

**PATRIARCHAL HEGEMONY IN GIRISH KARNAD'S 'NAGAMANDALA'**

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**ABSTRACT**

Girish Raghunath Karnad (b. 19 May 1938) is an internationally acclaimed playwright, film-maker, a versatile actor and a person of wide accomplishments and interests. Based on his serious explorations of folklore, mythology and history, he was conferred the Padma Shri and the Padma Bhushan by the Government of India. He is a recipient of the 1998 Jnanpith Award, the highest literary honour conferred in India. The subject of his plays reflects the problems and challenges of contemporary life. Naga-Mandala is an important play that discusses the important issue of feminine desire for social independence and sexual fulfillment by defying the dictates of patriarchy and subverting the patriarchal constructs of gender and cultural discourses. In Naga Mandala the racial class divisions are not so prominent. But the female is itself presented as an oppressed class and Rani, the central character of the play, becomes a representative of it. The subjugation of a woman by the patriarchy through the instruments of gender and culture have been presented by Karnad in this play. The atmosphere of magic realism is created with Naga-Mandala as well, where Rani fulfils her sexual desires with the Naga in the absence of her husband Appanna. Here the female desire and the feminine discourse get overlapped with each other in the psychological discourse of a female self thus, creating a hybrid semi-real space. The issues of extramarital affairs and illegal sexual relationship have been put forth by Karnad in the modern context through myth and folklore.

**Keywords:** *Cultural code, Feminine, Mandala, Naga, Patriarchy, Serpent*



Nagamandala is an elaborate and spectacular ritual of serpent worship found in Tulunadu, especially in Mangalore and Udupi districts. Nagamandala is also called Hudiseve, Mandlabhoga or Mandlaseve by the Baidyas. But Nagamandala is a term generally used by all to denote this form of worship.

The term Nagamandala is a compound of two words: Naga and Mandala. Naga means serpent and Mandala implies decorative pictorial drawings on the floor. The decorative drawing in this context means the drawing of the figure of the serpent god in a prescribed form. Nagamandala depicts the divine union of male and female snakes.

Noted play writer Girish Karnad wrote a play titled Nagamandala between 1987-88. Like the ritual this also revolves around the union of a snake. However, here the union was not with another snake. Instead it was the union of a snake in the form of a human and another human. The play is based on two folk-tales that Karnad heard from his mentor A.K Ramanujan. It will take a direction towards the idea of a snake in the play and its various connected concepts to the Indian culture.

The play Nagamandala revolves around the character Rani. Rani is a young bride who is neglected by her indifferent and unfaithful husband, Appanna. Rani is locked inside the house by Appanna which shows his male dominism. He treats her as if she were a mere servant and meanwhile he keeps and uses a concubine. An old blind woman, who is always carried around by her son. Kappanna, tries to help Rani by giving her a potion which, she says, will cause Appanna to fall in love with her. Rani gives up that plan at the last moment, however, and pours the potion on the ant hill which happens to be the dwelling place of a King Cobra. The Cobra(a Naga) then falls in love with Rani. Naga, who can take the form of a human being, is enchanted with her and begins to visit her every night. He enters the house through the drain in the bathroom at night and once inside takes on the appearance of Appanna, the husband. This changes Rani's life completely as she starts to experience the good things in life though she never knows that the person with her is not her husband but the Naga. One of these days, she gets

pregnant and breaks the news to Appanna. He immediately accuses her of adultery and says that he has not fathered the child. The issue is referred to the village Panchayat. She is then asked to prove her fidelity by putting her hand in the snake burrow and taking a vow that she has not committed adultery. It is a popular belief that if any person lies holding the snake in their hand, they will be instantly killed by the snake God. She does place her hand in the snake's burrow and vows that she has never touched any male other than her husband and the Naga in the burrow. She is declared chaste by the village Panchayat. Later, Appanna accepts Rani and starts a new life together.

Appanna literally means "any man" and points to the metaphor of man in general, his chauvinistic stance and towering dominance to the extent of suppressing a woman's individuality. Rani endeavours to discover her individuality by seeking refuge in dreams, fairy tales and fantasies to escape the sordid reality of her existence. At an age where the typical fantasy would be a Sultan or prince coming on horseback, Rani's flight of the imagination transports her to a seventh heaven where her parents wait for her. Critics show her body as a site of "confinement, violence, regulation and communication of the victimized gender-self". And they also point out how she later uses the same body to rebel, to subvert and to negotiate her space in society. Appanna poses her as an adulterous woman whereas he himself has an illicit relationship with a concubine. He and his hypocritical society questions Rani's chastity and side-steps the validity of Appanna's principles. This is just a miniscule cross-section of the patriarchal society that we live in. In Indian myth, a miracle has been mandatory to establish the purity of a woman, while a man's mere word is taken for the truth; whether it be Sita, Shakuntala or Rani in this instance.

In a patriarchal social order, "masculinity is associated with superiority; whereas 'femininity' is linked with inferiority," and while "masculinity implies strength, action, self-assertion and domination, femininity implies weakness, passivity, docility, obedience and self-negation".<sup>3</sup>



Leaving a life without any future and identity, she is in search of her love and identity as a wife. Being thrown in the storm of isolation, she gets into the squall of Naga's love that comes to her in the form of her husband. Getting away from remoteness and breaking her silence with the questions of Naga she starts feeling comfortable and her fear and tear takes the form of ecstasy.

*"Let it. I don't feel afraid any more, with you beside me."* (Pg.: 273)

Naga makes up all that Rani had missed out in her married life. It is the only society to judge the things and according to it the situation through which Rani passes is against the laws and orders of the society as well as tradition. All of a sudden when she gets into the problem and her love making becomes a pain for her as she tells Naga:

*"Yes, there is. Give me poison instead. Kill me right here. At least I'll be spared the humiliation. Won't the cobra bite me the moment I touch it? I'll lie like your dog and your mangoose."* (Pg.: 286).

In Kiranth's words, "... an Indian woman knows that motherhood confers upon her a purpose and identity that nothing else in her culture can".<sup>4</sup> As a mother, Rani is seen in the last part of the story 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 should perform an annual "pinda-daan" in the memory of the dead snake.

The woman in her might have experienced the difference between the love of Naga and authority of Appanna. A. Jaganmohana Chari expresses views in this context: "The dichotomy of lover and husband is in the tradition she has inherited. When she discovers in her experience in the end the difference between Naga's love and that of her husband the feeling of experience hardly crosses the threshold of her consciousness because her experience of her head or her conscience hardly matters in the world of patriarchal hegemony".<sup>5</sup>

Folk tales in a patriarchal society represent primarily the male unconscious fears and wishes and is male-oriented. In these stories the women's experiences and inner feelings are not given importance. 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 folk tale in such a manner that it becomes a representation of the experience of man and woman in the psychologically transitional phase.

The Cultural code works on the principle of shared world view. It exploits information that persists in one culture and uses it to the best of its ability. By using appropriate cultural codes a lot of decoding is made easier for the readers. It throws light on the beliefs and superstitions that exist in that particular culture. For example, in that culture the snake is regarded as a sacred species. It is also feared by many and there is a saying that if one talks of the snake, the snake tends to appear immediately. The Snake primarily represents rebirth, death and mortality, due to its casting off its skin and being symbolically "reborn".

The best use of cultural code would be the snake ordeal that Rani performs in order to prove herself not guilty. Traditionally in that culture it is believed that to prove oneself not guilty one would either have to hold red hot bars of iron in the hand and plead innocence or perform the snake ordeal. Here Rani takes ordeal where she has to put her hand into the termite hill and pull out the snake. After which she has to prove her statement by promising in the snake's name. It is a belief in that society that if that person has said the person truth then the snake would bless that person, if not, it would bite the person which eventually led to the death.

In Rani's case the snake blesses her. Immediately the society divinizes her for her supreme powers and capacity and expresses guilt in putting her through the ordeal. Rani gets physically engaged with Naga (Cobra in the guise of Rani's husband Appanna) who makes love with her every night in the absence of her cruel husband Appanna who leaves her everyday locked in the room. The identities of Naga and Appanna have overlapped with each other thus creating a state of confusion among the husband and wife. The semi-dark atmosphere and the confused identities give Rani the opportunity to break away the barriers of patriarchy and exercise her own discretion in fulfilling her feminine desire



and subverting the male constructs. Through Rani, Karnad challenges the patriarchal constructs of chastity and ideal womanhood that the women are made to follow only to serve the purpose of the male.

Naga-Mandala is a feminist play. It questions the patriarchal moral code which demands the faithfulness of a woman to her husband but not the faithfulness of a man to his wife. This is accepted not only by men but also by women. Appanna openly and unashamedly commits adultery but nobody objects to it; the Village elders who sit in judgment do not find fault with him. Nobody believes the innocence of Rani. She sleeps with Naga without knowing it. She does not discover the identity of Naga who assumes Appanna's form by using his magical power.

At the end Appanna worships his wife and accepts the child. Now he is at peace, he has resolved his differences, but faces the dichotomy of her real and ideal self. She pats her hair, and tells Naga, "This hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss, live happily forever." She wants the love and the status of her wedded husband and she also yearns for the warm sensuous love of the Naga.

The play has made use of the snake effectively to bring out many messages. Unless and until the snake was personified, given a human form, the play would not have been able to get the message across. The snake here through its games and acts has given the rigid hero a new way of life. It has thrown light on the new relationship pattern and the importance of a wife and her love in a man's life. It is through the snake which is worshiped for fertility that Rani conceived and it is this point in her life that brought a complete change. Snake led to effected lives of many and redefined many relations especially of Rani and Appana. To conclude, people especially the devotees, strongly believe that the ultimate result of Nagamandala is Nagamangala i.e. prosperity of the village, prosperity of the town and bless for all living beings.

The issue of extramarital affairs is prohibited in Indian culture. But, in his play NagaMandala Karnad indirectly justifies Rani's act of adultery by stating it as a metaphor.

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