male-dominated society. Naga-Mandala is the story of a young girl, Rani, newly married to Appanna, and their gradual understanding of the role, function and responsibilities of the institution of marriage. This story is presented in the play by a woman narrator, a "flame" who has come to tell story. The play begins in a temple on the outskirts of a village, where a passerby stops at night for shelter. He then finds many tiny "flames" entering the premises, who then start talking to each other. All the "flames" have come from different households in the village, who, after the lights have been put out for the night, escape their houses, to collect, gossip and have some entertainment. Each flame is a female, a storyteller, sharing with the others her observations and new experiences. The stranger, a writer himself, enters into their conversation, and listens to a 'new' tale that has just escaped from an old woman's head. This play is the story of a woman who is visited by a Cobra at night when her husband is busy with his mistress. She epitomizes the woman who evolves from an innocent, homesick and lonely bride to a young woman who asserts her rights and lives happily even in a male-dominated society just because of her constant struggle.

Rani is married to Appanna whose parents are dead. The parents of Rani like other Indians also had the consideration in arranging her marriage that a rich young man without parents and having no social obligations would be a better match for their daughter. Indian parents prefer to find rich boys for their daughters as their husbands simply because they take it for granted that it is difficult to earn a livelihood and that their daughter will be happy if she is married to a rich family. They think that she will live a comfortable life with her rich husband but they forget that the emotional comforts are more important to maintain a happy marital relationship in comparison to a sound financial condition. The same thing happened in the life of Rani. She is married to Appanna who is rich but has no interest in Rani. He is interested in a

concubine. As his parents are already dead, there is nobody to tell him the difference between a wife and a concubine. Like many other Indian men, he considers his relationship with the concubine a normal thing and never feels ashamed of what he does in his life by ignoring the woman to whom he has been married in the presence of the society.

Having been bewitched by the concubine, Appanna fails to recognize the beauty of Rani who is young and beautiful. He treats her only like a mistress and gives her commands only to prepare his lunch. In spite of being married to a rich person, all the dreams of the young bride are shattered and the life which was supposed to be happy turns into a very miserable life. He maltreats Rani and becomes so cruel that she loses the balance of her mind. She is constantly haunted by the dreams which have become the only ray of hope for her. She gets hallucinations like the middle-aged woman of the Prologue. Her desires are left unconsidered and her life is full of monotony like many other Indian women.

Appanna is an example of male chauvinism which is a typical Indian word. He has become despotic as his parents are dead and there is none to control him. He himself goes to the concubine but keeps his wife under lock lest she should also get a lover. He fails to realize that love knows no barriers. In spite of his vigilance, Kurudava, the best friend of Appanna's dead mother meets her. Naga comes to her Rani through drains and crevices. It is due to his indifferent attitude towards his wife that Naga manages to court her and Rani also fails to identify this mystery and the contradictory behaviors of the two Appannas because she was pining for love. She had some doubts in the initial stages but Naga managed to win her confidence with his ingenuity. Appanna is shocked to notice that Rani is pregnant in spite of all the restraints that he has imposed upon her movements. He is shocked at this news and doubts about her chastity and charges her with the offenses of adultery and perjury:

“Tell me who it is. Who did you go to with your sari off? You haven't? And yet you have a bloated tummy. Just pumped air into it, did you? And you think I'll let you get away with that? You shame me in front of the whole village, you darken my face, you slut -!”

He takes her to the village elders who ask her to pass through the ordeal test in order to prove her piousness by holding a red-hot iron bar. Indian society is considered to be male-dominated and the women from the ancient time have been the sufferer of male dominance. Rani faces the same situation to prove her piousness as Sita did in Ramayana during her Agnipariksha. The male-dominated society has always been inflicting its rules upon the women and the women have never got any option other than accepting them. That is why it does not even take cognizance of

the offense done by the husband, rather asks the wife to take the acid test. Despite knowing the fact that Appanna himself is an adulterer, the village elders ask helpless and innocent Rani to go for a test instead of giving punishment to Appanna for his maltreatment and unfaithfulness to his wife. Rani passes the test but is not able to remove the doubt of Appanna who is confident that Rani's child is not born of him. This idea tortures him. He is exhorted by the village elders to spend his life in Rani's service. But he is not ready to accept the proposal of the villagers as he says:

“What am I to do? Is the whole world against me? Have I sinned so much that even nature should laugh at me? I know I have not slept with my wife. Let the world say what it likes. Let any miracle declare her goddess. But I know what sense am I to make of my life that's worth nothing!”

It is the greatest torment for any Indian to accept the adultery of his wife especially when he is confident that his wife is an adulteress and is not loyal to him. Appanna suffers such a kind of humiliation in his life though he himself is also an adulterer and does not deserve the sympathy of the society.

Rani asks him, “When we cremate this snake, the fire should be lit by our son. Every year on this day, our son should perform the rituals to commemorate his death”. By saying this, she confirms that the snake is the real father of her son. Appanna has to say nothing but the statement: “Of course, there is no question of saying no. You are the goddess herself incarnate. Any wish of yours will be carried out. “A cuckold husband, having the knowledge of being one, is forced to treat his wife as a goddess and to carry out every wish of hers. Indians have strong superstitious beliefs and this is evident in Appanna also. He is not any particular person but a representative of chauvinistic males in the Indian society. He demonstrates Indianness in many of his qualities, views, and attitudes.

The entire play moves around Rani who does not give up her values of life in spite of all the tyrannies imposed upon her by her own husband Appanna. She is the only child of her parents and gets their love in full measure. Her father like any other Indian father also finds a rich husband for her with the conception that her daughter would lead a happy life with a rich and parentless husband having no domestic liabilities and obligations. An Indian father generally thinks that a man is a good match for his daughter if he has the means to provide the wherewithal to his daughter. These fathers never bother about the character of the men with whom their daughters have to pass their lives. Many men have turned out to be libertines and adulterers, but their richness overshadows all other considerations. But later they do not prove to be faithful husbands and their wives are bound to suffer in their life as Rani lives the life of any dejected Indian woman.

Appanna regularly goes to a concubine and treats Rani as a mistress. He ignores Rani and becomes a jailor to her. From day one he locks her in his house with the command that he would come to the house only for his lunch which she would prepare punctually and regularly and would not ask any questions. Rani is shocked but accepts his orders as a typical Indian housewife. She becomes a maidservant in her own house. She sweeps, mops the floor, scrubs utensils, cooks food, and obeys Appanna's commands for a square meal. She tells Kurudavva her story and the way her husband talks to her. She says that her husband talks to her only in words such as 'do this', 'do that', and 'serve the food'. As she is locked in the house, she is not able to meet anybody. Narrating her painful story, she tells Kurudavva,

"Apart from him, you are the first person I have seen since coming here. I'm bored to death. There is no one to talk to...I am so frightened at night. I can't sleep a wink. At home, I sleep between my father and mother. "

At this point, we see Indianness as most Indian children remain very close to their parents until their marriage. In spite of this persecution, she does not want to provide any harm to Appanna. When she complains that her husband is quite indifferent to her and is engrossed in his sexual relationship with some other woman. She has been confined to a maid in her house as she gets nothing from her husband other than commands to prepare breakfast and lunch for him. Kurudavva gives her two magical roots, a small one and a big one which can chant her husband back to herself and help her in getting the love of her husband Appanna. First, she gives the small one to Appanna which makes him sick in place of having a desirable effect. Now she does not want to take any risk by giving him the bigger one rather she is reluctant to fascinate her husband in this way. So, she determines to allure Appanna with love and affection. But Kurudavva convinces her that the use of the bigger root will definitely have a positive effect to bring her husband under her control and he will start behaving like her own choice. Kurudavva says:

"Go in and start grinding this root. Prepare a tasty curry and mix this paste in it. Let him taste a spoonful and he'll be your slave for life. After that, you just have to say a word and he will carry you to my house himself."

Even after the advice of Kurudavva, Rani does not want to use the bigger magical root. So, she pours the paste of the root mixed in curry into an ant hill where a king cobra consumes it and falls in love with her. Rani is an example of a typical Indian wife who is ready to endure the tyrannies inflicted by their husbands, yet serve them with all sincerity and loyalty. Rani does not want to take any risk even to get the love of her husband. Appanna keeps her as a slave, yet he is her dear husband and has to be kept out of the harm's way. The Hindu marriage rituals

determine the superiority of man over woman and make the husband master of the woman and the wife a poor slave. This is clearly evident in Rani's life also. Rani gets nothing from Appanna in form of love and affection, yet she is ready to do anything for him for his safety. Even when she commits a mistake on the advice of Kurudavva, she feels guilty and expresses her repentance over her mistake. Like an Indian wife, she can suffer at the hands of her husband Appanna but does not take any risk to gain the love of her husband at the cost of his life. She never revolts even in her thoughts. Her character typifies an Indian wife who prefers to accept suffering rather than cause any harm to her husband whom the title of the God has been given in Indian scriptures. A true picture of Indianness is evidently visible in the character of Rani.

Appanna accuses Rani of infidelity when he comes to know about Rani's pregnancy. Since he knows that he has never made love with Rani, so is confident that she has maintained sexual affairs with someone else and that the child she is carrying in her womb, is of someone else. He calls her a strumpet and whore, drags her out of the house, threatens to give her extreme punishment for her adulterous conduct-

“Aren't you ashamed to admit it, you harlot? I locked you in, and yet you managed to find a lover! I swear to you I am not my father's son if I don't abort that bastard. Smash it into dust! I will go to the village elders. If they don't throw that child into boiling oil and you along with it, my name is not Appanna”.

Rani suffers from social humiliation for her pregnancy in place of having some celebration. Appanna, instead of giving her honor for providing an increase in his dynasty, drags her to the village elders who ask her to hold a red-hot iron or catch a snake to prove her innocence. In spite of knowing the fact that Appanna is behind a concubine, they don't dare to question his morality. They are more interested in seeing how Rani is going to pass the test rather than holding Appanna guilty of leading Rani to such circumstances due to his maltreatment and negligence as a husband. They compelled her to prove her innocence and chastity.

When Rani holds the Cobra in her hand tremulously before all to pass the test, it gives her full honor. It slides up her shoulder and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head. The snake sways its hood gently for a while, then becomes completely docile and moves over her shoulder like a garland. The elders are charmed by this scenic view and declare Rani a goddess. They order Appanna to spend all his life at her service. This incident reveals the superstitious beliefs of the people and typical Indianness in the way they speak and behave.

The play ends with the supreme sacrifice of a lover in form of King Cobra in the Indian style. Intending to have look at her, the King Cobra takes on his human form and goes into Rani's bedroom. Seeing her sleeping next to her husband with her head on his shoulders and her long loose tresses hanging down from the edge of the cot and her child by her side, Naga covers his face because he cannot bear to see the scene and expresses. Naga decides to kill her by burying his teeth into her breast for some movement to have her forever. But suddenly he changes his mind because he loved her every night before her trial for chastity.

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