



# Mythical Elements in Indian Plays : A Study of Naga-Mandala of Girish Karnad

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## ABSTRACT

Girish Karnad's plays abound with the elements of myth. In this paper the researcher tried to present the treatment of myth in *Naga-Mandala* of Girish Karnad. The aim of the researcher is to find out how far the mythical elements have been exploited by the dramatist to portray the socio-cultural problems and the evils of the society. It is concluded that although the ending of the play is not within the orthodoxy of Indian epic texts and Hindu philosophy, it can be seen in the cultural context of Indian woman of today who seeks to fulfil her needs and aspirations.

The middle and late nineteenth century saw many writers in colonial India, notably Michael Madhusudhan Dutt (*Sharmishtha* in Bangla), Annasaheb Kirloskar (*Subhadra* in Marathi), Vishnudas Bhave (who experimented with *akhyana* or verse narrations and *Yaksha-gaan*, a Kannada folk art form) struggle with this atemporal legacy, and begin to reorient myth and folklore towards negotiating contemporary Indian realities. As he avows himself, Girish Karnad<sup>1</sup> owes as much to this strain of 'Indian' theatre history as he does to the psychological complexity and individualism of the European dramatic tradition.<sup>2</sup> This sensitivity, then, to the cross-pollination of multiple dramatic traditions is crucial to any assessment of Karnad's position vis-à-vis Indian drama. It allows one to recognise the uniqueness of Karnad's dramatic vision and see him also as part of the post-independence 'modern' phase of Indian theatre, one where he shares space with Badal Sircar (*Evam Indrajit*), Vijay Tendulkar (*Ghasiram Kotwal*), K.N. Panikkar (*Ottayan/The Lone*

*Tusker*), and Indira Parthasarathi (*Aurangzeb*), to name just a few.

The inexhaustible lore of myths, parables and legends that pattern and define our culture offers immense scope for the Indian dramatists as Shastri says, "Myth, at all events, is raw material, which can be the stuff of literature".<sup>3</sup> Our early playwrights writing in English like Sri Aurobindo and Kailasam selected their themes from the myths and legends of Indian Literature. Though Karnad's themes appear to build castles in the air, he took refuge in the myths and legends and made them the vehicle of a new vision. His childhood exposure to street plays in Karnataka villages and his familiarity with western dramas staged in Bombay have induced him to retell the secular legends of India to suit the modern context. A vigorous vitality that combs the past for apt myths to analyze the present has been the hallmark of Girish Karnad, the pre-eminent Indian playwright in the Kannada language.



Karnad's creative genius lies in taking up fragments of historical-legendary experience and fusing them into a forceful statement. By using the 'grammar of literary archetype', Karnad links the past and the present, the archetypal and the real. Issues of the present world find their parallels in the myths and fables of the past, giving new meanings and insights reinforcing the theme. By transcending the limits of time and space, myths provide flashes of insight into life and its mystery. They form an internal part of cultural consciousness of the land, with different meanings and it reflects the contemporary issues. Karnad believes in the Jungian collective racial consciousness and so turns to the past habitually for the source materials. As Dhanavel says, the borrowed myths are "reinterpreted to fit pre-existing cultural emphasis".<sup>4</sup> All his plays are literary excavations of the Indian collective past – the racial, mythical, legendary and the historical and they have a strong contemporary relevance. By using these myths he tried to reveal the absurdity of life with all its elemental passions and conflicts and man's eternal struggle to achieve perfection Vanashree Tripathy has said that "Literature and Myth merely dramatize, heighten and highlight what is theoretically possible in nature and science."<sup>5</sup> According to Jyoti Sahi, "Girish Karnad's art can be described as a vision of reality".<sup>6</sup> So, Karnad delves deep into the traditional myths to spell modern man's anguish and dilemmas that are created in his mind. Karnad does not take the myths in their entirety, he takes only fragments that are useful to him and the rest he supplements with his imagination to make his plots interesting. His interest was not in recreating old myths and legends but in representing them to suit his artistic purpose. Karnad himself has revealed that Theatre can simultaneously be entertainment, political commentary and artistic statement and can be

composed in traditional, realistic and post modern forms .... Like masks worn by actors that allow them to express otherwise hushed truths, Indian theatre enables immediate, manipulative representations of reality.<sup>7</sup>

Gifted playwrights have discovered source materials from myths and legends and have employed them creatively. Realism in drama was a totally new concept and it was alien to theatrical conventions. Myths and legends serve as a surrogate for Karnad's plays. When Karnad was asked the reason for his handling of myths and legends, he replied that his sole purpose was to narrate the particular story effectively and so, "the borrowed tales are given a turn of the screw, as it were, which works wonders with his plays".<sup>8</sup>

Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* is based on two oral tales from Karnataka as we know from what he says in his "Introduction" to Three Plays: ... these tales are narrated by women- normally the older women in the family-while children are being fed in the evenings in the kitchen or being put to bed. The other adults present on these occasions are also women. Therefore these tales, though directed at the children, often serve as a parallel system of communication among the women in the family.<sup>9</sup>

The dramatist also attempts to instil an alienation effect by driving the material of the play from the folk tales, and also by using the 'non-materialistic techniques' of the traditional Indian theatre. The title of the play is not the name of a human character, but it is that of a snake. As the name suggests, it revolves around a woman and a serpent. As this play is based on a folk tale it could be observed that the serpent plays an important role as in most such narrations all over the world. "We are forced to believe that there exists a theory that the mothers of great men in history such as Scipio, Alexander the great, and Augustus Ceasar were all impregnated by serpents".<sup>10</sup> It is believed that snake myths are



found extensively in Brahmanism, Buddhism, Lamaistic and Japanese writing. In *Naga-Mandala*, the story of the cobra suggests that the play is intended to dramatize not merely the folk tales, but also to imply a deeper meaning at various levels. The folk-tale element of the *Naga-Mandala* and the magical power, which the cobra possesses continually, remind the spectators that they are only watching a play.

The play deals with a 'self-involved' hero, who undergoes a test put to him by his wife in order to survive. The psychological inadequacy he is trapped in causes acute lack of understanding and communication between him and his wife. It is a threat to family and society. Every man through adolescence faces this existential problem and so he must learn to overcome and this becomes more comprehensive in Karnad's plays. *Naga-Mandala* is not only about the male difficulty to trust and love women, it seems to be about the socialization process of both men and women, particularly in the Indian society, where marriages is more often than not the first experience of sex and love for most people. The transition from childhood into adolescence and then into adult roles has, in India, very different stages and psychological and cultural relationships are totally different from other less tradition-bound societies. The *Naga-Mandala* probes into the female and male growth into selfhood, and their mature adjustment with the social roles appointed for them by the traditional society.

Myths and folk tales in a patriarchal society represent primarily the male unconscious fears and wishes and are patriarchal constructs and male-oriented. In these stories the women's experiences and inner feelings are not given importance. They do not probe much light on women's fears, anxieties and psychological problems. It is a remarkable achievement of Karnad that he adapts this male-oriented folk tale in such a manner that it becomes a representation

of the experience of man and woman in the psychologically transitional phase.

In a folk tale, there is a magician or a snake that assumes the form of the Prince, enters the palace and woos the beautiful Princess, locked up in the palace. When the Prince becomes aware of this, he gets the snake/ magician killed and the Princess then sets him a riddle. If he fails to answer, he has to die. This existential crisis is treated in the folk tale in different ways. In Karnad's play, the story takes a happy turn, both Rani and Appanna adjusting to the family and community in a socially useful manner. But this is achieved after upsetting the male egoism and exaggerated sense of power over women. The male assumption of keeping full control over the body, sexuality and virtue of women through the insinuations of family and values like chastity are mocked in the story.

Appanna's violent reaction to his wife's infidelity does not make him consider for a moment his infidelity towards her. The other villagers also ignore this lapse on his part but they emphasize the institution of marriage and the procreative function of the couple. The importance of the family and progeny are established. The husband and the wife run towards each other, with a greater sense of relationship. The girl-bride now becomes the mother to be and as such gains a social recognition. This stage of Rani's social integration brings her a new sense of respect and her own worth. This is another significant aspect of the Indian social and cultural life in its treatment of women.

In Kiranth's words, "... an Indian woman knows that motherhood confers upon her a purpose and identity that nothing else in her culture can".<sup>11</sup> As a mother, Rani is seen in the last part of the story to be in command of the household with some authority and decision making power. Appanna even agrees to her rather strange demand that their son should perform an



annual “*pinda-daan*” in the memory of the dead snake.

In the alternate end to the play suggested by the playwright, the snake does not die. It is allowed by Rani to live in her dark, long and cool tresses. The lover is always present; he lives with her, within the family. The danger to male authority as a husband and patriarch lives on constantly at close quarters but mostly within the woman’s imagination. The dutiful and loyal wife may observe the social, moral code entirely; yet within her live the memories of the perfect lover who had given her first emotional and erotic experiences. These desires may haunt her or lie dormant within. Rani can understand emphatically why Kappanna, the young man, who was bound by filial duty to his old and blind mother, runs away one night. He had been pursuing his dream of a beautiful woman. Though he resisted the alluring voice and presence of the dream girl, he was trying to be a dutiful son carrying his old mother on his back. Finally he is pulled away when the dreams become too powerful. Rani has gone through these new desires, the daydreaming and fantasizing about love and she understands their power over the social and moral duties.

The unique challenge of *Naga-Mandala* lies in its exposure of its own limitations as a work of art. In this sense, the play is attuned to its contradictions with regard to women’s experiences of desire, and the modes of self-expression available to them within existing discourses. The play hints, indeed, that these contradictions lie at the heart of myths as a whole. Karnad’s way of reckoning with the anxiety this can generate is the classic postmodern theatrical device of multiple endings. It appeals to the postmodern sensibility of the late twentieth-century of which *Naga-Mandala* is a good example.

It can be concluded that, though the ending of *Naga-Mandala* is not within the

orthodoxy of Indian epic texts, the play must be studied and interpreted not only by keeping elements of Hindu philosophy as points of reference, but also by taking into account the cultural context of the Indian woman of today who seeks to fulfil her needs and aspirations.

### References :

1. Girish Karnad was born in Matheran, near Bombay, in 1938 and grew up in Sirsi (Karnataka). He writes his plays in Kannada and he himself translates them into English.
2. ‘The door banged by Nora in *The Doll’s House* did not merely announce feminist rebellion against social slavery. It summed up what was to be the main theme of Western realistic drama over the next hundred years: a person’s need to be seen as an individual, as an entity valuable in itself, independent of family and social circumstance.’ See Girish Karnad, *Three Plays*, New Delhi: OUP, 1994, p.9.
3. Shastri, J.L., ed., *Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology*, Vol. 1: “The Shiva Purana”, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1970, , pp. 229-230.
4. Dhanavel, P., *The Indian Imagination of Girish Karnad : Essays on Hayavadana*, Delhi: Prestige, 2000, p.58.
5. Tripathi, Vanashree, *Three Plays of Girish Karnad: A Study in Poetics and Culture*, New Delhi: Prestige, 2004, p.89.
6. Sahi, Jyoti, *The Child and the Serpent: Reflections on Popular Indian Symbols*, London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980, p.123.
7. Karnad, Girish, *Three Plays Nagamandala, Hayavadana, Tughlaq*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 331.
8. Chatterji, Suniti Kumar, *Indian Drama*, New Delhi: Publication Division, 1981, p.36.
9. Karnad, Girish, *Collected Plays : Tughlaq, Hayavadana, Bali: The Sacrifice, Nagamandala (Play with a Cobra)*, Vol. One. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005, p.16.
10. Ibid., p. 276.
11. Kiranth B.V., Translation of *Hayavadana* into Hindi, Delhi: Radhakrishna Prakashan, 1975, p.57.

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