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Women, Marriage and Agency: A Socio-Cultural Study of Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala*

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Abstract

This study is a socio-cultural analysis of Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala*, directing its attention to the interconnection between identity, marriage, fidelity and female agency. One of India's most renowned dramatists, Karnad challenges modern socio-economic realities by reimagining myth, folklore, and oral traditions. Set in rural South India, *Nagamandala* sheds light on the struggles of women who grapple with patriarchal structures, but still seek to maintain a sense of agency. Along with other important female characters, Rani's journey is highlighted in the play to show bravery, resiliency, and the pursuit of selfhood in the face of constrictive social norms. This exploration of the myth and social criticism within the narrative brings an awareness to how Karnad creates a lively representation of women found between oppression and dynamism. The article seeks the socio-cultural landscape of *Nagamandala* by deconstructing the complexities present in gender dynamics within Indian society. It presents a complex reading that differs from solely folkloric or psychological readings by fusing textual analysis with theoretical ideas from Simone de Beauvoir, Uma Chakravarti, and modern critics.

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Women have never had a predefined position in Indian society; their roles have changed over the ages under multiple social, economic, religious and political influences. As Uma Chakravarti writes, "Women's position is never determined in isolation, but through the interlocking structures of caste, class, and patriarchy that situate them differently within the social order" (Chakravarti 27). These positions have been influenced by complex factors including caste, religion, education, class and geography. Indian women's experiences can be complex, multifaceted, and frequently nested within one another, making them difficult to express as a single category. The historical and cultural particularities that each environment has been entrenched in have had a profound impact on women's daily reality. This article attempts to address two connected questions: how does Karnad subvert myth and folklore to critique patriarchal structures? And to what extent does *Nagamandala* permit its female protagonist not only symbolic elevation but meaningful agency also? Despite systemic hurdles, Indian women have remained strong-willed, upending stereotypes and playing a pivotal role in social, political and economic transformation. At this time, the resonance for gender equality, demand for acknowledgment of women's rights and risk to patriarchal constructions are mainstreaming the status and agency of women from across the Indian panorama.

In Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala*, the character of Rani, the play's protagonist appears to embody these tensions. As the beloved and the only daughter in her natal household, she is endearingly referred to as 'Rani,' a name that suggests regal dignity and beauty fit for royalty. Karnad bolsters this identity, referring to her as the Queen of the whole wide world. Queen of the long tresses" (Karnad, 253). But this aura of privilege is subverted by her entry into marital life. In her husband's home, Rani is relegated to servitude and cruelty while Appanna, her husband, has an affair with some other woman. Rani's life is then reframed by silence and suffering, her husband's authoritarian dominance gradually stripping away her sense of self. Her retreat into fantasies, daydreams and self-connections is a symptom of both her isolation and her quest for release from the terror of domestic tyranny.

At first, Rani comes to embody the stereotypical submissive Indian wife: her identity is limited to the domestic space. In this regard, she mirrors Simone de Beauvoir's definition of woman as "the second sex," limited to roles prescribed for her by patriarchal society. As De Beauvoir argues, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 295). Her suffering highlights the larger status of Indian women, whose feelings and needs are often dismissed by men. Rani's silence, then; is not only personal but a figure for the subaltern woman's predicament more widely, resonating with Spivak's question: "Can the subaltern speak?" Her dulled voice appears at first to corroborate her impotence within male-dominated establishments. Rani's lack of agency within her marriage; and the systematic denial of her consent, exposes this cycle of gender inequity that is entrenched in all corners of social life. But Rani's course of life is also a vital transition. She slowly realises that the only way to be

liberated from patriarchal oppression is to reclaim her identity. Karnad, in foregrounding this realization, seems determined to subvert conventional standards and depict a woman's will that she may take back control. In an intriguing touch, the play invokes the supernatural: Naga, a mythical serpent who becomes Rani's fiery lover. In sharp contrast to her husband's disregard, Rani finds contentment and validation in this partnership. Karnad challenges the institution of marriage and redefines female agency by de-mythicizing marital love and validating the transitions between human and supernatural. Through Rani's experience, he grounds the problem of female identity at the center of the plot and, in doing so, critically engages with contemporary dilemmas confronting women today. But the seeming 'happy ending' raises disturbing questions. Is Rani's transformation into a goddess a liberation for her as a woman, or does it make her an ideal that is unreachable and outside the realm of the typical female experience? The play's feminine potential is complicated by this ambivalence. Intricately staging Rani's predicament, Karnad emphasises her progressive empowerment to subvert and reinterpret patriarchal society's moral standards.

Rani's yearnings are beyond the reach of simple passive endurance, or even abstract liberation; she seeks companionship, touch and satisfaction that escape the rigid structure of her marriage. Her suppressed desires, as much physical as emotional, need release. Malati Adiga notes, "Karnad projects woman not only as a sufferer of tradition but also as a figure of desire whose body and mind yearn for fulfillment" (Adiga 150). Set on fulfilling these cravings, she seeks the guidance of Kurudavva, an old woman whose influence is pivotal in changing Rani's life. Kurudavva gives her a root that is magic, a strong love potion, and once applied captures the unending loyalty of the King Cobra Naga. But rather than being mere fantasy, this potion represents women's subversive strategies of survival in malignant landscapes. Through Naga's love, Rani finds not only sexual gratification but also safety, recognition and self-worth denied to her so far.

Naga's arrival into Rani's life disrupts conventional traditions. In nocturnal visits disguised in the form of Appanna, Naga offers Rani respite from her husband's brutality and conjures an evanescent sphere of emotional and physical intimacy for her. Around him, Rani changes the way she sees herself; no longer a muted and objectified spouse, she becomes a subject in life who knows that she can impose her will. Naga does fill in for her with love, affection, tenderness and even the promise of motherhood; all facets Appanna had denied. It is visible that in the arms of Naga, she finds solace: "Let it. I don't feel afraid any more, with you beside me" (Karnad, p. 273). It not only announces Naga's liberation from the obfuscation she has imposed upon him but also postulates her connection to him in so much as it is rooted in a deep emotional security that cannot readily be broken when she forms an attachment even if he remains a figment of herself. The symbolic force of the aphrodisiac root plays an essential role in the development of the play. After consumption, the King Cobra takes the shape of Appanna, granting him party in a form dictated by the magical compulsion to provide companionship and security. But Naga's function goes beyond gratifying Rani's needs; he becomes a sacrificial figure, doomed to give up his life for the sake of his beloved. His nightly

visits, after Appanna has left for the day, fill Rani's lonely chamber with intimacy and dialogue. Important to note, Naga gives up to her husband the decision to choose their union's terms and says, "No, let's say, the husband decides on the day visits. And the wife decides on the night visits. So, I won't come at night if you don't want me to" (Karnad, p. 272). This expression of consent serves as a foil to Appanna's tyrannical domination, making Naga something of an ironically human figure who invokes a more egalitarian sense in marriage relations despite his mythical presence. However, this is not without rupture in the illusion. Rani receives disturbing clues about Naga's true self, starting with the frightening reflection in the mirror: "she looks at him in the mirror. Screams in fright...She is trembling" (Karnad, p. 272). As she bemoans, "When I looked in the mirror, I saw there—where you were sitting—instead of you, I saw a—(Mimes a cobra hood with her fingers.)—sitting there" (Karnad, p. 273). The uncanny is reinforced still when she notices the coldness of his blood, exclaiming, ", "Your blood is so cold. It's the way you wander about day and night, heedless of wind and rain" (Karnad, p. 273). In the light of these facts, Rani's refusal to face reality reveals not only her fragility but also her instinct to hold on to the haven they represent; a reaction steeped in a ceremonial scene where she asks Naga one question: "Since I looked into the mirror, I seem to be incapable of thinking of anything else. Father says: 'If a bird so much as looks at a cobra'" (Karnad, p. 273), captures the paradox of her situation: knowledge of deception even as one cannot or will not walk away from its comfort. Through this intricate interplay of desire, dishonesty, and denial, Karnad examines the fragile boundaries between perception and reality, situating Rani's experience within a larger discussion about female identity and agency. Even at the cost of horrible sacrifice, her relationship with Naga, although being mythologised, provides a forum for the expression of suppressed impulses, the momentary suspension of patriarchal dominance, and the possibility of female self-realization.

The only sounds in this clandestine entrance are growling dogs, fighting dogs, and the hissing of a snake: Naga slips into Rani's house unnoticed under the cover of night. The sound alone, juxtaposed with the fact that blood splatters his face and shoulders as well, is one of the strongest clues to his true reptilian nature. Yet Rani is too unwilling to confront or interrogate these signs. Her perceptive awareness tends to come out in things like her exclamation, "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, p. 271). Rani's gesture is thus ambiguous, as Pranav Joshipura points out: her "gesture is questionable because there are sufficient reasons to believe that Naga is not Appanna" (Joshipura, p. 259). In the face of conclusive evidence, she refuses to disentangle Naga from Appanna, however. Karnad does this to highlight her preference for emotional and sexual gratification instead of epistemic violence with truth. Naga, in turn, takes on the role of helping liberate her. His eagerness to negotiate toward desire is reflected in his comment, "the husband decides on the day visits. And the wife decides on the night visits" (Karnad, p. 272). As Moutushi Chakravartee wisely puts it, "Her adultery seems the proper lesson for her adulterous husband" (Chakravartee, p. 185). This lens places Rani's act of breaking faith within

an interpretive frame that contextualizes her as both as a personal insurrectionist and a symbol to subvert patriarchal codes of fidelity.

Karnad employs the narrative strategy of magical realism to give shape to this paradox. According to Aparna Dharwadker, "Karnad uses myth and folklore not as static cultural remnants but as dynamic frameworks through which modern social tensions can be re-imagined" (Dharwadker 2005, p. 214). A hybridised zone of female psychological freedom is created through the interaction of the fantastic, represented by Naga's nightly visitation, and the real, represented by Appanna's oppressive domesticity. Rani is able to break free from the tight constraints of patriarchy thanks to this semi-reality, which transforms her alleged "adultery" into a symbolic act of resistance. By submitting to Naga, she not only engages with her repressed sexuality but also takes the reins; she recasts herself as a subject who is capable of desire and choice. According to Abhinandan Malas, "Through Rani, Karnad challenges the patriarchal constructs of chastity and ideal womanhood that women are made to follow only to serve the purpose of the male" (*The Criterion*). When Appanna turns on Rani, accusing her of infidelity, it is the touchy question of chastity that becomes central. His invective; "...you whore! All right then, I'll show you. 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" (Karnad, p. 285), captures the patriarchal obsession with female purity at play while conveniently erasing his own adulterous behavior in one fell swoop. Naga on the other hand has become a savior to Rani and her unborn baby. He suggests that she should go through the snake ordeal, which harks back to Sita's trial by fire (*Agnipariksha*) in the *Ramayana*. The parallel is intentional: just as Sita has to prove her chastity, so does Rani, albeit in a very different cultural context. Naga carefully instructs Rani: "There is an enormous ant-hill under the banyan tree. Almost like a mountain. A King Cobra lives in it. Say you will put your hand into the ant-hill". To her anxious query; "Won't the Cobra bite me the moment I touch it?", he responds reassuringly, "No, it won't bite. Only, you must tell the truth". His final words bolster her courage: "All will be well, Rani. Don't worry. Your husband will become your slave tomorrow. You will get all you have ever wanted" (Karnad, p. 286-87). This counsel prepares her for a trial that is simultaneously an ordeal of fidelity and a theatrical performance of resilience.

The following day, Rani confronts the ordeal before the gathered village elders and an assembled crowd. Elder III remarks, "But you insist on swearing by the King Cobra. The news has spread and, as you can see, attracted large crowds" (Karnad, p. 288). Her decision to risk the ordeal transforms her into a spectacle of courage, a heroine whose defiance unsettles patriarchal authority. Inserting her hand into the anthill, she delivers her oath:

> Since coming to this village, I have held by this hand, only two...My husband and... And this Cobra...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 (Karnad, p. 292).

Rani is exalted to celestial status, in contrast to Sita, who is still denied honour and respect following her trial. Unfurling its hood over her like an auspicious canopy, the King Cobra

seems as a protector rather than a punishing force. The people and elders praise the remarkable occurrence:

- Elder I: "A miracle! A miracle!"
- Elder II: "She is not a woman. She is a Divine Being!"
- Elder III: "Indeed, a Goddess!" (Karnad, p. 292).

The symbolic transformation is complete when Elder I declares to Appanna:

> Appanna, your wife is not an ordinary woman. She is a goddess incarnate. Don't grieve that you judge her wrongly and treated her badly. That is how goddesses reveal themselves to the world. You were the chosen instrument for the revelation of her divinity. (Karnad, p. 293)

So, unlike the *Ramayana*, in which Sita's ordeal ratifies patriarchal notions of wifely devotion, Karnad reframes the trial, flipping gender hierarchies. Not the victim of her circumstances, Rani is worshipped rather than defeated, elevated beyond the bounds of wifehood up into divinity itself. This radical transcendence speaks to the patriarchal constraints on marriage, fidelity and chastity that Karnad is critiquing, while recovering female agency and reconfiguring womanhood as a force of strength and empowerment. *Nagamandala* comes up with symbols all of which are pulled by the strings of truth and following the torment, there is a decisive muddle in power. Even the formerly all-powerful Appanna is forced to bow at Rani's feet, confessing his sin and ignorance with: "Forgive me. I am a sinner. I was blind" (Karnad, p. 293). His anguished cry, "What am I to do? Is the whole world against me? Have I sinned so much that even Nature should laugh at me?" (Karnad, p. 294), an expression of deep humiliation and disorientation when the patriarch who previously actualizes authority has lost moral legitimacy. In this way, Karnad dramatizes Appanna's falling fortune so that it serves to elucidate the changing axis of power within the conjugal relationship. Central to this transformation is Rani's desire for more than the rigid parameters of matrimony. It is through Naga, who accepts his fate and dies in the process of being a true lover, that her wishes are fulfilled, not through Appanna. In a last act of devotion, Naga latches onto Rani's flowing hair and face with his hands, finding death to be the ultimate consummation of their illicit connection. This sacrifice emphasises Naga's dual role as a deceitful and ardent lover, whose life is ended by the object of his desire. Rani's increased prominence and the accomplishment of her goals are embodied in the play's epilogue:

> So Rani got everything she wished for, a devoted husband, a happy life. For Appanna's concubine was present at the trial. When she saw Rani's glory, she felt ashamed of her sinful life and volunteered to do menial work in Rani's house. Thus, she even got a life-long servant to draw water for her house. In due course, Rani gave birth to a beautiful child. A son. Rani lived happily ever after with her husband, child and servant. (Karnad, p. 293)

Rani's declaration during the trial that she had touched "only two...My husband and… And this Cobra" (Karnad, p. 292), a list that provides a rationale for Naga's refusal to hurt her. The irony was that Appanna disguised as him to get close to her made him caught in her destiny.

In death, Naga celebrates the surreptitious love he had with Rani; his death symbolic of the price of desire and deceit alike. In the process, Rani's own autonomy is consolidated. She convinces Appanna to allow their son to perform the last rights for Naga, who is subsequently remembered every year. Her initial response to anger is a symbolic move from the position of desired object to that of desiring subject, and in doing so she assumes power in both domestic and social spaces. As Nasser Dasht Peyma observes shrewdly: "The male assumption of keeping full control over the body, sexuality and virtue of woman through the institution of family are mocked in the play" (Peyma, p. 220). In positioning Appanna and Naga as secondary characters instead of primary, Rani firmly asserts herself to be central to the story.

Set against the backdrop of Indian literary tradition, Rani's victorious moment reverberates with echoes of mythological women; Gargi, Maitreyi, Lopamudra, Shakuntala, Sita and Draupadi and Savitri, who have long shaped cultural imagination through their combination of strength and beauty. These women appeared in epic and classical texts, personified the birth of Shakti, entered places of veneration in the collective psyche. As David Kinsley says "The goddesses embody Shakti, the dynamic feminine energy, and through them women in myth are envisioned as powerful, creative, and protective beings" (Kinsley19). But as history advanced, the ascendance of entrenched patriarchy began to gradually wear away at such noble stations. Women were systematically repressed, their identities wholly predicating on subservience. Karnad's dramaturgy, intricately embedded in this literary-historical continuum, revisits these archetypes and questions their relevance to the present.

In doing so, Karnad not only retrieves cultural memory of feminine power but also submits it to a critical re-imagination. He brings in elements of Western dramaturgy; idea of sexuality being explored outside rigid marital lines, but also opens up Indian theatre towards contemporary issues. Informed by the same educational and social issues, characters such as Rani of *Nagamandala*, Padmini from *Hayavadana*, and Vishakha of *The Fire and The Rain* stand together as strong instruments to resist patriarchal authority. Returning to Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri, she declares "Karnad's women do not remain silent victims; they destabilize authority and often turn the tables on patriarchy through wit, courage, and sexuality" (Chaudhuri 103). They undermine normative expectations of chastity and propriety, revealing the discriminatory politics of gender and also challenge the ideology of male hegemony. By way of Rani's metamorphosis from victimhood to divinization, Karnad delineates a fundamental rethinking of female identity in the socio-cultural fabric. Her transformation is a metaphor for the resilience and adaptability of women in Indian drama, simultaneously critiquing patriarchal oppression while celebrating the affirmation of female agency. *Nagamandala*, therefore, emerges not only as a play about elements of myth and folklore but also as deep meditating on marriage, fidelity and reclaiming women's voices within the cultural narrative of modern India.

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