

## **Marginality and Psychological Realities – A Perspective from Girish Karnad's Nagamandala.**

By - Dr M. Nagalakshmi, Associate professor, Dept. Of English, VISTAS, Pallavaram

### **Abstract**

India has a rich culture and values since ancient time and the ideal credit has been given to man who possess high knowledge while the woman is considered weak and vulnerable. This serious thought is observed by the writers especially the contemporary Indian dramatists who have raised their voice to support women and write an epilogue to their sufferings and difficulties. Interestingly the contemporary India's dominant playwright Girish Karnad has managed to deal the gender issues in his plays brilliantly. Nagamandala is one such play which exhibits not just assaults and uncovered male dogmatism, the suppression of women, the ghettoization done to them by the so called patriarchal society, yet additionally discreetly flattens the idea of celibacy. It is a play on the sovereignty and strengthening of the women who need to take up a fundamental position for the recuperation of a crumbled social request. Karnad's preferences themes from folktales and puranas and depicts the Indian marital life in male dominated society. He weaves together immortal convictions about human life and feelings contained in obsolete Indian folktales with the changing social ethics of current life. The present paper aims to analyse the theme of patriarchal ideology and the psychological realities of Rani the female character of Girish Karnad. Further, the article will examine the marginal position, and female sensibility of women in the Indian Society.

(Key words: Patriarchal ideology, marginality, psychological reality, gender roles).

K.R.S. Iyengar proclaims that the Indo-English drama is 'neither rich in quality nor on the whole of high quality'. The most unfortunate aspect of Indo-Anglican drama is that it has never been fit for performance of the stage. But the greatness of Girish Karnad lies in the success on the stage as well as among readers. The key to success as a playwright is the use of folk elements in his dramas. He was one of the major playwrights, actor and film director who grew up watching regional folk dramas and had many friends and colleagues in the literary field. He read about the Puranas, acting, plays and with theatre experiences he produced many plays which reflect his own thoughts and ideas. Referencing through K.R.S. Iyengar words that his major plays whether the theme is historical, mythical or legendary his

approach is ‘modern’, and he deploys the conventions and motifs of folk art like masks and curtains to project a world of intensities, uncertainties and unpredictable denouement.

Various influences have shaped Karnad’s ideas as he went to Oxford University as a Rhode scholar where he witnessed and experienced an undeviating clash between Western and Indian tradition. Though he has highly predisposed by his contemporaries, he diverges from them to a great extent, as he understood that the sole aim of literature is enhancing life and the dissemination of human values. Returning India Karnad has started writing in his mother tongue, that is, Kanada. His profound interest in Indian epics and connection with foreign writers traversed in his plays. His brought up gave him the liberty to write about gender and sexuality. He prominently chose the condition of women and their inability to fight in the patriarchal society in his plays. His contribution to Indian theatre is incomparable. He received many awards for his works, Padma Bhushan (1992) and Jnanpith Award for contribution to literature and theatre (1999). Some of his prominent plays are *Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1972) and *Nagamandala* (1988).

Girish Karnad in the introduction to the collection of his plays “Three Plays” states that ‘the myth had nailed me to my past’. His influence and inspiration of Indian history and mythology made a great impact on his plays and using those he transformed the traditional past into modern present. His play *Nagamandala* was inspired by two oral tales narrated to him by A. K. Ramanujan. The first play ‘*Yayati*’ was the inspiration of the story of a King from the Indian epic ‘Mahabharata’. The ‘*Thghlaq*’ was based on the story of Muhammed *Tughlaq* a fourteenth century Sultan of Delhi. ‘*Hayavadana*’ was inspired by ‘*Kathasaritasagara*’ a collection of tales and Thomas Mann’s ‘The Transposed Heads’. All of these plays have their sources in the past but their characters are built with a modern approach.

Karnad uses myths and legends as metaphors for contemporary situations. By using myths, he projects the women who are suppressed and exploited more than men in our society and it remains culturally patriarchal in spite of democracy. Indian women suffer in a male – dominated society. Indian culture is a complex one, in perspective of its various social demands, depending on complex traditions and gender discriminations. It is exceptionally relevant to analyse the historical background of ancient women, particularly from Manusmriti to postcolonial times. “some steps back to the ancient times can give us a vivid picture of the position of woman in Indian socio-cultural context”. Manusmriti, one of the

original writings of ancient times states that “Day and night woman must be kept in dependence by the males (of) their (families), and if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyments, they must be kept under one’s control. Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence.

Manu’s portrayal of woman in accordance with the depiction of women characters in our ancient Epics and Puranas where women should be submissive to their male counterparts, be dutiful and chaste, and be always at their mark to prove their chastity if the society demands them to do so. Jasbir Jain points out,

“Gender construction in India has its roots in Sita’s Agnipariksha, Draupadi’s Chirharan and Damayanti’s adherence to the pativrata code”.  
(Indigenous Roots of Feminism 29).

Draupadi is forced to maintain marital relationship with five husbands while Sita and Ahalya, without any active role in violation of social codes are commanded purification through symbolic deaths (one by being transformed into stone and another by being asked to pass through fire). This kind of depiction clearly show that the women were subjected to atrocities, humiliation denied self-respect and dignity by the male-centric society. On the other hand, there are the deities of Durga and Kali adored in the society, the deities considered being supremely powerful and symbolizing creation and destruction respectively. The concept of Swayamvara, the privilege of a woman to choose her husband, is another feature which marks woman power in the earlier social construct. Moreover, the women in the epics are not always essentially passive. While Sita opts to return to mother earth instead of going back to her husband, Draupadi demands war for justice in order to take vengeance against the Kauravas for her Vastraharan. Thus there is an interesting duality in the position of woman in Indian socio-cultural context. Though her potential tried to be curbed by the patriarchy, her spirit, dignity and self-respect have often come to the forefront despite all hurdles laid down on her way.

Patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence. (bell hooks, understanding Patriarchy)

The story of '*Nagamandala*' deals with the life of 'Rani' and 'Appanna'. Rani and Appanna represent the whole humankind. Rani is the queen of the long tresses, which, when tied into a knot resembled a 'Cobra'. Rani is married to Appanna and she is brought to her husband's house. Appanna spends his time with his concubine and comes to Rani only for lunch. Rani is never treated as a wife not even as a human being by her husband. The traditional patriarchal system did not allow Rani to express her difficulties and grievances to anyone else, because Appanna keeps her like a prisoner. Rani wants to free herself from the cruel clutches of Appanna but the patriarchal brought up did not allow her to do so.

"Patriarchal thinking shapes the values of our culture. We are socialized into this system, females as well as males. Most of us learned patriarchal attitudes in our family of origin, and they were usually taught to us by our mothers" (Understanding patriarchy, bell hooks)

On the nuptial relationship Rani is ignored, bullied and beaten up by her husband who crushed her emotional and intellectual thoughts all together. As a result, she is left alone with no voice and choice as a dignified member of human society.

The sex/gender system is argued to be a set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into gendered beings whose activities and roles are expected to correlate with biology; deviations from assigned and anticipated "entailments" from one's biological sex are taken as signs of pathological or criminal behaviour. Within this (dichotomized) sex/gender system, then, biological sex is taken as given, and gender is assumed to "naturally" follow- as is the appropriate object-choice of desire. Gender thus is an analytical category that refers to the social organization of the relations between the sexes. The term gender is used to designate psychological, social, and cultural aspects of maleness and femaleness... (Nancy Potter, "Key Concepts: Feminism" Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology)

In Indian society, the woman is said to be complete only after marriage. However, paradoxically Rani neither belongs to this world or that: her parental home or her husband's abode. For the woman, the home is said to be an expression of her freedom. It is her domain. However, in Rani's case she is imprisoned in her own house by her spouse. Women were subjected to artificially constructed ideas of the feminine,

and all that aspects of society and culture functioned according to a sexual politics that encouraged women to internalise their inferiority until it became psychologically rooted in them.

Appanna locked the door from outside but God opens a door for her in the form of a King cobra. The king Cobra gets seduced by the love potion provided by Kurudavva to Rani to lure, pathetically, her own husband who turns to blind eye to her. The snake assumes the form of a loving Appanna in contrast to the atrocious husband at day. The climax is reached when Rani becomes pregnant and Appanna questions her chastity.

Rani: "I was a stupid ignorant girl when you brought me here. Now I am a woman, a wife and I am going to become 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?"

Appanna: "Aren't you ashamed to admit it, you harlot? I locked you in and you get managed to find a lover! Tell me who it is. Who did you go to with your 'Sari' off? (Karnad, T.P. II 32)

From the beginning of the play, Appanna behaves like a moron to his own wife Rani and ignores her totally and lives with his concubine. He visits his home at noon to have his lunch. He is never questioned by the society and not asked to prove his chastity in front of the village elders as Rani is asked to prove her chastity.

"Clearly we cannot dismantle a system as long as we engage in collective denial about its impact on our lives. Patriarchy requires male dominance by any means necessary, hence it supports, promotes, and condones sexist violence" (bell hooks, Understanding Patriarchy).

The village usually asks the accused person to go through a trial of taking an oath with holding a red-hot iron in the hand or sometimes they may wish to plunge the hand in boiling oil. Here Rani insists on swearing by the King Cobra.

RANI:           since coming to this village, I have held by this hand, only two.

APPANNA: (Triumphant) There. She admits it. Two, she says two!  
Who are they?

RANI: My husband and.....

APPANNA: And-say it, who else?

RANI: And this Cobra (suddenly words pour out) yes, my husband and this 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. (Karnad, T.P. II 58)

“Virtue should not be relative to gender as both men and women were created by God and have souls, they have the same kind of propensity to exercise reason and develop virtue”. (A Vindication of the Rights of Women, Merry Wollstone Craft).

Rani’s innocence is proved by virtue of the snake ordeal that the village elders put before her, and she is eventually proclaimed a Goddess incarnate. Appanna is instructed to honour her divinity and the couple have got a beautiful child. Appanna has plenty of questions and doubts on his mind but still the society insisted him to accept Rani as her innocence is proved in front of the patriarchal society.

ELDER 1: Appanna, your wife is not an ordinary woman. She is a goddess incarnate. Don’t grieve that you judged her wrongly and treated her badly. That’s how goddess reveal themselves to the world. (Karnad, T.P. II 59)

Rani, the protagonist and the heroine of the play has two different images throughout the play. The innocent, obedient and suffering bride and the other of a goddess incarnate. Karnad brilliantly portrays the arrogance of patriarchal ego by projecting entirely different images of the heroine. Rani’s fidelity and chastity is set against Appanna’s illegal relationship with woman is an open secret to the elders but he is never questioned in this male dominated society, where social codes have been framed by men, they enjoy certain privileges.

“Psychological patriarchy is the dynamic between those qualities deemed “masculine” and “feminine” in which half of our human traits are exalted while the other half is devalued. Both men and women participate in this

tortured value system. Psychological patriarchy is a 'dance of contempt', perverse form of connection that replaces true intimacy with complex, covert layers of dominance and submission, collusion and manipulation.

Thus Karnad overtly proves through this play the very basic notion of patriarchy is manipulating power and it was a political institution which relied on subordinates' roles of women stated by Kate Millet's 'Sexual Politics'. Hence the very statement of Kate Millet's 'Patriarchy's chief institution is family' is proved.

### **References**

- Beck, Abaki. "Understanding Patriarchy by Bell Hooks." *POC Online Classroom*, POC Online Classroom, 9 May 2017, [www.poconlineclassroom.com/blog/2017/4/29/rad-reading-understanding-patriarchy-by-bell-hooks](http://www.poconlineclassroom.com/blog/2017/4/29/rad-reading-understanding-patriarchy-by-bell-hooks).
- Endersstocker, Bryan. "NO BORDERS: Louisville's Radical Lending Library." *NO BORDERS: Louisville's Radical Lending Library*, [imagineborders.org/](http://imagineborders.org/).
- Hooks, Bell. *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. W. Ross MacDonald School Resource Services Library, 2016.
- Jain, Jasbir. *Indigenous Roots of Feminism: Culture, Subjectivity, and Agency*. SAGE, 2011.
- Karnad, Girish, et al. *Three Plays*. Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Karnad, Girish. *Three Plays: N-Aga-Mandala, Hayavadana, Tughlaq*. Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Millett, Kate, et al. *Sexual Politics*. Columbia University Press, 2016.
- Potter, Nancy. "Key Concepts: Feminism." *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1 Mar. 2002, [muse.jhu.edu/article/28377](http://muse.jhu.edu/article/28377).
- R., Srinivasa Iyengar K. *Indian Writing in English*. Sterling Publishers, 2003.

Simons, Margaret A. *Beauvoir and the Second Sex: Feminism, Race, and the Origins of Existentialism*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999.

“Understanding Patriarchy : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming.” *Internet Archive*,  
[archive.org/details/UnderstandingPatriarchy](https://archive.org/details/UnderstandingPatriarchy).

Wollstonecraft. “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman by Mary Wollstonecraft.” *Project Gutenberg*, 1 Sept. 2002, [www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3420](http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3420).