

GIRISH KARNAD'S NAGAMANDALA: THE DISCOURSE OF EMPOWERMENT

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Nagamandala, translated into English, is a play told in the form of a folk tale. Girish Karnad, the foremost national playwright, was deft in the art of retelling stories that were borrowed from myths and legends. The playwright invigorated his plays with a modern outlook. *Nagamandala* is one such creation. The play, in the form of a folk tale, tells the story of Rani. She is the newly-wedded wife of Appanna, who locks her inside the four walls of the house soon after their marriage. The play echoes the sufferings of Rani and her journey, henceforth, towards finding her way out of the trappings of the social system that does not allow a woman to breathe freely. The character of the Naga or the King Cobra lends other worldly atmosphere to the play. The character of Naga helps to throw more light on the ill-doings of Appanna. I intend to analyse the situation of Rani in the above said play so as to set a reminder on the question of empowerment as a distant dream for women. The paper will be a textual analysis of *Nagamandala* in the light of Michel Foucault's precept of discourse as enunciated in the 'Order of Discourse' and *The Archaeology of Knowledge: The Discourse on Language*. Discourse or the utterances, in general, affect the relations of power in a social set up. The paper will endeavour to establish the discursive practices looming havoc on the life of a woman caught in the trappings of day to day life. The paper intends to establish the link with the theme of the conference as human dignity being an essential part of human rights and the contribution of the same to lend support to the process of empowerment in the real sense of the word.

Keywords: Discourse, Discursive Practices, Marginalised, Power, Knowledge, Social Reality.

Girish Karnad, a recipient of Jnanpith award, Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan, lent a unique voice to the genre of drama. He was a social activist who not only voiced his sentiments through his plays but in fact, brought a sea change in the representation of art as playing a significant role in creating the social consciousness. As a playwright, poet, actor and director, Karnad earned international fame. His plays are a curious mixture of the traditional and the modern elements. His plays can very well be discerned by an average reader or an audience. Karnad's plays have won acclaims both at the national and the international level. His plays are a culture in miniature. The playwright drew heavily from myths, legends, history and folk tales. The past was used as a mould by him to be filled in with the quintessence of the immediate. The magical and the mundane coalesce in his plays. It was his concern with this 'immediate' that is the present, that made him adopt a plausible style that catered to the realistic treatment of the stories taken from history, myth or folktales. The realistic treatment meted out to the plays makes them pulsate with life. His plays, firmly embedded in the Indian soil, *Yayati* (1961), *Tuglaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1971), *Nagamandala* (1971), *Anjumalige* (1977), *Hittina Hunja* (1980), *The Fire and The Rain* (1994), *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (1997), *Broken Images* (2004) and *Flowers: A Monologue* (2004) *The Wedding Album* (2009) and *Boiled Bean on a Toast* (2014), are a measure of the extensiveness of his genius.

This paper attempts to analyse Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* while keeping in view the theme of conference as human dignity being an essential part of the human rights and its need towards the empowerment of women not just in words but in deeds. Karnad's plays assimilate the anxiety between 'the cultural past and the colonial past' (Karnad1), between the western mode of thought and our own traditions and finally between the diverse visions of the future that opened up once the freedom was achieved via a common political cause. This is the foundation upon which his plays took birth. Karnad's vision of the Indian theatre can be described in the author's own words as, "The energy of the folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values, of making them literally stand on their head." (Karnad14) Karnad's concern for the social change can well be ascertained from the way he voiced the important issues that pertained to the immediate needs of society. As concerning his plays, he imbibed the realistic concerns of the Brechtian theatre in order to achieve the effect of 'complex seeing', which is an expert detachment on the part of the audience. All his plays that are centred on women voice a deep concern for them from the perspective of the marginalised.

The play, *Nagamandala*, is based on the oral tales heard by the playwright from A.K.Ramanujan. These tales were told orally by the elder women in the house to the children. These tales were on one hand meant to entertain the children and on the other, pointed out a disclosure of the information that was being shared amongst these women. The stories discussed by these women and the consequent discussion arising out of the

same can be the effect of the lived experiences of these women within the patriarchal set up of the institutions like marriage, family and society that surrounded their being.

Rani is the newly-wedded wife of Appanna. As soon as he brings her home, he locks her inside the house. Rani is locked everyday and is left alone by herself. She is scared all alone especially at night. Appanna visits his concubine and is least interested in Rani. Kurrudevva, who possesses a magical root given to her by a mendicant, gives the same root to Rani to be put in the food of Appanna. This root, being too small, does not have the desired results. Kurrudevva gives a bigger root next time, which Rani, puts in the curry cooked for Appanna but does not serve him out of fear. She puts the curry into an anthill and after consuming which the Cobra falls in love with Rani. The Cobra takes the shape of her husband, Appanna and starts paying nocturnal visits to Rani. Rani conceives a child to which her husband, Appanna, reacts violently as he is sure never to have touched his wedded wife. Rani's conduct is questioned and she is brought before the village elders. She is made to prove her chastity because Rani denies having touched anyone except her husband. It is beyond the comprehension of Rani to ascertain as to the actual identity of Appanna at night which seems so contrary to the Appanna of the day time.

Nagamandala, raises the important issue of human dignity as denied to the women in a patriarchal society. The dignity of a woman is affected due to the inequalities prevalent in our social set up as a result of the workings of the institutions that favour the proliferation of the patriarchy. The discourse on empowerment becomes an essential aspect of discussion in this direction. The paper intends to study empowerment as a discourse under the precepts enumerated by Michel Foucault in 'Order of Discourse' and *The Archaeology of Knowledge: And The Discourse on Language*. The paper brings to the forefront the denial of human dignity to women engendered upon them by way of gender inequality.

Discourse as held by Michel Foucault is the "... the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements." (AK80) An individual is constituted and understood through discourse. It lies in the way our surroundings are created for us in which we inhabit our lived world. So, in this sense, discourse comprises of not merely a language but much more than that. An individual comes to perceive his or her entire being through discourse. Foucault has used the words 'individualizable group of words' which indicates assemble of groups. The present paper aims to explore the question of empowerment with respect to the emancipation of women. As understood from the study of discourse in 'Order of Discourse' and *The Archaeology of Knowledge: And The Discourse of Knowledge*, discourse finds its intricate association with knowledge and power. Knowledge in an organised form is found to be instrumental in understanding the workings of social relations in a social set-up. Discourse also comes to be associated with the social relations that are in one way or another political in nature. The political investment in the social relations leads to an unequal distribution of power that brings about subjection of the one who is marginalised. Power, thus, is both the source and effect of discourse. Power acquires its force through discourse. Foucault held power as the basis for the discursive practices and discourse is the terrain through which both find ample representation. Power and discourse are inter-related and are inter-dependent. Foucault opined that, "It is in discourse that power and knowledge join together." (HS 100)

The inequalities prevalent in a social system surface through discourse. Foucault designated discourse "as a set of regulated practices" (AK180). It refers to the rules meant to be abided by those considered marginalised or bereft of power. The enumeration of these rules, form a considerable part of his discussion in the 'Order of Discourse'. Foucault contends, "... in any society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events..." (Young 52) It is the impact of discourse as social practices which regulate and circumscribe the life of a woman within the set norms. As for instance, even the language in a patriarchal set-up is meant to be used by the male and not the female.

Foucauldian concept of discourse reflects the notion of exclusion finding an ample expression in his entire oeuvre. The discrimination resulting in exclusion through the medium of language interested Foucault. It is through and by this exclusion, that an individual is not only constituted but also marked as an object to be transformed. Foucault ascribed certain external procedures as seen to play a significant role in the proliferation of such discourses and according to him, taboo, the difference between the true and the false and the distinction between the mad and the insane, formed the broad classifications. Taboo refers to what is allowed and what is prohibited according to the prevailing norms of society. Truth and falsity is again determined by those in authority. The difference between the mad and the insane referred in this paper will be what is normal as against abnormal, the words being coined by Foucault. The internal procedure of rarefaction is also mentioned which meant, the right to speak by those who were authorised to speak. The relations of power form the basis of all these categorisations. It is owing to these categorisations that gender inequalities in the social relations are prevalent.

Nagamandala is one such play that depicts the denial of basic human rights to a woman dominated by male patriarchal norms. Foucault also talks about the dominant discourses. It is the right to speak or utter words that lie as the sole possession with men in a patriarchal set-up. Women are a marginalised lot in this social set-up. Rani from now on has to live a life that binds her to the taboos imposed upon her by the society and implemented on her through the authority of her husband, Appanna.

APPANNA: Have we brought in all the bundles? (27)

RANI: Yes.

APPANNA: Well then, I'll be back tomorrow noon. Keep my lunch ready.

I shall eat and go. (27)

Rani is not also given the chance to see her new house soon after Appanna brings her to his house. The words uttered by Appanna also mark the beginning of an imprisonment inside the house for Rani for no fault of hers. She attempts to convey her discontent and fear at being left alone in the house all by herself. Appanna silences her. Silence on the part of the female is considered to be a virtue in her.

RANI: ... I feel- frightened- alone at night. (28)

APPANNA: What is there to be scared of? Just keep to yourself. No one will

Bother you. Rice! (27)

APPANNA: ... I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand?

I'll be back tomorrow for lunch. (28)

Appanna shows no signs of affection or concern for the young bride. All he is bothered here is his food, finishing whence he intends to have nothing to do with her. The speech uttered as such by women is coined as insignificant by the male dominated society. The exclusion of Rani from the life of Appanna is very well suggested and taken care of by Appanna himself. The beginning of the play has suggestions regarding the marriages of conveniences giving an isolated existence to women.

KURRUDEVA: Appanna in his concubine's courtyard. He has got himself a bride- and is still goes after that harlot?(29)

KURRUDEVA: You don't think he could have sent his wife back to her parents already do you?(29)

KAPPANNA: Mother, what does it mean when a man locks his wife in? (30)

KURRUDEVA: You tell me.

KAPPANNA: It means he does not want anyone to talk to his wife.

KURRUDEVA: ... He keeps his wife locked up like a caged bird? I must talk to her. (30)

Kurrudeva voices the sentiments of a fellow woman who is able to gauge young Rani's predicament at the hands of her husband. Even Kurrudeva's young son, Kappanna, answers her mother's question correctly by understanding that Rani is not allowed to talk to anyone and her situation is like that of a prisoner in marriage. Kurrudeva represents an elder woman who is aware of the atrocities which young brides undergo after marriage. Kurrudeva has to stand in hiding near the window unseen by Appanna in order to have a word with Rani and Appanna does find this out and ties a dog outside his house to bar anyone from coming near the house. Rani is thus, kept as a captive in her husband's house.

RANI: They call me Rani. (31)

The above words are highly significant because Rani's understanding of herself is limited by what others think of her and say about her and this is how she introduces herself to Kurrudevva through the window of the locked house.

NAGA: What beautiful long hair... (41)

RANI: I must have been dreaming again. (41)

When the Cobra king falls in love with Rani as a result of consuming the curry mixed with the magical root given to her by Kurrudevva, the Cobra King or Naga visits her at night by slipping through the bathroom, Rani is more than astonished to see Appanna by her bed side as the Naga took the shape of her husband, Appanna. The Naga talks affectionately to Rani and when he describes her beauty Rani is confused because she is not used to be treated with love and affection by her husband. These visits land Rani in trouble. She conceives a child and her husband takes her to the village elders. Rani has not consciously committed any sin. She is least aware of the identity of the real Appanna. The transgression in her case is unintentional. In *Contemporary Indian Drama: astride two traditions*, a book edited by Urmil Talwar and Bandana Chakrabarty, desire in the female protagonist is discussed. The character of Rani in the play *Nagamandala*, is observed to gain an upper

hand during the trial. The trial, to quote from the book, is labelled as a “classic case of equivocation” (154).It is here that the Karnadian voice becomes resonant in his expression for a concern for the condition of women in our social set- up. Rani has no mal- intentions and her sufferings are not due to any intentional moral laxity on her part. It coincides to any such situation where another male member may take a disadvantage of any female member in a family and the poor woman will not be listened to as her words will fail to have the impact of truth as understood in patriarchy.

RANI: I am pregnant. (50)

APPANNA: Open the door! Open the door, you whore! ...I'll go to the
Village Elders. If they don't throw that child into boiling oil and
you along with it... (53)

ELDER1: It brings no credit to the village to have a husband publicly
question his wife's chastity ... (55)

Rani is taken before the village elders where her chastity is put to question. Appanna is not questioned for his faults by these same elders. What seems true for the men turns out to be falsity in case of a woman. The book edited by Dr. C.I. Khatri and Dr. Sudhir k.Arora *Thunder on Stage: A Study of Girish Karnad's Plays*, incase of *Nagamandala*, assigns the celebration of women's sexuality from a woman's point of view.(158- 64)I do not quite agree to this view because patriarchal norms have moulded a woman's mind to such an extent that she lacks the courage to celebrate her sexuality and any woman attempting to do so is labelled as an outcaste. As seen from Appanna's keep, Madhavi, a woman's sexuality raises the question of her exploitation in the society rather than celebration. Rani, with her pregnant body, is dragged through the entire village and put before the village elders and for the public humiliation. Rani is asked by the village elders to touch the red hot iron in order to prove her chastity. She, after a lot of hesitation and fear, agrees to put her hand in the ant hill and touch the Cobra to which the Naga in the disguise of Appanna had directed her. The elders agree to this. Rani touches the Cobra and declares that she has never touched any other man except her husband and this Cobra. The Cobra coils round her and the crowd stands in wonder. Rani is declared as a goddess and Appanna is asked to take her home. It is a bane of our society that a woman is either derided to the level of a 'Devil' or idealised as a 'Devi'. The concept of chastity of the woman is a brainchild of a male chauvinistic society where patriarchy rules the roost. Men and women are treated differently by the society. A woman is said to be virtuous only if she is chaste and is a “conformist” (reference to the psychological concept of conformist) as per the social norms. We are not unaware of the atrocities committed on women irrespective of the section of society to which they belong. M.Sarat Babu in his book *Indian Drama Today: A Study in the Theme of Cultural Deformity* talks about gender deformities within our society. According to him, inequality does not just confine to the differentiation of male or female but it invades the body, mind and soul. Gender deformity, he says, makes an individual incomplete and easily accessible to oppression. Sarat Babu is of the opinion that chastity in the form of a taboo is placed above everything else in the life of a woman. (28- 43)

The framers of Indian Constitutions however, dreamt of a world where women would get a deal of equality everywhere in the society. This is evident from the reading of Articles 14, 16, 21 and Article 39. Article 14 provides that “The state shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India. Article 16 Sub Clause 2 provides “No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth, residence or any employment or office of the state. Similarly Article 21 relates to the freedom of his life or personal liberty, except according to the procedure established by law. Article 39 provides the citizens, men and women, equally have the right to an adequate means of livelihood. Karnad's plays seeped with reality shows the non implementation of these laws and the conditions meted out to the female protagonist depict the ground reality of the discourses of patriarchy in their full impact.

The basic right of being called and treated like a normal human being and an individual in her own right is denied to her. Article 1of the UN Charter stipulates that one of the purposes of the United Nations is to promote respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms “without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion”. In 1993 the world conference on Human Rights were raised with women rallying cry “Women's rights are Human Rights”.

Despite the laws evolving with time in favour of women, the ground situation however, has not changed much, especially in the third world countries where women are subjected to various physical and mental indignations by men. A woman has every right to be treated as a human being. Many laws have been legislated in India to prevent domestic violence against women, for instance, The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005. This Act seeks to redress many abuses that women are subjected to in Indian society, for example “Physical Abuse”, “Sexual Abuse”, “Verbal Abuse” or “Economic Abuse”. Although it is debatable as to how much successfully has the Legislation redressed the grievances of women but it was a step in the right direction. The punishment for the offence of “bigamy” that is, remarrying despite the subsistence of lawful first marriage is also there in the Indian Penal Code under section 494 IPC. However, there is interestingly nothing to punish a

consensual relationship outside the marriage even under the law. Men like Appanna follow their whims and are unstoppable.

Appanna wrongfully confined Rani in the house. The law does not provide any confinement of a human being. Appanna goes out and establishes relationship with a woman other than his spouse and at the same time denying that lawful right to Rani. As pointed out in the book *Girish Karnad's Plays: Performance and Critical Perspectives*, edited by Tutun Mukherjee, *Nagamandala* is seen as a morality play that imposes obedience to the rituals in a cultural tradition on women and which she is required to abide by while remaining within the confines of her domesticity. (208- 15) I am of the opinion that Rani's body is the site for her identity creation as well as identity communication. The patriarchal norms regulate a woman's body wherein the female body acts as desired by her male counterpart. This count for "cruelty" within the meaning of Section 13 of the Hindu Marriage Act .The fundamental rights of any person are granted under Article 14 and 21.The protection of women from Domestic Violence Act 2005, and then the matrimonial laws which deal with situations arising out of the circumstances are enumerated in the story. Girish Karnad gave an ambiguous ending to this play leaving to the audience or the reader to derive their observations. The ambiguous ending may again be interpreted to stifle the mind of the readers towards a concerted action on their part. In conclusion I must quote Judith Butler's words written in the preface to her book *Gender Trouble*, "... a feminist view argues that gender should be overthrown, eliminated or rendered fatally ambiguous precisely because it is always a sign of subordination for a woman."(Butler xiv)

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