

Redeeming the Feminine: Myth, Memory and the Politics of Identity in Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala*

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Abstract:

Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* explores the dynamic interaction of myth, memory, and identity to highlight women's agency within a patriarchal cultural context. The play uses the serpent myth from Kannada folklore, turning it into a powerful story where Rani, the silenced wife, gains new legitimacy and authority through mythic intervention. Here, memory works on two levels: as collective memory, kept alive through oral traditions and folk storytelling, and as personal memory, seen in Rani's shift from submission to self-assertion. Through this dual function of memory, identity becomes a negotiated and performative construct rather than a fixed category. By reconstructing oral folklore, Karnad not only preserves cultural memory but also elevates female subjectivity from marginalization. *Naga-Mandala* shows how myth and memory serve as strategies of redemption, allowing a critical re-evaluation of gender identity in Indian society.

Keywords: Girish Karnad; *Naga-Mandala*; Folklore; Memory; Female Identity.

Introduction

Girish Karnad is one of the most celebrated luminaries in contemporary India. He is one of India's pioneering playwrights with proficiency in performing arts. Karnad belongs to the Semi-Marathi and Semi-Kannada Saraswati Community of Dharwar. His plays are predominantly written in Kannada, which have later been translated into English and other native languages. Karnad has translated some of his own plays into English. Karnad's fascination with drama started with his parents' interest in the native drama, which later proved instrumental in shaping him into a successful dramatist. Karnad is among the three great writers of drama in Contemporary Indian Drama, along with Vijay Tendulkar and Badal Sircar. Sircar and Badal explore the issues of the middle class, while Karnad examines Indian myths and legends. Karnad makes use of the myth to reveal the irrationality of life and man's quest to seek everlasting excellence. Karnad's portrayal of female characters is notable, as his female characters are enlightened, emancipated, and ahead of their time.

Karnad has eight plays to his credit: *Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1971), *Anugumalinge* (1977), *Hittina Hunja* (1980), *Naga-Mandala* (1988), *Tale Dande* (1990), and *Agni Mattu Male* (1995). Among Karnad's eight plays, five of his plays- *Hayavadana*, *Naga-Mandala*, *Tale Dande*, *Agni Mattu Male* (*The Fire and the Rain*), and *Tughlaq* have been translated into English.

Myths

Karnad has made extensive use of myths in his plays. In his play, *Yayati* Karnad incorporates the ancient myth from the *Mahabharata* in a modern setting. While in his play *The Fire and the Rain*, he makes use of the myth of Yavakri and Parvasu from the *Mahabharata*. Another play by Karnad, *Hayavadana*, the plot of which comes from *Kathasaritsagara*, an ancient collection of stories in Sanskrit, Karnad has also borrowed it from Thomas Mann's retelling of the story in *The Transposed Heads*. Karnad made use of myths and folklore in his plays to eliminate the social and cultural changes brought by the colonial West. Karnad was exposed to two forms of indigenous theatre at a very young age, which significantly widened his grasp of playwriting and the dynamics of theatre. Karnad learned about the professional actors through the Natak-Companies, which his father introduced him to. Karnad's house help introduced him to the traditional performances like Yakshagana, the form that Karnad will go on to apply in his plays, giving his plays a distinct indigenous trait.

Myth is predominantly a kind of story, with some characters in the form of gods or supernatural beings, wielding more power than a human being. Myths are set in a world above or before ordinary time. The setting of a myth is similar to a folk tale; it has an abstract story pattern. Myths are also stories associated with religious beliefs. The theme of a myth is often the victory of a god or hero, who is incredible or beyond human in nature. In *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms*, Roger Fowler defines myth as

...Myth is a language designed to communicate thought, amenable to a reconverted form of linguistic analysis; the properties common to all myth are not to be sought at the level of content but at the level of structure necessary to all forms of communication. (Fowler 154)

Nand Kumar, in his work *Indian English Drama: A Study in Myths* (2003), unearths the importance of myth in human psychology. According to Kumar,

Myth has always had a very significant position in human psychology and society, from its beginnings as a primitive religious narrative to its recent adaptation as an aid in the exploration of the unconscious mind. The word "myth" has often suffered from a wrong connotation...the psychoanalytical approaches to criticism have made it possible to evaluate the concept of myth afresh. (Kumar 1-2)

The 'Nagamandala' Myth

Karnad's play *Naga-Mandala* is based on two popular Kannada myths. The first is based on 'Nagamandala', an intricate and picturesque variety of serpent worship which is practised in the Northern part of Tulu Nadu. 'Naga' means serpent, and 'mandala' refers to decorative pictorial drawings on the floor. The term 'Naga' has a symbolic meaning connected to the symbol of Kundalini power, cosmic, that coiled and rested within man. 'Nagamandala' inspires seekers to subdue misconduct and adversity by lifting the serpent power of the spine, leading to spiritual enlightenment. 'Nagamandala' portrays the divine union of male and female snakes, performed by two priests: the first priest, 'patri', inhales the areca flower and takes the form of the male snake, and the second priest, 'Naga-Kannika', dances and sings around the intricate serpent design drawn with natural colours on the sacred ground. The main goal of 'Nagamandala' is Naada Mandala, which brings prosperity to the village, town, and nation, seeking eternal blessings for all living beings. Naga-mandala is also a macro-religious ritual which involves the naga, the snake-god of the Hindus, who fulfill wishes for his devotees, especially those related to fertility and progeny. Rani in the play is cured of her frigidity, and Appanna, her husband's cold behaviour, is transformed into affection and contentment for family life. The Naga represents a cultural leader

instrumental in bringing about socio-cultural reform. The story of the snake-lover has become a “vratkadha”, a cobra worship recited during the cobra festival to appease the Naga, seek his protection and boon for progeny. Nagas in the Indian context are symbols of human maleness and strength; they are also personified as handsome men, or half-man and half-snake, with the upper body of a man and the lower half a coiled snake. Karnad’s *Naga-Mandala* probes into male and female progress into selfhood and maturity by breaking the barriers set by the traditional society.

The Myth of Oral Tales

The next myth that Karnad uses in the play has its origin in stories he heard from his professor, A.K. Ramanujan, a poet and academician. Karnad makes use of the oral story where the womenfolk communicate among themselves in the kitchen while feeding their children. The play focuses on four different stories that constitute the play. The first is the frame Story, where an Author is condemned to death, his only crime is the boring nature of his plays that made the audience sleep; he can redeem himself by staying awake for a month. He laments, “I may be dead within the next few hours.” The second Story is through gossip tales, where a group of personified flames gather at night and narrate stories at the same ruined temple. The Author is contemplating his adversity, and the author, alarmed by their sound, hides only to eavesdrop on their stories. The third story is a tale told by one of the flames due to her tardiness. Her tale is about a woman who knows a wonderful story yet refuses to share it; therefore, at an opportune moment, the Story escapes from her mouth and is thus transformed into a young lady, and the song accompanying the Story turns into a beautiful sari. The story personified in the fourth narrative structure relates to Rani, the main protagonist in the play, and her life. In the ‘Author’s Introduction in *Three Plays*, Karnad remarks on the tradition of oral story:

They have an existence of their own, independent of the teller, and yet live only when passed from the possessor of the tale to the listener. 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. (Karnad 22)

The Serpent Myth

The serpent myth in the play symbolizes a regenerative and erotic energy of the natural world, which is often suppressed in the patriarchal tradition. Rani’s role in embracing the serpent as her lover is symbolic, which helps in redeeming her physical and spiritual autonomy. The transformation of the Naga into her husband blurs the distinction between sacred and profane, implying that love and identity surpass social structure. The figure of the Naga in the play acts as an agent of transformation, redeeming Rani from the traditional role of a homemaker imposed by her husband, Appanna. Karnad thus transforms the myth into a critique of the social and moral system that characterizes the female virtue and faithfulness.

Performative Nature of Myth

Karnad’s use of meta-theatrical structure, where story, flame, and the author interact, highlights the performative nature of myth. The Story in the play is personified, emphasizing the continuous cycles of the story that are reborn through oral storytelling. The retelling of each story in the prologue reinterprets the myth to reflect the contemporary realities, especially the shifting dynamics of gender. By constructing myth as a creative and subversive force, Karnad indicates that folklore can be redeemed as a feminist language, a medium through which marginalised women can speak.

Memory: Collective and Personal

In *Naga-Mandala*, memory operates on two interconnected levels: the collective memory of the community and the personal memory of the protagonist Rani. The collective memory is embodied in the oral storytelling tradition- the gathering of the flames, the telling of tales, and the transmission of values across generations. The oral nature of storytelling resists the fixed nature of written stories; it celebrates fluidity, diversity, and alteration. Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory helps elucidate this process: memory, when embedded in ritual or performance, serves as a living conduit between the past and the present. (Assmann 129)

In the opening scene of the prologue, where the flames gather to listen to a new story, the frame of collective memory is established. The Story is personified, reminding the readers and the audience alike that narratives are active participants in shaping identity. The living memory of oral storytelling preserves folklore as an evolving cultural heritage. Karnad excellently preserves the female experience within the collective consciousness by giving voice to the Story.

Memory at the personal level functions as Rani's internal dialogue. Rani's subsequent awakening from a submissive, isolated wife to a woman who gains renewed awareness of her desires and self-worth is mediated through her interactions with the myth. Rani's dreams, conversations, and relationships with the Naga constitute a form of psychological memory that helps in reconstructing her fragmented identity. The blending of dream and myth in Rani's consciousness reveals that memory is not linear but cyclical, reflecting the rhythm of folklore itself. Through remembering and reimagining, Rani transforms her personal trauma into spiritual wholeness.

Identity: Imposed Roles and Self-realization

Identity in *Naga-Mandala* is a site of negotiation between imposed roles and self-realization. The patriarchal order, embodied by Appanna, defines Rani's identity through domesticity, chastity, and silence. She is confined to the boundaries of her home, denied companionship, and rendered invisible. However, through her engagement with myth and memory, Rani redefines her identity beyond societal prescriptions. In Elaine Showalter's 'Towards a Feminist Poetics' (1974), she traces the history of women's literature, suggesting three phases. In this paper, we have the term "feminine," which in Rani's context is equated with her writing, rewriting, and redeeming her identity. Rani, through the snake ordeal, rises above human and is hailed by the people in her village as a goddess. Rani undergoes the snake ordeal to prove her innocence and chastity, which rules in her favour. Rani puts her hand in the ant-hill and says:

Since coming to his village, I have held by this hand, only two...My husband and...this cobra.

Yes, my husband and this king cobra. Except for these two, I have not touched any of the male sex.

If I lie, let the cobra bite me. (Karnad 58)

The snake ordeal redeems Rani's identity. It did not bite her to the utter surprise of all the onlookers in the village; instead, it glided up her shoulders and spread its hood over her head, covering her like an umbrella, swaying its hood gently over her shoulder like a garland. The elders in the village exclaim on this divine being, "She is not a woman. She is a Divine Being!" elevating her to the position of "A Goddess." This sudden transformation of Rani challenges the patriarchal worldview of her husband Appanna, who trembles at her feet, saying, "Forgive me, I am a sinner. I was blind..." The snake ordeal redeems the identity of both Rani and her husband. Rani gains freedom and empowerment while Appanna turns into a devoted and respectful husband.

The Naga also plays a pivotal role in redeeming Rani's identity and placing her on equal footing with men-intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally. He suggests that Rani undertake the snake ordeal when summoned by the elders of the village, reassuring her of regaining her dignity. He says, "When you face the Elders, tell them you will prove your innocence. Say you will undertake the snake-ordeal." The Naga is instrumental in redeeming Rani's identity and restoring her position in the village, while ensuring that she gets a fair trial. The Naga's presence catalyses Rani's transformation. He fulfils the emotional and sensual aspect of her life that Appanna denies.

Appanna in the play exhibits a dual persona, especially through the eyes of Rani. This duality contributes to the plot development. The magical roots in the form of an aphrodisiac drink, curated for Appanna, enter into an ant-hill, which Rani discards owing to her conscience, and develop a new turn in the plot. The drink meant to transform Appanna into a loving and devoted husband, drops on the Naga through the ant-hill. Nagas are known for their shape-shifting attributes; the Naga transforms into Appanna, leading to a prominent change in Appanna's overall being. The sudden change in Appanna perplexes Rani, she says, "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 42). The gentleness and warmth of Naga (Appanna for her) are incomprehensible to her. Simone de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex* asserts "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 283), which deeply resonates with Rani's transformation from object to subject. Rani's selfhood is not inherent but constructed through narrative and performance.

Postcolonial Elements in the Play

From the postcolonial standpoint, Karnad's adaptation of oral myth challenges the colonial privileging of written, "high" culture. By bringing folk narratives into the realm of modern theatre, he validates indigenous epistemologies and gendered voices. The spectators witness the transformation of myth into drama by becoming participants in the act of cultural reinterpretation, which aligns with Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, where the postcolonial text becomes a "third space" of negotiation between tradition and modernity. (Bhabha 37) Karnad's stage becomes a space where old myths are renewed and gender identities are reimagined.

Redemptive Transformation of Rani

At its core, Naga-Mandala is a work of redemption—of reclaiming the divine feminine through mythic renewal. The final image of Rani's deification is not merely symbolic but transformative. In Indian cultural thought, the goddess (Devi) embodies both creation and destruction, nurturer and power. Karnad repositions this archetype within a feminist framework: Rani's deification signifies not submission but empowerment through recognition.

This redemptive trajectory is sustained by the cyclical nature of myth. Rani's journey mirrors the pattern of death and rebirth—the shedding of fear, the embrace of love, and the transcendence of social boundaries. Her story, now absorbed into the collective memory of the flames and storytellers, ensures that her identity is preserved and retold. Through this act, Karnad asserts that myth can serve as a repository of liberation rather than subjugation.

The play's open-ended conclusion resists closure, suggesting that the process of redemption is ongoing. Myth remains a living entity, evolving with each retelling, and the feminine continues to be redefined through its rearticulation in cultural narratives.

Conclusion

Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* reconfigures the relationship between myth, memory, and identity to redeem the feminine from patriarchal erasure. By transforming a traditional folktale into a site of feminist inquiry, Karnad demonstrates that myth can be a tool of empowerment rather than oppression. Memory, in both its collective and personal forms, becomes the bridge between history and selfhood, ensuring that women's voices are inscribed within cultural consciousness.

Rani's journey from confinement to deification encapsulates the play's central vision: the rediscovery of feminine power through mythic remembrance. Her transformation is not only personal but symbolic of a larger cultural awakening—a restoration of balance within the moral and imaginative order. In reimagining folklore through modern dramaturgy, Karnad achieves a rare synthesis of tradition and subversion, spirituality and selfhood. *Naga-Mandala* thus stands as a luminous example of how myth and memory can redeem the feminine, offering both aesthetic beauty and ethical insight into the politics of identity.

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