

## Portrayal of Women in Girish Karnad's Play 'Nagamandala'

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### Abstract

Girish Karnad's plays reflect the contemporary patriarchal structure of Indian society. His works primarily explore themes of Indian culture and tradition, often employing historical contexts and a satirical lens to critique deeply ingrained societal norms. This study aims to examine how Karnad vividly portrays female characters in *Nagamandala*, who serve as representations of contemporary women's existence. The analysis focuses on the major characters, Rani and Kurudavva, highlighting Rani's subjugation within a patriarchal framework. Furthermore, the study sheds light on the paradoxical treatment of Indian women—exploited in the name of chastity and purity while simultaneously being revered and worshipped as *Devi* (the supreme embodiment of divine power) in various mythological forms.

**Keywords:** Women hood, patriarchal society, Female subjugation, race, gender, folklore, question of female identity, history and tradition.

### Introduction

Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* is a folk tale originally written in Kannada in 1990 and later translated into English by the author himself. This is a feminist play that revolves around the female protagonist, Rani. The name *Rani* itself serves as an ironic element in the narrative. In the Indian context, *Rani* means 'queen' or the Lakshmi of the household, yet in the story, she is treated worse than a maid. The play explores the theme of marriage, where the female character, Rani, is married to a landlord, Appanna. Throughout the play, Appanna is portrayed as a symbol of male chauvinism. Rani accepts the marriage without protest, but her life takes a drastic turn after marrying Appanna. He is a strict and controlling husband who locks her inside the house—symbolically resembling a 'caged bird'—and only visits her once a day for lunch. He shows no interest in Rani beyond ensuring that she remains confined at home. Meanwhile, Appanna himself engages in an illicit relationship with a concubine.

As Appanna's wife, Rani dutifully takes on household responsibilities, such as preparing his bath and lunch. However, after lunch, he locks her inside again and leaves to be with his mistress. Rani feels lonely and miserable, longing for the affection of her parents. She expresses her plight to Kurudavva, revealing the emotional and psychological toll of her isolation:

**‘I am so frightened at night. I cant sleep a wink. At home I sleep between father and mother , but here alone. Kurudavva , can you help me , please?’ 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 ? I would jump into a well – if only I could.’**

The above lines of Rani reveal her suffocation and frustrated mindset. Here, Rani indirectly reveals her desire to be free from Appanna. Only in her dreams can she imagine love and affection. But in real life, she is just like a caged bird, crying for freedom.

The split personality of Appanna depicts the patriarchal culture that suppresses women’s rights in the family and also uplifts male dominance over females. Through the character of Rani, the question is raised about patriarchal society, which remains relevant in contemporary society. A man is not questioned even if he is involved in adultery, but a woman is forbidden from such acts, and it is considered a crime. The question of chastity is raised here. The terms ‘Pativrata’, ‘Loyalty,’ and ‘Chastity’ are used to restrict women in India.

Exploitation of women in the name of chastity. Referring to the mythologies like ‘The Ramayana’ and ‘The Mahabharata’ which openly questions the concept of chastity among the female protagonists in these epics. For example, the female protagonist Sita has to enter a fire ordeal to prove her chastity to her husband, Lord Rama in The Ramayana. In Nagamandala, the female protagonist Rani has to prove her chastity in front of the elders of the village by performing the ‘Snake ordeal’.

The concept of dependency has been portrayed in the play Nagamangala. The women characters Rani and Kurudavva’s dependency in three stages of life could be seen throughout the play. Rani as a daughter (her dependency on her parents), as a wife (Rani’s dependency on her husband Appanna) and as a mother (Kurudavva’s dependency on Kappana)

Rani was a naive woman ,who had no idea about marriage and also she was not taught about sex. Her lack of knowledge about creating love renders and her incapable of convincing her husband to understand her was unsuccessful Because of her innocence, she is able to tolerate her husband's callous behavior and suffers quietly while unsure of what to do or settle the problem. There comes the character called Kurudavva, who enquires about her post marital life. Rani laments about her marriage life.

Listening to Rani’s life she was given a larger root by Kurudavva, who instructs her to incorporate its paste into the curry. Consequently, after dropping the root into the curry , it starts boiling and the curry turns into red. She talks to herself when she feels scared, perplexed, and suspicious. (Pg. 16).

**“Oh my god! what horrible mess is this? Blood. Perhaps poison. Shall I serve him this. That woman is blind, but he isn’t. how could he possibly not have seen this boiling blood, this poisonous red? And then -even if he doesn’t see it -how do I know it is not dangerous?”**  
pg.17

She communicates her dread and worry with a puzzled expression, just like any other traditional Indian wife would do. Even in conflicting situations, Indian women are incapable of thinking of betraying their husbands and turning unfaithful.

**“No No Forgive me god . this is evil , I was about to commit crime. Father and mother , how could ! your daughter agrees to such a heinous act. No I must get rid of this before he notices anything’ (pg.17)**

She believed that her parents would be disrespected and defamed by the act she was supposed to perform. In order to avoid the shame and guilt, she fearfully pours the boiling curry onto the anthill. This is a sign of a devoted wife to her spouse.

Rani's naive gesture of spilling the curry into the anthill illustrates her lack of courage in serving her spouse the same red boiling dish. However, the curry was tasted by Naga in the ant hill and fell in love with Rani. In order to visit Rani covertly, Naga disguised himself as Appanna during the night.

Rani kept the husband-wife relationship in the family since she was unaware about the real identity of Naga. However, when she became pregnant, the true issue arose. Her real husband Appanna accused Rani for berating her since he was aware that he did not maintain a physical relationship with her. Rani is extremely perplexed by her husband's actions. The real husband, Appanna, is incensed when he learns about Rani's pregnancy. He kicks her and swears.

**Appanna : Aren't you ashamed to admit it, you harlot? I locked you in, and yet you managed to find a lover! tell me who it is. Whom did you go to with your sari off?**

**Rani : I swear to you I haven't done anything wrong.**

**Appanna: You haven't? and yet you have a bloated tummy. Just pumped air into it, did you? And you think I'll let you get away with that? you shame me in front of the whole village, you darken my face, you slut' (pg.54)**

Appanna does not accept Rani's innocence. He drags her out and tries to throw stones to kill the infant in the womb but suddenly the cobra comes and hisses loudly. Appanna throws stones at the cobra but somehow it escapes into the anthill.

Appanna complains this issues to the 3 elders of the village to sit in the judgment and punish her. The village elders asked Rani to prove her chastity by performing 'snake ordeal'. Rani swears that she has not touched anyone except her husband and the cobra, nor has she slowed any male to touch her.

**“If I lie, let the cobra bite me" (pg.58)**

The cobra does not bite her, but slides up her shoulder and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head. The crowd is stunned, while the elders declare that she is the incarnation of goddess 'Devi'.

**“Elders-I: A miracle! A miracle.**

**Elders-II: She is not a woman; she is a Divine being.**

**Elders-III: Indeed, a goddess-!”**

All the villagers including the elders of the village fell at her feet.

Two extreme contradictions in the character of Rani. Firstly, she is picturized like a caged bird in the beginning of the play later after the ordeal she has been praised and treated as goddess left free to choose her own way of life. Thus, the play exposes the double standards of this so called cultured society that strongly demands of a woman the fidelity to her husband. In Indian society, only fidelity is expected only from a woman and man is left free unquestioned. That is why village elders ask Rani alone to prove her fidelity by performing snake-ordeal.

Appanna in the day and Naga in the night are the two different facets of a man's nature. Appanna in the day performs the role of dictator and at night, who plays the lover's role. These two contradictory faces of men symbolize a woman's exploitation by men and his double standard of morality. Rani Symbolizes women's endless suffering in understanding man's true nature in male-dominated society.

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