



Girish Karnard's Treatment of Myth and Folklore in *Naga-Mandala*

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Naga-Mandala, published in 1988, is derived from folk-lore. In *Naga-Mandala* Karnad turns away from the 'classical' traditions to the local Kannada folktales as his source, which he had heard from A.K. Ramanujan, India's renowned scholar of oral traditions. Here Karnad combines two tales – the flame story, and the story of Rani and Appanna to bring out his chosen premise. The flame story explores the notion of stories derived from oral traditions, having a life independent of their narrators, while the second, the central one, focuses on the snake – lover motif, which is instrumental in the "exploration of women's sexuality within the confinements of domesticity" (Sreekumar and Bindu 216).

Two very popular Kannada folk tales go into the making of *Naga-Mandala*. Added to these folk tales is an element of surrealism to create a captivating and socially very relevant domestic drama. *Naga-Mandala* opens with a prologue. The play is set in the sanctum sanctorum of a village temple. The prologue itself sets the tone of the play. The ruined temple, the broken idol of the presiding deity, time of night and moonlight seeping through the cracks in the roof – all combine together to create a mystic and ethereal setting. As the play opens the audience comes face to face with a man, sitting all alone in the ruined temple. He is trying hard to keep himself awake. It is in the middle of his efforts that he addresses the audience and tells them why he is desperately trying to remain awake. He tells the audience that a mendicant told him to stay awake at least one full night of the continuing month, failing which he will die. He has tried his level best to stay awake the whole night but has failed to do so till now. The man is a writer who wrote and staged plays and caused people to sleep curled up uncomfortably in their chairs while watching his hopeless plays. It is here in this temple that the man vows not to do anything with stories and plays if he survives. In these folk tales, Karnad found relevance to modern times. *Naga-Mandala* explores some very contemporary social concerns. Karnad is present in the tales as an objective, witness. We can feel his presence in 'The Man' of the 'Prologue'.

The main plot of the play unfolds before us as a story embedded in the sub-plot. The plot of flames is the peripheral one, whereas the main plot of Rani and Appanna constitutes the story that has been stifled for long and which now longs to be told. As the lamps in the village are put off, the flames gather in the old ruined temple where the man has taken shelter for the night. Here as all the flames gossip and share their experiences there comes a flame that is late that night. When the other flames ask her as to why she got late she tells them that in her household there was



a row. She stayed with an old couple. Now the old woman knew a story and a song, but she would never tell this story or song to another person and this suffocated both the story and the song. On that particular day, as the old woman took a nap after lunch, her mouth opened slightly and both the story and the song fled out and hid in the attic. At night the story took the shape of a woman and the song became a sari, which was draped by the story. After the husband had slept, the story and the song (in the form of young woman in the sari) fled from the house. The old woman saw the woman coming out of their room and it created a quarrel between the husband and wife. Flame I very rightly observes:

So, if you try to gag one story, another happens. (Girish Karnad I: 25)

This is how the story of Rani and Appanna comes out and through. The man reaches the readers and the audience.

The story begins in the house of Appanna in his village where he has brought his wife Rani after she had attained womanhood. Strangely, no soft feelings are evident between the couple. Appanna already has a mistress and therefore he does not have any interest in his young and beautiful wife. He locks her in and goes away, only to come once during day to take bath and have lunch. Rani is naturally desolate and depressed. She misses and longs to be with her parents, but does not know to break out of her monotonous life. To relieve her of this pathetic situation there comes Kurudavva, a blind woman and a friend of Appanna's deceased mother. She is carried by her son Kappanna who does not approve of his mother's efforts to talk to Rani, the neglected wife. Kurudavva gives Rani two roots. If Rani could feed either of the roots to Appanna, he would fall in love with her. Rani grinds smaller one in her husband's milk. However, it does not produce the desired effect. On Kurudavva's insistence Rani makes a curry with the bigger piece of root. However, the curry turns out to be blood-red in colour and Rani does not want to feed it to Appanna for fear of harming him. She is a virtuous and faithful woman, and therefore on the suggestion of the story itself she pours it on the side of an anthill near their house. In this anthill lives a cobra, who consumes that curry and the inevitable happens. From now on cobra enters Rani's house through the drain in bathroom and since he knows that Rani would never let any other man to even come near her, he assumes Appanna's form and becomes Rani's husband. He is called Naga to distinguish him from Appanna. Now Rani encounters two aspects of her husband – the dry and aloof one during day time and very caring and intensely emotional lover at night. Rani fails to understand this dichotomy, but a dutiful wife that she is, she doesn't ask any questions, for Naga forbids her to do so. Rani is happy with Naga and night after night they are together. As a result of their togetherness Rani conceives and the knowledge of this conception creates a major Upheaval in the village community. Appanna has not touched Rani and he is obviously highly disturbed and



infuriated. The village community asks Rani to confess her guilt but Rani pleads 'not guilty' for in her knowledge she has not committed any crime. Rani has to prove her innocence. Naga tells Rani that she must take a vow to her innocence by holding the king cobra in her hand, and no harm shall come to her. Rani is confused with the behaviour of her husband; however, she does as is told by Naga, and survives the ordeal. The village people eulogize her as a goddess, and Appanna and Rani live together happily ever after. The folk tale ends here. There are no emotional or psychological issues involved. However, the Man does not accept this end. He argues that Rani's and Appanna's life needs to be strengthened out. Appanna knows he has not slept with his wife, and Rani will also come to know that it was another man who fathered her child. She will soon realize that it was Naga. Also Naga will find it difficult to stay away from her. So one night, according to man, he comes, back again and strangles himself in Rani's long tresses. The flames refuse to accept this sad ending, so the man suggests another one in which the snake lives in Rani's long tresses and thus remains near her.

The story of Rani and Appanna is significant in the sense that it can be the story of any man and woman Appanna means a common man obviously Karnad had a clear intention of conveying to the audience that Appanna lives in each and every man, and hence his behaviour is the common archetypal behaviour of an average male. Rani is again a common name, given to a young girl or woman lovingly, when she is very dear to her parents. We know from what Rani says that Rani was indeed very dear to her parents.

Then Rani's parents embrace her and cry. They kiss her and caress her. At night she sleeps between them. So she is not frightened any more. 'Don't worry,' they promise her. 'we won't let you go again ever!' (Girish Karnad's I: 28)

The myth of snake is the strongest and most prevalent strain of Indian folk tales and *Naga-Mandala* happens because of Naga only. Snake has been the subject of many a folk-lore and mythical stories, and the true nature of snake has always remained a mystery to human beings. Karnad has taken advantage of this element of mystery surrounding the snake and created a complex interplay of man-woman relationship with the help of a snake. This myth bears fruit when Rani conceives a child from Naga. Thus Naga is living up to the mythical belief and gives wedded bliss to Rani. He further proves his godliness by enthroning Rani as a goddess. In this sense Rani and Naga become, in fact, real companions for both of them are above mere humans. Thus, as has already been said, the human and the non-human worlds step on each other's territory and the distinctions blur. That there is no real distinction between the human and non-human worlds is further made clear by the fact that Appanna, a human being acts like an animal and Naga, an



animal, behaves like a human. V. Ranjan in this context rightly observes that “by endowing Naga with the feelings of genuine low Karnad, demythicizes the husband-wife marital love” (204).

Naga-Mandala deals at length with the issue of status and position of women in patriarchal societies. The story of the play is taken from a folk tale which is relevant for all times. India has traditionally been a patriarchal society. Even today when there have been efforts to make women more empowered and aware, they are still dominated by men, in their personal as well as social life. The flames in the play are all women who must flee their homes and be in the company of women only if they wish to speak and be heard. The women are fated to burn like the flames. Like flames women must work till others need them, and after their need is over the flames are turned over. The same is true of women. The story of Rani is the story of every woman. And because it is the story of every woman, it does not evoke much sympathy from the society, at least not from that society which is male-dominated. It is because of this reason that Karnad employs woman to narrate Rani’s journey. Thus the story is a woman who will tell Rani’s story to the audience. As a woman the story will be better equipped to relate to any interpret Rani’s emotions and experiences.

The play addresses itself to the problem of feminine sensibility and the female quest for her identity. It tries to analyse and interpret the position and status of women in our society. The ordinary woman with normal desires, i.e. Rani as she is, is rejected by her husband Appanna. She is acceptable to him either as an inferior or a goddess. A woman is never an equal to the man. The play thus poses some very relevant question regarding the institution of marriage as it exists in India. Marriage will always remain a problem in a society in which people like Appanna and the village elder dominate. These people refuse to look upon women as ordinary human beings, with normal human desires. Appanna locks Rani in the house whereas he associates himself the right to spend nights with another woman. Thus male is indulging in vulgar display of power where he is treating women as disposable objects – be it his wife or mistress. Jyoti Rani rightly points out:

The two (Rani and Appanna) are psychologically and physically mismatched. Appanna with his regular visits to concubine finds his inexperienced new wife uninteresting and leaves her everyday to herself locked in the house alone. (59)

Nowhere in the play does Appanna ask Rani what she wants or needs. He expects and demands submissive obedience from her. Unfortunately, the situation is indeed acutely reflective of the present social set-up husbands demand submission without an opinion from their wives: The same is true of Rani’s situation. The locked house is symbolic of a woman’s caged existence in wedlock.



The story and the flames do not form a part of the main plot, but they are always present and form an integral part of the play. The story also has a power to change the course of action of the play.

Another face of womanhood that emerges in *Naga-Mandala* is Kurudavva. She is a mother figure. Kurudavva is mother not only to her son Kappanna but she also proves to be mother to Rani. She wants to set things right at Rani's place and for this purpose she gives Rani two roots with which she can prepare magic potions. Her purpose is to bring love in Rani's life. And she does succeed in her aim, though love knocks at Rani's door in the shape of Naga, not Appanna. The woman characters play a major role in the play.

Karnad very deftly conveys to the reader that the change in the status of Rani in Appanna's eyes is the result of social compulsion. The society proves to be stronger and he has to forego his personal desires and likings. Appanna knows that he has not made love to his wife; she cannot be carrying his child. But then as Rani has passed the cobra test and the village elders have proclaimed Rani a goddess, Appanna has no choice but to accept her happily. The man in the play very rightly says that ending of the story that Rani and Appanna lived happily ever after doesn't come across as being very acceptable Appanna must wonder what is happening to his life.

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 haven't slept with my wife. Let the world say what it likes. Let my miracle declare her a goddess. But I know! What sense am I to make of my life if that's worth nothing? (Girish Karnad I: 60)

Girish Karnad also exposes the dual stance of society on morality. Rani, a woman, has to prove her chastity and innocence in full public view, when she has not even committed any crime or lapse. On the other hand, Appanna is not required to undergo anytest to prove that he is chaste and morally upright, though his visits to his concubine are a thing of common knowledge in the community. The play thus "uncovers the injustice of patriarchal moral code which demands the faithfulness of a woman to her husband but not the faithfulness of a man to his wife" (Baba 37). The hypocrisy of the society also comes to the fore when, as Rani decides not to swear by the king cobra but the red hot to swear by the king cobra but the red hot iron, the crowd is disappointed. Whole of the village community has gathered there just to see the fun and entertain themselves. They are not concerned with the themselves. They are not concerned with the turmoil that two of their fellow beings must be going through. This is exactly what the attitude of society is others' problems or troubles become a source of enjoyment.

In *Naga-Mandala* Karnad has beautifully employed the myth of snake to convey the complexities of life. Cobra is the symbol of masculine strength and virility. Naga represents



positive masculinity. He is neither a snake nor a Chauvinist. By assuming the form of Appanna, along with the human emotions that Appanna lacks, Naga becomes more human than the human beings themselves. Naga stands in sharp contrast to Appanna. He comes across as an understanding male who can ensure matrimonial harmony and happiness. The story of Rani and Appanna also makes a telling study of what forces a woman look for love and satisfaction outside marriage.

Karnad has made use of traditional drama elements such as mime song and dance, in *Naga-Mandala*. The use of these elements brings it closer to the *Yakshagana* tradition of Karnataka. *Naga-Mandala* is a very modern drama dealing with very modern concerns. It is Brechtian in the sense that it does not offer any clear cut solution in the end. Both Appanna and Rani are perplexed and they both know that their relationship is based on lies that they have accepted. They are resigned to the fact that many things happen on their own and human life is shaped by powers beyond our control. Only acceptance of this fact can bring harmony. The story very rightly says:

When one says ‘And they lived happily ever after, all that is taken for granted. You sweep such headaches under the pillow and then press your head firmly down on them.’ (Girish Karnad I: 60)

In *Naga-Mandala* Girish Karnad brings to us a society which has two separate sets of standards of men and women *Naga-Mandala*'s social norms are reflective of our own 21st century. For all our talk of gender sensitization and female empowerment the situation remains much the same as presented in *Naga-Mandala*. The following conversation between Appanna and Rani is quite revealing:

Appanna: What is there to be scared of? Just keep to yourself. No one will bother you. Rice! (Pause)

Rani: Please, you coul

Appanna: Look, I don't like idle chatter. Don't question me. Do as you are told. you understand (Finishes his meal, gets up). (Girish Karnad I: 28)

Thus, the man-woman relationship emerges as one of the master and slave. There is absolutely no equality of genders. The play exposes the ‘gender-biased’ values and morals of our patriarchal social order that has oppressed woman for almost eternity, and sets us thinking. This oppressed woman does show signs of becoming confident and attaining maturity. Perhaps her impending motherhood brings this change in her. When Naga asks her to hide her pregnancy for as long as possible and do as he says, she tells him:



(Blankly) Yes, I shall. Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you. I shall do what you tell me. Scowls in the day. Embraces at night. But day or night, one motto does not change: Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you. (He is silent)

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. Why don't you take it on trust that I have a mind and explain this charade to me? Why do you play these games? Why do you change like a chameleon from day to night? Even if I understood a little, a tiny bit – I could bear it. But now sometimes I feel my head is going to burst. (Girish Karnad I: 51)

This confidence and assertiveness of Rani acquires a new meaning when after the trial Appanna accepts her superiority and as we see later, fulfils all her wishes as orders.

In all his plays Girish Karnad has drawn incidents from either history or mythology or folk-tales. However, all his plays are a seething and honest commentary on the present state of affairs in political and social realms. The play can also be seen as a journey towards self-knowledge and revelation along with role-shifting. The setting itself of the play is a telling commentary on the human and social psyche. The story of Rani is narrated through the flames who assume the forms of women after the day's work is over. This is a world of dreams and fantasies and Karnad allows the reader to be a participant in the action of this world and thus himself / herself become unreal too. Karnad here makes it very clear that we are ready to tackle, may be even look at the social issues or problems only when we are secure in the knowledge that they are unreal.

When Rani comes into Appanna's life, she is a young and naive girl. She does not even know the real meaning of marriage, and the role of sex in her or for that matter any marriage. The play very beautifully captures the gentle blossoming of female sexuality. Rani grows from a girl to a woman and then matures into a mother from one role to another she goes from strength to strength. Her tale is the story of women empowerment. However, Karnad also shows that a perfect balance always eludes us, may be because of man's inadequacy to accept woman as an equal partner, a companion in the true sense of the word. Women find real companions only in other women for they share similar experiences, and "it is in the stories that women have a sense of community it gives their repressed, stifled lives some freedom to be" (Tripathi: 22).

Naga-Mandala too like the *Fire and the Rain* and *Hayavadana* sees a close interaction between the human and non-human world. The flames become women. The story does the same and the song becomes a sarl. Thus the non-human things step into the human world and introduce the main plot. In the story of Rani too we find the existence of non-human world in the sub-plot of Kappanna. Kappanna has a vision of a female who he is sure not a girl from one of neighbouring



villages as his mother seems to believe. She emerges from places associated with non-human forces to entice him.

Karnad is also her indicating at the male sexuality, which is always looking for the forbidden fruit. The appearance of a spirit from another world to entice Kappanna may also symbolize a man's fascination with the unknown, and the element of risk involved in the game of love. However, the fact remains that the non-human world and the human world form a part and parcel of each other's existence. Savita Goel observes, "Through metamorphosis, Karnad inextricably intertwines the human and the non-human world interacting and entering into one another's lives and becoming part of one another" (Goel 121).

Girish Karnad is a humanist to the core and thus it is only natural that he presents a hope for humanity, even in the face of adverse and difficult circumstances. Every oppression has a hope for redemption. In *Hayavadana*, it is the child's laughter as the curtains fall. In *Nagamandala* too Karnad presents a hope for the oppressed womanhood, when Rani is established as the queen of her home and the goddess of the village. Of course the Naga has to make, a sacrifice. He sacrifices his love, and later on his life too. In the process he charts the path for women's emancipation. Karnad also upholds the noble value of forgiveness. Rani forgives Appanna all the excesses he committed on her. *Naga-Mandala* also hints at the duality of personality in all human beings.

As in his other plays, here in *Naga-Mandala* too Karnad has developed his action in the traditional theatrical devices. We have song of the flames and the Sutradhar in the shape of the story, who also becomes a part of the action. The title is also a direct offshoot of the folk tales where non-human world is used to predict human fate. The non-human becomes more important as it is the *Mandala* i.e. circle or range of the Naga i.e. a non-human which envelopes whole action. The cobra from the other world brings Rani all the worldly pleasures denied to her by her husband. It is because of Naga's help that Rani is able to win acceptance and respect for herself.

Karnad has used *Naga-Mandala* as a tool to expose the selfishness and hypocrisy of the patriarchal society. At the same time there appears to be more profound and complex issue to be dealt with that of questioning the persons in positions of authority. Like Padmini of *Hayavadana* who dares the society and possesses two men which is entirely against the social values, Rani too does so. The only difference is that where Padmini's is a conscious decision, Rani is not even aware that she is doing so. She enters the reader's mind as a shy, submissive girl. However, once she realizes her strength she does not let society overpower her. It would appear that Rani realizes that there are two men in her life in the shape of Appanna and Naga. She speaks the truth when she says that she has touched only two males since coming to the village Appanna and the king cobra. The real truth lost on the village community, but is understood by the audience, and may be by



Rani too. Sudha Shastri and Smith Kumar, P.V. very aptly remark that “Rani’s predicament poignantly reflects the human need to live by fictions and half truths, the need not to push for truth beyond the point, where the structure of daily life may be threatened” (151).

And whereas one might be under compulsion to live by half-truths and fiction it also remains true that there is an ongoing search for completeness or truth. In *Hayavadana* this quest is open. Padmini is overtly seeking completeness. In, *Naga-Mandala* too this quest for completeness, a perfect existence is there. Here this search is covert for Rani does not know that Appanna and Naga are two separate entities. Together they constitute a complete male, who can be rude and gruff at times, but caring and very tender too at other times.

Karnad’s concerns are always human and therefore they are eternal. As far as structure and presentation techniques are concerned, there too *Naga-Mandala* draws heavily from the folk tradition. *Naga-Mandala* employs the age-old folk tradition of having a story within the story. The play starts with the story of the man. Then we are introduced to the main plot of Rani and Appanna where the story is in the form of a woman who is clad in a song which takes the shape of a sari. The story (woman) clad in a song (sari) points to another folk technique, that of using songs and music for furthering the action of the play. And music is used deftly throughout the play to indicate the mood and swing of characters and incidents. When Rani is proclaimed goddess there is heavenly music. Whenever Naga appears it is dark to snow night. This darkness is also suggestive of the mystery that shrouds Naga. When Appanna appears the stage is lighted indicating day time. This suggests that Appanna is a flat character and does not have hidden layers. This deft use of light and dark also helps the audience to differentiate Naga from Appanna. Rani’s disclosure of her pregnancy to Naga is followed by a splash of light.

Karnad takes the technique of story within the story within the story further when we are familiarized with the life story of Kurudavva, the blind woman. She tells Rani how she got a husband with the help of the roots, which Rani must use to lure her husband towards her. The story within the story is taken further in the story of Kappanna, Kurudavva’s son. He sees the vision of a female who beckons him and he finally melts into nothingness presumably with her. Here the non-human world steps in the human world and both intermingle.

Folk theatre always had someone introducing the action of the play, called the sutradhar. In this play, the story is the Sutradhar. Generally the Sutradhar only introduces and sums up the play, the Sutradhar of *Naga-Mandala* is slightly different. The story is also a participant and in fact assists in furthering the action. She is Rani’s advisor too. In fact she directs Rani to the huge ant-hill, where the cobra lives, to throw the curry. And this one action makes all the difference to the action of the play.



Karnad once remarked in the course of an interview that since he cannot invent his own tales he draws inspiration from history, myth and folk-tales. Playwrights have often done so. The folk-tales are rich in symbolic meanings which makes them a perfect vehicle to comment upon the modern society. Girish Karnad does so in *Naga-Mandala*. Using the apparently simplistic tale of Appanna, Rani and Naga the play deals with the complex issue of the discovery of the self by a woman. It is Ran's journey to find her identity. And Karnad does it within the framework of a folk-tale Moutushi Chakravartee observes:

Karnad has deployed all devices used with the folk tale and / or mythic patterns, like the imputation of superhuman qualities to humans and non-humans, the use of magic elements, extraordinary ordeals. The flames, the Nage taking Appanna's form, the magic roots the imputation of divinity to a woman-all conform to the needs of folk tale and myth (185).

Naga-Mandala is the story of a confined woman. The play sends out a message that the days of confining women are over, and the women will have their own voices which must be heard. In *Naga-Mangala* Karnad questions the gender biased justice which favours men, like Appanna. But he also shows that women who are reduced to live a life on the periphery of social existence will assert themselves and have a voice of their own. They will be heard, and will form the nucleus of the society set up. However, one issue still remains – women are either inferior or superior she can either be a witch or a goddess. As a wife she will be dominated, as a mother she will be looked up to. There can be no gender equality, it seems.



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