

Social Concerns in Girish Karnad's Nagamandal

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Abstract

Drama is an audiovisual medium of expression that is effective and powerful in the domain of Literature. The evolution of drama in numerous countries like Greece, Rome, England and India emphasizes upon the fact that it has always been an integral part of culture, highlighting and evaluating moral commitments, religious convictions, philosophical approaches and social and political changes in various countries. Karnad has discovered and reinvented diverse patterns of drama from Indian and the world literature and his works have rejuvenated, expanded and energized the poetics of contemporary drama. He goes ahead shares of writers like Ratan Thiyam and Habib Tanvir in his interest in reshaping the Indian theatre. The maturity of his works has been compared with that of the works of Peter Brooks, Jerzy Grotowsky Engenio Barba, Suzuki, Tadashi in Japan and Wole Soyinka in Nigeria. The present paper tries to highlight how Girish Karnad presents the social concerns in a very deft manner in his *Nagamandalam*. The paper particularly focuses on the depiction of the plight of women in the play. *Nagamandal* is thus, a ingenuous manifestation of the social conditions prevalent in India in so far as man-woman relationship and patriarchy is concerned. Karnad depicts how love, marriage and any other bond or value governing the relationship is conditioned by this, socio cultural context. The play holds a social, cultural and psychological significance.

Keywords: *Social concerns, patriarchy, bigotry, chauvinism.*

1. Introduction

Karnad has discovered and reinvented diverse patterns of drama from Indian and the world literature and his works have rejuvenated, expanded and energized the poetics of contemporary drama. He goes ahead shares of writers like Ratan Thiyam and Habib Tanvir in his interest in reshaping the Indian theatre. The maturity of his works has been compared with that of the works of Peter Brooks, Jerzy Grotowsky Engenio Barba, Suzuki, Tadashi in Japan and Wole Soyinka in Nigeria. In responding to dramatic strength of his works, we find complete theatre experience; its genesis in story telling-acting out stories, dancing, singing, wearing, masks impersonating other humans, animals, supernatural and all such things. Through these experiences Karnad has revealed the nature of human

awareness-the cognitive life, the life of desire in a socio-cultural context.

Nagamandal is one of the most noteworthy plays by Girish Karnad and also one of the most notable milestones in Indian English drama. The play has a adroit amalgamation of myth, ritual and imaginative writing, making most artistic use of the popular modes of theatre and serious play writing; along with an analysis of the social situation of the times.

2. Discussion

Nagamandal is based on two oral tales which Karnad has heard from A. Ramanujan. 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. These tales are representative of the parallel system of communication among the women in the family. These stories also express a woman's distinctive understanding of the reality around her; counterpoint to the patriarchal structures of classical texts and institutions. This turns the play realistic relating easily with the readers. As Ramanujan puts it,

"Even in a large modern city like Bombay, Madras or Calcutta, even in Western-style nuclear families with their planned 2.2. Children, folklore..is only a suburb away, a cousin or a grandmother away" (p xiii).

Karnad's play delineates not merely a facet of Indian social life, but also diagnoses many social evils. The focus of his play is on the lives of men and women in diverse relationships, bringing out the patriarchal ethos which sets the tone in inter-personal relationships. In such a position, women inevitably are at the receiving end. Characters like Kurudavva and Rani are shown as suffering, and through them the writer highlights the subordinated role of women in Indian Society.

Nagamandal deals with the life of a couple Rani and Appanna –placed in a quiet conventional situation in India. The husband pays no attention to

the wife and has a concubine who gets his exclusive attention. An old woman in the community, Kurudava takes pity on Rani and gives her three roots with miraculous powers. One of these is fed to Appanna but he rushes out. When Rani tries again, the root makes the curry look dangerously red, she throws away the curry and a cobra snake tastes it and falls in love with Rani. The cobra enters the house stealthily and assumes the form of Appanna and woos Rani successfully, when Rani becomes pregnant, her husband drags her to the village elders, calling her unfaithful. However, Rani, on the bidding of the elders, takes the snake-test where she handles a cobra snake. Rani is now hailed as a living goddess and Appanna has no option but to accept her. An in-depth analysis of the play reveals the delineation of the patriarchal social order which undermines the position of women in the community.

Rani's dilemma in the play is a symbol of the fate of most women in a traditional patriarchal society like India's. It highlights how a young bride in a joint-family interacts with her husband in two absolutely divergent ways. During the day the husband conducts himself as a total stranger, while at night he functions as ardent lover. The locked house in which Rani is confined during the day is symbolic the wedlock which has practically imprisoned her. Rani is representative of the typical Indian girl- living in her parent's place and then one fine morning being married off to a stranger and shifting to his place. The locked house is also symbolic of her not being allowed to have any contacts with anybody without the consent of her husband. As Rani says:

"I would merely lie here, my eyes shut tight. What is there to see after all ? The same walls. The same roof. As the afternoon passed. My whole being got focused in my ears. The bells of cattle returning home-that means it is late afternoon. The cacophony of birds in a far-away tree it is sunset.."

Through the stories told by old women of the house, Karnad depicts that the Indian myths and folklore inscribes on the minds of children very unambiguously the idea that a woman is 'the weaker sex' and therefore at every stage of her life she need to be guarded by some male relative. It is the father when the girl is young, the husband when she attains puberty and the son, when she is old. Kurudovva's father is greatly concerned for he has not been able to find a suitable match for his blind daughter. Rani's father considers his job done after he has found in Appanna a deserving match for her. But the main thrust of the play is on the role of the husband rather than that of the father.

Appanna has been presented as a typical male, arrogant and indifferent who meets his concubine every right, leaving Rani alone. Not merely that, he locks her up in the house before leaving to ensure that he is not exposed. The portrayal of Appanna as an indifferent husband during the day and as an ardent lover at night (through the disguise of the Naga as Appanna) serves the purpose to reveal the traditionally sanctioned functioning of a husband vis-à-vis the wife in a typical Indian context. Moreover, Appanna does not care for Rani's feelings and considers her a subhuman slave who is to serve him with the contempt of a typical male bigotry. He mercilessly disregards her feelings, he says, "look, I don't like idle chatter. Don't question me. Do as you are told and you won't be punished." It brings out the gross injustice meted out to women in our patriarchal society.

In opposition to Appanna, the Naga (as the Cobra) provides the unconventional and alternative view of the functioning of a husband in relationship with the wife. It is significant to note that Naga stands for a sacred image in Indian mythology. Snakes are associated with Lord Shiva symbolizing man's procreative energy. In the play Naga's role is specifically that of being an agent of consummation of love and procreation. Furthermore, in his relationship with Rani, love and understanding precede the striking of a physical relationship. The play seeks to project the view that a healthy physical relationship between man and women is required for building a strong human relationship between them but love and understanding must follow it. Naga understands human psychology and he allows Rani to start talking to him fully and without inhibitions. In this respect Naga presents a contrast with Appanna most radically and is a personification of the male principle without Chauvinism.

Karnad has also very thoroughly exposed the patriarchal notion of the requirement of chastity in women. Rani, being accused of unfaithfulness by her husband, has to prove her chastity before the village elders. That is another consequence of the hold of patriarchal on the position of women in society and it is very obvious that a man is not required to prove his 'chastity' or 'purity'. Rani proves her innocence not by challenging the elders and exposing her husband's indifference and lack of faithfulness to her. She has to prove her chastity by taking 'snake-test' rather than the fire test. The same Cobra who in the outer form of Appanna, had a relationship with her crawls on her hand and shoulders, leaving her unharmed. There is great irony in Rani's ignorant remark that she has touched only two males, *'my husband and this king*

Cobra. Karnad highlights the absurdity of patriarchal insistence on purity in case of women.

Chastity is a value invented by patriarchal culture and accepted by woman. There has been enough literature, both oral and written, glorifying this and enslaving value and deifying the women characters who observed it faithfully. Srilatha Batliwala supports the view:

“Since the beginning of civilization, every society has lived by certain values and beliefs which are cleverly transformed into immutable truth. In reality, these ideologies are specifically created and disseminated to justify the inequalities and injustices of prevailing social structure, and thus protect the rights and privileges of the powerful.” (p. iii).

Nagamandal deals in a very subtle manner with the notion of female space and the irrepressible need for women to speak out.

The play through a feminine personification of flames conveys indirectly the playwright's comments on the paradoxical nature of the patriarchal society.

The flames are shown gossiping like typical village woman. They talk of their master, mistresses, their homes and hearth, their affection and concern, loves and hatreds. But Karnad, at the same time, seems to be echoing the patriarchal contention that women think only of trivial, routine issues of life. They cannot come up with any original thought. As evident from Appanna and Naga's repeatedly contention to Rani saying, 'Do as I tell you'. Even though the Naga has been presented as a male who is not bigotist in his thinking, is at a level not different at all. Like Appanna, Naga also asks Rani not to ask questions.

The village elders, despite their overall sympathetic attitude, would like Rani to undergo the usual tests to prove that she has been pure and faithful. Thus, Karnad exposes the hypocrisy of the male-dominated values of Indian society because nobody seems to mind the fact that Appanna himself has been most unfaithful to his newly wedded wife. Even at the end after Rani's purity has been vindicated, the concubine stays in Appanna's house, though as a maid.

The stage of motherhood brought Rani's social integration brings her a new sense of respect as her own worth. This is another significant aspect of the Indian social and cultural life in its treatment of women. In Sudhir Kakkar's words, "an Indian woman knows that motherhood confers upon her a purpose and identity that nothing else in her culture can" (p. 57). As a mother, Rani is seen, in the last

part of the story, to be in command of the household with some authority and decision making power.

The playwright has shown woman as dependent shelter, seeking part of the society. They have to have a male protector. The presentation here tallies with the advice rendered in the Indian scriptures that a woman should be under the protection of her father, husband and son. The subplot concerning Kurudavva shows clearly one facet of it. She is wholly dependent on her son, Kappanna, even though her being blind gives some cover of legitimacy to it. When Kappanna disappears, perhaps lured by some snake or Yaksha temptress, as the mother suspects, she is rendered absolutely helpless. Kappanna's leaving his mother to live a life of his own with a woman of his choice is understandable from a psychological perspective. But the mother's helpless plight moves Rani and she asks the story why a woman has to suffer like this. This dimension of woman's portrayal adds a note of poignancy to the subordinate role played by women in any relationship with men folk.

He is a very truthful representation of the Indian socio-cultural reality for this movement from the mother to a mistress is rather delayed in our traditional context and it seems abrupt when it does come. The playwright thereby displays his grasp on Indian psyche and various contemporary issues related to social evolution of an individual.

3. Conclusion

Nagamandal is thus, a ingenuous manifestation of the social conditions prevalent in India in so far as man-woman relationship and patriarchy is concerned. Karnad depicts how love, marriage and any other bond or value governing the relationship is conditioned by this, socio cultural context. Karnad has dealt with patriarchy in a complex manner. At occasions, he takes a feminist stance, while at other places he seems to be reinforcing the patriarchal mindset, exposing various social evils, moreover he makes his characters. The play is indeed of great sociological, cultural and psychological significance.

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