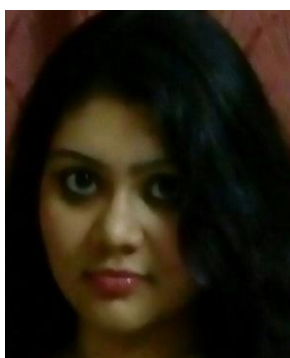




THE POSTMODERN FEMINISM AND MYTHOLOGY IN THE PLAY "NAGAMANDALA" AND THE FILM "HISS"

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this project is to revitalize the individuality of a woman as a human being from the prolonged adversity suffered in patriarchal society through Post Modern Feminism. We have a tradition of paying respect to women but we never practice what we preach. As a result women suffer certain injustices on account of their sex and they are being treated with sarcasm. They are regarded as unequal and inferior. While Feminism focusses more on bringing female gender into the main stream of social strata by ensuring them equality in all fields with that of men, Post Modern feminism tries to elevate their position by attributing divinity. The play *Nagamandala* by Girish Karnad and The Hollywood and Bollywood movie *HISS* directed by Jennifer Chambers Lynch deals with such postmodern feminist views intermingled with mythology.

KEY WORDS: Postmodern feminism, Nagamandala, Myth, dignity of women

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural renaissance is a post- colonial aspect of independent India. Writers like Karnad who was both Indian and English in his writings effected a tension between the East and West. He did this by taking the raw materials for his plays from the myths and legends of his native state Karnataka. GirishKarnad is the most important name in the area of play writing in Indian English Literature. The greatness of Girish Karnad lies in the success on the stage as well as among the readers. Girish Karnad introduces existentialist issues like identity, split personality, ideological break-ups and dichotomy of life in his plays. His play *HAYAVADANA* deals with the problem of identity and search for completeness in life. His play *TUGHLAQ* deals with dual personality of the king. *THE FIRE AND THE RAIN* presents again juxtaposition of various ideas and emotions in the background of myths. GirishKarnad

loves to discover less known and obscure myths, tries to understand their significance and relate them to the chosen story. Thus he succeeds in providing romantic charm to his plays. Folklore and myth move side by side in most of his works where he mixes issues relating to human existence. Love and hate, trust and treachery, penance and unethical conduct, power and weakness, sacrifice and murder are juxtaposed to each other in the play.

Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* focuses on man-woman relationship, the failure of man to treat woman as an individual and provide space for the fulfilment of her personality using a popular myth of the king cobra which prevails among *Kannadigas* to this day. The folk beliefs and myth of cobra give a romantic charm to the story. Rani (the central character) decides to drug her husband Appanna with a love root in order to win his

affection. The curry in which she mixed the love root was spilled on the Naga (the king cobra). Naga who can take the form of a human being is enchanted with her and begins to visit her every night in the form of her husband. One of these days, she gets pregnant and breaks the news to Appanna. He accuses her for adultery. Rani is then asked to prove her fidelity by putting her hand in the snake burrow. She succeeds in that attempt and declared chaste by the Village Panchayath.

Jennifer Chambers Lynch (born on April 7, 1968) is an American film director and screenwriter, also known for writing the book *The Secret Diary of Laura Palmer*. *Hiss*, also known as *Nagin: The Snake Woman* is a 2010 film directed by Jennifer Lynch. George States (the villain) suffers from the last stage of brain cancer and has only six months to live. In order to prevent death and gain immortality, he decides to extract the 'Nagmani' (snake-spirit) from Nagin (half-human, but with a serpent's tail). George attempts to capture the Nagin during intercourse with her mate Nag. He captures her by using her dying mate as bait to a trap. Angered by the death of her mate by the hands of George, she takes on a huge form: half snake, half woman and brutally murders him.

Both the drama and the film are created with the basis of myth and superstition, fact and fantasy, instinct and reason, the particular and the general and this rare blend leads to universal evocations. The play *Nagamandala* and the film *Hiss* are inspired by the snake myths prevalent in South India. From a historical point of view, myth is directly proportional to custom, culture and conventions. In a nutshell it is used to reinstate the socio-religious structure and order in society.

In both works they are projecting the female protagonist under the influence of similar psycho mythical nexus. Snake has a major role in both works. Snake has been a favourite subject of folklores, myths and legends of ancient India. Snakes are also capable of coming to the aid of human being even by changing or transforming their form as in *Nagamandala* and *Hiss*. Transformation is a recurring feature in myths and is an integral part in the play and film. The main transformation in the play is that of the cobra assuming the form of Rani's

husband Appana. In the film *Hiss*, Snake is transmuted into woman and mixture of woman and serpent-like traits. The theme of patriarchal tyranny, female and male sexuality, adultery and chastity are woven into this theme and it enables the writers to present complex human experiences. Both GirishKarnad and Jennifer Lynch are concerned with the basic theme of women power and Mythology. The feminine character as portrayed by Karnad in *Nagamandala* and Jennifer Lynch in *Hiss* is not the stereotypical woman found in contemporary writings. Karnad gives to Rani a spiritual power that would border on postmodern feminist perspectives as well as interpretations on the Indian myth surrounding the snake which has survived centuries of ritual and worship in parts of India.

KARNAD'S FEMALE PROTAGONIST: POSTMODERN FEMINISM

Girishkarnad is a prominent Indo Anglican writer who sought myth, legends and folktales as a character or theme in almost all his plays like *Yayati*, *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala*, *Tale-Dande* and *The fire and the Rain*. Here this study aims to analyse the use of myth in the play *Nagamandala*. A serious and meticulous attempt has been made to examine exhaustively how myths have panegyrically added to this play to enlighten the patriarchal community about the 'resurrection' of women from subjugation.

Nagamandala is based on two oral tales from Karnataka which Girish first heard several years ago from professor A K Ramanujan. (GirishKarnad's 'preface' to *Nagamandala*). These two plots make up *Naga-mandala*. The meaning and value of these tales go beyond those of the local variations and specificities that Ramanujan suggests. They have within their 'folk-mythologies', sthala- *puranas* or stories of local / regional life. In Karnad's hands, folklore transforms to resonate not only for whom the *Natyashastra* calls the *Sahrida* spectator (the spectator who knows the story and hence can readily relate to it), but also for the urban reader for whom the tale can, in transformed ways, emblemise crises in identity-formation and articulation. Karnad makes use of myths and folk forms in his plays to exorcise socio-cultural evils. He says in his introduction to the play, 'The energy of

folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning those values, of making them literally stand on their head (GirishKarnad's *Three Plays*, p-14) In *Naga-mandala*, Karnad not only exposes male chauvinism, the oppression of women, the great injustice done to them by patriarchal culture and men, but also overtly deflates the concept of chastity that undergirds the patriarchal mythic imagination across religion and language. As Ramanujan notes, myths and folk tales in a patriarchal society represent primarily the male's unconscious fears and wishes and have patriarchal constructs (Dharwadker, 413). In these stories, women's inner subjectivity and experiential realities often get subsumed into male concerns and troubles, usually to do with women and policing women's desire.

The subtitle, '*Play with a Cobra*' given by Karnad himself is an indicative of its theme and significance of the role of Cobra in it. *Nagamandala* is a powerful portrait of the agony and anguish faced by both men and women in their development into adult roles and social adjustment in a society where the individual is given little space for self-development, awareness and independence as beings (Santosh Gupta, *Nagamandla: A story of Marriage and Love*, 249). Appana always keeps his wife Rani in a locked room and does not allow her even to talk and smile with anyone. Somehow a cobra, closely associated with the mythical Lord Shiva who is great to grant anything to his devotees and worshipers, appears for her rescue, relief and recreation. Rani's frustration ends the moment she comes into contact with Naga. The Naga is a powerful symbol in Indian Mythology and Hinduism. These are regarded as having strong magical powers, vast knowledge and a capricious nature, which can quickly change from friendly and helpful to angry and malicious. There is also mythical element in the creation of circumstance of the cobra's love and affection to Rani. Karuddavva the blind women, as a part of helping Rani from miserable conditions, try to give her a root which has a magical power of creating love and affections (*Nagamandala*, Act 1 p. 13).

She prepared the paste and mixes it with milk but unexpectedly the cobra gets chance to drink it and the Cobra becomes in love with Rani. The myths regarding herbs or roots which have magical power are narrated in the mythology of India, Greek, Egypt, China etc. The herb *Acacia* has been connected to a resurrection and immortality in many religious traditions and magical contexts. In West African Vodun and African-American Conjure *Acacia* is used with frankincense and myrrh in rituals to contact the dead and to open the mind to visions (Catherine yronwode, *Hoodoo Herb and Root Magic*) Agrimony is used in African-American Conjure to reverse a jinx, curse, or hex after it has been put on you. It is used in protection spells, to banish negative energies and spirits and to reverse spells and send them back to the sender (web, Indian Mirror). Indian mythology narrates about the herb called Sanjeevani Booti which is capable of curing any woe irrespective of its type and origin (*Valmiki Ramayana, Yudhakanda*). In Indian myth, a miracle has been mandatory to establish the purity of a woman, while a man's mere word is taken for the truth. Here Rani was compelled to prove her chastity by putting her hand into the ant-hill where a king cobra lived. She should pull out the king cobra and take her oath by that cobra. It was same in case of Sita, the consort of Rama. She undergoes Agni Pariksha (an ordeal of fire) by which she proves her chastity before she is accepted by Rama (Wendy Doniger, *The Fire Ordeal in Hindu Myths* 198-204). After the ordeal of holding the cobra, the Cobra slides up her shoulder and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head. The crowd gasps. The Cobra sways its hood gently for a while, then becomes docile and moves over her shoulder like a garland. The whole crowd of elders was astonished to see this. They all began to believe that she was not a woman but a "divine being" (Act 2, p. 39 & 40). So King Cobra here turned up as a protector for Rani. This reminds us of a story in Hindu mythology where Lord Vishnu is seen resting on the coils of the serpent Shesha. Shesha has a thousand heads swinging to and fro over the form of Lord Vishnu, creating a shelter and couch for the Lord. So he uses the mythology to highlight Rani's position as a goddess in patriarchal society. Postmodern feminist

thoughts are applicable to great extent in this play. Rani the typical Indian women are 'resurrecting' from all type of evils of the patriarchal society and honored as goddess. Not only she is honored but her husband Appanna was forced to dedicate his life at her services. A husband who always tortured his wife mentally and physically turned to serve her. Rani is seen in the last part of the story to be in command of the household with some authority and decision making power. Appanna even agrees to her rather strange demand that their son should perform an annual "pinda-daan" in the memory of the dead snake. This change of patriarchal society is the ultimate aim of postmodern feminism. That means something more than equality.

Garish Karnad's effort to revitalize the individuality of a woman as a human being from the prolonged adversity suffered in patriarchal society is noticeable in his play *Nagamandala*. Its themes not only lead to feminism but also to postmodern feminism. The term postmodern feminism is believed to have begun and widely used in the 1980's. It is used to refer to the many different theories within the Feminism movement. The feminism was positive, as it was first established to help women receive the rights they deserved. In today's society, it is viewed by some that women's rights are as they should be and feminism is no longer needed, hence we are now in the postmodern feminism age. The term is viewed as to represent a new era for women and the thought that they are completely equal in today's society, moving on from the 'old' views of traditional feminism. The radicalized views of postmodern feminism truly feel it's time to move on from traditional feminism. They are wary of feminisms that posit a natural sisterhood of women, presupposing a universally shared experience of oppression. They argue, instead, that women have different experiences of oppression and that any solidarity women may develop should arise from women's consciously choosing to work together on an issue. They do not expect that such coalition building will be free of conflict among different women (and/or men) working together or that it should be. Women have been oppressed and discriminated in all areas. Their focus has been to

detail how the male dominated society has forced women into oppressive gender roles, and has used women's sexuality for male profit. Suppression of women, in one or in other ways has been continued socially, culturally, economically, politically and mentally after spreading the feminism activities around the world. Even after they got 'equality' by laws they are forced to live as 'subjugated community' under male domination. It has happened spontaneously in such a way, after the enlightenment of feminism. So it is necessary to give a 'new' point-of-view on society, when eliminating old assumptions about why things are the way they are, and looking at it from the perspective that women are not inferior and men are not 'the norm.' A postmodern feminist approach provides new tools that can be used by theorists/ writers to talk about feminism in terms that are entirely more empowering than previous applications.

Here GirishKarnad empowers postmodern feminist thoughts through the protagonist 'Rani' in his play *Nagamandala*. He very dexterously pictures the condition of a typical Indian female, ruled by the patriarchal order bounded by tradition, but whose spirit remains unbounded. In the beginning of drama Rani's arrival to her husband Appanna's house just after their marriage was with new dreams and expectations. But Appanna pays no attention to her, goes out, shuts the door, locks it from outside and goes away. She runs to the door, pushes it, finds it locked, peers out of the barred window. He is gone (*NagaMandala*, Act 1 p. 6).

In the tight noose of traditional marriage, Rani finds it very hard to have healthy marital and social interaction and to articulate her grievances and grudges, as Appanna keeps her "locked up like a caged bird". Rani longs to have freedom from the cruel clutches of Appanna. On the sexual plane, she is neglected; on the physical, she is bullied and beaten; on the emotional she is crushed; on the intellectual she is hushed up, and on the social she is almost ex-communicated. As a result, she is left with no voice and choice as a dignified member of human society.

Appanna, a typical representative of the male domination, decides to have sex with a concubine instead of his wife. Every woman has the

right to have sex and reproduce young ones with her husband. Here Rani was totally neglected as a wife or a woman. When he denied it her mind longed for it and a cobra came there to satisfy her. Cobra lover started visiting Rani at night and made love to her in the shape of Appanna. Appanna (naga) at night is loving, caring, understanding and passionate but Appanna at day time becomes harsh, cruel and neglecting. The woman in her might have experienced the difference between the love of Naga and ruthlessness of Appanna. But she neglects it for her interlining feminine thought. A. Jaganmohana Chari expresses views in this context: 'The dichotomy of lover and husband is in the tradition she has inherited. When she discovers in her experience in the end the difference between Naga's love and that of her husband, the feeling of experience hardly crosses the threshold of her consciousness because the experience of her head or conscience hardly matters in the world of patriarchal hegemony' (Jaganmohana Chari, *A Study in Postcolonial Dialectics*, pp. 148-153).

Man's ultimate aim is to make woman "a slave". She can't question any male including her husband. She has to obey whatever she was told by her husband or any other male. Here nobody permits Rani to question anybody-- Naga because of his deep passionate love for her and Appanna for his egoistic, male chauvinistic dominance (*Nagamandala*, Act 2 p. 32).

Appanna poses Rani as an adulterous woman whereas he himself has an illicit relationship with a concubine. He and his hypocritical society questions Rani's chastity when she became pregnant and they demand to prove her honesty by taking ordeal. If she failed in the ordeal they are ready to punish her. But they are not bothered about his immoral life. Nobody is intended to question Appanna regarding his misbehavior to his wife. Questions are only for women. Not for men. This is just a paradox of the patriarchal society that we live in. Here GirishKarnad's effort to emphasis man-women equality is noticeable. After questioning, Rani became not only equal to man but beyond the human being as a Goddess. This proves that men have more physical strength than women, but women have more spiritual strength than men. This

is the principle that is clearly established in Postmodern Feminism. The feminist community longed for this type of change and postmodern feminism has honored the sanctity of this phenomenal change of male domain.

NAGIN: A POSTMODERN FEMINIST REPRESENTATION

The Hollywood and Bollywood film, *HISS* directed by Jennifer Chambers Lynch is notable with the dominant heroine character. This film was released in 2012 with snake-woman as central character. The snake as central character is not a novelty in Hollywood films. There are so many films where snake has leading role like *Anacondas*, *Copperhead*, *Hard Ticket*, *King Cobra* etc. In Bollywood also there are so many films like *Sheshanaga*, *Nagina*, *Nigaahen*, *Nagin* etc. But *Hiss* is separated from those films, particularly those Hollywood films because of its theme which is taken from Indian mythology of *Garuda Purana* and this film promotes the empowerment of the feminism.

George States captures Nagin at the time of mating with her lover Nag for the purpose of taking Nagamani and use it for the curing of cancer. Nagamani from *Ichchadhari* Nag (cobra snake which have spiritual power to take any form of living being) and its healing power is described in Hindu mythology. According to *Garuda Purana*, the Hindu sacred text, a man in possession of such a cobra pearl will never be troubled by snakes, demonic beings, diseases, or disturbances in any form. Even it is believed to invite the gods of other world to help you and it can confer wealth of the other worlds (*Garuda Purana*- Chapter 69). As snakes grow, many of them shed their skin at various times, revealing a shiny new skin underneath. For this reason snakes have become symbols of rebirth, transformation, immortality, and healing. The ancient Greeks considered snakes sacred to Asclepius, the god of medicine. Asclepius carried a caduceus, a staff with one or two serpents wrapped around it, which has become the symbol of modern physicians.

Maya Gupta, wife of hero Vinkram Gupta was totally despaired of barrenness. His mother-in-law is a worshiper of snake goddess and she believes that fertility is possible with blessing of Snake

Goddess. Snake woman on the process of tracing out her mate, got a chance to stay in hero's house. She realized hero's mother-in-law's devotion to snake goddess. At the end of film Maya Gupta become pregnant with the blessing of snake woman. It is a usual custom in South India to worship snake goddess for the fertility of women. The Mannarasala Temple in Kerala, offer milk, butter, turmeric or rice powder as part of daily puja to the serpent deities. For women desiring children, a bell-metal vessel is offered. Thousands of barren women are visiting this temple. In Tamilnadu there is a custom called Naga Pratishta for the blessing of barren women. A stone image of a snake is first submersed in a spring or pond for a certain time to be impregnated with the mysterious power of the snakes living there. Then the barren woman circumambulates the Ashvatta tree and has the snake stone established under the tree.

The police inspector, who is trying to help her, find her mate, investigates the murders. Finally, she reaches George's hideout where she reclaims her mate and they engage in sexual intimacy. George attempts to capture the Nagin during intercourse since this will be when she will be at her most vulnerable. Wearing a suit that hides his heat signature, he lures her by using her dying mate as bait to a trap. He captures her and tries taking the *Nagmani* but at that moment, the police inspector arrives and helps her. Angered by the death of her mate by the hands of George, she takes on a huge form: half snake, half woman, and throws him in the same glass box where her mate was kept and electrocutes him. There is also some mythological factor about this transformation and revenge in Hindu mythology. Taksaka, the third Naga king sends some Nags disguised as hermits to kill the king Parikshit as a revenge of insulting the rishi who was in deep meditation. Taksaka also transformed himself into a caterpillar and entered into one of the fruits in the basket which were being taken to the king as an offering. Once inside the king's chambers, Takshak came out of the fruit, assumed his original form and bit Parikshit who immediately died and his body turned into ashes. This type transformation is also seen in other mythologies. In Greek mythology, Echidna was a half-woman and half-serpent monster

whose offspring included several dragons. Cecrops had a man's head and chest on a snake's body and was a culture hero to the Athenians. In Toltec and Aztec mythology, Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent, held an important place.

The film *Hisss* is based on not only mythological facts but also with perspicuous postmodern feminist views. When a male becomes angry for any reason, he is getting consolation by torturing a female. This can happen in the daily life of any women. This is a common phenomenon of Society. Nobody cares or worries about it because other terrific activities like rape, murder, cruel harassment by males are happening everywhere in our world. Here the heroine, the Snake woman, on the way to find out her mate, unexpectedly confronts some violence against herself and other women. Two criminals abduct the snake woman and try to rape her. In another occasion she witnesses a husband's brutal harassment to his wife in front of his children. She also witnessed a woman who's lead to coercible sex with the support of another woman. In all of these three cases she executed capital punishments to the culprits. In the third case woman induces to harass another woman, which is highly notable. Such type of incidents is recurring nowadays. Even though there are plenty of laws to protect women rights, harassment to women in many forms are increasing day by day. Postmodern feminism meant full protection and equal right to women as a human being. A life free from violence is part of human right, yet millions of women and girls suffer disproportionately from violence both in peace and in war, at the hands of the state, in the home and community. Violence against women is compounded by discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnicity, sexual identity, social status, class, and age. It is rooted in a global culture of discrimination which denies women equal rights with men and which legitimizes the appropriation of women's bodies for individual gratification or political ends. Every day, all over the world, women face gender-specific persecution including genital mutilation, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, domestic violence, rape and murder. At least one out of every three women worldwide has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her

lifetime, with rates reaching 70 % in some countries (Amnesty International, *End the Cycle of Violence*). The film *Hisss* reconciles with the message of postmodern feminism.

In this film the heroine executes the capital punishment to culprits in all women's harassment cases like rape, domestic violence and sexual assault. We know that it is not a message to accept because citizen has no right to take law in their hands. But she gives the message that women are capable to react to last extent if such type of harassment is continuing. In all most all cases women harassment, police men, as a part of male dominated patriarchal society try to settle the domestic violence instead of registering FIR. They think male has the right to do such things. Male must understand that women are also human beings, and they have no right to harass them.

In this context, it is highly worth to quote a paragraph from Amnesty International publication, *Violence Against Women, End the Cycle of Violence*, "Living free from violence is a human right, yet millions of women and girls suffer disproportionately from violence both in peace and in war, at the hands of the state, in the home and community. The film, *Hisss* reconciles with the message of feminism. The heroine in the film acts for the fulfilment of the women right. She demonstrates that if man has more physical power, women should have more spiritual power. Physical power can be overcome by spiritual power.

CONCLUSION

In both works, *Nagamandala* and *Hisss*, myth and postmodern feminism is scrumptiously blended to digest contemporary high tech society which is averse of honouring each other as human being. Myths are symbolic tales of the distant past that concern Cosmogony and Cosmology, may be connected to belief systems or rituals and may serve to direct social action and values. Through the concept of postmodern feminism women's spiritual power is raised to a higher degree of value than men's physical strength. Feminists have already defined, established and defended equal political, economic and social rights for women. Karnad pays adequate attention to his characters. They are living characters and are not devoid of life and vitality. In

fact, Karnad highlights those qualities of his characters which aid the development of his plot. His characters and plots are co-related. For his character-portrayals Karnad uses various devices such as dialogues, irony, contrast, parallelism, myths and even feminism. In his *Nagamandala*, Rani, an innocent girl who experiences the life of hell by her husband's callousness and infidelity is given the status of Goddess by the same husband Appanna and society.

In film, *Hisss*, heroine is very powerful with supernatural powers. She uses this power to protect women from various harassments they suffer in day to day life. She also uses her powers to bless the despaired women to get their desires. The characterization and directorial style of heroine as snake woman will strengthen the feminist thoughts.

Here GirishKarnad and Jennifer Lynch have facilitated the projection of their vision of empowering the women through postmodern feminism with the aid of myths and legends. Their works are the media where they raise socio-political and cultural problems prevalent as in Indian society and calls upon us to discuss and evolve a common consensus about how to keep the dignity of women

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