

EXPLORING THE COMPLEXITIES OF SOCIETY THROUGH POTENT SYMBOLISM WITH REFERENCE TO THE PLAY “NAGA MANDALA” BY GIRISH KARNAD

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Abstract

This research paper “Exploring the Complexities of Society through Potent Symbolism with Reference to the Play “Naga Mandala” by Girish Karnad”, delves into societal complexities through potent symbolism. The flickering flames are symbols of negativity that encompass societal ills through narratives. The ruined temple symbolizes the corrosion of ethics and moral values among humans and urge for introspection. The protagonist's struggle to stay awake becomes a metaphor for society's need for renewal. Getting back to the roots and reconnecting with cultural heritage is presented as key to individual and societal well-being, with the protagonist's potential salvation signifying the transformative power of reclaiming lost values. The play eschews condemnation, but promotes a nuanced examination of morality and its challenges.

Key Words: Society, symbolism, folk tales, culture, tradition

Girish Karnad a towering personality known for the dramatic art form in post colonial Indian theater. He wasn't just a playwright, but a bridge builder and a weaver of stories, delving deep into the psyche, impregnated with subtlety and traditional values of life. Unlike others who saw Indian mythology as a dusty relic, Karnad, the archaeologist of stories, dug deep into the core of culture and tradition and saw it as a vibrant reservoir of wisdom and reflection, brimming with relevance for the contemporary world. Like Amish who gave a new direction to Indian mythology through his Trilogy of Shiva, Karnad's art too lay in resurrecting these myths, fragments at a time, and fusing them with the pulsating realities of modern India. He is not orthodoxical in approach. He adapted himself to variegated strategies of storytelling. He created magic through his characters and knew the significance of folk traditions in preserving the cultural tapestry of India. Through his innovative reinterpretation of myths and his embrace of folk traditions, he revitalized

Indian theatre and left an enduring legacy that continues to inspire generations of artists and audiences alike.

Karnad wasn't merely a collector of dusty artifacts. He was an alchemist, transforming these borrowed elements into potent commentaries on modern society. His plays, like "Naga-Mandala," were not mere historical re-enactments; they were conversations that serve as connectivity between the past and the present. Every myth is like a mirror reflecting the complexities of contemporary life. Through these stories which seem to be timeless, he explored universal themes of love, loss, identity, and the constant struggle for truth.

His plays went beyond mere entertainment; they were potent political statements. He wasn't afraid to challenge dominant narratives, question social norms, and expose the hypocrisies lurking beneath the surface. He understood that theatre, like those ancient masks worn by actors, could reveal hidden truths, sparking uncomfortable but necessary conversations about gender, power, and the very fabric of Indian society.

Karnad's impact on Indian theatre was multi-faceted. He didn't just revive forgotten traditions; he breathed new life into them, making them relevant and accessible to a modern audience. He reminded everyone that theatre wasn't just about grand productions; it was about intimate storytelling, powerful voices, and questioning the status quo. By using mythology as a springboard, he ignited a conversation about history, identity, and the enduring human spirit. Girish Karnad wasn't just a playwright; he was a weaver of narratives, a bridge builder between past and present, and a fearless voice challenging societal norms.

In Karnad's play "Naga-Mandala," Karnad takes a feminist and humanist stance through the protagonist, Rani. Trapped in a loveless marriage, Rani endures neglect and isolation after her husband, Appanna, seeks solace in a concubine on their first wedding night. Her confinement symbolizes societal restrictions and her longing for connection. The arrival of a mysterious Naga (snake) changes everything. It grants Rani the emotional and physical intimacy she craves, challenging societal norms that demand female fidelity while overlooking male transgressions. This incident, reminiscent of Sita's fire ordeal in Ramayana, ultimately transforms Rani into a figure revered by Appanna, who confronts his own failings and limitations.

Karnad cleverly uses the Naga to highlight social double standards and question the very concept of truth. Each character – Rani, the Naga, and Appanna – has their own subjective interpretation of reality, exposing the complexities of perception and belief. Girish Karnad's "Naga-Mandala" delves deeper than just a thrilling encounter with a cobra. It weaves a complex tapestry of tradition, culture, and gender dynamics, drawing inspiration from two Karnataka folk tales narrated by women. These stories, shared within the intimacy of family, transcend mere entertainment, serving as a hidden language passed down through generations, often between women.

The title itself, "Naga-Mandala," holds symbolic weight. The word "Naga," referring to the cobra, signifies not just a physical creature but also a potent cultural symbol. Historically, it represents the union of male and female snakes, hinting at the play's exploration of forbidden

desires and transgressions. This cobra transcends its reptilian form, transforming into a human, blurring the lines between reality and myth, nature and desire.

But the title doesn't solely center the snake. "Mandala," meaning circle or union, also points towards the protagonist, Rani. Trapped in a loveless marriage, she finds solace and intimacy in the unlikely serpent figure. This "play with the cobra" becomes a metaphor for defying social norms and seeking forbidden connections.

Karnad emphasizes the significance of this serpent not just through the title but also by making it the only non-human character with a name. This decision elevates the snake beyond its animalistic role, transforming it into a complex narrative thread that challenges societal expectations and beliefs.

The reference to historical anecdotes like "mothers of great men impregnated by serpents" further underscores the play's subversion of traditional power structures. It hints at the potential for marginalized voices, like Rani's, to challenge established narratives and rewrite their own destinies, even if seemingly aided by supernatural forces.

In conclusion, "Naga-Mandala" goes beyond a sensational encounter with a serpent. It uses the figure of the cobra as a powerful symbol to explore themes of societal norms, forbidden desires, and the potential for marginalized individuals to forge their own paths, even if it means venturing into the realm of myth and defying expectations.

NagaMandala, drawing upon Indian snake myths, uses the cobra's magical tale not just as entertainment but as a deeper exploration. While the folk elements and mystical powers remind audiences they're watching a play, the story delves into profound themes.

Though Karnad doesn't reveal specific sources, similar stories exist in most Indian languages. The first involves a cobra transforming into a man at night to visit a married woman, while the second explores the belief that an all-night temple vigil can ward off death. Karnad masterfully merges these elements, creating a modern interpretation of age-old themes.

By weaving together these two folk tales, Karnad creates a compelling narrative that highlights the interplay between art and imagination on one hand, and reality on the other. This interplay invites the audience to engage with the deeper meaning embedded within the play's seemingly fantastical elements.

Naga Mandala: A Social Commentary Through Symbolism

Naga Mandala delves into the complexities of society, employing potent symbols to explore moral dilemmas and potential for change. The flickering flames serve as a multifaceted symbol. While representing negativity within society, they also act as individual voices whispering stories of greed, disrespect, and stifled tradition. Their diverse narratives unveil the spectrum of societal issues, prompting reflection on individual and collective responsibility. The ruined temple stands as a poignant symbol of society's eroded moral foundation. Its decaying state reflects the fading importance of ethics and tradition, highlighting the need for introspection and revival.

The protagonist's desperate struggle to stay awake through the night carries metaphorical weight. His battle for survival reflects the urgency for modern society to recognize its precarious state and seek renewal. The play suggests that rediscovering and reconnecting with one's cultural heritage is crucial for individual and societal well-being. The man's potential salvation symbolizes the transformative power of reclaiming lost values and traditions.

While highlighting problematic societal trends, NagaMandala avoids simplistic judgments. The play encourages deeper understanding of the characters and their contexts, offering a nuanced exploration of morality rather than mere condemnation.

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