

Reimagined Mythology in Girish Karnad's *Fire and the Rain* and *Nagamandala*: Challenges, Cultural and Patriarchal Hegemony through Subversive Narratives

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Abstract:

This paper is premised on the adaptation and retelling of myth in Girish Karnad's *Fire and the Rain* and *Nagamandala* and how the narrative challenges socio-cultural norms. It deals with the scrutiny and derision faced by women under the pretext of divine order or sexual ethics perpetuated by hegemonic masculinity. This study delves into the ideals and societal image of women in Indian society, highlighting the pressures that often compel them to suppress their whole being. Karnad's narrative establishes a structural link between *Fire and the Rain* and the *Mahabharata's* Yavakri Myth. His unique approach to mythology provides a lens through which the intersections of tradition, gender dynamics, and power structures in contemporary India can be examined. This paper also analyses the religious and cultural tension observed throughout the play and the struggle it causes between characters from different communities. The dramatization of the deep-rooted androcentric ideas resonates with the issues in the contemporary world and reinterprets the essence of Indian heritage. The playwright's use of elements of Indian folk culture and reimagined mythology open up discussions on the evolution of Indian society and the relevance of its traditions in the modern era while challenging cultural and patriarchal hegemony.

Keywords: Tradition, society, hegemony, masculinity and myth.

Girish Karnad's contributions to Indian theatre are marked by his innovative storytelling and his ability to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity through his narrative techniques. His uncanny talent for reimagining classical myths and legends within a contemporary context to critique the complexities of Indian society is reflected

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in a majority of his plays. The select plays *Nagamandala* and *The Fire and the Rain* are exemplary representations of his technique.

Indian mythology and folktales are deeply ingrained in the country's cultural identity and history. They are not relics of the past but are evolving traditions. By reimagining these ancient tales, Karnad opens up discussions on the evolution of Indian society and subtly points out the conflicts in Indian familial and cultural scenarios. Traditional myths often contain stereotypes and gender roles that might not align with contemporary values. Karnad uses reimagining as a tool to subvert these stereotypes and portray characters in a more progressive light. This helps challenge societal norms and promote a more inclusive view of the world. *Nagamandala* and *The Fire and the Rain* both resonate with the androcentric social structure that still exists.

One of the most striking aspects of *Nagamandala* is the subversion of traditional gender roles. Rani finds herself trapped in a loveless marriage with Appanna who frequents his mistress and is abusive towards Rani. She has no agency or any real power while Appanna and the men in her village hold the power to thoroughly judge and condemn her. But towards the end, though she is oblivious to the interference by the Naga, she achieves a status that is superior to those of the men around her. The villagers declare that she is a goddess incarnate and start treating her as one. The social norms and the patriarchal beliefs in a society are framed in such a way that a woman would be condemned for life if she ever dares to be defiant. The play addresses the cultural stigmatisation of women who break these norms. When Appanna accuses Rani and she is taken to the village panchayat, the villagers follow the same custom that they had been following for years. This suggests that in all those cases, it was always the women who were forced to prove their loyalty. Appanna was so sure that Rani conceived the child through adultery which means that according to him, it was justice to let his wife be bitten to death by a snake. The whole village shares the same belief which in turn means that women who commit adultery are sentenced to death while the system allows unfaithful men to take advantage of their chauvinistic privilege. Yet, out of this trial which was meant to condemn her, Rani gains the one thing that she deserved but did not have; respect. This turn of events show a woman's struggle to find and use her voice when she is constantly pushed to the sidelines by the male-governed society.

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Rani's sexual encounters with the cobra are depicted as consensual and liberating, in stark contrast to the repressive environment in which she lives. This subversion indirectly challenges the idea that female sexuality must be controlled and repressed and offers an alternative perspective on women's desires. Karnad describes Rani as "Queen of the whole wide world" as her name itself justifies. But she is treated as a mere servant by Appanna and she is portrayed as the epitome of an ideal demure Indian woman whose feelings and emotions are constantly exploited. Though the Naga meant no ill intent, he disregarded the need to earn Rani's consent by impersonating Appanna, while entering her chambers at night and taking advantage of her, even though she is completely unaware of the deception. This emphasises how women are objectified and seen as beings valued only for their chastity.

Karnad breaks age-old conventions by legalizing sexual intercourse between the human and subhuman world and overcoming a paradigm of gender bias through his reimagined mythology. Rani is still the perfect submissive wife tending to her husband but she transforms into a respected woman and breaks free of the chain of restrictions placed around her. She finds marital bliss and starts to feel secure and comfortable in her newly established identity.

Fire and the Rain revolves around the ingenious myth of Yavakri from the 'Vana Parva' of *Mahabharata*. The original myth focuses on the friendship between two sages Bharadwaja and Raibhya. Bharadwaja's son, Yavakri, seeks wisdom through a harsh lifestyle but ends up committing a grave offence against Raibhya's family as revenge for a grudge he holds. As a result, he faces curses and misfortune, ultimately leading to his death. Raibhya's son Parvasu accidentally kills his father in the presence of his brother Aravasu, and a series of tragic events unfold. Ultimately, with divine intervention, the sages and others are restored, and Yavakri is advised to seek knowledge more earnestly. In his play, however, Karnad introduces new characters including Nittilai, tribal people and Vishakha to explore modern man's apathy towards complex human relationships and psychological and physical exploitation of women as well as their resistance against their ill-treatment. The plot involving Nittilai and her tribal people emphasises that patriarchy is not just confined to gender but is also related to caste and class.

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The redesigned portrayal of Aravasu as a Brahmin who loves to dance and sing though the Brahminical scriptures and culture do not allow it makes him a counterpoint to orthodox upper-class characters like Paravasu or Yavakri. Aravasu unlike in the *Mahabharata* is unwilling to join the sacrificial ritual or perform penance in a forest but is ready to give up the privileges of his higher-class identity just to be able to experience genuine love and a peaceful life. Despite everything he attempts to achieve, a series of factors including class discrimination, jealousy, the drawbacks of inflexible customs and savage acts driven by religious allegiance stop him from uniting with his lover. Karnad's reconstruction of the original myth adds a subtle voice which makes the play resonate with the contemporary issues in India and proves that myths can be used as tools to revitalize tradition while also questioning the unethical aspects of it.

Vishaka is the wife of Paravasu and the daughter-in-law of Raibhya. In this redesigned version of the myth, Vishaka acts as the opposite of a stereotypical submissive woman by breaking her silence and by not being an object of subjugation. Despite being in love with Yavakri, she is forced to marry Paravasu since it is only the men who hold the power to make decisions. Paravasu views her as a means to further his spiritual experiments and abandons her once he is chosen to be the Chief Priest of the Fire Sacrifice to Indra, which is a seven-year-long ritual. In the meantime, she is physically, sexually and verbally abused by Raibhya, Paravasu's father. Vishaka is portrayed as the primary victim of patriarchal hegemony. An analysis of the relationship between Aravasu and Nittilai reveals that it is the same case in the lower-class society as well. Nittilai, despite being an intuitive and smart woman, has to move according to the rigid codes made by the men in her community. She acts as the voice of reason and as a bridge between the higher class and the lower-class society through her relationship with Aravasu but fails miserably because of the unyielding religious and cultural tension between the two communities. When Aravasu fails to win her father's approval for their marriage, she is forced to marry a man from her tribe who in the end brutally stabs her to death because she decided to stay with her lover. Nittilai views her death as freedom and for Vishakha, the death of all the abusive men in her life- her husband, father-inlaw and her lover is a form of liberation.

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Through these women, Karnad explores the concept of modern sensibility with which they find ways to fight against patriarchy and oppressing power structures. Nittilai frees herself from a forced marriage despite the consequences she knows she will have to face. Vishakha finds her voice and leaves her confinement to live her own life, in the end. Through the characterization of Vishakha and Nittilai Karnad highlights the multiple victimization of women from the ancient past down to the present day and questions the darker aspects of Indian tradition and the cultural and patriarchal hegemony entwined with it.

These two plays *Nagamandala* and *The Fire and the Rain* serve as compelling examples of how an amalgam of narrative and storytelling techniques and reimagined myths can be an effective tool for challenging deeply ingrained hegemonic structures.

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