

<https://doi.org/10.53032/tvcr/2025.v7n1.32>

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Subjugation of Women through Mythepistemic Concepts in Girish Karnad's Play *Naga Mandala*

Dr. Mukesh Kumar Maurya

Assistant Professor

UP Rajarshi Tandon Open University,
Prayagraj (UP), India

Abstract

The concept of the “epistemic,” as articulated by Michel Foucault, refers to the historical construction and codification of knowledge within specific epochs. Building on this foundation, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak introduced the notion of “epistemic violence” to describe the marginalization and silencing of subaltern voices within dominant discourses of knowledge, particularly in postcolonial contexts. In a related vein, the term *mythepistemic violence* designates the instrumentalization of myth and folklore as a legitimizing apparatus to perpetuate structural inequalities and the subjugation of marginalized groups—especially women—by positioning their inferiority as culturally or cosmologically ordained. This form of violence not only shapes epistemic hierarchies but also reinforces patriarchal norms that delimit women’s agency and identity. Girish Karnad’s *Naga Mandala* serves as a compelling literary case study of mythepistemic violence. Through the character of Rani, the play interrogates how traditional mythic narratives function as tools of gendered oppression in a patriarchal society. Rani’s enforced passivity, her symbolic trial by ordeal, and her subjection to societal suspicion echo mythological precedents that encode and reproduce patriarchal authority. The play critiques the cultural and epistemological systems that sustain such oppression while simultaneously imagining avenues for female empowerment and epistemic reclamation. This paper examines *Naga Mandala* through the lens of mythepistemic theory to highlight how knowledge, when embedded in mythic discourse, becomes a mechanism of control and subjugation, particularly of women, within patriarchal structures.

Keywords: Epistemic, Subjugation, Mythepistemic, Discrimination, cross-fertilization, intellect

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 1 (January 2025)

Girish Karnad, an eminent playwright, actor, director, and cultural theorist, was born on May 19, 1938, in Matheran, near Mumbai, into a Saraswat Brahmin Konkani family from Karnataka. His formative years were spent in the village of Sirsi (then in Maharashtra), where he received his early education in Marathi. Karnad's artistic sensibilities were deeply shaped by the regional theatrical traditions he was exposed to during his childhood, particularly the performances of itinerant drama troupes that frequently visited the village. His father, an avid theatre enthusiast, often took the young Karnad to these performances, which left an enduring impact on his imaginative and impressionable mind. This early encounter with native dramaturgy played a foundational role in shaping Karnad's later theatrical innovations.

At the age of fourteen, his family relocated to Dharwad in Karnataka, where he continued his education alongside his two sisters and a niece. He obtained his B.Sc. in Mathematics and Statistics from Karnataka Arts College, Dharwad (affiliated with Karnataka University) in 1958. Later that year, Karnad moved to Mumbai for postgraduate studies, a transition that marked a significant turning point in his intellectual and creative development. Mumbai exposed him to contemporary theatre practices, modern dramaturgy, and the work of international playwrights. It was here that he first encountered a production of August Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, directed by the celebrated Indian theatre director Ebrahim Alkazi. This experience was instrumental in catalyzing Karnad's engagement with modern theatre.

In 1960, Karnad was awarded the prestigious Rhodes Scholarship and proceeded to Magdalen College, Oxford, where he pursued a Master's degree in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics (PPE). During his time at Oxford (1960–1963), he was elected President of the Oxford Union, a testament to his intellectual stature. Upon his return to India in 1963, Karnad joined the Oxford University Press (OUP) in Chennai, where he worked for seven years. His tenure at OUP significantly enriched his literary exposure, offering him extensive engagement with both Indian and Western literary traditions. During this period, Karnad also participated in local theatre through his association with the Madras Players, a prominent amateur theatre group. Eventually, he left OUP to devote himself entirely to writing and theatre.

Karnad received the Homi Bhabha Fellowship (1970–1972) and, in 1974, was appointed Director of the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune. His career further expanded into academia and international scholarship when he served as a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Chicago's Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations in 1984. He later held prominent institutional positions, including Chairman of the Sangeet Natak Akademi (1988–1993) in New Delhi, where he introduced significant reforms, and Director of the Nehru Centre and Minister of Culture at the Indian High Commission in London (2000–2003).

Renowned for his versatility, Karnad contributed significantly to Indian cinema and television. He acted in and directed numerous Kannada and Hindi films, including *Samskara* (based on the novel by U.R. Ananthamurthy), which won the President's Golden Lotus Award in 1970. His other directorial ventures include *Godhuli* and *Utsav* (1984), and he also

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 1 (January 2025)

produced several acclaimed documentaries. His performances in Nagesh Kukunoor's films such as *Iqbal*, *8x10 Tasveer*, and *Aashayein* received critical praise. In television, he was widely appreciated for his portrayal of Swami's father in the *Malgudi Days* series (1986–87) and as the host of the science program *Turning Point* on Doordarshan in the early 1990s.

As a dramatist, Karnad is celebrated for revitalizing Indian theatre through his synthesis of classical, folk, and contemporary themes, often using myth and folklore as mediums for exploring modern existential, social, and political dilemmas. His plays have been translated into multiple languages and are globally recognized for their intellectual depth and cultural resonance. Some of his most influential works include *Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1970), *Naga-Mandala* (1988), *Tale-Danda* (1990), *The Fire and the Rain* (1994), *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (2004), and *Broken Images* (2006). His dramatic oeuvre embodies a sustained engagement with questions of identity, power, tradition, and transformation.

Girish Karnad's enduring contributions to Indian theatre, cinema, and cultural discourse earned him numerous national and international honors, including multiple National Film Awards, the Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan, and the Jnanpith Award—India's highest literary honour. His legacy remains integral to the understanding of modern Indian dramaturgy and postcolonial cultural production.

Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* is a powerful dramatization of the quest for feminine identity and autonomy within the confines of a patriarchal social order steeped in decaying traditions and misogynistic norms. The play foregrounds the condition of women, particularly through the character of Rani, who is subjected to emotional neglect and psychological humiliation by her husband, Appanna. The oppressive domestic sphere, symbolized by the locked room in their house, becomes a site of alienation and secrecy, as Appanna engages in an extramarital affair and returns home only at dawn. Rani, isolated and confused, eventually confides in Kurudavva, Appanna's blind aunt, revealing the emotional and physical distance in her marriage.

Kurudavva, representing traditional folk wisdom, offers a root with aphrodisiac properties, instructing Rani to prepare a paste and administer it to her husband in his drink. When Rani follows the instructions, the milk turns red, alarming her. She discards it into an anthill, unknowingly initiating a supernatural intervention: a King Cobra consumes the mixture and, enchanted, takes the form of Appanna to visit Rani at night. Unaware of the serpent's true identity, Rani becomes emotionally and physically bonded to him. The irony here is profound—while her real husband scorns her during the day, the serpent, disguised as him, becomes her loving companion by night. As the narrative unfolds, the blurring of identities challenges the binaries of truth and illusion, reality and myth.

The dramatist effectively employs dramatic irony, especially through the serpent's assertion that the husband governs the day while the wife governs the night. He imposes strange conditions upon Rani, including a prohibition against watching him enter or exit. Kurudavva, sensing something amiss, remarks that something "funny is happening here."

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 1 (January 2025)

Kappanna, her son, witnesses a cobra emerging from Rani's bathroom, intensifying the sense of enigma. Rani's relief upon realizing that Appanna, who had left minutes before, could not have been the snake she just encountered, contributes to the dramatic tension. Disguise, as a structural motif, introduces layers of irony and humor characteristic of folk narratives.

Irony reaches its peak when Rani, in response to Kurudavva's inquiry about her marital status, affirms the commencement of conjugal life—though unbeknownst to her, it is with a serpent. The ensuing events grow increasingly complex: Appanna's pet dog dies from a snakebite, prompting him to unleash a mongoose into the household. In the fierce battle that ensues, the cobra is wounded and does not return for a fortnight. When he does, his body bears healing wounds, but Rani finds no such scars on Appanna's body during the day. Her subsequent pregnancy leads to scandal and suspicion. Appanna publicly denounces her, accusing her of adultery, asserting that he has never touched her since their marriage.

To prove her innocence, Rani undergoes the 'snake ordeal,' reminiscent of Sita's *agnipariksha*, emerging unscathed and thereby vindicated. She is elevated to divine status by the villagers and is venerated as a goddess. Her husband, confronted with the miraculous nature of her purity, accepts her with genuine remorse. Rani, in turn, allows the cobra to remain nestled in her hair as "the symbol of my wedded bliss." This symbolic gesture underscores her agency in redefining the constructs of fidelity and devotion. Karnad here offers a nuanced portrayal of female sexuality and spiritual strength, as Rani embraces her identity on her own terms. She nurtures her sensuality and womanhood with self-awareness and dignity, caressing her hair "like those of snake princesses." The duality in Rani's experience is highlighted in her own words, "You talk so nicely at night. But during the day I only have to open my mouth and you hiss like a... stupid snake. I do not know that the man who loves her at night and hates at day." (*Naga-Mandala*, 22)

This poignant articulation encapsulates the psychological dissonance she endures and illustrates the disparity between appearances and emotional realities. The play skillfully integrates elements of irony, disguise, mystery, and folklore, transforming the Naga's metamorphosis into a poetic embodiment of love and longing. The presence of personified flames in the narrative adds to the mystical atmosphere and suspenseful structure of the play, amplifying its dramatic impact.

Karnad's folk imagination reworks conventional myths, investing them with new meaning to interrogate male dominance and social hypocrisy. The ruins of a temple—where the play begins with a man conversing with himself and overhearing three flames—serve as a fitting metaphor for the decayed moral and social order the play seeks to challenge. The arrival of a story that fuses with the plot reflects the intertextual interplay between oral tradition and dramatic structure.

Ultimately, *Naga-Mandala* critiques traditional patriarchal values while offering a vision of feminine resilience and self-assertion. It simultaneously celebrates myth and exposes its complicity in women's subjugation, using that very structure to enable subversion. Through the ordeal and her triumph, Rani reclaims her subjectivity and disrupts

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 1 (January 2025)

the norms of a male-dominated society. The play thus becomes a parable of emancipation, illustrating how the reclamation of narrative—through myth, irony, and identity—can become a vehicle for transformation and empowerment.

In *Naga-Mandala*, Girish Karnad deftly employs accessible and evocative language to convey the ethos of traditional folk narratives. The dialogue, marked by its simplicity and vibrancy, authentically reflects the speech patterns of rural Indian communities and enhances the oral quality of the text. The character of the Flames—personified female figures who gather in the ruins of an old temple—exemplify this folk tradition, embodying the communal spirit of storytelling and song-sharing that ensures the preservation and transmission of folk tales across generations. The role of music and poetic imagery is integral to this process, reinforcing the performative and mnemonic functions of folklore. This aesthetic is evident in Kurudavva's poetic description of Rani's beauty: "*Ayyo! How beautiful you are. Ears like hibiscus. Skin like young mango leaves. Lips like rolls of silk*" (*Naga-Mandala*, 11). The metaphor-laden language evokes natural elements and emphasizes the folk sensibility with which the play is imbued.

Structurally, *Naga-Mandala* is framed through a double narrative based on two interconnected folktales. The outer frame begins in a ruined temple where a storyteller is compelled to stay awake on the last night of the month to avoid a fatal curse. The mendicant, who warns him, reveals that the storyteller's plays, while transformative for audiences, have violated a metaphysical boundary, resulting in a divine punishment. This metafictional frame creates a "play within a play" structure that deepens the dramatic complexity of the narrative while simultaneously highlighting the blurred lines between myth and lived experience. Karnad integrates elements of suspense, surprise, and irony to enhance the dramatic texture, while reinforcing thematic concerns such as feminine resistance and the critique of patriarchal hegemony.

Thematically, the play interrogates the subjugation of women through what may be termed *mythepistemic* constructs—those cultural narratives and epistemologies rooted in myth that serve to legitimize patriarchal authority and suppress female agency. In this regard, *Naga-Mandala* continues the dramaturgical strategies Karnad developed in earlier plays such as *Hayavadana*, where folklore and myth are not merely aesthetic devices but are deployed as ideological tools for cultural critique. His plots, though derived from diverse sources—history, mythology, folklore, and contemporary life—are not intended as mere re-enactments of traditional narratives. Rather, they are reconceptualized through a modern lens to critique enduring social hierarchies, particularly those involving gender and power.

Karnad's dramaturgy reflects a deliberate reworking of inherited tales to align with his broader philosophical vision—one that is liberal, humanistic, and inclusive. His ability to integrate epistemological critique with folkloric structures positions him uniquely within Indian and global theatre traditions. In *Naga-Mandala*, myth is not static; it is transformed into a site of contestation, where issues such as identity crises, feminine subjectivity,

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 1 (January 2025)

metaphysical inquiry, and patriarchal dominance are examined through the interplay of narrative and performance.

This synthesis of the mythical and the philosophical—what may be viewed as the “cross-fertilization of Eastern and Western intellectual traditions”—allows *Naga-Mandala* to engage critically with both indigenous and contemporary modes of knowledge. The play thus becomes an exploration of how epistemic systems, when embedded in myth, function as instruments of control, particularly over women’s bodies, identities, and choices. Yet, in exposing this mechanism, Karnad also proposes a subversive counter-narrative that celebrates female agency, erotic autonomy, and spiritual resilience.

Indeed, the dramatic challenge of *Naga-Mandala* lies in its ability to balance supernatural intrigue with a sustained intellectual inquiry into the limitations and possibilities of myth as a narrative form. The story-within-a-story structure, coupled with a heightened awareness of the performative dimensions of knowledge and belief, underscores the contradictions inherent in mythepistemic systems. These contradictions form the thematic core of the play, as Rani’s journey from subjugation to sanctification embodies a larger dialectic between oppressive tradition and emancipatory reimagination.

In conclusion, *Naga-Mandala* is a sophisticated rearticulation of folkloric and mythic material through the lens of contemporary gender theory and epistemological critique. The play foregrounds the subjugation of women within patriarchal structures perpetuated by mythic authority while simultaneously offering a vision of resistance and renewal. Through its seamless fusion of folk aesthetics, mythological motifs, and intellectual inquiry, the play affirms the role of theatre as both a mirror and a medium for societal transformation.

Works Cited

- Das, S.K. *A History of Indian Literature, Vol. VIII*. Sahitya Akademi, 1991.
- Dipesh. *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton University Press, 2000
- Ghosh, S. *Rabindranath Tagore*. Sahitya Akademi, 1986
- Iyengar, K.R.S. *Indian Writing in English*, Sterling Publishers, 1985
- Karnad, Girish *Three Plays*. Oxford University Press, 1994
- Kumar, Satish. *A Survey of Indian English Drama*. Prakash Book Depot, 1993
- Naik, M.K. *Dimensions of Indian English Literature*. Sterling Publishers, 1884