

Gender Bias Verses Power of Sexuality:

A Study Of

Girish Karnad's *Naga- Mandala*

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ABSTRACT

This article studies Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* as both the concept of gender and sexuality. In this article, I propose to illustrate the difference between gender and sex and also the power of sexuality of the female protagonist in the gender biased society in Girish Karnad's *Naga- Mandala*. And at the same time, it highlights the female sexuality in the cast of Rani who wants to satiate her sexual desire by trapping her male counterpart through the magical power even if in the male dominated society. By discussing the works of Karnad, women are though submissive, silent in nature, they have shown the power of sexuality by fulfilling their sexual desire and stood as a fully woman in the society. So the paper seeks to explore these gender issues and analyses their abiding relevance, especially in the context of a pan-Indian resurgence in conservative, chauvinistic reactions to women's role in society. The study is to explore how the images of men and women in literature either reflect or reject the social forces that have historically kept the sexes from achieving true and social equality.

Key words: gender, sex, patriarchy, male chauvinist, gender bias, female sexuality, gender discrimination.

The concept of gender and sexuality basically emerges in post-independence Indian drama. The term gender refers to proposed social and cultural constructions of masculinities and femininities. On the other side the term sex refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women. So the word sex should be reserved for reference to the biological aspects of being male or female or to sexual activity, and that the word gender should be used only to refer to sociocultural roles. The gender issues depict the inequality between man and woman. Specifically, the woman in the Indian society, whether of high or low social standing is always looks down upon by virtue of being a woman and ill-treated by the domineering patriarchy.

We come across experiences where women are not only treated as subordinate to men but are also subject to discriminations, humiliations, exploitations, oppressions, control and violence. They have to suffer because patriarchy is inextricably woven in social structure and male domination continues. Patriarchy is based on a system of power relations which are hierarchical and unequal where men control women's production, reproduction and sexuality. It imposes masculinity and femininity character stereotypes in society which strengthen the iniquitous power relations between men and women. The role of the male as the primary figure of authority is central to social organization, and where fathers hold authority over women, children, and property. It implies the institutions of male rule and privilege, and is dependent on female subordination. The principle of patriarchy has been central to the social, legal, political, and economic organizations down the ages. Sylvia Walby in "*Theorizing Patriarchy*" calls it "*a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women*" (Walby,30).

In Girish Karnad's plays, gender based discriminations and exploitations are widespread and the socio-culturally defined characteristics, aptitudes, abilities, desires, personality traits, roles, responsibilities and behavioural patterns of men and women contribute to the inequalities and hierarchies in society. Gender differences are man-made and they get legitimized in a patriarchal society. The conflict of gender discrimination arises when only physical part of one's strengths is considered and the mental is neglected. As a result of such half considered phenomenon, individuals categorized a strong & weak, emotionally, strong & emotionally sensitive competent & incompetent, leaders and followers etc. In this case, the gender discrimination doesn't remain in its totality or originality & is considered as a factor deteriorating the process of development of human skills. The major determinants of gender

discrimination include the social set up, culture, religion geographical conditions, economic set up, moral standards and educational level of the society. All these factors individually or combination make up the face of gender discrimination.

In this regard, Judith Butler calls into question the category of “woman”, saying that many feminist theorists have mistakenly assumed the existence of this category as fixed and permanent. She argues that the category of the subject is a performative construct and there are ways of “doing” one’s identity which might trouble the neat binary oppositions of male/female, masculine/feminine, straight/queer etc. Butler claims that gender identity is a sequence of acts, but she does not mean by this that there is a pre-existing performer who performs these acts. However, this does not mean that there is no subject: it merely means that the subject does not come before these acts. Arguing about the instability of the category of “woman”, Butler says:

Woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and re signification. Even when gender seems to congeal into the most reified forms, the “congealing” is itself an insistent and insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various social means.
(p.33)

Butler believes that sex, gender and sexuality do not exist in relation to each other. Generally, sex is seen to cause gender and gender is seen to cause desire, but Butler’s attempt is to show that gender and desire are not fixed but flexible. It is possible to be female by sex and yet display masculine traits. Gender, according to Butler, is a “choice”, that is not as simple as it might appear to be. By “choice” Butler does not mean that a subject is an entirely free agent who can select her/his gender; this is not possible because the choice of gender is always limited from the start. Butler remarks:

In Variations on Sex and Gender, To choose a gender is to interpret received gender norms in a way that organises them anew. Less a radical act of creation, gender is a tacit project to renew one’s cultural history in one’s own terms.(p 131)

Gender then, according to Butler, is constructed and not naturally determined by sex. But this raises the question as to whether sex is also culturally

constructed as gender is or, in other words, whether sex is gender. Thus, questioning the distinction usually made between sex and gender, Butler says that both these categories are performative:

Gender is not a noun (but it) proves to be performative, that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed. (p. 25)

In case of rani, the female protagonist of Karnad's *Naga-Mandala*, who just married to Appanna and their gradual understanding of the role in their conjugal life. This incident is presented to understand female context and women's feeling in man-oriented society. Karnad brings play within play the strong association between oral narrative tradition and women's emotion existing within the patriarchal societies. In short the female experience expressed in female narratives is woven within the folk tale as the 'flame' tells her story to the male playwright. In the connection of the play's title, Pranav Joshipura comments:

The title of the play takes not after any human character, but after a snake-Naga. The story of the Cobra suggests that the play not merely dramatizes the folk tales in modern interpretation, but it applies a deeper meaning at various levels. Snakes are also the symbols of human maleness and strength. (Surendran, 105)

The action of the whole play centres around her character- her hopes, desires, misery, happiness and at last her union with her husband. The character of Rani presents the journey of a woman from enslavement to empowerment and from frigidity to sensuality. She begins as a victim of her husband's oppression but ends up as a Goddess. Rani, the protagonist of the novel is a character whose life the play trails as she evolves from an immature, naïve girl into that of a confident and mature woman. Like any other girl, she too enters this new life with many expectations and trepidations, desires and dreams. But reality knocks her down nonplussed. Appanna locks her up in the house all alone only to return in the day for his bath and lunch. Rani's presence in his life is only as his housekeeper and cook. He does not want

her to have any social contacts and interactions, and to ensure her complete alienation, he first brings home a watch dog and then a mongoose.

Here we can say that gender discrimination is the basis of all kinds of domination and subjugation amongst the sexes. The marginal position of women in the Indian society as a result has become an integral part of the socio-cultural identity of the country. A woman has no identity of her own, a victim of 'incompleteness' she craves for completeness in her relations, in love but usually finds none. Though traditionally the man-woman relationship is compared to the two wheels of a cart, both equally important, yet in reality the female is always the broken, fragmented wheel clinging to the other (male) for support and survival. This inequality and imbalance is clearly visible in the relationship of Rani-Appanna. Rani has no say in any matter; she cannot even question the behaviour of her husband. A result of years of conditioning that a girl goes through right from birth, Rani also accepts her subjugation submissively.

Rani is very traditional Indian woman who does not dare to do any harmful act against husband. Therefore she pours the curry into the anthill to destroy it. But there is a King Cobra which is called Naga tastes that liquid and starts love to Rani. A cobra can assume any form as it likes. Naga which eats that liquid enters the house through the bathroom drain and took the shape of Appanna. Naga feels very pity on Rani for her dismal condition he goes to close Rani when she was sleeping. When she wakes up she assumes that her husband Appanna comes in home. Naga starts to love very affectionately:

***Naga:** Quite right! That won't do any more. From tomorrow I want you to be fresh and bright when I come home at night-*

***Rani:** At night?*

***Naga:** Yes. I shall come home every night from now on. May I? May I sit by you now? Or will that make you jump out of your skin again?*

***Naga:** Don't be afraid. Put your head against my shoulder. Now, don't be silly. I am not a mongoose or a hawk that you should be so afraid of me. Good. Relax.(p.56)*

The conversation between Naga and Rani reveals that first Rani fears but when she comes to know that her husband Appanna starts to love her at that moment she becomes ready to response. But reality is that Naga is in the form of Appanna. However, Rani is not aware that Naga comes to meet her in form of Appanna in night, but real Appanna comes in morning. Rani thinks that Appanna changed his behaviour so she greets him naturally without burden but Appanna does not respond nicely to her. She gets very confused to see the double behaviour of her husband who loves in night very passionately but in the day time he maintains distance with her. Therefore she complains to Naga:

Rani: What can I say if you behave like this?

Naga: Like this.

Rani: You talk so nicely at night. But during the day I only have to open my mouth and you hiss like a ... stupid snake. It's all very well for you to laugh. I feel like crying.

Naga: What should I do then-stop coming at night? Or during the day?(p.57)

As above mentioned that Rani expresses her confusion about her husband's double behaviour and she cannot understand the reality. Rani cannot comprehend the situation since Appanna cannot so affectionate and compassionate. Yet she willingly suspends her disbelief and enjoys the concern and affection of Naga who is in the guise of Appanna. It means that she meets Naga and enjoys his company as assuming that he is her husband. In this connection, Girish Karnad says:

The position of Rani in the story of Nag-Mandala, for instance, 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 two unconnected roles-as a strangers during the day and as 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.(Karnad,186)

Moreover, Rani has sufficient reasons to believe that the Naga is not Appanna. On the night, when the cobra enters the darkened front yard of rani's house, she hears the sound of the dog's growling and fighting, mixed with the hiss of snake, which ends shortly after the dogs give a long painful howl. On the night, when she moves into his arms she notices blood on Naga's cheeks and shoulders. She screams in fight as she looks at Naga in the mirror. At the place, where the Naga is sitting, she sees a cobra. The next morning when Appanna comes, Rani's confusion is worst confounded. She says: *But last night....he had blood on his cheeks... and shoulders. Now...(p.60)*

So from the above dialogues show that Rani's increasing suspicion about Naga's identity is more, but she doesn't ask a single question to Naga. Her questionable actions reveal that rani wants to stay happy with her husband like other women in the society and also satisfies her sexual desire with Naga although in the disguise of her husband, Appanna.

Considered from a realistic point of view, Naga represents the modern, new woman's right to choice, the right to choose a life overcoming all obstacles to her happiness. It symbolizes the breaking of barriers, crossing of the lines that intend to imprison a woman and distance her from her surroundings as well as her own 'self'. More an initiator than a leader, Naga actually initiates Rani on to the path of transformation.

The embodiment of Rani's happy married life; Naga's love is the life support for Rani. In her dream-like state, a result of her long moments of isolation and yearning, Rani is blissfully intoxicated with Naga's love and throws all caution to the winds regarding her husband's contrasting behaviour. Stranger by day and lover by night, Appanna reflects the schizophrenic temperament of the typical male, insensitive and selfish. Still a pinch of suspicion remains in Rani's mind, which is finally removed when she finds out that she is pregnant. The child within her finally proves to her that Naga's love is not an illusion but a reality. Assured by her pregnancy she says, *I have definite evidence to prove I was not fantasizing.(p.61)*

In this respect, Girish Karnad presents the problem of chastity which is gender biased, majorly related with women and they must care more for chastity than men in Indian society. Traditionally the concept of chastity is patriarchal term that has been used to weaken women and to control them in male-dominated society. Ramayana is the great epic of

Hindu mythology. The female character Sita has to face fire ordeal to prove her chastity in the presence of the all elders and her husband. It is a kind of example which shows that from very ancient times women are exploited on the name of chastity. In the same way, Girish Karnad presents 'Snake ordeal' for Rani to prove her chastity in Naga- Mandala. The concept 'ordeal' is related with only women from very ancient age to modern age. Also such incidents show the reality that women in Indian society have very secondary place and they have to suffer on the name of purity in marital life.

It explain that Rani presents herself as conscious woman who justifies her equal rights in the family. She does not hesitate to raise questions about the dominance of male-dominated society where women are exploited. She asserts herself for the first time when she refuses to follow her husband's dictates blindly. She is presented as a tool in the hand of male and it is closely related traditional Indian women who expressing their plight in social structure existing in modern Indian society. In real life, however, Rani does not crave for any extraordinary status. She craves for happiness with her husband. Rani emerges as a strong individual with a mind of her own after she becomes pregnant. She questions her husband's authority and paradoxical behaviour without realising that Naga and Appanna are two different individuals reacting to her pregnancy in their own manner. At end, to prove her chastity Rani accepts the 'Snake ordeal' and she puts hands into the snake pit. When she pulls the snake, snake binds itself around her and does not bite. She is declared as a goddess. Appanna asks her pardon and lives with her.

Karnad presents the man and woman pass through several stages of doubt, uncertainty and even failures before they become mature and learn to live harmoniously as husband and wife within the married life. Karnad projects the significance of the institution of marriage. Husband and wife have to adjust and understand each other in their married life. Even because of their marriage they are honoured in the community. Both man and woman accept the social pressure in putting aside personal feelings about selfhood, dreams and self freedom. When Appanna becomes mature one in his married life, it is observed that Appanna's self-centred and physical relationship with the prostitute are given up and he takes interest of the family and community. Rani is in dilemma when she does not understand what the reason is so she is blamed as a whore. Indian ethics does not permit a woman to have extra-marital relations even if the woman is a deserted wife. Naturally Rani is shocked when she realizes that she is blamed as a whore.

Society can never accept or come to terms with a woman strong enough to be assertive and independent; even if it does accept a woman as the leader, it does so with grudge and after much ado. A woman can either be a slave or a Goddess but never an equal. The extremes in the attitude of a patriarchal society towards a woman reveal an inherent fear of femininity which is the ultimate authority in the Indian psyche.

Rani accepts her subjugation submissively and her desire for love, comfort and companionship are repressed and suppressed and she is isolated and detached from any social interactions by the dictates of her tyrant husband. She dreams of herself being locked up by a 'demon' in a castle, while the prince comes in the guise of the cobra and leads her to cross the line demarcated for her by her husband and society. In her dream-like state, a result of her long moments of isolation and yearning, Rani is blissfully intoxicated with the love of Naga who comes in the guise of her husband Appanna. The suspicious husband finds out about her pregnancy and beats her up accusing her of adultery. In the trial before the village elders, she speaks the truth: Yes, my husband and this king Cobra. Except for these two, I have not touched any one of the male sex. The villagers judge her to be innocent and hail her as a Goddess. Rani's transformation from an immature and naïve girl to the ideal 'mother' becomes connected through the acceptance of socially approved roles. After the test of her fidelity, a brute husband who has an illicit relationship with a concubine becomes her slave and server with a sense of metaphysical mystique. Rani has to prove her chastity by undergoing 'snake ordeal'.

The power of sexuality comes when rani keeps sexual relationship with Naga who is in the guise of Appanna. She totally forgets her husband's rude behaviour and accepts his love for her at night. So we can say that power of sexuality is prior than the gender bias. So rani indulges in an extra-marital relationship, she does not express her desire openly. By the supernatural aid, she is able to satiate her desire. In case of Rani in, Kurudavva gives Rani the magical roots to seduce her husband Appanna who is way ward but the root is consumed by a king cobra which results in very interesting twists and turns in the play. Another common belief is that the cobra its divine power and it can assume any form it desires. So, in some sense, rani has nothing to do with this unlawful sexual communion. It is with his supernatural powers, Naga saves Rani from her pitiable and dangerous plight to prove her chastity.

The discriminating treatment acts on Appanna and Rani in Naga- Mandala. Appanna openly and unashamedly commits adultery, but nobody objects to it. Even the village elders who sit in judgement of Rani's adultery do not find any fault with him. Nobody believes the innocence of Rani. She sleeps with Naga without knowing its identity. She does not discover the identity of Naga who assumes Appanna's form by using its magical power. Her failure to discover the truth is the suppression of her reason and intuition by the injection of Appanna and Naga not ask any question. If she had discovered the real identity of Naga she would not have allowed him to enter her bedroom. As a typical woman, she is frigid and despises sex. What she craves for is affection which Naga gives her in plenty by functioning as a surrogate parent for a while. By using his erotic art Naga cures her frigidity. Because of this, latter Appanna and Rani could enjoy marital life happily.

The play deals with gender-biased and the subjection of woman in patriarchal Indian orthodox society. The female protagonist Rani is generic creation stands for Indian woman. Rani is placed in a world where orthodox social conventions, cultural taboos and coercive forces work. She is socialised to internalised the male superiority—an invisible conspiracy to derogate and marginalize her position in the society. She adopts new ways to transcend age-old subjection of woman. Rani is surrounded by evil social forces where she finds herself helpless; tortured by alienation and despair but she never surrenders and continues her struggle for identity—as a woman, as a wife and as a mother (karkar, 50). Karnad's solution appears, at the first observation odd, unconvincing and unconventional violating traditional mode of treatment. It is clear that despite alienation, despair and antithetical conditions a woman must continue her struggle for her existence and transcend "nothingness" in life and manipulate co-existence as a means for self-existence, patriarchy, socio-cultural practices, parents of Rani, Appanna, village elders, Naga, dog and mongoose etc are the tools to perpetuate exploitation of Rani.

The appearance of love filling the emptiness of Rani's life with love and care is explained through the myth of 'Naga', a folk tale where it represents prosperity, happiness and fertility. A man does not need to explain his reasons for gratification of his sensual pleasures but a woman's instinctual need is ignored, and their desire is considered a transgression of moral codes requiring supernatural justification. The Naga in the guise of Appanna presents a choice for Rani, a choice to live a fuller and happier life. It is her expression of desire and also the fulfilment of her wish for love, her desire to live life fully and with satisfaction. If Appanna

is the demon then Naga is the prince in Rani's life. A source of energy, the Naga represents the positive element, the cultural leader, and harbinger of a social change, generating a transformation not only in the character of Rani but also in the society at large.

Karnad though presents a rebellious and open minded outlook on the issue of gender discrimination and exploitation of women in the Indian society, yet he is unwilling to break the fragile balance of social and cultural norms. In this play, The public and private selves become connected through the acceptance of socially responsible roles (Sarat Babu,237). And so Rani's transformation is in agreement with her acceptance of Appanna as her husband and father of her child. Desires may be fulfilled and remain concealed in her psyche as evidenced by the presence of Naga in her tresses or in her imagination, but in reality she confirms to the pre-determined role set by society not as a naïve and submissive girl but as an experienced and assertive woman aware of her rights and position.

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