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### Portrayal of Rani: A Feminist Reading of Girish Kanrad's *Nagamandala*

#### ABSTRACT

Girish Kanrad, a notable dramatist in Indian writing in English has represented Indian drama with its elements like Indianness, Indian ethos and tradition. His play *Nagamandala* is replete with such themes and it is based on two folktales of Karnataka. In a developing country like India, patriarchy, stereotyped notions about women still exist as barriers in the path of an all-round upliftment of a woman. This paper attempts to study the portrayal of the protagonist of the play namely Rani who is also victimized by such taboo of the society. It is examined here how female sexuality is projected in the play. Also, it is critically explored how the concepts like 'chastity', 'virginity', 'purity', 'pregnancy' etc. are gender based and stereotyped. Furthermore, even the folktales are discovered to be male oriented. On the otherhand, the eventual development of the 'mind' of Rani against her 'body' is another pivotal aspect of study in this paper.

**Key Words:** Feminism, patriarchy, sexuality, chastity, folktales

“One is not born, rather becomes a woman.” – Simone de Beauvoir

In a very simple sense, drama, an inalienable genre of literature is the mode of fiction represented in performance. As Abrams defines, drama is “the form of composition designed for performances in theatre, in which actors take the roles of the characters, perform the indicated actions, and utter the written dialogues.” As the British drama has its colourful history right from the mystery, morality and miracle plays till the plays of Marlowe, Shakespeare, Ibsen and so on; it the Indian dram which is also been bestowed with new flavours in terms of themes, techniques and performances. Along with other dramatists of India, Girish Kanrad who was born in Maharastra has contributed a great deal to the Indian dram by leaving behind such plays as *Yayathi* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1971), *Nagamandala* (1988), *Thaledanda* (1990), *Agni Mattu Male* (1995), and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (1997). However, this paper aims to study the central female character, Rani in the play, *Nagamadala* in light of feminist lens.

The principal hypothesis governing this paper is that in the conventional Indian society as well, the female sexuality, concepts of 'chastity', pregnancy and the overall freedom of a girl

and woman are manipulated and restricted by the male dominated society. In the play, *Nagamadala* also, Rani is such a character victimized by the taboo and age old patriarchal norms of the society. But the gradual growth of her 'mind' against her 'body' is something i.e. very notable. Eventually, she has been elevated to a goddess that is the climax of the utter development of her 'mind' and overall triumph over patriarchy and all.

The play *Nagamadala* is based on two oral tales of Karanataka. The very subtitle of the play, *Play with a Cobra* is again quite indicative of the intermingling of myth and history in it. As the narrative proceeds, it is Rani who is portrayed as the protagonist of the play since she is dominating the entire plot of the play. Appanna, a village man marries Rani and brings her to his house. As a typical Indian woman, she arranges for his bath and serves him lunch. But after lunch, he locks her into a room and goes to visit his concubine. Rani is craving for a child of her own but she is isolated. Kurudavva, an intimate friend of Appanna's mother comes to Rani and knows her condition. Having heard her miserable story, she gives her a root to grind it and mix in Appanna's food that will result in his love for her. Unfortunately, a King Cobra namely Naga consumes the curry prepared by Rani and falls in love with her. The Naga assumes the form of Appanna and starts visiting Rani at night. When Appanna comes to know about her pregnancy, it infuriates him and this issue is referred to the village Panchayat. Finally, Rani is asked to prove her innocence by putting her hand into the snake burrow. Surprisingly, Rani does it and vows that she has not touched any other male. This has elevated her to the place of a goddess. People including her husband accept it. However, in the fight between the Naga and Appanna, the Naga is killed and Kanrad explores multiple closures to his play.

In the play Rani is a burning symbol of a typical Indian woman dominated by the patriarchal society initially. She cannot go a step from the threshold of her husband's home. She is caged in the room by her husband. In a way, she is the allegory of emotional, physical, mental, and intellectual domination by the patriarchal society. She has been bound to accept her solitary cell. Apart from this solitary imprisonment of Rani, if we look into it critically we can come to know that even the Panchayat is acting as the symbol of patriarchy. The Panchayat has no comment on the adultery of Appanna but it pushes Rani into the Snake Trial. From this perspective, Rani is just a 'second sex' who is no longer having her own voice and freedom at all in the male dominated society:

Rani: Listen – (*fumbling for words*) Listen – I feel frightened – alone at night.

Appanna: What is there to be scared of? Just keep to yourself. No one will bother you .Right! (Act I)

In the play, female sexuality is dominated by male sexuality. Conventionally, has been treating the woman as an object of satisfying desire of a man in a variety of ways. For instance, although Appanna does not desire Rani physically, he is seen satisfying his physical needs and desire with the concubine. He is manipulating over here the female sexuality according to his own interest. Appanna is never bothered about Rani and her thoughts and desires. From this perspective, he is also a part of a heterosexual society and in such a

society, merely the male sex instincts are justified and supported. Furthermore, Appanna cannot realise the depth and intensity of a married life. The innocence and weakness of Rani's sexuality in front of the manipulation of the male sexuality is reflected when she says,

Give me poison instead. Kill me right here. At least I'll be spared the humiliation.  
Won't the Cobra bite me the moment I touch it? I'll die like your dog and your  
mongoose.  
(Act II)

'Chastity' is another key concept in the connection of reading the drama from a feminist framework. In the play, 'chastity' is projected as a patriarchal concept. It is used to oppress a 'weaken' woman like Rani. In the context of Rani, her chastity and virginity are clearly gender based. In the eyes of Appanna, she is nothing but his personal property and all the time he seems to adopt a possessive attitude towards her. In an Indian society, it is always the purity, chastity and virginity of a woman that is given due heed with stereotyped suspense but it is not so in case of the chastity of the male. It is Appanna who intentionally commits adultery but nobody objects not just because he is a male. Rani has not committed wrong knowingly. Without knowing the real identity of the Naga, she sleeps with him as he visits her in guise of her husband. In a way, her chastity can be compared with that of Oedipus when he kills his own father and marries his mother. Appanna does not let her talk to anyone,

She won't talk to anyone. And no need to talk to her. (Act I)

While studying the folktales it can be seen that most often in a patriarchal society even the folktales represent the male unconscious, fears and wishes. The tales are mostly male-oriented where the female are not bestowed a deserving space. In these stories, there seems to be little space for the desires of a woman like Rani, for instance. Nevertheless the play is based on such male-oriented folk tales of Karnataka, it is the playwright Kanrad who is very much successful in portraying the domination and struggling the space for a woman's freedom. The most significant part is that Kanrad being a man of such society he explores such these and eventually ends up the play with a positive note for woman. The open ended nature of the play as well denotes Kanrad's post-structuralist and postmodernist treatment of those themes.

Rani's Pregnancy is another aspect of the play that bears enormous feminist reading. Her pregnancy is depicted in such a way that is nothing but to be determined by the man. In a patriarchal society, also in India, woman's fertility has been generally considered to be just the fulfilment of a man's desire. Appanna maltreats her and even kicks her. But she is unknown to the real cause while she has become pregnant due to her failure to understand the presence of Naga in the guise of her husband at night. Appanna rebukes her,

Are't you ashamed to admit it, you harlot? I locked you in, and yet you managed to find a lover! Tell me who it is. Who did you go to with your sari off (Act II)

However, it is quite notable that the development of the 'mind' of Rani can be noticed in a gradual way. Especially, when she says, "I'm pregnant"; the subject position 'I' is clear here. She is gradually realising her 'self'. This realization of 'mind' against 'body' is a significant part in feminist resading. In the words of Elizabeth Grosz,

Women are somehow more biological, more corporeal, and more natural than men.  
(Grosz 1994, 14)

In Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as well, as the play proceeds, Lady it is Macbeth who is so desperate to have power is gradually losing her power and manipulation. It's not just a disintegration of her power over her husband, her castle; but it is also utterly a gradual disintegration of her mind. Eventually, she loses her mind and she is getting insane. Now, merely her body works i.e. a female body as such. The doctor tells about her,

" infected minds To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets: More needs she the divine than the physician. God, God forgive us all! Look after her; Remove from her the means of all annoyance, And still keep eyes upon her." (*Macbeth* V, ii)

Unlike Lady Macbeth, towards the end Rani is not getting insane and losing her mind completely; but she is much powerful now. In fact, having being proved an innocent she is elevated to a goddess. The village people along with her husband in a way worship her to be as a divinity. In case of her 'mind', she is very much powerful and at this point she is seemingly manipulating her two husbands i.e. Appanna and the Naga. Although towards the end, the Naga is killed by Appanna, this development of the 'mind' of Rani remains to be her ultimate victory as a woman and as a human being in a greater sense. This seems to be the ultimate triumph over the domination, patriarchy, tradition and restriction.

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