

Myth and Female Identity in Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala*

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Article Received: 10/06/2026

Article Accepted: 11/07/2026

Published Online: 13/07/2026

DOI: 10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.07.303

Abstract

The research paper explores Girish Karnad reconstructs myth and folklore to explore female identity in *Nagamandala*. Karnad draws on oral narratives from Karnataka and reshapes them into a modern dramatic structure that foregrounds women's experience, desire, and agency. Karnad does not treat myth as a fixed cultural inheritance; instead, he actively reinterprets it to question patriarchal norms and to create space for female subjectivity. Through the character of Rani, Karnad depicts the psychological and emotional journey of a woman confined within a rigid marital system. He uses the serpent figure as both a mythic symbol and a dramatic strategy to challenge conventional ideas of fidelity, virtue, and identity. The play transforms traditional motifs such as the serpent-lover and the trial by ordeal into instruments of resistance.

Karnad presents myth as a dynamic narrative force that enables Rani to negotiate her position within society rather than passively accept oppression. He emphasises the influence of narrative on gender roles and cultural memory by utilising storytelling as a central structural approach. The play challenges socially constructed notions of chastity and honour and portrays Rani as a psychologically complex individual rather than a stereotypical obedient wife. Karnad reclaims folklore as a site of feminist negotiation and modern reinterpretation. He transforms inherited legends into a dramatic discourse that affirms female interiority and challenges patriarchal authority. Through this creative engagement with myth, *Nagamandala* asserts that identity emerges not from submission to tradition but from active reinterpretation and self-articulation.

Keywords: Myth, Female Identity, Folklore, Patriarchy, Oral Tradition, Gender.

Introduction

Nagamandala (1988) transforms oral narratives from Karnataka into a multifaceted drama exploring storytelling, desire, and the construction of female identity. Karnad critiques the patriarchal delineation of women's roles by focusing on the overlooked wife, Rani, situated at the convergence of three interrelated myths: a narrative framed by a speaking flame, a trial of chastity, and a serpent lover. The play's myth serves as an active conduit via which Rani navigates fear, desire, sexuality, and societal validation, rather than just embellishing the narrative. The article asserts that Karnad utilises folklore and legendary elements to contest strict gender norms, while simultaneously illustrating how women reshape traditional narratives to forge their own identities. Myth denotes fantastical narratives imbued with elements of illusion, originating from folklore. Examining myth as interpreted by M. H. Abrams:

Folktales are typically regarded as traditional oral narratives and social practices transmitted predominantly through oral tradition. Folktales thrived and persisted most effectively in societies with low literacy rates. It encompasses, among other elements, legends, superstitions, songs, narratives, proverbs, riddles, spells, nursery rhymes, and a pseudo-scientific foundation for meteorology, botany, and zoology. (63)

Women as a source of power have been accorded increased significance in Indian society. The Sacred Feminine has birthed the entire universe from her womb. Indian mythology and history have compelling narratives concerning ladies who have been instrumental in both significant victories and the profound decline of powerful reigns. Rani, despite her limited cognisance of the Naga's true identity, seems to be firmly ensnared in the dynamics of power relations. The Naga attempts to control the body in question, that of Rani. Her inadvertent action of pouring red curry toward the ant mound causes the Naga to develop romantic feelings for her. Rani has now been Naga's focus of interest. The Naga is cognisant of Appanna's existence in Rani's life prior to assuming his form. He ensures that Rani awaits his arrival on his nocturnal visits. The Naga are completely aware that Rani may become pregnant. Naga's amazement at the announcement of Rani's pregnancy indicates his own inconsideration. Appanna's contrasting behaviour between day and night perpetuates her ongoing distress. Naga, for his part, similarly exploits Rani to satisfy his desires, being oblivious to the societal pressures she must endure. Rani approaches the challenge with

considerable contemplation of the ramifications of undertaking such an endeavour. He defines:

RANI. Snake ordeal? What is that?

RANI. Won't the cobra bite me the moment I touch it?

RANI. And suppose what I think is the truth turns out to be false? (2.54)

The phrases accurately represent the current condition of women in our societal structure. All that they express is falsehood. However, regarding the notion of retribution, Rani has begun to question whether her perceived truth may not be accurate and could potentially be the genuine source of her unwarranted punishment and humiliation before the entire community. Karnad emphasises the intrinsic power of narrative. The Prologue presents the drama as a narrative conveyed by flames, implying that folklore functions as a collective memory. Rani initially presents as the quintessential submissive bride, constrained by Appanna's dominance. The mythical serpent (Naga), which takes on Appanna's guise at night, presents an alternative paradigm of intimacy and reciprocity. Karnad presents a conflict between societal 'truth' and emotional truth through this duality. Anupama Rao, in her piece "Myth and Modernity in Karnad's Dramaturgy," delineates the feminist reinterpretation of folklore in *Nagamandala*. She notes:

Karnad adapts a regional folktale into a contemporary allegory concerning gendered subjectivity. The serpent serves as both a magical instrument and a realm of imagination, allowing the hero to explore desire free from oversight; hence, myth emerges as a counter-narrative to patriarchy. (142–43)

Rao's analysis highlights how Karnad reinterprets traditional mythology to challenge patriarchal dominance and to provide a symbolic realm for female self-expression. Karnad transforms folklore into a potent instrument of resistance by depicting the serpent as both a legendary monster and a metaphor for unfettered desire, thereby redefining feminine identity within a contemporary context. Myth serves as a cultural framework that both restricts and emancipates. The community's dependence on ritual examinations of virginity illustrates how mythological belief legitimises the regulation of women's bodies, even as the identical narrative (the serpent's divinity) finally exonerates Rani. Karnad, the individual who diverges from the rigid 'civilised' role of a consecrated wife, is venerated by her deceived husband gullible society, which believes it has imposed its moral code on the lives of this couple.

This play explores the female heart's yearning for male companionship and the fulfilment derived from childbirth, challenging conventional norms of culturally sanctioned

sexual relationships. However, it is clear that this fulfilment exists solely as a conceivable reality inside the realm of imagination and absurdity, a domain of celestial intervention. The mythological Naga is entangled in the moral obligation towards the woman he has loved, cohabited with, and fathered a kid with. The woman uncovers the duplicity in which she is unwittingly entangled, yet she chooses to withhold this information and refrain from revealing it to a world that remains oblivious to such possibilities. The Naga represents duality: peril and safeguarding, deceit and loyalty. In conventional mythology, serpents symbolise fertility and regeneration. Karnad utilises these associations to express female desire without diminishing it to mere transgression. Rani's emotional awakening transpires within the 'safe fiction' of the Naga's mask, serving as an ironic critique of how patriarchy regulates overt female sexuality. Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker, in her book *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India since 1947*, asserts that Karnad's dramatic oeuvre not only resurrects traditional narratives but also reinterprets them to elucidate contemporary issues of identity, power, gender, and nationhood:

Karnad destabilises the binary of faithfulness and infidelity by having the snake take on the shape of the husband. Rani's experience calls into question the law's literalist approach and reveals the moral hypocrisy inherent in male power. (Dharwadker 201–02)

Myth offers a language for desires that the social order would otherwise prohibit. The serpent's delicate and caring affection stands in stark contrast to Appanna's neglect, demonstrating how patriarchal marriage denies women emotional reciprocity. When Rani becomes pregnant, the village requires proof of purity. The cobra's struggle, based on folklore, paradoxically ensures her honour. She declares she has "touched no male individual other than her spouse and this cobra," (56) which is technically correct according to the play's legendary logic. The show highlights how patriarchal systems rely on performative purity. The heavenly approval bestowed by the cobra transforms the trial into a critique: the very myth employed to subjugate women vindicates Rani. Tutun Mukherjee emphasises the subversive nature of Rani's development in *Nagamandala*. She claims, "The play exposes the absurdity of equating virtue with bodily surveillance" (85). Rani survives not by giving way to patriarchal reason, but by negotiating its legendary loopholes and transforming superstition into agency" (88-89). Mukherjee's comment demonstrates how Karnad examines patriarchal concepts of chastity and moral control. Rani defines virtue on her own terms. Thus, the play eventually depicts myth as a flexible cultural resource that allows female identity to assert itself, rather than as an oppressive mechanism.

Traditionally reared girls are oblivious to the connection between male and female. They contend that all sexual interactions are immoral and sordid. If fortunate, they will be navigated through the complexities of sex by a kind partner. Nonetheless, their ignorance can be manipulated and exploited vigorously. The cruelty inflicts enduring and severe trauma on their psyches. They manifest as rigidity, neurosis, and various physiological complications. When healthy adult minds receive understanding and patience, their aversion to sex is swiftly surmounted. Consequently, Rani considers herself fortunate to have Naga start her following the distressing dissatisfaction she endured with her husband. Rani conceives due of a need for fulfilment. However, the issue is that her marriage has undergone an extraordinary split. Rani's actual partner neglects her femininity and treats her like a subordinate. He manages to put terror in her heart. During Naga's nocturnal substitutions, he exhibits remarkable kindness and tenderness towards her. She cherishes him and the sensual pleasures he offers her. However, she is unaware that Naga is not her spouse. Naga not only refrains from disillusioning her but also does every effort to maintain her immersion in her illusions. This is regrettable. At this juncture, Rani cannot be deemed accountable for her acts.

Rani spends her evenings weeping, lamenting, and yearning for him. Upon his return, his body was adorned with wounds that had not completely healed. She applied ointment to the wounds. Nevertheless, she never enquired about them. His reappearance sufficed. One night, she expresses her concerns with his potential visit and questions the authenticity of her experiences with him. Her words reflect her typical feminine disposition. She asserts that throughout this time, she was never convinced that she was not only fabricating these nocturnal visits of his. Rani articulates her anguish. She asserts that he is oblivious to her anguish. Upon witnessing his grim visage in the morning, she became persuaded that it was all a dream and nearly succumbed to tears. However, her genuine apprehension began as nightfall approached. She would merely recline, eyes firmly closed.

The anguish appears authentic. For an ordinary woman, nothing surpasses the exhilaration of sensing another living being within her. Nonetheless, Rani's distinctive circumstances preclude her from attaining that bliss. Naga is not allowed to feel joy or pride at his beloved woman's childbirth of a son and heir. He is bewildered by the atypical circumstances surrounding this event. Ultimately, she is exasperated to the point of intolerance and erupts with the inherent fervour characteristic of a slighted woman. Naga desires her to conceal her pregnancy from him and the broader public. However, being a woman, she recognises that she cannot maintain the secrecy for an extended period, and when faced with this distressing situation, she gets desensitised. She reverts to her former

existence and recollects all that he conveyed to her. Rani feels profoundly humiliated and can no longer endure it silently as she has until now. Naga is incapable of offering her any solace or solution. He arrives at the appointed time. The reality arrives at midday. The apprehensions of Naga and Rani are realised. He discovers her pregnancy, leading to the ensuing, unavoidable shame. He violently attacks her. A conflict exists. The current husband is astonished. In Indian culture, sexual flexibility is exclusively attainable for males. Appanna conveys his power by his statement:

Appanna: ¿Do you not feel any shame in confessing this, you promiscuous individual? ¡I confined you, yet you succeeded in finding a paramour! Identify the individual. Whom did you accompany without your sari?

Rani: ¡I assure you that I have not committed any wrongdoing!

Appanna: ¿You have not? Nonetheless, you possess a distended abdomen. Did you inflate it? ¿Do you believe I will permit you to evade accountability for that? You humiliate me before the entire town, you tarnish my reputation, you harlot--! He assaults her. The Cobra observes this from a window and moves restlessly. Neither of them observes it. (2.35)

Appanna seizes a stone to strike her skull. The serpent emerges, hissing. Amidst the turmoil, Rani enters the house and secures the door. Appanna departs in indignation, asserting that he will approach the village elders to have the embryo and lady immersed in boiling oil. Rani's survival marks a shift in identity from passive acquiescence to deliberate self-fashioning within inherited codes. The play's meta-theatrical framing stories striving for survival imply that identity is narratively produced. Rani transforms from stillness to self-possession, mirroring the story's progression from obscure legend to modern theatre. The myth here is about memory in action. It protects cultural values while remaining open to revision. Karnad's rendition reframes the folktale to emphasise women's interiority, elevating Rani Complexity above stereotype. Karnad's adaption reframes the folktale to highlight women's inner selves, giving Rani a depth that transcends a set paradigm. In his book *Indian Writing in English*, K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes:

Karnad's dramaturgy resurrects the woman at the center of the fable, adding psychological depth to what folklore renders symbolic. In doing so, he reclaims myth as a space for feminist negotiation rather than fatalistic destiny. (57–58)

Karnad criticises patriarchal interpretations and portrays myth as a dynamic environment in which women can assert agency rather than being constrained to inherited roles. This reframes myth as dialogic rather than dogmatic. Appanna is unconvinced by the

root's first taste. Rani throws away the solution with terror after it becomes blood crimson the second time. The combination occurs to fall on an anthill inhabited by The King Cobra Naga. The Cobra develops romantic feelings for Rani and starting seeing her disguised as her husband. In Hindu mythology, the Naga is represented by numerous images. Snakes are symbolic of human masculinity and power. In Indian culture, particularly in Kundalini Yoga, the snake represents life energy, or cosmic energy. Rani's encounter with Naga is almost surreal, and she frequently mentions sleep and dreams. Appanna is curt and rude, giving her only laconic commands and threats. Naga-Appanna's copy is completely different in look. Poetry gushes from him, as in his paeon to natural fertility:

Frogs croak in the torrential rain, while tortoises emit silent sounds in the darkness...
the female begins to exude the scent of damp soil. Attracted by her scent, the King Cobra begins to seek his Queen. (25)

One afternoon, she attempts to speak with Appanna, who dismisses her once more, leading Rani to suspect that the previous night's incident is merely a dream. She continues to oscillate between the twin poles of credulity and knowledge. When Appanna confronts Rani with the news of her pregnancy, accusing her of infidelity, she is unable to understand her husband's actions. Here, the drama appears to be a re-mythification of the Ahalya myth. By mimicking Ahalya's spouse Gautama, Indra commits adultery. Ahalya is associated with chaste ladies in popular culture, hence it is impossible for her to intentionally sin. In the play, Rani is also naive; Naga is the only one who knows, but he refuses to inform her. Naga, despite claiming to adore Rani, uses the same patriarchal language to force her to remain silent. He abandons her to face the tragedy alone and refuses to accept responsibility for her pain.

Conclusion

In *Nagamandala*, myth and folklore serve as both patriarchal tools and resistance resources. The serpent, the trauma, and the storytelling frame all depict how female identity evolves inside and against traditional scripts. Rani represents all innocent Indian women, whereas Appanna represents all men. Rani suffers from Appanna's negligence. Otherwise, she would have stayed a loyal wife. At the height of her innocence, she realised her crime: No two men engage in intimacy identically, yet she embodies a divine presence before the villagers. As a result, she conceals her infidelity. Conversely side, she has her son execute the final ceremonies for the deceased Naga there, symbolising that he is the child's father. Karnad neither rejects nor romanticises tradition; rather, he reinterprets folklore to expose its

untapped potential. Rani's path from captivity to acknowledgement highlights how, when creatively altered, myth may voice marginalised aspirations and challenge rigid rules.

Karnad depicts female identity as a negotiated place in which memory, magic, and agency intersect. Myths are not only fairy stories; they are live cultural narratives that continue to influence human awareness, customs, and social structures. Myths and folklore have had tremendous influence on the definition of moral, religious, and social values in Indian literature. Girish Karnad, one of the most esteemed playwrights in modern Indian theatre, draws significantly on mythology, folklore, tales, and history to produce meaningful theatrical experiences that reflect both previous traditions and current reality. Among his many plays, *Nagamandala* is a wonderful example of how Karnad weaves folk belief, myth, magic, and reality into a multilayered story. While The drama is predicated on a folktale, it addresses larger socioeconomic concerns such as patriarchy, chastity myths, women's oppression, and the quest for identity.

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