

# Naga-Mandala as a Feminist Play

Khushhali

Assistant Professor in English

Khushhali.hooda@yahoo.com

## INTRODUCTION

Girish Karnard is the versatile and foremost playwright of India. He has given the Indian theatre a richness and enlarged the scope of drama by introducing new techniques and thematic variations. He oftenly uses history and mythology to deal with contemporary issues. Originally he wrote in Kannada and later on translated them in to English. Karnard's first play is 'Yayati' in 1961 was a great success, deals with mythical characters from the Mahabharata. Subsequently he published 'Tughlaq' (1964), 'Hayavadana' (1971) based on 'The Transposed Heads' a novella by Thomas Mann, 'Hittina Hunja' (1980), 'Naga-Mandala' (play with Cobra, 1988) based on a folk tale which he heard years ago from Professor A.K. Ramanujan which brought him the Karnatka Sahitya Academy Award in 1989.

This play Naga Mandala is a powerful portrait of the agonies and problems of the marital life. It employs the frame of folk tales and it is replete with myth, magic, super-naturalism and fantasy. This play is a feminist in its true sense. It questions on our patriarchal society and presents the biased nature of it towards the male and female. It highlights the poor condition of woman's and how physically, mentally they are suppressed under the male chauvinism and ego. A woman suffers physical and psychological violence under the patriarchal system.

Our patriarchal moral chord demands chastity, virginity and faithfulness of a woman not of a man. According to the societal norms a woman is dominated by the male authority and she has to be sensitive towards her marriage in any circumstances. According to Karnard "Women's sexuality and adultery are normal human response and not as something sinful".<sup>1</sup>

In the play Rani commits adultery unknowingly as Naga visited Rani by assuming Appanna's home whereas Appanna openly commits adultery but no one questions him and the village elders tries the case of Rani and asked her to prove her innocence. This differentiation it highlights the gender biased justice only. Though at the end of play Rani is emancipated but in the beginning she has to suffer due to social conditions, traditions and so called culture. Karnard in his 'Introduction to Three Plays' says about the position of Rani.

He says,

"The position of Rani in story of Naga-Mandla for instance can be seen as a metaphor for the situation of a young girl in bosom of a joint family where she sees her husband only in two unconnected roles as a stranger during the day and as a lover at night. The empty house Rani is locked in could be the family she is married into".<sup>2</sup>

Naga-Mandla is a folk tale transformed into the metaphor of the married woman. Act one begins with the story addressing the audience,

"A young girl. Her name...it doesn't matter. But she was an only daughter, so her parents called her Rani. Queen. Queen of the long tresses"(7).

Rani here is not only a character but represents Indian woman in general.

"The female protagonist is Rani, it is not just a name but an epithet from the folk vocabulary that describes any beautiful woman as 'queen-like'".<sup>3</sup>

Her parents wished her a happy married life for her by marrying her to Appanna (literally means "any man") but reality was different Appanna proved to be cruel husband who maltreated Rani leaving her alone in the night and visits home only for lunch and bath. He locked up Rani inside the house and this lock it symbolize the sense of possession and

male chauvinism. Rani was unable to understand this kind of behavior and she feels frightened at night. When she tried to talk to Appanna, he replies.

“Look, I don’t like idle chatter. Don’t question me. Do as you’re told and you won’t be punished. (Finishes his meal gets up). I will be back tomorrow for lunch” (7).

Appanna exercises absolute supremacy over her and oppresses her. According to patriarchy a woman is not supposed to question her husband and she has to work according to the desires of her husband. Rani stopped questioning him because Appanna never listened to her words and this was the only communication between them.

“‘Do this’, ‘Do that’, ‘Serve the food’” (10)

She was like a caged bird who was alienated from her family and society. Appanna himself enjoys all freedom. He visits concubine for sexual pleasure but locked his wife inside so that she can remain pure and chaste. In case of male extra marital relationship are not questioned as it is patriarchal authority. It is the societal culture whether a husband humiliates or harasses his wife; she will still follow him blindly as a typical Indian wife is supposed to follow without questioning his ways.

When Kurudavva met Rani, she was surprised that how Appanna could leave such a lovely wife away at home.

“Ayyo! How beautiful you are. Ears like hibiscus. Skin like mango leaves. Lips like rolls of skin.” (11)

Kurudavva sympathized with Rani and gave her magical root to be made into paste and serve with food to win Appanna’s love.

“Once he smells you he won’t go sniffing after that bitch. He will make you wife instantly.” (13).

Rani prepared curry and added the paste of aphrodisiac root to it, as it turned red. It frightened her and she throws away the paste into an ant-hill near her house. Rani like a typical concerned wife did not want to cause any harm to her husband. This shows the difference in nature of a man and a woman in a patriarchal culture.

Naga, a King Cobra living in the ant-hill consumes the paste and falls in love with Rani and he started visiting Rani every night assuming Appanna’s form so that he can get close to Rani being Appanna. Naga was very compassionate and affectionate towards her. Rani could not believe the sudden change in Appanna so she asks :-

“You talk so nicely at night. But during the day I only have to open my mouth and you hiss like a .....stupid snake”. (22)

Naga knew this thing that his identity would not be kept hidden longer that’s why he too uses the patriarchal authority to suppress Rani’s reason and intuition so that truth could not come out.

“Naga : (seriously), I am afraid that is how it is going to be. Like that during the day. Like this at the night. Don’t ask me why.

Rani: I won’t”(23)

Rani believed on him and enjoyed his love. Rani came to know the real identity of Naga when she slept with Appanna till then she was in belief that it’s Appanna who loves her at night.

When Appanna discovered that Rani is pregnant, he accused her of adultery and cursed her.

“Aren’t you ashamed to admit it, you harlot? I locked in and yet you managed to find a lover! Tell me who it is.” (33)

He called up the village elders to punish Rani for adultery in return Rani tells that she has committed no sin and she is innocent. The Village Elders asked her to prove her innocence by holding a red-hot iron rod. But she as directed by the Naga (disguised as Appanna) one night before, requested to take the snake ordeal. She puts her hand into the ant-hill and took out cobra and while holding it she says:

“I have held by this hand, only two...my husband and this cobra. Except for these two, I have not touched anyone of the male sex. Nor have I allowed any other male to touch me. If I lie, let the cobra bite me.” (39).

The cobra raised its hood over her head for a while and then gently moves over her shoulder like a garland. This was a miracle according to the villagers and it established her purity and she was hailed as goddess. Appanna became a tractable and devoted husband after this incident.

Naga-Mandala questions the patriarchal moral codes which demands faithfulness of woman not of a man. It deals with the theme of patriarchal despotism, female and male sexuality, adultery and chastity. It represents the basic human nature prevailing in society that the woman is controlled by her man. If a woman wants to live happily she has to develop her own individuality. These terms chastity and virginity are only used for women to oppress and weaken them. Rani committed the sin of adultery in the ignorance. If she would have known the reality, she would not have allowed Naga to touch her. Girish Karnard through this play reflected the social realities of conservative Indian society.

### **REFERENCES**

- [1]. Tuntun Mukherjee : 'In His Own Voice: A Conversation with Girish Karnard', Girish Karnard plays: Performance and Critical Perspectives, p. 43.
- [2]. Girish Karnard, Introduction to Three Plays, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- [3]. V. Rangan: 'Myth and Romance in Naga-Mandla or their subversion?' in Tuntun Mukherjee (ed.) Girish Karnard's play: Performance and Critical Perspectives, Pencraft International, Delhi, 2006. P. 201.
- [4]. Girish Karnard, 'Naga-Mandla', New Delhi: Oxford University Press, (1990). All textual reference kept in parentheses in article are from this edition.