

## Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala*: Myths Retold

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### ABSTRACT

"The real function of literature in human affairs is to continue myths' ancient and basic endeavour to create a meaningful place for man in a world oblivious to his presence", says Vincent B. Leitch. Following that, Girish Karnad's plays reflect upon contemporary Indian cultural, religious, psychological, and social life through the use of myths, folktales, and historic legends. His *Naga-Mandala* revolves around the tale of Rani who is treated like a dumb member by her father and her husband, with neither voice nor choice. This paper analyses how Karnad has made use of myths and folktales in *Naga-Mandala*.

### KEYWORDS

Myth; *Naga-Mandala*; Folktales.

### Introduction:

In *Naga-Mandala*, Karnad forges a synthesis between the ancient and the modern to serve his purpose of using the past to illuminate the present. He uses a traditional folk-tale to throw light on the present, thereby fusing the past and present. Farmers avoid ploughing their fields on 'Naga Panchami' day. According to the legend, a farmer who was ploughing his field accidentally killed the young ones of a snake. When the mother snake discovered this, she killed all the members of the family except a married woman. The snake found her deep in meditation, worshipping Shesha, the king of Serpents. While it was waiting to kill her, it drank the milk kept as an offering and was appeased and later confessed that it had killed all the members of her family. It gave her nectar, 'Amrit', and asked her to put a drop on the lips of each of her dead family members, and it restored them to life. This incident is believed to have occurred on the fifth of Shravan (July-

August). Since then, the Nagas are worshipped on this day. "It is believed that the Naga motif symbolizes a life moving towards perfection and male energy", writes K.V.Jayaram in *The India Magazine* (77-78).

Similarly, the Shaiva Lingayats worship snakes, which are often depicted along with Shiva. On the Naga Panchami day, the festival held in Sravana on the fifth day of the first half of the lunar moon, wrestling matches are organized, and women pour offerings of milk and cereals into the snakes' habitat.

Commenting on the use and expression of ancient myths and folk tales in today's idioms, Karnad remarks, "we keep acrobating between the traditional and the modern, perhaps we could not hit upon a form which balance both" (*Indian Literature* 35).

It has to be noted that Appanna and Naga- the two faces of a single man, one seen during the day, the other at night symbolize the "double standards" of man.

Rani is the symbol of a woman's eternal endurance of this oppression. The scene of Rani's trial reminds us of Sita's trial in the *Ramayana*, and it shows its affinities with the traditional Indian values. The traditional test in the village court has been to take the oath holding a red-hot iron in the hand. But Rani walks up to the anthill, plunges her hand into it pulls the Cobra out, and says:

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 of the male sex. Nor have I allowed any other male to touch me. If I lie, let the cobra bite me. (58)

Karnad's retelling of this folktale was inspired by western playwrights like Bertolt Brecht and Jean Anouilla. Karnad himself has confessed that the cobra hero Naga's long speech in the second act "owes much to Jean Anouilla, although I have been unable to identify the play" (*World Literature Today*, 434). Karnad in his plays tries to evolve a symbolic form out of the tension between the mythic experience and living response to life and its values. Contemporariness in Karnad's plays manifests itself through his operative sensibility in his attempt to give new meaning to the past from the vantage point of the present.

The whole trial of Rani with the king cobra spreading its hood over her can be seen as having a symbolic significance. The period of the Rani - Appanna-as-Naga relationship is the period of learning, of assessing, for both. In the early marriages that were so common in India some five or six decades ago, physical maturity preceded emotional and psychological maturity and this caused pain and suffering in most cases. This is symbolized in the trial. Rani, true to the 'Pativrata' archetype, is willing to face death to prove her fidelity, and her 'pativrata' brings

about a change of heart in Appanna. Day writes in *The Many Meanings of Myth*:

Aquatic or terrestrial, snakes in myth display an extraordinary range, such as fertility in the case of the Indian snake groves, joining tree and serpent as fertility symbols are often famed for aiding barren women to conceive, and secondly, for the healing purpose as the entwined snakes of the caduceus are still the world's best-known symbol of the healing arts. (425-428)

There are also myths about the weddings of nagas and humans, and "countless serpentine interventions in human affairs transverse almost all the known themes about snakes and are often bafflingly ambiguous" (Day 428).

*Naga-Mandala* is based on folklore. In the south Indian villages there is a practice among women to pour milk on anthill occupied by cobras ritualistically on a certain day in the year; 'Nagulachaviti', 'Naga- Panchami' the fourth day and the fifth day of the waxing period of the moon. It is a way of propitiating the phallic symbol. Cobra is the phallic symbol worshipped by unmarried girls and the supposed barren women, the former for getting good husbands and the latter to become mothers, of which Rani in *Naga-Mandala* becomes a mother and gets a good husband. Naga pratistha, the setting up of cobra icons is another fertility rite. The 'vasikarana mulika', the herb of the lure, an aphrodisiac, is another folk belief. An uninitiated girl on attaining puberty looks at the blood with repugnance as well as relief.

When Rani finds the pastry of the second root boiling blood red, she is afraid of administering it to her husband. So, she pours it over the anthill, the home of Naga and he accepts it. In ordinary practice, it is a symbolic invitation to the phallic symbol. In the realm of man-woman

relationship, the Naga can be taken as a symbol of a man who is capable of fulfilling a woman's secret desire even though he is not the legitimate husband; he cannot prolong any further relationship with her, for it will result in further complications in any society.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, Rani in *Naga-Mandala* yearns for a complete life; she wants a loving and devoted husband. Though the Naga appears in the beginning in the form of Appanna, later he brings a change in the life of Rani. It has to be noted that in many folklores snake god will fulfil the wishes of his devotees.

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