

Modern Indian Writing in Translation
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Nagamandala Part – 6

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Folk theatre

- The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values, of making them literally stand on their head.



Hello and welcome to the session. We we'll talk about Karnad's views on theatre. And we will also talk about a couple of criticisms of Karnad's theatre and its practice and we also will look at some of the critical viewpoints on Nagamandala.

Karnad says about folk theatre, he says that 'the energy of a folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values of making them literally stand on their head.'

So, this idea, the idea that there is an enforcement, there is a reiteration of traditional values as well as questioning of them, takes place in Nagamandala. We have Rani here and there, questioning Naga for not informing her about the circumstances which bind them. So that traditional idea that the horsemen must not be questioned is questioned by Rani here and there. We also see as readers and viewers of this theatre, of this piece of theatre, we also see that double standards are at play. Double standards very clearly in the case of Appanna who gets away with adultery, right? So, internally within the play there is a kind of rebellion, momentary rebellion here and there, and externally from the audience, we question. We question the hypocrisy. So, traditional values are being questioned.

Secondly, Karnad here states that, certain of these values are turned on their head, right? And this pertains to the second conclusion that we have in Nagamandala. There we have a threesome, right? Rani, Appanna and Naga in that domestic household. So, the traditional heterosexual unit is questioned there. That's inevitable, we recognise that. But there is no way Rani is able to really question or get out of the clutches of male hegemony, that she cannot do, she cannot get out of that. So we have two men exercising power over her. One is Naga and the other is Appanna and Rani has no, what you know, saying no or getting out of their influence and hegemony. So that is always there.

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Review of Naga-Mandala

By **Rashad Khan**

- The play is based on a rural setting and centred around the life of Rani, who is the everyday submissive rural Indian woman who is married off to a man by her parents, who arrange the marriage without taking into consideration her wishes. Her husband, a rich man named Appanna (which translates to any man). The name is a symbol employed by Karnad to highlight that this is the reality of most weddings that occur. It is to show how marriage is a patriarchal institution that has always been unfair to women.

- <https://feminisminindia.com/2019/04/12/nagamandal-a-girish-karnad-review/>



Next point, Karnad on folk theatre again, he says that 'The various conventions, the chorus, the masks, the seemingly unrelated comic episodes, the mixing of human and non-human worlds permit the simultaneous presentation of alternative of points of view, of alternative attitudes towards, alternative attitudes to the central problem.' So, all these are present in Nagamandala. We have the Story which acts as the chorus, we have the presence of flames who kind of offer several anecdotes and who also act as audience, commenting on the action. And then we have a mixing of the human and the non-human world in the figure of Naga who can take on a human form. So, the animal and the human world collapse into one another. And what Karnad says is that these are various forms of multiple plural points of view on the same subject, on the same feminine subject.

And the question is, to ask is the perspective multiple? Is the perspective multiple? Do we have differing viewpoints, alternative attitudes offered about life through these various forms -the chorus, the flames, the story, the song, the playwright and so on and so forth? So I want you to

kind of think about the answer to that question very very deeply, Or do we have the same approach to life, the same approach to the life of a woman, presented in different ways? The same approach being offered in different forms. So I want you to test this theory of Karnad against Nagamandala.

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***B.M.Bhalla's Review of Tutun Mukherjee's Girish
Karnad's Plays: Performance and Critical Perspectives***

- 'His plays are directed to the "post-colonial search for Indian roots." Most of his themes are mythological or historical, and he has progressively shown that ancient Indian myths can be harnessed "to address the modern sensibility of loss of individual identity".



Now, here we have a criticism on Karnad's plays by B.M Bhalla. It's Bhalla's review of Tarun Mukherjee's book on Karnad's Plays: Performance and Critical Perspectives. The critic says, 'The plays are directed to the post-colonial search for Indian roots. Most of his themes are mythological or historical, and he has progressively shown that ancient Indian myths can be harnessed to address the modern sensibility of loss of individual identity.'

Okay it is a very interesting quote, let us take this slowly. The first point is that Karnad's plays are you know, part of a search for Indian roots, right. So there is a movement towards indigenous culture, indigenous ways of looking at the problems in society and trying to figure out an indigenous solution to the problems faced by an individual, right. So, therefore Karnad's plays are mythological or historical.

And the critic also says that Indian myths can be exploited, harnessed, used, utilized. Indian myths can be utilized, can be used as instruments to address the modern sensibility of loss of individual identity. So, the point is, the modern sensibility, the modern condition is that we have lost our individual identity, right? If you apply this to Nagamandala, we can see that Rani doesn't have an individual identity at all. She is a lover to Naga, she is a wife to Appanna. What is she herself? We do not know, there is a vacuum, there is a massive lacuna in there.

At one point in the play she says, 'I was a child when you married me, I am now a wife, I am going to be a mother,' so look at the various roles that she is pointing to in relation to her attempt at defining herself. She can only define herself in relation to all these positions, functions towards somebody else, towards somebody else, child to her parents, wife to husband, mother to her child and so on, right.

And which is why the disability of Kurduvva, very very literally tells us the independence of the female, the lack of independence of the female and the dependence of the female on the husband on or on the male heir. So, that disability is very-very symbolic as well as literal, which is why Kurduvva's character is very important in this play.

So, going back to the point about mythology being used to address the modern sensibility of loss of identity, it seems to work to a certain extent in Nagamandala. Karnad very beautifully, effectively, captivatingly uses myth to talk about the loss of individuality of Rani and we as enlightened readers, perceived the function of myth. To what extent myth is successful in portraying that loss? But we also, as enlightened readers, realize that the myth comes short. And we also realise that the ending, even the second ending, the alternate ending is dissatisfactory. Why is it dissatisfactory? The only liberation, the only liberation that Rani gets in this play is sexual elaboration, right? The only way that she can assert herself, the only way she can assert herself is by becoming a goddess, not by becoming an individual of her own with functions of her own towards the rest of the society. She still continues to be contented with a good husband, a child, right? Other things do not matter, other things, she is not even aware of.

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B.M. Bhalla

- He understood more fully the politics of his aesthetic choices and mastered the art of subversion of the well established and endless deconstruction of the hierarchies with remarkable irreverence by complex manipulation the meaning in order to perform a subsequent act of reinterpretation.



Bhalla, the critic goes on to say that Karnad ‘understood more fully the politics of his aesthetic choices, understood the politics of his aesthetic choices and mastered the art of subversion of the well-established and endless deconstruction of the hierarchies with remarkable irreverence by complex manipulation the meaning in order to perform a subsequent act of reinterpretation.’

So, let me pick out the interesting words. They are deconstruction, deconstruction, irreverence, manipulation and reinterpretation. So, this would really beautifully sum up the entire play. So, what Karnad is doing here is that, he is subverting, he is subverting the sexual authority of the husband by introducing this insidious, crafty, clever, charming Naga into the world So, therein lies the subversion, right. The husband's autonomy is shattered there, the husband does not have the sole influence authority there. The power to offer love is not limited to the husband. So, there is subversion there, the hierarchy of the husband is broken up there. So, we have a reinterpretation of the role of love offered by the husband. So, that reinterpretation is also ongoing.

So, we have a complex manipulation obviously, here in the way Rani kind of accommodates Naga, her first lover into her wedded bliss with Appanna. So, there is craftiness, there is manipulation there, the hierarchies are collapsed. So, in that way we do have a reinterpretation. But once again we need to remember, what about the individual identity of the female, the feminine which is kind of caught in this network of manipulation and reinterpretation? How far does she get a fulfilled individual life in this society? Her sexual liberation does not seem to you know let her get out of the house. And at one point Naga says ‘I have not seen her’, right? She does not seem to know what was going on in the outer society and if you remember



the trial day and the elders say, 'Don't you know that Kurдавva has run mad?' she does not know, she does not know what is going on in the outside world.

So, it is very interesting that her liberation, her freedom, her satisfaction, her containment seems to end within the bedroom. And that seems to be the reality for her.

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Review of Naga-Mandala
By **Rashad Khan**

- Karnad through the play exposes the exploitation and incarceration of women that occurs through the institution of marriage and how myths display the fears of men in society and are thus inherently patriarchal and are used in order to control and restrict the actions of women. The play also mocks the idea of chastity and aims at the emancipation and empowerment of women.
- <https://feminisminindia.com/2019/04/12/nagamandala-girish-karnad-review/>



Next one. Okay here we have a very interesting set of ideas from Rashad Khan It's a review of Nagamandala, it's easily available online, just Google search review of Nagamandala by Rashad Khan, you will get the entire article, it's free access.

Rashad Khan here says that 'Karnad through the play exposes the exploitation and incarceration of women that occurs through the institution of marriage and how myths display the fears of men in society and are thus inherently patriarchal and are used in order to control and restrict the actions of women. The play also mocks the idea of chastity and aims at the emancipation and empowerment of women.'

So, it's pretty clear and neatly laid out - the problematics of the institution of marriage which incarcerates women and the critic also very clearly points out that the myths here, as represented by Karnad, tell us they are patriarchal. And the myths are used in order to control and restrict the mobility of women, the individuality of women.

And clearly the play mocks, that's what is interesting about Nagamandala. And something that we can really, you know notice and appreciate is the fact that the idea of chastity is kind of shattered by this alternative ending offered by Karnad. She is not limited to a particular kind of chastity that is dictated by the institution of marriage. And the critic says that the play as

pious, aims at the emancipation empowerment of women but we don't really see it. It is a very, as I said a very limited kind of liberty that Rani gets in being (you know) accommodative of Naga.

So, it's a limited you know liberation that Rani is offered through this mythological, through this folklore play. There is a wonderful, as I already showed you, there is a wonderful adaptation of Nagamandala, a Kannada movie which I would highly recommend for viewing. Thank you for watching.