

## Submissive to Assertive: Metamorphosis of Rani in

### Karnad's *Nagamandala*

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#### ABSTRACT

Beginning in the early nineteenth century, Indian English Drama has walked a gruelling path to the present, where it has received a breath of fresh air and life from emerging dramatists such as Asif Currimbhoy, Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Dattani, and others. Girish Karnad is a name that many people regard among this new generation of playwrights. He is a well-known playwright as well as a critically acclaimed film actor. Karnad began his writing career with *Yayati* and has since written a number of thought-provoking and symbolist plays steeped in myth and local culture. *Nagamandala* (1988) is a play that takes its inspiration from popular myth and oral stories centred on the King Cobra, 'Naga,' but raises issues that are as relevant today as they were in the past. It discusses the man-woman relationship, a woman's position and identity, psychology, and the impact of social and cultural modes on the feminine psyche. This paper is a modest attempt to mark the metamorphosis in Rani, a character in Karnad's *Nagamandala*

**Keywords:** *Indian English Drama, cultural hypocrisy, socio-cultural identity, Gender discrimination, repression and alienation.*

An ancient and rich tradition marks the genre of Dramatics in India. In fact, none other than an Indian has given the most comprehensive, in depth and analytical study of the dramatic art to the world. Bharat Muni's *Natyashastra* is the best literature that can be found on the genre. However, when it comes to Indian English Drama, the genre is very poor in quality as well as quantity. A late flowering in the field of Indian English Literature, Indian English Drama has faced a scarcity of good talent and appreciation in the country.

Indian English Drama, beginning in the early nineteenth century has walked a long tedious path to the present where it has received a breath of fresh air and life from such emerging dramatists as Asif Currimbhoy, Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Dattani, etc. Amongst this new breed of playwrights, Girish Karnad is a name that strikes a chord of recognition for many. A known playwright, he is also a critically acclaimed movie actor. Starting his writing career with *Yayati*, Karnad has moved on to give many more thought provoking and symbolist plays richly steeped in myth and local culture. A highly learned and intellectual person, Karnad's plays are

his mouthpiece to act as an impetus to thought regarding many of the contemporary issues plaguing man and society.

*Nagamandala* (1988), is a play taking its inspiration from the popular myth and oral stories centring around the King Cobra, 'Naga' but raising issues that hold true as much of our times as of yester years. It discusses issues about man-woman relationship, position and identity of a woman, about psychology and the impact of social and cultural modes on the feminine psyche. In fact, *Nagamandala*:

...is a powerful portrait of the agony and anguish faced by both men and women in their development into adult roles and social adjustment in a society where the individual is given little space for self-development, awareness and independence as a being. (Gupta, 1999: 249)

The dramatist using two very common characters who are more types than individual has tried to shed light on the unequal and lop-sided position of a woman as compared to man in our society. Depicting a typical rural scene, he has very poignantly represented not only the social and cultural hypocrisy and prejudices but also the effect that these forces have on the psyche of an individual.

Rani, the protagonist of the novel is a character whose life the play trails as she evolves from an immature, naïve girl into that of a confident and mature woman. She is a symbol of any woman who is unprepared to face life on her own once she leaves the protective threshold of her parent's home. The reality and harshness of the world beyond shocks and confuses her.

At the beginning of the play Rani is introduced as a young bride on the verge of a new life with her husband Appanna. Like any other girl she too enters this new life with many expectations and trepidations, desires and dreams. But reality knocks her down nonplussed. Appanna locks her up in the house all alone only to return in the day for his bath and lunch. Rani's presence in his life is only as his housekeeper and cook. He does not want her to have any social contacts and interactions, and to ensure her complete alienation he first brings home a watch dog and then a mongoose.

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, 1999: 239)

Like Rani, her husband Appanna is also a type representing the stereotypical image of a chauvinistic male as per the patriarchal dictates of society, dominating, cruel, selfish and

callous. Naga on the other hand is a representation of the matured, caring and loving male, truly a myth in the rigid and tradition bound patriarchal society.

Gender discrimination is the basis of all kinds of domination and subjugation amongst the sexes. The marginal position of women in the Indian society as a result has become an integral part of the socio-cultural identity of the country. A woman has no identity of her own, a victim of 'incompleteness' she craves for completeness in her relations, in love but usually finds none. Though traditionally the man-woman relationship is compared to the two wheels of a cart, both equally important, yet in reality the female is always the broken, fragmented wheel clinging to the other (male) for support and survival. This inequality and imbalance is clearly visible in the relationship of Rani-Appanna. Rani has no say in any matter; she cannot even question the behaviour of her husband. A result of years of conditioning that a girl goes through right from birth, Rani also accepts her subjugation submissively. When she does try to plead with Appanna, his response is obviously one of irritation and disregard. "Look, I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand?" (254)

Indian society is not an individualistic society, and especially in case of a woman her claim to individuality is out of question. The emphasis is more on duty than on individuality, and resultant effect is repression of individuality.

In the rigidly formed and tradition-bound societies like India the repression one has to put up with is usually very severe and resultant suffering often assumes pathetic proportions for sensitive individuals. Among Indians again the women happen to be the worst sufferers as the social norms and moral codes have been so framed as to be particularly disadvantageous to them. (Rajeshwar, 1995: 141)

Freud in his study of the human psyche has stressed on the tremendous effect that repression has on the individual. The social and cultural norms always stand in opposition to the natural instinctive urges of the individual, which are then repressed in order to conform to the pre-decided socially and culturally acceptable roles. So society, 'the creative agent' as Eric Fromm refers to it is the factor responsible for conditioning, moulding and creating the individual characters into pre-set moulds and types.

According to Freud there is always a return of the repressed. External factors, situations and society can repress an individual's longings and desires, but it cannot totally extinguish them. Thoughts, emotions and desires which are repressed and are not able to find a free outlet of expression, gets imbedded in the 'unconscious' of the person finding a covert form of expression and wish fulfilment through dreams and myths.

The underlying assumption is that when some wish, fear, memory, or desire is difficult to face we may try to cope with it by repressing it, that is, eliminating it from the conscious mind. But this doesn't make it go away: it remains alive in the unconscious, like radioactive matter buried beneath the ocean, and constantly seeks a way back into the conscious mind, always succeeding eventually. (Barry, 2007: 100)

Rani is a victim of severe repression and alienation. Confined and left alone without any companionship and comfort, she starts hallucinating. Her innermost desires of love, companionship and comfort find an expression through her various dreams that reveal the severe state of repression and depression that she is going through in her isolation. In her state of mental and emotional anguish, the line between illusion and reality is blurred. Isolated and confined to live a life detached from any social interactions, and emotionally deprived, Rani takes refuge in her dreams about 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 away again ever!' (255)

Rani tries to fill the emptiness of her life with the love of her parents. A dutiful wife as she has been conditioned to be, Rani obeys the dictates of her tyrant husband without a word, but her true feelings find an expression in her dreams wherein she imagines herself being locked up by a "demon" (263) in a castle. The demon is none other than Appanna who locks her up in the house.

Rani's dreams show the inner workings of her psyche, they are an expression of her inner most desires and yearnings suppressed in her unconscious. Highly symbolical in nature her dreams are symbols representing persons and ideas lying hidden in her unconscious. When Rani dreams of her parents for the first time, she imagines an Eagle taking her to them. An Eagle, which is a bird of prey, symbolizes strength and courage. A bird also represents flight and freedom, which expresses Rani's yearning for release from her confinement. She seeks not only solace but also strength for survival from her parent's love.

Rani, being a naïve and innocent girl is totally unaware of the ways of the world and realities of life and relationships. Though unknowingly yet instinctively she craves for Appanna's love, her prince who in reality is a beast. So she takes refuge in the dreams of a prince who will rescue her from her distress.

In the morning, the stag with the golden antlers comes to the door. He calls out to Rani. She refuses to go. 'I am not a stag', he explains, 'I am a prince'... (255)

The stag is the prince of her dreams, an expression of her natural life instinct 'Eros' present in every individual. In another interpretation the stag with the golden antlers also alludes to the 'golden deer' that had enticed Sita and eventually led her to cross the line. In Rani's dream also, the stag is a prelude to the prince in the guise of the cobra who will lead Rani to cross the line demarcated for her by her husband and society.

In her endeavour to find love and companionship Rani finds the much-needed comfort of a mother in Kurudava. Interactions with Kurudava and her support puts a balm on Rani's tortured and tormented psyche, and at last she finally finds a glimmer of hope in her otherwise lonely and gloomy life. This promise of love and hope represented by Kurudava who shows Rani the path to a better future is symbolized by the Whale in Rani's dream who rescues her from the clutches of the demon. Whale symbolizes the motherly love and protection, the image of which is conjured up in Rani's mind after her meeting with Kurudava.

Similar to the dreams of Rani, which are personal in nature, myths are the expression of the primordial experiences of a race inherited as the 'Collective Unconscious'. Myths, legends, stories or folk narratives are a part of cultural constructs intended to shape the individual in accordance with the moral and traditional codes. Social codes of conduct and cultural influences are all inherent in the myths and folk narratives. Symbolical in nature they disguise the truth not only to maintain the social and cultural order but also to give expression to hidden instincts whose open expression can pose to be a threat to social order and conduct. Particularly in a patriarchal society myths represent the male perspective in need to suppress female individuality.

Superstitions and supernatural elements play an important part in the composition of a myth. The aphrodisiacal root given to Rani by Kurudava is one such superstition that gives an interesting twist to the turn of events in the play. This hold of superstitious belief can also be seen in the heavily prejudiced view of Kurudava regarding the women in her son Kappana's life, and also in the life of Appanna. Both men neglect their duties and abandon their mother and wife respectively to gratify their physical needs, but still superstition points the guilty finger towards the women who are said to have magical powers to lure and entice the men. Women who live outside the limits decreed by society are either loose women or supernatural

beings like Kappanna's enticer whom Kurudava describes as, "A temptress from beyond...A yaksha woman..." (291)

Myths exist as a kind of rationale for social customs, observances and codes, and many a times also as the explanation of events and incidents that transgresses these codes thereby mending any crevices that might have occurred in the social structure of norms.

The appearance of love filling the emptiness of Rani's life with love and care is explained through the myth of 'Naga', a folk tale and local culture of Kerala where it represents prosperity, happiness and fertility. A man does not need to explain his reasons for gratification of his sensual pleasures but a woman's instinctual need is ignored, and their desire is considered a transgression of moral codes requiring supernatural justification. The Naga in the guise of Appanna presents a choice for Rani, a choice to live a fuller and happier life. It is her expression of desire and also the fulfillment of her wish for love, her desire to live life fully and with satisfaction. If Appanna is the demon then Naga is the prince in Rani's life. A source of energy, the Naga represents the positive element, the cultural leader, and harbinger of a social change, generating a transformation not only in the character of Rani but also in the society at large. A representation of the true life force, Naga is the source as well as the preservation and regeneration of life.

Considered from a realistic point of view, Naga represents the modern, new woman's right to choice, the right to choose a life overcoming all obstacles to her happiness. It symbolizes the breaking of barriers, crossing of the lines that intend to imprison a woman and distance her from her surroundings as well as her own 'self'. More an initiator than a leader, Naga actually initiates Rani on to the path of transformation.

The embodiment of Rani's happy married life; Naga's love is the life support for Rani. In her dream-like state, a result of her long moments of isolation and yearning, Rani is blissfully intoxicated with Naga's love and throws all caution to the winds regarding her husband's contrasting behaviour. Stranger by day and lover by night, Appanna reflects the schizophrenic temperament of the typical male, insensitive and selfish. Still a pinch of suspicion remains in Rani's mind, which is finally removed when she finds out that she is pregnant. Assured by her pregnancy she says, "I have definite evidence to prove I was not fantasizing." (282) The child within her finally proves to her that Naga's love is not an illusion but a reality.

Transformation and change in Rani's character and attitude started from the moment Naga entered her life. Left to wither away in neglect and isolation, she blossomed like a beautiful flower nurtured by the love, care and concern of Naga. He is everything that her husband should have been but was not. The emotional and moral support she receives from Naga makes her bold enough to assert herself and question him, though her love for him still makes her accept his decisions and advise.

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? (284)

When Appanna finds out about her pregnancy and beats her up accusing her of adultery, she fights back saying, "I swear to you I haven't done anything wrong!" (285) Pure at heart like Hardy's Tess, Rani emerges during this ordeal and later as the dominant character. Earlier it was Naga who had taken care of her but now it's her turn to comfort him when she finds him tensed and disturbed. "I must listen to my heart and hold you back. Take you like a baby in my arms and keep you safe." (287)

The transformation of Rani and her emerging identity is a direct outcome of the emotional support and succour she receives from Naga. In the Indian society as per the dictates of Manu, a woman's identity is defined in relation to the other members of her family or to be more precise in relation to a man. She is a daughter, a wife or a mother. So, "...identity for them is usually a matter of relationships." (Gupta, 1999: 252) The incompleteness experienced every woman forms an integral part of her psyche contributing to her fractured and ill-formed 'self' identity. The glorified status that is associated with motherhood in the social and cultural ethos of India is the only way that a woman achieves identification and a significant position. According to Kakar, "...an Indian woman knows that motherhood confers upon her a purpose and identity that nothing else in her culture can." (Kakar, 1996: 57)

This identification of motherhood with freedom and authority, peculiar to the social and cultural context of a patriarchal society finds an echo in the words of Naveed, a character in Salman Rushdie's novel *Shame*, wherein she declares:

You stop being someone's daughter and become someone's mother instead, .... Then who can tell you what to do? (Rushdie, 1995: 155)



“By the end of the play, Rani has travelled a long route from innocence to experience.” (Rangan, 2006: 206) And this long route to experience does not reach its ultimate destination without a final ordeal for Rani.

Hypocrisy underlines the dictates of a patriarchal society that is partial towards men and unduly harsh and cruel to the women. Rani’s transformation, her shift from suppression to emancipation requires a final show of resilience of spirit and courage.

A victim of gender discrimination, a woman has to undergo trial for an offence she is not guilty of, while the men go scot-free even after committing a dozen crimes openly. Appanna can beat his wife, lock her up and accuse her of adultery while his own character and adulterous relations are not to be put up for questioning by society.

Rani has to face trial before the Village Elders to prove her innocence. Following the advice of her beloved Naga she takes up the Snake trial and speaks the truth, “Yes, my husband and this King Cobra. Except for these two, I have not touched any one of the male sex.” (292) In her ultimate trial also Naga protects Rani, and she emerges victorious from the Snake trial to be hailed as a Goddess by the very villagers who were to judge her crime.

Society can never accept or come to terms with a woman strong enough to be assertive and independent, and even if it does accept a woman as the leader it does so grudgingly and after much ado. A woman can either be a slave or a Goddess but never an equal. This extremes in attitude of a patriarchal society towards a woman reveals an inherent fear of feminity which is the ultimate authority in the Indian psyche as represented through the glorification of the ‘mother’.

Rani as the new bride is docile and mute, as the lover, shy and submissive and as the mother assertive and confident. She is the silent rebel unlike the rebellious women protagonists of Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee or Aruna. Neeli, the protagonist of Aruna’s novel of the same name though belonging to the same rural background is much more vocal and open in her rebellion against society than Rani.

Rani on the other hand accepts the socially acceptable role of being Appanna’s wife, though after the oath-taking ceremony the balance in their relationship is reversed and Rani becomes the dominant partner fully confident of her role and position, and assertive of her thoughts and decisions. It is she who decides as per the first ending of the play that her son should lit the pyre of the dead snake and commemorate its death every year.



In the second ending given to the play by the dramatist, Rani's acceptance of Naga as her lover within the framework of her relationship with Appanna presents a much more bold and rebellious character of the protagonist. She is truly a transformed woman, a modern woman fully in tune with her desires and emotions, and choosing a life which is true to her own wishes and instincts. Yet in her adherence to her role of Appanna's wife, she does not fully reject the social and cultural constraints as well.

Karnad's Nagamandala thus presents a hypocrite and biased social and cultural trait of the Indian society and its effect on the feminine psyche. "The play mocks at and questions the unjust values of our patriarchal society." (Babu, 1999: 750) Highlighting the inequality and imbalance in the man-woman relationship, Karnad juxtaposes questions of morality and adultery, and the diverse reactions and responses that a man and a woman face in this regard from society. A story of a woman's journey from innocence to experience, the play depicts her transformation and rebellion to survive as an individual having equal rights to respect, freedom and love.

Karnad though presents a rebellious and open minded outlook on the issue of gender discrimination and exploitation of women in the Indian society, yet he is unwilling to break the fragile balance of social and cultural norms. In this play, "The public and private selves become connected through the acceptance of socially responsible roles." (Gupta, 1999: 254) And so Rani's transformation is in agreement with her acceptance of Appanna as her husband and father of her child. Desires may be fulfilled and remain concealed in her psyche as evidenced by the presence of Naga in her tresses or in her imagination, but in reality she confirms to the pre-determined role set by society not as a naïve and submissive girl but as an experienced and assertive woman aware of her rights and position.

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