

From Myth to Contemporaneity : A Study of Gender Identity and Split Personality in Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* and *The Fire and the Rain*

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Abstract

Girish Karnad presents the individual as well as social predicaments, resulting from the dichotomy between instinct and reason, body and mind, male and female psyche in his plays like *Nagamandala* and *The Fire and the Rain*. In Karnad's plays, while the female characters search for a completeness within their partners, the men fail to achieve a harmonious existence of their body and mind. Karnad's plays become aesthetic experiences, which release multiple connotations with their rootedness in human emotions and instinct. *Nagamandala* as well as *The Fire and the Rain* becomes universal, timeless plays, where myth and reality, fact and fiction get fused in order to unravel the complex, discursive demands of contemporary socio-cultural paradigm. The plots of these two plays, *Nagamandala* and *The Fire and the Rain* are drawn from myths and folk tales. Karnad, for whatever the causes may be, derives the plot of most of his plays from pre-existing materials like myths, legends, folklore, history, yet like any great craftsman like Shakespeare, he transforms the raw material into a unique drama of human emotions and feelings. Karnad recreates, adapts and relates these mythic as well as the folkloric tales in order to relate them to the predicament of split personality of modern man. These plays also latently manifest Karnad's concern with the issue of gender identity. Karnad's plays are, thus, not mere imitations of life, but are representations of existential predicament and concretizations of philosophical abstractions.

Keywords- *Identity, Agency, Split Personality, Gender Conflict*

Introduction

Girish Karnad is one of the most significant playwrights of India. He has reproduced Indian culture, myth, philosophy and traditions, His plays become aesthetic experiences, which release multiple connotations with their rootedness in human emotions and instinct. His drama offers a unique aesthetic approach to myths, folklore and story-telling. The plots provide ample scope for a variety of experiments on the stage. *Nagamandala* as well as *The Fire and the Rain* becomes universal, timeless plays, where myth and reality, fact and fiction get fused in order to unravel the complex, discursive demands of contemporary socio-cultural paradigm. The denotative quality of his plays is expressed in the use of myths and history in order to manifest the spirit of contemporaneity. The various states of human condition become Karnad's main thematic concern, and performance becomes the creative motivation of his dramatic vision. The plots of these two plays, *Nagamandala* and *The Fire and the Rain* are drawn from myths and folk tales, yet like any great craftsman like Shakespeare, he transforms the raw material into a unique drama of human emotions and feelings. Karnad's reworking with the episodes from myths and folk tales helps him to communicate the universal experience of split personality in *Nagamandala* and *The Fire and the Rain*. About this issue Karnad himself commented in an interview on receiving the Jnanpith award,

I cannot invent plots; therefore I use myths. I cannot invent stories and hence go to history.... Drama is not for me a means of self-expression. Drama cannot be production of meaning also. The story has an autonomous existence [. . .].

These plays also latently manifest Karnad's concern with the issue of gender identity. Karnad's plays are, thus, not mere imitations of life, but are representations of existential predicament and concretizations of philosophical abstractions. He deploys this twin-facetedness of the folkloric as well as the mythic tradition in order to communicate the aesthetic experiences, which release multiple connotations with their rootedness in human emotions and instinct.

Nagamandala is a folktale transformed into the metaphor of the married woman. It is a Chinese box story with two folktales transformed into one fabric where myth and superstition, fact and fantasy, instinct and reason, the particular and the general blend to produce a drama with universal evocations. *Nagamandala: Play with a Cobra* is, as Karnad says in his note to the play, based on two oral Kannada tales, he had heard from his mentor-friend and well-known poet A.K. Ramanujan, to whom Karnad also dedicates the play. In fact, a comparative reading will reveal that, as with the plots of much Greek drama, the plot of *Nagamandala* is a reworking into the dramatic medium of the "folk-mythologies", whose stories Ramanujan retells. Two plots make up *Nagamandala*. The framing plot of the male playwright and his curse is a re-telling of the story that Ramanujan calls "A Story and a Song", while the plot that deals with the story of Rani is based on

“The Serpent Lover”. Karnad also makes use of myths and folk forms in his plays to exorcise socio-cultural evils. He says in his Introduction to the play, “The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning those values, of making them literally stand on their head” (14). Fusing two folktales into one, it becomes a tale of love, yearnings and psychological manifestations. The play is about a couple and how the wife Rani failing to win her husband Appana's affection, eventually falls in love with the metamorphosed Naga. There is an evident use of magic realism in the portrayal of the character Naga, who serves as the emotional and physical resort for Rani, when her husband is away out of continuous resentment. The character of Naga is borrowed from the concept of King Cobra of Kannada folklore, which can assume human dimensions. Naga has often been interpreted as the manifestation of the repressed urges and the needs of a neglected wife. Rani's predicament is about a life, lived by fiction and half truth. In Nagamandala Karnad not only exposes male chauvinism, the oppression on women, the great injustice done to them by patriarchal culture and men, but also overtly deflates the concept of chastity, that undergirds the patriarchal mythic imagination across religion, language and folktales.

Nagamandala begins with a Prologue, depicting the predicament of the Man, who is caught between a limbo-like situation of sleep and wakefulness, life and death. As the Man says in the Prologue, the audience, like the wedding guest of “The Ancient Mariner” can not but enter into the make-believe world of fantasy, created by the narrator. A “mandala” consists of a triangle. Similarly the zeitgeist of the play is the mandala. The three points of the triangle are Rani, Appanna and Naga, which illustrates the eternal triangle of an adulterous situation presenting the wife, the husband and the lover. In Nagamandala, Naga assumes the form of the husband Appanna during the night and becomes an embodiment of love, passion and concern, unlike Appanna of the daytime who is indifferent, harsh and callous. Appanna, as a typical representative of the patriarchal mindset, is unfaithful to his wife and spends most of his time with his concubine. He comes home only to bathe, eat and impose restrictions on Rani. It is at the behest of Kurudavva and with the hope of changing her husband that Rani is willing to try the love potion. The redness of the extract frightens her and in a moment of confusion she throws the extract upon the anthill. Naga internalises it and immediately falls in love with Rani. Now he takes the form of her husband to approach Rani. Then life starts to grow into a dream for Rani, who undergoes almost a trance-like state, when only instinct works. Even as she suspects Naga, she refuses to wake up to reality. Rani's experience with Naga borders on a dream-like situation. Naga comes in the guise of her husband, but he cannot change what he is. This is brilliantly manifested by the dramatist:

Frogs croaking in pelting rain, tortoises singing soundlessly in the dark, foxes, Crabs, ants, rattlers, sharks, swallows-even the geese! The female begins to smell like wet

earth. And stung by her smell, the king Cobra starts searching for his queen. The tiger bellows for his mate. When the flame-of-forest blossoms into a fountain of red and earth cracks open at the touch of the aerial roots of the bunyan, it moves in the hollow of the cottonwood in the flow of the estuary, the dark Netherlands, within everything that sprouts, grows, stretches, creaks and blooms- everywhere, those who come together, cling, fall apart lazily! It is there and there and there, everywhere. (25)

The passage recalls the myth of union of Heaven and Earth and of the first male and female. It is this law of life that Rani is ignorant of. The above mentioned passage is replete with erotic images. Rani enjoys Naga's company so much that she wants the night to last forever. Naga employs the myth of life to educate her about physicality. Naga as the phallic symbol initiates her into sex. Appanna is here symbolic of the reasonable side of man, while the Naga with all its phallic connotations typifies the primitive instinct of a man. Naga has often been interpreted as the manifestation of the repressed urges and the needs of a neglected wife. Rani's predicament is that she can not attain both of the qualities in the single person. Hence failing to accept the harsh realities of life, she chooses to live her life, by fictions and half truths, ignoring the reality. The predicament of Rani is that she can not gain both of the qualities within the single person

Appanna accuses Rani of infidelity when he comes to know about her pregnancy. Naga ultimately solves the problem and helps her to win not only her husband's love, but also the reverence of the entire village. To the play's explicitly feminist vision, the ironies inherent in Rani's success in the snake-trial are vital. As a test of her chastity, the trial defeats the purpose for which it was devised in the first place. The snake ordeal mocks the classic Hindu mythic chastity test, the test of truth. In the *Ramayana*, Sita comes through the ordeal of fire because she is truly chaste and faithful. In Karnad's play, the woman comes successful through the ordeal of handling a venomous snake only because the snake is her lover and eventually her confession that she has not touched any other male bodies than her husband and the Naga, becomes true. Hence "it is her very infidelity that comes to her aid in proving that she is a faithful wife" (Dharwadker, 444). The solution also puts an end to Naga's love affair with Rani. Now the Naga suffers from the pangs of separation like a human lover. Realizing too well that he could no longer assume Appanna's form and as a snake could not have a human mistress, he decides to end his life so that his lover might live in happiness. Ultimately, in *Nagamandala* Rani realises gradually the distinction between her husband and the snake-lover and gains the knowledge that two men do not love alike :

When her true husband climbed into bed with her, how could she fail to realize it was someone new? Even if she hadn't known earlier? When did the split take place?(60)

The similar predicament of the splitted self and incomplete personality creates the ambience of the triangular love among Vishakha, Parvasu and Yavakri in *The Fire and the Rain*. Here Vishakha, aged about twenty-six, got married to Parvasu against her will. But after her marriage she gradually falls victim to the same predicament of the splitted self of her husband. Parvasu, who is a man of principle, reason and intellect, fails to satisfy Vishakha's need of a complete man as her life-partner. Parvasu uses her body mechanically whenever he likes as an instrument, but fails to satisfy her physical, instinctive demands as well as the need of mental reciprocity. Parvasu uses the body of his wife in order to experiment about something 'spiritual'. About her frustration in marital life Vishakha comments:

Yes, Father was happy. I was married off to Parvasu. I didn't want to, but that didn't matter. . . He used my body, and his own body, like an experimenter, like an explorer. As instruments in a search. Search for what? I never knew. But I knew he knew. Nothing was too shameful, too degrading, even too painful. shame died in me. And I yielded. I let my body be leading me to something. Mystical? Spiritual? (16)

Within the wedlock Vishakha always felt a sense of 'lack', generating out of her sense of physical dissatisfaction as well as mental sterility of love. Body which acts as an agent of the transcendental love of soul, here becomes a means of spiritual exploration of Parvasu. He uses the 'body' of his wife as a commodity of his personal achievement. Physical consummation never becomes an outcome of their mutual love, but a calculated mechanism of Parvasu's experiment to attain a higher life. Through the crevices of Vishakha's frustration in her marital life, Yavakri intrudes into her female interiority as an outlawed lover. Yavakri awaits for four days, like a bird of prey, on the way of Vishakha, who had gone to fetch water for her home. Yavakri lures her gradually through the persuasive, sensual words, that revive her feelings of mental isolation, female humiliation, physical deprivation and insinuate her erotic desire. He confesses that she was the last woman, he came across before entering into penance for acquiring the universal knowledge and for ten years he has not looked at the face of any other woman. Ultimately, in order to convince Vishakha he fervently appeals, "Vishakha, after ten years in solitude, I am hungry for words." (13) At these words, Vishakha's sense of resistance starts to crumble down.

When Vishakha wants to remind him time and again about his rigorous penance and his achievement of the 'universal knowledge' from Indra, Yavakri equates it almost to a sort of fantasy, persued by someone in a mood of playfulness :

Universal knowledge! What a phrase! It makes me laugh now. But do you know it was in order to win some such grandiose prize that I went into the jungle? You put it so simply in that one sentence. So beautifully. You go into the jungle. You perform

austerities in the name of some god. You stand in a circle of fire. The pressure of your austerities forces the god to grant you your wish. And you get ‘Universal knowledge’. Victory! (Pause.) It wasn’t at all like that, you know.(13)

Yavakri, on the contrary, reminds Vishakha, how he was continuously pining for her even after acquiring the ‘universal knowledge’:

[. . .] The day I decided my penance was over I fell down in a dead faint. I don’t know how long I was in that state. It was terrible exhaustion, the pain of sheer relief. And when I opened my eyes, do you know the first thing that I thought of ? Ten years ago I had come to your house to bid you goodbye. And you led me quickly to the jack-fruit grove behind your house. You opened the knot of your blouse, pressed my face to your breasts, then turned and fled. I stood there stunned. The trees were loaded with fruit. Many were ripe and had split open and the rich golden segments poured out. The sweet sick smell of the jack-fruit, the maddening hum of a fly. The smell of your body. Ten years later I opened my eyes and I knew I was hungry for that moment. (14)

Yavakri’s achievement of spiritual knowledge could not satisfy his carnal desire. Hence even at the moment of attaining his spiritual goal, he missed those erotic moments with her beloved. Being surprised at such behaviour of Yavakri, Vishakha exclaims:

I can’t believe it! The whole world may be singing your praises. But you haven’t grown up! These ten years have not made any difference to your teenage fantasies. That’s all gone Yavakri. Indra may be immortal. But ...my breasts hang loose now. (14)

The ‘spiritual knowledge’, given by Indra becomes almost a substitution for the ‘body’ of Vishakha to Yavakri. So he says in a roundabout way : “You and Indra. That’s right. The presiding deities of my life. It’s because of you two that I have avoided women altogether until now” [. . .]. (15)

All of these titillating words of Yavakri re-awakens Vishakha’s sense of frustration from her husband in her marital life and she succumbs to the masculine appeal of Yavakri, that knocks at the threshold of her basic instinct. She wants to get fulfilment of her ‘desire’ within Yavakri, who now appeals to her senses through his instinct as an antithesis of Parvasu, who was emblematic of only reason. Vishakha too aspires to get both the sex and the soul, the instinct and the reason within her single husband, who fails to make the both ends meet. As a result, Vishakha also like Rani in *Nagamandala* or like Padmini in *Hayavadana* has to fulfil her desire for a ‘complete man’ within the ambience of an extra-marital affair. This is the basic predicament of many of the married women

characters in some of the plays of Karnad. No man, in most of the plays of Karnad, is complete within himself. A married person appears to her wife as the splitted self of certain qualities, devoid of so many other qualities, whether it is the case of Parvasu in *The Fire and the Rain* or of Appanna in *Nagamandala* or of Devadatta in *Hayavadana*.

Anticipating Vishakha's frustration in her marital life, Yavakri attempts to enkindle her desire and finally succeeds to entangle her within his trap. When this calculated attempt of Yavakri to emotionally seduce Vishakha is complete, she enchantingly utters:

You are hungry for words. And so am I. So let's talk. Sit down... I live in this hermitage parched and wordless, like a she-devil. And words are like water – precious. I was afraid to bathe. Now I want to drown...(15)

Here Vishakha symbolically manifests her desire to plunge into the sensuality of her erstwhile lover Yavakri. She wants to get a substitute of her husband within her lover. Yet at one moment she even thinks that there is not perhaps much distinction between her lover or husband as both of them, being the product of the same patriarchal mindset, observe woman as nothing but an object, who can satisfy their physical demands. But they totally ignore the fact that even a woman can have her personal 'desire' as well as the need of physicality or sensual 'pleasure', whenever she likes. Here one thing is notable that it seems that Rani ignorantly copulates with her extra-marital lover Naga, while Vishakha does the same thing deliberately. But Karnad here obliquely hints that it is a matter of conjecture whether Rani was ignorant or posed to be ignorant in order to quench her thirst for a potent partner, that was denied to her in the wedlock with Appanna.

Unlike the traditional, subservient, passive Hindu woman Vishakha manifests her sense of pride in the glory of her female 'body'. Here she gains the female 'agency' by having the authority to control her body. Instead of acting in the passive role, here she ventures to use her body as an independent agent to satisfy her 'desire'. Her body becomes an agent of her assertion of her self-identity, and a means to control the 'game of seduction'. Through the language of her 'body' Vishakha wants to give Yavakri the knowledge of life. Hence, out of her sense of self-pride she utters:

I'll give you the knowledge Indra couldn't give
you. My body- it's light with speech now [. . .] (17)

Here her venture to give the knowledge to Yavakri through her 'body' suggests obliquely the knowledge of the complete selfhood, that a woman can only teach a man, who is the victim of split and alienation, in the plays of Karnad.

Both Rani and Vishakha, are oppressed through the claustrophobic dimension of their wedlock. Their female subjectivity as well as female 'agency' are always denied by their husbands,

who act here as the agent of patriarchal dictates of the society. On this form of oppression of the patriarchal mindset, which intends to confine women as an object, Simone de Beauvoir comments in *The Second Sex*:

In woman, on the contrary, there is from the beginning a conflict between her autonomous existence and her objective self (her being-the-other). She is not given the freedom to grasp and discover the world around her . . . she does not dare to affirm herself as subject (307-08).

Rani and Vishakha both ultimately realise that their husbands, as well as their lovers do not differ much from one another. Both of the husbands and the lovers, being incomplete and the same product of the patriarchal society, can not but think women as an object of their 'desire'. Hence in utter frustration Vishakha languishes that : "My husband and you! He left no pore in my body alone. And you – you think a woman is only a pair of half-formed breasts. (16)

When Vishakha ultimately realises that Yavakri had seduced her intentionally in order to take retaliation on her husband and father-in-law, she confesses:

It's my fault. I shouldn't have yielded to you . . . I was so happy this morning you were so good. So warm. I wanted to envelope you in everything I could give . . . Why life is so contrary, Yavakri ? One thinks one has stepped onto a bit of solid ground – a little heaven – and the earth gives way . . .(23-24)

Thus, throughout these plays Karnad problematises the concept of 'identity' as well as the notion of the split personality. Besides, Karnad also highlights the irony that lies between the concept of personal chastity and public reputation as it is manifested through Rani's 'snake ordeal', which eventually proves to be a facade to eyewash the public. Within this dichotomy between the lover and the husband, the instinct and the reason, it is the instinct that seems to win. Thus the male characters, in the plays of Karnad, can utter only in a mood of frustration like Robert Browning's character, Andrea Del Sarto that "And thus we half-men struggle . . .". Karnad presents in these plays the individual as well as the universal predicaments highlighting the gulf between instinct and reason. So the beloved's aspiration for an amalgamation of both of the qualities within her partner remains unfulfilled for ever like John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn", where Keats too vainly seeks to unite the warmth of life and the permanence of art.

Within the ambit of these plays Karnad highlights the oppressive as well as the claustrophobic notions of the Indian society, where an Indian woman has to justify always her chastity in the public in spite of her husband's open infidelity. Through these plays Karnad attacks the traditional, patriarchal conspiracy to confine the female self within the circumference of the claustrophobic notions of femininity .The need to prove fidelity is imposed here on only the married women, while

their husbands are not even questioned about their extramarital affairs. Their female subjectivity is always denied. Their lives are guided by the decision of the 'other'. Thus, they become objects to the will of the patriarchs of the society. Due this process of 'othering' of the female self, Gayatri Spivak addresses the humiliated female figure as the 'gendered subaltern'. In the essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak writes that women because of the "ideological construction of gender" (271) within patriarchy, are replaced from the socio-cultural sites as 'subjects'. Spivak argues that "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (287). On the female subjugation by the patriarchy she further writes,

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is double effaced. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labour, for both of which there is 'evidence'.

It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. (287)

So the figure of woman, whether in social atmosphere or in literary discourse, is ultimately erased and Spivak reflects on this issue,

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman'... (306)

In this essay Spivak compares these 'gendered subaltern' to a medium like 'palimpsest', written over with the text of 'other' desires. Thus woman is formulated as the passive self, devoid of subjectivity. Same thing happens to the life of Rani and Vishakha. But Karnad here not only attacks the traditional notions of the gender stereotypes, but also tries to manifest the vision of a true female self, having the authority over her own 'body' as well as mind. Hence even with the traditional theme of justification of a woman's chastity within the folkloric structure, Karnad coalesces the feminist ideology of a woman's need of assertion of her female self as well as the 'body'. Rani and Vishakha, who were gradually losing their identity as well as their subjectivity being turned into an object of patriarchal desire, start to regain their lost identity, when they step out of their 'home'. Agency, Karnad suggests in *Nagamandala* and *The Fire and the Rain*, like the agency in women's tales in general, is intimately connected with their being able to control their 'body' at their own pleasure, and to tell their own stories from their point-of-view. In many ways, *Nagamandala* and *The Fire and the Rain* are feminist plays, and within the rubric of folk-mythology they fuse the oft-used themes of fate, chastity, women's social role and the feminist perspectives of a woman's desire of 'jouissance' within the matrix of her wedlock, and her aspiration for a sense of completeness within herself as well as within the splitted self of her counterpart.

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