
LANGUAGE IN INDIA

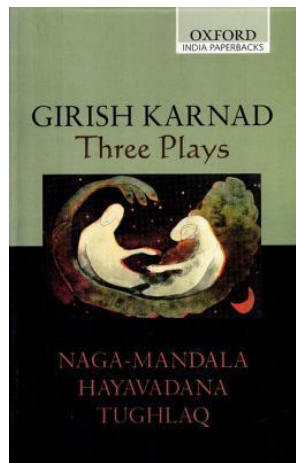
Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 14:2 February 2014
ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.
Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.
Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.
B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.
A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.
Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.
Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.
S. M. Ravichandran, Ph.D.
G. Baskaran, Ph.D.
L. Ramamoorthy, Ph.D.
C. Subburaman, Ph.D. (Economics)
Assistant Managing Editor: Swarna Thirumalai, M.A.

Mythological Aspects in Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala*

Anju Bala, Ph.D. Research Scholar



What is Myth?

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:2 February 2014

Anju Bala, Ph.D. Research Scholar

Mythological Aspects in Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala*

Myth refers to colourful stories that tell about the origin of humans and the cosmos. As stories, myths articulate how characters enact an ordered sequence of events. According to the common misconception of the term myths are merely primitive fictions, illusions or opinions based upon false reasoning. It is also believed that myths have developed out of folktales. According to M. H. Abrams:

Folktales have been normally understood as traditional verbal materials and social ritual that have been handed down primarily by r, word of mouth. Folktales developed and continued to flourish best in communities where few people can read or write. It include, among other things, legends, superstitions, songs, tales, proverbs, riddles, spells, nursery rhymes; pseudo-scientific core about the weather, plants and animal (63)

In reality, mythology includes much more than grade school stories about the Greek and Roman deities or clever fables concocted for children's enjoyment. As Mark Schorer in *William Blake: The Politics of Vision*, says "Myth is fundamental, the dramatic representation of our deepest instinctual life of a primary awareness of man in the universe, capable of many configurations, upon which all particular opinions and attitudes depend." According to Alan W. Watts, "Myth is to be defined as a complex of stories (some no doubt fact and some fantasy) which for various reasons human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe and of human life".

Myth in Indian Literature: Girish Karnad's Plays

In Indian literature, myth has always enjoyed a prominent position. India is a nation richly imbued with religious sentiment and belief. According to M. Rajeshwar, "Most Indians are at least in theory religious in outlook." The two epics The Ramayana and The Mahabharata as well as The Puranas have been an unending source material for literature. The Indian drama written in English by Indian playwrights such as those of Girish Karnad's plays vividly exemplify this trend. Girish Karnad is regarded as one of the three great writers of the contemporary Indian drama, the other two being Vijay Tendulkar and Badal Sircar.

While Tendulkar and Badal Sircar deal with middle class problems, Karnad takes Indian myths, legends and folklores, making use them to create a new vision. In all his plays, he honestly portrays the Indian way of life with all its positive and negative aspects, its traditions and their contemporary relevance. Karnad is a man of creative genius, who takes up fragments of ancient myths and history to create a forceful social statement. As Karnd says, "The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values, of making them literally stand on their head".

Girish Karnad is a contemporary Indian playwright, actor and movie director in Kannada language. He is among the seven recipients of Jnanpith Award for Kannada, the highest literary

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:2 February 2014

Anju Bala, Ph.D. Research Scholar

Mythological Aspects in Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala*

honour conferred in India. As a playwright, he is preoccupied with the retelling of Indian myths, legends, folklores and history. Of his eleven plays, seven are based on myths and legends and three on history, and only one on contemporary experience.

The reason why Karnad chooses myths and legends is not very difficult to understand. As Jung points out:

Myths and legends embody themselves in the form of motifs and symbols, certain recurring patterns of collective human behaviour and certain archetypal human experiences. Myths express certain archetypal social relationships. These relationships could be of father and son, husband and wife or of brothers. Secondly, myths have the power to affect us even without our being aware of it (2 Mukherjee 57).

Treatment of Myth in Karnad's Plays

Karnad, in his plays, does not take myths in their entirety. He takes only fragments and uses his imagination to create original plots. He uses myths and folktales as raw material for his plays. As Shastri says, "Myth, at all events, is raw material, which can be the stuff of literature"(Shastri.229-230). When Karnad was asked the reason for his handling of myths and legends, he replied his only purpose was to narrate the specifics story effectively and so, "the borrowed tales are given a turn of the screw, as it were, which works wonders with his plays".

Focus of This Paper

In the present paper, an analysis has been made to find out as to what extent Karnad was able to interpret the present in the light of the mythical past. It is a well-known fact that the themes of Karnad's plays are mythical, historical or legendary, but his manner of treating them is quite modern. He is the only playwright who uses myths imaginatively and creatively resulting in stage worthy plays. By using these myths, he tries to reveal the absurdity of life with all its elemental passions and conflicts and man's eternal struggle to achieve perfection.

Nagamandala

The play *Nagamandala* is derived from folk-lore. In this play, Karnad turns away from the 'classical' traditions to the local Kannada folktales as his source. It is based upon two oral Kannada tales he had heard from his mentor friend and well-known poet and translator, A. K. Ramanujan, to whom, he also dedicated the play. Here, Karnad combines two tales – the flame story, and the story of Rani and Appanna. Karnad's *Nagamandala* is based on two oral tales from Karnataka, as we know from what he says in his "Introduction" to Three Plays:

....these tales are narrated by women – normally the older women in the family – while children are being fed in the evenings in the kitchen or being put to bed.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:2 February 2014

Anju Bala, Ph.D. Research Scholar

Mythological Aspects in Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala*

The other adults present on these occasions are also women. Therefore these tales, though directed at the children, often serve as a parallel system of communication among the women in the family.

The Plot

In this play Karnad makes an interesting mixture of myth and history, and through this, he takes up socio-cultural issues in India. The play *Nagamandala: A Play with Cobra*, incorporates a mythical plot. The play focuses on the projection of the female protagonist, Rani, under the influence of Psycho mythical nexus. History is replete with many such stories in which a woman has to undergo many ordeals to prove herself chaste and pure. In the play Karnad presents a re-mythification of the Ahalya myth. In Valmiki's Ramayana, Ahalya commits adultery knowingly, but the folk mind equates Ahalya with the chaste woman and therefore, can't allow her to commit the sin deliberately. So, Indra is shown to have perpetrated a fraud on her by disguising himself as her husband Gautama. In the play too, Rani is innocent. It is Naga, in the form of her husband Appanna, who makes love to her. She thinks that she bears her husband's child and doesn't suspect Naga's identity till the very end.

Rationalizing Rituals

A ritual is a sacred manifestation of or an epiphany of a myth in action, says Northrop Frye (Frye.341). In other words, myths rationalize a ritual by providing an authority for it. It is a common practice in India, that women perform the rituals of offering milk to cobra to get good husbands. In the play, Kurudavva gives some root to Rani to lure her husband, but Rani throws that paste upon the anthill. And the cobra accepts the offering and falls in love with Rani. With the Root hangs a myth: The Kunti myth: in the earliest received version and also in its present version, a virgin Kunti (Kurudavva) gets magical power from a saint, for serving him devotedly. Kunti shares this power with Madri and in the play, Kurudavva shares this magical root with Rani, because she thinks herself to be the mother of Appana and the latter acknowledges it as much when he says, "In my sleep it sounded like my mother calling me". (P.43)

Dramatization of Two Folk Tales

Nagamandala is inspired by the snake myths prevalent in south India. It is a dramatization of two folk tales of Karnataka. In fact, Naga cult is widely practised in many parts of India. *Nagamandala: A play with Cobra*, based upon folk beliefs and myth, is an ambiguously simple play whose complexity consists in co-ordinating the elements of myth, magic, folk belief and romance. By endowing Naga with the feelings of genuine love and making him in the process, the sorrowing lover whose cruel mistress is Rani, Karnad de-mythicizes the husband-wife marital love (as described in all Indian cultural texts) and re-mythicizes the Beauty-Beast myth. Naga suffers the pangs of separation when the villagers unite Rani with her husband after

she goes through the snake ordeal. So he decides to end his life so that his beloved might live happily.

Sita's Trial

The scene of Rani's trial reminds us of Sita's trial in The Ramayana and it shows its affinities with the traditional Indian values. As in The Ramayana, Sita throws herself on a funeral pyre in anguish and her chastity is proved when she is spared by the flames. Similarly in the present play Rani steps up to ant-hill, plunges her hand into it, pulls the cobra out and says,

Since coming to this village, I have held by this hand, only two.....my husband.....And this cobra.....yes, my husband and this king cobra. Except for these two, I haven't touched any of the male sex. Nor I have allowed any other male to touch me. If I lie, let the cobra bite me". (P.58)

The Title of the Play

The title of the play is extremely significant. It presents one of the dramatis personae of the play around which the whole play revolves. The play abounds in mythical references and evocative sensual images. The play opens with a conundrum. The opening lines of the prologue suggest that "the presiding deity of the temple cannot be identified" (247). So, in accordance with Hindu mythology it can be assumed that the broken idol is that of Ganesha, who is termed as 'Vighanharta' in Hindu mythological books. His propitiation is necessary for all important works. Similarly, the female protagonist has no identity of her own. The playwright introduces her as, "A young girl...her name....it does not matter. But she was an only child daughter, so her parents call her Rani" (253). Her husband marries her because he needs a servant for household work. Every night, he locks her in the house and goes to his concubine. Then another woman Kurudavva, who also had the same story, shares a magical root with Rani to lure Appana. Rani mixes this root with his food, but seeing its blood red colour, is horrified and throws the gravy on the ant hill in which Naga, the cobra lives. Because of the root effect Naga falls in love with Rani and starts visiting her in the guise of Appana. In Hindu mythology, it is believed that the King cobra could assume a human form. Karnad uses this myth to show like Appanna, Naga too makes use of patriarchal discourse to subjugate Rani into silence, although he claims to be in love with her. He betrays Rani, when she becomes pregnant, and leaves her alone to face social degradation, And when Rani becomes successful in her trial, the same society tags her as a "Goddess".

Cultural Constructs

Folk narratives are cultural constructs designed to mould the individual in accordance with the codes of the moral tradition. The folk epistemology of moral is rather lucid and is connected to the wisdom codes of community that affirm strict verbal codes. For instance, in the trial scene, the elders of the village, who are the guardians of moral codes and symbolize the

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:2 February 2014

Anju Bala, Ph.D. Research Scholar

Mythological Aspects in Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala*

folk justices want a sign from the accused that satisfies the moral beliefs of the community. Moral codes derived from the wisdom codes are the basis and criteria for folk judgements, which is often unreasonable in comprehension. The hermeneutics of Nagamandala has multiple streams as Freudian, psycho-symbolic, mythical / archetypal, feminist and so on. The leitmotif of Kannadiga art is the metamorphosis of the central characters in mythical and social situations, from meaning to being and being to meaning.

A Folk Morality Play

While reading Nagamandala as a folk morality play, a community of beliefs and concepts get transferred. God (her Naga, a symbol of supernatural power) fulfils the desires of the devotees. Rani (the symbol of womanhood) desires love and affection from her husband Appanna (the symbol of manhood) who has denied that love in her marital life. Her actions based on folk beliefs fulfil her desires. It is highly believed in our society if someone does God's worship devotedly then God always fulfills his wishes. In India, women do Karvachauth fast for their husband's long life. Many girls do sixteen Monday fasts for getting good husbands. These entire stereo – typed beliefs are created by society. The (stereo – typed) moral is that when the devotee is in need, the god of faith incarnates with a solution. Pragmatic actions based on a blind belief fetch grace. Grace in operation is the fulfilment of a desire.

Metaphoric Function

Myths and legends serve as metaphors for contemporary situation in Karnad's plays. They are used as subterfuges to discuss socio-cultural evils. Modern theatre directors also takes myths as their themes, as these myths have elements of modernity and are relevant to the present day audience. The play shows woman as a commodity of use, where she is not an individual but an object of desire. She is subjected to social discrimination and being crushed under male dominated society. Girish Karnad uses myths and legends as a vehicle to explore this injustice, cruelty and social gradation of females. He uses these myths to show the superficiality of human society. Thus Karnad's use of myth and folk elements to deal with a theme which has a striking contemporary relevance is wholly authentic and salutary and has the weight of experiments successfully made in contemporary world literature. The purpose of drama is only to portray the life of the whole universe and Girish Karnad, through the element of myths, has effectively portrayed the contemporary world making his portrayal universally appealing.

Works Cited

- Abrams. M. H. Glossary of Literary Terms. 7th Ed. Madras: Macmillan, 1995.63.Print
Frye, Northrop. Anatomy of Criticism. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:2 February 2014

Anju Bala, Ph.D. Research Scholar

Mythological Aspects in Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala*

Karnad, Girish. Author's Introduction Plays: Nagamandala, Hayavandana, Tughlaq.
New Delhi: OUP, 1994.

Karnad, Girish. Nagamandala: A Play with a Cobra. New Delhi: OUP, 1990.Print.

Rajeshwar, M. "Psychoanalysis and Indian Writing in English: Promises and
possibilities." Indian Writing Today. Ed. C.R Visweswara Rao. New Delhi: IAES,
1996.22.

Schorer, Mark. William Blake: The Politics of Vision. New York: Holt.1946.28-
29.Print.

Shastri, J.L Ed. Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology. Vol. I: "The Shiva Purana".
New delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1970. PP 229-230.

Watts, W.Alan. Myth and Ritual in Christianity. New York: Vanguard P.1954.7.Print

=====
Anju Bala, Ph.D. Research Scholar
Maharshi Dayanand University
Rohtak
Haryana
India
anju.ahlawat26@gmail.com