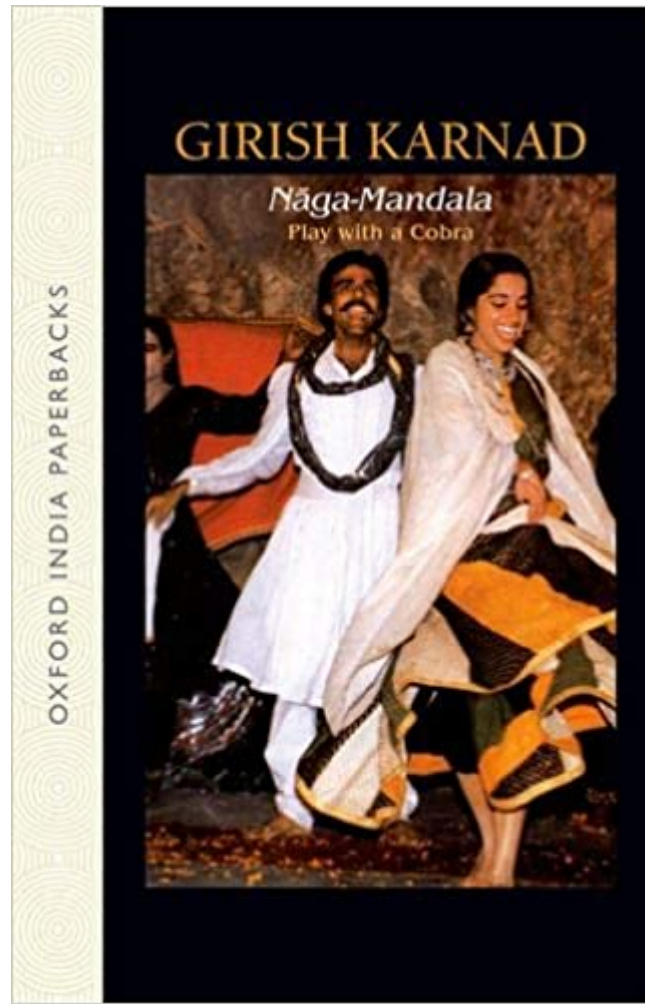


The Plight of a Rural Girl in Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala*

Dr. A. Kayalvizhi, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of English
Salem Sowdeswari College, Salem
Tamilnadu, India
kayalsiva1979@gmail.com
Mobile No: 9487550023



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Abstract

Gender discrimination is a phenomenon that is evidently ascertained in global level. The wretched condition of female gender is quite commonly observed even in this progressive age. Even though the urban women face gender inequality in day-to-day life, their situation is far better

when compared with the predicament of the rustic womenfolk of the countries like India that value culture and conventions more than humans. The women of countryside undergo awful mistreatment of the conservative patriarchal society in the name of traditional practices. The deplorable condition of such afflicted women is exposed by the renowned Indian playwright Girish Karnad in his play *Naga-Mandala* through the character Rani.

Keywords: Girish Karnad, *Naga-Mandala*, male chauvinism, gender discrimination, culture, customs, conventions.

Introduction

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About the Author

Girish Karnad is a famous multifaceted personality who is known as a Kannada writer, translator, actor, and film director. He emerged as a playwright in the 1960s that marked the attainment of maturity of modern Indian playwriting in Kannada. He was conferred Jnanpith Award in 1998, the highest literary honour granted in India. He translated some of his plays into English as well. As an actor, he received Padma Sri and Padma Bhushan awards from the government of India and also won four Filmfare awards.

Naga-Mandala

Girish Karnad, in the preface of the play, states that the story is based on two oral tales of Karnataka which he happened to hear from the famous Indian poet A.K. Ramanujan whom he mentions as his guru. Folk tales, naturally, are the reflections of the lives of the country folks that showcase their customs and traditions. This play, undoubtedly, evinces the plight of rural women who are caught under the agonising clutches of conventions.

Rani, the Protagonist

The play revolves around the character who is called Rani, that means queen, though it is not necessarily her name. Her father, in accordance with the customs of their culture, marries her, when she is just a little girl, to a parentless rich man. In the Indian system of arranged marriage, wealth is enough to make a man preferable as groom. Being parentless is assumed as a merit, since the girl is spared from the domination of in-laws. Therefore, from the social perspective, it seems that the father's decision is favourable to Rani. Pushpanathan comments:

Indian parents feel satisfied if they succeed in finding rich boys for their daughters perhaps because they find that earning one's livelihood is terribly difficult and their daughter will live in comfort with her rich husband, forgetting that the emotional comforts which proceed from happy marital relations are far more important. (1)

Start of New Life

As per the customs, Rani is taken to her new home by her husband Appanna after she comes off age. Right from the first day, Appanna locks her inside the house and goes out, and visits the house only for having lunch. As Rani is so young, she is frightened of being alone in the house all the time. When she expresses it to her husband during his visit for lunch, he pays no heed to her plea. He commands, "Look, I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told." (7)

Chauvinistic Husband

Leaving Rani alone in his home, Appanna spends his time at his concubine's house. This man, though he is love with another woman, brings Rani, whom he has already married, to his house in order to comply with the social norms. He utilises his wife for serving him food which is considered as one of the wifely duties in the system of the patriarchal society. He believes that by having the food prepared by Rani, he fulfils the part of a husband. Locking her inside the house signifies his male chauvinism that he inflicts isolation on her and intends to preserve her chastity by imprisoning her.

Visit of Kurudavva

In Appanna's absence, his house is visited by a blind old woman Kurudavva, a friend of Appanna's dead mother. On knowing the pathetic state of Rani, she feels sympathetic towards her. She assumes that Appanna has gone to his concubine leaving wife, because Rani may not be beautiful. It is quite usual that some menfolk have the temperament of justifying their act of seeking another woman on the grounds that the wife is not good-looking. This is the reason for Kurudavva's surmise. Then she feels Rani's features with her hands and discerns her prettiness. She describes, "Ayyo! How beautiful you are. Ears are 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) This statement is a substantiation for the principle of the male-dominated society that it is essential for the wife to be beautiful, or else the husband deserves to find another woman.

Manifestation of Naga

Kurudavva offers Rani two roots for the sake of enticing Appanna. As per her advice, Rani grinds the small root and mixes with the milk before serving Appanna. It does not produce the desired effect; he just faints, and after waking up, behaves as usual. When she tries the big root, mixing with curry, it turns blood red. Appalled by seeing this, Rani pours the curry into the anthill outside the house which is resided by a King Cobra. It tastes the curry and falls in love with Rani at once.

It watches Rani being beaten by Appanna for stepping out of threshold. Physical abuse is yet another ill treatment caused to women extensively. Domestic violence is, of course, a proof for the tyrannical tendency of certain menfolk.

After Appanna leaves, it enters the house through the drain in the bathroom. As Cobra has the power to transform to any shape, it assumes the form of Appanna. This character is denoted by the name Naga.

Affectionate Naga

Naga starts visiting Rani during nighttime and he showers love on Rani. Rani, though confused about her husband's changing behaviour in day and night, is pleased by Naga's night visits in which she receives his love and escapes from her bitter seclusion. Mahato makes a comparison between Appanna and Naga:

The paradox in the play is the behaviour of Rani's husband Appanna and that of the Naga. One is human but not humane, other is not human but humane. One is indifferent to his own wife and gallivants after the concubine. Other one is 'love struck' by the effect of the 'love root' not only expresses his tender love to Rani, but also renders Rani with the opportunities to become a wife, a mother and a woman while her husband who is entitled to and entrusted with these responsibility fails to do so.” (20)

Naga, in spite of having affection for Rani, could not clear her doubts regarding his strange behaviour as it may lead to disclosure of his real identity. So, he insists, “don't ask me why” (26), for which Rani replies, “No, I won't. The pig, the whale, the eagle-none of them asks why. So, I

won't either" (26). This clearly shows how a woman is conditioned not to use her sixth sense, her rational mind, which is a human attribute, and to consider herself equal to the creatures having less senses.

Sexual Relationship

Then Naga begins to have intercourse with Rani who is ignorant about it thus far like most of the Indian women. She feels that it is quite wrong and so accuses Naga: "I didn't know you were such a bad man. I should have known the moment you started using honeyed words" (24). Laughing at her naivety, Naga explains in flowery language that this is the law of Nature.

This is another drawback of Indian culture that the girls are deliberately kept away from the knowledge about sex, and they are expected to undergo that experience right after marriage. Therefore, many a women develop aversion to sex.

Consequence of the Contact

Rani gets pregnant, as a result of their relationship; Naga is worried about it, considering the consequence. As he predicted, Appanna is furious when he comes to know about the pregnancy of Rani. He chastises Rani using vile words: "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 with your sari off?" (33)

Then he beats her, drags her to the street, and tries to abort the child using a stone; but he is diverted by Naga in Cobra form. Rani escapes by running into the house and locks herself in. Appanna swears, "... Open the door, you whore! All right then, I'll show you. I'll go to the Village Elders. If they don't throw that child into boiling oil and you along with it, my name is not Appanna." (33)

Trial at Village Court

As sworn, Appanna makes a complaint to the Village Elders. As per the customs of their village, the woman, who is charged with having committed adultery, should hold red-hot iron in her hand and take an oath pleading innocence. Or else, she can opt for plunging her hand in boiling oil. These horrible practices seem to be the variants of the fire ordeal taken by Sita for proclaiming chastity in *Ramayana*, the Indian mythology. It is undoubtedly a disgraceful convention of the patriarchal society that the wife should remain chaste, otherwise she has to undergo dreadful ordeals whereas the husband can have affair openly. This is the loathsome status of certain cultures of India. Sahoo puts it: "The play questions the patriarchal moral code, which demands the faithfulness of a woman to her husband but not the faithlessness of a man to his wife. Rani sleeps with Naga without

knowing it, as Naga is in the guise of Appanna. On the other hand, Appanna enjoys extra-marital sex openly and unashamedly. Everybody even the elders in the village know this but do not prove his chastity.” (32)

Snake Ordeal

Rani, as per the guidance of Naga, requests for undertaking the snake ordeal which creates excitement in the village, since it is the first time to happen. And so, many people gather to witness it. Even though Rani is scared of taking the Cobra initially, she then proceeds with performing it. Holding the Cobra in her hand, she swears the oath: “Since coming to this village, I have held by this hand, only two ... my husband and this King Cobra. Except for these two, I have not touched any one of the male sex. Nor have I allowed any other male to touch me. If I lie, let the Cobra bite me.” (39)

Divine Status

Subsequently, the Cobra slithers up to Rani’s shoulder and spreads its hood over her head. The whole crowd is astonished to see this miracle and they fall at her feet in reverence. The Village Elders come to a conclusion that she is a Divine Being, and they advise Appanna, “your wife is not an ordinary woman. She is a goddess incarnate. ... Spend the rest of your life in her service” (40). Then the crowd takes Rani along with her husband on the palanquin to their house with respect.

Change of Heart

Appanna is bewildered by the event, and he too falls to her feet asking for forgiveness apologetically. Then he turns a devoted husband to her. Furthermore, his concubine, as an act of repentance for her sins, becomes the servant of Rani. Thus, Rani lives happily thereafter with her husband and child.

Conclusion

Even though the story ends on a seemingly happy note, it is a clear representation of male chauvinism. Rani has never taken a decision in her life; her life is steered by several men. Her marriage takes place according to the decision of her father that the father chooses the groom and marries her at young age. After marriage, her husband, due to his selfishness, subjects her to seclusion and maltreatment. Naga, the male Cobra, too plays his role in her life that he impregnates her as per his fancy. The prevailing system of the male-dominated society compels her to undergo the ordeal. The result is also the outcome of the decision taken by the male Cobra. Then the Village Elders, who are also men, pass a verdict that she should be treated reverently by her husband. The

patriarchal society imposes her to live with a man who has no love for her and is forced to stay with her by the judgment. Hence, a woman, especially in the culture-bound countryside, has no chance to take decisions in her life and live as per her wish.

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