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Changing Faces of New Woman in Indian Writing

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Abstract:

The post-modern liberalization grants women a space for their presence and thereby provides the opportunity to develop multiple identities for them as women from different cultures are adopting different means of countering the dominant narratives. While some of the women from the western cultures seems to be fascinated by a “manly” image of woman, which tries to gain space by aping everything masculine, we find a different reaction in Indian context.

Instead of eliminating their essential subjectivity, a section of Indian women evolves a new counter strategy which consists of an understanding of the patriarchal discourse of power and utilizing them in an improvised way to their own advantage. They are manipulating the techniques of operation in order to create their own space and thereby evolving an identity for themselves as the master players as here the women are paying it back but under the disguise of being stereotyped. Instead of subverting the system in some overt mode of confrontation they prefer to remain stereotyped but play their game of manipulation.

In Girish Karnad’s Nag Mandala, we find a woman, Rani who is rejected and confined in a room by her husband, who likes to spend the nights outside at the chamber of a prostitute. Now Rani develops an extra-marital relationship with a snake, a cobra which can take the shape of Rani’s husband by magical power. When she becomes pregnant, her husband who never touched her in his life drags her to the village court, the Panchayat to put her under trial. Here the patriarchal regulatory body comes to play its role. The Panchayat asks Rani to go under a fire ordeal, the Agnipariksha. But she insists on the snake ordeal where she puts her hand into the hole where the cobra lives and swears diplomatically that she has never touched any other male in her life except her husband and this cobra. The cobra does not bite her as she speaks the truth, and she, thus comes out victorious by manipulating one patriarchal instrument of operation i.e., the ordeal, to her own advantage

1. The New Women in Girish Karnad’s Nagmandala

If there is any commonality between the cultures of the west and the east, it is marginalization and interiorizing of woman. The male has a voice whereas the female has no voice, she has often silent, subdued and suppressed. Woman is considered an inferior being and a subordinate person to man in every sphere. Literature is replete with examples of women who met with destruction: Hawthorne’s Hester, Isben’s Nora, Namita Gokhale’s Paro and several heroines of Anita Desai. The subjugation of women is a part of the Indian ethos. The women of modern India still have always been deprived of their rights and claim for individuality by the male dominant society. A woman is still slave living in lifelong slavery dominated just by her father, then by her husband and finally by her son. In spite of increasing education and the western influence, atrocities against women are on an increase. Even educated women have to give up before the tradition and social pressure. Mulk Raj Anand has remarked in an interview, “Woman in our society has been so much humiliated that there is no way in which you can restore the dignity.” Girish Karnad’s Nagmandala can be seen in the context of the concept of the new woman.

Nagmandala story of male superiority and inferiority. All men are empowered to exercise “right” over woman. So does Appanna. The treatment Rani receives at the hands of her husband is a treatment with the contempt of a typical male chauvinist. The play mocks at the questions the unjust values of our patriarchal society. The compelling question that the play raises is about the fate of woman who find themselves almost destitute and helpless in callous, and sometimes a cruel world. Let us look at Rani. As it happens with a majority of Indian girls, Rani had married at a young age a boy of her parent’s choice. After marriage, she is shocked to find her husband least interested in her duty. Appanna treats her cruelly and locks her in the house all alone with only a suggestion that he will come only to lunch the next day:

- Rani: listen – (fumbling for words) listen – I feel – frightened – alone at night-
- Appanna: what is there to be scared of just keep to yourself. No one will bother you.
- Rani: please, you could –
- Appanna: look, I don’t like idle chatter. Don’t question me. Do as you are told and you won’t be punished. (Finishes his meal, gets up) I will be back tomorrow for lunch.

Appanna represents the typically bull- type man who defines the duty of a woman, for whom a woman is made for serving the male. She is put behind the lock like a caged bird lest she should get a company to abate her suffering. She is exerted to follow the dictates of her husband. Indian wives thus have no voice. She is further told that lucky is the wife whose dead body is carried to pyre by her husband, implying that she has to live and die in her husband's house irrespective of the treatment she receives from her husband. Rani, therefore, bears all suffering without speaking of a word of revolt. She is left by her parents also to find herself everything in her husband's house. Rani remembers her favorite nursery tale and day –dreams that an eagle takes her to her parents who care her affectionately. When she comes into real world she sobs. Here we have an innocent girl who can dream only between her husband and the shelter of her parents. She is a non-entity; just a parasite which feeds on others. She is a creeper who needs a strong trunk to grow and survive. Thus the miserable days of Rani roll by in this manner. Appanna treats her as if she were non human, like a robot that follows his instructions. As male chauvinist he has utter contempt for his wife. This mental torture forces her to fly mentally into the lap of her parents. Rani here is a representative of such victims in our society. Here Karnard, raises a question about the attitude of a typical male towards his wife and also seems to ask how fair it is to talk about democratic value and egalitarianism.

The husband, on the other hand, can enjoy any liberty. He enjoys extra-marital sex and the society does not question him. Appanna's going to a concubine is no secret in the town. Here the name Appanna means 'any man' and it is a wry comment on any man who tries to enforce chastity on his wife, while he himself indulges in extramarital relationship. Instead, Appanna keeps his wife under lock and key lest she should get a company to abate her suffering. He mercilessly keeps her starved of affection and love which are indispensable for the growth and sustenance of human mind. Mark what Appanna says to Kurudavva, "She won't talk to anyone. And no one need talk to her." Later he brings a watch dog to prevent people from talking to his wife. This solitary confinement of Rani by Appanna in the house symbolizes the chastity belt of the middle ages, the reduction of a woman's talent to house work and the exclusion as women from enlightenment and enjoyment. It is always the woman who is not supposed to cross the Lakshman Rekha. It is in her character of a typical Indian wife that will serve her husband very sincerely even when the husband is in the clutches of a concubine. She should be a living image as '*tyaga, tapasya and tanmayata.*' Once Kurudavva gives Rani a piece of aphrodisiac root and instructs her to grind the root and mix it in Appanna's food to seduce him. Rani mixes the paste but as the curry turns red and looks sinister, she throws it on the anthill in front of the house. Here Rani as a typical wife does not want to cause her husband any harm which she fears will be caused by the root through her husband punishes her severely even for small things like her going out, though she has been serving him without any grudge since he brought her. Once he slaps her so hard that she collapses onto the floor "There is not a trace of anger in anything he does. Just cold content." Of course, Appanna here, like many men who are slaves of patriarchal culture, is only playing the role expected of him. Karnard has added the character of Rani, with mythical touch. Rani can be judged against many legendary Indian women who were forsaken by their husbands but still they breathed only their husband's name. The Indian ideal woman is instilled with such ideas from her childhood and is taught that her husband is equal to God. Karnard has impregnated all the devotion, sacrifice and whole-hearted surrender of an Indian wife, who smilingly suffers any pang for the sake of husband. '*pati parmashwar*' (the husband as the deity) is the ideology of a married Indian wife. Rani throws the curry away and finds her secure future with Appanna only. She says:

Suppose something happens to my husband? what will my fate be?

That little piece made him ill. Who knows....?

(Slaps herself on her cheeks)

No no. Forgive me God. This is evil. I was about to commit a crime.

Father, mother, how could I your, daughter, agree to such heinous act?

Thus the post colonial matrix embedded in the play opens up yet another space for the working out of the theme of patriarchal oppression. But, Naga-Mandala is something beyond the store of the oppression of women. When Naga comes into picture, the image of the play also changes gradually. Naga represents a cultural leader who is instrumental in bringing about a socio-cultural reform. Rani has evolved through the love of Naga. She grows as she received the affection of Naga. She, a little helpless diffident girl, gradually becomes a confident and courageous lady. This can be seen when she speaks to Naga later in the play:

I was a stupid, ignorant girl when you brought me here. But now I am a woman, a wife, and I going to be a mother. I am not a parrot. Not a cat or a sparrow. Why don't you take it on 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? Even if I understand a little, a tiny bit- I could bear it. But now sometimes I feel my head is going to burst!

Here 'the new woman is an assertive and self-willed lady, searching to discover her true self. Rani tells Naga that he is a different person. She was a stupid girl when Appanna brought her but now she is different. The image of the New Woman has emerged here. She now dares to ask direct questions and wants to know why he is playing games with her. She has grown up fully to know what she has to do in a given situation. She has learned to stand on her own. Her experience has emboldened her to question the authority of Naga. She later shows the same courage which shocks Appanna:

(Snarling at Appanna) "If you don't let go I will ----"(taken aback by her fury), Appanna lets her go.

The initial stage is painful for Rani but in the last part of the story, she is seen to be in command of the household, with some authority and decision making authority it is through the Naga that Rani grows confident. Motherhood is bestowed upon her and she becomes a woman who believes in herself. She is cured of frigidity. After the ordeal she gets a devoted husband. Her husband's concubine becomes a lifelong servant- maid for her. The nervous and frightened young girl finds within herself a new courage and confidence. She emerges triumphant from the public trail as the snake does not bite her. The cold aggressive and indifferent is subdued, mildly tamed and accepts her judgment the position of Rani is now transverse to the extent of Appanna agreeing to her rather strange demand

that their son should perform an annual “Pind-Daan” in the memory of dead snake. If we look at the end of the play, we find Naga Mandala feminist in nature to quote Chaman Nahal:

I define feminism as a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome. There is dependent syndrome: whether it is husband or the father or the committee or whether it is a religious group, ethnic group. When woman free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materializes.

In end two of the play, the snake does not die. Rani allows him to live in her tresses, her “dark, long and cool tresses like snake princess” the new woman now always wants her lover to be with her. The dutiful and loyal wife may observe the social, moral code entirely, yet within her, live the memories of perfect lover who had given her, her first emotional and erotic experience.

Naga Mandala thus ends a feminist play. It questions the patriarchal the moral code which demands the faithfulness of a woman to her husband but not the faithfulness of a man to his wife. It also gives a real message to all that it is a sin to subject once wife to torture and deny her the rights of a wife. Otherwise the modern social changes will compel him to do so.

The playwright successfully exposes male chauvinism, and seems to suggest that matriarchy (which according to Dachofen’s theory of mother right is the lost paradise of mankind) will come again. Karnad has got a deep insight into the female condition. He wants brings reform and improve the condition of woman. Naga Mandala seems to suggest that if people of the modern age are really willing to have all round development they are required to make successful efforts in order that woman can be given proper response in every field of life. Their exploitation means the exploitation of the cell. Karnd has successfully pictures one of the modern problems of universal significance, that is, the suffering and injustice associated with woman for ages. Simon De Beauvoir comments:

..... man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as autonomous being... she is the incidental inessential as a post to the essential. He is the subject, he is the absolute- she is the other.

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2. References

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