

A Study of Man -Woman relationship in *Nagamandla: Play with A Cobra* by

Girish Karnard

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*Marriage is the basic foundation of man-woman relationship. From the ancient times marriage has remained the greatest and the most important of all institutions. The smooth functioning of man-woman relationship requires gender equality, i.e. adjustment and compromise equally from both sides. But our Indian society at large is patriarchal in nature where male and female perform their assigned gender roles. Women are generally considered passive and subordinate whereas men as active and dominating. Women are defined through their status role of marriage and motherhood. In this play Nagamandla: Play with A Cobra, Karnard has dealt with gender concerns while exposing and critiquing the male chauvinism prevalent in patriarchal society. Girish Karnard, the Kannada writer believes that marriage is a patriarchal institution that has always been unjust to women. He debates about the contemporary issues by beautifully blending the history and mythology. The paper is an attempt to provide the in-depth study of man-woman relationship in nuptial knot.*

Keywords: Marriage, Folklore, Mythology, Identity, Marriage, Gender issues, and Patriarchy.

*Nagamandla: Play with A Cobra* is a two Act play by twentieth century Indo-English playwright Girish Karnard who writes plays with a humanistic vision. He is the most prominent playwright, author, filmmaker, and actor in Indian entertainment industry. Existential issues like Identity, split personality and dichotomy of love find full expression in his writings. His plays *Hayavadana* deals with identity crisis, *Tughlaq* deals with dual personality of the King, *The Fire and The Rain* brings

out the juxtaposition of various ideas in emotions and feelings while making use of myth as background. He uses myths that are relatable to his story or go well with his purpose. In other words, he uses myths to reveal the absurdities of life with all its fundamental passion.

Karnard was conferred with Padma Shri (1974) and Padma Bhushan (1994) by the government of India and also credited with many films fare awards. *Nagamandla* (1988) is based on two oral tales told from his mentor friend and well-known poet A.K. Ramanujam. The present analysis paper is an attempt to bring out the exploitation of women that occurs in the institution of marriage by portraying the wretched plight of Rani, the forlorn bride of Appanana through Karnard's *Nagamandla: Play with A Cobra*.

Karnard has used the folktale in feminized form to highlight the problems faced by both man and woman in marriage. The name of the main protagonist, Rani, depicted in the play is quite ironical. Rani, in the usual sense means queen, who is supposed to have certain authority and respect but she is depicted as a servant to her husband, degraded and imprisoned in the house, deprived of nuptial rites. She is deprived of any interaction from her husband, Appanna who mistreats her and not at all bothered about her basic needs. She is leading a monotonous life devoid of any type of love, care and respect.

Karnard has attempted to showcase the typical orthodox mentality of the males in the traditional Indian society while portraying the character of Appanna. Appanna is everyman and Rani represents the plight of every woman. Like an orthodox husband, he is not aware of the basic needs of his wife. She does not only need bread to live but needs to be loved and cared so that she may forget her parents and belongs entirely to her husband's family. But his male chauvinism prevents him from doing so, he does not care for her and by locking her at his residence, he remains out of the house whole day. This painful experience of confinement makes her feel horrible and she longs for the company of her parents.

Rani is living in an unromantic and loveless relationship becoming emotionally starved. Appanna shows no concern to her, spends much of time with his concubines, and comes home only to have lunch. When Rani is unable to attend the call of Appanna, he beats her. Rani suffers the pangs of sadness and isolation. Kurudeva, a blind friend of her mother-in-law and the only motherly figure in the play comes to her rescue. Kurudeva gives her the magical roots which will make Appanna falls madly in love with her. Rani makes a curry which turns blood red and afraid

of being noticed by Appanna, throws it on an anthill where a cobra was residing and unfortunately, the curry is consumed by the cobra.

Thus, through Kurudeva Rani gains the love of Naga disguised as Appanna. Naga knows that Rani is a virtuous woman, so in order to make love to her he takes the shape of Appanna and starts visiting at night. Naga's first entry to her room is deftly described by Karnard as having erotic images recalling the myth of coming together of Heaven and Earth and that of first male and female. Karnard has intensely portrayed the scene of his entry as:

Frogs croaking in pelting rain, tortoises singing soundlessly in the dark, foxes, Crabs, ants, rattlers, sharks, swallows-even the geese! The female begins to smell like wet earth. And stung by her smell, the king Cobra starts searching for her queen. The tiger bellows for his mate. When the flame-of-forest blossoms into a fountain of red and earth cracks open at the touch of the aerial roots of the bunyan, it moves in the hollow of the cottonwood in the flow of the estuary, the dark Netherlands, within everything that sprouts, grows, stretches, creaks and blooms-everywhere, those who come together, cling, fall apart lazily! It is there and there, everywhere. (25)

It is indeed through Naga, Rani first time experiences the joy of love, and she never wants the night to end as she wants her joy to last forever. Naga fulfills her basic needs of love and care. Rani gains emotional fulfillment and maturity, and after getting pregnant feels fulfilled as a woman, wife and a mother. When Appanna becomes aware of Rani's pregnancy he accuses her of being a whore and tries to kill the child. This reminds of Ramayana's Ahilya who was also accused of adultery by her husband Gautam Rishi. The play indeed is built on myth and traditional ways.

When Rani was accused of being a whore, and asked for snake ordeal, then as a deus machine Naga intervenes and comes to safeguard both Rani and her child. The judges declare her as goddess. Appanna accepted the orders and judgment of the judges and they both live happily with their child for the rest of their life. This is how finally Rani gains her lost status as a wife, mother and goddess in human form through the appearance of Naga, the fantasy of her husband Appanna. Poetic Justice has been done in the end where she has travelled a long route from innocence to experience. Fact and fantasy however is blended together during the making and

breaking of Rani's dream. The snake lover story has become a "vrata-katha", a tale usually told at the festival of cobra for endowing wellbeing and progeny to their family.

In Hindu mythology, the ordeal of chastity was also given by Sita, in the *Ramayana* because she was really pure and truthful. But this play through the ordeal of snake ridicules the classical test of chastity because Rani here is not chaste and the snake Naga is her lover that's why she successfully performed the ordeal. Hence "it is her very infidelity that comes to her aid in proving that she is a faithful wife" (Dharwadker, 444).

In several ways it can also be said that *Nagamandla* is more of a feminist play and Karnard has dexterously used the folktale in its feminized form to highlight the problems faced by both man and woman in marriage.

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