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**Mapping Alternative Masculinities in Girish Karnad's Play *Naga-Mandala***

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**Abstract:**

The paper intends to explore the representation of alternative masculinities in the play *Naga-Mandala*, in its English translation by the author Girish Karnad. The constructs of masculine identities in the play *Naga-Mandala* present complexities and nuances that demand further exploration. The paper tries to trace the practices and behavioural codes by which alternative masculinities are constructed in the play to challenge normative hegemonic masculinities and to suggest the possibility of coexistence with negotiation. In the play *Naga-Mandala*, an examination of the characterisation of Appanna and Naga, the conformist behavioural practices in domestic and public spaces which shape their complex relationship with Rani will help to map the constructs of alternative masculine identities. This characterisation will be analysed to bring out the collision and/or coexistence of alternative and hegemonic masculine attributes in individual characters. The role of patriarchal institutions such as marriage, family, and the panchayat system in the play will be examined to explore the masculine identities that emerge thereof. Theoretical frames from masculinity studies will be used as analytical tools to develop the argument. The paper argues that the constructs of alternative masculine identities in the play present a continuous struggle to cope with hegemonic masculine identity and that the behavioural practices thereof are ultimately sanctioned by normative patriarchy.

**Key words:**hegemonic and/or alternative masculinity, desire, sexuality, family, patriarchy.

**Introduction:**

Girish Karnad (Indian playwright, actor, and film director) wrote *Naga-Mandala* in 1988 in Kannada and translated it into English himself. *Naga-Mandala* is based on two oral stories, named *A Story and a Song* and *The Serpent Lover*, which Karnad heard from A. K. Ramanujan. As Karnad says in the introduction to the play, “These tales are narrated by women, normally the older women in the family, while children are being fed in the evening in the kitchen or being put to bed” (314). These stories not only inhabit the world of women but also of men, thus becoming “lived counterparts of the patriarchal structures” (Karnad 314) in which masculine identities are presented and re-presented, shaped and reshaped, constructed and deconstructed. Dasgupta and Gokulsing observe that “studies on men are critical, interdisciplinary, relational, materialist, deconstructive, and anti-essentialist,” referring to debates on indigenous masculinities in *Critical Masculinity Studies* (16). This approach provides theoretical frames to explore the representation and construction of alternative masculinities in the play *Naga-Mandala*. The paper will explore how these constructs are related to hegemonic masculinities, female identity, sexualities, and multiple patriarchies embedded in the social institutions of family and panchayat. In the words of Kumar and Shikar, “Indian masculinity is not a singular or fixed category but a dynamic and contested site of cultural production. It is shaped by an ongoing negotiation between tradition and change, between hegemonic norms and subversive practices” (3384). Within this framing, Girish Karnad’s play *Naga-Mandala* is viewed as “the uneven landscape of multiple masculinities and multiple intersections of domination and subordination” (Chakraborty 418).

The main plot of the play *Naga-Mandala* is woven around the three characters—Appanna, Rani, and Naga. Appanna brings his wife Rani to his house after she reaches maturity. But he locks her up within the four walls of the marital home, deserting her emotionally and sexually. In an attempt to win the heart of her husband, Rani cooks magic root, given by Kurudavva, a minor character in the play. But the red colour of the curry frightens Rani. She pours the curry of the magic root into an anthill. A cobra (the character Naga) living in the anthill falls in love with Rani and consummates a sexual union with her in the disguise of Appanna. As a result, Rani becomes pregnant, infuriating Appanna with her alleged ‘adultery’. Rani proves her innocence by the grace of Naga in the ritual snake ordeal; thereafter Rani is worshipped by the villagers as a divine being. Finally, Appanna lives his life in service to his goddess-wife, Rani. Here, the characterisation of Appanna and Naga is the main focus of analysis in mapping alternative masculinities in the play *Naga-Mandala*. The paper explores the complex relationship between Appanna and Naga; also, Rani’s relationship with Appanna and Naga becomes an indicator of their compliance with the traits of hegemonic masculinities. The role of multiple patriarchal structures—family and panchayat—in the construction of their identities will be explored.

Appanna is an exemplar of traditional Indian hegemonic masculinity. He embodies hegemonic masculine ideals such as “strength, honour, duty, and authority” (Kumar and Shikar 3383). Critical analyses of his character have variously configured Appanna as “any man” (Rukhaya 1) and “every man” (Hussain 31). These observations generalize Appanna’s masculine identity as a homogenous entity in the Indian context. Aparna Dharwadkar, in her introduction to the play *Naga-Mandala* calls Appanna “the ill-tempered, tyrannical, two-dimensional husband, who rapidly reduces Rani’s daily life to a featureless existence without companionship and community” (Dharwadkar xxx). The masculine identities in the play “... hold cultural significance, yet they increasingly coexist and sometimes conflict with emerging narratives that value emotional expression, vulnerability, egalitarianism, and introspection” (Kumar and Shikar 3383). According to Chakraborty, “masculinity does not mean the same thing to all men or the same thing to the same man in the course of his lifetime” (414). Hence, the study of masculine identities in the play *Naga-Mandala* “remains attentive to their fluidity and complexity, recognizing how gender “intersects” with diverse situations and sometimes contradictory masculine subjectivities” (Kumar and Shikar 3383). Karnad suggests in his introduction to the play that “the position of Rani in the story *Naga-Mandala*, ... can be seen as a metaphor for the situation of a young girl in the bosom of a joint family where she sees her husband only in two unconnected roles—as a stranger during the day and as a lover at night” (Karnad 314). Karnad’s words point to the possibility of viewing Naga as another self of Appanna: Appanna performs his gendered role as an oppressive husband during the day, conforming to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, and also becomes Rani’s lover at night as Naga. His behaviour with Rani at night signifies an alternative masculinity, establishing an intimate relationship with her. This dual dialectic of Appanna’s identity illustrates the contradictions within the troubled terrain of Indian masculinity. It becomes obvious that Appanna is caught between a hegemonic patriarchal image in which “intimacy and emotional expression are complex aspects of Indian masculinity, with traditional norms often discouraging men from openly expressing emotions or intimacy” (Kumar and Shikar 3382), and concomitantly, a more modern image which “... embrace(s) emotional expression and intimacy” (Chakraborty 414). Many research scholars have analysed Appanna as a split personality: “Naga, or snake, with its phallic connotations, typifies the sexual side of Appanna” (Rukhaya 2). Appanna/Naga simultaneously conforms to the norms of hegemonic masculinity—“aggressive,” “being tough,” and “not displaying emotions” (Vaz, n.pag). prescribed by normative patriarchal society and inhabits the alternative masculine identity of “the New Man—a softer, caring creature” (Pradhan and Ram 546) in opposition to the former identity.

In her analysis of the fluidity of masculinities, Urvashi Singh introduces the terms ‘place,’ ‘practice,’ and ‘effect’. Singh observes that “individuals constantly occupy locations

(place) in the gender structure, endlessly constituting and contesting masculinities through “practices and producing effects through and being affected by these practices on an “individual level and collective level” (109). This observation helps to realize that Appanna shifts from the public sphere during the day to the private space at night with contrasting behavioural codes, which constitute his complex personality, affecting himself, Rani, and finally the collective group of the people of his village. Appanna secures his hegemonic position by internalizing and enacting the patriarchal behavioural codes of verbal abuse, physical assault of his wife’s body, emotional barrenness, control over her sexuality, and alienating her from society, demonstrating the patriarchal prescription that “men have to prove their (hetero)sexuality through their relationship with women or distance themselves from women to control their sexuality” (Chakraborty 414). Appanna in his patriarchal role controls Rani’s sexuality by according primacy to his own desire and thereby depriving her of sexual pleasure. As Naga, he loves his wife and shows his sexual virility by expressing gentle emotions, using polite language and being a romantic lover. In order to be Naga, Appanna would require “the relegation of his ego, his perspective of masculinity, submitting to his sexual impulses, and being submissive to his wife” (Rukhaya 3). Hence, Appanna’s masculinity can be viewed as a complex amalgamation of the gender roles of hegemonic masculinity and alternative masculinity, which simultaneously coexist and/or collide.

When Appanna in his patriarchal capacity hires a dog and mongoose to keep watch over the house, it raises the question whether Appanna and Naga are the same person. It is confirmed that Naga is not Appanna when Rani reveals her pregnancy and Appanna is shocked by her condition. He calls her adulterous and assaults her physically. His violent behaviour with Rani confirms that he is not the cause of Rani’s pregnancy. The words of Story (itself a character in the play), "No two men love alike" (Karnad 294), further emphasize this understanding. Thus, the examination of the construction of Appanna/Naga’s masculine performativities contributes to an understanding of “the fluidity, diversity, and heterogeneity of masculinities” (Chakraborty 414).

According to Vaz, “the vision of an alternative masculinity is centered around three main themes: first is a rejection of violence; second is contributing positively to the well-being of the family; and third is the ability to embrace the wide variety of differences in gender and other identities” (n.pag). Naga’s masculine identity abides in three different worlds—the world of men (human beings), the world of animals, and the world of gods. Naga is an ‘intruder’ to the patriarch Appanna’s house. As Rani’s lover, his behaviour incorporates the traits of alternative masculinities: he wants to win the heart of Rani and fulfill her emotional and sexual desires. Naga’s alternative masculine identity is marked with his rejection of domestic violence, intimate companionship, and consensual sex with Rani.

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Animalistic nature, human feelings, and godly powers are incorporated in the identity of Naga. He basically does not belong entirely to the world of human beings. He changes his corporeal form as a human being at night and kills the dog and mongoose to reach his beloved, Rani. His embodiment of alternative masculinity is underscored by the fact that his behavior does not conform to and indeed is in opposition to patriarchal norms. Even though he functions as a human being, he is not the 'legitimate' husband of Rani, because the patriarchally sanctioned 'legitimacy' of a husband prescribes authority, power, and control over his wife. Also, Naga does not belong to a family structure, which is one of the fundamental patriarchal units within which hegemonic masculinity gets played out.

Naga's alternative masculine performativity can be viewed as the manifestation of Rani's desire, which is acted out through the trope of female agency. Kurudavva communicates with Rani through the window when Rani is deserted and confined by Appanna. Kurudavva gives Rani three pieces of magical root and instructs Rani to feed them to her husband. The use of the magical root is connected to the belief that persons who consumed it would fall in love with whoever fed it to them. In the play, female agency is manifested through Rani's secret mission to make Appanna fall in love with her – projecting a generalized female desire framed within a male-dominated normative patriarchal society to deflect male aggression and obtain consensual love within a heterosexual marriage. This projection represents men as ceding power to women in all matters within the domestic space while sustaining their hegemonic positions in public spaces. Naga's words, "Your husband will become your slave tomorrow. You will get all you have wanted" (Karnad 287) further emphasize this interpretation. Naga did not come in search of Rani and fall in love with her voluntarily; Naga takes the shape of a human being and follows Rani when she pours the curry of magical root into the anthill. So, it is the effect of the magical root that made Naga conceal the original identity of its animalistic nature and appear to Rani as a human being capable of fulfilling her desires.

Naga's alternative masculine behaviour projects and represents the expectations of female desire within heterosexual marriage, but the identity Naga derives from this behavior has further complex dimensions to it. Interestingly, Satish et. al. interpret the character of Naga as representing an alternative masculinity that is also subversive; this is because Naga deceives Rani by taking Appanna's identity as a disguise. They observe that "while his (Naga) demeanour appears as gentler ... he manipulates both identity and consent by masquerading as another man" (Satish et. al. 36). Hence, Naga is analysed as "... a manifestation of toxic masculinity rooted in deception. Even the semblance of tenderness serves as a façade, enabling him to exert control and gain access to Rani in a manner that undermines her autonomy" (Satish et al. 36). Naga holds control over Rani's sexuality by

displaying alternative sexual behavior which deceives her into a participatory role. Appanna forbids Rani from questioning his attitude and behaviour with an aggressive display of male dominance. Naga also forbids Rani from asking questions. So, both Naga and Appanna succeed in accomplishing control over Rani in their own ways. Hence, hegemony over female sexuality in the normative patriarchal society has once again prevailed; the alternative masculinity projected in the play also emerges as a construct that is ultimately sanctioned by patriarchy.

The institutions such as family and panchayat are the basic units of patriarchy by which the patriarchal norms successfully prevail in society. Naga does not reveal his identity to Rani or to larger society. His gender role is not authenticated by the social construct of family structure. He is unable to declare that he is the biological father of Rani's child. Naga's alternative masculine identity does not receive social sanction and authentication by the patriarchal norms that operate through family. Hence, he is left helpless and unacknowledged by society. It has been noted that "the family structure reflects this dynamic, where a man's honour is tied to controlling the chastity and behaviour of female family members" (Dochania et. al. 2). Appanna attempts, but fails to control the 'chastity' and behaviour of Rani. His success in performing the assertive gendered role of hegemonic masculinity is short-lived. Appanna's failure reflects "the slipperiness of gender identity, more specifically masculinity, (which) ensures that this success is often short-lived, because, as in the case of male bodies, one single diversion from the sex role or stereotype may lead to the loss of manhood" (Gunwant & Gaur 194). So Appanna complains to the members of the panchayat in order to reassert his masculinity. In a typical display of the panchayat's patriarchal mindset, Appanna's illicit relationship with a concubine is not even questioned. Rani announces that she will go through the snake ordeal to prove her innocence, as suggested by Naga. Fortunately, Rani is declared as a divine being when Naga moves over her shoulder as a garland. The crowd cheers, and Appanna is left bewildered (Karnad 292). The elders who are members of the panchayat exhort Appanna thus:  
 "Elder I: "Appanna, your wife is not an ordinary woman. She is a goddess incarnate. Don't grieve that you have judged her wrongly and treated her badly".  
 Elder II: Spend the rest of your life in her service. You need merit in ten past lives to be chosen for such holy duty" (Karnad 293).

The verdict of the panchayat switches Appanna's hegemonic masculine behaviour to a model of alternative masculinity. Appanna is told to be subservient to Rani and serve her. Appanna's transformed masculine identity is again related to Rani, thus 'legitimizing' it through the patriarchal norms of the panchayat. This situation illustrates the observation of Urvasi Singh that "durability and survivability of patriarchy are more through 'incorporation

than active oppression” (110) and “hegemonic masculinity is imparted normative value in a 'slanted relationship' with non-hegemonic masculinities, constituting everything that non-hegemonic masculinities constantly lack while it can freely 'effeminate,' 'incorporate,' and 'oppress” (111).

Appanna is aware that a rejection of the panchayat’s verdict may lead to his emasculation in the public sphere. “The ideology of manhood constructs the hegemony of the discursively ubiquitous though not universal image of ‘Man-the-Impregnator-Protector-Provider’, and cultures accomplish such goals through repressive and ideological apparatuses” (Gunwant & Gaur 194). Hence, Appanna incorporates the patriarchally prescribed alternative masculine behaviour though he is not the biological father of Rani’s child. Once again Appanna’s hegemony over Rani is reinstated though he is asked to take care of her as she expects a child.

The idea of a ‘real man’ is “(being able to) earn and maintain a family, to take decisions, to physically satisfy spouse/partner, and to procreate besides having a well-built body” (Pradhan and Ram 546). Naga becomes successful in satisfying Rani’s physical desires and procreates, whereas Appanna fails to perform these gendered roles. But Appanna’s hegemonic masculine identity is sustained even as an alternative masculine performativity is sanctioned by normative patriarchal society. This research paper has tried to analyse the two characters, Appanna and Naga, in whom both hegemonic and alternative masculine identities are brought together in collision and/or co-existence. Appanna’s original masculine identity (as an abusive adulterous husband) receives tacit social sanction by normative patriarchal structures—family and panchayat; the proof of Rani’s ‘chastity’ is the fulcrum on which an alternative masculine identity/role is prescribed to Appanna by a patriarchal society whose norms revolve around fear and control of female sexuality. Naga as an embodiment of female desire (even when situated within the bounds of heterosexual marriage) goes unacknowledged and placed out of the frames of patriarchal society. The play *Naga-Mandala* has three endings. First, Appanna and Rani live happily ever after with the child. But Naga remains without an identity in the human world. Second, Naga revisits Appanna’s house to see Rani. He feels jealous and thinks to kill Rani. But he commits suicide by tangling himself in the long dark hair of Rani. Third, a live snake falls out of Rani’s hair. Appanna goes to bring a stick to kill Naga. But Rani saves him, allowing him to climb up into her hair. She says, “This hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss. Live in there happily, forever” (Karnad 300). Finally, Appanna and Naga become part and parcel of Rani’s life. This ending gestures towards the possibility of the coexistence of both hegemonic and alternative masculine identities.

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