

# Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* and Varsha Adalja's *Mandodari*: Rethinking the 'woman' and devising strategies of resistance

Joydeep Bhattacharyya

Assistant Professor of English, Kurseong College, Kurseong, Darjeeling, India.

[orcid.org/0000-0002-0329-3756](http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0329-3756). Email: [b\\_joydeep31@rediffmail.com](mailto:b_joydeep31@rediffmail.com)

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## Abstract

Indian notion of sexuality and gender certainly has an ancient lineage, but the entire notion, specially the idea of 'woman', undergoes an unprecedented reconfiguration and strategic systematization only during the colonial period. Sexuality, thus recast both in the hands of the colonial and the anticolonial forces, continues to sustain patriarchy even in the post-Independence socio-political narrative of the nation. Importantly, alongside the patriarchal hegemony, a growing sign of sexual counteraction becomes visible. And Indian drama, after Independence, has lent a strong voice to the forces of sexual dissension, while exposing the social sexism at large. The present study seeks to read Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* and Varsha Adalja's *Mandodari* where patriarchy is not only exposed but challenged through ingenious ways. It remains to be seen how the plays in question explore the survival strategies in a male dominated social regime and redefine the docile image of female subjectivity as self-conscious and resourceful.

**Keywords:** Indian woman, gender, Girish Karnad, Varsha Adalja, theatre.

## 1. Introduction

Independence of 1947 brings in a historical situation where the newly independent Indian nation aspires to build a nation-state through a relook at the past and a negotiation of the present. The nationalistic consolidation wants to shape the present through a revivalist approach to a pristine past and create a 'true' Indian nation/society by retaining the traditions of that past in the present. The Indian postcoloniality after the independence does, however, indicate not only a statist or nationalistic reconstruction but also a critical engagement with "any form of authority or pattern of exploitation" (Sengupta, 2014, p. 15). Strong nation-state remains the primary agenda of decolonization, but the very process of building-up the nation is also scrutinized. The revivalist approach to a mythic past and that past's continuation in the present has been interrogated. As a result, different lost or marginalized voices find recognition and the post-Independence development story of the nation becomes a plural one.

### 1.1. The idea of 'Indian woman' under colonialism

One important domain, which draws serious intervention both from the nationalistic and 'anti-nationalistic' discourses after the independence, is the contemporary landscape of sexuality, and the reason is historical. The notion about sexuality and gender is a crucial factor in formulating the social structure of a nation. This is why the domain draws enormous attention both from the colonial and the anti-colonial or nationalist forces during the colonial period. Male dominance in the Indian society surely precedes the colonial time, but the second half of the nineteenth-century colonial India witnesses "a definite cultural focus on the Indian woman" (Sen, 2001, p. 2). The social hierarchies, such as gender and caste which seem to be primordial in the Indian society, are recast by colonialism (Chaudhuri & Rajan, 2006, p. xviii). The native woman, who traditionally stands as an epitome of the native culture, has a strategic appeal to the colonial politics and is subjected to a process of identity-construction (Loomba, 2001, pp. 151-9). Historically, she becomes the passive site of ideological manipulations by both colonial and anti-colonial forces. The Orientalist prescription for the Indian woman, who is devoted, chaste, self-sacrificial on the one hand and 'modern' on the other, is appreciated by the Renaissance reformers in their quest for an autonomous feminine identity. She is expected to remain 'Indian' but, at the same time, become educated and enlightened. However, the nationalists later come to reject this 'modernization' of Indian woman on the Western line. They oppose the Renaissance modernist reform as unnecessary concession to the Western/colonial influence on Indian traditions and conceptualize the image of Indian woman strictly on the line of material/spiritual or modern/traditional or external world/internal home or, finally, male/female dichotomy (Chatterjee, 2007, pp. 119-21). Importantly, both the reformists and the nationalists, despite their dissimilar methodologies, owe their theoretical premises to the Orientalist discourse that offers them the definitions of both, 'modernity' and 'Indianness'.

The Orientalist construction of 'Indian woman', among other constructed Indianness, appeals strongly to the nationalists. They readily appropriate the Orientalist image of self-sacrificial Indian femininity and use it as an ideological trope to redefine the nation on religious-cultural line. Anti-colonial inspiration is drawn from invoking the power of the goddess, 'Shakti' or 'Durga,' and this divine power to destroy and re-create is combined with the self-sacrificial image in order to design the Indian woman as both powerful and devoted, who is to be seen as one with the nation. This identification of the deified woman with the nation regards the woman as a material territory and the repository of culture, which is never to be yielded to the alien power. As a result, woman is to be confined within the sanctum of 'home', away from the polluted space of the outdoor. This gendered notion of home and society, indoor and outdoor legitimately domesticate the woman, as she is the 'deified nation' to be protected from alien contamination.

It should be mentioned here that the identification of the nation with the woman is precolonial. The reference to the *Bharatmata* (Mother India) as the presiding deity of *Bharat* can be found in early Sanskrit texts of the fifth/sixth century AD (Bagchi, 1997, p. 69). The male-centric character of the nationalist force draws on this scriptural configuration of the past to strengthen its anti-colonial stand. The native Indian men, under the colonial regime, are "increasingly disenfranchised and excluded from the public sphere" (Loomba, 2001, p. 168) and conveniently/strategically recognize the domestic sphere as their last stronghold and seize "upon home and the woman as emblems of their culture and nationality" (Loomba, 2001, p. 168). To put it simply, when they, on their own, fail to resist the political and cultural aggression of the colonial/Western power, they plan to project the Indian woman as an authentically cultural, and hence national, symbol of demarcation. As a result, the Indian femininity is re-invented on the

notion of an 'indigenouslyness' and the nationalist movement is shaped on this image of the woman, vis-à-vis the image of the man, in order to compensate for the ground the native men are losing or have lost in the public sphere. The strategy works because it successfully merges the 'cultural' with the 'national' and connects the nationalist movement with the mass by appealing to the cultural and religious sentiment of the people. Absent from the nationalist centre stage, the women remain the helpless witness to this mobilization of identity. Their popular image is narrativized and widely circulated for continuation in the days to come even after the independence.

### **1.2. Post-1947 continuation of the nationalist idea of woman and subsequent female countervoices**

The nation-building project, undertaken since 1947, does not bring fast and fundamental changes to the status of women in the society and it is well exposed by the publication of *Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India* in 1974. The reason is the continuation of the pre-Independence nationalist narrative on woman, which fits, after necessary modifications, to the new-born state's nation-building project. The nationalist image of the woman lingers in the post-1947 nationalistic build-up chiefly because of the decolonization drive of the newly independent, postcolonial nation-state. The postcolonial urge to free itself from all colonial influences often pushes for a revival of the precolonial/Hindu past and retention of the nationalist discourse which drew its ideological strength from that glorified past. However, postcoloniality in India has its other side as well. The social and political discontent over the state, due to its failed promises of all-round development, steadily rises, resulting in a new wave of social, political and cultural engagement with the given 'system/s'. The declaration of Emergency in 1975 enacts the most visible encounter between the state and its angry citizens that include even the most quite and conservative groups such as doctors, engineers, teachers (Tharu & Lalita, 2005, p. 98). The widespread discontent over the perceived failures of the state and the social structure to deliver on the post-Independence promises has its ramifications in several social sectors. The rise of the 'woman question' that challenges the andocentric system by self-assertive female consciousness is one such ramification. The post-Independence postcoloniality seems to attain its fruition as the dominant statist narrative of development is contested, with different marginalized groups, notably the women alongside others, raising their unheeded voices. The situation creates the scope to question the 'given' related to any "structural domination" and "suppression" (Sengupta, 2014, p. 7). The political independence certainly gives the society this freedom and power to question and facilitates the post-Independence postcoloniality. But this situation of introspection is also occasioned by the post-Independence negative developments which produce discontent. Discontent generates doubt and doubt causes critique, resulting in an introspective review, or the demand for it, of everything predominantly existing. Under the process of socio-political rethinking, serious question has been posed on gender and the status of women. In an attempt to achieve gender justice, social institutions and relations have been critically engaged, with a view to contesting the gender imbalances kept hidden or rationalized in the patriarchal society.

### **1.3. Female countervoices on the stage**

The countervoice of critique of the state-encouraged discourses of development and re/build-up of the 'Indian' society find representation in different art-forms. Drama seems to be one of the

prioritized and effective media of critical engagement that critiques the society which it is born of. The growing discontent among the people and the intelligentsia produces remarkable works of protest and dissent on the Indian stage that in turn often impacts the prevailing situation. By virtue of its proximity to the society through its textual and performative reach, theatre becomes a powerful art-form that is mediated by and mediator of its socio-historical context. The growing gender-consciousness, stimulated by the global anti-establishment movements and also the anti-quietist trends at home, occasions onstage negotiation of sexuality and gender. Critique of the patriarchy and counterassertion of the sexually marginalized, particularly the women, are the chief objective of this onstage representation that attempts to redefine the prevalent sexual equation of the Indian society. Plays have been produced in different languages and cultures to question gender. Attempts have been made to formulate strategies of resistance against patriarchy.

Women playwrights and directors have begun to arrive in the masculine domain of urban theatre since the 1970s as a corollary of the women's movement and gender-consciousness in urban India. The urge to formulate a "womanist dramaturgy" (Mukherjee, 2005, p. 17) becomes visible as women playwrights and directors try to re/read women's issues through methodologies involving either "non-linear, anti-realist" conventions or "realist tradition" (Sengupta, 2014, p. 22). The purpose remains to negotiate women's position in the andocentric society from a gynocentric perspective, and this is to achieve through the dramaturgies, which are either innovative on their own right or innovative use of the existing dramaturgies. This is required to put woman at the centre of the stage as also to sensitize the audiences which are predominantly gender-biased or gender-blind. Importantly, the male playwrights also contribute significantly to develop the tradition of woman-centric theatre in India. Differences are there between the two categories in terms of the quality and limit of their gendered perception. But similarities can also be found sometimes in their shared concern for women empowerment and autonomy and in their techniques which are either offbeat or inventive use of the beaten.

#### **1.4. The present study aims at**

In view of the growing dialogue with 'woman' and the larger issue of gender, the present study reads two plays – Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* and Varsha Adalja's *Mandodari*. The purpose is to understand the formulation of female subjectivity and survival strategies in a male-dominated social regime. It remains to be seen how two different women respond to the discourses of sexual domination and resourcefully manipulate it to their own advantage. Without an outright challenge to the system, it is to see how they covertly contest some specific sites of gender injustice in order to achieve their individual goal. The study endeavors to look into the reason, function and consequence of their strategies with a view to understanding the scope of women's dissent against or resistance to a structure of power or system of exploitation. The skilful adaptation of either the folk conventions or the myth formulates an anti-realist theatrical technique that helps unfold the onstage 'dialogue' through an innovative idiom of representation. And the study seeks to be equally informed of this deft fusion of the thematic and the performative.

#### **2. *Naga-Mandala***

Karnad's *Naga-Mandala* tells the story of a suppressed female sexuality within the marital restraint. A young girl, Rani, is married off with a polygamist man who stays with her during the

daytime but goes out at night only to reappear in the morning. Rani finds no reason to cheer about when he comes back sexually gratified from his mistress. Rani suffers from dual misery since her mind is tortured as also her marriage is not consummated. Her condition exposes the crude face of sexual exploitation alongside nurturing the possibility of aberration of a sexually suppressed woman.

### 2.1. Use of folk to question the idea of 'woman'

Karnad's use of folk conventions in the Prologue metaphorically points to women's dependant status in the society. A pseudo-real world has been created with some inanimate figures along with a human in order to let the story roll on. In the darkness of night in a temple, a Man is cursed by fate, for writing some bad plays, to have to remain awake at least one whole night to save his life. He comes to find a group of Flames gossiping about common domestic problems and a Story, a feminine form wrapped in a sari. The Man intervenes as he finds in the Story a way out to pass his time and keep himself awake. On some preconditions of folk and oral aesthetics, the Story agrees and narrates the tale of Rani. The oral tales or stories have a paradoxical nature. "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" (Karnad, 1994b, p. 17). Thus the Story becomes an allegory of the 'naturalized' status of a daughter. In spite of their independent desires which lie suppressed, the daughters exist only in their customary shift from one home to another – more specifically, in their relation to men.

Karnad exploits the folk world of the paranormal to expose the patriarchal society and gets it challenged as well through ways unthinkable at the level of normality. He brings in the magical Naga, a king cobra, to show its illicit affair with the dissatisfied, young wife. Rani, seemingly, finds no wrong in sleeping with the Naga, which incarnates her husband. As she becomes pregnant in due course much to the anger of her original husband who never touched her, the male society springs up and demands proof of her innocence. It exposes how the sexist paradigm is sustained by the 'knowledge-makers/keepers', who lay down "dire, horrifying and obnoxious punishments for the erring wife" (Bhattacharji, 1997, p. 31), though "for similar offences men suffered nothing except occasional social censure" (Bhattacharji, 1997, p. 31). The court of elders, something like the modern day 'panchayat' in rural India, puts the onus on the woman to prove her innocence and asks her to hold a red-hot iron ball in hand! The attitudinal aspect of the society betrays a clear gender prejudice – a persecution motif that holds the woman as inferior, gullible to sin, and untrustworthy.

Karnad uses the snake as a ploy to unsettle the patriarchal ethos. The liaison with the snake leads to the unusual path of extra-marital as a mode of dissent. It challenges the prevailing abhorrence of female extra-marital or polyandry but through the irony and understatement of folk style. The issue of extra-marital relation and pregnancy is underscored but without a bang so as to avoid direct confrontation with the society. The metaphysical intervention deliberately creates a confusion regarding Rani's unawareness about or consent to sex with a man other than her husband. Her unintentionality is shown in her accidental throwing out of the magic root, the herbal medicine meant for the sexual arousal of her husband, near the cave of the cobra. So, as an understatement, it seems to be the magic (the root-cum-the Naga), and not Rani herself, that initiates the extra-marital. Then the question, as to whether she remains unaware all through, persists till the end through Karnad's deft fusion of the real and the magic. This style of keeping the question under suspension almost till the end and exploring different possibilities understates

the aberration and its outcome. The use of the Naga, instead of a human suitor, is however the most important ploy of understatement in the play. In her opposition, the woman here is not found to be eager to script a man-less space. All she tries is to redesign the traditional roles to rectify the sexual imbalances existing between man and woman, and that is too through a covert manipulation in order to escape reprisal and be effective as well. For this purpose, the understatement of the folk style is appropriate because it helps to hide all implications of aberration and avoids direct clash with the society. A normal human being, instead of the magical Naga, might exaggerate this challenge and endanger it in its very inception.

## **2.2. The woman's strategy of survival**

Rani's pregnancy drags her to the court of the village elders. Here we find her unfolding a clever technique that exploits the male mindset to her own advantage. She chooses to insert her hand into the hole where the cobra lives and swears diplomatically that she has never touched any other males in her life except her husband and this cobra (Karnad, 1994a, p. 58). The snake remains content with this truth, and Rani proves her innocence. The society, which was up to castigate her as fallen woman, now comes out to worship her as a divine being, a goddess or a 'devi' and orders her husband to spend the rest of his life in her service. It is true that Rani fails to dismantle the male discourse that condemns as well as valorizes the woman for its own needs. But that does not seem to be her aim at all. The dream of this little bride was only to have a home that would be less oppressive and more accommodative than it was given to her, and finally she seems to have got something more than she ever expected. The question about how much conscious she is all through her strategy is made clear by the playwright through the ironical and may-be-this-or-may-be-that style of the folk. She is shown as more unintentional than she actually is. The fleeting sense of unnaturalness of the 'man' she is sleeping with comes just the night before the snake ordeal, but her growing maturity to handle the nocturnal romances tacitly betrays a sense of awareness in her mind. The issue of un/awareness is examined in detail at the play's ending, which offers three competing versions of the conclusion. Following the accommodative style of oral story-telling, different versions have been debated and the third one, where Rani welcomes the return of the cobra and hides it inside her lock, is unanimously accepted. This self-styled co-existence with the legitimate husband and the illegitimate one makes clear the amount of consciousness the woman has of her action. Without dismantling the system, the woman here remodels, through her clever strategy, the power relations inside the traditional spaces and makes them as spacious to her as they are to men.

## **3. *Mandodari***

Varsha Adalja's *Mandodari*, which won the Gujarati Sahitya Akademi Award in 1997, is another example of the ingenious strategy of female counterassertion. The play draws on the epic story of the *Ramayana* and rereads the character of Mandodari, the wife of Ravana, to explore some unusual mode of challenge and survival on the part of the woman. The entire play has been structured through the metaphor of a game of chess between Mandodari and Kaaldevata, the God of Death. At the apparent level of the story, Mandodari tries to resist the moves of Kaal who scripts the destruction of Ravana in Rama's hand. She acts like a loyal wife who desperately tries to save her husband from the Kaal. But she has a hidden agenda, which she executes by outsmarting the God. The play is about how Mandodari finds herself in an empty space as the

wife of Ravana and how she covertly turns the table in her favor through a clever strategy of resistance.

### **3.1. Devising a strategy to survive**

Mandodari's agony as wife doubles when Ravana kidnaps Seeta and endangers her position as the chief queen of Lanka. She bears the lechery of her husband and can foresee her misery whether Ravana wins or loses the battle. In case of a win, Seeta will become the chief queen and she her attendant. If Ravana loses, she will either become a 'sati' with her dead husband or be offered to Ravana's brother Bibhisana as his concubine. Under the given circumstances, Mandodari devises a strategy to avenge her misery and entangles her husband in a web of covert conspiracy. In her plan, she challenges under the disguise of loyalty and uses the boastful God of Death and her proud husband as her pawns. She exploits the male ego of both the God and Ravana and provokes them to do what she wants them to do. The God wants to destroy Ravana, as the law of destiny, by making him do all the wrong deeds, and the more she challenges the God with her and her husband's superior power, the more determined the God becomes to fulfill his mission. On the other hand, she plays the same trick on Ravana and pushes him into committing the wrongs by her requests and pleadings for the opposite. The action moves exactly the way she likes it to be. The God is outplayed, and Ravana is killed.

Mandodari's action highlights two aspects of female subjectivity. The woman refuses to remain docile and passive against male oppression. She is self-conscious and ready to devise the downfall of the patriarchy through maneuver and manipulation. On the other hand, the desire for a family, which will be sexually accommodative and equal, is acute. Her lament, at the end, implies her sense of loss in spite of the win. She refuses to live under Ravana. But her challenge never undermines her desire for a family where husband and wife will be on an equal footing with mutual respect and dignity. It is not a male-free world she aspires for, but rather a world free from the male bias against women.

## **4. The dramaturgies at work**

Both the plays, under discussion, recognize the andocentric structure of the society and expose its discriminatory approach towards women. Importantly, this recognition is followed by an awareness and articulation of the gynocentric concerns and responses. The women challenge the patriarchy, but their challenge does not call for the total rejection of the male-made structure. Instead, they use the given system to their advantage in order to challenge it from within. For this purpose, both the plays adopt dramaturgies that are innovative in many ways, while remaining primarily traditional. They use the traditional proscenium stage with its urban set-up to work with the performance conventions and devices of the folk and the stories of mythology. The purpose is to formulate a different dramaturgy that would break away from the given 'way/s' of looking at the society and look differently at it in order to critique. Girish Karnad has adapted the performance conventions of oral tales, and Varsha Adalja has retold the myth on the urban, proscenium stage and equipped the traditional form of theatre with a new idiom to examine and subvert the structures of sexual domination. The oral tales, which "serve as a parallel system of communication among the women in the family" (Karnad, 1994b, p. 17) and are known for their fluid structure, and the myth, which is the storehouse of "compressed meanings", contributed by all "who lived with and used" (Rushdie, 2010, p. 48) it, become potent tools of signification when

used on purpose in a different dramatic set-up. This collaboration between the borrowed materials of folk and myth and the prevailing set-up of theatre gives birth to a dramaturgy that effectively raises the question of 'woman'. The non-real and the real seem to fuse together to formulate a style that creates a pseudo-real, alienated world and freely interrogates, by implications, the real world. Adalja's technique denotes the "womanist dramaturgy" (Mukherjee, 2005, p. 17) that contests the oppressive 'real' by becoming the 'non-real'. Karnad also offers a befitting style to locate the woman at the centre and gives her the power of agency through the ever-twisting/stretching narrative of his non-real world. The patriarchal hegemony is subjected to an in-depth probe and autonomous female subjectivity is contemplated through the unusual mode of dissent, and all is done with the interpretive freedom of the non-real narrative.

## 5. Conclusion

Both *Naga-Mandala* and *Mandodari* are significant in the tradition of woman-centric plays in Indian theatre. They represent the changing pattern of sexuality and gender on the Indian stage and, by extension, in the Indian society at large. Both the women are shown as culture/situation-specific without denying the primary quest for emancipation and empowerment. They make us rethink the scope and nature of woman's challenge to the prevailing discourse of sexuality and gender. Both of them dream of a free and fair family, but when denied, they try to maneuver the system covertly to their advantage and achieve their respective goals, since an open challenge would nip their plans in the bud. They provide patriarchy with a sense of self-assurance by displaying calculated conformity and prepare the ground for their covert operation, ensuring lesser reprisal and greater success rate. This development of onstage gender-negotiation is important because the women characters evolve not only into some resistant females but some resourcefully and ingeniously resistant females who can talk back to the patriarchy in a befitting idiom. The plays are also significant for their dramatic techniques that unfold the female counteraction through a different 'language' of representation. They use the 'illogic'/freedom of the non-real world of folk and myth to problematize the 'logic'/oppression of the real world and lay the issues bare, otherwise impossible to think of under the 'logic' of a normal society.

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*Joydeep Bhattacharyya teaches English literature, as an Assistant Professor, in Kurseong College since 2005. He wrote his M.Phil. dissertation (2000) on Robert Frost's dramatic poetry and obtained Ph.D. (2014) on the plays of Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad. He has contributed articles, especially on Indian theatre, to several edited volumes and journals.*

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