



Mythical Symbolism and Female Agency in Girish Karnad's Naga-Mandala

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ABSTRACT

Naga-mandala is a popular play written by Girish Karnad. It is based on two old folk stories and mixes magic, fantasy, and real-life problems. The play talks about love, marriage, truth, and the place of women in society. The story is about Rani, a young woman who is married to Appanna, a man who doesn't care for her. He locks her in the house and visits only during the day. Rani feels lonely and confused. One day, an old woman gives her a magic root that is supposed to make her husband fall in love with her. But something strange happens the root is eaten by a cobra (a snake) who turns into her husband at night and starts visiting her secretly. This snake, in the form of Appanna, shows her love and care, which makes Rani happy. She doesn't realize he is not her real husband. Later, when she becomes pregnant, her real husband accuses her of being unfaithful. The village demands that she prove her innocence. She passes the test in a surprising way, and people believe she is pure. In the end, Appanna accepts her, and the cobra goes back to the world of snakes. Through this magical story, Naga-mandala shows how women often suffer in silence and how they long for love and respect. It also shows how stories can be powerful and full of meaning. The play mixes real emotions with fantasy to tell a story that feels both old and new.

Introduction

Naga-mandala is a famous Indian play written by Girish Karnad, one of the most respected playwrights in modern Indian literature. The play was originally written in Kannada in 1988 and later translated into English by Karnad himself. The word Naga-mandala means "a play with a cobra" (naga means snake or cobra, and mandala refers to a ritual or magical circle). The play is a mixture of magic, folklore, love, betrayal, and fantasy, based on two oral tales told by women in Karnataka. The story of Naga-mandala mainly revolves around a young woman named Rani, who is trapped in an unhappy marriage with a man named Appanna. Rani is innocent and kind-hearted, but her husband does not love or respect her. He locks her inside the house during the day and visits another woman outside. Rani feels lonely and helpless in her new home.

Rani's life begins to change when she unknowingly uses a magical root, given by Kurudavva, to make her husband fall in love with her. However, instead of her real husband, the magical potion attracts a mystical cobra (naga), who takes the form of Appanna and starts visiting her every night. Rani, not knowing the truth, thinks her husband has changed and now loves her. The play cleverly blends real-life problems with elements of folklore and fantasy. It questions the idea of truth, love, and identity. Through Rani's character, the play also shows the pain and silence many women experience in their marriages and how they find strength in difficult situations. Even though Rani is a victim of betrayal and lies, she gains agency (power over her own life) as the story unfolds. One of the most special things about Naga-mandala is how it uses storytelling as a major theme. The play begins in a strange and magical way, with a storyteller speaking to flames in a ruined temple. This creative beginning sets the tone for the entire play, which is full of stories within stories. Karnad uses this technique to connect traditional Indian storytelling with modern theatre. The play also shows the deep connection between humans and nature. The cobra, a symbol of power and mystery in Indian mythology, becomes an important character. The snake is not shown as evil, but as a loving and caring figure. This unusual portrayal makes the audience think differently about myths and beliefs.

In Naga-mandala, Karnad successfully brings together old folktales and new ideas. He presents serious social issues, such as women's rights, marriage, and freedom, in a beautiful and symbolic way. The play encourages us to listen to the unheard voices of women and to understand the complexity of relationships.

Overall, Naga-mandala is not just a story about a woman and a snake. It is a powerful play that explores love, truth, tradition, and the strength of the human spirit. Girish Karnad's writing style is poetic, thoughtful, and filled with imagination, making Naga-mandala a timeless piece of Indian theatre.

1. Female Agency

In Naga-mandala, Girish Karnad tells a magical yet meaningful story that highlights the struggles of women in a traditional Indian society. One of the most important themes in the play is female agency, which means a woman's ability to make choices, express herself, and take control of her own life.

Through the character of Rani, Karnad shows how a woman, even when trapped in an unfair situation, can grow and find her strength. Rani is a young and innocent village girl who is married to Appanna, a man who treats her badly. After their marriage, Appanna keeps her locked up in the house all day and visits her only during the daytime. At night, he goes to another woman. Rani is left alone, confused, and heartbroken. She has no freedom, no voice, and no one to talk to. In the beginning, she is like many traditional women who suffer silently and follow whatever their husbands say. At this stage, Rani has very little agency. She does not question her husband or try to fight back. She only hopes that one day he will change. Her silence and patience show how deeply she has accepted her role as a submissive wife, just like society expects her to.

Things begin to change when Rani is given a magical root by an old woman. She is told that it will make her husband fall in love with her. This is the first time Rani tries to take action for herself. Even though it involves magic, it shows that she wants to change her life and take control of her happiness. When the magic root is accidentally consumed by a cobra, the story takes a magical turn. The cobra falls in love with Rani and starts visiting her every night, taking the form of her husband. Rani, unaware of the truth, feels loved and cared for for the first time. She becomes happy and more confident. Though this love comes from a magical snake, it helps Rani discover her own strength and self-worth. The real test of Rani's agency comes when she becomes pregnant. Appanna is shocked and accuses her of being unfaithful. The villagers demand that she prove her innocence. At this point, Rani could have broken down, but she remains calm and strong.

She agrees to take the test holding a red-hot iron in her hand but before that, she cleverly speaks the truth in a smart way. She says she has never touched any man other than her husband and the cobra, without revealing the full story. Her clever words save her life and honor. Everyone believes she is pure, and Appanna accepts her fully. This moment is very powerful because Rani takes control of the situation with her words and wisdom. She does not shout or rebel, but she uses her intelligence and calmness to protect herself. This shows her inner strength and growing agency.

2. Gender role

Naga-mandala is a play that tells the story of a young woman named Rani, who is stuck in an unhappy marriage. The play mixes magic, fantasy, and reality to talk about real-life issues, especially gender roles the expectations that society places on men and women based on their gender. Through the characters and their actions, Karnad shows how traditional gender roles can be unfair and how they affect both men and women in different ways.

Rani and the Role of Women

At the center of the story is Rani, a kind and innocent girl who is married off to a man named Appanna. After marriage, Rani is locked inside the house all day. She is not allowed to go outside or talk to anyone. Her only job is to cook, clean, and wait for her husband. She is treated like an object, not as a person with thoughts or feelings. This shows the traditional role of women in many societies: to stay quiet, obey the husband, and accept whatever happens. Rani's situation represents the lack of freedom and identity many women face. She cannot make her own choices. She doesn't even know what love is supposed to feel like until the magical cobra enters her life, pretending to be her husband. This magical twist gives Rani attention and care something her real husband never gave her.

Appanna and the Role of Men

Appanna is a symbol of the patriarchal mindset where men believe they have more power and rights than women. He controls Rani's life, visits her only during the day, and spends his nights with another woman. Yet, when Rani becomes pregnant, he is quick to accuse her of being unfaithful. This shows a double standard where men can do what they want, but women are expected to stay pure and loyal.

Appanna never sees Rani as an equal partner. He expects her to be silent, faithful, and obedient, even though he is not faithful himself. This reflects the unfair expectations placed on women in many traditional families.

Gender Inequality in Society

The village society in the play also follows strict gender roles. When Rani is accused of being unfaithful, she is asked to prove her purity by going through a dangerous trial. The villagers do not question Appanna's behavior or ask him to prove anything. The pressure is all on Rani. This shows how society often blames women while protecting or ignoring the faults of men. Also, women in the village use magic and gossip to deal with their problems, while men use control and power. This shows how women are often forced to find secret or indirect ways to get what they want, because they are not allowed to speak openly or take action.

Breaking the Stereotypes

Even though Rani begins the story as a weak and silent character, she slowly starts to grow. She uses her cleverness and calm nature to prove her innocence in front of the whole village. She does not lie, but she tells the truth in a smart way. This shows that women can be strong in their own way, even if they do not shout or fight. By the end of the play, Rani earns respect and becomes a powerful figure. Even her husband changes his behavior. This transformation shows that gender roles are not fixed people can change, and women can rise above the limits placed on them.

Folk Elements in Naga-mandala

Folk traditions play a very important role in Naga-mandala by Girish Karnad. The entire play is based on two folktales that were told to Karnad by A. K. Ramanujan, a famous Indian writer and scholar. These stories come from the oral traditions of Karnataka, where people passed down stories through generations by speaking or singing them. Karnad uses these folk stories to create a magical, symbolic, and meaningful play.

One major folk element in Naga-mandala is the idea of shape-shifting. The cobra (naga) takes the form of Rani's husband at night. This magical event is not explained scientifically—it is accepted as a natural part of the story. This shows how folk stories often mix the real and the magical without question.

Another folk aspect is the character of Kurudavva, an old blind woman who gives Rani a magical root to win her husband's love. Using herbs, charms, and folk medicine is very common in rural Indian traditions. It shows the deep belief in natural magic and village wisdom. The opening of the play is also very unique. A storyteller speaks with flames (yes, real fire flames!) in a temple. This is a beautiful example of how stories themselves are alive in folk culture. The play shows that stories have their own power and can shape people's lives.

Overall, Karnad uses folk tales not just for entertainment but also to talk about serious issues like gender roles, marriage, and identity.

Conclusion

Naga-mandala is a unique play that teaches us many important lessons about life, relationships, and society. The play tells the story of Rani, a young woman trapped in a loveless marriage. Through her journey, we learn about the pain of loneliness, the struggle of women in a male-dominated world, and the hope that change is possible.

One of the most important things we learn from Naga-mandala is the idea of female strength and agency. In the beginning, Rani is quiet and powerless. But as the story continues, she grows stronger. Even though she faces betrayal and confusion, she learns to make decisions for herself. This shows that women, even in difficult situations, can find their voice and power.

The play also talks about gender roles and how unfair they can be. Rani is expected to be a perfect wife, while her husband Appanna does whatever he wants. The play questions these old rules and shows how they hurt people, especially women.

Another reason this play is special is because of its folk elements. Karnad uses Indian village stories, magic, and imagination to tell a deep and meaningful story. The talking flames, the shape-shifting cobra, and the magical root make the play exciting and creative.

Overall, Naga-mandala is a good play because it makes us think. It mixes fantasy and reality to show real problems in society. It gives importance to women's voices and challenges old traditions. It is not just entertaining, it is meaningful and emotional. We come away from the play with a better understanding of love, truth, and the hidden strength inside every person.

References

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