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## Decoding Gender Roles, Identity, Marriage, Fidelity and Female Agency in Karnad's *Nagamandala*

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### KEYWORDS

Patriarchy, Dominance, Gender roles, Myth, Contemporary society, Identity, Segregation

### ABSTRACT

Girish Karnad is one of the greatest known dramatists of India. He extracts his narrative structures from mythologies, which are reinterpreted through a contemporary lens. Essentially, Karnad utilizes his female characters as the victims of pervasive patriarchal repression. Nevertheless, Karnad endeavors to endow his female figures, such as Vishakha, Nittilai, Padmini, and Rani, with a powerful voice of modern women. These characters, despite being ensnared in the obscurity of a malevolent world ruled by patriarchal forces, display remarkable audacity as they struggle to lead lives marked by daring independence within a society plagued by gender segregation. *Nagamandala* is one of the greatest creations of Karnad. The play epitomises the contemporary roles of women through the help of mythical background. The present article aims to explore various issues related to the representation of women in *Nagamandala*.

Across a broad range of social, economic, religious, and political circumstances throughout history, women have traditionally held a variety of responsibilities and statuses. Numerous factors—such as caste, religion, education, social status, and geographical diversity—have an impact on this intricacy. It is important to consider the ways that various cultural, historical, and sociopolitical contexts have influenced these varied experiences of women in the Indian setting. Indian women don't belong to a single category; instead, their identities and experiences are nuanced, multifaceted, and frequently overlap. Notwithstanding the obstacles encountered, Indian women have demonstrated

tenacity and persist in shattering stereotypes, making a substantial contribution to the country's advancement on the social, political, and economic fronts. The current era is witnessing an increased push for gender equality, recognition of women's rights, and broader societal changes that challenge patriarchal norms and uplift the status of women across the Indian landscape.

When we delve deep into Karnad's *Nagamandala*, we encounter Rani, the female protagonist of the play. As the sole daughter of her family, she is endearingly addressed as 'Rani', a name which resonates with her royal status and beauty akin to a princess. Reinforcing her persona, Karnad depicts

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her as the “Queen of the whole wide world. Queen of the long tresses” (Karnad, p.253). However, in stark contrast, she experiences a reversal of fortune in her matrimonial home, where she is relegated to a subservient role and subjected to torments, while her husband indulges in an extramarital affair. Rani morphs into a silent victim of her husband’s tyrannical dominance. His conduct towards her grows increasingly harsh, hinting at the subversion of the Romantic narrative. The fear of solitude compels her to long for her parents’ company. She finds solace in daydreaming and engaging in self-conversation as a means to escape the brutalities of Appanna.

Initially, Rani personifies the quintessential image of an Indian woman—reserved and compliant—akin to the embodiment of Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of ‘the second sex’, wherein Rani is trapped within the confines of her marital home. Women in India are often overlooked, as their male counterparts fail to comprehend that they, too, possess feelings and emotions. Rani’s exploitation stems from her gender, and her consent is tragically neglected, highlighting the ingrained gender inequalities that persist in the society.

At this stage, Rani comes to understand the paramount importance of reclaiming her identity, which she perceives as a path towards liberation from the tyranny of her circumstances. This insight suggests that Karnad is attempting to overturn age-old conventions by depicting Rani’s firm resolve to free herself from her oppressive reality. Notably, Karnad appears to legitimize the intersection of the human and supernatural worlds in sexual unions, presenting it as a source of tranquility and joy.

Essentially, Karnad engages with the problem of female identity, providing him a platform to address contemporary women’s issues. In this narrative, Naga, a mythical snake figure, assumes the role of a fervent lover, offering Rani sexual gratification, thereby, de-mythicizing the husband-wife marital love.

Karnad explores the intricate dilemma of Rani’s situation, which ultimately equips her to challenge the societal moral codes imposed upon her. Rani’s desires extend beyond mere liberation—she seeks a male companion who can provide her with happiness. Her suppressed inner yearning seeks release, and she is determined to fulfill her sexual desires at any cost. Assisted by an old woman named Kurudavva, Rani manages to find a lover who satisfies her repressed longing. Kurudavva gives her a magical root, a potent love potion, which aids Rani in capturing the eternal affection of the King Cobra Naga. Naga endears himself to Rani by offering her a sense of security and fulfilling her desire for sexualization. Naga’s entry instills confidence in Rani, allowing her to revel in the heavenly bliss of marital union.

Karnad subverts the traditional conventions by depicting an idyllic world for Rani, one where she finds solace in Naga’s company. Naga, assuming the form of Appanna, begins to visit her during the night, helping her escape the nightmarish reality of her harsh husband. Her growing self-awareness enhances her status in her own eyes, facilitating her evolution from a mere object to a self-assertive subject. Rani appears to emerge as a liberated woman who capitalizes on her plight to transcend the confines of gender bias. In contrast, Naga, her

snake-lover, who fulfills Rani's desire for motherhood, ultimately sacrifices his life for his love. The affection and care that Rani does not receive from her husband, she finds in Naga. In Naga's arms, who appears in the guise of her husband, Rani begins to feel safe and comfortable, breaking free from her isolation. This is exemplified in her words to Naga: "Let it. I don't feel afraid any more, with you beside me" (Karnad, p. 273).

After ingesting the potent aphrodisiac paste, the King Cobra Naga is compelled to assume the form of Appanna. His purpose, driven by the effects of the potion, is to offer Rani companionship and security in the nighttime hours. However, Naga becomes a sacrificial figure who, in the end, must lay down his life for Rani. This ultimately leads to Rani's transformation into a divine figure in the eyes of the villagers. Generally, upon Appanna's departure from the house after lunch, Naga visits Rani under the cloak of darkness, sharing her bed and offering solace. Naga even inquires about her preferences, 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 dialogue suggests Naga's desire to free himself from Rani's authority.

Notably, Rani overlooks Naga's true identity, even when she is confronted with the reflection of a cobra, rather than Naga, in the mirror. Rani discovers the concealed truth about Naga when "she looks at him in the mirror. Screams in fright...She is trembling" (Karnad, p.272). Rani even acknowledges, "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). Her suspicion is further fuelled when she touches Naga's wounds and exclaims, "Your blood is so cold. It's the way you wander about day and night, heedless of wind and rain" (Karnad, p.273). Despite these signs, Rani turns a blind eye to the enigmatic truth, stating, "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).

Further, when Naga enters her house in the dark, Rani hears the eerie sounds of dogs growling and fighting, intermingled with the hiss of a snake. Upon retreating into Naga's arms, she observes blood on his cheeks and shoulders. Yet again, Rani exclaims, "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). Hence, there exist substantial clues revealing Naga's true identity, to which Rani never confronts him. Pranav Joshipura contextualizes this ambiguity in his comment, "Rani's gesture is questionable because there are sufficient reasons to believe that Naga is not Appanna" (Joshipura, p. 259).

Rani appears disinterested in untangling the perplexing enigma surrounding the glaring disparities between Naga and Appanna, despite having concrete evidence at her disposal. Furthermore, Naga is expected to accept her sexual awakening and liberation, as elucidated by Naga's assertion that "the husband decides on the day visits. And the wife decides on the night visits." Moutushi Chakravartee's analysis provides a

valuable insight into this dynamic: "Her adultery seems the proper lesson for her adulterous husband" (Chakravartee, p.185).

In the play, Karnad ingeniously employs the technique of magical realism. This narrative style intertwines reality, represented by Appanna, with the fantastical world embodied by Naga, within the context of a female's psychological narrative. The result is a semi-real, hybrid space that is both unsettling and intriguing. Through this lens, Karnad indirectly vindicates Rani's act of adultery by framing it metaphorically. Sexual repression catalyzes Rani's determination to engage physically with Naga, who offers her love and intimacy each night during the absence of her ruthless husband, Appanna, who routinely leaves her locked within their dwelling.

The semi-dark ambiance and the confounding identities of Naga and Appanna afford Rani the opportunity to shatter the confines of patriarchy and exercise her discretion in fulfilling her sexual desires. Rani's intense yearning for sexual fulfillment is so profound that she longs for the night to extend indefinitely, thereby subverting established male constructs. Abhinandan Malas offers an insightful commentary on this issue, suggesting that, "Through Rani, Karnad challenges the patriarchal constructs of chastity and ideal womanhood that women are made to follow only to serve the purpose of the male" (The Criterion).

Additionally, she coerces Appanna, who personifies patriarchal egoism through his actions, to publicly acknowledge Rani's reality when she becomes pregnant. Appanna's questioning of her chastity becomes the basis of her trial. However,

she manages to validate her innocence through the snake ordeal in the presence of the village elders. Appanna, who has never shared a bed with his wife, reacts violently to Rani's pregnancy. He vociferously protests, exclaiming, "...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).

In this pivotal juncture, Appanna seems oblivious to his own failure to be faithful towards Rani. However, Naga, in contrast, is dedicated to safeguarding both Rani and her unborn child. He offers solace and guidance, encouraging her to confront the situation bravely. He further suggests the snake ordeal as a means to validate her chastity. In a parallel to the epic Ramayana, Rani finds herself in a position akin to Sita, necessitating an 'Agnipariksha' (trial by fire) before the village elders. Just before this test, Naga advises her, "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).

Naga even recommends that she extract the King Cobra and swear her oath upon it. Rani, understandably anxious, inquires, "Won't the Cobra bite me the moment I touch it?" (Karnad, p.286). To this, Naga responds, "No, it won't bite. Only, you must tell the truth" (Karnad, p.286). He continues to console her, assuring, "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). Subsequently, Naga departs from the scene.

The following morning, Rani is confronted with the ordeal. At this juncture, her actions symbolize a performance of heroism, one that has the capacity to captivate a considerable audience. This is underscored when Elder III 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). The impending trial becomes a spectacle, a testament to Rani’s courage and resilience, thus reflecting the power dynamics at play within the societal structure.

In accordance with the guidance previously offered by Naga, Rani opts to reach her hand into the anthill, extracting the Cobra in a daring act of defiance and faith. Subsequently, she fervently swears her fidelity, affirming, “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 sexes. Nor have I allowed any other male to touch me. If I lie, let the Cobra bite me” (Karnad, p. 292).

During the patriarchal epoch embodied in the *Ramayana*, women were engaged in a perpetual struggle to establish their identities and claim a space of honor. Reflecting the patriarchal characteristics of Indian society, Valmiki’s *Ramayana* portrays ‘Sita’ as the paragon of wifely duty, who follows her husband without question, accompanies him in exile, and endures abduction by the ‘Rakshasa’ king Ravana. She must face the ‘Agnipariksha,’ or trial by fire, to vindicate her chastity during her time in captivity. Yet, even after navigating these trials, she is compelled to leave her husband Rama when the populace of his

kingdom casts aspersions on her character. *The Ramayana*, in this regard, upholds the ideal of the ‘Pativratastree’ — a woman for whom her husband is her entire world.

However, in contrast, Karnad elevates the status of Rani to a position of satisfaction and reverence. Appanna, her husband, must accept her in silence during the public trial, where the village elders acclaim her as a ‘goddess incarnate.’ This acknowledgment is something *Ramayana*’s Sita did not receive despite her successful completion of the ‘Agnipariksha.’ The entire village is taken aback by Rani’s victory when the King Cobra does not bite her but instead unfurls its hood over her head like a protective umbrella. The Cobra, in a display of docility, gently sways its hood for a moment before draping itself over her shoulder akin to a garland. Rani is left in a state of bemused confusion amidst the uproar of praise and cheers from the crowd. Even the village elders participate in the collective exclamation of her triumph, underscoring the transformation of Rani’s status within her community.

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).

Even Elder I suggest Appanna to honour her divinity after the test ordeal:

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)

Subsequent to the revealing ordeal, even the assertive figure of Appanna is compelled to prostrate himself at Rani's feet, exclaiming with a sense of repentance and newfound humility, "Forgive me. I am a sinner. I was blind" (Karnad, p. 293). Appanna further voices his despair and confusion by questioning, "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). Karnad's play, in its unfolding narrative, intricately explores Appanna's anguish, guilt, and sense of oppression following the decree by the village elders, which endows upon Rani an exalted status as a divine entity.

Within Rani, a deep-seated yearning existed to discover a partner who could provide her with a sense of holistic fulfillment. This desire was ultimately actualized as Naga fulfilled his earlier promise, albeit at the steep cost of his own life. In an act of self-sacrifice driven by devotion to his beloved, Naga concludes his life by purposefully entangling himself within Rani's hair.

Further, the narration of the story provides an insight into Rani's emergent social status and the prosperous life that awaits her:

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)

Notably, Rani unabashedly proclaims the truth about her physical interactions limited to two entities— her husband and the Cobra, providing a plausible reason for Naga's refusal to inflict harm upon her. Interestingly, Naga finds himself ensnared due to his intimate involvement with Rani while disguised as Appanna. Consequently, he is compelled to surrender his life, a sacrifice orchestrated by a woman he deceived. In the end, the Cobra chooses to meet its demise entwined in Rani's luxuriant tresses, symbolising the clandestine love between them.

In the aftermath, Rani succeeds in securing ample autonomy, successfully persuading her husband to allow their son to carry out the final rites for Naga as a paternal figure and commemorate his death on an annual basis. In an interesting turn of events, Rani transitions from being an object of desire to the desiring subject herself, firmly establishing her position at the nexus of power within the narrative. In doing so, she effectively diminishes the significance of the male characters, Naga and Appanna, reducing them to mere objects. As Nasser Dasht Peyma astutely observes, "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).

Upon reviewing the aforementioned analysis, the

playwright's success in presenting a coherent pattern becomes evident. This pattern emerges both in the harsh treatment endured by the female characters in the plays under scrutiny and their subsequent triumph in the face of formidable challenges, showcasing their resilience and strength. As has been analyzed, retains an evocative manifestation of femininity as celebrated in the sphere of Indian drama. It commences by illustrating the commanding glorification bestowed upon such mythological figures as Gargi, Maitreyi, Lopamudra, Shakuntala, Sita, Draupadi, and Savitri. These women are central figures in the landscape of Indian literature and paragons of radiant beauty. The culture of Shakti undeniably points towards a favorable societal context in relation to women's status during these times. It is indisputable that the tales of these distinguished women continue to resonate within the collective consciousness of the Indian populace.

However, it is imperative to acknowledge that this laudable conceptualization of women gradually vanished in the subsequent periods of history and civilization. This came about as the patriarchal system began to exercise its ominous influence over women's position and initiated the suppression of their identity. The representation of women as portrayed in classical literature, along with its subsequent implications, comes to

influence the drama of Karnad. This influence enables him to contribute to a specific paradigm, despite this paradigm being subject to temporal shifts.

To conclude this, Karnad incorporates some Western concepts such as romantic assumptions of life, where sexual intercourse is not strictly confined within the boundaries of marriage, potentially leading to extramarital affairs. Karnad challenges the tenets of patriarchy by using his female protagonists like Padmini, Rani, Vishakha, or even Nittilai, as instruments of resistance against the accepted notions of propriety and decorum in a society marred by gender-based abuse. These characters serve as a stark counterpoint to the traditional representations of women within Indian patriarchal discourse. They intrigue the contemporary audience, as Karnad endeavors to illustrate the discriminatory politics inherent in male hegemony within his plays.

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