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Indianness In Girish Karnad's Nagamandala

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Abstract: The play, Naga-Mandala, is based on folktales about Naga, popular in Karnataka and in several other parts of India in its different forms. Karnad had heard these tales from A.K. Ramanujan, who had collected many folktales and their variants prevalent in different parts of India. In the folktale, there is a snake who assumes the form of the prince enters the palace and woos the beautiful princess. When the prince comes to know about it, he gets the snake killed. The wife then sets him a riddle. If he fails to answer the riddle, he is to die. In some tales, the snake takes revenge on the man. In Karnad's play, it sacrifices itself for the happy life of Rani and Appanna. The play dramatizes man's attitude to woman in a patriarchal society, mistrust, infidelity and lack of communication, breaking family life and the institution of marriage, and it reaffirms the significance of motherhood as the cementing factor in the family and the society. The play upholds the significance of family, marriage and society.

Keywords: riddle, family, marriage, tales

The story of Naga-Mandala is narrated by a special character 'Story'. The narrator-story is born of a woman's mind which is strongly agitated due to her suspicion that her husband is carrying affairs with some other woman. Therefore Rani and Appanna's story is not of any particular couple, it is rather a story of mis-matched man and woman in a typical Indian society.

Rani is married to a man who does not have any particular name – "Well, any common name will do". The man is named Appanna. The parents of Rani had only these considerations in arranging his marriage – "The young man was rich and his parents were both dead". Indian parents feel satisfied if they succeed in finding rich boys for their daughters perhaps because they find that earning one's livelihood is terribly difficult and their daughter will live in comfort with her rich husband, forgetting that the emotional comforts which proceed from happy marital relations are far more important.

Appanna is rich but has no interest in Rani. He is interested in a concubine. As his parents are already dead, there is nobody to tell him the difference between a wife and a concubine. Like many Indian men, he considers his relationship with the concubine a normal thing; he never feels ashamed of it.

As Appanna is bewitched by the concubine, he fails to see that Rani is young and beautiful. He claps her lock and key and tells her that he would come every day only for lunch which she should keep ready for him. It is a bolt from the blue. All the dreams of the young bride are shattered in a jiffy. He becomes so cruel that Rani loses equilibrium. She has only dreams left which haunt her day and night. She gets hallucination like the middle-aged woman of the Prologue. As many Indian women's dreams and desires, hers too are left unconsidered.

Appanna is an example of male chauvinism which is a typical Indian word. He goes to the concubine but keeps his wife under lock and key lest she should also get a lover. He fails to realize that love knows no barriers. Inspite of his vigilance, Kurudava meets her. Naga comes to her through drains and crevices. It is due to his failure to love his wife that Naga manages to court Rani, and Rani fails to unravel the mystery of the contradictory behaviours of the two Appannas due to her craving for love. She had some doubts in the intial stages but Naga managed to win her confidence by his

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ingenuity. Appanna is shocked to notice that Rani is pregnant in spite of all the restraints that he has imposed upon her movements. He is shocked. With the Indian concept of chastity in mind, he starts questioning her.

He charges her with the offences of adultery and perjury – "Tell me who it is? Who did you go to with your sari off? You haven't? And yet you have bloated tummy. Just pumped air into it, did you? And you think I'll let you get away with that? You shame me in front of the whole village, you darken my face, you slut - !" He takes her to the village elders who ask her to hold a red-hot iron bar to prove her innocence. They very well know that Appanna himself is an adulterer. Indian society is a male dominated society. It does not even take cognizance of the offence done by the husband, but asks the wife to take the acid test.

Rani passes the test, but it does not remove the doubts of Appanna. He knows for certain that Rani's child is not born of him. This idea tortures him. He is exhorted by the village elders to spend his life in Rani's service. "You need merit in ten past lives to be chosen for such holy duty", they say. He raves, "What am I to do? Is the whole world against me? Have I sinned so much that even nature should laugh at me? I know I have not slept with my wife. Let the world say what it likes. Let any miracle declare her goddess. But I know what sense am I to make of my life that's worth nothing!" For any Indian, it is the greatest torment if he knows that his wife is an adulteress. Appanna suffers such a situation.

Rani tells him, "When we cremate this snake, the fire should be lit by our son. Every year on this day, our son should perform the rituals to commemorate his death". By saying this, she confirms that the snake is the real father of her son. Appanna has to say nothing but the statement: "Of course, there is no question of saying no. You are the goddess herself incarnate. Any wish of yours will be carried out. " A cuckold husband, having the knowledge of being one, is forced to treat his wife as a goddess and to carry out every wish of hers. Indians have strong superstitious beliefs and this is evident in Appanna also. He is not any particular person but a representative of chauvinistic males of the Indian society. He demonstrates Indianness in many of his qualities, views, and attitudes.

RANI

Rani is the main woman character of the play, if not the heroine of the play. She bears all the tyrannies, yet she does not give up her values of life. She is the only child of her parents and gets their love in full measure. As happens with most of the Indian girls, her fond father finds a match for his daughter and marries her to Appanna. An Indian father generally thinks that a man is a good match for his daughter if he has means to provide wherewithal to his daughter. These fathers never bother about the character of the men with whom their daughters have to pass their lives. Many men have turned out to be libertines and adulterers, but their richness overshadows all other considerations. Rani is married to such a rich man who is called Appanna and lives a life of any dejected Indian woman.

Appanna goes to a concubine; he ignores Rani and becomes a jailor to his wife. From day one he locks her in his house with the command that he would come to the house only for his lunch which she would prepare punctually and regularly and would not ask any questions. Rani is shocked but accepts his orders as a typical Indian housewife.

She becomes a maid servant in her own house. She sweeps, mops the floor, scrubs utensils, cooks food, and obeys Appanna's commands for a square meal. She

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tells Kurudavva that her husband speaks to her only in words such as 'do this', 'do that', and 'serve the food'. As she is locked in the house, she is not able to meet anybody. Narrating her tale of woe she tells Kurudavva, "Apart from him, you are the first person I have seen since coming here. I'm bored to death. There is no one to talk to…" To add to her woes, she is alone during nights. She is timid as young girls generally are. "I am so frightened at night. I can't sleep a wink. At home, I sleep between my father and mother. " At this point, we see Indianness as most Indian children remain very close to parents until their marriage.

Inspite of this persecution, she does not want any harm to reach Appanna. Kurudavva gives her some roots which can get her the love of Appanna. The small piece she gives Appanna makes him sick. Therefore, she does not give the bigger piece to him. Kurudavva says with confidence that it will certainly bring him back to her: "Go in. Start grinding it. Make a tasty curry. Mix the paste in it. Let him taste a spoonful and he will be your slave. " But Rani does not take any risk even to get the love of her husband.

Rani is an example of Indian wives who endure the tyrannies inflicted by their husbands, yet serve them with all sincerity. Appanna keeps her as a slave, yet he is her dear husband and has to be kept out of the harm's way. The marriage rites make the husband master of the woman and the wife a poor slave. This is evident in Rani's life also.

Rani expects nothing from Appanna, yet she is ready to do anything for him. Even when she comes to commit a mistake, she holds herself guilty and ever remains repentant for the lapse. It will not be amiss to say that an Indian or rather an Indian wife is masochistic, taking pleasure in being tormented by the husband. She never revolts even in her thought. She suffers at the hands of Appanna but does not take any risk to gain the love of her husband. Her character typifies an Indian wife that accepts sufferings as fait accompli; Indianness is evident in her character too.

THE ELDERS

When Appanna comes to know of Rani's pregnancy, he accuses her of infidelity. He knows that he has never made love with her. He is out of himself. He calls her a strumpet and whore, drags her out of the house, threatens to give her extreme punishment for her adulterous conduct – "Aren't you ashamed to admit it, you harlot? I locked you in, and yet you managed to find a lover! I swear to you I am not my father's son if I don't abort that bastard. Smash it into dust! I will go to the village elders. If they don't throw that child into boiling oil and you along with it, my name is not Appanna". This is how she is greeted for her first pregnancy.

He drags her to the village elders. They ask her to hold a red-hot iron or catch a snake to prove her innocence. They all know that Appanna is behind a concubine, but no one dares to question his morality. But, they are interested in seeing how Rani is going to pass the test. They compel her to prove her innocence and chastity.

When Rani holds the Cobra in her hand tremulously before all, it gives her full honour. It slides up her shoulder and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head. It sways its hood gently for a while, then becomes docile and moves over her shoulder like a garland. The elders are charmed by this view and declare that Rani is a goddess. They order Appanna to spend all his life at her service. This reveals their superstitious beliefs, and they show typical Indianness in the way they speak and behave.

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