



Folklore Tradition of India in Girish Karnad's Nagmandala

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ABSTRACT

Myths are universal, occurring in almost all cultures. They deal with basic questions about the nature of the world and human experience and can illuminate many aspects of a culture. Culture defines society. The cultural ethos of every society is unique in its form and essence representing the character of its people, their experiences and beliefs. Myths, legends and folklore are in fact the embodiments of these cultural ethos that represent the underlying values and principles of life, the shared experience of the race, the rules and the codes of society. This paper explores the style acquired by Girish Karnad in presenting these folklores through plays and characterization.

Keywords: Folklore; Nagmandala

Introduction

Girish Karnad makes extensive use of tradition, myths, legends and folklore. Girish Karnad's plays vividly exemplify this trend. Girish Karnad is a major dramatist who has significantly gone back to the roots of Indian myth, tradition and culture and has re-created for us the rich and vibrant picture of Indian society, culture and its people. In all his plays he genuinely portrays the Indian way of life with all its positive and negative aspects, its tradition and their relative contemporary importance and relation (Lallithas, 2016).

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“The real function of literature in human affairs is to continue myths’ ancient and basic endeavour to create a meaningful place for man in a world oblivious to his presence”, says Vincent B. Leitch. Karnad’s taking to myth and legend in his plays was more an act of impulse rather than intention (Nair, 2006). He had rightly chosen to use myths and legend for his plays. He feels they are very much relevant today, and hence, seeks to adapt myths and folk forms in his plays. Thus he effects a synthesis between the ancient and the modern to serve his purpose of using the past to illuminate the present.

Karnad uses myths, legend and folk tales in his plays *Yayati*, *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala*. Girish Karnad's *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala* source their origin from the folklore tradition of India. *Hayavadana* is based on Thomas Mann's translation of the Sanskrit 'Vetal Panchavimashati', which forms part of Kshemendra's *Brihat Katha Manjari* and Somadeva's *Kathasaritsagara*. Karnad's *Nagamandala* is inspired by the snake myths prevalent in South India. It is a dramatization of two folktales of Karnataka. In fact, Naga Cult is widely practiced in many parts of India.

In *Naga- Mandala*, Karnad forges a synthesis between the ancient and the modern to serve his purpose of using the past to illuminate the present. He uses a traditional folk-tale to throw light on the present, thereby fusing the past and present. Karnad takes his inspiration from the rich tradition of India's past and weaves it through the web of his imagination into tales of his own.

Sacrifices also form a part of such religious practice as seen in the obliteration of the self physically in *Hayavadana*, the snake ordeal that Rani undergoes in *Nagamandala*.

Superstition, an innate characteristic of traditional and orthodox religion, finds a reflection in Nagamandala wherein Kurudava gives the aphrodisiac root to Rani, giving a new twist to the tale. The reference to a Yaksha woman enticing Kappanna, the son of Kurudava, also reveals predominance of superstitious belief and belief in the supernatural elements (Rangan).

Naga-Mandala is based on folk-lore. In the south Indian villages there is a practice among women to pour milk on ant hill occupied by cobras ritualistically on a certain day in a year; 'Nagulachaviti', 'Naga- panchami' the fourth day and the fifth day of the waxing period of the moon. The energy for the folk-theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values. The various conventions- the chorus, the music, the seemingly unrelated comic interludes, the mixing of human and non-human worlds permit a simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view.

The story deals with the life of Rani and Appanna. They are not given any name in the beginning and hence they represent the whole humankind. Rani is so called because she is the queen of the long tresses, which, when tied into a knot, resembled a 'cobra.' Appanna and Rani are married, apparently Rani being a child bride. After gaining puberty, she is bought to her husband's house. Appanna is not a faithful husband. He spends his time with his concubine and comes to his house only to have his lunch.

Rani leads a secluded life and then Kurudavva saves her. It is only she who understands Rani's real problem. Kurudavva gives two small roots to Rani and asks her to mix it in Appanna's food. It is believed that, by taking the root, Appanna will not go and visit with the concubine again. The first root has no effect on Appanna. Rani takes a bigger root, and when she mixes it in the curry it becomes bloody red. She actually curses herself for trying to give this to Appanna. She spills it on a nearby anthill. A snake living in the anthill instantly falls in love with Rani.

The snake in the myth is believed to be a symbol of fertility. The snake takes the shape of Appanna and has sexual communion with Rani. It is through the snake that Rani understands the meaning and passion of love in marital life. When the real Appanna finds that she is pregnant, he calls her a "whore."

Rani is asked by the village leaders to perform the ordeal of holding the hot iron rod to demonstrate that she is a chaste woman and faithful to her husband. The snake advises her to perform the ordeal of holding the snake instead. Rani follows this advice, and holds the snake, which spreads its hood on her head and sways it gently and hangs like a garland around her neck. The elders on the village judicial committee proclaim her to be a 'goddess.'

In the end, Rani gets her husband back and enjoys a happy life. Naga, the snake, who has brought about such a happy consummation of married love, wants to have a final look at Rani. He makes the final visit when they are fast asleep. Naga then presses Rani's hair to his body, ties a noose and strangles himself to death. When Rani combs her hair later, a dead cobra falls to the ground. It is cremated and her son lit the funeral pyre. Once again, the snake appears and Rani allows it to live in her tresses forever.

The whole trial of Rani with the king cobra spreading its hood over her can be seen as having symbolic significance. The period of the Rani- Appanna as Naga- relationship is the period of learning, of assessing, for both. In the early marriages that were so common in India some five or six decades ago, physical maturity preceded emotional and psychological maturity and this caused pain and suffering in most cases. This is symbolized in the trial. Rani, true to the 'Pativrata' archetype, is willing to face death to prove her fidelity, and her 'pativrata' brings about a change of heart in Appanna. Day writes in *The Many Meanings of Myth*:

Aquatic or terrestrial, snakes in myth display an extraordinary range, such as fertility in the case of the Indian snake groves, joining tree and serpent as fertility symbols are often famed for aiding barren women to conceive, and secondly, for the healing purpose as the entwined snakes of the caduceus are still the world's best-known symbol of the healing arts.

There are also myths about the weddings of nagas and humans, and "countless serpentine interventions in human affairs transverse almost all the known themes about snakes and are often buffingly ambiguous" (Day 428).

Karnad in his plays tries to evolve a symbolic form out of the tension between the mythic experience and a living response to life and its values. Contemporariness in Karnad's plays manifests itself through his operative sensibility in his attempt to give new meaning to the past from the vantage point of the present.

The story of Appanna also has certain interesting touches. It is believed that some witch or fairy enchanted him away from his lawful wife. Once again, the act of the unfaithful husband is explained away through the use of some mysterious fairy. The identity of the woman who entices Appanna away is unknown and it remains a mystery. Are these anecdotal explanations intended to justify that we as human beings are simply pawns in the hands of the divine, or that these events are inevitably caused by Karma?

As per the traditional scales of social roles and culture, the individual holds a subordinate position to society, community or family. In Nagamandala Rani and Appanna confirm to their social roles and obligation as husband and wife even though both are aware of the truth of their relation.

Girish Karnad uses a magical folktale to reveal the complexity of human life. In particular, he uses the folktale in the Indian context to reveal the social and individual relations.

Man-Woman intimate relationships, the question of chastity being imposed on married women while their husbands have a merry-go-round with other women outside their wedlock, married women's earnest desire for the love of their husbands in spite of the shortcomings of their husbands, the throbbing of secret love that Naga demonstrates by his killing himself on the passionate and warm body of Rani, and, above all, the result of the sexual communion being a male child, the "son" lighting funeral pyre and so many other potent and hidden meanings, make this play a very complex play. The village judicial system also comes to be portrayed with ease, and with this the process of deification in Indian society also gets revealed. Demonstration of unusual power and tolerance is sure ground and an essential step toward deification.

Indian society is traditional and an individual is still governed by societal roles and norms that ensure a continuity and survival of its cultural mores. As Eric Fromm writes, 'We

are what we believe in and where we live in.' Girish Karnad makes use of myths, mythologies and folklore as his source for his plays, not for the glorification of the chosen myths but to relate the myths to the present and to the past beliefs found in these myths. Karnad provides us with a glimpse of the past as well as its relevance to an understanding of the contemporary world.

Although in our Indian context myths are related to religion, Karnad is only interested in the mythical side of it. He finds a Jungian quality in these myths. Moreover the elements of myth and history are common to most audiences in our country. Most myths have a strong emotional significance and the audiences have set responses towards them and Karnad likes to play on that.

Karnad says that use of myths and folk techniques allow for "Complex seeing", although the myths have traditional and religious sanction, they have the means of questioning these

values. Added to this Karnad believes that the various folk conventions like the chorus, the music, the mixing of human and non-human worlds permit a simultaneous presentation of alternate points of view. Thus, the myth acquires new dimensions in the creative hands of Karnad, and the play unfolds rich strands of meaning.

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