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## CULTURAL SEMIOTICS IN GIRISH KARNAD'S 'NAGA-MANDALA'

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### ABSTRACT

The paper titled 'Cultural semiotics in Girish Karnad's Nagamandala' explores the cultural symbols presented in the play Naga-Mandala (1987-88). Semiotics deals with symbols and signs that represent a meaning in the given context. Cultural semiotics studies the cultural signs and symbols. Naga-Mandala is a folk cultural play. The cultural context determines the true meaning of the play. The cultural construct generated by the patriarchal system is predominantly reflected in the play. The paper studies various signs and symbols presented in the play for understanding the deeper meaning of the play. It mainly focuses on the cultural symbols that represent Indian attitude through Hindu Myth. These cultural symbols and signs hints at open and unspoken messages. Naga-Mandala stays alive due to the richness of its symbols.

**Key words:** Naga Mandala, Culture, Semiotics study, Signs and Symbols, Representation, latent meaning, Conflict, Socio-cultural concerns.

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Girish Karnad, the Jnanpeth Awardee, is the most outstanding dramatic genius of the post-Independent Indian literature. The play Naga Mandala was written by Girish Karnad at the University of Chicago where he was a visiting professor. The play is based on two folk tales which Karnad heard from A.K. Ramanujan-one about lamp flames who gather late at night in a temple to gossip and the other about a cobra who visits a woman every night by taking the human form of her husband.

Naga Mandala reflects Indian cultural, religious, psychological and social life through the use of symbols. It projects the flaws in patriarchal culture, its modes of conduct, age-old traditional values and belief system existing in the past. It speaks of various issues such as man-woman

relationship, position and identity of woman, the impact of social and cultural modes on the feminine psyche and various concepts connected to Indian culture. The cultural codes used in the play reflect values, attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, superstitions and practices of Indian culture and community; they can be traditional, ritualistic, social, etc. The aim of this paper is to study Naga Mandala from the cultural semiotics point of view since the cultural codes used in the play plays a distinct role as they help in the construction of meaning.

**Prologue:** Naga-Mandala was presented in three parts: Prologue and two acts in tune with the classical Indian drama. The prologue was set in the inner sanctum of a ruined temple. The idol was broken and it was difficult to identify the presiding deity. It was night time and the moon lights swept

through the cracks of the roof and the walls. A playwright sitting in the temple and was trying very hard to keep himself awake. He was cursed that he would die in case he slept. For, he had bored the audience with his plays and their suffering turned into the curse of death.

The inner sanctum of a ruined temple. The idol is broken, so the presiding deity of the temple cannot be identified.

It is night. Moonlight seeps in through the cracks in the roof and the walls. (Karnad 247)

**The Location:** The location of the temple is repeated in Karnad's plays. As in the case of the play 'Bali, the sacrifice,' Naga Mandala also begins in a ruined temple. He presents it as a place where anything that is human is sacred, whether it is the act of having an illicit affair as in *Bali*, or the act of shedding blood within the four walls of the holy place as in *Hayavadana*. In Nagamandala, it becomes a place of gossip for the lamp flames. The state of the broken idol stands for the diminishing faith on God among the people. It represents the true state of man who is drowned in sins and hopes for forgiveness. The ruined temple, the broken idol, the moonlight beaming through the cracks in the roof suggests that the play shall unfold something more ethereal than merely material. In the play, it is a playwright who has to stay awake the whole night for having been cursed for making so many of his audience soporific in the past. In order to break the curse, he decides to spend the night in the temple. He finds solace in the presence of God and hopes to redeem himself. The play deals with the introspection of a playwright who was a failure. As he is struggling to remain awake, he hears female voices to his surprise. He hides behind a pillar in the temple. To his utter disbelief, naked lamp flames enter the temple giggling and talking to each other.

**The Flames:** The flames gather in the temple during night and gossip. Flame-1 is from a house where the master buys all the groceries because his wife is spendthrift. While Flame-1 feeds on Kusbi oil, Flame-2 is fed on coconut oil. When Flame-2 expresses her disgust for kusbi oil and peanut oil, Flame-1 asks her about her friend, the kerosene flame.

"Flame 2: Kusbi oil! Peanut oil! How disgusting! My family comes from the coast. We won't touch anything but coconut oil." (Karnad 249)

By presenting different flames burnt on different oil, Karnad symbolically and sarcastically comments on socio-economic situation prevalent in Indian culture for many centuries. The caste divisions, the attitudes of the people are reflected. The high caste people undermine the low caste people and show disrespect towards them. Flame-4 is able to come early because the young couple is enjoying erotic pleasure as the master's old ailing mother died. But flame -3 is unhappy since she has to witness what is better left to the dark as her master wants to see his beautiful wife naked in order to be erotically stimulated. The gossip of the flames resembles the discussion made by typical village women in India. They talk of their masters and mistresses, of their homes, their affections and sexual life. They also argue with each other on the quality of the houses they give light to. They set the background for the play and prepare the mood of the audience towards the theme. They describe the bad manners of various couples. The episode of the couple hints at the problems faced by the couple in the joint family system in India. The playwright tries to bring out the typical attitude of people of India through the flames not only by the tone of slandering and sneering but also by their eagerness to hear new tales about people, to mock, giggle and enjoy the fun. The gossip, the story telling, love making, the lighting of the flame and putting it off are all activities of the night.

**Sari and song:** The man and the story remain on the stage throughout the play while the flames too listen from a distance. In a drama both song and story go hand in hand on the stage. They enrich each other's performance and create a make believe situation by stimulating emotions among the audience. Hence, story comes to the stage wearing song as her sari. Sari is a traditional Indian dress which women have been wearing for centuries. It reflects the history and culture of Indian society. The role played by the playwright presents an autobiographic element of Girish Karnad. He speaks of why Girish Karnad started writing plays again

after the self exile from the theater until 1987. Though it is only a folk tale, it highlights the necessity of passing one's knowledge to others because culture can be enriched only through sharing and transmitting it.

**Names of Rani and Appanna:** The names of the two principle characters in the story, Rani and Appanna are significant. They are the common names found everywhere in India. The name Rani is used commonly for any woman who is dear to her husband or parents. The name Appanna is also a very common name found in the public. Through the names, Karnad indirectly suggests that it is the story of any common man. By giving these general names, Karnad aims to universalize the characters in the play. The spectators and the readers are able to identify themselves with the characters and this gives the play the stamp of universality.

**Dreams:** Rani feels lonely and frightened as she is imprisoned in the house and left alone. She repeats herself the nursery tale in which a girl is taken to her parents who cares her affectionately. She feels herself secure indulging in such fantasies. In the dream, Rani is taken to her parents by an eagle. The idyllic surroundings of the garden where she is carried by the eagle are typical of all Indian folk-tales, across the seven seas, on the seventh island, in a magic garden. The magical garden becomes an exotic symbol of a perfect world which every individual craves for, but which exists only in our imagination. Rani dreams of her parents, embraces them in her sleep and cries, the parents console her, reassure her that they would not let her go.

"Rani: Then Rani's parents embrace her and cry. They kiss her and caress her. At night she sleeps between them. So she is not frightened any more. 'Don't worry.' They promise her 'we won't let you go away again ever! In the morning, the stag with the golden antlers comes to the door. He calls out to Rani. She refuses to go. 'I am not a stag', he explains, 'I am a prince' (Karnad 255)

Rani's dreams show the inner workings of her psyche, they are an expression of her inner most desires and yearnings suppressed in her unconscious. Rani's dreams are highly symbolic in

nature representing the ideas lying hidden in her unconscious. When Rani dreams of her parents for the first time, she imagines an Eagle taking her to them. An Eagle, which flies in the sky with broad wings, symbolizes strength and courage. It also represents flight and freedom, which expresses Rani's yearning for release from her confinement. The stag with golden antlers coming to the door and calling reminds us of the plight of Sita in Ramayana. She seeks not only solace but also strength for survival. She gets satisfaction in her fantasy through her favorite nursery tale.

**Kurudavva and Kappanna:** Kurudavva represents a typical folk-tale character, who contributes to the escalation of the action in the play. She typically resembles the traditional Indian mother who worries about the well being of her daughter. Kurudavva's initiative paves way for the use of myth which constitutes a necessary aspect of a folktale. Kurudavva, the blind lady, mother of Kappanna and a friend of Appanna's deceased mother plays an important role in the play. Like a traditional elderly woman of India, she considers it her moral duty to set things right in the house of her dead friend's son. The blindness of Kurudavva signifies the wisdom she carries within her. Her words reveal the innate wisdom she possesses:

Kurudavva: Of course it is, silly! How can anyone be inside when there is a lock outside on the door? Tell me, can you see clothes drying inside? What kind of clothes? Any saris? Skirts? Or is it only men's clothes? (Karnad 257)

Kurudavva's conversation with Rani reveals her innate motherliness and Rani's desperation to be freed. Kurudavva's description of Rani is also typically Indian. She has her own stereo typed way of describing Rani's hibiscus like ears, skin like mango leaves and lips like rolls of silk. She feels sorry that such beauty as Rani's is languishing in loneliness. She wants to know whether Rani has ever been touched by her husband but Rani has not been instructed in Man-Woman relationship by her mother. The growing intimacy between the Cobra and Rani define the complexity of the theme. The conjugation between Rani and the Cobra is depicted through the dialogues between Rani and Kurudavva.

The affirmative response of Rani to Kurudavva's query if she has 'started her married life' ratifies the union. Kurudavva's giggling remark further ratifies the idea:

Kurudavva (laughs) Tired? Poor thing! So you see the power of my roots.

Didn't I tell you your husband will sting to you once he tastes it?(Karnad279)

Kappanna's devotion, affection and duty towards his blind mother is a sure sign of Indian culture. Though he is suffering from backache, Kappanna carries her on his back day and night. He is great devotee of mother, therefore, prays Lord Hanuman to give him strength, not for wrestle or fight, but for carrying his mother around. Duty and service finds rarely in youths and it presents Kappanna's good morality. The relationship between the mother and son is one of unaffected love and affection.

**The Herb:** It is remarkable that besides the use of Cobra myth, Karnad employs a number of supernatural beliefs prevalent in Indian culture. The herb of lure, an aphrodisiac, is another belief prevalent in the villages of India. Using herbs and roots is very common in villages of India to create love or to take revenge against someone. It is a practice quite common among the people of this culture to tie some roots or herbs to their body to get protection from evil or to get benevolences. They firmly believe that mother earth takes care of every problem that people encounter and suggests the way out especially for a woman. Whenever a woman suffers, Hindu mythology makes the earth as the ultimate asylum. Radhiga Priyadarshini compares Kurudavva to mother-earth, 'Kurudavva is the mythological earth mother displaced in the plausible human direction. She is associated with ploughs, roots, pebbles etc. Girish Karnad makes the earth erupt out in the form of Kurudavva, roots, plough, ant-hill and a serpent to rescue Rani and avenge Appanna'. (Priyadarshini 169-170)

**Appanna:** Appanna is the epitome of Indian masculinity. He represents typical patriarchal culture. He shows his supremacy by arresting the spouse's selfhood within the four walls of the house. Appanna is the king of his house, a supreme egoist. He represents male chauvinist. For him, submitting his sexual impulses means being submissive to his

wife. He literally cages his wife in his dwelling. He treats Rani as if she were an object without life and feelings. He regards Rani as his personal property and adopts a possessive attitude towards her. He has cold contempt for her. The innocent and innocuous woman is in his view a culprit or a potential criminal deserving solitary confinement. While he enjoys extra marital sex, he does not like anybody even to talk to her. It can be noticed that Appanna and Naga are the two faces of a single man, one seen at day, the other at night symbolize the "double standards" of man. Karnad says "The position of Rani in the story of Naga Mandala, for instance, can be seen as a metaphor for the situation of a young girl in the bosom of a joint family where she sees her husband only in two unconnected roles – as a stranger during the day and as a lover at night. Inevitably, the pattern of relationships she is forced to weave from these disjointed encounters must be something of a fiction."(Karnad 314) Simon de Beauvoir's assertion that "One is not born a woman, but rather, becomes a woman" (Beauvoir, 351) is quite sound and appears equally applicable in case of man. One is not born a man, but rather becomes one under the impact of the existing socio-cultural and economic forces. In this play, Appanna is not born a man, but becomes one under the male-hegemonic social system. On the whole, Appanna's absolute superiority over his wife, his minimal communication with her, her separation from all male and female companionship and his gender biased inhuman treatment with his wife are some examples of patriarchal culture's tyranny against women, to which Appanna is a representative. Appanna is not a human being rather he is like a wild beast in the guise of man, but under the cover of patriarchy he oppresses Rani, thereby ignoring her existence as a human being. Indeed all his treatment and behaviour presents false morality.

**Rani's father:** Rani's father represents the role of a typical Indian father. He arranges her marriage with a parentless young boy with plenty of wealth, but the choice of Rani is overlooked taking for granted that she is incapable of taking decision. Alike many Indian fathers, he looks at the marriage from a materialistic perspective, thereby overlooking all

other aspects of healthy and meaningful marital life: "Her fond father found her a suitable husband. The young man was rich and his parents were both dead" (Karnad 253). Here the word "suitable" is used ironically.

**The Dog:** The dog stands for the will power of Appanna. The death of the dog implies the death of his will-power and therefore infuriates Appanna. The dog that was initially brought for human-intruders proves to be futile. On the death of the dog, Appanna buys a mongoose as a guard. A mongoose can't guard humans. Therefore, it is for the snake or Appanna's sexual self that he sets a watchdog at the beginning itself. The mongoose is evidence enough. It says that the mongoose had given a tougher fight and so there was no sign of Naga for the next several days and when he does arrive, his body was covered with wounds that had only partly healed.

**The Naga:** In the play, Karnad used the traditional symbol 'Naga' artistically and effectively to bring out many messages. The role of snake effected lives of many and redefined many relations especially of Rani and Appanna. The snake through its acts has given Appanna a new way of life. It is through the snake which is worshiped for fertility that Rani is conceived and it brings a complete change in her life. Snake has been used as an age-old symbol of male sexuality, long black tresses as the female sexuality, night as the personal aspect of human being and day as public front. In the south Indian villages, there is a ritual among women to pour milk in ant hill occupied by cobras on a certain day in a year; 'Nagulachaviti', 'Naga- panchami' the fourth day and the fifth day of the waxing period of the moon. It is a way of propitiating the phallic symbol. Naga is the phallic symbol worshipped by unmarried girls and the supposed barren women, the former for getting good husbands and the latter to become mothers, of which Rani in *Naga- Mandala* becomes a mother and gets a good husband. Naga pratistha, the setting up of naga icons is another fertility rite. Nagamandala depicts the divine union of male and female snakes. When Rani finds the pastry of the second root boiling blood red, she is afraid of administering it to her husband. So she pours it over the ant hill, the home of Naga and he accepts it. In

ordinary practice it is a symbolic invitation to the phallic symbol. In the realm of man-woman relationship, the Naga can be taken as a symbol of a man who is capable of fulfilling a woman's secret desire. To quote Rajinder Paul, "It is a play where a cobra plays the lover and proves to be better behaved than his human counterpart who is as insensitive as a husband as we read about in bad tales." (Rajinder Paul, p.31)

In Indian cultural context, the Naga represents the vertebral column present in human body. As per the parlance of ancient yogic system of India, one has to channelize the energies present in the vertebral column (Kundalini) with continuous conscious contemplations. It is believed that these energies will elevate and bestow the divine blessings with which splendor of life can be experienced by the practitioners. It is believed that the kundalini energy can even raise the mundane man to super mundane level. In the play also, Naga appears and gives blissful life to Rani. He transforms the life of Rani by giving everything she sought after and also elevated her to the level of divinity. At the end of the play everyone treats Rani as goddess.

**The snake Ordeal:** The snake ordeal that Rani performs in order to prove her innocence stands as a cultural code of India. It reminds us of Sita's trial in the *Ramayana*, and it shows its affinities with the traditional Indian values. In ancient Indian villages there is a tradition that to prove one's honesty one would either have to hold red hot bar of iron in the hand and entreat innocence or to take snake ordeal. In the play Rani performs the snake ordeal as ordained by Naga. She takes snake ordeal where she has to put her hand into the ant hill and pull out the snake. After which she has to make her statement by promising in the snake's name. It is a belief in that society that if the person has said the truth then the snake would bless that person, if not, it would bite the person which eventually lead to the death of the person. Rani walks up to the ant- hill, plunges her hand into it pulls the cobra out and says:

"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 of the male sex. Nor have I allowed any other male to touch me. If I lie, let the cobra bite me." (Karnad 292)

The whole trial of Rani with the king cobra spreading its hood over her can be seen as having symbolic significance. The period of the Rani- Appanna as Naga- relationship is the period of learning, of assessing, for both. In the early marriages that were so common in India some five or six decades ago, physical maturity preceded emotional and psychological maturity and this caused pain and suffering in most cases. This is symbolized in the trial. Rani is willing to face death to prove her fidelity and her truthfulness brings about a change of heart in Appanna. R. Radhiga Priyadarshini compares the western and eastern views of a snake. While in the west a snake is considered 'demonic', in the east they acquire the status of a deity especially in Hindu mythology and folklore (Priyadarshini 165).

The end of *Naga Mandala* is also exceptionally symbolical. The playwright has suggested two ends and both the ends convey the same meaning with equal intensity. According to the first ending, the snake sacrifices itself for Rani's marital bliss. When Naga died Rani requested her husband to allow her son to perform the last ritual of Naga. The second ending suggests the entry of Naga into her long black tresses, symbolizes his eternal presence: "This hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss. Live in there happily, forever." (Karnad 300). In the second, the more romantic one, it snuggles in her tresses and remains a constant danger to Appanna's patriarchal authority:

RANI (*softly, to the Cobra*). You? What are you doing here? He'll kill you. Go.

Go away. No! Not that way. He's there. What shall we do? What shall we do?

Why did you ever come back here, stupid? (*Suddenly*) My hair! Of course, Come, quick. Climb into it. (*She lets her hair down to the floor.*) Quick now. Get in.

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? (*Appanna comes in with a stick.*)

It went that way towards the bathroom. (*Appanna rushes out of the bedroom, toward*

*the bathroom, looking for the snake. Rani pats her hair.*) (Karnad 299)

Karnad wants to point out a social reality with the snake ordeal: Why village elders did not ask Appanna to prove his innocence? Why there is the moral code of conduct for women only why not for males? Why is it that a woman has to face all these problems? All these questions remain unanswered or rather there is no answer to these questions. By presenting this socio-cultural reality, Karnad compels society to fight against moral insensitivity, inhuman customs and cultural lethargy of the times.

**Rani:** Rani is the central character in the play. The whole story revolves round her. The story of Rani represents the story of every woman. Rani, like every girl in India, lives with her parents till she is married; then, suddenly her husband's house becomes her home. The plight of Rani in the locked house symbolically describes her position in the house where she has no contacts against the wishes of her husband. As a young girl, Rani has desires and dreams, needs and necessities, but she has to suppress all of them in the face of stiff and strong hegemonic system. The prime factor behind her silence and submission is that she has been counseled and conditioned to be cordial and co-operative; shy and submissive, timid and tolerant in her marital life. As a result, she fails to gather courage and confidence to question the exploitative and oppressive system. "This solitary confinement of Rani by Appanna in the house symbolizes the chastity belt of the Middle Ages, the reduction of women's talents to housework and the exclusion of women from enlightenment and enjoyment" (Sarat Babu. M 239)

Rani is the symbol of a woman's eternal endurance of this oppression. She is like other Indian wives, suffers from an acute sense of loss and lassitude within wedlock. She suppresses her urges-sexual, social and psychological. Rani observes all her domestic traditional duties sincerely. Though her husband makes her captive in the house, exploits her feelings and gives mental tortures, she remains loyal to him. She does not complaint about anything. She tolerates all his injustices mutely like a traditional Hindu wife. She remains a dutiful and obedient wife despite of Appanna's rude and cruel



behaviour. Alike the Indian wives, she is also concerned about the safety of her husband: "Suppose something happens to my husband? What will my fate be? Forgive me god. This is evil. I was about to commit a crime. Father, mother how could your daughter agree to such a heinous act" (Karnad). No tradition-bound Indian woman likes to see her husband die before her death and wants to become a widow. Born and brought up in the man-made system, she is averse even to the idea of death of her husband while she remains alive because she knows that the life of a widow is not only vulnerable but also painful. Indeed, Rani is culturally virtuous and religious minded woman. Her devotion and loyalty is unquestionable. Therefore, she stands for good morality.

The position of Rani in the story of *Naga-Mandala*, can be seen as a metaphor for the situation of a young girl in the bosom of a joint family where she sees her husband only in two unconnected roles—as a stranger during the day and as a lover at night. In Indian society a woman is expected to perform unquestionable obedience to her husband as Rani does in this play. She has no right not only to refuse her husband but also to question him. Appanna openly and unashamedly commits adultery, but nobody objects to it; the village elders who sit in judgment do not find any fault with him. Nobody was ready to believe the innocence of Rani. She sleeps with Naga without knowing his identity. She does not discover the identity of Naga who assumes Appanna's form by using its magical power. Her failure to discover the truth is the suppression of her reason and intuition by the strong warning of Appanna and Naga not ask any question. If she had discovered the real identity of Naga she would not have allowed him to enter her house. Rani is frigid and despises sex. What she craves for is the affection which Naga gives her in plenty by functioning as a substitute parent for a while. By using his erotic art Naga cures her frigidity. What Rani does and what she suffers is not due to some weakness in her character. Like Oedipus, who murders his father and marries his mother unknowingly, Rani also commits the sin of adultery due to lack of knowledge of the real identity of Cobra. But the society, based on the patriarchal

norm never forgives a woman who lost her chastity. On the whole, Rani, the chaste woman represents good morality whereas her adulterous and duty-avoiding husband stands for false and egoistic morality of patriarchal culture.

#### Conclusion

Naga mandala signifies the cultural world of India. Patriarchy, socio-cultural practices, parents of Rani, Appanna, Rani, Kurudavva, Herbs, Naga, Dog, Snake ordeal, Village elders, etc are the tools mirror the culture of India. It also depicts the condition of an Indian woman. In the Indian context, it is imperative that Rani does not walk out of her husband, nor would it be in the fitness of things to have a lover. A woman must gain at least her status, if not, emancipation within the rules set up. Karnad was conscious of the controversy the play could raise if Rani was to have Naga as her lover. Naga must die and the people must believe that Rani was an epitome of chastity. Rani, it seems, is relieved at the end that her lover was no more than a snake and dismisses the whole thing after a customary homage. It seems that she herself would not like to admit having a lover. The stories in India must conform to the Indian minds reservation about human behaviour. Karnad was conscious of it, as were the earlier storytellers and avoided themes of incest or marital infidelity in women.

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