

The Dehumanised World of Women- Restraints and Constraints in Karnad's *Nagamandala*

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Abstract

The aim of the present research paper is to study the impact of the powerful agencies of restraints and constraints on the lives and psyche of the female characters in Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala*. The paper seeks to examine the dehumanising forces acting upon the women characters in Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* to show the debilitating effect of dehumanisation on women, in a patriarchal setup. The paper examines whether the playwrights universalizes the plight of the women and offer any solution to their predicament. The paper determines Karnad's feminine sensibility on the basis of his treatment and justification of these instruments of oppression, and to explore whether they endow their females with resistance or not.

Keywords: *Nagamandala, Girish Karnad, dehumanisation, restraints, constraints, feminine sensibility.*

Full Paper

Constraints bind and restrict people from within and affect their decision-making faculties. Constraints can be likened to any constriction in the wind pipe of an individual, which debilitates his breathing. Human beings place many cultural, social and moral constraints upon themselves in order to conform to existing norms and conventions. When restraints and constraints become overbearing and detrimental to the existence of the human self, they lead to dehumanisation. The Collins Dictionary defines "dehumanisation" as, "to deprive of human qualities, as pity, kindness, individuality, or creativity; make inhuman or machinelike" ("dehumanisation" collinsdictionary.com).

Human beings stretch beyond endurance to enforce restraints and constraints. The essential human characteristics and traits are demeaned and derided, to accommodate dehumanisation. The phenomenon of dehumanization is not new and singular. It has been a potent tool of oppression for centuries in all civilizations. Its aim is to propagate violence against all those who are considered 'subhuman' or 'less than human'.

Nagamandala is an elaborate ritual of serpent worship at present found in Tulu Nadu, especially in Mangalore and Udupi districts. The term '*nagamandala*' is a combination of two words: *naga* and *mandala*. *Naga* means serpent and *mandala* implies decorative pictorial drawings on the floor. The decorative drawing in this context means the drawing of the figure of serpent god in a prescribed form. *Naga-Mandala* depicts the divine union of male and female snakes. Noted play writer Girish Karnad wrote the play titled *Naga-Mandala* in 1987-88. It was originally written in Kannada. The play is based on two folk-tales that Karnad heard from his mentor A.K Ramanujan. The play contains a Prologue and two Acts. Like the ritual this play also

revolves around the union of a snake. However, here the union was not with another snake. Instead it was the union of a snake with a newly married girl. In an interview with Tutun Mukherjee, Karnad revealed:

Naga-Mandala combines two folk-tales. The framing story describes the gathering of the flames in a dilapidated temple after the lamps in the village homes have been extinguished. The gossip of flames is overheard by the playwright who is condemned to die unless he can keep awake the whole night. The story the playwright hears is about a woman, her husband and her snake-lover. When I heard the folktale, I was captivated. I wondered if a woman in such circumstance would commit a deliberate adultery. Would she accept the secret lover? The conservative Indian attitude will neither permit nor tolerate this, of course. So how does she face the fact that the person who visits her at night, who is her tender lover, is not really her husband? What kind of truths or half truths do we tell ourselves to avoid facing a stark and unpleasant reality? That was the inception of the play in my mind. (42)

Naga-Mandala is about Rani, a young girl with long tresses. She is newly married, but locked up in the house and mistreated by her cruel husband Appanna, who frequents a concubine during the nights and comes home only for lunch. Rani yearns to go back to her parent's home. A blind woman, Kurudavva, the best friend of Appanna's mother, gives Rani a piece of magic root to feed Appanna to win over his heart. When the first piece fails, Kurudavva gives Rani another piece which she grinds into a paste and cooks. The deep red colour of the curry frightens Rani. She thinks, "suppose something happens to my husband? What will my fate be?" (Karnad 37; act 1). She then throws the magic potion into the ant hill outside the window.

The paste which is actually an aphrodisiac is consumed by a black King Cobra, who lives in the ant hill. He falls in love with Rani and as soon as it darkens he assumes Appanna's form and starts visiting Rani. The love of the Cobra arouses Rani's senses and transforms her into a complete woman. Rani is puzzled because Appanna's nocturnal behaviour is exactly opposite to his attitude during the day. She is unaware that the Appanna visiting her at night is actually a snake in human form. The Cobra in Appanna's disguise indulges in passionate lovemaking with the innocent and unsuspecting Rani and briefs her on keeping silent about the events of the night to him during the day. He does this to keep the real Appanna in the dark. A puzzled Rani has no option but to follow the Naga's instructions.

Rani's ordeal begins when she becomes pregnant. Appanna blames her of cheating him and carrying someone else's child, for he never consummated the marriage. He abuses Rani and asks her to accept her disgraceful deed or publicly prove her chastity, which she does by undergoing the 'snake ordeal'. Rani holds the King Cobra by her hands and vows that she has never touched any male other than the cobra and her husband. Since Rani speaks the truth, the snake does not bite her. The villagers convinced that Rani is a blessed woman, coerce Appanna to accept her. A helpless Appanna is transformed into a complacent, dutiful husband. A mature Rani accepts the reality. She reconciles to her domestic life, but remembers the King Cobra fondly. Karnad suggests three endings to the story, and leaves it up to the audience/ readers to choose one to their liking.

The 'Man' hearing the story in the temple has to promise to pass it on. Just like women leave their homes to relocate in their husband's home, oral tales also need to be passed on in order to survive. Tales keep changing in content as they pass from one mouth to another, like

women, whose identity keeps getting modified by the strong patriarchal forces in society. Karnad tries to say that many stories lie dormant in the repressed female psyche, waiting to unfold. *Naga-Mandala* is not the story of only Rani and Appanna; it is a universal tale, as it speaks for all the mismatched couples in society, who lead complicated lives. As Flame 1 says in the prologue, “So if you try to gag one story, another happens” (Karnad 25).

The play begins by saying, “A young girl. Her name ... it does not matter. But she was an only daughter, so her parents called her Rani” (Karnad 27; act 1). To deny an individual a name is in itself a violent, malicious, and dehumanising act. Rani’s identity and her name are irrelevant for society. Karnad rues the fate of the nameless, identity-less female community in society. Rani means Queen of the kingdom, and the beloved of the King. Ironically Rani is a prisoner in her ‘kingdom’, her home, and is despised by her husband, the ‘King’.

Rani’s parents tie her to Appanna as he is rich and his parents are dead, making him an ideal match for their daughter. They represent the traditional outlook of society where a girl’s parents are restrained by unwritten rules, and are taught to think of daughters as future brides, born to be dispatched to the groom’s house. It is also important to understand that Rani’s parents and others in society believe that the only quality desirable in a groom is his financial stability. A woman’s need for companionship is too whimsical a thought to deserve consideration. Rani’s parents do not labour to check Appanna’s background, or else his pursuit of the concubine would have been revealed. But even if he had been exposed, promiscuity of men is accepted as natural and normal.

Rani’s parents reasoned that because Appanna’s parents are dead, Rani will be saved from the wrath and responsibility of her in-laws. Little did they know that Rani’s husband would emerge as the greatest destabilising and dehumanising factor of her life. Appanna is rich but has no interest in Rani. He is fascinated by a concubine, but obviously cannot make her the pride of his home.

Appanna brings Rani to his home. The tender dreams of a young girl are shattered. From a cherished daughter she becomes a bonded worker. Appanna treats her as a care taker, cook, and servant, and abuses her physically. He denies her right to a physical union, coming home only to satisfy his basic needs like bathing and eating. Rani sacrifices her pleasures and serves her husband faithfully like a conventional wife. Deserted every night, she craves for liberty and reunion with her parents. When Appanna locks Rani in the house then dreams become her only solace. She dreams of an Eagle and asks him:

Where are you taking me?” And the Eagle answers: “Beyond the seven seas and seven isles. On the seventh island is a magic garden. And in that garden stands the tree of emeralds. Under that tree, your parents wait for you”. So Rani says: “Do they? Then please, please take me to them---immediately. Here I come”. So the Eagle carries her clear across the seven seas... (Karnad 28; act 1).

Rani’s soliloquy and her dreams give her a flight of freedom from her inhuman existence. Flight is a very strong motif used in literature, to depict liberation and freedom. In almost all cultures the imagery of the flying bird has the same connotation. Rani, a beloved daughter is now forced to live in isolation like a caged animal, a realistic projection of the degradation of humanity. And through the metaphor of the bird, Karnad depicts social institutions as instruments of subjugation of the females, regardless of their class, caste, or economic

background. Marriages in India curb a women's freedom, transforming her into a machine performing daily chores.

Rani's traditional upbringing restrains her from going against Appanna, who tells her, "Do as you are told, you understand?" (Karnad 28; act 1). Women have always 'been told' what to do as if they are machines or programmed robots. Their human garb of emotions, thoughts and feelings is pulled away from them, to expose a body with just limbs to do what is 'told'. Rani is a human being in a vegetative existence, decomposing slowly in the shroud of tradition. Like the rest of her tribe, she has been groomed to look after the 'master of the house' as a dutiful housewife.

Gender is a powerful social construct that stereotypes the roles of men and women. Since ages familial duties have been divided between sexes. Men are expected to go out and earn, while women are meant to do household chores and rear children. Men have the freedom to venture out unrestrained, anywhere, anytime, but women need permission to go out, and men to accompany them. Society places restraints upon females like reins on horses and whip them regularly, to keep them disciplined.

No one from the neighbourhood comes to the rescue of the imprisoned Rani. In a man's world Appanna has the right to treat Rani like his property, confined and condemned. In Appanna's world, Rani is a slave. He is neither restrained by the regulations of society, nor by self constraints or conscience. The dehumanisation of Rani is not the sole requisite of Appanna; it is the prerogative of the entire patriarchal society. There are no celebrations or feasts to welcome Rani in the village as a bride, but there is definitely a 'snake ordeal' awaiting her.

The plot progresses further with the introduction of the characters, Kurudavva and her son Kappanna. Their appearance highlights the importance of peer support which serves as a breather for Rani. Kappanna asks his mother not to interfere in, "other people's affairs." (Karnad 28; act1). Karnad depicts the universal human attitude through Kappanna's words. People exercise constraint when interfering in the lives of others. They look away when a wife, mother, or daughter is beaten. These constraints ensure a peaceful social and civic order. Karnad exposes the hypocrisy of society which hides behind doors, when a woman is tortured, but arrive in full grandeur to watch the degradation of women.

The chastity of Rani becomes a public issue, but no one questions the immoral Appanna or the concubine. Appanna's acts befits manhood, it is Rani, a female who is challenging society's notion of womanhood

Karnad projects Kurudavva as the moral voice of the play. She is old, yet wide awake, agile and active. Blind since birth, Kurudavva learns to live by her instincts. Not the one to back out from her conviction, she blindly supports Rani. Her restraints and constraints are a product of her own intellect. She is a faithful friend of Appanna's mother and hence tries to save her poor daughter – in law. Kurudavva symbolises the sub- altern support system. She is the humanising factor in Rani's life, the sympathy and appreciation that Rani required. The enchanting root gifted by Kurudavva is a sign of hope for Rani. It also signifies the vulnerability of human beings for superstitions.

Rani pleads with Kurudavva to inform her parents about her predicament. The girl's parents merely watch from a distance, completing their daughter's isolation. Rani says, "I would jump into a well-if only I could" (Karnad 32; act 1). She is so desperate owing to her captivity

that she contemplates suicide. By ex-communicating and isolating Rani, Appanna dehumanises her in the worst possible way.

Appanna decides to keep a watch dog to prevent Rani from meeting anyone. Appanna says, “I put a lock on the door so those with sight could see. Now what does one do with blind meddlers? I think I’ll keep a watchdog” (Karnad 35; act 1). The dog and the mongoose symbolise moral- watchdogs deployed by society to keep women within boundaries. Society becomes self- proclaimed guardian of patriarchy and lays down restraints on women’s freedom. It is Appanna who needs a watch dog to guard off his lust. Rani gets a chance to dash out of the open doors when Appanna becomes sick from the magic potion. But instead, she tries to resurrect the devil that locks her as soon as he regains composure. Rani is a pitiful victim of traditions yielding to power pressures and reconciling to oppression, condemned to suffocate, and confined to the gallows.

The miraculous root aimed at Appanna a second time, casts a spell on the Naga. The play gets overpowered by the mythic content. *Nagas* are symbol of fertility and regeneration in Hindu mythology. The Naga comes in the disguise of Appanna at night and Rani is unable to comprehend the sudden change in Appanna, who is tender, caring, and sympathetic at night. The duality of Appanna symbolises man as a lover during the night and a dominating husband at daytime. The figure which yields to feminine charm at night tries to control and subdue the same feminine traits during the day. Men assume different roles to achieve what they desire, love as well as submission. Women are restrained from questioning this duality in males and humbly submit to them.

One night, the Naga kills the watch- dog and then the mongoose. Rules are now being broken. The moral guardians in the form of the watch dog are silenced. Traditional restraints are being challenged and constraints are eased by Karnad who then goes on to explore new possibilities. The narrator, Story, a woman, turns in favour of another woman. Rani’s femininity starts evolving from a docile girl into a fully grown woman. She communicates with the Naga, and likens his behaviour during the day to “a ... stupid snake” (Karnad 42; act 2).

The Naga arouses Rani’s senses but she is afraid to surrender to her sexual urges. This hints at the constraints within women to exhibit and seek gratification of sexual desires, which is considered a sinful act. Religious texts, myths and fables abound with tales of women who sinned and were punished. Discussing sex and physical relationships is still a taboo. Rani refrains from manifesting her sexual needs. Karnad depicts a deep sensitivity for women’s issues and problems.

Naga asks Rani not to discuss the events with him, during daytime. Rani is baffled, but is barred from asking questions. She acquiesces to both her husband, as well as her lover. The patriarchal society restrains women from challenging the deeds of men and employing their intellect. Women ‘give’ in voluntarily, owing to psychological conditioning. It is significant that the Naga does not come to Rani willingly. He has been enticed by the magical roots. This shows that women have to use their physical charm and sexuality to allure men. It is a very materialistic attraction and superficial love that Rani gets. The Naga knows that he has no place in the human world. He does not intend to liberate Rani from domestic abuse; he craves only for her physical charms.

Rani has to keep up the masquerade of her marriage because of traditional restrictions. The Naga could have easily killed Appanna and rescued Rani from his cruel clutches, but even

he is constrained by rules of his animalistic world. Rani is a human -being and must conform to her social order. Moreover, if the Naga killed Appanna, Rani would have failed to justify her pregnancy, and Naga's enterprises would have ended. By keeping the foil of marriage intact, Naga wants to enjoy the pleasures of the human world.

Rani becomes pregnant and it is only now that she realises that the trysts at night were for real. Motherhood lends substance to a relationship and endows the woman with an identity she never had. Neither Appanna nor Naga suffer the tremors which Rani experienced due to the conflicting behaviour of her husband during the day and at night. Rani asserts her maternal rights and desires to come out openly with her pride of motherhood. When Naga tells Rani to hide her pregnancy, she reacts and voices her discontent for the first time. She tells Naga that she has matured as a woman, wife, and mother, "I am not a parrot. Not a cat or a sparrow. Why don't you take it on trust that I have a mind and explain this charade to me?" (Karnad 51; act 2). Rani refuses to be treated like an animal anymore. She exerts her identity and intellect for the first time. Karnad thus gives Rani the strength to revolt and question her dehumanisation. Rani is now disillusioned with the tender show of love from Naga.

Appanna brands Rani as a "harlot" and a "slut". He questions her chastity and "the bloated tummy" and beats her. He says, "I locked you in, and yet you managed to find a lover! Tell me who it is? Who did you go to with your sari off"? In the night Naga visits Rani and informs her about the Elders' judgment. Rani pleads with him to save her from the humiliation. The Naga says, "I can't help it Rani. That's how it has always been. That's how it will always be" (Karnad 52, 54; act 2). Since ages, men have raised questions on the women's chastity. Their suspicion has become the burning pyre of women. His vanity destroys the institution of marriage.

The passing of the verdict that Rani has to undergo the snake ordeal was confirmation enough that she was condemned. The humiliation that a faithful woman has to prove her chastity is a greater punishment than the actual ordeal. The need to conform to traditional norms is the most debilitating factor affecting individual happiness. Naga advises Rani to, "undertake the snake ordeal" (Karnad 54, 53; act 2). The equations have not changed since Sita's ordeal in the Ramayana. Rani's truth needs to be verified before all. Physically, Rani is beaten, sexually she is thwarted, emotionally she is shattered, intellectually she is silenced, and socially she is excommunicated. As a result, she is left with no choice but to look forward to her ordeal.

Next day there is a huge gathering in front of Rani's house. The Elders suggest that Rani take the oath by holding red-hot iron in her hand. This evokes the theme of peer pressure and victimization of women at the hands of old customs and traditions. Rani is bestowed with divinity by the people after passing the dehumanising test of her chastity. Society either condemns a woman as a 'harlot' or proclaims her a Devi. She is refused the dignity of an ordinary human being. Rani is a creation of the patriarchal social order where the existence of women as a mortal human being is ignored.

The story has three suggestive endings. In the first ending Rani, Appanna and their son live happily ever after. It signifies the transformation of Appanna. But Man, the cursed narrator who is listening to the story in the temple, does not like this ending. This end has too many loopholes, regarding the fate of the Cobra and Appanna's feelings for the child which is not his own. Rani will soon realise that Appanna and Naga are different individuals and this will be a torment for her. Man, the *sutradhar* is not happy.

Story gives a piece of advice to Man that in order to live in marital bliss, some questions have to be left unanswered. Karnad shows that men and women pass through several stages of doubt, uncertainty, and failures before they become mature and learn to live in harmony as husband and wife. He projects traditional sensibility by depicting the significance of the institution of marriage. He endorses the values of compatibility and assimilation as indispensable in couples. Both Rani and Appanna mellow down after the snake ordeal. Rani gets a devoted and responsible husband in the transformed Appanna. This ending to the play confirms to the social norms and is most suited as it keeps the familial structure intact.

But Man does not accept the ending. According to him, Rani's story is lacking in something. So, in the second ending suggested by Story, the Cobra comes to visit Rani and finds her sleeping contentedly next to her husband and child. Karnad shows that a woman needs emotional fulfilment and satisfaction in her marriage. The sad Cobra decides to live in Rani's tresses but is smothered and dies. This ending signifies that the two different identities can never exist together, so one has to die. Naga, being an outsider in the marital fold must be the one to die. Rani says that Naga will be cremated by her son, who will also perform annual rituals to commemorate his death. Rani tries to do justice to Naga in the second ending by giving him a respectful, humanistic death.

The Man is still not convinced by the ending. The Man is ultimately a product of patriarchal society. He wants neither man's domination in the form of Appanna, nor his lust in the form of Naga to be defeated. Therefore in the first ending he rejects Appanna's unconditional transformation, and in the second ending he rejects Naga's death. The narrator Story is ultimately a woman, so she suggests conservative endings, whereby Naga is removed from Rani's life. Karnad shows that the impact of restraints and constraints on a woman's psyche is long lasting.

The Man suggests a third ending in which the cobra is discovered alive in Rani's hair and Appanna wants to kill it. But Rani hides him in her long tresses where he lives happily ever after. In this way both forms of Appanna are winners.

Karnad's breaks many traditions in the play. For a change, the story is neither about a male hero, nor is it narrated by a male. It is the story of Rani, a female and is narrated by Story, another female. Karnad thus upholds feminism in the story. In *Naga-Mandala*, the Man is just a listener to Rani's story. He must keep awake until the story is over. This symbolises male awakening. In addition, he is condemned until he tells an interesting story. This implies that the audience no longer aspire to hear stories conceived by the patriarchal story tellers. The playwright can sustain only if he revolutionizes the entire process of story-telling. In other words, the audience today is the new awakened society and the playwright represents the patriarchal forces. The patriarchal setup needs restructuring and acceptance of the forces of change, otherwise it will be left in a limbo.

The Man is forced to give a closing to the tale whereby, the Naga lives in Rani's tresses, "This hair is a symbol of my wedded bliss. Live in there happily, forever" (Karnad 64; act 2). This conclusion to the story establishes Naga as a symbol of a woman desires from marriage-love and companionship. The Naga is endowed with humanistic traits. He introduces Rani to womanhood and motherhood. By giving the Naga life and an abode in Rani's beautiful tresses, the Man, a condemned playwright glorifies humanitarian values and virtues.

Karnad weaves a magical tale, with the delicate threads of humanism. A true visionary, he upholds tradition while carefully clearing the grime gathered on the surface. He invests his

faith in society, community, and family and therefore instead of advocating dismantling of these social structures, he asks them to be more democratic and egalitarian. In *Naga-Mandala*, Karnad shows the uncanny feminine strength of Rani in breaking away from the fetters of dehumanising restraints and constraints. When Kurudavva fails to support Rani in the end, Rani picks up the broken strands of her own determination and declares a lone war against the patriarchal forces. She is no longer petrified of Appanna, or bewitched by the charms of Naga any more. When she pulls out the snake she is aware only of a single truth, that her integrity and honesty can surpass all ordeals. Rani becomes a 'Queen' finally, as she now rules her home and her life. Naga's refuge in Rani's tresses shows his subservience to her. By suggesting this unconventional denouement, Karnad breaks all existing conventions and gives validity and life to the union of humans and non- humans. He shatters the constraints within Rani by giving her the right to cremate the dead Cobra and conduct his annual rites. Appanna's humility symbolise the subservience of all restraints. He and the Naga become ornamental objects adorning the divine Rani.

An emblem of womanhood, Rani knows how to repay Naga's love and warmth. She is not outraged that the child she carries is from the Naga, a snake. She intends to raise her child as a precious human being because she is transformed into a powerful feminine force with an indomitable spirit, and the potential to nurture and foster humanity. This becomes her greatest virtue.

Naga-Mandala has been exhaustively studied by many research students in India and abroad, because of its universal appeal. Women's issues and their dehumanisation are global phenomena. The west has seen the growth of feminist movements and literature in response to women's subjugation. It is a tough and exhaustive war waged against the society by half its human population, for the restoration of their dignity and freedom.

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