

The Overlapping and Interlacing of Desire, Woman and Society in Karnard's *Naga-Mandala*

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Abstract: Allied with the strategical binary formation the conceptual note of public men and private woman, my article maps the social issues that continuously surveys on the identity of the women in our society. By taking Karnard's disturbing text *Nagamandala* as a socio-political text, it will be revealed that patriarchal parade is still in its full force that resists the growth of women liberation. Compression or suppression of powerful passions of woman is a strategic shift of our gendered society.

Keywords: Identity, Right, Desire, Woman, Feminism, Domestic Violence, Positional Politics and Society

Dharwadker's rigid statement that "In many respects, *Naga-Mandala* is a companion piece and 'sequel' to *Hayavadana* rather than a work of striking originality" (Dharwadker viii) gives the play an absolutely new dimension of meaning that ultimately has made the text much popular at least in the academic discipline. *Naga-Mandala: Play with a Cobra*, a play originally written in Kannada and later translated in English by the dramatist himself, opens with the Prologue that projects the disturbing sense of an unsatisfied Man, a failed playwright. The Man's intense desire has been put on the conditional point that has been attributed by the personified 'Story'. The story telling method discussion of this artistic method in the Prologue of the drama gives the play a cult Indian dimension because story telling method has deeply been ingrained in the Indian psychology; R K Narayan in *The Guide* and Raja Rao in *Kanthapura* have exploited that oral genealogy to the maximum. Achievement of the Man's whims has been resisted by his previous vow: "I have just now taken a vow not to have anything to do with themes, plots or acting. If I live, I don't want to risk any more curses from the audiences" (04). Vis-à-vis such statement Naik and Narayan read the play totally on that direction of artistic story-making: "The tale of the failed playwright seems to suggest that art demands everything from the artist and that he will die if he cannot fulfill his mission. The Rani-Appanna- Cobra tale is evidently an allegory of the nexus between the world of art and the world of mundane reality. That the cobra finally finds permanent refuge in the hair of Rani is perhaps indicative of the permanent *alliance between art and imagination*." (Naik and Narayan 203, my emphasis) In fact, unsatisfied desires bring the divisive ideologies of abstruse subject, working through the clandestine activities. In such a socio-religious setting where the 'idol is broken' (01), fulfillment of

dream is not an easy one to achieve. The Man is not sleeping at that night only because he has a tremendous whim to live: "A mendicant told me: 'You must keep awake at least one whole night this month.'" (01). The interesting Prologue also projects the Man's compressed desire of survival: "I swear by this absent God, if I survive this night I shall have nothing more to do with themes, plots or stories. I abjure all story-telling, all play-acting" (02).

Episodic intensification of personal drives of desire and dissatisfaction brings the sense of burgeoning inequality in the stringent standards of society. The play also focuses the marital muddle and misunderstanding in the lives of Rani and Appanna. Sensitive openness ["She cannot even weep" (06)] and insensitive darkness [Appanna "*pays no attention to her, goes out, shuts the door, locks it from outside and goes away*" (06)] bring the contrastive display of different human dislocation when the sense of romantic affinity is lost. Unsatisfied whims of Rani can easily be contrasted to the satisfied desire of Rani's father when he found for Rani "a suitable husband" who was "rich and his parents were both dead" (06). Such drastic desire, be it satisfied or unsatisfied, brings the problem of influencing in fluency, a resource reliant of shape shifter. Even the 'crying' (11) of Rani's mother during Rani's leaving with her husband is one such eternal hunger of human desire to put their child very near to them eternally. And later on the statement of Rani too marks such contrast of her present life and her life in her father's house: "I am so frightened at night, I can't sleep a wink. At home, I sleep between Father and Mother. But here, alone ... I would jump into a well – if only I could" (11). She was refused to get an entry in public by her husband because public sphere was considered only for the male members of the family, while only the private trope was strictly assigned for female. J B Elshtain in *Public Man, Private Woman*, Moria Gatens in *Feminism and Philosophy* and R. Pringle in *Sectarians Talk: Sexuality, Power and Work* have talked a lot on that issue. Similar observation has been reflected in Tara's momentary spurt of energy in *Tara*: "The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going to go hunting while the women looked after the cave" (Dattani 328). Such intensification of intention heavily connotes the reflection of the obligatory presence of dizzying desire in the dazzling display of human lives. Like Garbo in Elkunchwar's *Garbo*, Rani too is being treated as a mere machine in the patriarchal production house: "Well, then, I'll be back tomorrow at noon. Keep my lunch ready. I shall eat and go." (06). Consequently, Kappanna's sentence is not an overstatement: "That Appanna should have been born a wild beast or a reptile. By some mistake, he got human birth. He can't stand other people." (08)

Unlike the other texts of Karnard, *Naga-Mandala* is not a literalization of mythical history. In the projection of a contemporary scenario, Rani has nothing but only one action to 'serve' (07) Appanna food and 'snob' (07) silently. Unadjusted tune of utter dissatisfaction marks Rani to be the puppet of the patriarchal power: "I'm bored to death. There is no one to talk to!" (11) Rani's father found the suitable boy – in fact, 'suitable husband' ["The young man was rich and his parents were both dead."

(06)] for Rani with the intention that Rani will live in wealth and there will not be any interfering parents-in-law. But Rani is now sensing the poor nature of her perverted 'lunatic' (09) husband in her lonely deracinated life: "I am sick of being alone" (23). She can be read in terms of Menon's argument: "Single women are...invisible and disempowered" (154). Years ago, Kurudavva's intention of marriage could be fulfilled by some self-imposed superstition; but achievement of intention for all the time is not a subject to such libidinal fulfillment. Desirability of a near and dear husband does not work for Rani because there was some other taxonomy of desires:

KURUDAVVA: Didn't want to tell you. There is a woman, a bazaar woman. She has your husband in her clutches. Squeezes him dry ... (15)

By rousing the subterranean animosity, such projection and rejection of such intentional social stratification should be cut short right from its embryonic form to safeguard the sacrosanct meaning of marital relationship. As far as Rani's relation-status is concerned, Appanna has "judged her wrongly and treated her badly" (40). Slapping Rani is a customary patriarchal desire to treat woman as a mere object to mould it according to the whimsical male desire. According to Indrani Sen, Patriarchy has designed the concept of home as "an area of protection from external dangers and as a space containing female sexuality, the notion of separate spheres being obviously undergirded by anxieties about female sexual energy and, in effect, imposing a 'chastity lock' on the female body through domestic confinement" (02). 'She' is the 'other' to perform the assigned order according to the dialectic demand of male desire:

KURUDAVVA: (*Pause.*) Does he ... 'talk' to you?

RANI: Oh, that he does. But not a syllable more than required. 'Do this', 'Do that', 'serve the food'. (10)

Patriarchy is a powerful powerhouse for the suppression of woman-identity; it is an organized system of "male power that permeates all aspects of life at all times and in all places" (Lloyd 74). Vis-à-vis patriarchy women, from cradle to grave, are mere objects to confront that devouring and devastating nature of patriarchy. Limitless fragmented identity of women is the focus of patriarchy. At the regular proliferation of male desire, liberating space for women is being restricted into the heavily enclosed space. Projection of such dark room throughout the play marks it to be a meta-critical space of liberation and deliberation. Rani's tremendous crave for her association with the disguised lover Naga is a clear hint of desired escaping from such crude reality or real crudity. Home, sometimes as Jose Casanova notes, functions as the "female sphere per excellence" (33). The room where Rani is enclosed becomes one such female sphere where multiple female dream and achievement are negotiated through freedom in bondage and produces the fantasy figure of reclamation (Naga) who virtually becomes a liberating figure for satisfaction; the sense of a 'room of one's own' that remains far away from the confined, claustrophobic domestic dynamics. Her pregnancy puts her in front of a zone of romance. But disguised

Naga probably has something other in his mind:

RANI: ... What I feared has come true. What kept me silent has happened. You are not happy about the baby. You are not proud that I am going to be a mother. Sometimes you are so cold-blooded – you cannot be human. (31)

In the world of superstition and 'spell' (15), it is ultimately the mirror that represents the reality by reflecting the real appearance of Naga. The disembarkation card of the deceiving elf (Naga) questions the introspective reasoning of intention. In that sense, Naga can be equated to Kanhaiya in *Bravely Fought the Queen*. Be it a problematic drama or dramatic problem of a pregnant woman, the point is to be noted is that women become more assertive during pregnancy.¹ It would be relevant to mention Vasudha's monologue in Shanta Gokhale's *Avinash*: "There's only two ways open to us. We either despair and die, or hope and live. Who knows how this baby will be – perfect or imperfect, bringing joy or sorrow. But it's a whole new life. And that's something. A new life to live with and grow with".² Incommensurability of interpretive dynamics of human desires, as the play dramatizes, lead the characters towards the non-identical networks of nodal points of dissatisfactory humiliation: "I am not a parrot. Not a cat or a sparrow. Why don't you take it in trust that I have a mind and explain this charade to me? Why do you play these games? Why do you change like a chameleon from day to night?" (32). The text has basically been formed through the character's flexible accumulation of the specific obsessional effect. As "Culturally as well as physically, women were conditioned not to fight back using violent means",³ Rani tries to make 'a struggle for recognition'⁴ against the patriarchal self through her assertive tone for her child. Identical assertion generally provides a strong self that wants to construct the autonomous self power with an apparent impression of filling the prevalent social lacks. Centre proposes and margin dispossesses when the marginal women are discriminated at work and are ignored by patriarchal-centered society. Appanna has no desire to fulfill the feminine desires of Rani, but can cast a strong desire to humiliate his wife in front of the villagers; he can "publicly question his wife's chastity" (36). Rani too, like Hardy's Tess and Tendulkar's Benare, becomes a woman under public question because the woman in the dock is a timeless sensation for patriarchy. Once again it is the woman who has to examine in the time of identity crisis: "Yes, my husband and this King Cobra. Except for these two, I have not touched anyone of the male sex. Nor have I allowed any other male to touch me. If I lie, let the Cobra bite me." (39). At certain times, antagonism and agonism of desire bring a pressurizing additive logic of interrogatory stance that can only cast what Vaid and Sangari call "slender representation of women" (04). Speaking symbolically, the image of locking up the key is a marker of locking up the female desire, by putting woman in the corner. She is the other, the 'second sex'. Rani is in fact a 'caged bird' (10) who, like a living and sensitive human being must have the desire to 'talk' (10) to others. In *Sakharam Binder*, women, in a derogatory sense, have been treated as

birds and are put in the “bird's cage”. Bronte's marginalized 'mad woman in the attic' comes easily to our minds because in both the cases, tolerance becomes a key word in the discourse of identity politics. Pradip Basu, in his analysis of Kinship Theory, has observed that “every society has some system for deciding who can marry whom, who inherits what from whom, and how all of these relationship are named ... Kinship systems explain what Levi-Strauss called the 'exchange of women', wherein family groups 'give' women to another family to be a wife, and receive in exchange something of value (a dowry)” (Basu 44). Dogs and mongoose are even used to watch and guard a woman and the deaths of these animals are the markers of falling down of the continuous patriarchal vigilance upon woman. The sense of loose patriarchal authority has been implied here. After all, “human beings should have some sense of shame” (25). The specific problem is that “Desire is not purely a matter of the flesh but involves the soul: the shame of desire is that the soul cannot command either its own wishes or the body” (Belsy 62). She is alone, isolated, suppressed, cornered and fragmented; it is pathetic that her husband comes home only 'for lunch' (11). They are mismatched couple through their segregationist impulse of self-righteousness and self-defeating; dissatisfaction is the sense and essence of their marital life. It is not understandable that why Appanna leaves the 'tender bud' (19) and 'a pretty jasmine' (13) like Rani. The picture of an 'ailing mother' (03) and 'insomnia' (08) of Kurudavva are not the isolated picture of society but it is a general image of 'ailing' women in the hegemonically patriarchal society. The following sentence brings the expression how the formation of patriarchy happens in our society – “a woman is supposed to be in the house” (09).⁵ Even the jealous Harebrain in Thomas Middleton's *A Mad World, My Masters* (1608) believed that textual pleasure will definitely lead to sexual pleasure.

Undoubtedly, Rani has been projected as the 'second sex', the other, the cornered, the marginalized, the victimized and it culminates with the sense how the female being 'becomes' woman. Though 'she' is depicted or placed as the other, 'she' has also been given a minimum space of self realization and self-induced sensitivity at the end of the text when the text suddenly takes a U-turn through the deification of woman: “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.” (40). It is a new space of abstention, bringing together epistemological error and ontological turn. Almost at the end of the critical convergence, the pathetic cry of Kurudavva [“Son! Where are you?” (43)] is the desired search of every mother for her own child. To see her child visually she can only wish for eyes verbally: “If only I had my eyes” (38). Much like this blind Kurudavva, Andhaka too in *The Fire and the Rain*, has an immense desire to look the way of the world. Her static situation can well be described in the social theorists' words: “Deprived of access to the (dark, satanic) places of subsistence and survival, disabled people joined the growing

ranks of itinerants and became a 'social problem'. Forced into idleness, they became categorized as 'unproductive' and consequently burdensome" (Peterson 37). By mixing memory with desire, Kurudavva realizes how Appanna's mother could not fulfill her unsatisfied desire of rearing up her child as she "died bringing him into this world" (08). In fact, desire, through its intensification of the gap between self and society, has a tremendous mechanism of social disintegration. In addition, the total play can also be read in terms of dissatisfaction of everyday mundane world and crave for dissident imaginative world. Even the heavily conflictual ending marks the desired notion of dissatisfaction. *A la Kermode*, the ending of a literary work marks a much necessary reflection for a desired temporal propriety of ordered force.⁶ Karnard's text, by projecting two different endings, is indeed a practical case in point.

Notes:

- Compare Benare's final soliloquy in Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court Is In Session*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- *City Plays*. Calcutta and New Delhi: Seagull, 2004, pp 30-1.
- See Anagol, Padma. "From the Symbolic to the Open: Women's Resistance in Colonial Maharashtra" in Anindita Ghosh (Ed). *Behind the Veil: Resistance, Women, and the Everyday in Colonial South Asia*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007, pp 21 - 57.
- Fiona Tolan's phrase in "Feminisms" in Waugh, Patricia (Ed). *Literary Theory and Criticism*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006, p 321.
- In Manjula Padmanabhan's "Lights Out", Bhasker opines to Naina and Mohan: "A decent woman would never be with four men at once." (*City Plays*. Calcutta and New Delhi: Seagull, 2004, 174)
- See Kermode, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending*. London: Oxford University Press, 1967, pp 3-31.

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