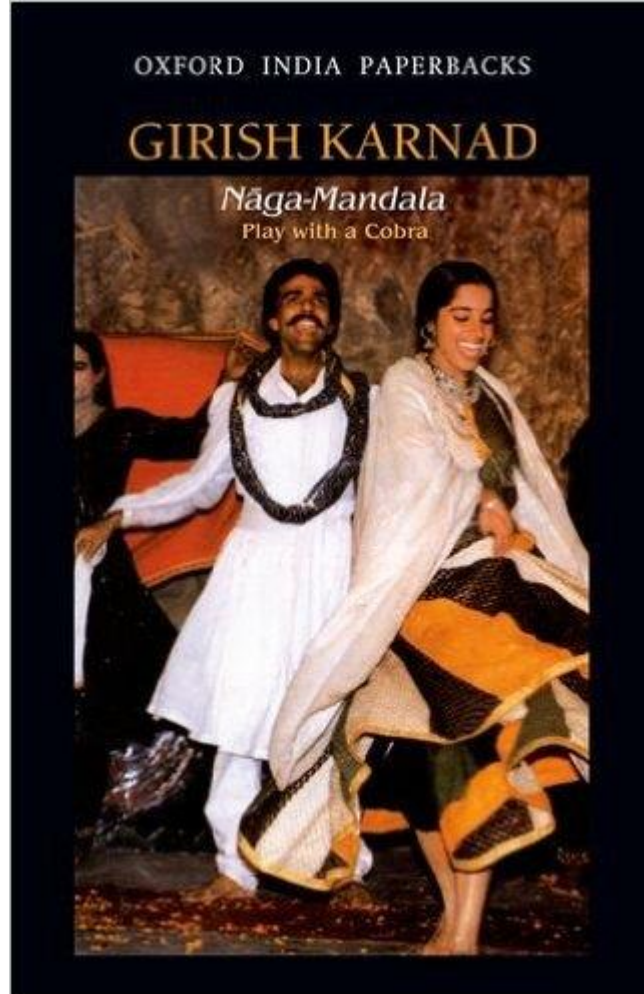


Power Structures in Karnad's Play *Nagamandala*

Smitha Sankaranarayanan, M.A., M.Phil. (English), Ph.D. Research Scholar



Abstract

This paper aims at highlighting the power structures operating in the various realms in Girish Karnad's play '*Nagamandala*'. The effect of power on the lives of men and women is elicited through this work. The condition of a society without power relations has become a matter of dispute among intellectuals. The need for establishing power is also discussed in this work.

Key words: Power structures-myths and superstition-patriarchal society-language-sexuality-legal authority-medicines-male hegemony.

Introduction

The play *Nagamandala* by Indo-Anglian playwright Girish Karnad has succeeded in unraveling the power structures that underlie the relationships prevailing in society. The effect that these elements of power have on the mindset of human beings and their identity is analysed here.

Michel Foucault is of the view that a society without power relations is a general idea, but it is impractical. As is explained in his work *Subject and Power*, power is exerted over others to maintain certain privileges, to outsmart others, to maintain one's status or position, to show one's competence, for making profits, financial benefit, approval, recognition, authority, etc. Power can be exercised by instilling fear, using force, abusive language, threat, enforcing rules, etc. (*Subject and Power*. pg.223) Thus, the system of social network is tightly held in these shackles of power relation. The power structures in the play *Nagamandala* are dealt with in this article.

Power of Myths on Human Beings

The play begins with the scene of a temple in a dilapidated condition and the broken idol adds to the feeling of an ill omen looming over the play. The scene occurs at night time, which is once more a sign of an unpleasant event. The night which is a symbol of death evokes fear and anxiety in the readers. The dilapidated temple, the broken idol, the night time and the foretelling of the man's death by the sage maybe treated as the curse brought about by the pitiable condition of the temple. The dejected writer sitting in the temple announces his death that is likely to occur in the next few hours. The foretelling of the man's death by the mendicant is dealt with seriously both by the man as well as by the readers. The man's fault is revealed by the saint as follows

Saint: You have written plays. You have staged them. You have caused so many good people, who came trusting you ,to fall asleep twisted in miserable chairs, that all that abused mass of sleep has turned against you and become

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:11 November 2015

Smitha Sankaranarayanan, M.A., M.Phil. (English), Ph.D. Research Scholar
Power Structures in Karnad's Play *Nagamandala*

the Curse of Death. (Nagamandala, pg. 2)

We also get glimpses of mythology being uttered by the simple Rani. She compares herself to a helpless bird which looks into the eyes of a cobra and gets mesmerized by the moving colours in the eyes of the cobra. It stands stunned with its wings half opened and the snake strikes it at once. Here, the cobra is none other than Naga. There is a reference that a snake is a powerful being and that all other living beings are created only for satiating the snake's whims. An object of power instills fear in the mind of people and this fear in turn transforms these objects into symbols of worship. Myth and superstition play a very vital role in gripping the society in its strict powers and they impose constraints and prohibitions on the society.

Power of Superstition on Human Beings

Rani unfolds her superstitious self before Naga when she tells him that if one utters the word 'Naga' at night, it would come into the house. Rani forms the mouthpiece of the superstitious Indians. The belief nurtured by Indians that a snake can take any form is presented in the play when Naga takes the form of Appanna to court Rani. Moreover, no matter whichever form it takes, its reflection in the mirror will be that of the snake itself. We are reminded of this belief when Rani looks into her mirror-box and is alarmed at the sight of the Naga.

The Naga cult forms the foundation of the play. In the same way, rituals also have a vital role in *Nagamandala*. Rani demands that her son has to perform the funeral rites of Naga every year. She develops a strange logic for this act by stating that the Naga had saved the life of her son by not biting him while he was asleep and it was indeed a fatherly act. Appanna has no alternative but to bend according to the desires of Rani.

Power of Husband over Wife

Karnad's women are the products and subjects of the patriarchal society. Man's power over woman is considered to be the elementary power relationship in human society. In the initial part of the play, we come across Appanna who over rules his wife, Rani. His power over the innocent, docile and timid Rani makes us abhor the pure husband-wife relation. He orders

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:11 November 2015

Smitha Sankaranarayanan, M.A., M.Phil. (English), Ph.D. Research Scholar
Power Structures in Karnad's Play *Nagamandala*

her to cook for him, imposes isolation on her and behaves brutally towards her. He treats her as a slave and a subject, somebody whom he is expected to rule.

‘Power is exerted only on subjects who are free.’(Subject and Power, Pg.221)

Maybe that is why Appanna tries to exert his power over his wife. Apart from depriving her of her rights of a wife, he ill treats her, abuses and slaps her and has no remorse in humiliating her in public. His torture becomes so unbearable that Rani addresses him as ‘the demon’. She has no place in his heart. Rani’s parents are not assigned any role since the day of her marriage. This situation leaves her a lonely and abandoned individual who can be easily susceptible to any degree of torture. The play makes no mention of her parents coming to visit their only daughter.

His attitude towards Rani is that of one towards a material object. This cruel man is not ready for a self evaluation whereby he keeps illicit relation with a concubine of the village and on the other hand expects total commitment from his wife. He locks Rani within his house which reminds us of the old legends where a beautiful maiden is kidnapped by a demon and is kept totally isolated from the world. Such is the nature of power that a tyrannical husband exercises over his life-partner.

Power of Language over People

It has been noted that language also has the power to subordinate and exclude people. Appanna’s use of abusive language forces Rani to be afraid and submissive. The writer within the play makes use of unimpressive language which leads to monotony among the readers. They went off to sleep so often that they cursed the man with death. Appanna calls his wife a harlot, whore, etc. When Appanna learns of Rani’s pregnancy, he abuses her by saying

‘Aren’t you ashamed to admit it, you harlot? I locked you in and you managed to find a lover! Tell me who it is? Who did you go to with your sari off?’(Nagamandala, p. 32).

He uses other obscene terms like slut, harlot, bastard, etc. Often the use of such words imparts a sort of power to the people who articulate them.

Power of Women over Men

The only realm where women are expected to exhibit their power is in terms of food and sexuality. Rani is approached by her husband Appanna for lunch only. Lunch is the only bridge between the husband and wife in the beginning of the play. But, it may be noted that the same Rani has her influence on Naga because of his sexual involvement with her. Otherwise, he too behaves as a male chauvinist by preventing Rani from asking questions and enforcing a number of rules over her. She dares to speak out her mind to Naga only after learning of her pregnancy, as if intercourse and pregnancy form a license for a woman's opinion. She protests and questions Naga as she has become bolder. The yakshi's power over Kappanna is also mentioned in the play. The identity of this spirit is a matter of concern among critics but it can be interpreted as the invisible control that a ravishing beauty has over the panic-stricken Kappanna. The concubine has a strong control over Appanna which has emerged as a result of their sexual relationship and the intensity of her influence is symbolized by the lack of effect of the magical root on Appanna. Even the timid and docile Rani is elevated to a stature of power after she has slept with Naga. She assumes more power when the Village Panchayat proclaims her as a Goddess.

Power of Law over Public

The play introduces us to the Village Panchayat when Appanna raises his complaint against his wife. The Elders of the Panchayat elevate Rani to the position of a goddess just to keep alive the Naga myth. The same Panchayat would have depreciated the stance of Rani to that of a fallen woman had she failed in the Naga ordeal. When the snake slides down her shoulders and forms a garland around her neck, the villagers and the law maker's superstitious beliefs regarding Naga's magical powers are flattered. They at once hail her as their goddess.

Even, Appanna becomes forced to obey the verdict of the Panchayat. Knowingly or unknowingly, Rani acts as an instrument to subvert the patriarchal structures. She expressed her mind and claimed her chastity boldly and relies on the Naga for the Panchayat's verdict. Holding Naga in her hand, she announces

Rani: Since coming to this village, I have held by this hand, only two. My husband and this Cobra. Except for these two, I have not touched any one of the male sex. Nor have I allowed any other male to touch me. If I lie, let the Cobra bite me. (Nagamandala, p.39)

She had made up her mind to face the adverse condition in spite of her fear of being shamed and humiliated in the public. The verdict of the Panchayat that Appanna was to serve her throughout his life and that his concubine was also to spend her entire life attending to the needs of Rani turns to be a compensatory reward for Rani. Here, the legal body pronounces a judgment which subverts the patriarchal norms and it comes to Rani's aid and the public is satisfied by this decision. Finally, she wins her husband, her lover, husband's concubine and her son, all to herself. Here, we can visualize legal forces overpowering society. Members of the society are obliged to abide by the decision irrespective of their personal likes or dislikes. Just as we see in the case of Appanna, he does not require any conviction in the matter that the child that Rani is carrying is not his but he has no alternative other than to accept the situation with a smile on his face.

Power of Medicines over the Sick People

Often, the sick people are devoted to the doctor because of the doctor's power to free the sick from the clutches of illness. But, there are others who are too vain to feel enslaved by medicines.

According to the blind Kurudavva, Rani's husband is suffering from a chronic case of obsession for his concubine. So she advises Rani to feed Appanna with any of the three pieces of the magical root that was suggested to her by a sage. In her youth, Kurudavva fed the middle sized root to her relative and he at once fell in love with her and married her in two days. He did not resist being confined in a relationship. As per the blind woman's advice, Rani feeds her husband with the small piece of the root but his invulnerability to this medicine proves his resistance in being over powered by any other force.

Power of Stories on Audience

The play gives us an insight into the negative effect that the playwright in the story made on his audience. His monotonous work made people crouch in their chairs and go to sleep.

The message conveyed by this instance is that a playwright ought to be dedicated and his commitment can make the audience spell-bound.

Power of Death

No matter how much ever powerful one is, every mortal has to succumb before the all-pervading Death. Physical death, death of vices like pride, cruelty, immorality, etc., are vividly portrayed in this play. The night time at the opening of the play symbolizes death. The writer anticipating his death with fear makes him take an oath that he will not write any more plays to annoy the viewers. We learn about the demise of an old woman from the conversation of a flame. Kappanna's disappearance can be interpreted as death since he gets glimpses of a beautiful woman springing out from a haunted well and at another instance, from a cemetery.

Then, the climax of the play disappoints us with the suicide of Naga. The passing away of the old woman is natural but the death of Kappanna and Naga are tragic ones. Besides the physical death, we witness the end of Appanna's male hegemony on Rani. After getting the verdict from the Panchayat, Appanna's immoral life was also strangled to death. The power exercised by Death over the trivial and insignificant human beings is presented in the play.

Conclusion

Everybody is in the strong grip of some kind of power and the power effects are created by age old traditions and rituals of our society. A number of anti authority struggles are brought up by the characters of *Nagamandala* to fight these power structures. In the very beginning, we are introduced to the writer trying to resist death by staying awake. He also forcibly makes the Story to narrate her tale so that he can remain awake throughout the night. When Rani comes running to Appanna with an intention to speak sweetly to him, he glares at her and thereby stops her from being friendly to him. Similarly, he shows his resistance to medicines by not imbibing the desired effect of the magical root. In short, the play is rich in illustrations of power relations.

References

Foucault, Michael. *Subject and Power*. The University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Karnad, Girish. *Nagamandala*. Oxford University Press, 1990.



Smitha Sankaranarayanan, M.A., M.Phil. (English), Ph.D. Research Scholar
Non-Vocational Teacher in English
GVHSS Ayyanthole
Thrissur-680003
Kerala
India
smitha.dileep123@gmail.com