

**MYTHS AND SUPERSTITIONS IN GIRISH KARNAD'S NAGAMANDALA: A
ASOCIO CULTURAL STUDY**

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ABSTRACT

Girish Karnad, well known writer (born May 19, 1938, Matheran, Bombay Presidency [now in Maharashtra], India—died June 10, 2019, Bengaluru, Karnataka), Indian playwright, author, actor, and film director whose movies and plays, written mostly in Kannada, explore the present by way of the past.

After his graduation from Karnataka University in 1958, Karnad studied philosophy, politics, and economics as a Rhodes Scholar at the University of Oxford (1960–63). His first play, the *Yayati* (1961), critically acclaimed, while he was at Oxford. Centred on the story of a mythological king, the play established Karnad's use of the themes of history and mythology that would inform his work over the following decades. Karnad's next play, *Tughlaq* (1964), tells the story of the 14th-century sultan Muhammad ibn Tughluq and remains among the best known of his works. What always astonished me was the fact that he wrote all his plays in Kannada and not in English. Basically Karnad belong to the Rannade theatre. Girish Karnad uses Bhagavata as chorus. Like chorus in ancient Greek drama he reports all the important events and developments which are essential for the development of plot. Other devices and conventions of folk tales and folk theatre like masks, curtains, dolls, the story within a story etc.

Samskara (1970) marked as an entry into the film industry. The screenplay was written by Karnad and also he played the leading role in the film, an adaptation of an anticaste novel of the same name by U.R. Ananthamurthy. He was followed by *Vamsha Vriksha* (1971), codirected by B.V. Karanth. During this period Karnad continued to produce work as a playwright, including *Hayavadana* (1971), widely recognized as among the most important plays of postindependence India. He was awarded the Padma Shri, one of India's top civilian honours, in 1974 for his contributions to the theatre. Karnad's other well-known films in Kannada included *Tabbaliyu Neenade Magane* (1977; *Godhuli*) and *Ondanondu Kaaladalli* (1978). He also worked in Hindi, directing the critically acclaimed *Utsav* (1984), an adaptation of Shudraka's 4th-century Sanskrit play *Mrichchakatika*. With the play *Nagamandala* (1988), Karnad framed an unhappy contemporary marriage in imagery drawn from Kannada folk tales.

In 1992 Karnad received the India's another of its highest honours, the Padma Bhushan, in recognition of his contributions to the arts. He was the recipient of the highest literary prize, Jnanpith Award, in 1999 for his contributions to literature and theatre. He continued to

work in film, directing such movies as *Kanooru Heggadithi* (1999) and acting in *Iqbal* (2005).

Keywords: Myth, Superstition, Karnad, Tradition, Social culture, Patriarchal ideology

The play *Nagamandala* exposes the exploitation and incarceration of women that occurs through the institution of marriage and how myths display the fears of men in society and thus inherently patriarchal and are used in order to control and restrict the actions of women. In this play Karnad also mocks the idea of chastity and aims at the emancipation and empowerment of women. The setting of the play is based on rural and centred around the life of Rani, who is the everyday submissive rural Indian woman who is married off to a man by the wish of her parents, and without taking into consideration of her wishes. Her husband, who is a rich man named Appanna (which translates to any man). The name symbolised by Karnad to highlight that this is the reality of most weddings that occur. Marriage is a patriarchal institution shown by Karnad has always been unfair to women. Rani goes to Appanna's house expecting a quiet, domestic life that she has been conditioned to but the reality she faces is horrendous. Appanna locks her in the house and goes to visit his mistress on the first day of marriage. This became continuous as Appanna's treatment of Rani is sub-human and he neglects her needs. She was isolated from society and due to the conditioning, she has undergone in her patriarchal set-up, she does not have the courage to question Appanna and better her condition. This stands to show that women in society has no power to question but they are questioned immediately when they violate the prescribed patriarchal norms.. Rani is a young bride who is not recognised as a wife and neglected by her indifferent and unfaithful husband, Appanna. Appanna comes home only for lunch and he spends most of his time with his concubine. Rani is a typical wife and by any means she wants to win her husband's affection. In an attempt to do so, she mixes a drug in milk with a love root. She spills that milk on the nearby anthill and Naga, the cobra drinks it. Naga, who can take the form of a human, gets attracted with her and begins to visit her every night in the guise of her husband. This makes changes in Rani's life completely as she starts to experience the good things in life though she is not aware that the person with her is not her husband but the Naga. Soon she gets pregnant and breaks the news to Appanna. He immediately blames her of adultery and says that he has not impregnated her. The issue is referred to the village Panchayat. Rani has to prove her fidelity by putting her hand in the snake burrow and taking a vow that she has not committed adultery. (It is a popular belief that if anyone lies holding the snake in their hand, they will be instantly killed by the snake God.) She places her hand in the snake burrow and vows that she has not touched any male other than her husband and the Naga in the burrow. She is declared chaste by the village Panchayat. However, her husband is not ready to accept her pregnancy and decides to find out the truth by spying on the house at night. Appanna is shocked to see the Naga's visit at Rani in his form, spending time with her and then leaving the house. Appanna gets very angry with the Naga and indulges in a fight with him. Both of them fight vigorously. Eventually, the Naga dies in the fight. After this incident, Appanna realizes his mistake and accepts Rani along with the child she is carrying.

In this paper, I am dealing with the theme of superstition, belief and myth. I am discussing here some questions and my answer to the questions. The influence of deep rooted culture affects the life of common people.

Deep rooted beliefs

Nagamandala consists of several myths and unreal elements to present a domestic drama. In the introduction to the play, Karnad himself mentions that the play is forged from two Kannada stories that Karnad had heard from A.K Ramanujan in Chicago. Superstitions, myths and beliefs intertwined in this play, to bring forth the psychological and philosophical conflicts of modern man. The very opening of the play itself is a symbol of superstition in its way. The way in which all the lambs assembling at the old ruined temple and having a conversation during every night is a perfect example of superstition. And considering the ending of the plot where Rani gives shelter to the snake in her tresses as a token of gratitude is also a mark of superstition. The whole plot of the play centres around a snake taking a human form and having a relationship with a woman. A snake taking a human form is a typical myth appearing in old superstitious stories. So the central plot is intertwined within superstition. The concept of highly venomous snakes having superstitious powers is prevalent among the Indians.

When Kurudavva finds out about Rani's situation, she gives her magical roots. She believed that these roots possess some super powers which could attract Appanna but when the snake drinks the mixture of roots the snake gets attracted to Rani. When Appanna finds that Rani is pregnant, he accuses her for adultery and she is brought before the Panchayat to prove her chastity. The snake ordeal which she performed represents the superstitious beliefs of the whole community. Each and every incidents in the play is entangled within superstitious beliefs. These incidents are reflections of the society which, through the play inflicts a conflict within the normal human minds.

Cultural Aspects

In the play, Karnad is giving experimentation with narrative and dramatic style. He is well conscious for the post colonial Indian dramaturgy. He is using myths and folk tales as the dramatic performances. The deep rooted culture has become a part Indian indigenous dramaturgy. This play can be read in the South Indian neo colonial cultural aspect. Naga first depicts the treatment of dramatic space and then as the extension of Naga culture performed in Kerala folklore. So that Naga, the protagonist of the play is a cultural sign. Naga depicts the impact of Hindu mythology. The play is themed with folk culture. We can see a lot of community believes in the play: Naga, as a supernatural power, Rani as a symbol of womanhood desires. The play is combined with the scene of nature and the sense of religious mysticism. It may also can be seen as a mortality play. This play deals with the sexual excitement and mellow dreams of a typical Indian woman. Karnad chooses this theme because married woman is completed only when she gets satisfied with her husband's love. Karnad has extremely inspired by his mother after the death of his father so that he uses feministic interest in to the play. Chastity is one of the most powerful cultural aspects which is revealed in this play. From very ancient time cultural aspects are imbibed within us. In our

epic Ramayana we can see similar instances proving the life of woman. Seetha proved her chastity by fire ordeal. The concept of chastity is used by Karnad in this play to showcase the injustice done by man towards woman.

Rani's plight as a typical wife

There are two plots in *NagaMandala*. The first plot is about the flames that gather in a village temple to exchange gossip about the households they inhabit. This is a minor plot but used as a device to introduce the major plot, which is about the plight of woman called Rani. Rani and Appanna is a newly married couple. The latter has been in liaison with the concubine because of which he never stays at home at night. He returns home during the daytime and stays with the prostitute in the night. While he leaves home at night, he keeps his wife inside the house and locks the door from outside. Kurudavva, who is a blind woman in the neighbourhood and is an old friend of Appanna's mother, meets Rani through the window and gives two magic roots to attract her husband towards her. When she has tried the first small root, it makes no effect on her husband. Then she tries the second big one and she becomes scared to find that the food in which it is mixed becomes blood red. Therefore, she pours it in the hole by anthill. The king snake of the ant hill consumes it and falls in love with her. It visits her in the form of Appanna and she becomes pregnant subsequently. Appanna alleges that his wife is unfaithful to him and on the suggestion of the snake-Appanna, she faces the snake ordeal and gets through it proving her chastity. Her husband becomes slave of her thereafter. The snake lover visits her once after sometime and becomes vexed finding Rani and Appanna are in harmony. Without being able to tolerate it, the snake commits suicide in Rani's long tress. On the advice of Rani, her son cremates the dead. In the minor plot, he has used the tale of lamps to suggest the practice of gossip in the villages in the common place like temples.

The main plot of the play is an adaptation of the fifty sixth story entitled "The Serpent Lover" in the said collection. In the original text, it is the story of Kamakshi. Her husband does not indulge in the conjugal love with her as he has been under the love spell of a concubine. An old woman, from the neighbourhood, tries to help her by giving a root suggesting her that she should serve its paste through the meal. Accordingly, she mixes its paste in the sweet porridge but is taken aback to it turning into blood red. Therefore she spills the love potion in the ant hill behind her house. The king of snakes, which lives in the anthill, consumes the love potion and consequently falls head over heel in love with her. Then he visits her every night in the form of her husband and makes love to her. As a result, she becomes pregnant. On discovering this factor, the snake reveals its original identity and persuades her to follow his advice to safeguard her from the crisis device of drama in *Nagamandala*.

The snake lover suggests her that she should approach the king in his court in the next day and argue that her husband is the father of the child. She should propose to undergo the test of truth by holding the snake in the Siva temple if she is not trusted. Accordingly she meets

the king and pleads for her case. But her husband refuses to trust her. Hence she faces the test of truth by taking the snake from the anthill. As per the plan, the snake does no harm to her. On the contrary, it hangs around her neck like a garland. As a result, she is declared chaste.

Social norms are basic rules of behavior governing a cultural group, and as 'rules' they are conceptually understood rather than documented. Social norms can be divided into four categories: beliefs, rituals, superstitions, and taboos. While these four things have their own distinct definitions, they are all rooted in the cultural perspective in which they are found. Valued rituals in one culture may be seen as silly superstitions in another. Culture is at the centre of the definitions of each of these ideas. Beliefs are general understandings of truths. When we turn on the faucet in our kitchen, we believe water is going to come out. When we drop a knife, we believe that it could hurt us, so we move quickly out of the way to avoid being hurt. These general beliefs determine our behaviours every day in every small thing we do. Rituals are commonly found in sacred exercises, but they are not confined to the religious arena. They are simply repeated actions and/or words intended to focus attention to an event or time of life. Most religions carry out strict rituals in their ceremonies.

Conclusion

The plays of Girish Karnad always pointed the reflection of Indian culture and a mirror for man. He expressed his own experienced of human emotions through his works. The eternal truth of life is communicated in this play. I am dealing with the themes of superstitions, myths, beliefs in the play *Nagamandala*. I am discussed here some questions and answer to those questions. Superstition is a common theme but here I have talked about why Karnad has chosen the theme of superstition in the play. The central character Rani influenced by Kurudavva and thereby she learns about the magical powers. There are many more ways that can be chosen by Rani but her living condition made her to do such a superstitious practice. And she was deeply in to the words of kurudavva. Karnad is giving many examples for cultural beliefs throughout the play and these are all pointing to the attitude of typical Indian peoples, and their vision about superstitious beliefs, myths and all.

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