

Rani in Nagamandala: Silence, Storytelling and Sexual Agency

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Abstract -- Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala: Play with a Cobra* - 1988 reworks a South Indian folk tale to explore gender, marriage, and power in a patriarchal society. At the centre of the play stands Rani, a young wife who is confined, neglected, and silenced by her husband Appanna. This article argues that Rani's journey from silence to speech marks her transformation from a passive victim to an agent of her own sexuality and narrative. Through two key strategies — silence as resistance and storytelling as empowerment — Rani reclaims her body and voice. The Naga, far from being merely a magical element, becomes the catalyst that enables Rani's sexual agency. By the end, Rani does not break patriarchy but negotiates within it using folklore, performance, and orality. Thus Karnad presents Rani not as a helpless woman, but as a storyteller who uses silence and stories to assert identity, desire, and dignity,

Keywords-- Girish Karnad, Nagamandala, Rani, Silence, Storytelling, Sexual Agency, Indian English Drama, Feminism, Folklore

I. INTRODUCTION

Girish Karnad is one of the founding figures of modern Indian English drama. In *Nagamandala*, he draws from Karnataka oral traditions to question marriage, fidelity, and female identity. The play begins with a woman trapped in a dark house, ignored by her husband who visits another woman at night. Rani's initial condition is one of complete silence and invisibility. However, by the final scene of public trial, she becomes the central speaker whose words determine truth.

This article examines how Rani moves from enforced silence to powerful storytelling, and how this journey grants her sexual agency — the right to desire, to choose, and to narrate her own experience,

II. SILENCE: FROM OPPRESSION TO RESISTANCE

In the first act, Rani's silence is not voluntary. Appanna locks her in the house, gives her food once a day, and never speaks to her. Her silence is imposed by patriarchy. She is "a wife without a husband".

However, Karnad shows silence as a dual space,

1. Silence as Suffering: Rani weeps, talks to herself, and to the objects in the house. Her silence shows loneliness.

2. Silence as Resistance: By not questioning Appanna, by enduring, Rani preserves her inner self. Her silence protects her until the Naga enters her life.

Thus silence is the starting point. It is the condition that forces Rani to look inward and later to speak with authority,

III. STORYTELLING: THE TOOL OF EMPOWERMENT

The turning point comes with the Naga and the root given by the old woman. Rani, without knowing, invites the Naga to become her nightly companion.

Here storytelling begins,

1. Stories to the Cobra: Every night Rani tells stories to the Naga. Through storytelling she creates an emotional and intimate bond. She becomes the narrator, not the listener.
2. Stories to the Public: In the final trial scene, Rani is asked to prove her chastity by holding a red-hot iron. She tells her story to the entire village. Her story is her evidence.

Karnad shows that in oral cultures, a woman's story is her power. Rani uses folk narrative to rewrite her marriage. She does not lie, but she redefines truth on her own terms,

IV. SEXUAL AGENCY: DESIRE, BODY AND CHOICE

The most radical aspect of *Nagamandala* is Rani's sexual agency,

Traditional readings expect Rani to be a "pativrata". But Karnad gives her desire.

1. *Body*: With the Naga, Rani experiences love, touch, and companionship that Appanna denied her. For the first time her body is not owned, but desired and desiring.
2. *Choice*: Rani does not "choose" the Naga knowingly, but she chooses to continue the relationship and later to protect it in public.
3. *Maternity*: At the end, she gives birth to a child. She claims both Appanna and the Naga as fathers. This is her ultimate act of agency — she refuses to be shamed and instead creates a new social truth, Karnad does not present Rani as immoral. He presents her as a woman who, denied legitimate sexuality, finds it through myth and folklore, and then owns it publicly.



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V. CONCLUSION

Rani in Nagamandala is not a silent, suffering Sita. She is a storyteller-queen. Her silence teaches her patience. Her stories give her voice. Her experience with the Naga gives her sexual agency.

Karnad uses folklore to critique patriarchy without directly attacking it. Rani wins not by rebellion, but by narrating herself into power. In the end, the village believes her story because she tells it with conviction.

Thus Nagamandala shows that for Indian women, silence can be strategy, storytelling can be resistance, and desire can be agency.

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