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

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**Abstract**

The present study offers a socio-cultural exploration of Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala*, focusing on the intertwined themes of identity, marriage, fidelity, and female agency. As one of India's foremost dramatists, Karnad reimagines myth, folklore, and oral traditions to interrogate contemporary social realities. Set against a rural South Indian backdrop, *Nagamandala* illuminates the struggles of women negotiating patriarchal structures while striving for autonomy. The play foregrounds Rani's journey, along with other significant female figures, to depict resilience, courage, and the quest for selfhood amid restrictive social codes. By examining the narrative's fusion of myth and social critique, this study highlights how Karnad crafts a dynamic portrayal of women as both victims of repression and agents of transformation. Ultimately, the paper underscores the socio-cultural significance of *Nagamandala* in articulating the complexities of gender dynamics in Indian society. This study adopts a feminist-socio-cultural framework, combining textual analysis with theoretical

insights from Simone de Beauvoir, Uma Chakravarti, and contemporary critics, thereby offering a nuanced reading distinct from purely folkloric or psychological interpretations.

**Keywords:** Socio-cultural study, Gender dynamics, Female agency, Identity, Marriage, Fidelity, Patriarchy, Myth and folklore

Women in India have never occupied a fixed status; their roles have varied across time, shaped by social, economic, religious, and political forces. As Uma Chakravarti observes, "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 shaped by complex determinants such as caste, religion, education, class, and geographical location. The experiences of women in India cannot be reduced to a monolithic category; rather, they are layered, multifaceted, and often intersecting. The historical and cultural specificities of each context have significantly influenced women's lived realities. This article seeks to answer two interrelated questions: How does Karnad reimagine myth and folklore to challenge patriarchal structures? And to what extent does *Nagamandala* allow its female protagonist to achieve genuine agency rather than symbolic elevation? Despite persistent structural barriers, Indian women have consistently demonstrated resilience, challenging stereotypes and contributing meaningfully to social, political, and economic transformation. In the present moment, the demand for gender equality, recognition of women's rights, and societal efforts to dismantle patriarchal conventions are redefining the status and agency of women across the Indian landscape.

Turning to Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala*, the figure of Rani, the play's central protagonist, embodies these tensions. As the cherished only daughter in her natal household, she is affectionately named 'Rani,' a title that connotes regal dignity and beauty befitting a princess. Karnad reinforces this identity, describing her as the "Queen of the whole wide world. Queen of the long tresses" (Karnad, 253). Yet this aura of privilege is subverted upon her entry into marital life. In her husband's household, Rani is reduced to a position of subservience and subjected to cruelty, while Appanna, her husband, pursues an extramarital affair. Rani's life is thus redefined by silence and suffering, her husband's authoritarian presence steadily eroding her sense of self. Her retreat into fantasies, daydreams, and self-conversations reflects both her isolation and her search for respite from the violence of domestic tyranny.

At the outset, Rani epitomizes the conventional image of the submissive Indian wife, her identity circumscribed within the domestic sphere. In this sense, she echoes Simone de Beauvoir's formulation of woman as 'the second sex,' confined to roles imposed upon her by patriarchal society. De Beauvoir asserts, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 295). Her plight underscores the broader condition of Indian women, whose emotions and desires are frequently overlooked by their male counterparts. Rani's silence,

therefore, is not only personal but emblematic of the broader subaltern woman's condition, echoing Spivak's question: "Can the subaltern speak?" Her muted voice initially seems to confirm her inability to intervene in male-dominated structures. Rani's lack of agency within her marriage, and the systematic denial of her consent, reveal the deep-rooted gender inequities that permeate social life.

However, Rani's trajectory also marks a crucial shift. She gradually recognizes the necessity of reclaiming her identity as a means of emancipation from patriarchal domination. Karnad, in foregrounding this realization, appears intent on subverting traditional conventions and portraying a woman's resolve to assert autonomy. The play intriguingly incorporates the supernatural through the figure of Naga, a mythical serpent who assumes the role of Rani's passionate lover. In this union, Rani discovers fulfillment and affirmation, which contrasts starkly with her husband's neglect. By de-mythicizing conjugal love and legitimizing the intersection of the human and the supernatural, Karnad interrogates the institution of marriage and reimagines female agency. Through Rani's experience, he situates the problem of female identity at the core of the narrative, thereby engaging critically with the dilemmas confronting women in contemporary society. Yet, the apparent 'happy ending' raises troubling questions. Does Rani's elevation into divinity liberate her as a woman, or does it abstract her into an unattainable ideal beyond the reach of ordinary female experience? This ambiguity complicates the feminist potential of the play.

Karnad intricately stages the dilemma of Rani's predicament, foregrounding her gradual empowerment to resist and reconfigure the moral codes imposed by patriarchal society. Rani's desires surpass the limits of passive endurance or abstract liberation; she yearns for companionship, affection, and fulfillment that transcend the rigid confines of her marriage. Her suppressed longings, deeply rooted in bodily as well as emotional needs, seek an outlet. 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). Determined to satisfy these desires, she turns to Kurudavva, an elderly woman whose intervention becomes pivotal in altering the course of Rani's life. Kurudavva entrusts her with a magical root, a potent love potion, which, when used, ensnares the eternal devotion of the King Cobra, Naga. Far from being a mere fantastical device, this potion symbolizes women's subversive strategies of survival in hostile environments. Through Naga's love, Rani discovers not only the gratification of her sexual desires but also a sense of safety, recognition, and self-worth previously denied to her.

Naga's entry into Rani's life thus destabilizes traditional conventions. Disguised in the form of Appanna during nocturnal visits, Naga offers Rani respite from the cruelty of her husband, creating for her an idyllic sphere of emotional and physical intimacy. In his presence, Rani's perception of herself transforms; she shifts from a silenced and objectified wife into a subject with agency, aware of her own capacity to assert her will. Naga endows her with affection, tenderness, and even the promise of motherhood—dimensions Appanna had withheld. It is telling that in Naga's arms she discovers comfort, articulating, "Let it. I don't

feel afraid any more, with you beside me" (Karnad, p. 273). This statement not only reflects her release from isolation but also affirms the profound emotional security she associates with Naga, even though his identity is deceptive.

The symbolic force of the aphrodisiac root is central to the play's unfolding. Once ingested, the King Cobra assumes the form of Appanna, his purpose dictated by the magical compulsion to offer companionship and security. Yet Naga's role extends beyond the satisfaction of Rani's needs; he emerges as a sacrificial figure, destined to surrender his life for the sake of his beloved. His nightly visits, timed after Appanna's daily departure, transform Rani's lonely chamber into a space of intimacy and dialogue. Significantly, Naga offers her choice in determining the terms of their union, remarking, "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 stands in stark contrast to Appanna's coercive domination, positioning Naga as a paradoxical figure who, despite his mythical nature, embodies a more egalitarian sensibility in marital relations.

Nevertheless, the illusion is not without rupture. Rani encounters unsettling hints of Naga's true identity, beginning with the chilling vision in the mirror: "she looks at him in the mirror. Screams in fright...She is trembling" (Karnad, p. 272). In her own words, she confesses, "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 further reinforced 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). Despite these revelations, Rani's refusal to confront the truth underscores both her vulnerability and her determination to cling to the emotional sanctuary Naga provides. Her final statement—"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: awareness of deception coupled with the inability, or unwillingness, to relinquish the comfort it offers.

Through this intricate interplay of desire, deception, and denial, Karnad probes the fragile boundaries between illusion and reality, situating Rani's experience within a larger discourse on female identity and agency. Her relationship with Naga, though mythologized, becomes a site where suppressed desires find articulation, where patriarchal subjugation is momentarily suspended, and where the possibility of female self-realization emerges, even at the cost of tragic sacrifice.

When Naga clandestinely enters Rani's house under the cover of darkness, the atmosphere is marked by eerie sounds—dogs growling, fighting, and the distinct hiss of a snake. These sonic cues, along with the sight of blood upon his cheeks and shoulders, provide significant indications of his true serpentine identity. Yet, Rani remains unwilling to confront or interrogate these signs. Her perceptive awareness surfaces in 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). The ambiguity of her gesture, as Pranav Joshipura observes, renders

her complicity complex: "Rani's gesture is questionable because there are sufficient reasons to believe that Naga is not Appanna" (Joshipura, p. 259).

Rani consciously refuses to disentangle the disparity between Naga and Appanna, despite ample evidence before her. In this way, Karnad underscores her prioritization of emotional and sexual fulfillment over the stark confrontation of truth. Naga, in turn, accepts the responsibility of facilitating her liberation. His willingness to negotiate desire is captured in his remark, "the husband decides on the day visits. And the wife decides on the night visits" (Karnad, p. 272). As Moutushi Chakravartee insightfully argues, "Her adultery seems the proper lesson for her adulterous husband" (Chakravartee, p. 185). This interpretive frame situates Rani's transgression not only as a personal rebellion but as a symbolic inversion of patriarchal codes of fidelity.

Karnad deploys the narrative strategy of magical realism to frame 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). The interplay of the real, represented by Appanna's oppressive domesticity, and the fantastic, embodied by Naga's nightly visits, creates a hybridized space of female psychological emancipation. This semi-real world offers Rani a reprieve from the rigid codes of patriarchy, transforming her so-called "adultery" into a metaphorical act of resistance. In yielding to Naga, she not only addresses her repressed sexuality but also seizes agency, recasting herself as a subject capable of desire and choice. As Abhinandan Malas contends, "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*).

The question of chastity becomes central when Rani's pregnancy prompts Appanna to accuse her of infidelity. 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)—exemplifies the patriarchal fixation on female purity while simultaneously erasing his own adulterous conduct. In contrast, Naga emerges as the protector of both Rani and her unborn child. He advises her to undergo a snake ordeal, which recalls the trial by fire (*Agnipariksha*) of Sita in the *Ramayana*. The parallel is deliberate: just as Sita is compelled to prove her chastity, so too must Rani, though in a markedly different cultural reimagining.

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" (Karnad, p. 286). To her anxious query—"Won't the Cobra bite me the moment I touch it?" (Karnad, p. 286)—he responds reassuringly, "No, it won't bite. Only, you must tell the truth" (Karnad, p. 286). 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. 287). 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).

Unlike Sita, who after her trial is still denied honor and acceptance, Rani is elevated to divine status. The King Cobra emerges not as an agent of punishment but as a protector, unfurling its hood above her like an auspicious canopy. The elders and the villagers acclaim the miraculous event:

- 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).

Thus, in contrast to the *Ramayana*, where Sita's trial reinforces patriarchal ideals of wifely devotion, Karnad reconfigures the ordeal to invert gender hierarchies. Rani emerges not as a victim but as a figure of reverence, transcending the limits of wifehood and being consecrated as divine. This radical elevation underscores Karnad's critique of patriarchal strictures on marriage, fidelity, and chastity, simultaneously reclaiming female agency and reimagining womanhood as a locus of power and autonomy.

Following the ordeal of truth, the power dynamics within *Nagamandala* undergo a decisive reversal. Even the once domineering Appanna is compelled to bow at Rani's feet, admitting his guilt and blindness with the words: "Forgive me. I am a sinner. I was blind" (Karnad, p. 293). His anguished lament—"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)—reflects a profound sense of humiliation and disorientation, as the patriarch who once enforced authority is now stripped of moral legitimacy. Karnad thus dramatizes Appanna's downfall, using it to highlight the shifting axis of power within the conjugal relationship.

At the heart of this transformation lies Rani's longing for fulfillment beyond the rigid boundaries of marriage. Her desires are realized not through Appanna but through Naga, who fulfills his promise of love and intimacy, though at the cost of his own life. In a final gesture of devotion, Naga entangles himself in Rani's luxuriant tresses, choosing death as the consummation of their clandestine bond. This act of sacrifice underlines the paradoxical nature

of Naga's role—simultaneously deceiver and devoted lover—whose existence is extinguished by the very woman he sought to possess.

The play's epilogue reflects Rani's elevated status and the materialization of her aspirations:

> "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)—provides a rationale for Naga's refusal to harm her. Yet the irony lies in the fact that his intimacy with her, while disguised as Appanna, renders him ensnared in her fate. In death, Naga affirms the clandestine love he shared with Rani, his demise emblematic of the costs of desire and deception alike.

In the aftermath, Rani consolidates her autonomy. She persuades Appanna to allow their son to perform the final rites for Naga, ensuring that his memory is annually commemorated. This symbolic act underscores her transition from an object of desire to an active subject of desire, thereby claiming authority within both the domestic and social realms. As Nasser Dasht Peyma perceptively observes, "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). By relegating both Appanna and Naga to the position of secondary figures, Rani asserts her centrality within the narrative.

Placed against the backdrop of Indian literary tradition, Rani's triumph resonates with echoes of mythological heroines—Gargi, Maitreyi, Lopamudra, Shakuntala, Sita, Draupadi, and Savitri—whose strength and beauty have long shaped cultural imagination. These women, celebrated in epic and classical texts, embodied the concept of *Shakti* and occupied spaces of honor in the collective consciousness. As David Kinsley explains, "The goddesses embody Shakti, the dynamic feminine energy, and through them women in myth are envisioned as powerful, creative, and protective beings" (Kinsley19). Yet, as history progressed, the rise of entrenched patriarchy led to the gradual erosion of such exalted positions. Women were subjected to systemic suppression, their identities confined to roles of subservience. Karnad's dramaturgy, deeply rooted in this literary-historical continuum, revisits these archetypes and interrogates their resonance in modern times.

In doing so, Karnad not only reclaims the cultural memory of feminine power but also subjects it to critical re-interpretation. By incorporating elements of Western dramaturgy—such as the exploration of sexuality outside rigid marital boundaries—he expands the scope of Indian theatre to address contemporary concerns. Characters like Rani in *Nagamandala*, Padmini in *Hayavadana*, Vishakha in *The Fire and the Rain*, and Nittilai in *Hayavadana* collectively emerge as instruments of resistance against patriarchal authority. Asha Kuthari

Chaudhuri affirms, "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 subvert normative expectations of chastity and propriety, exposing the discriminatory politics of gender and challenging the ideology of male hegemony.

Through Rani's journey from subjugation to divinization, Karnad presents a radical reconfiguration of female identity within the socio-cultural framework. Her transformation exemplifies the resilience and adaptability of women in Indian drama, simultaneously critiquing patriarchal oppression and celebrating the assertion of female agency. *Nagamandala*, thus, becomes not only a play about myth and folklore but a profound commentary on marriage, fidelity, and the reclamation of women's voices in the cultural discourse of modern India. Ultimately, Nagamandala transcends its folkloric frame to become a profound socio-cultural commentary on identity, marriage, fidelity, and female agency, thereby reclaiming women's voices within the broader discourse of Indian modernity

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