

In Search of their Voice: Women on the Periphery in *Naga-Mandala*

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ABSTRACT

Relationships among different components of society form the core of Karnad's plays. For Karnad man and woman are two forces which make and run the society. At the same time he is also conscious that woman does not get her due in our society. *Naga-Mandala*, published in 1988, presents the voice of ordinary women of our society. Women in our society form the core of existence—be it family or society, yet they do not get to express themselves. In fact, they have no say in the familial or societal matters. Thus women form their own groups where they share their innermost feelings. And though they are forced to live on the fringes, they voice their opinions and concerns as thinking and intelligent human beings in and through these women groups. The present paper explores this need of women to speak and to be heard through Karnad's *Naga-Mandala*. Karnad here uses two folk tales to bring before us the situation of women in the present social warp and weft. The paper makes an effort to show how *Naga-Mandala* elucidates that women, though living on the periphery, voice their opinions and concerns and lead a life of their choice within the boundaries fixed by the society.

KEYWORDS

Relationship; Voice of Women; Women's Concerns; Oppressed Ordinary Women.

Girish Karnad impresses his reader as a man of poetic sensibilities, who writes of human concerns straight from his heart. Relationships among different components of society form the core of Karnad's plays. And nowhere else is it more evident than in *Naga-Mandala* published in 1988. For Karnad man and woman are two forces which make and run the society. At the same time he is also conscious that woman does not get her due in our society. She is not heard. In fact, she does not get a fair chance to express herself. However, she finds ways and means to express and also

carve a niche for her in this male dominated society. *Naga-Mandala*, published in 1988, presents the voice of ordinary women of our society. This he does through Kannada folktales as his source, which he had heard from Dr. A. K. Ramanujan, India's renowned scholar of oral traditions. Here Karnad combines two tales – the flame story and the story of Rani and Appanna.

Naga-Mandala opens in the sanctum sanctorum of a village temple. The Prologue itself sets the tone of the play. The ruined temple, the broken idol of the

presiding deity, time of night and moonlight seeping through the cracks in the roof--all combine together to create a mystic and ethereal setting. As the play opens the audience comes face to face with a man, sitting all alone in the ruined temple. He is trying hard to keep himself awake. It is in the middle of his efforts that he addresses the audience and tells them why he is desperately trying to remain awake.

A mendicant told him to stay awake at least one full night of the continuing month, failing which he will die. Today being the last day of the month, he must remain awake to evade death; otherwise his temporary sleep might convert into the permanent one. And this night, which could be his last night, the man comes to this deserted temple to avoid dying, if death does visit him in the form of sleep, in front of his family. The man is a writer who wrote and staged plays and caused people to sleep curled up unfortunately in their chairs while watching his hopeless plays. Hence this curse. It is here in this temple that the man vows not to do anything with stories or plays if he survives. And yet ironically enough it is here that an interesting story unfolds in front of him which must be told.

The main plot of the play unfolds before us as a story embedded in the subplot. The plot of the flames is the peripheral one, whereas the main plot of Rani and Appanna constitutes the story that has been stifled for long and which now longs to be told. It is believed that after their job is over in their respective homes, the flames meet in some deserted and secluded area of the village. Karnad makes use of this myth and gives us a glimpse of the female world through the Flames. As the lamps in the village are put off, the flames gather in the old ruined temple where the man has taken shelter for the night. Safe in the knowledge, that there is no one to eavesdrop on them, the Flames talk of even such subjects which are

considered taboo. As all the flames gossip and share their experiences there comes a flame that is late that night. When the other flames ask her as to why she got late she tells them that in her household there was a row. She stayed with an old couple. Now the old woman knew a story and a song, but she would never tell this story or song to another and this suffocated both the story and the song. On that particular day after lunch, as the old woman took a nap, her mouth opened slightly and both the story and the song fled out and hid in the attic. At night the story took the shape of a woman and the song became a sari, which was draped by the story. After the husband had slept, the story and the song (in the form of young woman in the sari) fled from the house. The old woman saw the woman coming out of their room and it created a quarrel between the husband and wife. Thus the lamp was put out later than usual. This is how the story of Rani and Appanna comes out and through The Man reaches the readers and the audience.

Naga-Mandala is a telling commentary on the predicament and status of women in a patriarchal society. In their homes, the women perhaps do not get anytime to speak or express themselves, for they are only supposed to work and take care of others, as the flames are supposed to burn till they are turned off. The Flames in the play are all women who must flee their homes and be in the company of women only if they wish to speak and be heard. Like flames women must work till others need them. After their need is over the flames are turned off. The same is true of women. The Story is a symbol which represents human beings' need to express themselves. It is more symbolic of a woman's need of expression, for women in India are generally not allowed to express themselves freely. The males never try to peep into the lives of their womenfolk and try to understand their feelings. It is because of this reason that Karnad chooses a woman, a story to

tell the tale of Rani. The 'Story', a woman will be able to interpret and convey Rani's emotions and thoughts, her anguish, sorrows and pain and her joy to the audience better than any male. Thus the Man is only a listener, who is entrusted with the job of reporting only. Karnad also makes here another implicit observation that men might not be able to relate to the feelings and emotions of other human-beings especially women.

India has traditionally been a patriarchal society. Even today when there have been efforts to make women more empowered and aware, they are still dominated by men, in their personal as well as social lives. *Naga-Mandala* presents a subtle study of the forces that shape the life of a woman. The story of Rani is the story of every woman. Because it is the story of every woman, it does not evoke much sympathy from the society, at least not from that society which is male-dominated. The play addresses itself to the problem of feminine sensibility and the female quest for her identity. It tries to analyse and interpret the position and status of women, who traditionally enjoy only peripheral roles in our society. The play poses some very relevant questions regarding the institution of marriage as it exists in India. Appanna locks Rani in the house whereas he himself spends nights with another woman. Thus male is indulging in a vulgar display of power where he is treating women as disposable objects – be it his wife or mistress.

Karnad perceives a woman's life through a lens of compassion and sympathy, and in the process examines several social issues. Appanna's attitude towards Rani is that of a typical male, who feels that he owns a woman, after he has married her. Appanna leaves the home soon after bringing Rani there, with specific instructions, which he expects and knows, will be carried out. Nowhere in the play does Appanna ask Rani what she wants or needs. He expects and demands

submissive obedience from her. Unfortunately, the situation is indeed acutely reflective of the present social set-up. The locked house is symbolic of a woman's caged existence in wedlock.

Appanna is any man, any ordinary man in the traditional patriarchal society, who is not sensitive towards his wife, and shows an utter disregard for her emotions. Rani is any woman, who is named Rani out of affection by her parents. However, when the reader meets Rani, she is treated not as the queen, rather as a servant of the house she is supposed to rule. The paradox of Rani's life is highlighted because of her name. Rani does become the queen, not only of her house, but of the entire village. She is considered goddess incarnate, because she proves her chastity in front of whole of the community. Ironically enough, the reader knows that Rani is not chaste in body, though of course she is chaste in mind.

Another face of womanhood that emerges in *Naga-Mandala* is Kurudavva. She is a mother figure. Kurudavva is mother not only to her son Kappanna but she also proves to be a mother to Rani. She wants to set things right at Rani's place and for this purpose she gives Rani two roots which can prepare magic potions. Her purpose is to bring love in Rani's life. And she does succeed in her aim, through love knocks at Rani's door in the shape of Naga, not Appanna.

Naga-Mandala is Girish Karnad's mouthpiece on very complex issues of man-woman relationship and women's position and status in society. The central character Rani is an ordinary Indian girl, who is married to Appanna because her parents find him suitable for their daughter. He is rich and has no encumbrances. Rani's parents, therefore, expect that Rani's life will be very comfortable and smooth. However, we know that it does not turn out to be so. Appanna has a mistress whom he visits every night. So Rani remains only that wife

to Appanna who serves him food and does other sundry things. It is left to Naga to make her a wife in the real sense of the word. With Naga Rani shares both her joys and sorrows. Naga is her confidant too. He shows consideration towards her feelings. Naga becomes a friend to Rani, whereas Appanna remains her master. Brought up in a typically traditional manner Appanna has, in his mind, clearly chalked out their respective roles. He has typically chauvinistic attitude towards Rani's duties as a wife. Whether she could have any rights too, is beyond his comprehension. Karnad has attempted a split in the male psyche in the shape of Appanna and Naga. Here the split is physical too; otherwise the same man could be an ardent lover at night and an autocratic husband during the day time.

Rani's predicament is a telling commentary on the social bond called marriage. It is expected that either love should culminate in marriage, or else marriage should bring love. However, in Rani's and Appanna's case love and marriage are two contrasting things. They are married to each other, but Rani finds love in Naga, and Appanna in his mistress. Love for them exists outside marriage, though, of course, in Rani's case; it is in ignorance that she finds love outside marriage. Rani's life exposes the myth of finding love and fulfilment in marriage. Marriage should mean companionship and oneness. However, ironically enough in her marriage Rani is alone, and also alienated from society both physically and psychologically.

Naga-Mandala satirises the farcical social norms as regards chastity. It exposes the 'gender-biased' values and morals of our patriarchal social order that has oppressed women for almost eternity, and sets us thinking. The gender bias is brought out in all its painful intensity in the trial of Rani. Rani is castigated as immoral and is tried by the village elders in the presence of whole of the village community

for they think that Rani is having an extra marital relationship, which she is having but only unknowingly. Naga assumes the form of her husband and woos her. There is no way for Rani to know that Naga is not Appanna and she succumbs to the pleasures of marriage. Appanna too is in an extra-marital relationship and he does so openly. This situation exposes the age-old moral code which demands faithfulness of wife to her husband, but not that of husband to the wife. Appanna here represents all men. Anand Kumar Raju observes:

His name means any Man and is a wry comment on any man who tries to enforce chastity on his wife while he himself indulges in extra-marital relationship.¹

Rani has the choice of opting for a trial to prove her innocence by dipping her hand in boiling hot oil or by holding a red hot iron rod or holding a King Cobra in her hand. If she comes out of these trials unscathed she is pure, otherwise not. In fact no woman could survive these tests and in a male-dominated society, they have no choice but to live like slaves otherwise they risk being branded women of loose character. Manchi Sarat Babu observes:

Thus 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. There has been enough literature, both oral and written, glorifying this enslaving value and deifying the women characters who observed it faithfully. The Ramayana in which Sita undergoes the fire ordeal to prove her chastity to Rama has been the cultural guide to Indians for more than two thousand years. Extra marital enjoyment for women is a taboo even in this ultra modern age.²

The same social attitude is exemplified in Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session (Shantata ! Court Chalu Aahe)*. Miss Leela Bernare is mercilessly attacked verbally under the garb of mock trial. The male culprit here also goes scot-free. However, these women are not ready to let society overrule them. They want to have a choice, and wish to exercise a control over their bodies and thus their lives. Leela Benare in *Silence! The Court is in Session* says:

Who are these people to say what I can or can't do? My life is my own – I haven't sold it to anyone for a job! My will is my own. My wishes are my own. No one can kill those – no one! I'll do what I like with myself and my life!³

Unfortunately, *Naga-Mandala's* social norms are reflected in our own so very modern 21st Century. For all our talk of gender sensitization and female empowerment the situation remains much the same as presented in *Naga-Mandala*.

The following conversation between Appanna and Rani is quite revealing:

Appanna What is there to be scared of? Just keep to yourself. No one will bother you. Rice! (Pause)

Rani Please, you could__

Appanna Look, I don't like idle chatter. Don't question me. Do as you are told and you won't be punished. (Finishes his meal, gets up).⁴

Thus, the man-woman relationship emerges as one of the master and slave. There is absolutely no equality of genders. One can decide on the conduct of the other and award reward or punishment accordingly. Where does the much hyped-up equality exist? And shockingly enough the situation has not changed much, not in men's psyche at least. And, precisely because of this relationship between the

two of them, Rani does not question even Naga (who, she thinks is her husband). She has not been given this right.

Physical purity is of prime importance and Rani in *Naga-Mandala* has to prove her innocence only for the purity of body. Heart is nowhere taken into consideration. Rani is chaste of heart at the time of trial. Her body, of course, by the standards of society is not pure. Karnad is looking critically at the concept of purity. What should purity be associated with – body or heart? By the time of the snake ordeal Rani does not know that Naga and Appanna are two different persons. For her they are the two faces of the same man, and she is intrigued also about the opposing types of behaviour of the same man during day and night. But after the snake ordeal is over and Rani is proclaimed a goddess, Rani must come to know that Naga and Appanna are two different men, for as the story very rightly observes:

No two men make love alike. And that night of the village Court, when her true husband climbed into bed with her, how could she fail to realize it was someone new⁵

Rani must have realized that night that though she was Appanna's wife it was some other man who made her his wife. From this night onwards Rani's thoughts must have gone to her lover every night and she must have hankered after him. The chastity of thoughts is also gone now, though it is now that Rani is being revered as a goddess. This leads us to another telling observation on the status of women in the society – that they are acceptable either as inferiors, fit to be treated as servants, or as superiors, to be throned as goddesses. There cannot be any equality of genders. Appanna is told that his wife is a goddess and she should be treated as such. The uncommon situation which brings role reversal leads only to superficial quietude and harmony.

Rani is a perfect prototype of an average Indian woman. Appanna exercises total control over her. He makes it clear that Rani has only to do his bidding and is not allowed to ask any questions. Understandably, then, Rani does not ask any questions from Naga. Naga turns Rani into a woman from a girl. Though in the beginning Rani's only wish is to go to her parents for comfort, later on she starts waiting for Naga. She looks for the signs of approaching night, the time when Naga comes. Rani enjoys an easy camaraderie with Naga. They love each other deeply and ardently. However, in this relationship also, the rein is the hands of male. Though Naga loves her, due to his own reasons, he cannot allow her to ask questions about his nightly visits. Naga's will decides the course of their relationship. Rani can only wait for Naga and when he comes, welcome him. Thus the female remains the passive and subservient element of the relationship. The male whether as a husband or a lover, will always be in a dominant situation, with woman forced to accept his whims and wishes. Obviously then, women enjoy their rights and freedom but within the bounds set by the men of the society. However, with Naga Rani experiences love, whereas with Appanna she makes only adjustment. The life of Rani and Appanna is a sad commentary on the institution of marriage. A social bond which is expected to bring love culminates in adjustment only. For love one has to often look outside marriage.

Rani is a traditional woman, yet she is very modern in some respects. Karnad has, in *Naga-Mandala*, touched a very sensitive issue, that of female sexuality. He brings out the forbidden truth that women can be as sexual as men. After Naga's discourse explaining to Rani about the beauty of the meeting of the sexes, Rani accepts her enjoyment and satisfaction in this meeting thus:

The pig, the whole, the eagle – none of them asks why. So I won't either. But they ask for it again. So I can too, can't I? ⁶

Rani's avowal of her desire is reflective the modern day woman's acceptance of her physicality.

Another thing that stands out clearly in *Naga-Mandala* is that though women here are marginalised and in general they are not given a right to express themselves, they are far more intelligent than the men. Rani is sensitive, sensible and intelligent. This is evident throughout the play. When she is with Naga, she is a complete woman.

The women in the play are all traditional and conventional ones. Krudavva, the blind old woman, represents the Indian women as traditionally conceived. She is eager to help and happy to serve others. She is concerned about the marital happiness in Rani's house. On learning that Appanna does not show any love towards Rani, she gives her the roots to be fed to Appanna. When Rani tells her that her married life is going on happily she goes off, saying, "My work is done,"⁷

The third woman in the story is Appanna's concubine. Though it would be easy to assume that she is a bad woman, who has snatched the husband of another woman; yet she too like Rani is an exploited person. If Rani does not get her due as the wife, she also does not get anything. Rather she is looked at with contempt. Kurudavva comments after feeling Rani's face,

How can that Appanna gallivant around leaving such loveliness wasting away at home.⁸

And later

Once he smells you he won't go sniffing after that bitch.⁹

Later after Rani is proclaimed goddess and Rani and Appanna start living as man and wife, she becomes a servant in their home. Appanna on the other hand

enjoys the company of his wife now. And one more thing that must be kept in mind is that she was already associated with Appanna when he brought Rani home. Thus, one or the other woman will suffer. The story of Rani and Appanna also makes a telling study of what forces a woman look for love and satisfaction outside marriage.

That *Naga-Mandala* is based on oral folk tales handed down from generation to generation also makes it a women-oriented play and that too the marginalised ones. These tales are narrated to children normally by women at bed time, and the other adults present are also women. Thus these tales become a way of communicating among the women of the family.

Karnad in *Naga-Mandala* presents women that we meet every day. They are all ordinary women. They want their lives, they hanker after their rights, yet they are not rebels. These are the women who live on the periphery of their existential set up, be it the society or their own families. They never emerge as the centre or nucleus of the set-up that they are part of, though they might in fact be the central hub of the existence of their families and thus society too. But they are never given that recognition. Thus Rani can be locked up in the house, while Appanna roams free to hob-nob with his concubine, yet it is Rani who is answerable for all her actions to Appanna and not the other way round. In *Naga-Mandala*, Karnad shows that though men and society oppress women, and deny them their very lives, yet they will find ways and means to express themselves. They create a world, as the flames and the Story do, where men are barred from entering. The man only becomes a tool for them, one which they cannot dispense with, since their voice is certainly smothered and they need a medium for their expression. The Man only fills that void. And this oppression of women at the hands of male dominated society is not because of any intellectual superiority, but

because of the physical superiority of man over woman, as we can see in case of Appanna and Rani. Appanna hits Rani and beats her when she goes out of house without his permission. As has already been said Naga also does not give right to question to Rani and he also exploits Rani in this sense. Marulasiddappa observes:

The irony of the term 'fidelity' comes through in this sequence of events. Appanna and Naganna – two faces of one man, one seen at day, the other at night – symbolise the exploitation and double standards of man, while Rani is the symbol of a woman's eternal endurance of this oppression.¹⁰

However, this oppressed woman does show signs of becoming confident and attaining maturity. Perhaps her impending motherhood brings this change in her. When Naga asks her to hide her pregnancy for as long as possible and do as he says, she tells him:

(Blankly) Yes, I shall. Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you. Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you. No, I won't ask questions. I shall do what you tell me. Scowls in the day. Embraces at night. The face in the morning unrelated to the touch at night. But day or night, one motto does not change: Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you

(He is silent)

I was a 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 a 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 – I could bear it. But now sometimes I feel my head is going to burst.¹¹

Later on, during the court scene Appanna also gets a taste of her new-found courage and boldness, when he tries to stop her from going to Kurudavva.

(Snarling at Appanna) If you don't let go, I'll _

(Taken aback by her fury, Appanna lets her go)¹²

This confidence and assertiveness of Rani acquires a new meaning when after the trial Appanna accepts her superiority and as we see later, fulfils all her wishes as orders.

Thus in *Naga-Mandala* Karnad questions the gender-biased justice which

favours men like Appanna. But he also shows that women who are reduced to live a life on the periphery of social existence will assert themselves and have a voice of their own. They will be heard, and will form the nucleus of the society set up. However, one issue still remains – women are either inferior or superior, she can either be a witch or a goddess. As a wife she will be dominated, as a mother she will be looked up to. There can be no gender equality, it seems.

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