



## Metamorphosis of a Despondent Indian Woman: A Feminist Evaluation of Girish Karnad's Naga-Mandala

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Abstract

The article engages with the feminist approach in Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* (1988) in the framework of postcolonial gender analysis. *Naga-Mandala* (1988) addresses the continued uneven power relations between female and male gender. Karnad's female character, Rani, in *Naga-Mandala*, is primarily pitiable, downgraded and most importantly an object of patriarchal social and political dominance and authority. The paper postulates Rani as a site of theoretical transformations, engaging with issues of gender subjectivity, sexuality, and power positionality in relation to the patriarchal Indian state. It further argues that Rani situates a performative self in the text through an interrogatory narrative voice that succeeds in participating in the critique of patriarchal subjectivity and hegemonic feminist positioning while inserting a resistant feminist ideology into gender discourse to re-envision the role of Indian women in India's development. *Naga-Mandala* echoes a substantial constituent of feminism. The drama enquires the patriarchal ethical enigma which burdens women with fidelity to their husbands but not the loyalty of men to their wives.

**Key Words:** Feminism, Gender discourse, Girish Karnad, Male-dominance, Oppression, Patriarchy.

### Introduction

The significant concern of the article is to show how in *Naga-Mandala* (1988), the female protagonist, Rani, who in the start of the play is dominated, revolts against the limitation of social customs and eventually upsurges from her subservient position to a goddess. This study is to establish how Girish Ragunath Karnad (1938-2019) critiques the conventional images of women that have always been imposed on them by patriarchy.

In his dramas, Karnad cleverly depicts the state of a representative Indian woman, controlled by the patriarchal order constrained by convention, but whose temperament is uninhibited. Karnad is considered a celebrated Indian film director, actor, and a playwright. He performed not only in plays but also in several outstanding films.

*Naga-Mandala* (1988) was primarily composed in Kannada and published in 1990. The drama is an intermingling of mythology and two Kannada folk-tales that Karnad had heard from his intellectual and writer companion, A.K. Ramanujan (Bala 2014, 3). Aparna B. Dharwadker enlightens about *Naga-Mandala* (1988) by saying as follows:

The first story, about the lamp flames that gather in a village temple to exchange gossip about the households they inhabit, is part of the outer play and gives imaginative expression to the idea of community life. The second story, about the woman who was visited by a King Cobra in the form of her husband, is personified in the play as a beautiful young woman in a sari and it 'tells itself' (as the inner play) to an audience composed of the playwright and the flames (Karnad *Collected Plays* 2010, 1).

Karnad has used this style of discussion among the womenfolk by engaging female performers as Flames and Story in *Naga-Mandala* (1988). The story in the drama tells the story of a young girl called Rani to a crowd of

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women present on stage in the form of Flames. *Naga-Mandala* (1988) is a play that uses feminism to postulate a transformative agenda for Indian women and the Indian state. Rani's quest is to address the collective neglect faced by Indian wives and to theorize alternate strategies for their psychological and emotional liberation. Framed by sharp observations about gender discrimination that marks present-day gender relations in a patriarchal society, the introduction sets the tone for the (de)constructive scope of the play. There is a narrative transfiguration of Rani, from a racialised object framed by colonial discourse to a self-actualised individual who transcends her own and society's discrimination.

*Naga-Mandala* (1988) has at its center the timeless test of anticipated female honor – the chastity-test. It, hence, problematizes the issue of chastity and promiscuity by differentiating between the real core of chastity and the social observation of an individual as chaste. The matter which has been a part of the Hindu social code since primitive and pre-historic times is evident in the *Ramayana* where even Sita is made to pass the trials in order to mollify the subjects of Ayodhya that she is chaste, having spent her detention under another male. Comparably Rani, once doubted by Appanna of adultery, is required to endure the threatening trials to verify her honor and integrity. The play vehemently dramatizes the torture of predominantly women, in the Indian social backdrop, involved in the practice of evolving into adult responsibilities in a society which hardly provides any space for individuality and self-development. A natural and everlasting elucidation of matrimonial and conjugal impropriety is appropriated as the locus of discrete socio-cultural appraisal by the dramaturge. In fact, *Naga-Mandala* (1988) is an ardent review of attributing a limited interpretation to the expression and notion of “chastity”, which should have a global recommendation, with its exposition to the female-only whereby, she is anticipated to be chaste, in mind and body, and ingenuous forever, separately from what her male companion does. The text not only presents Karnad's intent to alter the relations between men and women but to generate a theoretical model from which to reconstitute the fabric of their everyday life. Rani, in her journey from her parents' home to her husband's home, encounters different questions on female identity, questions the identity of her husband, and develops consciousness in the negotiated space. Transformed in her journey, she (re)creates her Indian female identity to negotiate the tensions of her status as an Indian wife. *Naga-Mandala* fills in the silence of women in Indian patriarchal society, who never speak. They never give voice to their mistreatment, especially by the male members of their patriarchal society, but Rani does.

When we first glimpse Rani, she is undeniably naïve and gullible and knows little of the world outside of her enclosed realm. For her, the marriage she is about to step in is the marriage of her imagination. It is the marriage she has dreamt about only. Rani's emerging successful and alive through the snake ordeal verifies beyond suspicion her chastity to the gathered Village elders who consign upon her the acclaims of being nothing less than a goddess, though at the same time suggest the appalling reality before Appanna who now has to take Rani as the chaste, “pativrata” wife, although alert of the fact that she has had a lover and a child that is undeniably not his own. Hence the male right of instigating the embarrassing chastity-test for the wife rebounds and in fact demeans the husband who has to accept his cuckoldry by enduring the outcome quietly and not revealing the ignominy.

Karnad's treatment of the undying fundamentals of myth, which had before always been used for announcing or echoing patriarchal authorities, for affronting the male entitlements and empowering the woman by identifying her desires as an individual and as a sexual being, makes *Naga-Mandala* (1988) more than just a postcolonial play with Indian essentials of dramaturgy; it also stands out as a play with notable feminist tones. In multiple spatial and temporal realms, Karnad's writing asserts the coherent, actual, speaking self through the different journeys of women empowerment.

The play starts with the arrival of Rani to her husband's home after their marriage and the harsh conduct of her husband, Appanna, towards her. Appanna's rule of dread commences by crafting Rani's survival a pain. Appanna makes Rani work during the day when she is refused any vocal relationship with anyone, he humiliates the upright woman by doubting her as an adulteress, and finally enforces harsh punishments on his wife such as making Rani to either grasp a red hot iron in her hand or to put her hand in a Cobra's anthill to confirm her chastity. Whilst Appanna is having his power of misery on Rani; the father never comes to his daughter's salvage. When Appanna recognizes Rani's pregnancy, his control of dread returns, and it touches its climax. The elders are called for Rani's public trial as the society that is represented by the elders in the play is frantic and wants Rani's prosecution. Therefore, initially, the woman appears as the marginalized character in the play.

## The Theoretic Foundations of the Analysis

Postmodern theories of gender assert that gender is not an everlasting or persistent category throughout the world. In other words, a gender is an unremitting act whose denotation can never be stable for all time or as universal. Hence, gender and its implication are created over repetitive performances. Butler says that, gender is not a noun (but it) verifies to be performative, that is, creating the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, nonetheless not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the act" (1992, 25). Perhaps, Rani thinks that gender is a performance, and it can be discussed and questioned by not performing the role enforced on her by the patriarchy. In the third ending of the play, Appanna thinks about killing the Cobra, but Rani succeeds to hide him in her hair, and she conveys to Appanna that the snake has fled. It is a kind of a reverse in the play. At this point of time, a woman is taking responsibility and commanding the male to look for the snake here and there, "It went that way-toward the bathroom" (Karnad *Three Plays* 1994, 64). It is one of such occurrences that evidence the fact that the story of Rani is not static and permanent. The feminist self in Rani rises to such a level that she accomplishes in getting a state where patriarchy becomes her slave and the thoughts like chastity is no longer valid. Rani's transformation to a goddess can also be taken as exceptional as traditionally the strange women are considered as witches. For instance, Bertha Mason, the madwoman in *Jane Eyre* (1847) and the witches in *Macbeth* (1606) are treated as witches because they are not ordinary. However, in *Naga-Mandala* (1988), Rani has not been treated as Which but rather worshipped as a goddess. This also indicates the transformation of women's state under the rule of patriarchy. Therefore, it would not be erroneous to say that Karnad has tried to give women a position in society by obliterating the marginalized position and the transformation of Rani epitomizes an overt rebellion of the principles of a traditionalist society rooted in patriarchy. Undeniably, it can be held that Karnad is in the act of deconstructing myth. Women nowadays have a stature in government, and they embrace influential professions.

Silvia Walby in her *Theorising Patriarch* represents patriarchy as social arrangements and exercises in which men rule, dominate and control women. Cultural predispositions constantly have male power at the top. However, in this situation, Karnad's dramas are notable from a feministic point of view.

## Justification of the Study

It was Simon De Beauvoir who suggested that women must take care of their own worth. Instead of being the undesirable, subordinate others, they must develop as subjects in their own right. They must not be controlled by or ordered to perform the roles forced on them by patriarchy. Beauvoir considered that when women decide for themselves, they decide for the entire society. Thus, the woman's choice is about revolution. In *Naga-Mandala* (1988), Rani is shown in such a light in which she takes the responsibility of herself. Just as she is *othered* by her society, she begins a process of *othering* the male members of society. Feminists claim that the woman is reduced to the womb, treated as a sex object or a reproducing device. In the play, Rani too goes through the process of reproduction. Nevertheless, it is extraordinary in the sense that women are thought to be frail because of their genetic differences from men. In the early encounter with the Naga in the disguise of Appanna, Rani is happy and feels protected. "Let it. I don't feel afraid any more, with you beside me" (Karnad *Three Plays* 1994, 273). Naga provides all that Rani was deserted in her marital life. But Naga too, a Male character, in a way orders Rani to keep her pregnancy a secret, "I am glad you hid the news from me all this time. Even now, try to keep from speaking about it as long as possible. Keep it a secret." (Karnad *Three Plays* 1994, 51). As a response, Rani says as follows:

I was a stupid, ignorant girl when you brought me here. But now I am a woman, a wife, and I am going to be a mother. I am not a parrot. Not a cat or a Sparrow. Why don't you take it on trust that I have a mind and explain this charade to me? (Karnad *Three Plays*, 1994, 51).

Rani's attitudinal shift in this passage indicates that she is not the stereotypical, submissive subject of Indian patriarchy. Rani's response realigns the specular burden, for now, Indian women look back and find that the patriarchal system is unjust towards women. The gender partialities in Indian patriarchal society are thus confronted with an equal gender stance, through Rani's re-challenging of the bias. However, her response does not arise out of a naturalized sense of superiority, but in reaction to her challenged subjectivity. Suddenly when Rani faces difficulty and her lovemaking changes into agony for her she communicates to Naga, "Yes, there is.

Give me poison instead. Kill me right here. At least I'll be spared the humiliation. Won't the cobra bite me the moment I touch it? I'll lie like your dog and your mongoose." (Karnad *Three Plays* 1994, 286). From this point onwards the self of Rani has grown up. She is forced to look within, and her interior vision is forever changed. Subverting the dialectic between self and other, she nullifies the simple binary constructions to (re)construct her subjectivity. She is challenging the patriarchy that she should be considered as a human being who is sane and adept in thinking. Normally in a patriarchal society, a woman is imagined to be blameworthy of all, or even having desires for someone other than her husband. However, Rani is exceptional here in the sense that she is not embarrassed by making love to the Cobra. On the contrary, in the conclusion of the drama, she hides the Cobra in her hair and says, "this hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss. Live in there happily, forever" (Karnad *Three Plays* 1994, 64). This precise dialogue of Rani depicts the inclination of taking charge of her own choices. Further, it also shows the transformation of Rani from an innocent, voiceless girl to a woman and not a conventional dominated woman but a woman who fights for her rights.

Rani's unawareness, genuine or contrived, about the two different husbands visiting her, one during the day time and the other at night do not make her open to moral penalty and unfaithfulness particularly as she says, "Rani: . . . The Pig, the Whale, the Eagle none of them asks why. So, I won't either. But they ask for it again. So, I can too, can't I?" (Karnad *Naga-Mandala* 1990, 26). She is seen first as a submissive wife, but by the end of the play, Rani's growing oppositional consciousness allows her to identify herself as an emancipated Indian woman. Linked to the larger totality of her gender, her identity expands beyond her corporeality to become a representation of the mass that is a woman.

Rani's words are prominent as they express in an understated manner both the female submissiveness of not just following the authority to surely not probe questions except merely submitting to the orders, nevertheless at the same time progress satisfaction in the performance of sexual congress even if it entails a willing suspension of disbelief. It also highlights the boldness in the fact of a woman desiring for sexual pleasure and expecting such each night, upsetting thus the untruth of female reserve and the social decree that a wife's duty is merely that of gratifying her husband's sexual needs, while she has none of her own. Gender becomes the mediating focus as she sees her relationship with her husband. Rani's identity and place in the Indian patriarchal world are immediately scrutinized and destabilized. Rani as a site of subjective transformation is also a site of theoretical transformation: in rejecting the concept of the Other, she reconstitutes her identity and ideological centre, to reposition herself in the global order.

*Naga-Mandala* (1988) carefully, but manifestly, indicates that though Rani may be innocent, it is unbelievable for her not to have detected the difference between the husband who visited her during the daytime and the one who visited her conjugal bed at night. The last scorn and contempt for patriarchal mores and the male self-esteem, which have shaped such chastity-tests for women through the ages, is Rani's snake ordeal.

Sita or Savitri had emerged uninjured as they are actually chaste. However, Rani's state is strange. She is led to select the hardest and dangerous, and so maximum striking to society, snake-ordeal by Naga since she shares an adulterous love-relationship with the snake, and as she is "unchaste", in the physical and not the moral sense, she emerges unharmed.

## Loneliness and Desertion

The unsociable detention symbolises 'the reduction of women's talents to housework and the exclusion of women from enlightenment and enjoyment' (Babu 1999, 239).

Rani is "frightened" for staying "alone at night", engrossed in her fears of insecurity, while Appanna, rather than solacing her with any relief and care, antagonistically snubs her: "What is there to be scared of? Just keep to yourself. No one will bother you..." (Karnad *Three Plays* 1994, 28) Rani gives outlet to her sorrow, but Appanna silences her with hostility: "Look, I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand?" (Karnad *Three Plays* 1994, 28) Karnad sets the stage for the interrogation of concepts of alienation. Inviting Freudian psychoanalysis, concepts of repression and dream formation readily support the journey motif as Rani passes from a stage of innocence to self-actualization.

At the beginning of *Naga-Mandala* (1988), Karnad has made Rani trivial in the play except as bodily and sexual object. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak emphasizes that "The ideological construction of gender keeps the

male dominant” ([Spivak 2006, 32](#)), and this belief is dominant in *Naga-Mandala* (1988). The postcolonial understanding, the notion of authoritative, overriding West with virility and compliant, pathetic, and submissive East with femininity is undoubtedly displayed. The female gender is contemplated as “Other” - merely taken to be for granted. They have no authority and social standing excepting the conventionally given roles-wife or sex-partner.

### Use of Power

In a patriarchal social makeup, males use an authority in their own way to gratify their decadent wants. Appanna, who is married to Rani, proves a rogue in her life. In spite of being a social animal (man) his cruelty for Rani makes him bestial.

Every night he leaves Rani lonely in the house and goes out just uttering: “Well then, I’ll be back tomorrow at noon, keep my lunch ready. I shall eat and go” (Karnad *Three Plays* 1994, I.27). He is not considerate towards her and goes out, locks the door from outside and leaves without worrying about his newly married wife. “She runs to the door, pushes it, finds it locked, peers out of the barred window. He is gone” (Karnad *Three Plays* 1994, I.27). When Appanna returns the following morning, he forewarns her against futile conversation and commands, “Do, as you are told, you understand” (Karnad *Three Plays* 1994, I.28).

Amongst Indians, it is the female gender that happens to be the victim as the social customs, and ethical codes have been so outlined as to be predominantly harmful to them ([Rajeshwar 1995, 141](#)). Rani gets no love from her social counterpart and instead receives only cold indifference. Rani, who has never seen her husband’s love and affection and has never had any communication with him naturally, accepts any condition for having a nice company of her husband. No matter if it is a part-time business. Her loneliness makes her dreamy, and she swings between dream and reality until Naga enters into her life. But she needs to relate someone, for it is through her relationship with some other that she as a woman is likely to realize herself. ([Gupta 1999, 251, 252](#)). In the traditional society of India, the elders fix a marriage. Majority of the Hindus believe that the marriage is arranged in heavens. However, opposite, irreconcilable the couple may be, they compromise to adjust with each other in order to preserve the social setup. Marriage brings a turning point in a girl’s life. Her identity changes from the daughter of so and so and she becomes the wife of so and so. And the third stage is the mother of so and so. It is the fulfilment of a woman, as, without motherhood, she is considered incomplete in Indian society.

Karnad’s extraordinary use of imagery and metaphor creates a vital situation and mesmerizes the audience, by giving heart and soul to the theme and plot of *Naga-Mandala* (1988). He gives a picturesque description, in the Prologue:

It is night. Moonlight seeps in through the cracks in the roof and the walls. A man is sitting in the temple. Long silence. Suddenly, he opens his eyes wide. Closes them. Then uses his fingers to pry open his eyelids. Then he goes back to his original morose stance. He yawns involuntarily. Then reacts to the yawn by shaking his head violently, and turns to the audience. (Karnad *Three Plays* 1994, 22).

### Rani’s Chastity Test and the Indian Patriarchal Society

*Naga-Mandala* (1988) highlights the subaltern’s subjugation and position in a patriarchal society. With fright and worry, Rani puts her hand into the anthill of Cobra and pledges: ‘Since coming to this village, I have held by this hand, only two... My husband... And this Cobra’ (Karnad *Three Plays*, 1994, 58). The Cobra does not sting her and rather “sways its hood gently for a while, then becomes docile and moves over her shoulder like a garland” (Karnad *Three Plays* 1994, 58).

In a traditional Indian society, it is observed that questions are proposed only for women but not for men. Appanna positions Rani as a disloyal woman although he himself has an illegitimate liaison with a concubine. Even though Appanna himself is an adulterer, he is not going to take any trial to prove his integrity. Women are prepared to obey simply to attend to the needs of the men. In this regard, M. Sarat Babu writes as follows:

*Naga-Mandala* is a feminist play. It questions the patriarchal moral code which demands the faithfulness of a woman to her husband but not the faithfulness of a man to his wife. This is accepted not only by men but also by

women. Appanna openly and unashamedly commit adultery, but nobody objects to it; the Village Elders who sit in judgment do not find fault with him. Nobody believes the innocence of Rani. She sleeps with Naga without knowing it. She does not discover the identity of Naga, who assumes Appanna's form by using his magical power. (Babu 1999, 76)

This is just a minute cross-section and absurdity of the patriarchal society that the Indian women live in. Rani does not want to be victimized as a woman rather decides her own fortune by taking the snake ordeal. Here Karnad's struggle to stress on man-woman equality is visible. After the snake ordeal, Rani not only becomes just equal to man but also becomes beyond human being, a goddess. Rani's transformation from an innocent young marginalized woman to a goddess is striking because Rani's relationship with Naga gave her the power to fight against the prevailing patriarchy.

## Conclusion

Satya Dev Dubey thinks Karnad to be "the only playwright in the history of Indian theatre to have treated adultery as normal and treated adulterous women sympathetically" (qtd.in Shah. Blog spot.com). In *Naga-Mandala* (1988), Rani agrees to accept the load and calls the Cobra, "Get in (to my hair). Are you safely in there? Good. Now stay there. And lie still. You don't know how heavy you are. Let me get used to you, will you?" (Karnad *Three Plays* 1994, II.64). In other words, Rani accepts her lover Naga forever in her life and family.

We see that Karnad is extremely convincing on the issue of the female gender. Aparna Bhargawa Dharwadker whilst interviewing Karnad enquired him if the deed of consciously discounting the evidence constructs Rani an amoral character. In reply, Karnad said, "I think we are all amoral to some extent, at least at some point in our life" (Karnad *New Theatre Quarterly* 1995, 359). He then shared his personal life by saying that when he was almost fifteen, it was disclosed to him that both his parents had been married previously. His mother had been widowed when she was merely nineteen. In the 1940s, Brahmin widows were made to shave off their heads and were restricted to the kitchen. However, Karnad's mother was a bold woman who took a courageous move and became a nurse. There she saw Karnad's father (a doctor) who had a sick wife. Karnad's parents later got married, but their first marriage was held a secret from Karnad and his siblings till they were in their teens. The drive behind hiding this reality was middle-class decorum. Karnad says, "this late revelation made me aware that my mother was human, had human desires" (Karnad, *New Theatre Quarterly* 1995, 359). It is, thus, as a consequence of Karnad's personal account that his female performers emerge as humans who need sexual satisfaction and struggle to get it.

Each night, Naga arrives and satisfies Rani's wants and desires. In the morning, Appanna comes back for meals and as typical of him, abuses Rani. When she gently enquires and questions about his coming in the night for love, the disguised husband, Naga, mutes her with his honeycomb of love.

Mirroring Rani's emotional discord, Karnad also subverts the linear, patriarchal form. Karnad boldly reveals his intent – to question the issue of power and control over Indian women in both the representational sphere and its political trajectory. The construction of Rani's oppositional consciousness results in her ability to negotiate between the centre and the margin and speak to the complexities that lie between these two worlds. She does not, however, accept the known sense of centre and margin, whereby the centre is the male stronghold and the margin of his conquered women. For her, the centre is herself, her life and her world-view as a representation of Indian women, and as such, her journey from innocence to experience becomes one in which she displaces and destabilizes the patriarchal world and world-view and makes *her* gender recognizable.

The methodology used in the article superintends the element that power subtleties, created on one's race, gender, capability, and added types, function in everyday, taken-for-granted, and "common sense" means. Though attitudinal alterations and multinational education (for instance) are required ideas of withdrawal for forming a complete society, they do not discourse the embeddedness of prejudice and bigotry as tedious acts in the patriarchal society.

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