
Research Papers



From Margins to Centre: Rani's Journey in Girish Karnad's Naga-Mandala

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ABSTRACT

The present paper seeks to examine the dynamics and dimensions of Rani's journey from the marginalized position to the central one in her marital life. In the beginning, she as a naïve and submissive girl is found in a marginalized position. She is subjected to various forms of deprivation, humiliation subjugation and violence under the iron rule of patriarchy. But by and by she gathers courage and self-confidence and becomes Rani in real sense, occupying the central and consequential position in her marital life. Though the journey is fraught with trials and tribulations, pains and privations, humiliations and harassments, she succeeds in punctuating the male ego and his inflated sense of power over woman and exposing his duplicitous face. Rani occupies the central position in household affairs by subverting the value system of patriarchal order. In her new role, she gets the actual fulfilment in social terms of her name. Though she emerges as a completely changed woman with modern outlook, entirely in harmony with her desires and decisions and true to her wishes and instincts, she does not reject the male world.

Girish Karnad's deep-rooted humanistic zeal impels him to give voice to the silenced majority through his dramatic corpus. His dramatic world is filled with the deprived, the dispossessed and the down-trodden, subjected by patriarchy or upper class hierarchy. Deprived of decent and dignified life as human beings, they live like slaves or animals in the contemporary democratic and civilized world where the constitutional bodies like Human Rights Commission operate on various levels with a view to ensure justice to those who are meted out injustice. Karnad not only underscores their subservient and sub-human plight but also fuses in them energy enough to register a strong protest against the life-denying system and to shift their level analogous to that of their counterparts. In the dramatic world of Karnad, women, within and without wedlock, are subjected to various forms of deprivation, humiliation, persecution and aggression in every quarter human life in one way or the other. The playwright not only exposes the viciousness of the system where women are considered as "second sex," "other," "non-persona," but also questions the way women are conditioned through the process of socialization to internalize the reigning hegemonic ideology and degrade their own position to perpetuate the state of subordination and subjugation. Patriarchal hegemony deprives them of due chances to realize their innate powers and potentialities as human beings. Krishnamayi remarks: "Gender equality still remains a myth...the discussion of the relationship between man and woman have been prescribed by man not by woman. Man who is ruled by the mastery-motive has imposed her limits on her. She accepts it because of biosocial reasons."(Krishnamayi, 64-65)

In Naga-Mandala, the playwright foregrounds the recurring problems of women in the present-day Indian rural society. The play registers a strong protest against the patriarchal social order for its myriad forms of deprivation, violence and oppression of women in the contemporary Indian society. In

the play, Rani, a naïve and submissive girl, falls prey to the unjust social order through the institution of marriage which impedes all the channels that can provide her with opportunities to have self-discovery, self-growth and self-actualization. The patriarchal order uses marriage as potent tool to exploit and oppress women on various planes---physical, emotional, intellectual, sexual and social. Toril Moi keeps the view: "They have been victimized, intellectually, emotionally and physically by men." (Moi, 67) Rani's father arranges her marriage with a parentless young boy with plenty of wealth, but the choice of Rani is grossly overlooked thinking that she is incapable of taking decisions. Alike any other Indian father he looks at the marriage from a materialistic perspective, thereby overlooking all other aspects of healthy and meaningful marital life: "Her fond father found her a suitable husband. The young man was rich and his parents were both dead." (Naga-Mandala, 6) The word "suitable" is used ironically. Appanna, an adulterous, is the most unsuitable husband for the young bride like Rani who is completely ignored of the worldly ways. He is not a human being, rather he is "a wild beast or a reptile" (8). The way Appanna mal-treats his wife proves that he is a monster or an animal or a hunter in the guise of man.

In the tight noose of traditional marriage, Rani finds it rather hard to have healthy marital and social interaction and articulate her grievances and grudges, as Appanna keeps her "locked up like a caged bird" (10). Rani longs to have flight and freedom from the cruel clutches of Appanna. On the sexual plane, she is neglected; on the physical she is bullied and beaten; on the emotional she is crushed; on the intellectual she is hushed up, and on the social she is almost ex-communicated. As a result, she is left with no voice and choice as a dignified member of human society. In Indian society, it is supposed that a woman find sexual fulfillment and social dignity through the institution of marriage, Rani is starved on the sexual plane and demeaned on the social by Appanna. As a young girl, Rani has preferences and proclivities; desires and dreams, needs and necessities, but she has to suppress all of them in the face of stiff and strong hegemonic system.

Appanna's bestial instincts come to the fore the very first day of the marriage when he goes out to meet his mistress locking up Rani in the house with the words: "...I'll be back tomorrow at noon. Keep my lunch ready. I shall eat and go" (6). Neither he tells her why and where he goes to nor does she gather courage to question his nocturnal visits. The patriarchal order has counselled and conditioned her to be cordial and co-operative; shy and submissive, timid and tolerant in her marital life. As a result, she fails to gather courage and confidence to question the exploitative and oppressive system. In patriarchal order, women are not supposed to question man's indiscretions; rather they are subjected to harsh interrogation and severe chastisement if they try to deviate even slightly from the prescribed rules and roles. The lock signifies the entire patriarchal discourse of chastity which is used to contain and confine woman. Manchi Sarat Babu aptly remarks: "This solitary confinement of Rani by Appanna in the house symbolizes 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) Rani feels "frightened" (7) being "alone in the house" (10) haunted by the feelings of fear and insecurity, but Appanna, instead of providing her any emotional succor and support, threateningly interrogates her: "What is there to be scared of? Just keep to yourself. No one will bother you..." (7). Locked up in the empty and isolated house, Rani finds no one to share her pains and privations. 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). Rani is impatient to vent her anxiety and agony, but Appanna hushes her up with the harsh words: "Look, I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand?" (7). In the conventional marriage, husband enjoys all privileges to give orders, not to be dictated; whereas wife is compelled to go by his all and sundry wishes and whims, desires and dictates. Rani, alike other Indian wives, suffers from an acute sense of loss and lassitude within wedlock. Being helpless, she suppresses her urges---sexual, social and psychological. In Indian society, a woman is not supposed to claim freedom and individuality. In such a situation, repression of individuality is inevitable. M. Rajeshwar observes:

In tradition-bound societies like India the repression one has to put up with is usually very severe and resultant suffering often assumes pathetic proportions for sensitive individuals. Among Indians again the women happen to be the worst sufferers as the social norms and moral codes have been so framed as to be particularly disadvantageous to them. (Rajeshwar, 141)

Sigmund Freud holds the view that repression of the natural urges puts tremendous impact on the psyche of an individual. One has to repress his or her natural instincts, in the face of stiff opposition from the socio-cultural code and mores, to conform to the socially sanctioned roles, but the repressed

desires get fulfilment through dreams, hallucinations and myths.

The underlying assumption is that when some wish, fear, memory, or desire is difficult to face we may try to cope with it by repressing it, that is, eliminating it from the conscious mind. But this doesn't make it go away: it remains alive in the unconscious, like radioactive matter buried beneath the ocean, and constantly seeks a way back into the conscious mind, always succeeding eventually. (Barry, 100)

Rani, as a victim of severe repression and alienation, seeks refuge in the world of dreams, fantasies, hallucinations and myths. She fantasizes that she is being carried away by an eagle far from the world of Appanna. She asks the eagle: "Where are you taking me?" (7). The eagle answers "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). Then Rani asks him again: "Do they? Then please, please take me to them..." (7). While dreaming she falls asleep and moans: "Oh, Mother" (7). But the make-believe world does not last long; very soon she confronts the harsh realities of life, on waking up, to find her in the locked house of the monstrous Appanna. Rani's dreams demonstrate the inner working of her psyche; they are articulation of the innermost desires suppressed in her consciousness. The eagle symbolizes flight and freedom which represents Rani's yearning for release from the cruel clutches of Appanna. She yearns to fly away from the dark and dreadful world of Appanna, but to no avail.

Rani, being aggrieved and upset, dreams that she is in the comfortable company of her parents: "Then Rani's parents embrace her and cry. They kiss her and embrace her. Don't worry... 'Don't be worry, they promise her' 'We don't let you go away again ever'"(7). But the parents, in reality, do not come to her rescue, holding the view that she would be happy with her husband or it would be an act of encroachment on the territory of the husband. In her imagination she finds "the stag with golden antlers comes to the door....He explains, 'I am a prince'" (7). It is evident that she has cherished a desire that a prince would come and make her real Rani, but Appanna, in the form of monster, has taken her away and reduced her to the position of a maid to look after his physical needs. Then she alone in the house at night imagines: "...the demon locks her up in his castle" (14). The demon is none other than Appanna who locks her up in the house. Rani's only duty is to cook food for him. He doesn't want her to have any social contact, communication and interaction. He locks her up in the house and brings home a watchdog and a mongoose to ensure her complete alienation from the society.

At this critical juncture in Rani's life, Kurudavva, a blind and aged woman, comes to her rescue, but the help is confined to time and space. Kurudavva offers her magical roots as remedy to win back her husband from the clutches of mistress. But the magical potion turns into a disaster-like situation. As Appanna consumes it; he falls on the floor and becomes unconscious. On the insistence of Kurudavva, Rani tries the bigger root to woo her husband, but the curry turns red---blood red. Frightened Rani stealthily rushes out and pours it into the anthill, but the very gesture of Rani infuriates Appanna who "slaps her hard" and "she collapses to the floor" (17) and bears all this speechlessly and ungrudgingly. It is obvious that the laws of Manu allow the husband the right to subject his wife to corporal punishment.

Rani remains silent sufferer thinking that she is nothing without Appanna. This is why, she hesitates to give him the blood coloured curry even though it is believed to have power enough to win over Appanna's love and attention. She, alike the Indian wives, is concerned about the safety of her husband: "Suppose something happens to my husband? What will my fate be" Forgive me god. This is evil. I was about to commit a crime. Father, mother how could your daughter agree to such a heinous act"(17). No tradition-bound Indian woman likes to see her husband die before her death and wants to become a widow. Born and brought up in the man-made system, she is averse even to the idea of death of her husband while she remains alive because she knows that the life of a widow is not only vulnerable but painful also.

Ironically enough, the magical potion succeeds in wooing Naga living in the anthill. Now Naga visits her at night through the drain in bathroom and puts on the guise of Appanna. He praises her long tresses and talks a lot about her parents, besides listening to her intently. Naga gradually breaks her frigidity and hesitancy, and dispels feelings of fear and insecurity with the help of "honeyed words" (25). Rani tells Naga: "I don't feel afraid anymore, with you beside me" (24). Gradually, Rani falls in love with Naga and waits for him impatiently when the evening approaches, and when he does not come for fifteen days, she spends her nights "crying wailing, pining for him" (29). Naga coaxes her into sexual union, and resultantly she becomes pregnant, but this turn of events invites anger, insults and beatings from

Appanna. It is Naga who brings about radical changes in Rani. Now she becomes bold and assertive. When Naga expresses his helplessness to save her from the chastity test: "I'm sorry, but in can't be done" (34) Rani comes out with reactionary words:

I was 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 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? Even if I understood a little, a tiny bit---but I could bear it. But now---sometimes I feel my head is going to burst! (32)

When Rani reveals her pregnancy to Appanna, he beats her up accusing her of adultery with the indecent and indecorous words: "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 do with your sari off?"(33). But Rani, thinking that she has not committed any crime, swears to him about her innocence: "I swear to you I haven't done anything wrong" (33). But Appanna reports the matter to the village elders who pass orders that she must undergo chastity test either by putting red hot iron on her palm or putting hands into the hole of cobra. With great fear and trepidation Rani puts her hands into the hole, takes out cobra and vows: "Since coming to this village. I have held by this hand, only two....My husband....And this Cobra" (38). The Cobra instead of stinging her "sways its hood gently for a while, then becomes docile and moves over her shoulder like a garland" (39). At this the same villagers, who were determined to declare her a whore a minute ago, exclaim: "A Miracle! A Miracle! She is not a woman! She is a Divine Being!" (39). They come forward and prostrate before her in order get blessings. They elevate her to the status of a goddess: "Appanna your wife is not an ordinary human. She is goddess incarnate. Don't grieve that you judged wrongly and treated her badly. That is now goddesses reveal themselves to the world" (40). The metamorphosis of Rani and her emerging identity is a direct outcome of the emotional support and succor that she receives from Naga.

In the end, Appanna changes his behaviour and attitude towards Rani, may be under the pressure of the village community or because of the pricks of his conscience. He falls at her feet and says: "Forgive me. I am a sinner. I was blind..." (40). Now he realizes the beauty of her long tresses and dignity as a human being. When the dead Naga falls from her hair, Appanna says: "Your long hair saved us" (44) from the deadly Cobra. When Rani expresses her wish that the cobra has to be ritually cremated, the fire should be lit by their son and every year on this day, their son would perform the ritual to commemorate its death, (44) Appanna agrees: "Any wish of your will be carried out" (44). Now Rani plays an active role in the familial affairs, becoming a dominant partner fully confident of her role and status, and assertive of her thoughts and decisions. In the alternate end to the play, Rani's acceptance of Naga as her lover within wedlock presents her with much more bold and rebellious character. She invites Naga "Get in (to my hair). Are you safely in there? Good. Now stay there. And lie still. You don't know how heavy you are. Let me get used to you, will you?"(45).

Thus, Rani moves from the marginalized position to the central one in the arduous journey of her marital life. Though the journey is fraught with pains and privations, she occupies the central position in the familial affairs by collecting courage and confidence and by disconcerting the male ego and his inflated sense of power over women. Though Rani emerges a completely changed woman with modern outlook, entirely in harmony with her desires and decisions and true to her wishes and instincts, she does not reject the world of Appanna. The playwright succeeds in positioning Rani at the helm of affairs. Though the end is symbolic, it carries deeper implications. It presents the view that love, loyalty, trust and tolerance can provide happiness and harmony to the lop-sided or strained human relationships. The end also presents the vision of the playwright: vision of peaceful co-existence.

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