

# Hegemonic Femininity and Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala: Play with a Cobra*

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## Abstract

Feminist critics have foregrounded that woman has been denied full humanity. A woman is what hegemonic masculinity wants her to be. Beauvoir has rightly observed that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (295). It is the androcentric ideology that constitutes the identity of a woman, archetypal other. She is seen as an object on which several limitations have been imposed. A demand for equal status for women in the androcentric social structure was heard in nineteenth-century Europe and gradually this demand developed into a struggle for women's rights in the twentieth century. Broadly speaking, feminist criticism launches its attack on a patriarchal ideology, the prevailing concepts of gender, and the marginalized roles allotted to women in the male-governed society. This paper is an attempt to explore how Girish Karnad has strengthened the feminist voice through the protagonist of his slender play *Naga-Mandala: Play with a Cobra*. The study of the play tends to underline the two states of women, the subordinate and marginalized and the dominant and valued, which Karnad artistically conceals beneath the manifested theme and technique.

**Keywords:** Hegemonic masculinity, hegemonic femininity, androcentrism, and dichotomous ideology.

While many feminist critics have decried the literature written by men for its depiction of women as marginal, docile, and subservient to men's interests and emotional needs and fears, some of them have also identified male writers who, in their view, have managed to rise above the sexual prejudices of their time sufficiently to understand and represent the cultural pressures that have shaped the characters of women and forced upon them their negative or subsidiary social roles; the latter class is said to include, in selected works, such authors as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Samuel Richardson, Henrik Ibsen, and George Bernard Shaw. Some Indian English dramatists also belong to this class such as Tagore, Aurobindo, S. Fyze, A.S.P. Iyer, Girish Karnad, Mahesh Dattani, etc.

Girish Karnad was the leading dramatist of post-independence India. His contribution to Indian drama in English and playwriting in Kannad carved a path for modern literature in India. In the Introduction to the Collected Plays, vol.1, Dharwadker introduces Karnad as a playwright who "belongs to the formative generation of Indian playwrights

who came to maturity in the two decades following independence, and collectively reshaped Indian theatre as a major national institution in the later twentieth century" (vii). Karnad's art of representing contemporary issues through mythology and history distinguishes him from other well-known Indian playwrights such as Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani. N Moorthy has commented as follows: "Girish Karnad ... takes refuge in the Indian legends and myths and tries to show the absurdity of modern life" (139). *Naga-Mandala* perfectly epitomizes Karnad's signature style of foregrounding contemporary issues. The play depicts two interwoven folk tales, which he had heard from A. K. Ramanujan. Karnad portrays an innocent girl, Rani, who married in her childhood and becomes a victim of hegemonic masculinity.

Rani is married to Appanna when she was a child. She comes to live with Appanna when she is grown to the age which is socially considered appropriate to play the role of a wife. Rani enters into a new world with a new zeal, fervor, and dreams in her eyes. She expects that Appanna will treat her with love and affection as she was treated by her parents, but the very first words she hears from her husband are in form of order, which disintegrates her dreams:

Well, then, I'll be back tomorrow at the noon. Keep my lunch ready. I shall eat and go. (254)

To her surprise, Appanna treats her as an object, the day he brings her to his house. He keeps her locked in the house alone all day and night. He visits her only once a day. He comes for lunch and leaves her alone again after lunch. There is little discourse between the two. Appanna speaks "But not a syllable more than required. 'Do this', 'Do that', 'Serve the food'" (268). Like many other women, Rani is also bound to surrender her will to the will of her husband.

Hegemonic masculinity empowers men to claim and sustain a leading position in social life. It "guarantees... the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell 77). Androcentric social structure trains women to be submissive and accept the man as their master. The woman is made dependent on men for everything, even for their identity. They are denied "the human right to create, to invent, to go beyond mere living to find a meaning for

life" (Walters, 98) to project man as a creator and inventor who made life meaningful and valuable. Karnad has presented Rani as a woman who personifies hegemonic femininity. She surrenders herself to the will of her husband and accepts him as her master. She tries to be what her husband wants her to be.

It becomes a routine for Appanna to leave the house locked from the outside. It is an incongruous and excruciating event, which was not expected by Rani. The predicament is great for her. She has ample time to ruminate. She is a new bride in a new world and village. She needs her husband's company, but she gets, instead of it, four walls of the house to talk to and haunting peace for consolation. The small province of the house is only the world of Rani. She symbolizes every woman, whose limits are her four walls. They are bred to live in this world surrounded by four walls and men for the outer world. Rani is not a human being or wife, but an object or property for her husband, which he keeps locked and safe. When Rani complains, he replies:

What is there to be scared of?  
Just keep to yourself. No one  
will bother you. (7)

It is not only the reply of Appanna but of the whole patriarchal society. Commenting on Appanna's character M K Rukhaya writes: "Appanna' literary means 'any man' and points to the metaphor of man in general, his chauvinistic stance and towering dominance to the extent of suppressing a woman's individuality"(1). A woman has her husband, child, father, brother, etc. to look after, but for herself, she has no one who takes care of her. "If a woman seems to be the inessential which never becomes the essential, it is because she fails to bring about the change" (Beauvoir, 19). Rani is a caged bird, who longs to fly in the limitless sky. She flaps her wings but in vain. Her master is hostile to her agonies. She is only allowed to peer through the window, where she gets a glance at the outer world. It's a symbol of her hope that one day she will soar. She is determined not to yield to the circumstances.

Kurudavva's visit is the visit of an angel for Rani, she is the only person whom she talks to after Appanna. Rani expresses her feeling to Kurudavva believing that being a woman; she will understand Rani's agonies:

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! (259).

Kurudavva consoles her and gives her a remedy in form of magical roots, which she got from a mendicant. As per the advice of Kurudavva, Rani pours the paste of the root into

the curry. Suddenly the curry turns red – blood red. She speculates, perhaps the curry has turned into poison and will cause her husband's death. It's hegemonic femininity that makes Rani angst for her husband even when he is hostile to her. It is women's potent patience that strengthens them to tolerate exploitation without complaint. Rani knows that a woman without a man is pathetic in a patriarchal society, women are nothing without men. Therefore, she does not want to risk her husband's life. She decides to get rid of that curry before her husband notices. She steps out of the *Lakshman Rekha*, drawn by Appanna, and goes outside the house to pour the curry into an anthill. It's an excruciating deed for Appanna, he first beats her and then locks her again in the house. It intimates that the patriarchal society has drawn a line; the violation of which is a punishable offense. This dichotomous ideology entitles a man to use force to suppress and compel a woman to practice the role androcentric culture has scripted for her.

Girish Karnad has presented a world, through Naga and Rani's relationship, which is hostile to patriarchal society, a world in which women are preferred, have rights, and govern men. It is a world in which they can follow their hearts; it's a world of converted binaries. Rani's nights completely differ from her days. She is a hostage or slave during the day, but at night she is a mistress, a ruler, and a goddess. Naga is ready to die for her. He is ready to do anything for her single smile. Rani cannot understand his contradicting behavior day and night. She does not know that it is Naga who comes to her at night. It is the mastery of Girish Karnad that he has presented the two worlds, a world dominated by men and the world dominated by women, impartially, as stated by Nagga:

No, let's say, the husband  
decides on the day visits. And  
the wife decides on the night  
visits. So I won't come at  
night if you don't want me to.  
(272)

Naga is nothing more than a nightmare. It ends with the arrival of the day. But the consequence of her dream leaves her pregnant. It gives her strength to debate with herself to discover that she is a human being like men and deserves some value:

I was a stupid, ignorant girl  
when you brought me here.  
But now I am a woman, a  
wife, and I am going to be a  
mother. I am not a parrot.  
Not a cat or a sparrow. Why  
don't you take it on trust that

I have a mind and explain  
this charade to me? (283-84)

Women are not born but made. They are molded by this patriarchal mechanism. It considers them as an object which can be molded in any shape according to needs – mother, daughter, sister, and wife – and at every stage, they are only subject to men. They are always tested. It cannot be expected that a man like Appanna and the patriarchal society will digest her pregnancy so easily. Appanna accuses her of infidelity and asks her to prove her fidelity to him. And, as in the Ramayana, the test is only for women, not for men. A man is never decried or punished for his brutish behavior.

What occurs is out of Rani's perception. She is made to undergo a version of *Agni – pareeksha*. She announces that she will undertake a "snake ordeal" to prove her chastity. The three Elders come and take their positions near the anthill. The villager's people there and the village court has turned into a country fair. They emerge to see the snake ordeal as well as the unique trial. Rani becomes a piece of an exhibition in the patriarchal society. It's not only the trial of her chastity but also an opportunity for her to speak on behalf of all women who suffer in a man-dominated society. She proves herself in front of the whole village and the villagers take her as a "Divine Being" or a Goddess. In other words, the woman can be either a whore or a Devi, nothing in between. It is hostile to what Appanna expects. One of the Elders persuades Appanna:

Appanna, your wife is not an ordinary woman. She is a goddess incarnate. Don't grieve that you judged her wrongly and treated her badly. That is how goddesses reveal themselves to the world. You were the chosen instrument for revealing her divinity. (293)

Appanna accepts the judgment of Elders, unwillingly. He goes to his home with Rani. But, still, he suspects her character. Morning brings a change in their life. When Appanna combs her hair, on her plea, a dead cobra falls from her hair. Appanna realizes the strength of his wife, also accepts her as a goddess incarnate.

Though Rani achieves victory, she achieves it only with the assistance of Naga. What she gets, is the Naga's gift to her. Karnad has tried to convey that the man and woman are the two wheels of a train, which runs smoothly when they move together. In other words, they are two sides of a coin, which cannot be separated. If it happens, they will lose their

existence, Karnad has depicted it through the relationship of Rani-Naga and Rani-Appanna. In Rani and Naga's relationship, we find smoothness, because they co-operate with each other, while we find hostility in Rani and Appanna's relationship earlier, and at the end, it also comes on track. So, adjustment and co-operation always work for a pleasant life. "The play narrates Rani's marital journey from a marginalized position to a central one. It is a simple but magical tale that celebrates sensuality from a women's point of view" (Waghela 73)

Karnad disseminates that a wife needs nobody except her husband. He has presented Rani as a metaphor for the situation of a young girl in the bosom of a family where she sees her husband in two connected roles – as a stranger during the day and as a lover at night. The empty house Rani is locked in could be the family she is married into. She feels alienated in this family because she doesn't have anyone to whom she can convey her agonies. Therefore, she craves her husband's love and attention, which she gets in the end. The victory falls on Rani, and it is not only her victory but also the victory of feminist ideology. It is the liberation of women from patriarchy.

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