

The Animorgas the Tool for the Sub Version of Gender Norms in Nagamandala : A Posthuman Analysis

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Abstract

"Mythology is a subjective truth. Every culture imagines life in a specific way," says Devdutt Patanaik. Mythology refers to the study of various collections of myth, which basically comprises oral narratives of people trying to explain the phenomenon of their natural surroundings, which might also include some supernatural beings. There are various mythological traditions across the world. And these myths vary according to the subjective truths. Myths form the basis of many cultures and religions. And these myths fascinate writers so much that they try to include those mythological elements in their writings. Nagamandala [or originally titled Nagamandala in Kannada] is one such famous play written by Girish Karnad in the year 1990, where the playwright had incorporated various mythological elements. Girish Karnad through his work tries to bring out the various social discriminations prevailing in the society. The themes of the independent nature of oral tradition and the art of storytelling, the predicament of female protagonists who were marginalized by the upper strata of the society, especially by men, the ill treatment endured by the 'Other' which includes not just the marginalized human beings but also the non-human beings as like the Cobra in the play etc.

Keywords: Mythology, Gender, Supernatural, Cultures, Discrimination, Other, Ill, Society.

Introduction

Indian Hindu culture worships the fictionalized version of King Cobra. In some places, snakes are revered by offering milk, food, etc. There is still a sense of threat imbibed within us, showcasing the paradoxical nature of Indian minds. The gender marginalized Rani's predicament reflects how she had to remain submissive, silenced, and had to transcend through dreams and by relying on half-truths. Rani always wanted to have a good familial relationship with her husband, Appana, who never treated her right. In Indian context, the expectation of an "Ideal wife" with qualities of ever-loving, ever-caring, and chastity is always upheld and consciously monitored in the society while the actions of a husband are ignored and left unnoticed. Though the identity of the snake is never openly disclosed to Rani, the love that the snake offered to her is above what

her husband can give her. The cobra, assuming the human form of her husband, but named Naga for reader's convenience, embodies all human qualities and emotions. Naga is attributed with the human feelings such as love, care, sacrifice, etc., while also possessing the human consciousness and human actions. Naga could be a representation of 'animorg' which has a polymorphic identity with blurred boundaries between traditional binary distinctions of human and animal, divinity and mortality, etc. As an animorg, Naga acts as a tool to upbring a resilient voice of the marginalized Rani when she was forced to prove her chastity by the patriarchal society and also heals her emotional trauma with her husband. Thereby the snake acts both as a healer and a preserver, elevating her status from a subordinated woman to that of a divine goddess.

Treatment of Snakes in Indian Context

Snakes are deeply connected to the mythological, cultural and religious practices of the Indian subcontinent. India has a very long history of snake worship and reverence for this reptile. Indian folklore and religious texts are rich with narratives surrounding snakes. In Indian Hindu mythology, snakes are associated with Lord Shiva. Lord Shiva is often portrayed with a snake, named Vasuki or Nagendra, coiled around his neck. The principal god of Vaishnavites, Lord Vishnu, is also depicted as resting on a coiled snake named Shesha, according to Hindu Puranas. Snakes are also believed to be the guardians of treasures and sacred places. Their ability to shed their skin makes them associated with the themes of life and rebirth.

Snakes are also popular among Indian folklore. Apart from snakes being connected to Hindu gods, they are also attributed with individual complete forms. There are descriptions about Nagas and Naginis. These Nagas and Naginis are semi-divine, half-human, half-snake beings who have the ability to change their forms according to their will. Naga Panchami is a popular festival celebrated in India to pay tribute to the snake deities. On this particular day, people offer milk and other offerings to snake idols and real-life snakes, seeking the blessings of the snake deities and also to protect from snake bites.

One noticeable aspect behind the myths and folktales surrounding snakes is the blurring of boundaries between divinity, animal, and human divisions. The basic human emotion of fear is so high that it makes them posit snakes above the stature of an animal, above humans and above gods. People started anthropomorphizing snakes. When humans anthropomorphize animals, like snakes, they tend to attribute human qualities and emotions to animals. Charles Darwin first observed this phenomenon and described in detail in his book "The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals" (1872). This anthropomorphic behavior of naming snakes, believing that humans would seek revenge, etc., is often aimed at satisfying the human need for that relationship rather than truly trying to understand the real motives and emotions of that animal. In the context of snakes, we try to mask our fear and the venomous nature of the snake by attributing some divine and more humanly qualities to it. Urquiza-Haas and Kotschal attribute anthropomorphizing actions to the biophilic nature of human beings; that is, an implicit connection with animals and, more broadly, with nature in general. This could be another reason for anthropomorphizing snakes as Indians are more associated with nature and its living beings.

Snake: An Animorg

The concept of Animorg is highly influenced by Donna Haraway's concept of 'Cyborg,' which she defines as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" in her seminal work "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985). Animorg is the polymorphic identity of an animal-human-divine being. Animorg is mainly intended to portray animals that forgo or transcend their traditionally labeled identity of an "animal." The identity of Animorg changes according to those who perceive it. It transcends the.

Boundaries of any binarisms such as divine/mortal, human/animal, superior/inferior, man/woman, etc., that existed in Western philosophy. The concept of Animorg is beyond a fixed identity and emphasizes the fluidity of identities. Animorg is a matter of fiction, and the living experiences of an Animorg change with the perception of people.

Folktales and traditional narratives are filled with Animorgs—creatures categorized under animals according to science and attributed qualities of humans, divinity, or even demeaned as an unfit entity by people who believe that such identities too exist for such Animorgs. The boundaries between folktales and reality become an optical illusion here, as people started believing this transcending polymorphic identity of an Animorg and started to live with it in.

Reality. It is a notion of anthropomorphism taken to an extent of zoolatry or theriolatry, not just in a transcending sense but also in the devaluing sense of something as a threat to society and needed to be vanquished from the society.

A snake in the Indian context fits all these criteria of an Animorg. As we have discussed before, India is a land where people attribute multiple identities of a God, semi-human, an animal, and also as Satan and as a perpetrator to a snake. The same animal that is treated with all respect and offered food and poojas is also thrashed to death when it seems quite in the position of harming a human or other animals. It is treated as a dark, sinister creature at times and as sanctimonious at others. As the narrator of the play Nagamandala mentions, “As you know, a cobra can assume any form it likes,” people believed in a Cobra’s ability to shape-shift. There is a sense of ambiguity in the identity and treatment of an Animorg.

The snake in the play is a perfect example of an Animorg. In the play Nagamandala, the identity of the snake changes gradually towards the end of the novel. It was seen at first as a deceptive, dark figure. But after the encounter with the protagonist of the play, Rani, the humane attributes of the snake are revealed. The snake exhibits all the emotions that had always been associated with humans, such as love, compassion, and care when its shape shifts into a human. The snake in the play impregnates the woman. It is fictitious for such occurrences to happen naturally. But there are real-life instances where snakes are proven to have approached humans with the intention of mating. For instance, recently Australian researchers found out that *Aipysurus laevis*, known as olive sea snakes, swim towards scuba divers in the coastal regions of Australia with the intention of mating, especially between the months of May and August, and could be seen coiling around humans experiencing “misdirected courtship responses.”

In the play, the cobra is first seen as a perpetrator. Appana and Rani herself were afraid of the presence of the snake. And they were always in a state of anxiety and fear about the possibility of the snake getting inside their house. The snake had always been considered to be a threat by all the characters in the play until the scene of Ordeal by the Cobra. The cobra, which had always been treated as a threat till then, was revered as a divine being when the snake spread.

Its hood above Rani, proving her chastity and elevating her status to be a divine goddess. In the process of sanctifying Rani, the snake proved its divine stature. The snake here is believed to be the preserver of Truth and the arbitrator of Justice. Thus the identity of the snake remains fluid throughout the play. The disposition of the snake is antithetical, where it is positioned on par with Gods and also set in the position of being thrashed to death by humans, considering it unfit to survive in the world, abducting it of the right to live. This ambiguity of a creature being situated from the highest to lowest points in society makes it an Animorg.

Animorg: A Tool for Subversion

The polymorphic identity of an Animorg critiques the traditional constraints. It subverts conventional narratives and the binarisms of Western philosophy in sticking onto the identity of

an animal. The Indian mindset has never been sticking onto specific identities. Even Gods like Shiva and Parvati are portrayed to be both female and male residing within a single body. Indian mythology and religions are beyond this definite identity tradition, but not always. It couldn't be refuted that class divisions based on identity exist. The concept of Animorg is beyond cultural class divisions. Animorg has never particularly been specified into any such class divisions. The identity of Animorg has always been fluid and never put into any class constraints. The fluidity and this liberation that the Animorg possesses is in itself an act of subversion.

The Animorg in the play not just subverts its own position in society, but also plays a greater role in elevating the marginalized 'other' in society. It reimages the 'other' not as a figure of exclusion but as a powerful agent of change. In the play Nagamandala, both the snake and the female protagonist are marginalized by society. Though both characters are considered to be sanctimonious, they are marginalized to a greater extent to remain within the space allocated to them. Rani is locked by Appana to make her remain within the house. She is even prohibited from talking to strangers and made to lead a lonely and submissive life. She is not allowed to venture beyond the front door of the house. She is even proscribed from pouring all her feelings to her parents, and she yearns to go back to her parents' house, which seemed impossible when her husband was alive. Her world is limited within the four walls of her house. In the very same way, the Cobra's space is also limited within its ant-hill. The world outside its ant-hill poses a threat to its life. A snake seen outside its space is considered to be a threat. Even Rani is threatened to imagine having a snake within her household at the start of the play. This emphasizes the existing social conditions that the marginalized are always secluded in their own spaces.

The once marginalized Animorg transcends its position in the play because of the fluidity of identity it possesses. It came out of its secluded boundary and transformed into a human to be in close connection with Rani. The Animorg could have transformed into its godly status. But the transformation of the snake into a human in the impersonation of Rani's husband is because of the need of that particular context. Rani always wanted to have a smooth nuptial relationship with her husband. The snake could have taken the form of any other man to seduce her and replace the void that her husband had left. But the reason behind the Animorg assuming the form of Appana is mainly because of the perception of Rani. She never wanted to have an extramarital affair with someone other than her husband. Her perception decided the identity of the snake. An Animorg's identity is completely based on the conception of those who perceive it. It depends on the cultural and individual biases through which they view the Animorg. This subjective nature makes it possible to have multiple interpretations about an Animorg based on the perceiver's framework of mind.

The Animorg not just subverts its own fixed labeled identity, but goes on elevating the marginalized humans from their social strata. The status of Rani rose up from being imprisoned within her house to someone who was entitled to be a goddess by the people of that society. And the Animorg plays a crucial role in creating this identity fluidity of Rani and others who are marginalized. If not for the identity fluidity of the snake, even the unborn child would also have been an outcast. Thus the presence of Animorg is potent in upgrading the social stratum of those surrounding it too.

Silent Call for 'Agency'

Every Animorg has an 'Agency' of its own. The term agency has multiple meanings in various disciplines. In sociology, the term "agency" refers to the subjective experience and the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices, based on their will. Humans have long believed to have this capacity of Human agency. According to Houston, Human agency

is defined as “an individual’s capacity to determine and make meaning from their environment through purposive consciousness and reflective and creative action.” Similarly, an Animorg has an agency of its own, which remains incomprehensible to the human mind. All we could decipher is what our perception of Animorg facilitates, but the real dimensions of the fluidity of an Animorg could be something beyond human cognizance. We humans could never really understand the world of animals. Even the denominations of God, human, perpetrator, etc., are human designations. The multiple identities that these Animorgs possess could be beyond human comprehension, allowing them to have agency of their own. Though Animorgs are human perceptions of the identity of an animal, it need not necessarily stick onto human apprehension. It is something that is beyond the human understanding of the natural world. The real experience of an Animorg still remains cryptic. In Nagamandala, Rani finally came to know the truth about Naga, the Animorg. Unlike the people who stick to traditional binary notions, she was able to accept the ambiguity of the Animorg. Though this play is a fictitious one, it reminds us of the real humane instincts of animals. If animals could possess such humane qualities, there could be a possibility of them possessing divine traits as well. Human understanding is first perceived through our senses. John Locke, in his essay “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding” (1689), argued that our mind at birth is a “Tabula Rasa” and all knowledge that we obtain is through our sensory experiences. To quote Locke: “All ideas come from sensation or reflection.” What is beyond our sensory perception remains a mystery to us. We can’t sense what an Animorg senses. Snakes and various other animals can forecast weather accurately; the experience of such animals remains a mystery. This unknown mystery creates a new identity that could add onto the fluidity of that Animorg. Thus the concept of Animorg could be both applied to fiction as well to reality.

Tool for Resilience and Healing of the ‘Other’

In the Indian context, patriarchy plays a major role in teaching women verbally and non-verbally that chastity is the most virtue of her life, even at the cost of her death. The loss of chastity would bring an unbearable social stigma to her. There are worse punishments, like making them roam around the streets of the village in nudity if they fail to prove their chastity. Many women in India sacrifice their lives to protect their chastity, and there are many superstitious practices still existing in our society to prove their chastity. Women, like the protagonist of the play, Rani, go on to the extent of trying to prove their chastity at the cost of their death. The gender-biased society only tries to bring out the faults of women, while the openly done crimes by men are left unquestioned. Any bold woman who tries to question these notions is culturally exterminated and even killed. This pushes the marginalized to remain silent.

The Animorg acts as a tool in giving up a resilient voice to the marginalized. The character of Rani had been forced to remain silent throughout the play until its climax. The harsh statements put forth by Appanna to silence her voice were: “Look, I don’t like idle chatter. Don’t question me. Do as you are told, you understand?” and “She won’t talk to anyone. And no one needs to talk to her.” These lines show the oppressive and male chauvinistic nature of Appanna. Only after the intervention of the Animorg in proving her chastity and her innocence did she get a chance to speak to her husband. Only then were her desires and needs met. The intervention of the Animorg plays a major role here in bringing up voice to the forefront. And to note that it was this Animorg that had been with her and healed her when she was facing a traumatic experience with her husband. With no one around to talk to her, the Animorg had been her constant companion and had been her healer at those harsh times of her life. Thereby, an Animorg acts both as a tool in facilitating resilience and healing within the ‘othered’ characters.

Conclusion

Animorg could be the best tool employed in fiction to give voice to those who are othered. Especially in Indian folktales and other religious and mythological tales worldwide, this depiction of animorgs had been used to explore the fluidity of identity and the potential for resistance. The animorg subverts the conventional narratives and reimagines the 'Other' not as a figure of exclusion, but as a powerful agent of transience in bringing out the so far silenced voices and being a healer in their times of oppression. Not just in fiction do animorgs exhibit these qualities. Even in reality, animorgs have been the solace and the healer for the oppressed and traumatized minds. While being a source of resilience, the silent struggle for these animorgs to procure agency and the mere struggle for existence should be acknowledged.

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