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RESEARCH ARTICLE

EXAMINING CULTURAL CONFLICT: IDENTITY AND TRANSFORMATION IN GIRISH KARNAD'S NAGA-MANDALA

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Abstract

Naga-mandalais a compelling exploration of cultural conflict, identity, and transformation within the socio-cultural framework of India. The play interweaves traditional folk narratives with contemporary existential dilemmas, offering a nuanced commentary on gender dynamics, societal norms, and individual agency. The tale of Rani, a young woman trapped in a patriarchal marriage, serves as a lens to examine the intricate interplay of cultural traditions and personal identity. Her transformative journey, shaped by mythological elements like the mystical serpent (naga), underscores the tension between rigid societal expectations and the fluidity of human identity. Karnad employs folklore as a narrative device to critique oppressive structures and highlight the potential for personal and collective transformation. The magical realism in *Naga-mandala* bridges the chasm between myth and reality, allowing for a reimagining of cultural identity that transcends traditional binaries of male and female, individual and community. The play also raises critical questions about the construction of gender and the evolving roles within familial and societal contexts. The present paper examines how *Naga-mandala* portrays the complexities of cultural identity as both a personal and collective construct, highlighting the conflicts that arise from societal rigidity and individual aspirations. Through its layered narrative, the play challenges audiences to rethink the narratives that define cultural and personal identities, urging a broader acceptance of transformation and hybridity in a globalized context.

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Introduction:-

Girish Karnad is an eminent Indian playwright, actor, and filmmaker known for his contributions to modern Indian theatre and cinema. Karnad blended traditional Indian myths, history, and folklore with contemporary themes, creating powerful narratives that explored identity, politics, and human relationships. His plays, such as *Tughlaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1971), and *Bali: The Sacrifice* (1980), are celebrated for their innovative use of symbolism and dramatic structures. Karnad's works often delved into existential and social issues, challenging societal norms and provoking critical thought.

Naga-mandalaby Karnad is a mythological play that explores themes of love, fidelity, identity, and transformation, deeply rooted in Indian mythology and folklore. The play centers around the life of Rani, a young woman trapped in

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an oppressive marriage to Appanna, a neglectful and unfaithful husband. The narrative unfolds in a magical realist setting, blending the mundane with the fantastical. A mystical element is introduced when Rani consumes a magical potion intended to win her husband's love. Instead, the potion transforms into a cobra (Naga) that assumes Appanna's form and begins a relationship with Rani. This duality creates a layered exploration of identity, fidelity, and desire.

Culture is not instinctive or inherited; rather, it is something humans learn and adopt through experience. It encompasses a collective set of beliefs, values, and attitudes a community shares. An action or thought becomes part of culture when it is collectively embraced and upheld by a group of people, forming a shared understanding that defines their identity. Over time, culture evolves, with certain traditions and beliefs fading away while new practices and ideas emerge. This fluidity is a defining characteristic of culture: it is always in motion and never static. As fresh concepts and innovations are introduced, they blend with the existing ones, reshaping and redefining the culture, and ensuring its continuous transformation.

The term "culture," as a concept, encompasses the traditions, lifestyles, and beliefs that shape both the tangible and intangible elements of a society. It is through culture that we find purpose and direction in our lives. Humans are not only the creators of culture, but it is culture itself that defines and enriches our humanity. The American anthropologist Ernest Gellner articulates the unique characteristics of national culture, emphasizing its distinct qualities in his writings:

Culture is now the necessary shared medium, the life-blood, or perhaps rather the minimal share atmosphere, within which alone the members of the society can breathe and survive and produce. (Gellner 37-38)

In other words, despite the differences in gender, class, or race among its members, a national culture strives to bring them together under a unified cultural identity. A national culture is not merely a means of connection, loyalty, or symbolic representation but also a framework for cultural power. While cultures may vary, sociologists acknowledge the presence of a dominant culture that typically stands out. Therefore, it can be argued that "The dominant culture of a society refers to the main culture in a society, which is shared, or at least accepted without opposition, by the majority of the people". (Lindholm 32)

The dominant culture of a society represents its prevailing cultural norms, widely accepted by the majority without significant opposition. For instance, in British culture, the predominant feature may be associated with being "white." However, it is important to acknowledge and respect the coexistence of diverse cultural expressions within the dominant framework. These alternate forms can be categorized as subcultures, folk cultures, or high cultures, each contributing to the cultural fabric. These can be described as,

A subculture is a smaller culture held by a group of people within the main culture of a society, in some ways different from the main culture but with many aspects in common. Examples of subcultures include those of some young people, gypsies and travelers, gay people, different social classes and minority ethnic groups. (Lindholm 32)

The concept of identity has long been a subject of deep human contemplation, with its many complexities explored across various fields, including political, sociological, and cultural studies. Identity holds significant theoretical value, as it is through the recognition of our own identity and understanding the identities of others that we navigate our roles as social and political beings.

Identity refers to how individuals or groups perceive and define themselves, as well as how they are perceived by others. It is shaped by the process of socialization and the impact of key institutions like family, media, and education. Both personal choices and external responses play a role in defining identity, but individuals often cannot freely select their identity. Factors such as social class, ethnicity, and gender heavily influence how others view them, limiting their freedom to adopt any identity they desire. As Stuart Hall writes about identity, "Identity is not fixed property and it is like a fluid form that changes from time to time'....We know that the identity which we establish has no constant whole but it changes from time to time". (Hall 39)

Edward Said critiques the idea of a singular, fixed identity, calling for the deconstruction of this all-encompassing concept. He argues that identity should not be viewed as static or monolithic. As he remarks, ". . . that identity does

not necessarily imply ontologically given and eternally determined stability or uniqueness, or irreducible character, or a privileged status as something total and complete in itself". (Said 315)

Stuart Hall provides a profound perspective on the development of cultural identity. He suggests that identities are not static or finalized; they are always evolving, shaped and reshaped over time. Hall views identity as a dynamic, ongoing process, always "becoming." Emphasizing the influence of discourse in identity formation, Hall states:

'I use 'identity' to refer to the meeting point, the point of suture, between on the one hand, the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be spoken. Identities are the points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us' (Hall 222-223)

Hall states in *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory*, "Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power". (112)

Cultural identity, a construct shaped by shared traditions and collective memories, often conflicts with the evolving realities of modern society. *Nagamandala*, rooted in Indian folklore, reflects this tension, providing a rich narrative that interrogates the boundaries of tradition and modernity. The play, set in a rural Indian village, explores themes of tradition, folklore, and societal roles, all contributing to the construction of cultural identity. The central character, Rani, navigates the constraints imposed by her community's expectations, gender norms, and family traditions, all forming a complex web of cultural identity.

The narrative blends myth and reality, with the story of the snake goddess, and the magical transformation of Rani's life is central to the play. This intertwining of folklore with everyday life illustrates how cultural identity in *Nagamandala*, is not static but rather shaped by myth, tradition, and personal experiences. Karnad suggests that cultural identity is not just an individual construct but is deeply influenced by the collective values and stories of the community, with elements of folklore and ritual playing a key role in the forming and reforming of identity. As Karnad says,

Many of these tales also talk about the nature of tales. The story of the flames comments on the paradoxical nature of oral tales in general: they have an existence of their own, independent of the teller and yet live only when they are passed on from the possessor of the tale to the listener. Seen thus, the status of a tale becomes skin to that of a daughter, for traditionally a daughter too is not meant to be kept at home too long but has to be passed on. This identity adds poignant and ironic undertones to the relationship of the teller to the tales. (Karnad, "Appendix 1", 314-315)

The Fusion of Myth and Modernity

The fusion of myth and modernity refers to blending traditional mythological narratives with contemporary concepts, values, and realities. This convergence creates a unique space where ancient stories, symbols, and archetypes are reinterpreted and infused with new meanings in modern life. The fusion is not merely a matter of juxtaposing the old with the new; rather, it is a dynamic process that reflects the complexities of a society navigating between its historical roots and modern influences.

In literature, theatre, and other forms of cultural expression, the fusion of myth and modernity often serves as a means to explore the tension between tradition and progress. Myths, which have long been vehicles for explaining the mysteries of existence, are reimagined to address contemporary issues such as identity, power, social transformation, and individual agency. This blending can also be seen as a response to the alienating effects of modernity, where myth serves as a grounding force, offering a sense of continuity and belonging in an ever-changing world.

In Indian theatre, Girish Karnad's *Naga-mangala* and *Tughlaq* blend mythological themes with modern social concerns. *Nagamangala* juxtaposes the ancient myth of the snake goddess with the everyday struggles of a woman trapped in a traditional marriage, while *Tughlaq* uses historical and mythic elements to question the nature of power and leadership in a rapidly changing world. Both plays demonstrate how myth can be adapted to interrogate the complexities of modern life.

The fusion of myth and modernity also allows for a re-examination of cultural identity. As societies modernize, the old myths may seem increasingly irrelevant, yet they continue to shape collective consciousness and provide a framework for understanding new realities. The incorporation of myth into modern contexts enables individuals to grapple with modern dilemmas while remaining rooted in their cultural heritage. As the lines suggest,

The inner sanctum of a ruined temple. The idol is broken, so the presiding deity of the temple cannot be identified. It is night. Moonlight seeps in through the cracks in the roof and the walls. A man sitting in the temple. Long silence. Suddenly, he opens his eyes wide. Closes them. Then uses his fingers to pry open his eyelids. Then he goes back to his original morose stance. He yawns involuntarily. Then reacts to the yawn by shaking his head violently, and turns to the audience. (Karnad 247)

In the play, the myth of the snake goddess, as well as the magical transformation of Rani's life, is interwoven with her struggles within a rigid, patriarchal society. This mythological framework, while rooted in ancient beliefs, is used to comment on contemporary societal issues, such as the oppressive roles women play in rural communities. The magical and mythical elements of the play represent the enduring power of tradition, while the narrative structure and its exploration of personal freedom reflect modern concerns. Kurudava said in the play,

I'll tell you. I was born blind. No one would marry me. My father wore himself out trudging from village to village, looking for a husband. But to no avail. One day a mendicant came to our house. No one was home. I was alone. I looked after him in every way. Cooked hot food specially for him and served him to his heart's content. He was pleased with me and gave me three pieces of a root. 'Any man who eats one of these will marry you', he said. (Karnad 261)

The fusion of myth and modernity in *Nagamandala* emphasizes the fluidity of cultural identity. Karnad suggests that modernity doesn't erase tradition; instead, it provides new lenses through which ancient myths and stories can be reinterpreted, allowing for the reinvention of cultural narratives in response to changing social realities. Through this fusion, the play explores how myths continue to inform and shape modern identities, even in the face of changing social, political, and cultural landscapes. Rani says,

When I saw your scowling face in the morning, I would be certain everything was a fantasy and almost want to cry. But my real anxiety began as the evening approached. I would merely lie here, my eyes shut tight. What is there to see after all? The same walls. The same roof. As the afternoon passed, my whole being got focused in my ears. The bells of cattle returning home—that means it is late afternoon. The cacophony of birds in a far-away tree—it is sunset. The chorus of crickets spreading from one grove to another—it is night. Now he will come. Suppose he doesn't tonight? Suppose the nightqueen does not blossom? Suppose it's all a dream? Every night the same anxiety. The same cold feeling deep within me! Thank God. That's all past now. (Karnad 282)

Rani: A Symbol of Cultural Dichotomy

In *Naga-mandala*, Rani serves as a powerful symbol of cultural dichotomy, embodying the tension between tradition and individual transformation. Set against the backdrop of rural India, Girish Karnad's play explores the complexity of cultural identity, especially for women trapped within traditional gender roles and societal expectations. Rani's character is not just a representation of a personal struggle, but also a reflection of the broader cultural conflict between the old and the new, the mythic and the modern.

At the beginning of the play, Rani is a young woman caught in the traditional expectations of marriage and domesticity. She is married to Appanna, a man who neglects her and remains emotionally distant. Rani's life is defined by the cultural norms of her rural community, where women are expected to be subservient, silent, and obedient. She is isolated, both emotionally and socially, and her identity is largely shaped by the roles prescribed to her by her culture.

Her early portrayal reflects the struggles of many women in patriarchal societies, where individual desires and agency are often suppressed. Rani's sense of self is defined not by personal choice but by the expectations placed on her as a wife. As she says:

I was a stupid, ignorant girl when you brought me here. But now I am a woman, a wife, and I am going to be a mother. I am not a parrot. Not a cat or a sparrow. Why don't you take it on trust that I have a mind and explain this charade to me? Why do you play these games? Why do you change like a chameleon from day to night? Even if I understood a little, a tiny bit—I could bear it. But now—sometimes I feel my head is going to burst! (Karnad 283-284)

The above lines reflect a poignant moment of self-awareness and empowerment, capturing a woman's journey from naïveté to self-realization. Rani acknowledges her past ignorance, emphasizing her transformation into a mature individual—a woman, wife, and soon-to-be mother. The metaphorical rejection of being likened to a parrot, cat, or sparrow symbolizes her refusal to be dismissed as insignificant, passive, or devoid of intellect. Instead, she asserts her agency, urging her husband to trust in her capability to comprehend the complexities of their relationship and circumstances.

The Transformation: Myth and Identity

The play takes a significant turn when Rani, seeking solace and love, becomes involved with a snake spirit (Naga) that enters her life through a supernatural transformation. This mythical encounter marks a departure from the constraints of traditional life, as the Naga gives Rani a new sense of agency and identity. The snake, through its mystical powers, allows Rani to explore a new self—one that is no longer bound by the patriarchal norms of her community.

In this transformation, Karnad weaves the power of myth into the fabric of Rani's identity. She can live out a parallel existence with the Naga, which symbolizes her potential for personal autonomy and empowerment. The encounter with myth allows Rani to break free from the cultural constraints that defined her earlier life. She is no longer just the dutiful, silent wife but becomes a woman who experiences both love and autonomy.

Rani's character embodies a cultural dichotomy in this transformation—she is caught between the traditional expectations of womanhood and the new possibilities for personal identity that the myth provides. Her shift represents the tension between a society that demands conformity and a personal desire to break free from those constraints. Karnad said,

Rani got everything she wished for, a devoted husband, a happy life. For Appanna's concubine was present at the trial. When she saw Rani's glory, she felt ashamed of her sinful life and volunteered to do menial work in Rani's house. Thus Rani even got a life-long servant to draw water for her house. In due course, Rani gave birth to a beautiful child. A son. Rani lived happily ever after with her husband, child and servant.(Karnad 293)

The passage illustrates a resolution that aligns with the traditional structure of poetic justice, where virtue is rewarded, and wrongdoing is rectified. Rani, having endured trials and challenges, emerges victorious, receiving the life she desired—a devoted husband, a harmonious household, and ultimately, societal reverence. The presence of Appanna's concubine at the trial serves as a pivotal moment of transformation. Witnessing Rani's dignity and glory evokes shame in the concubine, prompting her to renounce her sinful ways and voluntarily take on a humble role in Rani's household. The birth of a son also symbolizes fulfilment and continuity, solidifying Rani's position in the familial and social hierarchy. The narrative concludes with Rani living a contented life, suggesting that her perseverance, righteousness, and fortitude lead to a just and rewarding outcome, reinforcing moral ideals within the story's framework.

Rani is a compelling representation of cultural dichotomy. Her initial role as a dutiful wife reflects the oppressive traditional norms of her society, through her encounter with the Naga and her eventual transformation, Rani breaks free from these cultural constraints. Karnad uses Rani's character to explore how cultural identities are not fixed but are instead constantly evolving, shaped by both personal choices and the broader cultural forces. Rani symbolizes the struggle to reconcile the forces of tradition with the desire for personal freedom and self-empowerment, making her a powerful symbol of cultural dichotomy in contemporary Indian theatre.

The Cobra: A Symbol of Transformation

In *Naga-mandala*, the cobra (Naga) functions as a potent symbol of transformation, both personal and cultural. Through its mystical and mythological presence, the Naga disrupts the conventional norms that bind Rani, the protagonist, to a passive and submissive existence. The cobra's role is multifaceted, symbolizing the potential for self-realization, spiritual awakening, and the breaking of societal boundaries. It acts as a catalyst for Rani's transformation, shifting her identity from an oppressed woman to one who navigates the complexities of love, desire, and autonomy.

The cobra's first appearance in the play represents a profound shift in Rani's life. As a symbol of the divine and supernatural, the Naga offers Rani the opportunity to transcend her mundane, stifling reality. Initially, Rani is

depicted as a lonely and unfulfilled woman, constrained by the cultural norms of her rural Indian society. Her marriage to Appanna is devoid of affection, and she feels rejected and ignored by him. When the Naga enters Rani's life, it disrupts the traditional boundaries that govern her existence, offering her both the possibility of empowerment and a new identity. As Rani remarks,

I shall. Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you. Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you. No. I won't ask questions. I shall do what you tell me. Scowls in the day. Embraces at night. The snarl in the morning unrelated to the caress at night. But day or night, one motto does not change: Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you. (Karnad 283)

The juxtaposition of "scowls in the day" with "embraces at night" symbolizes the emotional volatility and manipulation that the speaker endures. The "snarl" in the morning and the "caress at night" represent the inconsistency of affection and the confusion it creates. The repetition of the mantra—"Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you"—reinforces the dominance exerted over the speaker, suppressing any desire for understanding or clarity. This reveals the psychological strain of living under such conditions, where control is exerted without regard for emotional well-being, highlighting the destructive impact of such one-sided power dynamics.

The Cobra as a Symbol of Rebirth and Sexuality

The Naga also symbolizes rebirth and sexual awakening. Through its supernatural intervention, Rani begins to experience a sense of empowerment she had never before known. Her encounter with the cobra releases her from the cultural constraints placed on her as a wife, allowing her to experience sexual desire and intimacy outside the confines of marriage. The Naga, therefore, not only represents transformation in a spiritual or personal sense but also embodies the release of suppressed desires and the reclaiming of sexual autonomy. As Naga speaks,

Rani! My queen! The fragrance of my nights! The blossom of my dreams! In another man's arms? In another man's bed? Does she curl around him as passionately every night now? And dig her nails into his back? Bite his lips? And here I am—a sloughed-off skin on the tip of a thorn. An empty sac of snake-skin. No. I can't bear this. Someone must die. Someone has to die. Why shouldn't I kill her? If I bury my teeth into her breast now, she will be mine. Mine forever! (Karnad 295-296)

The cobra thus acts as a liberating force, enabling Rani to realize the depths of her sexuality and desires, which had previously been stifled by the traditional roles imposed on her. The Naga facilitates a process of self-discovery, where Rani becomes attuned to parts of her identity that were buried under the weight of cultural repression.

In the play, the cobra is not merely a mythological figure; it is a symbol of profound transformation. It facilitates Rani's journey from a passive, oppressed woman to an empowered individual, allowing her to break free from the cultural and societal limitations imposed on her. The Naga represents the forces of change—both liberating and disruptive—that challenge the fixed structures of identity and tradition. Through the cobra, Karnad illustrates how myth can be a powerful tool for personal and cultural transformation, offering individuals the opportunity to transcend the roles that society assigns them and embrace new, more complex identities.

Conclusion:-

Girish Karnad explores the intricate dynamics of cultural conflict, identity, and transformation within a traditional Indian setting through the play. The play delves into the complexities of gender roles, societal expectations, and individual agency, using myth and folklore to highlight the struggles of its protagonist, Rani. Through her journey, the narrative interrogates the oppressive norms imposed on women, while simultaneously showcasing their resilience and ability to reclaim their identity. Rani's transformation from a submissive, voiceless figure to a powerful individual who commands respect and admiration underscores the potential for change within rigid cultural frameworks. The play also serves as a poignant commentary on the evolving notions of identity and the necessity of balancing tradition with progressive ideals, making it a timeless exploration of human relationships and cultural discourse.

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