

## Girish Karnad's Naga-Mandala: Mythological Aspects and Identity Crisis

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### Abstract:

*Girish Karnad's Naga-Mandala offers a profound exploration of marriage, identity, and the complexities of gender relations within the framework of mythology and folklore. By weaving together myths, folktales, and historical narratives, Karnad delves into the psychological and moral dilemmas faced by modern Indian men and women in various social contexts. The play's central theme addresses the struggles of twentieth-century women, highlighting issues of gender oppression and the challenges posed by patriarchal authority. Naga-Mandala not only portrays the dynamics of marriage but also critically examines the societal norms and traditions that reinforce gender exploitation. Karnad's use of mythology and folklore is a powerful tool in addressing these themes, offering a lens through which the dichotomies of instinct versus reason, body versus mind, and male versus female psyche are explored. Through characters who seek wholeness and balance, Karnad illustrates the complex journey toward coexistence in a society fraught with traditional constraints. This research paper aims to analyze the various norms and traditions depicted in Naga-Mandala, study the factors influencing their implementation, and critically assess the exploitation of women within these frameworks.*

**Keywords:** *Mythology, Gender oppression, Folklore, Identity crisis, Patriarchy.*

### Introduction

During the 1800s, colonial India faced challenges due to the pervasive influence of European theatre. Prominent writers such as Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Annasaheb Kirloskar, and Vishnudas Bhave engaged with verse narrations and explored regional art forms like the Kannada folk art Yakshagana. Girish

Karnad, a renowned Indian playwright, acknowledges his unique role in Indian theatre and the fusion of diverse dramatic traditions. Karnad's deep engagement with Indian mythology and history in his works transforms theatrical performances into profound aesthetic experiences, rooted in human emotions and natural impulses. In

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universal and timeless plays such as *Naga-mandala* and *The Fire and the Rain*, Karnad blurs the boundaries between myth and reality, highlighting the interconnectedness of the world and the significance of communication within modern societal and cultural contexts. Like Shakespeare, Karnad reimagines myths, traditional stories, and historical narratives to portray human emotions and sentiments, while also addressing complex issues of gender identity and existential dilemmas.

Girish Karnad's unique dramatic vision positions him as a significant figure in the post-independence "modern" era of Indian theatre, alongside prominent playwrights like Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar, K.N. Panikkar, and Indira Parthasarathi. Indian playwrights have a long tradition of portraying society through myths, parables, and tales, with early figures such as Kailasam and Sri Aurobindo drawing themes from Indian literature. Karnad, a renowned Indian playwright writing in Kannada, drew inspiration from these myths and stories to create innovative and thought-provoking works. His exposure to Western theatre in Bombay and street plays in Karnataka villages during his formative years spurred him to modernize Indian religious mythology. Karnad's vibrant energy allows him to examine contemporary issues by seamlessly blending meaningful narratives with historical context, making his works resonate deeply with modern audiences.

In *Naga-Mandala*, Girish Karnad portrays Naga as the embodiment of kindness, love, and protection, leading Rani to trust and ultimately surrender herself to him. However, the true fault lies with Appanna, who abandons Rani, locking her in a house while indulging with a concubine, making Rani the victim rather than the villain. The play examines the identity, status, and dignity of women through Rani's experiences, which serve as a metaphor for a young bride in a joint family who sees her husband in two contrasting roles: a stranger during the day and a lover at night. Karnad uses this dynamic to explore the position of women in a male-dominated society.

Drawing from South Indian folktales about snakes, Karnad incorporates folkloric techniques into *Naga-Mandala*. Unlike Shakespeare, who often uses myths and stories to engage with historical themes, Karnad tackles contemporary issues through these ancient narratives, earning him the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award. He also integrates Brechtian techniques, prioritizing critical thought over emotional involvement. The drama challenges societal norms by blending fantastical elements with complex characters, prompting audiences to reflect on their own judgments and perspectives. Karnad uses the theme of human-animal conflict, particularly through the characters of Cobra and Rani, to evoke a sense of alienation and present contrasting viewpoints.

As Rani resorts to supernatural means to reclaim her unfaithful husband's love, she unwittingly attracts the attention of the King Cobra disguised as a man, exposing the gender inequality she faces. When accused of infidelity, Rani is subjected to a trial by the local council, where her loyalty is proven, ultimately securing her marriage and societal acceptance. Through *Naga-Mandala*, Karnad delves into the deceptive nature of reality, encouraging the audience to view issues from multiple perspectives and question entrenched social norms.

Girish Karnad, who transitioned from screenwriter to acclaimed folk theatre playwright, adeptly addressed modern challenges in his plays by drawing on Indian history and mythology. His incorporation of myths and historical events transforms them into contemporary social and political narratives, evoking powerful emotions from audiences. By deeply engaging with mythology and history, Karnad offers writers a rich source of inspiration to explore themes such as love, existentialism, patriarchy, and the caste system. Through his works, he critically examines societal structures from antiquity to the present, highlighting the roles and struggles of women in male-dominated civilizations. Karnad's ability to use mythology and history to illuminate pressing contemporary issues showcases his talent for making ancient narratives relevant to today's world.

### **The significance of Myths and Identity Crisis**

The significance of myths in society is thoroughly examined in Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala*, particularly in how they shape interpersonal relationships and cultural beliefs. The protagonist, Rani, seeks love and happiness in her marriage to Appanna, who embodies patriarchal culture, by turning to mythology and her heritage. In rural areas, the use of love roots and other mystical elements is common, as mythology is deeply embedded in the local culture. Karnad uses these myths to expose the darker realities hidden beneath conventional beliefs, highlighting the tension between personal aspirations and societal norms. Despite understanding the reality of their relationship, both Rani and Appanna adhere to social expectations, raising questions about the truth of these beliefs by exploring the complexities of relationships, superstitions, and cultural expectations.

Karnad challenges readers to reflect on their own cultural beliefs and customs by highlighting the flaws of patriarchal society through Rani and Appanna's story. The play critiques cultural norms and the psychological impact of myths, emphasizing the enduring power of these ideas over time. Within a patriarchal society that confines and isolates women, Rani endures mistreatment and violence at the hands of her husband, Appanna, who symbolizes the oppressive forces of patriarchy where women's rights are

curtailed and they are deemed inferior. Appanna's dual nature—cruel by day and kind by night—illustrates the conflict between his animalistic and human instincts. Conversely, the serpent Naga represents fertility, love, and affection, bringing a sense of fulfillment to Rani's life. The use of animal metaphors, such as bringing a dog and mongoose for protection, underscores Appanna's fears and insecurities.

Naga's tenderness towards Rani, contrasted with Appanna's harsh treatment, challenges the norms of patriarchal society. Themes of parenthood, sexuality, and reproduction are also explored through Naga's role in Rani's life. By delving into issues of identity, patriarchy, and societal systems, Karnad invites the audience to question conventional wisdom. The drama intricately examines interpersonal relationships, power dynamics, and the influence of cultural standards on individuals.

Karnad's play retells a Hindu myth in which a snake, after a hundred years, can transform into a human. In the story, Rani attracts a cobra by pouring curry on an anthill, and the cobra transforms into her husband, Appanna. Rani and the cobra, now disguised as Appanna, fall in love due to a magical root in the curry. The cobra symbolizes the ideal partner many women long for, while the real Appanna falls short, being unfaithful and neglectful. Despite her husband's failings, Rani yearns for a "prince charming" to rescue

her from her loneliness, exacerbated by his actions. The drama highlights the psychological strain and frequent disappointment experienced by women who desire a perfect marriage, examining the complex emotions and aspirations of women in relationships.

The play also explores the identity of stories and their continuity through retelling. Personifying the story as a woman, Karnad emphasizes its individuality and existence. V. Rangan suggests that a story is born, grows, and possesses an independent character. The narrative underscores the role of the reader in constructing meaning, aligning with reader-response theory, which posits that a story gains existence only through the reader's perception. The act of being "told" and "re-told" is an interpretation and reinterpretation process.

The backdrop of the flames symbolizes the concept of "passing on," with the flames representing the story's enduring nature. Karnad, a male playwright, personifies the story as a woman, implying that men shape women's identities. The story, like a woman, has its own existence and thrives through meaningful interpretation and re-interpretation. The narrative framework mirrors the main story's theme, as Rani's role is inverted by the end, with Appanna becoming a means to prove her divinity. The roles of the playwright and the story are also reversed, as the playwright listens to the story, a woman.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, *Naga-Mandala* delves into women's experiences of desire and self-expression within dominant discourses, exposing the limitations of these narratives. The play suggests that myths are inherently rooted in contradictions. *Naga-Mandala* serves as an excellent example of how Karnad addressed these concerns using the postmodern theatrical technique of multiple endings, resonating with the postmodern mindset of the late twentieth century. In Indian society and culture, where rules and traditions are ingrained from an early age, the concept of mythology is far from new. This paper connects mythological elements to contemporary issues, showing how Karnad skillfully illuminates these topics without overtly criticizing society.

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