

Mythical Structure in Girish Karnad's *Nāga-Mandala*

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Abstract

Girish Karnad's play *Nāga-Mandala* is consciously anchored in the ancient theory and tradition of Indian theatre. The play thus reflects Karnad's respect for the technical elements of theatrical art and also for the Indian tradition of storytelling, even though he innovates and experiments by sharing twentieth century views. In *Nāga-Mandala*, the author brings his drama into line with the changes occurring in Indian society and mentality. This article analyzes his technique of using different narrative levels and shows how in *Nāga-Mandala* the superimposed stories lead to an exemplification of his vision of theatre as a unifying, total experience. It is shown how the overall structure of the interrelated stories and plots, the triangular relationships, and the triple ending can be visualized graphically as a mandala. The article ends by focusing on and discussing the three endings of the play, which have been the cause of surprise and controversy. It concludes that, though the last ending is not within the orthodoxy of Indian epic texts, the play must be studied and interpreted not only by keeping elements of Hindu philosophy as points of reference, but also by taking into account the cultural context of the Indian woman of today who seeks to fulfil her needs and aspirations.

Girish Karnad has emerged as the most significant playwright of post-independence Indian literature, according to the Indian critic P. Dhanavel (2000: 11).¹ This critic emphasizes Karnad's humanism, derived mainly from his profound concern for the "oppressed" and the "downtrodden", his compulsive return to and reinterpretation of the mythical past and oral tradition, and his "determined demystification of the dominant beliefs and practices" (2000: 16). Other Indian critics, in their analysis of contemporary Indian theatre, focus on its ambivalent relationship both to its classical and colonial past, and to the contemporary problems of Indian society. Aparna Dharwadker specifies that Karnad "employs traditional Indian narrative materials and modes of performance successfully to create a radically modern urban theatre" (in Karnad 1995: 355).² Indeed, Karnad has felt challenged by the tension that exists nowadays between these two realities in India, the traditional and the modern, and has thrived in developing a credible style of social realism.

Karnad shows a great interest in the theatre as representation as well as in the incorporation of stories which come from popular wisdom. His interest in storytelling contributes to the success of his plays in Indian villages, as he proudly admits (Karnad 1995: 368). Karnad looks for subjects in traditional Indian folklore, is attentive to the innovations brought about by the European playwrights of the first half of the twentieth century, and uses magical-surrealistic conventions to delve into the situation of the

Indian men and women of today, consciously giving expression to the concerns of people.³

Speaking of his own work, in the introduction to *Three Plays: Nāga-Mandala, Hayavadana, Tughlaq*, the playwright tells us how the cultural tensions which remained dissembled up to the moment of India's independence visibly surfaced afterwards and required authors to deal with those tensions openly (1999: 3).⁴ In each of his plays the tension caused by the drama's major conflict progressively disappears, and in the case of *Nāga-Mandala* different levels of knowledge are superimposed and different theatrical techniques are used, which permit us to discover, or at least surmise, the possibility of transcending the conflict to achieve wholeness.

Karnad says that to create his plays he holds up a mirror in which the present society can be reflected. However, he also incorporates elements of the collective tradition of storytelling (in Mendoca 2003: 4). As he explains in the Introduction to *Three Plays*:

The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values, of making them literally stand on their head. The various conventions—the chorus, the masks, the seemingly unrelated comic episodes, the mixing of human and nonhuman worlds—permit the simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view, of alternative attitudes to the central problem. (1999: 14)

As a playwright, he thus combines conventional and subversive modes, as is clear in *Nāga-Mandala*.⁵ This play is labelled as “story theatre”, that is, theatre whose action is based on folk stories. Karnad found his source of inspiration for this play in stories that he heard from the poet and academic A.K. Ramanujan. Karnad explains that this type of story is told by women while they feed children in the kitchen, but that very often these stories serve as a parallel system of communication among the women in the family (Nāga: 16-17). Consequently, the purpose of this analysis is to discover the meaning conveyed by the protagonist of the story and to study the way in which the author structures the play and presents and solves the conflicts. I then propose to show that the folk stories reveal the perception a woman can have of her own reality and that, in this sense, these stories counterbalance the classical texts and serve as means of escaping the orthodoxy of Indian epic stories.

Focusing on the four different stories which make up the play *Nāga-Mandala*, we see that they are on four narrative levels. The frame story contains three other stories, each one of them inside the previous story. On the first narrative level, the frame story tells of an Author whose plays were so boring that the audience often went to sleep. For this “crime” the Author is condemned to death unless he manages to remain awake for one entire night before the end of that month. The night of this theatrical performance is precisely his last chance. We hear his repeated laments: “I may be dead within the next few hours” (Nāga: 22).

The second and third narrative levels contain magical elements. The second is formed by the gossip-type tales that a group of personified flames tell each other when they gather at night, after their work has ended. The Flames choose to go to the same ruined temple where the Author is bewailing his plight. When he sees them arrive, he hides behind a column from where he closely follows their stories. On the third narrative level, there is the tale told by one of the Flames who wants to be forgiven for

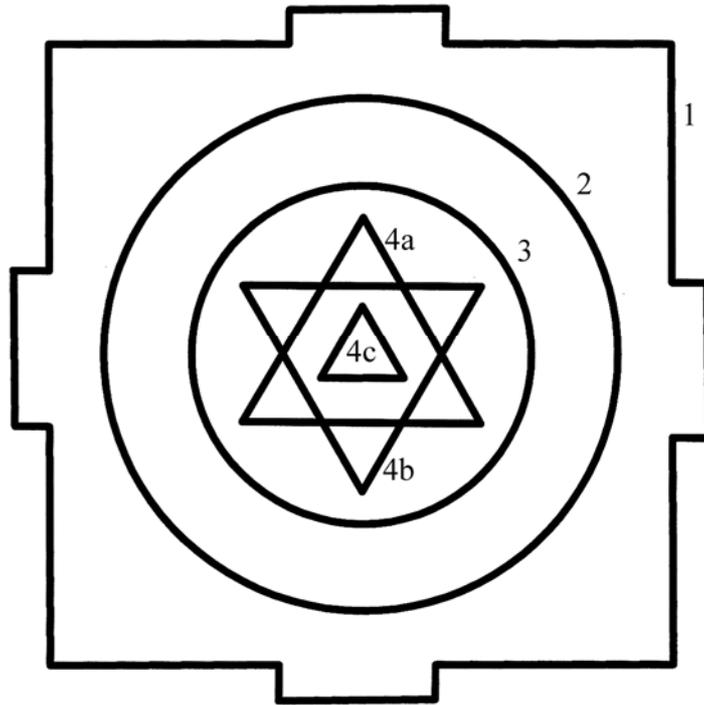
arriving late. Her singularised tale is about a woman who knew a beautiful story but refused to tell it and share it with other people. One day, that story, taking advantage of the fact that the woman was sleeping with her mouth open, escapes and is transformed into a young lady. And the song that accompanies it turns into her beautiful sari. The Story thus personified on the fourth narrative level relates the life of Rani, the main character of *Nāga-Mandala*. The need for the story to escape illustrates the paradoxical nature of oral tradition, according to Karnad. Stories are autonomous and independent of the person who tells them, although they live by being told and shared (Nāga: 17).

The moment when the main story, Rani's, begins is interestingly complex from the point of view of structure, because there is interaction between the narrator of this story, the personified Story, and the narrators of the previous stories, the unfortunate Author and the Flames. The Author-narrator of the first level, who has been listening to the second and third narrative levels, establishes a dialogue with the Story-narrator of the third level and he suggests a name for the main masculine character in the central story, Appana, which means "any man". Furthermore, they reach an agreement by which the Author promises to retell the story, thus keeping it alive, if it is interesting enough to keep him awake for the whole night, which would amount to saving his life.

The plot of this central story, Rani's story, can be summarized as follows: young Rani, recently married to Appana, is locked inside the house by her husband. He treats her as if she were a mere servant, and meanwhile he keeps and uses a concubine. An old blind woman, who is always carried around by her son Kappana, tries to help Rani by giving her a potion which, she says, will cause Appana to fall in love with her. Rani gives up that plan at the last moment, however, and pours the potion on the ant hill which happens to be the dwelling place of a King Cobra. The Cobra (a Nāga) then falls in love with Rani.⁶ He enters the house through the drain in the bathroom at night and once inside takes on the appearance of Appana, the husband. Despite the disorientation and wonder that this new situation causes in Rani, their relationship is fruitful and results in Rani getting pregnant. As soon as Appana discovers her pregnancy, he informs the elders of the village in order that they may determine her guilt or innocence, since he and she had never had sexual intercourse. Rani proves her "innocence" by undertaking the Snake Ordeal, that is, by holding the King Cobra in her hand. Surprisingly, the Cobra, instead of biting her, "slides up her shoulder and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head" (Nāga: 58). The onlookers are awestruck, Rani is considered a goddess, and Appana can do nothing but accept her as his wife.

The characters of this main story, which, as mentioned above, develops on a fourth narrative level, appear in two groups of three interrelated individuals that can be visualized geometrically as two intertwined triangles: one formed by the three protagonists, Rani-Appana-Nāga, and the other by Rani, Kurudavva (the old blind woman), and her son Kappana. In Hindu tradition the intersection of two triangles, one pointing upwards and another one pointing downwards, indicates the union of the male and female principles, that is, the union between Shiva (the Supreme Consciousness) and Shakti (the Creative Force). Finally, a third triangle can be visualized, inside the other two, to represent the three endings that the play offers.

Furthermore, by taking into account the setting and structure of the play as well as the different narrative levels and the symbolism in each one of the stories, we can comprehend the whole play as a complete mandala in graphic form. A mandala, we remember, imposes order over chaos and leads, by means of concentric geometric figures, to a centre and resolution (Cirlot 1962: 192).



Graphic representation of the play Nāga-Mandala

- 1.- Square. Base of the ruined temple
- 2.- First circle. Ring of the Flames
- 3.- Second circle. Acoustic wave of the song
- 4a.- Upward triangle: Kurudavva-Rani-Appana
- 4b.- Downward triangle: Appana-Rani-Cobra
- 4c.- Inner triangle: The triple ending of the play

This graphic mandala represents the four different narrative levels of the play, starting from the outside. The outer square represents the base of the ruined temple. The first circle stands for the Flames of the second narrative level who form a “circle of fire”. In that circle, there is another one that represents the acoustic wave of the song, materialized in a sari wrapped around the beautiful woman who is the personification of the Story of the third narrative level. Finally, in the centre we see the three triangles previously described. The square, the circles, and the triangles are geometric figures which complement each other and lead to the required balance of the centrifugal and centripetal forces of a mandala. Furthermore, if we imagine this mandala as three-dimensional, then we can see that, as the performance progresses, Karnad is symbolically reconstructing the ruined Indian temple.

The sacred level (the temple) and the artistic level (the theatre) are once more identified, following the Hindu tradition. The Indian theatre has a divine origin according to the *Natya Shastra*, one of the earliest treatises on theatre in the world.⁷ There it is said that it was Brahma who wrote the fifth *Veda*, *Natyaveda*, or sacred book of dramatic art.⁸ The *Natya Shastra* also makes explicit that the drama contains the three worlds (the celestial, the terrestrial, and the infernal) and thus integrates the supernatural, the human, and the subhuman. The mandala evokes the complexity of the cosmos and interweaves the three worlds, just as the theatre does.

Nāga-Mandala is unconventional in that it offers three endings. The question may persist as to whether this decision responds to differences in points of view, or whether it reflects a more serious aim or purpose planned by Karnad from the beginning. In this connection, Shubhangi S. Raykar has called attention to Karnad’s conscientiousness. He says, “Usually the idea of a play incubates in his mind for a long time and it is only when the total action of the play is clearly before his mind’s eye, that he starts writing a play” (1990: 46).

The first of the three endings goes along with what one would expect in a fairy tale or folktale. Rani, after having succeeded spectacularly in demonstrating her innocence, is considered a goddess.⁹ Appana automatically considers her his wife and forgets about his concubine, who voluntarily becomes Rani’s servant. This ending is found to be loose, however, as the Author-narrator points out. Obviously, Appana knows that the child his wife is expecting is not his, since he has never had any sexual relationship with Rani. Though Appana has his doubts, he can do nothing and, in fact, as Dhanavel says, “Appana begins to suspect his own sanity”, when the elders convince him that Rani is the “Mother goddess” (2000: 24). The spectator or reader has access to his thoughts expressed in these lines: “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!” (*Nāga*: 60). And furthermore, the Cobra cannot be ignored. On the Story-narrator’s part, she wonders about Rani’s thoughts. Now, after being intimate with her husband, Rani has to know that the man with whom she used to have intercourse was not her husband.

The second ending takes into account both Appana’s suspicion 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 in Rani’s abundant 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 Appana reappear on the stage to perform a third ending, which at first seems to be a repetition of the second one. However, this time when the Cobra falls from Rani’s hair he is alive. Appana immediately thinks about killing the snake, but

Rani devises a way to save the Cobra. She lets him hide in her hair again, though she tells Appana that he has escaped. It ends with these words spoken by Rani: “This hair is the symbol of my wedded bliss. Live in there happily, for ever” (Nāga: 64).

Sometimes academics and critics do not wish to accept interpretations which run counter to religious or social conventions. Indian culture, says Manchi Sarat Babu, considers marriage to be “the supreme boon of a woman” because it offers her “salvation through her service to her husband”. For that woman “chastity is superior and preferable to life” (1997: 37). Therefore, the third ending of *Nāga-Mandala* may not be acceptable within the orthodox Indian tradition. Accordingly, Karnad can be seen as an author who presents the character of the married woman from within an unconventional perspective. His point is that Indian society at large is “dreadfully puritanical” and that most Indian men are “embarrassed by women who are not closely related to them”. As a consequence “most Indian playwrights just don’t know what to do with their female characters” (Karnad 1995: 359). In fact, Satyadev Dubey believes Karnad to be “the only playwright in the history of Indian theatre to have treated adultery as normal and treated adulterous women sympathetically” (Karnad 1995: 358). Yet, Karnad repeatedly turns the situations and manipulates language brilliantly so as to create ambiguity and a space of freedom for himself and the readers and spectators.¹⁰ We recall here how Federico García Lorca, whom Karnad admires for his capacity to develop extraordinarily powerful feminine characters, claims that the theatre should be “a rostrum where men are free to expose old equivocal standards of conduct, and explain with living examples the eternal norms of the heart and feelings of man” (1982 (1960): 59).¹¹ Furthermore, A. K. Ramanujan reminds us that by using folklore, the author and his public can think more freely. He says: “Tales speak of what cannot usually be spoken. Ordinary decencies are violated. Incest, cannibalism, pitiless revenge are explicit motifs in this fantasy world, which helps us face ourselves, envisage shameless wish fulfilments, and sometimes ‘by indirection find direction out’” (Ramanujan 1989: 258).

Still, the second ending, in which the Cobra dies, is chosen as the most satisfactory ending by some critics. Those critics, among them K.M. Chandar, probably do not want to diverge from the canonical texts which, in the words of Karnad himself, have “glamorized the devoted wives, the Sitas and the Savitris” (1995: 359). If the Cobra disappears, the possible destabilizing element for the new home is eliminated and the values of the *akam* and the *puram*, in Chandar’s opinion, would be restored to their respective places. This critic mentions the need for an equilibrium between the *akam*, which, according to A.K. Ramanujan, means “interior, heart, self, house, household”, and the *puram*, which means “exterior, outer parts of the body, other, the yard outside the house, people outside the household” (1989: 256). Consequently, the moment when Appana gives up searching for the values of the *akam* outside the house, Rani should do the same. In this latter case, we could assume that Rani embodies the ideal wife, patient, faithful, and ready to submit and sacrifice herself. As regards this second ending, if we limit the role of the Cobra to the sexual sphere, and interpret the fact that he hides in the “long dark serpentine tresses” as a symbol of fertility, the way Chandar and Dhanavel do, then the ending could be convincing (Chandar 1999: 79; Dhanavel 2000: 28). However, the role and symbolism of the Cobra in his relationship with Rani can be interpreted as going further, confirming that Karnad has defied the orthodoxy of Indian epic stories.

In the Indian cultural context, specifically in Kundalini-Yoga, the snake is the image of vital energy, or the energy of the cosmos. Ajit Mookerjee 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” (2001: 9). Thus, the process of development in human beings consists in moving up this energy, coiled at the base of the spine, so that the seven centres of energy and consciousness (*chakras*) can be progressively opened. The initial state of this energy is described in this way in the *Yoga Kundalini Upanishad* 1.82: “The divine power, / Kundalini, shines / like the stem of a young lotus; / like a snake, coiled round upon herself, / she holds her tail in her mouth / and lies resting half asleep / at the base of the body” (Mookerjee 2001: 10).¹²

In the case of Rani the spectator or reader can believe that, after her sexual awakening, her vital energy moves up. Her satisfactory emotional relationship with the Cobra culminates with the awakening of her consciousness (when the sixth *chakra*, the *ajñā* or third eye of Shiva is opened). This moment when the individual is capable of discovering his or her true essence is symbolically represented by her placing and keeping the Cobra in her hair.¹³ Rani, by taking this step and declaring “Live in there happily, for ever” (Nāga: 64), explicitly accepts not only the existence but also the significance of her relationship with the Cobra.¹⁴ Thus, from the philosophical and mythological point of view, there is reason to say that the Cobra causes Rani’s integration at different levels, the physical, the emotional, the spiritual, and the intellectual, and that he has given her the chance to choose and achieve liberation.

As has been mentioned above, in the *Natya Shastra* it is specified that drama has a role of integration of the three worlds. Likewise, throughout his play Girish Karnad manifests a unifying purpose. The setting, scheme, structure, and symbols of the play, all contribute to the author’s aim. The setting is a temple, the Hindu temple being a mandala, a representation of the whole universe, of the cosmos. The four stories of *Nāga-Mandala* are interconnected and the plot of the main one moves towards the liberation and fulfilment of Rani, the new Indian woman, through her relationship with the Cobra. The complete circles and the complementary intertwined triangles, which in this case are part of the mandala, are symbols that in themselves represent unity. Here all of them help display the layered structure of the drama to give graphic form to the essential universal pattern of the mandala.

Notes

¹ Girish Karnad was born in Matheran, near Bombay, in 1938 and grew up in Sirsi (Karnataka). He writes his plays in Kannada and he himself translates them into English.

² In a recent publication of Girish Karnad’s *Collected Plays*, Dharwadker states that Karnad belongs to the “formative generation” of Indian playwrights who “collectively reshaped Indian theatre as a major national institution in the later twentieth century” (2005: vii).

³ In this respect, Veena Noble Dass says that Karnad has been influenced by Brecht, Anouilh, Camus, Sartre and to a considerable extent, Pinter (1990: 71).

⁴ In subsequent references the play *Nāga-Mandala* will be referred to as Nāga.

⁵ *Nāga-Mandala* means “snake circle”.

⁶ The *Nāgas* in Indian mythology are considered deities, half human and half snake, and are carriers of fertility, especially in the south of India.

⁷ The *Natya Shastra*, written by Bharata Muni around the 2nd century B.C., is the earliest and most elaborate treatise on Indian theatre. In it, various traditions in dance, mime, and drama were consolidated and codified.

⁸ According to legend, God Indra, with the rest of the gods, approached Brahma, the Creator of the Universe, and begged for a mode of recreation accessible to all classes of society. Brahma acceded to this request and decided to compose a fifth *Veda* on *Natya* (drama). From the four *Vedas* he extracted the four elements of speech, song, mime and sentiment and thus created *Natyaveda*, the holy book of dramaturgy. He asked Indra to pass the book on to those of the gods who are skilful, learned, free from stage fright, and given to hard work. As Indra pleaded the gods' inability to enact a play, Brahma looked to Bharata and revealed to him the fifth *Veda*.

⁹ This situation reminds us of the stories of Sita and Savitri, but it offers a very different point of view. Sita, wife of king Rama in the epic *Ramayana*, is a powerful symbol of female purity, fidelity, and endurance in Hindu culture. Savitri, whose story appears in the *Mahabharata*, symbolizes conjugal love that defies death and the gods.

¹⁰ Karnad tells us in the introduction to the play: "The position of Rani in the story of *Nāga-Mandala*, for instance, can be seen as a metaphor for the situation of a young girl in the bosom of a joint family where she sees her husband only in two unconnected roles—as a stranger during the day and as a lover at night" (*Nāga*: 17).

¹¹ Girish Karnad expressed his admiration for Lorca in this sense during a conversation I had with him at the University of Mysore, India, on 23 July 2005.

¹² As Mookerjee explains, "The human body is divided into zones which involve the sacral plexus, the solar plexus, the cardiac plexus, the laryngeal plexus, the region of the pineal gland and the cerebral cortex" (2001: 73).

¹³ In *The Child and the Serpent*, we read that according to the *Visnu Purana* (I.5. 26-48), "the hairs of Brahma's head became serpents. These were called serpents because they glided (*sarpana*), and snakes (*ahi*) because they departed (*hina*)... But hair has deeper unconscious connections. It seems to represent life and vitality itself" (*Sahi* 1980: 161).

¹⁴ For more information on the awakening of consciousness see Chapter 4, "Transformation of Energy" (Mookerjee 2001: 59-70).

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