



MYTH, MAGIC AND PATRIARCHY IN INDIAN DRAMA: A CULTURAL STUDY OF GIRISH KARNAD'S THEMATIC VISION

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Abstract

The present study aims to analyse the text *Nagamandala* by the famous modern Indian playwright, actor, director Girish Karna through its various aspects like the struggle between the myth, reality and dream like situation that the protagonist of the play faces. The extensive study of the play reveals how Karnad has used materials from Indian folk lore as a backdrop of the dramatic analysis of contemporary life. The playwright employs all the devices used in folktales and mythic patterns, such as the imputation of superhuman qualities to human beings and non-human entities, to highlight the deplorable state of a typical Indian female, who is ruled by the patriarchal order while simultaneously being bound by cultural constructions. The play tends to combine conventional modes through its four narrative levels. The interrelated stories and plots with triangular relationships and triple endings tend to reflect the cultural complexities present in the fabric of Indian society. The present study aims to analyze the magical and mythical framework of the text, utilizing cultural studies to reveal complexities in the social fabric.

Keywords: *Myth, Cultural Complexities, Magic, Folklore.*

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1. Introduction

Girish Raghunath Karnad is a contemporary Indian Playwright who is known for writing plays in Kannada and English. He is among the seven beneficiaries of the Jnanpith Award for Kannada, the most prestigious honor presented in the field of literature in India. Girish Karnad composed the play *Naga Mandala* in 1987-88. The play depends on two oral Kannada stories he had heard from his coach companion A. K. Ramanjun. *Naga Mandala* is a play where fantasy and magic

assume control over the real world. It was originally written in Kannada and then translated into English by Karnad himself. This story is inspired by Kannada folklore.

The inexhaustible lore of myths, parables and legends that pattern and define our culture offers immense scope for the Indian dramatists as Shastri says, “Myth, at all events, is raw material, which can be the stuff of literature” According to the common misconception of the term myths are merely primitive fictions, illusions or opinions based upon false reasoning. It is also believed that myths have developed out of folktales. According to M. H. Abrams, Folktales have been normally understood as traditional verbal materials and social rituals that have been handed down primarily by word of mouth. Folktales developed and continued to flourish best in communities where few people could read or write. It includes, among other things, legends, superstitions, songs, tales, proverbs, riddles, spells, nursery rhymes, and pseudo-scientific lore about the weather, plants, and animals. Myths and folk tales in a patriarchal society represent primarily the male unconscious fears and wishes, and are patriarchal constructs and male-oriented. They do not shed much light on women’s fears, anxieties, and psychological problems. It is a remarkable achievement of Karnad that he adapts this male-oriented folk tale in such a manner that it becomes a representation of the experience of man and woman in the psychologically transitional phase.

2. Focus of This Paper

The present paper analyses the text to find out to what extent Karnad was able to present a magical folklore that makes a way towards cultural complexities. It is a well-known fact that the themes of Karnad’s plays are mythical, historical, or legendary, but his manner of treating them is quite unusual. He is the only playwright who uses ancient folklore and its content imaginatively and creatively, resulting in stage-worthy plays that tend to capture the audience’s attention by creating a magical ambiance. By using these myths, he tries to reveal the absurdity of life with all its elemental passions and conflicts, and man’s eternal struggle to achieve perfection

Girish Karnad’s *Nagamandala* offers a powerful cultural critique by blending elements of myth, magic, and patriarchy to reflect on the complex social realities of Indian society. Rooted in Kannada folklore, the play reinterprets traditional stories to question the rigid structures of male dominance and female subjugation. Myth in the play serves as more than a narrative device; it

becomes a cultural symbol reflecting the deep-seated norms and expectations placed upon women. The character of Rani, trapped in a loveless marriage, represents the silenced and controlled female figure within a patriarchal framework. However, her relationship with the magical serpent (naga), who takes the form of her husband at night, introduces the transformative power of magic, which symbolizes both the hidden desires and suppressed identity of women in traditional society. Magic in this context becomes a metaphor for resistance, imagination, and alternate possibilities that transcend societal norms. Karnad uses this magical-mythical framework not to glorify the supernatural but to expose the contradictions of patriarchy and create space for female assertion and redefinition. The trial by fire scene, a motif drawn from myth, is reimaged to question the moral double standards imposed on women, while the community's acceptance of Rani after the ordeal ironically reflects how myths can also be manipulated to preserve honor within a male-centered culture. From a cultural theory perspective, *Nagamandala* becomes a site of negotiation where folklore, belief systems, and gender politics intersect, offering a layered exploration of how cultural narratives shape, sustain, and sometimes challenge oppressive social structures. Karnad's thematic vision lies in this ability to turn traditional myths into tools of interrogation, using the language of magic and storytelling to subvert patriarchal ideology and envision empowerment within the cultural fabric of Indian drama.

3. Nagamandala

Naga-Mandala is a mythical play based on a magical folklore lore as Karnad himself accepts," *Naga-Mandala* is based on two oral tales from Karnataka which I first heard several years ago from Professor A. K.Ramanujan. These tales are narrated by women, normally older women in the family, while children are being fed in the evening in the kitchen or being put to bed. The other adult parents on these occasions are also women. Therefore, these tales, though directed at the children, often serve as an open system of communication among the women in the family. This play is full of mythical elements and this paper will try to find out how the magical folklore tends to make a way towards cultural complexities.

The play begins with the Myth says that the flames, after being extinguished in the houses in the village, gather and spend the night together gossiping. It is the story, which transformed into the young woman, who narrates the story of Rani. As obvious, the play utilizes wizardry authenticity

in which the myths are brought into a reasonable climate. The narrative of Rani has emerged from an old woman who has not at any point shared the story and the song she knew. The story, unfit to remain inside the woman any more, changes to a beautiful lady and the tune to a stunning sari and comes out to the world. This steady portrayal of fantasies and deceptions prompts the crowd to comprehend that it is not reality, but rather a play, a showstopper. Therefore, the prophecy made by the mendicant about the playwright's death because of making his readers sleep is unrealistic. Naga is considered as a divine creature who fulfils the desires of men. Secondly, in Indian society, as Girish Karnad mentions, there is a prevalent belief that the name of snakes is not pronounced at night. It is believed that if it is called by its name, it would appear in the house. It is called by its symbolic names as rope, insect, and animal. Rani, the female protagonist, is married to Appanna. Their marriage remains unconsummated as there is no physical union between the two. Appanna spends nights with his concubine outside and his wife has to stay alone at night. This separation is torture for her. One day, Kurudavva, the friend of her mother-in-law, visits her and befriends Rani. The first thing she does without the knowledge of her husband is that she stealthily meets Kurudavva. Had she not been left alone at night, she would have never listened to her advice. She develops intimacy with her in no time as if she were already waiting for someone to come to her rescue. When Kurudavva explains to her the story of the magical root' Rani listens to it very attentively. She laughs for the first time after her marriage when Kurudavva narrates how the root given to her by a mendicant helped her in marrying a man and "it took the plague to detach him from her (p. 34). Perhaps, she has found a ray of hope in Kurudavva's folk lore. That's why she requests her to "come again". She makes the paste of the root and mixes it up in the milk boiled for Appanna. He drinks it but she fails to win him for her nights. Again, when she is locked, "then it rains for seven days and seven nights. It pours. The sea floods the city. The waters break down the door of the castle...". When Kurudavva further suggests her to use the larger piece of the root and assures her that Appanna will carry her to his concubine's house, she "blushes" at this. Rani's feminine self is out with joy, but she does not know how to express it when the Naga visits her at night for the first time in the shape of Appanna. She simply stands "dazed" leaning against the wall confused with the joy she offers him for food even at midnight at which Naga laughs. When he assures her that he will come every night, she laughs "shyly". Then she puts her head against his shoulder and he envelops her into his arms. During his next visit Naga wants to know whether she

likes his night visits. For the first time, docile Rani gathers courage to acquire a confident tone: "Go away! Don't talk to me." He asserts its universality of man woman relationship as:

Frogs croaking in pelting rain, tortoises singing soundlessly in the dark, foxes, crass, ants, rattlers, sharks, swallows--even the geese ' The female begins to smell like the wet earth. And stung by her smell, the king Cobra starts searching for his Queen! The tiger bellows for the mate. When the flame of the forest blossoms into a fountain of red and earth cracks open at the touch of the aerial roots of the banyan, it moves in the hollow of the cottonwood, in the flow of the estuary, the dark limestone caves from the womb of the heavens to the dark netherworlds, within everything that sprouts, grows, stretches, creaks and blooms everywhere, those who come together cling, fall apart lazily! It is there and there and there, everywhere. Rani never doubts the identity of the man who visits her at night, though she has sufficient proof that he is not her husband. But why should she be suspicious and spoil her nights when her husband does not satisfy her. Whenever there is a doubt about Naga's identity, she makes no effort to confirm it. Her suspension of her disbelief willingly leads towards creating a complex cultural moral and social situation. Looking for ointment to apply to the wounds of Naga she opens the mirror-box and in the mirror finds a cobra in place of Appanna. But she never tries to confirm it by just seeing into the mirror again. Moreover, Naga disappears from the room when her door is locked from outside, and Kurudavva too tells her that they have seen a cobra coming out of the bathroom drain and no human being has come out. Furthermore, in the morning she finds no scare on the face of Appanna. He also says that the dead dog was not an ordinary hound and it has cornered a *cheeta* once: "It must have sensed the Cobra. It must have given a fight. Didn't you hear at night?", asks he. At this she shakes her head in disbelief but overlooks the detail of the incident. In the morning, she sees the bits of snakeskin in the mongoose's teeth but she does not doubt it. Naga mustn't turn up for fifteen days after this incident. When he reappears, his body is covered with partly healed wounds. She applies ointment and nurses his wounds but she never questions him about it. Perhaps she does not want to lose him again as she feels, "it was enough that he had returned". Appanna at day and the Appanna at night, apart from the behavioral difference, have noticeable physical difference especially of wounds on their faces. But it never becomes a source of suspicion for Rani. She simply forgets everything when she thinks of Naga and that of the nights spent with him as if she herself is under the magic spell of the root. it seems that the magic of the root has cast its spell on Rani's senses too. Both Rani and Naga are under the magic of the root and their relationship leads

to a complex situation where Rani has to prove that she has not cheated on her husband Appanna and she has maintained the sanctity of the marriage. Appanna calls the elders to intervene when he learns about his wife's pregnancy. He feels cheated upon by a wife to whom he has been cheating since the day one of their marriage.

4. Snake Ordeal

Appanna, who shamelessly has a concubine and extends to get married with a young girl only to look after his house. He is satisfied with the affair he is maintaining, but he wants to get married because he has attained the age at, he is capable of, and wealthy and wants to become a family man in society. He is not care of any customs, traditions and not even feelings. No villager questions him when he keeps his wife locked and spends his time with his concubine. But the same villagers raise question on Rani's chastity when Appanna complained against her. They do not even stop Appanna from throwing a stone on Rani. The villagers have known that Appanna is spending time with concubine and they have not asked him anything about the ill treatment of his wife and his guilt. But when Appanna has complained against the chastity of Rani, they are furious and started enquiring her.

Elder II: *It brings no credit to the village to have a husband publicly question his wife's chastity.* But Appanna here says: Since the day of our wedding, I have not once touched my wife or slept by her side. And yet she is pregnant. He has registered the complaint, so we must judge its merits.

Elder III: *The traditional test in our village court has been to take the oath while holding a red-hot iron in the hand. Occasionally, the accused has chosen to plunge the hand in boiling oil.* Finally, Rani, after the snake ordeal is acclaimed as 'Pativrata' a noble woman who got everything that she wished for, she has been patient and bearable and waiting for her husband in good reasons. Usually, Indian girls are brought up like that they are tuned from childhood itself that they should not question their husbands irrespective of their harassment, abandon and torture. Even Rani is not an exception. She is directed by her parents to be patient and calm with her husband and she obeys the same thing. Even her parents do not worry about their daughter and have not enquired her conditions even after few months of her marriage. They simply think that their burden (daughter) is handed over to son-in-law and nothing to worry for her. Karnad has given a true picture of the culture and traditions usually the society has.

‘Naga’ the king Cobra, it stays in an enormous ant hill nearby Rani’s house. It does not want to commit adultery intentionally but influenced by the magical root curry which is poured onto the anthill by Rani makes Naga to get attracted towards her. ‘Naga’ is not seen in such a way that started leading an extramarital affair with a human being, and that too taking the form of her husband Appanna. Kanad’s typical play deals with the failed relationship between a man and a woman, where the man fails to treat the woman as a wife and at least a human being. The entire focus of the play is the myth of a Cobra. In the end when she sees the dead Cobra from her tresses, she is not startled. She responds peacefully.

RANI: “*Oh, poor thing. It is dead...*” She never hesitates in giving an order to her husband that their son has to perform the rituals and funeral rites to the dead cobra, stating that her son is given the gift of life by the Cobra.

5. Conclusion

Girish Karnad has brilliantly utilized elements from Indian folklore as the foundational backdrop in his play *Nagamandala* to deliver a nuanced and dramatic analysis of contemporary Indian life. Drawing from age-old oral traditions, Karnad incorporates the myth of the snake assuming a human form and the legend of a magical root that can enchant the senses, not simply as fantastical devices, but as profound cultural metaphors. These myths serve to unravel the inner turmoil, desires, and psychological conflicts faced by the female protagonist, Rani, who is caught in a web of patriarchal neglect, emotional isolation, and societal expectations. The magical elements are not merely decorative but function as critical tools that reflect the deeper cultural dilemmas and complexities surrounding gender, identity, and power. Through a multi-layered narrative structure that blends fantasy with reality, and oral tradition with modern dramaturgy, Karnad successfully bridges conventional modes of storytelling. The use of interrelated stories — the outer narrative of the storyteller and the flame, and the inner tale of Rani, Appanna, and the serpent — along with the triangular relationship and the triple ending, not only enriches the plot but also mirrors the pluralistic and often contradictory nature of Indian society. These layered dimensions reflect how myth and folklore continue to shape cultural consciousness and interpersonal relationships, while also offering spaces for critique and reinterpretation. Ultimately, *Nagamandala* becomes a powerful cultural text that interrogates the intersections of myth, magic, and patriarchy, positioning Karnad as a playwright who uses tradition not for preservation alone, but for transformation and reflection on the human condition in modern India.

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