

# Darkness at the Roots: Generation of Life and the Birth of Stories Amidst Darkness in Karnad's *Naga-Mandala*

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## **Abstract:**

Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* is replete with darkness. Darkness is all around— in the “sanctum of a ruined temple” (1), in the homes from where the flames and the narrators of stories arrive, the darkness is in the locked room of Rani, in the streets of the villages at night, in Kurudavva's blind eyes, in the anthill and in the darkness of the storyteller's heart awaiting the birth of a story. Everywhere that darkness prevails in the different corners of the play, whether in the sanctum or the cemetery, everywhere is a ground that swells with the prognostication of a story. The Naga's transformation into a lover and Rani's transformation into a mother are all magical spells of the darkness. The darkness breeds stories and holds the potential of making them real. The transmigration from Rani's dreams to the reality of her existence is studied in this article as the mystery of her life make her a deity and her realization of sexuality give her a realization of her identity.

**Keywords:** Darkness, identity, Indianness, magical, mysticism, mythical.

Girish Karnad (1938-2019) is one of the veteran playwrights in Indian English who upholds the spirit of India, its ethics, its cultural totems, the mysticism associated with India, the numerous dimensions and the unlimited perceptions which go with the notion of Indianness. Every character in Karnad's plays is strikingly Indian in their countenance and gestures and each character is in his own approach an Indian true to the spirit of India. The characters in Karnad have a specific nature of understanding and personality. The personalities in a single character too are numerous and enormous scope is perceived as the characters change themselves and transform their moves, in their own ambience.

The plays of Karnad centre around mythology, the myths which form an intricate connection with the contemporary man in search of his existence and facing the crisis of life. The characters in the plays of Karnad are unique humans who though tread the world of myths and scriptures are nonetheless characters who suffer from the enigma of modern man. The characters move in and out of the disturbances and placidity of their existence and enter into a sphere where the men and their aspiration of the self, meet; the world of differences end and humans tread the spatio-temporal continuum.

Karnad's tales centre around birth and rebirth, generation and regeneration and above all birth and death. The host of stories that congeal in the frame of a single drama create overlaps and reiteration, making scope for palimpsest and blurred vision due to the compilation of numerous semblances. The key stories in Karnad centre around issues of humans who travel beyond their day to day experiences.

The tales of Mahabharata and different epics, folktales and folklores create not only an introduction to Indian life and culture but delve deeper into the collective consciousness of India, its cultural construct, the mind and psyche. Treading away from the cultural construct that in India the women hardly express their desire or the women's desire get unheard of, in Karnad's exploration of human drama, human desire is one complete whole, whether with the man or the woman. If the man overtly expresses himself the woman's desires move surreptitiously through disguise and guile. However the patriarchal nexus exists creating hindrances in the path of woman's attainment of life's succour. If the man openly courts his desire, and is permitted in the institution of marriage as polygamy; when it comes to a woman, she meets resistance in society.

The symbolic gestures which a woman takes up in order to satisfy her desires create reverberations leading to stories and episodes that create further resonances. The great number of stories and fascinations create immense scope for people and livelihood. The resonances that come up as a result of a woman's coming to herself and her realization of her hopes create deep problems and bigger disturbances. Day in and out new scopes are made, and human actions are not only carried out in actuality but actions get performed on the terrain between life and love, actuality and beyond. The forms and shapes formed are continuous and repetitive, maintaining an order.

The women characters mostly focus on their self dignity and consistency defying society's strict regulations of purity. Far from vaunting the useless values laid down by patriarchy, the characters seek the gaps and loopholes in the rules made only to live life and attain control over their self. The characters perform their existence and every character's life in Karnad's plays is to explicate their existence. The characters in Karnad's plays create a strange admixture of the conventional and bear the trend of the day. The women characters defy with subtlety while the men create an ambience of placidity, the calmness which can only be acquired while not intervening with the tradition and convention.

Karnad toys with the meanings of chastity as the characters toy with the codes laid down for women by patriarchy. Karnad an actor and playwright, quite meticulously creates the space for characters who find their life amidst straitened conditions. The characters under the cryptic processes of society find for themselves the functions of growth. As a child grows, so too do the other characters. The child Rani (*Naga-Mandala*), growing into an adult and Padmini the youth are both chaste in spite of their more than one companion. Padmini and Rani both grow and flourish while remaining confined to the norms of their lives.

Karnad, the playwright who in his plays intricately connected the Indian setting to the Indian persona recreates the predominance of darkness in Indian life. From belonging to the post-colonial world to the continent where whites had ruled because of their supremacy in being whites, everywhere lurks darkness. This darkness finds its substance as the villages devoid of electricity

creates a deeper impact on the mind in weaving stories of fear and fancy amidst the darkness of Indian roads and villages.

The darkness that spills throughout the text creates a dark blackboard for the projection of motifs. The setting of *Nagmandala* has an ambience which seems quite feminine. Rani, a young girl has set out to her husband's place for the first time; this is her first move out of the proximity with her parents, out of the warmth of home and hearth. She has attained puberty, but is still a girl, yet to grow up in the realization of a woman.

Rani is a young adolescent but as she steps into the domain of marriage, she becomes a matured individual. The female principles in *Naga-Mandala* come up and unite as one factor clamouring for the liberation of their souls. The flames come together bringing in their story and every story has a resonance which goes on and on. The characters other than the flames, that of the old woman who had stifled her song and story had in their turn rebelled against her. The song and story in being stifled within a woman's heart get suffocated and ultimately become her enemies, rather than what could have been an element of power. As the narration goes—

The moment her mouth opened, the story and the song jumped out and hid in the attic. At night when the old man had gone to sleep, the story took the form of a young woman and the song became a sari. The young woman wrapped herself in the sari and stepped out, just as the old lady was coming in (Karnad *Naga- Mandala* 4).

The woman's deep seated longings and desires in the form of story grow powerful and in their overpowering sentiments they finally ruin the possessor as the old lady finds the young woman coming out of her husband's room. Dr Prem Sagar and Raka Varshney in the *Introduction* to the book *Yayati*, finds a connection between the crafting of story with the local village plays that Karnad had seen, spinning together myths, dreams, vision and all that had penetrated deep in his consciousness— "Karnad recollects that he used to go with the servants to sit up nights watching the more traditional *Yakshagana* performance..." (1)

The story and the song along with the flames pile together to form a sisterhood— the story gets preserved in the heart of the flames who gossip like women in the darkness. The camaraderie that is formed is suddenly intruded upon by the dramatist who gets hold of the flames in search of a story. The story emerges in the confined cloister where women open their hearts. This sisterhood and unison is extended. Kurudavva comes together with Rani, and Rani and Kurudavva together defy Appanna. Appanna who was intent upon taking to his whims is suddenly defied by the women who trick him. If Kurudavva had attempted to keep Appanna tied to Rani's apron string, Rani becomes one with the Naga in the semblance of her husband. Appanna is marginalized by the end of the play and Rani, as her name implies, emerges as the queen. The protagonist Rani becomes the sole arbiter of her lot as she chooses to consider the Naga, in the resemblance of Appanna as her husband.

Rani's husband Appanna restricts her moves to the kitchen and keeps her to the household chores and cooking. Appanna has no concern for Rani and as comes up from the version of the blind lady Kurudava, he has an amorous relationship with a concubine. She pines all day and night and in a dire attempt to get out from her closeted existence she befriends the darkness of her room. In this darkness Rani spins new dreams and recreates fantasies that had crept in her mind during the day. However in this ambience they sprawl and grow and make scope for new imaginings— "Her words become distinct as the lights dim. It is night" (7).

Rani's seclusion in the confinement of her room parallels the desolate setting of the tryst of the flames where they re-live after they are put off. The flames begin in darkness and darkness acts the base of their survival. They however demean darkness by their very presence. In the dark ambience the flames gather together, giving birth to stories in the pregnant darkness. The setting is still but not stagnant. In this ambience grows and brews new feelings, newer perceptions and the unnamed stirring attains a name and structure in the form of a story. The flames blurt out their own stories

and thus begin the unending saga of love and coming together, exchange and communication. Darkness aggravates passion and makes the perfect setting for love-making.

Darkness can be elaborately connected to human imagination, the unconscious that gives a form to human mind's nascent feeling and what emerges is a picture curved and portrayed into a form. The flames endure a shock as they guess the presence of an eavesdropper in the figure of the playwright. The formation of the story from darkness of the mind or setting where it is brewed to the lime light of the theatre house, via the imagination of the creative artist opens up in the anecdote of the playwright overhearing the original story lived and narrated by the flames.

The flames glow in darkness, the darkness that endows vision to the blind, the spirit that connects the frame narrative to the embedded narrative. Darkness gives layers to the linear narrative and in the play of light and shade; the fictitious reality gets relegated to the background while the reverberations get sounded. In the nascent effervescence that is formed in Karnad's *Nagmandala*, a zone is sought where each character can grab her space in spite of his/her space in spite of her/his reality. This search for a space of one's own connects almost every character in their pursuit. The characters in *Naga-Mandala* do not get cloyed by darkness, nor do their souls get numbed. Instead the characters grow a voracious appetite to gorge life and extract their essences.

Darkness all around carves shades of mystery. Darkness makes scope for imaginings and the characters become fluid, changing form and transforming themselves. Darkness broods, brewing passion and what unravels is a host of confusions possessing double meanings. The unfathomable darkness creates panic but nonetheless opens up possibilities and newer beginnings are created. As Karnad recollects his memory of childhood in Sirsi in his autobiographical book *This Life at Play: Memoirs*:

I must mention two aspects of my childhood in Sirsi which we have lost forever.

The first is the experience of total undiluted darkness. There was no electricity in Sirsi ...And we learnt to taste the many shades of darkness... That quality of total darkness that takes us to the brink of blindness, also has a close relationship with complete silence. The lack of sound itself seems to shape the light one senses....

The other element we have lost along with the world of complete darkness is an abundance of stories. You could run into them everywhere— (46-47).

In *Naga-Mandala* the protagonist Rani steps out of her father's house and ventures into a new world in the house of her husband. However there is no peace, and this absence is supplanted in the presence of the darkness of her ambience where a huge whale comes and different other aspects of nature emerge to give release to the mind from the caverns of dark distress. Rani an alien in her new home and land remains submerged in grief and only then Kurudava works out her release in extending her presence to the young girl. Moreover she gives a miracle potion to Rani that would make her husband fall in love with her. But it accidentally falls upon the Cobra.

It is darkness which makes possible the entry of the Naga in Rani's household. As Kurudavva's potion starts working upon the Cobra, the Cobra falls in love with Rani. The love-lorn Rani gets fulfilment in the love of the Naga who comes to her in the resemblance of her husband. Though several incidents put together might have given enough reasons to Rani to disbelieve in the fake resemblance of the Naga with her husband Appanna, yet till the end of the play there is hardly any clear indication as to Rani's doubts in the existence of the Naga as a different entity other than her husband. In the depths of darkness Naga and Rani unite becoming the perfect soul-meet to each other.

Nature beguiles man and cheats Appanna in his very resemblance. Appanna endures a terrible shock when he finds Rani pregnant. In this regard it might be said that Karnad was experimenting with the thought of fruition in love and hence the emergence of the baby through interaction between the

woman and the Cobra. Sincerity and fullness in love in the relationship of the Naga and Rani, stand as a contrast to the relationship of Appanna and the concubine, where the relationship is merely for attraction, and satisfaction of the appetites. This darkness ends abruptly as Appanna comes to know of Rani's pregnancy. Immediately it is broad daylight putting an end to the night's darkness. The love and amorousness, the desire and deep longing get transformed into jealousy and envy. The lack of darkness spills the romanticism prevalent in the work.

Karnad's works had seen surfacing of epics and folk-lore, the coming up of different stories from the episodes of *Mahabharata* or *Kathasaritsagara* or the folk-tradition of India where stories have a unique existence devoid of the story-teller who direly attempts to fit in the dynamic story into the life's experience of the narrator. The narrator attempts to possess the story but in vain. In several works of Karnad, the existential crisis of man trapped in his setting and ego becomes prominent. Kirtinath Kurtkoti in the *Introduction to Hayavadana* introspects:

He had the genius and power to transform any situation into an aesthetic experience, the quality of which, to use Joyce's vocabulary, would be 'static' rather than 'kinetic' (ix).

The darkness though a hindrance to those with sight is no hindrance for Kurudavva, whose blindness gives her a sense beyond the superficial senses of this world. Kurudavva's son gives her the vision and on one occasion as he stumbles, Kurudavva claims that it is the problem of the people with sight. Amidst darkness vision is nowhere impaired, rather darkness provides a serenity that transcends vision.

When Rani's vision and Kurudavva's experiences meet, Kurudavva can easily see the beauty of Rani by feeling her countenance with her hands. Naga takes advantage of the night. As the night-queen blossoms and the air is filled with the fragrance Naga slithers in and the blank darkness of Rani's room finds its meaning and Rani's heart, its fulfilment. The advantage of darkness makes ground for the flow of desires and the union of hearts.

In the darkness of the night Rani finds her self, realizes her womanhood and attains perfect reciprocation in love. The Naga though not a human gives her the fulfilment that she had aspired for. Rani gets her deserving only when Naga falls in love with her. The potion given to her by Kurudavva had failed to work its influence on Appanna and though it had made him unwell the desired result had not come. On the contrary the very pouring of the curry cooked with the root given by Kurudavva makes the Naga fall in love with Rani.

In the midst of night Rani and Naga dance and in their perfect orchestration the moment reaches the acme of bliss in togetherness. The two together form their world in the darkness of the room. Though Rani had guessed the difference between the same person behaving like polar opposites during the day and night, she had been shocked to see the bite marks of the dog or the mongoose on the man of the night, disappearing in the man of the day; still she had believed in Naga and believed in his presence in her room as authentic. Until the end of the play though quite naive on the part of Rani, we had ever believed in her simplicity whereby she had believed in Naga as the same person as the one appearing in daylight. This dichotomy between realities at day versus dream- imagination by night perishes as Rani conceives and can feel the child in her womb, the real reality, far from the dilemma of her thoughts and perceptions.

Rani gets away from Naga by her pregnancy and the altercation which emerges as a result of the same. The aldermen of the society pile up at the behest of Appanna and as Rani blames the Naga for behaving in an alien manner and calling upon the village elders to judge upon her the readers/audience become quite confident of Rani's stupidity. However this dubiousness of her character reveals its guile as Rani, while in the company of her husband in the end, encounters the Naga dropping from her head, feeling heavy and discomforting. She immediately reveals her recognition reiterating her connection with him claiming, "You? What are you doing here? He'll kill you" (Karnad *Naga-Mandala* 45), and advising him to enter into her hair and stay there as a part



of their existence and as a mark of her desire. The attractiveness and the seductiveness in women as had often been considered to have emerged from the black locks of hair in women is pronounced in this symbolic performance where the snake who had responded to Rani's desire ultimately turns out to add on to her seductive looks.

The self (Naga) who had made her a wife as Kurudavva had wished remains tied to her enmeshed in her hairs. As Rani accommodates the norms of life and society by sharing her body with her husband, she shares her head with the male who had given her the power to realize her dreams and had made her fearless in love. She had given up dreading and had converted the snake to a mere black strand of her hair. As the darkness of the night had hidden the slithering moves of the Naga, the swaying darkness of her hairs had harboured the dark stature of the Cobra, for life, giving him a new existence.

As daylight sets into the play, confusion emerges and towards the light begins the journey of rationality. The characters throughout the play are trapped in this dichotomy. The broad daylight which is supposed to pose the truth, actuality renders the real truth null and void. What comes up is that there is hardly any real truth. What is seen as the truth is just a version of truth not specific but unknown. In this coming together of the different versions of truth arise the multifaceted meaning of life. Life is seen from a different angle and the different responses to life create numerous versions. However with the advent of daylight the tryst of Naga and Rani is destroyed and the serenity of the confined hearth is let loose; the characters all come to the thoroughfare of life. Under such a circumstance as life seems to be getting beyond its strict parameters of confinement and surreptitiousness, Kurudavva loses her sense. She no more can recognise Rani, nor narrate the story of her offering the roots to her, that which was meant to arouse love and affection in her husband. Instead she searches as a madwoman, for her son Kappanna, one who had served as her vision. On one occasion Kappanna confesses that he would pray to the Lord Hanuman of the gymnasium so as to derive strength to carry his mother on his shoulders.

Kurudavva had been seeking her son in the village but was nowhere to be seen. Kappanna had vanished in a suspicious manner. The Dark One, Kappanna had vanished in the same fashion as darkness itself, and every man, Appanna had come to the broad daylight claiming his rightful claim over the virginity of his wife. Previously as Appanna was missing, Kurudavva had treaded the way to the house of Appanna only with the help of Kappanna, one who had carried her on his shoulders.

Kappanna as is revealed from the comments of Kurudavva and from the previous conversations between the mother and son, was always being stalked by a Yaksha woman. It is this Yaksha woman who had emerged and out of a terrible uncanny desire had taken Kappanna in her grasp. The vanishing of Kappanna and Naga along with the darkness suggest that both these characters— one the dark one as his name implies and the other the Dark Cobra, everywhere is a connection with the earth and the heaviness associated with it. The darkness reflects one of the predominant aspects of the Universe that is generally defied by the animal world, especially humans, as they disregard their rights in sleep.

The host of unrequited desires prowl at night time and so too the splendour of natural beauty which breathes its essence into the air of the night sky, the dew drops drop on the flowers and trees freshen up the air with fragrant breeze. The rejuvenating power of night, the life-giving grace-showering quality of night gives to the world the space and vigour to recreate itself. This darkness is the source of budding of new life, the sprouting of new vegetation and the birth of newer potentialities.

The darkness in *Naga-Mandala* is that generative darkness that enables the flourishing of the mind. The growth and nourishment that life gets from nature is mainly brought about during the night. The soothing, caressing effect of night is the comforting silence of mother's womb, the flow of the ambience in the wind gently blowing and the ripples moving quietly is felt. The generative power of darkness which is very much conspicuous in the darkness of the mother's womb can be felt in the

whale coming up as the mother and swimming away with Rani, possibly to the calmness and peace, the safety and security of sleeping between her parents. The jelly-like flow in the mother's womb and the flow of imagination in the mind, sprouting the flow of unconscious act strongly here and is felt quite stirringly.

The episode of the Naga and the Yaksha woman surface as the two faces of the same coin. The desire which transforms even a serpent to a human and resemblances from the other worlds encroach upon the human world becomes quite visible in *Naga-Mandala*. Like the character of Padmini *Hayavadana*, where she unconsciously transposes the head of her husband Devdutt on the body of Kapila, the man towards whose body she feels an indomitable pull, merging both Devdutt and Kapila into one being, bringing together the best of both the ends, similarly in *Naga-Mandala* too, the two characters Appanna and Naga unite to become one single entity bearing the resemblance of the man to whom she is wedded. Rani in this merging of both the entities can at once show her fidelity to her husband and still possess the heart of the serpent who desires her.

Kurudavva had named her son Kappanna, the Dark One, but he was not dark, rather fair and beautiful. However the darkness all around the blind Kurudavva had made her son a dark presence before her. Rani's black hairs on a similar note had made her daubed in the colour black as her traces had flown down to her ankles. The darkness that had covered all of Rani's life had given her the new scope of a life beyond. As Rani had sat trapped in the dark fears of her alienation, she had started dreaming. Her dreams would bring about the wish-fulfilment. As darkness would set in she would start dreaming. Her dreams would bring about the big eagle, who would carry her on its strong wings and take her to her parents where she would have to languish no more as she would reach the safety and security of her parents, she would lie down between her parents and then would come the big whale working out her release. In her confinement she would always have dreams of release; as powerful as to materialize into truth. The release does come and indeed in the hands of the object of nature, the Cobra the symbol of which she had carried from her head in her hairs, through the nape to her ankles.

The darkness all about her get coiled in the congealed darkness of her mind's void. The Naga, the black Cobra gives her love, joy, company. Rani attains womanhood and journeys towards motherhood only when the Naga embraces her in love. Dr. Tuta Eswar Rao, a veteran critic in his paper titled, "Mythical Elements in Indian Plays: A Study of *Naga-Mandala* of Girish Karnad" published in the *Orissa Review*, realizes—

In *Naga-Mandala*, the story of the cobra suggests that the play is intended to dramatize not merely the folk tales, but also to imply a deeper meaning at various levels. The folk-tale element of the *Naga-Mandala* and the magical power, which the cobra possesses continually, remind the spectators that they are only watching a play (85).

Rani's life grows as she learns guile and gets educated in the wiles through which she can remain within the strict parameters of the society, yet stay outside it. Her growth and flourish includes her listening to her self rather than resorting to the others around her. In the beginning of the play she had been dominated by her husband, Appanna. In the end she gets over the struggles and stands victorious controlling the lives of both her husband and the concubine, to whom her husband had devoted himself, in the beginning of the play. The Naga who had taught her the lessons of love and guile, surreptitious enjoyment, changing of shapes and forms, ultimately is guided by Rani into taking up mysterious shapes and identity in her life. As in the Introduction to *Historicizing Gender and Sexuality*, Kevin P. Murphy and Jennifer M. Spear summarize the understanding of Howard Chiang's paper titled, "Epistemic Modernity and the Emergence of Homosexuality in China," as it gives an insight into sexuality as instrumental in formation of identity—

Chiang argues that the engagement of Chinese intellectuals with western sexual scientific knowledge points to a broader transformation in the conceptualization of ‘personhood, subjectivity and identity (5).

The deep feeling of despair with which Rani had started her journey gets transferred upon Naga, who had been powerful enough as to guide her along and endow upon her the realization of life. While her husband had played the trick demeaning her entity, making her know that she was not needed, the situation gets reversed after the moral trial of Rani where Appanna has to live a puny existence. The entire situation is turned upside down, however Rani’s beautiful locks continue to make her beautiful and prove functional in the end.

The term “Naga-Mandala” in the title suggests a completion, a circle formed and a process bearing neither beginning nor any end. The entire process begins and ends without hindrance or interference. Life is thus a continuous process which in this play had been incited by the presence of Nature in association with humans, another element of nature. Nature and man are intricately connected and this affects completion, the completion that had been given by the union between human, Rani, and the serpent, Naga. Their union giving birth to a son, this birth creates a new interpretation of life, which is complete— the life which opens out is nothing but one replete whole created by the presence of the snake who begins the story and puts an end to it. This completion which is stricken by the presence of the snake is reflected in the ambience by the darkness all around. The darkness creates a regenerative pall which brews newer possibilities and energies. New beginnings are crafted and deadlocks released only in the presence of darkness.

The darkness creates a concentration which seeps deeper than individual existence and transcends to form a collective existence where women form a sisterhood. The flames with female voices arrange themselves in order and the world of nature with animals and snakes and ant-hills become one in love, desire and suffering. The Yaksha woman from the haunted well or the desolate cemetery are driven by their desires into the world of men and vice-versa.

In this play the presence of males as the playwright, the Naga or Kappanna, though males, yet in their marginalized state are far from their maleness or power which is predominant in a male-dominated society. Instead they are engulfed in the darkness, erased in the void or harboured in the dark tresses of life. The playwright enamoured in the darkness await the birth of a real story to salvage his soul and escape the shadow of non-existence. As Tutun Mukherjee in the *Introduction* to her book *Girish Karnad’s Plays: Performance and Critical Perspectives*, aptly observes:

In Karnad’s plays, the worlds of reality and fantasy or illusion meet in such a way that poetry is created. To echo what was said about Genet’s work, Karnad’s plays represent the junction point at which “dream is simultaneously reality, where the invisible coincides with the visible, where the object is both itself and the revelation of something not-itself” (Coe, 213-14) (qtd. Mukherjee 17).

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