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Female Identity and Conflict in Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala*

Dr. Upendra Kumar Soni

Assistant Professor,
Department of English
Mahamaya Rajkiya Mahavidyalya,
Shrawasti, U.P., India

Abstract

One of the most powerful theatrical interrogations of gender, desire, and social agency in Indian theatre is Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala*. The play responds to these wooden storytellers through folk narrative, oral storytelling and symbolic dramaturgy contemplating the structures that determine female identity is regulated, silenced or at times salvaged within patriarchy. The article suggests that Karnad presents female identity in *Naga-Mandala* not as a fixed quality but rather a contested state affected by domestic enclosure, sexual desire, social exposure and religious sanctification. The central female figure, Rani, passes from passivity and exile to a difficult power; still her emergence is neither easy liberation nor total freedom. Her agency is exercised indirectly, through secrecy and ambiguity, and by the same patriarchal institutions that limit her. Taking a close reading of the play through feminist lenses, the article demonstrates how *Naga-Mandala* draws attention to the opposition between real female experience and socially permissible concepts of being a woman. Karnad manages to showcase the many ways women negotiate identity, not in liberation from power, but within systems consistently trying and failing to contain and rewrite them. Rani becomes legible to her world only when her private experience is publicly translated into the patriarchal languages of chastity, divinity, and motherhood. The play's feminist force lies not in a simple emancipation plot but in exposing how women negotiate power through ambiguity, performance, and compromise within institutions that first silence them.

Keywords: Girish Karnad, *Naga-Mandala*, Female identity, Conflict, Patriarchy, Feminist drama, Indian theatre

Girish Karnad occupies a pivotal position in the realm of modern Indian drama as he successfully juxtaposes a range of ever-vivified myth, history, folklore and contemporary social issues. His plays have never been straight retellings of inherited stories. Instead, they rewrite familiar materials into essential tools in the allegorical construction of contemporary insecurities surrounding power, gender, lust, identity and social order. *Naga-Mandala* has

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emerged as perhaps the most discussed of his stage plays, searing in its representation of womanhood under a patriarchy. Through a series of oral stories, the play resorts to folkloric idiom as it unpacks an intensely modern quandary: how might a woman come into her own being in a world that denies her subjectivity first and then allows for heroine to be accounted social presence only through male-centric codes of chastity camouflaged with subservience and domestic virtue? This article proposes that *Naga-Mandala* allows female identity to be seen as a conflict ground rather than as an end point. There is no pre-existing Rani in the play; she grow(s) in opposition, heteronomously re-composed by marriage and restraint, lust and trepidation, gestation, and judicial gallery. Her plight is not only a physical one, against Appanna's cruelty and patriarchal dominance but it is also epistemological and affective, as she has an untutored learning to replace years of being alienated from the reality of her own experience by the pre-assumptions of everyone else. The play thus enacts a politics of woman. Rani makes strides toward selfhood, but her emergence is extra-precisely compromised, ambiguous and ironic. She is given status but only after the community reframes her experience through patriarchal and religious coding of purity and miracle.

Naga-Mandala is particularly amenable to a feminist reading because of the way in which it exposes the very mechanisms through which patriarchy creates female silence. In this context, a well-known quote from Simone de Beauvoir springs to mind: "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (329), because Rani's identity is strictly constructed in and through social institutions rather than being given as some kind of natural essence. She is made into a certain type of "woman," by marriage, by domestic enclosure, by reproductive expectation and communal judgment. But Karnad does not depict this process as absolute or uncontroversial. Where Rani's subjectivity lives on, it does so in the language of imagination, desire in surreptitious ways that might be broken or indirect or even socially illegible. In this way, the play is evidently concerned with female oppression but also with female negotiation. An extraordinary frame sets a dramatic world for *Naga-Mandala*. Truth will be mediated through oral tradition, gossip, embodiment, fantasy and performance. This structure alone is important in terms of feminine identity. Rani herself would have no influence over how her life was interpreted in a true social order. Yet in the folk mode of the play, Repressed experience can construct itself in symbols, transformations and traces of alternative narrative routes. That's why the frame is not only a decorative element but also it generates the theatrical potential that can make female experience legible.

The dispossession that marks Rani's very marriage to Appanna initiates the conflict, and Karnad sets the tone of such dispossession at Appanna takes her back to his place, directs few simple orders and shuts the door behind. There is no reciprocity, no companionship in the marriage, no shared domesticity at all. The behaviour of treating Rani, not as a partner but as a commodity that moves from the wife into husband's household. The gender logic of patriarchy in explicit display: the husband owns space, mobility, and public life; the wife makes invisible choices to wait and cook while remaining silent and obedient. He controls the house, the timetable, and puts the terms as to how they talk. She will remain trapped in a domestic box that exorcizes her soul. Therefore, female identity in this play commences with not so much as recognition but elimination of any sort prior to that. The dramatic power of these scenes relies on how closely Karnad manages to juncture ordinary patriarchal violence.

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Appanna does not become non-violent when he yells or hits Rani. Where his more insidious violence is defining her existence. He never inquires what she feels, whether this is her plan too. He simply speaks commands. One of the startling refrains from the play makes the principle of female subordination plain: “Don’t ask questions. Do as I tell you” (Karnad 283). The problem here is not a mere obedience in a household like cases, but the erasure of epistemic agency Rani is denied this ability to know, interpret, or question. So where is the patriarchy — which ostensibly manifests as male superiority over female flesh, and yet also inhibits feminine thought and cancel out feminine expression? This is ideal as her instinctive reaction to being confined. While she may not outright resist yet, she turns inwards and starts dreaming of other worlds. She thinks about her parents and creates stories from far away. The importance of these acts of imaginative narration is that they show us how subjectivity somehow persists even when social power seeks to eradicate it. Rani keeps alive an interiority in imagination where Appanna muzzles external speech.

The Naga, the cobra that enters Rani at night as Appanna’s form is the play’s most striking complication. Naga gained traction is on one level a subversion of Rani’s life as a married woman. What Appanna did in respective brutal, apathetic and idly, Naga does the opposite with cold care, warmth and deportment. Rani gets love, sex and identification under his night touch. By igniting her body and her hunger, these encounters awaken a kind of feminine experience denied to her by patriarchy-mandated marriage. But Karnad does not allow us to read this as a straightforward emancipation. Now Naga can be with Rani only if he impersonates him as a husband. Thus, her sexual awakening is mediated by way of an authorized masculine disguise, sanctioned in the institution of marriage. The lover who calls her tenderness must still wear a patriarchy face. This ambivalence is key to the way female conflict happens in the play. Rani’s experience with Naga makes it difficult to see oppression or freedom as monoliths. He brings emotional warmth and erotic satisfaction but he does not entirely shatter the asymmetry of power. He, like Appanna, is the one who has a hold on knowledge. Which Rani does not know is what he already knows full well about himself. He transcends the shapes and spaces, she is stuck in visual formats. The same sentence that first expressed the theme of patriarchal control returns in a relationship that feels loving enough. This is how Karnad gets to his point: not every alternative to the oppression of marriage means genuine freedom. A woman can be prized; and also denied the power to entirely interpret her own life. Rani begins to contest this structure of imposed silence and in so doing, she develops into a more self-aware figure. One of the most telling moments comes when she states, “I am not a parrot” (284). And the next statement is, in fact, much more significant than its simplicity implies. The parrot is a creature of replication, not reason; mimic, not meaning. In doing so Rani chooses not to accept the metaphor; she has been allocated, by both patriarchal marriage and secret erotic manipulation. The needs of her personality extend beyond being simply a voice in the echo chamber of male instructions, and she insists. This is a watershed moment in female identity. Rani is not only a passive receptacle of male lust, violence or secrecy but she seeks explanation. She wants truth. She wants to be a willingly situated subject of her own experience. This is where the topic of pregnancy comes into focus. This apathy morphs into accusation as soon as Rani becomes visibly pregnant. The female body, which was being treated solely as a domestic tool till then, now becomes

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the centre of legal and moral examination. Adultery is attributed to Appanna and Rani is forced to face embarrassment and cruelty. The transition is telling. And while women can be expendable in patriarchy if they come across as less than a threat, female sexuality becomes keenly surveilled when it appears to threaten the patriarch. Rani cannot hold any private meaning in her body. Patriarchal ownership is what we must publicly interpret. She is pregnant, which is now proof in a societal patois long before she herself has the opportunity to testify otherwise. It is at this point in the play that the critique of patriarchal culture is most stark. The *Naga-Mandala* polices female identity not only through marriage but also through Appanna and the village elders. Rani's experience hardly mattered; what mattered was a preservation of a moral code which protected male authority. The community husband suspects that her body, not she, is the ultimate site to be governed; the question is no longer who she but whether or not a woman conforms to social expectations about being a virtuous wife. Because of this, female rivalry in the play exists at an intimate and institutional level. And so, Rani finds herself fighting not only an individual husband, but a social regime in which women are stigmatized by design.

The ordeal scene is the play's dramatic and thematic center. Dismissing the more accepted trial by hot iron, Rani responds saying, "I'll opt for the ordeal by the Cobra" (292). This makes a complete change to the underlying rationale of the whole situation. The trial that should establish her purity becomes a tableau of equivocation, irony, and subversion. Rani's oath is crafted with divine precision. She will swear on anything that there have only been two men whose hands she has ever laid— her husband and the snake. The statement is literally true, but calumniously social. It fulfills the formal requirement of the trial by ordeal, while disturbing the binary categories on which patriarchal judgment stands. This moment is identified as one of the most significant acts of "subversion of patriarchal mores" (64) in that it occurs within the play itself. Rani lives only by the same dishonest means and with the duplicitous nature of patriarchal justice that truth has convincingly been found in any sense transparent but cannot be manipulated for its own uses against itself. The complexity of the scene is furthered by the cobra's own response to the oath. The snake wraps itself around Rani and pulls itself away harmlessly, making a miracle instead of harming her. The villagers interpreted this as proof of her virginity and divinity. On the outside, she is metamorphosed from the accusing harlot into the holy wife. Yet the irony is unmistakable. The community believes they have validated a traditional model of femininity, but we understand the reality is much more fragile. The ordeal does not return things to a simplistic moral order; it reveals how the social systems create meaning by misreading lived experience. Thus, the reality of Rani's survival hinges on the schism between private truth and public perception. And there is a reason for this; which concludes with why Rani's re-emergence at the end of play cannot be termed empowerment as uncomplicated. Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker observes that Rani moves from "total abjection" to "unqualified power," but she also warns that the ending is "riddled with irony and compromise" (xxx). A definitive evaluation of the play's feminist intricacy. Rani does gain authority. Appanna, humiliated by the experience, takes her in and begs her forgiveness. The community honours her. Mother, wife and holy woman all at once. But this authority bestowed to her exists only because she has a kind of handle on her

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experience that patriarchal lines will accept. She is not a woman who wants/feels/was split in half emotionally. She is a woman exalted into an icon of purity.

This ambiguity is further emphasized by the ending as it relates to Rani in relation to the dead cobra. Once her honour is returned by society, she does not only abandon or condemn him. Rather, she keeps him alive in her mind and simply places him within the emotional and ritual structure of the household. This gesture is profoundly revealing. It indicates that the public fiction of chastity cannot hold Rani's inner truth. The world may dub her the pure wife, but she will never be that simple emotionally. There is something within her that social language does not contain. At this point, the ending does not merely resolve conflict — it contains it. The contradictions of desire, marriage, truth and social legitimacy endure. To say *Naga-Mandala* celebrates female liberation, as one criticism goes, would be too simple an assertion. Rani refuses to break free from patriarchal bounds into selfhood as a more autonomous modern home. She retains power only as long as she is operating within constructs of domesticity, motherhood, or village acknowledgement. Fair enough, but it would be perhaps just as reductive to view her through the other lens as simply a passive victim absorbed into patriarchy again. The evolution of her self-awareness, speech, and power is clear as day in the play. What Karnad presents is not a utopia of absolute liberation, but rather a nuanced portrayal of female bargaining in unfavourable circumstances.

Such complexity is inextricable from the play's folk form. Being based on an oral tale; metamorphosis; and symbolic patterning enabled *Naga-Mandala* to stage truths that realist social drama would be limited in its rendering of. The frame of story and flame, the transformative serpent, the agonistic rite – all allow Karnad to point to how theatrical and performative social identity itself is. In the play, female identity is not a fixed essence but a part assigned, challenged and rewritten over time. One after the other, Rani becomes a bride, prisoner, lover, suspect adulteress, miracle worker and holy wife. Her experience is always more than any of these identities, but each identity is socially produced. This makes the folk mode, then a strong medium for feminist investigation. It is also significant as it runs counter to the romanticism around marriage in Indian social discourse. Marriage is often considered as the institution that gives women security, belonging and valid identity. But in *Naga-Mandala*, marriage is shown first as an imprisonment. Through marriage, Rani gets to lose her mobility, companionship and voice. The spouse instead of being the guardian angel, becomes her closest nightmare, an embodiment of fear and loneliness. Karnad thus deconstructs the narrative that domesticity is a sure-shot elixir for female satisfaction. Rani is not beyond reproach because she wants to be loved and desired. The tragedy is that desire and tenderness must enter her life by trickery, for the institution of marriage has failed.

One of the most radical aspects about the play is its treatment of female desire. Discourse of patriarchy gives women virtue but no desire, fidelity but not erotic subjectivation. Rani and her sensual awakening are the fulcrum of the drama, breaking this pattern. She does not simply obey, she feels, reacts, desires and grows. But the play is careful to avert any simplification of romance. Desire itself is not depicted as unbridled freedom. It is a landscape of hiddenness and peril. Karnad admits the need of, as well as the threat that female desire poses to male interests. Rani may be real but her erotic life cannot easily become socially acceptable. This tension plays out more broadly, finding connections to feminist themes in

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works such as *Naga-Mandala*. Within existing moral categories, and on condition that it is socially recognizable, women's experience will only rarely have significance. That which falls outside of those brackets is silenced, warped or glorified. Rani is not, to her community, a desiring subject: she is a miraculous incarnate of chastity. The irony is stark: the white whale that redemptively saves her also misnames her. So, in effect, Karnad's drama exposes the paradox where recognition becomes a form of misrecognition. In the process, a woman can become someone of significance and yet alienate herself from her own experience. When perceived in this manner, under its folkloric cover *Naga-Mandala* is a deeply modern play. It wonders how discourse, performance, institutional power and community reading shape identity. It demonstrates that conflict is not just a collision of characters, it is tension within the process of female subjectivity itself. Rani is pulled between who she is and what society will permit her to represent. She goes not from weakness to ground zero from freedom, but from voicelessness to a perforated visibility. Still, that tenuous visibility matters. Karnad does not deny the price of compromised lives, but he also does not forget about survival and negotiated agency.

Thus, *Naga-Mandala* offers perhaps one of the most profound representations of female identity in modern Indian drama before the absolute finality. Patriarchy defines Rani, but it does not extinguish her. She endures imprisonment, invisibility, indictment, and shreds of her public persona while simultaneously awakening to herself, to pleasure and to strategy in relation to power. The production of female identity is conflict: in the shape: body, law; experience and interpretation; desire and virtue; private truth and public meaning; One of Karnad's feminist insights is that women do not always gain agency through moving against rupturing oppressive structures; instead they must be read between the lines and move their way past those structures by exercising ambiguity, intelligence, endurance and symbolic reinvention. Hence, reading *Naga-Mandala* is not to hear a tale of oppression or empowerment, but a drama of contested womanhood. Rani gains social power, but the nature of that power is unresolved. Even when she appears to inhabit them well, her identity is never perfectly identical with the roles imposed upon her. It is also the most powerful element of tension within the play. Karnad centres female experience in a world of drama drawn both from folklore and shaped by patriarchy, highlighting the violence but also the fragility of structures that determine women. He produces a work that continues to speak critically to issues of gender, agency, marriage, and identity in feminist discourse.

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