

**Triangular Love in Girish Karnad's  
*Hayavadana, Nagamandala and The Fire and the Rain***

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**Abstract:**

Girish Karnad, as a playwright, picks up his plots from Indian myths and legends where *Kama* (sexual urge) plays an important role. So love and sex are awarded special significance in Karnad's plays. Under the influence of *Kama* his male and female characters don't hesitate to cross social and religious barriers. For their physical gratification the wives in his plots look outside their marriage if their husbands cannot satisfy them.. Incidentally, in *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala* and *The Fire and the Rain*, there is a triangular love – one woman is at the center of two men and she tends to side with the one who can better satisfy her physically. In *Hayavadana* Padmini develops liking for the friend of her husband who is physically weak. In *Nagamandala*, Rani likes to be in the company of *Naga* who appears as her husband at night. She suspends her disbelief about the identity of *Naga* and enjoys nights with him. Similarly, in *The Fire and the Rain* Vishakha loses control over herself seeing her old lover *Yavakri* in the absence of her husband.

Folktales, myths and legends are the reservoir of plots for Girish Karnad as a playwright. He employs them in such a way that they acquire the status of the stories of human heart. As Indian tradition and culture always operate at the background of his art of playwriting, the sexual urge (*Kama*) is awarded special significance in Karnad's plays. *Kama* is the Hindu god of love who is

believed to be the most handsome of all gods. In the *Rig Veda*, *Kama* (literally meaning desire) is described as the "first movement that arose in one after it had come into life through the power of fervour of abstraction". In the *Puranas* also the god of love or sex appears and his main function is to create sexual desire in men and women. The moment Kama was born he let loose a shaft on his father. Wounded with this, the creator of the universe (*Brahma*) fell in love with his own daughter. The Hindu scriptures describe in detail the mischief done by this god of love in every sphere.<sup>1</sup>

Modern thinkers like Sigmund Freud also maintain that all human activity is governed by the sexual instinct. To Freud the Libido is the primal source of all energy. He holds that the sexual instinct (Libido) is the most basic instinct in man. Due to his fondness for tradition and influence of Freud, the feeling of love and sex finds frequent reference in Karnad. In his *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala* and *The Fire and the Rain*, it emerges as a major issue. Incidentally, in all the three plays sexuality is awarded significance and all the major female characters tend to look outside their marriage forming a triangular love in their relationship.

The relationship of Padmini, Devadatta and Kapila in *Hayavadana* bears this mark. Padmini is married to Devadatta with a weak body that never enchants her and she develops liking for Kapila (friend of her husband) who reciprocates it in a hidden way. Her sexual liberty is hinted at by the playwright when the female chorus says that love cannot be restricted to a single person, "Why should love stick to the sap of a single body? When the stem is drunk with the thick yearning of the many petalled, many flowered lantana, why should it be tied down to the relation of a single flower?"<sup>2</sup>. Soon after getting married with Devadatta, Padmini starts liking Kapila because her own husband has a small "feminine waist" which looks "so helpless", she says. On the other hand, her attraction for Kapila explains itself: "What an ethereal shape! Such a broad back - like an ocean with muscles rippling across it. He is like a celestial being reborn as a hunter. How his body sways, his limbs curve - it's a dance almost" (p.96). When Kapila saw Padmini for the first time he rightly says that Devadatta is no match for her: "Devadatta, my friend. You are a gentle soul. But this one (Padmini) is fast as lightning... She is not for the likes of you. What she needs is a man of steel" (p. 90).

Devadatta too does not deny the physical superiority of Kapila and justifies his wife's attraction for him. He feels that no woman could resist him and it is nothing strange if Padmini likes him. Rather he curses himself for not understanding her. First he blames Kapila who is "begging for a favour." But soon he understands the reality: "Only I see the depths- Now ! Look at those yellow, purple flames. Look how she is pouring her soul in his mould. Look ! Look deep into these eyes-look until these peacock flames burn out the blindness in you" (p. 96). If she insists on going to the temple of Ujjain with Kapila inspite of his resistance it is only because his physical presence fascinates her so much. When Devadatta tries to cancel the trip reminding her of her pregnancy, she rejects it outright saying "she has a womb of steel" (p. 93). So, as expected, during this visit she enjoys the company of Kapila and appreciates his muscular body in the presence of Devadatta. Because nothing can stop her, she goes to the temple of Rudra with Kapila leaving her husband behind.

As the heads of Devadatta and Kapila mix up as both behead themselves in the temple of Kali, Padmini prefers the body of Kapila (with Devadatta's head). Before their dispute, that is, who is the actual husband of Padmini is resolved by the Rishi, she has already made up her mind to go with the figure that has Devadatta's head. It is the same body which she used to cherish before this incident. When Kapila (with Devadatta's body) asserts his claim over her, she feels upset and says, "Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" (p.106) and asks him to "shut up". She calls him "rascal" and "brute". At this Kapila points out the shrewdness of Padmini : "I know what you want, Padmini. Devadatta's clever head and Kapila's strong body." Devadatta calls it natural and finds there is nothing wrong in it. "It's natural for a woman to feel attracted to a fine figure of a man" (p. 108). After the dispute is decided by the Rishi the first thing Padmini admires in the new Devadatta is his body. She caresses his shoulders and says, "What a wide chest. What other canopy do I need?" (p.111). To her, he appears like a bridegroom with an ornament of a new body. But the moment they part ways with Kapila, Padmini finds it hard to leave him alone. She advises him not to be sad but to wait for her coming back to meet him again. He should "cheer up" says Padmini as she is going with his body. Actually, by saying so she cheers up herself as well. Soon Devadatta's new body starts turning weak as before, and Padmini begins to long for

Kapila again. One day, after getting toys for her son from the fair, she starts searching Kapila in the forest and finds him. She implores him reminding him of the old relationship of their bodies:

Be quiet, stupid. Your body bathed in a river, swam and danced in it. Shouldn't your head know what river it was, what swim? Your head too must submerge in that river-The flow must rumple your hair, run its tongue in your ears and press your head to its bosom. Until that's done, you'll continue to be incomplete (pp. 126-27).

After listening to her we see that "(Kapila raises his head and he looks at her. She caresses his face, like a blind person trying to imprint it on her fingertips. Then she rests her head on his chest...Kapila lifts her up and takes her in)" (pp. 126-27). Soon Devadatta also appears on the scene. Discovering the intensity of the bond between Kapila and Padmini he challenges the former for a duel as he finds no other way out of this triangle. They kill each other and Padmni performs Sati.

The other play marked by love and sexuality is *Nagamandala*. Sexuality comes to the fore through Naga, which is much celebrated in Hindu mythology. Rani, the main character, is married to Appanna. Their marriage remains unconsummated as there is no physical union between the two. Appanna spends nights with his concubine outside and his wife has to stay alone at night. This separation is a sexual torture for her. One day Kurudavva, the friend of her mother-in-law, visits her and befriends Rani. The first thing she does without the knowledge of her husband is that she stealthily meets Kurudavva. Had she not been left alone at night she would have never listened to her advice. She develops intimacy with her in no time as if she were already waiting for someone to come to her rescue. When Kurudavva explains to her the story of the 'two pieces of a root' Rani listens to it very attentively. She laughs for the first time after her marriage when Kurudavva narrates how the root given to her by a mendicant helped her in marrying a man and "it took the plague to detach him from her (p. 34). Perhaps, she has found a ray of hope in Kurudavva's tale. That's is why she requests her to "come again" (p. 24). She makes the paste of the root and mixes it up in the milk boiled for Appanna. He drinks it but she fails to win him for her nights. Again when she is locked, "then it rains for seven days and seven

nights. It pours. The sea floods the city. The waters break down the door of the castle..." (p.35). It is actually the flood of feminine desire in her for her husband. When Kurudavva further suggests her to use the larger piece of the root and assures her that Appanna will carry her to his concubine's house, she "blushes" at this.

Rani's feminine self is out with joy but she doesn't know how to express it when the Naga visits her at night for the first time in the shape of Appanna. She simply stands "dazed" leaning against the wall confused with the joy she offers him for food even at midnight at which Naga laughs. When he assures her that he will come every night she laughs "shyly" (p. 46). Then she puts her head against his shoulder and he envelops her into his arms. Rani falls asleep as she has already undergone enough of sexual insomnia. During his next visit Naga wants to know whether she likes his night visit. Rani turns emotional. "*(Eyes filling up)* Why do you tease me like this? I am sick of being alone.... I was desperate that you should come again tonight" (p.42). Modest Rani is unable to hide her feminine desire any longer.

No doubt, the first sexual experience shakes her but it also infuses new courage in her. For the first time, docile Rani gathers courage to acquire a confident tone: "Go away! Don't talk to me" (p. 44) and "warns" Naga not to say anything against her parents. Naga tries to pacify her by telling her that sex is the most basic instinct in everyone and they are no exception to it. He asserts its universality thus :

Frogs croaking in pelting rain, tortoises singing soundlessly in the dark, foxes, crass, ants, rattlers, sharks, swallows--even the geese ' The female begins to smell like the wet earth. And stung by her smell, the king Cobra starts searching for his Queen! The tiger bellows for the mate. When the flame of the forest blossoms into a fountain of red and earth cracks open at the touch of the aerial roots of the banyan, it moves in the hollow of the cottonwood, in the flow of the estuary, the dark limestone caves from the womb of the heavens to the dark netherworlds, within everything that sprouts, grows, stretches, creaks and blooms--everywhere, those who come together cling, fall apart lazily! It is there and there and there, everywhere (p. 45).

This seems to convince Rani as she never likes to part with him onwards. She runs to him and embraces him before he goes out. She curses the birds that show by their chirping that the night is over and they should depart now: "Why don't those birds choke on their own songs? Who has given them the right to mess about with other creatures' night" (p.45) And when Kurudavva enquires if she has started her married life, "she blushes" and then "laughs" (p. 47). Perhaps she wants to laugh aloud and proclaim that now she is in love with someone, but she doesn't. Then she asks Kurudavva to come again. So it is evident that the sexual experience with Naga has actually delighted her.

Rani never doubts the identity of the man who visits her at night, though she has sufficient proof that he is not actually her husband. But why she should be suspicious and spoil her nights when her husband does not satisfy her. Whenever there is a doubt about Naga's identity, she makes no effort to confirm it. She seems to suspend her disbelief willingly. Looking for ointment to apply to the wounds of Naga she opens up the mirror-box and in the mirror finds a cobra in place of Appanna. But she never tries to confirm it by just seeing into the mirror again. Moreover, Naga disappears from the room when her door is locked from outside, and Kurudavva too tells her that they have seen a cobra coming out of the bathroom drain and no human being has come out. Furthermore, in the morning she finds no scare on the face of Appanna. He also says that the dead dog was not an ordinary hound and it has cornered a *cheeta* once : "It must have sensed the Cobra. It must have given a fight. Didn't you hear at night?" (p. 48), asks he. At this she shakes her head in disbelief but overlooks the detail of the incident. In the morning, she sees the bits of snakeskin in the mongoose's teeth but she does not doubt it. It is important that Naga does not turn up for fifteen days after this incident. When he reappears his body is covered with partly healed wounds. She applies ointment and nurses his wounds but she never questions him about it. Perhaps she does not want to lose him again as she feels, "it was enough that he had returned" (p. 49). Appanna at day and the Appanna at night, apart from the behavioural difference, have noticeable physical difference especially of wounds on their faces. But it never becomes a source of suspicion for Rani. She simply forgets everything when she thinks of Naga and that of the nights spent with him: "There it is ... the smell of the blossoming night queen! How it fills the house before he comes. How it welcomes him! God, how it takes me, sets each

fiber in me on fire" (p. 49). She waits throughout the day to burn with this "fire" at night. Her joy knows no bounds when she informs her "night-husband" that she is pregnant. She feels happy over her inner growth: "I was a stupid, ignorant girl, when you brought me here. But now a woman, a wife and I am going to be mother. I am not a parrot. Not a cat or sparrow" (p. 50) as she has always been treated during day time. It is only Naga that cures her of frigidity with love as the male sex surrogate. She is not scared of anything now. If anything frightens her it is the thought of losing her night-life which she never wants to do: "I don't want any tomorrows or days after. I want night to last forever .... I mustn't let you go. I must listen to my heart and hold you back. Take you like a baby in my arms and make you safe ' (p.55). The mother in Rani consoles Naga "like a baby". First she used to behave as a baby. It is with the love of Naga that she grows up. M. Sarat Babu observes that she behaves "as a frightened child in the presence of Appanna. She grows as she receives the affection of Naga. She, a little helpless indifferent girl, gradually becomes a confident and courageous lady"<sup>3</sup>.

In *The Fire and the Rain* too love and sex remain a major concern. The play presents two love stories. The first is of Arvasu and Nittilai who are in their teens: Arvasu is nineteen years old and Nittilai is just fourteen. Their teenage love is in progress and they are planning to get married. If Rani in 'Nagamandala' is to face the Elders of Appanna's village for having sexual relations with a man other than her husband, Arvasu is to face the Elders of Nittilai's tribe. Going by the tribal custom every young man who wants to marry their daughter has to appear before the Elders first. But here the problem is that Arvasu is a Brahmin and Nittilai is a hunter girl. Their orthodox family won't allow this inter-caste marriage. Arvasu respects his elder brother Parvasu, a rigid Brahmin, but won't sacrifice his love for Nittilai for his sake. He is ready to face the Elders for her. But he cannot reach there in time, so he is refused Nittilai's hand. Her brother knocks him down and plants his foot on his chest for being troubled and humiliated by Arvasu called his sister by name in public. But they fail to check the lovers meeting each other. Nittilai runs away from her husband and comes to stay with Arvasu. When her lover becomes the target of her parents' wrath she comes out for his help.

In spite of her passionate love for Nittali she does not have any physical liason with Arvasu even before or after marriage. If she has keen interest in her life it is because of her attachment

with him. As she says, "Do you think I want to die? You think I want to be hunted down by my brother and my husband? ...Arvasu. I am still young. I don't want to die"<sup>4</sup> But as Arvasu runs amok playing the role of Vritra she runs for his protection forgetting that their relationship is socially unacceptable. When her husband feels the two lovers are difficult to separate from each other he slashes her throat.

The other character asserting love and sexuality in her own way is Vishakha. She was loved by Yavakri before her marriage. Ten years ago when he came to her to bid her good bye before leaving for the spiritual life in forest, she lost control over herself, Succumbing to her bodily desires, she led him quickly to the Jack fruit grove behind her house. No doubt, time has affected her body as her "Breasts hang now" but her urge to be loved is young as ever. Meeting Yavakri for the second time she repeatedly hints at her unsatisfied sexual urge.

Vishakha offers herself to Yavakri on his second visit to her like Rani in *Nagamandala* who willingly suspends her disbelief about the identity of Naga because her husband does not satisfy her. Even though Vishakha is married, she fails to control herself on seeing her old lover after a long time. She sits down and readily agrees to listen to him. The moment he tries to kiss her she sheds all fears and admits that Yavakri has rekindled her desire. She says. "I thought it was dead and gone. Gently, don't rush... and words are like water precious. I was afraid to bathe. Now I want to drown" (p.16). Then she narrates to him how Vishakha has been left alone by her husband for the last fifteen years. She even narrates her sexual experience with her husband to her old lover. She feels much relieved and frankly confesses that the married life of one year gave her a great joy as her husband plunged her into a kind of bliss. She did not know that she even breathed. It was a "heaven for her" (p. 16). She narrates:

He plunged me into a kind of bliss. I did not know it existed. It was heaven-  
hero and now-at the tip of all my senses. Then.... He used my body, and his own  
body like an experimenter, an explorer. As instrument in a search. Search for  
what? I never knew... Nothing was too shameful, too degrading, even too painful.  
Shame died in me. And I yielded. I let my body be turned inside out as he did his  
own. I had a sense he was leading me to something. Mystical? Spiritual? We  
never talked... (p. 16).

Perhaps she longs to undergo such an experience again that is why she shares this erotic experience with Yavakri. She also feels how neither her husband nor her lover could take cognizance of her feminine self. Very significantly she divulges, "I shall give you the knowledge Indra could not give you -My body...." (p. 17).

When her husband enquires about her meeting with Yavakri she does not hide anything. She says, "Whatever you heard about Yavakri and me... Was no rumour (p. 31). She also states that he and Yavakri resemble so much with each other. She justifies her husband's secret visit to her at night: "I suppose that it would be too human. But what's wrong with being human? What's wrong with being happy?" (p. 32). She also praises Yavakri in her husband's presence as Padmini praises Kapila in Devadatta's. She says, "At least Yavakri was warm, gentle" (p. 31). Finally, her desire to be killed by her husband may be taken as her last effort to escape the sexual suffering she has been experiencing.

Apart from the traditional mythological symbols used for love and sex, Girish Karnad uses new symbols and images. In *Hayavadana*, Padmini's description of the moving bullock cart driven by Kapila has strong sexual overtones. The description of the journey by the rider becomes allegory of the sexual act. Here the cart driven by the oxen stands for the phallus, the bull for the male virility and the road for the female sexual organ. Addressing Kapila, Padmini says, "The cart...the oxen seem to know exactly where to go-you drove it so gently" (p. 95). But about Devadatta she says, "Devadatta took me in the cart that was soon after our marriage... so we started- only two of us, me and Davadatta driving against my advice...And we didn't even cross the city gates. The oxen took everything except the road"(p.96). Then Kapila's description of the fortunate Lady's flower is also suggestive of the female sexual organ, "The yellow on the petal... here-that thin saffron line like the parting of you're here-That-.... here near the stem a row of black dots" (p. 9). Padmini calls it good for a simile. She is also called Lotus, which apart from representing the beauty, stands for the female generative organ. The Linga or the sacred phallus in the Hindu mythology is also depicted as resting on or surrounded by Lotus petals symbolizing the unity between the male and the female as the secret of life in the universe. Then, bathing in a river in *Hayavadana* stands for physical union. During conversation in the forest,

Padmini reminds Kapila of the old relationships between their bodies by using the image of bathing in the river. She says, "your body bathed in a river, swam and danced with it" (p.127). Bhagavata rightly adds that "the river has no fear of memories" (p. 127).

In *Nagamandala* it is through the king cobra that Rani gratifies her sexual urge and ultimately gets pregnant. So the snake can be viewed as phallic symbol taken from the Hindu mythology. The snake or the cobra is the symbol of sexuality: "It is associated with sexuality because of its phallic shape."<sup>5</sup> Sex is always viewed as poisonous by the society but it is pleasing to the individual. The cobra too is viewed poisonous by everyone except Rani. In the Hindu mythology itself snake or Naga is awarded specific importance as the symbol of creation or procreation:

In Hinduism, snakes are held to be both malevolent and benevolent creatures... As symbol of dark and unknown recesses of the underground they are associated with the Creation and Procreation. Propagation and Plentitude. The word 'Naga' itself results from double negatives (Na+aga) and refers to that which is "not immobile" or 'which moves'. It carries with it association of all which teems, the ever flowing. Indiscriminate abundance of nature, at one moment savage, at another moment serene.... To one who pleases them the prayers will be answered for fertility, petitions will be honoured for same deliveries.<sup>6</sup>

Cobra becomes the phallic symbol at the end of the play when Rani permits it to enter into her hair as "This hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss", says she (p. 64). Like the cobra the arrow becomes the phallic symbol in *The Fire and The Rain*. Vishakha wants her husband to "pierce her" with the arrow before leaving her all alone.

Girish Karnad is a playwright who views human beings from human angle, so love and sex form the core issue in his plays. Believing in the religion of human heart, he seems to transgress the social code of morality and sexual values as advocated by society and religion. The institutions of marriage and family are no bars for his characters as they believe in satisfying their fleshly desires. The playwright aims to subvert the established order of religion and social

dogma that restrict human freedom. Hence, love and sex remain human concern in his plays knowing no boundary lines drawn by social values and institutions like marriage.

### Notes and References:

1. "Kama roams about the woodlands, fountains, cities and villages on errands of love, creates desire in ascetics and causes weakness in various women. Wounded by the shafts of Kama, faithful wives become adulterous, young ladies yield themselves to betrayers and youthful men commit follies. Leap Rishis practicing austerities give up asceticism and run after women. Countless indeed are the mischiefs done by the God of love," Quoted from Thomas P. "Love and Sex", *Epics, Myths and Legends of India* (Bombay : Taraporvala Sons and Co., 1952) p. 105.
2. Girish Karnad, 'Three Rlays : *Nagamandala, Havavadana, Tughlaq*' (New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1994) p. 182. All subsequent textual references are from this book. Only page number is given in parentheses after the reference.
3. M. Sarat Babu, "The Concept of Chastity and Nagamandala," ed. Jaideepsinh Dodya. *The Plays of Girish Karnad : Critical Perspectives* (New Delhi : Prestige Books, 1998) p. 243.
4. Girish Karnad, *The Fire and the Rain* Tr. (New Delhi: Taurus Press, 1998) p.40. All subsequent textual references are from this book. Only page number is given in parentheses after the reference.
5. *The Encyclopedia of World Mythology* (Herrgkorg : Mandaine Publisher Ltd.. 1979) p. 214.
6. H. Daniel Smith and M. Narsimachary, *Handbook of Hindu Goddesses, Gods and Saints* (Delhi: Sandeep Parkashan. 1991) p. 237.