



NAGAMANDALA-COUNTER POLITICS

Prof. Madhav Radhakisan Yeshwant

Head,

Department of English,

Shri. Raosaheb Ramrao Patil Mahavidyalaya, Savlaj,

Tal: Tasgaon, Dist: Sangli

ABSTRACT:

Girish Karnad tackles existentialist crisis through characters locked in psychological and philosophical conflicts. Nagamandala is based on his English translation of the Kannada original. This is a story of Rani, an innocent girl who counters the politics of gender discrimination in her married life. Kurudavva an elderly woman persuades her from committing suicide. She advises Rani not to be the victim of the politics of male dominated society but encourages her to counter it with certain tricks based on her own experiences. Rani is pregnant for Naga's child who meets her in disguise of Appanna. Appanna challenges the adulterous pregnancy by ordeal. Rani completes the snake ordeal with success for which she is in debt to the snake. She allows the cobra to sit in her hair. Rani's predicament reflects her rebellion against gender discrimination. In short, Nagmandal reflects Rani's counter politics towards the male dominated society.

NAGAMANDALA-COUNTER POLITICS:

Girish Karnad¹ was the fourth child of his mother ranking third in the four children of her widow remarriage with Dr. Raghunath Karnad, a doctor in the Bombay Medical Services. Girish's mother Krishnabai Mankikar was a nurse and cook for the bedridden wife of Dr. Raghunath Karnad, a Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmin. Being the child of such nuptial knot, he experienced the then prevailing social prejudice against widow remarriage and the children born out of such wedlock. Thus, Girish Karnad initially learnt Marathi but when his father was transferred to Sirsi the Kannada-speaking regions of Bombay Presidency where Kannada remained his language of choice. His exposure to

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Girish_Karnad

travelling *natak mandalis* (theatre troupes) lured him towards Yakshagana and the theater in his village. After his B.A. from Karnataka University, he was M.A. in Philosophy, Politics and Economics from Magdalen in Oxford. He worked with the Oxford University Press, Chennai besides his involvement in 'The Madras Players'². During the four decades Karnad used history³ and mythology⁴ to tackle contemporary themes and existentialist crisis of modern man through characters locked in psychological and philosophical conflicts. In short, Padma Shri⁵ and Padma Bhushan Girish Karnad was an Indian actor, film director, Kannada writer, playwright⁶ and a recipient of the 1998 Jnanapith Award.

During Girish Karnad's tenure at the University of Chicago as visiting professor and Fulbright playwright-in-residence⁷ *Nagamandala*⁸ had its world premiere celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. *Nagamandala* is based on his English translation of the Kannada original. This is a story of Rani, an innocent girl who counters the politics of gender discrimination in her married life. Rani's predicament reflects her rebellion against gender discrimination.

WOMAN SUBJUGATION:

Even the prologue of the drama describes contemporary society's approach towards women. The prologue starts with a man yawning at the inner sanctum of a ruined remote temple. He was cursed by a mendicant not to sleep during all the nights of the month, if he sleeps he will die. And now this is the last night of the month. He hides behind a pillar to see the flames from different households exploring the agonies, misery and uneven the death of their female mistresses in their respective abodes. However, the last flame tells that how an old experienced woman quarrels with his old husband late in the night as she suspects her old husband's affair with a beautiful girl who runs out in front of her from their bedroom. Metaphorically, the young girl was an untold story that

² local amateur theatre group

³ *Tughlaq* (1964) allegory on the Nehruvian era started with ambitious idealism and ended up in disillusionment.

⁴ *Hayavadana* (1971) originally found in the 11th century Sanskrit text *Kathasaritsagara*

⁵ 1974

⁶ Karnad wrote nine plays in total

⁷ between 1987 and 88

⁸ It was based on a Kanada folktale, brought him the Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award for the Most Creative Work of 1989.

the old woman knew. It had come out of her mouth and had changed into girl in the attic of the bedroom. At this moment, the girl i.e. the story enters the sanctum. All of a sudden, the man grasps the story. He promises to leave her after listening it attentively to keep himself awake during the whole night.

The drama starts with Rani literally meant queen, a single beautiful daughter of her parents with thick and long hair that the tresses meet to her silver anklets. She is married to a rich young Appanna whose parents were died long ago. From the very beginning of their marital life Appanna comes to home every day in the afternoon only for lunch and rarely speaks with Rani. Every night he locks Rani inside the house while going out to sleep with his concubine. The lonely Rani dreams and aspires during every night to meet her parents to share her grief. Kurudavva, a blind old woman was the best friend of Appanna's mother, subsequently has motherly affection for him. Being carried away by her son Kappanna, Kurudavva comes to meet Rani, the newly wedded wife of Appanna. When she comes to know Rani's ruined marital life, Kurudavva persuades her from committing suicide. She realizes Rani's victimization in her male dominated household. Kurudavva advises her not to be the victim of the politics of male dominated society but encourages her to counter it with certain tricks based on her own experiences. Kurudavva describes her own experience that how she, being a blind girl was her parents' challenge of her marriage. They were unable to bring a suitor for her. She was double victim of male dominated society- being a girl, and blind. As a *Deus ex machina*⁹, she happened to serve a mendicant with every care. Satisfied with her services, the mendicant gave her three root pieces with which she could overcome the difficulties of her marriage. He told her that she had to feed the root piece to the man that she would desire to be her husband because whosoever would eat the root piece would marry her. Accordingly, she liked a young distant relative to be her husband, who happened to visit their house. Kurudavva served the root piece to that young man who afterwards married her and begot a child i.e. Kappanna. Still she has persevered those root pieces.

COUNTERING THE OPPRESSION:

Kurudavva apprehends Rani a beautiful woman is treated as a precious object by her husband. Thus, she has been a victim of masculine society wherein

⁹ a person or thing that appears or is introduced into a situation suddenly and unexpectedly and provides an artificial or contrived solution to an apparently insoluble difficulty.

she is kept inside the house by her husband Appanna like a master locks his precious objects. Her human identity, need, aspirations, emotions etc. are all rejected by him. To counter the politics of male dominated society Kurudavva asks Rani to follow her own ways. She offers Rani a little root piece to feed it to Appanna. Kurudavva says that as a result Appanna will stop to oppress Rani in any way. On the contrary he will love Rani once he will eat the root piece. To counter the masculine society's politics for her, Rani serves the root to Appanna by mixing it in a glass of milk. It doesn't work properly. Still Appanna locks up Rani inside the house and goes to his concubine. Rani compares herself with a beautiful girl locked up inside a castle by a demon who is rescued by a big whale from sea. She expects another masculine entity to overcome her captivity by her husband.

In her second meeting with Rani Kurudavva offers her strong dose of the root. This time Appanna is accompanied by a dog that stands for loyal agent of the masculine society who will execute every plan of the male dominated society. This time Rani pours the root pest in curry which turns red as blood. Rani fears that the root might have changed the curry into poison that may end the life of her protector i.e. her husband Appanna. She does not want to end his life as he has not made any effort to kill her. She merely wants to compensate her captivity by enslaving him for her beauty as blind Kurudavva had enslaved her husband in her prime days. Subsequently, she does not dare to make him eat the red curry which she presumed to be changed into poison. She pours it into an ant hill. As she crosses the threshold of her house in the absence of Appanna, his loyal servant i.e. the dog in the yard howls at her. This is the first time when she fails to counter the politics of male dominated society. By chance the curry is drunk by a king cobra, who again represents an agent of male dominated society. The curry effects the cobra and he is enslaved by Rani unknowingly. Immediately, the cobra comes out of the ant-hill and follows her at a distance when Rani is already on the door steps. Appanna is annoyed when he sees Rani in the yard. He enquires her harshly why and where she has gone out of the house. He physically assaults Rani for the same. Once again Appanna locks up her in the house and goes to his concubine. The king cobra watches all this drama from behind a tree, hissing, being excited and restless to help her under the effect of the root.

DOUBLE VICTIMIZATION:

At the same night the king cobra enters the house through bathroom drain which is objected by the dog by barking at it. The barking disturbs Rani. However, the king cobra disguises himself into a man, particularly Appanna into the bathroom. He is addressed as Naga. Though Rani is not successful to enslave her husband still she has enslaved another masculine entity to counter the male dominated politics.

Rani takes Naga granted as Appanna, her husband. Initially she is surprised to his presence in the house during the night. However, she is more surprised to hear Naga (Appanna) her beautiful long hair as they are dark and black as like as snake-princess. Moreover, he repents on Appanna's beating Rani in the morning and locking her inside the house. He wonders whether she misses her parents. At dawn Naga (Appanna) goes into bathroom, turns as a snake and slides away in the ant-hill.

Rani feels Appanna's rude behavior when he comes house in the afternoon that is totally different from her experience of the night. She feels that she has seen a dream at night. At the evening when Appanna locks her as usual, the snake comes out of the ant-hill during night. He kills the dog and enters into the bathroom through the drain whole. Once again he disguises as Appanna and washes blood stains on his face. Now Naga (Appanna) enters in Rani's bedroom. She is stunned to see the change in Appanna because she compares Appanna in the afternoon with Appanna in the night. She asks him about this sudden change in the afternoon and at night. However, Naga (Appanna) diverts her saying that husband will behave with his own whims during the day while wife will dominate him during the night. He asks her not to ask questions anymore. She applies ointment on his injuries that is given by her mother. As she opens the mirror box, she looks at Appanna's (Naga's) image in the mirror as a snake. Naga (Appanna) craftily closes the mirror box and pulls her away in his arms. Rani dares not to refer his snake image reflected in the mirror. She suggests Naga (Appanna) not to utter a word 'snake' because uttering 'snake' is an invitation to a snake. She notices Naga's (Appanna) cold blood. She stares into his eyes while remembering her father's preaching that a cobra spells its prey bird by changing eye colours. It makes the bird to stand still while the cobra can easily swallow it. Afterwards Naga (Appanna) desires physical intimacy with Rani, but she denies for the same because she thinks such intimacy is illegitimate and can bring her parents wrath. However, Naga (Appanna) explains evidences of physical intimacy through various examples in nature.

After their physical intercourse, Naga (Appanna) tells Rani that he will come twice in a day. She has not to peep out either of window or of the room when he is going away. She mutely consents for the same. Naga (Appanna) goes to bathroom. At the same time Kappanna carries Kurudavva near Appanna's locked house. They hear manly footsteps inside the house. Immediately, Kappanna goes backyard to peep through the window. But he sees a cobra coming out from the bathroom drain and he screams. Now Kurudavva informs Rani that a snake has emerged out of the bathroom drain. Rani rushes towards bathroom as she knows that Naga (Appanna) has gone there. She does not find him in the bathroom. Besides, Kurudavva tells her that no one can come through the door as it is locked from outside. However, Kurudavva is happy to know Rani's happy married life.

Appanna comes to his house in the mid-day. He sees that the dog that he has bought for fifty rupees is dead. He observes that it has been bitten by the cobra from ant-hill. He asks Rani if she knows anything about the dead dog at night. She nods her head to say 'no'. There is no wound marks on his face that she has applied ointment on. Next time Appanna brings a mongoose but it is also killed. Its face is smashed with blood. There are bits of flesh in its claws and bits of snake teeth on its skin. From that night Naga (Appanna) does not come to Rani for next fifteen days. After fifteen days, when he comes to the bedroom, Rani notices many injuries on his body. She applies ointment to injuries. She never questions about marks of injuries at night to Naga (Appanna) and absence of marks injuries at day to Appanna.

Rani is happy with Naga's (Appanna) presence. She tells him that she is pregnant. She is happier because she gets proof of his nightly visits. Those visits are not her fantasy. But she surprises to see that Naga (Appanna) is not excited with this good news. On the contrary, Naga (Appanna) asks her to hide the news from him in day time as long as possible. Rani says that she cannot keep it as secrete because it is her fifth month of pregnancy. After fifteen days or three weeks it will be an open secret. Now she is anxious and does not understand why Appanna is always asking her not to ask questions, and ask to do as he tells her. She is frustrated towards change in Appanna from day to night which is similar to chameleon. She wants to abort the fetus which is highly impossible now. Thus, she has been again counter attacked by the male dominated society. If she is pregnant, then it should be approved by her husband not only at night but also at the day, not only in loneliness but openly in the public.

HONESTY AGAINST OPPRESSION:

In the afternoon Appanna notices Rani's pregnancy and he accuses her for adultery. It is one of the measures of male dominated society to be applied to the women and not to the man. Appanna every night sleeps with his concubine that adultery neither Rani nor the society can question. On the contrary, Rani's loyalty to Appanna is quickly questioned by Appanna himself. If Naga would not have disguised himself as Appanna, would Rani surrendered to him? Besides, Appanna keeps aside the fact that he used to lock her inside the house every day. Rather ensuring his act, he drags Rani into the street, asking to abort the fetus. He is about to crush her with a heavy stone. Suddenly, the cobra draws his attention with loud hissing. Rani screams with fear of death either with stone or by cobra biting. Appanna throws the stone at the cobra. Rani goes inside the house and locks it from inside. Appanna bangs on the door. Appanna decides to seek justice from the village Elders for his wife's adultery. These village Elders are the elderly men in the village who are seasoned in dominating the females in their long experienced life with various tactics.

ORDEAL AND TRUTH:

On that same night, Naga (Appanna) enters Rani's bedroom. He tells her that how she will have to prove her chastity to the village elders. Rani asks Naga (Appanna) to withdraw the complaint. He says that he is unable to do that. On the contrary, he asks Rani to undergo snake ordeal in which she will have to swear her chastity by holding cobra in her hand. Rani is not ready for it. Naga (Appanna) cautions her to speak the truth while swearing to save herself from cobra bite. Naga (Appanna) assures her that after the trial 'her husband' will be her slave. Naga (Appanna) disappears when she searches him inside the front door and in the bathroom.

All the villagers gather in a village square where three Elderly men seat near the ant-hill. Appanna has registered a complaint to the village Elders. He accuses that Rani's pregnancy is nothing but marital disloyalty. Rani has to undergo certain ordeal to prove her chastity. The Third Elder Man describes traditional ordeals –to swear either by holding hot red iron or putting hand in boiling oil. The Second Elder Man describes their helplessness for such ordeals. When Rani requests that to swear by holding a cobra in her hand, the First Elder Man sympathetically permits her for the same. Such innovative ordeal has attracted large crowd. The Third Elder Man is ready to offer another ordeal for the sake of fetus in her womb. She can change her ordeal if she fears cobra bite.

The First Elder Man suggests her to undergo hot red iron ordeal since it will be less painful. However, Rani decides to undergo sneak ordeal. When she approaches the ant-hill to draw out the cobra, the cobra itself comes out swaying its hood. She gets afraid of it and runs to Appanna. She requests him to save her from such trial. Appanna abuses her and confirms his accusation. The Third Elder Man soothes Rani. The First Elder Man tells her that if she is afraid of the ordeal, they can assume her as guilty. They can punish her for her guilt and thus there will be no need to for any such trial. But Rani denies all these things. She once again proclaims her chastity. Now the Second Elder Man angrily asks her either to confess the guilt or undergo the ordeal. The Third Elder Man suggests her for the options of ordeal. Now Rani shifts to the hot red iron ordeal.

All the Three Elder Men are relaxed with this choice as there is little risk of life. Immediately, they want to finish the matter. When Rani is summoned to hold the hot red iron bar in her hand, she goes to the ant-hill, fetching the cobra out it. The Third Elder Man asks her to swear immediately and complete the ordeal. Rani swears that she has hold only two male-her husband and the cobra and neither touched nor allowed to touch other male. If she lie; let the cobra bite her. The cobra does not bite her, but slides upon her shoulder and spreads its hood over her head like an umbrella. The cobra sways its hood gently for a while and then becomes docile and moves over her shoulder like a garland. The cobra slips back into the ant-hill. The Elder Men immediately discharge her from the accusation. They tell Appanna that Rani is an extraordinary woman, an incarnated goddess. Appanna is chosen as her husband due to his merits of ten past lives. Now it is his holy duty to protect and respect her honour. Appanna surrenders to her. All of them fall at her feet. They sit the couple in palanquin to take them to the house in procession accompanied with music. Appanna's concubine volunteers for the menial work at Rani's house.

COUNTERING THE POLITICS:

Rani notices Appanna is no longer romantic like Naga (Appanna) during night time. Her experience with Appanna is different than with Naga (Appanna). One day the cobra comes to Rani's bedroom. He feels sorry to see Rani in Appanna's arms. He decides to bite her but resists himself. He understands his limitation that he is not a human being. He is attracted towards her long hair as like as a snake-princess. Rani and Appanna are sleeping with their child next to them. She wakes up, moaning pain to her hair. She feels that someone is pulling her hair out. Rani requests Appanna to comb the hair. When Appanna combs her

hair, a tiny cobra falls down out of her hair. Appanna thinks that Rani's thick hairs have saved her from the cobra bite. Appanna searches for a stick to kill the snake. When Appanna goes out to find a stick, Rani invites the cobra to climb into her hair. She allows the cobra to sit in her hair. When Appanna comes with a stick, she tells him that it has gone towards bathroom. Appanna rushes towards the bathroom, looking for the cobra. Rani pats her hair and asks the cobra to live there happily, forever. She feeds the baby. Afterwards Rani lives happily ever after with her husband and child.

CONCLUSION:

Rani encounters the injustice done towards her by the male dominated society. She resists the male oppression with every possible means that she has. Moreover she appreciates the male agent that is the snake who protects her dignity in the male dominated society. As the snake has shown his affection towards her in the ordeal, similarly, she does not fear the snake at the end. Rather she protects him from Appanna and hides him in her hair. Thus, she represents a common young girl who undergoes harassment by her husband. She shows what a newly married girl requires i.e. freedom. She is innocent to believe in Kurudavva, and Naga. However, after a dangerous trial she commands the situation and controls her pathetic situation. In short, Nagmandal reflects Rani's counter politics towards the male dominated society.

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