

A Comparative Thematic Analysis of Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain* and *Naga-Mandala*

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Abstract:

This paper reveals a comparative thematic analysis of Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain* and *Naga-Mandala*. It argues that while both plays fundamentally critique patriarchal societal structures and delve into the intricate psychological landscapes of their characters. They employ distinct narrative strategies and explore different facets of human relationships, ultimately converging on the struggle for female selfhood and agency. Karnad's ability to reinterpret ancient themes within a modern context demonstrates his mastery in holding a mirror to the evolution of Indian theatre, remaining true to its traditions while responding to contemporary concerns.

Key Words: Comparison, themes, patriarchy, sensibility, reworking

Girish Karnad stands as a towering figure in modern Indian drama. He is renowned for his innovative use of myth, folklore, and history to explore contemporary socio-cultural issues. His plays, often rooted in ancient narratives, transcend their historical origins to offer profound insights into the human condition, societal structures, and psychological complexities. Karnad's distinctive approach involves not merely retelling ancient stories but actively reinterpreting and subverting them to reflect modern sensibilities and critique prevailing norms. This allows him to bridge the temporal gap between the past and the present by making his works universally resonant and providing new meanings and insights.

Thematic Concerns of *The Fire and the Rain*

The Fire and the Rain, published in 1998, is a highly successful play based on the myth of 'Yavakri' from the Mahabharata. It is originally titled *Agni Mattu Male* in Kannada. It is a powerful exploration of desire, jealousy, betrayal, and redemption, delving into the depths of human emotions and questioning moral complexities.

Mythological Reworking and its Contemporary Resonance

The play is deeply rooted in the Mahabharata, specifically drawing from the Yavakri myth and intertwining it with the Indra-Vritra myth, both featuring the common motif of fratricide. Karnad's genius lies in his significant departures from these original myths, transforming them into a novel narrative that explores themes of love, passion, betrayal, and retribution. For instance, in the original myth, Raibhya creates a double of Vishakha to take away Yavakri's protective water. However, Karnad's Vishakha actively avenges Yavakri's deceit by pouring out the sanctified water from his kamandalu. It demonstrates her profound agency and a realistic interpretation of the myth. Similarly, Parvasu's patricide, depicted as an accidental killing in the Mahabharata, becomes a deliberate act in Karnad's version, intensifying the theme of betrayal and familial conflict.

Karnad's re-imagining of Arvasu is another significant deviation. In the original myth, Arvasu is involved in Brahminical rituals. But Karnad portrays him as an authentic common man, a lover of life interested in acting, dancing, and singing. This transformation serves to directly counterpoint the "hollow Brahminical life of rituals, false learning and power politics" prevalent in the play's setting. The consistent emphasis on Karnad's departures from and reworking of myths, rather than mere retelling, reveals a deeper purpose. These modifications signify specific thematic critiques. The transformation of Arvasu into a non-conformist Brahmin directly targets the performative and corrupt aspects of traditional religious practices. This demonstrates Karnad's intent to use the familiar mythological framework as a vehicle for social and moral commentary, challenging the very foundations of the narratives he adapts. His use of myth is not an act of historical preservation but a deliberate, transformative literary strategy. He leverages the inherent familiarity and cultural resonance of ancient narratives to create a critical distance, allowing him to dissect and critique contemporary societal issues like patriarchy, caste, human relationships, and power dynamics without being overtly didactic. The "turn of the screw" in his adaptation implies a subversive reinterpretation that challenges traditional interpretations and values, making the ancient relevant and unsettling for the modern audience.

Patriarchy, Power Dynamics, and Gender Injustice

The play explicitly ridicules "the unjust values of the patriarchal society which does not

care for the feelings of a woman and considers her a sub-ordinate that exists only to serve him with absolute loyalty". Female characters like Vishakha and Nittilai are central to this critique, depicted as being "pushed into the tangled network of the action, controlled by the male domination". Vishakha's experience highlights the societal expectation for women to remain "silent" or "dumb," and her victimization through a "joyless and companionless" married life, leading to male persecution and sexual exploitation. She is tragically used as an instrument of vengeance by Yavakri, her body becoming a mere pawn in his game.

Nittilai, though innocent and victimized, bravely challenges the oppression imposed upon her, gradually transforming into a "strong, bold and rational woman" and a "fearless critic of Brahmanism". Her poignant observation, "These high-caste men are always glad enough to bed our women but not to wed them", powerfully exposes caste-based gender hypocrisy. The narratives for female characters consistently present initial victimization, followed by a transformation into assertive individuals who challenge oppression and seek retribution. This progression from victimhood to agency is a consistent pattern in the play. The contrast between their suffering and their eventual assertiveness indicates that Karnad is exploring not just the impact of patriarchy but also the response to it, suggesting a capacity for resilience and defiance within the oppressed. Karnad does not simply depict women as passive victims; he highlights the profound suffering inflicted by patriarchy but also emphasizes the inherent resilience and emerging agency of women. Their victimization becomes a catalyst for transformation, pushing them towards self-realization and active resistance. Nittilai's tragic end underscores the high cost of challenging the system, but her defiance itself is a powerful statement. Vishakha's actions, though born from pain, represent a reclaiming of power. This suggests that even within oppressive structures, individual acts of defiance, however costly, can expose the system's flaws and inspire a redefinition of female identity.

Human Emotions: Jealousy, Betrayal, and the Quest for Redemption

The play is a "powerful exploration of desire, jealousy, betrayal, and redemption", delving into "the depths of human emotions". Central themes include "hatred, jealousy, man woman relationship, gender roles, and patriarchal dominance". "Jealousy of man against man, father against son, wife against husband, high caste against low caste people, and man against God" are explicitly explored. The "greed for power and family betrayal" drive much of the conflict,

particularly among the dysfunctional relationships of brothers and cousins. Yavakri's story is an "intricate web of betrayals—romantic, familial, and spiritual".

Despite widespread moral decay, "suffering, in Karnad's hands, becomes a precursor to redemption". The humble Arvasu, through his "purity of heart and bravery," ultimately moves the God Indra to bring the rains, signifying the triumph of altruism over egoism. The recurring identification of negative emotions such as jealousy, hatred, greed, and betrayal as dominant forces in the play highlights their destructive consequences, leading to tragic outcomes and a moral vacuum. However, the resolution of the central conflict, the drought, is not achieved through these destructive forces or through the powerful but morally compromised characters. Instead, it is the humble Arvasu and his purity of heart that bring divine intervention. This juxtaposition highlights a causal relationship: destructive passions lead to suffering, while altruism and sincerity offer the path to redemption and restoration. Karnad meticulously portrays how unchecked human passions—particularly jealousy, ambition, and ego—create a self-perpetuating cycle of destruction, leading to dysfunctional relationships and societal decay, symbolized by the pervasive drought. The play suggests that while these destructive forces are potent, redemption is possible, not through elaborate rituals or power, but through genuine human virtues like selfless love, compassion, and purity of heart. Arvasu's character embodies this redemptive possibility, offering a counter-narrative to the pervasive moral corruption.

Caste, Rituals, and Spirituality

The play critiques the "restriction of the universal knowledge on the caste bases division in society". The love story between Arvasu (Brahmin) and Nittilai (lower caste/Hunter) directly addresses caste conflict and societal barriers. Nittilai's character serves as a "fearless critic of Brahmanism," exposing its "deceitfulness, hypocrisy and opaqueness". A significant critique is leveled against the efficacy of rituals versus genuine devotion: the god Indra appears to the humble Arvasu, not the powerful priests, demonstrating that "purity of heart and bravery are what move the god to help his devotees, not rituals and prestige". The central fire ritual (Yajna) is depicted as being corrupted by human ambition and power struggles, rather than serving as a pure spiritual act. Karnad uses this to "question the whole patriarchal, segregationist discourse of Hindu myths in general and the Yajña (the fire sacrifice)".

The play establishes a clear contrast: the elaborate, high-caste Brahminical rituals and the

appointment of the chief priest are associated with power-hungry individuals and false learning. In direct opposition, divine intervention, in the form of rain, is granted to the humble Arvasu, who embodies purity of heart and bravery, while his low-caste lover, Nittilai, critiques the very system. This establishes a causal link: the failure of the rituals and the drought are consequences of a corrupt, hierarchical system, while redemption comes from a rejection of that system's superficiality in favor of authentic human values. Karnad uses the mythological framework to critique the performative and hierarchical aspects of traditional Indian spirituality and social structures. He argues that true spiritual efficacy and divine favor are not found in rigid rituals, caste-based privilege, or the pursuit of power, but in genuine human emotions, moral integrity, and selfless acts. The drought, initially attributed to divine displeasure, is implicitly linked to the moral decay and corruption within the Brahminical system, suggesting that societal healing requires a return to fundamental human values rather than superficial religious practices.

Symbolism of Fire and Rain

The title itself embodies "opposing elements; the rains of human love and sacrifices" and "the fire against the rain, and passion against the truth". Nittilai is explicitly identified as symbolizing the "rains of human love," while Vishakha represents the "fire of human passions". The drought serves as a powerful metaphor for the characters' "emotional emptiness" and the "barren, scorched land" of their lives, devoid of harmony. The interplay of fire, representing destruction, human conflicts, and moral decay, and rain, symbolizing renewal, restoration, and redemption, reflects the cyclical balance of nature and the consequences of human actions. The play directly assigns symbolic meanings to "fire" (passion, destruction, Vishakha) and "rain" (love, renewal, Nittilai). The drought is then explicitly linked to the characters' emotional emptiness. This establishes a clear metaphorical system where the external environment mirrors the internal moral and emotional state of the characters and society. The resolution, with the return of the rains, is tied to the triumph of purity of heart, indicating that the physical state of the land is a direct consequence of the moral state of its inhabitants, reinforcing the play's deeper message about human responsibility. The symbolism of fire and rain extends beyond mere natural phenomena to represent the dualities of human experience and the moral landscape of the play. Fire embodies destructive passions, ambition, revenge, and the consuming ego, leading to internal desiccation and external societal breakdown (the drought). Rain, conversely, symbolizes selfless

love, compassion, purity, and the potential for renewal and redemption. The return of the rains signifies not just a physical end to the drought but a moral and spiritual cleansing, implying that human connection and altruism are the true sources of societal and individual flourishing. This deepens the critique of a society parched by its own internal conflicts.

Thematic Concerns of *Naga-Mandala*

Naga-Mandala, published in 1990, was originally written in Kannada and later trans-created into English by Karnad. It is a poignant narrative that explores the complexities of marriage, love, and selfhood within a patriarchal framework.

Folktale as a Lens for Modern Relationships

Naga-Mandala transforms a traditional folk tale into a metaphor for the married woman. It blends elements of superstition, fact, fantasy, instinct, and reason to achieve universal appeal. Karnad utilizes these ancient narratives to reflect "contemporary Indian cultural and social life" and address the "psychological problems, dilemmas, and conflicts of modern Indian men and women". The central theme, derived from A.K. Ramanujan's collection of folk tales, is the "narcissism" of the "self-involved hero" and the male difficulty in trusting and loving women. The play adapts a "male-oriented folk tale" in a manner that represents the experience of both man and woman in a "psychologically transitional phase".

The play is described as a "folktale transformed" and is explicitly used by Karnad to reflect contemporary life and modern man's anguish and dilemmas. The explicit mention of the "narcissism of the self-involved hero" and "psychological inadequacy" points to an internal, modern psychological focus. The "Chinese box story" structure suggests layers of meaning beyond a simple narrative. This indicates a deliberate choice to use the folk tale's archetypal nature to diagnose and explore complex, modern psychological and social issues, rather than just narrate a simple story. Karnad employs the archetypal structure of the folk tale as a psychological and sociological diagnostic tool. By embedding modern dilemmas within the familiar framework of ancient narratives, he universalizes the struggles of contemporary individuals, especially in relationships and self-discovery, while simultaneously critiquing the specific societal pressures, such as patriarchy and traditional marriage norms that exacerbate these issues. The layered narrative structure mirrors the complex, often hidden, psychological states of the characters,

inviting deeper reflection on the interplay between instinct, reason, and societal conditioning.

Feminist Critique of Patriarchy and the Concept of Chastity

The play is explicitly identified as a "feminist play" that "exposes male chauvinism, the oppression of women, the great injustice done to them by men and the patriarchal culture". A key aspect of its critique is the "stealthily deflating the concept of chastity". Rani's predicament, despite her name meaning "queen," is "deplorable," satirizing the idealized "Rani or Lakshmi of the household" image in Indian society. Appanna is presented as a "prototype of Indian masculinity," a "supreme egoist" that confines his wife, symbolizing "any man". The play highlights societal double standards where Appanna questions Rani's chastity while he is having an illicit relationship. The male assumption of control over women's bodies and virtue is openly mocked.

The explicit labeling of the play as "feminist" and its stated purpose to "expose male chauvinism" and "deflate the concept of chastity" are direct indicators of its core message. The character of Appanna as "any man" who confines his wife and the hypocrisy regarding his own infidelity versus Rani's "chastity" establish a clear critique of patriarchal control and double standards. The outcome, where Rani is elevated to a goddess despite or because of her relationship with the Naga, signifies a radical redefinition of female virtue and power, challenging the very foundation of patriarchal morality. Karnad uses *Naga-Mandala* to dismantle the patriarchal construct of female chastity, revealing it as a tool for male control and a symbol of societal double standards. By having Rani's "infidelity" with the Naga lead to her elevation to a goddess and Appanna's eventual submission, Karnad subverts traditional morality. This suggests that true female empowerment and fulfillment may lie outside the rigid confines of patriarchal expectations and even traditional marriage, challenging the very definition of "purity" and "devotion" in a male-dominated society.

Communication, Identity, and the Split Self

The play centrally addresses "dented human relationships" caused by a "lack of proper communication". Rani is literally "excommunicated" and locked in her house, unable to communicate with anyone outside. Appanna's "psychological inadequacy" contributes to the "acute lack of understanding and communication" in his marriage. Rani copes with her isolation by building a world of stories and fantasy, which serves as an outlet for her unfulfilled psycho-

erotic needs.

The Appanna/Naga duality is a core representation of the "split personality and identity crisis". Naga embodies Appanna's "sexual side" and his "inhibitions," representing "two sides of the same coin" – ego and instinct. Appanna's conscious mind prefers to believe Rani committed adultery rather than accept his own identity as Naga, highlighting his internal conflict and denial. Rani's self-realization occurs when she sees Appanna's reflection and understands his interest is "purely sexual," leading her to retreat from him. The play explicitly links communication breakdown to "thwarted human relationships" and "dented human relationships". Rani's literal confinement and excommunication symbolize her inability to express herself or connect with her husband, leading to her retreat into fantasy. The Appanna/Naga duality is presented as a "split personality and identity crisis," with the Naga representing Appanna's suppressed instinctual and sexual self. Appanna's denial of the Naga's actions and his preference for believing his wife unchaste demonstrate his inability to integrate these two aspects of his identity. This fragmentation prevents genuine communication and connection. Karnad explores how societal pressures, particularly patriarchal norms that dictate male behavior and suppress natural instincts, such as sexual desire outside rigid constructs, can lead to a fragmented self. Appanna's inability to integrate his "instinctual" (Naga) and "egoistic" (Appanna) sides results in a profound communication gap and an identity crisis. Rani's journey of self-realization, triggered by her understanding of Appanna's purely physical interest, is a crucial step towards her own agency, as she begins to define her identity beyond his limited perception.

Female Selfhood, Agency, and Transformation

Rani's journey from confinement and loneliness to self-realization is central to the play. Initially isolated and neglected by Appanna, she finds solace in fantasy. Her transformation is significantly propelled by her relationship with the Naga and her subsequent pregnancy. Motherhood is presented as a crucial stage that confers purpose and identity upon an Indian woman, enabling her to gain command of the household and decision-making power. Rani's triumph in the public trial, where the snake does not bite her, elevates her to a goddess-like status, gaining her social respectability and transforming her into a courageous and confident woman. This transformation of both Appanna and Rani, where he becomes a caring husband and accepts her decisions, underscores the significance of adjustment within the institution of marriage. Both

characters learn to put aside personal feelings for the sake of family and community, with Rani giving up her dream of a lover and Appanna abandoning his self-centered relationship.

Rani's initial state of confinement and loneliness is explicitly stated, along with her coping mechanism of fantasy. Her subsequent pregnancy and the public trial are presented as pivotal moments that lead to her gaining "new courage and confidence" and "social respectability," culminating in her elevation to a goddess. This progression from victimhood to empowerment is a clear narrative arc. The play presents motherhood as a transformative force for Rani, granting her identity and purpose within her culture. This transformation, coupled with her bold acceptance of the truth during the public trial, allows her to transcend her initial victimhood and achieve a respected social position. This suggests that female agency in a patriarchal society can emerge through unexpected avenues, challenging conventional notions of female roles and power. The play depicts the journey of both man and woman through doubt, uncertainty, and even failure before they mature and learn to live harmoniously as husband and wife. Appanna's transformation into a caring husband, accepting Rani's decisions, is a key aspect. This change in Rani's status is attributed to her motherhood and the public trial.

Instinct verses Reason and the Modern Condition

The play highlights how instinct, as a creative force, reigns supreme in Karnad's plays, often winning despite reasoning. This is exemplified by Naga's instinctual needs at night versus Appanna's conscious denial during the day. The Naga, with its phallic connotations, typifies Appanna's sexual side, an aspect he cannot accept because his sexual impulses are seen as submissive to his wife. This suggests a deep internal conflict where Appanna sets a "watch-dog against his own self at night," a futile attempt to guard against his instincts. The play concludes that Karnad interprets ancient themes within a modern context, where the common man is lost in material and sensual pleasures, and old spiritual values have been swept away, with new ones yet to be discovered.

The Appanna/Naga duality is explicitly presented as a conflict between "heads– the ego and tails– the snake following its instincts". Appanna's conscious denial of the Naga's actions, despite evidence, demonstrates the suppression of instinct by ego. This internal struggle is then linked to the "modern man's anguish and dilemmas" and the loss of "old spiritual values". The play critiques the modern condition where a disconnect exists between instinctual desires and conscious

reasoning, often leading to psychological inadequacy and a lack of understanding in relationships. Appanna's inability to reconcile his primal urges with his societal role as a husband reflects a broader societal malaise where individuals are "lost in material and sensual pleasures," having abandoned traditional spiritual values without finding new ones. This suggests that the internal fragmentation of characters like Appanna mirrors a spiritual and moral vacuum in contemporary society.

The Nature of Storytelling and Reality

The play emphasizes the identity of tales, their reality, and their continuance through being passed on. The story is personified as a woman, leading to questions about whether man creates woman. However, the playwright suggests that a story has an autonomous existence and lives through interpretation and re-interpretation, paralleling a woman's existence through meaningful procreation. The play also touches upon reader-response theory, questioning the endurance of the author's viewpoint without the reader's perception, implying that any literary piece is only an object without the reader breathing meaning into it.

The play explicitly personifies the story as a woman and discusses its "autonomous existence" through "interpretation and re-interpretation," drawing a parallel to a woman's existence through "meaningful procreation". This meta-narrative element suggests that just as a story gains life and meaning through its retelling and the audience's engagement, female identity is not static or solely defined by patriarchal constructs. Instead, it is dynamic, evolving through individual experiences, interpretations, and the act of creating life and meaning. This narrative choice reinforces the play's feminist stance by elevating the act of female creation and self-definition to the level of artistic creation.

Comparative Analysis

Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain* and *Naga-Mandala* both stand as powerful critiques of societal norms, yet they achieve their thematic depth through distinct narrative strategies and emphases.

Shared Thematic Concerns

Both plays fundamentally critique patriarchal societal structures and the oppression of

women. They consistently ridicule the unjust values of a male-dominated society that subordinates women and disregards their feelings. Female characters in both plays, such as Vishakha and Nittilai in *The Fire and the Rain* and Rani in *Naga-Mandala*, are depicted as victims of male persecution, confinement, and exploitation. Both works also delve into the intricate psychological landscapes of their characters, exploring themes of identity, unfulfilled desires, and the internal conflicts arising from societal pressures. The damaging effects of a lack of communication are also evident in both plays, leading to thwarted human relationships. Furthermore, Karnad consistently employs traditional Indian narratives— mythology in 'The Fire and the Rain' and folklore in *Naga-Mandala*—as a lens to examine contemporary Indian cultural and social life, bridging ancient truths with modern dilemmas. This approach allows him to universalize human emotions and experiences while offering specific critiques of Indian society.

Divergent Approaches and Emphases

Despite these commonalities, the plays diverge in their specific focus and narrative strategies. *The Fire and the Rain* draws from the grand epic mythology of the Mahabharata, specifically the Yavakri and Indra-Vritra myths, to explore themes on a broader societal and cosmic scale. Its critique of patriarchy extends to the caste system, the hypocrisy of Brahminical rituals, and the corrupting influence of power and ambition within religious and familial structures. The female agency demonstrated by Vishakha and Nittilai often manifests as direct defiance or a tragic, yet powerful, act of resistance against overt male domination and societal injustice. The resolution of the central conflict, the drought, involves divine intervention, albeit one prompted by genuine human purity rather than ritualistic adherence. The symbolism of fire and rain encapsulates destructive passions versus selfless love, reflecting a moral landscape where societal decay is mirrored by environmental desolation.

In contrast, *Naga-Mandala* utilizes a folk tale, transforming it into a metaphor for the married woman's experience, focusing more intimately on the institution of marriage and the psychological complexities within a domestic sphere. Its feminist critique specifically targets the concept of chastity, male narcissism, and the confinement of women within marital roles. Female agency in *Naga-Mandala*, particularly through Rani, emerges more through internal transformation, the embrace of instinct, and the redefinition of selfhood through unconventional experiences like her relationship with the Naga and motherhood. The resolution is less about divine

intervention and more about the psychological integration of the split self (Appanna/Naga) and the re-negotiation of marital roles, leading to a more harmonious, albeit complex, adjustment. The play's exploration of instinct versus reason, and the split personality, delves deeply into the individual's psychological struggles in a modern context where traditional values are eroding.

Karnad's Broader Vision

Both plays contribute to Karnad's overarching critique of societal norms and his profound exploration of the human condition. 'The Fire and the Rain' highlights the destructive nature of unchecked human passions, the hollowness of ritualistic religion, and the pervasive impact of caste and power struggles, suggesting that true redemption lies in altruism and moral integrity. *Naga-Mandala*, conversely, delves into the psychological toll of patriarchal expectations within marriage, advocating for female selfhood and challenging rigid moral codes, suggesting that fulfillment can be found beyond conventional boundaries and through the integration of one's full self. Together, they showcase Karnad's masterful ability to adapt ancient narratives to illuminate contemporary issues, providing a nuanced commentary on human relationships, identity, and the enduring struggle for liberation in a complex society. His works consistently hold a mirror to society, reflecting on the destructive nature of human desires and posing fundamental questions about human capacity for transcendence and redemption.

Conclusion

Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain* and *Naga-Mandala* stand as exemplary works in modern Indian drama, each offering a distinct yet complementary thematic analysis of human existence within patriarchal structures. *The Fire and the Rain*, through its ambitious reworking of Mahabharata myths, exposes the corrosive effects of jealousy, power, and ritualistic hypocrisy, ultimately advocating for genuine compassion and purity of heart as the path to societal and spiritual renewal. It critiques caste-based injustice and the subjugation of women, portraying their suffering as a catalyst for defiance and a redefinition of female identity.

Conversely, *Naga-Mandala*, by transforming a simple folk tale, delves into the intimate psychological landscape of marriage, challenging the patriarchal concept of chastity and exploring the fragmented self. It champions female selfhood and agency, illustrating how a woman can achieve empowerment and redefine her role within and beyond conventional marital expectations.

The play's exploration of the instinctual versus the rational self, particularly through the Appanna/Naga duality, offers a profound commentary on the modern individual's struggle for integration and authentic connection.

Collectively, these plays underscore Karnad's genius in projecting ancient narratives to dissect contemporary socio-cultural dilemmas. They demonstrate that while patriarchal oppression manifests in various forms— from overt societal control and caste discrimination to subtle marital confinement and psychological suppression— the human spirit, particularly that of women, possesses an inherent capacity for resilience, transformation, and the pursuit of selfhood. Karnad's enduring legacy lies in his ability to craft narratives that are deeply rooted in Indian tradition yet universally resonant, prompting audiences to reflect on the timeless struggles of power, identity, and the quest for true liberation.

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