

# NEGOTIATING MYTHS IN/AS BARGAINING WITH PATRIARCHY IN GIRISH KARNAD'S NAGAMANDALAM

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## Abstract

*Girish Karnad is a Modern myth maker. His ingenuous use of traditional myths not only presents indigenous customs and rituals but also interrogates them in altered perspectives. My paper looks at Girish Karnad's famous play Nagamandalam as subversive narrative on Indian patriarchy. The reinvention of old myths in the hands of Girish Karnad transforms the passivity of women into agency. Furthermore, my paper explores Karnad's Nagamandalam as an affirmation of Deniz Kandiyoti's concept of 'bargaining with patriarchy' where women folk contextually manipulate the patriarchal convention on a daily basis in keeping the façade of male domination yet in a remarkable machiavillian manoeuvring corrodes it internally, saving for itself the last laugh. The paper further looks into the sexual agency of women as crucial to its identity and its assertion of self. Rani's final act of hiding the snake lover into her thick lock of hair is an apologetic celebration of her body which not only bestowed her a status of Goddess but also domesticated her abusive and negligent husband. Rani's bargain with the patriarchy is embodied in the layers of myths which are instrumentalised to demarginalise womenfolk.*

**Keywords:** Myths, Feminism, Patriarchy, Marginalisation, Culture.

## INTRODUCTION

Girish Karnad along with U.R. Ananthamurthy and A.K. Ramanujan is instrumental in bringing the regional literature to the western world. A playwright, actor, screen play writer, visionary and a conscientious objector of the society, Karnad is not easy to sum up. Besides his multitudes of talents, Karnad remains a pioneer in not only reinventing the regional theatre but also showcasing it to the world ( his own translation in English) through the inventive use of myths, folk stories, oral story telling tradition and legends. In retelling of lost and forgotten myths, Karnad is no less than Marquez. Marquez's magic realism finds place in Karnad's mythic universe where real and unreal meet on a daily basis defining the life and events of the characters. The utter normalcy of the bizarre events are justified under the sanctity of all pervasive myths. While Karnad reinvents myths to question the gender discrimination, the relationship between his deployment of myths and gender discourse has never been easy. Twenty decades after Simon de Beauvoir's iconic book, *The Second Sex* in which she deconstructs the idea of 'woman' as, " One is not born, rather, one becomes a woman". The second wave feminist were arguing for contraceptives and abortion rights, the paternal french law was dissolved in 1970 which gave all rights to the father with respects to children. It is unimaginable that Girish Karnad who studied at Oxford and University of Chicago as a Rhodes and a Fulbright Scholar respectively would have been untouched with the growing demands of feminism in the western world. Karnad's insistence on using the familiar narrative, "I cannot invent plots therefore I use myths. I cannot invent stories and hence go to history" is telling in building a common consciousness of nation building. It is ample clear that Girish Karnad is no crusader for women's rights like Ibsen, maybe, yet women remain a potent force in his dramatic energy. My paper will explore this complex and problematic relationship between Karnad's ingenious reworking of myths and its altered gendered manifestation. The result is not the subversion of patriarchy but a clever bargaining tact that ironically renders patriarchy impotent in the face of almost machievellan, yet docile women characters. The prime focus for this deliberation would be one of the most acclaimed plays of Girish Karnad namely *Naga-mandala*.

Deniz Kandiyoti in her essay "Bargaining with Patriarchy" maintains that "women strategize within a set of concrete constraints" to strike a "patriarchal bargain" subjective to their class, caste and ethnicity. As a sociologist Kandiyoti deconstruct patriarchy through her field work in carefully delineating the agency amongst women to deflate patriarchal norms. Kandiyoti revealingly states:

These Patriarchal bargains exert a powerful influence on the shaping of women's gendered subjectivity and determine the nature gender ideology in different contexts. They also influence both the potential for and specific forms of

women's active or passive resistance in the face of their oppression. Moreover, patriarchal bargains are not timeless or immutable entities, but are susceptible to historical transformations that open up new areas of struggle and renegotiations of the relations between genders ( Bargaining with Patriarchy 275).

Arguably Karnad's *Naga-mandal* in its ambiguous plot construction uses the traditional myths as agent of deconstructing patriarchy. Appanna, the philanderer is compelled to accept his guilty wife as a Goddess, the lover as a miracle and the illegitimate son as his heir.

### A MODERN MYTH MAKER

Girish Karnad can be rightly hailed as a modern myth maker. His productive oeuvre runs parallel to the formation of modern nation building. Archiving the rich folk tales, myths and legends of the country into his narrative, Karnad exploited the shared knowledge into national consciousness of regional theatre. Aparna Dharwadker in her introduction to the *Collected Plays* affirms that Karnad " employs traditional Indian narrative material and modes of performance successfully to create a radically Modern urban theatre". As a postcolonial writer, Karnad's use of indigenous traditions, stories and rituals also served to challenge the western colonial discourse. However Karnad does not simply use the myths but reinvents and reinterprets them in comprehending the protean Indian society undergoing new challenges after the newly achieved Independence. Karnad deliberately uses the conventional with the subversive elements to question the gender discrimination. By recalibrating the old myths, Karnad not only radically questions them but subtly weaves new myths to capture the furtive gendered renegotiations operative in the patriarchal society. Karnad explains in the Introduction to *Three Plays*:

The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning those values, of making them literally stand on their head. The various conventions- the chorus, the masks, the seemingly unrelated comic episodes, the meaning of human and non human worlds- permit the simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view, of alternative attitude to the central problem (14).

Girish Karnad wrote *Nagamandala* in 1988 in Kannada and later translated it in English. This critically acclaimed play not only earned him Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award but was also well received internationally through performances in Germany and university theatre at Chicago. Nagamandala is a heady mix of folk tales weaved in mythic structure with a traditional oral story telling technique and a modernist approach. As Karnad says in the 'Author's Introduction' of *Three Plays* "Naga-Mandala is based on two oral tales, I heard from A. K. Ramanujan. 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" (16). These stories inhabit the world of women thus becomes "a lived counterpart of the patriarchal structures of classical texts and institutions" (17). Highlighting the inherently subversive nature of these tales, Karnad thus employs his dramatic strategies to allow for such alternate space to exist albeit covertly. There are four layers of narrative within the play. The frame story of the playwright who is accursed to die, the story of the gossiping flames, the tale of story in a saree and the central story of Rani and Appanna as told within the flames nightly ritual of gossips.

The first frame story acts as a *sutradhar* in integrating all the narratives. A playwright by name "man" is desperately trying to stay awake through the night. He is punished by a mendicant to die if he falls asleep because all his soporific plays lulls the audience to sleep and hence the curse " you have caused so many good people, who came trusting you, to fall asleep twisted in miserable chairs, that all that abused mass of sleep has turned against you and become the Curse of Death" (12). The writer thus has the last chance to be alive by staying awake. While the man takes refuge in the nearby temple, the second frame story develops with all the flames running into the temples to discuss the spicy gossips about their masters. These personified female flames narrates numerous stories. The old belief that all the flames get together at night to gossips come alive in Karnad's play. Easily overcome by his initial surprise, the man is intrigued and hides to hear their secret stories. The seamless encounter of unreal with the real becomes an alternate subjective space heightend by its femininity. One such story is by a New flame who narrates about her mistress who knew a song and a story but refused to share it with anyone, while sleeping with her mouth open, the story and song escaped from her mouth. The story took a shape of young enchanting women and the song became her saree. As the young lady got out of her husband room, the old woman got up, furious begins to fight. This was the story's revenge on

the old woman. The personified story enters the temple where the flames had gathered to narrate her story. As a female, story foregrounds the tale of the female protagonist, Rani.

And hence becomes the fourth and central story of Rani and Appanna. The story is told on a condition that it would be retold in order to continue the tradition of story telling. The 'man' playwright grudgingly agrees as it becomes their battle to survive. The story will be dead if not retold and the playwright has the last chance to be alive. Thus begins the tale of Rani and Appanna. Young Rani is married to Appanna who denies her any conjugal bliss. Locked up in the house, Rani spends her time either cooking or crying. She misses her parents and even wishes to die. Appanna visits a concubine and treats Rani no less than a slave. The story foregrounds the psychological torture of a woman who is not allowed any social contact. Kurudava, an old blind woman sympathises with her sad plight and gifts her magical roots to captivate her husband. Rani tries the roots concoction in small amount to no affect. Defeated and scared she tries again with the large amount of root only to be petrified at his blood red colour and in utter confusion throws it on the ant hill. The King cobra who dwells in the ant hill drinks the potion and falls in love with Rani. The snake begins to visit her every night in the guise of Appanna. Subsequently, Rani gets pregnant and Appanna accuses her of adultery. Rani is forced to take the chastity test by the village elders to prove her innocence. Reminiscent of Sita's chastity ordeal from Mahabharata, Rani vows to take the snake ordeal to prove her innocence. Rani holds the King cobra by her hand and the King cobra instead of poisoning her with its venomous fangs "Slides up her shoulder and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head" (Nagamandala 58). Rani is declared a goddess by the spellbound crowd and Appanna becomes her slave. The story however does not end there. The playwright demands for another ending and thus the story who is actually narrating Rani's tale provides the audiences with four different endings. The alternate multiple endings brings out the instability of mythmaking. Karnad's postmodern myth narratives often interrogating contradictory realities exposes the fissures in the society and its long held beliefs.

#### **NAGA-MANDALA: MANIPULATING MYTHS TO BARGAIN WITH PATRIARCHY**

Like Shakespeare, Karnad reworked the traditional myths as he made significant changes in the myths he borrowed from A.K. Ramanujan. The first tale of the flame about the story dressed in a saree is dramatically altered. In the original story as told by Ramanujan, it is the coat and the boot ( and not the story and saree).

One day, when she was sleeping with her mouth open, the story escaped, fell out of her, took the shape of a pair of shoes and sat outside the house. The song also escaped, took the shape of something like a man's coat, and hung on a peg. The woman's husband came home, looked at the coat and shoes, and asked her, "Who is visiting?" "No one," said she. "But whose coat and shoes are these?" "I don't know," she replied. He wasn't satisfied with her answer. He was suspicious. Their conversation was unpleasant. The unpleasantness led to a quarrel and the husband flew into the rage, picked up his blanket, went to the Monkey God's temple to sleep. The woman didn't understand what was happening. She lay down alone that night. She asked the same question over and over: "Whose coat and shoes are these?" Baffled and unhappy, she put out the lamp and went to sleep. (Ramanujan, 1).

The coat and shoes are replaced by the story and a saree by Karnad in *Naga-mandala*. The simple change completely altered the story and instead of a suspecting husband, Karnad made a suspecting wife. By passing the guilt from woman to man in the frame story, Karnad points out the underlying hypocrisy of the central story where innocent Rani is suspected while promiscuous Appanna remains guiltfree. The frame story of flames thus thematically addresses the question of adultery and chastity in marriage. The husband in the original story storms out of the house and take refuge in the temple of monkey god where he overhears the flames gossip about framing the woman. Satisfied of his wife's innocent, the man retires home. Karnad offers no such cathartic resolution. The family feud initiated by the story remains unsettled as its revenge. The lack of resolution in the prologue is striking as it mirrors the multiple endings of the main story.

The central story of *Naga-mandala* is taken from A.K. Ramanujan's "The Serpent Lover". Karnad has cleverly deployed the mythical elements of the story to not only communicate the evils that prevails in a patriarchal society but also how women navigate their way through it. In the story "The Serpent Lover", the snake informs about his true identity and thus Kamakshi is in a consensual affair that leads to her pregnancy. Ramanujan tale as suggested by its name "The Serpent Lover", is primarily about punishing the errant husband with the help of the serpent lover. The husband remains unnamed and has unquestionably accepts her after she clears the chastity test. The scripted chatity test is also self invited by Kamakshi as per the plan of the snake lover to reports in the king's court and voluntarily offers for the

chastity ordeal. Ramanujan uses the chastity test to validate an adulterous affair, thereby mocking its credibility. Kamakshi despite her adultery is ironically hailed as a goddess by the society. As a stock tale Ramanujan fails to capture the complex social reality. Karnad's *Nagamandala* uses the same story to tell more nuanced commentary on the society and its patriarchal conventions. Kamakshi is replaced by Rani, in fact we are told in the beginning that name is of no importance and she is called Rani simply because she was adored like a queen by her parents .

STORY: A young girl. Her name ... it doesn't matter. But she was an only daughter, so her parents called her Rani. Queen. Queen of the whole world. ... Rani continued to live with her parents until she reached womanhood. Soon, her husband came and took her with him to his village. His name was -well, any common name will do—

MAN: Appanna?

STORY: Appanna. (*Nagamandala*, Act One, 253).

And the unnamed man is called Appanna which translates into Everyman. Thus the story of Rani and Appanna becomes a universal story finding parallels across time and place for its manifested misogyny. Ironically Rani is treated like a *dasi* or even worse by Appanna who has enslaved her as his masculine entitlement. As a caged bird Rani dreams of the comfort and warmth of her parents. Her sorrow is alleviated by a blind woman, Kurudavva. Kurudavva shares the secret of her marriage with Rani in order to give her hope and a way to win over her husband. Rani conspires with Kurudavva to win over Appanna through magical roots. Kurudavva who has been born blind also used the magical roots to acquire a husband which would have been otherwise very difficult. Unlike radical feminist, Rani and Kurudavva do not question the institute of marriage as a patriarchal convention but they cleverly circumvent their ways to strike the best bargain. Kurudavva, we are told in the play served a mendicant in order to procure the gift of magical roots which she instantly used to trap the next man who stopped by to become her husband as he "instantly fell in love. Married within the next two days. Never went back to his village. It took the plague to detach him from me" (21). Kurudavva: I'll tell you. I was born blind. No one would marry me. My father wore himself out going from village to village looking for a husband. But to no avail. One day a mendicant came to our house. No one was home. I was alone. I looked after him in every way. Cooked hot food specially for him and served him to his heart's content. He was pleased with me and gave me three pieces of a root. 'Any man who eats one of these will marry you' he said (20).

Rani followed suit but nervously threw the magical concoction on the ant hill, making the snake for her lover. While Kamakshi is in full cognisance of her serpent lover, the façade of Rani's innocence is conserved till the end of the play. Rani is torn between Appanna at day time and Appanna at night. She feels her conjugal bliss to be a dream until she gets pregnant. The pregnancy becomes Rani's passport to be a Goddess. As she triumphantly holds the snake in her chastity ordeal, Rani not only enslaves her husband and his concubine but also the reverence of the entire village. From being incarcerated without any one to even talk to and chased around as a harlot, Rani is now worshipped by the entire village. This transformation of Rani inspired by Kurudavva's clever plot in the words of Denize Kandiyoti is "patriarchal bargain", the multiple endings of the play is a subtle indication of Rani's tacit compliance to the entire affair.

STORY: No two men make love alike. And that night of the Village Court, when her true husband climbed into bed with her, how could she fail to realize it was someone new? Even if she hadn't known earlier? When did the split take place? Every night this conundrum must have spread its hood out at her. Don't you think she must have cried out in anguish to know the answer? ...

When one says, 'And they lived happily ever after that', all that is taken for granted. You sweep such headaches under the pillow and then press your head firmly down on them. It is something one has to live with, like a husband who snores or a wife who is going bald. (*As the story speaks, Rani and Appanna come together, smile, embrace and plunged into darkness.*) (*Nagamandala*, Act Two, 295).

The first ending is full of gaps, with Rani turned into Goddess and the husband her slave. Appanna's shock at Rani's successful chastity ordeal is totally occluded in Ramanujan's tale but Karnad makes Appanna's confusion real. Appanna knows that he has been cuckolded and the child in Rani's womb is not his and hence the bewilderment.

APPANNA: What am I to do? Is the whole world against me? Have I sinned so much that even Nature should laugh at me? I know I haven't slept with my wife. Let the world say what it likes. Let any miracle declare her a goddess. But I know! What sense am I to make of my life if that's worth nothing? (*Nagamandala*, Act Two, 294)



Thus Rani much like Kurudavva has extracted a perfect revenge on Appanna. Rani used the shame and ignominy of chastity ritual to humiliate and punish Appanna. Appanna is emasculated and cannot deny the paternity of the unlawful child. The innocence of Appanna in having not slept with his wife is rendered immaterial as he is forced to live with his "guilty" wife and illegitimate child. Karnad manipulates the misogynist patriarchal conventions to turn against men in a bizarre reinterpretation of myths thereby questioning the gender stereotypes. In Dhanavel words "Appanna begins to suspect his own sanity" (24), as he is compelled by the villagers to worship Rani as "Mother Goddess"

The third ending where the jealous snake commits suicide in the thick and dark hairlocks of his beloved Rani seems to reclaim Appanna's masculinity as Rani's only lover and generally accepted as the most logical conclusion. In the movie version of the play where Karnad wrote the screenplay, the masculinity is further validated by a duel between the snake and the husband. The husband comes out victorious and repentant. The harmony is thus achieved as the institute of matrimony is rehabilitated. Apparently the dead snake is given a respectable funeral by the child (who is the son of the snake) as it the according to the Hindu funeral ritual, the last rites are to be undertaken by the son. This again testifies Rani's apparent innocence.

However it is the fourth ending that completely destabilises the matrimony. Rani hides the snake in her thick locks indicating her secret love affair. The snake's living presence in Rani's body is suggestive of her desire and sensuality. This threateningly sexually evocative ending is mostly rejected in favour of the death of the snake in a staid pursuance of the matrimonial bliss. Karnad in keeping this alternate ending gives precedence to the feminine body with (emphasis on her dark long hair) its hidden pleasures and desires as she declares ironically, "This hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss. Live in there happily, for ever" (64). Rani like Helene Cixous's 'écriture feminine' in an eery echo of Medusa's venomous locks of snake on her head for hair, embraces her sexuality albeit secretly. Cixous reinvents Medusa's myth from the Greek mythology of a spurned gorgon to an empowered feminine space with a unique 'feminine gaze'. While Medusa's venomous serpent locks make her an outcast and a monster because she threatens patriarchy with female desire and agency. Karnad's Rani on the other hand, with a hidden serpent in her locks continues the façade of matrimony and establish herself a status of goddess. Ostensibly the patriarchal order remains unperturbed as the semblance of the matrimonial order is preserved yet turned upside down by Rani's subversive embrace of her body and sexuality. Cixous elaborates Rani's sexuality in *The Laugh of Medusa*:

Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth. Our naphtha will spread, throughout the world, without dollars-black or gold -nonassessed values that will change the rules of the old game. To write. An act which will not only "realize" the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal; it will tear her away from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being "too hot"; for not being both at once; for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing ... (880).

Unlike Cixous's radical resistance against the phallogocentric order, Karnad's *Nagamandala* which on the surface appears to records the patriarchal codes and conventions of matrimony in effect covertly works to renegotiate the changing paradigm of gender dynamics. The untold and subtle strategies of negotiating with the patriarchy results into a clever bargain on the sides of the women as it unites them in planning and plotting as does Rani and Kurudavva against patriarchy. Undoubtedly Karnad's creative use of myths disempower the gender stereotypes in locating the subversive agency of women.

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