

A Mythical Study of Naga Mandala: one of the Plays of Girish Karnad**N.M. Siri**M.A. English, KSET
Chitradurga**Introduction:**

Girish Karnad was an Indian actor, film director, Kannada writer, playwright and who predominantly worked in Kannada, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Marathi films. His rise as a playwright in the 1960s marked the coming of age of modern Indian playwriting in Kannada, just as Badal Sarkar did in Bengali, Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi, and Mohan Rakesh in Hindi. He was a recipient of the 1998 Jnanpith Award, the highest literary honour conferred in India.

For four decades Karnad composed plays, often using history and mythology to tackle contemporary issues. He translated his plays into English and received acclaim. His plays have been translated into some Indian languages and directed by directors like Ebrahim Alkazi, BV. Karanath, Alyque Padamsree, Arvind Gaur, Satyadev Dubey, Vijay Mehta, Shyanand Jalan, Allana and Zafar Mhiuddin.

Naga Mandala:

Girish Karnad bases his play *Naga-Mandala* (Play with a Cobra) on two folk tales from Karnataka, which he acknowledges to have heard several years ago from A. K. Ramanujan. Karnad's plays reflect upon contemporary Indian cultural and social life using folk tales, myth and historical legends. He weaves together timeless truth about human life and emotions contained in ancient Indian stories with the changing social mores and morals of modern life. His plays are particularly concerned with the psychological problems, dilemmas and conflicts experienced by the modern Indian men and women in their different social situations. His play *Naga-Mandala* is a powerful portrait of the agony and anguish faced by both men and women in their development into adult roles and social adjustment in a society where the individual is given little space for self-development, awareness and liberty as a being.

The play *Naga-Mandala*, directed by Vijaya Mehta in German was presented by Leipziger Schauspielhaus at Leipzig and Berlin for the Festival of India in Germany in 1992. Again, it was performed at the University Theatre at Chicago and subsequently at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis as part of its 30th anniversary celebrations in 1993.

Naga-Mandala (1988) is Karnad's one of the finest plays. It was published in Kannada first and then translated into English by Karnad himself. It is based on a Kannada folk tale. It combines folk elements with mythical and surreal to present a domestic drama. Karnad himself writes about the source material of play in *Introduction to Three Plays*:

"*Naga-Mandala* is based on two oral tales I heard from A. Ramanujan. These tales are narrated by women—normally the older women in the family—while children are being fed in the evening in the kitchen or being put to bed. The other adults present on these occasions are also women. Therefore, these tales, though directed at the children, often serve as a system of communication among the women in the family.

They also express a woman's understanding of the reality around her, a lived counterpoint to the patriarchal structures of classical texts and institutions. The position of Rani in the story of *Naga-Mandala*, for instance, can be seen as a metaphor for the situation of a young girl in the bosom of a joint family where she sees her husband only in two unconnected roles— as a stranger during the day and as lover at night. Inevitably, the pattern of relationships she is forced to weave from these disjointed encounters must be something of a fiction.

The empty house Rani is locked in could be the family she married into. Many of these tales also talk about the nature of tales. The story of the flames comments on the paradoxical nature of oral tales in general: They have an existence of their own, independent of the teller and yet live only when they

are passed on from the possessor of the tale to the listener. Seen thus, the status of a tale becomes akin to that of a daughter, for traditionally a daughter too is not meant to be kept at home too long but has to be passed on. This identity adds poignant and ironic undertones to the¹ relationship of the teller to the tales”.

The feeling of dread and repugnance venomous reptiles universally inspire, is shared by the Indians too. It was probably their dreaded powers that led to the deification of serpents. In Hindu scriptures, snakes are in some places mentioned as the enemies of mankind and in others as deities. Originally, the Indo-Aryans were averse to snake-worship, but later Hinduism absorbed some races who worshipped snakes and with them their beliefs.

The Nagas (*snakes*) are fabled to live in a magnificent world named Patala, situated in the nether regions. There dwell the lords of snake-region, *Vasuki, Sankha, Kulika, Mahasankha, Sweta, Dhananjaya, Dhritarashtra, Sankhachurna, Kambala, Aswatara, Devadatta* and other large-hearted serpents. Of these, some have, five hoods, some seven, some ten and some a thousand. The gloom of the nether regions is lighted up by the splendour of the excellent gems gracing their hoods.

The capital of the serpent-world is *Bhogawati*, a city famed for its wealth. The serpents there are in possession of the most precious stones in the worlds.

The *Nagas* are said to be the progeny of *Kadru* (one of the wives of *Kasyapa*) and mortal enemies of their half-brother *Garuda*. Because of its habit of sloughing its skin, the serpent is believed to be immortal. It is said that once when *Garuda* was taking ambrosia from heaven to *Patala*, he happened to drop some of the nectar on the earth, which fell on *Kusa* grass and snakes greedily kicked it up and became immortal. They, however, burnt their tongues and hence they have forked tongues.

The chief of the serpents is said to be *Ananta*, the thousand hooded hydra, on whom *Vishnu* sleeps. The earth is poised on one of his hoods. The word *Anallfa* means endless. The serpent, particularly one eating its tail, is indicative of eternity.

While *Ananta* and *Vasuki* (*Shiva* wears this serpent as his girdle) are objects of veneration, *Kaliya* is said to represent sin. This cobra inhabited the river *Kalindi* (*Jamuna*) and was a cause of anxiety to the

herdsmen among whom *Krishna* lived. The boy *Krishna*, one day, entered the river and after a fierce combat, subdued the monstrous reptile. At the request of the wives of *Kaliya*, *Krishna* spared his life but made him depart from *Kalindi*. The story of this combat is very popular among the Hindus, and *Krishna* is very often represented as a boy dancing on the hood of *Kaliya*.

Nagapanchami, the fifth day of the Hindu month of *Shravan* (July-August) is sacred to snakes and they are particularly worshipped on this day.

In Indian literature and lore, a serpent or King Cobra *Naga* represents a positive force, sympathetic to like. A snake is often a guardian figure. According to *Zimmer*:

“Serpent Kings and queen (*Naga, Nagin*) personifying and directing the terrestrial waters of the lakes and ponds, rivers and oceans, the goddess of the three sacred streams² ...”.

“As per the popular lore, a *Naga* bestows the boons of earthly happiness - abundance of crops and cattle, prosperity³, offspring, health, long life...”

The *Mandala* of the title suggests a circular area or a cyclic time. As such, *Naga-Mandala* denotes a world dominated by *Naga*. The reference to circular time and space evokes an image of concentric circle in motion that move outwards only to start all over again.

The story of *Naga-Mandala* draws its concept from the snake stories deeply rooted in our myths and folklores. The sinister hissing of snake, its slithering movements, glittering eyes and fatal poison, its sudden appearance and disappearance has always aroused the interest and fear of mankind in this mysterious species. Our Bollywood film producers also took interest and made some box-office hit movies on such subjects. They added fuel to the fire of belief and imagination of the people of the nation. Lord *Shiva* is seen with a Cobra around his neck. Our religious books have also added the element of curiosity to and eagerness of the people. The study of ancient life in India reveals that Nagas (Cobras) were sacred beings whom it was forbidden to touch and whose complex character made them equally feared and adored. Their aggressive tendencies were proverbial, and their vengeful spirit made them quite capable, supposedly of exterminating an entire population by exuding the fatal poison contained

either in their fangs, or by suffocating their victims in their coils. They were also capable of blinding people with their foul breath or killing them with the fire of their glance. Indeed their gaze was so powerful that it could easily reduce a whole town to ashes. Yet, despite this, they were equally capable of coming to the aid of humans and could, like the *Yakshas*, make women fertile. They also guarded treasures buried in the ground. The skin they sloughed was supposed to have the power of granting invisibility to the one who picked it up, and to ensure him long life, or even immortality, since the process of sloughing off symbolize the soul liberating itself from evil and cycle of rebirth. It is also a wide spread belief that the cobra can transform into a man, a bird or a wolf. However, the main transformation in *Naga-Mandala* is that of the cobra assuming the form of Rani's husband, Appanna to make love to her. The playwright traces the movement of Rani (or the Indian women, in general) from enslavement to empowerment. Into this metamorphosis are woven the themes of patriarchal tyranny, female and male sexuality, adultery and chastity. There are multiple levels of transformation in the play. There are transformations at the physical level - the flames assume female voices, the story transforms into a young woman and the snake into a man. Besides these, there is psychic and emotional transformation of different characters. Metamorphosis also leads to self-knowledge, revelation, and role shifting.

Pranav Joshipura writes:

“Girish Karnad, while using mythology, has put forward a question mark to some of the values of today. While we are busy satisfying ourselves, our desires, thirst, we forget or overlook certain values, which may lead us towards a stage from, where we feel satisfied with ourselves, with what we have, what we possess. Although we live in so called 'society' where we are closely "related" to one another, we are very 'alien' to each other. Our 'Brihadaranyaka' Upanishad' describes the formation of human beings as following: "In the beginning, this universe was nothing but the self in the form of a man ... He was as large as a man and woman embracing. This Self divided itself into parts; and with that, there were a master and a mistress." This symbolizes the split of a whole human being into a man and woman. The same symbolism can be found

in the creation of Adam and Eve by God as described in the 'Bible'.

We are born whole human beings, but gender-based divisions of labour break us into male and female fragments. Each fragment retains only half of the human potential. The retained part overgrows to compensate for the other part, which remains underdeveloped. These two polarized, deformed fragments are called men and women. Gender deformities are thus caused and gradually 'canonized' by socio-cultural programming of sex roles.

It is significant to note that the title of the play comes not from any human character, but from a snake - Naga. The story of the Cobra suggests that the play not merely dramatizes the folk tales in modern interpretation; it also implies a deeper meaning at various levels. In our Hindu mythology, the Naga represents several images. In South India many houses have their own shrine, which is, often a grove reserved for snakes, consisting of trees, festooned with creepers, situated in the corner of the garden. Snakes are also the symbols of human maleness and strength. Nagas are sometimes portrayed as handsome men, or as half-man and half-snake, the top half using the torso of a man, the lower half a coiled snake. Karnad in 'Naga-Mandala' has made use of the folk tales and the "mixing of human and non-human worlds" as a distancing device, which brings in the element of alienation in the play⁴...”

Naga-Mandala is the story of a young girl, Rani, newly married to Appanna, and their gradual understanding of the role, function and responsibilities of the institution of marriage. This story is presented in the play by a woman-narrator, a *flame* that has come to tell a story. The play begins with a Prologue in which one is taken to the inner sanctum of a ruined temple. The temple is very old and the idol in it is broken and therefore cannot be identified. It is night and a man is sitting in the temple, yawning involuntarily. He turns to the audience and confides:

“I may be dead within the next few hours. I asked the mendicant what I had done to deserve this fate. Moreover, he said, “You have written plays. You have staged them. You have caused so many good people, who came trusting you, to fall asleep twisted in miserable chairs that all that abused mass of sleep

has turned against you and become the Curse of Death". (NM 22-23)

"The man is sad because a mendicant has told him, You must keep awake at least one whole night this month. If you can do that, you'll live, If not, you'll die on the last night of the month". (NM 22)

"The man has been dozing off every night, and tonight is the last night of the month. His guilt is that he has written plays and thereby caused so many people to fall asleep twisted 111 miserable chairs". (NM 22-23)

"Hence, there is the Curse of Death (NM - 23) on him. "He swears that if he survives this night he will adjure all story-telling, all playacting". (NM 23)

Suddenly he is shocked to see naked lamp flames entering the temple, talking to each other in female voice. All the flames have come from different households in the village, who, after lights have been put out for the night, escape their houses, to collect gossip and have some entertainment. Each flame is a female, a storyteller, sharing with the others her observations and new experiences. Then a new flame enters and is enthusiastically greeted by the other flames. This new flame tells the others:

"My mistress, the old woman, knows a story and a song. But all these years she has kept them to herself...This afternoon ... The moment her mouth opened the story and the song jumped out". (NM 24-25)

The story took the form of a young woman and the song became a sari: this young woman wrapped herself in the sari and stepped out.

The identification of the flames with young, sprightly, and vocal women and stories that they tell each other is a brilliant device used by the playwright for creating a particularly female context and content in the mall-oriented folk tale.

References:

1. Karnad, Girish. *Three Plays: Naga-Mandala, Hayavadana, Tughlaq*. New Delhi: OUP, 1955.
2. Zimmer, Heinrich. *Myths and Symbols In Indian Art and Civilization*. Ed. Joseph Campbell. Delhi: Motilal Banarasisdas Publishers Private Limited, 1972. p. 59.
3. *ibid.* p. 59-60.
4. Joshipura, Pranav, 'Naga-Mandala Reconsidered', *The Plays of Girish Karnad: Critical Perspectives*, Ed. by Jaydip sinh Dodiya New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1999.