

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN0976-8165

# THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

14 Years of Open Access

Vol. 14 Issue-III June 2023

Bi-monthly Peer-Reviewed e-Journal

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ISSN 2278-9529

**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**  
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## **Chastity Demythcized: The Portrayal of Rani in Karnad's *Naga- Mandala***

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**Article History:** Submitted-05/06/2023, Revised-28/06/2023, Accepted-29/06/2023, Published-30/06/2023.

### **Abstract:**

Girish Karnad is an eminent Indian playwright who has written various plays. Among such names as Asif Currimbhoy, Mahesh Dattani, Vijay Tendulkar, G.V.Desani etc, Girid Karnad is the name whose plays are known for providing impetus to various social issues plaguing the contemporary society. Weaving together the universal truths about human life and emotions as present and portrayed in ancient Indian stories with the changing realities of modern life, Karnad has tried to articulate the possible solutions to various socio-cultural problems. This paper is an attempt to analyse the play *Naga-Mandala* written by Girish Karnad in the light of portrayal of women and the socio-cultural norms of chastity prescribed for them.

The play presents Rani, the female protagonist as a common Indian woman who suffers at the hands of her husband in particular and the society in general. Presenting the metamorphosis of Rani from being victimized in the beginning to the emancipated woman towards the end, Karnad has presented her as a representative of women who in patriarchal institutions have to survive and fight for their own individuality and dignity. Fulfilling the various roles assigned to them, they have to follow the strict social and moral codes with no choice available to them for the fulfillment of their own dreams and desires. Rani fights for what she wants and emerges strong and confident.

**Keywords : Myths, Rituals, Chastity, Emancipation, Choice, Dignity.**

Drama is considered to be a literary form which expresses the human sentiments, needs, desires, pleasures, pains etc. in a spontaneous but powerful manner. Girish Karnad belonging to the contemporary generation of Indian playwrights has said in an interview:

“.....*the subject of any play has to be the human spirit.*” [as quoted by Nimsarkar, 2009:15]

Girish Karnad belongs to that generation of the emerging Indian English dramatists who have given a new life and identity to the Indian English drama long after it faced the loss of recognition in the field of Indian theatre and literary world. Karnad is known significantly for not only his experimentation with the forms of drama but also his understanding of the human condition in its contemporary and universal manifestation as well. Using folk-tales, myths, rituals and stories from history, his plays talk about the contemporary Indian culture in all its possible dimensions. His use of myths in the plays has displayed that “*the ancient Indian myths can be harnessed to address the modern sensibility of loss of individuality.*” [Boratti and Haritsa, as quoted by Nimsarkar, 2009:34].

The myths, legends and folk forms are reflectors of the racial and cultural unconsciousness and all ritualistic performances. M.Sarat Babu rightly says that Karnad uses “.....*myths and folk form in his plays to exorcise socio-cultural evils.*” [2009:238]. Karnad himself says :

“*The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values, of making them literally stand on their head.*” [1994:14].

Naga-Mandala is a play based on the popular folk tales about the snake-worship associated with various wishes of common folk with regard to peace, prosperity and fertility etc. in life. But while talking about various rituals and beliefs of people in conventional values, Karnad has taken up the issue of the oppressed status of women and the injustice they meet at the hands of the so-called stake holders of such values and has questioned the whole concept of chastity specifically prescribed for women.

Fidelity and chastity are not just the two words. They have been rather the values prescribed by the society and instilled to such an extent in an individual's psyche that they get transferred naturally to the socio-cultural psyche. Women have been enslaved for ages in the name of these and they have proved to be quite powerful factors dominating the whole socio-cultural set up. Men have often enacted these values and women have followed them quite

unquestioningly and meticulously. Not only this, there have been ample literature which has glorified and deified the women characters observing these values. Sita in *The Ramayana* has always been put on high pedestal who unquestioningly underwent the fire ordeal as demanded by her husband Lord Rama, just to prove her chastity. Women in our society have always been instructed, verbally or otherwise, by the parents and elders of the family to understand the importance of chastity in life. The daughters are taught that the loss of chastity brings an unbearable social stigma which is worse than death. If by chance any bold woman deviates from such norms and values, she has to bear the brunt of not only the society but her own family also who sometimes goes to the extent of excommunicating her.

Karnad as a playwright has been bold and liberal so far as the portrayal of women in his plays is concerned. His women characters are very much the part of society, culture and family. They fulfill their roles of being a mother, wife, daughter etc. but taking care of their individuality, Karnad portrays them as women who besides taking care of the whole family and their responsibilities towards all are aware of their own needs and desires and don't hesitate to devise their own ways to fulfill them.

Besides other aspects of women's personal roles as assigned by society, Karnad prominently discusses the concept of sexuality and presents it with a liberal point of view. Kakar's opinion in the context seems quite relevant;

*“Sexuality ...is a system of conscious and unconscious human fantasies, arising from various sources, seeking satisfaction in diverse ways and involving a range of excitations and activities that aim to achieve pleasure that goes beyond the satisfaction of any basic somatic need.”* [1990:21]

For Karnad, woman's sexuality and adultery is a 'normal' human response, not something 'sinful', as he has said in a conversation with Tutun Mukherjee. In the same conversation, Karnad relates : *“I used to know a married woman once who positively blossomed after she had an extra-marital affair. If womanhood finds fulfillment in love that happens to be outside marriage, why should that be considered wrong ? Radha's love for Krishna was such.”* [Tutun Mukherjee, as quoted by Nimsarkar,2009:20].

The treatment of female sexuality is thus central in the projection of women in some of his plays besides their other social roles. Karnad as an author presents the character of married woman in his plays in an unconventional manner. For Satyadev Dubey, Karnad is “*the only play-wright in the history of Indian theatre to have treated adultery as normal and treated adulterous women sympathetically.*”[as quoted by Collellmir:6, [www.publications.ub.es/revistes/bells15/documentos/71.pdf](http://www.publications.ub.es/revistes/bells15/documentos/71.pdf)]

Naga Mandala talks about the man-woman relationship and the identity and psychology of a woman in particular and that of the adults in general that gets affected by the strict socio-cultural norms. In fact, Naga-Mandala is “*a powerful portrait of the agony and anguish faced by both men and women in their development into adult roles and social adjustment in a society where the individual is given little space for self-development, awareness and independence as a being.*” [Gupta:1999:249]

The present paper focuses on the metamorphosis of Rani in Naga-Mandala from an immature innocent girl to that of a mature and emancipated woman. She is representative of all those women who have yet to learn how to face life on their own once they are married and move out of the protective and secure environment of their parents' home. Rani is a young married girl who has to begin a new life in her husband's house. Leaving her parents back, she enters her new life with a lot of dreams and desires. The reality however shocks and confuses her. Instead of welcoming her in the new life with love and care, her husband Appanna rather leaves her alone in the house and infact locks her up when he himself moves out of the house. The door opens only when he returns for his bath and lunch. Ignoring altogether the needs and desires of Rani, he spends his nights with his concubine. Her situation proves that “*man is the maker of outside world, and woman's duty is to make a house.*” [Devi,as quoted by Chatterji, 2010:3]. In the same context, M.Sarat Babu also writes : “*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 house-work and the exclusion of women from enlightenment and enjoyment.*” [2009:239].

Rani's husband Appanna is representative of male chauvinism being the dominating, cruel and callous husband. Naga is however a mature, loving and caring male. Naga-Mandala exposes the ugliness of a society where woman is considered ‘second sex’, ‘other’, and ‘subject’.

The social training of women teaches them to internalize the reigning patriarchal ideology where the male is considered 'superior' and woman remains inferior and exists with no individual identity. Feeling incomplete in herself, she longs for completeness in her relationships of love but is left hopeless usually. The conventional concept of considering both men and women equally important as the two wheels of a cart, remains a theoretical concept only and the ground reality turns out to be entirely different because a female's reality is always that of a broken and shattered wheel dependent on the other (male) for care and support. The relationship between Rani and Appanna is just an example of such an imbalanced and incompatible relationship. Rani has no permission to even speak her heart out as whenever she tries to speak or ask anything, Appanna responds with irritation and disregard:

*“ Look, I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand?” [p.28]*

Naga-Mandala is a dramatization of folk tales where the illusion has been transformed to embody the reality of issues. Karnad has reconstructed a myth by mixing the mythical and the magical combined with the contemporary social problems so that the spectators/readers may watch/read, contemplate and understand the intensity of the issue concerned. Kerala is one of the regions famous for serpent-worship where the serpent (or Naga, as used in the play) is considered a deity blessing the human beings with prosperity, fertility and all kinds of fulfillment a human being can aspire for. In Naga-Mandala, this myth explains the importance of love for Rani which she needs to fill the void in her life. When it is about the sensual pleasures and their gratification, society prescribes different sets of rules for men and women. A man needs no justification for his desires where as a woman's desires and instinctual needs are considered to be a transgression of morality if and when expressed. The Naga appears as a symbol of choice for Rani. It becomes a means of not only the expression but also the fulfillment of her desire to live a loveful and contented life. Naga appears as a source of positive energy. When Appanna is the villain, Naga is the hero in Rani's life. He comes as an agent of social change influencing not only the character of Rani but the whole society as well. Representing the true-life force, Naga not only preserves but also regenerates life. A woman's right to choose gets an impetus via Naga. The women chained and blocked within the strict socio-cultural moral codes is distanced not only from her surroundings but her own self as well. The relationship of Rani with Naga symbolises the breaking of those chains and crossing the demarcated lines. The entry of Naga in

Rani's life is the beginning of transformation in her character and attitude. Neglected and isolated from the very beginning of her marriage, she did not possess even the right to tell her husband about her agony, her problems or ask him anything. The love, care and concern of Naga, however, makes her blossom like a beautiful flower. She mutters up the courage to put her foot down and even instructs her husband not to ask her any more questions when she says, "Don't ask questions. Do as I say." [p.51] She rather gets bold enough to question even his behaviour, thereby asserting her identity in her different roles:

*"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?"*[p.51]

Rani's intentions are however, questionable regarding the difference in the behaviour of the Naga and Appanna. It can be assessed very easily that she understands the difference between the two but deliberately ignores it. Appanna is always rude, indifferent and inconsiderate whereas the Naga is always affectionate and considerate towards her. But seen from her point of view as an individual and a woman seeking fulfillment in life, she stands justified. She definitely realizes that it is Naga who comes to her as Appanna during night, but at the same time, she also realizes that Naga is the love who has brought pleasure and security to her. The very moment of the Naga's arrival creates wonderful atmosphere around her as she describes:

*"The smell of the blossoming nightqueen! How it fills the house before he comes! How it welcomes him! God, how it takes me, sets each fibre in me on fire!"*[p.49]

The company of Naga makes Rani forget everything else. She feels fulfilled with him as his love and care paves the way for her to achieve the fulfillment of her long-subdued instinct for sex. Moreover, she is able to discover her own self, Rani, the woman who she is. She deliberately ignores the reality of the difference between the two persons. Instead of tolerating humiliation, torture and imposing presence of Appanna, she prefers the loving company of the Naga who appreciates her beauty, comforts her and fulfills her sexual urge with respect and mutual understanding. In this context, Nimsarkar has stated: "*The fire in Rani is metaphoric; it is*

*not the fire of sex but the strong desire of a woman aspiring for complete womanhood and family, what she ultimately feels to achieve in the life.” [2009:135]*

The play makes Rani travel from innocence to experience. However, the route she takes comes with its own terms. Moreover, it reveals the hypocrisy of society with different attitudes towards men and women. It remains in favour of men and women face the undue harshness of the patriarchal society. Rani requires, gathers and expresses a lot of courage in her journey to emancipation. But that does not prove sufficient as she requires some more resilience to prove the grit of her spirit. The villagers want her to prove her innocence and purity through the snake trial. She accepts the challenge and agrees to undergo the trial and boldly admits the truth of her reality:

*“Yes, my husband and this king 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.”[p.58]*

Her submission that she has touched two persons is actually the acceptance of adultery indirectly yet it makes the elders accept the human shape of the Naga and the supernatural power in her:

*“Appanna your wife is not an ordinary woman. She is a goddess incarnate... You were the chosen instrument for revealing her divinity.”[p.59]*

The situation gets more interesting. The same villagers who were to test the so called ‘chastity’ of Rani, say to Appanna:

*“Spend the rest of your life in her service. You need merit in ten past lives to be chosen for such holy duty.”[p.59]*

The biggest irony of Appanna’s life is that he knows Rani is not ‘chaste’ according to the social and patriarchal norms of chastity. He knows that he is not the father of Rani’s child yet he can’t prove it. Neither can he reject her. He is shocked and bewildered as he says:

*“What I am to do? Is the whole world against me?...Let any miracle declare her a goddess. But I know!”[p.60]*

In the context of all these situations, it can be said that Karnad presents the issue of female sexuality and chastity from an open-minded and liberal perspective. He has demythicized and subverted the whole concept of ‘chastity’(that too framed specifically for females) showing Rani’s boldness and acceptance of the Naga. Her placing and keeping Cobra in her hair besides saying “how heavy you are” [p.64] is symbolic of the realization of her own power and essence:

“*This hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss. Live in there happily for ever.*”[p.64]

In saving the Naga from being killed and allowing him to stay with her, she proves the power of her feminine desires over other social and moral duties. Her acceptance of Appanna as her husband is however the acceptance of social norms in a way. It can be said that the playwright has deflated the concept of chastity quite boldly but he has not tried to make his female protagonist break the norms set by culture and society. Rani gets her wish fulfilled within the boundaries of the acceptable social norms. Any sensitive writer has to use a kind anaesthesia while operating on culture to remove the morbid tissue. Karnad has proved himself to be a sensible writer using this “*cultural anaesthesia*” [Babu,2009:236]

A.K.Ramanujan's views about the relevance of using folklore are worth quoting in this context: “*Tales speak of what cannot usually be spoken. Ordinary decencies are violated. Incest, cannibalism, pitiless revenge are explicit motifs in this fantasy world, which helps us face ourselves, envisage shameless wish fulfillments, and sometimes 'by indirection find direction out'.*”[as quoted by Collellmir:6, [www.publications.ub.es/revistes/bells15/documentos/71.pdf](http://www.publications.ub.es/revistes/bells15/documentos/71.pdf)]

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