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Research Paper

Vision of Co-existence in Girish Karnad's Naga-Mandala

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ABSTRACT

The present paper purports to examine the view of GirishKarnad towards the martial relationship between Rani and Appanna in Naga-Mandala. The conjugal relationship between Rani and Appanna is lop-sided and imbalanced where the latter ignores the existence of the former as human being. The position of Rani is analogous to that of slave and animals. She is subjected to various forms of deprivation, violence and torture, and left with no choice and voice. The playwright fuses energy in Rani to enable her to subvert the patriarchal value system which helps Appanna subjugate her on various planes of life. He strikes a balance in their relationship by deconstructing the patriarchal value system.

Towards the end, Rani enjoys the status analogous to that of her husband. Appanna also changes his attitude towards Rani by appreciating her beauty and acknowledging her existence as human being. With this Rani finds a dignified position in the conjugal life with voice and choice. Moreover, the play accommodates lover and concubine within the fold of marriage. Now both the husband and wife live happily with their differences and choices. The way the marital relationship fructifies exemplifies the vision of the playwright--the vision of co-existence. As a humanist, the playwright underscores the human virtues such as love, trust, tolerance, mutual understanding for harmonious and healthy human relationships.

Paper

Girish Karnad's deep-rooted humanitarian zeal impels him to give voice to the silenced majority through his plays. His plays are filled with the deprived, dispossessed and down-trodden who are subjected by patriarchy or upper class hierarchy. Deprived of decent and dignified life as human beings, their position is analogous to that of slaves and animals in the contemporary democratic and civilized world where the constitutional bodies like Human Rights Commission operate on various levels with a view to ensure justice to those who are meted out injustice. Karnad not only underscores their subservient and sub-human plight and position but also fuses in them energy enough to protest against the life-denying system and to shift their position to the level of their counterparts.

In the dramatic world of Karnad, women, within and without wedlock, are subjected to various forms of deprivation, humiliation, violence and torture in almost every walk of life in one way or the other. The playwright not only exposes the arbitrariness of the system where women are considered as "second sex," "other," "non-persona" but also questions the way women are socialized to internalize the reigning hegemonic ideology and degrade their own position to perpetuate the on-going subordination and subjugation. Patriarchal hegemony deprives them of due chances to realize their innate powers and potentialities as human beings: "Gender equality still remains a myth…the discussion of the relationship between man and woman have been prescribed by man not by woman. Man who is ruled by the mastery-motive has imposed her limits on her. She accepts it because of biosocial reasons" (Krishanamayi, 64-65).

In Naga-Mandala, the playwright foregrounds the recurring problems of women in the present-day Indian rural society. The play registers a strong protest against the patriarchal social order for its myriad forms of deprivation, violence and oppression of women in the contemporary Indian society. In the play, Rani, a naïve and submissive girl, falls prey to the unjust social order through the institution of marriage which impedes all the channels that can provide her with opportunities to have self-discovery, self-growth and self-actualization as a human being. The patriarchal order uses marriage as a coercive tool to exploit and oppress women on various planes---physical, emotional, intellectual, sexual and social. Rani's father arranges her marriage with a parentless young boy with plenty of wealth, but the choice of Rani is grossly overlooked taking for granted that she is incapable of taking decision. Alike many Indian fathers he looks at the marriage from a materialistic perspective, thereby overlooking all other aspects of healthy and meaningful marital life: "Her fond father found her a suitable husband. The young man was rich and his parents were both dead" (Naga-Mandala, 6). Here the word "suitable" is used ironically. Appanna is not a human being, rather he is "a wild beast or a reptile" (8) in the guise of man, but under the umbrella cover of patriarchy he oppresses Rani, thereby ignoring her existence as a human being.

A patriarchal social set up, like ours, firmly asserts men's superiority over women and is based not on mutuality but on oppression. The image of woman was created by man. It is what "he wants her to be inferior and he never wants her to be an equal, a co-sharer of all the privileges he is enjoying" (Moi, 209). It is generally assumed that the biological factor plays an important role in the ascription of male or female

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too, but the societal forces also play an equally important part in the division of gender. Simon de Beauvoir's assertion that "One is not born a woman, but rather, becomes a woman" (Beauvoir, 351) is quite sound and appears equally applicable in case of man. One is not born a man, but rather becomes one under the impact of the existing socio-cultural and economic forces. In this play, Appanna is not born a man, but becomes one under the male-hegemonic social system.

Rani in Naga-Mandla is a creation of patriarchal social order which ignores the existence of women as human beings. In the tight noose of traditional marriage, Rani finds it very hard to have healthy marital and social interaction and articulate her grievances and grudges, as Appanna keeps her "locked up like a caged bird" (10). Rani longs to have flight and freedom from the cruel clutches of Appanna. On the sexual plane, she is neglected; on the physical she is bullied and beaten; on the emotional she is crushed; on the intellectual she is hushed up, and on the social she is almost ex-communicated. As a result, she is left with no voice and choice as a dignified member of human society. "Marriage is not only an honourable career and one less tiring than many others: it alone permits a woman to keep her social dignity intact and at the same time to find sexual fulfillment as lived one and mother" (Beauvoir, 352). But here, in a patriarchal society Rani is always subordinated and treated as a 'second sex' by Appanna.

As a young girl, Rani has preferences and proclivities; desires and dreams, needs and necessities, but she has to suppress all of them in the face of stiff and strong hegemonic system. The prime factor behind her silence and submission is that she has been counseled and conditioned to be cordial and co-operative; shy and submissive, timid and tolerant in her marital life. As a result, she fails to gather courage and confidence to question the exploitative and oppressive system. In a patriarchal social order, "masculinity' is associated with superiority; whereas 'feminity' is linked with inferiority," (Kaur, 11) and while "masculinity implies strength, action, self-assertion and domination, feminity implies weakness, passivity, docility, obedience and self-negation" (Kaur, 11).

Appanna's bestial instincts come to the fore the very first day of the marriage when he goes out to meet his mistress locking up Rani in the house with the words: "…I'll be back tomorrow at noon. Keep my lunch ready. I shall eat and go" (6). Neither does he tell her why and where he goes to nor does she gather courage to question his nocturnal visits. In patriarchal order, women are not supposed to question man's indiscretions; rather they are subjected to harsh interrogation and severe chastisement if they try to deviate even slightly from the prescribed rules and roles. The lock signifies the entire patriarchal discourse of chastity which is used to contain and confine woman's urges. "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, 239).

In a patriarchal social system, husband is supposed to provide security and safety to wife, but in the play, it is the husband who engenders sense of insecurity and fear in his wife. Rani feels "frightened" (7) being "alone in the house" (10) haunted by the feelings of fear and insecurity, but Appanna, instead of providing her any emotional succor and support, threateningly interrogates her: "What is there to be scared of? Just keep to yourself. No one will bother you…" (7). Locked up in the empty and isolated house, Rani finds no one to share her pains and privations. Rani tells Kurudavva: "… you are the first person I have seen since coming here. I'm bored to death. There is no one to talk to!" (11). Rani is impatient to vent her anxiety and agony, but Appanna hushes her up with the harsh words: "Look, I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand?" (7). In the conventional marriage, husband enjoys all privileges to give orders, not to be dictated; whereas wife is forced to go by his all and sundry wishes and whims, desires and dictates. Rani, alike other Indian wives, suffers from an acute sense of loss and lassitude within wedlock. Being helpless, she suppresses her urges---sexual, social and psychological.

In Indian society, a woman is not supposed to claim freedom and individuality. In such a situation, repression of individuality is inevitable. "In tradition-bound societies like India…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, 141). In the twentieth century, psychological theories make the point that repression of the natural urges puts tremendous impact on the psyche of an individual. One has to represses his or her natural instincts, under the duress of socio-cultural codes and mores, to conform to the socially sanctioned roles, but the repressed desires get fulfillment through dreams, hallucinations and myths. Peter Barry holds the view:

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, 100)

Rani, as a victim of severe repression and alienation, seeks refuge in the world of dreams and hallucinations. She fantasizes that she is being carried away by an eagle far from the world of Appanna. She asks the eagle: "Where are you taking me? (7). The eagle answers "Beyond the seven seas and the seven isles. On the seventh island is magic garden. And in that garden stands the tree of emeralds. Under that tree, your parents wait for you" (7). Then Rani asks him again: "Do they? Then please, please take me to them…" (7). While dreaming she falls asleep and moans: "Oh, Mother" (7). But the make-believe world does not last long; very soon she confronts the harsh realities of life, on waking up, to find her in the locked house of the monstrous Appanna. Rani's dreams reveal the inner working of her psyche; they are articulation of the innermost desires suppressed in her consciousness. The eagle symbolizes flight and freedom which represents Rani's yearning for release from the cruel clutches of Appanna. She yearns to fly away from the dark and dreadful world of Appanna, but to no avail.

Rani, being aggrieved and upset, dreams that she is in the comfortable company of her parents: "Then Rani's parents embrace her and cry. They kiss her and embrace her. Don't worry…'Don't be worry, they promise her" 'We don't let you go away again ever"(7). But the parents, in reality, do not come to her rescue, holding the view that she would be happy with her husband or it would be an act of encroachment on the territory of the husband. In her imagination she finds "the stag with golden antlers comes to the door….He explains, 'I am a prince" (7). It is evident that she has cherished a desire that a prince would come and make her real Rani, but Appanna, in the form of monster, has taken her away and reduced her to the position of a maid to look after his physical needs. Then she alone in the house at night imagines: "…the demon locks her up in his castle" (14). The demon is none other than Appanna who locks her up in the

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house. Rani's only duty is to cook food for him. He locks her up in the house and brings home a watchdog and a mongoose to ensure her complete alienation from the society.

At this critical juncture in Rani's life, Kurudavva, a blind and aged woman, comes to her rescue, but her help is limited in time and space. Kurudavva offers her magical roots as remedy to win back her husband from the clutches of his mistress. But the magical potion turns into a disaster-like situation as Appanna consumes it; he falls on the floor and becomes unconscious. On the insistence of Kurudavva, Rani tries the bigger root to woo her husband, but the curry turns red---blood red. Frightened Rani stealthily rushes out and pours it into the anthill, but this gesture of Rani infuriates Appanna. In fury, he "slaps her hard" and "she collapses to the floor" (17). It is Rani who feels herself nothing without Appanna. That is why, she does not give him the blood coloured curry even though it is believed to have power enough to win over Appanna's love and attention. Rani, alike the Indian wives, is concerned about the safety of her husband: "Suppose something happens to my husband? What will my fate be? Forgive me god. This is evil. I was about to commit a crime. Father, mother how could your daughter agree to such a heinous act" (17). No tradition-bound Indian woman likes to see her husband die before her death and wants to become a widow. Born and brought up in the man-made system, she is averse even to the idea of death of her husband while she remains alive because she knows that the life of a widow is not only vulnerable but also painful.

Ironically enough, the magical potion succeeds in wooing Naga living in the anthill. Now Naga visits her at night through the drain in bathroom and puts on the guise of Appanna. Naga gradually succeeds in breaking her frigidity and removing her feelings of fear and insecurity with the help of "honeyed words" (25). Rani tells Naga: "I don't feel afraid anymore, with you beside me" (24). He praises her long tresses and talks a lot about her parents, besides listening to her intently. Gradually, Rani falls in love with Naga and waits for him impatiently when the evening approaches, and when he does not come for fifteen days, she spends her nights "crying wailing, pining for him" (29). Naga coaxes her into sexual union, and resultantly she becomes pregnant, but this turn of events invites anger, insults and beatings from Appanna. At this critical juncture, Naga also expresses his helplessness: "I'm sorry, but in can't be done" (34) and does not like to be exposed publicly. But it is Naga who brings about radical changes in Rani. Now she becomes bold and assertive. When Naga expresses his helplessness to save her from the chastity test, Rani comes out with reactionary words:

I was 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 sparrow. Why don't you take it on trust that I have a mind and explain this charade to me? Why do you play these games? Why do you change like a chameleon from day to night? Even if I understood a little, a tiny bit----but I could bear it. But now---sometimes I feel my head is going to burst! (32)

When Rani reveals her pregnancy to Appanna, he beats her up accusing her of adultery with the indecorous ugly 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 to with your sari off?"(33). But Rani who has not committed any crime swears to him about her innocence: "I swear to you I haven't done anything wrong" (33). "Women are sexually oppressed. It is reflected in the concept of chastity, a patriarchal value. It is one of the most powerful, yet invisible cultural fetters that have enslaved women for ages…..Extra-marital enjoyment for women is a taboo in this ultra-modern age."(Babu, 33-34.) But Appanna reports the matter to the village elders who pass orders that she must undergo chastity test either by putting red hot iron on her palm or putting hands into the whole of cobra. With great fear and trepidation Rani puts her hands into the hole of cobra and vows: "Since coming to this village. I have held by this hand, only two….My husband….And this Cobra" (38). The Cobra instead of stinging her "sways its hood gently for a while, then becomes docile and moves over her shoulder like a garland" (39). At this the villagers, who were determined to declare her a whore a minute ago, exclaim: "A Miracle! A Miracle! She is not a woman! She is a Divine Being!" (39). The villagers fall at her feet. The crowd surges forward to prostrate itself before her. They elevate her to the status of a goddess: "Appanna your wife is not an ordinary human. She is goddess incarnate. Don't grieve that you judged wrongly and treated her badly (40). The transformation of Rani and her emerging identity is a direct outcome of the emotional support and succor that she receives from Naga.

In the end, Appanna changes his behaviour and attitude towards Rani, may be under the pressure of the village community or because of the pricks of his conscience. He falls at her feet and says: "Forgive me. I am a sinner. I was blind…" (40). Now he realizes the beauty of her long tresses and dignity as a human being. When the dead Naga falls from her hair, Appanna says: "Your long hair saved us" (44) from the deadly Cobra. When Rani expresses her wish that the cobra "has to be ritually cremated, the fire should be lit by our son and every year on this day, our son would perform the ritual to commemorate its death," (44) Appanna agrees: "Any wish of your will be carried out" (44). Now Rani plays an active role in the familial affairs. She is fully confident of her role and status, and assertive of her thoughts and decisions. In the alternate end to the play, Rani's acceptance of Naga as her lover within wedlock presents a much more bold and rebellious character of the protagonist. She invites Naga "Get in (to my hair). Are you safely in there? Good. Now stay there. And lie still. You don't know how heavy you are. Let me get used to you, will you?"(45).

Thus, Rani moves from the marginalized position to the central one in the arduous journey of her marital life. Though the journey is fraught with pains and privations, she occupies the central position in the familial affairs by collecting courage and confidence and by disconcerting the male ego and his inflated sense of power over women. Though Rani emerges a completely changed woman with modern outlook, entirely in harmony with her desires and decisions and true to her wishes and instincts, she does not reject the world of Appanna. The fact remains that the non-human world and the human world form a part and parcel of each other's existence.

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