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USE OF FOLK TALES IN GIRISH KARNAD'S NAGA-MANDALA

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ABSTRACT

Girish Karnad is one of the most prominent modern Indian dramatists who successfully blended Indian folk traditions with contemporary theatrical concerns. His play Naga-Mandala (1988) is a remarkable example of the creative use of folk tales to explore complex themes such as gender, marriage, patriarchy, sexuality, and identity. Based on a Kannada folk tale and framed through oral storytelling traditions, the play reinterprets folk material to question social norms and power structures. This research paper examines the use of folk tales in Naga-Mandala, focusing on narrative technique, symbolism, myth, folklore, and their dramatic significance. The paper argues that Karnad does not merely retell a folk story but reshapes it to give voice to women's experience and challenge traditional patriarchal values. The study highlights how folklore becomes a powerful medium for social criticism in modern Indian drama.



KEYWORDS: Girish Karnad, Naga-Mandala, Folk Tales, Indian Drama, Myth and Folklore, Feminism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian literature and theatre have always drawn deeply from folk traditions, myths, legends, and oral narratives. These elements have served not only as sources of entertainment but also as carriers of cultural values, social norms, and moral lessons. In modern Indian English drama, Girish Karnad occupies a significant place for his innovative use of folk and mythological material to address contemporary issues.

Naga-Mandala, first written in Kannada and later translated into English by Karnad himself, is a play that exemplifies the fusion of folk tale and modern dramatic sensibility. The play is based on a traditional Kannada folk story that Karnad heard from A.K. Ramanujan. However, Karnad reshapes the folk narrative to explore the emotional and psychological condition of a woman trapped in a loveless marriage.

This paper aims to study how folk tales are used in Naga-Mandala, how Karnad adapts oral tradition into dramatic form, and how folklore becomes a tool for questioning patriarchal structures. The paper also examines the symbolism, narrative frame, and thematic depth achieved through folk elements.

2. GIRISH KARNAD AND HIS USE OF FOLK TRADITION

Girish Karnad (1938–2019) was not only a playwright but also an actor, director, and cultural thinker. His plays often reflect a deep engagement with Indian history, myth, and folklore. Karnad believed that folk forms provided a natural theatrical structure that suited Indian sensibilities.

Plays like *Yayati*, *Hayavadana*, *Tughlaq*, *Naga-Mandala*, and *The Fire and the Rain* demonstrate his interest in reinterpreting traditional stories. Karnad used folk material not to escape reality but to confront it. Folk tales, in his hands, became a means to talk about identity crisis, power, gender inequality, and human desire.

In *Naga-Mandala*, Karnad consciously uses folklore because folk narratives allow the blending of realism and fantasy, making it easier to express suppressed emotions and social tensions.

3. Folk Tale as the Source of Naga-Mandala

Naga-Mandala is based on a folk tale from Karnataka, narrated orally for generations. The folk story tells of a neglected woman whose husband visits her only at night in the form of a serpent. The tale highlights themes of female desire, fidelity, and social judgment.

Karnad acknowledges that the folk tale fascinated him because it openly addressed female sexuality, something rarely discussed in classical literature. However, instead of retelling the story faithfully, Karnad reworked it to suit the modern stage and contemporary sensibilities.

The folk tale provides the basic plot, but Karnad adds layers of psychological depth, symbolism, and social critique. This transformation shows how folk tales can be dynamic and adaptable rather than static cultural artifacts.

4. Frame Narrative and Oral Tradition

One of the most striking folk elements in *Naga-Mandala* is its frame narrative. The play begins with a storyteller-like situation involving flames that come alive at night and narrate stories. This device reflects the oral storytelling tradition where stories are passed from one speaker to another.

The narrator, who is cursed to stay awake all night, listens to these stories. This framing technique creates a sense of timelessness and mystery. It also establishes the play as a story being told rather than a realistic event, allowing the audience to accept supernatural elements naturally.

The frame narrative highlights the folk belief that stories are living entities. In *Naga-Mandala*, stories escape from books and circulate orally, suggesting that folk tales resist confinement and belong to the collective imagination.

5. Role of the Supernatural and Folk Belief

Folk tales often include supernatural elements such as spirits, snakes, magic potions, and divine intervention. *Naga-Mandala* extensively uses these features to create a mythical atmosphere.

The serpent (Naga) who assumes the form of Rani's husband is a central supernatural figure. In Indian folklore, the snake is associated with fertility, sexuality, mystery, and divine power. Karnad uses this symbolism effectively to explore suppressed female desire and emotional fulfillment.

The presence of magic roots, talking flames, and transformation reflects folk belief systems where the natural and supernatural coexist. These elements allow Karnad to move beyond realism and address deeper emotional truths.

6. Folk Tale and the Portrayal of Womanhood

One of the most important aspects of *Naga-Mandala* is its portrayal of women, particularly Rani. In traditional patriarchal society, women are expected to be obedient, silent, and faithful. Folk tales often reinforce these values, but Karnad subverts them. Rani begins as a submissive and neglected wife. Her husband Appanna treats her as a possession rather than a partner. He locks her inside the house and visits her only to eat. This situation reflects the harsh reality of many women in traditional marriages.

Through the folk element of the Naga, Rani experiences love, attention, and emotional fulfillment for the first time. The folk tale thus becomes a medium to express a woman's inner desires, which are otherwise suppressed in social reality.

7. The Snake as a Folk Symbol

In Indian folklore, the snake is a powerful and complex symbol. It represents fertility, rebirth, danger, and desire. In Naga-Mandala, the Naga embodies all these meanings.

The snake's transformation into Appanna allows Rani to experience marital happiness without social rebellion. Ironically, the supernatural lover fulfills the duties that the real husband neglects. This reversal questions the institution of marriage itself.

The Naga also represents male sexuality that is sensitive and caring, unlike Appanna's cruelty. Through this folk symbol, Karnad critiques toxic masculinity and patriarchal authority.

8. Folk Justice and Trial Scene

The trial scene in Naga-Mandala is another example of folk tradition at work. When Rani is accused of infidelity, she is subjected to a traditional test of purity. Such trials are common in folk narratives where divine forces reveal truth.

Rani's ordeal, where she must prove her chastity by holding a snake, reflects folk belief in supernatural justice. Interestingly, the snake protects her, proving her innocence in the eyes of society.

This scene exposes the double standards of patriarchy. Appanna, who openly keeps a mistress, faces no punishment, while Rani must undergo a dangerous trial. Folk justice here ironically exposes social injustice.

9. Irony and Subversion of Folk Morality

Traditional folk tales often reinforce moral values such as female chastity and obedience. However, Karnad subverts these morals by giving Rani social legitimacy without moral punishment. Although Rani's pregnancy is a result of a supernatural relationship, society accepts her as a virtuous wife after the trial. This ironic acceptance questions the rigid moral codes imposed on women.

Karnad uses folk tradition not to glorify old values but to expose their contradictions. The folk tale becomes a mirror reflecting social hypocrisy.

10. Language and Folk Idiom

The language of Naga-Mandala reflects folk simplicity and oral style. Dialogues are direct, symbolic, and often repetitive, resembling spoken storytelling rather than literary prose.

Proverbs, metaphors, and symbolic expressions enhance the folk flavor. This linguistic simplicity allows complex themes to be communicated effectively to a wide audience.

The use of folk idiom also connects the play to rural India, making it culturally rooted while addressing universal themes.

11. Folk Theatre Techniques

Karnad draws from Indian folk theatre traditions such as Yakshagana and Therukoothu. The use of chorus-like narrators, direct address to the audience, minimal stage setting, and symbolic props reflects folk performance styles.

These techniques break the illusion of realism and remind the audience that they are watching a story being enacted. This distancing effect encourages critical thinking rather than emotional absorption.

12. Feminist Interpretation through Folk Narrative

Naga-Mandala can be read as a feminist text that uses folk narrative to give voice to women's experiences. Rani's transformation from a passive wife to a confident woman is central to the play.

The folk tale allows Karnad to explore female sexuality without moral condemnation. Rani gains social power and self-respect, while Appanna is forced to accept her authority. Thus, folklore becomes a tool of empowerment rather than oppression.

13. Relevance of Folk Tales in Modern Drama

Karnad's Naga-Mandala demonstrates that folk tales remain relevant in modern society. Issues such as gender inequality, marital conflict, and emotional neglect are still prevalent.

By using folk material, Karnad bridges the gap between tradition and modernity. The play speaks to contemporary audiences while remaining rooted in Indian culture.

14. Critical Reception of Naga-Mandala

Critics have widely praised Naga-Mandala for its innovative use of folk elements. Scholars have noted Karnad's ability to combine myth, fantasy, and realism seamlessly.

The play has been interpreted from feminist, psychoanalytic, and cultural perspectives. Its continued performance across languages highlights its universal appeal.

15. Conclusion

The use of folk tales in Girish Karnad's Naga-Mandala is central to its thematic depth and dramatic power. Karnad does not merely retell a traditional story but reshapes it to address contemporary concerns related to gender, power, and identity.

Through folk narrative, symbolism, and theatrical techniques, Karnad exposes the contradictions of patriarchal society and highlights the inner life of women. The play demonstrates that folk tales are not outdated relics but dynamic cultural resources capable of expressing modern realities. Naga-Mandala stands as a powerful example of how folklore can be transformed into modern drama, making it both culturally rooted and socially relevant.

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