



## Mythic Interpretations using Sociological Perspectives in South Asian Literature: An Analysis of Girish Karnad's *Naga Mandala*

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### Abstract:

*The article shall explore the interpretations of myth in Girish Karnad's play, Naga Mandala (1987-88). The paper argues that the mythical pattern and structure of the play serve to relocate the boundaries of perception outside of the finite knowledge of civilization to include the world of Hindu Myth. The Hindu Myth will be interpreted in terms of three sociological perspectives: Functional-Structural perspective, Conflict perspective and Symbolic Interactionist perspective. Furthermore, the paper highlights the antithetical condition of terrestrial existence with the celestial plain e.g. the female protagonist 'Rani' is projected both as a wife and as a goddess. The objective portrayal of myth lending an elevated stature and empowerment to the female protagonist and the anthropomorphic depiction of celestial entities is the key concern of the paper. Myth criticism and Feminist criticism are applied to set the base for the historic development of myth, its diverse interpretations and to study the text in the exploration of contemporary social concerns.*

**Key words:** Myth, Girish Karnad, *Naga Mandala*, Terrestrial, Celestial, Sociological perspectives, Functional Structural, Conflict, Symbolic-Interactionist, Social concerns.

According to *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, one of the meanings of the word "myth" is "a 'sacred' narrative, from which legends and fairy tales are not always

clearly distinguishable” (407). It is a going-concern entity and its significance lies in how much it is adaptable to serve the authorial intentions.

Girish Karnad's *Naga Mandala* (play with a Cobra) incorporates a mythical structure. The artist takes on the role of the creator to retrieve, recycle and re-establish myths for the contemporary audience and, by applying his creative genius, he throws a lurid light on the social concerns prevailing in the society. Girish Karnad has facilitated the projection of his vision with the aid of historical myths and legends. He wants to empower the female gender and strives for the recognition of their individualistic identity; he feels it is mandatory to reinstate coherent order to the world beyond the self - that is the world of human relationships, of nature, of society as a totality. The critical study expounds the idea of social order and control and the notion of social change.

The paper is interpretative in its approach and is following the policy of 'domain in design' i.e. the design or the structure is replete with mythical patterns and the domain is the focus on Hindu myth and the milieu where Rani and Naga are the key figures. The literature review would look at the historical development of the definition of myth, and then it would proceed towards elucidating the relationship between Myth and Literature from the psychological and philosophical perspectives. The focus would shift to Indian Myth and Karnad's treatment of these myths in his plays, especially *Naga Mandala*. The Literature Review would highlight Karnad's projection of women and various feminist concerns supported by feminist criticism. Karnad's concern is the objective portrayal of myth serving as an integral part to the story of a woman overwhelmed in the quest for identity, empowerment and self-actualization, in a mechanized and constricting society. The play further highlights the dichotomy of a personage being a terrestrial creature as well as a celestial creator focusing on Naga, the serpent and Rani, the female protagonist who is

given an elevated stature in the denouement of the play. The anthropomorphic portrayal of celestial entities acts as a centripetal force in the play.

The critical study would look at the structural, thematic and narrative dimensions of the play; the analysis would be divided into three sections and to be more specific these sections are based on the perspectives that shape up the mythic interpretations: Functional-Structural perspective, Conflict Perspective and Symbolic Interactionist perspective.

The Functional-Structural perspective highlights the idea of a key-myth: Naga providing a foundation to all the allied cum reference myths: Devi, Agni and Ganesha in the structure of the play. Moreover, the mythic structure of the play is divided into three sub-sections or tri-dimensional matrix: it provides a thesis in which the female protagonist gets married, settles in the household of Appanna and meets Naga, an antithesis in which she gets pregnant and is cursed by her husband, a point where there is static harmony: it is the point where the village elders ask her to undergo a trial to prove her chastity and she succeeds in it and lastly, the final consummation where her celestial qualities are recognized and she starts her marital life again with her husband and a newborn child.

The Conflict perspective argues that there are differences of interest between groups in the world portrayed in the text. This creates the potential for conflict between groups. At a general level, the focus of this section would be to examine the shady relationship of Rani and her husband Appana. The concept of patriarchy and female subjugation, identity crisis, repression and alienation, existence of patriarchal myths, gender discrimination, man-woman relationship and submission / assertion syndrome in the light of Rani-Appana-Naga relationship would be discussed in this section.

Man interacts in symbols. The Symbolic Interactionist approach tends to focus on the interpretation of the myths and

how we extract the internal meanings that cannot be directly observed. Myths are regarded as a) symbols, b) phenomena and they imply certain behavior in an Indian society. It is the governing ideology of the stated approach. The life of the modern man is 'incurably plural' and the way these myths by offering diverse interpretations comment upon the plurality of social roles assigned to human beings and the evocation of high-density event related potentials in the dramatis personae, would be the focus of this portion. The different manifestations of Indian myths like Naga, Agni, Devi, Lakshmi, Ganesha would be discussed. It would serve as a link between tradition and conventionality (folkloric-indigenous oral tradition) and contemporariness (three endings and contemporary concerns). The story has to be told and the protagonist has to find fulfillment. The various subject positions offered to Rani in the structure of the play would be discussed in this section. In a nutshell, it not only covers the key strands of all the previous approaches but it deals with the notion of the shifting subject positions of the female protagonist throughout the play.

While concluding the paper, the female protagonist Rani's transition from age of innocence to age of experience, the diverse subject positions offered to her in the play and the themes of empowerment and self-actualization are highlighted. Moreover, the methodological problem associated with the interpretation of myths and the scope of the phenomenological study of myths would be discussed.

According to *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* "myth is a narrative or a group of narratives which recount the activities of a culture's gods and heroes. These narratives are the product of communal and (often) sacred impulses to sanction and reflect the cultural order existing at the time of their creation" (806). A close study of the ancient civilization divulges the fact that the myth relating to a particular culture is dependent on the origin of the world, essence of the gods, man, society and law. The Greek sophists

regarded myths as “allegorical and symbolic means of conveying truths about nature and the world, as well as human ethics” (807). Euhemerus (3d C.B.C) perceived myths rather as “covert accounts of purely naturalistic or historical occurrences and personages” (807). Vico’s approach to myth was the amalgamation of the earlier works of the Greek sophists and Euhemerus. He represented society as divided into different fractions and the prevailing attitudes and the mythical figures comprising the class symbols of the society. Formative theorists like Goethe and Herder in Germany found myth to be, “a self-sustaining structure of the human spirit which is a necessary and essential mode of belief and of conceiving reality” (807).

Literature developed in close relation to myth as exemplified by those myths held and venerated by individual, ethnic and national groups. Thus Indian literature is permeated with mythic materials, characters, subject matter, plots and action. It is said that “India thinks in images...Hindu myth has remained archaic, the collective heritage of a religious community which even today continues to refashion and reshape what is the most complex living culture in the world” (59). J. L. Shastri in *Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology* points out that “Myth, at all events, is a raw material, which can be the stuff for literature” (229). The contemporary artists like Girish Karnad deliberately reach back to retrieve, revive and recycle the myths of their region. Karnad remarked on his craft in an interview: “I cannot invent plots therefore I use myths. I cannot invent stories and hence go to history” (Web). Therefore, it can be deduced that Karnad’s play abounds in elements of myth. Tuta Aswar Rao in his article “Mythical Elements in Indian Plays: A Study of *Naga Mandala* of Girish-Karnad” reinforces that “Karnad does not take the myths in their entirety, he takes only fragments that are useful to him and the rest he supplements with his imagination to make his plots interesting. His interest was not in recreating old myths

and legends but in representing them to suit his artistic purpose.”(Web)

Myth and literature are not cent per cent reliable and accurate records of historical events. Yet both are taken seriously and held to possess meaning and significance because of their close socio-religious affiliations and the way they are woven in a particular society. It is plainly a matter of belief. Members of a culture might accept it as a model or paradigm of past or future events, but they may be skeptical about the credibility of these myths. Members outside the culture might consider it fictitious but it is a matter of perception and reality. In following mythic phraseology, the perceptions of the critics were shaped by many literary perspectives, but in relevance to the paper the psychological and the philosophical perspectives will be stretched further. The play evocatively foregrounds the emotional and the psychological anxieties of the woman: the female protagonist Rani in a patriarchal society during the socialization processes of childhood, marriage and motherhood.

Different versions of a myth represent adaptation to the needs of a group or individual. As the story, involving a myth, progresses it is subjected to the activities and interpretations of different storytellers. An individual might use it to express personal perspective and experiences which formulate the literary versions of a myth. As Girish Karnad pointed out in an interview, “while I was writing the play, I saw it only as an escape from my stressful situation. But looking back I am amazed how precisely the myth reflected my anxieties at the moment...” (1997-3). A scholar might use it to draw inferences about people and societies, which is the rationalized vision of a myth, and simultaneously they become a part of particular ceremony or ritual of a society---the working version of the myth. In this regard, Girish Karnad further adds that the myth of Yayati from the play *Yayati* involving the sacrifice of the son’s youth for the benefit of his father, “enabled me to articulate to myself as a set of values that I had been unable to

arrive at rationality...the myth had nailed me to my past.” (1997-3).

Sigmund Freud portrays myth as “a representative of the basic elements of human existence as developed by the ego of the child and persisting in some measure into adulthood. Occurrences such as copulation, coupled with the feelings of aggression, anxiety, pleasure, disgust, self-actualization and pride they arouse, are projected into fantasy form” (811). The advocates of ego psychology viewed myth and folklore as “providing individuals and groups, escape mechanism from socially imposed repressions such as taboos on incest or polygamy as well as from blockage drives other than sexual” (811).

The Neo-Kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer elucidated that myth can also be counted as “ a symbolic expression of the human spirit [...] myth is not only a mode of narrative but also a mode of thinking which is basic and ineradicable activity of human consciousness. It is, however, neither rational nor intellectual, but a function of will and emotion” (811), it is a matter of human perception and emotions are objectified into images and symbols. So myth as a narrative, as a symbol and as a structure all add up to one single notion that it is a phenomenon.

Karnad’s plays seek to evolve a symbolic form out of a tension between the archetypal and mythical experience and at the same time he attempts to give new meanings to the past from the vantage point of the present. *Hayavadana* (1970) is one of his representative plays. It deals with an archetypal theme, underlying mythical patterns, identifiable character-types, folk theatre conventions i.e. use of mask, curtains, dolls, and story within story. The use of images of Kali, Ganesh and Rudra lends an allegorical significance to the play. His ‘Yayati’ is a re-interpretation of the familiar old myths from *Mahabharata*, which deals with the exchange of ages between father and son. In Tughlaq, Karnad handles a historical myth

for the modern theatre, depicting the 'absurd' conception of the human situation. Karnad thus revels in rooting the contemporary concern in old myths.

Girish Karnad's play *Naga Mandala* highlights the topical concerns of the contemporary society. In fact *Naga Mandala*:

[...] is a powerful portrait of the agony and anguish faced by both men and women in their development into adult roles and social adjustment in a society where the individual is given little space for self-development, awareness and independence as a being"(249).

Girish Karnad, in his play, *Naga Mandala* centers upon projecting the female protagonist, Rani, analogous to Sita in the *Ramayana*. The story of Sita in the *Ramayana* represents the current situation of the woman in the Indian society. The theme of the chastity of woman is the central theme of the play. History is replete with such examples in which women have to undergo cumbersome ordeals to prove their virginity. According to the *Ramayana*, Rama elates Sita from Ravana's prison. But after this Rama abandons her by accusing her of "sleeping in another man's house" (Web). Thus Sita undergoes a self-inflicting trial and throws herself on a funeral pyre in anguish, and her purity is proven when she is spared by the flames. *Naga Mandala* offers a detailed study of women's positioning: we find out that women have been marginalized from the very beginning in male-dominant society and there is a sheer need for women to give voice to their rights. A renowned sociologist, Allan G. Johnson, in his book *Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy* expounds his views about patriarchal society in the following words: "A society is patriarchal to the degree that it promotes male privilege by being male dominated, male identified, and male centered. It is also organized around an obsession with control and involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women" (N.pag.).

The history of civilization has been the history of women oppression and the history of patriarchal hegemony. The common denomination in world civilizations from the civilization of the Ancient Near East (Sumerian, Mesopotamian and Egyptian), through the classical civilizations (Iranian, Indian, Greek, Roman and Chinese) to modern civilization (led by Europe and America) is that all civilizations have been in reality patriarchal societies.

Characteristic patriarchal conditions developed in the Mesopotamian civilization. Marriages were arranged for women by their parents, with a formal contract being drawn up. The husband served as authority over his wife and children just as he did over his slaves. Early Sumerians may have given women greater latitude than came to be the case later on. Their religion attributed considerable power to female sexuality and their early law gave women important rights, so that they could not be treated as outright property. Still, even in Sumerian law the adultery of a wife was punishable by death, while a husband's adultery was treated far more lightly - a double standard characteristic of patriarchalism.

Anupama Mohan's article, "Girish Karnad's *Naga Mandala*" (play with a cobra) highlights that Karnad "crafts a head on collision, as it were, between local/material realities of women's lives in Hindu India and the universal/mythical discursive idealization of woman that structures women's existence"(Web) . Dr. S. Prasanna Sree discusses the condition of women in general and the character of Rani in particular:

Day and night women must be kept in subordination to the males of the family; in childhood to the father, in youth to her husband, later to her sons [...] Even though the husband is destitute of virtue and seeks pleasure elsewhere, he must be worshiped as God (Web).

Anupama further argues that, "by foregrounding the limits of its own dissidence, the play presents a searching

critique of the structures that circumscribe women's agency in the real world" (n.pag).

The following section will address myths from three different sociological perspectives, namely, The Structural-Functional perspective, The Conflict perspective and The Symbolic Interactionist perspective. The paper will examine the functions of Hindu myth, how it proves to be instrumental in the multi-tiered empowerment of the female protagonist, her transformation, how it portrays Rani as a subject, the two worlds (terrestrial existence with the celestial plain) she is living in and how it comes at the forefront to portray different social concerns.

Myth can be interpreted in terms of the function it performs and the way it is imbued in the structure of the play because everything begins with structure, configuration, or a relationship. Myths are whole systems of inter-related parts. Each part has meaning only in terms of its relation with the whole, performing a specific function within the system. Society, precisely Indian society, is thus a system of interdependent elements like myths and oral traditions, all of which contribute to the integration and adaptation of the system as the whole. The title of the play *Naga Mandala* is extremely significant in the sense that it reflects the importance of the persona around which the plot is weaved. Thus the anthropomorphically depicted cobra acts as centripetal force in the play. The desire is to humanize creatural life or to humanize mythic and folkloric elements, such as when the 'Story' and 'Song' become the woman and her sari in the play. The 'Story' has to be told, it comes to the aid of the author/Man and the protagonist 'Rani' has to find fulfillment amidst the interplay of elemental and creatural imagery. The myth of 'Naga' can be termed as a key myth whereas 'Devi', Flames symbolizing 'Agni', 'Ganesha' and others might be termed as reference or complementary myths.

The paper is interpretative and the research methodology employed is a qualitative one: the discourse analysis, as it best suits to the dissection of the semantic structure of the play. It has certain interdisciplinary elements, particularly related to the disciplines of Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology and Philosophy, incorporated to complement the contention. An ardent effort has been made to access the required material from as much varied resources as possible, in electronic as well as print form. However, both the credibility and the reliability of the source material are not compromised in the slightest. To facilitate the contention, relevant myth criticism and feminist criticism are applied, keeping in view the time and spatial constraint. However, an anticipatory apology is made regarding the chances of human-error.

Girish Karnad's play *Naga Mandala* is dense with literary allusions, mythical references and evocative sensual images that stimulate the sensory perceptions of the readers. They prove to be instrumental in setting up a thematic nexus for a smooth progression of the plot. The artist, keeping in view the treatment of mythic and the historical narrative, tries to reinstate them by embedding them into the aesthetic structure of his writings. The mythical plot and structure of the play are presented in a three dimensional matrix: thesis, antithesis, synthesis.

The play inaugurates itself with an enigma. The opening lines of the prologue suggest that "the presiding deity of the temple cannot be identified" (247). The temple is ruined and there is an implied suggestion that past has been forgotten. The urge is to introduce, reshape or create something new out of the ruins. The temple thus becomes the 'Mandala' where the play would be executed. In the light of Hindu mythology, it can be inferred that the broken idol is that of Ganesha because he "removes obstacles and vouchsafes wisdom. He is propitiated at the beginning of any important enterprise and is evoked at the

commencement of books” (73). As an identity has been given to the nameless deity, similarly we shall acknowledge the identity of the female central character, Rani. The myth being discussed here and later on is purely at the personal end of the mythic spectrum. The character of Rani is not a woman in person but a woman in effect which destabilizes her personality. Although the writer suggests her proper name, yet, we come across her as a character without any tangible identity. The opening lines of Act One say: “A young girl. Her name...it does not matter. But she was an only daughter, so her parents called her Rani” (253).

Joan Riviere, a psychoanalyst, in an article named “Womanliness as a Masquerade”, in *International Journal of Psycho-analysis*, argued that “women adopt a public mask of ‘womanliness’ or femininity in accordance with a male image of what a woman should be. Thus they conform to the stereotypes of patriarchy” (303). In simpler words they acquire an imposed female identity. The first strand of the broader mythical design is the development of the thesis point.

Rani’s husband, Appanna, takes her to his house after marriage. Appanna treats her as a care taker and servant. They have no physical union. Their marriage is incomplete because he is interested in a “concubine”. So he spends his nights with a “bazar woman” instead of his wife. He only comes home to satisfy his basic instincts like bathing and eating. Rani sacrifices her pleasures and serves her husband faithfully like a “good” conventional wife.

Every night Rani is deserted by her husband and so she craves for liberty and reunion with her parents. Appanna locks her every night and her dreams become the only source of relief for her. She dreams of an Eagle and asks him: “Where are you taking me?” And the Eagle answers: “Beyond the seven seas and seven isles. On the seventh island is a magic garden. And in that garden stands the tree of emeralds. Under that tree, your parents wait for you”. So Rani says: “Do they? Then please, please take me to them---immediately. Here I come”. So

the Eagle carries her clear across the seven seas... (254). Her soliloquy and her dreams become an alternative of flight and freedom from this dire isolation. She talks to herself as:

Then Rani's parents embrace her and cry. They kiss her and caress her. At night she slept between them. So she is not frightened any more...In the morning, the stag with the golden antlers comes to the door. He calls out to Rani. She refuses to go.' I am not a stag,' he explains, 'I am a prince'... (255).

In a nutshell, the dream and the monologue serve as an escape mechanism for Rani. The span of the plot progresses further with the introduction of the characters of Kurudavva and her son Kappanna. Their appearances highlight the theme of peer support which serves as a lifeline in Rani's hard times. Kurudavva's character and actions can be classified into three steps. The first step is that of Kurudavva's being a silent observer and inspecting the house through the eyes of Kappanna. After learning about the presence of Rani in the house she adopts the role of an informer when she informs Rani about her beauty. She discloses the affair of her husband with a whore and in the last phase Kurudavva supplies her with a magical root to cast a spell on her husband. The effect of the root will open Appanna's eyes and "he won't go sniffing after that bitch. He will make you a wife instantly" (262).

The enchanting root is a sign of hope for Rani. It also signifies the fallibility of human beings to new-age beliefs like superstitions. Later on, while cooking curry with the paste of the root she observes it "boils over, red as blood". She hesitates to serve the curry to her husband and "puts it in that ant- hill". This mistake (human error) ignites the action. A cobra dwelled in that ant-hill and it devours that curry. Consequently, the miraculous root that was aimed at Appanna cast a spell on the cobra. This event leads to the first appearance of Naga. This is the point of elevation where the structure of the play gets dominated or overpowered by the mythic content. "Nagas are

serpent-genii figures in the Hindu mythology. They have a friendly disposition and are a symbol of fertility and regeneration” (81). This myth is again at the personal end of the mythic spectrum. So Naga takes on Appanna’s shape and approaches to Rani at midnight. He acknowledges her beauty, calls her a ‘tender bud’, and tries to come close to her. Rani is submersed into confusion and she constantly questions herself about the binaries in her husband’s persona triggered with the change of hours.

The meeting of Naga and Rani continues in the same fashion. She is on a rack of indecision and calls it a dream as most of the time of her leisure she used to indulge her mind into the realm of imagination. Later as the play unveils: “they make love” and she convinces herself that she is “not fantasizing” about these nocturnal meetings. She then declares, “I am pregnant”. This part is replete with various points of depression where myth is avoiding, taking any position at the forefront.

The second strand of the mythical plot is the antithesis. Rani’s innocent utterance invites a tough time for her. Appana brands her as a “harlot”, a “slut”. He questions her about her chastity and ‘the bloated tummy’. He says: “I locked you in, and yet you managed to find a lover! Tell me who it is? Who did you go to with your sari off”? (284). In the night Naga visits Rani and informs her about the Elders’ judgment which will be held in the morning. Rani pleads him to save her from the humiliation and take his words back.

RANI: Why are you humiliating me like this? Why are you striping me naked in front of the whole village? [...] Look at the way you talk --- as if you were referring to someone else [...] After you complained to the Elders about me. Now you can go and withdraw the complaint. Say my wife isn’t a whore (285).

Although myths seem to uphold traditional values, they have, ironically, also been the means of questioning these

values. These myths focus and question the patriarchal moral code that demands the faithfulness of a woman to her husband but not the faithfulness of a man to his wife. Naga's words bring frustration to her when he informs her that 'it can't be done'. He advises her to 'undertake the snake ordeal'. She trembles with fear while she hears this. She says: "won't the Cobra bite the moment I touched it? I will die like your dog and your mongoose" (286). But Naga informs her that the Cobra will not bite you unless you tell a lie. When Rani refuses to do so Naga gets angry and says: "I can't help it, Rani. That's how it has always been. That's how it will always be" (287). Through these lines of Naga, Karnad shows the practice of male companionship in all its dominance in the Hindu society in particular and on a universal level in general. Through these lines he beautifully projects the sufferings of the female gender in the male dominating society where no reason is presented to satisfy the mental conflicts of the female minds.

Appana goes to the village Elders. Next day a huge crowd gathers in front of Rani's house. The Elders suggest Rani to take her oath by holding red-hot iron in her hand. The village Elders evoke the theme of peer pressure and victimization of women at the hands of old customs and traditions. Appana proposes to the Elders to throw Rani and her illegitimate child into boiling oil. The advice of Naga comes into Rani's mind. Rani is left to confront the conflicting impulses related to the difficult decision which she has to take regarding her future. She strikes a deal with the village Elders and decides to undergo the snake test to save her honor and repute. Rani shows uncanny strength, indomitable courage and remains firm and resolute turning down the alternative offer of the village Elders. She goes to the ant-hill, puts her hand into it and takes the Cobra out. The Elders advise her to 'be quick' in taking her oath. So she swears by the Cobra that: "I have not touched any one of the male sex. Nor have I allowed any other male to touch me. If I lie, let the Cobra bite me" (292). The Cobra does not bite

her and it “slides up her shoulder and spreads its hood like on umbrella over her head”. It becomes submissive and “moves over her shoulder like a garland”. This instance becomes the second point of elevation where the myth has again become overpowering.

The third strand of the mythical pattern is the synthesis where contraries in Rani’s life come into balance. The Elders call it the working of something supernatural. One of the Elders says: “A miracle! A miracle” (292)! Rani is taken to be a Devi who in Hindu mythology appears “to hold the universe in her womb: she lights thee lamp of wisdom” (72). The myth stands at the impersonal end of the mythic spectrum now as it affects the whole society being depicted in the play. Everybody present there immediately recognizes the role reversal and this lead to her transformation from terrestrial creature to a celestial creator. This event portrays myth leading to ethnic cleansing of the society at large. Appanna repents on his past unjust behavior to his wife. But one of the Elders tells him that: “...your wife is not an ordinary woman. She is a goddess incarnate. Don’t grieve that you judged her wrongly and treated her badly. That is how goddesses reveal themselves to the world.”(293). Appanna goes to his wife and begs for forgiveness from her. She forgives him and “takes him in her arms” as was expected of her. When Appanna’s concubine watches this miracle she “feels ashamed of her sinful life and volunteered to do menial work in Rani’s house” (293). After some time Rani gives birth to a beautiful baby boy and in this way the play fulfills the part of a desired consummation which lends the synthesis a sense of completeness. So it marks the transformation of Rani at various levels. She has found conjugal bliss, she is in full control of her wishes and desires, and she has embraced motherhood. She has become an ethereal creature in the eyes of the society, however in her adherence to the role of being Appanna’s wife; she does not reject the social

and cultural constraints but becomes aware of her rights and position. Therefore, order is restored.

One day Naga thinks of Rani and he wishes to see his “queen”. He visits her in the same old fashion. When he watches her sleeping with her husband and son, he feels jealous. He decides to kill her but stops because his “love has stitched up ‘his lip’”. He decides to live in her hair and so he “becomes their size now. Enter her tresses! Make love to them” (296). Rani feels something heavy in her hair. She asks her husband to comb her hair. When he combs, a Cobra falls down. Both of them are frightened to see it. Appanna acknowledges Rani’s goddess-like qualities and says that: “Your long hair saved us”. Appanna goes out to find a stick in order to kill the snake. Rani recognizes the snake and lets it “climb into” her hair because the relationship between Rani and Naga is like a salvation that sustains her through the heartache of marriage. She can neither leave nor betray Naga as Naga was the entity which marked her as the goddess.

Myth can be interpreted in terms of another perspective that is dependent upon the conflicting interests of the various stakeholders of the world being projected in Karnad’s *Naga Mandala*. The integration, as suggested earlier, between all parts of the system is never perfect. The basic tendency of social system like Indian myths is towards achieving equilibrium. Deviance, tensions, conflicting interests and strains exist as dysfunctional elements which tend to become either institutionalized or resolved in the direction of integration or equilibrium. The key stakeholders with their conflicting interests are actually the dramatist himself, all the major, minor or the peripheral characters of the play. Rani, Naga and Appanna are the more active characters, whereas Kurudavva, Kappanna, Flames, the Story and The Song and the society at large represented by the village elders are the complementary characters.

Girish Karnad, through myths, explores the socio-religious dynamics that lead to the empowerment of Rani in the time of apparent chaos and disorder. His act of writing is like lending an opportunity to woman to break her age-old silence. The culture of marginalization and dejection, accompanied by denial, rather raised her stature instead of belittling her. She achieved a sense of self-actualization. The dramatist has thrown a lurid light on the lop-sided and unequal relationship of woman as compared to man in the Indian society pitched against a rural backdrop along with its social and cultural hypocrisy and prejudices. He has tried to portray the impact they have on an individual. Rani, abiding by the norms and values of the society is contended with her life as a domestic engineer and does not question her marital life that echoes more of a solitary confinement. Her husband, on the other hand, is selfish, callous and dominating. He is emblematic of male chauvinism that nurtures and is perpetuated in a patriarchal society. Naga represents the loving and caring male, whose existence can be counted as a myth in a patriarchal society. Rani is a victim of subjugation, alienation and repression owing to her ascribed status that depicts her less of a housewife and more of a slave. Domestic slavery is an implicit concern of the play. Slavery is the most vicious anti-family institution human beings have ever devised. It is a going concern enterprise, where human beings are merchandised, everything has its price and that price is tyrannical.

Ownership and possession are characteristic of slavery. They reflect the fiscal exchange (as according to Rani's parents, Appanna was a rich man and an eligible suitor for Rani) involved in that system of dehumanization as well as the psychological control usually attendant upon the physical imprisonment. The word "ownership" refers to the practice of masters, like Appanna, having legal rights to bodies and labor of their slaves, like Rani. The word "possession" is used to refer to the psychological dimension of the relationship, in which

masters were able to convince some slaves to believe in the institution of slavery and to concede that their relationship was hopeless. To validate the argument, a statement from the *Quarterly Newsletter* of Aurat Foundation can be used to exemplify: “The girl is a liability; at an early age the girl child is made aware that she is only a temporary member of the family. Any skills she learns will benefit not her own family but her in-laws.” (Vol. I, 2, 1989).

Karnad has presented the subject of domestic slavery in a new way and a new era. He wants to project it as something not natural, but institutionalized, constructed, planted and legalized. Secondly, he highlights the hypocrisy of the society which gives much space to Appanna in terms of seeing a concubine and satisfying his sexual instincts whereas Rani is made to prove her chastity through a courageous task.

The question of the chastity of woman is another important concern of the play. As stated earlier that the story of Sita in the *Ramayana* represents the situation of the woman in the Indian society, history is replete with such examples in which women have to undergo cumbersome ordeals to prove their chastity. According to the *Ramayana*, Rama elates Sita from Ravana’s prison, but after this Rama abandons her by accusing her of “sleeping in another man’s house” (Web). Thus Sita undergoes a self-inflicting trial and throws herself on a funeral pyre in anguish, and her purity is proven when she is spared by the flames. Similarly, Rani undergoes the snake-ordeal.

The flames, the whole notion of telling narratives, the Man and the Woman (the Story and the Song) represent the meta-theatrical elements in the play and they are deliberately brought about by the dramatist to make the play more diverse and engaging. The Flames are positioned in the play to talk about the paradoxical nature of tales. These tales have their own autonomous existence, they are not dependent on the teller but still they need to be passed on from the possessor of tales to

the listeners. The character of the blind woman Kurudavva can be termed as a metaphor for motherly-affection and hope for Rani. Kappanna can be considered as another man who is not ready to take responsibility and is after some woman who is “A temptress [...] A *yaksha* woman” (291). In the denouement of the play, he deserts her poor mother and disappears. The conflicts or the problems were recognized, they were rectified and a stage of redemption was achieved and myths served as a backdrop or a foundation to this process of eradicating social errors. The harmony was achieved by following an eight-point agenda that was offered by the myth itself. The people gained a ‘right understanding’ of the ills that were eating their society, they were equipped with a ‘right thought’ as they recognized that the voice of the women should be heard and they are not commodities, they started valuing the importance of a ‘right speech’ as Rani questioned her husband and the village elders depicting her critical analytical quality. A ‘right action’ was taken as Rani was given a proper position by her husband and the society with the consequence that she gained a ‘right livelihood’: a balance between husband and wife relationship was achieved portraying a ‘right mindfulness’ and social recognition and lastly, as they had to rear a child now so they achieved ‘right concentration’ to keep all the conflicts at one side and socialize and nurture their child with unified sensibility.

Myths can be interpreted using the tenets of symbolic interactionism and phenomenology. Myths are structures that are shaped by individuals, like Karnad has retrieved, altered and filtered the myths to serve his authorial intentions in the play. People interact in symbols and they interpret the meaning of things or any external stimuli before reacting to them. So the meanings develop during interaction and are not fixed. They are subjected to various interpretations. Myths are symbolic in nature as well. Myths are cultural constructs intended to shape the individual according to moral and traditional codes. Social

codes of conduct and cultural influences are all inherent in the myths. So the focus is on the individualistic interpretation of the myths, both internally - the inner dynamics of the myths or the characteristics of the mythic archetypes are important - and externally - what the myth means to the play and the society in totality- .

Firstly, the form and content of the play is based on oral folkloric tradition, which is an old but living practice in India and serves as a means of communication among the women in the family. It is a part of their socialization. The play with its diverse thematic concerns, offers three different endings which suggest its contemporariness. Thus, there is an interesting blend of conventional and contemporary elements. Edward Shils in his book titled *Tradition* says,

Substantive traditionality, i.e. the appreciation of the accomplishments and the wisdom of the past and of the institutions especially impregnated with tradition, as well as the desirability of regarding patterns inherited from the past as valid guides, is one of the major patterns of human thought” (Web).

These myths serve as a link between tradition and change, a change much desired in the present times.

Since the focus of the paper is on Indian myths which have a direct affiliation with Hinduism, the central figure in Hinduism is discussed first and fore mostly. It is Brahma the Creator who emerges in multiple manifestations, but most characteristically in the Trimurti (Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver and Shiva the destroyer).

Next in focus is Agni as the presence of the Flames in the play suggests the existence of Agni. Agni personifies “fire [...] the ever new beginning. As the bestower of immortality [...] acted as a mediator between gods and men” (65). Furthermore, “Agni is invoked by Hindu lovers and by men for virility” (65). Rani is termed as Devi by the village elders in the public trial. The character of Devi as a goddess is split into two binary

positions. She stands both for benevolence and for fierceness. Rani echoes the benevolent aspect of Devi in the play. There is an implicit reference to Dharma as well. Dharma in Hinduism reflects “the doctrine of the duties and rights of each caste in the ideal society, and as such the mirror of all moral action” (73). Ganesha is there as the possible deity of the ruined temple. It is invoked before every enterprise and most importantly, at the beginning of books; there is a possibility that Karnad has deliberately not mentioned the name of the deity of the temple and has left it to the audience to name the presiding deity of the temple.

Rani was termed as a ‘goddess incarnate’ in the play. One interpretation is that she is Devi and another interpretation is that she is Lakshmi. Lakshmi, ‘good fortune’, is “not only universal mother of life in her benevolent life-increasing aspect, but more in her magnanimous wisdom-bestowing activities she is the entrance to transcendental life” (78), and a source of enlightenment. Kappana is shown as a devotee of Hanuman. He represents the dramatic changes in shape and size of an entity and the power of flight. He was the one awarded the gift of perpetual life by Rama, another famous god in Hinduism.

Lastly, Naga depicts fertility and stands for the instigation of vital energy in Rani. The act of placing the snake in her tresses marks her sexual awakening and rising of her vital energy because tresses connote sexuality. Rani has experienced some high density events that have brought about her hidden and inhibited potentials to the limelight, the myths have facilitated her multi-tiered empowerment as a complete subject from a split subject, a submissive girl to an assertive woman, a mother and lastly a ‘goddess incarnate’, channeled her transformation and her journey from innocence to experience is completed. These are all the different manifestations of the myth found in the play.

Myth can be termed as a phenomenon and again the responsibility lies with an individual for organizing chaotic sensory experience into phenomena. Phenomena are things which are held to have characteristics in common but the emphasis is on the subjective nature of categorization as it is a matter of human choice. As per the psychological perspective on Myths given by Carl Jung, it can be said that Myth is a function that is rooted in the structure of mind and is therefore a phenomenon. It is worth mentioning that Karnad has deliberately used such a phenomenon to highlight the concerns of the society that are at one level, specific to the Indian society and at another level, they are universal in nature. The characters of Rani and Naga can be called phenomena as they re-define each other's relationship, they do not have fixed positions in the play; they are the subjects in process and are in a state of flux in the cosmos of the play. The plural endings of the play lend it a post-modernist touch and they depict the resolution of two different and dominant frames. One frame echoes a sense of loss as the snake has sacrificed his life for the conjugal bliss of Rani and the second frame echoes a sense of gain as the snake merges in the tresses of Rani: a sense of mystical union is projected. She says: "This hair is a symbol of my wedded bliss. Live in there, happily forever" (300). The Man, the cursed storyteller has also completed his tale in the stipulated time period and gathered praise of the audience.

Myth as phenomenon appears in all the three perspectives that have shaped the argument of the paper. Myth appeared as being embedded in the structure, it had a functional element attached to it, and it highlighted different conflicts and crises of civilization which were phenomena themselves. It was projected as symbol based on the subjective interpretations of symbols. Therefore, it would not be wrong that myth as phenomenon is the most potent yet implicit interpretation of the myth in the play. Earlier in the paper the female protagonist Rani was declared as a subject in process. It

should be noted that subjectivity is the locus of all conflicts. Rani is a subject that is faced by existential concerns. One of its connotation is that she in her earlier phase of life was sustaining the notion that woman is a biologically constructed notion. It is towards the climax of the play that this point of view is questioned and it is portrayed that woman in its very essence is a socially constructed idea as a 'being in the world'.

The argument is that the myth has facilitated Rani to become both subject and object in the course of the play and it has added that fourth transcendental dimension to her life, the infinite unknown. She is a woman living in three different worlds at one time. She has the surrounding world, the personal world and the symbolic world, all of them working to empower her and hence, promote her stature. She is a subject that offers plural and diverse discursive locations in the play. The play is deconstructed to show the foreground action of the shifting subject positions of the female protagonist Rani and the myth, on the other hand, serving as a foundation to the processes going on in the superstructure i.e. Rani's world. It should be noted that we create our subjective selves through our objective social relations, and our self-consciousness is not the product of private introspection but of social interaction.

In Act One, the Story comments: "A young girl. Her name [...] it doesn't matter. But she was an only daughter, so her parents called her Rani. Queen of the whole wide world. Queen of the long tresses" (253). It should be noted that another character 'the Story' is introducing the protagonist herself and it is highlighted that her name or identity is insignificant, though in the period of her primary socialization she was called Rani. Her tresses, which are a romantic symbol of beauty, fertility and sexuality, are specifically mentioned foreshadowing the story that is going to unfold. Therefore, Rani is introduced as an individual with induced identity which is given to her by the Story, by her parents and by her tresses.

After her home-coming, the first time she uses the personal pronoun 'I' is to express her fear of being alone and she is subdued by the 'I' of her husband when he says: "Look, I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand"? (254). The statement not only ends with interrogatory punctuation mark but also suggests that she is being dominated and ordered to do something. She is again being given an imposed subject position or imposed wife-identity by her husband. She has started to become an active case of the commoditization of women by men. She starts to remain silent. Silence condones injustice, breeds subservience and fosters a malignant hypocrisy. Her silence has led to her husband getting a stronger and assertive position in their marital relationship.

Lately, Kurudavva terms her as a "caged bird" and when she inquires about Rani's name, she replies: "They call me Rani" (258). The word 'they' used here suggests that Rani is in an object position and no longer an active or a passive subject. The anonymous or the plural pronoun suggests a possibility of inclusion. It suggests that a collective entity is shaping an individual identity.

Rani is keen to seek help of her parents to save her of her misery, she is eager to change her essential spatial reality, she dreams, and even ponder over committing suicide by jumping in the well. Kurudavva, being her only support system redeems her partially. It is after they meet when Rani voices out a statement of iconic proportions and that is "Yes, I am" (262). The process of self-actualization and empowerment has been triggered and this very statement is the first open declaration of it. Appanna stops her from meeting with Kurudavva. He says: "She won't talk to anyone. And no one need talk to her" (262). Appanna has strategized to alienate Rani from her surroundings by closing the door of active communication. He has very cunningly pointed out the discontinuation of two-way process of communication. It can be counted as a sign of their unhealthy conjugal relationship.

Rani gets scolded and later on, Naga appears and calls Rani, a “Poor thing” (268). Rani exclaims: “I didn’t say anything!” (268) this comment can be counted as a blind adherence to the set norms and values of society, no matter if they are impregnated with cruelty and inequality. She accepts that she didn’t retaliate to the abominable act of domestic violence and it shows her weak position as a subject. Now she might be considered a split-subject. The expression ‘Poor thing’ used by Naga suggests more of pity, mercy and less of compassion, affection and consolation. It should be noted that Naga is of the male gender himself and has appeared as Appanna. Although his approach is different, he still implicitly dictates Rani regarding certain issues. It should be noted that Naga says: “I want you to be fresh and bright when I come home at night” (269). The male/female duality and the power dynamics of gender should be kept in mind when analyzing this remark. Huma Iqbal in her essay “Victims of patriarchy: Save the women of Pakistan” (2010) condemns these sort of practices and says:

Violence against women, be it physical, psychological, sexual or through economic deprivation is one of the most pervasive of human rights violation which denies women equality, security, dignity, self-worth, and their right to enjoy fundamental freedoms.

Act One ends on the discussion between Rani and Naga. The discussion is replete with questions posed by Rani. They relate to her being unable to make out the difference between illusion and reality, she being unable to say something, unable to behave in a rational way, she is all-action and emotion and lastly, she is left questioning whether it is their house or the house just belongs to Appanna. Rani comments that if the name of a snake is mentioned at night, it might appear and Naga consoles Rani that he is there to protect her. This remark highlights belief in superstitions and stories.

Rani has a very obscure identity as she is seen vacillating between two extreme positions of faith and doubt in Act Two and by the end of the play enters into the state of disbelief. Rani is still unable to absorb the change that occurs in the behavior of her husband with the shift of day and night. She even gets carried away by the scent of Night queen that follows Naga appearance and calls it welcoming. While talking about her state, she says: “[it] sets each fiber in me on fire” (281).

This symbolizes the evocation of her vital energy and the awakening of her sexual instincts. The comment suggests that the scent or a sensuous experience has displaced her from her subject position into an object position. Later on, her declaration that she is pregnant is an objective reality, not a fantasy; coupled with the use of personal pronoun ‘I’, it reinstates her prior subject position. So there is a to and fro motion in the narrative. This time she is not a split subject but a subject undergoing transformation. She is a mother-to-be and she longs for a sense of acknowledgement of her motherhood - she declares: “I am going to be a mother” (283). She complains to Naga, who is still in the garb of Appanna about his inhuman behavior like that of a cold- blooded being. Using her critical analytical quality, she attempts to make a revolt against her current situation. “Do as I tell you. Don’t ask questions [...]. I was a stupid, ignorant girl when you brought me here. But now I am a woman, a wife, and I am going to be a mother” (284). This comment signifies her acceptance and acknowledgement of her new identity and subject position. A sense of faith in her is restored but the next step would be to face the society and earn their acknowledgement.

There is a tragic shift in circumstances and again her subjectivity is challenged by the appearance of her real husband who humiliates her and Rani is made to think that her life is not her own and death and suicide is the best option. She is in a state of doubt now. Her doubt is magnified and converts

into disbelief when Naga fails to save her from public-humiliation. Naga adds: "I can't help it Rani. That's how it has always been. That's how it will always be" (287). Naga has once again portrayed that he cannot challenge the set traditions of the society. He even eliminates the chance of anyone retaliating at present or in future to the norms of the society by using an empty subject 'it' and complementing it with 'will' in his statement as it is mentioned in the preceding lines.

The village Elders, who depict legal-traditional authority in matters of public welfare, constantly refer to her as a child and even Rani herself accepts that she is innocent and submits a claim for forgiveness. "I am young and immature. I know nothing. But I ask the pardon of Elders" (289). So she is re-positioned as the same subject as she appeared at the start of Act one. Apart from this, her husband Appanna who represents legal-traditional authority in all the domestic matters in an Indian setting calls her a 'harlot'.

There comes a point in the play which can be termed as a point of static harmony where myth serves as an interlude in renewing Rani's integrity and fixing her complete subject position. Rani declares: "Since coming to this village, I have held by this hand, only two" she further adds: "My husband and..." "And this Cobra" (292). The Elders declare that Rani is not an ordinary woman; she has celestial characteristics and is a 'goddess incarnate'. Once again, Rani is given her new identity by the society; it is like a structure defining a cell or an individual. "[G]oddesses reveal themselves to the world. You were the chosen instrument for the revelation of her divinity" (293) this statement reflects that Rani, who has already been termed as a 'goddess' is a new subject now and Appanna has become an object-'the chosen instrument'. The myth has made an appearance to highlight this subject-object transformation and it has evoked new identities. The binaries of human being/divine being, Naga/Appanna and animal/human seem to disappear, balance or merge now.

The denouement of the play can be split into three portions. In one portion, the dramatist or the Man is projected as if he is commenting upon the weakness of the plot. "Too many loose ends" (294) and he attempts to figure out the missing details, thus leading us to the second portion of dual endings. The dramatist or the Man has attempted to keep the play open-ended as if abiding by the modernist tradition. Lastly, the myth or Naga itself accepts that he has been instrumental in bringing the desired consummation in the life of the female protagonist. The symbolic world and the personal world amalgamate in the ending of the play. Naga plans to visit Rani. In a state of sheer anxiousness he utters: "I have given her everything. Her husband. Her child. Her home. Even her maid. She must be happy" (295). He declares Rani as his queen and he confesses that he has left his brutish qualities after getting enmeshed in Rani's love. In the last portion, Appana accepts that Rani's long hair has saved them and that she is an uncommon being. Rani declares her son to be the life-line of their conjugal relationship and he has been given the gift of life by the Cobra. Appana accepts a submissive subject position by uttering: "You are the goddess herself incarnate. Any wish of yours will be carried out" (298). This act of defining his subject position has indirectly led to the definition of Rani's new subject position. The Man attempts to rewrite the story with another ending where Naga would become one with Rani's tresses and would dwell there forever. The child is taken as a fourth entity that sustains their symmetrical relationship. The Man bids farewell to the audience and leaves the stage.

Myth is a loaded word. Therefore, it was interpreted from three different perspectives. It has socio-anthropological, psychological and philosophical affiliations as well. Myth highlighted the coordinates and contradictions of the play. The projection of myth as an essence, its existence, its substance and the subject positions encapsulated internally and its external manifestations were the concerns of the paper. Its

function was to orient, balance and organize the structure and at the same time lend a deep critique on the socio-political dynamics of the contemporary society. To be more specific, the play *Naga mandala* (play with a cobra) portrays the commoditization of women in a society where women are not valued as objects of individuality but as objects of possession. They are subjected to social indoctrination and their voices are marginalized. The place of women is shaped by topical references and the idea of a woman holding power of any sort over a man attacks the male ego. A person needs to be seen as individual, as an entity valuable in itself, independent of family and social circumstances.

The key research findings are that myths not only have an ethereal dimension but they have a human dimension, which is overpowering and taking a lead in the play. Myth cannot be broken down into separate, autonomous parts but if it is broken for the sake of interpretation then one might notice that all the parts are relative, rather than being discrete and distinct. Myth is working to empower the female protagonist in the play. It is not static, but dynamic and is swaying in a to and fro motion, undergoing the processes of elevation and depression/displacement. Girish Karnad has used the idea of 'rationalized myth retrieval' to portray the topical concerns of the society, like the notion of domestic slavery and gender discrimination.

Rationalized myth is the one in which the author deliberately modifies the myth as a whole or a specific portion of the myth to serve his intentions. Myth can be counted as an integral part of the structure or the epicenter of the structure, it can be taken as a collection of images, symbols and metaphor and lastly, it can be taken as a process of mind, a phenomenon. Myth can be counted as a socially constructed idea and at the same time it shapes the social lives of the people. Rani is a subject that is shaped in the cradle of a myth. She offers multiple discursive positions to the researchers. Act One

depicts her being in the age of innocence, while Act Two portrays her being in the age of experience. She is constantly oscillating between the triangular thematic construct of faith, doubt and disbelief. Her earlier life, as it is portrayed in the world of text is an episode of gaps and indeterminacies and later on, on attaining motherhood and the status of a goddess she finds the solace in her life in terms of a symmetrical conjugal relationship.

The study of myths raises a methodological problem. As mentioned earlier, they cannot be broken down in the real sense for the sake of analysis as then there would be no unity within the framework of these myths. Their themes would split up *ad infinitum*. The researcher might take the wrong view that he/she has disentangled and separated the myths for the sake of analyzing them, but later on, it would seem that they have started to diffuse or knit together. The best interpretation of a myth is that it is a phenomenon of imagination and perception. It is a subjective process and is constantly in a state of flux or kinesis. Therefore, it leaves a vacuum for other scholars to analyze it more broadly in terms of phenomenology.

Lastly, it would not be wrong to say that all the mythic interpretations are a myth in themselves as they are subjected to various interpretations and one cannot shape these interpretations by taking the aid of few perspectives.

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