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## Naga Mandala:

*A Mythical Tale with Modern Techniques and Contemporary Themes*

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the unique narrative techniques Girish Karnad used in his play, *Nagamandala*. This play is based on two folk tales of Kannada. In order to cast the folktale and myth into a drama, Karnad has used the traditional techniques of folk theatre like the use of the magical elements, supernatural qualities of human and non-human, etc. The narrator of the *Nagamandala* is a "story" and it is told to a man. The flames in the play, typically depict the nature of Indian women who, gather at a place after the household chores and refresh themselves. The flames tell each other what has happened at their house, why they had to come either early or late to the temple, etc. Karnad has indirectly used sarcasm to explain that the woman does not hold back the truth and it is the nature of the woman in the Indian villages to gather around in the evening and discuss or gossip about each other. The socio-cultural practices of the society in the play are enriched by using both the myth and the folklore form. Karnad employs modern theatrical techniques to bring the mythical tale to life on stage.

**Index Terms:** folklore, supernatural, narrative techniques, socio-cultural Practices, the flames

*Nagamandala* by Girish Karnad perfectly fits the description of a mythical tale woven with modern techniques and contemporary themes. It is published first in Kannada in 1988 and later translated into English by Karnad himself. This play is based on two folk tales of Kannada and effortlessly blends folklore, mythology, and contemporary themes, employing a non-linear narrative structure that keeps the audience engaged. The socio-cultural practices of the society in the play are enriched by using both the myth and the folklore form. In order to cast the folktale and myth into a drama, Karnad has used the traditional techniques of folk theatre like the use of the magical elements, supernatural qualities of human and non-human, etc. Karnad has used Story as a unique style of narration to the playwright in the play. The Story in the play is portrayed as a woman. M Sarat Babu mentions the Story as "The Bhagawata of Nagamandala, a modified version of Yakshagana."

The play *Nagamandala* is divided into a prologue and two Acts. As told earlier, the drama is based on two folk tales from Karnataka. These two tales are mentioned in the Collected Plays by Aparna B Dharwadkar. In Karnad's own words from the author's introduction in the collective plays volume 1, "Naga-Mandala is based on two oral tales, I heard from AK Ramanujan. These tales are narrated by women-normally the older women in the family-while children are being fed in the evenings in the kitchen or being put to bed". ... "the first story, about the lamp flames that gather in an old village temple to exchange gossip about the household they inhabit, is part of the outer play and gives imaginative expression to the idea of community life. The second story, about the woman who was visited by a king cobra in the form of her husband, is personified in the play as a beautiful young woman in a sari, and it 'tells itself' (as the inner play) to an audience composed of the playwright and the flames".

*Nagamandala* won the Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award in 1989 for Karnad in the category of the most creative work of the year. This is also directed as a film in Kannada by TS Nagabharana. The play was first staged at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis in 1993 as a part of the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebrations. In the words of Makarand Paranjape, a novelist, and poet from India, “Girish Karnad makes this folk tale ‘Naga-Mandala’ stand on its head, letting it unfold dramatically...this is a fine play, powerful, gripping and exciting... it uses tradition creatively and sensitively... it is fast paced, well plotted coherent, and controlled. The central character is sharply defined and brilliantly executed.”

### The significance of the title:

Mandala in the Indian context is a sign/ a symbol. It can also be referred to as a code that reflects certain values, attitudes, beliefs, and practices of a particular culture, etc., they can be ritualistic, traditional, social, etc., henceforth, ‘Mandala’ in the play ‘Naga-Mandala’ plays a different role of a sign and a symbol.

According to Natyashashtra of Bharat Muni, theatre is of divine origin and has an intricate interweaving of all the three worlds – the celestial, the terrestrial, and the infernal. The play ‘*Naga-Mandala*’ also has the presence of all these elements. In the play, the mandala is a metaphor for the life of an Indian woman. The shape of the mandala comprises two triangles, put together one facing upward and the other, downward. Thus, this mandala can be seen as the play itself, with the three corners of one triangle depicting the three main characters of the play- Rani (the protagonist), Appanna (the husband of Rani) and Naga (the lover of Rani). The three corners of the other triangle depict the three culminations of the play, with Rani forming the centre i.e., whatever may be the direction of the mandala structure and however we shift the direction, Rani remains at the centre. All three edges give different interpretations of the condition of women in Indian society.

The first interpretation is the typical fairy tale ending wherein, Appanna accepts Rani’s chastity and personifies her as the Goddess. In the second situation, the Naga kills itself, for it cannot see Rani with somebody else. In the third ending, Rani saves the Naga from her husband Appanna by hiding it in the locks of her tresses.

The character of the Naga and Appanna can be of the same person, as perceived by the wife. Karnad says, “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 a lover at night.” (Appendix 1, Pg.no- 314) Therefore, the Naga-Mandala signifies the world of Rani that is unconsciously created, to make sense of her life, gain awareness about herself and construct her own identity.

There is a unique style of narration of the story in the play *Naga-Mandala* i.e., the Bhagavatha technique. The setting of the play is the ruined temple of an unknown deity. The play starts when the man, who has come to the temple in the night explains his present plight to the audience. He says that he has been cursed for being a playwright who puts his audience to sleep. He also says that an unknown mendicant has advised him that if he could stay awake at least for one night in the whole month, he would be saved from the curse. When he was unable to control his sleep, he promised that he would never be a playwright again if he was saved. Later, he hears some voices of the women coming towards the temple. He hides and listens to them. The voices are none other than the flames that are put off in the houses of the village, who gather every evening and discuss what happened in their household.

One of the flames says that she had to come late to the temple because there was a feud going on between the couple. The flame says that the lady of the house knew a story and the song that she had never told anybody. That day, when she was taking a nap in the afternoon, the story came out of her mouth as a beautiful young lady draped in a red saree and hid in the room. At night, when the lady of the house was in the kitchen, the story was present in the bedroom while her husband was also in the bedroom. When the lady of the house finished her chores and came to the bedroom, the young lady saw her and ran out of the house. Doubting her husband, she starts a fight between them over the young beautiful lady. Now, the flame has brought the story along with her to the temple and asks her to narrate the story. When the story tells that whatever she narrates should be passed on to the people, the man who was hiding behind the door comes out and promises that he will do so if the story helps him stay awake the whole night.

Here, it can also be stated that the stories are never to be kept to oneself for they may carry the virtues that the world needs to learn. And that is how the Indians still take pride in the folklores, folktales and folksongs, that describe the Indian way of life one must lead.

The flames in the play, typically depict the nature of Indian women who, gather at a place after the household chores and refresh themselves. The flames tell each other what has happened at their house, why they had to come either early or late to the temple, etc. Karnad has indirectly used sarcasm to explain that the woman does not hold back the truth and it is the nature of the woman in the Indian villages to gather around in the evening and discuss or gossip about each other. He has also brought to light the psychological aspects of a woman.

The narrator of the *Nagamandala* is a "story" and it is told to a man. In a village, there is a couple, Appanna and Rani. Appanna's illicit affair with a concubine keeps him away from his newlywed wife, Rani. He spends most of his time away and only comes home for lunch. Rani is confined to a house. She is not allowed to get socialised with the neighbours in the village. Their married life is about to break up. Rani, who misses her parents' love, longs for her husband's love but finds no development in Appanna's attitude towards her. He always shouts at Rani even for the little time she spends with him. She does not get love and freedom in the house. No one is there to support her. Rani wants to win back her husband at any cost. Kurudavva, an old blind lady, and her son Kappanna one day meet Rani at her house and talk about the infamous deeds of Appanna with his concubines. Kurudavva hears about Rani's pitiful condition. She gives Rani two roots of love and advises her to try first the smaller root by mixing it into his food. She said if the root doesn't work on him, then try the bigger one. Rani, as per Kurudavva's guidance, mixes the small root with milk and gives it to Appanna but finds no change in his attitude towards her. Later the next day, with Kurudavva's advice again, she mixes the big root into the curry and finds the curry turning into a bright red colour. Scared, Rani pours it into the anthill in front of the house before Appanna finds out. The Naga (king cobra) drinks the potion and falls in love with Rani, the protagonist.

Naga takes the form of Appanna during the nights and spends a happy time with Rani. Seeing Appanna's change in behaviour during the day and the night, Rani gets confused about whether she is dreaming or is real. After a few days, she finds herself pregnant and clears that she is not dreaming but whatever is happening from the past few days is real. Therefore, she reveals her pregnancy to Appanna. Appanna, who has not had any physical relationship with Rani from day one, complains at the village panchayat about Rani's extramarital relationship. When Rani says that she has never touched anybody except her husband, the panchayat asks her to prove her innocence by holding a red-hot iron in her hands or by dipping the hand in the boiling oil. But Rani says that she would prove her innocence by holding the cobra from the anthill in her hand and telling the truth. As told by Naga the previous night, she tells the truth and therefore no harm happens to her. Naga moves around her neck like a garland. Witnessing this, the panchayat declares that she is not an ordinary woman, but a Divine being in human form. With no choice, Appanna accepts Rani and her pregnancy. Along with the whole village, Appanna also starts believing that she is the divine in human form and changes his attitude towards her. With this, Rani enjoys the new life with Appanna and the child. There are three different ends to the play. The first is the happily ever after ending with Rani and Appanna living a happy life with the newly born child, the second ending is when Naga, not able to bear to see Appanna by Rani's side, kills himself by entangling himself in Rani's hair. After seeing Naga's death, Rani tells Appanna that the funeral pyre will be lit by their son Naga. The third ending is when Appanna, Naga and Rani live together happily with Naga hiding in the tresses of Rani forever.

The play employs the narrative technique, shifting between the past and the present to bridge together the folklore and the contemporary story of Rani. The audience can have a clear view of the past and the present. This technique can be taken reference from the Epic theatre introduced by Bertolt Brecht, a German theatre practitioner and playwright, in which the audience is separated from the play and is brought in contact with the social realities of the Indian society. The elements of the *Verfremdung* effect of the Epic theatre can be seen in the dialogues between Rani and the story – when Rani is in a dilemma about whether she should mix the roots in the curry, she asks the help from the Story; Act 1, pg. no- 265,

RANI (to the story): Shall I pour it in?

STORY: Yes

(Rani prays silently to the gods and pours the paste into the curry. There is a sudden explosion. She runs and hides in a corner of the room. The curry boils over, red as blood. Steam, pink and dangerous, coils out of the pot. Rani shuts her eyes in fear. Appanna calmly continues his bath. He has heard nothing.

There is also another interesting element in the play: when the story gives a sad ending to the play, the Narrator asks the story to change the end as it was not satisfactory to him. The dialogues go like this:

MAN: It can't be. No one will accept this ending.

STORY: But why not?

MAN: Too many loose ends. Take Kappanna's disappearance, for instance.

(Text: Act 2, pg.no-294- 295)

MAN: But that ending lacks something. (Remembering,) Of course, the Cobra!

While naming the characters of the play, Karnad has typically brought about the local names used in Karnataka. The names Rani, Kurudavva, and Kappanna mean the queen, the blind woman and the dark-complexioned man. Naga in the regional language means the King Cobra. It is the non-human element that the Indians usually believe in. The Naga is given the Godly status by the Indians. This can be proved with a reference in the play when the panchayat asks Rani to tell the truth holding Naga in her hands. When Naga is given godly status, it is normal to expect supernatural power from the character. the reference in the play to this point is when Naga falls in love with Rani, it takes the human form at night to get closer to her.

The characters' names in the play are very intricately developed by the dramatist. The names of the characters in the play depict the society of India in its 20<sup>th</sup> century. Each character represents the various facets of society and human nature. The name Rani means Queen in the regional language. The woman who is regarded or called the goddess, in this play can be seen as the victim of oppressing male domination. Appanna in the regional language, also about the dialogue between the Man and the Story means, any man. Hence, Appanna represents any man with the Patriarchal characteristics in him. Both the characters; Appanna and Naga can be seen as the two different qualities of the same man. Kurudavva means a blind woman, which instinctively represents the nature of women in general, who try to know the happenings and also sometimes help the neighbours in need. In the same way, flames can also be found in the women's characteristics.

Kurudavva can be taken as one of the main characters who is responsible for the turning of the events in the play. the play takes a turning point when she gives the magical roots to Rani to get back her husband. But, with the portion mixed with the roots turning red, scared, she pours the portion into the anthill and the naga drinks it and immediately falls in love with Rani. The names selected for the characters also show the storytelling of the folk oral tradition. This is illustrated in the play in the Act 1, pg. no 253 as:

STORY: A young girl. Her name...it doesn't matter. But she was an only daughter, so her parents called her Rani. Queen. Queen of the whole world. Queen of the long tresses. ... rani continued to live with her parents until she reached womanhood. Soon, her husband came and took her with him to his village. His name was— well, any common name will do— MAN: Appanna? pg. no, 251

The play highlights the male domination and female oppression in the society; where she has no power to voice her thoughts and opinions. She is seen as the expression of chastity. Once, she loses it, she is not considered a decent lady by society. The author, in the play, has very beautifully blended the human and non-human elements to bring out the harsh social reality. The characters Appanna and Naga are the metaphor for the two sides (characteristics) of the male who is dominant over the female. Appanna represents the egoistic side of a man, behaving as if Rani is not his wife from the day they come home while Naga represents the instinctive side of a man who desires the love of a woman at night. There is also a supernatural element that represents the Indian belief system of good and evil. The reference to this point can be seen mainly in two instances firstly, when Naga who has fallen in love with Rani changes his form exactly to Appanna including the voice and body language to meet and love Rani every night.

STORY: As you know, a Cobra can assume any form it likes. That night, it entered the house through the bathroom drain and took the shape of—

(The Cobra takes the shape of Appanna. To distinguish this Appanna from the real one, we shall call him Naga, meaning a 'Cobra'. ...) Act 1, pg. no- 267

The loneliness of Rani is depicted via daydreaming. Rani, who yearns for the love and affection of her husband, stays alone at home and also imagines an eagle taking her back to her parents. This can be seen in the following dialogue;

RANI: Listen— please—

(She does not know what is happening, stands perplexed. She cannot even weep. She goes and sits in a corner of her room. Talks to herself indistinctly. Her words become distinct as the lights dim. It is night)

...So, Rani asks him: 'Where are you taking me?' and the Eagle answers: 'Beyond the seas and seven isles. On the seventh island is a magical garden. And in that garden stands the tree of emeralds. Under that tree, your parents wait for you. So Rani says: 'Do they? Then please, please take me to them— immediately. Here I come.' So the Eagle carries her clear across the seven seas...

(she falls asleep. Moans 'Oh Mother!' 'Father' in her sleep. It gets light. She wakes up with a fright, looks around, then runs to the bathroom, mimes splashing water on her face, goes into the kitchen and starts cooking. ...) Act 1, pg. no, 254

The rigid social norms and practices of the Indian society can be seen in the dialogues between Rani and Appanna at the beginning of the play.

APPANNA: well, then, I'll be back tomorrow at noon. Keep my lunch ready. I shall eat and go. Act 1, pg. no: 254

(Rani looks at him nonplussed. He pays no attention to her, goes out, shuts the door, locks it from the outside and goes away. She runs to the door, pushes it, finds it locked, peers out of the barred window. He is gone.)

RANI: Listen— please— ....

(She falls asleep. .... Appanna comes. Opens the lock on the front door and comes in. goes to the bathroom. Mimes bathing, then comes to the kitchen and sits down to eat. She serves him food.)

RANI: Listen – (fumbling for words) Listen— I feel— frightened— alone at night—

APPANNA: what is there to be scared of? Just keep to yourself. No one will bother you. Rice!

RANI: Please, you could –

APPANNA: Look, I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand? (Finishes his meal, gets up.) Act 1, pg. no, 254-255

The concept of chastity of a woman is very evidently expressed in the play. Appanna questioned her chastity before everyone in the Village Panchayat of her pregnancy. As soon as Appanna got to know that Rani was pregnant, he said: Aren't you ashamed to admit it, you harlot? I locked you in, and yet you managed to find a lover! Tell me who it is. Who did you go to with your sari off? .... Act 2, pg.no, 284

... I'll go to the Village Elders. If they don't throw that child into boiling oil and you along with it, my name is not Appanna. Act 2, pg. no 285

Though Appanna is okay with cheating on Rani from day one of their relationship, spending all his time with the concubine, he expects his wife to be very loyal and chaste to him. When the truth that she is pregnant is disclosed to him, he wants to punish her and abuse her. Here, the typical patriarchal domination over the woman can be found. The society that knew about the extramarital affairs of Appanna never questioned his behaviour but questioned innocent Rani. Karnad has also brought about the Indianness with the use of the supernatural elements. This can be seen when Rani is considered the Goddess after the snake ordeal by the villagers including her husband Appanna.

यत् कृतं स्याच्छुभं कर्म पापं वा यदि वाश्रुते।

तस्माच्छुभानि कर्माणि कुर्याद् वा बुदधिकाभिः॥

Meaning that whatever the karma (good or bad) a person does, they can never avoid its results. Therefore, one has to perform good actions with proper use of his mind and body.

Most of the individuals in India believe that whatever a person does in his life, will come back to him in one or the other way. It is inevitable for anybody to escape it. The Indians especially, carry the philosophy of karma while they perform any activity. It can be seen that the elders encourage the younger generation to perform good deeds and be kind to the other person for the same karma comes back when the person is in need. Likewise, it is bad karma.

Concerning the play, this can be seen in the prologue where the Man narrates his plights to the audience present. He says, 'I may be dead within the next few hours.'

I am not talking of 'acting' dead. Actually dead. I might die right in front of your eyes. ...

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.'

The other reference is from the main plot where Appanna cheats on Rani by staying with the concubine always, and ends up raising a child that is not born to him. (p.248)

In the Play *Nagamandala*, Karnad experimented with many narrative techniques, using both myth and folklore to engage the audience and enhance the dramatic impact. It's common for Karnad to draw themes from Indian mythology and history while addressing contemporary issues. It's a typical modern play with technical excellence. He skilfully entwines ancient narratives with modern contexts, offering insightful reflections on society and human nature. *Nagamandala* is indeed a striking example of Girish Karnad's technical excellence as a playwright. It remains a testimony to Karnad's enduring legacy as one of India's most influential playwrights.

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