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Chastity's Shackles: Deconstructing Patriarchy in Karnad's *Naga- Mandala: A Play with a Cobra*

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Abstract:
Postcoloniality in India involves much more than merely confronting the colonial legacy of the past. Apart from the burden of Western domination, the Indian psyche must also grapple with dominant structures within the nation itself such as gender biased issues. Indian women, in particular, experience dual marginalisation: they are subjected both to the dominance of the colonisers and to that of native men. Patriarchy, which upholds male dominance over women, has existed in societies across the world. However, in India, gender discrimination has become deeply ingrained in the social and legal framework since the time of the *Manu Smriti*. The idea of the "ideal Indian woman" has emerged as an image of a submissive, traditional figure that girls are encouraged to emulate. Over time, this patriarchal system has evolved into a powerful instrument of male oppression.
Since Indian postcoloniality also addresses indigenous forms of dominance, postcolonial writers have sought to challenge and undermine these native hegemonic structures and Karnad's plays frequently interrogate the very foundations of such systems. Karnad interrogates the injustices and inequalities that are legitimised in the name of social customs and conventions. In his works, the issue of gender gains renewed prominence. Karnad critiques notions such as pativrata and chastity, which function as instruments of patriarchal control over women. Although he is a male writer, his treatment of the female world often reflects a distinctly feminist perspective. He emphasizes the importance of women's empowerment as one could find in *Naga- Mandala: A Play with a Cobra.*

Key Words: Postcoloniality, Indian women, dominance, patriarchy, Girish Karnad, *Naga-Mandala.*

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Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* offers an especially powerful critique of the injustices and inequalities inherent in patriarchy. *Naga- Mandala* has won Karnad the Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award for the Most Creative Work in 1989. The play is based on two oral tales that Karnad had heard from A.K.Ramanujan. The outer frame is about a fictional playwright who can continue to live only if he keeps awake for one whole night. It also includes the oral tale about gathering of flames in village temple to exchange gossips. The sub-plot tells the story of Rani, a young wife, Appanna, her cruel husband and Naga, her snake- lover. Appanna locks his newly- wedded wife Rani and visits his concubine. Kurudavva, the blind one, pities Rani's plight and gives her a magical root to prepare a love potion. Afraid to serve the blood red potion to her husband, Rani pours it to an ant-hill. It is tasted by the King Cobra of the ant-hill and it falls in love with Rani. It visits Rani at night in the guise of Appanna and makes love. The Naga impregnates Rani and Appanna puts Rani to public shame. As advised by Naga, Rani takes the snake ordeal in the presence of the villagers and she is elevated to the level of a goddess by the serpent. In the play, Karnad repeats the pattern of triangular love, the love between one woman and two men. The play uses traditional mould to discuss the modern themes like the unequal relationship between man and woman in patriarchal society. Rani's predicament reflects the typical experience of a young bride in a traditional, patriarchal Indian household.

Appanna and Naga together represent the divided identity of a husband: Appanna is distant and authoritarian during the day, while Naga, appearing in his guise at night, embodies tenderness and desire. The passionate Naga may thus be interpreted as the sensual, repressed side of Appanna's personality. The empty house in which Rani is confined symbolises the joint family she marries into- an environment in which she nonetheless remains isolated and emotionally abandoned. The character of Appanna in the play serves as a quintessential example of Indian patriarchal male who considers his right to dominate his wife. He exercises absolute authority over Rani and returns home only for his midday meal. Rani is deprived of all the rights traditionally associated with a woman including the right to speak. Appanna bluntly warns her: "Look, I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand?" (Karnad 1: 254). His decision to keep first a watchdog and later a mongoose further reflects his determination to isolate her completely from the outside world. In this context, Dharwadker comments:

As the ill- tempered, tyrannical, two dimensional husband, Appanna rapidly reduces her daily life to a featureless existence without companionship or community, except for the clandestine visits by Kurudavva, the old blind village woman. (Karnad 1: xxx)

Appanna considers his wife as a private property just like any typical husband in patriarchal Indian family.

Appanna is also depicted as the typical patriarchal male who insists on sexual purity from his wife while refusing to abide by the same standard himself. He expects absolute fidelity from Rani even as he openly maintains an extra-marital relationship. Rani's pregnancy affects his male chauvinism and accuses her, saying, "Aren't you ashamed to admit it, you harlot? I locked you in, and yet you managed to find a lover! Tell me who it is. Who did you go to with your sari off?" (Karnad 1: 284). He even assumes the authority to punish her physically. Appanna publicly condemns Rani for alleged adultery and demands harsh punishment for her, while his own infidelity passes unquestioned. In a patriarchal society, men assert control over women's sexuality, and concepts such as pativrata are designed to reinforce female subservience and sexual restraint. Men, however, claim unrestricted sexual freedom. While Appanna's adultery is completely ignored, Rani's supposed offence is treated as a serious moral crime.

Though Naga, the King Cobra who is disguised as Appanna is compassionate and considerate to Rani, yet his patriarchal dominance can be felt when he says: "I am afraid that is how it is going to be. Like that during the day. Like this at night. Don't ask me why." (Karnad 1: 272) He also cautions her:

I shall come home every day twice. At night and of course again at mid- day. At night, wait for me here in this room. When I come and go at night, don't go out of this room, don't look out of the window whatever the reason. And don't ask me why. (Karnad 1: 276-277)

Even though Naga frees Rani from the shackles of adultery but still he instructs Rani to keep the news of her pregnancy secret, saying, "I realize it cannot remain a secret for long. That is why I said, as long as possible. Please, do as I tell you." (Karnad 1: 283). Naga, too, belongs to the same patriarchal order. Naga seeks to control Rani in order to shield himself from being discovered with his true identity. In this sense, both Appanna and Naga share a common trait: each demands unquestioning submission from women. The village Elders also embody the patriarchal mindset. They are eager to preside over Rani's trial and pronounce judgment on her supposed adultery - an irony made sharper by their complete silence regarding Appanna's blatant affair with his concubine. Through the portrayal of Appanna, Naga, and the Elders, Karnad lays bare the oppressive structures of patriarchy and the injustices inflicted upon Rani in *Naga-Mandala*.

Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* examines the idea of chastity within marriage, revealing how deep the gender-biased concept is. Society insists upon chastity from women, while men are rarely held to the same standard. Rani's unintended "adultery" is condemned with severity, while her husband Appanna's deliberate infidelity is ignored. However, Karnad ultimately subverts this notion of chastity in the trial scene, where Rani is vindicated and elevated to the status of a goddess. In this regard, Santhosh Gupta views, "It is an extremely ironic moment in the play when Appanna is left holding in public another man's child and asks to respect his wife as a goddess" (Dodiya 255). Appanna himself falls at Rani's feet and calls her a goddess. Hence, the age old concept of chastity is ridiculed when Appanna himself calls Rani a goddess and falls on her feet.

In *Naga-Mandala*, Karnad deliberately diminishes the importance traditionally attached to chastity. None of the principal characters - Appanna, Rani, or Naga - can truly be called chaste. Both Appanna and Rani are aware that the child is born outside the bounds of legitimate marriage, yet they choose to accept him as their own and never reveal the truth to one another. Appanna's awareness that Rani had a lover, and that he is not the biological father of the child, becomes evident in his words:
Have I sinned so much that even Nature should laugh at me? I know I haven't slept with my wife. Let the world say what it likes. Let any miracle declare her a goddess. But I know! What sense am I to make of my life if that's worth nothing? (Karnad 1: 294)

Rani probably understands the difference between Appanna and Naga towards the end, as the Story makes it clear:

No two men make love alike. And that night of the Village Court, when her true husband climbed into bed with her, how could she fail to realize it was someone new? Even if she hadn't known earlier? ... Don't you think she must have cried out in anguish to know the answer? (Karnad 1: 294)

Thus, both Rani and Appanna eventually recognise that neither of them is chaste, yet they learn to accept one another. This acceptance is presented as something ordinary, something to be lived with, just as the Story remarks: "It is something one has to live with, like a husband who snores, or a wife who is going bald" (Karnad 1: 295). Chastity, Karnad suggests, is merely a construct generated by patriarchy, and through the play Karnad works to strip the idea of sanctity.

However, their renewed life of apparent harmony is still shadowed by memory and regret. By the end of the play, Rani fully recognises that Naga, the King Cobra, was both her lover and the father of her child. In the first ending, she acknowledges that the dead Cobra has, in a sense, bestowed their son upon them and insists that it be given a proper ritual cremation. She also declares that their son must observe annual rites in its memory. Appanna, now revering Rani as a divine figure, readily agrees. In the alternate ending, Rani allows Naga to continue living contentedly within the long locks of her hair. "This hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss. Live in there happily, forever." (Karnad 1: 300) Thus, in *Naga-Mandala,* Karnad mocks at the male-oriented world by exposing the inequalities in the treatment of women and the futility of its age-old ideologies.

Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* also explores the empowerment of women within a patriarchal society. Although the play foregrounds the theme of male dominance, it simultaneously highlights a gradual shift in power relations. In the beginning of the play, Rani is depicted almost like a child, yearning for the parental affection she has lost where her helplessness and longing surface through her dreams. However, her relationship with Naga, who appears in the guise of Appanna, marks a turning point. Through his tenderness, patience, and emotional understanding, he awakens her from frigidity and helps her evolve from a naive girl into a self-aware woman. Naga becomes the catalyst for Rani's sexual and emotional liberation, and his final union with her symbolizes with his dwelling in her hair which represents her acceptance of Naga. In this context, Crow and Banfield observe:

The play's final ending, as the tiny cobra slithers secretly into the tresses of her hair, might be seen as representative of Rani's discovery, acceptance and 'ownership' of her own sexual pleasure, crucial to her independence and emotional wellbeing. (159)

This ending throws light on the physical and emotional growth in Rani and like any woman she devotes this transformation to motherhood which she aptly expressed through her words to Naga:

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? (Karnad 1: 283-284)

At first, Rani passively accepts the duality of her husband, brutish and indifferent by day, yet ardent and loving by night. She never questions this division between day and night. However, over time, she matures and grows courageous enough to confront him, even if her challenge is ultimately in vain.
Karnad presents a striking contrast in Rani's position throughout the play. She transforms from a state of complete subjugation to one of absolute authority. After undergoing the snake ordeal, Rani is revered as a goddess, and Appanna, her husband, is reduced to her servant. Even Appanna's concubine is relegated to the role of a maid in Rani's household. In this regard, Bansal and Kumar views:

Rani's triumph in the snake ordeal and her subsequent elevation to the status of a goddess suggests women empowerment and indicts unjust male domination. The institution of marriage is ultimately vindicated. (Khatri and Arora 162)

Thus, Rani's triumph in the snake ordeal transforms her from a submissive wife into a woman of unqualified authority. Appanna, who had previously shown nothing but contempt for her, becomes her most obedient admirer, declaring: "Of course, there is no question of saying no. You are the goddess herself incarnate. Any wish of yours will be carried out." (Karnad 1: 298) Unlike Padmini in *Hayavadana,* who ends her life, Rani gains absolute power within a male-dominated world. Her victory can be read as a reflection of the broader empowerment of women in contemporary society.

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