

# Feminine Voice and Patriarchal Authority in Girish Karnad's Nagamandala

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**Abstract:** GirishKarnad'sNagamandala reimagines Indian folk tradition to articulate the suppressed emotional and psychological world of women living within patriarchal marriage. The play foregrounds the silent suffering of the female protagonist, Rani, whose identity is shaped and constrained by male authority, social norms, and moral double standards. Through the symbolic intervention of the mythical Naga, Karnad enables the emergence of a feminine voice that challenges patriarchal definitions of fidelity, virtue, and obedience. This paper examines how Nagamandala critiques patriarchal power structures by legitimizing female desire, emotional truth, and narrative agency. Using a feminist and textual approach, the study explores the transformation of silence into articulation, the role of myth in resisting gender oppression, and the negotiation of female autonomy within traditional frameworks. The analysis demonstrates that Nagamandala offers a nuanced feminist vision that questions patriarchy without rejecting cultural continuity.

**Keywords:** Feminine Voice, Patriarchy, GirishKarnad, Nagamandala, Gender Politics, Indian Drama, Feminism.

**Introduction** - Indian English drama in the late twentieth century increasingly turned towards questions of gender, power, and identity, reflecting wider social debates about women's position in family and society. Among contemporary dramatists, GirishKarnad occupies a distinctive place for his creative engagement with myth and folklore as tools for social critique. Rather than using history to glorify the past, Karnad reinterprets traditional narratives to expose the hidden injustices embedded within cultural practices.

Nagamandala (1988) is one of Karnad's most compelling plays from a feminist perspective. Based on oral folk tales from Karnataka, the play centers on Rani, a young woman whose marriage becomes a site of emotional neglect and patriarchal control. Her husband, Appanna, represents institutionalized male authority—detached, dominating, and morally inconsistent. Rani's journey from voiceless submission to symbolic empowerment forms the thematic core of the drama.

This paper argues that Nagamandala constructs a powerful critique of patriarchy by foregrounding feminine experience and reclaiming women's emotional and sexual autonomy. Karnad uses myth not as escapism, but as a counter-discourse that legitimizes female subjectivity. The play interrogates patriarchal morality, exposes gendered double standards, and presents storytelling as a space where suppressed feminine voices can be heard.

## Review Of Literature

Critical scholarship on Nagamandala has largely focused

on its mythic structure, symbolism, and gender politics. AparnaBhargavaDharwadker interprets the play as an example of Karnad's broader project of using folk narratives to destabilize dominant social hierarchies. K. R. Srinivasalyengar highlights the play's exposure of patriarchal hypocrisy, particularly in relation to female sexuality and marital fidelity.

Some critics view the Naga as a projection of Rani's subconscious desires, while others interpret it as a symbolic challenge to male-centered definitions of love and authority. Feminist readings often emphasize Rani's transformation and the reversal of power within marriage at the end of the play. However, many studies treat this transformation as symbolic without closely examining the process through which feminine voice develops.

This paper extends existing criticism by focusing specifically on voice—how silence is imposed, how expression is mediated through myth, and how articulation becomes possible within restrictive social structures. The study treats Nagamandala as a text where feminine consciousness is not given but gradually constructed.

**Objectives Of The Study:** The study seeks to:

1. Examine the mechanisms of patriarchy in Nagamandala.
2. Analyze the silencing of women within marital structures.
3. Explore the symbolic emergence of feminine voice.
4. Study the role of myth and folklore in gender resistance.

5. Evaluate Karnad's contribution to feminist discourse in Indian drama.

**Research Methodology:** The research adopts a qualitative and interpretative methodology, grounded in feminist literary criticism. A close textual reading of Nagamandala forms the primary basis of analysis. Secondary sources related to gender studies, Indian drama, and Karnad's theatrical vision are used selectively for contextual support. The study prioritizes independent interpretation to maintain originality and minimize textual overlap.

**Patriarchy As A Domestic Structure:** In Nagamandala, patriarchy functions most visibly through the institution of marriage. Appanna's authority over Rani is unquestioned and socially sanctioned. He confines her to the domestic space, restricts her movement, and withholds emotional intimacy. Marriage, rather than offering companionship, becomes a mechanism of control.

Rani's suffering is normalized by social expectations that demand obedience and endurance from women. Her silence reflects internalized patriarchy—she accepts neglect as fate rather than injustice. Karnad portrays patriarchy not as overt brutality alone, but as an everyday system that conditions women to erase their own desires.

Appanna's behavior exposes the moral asymmetry of patriarchal culture. While his extramarital relationship is socially tolerated, Rani's fidelity is constantly monitored. The unequal standards reveal how patriarchy protects male privilege while disciplining female sexuality.

**Silence As Gendered Experience:** Silence plays a central role in defining Rani's early identity. She speaks sparingly, avoids confrontation, and suppresses emotion. This silence is socially produced, not natural. It reflects a cultural expectation that women should remain passive and self-effacing.

Karnad uses dramatic silence to represent absence of agency. Rani's lack of voice mirrors the broader exclusion of women from decision-making and self-expression. Her emotional life remains invisible within the patriarchal household.

However, silence in Nagamandala is also a preparatory space. It allows emotional tension to build, creating the conditions for transformation. Karnad suggests that prolonged suppression eventually seeks articulation.

**Myth As A Feminist Counter-Narrative:** The entry of the Naga introduces myth as an alternative reality where feminine desire is acknowledged rather than condemned. The serpent-lover, who assumes Appanna's form, offers Rani affection, attentiveness, and emotional recognition. This contrast highlights what patriarchy denies women.

The Naga does not dominate Rani; instead, he enables her self-awareness. Through this relationship, Rani experiences intimacy without fear or shame. Myth becomes a space where feminine desire is validated beyond patriarchal moral codes.

Symbolically, the Naga represents suppressed

emotional truth. Karnad uses folklore to legitimize experiences that society refuses to acknowledge. Myth thus functions as a feminist tool rather than a traditional constraint.

**Emergence Of The Feminine Voice:** Rani's transformation is neither sudden nor aggressive. As her emotional needs are fulfilled, she gains confidence and clarity. Her speech becomes assertive, and her body language reflects self-respect rather than fear.

The public ordeal—where Rani must prove her chastity—ironically becomes the moment of her empowerment. Patriarchal authority attempts to discipline her body, but myth intervenes to affirm her truth. Her survival redefines virtue on her own terms.

Rani's recognition by the community symbolizes the acknowledgment of feminine voice within a system that previously silenced it.

**Female Solidarity And Oral Tradition:** The framing narrative involving the Flames and the old woman underscores the importance of storytelling as a female tradition. Oral narratives preserve women's experiences that official history ignores.

Storytelling in Nagamandala functions as resistance. It allows women to share pain, wisdom, and survival strategies. Karnad positions the play itself as an extension of this feminine narrative space.

**Negotiated Feminism In Nagamandala:** While Nagamandala critiques patriarchy, it does not advocate radical social rupture. Rani remains within marriage, but power relations shift significantly. Appanna submits to her authority, reversing traditional hierarchies.

Karnad presents a negotiated feminism—one that seeks recognition and dignity rather than outright rebellion. The play acknowledges cultural continuity while demanding ethical transformation.

**Dramatic Technique And Gender Symbolism:** Karnad's dramatic technique enhances feminist meaning. Non-linear narration, symbolic imagery, and irony expose patriarchal contradictions. The serpent, flames, and potion operate as metaphors for desire, suffering, and transformation.

Irony is particularly effective: institutions meant to control women ultimately legitimize their authority. This inversion destabilizes patriarchal logic.

#### Findings Of The Study:

1. Patriarchy in Nagamandala operates through domestic and moral control.
2. Silence is a socially imposed gender condition.
3. Myth enables articulation of suppressed feminine desire.
4. Rani's voice emerges through emotional self-realization.
5. The play offers a culturally grounded feminist critique.

**Conclusion:** Nagamandala is a powerful dramatic articulation of feminine experience within patriarchal society. Through Rani's journey from silence to selfhood,

GirishKarnad exposes the injustice of gendered power relations and moral hypocrisy. The play legitimizes female desire, emotional truth, and narrative agency through myth and symbolism.

Rather than rejecting tradition, Nagamandala reinterprets it from a feminine perspective. Karnad's achievement lies in creating a drama where the feminine voice is not merely heard but validated, making the play a significant contribution to feminist discourse in Indian English drama.

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