

# REDEFINING FEMININE POWER IN GIRISH KARNAD'S NAGAMANDALA

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## Abstract

*This paper attempts to highlight the play, Nagamandala written by Girish Karnad, emphasis on how women suffer in the hands of Patriarchal domain for ages, and the way they liberate themselves by fighting against the unjust norms of the society. This play particularly presents the condition of a typical Indian woman and exposes the problems women face related to the traditional Indian patriarchal system. It is well known universal phenomena that happen to women from antiquity to the present times. This paper aims at portraying the ways in which Karnad depicts his women characters as revolutionary and emancipated personas through the storyline of the play Nagamandala.*

**Keywords:** Emancipation, Liberation, Society, Women.

## INTRODUCTION

Drama is a literary form for the expression of human sentiments in which actors play the parts assigned to them and utter the written dialogues. Indian Drama in English is a significant literary genre that merits special attention. The term Drama is derived from the Greek word “dran” which means ‘to do’, ‘to perform’. This meaning indicates that it has a particular relation to the action. According to the Indian view of life, the purpose of drama and theatre was to create a feeling of pleasure or bliss by portraying the different situations, mental status, and feelings of human beings.

One of the leading dramatists in India, Girish Raghunath Karnad, a multi-faceted personality who has earned international praise as a contemporary writer, playwright, renowned actor, film producer, screenwriter, critic, translator, and movie director. Karnad has won numerous awards. The prestigious national civilian awards bestowed upon him are the Padmashree award in 1974 and the Padmabhushan award in 1992. He was awarded the Bharatiya Jnanpith Award, the highest and most prestigious literary award conferred on India on 1999. Apart from literature, in the year 2008, he was honoured as world Theatre Ambassador by the International Theatre Institute of UNESCO.

Karnad has been actively associated with the stage and has written plays with an eye to its production. According to him, a play realizes its full potential only through the presentation on the stage. He says, “When a story excites me, I want to share the excitement with others. As I analyse the components of its fascination, the form of the play gets shaped” (The Hindu). His plays are appreciated for their absorbing storyline, intricacy and riveting structure.

Girish Karnad's works in the theatre reveal two outstanding qualities: continuous experimentation with dramatic forms and deep involvement with the human condition in its contemporary as well as universal manifestations. His plays reflect upon the contemporary Indian culture and society through the use of folk tales, myths and historical legends. These are the parts of cultural constructs intended to shape the individual following the moral and traditional codes.

## KARNAD AND THE THEME OF FEMINISM IN HIS PLAYS

Gender issues seem to be suffused in most of the plays of Karnad. The issue of the gender-bias in society and the situation of women under patriarchal order happen to form an important part of the Karnad's play. His plays portray the harsh and realistic situation faced by women in India. Sunitha in the article remarks, “Karnad very dexterously pictures the condition of a typical Indian female, ruled by the patriarchal order bounded by tradition, but whose spirit remains unbounded.”

The conspicuous quality that differentiates Karnad from other writers is that he gives a picture of his women characters as inculcated with feminism, scraping the undue norms of the patriarchal order. Karnad envisages profound changes in traditional, social and the psycho-cultural status of woman and tries to establish the identity of a woman in his plays. His women characters are the products of a postmodern world that desires to gain what they need.

Unlike other male writers, who do not throw much light on women's fears, anxieties, and psychological problems, Karnad employs a new approach like drawing from mythological and historical sources to tackle contemporary issues, and the existentialist crisis of woman, through his female characters who are caught up in

psychological and philosophical conflicts. He illustrates how the woman can get a solution but also to stress the rigid mould that suppresses and oppresses her.

It is a remarkable achievement of Karnad that he weaves together timeless truths about women and their psychological emotions contained in ancient Indian stories by altering the social mores and morals of modern life. His female characters are portrayed as liberated and emancipated personas. As Sathyadev Dubey in "Meaning and the Materials of Modern Indian Theatre" points out "Girish Karnad is the only playwright in the history of Indian theatre to have treated adultery as normal and treated adulterous women sympathetically."

### THE CHARACTER OF RANI IN NAGAMANDALA

Nagamandala is based on two oral tales from Karnataka which Girish Karnad first heard several years ago from his Professor and India's renowned scholar of the oral traditions, A.K. Ramanujam. Karnad in this play portrays the predicament of an immature and emotionally undeveloped person. The suppressed woman at the end is raised to the level of the deity worshipped by the society thereby showing her empowerment. This play brought him the Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award for the Most Creative Work of 1989. It was directed by J. Garland Wright, as part of the celebrations of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Guthrie Theatre, Minneapolis.

The play presents several women characters, all of whom live a barren life, devoid of honour and dignity. The prologue of the play provides an insight into the private lives of women. Karnad presents the problems of a married woman, the position and status of a woman in her relation to her husband and home. The play is centred on the marital status and social status of women through the character of Rani, the female protagonist of the play.

The four women illustrated by the flames in the prologue are not given any names since they are not any particular women, but Indian women as a whole. They are women without any ambition, without even a desire for an honourable life. They accept their life as it is without questioning their counterparts. This shows the typical Indian woman, ruled by the patriarchal order. In Indian society, the woman is said to be complete only after marriage. However, Rani, the central character of the play is introduced as a young bride on the brink of a new life with her husband Appanna.

Like any other girl she too enters this new life with many expectations and imaginations. But reality knocks her down. Appanna locks her up in the house all alone only to return in the day for his bath and lunch. Appanna says "Look, I don't like idle chatter, do not question me. Do as you are told and you won't be punished. I'll be back tomorrow for lunch" (28).

This shows Rani's helplessness. She finds herself to be a prisoner in the house of her husband. He does not want her to have any social contact and connections. His cruel neglect and harshness towards Rani make her mentally and physically worn out. This imprisonment of Rani by Appanna in the house symbolizes the chastity belt of the middle ages, the decline of women's talents to housework and the keeping women away from enlightenment and enjoyment.

There comes a sudden twist in Rani's life where Naga, a serpent disguises in the form of Appanna enchants Rani. She is in a dilemma because the Appanna of the day is totally different from Appanna of the night. When Naga tries to talk to her, she bites her finger to ensure whether all that is happening to her is real or she is dreaming. In due course, Rani becomes pregnant. She is very happy that her wifehood has reached completion. As a mother, Rani is seen in the last part of the play as powerful and authoritative. These words by Rani show her transformation from an immature innocent girl into a mature woman. She is no longer the tongue-tied and obedient girl of the past. She boldly questions Naga's attitude towards her pregnancy and demands him to stop playing games with her. For the first time, Rani shows a streak of rebellion. Accordingly, the famous psychologist, Sudhir Kakkar, in the book *The Indian Psyche* says "an Indian woman knows that motherhood confers upon her a purpose and an identity that nothing else in her culture can" (65).

Meanwhile, Appanna coming to know about Rani's Pregnancy brings the issue into light in front of the village elders. This can be seen as the second instance where Rani tries to prove herself and thereby gains respect and identity. She confidently declares this in front of the crowd and wins over her case. When she holds the cobra in her hand it 'moves over her shoulder like a garment' and 'spreads his hood like an umbrella over her head'. Now Rani becomes a goddess and Appanna is told by the elders to spend the rest of his life doing her service.

Towards the end of the play, she protects Naga by allowing him to stay in her long tresses. This shows the position of Rani who is baffled by the behaviour of Naga, in the beginning, but now gives life to Naga. Rani says to Naga "Why did you ever come in here, stupid? He'll kill you. My hair! Of course. Come, quick. Climb into it. This hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss. Live in there happily, forever" (66).

### CONCLUSION

The psychological transformation of Rani from an immature girl at the beginning of the play to a goddess incarnate at the end suggests the woman's power in the quest for her own identity. It symbolizes that the submissive and suppressed woman has started to break the barriers, cross the lines that intend to imprison a woman by distancing her, from her surroundings as well as her own 'self'. Rani represents the woman's right to

choose, the right to choose a life overcoming all obstacles. Rani suffers a mental crisis initially and instead of being shattered, she emerges from a meek bride into a strong new woman struggling for survival. Karnad depicts Rani as a representative of modern Indian women who are strong enough and have the unique ability to deal and survive under any circumstances. The transformation in the character of Rani from enslavement to empowerment is seen.

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