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Myth, Folklore, and Cultural Identity in Girish Karnad's Nagamandala and The Fire and the Rain

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Abstract

This paper examines the interrelationship between myth, folklore, and cultural identity in two major plays by Girish Karnad, Nagamandala and The Fire and the Rain. While Nagamandala draws upon Kannada oral folk narratives collected by A. K. Ramanujan, The Fire and the Rain reconstructs an episode from the Aranyakaparva of the Mahabharata. Through a close comparative reading, the paper argues that Karnad does not merely retell inherited narratives but reinterprets them through symbolic imagination, psychological realism, and modern theatrical technique in order to interrogate questions of gender, patriarchy, ritual, sacrifice, and spiritual transformation. The study situates Karnad's dramaturgy within postcolonial and feminist frameworks, showing how folklore and myth become dynamic cultural texts capable of mediating between tradition and modernity. The paper concludes that both plays affirm the continuing vitality of Indian mythological consciousness as a resource for articulating contemporary human and cultural concerns.

Keywords: Girish Karnad, Nagamandala, The Fire and the Rain, myth, folklore, cultural identity, gender, postcolonial drama

1. Introduction

Girish Karnad occupies a distinctive position among modern Indian playwrights because of his sustained engagement with myth, folklore, and history as living resources for dramatic art rather than as fossilised cultural inheritances. Two of his most widely studied plays, Nagamandala and The Fire and the Rain, illustrate this engagement from markedly different narrative traditions. Nagamandala is rooted in the oral folk culture of Karnataka, while The Fire and the Rain reconstructs a lesser-known episode from the Mahabharata. Despite these different points of origin, both plays share a common artistic strategy: they transform inherited narratives into vehicles for exploring gender, authority, ritual, and the search for personal and spiritual fulfilment within contemporary Indian society.

This paper undertakes a comparative examination of the two plays with particular attention to the symbolic and philosophical dimensions of Karnad's use of myth and folklore. It considers how Karnad employs supernatural motifs, ritual structures, and archetypal characters to critique patriarchal institutions, examine the ethics of sacrifice, and articulate a vision of cultural identity that is neither nostalgically traditional nor uncritically modern. The discussion



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proceeds through ten interlinked sections that move from theoretical framing and authorial context, through close readings of each play, towards a comparative and postcolonial-feminist synthesis. In doing so, the paper aims to demonstrate that mythology and folklore, in Karnad's hands, become instruments of continuous cultural reinterpretation rather than static repositories of the past.

The choice of these two plays for comparative study is deliberate. Nagamandala and The Fire and the Rain represent the two major streams from which Karnad draws his dramatic material across his career: the informal, domestic world of oral folk narrative, and the formal, cosmological world of classical Sanskrit epic. Examining them together therefore allows this paper to test whether Karnad's underlying dramaturgical principles remain consistent across sources of markedly different scale and cultural register. It also allows the study to interrogate a question of continuing critical significance in Indian literary studies: whether folklore and epic mythology should be regarded as separate and hierarchically ordered narrative traditions, or whether, as this paper argues following Karnad's own dramatic practice, they function as equally rich and equally malleable resources for exploring the ethical and psychological dimensions of Indian cultural life. Approaching the two plays side by side also clarifies how gender is inflected differently depending on the scale and register of the source narrative, a distinction developed more fully in the later comparative sections of this paper.

2. Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature

Scholarship on Karnad's use of myth and folklore has grown substantially over the past decade, offering multiple interpretive lenses through which his plays may be approached. Feminist readings of Nagamandala have generally focused on the transformation of Rani from a passive, confined wife into a figure of agency and social recognition, reading the play's folkloric structure as a means of legitimising female desire within a patriarchal social order (Pradeepa, 2019). Other studies have emphasised the play's roots in oral storytelling, arguing that Karnad's foregrounding of the personified Story and the Flames reflects a broader Indian tradition in which folk narratives function as a means of communication and moral transmission among women within the domestic sphere.

Studies of The Fire and the Rain have tended to approach the play through the lens of power, ritual, and psychological conflict. Readings informed by Foucauldian theory have interpreted the sacrificial ritual as a mechanism through which social power reproduces itself, suggesting that Karnad exposes the ways in which religious institutions can be appropriated for personal ambition (Sankar, 2022). Other critics have focused on the ethical dimension of sacrifice, arguing that Arvasu's capacity for selfless love and forgiveness constitutes the moral centre of the play, in contrast to Parvasu's self-interested pursuit of ritual prestige. Comparative and thematic surveys of Karnad's oeuvre, situating Nagamandala and The Fire and the Rain alongside Hayavadana, Tughlaq, and Tale-Danda, have further shown that Karnad consistently



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uses myth to interrogate questions of gender, power, and cultural continuity across his dramatic career.

Taken together, this body of scholarship establishes that Karnad's dramaturgy cannot be reduced to simple retellings of inherited stories. Instead, his plays function as sites of critical reinterpretation in which myth and folklore are reactivated to speak to modern concerns. The present paper builds upon this scholarship by offering a sustained comparative reading of the two plays' symbolic structures, situating them within postcolonial and feminist frameworks that illuminate their shared cultural and philosophical project.

Methodologically, this paper adopts a qualitative, text-centred approach combining close reading of the primary plays with secondary engagement with existing critical literature. Rather than applying a single theoretical model uniformly across both texts, the paper draws selectively upon feminist theories of gendered subjectivity, postcolonial theories of cultural reclamation, and structuralist approaches to myth and archetype, deploying each where it illuminates a particular dimension of Karnad's dramaturgy. This eclectic but disciplined methodology reflects the interpretive demands of the primary material itself: *Nagamandala* invites predominantly feminist and folkloristic analysis, while *The Fire and the Rain*, with its epic scale and philosophical concerns regarding dharma and ritual, invites analysis informed additionally by theories of power and by classical Indian ethical thought. The comparative sections of the paper subsequently bring these separate strands of analysis into dialogue with one another.

3. Girish Karnad and the Indian Dramatic Tradition

Girish Karnad's dramatic career developed at a moment when Indian playwrights writing in English and in regional languages were consciously seeking alternatives to Western realist theatre. Trained partly in the philosophical traditions of Oxford yet formed by a childhood exposure to Kannada folk theatre and touring natak companies, Karnad occupied a distinctive position between indigenous performance traditions and modern dramatic technique. His engagement with yakshagana and other folk theatrical forms, most visible in *Hayavadana*, established a pattern that recurs throughout his career: the use of non-realist, ritualistic, and mythic structures to address distinctly modern psychological and social concerns.

This dual inheritance is central to understanding both *Nagamandala* and *The Fire and the Rain*. Rather than treating indigenous narrative material as merely decorative or nostalgic, Karnad approaches myth and folklore as structurally generative resources capable of dramatising conflicts that realist theatre, with its emphasis on plausible everyday action, struggles to represent. The supernatural transformation of the cobra in *Nagamandala* and the elaborate sacrificial ritual in *The Fire and the Rain* are not incidental theatrical devices; they are the very mechanisms through which Karnad externalises inner psychological and moral conflict. Understanding Karnad's biographical and theatrical formation therefore provides an essential context for the readings that follow, situating his mythic imagination within a broader



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postcolonial project of reclaiming indigenous cultural forms for contemporary artistic expression.

It is also significant that both plays exist as translations, moving from Kannada into English, a linguistic transition that itself signals a particular cultural positioning. Karnad's decision to render these deeply regional and classical materials into English placed his work before both a national and an international audience, extending the reach of Kannada folklore and Sanskritic myth well beyond their original linguistic communities. This translingual practice situates Karnad among a generation of Indian playwrights who used English not to distance themselves from indigenous material but to carry it into wider circulation, a strategy that has itself become a significant subject of critical commentary on the development of modern Indian English drama and its relationship to regional-language source traditions.

4. Myth and Folklore in Nagamandala

Nagamandala is drawn from two Kannada folk tales narrated to Karnad by the folklorist A. K. Ramanujan, and its dramatic structure preserves the oral, performative quality of its sources even as it reworks them into a unified theatrical narrative. Unlike plays based on classical epic sources, Nagamandala draws upon a living oral tradition in which folktales function as repositories of communal memory, ethical instruction, and imaginative play, often transmitted among women during domestic routines. Karnad's decision to frame the play through the device of a man condemned to remain awake, who is offered stories by a group of personified Flames, foregrounds the act of narration itself as a central dramatic concern.

The personification of Story and Flames within the play signals that oral narrative possesses an existence independent of any single teller, surviving through repetition, communal memory, and continual retelling. Supernatural events, such as the cobra's assumption of Appanna's form, the potency of the magical love root, and the ordeal by snake bite, are presented without any anxiety about their plausibility. Karnad instead treats them as symbolically truthful representations of emotional and social realities that a purely realist idiom could not adequately convey. Folklore in Nagamandala therefore operates on two interlocking levels: as a formal device that shapes the play's non-linear, embedded narrative structure, and as a thematic resource through which questions of marriage, patriarchal authority, and female desire are explored. Karnad's engagement with these folk materials illustrates a broader critical claim, echoed across recent scholarship on the play, that folklore is not a static repository of custom but a flexible narrative mode capable of interrogating the very social norms it appears to describe (Karnad's Naga-Mandala, as discussed in recent folklore-based readings, has been read precisely along these lines).

The frame narrative itself deserves particular attention, since it establishes the interpretive conditions under which the central folk tale is received. A playwright condemned to remain awake through the night is offered a story by a group of Flames gathered for gossip, and the story he hears then becomes the substance of the play proper. This structure reproduces, within



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the theatre, the very conditions of oral transmission that generated the folk tales Karnad adapted: storytelling as a nocturnal, communal, largely female-mediated practice occurring at the margins of official social life. By dramatising this frame rather than simply presenting the folk tale directly, Karnad draws explicit attention to the cultural mechanics of oral tradition itself, inviting the audience to consider not only the content of the inherited narrative but also the social conditions of its survival and transmission across generations.

5. Symbolic Imagination, Marriage, and Female Identity in Nagamandala

At the centre of Nagamandala lies the transformation of Rani, whose journey from an isolated, neglected bride into a publicly vindicated and respected woman constitutes the play's central symbolic action. The cobra, a figure of considerable significance within Indian myth and folk belief, is reworked by Karnad into a complex symbol of tenderness, fertility, and emotional fulfilment that stands in direct contrast to the neglect and possessiveness displayed by the human Appanna. Because the cobra assumes Appanna's physical form, Rani cannot consciously distinguish between her husband's cruelty and the serpent's affection, and this ambiguity becomes the mechanism through which the play interrogates the boundary between social propriety and emotional truth.

The trial by ordeal, in which Rani places her hand into a pot revealed to contain a live cobra and survives unharmed, dramatises the play's most pointed critique of patriarchal justice. Village society, having condemned Rani for a suspected transgression, is compelled by supernatural intervention to reinterpret her as chaste and even semi-divine. Karnad thereby exposes the arbitrariness of a social order that measures female virtue through ritual spectacle rather than lived experience, while simultaneously allowing folklore's supernatural logic to grant Rani a form of vindication unavailable within ordinary social discourse. Female identity in the play consequently emerges not as a fixed role assigned by marriage but as a process of psychological and emotional transformation, achieved through experiences of intimacy, fear, and eventual public recognition. Scholars have consistently read Rani's arc as an assertion of female agency achieved through, rather than against, the folkloric idiom in which the play is composed (Nagamandala: A Feminist Reading, 2018), underscoring Karnad's insistence that indigenous narrative forms can accommodate rather than foreclose feminist critique.

It is worth noting that Karnad complicates any straightforwardly celebratory reading of Rani's transformation by refusing to resolve the play's ambiguities entirely in her favour. Rani herself never learns, with certainty, whether the loving figure she encountered at night was her husband or the serpent in disguise, and the community's newfound reverence for her is granted only because supernatural forces intervened on her behalf, not because village custom itself has been reformed. This unresolved quality suggests that Karnad is less interested in offering a simple triumphalist narrative of female empowerment than in exposing the structural conditions under which women's dignity remains contingent upon extraordinary, rather than ordinary, circumstances. The play's folkloric ending, in which Rani is elevated to near-divine status, can



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therefore be read simultaneously as a moment of vindication and as an implicit critique of a society that requires the miraculous in order to recognise what should be an unremarkable human right to dignity and respect.

6. Mythological Framework and Ritual in The Fire and the Rain

The Fire and the Rain reconstructs an episode from the Aranyakaparva of the Mahabharata concerning the sage Yavakri, his rivalry with Raibhya, and the destructive consequences of ambition and misused spiritual power. Karnad significantly expands the psychological texture of this episode, introducing sustained conflicts among Parvasu, Arvasu, Vishakha, and Yavakri that are only briefly sketched in the source epic. The prolonged drought afflicting the kingdom, addressed through a seven-year fire sacrifice intended to propitiate Indra, functions simultaneously as a literal ecological crisis and a symbolic register of moral and spiritual disorder among the play's characters.

Ritual in the play is thus never merely ceremonial. The sacrificial fire is charged with a dual symbolism: it represents disciplined spiritual aspiration even as it mirrors the destructive ambitions, jealousy, and pride consuming the principal characters. Karnad's dramatisation suggests that ritual observance divorced from ethical integrity is incapable of producing genuine spiritual efficacy, a claim that recent criticism examining the play through theories of institutional power has substantiated by showing how ritual authority can be mobilised for personal prestige rather than communal welfare (Power and Myth in Girish Karnad's The Fire and the Rain, 2022). Rain, appearing only after this moral crisis reaches resolution, therefore signifies not simply meteorological relief but the restoration of an ethical order that ritual performance alone had been unable to secure.

Karnad further complicates the mythological framework by embedding a play-within-the-play, in which a masked performance re-enacts the very story of Yavakri and Raibhya that the main action dramatises. This theatrical device draws attention to the layered relationship between myth, ritual re-enactment, and lived experience, since the boundary between performed myth and actual event becomes increasingly unstable as the drama progresses. The device also underscores a central argument of the play: that mythological narrative is never simply consumed as distant history but is continually re-enacted, consciously or unconsciously, within the present. By staging this recursive structure, Karnad suggests that the ethical failures dramatised in ancient myth remain available for repetition in every generation unless they are consciously confronted and transcended.

7. Human Conflict, Spiritual Transformation, and Cultural Consciousness in The Fire and the Rain

The dramatic conflicts among Karnad's principal characters give the mythological material of The Fire and the Rain its distinctly modern psychological depth. Parvasu's determination to secure ritual prestige leads him into a chain of betrayals, including his neglect of his wife Vishakha and his eventual involvement in his father's death, while Yavakri's pursuit of



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forbidden spiritual knowledge without corresponding discipline results in his own destruction. Arvasu, by contrast, is repeatedly wronged yet retains a capacity for compassion and forgiveness that ultimately positions him as the play's moral centre. Recent scholarship examining the play's treatment of sacrifice and revenge has similarly emphasised this structural contrast, reading Arvasu's self-sacrifice as the ethical counterweight to Paravasu's self-interested ambition (Trope of Sacrifice: A Study of Girish Karnad's *Fire and the Rain*, 2021). Through these interwoven conflicts, Karnad reframes destiny not as a matter determined solely by divine decree but as a consequence of individual moral choice. The play's engagement with Indian philosophical concepts of dharma and karma reinforces this reading: characters shape their own fates through actions rooted in ambition, jealousy, or compassion. Spiritual transformation, when it occurs, arises through inward acceptance of responsibility rather than through external ritual accomplishment alone. In this respect, *The Fire and the Rain* extends the concerns of *Nagamandala* into a broader ethical and cosmological register, demonstrating that Karnad consistently locates authentic transformation in psychological and moral experience rather than in the mere performance of custom.

Vishakha's presence within this predominantly male conflict deserves particular emphasis, since her experience of abandonment, unfulfilled desire, and eventual reconciliation with Arvasu offers a counter-narrative to the ambition-driven trajectories of Paravasu and Yavakri. Her willingness to acknowledge her feelings for Arvasu, in defiance of the social expectations attached to her marriage, aligns her with Rani's earlier assertion of emotional truth over social convention. Read together, Vishakha and Rani suggest that across both plays, Karnad consistently positions emotional honesty, rather than adherence to prescribed social role, as the foundation of genuine ethical life, even as the two characters pursue that honesty within very different narrative registers, one domestic and folkloric, the other epic and ritualistic.

8. Comparative Analysis: Mythic Structures, Archetypes, and Gender

Read together, *Nagamandala* and *The Fire and the Rain* reveal both the range and the coherence of Karnad's mythological imagination. The two plays draw upon distinct narrative traditions, oral folklore in one case and classical epic in the other, yet both employ symbolic structures to dramatise conflicts that a purely realist idiom could not adequately represent. In *Nagamandala*, the cobra, the magical love root, and the personified Story constitute an intimate, domestic symbolic world oriented around marriage and female selfhood. In *The Fire and the Rain*, fire, rain, drought, and the sacrificial ritual constitute a broader cosmological symbolic system oriented around communal welfare, ambition, and spiritual responsibility. Despite this difference in scale, both symbolic systems perform a comparable function: they externalise inward psychological and ethical states, allowing suppressed desire, guilt, and moral conflict to become visible on stage.

The two plays also share an archetypal patterning that recurs across Karnad's broader body of work. Rani's evolution from a passive, silenced wife into a figure of dignity and public



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recognition parallels, in an inverted register, Arvasu's evolution from a wronged and marginalised younger son into the play's central agent of redemption. Both characters achieve transformation not through direct confrontation with the structures that oppress them but through an inner resilience validated by supernatural or ritual events beyond their control. This shared archetypal logic suggests that Karnad understands mythic and folkloric narrative as fundamentally concerned with the relationship between individual suffering and collective moral recognition, whether that recognition takes the form of village testimony in Nagamandala or communal renewal through rainfall in *The Fire and the Rain*.

Gender operates differently across the two plays, however. Nagamandala foregrounds the domestic and marital dimensions of patriarchal authority through Rani's experience, directly interrogating chastity, obedience, and the sexual double standards embedded in rural custom. *The Fire and the Rain*, though centred on a predominantly male cast of ambitious sages and priests, nonetheless registers the costs of patriarchal structures through Vishakha, whose desires and grievances are repeatedly subordinated to the ritual and familial obligations of the men around her. Comparative readings of Karnad's broader dramatic output have noted this recurring pattern, in which female characters across his plays articulate critiques of gender hierarchy even when they are not the plays' formal protagonists (Girish Karnad's *Theatrical Vision: Gender, Power, and Identity in Modern Indian Drama*, 2023).

The two plays further differ in the scale at which cultural identity is negotiated. Nagamandala locates cultural identity within the intimate space of the household and the village community, suggesting that collective memory and social value are transmitted through domestic storytelling practices, gossip, and communal judgment. *The Fire and the Rain*, by contrast, situates cultural identity within a cosmological and institutional framework encompassing kingship, priestly authority, and the maintenance of ecological balance through ritual sacrifice. This difference in scale should not, however, obscure the underlying continuity between the two works: in both cases, Karnad demonstrates that inherited cultural structures, whether domestic custom or institutional ritual, retain their legitimacy only insofar as they remain answerable to compassion, honesty, and ethical responsibility, rather than to inherited authority as such.

9. Postcolonial and Feminist Perspectives

Karnad's recourse to indigenous folklore and classical mythology situates his work within a broader postcolonial project of reclaiming narrative traditions that had often been marginalised within colonial and early postcolonial literary hierarchies, which tended to privilege realist and Western dramatic conventions. By returning to Kannada oral tales and to the Mahabharata as primary source material, Karnad asserts the continuing intellectual and artistic seriousness of indigenous cultural forms, treating them as sophisticated vehicles for philosophical inquiry rather than as merely quaint or primitive material. Critical studies of Karnad's engagement with folk theatrical conventions, including yakshagana-influenced staging techniques, have



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identified this recovery of indigenous form as a central feature of his contribution to what has been described as an Indian theatre of roots.

At the same time, Karnad does not treat these inherited traditions uncritically. His plays repeatedly expose the ways in which patriarchal custom, ritual authority, and social convention can become instruments of oppression, even as they are dressed in the sanctioned language of tradition. Nagamandala directly interrogates the sexual double standards embedded within village custom, while The Fire and the Rain exposes how ritual authority can be captured by personal ambition. This combination of cultural reclamation and internal critique exemplifies a balanced postcolonial-feminist approach: Karnad neither rejects Indian mythological and folkloric heritage nor accepts it as an unquestionable moral authority. Instead, he treats myth and folklore as a living discourse, continuously open to reinterpretation, through which questions of gender justice, spiritual integrity, and cultural continuity can be renegotiated for a contemporary audience.

This balanced approach also distinguishes Karnad's work from two less productive tendencies within postcolonial Indian writing: an uncritical revivalism that treats indigenous tradition as inherently virtuous simply because it is indigenous, and a wholesale rejection of tradition as inherently regressive simply because it is old. By contrast, Karnad's plays model a third position, in which cultural inheritance is neither idealised nor discarded but actively reworked through dramatic form. This position has particular significance for a postcolonial Indian readership negotiating its relationship to a plural and often contested cultural past, since it offers a model of engagement with tradition that is neither defensive nor dismissive, but genuinely critical and creatively generative.

10. Conclusion

This comparative study of Nagamandala and The Fire and the Rain demonstrates that Girish Karnad's engagement with myth and folklore is neither antiquarian nor merely decorative but constitutes a sustained artistic method for interrogating gender, power, ritual, and spiritual responsibility within Indian society. Drawing upon Kannada oral folklore in one play and upon the Mahabharata in the other, Karnad transforms inherited narrative material into dramatic structures capable of dramatising conflicts between individual desire and social convention, between ritual observance and ethical integrity, and between inherited tradition and the demands of contemporary experience. Rani's journey towards recognition and Arvasu's journey towards redemption together illustrate Karnad's consistent conviction that authentic transformation arises from inner moral and emotional experience rather than from external social or ritual validation alone.

By situating these readings within postcolonial and feminist frameworks, this paper has shown that Karnad's mythological imagination performs a double cultural function: it reclaims indigenous narrative traditions as intellectually serious resources for modern Indian drama, while simultaneously subjecting the patriarchal and hierarchical assumptions embedded within



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those traditions to critical scrutiny. Nagamandala and The Fire and the Rain therefore stand as complementary demonstrations of the same underlying principle, that myth and folklore, far from being static relics of the past, remain dynamic cultural texts capable of generating new meaning across changing historical and social contexts. Future research might productively extend this comparative approach to Karnad's other mythologically inflected plays, such as Hayavadana and Yayati, in order to trace more fully the continuities and variations in his lifelong dramatic engagement with India's mythological and folkloric inheritance. The enduring critical and theatrical appeal of both plays lies in Karnad's refusal to treat mythology and folklore as closed or finished narrative systems. By reopening the folk tales of Karnataka and the epic world of the Mahabharata to fresh psychological, ethical, and feminist scrutiny, Karnad affirms that Indian cultural memory is not a fixed inheritance to be passively received but an ongoing conversation between past and present. Nagamandala and The Fire and the Rain, read together, thus offer a compelling model of how modern Indian drama can remain rooted in indigenous tradition while continuing to speak with clarity and urgency to the ethical concerns of contemporary audiences, both within India and beyond.

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