



## **GENDERED AND NARRATIVE AGENCIES IN GIRISH KARNAD'S NAGAMANDALA**

<sup>1</sup>Winmayil B and Sindhiya S<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor of English, V.V.Vanniaperumal College for Women, Virudhunagar.

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor & Head, Department of English(SF),  
Saiva Bhanu Kshatriya College, Aruppukottai.

Corresponding Author's mail ID: winmayil@vvvcollege.org

### **ABSTRACT**

Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala: A Play with a Cobra* (1990) integrates Kannada folk tradition, magical realism, and feminist subversion to expose the contradictions of patriarchal Indian society. This paper explores how Karnad uses oral narrative structures, female subjectivity, and metatheatrical techniques to interrogate gender hierarchies. Through the experiences of Rani, Appanna, and the mystical Naga, the play dramatizes the tension between social law and personal desire.

**Keywords:** Girish Karnad, *Nagamandala*, folklore, feminism, patriarchy, gendered agency, Indian drama, narrative

### **INTRODUCTION**

Girish Karnad (1938–2019) is celebrated as one of the modern India's most influential playwrights. His innovative blending of history, mythology and contemporary social critique has bagged him national and international literary honour. Emerging alongside Badal Sircar and Vijay Tendulkar, Karnad transformed Kannada theatre with a new

modern sensibility deeply rooted in Indian storytelling traditions. He is a pioneer of producing actable dramas. He has the genius of transforming any situation into an aesthetic experience. He has been honoured with the Jnanpith Award, the Padma Shri and the Padma Bhushan for his creative contributions. His most celebrated plays, such as *Yayati*, *Tughlaq*,

*Hayavadana*, and *Nagamandala*, have been staged many times and often adapted into multiple Indian languages. His characters have explored the existential crisis and psychological, ideological and philosophical conflicts. His *Nagamandala* (1990) occupies a central position in Indian postcolonial theatre. It is written originally in Kannada and translated into English by the author. It revitalises oral storytelling to comment on contemporary gender relations.

Karnad's *Nagamandala* presents an interrogation of gendered power, desire and narrative authority. Karnad opens the play *Nagamandala* with gossiping Flames which comment on the action of the play. The play is woven around the contradiction between Rani's submissiveness and her sexual desire. Rani is presented as a scapegoat to societal polarity— her female subjectivity is denied at day time and validated only at night.

Gender agency means individual having the ability to make choices and act. But Gendered agency refers to the ability getting shaped by the rules and expectations that society links to a person's gender. For instance, cultural norms and power dynamics can support or limit what a woman is able to do in patriarchal contexts. In *Nagamandala*, Rani's journey

embodies gendered agency. She moves from silence and submission to actively shaping her fate through negotiating relationships with the Naga and Appanna. "Karnad through the play exposes the exploitation and incarceration of women that occurs through the institution of marriage and how myths display the fears of men in society and are thus inherently patriarchal and are used in order to control and restrict the actions of women." (Khan)

### **RANI'S STORY**

*Nagamandala* begins in a ruined temple at night, where a Man, the Playwright must stay awake or die. Flames appear in the darkness and start sharing stories with each other — one of which becomes Rani's story. Thus, the Prologue of the play foregrounds the metafictional opening and anxiety of creation. Rani is married to Appanna, a controlling husband who locks her inside the house every day and visits another woman outside his marriage. The locked house symbolises "a woman's caged existence in wedlock" (Dahiya 113). Rani spends her nights in silence and fear. Her only visitor is Kurudavva, a blind old woman and her mother-in-law's friend. Knowing her pathetic story, she gives her a magical root which can win Appanna's love. Rani, innocent and desperate, tries the charm, but the red potion is unintentionally

poured into an anthill. This episode reflects women's dependence on superstition when the marital life is confined by patriarchal structures.

From that anthill rises a King Cobra (Naga), who takes the shape of Appanna and begins to visit Rani every night. Rani believes that her husband has changed. She feels loved, cherished, and emotionally alive. Karnad shows how her dark, confined nights become moments of freedom and fulfilment. Rani's diurnal sufferings and nocturnal sexual fulfilment determine the gendered agency in *Nagamandala*. "The smell of the blossoming night-queen! How it fills the house before he comes!..., How it takes me, sets each fibre in me on fire!" (Karnad 33). Here her female body reclaims narrative centrality.

Appanna represents every man's psyche, "the common archetypal behaviour of an average male" (Dahiya 112). When he learns of Rani's pregnancy, he accuses her of being unfaithful and takes her before the village elders for judgment. Yet her innocence and genuine affection protect her in the trial of chastity. "I was a stupid, ignorant girl when you brought me here. But now I am a woman, a wife, and I am going to be a mother. I am not a parrot. Not a cat or a sparrow." (Karnad 42). Rani, thus, transformed from

a submissive wife to a female with desires and assertiveness. In *Ramayana*, Sita's chastity is tested through the ordeal of fire. Here Rani's chastity is tested through snake ordeal. The consummation between Rani and the Naga transcends beyond moral binaries. But it is her mystical union that comes to her aid in proving that she is a faithful wife. "yes, my husband and the King Cobra, Except for these two, I have not touched anyone in the male sex. Nor have I allowed any other male to touch me. If I lie, let the Cobra bite me." (Karnad 47). Karnad uses surrealistic elements to mock at the double standards of patriarchy which never questions the extra-marital affair of Appanna. The villagers worship her as a holy woman. Her husband, shocked and ashamed, accepts her back. Rani's female agency emerges as a challenge to "patriarchal moral code that demands the faithfulness of a woman to her husband but not the faithfulness of a man to his wife..." (Mohan). Rani's failure to discover the truth and her unshakable faith in Naga decide her fate in *Nagamandala*.

## NARRATIVE AGENCY

Narrative agency denotes the power and ability to shape or control stories. It tries to assert subjectivity and voice through storytelling, especially where official narratives hushed particular

perspectives. Rani's agency is dramatised within a distinctly Indian setting explicated in folk traditions and oral culture. The layers of oral storytelling—where the female Story, Rani herself claims the right to speak, and the Man questions the ending—demonstrate narrative agency. Because it gives voice and legitimacy to women's experiences which are silenced or marginalized. It is rightly expressed by Gaikwad- "the playwright is a man, and the story is personified as a woman. So does Man create Woman?... the gist of the framework of the story runs parallel to the theme of the main story." (396).

*Nagamandala* exemplifies how female agency and narrative control can subvert and reimagine gender roles. It is not only retelling of a folktale but is about the very act of *telling stories*—the act of liberation. The folk theatre not only upholds traditional values but also subverts the conventions of theatrical devices as well as societal frameworks. Stories are personified and the narrative becomes multi-layered with "a play within a play". The characters—the Playwright, and the Flames—break the fourth wall and engage directly with the audience, making them conscious participants rather than passive observers. Karnad's employment of Flames, Story and Rani as voices of married Women places Women as Story

Tellers not as Stories to be told. The core theme of resilience of women's narratives is reaffirmed in "If you try to gag one story, another happens" (Karnad 4). At the end of the play too, the casts firmly state that "No two men make love alike" which again leaves the narrator to change the fate of the Naga (Karnad 60). Rani's long locks of hair which acts as noose for the Naga's suicide attempt is changed into a dwelling place for the Naga. Thus, this leads to yet another story of Rani proudly proclaiming "This hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss" (Karnad 48).

Even after giving a mythic closure of Appanna accepting Rani, Karnad ends the play with the fusion of fantasy and reality. Though she attains fulfilment from Appanna, she integrates her emotional self with her. Hence, Ghosh writes, "within this dichotomy between the lover and the husband, the instinct and the reason, it is the instinct that seems to win"(762). Her ambivalent mind merges the two opposing identities. Appanna stands for social order whereas the Naga is her emotional awakening. "The dutiful and loyal wife may observe the social, moral code entirely; yet within her live the memories of the perfect lover who had given her first emotional and erotic experiences. These desires may haunt her or lie dormant within." (Rao 86).

The play has a folkloric closure and a subjective ending. The divided consciousness of the characters is questioned as audience, thereby reflecting multiple agencies of narrative – characters', storytellers', and the audience's. This self-referential questioning is the essence of metatheatre. The storyteller and the listener co-create meaning. These metatheatrical techniques refer to the play's self-awareness as theatre and its use of theatrical conventions that draw attention to its own storytelling. Karnad thus positions metatheatre not as stylistic ornamentation but as a political and ethical intervention that restores voice to those excluded from official narratives.

### **DARKNESS AS A NARRATIVE METAPHOR**

Karnad inverts the traditional symbolism of darkness as evil; instead transforms it into a space of storytelling, self-discovery, and female empowerment. The Man's fear of sleep/death in darkness signifies a modern artist's survival crisis to be conscious of truth. The gathering of Flames in darkness shelters the forbidden stories. Kurudavva's blindness allows her perceive truth invisible to others and transmit the mystic wisdom across generations. The recurring motif sleep presents darkness as a space of anxiety, desperation, and longing: Rani's fear of

night dramatizes her vulnerability in a patriarchal home and the Man's sleeplessness denotes the isolation imposed by societal expectations. Yet, paradoxically, darkness becomes the medium of transformation. The Naga's arrival at night blurs the boundaries between dream and waking, fear and fulfilment and thereby embodies her spiritual awakening. This unarticulated space is the metaphor of feminine subconscious. In contrast, the day represents the masculine world of Appanna's domain. The confined darkness imprisons her and frees her, as well. Rani's self gets merged with her unknown shadow in the unconscious human mind. Thus, *Nagamandala* reframes female empowerment as a movement from imposed silence to embodied authority, where darkness becomes the medium of ethical and emotional illumination.

### **SUMMING UP**

Karnad's Rani is an embodiment of female desire and identity in a patriarchal society. Rani's journey from a docile housewife to an assertive woman redefines the narrative agency of *Nagamandala*. The play leaves upon a question with audience whether Rani has achieved autonomous authorized identity or a mere female identity. Karnad employed the folk theatrical devices as a mixture of folktale,

myth, and magical spectacle. Folklore functions here as counter-history, preserving women's lived experiences that formal historical narratives erase. Hence, it creates a space for female agency which is narrated and enacted into being. Thus, *Nagamandala* transforms storytelling into an act of justice, where narrative agency becomes a means of resistance against fixed truths and gendered silencing.

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