

The Snake the Rescuer; The Woman the Avenger: Reversal of Order in Girish Karnad's Naga-Mandala

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Abstract: Girish Karnad in his plays makes a dire attempt to create a world where the women would have their due of love, desire and sexuality. Walking beyond the strict rules of the society that has ordained sexual pleasures as the rightful claim of men and that which is a shame when it comes to a woman, Karnad creates an equal ground. The woman protagonist Rani attains the fulfilment of her desires without an iota of guilt and without Nature's intervention. Nature the primordial had ever been one with human instincts and the urge for sexuality being a prime instinct had never been interfered with. It is civilizations' bias that had worked on the contrary. Here the power game between the different quarters come to the focus and Nature in the Naga and civilization in the husband face the human in Rani making her victorious.

Keywords: Folklore, Indianness, Myth, Nature, Primordial, Stories.

Girish Karnad (1938-2019), playwright, actor, director and screenplay writer is one of the most revered playwrights in Indian English. He spins webs of relentless stories which are derived from myth, folklore, history, that charms and entices the Indian mind. As Om Prakash Budholia in his book titled *Girish Karnad: History and Folklore*, observes:

Girish Karnad in some of his plays has worked out two specific devices: the motifs of history for universalizing the humanitarian notes and the use of folklore for unveiling the real intents of human mind (*Budholia* vii)

Karnad having crafted infinite stories of the intricacies of the woman's heart, (he) gives an inroad to the power lurking deep beneath. The deep dark recesses of the human mind startle and scare at once. The watching of the unconscious and the sudden taking over us keep the human mind agog with a fear of the unknown. The human mind taken to its subtlest ramification is often manifested in a woman's heart. The woman sits down to express her fears, her helplessness and deep dark scourges within, and in her senility she holds on to a twig, a beetle, a spirit, a witch, a crevice in the dark interstices of the earth. The woman when confined suddenly discovers a way out of her closet in search of an escape root that finds its way through a rift in the surface, to effulge as molten lava— darkness turning to aurora.

The woman in Karnad's plays from tender girls to middle aged women, blind women (Kurudavva), concubines, charming, attractive as an ogress, or simple as Nittilai are all double-headed, marked by the two-headed emblem in the doorway of Padmini's house in *Hayavadana*. In *Naga-Mandala*, Karnad's one of the most intricate stories dealing deeply with the turmoils of a woman's heart, its ramrod straight intent where the shaft hits the mark with its absolute precision, Karnad goes to the ultimate extent.

In Karnad's *Naga-Mandala: Play with the Cobra*, the naked flames, with women's voices gather in a temple, where the deity is broken and hence cannot be recognized. The darkness of the sanctum is

interspersed with moonlight. The darkness creates a fear and the moonlight a perfect ambience for imagination. The stage having set for the drama, the flames enter as characters, who are all pregnant with a story. The flames go alight with their stories. Everywhere is a story, everywhere is an inkling of a new life yet to be born. As Gauri Shankar Jha writes in his *c*, Delhi, 2015—

The inner sanctum of the temple provides life-renewing force to an individual and a man is re-energised with maximum potential that of a new born child like the seed of procreation with ecstasy.

In the absence of a male responsible for the birth of story, we have to rely on a mid-wife in the stature of a man, a story-teller who comes to save his life in the birth of a story. The story begins with a frame-narrative where a playwright is cursed with the curse of his death by a mendicant for having bored people to death. His plays have put people to sleep in uncomfortable positions in their seats in the theatre-houses which had brought about the curse. The playwright had been given the option for survival by keeping an entire night awake in the entire month. Day in and day out everyday he had waited to keep awake but in some way or the other he had fallen asleep.

In this urge to keep awake and at the same time think beyond his mundane existence; to create something to live and live by creating and recreating, the playwright gets hold of the flames. The truncated, bodiless, all-soul flames having blown off at night in their respective quarters look out for their survival in a desolate place where flames come with their stories to narrate to one another. As the flames live, so do the stories of every household.

Along with the stories which the flames bear emerge the story with the song that had been lurking within an old woman's heart. The story and the song having been stifled beyond bearable torturous conditions escapes from the gaping mouth of the old lady, sleeping. The story and the song armed to avenge the old woman always dedicated to her husband and the humdrum duties of her house, come out of her sleeping husband's room, leaving her confused and shattered. As Karnad writes:

The moment her mouth opened, the story and the song jumped out and hid in the attic. At night when the old man had gone to sleep, the story took the form of a young woman and the song became a sari. The young woman wrapped herself in the sari and stepped out, just as the old lady was coming in (Karnad *Naga- Mandala* 4).

The story in the form of woman adorned in a new saree of a song is a story awaiting its expression, its rejuvenation and ramification. Its rendering would come out in its perfect grace being adorned in a saree as a story enacted out as an act in performing arts would come up in its beauteous stature. The man waits and waits only to find the masterpiece that his heart desires that which would stop him from sleeping and hence save his life. Stripped of boredom, agog with life, the playwright waits for the narration of a story. The story confined within a woman's heart gets released to unravel a story entwined in myth, miracle, mysteries and desires. The desires of a woman's heart spun out of secrets and lifelong confined racial memories and collective unconscious of female existence spews colours to form the kaleidoscopic image of Rani's life.

In *Naga-Mandala*, Rani, a young girl just 'matured' is sent to live with her husband, a woman who gets married to a man but is deprived of any love that is due to a woman's heart. The woman's heart is full of anguish and creates an opening for herself in the release sought by her heart. She connects with the world of nature and the mystic world of miracles. She struggles hard to eke out a life of love and a space for herself in the societal order. Rani translates her existence from a downtrodden and exploited girl to one who transcends the hierarchy of sexes to create a place and standing which is superior to her husband. Through her tactful acquisition of power she almost becomes a deity.

The women in this play, whether the flames, the story with the song, or Kurudavva, the blind woman who comes to Rani's aid and gives a new beginning to her life; do not go by the hierarchy of sexes in the patriarchal society in rural India. Instead they defy male supremacy or the possessiveness of male agency. The women play their own roles with very little male intervention. However Rani's life initially charts the traditional track and she becomes a victim of male oppression. Her husband

Appanna, a young man, as his name implies is every man who tortures, torments and hardly responds to the longings of a woman's heart.

Appanna, Rani's husband is reciprocated in his desires by a "concubine", who is addressed thus throughout the play and is never given a name. The nameless concubine is just a torso who fulfils the desires of Appanna, that is, every male of the society. Her body becomes a commodity which is desired by the male world but she is never attributed with a name or an identity.

Rani, far from being happy in the company of a human, she is wrenched and destroyed beyond expression by the world of men. The humans do not come to her rescue. Though Kurudavva tries hard to make her life happy for her, she is nonetheless ruled by the patriarchal construct that a woman's existence becomes fruitful in the love of a man. If a man's life is for his aspirations, a woman's aspirations are all surrounded around a man, who is invariably her husband. Kurudavva in her own way tries hard to make scope for a union between the man (Appanna) and wife (Rani). This is in a way succumbing to the cul de sacs of patriarchy where the young girl would be forced to go by the whims of the man who had never loved her and had instead tortured her.

Whether this man would ever invoke any sense of love and longing in the girl is never asked or considered important. Instead Kurudavva manoeuvres potions to beguile the man and draw him towards Rani by dint of magical powers. Rani is made to wait for her husband's change of mind so that he falls for her and gives up his bitterness. A bargain in a way would be made where the man would give up one woman for the other; compromise one's desires for the other's longing. A bad bargain indeed, but is considered the best option with regard to the societal norms as a wife is considered the one who is the authentic receptacle of harbouring the male desire whereas the concubine is thought to be an aberration of the norm.

The presence of the three women— Rani, the concubine and the Yaksha woman who would always pose before Kapanna create a trio of women's unfulfilled desires. The desires which are unfulfilled or courted by men as per their whims create a fear, a unified stature of womanhood's desires. Kurudavva the elderly woman stands as the emblem of the matured woman who tries to create a life full of happiness and one secure in the home and hearth, in the company of the husband, for Rani. She however hates the presence of the concubine and is dreaded by the presence of the Yaksha woman. She was strong enough to make a life all her own and create a life of love and joy through the blessings which she had received.

This boon of three roots that had the powers to kindle the flame of love in any man's heart who would look upon her in case he had been fed with the roots, had been acquired by Kurudavva by serving a mendicant in every possible way. This certainly had meanings that she may have had advanced sexual favours, as well.

The women come together, each with her story of desire and longing in a loveless male world, and instead create a world all their own and at their command. Kurudavva having left with the two pieces of unused roots asks Kapanna to bring them for Rani. Rani in her turn uses them for her husband Appanna twice, but in vain. Once she fails to enchant her, and on the second attempt the curry having turned blood red, she puts the entire thing on the ant hill. This charms the cobra residing in the ant-hill and it immediately becomes restless as Rani's husband Appanna slaps her (Rani).

This begins the fascinating love story of a young girl yet to become a woman and a Naga (a snake) made a lover of a woman with long tresses like the snake woman. Numerous episodes of love and fulfilment of desire pass between the lovers until Rani finds out that the cobra in the resemblance of her husband is not her husband. However throughout the play we do not get a single hint from Rani or the playwright (in the play or Karnad) as to whether Rani had come to terms with the fact that the Naga is a better lover and hence a better husband in place of his human counterpart. This continues till she becomes pregnant and is given to choose several options of ordeals that would prove her chastity. The women form a clout just like the flames who listen to one another's stories and become one in their togetherness.

The fear and unrest that Rani had felt suddenly disappears after the advent of Kurudavva. Though she fails to change her husband, yet Naga's advent in her husband's image and the face of her husband make her life peaceful and happy until the aldermen of the society close in upon her asking for clarification. In this play by Karnad we find the simple girl's deep denial to get back to her husband or clamour for chastity. Moreover she doesn't even consider her unchaste. Out of dire urge to do away with her loneliness, Rani imagines an eagle, a stag with the golden antler, a big whale a big whale all come to rescue her; to release her from the confines of her torturous husband.

Though she dreams of the presence of these animals, she fails to get at them in reality. However the Naga appears not in imagination but in reality making its real presence felt in the pregnancy of Rani. Rani direly struggles to get out of her stifled state of existence but in vain. It is only with the advent of the Naga that she receives her liberty. Naga had given her the love due to a wife along with the fulfilment of her desires. She had crafted a lie of her own out of guile, playing with the self-same false resemblance that Naga had feigned initially out of its uncontrolled love for Rani. Rani in her turn feigns chastity claiming she had touched no man other than her husband and the cobra. Both roles to play during day and night she does not struggle between her entities as Apanna's wife and the Naga's beloved.

Knowing fully well that her husband appearing during the day is in no way the same entity as that appearing at night she still continues in her dual role without a single word. Her unrest at the death of the mongoose with blood in its fangs and the arrival of the scarred Naga, and the coming of Apanna with no scars during the day show how difficult her silence might have been. However she had maintained her poise day and night to play the role of the wife and beloved at once. She had out-witted patriarchy in its own game and had maintained the possession of the wife's status.

By the end of the play Appanna turns out to be duped by both Rani and the Nature. He has to accept the child as his own in spite of the fact that he had never begotten the child. The concubine comes to her aid as the maid. The Naga is forgotten but then again he appears and Rani does not delay in giving him the status of her lover and the father of her child. However she does not give up her husband or the society. She does not even accept the societal norms. Instead she keeps him to herself, thereby gaining from every side. She gets her love and at the same time becomes a great success story. She ascends to the status of a Goddess as she is carried in a palanquin and men and women aspire for her blessings after the cobra sat in the form of a garland around her neck.

Rani had begun as a tender girl, as Kurudavva would detail out, "My God! You are marvellously beautiful. Your ears are as soft as flowers of hibiscus, your skin as smooth and tender as young mango leaves; your lips are as delicate as rolls of silk" (96). Gradually with the gaining of heightened status she evolves as a matriarch. Her deep feeling of love is genuine but she exploits the Naga by never accepting him. The mystical and mythical aspect of the play makes it impossible though, yet the readers/ audience can see through Rani's silence and her brilliant disposition on the occasion of the performance of the snake ordeal.

Rani never quits her husband, nor does she give up her love when the Naga enters her room at the end of the play out of sheer curiosity. The conjugal love which she attains by the participation of the Naga remains intact. The Naga had never been sought and only when he arrives uninvited does she ask him to get into her hairs and stay there unseen by her husband. She gets her due of the societal status, love, fulfilment of desire, motherhood and the stature/status of a goddess. Her good luck is made possible by the presence of Kurudavva who further propels the advent of the Naga. However we do not get to hear of Kurudavva after her blind pursuit for her son who had suddenly disappeared.

Naga's deep urge for Rani keeps him satisfied when the same urges him to quicken within her tresses. He is happy to lose himself in her tresses unidentified, unrecognised. What remains of him is simply his truncated and thinned entity without substance. His further amorous activities, if at all possible in the presence of the husband, is not known.

Rani avenges the world for its dire tortures meted out to a girl just attained puberty, but from her powerless state she attains the stature of an avenger. Her daring moves by which she compromises the

norms of virtue and the codes of society, gives a jolt to the readers/audience who had seen her as a child who had longed to sleep between her parents and had endlessly waited for the dawning of the day. She accepts both the Naga and her husband Appanna leaving it to the onlookers to accept her as she is or remain baffled in their straitjacketed notion of chastity, sin or societal taboos. Rani breaks away from ideological notion of gender. She swims against the tide doing away with every qualm of conscience and fear of the other. Rani's transformation becomes quite visible as she becomes a woman from a girl, a wife from a woman and mother; but most importantly she becomes powerful enough to write her own destiny.

Girish Karnad deals with a number of topics of which myth plays a very important part. The dealing of myth in the hands of Karnad is quite interesting as they not only represent the mythological structure that they had initially represented but they have a deep connection with today's day world. Karnad's characters do represent the age-long structure of life, but still they go beyond the parameters which they had begun from. They transcend the simple norms, histories and processes of life and instead give birth to various concerns which are of this day. Girish Karnad deals very wisely with a number of topics of which the concern of woman's role and her importance in society becomes an important area, that is, the large number of characters even within the purview of such brief plays. The characters of Girish Karnad's plays are all deeply rooted in their life. The characters are far from being grabbed by the transcendence of life; instead they are deeply rooted in their culture and their surroundings. Nature forms a very important component of Karnad's play. Nature is not merely the backdrop that forms an important component but it is a presence which in a way complicates and unravels the mysteries of the play.

Girish Karnad in his plays makes a different scope for the women. Unlike in most Indian writing in English where women have a docile role to play, are beaten by men and are brutally tortured in the hands of patriarchy, Karnad's women far from being tortured or molested, which do form a stream in their life initially; they get over the same and evolve as power women. These women become matriarchs and overpower the patriarchal strain that had initially disturbed their lives and humiliated them. On the contrary they form an intricate bonding with nature and this bonding makes them further powerful. This power which comes not only from an understanding of life but also from a deep entanglement with nature itself becomes important for them and they become nonetheless unique in their roles.

The women in Karnad's plays give over the hypocrisy which the patriarchal society had made them resort to. The hypocritical air is given up and instead they fight their lot to become exactly what they wish to make of their lives. The characters, mostly women in Karnad's plays act as protagonists and these protagonists become the key persons around whom the plays revolve. They act as the wheels of the plot and gradually lead the plot to their destination leaving the readers/ audience startled as to how could such women who had begun as naive, innocent adolescents suddenly grow up to become the representations of nature. As Tutun Mukherjee in her book *Girish Karnad's Plays: Performance and Critical Perspectives* rightly comments:

It is remarkable that whatever be the physical or behavioural embodiment given to the mythical, historical, social, or psychological horizons of his plays, the issues that build the plots are drawn from and remain firmly grounded in the experimental world of the readers/spectators but bearing larger implications capable of transcending cultural specifications to reach out towards a universality of human knowledge (17)

The men in Karnad's plays do form an important role, yet are to an extent marginalised for the understanding which Karnad has for his train of women is hardly found in his delineation of the roles of the men. Men and women form a component together as well but the relationship is often based on several sorts of guile and compromises. Though such relationships as that between Nittilai and Arvasu (*The Fire and the Rain*) also occur where pure love prevails, most relationships fail to attain the idyllic bliss that is expected of a man-woman relationship. The characters again and again repeat themselves and become so important in their realisation of life that they grow beyond their normal day to day existence and become one with the primordial instincts of life.

Karnad was never away from Nature, rather his childhood was too embedded in it. As he writes in his *Memoires*, “Sirsi was in the heart of the dense, wild jungles of the Western Ghats, with the wilderness even invading the town wherever it could force its way in” (Karnad *This Life* 21). Here the Naga, an element of Nature responds to the desire of a woman who is deeply rooted and one with Nature as against the male, forcing into the human world. The man is defeated in his own game of exploitation and become the marginalized himself. Here human quest transcends divinity. As Karnad would always be for the human will to power he sarcastically writes in the *Prologue of Yayati*—

The mythological is fiercely convinced that all suffering is merely a calculated test, devised by the gods, to check out our willingness to submit to their will. If we crush our egos and give ourselves up in surrender, divine grace will descend upon us and redeem us (Karnad *Yayati* 5).

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