

## THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN GIRISH KARNAD'S *NAGAMANDALA*

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### **Abstract:**

*Ever since history was documented, the role of a woman in society was defined by a man who is physically powerful than woman. A woman is supposed to play a submissive role to a man, supporting him and looking after the family. Men and woman, had clear - cut roles to play in the society, where the man earns and provides for the family and the woman cooks and looks after the family, As times changed so did our needs and priorities. Accordingly, a woman's role undergoes many changes and unduly the new roles added up to her old roles instead of replacing the old roles. Moreover, a woman is questioned if she deviates from her man made path but unfortunately there is no one to question a man if he drifts away from his family.*

**Key Words:** *Submissive, new roles, mythical story.*

According to Simone de Beauvoir's gender theory, "women do not try to come out of this oppression as since times immemorial women were familiarized to acquiescent roles" (49). De Beauvoir asserts that this habituation is the main reason for women not uniting to fight for their rights. Most of them do not even realize their loss in living as secondary citizens. Beauvoir emphasize that as women do not bond with religion, community, gender or history similar to under enemy control groups like Jews or African Americans they never realized the importance of their lives nor did they try to fight for their rights. Pranav Joshipura also stated in his book '*Naga-Mandala Reconsidered' The Plays of Girish Karnad: Critical Perspectives*, "Gender deformities are thus caused and gradually 'canonized' by socio-cultural programming of sex roles." (198)

Nagamandala is based on a mythical story which deals with a woman who unknowingly falls in love with a Naga who impersonate her husband. This play is about the story of a woman, Rani who is neglected by her husband, Appanna. Rani, though, Appanna is unfaithful and unfeeling, tries to win his love by any means. She thinks of cast a love spell on her husband by mixing a love root in the milk he drinks. Unfortunately, she spills the milk on an anthill and Naga, the king Cobra drinks it. Naga fell deeply in love with Rani and is powerless to stay away from her. As he has the power to renovate himself into a human being, he transforms himself into Appanna and starts visiting Rani at nights. Rani who is under the illusion that her husband has mended his ways due to the love potion is happy to have him back at nights.

In due course, she becomes pregnant and Appanna is fuming when he comes to know of this development. He accuses her of adultery and calls a panchayat meeting. The panchayat decides to test her reliability by forcing her to put her hand in a snake burrow to declare her innocence. The general belief is that if a person lies while holding a snake he will be immediately bitten to death by the snake. Rani puts her hand in the snake warren and holds Naga while stating her innocence to the world. She states that she never touched any person except her husband and the King Cobra in her hand. As it is the truth, she is saved from the snake bite. The panchayat announces that Rani is virtuous and tells Appanna to accept her. As Appanna knows that he didn't have any sexual relations with his wife he decides to spy on her. To his great shock, he

finds Naga visiting his wife in his form and spending time with her. When Naga comes out of the house, Appanna challenges him. In the pursue fight Naga is killed.

The society we live in is pitifully hypocritical, as no one question Appanna regarding his neglect of his wife but the society is ready to test Rani basing on Appanna's words. Karnard was only reflecting the times as we see in some present day newspapers where a woman's loyalty is questioned and many times she is punished based on ridiculous doubts. In the case of a working class woman, the news makes headlines whereas in the case of a middle class or upper class woman the truth gets suppressed. It makes one wonder whether times have really changed since the time Rama compelled Sita to perform 'agnipravesam' based on the word of a commoner. Karnad himself writes about the source material of play in *Introduction to Three Plays*:

“Naga-Mandala is based on two oral tales I heard from A. Ramanujan. These tales are narrated by women—normally the older women in the family. They also express a woman's understanding of the reality around her, a lived counterpoint to the patriarchal structures of classical texts and institutions. The position of Rani in the story of Naga-Mandala can be seen as a metaphor for the situation of a young girl in the bosom of a joint family where she sees her husband only in the two unconnected roles— as a stranger during the day and as a lover at night. Inevitably, the pattern of relationships she is forced to weave from these disjointed encounters must be something of a fiction. The empty house Rani is locked in could be the family she is married into.”(23)

A question arises when we contrast this protagonist i.e., what exactly is the role of society in a woman's life. Another pertinent question arises regarding the role of family towards the woman in the house, family here includes parents, in-laws, children and husband. Women and their service to the family are generally taken for granted in our society. The society expects a married woman to care for her home and family without thinking of the self. A woman is acknowledged not to have any feelings and her needs and wants take a second place to her society indomitable responsibilities. A woman's sacrifice of her interests and passion is never given its due importance.

In most families, husbands pursue a career and expect a supporting wife who stays at home to look after the family. It is irrational to expect an intelligent woman to keep her interests sideways to play a secondary role to her husband. As time passes the monotony of a family life makes a woman's secondary role intolerable and she seeks to break her barrier. A woman, like a man, needs to satisfy her intellectual self. In Naga-Mandala Rani also expresses her plight she says,

“Listen—I feel frightened -alone at night.” But Appanna does not care about her feelings, he said “What is there to be scared of? Just keep to yourself. No one will bother you. Rice!” and added “Don't question me. Do as you are told and you won't be punished. (Finishes his meal, gets up) I will be back tomorrow for lunch.”(NM28)

Rani's miserable days roll by in this manner. Appanna treats her as if she were a non-human thing, without any feeling and a robot cook following his instructions without uttering a single word of complain. He locks her in the room, and scolds the old woman Kurudavva and her son Kappanna when they attempt to become friendly with Rani. Her willingness to build friendly relationship with the old woman reflects the thoughts of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, an American feminist, who in her famous essay, “The Lady of the House,” asserts that women are denied bonding within the same gender that men enjoy. Society and family life demarcate a wife's role such that she is denied companionship and development requisite by individuals to evolve. This refusal influences her growth as a person which in turn affects her performance at home. It makes her feel inferior and lowers her self - confidence. These feeling accordingly ruin the husband wife relationship and family life. Gilman further articulates in her essay, *The Lady of the House as*:

“The man needs the wife and has her needs the world and has it. The woman needs the husband instead. He stands between her and the world, with the best of intentions, doubtless: but a poor substitute for full human life”(15-23).

Rani comes from a lower class family and her feelings are shaped by the factor that she is uneducated and financially dependent on her husband. It is palpable that for a working class woman, it is difficult to think beyond her husband. Rani loves her husband and craves for his attentions. But Appanna's strange behavior disturbed Rani's happiness. That night Naga comes and Rani asks him with flood of tears in her eyes:

“Why are you humiliating me like this? Why are you stripping me naked in front of the whole village? Why don't you kill me instead? I would have killed myself. But there is not even a rope.” (NM. 53)

Unlike Shrimathi, she is unintelligent and destitute. From her view point, life would be happier for her if she is loved by her husband. Afterward, she concentrates her efforts to that end. In Rani's case, it is obvious that if society was impartial and reprimanded, Appanna would have realized his mistake before tragedy struck in the form of Naga's attention's towards Rani and eventually to Naga's death.

The present generation woman is loaded with more work, physically and emotionally, when compared to the previous generation woman. Nevertheless, it is inspiring to see women rising up to the occasion. Today's upper class woman is intelligent and needs to satisfy her intellectual needs in totaling to looking after the family. Today's woman is not seeking to cut off her family relations to fulfill these needs on the opposing she is crying out for help. The family has to step in at this point to help the woman realize her intellectual needs. A working class woman's life, obviously revolves around her husband and her family. Her needs are emotional and reliant on her husband. As society feels, it is its right to act as moral policy where a woman's morals are anxious, it should also realize its duty in educating a man about his responsibilities towards his wife before any disaster occurs in the family due to his irresponsible behaviour. The study concludes that owing to education and awareness today's women are ready to discover the selves, identify their needs and work towards accomplish their aspiration. With a little help from the family and society, people can lead better lives without any inconvenient happening. A little compromise and timely action from the family and society instead of unreasonable prospect can unite families instead of breakups.

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