

Mythological Structures in the Nagamandala

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The story of Nagamandala is uprooted from Kannada folklore which Karnad had himself heard from the poet and academic, A.K. Ramanujan. It reflects Karnad's respect for the technical elements of theatrical art and also for the Indian tradition of storytelling although he innovates and experiments by sharing twentieth century views. 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 devices for telling that story.”

The summary of this personified story goes like this. The young bride Rani is married to indifferent man Appanna who always ill-treats her. Rani being always locked inside the house by her husband whenever he goes out, feels depressed for not having any freedom. Appanna treats his wife as a servant and meanwhile he keeps and uses a concubine. The other two characters in the play, the blind woman – Kurudavva and her son Kappanna, play an influential role by helping Rani, the protagonist of the story in fulfilling her needs and aspirations.

Kurudavva, who is always around on the back by her son Kappanna, gives Rani a potion and asks her to feed Appanna while serving food, so that, he might fall in love with her. Newly married Rani, who craves for her husband's love was tempted to use the potion given by the old woman. Being not dare enough to feed her husband with the potion, finally pours into an anthill which is the dwelling place for king cobra – The Naga.

Ridiculously, the king cobra falls in love with Rani, enters the house through the bathroom drain during the nights and takes the appearance of Appanna once he is inside. Disguised Naga in the form of Appanna builds relationship with the innocent Rani which soon becomes fruitful and results in Rani getting pregnant.

Thus, the protagonist in the story is treated as a mere property by an indifferent husband Appanna, and by night, a goddess cherished by cobra (in Appanna's form).

Appanna as soon as he discovers Rani's pregnancy, puts the issue in front of the elders of the village so that, they may help him to determine her guilt or innocence, as

Rani's innocence is proved when she takes the snake ordeal and holds the king cobra in her hand. Surprisingly, the cobra instead of biting her, slides up her shoulder and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head.

The villagers are panic-stricken. Hence forth, Rani is considered as a goddess and Appanna was left with nothing but just to accept her as his wife.

In Nagamandala, the author highlights the changes occurring in Indian society and mentality. The play based on oral tales, introduces in its prologue the figure of a playwright who encounters a story that has sneaked out of the mouth of its teller to take shelter in a village temple. The overall structure of the interrelated stories and plots, the triangle relationships and the triple ending of the play can be graphically as a

Mandala. The play is the open media to the today's people and helps to understand cultural context of the Indian woman of today who seeks to fulfill her needs and aspirations.

Girish Karnad is quite adept at amalgamating ideas from traditional folk theater, mythology, history and contemporary literature in his creations with results that leave aficionados of literature in his creations with results that leave aficionados of literature and performing arts enraptured.

Karnad's passion for story telling contributes to the success of his plays in indian villages. He says that when he creates his plays, he holds up a mirror in which the present society can be reflected. He explains in “The Introduction to Three Plays, Nagamandala, Hayavadana and Tughlaq”,

“The energy of the folk theater comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values of making them literally stand on their head. The various conventions – the chorus, he masks, the seemingly unrelated comic episodes, the making of human and non-human worlds permit the simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view, of alternative attitudes to the central problem.”

The play Nagamandala is labeled as ‘Story Theatre’ as its actions are based on folk stories. Karnad asserts that these types of stories are told by women in the kitchen while they feed children or sometimes it becomes the mode of communication among the women in the family. Such stories as Nagamandala show how the protagonist of the story reveals the perception of woman that a woman can have her own reality and that it counter balances classical text and serve as means of escaping the orthodoxy of Indian epic stories.

To proceed with the study of the play Nagamandala, it can be observed that it really is a mesh of many stories. Four different narrative levels make up the story of the play. The frame story contains three other stories, each of them entangled with the previous one.

On the first narrative level, the frame story is about the playwright who has to stay awake for the whole night in the temple, to let the curse pass. The night of that theatrical performance was his last chance to see that the audience stay awake the entire night while watching his play. We hear author-narrator's repeated laments,

“I may be dead within the next few hours.”

Mythical elements can be seen in the second and the third narrative level. The author-narrator meets the host of the giggling flames, each one carrying her own story becomes the second story. These personified flames go to the same ruined temple where the author-narrator is bewailing his plight.

On the third level, we find a tale by a flame, who wants to be forgiven for arriving late to the hosting place. The tale is about an old woman who knew an interesting story but refused to share it with others. Ironically, that story slipped out of the snoring old hag's mouth and is transformed into a beautiful young lady and the song that accompanies it, turns into a beautiful sari.

Thus, the fourth narrative level is the story of Rani, the lady who born out of the story from the old hag's mouth. Rani becomes the main character of the play Nagamandala. As the main story begins, the complex turn in the structure of the story can be observed.

"There is an interaction between the unfortunate author-narrator and the flames – the dialogue between the narrator of the personified story and the narrator of the second and the third level."

The author-narrator of the first narrative level, thus, finds a story interesting enough, which helps him to stay awake the whole night that accounts him to save his life.

The characters of the main story forms the two groups of three interrelated individuals which can be geometrically represented as two intertwined triangles: First, a group formed by the three protagonists, Appanna-Rani-Naga and the other by Rani – Kuruddavva (the blind woman) and her son Kappanna.

According to the Hindu mythology,

"The intersection of two triangles, one pointing upwards and the other downwards indicates the union of the male and female principles, that is the union between Shiva (the supreme consciousness) and Shakthi (the creative force). A third triangle is seen inside the other which represent the triple ending of the play."

"The play Nagamandala when visualized from the point of structure and settings as well the different narrative levels and the symbolism, the entire play is considered to be a Mandala in the graphic form."

The graphic mandala represents the four different narrative levels of the play. The outer square signifies the base of the ruined temple which symbolizes the reconstruction of the ruined temple in the further progress of the play. The first circle inside the square represents the flames of the second narrative level and the second represents the acoustic wave of the song which is materialized into a beautiful sari wrapped around the young bride who is the personification of the story of the third narrative level. The two intertwined triangles represents the relation between the supreme consciousness and the creative force. The innermost triangle at the center stands for the three endings of the play.

The graphic representation of this play Nagamandals which comprises of the geometrical figures such as a square, the circles and the triangles complement each other and lead to the required balance of the centrifugal and centripetal forces of a mandala.

According to Natya Shastra, written by Bharatha Muni, a drama consists of three worlds, the celestial, the terrestrial and the infernal and thus integrates the supernatural, human and sub-human. Hence, the mandala of this play evokes the complexity of the cosmos and interweaves of three world.

As said earlier, the play has three endings. Of which, the first is the triumph of Rani; after the snake ordeal and being worshipped as an incarnate of the Devi – the personification and placement of the story as 'a story accomplished by a song', and the form of 'a young lady wrapped by a beautiful sari' narrating her own story provides a suggestion towards a woman's manifestation of the right to freedom of expression.

Appanna, Rani's strange husband automatically considers her as a wife and forgets his concubine becomes her servant. This type of ending which is usually found in the folktales or fairy

tales seems to be very loose. Appanna in spite of knowing that he had no sexual relationship with his wife, instead she was expecting a child seems to be something ridiculous where he is left with nothing but to accept her when the village elders said that Rani is 'Mother Goddess'.

The critic P. Dhanvel says,

"Appanna begins to suspect his own sanity."

The indifferent husband Appanna, responds to the victory of Rani after snake ordeal like this,

"What am I to do? Is the whole world against me? Have I sinned so much that even nature should laugh at me?... Let any miracle declare her a Goddess. But I know!"

Another point, in the first of the three endings that touches our inner sense is that, whether Rani knew that man with whom she used to have inter-course was not her husband; even after knowing, did she continue?; or did Naga know that "Rani knew that she was cherished by him?"

The second ending highlights the state of mind of the Cobra, who longs for the love of Rani is ready to sacrifice himself by hiding in her abundant hair. The flames who were listening to the story were pleased with this kind of tragic end, - the death of the Cobra which gave life to the story.

Hence, the author-narrator of the story decides to change the climax by making the reappearance of Rani and Appanna. However, this time when the Cobra falls from Rani's hair he is alive. The frightened Appanna thinks to kill the Cobra, but Rani saves him by letting him hide in hair again and tells Appanna that the Cobra had escaped.

The play ends with emotional words of Rani,

"This hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss. Live in there happily for ever."

The third ending of the play may not be accepted by many Indians because according to the Indian culture, 'marriage is considered as the supreme boon for a woman as it offers her the salvation through her service to her husband'. Whereas, Karnad in this play visualizes the position of Rani as a metaphor for a situation of a young girl in the bosom of a joint family where she sees her husband only in two connected role, - as a stranger during the day and as a lover at night.

In the words of SatyaDevDubey,

"Girish Karnad is the only playwright in the history of Indian Theatre to have treated adultery as normal and treated adulterous woman sympathetically."

According to the Indian tradition snake is the image of vital energy of the cosmos that symbolizes fertility and the process of development in human beings. So, Rani, the protagonist of the play symbolically shows her emotional relationship with cobra by letting it to live happily in her abundant hair. This signifies her vital energy as well as her conscious level being aroused after her sexual awakening.

Thus, the play Nagamandala, when viewed from the philosophical and mythological point of view, the cobra has given her chance to choose and achieve liberation and it causes Rani's integration at different levels, - the physical, the emotional, the spiritual and the intellectual.

As said in the Natya Shastra, a drama has role of integration of the worlds. Like-wise, Karnad, tries to manifest a unifying purpose throughout this play. The setting, scheme, structure

and symbols of the play are the elements used by the playwright to show the overall unification of the interrelated stories and plots, the triangular relationships the triple ending graphically represented as a mandala. The setting is the Hindu temple, - the representation of the whole universe of the cosmos – mandala. The four stories of the play are interconnected and the plot of the main story moves towards the liberation and fulfillment of Rani, the new Indian woman through her relationship with Naga, the Cobra.

The intertwined triangles and the circles of the mandala symbolizes the unity within themselves. These concentric geometric figures show the layered structure of the drama to give graphic form to the essential universal pattern of the mandala. An academic and an active figure in Kannada theatre,

Lakshmi Chandrashekar asserts that, “Karnad has been accused of escaping into the past. But the use of mythology in most modern literature validates individual experience and universalizes it and I think Karnad has been able to do that.”

References

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