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METAMORPHOSIS OF CHARACTERS: NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN *NAGA-MANDALA: PLAY WITH A COBRA* BY GIRISH KARNAD

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Abstract

Fictions have a mesmerising capacity to take readers towards the magical realm of imagination. Readers remain stunned and excited before the charisma of the narrators, the way in which the story is told. Authors lose themselves in the enchanting world created by the writer to entertain the readers and viewers. This is quite absolute, when it comes to the Epic poems like The Ramayana, The Mahabharata, The Iliad and The Odyssey etc, and folklores and fairy tales in different languages, and many tell-tale stories all over the world. Most of them carry traditional morals, cultural aspects, customs, philosophies etc., which are known to the people for many centuries. Readers of these works are enthralled and uplifted from the Earth to an altitude of skies, into a world of imagination. People enjoy reading such works, for they wanted to escape, at least for a while, from the core realities of life. They are even ready to believe in the supernatural characters and their superhuman powers told through these lores. Some of these stories have become religious scriptures for many communities to follow their rituals. The Ramayana and The Mahabharata, the two greatest Epic poems of India, are very good examples for this theory. Many are waiting for such Messiahs to come and save them from their miserable conditions, since centuries. Some even adjoin the coincidences happened in their life with these characters and console themselves or takes refuge under the shadow of those mythical characters. This paper intends to shed light into the techniques of metamorphosis of characters employed by the author, Girish Karnad, to tell the tale, in his renowned play, *Naga-Mandala: Play with a Cobra*, which is written based on two folktales.

Key-Words

Indian English Drama, Girish Karnad, Metamorphosis, Narration Technique, *Naga-Mandala*.



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Introduction

Girish Karnad is a very famous Indian writer, playwright, film director and actor. His plays stand in towering heights as fine examples for the amalgamation of history and mythology. He has always attempted, through his works, to address the contemporary issues. His *Naga-Mandala: Play with a Cobra* is based on two Kannada folk tales, which he has heard from his friend, A K Ramanujan, a renowned Indian poet, to whom he has dedicated this play. The play is one of the finest examples for using the techniques of metamorphosis of characters. It is enshrouded with magic and supernaturalism, myth and superstition, truth and fancy. It tells two stories, one told by the flame and the other by the 'Story' itself, in the form of a woman. The stories are well woven into one and metaphors are used to tell the stories. The main theme of the play is the story of a husband and wife, Appanna and Rani, in a traditional patriarchal Indian setup. 'Pati Parameshwar' (husband is god) is a conventional title carried by the Indian husbands. Many rituals in Indian culture, at the time of marriage, like the knot tied, with the hem of wardrobes of the bride and groom and taking seven rounds around the fire or the Homakund, show the dominance of male in the marriage process. All these rituals are the demonstrations of the prominence of a husband in a conjugal relationship. It is the groom that ties the chain around the bride, and it is customary for the bride to touch the feet of groom. The dominance of a husband and the helplessness of a wife are very well seen in Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala: Play with a Cobra*. The plot brings out such a traditional relationship between husband and wife, Appanna and Rani.

Metamorphosis of Characters

The author deploys techniques of metamorphosis or the transformation of

characters, to tell the story of a newly wedded couple, Appanna and Rani. The main theme of the play itself is narrated in a way that it is being told by a woman, draped in a saree, to the flames and a man, who are gathered in an inner sanctum of a ruined temple. As the Idol is broken, it is difficult to say the deity of the temple. From the very beginning of the play itself the author conveys the idea of transformation, for the temple is transformed to a platform or a stage, where the story is being told and the deity has transformed to mere piece of stone witnessing the whole show, and flames are presented like human beings, who can listen and speak. The 'woman', who narrated the story of Appanna and Rani, itself is a transformed version of a 'Story' and a 'Song', who have just reached in the temple in the form of a woman wearing saree. The author cleverly brings forth a 'story' inside the story, which is narrated by the 'New Flame'. It told the gathering an interesting story:

"You know I have only an old couple in my house. Tonight, the old woman finished eating, swept and cleaned the floor, put away the pots and pans, and went to the room in which her husband was sleeping. And what should she see, but a young woman dressed in a rich, new sari step out of the room! The moment the young woman saw my mistress, she ran out of the house and disappeared into the night. The old woman woke her husband up and questioned him. But he said he knew nothing, which started the rumpus. My mistress, the old woman, knows a story and a song. But all these years she has kept them to herself, never told the story, nor sung the song. So the story and the song were being choked, imprisoned inside her. This afternoon the old woman took her usual nap after lunch and started snoring. The moment her mouth opened, the 'story' and the 'song' jumped out and hid in the attic. At night, when the old man had gone to sleep, the 'story' took the form of a young woman, and the song became a sari. The young woman wrapped herself in the sari and stepped out, just as the old lady was coming in. Thus, the 'story' and 'song' created a feud in the family and were revenged on the old woman". (*Naga-Mandala: Play with a Cobra*, P. 04)

As the play opens Appanna, the husband, is portrayed as a dominating figure. He is a typical Indian husband, who is flourished under the prevailing patriarchy system, where a husband is treated as a god. A wife might not be able to enjoy her freedom and happiness, for in this system, she should be staying with her husband and his family. In most cases she had to sacrifice her interests against the interests of her husband, his parents and his siblings. Appanna appears to be a very cruel husband, who exercises absolute superiority over his bride, Rani. He married her and brought her from a distant place, where she lived with her parents. Her parents might have thought that the marriage will bring her a better life. After all, it is widely accepted that, a woman can't live alone, and she should marry for her own good. But Appanna, the husband, is not ready to have an intimate relationship with his wife. He doesn't like to caress her or to indulge in love making with her, as if he has married her without any interest. Rani's wish to experience a passionate touch or an affectionate talk from his side has not fulfilled, for he never spent much time with her. He is

not ready to sleep with her and found no time even to speak her. He opened his mouth only to say her a few words regarding the food or when he'll be visiting her again. He used to come home only at noon to have lunch. He takes a bath and eats his lunch and leaves his wife without even saying a word. He even locks the front door of the house, from outside, before leaving his wife all alone in the house. Most of the times during the day he spends time with a concubine, with whom he is very much physically attracted. He never thinks about leading a decent marital relationship with his wife, instead, flirts with a harlot and separate her from all male and female companionship. This continued for days and months and never once Appanna stretched his affectionate hands towards his better half.

Rani was very much frustrated by the behaviour of her husband. She can only lament on her unfortunate state of life. She used to sit in one of the corners of the house and weep. She saw her parents in her dreams, who came to her and slept with her. She tried to find console in those dreams, in which she was able to talk and share her miseries with them. She longed to have her parents or anyone, who loves her, visit her. Thus were the days of that poor girl, Rani, when she heard a footstep outside and found that an old blind lady at her courtyard. The old blind lady introduced herself as Kurudavva, a friend of Appanna's mother. She told Rani that she was the one who helped Appanna's mother, when she gave birth to him. She continued that he is like a son to her, and she heard that he has married and so she has come to see the bride. She feels Rani with her own hands, through the window, and finds that she is very beautiful. She was expecting to hear words of joy from the newly wedded bride but heard only the pathetic situation of Rani. She becomes shocked to hear the treatment Appanna has been inflicting upon his bride and curses him for isolating her in such a way. Kurudavva feels sorry for her and decides to help her. She calls out for her son Kappanna, who has accompanied her always. She asks him to go home and bring a particular box containing two roots. She hands them over to Rani, when Kappanna brought them and advised her to mix one of the roots in the food served to Appanna. She explained her about the magical power possessed by the roots. They were given her by a Yogi, who once visited their home. She herself is a beneficiary of the supernatural powers of the roots, for she got married and delivered a fair child, even when none was ready to marry her, being blind and dark. The Yogi gave her three roots; small, medium and big, in which she has used the medium one for her sake, and Rani may use either the small or the big roots she has. The magical power possessed by the roots is another technique implemented by the narrator to ease the worries of the heroine.

The blind lady, Kurudavva, who has come to help Rani, is another character who has undergone a transformation using one of these roots, by appearing herself as a very beautiful women in the eyes of the young man who married her.

As advised by Kurudavva, Rani mixes the smallest one in the milk and serves her husband. He takes it and falls unconscious, but no change happens in him. With much reluctance, she decides to experiment with the biggest one. She makes a delicious curry and mixes the bigger one in it. Suddenly the colour of the curry changes and turns it into

poisonous red. She becomes so frightened and finds herself having no courage to feed such a poison to her husband. She has seen her husband becoming unconscious, having the small root and what will become of him, if he takes this bigger one. Even though he is so cruel and harsh to her, she doesn't want to harm him in any way. So instead of giving it to Appanna, she pours it into an ant hill, which is the house of a poisonous king cobra. It drinks the curry and saw Rani and falls in love with her. The root transformed the King Cobra, a poisonous creature, into an affectionate lover. The very nature and form of that hideous reptile has been metamorphosed. The king cobra, turned lover, now disguises into Appanna and takes the name as Naga, goes to Rani in the night, through the bathroom drain. He kisses Rani with tenderness and care. But the next day when Appanna came, she found no trace of love in his behaviour. She thought the whole experience in the previous night is only a dream. But the nocturnal visits by Naga, disguised as Appanna, continued. She got immense love in the night and grave neglect in the daytime. Rani, a typical innocent country girl, becomes so bewildered at this unexpected complex behaviour of her husband for in the daytime he appeared as the same arrogant person who seldom speaks her but at the night, he performs the role of a true romantic lover and indulges in love making. But her confusions get cleared when she realised that she is bearing a child in her womb. Appanna becomes appalled and furious when he heard Rani's words that she is going to be a mother. He doubted her character, called a harlot, for he is very much sure that he has never indulged in physical relationship with his wife.

The transformation in a man's nature is well depicted by the author, the change from a 'lover' to a 'stranger'. Many are there who speaks sweet words to their partners to meet their physical need and rejects cruelly, when things are done. Rani's passionate words and painful cries fall in the dead ears of Appanna. He takes her to the Panchayat and complaints about her chastity. He wanted justice, he says, and the elders of Panchayat asked her to speak the truth. She has nothing to say other than that her husband is the only person responsible for her becoming pregnant. She has never been once touched by any other male than her husband, Appanna. The Panchayat got confused and decided to put a test upon her. One can prove her statement either by holding hot iron or by plunging hands into boiling oil. If nothing happens, even after holding a hot iron or putting hands in the boiling oil, then the elders will declare her as trustworthy. Here it is very interesting to notice that only a woman needs to undergo such ordeals to prove her innocence, as in the Epic poem Ramayana, Sita, the lead character, takes a fire test to prove her chastity. She was made to go through a burning fire to prove herself chaste.

But as instructed by Naga, Rani decides to put her hand in the anthill, where the King Cobra lives, and take the oath. Everyone in the panchayat thought it as a stupid decision, a decision that may take her life and her child's. But they yielded before the determination of Rani and consented her to do so. Mass gathered to witness such an unusual or extraordinary way of taking oath. Rani puts her hand in the anthill and touched the snake and said,

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“Yes, my husband and this King Cobra. Except for these two, I have not touched in the male sex. Nor have I allowed any other male to touch me. If I lie, let the Cobra bite me”. (*Naga-Mandala: Play with a Cobra*, P. 43)

Unlike the expectation of the crowd, the cobra doesn't bite her instead it climbs her shoulders, spreads its hoods like a umbrella and stood like a garland, around her neck. Astonished and astounded crowd cheered, at this sight, calling her 'Divine'. They lifted her into a palanquin. The elders declared her as the 'goddesses' incarnated. Even her unscrupulous husband is asked to touch her feet, by the elders. She is taken home with much colour and joy.

A magnificent transformation, the transformation of an ordinary village girl to a 'goddesses' occur here, a tortured and ill-treated woman into a worshipful deity, A neglected and locked up innocent girl into a protective mother. A negligent husband turns to a loving and caring partner. Even a concubine, out of remorse, decides to serve Rani as a servant. The author has been successful in narrating the story using the technique of metamorphosis.

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