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Nagamandala: Play with a Cobra

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The story “Nagamandala-Play with a Cobra” has been translated from the original Kannada¹. It weaves two Kannada folk tales together, the first tale talks about the paradoxical nature of other tales in general. These tales have an existence of their own and are independent of the teller. Yet they will continue to exist only if they are passed on from one story teller to another. Then we have the story of Rani, who makes up tales to fill the void in her life.

The Central Theme of the Play

This article is an attempt to show how Rani’s predicament mainly reflects the human need to live by fictions and half-truths. We find that the search for truth beyond a point will certainly tumble down the whole edifice of day to day living. Another point of interest in the play is the treatment of women in the man dominated society where the husband locks up his wife inside the house when he goes out even when he moves out to have an affair with other women.

The Prologue

In the prologue, we find the man as a Sutradhar, who conducts and comments on the theme in the Play. There are non-human characters of the flames. They act as a Chorus-representing the male dominated society. The women in the society are in deplorable position. They have no social status. They live as mother, sister, wife, daughter or any relation but they have no identity. They have to follow the maximum men command and women obey. They are dominated by males, “Girls must follow the rules. Men can do what they like but women must be obedient. The emancipation of women remains a dream”².

The Plot

The story of Rani begins with the first act. Rani is a young and beautiful girl. She is the only daughter of her parents. As such her childhood was the happiest period. Her parents marry her with a rich young man whose parents are dead. They thought their daughter will have a happy married life. But from the day she comes to her husband’s house, her life becomes a hell of unhappiness. Her husband named Appanna has an immoral relation with other woman. The husband does not keep any conjugal relation with Rani. He remains with the woman throughout the night and comes only once at day time to take bath and lunch. He goes away keeping Rani locked in the house. Her life becomes lonely. The desire and dreams of a newly married young girl are shattered. She cannot go anywhere and she cannot talk to anyone. She has to bear the burden of her sufferings with in her heart. Kurudavva the blind woman meets Rani and Rani asks her about her and Appanna. She is sorry to hear that her husband does not perform the duties of a husband. She offers Rani magical roots. She has to crush it make paste of it, and prepare curry to feed her husband to win the love of her husband. She pours the paste of the root into the curry, but there is an explosion and the curry turns red-blood red. The blood-red curry makes her doubt that it may badly hurt her husband. She throws the curry on the ant-hill where the king cobra lives. The cobra tastes the curry and falls in love with Rani. The king cobra (Naga) has a divine power to assume the human form. Naga visits Rani every night in the form of her husband Appanna at night. Rani finds her husband in a romantic mood but at day time, she finds her husband in different to her. As the days pass, Rani becomes pregnant. Naga in the form of Appanna shows no sentiments to the news. But when her husband (real Appanna) knows he

becomes very angry: To him the problem is how she can be pregnant, if he has not touched her at all. He accuses her adultery and complains to the village elders. The village elders declare her to pass through a chastity test. Naga asks her to undergo the snake-test, wherein she proves herself innocent. The elder villagers declare her as a DEVI and ask Appanna to take her to home. Now the love triangle arises, Naga thinks of killing Rani. Rani realizes the truth that she has a happy life because of Naga. Appanna heartily or unheartily accepts the verdict. At the end Naga hides in the long hair of Rani and lives satisfactory seeing his beloved and a son. Appanna adores Rani as a Devi and shows all his feelings to her. Rani feels that all her happiness is owing to Naga's love. The story ends on a happy tone. This is roughly the plot of this play.

The Characters

The human characters of the Man-Rani, Appanna, Kurudawa and Kappanna are significant to move the story. The non human characters of the flames and Naga have human touch. They play their roles impressively. The characters of Rani, Naga and Appanna are very much individual. They look to be real.

The Techniques and Style

The playwright has used the dramatic techniques of the folk - theatre. The style is unique and language is lucid and emotional. The setting creates effect. The Prologue is presented as an effective background and atmosphere.

Conclusion

To sum up, Nagamandala is an absorbing play which raises several issues even when the main focus is on Rani. The protagonist's predicament what is of contemporary importance is the treatment of women in the play. Rani is kept as a "prisoner" in the house by Appanna, probably because he fears of adultery. The interesting thing is that Appanna himself is never true to his wife as he chooses to spend his time 'more fruitfully' with his concubine. He never wants to establish a husband-wife relation and Rani is destined to suffer left by herself in her house. In fact, it is Naga who makes her life meaningful by providing her a life, husband and child. Much perhaps can be said on both sides when the issue of her committing adultery is raised. To be sure, at least by the end of the play it is well established that she wants to protect her son's father from the possible danger. When Appanna comes back with a stick to finish off the cobra she does everything to ensure that it

is safe in the midst of her lock. Before that, she has requested her husband to go for a funeral observing all rituals when the cobra died. Also, she wants her son to lit fire to the pyre. Identity crisis, a pet theme of³ is well drawn out in this play. Ultimately the play deals with the predicament of Rani who struggles hard in her life and attains the bliss of married life in the true sense the word. The end is not common. It is an ideal and no doubt it is a happy end. But it has questioned the traditional and orthodox values of our Indian society.

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