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Dissecting Domination and Exploring Strategic Essentialism: A Critical Study of Girish Karnad's Nagamandala

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Abstract
Girish Karnad's Nagamandala, an illustrious testament to the literary genius of its creator, stands as a monumental work of artistic and thematic profundity. This play, woven in the rich tapestry of folktale tradition, delves into the intricate realms of gender dynamics, power struggles, and the harrowing experiences of Rani, the newlywed wife of Appanna. Rani emerges as the quintessential representation of women ensnared by the iron grip of a heteronormative and patriarchal society. This discourse draws on Michel Foucault's concept of "Panopticism" as delineated in Discipline and Punish and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Subaltern Theory" expounded in Can the Subaltern Speak?, dissect the intricate power structures and amplify the silenced voices within a male-dominated societal framework. As a "sexualized subaltern", Rani becomes the linchpin of the narrative, and the play's climactic resolution serves as a resounding exemplification of strategic essentialism in action. Initially bowing to societal imperatives, Rani masterfully subverts her imposed subjugation to assert her agency, unmasking and deconstructing the system of domination that seeks to confine her.

Keywords: Gender, heteronormative, power, subvert, subaltern.

Introduction and Objectives:
In Nagamaṇḍala (a two- act play) published in 1988, Girish Karnad masterfully critiques the oppressive structures of a patriarchal society by portraying the journey of Rani, whose transformation from an object of desire to a subject with agency subverts traditional notions of femininity. Drawing upon folk legends, the play not only addresses the heteronormative expectations placed upon women but also reclaims female voice and identity, presenting a profound commentary on morality, destiny, and the complexities of female desire. The narrative revolves around Rani, a devoted spouse whose husband neglects her restoring to infidelity. After her marriage, Rani finds herself unable to capture her husband's attention, and he restricts her from leaving the house, effectively imprisoning her within its walls. The concept of Patriarchy parallels the idea of arborescent structures, where women are confined to limited spaces. Acting as a catalyst for the events of the play, Kurudawwa encourages Rani to rekindle her husband's interest using a root and chanting the name of the Naga. The Naga, possessing the ability to shapeshift, takes on the form of Rani's husband, Appanna. In
Appanna's absence, the cobra enters Rani's chamber and engages in intimate moments with her while pretending to be her husband, transforming her silent cries into ecstatic whispers.

This paper seeks to analyse Karnad's Nagamaṇḍala and explore the complexities of a woman's conjugal needs and her deliberate conscious choices regarding identity. Furthermore, it examines Rani's metamorphosis from an object to an autonomous subject, thereby challenging and subverting the conventions of compulsory heterosexuality.

Literature Review:

Girish Karnad's Nagamandala has been studied from various perspectives, especially for its portrayal of gender roles, female agency, and the use of folklore as a tool for subversion. Scholars like Mahato observe that Rani's gradual transformation from a voiceless wife to an empowered figure reflects the broader struggles of women under patriarchal rule. Gupta draws attention to how Karnad blends myth and history to question rigid gender expectations, while Dahiya focuses more on Rani's emotional and psychological journey, shaped by neglect and isolation in her marriage.

Theoretical insights from thinkers like Spivak and Foucault have also shaped the academic understanding of the play. Spivak's idea of the "subaltern" helps to explain Rani's early silence and later assertion of agency through what she calls "strategic essentialism." Foucault's theory of surveillance provides a useful way to read Appanna's control over Rani, especially his use of confinement and constant observation to maintain authority. Meanwhile, Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque can be applied to the snake character, who challenges conventional boundaries and gives Rani a chance to reclaim her identity.

Comparative readings also offer meaningful insights. For instance, Goswami's Sanskaar and Chughtai's Lihaaf feature female characters—Damayanti and Begum Jaan—who, like Rani, are pushed to the margins but find ways to resist and redefine themselves. These stories, though set in different contexts, share a common thread of women rising against societal norms.

Overall, the existing literature recognizes Nagamandala as a layered narrative that not only critiques patriarchal structures but also celebrates the resilience and inner strength of women who find their voices in the most unexpected ways.

Research Methodology:

The research methodology involves a critical reading of the primary text. Secondary materials have also been referred to substantiate the argument. Michel Foucault's "Surveillance" theory and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Subaltern" theory have been employed to critically analyse the primary text. A comparative study has also been utilized, drawing from Indira Goswami's Sanskaar to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the argument.

Discussion:

Set in rural Karnataka, India, Nagamandala centres on the tumultuous relationship between Rani and her indifferent husband, Appanna. Rani's situation was utterly wretched as she endured isolation from her husband within the confines of her own house. The irony lies in her name, Rani, which translates to "Queen" in English is akin to authority. However, she finds herself relegated to the role of a mere maidservant, by her husband, whose name, Appanna, ironically means 'any man'. Like any other young woman, Rani's dream of a happy married life shatters out of Appanna's ignorance. She was just surviving not living. Kurudavva serving as both mentor and confidante to Rani, played a pivotal role by providing guidance and support during her tumultuous marriage, acting as a catalyst for her

transformation. Rani endeavours to recapture her husband's attention by using a root given by Kurudavva. She says, "Take this smaller piece. That should do for a pretty jasmine like you. Take it! Grind it into a nice paste and feed it to your husband and watch the result" (Karnad, 1988). Rani apparently followed the sayings of the old lady and poured the paste into a curry only to turn "blood red…perhaps poison" (Karnad, 1988). Perturbed by terror Rani "runs to the tan ant-hill. Starts pouring the liquid into it" (Karnad, 1988). However, her actions inadvertently enchant the Cobra instead. Rani tries to enter the house, only to get a tight slap from her demonic husband, leaving her collapsed on the floor.

Appanna establishes virtual panopticon for surveillance and control. The constant fear of being under surveillance leads to psychological abuse. Appanna pays no heed to his wife

"goes out, shuts the door, locks it from outside and goes away" (Karnad, 1988). Appanna leaves Rani all alienated and deserted in the barren house every evening and returns only the next morning to have his food. Rani's heart-wrenching confession to Kurudavva who arrives stealthily, "apart from him, you are the first person I have seen since coming here. I'm bored to death. There is no one to talk to!" (Karnad, 1988), highlights her 'Othered' identity. In a bid to assert dominance and vigilance over Rani throughout the night, Appanna procured a dog. "Appanna comes. He has a vicious-looking dog on a chain with him. He brings it to the front yard and ties it to a tree stump there" (Karnad, 1988). However, the demise of the faithful dog occurs tragically, its fate sealed by the venomous bite of the Cobra. Moreover, the introduction of the mongoose onto the stage manoeuvre to thwart the menacing presence of an outer force. This strategic acquisition epitomized his relentless pursuit of control and unwavering surveillance, perpetually tethering Rani to his scrutiny even in his absence.

Rani inevitably falls helplessly into the position of subaltern. The term subaltern according to Antonio Gramsci is a position subordinated by hegemony excluded from any meaningful role in a regime of power. Further complex theoretical debate about this term was the invention of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" She claims in her work, "There is no scope from which the sexed subaltern can speak" (Spivak 307). Subalternity is a position without identity. In Nagamandala, readers encounter Rani lonely and desperately yearning for affection of her husband but unfortunately she has no voice to ask for it.

As the story reaches its climax with Rani's pregnancy, the hypocritical male chauvinist society subjects her to undergo a test of chastity, demanding purity over her overlooking the illicit relationship of Appanna with a concubine. This underscores the pervasive gender bias and glaring inadequacy of justice. Furthermore, Appanna inflicts upon her both physical and verbal torments. He "pushes her to the floor and kicks her" (Karnad, 1988) and hurls derogatory words at her claiming, "you darken my face, you slut! ... you whore" (Karnad, 1988). Moreover, the age-old tradition of assessing purity through measures such as grasping a searing iron rod or immersing one's hand in scalding water was deemed both illogical and barbaric. However, Rani resolves to establish her purity by solemnly swearing upon the regal presence of the Cobra. Rani exclaimed,

Since coming to this village, I have held by this hand, only two…my husband and.. and this 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. The Cobra slides up her shoulder and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head…. The Cobra sways its hood gently for a while, then becomes docile and moves her shoulder like a garland. (Karnad, 1988)

Rani succumbs to nightly encounters with the Naga, deceived by his guise as her husband. The demand for unquestioning submission leaves her in ignorance, unable to discern his true identity. Despite her aversion to physical intimacy, Rani yearns for love and affection, which only the Naga provides through praise, caresses, and arousal, ultimately thawing her frigidity. Appanna and Naga bought were anti-thesis to one another. One, though human, lacks humanity, while the other though not human, and embodies humane traits. He not only shared intimacy with Rani but also bestowed upon her the chance to embrace the cherished roles of wifely devotion, motherhood and womanhood- a privilege denied to her by her actual contemptuous husband. Rani became a victim of 'psychosis', which is the product of disturbance between the self and the exterior world. She was disturbed by the actions and questions him "Scowls in the day. Embraces at night…Why do you play these games? Why do you change like a chameleon from day to night?... Sometimes I feel my head is going to burst!" (Karnad, 1988).

The transition of Rani from a meek, docile and submissive character cocooned in a shell and her audacity to thwart the boundaries laid by the male-centric society and her husband, highlights the germination of a 'new woman'. Rani after being hailed as a goddess incarnate ascended to the position of family matriarch. Unlike, the previous patriarchal figure, Appanna, she refrains from subjugation, displaying instead a compassionate and feminine nature.

Furthermore, the character of Damayanti from Sanskaar, from is invoked to illuminate a comparative parallel, portraying the universal plight of women marginalized irrespective of their caste, creed or race. Pitambar, a childless Shudra Mahajan assisted by the astute priest Krishnakanta annihilating the societal norms satisfies his palette of trapped desire with the village pimp Damayanti. Damayanti, hailing from 'Sandilya gotra' being distressed by destitution eventually to make both ends meet welcomed the offer and got impregnated by a child.

Damayanti surrendered herself to Pitambar just for money. Her downtrodden situation compels her to admit,

My daughters were starving. The Adhikaar's wife used to ask me to do small jobs for her in the kitchen. But now she says that I am not fit to work in her kitchen, that whatever I touch will become impure and contaminated. Before I used to be asked to spin and make the sacred threads, the 'laguns'. But now the Brahmin families of this area will not allow me to make the 'laguns'. They say that I am corrupted. The tenant farmers know that I am all alone with no one to look after me or my interests. So they too have started behaving like monsters. (Goswami, 2015)

Damayanti also has the potential to defy the hegemonic traditional stereotypes of the society. In a traditional Brahmin setting, a Brahmin widow cannot entertain eating fish or meat.

But Damayanti is an exception "She does, and eats, whatever she likes, and does not care for any traditions or rules. She disowns the patriarchal rule" (Goswami, 2015). Apart from having non-vegetarian foods, she moves a step ahead of authorizing prostitution as a survival trade. Pitambar utopian dream of fathering a child is given a blow by his two wives. Pitambar was in seventh heaven when he heard that Damayanti was carries his child in her womb. But the news from Krishnakanta of Damayanti spoiling his seed was a bolt from the blue. The ethnocentrism of Damayanti despite stooping to the stature of a prostitute remained intact. Yes in one way perhaps Damayanti might desire to keep Pitambar's child or might plan of marring him. But the stigma of caste rooted in her psyche never allows her. Moreover, in order to subvert the hierarchy of phallocentric society aborts the embryo developed in her womb.

The concept of carnivalesque proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin in his Rabelais and His World is crucial as a specific means of unmasking the problematic nature of hierarchies and tries to subvert the centrality of the dominant authority or truth rejecting its claim to be natural, central and privileged. In this story Damayanti resurrected her repressed voice against male dominated society by giving wounds to the society. Pitambar commodified her body her womb which is merely looked as child bearing apparatus. But she restore to life from an object to a subject because "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in position of exteriority in relation to power. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" as Michel Foucault says in The History of Sexuality.

Again, the character of Begum Jaan in Ishmat Chughtai's Lihaaf serves to draw a comparative parallel that sheds light on the universal challenges encountered by marginalized women. Begum Jaan, a Muslim woman, at a tender age, gets married to a rich, much-aged

Nawab who was virtuous for not being entertaining "dancing girl or prostitute in his home" (Chughtai, 1990). Post weeding Begum Jaan figured out that she was nothing more than an object in the Nawab's house of luxury who "deposited her in the house with all his other possessions and promptly forget about her" (Chughtai, 1990) and relegated her to margins. She begins to "spend sleepless nights" (Chughtai, 1990) and she also fell prey to 'psychosis'.

Nawab continued his homosexual exploits under the garb of his pedagogical endeavors, and Begum Jaan "consequently became a picture of melancholy and despair" (Chughtai, 1990). She used talisman, black magic and other ways for winning the love of her husband. Having failed in all her attempts, she turned to books but this increased her desolation as the "romantic novels and sentimental poetry proved even more depressing" (Chughtai, 1990) for her. Begum Jaan remained a prized possession in the male chauvinist society. Chugtai's mentions "one cannot draw blood from a stone" (Chughtai, 1990) which denotes the Nawab's disinterest in her. The Nawab "installing her in the house with furniture" (Chughtai, 1990) highlights how the institution of marriage commodified women and reduced her to the object of a mere business transaction, instead of a united and inseparable pair. But with the advent of Rabbo, she refuses to give in to the repressive marriage customs and creates for herself the image of a new woman free from the clutches of patriarchy thereby articulating a new gender consciousness. Her new found lesbian relationship becomes the epicentre of her living giving it a meaning.

Certainly, Rani from Nagamandala, Damayanti from Sanskaar and Begum Jaan from Lihaaf navigates oppressive patriarchal societies where their voices are silenced and desires suppressed. Notwithstanding the disparate settings and cultural milieus, both the tales offer profound elucidations into the arduous trails endured by women within patriarchal frameworks, as well as their ardent odyssey towards the assertion of autonomy and emancipation.

Conclusion:

Nagamandala introduces a compelling character in Rani, who boldly challenges the heteronormative framework of relationships and embraces her own jouisaance. Confronted with stigmatization, double marginalization, and imposed debility, she navigates the complexities of femininity with remarkable resilience. Through her acts of transgression and defiance against patriarchal oppressors, Rani asserts her selfhood and carves out her identity. This paper emphasizes the necessity for equality between men and women, advocating for a society liberated from exploitation, injustice, oppression, and the dominance of any one gender. The concepts of masculinity and femininity, male and female, exist solely within the

confines of the heterosexual matrix—terms that are naturalized to obscure and protect the status quo from radical critique. Men and women are not opposing forces; rather, they complement one another. Rani's journey disrupts the repressive expression of sexuality, which has long been constrained by power dynamics.

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