

**The Representation of Folktales and Mythology in Girish Karnad's
*Naga-mandala: Play with a Cobra***

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Abstract

The present research paper analyses Girish Karnad's play *Naga-mandala* (1990) with its focus on representing or depicting the folktales and mythical tales or legends employed within the plot. Karnad has made use of various devices peculiar to a dramatic literary work along with the folktales or myths, attributing divine qualities to human or non-humans, the use of magic, exceptional and amazing ordeals, the use of Flames and Story as well as the Man or the Sutradhaar, the power of the demi-god Naga who can transform into a human (Appanna's) form, the magical roots, and lastly Rani who attains divinity near the end of the play. All these issues or devices employed by the playwright can be included within the folkloric or mythical framework of the play, *Naga-mandala*.

Keywords: Girish Karnad, *Naga-mandala* folktales, myth, Naga, divinity, human-form, and male chauvinism.

Girish Karnad is a renowned playwright who prefers writing about myths, folklores or traditional beliefs as a major issue / theme in his plays. Another astonishing feature of Karnad's writing style is that his plays reflect socio-cultural aspects along with metaphysical and are also mythical at the same time. Karnad's plays exhibit his rootedness in his cultural traditions and how tactfully he is able to evoke the sensibility of the contemporary audience.

In his play, *Naga-mandala: Play with a Cobra* (1990), the dramatist tells a wonderful fantasized and mythical story with which one can travel into an altogether different world. Since

ancient times, the retelling of old myths through the story of a drama in Indian literature has been a universal theme which is also embodied and weaved with perfection within the plot of *Naga-mandala* by Girish Karnad.

The storyline of this play also touches the issues of feminism as it points towards the exploitation of the women characters. The play throws light on the condition of a woman in a patriarchal society. And the vacant house in which Rani is locked in is devoid of any human presence except Rani. It could be connoted with the family in which Rani is married where she finds herself entrapped into the empty house feeling alienated and dejected so much so that her condition is like “a caged bird” (Karnad, 257). “The position of Rani in the story of *Naga-mandala*, for instance, can be seen as a metaphor for the situation of a young girl in the bosom of a joint family where she sees her husband only in two unconnected roles – as a stranger during the day and as lover at night” (qtd. in Ansari, 1813). Rani addresses Naga who is in the human form of Appanna, “You talk so nicely at night. But during the day I only have to open my mouth and you hiss like a ... stupid snake” (Karnad, 271).

Here, at a symbolic level, Naga (Appanna) can be viewed from two opposite perspectives: negative – as evil as Satan; and positive – as good as God. Due to the fact that Naga can cast off its skin and can emerge as a new being; it (Naga) is considered as a demi-god of the Indian society as it is believed that it gets reborn by shedding off its skin. This may be the reason why the playwright chose ‘Naga’ to hint at the duality of man’s behaviour. Naga (Appanna) can be viewed as positively, especially, when he assumes human form as an incarnation of God to grant the wishes of Rani, his devotee, so that he can make her life and her very existence meaningful by helping her in achieving motherhood. While on the other side of the coin, Naga (Appanna) can also be contemplated as a negative character because he despite being a divine being seduced or sexually exploited Rani and thus, played a negative role in the plot of the play. His role as an evil character reminds of Satan who too assumed the form of a snake and instigated Eve against Adam in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

Girish Karnad’s *Naga-mandala* (1990) is believed to have originated from two oral tales heard by the playwright from A. K. Ramanujan. But the tales were not specifically mentioned by

Karnad. It is also believed that there is a similar story in the Indian tradition which narrates the folktale of a Cobra who turns into a man usually at night and visits a married woman. By blending this folktale into the main story of the play, the playwright tries to present an alliance firstly, between art and imagination and secondly, with art and the projection of reality; ultimately pointing out that there is a permanent relationship between art and imagination / fantasy.

Storytelling or katha was a medium for people to showcase one's religion, caste systems, gender roles and several other reasons. The traditional Katha System had a common purpose to describe the divine powers and nature looking after the universe. These beliefs and traditions were so strong and till date run into generations. There are some major katha traditions in India through which originated other story telling formats in India. [One such katha / tale format is Yakshagana, which is expressed in the plot of *Naga-mandala*.] ... Through time immortal Nature is worshipped in some form or the other. Yakshagana is one of the most colourful and vibrant style of storytelling. This was based and originated in the states of South India. The word Yaksha means nature spirits, the protectors of concealed natural treasures of the earth. ... This art form originated in early 7th to 10th Century during Bhakti movement. In Yakshagana through classical dance and music stories of Lord Shiva and Vishnu are performed. The stories were derived from Puranas, Ramayana, and Mahabharata.

Yakshagana storytelling comprises costumes, masks and some sturdy male and female figures demonstrating the power of God's and Nature. (*Egyankosh*, 7-9).

The Prologue of *Naga-mandala* tries to settle down the tone and mood of the play. The plot of the drama takes the audience into the world of make-believe scenario or the world of a fantasized / made-up story. The beginning of the Prologue, reminds us of the beginning of the poem, "The Rime of Ancient Mariner" by S. T. Coleridge. "The play opens in a surrealistic setting – a dilapidated temple, a broken idol that is hard to identify, the time of the late night with

the moonlight creeping in through the crevices on the walls and the roof” (Challa, 3-4). This setting is similar to the one in hell or netherworld where Man or symbolically, the playwright (in the play) finds himself entangled and suspended between the world of life and death. Turning towards the audience, the playwright or Man confides and says:

I may be dead within the next few hours. I asked the mendicant what I had done to deserve this fate. And he said: ‘You have written plays. You have staged them. You have caused so many good people, who came trusting you, to fall asleep twisted in miserable chairs, that all that abused mass of sleep has turned against you and become the Curse of Death’. (Karnad, 247-48)

In this way, the Man mentioned in the Prologue is accursed because the spectators of his plays fell asleep while watching them. Then the Man promises when he says, “I swear by this absent God, if I survive this night I shall have nothing more to do with themes, plots or stories. I abjure all story-telling, all play-acting” (248). There is only one way to escape “the Curse of Death” or his predicament, that is, by staying “awake at least one whole night this month” (247). And only the last night of the month is left for the Man to stay awake. If he fails to stay awake, he will meet his death.

In a folkloric tradition, the story-telling dramatically represents a myth, a folktale or a legend that passes on from one generation to another, which goes along with song and music. Then, during night time, the Man hears some “female voices” coming from “outside the temple” (248). These “female voices” are “naked lamp flames” which are “giggling, [and] talking to each other” while entering the dilapidated building of the secluded temple where the Man is hiding “behind a pillar” after being terrified from these voices. Describing these flames, Karnad writes, “They are naked lamp flames! No wicks, no lamps. No one holding them. Just lamp flames on their own – floating in the air!”. These flames are actually accompanied with Story of different households which have assembled there for gossiping. It is the framework of the plot which discloses the intimacies present in marital love. The flames do have their own distinct characteristic as they are different from each other, as they are burning in kusbi oil, peanut oil, castor oil, coconut oil, or kerosene oil which is simultaneously reflective of the hierarchical

Indian socio-cultural system. These flames are not happy because of the loss of ethicality, human values and due to the presence of vices such as greed, selfishness, sexual immorality, lack of respect for aged / old people and cut-throat competition. Each of the flames narrates its own story / tale.

These types of tales are recounted by women, especially, the elderly women of the family while feeding children or while putting them to sleep. Therefore, narrating such types of tales to children is a kind of means to communicate with other women present in the family as they are also present when the tales are narrated by old women of the family. Above all, the narration of these tales suggest that it is expected from women who are taught since childhood to adapt themselves as per the demands and needs of the patriarchal family set-up. This is the reason why Rani, the female protagonist of *Naga-mandala* is told such stories.

Many of these tales also talk about the nature of tales. The story of the flames comments on the paradoxical nature of oral tales in general: they have an existence of their own, independent of the teller and yet live only when they are passed on from the possessor of the tale to the listener. Seen thus, the status of a tale becomes akin to that of a daughter, for traditionally a daughter too is not meant to be kept at home too long but has to be passed on. This identity adds poignant and ironic undertones to the relationship of the teller to the tales. (Karnad, "Appendix 1", 314-15)

Act I starts the story / tale of Appanna and his wife, Rani. When Kappanna enters carrying his mother Kurudavva, he resembles Shraavan Kumar (again a reference to Indian ancient narrative) whose dialogue foreshadows the plot of the play. Kappanna says, "That Appanna should have been born a wild beast or a reptile. By some mistake, he got human birth" (255). This dialogue portends the major event that takes place later where Appanna turns into a Naga (a beast).

In the play, there is re-mythification of the myth related with Ahalya. As per the societal views of our nation, people think that a Cobra or Naga can take any form or shape as per his wish or desire. This belief is originated from the status of divinity assumed to Naga. So, Naga

too comes in the category of divine beings that are believed to take any form of his choice. A particular episode in the *Ramayana* narrates the tale of the wife of Rishi Gautama, Ahalya, who is seduced by Indra as God Indra appeared in the form of her husband and in this way, Indra deceived Ahalya.

In *Naga-mandala* too the Naga / Cobra can transform into a human form of Rani's husband Appanna during nights and under this disguised form, he (Naga) seduces and impregnates Rani. While in reality, Appanna, the actual husband stays at home only till midday to have lunch and after that he goes to enjoy at his concubine's house in the evening and stays there the whole night. Rani is depicted as the one who is like Sita or Savitri in the ancient Indian legend where a woman is supposed to accept, surrender and suffer as well as she is not allowed to raise questions and react. As Rani bursts out:

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 snarl in the morning unrelated to the caress at night. But day or night, one motto does not change: Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you. (Karnad, 283)

According to Northrop Frye, "A ritual is a sacred manifestation or an epiphany of a myth in action. In other words, myth rationalizes or explains a ritual by providing an authority for it". For instance, it is a common practice in our country that on a certain day of a certain month of a certain year, women perform the ritual of pouring milk on ant-hills inhabited by Cobras. It is believed that married women propitiate the Cobra to get over barrenness and unmarried girls to get good husband. Naga of the play *Naga-mandala* is a supernatural being who reflects charisma and possesses the special powers of transformation. The scenography of *Naga-mandala* is set in the aura of Naga, which is both beautifully terrible and terrifyingly beautiful. This mysterious quality of Naga permeates the entire play.

Naga-mandala is a magico-religious ritual involving Naga, the snake-god of Hindus who grants wishes of his devotees, especially the wish for fertility. In

the play, Naga (Cobra) grants Rani all her wishes, which she does not express openly. She grows mentally and becomes a confident woman. She is cured of her frigidity. She gets a devoted husband. Her husband's concubine becomes a life-long servant-maid for her. Above all, she begets a beautiful son. Naga, in addition, makes Appanna's heart fertile with love and affection for his wife. For Karnad, mythology is never a dead past. He makes it relevant in the modern context. The modern men can learn and understand certain social values and morality from it. Myths, legends and folk forms function as a kind of cultural [anaesthesia] and they have been used for introducing and eliminating, in our racial unconscious, cultural pathogens such as caste and gender distinctions and religious fanaticism. Karnad makes use of myths and folk forms in his plays to exercise socio-cultural evils. He says, "The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values, of making them literally stand on their head". (Chapter-5: Use of ... and *Tughlaq*", 231-34)

The blind woman, Kurudavva, plays an important role in the play. Although she plays a minor role in the plot but it is very crucial or significant for the progress of the story. It is due to the magical impact of the root which is given by Kurudavva to Rani that the Naga starts falling in love with Rani and maintains relationship with her. "We can easily identify similarities between Goddess Kali of *Hayavadana* and Kurudavva in the sense that as Goddess Kali helps Padmini in [relivening] ... Devadatta and Kapila... In the same way, Kurudavva gives 'solution' to Rani's problem" (Agarwal and Yadav, 382).

Another myth is 'the Kunti myth' that is related with the magical root. In *Mahabharata*, the story of Kunti, a virgin is narrated who gets a magical mantra from a sage Durvasa for her devotion who then shares her power with another woman Madri, the second wife of her husband. And with the help of the magical mantra, Kunti invoked the Sun God, Surya, who then blessed her with a son, Karna; and Madri too was blessed with sons with the help of the mantra. Similarly, in *Naga-mandala*, Kurudavva, the mother of Kappanna gets the magical root from a mendicant who then shares it with Rani. And like Karna, Kurudavva too is blessed with a son,

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Kappanna. And like Madri, that is, the second woman with whom Kunti had shared the magical mantra, Rani in Karnad's play begets a son later in the story. Hence, as per this myth, Kurudavva is like Kunti and Rani is like Madri. Kurudavva cries pathetically near the end of the play when her son gets lost mysteriously. This event reminds of the entire episode of the *Mahabharata* when Gandhari cries over the loss of Duryodhana who meets his death. Kurudavva informs Rani that she (Kurudavva) is like 'a mother' for Appanna which is also acknowledged by him, when he says, "In my sleep, it sounded like my mother calling me" (Karnad, 297). In brief, it can be said that Kurudavva acts as the "mother" of all men / males and as the "mother-in-law", it is her job or obligation to inspire or initiate Rani to start her family life and carry on with her own generation; as Kunti does with Draupadi, and that is what Kurudavva does.

The lines, "Frogs croaking in pelting rain, tortoises singing soundlessly in the dark, foxes, crabs, 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 his mate" (276) "... recalls the creation myth of Uranus and Gaea, and of Heaven and Earth coming together: of the first male and female, Purusha and Prakriti, Yang and Yin. It is this law of life that Rani is ignorant of" ("Chapter-5: Use of ... and *Tughlaq*", 244). Therefore, Naga, in turn, employs the myth of life to educate her.

The last important myth associated with Rani is the myth of "the snake ordeal" (Karnad, 286) to prove her chastity and faithfulness towards her husband, Appanna, after she gets impregnated. Rani is like a slave under the bondage of man's or society's control. The society (in the play) believes in male chauvinism as the members of society does not object Appanna who enjoys sex openly with his concubine, but the society puts a question mark on the chastity of the female character, Rani (Appanna's wife). "The Village Elders" who "sit in judgement" (285) to judge the faithfulness of Rani asks her to conduct "the traditional test in [the] ... Village Court ... [by] tak[ing] oath while holding a red-hot iron in the hand" (288) and speaking the truth while holding it. But Appanna has not been asked to perform any such test to prove his faithfulness towards Rani. Later, in the plot, it has finally been decided that Rani will perform "the snake ordeal" (286) and speak the truth by holding the Cobra in her hand. When Naga tells about this

ordeal to Rani, she is terrified, and says, “Give me poison instead. Kill me right here. At least I’ll be spared the humiliation. Won’t the cobra bite me the moment I touch it? I’ll die like your dog and your mongoose”. When the moment arrives, Rani speaks the truth while holding the Cobra in her hand, “... Yes, my husband and this King Cobra. Except for these two, I have not touched any one of the male sex. Nor have I allowed any other male to touch me. If I lie, let the Cobra bite me” (292).

Immediately after saying these words, “The Cobra slides up her shoulder and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head. The crowd gasps. The Cobra sways its hood gently for a while, then becomes docile and moves over her shoulder like a garland”. After this, “the Village Elders” (288) started shouting that it’s a miracle and that Rani “... is not a woman. She is a Divine Being!” She is “Indeed, a Goddess - !” (292).

In this way, Rani is incarnated as a Goddess, this, achieving the status of divinity which is quite opposite from her earlier status as a white. Hence, Girish Karnad exposes male chauvinism by employing the device of “the snake / cobra ordeal” while on the other hand, he is also exposing “the double standard of morality of patriarchal culture and the hollowness of the concept of chastity”. The entire event / scene of “the snake / cobra ordeal” is evocative of the famous last scene of the *Ramayana*, where is to perform a similar “fire ordeal” to prove her purity of conduct in the presence of the elders and the respectable citizens of Ayodhya (Kumar, 318).

Therefore, to conclude in a nutshell, folktales or the myths in Girish Karnad’s *Naga-mandala* take the major portion of the content of the story and takes the readers away in a different scenario or in a metaphysical world, that is, away from the mundane activities and the complexity of human relationships which makes it easy to connect to the tales and hence, to the play. One gets completely lost in the folktales and myths and comes out of the web of complex situations prevalent in modern society. In the beginning of the play, that is, in the Prologue, suspense is created due to “the Curse of Death” (Karnad, 248) which makes the audience sit on the edge of their seats to witness all the happenings in the play.

The presence of ‘the supernatural elements’ reminds of S. T. Coleridge’s concept of “willing suspension of disbelief” (as is portrayed in “The Rime of Ancient Mariner”). The ending of the play is vague or round which simultaneously relieves the burdened minds of the people / audience / spectators / readers living in the complex post-modern world or lost in the complexity of the plot of the play. It may be due to the alienation effect which must be the aim of a drama according to Bertolt Brecht.

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