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Postmodernism in Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala*

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Abstract

Postmodernism is a concept that encompasses a wide range of ideals, methods and practices. It is more importantly not a philosophical movement in itself, but rather, incorporates a number of philosophical and critical methods that can be considered 'postmodern' the most familiar include feminism and post-structuralism. Put another way, postmodernism is not a method of doing philosophy, but rather a way of approaching traditional ideas and practices in non-traditional ways that deviate from pre-established super structural modes.

Nagamandala marks a high achievement in the evolution of the playwright. The text shows the rare quality of highly suggestive images and concepts transcend realism to produce a thought-provoking impression on the spectators. By developing an Indian myth, the play creates a mysterious and powerful experience though the dual representation of the Cobra and Appanna. They are inseparably connected in the tale, leading to a multi-dimensional situation; Rani's transformation from the moment of oath-taking heightens the suggestive quality of the play.

Keywords

Post-modernism; Myth and Reality; Male Chauvinism; Women Identity; Girish Karnad; *Nagamandala*.



Postmodern literature is hard to define and there is little agreement on the exact characteristics, scope, and importance of postmodern literature. It will not conclude with the neatly tied-up ending that is often found in Modernist literature, but often parodies it. Postmodern authors tend to celebrate chance over craft, and further employ metafiction to undermine the writer's authority. Metafiction is a type of fiction that self-consciously addresses the devices of fiction, exposing the fictional illusion. Postmodernism is a concept that encompasses a wide range of ideals, methods and practices. It is more importantly not a philosophical movement in itself, but rather, incorporates a number of philosophical and critical methods that can be considered 'postmodern' the most familiar include feminism and post-structuralism. Put another way, postmodernism is not a method of doing philosophy, but rather a way of approaching traditional ideas and practices in non-traditional ways that deviate from pre-established super structural modes.

Girish Karnad is reckoned as an eminent actor, playwright, television artist and a creative figure and ranks among the top dramatists in Indian English drama. The world of Indian English drama was taken by surprise when his *Tughlaq* was published in 1964. Karnad has since then composed many outstanding plays in both Kannada and English. His other famous plays are *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala*, *Bali: The Sacrifice*, *The Fire and the Rain*, *Broken Images*, *Flowers*, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, *Taladanda* and *The Wedding Album*. He was quite akin to Indian thought and developed a secular and scientific humanism.

The personification of 'story' and the 'Flames' and their action-oriented representation make the entire play very powerful and help to project a wide range of human experience. The most fascinating element in the play is the

playwright's attempt to recreate the Kannada myth to portray the human predicament in a contemporary social situation. His wearing together of the Western and Eastern concepts of the theatrical language in interpreting the myth is evident in the development of a plot.

In *Nagamandala*, Karnad questions the gender-based justice, which is favorable to men. The play exposes male chauvinism and the oppression of women and the great injustice done to them by men and patriarchal culture. The protagonist Appanna treats his wife Rani as if she were a non-human thing without any feeling, a robot-cook, which follows his oral instructions.

As a male chauvinist, he has utter contempt for the wife. Naga, the Cobra, takes the shape of Appanna, visits Rani during the night and makes love to her. She does this unknowingly. But Appanna ignores Rani and visits his concubine regularly without any sense of shame. When he comes to know that she has become pregnant, he is infuriated and he pushes, kicks and curses her. He yells at her, "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?" (Karnad 65). To this, the young helpless maid pleads that she is innocent. The central conflict in the mind of a female subject who is so entangled in the patriarchal discourses of chastity and duty that she is unable to make a choice between the husband and the ideal lover.

Initially Rani becomes a passive victim of her husband's oppression. As she is confined within the four walls, she feels isolated, lonely and frustrated. But with the ingress of the snake into her life, her transformation begins. By the shape-shifting of the Cobra, Karnad makes Rani and Appanna transform into better human beings. Rani emerges from a very weak, frail, archetypal Indian woman to an extremely bold person who is very well aware of the ways of the world. She tells her husband,

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. (Karnad 70)

The play *Nagamandala* has several examples of shape-shifting. The prominent one of course is the Cobra assuming the form of Appanna in order to make love to Rani. External factors, situations and society can repress an individual's longings and desire but it cannot totally extinguish them. Thoughts, emotions and desires which are repressed and are not able to find a free outlet of expression, gets imbedded in the 'unconscious' of the person finding a covert form of expression and wish fulfillment through dreams and myths. Rani is a victim of severe repression and alienation. Confined and left alone without any companionship and comfort, she starts hallucinating.

Rani's innermost desire of love, companionship and comfort find an expression through her various dreams that reveal the severe state of repression and depression that she is going through in her isolation. In her state of mental and emotional anguish, the line between illusion and reality is blurred. Isolated and confined to live a life detached from any social interactions and emotionally deprived, Rani takes refuge in her dreams about her parents.

Superstitions and supernatural elements play an important part in the composition of a myth. The aphrodisiacal root given to Rani by Kurudava is one such superstition that gives an interesting twist to the turn of events in the play. This hold of superstitious belief can also be seen in the heavily prejudiced view of Kurudava regarding the women in her son Kappanna's life and also in the life of Appanna. Both men neglect their duties and abandon their mother and wife respectively to gratify their physical needs, but still superstition points the guilty finger towards the women who are said to have magical powers to lure and entice men. Women who live outside the limits decreed by society are either loose women or supernatural beings like Kappanna's enticer whom Kurudava describes as, "A temptress from beyond... A yaksha woman..." (Karnad 68). Rani has to face trial before the village elders to prove her innocence. Following the advice of her beloved Naga she takes up the Snake ordeal and speaks the truth, "Yes, my husband and this King Cobra. Except for these two, I have not touched

any of the male sex” (Karnad 69). In her ultimate trial, Naga protects Rani, and she emerges victorious from the Snake ordeal to be hailed as a Goddess by the very villagers who were to judge her crime.

The temple is a favorite haunt of the flames that come from different houses so exchange notes on the present conditions of the society. The first flame come from the house of a miserly fellow who retires to bed early to save spending on lamp oil. The second tells in which the old mother has died neglected and third flame tells about the story of Rani whose predicament reflects the human need to live by fiction and half-truths. The drama is enacted in a temple at night, in the presence of three naked flames, in front of a man cursed to die within a few hours.

The appearance of love filling the emptiness of Rani’s life with love and care is explained through the myth of ‘Naga’, a folk tale and local culture of Karnataka where it represents prosperity, happiness and fertility. A man does not need to explain his reasons for gratification of his sensual pleasures but a woman’s instinctual need is ignored, and their desire is considered a transgression of moral codes requiring supernatural justification. The Naga in the guise of Appanna presents a choice for Rani, a choice to live a fuller and happier life. It is her expression of desire and also the fulfillment of her wish for love, her desire to live life fully and with satisfaction. If Appanna is the demon then Naga is the prince in Rani’s life. A source of energy, the Naga represents the positive element, the cultural leader, and harbinger of a social change, generating a transformation not only in the character of Rani but also in the society at large. A representation of the true life force, Naga is the source as well as the preservation and regeneration of life.

Considered from a realistic point of view, Naga represents the modern, new woman’s right to choice, the right to choose a life overcoming all obstacles to her happiness. It symbolizes the breaking of barriers, crossing of the lines that intend to imprison a woman and distance her from her surrounding as well as

her own 'self'. More an initiator than a leader, Naga actually initiates Rani on to the path of transformation.

Karnad's *Nagamandala* thus presents a hypocrite and biased social and cultural trait of the Indian society and its effect on the feminine psyche. "The play mocks at and questions the unjust values of our patriarchal society" (Chander 52). Highlighting the inequality and imbalance in the man-woman relationship, Karnad juxtaposes questions of morality and adultery, and the diverse reactions and responses that a man and a woman face in this regard from society. A story of a woman's journey from innocence to experience, the play depicts her transformation and rebellion to survive as an individual having equal rights to respect, freedom and love. Karnad though presents a rebellious and open minded outlook on the issue of gender discrimination and exploitation of women in the Indian society, yet he is unwilling to break the fragile balance of social and cultural norms. In this play, "the public and private selves become connected through the acceptance of socially responsible roles" (Tripathi 69). And so Rani's transformation is in agreement with her acceptance of Appanna as her husband and father of her child. Desires may be fulfilled and remain concealed in her psyche as evidenced by the presence of Naga in her tresses or in her imagination, but in reality she confirms to the pre-determined role set by society not as a naïve and submissive girl but as an experience and assertive woman aware of her rights and position.

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