Subjugation of Women in Girish Karnad’s Naga-Mandala

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Abstract
One of the Prominent playwright Girish Karnad in most of his plays, meticulously presents the ordeal of a typical Indian female, dominated and exploited by the patriarchal society while the spirit of the caged women strive for liberation from the chains of inequality, superstition, myth and tradition. In his play ‘Nagamandala’ (In Sankrit which means a sacred aura related to or made by naga). Karnad has dealt gender concern in his plays while exposing and criticizing the male chauvinism prevalent in patriarchal society. The author uses myths and folks in his plays to eradicate socio-cultural evils. The playwright Karnad accentuated problems of and treatment to a woman in contemporary biased patriarchal social order in his plays and exposes the prevalent double standard towards women in patriarchal society.

Keywords— Subjugation of Women, Patriarchy, Nagamandala

Naga-Mandala is a beautifully woven play of two folklores passed and perpetuated through generations in Karnataka. It is a story within story or even a story told by a story, where myth meets superstition, magic and supernatural powers. Fact and fantasy blends together during making and breaking of the dreams of Rani. The particular character becomes the general as it is evident since the very opening line of the story “A young girls her name…. it doesn’t matter.” Although the name of the girl is itself ironic as Rani means “Queen” in English supposed to have certain authority and respect but she is degraded into merely a maid servant or even an imprisoned one by her husband Appanna (literally ‘means any man’). She is even ignorant of sex and deprived of her nuptial rights, life of dignity and opportunity of becoming a mother.

The Exclusion of the ‘Second Sex’

In the play, Rani, an overprotected submissive girl, becomes victim of the unjust social order through marriage in very early age. Although thankfully she stays with her parents till she attains adulthood she never gets any chance of discovering herself, grow and develop as human being while realizing her true potentials. Neither at parents’ house nor at the house of her husband. Marriage, especially child marriage or marriage at very early age has been used to exploit, oppress and torture women in a patriarchal society. Newly wed girls are forced to think of their husbands to be the all and all of their lives. They are expected to be chaste or even be subjugated to chastity test while their husband can be a philanderer or womanizer.

Locked up in the house as a caged bird, Rani could find solace only in delusion of her parents’ presence. She helplessly dwells into the world of fantasy to fulfil her desires in the absence of social interaction and articulation. She is neglected sexually, beaten and bullied physically, mentally tormented by the uncertainty and indifference from Appanna. She is longs for freedom and pines for love. She is ostracized to the point of being mad. Her anguish...
can be felt by her statement in front of Kurrudavva. She is never heard, never allowed to live the life as a dignified member of the society. As Simone de Beauvoir again asserts that “Marriage is not only an honorable 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”.

In contrast here, the patriarchal society always subjugates and treats a woman as a ‘second sex’.

The Helpless Women

The women portrayed in the play lack independence and self-reliance. Her father thinks that Appanna is a perfect match for Rani. Rani too goes to her husband house with sweet dreams and desires of happy domestic life. It is a paradox that a Woman is called homemaker but neither her parents’ house nor her husband’s house is called her house. Home is said to be her expression of freedom but here she is permanently caged in her own husband’s home. Therefore Rani as a daughter is dependent on her parents for shelter, protection as well as decision making prior to marriage. After marriage, as a wife she is dependent on her husband. The only matron Kurrudavva is also handicap without her son Kappanna.

The Paradox

The paradox in the play is the behaviors of Rani’s husband Appanna and that of the Naga. One is human but not humane, other is not human but humane. One is indifferent to his own wife and gallivants after the concubine. Other one is ‘love struck’ by the effect of the ‘love root’ not only expresses his tender love to Rani, but also renders Rani with the opportunities to become a wife, a mother and a woman while her husband who is entitled to and entrusted with these responsibility failed to do so. Karnad’s concept of ‘Transposed heads’ in ‘Hayavadana’ is replaced by ‘Transposed personalities.’ The behavior of the Naga in contrast with that of Appanna symbolizes the poisonous attitude of hypocritical society towards women.

The Taboo and the Tool

The Story reaches to its climax when Rani becomes pregnant. The hypocritical patriarchal society subjected her to chastity test to establish herself pure while Appanna who himself is indulged in illicit relationship with the concubine escapes any such judgment. Here the chastity can be a value invented by patriarchal culture and imposed on women as one of the most powerful tool to enslave them in a patriarchal society. There are ample of literature
to glorify this enslaving value and the women who observed this submissively. ‘Sita’ of ‘The Ramayana’ has always been presented to guide this submission.

The hypocrisy of the patriarchal society is unearthed in another concept which goes with the concept of chastity, i.e. Sex is sin, the patriarchal society some time directly through moral teaching or indirectly through treatment shows that chastity is more important than life and that its loss which brings an unbearable social stigma is worse than death. Many women sacrifice their lives to protect their chastity and many other women silently and quietly tolerate all the oppression and violence silently to protect this so called chastity. This patriarchal concept of chastity has been used to oppress and weaken women since the time immemorial. The double standard of contemporary patriarchal society idolizes the pornstars who serving the male chauvinism but condemns the rape victims who are made to suffer unbearable humiliation and disgrace for crimes committed by somebody else against them, this way this chastity convicts the innocent rape victim with double punishment for no fault at all.

Here to in the play ‘Naga-Mandala’, Appanna brazenly commits adultery with his concubine, but nobody protest against it. Even The village Elders entrusted to pass judgment do not find any fault with him. The village court tries the case of Rani only and it ignores the crime of Appanna that highlights the gender-biased justice. Nobody believes in the innocence of Rani.

Rani sleeps with Naga as Naga comes to her every night in guise of her husband, whatever follows happens only because Rani is never allowed to question her husband during the day and Naga during the night. This demand for submission without reasoning keeps Rani ignorant.

Had she discovered the real identity of Naga, she would not have allowed him to enter her bedroom touch her. As a typical Indian woman, she is frigid and detest sex. What she craves for is love and affection which only Naga could give her. By Praising, caressing and arousing, Naga removes her frigidity.

The Ascension of the Woman

Naga’s affection completely transforms Rani’s personality, from a little encaged domestic help she gradually changes into a confident and courageous woman with reason. This is evident when she says to Naga that,

“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.” (Karnad, 32)

Towards the end of the play, she shows the same courage, in the village court which shocks Appanna, “If you don’t let go, I’ll – (Taken aback by her fury, Appanna lets her go)” (Page – 98). After the chastity test and the judgement, Rani is declared goddess incarnation consequently she becomes the head of the family. Appanna has to accept her superiority and says to her, “You are no common person. You are a goddess.” However, the Rani, unlike the past patriarchal Appanna, never tries to subjugate him rather she requests him if she needs a
favor from him. Appanna even agrees to her rather strange demand that their son should perform an annual rites in the memory of the dead snake.

The men who only seek sexual satisfaction from women and deny the importance of love and trust for them in a family their personal relationship are mocked with the disclosure of how superficial hold they have over woman’s mind, heart or body. Finally the need to provide greater space to the woman is accepted by the village elders, who respect the procreative role of woman, as they are hesitant to put pregnant Rani to Naga-Ordeal, compel Appanna to accept and respect his wife and change his chauvinistic and violent behavior. It is an extremely ironic that the play Appanna is left holding in public another man’s child and asked to respect his wife as a ‘goddess’. Thus, the story of Rani as told by the woman narrator transforms the tale which is tragic in its endings, to a mockery of the misogyny andself-centeredness of the male world as well as exaggerated male claims and ambitions to control female sexuality and virtue. This brings out a clear challenge to the double standard moral code of our patriarchal society. The public and private selves become connected through the acceptance of socially responsible role. But that cannot completely dispel the hidden, suppressed desire for greater love and personal fulfilment. The double ending of the play “Naga-Mandala’’ presents this duality through the structural device.

The Role of Love and the Lover

In End One of the story about Rani and Appanna, the Naga enters Rani’s bedroom again and dies for the sake of Rani and her family. Though Rani grieves for her lover, the Naga’s sacrifice paves the way for Rani’s happy married life. In the alternate Ending of the play, the snake does not die. He is allowed by Rani to live in her tresses. The lover is always present, he lives with her, within the family. The danger to male authority as a husband and patriarch lives on constantly at close quarters, but meeting within the woman’s imagination. The obedient and loyal wife may observe the social, moral code entirely. Yet within her live the memories of the perfect lover who had given her first emotional and erotic experience, the first experience of womanhood. These desires may haunt her or lie dormant within. What matters most to Rani during the period of her relationship with the Naga is the awakening of desire and her introduction to love rather than to sex. Rani has gone through these new desires, the day dreaming and the fantasies about love and she understands their power over other social and moral duties.

Conclusion

The radical female protagonists is the most noteworthy feature of Girish Karnad’s play. In ‘Naga-Mandala’ Girish Karnad has created the character of Rani in unconventional way. This character desires to achieve what she lacks, riots against the patriarchy and male-dominance, strives for survival and destroys traditional concepts with the belief of transformation in the attitude of the male-dominated society.
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