RESEARCH ARTICLE

NAGAMANDLA: A Magical Saga of Myth and Culture

PARAMJIT KAUR

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Government Brijindra College
Faridkot, Punjab, India
Email- saachidrishikaurbedi@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze Girish Karnad's play Nagamandala by exploring its intricate interplay between myth, reality, and dreamlike experiences that shape the protagonist's journey. A detailed examination of the text reveals how Karnad masterfully weaves Indian folklore into a dramatic critique of contemporary life. The playwright employs traditional folktale elements, including mythic structures and supernatural impositions on human and non-human entities, to highlight the plight of the Indian woman entrapped within a patriarchal framework and constrained by cultural norms.

Through its multi-layered narrative structure, the play merges conventional and traditional storytelling modes across four interwoven levels. The complex network of interrelated stories, triangular relationships, and triple endings reflects the cultural intricacies embedded in Indian society. This study seeks to investigate the magical and mythical dimensions of the text through the lens of cultural studies, unraveling the complexities within the social fabric.

Keywords: Myth, cultural complexities, magic, folklore.

Introduction

Girish Raghunath Karnad, a towering figure in modern Indian drama, has left an indelible mark on contemporary theatre through his exceptional works in both Kannada and English. Born in 1938, Karnad was not only a playwright but also an actor, director, and scholar whose contributions to literature and theatre redefined the cultural landscape of post-independence India. His literary and artistic pursuits were deeply rooted in the intersection of history, folklore, mythology, and contemporary socio-political concerns. Karnad's ability to seamlessly blend indigenous storytelling traditions with modern theatrical techniques set him apart as one of the most innovative playwrights of his time.

Karnad was honored with the Jnanpith Award, the highest literary recognition in India for Kannada literature, cementing his status as a pioneer in the field. His plays often serve as a bridge between the past and the present, reviving traditional narratives while infusing them with modern existential dilemmas, thus making them universally relevant. He engaged deeply with themes of identity, power, gender, and human destiny, using mythology and history as vehicles to interrogate contemporary realities.

One of his most remarkable and widely acclaimed plays, *Nagamandala* (1987–88), stands as a testament to his unique storytelling prowess. The play finds its origins in two oral Kannada folktales that Karnad first encountered through his mentor, the renowned scholar A.K. Ramanujan. These folktales, passed down through generations, form the narrative foundation of *Nagamandala*, a play that masterfully intertwines fantasy, mythology, and magic realism. By doing so, Karnad creates an evocative and layered exploration of illusion versus reality, societal oppression, and gender roles.

Nagamandala was initially written in Kannada and later translated into English by Karnad himself, expanding its reach beyond regional boundaries and enabling a global audience to engage with its themes. The play's reliance on Indian folklore, traditional storytelling, and oral narratives serves a dual purpose—on the one hand, it pays homage to India's vast and vibrant narrative traditions; on the other, it constructs a powerful social critique of gender norms, patriarchy, and the subjugation of women in traditional Indian society.

Indian culture is profoundly enriched with an extensive repository of myths, legends, parables, and folktales, all of which serve as conduits for articulating and preserving societal values, moral dilemmas, and historical consciousness. These narratives, often transmitted through oral tradition, act as both entertainment and moral instruction. As literary scholar J.L. Shastri aptly observes, *"Myth, at all events, is raw material, which can be the stuff of literature."* This underscores the fundamental role myths play in shaping and structuring literary expressions.

Despite their immense cultural significance, myths and folktales have often been dismissed as primitive fiction or irrational superstitions. However, far from being mere products of ancient imagination, they serve as cultural constructs that encode and transmit fundamental truths about human existence, social hierarchies, and collective belief systems. The renowned critic M.H. Abrams defines folktales as narratives that are orally transmitted and preserved across generations, encapsulating communal wisdom,

traditions, and moral frameworks. These tales encompass a diverse array of storytelling forms, including legends, superstitions, songs, riddles, proverbs, nursery rhymes, and even pseudo-scientific folklore that explain natural phenomena and human experiences.

Through *Nagamandala*, Karnad breathes new life into these age-old narratives, not merely retelling them but reinterpreting them in a way that challenges existing cultural constructs. The play serves as a feminist revisionist text, where Karnad employs myth and folklore not to reinforce patriarchal ideologies but to expose and critique them. His portrayal of Rani, the central female protagonist, underscores the internalized oppression and psychological turmoil faced by women in a rigidly male-dominated society. By using elements of magical realism and metamorphosis, Karnad allows the narrative to transcend the limitations of realism, opening up possibilities for subversion and reinterpretation.

In essence, *Nagamandala* is much more than a simple dramatization of folk tales; it is a sophisticated and deeply layered text that engages with gender politics, power structures, and the intersection of tradition and modernity. Karnad's masterful use of traditional storytelling devices to highlight contemporary issues affirms his position as one of India's most significant and enduring playwrights. His works continue to be a source of profound intellectual inquiry, cultural introspection, and dramatic innovation, making him a cornerstone of modern Indian theatre.

Methodology

In a patriarchal society, myths and folktales are not just stories but ideological constructs that perpetuate male-centric fears, desires, and worldviews. These narratives often marginalize or suppress the voices, emotions, and lived realities of women, reinforcing traditional gender roles and sustaining the existing power structures. By examining such stories through the lens of cultural studies, the writer uncovers the socio-cultural mechanisms that shape identity, hierarchy and gender relations.

As cultural theorist M.A.R. Habib observes, "Culture refers to the beliefs, rituals, and practices of a given social or ethnic group or nation." Culture, therefore, is not a static entity but an evolving system of meanings that both reflects and shapes human interactions. Cultural studies, as an interdisciplinary field, spans across history, literature, anthropology, sociology, and psychology, providing a critical framework for analyzing how texts both produce and challenge dominant ideologies. When applied to literature—especially drama—cultural studies expose the tensions between tradition and modernity, individual agency and collective norms, and oppression and resistance.

This study employs cultural studies theory to analyze Girish Karnad's Nagamandala, focusing on how he reinterprets and subverts a traditionally male-dominated folktale to foreground the experiences and psychological evolution of both men and women. By adapting a patriarchal folk narrative, Karnad does not merely retell an old myth but reconfigures it, creating a space where gender oppression, marital discord, and social conditioning are critically examined.

A crucial aspect of this study is understanding how Karnad employs myth, folklore, and oral tradition as tools to challenge and redefine cultural narratives. The play blends elements of magical realism, psychological realism, and symbolism, presenting an interplay between the supernatural and the socio-political reality of women in Indian society. While patriarchal folktales traditionally reinforce female passivity and male dominance, Karnad's reinterpretation in Nagamandala allows for an exploration of female agency, desires, and suppressed voices.

Additionally, this study explores the psycho-social dimensions of Karnad's characters, particularly how Rani's transformation from an obedient, subjugated wife to a revered, almost divine figure reflects a larger commentary on societal structures. The play presents a unique psychological transition, not only for Rani but also for Appanna, whose perception of masculinity and power is challenged by the events that unfold. By doing so Karnad dismantles the rigid

binaries of virtue and sin, chastity and infidelity, power and submission, offering a nuanced understanding of human relationships in a deeply entrenched cultural framework.

Thus, this study examines Nagamandala as an act of cultural negotiation, where Karnad simultaneously engages with and resists the historical constructs of gender, sexuality, and authority. Through this lens, the play becomes more than a retelling of a folktale—it becomes a site of ideological contestation, where the conflicts between personal identity, cultural tradition, and systemic power are laid bare.

Focus of This Paper

This research aims to critically analyze how Girish Karnad employs magical folklore as a literary and theatrical device to expose the cultural complexities, gender dynamics, and existential dilemmas embedded within Indian society. While many playwrights have drawn inspiration from myths, history, and legends, Karnad's approach stands out due to his subversive reinterpretation of traditional narratives. Instead of merely preserving folklore, he refashions it, infusing it with contemporary relevance while questioning deep-seated social hierarchies, rigid moral codes, and the often contradictory nature of human desires.

Karnad's use of magical realism—a technique that blends the real with the fantastical—allows him to navigate the tensions between fate and free will, patriarchy and female agency, tradition and modernity. His play *Nagamandala* exemplifies this interplay by transforming an oral folktale into a social allegory that critiques the systemic oppression of women within a patriarchal framework. Through elements of magic and mythology, Karnad not only constructs a dreamlike narrative world but also creates a space where silenced voices—especially those of women—can be heard and redefined.

A key focus of this paper is to examine how Karnad's dramatic techniques transcend conventional storytelling by incorporating:

- Symbolism and Allegory: The magical elements in *Nagamandala*—such as the enchanted love potion, the snake's transformation, and the trial by

PARAMJIT KAUR

fire—serve as metaphors for gendered oppression, societal hypocrisy, and the paradoxes of morality.

- Psycho-social Exploration: The play delves into the psychological turmoil of its characters, portraying Rani's evolution from a submissive wife to a figure of divine power, thus questioning the societal constructs of purity, chastity, and honor.

- Blurring of Reality and Illusion: By integrating magical elements into everyday experiences, Karnad highlights the fluidity of truth and the constructed nature of reality, especially in the context of folklore, belief systems, and gendered expectations.

- Interrogation of Cultural Norms: Karnad's use of folklore is not nostalgic but critical—he challenges its inherent biases, reclaims its potential for social commentary, and reinterprets its messages for modern audiences.

This paper argues that Karnad's use of magical folklore is not merely an aesthetic choice but a deliberate narrative strategy that enables him to engage with existential absurdities, emotional conflicts, and the unending human quest for self-fulfillment. Through this approach, *Nagamandala* and other such works become living cultural dialogues, encouraging audiences to rethink inherited traditions and question the societal structures that govern personal and collective identities.

By closely examining these aspects, this research seeks to unravel the intricate ways in which Karnad transforms folklore into a critical discourse on power, gender, and social transformation, making his plays deeply resonant, revolutionary, and relevant across generations.

Nagamandala: A Mythical and Magical Play

Nagamandala stands as a paradigmatic fusion of myth, magic, and folklore, a play that transcends the boundaries of traditional storytelling to critique deep-seated gender roles, societal constructs, and the intricate realities of human relationships. By drawing upon Karnataka's oral folk traditions, Girish Karnad reclaims and reinterprets folklore, transforming it into

a site of subversion and resistance against patriarchal norms.

In his introduction to *Three Plays*, Karnad explains:

> *"Naga-Mandala is based on two oral tales from Karnataka, which I first heard several years ago from Professor A.K. Ramanujan. These tales are narrated by women—usually older women in the family—while feeding children in the evening or putting them to sleep. Although meant for children, these stories often serve as a subtle mode of communication among women in the family."*

This observation underscores the dual function of folklore—as both entertainment and coded discourse, a space where women express their lived realities, fears, and desires within an oppressive patriarchal framework. Through *Nagamandala*, Karnad transforms such narratives into a powerful feminist critique, revealing how folklore can be a tool for both sustaining and challenging dominant social structures.

Magical Realism and the Transformative Power of Storytelling

The play begins with an unconventional framing device: stories are personified as flames that come alive at night, gathering to gossip and take on independent agency. This magical premise challenges the boundaries between reality and fiction, suggesting that stories are not mere reflections of life but active forces capable of shaping human destiny. The fluidity of this narrative mode enables Karnad to bridge myth and contemporary reality, making the play a rich site for interpreting cultural anxieties and gendered oppression.

At the heart of *Nagamandala* lies Rani's journey, a young woman trapped within a rigid patriarchal structure. Her life takes a surreal turn when she is forced into an arranged marriage with Appanna, a neglectful and abusive husband. Isolated and silenced, she finds unexpected agency through the intervention of a magical love potion—an element drawn from folktale traditions that symbolize the impossibility of female autonomy within an oppressive social system.

The magical potion does not just change her fate but also unleashes a transformation that exposes the inherent contradictions of patriarchal morality.

Symbolism and Gendered Resistance

Nagamandala is not just a tale of enchantment; it is a layered allegory that interrogates the oppressive structures of marriage, chastity, and societal honor. Key symbolic elements include:

● The Naga (Serpent) as a Fluid Masculine Presence: The Naga, who shapeshifts into Rani's husband, represents a paradoxical figure—both a liberator and an enforcer of gendered roles. While he provides emotional and physical intimacy denied by Appanna, his presence reinforces the idea that women can only experience fulfillment through male intervention.

● The Love Potion as a Metaphor for Female Agency and Rebellion:

Rani's accidental administration of the potion challenges the established power dynamics in her marriage. However, the fact that she must rely on external magical intervention rather than her own volition highlights the constrained choices available to women in patriarchal structures.

● The Trial by Fire and the Construction of Purity: In a striking climax, Rani undergoes a traditional "trial by fire", a ritual deeply embedded in Indian cultural narratives of female virtue. The irony lies in the fact that she is declared pure not because of truth but because of the mythic, divine perception imposed upon her. Karnad uses this moment to satirize the arbitrariness of patriarchal morality, where truth and deception are often interchangeable based on societal convenience.

Cultural Constructs and the Role of Myth in Reinforcing Gender Norms

Karnad's play critiques the way myths and folktales have historically been used to regulate female behavior. As M.A.R. Habib's cultural studies perspective suggests:

"Culture refers to the beliefs, rituals, and practices of a given social or ethnic group or nation."

Folktales often function as both prescriptive and subversive forces—while they reinforce traditional norms, they also carry the seeds of resistance. *Nagamandala* plays with this duality, presenting a story where myth simultaneously oppresses and liberates its protagonist.

● Folklore as a Mechanism of Social Control: Women in patriarchal societies are often defined through mythological constructs—as chaste, submissive, or divine figures. Rani's journey reflects this entrapment within male-centered narratives.

● Myth as a Space for Hidden Female Expression: While folklore has been a tool of oppression, it also serves as a subterranean space where women's voices persist. The oral tradition of bedtime storytelling, which Karnad highlights, functions as an alternative discourse where women can subtly critique and negotiate their positions within society.

Conclusion

The Blurring of Reality, Myth, and Social Commentary *Nagamandala* exemplifies Karnad's ability to merge the mystical with the material, the mythical with the modern, and the magical with the mundane. By embedding folklore within his dramatic framework, Karnad not only resurrects ancient narratives but also infuses them with contemporary urgency. The play stands as a testament to the power of storytelling as both a cultural construct and a revolutionary act.

Through the lens of magical realism, *Nagamandala* critiques:

1. The illusion of female autonomy in patriarchal structures.
2. The arbitrariness of societal morality and purity codes.
3. The paradox of myths as both oppressive and liberatory.

By exploring these tensions, *Nagamandala* remains a deeply relevant and compelling work, urging audiences to question the stories they inherit, the myths they sustain, and the cultural norms they accept without scrutiny.

PARAMJIT KAUR

References

[1].   Shastri, J.L., ed., Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology, Vol. 1: "The Shiva Purana", Delhi: Motilal   Banarsidas, 1970,, pp. 229-230.

[2].   Nair, Lakshmi R. "Mythopoesis in Girish Karnad'sNagamandala, "Paulene Journal of Research and Studies", Vol 2, August 2010

[3].   Dhanavel, P. The Indian Imagination of Girish Karnad: Essays on Hayavadana, India: Prestige Books, 2000.

[4].   Dodiya, Jaydipsinh. Perspectives on Indian English Fiction. New Delhi: Dominant Publishers and Distributors, 2002.

[5].   Gatwood, L.E. Devi and the Spouse Goddess: Women, Sexuality, Marriage in India. Maryland: Riverdale Company, Inc., 1985.

[6].   Thompson, S. The Folklore. New York: The Dryden Press, 1946.

[7].   Vanashree. Three Plays of Girish Karnad: A Study in Poetics and Culture: Hayavadana Prestige Books: India, 2004

[8].   Zimmer, Heinrich. Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972.

[9].   Abrams. M. H. Glossary of Literary Terms. 7th Ed. Madras: Macmillan, 1995.63.Print Frye, Northrop. Anatomy of Criticism. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957.

[10]. Karnad, Girish. Nagamandala: A Play with a Cobra. New Delhi: OUP, 1990.Print. 11. Habib, M.A.R.: Modern literary criticism and theory A History. New Delhi: Blackwell publishing Itd., 2013