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**Folk Theatre and Human Complexity in
Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala***

Dolly George, M.A.

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A Reluctant Master

Girish Karnad says that, though the English writers and the thought of writing in English influenced him, it was unknowingly that he became a playwright and started writing in Kannada. 'Yakshagana', the traditional folk theatre of Karnataka, influenced him. Karnad's plays, *Yayathi*, *Hayavadana*, *Tughlag*, and *Nagamandala* certainly reveal this influence.

Two Folktales and a Play

The play *Naga Mandala* is based on two folk-tales of Kannada. It was first staged at the University of Chicago. Karnad says:

The energy for the folk-theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values. The various conventions- the chorus, the music, the seemingly unrelated comic interludes, the mixing of human and non human worlds permit a simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view.

Bed Time Stories For Living in Day Time!

Old women in the family usually narrate the folktales, either when the children are being fed in the evenings or when they are put to bed in the night. Though they are narrated to children, stories serve as a parallel system of communication among the women in the family.

A Two Acts Play with a Prologue

The play *Nagamandala* is divided into prologue and two acts.

The Problem Starts With the Audience!

In the prologue, we find a ruined temple with a broken idol. A man comes to the temple and says that he was a playwright earlier, who with his plays had made many audiences to sleep. They cursed him to death!

A mendicant had advised him that if he could keep awake at least one whole night he would not die. That day was the last day of the month, and he kept himself awake in order to overcome the curse of death. He then swore to himself that if he could survive that night without sleep, he would have nothing more to do with story writing.

After sometime, he heard some voices and then saw some flames.

Flames With Speaking Tongues

Karnad says that the writer had heard that in some remote villages, the flames had the ability to speak. These flames talk to each other with female voices.

Flame 1 says that her master was a miser and hence had put the lights off early and due to this she could come to the temple early.

Flame 2 says that she came from a family, whose master was a 'lustful man'. He needed the light to feast on his wife's body.

Flame 3 says that, hereafter she could come early because her master and wife were free now to enjoy worldly pleasures. The master's mother had died and now both of them were free to enjoy.

All these flames are not mere flames, but they represent the society. The play deals with the loose morals that are being practiced in society. Further, humans in the present day do not give any importance to religious values.

A Different Story to Tell

Flame 4 has a different story to tell. The lady in her house was doubtful about her husband and she had a story and a song inside her mouth, which she kept for herself. She did not reveal it to anybody. One day, while she was snoring, the story and the song jumped out of her mouth. This story became a lady and the song took the form of a *saree*. When the woman woke up, she saw a young lady, coming outside her husband's room. It is reported that these were some hallucinations in the mind of the woman. This story and song tell a new story.

Breaking Vows

The writer-character, in spite of his vow not to indulge in any more story telling, promises that he would pass the story to others.

The Story of Rani and Appanna

The story deals with the life of Rani and Appanna. They are not given any name in the beginning and hence they represent the whole humankind. Rani is so called because she is the queen of the long tresses, which, when tied into a knot, resembled a 'cobra.'

Appanna and Rani are married, apparently Rani being a child bride. After gaining puberty, she is bought to her husband's house. Appanna is not a faithful husband. He spends his time with his concubine and comes to his house only to have his lunch. He speaks to Rani only in "syllables." He says:

APPANNA: Look, I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand? (*Nagamandala* 39).

Rani leads a secluded life and then Kurudavva saves her. It is only she who understands Rani's real problem. Kurudavva gives two small roots to Rani and asks her to mix it in Appanna's food. It is believed that, by

taking the root, Appanna will not go and visit with the concubine again. She says:

KURUDAVVA: Once he gets even the smell of yours he won't go after that concubine. (*Nagamandala* 261)

The first root has no effect on Appanna. Rani takes a bigger root, and when she mixes it in the curry it becomes bloody red. She actually curses herself for trying to give this to Appanna. She says:

RANI: Suppose it harms my husband, what will happen to me? (*Nagamandala* 387).

She spills it on a nearby anthill. A snake living in the anthill instantly falls in love with Rani.

The snake in the myth is believed to be a symbol of fertility. The snake takes the shape of Appanna and has sexual communion with Rani. It is through the snake that Rani understands the meaning and passion of love in marital life. When the real Appanna finds that she is pregnant, he calls her a "whore." Appanna asks:

APPANNA: Don't you feel ashamed to admit that you are pregnant, you whore? (*Nagamandala* 753)

Rani is asked by the village leaders to perform the ordeal of holding the hot iron rod to demonstrate that she is a chaste woman and faithful to her husband. The snake advises her to perform the ordeal of holding the snake instead. Rani follows this advice, and holds the snake, which spreads its hood on her head and sways it gently and hangs like a garland around her neck. The elders on the village judicial committee proclaim her to be a 'goddess.'

Elder 2 says that she is not a woman but she is a goddess.

In the end, Rani gets her husband back and enjoys a happy life. Naga, the snake, who has brought about such a happy consummation of married love, wants to have a final look at Rani. He makes the final visit when they are fast asleep. Naga then presses Rani's hair to his body, ties a noose and strangles himself to death. When Rani combs her hair later, a dead cobra falls to the ground. It is cremated and her son lit the funeral

pyre. Once again, the snake appears and Rani allows it to live in her tresses forever.

Supernatural Elements

Like in most folktales, supernatural elements play the vital role in *Nagamandala*. Traditional beliefs help generate supernatural elements. There is always some magical power in specific roots, according to traditional belief. Kurudavva gives Rani the magical roots but the root is consumed by a king cobra which results in very interesting twists and turns in the play. Another belief is that the cobra has divine power and it can assume any form it desires. In the play, Naga takes the form of Appanna. It is by the form of Appanna that Rani becomes pregnant. So, in some sense, Rani has nothing to do with this “unlawful” sexual communion. It is with his supernatural powers, Naga saves Rani from her pitiable and dangerous plight prove her chastity.

The story of Appanna also has certain interesting touches. It is believed that some witch or fairy enchanted him away from his lawful wife. Once again, the act of the unfaithful husband is explained away through the use of some mysterious fairy. The identity of the woman who entices Appanna away is unknown and it remains a mystery. Are these anecdotal explanations intended to justify that we as human beings are simply pawns in the hands of the divine, or that these events are inevitably caused by Karma?

Complexity of Human Life

Girish Karnad uses a magical folktale to reveal the complexity of human life. In particular, he uses the folktale in the Indian context to reveal the social and individual relations.

Man-Woman intimate relationships, the question of chastity being imposed on married women while their husbands have a merry-go-round with other women outside their wedlock, married women’s earnest desire for the love of their husbands in spite of the shortcomings of their husbands, the throbbing of secret love that Naga demonstrates by his killing himself on the passionate and warm body of Rani, and, above all, the result of the sexual communion being a male child, the “son” lighting funeral pyre and so many other potent and hidden meanings, make this play a very complex play. The village judicial system also comes to be

portrayed with ease, and with this the process of deification in Indian society also gets revealed. Demonstration of unusual power and tolerance is sure ground and an essential step toward deification.

We Wonder – The Audience Is Alive, and Not Dead!

In the backdrop of a folktale, which includes flames, snake, avatars, performance of impressive ordeals, cremation of the dead snake, and the background chorus, *Nagamandala* comes alive with numerous symbols, hidden meanings, and explicit and implicit lessons, even as the play bewitches the captive audience, scene by scene. The play started with a curse of dead or non-responsive audience, but we complete reading the play certainly as active and live audience! At the end of it all, we still wonder whether it is the magic, characters, events, conversations, or simply the ambience that takes us far from our mundane life even for a few hours. A master piece, indeed, from a reluctant Master.

Work Cited

Karnad, Girish. *Nagamandala: A Play with a Cobra*. Oxford: OUP, 2000.

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