

## Domination of Patriarchal Authority in Girish Karnad's *Naga Mandala*

KHUSHNUMA PERWEEN

**Abstract.** Women have been an aggrieved lot down the ages. The problems faced by women are the major issues in Indian writers. Writers like Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Kamala Markandaya et al have dealt with women-centered problems in their writings. Girish Karnad is one of the prominent writers writing in English who have focused on this issue. His play *Naga Mandala* reflects upon the conflicts and dilemmas faced by male authority in their societal norms. The play exposes the male bigotry and repression of women by men. *Naga Mandala* is a powerful portrait of the agonies and problems of the marital life. It highlights the deplorable condition of women and brings to the fore how women were suppressed mentally and physically under the male chauvinism and tyranny. In this play, Rani is a typical Indian woman who is ready to suffer at the hands of her husband without complaining, hoping that her husband will return to her in the end. Her husband Appanna is a wayward and he always tortures and condemns his wife Rani. She loves her husband but he has no interest in her because he has an extra-marital relationship with a concubine. The present paper aims at discussing the predicament of Rani, the protagonist of the play.

**Keywords :** Male domination; solitary; oppression; psychological problems; dilemmas.

Girish Karnad was a man of many parts-playwright, poet, actor, director and translator all rolled into one to become a renaissance man. Apart from being an acclaimed actor and director of theatre and films, he is a path breaking playwright of post-independence India. Karnad has realistic approach to life in his plays. His plays *Naga Mandala* basically dealt with the problems of isolation, frustration, despair, skepticism, status, search for identity and other modern issues like condition of women in a male dominated world. It discusses various philosophical and theoretical aspects of women who struggle audaciously against patriarchy, male chauvinism and gender discrimination. The oppression of women by the patriarchal order is an important part of Indian society. The finite dimension of the relationship between man and woman has been prescribed by man, not by woman. Her limits have been imposed on her by man who is ruled by the mastery-motive. She accepts it because of bio-social reasons. However; in modern times we find that women are more assertive, more liberated in their views and more articulate in their expression than the women of the past. Though they, in some cases suffer at the hands of their male counterparts, they assert their substantive identity. They on the one hand have established a coherent class structure-one of assertion of identity and defines of male supremacy while on the other have registered their protest,

being subordinated by men. Women empowerment from the variety of bondages and patriarchal control are the essential concerns in Indian plays. Karnad's *Naga Mandala* is particularly concerned with psychological problems, dilemmas and conflicts experienced by modern Indian men and women in their different social situations. It evaluates the mind and behaviour of a woman in a collective perspective. The issue of gender bias in society and oppression of women by the patriarchal order happen to form an important part of Karnad's play. The play reflects such social situations and cultural practices taking place in our country. Liberation of women from variety of bondages and rigid patriarchal control are the essential feminine concerns of Karnad's play. Indian culture and traditions are male dominated, hardly giving any scope to women to exercise their freedom for fulfilment of desires and development of identity which they claim as of their own. Karnad has been laid to bring down patriarchy and patriarchal ideas and give women choice to do whatever they want equally with men. Karnad's play *Naga Mandala* portrays harsh and realistic situation faced by women in India and he tries to establish the identity of a woman in his plays.

In *Naga Mandala* Karnad has portrayed an important female character Rani, who is probably a victim of Hindu patriarchal society and supernatural powers. He has also portrayed urgent human predicament, freedom of choice, selfhood, search of identity, isolation, frustration and failures artistically and aesthetically in his play *Naga Mandala*. This play also exposes effectively the hollowness and injustice of patriarchal family system. The main plot of the play centres round the emancipation of a bride, Rani from subjugation of her husband Appanna. Appanna and Rani are married at very early age. When Rani becomes young Appanna took her to his home. He has an illicit relationship with a concubine. He continues with her and ignores Rani. He neither talks to her nor spends time with her. She is forced to live all alone in his house like a cage bird. Rani is victimized for no fault of her own. She wishes to have her husband's love at any cost. Rani is so meek that she does not even question his spending night elsewhere. Appanna continues torturing Rani. Besides, Rani is accused of adultery. She is put to trial to prove her chastity. But no one questions Appanna for his extra-marital relationship with a concubine. The play brings out this glaring discrepancy in our social as well as legal system. The gender bias is an important issue addressed in the play. The very system of trial for woman is inhuman.

Rani has the choice of opting for a trial to prove her innocence by dipping her hand in boiling hot oil or by holding a red hot iron rod or holding a King Cobra in her hand. If she comes out of these trials unscathed she is pure, otherwise not. In fact no woman could survive these tests and in a male-dominated society, they have no choice but to live like slaves otherwise they risk being branded women of loose character. Manchi Sarat Babu observes:

Thus women are sexually oppressed. It is reflected in the concept of chastity, a patriarchal value. It is one of the most powerful yet invisible cultural fetters that have enslaved women for ages. There has been enough literature, both oral and written, glorifying this enslaving value and defying the women characters who observed it faithfully. (Babu, 49)

*The Ramayana* in which Sita undergoes the fire ordeal to prove her chastity to Rama has been the cultural guide to Indians for more than two thousand years. Extra marital enjoyment for women is a taboo even in this ultra modern age. Same social attitude is exemplified in Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* (Shantata ! Court Chalu Aahe). Miss Leela Bernare is mercilessly attacked verbally under the garb of mock trial. The male culprit here also goes scot-free. However, these women are not ready to let society overrule them. They want to have a choice, and wish to exercise a control over their bodies and thus their lives.

Rani's story expresses her needs, problems and experiences within the patriarchal institution. The play is a tale of male chauvinism that debilitates and degrades females and rests on the exploitation and incarceration of woman. Here Karnad not merely takes a dig at male dominance and reveals the exploitation of woman and great injustice to which they are put by patriarchal culture and the domineering class of men but it also overtly deflates the concept of chastity that undergrinds the male. The play deals with gender bias and woman's subjugation in an orthodox, male dominating Indian society. It imports a contemporary socio-culture and psychological problems. Rani is shown as a victim of cultural society and she is compelled to internalize male superiority and accept her marginalized position in society. But she adopts new ways to transcend and overcome her solution. She continues to fight for preserving her identity as a woman, as a wife and as a mother. The play exhibits the story of Rani's triumph over the unjust patriarchal injections to stand on her own connections. *Naga Mandala* presents several women characters all of whom live an abject life, devoid of honour and dignity. They don't have to make their marks in any field of life. They have accepted lying down like most of Indian women all that has come their way. They are women without any ambition, without even a desire for an honourable life. Rani is seen in the last part of the story to be in command of the household with some authority.

Girish Karnad portrays the character of Rani from an unconventional approach to demonstrate that the society is terribly puritanical, patriarchal and prejudicial to women. Rani represents the common submissive Indian rural girl who becomes the victim of the unfair social order through the institution of marriage. Her parents decide her marriage without even asking for her choice thinking that she is incapable of taking her own decision. She is asked to marry a person named Appanna, literally means 'any man'. So it is a not just the story of Rani and Appanna

but that of any man and a woman united in a wed-lock. Marriage is the age-old institution that has always been unfair to women. Women are exploited physically, mentally, emotionally, socially and intellectually. In fact, "to be a woman is something strange, so confused, so complicated, that no one predicate comes near expressing it and that the multiple predicates that one would like to use are so contradictory that only a woman could up with it". (Beauvoir, 175) Men can think of himself independently but a woman is not allowed to think of herself without the consent of man.

In a patriarchal society, a woman is controlled by her male counterpart and is treated like a commodity and possession. For Appanna, there is no social, ethical or established taboo. He is free from all limitations and his actions are not subjected to questions. Karnad very ingeniously raises the issue that our conformist society and social laws insist loyalty and dedication from a wife even to a disloyal and heartless husband. Rani is always locked by Appana in the house. This lock and key is the symbolical representation of the patriarchal cage man has prepared for women. In the words of Manchi Sarat Babu "This solitary confinement of Rani by Appanna in the house symbolises the chastity belt of the Middle Ages, the reduction of women's talents to housework and the exclusion of women from enlightenment and enjoyment." (Babu, 239) He comes only for lunch and remains there for a while without any conversation. He doesn't allow Rani to ask any question. He says, "Look, I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand?" (*Naga Mandala*, 7) Man, conventionally gets the privilege to order his wife in a marriage whereas wife is taught to follow what man dictates. Like most of the traditional Indian wives, Rani suffers severe sense of loss and weariness within wedlock. She is merely a mute and silent sufferer at the hands of her patriarchal husband. She suffers a lot on account of the male- ego and considers herself nothing without her husband.

A woman is deprived of liberty in a patriarchal society, or rather; she herself chooses to reject liberty. Appanna locks Rani up in the house and brings home a watchdog and a mongoose to ensure her complete alienation from the society. Rani has to stay alone for the whole day and night. She feels scared being alone in the house obsessed by the feelings of fear and insecurity. Instead of supporting her, Appanna threatens her, "What is there to be scared of? Just keep to yourself. No one will bother you..." (7). Rani does not find anyone to share her agony. Rani tells Kurudavva, "... you are the first person I have seen since coming here. I'm bored to death. There is no one to talk to!" (11). When she is unable to fulfil her sexual, emotional, social and psychological desires, she suppresses her desires. The suppression is inevitable as women in India are not free to claim their needs. Rani's fantasy of an eagle taking her far away from Appanna's world is the natural result of her repression of her desires. Her repressed desire to be loved and to be free gets expression in her fantasy where an eagle wants to take her :

Beyond the seven seas and the seven isles. On the  
seventh island is magic garden. And in that garden  
stands the tree of emeralds. Under that tree, your  
parents wait for you. (7)

The eagle is the symbol of the flight and freedom. It is the metaphorical representation of her yearning to get released from the tyranny of her married life. Her discontented desires are fulfilled in her hallucination, fantasy and dreams. The victim of severe repression and alienation, Rani seeks refuge to the dream land where she moans, "Oh, Mother". (7) But this dreamy world soon disappears like the lines drawn in the water. She confronts with the harsh realities the moment she wakes up. She finds herself locked in Appanna's house.

The action of the whole play centres around her character- her hopes, desires, misery, happiness and at last her union with her husband. The character of Rani presents the journey of a woman from enslavement to empowerment. She begins as a victim of her husband's oppression but ends up as a Goddess. He spends his nights with a harlot. He leaves home after lunch every day and returns only for lunch the next day. Rani who is locked in her house becomes a passive victim of her husband's oppression. At the beginning of the story, Rani emerges as the very image of an ideal Indian woman, puzzled and unquestioning. Rani is an extremely innocent and ignorant woman who has not seen the ways of the world, its cruelties and dominations. She never complains of not having sex with Appanna but his love and presence. She is unaware of the concept of sex. She is reduced to the status of a housemaid and cooks and waits for her husband. The play criticises 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 faithfulness of a woman to her husband but not the faithfulness of a man to his wife. Fidelity is expected only from a woman and man is left scot-free to commit more crimes. That's why the village elders ask Rani alone to prove her chastity.

To conclude Rani is a typical Indian woman who is ready to suffer at the hands of her husband without hoping that her husband will return to her at the end. She expects nothing, yet she is ready to make any sacrifice. She never revolts even indirectly with the problems of woman in a patriarchal society. Marriage forces a woman to face a new atmosphere and adjust to a new life style. *Naga Mandala* expresses the repression of a woman, discrimination done to them by men and quietly deflates the concept of chastity. It is a play on the liberation and empowerment of the women who have to play an essential role for the revival of a deteriorated social order. Karnad deals indirectly with the problems of women in a

patriarchal society. Marriage forces a woman to face a new atmosphere in *Naga Mandala*. Rani suffers a crisis initially and instead of being shattered, she emerges from a meek bride into a strong woman struggling for survival.

The characters have been portrayed in patriarchal society where male members of the family are given superior position in life but the women are treated as weaker section of the society. Rani was just like a bird in the cage without having an exposure to the outside world.

**Khushnuma Perween**

Research Scholar, Department of English  
Magadh University, Bodh-Gaya.

**Works Cited**

- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1976.  
Karnad, Girish. *Naga-Mandala : A Play with a Cobra*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004.  
Manchi, Sarat Babu. *The Concept of Chastity and Naga- Mandala. The Plays of Girish Karnad: Critical Perspectives*. (ed.) Jaydipsinh Dodiya. New Delhi : Prestige Books, 1999.