

When Karnad Experiments with Theatrical Techniques: Portrayal of Quest, Feminine Psyche and Women's Emancipation in *Nāga-Mandala: Play with a Cobra*

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Abstract

In traditional patriarchal society women are denied their rights to live the life of their own choice, instead they are forced to remain submissive, shy and *pativrata* in each and every sphere obeying the rules and regulations of the strict society as well as the domineering husband and as a result, an individual woman continues to embrace a fractured self of herself. In *Nāga-Mandala: Play with a Cobra*, Girish Karnad, out of his deep respect and sympathy for women, has tried to depict such a realistic representation through the plight of the heroine Rani, giving voice to the dreams and desires present in the feminine psyche. Karnad has brilliantly dealt with the concept of existential dilemma of a woman and at the same time depicted beautifully her yearning for love and respect. In this present play, the playwright has made use of multiple techniques in order to represent Rani's (every woman's) quest, her ultimate emancipation through a theatrical performance. This paper endeavours to examine how brilliantly Karnad embraced various innovative theatrical techniques in order to give voice to Rani's yearning for emancipation in *Nāga-Mandala: Play with a Cobra*.

Keywords: Quest, emancipation, Lok Katha, myth, shape shifting, epic theatre

The English version of *Nāga-Mandala: Play with a Cobra*, the product of an assignment to write a play for the Guthrie Theatre, Minneapolis on the glorious occasion of its thirtieth birthday celebration, is one of the loveliest flowers in the productive artistic garden of Indian English drama. It added another sparkling gem to the crown of Girish Karnad as a successful playwright of India. Being a multitalented artistic persona, Karnad, an Indian actor and film director, a Kannada writer and playwright, knew the proper synchronization of various artistic elements regarding theatrical presentation. He was well aware of the fact that in a theatrical presentation, the proper uses of mechanisms and devices as well as the story are very much necessary to make that presentation an acceptable one. As a dramatic craftsman, Karnad is never in favour of restricting the uses of techniques, rather he has embraced experimentation giving ample scope to flexibility based on the mathematical requirements of his plots. A recurring theme of quest—a search for moral order, search for perfection—provided added charm to Girish Karnad's plays. More importantly, his plays deal with contemporary social issues as he

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mentions, “to have any value at all, drama must at some level engage honestly with the contradictions that lie at the heart of the society it talks to and about” (qtd. in Leslie 52). *Nāga-Mandala* is no exception while the others being *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *The Fire and the Rain* et al. And in doing so, Karnad, the modern playwright, introduced to the readers/spectators a systematic amalgamation of the traditions of classical, folk and contemporary modern techniques and devices. At the same time, it would be a huge mistake to neglect the western influences on the playwright as he himself confessed this in his interview with Tutun Mukherjee:

I read the basic western canon—the Greek plays, Shakespeare, Shaw, O’Neill, Anouilh, Brecht, Sartre, Camus. Brecht’s technique influenced me a great deal in the earlier years. I remember *Life of Galileo* and *The Good woman of Szechwan* vividly. Shakespeare remains an inspiration. I remember a brilliant production of *Hamlet* I saw in Oxford once. Quite unforgettable. (qtd. in Das 7)

Karnad, a true genius, utilized brilliantly all the influences he got from various experiences throughout his life. This paper attempts to analyze how Karnad, with the help of his ability to deal excellently and artistically with all these diverse influences and techniques, gives voice to Rani’s feminine psyche, her quest for emancipation, her longing to achieve love and respect living in a male-dominated society.

Nāga-Mandala: Play with a Cobra attracts the attention of the sensible eyes very much convincingly towards the miserable plight of Indian women living in patriarchal society through the illustration of Rani’s life. Rani is every woman and Rani’s plight is that of every woman’s plight. She proves to be the representative of multiple Ranis who are suffering from the claustrophobia in incompatible marriages and have experienced enough existential crisis living in a society based on binary opposition. It is that society where double standard is always acclaimed as the husband’s adultery is not regarded as a sin whereas the wife’s is. Appanna “keeps his wife locked up like a caged bird” (Karnad, *Nāga-Mandala* 21) and like that imprisoned bird Rani only flutters her feathers being unable to look into the outer world. Rani, unable to figure out the strange behaviours of her husband, “stands perplexed” and “she cannot even weep” and later she finds a lonely shelter in a corner of her room (18). The Act One of the play opens with Rani’s meek and docile character who obeys her husband’s commands submissively as according to Manu, ‘the law giver’, “A faithful wife, who desires to dwell

(after death) with her husband, must not do anything that might displease him who took her hand whether he be alive or dead (Manu 196). Appanna like a typical Indian husband, talks to her a little, only comes to her for lunch and when Rani expresses her trauma of being alone at home and tells, “Listen—I feel—frightened—alone at night—”, Appanna uses the words of command, “What is there to be scared of? Just keep to yourself. No one will bother you” (*Nāga-Mandala* 18). This act of Appanna shows the binary opposition and the restriction of women to the domestic sphere only. In a patriarchal society the young girls are gifted with a destiny formulated by the society; it is not a natural one though they embrace it whole-heartedly as unalterable. Thus, she always remains alienated from her own self. According to Simone de Beauvoir, “... she does not dare to be enterprising, to revolt, to invent; doomed to docility, to resignation, she can take in society only a place already made for her. She regards the existing state of affair as something fixed” (330). Her own self gets fractured time and again, still she continues to behave in that way which is expected by the society and by her husband. The traditional society demands that the wives should remain *pativrata*, and they must follow the commands of their husbands. If she disregards, she must have to go through the same fate of Sita of the *Ramayana*, that is *agnipariksha*. In Karnad’s play, Rani, the heroine has to go through the snake ordeal as she is accused of adultery by her husband Appanna, though ironically, he himself has his extramarital affair. Karnad, out of his deep sympathy and respect for women, has brilliantly depicted Rani’s quest and her ultimate emancipation with the help of multiple theatrical mechanisms. Rani, an ordinary innocent girl performing the domestic duties and living the life of a caged bird in the beginning of the play emerges as the key figure towards the end of the play and is worshipped by everyone including her indifferent and dominating husband. She is given the promotion to the position of a living goddess from an imprisoned woman. Appanna, the rough and tough domineering husband becomes the slave of Rani. This transformation is very much significant in Rani’s life. Rani’s enslavement transforms to empowerment, innocence turns to knowledge. Rani’s journey of life shows a terrible truth of *antahpur* bringing to the fore the transformation of Rani’s life: once meek and submissive house wife shows enough courage to show resistance against the authoritative power of Appanna when words of protest come out of her throat:

I was a stupid, ignorant girl when you brought me here. But now I am a woman,
a wife, and I am going to be a mother. I am not a parrot. Not a cat or a sparrow.

Why don't you take it on trust that I have a mind and explain this charade to me? Why do you play these games? Why do you change like a chameleon from day to night? Even if I understood a little, a tiny bit—I could bear it. But now—sometimes I feel my head is going to burst! (*Nāga-Mandala* 48)

Now it will be very much interesting to have a look at the various mechanisms that are adopted by Girish Karnad in order to give proper shape to such an interesting story of an individual's quest and her ultimate emancipation.

Karnad's handling of the techniques of *lokal/deshi* culture of folk theatre is really a work of a true genius. With extraordinary artistic sensibility, he experimented with the same mathematically. The flexibility available in the *deshi* culture has that sufficient potential to talk about the serious as well as complicated issues in lucid and interesting ways. According to the playwright:

The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values, of making them literally stand on their head. The various conventions—the chorus, the masks, the seemingly unrelated comic episodes, the mixing of human and nonhuman worlds—permit a simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view, of alternative attitudes to the central problem. To use a phrase from Bertolt Brecht, these conventions then allow for 'complex seeing'. (Karnad, *Three Plays* 14)

In *Nāga-Mandala*, Karnad weaves two Kannada folk tales together. Time and again, Karnad mentions how he got attracted towards A. K. Ramanujan's habit of collecting folk tales and he gave Ramanujan the position of a "friend, guru, hero" (*Nāga-Mandala* Dedication) in his life. But unfortunately, Ramanujan breathed his last three days before *Nāga-Mandala* was staged at Guthrie Theatre. But the contribution of Ramanujan in Karnad's life remained undeniable. Ramanujan proclaimed that the folk tales were basically narrated for the entertainment of the children but at the same time they have undeniable connection with the domestic sphere of life and he "laid bare the complex 'political' role these tales played in the lives of women" (*Nāga-Mandala* 8). Again, Karnad mentions in the "Preface" to *Nāga-Mandala* the extraordinary significance of folk tales: "These tales dealt with a world in which women were protagonists;

they had initiative and imagination, set the terms, solved problems inaccessible to men, and provided a lived counterpart to the patriarchal norms dictated by classical texts and intuitions, ruling life outside the kitchen (8). In Kannada, *deshi* tradition of oral folk literature and pan-Indian *marga* literature are always different from each other; there is a binary system in between *deshi* and *marga* tradition. *Deshi* folk tradition has the liberty to experiment with the content unlike the official *marga* tradition and more interestingly, “*Deshi* theatre includes all that is considered relevant for educating and entertaining the audience” (qtd. in Das 54), as Karnad himself says to Mukherjee. This paradoxical nature of folk tradition establishes the independent existence of these tales, but still, they will remain alive only when they are shared from one person to another. The stories must be circulated in order to keep them alive in collective consciousness. And the tellers of the stories may be “professional and nonprofessional tellers” (Ramanujan xv). In *Nāga-Mandala*, Rani’s story is narrated to the Man by Story after he agreed with Story’s demand that he “can’t just listen to the story and leave it at that” and he “must tell it again to someone else” (16). In this way, Rani’s story will also survive. As already mentioned, *Nāga-Mandala* is based on two oral tales, those are narrated by women, collected from A. K. Ramanujan and these tales often allow a space for communication among women of a family. And by doing so, they help in the women’s understanding of the realistic aspect of society they are in. In the “Preface” to *Folktales from India: A Selection of Oral Tales from Twenty-two Languages*, A. K. Ramanujan talks about the importance of oral tradition of India and mentions very brilliantly, “... one should bear in mind that these tales are meant to be read for pleasure first, to be experienced as aesthetic objects. As an old Chinese proverb tells us: ‘Birds do not sing because they have answers, birds sing because they have songs.’ The songs of course have territories, species, contexts and functions” (xii). The folk tales have their own individual significance and they can lay bare many important aspects of society openly.

However, Kanad has written *Nāga-Mandala* as a family opera in the *Lok Katha* (Folk Tale) tradition of Karnataka. Being an extraordinary artistic persona, Karnad knows how to handle this theme of quest in an excellent way. He has very beautifully depicted the story of Rani’s quest with the use of frame-story and core-story. The frame story of the Flames, the Story, the ruined temple and a Man offers a very strong symbolic significance. The whole structure of the frame story makes the ground for the illustration of the core story of Naga, Rani and Appanna. The ruined temple seems to be Karnad’s beloved place for the exhibition of strange proceedings.

Not only in *Naga-Mandala*, in his other two plays namely *Hayavadana* and *Bali: The Sacrifice*, the image of a ruined temple serves in the development of the plot significantly. The Story plays the role of Sutradhara communicating both with Rani and the audience. When Rani was puzzled about what to do with the roots given by Kurudavva, the blind lady and friend of Appanna's mother, she takes help from the Story. Time and again, Story directs Rani what to do next. When the smaller piece of root did not work on Appanna, Rani being enriched with the advice of Kurudavva gets interested in pouring the paste of the largest root into the curry made for Appanna and she asks Story, "Shall I pour it in?" and immediately Story replies positively, "Yes" (*Nāga-Mandala* 29). Then Story goes on to describe what does Rani do and how she is frightened looking at the deep red blood like colour of the curry. Right at this very moment, Story brings a new dimension to the core story of Rani, Appanna and Naga. Being the Sutradhara of this play, she plays the key role in allowing Naga to enter into the core story as well as in Rani's life as she prepares the ground for Naga's entry into the plot by advising Rani to "put it (the curry) in that ant-hill" (30). Thus, a character of the frame story actively changes the direction of the core story and helps significantly in the progression of the plot. On the other hand, this Story, by narrating the core story of Rani's quest to the Man, the playwright, adheres to the rule of Lok Katha tradition as the oral story is circulated and thereby remains fresh. The man becomes the improved Bhagabata, who is now the playwright.

The use of mime is regarded as one of the most efficient techniques of communication with the audience in the folk-theatrical presentation of India. It helps effectively in depicting many events in front of the audience without using unnecessary language and the performance becomes more interesting and attractive. The tradition of mime can be traced back to more than 2,500 years ago and were available in all cultures. In theatrical performances they are alive significantly as they are acted to fulfil specific purposes. Rani's journey to her husband's house is presented with the use of mime and this journey of Rani is the beginning of her journey of life, her search for emancipation. She enters into a new life which is in stark contrast with the earlier one where she was a shy and timid housewife following the strict commands of her husband. Again, while communicating with Naga when he gets wounded by the dog, Rani "mimes a cobra hood with her fingers" (*Nāga-Mandala* 37) without uttering the name Cobra with the help of words. Naga also does the same thing in the same occasion.

Another important technique adopted by Karnad is shape shifting which is also a recurrent feature of folk performance. The artifice of shape-shifting is a very much significant traditional technique and it is in many cases mythical. In Indian mythological tales, the snakes could assume any human shape whenever they like. But in most of the cases they face tragic outcomes in life. In the present play, Naga assumes the human form of Appanna and appears in front of Rani at night as a tender and loving husband of hers. Naga played a significant role in Rani's life. Both Naga and Appanna represent two different sets of experiences of Indian women. The patriarchal domination of brutal husband is represented by Appanna. He does not even think before giving her the gift of tight slaps. Two sides of a husband in Indian joint families are represented here—the domineering and terrible husband at daytime and the dear and affectionate husband at night. Karnad himself mentions in the “Preface” to *Nāga-Mandala* the contradictory experiences of Indian housewives:

The central tale of *Nāga-Mandala* can be seen as a metaphor for the experience of a young woman in the bosom of a joint family, where she sees her husband only in two unconnected roles—as a stranger in the day and as a lover in the night. Inevitably the pattern she is forced to weave from the disjointed encounters must be something of a fiction. The empty house Rani is locked in could stand for the family she is married in. (8-9)

Naga fulfilled Rani's desire of having a loving and caring husband. The conflict in Rani's feminine psyche is portrayed minutely through the relationship among Appanna, Rani and Naga. But at the end, tragedy comes to the life of Naga who played the key role in Rani's emancipation. He only sees his beloved living 'happily' with her husband and son. In an imaginary conversation with Karnad, Paranjape makes the playwright remark, “You remember how you told me that shape shifting was like mathematics to you: hold one thing constant, change the other. Then see what happens. Where does it take you? Keep pushing the idea to its logical conclusions” (qtd. in Das 54-55).

Karnad's deft use of myths which are available in collective consciousness is very much praiseworthy as it adds grace to the whole story. Their importance and acceptance among people are wide ranging and significant. According to the popular belief, Naga is associated with Lord Shiva and also is associated with fertility, procreation and childbirth. Here in Rani's

case, her real husband is not the reason behind her pregnancy, rather Naga is the father of her son. On the other hand, though the snake or ghost may take any shape it likes, its real identity is always reflected in a mirror, as the common belief says. Naga gets wounded after his sudden fight with the dog kept by Appanna and then he comes to Rani's room where they meet every night. Rani tries to put ointment to Naga's wound and "rushes to the mirror-box and opens it" but "before Naga can move away so Rani won't see his reflection, she looks at him in the mirror" and "screams in fright" and starts trembling (*Nāga-Mandala* 36). Naga's actual reflection gets captured in the mirror. Ramanujan describes, "Mirror in mirror. Doubles, shadow worlds, upside-down reflections, are common in Indian myth and story" (Dharwarkar 32). So, the central plot of the play, that is the married life of Rani (Queen— 'every woman') and Appanna (meaning 'every man') with the help of the devices of the Yakshagana folk theatre, chorus and others, is very much capable to reveal a psychological fact—the dichotomy of mind—in the contemporary society. Again, an important custom of contemporary society—women's chastity needs to be tested—is presented with so much vigour and vitality. Rani's chastity is tested as that of Sita of the *Ramayana*. But unlike Mata Sita, Rani, after qualifying the test, lives with her husband and son "happily ever after" (*Nāga-Mandala* 57). However, "the traditional test" in Rani's village "has been to take oath while holding a red-hot iron in the hand" (52) but Rani demanded the 'snake ordeal' as suggested by Naga last night. So, Rani qualified in the chastity test and the 'snake ordeal' becomes a significant event in Rani's life as it gave new turn to her life. "The Cobra slides up her shoulder and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head... and moves over her shoulder like a garland" (56). The whole incident seems miraculous for all the people present there and they accept Rani as a divine woman, no more a normal woman. More interestingly, "they fall at her feet" considering her as "a goddess incarnate" (57). That is the moment of Rani's emancipation. In a moment everything in her life changes. Elder man present at the ordeal, advises Appanna, "Don't grieve that you judged her wrongly and treated her badly. That is how goddesses reveal themselves to the world. You are the chosen instrument for the revelation of her divinity" (57). Appanna's reaction is very interesting as he says, "Forgive me. I am a sinner. I was blind" (57). Within a moment a domineering husband completely changes and behaves like Rani's slave and thereby Naga's words come true as he told Rani last night, "your husband will become your slave tomorrow" (51). When Virginia Woolf says, "Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant"

(Woolf 32), her words are succinct for the average Indian women. When ‘miracle’ happens, Rani turns to be a ‘goddess’ for everyone, even to her once domineering husband, but just before the ‘miracle’ took place she was a “whore” (*Nāga-Mandala* 53) for the same husband. Naga gifted her a space for freedom, whereas Appana only gave confinement.

Another important mechanism adopted by Girish Karnad is his use of the techniques of Brechtian Epic Theatre. As already mentioned earlier that Karnad is very much influenced by the western techniques. He attempts to use Brechtian ‘alienation’ effect, an innovative theatrical technique to make the familiar issues strange and thereby, provokes critical responses from the readers. Karnad derives the material of the play from the folk tales and uses the ‘non-naturalistic’ techniques of the traditional Indian theatre, such as the use of narrator, use of songs and music, use of technology, use of frames, the three-tier audience: the man, the musicians and flames and finally the audience. This popular Brechtian technique of epic theatre is highly acclaimed in the folk performances of Indian theatre. Every element plays important role regarding the core story of the play. Girish Karnad himself admits, “Brecht’s influence, received mainly through his writings and without the benefit of his theatrical productions went some way in making us realize what could be done with the design of traditional theatre” (*Three Plays* 15). In Karnad’s plays, songs are used as significant devices as they are sung either by narrator or by other characters of the plays. Music and chorus play significant roles in epic theatre. Both in *Hayavadana* and *Nāga-Mandala*, songs are sung time and again in the crucial junctures of the plays. In *Nāga-Mandala*, the Flames sing. When Rani and Naga share a few happy moments of bliss, the Flames start singing, “Come let us dance/ through the weaver-bird’s nest/ and light the hanging lamps of glow worms... (38) and again Act Two of the play starts with their song, “Come let us flow/ down the tresses of time/ all light and song” (39). Their music gives motion to the upcoming events of the play and the audience can figure out what they try to convey.

Karnad registered enough space in his artistic oeuvre for the use of supernatural and magical elements. And *Nāga-Mandala* is no exception, where they play significant roles in the transformation of Rani’s life. When Rani is locked like a caged bird in her husband’s house, Kurudavva and her son Kappanna come to her and Kurudavva’s roots play magical role in Rani’s life. The largest root brings the sea change in Rani’s life: once helps her to become a ‘whore’ and finally helps to become a goddess. Magic plays productive role in Rani’s deserted life and brings grace. Again, Naga’s appearance and disappearance create supernatural effect

in the play. These elements bring a different track to the play as they register happiness in Rani's life. In many literary texts, supernatural and magical elements are used in negative senses unlike the present play.

It will be unjust if the significance of Mandala is not discussed while talking over Rani's quest. In South Asia, Mandalas do have very precise implications associated with rituals. Mandala refers to a diagram that is associated with some spiritual ritual in both Hinduism and Buddhism. To use the words of Carl Jung, a mandala denotes "a safe refuge of inner reconciliation and wholeness" and "it is a synthesis of distinctive elements in a unified scheme representing the basic nature of existence" (qtd. in Singh and Ananthanarayan 13). The symbol of mandala signifies Karnad's vision towards theatre as a whole where each and every component used in the play has individual importance. In traditional South Indian belief, Deities are invoked into the Mandala with the help of the mantras. Here in this play, the mixing of the paste of the magic roots provided by Kurudavva does function as the modified form of invocation of the deities into the Mandala and Appanna's house serves as the mandala for Naga and Naga becomes an integral part of the play. In an interview with Tutun Mukherjee, Karnad expresses his view regarding the title of *Nāga-Mandala*, "I did not intend any mystical connotations. I thought of it first as 'naga-bandha' but that sounded rather clumsy and my friends said that there [were] already too many 'bandhs!' 'Naga-Mandala' had the right sound, you know, strongly evocative of the coils of the snake" (qtd. in Das 60).

The ending of the play is quite fascinating and at the same time ambiguous because of double ending. After the story ends with a sad note, with the death of Naga, nobody was satisfied with that ending. The Flames expected a happy one. But Story has already left the scene. So, the Man, the playwright tries to do something different. There comes the alternative ending. The play does not have conventional ending. Karnad's use of alternative ending was the result of a suggestion from Rati Bartholomew, a Bengali lady married to Richard Bartholomew. Karnad mentioned how she reacted when he read out the text of *Nāga-Mandala* to Rati that it had an unhappy ending as Naga kills himself. Being heart-broken at the sight of Rani "sleeping next to her husband, her head on his shoulders" and "there is a quiet smile of contentment on her face" (59), Naga comes closer to Rani and after enough musings and considerations, "covers himself with the hair (of Rani) and dances" and "finally, Naga ties a tress into a noose and places it around his neck" and the "stage slowly becomes dark" (60).

This unhappy ending did not satisfy Rati Bartholomew as Karnad mentions:

When I read the play then it had an unhappy ending— that he kills himself. She said, but in Bengali it has a different ending. This folk tale...it has a happy ending— he goes and lives in her hair. So, I said, “how marvelous! What more can I want. So, we keep both ends.” So, I did the double ending. This is how folk tales develop. After all, oral literature develops. It’s my most popular play now. (Das 195)

Brecht always preferred not to offer typical ending for his plays, rather he expected the spectators would derive probable solution themselves. According to Brecht, “I do not like plays to contain pathetic overtones. They must be convincing like court pleas. The main thing is to teach the spectator to reach a verdict” (qtd. in Bentley 46).

To sum up our discussion we must engage our rational mind to speculate about a certain fact that Karnad has tried to depict the feminine psyche and also, he throws light on the fact how women accept domination as a natural one; they become ‘ideal’ women of patriarchal society. *Pativrata* women became the ideal women of a Brahminic society and they are worshipped for that. Mythological figures like Sita, Sabitri, Anusuya, Dayamanti have been praised over the years and till now they are worshiped because they followed *stridharma* throughout their entire lives and devoted whole life to fulfil that duty. This patriarchal view that women should be submissive, shy, and *pativrata* is reflected through Rani’s story from the beginning but after the snake ordeal her life changes. Rani becomes the representative of women for whom Karnad has deep respect. With the help of multiple innovative theatrical techniques, Girish Karnad, like a true genius exposed the rules of patriarchal society and wonderfully experimented with all those. All the theatrical devices used by Karnad to give voice to the sufferings, pains and the yearning for love and respect are quite successful in fulfilling their duties towards their experimenter in a quite outstanding way.

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