

**EXPERIMENT WITH FOLKTALES: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE IN  
KARNAD'S NAGA-MANDALA**

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**Abstract**

The folk form is one of two dominant forms of theatre in India, the other being Sanskrit. Indian folk theatre in the form of rituals stayed over the years, from the ancient times to the present because of its participatory and fluid nature. One of the reasons folk theatres could sustain the hardship of times was their nature of oral tradition. These forms of drama go beyond entertainment values. These folk forms of drama are related to the popular belief and rituals of common people, Richmond et al call them “ritual performances”. Experimentation with folk forms and rediscovering the power of it is doubly rewarding for the Indian playwrights: as they get the audience and as well as freely change the form whenever required.

Karnad has extensively used folktales to expose the gender disparity, caste issues and hegemonic power structures manifested in religion, state, and family through Naga-Mandala. The paper thus seeks to underline the role of folk narratives and its rationale in the subversion of power dynamics and showcases how confrontations between society and its ideological apparatuses have been dealt with the naga(snake) myths and their connection with the human beings in the (southern) India.

**Keywords:** Folklore, oral, performance, power, identity, subversion, alienation

**Folk in Modern Indian theatre**

Girish Karnad (1937-2019) has been considered one of the stalwarts of modern Indian theatre. He is also well known as an actor, director, scriptwriter, and cultural critic; hence he is a multidimensional personality. He belongs to, as Karnad has described in ‘Introduction to Three Plays’, “The first to come of age after India became independent of British rule.” (301) Karnad has shown a theatrical acumen, unique talent for visualization, rich theatrical aesthetics, and has drawn both from Indian classical and folk forms, and as well as western dramatic forms. Karnad died in June 2019 leaving many theatre lovers/ filmmakers shocked and saddened.

In India, the political decolonization starts in the early fifties. Indian theatre practitioners, however, started looking in the Indian indigenous performance traditions in later sixties as a part of ‘write back to power’ strategies. The folk form became one of the dominant forms to decolonize the Indian stage, as it were. The noted modern playwrights such as Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, Habib Tanvir, Girsh Karnad and C Kambar to name only these started creating a new idiom forging a link with Indian folk and modern European dramaturgy. Indian modernists hence used folktales for the subversive purposes to highlight the sociopolitical crises on an urgent basis.

Folk is one of two dominant forms in the Indian theatre, the other being Sanskrit. Sanskrit is known as Margi (connected to Shastra-well thought) tradition and folk are desi (connected to lok-people). Indian folk theatres in the form of rituals stayed from ancient times to the present because of their participatory and fluid nature. Folk theatre could sustain the hardship of times because of its nature of oral tradition. Hence folk theatre has still continued to survive in India even without having any state patronage, through the Ministry of Culture, Government of India claims to disseminate the folk studies. The situation has a bit changed. As the globalization process became more and more dominant and pervasive, the local and ingenious cultures get more and more commoditized or commercialized. As a result of which the public and private sectors equally initiated many schemes to study and preserve the folklore and oral cultures in India. The Sahitya Academy, India's premier institution of letters, and the ICSSR (Indian Council of Social Sciences and Research), the two public institutions with massive infrastructures took some major steps to revive the folk performance, arts, paintings, and oral narrative. And the folklore and folk studies in India became a major sought-after research domain across the disciplines.

In India several popular folk forms are very vibrant and spread across the different linguistic regions and some of them are like, *Ramlila*, *Raslila*, *Nautanki*, *Khyal*, *Mach*, *Nacha*, *Pandawani*, *Bhawai*, *Jatra*, *Ankiya Nat*, *Tamasha*, *Dashavatar*, *Pawda*, *Chhau*, *Yakshagana*, *Baylata*, *Kutiyattam*, and *Kathakali* and all these forms loaded with several cultural connotations.. The chief characteristics of such theatres artistically are 'stylized acting' and 'improvisation' and these perhaps are also binding thread among them. Generally, there is always an intermediate narrator in performance. These forms are visually so spectacular that they are surrounded by the audience from all the four sides. They are also considered 'total theatre' because the audience participates in the performance. These dramas go beyond the entertainment values. As they embody popular belief systems and rituals of common people, Richmond et al argue that folk theatres are "ritual performances" (1990, 121). Since they deal with contemporary issues, they do not create an illusion of reality. They follow anti-realistic approaches. Folk forms always undermined the notion of a holy character. A folk actor plays a role sometimes as a character and sometimes as a masquerade and often actor oscillates between the character and audience. The very holistic sense of character is undermined in the folk theatre. Folk theatre also prioritizes body over script and movement over dialogue. The body movements correspond with the rhythm of sound and musical accompaniments as wide as *Dol*, *Tambura* or *Dapfali* among others.

Modern Indian playwrights like Karnad used folk form not only as a source of material but also as the subversive tool against the realistic as well as colonial artistic hegemony. By adopting techniques of *Yakshgana*, such as *Sutradhra*/string-holder as a narrator (who directly talks to the spectators/readers present in theatre) he tried to demystify the proscenium/realistic modes of theatres. *Avant-garde* theatre in India is "re-examination and redefining of the (folk) form' (Awasthi 1989, Schechner, 1993) and Karnad reused it for the subversive purposes. Karnad intended to expose the gender disparity, caste issues, hegemonic power structures manifested in religion, state and family. He highlighted the confrontations between society and its ideological apparatuses. His folk form was poised to encounter such forces. Experimenting with folk was exponentially rewarding for the Indian playwrights as audience members could break the imaginary fourth-wall by participating (in performance) and they could extend the rationale of the visual storytelling (which the modernists otherwise intended) because "the unique character of all folk theatres lies in its folk audience." (Hollander 2007,46?)

## **Karnad's Naga- Mandala: subversion of power**

Naga-Mandala: play with a Cobra is a brilliant folk play which seeks to subvert the hegemonic power structures in society. Karnad's conspicuous ability to exploit the folktales for contemporary needs is quite commendable. This play is dedicated to A K Ramanujan, an eminent poet, and folklorist. About the tales, Karnad says, "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" (Dharwadker, 314). Naga-Mandala, as the subtitle refers is a play by a snake. The central story revolves around Naga and Rani and her husband Appanna. The play begins with direct addressing of story and taking into account the attention of the audience and the story acts as a narrator and commentator throughout the play. The story begins "A young girl. Her name ...it does not matter. But she was an only daughter, so her parents called her Rani" (*Naga- Mandala*, 252).

The play is divided into two acts. The prologue sets the tone of the play and it also illuminates the audience about the Rani's happy marriage. From the story, we learn of the play that Appanna is a young man who belongs to a rich family and his parents are dead. Rani was the only daughter of her fond father and mother so she was called Rani-the queen of the whole world. She was also called so because she was the queen of her long tresses and if she tied them up in a knot it looked like a huge black King cobra on the nape of her neck. Appanna married her when she just reached her age and he brought her to his house. As he was a regular visitor to concubine, he locked her up in the house. When Kuruddava, the friend of her husband's mother came to know her problem she advised her to use aphrodisiac roots which were supposed to have love potion. It had a magic power to mesmerize any male towards a female. Rani prepared it indulgently to give to her husband but the first time it didn't have any effect. When she prepared the second time the herb roots (Aphrodite) turned into blood red. She was so scared that she poured it down in the hole of an ant hill near her home. Since Naga was inside the hole he fell in love with Rani and got infatuated with her. As a result of which he began to visit Rani at night in the guise of her husband Appanna. When her husband, Appanna came to know about her pregnancy he was utterly shocked. So, he made up his mind to punish her for adultery and demanded that she must take a test (something like agni-pariksha) in front of elders to prove her chastity. She consented to give the Naga ordeal by holding a cobra in her hand. In the test, the snake didn't bite her because he was the same reptile who used to visit her at night. Thus, she was canonized as the goddess incarnate by the villagers and she became a proud mother and a wife. She could know that all this happiness in her life was made possible by Naga.

The play follows the multilayered plot pattern. Apart from the main plot (Rani-Appanna-Naga), there are subplots like the appearances of the Flame, Story and the Man, and the episode of Kuruddava and her son Kappanna. The play begins with the prologue where we encounter the story of 'Story', Flames and the Man. The setting of the play is the inner sanctum of a ruined temple at night and the image is fractured. Man looks worried and addresses the audience (here man acts as Bhagavata) because a mendicant has foretold that if he did not stay awake at least one whole night in the month, he would die on the last night of the month. This had disturbed the man and he had been dozing off many a day and passed many nights without a wink of sleep. To the wonder of the audience, the man has committed a crime by writing a play and he is accused of having caused many good people to fall asleep in miserable chairs. The man is narrating his story to the audience and wants to escape death. If he only survives the night, he would have nothing to do with plot, themes, and acting. Hence, the man is conscious of prospective damage

to his life. Thereafter the story of Flames comes. They are heard speaking female voice from the offstage, as they have disguised themselves like women and they are giggling with each other. They are naked and floating in the air without any concrete forms. The flames reveal another story that when all the lamps are blown off, flames come to meet in the temple and chat about their masters and their family. These inanimate flames/agents are projected as supernatural beings, as though. The new Flame that has just arrived says that her mistress is an expert of story and song but nowadays she is reserved and keeps all the stories with herself and they are getting choked in her mouth! When she took a nap in the day and started snoring, the story and song came out from her mouth and hid in the attic. The story interestingly is dressed up in a colorful sari of the song (very much like a bridal woman). She is well received by a group of surrounding flames. She is, however, much worried about the pathetic condition of the story:

STORY: Thank you, my dears. It is kind of you. But what is the point of your listening to a story? You cannot pass it on (Naga-Mandala, 251).

The story has been used as a metaphor for the plight of the Indian woman who gets married and leaves her place to go to her husbands' house. The flames too are like the women of villages. This folk narrative serves as a structural device and it has, as Karnad has stated, "a parallel system of communication among the women in the family". It is also the resistance of woman collective towards the patriarchal norms of subjugation and exclusion. The flames are 'imaginative', 'non-scripted or oral' to counter the hegemony of 'practical, patriarchal and scripted. These framed stories are the fictionalization of women's harsh experiences. They have their own stories to tell and to be heard independently. Karnad has rightly maintained that stories are the embodiment of the daughters in Indian family who are struggling for their identities and are not allowed to have their say in the family matters. Here folktales serve as the structural device to express the problems of the women in general and the character Rani in particular.

The Story is quite desperate because the Flames cannot pass it on. Meanwhile, when the story and flames were talking to each other they feel interrupted by the presence of 'the man'. All the animated flames are huddled and scared and they try hard to set themselves free from the grab of the man. The man wants to listen to her for keeping himself awake. He though promised to listen to her, he felt sorry as he could not tell anybody else because earlier, he had taken a vow that he will not do anything with themes, plot, and acting. Man wants to present a play before the audience because he has to escape death. Hence, he requests the audience and promises that he will make it interesting and he calls the musicians and story to begin the proper play of Rani and Naga. This interactive mode of play narrows the gap between stage and spectators. Subplots play an important role in the development of the main plot. They intersect the main story and have an independent existence.

The story of blind Kuruddava and her son Kappanna is an example of plot within a plot. Her superstitions and beliefs add another dimension to the play. It is Kuruddava who manages to solve Rani's problems. She gives the aphrodisiac roots to Rani which was supposed to make Appanna her beloved husband. Since she herself is familiar with the magical power of the roots and had used it when nobody was attracted to her. She describes its effect on the man whom she made to drink the paste:

He finished his meal. Gave me one look and fell in love. Married me within the next two days. Never went back to his village (261).

Rani to her advice makes a paste of the roots and gives him after which Appanna falls ill (inversion of the tale) and it was of no avail. But when she prepares the potion and poured in the

ant hole, Naga drinks and became her lover. The ambiance of the play is Appanna's house where Rani's bedroom is clearly visible.

The main theme of the play is the search for identity and subversion of power. Rani after marriage was never allowed to have her say. She could see only two men in her life. The one Appanna(husband) harsh and cruel in the day and another Appanna (Naga) caring at night. She is on her toes:

How it fills the house before he comes! How it welcomes him! God, how it takes me, sets each fiber in me on fire! (281).

Another recurring theme of the play is the freedom of women from the male hegemony. Rani transgresses all the cultural norms made by men and a patriarchal institution like marriage which only advocate the fidelity of woman and not of a male (hence, Karnad problematizes sexuality). As she goes against the norms of men and rebels, Karnad's through clandestine love – relations have undermined the whole concept of sexual purity or chastity against the existing ideology of subjugation through the folk narrative of Naga.

The practice of mixing human and animal or non-human being in the play suspends our belief in the reality of the stage performance. The mixing of non- human agents in the play is an efficient dramatic device to suspend the illusion of reality. When the non-human body is presented or shown on the stage it creates the estrangement. It impels us to think that what is being enacted is merely a show of story or 'illusion of reality' and the not reality itself. In Indian belief system snake is the embodiment of fertility and male prowess, and is acknowledged as the giver of life and happiness. When Naga visits Rani in the guise of her husband Appanna, she never questions because he fulfills her long felt desires of happiness and a life of the complete woman. However, she at the same time feels that the person who comes at night and talks so nicely is not the same who comes in the day and locks her up without any sympathy. Appanna (Naga) who comes at night bears the scars on his body due to fighting with mongoose. When Rani goes to the mirror box to apply the ointment on his body, she happens to see the image of big cobra sitting by her. She was afraid even though she never interrogates him. She gets a chance to listen to the hissing sound of snake mixed up with the sound of the dog's howl but she pretends as if she does not know anything. Her silence is puzzling and the story comments over the confusion of Rani:

That night he did not visit her. There was no sign of him for the next fifteen days. Rani spent her nights crying, wailing, pining for him. When he started visiting again, his body was covered with wounds which had only aptly healed...But she never questioned him about them, it was enough that he had returned. Needless to say, when her husband came during the day, there were no scars on him (281).

To fulfill his purpose Karnad has devised the masks because the person who is acting the role of Appanna is also playing the role of Naga. It was possible only by using the mask. Thus, the mask is devised in the play to play the double role: Appanna and Naga simultaneously by the same actor. So, the audiences are constantly reminded that they are watching a play of Naga-Rani and are sitting in the theatre hall. The role of story occupies a significant position in the folk narrative. It is personified from the very beginning to narrate the story of Rani and also to comment over the past and present action of the story. It acts as an agency like Brechtian chorus or like sutradhar of the Sanskrit theatre. The story narrates some actions which act as link scene:

"The death of dog infuriated Appanna. He next brought a mongoose. The mongoose lasted only one day. But it had evidently given a tougher fight..." (281).

Finally, it is a story that sums up the whole gist of the play:

So, Rani got everything she wished for, a devoted husband, a happy life. For Appanna's concubine was present at the trial... in due course, Rani gave birth to a beautiful child. A son. Rani lived happily ever after with her husband, child, and servant (293).

Most of the actions of the play are mimed by the actors. Their gestural movements express the meaning in the play. The stage performance has been presented more as a ritual. The enactment becomes interactive as the Rani's trial is about to begin. The stage is full of villagers from all the sides and there follows commotion and confusion among the audience. The elders come on the stage and then it becomes the village square and here Rani has to pass the test of snake ordeal.

Finally, the story exists and it is left for the readers to discuss what should be the ending of the play. The Flames want the happy ending whereas the Man who has the experience of storytelling wishes it to be a tragedy as it is the essence of life. The discussion between Man, Story and Flame are interesting to feel the pulse of the audience:

MAN (exasperatedly): These flames are worse than my audience. Can't they wait till the story is over? ...

FLAMES: But isn't it?...

MAN: It cannot be.

STORY: But why not?

MAN: Too many loose ends. Take Kappanna's disappearance, for instance.

STORY: Oh, that is Kurudavva's story... I am only Rani's story (294).

The debate between story and the man is the projection of confusion of the playwright himself. They convey the two selves of him: the creative personality and the story is his figment of the imagination. This is an introspective reflection over the pros and cons of playwriting and act of observation from the spectator's point of view. This makes the production a participatory ritual.

The ending of the play is like that of the problem of Appanna the most disturbing thing to the audience. There are open endings like when cobra dies it is proposed that on the day of snake's death anniversary the child of Appanna (naga) and Rani will pay homage and burn incense sticks because cobra not only gave life to the child but also the couple's lives by sparing them. Rani feels a heavyweight in her hair and when she combs her hair a living snake falls down, Appanna runs to get a stick to kill it. But she let her hair down and quietly hides the snake in her long tresses:

Quick now. Get in. are you safely in there? Good. Now stay there. And lie still. You don't know how heavy you are. Let me get used to you, will you?... This hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss. Live in there happily, forever (299-300).

The play unfolds some of the unpalatable questions: who is responsible for the deplorable condition of Rani? Who is chaste in the game of (love) life? Is happiness the co-existent or contingent upon infidelity? Or, can life be sustained without the compromise with circumstances? But all these questions are manipulated in the folktales, and it becomes but really disturbing for us to deal with issues. The subversive potentiality of folktales exposes the social and moral codes of the society and people double standard in the society.

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