

MAINSTREAMING GENDER: CHALLENGES IN GIRISH KARNAD'S NAGA-MANDALA

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Abstract:

Mainstreaming gender is a main concept gaining importance in the present century whose ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality through planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. But because of the patriarchal nature of the society, the objectives of mainstreaming gender seem to be far away. Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* (1970) sees through the game of patriarchal politics that the sexual domination is the most pervasive ideology and fundamental concept of power. The sexual politics of patriarchy situates man as the sovereign subject while a woman is required to find her total fulfillment in submissive drudgery. Male bias has been spread in the culture to such an extent that women never have a chance to see themselves through their own eyes as individuals. Mary Wollstonecraft as early as in 1792 in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* pleaded that women were not endowed with less intellect than men and therefore women's suppression was uncalled for and unjust. John Stuart Mill's famous essay *The Subjection of Women* (1860) generated much heat all over the world. It became almost a manifesto for the feminists. In India, too the double standards of males are quite common. On the surface level women are called 'goddesses' and 'devis' and underneath are hidden their mal motives. Suppression, oppression, cruelty and mal-treatment to women are quite common. The three and a half millennia that have followed the 'Laws of Manu' have taken their toll on women and left them as second class citizens in desperate need of 'Gender Mainstreaming'. Literature is replete with such examples as it shows the society its own face in the mirror. Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* is one such example where an innocent girl experiences and suffers the life of hell because of her husband's

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callousness and infidelity and in the end she is given the status of goddess by the same insensitive husband and society.

The concept of gender mainstreaming was first proposed at the 1985 Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi. The idea has been developed in the United Nations development community. That formally featured in 1995 at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. According to the report of the United Nations Economic and Social Council for 1997 mainstreaming a gender “is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality.”

Gender Mainstreaming is a globally accepted strategy for promoting gender equality. Mainstreaming is not an end in itself but a strategy, an approach, a means to achieve the goal of gender equality. Mainstreaming involves ensuring that gender perspectives and attention to the goal of gender equality are central to all activities. A strong, continued commitment to gender mainstreaming is one of the most effective means for the United Nations to support promotion of gender equality at all levels - in research, legislation, policy development and in activities on the ground, and to ensure that women as well as men can influence, participate in and benefit from development efforts. There is a continued need, however, to complement the gender mainstreaming strategy with targeted interventions to promote gender equality and women's empowerment, particularly where there are glaring instances of persistent discrimination of women and inequality between women and men.

In India we have a dualistic situation. For nearly five thousand years there has been a celebration of the feminine force. In the Rig Veda (circa.1500 BC) there are verses singing the praise of many Goddesses. Aditi is the Mother of the Gods – free, unbounded, upholder of the cosmic order. There is Prithivi , the Earth Goddess, generous and the equivalent of Gaia, the Greek Earth Mother. Saraswati is the mother of the Vedas, Goddess of wisdom, learning, science and music. Lakshmi is the Goddess of wealth, prosperity, love and good harvest. We also have the powerful concept of Devi –womanhood, feminine mystique and power, best symbolized by the Goddess

Durga. She was created with the strength of all the Gods and she exudes the force of the purest form of energy.

Against this backdrop of worshipping the feminine force, we had a sage named Manu who composed an exhaustive thesis on society and how best to run it. His views on women are chauvinistic in today's world. Manu dictated that a woman should be in the care and protection of her father in childhood, of her husband in adulthood and of her son in old age. The dualism of the status of Indian women was clearly established. Goddess or chattel. Worshipped or ignored. It is a powerful legacy which holds us captive even today. Unfortunately for India there have been too few Goddesses in real life. The three and a half millennia that have followed the 'Laws of Manu' have taken their toll on our women and left them as second class citizens in desperate need of 'Gender Mainstreaming'.

One major hindrance is the patriarchal system of the society. Society being patriarchal, females come to be associated with inferiority and Chris Weedon in her *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (1987) considers patriarchy where women's interests are subordinated to that of men. For Michael Barret in patriarchy women are the sexual property of men and the chaste mother of their children. Patriarchy is a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men by force, direct pressure or through rituals, traditions, law and language, customs, etiquettes, education and the division of labour, determine what part women shall and shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere under the male.

By representing women as sexual objects, rather than politically, socially and intellectually powerful subjects, women receive a version of femininity and womanhood that is perpetually limited. But now women are becoming more and more conscious of their subordination and are no longer prepared to tolerate patriarchal oppression. There is a revolutionary change in how men view women and more important still, how women view themselves. Mary Wollstonecraft as early as in 1792 in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* pleaded that women were not endowed with less intellect than men and therefore women's suppression was uncalled for and unjust. John Stuart Mill's famous essay *The Subjection of Women* (1860) generated much heat all over the world. It became almost a manifesto for the feminists. Feminists have added a new dimension to the women's struggle of emancipation. Now the shift has been to the gender mainstreaming.

Girish Karnad, an Indian English Writer, has made his contribution in mainstreaming the gender, rather voicing the weaker sex's voice raising some basic and fundamental issues through his plays. His creative output includes - *Yayati* (1961), *Ma Nishada* (1964), *Tughlaq* (1972), *Hayavadana* (1975), *Anju Mallige* (1977), *Naga-Mandala* (1990), *Tale-Damda* (1993), *The Fire and the Rain* (1998), *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (2004), *Bali- the Sacrifice* (2004), *A Heap of Broken Images* and *Flowers: A Dramatic Monologue* (2005) and *The Wedding Album* (2008).

Naga-Mandala (Play with Cobra, 1990) is an amalgamation of a folktale and a myth. It is based on two stories which the versatile playwright, actor, director Girish Karnad heard from the poet and academician A.K. Ramanujan in his childhood. It is a story within a story. The play is particularly concerned with the psychological problems, dilemmas and conflicts experienced by the modern Indian men and women in their different social situations. Gender issues seem to be suffused in most of the plays of Girish Karnad.

The story tells the tale of a common woman named Rani (Queen of her parents' house) based on a myth of cobra, a snake. Appanna, literally means 'any man' marries Rani only to lock her in. He comes only for lunch and he remains there for a while without any conversation. He doesn't allow Rani to ask any question. He says, "Look, I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand?" (Karnad 28). Whereas he gives himself full freedom to go to a concubine to enjoy himself.

Rani reflects the image of a common woman who comes to her husband's house with sweet dreams and desires of happy domestic life. But she has to face another side of reality. For Appanna, there is no social, moral or traditional taboo. He is free from all restrictions and his actions are unquestionable. Karnad very subtly raises the issue that our conventional society and social laws demand fidelity and devotion from a wife even to an unfaithful and callous husband. Village Elders demand proof of her innocence from Rani and not from Appanna whereas it is quite obvious that he goes to his mistress locking his wife in the house. It is Rani, who has to suffer and go through 'Cobra trail' in spite of her innocence.

Rani's thought about mixing a root in her husband's share of food and consequent reaction to it shows the traditional upbringing of a girl in a family. She is told from the very childhood not only by words but by actions also that a husband is a 'god' for a wife, though in reality he may

be a devil in handling his wife. After this thought comes into her mind she spilt the curry in an ant-hill where a cobra lived. The Cobra drinks it and in turn becomes her lover.

It is at this stage of play that problems start arising. Cobra lover starts visiting Rani at night and making love to her in the shape of Appanna. She finds a lot of difference between two visitors--mid-day Appanna and night Appanna. Appanna (Naga) at night is loving, caring, understanding and passionate whereas Appanna at day time becomes harsh, cruel. She only needs to open her mouth and he will hiss at her.

The woman in her might have experienced the difference between the love of Naga and authority of Appanna. A. Jaganmohana Chari expresses views in this context:

The dichotomy of lover and husband is in the tradition she has inherited. When she discovers in her experience in the end the difference between Naga's love and that of her husband the feeling of experience hardly crosses the threshold of her consciousness because her experience of her head or her conscience hardly matters in the world of patriarchal hegemony. (Chari 152)

But nobody permits her to ask any question--Naga because of his deep passionate love for her and Appanna for his egoistic, male chauvinistic dominance. Rani speaks at one point:

“Yes, I shall. Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you. Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you. No, I won't ask questions. I shall do what you tell me. Scowls in the day. Embraces at night. The face in the morning unrelated to the touch at night. But day or night, one motto does not change: Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you.” (Karnad 51)

Her problems begin with her pregnancy. Appanna becomes furious when he comes to know of her pregnancy. He maltreats her and even kicks her. He vomits venom from his mouth against her and speaks

“Aren't you ashamed to admit it, you harlot? I locked you in, and yet you managed to find a lover! Tell me who it is. Who did you go to with your sari off” (Karnad 52). He further says “I swear to you I am not my father's son, if I don't abort that bastard! Smash it into dust!” (Karnad 52).

He goes to the village Elders for 'Justice'. Village elders decide two alternatives for her. Either she should take 'Fire trial' or 'Cobra trial'. Here we are reminded of myth of Sita in Ramayana

who also faced fire ordeal without any of her guilt. Naga tells her to take 'Cobra trial' and speak truth and nothing else. Their dialogue reflects the dilemma of Rani.

RANI. What truth? Shall I say my husband forgets his nights by next morning? Shall I say my husband brought a dog and a mangoose to kill this cobra, and yet suddenly he seems to know all about what the cobra will do or not do?

NAGA. Say anything. But you must speak the truth.

RANI. And if I lie?

NAGA. It will bite you. (Karnad 53)

She is very confused during her trial and asks for help from everybody but in vain. At last, she puts her hand in the ant-hill and takes out Cobra and speaks. "I haven't touched any male in my life, except my husband and this cobra." Cobra doesn't bite her and makes an umbrella with his hood over her head. Her oath proves her innocence. She is designated as the incarnation of goddess and her husband Appanna accepts her and her child. Though she accepts and compromises with her life but "she cannot bear too much reality" (Chakravartee 186) and suffers physically as well as psychologically.

Karnad wants to point out a social reality with this incident--who is to ask Appanna to prove his innocence? Is there no moral code of conduct for males? Why is it that a woman has to face all these problems? All these questions remain unanswered or rather there is no answer to these queries. Society is made like this and woman herself is responsible for it. Marulasiddappa expresses an opinion similar to what the play argues:

The irony of the term 'fidelity' comes through in this sequence of events. Appanna and Naga-the two faces of one man, one seen at day, the other at night-symbolize the exploitation and double standard of man, while Rani is the symbol of a woman's eternal endurance of this oppression. (qtd. In Joshipura 260)

Rani is given the status of goddess by the village elders and everybody and she seems to be happy with it. But is she able to live a normal happy domestic life? Being normal and being worshipped as goddess are two contrary ideas and is very difficult to reconcile the both. The

cobra liberates her from “a life of sterility and slavery. But the village elders, a male institution, doom her to the inactive and fruitless life of a goddess” (Nampoothiri 217).

In *Naga-mandala*, Karnad takes the problem of woman suffering, her sacrifices, her longings and desires. Rani pines for the love of her husband and when she is not able to get it she yearns for the company of her parents. She suffers at the hands of her cruel husband without any fault. It is not the story of Rani only, but of every woman created as type as well as individual.

Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* (1970) sees through the game of patriarchal politics that the sexual domination is the most pervasive ideology and fundamental concept of power. The sexual politics of patriarchy situates man as the sovereign subject while a woman is required to find her total fulfillment in submissive drudgery. In fact patriarchy has conditioned women to such an extent that they have come to accept their subordinate position to men. Male bias has been spread in the culture to such an extent that women never have a chance to see themselves through their own eyes as individuals.

Rani suffers not only because of her husband but of society also. It is the village elders who decide to put her into ‘Fire Trial’ or ‘Cobra-Trial’. And ironically she gets relief, love and passion from a reptile-turned-human (Naga) who helps her to attain the status of goddess. Human beings are not capable enough to help their own race rather a crawling creature provides happiness to them.

The relative status of men and women; the interaction between gender and race and questions of rights, control, ownership, power and voice all have a critical impact on the success and sustainability of every development intervention. The challenges in the path of mainstreaming gender are not small rather the fight is bit long and difficult. Nonetheless, a worthy progress has been made in this direction but still a lot is to be done. Gender Mainstreaming will not just right a wrong but also make our world more harmonious, caring and ecologically friendly and that will be a worthy new beginning for mankind. Though a new beginning, there are lots of challenges and difficulties in achieving it. It will happen only with the awareness among the so called fair sex and Girish Karnad has made a commendable contribution through his play.

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