



## MAJOR THEMES IN GIRISH KARNAD'S NAGAMANDALA AS A SPLIT PERSONALITY AND IDENTITY CRISIS

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### ABSTRACT



We attempt in this paper is to study Karnad's plays from the point of view of Themes and Techniques. While doing so, the focus will mainly be on Man-Woman relationship with the institution of marriage in the postcolonial society. Karnad is India's best living playwright whose journey from *Yayati* to *Boiled Beans on Toast* holds a mirror to the very evolution of a truly 'Indian Theatre' which can be true to its traditions and at the same time responsive to contemporary concerns.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Patriarchal culture, Sexuality, Race, Gender, Folklore, Myth, Split Personality and Identity Crisis, Womanhood Brahminicide, byword, contemporaneity, continuance, existentialist, funny incensed, invulnerable, mythology, narrative, revenge, ruses, spawned and unnerving.

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### INTRODUCTION

*Naga-Mandala* was published in 1990. Originally it was written in Kannada and later the dramatist trans-created it into English. *Naga-Mandala* is a feminist play which not only exposes male chauvinism, the oppression of women, the great injustice done to them by men and the patriarchal culture, but also stealthily deflates the concept of chastity. The purport of the folk tale is seemingly to uphold the institution of marriage—it turns the unhappy married life of Rani into a happy one; however, at the same time, owing to its inherent quality of subversion, the same folktale deconstructs the idea that fulfillment of love and desires is found within the sacred predicts of married life. Is fulfillment achievable within marriage or outside it, is the question concealed within the very framework of *Hayavadana* as well as *Naga-Mandala*.

**Interpretating Meaning:** *Nagamandala* is a folktale transformed into the metaphor of the married

woman. It is a Chinese Box Story with two folktales transformed into one fabric where myth and superstitions', fact and fantasy, instinct and reason, the particular and the general blend to produce a drama with universal evocations. The predicament of '*Rani*' as opposed to the name is deplorable than of a maid. The name '*Rani*' ridicules at the Indian ideal of Womanhood as the Rani or Lakshmi of the household. As **Virginia Woolf** asserts in *A Room of One's Own*, "Imaginatively, she's of importance, practically insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover, is all but absent from history".

### Phases of Womanhood Portrayed in *Nagamandala*:

The woman is portrayed as dependant in all three Phases of her life – as a daughter (Rani's dependence on her parents), as a wife (Rani's reliance on Appanna) and, as a mother (Kurudavva's handicap without Kappana). In Indian Society, the woman is said to be complete only after marriage. However, paradoxically she neither belongs to this

world or that: her Parental home or her husband's abode. For the woman, the home is said be an expression of her freedom: it is her domain. However, Rani is imprisoned in her own house by her spouse in a routine manner that baffles others with door locked from outside. She does not shut the door behind her like Nora does in "A Doll's House", but God opens a door for her in the form of a King Cobra. The King cobra gets seduced by the love potion provided by Kurudavva to Rani to lure, pathetically, her own Husband who turns a blind eye to her. The Snake assumes the form of a loving Appana in contrast to the atrocious husband at day. The climax is reached when Rani becomes pregnant and Appana questions her chastity. Her innocence is proved by virtue of the snake ordeal that the village elders put before her, and she is eventually proclaimed a goddess Incarnate.

**Critical comments on Appana in Nagamandala:** 'Appana' literally means "any man" and points to the metaphor of man in general, his chauvinistic stance and towering dominance to the extent of suppressing a woman's individuality. Rani Endeavour's to discover her individuality by seeking refuge in dreams, fair tales and fantasies to escape the sordid reality of her existence. At an age where the typical fantasy would be a sultan or Prince coming on Horseback, Rani's flight of the imagination transports her to a seventh heaven where her parents wait for her. Critics show her body as a site of "confinement, violence, regulation and communication of the victimized gender – self". And they also point out how she later uses the same body to rebel, to subvert and to negotiate her space in society. Appana poses her as an adulterous woman whereas he himself has an illicit relationship with a concubine. He and his hypocritical society questions Rani's chastity and side – steps the validity of Appana's principles. This is just a miniscule has been mandatory to establish the purity of a woman, while a man's mere word is taken for the truth; whether it is Sita, Shankuntala or Rani in this instance .

**Appreciation of Author In the play:** The author also remarks of the identity of tales in general, about their reality of being and their continuance only on being passed on. The objectivity leads us to perceive

the story as concept with its own existence and identity; and to emphasize its individuality it is personified in form of woman. V.Rangan says "A Story is born and grows; it has life. Each story has an independent existence, and a distinctive character. All Story – tellers are ancient marines cursed to keep the story alive. The Story seems to echo that in order to live, a story has to be "told" and "re – told". I.e. the Story has no role without the listener or perceiver. And cannot help thinking that whether the author is stressing the reader's role in constructing meaning or phenomenology. The reader – response theory questions the endurance of the authors' viewpoint that has no existence without the reader's perception. Being "told" and "re – told" is nothing but "interpretation" and "re – interpretation". Therefore, any literary piece is only an object without the reader breathing meaning into it. So for the story to survive, it must be ultimately "Passed on". The backdrop of the flames emphasizes the idea of 'Passing on'.

Otherwise, the flames in the story were attributed with 'not having' – the qualities of 'passing on'. However, this is what they were precisely doing at the outset. Therefore, 'passing on' has wider ramifications here, that merely physically transmitting.

Again the playwright is a man, and the story is personified as a woman. So does Man create Woman? However, the playwright echoes that story has an autonomous existence and loves by virtue of interpretation and re – interpretation. Likewise, a woman has her own existence and lives by virtue of meaningful procreation. Thus, the gist of the framework of the story runs parallel to the theme of the main story. As Rani's role gets inverted at the end of the story and Appana turns into a mere "instrument to prove her divinity", likewise roles get reversed as the playwright (a man who tells stories) "listens" to the Story (a woman).

**Appana as a Split Personality:** The playwright hits the nail on the head when he asserts at the outset that "The idol is broken so that the presiding deity of the temple cannot be identified". Appana is the King of his castle, a supreme egoist. He is the prototype of Indian masculinity that asserts itself by arresting the spouse's selfhood within the four walls of the

house. Appanna literally cages his wife in his dwelling as she is subject to unmerited abuses and thwarted intentions. Naga or Snake with all its phallic connotations typifies the sexual side of Appanna. It is other side of Appanna which he himself cannot bring to accept for his sexual impulses, for him, is being submissive to his wife. Therefore, though these two aspects are completely disjoint – they are two sides of the same coin. *Heads and tails; heads – the ego and tails – the snake* following its instincts. That Naga is Appanna is indubitable from the very outset, the beginning of Naga's entrance.

**Naga:** You didn't. I am saying. Did it hurt .....? The beating this morning.

**Naga:** Locked up in house all day. You must be missing your parents. (Act 2; pg 39).

How does Naga revisit these facts? This offer ample proof that Naga is none other than Appanna, as Rani cannot and has no scope for communication with outsiders. Naga is Appanna minus his inhibitions. At night, he stoops to the limit of coaxing Rani for his own instinctual needs.

He renders himself loving and soothing at night. Paradoxically, he sets a watch – dog against his own self at night. This symbolically represents the guard he sets against his own instinct, that proves to be futile. Therefore, the tussle with himself, he gets defeated without accepting defeat, and ... "the scars remain". The Husband who inflicts injury at day becomes the Pharmakon at night. The spouse, who is the master at day, becomes submissive to his wife at night against his own will. **B.T. Seetha** states that instinct as a creative force reigns supreme in the plays of Karnad." In spite, of the reasoning it is the instinct that seems to win." (98 "Quest in Hayavadana and Nagamandala").

No, let's say that the husband decides on the day visits. And the wife on the night visits. I won't come at night if you don't want me to.

However, in the sub – consciousness mind – the knowledge remains: the Knowledge of the duality, the dissociative disorder.

**Naga (Seriously):** I am afraid that is how it going to be. Like that during the day. Like this at night. Don't ask me why.

He does not want to face questions as to the existence of his quality as it is something that he would prefer to deny than accept. A mirror to his split is too much for him to digest. The shielding of him from the mirror emblemizes this fact. For Rani, this is decisive point – the mirror stands for the crucial point of self – realization that Appanna's exclusive interest in her is purely sexual. This is why she retreats and refrains from making love to him when she sees his reflection in the mirror. She comprehends that there is no behavioral patterns of Appanna manifesting itself: like while asking Rani to adhere to unquestioning obedience Naga [...] when I come and go at night, don't go out of the room; don't look out of the window – whatever. And don't ask me why.

Rani likens herself to the whale but does not know why. She thinks herself to be a creature without any rational power only with basic instincts. She is now even attributed the power to think and is caged like an animal. In short she does not possess any persona, any identity. Her singularity is defined in terms of her husband's whims and fancies. There are various references to animals to exemplify the pre – dominance of the instincts or impulses.

The death of the dog implies the death of his will – power and therefore infuriates Appanna's. The dog that was initially brought for human – intruders proves to be futile. On the death of the dog. He buys a mongoose as a guard. Is a 'mongoose', a guard for human intruders? Certainly not!! 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 has given a tougher fight and because the mongoose had given a tougher fight, there was no sign of him for the next several days and when he does arrive; [...] his body was covered with wounds that had only partly healed.

Consciously, Naga is not aware of Appanna and Appanna refuses to acknowledge Naga. Perhaps, self – awareness does not creep in at the Climax when it most obvious to us.

Climax (she turns away, Naga takes a step to go. They both freeze. The lights change sharply from night to mid – day. In a flash, Naga becomes Appanna. Pushes her to the floor and kicks her.

**Identity crisis in Nagamandala:** Here the patriarchal hierarchy is explicit in expressionistic terms. For Appanna, the fact that his wife has committed adultery is more acceptable to conscious mind than the fact himself is Naga. For outsiders, the snake ordeal is test to prove the chastity of Rani. However, in reality, the rest is for Appanna to ascertain whether he himself is Naga, When the test ultimately does prove positive, the truth dawns ... Appanna = Naga. Therefore he had submitted to Rani. Therefore, she has triumphed over him... and therefore is elevated to the status of goddesses. Hence, a more domesticated, humble Naga.

My love has stitched my lips. Pulled out of my fangs. Torn out my sac of Poison [...] yes, this King Cobra is now no better than a grass Snake (The pride diminishes, 61).

**Note:** The references to 'fangs', "Sac of Poison" and 'Cobra' that point to full self – realization.

The playwright has proposed three endings –

1. In the first, they live happily ever after; Both Naga and Appanna fuse into one on self – realization.
2. Naga suicides. For one of the two selves to survive coherently the other must suicide – an emotional suicide.
3. Both Naga and Appanna co – exist. History repeats.

Finally, some critics question the identity of the play itself, that is, Nagamandala as a 'folk –play'. Jose George asserts that there is indeed a marginal difference between the 'real' lore of the folk and the lore that what is represented and constructed as folklore. He utilizes the term 'fake lore' to address the latter. He defines folk lore as that which represents the life of the people in close communion with nature, and that which is orally transmitted. Fake lore, on the other hand, is represented a folklore by outsiders for a specific purpose. Therefore, while folklore is the signifier of a signified, fake lore is the signifier of a signifier of a signified. "It is a fake drama in representation". It reminds one of Plato's Theory of ideas as something twice removed from reality. However, Karnad Himself counters this when he says, "Drama is not for me a means of self – expression. Drama can be

production of meaning also. The story has an autonomous existence ....."

**Conclusion:** To conclude that Girish Karnad's play 'Nagamandala as a split personality and Identity Crisis' interprets the ancient theme in modern context. Like Yayati, the common man of today is grouped in the darkness of material and sensual pleasures. He finds himself in a world in which old spiritual values have been entirely swept away and the new spiritual values are yet to be discovered. Karnad's interpretation of the old myth on the exchange of ages between father and son puzzled and angered conventional critics, but the enlightened readers and critics appreciated it for its modernity.

It was originally written in Kannada and now it has been translated into English. Mrs. P. Krishnaveni in her paper "A Comparative Study of Myth and Folk Elements in Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* and *Hayavadana*" has examined his two plays and concludes that these two plays are Karnad's own imagination. Both plays are love stories. In *Naga Mandala*, the snake changes into a man where as in *Hayavadana*, the horse changes into a man. Both plays show the relationship of man and woman. The theme also reveals the Upanishad principle that visualizes the human body as a symbol of the organic relationship of the parts to the whole. Sacrifices also form a part of such religious practice as seen in the obliteration of the self physically in *Hayavadana*, the snake ordeal that Rani undergoes in *Naga Mandala*. Spiritual thought and wisdom inherent in religion are also incorporated into the themes of the plays.

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