

A Paucity Of Discernment: The Parallel Conundrums In The Lives Of Karnad's Female Characters In *Nagamandala* And *The Fire And The Rain*

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Abstract

Karnad was an astounding literary figure who had carved out the unfathomable thoughts of women through his profound works. Karnad was an Indian playwright, actor and director. He often uses mythology and history to tackle the contemporary issues. He indubitably explores the psychological conundrums of female psyche by traversing the lives and experiences of a woman. He powerfully attempts to explore the psychological move abouts of a woman who is subjected to follow the traditional path assigned to her by the age-old phallogocentric power.

The present paper attempts to visualize the similarity in the consequences that paralleled among the two female characters in Karnad's play *Nagamandala* and *The Fire and the Rain*. Both plays become universal where myth and reality are fused together to explore the socio-cultural criterion. He presents the sad and despondent nature of Vishaka and Rani who fail to make distinction between reality and fantasy. Karnad apparently fabricated female characters in a way that uplifted the women in the society to make their life free from the constraints of supremacy. The paucity of discernment caused them to apprehend the incognito of their lovers. Karnad explicably divulged the indecipherable psyche of woman to untie the scathing power of male supremacy.

Keywords: Discernment, Sacrifice, Subjugation, Concern, Supremacy, Unfetter

INTRODUCTION

Indian drama renders a spectacular exposition on the historical, political, social and cultural tradition of Indian society. Girish Karnad, the versatile genius unveiled the complex life of women and the atrocities held upon them by the male authority. The plays *Nagamandala* and the *The Fire and the Rain* exquisitely shed light on the lives of women who are obliged to perish their lives trapped in the cobwebs of hegemony. Karnad picturises the submissive nature and mental dilemmas of a suppressed woman. Karnad tries to

obliterate the liberation of women from the male chauvinistic predominance.

Karnad states that: "Drama is a means of self-expression for me. Drama can be the production of meaning also. I did not create the story of *Nagamandala*. It was already there and the play simply creates the devices for telling the story." (Karnad, 2004)

The character Rani in *Nagamandala* and Vishaka in *The Fire and the Rain* bid equivalency in confronting the consequences due to a paucity of discernment. *Nagamandala* is based on the folk tale told by Karnad's mentor

A.K.Ramanujan from whom Karnad gets the inspiration to jot down his applausable work. Karnad exemplifies the concept of the traditional custom, where a woman is subjugated under the dominancy of man. Rani is a young, beautiful woman neglected by her unfaithful husband Appanna even from the first day of their marriage. Appanna leads an immoral life, having an illicit affair with a concubine. Krishnamayi quotes:

“In the dramatic world of Karnad, women within and without wedlock are subjected to various forms of deprivation, humiliation, violence and torture in almost every walk of life in one way or the other”(Krishnamayi,2003)

Rani has lived like a queen for her parents but the marriage thrashed her in tears. She represents a naive and submissive girl fallen as a prey to the unjust social principles through the institution of marriage. The domineering behaviour of her husband impedes all the opportunities of Rani to have self-growth, self-identity and self-realisation as a human. Appanna used to lock her up like a caged bird in that house who hardly find any sort of happiness from her husband.

The character Naga is portrayed as an emotional relief for Rani who becomes more affectionate with the metamorphosed Naga. Naga has been elucidated as the representation for the repressed needs of a wife neglected in the hands of her husband. Karnad disseminates not only male supremacy but also deflates the concept of chastity overtly.

In *Nagamandala*, the Naga presumes the form of her husband contrived with the qualities of love and concern unlike Appanna, who is rude and callous. Appanna is an epitome of the commanding patriarchal society who is unfaithful towards his wife. Rani hopes to change her husband with the help of an extract given to her by Kuruddava. But the redness of the extract confuses her, which is thrown upon the anthill. Naga consumes it and falls in love with Rani. Then Naga assumes the form of Appanna to make love for her. Naga becomes an embodiment of love for Rani and she experiences a dream like life which she yearns

for. At this juncture, she suspects Naga but refuses to snap the reality for she doesn't wish to blemish her love life. Though Naga disguises as Appanna, he couldn't alter his behaviour which is excellently portrayed by Karnad:

“The female begins to smell like wet earth. And stung by her smell, the king cobra starts searching for his queen.”(Karnad,1995,p.25)

Rani relishes her life accompanying Naga as she wishes to last the night forever. She takes the magical life that a woman desires to traverse along with her soul mate. Here, Rani curtails the enslavement that trammled up her dreams to be a lovable wife. Rani needs to be unshackled from the abusive behaviour of Appanna, rather than to be a person freed from the enslavement of marriage. She aspires to be a traditional wife serving her husband without any disregard, in turn desires love and care from her male counterpart. Rani's loneliness in the locked house represents her life of slavery. She is not allowed to interact with the fellow beings which implies Appanna's notion of not permitting her to enjoy social mingling. The right to freedom is being restricted by the callous behaviour of Appanna.

Rani is attributed with the quality of a sacrificial wife who is ready to be submissive to her husband. But she only desiderates the attention of Appanna bearing the age-old phallocentric notions of obeying the rules assigned by the patriarchal society. Naga is presented as the manifestation of imparting satisfaction to the needs and urges of a neglected wife. Rani's plight is that she cannot fulfill the qualities which she needs to get from her husband. Hence she is not obliged to accept the jarring reality where she takes up a life of half-truth, spurning the reality.

Karnad through the character Appanna, glared the traditional custom of imposing power upon women as he needs only the food served by Rani. He exerts Rani to live alone in the house. Appanna utilizes the authoritative power to break the moral values and natural justice. Appanna finally accuses Rani for disloyalty when he comes to know about that she is pregnant. The snake ordeal that tests the chastity

of Rani has been arranged by the villagers. But Naga's concern for Rani helps her to succeed in the snake ordeal, thereby winning the hearts of the villagers. In *Nagamandala*, Rani becomes successful in handling the snake as Naga is her lover. She also confesses that she has not been touched by any man other than her husband and Naga. Therefore, "it is her very infidelity that comes to her aid in proving that she is a faithful wife."

Eventually, Rani ascertains the distinctions between her husband and her lover. She is aware of the truth that in reality Naga is her husband. Her husband Appanna is absolutely disparate from her snake-lover. Rani deftly recognizes that the Naga is not her husband, as Appanna is a man of adverse qualities but Naga is stuffed with all the attributes of a lovable husband. At this moment, Rani accordingly ignores the reality and enters into a world of fancy and imagination where she accomplishes all her desires and dreams without any stumbling blocks.

Rani represents the woman who urges for an unconditional love to shatter away the harsh reality of hindrances and shares her unflinching love for her lover. At first, she fails to understand Naga as not her husband due to the unfathomable oppression she suffers as a wife. She knowingly or unknowingly becomes a victim of paucity of discernment to make a distinction between Appanna and Naga. But gradually she apprehends and admits the fact that Naga is not her husband as both of them do not love her alike.

"When her true husband climbed into bed with her, how could she fail to realize it was someone new? Even if she hadn't known earlier? When did the spilt take place?" (Karnad, 1995, p.60)

Thus, Karnad in the play *Nagamandala* overtly exploits the traditional system, that focusses

"On the other hand, there's lust. An old man's curdlest lust. And there is no one else here to take his rage out but me." (Karnad, 2011)

Vishaka is presented as a woman who has to sacrifice her married life. Paravasu's love and

more on the chastity of woman making a rightful path for the disloyal man. Appanna is not concerned about his disdainful attitude. Moreover, he is more contemptuous towards his wife at the time of her pregnancy to prove her chastity.

Rani failed to identify Naga as not her husband, throws light on the scornful attitude of Appanna. She gets the love, passion and concern from her lover that makes her feel comfortable thereby ignoring the reality to discern her lover. Her husband Appanna complains to the villagers regarding her chastity that consequently makes her to face the snake ordeal test. Though she overcomes the tragic situation, she has been figured as an enchaste woman.

The Fire and the Rain is an exuberant piece of work that surpass all other works of Karnad. Karnad apparently fabricated female characters in a way that uplifted the women in the society to make their life free from the constraints of supremacy. The character Vishaka is an upper caste woman who has been married to Paravasu and lived happily for one year. Paravasu, an epitome of male authority decides to attend the ceremonial sacrifice, neglecting his wife. Vishaka is forced to admit the decision taken by her husband. Through this character, Karnad exemplifies the superiority and determination accustomed on women. The marriage of Paravasu and Vishakha is commented by P.D. Nimsarkar:

"Marriage in the high caste Brahmin society where virtue is highly honoured. Husbands responsibility has been ignored by Paravasu where Vishaka's one-sided expressions of faith and affection remain sterile." (Nimsarkar, 2009, p.154-155)

Vishaka has to follow the instructions given by her father-in-law Raibhya who has a rude and lusty nature for her as she says :

concern for her are thrown into air ignoring his wife's love and sexual desires. He considers Vishaka as an object of pleasure as he behaves "like an explorer." Paravasu fettered Vishakha with intense pain of isolation by his stubborn decision to go for the sacred fire

sacrifice. Finally, Vishaka engages in a sexual intercourse with Yavakri, her former lover who abandoned her years ago. But now she finds solace with him to break the authority that subjugates her. She fulfills her sexual desires and yearns for the companionship of Yavakri. Vishaka is intertwined by the marriage as she blames her husband:

“Nothing was too shameful, too degrading even too painful. Shame died in me. And I yielded. I let my body turned inside out as he did his own”(Karnad,2011)

Vishaka is left alone by Parvasu for seven years. She is overwhelmed by the love of Yavakri that she bends the knee to Yavakri making love. However, she eventually understands that he has treated her as an instrument to take revenge upon Raibhya. But Vishaka, who craves for manly love accepts the love of her former lover. She unfortunately fails to understand the real nature of Yavakri. Her paucity of discernment on Yavakri makes her to face certain consequences in life. Even though she belongs to the high strata of the society, she is obliged to sacrifice her life. Karnad pictures the torments of a woman who repudiates her wishes. He presents the sad and despondent nature of Vishaka who failed to make distinction between reality and fantasy.

Vishaka is a character that unveils the pitiable plea of a woman who is neglected even by her father. Karnad liberates Vishaka from the hecatomb arranged by her husband and father-in-law and she raises her voice against Parvasu. Gokhale states:

“He (Karnad) transforms Vishaka from mere victim of molestation to an active agent who consciously yields to Yavakri, her beloved before he went away to do penance.”(Kosta,1999)

Yavakri and Parvasu consider her as an object of satisfaction and doesn't show any compassion for her. The negligence of her husband and the lusty nature of Raibhya drives her to have faith in Yavakri. She believes Yavakri for his love pacifies all her troubles, sacrifices and negligence from her husband. But even her lover

Yavakri also needs her body disregarding her love.

Mala Ranganathan renamed Vishaka as

“a sexual weapon in the hands of the male to avenge each other and the male search for knowledge and power suffocates her...”(Ranganathan,2008)

Vishaka in a sense extricates herself from the conservative cultural norms that a society rely upon her. But her liberation fails in achieving the love life with Yavakri. Her intense desire to be wrapped up with care and love from a man has to put an end when she gets to know about the true self of her lover. Vishaka, being an embodiment of sacrifice doesn't envisage the false identity of her lover. Her enslavement converted her to comprehend the mischievous intention of Yavakri. She is lost in the sea of loneliness which is compensated by the presence of Yavakri. But she has to witness again the treacherous attitude of man. Parvasu and Yavakri are not ready to live a peaceful life as they yearn to achieve universal truth.

Charlene Spretnak points out that

“...The problem is androcentrism (male-centeredness) rather than anthropocentrism (human-centeredness). Patriarchal society, in which the male definition of reality is normative and in which fear of women and nature set the stage for biocide, must be named as the problem.”(Charlene,1981)

Vishaka's lack of understanding the inner thoughts of Yavakri is evident from the words of Yavakri as his words betray the lustful remark on Vishaka's body “The sweet sick smell of the jackfruit”. She has to face the bad deeds of her husband and lover. Yet she gained enormous strength and courage to unfetter the manacles of authoritarian principles.

CONCLUSION

The character Vishaka and Rani are destined to bring down their lives for the fallacious decision taken by their fathers. Vishaka mistakes Yavakri's love and

indulges into an illegal affair with the molester. The male hegemony questions the affair despite her sacrificial life. Karnad illuminates the woman characters in a way to unshackle themselves from the bondage of self- sacrifice. Both of them have to undergo a long period of loneliness that moulded their characters. The ultimate consequences she has to face is no more than a troubled and exhausting tragic situation. Her lack of understanding the true identity of Naga before making love drives her to tackle the problems that follows it.

Vishaka and Rani are the embodiments of sacrifice and are unable to envisage the false identity of her lover. But the lives of both the characters parallel the consequences they had to tackle while approaching their emancipation. The paucity of discernment caused them to apprehend the incognito of their lovers. This steered them to handle the sequels of the same. Karnad moves through the indecipherable psyche of woman to untie the scathing power of man.

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