

Feminine Desire, Symbolism, and Patriarchal Negotiation in Naga-Mandala

Dipti Balchandra Pethe

Asst. Prof., Indrayani Mahavidyalaya, Pune

Abstract—The regulation of feminine desire has remained central to patriarchal cultural production across literary traditions. Modern Indian drama re-examines this regulation by reworking myth, folklore, and performative ritual into sites of gendered interrogation. This paper offers a sustained feminist and psycho-symbolic reading of *Naga-Mandala*, written by Girish Karnad, to explore how feminine desire emerges from silence, negotiates patriarchal scrutiny, and attains conditional legitimacy through symbolic transformation. Drawing upon feminist existentialism, subaltern discourse, psychoanalytic symbolism, and performance theory, the study argues that Rani’s experiential trajectory reframes desire from moral deviation into epistemic self-recognition. The serpent motif, dream-reality ambiguity, and ritual ordeal collectively construct a dramaturgical language through which suppressed female subjectivity becomes culturally intelligible. However, the play’s resolution reveals ambivalent empowerment, as validation depends upon miracle rather than structural gender justice.

The paper concludes that *Naga-Mandala* does not simply liberate feminine desire but stages its continuous negotiation within patriarchal modernity, thereby positioning folklore-based theatre as a crucial medium of feminist cultural critique in post-independence Indian literature.

Index Terms—Feminine desire; Indian drama; patriarchy; symbolism; feminist theatre; folklore; subjectivity.

I. INTRODUCTION

The representation of women within South Asian literary and mythic discourse has historically been mediated through patriarchal moral economies that equate femininity with chastity, obedience, and sacrificial endurance. Female subjectivity is thus rendered symbolic rather than experiential, transforming women into custodians of social honor rather than autonomous selves.¹

Post-independence Indian English drama initiates a critical rupture within this tradition by revisiting oral narratives and ritual performance to interrogate inherited gender hierarchies. Among dramatists engaged in this cultural re-evaluation, Karnad occupies a foundational position through his synthesis of folklore, mythology, and modern theatrical consciousness.

Naga-Mandala dramatizes the lived interiority of a young bride, Rani, whose emotional deprivation within marriage generates a symbolic encounter with a shape-shifting serpent lover. This narrative structure foregrounds feminine desire not as moral aberration but as human necessity emerging from neglect and silence.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Scholars of modern Indian drama frequently interpret Karnad’s dramaturgy as a dialogic space between tradition and modernity. Critical discourse highlights three recurring concerns:

- Folkloric narrative structure
- Mythic symbolism
- Gendered power relations

Feminist critics influenced by Simone de Beauvoir identify Rani’s marital confinement as existential objectification, wherein woman exists “for-others” rather than for herself.²

Postcolonial theorists such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak further illuminate how women’s speech becomes culturally mediated, emerging indirectly through myth, miracle, or narrative framing rather than direct articulation.³

Despite extensive scholarship on oppression and symbolism, desire itself remains under-theorized as a category of knowledge and resistance. This study addresses that lacuna.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Feminist Existentialism

Beauvoir's formulation of woman as the constructed "Other" clarifies Rani's voiceless marital position. Desire thus becomes the first movement toward subjecthood.

3.2 Subaltern Mediation

Speech emerges symbolically through serpent, dream, and ritual demonstrating that feminine articulation is culturally filtered rather than freely expressed.

3.3 Psychoanalytic Symbolism

The serpent simultaneously signifies erotic fulfilment, emotional reciprocity, fertility, and unconscious projection, transforming repression into symbolic presence.

3.4 Performance and Ritual

Truth in the play is theatrically negotiated rather than empirically verified, positioning communal witnessing as a mechanism of gendered authority.

IV. PATRIARCHAL CONFINEMENT AND MARITAL SILENCE

Rani's spatial imprisonment within the household symbolizes the broader societal mechanism of institutionalized feminine containment, where the domestic sphere becomes a site of control and limitation for women. This confinement reflects how patriarchal structures physically and psychologically restricts female agency, reinforcing gendered boundaries that confine women to private, regulated spaces. The household thus operates not merely as a home but as a microcosm of societal power dynamics, where Rani's movement and autonomy are curtailed, underscoring the systemic nature of female subjugation. Her hesitant speech patterns demonstrate internalized subordination, confirming that silence precedes repression. This dynamic reveals how power operates subtly within domestic spaces, enforcing gender roles through emotional neglect and control over sexuality. Rani's constrained agency highlights the pervasive impact of patriarchal structures that not only limit physical freedom but also regulate psychological expression. Her silence, therefore, becomes both a symptom and a mechanism of her

oppression, reinforcing the cycle of repression within the household.

The emotional absence and sexual secrecy maintained by Rani's husband further expose the asymmetrical power relations embedded in patriarchal norms. Male desire is socially accepted and often goes unquestioned, while female desire is subjected to moral scrutiny and surveillance, highlighting the double standard that governs gendered expressions of sexuality. This disparity enforces a regime where male needs are prioritized and normalized, whereas female sexuality is policed and rendered invisible or deviant. Together, these elements dramatize how patriarchal authority manifests through both spatial control and the regulation of desire, perpetuating gender inequality within intimate relationships and the household.

V. SYMBOLIC ERUPTION OF DESIRE: THE SERPENT LOVER

The transformation of the serpent into the husband's form symbolizes a profound contrast between two modes of relational dynamics: patriarchal possession versus emotional recognition. While the husband represents an authoritative figure who exerts control devoid of intimacy, the serpent embodies qualities of tenderness, open communication, and mutual respect. This metamorphosis highlights a shift from a relationship based on dominance and ownership to one grounded in emotional connection and reciprocity, emphasizing desire as a shared, conscious experience rather than a mere physical or sexual impulse.

Rani's gradual awakening from initial confusion to comfort and eventual attachment illustrates desire as a relational consciousness that unfolds within a liminal, nocturnal space. Night serves as a boundary-free zone, removed from societal surveillance and constraints, where psychological liberation becomes possible through dream-like encounters. This liminality allows for a reimagining of desire beyond conventional patriarchal frameworks, enabling an exploration of intimacy that is dialogic, transformative, and deeply human.

VI. PREGNANCY, SOCIAL SCRUTINY, AND MORAL TRIBUNAL

Pregnancy transforms what is typically a private, embodied experience into a matter of public concern

and communal judgment. Within a patriarchal framework, the pregnant female body becomes a site where societal expectations of purity and morality are rigorously enforced, often demanding visible proof of chastity and adherence to prescribed norms. This demand starkly contrasts with the frequent overlooking of masculine transgressions, highlighting a gendered double standard that reinforces control over female sexuality and autonomy.

The scene of accusation functions as a performative spectacle rather than a genuine judicial process, where the female body itself is scrutinized and treated as evidence in a moral trial. This dynamic reveals how morality operates less through impartial justice and more through public display and social sanction. The pregnant woman is subjected to a moral tribunal in which her body is both the subject and object of judgment, exposing the ways in which societal power structures regulate and discipline women's bodies under the guise of communal concern.

VII. RITUAL ORDEAL AND AMBIVALENT LEGITIMACY

Rani's trial by serpent functions as a complex ritual ordeal that simultaneously affirms her purity and reinforces existing patriarchal norms. The miraculous nature of her survival or vindication grants her a form of honor and social recognition, symbolizing a moment of empowerment. However, this empowerment is ambivalent and conditional, as it does not challenge the broader societal structures but rather upholds them. By framing desire and female agency within the bounds of myth, the society effectively sanctifies these elements only when they conform to traditional narratives, thereby avoiding any critical self-reflection or systemic change.

This dual outcome preserves the status quo by allowing Rani's individual experience to serve as a spectacle of purity and virtue, rather than as a catalyst for questioning or transforming patriarchal authority. Society gains a means to celebrate a seemingly extraordinary event without addressing underlying gender inequalities. Thus, the ritual ordeal operates both as a mechanism of social control and a symbolic affirmation, where empowerment is granted but strictly limited, ensuring that patriarchal legitimacy remains intact and unchallenged.

VIII. TRANSFORMATION, STORYTELLING, AND FEMININE MEMORY

Rani's transformation from a suspect wife to a sacred figure illustrates a profound shift in identity that is not self-generated but rather mediated through supernatural or external forces. This change underscores the limited agency afforded to her within the narrative, as her redefinition depends on intervention beyond her own volition or recognition. It highlights how identity, particularly feminine identity in this context, can be shaped and validated through cultural or spiritual frameworks rather than personal autonomy.

The metaphor of storytelling as a "flame" emphasizes the resilience of women's truths, suggesting that these experiences endure and are transmitted primarily through oral and performative traditions rather than formal institutional acknowledgment. Theatre thus becomes a vital archive for preserving suppressed or marginalized female memories, offering a space where women's narratives can survive and be rearticulated despite societal erasure. This positioning of theatre as a cultural repository challenges dominant historical narratives and affirms the power of storytelling as a means of sustaining feminine memory and identity.

Would you like to expand further on the role of theatre as an archive or explore how supernatural mediation affects identity formation in this context?

IX. DISCUSSION

The discussion highlights the complexity of the play's thematic exploration, where desire functions as an epistemic awakening, signalling a deeper consciousness or recognition rather than mere emotion. This awakening is intricately linked to symbolism, which acts as a protective linguistic device, allowing sensitive or controversial ideas to be expressed obliquely rather than directly, thereby safeguarding the narrative and its characters within a culturally acceptable framework. The portrayal of patriarchy is nuanced, depicted not as an outright system to be overthrown but as a structure subject to negotiation and subtle contestation, reflecting ongoing cultural dynamics rather than abrupt revolution.

Moreover, the depiction of female empowerment is ambivalent, suggesting that empowerment is neither absolute nor uniform but fraught with contradictions

and limitations shaped by the surrounding patriarchal context. The play thus stages a continuous cultural negotiation where liberation remains provisional and contested, emphasizing the fluidity and complexity of social change. This framing resists simplistic binaries of oppression and emancipation, instead presenting a layered narrative that captures the interplay between tradition, power, and agency within the cultural milieu.

X. CONCLUSION

Naga-Mandala intricately explores feminine desire not merely as a private or emotional experience but as a powerful, transformative force that shapes identity and agency. Through Rani's evolution from a voiceless, oppressed figure to one who attains a form of sanctification the drama foregrounds how desire can catalyze self-expression and challenge patriarchal silencing. However, while Rani's personal awakening affirms the potency of desire to generate voice and subjectivity, the play simultaneously exposes the entrenched limitations imposed by societal structures that continue to restrict genuine gender justice. This tension underscores the complexity of feminist resistance within cultural frameworks that both enable and constrain women's autonomy.

By employing folklore as its narrative and aesthetic foundation, Naga-Mandala situates its feminist critique within a tradition that is deeply rooted yet dynamic. The play's modern reimagining of folklore serves a dual purpose: preserving cultural heritage while critically interrogating its ethical boundaries, particularly regarding gender roles and power relations. This fusion makes folklore-based modern drama an essential feminist medium, capable of sustaining cultural memory and tradition while provoking reflection and transformation. In doing so, Naga-Mandala exemplifies how art can negotiate the delicate balance between honoring tradition and advocating for progressive social change.

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