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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Unveiling Gender Dynamics: Identity, Marriage, Fidelity, and Female Agency in Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala*

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Abstract

This research investigates the intricate portrayal of gender dynamics in Girish Karnad's renowned play *Nagamandala*. It epitomizes the contemporary roles of women against a backdrop of myth, exploring themes of identity formation, marital relationships, fidelity, and female agency within rural South India. Interweaving folklore with modern social issues, the play presents a diverse cast whose struggles reflect broader societal tensions. Characters like Vishakha, Nittilai, Padmini, and Rani emerge as influential voices of modern women, navigating patriarchal dominance with courage and resilience. Despite societal norms enforcing gender segregation, they assert bold independence, confronting challenges within a stratified society. This study scrutinizes the protagonist Rani's journey, revealing nuanced gender roles and power dynamics, thereby enhancing understanding of Karnad's thematic exploration and narrative technique. *Nagamandala* portrays female characters as victims of pervasive patriarchal repression, offering poignant insights into human complexities.

Keywords: Gender dynamics, Patriarchy, Sexual autonomy, Subversion of patriarchy, Transformation of identity

Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* is a powerful feminist play that intricately weaves folklore, myth, and magical realism to challenge patriarchal structures and explore the complexities of female identity, desire, and agency. Set within a rural Indian context, the play centers on Rani, a young woman trapped in a loveless marriage, who finds emotional and sexual fulfillment through a mystical encounter with a shape-shifting cobra. Through Rani's transformation—from a submissive wife to a revered goddess figure—Karnad critiques societal norms

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surrounding chastity, fidelity, and gender roles, offering a subversive narrative that empowers the female voice within both traditional and contemporary frameworks.

Throughout history, women have occupied a spectrum of roles and responsibilities shaped by diverse social, economic, religious, and political factors. Their experiences have never been uniform, as they are intricately influenced by multiple intersecting elements such as caste, religion, politics, level of education, socioeconomic standing, and regional variations. In the Indian context, this complexity is even more noticeable due to the nation's vast cultural and historical heterogeneity. It is essential, therefore, to examine how these cultural, historical, and sociopolitical frameworks have shaped the lives and identities of Indian women. Contrary to viewing Indian women as a monolithic group, it is more accurate to understand their lived realities as layered, complex, and overlapping. Despite numerous structural barriers and societal constraints, Indian women have consistently demonstrated resilience and determination. They have played a crucial role in challenging gender norms and have contributed significantly to the nation's development across all domains—be it social, political, economic, or intellectual. In contemporary times, there is an obvious and growing momentum toward gender equity, recognition of women's rights, and progressive social reform. This ongoing transformation actively questions patriarchal traditions and seeks to empower women throughout the Indian sociocultural landscape.

In *Nagamandala*, Girish Karnad offers a compelling reflection on gender roles through the character of Rani, the play's central figure. As the only daughter in her family, Rani is affectionately named—a term evoking grace, royalty, and innocence. This is reinforced by Karnad's description: "Queen of the whole wide world. Queen of the long tresses" (Karnad, p.253). Yet, her princess-like status quickly collapses upon entering married life. In her husband Appanna's home, she is stripped of agency and treated with contempt—confined, ignored, and emotionally starved, while Appanna openly maintains an extramarital affair. The romantic ideal of marriage is thus subverted, replaced by dominance and emotional abandonment. Isolated and yearning for love, Rani escapes into imagination, seeking solace in her inner world.

Initially, Rani embodies the stereotypical Indian woman—submissive, obedient, and self-sacrificing—mirroring Simone de Beauvoir's concept of 'the second sex,' where a woman is defined only in relation to a man. Her marginalization reflects the broader reality for many women in patriarchal societies, where emotional needs and consent are routinely ignored. Karnad uses Rani's experience to expose these structural injustices, urging society to question the norms that continue to silence and oppress women.

At this decisive and transformative moment in *Nagamandala*, Rani begins to awaken to the profound necessity of reclaiming her personal identity—a realization that serves as a pivotal step in her journey toward liberation from the suffocating boundaries of her patriarchal existence. This awakening does not occur in isolation but rather within a web of emotional neglect, societal expectations, and marital disenchantment. Rani's newfound awareness signals

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not only her internal shift but also Karnad's broader thematic aim: to challenge and deconstruct the rigid, long-entrenched cultural and social norms that have historically confined women. Through Rani's gradual assertion of selfhood, Karnad articulates a bold vision of female empowerment that defies conventional morality.

Karnad ingeniously frames this transformation within a mythical and folkloric context, blending elements of realism and the supernatural to amplify the symbolic depth of Rani's emotional and sexual emancipation. In doing so, he crafts a narrative where the boundaries between the real and the fantastical are deliberately blurred, allowing the protagonist to navigate a liminal space where desire, identity, and autonomy intersect. The mythical union between Rani and Naga, a shape-shifting cobra who assumes her husband Appanna's form, becomes emblematic of this space. Their sexual relationship, far from being portrayed as transgressive or illicit, is instead depicted as a site of solace, self-realization, and profound intimacy. Here, Karnad validates the convergence of the mortal and the mythical, rendering their union as a metaphoric rebellion against a world that denies women agency over their own bodies and desires.

This unique and subversive portrayal dismantles the orthodox conception of marital love, which is often grounded in social validation rather than emotional reciprocity. In *Nagamandala*, conjugal love is not legitimized by ritual or societal approval, but by genuine emotional and physical fulfillment. Karnad redirects the focus from duty and endurance to autonomy and personal happiness, particularly highlighting the right of a woman to seek satisfaction and meaning in her relationships. Thus, the play becomes a potent site for reimagining the contours of female identity, serving as a platform to interrogate the deeply ingrained social, emotional, and sexual inequities that continue to marginalize women.

Through Rani, Karnad explores the inner world of a woman trapped in a cold and indifferent marriage. Her husband, Appanna, embodies emotional neglect and patriarchal authority, offering her neither companionship nor affection. In contrast, Rani's inner life begins to stir with unspoken desires—for love, for intimacy, for someone who truly sees and values her. These suppressed longings, kept hidden by layers of social conditioning, begin to surface, urging her toward self-exploration and empowerment. Her encounter with Kurudavva, a blind yet insightful old woman, marks a turning point. Kurudavva provides Rani with a magical root—an aphrodisiac that becomes the agent of transformation in the narrative. This enchanted root, symbolizing forbidden but necessary desire, enables Rani to awaken Naga, who enters her life not merely as a lover but as an emotional anchor.

Naga, assuming the form of Appanna, fulfills the role her real husband refuses to play. He treats Rani with care, engages her with affection, and satisfies her yearning for emotional and physical closeness. Unlike Appanna, who exercises power through detachment and control, Naga's presence becomes a source of tenderness and liberation. Their nocturnal encounters gradually reshape Rani's understanding of herself—not as an extension of someone else's will, but as a being with desires, choices, and power. In this sense, Naga becomes not just a mythic

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lover, but a catalyst for Rani's journey toward agency. Through him, she finds the courage to embrace her emotions, challenge oppressive norms, and assert her right to happiness.

In crafting this narrative, Karnad does more than tell the story of a woman's transformation—he critiques the very structures that deny such transformations in real life. By embedding Rani's growth within a fantastical tale, he invites audiences to re-examine the societal scripts that have long dictated women's roles, relationships, and reputations. Ultimately, *Nagamandala* becomes a deeply symbolic and revolutionary text, presenting Rani's emotional and sexual awakening not as a deviation from morality, but as an affirmation of her humanity.

Karnad disrupts patriarchal expectations by envisioning a world where Rani finds solace and empowerment in the presence of a mythic being. As Naga, appearing in the form of Appanna, visits her each night, Rani escapes the alienation and neglect that define her waking life. These nightly encounters become her sanctuary—an alternative reality where her agency is acknowledged and nurtured. This shift catalyzes her transformation from a subdued, voiceless wife into a conscious and self-aware individual. Her journey mirrors the larger feminist struggle for autonomy, as she slowly redefines her sense of self-worth and moves beyond the societal confines of gender roles. In Naga's arms, Rani not only finds emotional and physical solace but also the opportunity to reclaim her identity as a complete and independent woman. The love she receives from Naga fills the emotional void left by Appanna, allowing her to experience affection and maternal joy. Her newfound strength is reflected in her words: "Let it. I don't feel afraid any more, with you beside me" (Karnad, p.273), revealing the comfort and empowerment she derives from this unconventional bond.

The consumption of the magical root compels Naga to assume the physical form of Appanna and visit Rani under the veil of darkness. This nightly masquerade, driven by enchantment, enables Naga to provide companionship and affection—elements entirely missing from Rani's marriage. Over time, Naga evolves into a tragic figure, offering unwavering devotion and ultimately sacrificing his life for Rani's wellbeing. His death marks the culmination of his love, and paradoxically, it elevates Rani to a revered, divine status in the eyes of the villagers. In the rhythm of their nocturnal visits—timed precisely after Appanna's departure each afternoon—Naga shares Rani's bed, enveloping her in warmth and understanding. He even respects her autonomy by asking: "No, let's say, the husband decides on the day visits. And the wife decides on the night visits. So, I won't come at night if you don't want me to" (Karnad, p.272). This gentle offer not only emphasizes his respect for Rani's agency but also suggests his own growing emotional entanglement and longing for her acceptance.

However, as their bond deepens, Rani begins to notice peculiar inconsistencies. When confronted with the reflection in the mirror, she is alarmed by the image of a cobra where Naga should be. "She looks at him in the mirror. Screams in fright...She is trembling" (Karnad, p.272). Her fear intensifies as she struggles to reconcile what she sees with what she believes.

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She confronts him, saying, “When I looked in the mirror, I saw there—where you were sitting—instead of you, I saw a—(Mimes a cobra hood with her fingers.)—sitting there” (Karnad, p.273). Even her tactile experiences begin to betray the illusion, as she touches his skin and remarks, “Your blood is so cold. It’s the way you wander about day and night, heedless of wind and rain” (Karnad, p.273). Yet, despite mounting evidence, Rani remains unwilling to fully accept the truth. Her inner conflict is encapsulated in her confession: “Since I looked into the mirror, I seem to be incapable of thinking of anything else. Father says: ‘If a bird so much as looks at a cobra’” (Karnad, p.273). This moment captures the interplay between denial and awakening, where Rani’s love, fear, and desire collide in a complex emotional landscape.

Through this intricate narrative, Karnad not only critiques the rigid moral structures of traditional Indian society but also gives voice to a woman’s journey from victimhood to self-realization. Rani’s evolving identity, shaped by both myth and reality, becomes a powerful testament to the human desire for connection, agency, and transformation.

As Naga begins to visit Rani under the cover of darkness, the atmosphere grows increasingly eerie. She becomes aware of unsettling sounds—dogs growling, fighting, and the ominous hiss of a snake—which foreshadow the presence of something unnatural. One night, after taking refuge in Naga’s embrace, she notices blood on his face and shoulders. These signs, though disturbing, are not entirely processed by Rani, who chooses not to confront him. In a moment that captures her conflicting emotions, she remarks, “You talk so nicely at night. But during the day I only have to open my mouth and you hiss like a... stupid snake” (Karnad, p. 271). Karnad subtly embeds several indications of Naga’s true identity within the narrative, yet Rani remains curiously silent about them. As Pranav Joshipura aptly notes, “Rani’s gesture is questionable because there are sufficient reasons to believe that Naga is not Appanna” (Joshipura, p. 259), drawing attention to the deliberate ambiguity of her actions and perceptions.

Despite possessing clear evidence that Naga and Appanna are not the same person, Rani shows little interest in uncovering or resolving the mystery. Her emotional and physical fulfillment with Naga seemingly outweighs the need for logical clarity. This acceptance suggests an inner shift—she no longer sees herself as beholden to rigid societal standards. Naga, representing this new world of freedom and desire, accepts Rani’s sexual awakening without judgment. His words, “the husband decides on the day visits. And the wife decides on the night visits,” express a progressive acknowledgment of Rani’s autonomy and sexual agency. Moutushi Chakravartee underscores this reversal of roles and power dynamics by stating, “Her adultery seems the proper lesson for her adulterous husband” (Chakravartee, p.185), thereby framing Rani’s extramarital engagement not as moral failure, but as poetic justice.

Karnad employs magical realism as a central stylistic device to blur the boundaries between the mundane and the mythical, creating a narrative space where inner truths are explored through fantastical means. Appanna, a symbol of harsh patriarchal reality, is

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juxtaposed with Naga, the embodiment of myth, desire, and emotional refuge. Within this imaginative and symbolic world, Rani's sexual relationship with Naga is not treated as a violation of social codes but as a legitimate assertion of her repressed self. Her acts, though deemed adulterous by societal standards, gain metaphoric significance, highlighting the psychological toll of sexual denial and emotional neglect. As Amrita Ghosh observes, "Rani's experience with Naga borders on a dream-like situation. Naga comes in the guise of her husband, but he cannot change what he is" (759). Locked in her home and isolated from love, Rani turns to this enchanted realm as a form of resistance and healing.

The indistinct line between Appanna and Naga, magnified by the dim lighting and the surreal environment, provides Rani with a unique opportunity to transcend patriarchal limitations and redefine her identity on her own terms. Her deep yearning for intimacy and connection becomes a transformative force, overturning traditional male-dominated constructs of chastity and obedience.

Rani's transformation becomes more assertive when she confronts Appanna's accusations about her chastity. Ironically, the man who has emotionally abandoned her and pursued an extramarital affair is the one to question her morality when she becomes pregnant. His reaction is violently accusatory, expressing both disbelief and rage: "...you whore! All right then, I'll show you. I'll go to the village Elders. If they don't throw that child into boiling oil and you along with it, my name is not Appanna" (Karnad, p. 285). His behavior highlights the double standards embedded in patriarchal societies, where women are held to stringent codes of purity that men are free to ignore.

In stark contrast, Naga stands as a figure of support and sacrifice. He not only comforts Rani during her moments of fear but also devises a way for her to prove her innocence. Like a modern-day mentor or guardian spirit, he urges her to undergo a symbolic trial reminiscent of Sita's ordeal in the *Ramayana*. Naga advises, "There is an enormous ant-hill under the banyan tree. Almost like a mountain. A King Cobra lives in it. Say you will put your hand into the ant-hill" (Karnad, p. 286). This proposed trial mirrors the ancient 'Agnipariksha' and is steeped in cultural symbolism. Understandably hesitant, Rani asks, "Won't the Cobra bite me the moment I touch it?" (Karnad, p. 286). To this, Naga replies with reassurance: "No, it won't bite. Only, you must tell the truth" (Karnad, p. 286). He continues to bolster her courage with hopeful words: "All will be well, Rani. Don't worry. Your husband will become your slave tomorrow. You will get all you have ever wanted" (Karnad, p. 287), then quietly disappears, leaving Rani to face her destiny.

The next morning, Rani approaches her ordeal with calm resolve. Her public trial becomes more than just a test of chastity—it becomes a spectacle of female strength and resilience. As one of the village elders observes, "But you insist on swearing by the King Cobra. The news has spread and, as you can see, attracted large crowds" (Karnad, p. 288). What was intended as a humiliating inquisition transforms into a moment of empowerment. Rani seizes control of the narrative, emerging not as a passive victim but as a courageous heroine.

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Guided by Naga's earlier instructions, she reaches into the anthill, pulls out the King Cobra, and boldly declares her truth before the gathering: "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 one of the male sex. Nor have I allowed any other male to touch me. If I lie, let the Cobra bite me" (Karnad, p. 292). This fearless proclamation marks the climax of her transformation—from a silenced woman to a commanding presence who dictates her own moral code.

This moment draws a powerful parallel to the *Ramayana*, where Sita, the archetypal wife, is made to prove her chastity through fire. Like Sita, Rani is forced to validate her purity before a judgmental public. However, unlike Sita, Rani's trial becomes a moment of triumph rather than tragedy. In *Valmiki's Ramayana*, Sita embodies the virtues of loyalty and submission, following her husband into exile, enduring abduction, and eventually facing exile again despite proving her chastity. The ideal of the *Pativratastree*, or devoted wife, dominates that narrative—where a woman's identity is wholly defined by her relationship to her husband.

In *Nagamandala*, Karnad subverts this ideal. Rani's journey affirms a woman's right to assert her agency, seek love and fulfillment, and reshape her identity outside the boundaries of male approval. The play, while rooted in myth and tradition, boldly reimagines a future where female autonomy is not only possible but celebrated.

During the public trial, where her chastity is called into question, her husband Appanna is left speechless, forced into silence by the overwhelming testimony of a miraculous event. Unlike Sita, who after passing the *Agnipariksha* was still not accepted unconditionally by her husband or society, Rani receives instant and unanimous veneration from the villagers. As the King Cobra emerges during the ordeal and refrains from harming her, instead raising its hood above her head like a divine umbrella and finally adorning her like a garland, the villagers erupt in awe. Rani, dazed by the spectacle, finds herself enveloped by the crowd's admiration. This act of divine protection profoundly alters the community's perception of her and grants her a position of sanctity.

The elders, astonished and moved, express this transformation through their exclamations:

ELDER I (proclaims): "A miracle! A miracle!"

ELDER II (profoundly moved, avers): "She is not a woman. She is a Divine Being!"

ELDER III (joining in the chorus of exultation, confirms): "Indeed, a Goddess!" (Karnad, p. 292).

The acknowledgment of her sanctity culminates in Elder I's directive to Appanna, compelling him to honour the divine nature of his wife:

Elder I: "Appanna, your wife is not an ordinary woman. She is a goddess incarnate. Don't grieve that you judge her wrongly and treated her badly. That is how goddesses reveal themselves to the world. You were the chosen instrument for the revelation of her divinity" (Karnad, p. 293).

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Confronted with irrefutable evidence and the village's reverence for Rani, Appanna undergoes a humbling transformation. Once proud and detached, he now falls at Rani's feet, confessing, "Forgive me. I am a sinner. I was blind" (Karnad, p. 293). His inner torment surfaces as he cries, "What am I to do? Is the whole world against me? Have I sinned so much that even Nature should laugh at me?" (Karnad, p. 294), revealing his crumbling masculinity and guilt. In contrast, Rani's long-suppressed desire for emotional and spiritual companionship is fulfilled by Naga, who, true to his promise, offers her love and validation—ultimately sacrificing his life by entwining himself in her hair, a final act of love and surrender. The narration following this climactic scene affirms Rani's ascent to a life of peace, power, and prosperity:

So, Rani got everything she wished for a devoted husband, a happy life. She even got a life-long servant to draw water for her house. For Appanna's concubine was present at the trial. When she saw Rani's glory, she felt ashamed of her sinful life and volunteered to do menial work in Rani's house. In due course Rani gave birth to a beautiful child. A son. Rani lived happily ever after with her husband, child and servant. (Karnad, p. 293).

Rani's courageous assertion of truth during the trial—claiming to have touched only two males, her husband and the Cobra—serves not only as her defense but also as a plausible explanation for why the serpent chooses not to bite her. Her declaration reinforces the purity of her experience while simultaneously complicating conventional notions of fidelity and legitimacy. Naga, who deceived Rani by appearing as her husband, becomes trapped in his own emotional entanglement and ultimately pays for it with his life. Yet, his final act—dying wrapped in her luxuriant hair—immortalizes the love they shared in secrecy.

In the aftermath of the trial, Rani's authority extends beyond her household into the broader social sphere. She asserts control by deciding that her son will perform the last rites for Naga, honoring him as a paternal figure. This marks a pivotal shift—Rani evolves from being an object of desire to a commanding subject, reducing both Appanna and Naga to secondary roles in her story. As Nasser Dasht Peyma notes, "The male assumption of keeping full control over the body, sexuality and virtue of woman through the institution of family are mocked in the play" (Peyma, p. 220).

Karnad's narrative thus follows a clear pattern: women endure patriarchal oppression but ultimately emerge strong and self-defined. Rani's transformation aligns with the legacy of mythic women like Gargi, Maitreyi, Lopamudra, Shakuntala, Sita, Draupadi, and Savitri—symbols of wisdom, beauty, and resilience. Yet, with time, patriarchal systems eclipsed this reverence. Karnad draws from these traditions to craft a new narrative—one in which the woman reclaims her voice and becomes the agent of her destiny.

Karnad also draws upon certain Western ideas—particularly romantic ideals—that challenge the idea of sexual fidelity being confined strictly to the institution of marriage. His plays subtly critique the social expectation that women must uphold chastity while men are permitted to transgress without consequence.

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Through *Nagamandala* Karnad lays bare the politics of gender oppression and reclaims a space for women's agency within the theatrical tradition. His nuanced female characters reject objectification, redefine virtue, and call into question the legitimacy of male dominance—thereby providing an enduring critique of patriarchal power structures in both past and present.

Thus, Karnad's *Nagamandala* masterfully reimagines the traditional contours of Indian womanhood by placing female desire, identity, and agency at the heart of its narrative. Through the character of Rani, the play exposes the hypocrisies of patriarchal society while offering an alternative vision where myth becomes a tool of emancipation rather than confinement. Rani's evolution from a passive, oppressed wife to a revered figure of power and divinity marks a significant departure from conventional portrayals of chastity and virtue. Her journey condenses the complexities of gender dynamics, challenging social norms and asserting autonomy in both emotional and sexual realms. In doing so, Karnad not only critiques deeply entrenched gender inequalities but also constructs a compelling narrative of female resistance and transformation. The play emerges as a powerful feminist text—one that subverts dominant ideologies, elevates female subjectivity, and affirms the possibility of empowerment even within a culturally and traditionally stratified society.

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