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Ecocritical Dimensions in Girish Karnad's Naga-Mandala and Yayati

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ABSTRACT

To examine contemporary social issues, Girish Karnad's dramaturgy draws heavily on myth, folklore, and ritual theatre. An ecocritical reading sheds light on Karnad's mythic revisionism, gender politics, and postcolonial interventions, but the plays' intimate relationships between humans and nonhuman entities (snakes, forests, bodies, seasons) shed light on interdependence ethics, vegetal/animal agency, and the ecological effects of power and desire. This paper examines Naga-Mandala (1988) and Yayati (1961) through ecofeminist and ecocritical lenses. It combines contemporary Karnad readings, Indian environmental theory, and classical ecocriticism to argue that both plays imagine moral economies in which human arrogance and gendered violence are inseparable from ruptures in the world beyond human beings. The analysis demonstrates how Karnad's folklore and myths, theatrical staging, and symbolic metamorphosis produce an ethics of relationality that is still relevant to current discussions regarding sustainability, the commons, and the place that humans play in nature.

Keywords: Girish Karnad, Indian theatre, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, myth, folklore, ritual, Naga-Mandala, Yayati, ecological ethics, human-nonhuman relations, metamorphosis.

INTRODUCTION

Girish Karnad (1938-2019) is one of the most famous playwrights, actors and directors of the modern Indian theatre, and he holds an extraordinary place on the border of the literature, folklore, and social thought. Karnad reformulated the modern Indian dramaturgy by uniting the materials of ancient myth and ritual theatre with the aesthetics and contemporary social commentary of modernism. Though his native language was Kannada, his work got global acknowledgment in terms of translation and performance. Instead of being a spectators of cultural artifacts, his plays encourage the audience to see themselves as members of moral and political communities; they wrestle with burning questions, including gender, power, caste, and memory.

The ecocritical inquiry of Karnad oeuvre is also open to sustained inquiry outside the area of the feminist, national and postcolonial identity that has received considerable scholarly attention. His dramaturgy dramatises in some order the confusions between human action and the nonhuman beings, forests, animals, serpents, rivers, and body changes. In this way, he makes a relational ethics that is highly representative of the modern ecological controversy. In its general meaning, ecocriticism involves the study of literature and culture with reference to the green issue. There has been a significant growth in this area in the last thirty years. The earliest ecocritical issues were the representations of nature and the denial of anthropocentrism, which often was associated with Western Romanticism. More recent movements and trends include postcolonial ecocriticism, ecofeminism, material ecocriticism, and

indigenous epistemologies, that are concerned with other paradigms other than Western. When Karnad adapts myth and folklore, he does so by mobilising cultural memory that not only predicts but also complicates the modern ecological thinking when placed within this broadened ecocritical set up.

His productions do not simply give a setting, or figurative expression of the thing of nature; they make rivers, serpents, forests and seasons to be actors in a common moral realm where there is no distinction between human choice and nature action. This ecological imagination is marked out by two plays in specific, his first major compositions, Yayati (1961) and later, a play called Naga-Mandala (1988), based on the Kannada folktales shared with him by A.K. Although both plays differ significantly in terms of tone and dramaturgy, both explore themes of desire, interdependence, metamorphosis and ethical responsibility. The old Mahabharata story of the curse of untimely end of King Yayati is changed in Yayati as an allegory of the intergenerational debt, overly desired, and the overly harmful impacts of unchecked consumption with the environment. The narrative framework of Naga -Mandala is built around the folktale of an abandoned wife, her experience with a serpent, and the transformative effect of narration, which allows focusing on the idea of human -animal intimacy, the vegetal mediation (through roots, wells, and lamps), and the permeable line between the human society and the nonhuman world.

It is observed in general that these plays prompt audiences to understand ecological violence, whether it is exploitative desire or patriarchal oppression, in its inseparability with disturbances in the natural and nonhuman relationships. As the ecocritical theory says, Karnad theatre portrays what material ecocritics identify as storied matter, a world where nonhuman agency is endowed with meaning to nonhuman beings. To point out but one example, the snake in Naga-Mandala is not just a metaphor; it is a living being that betrays human ideas of love, faithfulness, and truth. The roots of the medicinal plant that have been used to make a love potion depict that plants may be useful and harmful at the same time. The well, which is at the middle of the staging of the play, is not just a utilitarian object, but a place where life and death, desire and danger, purity and pollution collide. Likewise, interchange of age between father and son in the Yayati plays dramatises ecological temporality and also mythical temporality the way in which contemporary action to the future mortgages it, and the connection of human life to a larger cycle of debt among generations and the world.

The critical analysis of these plays, read in an ecocritical way, is not based on human struggles alone, but on extensive networks of interrelationships, which enlighten on the interconnectedness of the human and the nonhuman. The ecological imagination of Karnad is based on the Indian cultural traditions. Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain cosmologies have a doctrine of interconnectedness of all living beings (sarva-bhuta-hita, or the welfare of all beings, in Sanskrit). Classical Indian literature often gives animals, rivers, and forests moral and emotional depth, as seen, among others, in Rigvedic hymns and, in Abhijnanakutalam of Klidsa. Stories of serpent gods (nāgas), protector spirits and sacred groves whose violation causes ill fortune are also a common folklore motif. Instead of recreating an authentic past, Karnad reusing these narrative resources in order to put mythical and oral recollections into the conversation with modern anxieties of alienation, exploitation, and violence. In this regard, his dramaturgy is consistent with modern Indian environmental philosophy, including the work of Vandana Shiva, who critiques development and the ecofeminist actions, including the Chipko movement, which highlight the mutual dependency between the destruction of the environment and gendered oppression.

Specifically, ecofeminism gives Naga-Mandala its special echo. According to postulations put forward by ecofeminist scholars, patriarchal structures often reflect the systems that dominate and exploit nature, and oppress women. The imposed isolation of the family and the subsequent creative break-out that Rani

did with the help of the serpent symbolize that the inability of women to exercise agency is inseparably connected with their impotence. This radical alterity and transformative intimacy of the serpent surpasses the authority of patriarchy providing a precarious, though tentative, form of healing. The story of Rani ends on a note of environmental ethic stillness that implies a new direction of the community thought beyond the borders of humanity; at the denouement of the play she is equated and re-embedded in a patriarchate society. Similarly, desire as restructured by Yayati links the male hubris and violence of patriarchy to unsustainable consumption patterns and places gendered oppression, as exemplified by the use of Sharmishtha and Devayani, in a expanded field of relation of ecological surplus. In turn, the works of Girish Karnad are organic archives of ecological imagination and historical records of the Indian theatre of the post-independent period.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ECOCRITICISM, ECOFEMINISM, AND INDIAN PERSPECTIVES

As part of ecological discourse, ecocriticism provides reading tools by focusing on representations of nature, nonhuman agency, and how narratives shape environmental ethics (Glotfelty; Buell). Postcolonial contexts have been the focus of recent ecocritical research, which has looked at how environmental degradation intersects with empire, development, and dispossession histories. In addition, feminist ecocriticism maintains that gendered power structures regulate human interactions with other species (Plumwood). Despite its reliance on Western foundational texts, Indian ecocriticism places an emphasis on indigenous cosmologies, folk practices, and long-standing ethical traditions that envision a reciprocal relationship between humans and nature (reviewed in Indian ecocriticism historiographies). Readings that place Karnad's use of local folktale material in the context of global ecocritical debates are made possible by combining these approaches.

Key concepts used in the paper:

- **Nonhuman agency** — recognition that animals, plants, and landscapes can act as agents within narrative worlds, prompting ethical response.
- **Relational ethics** — moral responsibilities arising from interdependence rather than from human-centered dominion.
- **Ecofeminist critique** — analysis of how patriarchal domination of women parallels domination of nature; important for reading Karnad’s gendered plots.
- **Indian ecologies** — the way Indian folklore and ritual treat nonhuman beings as persons or relatives, a framework Karnad borrows and reshapes.

KARNAD’S SOURCES, FORM, AND THE THEATRE OF THE NONHUMAN

It's been widely acknowledged that Girish Karnad's theater brilliantly tackles the moral and political dilemmas of contemporary life while drawing from India's rich tapestry of myth, folklore, and oral traditions. One of the standout features of his work is how he weaves in sources and styles that are deeply embedded in non-Western storytelling, especially folk performances and ritual theater. This approach allows Karnad to bridge time and culture, crafting a stage where human and nonhuman elements—like animals, plants, natural forces, and mythical transformations—are intricately connected. Through the lens of ecocriticism, we can see how Karnad's artistic choices—like incorporating folk narratives, blending myth with modernity, and using dramaturgical structures that blur the lines between humans and nonhumans—create what can be called a "theater of the nonhuman," showcasing the relationships

among different species, forms, and elements. When it comes to oral history and folklore, Karnad's play Naga-Mandala (1988) serves as a prime example of his use of folk sources. The play is clearly inspired by two Kannada folktales that Karnad collected and retold. The influence of K. Ramanujan's exploration of India's vast oral and narrative traditions can be seen in the works of many contemporary Indian writers. By opting for oral narratives instead of traditional texts, Karnad suggests a cultural archive that is fluid, dynamic, and communal, rather than rigid and authoritative. Themes of transformation, encounters with serpents, and the mysterious power of nature are central to these folktales. They highlight the play's framing device, which underscores the flow of stories, voices, and lives. In the prologue, flames, tales, and a sutradhra—a folk theater narrator or stage manager—come together to enact the storytelling process, placing the act of narration within a participatory performance context.

NAGA-MANDALA: SNAKE, HOUSE, AND THE ECOLOGY OF HOUSEHOLDS

The Origins and Setting of Folktales The Naga-Mandala by Girish Karnad beautifully captures the essence of oral storytelling traditions, especially the folk tales he absorbed from the renowned scholar and poet A. K. Ramanujan. The play's atmosphere, its structural logic, and the way it's performed are all deeply rooted in these oral traditions, shaping not just the storyline but the entire experience. Karnad didn't just adapt a folktale into a drama; he also managed to keep the spirit of the oral world alive by weaving in elements like women's gossip, kitchen songs, and the expressive gestures of everyday rituals. In Indian folklore, it's often grandmothers and mothers who pass down cultural wisdom through stories, lullabies, and rituals, making them the heart of oral storytelling. By focusing on themes like knowledge, survival, and the subtle resistance against a patriarchal system that often silences women, Karnad elevates women's voices as vital sources of understanding. The storytelling in the play unfolds in warm, communal tones, with Rani's story shaped by the brief songs of women, whispers about marriage, and the ritualistic performances that happen in the kitchen. These everyday actions, often overlooked, create a rich dramaturgical world that highlights the significance of domestic life. The snake, or nga, transcends the role of just a monster or trickster in folklore. It embodies a complex being whose desires, care, and violence challenge notions of fidelity, marriage, and sexuality. By reimagining the tale with music, a chorus, and symbolic props, Karnad infuses the emotional depth of oral traditions into live theater, reviving the story's gendered and ecological themes.

The Snake as a Subject More Than Human Within an ecocritical lens, the nga emerges as a being with agency and emotional depth, rather than just a metaphor or narrative tool. The snake's true power lies in its ability to both engage with and question societal norms.

YAYATI: DESIRE, EXCHANGE, AND THE NATURAL ECONOMY OF AGE

In the heart of Girish Karnad's Yayati lies a lesser-known yet morally rich scene from the Mahabharata. Here, King Yayati convinces his son Puru to trade his youth for old age, driven by a curse from his father-in-law, Sukracharya, that dooms him to die young. While this myth has often been seen as a moral lesson about the perils of unchecked desire and the weight of responsibility, Karnad's version digs deeper into themes of power, exploitation, and the burdens passed down through generations. When we look at it through an ecocritical lens, these themes stretch beyond family dynamics and touch on broader ecological concerns. The play cleverly uses aging and rejuvenation as metaphors for ecological cycles, highlighting the king's desire to rejuvenate himself by draining the energy from another. This mirrors the way humans often exploit the natural world. In this context, youth symbolizes not just vitality but

also the potential for rebirth and continuity. Yayati embodies a self-centered mindset, viewing his son's life force as an endless resource for his own enjoyment. This curse serves as a stark reminder that energy is finite, caught in cycles of use, depletion, and renewal. Ignoring these natural limits can lead to self-destruction.

The idea of youth as a resource for the future? A Critique The play's main premise—that youth can be bartered for wealth—also critiques the modern tendency to commodify everything. In Karnad's retelling, Yayati sees his son's vitality as a renewable and tradable asset, reflecting a troubling perspective on how we value life and energy in today's world.

COMPARATIVE READINGS: METAMORPHOSIS, AGENCY, AND GENDERED ECOLOGIES

Taken together, the plays, both having the same title, are thematically consistent, and the playwrights are revealing hidden thematic truths, the same way as the playwrights of Yayati and Naga-Mandala do. This observation prefigures an ecological ethic that is deeply ingrained in cultural myth and folklore and at the same time echoes with modern-day environmental discourse. The two plays are framed by metamorphoses: in Naga-Mandala, the nga ability to take a human form erases the boundaries of the animal and human worlds, and in Yayati, the transfer of old age to youth that takes place between a father and a son is the main narrative change to transform the physical and time-based aspects of age and life. The radical dramaturgical role of these metamorphoses is to insist on that life is as changeable, relational and porous between species and generations, and thus destabilizes the anthropocentric myth of human distinctiveness and autonomy.

According to ecocritical perspective, the nonhuman characters in the plays by Karnad are a mirror to human societies, which refract and reflect the moral failures. The nga in Nagamandala symbolizes a kind of attentive care and affection that can only be delivered by the human character Appanna and as such, a moral reaction to the neglect of patriarchy. Similarly, the forest and austenite characters in the story of Yayati can be seen as environmental rebuke of the unsustainable extravagance of the king and remind the viewers of the law of limits that is enshrined in both the natural and cultural worlds. With the help of these symbolic characters, Karnad demonstrates that the human characters are not judged only on the basis of inner morality or social conventions but on the basis of the greater morality of their involvement in the lives of nonhumanity.

The strongest feature of both plays is the way it is demonstrated how patriarchal consumerism and dominance not only influences women and their dependents but the ecological commons. The availability of sonhood youth in Yayati is a literal allegory of the extraction of resources- extractive economies take forests, soils, and waters to make the chosen group of people happy, and thus reflect the assumption that human vitality can be endless to an infinite resource pool. Similarly, the lack of recognition of relationality with nonhuman neighbours in the forced subordination of Rani in a loveless marriage in Naga-Mandala depicts the unwillingness of the patriarchal culture to accept relationality with such nonhumans. It is only through her connection to the snake that Rani gains a more complete sense of vitality and agency and as such highlights the intersection that is heightened by the feminist ecoethics.

In the dramatic corpus of Karnad the bodies of the women are often the object of oppression and the ecological mediation. On the one hand, the imprisonment, distrust and forced loyalty of Rani reveal the manner in which women are treated as property that can be owned, owned and controlled by patriarchal structures. Conversely, her experience with the serpent indicates another moral yet relationship based on

care, reciprocity and receptiveness to the beyond-human and thus her erotic and emotional agency is reinstated. On the contrary, Yayati depicts sons as actual properties whose bodies are confiscated to gratify the unquenchable life-eating appetite of the father. This is an instrumentalization of gender and generation whereby the younger generation funds patriarchal lust, just like the ecological futures are sacrificed to the current consumption.

These comparative analyses explain why Karnad is right in his insight that social dominance and environmental dominance are structurally co-implicated. Feminist exploitation of women and ecologism exploitation of nature are parallel forces of power since anthropocentrism and patriarchy support each other. By enacting the brutality of regimes that dehumanize and dehumanize both human and nonhuman to utilitarian purposes, Karnad makes the female and young male bodies the allegorical location of extraction. His dramaturgy, therefore, represents a powerful ecofeminist ethical understanding: liberation, survival, and justice can not be viewed separately on human and environmental scales.

THEATRICAL TECHNIQUES AND ECO-PERCEPTION

Even though these two plays explore similar themes that highlight a shared ethical commitment to the environment, Karnad's unique stagecraft brings this ethic to life in a way that audiences can truly feel. His use of folk theater techniques blurs the boundaries between performer and audience, stage and ritual, story and participation, creating a rich tapestry of experience. Rather than just "representing" ecological ideas, these methods invite theatergoers to see the world through a fresh lens, enhancing their ecological awareness through sensory and performative experiences. For instance, in Naga-Mandala, the incorporation of the chorus, ritual songs, and oral traditions exemplifies this ecological approach to drama. The wandering flames in the prologue and the choral voices that ground the narrative create a shared space where storytelling becomes a communal act, reminiscent of ritual practices that nurture care and memory. Instead of merely being static props, elements like the well, serpent, and roots are presented as thresholds for encounters. These objects resonate with the audience, reminding them of how domestic life is deeply connected to nonhuman beings. This connection disrupts the spectators' sense of detachment, inviting them into a tangible realization that theater itself reflects the intricate web of ecological interdependence.

Similarly, in Yayati, the sutradhāra acts as a ritual guide, reminding the audience that what may seem like myth is also a performance of memory—a cultural act of collective remembrance. The ascetic figures in the forest scenes, contrasting sharply with the king's indulgence, highlight a ritualistic simplicity that emphasizes restraint and reciprocity. Together, the sutradhāra and the ascetics reflect oral traditions that carry ecological wisdom, passing down ethical principles about limits and balance. Karnad skillfully underscores the interplay between ecological education and theater through his sensory directions.

INDIAN ECOCRITICISM, FOLK KNOWLEDGE, AND KARNAD'S RELEVANCE

Karnad reflects the paths of Indian ecocriticism, which often emphasized the role of folk practices and indigenous systems of ecological knowledge in ensuring ecological balance, extensively in his ecological theatre. Ecological thinking in India has often been extensive and is based on livelihoods, commons, and everyday practices that keep people alive in opposition to some traditions of Western ecocriticism that are fixated on the notions of wilderness or nature writing. Activists and environmental historians use the term liability environmentalism today to refer to the processes by which communities conserve

biodiversity not based on abstract ecological principles but on ritual taboos, agricultural practices and communal activities embedded in the struggle to survive. These folk ecologies are also accurately re-created and dramatized in Karnad plays. The veneration of serpents and household cult in Naga-Mandala reminiscences the tradition where reverence to serpents and sacred groves by communities implies an ecological balance especially in terms of water resources and fertility. The forest as an sphere of restraint and asceticism in the book Yayati brings to mind a cultural vocabulary, where austerity and humility carry the ecological knowledge. By performing these aspects on the contemporary stage, Karnad is conveying indigenous eco-ethical logics to the present audiences, whether they practice them or not. His dramaturgy acts as a cultural intrusion that indicates to the urban, modern audience that sustainability is not a foreign notion, but one that is rooted in indigenous thinking. This is of major importance in terms of cultural mediation. Even though Karnad did not work directly with the Chipko movement, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, or ecofeminism by Vandana Shiva, his theatre relates to their interests by locating ecological issues in the context of everyday ethical life. His plays are thought provoking to imagination, cultural memory, and moral worldview as opposed to direct activism. They uncover how folk and mythical ethics of kinship with nonhumans are actually encoded in myth and folklore, and needed to be re-evaluated as a source of ecological wisdom and not a superstition. I am speaking specifically of the combination of folkloric and mythical resources with modern sensibilities, which is what makes the theatre of Karnad relevant nowadays. His dramaturgy acts as an ethical pedagogy of an age that is marked by ecological disasters like climate change, degradation of biodiversity and uncontrolled mining. Karnad offers an anthology of other imaginaries to anthropocentric modernity through the application of ecological thinking within theatrical experiences. His plays are indicative that sustainability needs to be re-established in cultural memory, ritual activities, and ecological imagination, and not exclusively designed and developed by technology or policy. Practically, Karnad is an example of how art contributes to ecological ethics: re-forming perceptions and reconnecting the sensibilities of relations, instead of providing scientific answers. Theatre becomes ecological ritual with the tragic desire of eternal youth in the yearning of *Yayati* as well as the rejuvenation of agency of a woman, and cooperation of a serpent of the partnership with a serpent called Rani, and the song and chorus that recalls the witnessing of the community. It teaches the audience that, the coercion of a female and the coercion of nature are expressions of the same desire and that the only way to be cured is to assert relationality, not coercion. A strong ecological vision of theatre is created by an ecocritical reading of both texts, coupled with Indian ecological traditions of thought, in the case of both documents, *Yayati* and Naga-Mandala. Nonhuman agents are highlighted as ethical reflections, and patriarchal power is placed in extractive logics, both dramatize metamorphosis to disrupt the human-related beliefs. These morals are additionally actualized by embodied perception through the methods of stage used by Karnad, and his plays are based on practices of sustainability in the indigenous practices. Both these plays illustrate that the linkage between ecological crisis and social and gendered domination on the one hand and cultural memory as a means to change it on the other hand are interconnected. With the growing urgency of the environmental problem, the dramaturgy of Karnad obtains some new urgency: basing his creations on the narrative and ritual practices of India, his theatre finds the visions of alternative morality and does not offer any remedies of the policy.

CONCLUSION

When read ecocritically, Girish Karnad's Naga-Mandala and Yayati reveal a dramaturgy dedicated to

investigating interdependence across human and nonhuman boundaries. These plays demonstrate an ethical imagination that rejects simple human mastery over nature through metamorphosis, ritual staging, and the imaginative recuperation of folk ecological knowledge. They insist that social injustices like patriarchy, youth commodification, and women's silence are linked to ruptures in communities' relationships with nonhumans. Karnad's plays offer contemporary audiences facing an ecological crisis more than cultural nostalgia: they dramatize relational scenes from which new ethical practices can be practiced.

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