

Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala*: A Note on Women Emancipation and Empowerment

Dr. Rushiraj P. Waghela

Lecturer

L. E. College, Morbi (Gujarat).

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ABSTRACT

The painful patriarchy, suffering of women and their reactions for equal rights in the ancient and contemporary Indian society are obvious to catch the attention of the literary world. Many contemporary Indian English dramatists have made attempts to give voice to the sufferings and predicaments of women in Indian society. Feminism has become the prime focus of the modern day dramatists in India. Girish Karnad has dealt with the gender issues in almost all his plays. *Naga Mandala* is a feminist play that not only attacks and exposes male bigotry, the repression of women, the discrimination done to them by men and the patriarchal culture, but also quietly deflates the concept of chastity. It is a play on the liberation and empowerment of the women who have to play an essential role for the revival of a deteriorated social order. The present paper attempts an in-depth analysis of *Naga-Mandala* to see how Karnad has deployed traditional and modern material to voice female desires and aspirations through the character of Rani. It seeks to examine the dynamics and dimensions of Rani's journey from the marginalized position to the central one in her marital life.

Key words: Women Emancipation

Naga-Mandala, blend of a folktale and a myth, is a drama of male chauvinism that weakens and degrades females and rests on the exploitation and confinement of women. It is based on two stories which the versatile playwright, actor, director Girish Karnad heard from the poet and academician A.K. Ramanujan in his childhood. It employs the device of a story within a story. Girish Karnad has dealt with the gender issues in almost all his plays. *Naga Mandala* is a feminist play that not only attacks and exposes male bigotry, the repression of women, the discrimination done to them by men and the patriarchal culture, but also quietly deflates the concept of chastity. It is the play resonating the persistent predicaments of women in the Indian rural society. Apart from documenting the women's problems, the play also presents the protesting voice against the iron rules of patriarchal society. It is a play on the liberation and empowerment of the women

who have to play an essential role for the revival of a deteriorated social order.

Girish Karnad in this play portrays the character of a married woman, Rani from an unconventional point of view to demonstrate that the society is terribly puritanical, patriarchal and prejudicial to women. Rani represents the common submissive Indian rural girl who becomes the victim of the unfair social order through the institution of Marriage. Her parents decide her marriage without even asking for her choice thinking that she is incapable of taking her own decision. She is asked to marry a person named Appanna, literally means 'any man'. So it is a not just the story of Rani and Appanna but that of any man and woman united in a wed-lock. Marriage is the age-old institution that has always been unfair to women. Women are exploited physically, mentally, emotionally, socially and intellectually. Her father thinks Appanna a suitable groom for Rani from the perspective of economical

criteria. He was rich and wealthy. Therefore her father thinks him suitable for Rani. Ironically, Appanna is adulterous and not at all suitable for a simple girl like Rani. Rani mirrors the image of a common woman who comes to her husband's house with sweet dreams and desires of happy domestic life. But she has to face another side of reality. Besides Rani, Appanna has a mistress whom he visits every night and comes to Rani only at noon. His treatment with Rani is monstrous and animalistic. He keeps her locked up inside the house so that she cannot express her grievance to anyone. Her sexual desires are neglected. She is frequently beaten. Her emotions are crushed mercilessly. And socially, she is not allowed to communicate with anyone outside the house. Rani's dreams and desires are shattered. She turns voiceless and choice less. She does not find emotional, social or sexual satisfaction from the institution of marriage. Appanna's inhuman treatment is witnessed on the first day of their marriage when instead of being with Rani, Appanna goes to meet his mistress and locks Rani up in the house. He says, "...I'll be back tomorrow at noon. Keep my lunch ready. I shall eat and go" (6). He doesn't even tell her the reason. Neither he tells her where he is going. Because of the patriarchy-conditioned mind, she even does not gather courage to question his night-visit. Her upbringing in patriarchal setup has made her timid, shy and submissive. She has lost her capacity to question. As a result, she fails to gather courage and confidence to question the exploitative and oppressive system. Women do not have freedom to question. However, they are questioned in case they deviate slightly from the prescribed path of patriarchal system. For Appanna, there is no social, ethical or established taboo. He is free from all limitations and his actions are not subjected to questions. Karnad very ingeniously raises the issue that our conformist society and social laws insist loyalty and dedication from a wife even to a disloyal and heartless husband. Rani is always locked by Appanna in the house. This lock and key is the symbolical representation

of the patriarchal cage man has prepared for women. In the words of Manchi Sarat Babu "This solitary confinement of Rani by Appanna in the house symbolizes the chastity belt of the Middle Ages, the reduction of women's talents to housework and the exclusion of women from enlightenment and enjoyment." (Babu, 239) He comes only for lunch and remains there for a while without any conversation. He doesn't allow Rani to ask any question. He says, "Look, I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand?" (7). Man, conventionally gets the privilege to order his wife in a marriage whereas wife is taught to follow what man dictates. Like most of the traditional Indian wives, Rani suffers severe sense of loss and weariness within wedlock.

Appanna locks her up in the house and brings home a watchdog and a mongoose to ensure her complete alienation from the society. Rani has to stay alone for the whole day and night. She feels scared being alone in the house obsessed by the feelings of fear and insecurity. Instead of supporting her, Appanna threatens her, "What is there to be scared of? Just keep to yourself. No one will bother you..." (7). Rani does not find anyone to share her agony. Rani tells Kurudavva, "... you are the first person I have seen since coming here. I'm bored to death. There is no one to talk to!" (11).

When she is unable to fulfill her sexual, emotional, social and psychological desires, she suppresses her desires. The suppression is inevitable as women in India are not free to claim their needs. Rani's fantasy of an eagle taking her far away from Appanna's world is the natural result of her repression of her desires. Her repressed desire to be loved and to be free gets expression in her fantasy where an eagle wants to take her "Beyond the seven seas and the seven isles. On the seventh island is magic garden. And in that garden stands the tree of emeralds. Under that tree, your parents wait for you" (7). The eagle is the symbol of the flight and freedom. It is the metaphorical representation of her yearning to get released from the tyranny of her married life. Her discontented desires are

fulfilled in her hallucination, fantasy and dreams. The victim of severe repression and alienation, Rani seeks refuge to the dream land where she moans, “Oh, Mother”. (7) But this dreamy world soon disappears like the lines drawn in the water. She confronts with the harsh realities the moment she wakes up. She finds herself locked in Appanna’s house.

In the midst of all the tyrannies and the sense of uncertainty, Kurudava, a blind and aged woman, seems to be her ray of hope. Blind Kurudava feels Rani’s superb beauty with her fingers and exclaims, “Ayyo! How beautiful you are. Ears like hibiscus. Skin like young mango leaves. Lips like rolls of silk. How can that Appanna gallivant around leaving such loveliness wasting away at home.” (11) She gives Rani a magical root, a remedy to win back her husband from the clutches of his mistress. She asks Rani to make it into paste and add into a curry. She advises Rani to feed it to her husband and watch the result. This process is supposed to make Appanna fall in love with Rani and he won’t go to his mistress. But when Rani adds the paste, the curry turns into red –blood red. Out of fear, Rani pours the blood-red curry in the ant-hill where the cobra lives. Affected by the magic of the root mixed in curry, Naga falls in love with Rani. Naga visits her every night assuming the form of Appanna. He praises her long hair and talks a lot about her parents, besides listening to her attentively. Naga gradually breaks her frigidity and hesitancy, and dispels feelings of fear and insecurity with the help of “honeyed words” (25). Rani also falls in love with Naga in the guise of Appanna.

However, Rani fails to comprehend how the brutal husband who comes to her only midday for lunch has been transformed into a sensuous lover at night. Cobra visits her every night and makes love with her in the guise of Appanna. She finds a lot of difference between two visitors--mid-day Appanna and night Appanna. She gets confused as the Appanna (Naga) at night is caring, loving and sensual where as Appanna at midday is as usual cruel and harsh. The Naga, who visits to

her during nights, disguised as Appanna, is the sexual self of Appanna. Rani observes, “you talk so nicely at night. But during the day I have to open my mouth and you hiss like a snake.... stupid snake”. (22) Through the double self symbol *Naga-Mandala* upholds the traditional significance of the institution of the marriage but exposes the evils of female exploitation in a male dominated or husband centric society.

The woman in her might have experienced the diversity between the love of Naga and dominance of Appanna. But nobody allows her to question –Naga because of his profound love for her and Appanna for his egocentric, male chauvinistic governance. Rani speaks at one point:

Yes, I shall. Don’t ask questions. Do as I tell you. Don’t ask questions. Do as I tell you. No, I won’t ask questions. I shall do what you tell me. Scowls in the day. Embraces at night. The face in the morning unrelated to the touch at night. But day or night, one motto does not change: Don’t ask questions. Do as I tell you. (32)

This phase of fluctuating feelings during day and night continues until Rani becomes pregnant as a result of her love making with Naga in the form of Appanna. Her pregnancy invites the bunch of troubles for her. Appanna turns livid with anger when he comes to know of her pregnancy. He maltreats her and even kicks her. He vomits venom from his mouth against her and speaks:

Aren’t you ashamed to admit it, you harlot? I locked you in, and yet you managed to find a lover! Tell me who it is. Who did you go to with your sari off” (33). He further says “I swear to you I am not my father’s son, if I don’t abort that bastard! Smash it into dust! (33).

Rani, thinking that she has not committed any crime, swears to him about her innocence, “I swear to you I haven't done anything wrong” (33)

But Appanna reports the matter to the village elders who pass orders that she must

undergo chastity test either by putting red hot iron on her palm or putting hands into the hole of cobra. This incident reminds the fire test Sita had to undergo to prove her chastity in the Ramayana. It is ironical to see that she has to undergo the chastity test to prove her purity whereas nobody expects any such chastity test from Appanna who has a mistress outside. Sita has to undergo the fire test to prove her purity but Rama is not expected to undergo any such test as the purity measures are only for women in Indian society. Naga tells her to take Cobra trial and speak truth and nothing else. Their conversation mirrors Rani's predicament:

RANI: What truth? Shall I say my husband forgets his nights by next morning? Shall I say my husband brought a dog and a mangoose to kill this cobra, and yet suddenly he seems to know all about what the cobra will do or not do?

NAGA: Say anything. But you must speak the truth.

RANI: And if I lie?

NAGA: It will bite you. (34)

Finally, Rani accepts the cobra trial and puts her hands into the ant-hill, takes out cobra and vows, "Since coming to this village. I have held by this hand, only two....My husband....And this Cobra" (38). Cobra, instead of biting her, makes an umbrella with his hood over her head and moves over her shoulder to make a garland. The irony of Rani's successful cobra ordeal ridicules the classic Hindu mythic chastity test. It is suggestive of Sita's ordeal of fire in Ramayana to prove her fidelity and chastity. In Karnad's play the woman undergoes another test, the ordeal of handling a venomous snake which proves "it is her very infidelity that comes to her aid in proving that she is a faithful wife." (Dharwadker: 444)

Her oath proves her innocence. At this moment, the elders and villagers who were ready to declare her a whore, exclaims, "A Miracle! A Miracle! She is not a woman! She is a Divine Being!" (39). She is designated as the incarnation of goddess and her husband Appanna accepts her and the child in her womb. She is proclaimed to be a goddess.

Villagers raise her to the status of goddess when they announce, "Appanna your wife is not an ordinary human. She is goddess incarnate. Don't grieve that you judged wrongly and treated her badly. That is how goddesses reveal themselves to the world" (40). Appanna seeks her pardon and lives happily with her and says: "Forgive me. I am a sinner. I was blind..." (40). Now he appreciates the splendor of her long locks and dignity as a human being. Rani's victory in the cobra trial and her consequent rise to the category of a goddess indicates women empowerment and accuses unreasonable male supremacy. The institution of marriage is eventually vindicated. Rani gets everything she wished for, a devoted husband and a happy life. She even got a permanent servant to draw water for her house. Appanna's keep was present at trial. When she witnessed Rani's grandeur, she felt embarrassed of her immoral life and volunteered to do menial work in Rani's house. Rani gives birth to a baby boy in due course of time. Rani gets a stable and happy life ever with her husband, son and servant.

Rani suffers from the hands of both the society and her husband. Her husband tortures her and villagers insist her to take either the snake-ordeal or the fire-ordeal. She doesn't get happiness and dignity from anyone in the society. Even her parents got her married to a monstrous man without asking for her wish. Ironically she gets love and dignity from a reptile in the form of man (Naga) who helps her to get the status of goddess. This is how Karnad has reflected the fact that humankind has failed to elevate their own race.

The anxious, scared, young girl finds within herself a new courage and confidence and gains social respectability as she emerges victorious from the public trial. This stage of Rani's social integration brings her a new sense of respect and her own worth. This is another central aspect of the Indian social and cultural life in its treatment of women. In Sudhir Kakar's words, "an Indian woman knows the motherhood confers upon her a purpose and identity that nothing else in her

culture can.” (56). As a mother, Rani is seen, in the last part to the story, to be in authority of the family, with some weight and decision making power. When the dead Naga falls from her hair, Appanna says: “Your long hair saved us” (44) from the deadly Cobra. When Rani articulates her strange desire that the cobra has to be ritually cremated, the fire should be lit by their son and every year on this day, their son would perform an annual “pinda-daan” in the memory of dead snake, Appanna agrees and says, “Any wish of your will be carried out” (44). Rani now turns to be an active member of the family who confidently performs her role and asserts her thoughts in decision making. In the alternate end to the play, Naga, who finds Rani merrily sleeping in the arms of her husband, strangles himself in her hair. It is here that one of the flames demands a happier ending .At this is the man amends the story .The Naga does not commit suicide. Alive snake falls out of Rani’s hair and lies writhing on the floor. Appanna wants to kill it but Rani hides it in her dark and dense locks saying, “The hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss. Live in there happily, forever.” (45) Rani accepts Naga as her lover and boldly invites him to stay into her hair. She says, “Get in (to my hair). Are you safely in there? Good. Now stay there. And lie still. You don't know how heavy you are. Let me get used to you, will you?”(45).

In a nutshell, *Naga-Mandala* is an out and out feminist drama imprinted out of the rubric of folk legends. It covers the theme of woman's

destiny, her chastity and societal role and merges it with an unpredicted ending latent on double crossing and reviving of old customs. The play narrates Rani’s marital journey from marginalized position a central one. It is a simple but magical tale that celebrates sensuality from a women’s point of view. Though she suffers pain and torture in the beginning of her married life, she achieves a respectable position in the end. Commenting on this, Prem Sagar says that we shall be “worse than blind Kurudava if we fail to give women their due place in the society and worse than Cobra if we fail to appreciate their potential. Rani's and Naga's ultimate act of reconciling with the situation is edifying. It is no wisdom to remain stuck to the past, when future beckons us.” (Prem Sagar "Preface").

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There is no exercise better for the heart than reaching down and lifting people up.

~ John A. Holmes