

**DECONSTRUCTION OF AHILYA MYTH IN KARNAD'S
NAGAMANDALA**

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**One is not born but rather becomes a woman
It is civilization as a whole that produces this
creature which is described as feminine.¹**

--- says Simone de Beauvoir in her world famous book *The Second Sex*. The statement has a universal appeal as it goes beyond time and place. The agony and suffering of women is the subject-matter of a number of writers in the post-modern period. Exploitation, subjugation, and suppression are the characteristic features of all societies in all ages. Biologically as well as culturally, human beings are divided into two classes: men and women. This division is further accentuated by the roles they are assigned to play in the making of a family. Man is the head of the family, governing and controlling all its affairs. Woman is entrusted with the household responsibilities, particularly those of cooking food and rearing children. This leads to the formation of exploitative and oppressive society of men as against the exploited and oppressed society of women.

Quite a good number of works in the post modern period illustrate, more or less, how women are exploited in various ways. The inhuman treatment that they receive from the male-dominated society indicates that they lose their freedom first and their lives later for the sake of man. Ideally speaking, it is sacrifice, but realistically speaking, it is sheer wastage physical as well as mental, on the part of women.

The two major tendencies of the Indian society are: male dominance and feminine frailty. Women suffer a lot at the hands of their male-counterparts. They do not have equal status with men; sometimes they have to part with their individual dignity. They are exploited both socially and economically. No doubt, men are largely responsible for the exploitative and oppressive nature of society, and surprisingly enough, women remain contributory to it. Their conservative minds do not allow them to show guts in their encounter with male-counterparts. Furthermore, they even provide them with an emotional support in a period of crisis.

The tendency of enduring exploitation is so deep rooted in their bones that even the thought of rebellion does not arise in their minds. They are hardly assertive and, at times, seem so slavish that their love and loyalty towards their husband and family do not allow them to raise any voice against them. The agonized women projected in the works of various writers appear to be the mute witnesses of the womankind's endless suffering in the male-dominated society for centuries.

Using the Ahilya myth, Karnad explores the position of woman in society. Rani, the central character is the victim of male-dominated society. Appanna, her husband, enjoys extra-marital relationship with a concubine quite openly and tries to punish Rani severely for sleeping

with Naga who appears in the home in the form of Appanna. The village elders also ask Rani to prove her chastity by taking an ordeal. Appanna goes unquestioned, even unnoticed. Similarly, the play delineates the character of Rani, her transformation from an innocent, shy, and timid, girl into a clever, determined, emotionally well-controlled, rational woman. She seems to be an extension, a revised version of Padmini in the Hayavadana.

Girish Karnad uses traditional forms and structure in his plays. As he explains in an interview on receiving the Jnanpith Award, “I cannot invent plots; therefore, I use myths. I cannot invent stories and hence go to history.”² The play *Nagamandala* subtitled *A Play with a Cobra* is based upon a folk belief and a myth. Outwardly, the play appears simple but in it, Karnad has successfully coordinated the elements of myth, magic, folk belief, and romance. The play starts with a prologue which effectively sets the tone and mood of the play.

The play opens in a surrealistic setting: The inner sanctum of a ruined temple. The idol is broken. So, the presiding deity of the temple cannot be identified. It is night. Moonlight seeps in through the cracks in the roof and the walls. A man, suspended between life and death, is sitting in this temple. He is cursed for making his audience fall asleep twisted in miserable chairs, who came trusting him. “All that abused mass of sleep has turned against him and become the cause of Death.” (247) That is the last night of his life if he fails to keep himself awake throughout the night.

Meanwhile Flames and story arrive in the temple to share some gossip. Man requests the story to tell him a tale accepting her condition that “he will tell it again to someone else.” (252).

It is a story of Rani whose husband enjoys extra-marital sex openly and unashamedly and locks Rani in his absence. He is reluctant to spend time with her. An old woman, Kurudavva, Appanna’s mother’s friend, is greatly moved by Rani’s plight. She gives her a magic root to fascinate her husband. On the advice of Krudava, Rani mixes the root in the food and cooks it. The solution appears like blood. Thinking that it may be poisonous and can cause a serious harm to her husband, Rani throws it. Incidentally, it falls upon an anthill within which lived the Naga, the King Cobra. Getting affected by the love potion, he falls in love with Rani. He starts visiting Rani every night, assuming the form of Appanna, her husband. In the beginning, Rani is somewhat shocked due to her husband’s rudeness during the day and amorousness in the night. However, in course of time, she learns to accept it and enjoy it. The conjugal love results ultimately in her pregnancy. When Rani informs Naga that she is pregnant, he gets anxious for her and tells her to follow his directions without fail. Rani’s husband Appanna discovers her pregnancy. He is sure that she has committed adultery as he has never slept with her. The village elders ask Rani to prove her chastity by giving an ordeal. As per the suggestions of Naga, Rani offers to go through a “snake ordeal”. She thrusts her hand into the anthill, pulls out the venomous King Cobra. She swears that she has never touched anybody except her husband and the Cobra. Naga spreads his hood over her head, sways it for a while, hangs himself around her neck like a garland and goes away. The whole village acclaims her ‘a goddess incarnate’ and her husband is forced to accept her as such. Appanna falls at her feet and begs for her forgiveness. Now, he is her devoted husband and his concubine becomes her servant-maid. However, Rani’s acceptance by her husband has tragic consequences for Naga. He cannot visit Rani anymore. As he cannot live without her, he entangles himself in her hair and commits suicide. Rani now gets conscious of the mystery. She honours Naga’s supreme sacrifice by making his son light his

funeral pyre in accordance with Indian custom and tradition. Thus, the story illustrates Coleridge's off-quoted critical term "willing suspension of disbelief".

The title of the play is highly symbolic. Naga stands for the character of the King Cobra. A "mandala" consists of a triangle and a square, i. e. a triangle within a square. The zeitgeist of the play is the *mandala*. The three points of the triangle are Rani, Appanna and Naga. It illustrates the eternal triangle of an adulterous situation presenting the wife, the husband and the lover. The four sides of the square provide the dramatic frame-work and stand for the Flames (the observer), the tale, the Man (the writer) and the audience (the respondees). The role of a story here is similar to that of *sutradhara* or the chorus in the Greek play. Her appearance on the stage throughout the play adds to the feministic aura of the play.³

According to Girish Karnad, "Appanna and Naga represent the two unconnected roles of a husband as a stranger during the day and as lover at night."⁴ Rajinder Paul rightly points out: "It is a play where a cobra plays the lover and proves to be better behaved than his human counterpart who is as insensitive as a husband as we read about in bad tales."⁵

The society projected in the play is divided on the basis of gender. The play criticizes gender-biased values and morals of this patriarchal society where women have been oppressed for centuries together. On the day of trial, Rani has been asked to prove her chastity by giving an ordeal while Appanna goes unquestioned, even unnoticed. Appanna enjoys extra-marital relationship quite openly with the concubine and tries to punish Rani severely for the same when she is even unconscious and ignorant of the sin of adultery. Thus, the play exposes the double standards of this so called cultured society that strongly demands the faithfulness of a woman to her husband but not the faithfulness of a man to his wife. In Indian society, fidelity is expected only from a woman and man is left scot-free to commit more crimes. That is why the village elders ask Rani alone to prove her fidelity.

Appanna and Naganna, are actually the two aspects of man's nature: the one, seen during the day who performs the role of a dictator, and the other, at night who plays the lover's role. These two contradictory faces symbolize the exploitation and double standards of man. Rani is the evidence of woman's endless suffering in the male-dominated society.

However, the forces of love prevail over those of tyranny. That is why Rani is helped by the King Cobra. She not only is rid of the trap but is also honoured and worshipped by the society around. So B. T. Seetha is quite justified in pointing out: "If *Nagamandala* symbolizes a woman's predicament in a traditional ... family set-up, there is also an underlying metaphor of love that rises from the realms of an abyss to reach the heights of a sanctified relationship of acceptance and reverence."⁶ The critic adds: "Rani and Appanna are presented as characters who 'live happily ever after', though not without a sense of restlessness in Appanna's inability to comprehend Rani's motherhood and her status as a goddess and Rani's anguish to know whether it was her husband who came to her as the lover, because 'No two men make love alike.' The desire and instinct to be happy buries the past, only to make it possible to move ahead in time."⁷

In Indian society, marriage is considered to be the holiest of holy institutions. It is believed that fidelity of a woman to her husband is the way to her salvation. Chastity is looked upon, as supreme virtue which she is expected to protect at the cost of her life. Under such circumstances, she is denied love, enjoyment, and education at her age. Actually, her position in the family is like a mattress, a non-entity. Rani is the true symbol of woman's piety and endurance. She was married in her teens and Karnad is deadly opposed of the convention of such

an early incompatible marriage. However, she grows physically mature and because, her husband's indifference towards her she behaves like a frightened child in her new house. In the company of Naga, she is happy. He offers her love, enjoyment, and knowledge of the world.

Towards the end of the play, Rani is portrayed as a goddess. But she never dreams of such a divine image. Throughout the play, she appears human. That is why the very realization that she is going to be a mother, gives her joy. There is a definite shift in her character. The play depicts her journey from an innocent, helpless, vulnerable, ignorant girl into a confident, courageous, clever, determined and self-assertive lady. It is evident when she says, "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." (283-84) After undertaking the snake ordeal, she receives what she has been longing for, i. e. her husband's love and affection. However, her union with her true husband results in a cessation of her love relationship with Naga, who can neither renounce his passion for her nor kill her. So, he commits suicide. Now, Rani is clever enough to realize the fact and to manage the situation accordingly. She skilfully gives Naga his right by receiving her husband's consent to perform the funeral rites by his own son. V. Rangan justifiably points out, "By the end of the play, Rani has travelled a long route from innocence to experience. When she finds the dead Naga in her hair, she has acquired enough cunning to successfully persuade her husband to allow her son to perform the last rites for Naga, as a father is entitled to receive from his son."⁸

The snake ordeal, Rani undergoes through, proves her purity which is actually an illusion. The fact is: Appanna never has shared bed with Rani. Naturally, he is not the father of the child, Rani has given birth to. Yet, he accepts both Rani and the child and hails Rani as goddess at the instance of the village-folk. He thinks that he is a sinner who has set the goddess on torture. So, he says: "Have I sinned so much that even Nature should laugh at me?" (294)

The play, thus, explores the issue of truth and illusion. Rani, Naga, and Appanna are well aware of the facts. Still, all of them treat illusion as reality. Actually, each of them sees and perceives truth from his/her own perspective. In the snake ordeal, Rani speaks the truth that she has been touched only by the two-- one her husband and the other the King Cobra. Naga gives her protection by raising his hood over her head. Appanna's stand is that he has not touched his wife. So, the snake ordeal surprises him. The villagers, however, think that Rani is not a human being but a goddess. Appanna prefers illusion to reality for he believes that Nature has turned back upon him. Rani's innocence ends with the snake ordeal since she realizes another truth regarding the father of her child.

V. Rangan appropriately states: "Does *Nagamandala* ... mean the 'coils of the cobra' that entangles Rani or is it Naga himself caught in the coils of love for Rani? Sex seems to be the road to salvation in the Karnad canon and holds an important place in all his plays....It is the supreme path that teaches the lessons of life to Rani, Naga and Appanna."⁹

The folk-tale used in the play, has several dimensions. Rani is innocent; she is ignorant of the adultery she commits. She does not suspect Naga's identity till the end of the play. Practically, the Naga is her husband's alter ego.

The 'Man' plays the role similar to that of the chorus in a Greek play. He is the sutradhara who introduces the main characters, supervises and passes comments on them, and correlates the events. Similarly, at the beginning of the play, there is just a suggestion of an invocation. The play is set in "The inner sanctum of a ruined temple. The idol is broken, so the presiding deity of the temple cannot be identified." (247) According to B. T. Seetha "A ruined

temple is symbolic of the fractured self in Nagamandala.”¹⁰ The King Cobra loses his identity in the love affair. He gets entangled in the throes of love. Towards the play’s end, his relationship with Rani is “a pleasing pain” for him. He cannot bear to see her in the company of her husband. So, he decides to bite her. But he fails to do it since he himself states: “No, I can’t. My love has stitched up my lips. Pulled out my fangs. Torn out of my sac of poison... Yes King Cobra is now no better than a grass snake.” (296). This is how Karnad humanizes the King Cobra, as Milton does the Satan in the *Paradise Lost*. The pride and poison of the King Cobra have been subdued by Rani’s love and affection. However, he proves superior to both Appanna and Rani by sacrificing his life for Rani’s marital bliss.

In the story of Ahilya, Gautam rishi punishes Ahilya for her extra marital relationship with Lord Indra who visits her in the disguise of her husband. Using this myth, Karnad depicts the emancipation of Indian woman in the contemporary society. Appana and the village elders try to punish Rani for her illicit relationship with Naga. However, they remain unsuccessful in their attempt. Naga helps Rani to turn the tables on them. She not only proves her chastity but compels the people to honour her accept her as a goddess. Appana’s plan of punishing Rani comes to nothing. Deconstructing the Ahilya myth, Karnad represents the changing position of women in the contemporary society. Rani symbolizes a new woman who has the capacity to take a decision on proper time and make the people to follow it. Instead of being dictated by men, she takes the situation under her control, imposes her will on the male-dominated society and establishes the fact that yes, the subaltern can speak now.

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