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## Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* as a Metatheatrical Play

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### **Abstract:**

The study argues Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* as a metatheatrical play through the analysis of the play using different aspects of metatheatre and the features of Indian folk theatre. This calls attention to the innovative rendition of the play representing a new theatre. The study aims to examine *Naga-Mandala* as a metatheatrical play. It also explores the conventions of metatheatre in detail and the role of myth in the play which adds to the technique of the play. The influence of German playwright, Bertolt Brecht's 'epic theatre' which opposes the Aristotelian concept of dramaturgy, in Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* will also be observed upon. The study intend to examine the differences in the metatheatre of the west and the Indian metatheatre.

**Keywords:** Metatheatre, Indian folk theatre, Epic theatre, Magic Realism.

Girish Karnad, a veteran playwright, director and actor, is a prominent member of Kannada literature. He belongs to the Navya phase of Kannada literature and his works come under Navya drama. "Navya wave caught up with the western avant-garde and we can trace the influence of Sartre and Camus, of Pinter, Ionesco and Brecht" (Sivasankari 194-195). This postmodernist influence is evident in the works of Karnad. Being a playwright of the post-independence India, he along with other contemporaries has reformed the Indian theatre and brought it to the forefront. The theatre of the twentieth century therefore embraces several concerns of the early Indian dramatics and disdains the colonial theatre practices.

Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala*, the play with a cobra, is centred on two oral tales from Karnataka. In the preface of the play while explaining the origin of the play, Karnad says that these two oral tales were told to him by A. K. Ramanujan, whom the book is dedicated to (244). *Naga-Mandala* is a play within a play which revisits the myth, folktales and history of Indian culture, particularly the culture of Karnataka. The first story is about the lamp flames who gather in a village temple after their day's work to exchange gossip about the households they live in and the second story is that of Rani, a woman neglected by her husband and visited by a cobra in the form of her husband who loves and cherishes her. Here, the 'story' itself comes in the form of a beautiful woman in a sari to narrate the story of Rani. Another significant aspect in the play is the presence of a playwright himself. He is seen initially in the prologue where he suffers from the curse of death which has come upon him from the 'abused mass of sleep' of his audience. In the end we see him freed off of the curse. The main theme of *Naga-Mandala* is the right of a woman to live in dignity and self-respect and not as a shadow of her husband. The play throws light on the patriarchal structures of the society under which women are forced to live.

The entire play is entwined with supernatural elements. Karnad has been successful in enmeshing the myths in the play. Karnad's plays always suggest the significance of the Indian myths that could be used to address the glitches of modern society. He has given a new meaning to these folk tales and myths in the contemporary society. Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker, in her Introduction to Karnad's "*Collected Plays: Volume 1*" says: "The majority of his (Karnad's) plays employ the narratives of myth, history, and folklore to evoke an ancient or premodern world that resonates in contemporary contexts because of his uncanny ability to remake the past in the image of the present" (ix). Karnad is unquestionably a modernist playwright, precisely a post-independence playwright, where he tries to connect to the colonial past and the post-colonial present of India using the resources of world theatre.

'Metatheatre', coined by Lionel Abel, described it as reflecting comedy and tragedy, at the same time, where the audience can laugh at the protagonist while feeling empathetic simultaneously. The technique reflects the world as an extension of human conscience, not accepting prescribed societal norms, but allowing for more imaginative variation, or a possible social change. Metatheatre is a technique that emphasizes on the play as a play and not reality. (Simon, n. p. Web) For this, it brings in the audience to the fore. Stuart Davis says:

'Metatheatre' is a convenient name for the quality or force in a play which challenges theatre's claim to be simply realistic ..... Metatheatre begins by sharpening awareness of the unlikeness of life to dramatic art; it may end by making us aware of life's uncanny likeness to art or illusion. By calling attention to the strangeness, artificiality, illusoriness, or arbitrariness — in short, the theatricality -- of the life we live, it marks those frames and boundaries that conventional dramatic realism would hide ( Metatheatre, n. p., Web).

*Naga-Mandala* is observed to have the features of metatheatre. The play engages the audience and specifies to them that it is a play through the presence of the fictional playwright, the flames and the story of Rani. The dejected playwright directly addresses the audience in the beginning of the play. He is anxious about the curse of death upon him, as the mendicant prophesied. The reason he gives for the curse is that his plays had caused many spectators to sleep off during the performances. He then assures to renounce his writing. Here, the audience is drawn attention to the circumstances of the production of the play.

According to Richard Hornby there are five techniques in metatheatre or metadrama:  
a) Ceremony within a play b) Role-playing within a role c) Reference to reality d) Self-

reference to the drama e) Play within a play (Zatlin 55). Few of these aspects, when analysed are seen true to *Naga-Mandala*. The cobra takes up the form of Appanna, Rani's husband, to visit her at nights which can be seen as role-playing within a role. Here, the cobra transforms itself to Naga using Appanna's body. The cobra is elevated from the animal world to the human world. Through the technique of magic realism, the author transforms the cobra to a human. The snake worship in the Hindu religious tradition, considers snake as God. Here, the cobra is seen to have special powers which reflect the beliefs of the Indian Hindu society. The transformation of the story into a young woman and the song into a sari could also be seen as role playing within a role. The abstract story is turned into a human form. The necessity of the story to be passed on to generations is recognizable as this is the reason for the transformation.

The play begins with the scene at the ruined temple. A playwright is distressed, whose death is prophesied by a mendicant. He is to stay awake the whole night in order to escape death. He directly addresses the audience. The reason he is being punished is because, as a playwright, he has caused many people to doze off during his plays and the abused mass of sleep has turned against him to become the Curse of Death. The presence of the playwright and his direct address to the audience reminds the spectators that they are watching a play and not reality. And this adds to the play as a metatheatre according to Hornby's techniques of metatheatre.

Play within a play is also a significant aspect in the play where the story of flames and the playwright forms the 'outer play' while Rani's story is the 'inner play'. Myth says that the flames, after extinguished in the houses in the village, gather and spend the night together gossiping. It is the story, which transformed into the young woman, who narrates the story of Rani. Karnad interconnects the two folklores to create a rich art work. However, metatheatre

cannot be contained in these five aspects alone. Apart from these five chief techniques, there are several other aspects that constitute a metatheatre which is presented in the play.

As evident, the play employs magic realism in which the myths are brought into a realistic environment. The story of Rani has come out of an old lady who hasn't ever shared the story and the song she knew. The story, unable to stay inside the lady any longer, transforms to a beautiful woman and the song to a dazzling sari and comes out to the world. This constant depiction of myths and illusions prompts the audience to understand that it is not reality, but just a play, a work of art. The curse of death on the playwright is caused by the abused mass of sleep of his audience, which augments the presence of unreal world of myth and illusion. The mendicant's prophecy of the death of the author for a silly reason of making his audience sleep watching his play is precisely unrealistic. From the play: Man: .....A mendicant told me: 'You must keep awake at least one whole night this month. If you can do that, you'll live. If not, you will die on the last night of the month.'

The flames which are given the human quality of talking and the supernatural quality of floating, the magical root which brings love and the cobra that can assume human form also adds to the understanding of the play as a metatheatrical play.

The names of the characters in the play are unique. Each name is a generic name and thus represents the different classification of people in the society. Rani means 'queen', representing the women folk who are suppressed in the hands of patriarchy. As mentioned in the play, she is her parents' only daughter, their queen, queen of the world and queen of the long tresses (247). Appanna means 'any man'. He clearly represents the patriarchal society. His treatment of Rani as not a wife, but a servant and mere object to meet his needs reflects the patriarchal minds of Indian society. From the play: Appanna: Well, then, I'll be back

tomorrow at noon. Keep my lunch ready. I shall eat and go (247). .....Look, I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand? (248)

Kurudavva, the old lady, means 'the blind one'. An expert in herbal medicine, she is the mother figure who comes to the rescue of the oppressed young woman. She embodies the set of people who sees the toxic patriarchy, and want to react, but prefers to stay blind eye to it, and helps the women deal with the issue herself and not involving the man. Kappanna means 'the dark one'. He represents the underprivileged belonging to the lower caste in the society. In the story, his death is ignored by the people of the village. No one comes to the help of Kurudavva who cries for her son. The author, here, is criticizing the racist attitude and lack of humanity in the Indian society. Naga means 'the cobra', the king of all snakes, strong, but poisonous. In the play, but the cobra assumes human quality, it has the ability to love, which the real human, Appanna, in the play is unable to.

Rani, the protagonist of the story, is seen addressing the story few times in the story. It means Rani is aware of the presence of the story, aware of her story being narrated. The author uses these disruptions in between as reminder for the audience, that it is a play, a performance. The playwright does not want the audience to emotionally attach with the characters, yet need a participatory audience who could question and ponder over the relevance of the play in the social milieu. The playwright wants the audience to derive the inner meaning of the play.

The influence of Brechtian techniques and his Epic theatre on the Indian epic theatre is great. Brecht's theatre shares its features with metatheatre. Most modernist plays have some features of the metatheatre. The Epic theatre opposes the theatre of illusion offered by Aristotle. It is contradictory to the Dramatic theatre. Aristotle emphasized on the 'willing suspension of disbelief', 'catharsis' and the three unities: of time, place and action. Brecht

staunchly opposed this and followed a Non- Aristotelian pattern in his works, which led to the creation of Epic theatre. The attraction towards non-naturalistic drama has made Karnad turn to Brecht's 'Epic theatre'. In his introduction to *Three Plays*, Karnad observes:

The theatrical conventions Brecht was reacting against – character as a psychological construct providing a focus for emotional identification, the willing-suspension-of-disbelief syndrome, the notion of a unified spectacle – were never a part of the traditional Indian theatre. There was therefore no question of arriving at an 'alienation' effect by using Brechtian artifice. What he did was to sensitize us to the potentialities of nonnaturalistic techniques available in our own theatre (14 – 15).

The use of Indian culture and traditions in the play is a proof to this observation. Karnad's other plays namely *Hayavadana* and *Yayati* also has its influences from Epic theatre. Brecht, in his plays, made a generous use of myths, epics and folklore. In *Naga-Mandala*, the Brechtian influence and the guidance of Indian folk theatre are manifested through folklore, myths, song (song of the flames) and magic realism. The whole play is based on this.

Bertolt Brecht, the eminent German playwright, caused a great sway in the world theatre. He rejected the Aristotelian Dramatic theatre and formed a theatre of his which met the need of the hour. A change was inevitable then from the kind of plays that presented the illusion of reality. His epic theatre thus disregarded aesthetics. In his study, Awanish Rai observes the features of Brechtian theatre:

The audience, thus, is expected to function as an active participant in place of a passive spectator who used to forget things the moment s/he came out of the theatre because the aim of the traditional Dramatic Theatre was to arouse cathartic emotion, 'clam of mind, all passions spent.' Brechtian Theatre,

essentially non-Aristotelian, advocates repeated disruptions in order to avoid a linear progression of action on the stage (Awanish Rai 969).

Brecht propounded an Alienation Effect, which he employed in his epic theatre. In Brecht's words, as translated by John Willet in "The Street Scene", from *The Theory of the Modern Stage*:

What is involved here is, briefly, a technique of taking the human social incidents to be portrayed and labelling them as something striking, something that calls for explanation, is not to be taken for granted, not just natural. The object of this 'effect' is to allow the spectator to criticize constructively from a social point of view (Eric Bentley 91).

This influence of Alienation Effect is seen in Karnad's *Naga-Mandala*, where he tries to portray the familiar in a strange manner. Looking at the play as portraying a social issue, this is true. The play indirectly discusses the patriarchal Indian society through the characters of Appanna and the village men as the agents of patriarchy and Rani as the victim of patriarchy. This ultimately points to the reality of the society. It is a critique on the contemporary Indian society. As mentioned earlier, Epic theatre has one of its characteristics as being a critique of society. Brecht used theatre as an instrument to instruct the common public and to achieve certain socio-political ends.

Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* is understood as a metatheatrical play, by making us aware of the difference in reality and dramatic art, and calling attention to the strangeness, illusoriness, and the uncertainty of it. The study thus explores the play, *Naga-Mandala*, as a metetheatre using Richard Hornby's techniques of metatheatre – a play within a play, role-playing within a role and self-reference to the play. The instances from the text attest to the play as a metatheatre. Karnad, inspired from the Brechtian ideas, derives the techniques used,

from the Indian folk tradition and culture. The rich Indian heritage is thus exposed through the play. The presence of magic realism using the two folklores and myths from Karnataka, which forms the significant part, in the play is examined to explain the play as a metatheatre. The influence of Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre and his alienation effect on Karnad's plays, specifically, *Naga-Mandala*, is thrown into light which adds to the understanding of the play as a metatheatre.

The study is limited to the metatheatrical aspect and Brechtian influences in the play. For future directions, the mythological traces and the Indianness in the play, the play as a critique of Indian society, a semiotic reading of the play, gendered reading, and the position of women in the play could be examined.

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