ENSEMBLE
A bi-lingual peer reviewed academic journal
ISSN: 2582 - 0427 (Online)
Vol. 3, No. 1
March, 2021
http://www.ensembledrms.in

Article Type: Review Article
Article Ref. No.: 21010800472RF
https://doi.org/10.37948/ensemble-2021-0301-a020

ROOTS, GENDERED RULES AND SUPERSTITIOUS RULE-OUTS: COMPLEXITIES AND CONFLICTS PERVADING THE ESSENCE OF NAGAMANDALA

MITHUNA S M[1]✉

Abstract:

Girish Karnad's play, *Nagamandala: Play With a Cobra* looks into the necessity of paying attention to women's individuality, unacknowledged by orthodox religions as well as taboo-driven ethnic and cultural norms. The very same vehicles of superstition, *story* and *song* are appropriated by the playwright to ignite the lamp of reason and curb ignorance. But, deep down, it presents the inescapability from the very societal tradition which is subjected to evaluation. This paper attempts to bring out the ways in which *Nagamandala* exposes the sinister outcomes of undisputed autonomy enjoyed by men over their licit or illicit partners and the role played by superstition in ensuring the same. Also, some of the obvious paradoxes which indicate the ambivalent conflicts and consonances between internalized traditional perspectives and their critique are analyzed as an extension of the masculine power dynamics. The study endeavors to deduce that the discursive space opened by *Nagamandala* does not seem to re-write the rules governing women's agency or erase the contours of women's opinions, since fighting the stereotypical image of the *feminine* in folk tales and mythical narratives makes it mandatory to liberate both from the folkloric base and the very cultural background, which will shoot the aesthetic appeal of the text down.

Keywords: Mobility, Authority, Sexuality, Abuse, Superstition

1.0 Introduction:

History of Indian theatre is incomplete without reference to the thespian, Girish Karnad who revolutionized the Indian stage and his plays such as, *Yayati* (1961), *Tuglaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1971),*Nagamandala* (1997), *Fire and the Rain* (1998) and so on which continue to provide novel insights and elicit fresh interpretations and engagements, decades afar their first performance. R.K.Dhavan (2009) observes, "Girish Karnad is the foremost playwright of the contemporary Indian stage. He has given the Indian theatre a richness that could probably be equated only with his talents as an actor-director"(p.13). Karnad followed his humanist instinct to comment at and correct many orthodoxies deep-rooted as the founding essence of Indian imaginary. He utilized the grand scope of theatre and visual media to implement his role as a social and political activist. He viewed the subjects of his plays from his own perspective, developed them in the melting pot of diverse sentiments and his own experiences; and employed them as a medium to communicate independent and original impressions. Folklore, mythology, history and the challenges of contemporary life are earnestly explored by Karnad. In his plays, past and present, tradition and

1 [Author] ✉ [Corresponding Author] Research Scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, BITS Pilani (Hyderabad Campus), Jawahar Nagar, Kapra Mandal, Telangana, 50007, INDIA. E-mail: mityyyzzz@gmail.com

modernity, human and the divine are connected with stylized dramatic art and the embedded subjectivities provoke questions regarding their contemporary significance.

Nagamandala owes its origin to two oral tales based out of Karnataka, which Karnad "heard…from Professor A.K. Ramanujam" (Karnad, 1990, *Preface*), to whom the play has been dedicated. Karnad wrote the play in 1988 while he was a resident of Chicago. At a time when *the empire* was beginning *to write back*, Karnad followed a different path, focusing his experience and insights on an unprecedented blending of folk tradition and contemporary theatre which resulted in a carefully designed critique of traditional cognitions. On one level, *Nagamandala* explores the need for valuing women's individuality, unrecognized by orthodox religions as well as taboo-driven social norms. But, deep down, it presents the inescapability of the creator or playwright ,the creation or play and its characters from the very societal tradition which is subjected to evaluation. This paper attempts to bring out some of the obvious paradoxes which indicate the ambivalent conflicts and consonances between internalized traditional perspectives and their critique.

2.0 The Mendicant's Roots:

The construction processes of many a human civilization have marked women's chastity as the epicenter of their foundation. When Appanna, the protagonist Rani's partner accuses her of adultery, he seems to follow the collectively internalized pattern of action characterizing the patriarchal conceptualization of chastity. This "personal whim"(Karnad, p.36) is reflected in the populace of the whole village as the prospective public test of a woman's chastity turns the "Village Court"(p.36) into a "Country Fair"(Karnad, p.36). In fact, Appanna's wrath has resulted from the Naga's transgressive tryst with the woman, in the form of an individual (Appanna) whom she has been conditioned to believe as the ultimate authority over her body. The patriarchal conditioning of feminine psyche rules her and prompts her to try the roots given by the elderly woman Kurudavva, on Appanna. But, in a way, Rani's throwing away of the blood-red potion symbolizes the refusal of subsequent generations to comply with the rules forged by their ancestors. Still, the ancestral voices refuse to let go off their synaptic corridors, re-entering women's thoughts and lives akin to the Naga's movements. Kurudavva considers it obligatory from the part of a wife to ensure that the man should be bound to her without letting another woman take her place. Kurudawa's intervention symbolizes the flow of rules for self-subservience from one generation to the next.

"Kurudavva: …..Has your husband touched you? How can I put it?(Exasperated)Didn't anyone explain to you before your wedding? Your mother or an aunt?" (Karnad, 1990, p.11)

Rani doesn't implore Kurudavva to help her in enticing or luring Appanna. On the contrary, what she asks for is a reunion with her parents which neither surprises or satisfies the spectator or the reader :

"Rani : I am so frightened at night, I can't sleep a wink. At home, I sleep between Father and Mother. But here alone…Will you ask them to free me and take me home? I would jump into a well-if only I could." (Karnad, 1990, p.11)

Rani desires to be free from the marital bond and escape the very locale of her sufferings. But, Kurudavva conjures up a flattering consolation and brings her back to the clutches of self-subservience, allowing the "demon to lock her up in the castle"(p.14). Subsequently, it is the Naga's intake of the "blood red" potion(p.16), prepared by an individual in the fire of her willingness to subject herself, which causes its intrusion. Hence, the snake, a being conditioned by nature to live, move, make love and die in secrecy is motivated to pursue an artificially ripened desire by the power of these traditionally built superstitions. Moreover, it is the Story, the obviously feminine side of the duo-Man and the Story, which prompts Rani to put the potion in

the ant-hill. Besides, the Village Elders' world view and their subsequent verdict rely on a transcendental signified, instead of an analysis or cross-examination of statements made by both Rani and Appanna.The transcendental power remains the same intruder, who has consumed the potion of the mendicant's aphrodisiac roots; ultimately, symbolizing the intricacies of patriarchal power dynamics.

As an implication of the very same power, when Appanna finds out about Rani's pregnancy, he lavishes the same abusive words on Rani, as used by Kurudavva on Appanna's mistress, referred to as the concubine, in the play. He calls her 'harlot', drags her into the street and picks up a huge stone to fling on her(p.33). Even the venomous Cobra is unable to protect a woman from the wrath of an infuriated man. It is interesting to note that neither Kappanna nor Kurudavva is present to save Rani from the fury of Appanna. People who find it their responsibility to change the mindset of a loveless man and prevent the woman's return to her parents are absent when Appanna showers abuses and threatens to "abort that bastard"(p. 33), which is then followed by Rani's screams for help.

"Rani : Why are you humiliating me like this? Why are you stripping me naked in front of the whole village? Why don't you kill me instead?" (p.33)

These questions flung at Appanna are not heard by him. It is heard by the Naga and addressed by it. The dual identities, particularly of the man-Appanna and the snake-Appanna exist only for the spectators, making us empathize with Rani when she asks, "Who else is there for me?"(p.34) From Rani's vantage point, Appanna remains a single human entity and the problem lies in the fact that her "husband forgets his nights by next morning"(p.34). She attempts to patch up with the same person who has proved a threat to her life and follows his instructions to undertake the snake ordeal. Rani is at the zenith of ignorant trust for her husband, when she agrees to put her hand in the ant-hill and pulls out the Cobra. She runs to him and embraces him as she is "afraid Not of the cobra. Nor of death! of you" (p.35).

Even after the Elder's paradoxical warning to opt for the ordeal of the red hot iron, Rani remains steadfast to her faith in the man.

"Elder III: ….If something goes wrong and the Cobra bites you, not just your life but the life of the child you carry will be in jeopardy.

Elder II: …..Think again. Listen to us. Desist from this stupidity.

Rani: ….. But I ask pardon of the Elders. I must swear by the King Cobra" (p. 36).

Hypothetically, considering Rani as a self-assertive woman, Appanna's actions are more than enough for her to detest him. On the other hand, if Rani is a selfless woman, Appana's threats concerning the murder of her child is enough not just to hate him, but to begin cultivating revenge on him. But, custom has taught her to value the husband above her life and the life within her. The cultural construction of necessary love and respect for the male partner rises above the natural instinct of a creature to save its own life and also to protect its offsprings. What Karnad ironically stresses is the woman's ignorance of her own basic biological nature. Thus, if the spectator steps into Rani's shoes, the meaning of the whole play alters from a wonderful depiction of two oral tales to a cautionary utopian vision revealing the intricacies of the influence that fatal beliefs concerning trust and devotion towards the male partner have on women's psyche.

3.0 Gendered Arena: Cobra's Mobility and Rani's Confinement:

The Cobra or Naga gets attacked by the dog and the mongoose when he steps out. Still, he survives the attack and returns to his dwelling place. Nevertheless, no one interferes in the Naga's sexual

liberty. Such liberty possessed by a beast is found missing in the women's lives. Rani doesn't possess the liberty that the beast has as part of his relation with the rest of nature. Rani is unable to appropriate the space to which she is brought. Rani never makes a subversive attempt to step out. Rani's situatedness makes her easily accessible to Appanna's abuses and Kurudavva's commandments. Amidst Rani's plight, Kappanna strongly argues 'against' the physicality and 'for' the metaphysicality of a woman trying to entice him, within the bounds of an illogical linkage between darkness and absence of women.

"She is not a village girl. Which village girl will dare step out at this hour?" (Karnad, 1990, p.28)

For Kurudavva, a woman is an "ogress" of "demon birth" (p.28) if she walks out at night. Lately, Kappana disappears; and subsequently, Kurudavva identifies a "yaksha woman" (p.38) as the driving force behind it, and utters: "What woman would come inside our house at that hour?"(p.38) Concisely, in the play, immobility is feminized and freedom of movement is masculinized. Subsequently, the greatest punishment in store for Appanna is immobility and servitude. Though Rani becomes a 'goddess' for the villagers, a right to own the space outside home has not been sanctioned by their community. This implies that a reversal of gender roles is unimaginable within the context of *Nagamandala.*

4.0 The Concubine's Voiceless Presence:

The concubine occupies the peripheral spaces of fictional landscapes, not just because of her necessity in the realistic portrayal of a way of life at a particular time span, but out of their ghostly presence in the dreams and thoughts pervading domestic spaces ruled by those who have sought after her. To Kappanna, Kurudavva tells about Appanna, "He has got himself a bride- and he still goes after that harlot?" (Karnad, 1990, p.8) After gifting Rani with the roots, Kurudavva says, "Once he smells you, he won't go sniffing after the bitch" (p.13). Someone, anonymous by all means, branded as harlot, bitch and "bazaar woman" (p.15) by another woman, symbolically "born blind" (p.12) and accepting that "my blind eyes know only the dark" (p.12) appears as the causative agent behind all dilemmas in Rani's life. Women like her are sieves that capture desire, wrath and worries of many, thereby seizing toxicities; obviously, without any definite gains for themselves. Although Rani and the concubine are two receiving ends of the same man enshrouded in prejudices on women, the concubine appears as a perfect foil to Rani or the embodiment of traditional feminine characteristics. At the end of the ordeal, Rani, who has been denied a choice to be agentic or not, is replaced by the concubine who has neither choice nor voice at all as the slave within the household. As the possibility of liberation of the concubine is outside the communicative language of the play, she cannot be imagined as a subject deserving kindness. As she cannot be erased from the narrative space, the concubine has to share the onus concerning Appanna's sins and continue to be a slave to another individual. Ironically, as per each of the multiple endings of the play, Appanna continues to enjoy all the rights of a traditional patriarch.

5.0 The Snake and Sexuality:

If the masculinity of Appanna is branded as maleficent at some junctures, the snake compensates the existing lack, as the embodiment of kindness and justice, on the one hand and of virility and fecundity on the other. The serpent is not a saviour. What ends the snake ordeal reflects the serpent's conviction of the necessity of gratitude towards someone who has satisfied his corporeal needs, highlighting the intricacies of man-woman relationships. This also signifies the rules of need, satisfaction and loyalty which function as a part of the materiality of the human world. Unravelling this would lead to an inordinate amount of scientific and cultural questions, answering which makes literature atypical of any single epistemic circuit. "In India, snakes are worshipped for apotropaic purposes as protectors of home and hearth, as healers of skin disease

and above all, for the benefit of human fertility" (Ferro-Luzzi, p. 47). J .H. Rivett-Carnac, in his paper published in the journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, *The Snake Symbol in India : In Connection with the Worship of Shiva* (1879) suggests that the serpant is a symbol of the phallus (p.14) in Indian culture. Sherman and Madge Minton, in *Venomous Reptiles,* write: "Throughout India, a symbolic equation of snake and phallus is specific and ubiquitous. The rearing stance and spread hood of an alert Cobra, suggesting phallic tumescence, make this snake a natural symbol of human virility"(as cited in Crump $ Fenolio, 2015, p.184). The linkage between Naga and phallus, has two contradictional implications within the scope of *Nagamandala*. Firstly, as the Naga seduces Rani in the guise of Appanna and since the Naga is initiated into an 'illicit' act by the potion, both Rani and Naga are out of blame for the tactical union. Thus, traditional cultural values are not consciously declined either by the woman or the beast. Secondly, the politics of households which has encouraged generations of men to consider women as lifeless beings for satisfying everyday sexual needs is a major point of concern. Mythically sanctioned and historically validated cultural past of coercive sex, anthropomorphic individuality given to the snake and the possible identification of the serpent as symbolic of the phallus make the linkage between both the actual man and the beast-man more transparent. Therefore, in *Nagamandala*, fear associated with the snake is shifted and translated into the signification of a caution (instead of fear) for the unequal power relationship in a patriarchal familial set up within a cultural context that reveres and worships the phallus.

6.0 The Mirror: As a Symbol of Sensory Perception:

In the play, a woman's reflexive ability to perceive the working of patriarchal power, nurture a cautionary mind and develop tactical resistance is hinted through the symbolic mirror. Rani catches a glimpse of the Naga in its real form through the reflection in her mirror-box and screams in fright before the snake could move away from the mirror's focus. Surprisingly, Rani refuses to question the man in her room and abstains from making attempts to bring out the truth. She does not trust the credulity of her own sensory perception and relies on the superstitious belief that "if you mention it by name at night, it comes into the house"(Karnad, 1990, p.23). Thus, the role of superstition in thwarting resistance, likely to evolve in women has been stressed and highlighted by Karnad.

7.0 Appropriation of Stories and Songs:

Within a play informed and reinforced by oral narratives; which, in fact, have played a significant role in shaping its cultural backdrop, the symbolic potential of the exquisitely personified stories and songs would be enormous. The following dialogue between Rani and Naga exemplifies this aspect.

"Rani: Father says, if a bird so much as looks at a cobra--'

Naga: Then the snake strikes and swallows the bird" (Karnad, 1990, p.24).

Here, both Rani and the Naga, represented by the bird and the cobra in the story, narrate the short piece of superstition related to each other, filling the pauses left by one another. This demonstrates the evolution of such stories from the interplay of mysterious aspects of nature, human fears, insecurities and wishes. Contrastingly, the *Song of the Flames*, inaudible to the 'blind' world within and audible to the spectator situated outside the play advocates that ignorance and fear, passed down through oral stories and songs, have to be subdued and humankind should embrace reason. But, what ensues is a crystal clear reflection of superstition's dominance and the paradox of rationality.

"Come let us dance

through the weaver-bird's nest

and light the hanging lamps

of glow-worms

through the caverns in the ant-hill

and set the diamond

in the cobra's crown ablaze

through the blind woman's dream

through the deaf-mute's song

Come let us flow

down the tresses of time

all light and song"(Karnad, 1990, p.30).

Here, women remain 'blind' and 'deaf' to the voice of reason, maintaining discreet submissiveness. 'Flames' symbolizing enlightened vision lighten up the 'caverns' of ignorance, 'dreams' of the carriers of ignorance and the minds of 'deaf-mutes' accepting superstitions as they are. Ultimately, light should 'flow down the tresses of time', along the pathways of oral and written history to enable humankind realize their own blindfoldness. Therefore, the very same vehicles of superstition, *story* and *song* are appropriated by the playwright to lighten the lamp of reason and curb ignorance.

8.0 Superstition: The Outcome of Ignorance:

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines 'superstition' as a "belief or practice resulting from ignorance, fear of the unknown, trust in magic or chance, or a false conception of causation", as "an irrational abject attitude of mind toward the supernatural, nature, or God" and also as "a notion maintained despite evidence to the contrary" ("superstition", n.d.). In a social context where intoxicating drinks and smokes are sanctioned as spiritually redeeming, both the Naga and Rani are puppets in the hands of superstition and they join a play conducted by the amalgamated spirit of both superstition and belief in the supernatural. Kurudavva, the embodiment of superstitious beliefs turns insane and gets struck in the single mental object, her son and the sole mission, to find out the missing Kappanna, towards the end. Adoration of Rani, hailing her as "Divine Being", "a Goddess" and "Mother" (Karnad, 1990, p.39-40) follows an extraordinary spectacle of "The Cobra" (p.39) sliding up her shoulder and spreading 'its hood like an umbrella over her head' and moving 'over her shoulder like a garland' (p.39). Thus, Karnad narrates between the lines, firstly, that revering and respecting a living woman would result only from such 'a miracle', nowhere next to reality. On the other hand, a reverence resulting from an understanding of the specialties of womankind with respect to patriarchal knowledges demands intelligent analysis; which takes time enough to witness the passage of generations. Secondly, through the motifs of Kurudavva's delusion and the crowd's excitement, the playwright exposes how superstitions get an individual to a hallucinatory trance, evading reality for a short duration, to which the person is redirected again. The playwright highlights the necessity of surviving these traps, for which people need intelligence, courage and confidence.

9.0 Why isn't Feminism?

Rani: …..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….Why don't you take it on trust that I have a mind and explain this charade to me(p.32) ?

The words spoken by Rani to Appanna(heard by Naga) reveal the meaning of individuality as internalized in her. The identity as an 'ignorant girl' stands in opposition to that of a woman, a wife and a mother. The very identities which a patriarchally developed civilization ascribes on women from man's standpoint are considered priceless and as the reflection of mind's maturity. Paradoxically, the alteration which Rani sees on herself is a mirage forged by the joint action of Naga's desire and her ignorance of the whole state of affairs. Shortly, she asks again:

"What shall I do? Shall I have an abortion" (p.32)?

Rani considers the husband as a rightful guardian and protector of her body. Even the decision to sustain or curb the life of her expected offspring is left to the husband's will. The presentation of mildly tempered, soft-spoken, ignorant and diffident Rani validates the typically traditional femininity not uncommon in literary and non-literary creative spaces. The inclusion of an unexpected twist in Rani's mannerisms, creating a non-conformist woman out of abuses and confusions would not get along well with the unique blend of realistic zeal and folklorist charm, achieved by the playwright. This compels even the negotiative perceiver to dismiss the fact that the play hasn't challenged public assumptions about the traditional feminine.

Aesthetics of such folklorist influences lose grip, if a feminist stand point is adopted by the playwright, without allowing conscious or unconscious gendering of the whole populace occupying the narrative. Kurudavva's motherliness, Rani's fears and insecurities, Appanna's abuses and walk-outs, the manliness of the snake are substantiations for gendering. The obviously gendered goddess, lamps, 'man' and 'the story', besides adding to the immediacy of the narrative, declare an apparent projection of the gendered state of universal contemporariness in the image of a gendered societal set up on stage.

10.0 Signification of Multiple Endings:

Following the ordeal, a reconfiguration of gender roles is dictated by the *Elders.* The husband is to become a slave and the wife, a master. The inherently dominant and subservient tendencies, respectively in Appanna and Rani, are highlighted throughout the play. Even after hearing the final verdict, Rani's reflections are dominated by thoughts on her baby, which she believes as Appanna's. If Rani could maintain a mind of serene longing for Appanna even after his mindless thrashings and beatings and follow his instruction to take the snake ordeal, it is evident that she has already forgiven her man for his misdemeanors, by the end of the play. Thus, the life-span of the roots and their power are congruent with the extent of the Naga's desire for Rani. Even if the desire was spontaneous, without the operation of the mendicant's roots, both man and beast would have duelled for establishing authority over the female, leading to one's victory over the other. Either the snake- man replaces the man or the man kills the beast. Above all, Rani's pact with the Naga is the cardinal projection of her 'willing suspension' of individuality.

In one of the multiple endings, Naga, hitherto presented as an icon of love, humility and concern for the partner, acquires the form of a hypocritical lover, refusing to forego the subject of his physical desire by any means. In one of the endings, he desires to kill Rani. In the penultimate ending, he hides among the "dark, jet-black snake princesses" (Karnad, 1990, p.43) play with them and "swim away in their dark flow" (p.43) and dies, making Rani suggest that her son lit the pyre and perform the yearly ritual to commemorate his death. In the ultimate ending, Rani permits the

snake to climb into her hairs and "live in there, happily, for ever" (p.46). In both cases, the Naga's presence in Rani's thoughts (as her son's father and as a secret) is observable. Thus, adoration for the ideal masculinity known to Rani survives and maintains its adobe close to her brain, the storehouse of all beliefs and the breeding ground for intuitive illumination.

11.0 Conclusion:

Though made sure of happiness of the heroine ever after its close, accompanying reverence from the social group to which she belongs, the folktale-influenced modern play ends by acknowledging the beastly phallic power which conquered the human phallic power to redeem regular heart-beats in a woman. The play establishes that traces of moments compelling discourses on femininity and women's liberation exist in the interstices of conflicts between oppositional or reciprocal masculinist logics. The discursive space opened by 'Nagamandala' does not seem to re-write the rules governing women's agency or erase the contours of women's opinions. Because, in order to fight the stereotypical image of the feminine in folk tales and mythical narratives it is mandatory to liberate both from the folkloric base and the very cultural backgound, which will shoot the aesthetic appeal of the text down.

Reference:

Crump, M and Fenolio, D. B.(2015). *Eye of Newt and Toe of Frog, Adder's Fork and Lizard's Leg: The Lore and Mythology of Amphibians and Reptiles*. University of Chicago Press.

Dhawan, R.K.(2009). "Girish Karnad : The Man and the Writer". In Dodiya, J (Eds), *The Plays of Girish Karnad : Critical Perspectives*. New Delhi: Prestige.

Ferro-Luzzi, G., Appadurai, A., Bharati, A., Campbell, R., De Leeuwe, J., Jarvie, I., . . . Stein, H. (1980). The Female Lingam: Interchangeable Symbols and Paradoxical Associations of Hindu Gods and Goddesses [and Comments and Reply]. *Current Anthropology, 21*(1), 45-68. Retrieved January 2, 2021, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/2741742

Karnad, Girish. (1990). *Naga-Mandala*. New Delhi: OUP.

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Superstition. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. Retrieved on January 2, 2021, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/superstition