

The Use of Myth in Selected Plays by Girish Karnad Ishraq Abd El Aziz Mohammad Marghany

Abstract

This paper focuses on Girish Karnad's use of myth in his plays to express the bad conditions that women suffer from in the patriarchal society. It examines the role of Karnad in modernizing the mythological tales of India to express the modern situation of women. The paper clarifies the postcolonial feminist approach which is adopted by Karnad in his plays. *Nagamandala* is selected to show the use of myth the use of the postcolonial approach in Karnad's work.

Keywords: Myth, Postcolonial, Feminism, Girish Karnad, Patriarchal society

, Indian drama, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*

The beginning of Indian drama can be traced back to the ancient rituals and seasonal festivities of the Vedic Aryans. Later, different events from the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* were picked up and enacted out in public places. The origin of the Sanskrit dramas dates back to 1000 B.C. (Nagane) Contemporary Indian drama is experimental and innovative in terms of thematic and technical qualities. It is not progeny of any specific tradition but it has laid the foundation of a different tradition in the history of world drama representing history, legend, myth, religion and folk-lore with context to contemporary socio-political issues. (Bharata7)

Indian English literature is a part of postcolonial literature. "Literature written in English in former British colonies" (Cuddon 97) Indian English literature from 1930s to the end of the 20th century can be divided into two phases: modernist and postmodernist. The former begins with Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) and the latter begins with Salman Rushdi's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Nissim Ezekiel's *Latter Day Psalms* (1982) (Boehmer 107). Indian English literature transcends the local and transforms it into global, and that is the hallmark of good literature. A prominent writer of this approach is Girish Raghunath Karnad(1938-2019). He has discovered and reinvented diverse patterns of drama from Indian and world literature. He has reached a maturity worthy of being compared to Peter Brooks, Jerzy Grotowsky, Eugenio Barba, Philip Zarrili in the West, Suzuki Tadashi in Japan, and Wole Soyinka in Nigeria (Dhanavel 3)

Postcolonialism simply indicates a form of critical practice, a way of thinking about colonization and its apparatuses and consequences"(Loomba 31). Postcolonial theory developed from the work of the colonial discourse Palestinian theorist Edward Said (particularly his books "*Orientalism*"(1978) and "*Culture and Imperialism*"(1993). Said is the

founder of postcolonialism. He analyses the way that Europe, in the nineteenth century, represented many of the cultures with which it came into contact through imperial expansion (Jackson and Johns 98). Postcolonial study is developed to create another branch called postcolonial feminism, which is "a path of convergent evolution. (Ashcroft et al 11) The postcolonial theory gives emphasis to the weak and neglected like the woman.

Feminism has no single definition; it is a collective term which has various critical perspectives and historical backgrounds. Feminist theory is a consequence of feminist movement. It aims to understand the gender inequality and socio-cultural role of women. Hence, the existence of profusion in feminism paved the way for various distinctive theories and movements such as Psychoanalytical feminism, Postcolonial feminism, Marxist feminism and Black feminism. (Lewis and Mills 20) Postcolonial feminism makes radical contributions to literary studies. It helps to shape feminism from universality to a movement of individual experiences and struggles. Main stream of this criticism examine the oppression of women experience in postcolonial countries. (Morton 57)

The main concern of this critical approach is studying the status of woman in the post colonized countries and expecting a brighter future for the non-western woman. Karnad depicts this picture in his plays tending to stimulate Indian woman to rebel against the restrictions of oppressive society.

Postcolonial feministic theory tries to put the third world woman in the mainstream of the Western woman. Postcolonial writers try to liberate the woman in the third world and make her similar to her counterparts in the developed modern world. Karnad does his best in this connection, since he draws a modern western heroine in her ideas and Indian in her appearance, he takes the illuminated side in the western culture and plants it in the Eastern woman's mind and character.

In postcolonial fiction in the twentieth century, myth is used as a framing device that contains and interrogates historical event, thereby functioning as a form of alternative history (Rice37). Rice's comment on the usage of myth in literature asserts the importance of myth in postcolonial fiction. Myth is an elementary constituent of expression in the postcolonial literature, which is concerned with nationalism and retelling history. Myth is considered a supporting factor of nationalism and history. Myth is an attribute of postcolonial literature. Since postcolonial literature stresses the national character of the country and its original heritage. Moreover, postcolonial literature tends to the revival of folktales and mythological stories.

Karnad`s theatre does not register the memory of colonialism or India`s struggle for freedom. Nonetheless, he reveals the way in which Indian theatre tries to put forward to disable impact of colonial acculturation on Indian creativity after independence. According to Barker:"it was a period when the concept of art itself was a bequest of a European episteme". (355) He suggests that through only a selective rejection of European referents that the concept could be inserted in India as his own naturalized inheritance. Karnad follows the same route; he believes that Indian art should be unique by itself and clearly separate from the Western art.

Karnad`s education in his early life has affected his character and career later. Karnad is influenced by the Indian culture and education, since he is exposed to them from the beginning of his life. His parents have their influence in forming his tendencies. This appears in giving him the chance to accompany them to the displays of the roundabout bands in India, which gives Karnad the stimulus to love the Indian theatre and be an admirer of the *Yakshagana* which means "the folkloric Indian theatre" in English. (cuddon 211) Karnad states that in the following words:"At seven or eight in the evening it felt like midnight, so we read or told stories, fairytales, and mythology. Mothers recounted stories...I have never bothered what tale to invent, I dip into my mind, into our culture." (Dhanavel 4) In the previous statement Girish Karnad demonstrates the nature of the folkloric story and imagination. The story is told and retold by women in the Indian community. It is usually "recounted" by women and usually women. This point denotes to the strong link between women and folklore in India. Karnad asserts the role of his imagination in adding to the main story.

Karnad has headed to England in his youth to broaden his horizons. He has looked forward to reaching the standard of such writers as George Bernard Shaw and John Osborn. His aspirations have not affected his nationality. This is obvious in his frustrating words: "I was hoping to draw some inspiration from people like (John) Osborn... but all those plays were quite terrible. Plays were held indoors, as if the British were afraid of the rain"(Gupta 22). In those words a great allusion of Karnad`s tendency towards his roots in India is felt. His concept about the theatre in England (the colonizer) reflects a deep nationhood in the Indian playwright. This nationhood makes his work distinguished and gives a great appeal in the world of modern drama. The most significant contribution Karnad has made to Indian drama is his attempt to retrieve the cultural and mythological rich traditions of Indian past. India has its own culture and heritage. It is a multi-cultural nation; Karnad finds a fertile land for his plays in the traditions and folklore of ancient India. He combines the ancient with the modern to create a distinguished character of Karnad`s India.

Karnad has written many dramatic works. He has written *Yayti* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1971), *Angumalinga* (1977), *Hittinia Hunja* (1980), *Naga Mandala* (1988), *Tale Danda* (1990) and *AgniMattu Male* (1995). He has been widely acclaimed by both the theatre and drama critics for certain aspects of his plays: plot construction, characterization, music, spectacles, symbolism, use of myth and folktales, reinterpretation of history, in addition to projection of contemporary social and psychological problems. (Serinvasa 34)

Kosta describes Karnad as "an intellectual playwright whose work has the tone and expression of a great drama. He has the genius and the power to transform any situation into aesthetic experience ". (108) With his logic, he develops each scene. He inspires and excites everyone with his presentation of possibilities especially in the end. Karnad follows the ancient Sanskrit traditions. He has succeeded in his attempt to grasp the eyes of the world to the Indian theatre. Karnad has proved that the past is relevant to the present in framing the future of other nation.

Karnad uses myth to express the mystery and the indirect notions. Karnad states that "The myth enabled me to articulate to myself a set of values that I had been unable to arrive at rationally" (Karnad, *Three Plays* 5) Karnad uses folklore and myth as a frame to his work in order to convey a definite message. This cannot be delivered directly, thus he uses myth to express it freely through imagination. Karnad seems to be torn between his western education and his affinity towards his religion and his mythology.

Nagamandala is one of Karnad's finest plays. It was written in 1988. It was first published in Kannada and then translated into English. *Nagamandala* has been translated into English by Karnad himself. This play brought Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award of 1989 for Karnad in the category of the most creative work of the year. It was first staged at the University of Chicago. *Nagamandala* is enacted at Leipzig and Berlin in the Festival of India in Germany in 1992. The whole drama is enacted in folk theatre form with all the usual devices of magic and mime (Dodya 15). *Nagamandala* is divided into a prologue and two acts. It focuses on the theme of subalternization of women in the Indian society. It tells the story of an ordinary marriage inside a patriarchal society. A young imaginative wife is shocked with the hard nature of her husband. He treats her as a servant in her own house. Her story refers to many themes and tackles a number of issues within the Indian society.

The setting of the play is the inner sanctum of a ruined temple of an unknown deity. The time is the night and the Sautradhar, it is an Indian term that means (narrator) in English, in the prologue is a man who addresses the audience and tells them about his predicaments. (Abrams 275) He is

cursed for being a playwright and storyteller. A mendicant has advised him that if he could keep awake at least one whole night he would not die. That day is the last day of the month, and he is keeping himself awake in order to overcome the curse of death. After some time, he hears some voices and then sees some flames. Karnad says that, in some remote villages, people have a myth about the ability of flames to speak. (*Nagamandala*, Act One 6) The flames talk to each other in a female voice. Flames talk; reveal what is going on inside the houses. They are compared to women to show a side of the female character, since they are interested in tales and gossip like the community of women. The fourth new flame appears with a new and different story, a story about a story.

Karnad embodies the story as a woman in a sari; this sari refers to the pure Indian flavor of his play. Karnad is highly related to his roots and he draws an Indian sketch of his India with western colours and Indian taste. When Story reaches the theatre the flames offer to pass her,. Then the Man comes forward and offers to repeat the story in the form of his new play. Story accepts the offer and starts narrating the story of Rani who marries Appana (any man). Appana treats Rani cruelly, locking her up in his house and visiting the house only to have his bath and lunch. "The lock signifies the whole patriarchal discourse of chastity which is used to confine women."
(Babu 56)

The play tells the story of the newly married Rani who is treated badly by her husband, Appana while he continues to visit his concubine. Kurdava- old blind woman- tries to help Rani by giving her a potion which, she says, will cause Appana to fall in love with her. Rani gives up the plan at the last moment and pours the potion on an anthill which happens to be the dwelling place of a King Cobra. The Cobra then falls in love with Rani. The Naga enters the house at night in the appearance of Appana. Rani is astonished at the change in Appana`s treatment with her at nights anddays. Time passes and Rani is pregnant and the matters begin to be complicated. As soon as Appana knows about her pregnancy, he informs the elders of the village so that they may determine her guilt or innocence since Appana has never touched Rani. Rani proves her innocence by undertaking the snake Ordeal, that is, by holding the King Cobra. The Cobra does not bite Rani, and Rani is considered a goddess. Appana is obliged to accept her as his wife and the child as his own.

The play grabs the attention of the audience from the title. The title of the play *Nagamadala* is an allusive one. *Nagamandala* is a combination of two words: Naga is an Indian word which means a snake or cobra in English and

the other word is Mandala an Indian word that means the pictorial drawing, or dancing in English. The overall meaning is playing with Cobra.(Abram 167) "Nagamandala" is an elaborate and spectacular ritual of serpent worship at present found in India, especially in Mangalore and Udupi districts".(Chakraborty206) Karnad shows the postcolonial effect via the title of the play which takes the audience to the roots of the Indian culture and heritage. The Naga of Indian mythology is not really the snake in general, but the cobra which is raised to the rank of a divine being. It is characterized by its hood which is prevalent merit in many myths. (Thury120) There is a notion about the remedy of the snake bites that is "like cures like".(Thury123) In other words, the cure of the snake bite is in the snake itself. This idea is utilized by Karnad, when he makes a double faced character of Appana(the husband and versus lover), the main cause of Rani`s hurt has been done by Appana and cured by Naga who assumes the appearance of Appana. It is a characteristic of the postcolonial approach. Since, Karnad inserts symbolic notions from the Indian culture within his work.

Rani, the heroine of the play, spills the magical potion in the anthill and king Cobra eats it. The anthill is the favorite haunt of the cobra. In the Indian mythology, the anthill is the visible entrance to the mysterious world of serpents which is called " palatal rastals".This Indian Sanskrit word means "far beneath the human world" in English.(Wilkins 80) The anthill in the play is the point in which the incidents of the play and Rani`s life take a new turn.

Appana does not pay attention to the suffering of his wife. Rani depicts the fear of the woman of loneliness and alignment. Like many oriental wives, her husband is her whole world. She lives with a strange man who" locks "and mistreats her. P. Dhanavel comments on this misery," She is treated not even like a maid servant. She is locked in the house like a prisoner. "(41).Appanna does not pay attention to Rani`s demands." She runs to the door, pushes it, finds it locked, peers out of the barred window. He is gone."(Naga Act One 7)Karnad denotes the bad side of the man controle over woman and it is a trait of the postcolonial feministic approach.

The Indian patriarchal society uses woman and affects her thoughts and concepts about herself. She is convinced that she must carry out this hard work and obey the orders issued from men without arguing or objecting. She is obsessed by the notion of being obedient daughter, faithful wife and devoted mother without paying any consideration to her desires or dreams. Karnad depicts the situation of every wife in India embodied in the character of Rani. The words of Appana demonstrates woman`s degradation in the patriarchal society.

APPANA. Look, I don`t like idle chatter. Don`t question me. Do as you are told, you understand? (Finishes his meal, gets up) I`ll be back tomorrow for lunch. (Nagamandala, Act One 7)

Appana's behavior shocks Rani and her dreams of a blissful married life are shattered. Her mind falls under a great pressure that she starts to suffer from hallucinations and day dreams. She begins to dream of a rescuer who would free her from the clutches of her demon husband:

RANI. I am so frightened at night. I can't sleep a wink. At home, I sleep between Father and Mother. But here alone ... Will you please send word to my parents that I am like this here. Will you ask them to free me (and take me home? *Nagamandala*, Act One 11)

The usage of hallucination of Rani's mind here is a means to include imagination in the play. Imagination is an element of the mythological writing. Karnad uses hallucinations to give Rani an outlet of her stressful situation. She imagines herself in an imaginary world where an eagle comes to save her from the demons. Rani dreams with freedom like any colonized and subalternated country.

APPANA. Well, then I'll be back tomorrow at noon. Keep my lunch ready. I shall eat and go.

RANI. Listen_ Please. (She does not know what is happening, stands perplexed. She cannot even weep. She goes and sits in a corner of her room talks to herself indistinctly. Her words become distinct as the lights dim. It is night). (Naga, Act One 8)

Karnad explains the physical colonization and its impacts on the mentality of the human souls. Rani here is a victim of the injustice and oppression of the patriarchal society, a victim of the man who tries hard to subdue her and to make her inferior to him.

The patriarchal society has also affected the woman. She gets used to be a servant and a cheap worker. This idea has its deep root in the psych of the women like Rani who cannot protest. Rani submits and needs some kind of simulation to urge her to rebel. Karnad creates the character of Nag to stimulate Rani to live as a human being, not as a slave. That is a dimension of the postcolonial feministic theory. Rani is surprised when Appana comes at night, since she is used to his visit only at lunch. She becomes more surprised on the way he deals with her. She asks him if he wants anything:

RANI. But when did you come? Shall I serve the food?

NAGA. {laughs} Food? At midnight?

RANI. Then something else. Perhaps... (*Nagamandala*, Act One 39)

The incidents of the play take a new turn. Naga comes to Rani at night in the appearance of her husband. Naga makes love with Rani and treats her kindly. Rani's life changes and she feels astonished with the strange attitude of Appana. He is cruel in the day and kind at night. The incident reaches its climax when Appana knows the pregnancy of Rani. A new stage begins in

the play; it is the revolution of Rani, who rebels as a mother for the right of her child.

RANI. 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. I am not a parrot.
(*Nagamandala*, Act Two 54)

Karnad uses the technique of shape shifting to change the form of Naga into the form of Appanna. Karnad has adopted this style of changing form from the ancient mythological stories and folktales. This is a mark of the postcolonial approach which characterizes Karnad's works. Rani gets confused on observing the dual nature of Appanna. She experiences two extremely different attitudes of her husband, who behaves in an arrogant way during the day at lunch time, and as a loving and caring husband at night.

RANI. You talk so nicely at night. But during the day I only have to open my mouth and you hiss like a stupid snake. (Naga laughs). It is all very well for you to laugh. I feel like crying. (*Nagamandala*, Act Two 41)

This technique supports Karnad in displaying his point of the ill-treatment which woman suffers in the transitional phase in India, after colonization.

In the Indian cultural context, especially in Kundalini-Yoga, the snake is the symbol of vital energy, or the energy of the cosmos. Mukherjee says, "The Sanscrit word Kundalini means coiled up. The coiled Kundalini is the female energy existing in latent form, not only in every human being but in every atom of the universe"(9). The initial state of this power is described in this way in the *Yoga Kundalini Upanishad*, "The divine power, Kundalini shines, like the stem of a young lotus; like a snake, coiled around upon herself, she holds her tail in her mouth and lies resting half asleep at the base of the body"(Mukherjee 10).

This vital energy of the cobra appears in Rani. When she contacts the king cobra she starts a new life, a real vital matrimonial life. Her satisfactory emotional relationship with the Cobra leads to awakening her emotions and her mind. Cobra causes an essential development in the incidents of the play and progress in the matrimonial life of Rani, and that is the core of the role of the Cobra. Rani loves the Cobra as he is a human being. This mythological love story is not weird of the Indian mythology. The idea of love between snake and human is existent in the Indian mythology. The element of mythology is a prevailing characteristic of the postcolonial approach.

The snake in the play refers to the matrimonial life. In India, there is a belief that the snake is believed to be a symbol of fertility and the givers of rain (Rangan 180). This notion is asserted by the pregnancy of Rani, because Naga is the real father of the child. Naga gives Rani a child and happiness in her matrimonial life.

NAGA. Why should I not take a look? I have given her everything her husband, her child, her home, even her maid. She must be happy. But I haven't seen her... It is night. She will be asleep. This is the right time to visit her, the familiar road, at familiar hours.
(*Nagamandala*, Act Two 61)

Karnad explains the difference between the fault of the man and the woman in the patriarchal society. The patriarchal society does not apply the same verdict. It is a prominent characteristic of the patriarchal society which Karnad highlights in the play. Appana does not suffer any kind of punishment. Yet, Rani is accused of adultery and treason when he knows her pregnancy. The patriarchal society is oppressive towards woman: what it sees as love and desire for man, it sees as adultery and crime for woman. It is considered a humiliation for woman and it is an embodiment of the postcolonial society.

NAGA. I am afraid it will have to bite you. What you think is not of any consequence. It must be the truth.(Anguished) I can't help it, Rani. That's how it always will be Rani.(Naga, Act Two 55)

Karnad uses the dialogue and discourse in a distinguished way. He succeeds in saving Rani from shame and killing with only words. He is genius in portraying the situation and solving the problem. The scene of this trial assures the creativity and skill of Karnad in writing the dialogue:

RANI. Since coming to this village, I have held by this hand, only two APPANA (triumphantly). There. She admits it. Two, she says two! Who are they?

RANI. My husband and...

APPANA. And say it, who else?

RANI. And this cobra. (Suddenly words pour out) Yet, my husband and this king Cobra. Except for these two, 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.
(*Nagamandala* Act Two 58)

Mythology and belief in the power of divinity appears in the words of the Elders of the village. They demonstrate the strong existence of the mythological thinking in the Indian society. They represent the thinking of the patriarchal society. They decide that Rani is a "goddess incarnate" which means that the soul of a goddess lives in the body of Rani, and that is a widespread belief in India that good people are incarnation of gods or noble people. The elders reach to this decision after seeing Rani stands with the king cobra spreading his hood on her shoulders. The cobra does not bite her and it deals with her as his princess. When the elders see Rani survives after the snake ordeal and the cobra is intimate to her, they decide that she is a goddess and not an ordinary human being. Moreover, the elders order

Appanna to take care of Rani and to serve her. And here appears the irony which shifts the roles between Rani and Appanna at the end of the play.

ELDER1. Appanna, 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. You were the chosen instrument for revealing her divinity.

ELDER 2: Spend the rest of your life in her service. You need merit in ten past lives to be chosen for such holy duty (*Nagamandala* Act Two 59)

But, is Appanna really convinced that Rani is chaste? These doubts of Appanna make the Story alter the ending of the play. The first ending expresses what one expects in a folktale. Rani, after succeeding in demonstrating her innocence, is considered a goddess. Appanna automatically considers her his wife and forget his concubine, who voluntarily becomes Rani's servant. The first ending represents the classical end of an ordinary folktale. Naga commits suicide after giving Rani everything she desires in life: love, affection and caring. He achieves the equality between Rani and her husband and gives her happiness in matrimonial life. Obviously, Appanna knows that the child is not his, since he has never had any sexual relation with Rani. Though Appanna has his doubts, he can do nothing. As Dhanavel says, "Appanna begins to suspect his own sanity"(91), when the elders convince him that Rani is a Divi" a goddess"(Abrams 43).

APPANA. What am I to do? Is the whole world against me? Have I sinned so much that even nature should laugh at me...Let any miracle declare her a goddess. But I know!(*Nagamadala*, Act Two 60)

The second ending takes into account both Appanna's suspicions and the state of mind of the Cobra who, after recognizing his love for Rani in another soliloquy, is ready to sacrifice himself, He hides himself in Rani's hair and dies. The Flames, this time, do not seem to be pleased with an ending which involves the death of the Cobra. Therefore, Rani and Appanna reappear on the stage to perform a third ending, which at first seems to be repetition of the second one. However, when the Cobra falls from Rani's hair, he is alive. Appanna immediately thinks about killing the snake, but Rani hides him in her tresses. (Collellmir) The play ends with Rani's words:" This hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss. Live in there happily, forever."(*Nagamandala* ,Act Two 64). This open ending gives flexibility to the play and diversity of opinions in the society.

Karnad is impressed by the Indian drama in its traditional form. He tends to use story telling techniques and the simple rules of folktales in order to make his works unique and distinguished. He follows the footsteps of his ancestors in writing but with some western innovations. Karnad hints at the

element of happy end which is employed in the classical Indian drama, and in the same time he follows Ibsen in achieving a distance effect from the audience.

Conclusion

Myth and history in the hands of Karnad are not just instruments to visit the past, but are also used to contemplate the possibilities which the future seems to hold. (Latif) According to Karnad, "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 heads" (Karnad, *Three Plays 2*).

Karnad develops the characters of the mythological context into new modern ones. He gives the women the chance to express their feelings and desires without fearing of the patriarchal society in which they live. They are ultimately subordinated by men in the Indian patriarchal community. Karnad gives vividness to the ancient mythological stories. He creates modern characters and modern situations to cope with the modern society. Karnad gives his heroines a voice to defend themselves against the oppression of the patriarchal society. Karnad's heroines seem to be modern in thinking and behaving. Karnad succeeds in Indianizing his works and, at the same time, presenting a modern image of the Indian female character. His works defy the western culture and employ it for his benefit.

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